

FORM

Form is an essential aspect of music which all too often gets neglected by music students at the expense of the more eye-catching, ear-bending elements such as harmony and rhythm. That's a pity, as an understanding of form and the manipulation of it to serve your own purposes can change something which is quite mundane into a much more interesting piece of music.

Form, in the sense that we are dealing with here, refers to how music is structured in terms of its composition and length, ie. how the sections which make up the complete entity are organised. Because of its very nature (ie. everything written down by the composer), classical music is much more highly organised than jazz. If anyone is interested in form relating to classical music, I would recommend looking at Musical Form in Wikipedia. Here we are just concerned with jazz.

Sections within a piece of music are referred to by alphabetical names, eg. A. Where this is repeated exactly we could talk of an **A A** or an **A A A** form, however it is enough just to use the single **A** and say that the **A** section is repeated. (Otherwise, you might get confused with battery sizes!) Incidentally don't confuse these letters with rehearsal letters even though they might coincide in the early stages of a tune.

The simplest form consists of simply an **A** section, which may in theory be any length but tends to be at the maximum 16 bars and usually no shorter than 4 bars. A 4-bar tune written in 12/8 is *The house of the rising sun* as is *Scarborough Fair*. There are probably other folk songs of this length.

With regard to 8-bar tunes, *Coral* by Keith Jarrett, *Perfect Love* by Karl Berger and *St James Infirmary* come to mind. You might find some more 8 bar tunes or shorter ones by free-jazz players.

Jazz musicians are very fond of 8-bar sections and multiples of these as they can easily feel them without having to count. It is surprising then that there are a few 10-bar tunes which are very popular: *Blue in Green* by Miles Davis/Bill Evans and *Peace* by Horace Silver. There are also a few 14 bar tunes - *Blue Daniel* by Frank Rosolino and *Sing me softly of the blues* by Carla Bley. Short tunes like these are however rare, with the exception of the blues.

The most common blues is the 12-bar. There are umpteen variations on the sequence, from very basic to very elaborate. For some reason, jazz musicians are very much at ease with feeling the length of each chorus, whereas a 12-bar section within another piece can easily throw them.

There is also an 8-bar blues:

| I | IV7 #IVo | I | VI7 | IIm7 | V7 | I | I |

and a much more common 16-bar blues

| I7 | I7 | I7 | I7 | IV7 | IV7 | I7 | I7 | V7 | IV7 | V7 | IV7 | V7 | IV7 | I7 | I7 |
(Just think of *Watermelon Man*)

All the above are 1-section tunes, although if you want you could subdivide the blues into A (4 bars) B (2 bars) A (2 bars) C (2 bars) A (2 bars) where it consists of 6 2-bar riffs, or A (4 bars) B (4 bars) C (4 bars) for 3 4-bar riffs (*Sunnymoon for two/Bag's Groove*-type of blues) whereas *Blues for Alice* would be purely a 1-section **A** tune.

There are some 16-bar tunes made up of a single **A** section, such as *Freedom Jazz Dance* by Eddie Harris, *Giant Steps* by John Coltrane and possibly *Iris* by Wayne Shorter. There are also some longer single section tunes, such as Chick Corea's *500 miles high* which is 18 bars long.

As you can see it all depends on if and where you draw what can be an arbitrary line within a long section to divide it into smaller units. One thing is more certain and that is that when there is only a slight change in the tune or the chords in the last bar or two of a repeated section, you can usually regard it as being just a tune with an **A** form. Where on the other hand there are substantial changes between two sections it is in **AB** form as in *All of me*, or *All of you* or *You stepped out of a dream*. This is sometimes called Binary form. Why? Because people like to show off with words like that. To jazz musicians it's an **AB** tune.

More commonplace that the **AB** variety is the **AABA** tune. The second **A** section is a repeat of the first **A** section with a few minor changes at the end to lead it into the **B** section which is often in a different key before reiterating the **A** bit again. The **B** section is variously called the *bridge* or the *middle 8*. The term *bridge* is sometimes also used for an *interlude* while the middle 8 may not actually be 8 bars - it can be 16. This is just to confuse you. You can also get away with calling it the *middle bit* or the **B** section.

