

Repetition in Music: Sections

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Look at “Ode to Joy” and notice that there is a section that is repeated three times and a contrasting section that is played only once. In music theory, sections are marked with capital letters.

Ode to Joy

Beethoven

The musical score for "Ode to Joy" is presented in five staves of music. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into sections A and B. Section A is marked with a capital letter 'A' and appears at the beginning of the first staff, at the start of the second staff, and at the beginning of the fifth staff. Section B is marked with a capital letter 'B' and appears in the second half of the third staff. The first staff contains measures 1-3. The second staff starts at measure 4 and contains measures 4-6. The third staff starts at measure 7 and contains measures 7-9. The fourth staff starts at measure 10 and contains measures 10-12. The fifth staff starts at measure 13 and contains measures 13-15. The score ends with a double bar line at the end of the fifth staff.

This AABA pattern is very common and is the most common pattern in the popular music of The Great American Songbook (popular songs that have become classics).

Increase your understanding of how tonality functions with the following experiments.

The key signature tells us that this piece is either in Bb Major or g minor. The last note, Bb, tells us that this piece is in Bb major. Bb is the tonic, some times called the “home tone,” because the music wants to return to that tone.

End the first A section and notice how the music wants to go on because it doesn't end with a tonic. Now try playing the tonic as the last note of this section and notice how that urge to go ahead has decreased.

The next A section is like the first A section except it ends on a tonic.

Notice how the B section contrasts with the A section. The melodic contour is different and it is more rhythmic, creating a feeling of agitation that needs to be resolved and it ends on a non-tonic note. Try ending the piece at the end of the B section and notice that there is a tension that needs to be resolved.

Going to the final A section resolves that tension and makes it final by ending on a satisfying tonic. Try ending the piece on some other note.

These experiments will help you understand how tonality, along with other factors, creates feeling in music.

Assignment

Look for sections in the music you are playing. There are many forms, so they won't all be AABA. In larger pieces, the sections are also larger.

Personal note: In my days of playing clubs and weddings, we were expected to play almost any song by memory.

The B section of a song is only played once while the A section is played three times, so it is harder to remember.

The B middle section is also called the bridge. I sometimes played a game with my musician friends that we called “bridge,” in which we challenged each other to play the bridge to any song that was named, as in “Play the bridge to “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” and then on to other tunes. It was common to hear a lot of groping around for the notes.