

# Chapter

# 6

## KEY WORDS

diatonic  
interval  
maqam  
mode  
modulation  
motif, motive  
octave  
pitch  
raga  
scale  
tonic

## Learning Objectives

After successfully completing this unit, the student will understand that:

1. Changes in pitch or vibrational frequency, which we usually perceive and describe as the “highness” or “lowness” of a sound, create rising and falling contours which we call melodies.
2. Most melodies consist of more than two pitches and draw their tonal material from scales or modes.
3. A melody must have a coherent form, although different cultures have different criteria for creating a pleasing form.
4. Whole music systems, such as those of India and the Arab world, may be based on elaborate melodic prototypes which can be unfolded in various ways through composition and improvisation.
5. Repetition, ornamentation, and variation are important techniques for developing and elaborating upon melodic form.

## Television Program

Melody

## Audio Selections

25. “Sonata in A Major” by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: First Movement.
26. “Dikrayati”
27. “Crossing the Shannon”
28. “The Rocks of Bawn” (1st verse), 1963
29. “The Rocks of Bawn” (1st verse), 1973
30. “Were You at the Rock?”
21. Gat in Rag Kamod, Teental

# Melody

*“Now for some people music and melody are the same thing. It’s the whole meal so to speak: . . . And they’re right, in a way, because what is music anyway but sounds that change and move along in time?”*

YOUNG PEOPLE’S CONCERT: WHAT IS MELODY?  
LEONARD BERNSTEIN

In this chapter we will examine the nature of melody, the “singable part” of music. Our earliest musical memories usually have to do with the simple tunes of common songs such as Christmas carols or nursery rhymes. When you remove the words from these songs, what remains is the melody. Pitch, the frequency (highness or lowness) of a sung or played sound, is the raw material from which melodies are made. Melodies, or tunes, organize pitches into sequences which have a distinct contour and rhythm.

Each music culture has its own ways of organizing pitches into melodies. In some cultures the rules of melody-making are unspoken,

learned by ear, and taken for granted by the members of a community. In other cultures, melodic systems have developed an elaborate and explicit musical grammar, which is discussed by theorists and practitioners. This chapter will introduce you to some of the ways that musicians create and think about melodies in a variety of cultures, including the European classical, Arabic, Irish, and North Indian musical traditions.

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“Melody is the story you’re telling,” says jazz saxophonist Josh Redman, “and for that reason, to me melody is in some ways the most important element of music.” American scholar and player of Turkish music Frederick Stubbs continues: “It’s like a story because it has a beginning, it has a plot, and it has an ending.” Melody tells its story through changing pitch, a succession of rising and falling tones.

A drone is not a melody: its *pitch* never changes. The regular rise and fall of an emergency siren has meaning as a signal, but few people would call it a melody; in its incessant regularity, it is more like a drone. It doesn’t tell a story. Neither does the signal of a two-note doorbell or cuckoo clock. The children’s song “Rain, Rain, Go Away” can be sung using just two pitches—the same two that doorbells and cuckoo clocks often use—but we might be more willing to call it a melody; this is probably because the words and rhythm give a feeling of shape to the overall utterance. Still, most people consider it a very simple, childish melody—it barely squeezes into the category. If we add one occurrence of a third pitch, as many children do, it already sounds more melodic.

Some melodies are very short. A celebrated example is the four-note theme from which Ludwig von Beethoven built the entire first movement of his Fifth Symphony. Melodies might be quite long as well. Some Arabic and Turkish melodies take several minutes to perform, and the melody of a Central Javanese gamelan composition can stretch even longer without repeating. What they all share is pitch, which can be described as the vibrating frequency of a tone.

In the Western common system, the pitch called “A” vibrates at or near 440 cycles per second. The pitch vibrating twice as fast—880 cycles per second—is also called “A,” but it is said to be an octave higher. When women and men sing the same melody together they often sing in octaves, the higher women’s voices sounding an octave above the men’s. Still, it sounds like they are all singing the same melody; tones which are an octave apart are perceived as sharing a basic pitch identity.

Perhaps for this reason, many of the world’s music systems involve the octave as a frame for placing other pitches, which may divide the octave in

various ways. Such subdivisions of the octave are called *scales*. In the West and in a number of other cultures, seven basic pitches or “steps” divide the octave into a diatonic scale. In fact the word *octave* (“eighth”) refers to these seven steps plus the next note, which is an “eighth” or octave above the starting pitch. Several other systems involve five steps, making a pentatonic scale; still others may use more or less. Steps may have names—such as the solfege syllables doh, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti or the letter names A, B, C, D, E, F, G in the West. Some other cultures also use solfege syllables to identify pitches in a row or scale: in India, the steps dividing the octave are called sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, and ni.

Western musicians also recognize a twelve-pitch scale called the *chromatic scale*, in which five of the diatonic steps are subdivided. This set of pitches represents all the white and black keys on the piano within one octave. Until the twentieth century, these chromatic pitches were always regarded as somewhat auxiliary to the prevailing diatonic scale pitches. As we will see later in this chapter, Indian and Arabic music systems have somewhat similar concepts.

In general, Western musicians do not regard scales as having meaning in themselves, beyond the overly simplified observation that melodies in major scales sound happy or serene and those in minor scales sound sad or agitated. American composer Gerald Shapiro refers to a scale as “a kind of bag of notes from which you can choose the notes of your melody.” In the music systems in some other cultures, scales are not used as abstract sets of pitches. Indian *ragas* are considered to possess inherent meaning, as did Arabic maqam in an earlier period; the composer or improviser does not simply choose pitches from a collection, but is entrusted with the responsibility of unfolding and developing a complex and rich aggregation of meanings that are considered to be already inherent in the melody form.

