PART I: MUSICAL MATERIALS

Most pieces of music are made up of a melody, a bass line, and some harmony filling out the texture. This is true of most kinds of tonal music. As we start composing, it is important that we have a checklist to refer back to:

What makes a good melody?

At its heart, a good composition needs a good melody – that is, one that moves with clarity and direction, holding the interest of the listener without too many surprises.

- Does the melody have a clear, recognisable line?
- Does the melody move in steps with occasional leaps?
- Does the melody have some rhythmic variety to keep it interesting?

What goes with a good melody?

Along with your melody, you need a bass line to support it. We need to keep the following in mind:

- Is there a clear bass line that underpins the melody?
- Is there a combination of similar and contrary motion between the melody and bass line?
- Is there a clear sense of implied harmony, where the combination of the melody and bass suggests a harmony, even if the chords haven't been written out?

How were famous composers taught to compose?

But where do these good melodies come from? For many eighteenth-century musicians, the answer was in a common stock of patterns passed down through teaching traditions. The earliest *conservatories* were set up in the port city of Naples, where the large number of abandoned children meant that a lot of orphanages were established there. Orphans were usually taught a trade in these institutions so that they wouldn't be destitute as adults. They were looked after, given food and shelter – they were 'conserved' here (which is where the Italian term *conservatorio* and the French *conservatoire* derive from). During the nineteenth century conservatories began to appear in northern Europe, famously in Paris and Leipzig, where many of the most successful musicians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were trained.

The orphans at these institutions were taught, first and foremost, to improvise. Improvisation in this tradition did not begin with silence, or a blank sheet of paper. Instead, children were taught some of the most commonly used basic ideas in the European tradition until they were familiar enough to refer to, play, and improvise around. We refer to each of these basic ideas as a **schema**.

These shapes, or **schemata**, can be used flexibly, combined, rearranged, decorated, and developed, in order to construct the framework of a piece of music. Of course, sometimes a composer will have to come up with something new, but much of this repertoire is built like a patchwork quilt of schemata that were ready to hand. Some of the schemata might be new to you, but it's likely that you'll recognise many of them, perhaps never having realised that they had a name!

Once we have introduced some of these basic shapes, we'll show you how to order and combine them into short pieces of music – a framework that you can then embellish, decorate, and *improvise* on. The process is not meant to be a rigid 'paint by numbers' approach, but an invitation for you to come up with something creative from some pre-existing materials. In fact, in each task you are encouraged to try something different if the process of improvising around the materials takes you there! Imagine the way a chef cooks a meal. The chef doesn't have to grow each individual ingredient – they are ready for him in the kitchen. Although these schemata were used in the eighteenth century, they describe patterns of motion and expectation that underpin much tonal and modal music today. Film scores, musicals, jazz standards, and pop music all use these shapes, consciously or not.

This section will begin by introducing three of the most versatile schemata in the style, along with a strategy for arranging these ideas into a form. By the end of **Part I** you should be able to construct a simple piece of music. We will start with one of the most instantly recognisable shapes in the repertoire.

OPENING SCHEMA: THE ROMANESCA

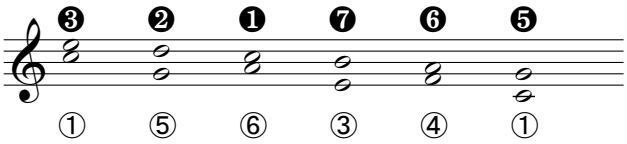
There are several different types of musical patterns that could be used to begin a composition. They vary in length but are usually a bar or two long, and they establish the key and provide a main idea for the piece of music.

Of all the musical ideas that circulated in the eighteenth century, the **Romanesca** was one of the most versatile. It was most frequently used as an opening idea which could be varied and developed in several different ways.

The 'leaping-bass' Romanesca

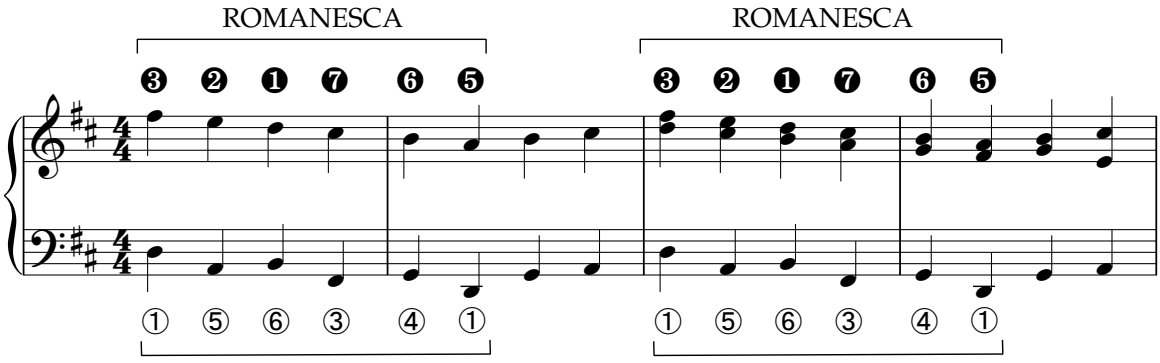
The most basic form, the 'leaping-bass' Romanesca, is built on a simple pattern in the bass voice. Let's look at it in C major: It starts on the tonic, C, then leaps down a fourth to G (the fifth degree), steps up a second to A (the sixth degree), leaps down a fourth to E (the third degree), steps up a second to F (the fourth degree), and so on.

