This article was downloaded by: [Columbia University]
On: 10 November 2014, At: 20:16
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered
Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41
Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

Proceedings of the Musical Association

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rma18>

The Higher Aspects of Musical Form

F. Gilbert Webb

Published online: 28 Jan 2009.

To cite this article: F. Gilbert Webb (1904) The Higher Aspects of Musical Form, Proceedings of the Musical Association, 31:1, 131-141, DOI: [10.1093/jrma/31.1.131](https://doi.org/10.1093/jrma/31.1.131)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/jrma/31.1.131>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with

primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

MAY 9, 1905.

DR. CHARLES MACLEAN, M.A., VICE-PRESIDENT,
IN THE CHAIR.

THE HIGHER ASPECTS OF MUSICAL FORM.

BY F. GILBERT WEBB.

It is with diffidence, born of knowledge, that I have ventured to take up the thorny subject of Musical Form, but my justification is a desire to contribute, in some degree, to a clearer apprehension than seems to exist at present concerning the principles which give form and design, force and influence. Music has ever reflected the spirit of its age, and at the present period nothing is sacred to the analyst and searcher after truth. Modern chemistry tells us that the word "opaque" has only a relative meaning, converts the air we breathe into a liquid, and presents us with a mysterious substance called "Radium" which contradicts our former estimation of Matter. Our voices are registered on wax cylinders, and the thunder-cloud is converted into a maid-of-all-work. Small wonder, then, that in the midst of this physical "Götterdämmerung" composers should question the rules of their forbears, and claim the liberty and expansion of thought that is agitating all thinking minds. The question of Pilate, "What is truth?" has never been asked more earnestly by all classes than to-day, and the answer can only be found by seeking active causes, and those principles which produce, permeate, and sustain life in all its forms.

Before such an assembly as this it would be superfluous to comment on the various accepted musical forms; but, by way of foundation to my remarks, I venture to quote some definitions of form; for definitions are the lighthouses which illuminate art, and make for safety when we embark on speculation and research.

Hauptmann, in his "Harmonics and Metrics," says: "There is in music an architecture which consists chiefly in the systematic manner and modulation of a composition; and so essentially requisite is it, that without it no piece of music can be regarded as a work of art." Ernest Pauer writes: "Music, when portraying feelings or emotions, assumes various forms, and undergoes various modifications; and, being the representation of a passing feeling or emotion, has a definite outline, a commencement, development and ending." Ludwig Bussler defines form as "The grouping together of identical, similar and diverse musical thoughts into one complete organism." Sir Hubert Parry says: "The means by which unity and proportion are arrived at in musical works are the relative distribution of keys and harmonic bases on the one hand, and of subjects or figures or melodies on the other; and this distribution is called the Form of the work."

From these quotations it is fair to make the deduction that musical form is an important factor in composition. Secondly, that its attributes make for law and order, and indirectly for clearness of design. One important attribute of form is its influence on details. The variations and embroideries may be elaborate, but if due regard be paid to form they will not destroy or obscure the main idea. Too often, however, episodic matter and embroideries are made prominent at the expense of the real subject, and although their brilliancy may dazzle us, they are as destructive to the longevity of a work as the ivy is to the tree it clothes. Berlioz is for ever breaking the coherency of his designs by episodes and harmonic incidents which seem merely to be introduced to secure effects, and in my estimation this weakness more than anything else has prevented his music from becoming popular. In "Faust" he has been guarded against his besetting sin by a well-knit story, but even in this work the tendency to excessively accentuate brilliant episodes is observable.

Formalism may be described as form run to seed, and is as inevitable as the decay of a beautiful flower. The germ of form is the desire for symmetry. We see it in the rude pattern-markings of the savage. Such markings may be described as form in an inert state. Active life comes to it with the spirit of expression, and the moment design becomes the medium of thought, it acquires artistic vitality, and its subsequent ramifications are the natural product of environment; but formalism is the killing of this spirit, the retrogression to the inert state. A musical work may be in faultless form; coherent, well balanced and well scored, and yet be as lifeless as the body of a dead man. I believe that that which makes the masterpiece differ from what may be termed estimable music is that, whereas the latter is more or less filled in by obedience to precedent and laws of theory,

every note of the masterpiece has been dictated by an overwhelming desire to give expression to a dominating idea, an idea so strong that intuitively it has controlled every detail. To-day, however, there is little risk of an epidemic of formalism, in fact the risk is greater of going to the other extreme,—formlessness—and that way madness lies.

