



The Composer Essay Project

A Compendium of Ideas About Form in Music

By Jocelyn Morlock

For many composers, formal development is the most challenging aspect of writing music. The explosion of musical languages in the last 100 years or so has led to an astounding diversity of formal processes and structures.

I asked some of the leading composers of our time to tell us their thoughts on form in music: what form means to them, how they structure their music, if/how they make formal plans, thoughts on repetition, audible structure from the listener's viewpoint, and how their ideas on form have changed over the course of their careers.

The composers who shared their insight on form with me were:

Michel van der Aa
Louis Andriessen
Zosha Di Castri
Michael Finnissy
Aaron Gervais

Oswaldo Golijov
Gary Kulesha
David Lang
Hugo Morales Murguía
Nico Muhly

Kaija Saariaho
Caroline Shaw
Ana Sokolovic
Andrew Staniland
Dan Visconti

I was curious to hear the similarities and differences among our respondents – would there be *leitmotifs*? (Yes, and in fact there was Wagner...) Were there any aspects of form in which we'd all agree? Would there be answers so different that you could imagine two composers coming to blows? (No, but I would love to hear a discussion about form between Louis Andriessen and Michael Finnissy.) I was secretly hoping for a magic answer, some kind of clarification that would make my own struggle with form less difficult, even though I know that's a lot to ask...

Each composer's unmediated responses to my questions can be found at musiconmain.ca under *The Composer Essay Project*.

1. What does “form” mean to you, and how does it relate to your process? Do you plan the form of a piece before you begin, or does it emerge as you write?

As it turns out, the formal structure of a composition is not only one of the most important aspects of composition for many composers that we surveyed, but also the most significant:

Form and structure remain the most important aspects of any musical work...Feldman's four-hour 'forms' still require a composer's judgment about where and when things change, even if only slightly...as such, it is central to my work.
(Gary Kulesha)

To me, form is the largest element of musical phrase in a composition. It is one of the more elusive attributes of composition. (Andrew Staniland)

For some composers, a formal structure can be predefined; many more will attempt to predefine their form, but will then proceed to make significant changes as the piece progresses.

It's the only thing I decide first. You work out the form and suddenly all the rest of it — the notes and the rhythms and all of that — comes later. (Nico Muhly)

I always plan the form ahead, except maybe for very small, spontaneously written works. As a young composer I was influenced by Kandinsky's ideas concerning form and content: "The form is the outer expression of the inner content" – in On the Problem of Form – he has verbalized what I felt intuitively. (Kaija Saariaho)

I think a lot about the form first. Often make drawings of the skeleton of the piece before even writing down the first note. Sometimes the form/skeleton changes midway if I feel the piece benefits from it. It's not a fixed, rigid thing. (Michel van der Aa)

Form is only the framework of a composition. It is independent from the content.
(Louis Andriessen)

Andriessen goes on to describe how he created the framework of his opera *Writing to Vermeer* by combining structural elements of Peter Greenaway's script with those of John Cage's *Six Melodies* and an imaginary mirror. He stays true to his formal process except for the final scene, which had to be shortened as the protagonists were drowning in a flood...

(You can see his diagrams online as part of his full response at musiconmain.ca.)

For other respondents, form is what results from the act of composing, and must be determined by the musical material.

To me, it's simply the fingerprint left by the process of composing and not something that is ultimately separable from process. (Dan Visconti)

Form results when musical material is imbued with a clear sense of purpose. (Zosha Di Castri)

The compositional process starts by experimenting with the object or instrument in question, generating and creating the sounds of the instruments as a first step in the process without taking them for granted, in this way the form or shape of the piece emerges from the development and narrative based on these techniques and their results. (Hugo Morales Murguía)

In my mind different musical ideas and materials are predisposed towards different kinds of forms, and finding the most appropriate formal expression for each idea (or, conversely, the most appropriate musical material when 'form' itself is the idea) is a fascinating (and sometimes frustrating) part of the compositional process. (Osvaldo Golijov)

Several composers referred to musical form as a physical object or activity. Although this concept at first seemed foreign to me, in thinking about it I realized that my own process is dependent on working with my musical ideas as objects to be studied. I need to become familiar with my material before discovering where to place it in time and space, and how it should evolve.

