

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO COMPOSING YOUR OWN PIANO PIECE



*The 6 crucial steps of
successfully writing
your own piano piece*

A teal-colored textured brushstroke with a rough, torn-edge appearance, spanning the width of the top of the page.

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Pianist's guide to the 6 crucial steps of
successfully writing your own piano piece

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An alternative method: by Melanie Spanswick

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Introduction

The ultimate guide to composing your own piano piece.

I know, it does sound a little daunting. There are so many details to think about: *What's it going to sound like? Will it be upbeat? Romantic? Scary? What key is it going to be in? What about structure?... Where on earth do I begin?*

Composing your own piece of piano music is easier than you think. The key is to take your time and break down each stage of the process, and to work your way through them at your own pace.

In this guide, we're going to navigate you through each of the following stages of composition:

- Style
- Key
- Chord progressions
- Main melodic theme
- Structure
- Extras
- An alternative method: by Melanie Spanswick

Each one of us has a different reason as to why we've decided to compose our first piece of music. The good news is that *Pianist* is here to help, so let's get started!

Step 1 - Choosing your style

How to refine your ideas into one definitive direction



Figuring out what style you'd like to write in is perhaps the most crucial stage of this guide, so it's a good job we put it first! Get your creativity whirring by thinking about these questions:

- 1. What genre of piano-led music do you like the most?
Romantic? Classical? Jazz? Cinematic? Other?**
- 2. Who is your favourite composer/artist?**
- 3. What mood do you envision for this piece? Romantic?
Melancholy? Upbeat? Dramatic?**
- 4. Are you writing this piece for yourself or for someone else?**

You now have a general idea in your head of the style of piece you want to create. Let's refine your ideas into one definitive direction for your piece.

For this, we're going to use word association. Simply grab a pen and paper and follow the steps below.

1. Using the word association document we've supplied you with (you're welcome!), write down a word in the middle of a blank piece of paper that sums up the general style of your piece.
2. At the ends of these stems and branches, think of some words and phrases that more specifically describe the stylistic word in the centre.

WORD ASSOCIATION

MINOR

Fast moving rhythms,
intense, left-hand
arpeggios, right-hand
eighth notes

MYSTERIOUS

Deeply intriguing, random
major chords to add to
mystery, unsettling,
chromatic melodies

CINEMATIC DRAMA

DARK

Loud, lots of
low notes

TO ACCOMPANY A DRAMATIC SCENE

A city, busy, London, camera
would focus on a man's face
as he walks through the
crowds, rainy, cold

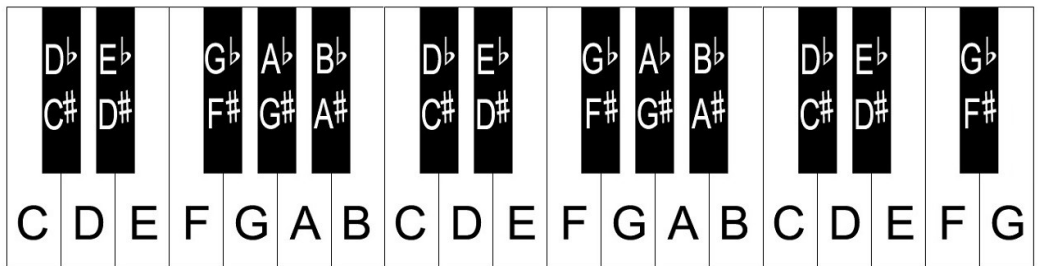
Step 2 - Picking your key

Knowing which keys are suitable for your playing level



Picking the key depends on your current level of playing.

- **Are you a beginner?** If you are at an early learning stage, it's best to stick to simpler keys such as C, D or G major, or A, E, or D minor.
- **Are you an intermediate?** You can add the likes of E, A and B major to that list, along with B \flat , C, or G minor.
- **Are you an advanced player?** Pick a key, any key! It's likely you can play comfortably in all keys.



Step 3 - Establishing your chord progressions

+ 3 tips for picking alternative chords



The next step is to pick a main chord progression, followed by a selection of alternatives that you can use for your other sections. When picking your chords, there is absolutely no right or wrong way. By sitting at your piano and playing around with the chords, you will find which ones fit and which don't. Here are *Pianist's* four different main chord progressions for you to use freely or manipulate to fit your piece.

Let's use C major as our root chord. The chords in **C major** are **Dm(ii)**, **Em(iii)**, **F(IV)**, **G(V)**, **Am(vi)**, and **B diminished(vii)**.

1. I iii IV(major7) V
 C Em F7 G

2. IV I V VI-V
 Fsus2 C G Am-G

3. I V vi I/iii
 C G Am C/E

4. vi ii vii(diminished) I
 Am Dm B diminished C

These are just four of many combinations that you can try. Our advice would be to spend some time at your piano trying these combinations out, until you find a progression that you like.

