

Classical Forms in Modern Popular Music

Popular music can be used as background knowledge by music educators in order to educate students on elements of classical music, such as form and compositional devices.

Research by: Emily Williams

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Jennifer Dalmas

The Period





The period is an 8 measure theme built out of two phrases: a 4 measure antecedent, followed by a 4 measure consequent... An antecedent phrase begins with a 2 measure basic idea followed by a two measure contrasting idea... The consequent phrase repeats the antecedent by bring a return of the original basic idea.

Caplin, William Earl. *Analyzing classical form: an approach for the classroom.* Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013.

House of Gold (Twenty One Pilots - 2013)

Lyric	Form
She asked me, "Son, when I grow old,	Antecedent (Basic Idea)
Will you buy me a house of gold?	Antecedent (Contrasting Idea)
And when your father turns to stone,	Consequent (Repeat of Basic Idea)
Will you take care of me?"	Consequent (Contrasting Idea)

Symphony No.94 in G major, Hob.I:94 (2nd Movement) (Haydn - 1791)

Antecedent: Basic Idea	Contrasting Idea
	
Consequent: Basic Idea	Contrasting Idea
	

Da Capo Aria

According to classical theory, this appears to be a basic ternary form; however, Spektor and Handel add an element that elevates this to a form known as the "Da Capo Aria". This element is added embellishment, for the purpose of personalization and expression.

Musicbox (Regina Spektor - 2006)

Time	27"	49"	1'13"
Classical Form	A	B	A
Vernacular Form	Chorus	Verse	Chorus
Instrumentation	Piano and Voice		

Spektor uniquely embellishes the repeat of the A section with noises illustrating the sound of swallowing bubbles, as per the lyrics of the song.

"He Was Despised" from Messiah (Handel - 1741)

Measure	1-44	45-67	1-44
Classical Form	A	B	A
Vernacular Form	Chorus	Verse	Chorus
Instrumentation	Voice, Strings		

Handel leaves the ornamentation up to the performer. These elements include trills, appoggiaturas, and turns, as well as cadenzas. This task, which was once common practice, must now be carefully studied in order to be historically accurate. Modern performance practice can easily over-embellish these Baroque period works.

Leitmotifs

Leitmotif: a theme, or other coherent musical idea, clearly defined so as to retain its identity if modified on subsequent appearances, whose purpose it to represent or symbolizes a person, object, place, idea, state of mind, supernatural force, or any other ingredient in a dramatic work.

(Oxford Music Dictionary)



Photo by Theo Wargo/WireImage

"Hamilton" (Lin-Manuel Miranda - 2015)

"Alexander Hamilton" (m. 43)

"Satisfied" (m. 51)

This motif denotes a character: Alexander Hamilton

"Das Rheingold"/"Die Walküre" (Wagner - 1848)

"Das Rheingold" Act 1, Scene 1

"Die Walküre" Act 1, Scene 3

The motif, called the "Renunciation of Love Motif", denotes Siegmund's need for love

Background knowledge is "the knowledge students have learned both formally in the classroom as well as informally through life experiences". By understanding the many ways that classical forms and compositional devices have influenced the popular, mainstream music our students listen to every day, we can access our students' background knowledge and interest to bring understanding to music history and theory. In this way, we can introduce musical concepts students may not have otherwise understood and enjoyed.

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