



Week 2:
**Song Forms
& Licensing
Instrumental Music**

Chapter 12

Form

The control and perception of form in any music involves recognition of two basic musical activities—repetition (or similarity) and change (or contrast)—plus an activity that combines these two. This latter activity is referred to as “development” and provides contrast within similarity. In this grey area, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish and designate one section from another. Some of the factors that help us differentiate one section from another are as follows:

1. Closure: either phrasal, rhythmic, melodic, or harmonic. (The degree of closure is directly related to the number of elements closing simultaneously)
2. The treatment of the tonality (e.g., diatonic vs. chromatic).
3. The length of the phrases.
4. The rhythm of the phrases.
5. The melodic contour.
6. The tessitura* and/or range.

Play and/or sing the following song. Notice where the song sectionalizes and what elements are causing the second section to sound different from the first section.

Ex.12.1

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C Am7 Dm7

1. G7sus4 G7 G7sus4 C Fine

2.

E7#5 F D7 G7 E7

Am F F/G Fm/G D.C. al Fine (take 2nd ending)

*Tessitura means the position of pitches within the melodic range (low, medium, high).

In the previous example, the listener expects a change to occur after the second ending (measure 16). This is caused by a number of elements in the music concluding or closing at this point:

1. The phrase structure. The phrase structure becomes completely symmetric at measure 16.
2. The tonality. The melody concludes on the tonic note; the harmony concludes on the tonic chord.

The section of music that follows does not greatly contrast with the previous section in all its elements. To be more specific, the melodic rhythm of the song remains pretty much the same throughout and the phrase lengths are mainly two measures long. What, then, does contrast?

1. The treatment of the tonality in this new section is quite different from that in the previous section. The harmony, which for 16 measures had remained diatonic, suddenly becomes chromatic. The first section states the tonality by both beginning and ending with the tonic chord. The second section avoids the tonal center by using secondary dominant chords and by never stating the tonic chord.
2. Another more subtle change is the melodic contour and range of the melody. In the first section, the melody does not move too far from the notes of the opening phrase, the tessitura of the section occurring in the medium-low to medium range. In the second section, the melody rises gradually over a number of measures to the highest notes of the song and then gradually falls, encompassing more than an octave within its nine measures.
3. An added measure at the end of the second section produces a welcome asymmetry that helps propel this section back to the beginning of the song and provides a healthy contrast to the predominantly two-bar phrase structure.

song forms The forms found in popular songs are generally simple. Most popular songs last three to four minutes and contain sections that repeat. The number of sections vary from one to four.

the central statement Common to most popular songs, no matter what specific form they take, is the goal area, which we refer to as the central statement or central idea. The central statement can be the title, the refrain, the hook (a term that generally means an extremely memorable melodic/lyric phrase [usually the title]) or simply an area of the song that contains very important lyric and musical content.

Song form can be conceived and analyzed as either *leading to* the central statement or as being *derived from* the central statement.

song sections:
the verse The verse is the section of the song that spins out the story, that furthers the action. The lyric of the verse is composed of a series of lines arranged in a recurring pattern. The number of lines, the meter, and rhyme scheme of the lyric in a verse, once stated, is fixed; only the content is changed. The music of the verse, once stated, remains fixed.

the refrain The refrain of a song is the central idea, either the title or a line containing the title, or a very important lyric that occurs as part of each verse. Although a refrain can begin a verse, it more commonly ends each verse (or ends a series of verses). The refrain is *not* a separate section of a song; it is always part of the verse.

Note: the term *refrain* was and still is used in some published music to mean what we call the chorus. All songwriting courses at the Berklee College of Music and most contemporary music publishers use the term as we have defined it.

the chorus The chorus of a verse/chorus song is a section of the song that usually contains the central statement (title or hook). This section repeats *both* words and music.

the bridge The term itself implies a section that connects two other sections. This, in fact, is the main purpose of any bridge. It may also have other functions, for example, to provide contrast or to modulate. The term “bridge,” without any prefix, refers to a section of a song that occurs *after* the central statement, for instance, after a refrain or after the *AA* section in a “standard” form *AABA* song (the *B* section of a standard form *AABA* song is the bridge).

transitional bridge A transitional bridge is a linking section, usually between verse and chorus. Its function is to lead up to or build up a momentum to the chorus. Sometimes the transitional bridge is followed by a refrain instead of a chorus, but its function remains the same. The transitional bridge is always found before the central statement.

Note: the term *transitional bridge* is a Berklee College of Music term coined because no adequate name existed for this section of a song. Sheila Davis, in her book *The Craft of Lyric Writing*, calls this same section the “climb”; others refer to it as the “pre-chorus” or “pre-hook.”

primary bridge A primary bridge is found in verse/chorus songs after the chorus section and, most usually, after the second chorus has been stated. It provides contrast or relief from previously heard sections and prepares a return (sometimes with a modulation) to either the verse or chorus.

Note: the term *primary bridge* is a Berklee College of Music term coined to differentiate it from the term *transitional bridge*.

frequently encountered song forms

The following forms are those most often encountered in popular songs. The list is neither totally inclusive nor conclusive. As I've tried to indicate, *form is often a result of continual compositional decisions, rather than a predetermined pattern by which you are forced to mold your song.* It is wise, however, to be aware of the most common forms, especially if you are aiming your songs at the commercial song marketplace. Common forms are useful. Ultimately, it is what you put in them that counts. Keep in mind that it is the taste of the wine that matters; after all, most wine bottles have the same shape!

