

## Oxford Songwriting Syllabus

### 1. Lyric writing (drawing on Davis and Pattison)

- Song forms/structures [see 4]
- Content
  - What's the Big Idea? A song has to be about something.
  - mode/treatment (Davis: history, realism, romance, fabulation, fantasy)
  - point of view (first, second or third person, or a combination)
  - emotional tone
  - personal & universal
  - time, place & plot
  - concrete v. abstract
  - particular v. general
  - show don't tell
- Sounds of words
  - rhyme (rhyme schemes, rhyme types, internal rhymes) and other sound effects (e.g. assonance, alliteration, vowel sequences, type and placement of consonants)
  - sound and meaning
  - rhythm and metre
  - relating line length, number of lines, rhythm and rhyme
  - writing words that can be sung
  - sound and emotion
- Language and vocabulary
  - wordplay
  - rhetoric (linguistic figures)
  - dialogue
  - comedy
  - verbs and tenses
  - using the senses
  - 'metaphorical collisions' (Stolpe) – unusual combinations of adjectives and nouns
  - cliché – when to use it, and when not to use it
- Titles: choosing the best title; placement in the lyric
- using reference tools: dictionary, thesaurus and reverse dictionary, rhyming dictionary
- setting tunes
- pitfalls (hidden scenario, not universal, judgemental, angry, sarcastic, unsympathetic, misleading listener, failed jokes, mixed metaphor, over-egging, contrived, semantic blinder, wrong topic for genre, mixing figurative and literal, aural ambiguity)

### 2. Melody (drawing on Perricone, 2000)

- Major scale, minor scales, modes – terminology (tonic, supertonic, mediant, subdominant, dominant, submediant, leading note) more stable and less stable tones, open and closed melody
- Conjunct (step-wise) & disjunct (wider intervals) movement
- Diatonic & chromatic melody
- Rhythm: pulse, metre, stress, masculine and feminine endings
- Symmetry/asymmetry v. balance; phrase lengths; matched and unmatched phrases

- Structural notes; embellished notes; melody shapes (ascending, descending, arch and inverted arch)
- Phrasal and rhythmic acceleration & deceleration
- Relationship between phrase starts, phrase endings, phrase lengths, rhythms, pitches and intervals – placement and pickup notes
- Building larger structures
- ‘Fragmentation’ – balancing rhythmically, but staying open tonally (i.e. finishing on unstable note)
- Developmental techniques:
  - sequencing (melodic shapes imitated at different pitches)
  - extending / truncating rhythm
  - inversion (turning intervals upside down)
  - retrograde (reversing melody)
  - diminution / augmentation (of intervals or note values)
  - segmentation (re-using a portion of a melody)
  - interversion (reordering phrases)
  - conjunction (adding new material to join phrases)
  - embellishment
  - thinning (e.g. to just structural notes)
  - rhythmic displacement (same motif in different placement in metre)
  - elision (by deletion)
- tessitura - low, middle or high range – or moving between them
- writing melodies that can be sung
- hooks (NB hooks are not always melodic); placement; having more than one hook
- riffs [When repeated, can be related to rhythmic or melodic ostinato, groove, or loops.]
- using silence

### 3. Chords & Harmony (drawing on Perricone and Rooksby)

- Triads for a major scale – more stable and less stable chords (tonic function, subdominant function, dominant function)
- Chord inversions
- Chord substitution in harmonic progressions
- Triads for minor scales (harmonic, melodic and natural minors)
- Turnarounds
  - major: 3 chords, 4 chords, 5 chords, 6 chords (mixing in minor with major creates sad-happy feeling)
  - minor
  - displacing a turnaround (altering order)
  - ‘up escalator’ ‘down escalator’ (Rooksby) – working the turnaround in strict ascending or descending order
  - incorporating inversions (for less sense of finality, and generating bass lines)
  - secondary turnaround (omitting a IV or V)
- Chord progressions
  - Harmonic rhythm: the speed at which chords change (e.g. every 2 beats, or every 4 beats, or every 2 bars)
  - Cadences (perfect V-I, imperfect x-V, plagal IV-I, interrupted)
  - Relative minors, relative majors
  - Modulation (temporary shift to new harmonic area) and tonicisation (Sondheim/Babbitt: more emphatic shift of harmonic centre)

