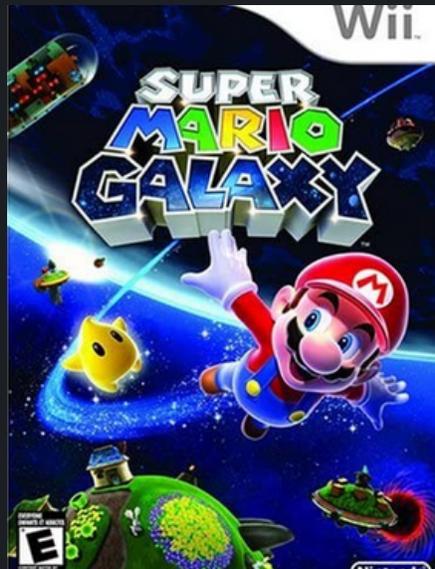


5 SIMPLE STEPS TO WRITE THEMATIC MUSIC

IN THE STYLE OF DISNEY & NINTENDO



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A PREFACE

Welcome, my friend. Thank you for downloading this guide, and I promise to deliver you some extremely valuable and practical information in our short time together.

As a composer or songwriter, it is crucial to consider your music from the perspective of a layperson. An amateur mistake we've all made is to try and be more complex than is needed, and this can end up confusing the listener. A common theme I share with my students is 'less is more'.

While music that contains a good theme can be very memorable, we need to take many things into account to ensure that a piece of music is as effective as possible. In addition to melody writing tips, we will also discuss some harmonic and structural concepts that will serve to make your piece cohesive and interesting.

I'll be using the music from **Gusty Garden Galaxy** for much of this guide, as I feel it's a perfect piece to describe the devices we will cover.

I hope you're as excited as I am to dive into some of the devices that composers of this adventure style use in their own music. Without further ado, let's jump in!

STEP 1: DEFINE THE STRUCTURE

Laying out the foundation of your piece is paramount, and is understated by many musicians and composers. The way we plan out the structure of our music will influence our composing decisions. Will we start with a memorable melody right away? Do we begin with a more dynamic section, or keep it reserved to save the energy for later?

In the case of **Nintendo's Super Mario Galaxy**, a very common structure is **ABC**, where **A** presents the theme right away, the **B** serves a bridge function where the energy decreases, and the **C** section presents an entirely new theme that serves as the climax of the piece. Following this, the sound editors add in a loop point to bring the piece back to the beginning. A good piece to reference this is '**Gusty Garden Galaxy**'. This is my go-to structure when I compose a cinematic orchestral piece.



STEP 1: DEFINE THE STRUCTURE

In the case of **Disney's** music, Alan Menken is a master of fitting in music with dialogue. He ensures that with any back and forth dialogue in the music, the main theme always comes back to hook the listener, and leave an imprint on the mind. Refer to 'Belle' from Beauty and the Beast, and take note of how the main theme is never far away.

The structure of this song is as follows (up to 02:40):

00:00 **Intro**: calm, shows the setting, sets up the story

00:33 **Main Theme**: catchy, dancing, light

00:46 **Dialogue**: instrumental, gives listener a break

00:57 **Main Theme**: villagers sing, repetition of main melody

01:12 **Development**: chord structure changes

01:36 **Main Theme**: villagers sing

01:51 **Bridge**: completely new section, room for melodic and harmonic exploration

02:22 **Main Theme**: villagers sing

As you can see, the main theme alternates with the other material in order to provide unity and memorability. You can keep it as simple as 2 main themes sandwiching a contrasting section in the middle, which brings a sense of unity to the whole thing.



STEP 2: THE HARMONIC PLAN

The wonderful thing about Disney and Nintendo's orchestral-based music is that they are directly influenced by classical music. By this, I mean that the songs are typically focused around a **major or minor scale**, as well as on the **primary chords of I, IV, & V**. Of course, the other chords of the chosen scale are used for interest, but the manner in which these chords are laid out influence how the melodies are composed.

A common way to apply these primary chords is by using a **musical period**. By this I mean a 4-bar question phrase, followed by a 4-bar answer phrase. The harmony serves to outline these phrases. Here is an example of a common chord progression:

Question phrase: I ii IV V (ends with half cadence)

Answer phrase: I ii V I (ends with authentic cadence)

Using '**Gusty Garden**' as an example, listen from 00:21 – 00:33, and notice how the question phrase is presented, and is immediately answered. This is because the question phrase ends on the **IV chord**, while the answer ends back on the **I chord**.

This should give you 8 bars of material so far. The following 8 bars allow you room to expand upon the melodic and harmonic material, experiment with non-diatonic chords, and more.

STEP 3: MELODIC CONTOUR

The most beautiful and memorable melodies result from having a smooth contour. Let's take a look at a transcription of the Gusty Garden Galaxy theme:

4

49

D Another great example of establishing a melodic sequence to "train" listeners ears, and then breaking the sequence ever so subtly to provide just enough contrast to create satisfying melodic interest.

