

# FIVE LEVELS OF FORM

## **Progressing from the Micro to the Macro** *A Hierarchy for Instrumental Classical Music*

### **LEVEL ONE – Motivic**

The construction, evolution, and manipulation of motives. These are small, flexible, melodic ideas that provide a generative impulse and lend coherence to themes, developmental and transitional passages, as well as sometimes whole movements and even pieces. The study of motives is analogous to the consideration of form at the cellular level.

### **LEVEL TWO – Phrase Structure**

The architecture of themes with attention to symmetry vs. asymmetry, the use of parallel or contrasting periods, division into four and eight-bar units as opposed to more unusual lengths such as three and six bars, the introduction of organic freedom via extensions or interruptions, etc. The concepts of antecedent and consequent will often be useful for examining phrase structure as well as, on a slightly larger scale, statement and counterstatement. Does a movement tend to have square phrase structure, as is typical of dance music, or do phrase lengths change more unpredictably? In some cases, movements will incorporate themes consisting of parts that receive immediate repetitions, such as binary form. Though the study of phrase structure is most easily applied to themes, it can also cast valuable light on freer transitional and developmental passages.

### **LEVEL THREE – Movement Structure**

Identifying the specific form of a movement, such as binary, ternary, theme & variations, rondo, sonata form, etc. and noting particular idiosyncrasies and refinements in the handling of the established template. Is the form employed in an orthodox manner, or are deliberate liberties taken? How does the thematic material work within the form to create a convincing and unified effect? This level is the one that springs most readily to mind when musical structure is considered.

### **LEVEL FOUR – Structure of Entire Composition**

Focusing on the arrangement and interrelationship of the movements comprising a piece. How many are there, and what are their various keys, tempos, meters, and forms? How do variety and contrast contribute to the cumulative effect of the work? Are there motivic or thematic links between movements or other unifying strategies such as an explicit or sensed program? How closely do the selection and ordering of the movements conform to the contemporary expectations for a specific musical genre? Naturally, this level does not apply to works in one movement, except perhaps those fantasies, etc. that seem to combine several individual movements fused together to form a continuous whole (for example, a number of works by Schubert suggest themselves).

### **LEVEL FIVE – Groups of Associated Pieces**

Individual compositions that a composer has linked together to form a larger musical entity, such as a set published together with the same opus number. Are these merely thrown together as a matter of convenience, or do they seem consciously planned to form a coherent whole? How do the pieces relate together in terms of ordering, key, character, contrast, and unifying features? In some cases a program may even be involved. The questions arising here are similar to those for Level Four, but expanded to a still larger scale. Just a few illustrative examples would be Handel's Op. 6 Concerti Grossi, Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," Mozart's "Haydn" Quartets, Beethoven's "Razumovsky" Quartets, and Smetana's *Má Vlast*. This would also be an appropriate place to include collections of single movement genre pieces (frequently for piano) such as Schubert's *Moments musicaux*, Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, Chopin's Preludes, Dvorak's Slavonic Dances, and Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance Marches.

**MUSICMAP NOTES**

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