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Introduction to music theory 1: form

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About this free course

This free course is an adapted extract from the Open University course A234, *Understanding Music* .

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Contents

Introduction

This free course explores **form**, or how music is organised in time. You will look at form in **popular music** and jazz from the United States, dance music from the Democratic Republic of Congo, North American Indigenous song, and Hindustani classical music. You will explore how form is represented through the use of specialist terms (such as ‘verse’ and ‘chorus’) and alphabetic designations (for example, AABA). You will also learn to hear and represent form yourself.

This is the first in a planned sequence of courses that draws on material created by Byron Dueck, Alex Kolassa, and Helen Coffey for the Open University module A234 *Understanding Music*. You do not need to play an instrument or read music to start these courses, but you will gradually learn to read staff notation and to play notes on a piano keyboard as you move through them. Each course builds on previous ones, so it is best to study them in order, unless you are already comfortable reading music.

The courses introduce you to Western staff notation and the building blocks of what is sometimes called Western common practice music, including scales and chords in major and minor keys. At the same time – since these elements account for only a small part of the music in the world – each unit also introduces structures and concepts from beyond Western common practice. The division is around 50/50 across the courses. The goal is to teach you the basics of one musical language while introducing you to aspects of many others.

As you progress through each course, you will be asked to clap and sing musical patterns and play these on an instrument if you have one. You will listen to various styles of music. If possible, try to listen using headphones or good quality speakers, rather than (for example) the speakers on a laptop or portable phone, since some sounds may otherwise be inaudible.

You will also listen to the lyrics of songs. In many cases, only short extracts are reproduced from these lyrics for reasons of copyright. If you find it difficult to follow the teaching without the complete set of lyrics, you may wish to try to find the words online.

This OpenLearn course is the first in a planned sequence of music theory courses. It is an adapted extract from the Open University course A234 *Understanding Music*.

Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand musical form as constituted through musical repetition, variation, and contrast
- perceive the unfolding of musical form in recordings of several styles of music
- understand how form can be represented using alphabetic designations and style-specific terminology
- use these designations and terms to describe musical form.

1 Indicators of form

Form in music – also called **structure** – is its patterning over time. It is most easily heard in terms of **repetition** and **contrast**. Put another way, you perceive form when you recognise you are hearing something you have heard before (repetition) or when you recognise you are hearing something new (contrast).

One common indicator of form across many kinds of vocal music is the difference between **verse**s and **chorus**es. In a typical example of a pop song from the West, the verses all share the same **melody** and the choruses all share the same melody, but the verses have a different melody from the choruses. Songs are frequently arranged in a pattern in which verses alternate with choruses; for example, as verse–chorus–verse–-chorus. Repetition and contrast both play key roles in such forms. For example, melodic repetition from verse to verse is interrupted by melodic contrast from verse to chorus.

Overlaid on this pattern of repetition and contrast is another layer of patterning involving the words of the song. The verses of a song have different lyrics from one another, but the choruses share the same (or very similar) words. As you listen to a song, you can identify the choruses because the words *and* the music repeat.

Activity 1 Listening to ‘In My Lonely Room’

Allow around 10 minutes

Listen to Audio 1, which is a recording of Martha Reeves and the Vandellas performing ‘In My Lonely Room’. Open the recording in a separate tab/window (click on the link and hold down Ctrl (or Cmd on a Mac)) so you can return here easily. Listen to the song two or three times, while following along with the lyrics and track times in Table 1 below. (You will need to hover over the playback bar to see the track time.)

Notice how:

- the two verses have similar melodies
- the choruses have similar melodies
- the two verses have different lyrics
- the choruses have the same lyrics.

Table 1: Form of ‘In My Lonely Room’ by Martha Reeves and the Vandellas

Section of song	Track time	Lyrics
Introduction	00:00	—
Verse 1	00:23	Every single time...
Chorus	00:47	But in my lonely room...
Interlude	01:11	—
Verse 2	01:23	Every place we go...
Chorus	01:47	But in my lonely room...

Discussion

You should have been able to hear the similarities and differences. If you had difficulty doing so, try listening again, either now or a little later on this week. You might also try to sing along with the words 'But in my lonely room ...' at the beginning of the two choruses so that you can feel the similarities between the melodies in your own voice at these points.

You may have noticed that Table 1 lists not only verses and choruses, but also two parts of the song without singing – an **introduction** at the beginning and an instrumental **interlude** in the middle. These parts of the form appear frequently in popular songs such as this one.

1.1 Repetition, contrast and variation

The relationships of repetition and contrast in verse–chorus forms are summarised in Figure 1. Verses and choruses have different melodies from one another, as shown in Figure 1 by the use of different colours. Words change from verse to verse but not from chorus to chorus, which is visually demonstrated by the darker box at the intersection of verses/words.

