
Writing a Popular Song Quickly Using Subsequences

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Repetition is an important part of writing music. Popular music is particularly repetitive and tends to produce music in certain forms. When sequencing popular music the composer can use this inherent repetition of form to his or her advantage. Technology allows us to easily copy and paste large sections of music together to produce a long piece with a minimum of effort. This lesson highlights the use of subsequences to quickly produce a frame for a popular style piece.

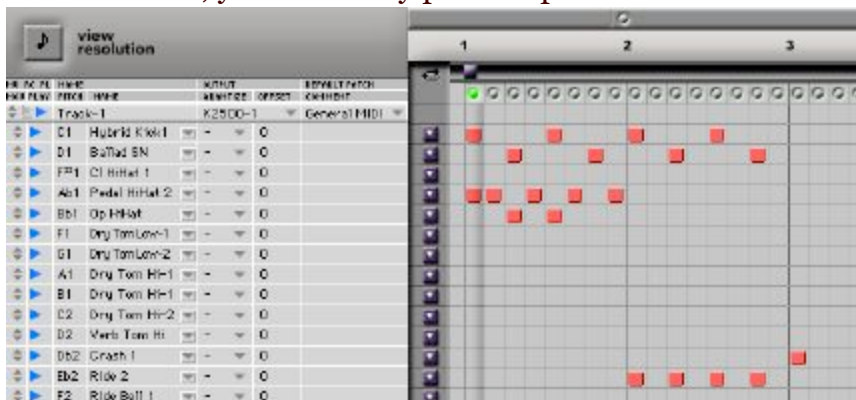
This article assumes that the composer already has some proficiency with MIDI software. The graphics are from the Digital Performer software package, but any MIDI sequencing package can be coaxed into the same functions.

Outline:

1. Create the structure of the piece
2. Write out a chord progression for the Chorus
3. Loop record a simple drum beat
4. Record in a bass line that follows the chord progression
5. Step in a keyboard pad
6. Add simple piano or guitar rhythms
7. Add a melody line
8. Repeat steps 2-7 for the Verse
9. Copy the Verse and paste into 2 new subsequences, Verse 2 and Verse 3
10. Repeat Step 9 for the Chorus
11. Repeat steps 2-7 for Bridge, Intro, and Out
12. Record additional parts to Verses and Choruses to add variety
13. Make changes for variety of timbres
14. Record in drum fills to add variety
15. Combine your subsequences into a complete sequence

Details

1. The first step in writing your song is to have an idea of the general structure of the piece. Forms for popular songs vary, but a standard form is:
Introduction/Verse 1 /Chorus/Verse 2/Chorus/Bridge/Verse 3/Chorus/Out. Choruses contain a memorable phrase know as a "hook" that serves as the part of the song people remember. The verses are contrasting sections that can contain more complex material. The bridge can be something completely different, or can be a solo over chorus material. Introductions are often a statement of the beginning of the verse material that is to follow. The Out can be chorus material repeated and faded or a dramatic ending based on previous material.
2. Now compose a chord structure for the chorus. I start with the chorus because often the chorus is easier to write because it contains the simple "hook." Also, the chorus tends to be repeated with less variation than the verses. If you are having trouble thinking of chord progressions, then why not look through some old jazz fake books, or use a program like Band-in-a-Box. Borrowing someone else's chord progression is not considered plagiarism.
3. Now set up a simple drum pattern. If your sequencer has a drum editor, you can easily pencil a pattern in.

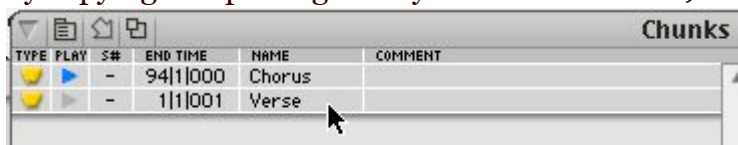


Try putting Kick (Bass) drum on beats 1 and 3, snare on beats 2 and four, with either ride on all beats or high hat (open and closed) on the division. Save the crash cymbals, Toms, and auxiliary percussion until later. If your software does not have a drum editor, then record in a simple drum part and loop it.

4. Now put in a simple bass line. Since you have your chord progression already, you may choose to just put in the root of all the chords for now.
5. Now add a pad track. Choose an inoffensive voice like Strings or Choir Aahs. Record in chords of the same duration as your chord changes from Step 2. If your sequencer has step recording, then the process is very quick indeed (much faster than real-time recording once you get the hang of it). Try leaving out the root of the chord on your pads – the bass player is already playing it anyway.



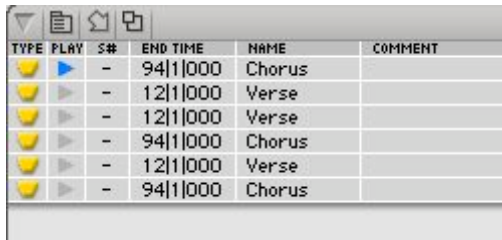
6. Add some other instruments to your taste. Piano or other keyboard parts would be nice.
7. Record in a melody. Often melodies sound more natural when played in rather than step recorded. If you have an alternate MIDI controller you are comfortable with, this is the time to use it! Remember your chorus melody contains your hook--the part you want people to remember. Keep it simple here.
8. Now we use subsequences for the first time. In Performer a subsequence is called a “Chunk,” but it may be called something different in your software package. Subsequences are like separate songs within the same file. Start a new subsequence and name it Verse after naming the old one Chorus. (If your software does not allow for subsequences, you can still use these techniques by copying and pasting all of your tracks at once.)



