

Rondo and Rondeau

The basic concept of rondo form is very simple; like a ritornello form, it is the formal equivalent of a Dagwood sandwich:

Dagwood form: AxAxA(xA)[xA]

x=B, C, etc

so

ABACA, ABACADA, ABACABA (very common in classical period), etc

A sections are generally closed (firmly), and have a clear melodic profile and generally unambiguous formal organization. They provide the primary material for the movement.

A sections generally return with no change or only minimal change. If they originally had repeats, the repeats may be omitted on their return, and they be decorated on their returns, but the basic material returns intact. They also generally return in the tonic key. Note the contrast with the ritornellos of a ritornello form; their appearances in the middle of the form are often in foreign keys, and they are often incomplete.

x sections (B, C, etc) can also be stable harmonically or not, and they can either have melodic interest or consist of figural patterns. Their main function is to contrast with A.

Baroque Rondeau

In baroque music, the rondo generally takes the French spelling, rondeau.

The defining characteristic of the baroque rondeau is that the x sections generally end with PAC's, usually in a key other than tonic; the return to A is thus a phrase modulation. The moment of return is a moment of abrupt contrast.

Another feature is that the x sections generally don't return: ABACA, ABACADA, ABACADAEA, etc.

Classical Rondo

In the classical period, the rondo takes its more familiar Italian spelling.

In the classical rondo, the body of an x section will conclude with a cadence in its main key, but this cadence will be followed by a transition that modulates back to prepare the return of A. This is the primary point of contrast with the baroque rondeau.

Also, the x sections are more likely to return; thus ABACABA is much more common than ABACADA. (But ABACA is more common than ABABA, which is more of a rounded binary form with a written-out repeat.)

The Sonata Rondo

This is a hybrid form, in which the classical rondo is arranged to imitate a sonata form. It has all of the features of a classical rondo and most of the features of a sonata form.

This is generally a 7-part rondo, ABACABA, and for Mozart and Beethoven most 7-part rondos are sonata rondos. It is a very common form for a final movement of a multi-movement instrumental work, especially a sonata or concerto.

A chart for this form follows.

Sonata Rondo Form

The upper line lists the formal units, named according to the rondo form. The lower lines describe the function in terms of a modified sonata form.

A	B ₁	A	C	A	B ₂	A'
P, tonic.	TR to contrasting key (V, III, or v), MC, S, C. Some features may be absent, especially MC and C. Concludes Retransition back to tonic (RT), as also found in some first endings of some sonata form expositions.	P, tonic, like start of exposition repeat. (A main contrast with normal sonata forms is the truncation of this repeat after P.	Takes place of development section, though it may or may not have a developmental character. Ends with retransition.	P, tonic, start of recap	Starts w TR, but as in sonata form gets to S material back in the tonic. Relates to B ₁ just as recap from transition on relates to parallel parts of exposition.	P, tonic, can play role of coda in sonata form. NB sometimes followed by actual coda with new material.

