

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO COMPOSING YOUR OWN PIANO PIECE



*The 6 crucial steps of
successfully writing
your own piano piece*

A teal-colored brushstroke with a rough, textured edge, resembling paint or ink, spans the top of the page.

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO COMPOSING YOUR OWN PIANO PIECE

Pianist's guide to the 6 crucial steps of
successfully writing your own piano piece

All Rights Reserved. No part of this eBook may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, without permission in writing from Warners Group Publications Plc, except by reviewers, who may quote brief passages in a review.

Visit www.pianistmagazine.com

Pianist Magazine,
Warners Group Publications
5th floor,
31-32 Park Row,
LS1 5JD,
Leeds,
United Kingdom
Tel: 0113 200 2929

Contents

Introduction

- 1. Choosing your style**
- 2. Picking your key**
- 3. Establishing your chord progressions**
- 4. Establishing your main melodic theme**
Includes blank sheet music for you to print off
- 5. Structures to consider**
- 6. Extras**

An alternative method: by Melanie Spanswick

Resources

Introduction

The ultimate guide to composing your own piano piece.

I know, it does sound a little daunting. There are so many details to think about: *What's it going to sound like? Will it be upbeat? Romantic? Scary? What key is it going to be in? What about structure?... Where on earth do I begin?*

Composing your own piece of piano music is easier than you think. The key is to take your time and break down each stage of the process, and to work your way through them at your own pace.

In this guide, we're going to navigate you through each of the following stages of composition:

- Style
- Key
- Chord progressions
- Main melodic theme
- Structure
- Extras
- An alternative method: by Melanie Spanswick

Each one of us has a different reason as to why we've decided to compose our first piece of music. The good news is that *Pianist* is here to help, so let's get started!

Step 1 - Choosing your style

How to refine your ideas into one definitive direction



Figuring out what style you'd like to write in is perhaps the most crucial stage of this guide, so it's a good job we put it first! Get your creativity whirring by thinking about these questions:

- 1. What genre of piano-led music do you like the most?
Romantic? Classical? Jazz? Cinematic? Other?**
- 2. Who is your favourite composer/artist?**
- 3. What mood do you envision for this piece? Romantic?
Melancholy? Upbeat? Dramatic?**
- 4. Are you writing this piece for yourself or for someone else?**

You now have a general idea in your head of the style of piece you want to create. Let's refine your ideas into one definitive direction for your piece.

For this, we're going to use word association. Simply grab a pen and paper and follow the steps below.

1. Using the word association document we've supplied you with (you're welcome!), write down a word in the middle of a blank piece of paper that sums up the general style of your piece.
2. At the ends of these stems and branches, think of some words and phrases that more specifically describe the stylistic word in the centre.

WORD ASSOCIATION

MINOR

Fast moving rhythms,
intense, left-hand
arpeggios, right-hand
eighth notes

MYSTERIOUS

Deeply intriguing, random
major chords to add to
mystery, unsettling,
chromatic melodies

CINEMATIC DRAMA

DARK

Loud, lots of
low notes

TO ACCOMPANY A DRAMATIC SCENE

A city, busy, London, camera
would focus on a man's face
as he walks through the
crowds, rainy, cold

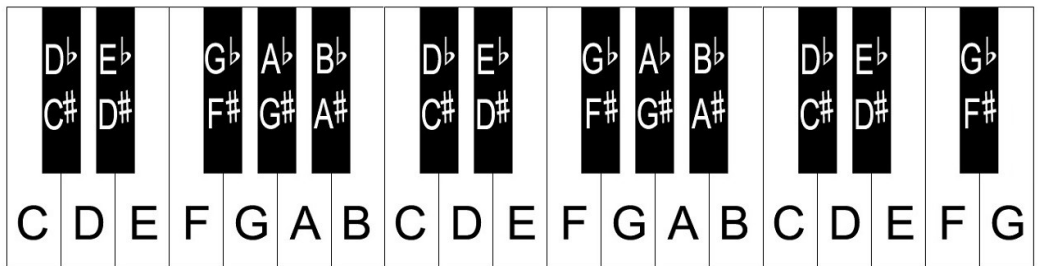
Step 2 - Picking your key

Knowing which keys are suitable for your playing level



Picking the key depends on your current level of playing.

