

Composition for the terrified - getting started.

Keri Degg

Have you ever marveled at people who write their own music? Did you think composing was a skill left to the select few? You're quite wrong! With a little guidance and practice you will soon be writing your own music and hopefully getting a lot of enjoyment out of the end results. I hope to offer a series of 'lessons' and steps to getting started.

In lesson one we learn to construct an effective yet simple ABA (Ternary form) piece using given 'themes' to get you started. To get started there are a few tools you will need;

pencil
rubber
a basic knowledge of key signatures, scales, and theory
a little imagination!

Example 1 overleaf begins in D harmonic minor (D,E,F,G,A,Bb, C#, D). Each note of the scale has a special name;

1 = Tonic
2 = Supertonic (BETTER than tonic; this one has a little red cape on!)
3 = Mediant
4 = Subdominant
5 = Dominant
6 = Submediant (I know! This one doesn't really make sense does it?!)
7 = Leading note
8 = Tonic / Octave

Lets write out the notes of our scale;

D E F G A Bb C# D

If you look at each note as an individual now, can you now write a TRIAD above each note? By triad we mean a stack of 3 notes each one 2 alphabet names higher than the one under it. Remember to stay 'in key' (remember your #'s and b's if there are any!) So you should have something like this;

A Bb C# D E F G A
F G A Bb C# D E F
D E F G A Bb C# D

I II III IV V VI VII VIII

Each upward rising 'stack' consists of a ROOT note (the bottom one) and a 3rd and 5th above it. I have also written in roman numerals underneath to indicate the chord 'name'. So for example, chord V in D minor would be; A, C#, E. This will become important later on when we deal with cadences (ends of phrases).

Tips;

Don't be too clever and overly fussy; simpler is often better!
DO use repetition and patterns in your compositions; too many ideas in one piece confuse!
Keep phrases to set lengths, use 'Question and Answer' phrases with thought out end notes
TRY out your progress on an instrument if you can; it helps to keep you on track often

Good luck! :)

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Lesson I

This first composition project is based on very simple but effective composition techniques. It consists of three sections; A,B,A (we call that 'ternary form'). Sections A (and C) are in D harmonic minor, with section B being in F major (the relative major = same key signature, but has lost the #7 accidental). When we move into another key we call it 'modulation'. Common modulations are to; relative majors or minor (the key 3 semitones up or down) to the dominant (so if we began in C major, the dominant would be G major), or sub dominant (again, if we were in C major, our sub dominant key would be F major).

This first project requires you to fill in a started simple composition. Note that we use repetition to give a feel of familiarity and this helps our theme to 'stick' in the listeners head. An Imperfect cadence is a something to V chord (common are; I-V, II-V, VI-V) which gives a feeling of wanting to 'go on'. So we need to end bar 8 with an A chord (and it will be an A MAJOR chord due to the C#'s in a D harmonic minor key remember!) a second, or 7th (E or C#)melody note will work well as a final note of bar 8 as it is a natural 'leader' into our next question phrase. Stick an 'A, C# or E' as the last note of bar 8 and you'll be 'safe' :)

Ensure at this level that the final note in bar 16 is a tonic note (D). A Perfect cadence is a V-I chord. Common perfect cadences are II-V-I, VI-V-I, IV-V-I. So, our final chord in bar 16 will be a D minor chord. A perfect cadence sounds 'finished' so end bar 16 on a D to be safe.
example 1.

A (also acts as section C)

Question phrase | Answering phrase

imperfect cadence here ↗

Question phrase (repetition of opening theme) | Answering phrase **Fine.**

perfect cadence here ↗

So, we've enjoyed our little journey in D minor but now we need to deliver something fresh. How about a modulation to the relative major? Therefore section B is now clearly in F major. We start on F (the NEW tonic) and you will see in bar 4 that the C natural confirms we are no longer in D minor. Make sure that at bar 24 you remember that we are in F major! Bars 25-28 should be similar to bars 17-20 just a couple of small changes will keep things interesting. Finally, bars 31 and 32 are going to modulate us BACK into section A in D minor. Bar 31 is a V chord of F major BUT with the C# having been re-introduced as an insight into what's about to happen (D minor). Bar 32 is the V chord (A C# E) of D minor and naturally pushes us back into the tonic of section A.

