**Musical forms**

**The term musical form refers to the overall structure or plan of a piece of music,and it describes the layout of a composition as divided into sections.**

**Binary form**

This form uses two sections (**AB**...); each section is often repeated (**AABB**...). In 18th-century western classical music, "simple binary" form was often used for dances and carried with it the convention that the two sections should be in different [musical keys](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical_key) but maintain the same rhythm, duration and tone. The alternation of two tunes gives enough variety to permit a dance to be extended for as long as may be required.

**Ternary form**

This form has three parts. In Western classical music a simple ternary form has a third section that is a recapitulation of the first (**ABA**). Often, the first section is repeated (**AABA**). This approach was popular in the 18th-century operatic [aria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aria),and was called [*da capo*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Da_capo) (i.e. "repeat from the top") form. Later, it gave rise to the [32-bar song](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/32_bar_form), with the **B** section then often referred to as the "middle eight". A song has more need than a dance of a self-contained form with a beginning and an end.

**Rondo form**

This form has a recurring theme alternating with different (usually contrasting) sections called "episodes". It may be asymmetrical (**ABACADAEA**) or symmetrical (**ABACABA**). A recurring section, especially the main theme, is sometimes more thoroughly varied, or else one episode may be a "development" of it. A similar arrangement is the [ritornello](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ritornello) form of the Baroque [concerto grosso](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concerto_grosso). [Arch form](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arch_form) (**ABCBA**) resembles a symmetrical rondo without intermediate repetitions of the main theme.

**Variation form**

Variation forms include [ground bass](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ground_bass), [passacaglia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passacaglia), [chaconne](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaconne), and theme and variations.[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Variation_(music)#cite_note-2) Ground bass, passacaglia and chaconne are typically based on brief [ostinato](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ostinato) motifs providing a repetitive harmonic basis and are also typically continuous evolving structures. 'Theme and variation' forms are however based specifically on melodic variation, in which the fundamental musical idea, or [theme](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theme_(music)), is repeated in altered form or accompanied in a different manner. 'Theme and variation' structure generally begins with a theme (which is itself sometimes preceded by an introduction), typically between eight and thirty-two bars in length; each variation, particularly in music of the eighteenth century and earlier, will be of the same length and structure as the theme.[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Variation_(music)#cite_note-Sisman_2001-3) This form may in part have derived from the practical inventiveness of musicians; "Court dances were long; the tunes which accompanied them were short. Their repetition became intolerably wearisome, and inevitably led the player to indulge in extempore variation and ornament";[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Variation_(music)#cite_note-4) however, the format of the dance required these variations to maintain the same duration and shape of the tune.

Variation forms can be written as 'free-standing' pieces for solo instruments or ensembles, or can constitute a [movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Movement_(music)) of a larger piece. Most jazz music is structured on a basic pattern of theme and variations.

**Sonata form**

A sonata-allegro movement is divided into sections. Each section is felt to perform specific functions in the [musical argument](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical_argument).

It may begin with an [*introduction*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonata_form#Introduction), which is, in general, slower than the main movement. In terms of structure, introductions are an upbeat before the main musical argument.

The first required section is the [*exposition*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonata_form#Exposition). The exposition presents the primary thematic material for the movement: one or two [themes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theme_(music)) or theme groups, often in contrasting styles and in opposing [keys](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Key_(music)), connected by a [modulating](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modulation_(music)) [transition](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transition_(music)). The exposition typically concludes with a **closing theme**, a [*codetta*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codetta), or both.

The exposition is followed by the [*development*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonata_form#Development) where the [harmonic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harmony) and [textural](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Texture_(music)) possibilities of the thematic material are explored.

The development then re-transitions back to the [*recapitulation*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonata_form#Recapitulation) where the thematic material returns in the [tonic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tonic_(music)) key, and for the recapitulation to complete the musical argument, material that has not been stated in the tonic key is "resolved" by being played, in whole or in part, in the tonic.

The movement may conclude with a [*coda*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonata_form#Coda), beyond the final cadence of the recapitulation.

