

Melodic Motives and Development

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So what is it exactly that makes a composition a solid one? Besides having interesting ideas and a smooth progression, one of the most important things is the development of your ideas. It's within the development of your initial ideas/motives that true unity within your composition can be achieved. It's the purpose of this article to examine (in the traditional jazz "song style") the mechanics of melodic motivic development.

To demonstrate some approaches to motivic development in composition, we'll take a look below at a lead sheet of one of my pieces, "Spring Ahead."

The basic form of the tune is A, A(1), B, A(1) meaning that it is set in four sections. The first A is 16 bars, the second A is almost exactly the same but has some variation and ends up as only 14 bars. The bridge is the B section (16 bars) and breaks away almost completely (as it should) from the initial motives...but not that much! Finally, there's a return to the A(1) section and a coda. [To listen to a basic MIDI file of the melody, click here.](#)

Example 1:

We'll begin, obviously, in the first "A" section and look at the 2 primary motives. *IT IS UPON THESE MOTIVES WHICH THE MAJORITY OF THE COMPOSITION WILL BE BASED.* Notice from measures 1-4, we have *motive #1*, and from (including pickups) measures 5-8, we have *motive #2*. Already within bar 6, I began to develop motive #2 by "augmenting" or "making longer" the rhythm from the pickups in measure 4. You'll notice the same half step relationships between the eighth note pickups to measure 5 and the quarter note triplet in bar 6.

In bar 7, I used the same starting tone as in measure 5, the 9th, this time changing up the rhythm slightly but still keeping the general "character" of bar 5.

EX. 1

SPRING AHEAD

Samba $\text{♩} = 125$

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The musical notation for 'Spring Ahead' is presented in two staves. The first staff shows measures 1 through 4. Measure 1 has a whole rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. Measure 2 has a quarter note C5, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note A4. Measure 3 has a quarter note G4, a quarter note F4, and a quarter note E4. Measure 4 has a quarter note D4, a quarter note C4, and a quarter note B3. The second staff shows measures 5 through 8. Measure 5 has a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. Measure 6 has a quarter note C5, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note A4. Measure 7 has a quarter note G4, a quarter note F4, and a quarter note E4. Measure 8 has a quarter note D4, a quarter note C4, and a quarter note B3. Chords are indicated above the notes: F6 above measure 1, Em7(b5) above measure 2, A7(b9) above measure 3, Dm7 above measure 5, Bbm7 above measure 6, and Eb7 above measure 7. A triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) is shown in measure 6.

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Example 2:

In measures 9-10, we see somewhat of a return to motive #1. Here I'm using the same rhythmic motive with the pitches altered. Through the maintenance of this same rhythm, though the pitches are different, a unity within the structure of the piece is achieved. The same holds true for measures 11-12...this area is based on a development/extension of motive #2. Bar #14 can be thought of (to an extent) as a development of motive #1, BUT it has the complete triad within it that distinguishes it quite a bit. It's probably best to call this *motive #3*. Remember this motive for later...we will briefly abandon it here, but it will return!

Finally, bars 15-16 can be thought of either as a new motive entirely, or better yet, a "diminution" or "squashing together" of the "key" tones of motive #1...C, F, A.

EX. 2

9 F⁶/C B^bm⁶/C Gadd⁹/B B^b6

13 F/A B^b/A^b G^bA⁷(#11) E^b7sus⁴ C⁷sus⁴

Example 3:

Here we are now at the second "A" of the tune, "A(1)." You'll notice right away that bars 17-23 are almost exactly identical to the first 8 bars of the first "A." While some writers will make them exactly the same, and that's perfectly fine as there are many great tunes that follow that protocol, I find it a bit more interesting to try and change the second "A" up just a little. Here you'll notice that I've just modified the rhythms a bit. In bars 20 and 22, I simply subtracted notes leaving rests. *When writing, don't be afraid to subtract. Rests can be just as important as notes!* In bar 25, you'll probably notice a new *motive, #4*. In bars 26-30, we return to more of the "developed" motive #2 which we modulate to lead us into the bridge.

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EX. 3

Musical notation for Example 3, showing three staves of music. The first staff starts at measure 17 with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a common time signature. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. Chords indicated above the staff are F⁶, Em⁷(b⁵), and A⁷(b⁹). The second staff starts at measure 21 with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a common time signature. The melody includes a triplet of eighth notes. Chords indicated above the staff are Dm⁷, B^bm⁷, and E^b7. The third staff starts at measure 25 with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a common time signature. The melody includes a triplet of eighth notes. Chords indicated above the staff are F⁶/C, D⁷, G⁷sus⁴, G⁷, B^bm⁷, C⁷sus⁴(b⁹), and C⁷sus⁴.

Example 4:

We are now at the “B” section or “bridge.” It’s time to experiment with some new ideas/motives. Though, do we really need to come up with many completely new ideas? While we want the bridge to sound fairly different than the “A” sections, it’s a good idea to first go back in the “A” sections and ensure that all of the motives there were fully utilized. If you recall, two of the motives in the “A” sections were only briefly stated. Those were motives #3 and #4. Therefore, with a little development, creation of one final motive, and a combination of all the aforementioned, we’ve essentially already written our bridge!

Motive #3 starts us out from bars 31-32. Notice the complete triad. We then add motive #5 in bars 32-33. In bar 35, I grabbed motive #4 and then combined it with motive #2 and the “diminished” motive #1! So, while this isn’t completely new material, it’s varied quite a bit to produce a different section, and there’s definitely a great deal “tying” it all together.

EX. 4

Musical notation for Example 4, showing two staves of music. The first staff starts at measure 31 with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a common time signature. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes. Chords indicated above the staff are D^Δ7 and G⁷sus⁴. The second staff starts at measure 35 with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a common time signature. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes. Chords indicated above the staff are D^Δ7, G⁷sus⁴, E^b7sus⁴, and A⁷alt.

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Example 5:

At bar 39, you can clearly see that we're back to motive #4 and then add motive #3 in bar 40 and finally add a developed motive #5 in bars 41-43. For something completely different in bars 43-46, I added several rhythmic kicks to get us back to the final "(A1)."

EX. 5

Musical notation for Example 5, showing two staves of music. The first staff starts at bar 39 with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. Chord symbols above the staff are D^Δ7, G⁷sus⁴, and G⁷#11. The second staff starts at bar 43 with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. Chord symbols above the staff are E⁷(#5), E^b13#9, D⁷(#9), A^b7(#5), D^b7(#9), G^b7(#11), and E^Δ7. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and performance markings such as accents and a 'gliss' marking.

Example 6:

Finally, the Coda takes us back to an even further developed (harmonically) motive #2.

EX. 6

Musical notation for Example 6, showing a single staff of music with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. A common time signature (C) is indicated at the beginning. Chord symbols above the staff are G⁷sus⁴, G⁷, A^bΔ7, D^bΔ7, G^bΔ7, and B^Δ7. The notation includes various rhythmic values and accidentals.

As you can see, motivic development is a key to composing in the jazz "song style" format. It's not enough to have good ideas...you must develop them, combine them, and really use them to the fullest extent (without, of course, going overboard and becoming minimalistic)!