- Finding / creating progressions; differences between potential of guitar or piano (Rooksby)
- Chord colours
  - Tierce de Picardie (in a piece in a minor key, ending on the major) and ‘reversed polarity’ chords (Rooksby: where a major or minor is substituted for minor or major respectively); reversed polarity chords can be used as ‘gateways’ to more distant keys
  - Dominant 7<sup>th</sup> (kinetic), major 7<sup>th</sup> (sinister) and minor 7<sup>th</sup> chords (mellow); 7<sup>th</sup> chords with flattened fifths
  - Major 6<sup>th</sup> chord (‘exotic’)
  - chords without thirds - sus4 (‘dramatic’), sus2 (‘enigmatic’)
  - 9<sup>th</sup> chords – in major (‘breezy’) and minor (‘tragic’)
  - Flattened chords within a major scale – bVII, bIII, bVI – their use in rock
  - In a major key, the use of minor IV (‘slush’) – can be used as ‘gateway’ to more distant key
  - Augmented and diminished chords
  - Open 5<sup>th</sup> chords
  - 11<sup>th</sup> chords

#### 4. Song Structure

- “Content dictates form” (Sondheim) “Form follows function” (Pattison) – picking, or designing the appropriate form
- Song elements and terminology: verse, chorus, refrain, bridge, middle eight, pre-chorus, intro, outro, coda – their purpose, and their relationship to each other
- AAA (including refrains)
- Verse/Chorus (and its variants, including pre-choruses, bridges, codas etc)
- AABA (and 32 bar form)
- Blues: traditional; modern adaptations (changing divisions, placement of title, adding bridges, doubling length and adding passing chords)
- Through-composed (e.g. rhapsodic, programmatic)
- Relationship between structure and the song’s idea / purpose (the Big Idea)
- Relationship to genre
- Relationship to title (it’s concept, and placement)
- Building to high points

#### 5. Arranging and producing

- groove – not precisely definable, but critical to the rhythmic character of any composition, or the performance of that composition – an overall supple ‘feel’ in a piece that feels ‘right’ and comes partly from: a) repetition of particular underlying rhythmic patterns, b) the minute, intentional, tasteful displacement of individual elements of the pattern from their theoretically ‘correct’ position mathematically & metronomically (although, some grooves arise from exactly correct placement of these elements ...) c) several musicians playing / singing / thinking / feeling ‘as one’, so the separate musical parts balance rhythmically, texturally and dynamically with each other (although a single melodic line or percussion part can also have a groove). [Can be related to a rhythmic or melodic ostinato, a loop, or a repeated riff.]
- ‘sound’ & ‘style’ – that makes a songwriter, song, artist, band, or album distinctly recognisable – like ‘groove’, a term that is hard to define – this can be a mix of any of the elements in the Songwriting Pentagon, and arise, in particular, from the way the music is arranged and/or produced.
- instrumentation

- vocal harmonies
- sampling
- loops [Compare with a rhythmic or melodic ostinato, grooves and riffs.]
- sound design & digital manipulation
- hooks arising from riffs, grooves, instrumentation, vocal harmonies or effects, samples, sound samples
- use of instrumental sections and solos [linked to song forms as well]
- writing for specific singers or voice types

