

Vocal Technique Lesson with Romain – Handout Friday 24 July 2020

Songwriting: Mood, Harmony, Melody

Hi everybody!

Last week I suggested a step-by-step guide for songwriting. I said, the order for these steps is only suggested, they can be done in any order you like of course. The first step: being inspired, looking for lyrics, the second step: brainstorming with yourself or with others, the third step: coming up with a structure, the fourth step: checking the lyrics, the fifth step: finding a good rhythm. Today, we will carry on and finish our journey towards the making of a song.

No matter how long it takes you to write a song, don't panic. Sometimes you will be very inspired and it will be made very quickly. Other times you will be very inspired too, but it will take a long time for your song to become real. Maybe because you feel demanding or maybe because you are struggling at one of more of these steps. Sometimes you will feel uninspired but still willing to write a song, which would also take a lot of time. I would just recommend: don't despair, if the inspiration is not quite there yet, just leave it for some time, sing other songs, and come back to it later. Inspiration can surprise you anytime, anywhere: on the bus, on the street walking, in bed. When it happens, try and seize this moment to write down/record your ideas with a recording device or your phone.

I feel that the best moment to come up with chords is when you have an idea of the lyrics. But of course, this is only one way of writing a song. Sometimes, you will first come up with the chords, which will then inspire you to write the lyrics and find a good rhythm. This is totally fine of course!

But in the case where we started to look for lyrics and other elements such as rhythm and structure, it feels natural to move on to finding the chords and focus on the harmony.

Your lyrics must be expressing a kind of mood, which then can be translated into music and especially chords.

Sixth step: finding out the general mood – minor or major key

Firstly you may want to find out what is the general mood and therefore which key would fit your song the best. Is it upbeat and positive? In that case, you may want to go for a major key. Or is rather reflective or sad? Maybe then, a minor key would be suitable. Or maybe, there are two different moods in your song and you want to highlight this contrast by having two different keys, a minor one and a major one. Maybe one of them for the verses, and the other one for the chorus.

Seventh step: thinking of a key and your vocal range

Once you have an idea of the key, major or minor, you should ask yourself: which key is my voice the most comfortable with. Depending on your own vocal range, you may find that some keys are easier for you to sing than others. If you are not sure about that, leave it for now and you can always decide and refine that later.

Eighth step: finding chords

Choose a line from your lyrics, maybe the first line of your first verse, or of your chorus. Say it and feel the right mood.

Try playing the root chord from the key you had come up with. Does it fit? If you think the key is right but that it should be another chord, try playing another chord, maybe the fourth or fifth degree of the key, or maybe its minor or major relative. Once you think the mood and the message from the lyrics match the chord, try singing this line, by just improvising. Don't worry too much about the melody and the rhythm yet. It is fine for you to just read the lyrics or sing the same note on top of the chord. This was just the first step of a whole journey, the 'harmonic' journey taking you from one chord to a succession of other chords.

Have a go at the second line. Compare it with the first line and ask yourself: is the meaning of the lyrics about the same, in which case you may be able to use the same chord? Or is the meaning different and in that case you should probably come up with a different chord?

Carry on the same work for the next lines. Once you have a whole verse or whole chorus, play the chords through and see if this succession makes sense musically. Another way of coming up with the right chords is to randomly choose a chord progression that you know well and match it with the lyrics. You may be very lucky and maybe this sounds like the perfect chord progression. Or it may be the opposite and it may sound completely off. In that case, try a completely different chord progression that you are familiar with too. And so one until one sounds better than the other ones. What happens often is that you end up finding a chord progression that sounds quite good but not entirely convincing. Then try and spot the moment when it sounds off. Which line is it? Swap it with another chord, or maybe swap the order of the chords. Basically play around the chords that you know and try and find a perfect match for your lyrics.

Another very important tip is: If you want to accompany yourself with either a guitar or a piano, you definitely need to ask yourself what chords you are able to play, if you are confident with most of the chords or if you should avoid some.

Ninth step: finding the melody

The melody is typically the sort of thing that can come up randomly, at some point in your day. It can appear magically in your mind and sometimes it will be so catchy that you won't be able to ignore it. It may even come with the lyrics you were working on, even better! If not, no worries at all. It is totally possible and frequent for songwriters to really 'compose' their melodies.

Here is a suggested way:

Focus on one line of your song and play the chord that you have decided. Then, let go your voice and look for melodies. Feel free to try various options: maybe start by singing the same note, that belongs to the chord, and then maybe be more adventurous by singing upward and then downward and so on. Be aware of the emotion that you want to convey as well. The most passionate words could be sung with higher notes maybe?

And then, think of the rhythm you had come up with for this line. Try and combine that rhythm with the various melodies you created. There should be one or two that sound more catchy than the rest.

Conclusion: Whatever you came up with, be ready to swap anything with something else. Nothing is set in stone, except the catchy elements which you are very sure about. Go again through all the different steps. Sing through bits of your songs. If you are stuck, do something else and come back to it.

I hope it is a bit helpful. Send us any song that you write, we'd love to hear them!