This brings me to my third point, the necessity of form. To many present this statement may seem a platitude, yet I am convinced that a good many young composers secretly feel inclined to think that form can be left to take care of itself. But form in nature is everywhere discernible, from the grouping of the petals of a daisy to the foliage of the largest tree. The diversity in uniformity is infinite, yet balance, symmetry and appropriateness are maintained. This was finely put by Schumann, when he wrote, "A genuine musical phrase has always, as it were, a certain centre of gravity. Mozart places it in the centre, Beethoven at the end, but the effect of the whole pivots on that centre."

There are two distinct aspects of form which it seems to me are overlooked. I mean the different action of form in mental conception and in comprehending the ideas of others. The simplest illustration of these phenomena is perhaps the action involved in the direction and delivery of a letter in England. The first thought of the writer is the person addressed; next in association is the road or street in which he lives, and last of all the county or country in which his house is situated; but the first thing the deliverer of the letter has to find out is the county, secondly the road or street in which the house is, and last of all the person's name. Now this has a very close analogy to mental action in composition and listening. The composer works from a central idea; a germ-thought, which he expands; the listener has to be conducted to that germ-thought by a series of introductions. By a germ-thought I do not mean a theme or melody itself, but the idea which prompts the theme, which idea the theme is an endeavour to express. Now the form in which ideas are evolved is one of relative importance. The need or desire comes first, the readiest means to satisfy it next, and subsequently details; but the listener may not only be dubious of the need of the composition, but he can only arrive at the intention of the composer by a gradual assimilation of details and groupings which have been developed in inverse order in the composer's mind. It follows, therefore, that what may be perfectly clear to the writer may be obscure to the listener. The composer stands within the edifice he has erected, and unless he has been careful in the building, its object and its meaning will be hard to discover by those outside. As a poet has said: "Whereas I stand within my inmost Temple, thou standest on the steps without."

We therefore perceive that the mental action involved in the conception and the subsequent development of ideas is the opposite to the process of mental assimilation, and here we have fixed principles of our being which cannot be too closely kept in view by composers; for be it remembered that the composer appeals purely to mental phenomena to produce his effects. There is no actual excitation of the nerves of touch, taste, smell, or sight brought into play by the musician. His sole go-between is the ear with its thousands of auditory nerve-cells that transmit his music to the listener's brain. In no art therefore is the consideration of the laws by which understanding is accomplished so imperative as in music. Yet I fancy few composers give a thought to making their music as easily understood as possible: but clearness of design is an attribute of all masterpieces, from Beethoven's Symphonies to Sullivan's Operas. Of course if a composer have little to say, the best thing he can do is to thicken up and obscure his design, and leave the explanation of the meaning of his work to a band of enthusiastic followers; but with such we are not now concerned.

Form is commonly regarded as two-fold, melodic and harmonic; but I think I have said enough to show that these two main divisions each contain many sub-divisions. Constructively, we are faced to-day with a remarkable number of distinct methods of design. On the one hand we have the rational procedure of inventing melody which is in consonance with its subject. I need only mention the heroic and expanding form of the Sword motive in the "Ring," and the narrow, niggling phrases put into the mouth of *Mime*, to indicate what I mean by appropriate form in melody, commonly called characterization. It is this particular constructive side of form which gives nationality to music, that is, the curves of the melody are dictated by the most salient characteristics of the people.

At present there is a noticeable tendency in certain composers to shorten the length of themes, compensation for proportionate loss of salient significance being sought in striking harmonic combinations. In Elgar's "Apostles" the theme of "Christ" is reduced to three notes, or, to speak more strictly, to a distinctive chord. The only possible further development is the "Rest," which Mendelssohn once said was "the most expressive device in music."

With the shortening of the theme there follows naturally an episodic style, the presentation of a series of distinct scenes loosely connected, of which Elgar's "Apostles" also furnishes a notable example. In contrast to this method we have the system pursued by Richard Strauss, who builds up his themes after the manner of a railway-train, the sections of which can be sent careering on their own account, or

transferred to those of another theme, or inverted. We are now also familiar with the repetition system of the Bohemian School, in which the melodic phrase is handed about from one instrument of the orchestra to another, and repeated in various keys, but always in its entirety, like a highly-glazed Doulton tile, the whole musical picture forming a mosaic rather than a woven pattern. The most successful exponent of this is Dvůrák.

From the above it will be seen that many methods are now open to the composer, and that he is no longer confined to forms commonly called "classical," and I fancy it is the multiplicity of designs which may be used legitimately that has generated the idea amongst conservative musicians that formlessness prevails in modern music. Examination of important works of our time shows that they are not formless, but that often their design is bad because it is unnecessarily difficult to follow by the listener. As a matter of fact, far more works have been ruined by slavish obedience to forms really obsolete than by lack of form.