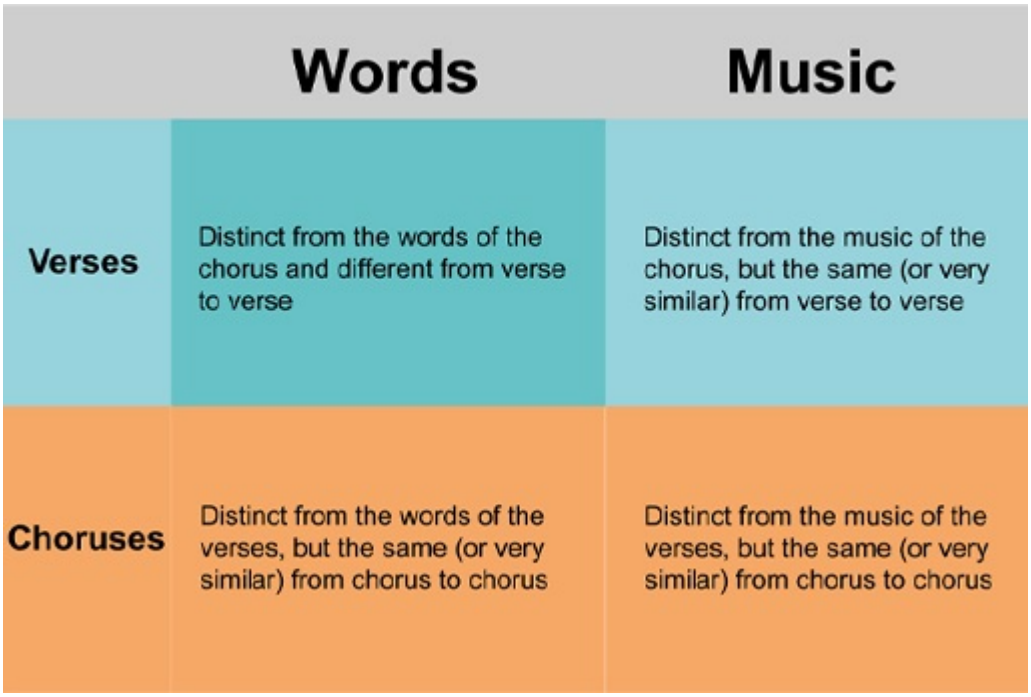

Figure 1 Distinguishing verses and choruses

As Figure 1 suggests, certain *kinds* of sameness or difference matter more than others when determining the form of a piece of music: in Western pop music, it is often the words and whether these are repeated. Part of getting familiar with music involves learning which similarities and differences help convey a sense of form.

In listening through 'In My Lonely Room' a number of times, you may have noticed subtle differences between the melodies of Verse 1 and Verse 2, and especially between the two

choruses. In fact, the first and second choruses start the same but end differently (not least because of the fadeout of the second chorus).

This brings us to a third way that music is patterned in time: through **variation**, or change in *how* something is repeated. Variation can be understood to exist on a continuum between repetition and contrast, as shown in Figure 2. Variation is a kind of contrasting repetition – what you heard before, but different.

Figure 2 The continuum between repetition and contrast

2 Perceiving song form

The terms ‘verse’ and ‘chorus’ identify two common elements of Western song form that would otherwise take many words to explain. One goal of theories of music is to provide musicians and listeners with terms and symbols that allow them to communicate efficiently about music. Often, this means using specialist terminology – including words such as ‘verse’ and ‘chorus’.

Not all the songs in the world are divided up into verses and choruses. There are many music cultures in the world, many kinds of songs, many song forms, and many sets of specialist or insider terminology to describe them. As this course continues, you will encounter a range of musical styles, as well as a range of terms used to describe their forms.

The specialist terms discussed so far refer not only to musical sound, but also to other kinds of musical conventions. For example, in pop songs, verses often emphasise the words, while choruses emphasise the music. Similarly, verses tend to prioritise the narrative aspects of the song (its story) and choruses the emotion. It is not uncommon to find words repeated during choruses, as well as the use of **vocables** (words without a fixed meaning: for example, ‘tra la la’). Choruses also tend to contain a song’s most memorable and engaging musical material.

In the next activity, you will try to identify verses and choruses in a new song.

Activity 2 Listening to ‘I’ll Be Around’

Allow around 10 minutes

Part 1

Listen to the first two minutes of Audio 2 and identify where the verses and choruses begin. Enter the track times and a few of the lyrics from the beginning of each relevant section in the text boxes provided in Table 2 below. A few of the lines have already been completed for you.

Note that this song form employs a slightly more complicated version of the verse-chorus alternation you saw in the previous song. There are two verses, then a chorus, two more verses, and then a chorus. As you get familiar with any musical form, it soon becomes apparent that musicians regularly find ways to make it more complex and interesting.

Table 2: Form of ‘I’ll Be Around’ by the Spinners

Section of song	Track time	Lyrics
Introduction	00:00	—
Verse 1	00:19	This is our fork...
Verse 2	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*
Chorus	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*

Verse 3	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*
Verse 4	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*
Chorus	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*
Interlude	02:01	—

Discussion

A completed table is shown below, which includes additional information.

Table 2 (completed): Form of 'I'll Be Around' by the Spinners

Section of song	Track time	Lyrics
Introduction	00:00	—
Verse 1	00:19	This is our fork ...
Verse 2	00:34	You made your choice ...
Chorus	00:51	Whenever you call me ...
Verse 3	01:09	I knew just ...
Verse 4	01:25	There's always ...
Chorus	01:42	Whenever you call me ...
Interlude	02:01	—
Chorus	02:16	Whenever you call me ...
Chorus	02:33	Whenever you call me .../Just call me ...
Chorus	02:51	Whenever you call me .../I'll be skipping ...

Part 2

The completed Table 2 also contains an analysis of the end of the song. Have a look at the table and notice how, after the instrumental interlude at 02:01, the chorus is repeated three more times in succession, sometimes with slightly different words. This is not unusual: pop songs typically begin with an orderly alternation of verses and choruses, but have a freer structure after the halfway point. The musicians may bring back early verses, repeat sections multiple times, or change the lyrics of supposedly fixed sections, such as the chorus.

