

FORMAL FUNCTION OF THE POP-DROP IN POPULAR MUSIC

by

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ABSTRACT

Often considered the most important part of a popular song, the true “chorus” of current popular hits has become increasingly difficult to locate. Techniques of Electronic Dance Music—a prominent subgenre within today’s realm of popular music—have created a shift in expectations across an array of musical elements, including form. The drop section from the EDM genre has shifted the formal hierarchies of collaborative songs in order to accommodate this formal expectation. Drops depend on momentum-building devices in order to create enough tension for release. When these momentum-building devices occur during the singer’s hook, rather than preceding it, they shift the musical importance away from the hook, such that it can no longer be considered the song’s climax, as it may have been otherwise. Numerous chart-toppers feature this new formal trend dubbed the “pop-drop.”

The original framework for this form stems from the success of remixes, such as “I Took A Pill In Ibiza.” As these collaborations developed into joint projects featuring original material, the form and formal hierarchy solidified into a set of expectations, which can be observed in the song “Stay” by Zedd and Alessia Cara. This structure relies heavily on density of texture in particular as an important formal cue. More conventional indicators such as melody and lyrics do not always serve as a reliable formal cue within this context, demonstrated prominently in the song “Bones” by OneRepublic and Galantis. The use of the pop-drop has become so widespread that it has surpassed the need for collaboration with EDM artists, as shown by Dua Lipa

with her hit “New Rules.” This project aims to analyze these changes in popular form and offer new ways to categorize sections within today’s popular music.

Chapter 1

WHAT IS A POP-DROP?

Often considered the most important part of a popular song, the true “chorus” of current popular hits has become increasingly difficult to locate. This would seem to be a paradox given the primacy of the chorus. Many foundational formal structures of pop music, such as the chorus, have remained consistent over time. This consistency, however, can be challenged as the creators of popular music are influenced by technological advances and trends in other genres. This paper examines both the causes and the effects of this formal development in regard to the popular music chorus.

In order to effectively discuss this phenomenon, it is important to first define the set of terms that are commonly used to discuss form in popular music: namely, the verse, prechorus, chorus and postchorus. The chorus is often considered an arrival point or destination within a song and is often regarded as the most significant section of musical material within pop music. This is most often marked by specific conventions such as lyrical repetition or significant changes in melody, harmony, texture, and instrumentation. The musical material found within this chorus is emphasized by its contrast with other musical sections.

A typical pop song begins with, or generally contains, a verse that transitions to the chorus. A verse’s musical material is often softer, sparser, or otherwise displays characteristics of a less musically significant section; however, its lyrical content is often denser and presents the majority of the narrative, which serves to move the

song's "story" forward. Jay Summach (2011) has tracked the emergence of a newer formal section, the prechorus, back to the 1960s. A prechorus creates a smoother transition from verse material to chorus material. This gradient effect softens the contrast between verse and chorus. As a result, tension is built over this stretch of time. Its release at the start of the chorus further solidifies the musical material of the chorus at the top of a song's hierarchy. A "conventional" pop form would typically start with a verse and move into a prechorus, then to a chorus.¹ This material sometimes transitions to the second verse by way of a postchorus—a musical interlude, often instrumental, that transitions from the chorus back into the verse.

As described by Trevor DeClercq, however, formal ambiguity in pop music (as well as in most other genres) is often the rule rather than the exception. Sections of music cannot always be neatly compartmentalized, as the artistic process of music making is rarely concerned with whether a section fits our analytical labels or not. Many variations on the standard verse-prechorus-chorus form are subsequently commonplace. While it is not uncommon for lines between formal sections to blur, the moment where the prechorus ends and the chorus begins in some recent music has been influenced by newer musical trends.²

As new music technology emerges and musical culture shifts, changes in formal expectations will inevitably occur over time. The emergence of electronic dance music, (commonly abbreviated EDM) within the context of mainstream popular music, has drastically reshaped the landscape of pop charts in recent years. EDM artists now often collaborate with pop artists, producing hits that differ from their

¹ Summach 2011, 2

² De Clercq 2017, 3.6

predecessors in a variety of ways. Thus, some of the expectations surrounding pop music have shifted accordingly. Electronic instrumentations, timbres, and effects are now common in popular music. Our formal expectations, however, have shifted as well to accommodate a central feature of EDM: the drop. The drop section in an EDM track is constructed mainly from the core idea of tension and release. This idea is similar to that of the prechorus/chorus and features many parallels to the pop genre's more conventional form.

The idea of creating tension to be released is central to most genres of music, and manifests in various ways. Perhaps the most obvious example of this from the domain of classical music is the dominant chord, and its aural pull towards a resolution to the tonic. Harmonic tension is a relatively conspicuous type of tension, often discussed within the context of form in the classical style. Formal tension in popular music is often constructed through other musical elements, and yet these alternative ways of creating tension and momentum can serve a similar function.