The composer is now face to face with eternal principles; and the essence of these principles, as of all laws of nature, is the maintenance of the appropriate and suitable, and the annihilation of the redundant. It is commonly said that nature abhors a vacuum, but observation shows that she will have nothing that is unnecessary or useless, and if composers would criticise their works from this standpoint they would make mankind, especially critics, happier and more grateful.

With regard to the harmonic side of form, it is time that we fairly faced the fact that key-relationship as taught by our forefathers is a thing of the past; that the only relationship which can claim, in some degree, natural origin is that between the tonic and dominant, which fact probably arises from the fifth of the scale being the first perceptible and most powerful harmonic after the octave. Apart from this the sense of relationship of chords merely arises from their having notes in common. The history of music shows that each generation has got farther away from the supposed affinity of particular keys. Harmonic design and sense of harmonic balance rest upon the power of the listener to remember certain tonalities, or their suggestion, on their recurrence. In this respect, particular harmonic progressions are more easily remembered than their actual pitch, consequently harmonic balance and coherence are largely dependent on the repetition of like progressions of chords. When this is neglected a sense of vagueness is engendered.

It is commonly held that lyrical and dramatic treatment are opposed, but I would rather say each style can be used inappropriately. It is possible to treat a dramatic episode lyrically and *vice versa*, but in either case there will result

misuse of form, since the design will be inappropriate to the matter. Many an otherwise excellent composition has been wrecked owing to insufficient consideration of the proper form before the composer began to write. The foundations are not true, and the entire edifice suffers.

In noting progress in any art, the influence of what may be termed the pendulum of change should not be lost sight of, for however good a thing may be, man, with familiarity loses his content, and will often accept that which is of less value, because of its freshness; but although the pendulum goes backwards as well as forwards, each swing registers an advance of time toward the infinite.

In conclusion:—It appears to me, that we have now arrived at an epoch in the development of music in which the long accepted theory of key-relationship must be discarded for a closer and more comprehensive system in harmonic argument; and that the form of all music must be dictated by the subject-matter or expressive aim of the composer, but with special regard to those eternal laws which govern apprehension and assimilation on the part of the listener, and that the surest way to gain acquaintance with these laws is the close study of their manifestations in accepted masterpieces.

DISCUSSION.

THE CHAIRMAN.—I beg to move a formal vote of thanks to Mr. Webb for his excellent discourse, the only fault of which was its brevity. [Passed unanimously.] As to this elusive matter of Form, there are so many standpoints that we can each take our own. I fear I have no contribution to make, except to repeat my own co-ordination of the subject based on ultimate technical analysis, which I offered to this Association in June, 1896. I found the four elementary principles underlying all the music which is poured forth by composers to be (a) the Monopodic, or simply uttered; (b) the Strophic, or recurrent; (c) the Episodic, or interrupted; and (d) the Isotropic, or balanced. Anyone who does me the honour to look up the Paper in question, will see how the four principles are developed so as to constitute the technical forms we already know or are ever likely hereafter to know. Certain I am that the most "advanced," the freest, music of which we are yet cognizant will all be found to take its genesis in these principles and their combinations. I think our excellent lecturer's point to-day is that henceforward the "subject-matter" is to govern the form. At the risk of being disagreeable, I fear I must demur. No amount of subject-matter will ever alter the fundamental principles

of the sounds which build up music. To take a single example in the key-relationships which have been mentioned: the composer has to *balance* these, and he can no more get on without balance of keys than he can without his pen and ink. If he fails, the listener does not know what is the matter, but he goes away feeling that the music was not successful. And the greatest composers are those who have the most profound sense of tonality. However, as I began by saying, we have each got our own point of view; and I daresay if we sat here long enough we should find that we are all quite agreed.

Sir FREDERICK BRIDGE—I missed the early part of the lecture, much to my regret, and therefore I have not sufficient ground to venture on. The only thing I can say is that I am not one who objects to short papers on these occasions, because it gives an opportunity for discussion. Often the papers are too long to admit of any discussion. Some of the most valuable things are to be found in the discussions of past years (I do not say that is the case now), but we have had some contributions from Dr. Maclean that have been very instructive. I was rather frightened by some of Mr. Webb's observations, and began to feel, getting on as I am in years, that it is time some of us left the scene, and allowed the musicians of the future to pursue their horrible devices without us. I am conservative, and I like to think that some of those things we have taught so long can be justified in the outrageous music we have to hear in these days. I am very much pleased with what I have listened to. The paper was one of particular interest, and was not too long; I do think we ought to encourage the writers of papers not to be too lengthy, and so promote these discussions.

