

Before I get too far into this, I want to make clear that this paper is not intended to be anything more than an explanation of how I use form in my own music. There are many books about musical form, ranging from the early classical to the modern. They draw conclusions based on analyzing the works of various composers from the time periods each are focusing on.

I've read many of these as part of my own musical education. But they only served to illustrate what other composers have done and, perhaps, why they've chosen the forms they used. To a limited extent, this can be useful. But what I discovered is that form, like composing in general, is usually an individual thing. A composer should decide for themselves what form is and how it helps to shape their own music.

Early on in my education and development as a composer, it was clear to me that the established forms, like the sonata allegro, couldn't be a one size fits all kind of thing. The classics didn't interest me, they still don't. I was a child of the modern era and I listened to the music that came out of those times. I evolved as a composer concurrent with the advent of serialism, electronic music, and the experimentalism of *John Cage* and others of the New York school.

That music helped define what form meant to me, and it was the work of those composers that was the focus of my studies. What I learned from them is what helped shape my own ideas of what form is. But I also recognized that there were many composers still writing in the classical style, using forms indicative of that genre of music. This, I believed, was for either of two reasons, or maybe both.

It was either because many newer composers seriously loved this style of music and sought to emulate it in their own work, or maybe because it was the most commercially viable and they wanted to earn at least part of their living writing it. When you're competing for commissions, you do what you need to. That's not

an indictment of anyone pursuing a career composing for money, it's a statement of fact. It's how it is.

Because that was not my choice, I didn't bother writing what someone else wanted me to. I wrote for myself with the hopes that others may find my work appealing. Like the composers of the 1950s in New York, I was influenced by what the painters were doing, and how that related to my own music. The biggest revolution that came out of that period was the shift from representational art, that was essentially impressions of something physical, to abstract expression.

Artists like *Jackson Pollock*, *Mark Rothko*, *Willem DeKooning* and *Philip Guston* went beyond the representational art of old, and began to paint more for painting's sake only. They didn't try to mimic the shape and form of the things they saw. They expressed their emotions and feelings on canvas with paint abstractly. At times, it was more of a tactile experience, where the materials themselves motivated the work. It was also more ephemeral, where the inspiration came moment by moment.

This resonated with me. This is how I believed my own music should unfold. While much of my earlier work centered around a common theme or motif, and the form it took reflecting that, eventually it morphed into something freer, less formal. I allowed myself to follow my intuitions moment by moment, rather than consciously trying to roll it all up in some form with a predetermined plan and meaning.

While it's good to think of things in those terms, and in that manner, ultimately the final arbitrator of any piece of music is how it sounds. After you compose your music, following whatever path you've chosen, it still has to sound good. And by good, I mean firstly acceptable to you, as the composer, and secondly acceptable to anyone listening to it. That has to happen first. After you've interested the listener, then the subtleties of how you've developed the work will come through.

What I discovered was a small handful of attributes that I felt contributed to form. The first is *density*, meaning how much concurrent music is being sounded. This is the result of a number of factors like dissonance, register and the number of contrapuntal and concurrent voices sounding at once. The second is *intensity*. I saw this primarily as a product of dynamics, but also reflecting the emotional response to the music at that particular moment. This meant that intensity was influenced by density.

When both density and intensity are lessened, and the dynamics becoming quiet and soft, the emotional response is different. It takes on a different feel, more subdued. That suggested the third attribute, *variation*. It's important to change things up, not stating the same kind of sonorities, with the same intensity and density, over too long a time period.

I believe there needs to be a balance between repetition and variation. Too much repetition can result in a sort of boredom, where the listener's interest begins to wane. Too much variation can lead to the listener becoming confused and uneasy. People tend to look for patterns, even subtle ones, in most things they take in, especially music. An apparent absence of any recognizable pattern is distracting, tending to cause the listener to lose interest.

Another factor that I feel contributes to music's form is relational continuity. By that I mean the establishment of motif-like figures that get repeated in various ways throughout the piece. That can be irrespective of any of the other attributes. It's one of the things a composer can do to establish the patterns listeners will subconsciously search for. This can be heard in many film and television soundtracks. It helps the viewer associate the music with a particular character or scene, thus giving it some continuity.

## SOME THOUGHTS ON FORM IN MUSIC

In my own music, I try to stay conscious of these attributes, especially if the work's duration is somewhat lengthy. The more time you spend listening to a piece, the more important these attributes are to the overall appeal of the music. For shorter pieces, it doesn't matter as much, at least to my way of thinking.

Form is an essential ingredient in any composition. As freely as the sounds unfold during the composing process, so should the form and shape. I'm less likely to be concerned with organization these days, certainly less so as I was when I wrote a lot of serial music. Morton Feldman said the last two great organization efforts in art were cubism and serialism. Both dealt with how the art was made, the methods used, the structure developed.

For me, I've moved away from that and now just let the sounds come forth. The sounds are there more for their own sake than to serve some structural purpose, although they still do to an extent. I let the sounds evolve as the composition progresses. I use sounds from all kinds of sources. That was *John Cage's* greatest gift to us. He gave us permission to use any sound we wanted and still regard it as music. It makes sense to extend that thinking to form.