

## How to Harmonize a Melody

by Dennis Winge

Many singer-songwriters use chords and lyrics as their starting point. There is nothing wrong with this approach, but if you are a composer who always starts with the same tools first, then you are missing out on many possibilities for creativity and potentially even working harder, not smarter when it comes to coming up with new songs.

Each of the elements of music: melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, timbre, form and dynamics can each be a source of inspiration unto itself. For example, when was the last time you conceived a song idea just by exploring a song form you were not familiar with and deciding to write something in that form?

This article will assume that you are going to conceive a new song with the element of melody taken first. Perhaps you have had the experience of humming a song you weren't sure was yours or not, or even heard a melody in your head upon waking from sleep. When you write a melody first, of course the next logical step is to put supporting notes, or harmony, to that melody.

As an aside, harmony and chords are not always the same thing. A chord is any 3 or more notes at the same time. They are considered harmony because they support a melody, but you can also support a melody with just one note, like a bass line, or 2 notes, like 2 other singers, at the same time. Ever hear a great singer being supported only by upright bass? The effect can be wonderful.

Here are some basic strategies to harmonizing a melody.

### I. Know What Key You're In

You have to know where your "tonic" is for your melody. Often it's the very last note. It's the note that "resolves," i.e. makes you feel like you've come back home. Only the tonic, the root-note of the key you're in, will make you feel like you don't need any more music to follow it to bring you a sense of release or arrival.

### II. Know Your Harmonized Scales

A harmonized scales is where you stack 3rds, i.e. take every other note in the scale, and put them on top of each scale tone. This article is not meant to go into detail, but in a nutshell if you're harmonizing a G major scale the notes are g - a - b - c - d - e - f# - g. Scale degree 1 is g. Every other note is g - b - d - f# which would be G major7. Scale degree 2 is a. Every other note from there is a - c - e - g which is Am7. Scale degree 3 is b which would come out to Bm7 because it's b - d - f# - a. The result for G major is:

I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
Gmaj7	Am7	Bm7	Cmaj7	D7	Em7	F#m7b5

Once you know what key you're in, you have to know whether your melody is major or minor and use the relevant harmonized scale. Minor harmonized scales are derived from treating the VI of the major scale as the new I. Thus an Em harmonized scale is:

I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
Em7	F#m7b5	Gmaj7	Am7	Bm7	Cmaj7	D7

### III. Work Backwards

Suppose your melody in the key of Em is g - b - a - e - g like this:



Working backwards means asking yourself for each note "If I choose a chord that has this melody note in it, what are my options?" Let's take the first note g. This note can be the root of a G chord, the 3rd of an Em chord, or the 5th of a C chord. Those are all chords within the G harmonized scale so they will all work.

If you're feeling more adventurous, you can try other chords not in the key you're in just for contrast or if there's some particular emotional quality the chord has that helps your song create a mood or deliver a message. For example the note g is the root of a G minor chord, the 3rd of an Eb chord, or the 5th of a Cm chord. Using one of those chords within the context of G major could be very effective. If every song only used diatonic chords, the world would be a harmonically dull place. And all this doesn't even mention the possibility of using a chord that does NOT contain the melody note in it. The possibilities are truly endless.

### IV. Explore

Other ideas could be having lots of chords (like one for every note above) or having very few (like just an Em), or having different chords for the same melodic passage that gets repeated (for example, first time through is Em, then same notes are played over a Cmajor7, then Gmajor7, or even one bar each of Gmajor7 and Ebmaj7). Harmony is a wonderful and never-ending creative avenue for songwriting.

So, next time you write a song, consider doing the melody first, and then exploring as many harmonic possibilities as you can. Go mad. Just have fun and explore. Chances are you'll find choices that none of your previous songs ever used before.