This motion in the bass line – ①–⑤–⑥–③ – is a progression of tension and release that is found in lots of different kinds of music, from classical pieces to pop ballads to jazz standards. To accompany this bass line, composers often wrote a melody beginning on ❸ and then descending by step, with one melody note to go with each note in the bass. This results in a series of root-position chords which eventually arrive back at the tonic.



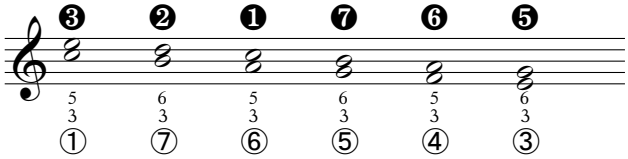
This pattern might be recognisable to you if you have heard Pachelbel's *Canon in D*, in which he modifies the melody at the end of the phrase in order to maintain the continuity of the music.

Pachelbel: ***Canon in D***



The 'stepwise-bass' Romanesca

The 'leaping-bass' Romanesca was the most basic option but there is also a 'stepwise-bass' version in which the bass simply moves down by a step. This produces a pattern of alternating root-position and first inversion chords, which are indicated by figured bass:



Figured bass recap

The numbers describe the intervals above the bass note which tell you the chord's inversion:
Let's take C major as an example:

- 5/3 – **Root position:** the bass is the root (C). Above it you hear a 3rd and a 5th (e.g. C–E–G).
- 6/3 – **1st inversion:** the bass is the 3rd of the chord (E). Above it you hear a 3rd and a 6th (e.g. E–G–C).
- 6/4 – **2nd inversion:** the bass is the 5th (G). Above it you hear a 4th and a 6th (e.g. G–C–E).

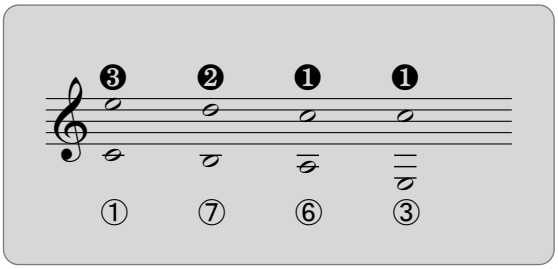
Musical references:
Pachelbel, Johann: *Canon in D,* bars 3–6

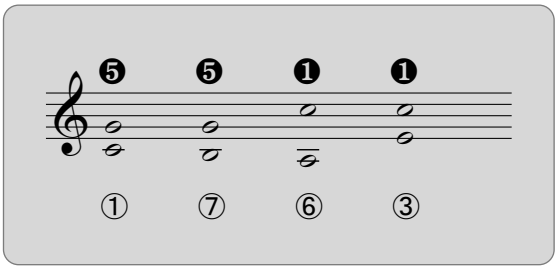
The Galant Romanesca

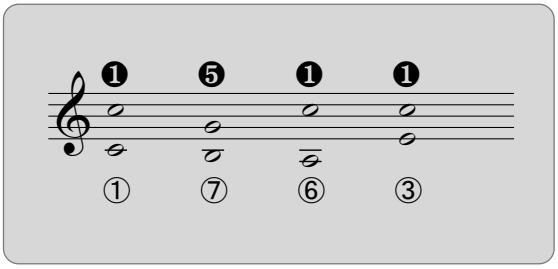
The most common version of the Romanesca in the eighteenth century, though, combines the two strategies, with the bass moving in step to begin with, before leaping down at the end producing the bass line ①–⑦–⑥–③. Let's call this the **galant Romanesca**.

The melody in the galant Romanesca usually focuses on a mixture of combinations of ❶ and ❺. Some of the main variants are shown below in the key of C major:

Variants of the galant Romanesca

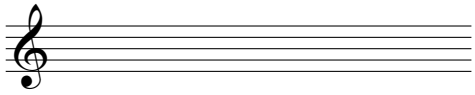






TASK

Play the three different galant Romanesca patterns on this page and the versions with leaping bass and stepwise bass on pages 13 and 14. Decide which one you prefer and try it out in a suitable key and range for your instrument.



The Romanesca in action

We have seen how to start a piece using the Romanesca as an opening schema. Although this method of composing originated as a way of creating Western classical music, it is certainly not restricted to this. The Romanesca's descending shape clearly outlines the key while providing a sense of nostalgia. Let's look at some examples from the Western classical, pop, and jazz traditions.