

Patterns to Live By

James Noyes
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...the fact of my invariable miscalculation, set me upon a train of reflection that made my limbs again tremble, and my heart beat heavily once more. It was not a new terror that thus affected me, but the dawn of a more exciting *hope*. This hope arose partly from memory, and partly from present observation.

-- from "A Descent into the Maelström" by E. A. Poe

A common question among young students of music – eager only to sing, or to play their instruments – is: "What's the point of learning music theory? It's *so* boring." In the past, theory teachers may have assumed the role of a doctor prescribing bitter medicine, stating, "Music theory is good for you, even if you don't like the taste." A more inspired insight into this realm of rhythms, scales, key signatures, chords progressions and song forms would speak to the myriad patterns found within music and how it is our ability to identify patterns that will guide us to lives of success and fulfillment. And, as Edgar Allen Poe makes clear, pattern identification may also mean the difference between *life and death*.

Sublime patterns and elegant designs are what shape the world of music: plain-note rhythms dividing by twos; dotted-note rhythms dividing by threes; white keys with alternating groups of two and three black keys on the piano keyboard; major scales constructed of whole-steps and half-steps (W-W-H-W-W-W-H); an order for flats in key signatures (B \flat , E \flat , A \flat , D \flat , G \flat , C \flat , F \flat), which, when reversed, gives the order of sharps in key signatures (F \sharp , C \sharp , G \sharp , D \sharp , A \sharp , E \sharp , B \sharp); key signatures arranged in a "Circle of Fifths"; and so on *par infinitum*. Eventually, through some effort, one comes to see the naturally harmonious beauty of the connections.

Sadly, too often when we talk of the patterns of real life, the focus is on the negative: a government's pattern of fear-mongering and deception; an individual's pattern of destructive behavior (i.e. violence, alcoholism); a corporation's pattern of discrimination; a pattern of reporting only bad news and gossip; a pattern to the "daily grind" of existence. Clearly, it is important to discern such activities, but to concentrate only on uninspiring routines, these patterns can grow ever stronger and more ominous, threatening to pull us down, just as the vessels, debris and living beings were absorbed into Poe's *Maelström*. Of course, Poe's main character survived his descent, by experiencing a sudden "dawn of a more exciting *hope*" – an epiphany! By noticing the size and shape of certain objects caught within the whirlpool and the speed with which they descended into oblivion, he was able to make a split-second decision that spared his life. His brother, failing to recognize such patterns, suffered the consequences.

Music theory impresses upon those who learn it the importance of recognizing patterns of beauty and natural wonder: for reasons that we might pattern our lives on those who inspire us; for reasons that we might surround ourselves with loving and supportive friends; for reasons that we might treat others with dignity and respect; for reasons of good health and security; and for reasons both remembered and observed. The choice is clear: recognize the patterns of experience that lead to a rewarding and meaningful life, or ignore them *at your own risk!*