B

Question phrase | Answering phrase

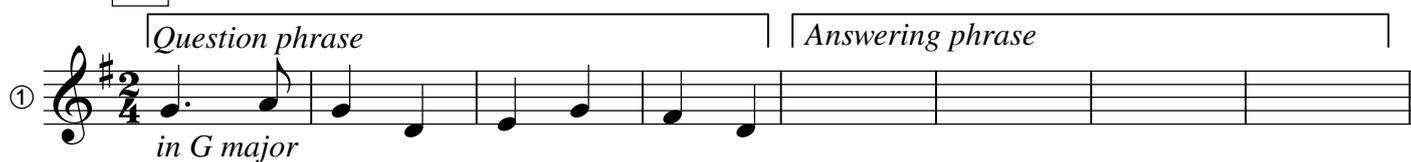
imperfect cadence here ↗

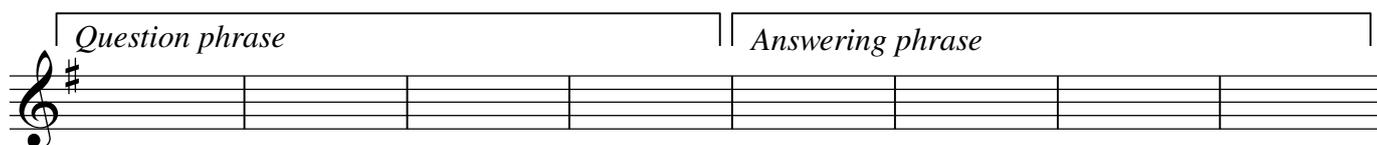
Question phrase (based on bars 17-20) | Answering phrase **D.C al fine.**

V I
back in D minor

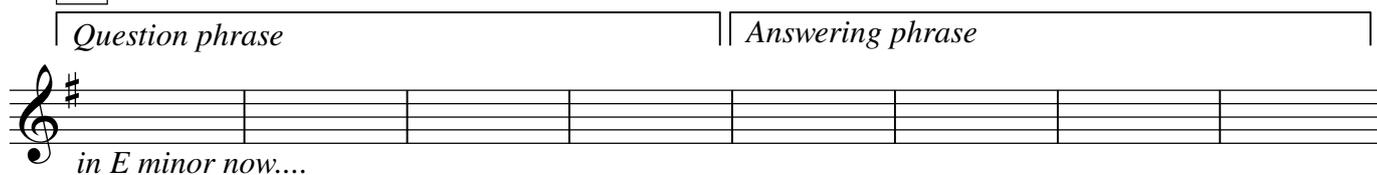
Use the following musical examples to create your own compositions using the method we have just practiced. Remember that these are in ternary form (ABA) and your middle section should be in the modulated relative major or minor key. To be safe, start each 'question' on the TONIC.

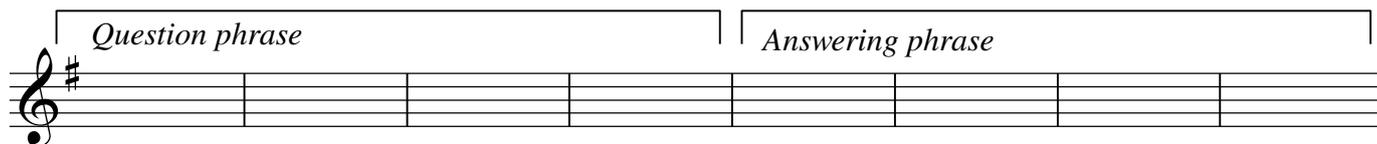
A

①  *in G major*



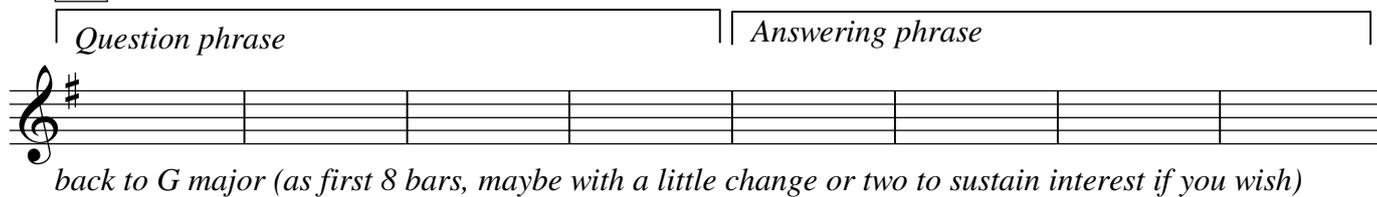
B

 *in E minor now....*



C

which is the same (or similar) to the A section

 *back to G major (as first 8 bars, maybe with a little change or two to sustain interest if you wish)*



- 4 Here are two more 'theme' ideas to get you started on another two compositions. Use the ABA Ternary form structure to create a 48 bar composition (16 bars of A, 16 bars of B in new key, and 16 bars of C back in original key). Use manuscript paper to write out your compositions (it can be printed off free of charge at www.masquerade-music.co.uk in the free resources section).

Theme idea 1 in E harmonic minor (modulate to G Major in section B)

1 Question phrase

Theme idea 2 in C major (modulate to A harmonic minor in section B).

1 Question phrase