Musical Form*

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Abstract

Musical form is the wider perspective of a piece of music. It describes the layout of a composition as divided into sections, akin to the layout of a city divided into neighborhoods. In an A-type form, the focus is on continuity; in an A/B-type, on contrast.

NOTE: Please note that you must have the most recent copy of Macromedia's Flash plugin installed to play the musical examples.

1 Grasping the Whole Composition

Driving through a city for the first time can be very disorienting. Building after building catches your eye. You circle past a monument, then a fountain. Restaurants, hotels and shops fly past. Trying to absorb and remember all of these landmarks quickly becomes tiring. Was the town square before or after the park? Did you pass a museum? If you don't speak the language, an extra anxiety sets in. You try to decipher the street signs, negotiate the traffic. By the time you arrive at the hotel, you fall on your bed, exhausted.

Similarly, it is easy to get lost in the moment-to-moment progress of a piece of music: There are often too many details to remember, too many implications to contemplate. If the work is particularly dynamic, you may become overwhelmed with its rapid progress. If the musical language is unfamiliar, even one poorly understood sound may throw you into confusion.

In your visit to a new city, it is wiser to begin with an overview of the neighborhoods. First, you notice that you are traversing the old town, where the buildings are closely packed together and the streets narrow and winding. Then, you pass into the modern section, with sleek high-rises, set apart along straight thoroughfares. You don't need to speak the language; nor is there the pressure to remember facades or street-names. Later, you may revisit the old town on foot, discovering quiet alleys and ancient monuments. But, for now, you content yourself with a general sense of the city's layout: How large is the old town compared to the new? How much variety of architecture characterizes each neighborhood? This more patient, disciplined approach helps to orient your future explorations. It will be harder to get lost or overwhelmed when you have a commanding sense of the city's geography.

Similarly, the path to informed listening begins with a grasp of the whole composition. There are tremendous advantages to beginning with a commanding perspective: While details tend to pass by very quickly; the overall trajectory of the music unfolds more gradually, giving you more time to consider it. The significance of an individual gesture is often clearer when related to the work's overall destiny. And, while the immediate sounds are bristling with personality and may be difficult to grasp, the larger structure is often easier to hear accurately.

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Thus, we will approach listening to a piece of music by moving from the whole into the details: We will begin by developing an awareness of the composition's form and destiny, then gradually sink into the details with a stronger sense of their relevance.

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Musical form is the wider perspective of a piece of music. It describes the layout of a composition as divided into sections, akin to the layout of a city divided into neighborhoods.

Musical works may be classified into two formal types: A and A/B. Compositions exist in a boundless variety of styles, instrumentation, length and content–all the factors that make them singular and personal. Yet, underlying this individuality, any musical work can be interpreted as either an A or A/B-form.

An **A-form** emphasizes **continuity** and **prolongation**. It flows, unbroken, from beginning to end. In a unified neighborhood, wander down any street and it will look very similar to any other. Similarly, in an A-form, the music has a recognizable consistency.

The other basic type is the **A/B-form**. Whereas A-forms emphasize continuity, A/B-forms emphasize **contrast** and **diversity**. A/B-forms are clearly broken up into sections, which differ in aurally immediate ways. The sections are often punctuated by silences or resonant pauses, making them more clearly set off from one another. Here, you travel among neighborhoods travels that are noticeably different from one another: The first might be a residential neighborhood, with tree-lined streets and quiet cul-de-sacs. The next is an industrial neighborhood, with warehouses and smoke-stacks.

The prime articulants of form are **rhythm** and **texture**. If the rhythm and texture remain constant, you will tend to perceive an A-form. If there is a marked change in rhythm or texture, you will tend to perceive a point of contrast–a boundary, from which you pass into a new neighborhood. This will indicate an A/B-form.

Listen to the following examples. What is the form of each?

Exercise 1 ***(Solution on p. 4.)***

What is the form?

This is an unsupported media type. To view, please see http://cnx.org/content/m11629/latest/http://music.cnx.rice.edu/Brandt/musical_form/Schumann__Piano_Quartet_in_flat_Major_I.mp3

(select one)

a) A-form
b) A/B-form

Exercise 2 ***(Solution on p. 4.)***

What is the form?