- **Are you a beginner?** If you are at an early learning stage, it's best to stick to simpler keys such as C, D or G major, or A, E, or D minor.
- **Are you an intermediate?** You can add the likes of E, A and B major to that list, along with B \flat , C, or G minor.
- **Are you an advanced player?** Pick a key, any key! It's likely you can play comfortably in all keys.



Once you've picked a suitable key, you can now start to create a chord progression.

Step 3 - Establishing your chord progressions

+ 3 tips for picking alternative chords



The next step is to pick a main chord progression, followed by a selection of alternatives that you can use for your other sections. When picking your chords, there is absolutely no right or wrong way. By sitting at your piano and playing around with the chords, you will find which ones fit and which don't. Here are *Pianist's* four different main chord progressions for you to use freely or manipulate to fit your piece.

Let's use C major as our root chord. The chords in **C major** are **Dm(ii)**, **Em(iii)**, **F(IV)**, **G(V)**, **Am(vi)**, and **B diminished(vii)**.

1. I iii IV(major7) V
 C Em F7 G

2. IV I V VI-V
 Fsus2 C G Am-G

3. I V vi I/iii
 C G Am C/E

4. vi ii vii(diminished) I
 Am Dm B diminished C

These are just four of many combinations that you can try. Our advice would be to spend some time at your piano trying these combinations out, until you find a progression that you like.

Once you have picked out your main chord progression, it's time to choose a selection of *alternative* chord progressions to use in other varied sections.

Here are three techniques you can use when picking your alternate chords:

1. **Start your new section with a minor chord.** The use of a darker chord here will signify a shift in mood to the listener, confirming that a new section is in play. You cannot go wrong with this technique. It's also a good idea here to use any other chords that weren't included in your main chord progression. Let's use chord progression No 3 from our examples above as a demonstration:

Main chord progression:

I V vi I/iii

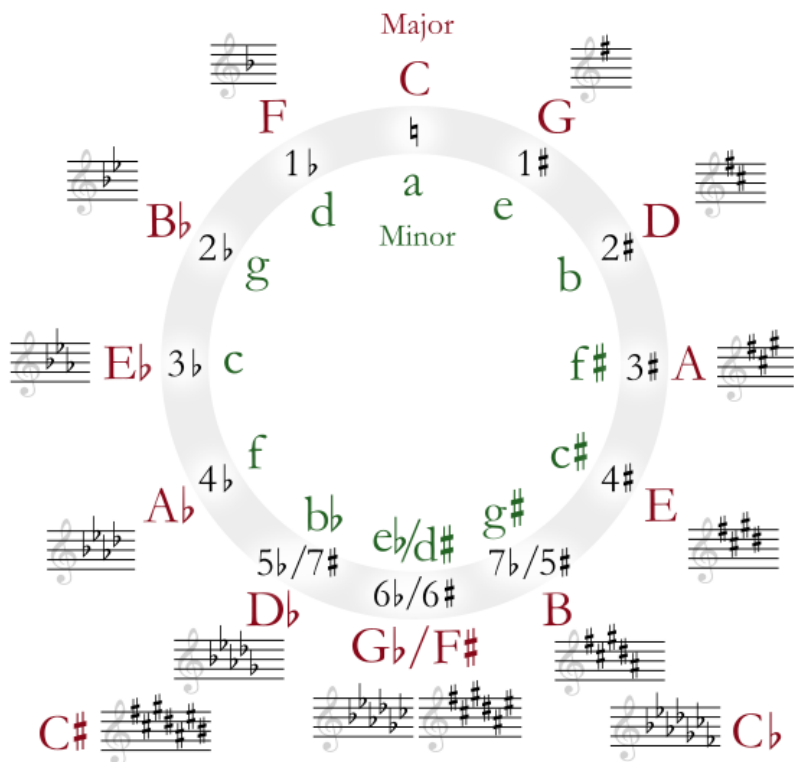
C G Am C/E

Alternative chord progression:

iii iv ii ii

Em F Dm Dm

Utilise the circle of fifths. In classical music particularly, this technique is used on a regular basis. The circle of fifths is the relationship among the 12 tones of the chromatic scale, their corresponding key signatures, and the associated major and minor keys. The following graph shows the circle of fifths.



