

COMPOSE YOUR OWN Melody

SEATTLE SYMPHONY 2021-2022
COMPOSER IN RESIDENCE,
Reena Esmail



For more examples, check out Reena's composition
activity videos on Seattle Symphony Live!

NOTES FROM REENA

Welcome to composing! I'm so excited to explore with you, and help you find your own, unique musical voice. Composing is how I express my thoughts, feelings, memories, emotions, ideas, dreams... and so much more. What do you want to express? Try saying it with a melody!

There are so many ways to compose a melody. In this packet, I want to show you some of the ways I begin my creative process. I hope some of my ideas inspire you to create your own! **Let's get started!**



Reena Esmail

Seattle Symphony 2021-2022
Composer in Residence

GETTING STARTED

How do we go from a blank page...to all THIS music?!

There are many ways to start, but most ways to compose begin without any instruments or music notes at all.



That's a lot of music! It took me three years to write, and if you played it all in a row, it would probably take about 7 hours.



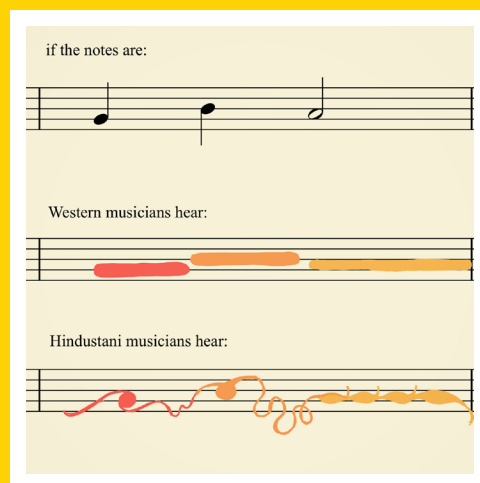
My very first written composition, age 13. I set a famous poem called "We are the Music Makers" to music.

EXPLORING SOUND

Explore the music and sounds around you. What music do you enjoy? Are there sounds in nature or the city that inspire you? How do those sounds make you feel?"

Now, let's get to know the instruments of the orchestra. Each instrument has a different personality. Some are bright and others are deep. Some are high, some are low. Some use breath, others use strings, keys or mallets. Just like each person has their own unique voice, every instrument does too!

After you listen, think about what instrument you would like to hear playing your melody. Why did you pick that instrument?