Both music theorist Jay Summach and EDM producer and blogger Sam Matla have contributed to this discussion of formal tension and release in popular songs. Summach's writings focus on formal structures in popular music through a scholarly lens, whereas Matla's blog is an informal website for EDM enthusiasts to receive production tips. Both drew similar conclusions, despite the fairly different repertoire that they study, about the ideas of tension and release.

There are various techniques used across several genres of music that employ what Summach refers to as "momentum-building devices." These devices help to build tension towards a song's most significant moments in order to signify their importance. The specifics of these musical devices vary from genre to genre, but their

overarching presence and effect are remarkably similar. Matla's tips for building towards a drop employ similar language and address similar elements. A common technique in EDM production, for instance, is the use of what is known as a riser, or a sound that slowly ascends in pitch for a designated duration. A riser underscores the musical material to subtly contribute to the build-up of momentum. This general ascent in pitch parallels more conventional melodic approaches to ascension in pitch in order to increase tension and anticipation.³ These momentum-building techniques can be found in pop songs, EDM tracks, and collaborations alike. Although these elements manifest in different ways, there are a similar repertoire of techniques used: ascent in pitch, increase in rhythmic activity, and most notably perhaps, change in density of texture.

Pop and EDM as independent genres each have their respective formal distinctions, but their dependence on these particular techniques of tension and release (as opposed to harmonic means, for instance) is quite similar. The most common way in which these two worlds have interacted has been through remixes—a complete pop song is modified and thus transformed into a new work by an EDM artist. This often includes the addition of a drop to the pop song, obscuring its original structure.

These ideas are best showcased through an example. Mike Posner's "I Took A Pill In Ibiza" was originally recorded as a slow, acoustic song that followed an archetypal pop format. The remix, however, by EDM artist Seeb, manipulates the original content in several unexpected ways. Interestingly enough, the remix saw more success on the pop charts than Posner's original song. Seeb's version makes obvious changes in timbre and instrumentation associated with EDM production, but it also

³ Matla 2018

plays with the overarching form of the song. Although none of the melodic or lyrical material is truncated, Posner’s original chorus loses its central position in the song’s hierarchy through the use of momentum building devices and the addition of new electronic musical material (please see Figure 1). The position of this new section, beginning with a drop and ending with a transition to the second verse, exhibits all of the tendencies of a chorus, where pent-up energy is released. Although this section is entirely electronic (including the distorted vocal sampling used throughout), it does not seem to function as a transition, interlude, or postchorus.

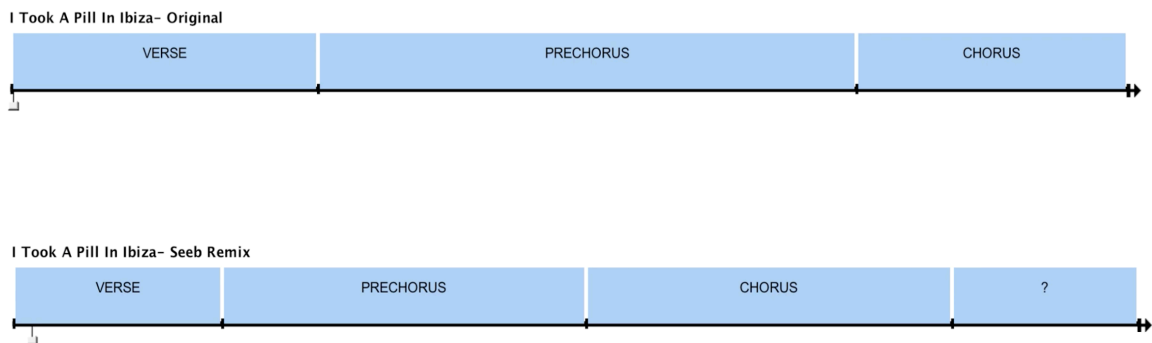


Figure 1 Formal Outline of I Took A Pill in Ibiza

Seeb’s remix, although undoubtedly effective, takes advantage of an increasingly commonplace concept. In his podcast, “Switched On Pop,” Charlie Harding coined the term “pop-drop” to encompass this new formal section.⁴ A pop-drop can best be defined as an electronic instrumental section of music that serves as

⁴ Harding 2016

the climax of the song and has a similar function to the more conventional chorus. In the Seeb remix, musical momentum is built throughout the singer's original chorus and is released at the pop-drop, distinguishing the EDM influenced section as the more important musical material. The prioritization of Seeb's material over Posner's results in a functional shift, and a rebalancing of the contributions of each artist beyond what the term "remix" would seem to imply. Each artist contributes their own hook—a section of musical material that is memorable to the listener, hence, hooking them in to listen again. Prioritizing the EDM hook creates a shift where the vocals take on a prechorus function through the momentum-building devices. Although Posner's hook may be the most memorable due to lyrical repetition and melodic interest, it provides no immediate closure or release of tension in this instance, diminishing its hierarchical importance.

