

Two- and three-part forms (binary and ternary forms)

Terms

Binary form

Tonal structure

- Sectional binary form
- Continuous binary form

Formal design

- Simple binary form
- Rounded binary form
- Balanced binary form

Ternary form

- Simple ternary form
- Compound (composite) ternary form

Introduction

The word **binary** has to do with the idea of twoness (think of what you may remember about binary arithmetic, or the way in which the human body seems to be binary—two hands, feet, arms, and so forth). In a variety of types of music, the idea of binary or two-section formal plans is important: Think of the notion of *free-strict* in such diverse music as the music of India and Japan, the western prelude and fugue, recitative and aria, the French overture, and many other musics. While this notion of free-strict is important in many genres, our focus here is specifically on **binary form** as it occurs in numerous instrumental dance forms (and related or derivative music) from the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. If one temporarily includes ternary form in the discussion (thus considering what are sometimes called the **small part-forms**, namely two-part and three-part), the repertoire includes such diverse pieces as the dances brought into the French ballet and opera by Lully, the stylized older dances and other movements in the Italian instrumental music of Corelli and other composers, dance movements in the later Baroque (as in the keyboard suites of Bach and Handel), the minuets of the Classical period (as well as the trios that often accompanied them, and the nineteenth-century scherzo and trio), and the small character pieces, waltzes, galops, and mazurkas of Schubert, Chopin, Schumann, and others. Many songs were written in these forms or variants of them. Even larger vocal pieces such as operatic arias often relied on complex, expanded versions of these forms, as in the *cavatina* and *cabaletta*.

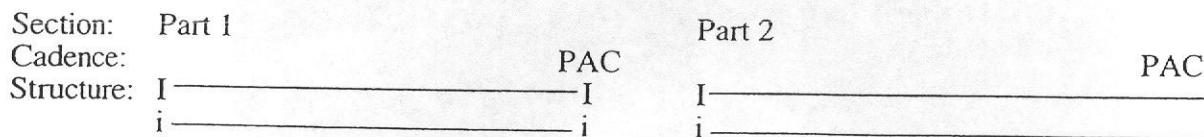
Remember the following as you read and think: What's discussed here are stereotypes and the most "typical" things you'd find in binary and ternary form examples; there are always exceptions. Also, don't get confused: Periods and double periods are binary, in a sense, but we do not usually use the term binary for them because a term like *parallel period* is more informative.

Tonal structure in binary forms

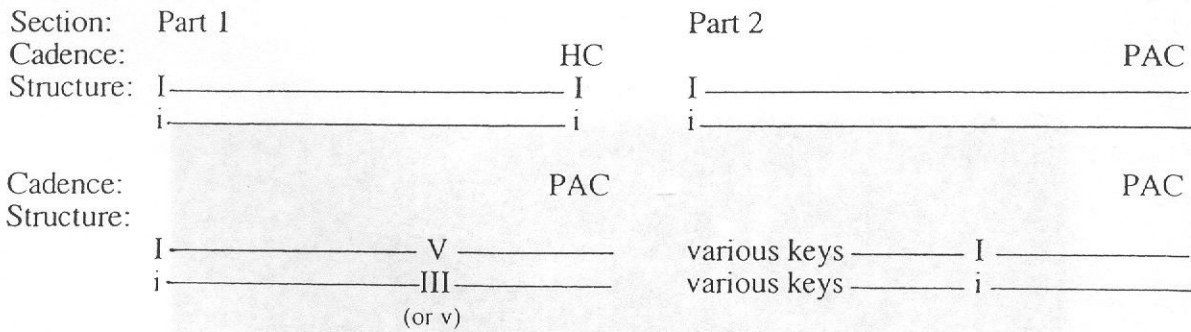
First, some brief definitions. *Tonal structure* refers to a temporarily isolated examination of keys and harmonies and their relationships. It's important to separate out tonal structure from *formal design*, which is the way different melodies, phrases, and themes are organized. Ultimately, of course, it's the way in which structure and design *interact* which creates individual pieces.

Let's assume the following for now: Binary form contains two parts, each of which is often (but by no means always) repeated. Here are two basic models of tonal structure found in many pieces in binary form:

Model no. 1: sectional binary form



Model no. 2: continuous binary form (note multiple possibilities here; examine these thoughtfully)



Some notes on the two models:

1. Sectional binary form:
 - It's so called because parts 1 and 2 form two tonally separate (and closed) sections. As a result, sectional binary often contains a lesser degree of tonal diversity than does continuous binary.
 - Sectional binary may still contain brief tonicizations of keys other than tonic.

2. Continuous binary form:
 - It's so called because parts 1 and 2 form one longer (more *continuous*) tonal gesture, and because part 1 is "open-ended" tonally.
 - In a sense, there are really two "levels" of continuous binary tonal structures: Those whose part 1 ends with a half cadence in the home key and those whose part 1 ends with a PAC in another key.
 - Major-mode continuous binary pieces most often modulate to the dominant key.
 - Minor-mode continuous binary pieces most often modulate to the relative major key, though occasionally they will modulate to the minor dominant key.
 - The "new key" is usually well established **before** the end of part I.
 - The beginning of part 2 (where it says "various keys") can simply *prolong* or extend the dominant or relative major key, or it can be more complex, tonicizing several different keys.
 - Often there's an arrival at a fairly strong half cadence immediately preceding the return to tonic.
 - The tonic key is usually re-established **before** the end of part II.
 - In 19th-century binary forms, the first section might well end in the mediant or submediant: Third-related keys were more prominently used by Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, and others.