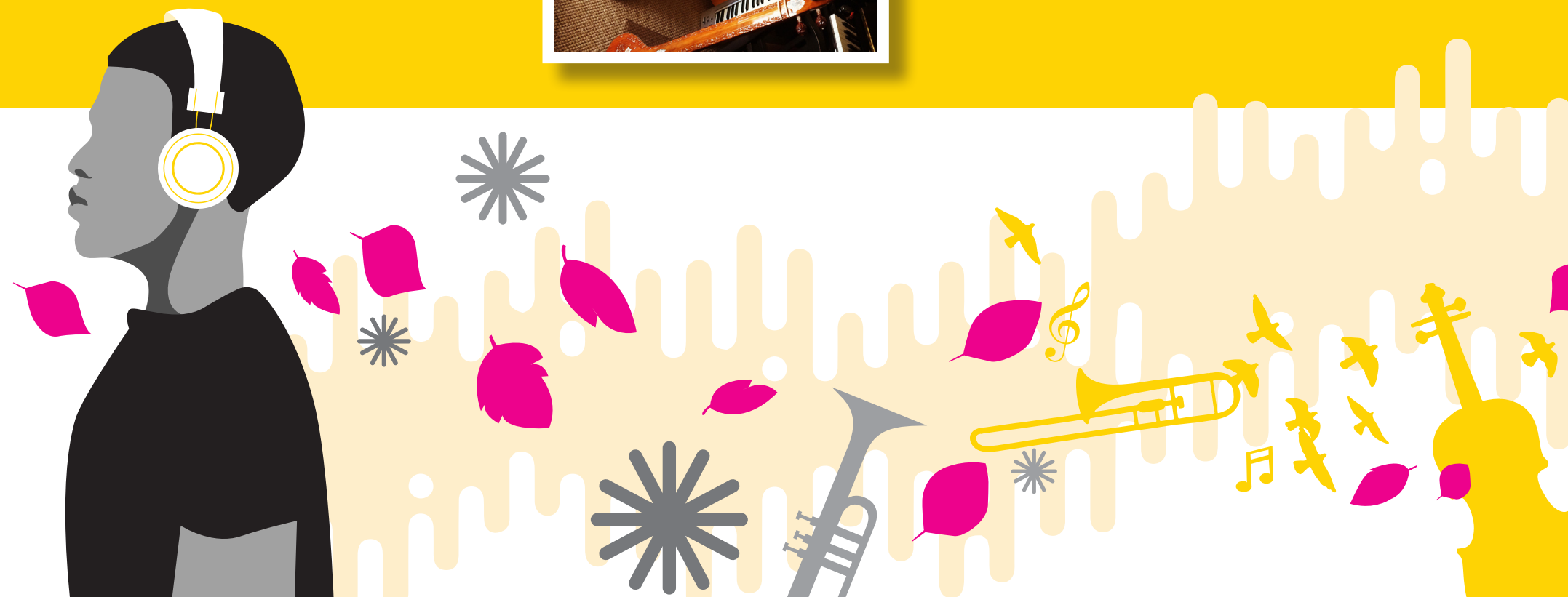


Just like people can say the same words with many different accents, people can interpret the same basic notes with many different variations. You might interpret a melody differently than another person – that's what makes your voice unique.



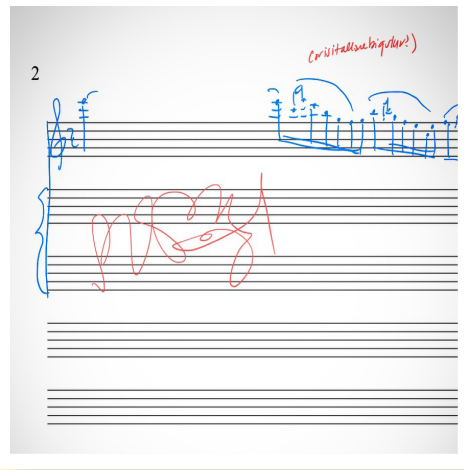
Here's me, sitting with all the instruments I own. I love playing around on them and finding new sounds. Some of these instruments are used to play Western classical music, and others are used to play Indian classical music, but I like figuring out how they can play together.

Listen to music you love, and music you've never heard before. How would you describe it to a friend who has never heard it? Music is like a language: the more kinds of music you know, the more ways you will find to express your own thoughts and feelings.



START YOUR MELODY WITH A **DRAWING**

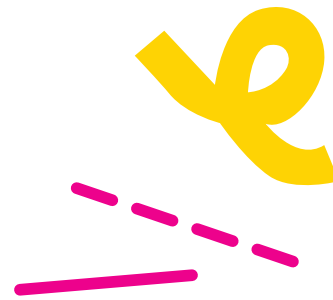
Time to draw! Did you know that even a simple squiggle can be interpreted as music? That's actually how music notation started centuries ago! Let's try it together.



When I don't know how something will go, I start with a squiggle. It helps me figure out the kinds of sounds I want to hear.



Sometimes I use different colors to represent different instruments when I'm orchestrating – it helps me visualize who is playing what part.



TRY IT!



STEP 1

Pick your favorite color utensil, grab some paper and make a quick doodle of a shape, line, swirl. Write down the first thing that comes to you! It should just take a few seconds.

Now observe your squiggle. Does it move up and down, side to side? Is it straight, or does it twist around? Does it have short stops or smoothness? All these qualities can be transformed into music!

STEP 2

Try to sing what you see. Just use your imagination – it doesn't have to be exact. Let the squiggle inspire you. Sing your idea a bunch of times, until you think you can remember it.

STEP 3

With your neighbor (or in small groups), sing your squiggles back and forth to each other, over and over again. Pretend it's a conversation and try to get your squiggles to respond to one another.

STEP 4

Once you're happy with your squiggle, record yourself singing it. Or if you're working with a partner, record or perform your 'squiggle conversation.'

Sing as clearly as you can, and then ask your teacher to help you write it down as notes on a staff.



Can you believe your imagined shapes are now a written melody on the page? How cool is that?!

