

# Musical form after the avant-garde revolution: A new approach to composition teaching

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**Abstract:** After the Avant-garde revolution, the notion of musical form as organically structured started from being left aside to even being disregarded absolutely. The introduction of non-Western conceptions of time, the emergence of electronic music and a wish to break with the previous musical standards led to the creation of new genres and new ways to render compositional ideas. The notion of form has been broadened, if not changed, and has even been questioned. But besides these discussions, the need to define some principles for composition teaching has led to the research on the new concepts on the matter that have arisen after the modern revolution, particularly, the division into organic and non-organic structuring of time. Although most of the research on the listeners' perception of form has been done with examples from the tonal harmony realm, there is a slowly growing corpus of investigations that pays attention to post-tonal practices. This paper deals with the matter of musical form, for the composer's and the listener's points of view basically within a psychological approach, starting from Kramer's notion of musical time and the aesthetic views of some contemporary composers and composition teachers. In spite of the above mentioned division of music time into two main types, it has been observed that the chronological or absolute time is an unavoidable one-directional dimension needed to appreciate or measure any proposed structuring of time. Hence, form as a tool in the composition teaching, has to deal with the idea of *passing time*, whichever the conception of musical time selected to be worked on. And this is the notion to be considered in the process of teaching composition.

Among the consequences brought by the new ways of understanding and composing music that started to show up at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the next are those which led to a different notion of musical form. Until the second half of the 18th century, musical form had been understood mainly as the ordering or setting of parts in a musical piece, following the dancing traditions where most musical works were founded. The organic conception of musical form —one that compared a musical piece with a living creature— dominated the composition and analysis of music as the only possibility. Even after the important changes in musical language which took place at the beginning of 20th century some composers, like for instance, Arnold Schoenberg, kept attached to the idea of organicism in the form in spite of the use of a musical language that was becoming further and further away from the tonality.

One of the goals of the avant-garde composers has been to break ties with traditions, and breaking with the organic conception of form has also been a must in some modern composition tendencies. Thus, composition practice started to disregard the notion of *dramatic shape* that had been used as one of the means to confer unity to a musical piece. Instead, it was considered necessary to focus on the structuring itself, independently of the result as a whole, but more centred on the musical material organization. Rowell (1993:127) provides one explanation for this, as he considers that Western musical tradition has regarded musical works as objects and not as processes, from which it can be understood the failure to recognize the necessity of structuring music as a *succession* of events in time, and more as an abstract organization of such events in a sort of frozen spatial conception of time.

The creation of new formal principles and consequently new ways of listening can be found among the results of the new composition procedures of the musical avant-garde. Kramer (1988), aware of this situation, proposes different possibilities of structuring music in time and new possibilities for the listeners too. But here a paradox is to be faced: in spite of the fact that the dimension where music happens is time, many avant-garde and modernistic

principles of organizing sound have neglected somewhat the passing of time. Kramer also proposes contrasting ways to consider time in a composition, in an effort to embrace some diametrically opposed positions in this respect.

Such an ample concept as avant-garde can take different meanings according to different authors and points of view, so it becomes necessary to mention that along this text the notion of avant-garde is the one explained by Samson (2010), so it refers not only to an aesthetic attitude opposed to tradition but also to a period of time in art history during the 20th century.

