

Notes on Labelling Phrases

1. Using a Different Letter vs. the Same Letter

One of the challenges of phrase labelling is deciding when to refer to a phrase by a different letter than a previous one—that is, to call a phrase ‘b’ instead of ‘a’.

This decision needs to be made within the context of the individual piece, and will always benefit from careful listening as well. In other words, try to avoid making a hard-and-fast rule with yourself.

A. Example One: Schumann’s “Wilder Rider”.

This is a 24-measure composition, containing six four-measure phrases. It’s clear enough that the second phrase is a slight variant on the first, and therefore there is no question that the proper labelling is:

1 – 4	a
5 – 8	a ¹

However, at the next phrase we are presented with a question. The melody is clearly the same as the melody in measures 1 – 4. It is being stated in the left hand, and is in F Major. Is this enough to warrant labelling it ‘b’? Or should we call it ‘a²’?

The answer lies in considering two factors. The first is the *larger picture* of the piece as a whole. Consider that measures 17 – 20 are clearly a verbatim repeat of measures 1 – 4; and measures 21 – 24 are likewise a verbatim repeat of measures 5 – 8. That leaves us with this much of the structure worked out:

1 – 4	a
5 – 8	a ¹
9 – 12	?
13 – 16	?
17 – 20	a
21 – 24	a ¹

So just from glancing at this diagram above we can see that there is a kind of tripartite structure—A B A, with measures 1 – 8 forming ‘A’ and measures 17 – 24 forming the final ‘A’. What lies between (measures 9 – 16) is in the nature of *contrasting* material.

That’s the larger picture, which seems to imply that 9 – 16 is *different* in some way. And then there is the second factor, which is *what we hear*. Play through the piece and listen carefully. The section from 9 – 16 sounds distinctly different from the other two, flanking, sections: it sounds like a bridge. The key and mode are

different, as is the piano setting. While it's true that the melody is the same as measures 1 – 8, we should remember that this is a short, one-idea piece, and contrasts are going to be much more subtle than they would be in a larger work with a significant variety of material. So the contrast in key and piano style in 9 – 16, combined with the tripartite nature of the piece as a whole, leads us to the conclusion that the best labelling is:

1 – 4	a	A
5 – 8	a ¹	
9 – 12	b	B
13 – 16	b ¹	
17 – 20	a	A
21 – 24	a ¹	

By labelling 9 – 16 as being *different* from 1 – 8, the diagram also makes the tripartite (ternary) nature of the piece clear at a glance. Therefore, this labelling is distinctly preferable to another labelling which might use more numeric superscripts.

B. Example Two: Schumann “Stuckchen”

This is another 24 measure piece, consisting of six four-measure phrases. Once again, like in “Wilder Reiter”, measures 5 – 8 are clearly similar to measures 1 – 4. Therefore, the correct labelling is:

1 – 4	a
5 – 8	a ¹

But the next question has to do with 9 – 12. Like “Wilder Reiter”, the melody is similar—in fact, it's on V rather than on I. We might be tempted to label it ‘a²’ given this similarity.

But consider the two factors I listed above: the *big picture* and *what we hear*. In the big picture, we have a situation in which 1 – 8 is one main idea (A), followed by 9 – 16 as a second idea (B), which is then repeated verbatim (B). So it's a bipartite structure with the second half repeated: A | B :|

Again the ear comes into play. When we hear this piece, we are hearing six phrases all of which have approximately the same melodic contour and rhythm. But that phrase at 9 – 12 sticks out because of being on V: *it sounds like a bridge* or somehow different from the other phrases. Therefore, the best solution is to label it ‘b’. If we do that, we see something very interesting:

1 – 4	a
5 – 8	a ¹
9 – 12	b

13 – 16 a¹
 14 – 20 b
 21 – 24 a¹

That is, that the second section (9 – 16) has the same ending as the first section—and thus has a kind of ‘rhyming’ feeling to it. This is, in fact, a structure which is sometimes called a *musical rhyme*. By labelling it with the separate ‘b’, we can see the musical rhyme more at a glance, as we can also see the binary structure of the piece (A |: B :|) at a glance.

2. Labelling Introductory/Transitional Material

In some pieces there will be a main body of phrases which are separated from each other by a different set of phrases which act as preludes, interludes, postludes—i.e., introductions, transitional passages, and such. This is quite typical in particular in vocal genres, especially in art songs or arias. Mendelssohn’s “Songs Without Words” are written for solo piano but are given classical aria, or art-song structures. In a number of cases there are such introductory or transitional passages interleaved with the main body of the work.

You can imagine such works as being for voice and piano: the preludes, interludes, and postludes are all for solo piano, while the main body of phrases in the work are with the voice.

Consider Song Without Words #35, “The Shepherd’s Complaint.” It is a longer piece than the Schumann works mentioned above. However, it has a rather simple structure—as long as we allow that it begins with a five-measure prelude and ends with a four-measure postlude.

It makes more sense to label the ‘ludes’ separately—you can use ‘i’ for this purpose if you want. Therefore, the “Shepherd’s Complaint” winds up with this structure:

1 – 5	i (prelude)	
5 – 9	a	A
9 – 13	a ¹	
13 – 17	b	B
17 – 23	b ¹	
23 – 27	a	A ¹
27 – 33	a ²	
33 – 37	i (postlude)	

Analyzed this way, the structure of the piece almost jumps out at us: it’s a tripartite (ternary) form with prelude and postlude!