

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 mostly determined by the harmony (keys, chords, cadences etc.), although melody, rhythm, dynamics and texture can also be important. Some commonly used forms are:

Binary - AB, often $\parallel: A :||: B :||$, occasionally $\parallel: A :|| B$ or $A :||: B :||$

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

Ternary - ABA, sometimes $\parallel: A :|| BA$

Three sections, with the third being similar to the first. In some cases the first and third sections are identical (e.g. a *da Capo*). Both A sections will usually end in the tonic key, and the B section is usually in a different key.

Rounded Binary - ABA, often $\parallel: A :||: BA :||$

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

Double Binary - ABAB, i.e. $\parallel: AB :||$ **Extended Ternary** - ABABA, i.e. $A :||: BA :||$

Minuet and Trio - $\parallel: A1 :||: A2 :||: B1 :||: B2 :|| A1 A2$

A type of compound ternary form. The Minuet and Trio are, individually, in binary or rounded binary form - each contains two repeating sections. After the Trio, the Minuet is played again without repeats. Very common in the classical period.

Sonata - $\parallel: Exposition :||: Development - Recapitulation :||$

An elaboration of Rounded Binary form, sometimes referred to as First Movement form. Very common in the classical period. The Exposition contains two thematic groups (subjects), the first in the tonic key and the second usually in the dominant or relative major key. The Development can be a reworking of the thematic material of the exposition in various keys, or a contrasting episode using completely new material. The Recapitulation contains a return of all thematic groups in the tonic key.

Rondo - ABACA...

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

Ritornello - ABACA...

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

Rondo-Sonata - ABACAB[A]

Also called sonata-rondo form. A combination of sonata and rondo characteristics. The first subject theme (A) is heard more than twice, as in a rondo. The second subject theme is heard twice, initially in the dominant key and later in the tonic key, as in sonata form. The development section is replaced by an episode (C).

Theme and Variations - AA¹A²A³...

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