

## PODCAST #9 AABA FORM

**Erik Nielsen**

Hello. This is the ninth in a series of podcasts dealing with different elements of music composition. In the first series of eight podcasts we concentrated on creating a melody using elements such as a motif or sequence, developing material once you've created it, and composing an appropriate bass line to go with your melody. In the next eight podcasts we'll focus on forms and creating harmonic accompaniment of various kinds as well as devote some time to both counterpoint and musical texture. Today's subject is AABA form.

AABA is one of the most common forms in Western music and is used in vocal and instrumental music of all styles. You know: you say something, say it again with a slight change to make sure the listener gets it, say something a bit different, then repeat the first statement a final time. One beauty of AABA is that if you create an A and a B section you'll end up getting double the amount of music because of the repeats of the A. However, it's good to keep in mind that the second and many times the third A as well contain small changes so that they aren't literal repeats of the original idea.

Today we're going to concentrate on one example of AABA form and it's a piece to which I've referred in previous podcasts. It's "Solitude", composed by Duke Ellington in 1934. In his autobiography entitled "Music is My Mistress", Duke (who was born Edward Kennedy Ellington in 1899 in Washington, D.C.) tells the interesting way in which the piece came into being. Ellington and his orchestra (and yes, he always called it an orchestra even though there was no string section) showed up at a studio to record four songs. However, Duke only had three written and ready. Luckily for him the band that was in the studio when Ellington's outfit arrived was running overtime, so Duke took music paper and pencil and wrote out a new song in 20 minutes using the glass window of the recording booth as his desk. The piece on which he spent so little time was recorded that day and has become an enduring classic, a jazz standard. Ellington recorded the piece several times as a purely instrumental number as on that first occasion or as a song with words. Ellington's written account answers the question I had had for quite a while as to which version came first. It's also probable that the recording you will hear today is from the original session, as the CD lists the piece as having been recorded in September, 1934.

One reason why Ellington was able to write the work so quickly, aside from his great compositional gifts, was that he was using a familiar form. In jazz AABA is called "song form" and has four identical-length sections of 8 bars, usually in 4/4, though it is possible to also add an introduction and/or coda at the end. In this case, merely playing the piece twice was enough to make a highly successful work. And as in many cases where the original material is simple, it's in subtle small changes from one section to another that much of the variety lies which makes the success possible.

I'd like to look at how the piece works from two perspectives. First we'll examine the melody and to a lesser extent the harmony. Then we're going to check out the orchestration.

Let's start by listening to the tune itself. (PLAY A) The A section melody which you've just heard begins with two quarter note pickups starting on the fifth step of the major scale. The melody moves step by step up to the keynote then takes a leap down a sixth to the third step of the scale. It then leaps up a third and then the rest of the melody moves by step, first up a note, then down four notes, reversing the upward motion of the beginning. It's all quite slow and uses mainly quarter notes, creating a contemplative, somewhat melancholy mood. Let's listen again and take note how well-balanced the melody is, with the steps on either end balancing the two leaps in the middle as well as each other. (PLAY A AGAIN)

Now let's listen to the second A (PLAY A') Notice any differences? If you were concentrating

on the melody you were listening in the wrong place. There's one change but it's a slight alteration in harmony which occurs on the downbeat of the third bar. Here it is in its original form (PLAY FIRST 11"). Now here it is the second time through (PLAY 24"-36"). Did you hear that one chord change? It's subtle but enough to give the second A a slightly different sound.

Now let's see what Duke does to achieve contrast in the B section. (PLAY 48"-1'10") I hope you noticed how different the character of the melody is compared to A. Ellington does this in two ways. First, in contrast to the A melody he uses mainly leaps to establish the character of the section: a minor third played twice then an octave which he repeats twice with a change at the end each time. He then uses a step to finish off. The second difference is that the B section is really a four-bar phrase which is repeated in slightly elaborated form to make up the 8 bars. Let's listen to B again. (PLAY 48"-1'10" AGAIN)

In the final A Duke keeps it simple, basically repeating the opening A. Why? Well, one good reason is that he knows we're going to hear the A section again twice more right away as he repeats the entire form for the second verse.

Now let's examine the orchestration. One of the reasons Duke Ellington was so successful at composition was that, unlike many other ensembles of the big band era, the Ellington orchestra retained many of the same players not just for years but for decades. Need an alto sax solo? Johnny Hodges. Trumpet? Cootie Williams and then later Clark Terry or Cat Anderson. This continuity allowed Ellington to hone his skills and tailor the sound of a piece to his orchestra whose personnel and strengths he knew exactly. As a result, like many other 20<sup>th</sup> century composers, Duke Ellington was able to make the ensemble a structural element in the piece.

Let's look specifically at each section. In the first verse we have a muted trumpet on melody with a clarinet shadowing it in harmony below. They're backed by the rhythm section of piano, guitar, bass and drums. This orchestration does not change in any of the three A sections of the first verse and it's all played quite straight and strictly in time. However, in B we get a saxophone solo (and given the range and sound it's hard to tell whether we're hearing Barney Bigard on tenor or Harry Carney on baritone sax). This is much freer rhythmically and the melody is ornamented in quasi-improvised style.

In the second verse, in addition to using much more of the entire band, a lot of the approach is reversed. That is, we get saxes, the entire section in fact, in the lead for A and trumpets for B. Not only that, but the treatment of the first two A sections is freer than in verse one, much more like the first verse B in approach. In contrast, the B section in verse two is stricter in rhythm and feel. Part of the reason for that is that just about everyone's playing in the B section, thus necessitating a more rhythmically precise rendition. The final A features the entire orchestra, but with a rather drastic reduction at the very end. Let's listen to verse 2 (PLAY 1'35"-3'10"). No coda. 3'10" and out.

There you have it, as clear an example of AABA as possible, yet full of subtlety, beauty and compositional skill. Is it the only such example? Nope. One of the hardest things about putting this podcast together was limiting myself to one piece. I'm glad I did because it enabled me to spend plenty of time on "Solitude", but I'd be remiss if I didn't urge you to check out other examples of pieces written in AABA form. The one which springs to my mind first is the "Ode to Joy", the main theme from the final movement of Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony. It's another marvelous example of the form.

So what can you take from this if you wish to write in AABA form? First, be simple and clear. Have an A melody which can bear repeated hearings and still keep the listeners' interest. Make little changes with each repetition to keep the A sounding fresh. Try to create a B section which contrasts with A but still sounds as if it belongs in the same piece with it. Finally, think about the sound: the instrumentation and how changes in it in particular sections can help structure the piece. If you can do all this, perhaps in 75 years people will be listening to your piece and commenting on what a beautiful example of AABA form it is. Next time we'll discuss rondo form. What's that? Listen in and find out!