The term 'sonata form' is controversial and has been called misleading by scholars and composers almost from its inception. Its originators implied that there was a set template to which Classical and [Romantic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romantic_music) composers aspired, or should aspire to.

**Opera** **form**

**Opera** (English plural: *operas;* Italian plural: *opere*) is an [art form](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Performing_arts) in which [singers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singing) and [musicians](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musician) perform a [dramatic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drama) work combining text (called a [libretto](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libretto)) and [musical score](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheet_music), usually in a theatrical [setting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Set_construction).[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opera#cite_note-1) Opera incorporates many of the elements of spoken theatre, such as [acting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acting), [scenery](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatrical_scenery), and [costumes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Costume) and sometimes includes dance. The performance is typically given in an [opera house](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opera_house), accompanied by an [orchestra](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orchestra) or smaller [musical ensemble](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical_ensemble).

Opera is part of the Western [classical music](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_music) tradition.[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opera#cite_note-2) It started in Italy at the end of the 16th century (with [Jacopo Peri](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacopo_Peri)'s lost [*Dafne*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dafne), produced in [Florence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florence) in 1598) and soon spread through the rest of Europe: [Schütz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinrich_Sch%C3%BCtz) in Germany, [Lully](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Baptiste_Lully) in France, and [Purcell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Purcell) in England all helped to establish their national traditions in the 17th century. In the 18th century, Italian opera continued to dominate most of Europe, except France, attracting foreign composers such as [Handel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Frideric_Handel). [Opera seria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opera_seria) was the most prestigious form of Italian opera, until [Gluck](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christoph_Willibald_Gluck) reacted against its artificiality with his "reform" operas in the 1760s. Today the most renowned figure of late 18th century opera is [Mozart](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfgang_Amadeus_Mozart), who began with opera seria but is most famous for his Italian [comic operas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comic_opera), especially [*The Marriage of Figaro*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Marriage_of_Figaro)*(Le Nozze Di Figaro),*[*Don Giovanni*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Giovanni), and [*Così fan tutte*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cos%C3%AC_fan_tutte), as well as [*The Magic Flute*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Magic_Flute)*(Die Zauberflöte)*, a landmark in the German tradition.

The first third of the 19th century saw the highpoint of the [bel canto](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bel_canto) style, with [Rossini](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gioachino_Rossini), [Donizetti](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaetano_Donizetti) and [Bellini](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincenzo_Bellini) all creating works that are still performed today. It also saw the advent of [Grand Opera](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Opera) typified by the works of Auber and [Meyerbeer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giacomo_Meyerbeer). The mid-to-late 19th century was a "golden age" of opera, led and dominated by [Wagner](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Wagner) in Germany and [Verdi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giuseppe_Verdi) in Italy. The popularity of opera continued through the [verismo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verismo) era in Italy and contemporary [French opera](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_opera) through to [Puccini](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giacomo_Puccini) and [Strauss](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Strauss) in the early 20th century. During the 19th century, parallel operatic traditions emerged in central and eastern Europe, particularly in [Russia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_opera) and [Bohemia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bohemia). The 20th century saw many experiments with modern styles, such as [atonality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atonality) and [serialism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serialism) ([Schoenberg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_Schoenberg) and[Berg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alban_Berg)), [Neoclassicism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoclassicism) ([Stravinsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Igor_Stravinsky)), and [Minimalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minimalism) ([Philip Glass](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Glass) and [John Adams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Adams_(composer))). With the rise of recording technology, singers such as [Enrico Caruso](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enrico_Caruso) became known to audiences beyond the circle of opera fans. Operas were also performed on (and written for) radio an

**Symphony Form**

S**ymphony,** a lengthy form of musical composition for [orchestra](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/431249/orchestra), normally consisting of several large sections, or [movements](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/395191/movement), at least one of which usually employs [sonata](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/554229/sonata) form.

