

AUDITIVE GESTALTUNG – SS 2010 – Lesson 4

Musical Form

1. Musical Form – Basic Principles
2. Levels of Organization
 - 2.1 Motif and Riff
 - 2.2 Phrase and Pattern
 - 2.3 Passage
 - 2.4 Piece
 - 2.5 Cycle
3. Single Forms
 - 3.1 Sectional Form
 - 3.2 Variational Forms
 - 3.3 Developmental Forms
4. Cyclical Forms

1 Musical Form – Basic Principles

Musical form is sometimes used to refer to a particular “musical style”, which is determined by melodic and harmonic language, rhythms, musical instruments used, as well as historical and geographical origins.

Within the vocabulary of art-music, “musical form” refers more to the type of structure on which the music is built (specifically, the *macrostructure*). It has often been defined as a set of strategies designed to find a successful mean between the opposite extremes of “unrelieved repetition” and “unrelieved alteration” (Scholes, Percy A. - *The Oxford Companion to Music*).

Example of *unrelieved repetition* (the same element is repeated over and over again):

X X X X X X X X ...

The danger of a musical piece based on unrelieved repetition is of course to cause boredom.

Example of *unrelieved alteration* (no repetition, new elements are continuously introduced):

X O □ ◇ ● Δ ✕ ...

A musical piece based on unrelieved alteration can soon cause listening fatigue and loss of interest, as it is not possible to recognize and hence relate to any of the new musical elements introduced. This is one of the problems of some contemporary musical styles, as the language and form do not follow any pattern that might be recognizable by the listener.

Richard Middleton (*Form – 1999*), describe musical form also through “repetition and difference”, presumably after Gilles Deleuze's - *Difference and Repetition* (1968). Musical form should not be confused with *content* (the parts) or with *surface* (the detail, or *microstructure*), however there is no clear line dividing them. “Form covers the shape or structure of the work, content its substance, meaning, ideas, or expressive effects” (Middleton 1999).

2 Levels of Organisation

2.1 Motif and Riff

The smallest building blocks within the musical structure are:

- the *motif* or *figure*, which is a short musical idea such as a succession of notes organized by melodic or harmonic content;
- the *riff*, which is similar to the motif, however with a stronger rhythmic rather than melodic or harmonic quality.

2.2 Phrase and Pattern

The further organization of motifs, through repetition and variation, leads to a true musical *phrase* having a definite rhythm and duration, with distinctive melodic and harmonic character. Typical musical phrases can be 2, 4, 8 or 16 bar long.

Similarly, the combination of riffs can build a rhythmic *pattern*, which can be 1 or more bars long.

2.3 Passage

Phrases are organized into musical "sentences" or "paragraphs", like for example the *verse* of a song. This is often decided by the verse-form or metre of the words or the steps of a dance.

2.4 Piece

The next level concerns the entire structure (*macrostructure*) of any single self-contained musical piece. If the Hymn, ballad, blues or dance simply repeats the same musical material indefinitely, then the piece is said to be in *strophic form* overall:

A A' A'' A''' A'''' ...

If it repeats with distinct changes each time in setting, ornamentation or instrumentation, then the piece is a *Theme and Variations*.

If two different themes are alternated indefinitely, as in a song alternating verse and refrain (chorus), then this gives rise to a two-fold or *binary form*:

A B A B A ...

If the theme is played (ev. twice), then a new theme is introduced, the piece then closes with a return of the first theme, we have a simple *ternary form*:

(A A) B A

A complex piece can have both binary and ternary elements at different organizational levels. For example a baroque Minuet is usually based on a simple binary form (a b b), it is then followed by another Minuet with different register or instrumentation (called the "Trio"), after which the first Minuet is repeated once:

(a a b b) (c c d d) (a b)
A **B** **A'**

This is overall a *ternary form* A B A: the piece is binary on the lower organizational level, but ternary on the higher.

If the piece is based on a returning main theme A alternated with sections (*episodes*) based on contrasting themes and musical material (here called B, C, D, etc.), we have a *rondo* form:

A B A C A D A ...

