

Notes on Form

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Basic Units: Motive, Grouping Unit, Phrase, Subphrase

The Motive

A **motive** is a short combination of a few pitches and/or rhythms (usually no longer than a measure) that is defined as a meaningful entity through repetition.

Consider Example 1, the opening of the first movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata, K. 331. The melody in the first measure, including both pitches and rhythms, is defined as a motive because of its varied repetition in measure 2, and because the bass line shadows it a tenth lower. The second half of measure 1, the repeated pitch with the quarter-eighth rhythm, is also defined as a motive because it receives its own repetition, separate from that of the entire measure, in both melody and bass in measure 3. If the rhythmic aspect of this figure is taken apart from pitch content, this motive is also present in the melody at the end of m. 4, and if the addition of another note under a slur is taken as an acceptably small variation, it can also be observed in the first half of m. 4. To see a final motive in this passage, ignore the neighbor note in the melody of the first measure; taking pitch content apart from rhythm, we can perceive a motive of a rising third, present in melody and bass in mm. 1-2, and slowed down with a passing note inserted in those same voices in mm. 3-4. The leap in m. 4 to the incomplete neighbor E5 could possibly also be heard as an expression of the motive of the rising third.

The key point to grasp about motives is that they are defined by the way in which they are used, the key factor being repetition. When you hear a motive for the first time, you cannot know that it is a motive – you need a repetition before you can recognize a motive. And it is in the relationships among the repetitions that we find out the answers to key questions. Does the motive include both pitch and rhythm or just one? And are all of the notes essential to the motive or are some (like the neighbor tones in the first half of m. 1) inessential?

The Grouping Unit

The most basic concept in form is that of the **grouping unit**. A grouping unit is, quite simply, some segment of music that belongs together. The music at the beginning of the grouping unit belongs with what follows more than it belongs with what comes before, and the music at the end of the grouping unit belongs with what comes before more than it belongs with what follows. (When musicians are speaking casually, they often use the word 'phrase' to describe what I have just defined as a grouping unit. In theory class, we shall carefully reserve the word 'phrase' for a very special use, to be described below.)

Another way of putting the issues of belongingness is to say that there is some sort of **grouping boundary** separating the grouping unit from what surrounds it. Grouping boundaries may be extremely strong and salient, or they may be quite weak and subtle.

To illustrate the grouping unit, return to Example 1. The repeat signs signal that these measures should be heard as a single unit, and, as we shall see, there are strong reasons within the music itself to reach the same conclusion.

Within these measures, grouping units include, among many others, mm. 1-4, mm. 1-2, mm. 3-4, and m. 2. Measures 1-4 constitute a grouping unit for the following reasons. Measure 1 must be a beginning because it starts out of silence; and it is a stable beginning because the first chord is a root-position tonic chord. The end of measure 4 is a grouping boundary for two reasons: the melody has a sense of coming to rest on the B4; and the return to the opening motive in m. 5 signals a new beginning (indeed, mm. 5-6 are identical to mm. 1-2). Measures 1-2 and 3-4 are each grouping units because of the grouping boundary at the end of m. 2, a boundary that is established by the end of the repetitions of the initial motive, and by the beginning of the slower, filled-in version of the ascending third. Finally, measure 2 is a grouping unit because of the grouping boundary at the end of m. 1, established by the repetition of the initial motive – we already understood the beginning of m. 1 as a beginning because it was *the* beginning, and when we hear the motive repeat at the beginning of m. 2, the definition of a new beginning point there also defines the end of m. 1 as a point of conclusion, even if a very weak and local one.¹

Though this passage contains many grouping units, it also contains segments that cannot be regarded as grouping units. Consider, for example, mm. 2-3. Measure 2 is a unit on its own, but if grouped with other music, it belongs much more strongly together with m. 1 than it does with m. 3. Similarly, measure 3 is a unit on its own, but it belongs much more strongly with m. 4 than it does with m. 2. In both cases this is because of the grouping boundary at the end of m. 2, discussed above. The segment consisting of mm. 2-3, then, cannot be a grouping unit because it fails both of the criteria: the music at the beginning belongs more strongly with what precedes than what follows, and the music at the end belongs more strongly with what follows than with what precedes. Measures 2-3 can be grouped together, but only within a *larger* unit such as mm. 1-4.