### **Musical form and its perception**

The experience of listening to music is manifold and there is a huge amount of writings on the subject ranging from philosophical approaches to neuropsychological ones, passing through linguistics and semiotics. There is no need to go deeper on this variety of thoughts, amply discussed somewhere else. Suffice it to say that nowadays one thing is agreed by scholars: every individual has his own way of listening to music and experiences it in a quite particular way, so there are no two people who would necessarily agree on what they listen for in music. But, of course, some common trends can be traced and researched, and have also been discussed by composers and authors not necessarily with scientific tools. Already in 1939, Copland mentions three separate listening planes which he calls sensual, expressive and sheerly musical and proposes that the listening experience happens in all three levels at the same time, suggesting that the listeners should train to experience mainly the third of these planes (Copland 2002:9–19). Somewhat in the same direction, Deri suggest that the listening experience should grasp the musical form for “the understanding and enjoying of music both old and new” (Deri 1968:88). Rowell (2005:130) points out several threads to assess the problem of the listening experience, reinforcing the idea of a multiplicity of possible situations. Cone calls for two kinds of perception, one that concentrates on grasping the music structure and form —*synoptic comprehension*— and another linked more to the sensual or emotional experience —*immediate apprehension*. This author claims for a balanced listening experience between both approaches. (Rowell 2005:131–132; Fischer 1990:115; Cone 1968:97.) Cone’s categories can be used to exemplify what is most common in listening as an activity: it can be attentive or non-attentive. When non-attentive, listening leads to an emotional, sensual experience where there is no need to search for how the music is done: it is just enjoyed as such. An attentive listening, on the other hand, looks for elements that might give an idea of the work’s construction, generally playing with expectations and surprises. Both ways of listening can be equally enjoyable and can be experienced also simultaneously and the tendency to use one or the other is usually based to the previous musical training of the listener. The perception of the musical form is then linked to an attentive listening —as has also been pointed out by Irène Deliège (1989:213).

Is it possible to perceive the musical form? Before trying to find an answer to the question it is necessary to clear out something concerning the term itself. There is still confusion in some literature between the concepts of *form* and *structure*. Although Gieseler (1975:77) discusses this matter, it seems that sometimes both terms are taken as synonyms. *Structure* is the set of relations that are drawn from the musical material in a work and are used for its internal order or organization, independently of the moment in time in which they happen or are perceived. On the other hand, *form* is the way a musical work is displayed in time, which can or cannot make obvious its structure to a listener, but through a series of procedures lets him have an idea of it. Form is related to the idea of contour or Gestalt.

Most of the research on musical cognition carried out during the last half of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st has not addressed the question of form perception —it has mainly centred its attention on mapping the listening process in the human brain or has addressed matters of music structuring but only on the tonal realm. It is remarkable the work carried out by Irène Deliège who widens the language spectrum of the music used for the investigation to

contemporary composers such as Boulez and Berio. This approach accounts for more creditable results because it supposes fewer prejudices from the participating subjects in her experiments. The first of her conclusions points out something already mentioned lines above: the influence of the previous musical experience and knowledge of the listener to find organizing elements in music. Second, the grasping of the form in a musical piece is correlated to the facilities it can offer the listener to find *cues* or prominent schemes which could let him look for relationships along the piece. (Deliège 1989.) But there is still some amount of research to be carried out on this area.

It can be concluded that the grasping of the form through listening to a musical work is possible but depends on the way the listener is attentive to perceive it, on his previous musical knowledge and experience, on his cultural background and on the construction of the musical piece itself.

### **Concept of form after the avant-garde revolution**

During the second half of the 19th century, when the Romanticism was reaching its expressive peak that also led to the reactions against it —which became the seed for the aesthetic changes that exploded towards the end of that century—, the idea of form was basically linked to the idea of organicism. The need for new stylistic trends to oppose to Romanticism and the growing interest on the music and thought of Middle and Far East Asian cultures in Europe conducted to a sort of abomination of the organic principles of form, being these basically then represented by tonality and the traditional goal-directed *forms*, i. e., sonata, rondo, binary, ternary, etc. This situation allowed, in one hand, more liberty for the composer, who had then to be more aware of the structuring forces in his pieces, but besides also led to a sort of disregarding of the importance of sound events happening through the *pass* of time, the unavoidable axis of music. In the next paragraphs the organic conception of form is discussed first and then other formal conceptions that reacted to it with the avant-garde new impulses.

#### **The organic idea of form**

Towards the end of the 18th century there was no doubt about the form of a musical piece. The form of a musical work was compared to a living organism and so enjoyed also a vital cycle: it had to be born, grow, reach a peak in its development to finally decay and die. This conception was born in Herder and developed by Goethe in nature and arts realms. (Montgomery 1992.) These ideas of Goethe led to the notion that from just one primal model there could be generated many different ones, introducing the idea of *generativity*: everything can be derived from a basic, primal, germinal seed —from the very essence of what is generated after it. In other words, everything in a generated object is already a part of the primal seed, so there is an intrinsic unity between them both.

