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Melodies and toplines

You're not going to write a club-rockingly fantastic topline by following a set of theoretical guidelines. That said, there are a range of techniques that crop up time and again in both underground and crossover hits. An understanding of how they work can help when crafting melodies and give insights into how they might be developed further.

CONTRARY MOTION

The term **contrary motion** describes the movement of two melodic parts in opposite directions.

In dance music, which typically deals with fewer melodic parts than orchestral arrangements, instances of contrary motion

tend to occur between the bassline and lead. The Prodigy's 2009 hit, 'Invaders Must Die', is a good example.

Here the driving bassline initially descends in pitch while the lead that enters at 0:42 moves upwards (Fig 27, below). The contrast in melodic trajectories creates an extra lift in the progression. Although both melody and bassline are strong in their own right, when played together the contrary motion adds a new dimension to the track.

For another striking example return to Burial's 'Archange' from the 2007 album *Untrue*, where the string sample (taken from Harry Gregson-Williams' score for a cut scene in the game *Metal Gear Solid 2*) runs in contrary motion to the bass.

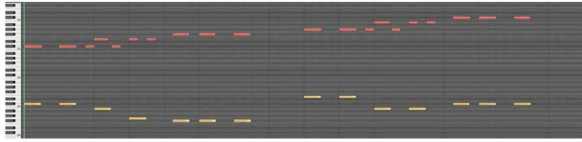
The ascending pattern of the top melody is C, D, Eb, and Ab – notes 1, 2, 3 and 6 of an ascending C minor scale (Fig 26, above right). The simplest potential bassline



Fig 26: Burial's 'Archange' melody in red and contrary bass in blue.

Fig 27: The Prodigy's 'Invaders Must Die', bass in yellow, lead in red.

would follow an ascending pattern starting on the C – effectively mirroring the lead. But Burial takes the contrary route instead, bass moving down the C minor scale from Ab through G to F. The increased sense of tension as the melodies work against each other results in a complex, moody combined sound.



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ANACRUSIS

An anacrusis is a note or series of notes in a melody that occurs before the first beat of a bar. The musical device can be used to lead a listener into a chorus or melody line, to generate a brief sense of anticipation, to provide continuity between musical phrases – or it can just give a tune an extra 'catchy' element, the ultimate precursor to an ear-worm-style chorus hook.

Commonly cited examples are found in the songs 'Happy Birthday' and 'We Wish You a Merry Christmas', in which the start of each chorus – the words 'Happy' and 'We' respectively – occur before the first downbeat of the line. In the Beatles' 'Yellow Submarine', the words 'In the' form the anacrusis before 'town' hits on the beat.

In dance music, a more relevant example can be found in the vocal part of the chorus




Fig 28: Disclosure, 'You and Me' Vocalist Eliza Doolittle's 'So please don't let go, 'cos you know, exactly what we've found' – occur before the first beat of the chorus, leading into the 'drop' of the first beat.

You can see above how this technique works in conjunction with the bass (which drops out temporarily to up the tension), and hear how it makes the transition from the long build to chorus even more impactful. Incidentally, the second half of the phrase features an example of contrary motion between bassline and vocal.

But anacrusis doesn't have to be confined to vocal parts. Fig 29 notates the catchy lead melody line from Pendulum's 2005 anthem 'Slam!', where the first three notes of the melody (it hits at the 1.36 mark) anticipate the first beat of the track's 'chorus', which enters on the fourth note of the melody line.

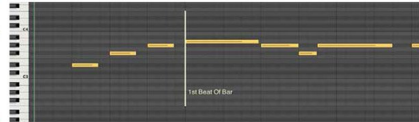


Fig 29: Anacrusis in Pendulum's 'Slam!'.

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