But whatever the specifics of the system, melodic meaning begins here, with the relationships of pitches to each other and often to the framing octave as well. Individual melodies might move up and down a scale smoothly by steps, or may leap past one or more steps to another pitch. They may slide between pitches, or use pitches which lie between the basic steps, sometimes dividing one step into minute subdivisions. But pitches only start to have meaning as melodies when they are heard in relationship to each other through time.

Pitch relationships are called *intervals*. We have already discussed the interval of an octave, or eighth. Other intervals are also referred to numerically: two notes which are one step apart constitute a *second*, notes two steps apart form a *third*, and so on. Two notes of identical pitch constitute



A demonstration of two important Western diatonic scales, major and harmonic minor. These are notated in **Appendix 2**.



A demonstration of melodic and harmonic intervals. These are notated in **Appendix 1**.

a *unison* (“one sound”). When notes sound simultaneously, the interval is said to be *harmonic*; when they sound sequentially, the interval is *melodic*.

The smallest interval in Western music is the *half step*, also known as a *minor second*. It can be visualized as the distance between two adjacent frets on a guitar fingerboard, or as immediately neighboring keys on a piano. The steps of diatonic scales are all either half steps or whole steps (comprising two half steps, a major second). The intervals of the chromatic scale are all half steps.

If you program a computer to move randomly between the pitches of a given scale, it is unlikely that the result would sound like a satisfying melody. A melody must have a coherent form. Different cultures have different criteria for creating a pleasing form, but pure formlessness is seldom regarded as music. There must be some formal considerations if any melody is to cohere and satisfy. Such considerations may involve clear subdivisions, giving a melody a feeling of inner relationships somewhat like the relationships between words in a sentence, sentences in a paragraph, paragraphs in a chapter, and so on. Or, perhaps more frequently, these formal practices might resemble elements of poetry—small-scale relationships like assonance, consonance, and rhyme; larger-scale relationships like metric patterns, stanzaic patterns, and so on.

Western musicians have developed a terminology for the structural elements of melody. The shortest unit, of course, is a single pitch. A relatively small group of pitches which repeats, perhaps with some variation, is called a *motive* or *motif*. Some people would argue that the four-note theme of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony is not a melody at all, but a motif which is used to build larger structures in the piece. A grouping of a small number of pitches which does not repeat motivically is called a phrase member, and two or more phrase members constitute a phrase. In turn, two or more phrases constitute a complete melody.

Another Western children’s song can provide a brief example. This melody has carried many different sets of words; in English, at least three sets are fairly well known: “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” “Baa, Baa, Black Sheep,” and “The Alphabet Song.” The first pitch (sung twice) immediately establishes a reference point for any following pitches. The second pitch creates an interval called a fifth: it is the fifth scale pitch above the first. The melody then moves up a step, returns to the fifth above the first pitch, and pauses there. This pause carries a little bit of tension: the melody doesn’t sound finished yet. Then the melody continues down stepwise, finally returning to the first pitch with a feeling of resolution.



### Melody Example 1: “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” Melody



Although this melody normally continues on from here, we can view this section as a little melody in itself: in Stubbs’s words, it has a beginning (the rising fifth), a plot (a pause followed by stepwise movement back down), and an end (returning to the initial pitch). Like most melodies, it involves both stepwise motion and leaping motion—the fifth at the beginning. It has a specific rhythmic shape as well: a rhythmic pattern is repeated, six quarter-notes followed by a half-note.

The midpoint pause separates the melody into two parts, increasing the tension which is resolved at the end. The words sung to this melody sometimes mirror this feeling with a question and answer: “Baa baa black sheep, have you any wool? / Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full.” The French text Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart referred to when he wrote his twelve variations on this melody has a somewhat similar structure—in this case the pause separates two clauses of one sentence: “Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman, / Ce qui cause mon tourment?” (“Ah, shall I tell you, Mama, / What is causing my torment?”)

The beginning of a melody Mozart composed for another set of variations can give us a chance to look at further kinds of melodic relationships. It starts with a brief melodic idea—a step up, a step back down, and an upward leap of a third—which can be called a motif. What follows is a varied repetition of this motif, moving it down one scale step. The phrase member which follows presents a contrast, rising and falling mainly in stepwise motion, but ending the whole phrase with that questioning sound which indicates that the story will continue. Then the original motif and its variation are repeated, and the following phrase member provides another contrast, echoing the stepwise rise and fall of its counterpart in the first phrase, but ending with a real feeling of resolution. In the ensuing variations this melody is transformed in several ways, but these basic relationships are always preserved.

### Melody Example 2: First Eight Measures from the First Movement of Mozart’s A Major Piano Sonata, No. 11 (K.331).



A performance of this theme-and-variations movement from Mozart’s Piano Sonata in A Major.

Drawing by Eugene A. Perry (1913), courtesy of Library of Congress.



▲ Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Many music-cultures make use of the idea of melodic variation, either in the kinds of large-scale systematic variations written by composers like Mozart or in more spontaneous and small-scale improvisational practices such as those associated with Irish traditional music, discussed later in this chapter. Variation can involve a very subtle level of musical communication. Once you know the basic melody, you can perceive every nuance of its variation, drawing you into an appreciation of the tiniest details of the composer or improviser's art.

Indeed, whole music systems, such as those of India and the Arab world which are described below, may be based on elaborate melodic prototypes which can be unfolded in various ways through composition and improvisation; knowledgeable audience members can recognize and understand a musician's individual approach to these prototypes in relation to the many other performances they have heard of them. Although these melodic systems have their own names—*rāga*, *maqam*, and so on—scholars sometimes refer to them cross-culturally with the term *mode*, borrowed from similar melodic prototypes which were used by medieval composers of Western church music.