These ideas were not absolutely new by then. Aristotle had already described tragedy as “imitation of an action that is whole and complete in itself”, where whole and complete means that it has a beginning, a middle and an end, with no arbitrary or obscure part relationship. In *Poetics* he mentions that “of simple plots and actions the episodic are the worst”, where *episodic* implies an absence of probability or necessity in the sequence of episodes. (Whitall 2008; Murtomäki 1993:23.)

Beethoven became an influential model for the organic thinking. Categories such as *development*, *logic* and *consequence* are born from his formal construction and are then transmitted by theorists to composers such as Brahms or Schoenberg (Kühn 1989:10). Beethoven’s composing process was purely generative, as can be proved by observing his working sketches. The importance of Beethoven and the positive value judgments of his work made of both the generative process and the organicism undisputed models for the following generations of composers.

Hanslick writings came to reinforce the idea of a desirable organic conception of form, by fulfilling musical ideas with internal life, which links to the notion of internal unity in a living organism. For this author there is no option for music to represent something outside music itself. (Hanslick 1854:31; Fubini 1990:330–332.) The organic model is taken for granted by Riemann and Schoenberg. The latter's *Fundamentals of Musical Composition* (1967) shows his deeply rooted organic conception of form. Schoenberg considers that the basis of coherence in a composition is the *Grundgestalt* (Schiano 2010). Although he does not use this word nor defines it, its function as a shaper of unity and form is expressed, for instance, when he claims that "[f]orm in the arts, and especially in music, aims primarily at comprehensibility" or "[f]orms are primarily organizations to express ideas in a comprehensible manner" (Schoenberg 1984:215, 381). This way of thinking goes even further:

The core metaphor of organicism, that of a seed germinating and developing into a full-blown plant, occurs not only in the writings of Heinrich Schenker, Rudolph Reti and their disciples (all of which are well-known exemplars of organicism in musical analyses), but is very much alive among writers of program notes and music appreciation texts. The seed metaphor is sown early in music education! (Levy 1987:5.)

In spite of the changes brought by the modernism and avant-garde revolutions, the organic principle has been still valid in many composers and authors during the 20th and 21st centuries. It is not anymore understood as part of the tonal language nor linked to traditional forms but reduced to organization principles to ensure the unity of the whole work, which also imply a linear conception with a beginning, a climax and an end. Smith Brindle, for instance, writes about "basic principles which underlie all matters of form, whether in short phrases, large movements, or even gigantic symphonies". He also assures that "any branch of art [...] which abandons formal principles to the point of formlessness is doomed to failure". (Smith Brindle 1986:7.) Belkin (2008:4) complains about the lack of texts dealing with basic formal principles. He refers to these principles as "the ways musical ideas are organized and connected in time, so that their evolution is compelling and convincing". Kühn (1989:9, 13–25) introduces form-generative principles, according to their nature and type, and discusses what kinds of musical thought derive from them. And Stanojevic mentions:

[t]he principle of an *overall shape* with its climax and arrival points, built by the rises and falls of tensions, as well as that of a *homogeneity*, realized by the use of musical material derived directly from the main idea, have [...] been discussed in connection with concepts of phrases and motives, and should be reapplied [...] for an understanding of form as a whole (Stanojevic 2004:42).

The overall shape mentioned by this author is what Fields (1992) calls *dramatic shape*. This idea comes from the dramatic structure used in theatre analysis but applied to music. As mentioned above, already Aristotle had discussed this topic but it was Freytag (1900) who introduced it in 1863 with a graphical display known thereafter as *dramatic* or *Freytag's pyramid*, where a climatic point is marked out by rising and falling curves of dramatic intensity. The above cited authors from the 20th and 21st centuries agree in (1) the idea of unity and homogeneity in a musical work by elaborations of some basic material; and in that (2) it has to possess a logical structure and has to develop in time towards a certain goal. This can be considered the present view of the organic form.

