

A Formal Affair

Getting Down to the Bare Bones of Music

■ Underneath melody, harmony, rhythms, dynamics, and articulations, there is form: the skeleton of the music. Most simply explained, musical form is an outline of when and where musical ideas are introduced, repeated, built upon, and expanded.



It's likely that you already know some musical forms without even realizing it. For example, you probably sang in rounds as a kid, and you're probably aware that pop and rock songs usually follow the format of verses alternating with a repeated chorus.

Of course you can play and enjoy music without knowing what's happening at the structural level. But have you ever noticed that the more you listen to a song, the more it tends to grow on you? Familiarity makes music more enjoyable—so recognizing the form of the music and having a sense of what's coming next will enhance your listening or playing experience.

Listed below are some of the most common forms that music follows. Forms can be labeled with letters, starting with "A" for the first grouping of musical material (for example, a verse in a song), and then using a subsequent letter for each time new music is introduced.

It's interesting to note that, as much as music has changed throughout history, some of the forms that were used centuries ago are still used in today's music.

Strophic: This is the simplest form music can take. The same material is repeated multiple times (AAAA). Hymns without a refrain follow strophic form, and folk music is often strophic, as well.

Binary: In this form, there are two themes, which may or may not be repeated. The song or piece always ends with the second theme (or "B"). Baroque dances are often in binary form (AABB). In popular music, the themes—the verse and chorus—are alternated (ABABAB). Many pop or rock songs replace the third verse with a contrasting "bridge" (ABABCB), but the basic structure is still binary.

Ternary: Music in ternary form also has two contrasting themes, but always ends with the original mate-

rial (for example, ABA). Often, the first statement of the "A" section is repeated (AABA). This variation of ternary form is commonly found in arias (sung solos) in 18th century operas, as well as in blues and jazz songs.

Rondo: A recurring theme is alternated with contrasting sections, called "episodes" (ABACAD ...). 16th and 17th century madrigals are often in rondo form, and symphonies or concertos may also take this form.

Theme and Variations: An initial theme undergoes a series of transformations; the theme is changed significantly, but remains recognizable (AA¹A²A³ ...). Bach's *Goldberg Variations* is the most famous example of this form, which is also found in many symphonies.

Sonata: This is the most complicated musical form—too complicated to label with letters. A piece in sonata form begins with an "exposition" of material, which usually involves two contrasting themes. There is then a "development" section, during which those original themes are somehow varied and changed. This may include moving to different keys, expanding small motives, altering rhythms, etc.

The original material then returns in the "recapitulation." You may also find an "introduction" before the exposition and a "coda" at the very end. Sonata form is probably the most widely used form in classical music. The first movement of symphonies and sonatas are almost always structured this way.