Formal design in binary forms

Preliminary notes

- In most pieces in binary form, there is very *limited* thematic differentiation between parts 1 and 2. (There is **not** the stronger contrast we will encounter in ternary form).
- Binary forms may be symmetrical (both parts are of equal length) or asymmetrical (the two parts are of unequal length). Usually the second part will be longer than the first.
- Part 1 may be a single or double period, a group of phrases, etc.
- Part 2 may also be a single or double period, a group of phrases, etc. It is perhaps less likely to be a period if there is a strong half cadence preceding the return of the tonic key.
- As stated earlier, binary form contains two parts, each of which is often (but by no means always) repeated. It's now time to mention that the repeats may sometimes be written out (rather than indicated with repeat signs). Schumann, Chopin, and others were fond of written-out repeats, sometimes with variations upon the repetition. Bear in mind, too, that there do not "have to be" repeats at all.

Simple binary form

Simple binary form involves the unfolding of a single musical idea in two main parts. It dominated the instrumental dance suites of the Baroque era. Simple binary form might best be represented as follows:

Section: Part 1 _____ Part 2 _____
 Design: A _____ B _____

Due to the limited thematic differentiation between parts 1 and 2, calling simple binary form **A B** is probably an oversimplification. It's more like something in between **A A'** and **A B**. However, as Ralph Turek writes: "The letter **B** does not necessarily suggest strong contrast—it only indicates that the second section is not a repetition or varied repetition of the first."

Rounded binary form

Rounded binary form might best be represented as follows:

Section: Part 1 _____ Part 2 _____
 Design: A _____ B _____ A' _____

Rounded binary features a return of the opening thematic/melodic material—in the tonic key—usually toward the end of part 2. The principal difference between simple and rounded binary is that rounded binary includes the return of opening material (thus: "rounding off the form") in the tonic key.\

- The return should make you say, "Aha!" when you hear it.
- The reprise (in tonic) is sometimes literal; it may be part or all of the first section. However, there's really a wide range of literalness and completeness of reprise; it could also be a varied return.
- Rounded binary is more common in Classic- and Romantic-era binary pieces than in Baroque ones.
- Rounded binary was *frequently* the form used in the minuets or trios of the Classical era; the typical arrangement of minuet-trio-minuet (or scherzo-trio-scherzo in the 19th century) is one type of compound ternary form (see later in this handout).

Balanced binary form

If there's a return of the **end** of part 1 at the **end** of the second part, this is called **balanced binary**. It's a sort of musical "rhyming." Note that either simple or rounded binary forms may also be balanced. Domenico Scarlatti, in particular, was fond of writing balanced binary forms.

Tonal structure and formal design, united at last

If you've followed the discussions above about tonal structure and formal design, you can see that there are many combinational possibilities. Here are a few, in diagram format:

1. Simple sectional binary form:

Section:	Part 1 _____	Part 2 _____
Design:	A _____	B _____
Cadence:		PAC
Structure:	I _____ I	I _____ PAC
	i _____ i	i _____

2. Simple continuous binary form:

Section:	Part 1 _____	Part 2 _____
Design:	A _____	B _____
Cadence:	HC	PAC
Structure:	I _____ I	I _____
	i _____ i	i _____
Cadence:	PAC	PAC
Structure:	I _____ V _____	various keys _____ I _____
	i _____ III _____	various keys _____ i _____
	(or v)	

3. Rounded sectional binary form:

Section:	Part 1 _____	Part 2 _____
Design:	A _____	B _____ A' _____
Cadence:	PAC	PAC
Structure:	I _____ I	I _____
	i _____ i	i _____

4. Rounded continuous binary form:

Section:	Part 1 _____	Part 2 _____
Design:	A _____	B _____ A' _____
Cadence:	HC	PAC
Structure:	I _____ I	I _____
	i _____ i	i _____
Cadence:	PAC	PAC
Structure:	I _____ V _____	various keys _____ I _____
	i _____ III _____	various keys _____ i _____
	(or v)	

Summary of binary forms

- Binary forms have two parts, each of which is often (but by no means *always*) repeated.
- There are two main issues in binary forms: Tonal structure and formal design.
- The tonal structure is either *sectional* (part 1 ends with a PAC in the home key) or *continuous* (part 1 ends with a HC in the home key or a PAC in some other key). If part 1 does modulate, it's most often to the dominant or the relative major.
- The formal design is either *simple* or *rounded* (no return during part 2 or return of the opening material during part 2, respectively). Simple binary occurs more frequently in Baroque music; rounded in Classical and later.
- In addition, one may encounter balanced binary form, and one may also observe whether or not the two parts are of the same length (symmetrical or asymmetrical).