Effectively, chord V of your current key becomes chord I in your new section. So, if we continue with our example of C major, using the chord progression example 1 from above...

Main chord progression:

I	iii	iv(major7)	V
C	Em	F7	G

The last chord here, chord V (G), will now be chord I in your new section. Your chord sequence will now look a little something

like this:

I	iii	iv(major7)	V
G	Bm	C7	D

If you want to really build up the tension in this section, you could keep going with the circle of fifths! Next up would be:

I	iii	iv(maj 7)	V
D	F#m	G7	A

... and so on.

2. Use chords that aren't in your key. This is particularly effective in cinematic or ambient pieces. There are numerous chord tricks that composers purposely use in order to cause a particular response from their audiences. Here are three tricks:

- Move from chord i to the minor v; for example, C major to G minor. It's used multiple times in the *Back to the Future* films, as well as hundreds of others. You may also recognise it from *The Way You Make Me Feel* by Michael Jackson. It creates an aura of amazement and magic.
- Create your own circle of SIXTHS: Let's start with the chord progression VI, V, major ii. In D \flat major, this would be: B \flat m (VI), A \flat (V) E \flat (maj ii). In the next phrase, switch to chord VI (Gm) of the first chord! For example, the next progression becomes:

Gm (VI), F (V), C (maj ii). This is basically a circle of 6ths! This particular trick is used in the blockbuster film *Avatar* (2009), composed by James Horner.

- c) Move from chord i to the major vi: for example, E major to C major. The expectancy is that we will hear E major to C# minor. However, the introduction of the C major is a pleasant and uplifting surprise.

TOP TIP

If you are struggling to settle on any chord progression, consider 'borrowing' a chord progression from a piece that has a similar style and tempo to yours.

Step 4 - Establishing your main melodic theme

Rhythm, melodic shape, and harmony



Whether you're listening to pop, jazz, rock, or classical, you'll (almost) always be able to hear a main melody that is played and re-used throughout the piece.

So, how do we create our own melodic theme?

There is no set recipe for doing this. No melody is 'wrong'.

To help you on your way, we've picked out three characteristics that play a huge part in how your melody turns out. Let's look at these three characteristics using the example melody below:

1. Rhythm

In the bass clef of bars 1-2 of this example (a), the composer has gone for two quarter notes, two eighth notes, and another quarter note, followed by two half notes in bar 2. This is a good variety and is an ideal combination for a theme.

The image displays a musical score with two systems of staves. The first system contains two staves (treble and bass clef) with four measures. The second system also contains two staves with four measures. Red brackets labeled 'a', 'b', and 'c' are placed under the bass clef staves to indicate specific sections. Bracket 'a' covers the first two measures of the first system. Bracket 'b' covers the last two measures of the first system. Bracket 'c' covers the first four measures of the second system. The notation includes various note values such as quarter, eighth, and half notes, as well as rests.

In bars 3-4 (b), you can see that the composer keeps the first half of the melodic line the same, but slightly varies bar 4; instead going for two quarter notes and a half note. Bars 5-8 (c) are again variations of the original two bars.

2. Melodic shape

This example features a right-hand melody line, with the notes ranging from a B \flat to a G.

In bars 1 and 3, the melody line ascends. There is an alternation of a slow ascending melody line in bars 1 and 3, and a hovering melody in bars 2 and 4.



The variation of the melody begins in bar 5. The right-hand melody line now descends, and the second beat has been split into two quarter notes.

Finally, in bars 7 and 8, we see two things:

- 1.Bar 7 shows an inversion of the melody, which is now being played in the bass clef.
- 2.Bar 8 features a resolution on chord I; B \flat .

**TOP
TIP**

American vs English note values

Whole note	Semi-breve
Half note	Minim
Quarter note	Crotchet
Eighth note	Quaver
Sixteenth note	Semi-quaver

3. Suggested harmony

In the first bar of the theme, we see it begins with chord I ($B\flat$, D, F are all used), before it teases F, chord V. You can see the eighth notes descending through A, G and F.

