

Structural Units in Music (Dr. Timothy Nord)

These units are based on the composer's primary intent with regard to the function of a significant segment of the composition.

Type of unit	Subjective characteristics	Objective characteristics
Expository, or "thematic"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • basic material presented as opening statement • "here it is — the materials which form the subject of this composition" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tonally stable • regular phrase structure • thematic/motivic material
Introductory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "setting the stage" • "preparation for" • optional section 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establish tonality • often ends on chord of tension • may have thematic material, but character not "thematic"
Transitional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "traveling music" • music connecting two more structurally important units 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tonally unstable: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> modulation (key) sequence dominant prolongation • irregular phrase structure
Developmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "working over" • <i>Durchführung</i> • "composer's showcase" • "examining the possibilities" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tonally unstable: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> modulation (keys) sequence • counterpoint (fugato?) • irregular phrase structures • thematic fragmentation • juxtaposition of fragments
Episodic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • music seems to "stand still" • lack of direction • reflects backward • mood setting qualities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • repetition of chord progressions (non-cadential)
Closing (Coda)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sense of "drawing to a close" • "winding down (or up) with the destination clearly in view" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • multiple cadencing (V-I) • tonic pedal • subdominant emphasis • massive cadential preparation • stylistically idiomatic closing gestures (trills, etc.) • often, absence of melody (use of passagework) • tutti orchestration

Transitions

(material by Dr. Timothy Nord)

Function

A transition simply *connects* two sections or parts of a composition. We can think of a transition as a musical passage connecting a *previous* section to a *following* section.

Transition or retransition?

When the *previous* section is A, the passage is a **transition**; when the *following* section is A, the passage is called a **retransition**.

Thus, in the following scheme:

A passage 1 B passage 2 A passage 3 C passage 4 A . . .

passages 1 and 3 are *transitions* while passages 2 and 4 are *retransitions*

Length

The length of a transition depends upon the scope of the composition. In small forms (binary, ternary, compound ternary, and certain rondos) the length of the transition can vary from one to several measures.

The transition may be as brief as a single chord.

In larger forms (sonata-allegro or sonata-rondo), transitions often occupy a great deal more than several measures and may even contain developmental characteristics.

Character

A transition often contains a modulation since the following section is generally in a different key from the previous section. However, modulation is not a *requirement* for a transitional passage.

The transition often involves some degree of *tonal change* as a source of *contrast*. This may take the form of a *false modulation* in which there is tonal excursion but the key at the beginning and end of the transition is the same.

The transition is frequently built fully or in part on a pattern of *harmonic sequence*.

If the transition contains material from either the previous or the following section, the treatment of this material differs from its treatment in the previous or following section.

Material

The transition may consist of material derived from the previous section.

The transition may consist of material derived from the following section.

The transition may consist of material derived from *both* the previous *and* following sections.

The transition may consist of entirely new or freely composed material.

Locating the beginning of a transition

The transition may begin after a strong cadence ending the previous section.

The transition may begin with a deceptive or an elided cadence at a point where a strong final cadence ending the previous section is expected.

The transition may simply “grow out” of the previous section — or, to think of it in another way — the previous section may *dissolve into* the transition. In this case it is often difficult to locate precisely the beginning of the transition or the ending of the previous section.

Locating the end of a transition

The end of a transition can usually be determined by locating the beginning of the following section or structural unit. This following section can be recognized by a change in musical character (e.g., the phrase structure may be more regular and/or the music may be firmly settled into a key area).

Often the transition ends with a half cadence in the key of the following section.

About the retransition specifically

In preparing the listener psychologically for the return of previous material, any or all of the following three types of preparation are used:

1. Tonal preparation: introduction of the key level of the forthcoming material.
2. Thematic preparation: anticipation of the motivic material of the forthcoming section.
3. Harmonic preparation: not separable from tonal preparation, but often involving statement — or even prolongation — of a dissonant harmony to underscore and intensify the expectation of the approaching section. Most often this consists of a *dominant prolongation* in the key of the following section.