### **Non-organic ideas of form**

The organic principles of form, being so related to tonal music, started to be considered somewhat suspicious by the composers looking for new ways of expression at the end of the 19th century. The new conceptions about time from Oriental cultures, which started to become fashionable towards the end of that century, were not supportive of the teleological trends of the organic form. Besides, Debussy's harmonic language moved away from the functional tonal system, including whole-tone scales, parallel chords and aimed to a timbral use of harmony. Nevertheless, it can be found that he used tension-distension relationships similar to the dominant-tonic of the tonal system, but with different means. Schoenberg, in spite of the

revolutionary musical construction system with twelve tones which destroys tonality completely, kept well attached to the traditional formal models. It is the next generation of composers which starts neglecting the organic principles, maybe due to the analysis of Anton von Webern's production<sup>1</sup> —which created then a bias towards plain structure— or to a simple desire to oppose to everything that would resemble tradition. Smith Brindle says:

[...] a great deal of contemporary music has been written which belies much or all of what I have to say [regarding organic formal principles]. This kind of music [...] deliberately aimed at beginning anew, ignoring the conventions of the past; the only universal ideal was that the new music should be completely unlike whatever was heard before. (Smith Brindle 1986:7.)

It is interesting to observe that during the first sixty years of the 20th century there are two positions concerning the notion of musical form: one that follows the traditional organic notion in spite of renewed musical languages, and another who neglects or ignores it or just takes it for granted. Schoenberg and all those composers who were more conscious of the formal principles are in the first group. In the second group are those who concentrated in the structure itself of the composition, and somewhat paid less attention to the formal result. Many texts dealing with the new composition trends during this period fail to mention any large or medium scale formal thinking. They mostly deal with structural principles and the notion of unity that is discussed is almost solely linked to the need to keep attached to structural rules, algorithms, schemes and so. For instance, in Messiaen's *Technique de mon langage musical* from 1944 he deals with rhythm matters, melodic formations and even talks about some traditional *forms*, but does not point out formal principles, just takes them for granted. Messiaen exemplifies this tendency that led to a different consciousness of musical form. Boulez discusses the notion of form in several texts, but tends to interchange form and structure as synonyms. For instance, he talks about *static* and *dynamic* forms, but actually he refers to structural principles rather than formal, even though they are related to events in time. (Boulez 1984:74–78.) In spite of his knowledge of the traditional formal schemes, Boulez denies their usefulness for the contemporary composer, and proposes that the form of a piece can only be known *after* the piece is performed, so it cannot pre-exist but only post-exist (*ibid.*:77–78; Padilla 1995:141). In his music, he feels free to depart from those traditional forms, thanks mainly to Debussy (Rorich 2006). Boulez is conscious of the necessity to organize music in time to make it understandable, but he rejects any traditional principles and trusts on the composers own intuition or the structural principles of every work to make it intelligible. Thus any formal result, as far as it is structured by the composer, is equally valid.

The above stated lines about Boulez's formal thinking can be extrapolated to almost every avant-garde composer. The structure of the musical pieces was the most important feature to consider, and the resulting form was just that: the resulting display in time of that structure. Some texts on the analysis of 20th century music show this way of thinking by focusing on the structural construction of musical pieces —even calling it *form*— and not on their display in time. Reti (1965:137–151) defines form in two ways: as a simple juxtaposition of parts and as a structural construction. He also considers that the big dilemma of contemporary music is its structural construction (*ibid.*:168). Maegaard (1964:67–102) introduces a classification of *new form definitions*, which are explained "from the composition method", as Iitti (1992:31) points out. In many avant-garde styles it seems possible to march under the flag of *new music calls for new forms* —or even question the existence or possibility of any form— as it can be observed in some different stylistic trends from the middle of the 20th century, including the experimentalism and minimalism of the United States.<sup>2</sup> It can be concluded that the avant-garde notion of form, when there is one or the composer is interested in determining one, is not necessarily governed by the succession of musical events in time but it is justified by the structuring forces of the piece; it does not need to have any relation to traditional forms but it has to be coherent and logical although not necessarily *in time*.