2.5 Cycle

The grandest level of organization is sometimes called *cycle*: it is the arrangement of several more or less self-contained pieces into a large-scale composition.

For example, a set of songs having a common or related theme may be presented as a *song-cycle*, while a set of baroque dances (such as Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Gigue) was presented as a *suite*.

A *Symphony*, a *Concerto* and a *Sonata* differ in scale and instrumentation, but are similarly organized into *movements*, often designated by their performing tempo, musical form or dance style, for example:

Allegro – Adagio – Minuet – Rondo (Presto)

3 Single Forms

Scholes (1977) suggested that European classical music had only six main stand-alone forms:

- simple binary
- simple ternary
- compound binary (sonata form)
- rondo
- air with variations
- fugue

although he allowed for several sub-categories and hybrids. Mann (1958), however, while confirming that the fugue has taken on certain structural conventions at times, emphasized that it is primarily a method of composition.

When a piece cannot be broken into clear sectional units, it is said to be *through-composed*. Such is often the case with forms that has *improvisational character*, such as Fantasia, Toccata, Prelude, Rhapsody, etc.

Keil (1966) classified forms and formal detail as **sectional**, **developmental** or **variational**.

3.1 Sectional Form

Sectional form is built from a sequence of clear-cut units (DeLone 1975) that may be referred to by letters as outlined above but also often have generic names such as Introduction and Coda, Exposition, Development and Recapitulation, Verse, Chorus or Refrain and Bridge. Introductions and codas, when they are no more than that, are frequently excluded from formal analysis. All such units may typically be eight measures long. Sectional forms include:

- **Strophic form** (A A A A ...) indefinitely - the "unrelieved repetition" that is one extreme of the spectrum of musical form.
- **Medley, potpourri** or **Chain** form: this is the opposite extreme of "unrelieved variation": it is simply an indefinite sequence of self-contained sections (ABCD...), sometimes with repeats (AA BB CC DD ...).
- **Binary Form** using two sections (A B ...); each section is often repeated (AA BB ...). In 18th-century western classical music simple binary form was often used for dances and carried with it the convention that the two sections should be in different musical keys but maintain the same rhythm, duration and tone. The alternation of two tunes gives enough variety to permit a dance to be extended for as long as may be required.

- **Ternary Form**, having three parts. In Western classical music a simple ternary form has a third section that is a recapitulation of the first (A B A). Often the first section is repeated (A A B A). This approach was popular in the 18th-century operatic aria and was called da capo (i.e. "repeat from the top") form.
- **Rondo** form has a recurring theme alternating with different (usually contrasting) sections called *episodes*. It may be asymmetrical (A B A C A D A E A) or symmetrical (A B A C A B A). A recurring section, especially the main theme, is sometimes more thoroughly varied, or else one episode may be a development of it. A similar arrangement is the *ritornello* form of the baroque *concerto grosso*. **Arch form** (A B C B A) resembles a symmetrical rondo without intermediate repetitions of the main theme.

3.2 Variational Forms

Variational forms are those in which variation is an important formative element.

- **Theme and Variations**: a theme, which in itself can be of any shorter form (binary, ternary, etc.), forms the only "section" and is repeated indefinitely (as in strophic form) but is varied each time (A A1 A2 A3 A4 A5 A6 ...), so as to make a sort of sectional chain form. An important variant of this, much used in 17th-century English music and in the *Passacaglia* and *Chaconne*, was that of the ground bass - a repeating bass theme or *basso ostinato* over and around which the rest of the structure unfolds, often, but not always, spinning polyphonic or contrapuntal threads, or improvising divisions and descants. This is said by Scholes (1977) to be the form par excellence of unaccompanied or accompanied solo instrumental music. The Rondo is often found with the main theme sections varied (A A1 B A2 C A3 B A4 ...).