Mr. SOUTHGATE.—There are one or two things in the paper that struck me as suggestive of a little thought. Mr. Webb said that composers, after they have done their work, examine it, and retain nothing that is useless. Who is going to determine that? When a modern composer has finished his work we may suppose he did it very much quicker than Beethoven would have done; we know something as to the time he took, how he revised his work again and again. See the enormous scores that our modern composers write, look at the immense number of instruments they put on the scores, think of the time it takes merely to write down the notes and directions, what a work it is! But supposing we were to agree that composers should discard everything that is useless, are they to be the sole judges of what is useless and what is necessary? It might be that a composer would set down a vast amount of elaborate music which to his mind seemed absolutely necessary, but when you put that

before an audience, how many of them will agree with the composer? Therefore, if the composer has to discard anything he thinks useless, I think when he looks over his completed works again they will be very much as they are now; there will be no difference. Our lecturer spoke of the one possibility of the future rather than of the present, when he mentioned the discarding of key-relationship. I have heard, and I am sure you have all heard, a great deal of modern music in which this has been well carried out; key-relationship has been magnificently discarded. I can recollect one piece in which the key of C minor is sustained in the orchestra, while the soloist is playing about very freely in C major. I mentioned that to Sir August Manns, and he said, "Why, that is just what you do on the organ. If you play the chord of C minor with the mixtures drawn, you have pipes sounding all the notes of the chord of C major." I replied, "That would be a satisfactory argument if one heard the separate constituents of the mixtures as such, but, speaking for myself, I do not." The practice of discarding key-relationship has been carried to such a pitch that I cannot contemplate any further advance of it without some very terrible effect striking on our ears. The same may be said of the balance of keys. Surely they do not take the trouble to modulate now. I remember in Brinley Richards' *Fantasias*, when, after a lot of brilliant firework stuff, he wanted to introduce a movement in another key, he used just to put down the dominant seventh and chord of the new key, and start off without any regard to its relation to what went before. The keys appear to me to be treated in an equally cavalier fashion in much of our modern music. There is one form of music which does not seem to follow any set plan. Under what head would Dr. Maclean class the florid cadenzas which we used to hear when we were young, and popular singers who could sing such things? There was certainly no design about them. I think the only thing that had to be regarded was the amount of breath the singer had at her command. It certainly showed us how splendidly voices were trained in those days. They went on as long as they could, and then the conductor gave the signal, raised his baton, and they arrived home all right. It would be a little curious to know under what type of music we could class those cadenzas. In the Rossini period, unless opportunity was given for a prima donna to let off such things, the prima donna would not sing. The position had to be found for her, and she did as she liked. As to balance of keys, we must remember that in the old Suite form, in which there were many movements, there was no attempt at balance of keys; they followed one another in the same key. I think one reason for our revolt against the old music is that there is no contrast

of key in it. Balance of key did not prevail in the old times, whereas now it is felt to be absolutely necessary.

Dr. YORKE TROTTER.—I fancy that Mr. Webb would not disagree with many of Dr. Maclean's remarks. I think we all acknowledge there must be something like balance or proportion in any musical composition. Mr. Webb said quite rightly there must be Form, and I think we take this balance as a part of Form that must be used. Another thing that I think Mr. Webb would agree with is Development. When we write any music we must develop our themes. If you play a theme and leave it for ever, the effect is so vague; you do not know where you are. Then comes the question of key-relationship. Well, I think it stands on a different footing from what it used to. In the old days keys were more or less strange to each other. If you were in the key of C, you thought the key of F# very remote. But now composers can use any chord, and bring it into any key they like. There is now a sort of *entente cordiale* between the keys that there used not to be. Then it seems to me that the form of course must be governed by the character of the particular composition. There must be form in every piece, but the composer has to take the form that suits his thoughts best. No matter what the form is, we are not bound to write in the old binary form or ternary form, or anything else, but the composer may choose any form that suits him best. There is one feature that is commonly resorted to, and that is climax. You lead up to the central point in your composition; everything hinges on that point, and this climax has become a very important thing in modern music. Take for instance the prelude to "Tristan," or the prelude to "Lohengrin." In Strauss's music you find it perpetually. I think there is not much more to be said about this matter. One would like to hear from Mr. Webb what principles in Form he considers actually acknowledged, and whether he agrees with Dr. Maclean.

Mr. SOUTHGATE.—A lady here has suggested that in the case of the cadences introduced into pianoforte concertos the question is a very much larger and wider one than that of the vocalist's cadenzas; because there harmonies can be produced and there can be progressions through a series of keys.

