Task 6: Composing by starting with rhythm

When writing songs, you could start with a chord sequence or a melody. But… there are many other ways to begin. In this task we are going to start with a rhythm.

Rhythms are really important. Try the following game to test this out:
Tap a rhythm from a famous song and ask a friend to guess what song it is. You might find that they are able to guess the song from just the rhythm.

Step 1. Building up a song by starting with the a rhythm requires skill. And being able to write down a rhythm takes practice. Please don't move on to step 2 until you are able to tap the rhythms below without help. Watch the video to hear what they sound like.

Composing with Rhythms - Practice Sheet

Step 2. Now, let's make up a song…

Here you have a choice. Either:

write your own song in your own way starting by making up a rhythm first

or:

make up your own song following my steps below.

We are all different. Do what's best for you!

In my example, I'm aiming to make a slow pop song at a speed of around 70 BPM. I will base it on two-bar or four-bar phrases, so it's easy to add a typical four-bar chord progression later.

These are my steps, which you can follow if you like.

1. Pick just one bar that you like from the rhythm sheet.
2. Write it down on manuscript paper or use a music editing program.
3. Make your second bar the same as the first.
Repetition is important in composing; without it the audience can feel lost!
4. Pick a different rhythm for your third bar.
5. For your fourth bar, you need a rhythm that creates a nice ending for the first four-bar phrase.

Here are my first four bars:

Step 3. To continue, repeat your first four bars but change your third bar slightly. *This will allow your music to be repetitive but still offer a bit of variation.*

Step 4. Create two two-bar phrases that are different from each other and then repeat these four bars. When you repeat them, include a small variation somewhere.
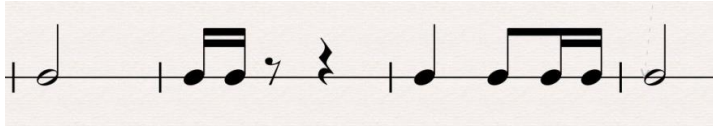
A phrase is like a sentence: by the end of the phrase, you should be able to take a breath before you start the next one.

Here are my two phrases:

Thinking about how long your phrases are is important as it creates a nice structure to the piece.

Here is my rhythm composition so far:

Step 5.

Now it's time to put a melody to your rhythm.

I suggest that you build your melody around this common chord progression:

Am G C F

Explanation:
Based on a natural A-minor scale (A, B, C, D, E, F, G):

- The **A-minor** chord starts on the first note of the scale, called the *tonic*: **ACE**
- The **G-major** chord starts on the seventh note (the *leading-note*): **GBD**
- The **C-major** chord starts on the third note (the *mediant*): **CEG**
- The **F-major** chord starts on the sixth note (the *sub-mediant*): **FAC**

Please, play these chords.

Step 6. Make up a melody using the rhythms you just came up with. The chords in my song change every bar and every bar is just two beats long. When you pick notes for your melody, you always can use the chord notes. If you like, you can also add notes that are in between your chord notes (the **passing notes** that were mentioned in the previous task). As long as you move in steps you can even start a bar on a note that is not in the chord. This note is called an **accentuated passing note**. They are very common in pop.
Remember that you need to stick to the notes in the scale.

My example is on the next page.

I used the chords on their own as an introduction. I then repeated my composition and added a tonic chord (A-minor) at the end.

I haven't inverted or developed the chords. This will be mentioned in further detail in task 8.

You are, of course, welcome to make a longer piece and put more of yourself into the composition.

The Joy of Composing

with Fredrik Holm

1-Am (ACE) 7-G (GBD) 3-C(CEG) 6-F(FAC)