Listen again to Audio 2. Pay attention to the material from 02:01 to the end of the song while following along with Table 2 above.

3 Further examples of specialist terminology

There are many kinds of songs that contain elements beyond those designated by terms such as ‘verse’ and ‘chorus’, as you will discover in the following discussion of **Congolese rumba**. Congolese rumba is a form of dance music popular in the Democratic Republic of Congo (the DROC; see Figure 3). It shares its name with an Afro-Cuban genre of music and dance and emerged in the wake of the global circulation of recordings of Afro-Cuban rumba (White, 2002; 2008). However, Congolese rumba is distinct in many ways from its Cuban namesake.

Figure 3 Map showing Democratic Republic of Congo

Congolese rumba songs have many elements in common with the US pop music you considered in the earlier sections; for example, many rumba songs have structural divisions similar to verses and choruses (White, 2008, pp. 54–5). At the same time, Congolese rumba has since the 1970s employed a distinctive formal element with its own specialist term: the **seben**. Songs that incorporate the seben typically begin with sections similar to, if not exactly like, the verses and choruses discussed earlier. But when the seben arrives, a few minutes into the song, the music changes, often becoming faster and almost always more danceable. The seben continues until the end of the song, frequently lasting longer than the preceding sections combined.

The seben typically incorporates exhortations to dance and calls out to existing or potential financial sponsors (it is often necessary to have the support of wealthy patrons in order to make a living as a musician in the DROC) (White, 2008, p. 171). These are spoken or sung by an **atalaku**, a vocalist who takes over from the lead singer during this part of the song (White, 2008). In addition to the atalaku, the seben typically features soaring guitar melodies and a repeated rhythm closely associated with the style (you will revisit this rhythm in a later course in this series).

Activity 3 Listening to ‘Perdu de vue (Aguisha)’

Allow around 10 minutes

The song in Audio 3 is ‘Perdu de vue (Aguisha)’ by Papa Wemba and Viva la Musica, a well-known Congolese ensemble. As Table 3 below shows, the song consists of three distinct sections. The start time for the first two sections is given.

Read the descriptions of the sections in the ‘Notes’ column of Table 3 and then try to determine when the third section of the song, the seben, begins. Enter the track time in the text box provided in the table.

Table 3: Structure of ‘Perdu de vue (Aguisha)’ by Papa Wemba and Viva la Musica

Part of song	Track time	Notes
First section	00:00	The lead singer (Papa Wemba) is heard prominently during this part of the song, which is sedate in comparison to later ones.
Second section	01:21	The rhythm changes at the beginning of this section, which is more animated than the preceding one. We still hear the lead singer, but he now sings in alternation with a group of backing singers, who take on a more prominent role as the section progresses.
Seben	*Provide your answer...*	The rhythm changes significantly at the beginning of this section, which is more animated still than the preceding one. There are prominent guitar melodies, and new vocalists take over, typically speaking but occasionally singing.

Discussion

The seben begins at 02:49. You should have been able to perceive the start of it. If not, listen to the recording a few more times, keeping an eye on the track time and listening for the changes identified in Table 3 above.

4 Powwow song

Specialist terms are also used by the musicians and dancers who perform at **powwows** – First Nations/Native American gatherings where participants in regalia dance to songs performed by singing groups seated around large round drums (see Figure 4). 'First Nations' and 'Native American' refer to the Indigenous people of North America. Powwows vary from small community celebrations to immense multi-day gatherings that bring together tens of thousands of people.

Powwows are held across North America, and the dancing and singing at them vary in ways both obvious and subtle, depending in part on the region and the host Indigenous community (see Browner, 2002; 2009). There are generally enough similarities between events, however, that a capable dancer or singer could participate in many different ones each year.

Figure 4 Drum group performing at International Peace Powwow in Lethbridge, Canada

You can hear an example of a **powwow song** in Audio 4. It is performed by Red Bull, a Cree drum group led by Edmond Bull, many of whose members are from the community of Little Pine Cree Nation (Saskatchewan, Canada). Red Bull sing in the northern style, whose characteristics include a tense vocal sound and the use of the highest part of the voice.

Powwow songs are usually sung four times through. Each of these iterations is called a **push-up**. At the beginning of each push-up, a solo singer called the **lead** sings a section that is also called the lead (Scales, 2012, p. 82; Perea, 2014, p. 32). Next, the rest of the group, called the **seconds**, joins in, echoing and extending the lead, and this is followed by what is sometimes called the **body** of the song (Scales, 2012, p. 82). As a push-up is coming to an end, the singers frequently play a series of louder drum strokes called **honour beats**, check beats, or hard beats (Scales, 2012, p. 83; Perea, 2014, pp. 32–3). Northern-style songs begin in the highest part of the singers' range and then descend, such that at the end of a push-up the singers are singing much lower than at the start.

Activity 4 Listening to 'Grass Dance'

Allow around 15 minutes

The song in Audio 4 is a grass dance song, one of the most common kinds of songs heard at powwows. It follows the form outlined in in Table 4. The table shows the four push-ups, each of which is numbered, as well as the subsections.

Listen to the song three or four times while following along with Table 4 below, until you can perceive the sequence of push-ups without the help of the table.

If you are not previously familiar with this kind of song, you may initially find it difficult to follow the form – in part because the singers sing vocables rather than words, as in many powwow songs. Nevertheless, following the form is relatively straightforward once you know what to listen for, and dancers become so familiar with the form that they are able to dance competently to songs they have never heard before.

