

SONGCRAFTERS COLORING BOOK

by Bill Pere

SNIPS, SNAILS AND PUPPY DOG'S TAILS

That, as the nursery rhyme goes, is what little boys are made of. But what is a song made of? In order to really fine-tune a song, it is essential to know its basic elements. This has always been necessary for giving songs that real polished look, but more than ever, it becomes important because understanding the elements of a song gives you the key to demystifying the new computerized tools for creating and expressing music. There is a central concept common to both: the PARAMETER. Learn and understand this word, and you can not only gain more control over your songwriting, but you will find it easier to understand and use today's equipment where each piece has a 300-page manual filled with very strange sounding vocabulary.

A parameter is a factor which can have settings or values which can vary over time, or remain constant. A song (or painting, novel, film, etc) is the sum total of the settings of its parameters. Parameters in a song are perhaps more easily understood if we first look at something a bit less complex. A painting, unlike a song does not involve the dimension of time. All of its parameters, once 'set' remain constant. Some parameters in a painting include hue (color), value (intensity), texture, outline definition, subject matter. Note that styles (abstract, realist, surreal, impressionist) are not parameters. They are the RESULTS of particular combinations of other factors. A single subject can be rendered in many different styles, depending on how other factors are treated. In a novel, some parameters would be characterization, time flow (linear, flashback), scope (does it cover hours, years, generations?), point of view ("me/you", "he/she"), subject matter, tone, setting (time and place). As in the case of a painting, the 'style' is the RESULT of the combined values of all the other factors. A gothic horror novel and a Western could be written with similar styles (characterization, time flow, point of view all equal), but differences in the subject matter and setting would result in very different end products. Conversely, two novels could have similar settings (both 1890's Western's) but differences in the other parameters could turn one into a comedy and one into a horror tale.

A song is one of the most complex art forms because it usually entails two complete entities, music and poetic words, each of which have their own set of parameters, which in turn interact in complex ways. As in the above examples, musical styles like 'jazz' or 'folk' or 'blues' result from particular combinations of parameter settings.

The number of factors to be considered in a song is formidable, and many songwriters tend to work instinctively, not really viewing the elements of a song as discrete factors to be manipulated. For really gifted writers, this works well, and many classic songs have been turned out by writers who only work by what 'feels' right. However, for those of us who are not quite as gifted, knowing how to analyze the parts of a song can help pinpoint what's working and what's not, and how to make effective revisions. To do this, you need to know what the parameters of a song are, and what happens as you change their values or settings.

Song parameters can be divided into three broad groups: 1)-Music factors; 2)-Lyric

factors; 3)-Whole song factors.

Music parameters include:

- melody (the time and musical distance between successive pitches),
- harmony (the musical distance between notes at the SAME point in time),
- rhythm (the division of time into discrete units),
- dynamics (volume),
- timbre (color, or more technically, the shape of the sound wave).

These are the five primary factors. There are many other music factors as well, like attack and decay, which relate to acoustical properties. It is important not to confuse actual parameters with the RESULTS of particular parameter value combinations. For example, 'swing' is not a parameter. It is the result of a particular treatment of rhythm. Articulation (legato/staccato phrasing) is not a parameter. It results from particular attack/decay combinations. 'Accent' is a result of dynamics. All of these things contribute to a musical feel or style. Interactions of some of these parameters give us some of the broader aspects of a song. Multiple melody lines give us counterpoint, which when combined with harmony and timbre, yield an 'arrangement'.

Consider the effects of some of these musical parameters. If EVERY factor is left to be totally random, the result is what we know as 'aleatory music', a style championed by composer John Cage, where everything is left to chance. The opposite end of the spectrum would be music where ALL factors are carefully programmed according to certain rules or equations. This is a very cerebral, mechanical type of music as shown by the work of Milton Babbitt. Another approach to music parameters is to concentrate heavily on only one. There is a school of composers whose music is primarily that of changing color (timbre); no melody, harmony or rhythm to speak of. Some composers deal in the extreme with melody, and are of a school started by Arnold Schoenberg, where the overriding factor in a piece is the ORDER of the 12 notes in a chromatic scale. Throughout a piece they must continually be used in a fixed order. These works are sometimes called 'tone poems'. For us as songwriters, our objective is to write something with a broad appeal, thus we don't want any particular parameter to be extreme, but we do need to fine tune each of them to contribute to the whole.

Lyric parameters include foot/meter (the 'rhythm' of the words) and white space (the empty space between words), rhyme scheme, conceit (an implied, unifying metaphor), and language devices (simile, alliteration, assonance, oxymoron, etc...). Each of these elements is discussed in more detail in other Coloring Book chapters.

There are some musical and lyrical elements which affect the song as a whole. Whole song parameters include: Subject matter (focus), point of view ("I/you" vs. "he/she"), tone (serious, satirical, humorous), and structure (verse-chorus-bridge). The sum of all the musical and lyrical factors combine to give us 'marriage' (the interaction of music and lyric), and 'style' or 'genre'.

Many parameters interact with one or more other parameters to produce particular results. For example, if the subject matter (focus) of a song is 'the happiest day of my life', then you would not use minor harmony (this is why focus is a whole-song

parameter, rather than just a lyric factor). However, if the tone of the lyrics was satirical or humorous then you very well might use minor harmony to emphasize this aspect. Thus, 'focus' interacts with 'harmony', but can be overridden by 'tone'.

If all of this sounds complex, it is. That's why a good song is such a treasure, and so often takes a great deal of skilled craftsmanship. Very often, we work in the dark, not realizing what parameter setting is 'off' and how we need to adjust it to make it better. A common method of doing this, which certainly works, is to solicit feedback, rewrite, solicit more feedback, and keep doing this until the majority of unbiased listeners 'like' the song. In this way, you can get the song to 'work' but you may not ever know exactly why. Thus, you may not be able to duplicate your success in the future, or avoid repeatedly making the same mistakes in subsequent songs.

An advantage of taking the time to learn about song parameters is that it can allow you to make better use of the feedback you get. If people tell you that the lyric 'doesn't work' for them, you could then analyze each parameter of your lyric and see if the rhyme scheme is off, or the meter, or if you have a 'mixed metaphor' (a metaphor about apples in a song full of oranges). Maybe someone will say the the 'rhythm doesn't feel right.' Only by analyzing it will you see that your music is in a duple meter while your lyrics are in a triple meter. And if you understand these factors, you will know how to correct the problem. Remember, the average listener does not know all the technical vocabulary and can usually only indicate that 'something isn't right'. It then up to you to analyze the song and try to find the problem.

I cannot over emphasize the usefulness of learning to view things as being made up of parameters. It is like donning a special pair of glasses that allows you to see music, art, or most anything in a new way, with a new understanding.

(For related information and a visual representation of song parameters, see the "Anatomy of a Song" chart)

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