

Classical forms

How instrumental music is built when there are no verses to hang it on. Each form answers the same two questions: what returns, and what key are we in when it does.

Binary

A B · TWO HALVES, EACH REPEATED

A

B

Tonic → dominant · dominant → tonic

A moves to a new key; B travels back. Both halves usually repeat. Dances, and most of a Baroque suite.

Ternary

A B A · STATEMENT, CONTRAST, RETURN

A

B

A

Home · contrasting key · home again

The middle is genuinely different — new key, often new mood — then A returns. Da capo arias, minuet and trio.

Rondo

A B A C A · A REFRAIN THAT KEEPS RETURNING

A

B

A

C

A

The refrain is always in the tonic

Episodes wander to related keys; the memorable tune keeps coming home. Nearly always a finale.

Theme and variations

A A¹ A² A³ · ONE IDEA, REDRESSED

A

A¹

A²

A³

A⁴

Same harmony and length throughout

Chords and phrase lengths stay; rhythm, texture and mode change. One variation turns minor, the last is fastest.

SONATA FORM, IN THREE ACTS

SECTION	KEYS	WHAT HAPPENS
Exposition	tonic → dominant (or relative major)	First subject at home, a bridge that modulates, a gentler second subject in the new key, a closing idea. Traditionally repeated.
Development	unstable, travels	Fragments of both subjects sequenced and pushed through distant keys. The tense part, and the shortest.
Recapitulation	tonic throughout	Both subjects return — but the second now stays at home. That change is the point of the form.
Coda	tonic	An added ending confirming the key. Short in Haydn, enormous in Beethoven.

WHERE EACH FORM TURNS UP

Symphony, mvt 1	Sonata form, fast
Symphony, mvt 2	Ternary or variations, slow
Symphony, mvt 3	Minuet and trio — ternary inside ternary
Symphony, mvt 4	Rondo or sonata-rondo, fast

HEARING THE FORM

Listen for three things: when a tune **comes back**, when the music **stops sounding at home**, and where the **full stops** fall. Mark them in letters as you listen.

A contrast that returns is ternary. A refrain returning more than twice is rondo. A return where everything is now in one key is sonata form.

FORM IS MEMORY

Every form works because a listener recognises something. Repeat enough to be remembered, change enough to stay interesting.

CONTRAST, THEN CONFIRM

B sections exist to make A sound like home. Give the contrast a different key or texture, not just different notes.

START SMALL

Write a sixteen-bar ternary before anything larger. Every big form is these shapes nested inside each other.