

Form.¹

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The constructive or organizing element in music. This article is concerned with the concept of form itself, not with the historical evolution of particular forms or genres (for which see articles under appropriate titles). Form might be defined simply as what forms have in common, reflecting the fact that an organizing impulse is at the heart of any compositional enterprise, from the most modest to the most ambitious. Yet the act, and art, of composition is not synonymous with the selection and activation of formal templates, and composers oblige writers on music to confront the infinite flexibility of the relation between 'form' as a generic category (such as ternary, canon, sonata) and the musical work as the unique result of the deployment of particular materials and processes. Practice particularizes, just as theory generalizes, and discussion of musical form has been especially vulnerable to the tensions which arise between these very different ways of thinking.

Discussions which concentrate exclusively, or primarily, on matters of musical form lie within the domain of musical pedagogy, rather than of criticism or analysis: their object is to instruct fledgling composers in how musical structures are correctly put together. When the subject is that of particular, and valued, compositions, the critical discussion of musical character and style, or the technical examination of tonal or post-tonal structures and matters concerning motivic and rhythmic processes, tends to have priority over considerations of form as either a generic category or an organizational process or template, which might even be distinct from other modes of organization. For example, Salzer distinguishes between 'structure' as revealed in Schenkerian voice-leading and harmonic analysis, 'form' as 'the organization and division of that structure into definite sections, and the relation of those sections to each other', and 'design' as the organization of the compositional surface, in terms of its thematic and rhythmic material (Salzer; Rothstein).

Definitions of form in both pedagogical treatises and texts on musical aesthetics have commonly given priority to the need for form to be unified and integrated, with contrasts and diversities subordinate rather than predominant. Moreover, form has generally been theorized as implying not simply organization, but organicism – with frequent recourse to biological or botanical analogies. In *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, Schoenberg declared that 'form means that a piece is organized: i.e. that it consists of elements functioning like those of a living organism ... The chief requirements for the creation of a comprehensible form are *logic* and *coherence*'. For Langer, in contrast, form 'is always a perceptible, self-identical whole; like a natural being, it has a character of organic unity, selfsufficiency, individual reality'.

The argument that formal organization is essentially and inevitably organic reflects the principles of aesthetics formulated during the 18th century, notably by Shaftesbury and Baumgarten. These principles can be traced back to the Aristotelian description of a tragedy as the 'imitation of an action that is whole and complete in itself'. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end, but the relationship between these elements must not be arbitrary or obscure. Aristotle (*Poetics*, 7 and 9) wrote that 'of simple plots and actions the episodic are the worst' – 'episodic' meaning the absence of probability or necessity in the sequence of episodes which make up the plot as presented in the play. It is clear from this that form (as an organic or episodic sequence of events)

¹ ARNOLD WHITTALL. Form. *Grove Music Online*. Ed. L. Macy (Accessed 14 August 2005), <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

and content ('plots and actions') are difficult to separate when the character of an art-work, and not simply its formal framework or structural model, is under discussion, and this difficulty has been a determining factor in studies of musical form which aspire to rise above the purely pedagogical.

Since the 18th century theorists of musical form have reiterated the need for wholeness, symmetry and proportion, though without necessarily imposing a limit to the number of acceptable compositional designs. In an apparent effort to resist the conventionalizing constraints of formal modelling, A.B. Marx argued that 'there are as many forms as works of art' (see [Analysis, §II, 3](#)), but the tendency of theorizing forms has inevitably been to explore degrees of uniformity: the conditions under which formal frameworks can be defined, and successfully imitated, and in which particular formal categories – chaconne, minuet and trio, and so on – can provide a common organizational underpinning for an infinite variety of musical materials and compositional procedures. What has come to be known as formalist aesthetics – in Hanslick's formulation, the principle that 'the beautiful is not contingent upon nor in need of any subject introduced from without, but ... consists wholly of sounds artistically combined' – does not in itself imply a limited category of 'beautiful' formal frameworks. Yet as theorizing became more systematic, and writing about music both critically and historically more formulaic, categorizations of various kinds gained the upper hand, until, as Dahlhaus observed, 'the theory of form was a description of genres'. As such, it was ill-equipped to confront the protracted crisis of 20th-century music and its fraught relationship to 20th-century social and political history.

