

Notes on Form

John Paul Ito

Symmetrical vs. Asymmetrical Periods and Hypermeter

If the first and second phrases contain the same number of measures, the period is called **symmetrical**. If not it is called **asymmetrical**. Because most periods are symmetrical, this will be our default. We will almost never speak of ‘symmetrical periods’, because we will assume that periods are symmetrical unless told otherwise.

The great majority of symmetrical periods have phrases of either four or eight measures, and indeed the most common phrase length in Western tonal music is some multiple of four measures: 4, 8, 12, etc. Especially when this is the case (though, as we shall see next term, in a great many other cases as well), many listeners hear **hypermeter**, a metrical organization that is larger than the notated measure.

As you know, hearing a meter involves a hierarchy of successively slower beats; in 4/4, for example, eighth-note beats are strong or weak depending on whether they coincide with quarter-note beats, which are strong or weak depending on whether they coincide with half-note beats, etc., with the downbeat constituting the strongest and the slowest beats within the measure. But what if there are beats still stronger and still slower? The term ‘hypermeter’ has two frequent uses; one describes any metrical organization at a larger level than the notated measure, and the other refers specifically to the metrical organization of the notated downbeats. We will use the term primarily in the second sense.

In hearing hypermeter, and especially in sharpening whatever intuitions about hypermeter we may already have, it can be very helpful to conduct along with various options for the hypermeter. Example 2 shows the traditional conducting patterns for measures with two, three, and four main beats. If you have not done so already, memorize these – they are very helpful for a variety of kinds of hearing in time. Try conducting along with Example 1, conducting in four with beats of the conducting pattern falling on the downbeats of the music. This corresponds to hearing the passage as two four-bar hypermeasures, probably the most common hypermetrical understanding of the passage. Does this seem to fit well? There are also other possibilities; for example, you could conduct along in two, so that the passage consists of four two-bar hypermeasures. Try this; how is it different?

All of the rest of the examples in these notes have phrases that are multiples of four measures (or in one case pairs of two-measure phrases), so it is possible to hear all of them with four-bar hypermeasures. Try this with each of them (with slower music it may take some practice), and also experiment with other possibilities. Try to get to the point at which hypermeter is an experience, not just a concept.