¹ This passage is sometimes assigned a different grouping structure: the final eighth notes in mm. 1-3 are heard as leading in to the next measure, so that the grouping boundaries fall between the 5th and 6th eighth-note beats of those measures. I am skeptical of this hearing; because the passage begins without a pickup eighth, and because the final eighth of m. 4 is the resolution of a suspension, finally providing the consonant chord tone, the strongest parallels (among the beginnings of each measure, esp. mm. 1-2, and among the endings of each measure) exist when the grouping boundaries are aligned with the barlines. If there had been an initial pickup note, and if m. 4 had been written so that the melody landed on the B4 on the beat and then moved to C#5 as an anticipation, I would certainly agree with hearing the final eighths as lead ins. But in the passage as actually written I do not.

The Phrase:

A **phrase** is a very special and specific kind of grouping unit.

In Example 1, consider the grouping units of mm. 1-4 and 5-8. Each starts with a particularly strong sense of initiation. This is true in measure 1 of course because it *is* the beginning, but beyond this it also *sounds* like a beginning – it sounds like a musical process is starting, like a musical journey is beginning. When we return to this music in m. 5, we both experience again the quality of a beginning and remember that this was the music we heard at the very start of the piece. Similarly, the ends of both measures 4 and 8 offer a sense of melodic conclusion, of coming to rest. We feel that a short musical idea has been completed, that this is a good place to take breath, literally or figuratively or both.

When music reaches such a sense of completion, of coming to rest, we say that it has reached a **cadence**. Cadences are essential to our definition of the phrase: a phrase is a grouping unit that begins with a strong sense of initiation and that ends with a cadence. In the music that we will look at this term, there will be a one-to-one correspondence between phrases and cadences. In any passage of music, the number of phrases and the number of cadences will be the same. Example 1 consists of two phrases, mm. 1-4 and mm. 5-8.

To make our definition of the phrase more solid, we will need some more detail on two questions: what do we mean by “a strong sense of initiation,” and what counts as a cadence? We’ll look at each separately.

What qualifies as a strong initiation? A metaphor will help clarify this. Some people like to think of a phrase as similar to a ball flying through the air: it gets thrown, it has an arc of motion through the air, and it lands again. Correspondingly, we may speak of an arc of *tonal* motion.

For a grouping unit to count as a phrase, it must begin with the equivalent to the throwing of the ball. In Example 1, we have already discussed mm. 3-4 as a grouping unit, and we have stated that they end with a cadence. Should they count as a phrase? No, because mm. 3-4 feel like they begin in the middle. They feel like a fragment. The ball is already in the air at the beginning of measure 3. For a complete arc of tonal motion, for a real sense of initiation that is followed by motion that lands with a cadence, we need measures 1 and 2 as well; the first phrase in this piece is measures 1-4. Measure 3 has enough of a sense of initiation to mark it off from the preceding two measures at a very low level of grouping structure, but this isn’t nearly strong enough to make it sound like the beginning of a phrase.

What is a cadence? For a grouping unit to count as a phrase, it must end with a sense of repose, with a sense that the ball is landing. Just how cadences are defined will vary among different styles of music. For tonal music, harmonic factors are central.

The cadences that are able to define phrase endings for our purposes are **authentic cadences** and **half cadences**.

An **authentic (or full) cadence** features motion from a dominant chord to a tonic chord, both of which must be in root position.

If, in an authentic cadence, the main melodic voice (often the highest voice present) ends on scale-degree 1, we call it a **perfect authentic cadence (PAC)**. If the main melodic voice ends on some other member of the tonic triad (scale-degrees 3 or 5), we call it an **imperfect authentic cadence (IAC)**. (“Imperfect” and “perfect” not in the usual modern senses of flawed and not flawed, but in the more traditional senses of incomplete and complete. An authentic cadence that ends with the melody on scale-degree 1 sounds more complete, more final, than an authentic cadence that ends on scale-degree 3 or 5.)