The fact that there is more to composition than form, and that discussing form separately from content in all but the most directly technical sense is, as stated above, purely pedagogical, has encouraged musicological interpretation of the musical work as a multivalent entity. For Nattiez, a composition is not merely 'a whole composed of "structures". ... Rather, the work is also constituted by the procedures that have engendered it (acts of composition), and the procedures to which it gives rise: acts of interpretation and perception'. The effect of this and other later 20th-century strategies is to challenge the stability and singularity of formal categorization as a means of defining and determining the essence of the musical work. Dahlhaus's assertion that 'to expect a discussion about musical form to produce definitions and prescriptions would be naive. It is by no means certain what form in music is, and any attempt to formulate rules would provoke nothing but derision' is provocative precisely because it turns conventional thinking on its head, and as such it fits well alongside the paradoxical reading of the 20th-century situation found in Adorno's understanding that 'form represents the progressive rationalization, integration and control of all aspects of the musical material at the same time as the material itself, as handed-down genres and forms, is tending towards fragmentation and disintegration'. Since, as Paddison notes, 'for Adorno the "critical" and "authentic" work strives for a consistency of form which is achieved without concealing the fragmentary character of its pre-formed, handed-down material', it is clear that the Schoenbergian prescription for formal comprehensibility – 'logic and coherence' – can no longer be taken at face value. It is as if, in *Fundamentals*, Schoenberg was identifying 'classical' procedures which students should first accept as models out of respect for tradition, but which are actually no longer available for authentic, free, post-tonal composition, however sincerely the composer strives to recover or re-create them. In Adorno's world, that striving cannot succeed, since 'art of the highest calibre' – including Schoenberg's – pushes beyond totality towards a state of fragmentation'.

Dahlhaus was willing to preserve the distinction between a concept of form signifying 'musical coherence on a large scale' and *musique informelle* (exemplified by the radical music of the 1950s and 60s) whose purpose was 'to draw undivided attention to the isolated detail, to the individual musical moment'. Since 'the symptom of extreme *musique informelle* is the heterogeneous nature

of the details from which a musical shape is constructed' and 'disconnected matter stands side by side in sharp contrast', the distinction between 'formed' and 'unformed' music is clear, and aesthetic judgments can derive from this distinction, whether one is regarded as good and the other bad, or both are believed to have equal potential for successful or unsuccessful use. This second position can be traced in the attitude that seeks to project the nature of the musical work as dependent not on form as organic – a principle of design that is ultimately singular, rational in the Schoenbergian sense – but on a view of any composition (from any era) as a discourse, something in which the play of different, often ambiguous meanings is the decisive factor. Far from being restricted to the role of 'progressive rationalization', which *musique informelle* rejects, form from this perspective is freed to participate fully in a new world of decentred heterogeneity. This transformation of structure into discourse reinforces the contrast between 20th-century readings of form and those of earlier eras, following the perception that although music is not 'literally a language', it 'becomes most essentially itself when it emulates certain principles found in language' (Clarke).

Given that these principles still involve basic distinctions between similarities and contrasts, their analytical use does not of itself promote less rigorous, less systematic exploration of formal design, as Clarke's analysis of Haydn shows. Yet the implication is that music is emulating 'certain principles found in language' by 'saying' something as the result of adopting certain formal procedures. What the composition says is, however, inherently and irreducibly ambiguous, since the very identity of any text (musical or otherwise) is equivocal and multivalent. Post-structuralist thinking about form therefore proposes that a text itself 'subverts the very idea of identity, infinitely deferring the possibility of adding up the sum of a text's parts or meanings and reaching a totalized, integrated whole' (Johnson).

Such a position seems to be at the furthest possible remove from the Aristotelian principles which underlie classical aesthetics, and pre-20th-century theories of musical form. But the shift from classicism to modernism in composition has helped to promote the exploration of such anti-classical, deconstructive strategies, and just as the application of linguistic analysis to classical music enriches one's awareness of its essential unity and stability, so its employment in relation to post-classical and modernist compositions reinforces the post-structuralist perception that to seek to impose a unified framework on a modernist composition is no less 'violent' than to approach it as a sequence of fragments which may or may not achieve coherence through a balance of opposites. Johnson observes that 'if anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another', and the 'careful teasing out of warring forces within the text itself', which Johnson proposes as the goal of deconstructive analysis, is particularly appropriate as a means of exploring the formal richness and multiplicity of musical structures which move through time rather than existing as solid, visible objects in space.

It is inevitable, and appropriate, that the concept of deconstruction in musicology should be surrounded by controversy, given the proposition, as formulated by Subotnik, that 'characteristically, a deconstruction results in (at least) two readings of a single text that coexist but cannot be reconciled with each other. In deconstructionist terminology, the relative weight of these two readings is "undecidable"'. There will be many musical works, particularly from periods before the 20th century, for which different, irreconcilable readings of their basic form (as distinct from what that same work expresses through its particular materials and processes) will be unlikely, and even when the composer has consciously worked with more than one formal model, as in the case of Webern's *Variations for Orchestra* op.30, the alternatives are not so much irreconcilable as complementary and interactive. Subotnik's claim that 'in the deconstructionist view, a text is a profoundly indeterminate construct, functioning always as part of an ongoing, open-ended process

of historical discourse' and that 'no single meaning can be definitively assigned to a text' underlines the sense in which 'meaning' is implicated in form, yet not identical with it. Even when the form can convincingly be assigned to traditional general categories like ternary, sonata, or variation, as with the movements of Beethoven's Symphony no.9, the meaning of the material through which the form is projected remains open to new and different interpretations (Cook). Ultimately, therefore, form is a factor making for relative stability in the inherently open-ended process of musical communication.

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