

Form

Definition – Musical shape formed through the use of pitch, rhythm, dynamics, timbre, texture, tempo, and cadence. A work's design, that is, its organization of the above elements, goes hand in hand with a work's tonal structure, or harmonic structure, in determining its form.

The term *form* may also be applied to generalizations about compositions for the purpose of categorization. By grouping compositions into formal categories, distinctions and exceptions to the general scheme of a form may be explored.

It is important to keep the terms *form* and *genre* separate. *Genre* refers to a distinct classification of composition and does not refer to a work's shape. Concerto, Overture, Symphony, Sonata are all genres. The forms in these works may be quite different. Likewise, fugues, variations, inventions, fantasias, and ricercars, and the like should be termed compositional procedures rather than formal schemes.

Determining a work's form:

- (1) Listen to the piece. Note important cadences and the reiteration of ideas, if any. Try to find some sense of shape or structure.
- (2) Determine the key by examining the key signature, the final cadence, the material of the opening measures, and any accidentals in the music that may suggest the minor mode.
- (3) Most forms are nearly symmetrical. That is, the sections of a work are balanced and roughly of the same size. This may not always be the case but it should give you a clue where to look for the important formal seams. Look for the repetition of material such as motives, themes, and keys.
- (4) Identify all cadences and keep track of the strong cadences, in particular the PAC.
- (5) Examine the work's musical shape by looking for changes in pitch (key in particular), rhythm, dynamics, timbre, texture, and tempo. Motives can play a particularly important role. Determine the work's sections based on relationships formed between or among these elements and the key structure.

Tonality and Form

There is a major distinction to be made between a section of music which ends in the key in which it began and a section of music which ends in a key other than that which it began. The former is to be called "closed" and the latter "open." Most tonal music exhibits a single harmonic movement, that is, the eventual return to the original key. Thus, in the largest level, a tonal work, if it begins and ends in the same key, is closed. However, if, say, the first section of a work ends in a key other than the tonic, it is said to be "open."