## MELODY IN WESTERN CLASSICAL MUSIC

The earliest examples we have of European music are notated melodies of sacred chants. These melodies are based on the mode system, which involves scales derived from the Western diatonic scale with differing “final” pitches—*finalis* in the Latin of the early scribes. Since these modal scales have been found in common practice among many of Europe's folk musicians, some scholars have suggested that local folk music provided the elemental basis for some of the more elaborate modal melodies of traditions like that of Gregorian Chant, while other melodies apparently were rooted in earlier traditions of Western Asia and Northern Africa. Throughout the medieval and Renaissance eras (until approximately the mid-sixteenth century), composers in religious and courtly traditions used modal scales in their melodic practices, but eventually the modal system was largely superseded by the tonal system, which involved two basic scales called major and minor.

For centuries, Western classical musicians have also worked with the idea of simultaneous melodies which might contrast with or complement each other. Early modal developments in counterpoint ushered in polyphonic systems involving two or more concurrent melodies, and composers delighted in crafting forms in which several voices or instruments

produced distinct melodies that blended into a harmonious whole. Such multi-melodic practices enriched a compositional tradition which continues to thrive and develop today.

In the twentieth century, many Western classical musicians began to reconsider their ideas about melody. Some immersed themselves in folk or popular musics, convinced that the melodic practices of non-classical musicians had much to offer. Others cultivated contacts with the melodic traditions of non-European cultures.

Another restructuring of melodic thought came from the serial practices developed by Arnold Schoenberg and his associates, in which the twelve tones of the chromatic scale are arranged into tone rows—abstract melodic prototypes that may be articulated in different ways, layered polyphonically, and varied through transposition (being raised or lower), retrograde (being played backwards), and inversion (being played upside-down). In such practices, the “melody” of the tone row is not necessarily meant to be consciously perceived as such. Its constant presence and manipulation is intended to give compositions an inner coherence that goes beyond earlier concepts of melodic usage.

Such ideas have led to a complete rethinking of the nature and role of melody in some spheres of Western classical music. Indeed, some composers and musicians have abandoned the ideas of scale and melody altogether. All of these twentieth-century developments are controversial; only time will tell whether a consensus can be reached about whose melodic ideas will survive beside those of Mozart and Beethoven.

## MELODY IN ARABIC MUSIC: MAQAM

Melodic systems in the art music of Turkey, northern Africa, and the Middle East share a common basis in the concept of *maqam* (Turkish *makam*) or melodic mode. The Arabic *maqam* system is practiced primarily in the eastern Arab world from Egypt to Lebanon and Syria. The influence of Arabic culture reaches from Spain to Indonesia, owing to the rapid spread of Islam during the centuries following the death of its founder, the Prophet Muhammad, in 632 CE. Instruments and elements of musical style travelled with Islam throughout the Muslim world, from southern Europe to North India and Indonesia.

The *maqamat* (plural of *maqam*) of Arabic music share significant features with European scales and modes and Indian *ragas*. All three systems create melodies from a set of seven pitches within an octave. In Arabic music, these notes are called “rast, dukah, sikah, jaharkah, nawa, husayni, awj”—although Western solfege syllables are now commonly used by





▲ Middle East

Arabic musicians. All three systems further divide the octave into smaller intervals, including higher or lower variants of each of the main pitches, and all three systems impose a particular hierarchy on the notes in a particular scale, mode, maqam, or raga—that is, some notes are more important than others. One particular note functions as what Western theorists called a *finalis*—the final note in a composition or improvised performance. In Western harmonic practice, this final note is called the tonic or keynote, and English-speaking Arab and Indian musicians often use the word *tonic* when referring to the concluding tone of a maqam or raga.

Recognizing the similarities between Western, Arabic, and Indian music is helpful in two ways. First, it alerts us to notice parallels when we encounter them. Second, it provides a framework for examining differences. Knowing that these are octave-based systems

which share the principle of note hierarchy, we are prepared to investigate the different ways in which scales, modes, maqams and ragas divide the octave and emphasize particular notes. We may also be on the lookout for major characteristics that the systems do *not* share—such as the harmonic structure of Western music, the fact that Arabic maqams often change their note content from one octave to the next, or that in Indian classical music the tonic never moves (or modulates) from the note “sa.”

It is also useful to bear in mind that melodic systems change over time. Western classical music before the time of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) employed a number of different tuning systems, and when modern listeners hear early music performed in its original temperament (or tuning), they may at first feel that the notes are out-of-tune. Prior to the eighteenth century, the twelve half-steps in the Western chromatic scale were not all equidistant from their neighboring tones; some half-steps were larger than others. The rapid modulations (or key-changes) in the music of Bach’s time necessitated the creation of the equal-tempered scale, in which equidistant half-steps allow the composer to move freely from one key to another without creating unwanted dissonances.

Arabic and Indian music also have changed in recent centuries, and arguments about the proper intonation or tuning of particular notes provide a rich ground for debate in both traditions. The influence of Western

music has been an important factor in these changes—exposure to Western music theory and equal-tempered instruments like the piano, organ, and the Indian harmonium, a bellows-blown, keyboard instrument, have created new challenges and controversies in non-Western music cultures.

## The Notes of Arabic Music

We may begin to understand the notes of Arabic music by comparing them to the notes of the Western major scale. Like Western musicians, Arabic musicians have a seven-note “natural scale,” but unlike Westerners, they subdivide the octave, not into twelve half-steps, but into twenty-four “quarter-tones,” which are needed to express the subtle intonational nuances of Arabic music. Thus, Arabic musicians recognize “half-sharps” and “half-flats” between the half-steps of the Western chromatic scale. In Western music, the space between the notes C and D is two half-steps; in Arabic music, the same interval includes four quarter-tones. E half-flat and B half-flat are included in the Arabic fundamental scale, which is built on the note “C” (Arabic “Rast”).

