

Elements of “Conventional” Melodies

There is no way to describe all melodies in a single effort. In this case, when we talk about “conventional” melodies, it means a limited focus on music from, or derived from Western Europe going as far back as the 1500s. Within that limited scope, some useful terms are:

Range/Shape: the range of many melodies is limited to an octave or a little more (reflecting the range of the average voice); the shape is often in an arch form, or at least having multiple changes in direction.

Conjunct/Disjunct Motion: conjunct means *moving my step*; disjunct means moving by *skips or leaps*. Most melodies have a higher amount of conjunct motion.

Motif/Motive: a short, incomplete idea that “leaves you hanging”, if that’s all you hear; it has a specific pitch and rhythmic profile/fingerprint; moreover, it *motivates* the music by being made significant through exact or varied repetition. To put it another way, a motif is something we hear more than once, and in a meaningful way. A motif is a very small musical *unit*, usually just a few notes long.

Phrase: a larger musical unit that feels complete (but maybe not finished), usually 4-8 measures long; it ends with either a resolved feeling, or an unresolved feeling, which creates the expectation that more music is to come). The ending moment of a phrase (resolved or not) is called a cadence – there are different types of cadences.

Cadence: a stopping/arrival point at the end of a phrase. Cadences either feel very resolved, somewhat resolved, or NOT resolved. A melody that ends on the tonic usually feels very resolved. A melody that ends on another note will feel less- , or not- resolved.

Sequence: the immediate repetition of a pattern at a higher or lower pitch level. Sequences are very common in melodies of all kinds, and they support continuity. With motifs, sequences help them feel more significant via varied repetition. Sequences also allow a melody line to develop gradually because by definition, a sequence is not providing much in the way of new material. Sequences can also create tension because their repetitive aspect can instill a feeling *waiting for the next thing to come along*.

Period: a collection of 2-4 phrases organized so the final phrase feels the most resolved (with the strongest cadence). This means the earlier phrases often end in an unresolved (needing to continue) manner, creating a feeling of forward motion as the listener awaits the eventual resolution. Not all groups of phrases for periods.

In summary, western based melodies tend to be limited in range, but are still shapely, favoring conjunct motion. They are in units (or portions) that include the motif (small & often sequenced), phrase (medium) & possibly the period (large). Bigger pieces of music may contain multiple motifs, phrases & possibly periods. Because most melodies work towards a resolution on the tonic (or being a part of the tonic chord), there is a sense that they are *going somewhere* and have an eventual *goal*.