This is an unsupported media type. To view, please see http://cnx.org/content/m11629/latest/http://music.cnx.rice.edu/Brandt/musical_form/Bach__Prelude_in_G_major_W

(select one)

a) A-form
b) A/B-form

Exercise 3 ***(Solution on p. 4.)***

Now consider a work in a less familiar style. What is its form?

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http://cnx.org/content/m11629/latest/http://music.cnx.rice.edu/Brandt/musical_form/Boulez__Notations_4th_Moveme

(select one)
a) A-form
b) A/B-form

3 Labeling the Forms

It is conventional to give alphabetic labels to the sections of a composition: A, B, C, *etc.* If a section returns, its letter is repeated: for instance, "A-B-A" is a familiar layout in classical music.

As the unbroken form, A-forms come only in a single variety. They may be long or short, but they are always "A".

As the contrast form, A/B-forms come in a boundless array of possibilities. There may be recurring sections, unique ones, or any combination of both. For instance, a **Rondo**–a popular form in Classical music–consists of an alternation of a recurring section and others that occur once each. It would be labelled A-B-A-C-A-D-A, *etc.* Many twentieth-century composers became fascinated with arch-forms: A-B-C-B-A.

An on-going form, with no recurrence whatsoever, is also possible: A-B-C-D-E... Any sequence of recurring and unique sections may occur.

Example 1
How would you describe the following form? First, click when you hear a new section. Then, use the pull-down menu to label each section.

This is an unsupported media type. To view, please see
http://cnx.org/content/m11629/latest/http://music.cnx.rice.edu/Brandt/musical_form/Beethoven__Sonata_no_13_opus

This movement is labeled as an A-B-A form. It opens with frantic, somber, rhythmically persistent music. The contrasting section has a lighter, more carefree feeling and a new prevailing rhythm. Finally, the opening section returns exactly.

4 Conclusion

Understanding the layout of the city is crucial for exploring it: once you understand its topography, you know how to find its landmarks, where the places for recreation or business may lie. Similarly, determining the form of a piece will tell you a lot about it. If it is an A-form, your next focus will be on the work's main ideas, and how they are extended across the entire composition. If it is an A/B-form, your next investigations will be into the specific layout of sections and the nature of the contrasts.

Solutions to Exercises in this Module

Solution to Exercise (p. 2)

b) A/B-form

Then, there is a strong musical punctuation: The music that follows is faster; the strings and piano move in alternation.

Just because the two sections contrast with each other doesn't mean they have nothing in common. If you chose A-form as a response, it may have been that you recognized that the two sections are closely related: the B-section's melody is a speeded up version of that of A's; the key of both sections, E-flat Major, is identical.

However, the contrast in rhythm and texture is too strong to overlook. A clear division between sections is created: It would be impossible to accurately describe the music without it.

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The Schumann is an example of an A/B-form. As the music commences, the pace is languorous. The strings and piano move together.

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Solution to Exercise (p. 2)

a) A-form

However, just because it is an A-form doesn't mean that nothing novel or exciting happens. Bach's melodic development is wonderfully inventive and lively, and the music is harmonically active. A lot happens in a short amount of time. Nevertheless, the consistency of rhythm and texture, and the fact that the continuity is unbroken–the piece never pauses–support an analysis of this movement as an A-form.

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The Bach, unlike the Schumann, is an example of an A-form. The rhythm is unbroken from beginning to end, moving fleetly without interruption or change. The texture is similarly steady. If there were a B-section, where would it begin? –There is no point of punctuation.

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Solution to Exercise (p. 2)

a) A-form

Microscopically, there is a lot of diversity in this movement. While the ostinato is a point of reference, the music around it is constantly changing. Listening to it moment by moment, the music

is filled with unpredictable events. However, the freshness of ideas is very circumscribed: There are no dramatic changes of speed, register or density. Stepping back to a wider perspective, the momentary gestures can be heard as an intricate shimmer; they unsettle but do not displace the movement's continuity.

The sounds of this movement may have been very unfamiliar to you. However, if this exercise was successful, you were able to follow the piece through to its completion and analyze its structure. Its language may still seem remote and intangible. Nevertheless, on first hearing, you already know something very crucial about the work: It prolongs a single idea. You have gained a point of orientation for future hearings.

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The Boulez and Bach share a lot in common: In both, the rhythmic speed and texture remain constant. Furthermore, in the Boulez, there is an insistently repeating melodic figure–known as an ***ostinato****–which stretches from beginning to end. The Boulez is an example of an A-form.*

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