Listeners who are unfamiliar with Arabic music will find it difficult to conceive of the sound of “E half-flat” or “B half-flat” without hearing the notes played or sung. To illustrate the principle, you may take a common Western instrument such as a piano or guitar and play the three notes, “C, D, E,” or “doh, re, mi.” These three notes, separated by two whole steps, are not only the initial pitches in a Western C major scale, but also the first three notes in the Arabic maqam known as *Ajam*. Now play the three notes, “C, D, E flat” or “doh, re, mi flat.” These three notes, separated by one whole step and one half-step, are the initial pitches in a Western C minor scale and the first three notes in the maqam known as Nahawand. Now sing the notes “C” and “D,” and then try to sing a third note which sounds approximately halfway between “E flat” and “E.” This is the third note in maqam Rast, the fundamental Arabic scale. Arabic listeners, who have grown up hearing these intervals, find them as natural as Western listeners find the notes of the major and minor scales.

Simon Shaheen illustrates the use of “E half-flat” in the “Melody” television program. As he points out, with practice Westerners can learn to hear, sing, and play the quarter-tones of Arabic music.

## The Nature of Maqam

A maqam is not a tune or a song, but, somewhat like a Western key, provides the tonal material for a great many songs and instrumental melo-

dies. Early writers associated specific maqamat with particular planets, signs of the zodiac, seasons, times of the day or night, elements, humors, temperaments, virtues, classes of people, colors, odors, raw materials, alphabetical letters, poetic meters, and healing properties, but more recent theorists have tended to dismiss these associations, restricting modern discussions to more tangible aspects of musical form.<sup>1</sup>

Although the maqamat are theoretically infinite in number, the number in current use is limited. The repertory of popular Arabic singers includes a core of about twelve frequently performed maqamat and another dozen which receive occasional performances. “Serious” composers in the academic world commonly supplement these approximately two dozen maqamat with an additional fifteen, and occasionally compose in another twenty to thirty less common ones. The total number of maqamat in current use, then, is about seventy, although scholars over the last two centuries have documented the existence of up to one hundred and nineteen distinct modes.<sup>2</sup>

The repertory varies between different parts of the Arabic music area. The maqamat also have changed over time, partly as a result of contact with Turkish, Persian, and European music, and partly due to changes in the status of music in modern Arabic culture. In Egypt, Arabic music has been transformed from a poorly respected profession to a mark of high culture which every student must encounter in school; one result of this “elevation” of the music has been a simplification of its theory and repertory to make it accessible to a broad population of amateur students.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to the twentieth century, the maqamat were described not as scales, but as melodic formulae, each with its own starting-note, ending-note, and typical, defining melodic phrases or song-like tunes. Modern Arabic music theorists define each maqam, not as a melodic formula, but as a scale, in which the final note also functions as the most important tone. Each maqam is a “weighted scale,” in that some notes may be regarded as strong, some weak, and others of moderate importance.<sup>4</sup>

Composers are free to create melodies without being confined to a prescribed order of pitches, but both composers and improvisers must observe certain conventions in ordering their compositions and performances. Arabic music theorist Touma writes that each maqam consists of a number of pitch regions, each “centered on a principal note around which the neighboring notes effect a rotary embroidery.” Each of these regions comprises a “phase in the development of a maqam.” Touma concludes that “the totality of these phrases constitute the form of the maqam which is defined by the succession of pivot-notes.”<sup>5</sup>

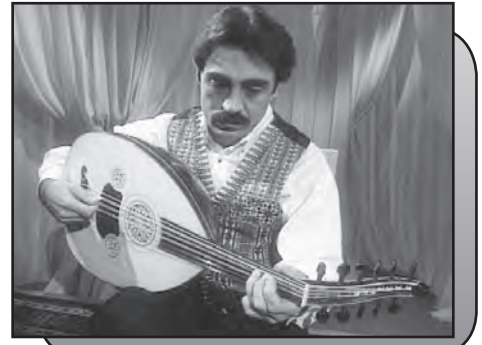
## The Maqam in Performance

In practice, the notes of each maqam are seldom rendered simply. The melody is enriched by the use of various slides, shakes, trills, tremelo (the rapid repetition of a single note), and grace notes. Early Western music, and melodic systems outside of the Western classical tradition, often employ such devices; while Western classical composers often rely on harmony to add flavor to their music, Arabic, Indian, and Irish traditional musicians use melodic ornamentation to add spice to their playing and singing. According to Simon Shaheen, musical ornamentation often reflects a preference for “dressing up” in other areas of life, such as visual art, calligraphy, clothing, and cooking.

You hardly listen to Arabic music or Arabic melody without this art of ornament. And it is obvious in our way of life, for example, the way we dress traditionally—like this vest, it’s very ornamented. When we prepare our food, the food on the table should be very much ornamented; otherwise nobody would touch it. And the same thing with music.<sup>6</sup>

Arabic musicians add variety to their music not only by ornamenting the notes of a particular maqam, but by *modulation* from one maqam to another in the course of a composition or improvisation. In some cases, such modulation involves changing the key-note, from C to G, for example. In other cases modulation to a new maqam involves altering the structure of the scale by raising or lowering one or more notes by a quarter-tone or half-step.

In the instrumental composition known as “Di-krayati,” both the key-note and the scale structure alter in the course of a modulation during the first section of the piece. We may describe the composition as having the form A-B-A. The A section begins in the maqam known as *Nahawand*, which corresponds to the Western scale of C minor. Partway through this segment, the melody modulates to the maqam known as *Bayyati*. In this modulation, the key-note moves up from C to G, and the note A is raised by one quarter-tone. The ‘ud player then plays a short improvisation called a *taqasim*, in which he eventually modulates back to the original maqam, Nahawand.



▲ Simon Shaheen playing the ‘ud



▲ The Simon Shaheen Ensemble



The Simon Shaheen Ensemble plays the composition “Dikrayati.”

The ensemble then plays a sprightly B section in Nahawand, and then returns to section A, concluding their performance on the key-note C. The recapitulation of section A does not include the original modulation to Bayyati maqam—the melody ends just before the point where that modulation occurred in the first statement of section A. The following time-line will help you to recognize important points in recorded selection Audio #26.