Symphonies in this sense began to be composed during the so-called [Classical](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/120262/classical-music) era in European music history, *c.* 1740–1820. The early part of this period and the decade immediately preceding it are sometimes called pre-Classical, as are the symphonies written before about 1750. During the 19th century, which included the Romantic era, symphonies grew longer, and composers concerned themselves with ways of unifying the movements; extramusical programs and new approaches toward tonality (the major–minor system of chord progressions) were among the solutions to the problems of large-scale symphonic form. Late in the century, symphonies—and orchestras—had grown to such an extent that reaction set in, culminating in the Neoclassical movement of the early 20th century, in which composers turned again toward principles of balance and formal discipline, using new techniques to achieve dynamic coherence. Economic considerations forced a reduction in the size of orchestras and amount of rehearsal time available to mid-20th-century composers, further justifying a return to less extravagant symphonic thinking.

Throughout the 19th century, however, a number of outstanding symphonists were able to reconcile the demands of fashion with strict musical logic. These composers represent the mainstream of symphonic activity, and their works remained models for much 20th-century activity in the genre. Throughout the following article two concerns predominate: a survey of the chief symphonic works and composers and consideration of the evolution of symphonic thought.

**Suite form**

**Suite,** in music, a group of self-contained instrumental movements of varying character, usually in the same key. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the period of its greatest importance, the suite consisted principally of [dance](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/150714/dance) movements. In the 19th and 20th centuries the term also referred more generally to a variety of sets of instrumental pieces, mainly in forms smaller than those of the sonata, and included selections for concert performance of incidental music to plays (e.g., Felix Mendelssohn’s music for Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* [composed 1843] and Georges Bizet’s *L’Arlésienne* suite [composed 1872]) and ballet music (e.g., Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s*Nutcracker* suite [1892] and Igor Stravinsky’s *Firebird* suites [1911, 1919, 1945]).

**Basic glossary of musical forms**

These definitions are taken in part from the [glossary](http://www.wku.edu/%7Esmithch/music/glossnew.htm) of the [The Classical Music Navigator](http://www.wku.edu/%7Esmithch/music/index2.htm) by [Charles H. Smith](http://www.wku.edu/%7Esmithch/index.html)

**Air/ayre:** (1) an English song or melody from the 16th to the 19th century; (2) a 16th-century solo song with lute accompanied.  
  
**Aleatory music:** music in which chance or indeterminacy are compositional elements.   
  
**Anthem:** a choral setting (often with solo voice parts and organ accompaniment) of an English language religious or moral text, usually for performance during Protestant services.  
  
**Antiphon:** a liturgical chant sung as the response to the verses of a psalm.   
  
**Arabesque:** a short piece of music featuring various melodic, contrapuntal, or harmonic decorations.   
  
**Bagatelle:** a short, light instrumental piece of music of no specified form, usually for piano.   
  
**Ballade:** (1) a 14th-15th-century French song form which set poetry to music; (2) an instrumental (usually piano) piece with dramatic narrative qualities.   
  
**Barcarolle:** song or instrumental piece in a swaying 6/8 time (i.e., suggesting the lilting motion of a Venetian gondola).   
  
**Berceuse:** a soft instrumental piece or lullaby, usually in a moderate 6/8 tempo; a lullaby.   
  
**Canon:** a contrapuntal form in two or more (voice or instrumental) parts in which the melody is introduced by one part and then repeated by the next before each previous part has finished (i.e., such that overlapping of parts occurs).   
  
**Cantata:** term applied to a 17th-18th- century multi-movement non-theatrical and non-liturgical vocal genre; subsequently used to describe large-scale vocal works in the same spirit, generally for soloists, chorus and orchestra; may also be for solo voice and accompaniment.   
  
**Canzona:** (1) 16th-17th-century instrumental genre in the manner of a French polyphonic chanson, characterized by the juxtaposition of short contrasting sections; (2) term applied to any of several types of secular vocal music.   
  
**Caprice/capriccio:** term describing a variety of short composition types characterized by lightness, fancy, or improvisational manner.   
  
**Carol:** since the 19th century, generally a song that is in four-part harmony, simple form, and having to do with the Virgin Mary or Christmas.   
  