'Form' is something I do: I form something, meaning I allow something to happen, and I shape it by following what happens, eye and ear conjoined. (Michael Finnissy)

When I think of 'form' I think of something having a physical shape, which music often does for me. (Caroline Shaw)

Musical form is indeed active - one of the biggest challenges of musical structure, as distinct from that of other art forms such as visual art or literature, is that it must be experienced in real time, from start to finish.

In a sense, "form" really means "timing". And as such, it is central to my work. (Gary Kulesha)

Form is time, more precisely timing...a starting and an arriving point...the heart of the piece itself. (Ana Sokolovic)

Memory is integral to formal perception in this temporal context, and recollections of the work affect the processes of writing and listening as it happens.

I do think that it is important to develop mastery of long-range phrasing. For me this entails both planning for what one hopes to happen, and listening deeply to what is actually happening. (Andrew Staniland)

Of course 'shaping' might seem 'intuitive', but that really implies additional input from memory, accident and mistake: brain-shadows. Bidden or unbidden. (Michael Finnissy)

Form is the mechanism by which composers regulate familiarity. (David Lang)

Form is both the logical structure of the materials and how they impact us psychologically: the interpretations our brains project on material we are hearing and have heard. (Aaron Gervais)

David Lang's description of how memory affects form could read as a reminiscence of an absent lover:

...you notice it when it happens, you notice when it leaves, you judge things against it that aren't it, you remember it when it returns. (David Lang)

2. Now that we don't tend to use formal structures like sonata, rondo, variations, do you work with prefabricated forms of any kind, either musical or extramusical? (Text, plot, visual art, quotation, etc...?)

As it turns out, several composers *do* use traditional formal constructs. Their explanations for why they use them, and their perspectives on why these "traditional" forms continue to be meaningful, is an enticement to try working with such structures.

I have in recent years started working with very old-fashioned sonata allegros. Why? Because they work. Most of my music is still driven by the notion of "discourse", ideas being presented and then developed. (Gary Kulesha)

...at the risk of sounding naive, I believe that all three ideas (Sonata, Rondo, Variations) are the (ever evolving) result of deep ways of unfolding a narrative, of an anthropological and timeless nature, rather than simply cultural products belonging to a specific era. (Osvaldo Golijov)

You cannot invent a new form. The sonata form is based on contrasts: two themes. All occidental music is based on contrasts. (Ana Sokolovic)

I love a passacaglia and a chaconne; the ritualistic nature of those older forms pleases me. (Nico Muhly)

Extramusical structures such as visual depictions of the piece, sketching, and timelines are useful for many composers, especially as a way of starting work. In my experience, whether the extramusical structure is kept or jettisoned later in the process isn't really that important after it fulfills its function as catalyst to getting music on paper.

[I] Usually [use] visual art or sculpture, or movement and patterns, rarely text or narrative. (Caroline Shaw)

Extramusical inspirations are also very effective - sculpture, poetry, images, and so forth. (Andrew Staniland)

I have made experiments with both drawings made by myself and texts. (Kaija Saariaho)

Form is a plot line, a film script of the piece. Drawings and text on a timeline. (Michel van der Aa)

I usually begin with formal sketches, rough roadmaps that at once guide the composition, yet remain flexible to change. I used to think of form quite rigidly...I now rely much more on my ear to organically fine-tune the timing and transitions between sections as a work develops. I constantly push myself to be more flexible in my thinking: maybe this beginning is actually the end. (Zosha Di Castri)

Whether musical or extramusical, prefabricated structural constraints are used by many composers to provide guidance and control.

I always use prefabricated forms, musical or extramusical, traditional or invented. Having a reason to do things one way instead of another is what leads you to creativity, even if that reason is arbitrary. The blank canvas is not liberating, it just blinds you to the fact that you're mired in your own habits and clichés. (Aaron Gervais)

However, others warn against the pitfalls of using non-musical material, or indeed any pre-existing material to structure their work.