### Audio Example #26: “Dikrayati”

0:00	0:07	0:17	0:29
A section begins in Nahawand maqam on note G	first phrase ends on note G	second phrase ends on note F	third phrase descends to low G

0:36	0:37	0:44	0:58
melody rests on key-note C	rising scale climbs to high C, modulates to Bayyati during descent to G	series of phrases ending on G, key-note of Bayyati maqam	series of phrases ending on high C, returning to G

1:20	1:41	2:30	3:09
'ud taqsim begins on G, modulates back to Nahawand, concludes on C	B section, faster	return to slow A section	piece concludes on note C, in original maqam

## MELODY IN IRISH MUSIC

According to Irish-American uilleann piper Jerry O’Sullivan, “With Irish music, the most important thing is the melody.” Broadly speaking, Irish traditional music can be divided into four categories or genres that are all based on single sung or played melodic lines: dance music, instrumental slow airs (usually based on song melodies), songs in the English



language, and sean-nós singing, a repertory of songs primarily in the Irish language. Sean-nós, translated from Irish gaelic as “old style,” is considered to be the oldest form of musical expression in Ireland. While the songs in both Irish and English are traditionally sung by one performer, the dance tunes are played in groups as well as by solo players.

## Irish Dance Music

The body of traditional dance music is played on instruments such as the fiddle, uilleann pipes, concertina, accordion, flute, tin whistle, mandolin, banjo, and bouzouki. These instruments are primarily used to play the melody or tune while guitar, piano, and bodhrán, an Irish frame drum, are often used to play accompaniments. Tunes include jigs, reels, hornpipes, and marches, most of which conform to a basic structure of two eight-bar sections. In performance, each section or strain is played twice before the entire tune is repeated again.

Musicians and scholars talk about the “bare bones” or “skeleton” of the tune, an unembellished version using only the basic notes, melodic shape, and rhythm that give a tune its own identity. Irish players don’t actually perform this skeletal melody. Performances differ from player to player because, as fiddler Brian Conway says, “There’s room for imprinting your own personality, your own creativity within the structure of Irish music.” Individual renditions of tunes will vary according to a variety of factors, including the player’s source for learning the tune, and his or her instrument, technique, and style. Many musicians insist that a tune should never be played the same way twice. However, as Brian Conway says, “The challenge is to alter it in such a way as to enable you to sit in and play with somebody you’ve never met before who also plays that tune. And then do it in such a way that doesn’t sound discordant, that it doesn’t sound chaotic. That’s the beautiful thing.” Jerry O’Sullivan describes the process as follows:

In Irish music, when you’re using variation in a piece, it’s a subtle type of thing where you can change notes. If you change the melody a little bit you can put in different notes. You can change the rhythm a little bit. And that’s okay as long as the variations you put in wouldn’t make another player uncomfortable, or make his job difficult, or obscure the main melody. If it becomes too different, then it’s a problem. However, the idea is not to have the same exact performance twice around. It should be a little bit different every time you play it.<sup>7</sup>



▲ Fiddler Brian Conway

These subtle variations don't get in the way in group playing. As Brian Conway stresses, the context for Irish music is often social and informal:

Irish music is a social music because it brings people together. House sessions are a major component of traditional Irish music. Houses are where people would congregate in Ireland, and even in my house [in New York] when I was growing up because both my parents were from Ireland, we had an Irish session almost every Friday where people would congregate. They would play tunes, sharing new tunes and old tunes. It's a wonderful opportunity to meet with people. And because the music is so predictable within its structure, people can sit down who have learned tunes from different sources and play a tune together. It's a wonderful aspect of the tradition that continues on today.<sup>8</sup>

The fiddle is one of the main melody instruments used by Irish musicians. Its presence in Ireland can be traced back at least two hundred years. The instrument is structurally the same as the standard violin, but it is held in a variety of ways. Some players rest it against their chest, shoulder, or upper arm; others tuck it under their chin. The method of holding the bow also varies enormously from player to player. Traditional players generally play only in first position on the fiddle, giving them a range of just over two octaves.

The uilleann pipes are a distinctly Irish member of the bagpipe family. The Irish word "uilleann" means elbow and refers to the fact that the piper must pump a bellows under his or her left elbow rather than blow in order to power the instrument. The standard uilleann pipes that developed early in the 1800s has a chanter (a holed pipe that provides the pitches), three drones, and three regulators. The regulators make the instrument fairly unique among bagpipes. While the drone pipes each provide one constant note tuned to the tonic, each regulator has four or five keys. If switched on, the regulators can provide more of a harmonic accompaniment to the tune. The piper must be very dexterous in order to pump the bag, finger the chanter, switch the regulators off and on, play the regulators with the right wrist, and keep all the pipes in tune. The sound of the uilleann pipes being played is much quieter than the Scottish war pipes and the instrument is meant to be played indoors in a seated position.



▲ Uilleann Pipes

## Analysis of a Tune

The tune “Crossing the Shannon” is a typical reel that has a two part structure. Like the majority of fiddle tunes in the Anglo-Celtic tradition, “Crossing the Shannon” (**Example 3**) has a first or “A” section that is played and then repeated, followed by the second or “B” section which is also repeated. This fixed structure is 32 measures long. In Irish music sessions, musicians tend to play a tune through two or three times at which point they switch without break into another tune. This technique of making medleys expands the melodic material in a single performance.



◀ Jerry O'Sullivan, Brian Conway, and Pat Kilbride

### Melody Example 3: “Crossing the Shannon” (Irish Reel)



While we can think of melody in Irish traditional music as the tune, we can also look at the smaller melodic units that make up the whole.

