Musical form

Form is the map of a whole piece: which parts come back, and which are new. Musicians label the parts with **letters**, so a piece of any length fits on one line.

LETTERS NAME THE SECTIONS

Call the first section **A**. If later music is the same, it is A again. If it comes back changed a little, add a dash: **A′** ("A prime"). Music that is really new gets the next letter: **B**, then **C**. Repeat signs (Handout 48) do not change the letters — a repeated A is still A.

same music → same letter | **changed a little** → A′ | **new music** → next letter

FOUR FORMS YOU WILL MEET

Binary AB



Two halves, and **each half is repeated**. A ends on a pause or a cadence; B usually travels to another key and then comes home. Binary and rounded binary up close: Handout 354.

HEAR IT **Minuet in G** (Handout 238; Petzold, from the Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook, 1725): two 16-bar halves; the first stays in G, the second visits D major and returns.

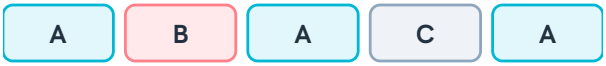
Ternary ABA



A, then a **contrasting** middle, then A again. Leaving and coming home makes the return feel like a reward. Telling it from rounded binary: Handout 354.

HEAR IT **Schumann, The Wild Rider** (Handout 240): a galloping A minor tune, an F major middle with the tune in the left hand, then A again, note for note.

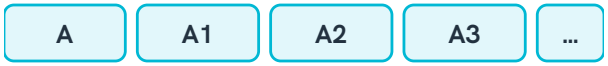
Rondo ABACA



A **refrain** (A) keeps coming back, with a different **episode** (B, C) between each return — like the chorus of a song.

HEAR IT **Beethoven, Für Elise** (Handout 342): the famous opening tune is A; it returns after each of two contrasting episodes.

Theme and variations A A1 A2 A3…



A **theme**, then the same theme again and again, each time dressed differently: new rhythms, new notes around it, minor instead of major.

HEAR IT **Mozart, 12 Variations on "Ah, vous dirai-je, maman," K. 265** — the theme is the tune of Twinkle Twinkle.

A VARIATION UP CLOSE



Theme · C C G G A A G



Variation · the cyan theme notes stay on the beats; new notes fill the gaps

An original variation in the spirit of K. 265, not one of Mozart's twelve.

Try it Listen to Für Elise and raise a hand every time A comes back — then write its letters. Play the theme above, then the variation, then invent your own (try the theme in **half notes**, or in C minor). Finally, compare the form map of Joplin's *The Entertainer* (**Handout 208**), a ragtime chain of strains: intro, AA BB A CC DD. For a bigger plan, sonata form, see Handout 395 (and the studies 239 and 379). Check the words: Exercise 74.

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