I tend to think that musical parameters like overall structure and timing are very difficult to work out with other extra musical elements besides careful listening and musical intuition. Whenever I have tried to base global form in non-musical foundations I find myself spending a lot of time recomposing and balancing timing afterwards. (Hugo Morales Murguía)

Usually there is an overarching theme, problem, or premise in each of my pieces and I believe that these concepts have become a substitute for form, not just for me but in lots of music from the past 50 years...I think art works best when on some level it remains implicit rather than explicit. (Dan Visconti)

The historical 'formal structures' that you mention are also processes, ways of presenting, or articulating, materials - and they are symbolic of their historical period, and a particular set of codes, a particular understanding of the universe. The 'form-ing' of a piece is uniquely integral to it, imposing another structure, from 'outside', would not be truthful to the experience. (Michael Finnissy)

3. How does form relate to contrast/repetition? Can there be formal "signposts" without contrast? How does repetition affect form in your work?

This question engendered a fair bit of commentary about the nature of repetition, and whether it is a requirement or inevitability in music. Several composers suggest, with reservations, that contrast and repetition might not be a requirement for music; in multiple responses, references were made to Morton Feldman. I suspect that the human tendency to compare events and seek order will prevent listeners from hearing any music as without contrast or repetition: even a hint of similarity of contour or gesture will be perceived, if not invented by the listener's ear and mind.

We now have the option of choosing to create music with or without contrast and repetition... Formal signposts may or may not be important in a work. They may also be very subtle. In Feldman's Piano and String Quartet, are there formal signposts? Or in Gondwana by Murail? Yes, there are, but they are defined less by obvious contrast than by subtle shifts in pitch and/or colour. The psychological time of these works sets up an expectation of stasis, so small changes become important. I cannot think of a single work in which there is not some kind of contrast, albeit very subtle.

(Gary Kulesha)

Contrasting elements are needed to create musical form, as they are needed in any other field to perceive differences. (Kaija Saariaho)

In the occidental world, people are used to changing atmospheres; contemporary pieces which are four hours long with not a lot of changes (like Feldman, and I insist that there I don't give any artistic opinion on this example) borrowed their form from oriental/meditational structures. (Ana Sokolovic)

There can certainly be intellectual form in a piece with no contrasts or signposts, but I do not think that there will be any musical form. Planning a "great form" and actually executing a "great form" are unfortunately not one and the same. (Andrew Staniland)

While it may be possible to avoid repetition, contrast will always be present, in varying degrees.

I think there is always contrast in music; the pure action of generating a sound is already a contrast with silence. (Hugo Morales Murguía)

The precise definition of contrast is significant – for some composers it is a much broader concept than for others, at least in the context of these responses. Some respondents find, paradoxically, that even repetition is in fact contrast. Several have addressed the fundamental human need for repetition, and inclination towards hearing patterns.

We know from scientific research about the human need for contrast and repetition, particularly with reference to the intelligibility of structure (or form-in-action). When you hear something a second time, your previous experience actually colours the second hearing, already rendering it different (therefore contrasting)... To some extent I believe that time-structures need to 'breathe', and that they therefore rely on contrasts of tension and release - repetition is a kind of release, familiarity before unfamiliarity. (Michael Finnissy)

Having material return is very important in my music. I fundamentally feel that we need these moments of 'sameness' in order to process and appreciate the new or unfamiliar. (Zosha Di Castri)

Humans are pattern-recognizers, that's what led us out of the jungles and into civilization. We even project patterns into random noise because we crave them so much...in my own work, I find myself using a lot of repeating structures, but not for ideological reasons. I'm just trying to make the piece interesting to me, and I try not to analyze it too much. That thing you thought was a formal signpost might turn out not to be, and if you get wrapped up in placing it throughout the piece you're likely to undercut more important elements. (Aaron Gervais)

Relatively recent changes in attitude towards repetition in western culture, and the conflicting ideologies that we've witnessed in the past 100 years, have brought many contemporary composers full-circle to a recognition of the pervasiveness of patterns throughout the natural world.