Typically, melodies are composed of phrases that create musical thoughts. In “Crossing the Shannon,” each grouping of four measures creates a complete thought or phrase. If we look more closely we can see how those four measures fit together. First of all, measures one, two, and three begin in exactly the same way, while measure four is different. Taken together, measures one and two present part of an idea that is responded to or answered in measures three and four. At this point the melody comes to a brief moment of rest marking the end of the phrase. However, the last two eighth notes in measure four, called the upbeat, propel the melody forward to begin a new phrase. Measures five and six are identical to measures one and two followed by two new measures of music that end the second phrase and section A.



A performance of “Crossing the Shannon” and “The Duke of Leinster.” The tunes are played by Jerry O’Sullivan on uilleann pipes, Brian Conway on fiddle, and Pat Kilbride on guitar.

In breaking down the melody in both section A and section B in “Crossing the Shannon,” we see that repetition plays an important role. For example, measures one and five are identical as are measures two and six. On an even smaller level, the motive that begins measure one also begins measures two, three, five, and six. The identical motive also begins measures nine, eleven, and thirteen in the B section. Therefore, repetition within the body of the tune can be seen on a micro level each time the motive reappears. The combination of repetition and contrast within the larger phrase structure creates a sense of both unity and movement. Repetition occurs on the macro level when the tune is repeated over and over again in performance.

As stated above, musicians alter the fixed structure of the tune in performance by their use of ornamentation and variation. These methods of improvisation are subtle when compared with techniques used in more highly extemporaneous genres, such as jazz or North Indian classical music. In jazz, the players will often start with a fixed tune or song, but during the course of their performance, will move completely away from the original melody. In Irish traditional music, the tune is always recognizable. The musician’s artistry lies in his or her ability to alter or vary the tune each time it is played. As fiddler Brian Conway says, “There are just plain notes, but that doesn’t make a performance.”

While other musicians may appreciate all the minute changes they hear in a particular rendition of a tune, all listeners can perceive the vitality and expression in the playing. Although subtle, the variations a musician uses may be perceived by the listener because of the use of repetition. Even though musicians are working within the framework of a fixed melody that is repeated in performance, their use of ornamentation and variation keeps the music spontaneous and new.

## Song Traditions in Irish and English

The human voice is perhaps the oldest and most accessible musical “instrument.” Most of us use our voices primarily to speak, but spoken utterances have a great deal in common with singing. Speech has rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and timbre (tonal color). More importantly for the subject of this chapter, speech requires the creation of rising and falling patterns of pitch—speech therefore has melody.

In most cultures there is a marked difference between everyday speech and song. Song takes the natural intonation patterns of speech and formalizes them into melodies. But melody when combined with language evokes added meaning and emotion. In quoting lyricist Yip Harburg, singer and composer Pete Seeger said, “Words make you think, music makes you feel, and a song makes it possible to feel a thought.”<sup>9</sup>

In some song traditions, the text fuels the melody: the words are carefully rendered so that their full meaning comes across to the listener. In other traditions, the melody seems to take precedence over the words. Irish traditional songs in both the Irish and English languages fall more into the former category. Because many of the songs are ballads—songs which tell a story—the texts are set in conventional verse or strophic form in which their meanings are clearly rendered. Jerry O’Sullivan describes the singing of ballads:

The singer, with these songs, is telling a story, literally. Some of these can be ten, twelve verses long. And sometimes they’re talking about love themes. . . . Some of them are about disasters, boating disasters or different types of disasters. But in all cases, it’s a very emotional thing—very very emotional, a very intense emotional type of thing.<sup>10</sup>

Each ballad may have many stanzas that are each comprised of four lines. While the text changes in each stanza in order to unfold the story, the music stays the same so that the same four lines of music are repeated over and over again. Nevertheless, it is rare for any two stanzas to sound exactly alike.

Singers use some of the same devices employed by dance musicians to alter their performance, including ornamentation and melodic variations. But because many of the songs are in free rhythm and performed by one person at a time, there is more room for rhythmic freedom—changes in word stress and timing. By spontaneously making these choices during a performance, the singer makes the song his or her own. Joe Heaney, one of Ireland’s finest exponents of both sean-nós and English language songs, described this process:

▼ Sean Nós Singer





And I do a song my own way, you know. I get a song off you or somebody, now I sing that song my own way. . . . Now I'm not saying this is the way that was decorated by somebody else. It's the way I do it, and every time I do it I probably do it different; but I do it in the same way. I don't take anything away from it, in fact I try to better it every time I do it, you know. . . . I love to sing it, and I love it so much that I don't want to leave it. I just want to hold on to it as long as I can when I'm singing it. That's the way to treat a good song.<sup>11</sup>

Two recorded examples of the first verse of “The Rocks of Bawn” show how Joe Heaney could sing the same song differently on two occasions. The first recording was made in 1963 (Example 4) while the second was made in 1973 (Example 5). Notice how the second version is much more highly ornamented than the first.

The story of the song takes place at the time of Oliver Cromwell in the late seventeenth century. Cromwell was responsible for seizing Irish properties, sending the original owners “to hell or Connaught”—Connaught being so rocky as to be virtually unfarmable. The title of the song refers to a specific place name, but is emblematic of the whole western region and the particular social, agricultural, and historical situation. The third verse is spoken by the bailiff, the agent of the absentee landlord, cursing Sweeney for being unable to pay the rent. The last verse contains a special irony, as Sweeney decides that his only hope for a future is in the army of his oppressors.



## 28, 29

Joe Heaney's recordings of the first verse of “The Rocks of Bawn” from 1963 and 1973, respectively.

### Melody Example 4: “The Rocks of Bawn” (first verse) sung by Joe Heaney in 1963

Come all you loyal heroes, where - ev - er might you be:

Don't hire with a - ny (m) mas - ter 'till you know what your work will be,

For you must rise up ear - ly, from the clear day - light 'till the dawn,

I'm a-raid (y) you'll ne'er be a-ble to plow the rocks o' Bawn.

