



**Week 14:**

**Building Sections**







Phrase 1

Phrase 2

Phrase 3

Phrase 4

Notice that phrase 2 begins like phrase 1 but changes melodic contour. Phrase 3 retains continuity with phrase 2 by beginning on the last two notes of the previous phrase and by using a descending contour to balance the previous phrase's ascending one. Phrase 4 rises to the unstable 2nd degree (the unstable 2nd degree also ended phrase 1 and phrase 2), which finally resolves to the tonic note at the end of the phrase.

**abab**

The *abab* structure is one of the most common found in popular song. It, too, builds a completely symmetric section. When we use the rhythmic structure of the (a) and (b) phrases previously exposed, a 16-measure section is created.

Ex.102 Rhythm Alone



Notice that the section does not close tonally at the first ending due to the unstable last note. The entire piece then repeats except for the last phrase (the second ending). There, it closes completely due to the ending on the tonic note.

**an asymmetric,  
balanced section:  
a a b b**

The *aabb* phrase order produces an asymmetric structure that has two rhythmic closures. The danger this presents is that the music may have a stop-and-go quality. This can be ameliorated by keeping the ends of phrases tonally open. If the last melodic pitch of a phrase is unstable, then that element alone will keep the section somewhat open.

Ex.103 *aabb*

Ex.103 is a musical example in 4/4 time illustrating an asymmetric *aabb* structure. It consists of two staves of music. The first staff shows the first two phrases, labeled 'a' and 'b'. The second staff shows the second two phrases, also labeled 'a' and 'b'. The first 'a' phrase ends with an unstable note, while the second 'a' phrase ends with a stable note. Similarly, the first 'b' phrase ends with a stable note, while the second 'b' phrase ends with an unstable note. The labels 'unstable' and 'stable' are placed above the final notes of each phrase to indicate their tonal quality.

The example now appears with its fourth phrase rewritten. Notice that complete closure is ensured by placing the tonic as the final note.

Ex.104

Ex.104 is a musical example in 4/4 time, identical to Ex.103, but with the fourth phrase (the second 'b' phrase) rewritten. In this version, the fourth phrase ends with a stable note, ensuring complete closure. The labels 'unstable' and 'stable' are placed above the final notes of each phrase to indicate their tonal quality.



**building a balanced but not perfectly symmetric section:**  
**a a b a**

A section made up of a group of phrases in an *aba* order does not set up strong expectations. The second (a) phrase balances the first, fragmenting the section. When the (b) occurs, the listener realizes something new has arrived but doesn't know what is to follow (since no expectations have been set up), so that when (a) returns in the balancing position, the closure sounds quite natural.

Ex.105

Ex.105 shows two staves of music in 4/4 time. The first staff contains two phrases, each marked with a circled 'a'. The second staff contains a phrase marked with a circled 'b' followed by a phrase marked with a circled 'a'.

**a b a a**

An *abaa* ordering of a section is more demanding of a listener's expectations than the previous example. After hearing (a) (b) followed by (a), the listener expects to hear another (b). When another (a) occurs, the listener's expectations are thwarted. The last (a) does, however, effectively close the section, since it is the fourth phrase and balances the previous (a). The closure is, therefore, deceptive. Deceptive closures (whether rhythmic or tonal) are one of the best ways in which songwriters, lyricists, and composers create interest and, possibly, delight our listeners.

Ex.106

Ex.106 shows two staves of music in 4/4 time. The first staff contains a phrase marked with a circled 'a' followed by a phrase marked with a circled 'b'. The second staff contains a phrase marked with a circled 'a' followed by a phrase marked with a circled 'a'.

**a a a b**

An *aaab* ordering of the phrases is balanced but obviously asymmetric. As my ditty indicates, it focuses the listener's attention on the last line. Notice that the matched rhythms and rhymes of the first three phrases focus even more attention on the last phrase (which neither matches nor rhymes). This structure is especially effective when writing a verse/refrain form with the refrain at the end of the verse or when writing a chorus with the title at the end of the chorus. A fine example of this strategy is found in Diane Warren's song, "Because You Loved Me," pages 48-49.



Ex.107

I've tried to keep this tune — mel - od - ic. —

It's hard - ly what you'd call — rhap - sod - ic. — It's not in - spired but it's — meth -

od - ic, — de - signed to em - pha - size a ti - tle or re - frain. —

**open or closed?**

After hearing the last example, you may feel that although the order of the phrases is asymmetric, the total effect of this section is closed. Let's look more closely at the compositional variables to analyze what is tending to close the section and what is tending to keep the section open:

1. The number of phrases: Symmetrical
2. Phrase lengths: Constant
3. Rhythm of the phrases: Constant
4. The order of the phrases: Asymmetrical
5. Cadential melodic pitch: Stable

We now can comprehend why the section sounds somewhat closed. It is only the order of the phrases that keeps the section slightly open and somewhat interesting (possibly interesting enough to allow the entire section to repeat).