Table 4: Structure of ‘Grass Dance’ by Red Bull

Push-up	Track time	Subsections	Notes
	00:04	Lead starts	
1	00:11	Seconds start	
	00:21–01:01	Body	Honour beats at 00:49–00:54
	01:01	Lead starts	
	01:08	Seconds start	
2			
	01:17–01:57	Body	Honour beats at 01:43–01:50. At 01:55 the drums start playing louder; this continues for the rest of the song
	01:56	Lead starts	This push-up speeds up noticeably
3	02:02	Seconds start	
	02:11–02:48	Body	
	02:47	Lead starts	This push-up also speeds up
4	02:53	Seconds start	
	03:01–03:37	Body	

Discussion

You should have been able to hear the structure of the push-ups, and perhaps even begin to predict when a new push-up was about to start. This kind of formal awareness is important for dancers, who keep track of the number of push-ups so that they are prepared for the end of the song. They are expected to stop dancing on the final drumbeat of the final push-up, even in the case of a song they have not heard before.

As the notes in Table 4 suggest, drum groups often vary aspects of the song from push-up to push-up to make the performance dynamic (Scales, 2012, p. 83). Moving from the second push-up into the third and fourth, the group starts drumming more loudly; the third and fourth push-ups also speed up. This is an example of variation: a repetition containing aspects of contrast.

You may have noticed while listening that some parts of the form begin before the previous ones have finished. For example, the body of push-up 2 finishes at 01:57, but the lead of the subsequent push-up begins just before this, at 1:56. The first singer often starts a new push-up just as the others are finishing the old one, thereby binding the sections together. This is an example of **elision**, in which one part of the form overlaps with another.

5 Song in Hindustani classical vocal music

Song takes many forms and is incorporated within many others, including in certain genres of Hindustani classical vocal music, a tradition that has emerged over centuries in the northern part of South Asia. Song plays a central role in Hindustani **classical music**, although it may comprise relatively little of what a singer actually sings in the course of performance.

This may seem confusing initially – what else, other than song, would a singer sing? Well, in many performances of Hindustani classical vocal music, singers spend part or most of the time **improvising** rather than singing a pre-existing song. Improvising might be understood as making up music in the course of performance, typically within the constraints of a particular tradition. Rather than a set text, an improvising singer may sing a variety of abstract syllables.

A note on diacritics and pronunciation

A number of diacritics (special marks above or below letters) are used when presenting musical terms from Hindustani classical music. A line over an ‘a’, as in ‘khayāl’, indicates that the vowel is to be pronounced as in the English word ‘father’. A line over a ‘u’ or over an ‘i’, as in ‘tanpūra’ or ‘sthāyī’, respectively, indicates that the vowel is given a longer duration. A mark over an ‘s’, as in ‘bandiś’, indicates that the letter is to be pronounced as ‘sh’.

Note that when this course quotes from an external source, that source’s preferred way of representing the sounds of the language is maintained. For example, some sources use ‘aa’ instead of ‘ā’.

There are several **genre**s or styles of Hindustani classical vocal music, including dhrupad, khayāl, and thumrii; this course will focus on **khayāl**. A performance of khayāl begins with a section called the **ālāp**, in which the singer improvises in a rhythmically free style, accompanied by sustained tones played on an instrument called the **tanpūrā** (Bor, 1999, p. 5). Occasionally, another instrument such as a **harmonium** (a kind of keyboard instrument that produces sound with the help of a bellows in the manner of an accordion), shadows what the singer performs, playing something the same as or very similar to what is sung.

After the improvised opening, the singer launches into a new section featuring the **bandiś**, a previously composed song, (Rao and van der Meer, 2013). The shift to this new part of the form is recognisable in two ways. First, the singer begins to sing words rather than vocables. Second, the singer is joined by a percussionist. In khayāl, the percussionist plays a pair of bowl-shaped drums called a **tablā** (see Figure 5). The percussionist helps establish a strictly regulated rhythmic pattern for the remainder of the performance.

Figure 5 Tablā

The presentation of the bandiś is often complemented by further episodes of improvisation. As this suggests, in Hindustani classical vocal music, the song per se only makes up part of the singing. It is the repeatable element of the performance: an existing composition with a set of words and a melody, reused in similar ways from performance to performance. The improvisation is the changeable element of the performance and may be substantially new each time.

5.1 Working with specialist terminology

The main sections of a khayāl performance are shown in Table 5, together with a summary of their characteristics.

Table 5: Selected sections of Hindustani classical music in performance

Section	Characteristics
ālāp	uses vocables, improvised, in free rhythm, without drummed accompaniment
bandiś	uses words, non-improvised, in strictly regulated rhythm, with drummed accompaniment

Activity 5 Listening to ‘Ahir bhairav’

Allow around 10 minutes

You will now try to listen for the elements of the form just introduced. Audio 5 is a short performance of khayāl by Padma Talwalkar, created for the Music in Motion project directed by Dwijendra Bijey Biswas.

Listen to the opening of the recording and try to determine the moment when the ālāp ends and the bandiś begins, with reference to the characteristics summarised in Table 5. In the text box below, enter the track time. It should be possible to determine this simply by watching and listening to the recording.

You may hear some mechanical distortion (or similar) at the very beginning of the recording. It sometimes helps to pause and restart the recording.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

You should have been able to hear the drummed accompaniment begin with a flourish at 02:04. You may have also noted that words begin to appear in the video at 01:58 and guessed that these were the text of the bandiś. If so, congratulations! This is the moment the singer begins to sing the text of the song (the first word is written as *rasiyaa* in the video).

