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Modular Form in Popular Music

ABSTRACT

Background

The examination of temporality and form in popular music has allowed the musical community to participate in and establish a set of conventional forms rooted in compositional practice. One divergence from such norms is the juxtaposition of seemingly disparate formal sections, whose highly contrasting units fail to conform to prototypes. The contrast between units is defined in their variable lengths and starkly different musical content. I call such instances examples of *modular form*. The modularity of the sections can be visualized on a spectrum: some songs are strongly modular, with little to no connective material and strongly contrasting content, or non-modular, with transitions between juxtaposed parts and the use of repeated material. For the purview of this paper, I must contextually define the nature of modularity based on the criteria of closure and contrast. Gestures of closure are typically judged on their harmonic, rhythmic, and motivic conclusiveness; however, the juxtaposed material that follows the closed module can provide or negate the sensation of closure. This measure of juxtaposition is often based on contrast. An essential yet under-theorized aspect of listening and analysis, contrast of musical domains between modules is essential to defining the nature and function of each unit.

Aims and repertoire studied

Antecedents of this formal process can be found in the music of Stravinsky and Stockhausen; an early example in rock can be found in the music of the Beach Boys. Brian Wilson's obsessive recording techniques, as heard on the Smile Sessions and beyond, created hundreds of small, disparate modules of music he calls *feels*, that were later edited together to form a full song that deliberately avoids normal rhetoric. Example 1 presents a diagram following Daniel Harrison (ex. 2.7, p. 43, 1997), which describes the form of the 1966 hit "Good Vibrations". I have modified Harrison's formal diagram of the song, modifying the number of modules to show how Wilson transitions between and contrasts sections, in dialogue with verse-chorus and sectional form. "Good Vibrations" is weakly modular due to the varied repetition of module α , and the similarities in texture in module β to α , but conforms to modular rhetoric because of the presence of reprise and transitions, despite strikingly different material in module γ . Additional examples from the second half of the 20th century include Billy Joel's "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant" (1977), in which Joel cites influence from the B-side of the Beatles *Abbey Road* as a work which weaves together separate ideas into a coherent, single, song.

Songs that present modular rhetoric have a growing presence in 21st century songwriting and popular performance. I will apply a modular analysis to contemporary artists such as the Punch Brothers (2010–2014) and Father John Misty (2017).

Methods

In analysis, a song deemed 'modular' should satisfy as many of the following criteria as possible:

1. Transitions: transitions impact the modularity of a work: the presence of a lengthy, connective transition weakens the stark juxtaposition of sections, and thus, removes a degree of modularity.
2. Reprise: material must return. The music can be changed substantially from the previous iteration, but should be recognized by a common listener as repeated material. This distinguishes modular forms from sectional and through-composed forms.
3. Harmonic material: while an overarching tonal coherence can be employed, modules utilize different harmonic material that distinguishes them significantly.

Naturally, other musical parameters also aid in determining contrast and reprise-based conditions, such as lyrical changes and rhetorical weight, or texture and instrumentation.

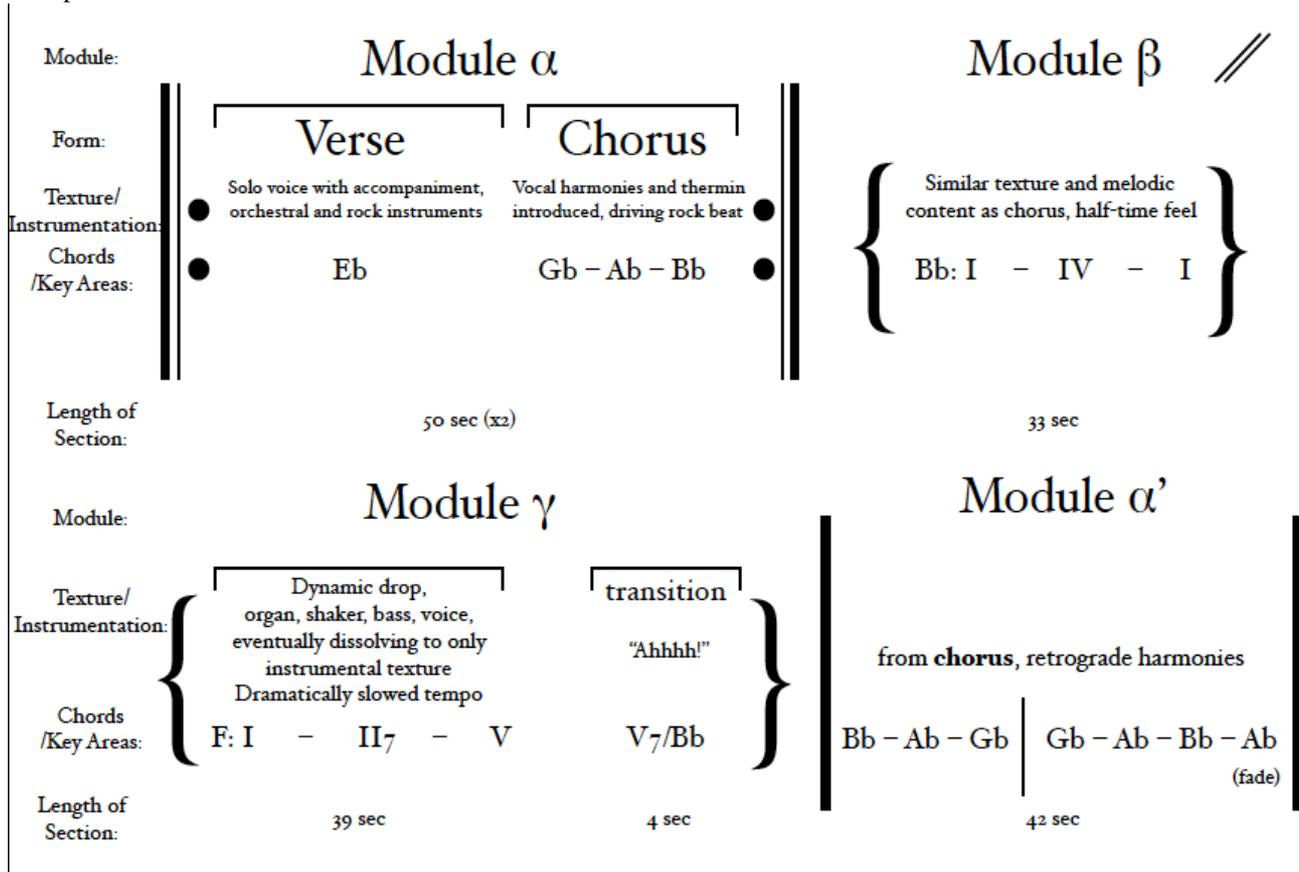
Other codified rock forms, such as through-composed (Osborn, 2011) or sectional forms (Summach, 2012) are not sufficient in describing modular songs because they do not fulfill these conditions in a consistent manner; consequently, modular songs do not satisfy the descriptions of through-composed or sectional forms.

Implications

The use of modular form in analysis of popular music allows the analyst to account for new songs that do not adhere to prototypes established to describe rock music from the mid-to late 20th century. Broader applications of this formal type could be compared to analysis of medleys, compilations, live versions of songs that modify forms, and other works which do not cohere to normal formal rhetoric. Just as innovations in songwriting change through the growth and use of technology, we must develop our theoretical technologies to accurately and musically reflect the content. I aim to show this growth by using musical examples from the 60's, to music published as recently as April 2017.

Keywords

Popular Music, Form, Juxtaposition and Contrast, Reprise

Example 1: Modular Rhetoric in *Good Vibrations*

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