

Sonata, symphony & concerto

Three of the biggest words in music, and all three describe the same thing: a piece in several movements, built on one argument about keys. A symphony is that plan played by an orchestra. A concerto is that plan with a soloist arguing back. A sonata is that plan for one or two players.

Learn the plan once and you can find your way through forty minutes of Beethoven, Brahms or Sibelius without a programme note. This pack takes it in order: the form itself, then each of the three genres, then how the whole scheme changed over a hundred and fifty years.



THE THREE GENRES AT A GLANCE

Orchestra alone Symphony Usually four movements. The full argument, with no one instrument in charge — the orchestra is the character.	Soloist and orchestra Concerto Usually three movements, no minuet or scherzo. Built on the contrast between one player and many.	One or two players Sonata Two, three or four movements. The same plan at chamber scale — for piano, or for an instrument with piano.
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- 2 Sonata form — the shape almost every first movement uses.
- 3 The symphony, movement by movement.
- 4 The concerto — and what a soloist changes.
- 5 The sonata, and the chamber music that shares its plan.
- 6 How the plan changed, from Haydn to Mahler.
- 7 Suggested listening, and how to hear the form going past.

Everything here is about key. In a suite, every movement stays in one key and variety comes from rhythm. In a sonata it is the reverse: the movements change key, the movements' *insides* change key, and the drama of the whole piece is leaving home and getting back.

Pairs with Classical forms, Changing key and The Baroque suite.

Sonata form

A journey out of the key and back

Not a genre but a shape, used for the first movement of almost every sonata, symphony, concerto and quartet written between 1760 and 1900. It is a rounded binary form grown enormous: two halves, the first stating two ideas in two keys, the second breaking them apart and putting everything back home.

FIRST HALF · OFTEN REPEATED	SECOND HALF	SECOND HALF	OPTIONAL
Exposition	Development	Recapitulation	Coda
First subject in the tonic, a transition that changes key, second subject in the dominant — or the relative major in a minor-key movement — then a closing group and a firm cadence in the new key.	No new tunes needed: fragments of both subjects are sequenced through unstable keys, often the minor side. Ends on the dominant, waiting.	Both subjects again in order — but the second now stays in the tonic. That one change is the point: the argument resolves.	A tail that confirms the key. In Beethoven it can be as long as the development.

The two subjects

CONTRAST

The first subject is assertive and rhythmic — something that can be chopped up later. The second is more lyrical and spacious. The difference is deliberate: you must tell them apart once the development starts throwing pieces of both at you.

Listen for — the moment the music settles into a new key and a smoother tune arrives. That is the second subject, and it is the halfway mark of the exposition.

The transition

THE BRIDGE

Getting from the first key to the second is the hardest thing in the movement, and the part students skip. It is where the modulation happens — usually via the new key's dominant — and where the music sounds busiest.

Also called — the bridge. In the recapitulation it has to be rewritten, because now it must *not* change key.

Slow introduction

OPTIONAL

A grave, wandering passage in a slower tempo, not part of the form proper and rarely brought back. Haydn uses one in most of the London symphonies; Beethoven's *Pathétique* brings his back.

Sonata-rondo

A FINALE HYBRID

Common in finales: a rondo whose refrain and first episode behave like a sonata exposition, with a development where the second episode would be — a tune returning too often for sonata form, over a key scheme too purposeful for a rondo.

THE KEY SCHEME, WRITTEN OUT

SECTION	MAJOR-KEY MOVEMENT	MINOR-KEY MOVEMENT
<i>First subject</i>	Tonic	Tonic minor
<i>Transition</i>	modulating	modulating
<i>Second subject</i>	Dominant	Relative major
<i>Recap · first subject</i>	Tonic	Tonic minor
<i>Recap · second subject</i>	Tonic	Tonic major or minor

Four things that give the form away

- 1 A pause or repeat mark a third of the way in — the exposition ending.
- 2 A stretch where you recognise scraps of tunes but nothing settles — the development.
- 3 A held dominant that lasts slightly too long, then the opening tune returns.
- 4 The lyrical tune returning a fourth lower than you remember it — the recapitulation at work.

The symphony

Four movements, four jobs

The four-movement plan was settled by Haydn, who wrote a hundred and four of them, and it held for a century and a half. The logic is contrast of pace and weight: a substantial argument, then a song, then a dance, then a release. Every movement is in the home key or closely related to it, and the last movement must end where the first began.