Once you have picked out your main chord progression, it's time to choose a selection of *alternative* chord progressions to use in other varied sections.

Here are three techniques you can use when picking your alternate chords:

1. **Start your new section with a minor chord.** The use of a darker chord here will signify a shift in mood to the listener, confirming that a new section is in play. You cannot go wrong with this technique. It's also a good idea here to use any other chords that weren't included in your main chord progression. Let's use chord progression No 3 from our examples above as a demonstration:

Main chord progression:

I V vi I/iii

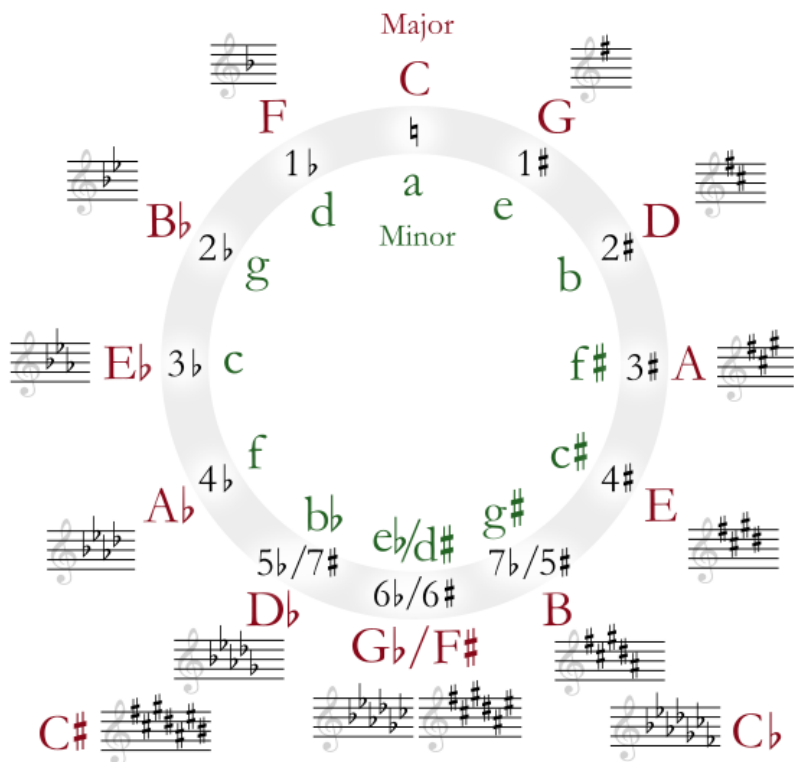
C G Am C/E

Alternative chord progression:

iii iv ii ii

Em F Dm Dm

Utilise the circle of fifths. In classical music particularly, this technique is used on a regular basis. The circle of fifths is the relationship among the 12 tones of the chromatic scale, their corresponding key signatures, and the associated major and minor keys. The following graph shows the circle of fifths.



Effectively, chord V of your current key becomes chord I in your new section. So, if we continue with our example of C major, using the chord progression example 1 from above...

Main chord progression:

I	iii	iv(major7)	V
C	Em	F7	G

The last chord here, chord V (G), will now be chord I in your new section. Your chord sequence will now look a little something

like this:

I	iii	iv(major7)	V
G	Bm	C7	D

If you want to really build up the tension in this section, you could keep going with the circle of fifths! Next up would be:

I	iii	iv(maj 7)	V
D	F#m	G7	A

... and so on.

2. Use chords that aren't in your key. This is particularly effective in cinematic or ambient pieces. There are numerous chord tricks that composers purposely use in order to cause a particular response from their audiences. Here are three tricks:

- a) Move from chord i to the minor v; for example, C major to G minor. It's used multiple times in the *Back to the Future* films, as well as hundreds of others. You may also recognise it from *The Way You Make Me Feel* by Michael Jackson. It creates an aura of amazement and magic.
- b) Create your own circle of SIXTHS: Let's start with the chord progression VI, V, major ii. In D \flat major, this would be: B \flat m (VI), A \flat (V) E \flat (maj ii). In the next phrase, switch to chord VI (Gm) of the first chord! For example, the next progression becomes:

Gm (VI), F (V), C (maj ii). This is basically a circle of 6ths! This particular trick is used in the blockbuster film *Avatar* (2009), composed by James Horner.

- c) Move from chord i to the major vi: for example, E major to C major. The expectancy is that we will hear E major to C# minor. However, the introduction of the C major is a pleasant and uplifting surprise.

TOP TIP

If you are struggling to settle on any chord progression, consider 'borrowing' a chord progression from a piece that has a similar style and tempo to yours.

Step 4 - Establishing your main melodic theme

Rhythm, melodic shape, and harmony



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