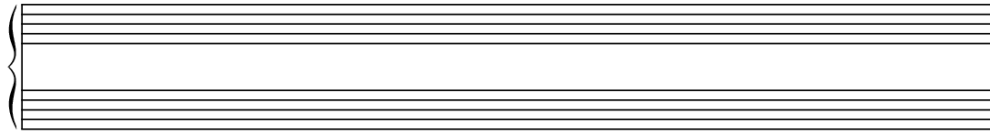
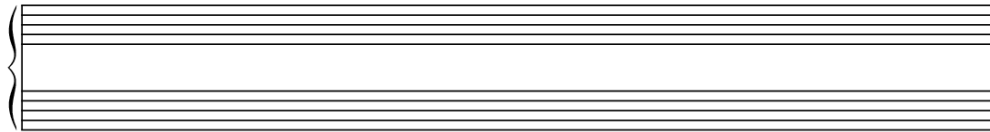
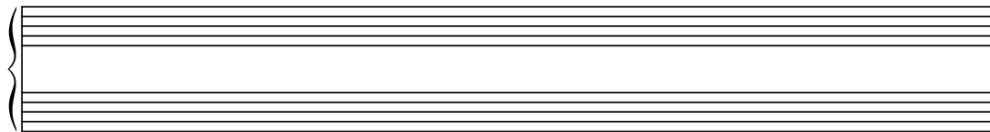
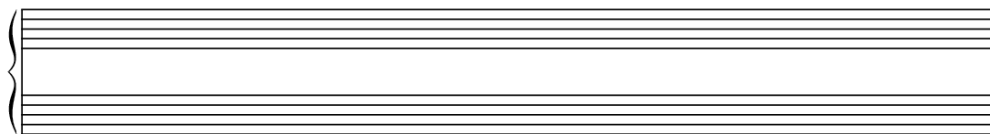
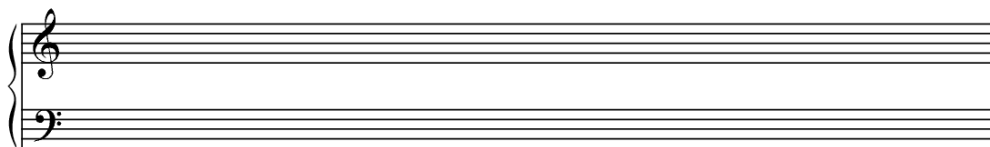
Bar 2 however takes us away from the expected V and up to Gm , the VI, before taking us back down to the V again before the bar ends.