**Chaconne:** a slow, stately instrumental work in duple meter employing variations.   
  
**Chanson:** French for song; in particular, a style of 14th- to 16th-century French song for voice or voices, often with instrumental accompaniment.   
  
**Chant/plainchant:** monophonic [music used](http://www.library.yale.edu/cataloging/music/glossary.htm) in Christian liturgical services sung in unison and in a free rhythm.  
  
**Concertante:** (1) a term used to modify another form or genre, suggesting that all parts should be regarded as equal in status (18th century) or indicating a virtuoso [first violin](http://www.library.yale.edu/cataloging/music/glossary.htm) part (19th century); (2) a work with solo parts in the nature of, but not the form of, a concerto.   
  
**Concerto:** (1) ensemble music for voice(s) and instrument(s) (17th century); (2) extended piece of music in which a solo instrument or instruments is contrasted with an orchestral ensemble (post-17th century).   
  
**Concerto grosso:** orchestral form especially popular in the 17th and 18th centuries in which the contrasting lines of a smaller and a larger group of instruments are featured.   
  
**Credo:** third item of the Ordinary of the [Mass](http://www.library.yale.edu/cataloging/music/mass.htm).   
  
**Divertimento/divertissement:** a style of light, often occasion-specific, instrumental music arranged in several movements..   
  
**Etude/study:** especially, a piece written for purposes of practicing or displaying technique.   
  
**Fancy/fantas(-ia)(-ie)(-y)/phantasie:** an instrumental piece in which the formal and stylistic characteristics may vary from free, improvisatory types to strictly contrapuntal; form is of secondary importance.  
  
**Fugue:** contrapuntal form in which a subject theme ("part" or "voice") is introduced and then extended and developed through some number of successive imitations.   
  
**Galliard:** a lively court dance of Italian origin, usually in triple time.   
  
**Gigue (jig):** a quick, springy dance often used as the concluding movement to 18th century instrumental suites.   
  
**Gloria:** second item of the Ordinary of the [Mass](http://www.library.yale.edu/cataloging/music/mass.htm).   
  
**Impromptu:** a short instrumental piece of a free, casual nature suggesting improvisation.   
  
**Incidental music:** music composed for atmospheric effect or to accompany the action in a predominantly spoken play; the music is not integral to the work even though it may have dramatic significance.   
  
**Lied(er):** German for song(s); in particular, a style of 19th-century German song distinguished by the setting of texts from the literary tradition and by the elaboration of the instrumental accompaniment.   
  
**Madrigal:** (1) a 14th-century Italian style of setting secular verse for two or three unaccompanied voices; (2) a 16th/17th-century contrapuntal setting of verse (usually secular) for several equally important voice parts, usually unaccompanied.   
  
**Magnificat:** a setting of the Biblical hymn of the Virgin Mary (as given in St. Luke) for use in Roman Catholic and Anglican services.   
  
**March:** instrumental music in duple meter with a repeated and regular rhythm usually used to accompany military movements and processions.   
  
**Masque:** an aristocratic 16th-17th-century English theater form integrating poetry, dance, music, and elaborate sets.   
  
[**Mass**](http://www.library.yale.edu/cataloging/music/mass.htm)**:** the principal religious service of the Catholic Church, with musical parts that either vary according to Church calendar (the Proper) or do not (the Ordinary).   
  
**Mazurka:** a moderately fast Polish country dance in triple meter in which the accent is shifted to the weak beats.   
  
**Microtonal music:** music which makes use of intervals smaller than a semitone (a half step).   
  
**Minuet:** a graceful French dance of moderate 3/4 tempo often appearing as a section of extended works (especially dance suites).   
  
**Motet:** (1) to ca. 1400, a piece with one or more voices, often with different but related sacred or secular texts, singing over a fragment of chant in longer note-values; (2) after 1400, a polyphonic setting of a short sacred text.   
  