The transitional codetta

Occasionally the previous section is followed by *closing material* before the transition begins. Such closing material is characterized by cadential repetition, subdominant emphasis, tonic pedal point, figure repetition, etc. The transition to the following section then seems to “grow out” of the closing material. In this case the general area of the beginning of the transition can often be recognized by the addition of chromatic tones indicating the possibility of modulation (either false or real), or by harmonic sequence.

Structural functions

The information in this handout is in part an expansion of chapter three of *A Practical Approach to the Study of Form in Music*, by Peter Spencer and Peter M. Temko. Give it a careful read for further details.

What is meant by "structural functions?"

Various types of musical *functions* are carried out by certain kinds of musical *passages*. Two familiar examples: passages that fulfill an *introductory* function and those that carry out some sort of function we call *coda* or *codetta*. These passages have their own musical features or attributes that help us to identify them as "introduction" or "coda." Of course, introductions and codas occur in typical *places* within a movement or piece — the beginning and the end, respectively. The functions discussed below also occur in somewhat predictable places, but they may occur in unexpected places, too, so it is a good idea to become familiar with some of their internal characteristics.

The four types of functions we will examine include:

- expository function
- transitional function
- developmental function
- terminative function

There are probably other functions one could consider, but these four will go a long way to increasing our musical comprehension. Musical examples will be distributed and discussed in class. Spencer and Temko draw a parallel between musical functions and the way in which "the parts of a book have specific purposes in the unfolding of the plot." If this analogy helps you, great!

Expository function

As you might expect, a passage that carries an expository function *exposes* musical materials that turn out to be important in the context of the complete movement or piece. In a book, this might be represented by those passages that reveal the most important topics.

"Exposition" is of course a loaded word, since it is a term encountered when analyzing fugues and also movements in sonata form. When used in relation to fugues, it refers to the opening statements of the subject and answer, "exposing" the main material which will be developed and reused throughout the fugue and the number of voices heard. The exposition in a sonata form movement typically is the section in which the main themes and motives of the entire movement are presented.

Note, however, that **expository function differs from exposition section**. The exposition section of a fugue includes material of expository function (the subject, for example) and also transitional function (the bridge). The bridge may also carry a developmental function, since it may sometimes contain transposed motivic fragments of the subject or countersubject, often used in sequence. The exposition section in sonata form may include a principal theme or themes (expository function), a transition (transitional and possibly developmental functions; even anticipatory function is possible here), a second theme or themes (expository function), then a closing section or theme (terminative function). The point here: don't confuse expository function with exposition section, though clearly *exposition sections* do contain a good deal of material of *expository function*.

So what characteristics might passages of expository function typically have? They are often characterized by *clear phrase structure* that is frequently *periodic* in some way. Further, in tonal pieces, music of expository function usually features harmonic activity that is *fairly stable in a key* and serves to *establish that key*. This is not to say that a passage has to be diatonic to serve an expository function — chromatic harmony may occur, especially in 19th century music. The point is that the listener can say, "OK, we're in G Major," based on the progressions and relative stability that establish that key.

The rondo theme (the A sections) in a movement or piece in rondo form and the presentation of the principal and second theme(s) in a movement or piece in sonata form are passages which typically carry an expository function. Bear in mind, of course, that expository function may occur in many other places: the exposition of a fugue, the beginning of movements in binary or ternary form, and so forth.