About listening

Take advantage of the repeats, when present! For many people, the easiest way to hear whether or not part 1 modulates is to listen very carefully to the end of part 1 (the first time through), then listen for the beginning of the repeat. Do you hear a return to the tonic key or not?

Listen during part 2 for a strong HC as a "signal" of the upcoming thematic return, if present.

At long last: ternary form

Ternary form is somewhat simpler. It involves statement, contrast, then restatement or return. It's best represented by the letters **A B A** or **A B A'**. Here, the letter **B** represents true *contrast*, created by a number of musical parameters, usually including being *in a different key* (an aspect, then, of tonal structure) and having *contrasting thematic material* (an aspect of formal design).

Simple ternary form

Simple ternary form is encountered in many da capo arias from the Baroque as well as compositions written in the Classic and Romantic eras. Simple ternary pieces are usually just **A B A** or **A B A'**. The scheme **A B A'** occurs when composers choose to vary or otherwise alter the **A** material upon its return.

- There may be various types of "extra" material, too, including such things as an *introduction*, a *transition* between **A** and **B**, a *retransition* between **B** and the return of **A**, or a *codetta* or *coda* at the end.
- The difference between transition and retransition is this: A transition involves the process of departing from the tonic key and moving to new thematic material, while a retransition involves a process of returning to the tonic key and to material already heard.

Compound (or composite) ternary form

As Peter Spencer and Peter Temko write: compound ternary form is "one in which smaller forms are clearly perceived in the articulation of the larger form's structure." Put a bit differently, compound ternary is simply a ternary form within which both **A** and **B** (and obviously the return of **A**) are complete, independent little pieces, often in rounded binary form. Compound ternary form is *very common* due to its occurrence within the "minuet movements" of symphonies, string quartets, and other genres.

The minuet-trio-minuet configuration would thus be:

Minuet A (rounded) binary tonic key	Trio B (rounded) binary contrasting key	Minuet A (rounded) binary, with the repeats omitted tonic key
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The same scheme holds true with the scherzo-trio-scherzo movements of Beethoven and later composers.

- **About tonal structure:** The tonic of the trio is usually different than that of the minuet or scherzo. It is sometimes in the subdominant or another near-related key, or it might even be in the parallel major or minor. This use of a different key in the second section is just like in simple ternary form.
- The overall design **may** include an introduction, transition, retransition, or coda, though these features are somewhat *rare* in this type of compound ternary. They are far more common in simple ternary.

A brief comparison of binary and simple ternary

BINARY

1. In **two sections**, each usually set off by double bars and repeat signs.
2. Each of the two sections typically ends in a different key from that in which it begins; thus, the sections are often tonally **open**.
3. There is **little thematic contrast** between the two sections.
4. In *simple* binary, the opening thematic material does not recur in the tonic key. In *rounded* binary, it does.

SIMPLE TERNARY

1. In **three sections**, the third of which is a literal or varied recurrence of the first.
2. Each of the three sections usually ends in the same key in which it begins; thus, the sections are often tonally **closed**.
3. There is **considerable thematic contrast** between the **A** and **B** sections.
4. The opening thematic material almost always returns in the tonic key, at the beginning of the final (**A** or **A'**) section.

The line between rounded binary and ternary forms can sometimes be subtle, because rounded binary may be seen as sort of a hybrid: It contains the recurrence of material associated with ternary form; it also contains the two-part frame, tonally open first part (if it's continuous rounded binary), and thematic similarity of the two parts of binary form. Some tips on their differences:

- The **B** material in ternary is often more contrasting than is typical in rounded binary.
- The initial **A** section in ternary usually ends in the tonic; part 1 of rounded binary often modulates.
- The **B** section in ternary usually begins and ends in the same key, while the "B" part of rounded binary is usually working its way back to the original tonic key in time for the return.
- The **B** section in ternary may well end with a PAC in the contrasting key, while the "B" part of rounded binary often arrives on a half cadence before the return.
- The **A'** section of ternary is usually a more complete restatement of the original material, while the "rounding" in rounded binary needn't be so complete.

Binary form and sonata form

Sonata forms may be considered an extension of the basic principles of binary form; in a very real sense, sonata form evolved out of the rounded (and balanced) binary:

: Part 1		: : Part 2	Return of Part 1	:
: a	b	: : (development)	a or a'	b or b'
: I	V	: : (various)	I	I
: i	III	: : (various)	i	i

Exposition				Development	Recapitulation			
: P	T	S	K	: : (from expos.)	P	T	S	K
: I	→	V	—————	: : (various,	I	—————	—————	—————
: i	→	III	—————	: : leading to V)	i	—————	—————	—————

- P = principal theme; T = transition; S = second theme; K = closing theme; → represents "modulating"
- The symbols P, T, S, and K are from the book *Guidelines for Style Analysis* by Jan LaRue.
- Some sonata forms have an extended *prolongation of the dominant* before the recapitulation. The development typically develops themes or motives from the exposition, but it may also contain new material.
- Bear in mind that the three major parts of sonata form make it bear some resemblance to ternary form.