

Decoding printed music

Once we can play from chords it is good to be able to play from music as well. Having said this it can be far too tempting just to read exactly what's on the music and forget all the good stuff about how to play chords, rhythm and fills. Don't do that!

Instead we can use printed music to help us rather than to constrain us. Publishers do try to give a good idea of the 'feel' of a piece of music when they're writing the piano parts. Unfortunately this can be held back by their need to put the tune in. Below are some helpful hints for how to get the most out of printed music. Try to use them when you're playing for fun:

1. **DON'T PLAY THE TUNE** (at least not all the time)
2. Use the chord symbols to find your starting place and inversion rather than the music on the staff as this is written to accommodate the tune.
3. Read the rhythm of the accompaniment carefully—it will usually be quite good and will give you a good idea of the right rhythms to play for the piece.
4. Look at the bass line and what's written below the melody in the right hand (this will have stems down). Again, this is where you'll find the 'feel' of the song. You will need to elaborate on it and you may need to use different inversions of the chords, but it's a good starting point.
5. Look at introductions, links and endings—these will be the most pianistic bits and may have good ideas for rhythm and melodies for fills.

Developing melodies and fills

New melodies (other than those in the tune of the song) can be used successfully as fills, introductions and endings (or for an instrumental verse). There is not much which is more satisfying than improvising a wonderful melody!

In order to come up with these melodies I suggest that you follow the rules we thought about earlier to do with fills. You will need to use chord notes, passing notes and auxiliary notes. You'll also need to vary the rhythms you play so that your tune doesn't become boring and predictable.

Very few people can just sit down with an instrument and come up with wonderful flowing melodies. However a lot of musicians have all the right ideas in their head. If you get frustrated with the melodies or fills you're playing you could try one simple thing—sing what's in your head. Our voices are extremely versatile instruments and are linked up directly to our brains. For this reason we'll often be able to sing wonderful melodies that we can't find using our hands.

If you find this helpful just stop once you've sung something good and work it out note by note on the piano or keyboard. The more you do this the more proficient you will become at playing good melodies as well as singing them. Try just sitting down once per week and 'just playing' using the chord sequence of a song that you like. Let your imagination and hands run wild and see how creative you can be with new melodies. It's amazing how just doing this will start to transform your playing.