First movement

ALLEGRO · SONATA FORM

The weightiest and usually the longest. Sonata form, in the home key, often with a slow introduction in front of it. This is where the piece states what it is about — the material here is what the whole symphony will be judged on.

Key — tonic. **Hear it** — Mozart, Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550.

Second movement

SLOW MOVEMENT

The lyrical centre. Usually ternary, theme and variations, or a compact sonata form without a development. It moves to a related key — most often the subdominant, or the dominant, or in a minor-key work the relative major — which is the first real change of colour in the piece.

Key — subdominant, dominant or relative major. **Hear it** — Haydn, Symphony No. 94 in G, the *Surprise*.

Third movement

DANCE MOVEMENT

A dance, back in the home key, in three time, and the direct descendant of the paired galanteries of the Baroque suite: minuet, trio, minuet again. Beethoven replaced the courtly minuet with the *scherzo* — the same layout, much faster, often savage, and often in one beat to the bar.

Key — tonic, with the trio often in the subdominant. **Hear it** — Beethoven, Symphony No. 5, third movement.

Fourth movement

FAST FINALE

The release. Quicker and lighter than the first movement in the Classical period — a rondo, a sonata-rondo, or a set of variations. From Beethoven onward the finale grows into the destination instead: the weight of the piece moves to the end, and a minor-key symphony can finish in the major as a victory.

Key — tonic. **Hear it** — Beethoven, Symphony No. 5, fourth movement, arriving in C major.

THE STANDARD PLAN, AND THE COMMON DEPARTURES

MOVEMENT	TEMPO	FORM
<i>I</i>	Allegro	Sonata form, sometimes after a slow introduction
<i>II</i>	Andante · Adagio	Ternary, variations, or sonata without development
<i>III</i>	Allegretto · Vivace	Minuet and trio, or scherzo and trio
<i>IV</i>	Allegro · Presto	Rondo, sonata-rondo, sonata form, or variations

Movements two and three swap places often enough that it is barely a departure — Beethoven's Ninth puts the scherzo second. Some symphonies run their movements together without a break (*attacca*); some have three movements, some five, and Mahler's Third has six.

Why four movements at all

The plan is inherited, not invented. The Italian opera overture of the early 1700s came in three sections — fast, slow, fast — and when it was detached from the theatre and played on its own it became the early symphony. Haydn's generation added the minuet from the suite, and the four-movement symphony is simply those two traditions bolted together.

It survives because it works as an evening's listening: something to think about, something to feel, something to enjoy, something to send you home. Every genre that borrowed the plan — the quartet, the trio, the sonata — borrowed the reasoning with it.

The concerto

One against many

Three movements, not four — the dance is dropped, because a concerto's contrast is already supplied by the soloist. Everything peculiar about the form follows from one practical problem: the orchestra can drown the soloist, who must be given the important material anyway. The answers are the double exposition, the cadenza, and thinner orchestration.

FIRST MOVEMENT	SECOND MOVEMENT	THIRD MOVEMENT
Allegro Sonata form with a double exposition. The longest movement, and where the cadenza goes.	Slow A related key. Ternary or variations, often the most singing writing in the work.	Finale Rondo or sonata-rondo, back in the tonic. Brilliant, and usually the fastest thing the soloist has to play.

The double exposition EVERYTHING TWICE

The orchestra plays an exposition alone, usually staying in the tonic. The soloist then plays it again — rearranged, often with a new tune of their own, and this time modulating properly to the second key.

Why — it establishes the material before the soloist has to compete for attention, and it makes the soloist's entry an event.

The cadenza UNACCOMPANIED

The orchestra stops on a chord and the soloist plays alone, unmeasured, working over the movement's themes before a trill and a scale bring everyone back. Originally improvised; from Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto onward composers wrote them out.

Look for — a fermata over a dominant-seventh chord, then a bar with no time signature. That is the cue.

Ritornello — the Baroque ancestor VIVALDI AND BACH

Before sonata form, a concerto movement alternated *tutti* refrains with solo episodes, the ritornello returning in different keys. The Classical double exposition wears that older alternation — which is why the orchestra speaks first.

Concerto grosso BAROQUE PLURAL

The Baroque alternative: a *concertino* of two or three soloists against the full *ripieno*. Corelli, Handel and Bach's Brandenburgs work this way. It returned in the twentieth century.