The final **A** section may be a few bars longer than at the start of the tune. This is called a tag. Some tunes are played without the tag when it comes to soloing - *I got rhythm* is a prime example. Others tend to retain the tag, eg. *The nearness of you*.

I tend to judge how good a tune is by the **B** section. If it is a cliched chord sequence, by which I mean a couple of II V Is, as in *Satin Doll* or a few chords taken from the cycle of fifths, as in *I got rhythm* I get very fed up playing it. Surely someone who has laboured over a catchy beginning of a tune can muster a bit more imagination than this. If you want some ingenious **B** sections, look at the tunes written by Jerome Kern (*All the things you are* or *The song is you*). That is what I call good writing.

The **AABA** form is so popular because it is useful to have a contrasting passage within a tune. If you dispense with this or if you want to have another contrasting element you might want to introduce an interlude between solos. Think of *Night in Tunisia* or *In you own sweet way* - which are **AABA** tunes plus an interlude.

Many **AABA** tunes come from Musicals or Films. In reality, many of them are longer than this form as they originally had verses (usually out of tempo) before the chorus (**AABA**). It is well worth while trying to unearth these verses, particularly if you are a vocalist. Some of them are just as good as the choruses although not as catchy: *Tea for Two*, *Night and Day*, *More than you know*, *The lady is a tramp*, *A foggy day in London town*, etc. In the jazz tunes repertoire, *Spring can hang you up the most* and *Lush Life* have especially good verses. Why not play them in instrumental arrangements too!

There are some other forms apart from the **AB** and **AABA** variety, both of them rather scarce - *I remember April* is an **ABA** tune, and *Song for my father* is an **AAB** tune. Then there are the tunes with additional sections **AABACA**, eg. *The Gypsy in my soul*. An interesting tune with an **ABCD** form is *No More Blues*, the **AB** is in a minor key and the **CD** in the major (like 2 **AB**'s). Then there is *Begin the beguine...* If you want to find more elaborate structures, look at tunes by people like Pat Metheny and bands like Weather Report. Notice that where a tune is quite involved harmonically, a simplified version is sometimes used for soloing on. Sometimes, the soloing may be on just one chord or may have no resemblance to the tune at all. It is vital then to give guidelines to the band members on the "geography" of a piece.

This brings me to an important point. For the sake of (other) musicians, please mark the end of each section with a double bar line which helps to put it all in context. And if there is no drum part, jot down the number of bars in each section. This includes intros and endings, which do not come into this discussion.

So let's summarise things. Tunes with a single section (**A**) are very rare. **AB** and **AABA** tunes are much more common. Other combinations are possible. The length of each section does not have to be 4, 8 or 16 bars. It can be any length you like. Fellow musicians may complain at first about 13 bar or 19 bar sequences but if that is how the music flows, they will get used to it. Don't be surprised though if time is spent at rehearsals counting bar lines to compare parts.

Finally, a few words about the internal form, ie. within each musical section.

Tunes come in different shapes and sizes. One common device is to repeat a short phrase or motif, either exactly or starting an another note or in a different key. There may be one or two notes which have to be changed in doing this. This may be all you need to form an **A** section, eg. *Blue moon*. This is also very often done in the middle 8, eg. *Take the A train*.

Some tunes do this and then introduce another phrase, eg. *Sweet and lovely*. This second phrase may also be repeated, more or less, eg. *Grooving high*. An instance of this device in the **B** section of a tune is in *The girl from Ipanema*.

Less predictable tunes which do not repeat any phrases are, for example, *What's new*, *Stardust* and *Yesterday*. (See the tutorial on melody for more discussion on these points.)

Counterpoint is another way of developing a tune. This occurs when two or more parts have independent lines. Actually, this occurs a lot in big band charts, with the brass and saxes, or the trumpets, trombones and saxes all doing their own thing. Some of them may be unison lines, some may be in block harmony. Yet it is still counterpoint. If you want to write a fugue-type of piece, go ahead, but be careful it doesn't become too pretentious or you'll live to regret it. Well, maybe you'll live...