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SONG FORMS AND SONG STRUCTURE

Basics of Song Form

Video referred to is at this link: https://youtu.be/2Q3BZ5cDn44

Even if you are an instrumentalist or singer without a lot of formal training, you will no doubt have some knowledge of the form of a song, how sections of a song are put together. As you learn and memorize a song your logical mind will organize it, consciously or subconsciously.

The great popular American "**standards**" that were written between the 1920s and 1960s are sometimes collectively called the ***Great American Songbook***. We are going to focus mainly on this repertoire, songs are still performed today by musicians and entertainers all over the world.

We'll start with **AABA** song form, a very common song form, though there are many other forms. The letters **AABA** do not relate to the key a song is in (we will talk about keys later). These letters refer to the **sections** of the song.

Analyzing the structure of a song in detail is not a necessary prerequisite to performing the song, but it can help in several ways: 1) It can help in memorizing the song, 2) Knowing the overall structure of the song will influence your expressive flow, 3) You will be able to give (or receive) direction while singing or playing, live or at a rehearsal, to jump to a particular section of the song, such as "go to the **bridge**," or "**last A**."

Another benefit of knowing song structure is that it will help you in your songwriting.

The first song illustrated is "**Blue Moon**," and as you sing or listen to this song, you will recognize four distinct phrases of the **AABA** form. In this song, each of the **A** sections starts with the words "**Blue Moon.**" The contrasting "**B**" section starts with the words "And then there suddenly appeared before me." The **B** section in this song form is also called the "**bridge**."

The next song, "**Over the Rainbow**," also has the **AABA** song form, starting with an 8-measure "**A**" section that ends with the word "lullaby." (If you're not familiar with this song, or haven't heard it for a while, you may want to listen to it, or sing it through, a couple of times). Please note, we are talking about the original version of this song sung by **Judy Garland**. The popular ukulele version of this song, though it has its charm, does not follow the original form, or even the original melody, as it was written by **Harold Arlen**. Extra credit if you write an analysis of the ukulele version!

With each of these first two songs, "**Blue Moon**" and "**Over the Rainbow**," there is a **change in tonality** at the end of each **B** section. Each songwriter, **Richard Rogers** and **Harold Arlen,** provide this beautiful musical nuance. We will go into more detail in keys, chords, and tonalities in later lessons. But, even without knowing all the details, see if you can get a basic sense of this **tonal change** in each **B** section. How does it affect the flow of these songs, and how can awareness of this help in the expression in your performance?

Songs with the **AABA** form typically have 32 "**measures,**" and each measure has 4 "**beats**." You can count these 4 beats in each measure, out loud or to yourself, as you listen to or hum the song. While the pace or "**tempo**" of the beats may vary widely from song to song, a good starting point is 2 beats per second. By the way, becoming acutely aware of **tempo** is very important in singing or any kind of musical performance.

Other common song forms are **ABAB** and **ABAC**. "**The Very Thought of You**" and "**Fly Me To the Moon**" illustrate **ABAB,** and "**All of Me**" illustrates **ABAC**.

Next, we find an unusual variation of song form with **Irving Berlin**'s "**Cheek to Cheek**." The basic form in this song is **AABBCA**. However, the sections are not symmetrical, since the **A** sections have twice as many measures as the **B** and **C** sections. So with 16 measures in each **A** section and 8 measures in each **B** or **C** section, the entire form is 72 measures!

The "**verse-chorus**" song form is traditional and often used in folk music. Sometimes the verse and chorus have different melody and chords, as in "**Fire and Rain**" and "**Your Song**." Sometimes verse & chorus are essentially the same melody, like "**You Are My Sunshine**," or "**Knockin' On Heaven's Door**." Check out songs like "**Blowin' In the Wind**," "**Sounds of Silence**," and **Leonard Cohen**'s "**Hallelujah,**" and determine how you would analyze them. These songs are probably not considered part of the **G*reat American Songbook***, but sometimes jazz & traditional pop singers will tap into this repertoire.

The term "**verse**" is sometimes applied in a slightly different way, especially with ***The Great American Songbook***. The "**verse**" in some cases refers to an introduction to the main part of the song, not part of the **AABA** structure, and it serves to "set up" the song. Often is is done *rubato*, meaning not in strict tempo, then the tempo starts with the main part of the song. **Ella Fitzgerald** has interesting recordings of verses with "**Lady is a Tramp**" and "**Someone to Watch Over Me**." **Frank Sinatra** often performs such verses. These verses are not always used in performance, but they are definitely worth exploring.

The traditional **blues form** is 12 bars. The lyric for the first 4 measures is repeated in the second 4 measure phrase with a different chord. Then the last 4 measures introduce yet a new chord and a new lyric. This is the basic, and widely used, **12-bar blues form**, but there are many variations. In the video I illustrate this with the song "**Kansas City**."

Sometimes a **blues song** will stay on only one or two chords with an indefinite number of measures. There is an 8 measure blues form, or it could be 14 or 16 measures, or even 13 1/2. Check out some old or new blues recordings and see if you can determine the form, which is usually fairly simple. **Blues** also has a particular approach to harmony and melody that we will be exploring in future lessons.

Variations to the "normal" song form are fun to discover and study, such as the 7 bar "**A**" section in "**Yesterday**," and the 6 bar **bridge** in "**Folks Who Live on the Hill**." Still other more adventurous song forms have been used in jazz and popular music. "**A Day in the Life**," "**MacArthur's Park**," and "**Band on the Run**" are some examples, along with **Dave Brubeck**'s "**Blue Rondo a la Turk**," which uses a classically-based *rondo* form. In a future lesson, we will be analyzing **Cy Coleman**'s great 1959 standard "**The Best is Yet to Come**," so you may want to check out the song to get a head start! **Cy Coleman**'s YouTube version is great. Here's the link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mb3wHcQOl4M