Now repeat steps 2-7 for your Verse section. The verse can be more complex than the chorus section. Change the key

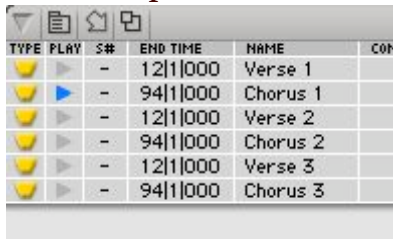
center for variety. The verse is often in a closely related key to the chorus, such as the Dominant or Subdominant.

9. Once you have produced a simple verse and chorus shell, then the fun begins. Simply duplicate your verses and choruses twice. In performer you choose your subsequence, choose Copy from the Edit menu, and then choose Paste from the edit menu twice.



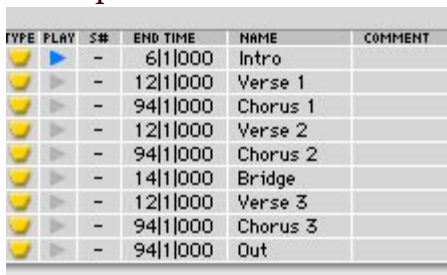
TYPE	PLAY	S#	END TIME	NAME	COMMENT
☺	▶	-	94 1 000	Chorus	
☺	▶	-	12 1 000	Verse	
☺	▶	-	12 1 000	Verse	
☺	▶	-	94 1 000	Chorus	
☺	▶	-	12 1 000	Verse	
☺	▶	-	94 1 000	Chorus	

10. You have three copies of your original work. Rename them and place them in the correct order.



TYPE	PLAY	S#	END TIME	NAME	COM
☺	▶	-	12 1 000	Verse 1	
☺	▶	-	94 1 000	Chorus 1	
☺	▶	-	12 1 000	Verse 2	
☺	▶	-	94 1 000	Chorus 2	
☺	▶	-	12 1 000	Verse 3	
☺	▶	-	94 1 000	Chorus 3	

11. Now it is time to add the Bridge, Intro, and Out. Create new subsequences. Bridges can be contrasting material or a solo break over previous material. Sometimes I use a verse or chorus from a song that did not work as a bridge for a different song. Introductions are often a statement of the beginning of the verse material that is to follow. The Out can be chorus material repeated and faded or a dramatic ending based on previous material. Order your subsequences.

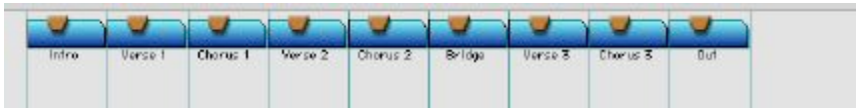


TYPE	PLAY	S#	END TIME	NAME	COMMENT
☺	▶	-	6 1 000	Intro	
☺	▶	-	12 1 000	Verse 1	
☺	▶	-	94 1 000	Chorus 1	
☺	▶	-	12 1 000	Verse 2	
☺	▶	-	94 1 000	Chorus 2	
☺	▶	-	14 1 000	Bridge	
☺	▶	-	12 1 000	Verse 3	
☺	▶	-	94 1 000	Chorus 3	
☺	▶	-	94 1 000	Out	

12. Now you have the basic framework for your song, and in considerably less time than if you had started recording

from bar 1 beat 1 on every track. But you are far from finished if you are trying to produce a work of art. Technology often gets the sometimes-justified reputation for producing bad music very quickly. Do not become one of the “midiots” who leaves the piece half finished! We now need to go into our shells and add to the subsequences. A general rule of thumb is to have some kind of change every twenty seconds or so to keep people’s attention.

13. One way to make easy changes is through patch changes at new choruses and verses. You can simply change the instruments, or, better yet, why not layer a copy of your melody on the part that s already there. Even better--why not add a harmony part that enters at the second or third verse. If the sequence becomes too thick, dropping out parts can be effective too.
14. At this point your drum pattern is probably sounding a little pedantic now that you have improved your music. Go back and record in some drum fills using the toms and crash cymbals we skipped before. Remember that the drummer can only hit one drum at a time with one hand.
15. Time to finish the process. We need to combine all of our small pieces into one long song. The process varies among software packages, but in concept they usually treat your subsequences as separate MIDI events. In performer you create a Song track and then drag the subsequences in.



The tricky part here is making sure that your subsequences were the length you expected them to be. Sometimes extra MIDI data causes the subsequences to be longer than expected, and you will need to tell the software where to stop playing. In my example above, stray data made my chorus seem to be 94 measures long—too much for a simple hook!

Another nice trick is to overlap sequences for material that crosses boundaries.



Finally, in Performer particularly, I find better results when I take the song track and combine it all into one long sequence. In the local song menu the command Merge Chunks to Sequence combines everything neatly into one sequence. If you have been careful about naming tracks as you go along, then the result is quite satisfying.

Although the task of composing using subsequences may seem cumbersome at first, a myriad of possibilities present themselves once the technique is second nature. The adept composer can layer chunks upon chunks, use drum patterns form one sequence in another, and produce interesting compositional elements within layers.



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