3.3 Developmental Forms

Developmental forms are built directly from smaller units, such as motifs, combined and worked out in different ways, perhaps having a symmetrical or arch-like underpinning and a progressive development from beginning to end. By far the most important in Western classical music is:

- **Sonata Form** (also known as *sonata allegro form*, *first movement form*, *compound binary*, *ternary* and a variety of other names, all of which have been found wanting in one way or another). This developed from the binary-formed dance movement described above but is almost always cast in a greater ternary form having the nominal subdivisions of *Exposition*, *Development* and *Recapitulation*. Usually, but not always, the "A" parts (**Exposition** and **Recapitulation**, respectively) may be subdivided into two or three themes or theme groups with contrasting character, tonality, texture etc. (for example: *main theme*, *side theme*, *closing group*): These theme elements are then taken apart and recombined to form the "B" part (the **Development**). The overall form might therefore look like this:

(abc) [dev. of a and/or b] (a'b'c') + coda
A **B** **A'**

This developmental form is generally confined to certain sections of the piece, as to the middle section of the first movement of a sonata, though nineteenth-century composers such as Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner made valiant efforts to derive large-scale works purely or mainly from the motif.

- **Fugue.** It is a type of polyphonic composition for a fixed number of *parts* or *voices*, which can be played by different instruments, based on a main theme or *subject* and *imitation*. A fugue generally consists of a series of *expositions* and *developments* with no fixed number of either. At its simplest, a fugue might consist of one exposition followed by optional development.

In the *Exposition*, the *subject* is first presented by one part, then passed to the other parts (usually alternating *Tonica / Dominant / Tonica / Dominant*) while the other voices use a *counter-subject* as contrasting material. The exposition structure may be similar to that of a *canon*. There may be more than one exposition in the course of the fugue (*counter-exposition*).

In the *Development*, or *middle entries*, the subject may be treated in several ways:

- *sequence*: repetition of the subject or other motif at another pitch level
- *modulation*: the subject or other motif modulates to another key
- *contrary motion*: the interval directions are made to move in the opposite direction of the original motif
- *double or triple counterpoint*: reappearance of a pair or trio of voices in which registers have been reassigned so that the voices have crossed, hence changing the interval relationships between voices
- *augmentation/diminution*: the rhythmic duration have been proportionally doubled, or halved
- *pedal note*: suspension of one pitch, often in the bass, in such a manner that it is alternately consonant and dissonant with the chord progression in the other voices
- *stretto*: more subject entries follow short after each other in the form of a *canon* (*the following entries begin before the first subject has finished its statement*)

In the *final entries and coda*, there is usually a combination of counter-expositions, *stretto* and ev. a *pedal note*.

The main sections of the fugue are separated by *episodes* or *divertimenti*, which may or may not use motives from the main theme(s).

The form evolved during the 18th century from several earlier types of contrapuntal compositions, such as the imitative *ricercare*, *capriccio*, *canzona*, and *fantasia*.

Johann Sebastian Bach reached the pinnacle of Baroque fugue having shaped his own works after those of Froberger, Pachelbel, Frescobaldi, Buxtehude, and others.

A widespread view of the fugue is that it is not a musical form (in the sense that, say, sonata form is) but rather a technique of composition. For example Donald Francis Tovey (1875-1840) wrote that the "Fugue is not so much a musical form as a musical texture," that can be introduced anywhere as a distinctive and recognizable technique, often to produce intensification in musical development.

4 Cyclical Forms

Opera was originally modeled upon classical drama and takes much of its form from its *libretto* and narrative.

Ballet was for many years a component of opera, not in itself narrative but having the form of a *suite* of set dances included at some appropriate moment in the story such as a festival or wedding.

It emerged as a separate form, supplying its own narrative or representation, during the nineteenth century.

At the same time the *Song cycle* emerged, a set of related songs as the suite is a set of related dances.

The *Oratorio* took shape as a narrative, often religious, recounted but not acted by the singers.

The *Sonata*, *Symphony* and *Concerto* were all developed by the great composers of the Viennese school, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven along the same formal lines into distinctively musical forms limited little by the forms of song, dance or ceremony.

Other forms of music, such as the *Catholic Mass* and *Requiem*, are largely shaped by and subordinated to their texts and ceremonial functions.

Suggested Literature:

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