

»Q: What is the difference between **period-form labels**, such as *contrasting period*, and *parallel double period*, and **the form labels covered in chapter 20**, such as *binary* and *ternary* forms (sometimes called “small song forms”¹)?

A: The difference is one of scale. **Period forms** refer to the organization of *phrases*, which, as a group, form a cohesive melodic unit known as a *period* or *theme*. **Binary and Ternary** (i.e. “song”) **forms** are labels that are usually used to describe the construction of *complete works* or *movements within larger works*. “A *song form* is usually somewhat larger and more complex than a period. Each of the two or three parts may be composed of one or more phrases, periods, or phrase groups.”²

Our text suggests that while *it may be possible* to label periods and double periods as binary forms, “a term like parallel period is more informative.”³ Presumably, by this the authors mean that labeling the two phrases which form a period as a ‘binary form’ would imply *equal structural weight* between a *phrase* and a *section*, which would be misleading.

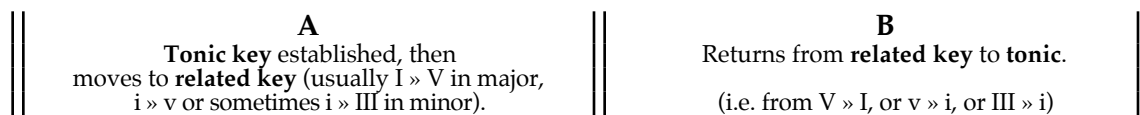
»Q: What are **binary** and **ternary** forms, and in what way do they differ?

1. According to Kostka and Payne, a *binary form* “is one that consists of two approximately equivalent sections,”⁴ labeled || A || B ||.

The authors make a distinction between *sectional binary form* (both halves end with ACs in the tonic key, which is extremely rare!), and *continuous binary form* (the first half cadences in something other than the tonic key, like V or relative major, while the second half cadences in the tonic key). Continuous binary form is *so much* more common than sectional binary form that for many authors the terms are synonymous; when they refer to “binary” form, they mean “continuous binary.” Here is Arnold Schoenberg’s definition:

“(Binary form) is characterized by two balanced segments, built from closely related but differentiated motive-forms, so that the second section is in some respects a contrast. **Generally, the first segment ends on the dominant; the second begins in the dominant (or other closely related) region, and closes with a cadence to I.**”⁵

Our text *further* categorizes the above forms as *two-reprise* if both sections are repeated. Since the great majority of binary forms have two repeated sections, the most typical binary form would be the *two-reprise continuous binary* variety. Here is a characteristic key scheme for such a form (||: A :||: B :||):



Rounded binary form, according to our text, refers to a binary form where *half of the A section* is included *at the end* of the B section (||: A :||: B + 1/2A :||):



The above key relationships would apply to *continuous rounded binary forms*. **Rounded binary forms are typically continuous** (esp. in the 18th century), although the only examples included in our text (“Oh, Susannah” and Brahms: “Ruf zur Maria”) are not (!).

N. B.: Students should be aware that there is some disagreement amongst music theorists regarding the above definition. Specifically, some writers suggest that rounded binary form could be *either* ||: A :||: B + 1/2A :|| (as above) *or* ||: A :||: B + A :||. That is, the restatement of the A material that occurs in the B section could be *partial* or *complete*:

¹in Ellis B. Kohs (*Musical Form*), p. 99, amongst others.

²*ibid.*, p. 99.

³Kostka and Payne textbook, p. 335.

⁴*ibid.*, p. 335.

⁵Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, p. 168 n.

“The final stage [of rounded binary form] is marked by a tendency to cadence in the tonic key towards the end of the second division, which is then *rounded off* by recalling **the original thematic material (or perhaps only a hint of it)** in a kind of recapitulation ending on a cadence in the tonic corresponding to that which ended the first section in the dominant.”⁶

Here is a typical tonal scheme for the $||: A :||: B + A :||$ variety of rounded binary form:

<p style="text-align: center;">A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tonic key established, then • moves to related key (I » V, i » v or sometimes i » III). 	<p style="text-align: center;">B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begins in the related key, then • works its way back to the tonic, often with a HC in I or i. 	+	<p style="text-align: center;">A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A brought back in tonic, • but this time it stays in I or i. • PC in tonic.
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So why is something with apparently *three* sections ($||: A :||: B + A :||$) called *rounded binary form* by some authors? The answer is that the $||: B + A :||$ portion is considered to be *one* section, albeit in two parts. If this seems difficult to accept, remember that even the definition in our text suggests that the $||: B + 1/2A :||$ portion of rounded binary should really be viewed as **one** section, although one *might* be tempted to regard the B portion as a section by itself, and the 1/2A as another one.

Let us now examine how the above notion of rounded binary form compares with *continuous ternary form*.

2. *Ternary form* has three sections, labeled ABA. Kostka and Payne suggest that, as with binary forms, ternary forms can be *sectional* or *continuous*:

Sectional ternary form: A (tonic cad.), B (cad. in dif. key), A (tonic cad.)

Continuous ternary form: A (cad. in dif. key), B (tonic key HC or PC), A (tonic key PC)

In fact, as it turns out, the form ($||: A :||: B + A :||$) discussed above as *rounded binary form*, would be called a *two reprise, continuous ternary form* by our text. There is much disagreement amongst theorists on this issue! The following summarizes this debate:

“The form $||: A^1 + A^2 :||: B + A^3 :||$ in which the four components are of comparable or equal length is regarded by some theorists as more **binary** than ternary. This view is generally associated with the questionable corollary view that $B + A^3$ is comparable in form to $A^1 + A^2$ The case for the term binary or rounded binary form as an appropriate designation rests largely on the following evidence: (a) the balanced proportions, (b) the scheme of formal repetitions, and (c) the strength of the closing cadences.

“Those who suggest that **ternary** or **incipient ternary** [meaning *almost* ternary] form is the better term point to the presence of (a) return following departure or episode, which may or may not involve compression or telescoping of A^1 and/or A^2 in the latter portion of part two (A^3); (b) the tripartite tonal or key scheme (tonic to related area to tonic); (c) the lack of unity in $B + A^3$ with respect to the materials and/or the procedures used; and particularly critical, (d) the bridge or retransition between B and A^3 , which provides not only separation and modulation but also a sense of aroused expectations for the return of A.”⁷

»Q: Do you understand both views? Which view do *you* think makes more sense?

⁶Spink, *An Historical Approach to Musical Form*.

⁷Kohs, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-112.