WRITING FOR A SOLOIST AND AN ORCHESTRA

- Leave the register clear. Keep the accompaniment out of the octave the soloist is playing in, and the balance solves itself.
- Thin the tutti. Under a solo line, use a handful of instruments, not the whole band. Save the full sound for the passages where the soloist is silent.
- Give the soloist the entries. Let them start phrases rather than joining them; a soloist who only ever answers sounds like an accompanist.
- Alternate, don't fight. The oldest and best device in the form is simple call and response — a bar of solo, a bar of orchestra.

How the balance changed

Mozart's orchestra is small enough that a fortepiano carries through it without effort, and his concertos are conversations. By Brahms the orchestra is twice the size and the piano an iron-framed concert grand — so his Second Piano Concerto is nearly symphonic, the soloist a voice inside the texture.

The Romantic virtuoso concerto pushes the other way: Paganini and Liszt wrote to display a player, and the orchestra largely gets out of the way. Knowing which you are writing decides every orchestration choice.

The sonata, and its relatives

The word means only "played" — as against *cantata*, "sung" — and in the Baroque it described almost any instrumental piece. From about 1760 it means something specific: a multi-movement work for one instrument, or for one instrument with piano. The plan is the symphony's, shrunk, and the chamber genres share it exactly.

Piano sonata

TWO TO FOUR MOVEMENTS

The composer's laboratory. Because it needs no players to assemble, this is where new ideas are tried first — Beethoven's thirty-two sonatas run ahead of his symphonies at every stage. Three movements is commonest: fast, slow, fast. A two-movement sonata usually drops the dance; a four-movement one is making a symphonic claim.

Hear it — Beethoven, Sonata in C minor op. 13, the *Pathétique*.

Sonata for instrument and piano

A DUO OF EQUALS

Violin, cello, flute, clarinet — and the title tells you the balance. An eighteenth-century "sonata for keyboard with violin accompaniment" means what it says; by Brahms the two instruments are equals and the piano part is the harder of the two. Never call the pianist an accompanist in this repertoire.

Hear it — Brahms, Violin Sonata No. 1 in G, op. 78.

Baroque sonata — the older meaning

TWO TRADITIONS

The *sonata da chiesa*, or church sonata, alternates four movements slow-fast-slow-fast. The *sonata da camera* is effectively a suite of dances. Both are usually *trio sonatas*: two melody instruments over a continuo of cello and harpsichord — three lines, but four players, which catches everybody out.

Hear it — Corelli, Trio Sonatas op. 3.

The string quartet

FOUR PLAYERS

Two violins, viola and cello, and the same four-movement plan as the symphony including the minuet or scherzo. Considered the hardest test of a composer, because with four equal single lines there is nowhere to hide a weak idea behind orchestration.

Hear it — Haydn, op. 76 no. 3, the *Emperor*.

ONE PLAN, SIX GENRES

GENRE	PLAYERS	MOVEMENTS	DANCE MOVEMENT?
<i>Symphony</i>	orchestra	4	Yes — minuet or scherzo, third
<i>Concerto</i>	1 + orchestra	3	No
<i>String quartet</i>	4	4	Yes
<i>Piano trio</i>	3	3 or 4	Often
<i>Piano sonata</i>	1	2 to 4	Sometimes
<i>Duo sonata</i>	2	3 or 4	Sometimes

Read down the last two columns and the rule appears: the more movements, the more likely there is a dance among them — and the concerto, alone, never has one.

Writing your own first movement

- 1 Write eight bars of first subject in your key. Make it rhythmic enough to break up later.
- 2 Write eight bars of second subject in the dominant. Make it smoother and longer-breathed.
- 3 Join them with four bars that modulate — through the new key's dominant seventh.
- 4 Take the first two bars of subject one and sequence them through three keys. That is your development.
- 5 Write both subjects out again, and transpose the second into the tonic. You have a sonata-form movement.

How the plan changed

1760 to 1910

The four-movement scheme did not sit still. Three things happened to it: the centre of gravity moved from the first movement to the last, the movements stopped being independent, and the orchestra playing them roughly quadrupled in size.

c.1760–1800 Haydn, Mozart The plan is set. Movements are self-contained, the first is the weightiest, the finale is light. Orchestra of thirty to forty.	1800–1827 Beethoven The scherzo replaces the minuet, codas grow enormous, and the finale becomes the goal. Voices in the Ninth.	1830–1870 Schumann, Berlioz, Liszt Themes carry across movements — <i>cyclic form</i> . Berlioz adds a story and a fifth movement; Liszt compresses the whole plan into one continuous piece.	1870–1900 Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Dvořák The Classical plan deliberately reasserted, on a Romantic scale and with the harmonic vocabulary of its own time.	1890–1910 Mahler, Sibelius Anything from one movement to six, an orchestra of a hundred, voices and offstage bands — or, in Sibelius, radical compression.
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Minuet to scherzo

THE CLEAREST CHANGE

Same layout — dance, trio, dance again — but the tempo doubles and the character turns from courtly to driven or grotesque. Beethoven makes it standard; by Bruckner and Mahler the scherzo is often the most violent movement in the symphony, and the trio the only place to breathe.

