

# Form in Music

Form is a way of describing the structure or shape of a piece of music - i.e. the way it has been constructed from various smaller sections. Form is primarily determined by harmony (keys, chords, cadences etc.), although melody, rhythm, dynamics, texture and register can also be important. Some commonly used forms are:

**Binary** - AB (or AABB, AAB, ABB; occasionally  $||:AB:||$ )

Two sections. Either or both may be repeated. The first section usually ends in the dominant or relative major key, or on the dominant chord. The second section ends in the tonic key.

**Ternary** - ABA (often AABA; sometimes  $ABA'$ ; occasionally  $A||:BA:||$  or  $A||:BA':||$ )

Three sections, with the third being similar to the first. Sometimes the first and third sections are identical (e.g. a *da Capo*). Both A sections will usually end in the tonic key. If the second A section is somewhat altered, it may be designated  $A'$ . Section B is contrasting, and is usually in a different key.

**Rounded Binary** -  $A BA'$  (often  $||:A:||:BA':||$ )

A combination of binary and ternary characteristics. Falls into two main sections, often indicated by repeat signs, as in binary form. The first section usually ends in the dominant or relative major key. The opening (A) theme returns midway through the second section, which ends in the tonic key.

**Minuet and Trio** -  $||:A1:||:A2:||:B1:||:B2:||A1||A2$

A type of compound ternary (i.e. ABA with internal subdivisions). The Minuet (A) and Trio (B) are each usually in binary or rounded binary form, with two repeating sections (A1 and A2, B1 and B2). After the Trio, the Minuet is played again, without repeats. Very common in the Classical period. In the 19th Century, the Minuet was often replaced by a Scherzo (making Scherzo and Trio form).

**Sonata** -  $||:Exposition:||:Development - Recapitulation:||$

An elaboration of Rounded Binary, sometimes referred to as First-Movement or Sonata-Allegro form. The Exposition contains two thematic groups (subjects), the first in the tonic key and the second in a related key (usually the dominant or relative major). The Development is a reworking of the thematic material of the Exposition in various keys, or (less often) a contrasting episode using new material. The Recapitulation contains a return of all thematic material in the tonic key. Very common in the Classical period.

**Rondo** - ABAC...A

The main theme (A) returns at least twice, always in the tonic key, separated by two or more contrasting episodes (B, C, etc.). Very common in the Classical period.

**Ritornello** -  $ABA'C...A$

Similar to Rondo, except that the main theme returns in *various* keys, beginning and ending in the tonic, separated by contrasting episodes. Very common in the Baroque period.

**Sonata-Rondo** - ABACAB'[A]

Also called Rondo-Sonata form. A combination of sonata and rondo characteristics. The first subject (A) is heard three or more times, as in a rondo. The second subject is heard twice, initially in a related key, and later in the tonic key, as in sonata form. The development section is replaced by an episode (C). The first subject may also return as a Coda.

**Theme and Variations** -  $AA'A''A'''...$

The theme (or "air") is stated and then subjected to a number of changes - melodic, harmonic, rhythmic or textural. Popular in all periods of music from the Renaissance to the present.