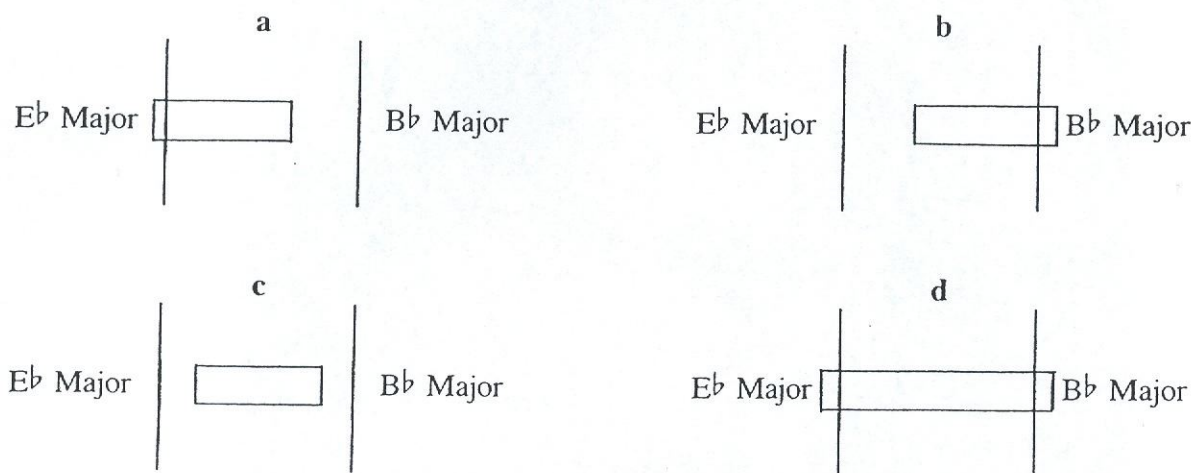
Transitional function

Spencer and Temko write: "transitional sections often serve a connecting function between sections of relative repose in the musical context. Transitional passages, therefore, may possess attributes that support the perception of *movement*, such as unpredictable or fragmentary structural units, rhythmic agitation, dynamic contrasts, and frequent changes in other structural phenomena. In tonal music, they are characterized by harmonic activity that serves to dissolve the previously established key and to establish a new one."

This excellent paragraph captures much of the essence of music of transitional function. Composers will sometimes "signal" the beginning of a transition by a change in texture, dynamics, rhythmic patterning, or some combination of these. The result is a sense that "we're going somewhere" — departing the just-heard stable passage and moving to another one. It's possible to hear this as increased musical tension during transitions. One also frequently encounters "unpredictable or fragmentary structural units," which means that one might hear fragmentation of motives, and that one generally *does not* hear clear phrase structure during transitional passages. Occasionally, transitions might also be heard as containing less important thematic material: one might just hear scales, broken thirds, or other figuration patterns rather than substantive thematic content.

One also perceives tonal instability and change during transitions. The "old key" is dissolved or destabilized, often by the introduction of the leading tone of the new key, and one then continues the journey from the old key into the new one. One's anticipation of the new key is sometimes heightened by a movement all the way to the *dominant* of the new key.

It might be helpful to envision tonality within the transition as a bridge (some people call transitions "bridges," by the way). Let's say that two "countries" — E \flat Major and B \flat Major — are separated by a river. Four possible "bridges" between them are shown below.



The bridges labeled a, b, and c are insufficient — one would not move successfully from the old "country" of E \flat Major to the new "country" of B \flat Major. The bridge labeled d would result in a successful passage. One begins in the old country, traverses the river between them, and lands in the new country.

Transferring the analogy to music: many musical transitions thus begin while we're still in the old key. The old key is then dissolved or destabilized, one traverses the distance between the old and new keys, then one completes the journey *in* the new key.

A word (or two) on transitions in sonata forms

In his wonderful book *Form in Tonal Music*, Douglass Green identifies *three tonal structural phases* often found in the transition section:

1. the passage before the modulation begins (still in the original key);
2. the deflection away from the tonic key (usually by the introduction of the new leading tone); and
3. a movement *past* the new key to its dominant [one might even hear and see the leading tone to the dominant (#4) in the new key!]

A transition which contains all three phases will be the most successful at obliterating the old key. Some transitions, however, contain only phases 1 and 2. Occasionally, a transition might even contain only phase 1, concluding with a half cadence on the dominant of the old key. The music would then pick up that dominant *chord* and continue by turning that dominant *chord* into the new dominant *key*.

