

General advice for transcribing by ear
By Dan Kinzelman 17.4.2020

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I encourage you to begin working on this as soon as you have learned 5-10 standards by heart and understand Roman numeral notation. I tend to use lower-case roman numerals for chords with minor thirds (minor, diminished and half-diminished) and capital letters for chords with major thirds (major, dominant seventh, and most sus chords). This is standard practice in the study of classical harmony, and serves as a helpful visual cue for me, but use whatever is comfortable for you - this is about sound and function, not notation.

Start with fairly easy songs. I will be compiling a list of songs and recordings which lend themselves to this. If you start by trying to transcribe something really complex, you will likely become frustrated and give up.

I usually like to start learning a new song by finding a version sung by a singer who tended to stick very close to the original melody and harmony. This way I can hopefully get the purest, simplest version of the song, and then subsequent transcriptions can be integrated to help me understand the way various artists reharmonized or interpreted the song. Once you have a bit of experience, you can begin to understand whether the version you are listening to has been reharmonized or not.

This is a list of some of my favorite singers who tended to stick close to the original harmony and melody:

Frank Sinatra
Nat King Cole
Mel Torme
Ella Fitzgerald
Chet Baker
Judy Garland
Fred Astaire
Rosemary Clooney

I rarely refer to contemporary versions, except if I really love some specific thing they've done, or as a secondary source to confirm (or contrast) what I'm hearing in the original. I think the danger in making contemporary versions your reference point is that you're getting something which has passed through a series of evolutionary steps which are unknown to you, and there is a rich history behind that music which you may never learn in this way.

At the same time, you do need a recording of good enough quality to allow you to clearly hear the bass and the harmony, otherwise you will make your life very difficult.

Strategy:

1. Figure out the form of the song - is it AABA? ABAC? Something more unusual? Is there a tag, or an intro?

Once you feel secure about this, put barlines on your staff paper and label sections A, B, C, etc. Avoid using repeat signs and first and second endings unless you are absolutely certain that there are no variations. Lay things out so that you can easily find your place (try to put 4 bars on a line, unless the song has an odd form, in that case do whatever makes most sense).

2. Figure out whether the song is in a major or minor key. Try to start to memorize the sound of that key, and if possible, it's dominant, and sing the scale to yourself. Keep these sounds in your head throughout the rest of the process.

3. Now we start figuring out the changes. Start with the easiest things, don't necessarily try to start at the first bar of the song, and don't worry too much about chord quality (major, minor, dominant etc) for now, just try to get the roman numerals.

Start to fill in the most obvious things you hear: where is the I chord? Are there any turnarounds? Any obvious things you recognize easily?

Write in whatever you are certain of, and make note of any major modulations you hear, or unusual harmonic movements that draw your attention. You don't need to figure them out immediately, but you should start to indicate where they fall in the structure.

4. Once you've filled in everything that comes easily, check your work. Make sure you're not fooling yourself - sing the bassline to yourself without the track, and sing the scale for reference. Then spot check anything you are unsure of. If you find errors, correct them, or if you are not yet sure what the real answer is, cross out the wrong answer (but leave it visible so you don't make the same mistake again). My sheet is usually full of crossed out things at this point, or symbols written with a question mark if I have an idea but am not yet sure.

5. Now you should have some things you are sure of and a number of gaps. Start to fill in the gaps, and remember you can work backwards. If you know bar one and bar three, you could try to think about what happens *after* bar one, but you can also think about what happens *before* bar three.

6. Use logic to make hypotheses, thinking about other standards you already know. Standard harmony is highly modular, and many of these modules are repeated in numerous songs. If you can't figure out what is happening by listening, try imagining what you might do logically to fill the hole you haven't yet figured out and move gracefully to the next chord you are sure about. Sing your hypothetical progressions to yourself, then check them with the recording and see if you were right.

7. If there are some spots that you're having trouble with, think about checking another chorus (if the recording has multiple choruses). Sometimes the arrangement will be slightly different and things will become clearer.

8. If you're really stuck, try pausing the recording exactly at the chord you are unsure of. Immediately sing the bass note you are unsure of and try singing down or up (use either the appropriate scale, or the chromatic scale) to arrive at the tonic or the dominant. If you play an instrument with keys or physical positions, imagine a comfortable key for you and imagine playing those notes on your instrument: What would it feel like?

9. If you feel like you can't get any further, try checking some other recordings and comparing what you've transcribed so far. Maybe the mysterious spot will be clearer on another version, but keep in mind that it could also be different.
10. Once you feel like you have all the bass notes right, try to finish filling in chord qualities. Use logic and your ears to understand the qualities of the chords. Think about which notes the melody is emphasizing - sometimes those can be revealing.
11. Once you feel like you can get no further without an instrument, go ahead and check your work with a piano, guitar, whatever you feel most comfortable with. Try to identify where you made mistakes and understand why you made that mistake. Sometimes you'll find that you misidentified one modulation, but all the successive harmony would otherwise be correct. Try to memorize the sounds of any unique or unusual harmonic movements you come across - you will likely recognize them more easily the next time you encounter them.
12. If all else fails, get everything you can and then check your work against a leadsheet. DO NOT assume that the real book's version is more correct than yours. One thing you will learn if you study standards this way is that there is no 'correct' version. Real books are not sources of divine wisdom, they offer only a single, necessarily limited viewpoint of something which in reality is extremely complex and nuanced. Many of them contain numerous errors. Don't be fooled, and don't be discouraged if you didn't get far, or made a lot of mistakes. Analyzing your mistakes is the first step towards improving.