

Musical Forms & Their Shapes

Form is the plan of a piece — what comes back, what is new, and where the music travels between keys. Learn to hear the returns and the shape tells itself. Sections shown in gold are music you have already heard.

Binary

A B · TWO HALVES, BOTH REPEATED

A

B

TONIC → DOMINANT DOMINANT → TONIC

Two balanced halves, each inside a repeat sign. The first travels to a new key; the second finds the way home. The staple of the Baroque dance suite.

LISTEN FOR

Two clear cadences, each followed by the same music again.

Rounded binary

A · B A' — THE OPENING TUCKED BACK IN

A

B

A'

TONIC → DOMINANT WANDERING TONIC

Still two halves, but the opening tune returns near the end of the second, inside the repeat. Hear that return and you have heard the seed of sonata form.

LISTEN FOR

The first tune coming back with the repeat sign after it, not before.

Ternary

A B A · THREE SEPARABLE SECTIONS

A

B

A

TONIC A RELATED KEY TONIC

Three sections that could each stand alone. B genuinely contrasts — new key, new mood — and A returns whole. A *da capo* aria simply says go back to the top.

LISTEN FOR

A middle section that feels like a different piece, then an exact return.

Minuet and trio

TERNARY BUILT FROM TWO SMALLER TERNARIES

Minuet

Trio

Minuet *D.C.*

TONIC OFTEN SUBDOMINANT TONIC, NO REPEATS

The third movement of most Classical symphonies. The trio is lighter — once literally three players — and the minuet returns without its repeats.

LISTEN FOR

A thinner, quieter middle dance, then the opening again.

Rondo

A B A C A · A REFRAIN AND ITS EPISODES

A

B

A

C

A

TONIC DOMINANT TONIC MINOR OR SUBDOMINANT TONIC

One tune keeps returning, always in the home key, with fresh material between each visit. Easy to follow, so composers put it last.

LISTEN FOR

A tune so familiar by the end you could hum it afterwards.

Theme and variations

ONE IDEA, CHANGED IN TURN

Theme

I

II

III

IV

V

TONIC SAME HARMONY UNDER EVERY VARIATION

The theme's length and harmony stay put while everything else changes: faster notes, a new accompaniment, the minor mode, a slow variation near the end.

LISTEN FOR

The same chord plan and phrase lengths under every variation.

Sonata form

EXPOSITION · DEVELOPMENT · RECAPITULATION

Expo-sition

Develop-ment

Recapit-ulation

TONIC → DOMINANT MANY KEYS TONIC THROUGHOUT

A drama in keys. Two subjects are stated in different keys, argued over, then restated with the second brought home to the tonic. A coda may follow.

LISTEN FOR

The second tune returning in the home key, not the key it first appeared in.

Strophic & through-composed

THE TWO WAYS TO SET WORDS

A

A

A

A

B

C

STROPHIC THROUGH-COMPOSED

Hymns and folk songs are strophic: one tune, many verses. A through-composed song follows the poem instead, finding new music for every line.

LISTEN FOR

Whether verse two sounds like verse one.

How to hear a form

Listen once for returns alone. Every time the opening comes back, mark it. The pattern of returns is the form.

Then listen for the cadences. A section ends where the music comes to rest, usually with a pause or a change of texture straight after.

Letters are given in order of appearance: the first idea is A, the next new one B, whatever the key.

Key is part of the plan

Nearly every form leaves the tonic and returns to it. Going away creates the tension; coming back ends the piece.

A major-key piece usually moves to the dominant; a minor-key piece to the relative major.

A return in the wrong key is not yet a return. Sonata form turns on exactly this.

Words worth knowing

Coda. A tail added after the last section to make the ending sound final.

Bridge or transition. Music whose job is to travel between two sections and change key on the way.

Da capo — from the head. **Dal segno** — from the sign. Both send the player back to make an A B A without reprinting the music.