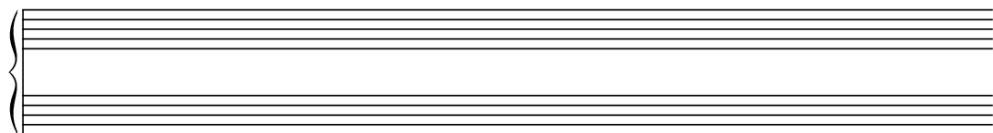
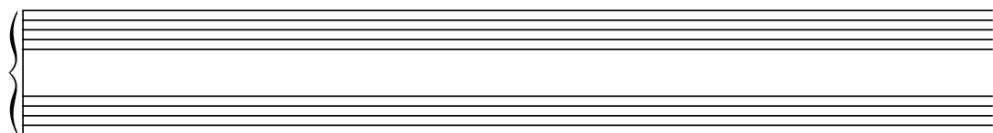
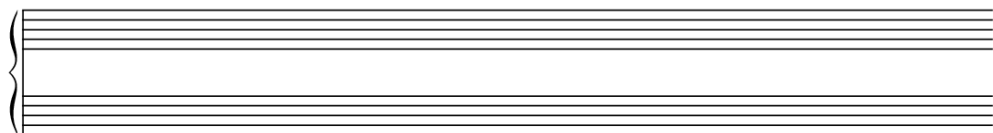
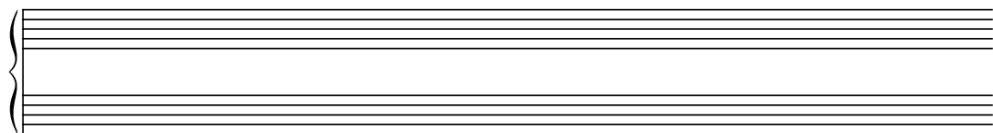
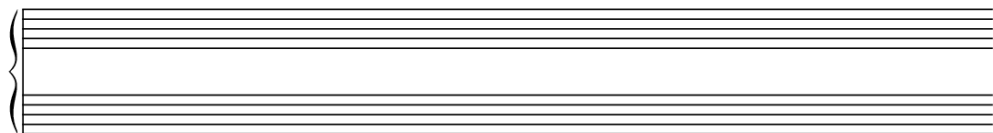
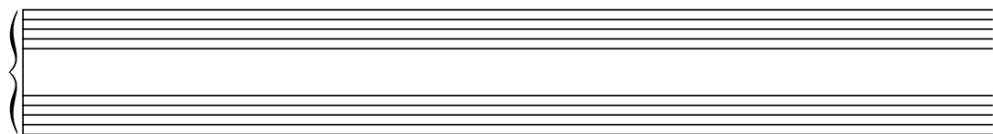
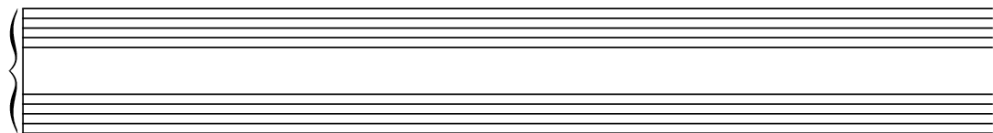
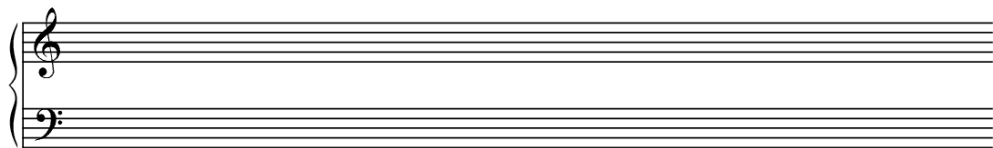


Bars 5-8 see the harmony move through $B\flat$'s most used chords; Gm , F, $E\flat$, and a brief switch to Dm at the end of bar 5 – chord iii.

Now that we know the key ingredients of a main melodic theme, it's time write our own! You'll need to:

- 1) Print the blank sheet music off below
- 2) Insert your key signature
- 3) Draw in the bass note of each chord in your progression, thinking about where they are going to be rhythmically
- 4) Begin drawing ideas for your melody!





Step 5 - Structures to consider

+ tips on how to vary your sections



Just to recap on what you have so far...

- **A style**
- **A key**
- **A main chord progression**
- **Alternative chord progressions**
- **A melodic theme**

If you've reached it this far, congratulations! The hardest work is done. All you need to do now is organise your creativity into a structure.

We have chosen two drastically different structures for you to think about. On page 33, Melanie Spanswick talks about another structure; Ternary ABA.

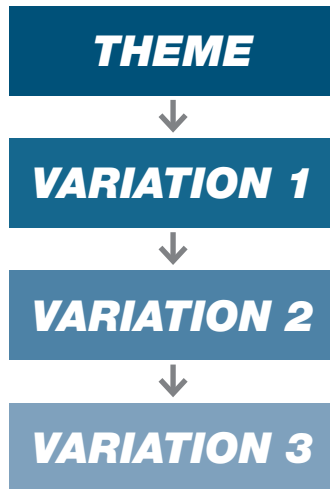
The first structure is 'Theme & Variations'.

Theme & Variations

The form of a theme and variations consists of a melody, or theme, followed by variations of that melody.

Composers often use theme and variation to write an entire piece or to write one movement of a larger piece. It is most often used in Romantic music.

The Theme & Variations structure is particularly popular in Classical music, and most notably Romantic music. Let's take a look at the structure below.



Theme

Like above, you will have already created your theme. It can be as many bars as you like. Popular theme lengths are 8 bars or 16 bars long.

Variations

There are many factors that you can use to create your variation. Let's take a look.