**Nocturne:** a moderately slow piece, usually for piano, of dreamy, contemplative character and song-like melody.   
  
**Ode:** cantata-like musical setting of the lyric poetry form so called.   
  
**Opera:** theatrically staged story set to instrumental and vocal music such that most or all of the acted parts are sung. a drama set to music sung by singers usually in costume, with instrumental accompaniment; the music is integral and is not incidental.   
  
**Operetta:** a light opera with spoken dialogue, songs, and dances.   
  
**Oratorio:** originally setting of an extended religious narrative (and since ca. 1800, non-religious ones as well) for vocal soloists, chorus, and orchestra, intended for concert or church performance without costumes or stage settings.   
  
**Ostinato:** a short melodic, rhythmic, or chordal phrase repeated continuously throughout a piece or section while other musical elements are generally changing.  
  
**Partita:** term initially applied as a synonym for "set of variations" (17th century), then as a synonym for "suite" (ca. 1700 to present).   
  
**Passacaglia:** an instrumental dance form usually in triple meter in which there are ground-bass or ostinato variations.   
  
**Pavan(e):** a stately court dance in duple meter, from the 16th and 17th centuries, and remaining popular in the 17th century as an instrumental form.   
  
**Polka:** an energetic Bohemian dance performed in the round in 2/4 time.   
  
**Polonaise:** a stately Polish processional dance in 3/4 time.   
  
**Prelude:** (1) an instrumental section or movement preceding or introducing a larger piece or group of pieces; (2) a self-contained short piece usually for piano.   
  
**Psalm:** a vocal work set to text from the Book of Psalms.  
  
**Quadrille:** a lively, rhythmic 19th-century French country couple dance that incorporates popular tunes, usually in duple meter.   
  
**Requiem:** a musical composition honoring the dead; specially the Roman Catholic Mass for the dead, but also other commemorative pieces of analogous intent.   
  
**Rhapsody:** term similar to "fantasia" applied to pieces inspired by extroverted romantic notions.   
  
**Romance:** (1) a song with a simple vocal line and a simple accompaniment; especially popular in late 18th-19th-century France and Italy; (2) a short instrumental piece with the lyrical character of a vocal romance.   
  
**Rondo:** an instrumental form in which one section intermittently recurs between subsidiary sections and which concludes the piece.   
  
**Scherzo:** term designating lively and usually lighthearted instrumental music; most commonly used to label the fast-tempo movement of a symphony, sonata, etc.   
  
**Serenade:** a light and/or intimate piece of no specific form such as might be played in an open-air evening setting.   
  
**Sinfonia:** term applied in a variety of contexts in different periods; e.g., as a near synonym for "instrumental canzona," "prelude," "overture," and "symphony."   
  
**Sonata:** an extended piece for instrumental soloist with or without instrumental accompaniment, usually in several movements.   
  
**Sonatina:** a short sonata, or one of modest intent; especially popular during the Classical Period.   
  
[**Song cycle**](http://www.library.yale.edu/cataloging/music/songcycl.htm)**:** a group of songs performed in an order establishing a musical continuity related to some underlying (conceptual) theme.   
  
**Stabat Mater:** a sequence in the Roman Catholic liturgy regarding the crucifixion, and used in several Divine offices.   
  
**Suite:** a set of unrelated and usually short instrumental pieces, movements or sections played as a group, and usually in a specific order.   
  
**Symphonic poem/tone poem:** a descriptive orchestral piece in which the music conveys a scene or relates a story.  
  
**Symphony:** an extended piece for full orchestra, usually serious in nature and in several movements.   
  
**Tango:** an Argentinian couple dance in duple meter characterized by strong syncopation and dotted rhythms.   
  
**Te Deum:** (from the Latin, "We praise Thee, O God") lengthy hymn of praise to God in the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and other Christian liturgies.   
  
**Toccata:** a piece for keyboard intended to display [virtuosity](http://www.library.yale.edu/cataloging/music/glossary.htm).   
  
**Trio sonata:** a 17th-18th-century sonata for two or three melody instruments and continuo accompaniment   
  
**Variations:** composition form in the theme is repeated several or many times with various modifications.   
  
**Waltz:** a popular ballroom dance in 3/4 time.