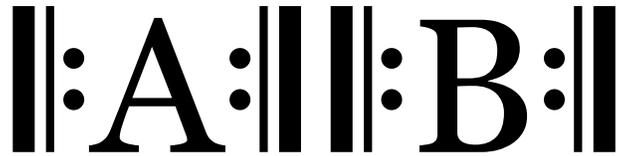


## Binary Forms

Binary form is one of the fundamental and important forms in western music. It is popular in smaller pieces like baroque dances, shorter arias, and character pieces, as well as a common organizational strategy for themes of larger works like rondo, sonata, or variations forms. Binary forms, as the name would suggest, are two-part forms, and follow the basic pattern seen below.



The A and B sections are each repeated and will each contain different thematic content. Often, themes will be organized as a period or a sentence, but looser formal designs are possible. Though repeats are occasionally written out, the repeat signs are a good indicator that you are dealing with a binary structure. There are several types of binary forms, as seen below.

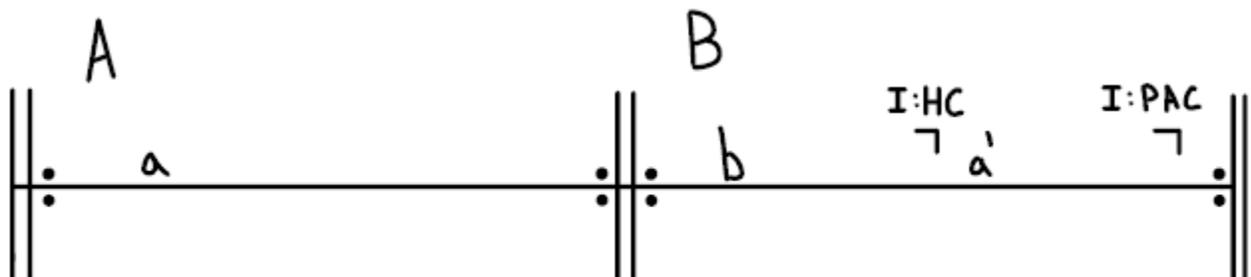
### Simple Binary

Simple Binary forms will contain different thematic material in both sections and organized just as seen above. The B section contain no direct references to themes from the A section, but the material may be in a similar style and the same key. This is the simplest binary form and is often seen in music of the baroque and classical period.

Examples: Bach, Cello Suite no. 2, Minuet no. 2  
Bach, Aria from *The Goldberg Variations* (along with the variations)

### Rounded Binary

Rounded binary forms are still in two parts, but will contain three sections within those two parts, as seen below. These will usually modulate at the end of “a” and return to tonic by the end of “b.”

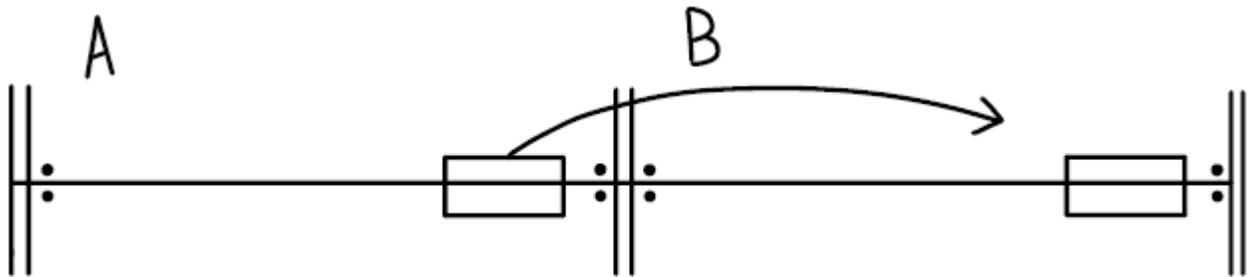


In the “B” section, thematic content that contrasts the A section (stylized as a lower-case “b” here because it is a different ) will appear followed by a shortened restatement of thematic material from the “a” section. If the “a” theme is a period, often the consequent phrase will be used. The “b” section will also often be subordinate to and linked to the “a” section somehow, setting it up both thematically and harmonically. The “b” section typically has looser phrase designs than the “a” section; periods are not common in “b.”

Examples: Mozart, Theme from Sonata in D-major, K. 284, iii  
Brahms, Theme from *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*, Op. 56

## Balanced Binary

Like the rounded binary, the balanced binary brings back some material from the A section at the end of the B section. However, in this case, only material from the the end of the A section will return; often, it is simply a repeat of the cadential material.



Examples: Beethoven, “Theme” from *33 Variations on a Waltz by Anton Diabelli*, Op. 120  
Mozart, Sorastro’s Aria “O Isis und Osiris” from *Die Zauberflöte*, K. 620

## Bar Form

Bar form is a German modification of binary form where the B section is not repeated. It is sometimes called song form, and is best described as AA|B. Often the A section here is referred to as the *Stollen*, and B as the *Abgesang*. A prime example of this form is *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

## Tonal Plans for Binary Forms

There are also some important terms for binary concerning key plans: *Sectional* and *Continuous*. Essentially, sectional forms depend on the tonal plan of the A section. If the material in the A section ends with a PAC in the original key of the piece, it is said to be *tonally closed*, resulting in a *sectional* binary form. Conversely, if the material in the A section ends in a different key or with a half cadence then the section is said to be *tonally open*, resulting in a *continuous* binary form.

Very often, binary forms **will** feature a modulation at the end of the A section, which will almost definitely be to the dominant in a major mode and the relative major (or sometimes minor dominant) in the minor mode.

## Other Considerations

- Sections of a binary form are seldom not repeated, but this shouldn’t distract you from recognizing two distinct themes or sections.
- Binary forms are often symmetrical, meaning that A and B will often contain the same number of measures.
- Rounded binary is sometimes called “small ternary” due to its three-part nature. Because of the two-part organization and because the “b” section is often subordinate to “a,” we will call them rounded binary.
- This form is largely hierarchical. Smaller forms (periods, sentences, etc.) will likely be contained within the binary form, and larger forms (compound ternary, rondo, etc.) will often contain binary forms within them. Additionally, the rounded binary form has two levels of hierarchy: AB and a|ba’.
- If the A section of a sectional binary form ends in a HC, and B in a PAC, this does **not** form a period. Phrase designs do not stretch across larger formal units.