Most commonly found in folk music, the AAA form is simply one in which the music, once stated, is repeated again and again, each time with a different set of lyrics.

AAA

||: **verse** :|| (number of repeats determined by lyric considerations)

Verse/refrain

||: **verse/refrain** :|| (repeats determined by lyric considerations)

Verse/refrain with bridge

|| **verse/refrain** | **verse/refrain** || **bridge** || **verse/refrain** ||

Verse/chorus

||: **verse** | **chorus** :||

Verse; transitional bridge, chorus

||: **verse** | **transitional bridge** | **chorus** :||

Verse, chorus with primary bridge

|| **verse** | **chorus** || **verse** | **chorus** || **primary bridge** ||: **chorus** :||

Verse, chorus with both transitional and primary bridges

||: **verse** | **transitional bridge** | **chorus** :|| **primary bridge** ||: **chorus** :||

the "standards" song form

The "standards" type of song, written mainly between 1920 and 1950, is still the mainstay of theater songwriting. The focus of this form is placed on the chorus because the dramatic action on stage usually doesn't require a verse to tell the story; instead, the writers usually need a section of music to move from dialogue into full-blown song. This is provided by an introductory verse.

the introductory verse

An introductory verse is usually stated only once and functions as an introduction to the main body of the song, the chorus. The length and form of the introductory verse vary greatly and are dependent upon each individual dramatic situation.

the chorus

The chorus of the “standards” type of song is the *whole song* divorced from its introductory verse. There are a number of formats that this “standards” type usually utilizes. The most frequent is the *AABA* in which the first section *A*, containing the central statement, is repeated and followed by a contrasting section *B* known as the bridge (also referred to as the “release”), which then returns to the first section *A*. The *A* section usually contains the title, which appears either at the beginning or at the end of it.*

Another format for the chorus of a “standards” type of song is the *ABAB^I* or *ABAC* a form that is characterized by the lack of a complete closure of the *A* section, with the climax of the song usually occurring in the *B^I* or *C* section. The *ABAB^I* is similar to the *ABAC*. When the *B* section is repeated, it is usually slightly altered to make a suitable ending.

The lack of a complete closure of the *A* section causes this form to be heard in two large sections: || *A B* | *A B^I* (or *C*) ||. *B* and *B^I* or *C* aren't meant to contrast drastically with the *A* section and *do not* function as a *bridge*; rather, they are meant to add variety, usually by developing materials already presented in the *A* section.

The 32-measure “standards” chorus tends to be balanced, especially in the number of measures in each section. If the *A* section in an *AABA* chorus is eight measures long, then it and its repetition yield 16 measures. If the *B* section is also eight measures long and is followed by the last *A* section (another eight measures), then these last two sections (16 measures) perfectly balance the first two sections. The *ABAC* or *ABAB^I* choruses also tend to be balanced because the *B* section (or *B^I* or *C* sections) are usually the same number of measures as the *A* section.

Note that although most songs written in the era of the “standards” song form were 32 measures long, many exceptions exist. Composers such as Cole Porter, Harold Arlen, Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim stretched choruses well beyond 32 measures

the concept of open and closed and its relationship to form

One of the most interesting aspects of composing a song is the control of how open or closed a section is to be. Not all elements need be uniformly closed in order for a section to sound or feel closed, nor do all the elements need to be uniformly open for a section to sound or feel open. One variable (e.g., a symmetric phrase structure forming a fragmented section) may imply stopping, while another variable (e.g., the harmonic cadence is a half cadence) may imply movement. It is the mixing and matching of the many possibilities involved in combining the compositional variables that determine its exact effect on the form and ultimately on the listener.

The following comments that deal with the effect of a section of music ending open or closed must be understood in light of the previous paragraph. In other words, the following consists of generalities (the specifics of each individual song are full of subtleties) that you may find helpful as you grapple with the study of form.

* A simple example of an *AABA* chorus is found in Ex. 12.1.

verse/refrain In a verse/refrain song, with the refrain in the end position, the verse remains open until the refrain closes the section. It is this closure that causes the listener to rightly hear a verse/refrain song as a one section song.

|| **verse—open** **refrain—closed** ||

verse/chorus Most verse/chorus songs have verses that end open and lead to the chorus.

|| **verse—open** | **chorus—closed** ||

bridge sections Most bridge sections end open. The *B* (bridge section) of an *AABA* song leads back to the last *A*.

|| **A** | **A** | **B—open** | **A** ||

The transitional bridge of a verse/transitional bridge/chorus song leads to the chorus and, therefore, tends to be open.

|| **verse** | **transitional bridge—open** | **chorus** ||

The primary bridge, found in verse/chorus songs, either leads back to a verse or, more usually, leads to the final chorus and, therefore, tends to be open.

|| : **verse** | **chorus** : || **primary bridge—open** || **chorus** : ||

assignment *Choose a song to study in depth. You will need a recording and sheet music or—better by far—transcribe the song in the form of a lead sheet.*

Ask yourself the following:

1. *Do I perceive the song in sections? If so, what is causing me to differentiate one section from another?*
2. *How closed or open is each section? What compositional variables are determining the effect?*
3. *If I do not hear the song in sections, what techniques have been employed to cause the song to retain interest, to retain coherence, to establish contrast?*

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