

FORM

Form: The structure of a composition. The framework. Based on repetition, contrast and variation. (Source: <http://www.music.vt.edu/musicdictionary>)

Understanding the form of a piece is like understanding the architecture of a building: we have an overall sense of the piece's shape and advance knowledge of where (and why) events and sections (similar to rooms in a building) will be. Furthermore, understanding a piece's form can give new meaning to the music and gets us inside the composer's head a little more.

The larger sections of a piece are like the rooms or even floors in a building. The divisions between sections (like walls, for example) are often quite clear. The ending of a section in particular will be marked by a strong cadence and the beginning of the next section will be marked by a new theme or idea, like walking into one room from another.

For medium- and some large-sized pieces, sections are often labeled with capital letters (A, B, C, etc).

BINARY FORM (two parts)

How do you know when a new/contrasting section comes along ("A" followed by "B" for example)? It is marked by obviously different material (a different theme or melody).

Labeled as: A B

What if the same material is reused immediately? We would say that it is an "A" section followed by another "A" section. If the second "A" section is slightly modified (for variety's sake), we might call it "A prime", symbolized as A'.

Labeled as: A A or A A'

This still may be a part of a binary form. The repeated A section doesn't change the fact that the music is still in two distinct sections, just that one of the sections repeats.

TERNARY FORM (three parts)

Often a musical follows a pattern where the first section returns after a contrasting section.

Labeled as: A B A