TOP TIP

Add as many variations as you like. Ending the piece with your original theme can add a sense of completion to your piece.

MELODY

Develop your theme without completely re-writing it! Simply take notes out or add new notes.

KEY

Change key e.g. use the circle of fifths method seen in the 'Establishing your chord progressions' section.

TIME SIGNATURE

If you're in 4/4, change to 3/4, for example. If you're feeling adventurous, change to 5/4 or 7/4. This latter change is usually present in cinematic/ambient music.

RHYTHM

Alter the rhythm. Add some more syncopation with the addition of sixteenth notes or change the mood with the addition of some whole notes.

CHORDS

Replace your theme chord progression with one of your alternate chord progressions. If you have not created an alternate chord progression, you can create your variation using any of the other five factors.

TEXTURE

Create further density to your chords by adding extra 3rds, 5ths, or extensions such as 7ths or 2nds. Alternatively, if your chords already include these, you could remove them for your variation and create a particularly sparse variation.

The Cinematic Structure

The Cinematic structure allows for almost complete freedom. If you are leaning towards this structure, it's likely that the piece you have in mind will be written to a visual or is an improvised piece that is driven by emotion and feeling.

Technically, there is no structure here other than the progression of the storyline, or the development of your emotions.

What advice can we give you?

Here are some tips from the professionals:



“In film music, the composer’s task is to add to what is already there. When your music is played in a score full of movement and dialogue, your job is to fill the background, not to take centre stage. Only write what is necessary! Sometimes, less is more.”

Brian Morrell, composer and author.



“It should sound like good music... it should be able to, away from the picture conjure up the same sort of feelings and images that it was meant to on screen.”

Patrick Doyle, composer.



“A melody is a kind of horizontal conversation of sounds, one after the other without repetition. Each sound should sound new, should sound different.”

Ennio Morricone, composer.



“Don’t feel tied to the genre of the visual. The director didn’t want the score to necessarily be a horror score, so the movie becomes much more than a horror film partially because of that score.”

Composer Joseph Trapanese talking about the film ‘Let the Right One In’.



“Remember, you’re telling a story with your music, so arrange your song in such a way that it keeps moving in a particular direction. Every ‘page’ of your composition should develop your storyline a bit more, building to a gratifying conclusion.”

David Nevue, award-winning pianist and composer.



“Once you’ve got a melody you feel good about, you can begin playing with it. Try playing the first three notes and adding some delay to leave the viewer or listening wanting more. Or, double the entire melody with the velocity turned up to get maximum attention and gravity.”


Dani DiCiccio, music producer.

Step 6 - Extras

How to add flair and originality to your piece



Now that your piece is complete (hooray!), the last step is to round off our compositional process. This involves adding tempo markings, dynamics, phrases related to mood, and extending some of your chords. Let’s start with tempo, dynamic and mood markings. Use the table below and mark your score with the appropriate phrases where needed.

TEMPO		DYNAMICS		MOOD	
					
<i>Grave</i>	Slow and solemn	<i>Crescendo</i>	Becoming louder	<i>Affettuoso</i>	Tenderly
<i>Lento</i>	Becoming slower	<i>Decrescendo</i>	Becoming softer	<i>Agitato</i>	Excited and fast
<i>Tardo</i>	Slow	<i>Forte</i>	Loud	<i>Animato</i>	Animated
<i>Adagio</i>	Moderate speed	<i>Fortissimo</i>	Very loud	<i>Cantabile</i>	In a singing style
<i>Moderato</i>	Moderately	<i>Mezzo forte</i>	Moderately loud	<i>Con amore</i>	With love
<i>Allegro</i>	Moderately fast	<i>Piano</i>	Soft	<i>Con brio</i>	Brightly
<i>Mosso</i>	Agitated	<i>Pianissimo</i>	Very soft	<i>Con spirito</i>	With spirit
<i>Sostenuto</i>	A slowing of tempo	<i>Mezzo piano</i>	Moderately soft	<i>Dolce</i>	Sweet
<i>Fermata</i>	Held or sustained	<i>Sforzando</i>	Sharply accented	<i>Lacrimoso</i>	Tearfully
<i>Presto</i>	Very fast	<i>Stentato</i>	Loud, boisterous	<i>Maestoso</i>	Stately
<i>Accelerando</i>	Accelerating	<i>Tremolo</i>	Trembling	<i>Misterioso</i>	Mysterious
<i>Affrettando</i>	Becoming hurried			<i>Risolto</i>	Resolved
<i>Ritardando</i>	Decelerating			<i>Scherzando</i>	Playfully
<i>Rubato</i>	Free flowing			<i>Sotto</i>	Subdued
<i>Tenuto</i>	Holding a single note			<i>Semplicemente</i>	Simply
<i>Alla marcia</i>	Marching pace			<i>Slancio</i>	Enthusiasm
<i>A tempo</i>	Return to tempo			<i>Vivace</i>	Up tempo
<i>L'istesso tempo</i>	Same speed				