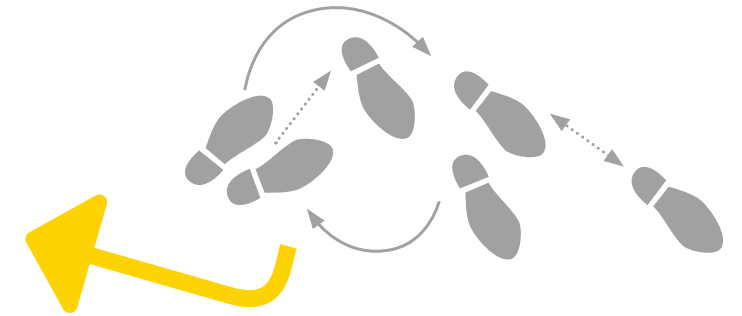


START YOUR MELODY WITH A MOVEMENT

Time to move! How can you use your whole body to express a feeling?
Movements can be turned into melody!



TRY IT!



STEP 1

Move around the room in a way that feels natural to you. You can use a lot of energy, or just a little. You can use certain parts of your body and keep other parts still, or switch between different parts. You can take up a lot of space, or curl in tight.

What does your movement feel like? Is it huge or tiny, fast or slow, straight or curvy? Is it pointy or is it more like a glide? All these qualities can be transformed into music!

STEP 2

Now as you move, start making sound. Imagine there is a soundtrack to your movement, and slowly turn the volume all the way up, until it becomes a sound other people can hear. If you're speaking, or making noises, try to transform those noises into singing.

STEP 3

How fast or slow is your movement? Does your movement and sound change when there is a steady beat?

Remember, you don't always have to go along with the beat – you can also go against it. (I love going against the beat!)

STEP 4

When you're happy with your movements, it's time to ask the teacher to help you write your melody as notes on a staff.

Congratulations! You've turned your signature moves into a written melody.



Sometimes I like to dance around as I create! When I can move freely, I can find music to go along with the shapes and feelings my body makes.

START YOUR MELODY FROM A WORD OR PHRASE



TRY IT!

STEP 1

Reflect on a memory that is special to you. Maybe an exciting adventure, or spending time with a favorite person, or achieving something awesome.

Write a few words or sentences describing how you felt. Write your words in the language that fits your feelings best.

STEP 2

Next, switch papers with a neighbor. Have your neighbor underline a few words or short phrases that they love from your writing. It could just be one or two descriptive words – it doesn't have to be a full sentence.

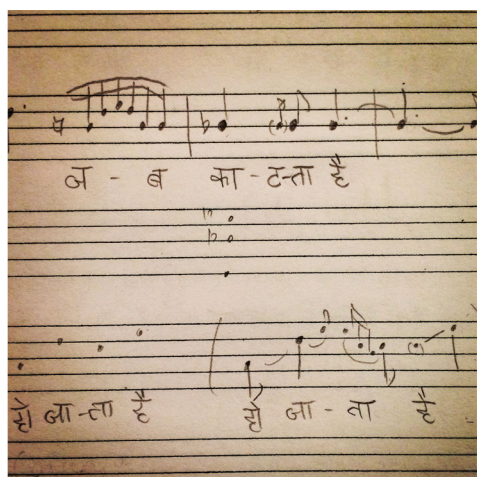
Look at what they've underlined. Why do you think they picked those phrases? Are they the same ones you would have picked?

STEP 3

Now focus on one word or phrase. First say them to yourself. Then say them like you're saying them to another person. Then, say them like you're an actor on a stage, speaking to a huge audience – speak slower, and let the tone of your voice rise and fall with the words. Now, instead of speaking, start to sing the words. If you'd like, you can even turn on a metronome or have a neighbor clap a beat as you sing.

STEP 4

When you're happy with your melody, it's time to ask the teacher to help you write your melody as notes on a staff.



A Hindi poem I set to music. The top line is about how it feels to get a blister from your shoes. (ouch!)

Q

f

E

G

J

A

b

M

L

LOOKING FOR MORE INSPIRATION?



Words from a box can help organize ideas on one theme

MYSTERY BOX

I have a box of words on my desk with words like “courage” and “kindness.” Sometimes I pick a word out of that box, and then think about how it might sound in music.

MIX AND MATCH

Take any of the short melodies you and your neighbors created in the exercises above and try to put them together. You can even put them on little pieces of paper and move them around, and then try to sing through them until you find an order you like!



