



Nakhon Pathom
Rajabhat University

A pair of white over-ear headphones is positioned on the left side of the slide. The headphones have a white headband and large, padded ear cups. A white cable is attached to the bottom of the right ear cup and extends towards the bottom right of the slide.

WESTERN MUSIC ANALYSIS AND COMPOSITION

Department of Music Education
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Nakhon Pathom Rajabhat University

Arnon Hosakulsuwan



Forms in Western Music Composition

In music, form refers to the overall structure of a composition. It is built from four main elements: tone, time (rhythm), melody, and texture. Understanding musical form helps musicians grasp a piece more deeply and supports effective performance and learning.



1. Form Structure



Tone

Composers create music through sound, which is produced by regular vibrations of air, while irregular vibrations create noise. Sound has four key properties:

- Pitch – the highness or lowness of a sound, determined by frequency.
- Duration – the length of a sound, shown in Western notation by different note values.
- Intensity – the loudness or softness of a sound.
- Quality (Timbre) – the tone color that distinguishes different instruments, influenced by sound production, shape, and materials.

Time (Rhythm)

Rhythm is the organization of sound in terms of speed, duration, and stress. When arranged systematically, these elements create various rhythmic patterns.

Psychologically, rhythm often stimulates physical responses, such as tapping or clapping along with the music.



1. Form Structure

Melody

Melody is the organized sequence of pitches shaped by pitch, duration, and dynamics over time. It is the most recognizable musical element, playing a major role in memory, emotional impression, and distinguishing one piece from another.

Texture

Texture refers to the overall sound relationship within a piece, including how musical lines interact vertically and horizontally. It describes whether sounds are layered, combined, or contrasted, forming the total sonic fabric of the composition.



2. Strophic Form

Strophic form is one of the most common musical forms, also known as song form or verse form. It is considered the most basic structure because it relies on repetition, typically following an A–A–A pattern. Each section (A) is usually a short phrase of about 8–16 measures.

This form is widely found in popular, folk, and lyrical music, where the same music is repeated with different lyrics. Examples include “The Wheels on the Bus,” “Amazing Grace,” and “Mary Had a Little Lamb.”

Although strophic form generally follows A–A–A, variations such as A–A′–A” may occur, where the main structure remains the same but includes slight modifications, such as small rhythmic or melodic changes.



2. Strophic Form

Example: Amazing Grace from IMSLP



1. A - ma - zing grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a
2. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace, my
3. Thro' ma - ny dan - gers, toils and snares I have al -
4. The Lord has pro - mised good to me, His word my
5. Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail, And mor - tal
6. The earth shall soon dis - solve like snow, The sun for -



3. Binary Form

3.1 Background

Pitch is the highness or lowness of sound, determined by vibration frequency. Faster vibrations produce higher pitch, while slower vibrations produce lower pitch. Pitch variation is essential for meaning in speech and for the existence of music.



3.2 Structure

Binary form consists of two sections: A and B, often repeated (A–A / B–B).

- Early examples were short and simple, usually without modulation.
- Later works expanded in length and frequently modulated (e.g., to the dominant in major or relative major/minor).
- Section B is often longer and more developmental.

Types

- Simple Binary (AB) – No return of the main A theme.
- Rounded Binary (ABA') – The main theme from A returns at the end of B, creating unity. This form later influenced ternary form

3. Binary Form

Example: 12 variation, Mozart from IMSLP



Nakhon Pathom
Rajabhat University





4. Ternary Form



Structure

Ternary form follows ABA (or ABA').

- A: Main theme in tonic key.
- B: Contrasting section (different melody, rhythm, harmony, mood), often longer and developmental.
- A (return): Original theme returns, usually in tonic.

• Types

- Ternary (ABA) – Clear three-part structure.
 - Includes Da Capo form (A–A–B–B–A), common in Baroque vocal music.
- Composite Ternary – Each large section (A and B) contains internal binary form (a–a–b–b / c–c–d–d / a–b).
 - Common in Classical works such as Minuet–Trio and Scherzo–Trio.



5. Rondo Form

Rondo form originated from the French poetic Rondeau in the 14th–15th centuries, which featured recurring refrains. In music, it became highly popular during the Classical and Romantic periods and remains in use today.

Rondo is an extension of binary (AB) and ternary (ABA) forms. Its structure alternates a recurring main theme (A) with contrasting sections (B, C, D, etc.), such as:



A–B–A–C–A–D–A.

- A (principal theme) always returns in the tonic key.
- Contrasting sections (B, C, etc.) usually modulate to different keys.

Types of Rondo:

- Simple Rondo – Section A is not in a standard internal form.
- Compound Rondo – Section A follows a standard form (often binary or ternary).



6. Sonata Form

The term Sonata originated in the 17th century from the Italian suonare ("to sound"), referring to instrumental music. In the Classical period, it became a standardized structural model, especially in first movements of sonatas, symphonies, and chamber works by composers such as Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.

Sonata form (also called Sonata-Allegro Form) is an expanded and complex form derived from rounded binary structure. It has three main sections:



Exposition

Presents main themes:

- First theme in the tonic key
- Transition
- Second theme in the dominant (or relative key)
- Closing section (codetta)

Development

Themes are transformed, modulated, and explored in various keys, creating tension and contrast.

Recapitulation

2. Returns to the main material from the exposition, but both themes remain in the tonic key, creating resolution.

Optional sections may include an Introduction at the beginning and a Coda at the end.



4. CONCLUSION

Form is the largest structural framework of a musical composition. Understanding form helps musicians gain deeper insight into a piece and supports effective learning and performance.

There are several common musical forms:

- Strophic Form (A–A–A) – One of the most common forms, widely used in popular, folk, and lyrical music, characterized by repeated musical sections with different lyrics.
- Binary Form (A–B) – The earliest standardized Western form, including simple binary (A–B) and rounded binary (A–B–A').
- Ternary Form (A–B–A) – A three-part structure, sometimes varied as A–B–A'. It includes simple ternary and composite ternary, in which each section may contain internal binary structure.
- Rondo Form (A–B–A–C–A–D–A, etc.) – An extension of binary and ternary forms, featuring a recurring main theme (A) alternating with contrasting sections.
- Sonata Form – A more complex development of rounded binary form, consisting of three main sections: Exposition (presentation of themes), Development (thematic transformation and modulation), and Recapitulation (return of themes in the tonic key).



Bibliography



Phancharoen, N. (2017). Musical Form and Analysis (6th ed.). Keskarat.

Cameron, D. (2015). An Introduction to Musical Structure and Analysis for Examination Candidates. Ontario: Sarabande Music.

Chase, S. (2022). What Is Rondo Form in Music. Retrieved May 5, 2022, from <https://hellomusictheory.com/learn/rondo-form/>

Ross, J. (n.d.). Types of Musical Forms (Examples, Definitions, Lists). Retrieved June 15, 2022, from <https://joshuarossplano.com/musical-forms/>

White, J. (1976). The Analysis of Music. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.