## 6. Combinations – using the Songwriting Pentagon™

- melody & harmony
  - isolate melodic progressions from harmonic progressions to identify their character
  - re-interpret (re-decorate, re-harmonise) melodies and degrees of melodic stability through choosing alternative harmonic pathways e.g. stable melody melodically and/or tonally (reaching closure) with unexpected harmonic instability (staying open), or vice versa
  - upper and lower auxiliary notes resolving to notes within the chord
  - passing notes
  - unanticipated approach notes (non-chord notes reached disjunctly, then resolving)
  - anticipated approach notes (chord notes reached before the chord)
  - escape note (non-chord note reached conjunctly)
  - melody-bass relationship (oblique, parallel, contrary movement); consonance & dissonance; pedal points; diatonic or chromatic descending bass lines (with changing or static chords above); unison melody and bass
  - relationship between melody, bass chord, home key and its tonic
  - front-heavy and back-heavy phrases (Perricone): melody begins with strong bar in harmonic-metric framework, or on weak/anticipatory bar
  - modes (Aeolian, Dorian, Mixolydian) as an atmospheric alternative to either major or minor tonalities (avoids leading notes, allows for harmonic progressions of adjacent chords, or up a minor 3<sup>rd</sup>)
- melody & lyrics
  - rhythm & metre; syllabic stress
  - word stress to match meaning of verbal phrase
  - pitch emphasis to match word emphasis
  - word painting – rhythm, note duration, pitch, ascending & descending - to match verbal idea
  - rhythm & phrase structures, and rhyme schemes
  - finishing musical phrases endings with open or long vowels
- melody & song structure – for different sections, changing ...
  - rhythmic patterning
  - phrase length and structure
  - pitches and intervals
  - pitch range / tessitura
  - degree of diatonic or chromatic colouring
- harmony & lyrics – to reflect lyric, change ...
  - tonal centre or harmonic mood (major, minor, modal)
  - inversions and work the bass line
- harmony & song structure - for different sections, changing ....
  - harmonic rhythm
  - tonal centre
  - between major and minor

- simple or complex chords
- harmonisation on return of same melody
- lyrics & song structure
  - title placement
  - narrative (verses), emotional core (chorus)
  - alternative perspective or new material (bridge)
  - leading up to the emotional payoff (pre-chorus)
  - twist in the tale or epilogue (coda)
- arrangement (instrumentation and production): changing instrumentation, number or type of voices, musical texture, digital effects or 'soundscape' in relation to song structure, lyrics, melody & harmony

## 7. 10 Overarching Principles

1. Focus (who, where, when, what, core emotion) – What's the Big Idea? And does it have a Title?
2. Distilling - less is more; remove everything you can
3. Clarity – will it make sense to a listener if a) it's the first time they hear it, b) it's the only time they hear it
4. Conservation / recycling: develop fewer ideas thoroughly, rather than filling the song with lots of new ideas
5. Congruence – between Big Idea, Title, Lyric, Melody, Harmony, Song Structure, Arrangement
6. Unity / consistency – every work of art creates its own rules that it must follow
7. Start well: grabbing the listener's interest quickly (lyrics & music)
8. End well: finishing strongly (lyrically & musically)
9. Progression - ideas (lyric, melodic, harmonic) must move forwards ; a song must take the listener coherently from A to a relevant and significant B
10. Managing Expectations (fulfilling them or challenging them): stability & instability; tension & resolution; repetition & variation; open & closed; balanced & unbalanced; symmetric & asymmetric; predictability & surprise (contrast, variety)

## 8. The 4 Cs: Catch, Create, Critique, Continuously Learn

- **Catch:** organise working methods
  - catch and store ideas so they can be recalled
  - Recording devices
  - Conventional music notation
  - Lead sheets
  - Other forms of notation and transcription
  - keep track of materials for a given song
  - archive all material
  - project management (e.g. preparing a song for rehearsal, recording, performance, album concept etc)
- **Create:** sources of inspiration, attitudes that foster creativity
  - Inspiration - and where ideas come from (everywhere!)
    - 'switch channels' (senses, artistic media and expression, activity) in order to remain creatively fresh
    - write in different styles
    - write for different instruments and voices