As the discussion suggests, it is 01:58 rather than 02:04 that truly marks the beginning of the bandiś (don't worry if you did not catch this). This is the moment when the singer utters the first word of the text and cues the percussionist to start playing.

The remainder of the performance alternates between presentations of sections of the song and freer, more improvised episodes. You will know you are hearing a section of the song when words appear near the bottom of the screen in the video. The song has two parts, the first called the **sthāyī** and the second called the **antarā**. The parts of the song and their respective texts (spelled as in the video) are shown in Table 6. You can find a synopsis of the meaning of the text about halfway down the page about the performance on Music in Motion.

Table 6: Sections of bandiś, 'Rasiyaa mhaara amalaaraa'

Section of bandiś	Text
Sthāyī	Rasiyaa mhaara amalaaraa, Raataa maataa aavo ji
Antarā	Daasi thaadi mein janama janama ki, Mhaane nita chaaho ji

From 01:58 to 03:22, the singer performs the **sthāyī** twice, first from 01:58 to 02:41 and second from 02:41 to 03:22. At 03:22, she moves into a freer, more improvised section. Unlike the ālāp at the beginning of the performance, this improvisation is in strict rhythm and supported by the percussion.

From 05:52 to 06:33, the singer performs the **antarā**. This has its own text and melody, and in accordance with convention moves into a higher vocal range than the sthāyī (this is especially evident from 05:57 to 06:06). The remainder of the performance is improvised, although it continues in strict rhythm and with the drummed accompaniment, and it occasionally incorporates words from the bandiś.

(You may notice that the image cuts out and the screen displays 'See booklet for explanation' during the last 43 seconds of the video. This is nothing to worry about, but you can find an explanation on the Booklet page of the Music in Motion website.)

Activity 6 Returning to ‘Ahir bhairav’

Allow around 10 minutes

Listen to Audio 5 again while following Table 7 below, which outlines the structure of the performance along with track times and information about the characteristics of each section. You may find it difficult to tell purely by ear the difference between the parts of the performance that present the bandiś and the parts that are more improvised. Don’t worry too much about this; the video helps by showing the text whenever the singer is performing the sthāyī or the antarā. The key thing is to understand that during certain parts of the performance the singer is presenting a pre-existing song, and during other parts she is improvising.

Table 7: Structure of Padma Talwalkar’s performance

Section	Subsection	Track time	Improvised or composed	Rhythmically free or strict	Tablā	Text
ālāp		00:00	improvised	free	No	No
	sthāyī	01:58	composed	strict	Yes	Yes
	sthāyī	02:41	composed	strict	Yes	Yes
bandiś	improvisation	03:22	improvised	strict	Yes	(some words)
	antarā	05:52	composed	strict	Yes	Yes
	improvisation	06:33	improvised	strict	Yes	(some words)

6 Alphabetical designations

The preceding sections have introduced a range of specialist terms for describing form in Western popular song (e.g., verse and chorus), Congolese rumba (seben), North American Indigenous powwow song (e.g., push-up, lead), and Hindustani classical vocal music (e.g., ālāp, bandiś).

In the remaining sections, you will look at another way of describing form in music, this time involving alphabetic designations. These designations allow musicians to identify simple forms quickly and clearly. They can also be used to describe complicated structures with precision.

Beginning with the most common designations, jazz and classical musicians regularly use labels such as AABA or ABA to communicate information about musical structures. The letters allow them to identify patterns of repetition and contrast. Reusing a letter indicates that a section of music is repeated; adding a new letter indicates that a contrasting section of music is introduced. For example, the designation AABA tells us that a section of music is presented twice (AA), that something new is then presented (B), and that the first section of music is then presented again (A).

AABA form has been used widely in popular songs from the West since the nineteenth century. During the early twentieth century, AABA form was closely associated with songs from US and UK **musicals**: stage dramas featuring music in a popular style. Many songs from musicals ended up making their way into **jazz**. Jazz is a musical genre rooted in African American expressive traditions including blues and gospel, and it makes extensive use of improvisation and cyclical forms (Tucker and Jackson, 2020), which will be discussed further below.

'Just One of Those Things' is a song in AABA form originally written by US songwriter Cole Porter for the 1935 musical *Jubilee*. It became a widely performed jazz standard. Audio 6 is a performance of the song by jazz singer Sarah Vaughan, accompanied by pianist Jimmy Jones, bassist Richard Davis, and drummer Roy Haynes. It was recorded live in a nightclub in Chicago in 1957.

Activity 7 Listening to 'Just One of Those Things'

Allow around 15 minutes

Part 1

Listen two or three times to the opening of Vaughan's performance of 'Just One of Those Things' in Audio 6, from 00:00 to around 01:45. Follow along with the form with the help of Table 8 below.

As you listen, keep two points in mind. Firstly, the designation AABA refers to repetition and contrast in the musical elements, rather than in the lyrics. Notice that although the first A begins 'It was just one of those things' and the second begins 'It was just one of those *nights*', the final A section strays from this pattern, beginning with the word 'Goodbye'. All the same, composers of popular songs often find ways to connect the various A sections to one another in terms of the text. In Porter's song, each of the A sections ends with the words 'It was just one of those things.'

Secondly, there are often differences between the A sections in AABA form. Put another way, the musical repetitions are varied. This variation frequently supports changes in the text from section to section, but it also occurs for musical reasons. The key thing is that the A sections sound much more like one another than they sound like the B section, or like something altogether new.