## Form and its structuring in time

Although time in music has been a concern for many scholars particularly during the first half of the 20th century, most of their approaches come from philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Fraser notices the failure of some approaches to study time in music:

I believe that explanations which focus on the flow of time [...] address significant but only secondary issues in the study of time in music. For, by taking the flow of musical time for granted, they fail to recognize and hence attempt to explain the fundamental rational mystery of music. Namely, by what means does music first establish the experience of time in the domain of hearing, so that it may then modulate and modify its flow? (Fraser 1985:181.)

Jonathan D. Kramer's *The Time of Music* (1988) addresses the problem with a fresh view, combining musical expertise and a psychological approach together with what was already written on the matter. Kramer's text aims to reinterpret the function of time in music, particularly in contemporary music, and proposes new ways for listening and understanding it. Kramer distinguishes between *musical time* and *absolute time*, being the first the experience of time along with the music and the latter just what can be measured by a clock. His main thesis is the proposal of two ways of structuring time with music: linearly and nonlinearly, this latter also referred as *vertical time*. The first one can be linked to organic musical form and the second to non-organic forms. He considers that both ways of structuring time are equally valid and suppose different attitudes from the listener in order to grasp the meanings of every musical piece. Every audition is carried out along the musical time, and the listener has the chance to decide if he applies an imposed linearity or nonlinearity to the piece, even independently of what the expectation of the composer was respecting its listening approach. Different time modes are also suggested as a combination of these two ways of listening/composing.

Kramer's proposal sounds quite obvious and logical, and many contemporary formal/structural outcomes can be handled this way. The imposed linear/nonlinear ways of listening suppose and attentive listening, but can also be compared to Cone's division into synoptic comprehension and immediate apprehension. Even though Kramer is conscious of that the musical time is experienced over or parallel to an absolute time, it seems that he takes for granted the fact that whichever way a listener experiences music, whichever the style, structure, form of the musical piece, this listening activity is carried out *in time*, in *absolute time*. The attentive listener's mind carries out a series of operations that are sequential, like memory recalling and expectation generating, so they are unavoidably linear.<sup>4</sup>

In the dialectical process of attentive listening expectation plays a very important part for the understanding and enjoyment of music. Regarding musical expectation, Huron states that:

[...] the biological goal of expectation differs from the musical goal. The biological goal of expectation is to form adaptively useful predictions about future events. [...] However, the musical goals of expectation are very different. In most situations the musical goal will be to evoke a pleasing or compelling emotional dynamic. From a musical point of view, it does not matter if experienced listeners form inaccurate expectations under the same musical conditions. (Huron 2006:98.)

The understanding of a musical piece is carried out mainly through fulfilment or not of the expectations that the attentive listener's mind exerts on it.

## A new approach to the teaching of musical form

As it has been stated before, the listening process is a very individual one, so the variability of what a specific listener could expect from a piece of music is huge. One of these listening attitudes is Kramer's *vertical time* experience, where the passing of time seems not to be perceived or is not relevant for the experience of music. Cage's preference for this kind of

experience is exemplified when he says “I don’t need sound to talk to me” at comparing sound with music (Sebestik 1992). In this situation, what is usually most important is the sensual experience of sound, so the structuring in time becomes irrelevant, as the composer does not expect the listener to recall events in order to grab a meaning, he just expects the listeners to enjoy the sound that is experienced moment by moment, without any reference to past nor future musical events. Or he may be interested in a slight perception of changes in time, but not to follow a contrasted contour of different moments.

The idea that, no matter how a musical piece is formally structured, it depends on the one-directional passing of time, the mentioned *absolute* time, leads to the conclusion that musical form, when experienced, is deeply linked to the listening experience along the time axis, which supposes the recording in memory of some of the experienced sound events and the search for relationships among them that are later recalled in a mind-processed shape, fulfilling expectations or providing surprise. As it was discussed in former paragraphs, whichever formal principles a composer sets for a piece of music they are experienced consecutively, and the listener’s brain finds (or fails to find) relationships according to what is listened at the moment in comparison with what has been listened before.