What else can we add?

EXTENDED CHORDS

Extended chords are simply chords with notes added beyond the eighth that exist within a scale. Why do we use extended chords?

They add colour and depth to your chord. It creates an extra level of harmony that was not there in the first place. Here's a small task for you.

Are you near your piano?

Play a C chord consisting of the notes C, E and G. It's simple and easy and works great if you are looking for simplicity and space.

Now, play that same chord, but with an added 7th – B – and an added 9th – the top D. Can you hear the added colour and depth? These added emotions can allow you to better express what you are trying to portray in your piece, especially if you are looking to create a more complex sound.

There are four possible notes that you can add in order to 'extend' your chord.

The 7th, 9th, 11th, and 13th. Why are there only four?

If you add all four extended notes into the primary triad of your chord, you will see that you have used up all the notes in that scale!

Have a scan through your finished piece, and experiment with where you might be able to add some colour with a few chord extensions.

An alternative method

by Melanie Spanswick



Melanie Spanswick is a classical pianist, teacher, write and composer. She is a contributor to *Pianist* magazine and has performed extensively across the world. Here, she offers her own personal method to composing your own piano piece.

Writing for the piano can unleash creativity. When learning standard repertoire, we are, to a certain extent, restricted by the composer's intentions; whether that be adhering exactly to the written score, or developing one's own interpretation, which must always be tasteful within the particular style or genre. None of these rules apply when writing a piece for yourself to play or teach. I have found the following ideas useful when faced with a blank sheet of manuscript paper!

STRUCTURE

Structure plays an important role when determining the length and shape of your piece, but if you are aiming to write a fairly short piano piece, perhaps lasting around three or four pages or two to four minutes long, you may consider writing in Ternary form. This is an ABA structure, where the themes are established at the beginning (A), with a contrasting central section (B), returning to the opening melody or melodies at the end (A). Many piano pieces employ this framework, and it provides the perfect opportunity to repeat the tune, capturing your listener's attention. Other typical structures include Binary form, Theme and Variations, or, for larger works, Sonata Form.

I have used Ternary form for small piano pieces, but I also tend to use an eight-bar pattern which I call the 'eight bar

riff'. It works on a similar principle to a Ground Bass; where a repeated bass line is established with melodic and rhythmic variation above.

PICKING A KEY

Begin by deciding which key you prefer for your piece. I favour minor keys, but it's a good plan to aim for simplicity; C, G or D major or A, E or D minor. A 4/4 time signature is a wise choice when experimenting as it is relatively easy to find workable note and rhythmic patterns, especially when writing in a minimalist style (which is the genre most closely associated with my compositions). Minimalism is essentially repeated structures or note patterns.

Once you have made a key selection, write eight blank bars on your manuscript paper and fill the first and last bar with your key chord (or chord I in your chosen key), using whole notes. These chords form the beginning and end of your 'eight bar riff'.

DEVELOPING A CHORD PROGRESSION

Chord selection is very much a personal choice; there is no right or wrong, but by playing the chords on the piano, you will discover which ones resonate and work well together.