In terms of *formal design*, Green writes that there are two possibilities encountered with some frequency: the **dependent** transition develops straight out of principal theme material. It may often begin like a simple restatement of the principal theme then “dissolve” the restatement into a modulatory passage. The **independent** transition introduces new material (perhaps *motivically* related to the principal theme, but not *literally* a restatement), the function of which is to modulate into the new key.

About retransitions

A retransition might be most easily defined as a transitional passage which takes one back to material heard before (and usually back to the tonic key). Retransitions have most of the same characteristics as transitions. They often conclude with (or even feature) a *dominant prolongation*, which is a passage — sometimes lengthy — which features chords of dominant function in the upcoming key, the function of which is to heighten one’s anticipation of the return of tonic. One might go as far as saying that *anticipatory function* is another functional category one might look out for when performing or analyzing tonal music.

Developmental function

Spencer and Temko write that “developmental sections are analogous to literary passages whose purpose is to amplify or discuss ideas previously introduced.” In a musical context, a passage of developmental function will *present thematic or motivic material previously heard in some altered form*. The alterations often will include (but are not limited to) fragmentation and sequence and possibly imitative texture. One usually *does not* hear clear phrase structure within passages of developmental function. Passages of developmental function are usually *tonally unstable*.

One might ask: “so how do passages of transitional function and those of developmental function differ?” They may often be very similar. A transition, however, works to move from one stable key to another, while a developmental passage will often run through more keys and be even less stable than a transition. Further, a transition may simply introduce new material rather than develop already-heard themes or motives.

Developmental function in sonata forms

Two quick points:

1. Passages of developmental *function* are not necessarily limited to the development *section*. The exposition and recapitulation may contain passages that develop material to some extent, and codas (especially Beethoven’s) often contain further development of material.

- 2. The development *section* usually is a passage of developmental *function*, but it can also contain areas of transitional function (most especially the *retransition*, leading to the recapitulation and return of the tonic key) and even sometimes expository function (this occurs in those developments which present “new themes,” such as the one occurring in the first movement of Beethoven’s *Symphony no.3* — “Eroica.”)

Terminative function

Spencer and Temko write: “the function of terminative passages is to bring sections or complete works to a close. The primary attribute of terminative sections is tonal activity that confirms and reinforces an established key. Continuous cadential activity [repeated V - I or even predominant - V - I motions] and static tonality . . . mark such sections.” They go on to mention that terminative passages may have clear phrase structure or they may be more fragmentary in nature, and that such passages may involve development or restatement of previously-heard material or contain newly-composed material. The new material sometimes might also be heard as containing less important thematic material: one might just hear scales, broken thirds, or other figuration patterns rather than substantive thematic content.

A word about “returns”

Bear in mind that forms that contain “returns” of material (most all do!) will often contain variation of that material upon its return. Consider one example — a seven-part rondo: the rondo theme (A section) is heard *four times*. Composers will often vary it upon its return, and the final return is often quite abbreviated — just a passing reference to the material.

Summary

The following table summarizes some of the ideas presented in this handout. Bear in mind that the table is an oversimplification, but it might be helpful to remember some of these characteristics as you perform and analyze music.

Function	Design characteristics	Tonal structure characteristics
Expository	clear phrase structure; often periodic	tonal establishment and stability
Transitional	often more fragmentary and unsettled; rhythmic agitation; sense of increased musical tension and movement; less likely to have clear phrase structure; may be simple figuration	modulation: movement from one key to another; tonal dissolution, instability, then (eventual) stability of the new key
Developmental	use of fragmentation and sequential restatement of material; often increased musical tension; less likely to have clear phrase structure	maximum tonal instability; frequent changes of tonic and/or mode; sometimes unpredictability
Terminative	clear phrase structure or more fragmentary; may be simple figuration; new material or recurrence of previously-heard material	confirming and reinforcing a key through repeated cadential progressions