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Lyric Writing: Writing Lyrics to Music

Lesson 2: Musical Stress

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Musical Stress: Position in the Bar



A musical note is either stressed or unstressed depending on two factors:

1. Its position in the bar.
2. Its relation to surrounding notes.

We'll look at these in turn.

Position in the Bar

Most popular songs are either in 4/4 time, 3/4 time, or 6/8 time (count 6 eighth notes per bar). In any real song, notes will have a lot of different values: whole notes, half notes, sixteenth notes, as well as quarter notes and eighth notes. There are other values as well.

In 4/4 time, we measure the length of the bar by counting four quarter notes. In 3/4 time, we measure the length of the bar by counting three quarter notes. In 6/8 time, we measure the length of the bar by counting six eighth notes.

In 4/4 time, the first beat of a bar is always the strongest. It is called the downbeat. The third beat of the bar is next in strength. Beats 2 and 4 are weak, beat 2 being slightly weaker than beat 4. This relative pattern of strong and weak beats, listed in order of strength, is

- Beat 1
- Beat 3
- Beat 4
- Beat 2

This strength relationship is maintained at all levels of 4/4 time:

Listen to this simple example of four quarter notes in a single bar, using "Life is simple." Dum da DUM da.

Note: As a songwriter, you need to be comfortable using your own singing voice as a tool, and you need to be able to settle for "good enough to illustrate the song." So, don't feel intimidated by the virtuosity of my sample recordings :-). Whatever you can do will be good enough. The idea is to record something so that others can all hear what you are after.

This same relationship is maintained over a series of bars. Let's start very simply by looking at four whole notes. Listen to the example below, which uses four stressed syllables in a row, "Long days, long nights."



"Long" sounds more important in this setting, doesn't it. "Days" and "nights" seem to attract less attention, though "nights" seems to stand out a little more than "days." So we can prioritize the strengths of the 4-bar sequence, from strongest to weakest, as

- Bar 1
- Bar 3
- Bar 4
- Bar 2

This relationship of bar strength is the same as the strength-pattern of beats in a bar of 4/4! Now listen to "long days, long nights" as half notes:



Now we have only two bars, but, as you can hear, the words still retain the same emphasis. So, again, we can prioritize the strengths of the four half-notes, from strongest to weakest, as

- Beat 1 (bar 1)
- Beat 1 (bar 2)
- Beat 3 (bar 2)
- Beat 3 (bar 1)

The earlier relationship we saw with whole notes is maintained by the half-notes. The first and third notes are the strongest, the fourth and second notes are the weakest.

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Now listen to "long days, long nights" as quarter notes:



Again, we hear the same relationship, from strongest to weakest:

- Beat 1
- Beat 3
- Beat 4
- Beat 2

But something a little funny seems to be happening, doesn't it? "Days" and "nights" are starting to feel a little too strong for their positions. Now that we've sped up the note values, beats 2 and 4 feel a little too weak for strong words. Since "days" and "nights" are nouns, they will always be stressed, making it necessary to place them in stressed positions in the bar. So when they appeared on the downbeat or third beat of the bars in examples 1 and 2, they were still in a position befitting their strength, even though they had less strength than "long." But when they are forced into one bar on the weaker second and fourth beats, they sound a little crowded.

Listen to this next example. The crowding is even worse with eighth notes:



Again, we hear the same relationship, from strongest to weakest:

- Beat 1
- Beat 3
- Beat 4
- Beat 2
- Beat 4&
- Beat 2&
- Beat 3&
- Beat 1&

The upbeats introduce a lesser level of strength, making beats 1, 2, 3, 4, by contrast to the upbeats, pretty strong. Think for a minute of the eighth notes as though they were quarter notes extending over two bars of 4/4 time: beats 1, 3, 1, 3 are strong, and beats 2, 4, 2, 4 are weak.

As for the upbeats, the ones that PRECEDE strong beats are stronger, the ones that follow strong beats are weaker. But none of them are very strong, and we can, for most purposes, regard them as equal.

Even though the eighth notes make this lyric feel crowded, you can still hear the same relationship between the beats as you did with 4 whole notes.

Very dependable that way, 4/4 time. :)

As an exercise, try replacing the eighth notes that used "long days, long nights" with "life is simple," and see how crowding ceases to be an issue.

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Musical Stress: Position in the Bar



So far, we've only used stressed syllables "long days, long nights." Let's see what happens with quarter notes when we use weaker syllables on the second and fourth beats. First let's use secondary stresses. I like "hotdog" as an example of strong/secondary, but we could just as easily use "daytime, nighttime." Listen.



Sounds more natural, doesn't it? Secondary stresses work fine for the second and fourth beats. What would happen if we use unstressed syllables on the weak beats? Let's try it with "summer's coming."



It sounds okay. Maybe the stressed notes could be a little longer and the unstressed notes a little shorter. More of that later.

Let's try eighth notes, using "school is done and summer's coming."



This sounds very natural. Note that "school" and "sum" stand out the most, with "com" third and "done" a close fourth," once again demonstrating the relative strengths of the beats in 4/4 time:

- Beat 1
- Beat 3
- Beat 4
- Beat 2

That's enough of 4/4 time for now, but we'll see a lot more of it as we go on.

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Due by July 16, 2003

Now that we have defined strong and weak positions in the 4/4 bar, let's try a few exercises that use several note values. Identify the strong notes in each of the following 4/4 time melodies.

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