**Melody Example 5: "The Rocks of Bawn" (first verse) sung by Joe Heaney in 1973**

Come all you loyal heroes, where - ev - er you may be:

Don't hire with a - ny mas - ter 'till you know what your work will be,

For you must rise up ear - ly, from the clear (e) day - (l) light 'till the dawn,

I'm a-fraid you'll ne'er be a - ble to plow the rocks of Bawn.

### "The Rocks of Bawn"

Come all you loyal heroes, wherever you may be  
 Don't hire with any master 'till you know what your work will be  
 For you must rise up early, from the clear daylight 'till dawn;  
 I'm afraid you'll ne'er be able to plow the rocks of Bawn.

And rise up gallant Sweeney, and give your horse some hay  
 And give him a good feed of oats before you go away  
 Don't feed him on soft turnip, put him out on your green lawn;  
 For I'm afraid he'll ne'er be able to plow the rocks of Bawn.

And my curse attend you Sweeney, you have me nearly robbed:  
 You're sitting by the fireside with a dudeen in your gob,  
 You're sitting by the fireside from the clear daylight 'till the dawn;  
 I'm afraid you'll ne'er be able to plow the rocks of Bawn.

My shoes they are well-worn now, my stockings they are thin;  
 My heart is always trembling, I'm afraid I might give in.  
 My heart is always trembling from the clear daylight 'till the dawn;  
 I'm afraid I'll ne'er be able to plow the rocks of Bawn.

And I wish the Queen of England would send for me in time  
 And put me in a regiment, all in my youth and prime.  
 I would fight for Ireland's glory from the clear daylight 'till the dawn;  
 But I never return again to plow the rocks o'Bawn.



Brian Conway plays “Were You at the Rock” as a slow air on the fiddle. This beautiful love song in the Irish language is also called “Have You Been at Carrack?”

Many of the melodies to particular songs are played on instruments as slow airs. According to Jerry O’Sullivan, the important thing in playing slow airs is to try to imitate the style of the singer:

You try as closely as you can, and it’s difficult because a musical instrument is different from the voice. But still you try to do what the singer does as much as possible. . . . You try to imitate the singer’s phrasing, their rhythm, even their variations. Because their timing is based on the words that they sing, and the words are different in each verse, it will be a little different every time around.<sup>12</sup>

## MELODY IN NORTH INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC: RAGA

The most common word for music in Indian languages is *sangit*, a term whose original meaning encompassed singing, instrumental music, and dance. The classical music of India is properly called *raga sangit*, that is, music which conforms to the conventions of the Indian *ragas* (modes or melody-types). While raga sangit is performed in both North and South India, the political and cultural histories of the two regions—especially the impact of Islamic, Turko-Persian culture in the North—has led to the creation of two separate systems of ragas. Our focus here is the classical music of the North.

### The Notes of Indian Classical Music

Like Western classical music, raga sangit employs a heptatonic (seven-note) scale. As discussed earlier, the notes are called “sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha,” and “ni.”

Indian solfege is like the Western “movable doh” system, in which “doh” is not fixed at any particular pitch. An Indian vocalist places “sa” at a frequency which suits the range of his or her voice, and Indian instrumentalists tune their instruments to the pitch at which they seem to sound best—or, when accompanying a singer, to the keynote chosen by the vocalist. Unlike Western and Arabic musicians, Indian classical musicians virtually never alter the keynote, once it has been established in a performance. “Sa” remains stable, and except in “light-classical” genres, musicians do not modulate from one raga to another.

Buddhadev Das Gupta, a master of the North Indian plucked instrument called *sarod*, states that “our music has the same twelve notes that occur in your piano keyboard in one octave.” The first and fifth notes of the scale (sa and pa) are considered unchanging. The other five notes can

be moved up or down by approximately one half-step, creating a twelve-tone set corresponding to the Western chromatic scale. Indian musicians further divide the octave into microtonal intervals, which in India are called *srutis*. Ancient theoretical texts divide the octave into twenty-two *srutis*, but the original placement of these microtones is a matter of conjecture. In modern times, the term *sruti* is used by musicians to indicate that a particular note should be sung or played a little higher or lower in a particular raga, or to describe the delicate shades of pitch in a glissando (glide) from one note to another.

## The Nature of Raga

“Indian music is totally melodic, but we cannot just go on producing any melody that comes to our mind. It is guided by certain rules and framework,” says Buddhadev Das Gupta. The “rules and framework” of Indian classical melody relate to the concept of raga. Each of the several hundred ragas in contemporary use provides a unique recipe for the creation of composed and improvised melodies. Every raga has a specific set of characteristics: a scale including five, six, or seven permitted (and required) notes, an ascending pattern, a descending pattern, a note hierarchy in which two particular scale degrees receive particular emphasis, and a set of prescribed motifs (short pieces of melody) which, taken together, create the “path” of the raga. In addition to these technical qualities, each raga also possesses extra-musical attributes: a prescribed time or season of performance, a prevailing mood, and, in some cases, legendary “magical” properties, such as the power to invoke rain, healing, or fire. A raga is not a composition or a performance, but each raga provides the raw material for hundreds of composed melodies and thousands of improvised performances.

*Rag Kamod* is a popular North Indian raga. Every raga has a prescribed time of performance; *Rag Kamod* is meant to be sung or played between six and nine at night. Every raga has a pair of particularly important notes, called the *vadi* and *samvadi*. Musicians often describe the *vadi* as the “king” of the raga and the *samvadi* as the king’s “minister.” In *Rag Kamod*, the *vadi* is *pa*, and the *samvadi* is *re*. Every raga has specific ascending and descending patterns; in *Rag Kamod*, the ascent and descent are crooked, creating melodies with interesting turns that Buddhadev Das Gupta describes as “kinks”:



▲ Buddhadev Das Gupta playing the sarod, accompanied by Ray Spiegel on tabla and Ira Landgarten on tanpura.

