

The Lesser Known Musical Elements: Form

by Dennis Winge

The big 3 when it comes to elements in music are melody, harmony, & rhythm. This series is about the other 4 elements that perhaps get less attention, and they are form, dynamics, timbre, and texture. Today's topic is on the musical element of form.

Form is underestimated, both in songwriting and in improvising. Having taught guitar soloing and songwriting for almost 2 decades, I can say that it is very common for students to suffer musically by not understanding the element of form, such as:

- They don't know where they are in the piece while they are soloing. If they have to solo for a specific number of bars and then come back to playing rhythm, they cannot find their way back at the right moment.
- They write songs that don't "go anywhere" because it's all free-form without any thought to song structure.
- They have trouble building a solo because they can't see the tune macroscopically (i.e. big picture.)

By form, in Western rock, pop, soul and jazz music, we are referring to the fact that each piece has a certain number of sections, and those sections are arranged intentionally. This is called "sectional form." Aaron Copeland in his classic book "What to Listen for in Music" says "the easiest form for the listener to grasp is that [which is] built sectionally."

When you listen to a pop song, you are usually focused on the lyrics and melody. Harmony and rhythm are a distant third and fourth, very generally speaking. But are you aware that most pop songs have forms that are very specific? Did you know that some forms are used so often that they have become, no pun intended, "formulaic?"

I have a friend and former student who always used the exact same form on every single one of his songs, and he achieved internationally recognition! The best part, to me at least, was that because the songs were all so different lyrically, harmonically, rhythmically, etc. I could barely tell that they all used the same form.

So do you want to know how to easily improve your chances of writing a hit song? Use a standard song form! Remember, something would have never become cliché if it weren't any good in the first place.

Some common song forms are:

AB – verse, chorus; repeat as necessary

AB, AB, CB(B) – verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus, (chorus)

B. AB. AB – chorus, verse, chorus, verse, chorus

AAB, AAB – verse, verse, chorus; repeat as necessary

ABC – verse, pre-chorus, chorus; repeat as necessary

AAB A – jazz standard form (32-bars)

AAA – 12 bar blues form

By listening more closely to a tune's form, you can:

- Appreciate how each section complements the other, or embellishes upon a previous section or takes it in a totally new direction
- Better understand an improvisation (as within the jazz standard form, for example). It allows you to hear what the improviser is thinking by knowing the underlying structure.
- More easily compose music that balances predictability with creativity
- More clearly decipher the other less obvious elements (like texture and timbre, which shall be discussed separately) that vary when a section is repeated but feels different because the other elements are different. In other words, you can compare a later chorus with an earlier one and analyze why its emotional impact may be stronger due to the other elements.

Of course this has only scratched the surface. It's not the place of this article to go more deeply into the many forms of classical music, for example. But next time you listen to a tune you love, ask yourself "what is the form?" So far we haven't discussed *how* to listen to form. Just start. As sections get repeated, assign a letter to each section (A, B, C, etc.) and write down what happens when.

It's a great practice just to analyze the forms of famous tunes. I'll help get you started with "Let it Be" by the Beatles where A is verse, B is chorus, and C is bridge:

(intro = first 4 bars of A section)

A
B
A
B
B plus "tag"
C
A instrumental
B
A
B
B + "tag"
C

About the author: Dennis Winge is a professional guitarist living in New York with a passion for vegan food and bhakti yoga. If you are interested in taking [Guitar Lessons in Ithaca](#), NY, then be sure to contact Dennis!