The image shows a musical score for the Gusty Garden Galaxy theme. It features a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The melody is written in a single line with a red outline. The chord progressions are: D-flat, D-flat/F, G-flat, G-flat, F minor, and B-flat. The Roman numerals below the chords are: I, I⁶, IV, IV, iii, and V/ii. A green box highlights the first two measures of the melody, with a text box explaining that this is a great example of establishing a melodic sequence to 'train' listeners' ears, and then breaking the sequence subtly to create satisfying melodic interest.

D_b D_b/F G_b G_b F_m B_b

I I⁶ IV IV iii V/ii

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As you can see from the red outline, there is a smooth shape in the melody that allows it be easily singable and memorable. A common device is to **write your melody by steps**, with **occasional leaps** to chord notes for increased emotion and interest.

Here is an easy method to ensure your melody is tonally centered and well-constructed:

1. **Write out 3-4 notes** in your melody for each chord, sticking with chord notes only for each beat
2. Make sure the notes are **rhythmically consistent** and **have a slope-like contour**
3. **Add in non-chord notes** between your chord notes to bridge the chord notes together and create a smoother shape. This will alter the rhythm of the melody, as you're inserting extra notes into the melody.

STEP 4: RHYTHMIC VARIATION

Another factor that creates memorability in your melodies is rhythmic variation. Again, let's refer back to the Gusty Garden melody:

4

49

Another great example of establishing a melodic sequence to "train" listeners ears, and then breaking the sequence ever so subtly to provide just enough contrast to create satisfying melodic interest.

I I⁶ IV IV iii V/ii

Analysis copyright 2013 GameMusicTheory

Notice how even though the time signature is 4/4, the rhythm in the melody in bar 49 uses **syncopation and dotted notes** to play around with the rhythm.

In bar 52, we have a quarter rest, allowing the musicians to breathe, then **ascend with quarter notes**, a more steady rhythm.

Bar 53 is completely different, with a **half note followed by a series of 8th notes** to add some variety and spice.

The idea is, while bars 49-51 contain essentially the same rhythm to plant the theme in our minds, the following bars mix up the rhythm so that the listener gets to hear something new, rather than repeat the same rhythm once again. This variety is essential in allowing our brains to hear groups and patterns from these notes.

STEP 5: HARMONIC DEVICES

One crucial thing that separates mainstream pop music from classically inspired video game/movie scores is the use of harmonic devices that take the song or piece beyond the diatonic level.

2 of my favourite devices are:

- Modal mixture
- Secondary dominants

Modal mixture occurs when we take our major or minor scale and borrow chords from other modes, for example Lydian, Mixolydian, or even the parallel major/minor key. For example, the **Gusty Garden** intro begins with the **b6, b7, 1** chord progression in Db. The **b6** and **b7** are found in the parallel minor key (C#-), but when brought into the parallel major, it creates a rich and new sound. Meanwhile, the Lydian mode creates chords like the major 2 in a major scale, while the Mixolydian mode also creates the b7 chord.

Secondary dominants are especially effective when preceding a chord that is not the 1 chord of a scale. For example, in **Belle**, the bridge happens at 1:51 in C major. However, the 2nd half of this theme, which starts at 2:06, begins on an F major chord. Instead of simply preceding it with a C major chord, which creates a standard V-I in F, Alan Menken turns it into a **C7 chord** (2:02), adding in the Bb for that extra push to the F chord. It's a subtle technique common in Broadway, musical theatre, and Disney.

WRAPPING UP

As you can see, writing a piece of memorable music takes many factors into consideration. Not only do we want to ensure that the melody itself is centered around chord notes with non-chord notes bridging them together, and ensuring that it has a smooth contour and rhythmic variation, but the way in which we structure the song/piece and our chord choices are equally important.

To write in the classic Disney/Nintendo style, **use classical chord progressions in combination with occasional modal mixture.**

This means:

- Learn all the **chords** of each key and their **functions** (I, ii, iii, IV, V, vi, vii, and being familiar with cadences)
- Be familiar with the **major modes** (esp. lydian, mixolydian, dorian, phrygian)
- Write **melodies based on your chord choices**, and add non-chord notes to create a smooth slope-like contour
- Use **rhythmic variety** to create interest in your melodies
- **Repetition is key.** Take a short melodic fragment and repeat it a step up/down to create a sequence. Make sure it matches your chord choices.

These are just a few of the techniques that I use on a regular basis in my own compositions. If you'd like to hear an example, take a listen to my piece **Final Hope**.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read through this guide, and I hope you can apply at least one of these concepts to your music. Most importantly, have fun!

If you need anything, feel free to reach out at christophersiu.com!

Take care,
Christopher

AWESOME RESOURCES

YouTube Channels:

Christopher Siu - <http://www.youtube.com/c/ChristopherSiu>

8 Bit Music Theory - <https://cutt.ly/KaAiD3W>

Alex Moukala Music - <https://cutt.ly/6aAi3xj>

Nintendo - <https://www.youtube.com/user/Nintendo>

Disney - <https://www.youtube.com/user/disneysshows>

Rick Beato - <https://www.youtube.com/user/pegzch>

Social Channels:

Composing Made Simple - <https://discord.gg/JFuEsy>

Virtual Orchestration - <https://cutt.ly/baApSWc>

Cinesamples Composer Community - <https://cutt.ly/CaApVIN>

Evenant Music and Audio - <https://cutt.ly/CaAdk6Q>