

Musical Forms Made Easy

**A Thorough Demonstration of Each Form
in the Most Time-Effective Way**

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CHAPTER 1

Binary Form

We will begin with binary form, a two-part structure most commonly encountered in baroque-era compositions.¹ The following schematic demonstrates this form:



“A” represents the material with which the piece begins and “B” represents the subsequent material that ultimately concludes the piece. In many cases, these two sections are very similar in aspects such as structure and content, bearing only subtle differences.

Despite this, the two sections are clearly discernible to the listener as separate. First, “similar” does not mean that they are the same. Differences *are* present, and though not particularly strong, a contrast is present because of this. In addition, each section has a special role. “A” creates an expectation for additional material and “B” fulfills that expectation. The terms used to describe such a relationship are *antecedent*, material that occurs before and creates an expectation for subsequent material, and *consequent*, material that occurs as a result of what has preceded.

The antecedent, in this case, often creates the need for subsequent material by moving toward a tension of some sort and concluding without resolving this newly created tension. Since the piece cannot end on a tension, another section is required. The consequent, or “B,” resumes at the tension, and travels toward a resolve, ultimately ending the piece. It can be envisioned as follows:



Modulation is often the vehicle of this tension, lending a greater emphasis to the divergence of the two sections. This is achieved by “A” traveling to a different key and “B” beginning in that “new” key and ultimately, traveling back to the home key. Most often this new key is the *dominant* (the tonality built on the 5th note of a scale). The “home key,” or the key in which the piece began, is referred to as the *tonic*. Substituting the harmonic functions of each section would yield the following:



The main concept that is important to understand is that each section has its special function. “A” sets up “B,” and “B” concludes the piece.

1. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Symphony No. 6 in F Major, K. 43*. The fourth movement, “Allegro,” is a classical-era example of binary form.

As an aside, the setting of subsequent material in the dominant key is common practice in many forms, not just binary form. However, it is dangerous to always expect the dominant. Composers, especially since the classical period, often utilize other keys.²

Common practice dictates that each section of binary form is repeated. To indicate these repeats in our schematic we will use the symbol “:|”. The result is as follows:

|: A :||: B :|

This of course helps even further to distinguish between the individual sections.



Handel's Music for the Royal Fireworks: La Paix

George Frideric Handel (1685–1759) is best remembered for his oratorios and other choral compositions. Nevertheless, his instrumental compositions are also true masterworks, as we shall soon discover. Handel was born in Halle, Germany and became a British citizen in 1727. His *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, from which we are about to examine “La Paix” (“The Peace”), was composed to commemorate the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle.

A realistic interpretation of “La Paix” that uses samples can be accessed on the MP3 CD included with this book. The excerpt tracks should be listened to as the text indicates. All of the tracks for all of the chapters can be found there as well.



“La Paix” begins in the key of D major. It is scored for oboes, bassoons, horns, trumpets, and strings with most of these instruments doubling one another. This opening section is “A.”

Oboe, Trumpet, and Violin 1 Tutti
(first four measures)

Largo alla Siciliana

The musical score is written for Oboe, Trumpet, and Violin 1 Tutti. It is in the key of D major (two sharps) and 12/8 time. The tempo is Largo alla Siciliana. The score consists of two staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps. The time signature is 12/8. The music is characterized by a slow, stately pace with a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. The second staff continues the melodic line with similar rhythmic patterns and some rests.

2. Johann Sebastian Bach, *Partita No. 2 in C Minor: Sarabande*. Section “A” modulates to the *mediant* (the key based on the 3rd note of the scale) and section “B” modulates back to the tonic. This is more common in minor keys; George Frideric Handel, *Water Music: Coro*. Neither section “A” nor section “B” employs any modulation whatsoever. The entire piece remains in the key of C major; Franz Schubert, *Four Impromptus, Op. 90, No. 2 in E♭ Major* (albeit in ternary form). “B” begins in the extremely remote key of B minor.