Table 8: Structure of the first part of Sarah Vaughan's performance of 'Just One of Those Things'

Section	Track time	Lyrics
Introduction	00:02	
A	00:14	It was just one of those things ...
A	00:37	It was just one of those nights ...
B	00:58	If we'd thought a bit ...
A	01:20	So goodbye, goodbye ...

Part 2

Now that you are familiar with the AABA form, try to work out how it structures the rest of the performance. At 01:40, Vaughan starts to move through the form again. Listen a few times to the recording starting at that point and try to identify where the four parts of the AABA form reappear. Add the relevant track times to the appropriate text boxes in Table 9 (the first one has already been completed for you). When you've done this, answer the question underneath.

Table 9: Structure of the second part of Sarah Vaughan's performance of 'Just One of Those Things'

Section	Track time 1	Lyrics
A	01:40	It was just one of those things ...
A	*Provide your answer...*	It was just one of those nights ...
B	*Provide your answer...*	If we'd thought a bit ...
A	*Provide your answer...*	So goodbye, goodbye ...

Do any of these sections sound different from how they sounded earlier? Make two or three observations in the text box below.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Here is Table 9 with the missing track times added.

Table 9 (completed): Structure of the second part of Sarah Vaughan's performance of 'Just One of Those Things'

Section	Track time	Lyrics
A	01:40	It was just one of those things ...
A	02:02	It was just one of those nights ...
B	02:22	If we'd thought a bit ...
A	02:42	So goodbye, goodbye ...

You should have noticed that all of the sections sound a little different than the first time through the AABA form. You may also have realised that Vaughan introduces improvised variations as she moves through the song form a second time. The most substantial differences occur in the final A section, which the entire ensemble stretches out to help create the sense of an ending.

7 Form in instrumental jazz

As was evident in Vaughan's performance of 'Just One of Those Things', performers of jazz and popular song sometimes move through a song form such as AABA more than once in a performance.

In the next activity, you'll listen to another performance of 'Just One of Those Things', this time without a vocalist. The performance features pianist Bud Powell and saxophonist Don Byas playing together with bassist Pierre Michelot and drummer Kenny Clarke.

Jazz instrumentalists regularly make use of the possibility of repeating a song's structure, albeit in a particular way. They begin by performing a familiar version of the song, with the melody presented prominently and in an easily recognisable form. They do the same thing at the end of the piece, sometimes taking a few more liberties there. Musicians refer to this recognisable version of the song – the part that carries something like the original melody – as the **head**.

In the middle of the piece, the musicians move several times through the song form, maintaining aspects of the harmony and rhythm (you will learn about these musical parameters later in this series of courses) but taking turns improvising new melodies. The repetitions of the song's form are called choruses.

Activity 8 Listening to an instrumental version of 'Just One of Those Things'

Allow about 15 minutes

In Audio 7 you will hear Powell, Byas, Michelot and Clarke playing an instrumental version of 'Just One of Those Things'. Listen to the performance three or four times while following along with the form in Table 10. Most of the details have been provided but some parts of the table are incomplete. Add the missing information once you have a sense of the unfolding form.

You may find that humming the original melody of the song helps you keep track of the form as you listen to the improvised choruses. However new the improvised melodies, the accompaniment still fits the original melody.

Table 10: Structure of 'Just One of Those Things' as performed by Bud Powell, Don Byas, Pierre Michelot and Kenny Clarke

Section	Form	Track time	Soloist and instrument
Introduction	—	00:00	
Head	AABA	00:06	Powell, piano
Chorus 1	AABA	00:55	Byas, saxophone
Chorus 2	AABA	01:45	Byas, saxophone
Chorus 3	AABA	*Provide your answer...*	Powell, piano

Chorus 4	AABA	03:24	Powell, piano
Head	AABA	*Provide your answer...*	Byas, saxophone

Discussion

Here is the completed table.

Table 10 (completed): Structure of 'Just One of Those Things' as performed by Bud Powell, Don Byas, Pierre Michelot and Kenny Clarke

Section	Form	Track time	Soloist
Introduction	—	00:00	
Head	AABA	00:06	Powell, piano
Chorus 1	AABA	00:55	Byas, saxophone
Chorus 2	AABA	01:45	Byas, saxophone
Chorus 3	AABA	02:35	Powell, piano
Chorus 4	AABA	03:23	Powell, piano
Head	AABA	04:12	Byas, saxophone

You may have noticed that the repetition of the head at the end of the performance is not altogether straightforward. Byas plays the main melody for most of it, but he improvises during the B section (from 04:36 to 04:48) before returning to the familiar melody for the very final A.

You may also wonder about some of the indicated track times. For example, Byas begins his solo at 00:53, at a moment when all the other instruments have stopped, yet the beginning of the first chorus is noted at 00:55. This is because Byas starts his solo a little early, leading into the beginning of the first improvised chorus. The piano, bass and drums mark the actual arrival of that chorus when they leap back into the performance at 00:55. (It is fine for you to have indicated either time.)

Keep in mind that the jazz tradition contains a great range of practices. The structure that has just been outlined is a very common one, but is not used universally.

8 Using alphabetic designations

The previous activity reveals that musical form often involves **nesting** or **embedding**: that is, smaller forms often sit inside larger ones. In a jazz performance, the subsections of an AABA form may sit inside larger patterns of repetition, contrast, and variation.