THE CHAIRMAN.—I may give my own answer. A cadenza is generally an example of the Monopodic principle, being a simple outpouring, a block of music which cannot be divided further by analysis. But if it is of an extended kind, it very often introduces the other principles, showing, for instance, strophic or "balance" attributes. All depends on how the composer makes it.

Mr. WEBB.—I fear my paper has given the impression that its tendency is destructive, but I intended it to be so only

with regard to dissipation of rules and observances which, helpful in the past, are no longer applicable now, and retard progress. Modes of life and forms of expression change with the increase of knowledge and expansion of thought, and music has ever reflected the spirit of its age. It is therefore as unreasonable to judge the form of a modern work by Beethoven's model as it was to judge Beethoven's procedures by those of Haydn. All the false contemporary estimates of masterpieces have arisen from attempting to estimate the present by comparison with the past. Each period has a prominent form which is gradually developed until perfection in that form is attained. When this has been achieved, no further progress in that direction being possible, a departure is inevitable. Thus the old phantasies and divisions gave way to the suite, and the suite to the sonata, and, in our own day, the symphonic poem has budded out of the symphony, because the form of the latter was felt too rigid for appropriate treatment of certain subjects; but it is irrational to judge the construction of the symphonic poem by comparison with that of the symphony. It is obvious that each form has arisen from the working of certain principles, and what I desire is to draw attention to these principles, and to show that they are the outcome not so much of the needs of the composer as of the listener. You can only apprehend any complexity of thought of another person by a certain mental process which is more or less dependent upon a systematic linking of facts and ideas. If I say camera, boots, flower-pot, they convey no meaning, but if the link-words be added—"the camera photographed boots on a flower-pot"—the brain receives a mental picture. Moreover words must be presented in a certain order to become significant, and it will be found that the strongest sentences owe their force to the appropriateness of the words, and the form of the sentence. The same laws dominate the apprehension of the significance of musical sounds. I find a multitude of composers who have good ideas and can invent an attractive theme, but the large majority fail to catch the ear of the public because the music is so clumsily constructed that its significance is hidden, or so obscured that it is irritating instead of being fascinating. I want to see more attention paid to the principles which govern reception and comprehension,—in other words, that consistency and rational sequence of ideas which distinguish all masterpieces; a little more time spent in the planning and consideration of the object of the composition and the best means to secure clear and expressive delivery. With regard to my comparison of Dr. Strauss's themes to a railway train, I meant that the themes of his most important works are built up in sections, after the manner of the carriages of a

train, inasmuch as each section can be run separately or hooked on to another section. Thus the principal theme of the symphonic poem "Ein Heldenleben" consists of four sections, each of which refers to a mental attribute of the hero, and each section is worked by the composer separately or in combination with definite significance; at least, so we are given to understand. Harmonic balance appeals to the listener's memory, and the sense of tonality of a piece of music depends upon the listener's perception, conscious or unconscious, of one key being more prevalent than any other; but when this is not the case, when a particular tonality has not been impressed on the ear, I think very few would perceive if a piece ended in a different key to that in which it began, and consequently there would be no sense of incompleteness. Moreover it is possible that the subject-matter of a piece might be such that it would be more artistically consistent to end in a different key from the commencement. The rule that a work must begin and end in the same key is just one of those maxims which we have accepted without perceiving that if it have any expressive effect it cannot always be artistically true, that there must be some exceptions to the rule. Perfect balance in form is not always desirable any more than it is pictorially. There is such a thing as unsymmetrical symmetry, and beautiful examples are plentiful in Japanese work. Sir Hubert Parry's oratorio "Job" is unbalanced with regard to its principal solo and its choruses, but it is justified by the subject. *Job's* speech is of such paramount importance that it is right that all else should form a background. It seems to me that many musicians are too prone to judge a new work by its conforming to long-established rules with regard to form, instead of measuring its artistic value by criticising the appropriateness of the form to the subject treated. The choice of subject may be partly or wholly outside the limitations of music, but when this is not the case the form to be artistically true must be dictated by the subject, just as much as should be the orchestration or the style adopted. Concerning cadenzas, I regard the large majority of them as irritatingly redundant. A few are in themselves beautiful examples of form and thematic development in miniature, but for the most part cadenzas are designed and employed merely to display the executive skill of the performer, with the result of depreciating the artistic value of the work, and unnecessarily intruding the least estimable attribute of the player's personality. In conclusion, let me assure you of my appreciation of all that has been said, and the attention with which you have listened to my remarks on a subject which is exceptionally difficult to treat and follow.