**creating open sections**

Sections of songs meant to lead to the central idea, for instance, a verse or transitional bridge leading to either a chorus or refrain, tend to be somewhat open. That does not mean all the compositional variables must be open. In fact, many songs contain verses that are symmetric and closed in all but the melodic and harmonic instability of the last cadence before the central idea. (See Ex.10.8 containing an *abab* order.)

Ex.108

C Em F F/G Dm Em G/A A7

Dm Dm/C Dm/B Am C7/G C7 Dm Am/E F F#°7 Dm/G



## unbalancing a section

Unbalancing a section creates a sense of movement and tension that seeks resolution. It is an especially useful device to employ when writing verse sections or transitional bridge sections—sections whose main function is to lead to the central idea.

It is possible to unbalance a section in any number of ways. The means demonstrated in Ex. 10.9 are just some of the ways this can be done.

1. Shortening the last phrase (unbalancing the number of measures per phrase), thereby causing an acceleration into the next section (see first and second endings). Compositional variable used to unbalance section: *length of the phrases*.
2. Lengthening the last phrase (unbalancing the number of measures per phrase), thereby decelerating the momentum. This deceleration frustrates the listener's expectations, causing him to focus on the next section (see third and fourth endings). Compositional variable used to unbalance section: *length of the phrases*.
3. Adding a phrase and, in addition, shortening the last phrase to cause an acceleration into the next section (see fifth ending). Compositional variables used to unbalance section: *number of phrases and length of the phrases*.

Notice that (1) the order of the sections is not symmetric (the fourth ending does yield an *abab* order, but the added two beats of rest effectively unbalance the structure), and (2) each section ends on an unstable pitch, which, of course, helps the section to be open.

Ex. 10.9

Ex. 10.9 illustrates five different ways to unbalance a section, shown in 4/4 time. The notation is as follows:

- 1.** A phrase (a) of 8 measures is followed by a rest (b) of 2 measures. The phrase ends on an unstable pitch.
- 2.** A phrase (a) of 8 measures is followed by a phrase (c) of 4 measures. The phrase ends on an unstable pitch. An arrow points to "chorus".
- 3.** A phrase (c) of 4 measures is followed by a phrase (c) of 4 measures. The phrase ends on an unstable pitch. An arrow points to "chorus".
- 4.** A phrase (c) of 4 measures is followed by a phrase (c) of 4 measures. The phrase ends on an unstable pitch. An arrow points to "chorus".
- 5.** A phrase (c) of 4 measures is followed by a phrase (c) of 4 measures. The phrase ends on an unstable pitch. An arrow points to "chorus".



4.

5.

**creating interesting balanced sections**

Most *A* sections in *AABA* songs and most *chorus* sections in verse/chorus songs contain the central idea of the song. (See Chapter Twelve for definitions of these song forms.) Unlike verse or transitional bridge sections in verse/chorus songs, whose purpose is to lead to the central idea, sections that contain the central idea (often the title) are summational or declarative. Because of this, these sections tend to be balanced. There are, however, many additional ways of building sections that may be imperfect in their symmetry but that still produce a sense of balance within the section.

The possibilities for creating an interesting balanced section are as infinite as one's imagination. The following examples are possible balanced sections, not models that must be stringently adhered to.

Ex. 1010 *abcca*

Retaining the initial musical idea established by the first phrase, I then create a second phrase, (b), which retains the exact pitch of the (a) phrase for its first measure but extends into the upbeat of three in its second measure. The following two (c) phrases are also derived from the initial idea, which is now truncated, reducing each phrase to one measure. This phrasal acceleration produces tension and focuses attention on the last phrase. The last phrase provides release in two ways: by returning to a two-bar structure and by concluding on the tonic note.

This section is not symmetrical (the order of the phrases is asymmetrical; the number of phrases is asymmetrical), but it is balanced. Each phrase or phrase grouping has a phrase or phrase grouping that balances it: (a) (two measures) is balanced by (b) (two measures) and the two (c) phrases (one measure each) are balanced by the final (a) (two measures) phrase.



A balanced section with these characteristics can be very useful. Consider that the (a) phrases could easily contain the title, placing it both as the first and the last thing heard in the chorus. The end rhymes (i.e., *unfold, old*) of the (c) phrases heighten the tension caused by phrasal acceleration and further help focus attention on the last phrase.

Ex.1011

I'll al - ways re - mem - ber to - day 'cause you made it spe - cial in ev - 'ry way. As  
our lives un - fold this day won't grow old. I'll al - ways re - mem - ber to - day.

**aba/aba** The following example is another attempt to create a longer balanced section. The first part of the section consists of three phrases, (a) (b) (a'). Each of the phrases is two measures long. They are followed by a matched set of phrases, (a) (b) (a'), which effectively closes the section. This section, you may have noticed, is 12 measures in length rather than the usual eight.

Ex.1012

(a) (b) (a') (a) (b) (a')