In a **half-cadence**, the phrase comes to rest on a V chord, always in root position. V7 is generally not used in a half cadence because the urgent need of the 7th for resolution works against the sense of coming to rest. Half cadences are usually metrically strong; a V chord that arrives on beat 2 or on beat 4 in 4/4 will rarely be heard as participating in a half cadence, because the metrical strength contributes to the sense of rest and stability. Because half cadences lack the inherent conclusiveness of authentic cadences, they require more support from the meter.

One other cadence type deserves brief mention. A **contrapuntal cadence**, in which dominant harmony moves to tonic harmony, but in which at least one of the chords in question is not in root position, will sometimes end a phrase. This is quite rare in baroque music, starts to happen in the Classical period (Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven...) and occurs with increasing frequency in music of the 19th Century. In the music we see in the first year of the theory sequence, contrapuntal cadences will be relatively rare. If you think that you are hearing a contrapuntal cadence, you should strongly consider the possibility that you are merely hearing the end of a grouping unit that is smaller than a phrase. Only with very strong evidence from other aspects of phrase structure should you decide that a phrase ends with a contrapuntal cadence.

Based on this review, cadences seem quite simple. But what has been said so far is only half of the story. V-I motion alone is not sufficient to identify an authentic cadence, nor is finding a V chord on a strong beat. To qualify as a cadence, these chords must also give a phrase a sense of conclusion.²

² Unfortunately these definitions are circular – you cannot define the phrase without reference to the cadence and you cannot define the cadence without reference to the phrase. Thankfully most people can grasp the definitions despite the logical circularity. But being aware of the circularity helps to head off possible areas of confusion.

Is it a cadence?

Suppose you've found a V-I motion or a V chord and you're wondering if it forms a cadence. Listen to the what leads up to it – is there a sense of conclusion, of rest on the chords in question? If so, you may count it as a cadence. If not, it is just an incidental part of a larger harmonic progression. (Remember, of course, that the sense of conclusion in a half cadence is always somewhat incomplete.)

Is it a phrase?

Similarly, suppose that you have identified a grouping unit and you are wondering whether or not to call it a phrase. You should go through the following steps:

- 1) Does it end with a cadence? If so, it might be a phrase. If not, it is definitely not a phrase.

But if it ends with a cadence, why only “it might be a phrase”? Doesn't it have to be a phrase, by the definition given above? If it ends with a cadence, then the end of the grouping unit is the end of a phrase. But the grouping unit might contain multiple phrases, like mm. 1-8 in Example 1. Or like measures 3-4 of the same example it might be only the final portion of a phrase. For this reason we need steps 2 and 3.

- 2) Are there cadences in the middle of the grouping unit? If not, and if it does indeed end with a cadence, then it might be a phrase. If there are other cadences in the middle of the grouping unit, then the grouping unit probably consists of multiple phrases.³
- 3) Does the beginning of the grouping unit start an arc of motion? Does it begin with a beginning (as opposed to sounding like it starts in the middle of something)? If so, and if conditions 1) and 2) have also been satisfied, then it is a phrase. If not, and if conditions 1) and 2) have been satisfied, then it is probably the final portion of a larger phrase.

Grouping units come in all different sizes; for the purposes of the theory core, we focus first on the phrase (in our more specific sense). But there are also more specific terms for larger and smaller grouping units. Grouping units that are larger than a phrase will be dealt with in the following sections. Any grouping unit that is smaller than a phrase is called a **subphrase**. In our discussion of grouping units in Example 1, mm. 1-2, mm. 3-4, and m. 2 are all subphrases.

³ “Probably” because composers sometimes add extra cadences after the conclusion of a single phrase. You'll learn about this kind of phrase extension in the next unit. Until then, we'll avoid showing you phrases that have that kind of complication.