For this reason, this set of courses typically uses upper-case letters to designate larger, more global aspects of form, and lower-case letters for smaller, more local ones. For example, the opening of Powell and Byas's performance of 'Just One of Those Things' might be represented as in Table 11, with the upper-case As in the column on the left representing the sequence of choruses, and the lower-case letters in the 'subsection' column representing the constituent parts of each chorus.

Notice that in this table, while 'AABA' has until now been spelled out in upper case, here it's 'aaba' in lower case. This is a result of zooming out to a larger, more overarching layer of the form, in which bigger letters represent the bigger picture.

Table 11: Overall structure of Powell, Byas, Michelot and Clarke's performance of 'Just One of Those Things' (introduction, head and first two solo choruses)

Section	Subsection	Track time	Notes
I		00:00	Introduction
A	a	00:06	Head
	a	00:19	
	b	00:31	
	a	00:43	
	a	00:55	
A	a	01:08	First solo chorus: Byas, saxophone
	b	01:20	
	a	01:32	
	a	01:45	
A	a	01:57	Second solo chorus: Byas, saxophone
	b	02:10	
	a	02:22	

Activity 9 Returning to the instrumental version of 'Just One of Those Things'

Allow about 10 minutes

Listen two or three times more to the opening at 02:35 of Powell, Byas, Michelot and Clarke's performance in Audio 7. Try to follow both the larger sections of the form

(the three As in the left-hand column of Table 11) and the subsections within these (marked aaba).

Again, you may find that humming the song's original melody helps you keep track of the form during the improvised choruses.

Another symbol that can be useful when distinguishing sections of the form is the **prime** (′) mark, which helps to distinguish sections that feature variation rather than contrast.

For instance, the two solo choruses that follow the head in Table 11 above feature improvisation by a soloist rather than the familiar melody of the song. If you wanted to make a point of this variation, you might mark the A at 00:55 as A′ and the A at 01:45 as A″ (that is, with a prime mark and a doubled prime mark, respectively) to distinguish them.

9 Formal detail in drum song

Alphabetical designations are particularly useful for describing intricate musical structures such as those found in many kinds of North American Indigenous song (see Browner, 2002; Nettl and Levine, 2011). For example, powwow songs, including the one by Red Bull discussed earlier, employ complex patterns of repetition, contrast and variation.

You have already studied how at the beginning of a push-up the lead introduces a melody that is not only echoed but extended by the rest of the singers. The nature of that extension, which complements the initial solo melody by means of a kind of rounding-off formula, will now be considered.

Activity 10 Returning to 'Grass Dance'

Allow about 20 minutes

Part 1

Listen to the opening of the first push-up of 'Grass Dance' in Audio 4. The lead starts at 00:04 and the seconds join at 00:11. Notice how the seconds not only echo what the lead has just sung but also extend this through some additional vocables on a fixed note: the 'Wey-ey hey ah hey' pattern between 00:18 and 00:20.

This additional material means that the seconds sing a melody that is slightly longer than what the lead sings, so the two can be distinguished as **a** and **a′** in the 'subsection' column of Table 12 below.

Table 12: Structure of first push-up of 'Grass Dance' by Red Bull

Push-up	Named part	Subsection	Track time	Notes
1	Lead	a	00:04	
	Seconds	a′	00:11	rounding-off formula at 00:18
	Body	b	00:21	rounding-off formula at 00:29
		c	00:32	rounding-off formula at 00:39
		b	00:42	rounding-off formula at 00:50
		c	00:53	rounding-off formula at 00:59

Part 2

You may have noticed that what was earlier called the body of the push-up is divided into four subsections in Table 12 above. Each of these four subsections ends in a closing or **cadential** pattern – that is, a closing formula similar to the one at the end of the a′ section.

Revisit the first push-up in Audio 4 and listen for the four subsections of the body, which begin respectively at 00:21, 00:32, 00:42, and 00:53. Then listen for the cadential pattern at the end of each subsection. In each case, you should hear a set

of vocables (‘Wey-ey hey ah hey ah’ or similar) sung on a single note. These occur at 00:29–00:31, 00:39–00:41, 00:50–00:52, and 00:59–01:01.

The four subsections themselves have a pattern of organisation: the first and third sound the same, and the second and the fourth sound the same, so they are designated as b and c, respectively. This means the push-up as a whole has the form aa′bcbc.

Part 3

Listen to the first push-up of ‘Grass Dance’ three or four more times to get familiar with the six subsections of the push-up. It may be helpful to pay attention to the overall **contour** of the melody; that is, its pattern of descent and ascent. Notice how the singers start the push-up at the very top of their range and then gradually descend: a is higher than b and b is higher than c. After the first bc, the singers leap up, then descend again through the second bc.

Finally, drawing on what you now know, try to identify the track times of the six subsections of the second push-up, beginning at 01:01 in the recording. Add your answers to the relevant text boxes provided in Table 13 below.

Table 13: Structure of second push-up of ‘Grass Dance’ by Red Bull

Push-up	Named part	Subsection	Track time
	Lead	a	01:01
	Seconds	a′	*Provide your answer...*
		b	*Provide your answer...*
2		c	*Provide your answer...*
	Body	b	*Provide your answer...*
		c	*Provide your answer...*

Discussion

A completed table is shown below. You should have managed to perceive the beginnings of the various sections. If you didn’t, try listening to the second push-up a few more times while following along with the completed table. It may help to take a break and return to try the exercise on another day.

