

Ternary Forms

Ternary forms are another fundamental and important form in western music. They are often found in slow movements, baroque arias, dance- trio forms, some marches, and some smaller works like nocturnes or mazurkas. This three-part form follows the **Statement—Departure—Return** pattern seen below.



Ternary forms feature an initial statement of an idea (“A”), a departure to a contrasting idea (“B”), and a return to either a literal repeat (“A”) or an altered repeat (“this is called A’ or A-prime”). The “B” section may differ from the “A” section in many ways: key, mode, length, meter/tempo, thematic material, orchestration, etc.

Another important feature of the ternary form not often found in binary form is connective material between sections. Often, there will be instances of sometimes lengthy transitions or bridges between sections. There may also be post-cadential material (codas, codettas, or cadential extensions) included after any section.

While this might sound like rounded binary form, there are some important differences...

1. The “B” section of the ternary form will be often be much more substantial or independent than those found in rounded binary forms; it could likely function as its own piece. The function of the “B” section is not to create instability (like “b” in binary forms), but to contrast.
2. The tonal plan for a ternary plan is much looser than rounded binary. In binary forms, the contrasting theme will most often be in the dominant or relative major key, whereas the tonal plans of ternary forms are much more flexible.
3. Ternary forms do not *necessarily* have repeats. While repeats may occasionally appear, they are absolutely **not** required for a ternary form. In a binary form, they are essentially required.

Simple vs Compound and Tonal Plans

All ternary forms will be either *simple* or *compound* **and** *sectional* or *continuous*.

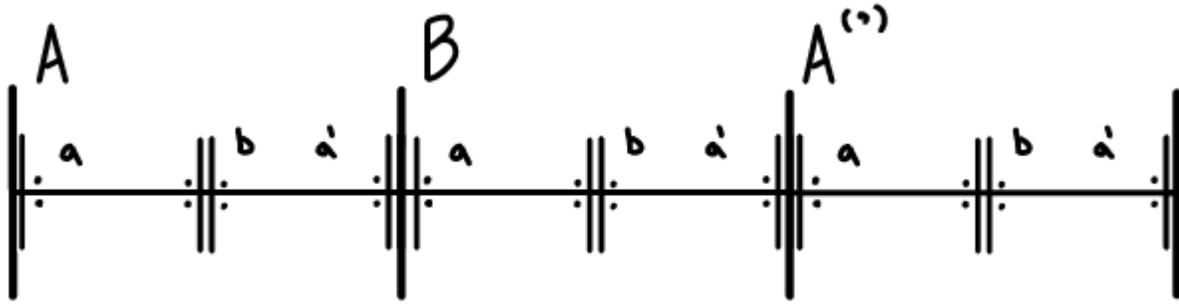
Compound ternary forms are *hierarchical*, meaning that one or more sections of the larger ABA structure will include a smaller embedded form (almost always a binary form, usually rounded (a|ba')). *Simple* ternary forms do not contain embedded forms.

Recall that *sectional* means that each section is *tonally closed*, meaning that each section begins and ends in the same key. The middle section may still change key in a sectional ternary. *Continuous* forms are the opposite: one or more sections will end with either a PAC in a different key than it began or a half-cadence. Compound forms are almost always *simple* because of the difficulty of ending a binary form in a different key.

Ternary forms have a much more flexible tonal plan than binary forms. “B” sections in ternary forms are open to all closely-related keys or the parallel mode of the “A” section, while binary forms are restricted to the dominant or relative major key. Of course, there are occasionally exceptions.

- Examples: R. Schumann, *Album for the Young* Op. 68 no. 3 (Simple Sectional Ternary)
C. Schumann, “Notturmo” from *Soirées musicales*, Op. 6 (Simple Continuous Ternary)

A typical compound ternary form with embedded rounded binary forms



Typical Genres in Ternary Form

Dance and Trio (Minuet and Trio, Scherzo and Trio, Polonaise and Trio, etc.)

The third movement of a symphony, string quartet, or four-movement sonata will often be a dance and trio. Usually, the second iteration of the dance is not written out, but instead the “da capo” instruction is given, meaning that the dance is repeated literally. These are usually compound ternary forms.

Examples: Mozart, Symphony no. 40, K. 550, iii (Compound Ternary with embedded binary forms)
Haydn, Keyboard Sonata, Hob. XVI/26, ii: *Minuetto al Rovescio* (listen to it backwards!)

Da Capo Aria

This form is very commonly seen in arias from Baroque operas or cantatas. Typically, the first section ends with a double bar followed by a contrasting “B” section (often with a different theme, new text, or even a *recitative* section). After the second section, the *da capo* instruction appears indicating that the performer should return to the “A” section, where is customary for singers to add their own ornaments. The “A” sections may include *ritornello* sections or instrumental introductions/codas.

Examples: Handel, “Non disperar” from *Giulio Cesare*
Bach, “Stumme Seufzer, Stille Klagen” from *Mein Herze schwimmt im Blut*, BWV 199

Nocturnes, Mazurkas, etc. (Esp. those by Chopin)

Many of the smaller romantic genres utilize ternary form. They may or may not include double bars as delineations of the form and are occasionally compound.

Example: Chopin, “Raindrop” Prelude in Db, Op. 28 no. 15 (Continuous Ternary, somewhat compound)

Baroque Dance Pairs

Baroque suites will often feature pairs of dances where the performer is expected to repeat the first dance. For example, after the second minuet in Bach’s first cello suite, the marking “*Minuetto I D.C. senza repetitione*” instructs the cellist to play the first minuet again without repeats.

Examples: Many pairs of Minuets, Gavottes, Bourrées, etc. in Baroque dance suites. Bach’s cello suites (BWV 1007–1012) are excellent examples.

European Marches

It is common for European marches to feature a Da Capo form as seen in the Dance and Trio genre.¹

Example: Holst, “March” from *Second Suite in F* (Compound Sectional Ternary)

“No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.”

¹ Note that American marches will have a different form that is better defined as ||: A :||: B :|| C (trio) ||: D | C :||