The organic principle of form, devoid of its philosophical linkage, can be understood as one of the ways for structuring music in time, corresponding to the one-directional perception that has been stated here. Although the organic principle is almost solely related to tonal music,<sup>5</sup> it can be also applied to any pitch organization system if it is reduced to the principle of dramatic shape on which it is based. This implies also the need, to some extent, to consider the organization of the musical material in such a way that can help the listener to find relationships in time that could guide him to grab the musical piece. Although this assertion does not imply that the organic form is the only one that can be used by composers for their music to be understood, it just underlies the fact that whatever the formal organization principles a composer decides to use, his music is bound to be experienced as a succession of moments or events in time with all its consequences. The bias to the structural construction of musical pieces —attitude deeply attached to some avant-garde trends— has sometimes disregarded the listeners’ experience of music *in* time.

The approach for teaching composition considering the form as a departure point is not new, as composition teachers have used the notion in different ways and also with different denominations. Schoenberg claims for the need of *organization* in a musical piece to be understood, adding that it should thus resemble a “living organism”. Such organization he names as *form*. Also adds that a musical piece’s form is not constructed by simply adding elements, but the conception of it is once complete in the composer’s mind before he attempts to write its parts by *forming* its material. (Schoenberg 1967:1.) Clearly, Schoenberg’s approach goes to the side of organicism, but what has to be grabbed from his idea is the fact that the piece has to be in a sort of coherent shape in the composer’s head before he starts to work with the details of it. This is not, of course, the only way to proceed in a composition, nor necessarily a desired or possible one in every case. But, somewhat against Boulez’s thought, it remarks the necessity of having a sort of knowledge, in advance, of what the whole piece should *sound like* before starting to giving it shape —how it could be possible to give shape to a thing without knowing its final shape?

The preceding statement does not mean that a composition cannot be started from scratch, doodling over the piano or playing —in all its meanings— with sounds, as part of a process of looking for musical ideas or materials. It wants to emphasize that there is a need to have a more or less clear idea of what is to be composed and how is the final *shape* of the composition before starting to write the first measure of it. This is to avoid the common problem that many students face of reaching to a certain point in their work sketches and then having no idea of how or where to continue. The lack of a clear aim in a compositional process, being this understood as the lack of an idea of the resulting work’s form, may lead to

frustration. Composer Gerald Levinson refers to an anecdote as a student of Olivier Messiaen. Levinson premiered a piece that did not manage to show to his teacher. The piece had a terrible result that he regretted, basically for the problems with its form. Just after the premiere Messiaen only said: "you know, you really should have talked to me beforehand". (Benitez 2008:19.)

Becerra (1959:54), whose concept of form is teleological, proposes the idea of teaching/using form as the result of a series of procedures that lead to a goal, to an ideal. Every composition project starts with a plan of what the work is going to be. Boulez calls it "aesthetical and technical election" (Padilla 1995:141); Belcastro (2009) calls for a four-phased compositional hypothesis (synopsis, formal scheme, characterization and translation); similar ideas are shared by Smith Brindle (1986:4) and many others. Whichever this project of composition would be, the formal plan should be part of the starting point of it. And this formal plan should also take into account what has already been mentioned in regard to dramatic shape or structure. The selected structural principles and the musical language itself should not be in contradiction with this formal plan selection. One just needs to remember that the musical piece is addressed to a group of listeners with different attitudes, so the more clear the musical statements the more possibilities they will have to enjoy the music and understand the meaning of the composition.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Anton von Webern's production was one of the favourite topics for discussion during the *Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik* of Darmstadt, one of the important departure points for the musical avant-garde.

<sup>2</sup> In his *New Directions in Music* (1981) David Cope offers a good review of these stylistic trends.

<sup>3</sup> Particularly important is Susanne Langer, who states that "music makes time audible" (1953:110) and differences *virtual* from *clock time* (*ibid.*:104—119). It is also important some work by Lewis Rowell (1979, for instance).

<sup>4</sup> Deliège and El Ahmadi (1990) describe some of these processes in the attentive listening, from passive reception of sound information to active auditive analysis.

<sup>5</sup> One remarkable exception can be found in Arnold Schoenberg's formal thinking.