Table 13 (completed): Structure of second push-up of ‘Grass Dance’ by Red Bull

Push-up	Named part	Subsection	Track time
2	Lead	a	01:01
	Seconds	a′	01:08
	Body	b	01:17
		c	01:28
		b	01:38
		c	01:48

Throughout this part of the analysis, lower-case letters have been used. This is in the first case because lower-case letters typically designate the most local elements of any musical form. Second, these local elements are located within a larger, overarching structure; namely, the fourfold repetition of the push-up. This more global aspect of the form can be represented using upper-case letters: AAAA, with each A standing for one of the push-ups.

Conclusion

In this course you have learned about musical form or structure: that is, how music is organised in time. Form is typically instantiated by means of repetition and contrast, as well as by variation (a procedure that lies somewhere between repetition and contrast).

Many musical traditions make use of style-specific terms to designate parts of musical form, and these terms help to coordinate musical interactions including ensemble performance and dancing. You looked at a number of examples of these terms, including in Western popular song, Congolese rumba, Hindustani classical vocal music, and powwow singing.

You also learned how to use alphabetical designations to indicate song form, exploring how to use upper- and lower-case letters (AABA, aabcbc) and prime marks (′,″). These alphabetical designations are especially helpful for characterising musical forms in which nesting takes place; that is, where smaller, local forms are embedded within larger, global ones.

Now that you have learned to identify form by ear, you may wish to attempt to identify the form of a piece of music that you enjoy. Try starting with something short and simple, perhaps a familiar song three or four minutes long. Good luck!

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Glossary

AABA form

A **form**al structure widely used in Western popular music of the twentieth century, in which an initial section (A) is introduced and repeated, a contrasting section (B) is introduced, and the first section (A) is repeated again.

ālāp

In Hindustani classical music, an introductory section in which a singer or instrumentalist improvises in a rhythmically free style.

antarā

The first part of the song heard in the **bandiś**.

atalaku

In **Congolese rumba**, a vocalist who takes over from the lead singer during the **seben**. The atalaku frequently exhorts listeners to dance and addresses existing or potential sponsors.

bandiś

In Hindustani classical music, the part of a performance that draws on a previously composed song.

body

In **powwow** song, the part of the song form that follows the **lead** and its repetition/ extension by the **seconds**.

cadential

A term used to describe musical material that marks the close of a musical section or creates a sense of arrival. Derived from the word ‘cadence’.

chorus

In Western song structure, a section in which both melody and words are repeated. The chorus is often sung in alternation with other sections of a song (especially **verse**s) and frequently contains the most memorable and engaging musical material.

chorus (jazz)

In improvised parts of **jazz** performance, a single statement of (i.e. one time through) the form of the song.

classical music

An elite form of music, typically requiring extensive training of participants. Classical musics often have their origins in royal courts and religious institutions and are often funded (wholly or in part) through patronage. Sometimes called art music.

Congolese rumba

A form of popular dance music originating in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Rumba shares some commonalities with Cuban rumba but is in most respects a distinctive style.

contrast

A **form**al technique involving the presentation of musical material that has not been heard before.

elision

The overlapping of one section of music (e.g. the end of a melody) with another.

embedding

The nesting of a smaller form or forms within a larger one.

form

(adj. formal) The organisation of music in time.

genre

A style or kind of music.

harmonium

A keyboard instrument whose sound is produced with the help of a bellows.

head

In **jazz**, the main melody, often presented at the beginning and the ending of the performance of a piece.

honour beats

In powwow song, a series of loud drum stokes heard during the body of the song. Sometimes also called check beats or hard beats.

improvising

Making up music in the course of a performance, typically within the constraints of a particular style.

interlude

In Western song, a passage of music without words in the middle of a song.

introduction

In Western song, a passage of music, typically without words, at the very beginning of a song.

jazz

A musical genre rooted in African American expressive traditions, including blues and gospel, and making extensive use of **improvisation** and cyclical forms.

khayāl

A **genre** of Hindustani classical music.

lead

In **powwow song**, (a) the solo singer who performs the melody at the beginning of the song and (b) the melody that the singer performs.

melody

The melody or tune is the sequence of notes to which a singer puts the words of a song. It is distinct from the words and can be performed without them, for example when whistling or humming a song.

musical

A Western stage drama featuring music in a popular style.

nesting

The embedding of a smaller form or forms within a larger one.

popular music

An accessible form of music, typically regarded as less elite and more commercially oriented than classical music.

powwow

First Nations/Native American gatherings at which participants, typically wearing special regalia, dance to songs performed by singing groups seated around large round drums. These gatherings range from small community celebrations to large multi-day events that bring together thousands of people.

powwow song

Songs sung at powwows. This term frequently refers to songs in the widely used a′abcbc form.

prime

A mark (′) used to indicate that a repeated section is varied in some way.

repetition

A **form**al technique involving the presentation of musical material that has been heard before.

seben

In **Congolese rumba**, a livelier and more danceable section that arrives part of the way through a song and continues to the end. The seben often features exhortations to dance and calls to existing and potential sponsors, spoken or sung by an **atalaku**.

seconds

In **powwow song**, the group of singers who repeat and extend the solo melody (the **lead**) heard at the beginning of the song.

sthāyī

The second part of the song heard in the **bandiś**.

structure

The organisation of music in time.

tablā

A pair of bowl-shaped drums used to accompany performances of Hindustani classical music.

tanpūrā

In Hindustani classical music, a plucked stringed instrument that plays sustained drones.

variation

A **form**al technique involving the altered presentation of music that has been heard before.

verse

In Western song structure, a section that has the same musical content as other verses, but different words. Verses tend to have more text and be more focused on narrative than **chorus**es.

vocables

Sung words that do not have a fixed meaning.