Cyclic form

THEMES THAT RETURN

A theme from one movement reappears in another — transformed, not merely quoted. Berlioz's *idée fixe* runs through all five movements of the *Symphonie fantastique*; Franck and Dvořák build finales that gather up everything heard so far. The four movements stop being four pieces.

The finale as destination

WHERE THE WEIGHT WENT

Haydn's finales send you home smiling. Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth make the last movement the point of the whole work, and the minor-to-major arrival becomes the standard narrative. Once that is available, a light finale reads as a deliberate choice rather than the norm.

Programme and title

MUSIC ABOUT SOMETHING

The *symphonic poem* — Liszt's invention, taken up by Smetana, Strauss and Sibelius — keeps the orchestral scale and the thematic argument but throws away the movement plan, following a story or a picture instead. It is the main nineteenth-century alternative to the symphony rather than a version of it.

What did not change

Through all of it, one thing holds: the piece leaves its home key, goes somewhere unstable, and comes back. Mahler's Second lasts eighty minutes and adds a choir, but its argument is the same one Haydn is making in twenty — the tonic is home, everything else is travel, and the ending has to earn the return. If you can hear that, you can follow any of them.

Suggested listening

Start at the top and work down

Eleven works, chosen so each shows the form more plainly than the last hides it. Hear the first movements straight through this list before going back to any work whole.

COMPOSER	WORK	DATE	WHAT TO LISTEN FOR
Mozart	<i>Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550</i>	1788	Sonata form at its clearest. The second subject arrives in Bb major and you cannot miss the moment it does.
Haydn	<i>Symphony No. 94 in G, Surprise</i>	1791	The four-movement plan complete, with a slow introduction and a variation slow movement whose joke everybody knows.
Mozart	<i>Piano Concerto No. 23 in A, K. 488</i>	1786	The double exposition, laid out so plainly you can hear the orchestra finish and the piano begin the same argument again.
Beethoven	<i>Piano Sonata in C minor op. 13, Pathétique</i>	1798	A slow introduction that comes back — twice. Proof that the rules are conventions and not laws.
Beethoven	<i>Symphony No. 5 in C minor</i>	1808	The scherzo instead of a minuet, the movements running into one another, and the finale as the destination.
Schubert	<i>String Quintet in C, D. 956</i>	1828	The same plan at chamber scale, with the second subject given more space than the form strictly allows.
Berlioz	<i>Symphonie fantastique</i>	1830	Five movements, a story, and one theme that turns up in all of them. Cyclic form at its most obvious.
Brahms	<i>Violin Concerto in D, op. 77</i>	1878	A concerto written like a symphony. Notice how much of the tune the orchestra keeps.
Dvořák	<i>Symphony No. 9 in E minor, From the New World</i>	1893	A finale that gathers up themes from all three earlier movements before it ends.
Sibelius	<i>Symphony No. 7 in C, op. 105</i>	1924	The whole four-movement plan compressed into one continuous span of about twenty minutes.
Shostakovich	<i>Symphony No. 5 in D minor</i>	1937	The Classical four movements used two centuries later, and a major-key ending whose triumph is still argued about.

How to hear the form going past

- 1 Note the time on your player when the opening tune finishes. That is roughly one first subject.
- 2 Listen for the second, smoother tune. Note that time too — you now have the exposition.
- 3 When the music stops settling, the development has begun. When the opening tune returns, it has ended.
- 4 Compare the three times. In Mozart they are near enough equal; in Beethoven the development and coda swallow everything.

Where to go next

Once first movements are easy, do the same on finales — sonata-rondo is far harder to hear, and hunting for it teaches you both. Then take one composer in sequence: Beethoven's nine symphonies, or Haydn's last twelve.

Log what you hear on the Listening log worksheet, and keep the Classical forms chart beside you while you do it.