

"Form and Style, Mind and Body; or, What Makes a Rondo Rondo-ish?"

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How might music's large-scale form relate to its stylistic content? This theoretical question parallels philosophical questions about mind-body relations. As such, this talk investigates form and style by combining empirical musicology with the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Musical form is often understood as an abstract repetition pattern. For example, rondo forms are defined by a recurring refrain that alternates with episodes: the contrasting episodes should reduce inattention, functioning as dishabituation stimuli; meanwhile, the increasingly familiar refrain should enhance processing fluency and aesthetic pleasure (Huron, 2013). In this account, formal structure is effectively independent of content. And David Huron claims that movements in rondo and sonata form "almost certainly do not evoke different listening schemas" (2006, 208). In the late eighteenth century, however, rondos were identified with a certain character. Here I will discuss an empirical project on instrumental rondos, composed between 1770 and 1799. Our corpus analysis and psychological experiments suggest that movements in sonata and rondo form have distinct stylistic and affective tendencies. I interpret these results—and form-style relations more generally—in phenomenological terms. Merleau-Ponty's work on "institution" is particularly suggestive here, connecting musical form and style with history, emotion, and human embodiment.