- when writing a song, start anywhere: title, word, phrase, story, image, melodic motif, chord progression, groove, message, someone else's music or lyrics, time signature, key, musical genre or form
- experiment
- use all our senses
- Listen - to as many different kinds of song and music and sound - as possible. Listen within yourself – lyric writing and music writing as acts of 'listening'
- learn something new before you write your next thing
- What have you not explored before? Especially, what have you avoided?
- Attitudes
  - Failure, mistakes, deviations and 'blind alleys' are not problems, but necessary and creative elements in the learning process, and in producing our best work. We have to write bad songs in order to write good songs, and we have to have stupid ideas in order to generate good ones. 'Mistakes' often become legitimate compositional material.
  - be naïve – don't censor early on; assume the unlikely or impossible might be possible and work, or lead us somewhere useful that we hadn't anticipated
  - use each new piece of writing as an opportunity to learn and be transformed
  - be disciplined and be playful; plan and be in the moment
  - Care: about yourself, and about quality - be forgiving of yourself, and be demanding of yourself
  - take risks – technical risks, artistic risks and emotional risks
  - originality & authenticity – experiment & innovate; but also, if something is authentic to you, don't be afraid to say something that you think has been said before (even if you think that other example is better than yours); dare to be different, and don't feel you have to be
  - boredom and aimlessness are not enemies of creativity, but a natural and necessary part of it
  - Problems are good: look for problems; ask awkward questions; find new questions; set yourself a problem and then try to solve it
  - Music is a process, not a product - At some point, we must commit, and put our ideas out there for the audience to do with what they will. Nothing is final. We create songs, and share them, people hear them, people respond, we respond to their response and create again – and so the wheel turns, the conversation between artist and audience continues.
- working to a writing brief (artist, deadline, occasion, genre, topic, title, lyric, melody, chord sequence)
- **Critique:** road testing songs – use performance as a testbed
  - read out lyrics to someone
  - sing just the melody
  - play just the chords
  - sing/play melody and chords
  - sing just melody and lyrics
  - perform a rough draft of the song to someone
  - try it out in several performances (let the song 'mature') before you craft a 'final' version for recording or more significant performances
  - all songs can be improved, and this is more likely to happen when we allow other people to give us feedback
  - rewrite, rewrite, rewrite

- **Continuously Learn:** lifetime commitment to extending existing skills, learning new ones, and expanding knowledge
  - Master your tools
  - train your ears
  - learn from good examples – ‘steal’ (and adapt) but don’t copy/plagiarise
  - keep listening, keep reading, keep widening horizons
  - search widely for inspiration and search deeply within yourself
  - lyricists must take an interest in music and musicians, composers must take an interest in lyrics and musicians, musicians must take an interest in lyrics and musical composition
  - composers must learn an instrument (preferably guitar or keyboard), and be able to sing a basic tune (even if badly)

## 9. The Songwriting Business

- Recording: planning use of session time; principles for demos (essentials / ‘bare bones’ rather than full arrangements; get to the title/chorus/hook early); booking musicians; producers; engineers; recording, mixing, mastering; sound equipment; album planning; microphone technique; managing the session; managing the performers; managing the writers; managing the engineer(s) and producer(s)
- Vocals: understanding the voice (writing for singers); writers developing their own vocal ability
- Collaborating: working methods, etiquette in the creative process, royalty split
- Working to a brief (including specialist briefs of writing for jingles, TV, film, video game, the stage)
- Song placement and monetizing songs
- Legal: copyright, intellectual property, performing rights, contracts, licensing. Titles, single words, short verbal phrases, chord sequences, and song structures are not copyrightable. Lyrics, melodies, riffs, distinctive bass lines and samples are copyrightable.
- Business trends
- Marketing – building a listener base
- Networking
- ‘Soft skills’ – emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills
- What is a ‘hit’ song?

## 10. The Songwriter’s Kit

- Notepad (lined) for lyric writing
- Notepad for ideas
- Music manuscript paper
- Graph or squared paper
- Pencils and erasers
- Recording device
- Instrument
- Dictionary
- Thesaurus
- Rhyming dictionary

# Songwriting Pentagon

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