Now search for the six remaining chords of your riff; you may favour tonal chord progressions, such as the subdominant chord (chord IV) followed by a dominant chord (chord V) etc. or you could experiment with dissonant chromatic chords which don't necessarily relate to the key or each other (diminished seventh chords work well here, adding spice). By playing them slowly,

one after another, you will find a progression which is generally a mixture of the two, and, most importantly, one which you like. One chord per bar is a safe bet. I find that by constantly keeping the tonic note in the bass, or lowest note of the harmony, for all eight bars, irrespective of the harmony above it, symmetry is achieved and almost any chord progression sounds effective. But changing the harmony completely works too.

Your chosen chord progression is now ready to be transformed and it can be used repeatedly. The trick is to vary the texture, rhythm, and melody. Five or six repetitions usually suffice for a short work i.e. the eight-bar chord pattern will be repeated five times. But it could be used as many as ten times or more, depending on your imagination.

This eight-bar pattern can be employed in a myriad of ways; try writing a melody in the treble with a flowing left hand eighth note accompaniment, all constructed using the harmony within each chord. Alternatively, you may prefer to use the chords of your progression as the basis for more ‘atmospheric’ sounds. Experiment with your eight chords by playing them as rippled or arpeggiated whole note chords in the lower part of the keyboard, sustaining each one with the pedal. Above every chord suspend a quarter note in the left hand or bass clef (maybe on beat 3 of the bar) followed by another in the right hand or treble clef (on beat 4), with both notes played in the upper part of the keyboard, selected from the chord of that bar. Choose a very slow tempo, and work through this pattern for all eight bars of your riff. The result should be reflective, sonorous

and dreamy.

This pattern may be continued with a slightly more elaborate subsequent eight bar phrase. You might decide to keep the sonorous chords and add a delicate eighth or sixteenth note pattern above, in the right hand. But you could also use the chords by sustaining them in the right hand, with rapid left-hand figurations.

TOP TIP

Develop rhythmic patterns by using the chords as the basis of an offbeat pattern, setting the left hand against the right in eighth notes (or sixteenth notes), supplying some rhythmic energy and excitement (which might be appropriate for the climax of your piece).

The combination is limitless, and whatever you write will be unique. You may eventually write sixteen bar riffs, elongating the whole process. Dynamics, expression markings, and pedal are all crucial to the overall sound. Aim to 'phrase off' each eight-bar pattern during the final bar (with the key chord), in preparation for the next eight bars. Once have completed your 'cycle' of eight bar repetitions with their differing textures and colours, finish your piece with a short coda or a short conclusion, which may just be a couple of bars in length and is generally in the key of the piece.

Your new work could potentially be full of rhythmic energy or it may be contemplative and wistful in character. But whatever you decide, this method can create instant, pleasing results and is an engaging way to start writing at the piano.

Save 20% off an annual digital subscription to *Pianist* magazine!



CLICK HERE to to claim your discount

“Pianist magazine is always beautiful, always informative, and usually fun too. Anyone who loves the piano will find something to enjoy between the sheets.”

Stephen Hough, concert pianist.

You'll have access to all of this:

- How-to play lessons and videos
- Over 40 pages of sheet music from beginner to advanced featuring different genres of music
- Exclusive interviews with the world's most famous pianists
- Extra world-class content!

Prefer print?

Our annual print subscription makes for a great gift for someone special. Get the paperback version of *Pianist* magazine **here**.

Resources

Classic fm. The best film composer quotes. Available: <https://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/periods-genres/film-tv/best-quotes-film-composer/>. Last accessed 9th Aug 2018.

Classic fm. (2015). Ennio Morricone's tips for writing film music as iconic as Gabriel's Oboe. Available: <https://www.classicfm.com/composers/morricone/how-to-write-film-score-hateful-eight-tarantino/>. Last accessed 9th Aug 2018.

Lowe, B. (2014). 5 Improvisation Tips That Will Make You Better Immediately. Available: <https://jazzpianoschool.com/5-improvisation-tips-that-will-make-you-better-immediately/>. Last accessed 9th Aug 2018.

(2013). 10 Ways To Improve Your Piano Improv Skills. Available: <https://keyboardimprov.com/10-ways-to-improve-your-piano-improv-skills/>. Last accessed 9th Aug 2018.

Music Theory. Italian Musical Terms. Available: <http://www.musictheory.org.uk/res-musical-terms/italian-musical-terms.php>. Last accessed 9th Aug 2018.