



Form

So far in this series of articles on music elements we have looked at rhythm, beat, melody, harmony, dynamics, tempo and tonality. Now we move on to the element of form.

In terms of music, what is form? A simple definition is ‘form is the shape or plan of music sections moving along a timeline.’

Form in anything is the shape, structure and design of something. The Hebrew, Greek and Latin origins reveal many meanings of the word, form — figure, model, mould, appearance, pattern, structure, vision, frame, purpose. Drawings and paintings use lines to show shapes or forms of objects in two dimensions. Architecture and sculptures have shapes and forms in three dimensions. These examples are all visible forms and can be divided into sections.

Language and music also have form. A book can be divided into chapters, paragraphs, sentences, words and letters. The author has a plan and moulds the letters

into ‘shapes’ (sections, patterns and order) according to their purpose and message. Likewise a symphony can be broken into movements, sections, phrases, slurs and individual notes. The composer has a plan and organises sounds according to their purpose and message. A hymn and its poetry can be broken into verses, refrains, lines, phrases, words, syllables and notes.

The timeline

Language and music are both visible in their notation but also invisible because they are audible. The end of our definition says ‘moving along a timeline.’ Time marks the difference between visible and invisible forms. Visible forms can be seen in their entirety at the same time. For example, we can see a picture with all its variety of lines and shapes in a glance of one second. In contrast, music form is heard and spread over time with a beginning, middle and end. Music form takes time — be it seconds, minutes or even hours. If we heard all of the notes at the same time, the sound would be an unrecognisable, discordant mess.

Sameness and difference

Those who have not learned to read music and how to divide it into sections can only hear the sounds. The form can be easily missed if they don’t know what to listen for. So what can we listen for to identify the form/shape/plan of the music to make sense of it?

Firstly, the brain basically listens for sameness and difference — like a young child learning to identify the alphabet letters. For

example, a musical phrase (the equivalent of a sentence) may be repeated identically or with a slight variation. We can label the original phrase as Part A and the variation Part A1. Then there may be a completely different phrase which is labelled Part B. Part A or A1 may be repeated to form a balance. Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* is an example of this form — A A1 B A1. Try hearing it in your head and listen for the repeated parts and the contrasting third phrase.

Music pieces can have a variety of arrangements of sections. For example, AB is **binary form** because it has two sections. ABA is **ternary form** because it has three sections. ABACA is called **rondo form** because Part A keeps coming ‘round and round’ (*rondo* means ‘round’) again. We will meet many more forms later in the article.

Cadences: edges and boundaries

Secondly, the brain needs to identify the ends or ‘edges’ of phrases. In a painting we can easily see the corners of the frame and the outline of the shapes within. Silhouettes clearly show outlines of objects. These visual boundaries delineate identifiable shape and form. In music we hear the invisible end of a phrase called a **cadence** which indicates the phrase has either finished or wants to move on along the timeline.

In the previous article on tonality we learned about two **cadences** which form strong endings to musical phrases. They are like full stops, indicating a definite ending

and time to take a breath. For example, we learned about the **perfect cadence** which makes a strong statement that the phrase has ended. It moves from the dominant fifth note or chord (V) in a scale to the tonic 'home' note (I) in the scale. It is labelled as a V–I cadence.

The **plagal cadence** is a strong but more gentle sounding ending, and moves from the subdominant (IV) note or chord to the tonic 'home' note. It is labelled as a IV–I cadence. It is the peaceful, restful sound of 'Amen' sometimes sung at the end of a hymn. Another type of cadence is the **imperfect cadence** which is the opposite of the perfect – V–I. This is like a comma, indicating the sentence/phrase wants to continue. The **interrupted cadence** is like a question mark, leaving the listener wondering what the answer might be. It starts with the dominant (V), implying it may move home to the tonic (I), but instead surprises and interrupts the listener by moving to the VI. This is labelled as a V–VI cadence. It is definitely not the final ending and demands an answering phrase to its question.

Cadences are part of music grammar. They set the edges, boundaries or limits to a section, thus giving it shape and form. We saw how they are like the frame outlining the picture. Other analogies are a garden border separating the flowers from the grass, a cake tin which forms the shape of a cake, or lines on roads setting boundaries for traffic. Within the relevant shape or boundary there is freedom for people to be creative

and paint whatever they like, or design the cake they want. There is also safety and security driving a vehicle according to the boundaries and traffic laws. Likewise composers set types of boundaries and limits when composing so the piece makes sense to the listener. Form is all a matter of planning and organising whatever elements are given to work with, whether it is music elements, letters and words, soil and seeds, cake ingredients or roads and lines.

The most obvious parts of a piece of music are the beginning, middle and end. These comprise its timeline. The start is when we first hear the sounds and the end is the obvious silence indicating the music has stopped. This is a very definite ending. In the middle many things can be heard such as repeated patterns and cadences indicating section endings. A music timeline could last seconds, minutes or hours.

Shapes, plans, patterns, structure, boundaries, limits and design are part of much longer eons of time. For example, our lifetimes can be divided into sections – birth, baby, infant, child, youth, adult, middle-aged, elderly, and death. God knows everyone's timeline, past, present and future. He told Jeremiah, 'Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee... and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations' (Jeremiah 1:5). God also said He planned his future and hope in eternal life (Jeremiah 29:11). God also has plans, shape and form for individuals and groups all throughout history as well as us today. In the Old Testament days He formed a

minority group, the Israelites, to be a model of Godly character for the rest of the world. 'This people have I formed for myself, they shall shew forth my praise' (Isaiah 43:21). Throughout the last two millennia He has continued to form and mould characters of people for Himself, thus being a reflection of His own loving character as exemplified in His Son.

