

**Early approaches to structure in  
composition:**

**Part 2: An introduction to binary form,  
including pupil composition task.**

## Using simple binary structure in composition

We have examined how to use smaller structures in melodic composition in the first part of this tutorial. However, when it comes to using harmonic and architectural structures, it is necessary to think in totally different terms.

Initially, we have to look at some of the conventional forms that you are likely to need to use, the most common of which is called Binary form. As the name suggests, is a composition in two parts. We can call these Section A and Section B.

Look at the example that accompanies this resource ([www.musicteachers.co.uk/resources/binaryex1.pdf](http://www.musicteachers.co.uk/resources/binaryex1.pdf)).

Take a look at this melody by the French composer Joseph Boismortier (1691-1755). You will see that it is in two parts, and that each part is marked with a repeat mark.

### Example

Here are a few things to note:

1. The second part is slightly longer than the first. This is often the case, and is usually because composers need to add a coda at the conclusion, either because of the key structure or because it feels it needs a little extra "statement" to make it sound finished.
2. The first half, Section A, begins in D major, but in bar 8, the harmony suggests b minor, which is Chord VI of D major. The use of Chord VI allows the music to act as a dominant of E major, which is established at the end of the bar, itself acting as the dominant of A major, and A major is, of course, the dominant of the opening key of D, where it stays (with a few transitory modulations) until the double bar line. Thus, in the first 8 bars, the composer has **modulated** to the dominant for the opening of the second part, Part B.
3. Look at the figuration of the opening part. Between bars 1 and 3, we have three units that are roughly related in terms of shape and rhythm. Although they are not an exact sequence, the composer shapes these to make sure he can modulate through a series of different chords.

Now look at the figuration of the second part. Clearly, it begins on a chord of A major and has thematic material that is not unlike the opening, it roughly being an inversion of the melody. This is where the melody changes shape to go in approximately the opposite direction of the beginning (see example 2 – [www.musicteachers.co.uk/resources/binaryex2.pdf](http://www.musicteachers.co.uk/resources/binaryex2.pdf)). Now in this part, several interesting things happen. First, it begins on a chord of A major, but goes back to the opening key of D major. This is not unusual (nor would it have been unusual had Boismortier decided to stay in the dominant). Instead, the opening chord and its **resolution** to the D major chord is really nothing other than a perfect cadence in the tonic, which occurs between beats two and three.

At the beginning of bar 14, we have a statement on a G major chord, followed by, on beat 3, c-sharp minor, which moves to F-sharp major at the beginning of bar 15. This, however, is only a dominant of b minor, which is cadenced to B major by the middle of bar 16.

The B major of bar 16 is short-lived, however, and to establish the key of A major, which is the piece's dominant, we have a further modulation to a chord of E at the beginning of bar 17, which acts as a dominant of A major, to where it resolves between beats 2 and 3.

What have you noticed about this series of modulations? We have gone through the following series of chords:

A—D—G—C-sharp—F-sharp—B—E —A

The relationship is a cycle of 5ths. Boismortier wants to take the music to A major and uses the a very strong means of modulation to do so, through a series of chords that are closely related. Try playing this chord sequence on the piano to see how easy moving from one to the other sounds.

Now we have ended at a middle point of Section B, which appears in the expected dominant. We know it is the middle for three reasons, and to understand why, we must look at the evidence:

First, the manner in which Boismortier continues his figuration changes considerably. The opening figuration alters considerably to something that is a little more conjunct in texture, that is, it moves more by step. The second is that the manner in which the harmonic movement changes: rather than a cycle of 5ths, we have a chord sequence that is achieved through a series of suspensions, which goes hand in hand with the conjunct texture of the melody.

The third reason can be gleaned from the change of figuration which occurs in the last two bars. Here, the motif in the melody seems unconnected with any of the figuration that occurs elsewhere in the music. In a piece of binary music, we might expect a final cadence in the tonic at between bars 23 and 24, since this makes the proportions of Section A and Section B the same. Instead, Boismortier extends the phrase another bar, touching an E major 7 chord in its first inversion (24.2) before a full cadence in D major (24.4 – 25.1). As if to reaffirm the key centre, possibly because of the tonal instability of bars 13 – 20, this two-bar coda is appended in which the conjunct movement of the solo line is replaced with what is, essentially, a series of chordal outlines. It

is interesting to note that this is the only time such figuration is used, and acts as probable evidence of Boismortier's thinking at this point.

4. Now it might seem that the whole of the information above has a little too much analysis and this might have left you wondering what that has to do with your learning process as a composer. Initially, we have seen that there is a very strong key structure, based mainly on the relationships between tonic and dominant chords, and that the melodic line has been built around an opening motif, which is later inverted.

All of this is of extreme importance, since the strong harmonic movement and the melodic lines built around similar themes give the music a sense of cohesion. It is only in the coda that the music seems slightly at odds with the preceding material, which is quite acceptable, since the composer uses this purely as a device to enable the listener to get a feeling of the final tonic key.

### Task

This is a two part task, requiring you to have read and understood the information contained in the first part of this series.

1. Build a harmonic structure of two times eight bars' length, the first section of which ends in the dominant. The second section can either begin in the dominant or in the tonic, but make sure that it ends in the dominant, as in Boismortier's example. You will perhaps have to examine the harmonic devices explained in this article in a little more detail, but using the cycle of fifths is usually a very good means of going through several different keys in a short period without too many difficulties.

Add a three bar coda that takes you back from the dominant to the tonic.

(In this first part, don't worry about developing anything other than a chordal structure. Melody is not important.)

2. Begin to structure a melody around the chord sequence of the first half. As you will have read about melodic structure, there are many devices you can use to make sure that the melody remains concise and interesting.

Taking the opening melody, try to develop a variation of the figuration through inversion for the Section B.

3. For the coda, you can devise your melody from either previous material or, alternatively, use something completely different which helps you to establish the chord structure of the final three bars.