

*** COMPOSE A TUNE USING A HANDY ALPHABET CHART! ***

How do you come up with the notes for the beginning of a new melody? Do they have to come to you in a dream or vision or stroke of genius? No! You can search for them in all sorts of ways!

I noticed that various Classical composers *derived themes from the letters in words*: Bach used the letters of his own name B-A-C-H (by the way, B is H and Bb is B in Germany); Shostakovich used the first four letters of his name as a theme of defiance toward Stalin (and the Premier never caught the reference); Schumann used the

initials of his personal motto as the basis for some tunes; and Brahms made a melody from his former girlfriend's name. Maybe we can do that type of thing with other musical genres!

But how do you get *letters from the rest of the alphabet* --- the letters after the note names A through G? I thought I'd try making up a *chart* that could be used to transform a note that's from H to Z into a note from A to G:

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
H	I	J	K	L	M	N
O	P	Q	R	S	T	U
V	W	X	Y	Z		

Let's *start with the word "dulcimer"*: Some letters are already note names, but for each of the others we can simply go up its column to the letter name. "Dulcimer" becomes D-G-E-C-B-F-E-D. Try that series of notes --- any rhythm, any meter, any combinations of note lengths you feel like trying --- and see if you like it as the beginning of a melody!

And what about the F or C or G (for example): Can it be sharpened, thus allowing different key centers and thus different flow to the tune? Sure! Whatever you'd like to try!

Next you might want to *try this with your own name* -- all of it, or part of it, or a nickname. And the genre (fiddle tune, waltz, impressionist, rock, whatever) may be derived from how the notes feel as you mess around with them.

What if a note doesn't serve your taste well enough? Change it or remove it! You can do that as a composer.

THE PROCESS: HOW I MADE UP A SCOTTISH AIR

A few years ago I decided to write a tune for my wife that I could debut at a Valentine's Day party; I wanted it to be Scottish, sweet, and playable on accordion and guitar so a fellow attendee, Howard Nilsen, could join me on it, and with the Scottish-themed title "My Sweet Rowena in the Glen". I also had the idea of making it sort of mixolydian like "Marie's Wedding", with a flatted note in it.

Okay, I'd *start with her name*, Rowena. I plugged it into the chart and got the notes D-A-B-E-G-A. When I played the notes it seemed to be in D, and that G-A could give the mixolydian feel, but the tune needed a meter and some more notes. $\frac{3}{4}$ seemed to work, starting on the downbeat, and the first note could be longer than the second. I tried a "Scotch snap" rhythm on the third and fourth note, and I decided to add a couple of notes before and between the G-A, and I had a first phrase ("I" in the sheet music).

Now, *where do we go from here?* I wanted it to "wander with a destination," so I gave it a series of eight notes that wind upward and come to rest on an E with an A chord. (Notice how those last notes are somewhat like the last notes of "ROWENA"?) The A chord led us into phrase III, which I decided to start with the same series of notes as the previous phrase, thus being both unusual and recognizable. The last few notes of this phrase are a little different, and they give a sweet, wistful feeling, ending on a B with a G chord. Then the first half of the melody comes to its end using some note groups drawn from various parts of the earlier phrases and ending with exactly the same notes that the first phrase ended with, but with a D chord instead of an A chord. See how all that was drawn out of the ideas of the notes from the chart?

The second half of the tune begins with a repeat of the last few notes of the first half --- a technique used in

some old airs --- and I decided to go to the highest point of the melody after this for dramatic effect. Then I experimented with the important next section, phrase VI, to wind it meaningfully down from that high point back toward a phrase ending similar to that in II; then the melody in phrases VII and VIII is identical to phrases III and IV, but not boringly so because of all the colorful movements in the other phrases (and in these). Also notice that I chose to end the melody on an A chord, sort of leaving it hanging, rather than on the D chord with which the first half ended --- another method used in some old tunes, giving a more “modal” feeling.

A TUNE OF A DIFFERENT GENRE: SOUNDTRACK STYLE!