In any case, some pretty crazy detours were taken in music when "repetition" was dissed by Schoenberg and then officially banished by Boulez for "serious" composers, and when it was rediscovered with fresh ears and minds by the minimalists, we were reminded that repetition is in its many disguises, an essential part of life: it exists in nature and in all folk narratives. (Osvaldo Golijov)

I would love to follow up on Caroline Shaw's idea that *"these would be such great questions to ask a choreographer! Dancers are thinking about movement and space in this way all the time, and I love it,"* and I wish I knew more regarding Nico Muhly's concern: *"I'm not sure that this is really a question as much as a series of misconceptions about how music works?"* as I think that would be an interesting conversation...

4. Is the form of the piece (whatever that means to you) something that you want the listener to be consciously aware of?

Not a single composer said an unqualified "yes" to this question; everyone had some reservations about the idea of the listener focusing too strenuously on form, although several respondents noted that engaged listening might include an intellectual awareness of formal development as it happens.

Awareness of place is certainly part of active listening: where are you now? where were you then? where will you soon be?...However, when a piece is successful, it is because several appreciable aspects are simultaneously effective...Active listening means listening with your full being, not necessarily to include counting measures in the seven part rondo. (Andrew Staniland)

Yes, in the sense of something "working," but no, in the sense of counting bars and beats and watching a process unfold. (Nico Muhly)

Not consciously. But it is important to recall that taking "pleasure" from a piece of music is a very different experience for each individual listener. When audiences in the Baroque era heard a fugue, part of the pleasure they took in hearing it was an intellectual appreciation of what was happening...the audibility of the form was (and is) very much part of our enjoyment of the work. (Gary Kulesha)

I think only if it is necessary to support the main premise of the piece...But occasionally I write a piece in which the fulfillment of the main ideas has nothing to do with form, and it can become a dogmatic distraction to be concerned with any musical element when it becomes irrelevant. (Dan Visconti)

Although a conscious preoccupation with form may not be desired, each of the composers who answered this question expressed a desire for their audience to engage with the form on some level, to get a sense of structural significance even if they don't consciously know why they perceive it. Kaija Saariaho does not make reference to other listeners, but explains that perceiving form when she herself is listening to music is very significant to her.

I like to be conscious of the form and I find it disturbing if I cannot perceive it when listening to the music. (Kaija Saariaho)

I hope that my conception of form will affect listeners even if they are not able to articulate a piece's structure in any schematic sense. I believe that even an untrained ear can detect when a form works, and when it does not. (Zosha Di Castri)

When something new happens, we start a new part of a piece, a new section or a movement. And the audience feels it without necessarily naming it. (Ana Sokolovic)

I want the listener to feel the form unconsciously. It's not about the shape of the route but the fact that it brings you to places you haven't been before. (Michel van der Aa)

*No. But I think that form (or rather, formal processes) can have a great physiological impact in the listener... There are many examples in my view of how form can affect the listener, even if unconsciously, deeper than what we call the "material".
(Osvaldo Golijov)*

In fact it may be more enjoyable for the listener, or even the performer, to experience the form without paying it too close attention.

I rarely think about form when I'm playing Mozart or Brahms, because I'm so into the particular harmonic shifts and elegant melodic twists that are happening...Of course, I could retrace it if I needed to, but that's not really what I'm thinking about when I'm learning and playing the music. (Caroline Shaw)

It is difficult for a composer to know what any given listener might find in their piece, despite their best attempts to guess. In my experience, if I feel strongly about what I've written, then the audience will as well; whether their reaction will be similar to mine is another story.

I don't care what people hear in my music. I do care if they feel something about the experience, but other than that, it's not really any of my business what they perceive or don't perceive. (Aaron Gervais)

As several composers have pointed out, 'the listener' is a fictitious (and fluid) construct.

