

SONGWRITING FROM SCRATCH
using chord sequences for beginners
by Jilly Jarman

In primary schools singing activity inevitably involves composition at some point.

This can be approached from such a wide variety of ways that there will always be an approach that a teacher can use effectively and confidently.

As music practitioners with some musical training it is easy to forget how much knowledge and experience we draw from when taking even simple decisions about how to plan and execute a composition session.

We may automatically know how to construct a melody so that it fits with another, is easily harmonisable, works over a simple chord sequence and has a logical structure.

We may be doing this by instinct not a theoretical understanding but it is an instinct formed from experience as well as musical aptitude.

There is a current focus on starting from existing well-known tunes such as nursery rhymes and making creative changes to the words, context, performance, etc. This is a really useful way in, and acts as a safe template for experimentation.

Another template we can use if we want to move away from existing melodies and explore the creative process further is the chord sequence. I think this can be used just as effectively by teachers who have no instrumental or musical training and makes a wider range of music accessible.

Chord sequences are incredibly adaptable. Using the same sequence you can work in blues, reggae, folk, Spanish, rock, pop, punk etc styles, working slow, fast, mournful or upbeat and you can change and develop tunes as you go along.

You can explore the connection between pulse and rhythm in an enjoyable and understandable way that gives a good grounding for later music activity.

At this point the question is: how do you know which chord sequences to use? What works? Even if you can use the same sequence for different styles, how do you play the different rhythmic feels?

The obvious thing is to start from somewhere and gradually add to your library of things that work.

I have started with a descending 4-chord sequence and used two songs in different styles that use it in different ways.

You're mean is a blues and because the blues works well over a 'walking bassline' ie. Just playing on the pulse, the accompaniment can be very simple and on the beat.

Canta is a Spanish song, and here it works better (and is easier to play because it works) to follow the rhythm of the tune. To write this out looks complicated and unfriendly, so it is fine to just set the accompaniment out as a basic plan and guide and do the rest by ear.

Made in India is the English section of a famous Hindi pop song by Alisha Chinoy. You can download a Russian version from itunes!!

The chords go: Em D D C C D Em Em (repeat) for the chorus;

And: Em Em Em Em C C D D Em Em (repeat) for the verse

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