

Notes on Form

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Graphing Phrase Structure I: The Basics

Note: the guidelines described here may not correspond exactly to the expectations of your instructor. You may well be asked to follow somewhat different practices. But while some details may be different, in broad terms what is described here will be similar to your section's practice.

Templates and Arcs

Always use one of the downloadable phrase templates that look like railroad tracks. In some cases you may need to renumber the measures. Example 11 shows one of these templates.

Indicate grouping units using slurs (in this context also referred to as arcs, arches, or umbrellas).

Never bother to make slurs for grouping units smaller than the measure; this would make the diagrams hard to read. Similarly, never draw slurs for grouping units consisting of a single measure. The "railroad ties" already make the measures visible. To make it easier to see the length of slurs, all slurs that cover four measures or more should be labeled with the number of measures under the slur. Slurs of two or three measures don't need these labels because we can perceive immediately how many measures they cover without counting measures.

Always make your arcs touch down on the barlines, making each grouping unit always contain a whole number of measures. This does not imply that grouping units always begin and end exactly at barlines! This is just a notational convenience to make diagrams look cleaner. If the end of a grouping unit includes the downbeat of some measure but does not include all of that measure, include the whole of the measure under the arc, touching down on the following barline. If some grouping unit begins in the middle of a measure, not including the downbeat of that measure, treat that beginning material as a pickup to the next downbeat, and begin your arc on the barline that starts that next measure. To summarize: if the downbeat of a measure is included in a grouping unit, include that whole measure in the grouping unit's arc; and if the downbeat of a measure is not included in a grouping unit, do not include any of that measure under the arc.

Example 8 illustrates this principle. Each of the two phrases begins with three pickup eighth notes. In the phrase diagram, shown in Example 12, the arcs start from the first downbeats of each phrase. They do not start in the middles of mm. 0 and 4, attempting to convey the precise start of the phrase. This would look like Example 13; for the sake of

simplicity, our diagrams will not look like this. Above all, don't make the mistake of thinking that the notation used in Example 12 implies that the phrases really start on the downbeats, as if the music were to be performed with the large phrasing slurs shown in Example 14!

Cadences and Larger Formal Units

Label all cadences. Always place the label clearly below the measure in which the cadence occurs; don't place the label above or below the point at which the arc touches down. In the case of an authentic cadence, the cadential dominant may fall in the measure preceding the arrival on tonic; position the label under the measure in which the tonic chord occurs.

Label the key of the first cadence, and label the key of the first cadence after each modulation.

Be careful to distinguish between where the phrase finally comes to rest and where the final harmony of the phrase begins – sometimes, especially in a longer phrase, the final harmony may arrive earlier than the final bar, even though some motion will likely continue into the last measure of the phrase. In such a case, the cadence occurs where the harmony arrives, not where the motion stops.

Label all formal units larger than the phrase (for now, various types of period or double period).

Subphrases

In slurring together subphrases we first encounter a principle that will guide every level of formal analysis that we undertake: small units group together by 2's and 3's as they form larger ones and, correspondingly, larger units divide into two or three pieces as they are split apart into smaller units.

This follows a principle of Gestalt psychology, that groups of two or three elements can be perceived directly as such, but larger groups are perceived as groups of two or three elements each.

Thus, for example,

X X

is perceived directly, as is

X X X.

But

X X X X

is perceived as two groups of two, and

X X X X X

is perceived as 3 + 2 or as 3 + 2 (or, possibly, as 1 + 3 + 1 or as 2 + 1 + 2).

Once you have identified the phrases, your next task will be to break up each phrase into either two or three subphrases. You will further divide the subphrases until you are left with arcs that cover either two or three measures. The following rules will guide this process.

If a grouping unit includes any subunits, it must be entirely divided into subunits. Thus Example 15a is not correct; the second half of the larger arc should also be covered by one or more subunits, as (to show just one possibility) in Example 15b.

If a grouping unit is subdivided into more than three units, intermediary grouping levels should be added until no arc contains more than three arcs immediately below it. This is a direct consequence of the principle of division into two or three parts. Thus Example 16a requires another level of structure, such as those shown in Example 16b.

Arcs on the same level don't intersect; no music is covered by more than one arc at the same level of structure. Thus Example 17 is not correct. (In Second Term we will learn about some exceptions to this rule – but don't break the rule until then.)

If an arc touches down at some point, arcs must touch down at that point at all lower levels. In other words, something that is a boundary at a higher level of structure cannot be a middle at a lower level of structure. Example 18 illustrates what not to do.

Hypermeter

If you wish, or if your instructor requests it, you may also add notation for hypermeter below the diagram. Label beats of the hypermeter as if they were fractions, with the numerator the beat number and the denominator the size of the hypermeasure. For example, hyperbeat 2 within a four-bar hypermeasure would be notated as “2/4”, pronounced either as “two of four” or “two out of four” (but not as “two fourths”!). It is necessary to specify the size of each hypermeasure in this way because hypermeter is not part of the notation of the music in the way that meter is, and because, as we shall see next term, hypermeter is rather variable.

A formal chart that applies all of the guidelines developed here to Mozart's K. 331 is given as Example 19.