

Other Musical Forms

While the sonata form is considered one of the most complex and widely used forms of common practice music, there are other forms that composers employed on a regular basis. While not as complex as the sonata form, these other forms might have been used in multi-movement pieces to provide variety from one movement to the next.

Rondo Form

Derived from an old French dance format, the rondo form uses a regularly recurring section (the *refrain*) interspersed with different, varying material (*episodes*). The refrain would use the same, or nearly the same material each occurrence, while the episodes could use different material each time.

In terms of labeling, the refrain is identified as the **A** section and the various episodes are labeled **B, C, D** and so on. The formal layout of a rondo could follow a symmetrical design like this:

|-----A-----|-----B-----|-----A-----|-----C-----|-----A-----|-----B-----|-----A-----||
refrain 1st episode refrain 2nd episode refrain 1st episode refrain
(again)

Or the layout could be linear:

|-----A-----|-----B-----|-----A-----|-----C-----|-----A-----|-----D-----|-----A-----||

Whatever the arrangement of interspersed episodes is, the rondo form will begin and end with the refrain. The unifying idea behind the rondo form is to hear the familiar **A**-section material (the refrain) return every so often. Refrains in the middle part of the rondo could be varied, such as being in a different key, or featuring other rhythms, but the theme would still be clearly recognizable.

Many symphonies and piano sonatas use the rondo form in their final movements. The tempo can be fast or slow, although it is usually fast if in the final movement.

Theme and Variations Form

This is a smaller format, but one that features the principal of variation and development. In this format, a short theme is presented (around 32 bars). Then a number of variations of the same length follow. Each variation will apply one or many changes to the original theme while still keeping the theme's essence in tact. The variations could ornament the melodies, change the chords, change the rhythms, change the key (like from major to minor), and so on. As the variations pile up, they usually become more and more complex—showing off the composer's ability to vary and develop the original idea.

One of the most famous set of variations is J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* for harpsichord from 1741. This features a short introduction called and *Aria* (the theme on which the variations are based) and then 30 variations on a single theme, and finally closing with the same original there/*Aria*. Mozart's piano sonata K.330 is another impressive set of variations.