Form in the historical periods

Music history covers a vast variety of music forms in both secular and sacred music with many names and plans/structures/sections within. We don't have space in this short article to go into depth but you can check in music dictionaries if you wish to find out more details. I will summarise and give a few examples.

In Ancient Times there were psalms and songs of the Old Testament as well as pagan music forms. The Middle Ages had Gregorian chant, antiphon and motets. The Renaissance brought forth more motets, madrigals, sonnets, fantasies, dance suites and hymns. In the Baroque are early opera and ballet music, oratorios, chorales, cantatas, anthems, masses, passions, sonatas, preludes, fugues, toccatas, concerti, theme and variations and overtures. In the music of the Classical Period we hear developments of the previous forms plus symphonies, opera seria and opera buffa, trios, quartets, quintets and divertimenti. The Romantic Period further developed these earlier forms and produced programme music and more art song which

grew into the song cycles. The Late Nineteenth Century expanded music forms into grander forms with huge numbers of musicians as well as many smaller forms. In the Twentieth Century the variety and number of musical forms exploded so that some composers experimented with as little form as possible. For example short fragments of music were created and could be played in any order and any number of times.

■ God designed our brains to look for and be stimulated by variety

Variety vs. repetition

Theme and variations is a form used for many centuries. It starts with an original idea which is then varied by changing music elements such as melody, rhythm, harmony, tempo, tonality, dynamics and others. The result is the vast diversity of music styles accumulated throughout the centuries, an aural feast for today's listeners. It has great versatility and provides infinite opportunities for creativity. God designed our brains to look for and be stimulated by variety. Just look at the variety in our foods, in different types of people, plants and animals. Repetition dulls the mind and much of modern music is just that – boring repetition, especially of beat, so listeners are unknowingly dulled, numbed and stupefied mentally. The frontal lobe (which is the seat of reasoning,

discernment, spirituality and wise judgement) is bypassed. The mind is opened to manipulation by others.

Same but different

The musical element of form has many spiritual applications. For example, in theme and variations form we see the principle of 'same but different' or unity and diversity. God's creation reflects His character. People are all people but with huge differences. Animals are all animals and plants are all plants but there are so many different species. Music is music but with many different forms. Things can be the same but different at the same time. This concept is a reflection of the unity and diversity within the Godhead. He is the one true God but also the Three-in-One — Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The element of form reveals even more about God. In the same way that a garden border needs a gardener to design and make it, or a cake needs a cook to design and mix it, or roads need lines and signs to set the rules/boundaries/limits, so does a piece of music need someone to plan and compose it by mixing the music elements. And so it is with all of God's creation. There is a Master Designer, Creator, Maker of the whole universe and all that is in it.

Cause and effect

In the element of form we also see the principle of cause and effect in action. Nothing happens by chance. Notes do not just appear on paper to form musical sounds by themselves. Ingredients for a cake do not

mix themselves, slide into a cake tin, jump into the oven and then turn into a cake. There is a reason and cause for everything whether we see the cause or not. The word *because* means 'by cause.' Notes appear on paper and turn into sounds because of what happens previously and invisibly in the composer's mind. The cake became visible because of the idea in the cook's mind before they prepared it. Much happens in the visible realm because of prior things in the invisible realm.

■ many are being lured away from God in the same way the Pied Piper lured away the children to their destruction

Genesis 1:1–2 tells how God created the heaven and earth in the beginning and 'the earth was without form.' He moulded and formed it into the perfect shape and structure for his plans and purpose. Genesis 2:7 describes how man was 'formed from the dust of the ground.' The whole of Genesis chapter 1 describes the repeated sections/days and variations He used over the days of Creation. The basic life pattern of night/day/night/day was established along with a vast amount of variations within His creation. Music is yet another example of this cause and effect principle. It doesn't just happen accidentally.

God, the original cause

If things come into being (into a form of some sort) because of something that existed earlier, then who was the very first Cause? It must be God because He originally created the heavens and the earth. There is no-one before Him (Gen 1:1). If we are to understand why the world and its music is like it is today, we need to step out of the present and look to the past for causes and eventually to the very beginning in God, the Creator and First Cause. We need to look beyond what we see and hear right now to much higher and grander things. This is why Paul says, 'While we look not at the things which are seen but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal but the things which are not seen are eternal' (2 Cor 4:18). He also writes, 'Set your affections (mind) on things above, not on things on earth' (Col 3:2).

Looking higher

Why do we need to look beyond ourselves to a higher and greater Cause? Because God knew exactly what His plans for this earth and us were when He created it all. What did God use in forming His perfect creation? He used wisdom, understanding and knowledge of the perfect order. 'The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath He established the heavens. By His knowledge the depths are broken up and the clouds let drop the dew' (Proverbs 3:19). Man in his pride and human wisdom has tampered with the original plans and forms and made the world and its music the way it is now.

Some readers may find these articles rather heavy and over-spiritualising music. However, I believe it is vital to understand more deeply and see the invisible factors behind the visible. We then see how so many are being lured away from God and His original plans for man in the same way that the Pied Piper of Hamelin stealthily lured away the children to their destruction with his mesmerising music. We must look higher to the invisible, spiritual, eternal factors behind the temporal scenes of this world and gain a much broader perspective. If we don't try to understand more from God's viewpoint we will drown in worldly details and succumb to the manipulations of the forces behind this powerful music medium.

In conclusion, God is the original Cause. The effect or result is the element of form, along with its infinite, visible and invisible variety of shapes, sections and patterns. This music element teaches us many things about God. He designed His creation (including music) with shapes and plans. He has plans for each of us along our earthly timelines. He also gives shapes and boundaries to our lives and, within these boundaries, He gives freedom, safety and security (Jeremiah 1:5; 29:11, Isaiah 43:21, Genesis 1:1-2; 2:7). ■

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