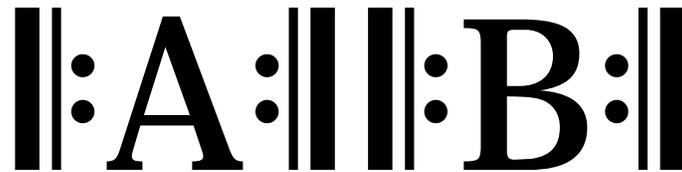


Binary Forms

Binary form is one of the most important and fundamental forms in western music. Many smaller pieces like baroque dances, shorter arias, instrumental sonatas, string quartets, and character pieces are commonly found in binary form. It is also 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.



In this course, we will focus mostly on two types of binary form (simple and rounded), though other kinds exist. All binary forms share some common characteristics...

1. The A and B themes will have different thematic content.
 - a. This is indicated by labeling the themes with an A and B. Other forms use the same pattern.
2. A and B sections are each repeated once.
 - a. Though repeats are occasionally written out, the repeat signs are most common and a great indicator that you are dealing with a binary form.
3. Themes in each section are usually tight-knit, either a period or a sentence.
4. Some binary forms are *hierarchical*, meaning that there will be two levels of hierarchy to consider. These will be delineated with capital and lowercase letters.

Simple Binary

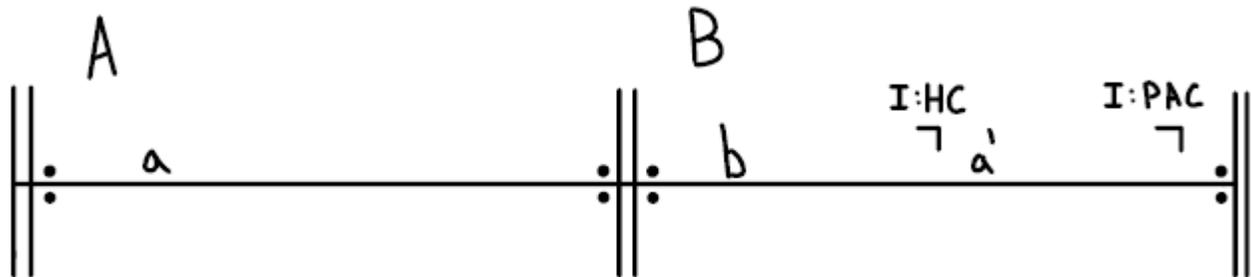
Simple Binary forms contain differing thematic material in both sections and are organized just as shown above. It is important to recognize that, even though the “B” section will likely contain no *direct* references to themes from the “A” section, the material may be in a similar style and/or the same 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 organized into larger two parts, but will contain three smaller sections within those two parts, as seen below. This form is *rounded* because material from the beginning of “A” section comes back at the end of the “B” section.



Notice that the larger “A” and smaller “a” section are congruent in this case. The “B” section, however, is in two distinct parts: “b” and “a-prime.” In the “B” section, contrasting thematic material, “b,” *digresses* from the preceding material before coming to a half-cadence, called an *interruption*. This half-cadence is followed by a shortened restatement of thematic material from “a,” usually called “a-prime.”

Notes about rounded binary form:

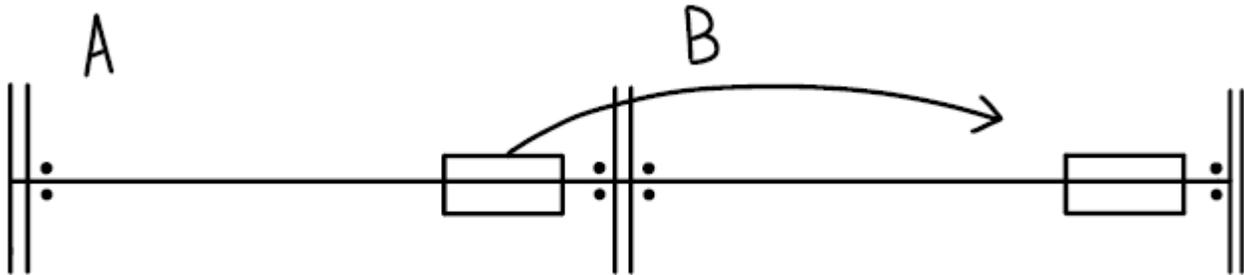
1. If the “a” theme is a period, often only the consequent phrase will be used.
2. The “b” section material will usually be *subordinate* to and linked to the “a prime” section somehow, setting it up both thematically and harmonically.
3. The “b” section typically has looser phrase designs than the “a” section; periods are not common in “b.”
4. Rounded binary forms will usually modulate at the end of “a” and return to tonic by the end of “b.”
5. Rounded binary is sometimes called *small ternary*.

Examples: Mozart, Theme from Sonata in D-major, K. 284, iii

Brahms, Theme from *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*, Op. 56

Balanced Binary

Simple and rounded binary forms might have an additional quality: they may also be *balanced*. The balanced binary brings back material from the end of the A section at the end of the B section. It is important to note that only material from the the end of the A section will return; often, it is simply a repeat of the cadential material. Do not confuse a balanced simple binary form with a rounded binary form.



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

Tonal Plans for Binary Forms

There are some important terms for binary concerning key plans for forms: *Sectional* and *Continuous*; these terms are used to describe most large forms. The tonal plan of a binary form essentially depends on what happens in the A section.

1. 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.
2. If the material in the A section ends with an HC in the original key of the piece, or with any cadence in a different key than the original key of the piece then the section is said to be *tonally open*, resulting in a *continuous* binary form.

Very often, binary forms **will** modulate at the end of the A section. Which key that the piece will modulate to is predictable.

1. Major mode binary forms will almost always modulate to the dominant (V).
2. Minor mode binary forms will commonly modulate to either the relative major (III) and less commonly to the minor dominant (v).

Other Considerations

1. Sections of a binary form are seldom not repeated, but this shouldn't distract you from recognizing two distinct themes or sections.
2. Binary forms are often symmetrical, meaning that A and B will often contain the same number of measures.
3. 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.
4. 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.