Music has, let us say, three kinds of movements: going up from down, coming down from up, and a mixture of the upward and downward movements. So our ascent, or upward movement, may not be a straight one. . . . The rules of the raga may preclude you from just lining up straightforward in sequence. It may have kinks in it. Now, this rule for ascent and descent has to be stuck to always, even when you are improvising.<sup>13</sup>

We may observe in **Example 6** that the ascending and descending forms of Rag Kamod do indeed reveal “kinks,” crooked patterns such as “dha pa, ni-dha-sa,” and “ga ma pa, ga ma re sa.” One of the challenges Indian musicians face is the strict observation of such crooked motion, even when improvising at great speed.

### Melody Example 6: Rag Kamod: Aroha and Avaroha

Ascent:

sa re, pa, ma pa, dha pa, ni dha sa

Descent:

sa, ni dha, pa, ma pa dha pa, ga ma pa, ga ma re sa

Every raga has its own unique melodic personality, and Indian musicians often compare the features of a raga to the characteristics of a human being. As Buddhadev Das Gupta says:

Out of these several “dos” and “don’ts” there finally emerge a set of basic phrases which are just like the ears, nose, eyes, lips of a human countenance. These basic phrases, when you go through them, they paint the face of the raga before you. Now our music is such that you can start either from the nose or from the eyes or from the ears, but you have to draw the entire face eventually.<sup>14</sup>

Musicians “draw the face” of a raga in improvisations which often use a brief, more-or-less fixed composition as a point of departure and return. A short instrumental composition set in a particular raga is called a *gat* (pronounced “gut”).

While reading a transcription of the performance of Rag Kamod (**Example 7**), we may discover some of the ways in which this composition reveals important melodic characteristics of the raga in which it is composed.



## Melody Example 7: Gat in Rag Kamod

The musical notation is presented in three staves. The first staff contains the lyrics "ma re pa ma pa dha pa ga ma dha dha pa pa ga ma re sa sa" and is annotated with "sam X (clap)", "2 (clap)", "khali O (wave)", and "3 (clap)". The second staff contains the lyrics "pa ma pa pa pa sa ni sa dha pa ga ma dha dha pa pa ga ma re sa sa" and is annotated with "X (clap)", "2 (clap)", "O (wave)", and "3 (clap)". The third staff contains the lyrics "ma re pa..." and is annotated with "X (clap)".



Sarod player Buddhadev Das Gupta playing the first section of a teental gat in Rag Kamod, accompanied by Ray Spiegel on tabla.

In the first measure, emphasis is given to the minister-note and king-note, re and pa. The first, fourth, eighth, and ninth measures feature two characteristic melodic “kinks” of Rag Kamod, ma-re-pa, and ga-ma-re-sa. The entire composition is set in the rhythmic cycle known as teental, with *sam* falling on the first beat of the gat. Here, rhythm serves melody, giving added emphasis to the minister- and king-notes by placing them on the strong first and third beats of the first and last measures.

## SUMMARY

We began this chapter with the idea that melodies are like stories, with a beginning, a plot, and a conclusion. Perhaps we find melodies memorable and meaningful because their form is similar to that of speech. Melodic systems are very much like languages. They have vocabularies (itches organized into frameworks such as scales, modes, maqams, and ragas), grammars (the rules of the systems), idioms (genres and styles within a music culture), and structural units like spoken or written phrases, sentences, and paragraphs (motifs, phrases, and sections). Motifs which are common to an entire genre are like the cliches or common usages of a spoken language.

While melodic systems are similar to languages, we should remember the ways in which they are *not* like speech or literature. A single melody, when combined with one set of words in a patriotic song like the English “God Save the Queen,” has a different meaning when sung with the text of the American “My Country ’Tis of Thee.” Speech is verbal and often literal; it speaks *about* things and events. Melody is non-verbal and often

abstract. Melodies are *like* stories, but they do not always *tell* stories. Part of the appeal of music is its ability to move us in ways that have little to do with intellectual understanding. The plot of a melody does not need to describe anything outside of itself, and its meaning may simply be in the beauty of its construction.

Comparing music with speech, melody can be related to the rise and fall of a speaking voice. Speech is given meaning, not only by the use of words, rhythm, and changing pitch, but by the tonal quality or *timbre* of the speaker's voice. Similarly, musical meaning is created not only by rhythm and melody, but by the tone colors of singing voices and sounding instruments. In Chapter 7, we will consider the subject of timbre—the aspect of sound that gives each voice and instrument its unique tonal personality.

## POINTS TO REMEMBER

1. Pitch, which can be described as the vibrating frequency of a tone, is what all melodies have in common.
2. A melody must have a coherent form, although different cultures have different criteria for creating pleasing musical shapes.
3. Many of the world's music systems involve the octave as a frame for placing other pitches, which may divide the octave in various ways. Such subdivisions of the octave are called *scales*.
4. Western musicians have developed a terminology for the structural elements of melody. The shortest unit is a single pitch. A relatively small group of pitches which repeats, perhaps with some variation, is called a motive or motif. A grouping of a small number of pitches which does not repeat motivically is called a phrase member, and two or more phrase members constitute a phrase. In turn, two or more phrases constitute a complete melody.
5. Many melodic systems make use of variation, ornamentation, and repetition.

## POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do all melodies have in common?
2. Why does a melody need a coherent form? Are the criteria for a pleasing form the same from culture to culture?
3. What do many of the world's music systems use as a frame for organizing pitches?
4. What are the terms that Western musicians use to define the structural elements of melody?
5. What are some characteristics of the North Indian raga system that are similar to the Western system? What are some of the differences?

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is a melody?
2. What are motifs and phrases?
3. What is a maqam?
4. How are Irish dance tunes structured?
5. What is a raga?
6. Describe the differences between scales, maqamat, and ragas.

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