Using ideas like puzzle pieces helps keep things flexible!

GROUP TELEPHONE GAME

Sit in a circle. One person starts by singing a short melodic phrase. The next person sings it a little differently – just changing one thing. It gets passed around the circle until arriving at the last person. Do you remember how it started? Sing the beginning and ending versions side by side.

MAKE-BELIEVE OPERA

Pretend you are in an opera with your friends. Say what you would usually say to one another, but sing it instead of speaking. It might feel funny at first, but what happens if you keep going until you get comfortable singing? How does it change the way you hear what your friends say?

A lullaby in progress

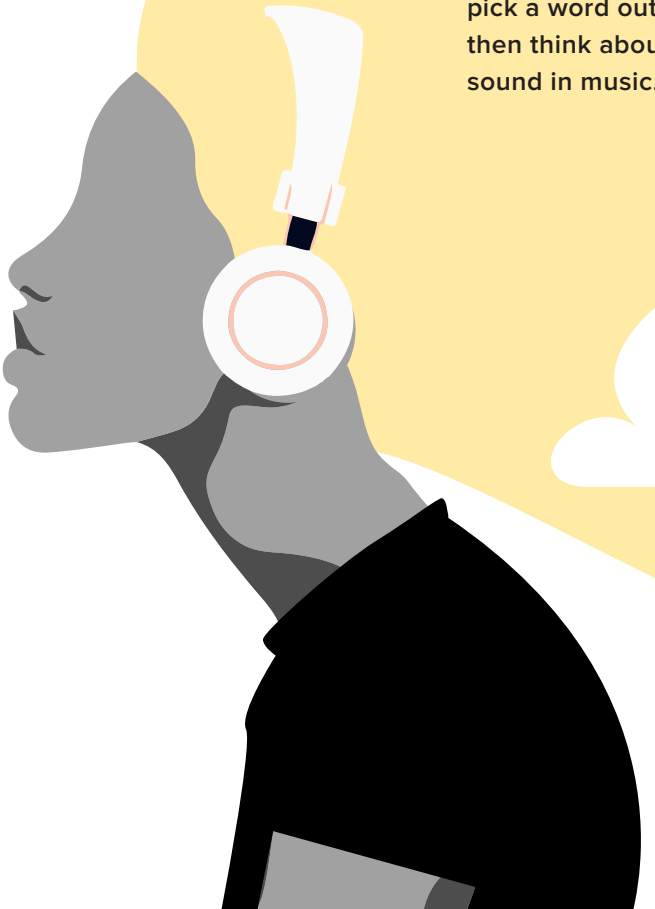


THESAURUS

Look up a word you know in the thesaurus (or find synonyms for it online). Find the synonym that sounds the coolest to you when you say it. Why do you like the sound of that word? Now you can turn that word into a melody using the activity on the previous page!

OBSERVATION WALK

Go outside or into a different space. Walk around and observe until you find something that catches your eye, perhaps an interesting shape or pattern. If you could make music that goes along with this pattern, what would it sound like?



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COMPOSING MUSIC IS ABOUT YOU

Music is like language – it’s a way to communicate what’s inside you to others. You might know exactly what you want to say, or you might find it along the way. It might stand by itself, or it might be part of a longer conversation. You might mean it one way, and someone else might hear it a different way. That is the beauty of expression: it’s as much about what you’re saying as who you’re saying it to.

1

Who do you love talking to? Compose a melody that feels like talking to them.

2

Who do you find really hard to talk to? Compose a melody that expresses what you might not be able to say in words.

3

Who do you hope to talk to one day? Write a melody imagining what you might want to express when you finally meet.



“You are unique, and so is your music. No one else in the entire world thinks, dreams or expresses themselves exactly like you do. I can’t wait to hear what you create!”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Reena Esmail (b. 1983) is an Indian-American composer. Her primary instrument is the piano, and she also plays guitar, violin, and sings Indian classical music. Reena studied composition at Juilliard and Yale School of Music, and also spent a year studying Hindustani classical music on a Fulbright Scholarship in India. She writes music for orchestras, choirs and chamber groups all over the country, including the Los Angeles Master Chorale, Seattle Symphony and Kronos Quartet. Reena loves bringing people from different cultures and communities together through her music. When she isn’t composing, she loves doing math and spending time with her dog, Rusty.

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