When I was beginning to compose music for National Parks, I wanted a tune that would have a “motion picture theme” character with the appropriate title “Preservation”. I devised the letter chart at that time, and I filled pages with groups of notes from various National Park words that I’d plugged into the chart; but none of them really rang true as the notes to use till I tried **the word “Creator”** --- related to my aim of acknowledging God as the one behind the natural world of the Parks. The notes from the chart for this word were C-D-E-A-F-A-D; they sounded interesting and meaningful, and they fell easily into the key of C. Hooray! I still remember where I was when the “Eureka” moment happened: pacing back and forth in the dining room.

I **modified the note choices** a little, gave some **rhythm** to them, then chose to begin phrase II with the same notes as phrase I but to change it to a “**second ending**” **type of variant** to help propel the melody forward toward phrase III. This phrase starts with the same movement as the others but begins on E instead of C, then at the junction of phrase IV does a couple of **jumps** (because I like lyrical jumps) that then **cascade down** to an actual first ending. The **actual second ending** was tricky, because I wanted to make sure the last few notes really spoke the message of the melody, and didn’t just sound trite; I tried various ideas for the series of notes, and finally settled on the ones you see, with the chords of an “Amen cadence”: ending with the **F** chord to the C chord.

I had the thought that it would be good not to move on to a second and final section like a simple air or a dance would have, but rather to switch to the **relative minor key** (A minor) and have the melody stay quite similar. It worked out well here, as you can see in section V. And it leads easily back into a restatement of phrases I and II.

Notice how most of the small groups of notes have **similar movements** to various other notes, giving the tune an organic unity: for example, the B-A in measures 6 and 10 echo the F#-E in measure 2. Try to develop an intuition for similar things like this as you’re experimenting with making a series of melody sections.

The tune was a hit at the party, and it worked well in the new album *Celtic Airs!*

Section VI needed to be a departure from everything before, like an **interlude or bridge**, it seemed. I spent quite some time struggling with ideas (weeks?) but one day while driving in our local Colonial National Historical Park an idea came to mind and I was concentrating on going over and over it in my head to try to remember it when... blue lights started flashing and I was pulled over for speeding by a Park Ranger! Oh, the irony! After he left me I wrote the notes down, a heartfelt, especially lyrical passage that ends with one of those jumps that leads to a D with a G chord, calling for a finale!

Well, the **finale** that made the most sense was a repeat of phrases I-IV with only the second ending, but in the next key up --- so you shift from a D ending note in the key of C to a D beginning note in the key of D, an effective dramatic statement.

That day in 1995 I realized that I really could write tunes! And the use of a simple but practical chart gave the material from which the tune’s fabric could be stitched. I encourage you to try this yourself, even if you doubt that you have the ability to write music. Give yourself time to mull over what to do with the development of a particular melody --- make it a small, low-key project that works toward saying something you want to say. But expect it to --- before too long --- become something you’re satisfied with, even if it’s not on the level of Bach or Brahms!

And yes, I went and bought a cheap recording unit to keep in the car to avoid the risk of any more tickets!

---Timothy Seaman, February, 2011

My Sweet Rowena in the Glen

Timothy Seaman

I. *D* *Em* *G* *D* II. *Em*

6 *D* *Bm* *A* III. *Em* *F#m*

11 *Bm* *G* IV. *Em* *D* *G*

16 *D* V. *Bm* *A* *D* VI. *F#m*

21 *Bm* *G* VII. *Bm* *A* *Em*

26 *F#m* VIII. *Bm* *G* *Em* *D*

31 *G* *A*

Preservation

Timothy Seaman

{I.} C Em Dm G {II.} C Am Em G {III.} C Em

6 F Dm {IV.} 1. C Am Dm G {IV.} 2. F Dm C To Coda ⊕

11 {V.} Am G E Em Am Em G C Am

16 Em Dm Am C E Em {VI.} Coda Em F G

21 Em F Dm G Am F C F C Em

26 {VII.} Dm G D F#m Em A D Bm F#m A

31 D F#m G Em D Em D