

BINARY AND TERNARY FORMS

It would be possible for a composer to create a unique form for every new work, but you can imagine how increasingly difficult such a task would become — particularly if *every* composer had this goal in mind. Not only would it take more and more time to work out a new plan, but each new plan would demand a different dramatic approach (and therefore a different compositional strategy). Perhaps this is why many composers prefer to reuse a relatively small number of forms. Alternatively, we might wonder whether composers use familiar forms in order to play with audience expectations — maybe a little of both. Whatever the underlying reasons might be, a great deal of music falls into the broad recurring categories outlined below.

The two most important features of form are thematic design and harmonic structure. Thematic design refers to the repetition of similar (or even identical) melodies and/or the use of contrasting melodies. Harmonic structure refers to patterns of chords and key areas, focusing particularly on important cadences. The interaction of thematic design and harmonic structure creates a variety of common forms. (Notice that thematic design and harmonic structure are independent issues, since it is quite possible to write different themes in the same key or the same theme in different keys).

Thematic issues

Binary form: the music falls into two large sections (usually both sections are repeated)

Subcategories of binary form:

- simple — material from the first section does not literally reappear in the second section. If the two sections are relatively different, the form may be represented as AB (or $\parallel A \parallel B \parallel$ to indicate the repeats); if the two sections are very similar, the form may be represented as AA' (or $\parallel A \parallel A' \parallel$).
- rounded — material from the beginning of the first section returns after a digression in the second section, resulting in an ABA or ABA' form (with repeats, $\parallel A \parallel BA \parallel$ or $\parallel A \parallel BA' \parallel$).
- balanced — the cadential formula from the first section returns at the end of the second section (usually just a measure or two, but perhaps as much as a phrase). This is strongly associated with continuous binary form (see back of page).
- barform — the first section is repeated, but the contrasting second section is not repeated, resulting in an $\parallel A \parallel B$ form (example: *The Star-Spangled Banner*). This is associated with sectional binary form (see back of page).

Ternary form: the music falls into three large sections, the last of which is identical (or nearly identical) to the first, resulting in an overall ABA or ABA' form. Repetition is less predictable; $\parallel A \parallel B \parallel A \parallel$ and ABA without repeats are both common, and $\parallel A \parallel BA \parallel$ is possible. The only thematic subcategory of ternary form is compound ternary form, in which each of the three large sections embeds a smaller form (frequently some sort of binary form).

Harmonic issues

Sectional: the first section is harmonically complete and ends on the original tonic.

Full sectional (refers to ternary forms only): all sections are harmonically complete. It is possible (in fact, likely) that the second section has its own key.

Continuous: the first section is harmonically incomplete, either ending with a half cadence or modulating to another key (usually V in major keys and III in minor keys).

Common forms

Since thematic design and harmonic structure are relatively independent, many combinations are possible:

simple sectional binary	A (harmonically complete) B; also AA'
rounded sectional binary	A (harmonically complete) B A ⁽¹⁾
simple continuous binary	A (harmonically incomplete) B; also AA'
rounded continuous binary	A (harmonically incomplete) B A'
balanced continuous binary	A (harmonically incomplete) B with cadence from A
sectional ternary	A (harmonically complete) B (harmonically incomplete) A ⁽¹⁾
full sectional ternary	A (harmonically complete) B (harmonically complete) A
continuous ternary	A (harmonically incomplete) B A'

Notice that compound ternary forms will always be full sectional, because the B section (by virtue of having its own small form) is harmonically complete.

A very gray area

As you may have noticed, both rounded binary and ternary forms have an overall ABA thematic design. How can we tell which is which? Remember that binary forms have *two* large sections (we hear that B merges with the following A), while ternary forms have *three* large sections (we hear B as relatively independent from the following A).

It is often helpful to consider the following questions:

- Would B make musical sense if played alone?
- Does B have its own tonal area that distinguishes it from A?
- Is B motivically independent from A?
- Is the character of B strikingly different from that of A?

Every positive response to these questions supports ternary form, and every negative response supports binary form. Keep in mind that at some point this simply becomes an issue of individual judgment and the difference is not terribly important.

Possibilities for variation

Always remember that form designations refer to compositions that share some very broad characteristics. Good composers don't treat form as a blueprint to which they absolutely must adhere. If you encounter music that doesn't quite fit a standard model (and you undoubtedly will!), don't jump to the conclusion that the composer has made a mistake or is being deliberately confusing. While the predictable aspects of music (standard forms, functional harmony, etc.) make it easy for us to follow a composition we don't know, sometimes it is the unpredictable moments that we enjoy most. For this very reason, though, we should not ignore what we know about form: if we have no expectations, then we cannot be surprised.