*I prefer not to think or have big expectations on how 'the listener' will interpret my works, mainly because it always surprises me the plurality on which we as human beings listen and understand music, in that sense I think there is no 'one listener', the same listener can even have different interpretations of the same work after time.
(Hugo Morales Murguía)*

*At some levels 'yes', I would prefer the listener to be ACTIVELY involved. But I do not think you can, or should, generalise 'the listener' - they are a hypothesis.
(Michael Finnissy)*

5. Have you changed your ideas about form in music over the course of your career, and if so, how/why?

This is the only question that I expected everyone to answer in the affirmative. This was not the case; several composers felt that their fundamental conception of form remained the same, even if their stylistic and formal preferences had changed.

In my case form has remained very much a consequence of lower-level activity rather than a superimposed mold or a preconceived notion. (Hugo Morales Murguía)

I don't think my basic perceptions and concept about the form being in close connection with material has changed as such, even if in different periods of my career I have been working on different kinds of formal ideas. (Kaija Saariaho)

Yes and no. As I said earlier, in my youth I worked in traditional forms almost exclusively, then I moved away and worked with looser forms, and now I have returned to more clear forms. I have always been convinced that formal procedure is the most difficult thing to master in composition, and I once again add the disclaimer that this applies equally to anyone who deliberately tries to avoid any kind of audible or traditional form...I have always believed that it is the job of the composer to lead the listener through this experience in a convincing way, and that, to me, means organizing time, which in turn means controlling form. I have always held this to be true. (Gary Kulesha)

Several composers mentioned being specifically influenced by listening to other people's music.

Yes — I started listening to more Wagner! You can strettttttch out the douuuuuuuugh (Nico Muhly)

For years I was fascinated by process rather than a pre-existing formal structure, and thought that repetition or return were things of the past...but more and more I am in awe at how the simplest forms can sometimes have such emotional power: the return of a chorus in a song like Bob Marley's "No Woman No Cry". Or the short silence before the last "Da Capo" repeat in a "formally simple" aria like Bach's "Schlummert Ein... (Fall asleep, you weary eyes)". Our planet's rotation skips a beat at those moments! (Osvaldo Golijov)

My (partly incorrect) assumption when asking this last question was that a composer's ideas about form would necessarily change, simply because of the passing of time, and it was just a matter of how. Several respondents had similar feelings:

Hasn't everyone changed their ideas about form over time? My ideas about most aspects of music are constantly shifting as I have new experiences and work with materials in new ways. Whenever I'd thought I figured out some fundamental truth about music, karma has quickly found a way to make me look like an idiot. The only basics that I accept are those stemming from human physiology, which is why increasingly I turn to evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and anthropology as inspirations. (Aaron Gervais)

It changes (and should change) for each new work. (Michel van der Aa)

Sorting music by formal or conceptual style is one way for composers to keep tabs on their own evolution.

I've started to categorize some of my pieces according to this little grid I made up — where some pieces are more like conceptual poetic art objects, and other pieces lean toward being pure music that lifts and falls, that just tries to be joy and sadness without words. (Caroline Shaw)

Coming of age and experiencing a lifetime of social and cultural advances, fundamentally influences a composer's entire being; by extension, their work will also be changed. Michael Finnissy responds to this question about changing his ideas about form over the course of his career:

Of course I have. When I started writing - between the ages of four and five - I knew what an average (if hyper-active and over-imaginative!) child of that age knows. I did not study composition in a conventionally disciplined way until I was eighteen, and by that time I was very stubborn and opinionated about what I was writing. Homosexuality was only just LEGAL. There was no Internet. The skies in England tend to be grey ten months in every year. Work it out for yourself: I am not super-humanly detached from my music, I am right IN there. Why change? Because no man is an island, we should try and share our thoughts and experiences. How change? Lots and lots of hard, bloody work. (Michael Finnissy)

Receiving responses from so many composers reveals a plurality of perspectives. Given these perspectives, and the composers' constant grappling with formal coherence, it seems to me that form in music – even for those who can predefine it – is always in motion, always evolving. There is a constant tension between newness and familiarity, momentum and interruption, surprise and relief.

Is form a tangle of intertwining conversations in which expectations are gratified, or not gratified? Conversations between composer and audience? Composer and performer? Composer and their own material?

Ultimately, perhaps form is simply about the process of ordering – and disordering – our sonic world.

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