The pop-drop's success is obvious when examining the recent billboard charts with this knowledge in mind. Remixes and collaborations are prevalent, and many of these types of songs exhibit pop-drop tendencies. Pop music's biggest names from the past few years are featured on these lists: Justin Bieber, Maroon 5, Coldplay, and Rihanna are all showcased by their EDM collaborators. These EDM artists, such as Zedd, Calvin Harris, Martin Garrix, and the Chainsmokers have achieved celebrity status as a result, and are among some of the all-time most streamed artists on streaming services like Spotify.⁵

⁵ Spotify 2018

Chapter 2

FORMAL FUNCTIONS: HERE TO “STAY”

Categorizing this formal trend (which could perhaps even be understood as creating a crossover or subgenre) has posed an interesting challenge; the blend of styles has impacted the hierarchy of formal sections. The invention of a neological title for its hybrid of a chorus alleviates some of the formal ambiguity, but for all of the impact that EDM has had on popular genres recently, an overarching system of categorization may prove to be useful. William Caplin’s theory of Formal Function is one of the more convincing approaches in the categorization of phrases and formal sections within the classical realm. Formal functions serve to indicate relative temporality within a piece—that is, how passages indicate whether a piece is in its beginning, middle, or end.

Caplin references our ability to “chunk” music into “discrete segments of time.”⁶ Within the classical realm, these cues are typically melodic or harmonic, whereas within the EDM realm, these cues rely more on rhythm and instrumentation. This is not to diminish instrumentation’s role in classical form; rather, the most important formal cues are found within different parameters, such as phrase structure. Caplin also points out that the three labels, “beginning,” “middle,” and “end” do not account for the more complex spectrum of temporal events (25).

⁶ Caplin 2010; further citations will be given in the text.

According to Caplin, the four main categories of elements that contribute to this categorization are harmony, tonality, grouping, and cadence. He also gives five broad categories of these formal functions, but they are almost entirely specific to Classical era sonata form (23). Nevertheless, this framework only needs to be remodeled slightly to work in the context of a typical pop song. There is often a before-the-beginning intro and an after-the-ending outro in a very similar fashion to the ones that Caplin describes. From here, one could interpret the verse as an initiating function, the prechorus as a continuing function, and the release of tension at the pop-drop as a concluding function; however, the repetition of these units, as well as unlabeled units such as the bridge, cause issues when trying to overlay this exact model, but the above shows that even just a slight adaptation of this theory proves useful in examining other genres such as popular music. Through this lens, we can look at lower level phrases with a similar mindset; however, the approach to categorizing these elements will vary at this level, as elements like cadential motion and key area will not play a large role in indicating pop functions. Cadences do not frequently provide closure and release in pop music; rather, a more reliable indication of formal function is density of texture.

Density of texture will typically gradually increase during a continuing function, such that there is sufficient energy to be released at the entrance of the concluding function. This gradual increase of density of texture is a crucial element when building to a drop, and therefore it is prevalent in the prechoruses of songs that contain a pop-drop. Within a similar framework, verses tend to be sparser, while choruses have a fuller, thicker layer of tracks. The density of texture during initiating

functions is low, it increases during the continuing function, and is heightened at the concluding function, although not always as dense as the buildup before it.

A notable and frequent feature of EDM in setting up the drop is a short pause seconds before the onset of the drop. This brief event purposefully interrupts the overarching trajectory of the momentum, where density of texture completely drops off to its sparsest moment just before the release. This signifies the arrival of an important musical event, and creates a strong, sharp contrast in order to emphasize this. This event occurs routinely in songs that contain a pop-drop as well.

This build-up of tension can also be accomplished through other musical means; pitch risers serve as a good example of this and can often be viewed as having a continuing function. Their slow ascent in pitch over time gradually increases the tension in the sonic landscape, whether it lasts for a measure or an entire section of music. Although these risers are pitched, their overall effect contributes more than any one specific pitch that sounds throughout. Despite the fact that risers are a pitched event, most of our temporal cues in this genre rely on other aforementioned momentum-building devices. While pop melodies typically feature motivic repetition, srdc (statement-repetition-departure-conclusion) phrase patterns,⁷ and share other similarities to classical gestures, pop/EDM collaborations typically do not use a strong harmonic or contrapuntal coordination to underpin these melodic gestures. Although interesting harmonic language can be employed, a pop-drop is often centered around the repetition of melodic ideas. These central melodic themes may serve a specific function, but other elements within the song give further implications of various formal functions. Arguably, texture and density consistently prove to be more reliable

⁷ Covach 2004, 66

indicators of function and hierarchy. The addition and removal of layers often occurs at pivotal moments in a song with a pop-drop—driving to the drop, releasing at the climax, and transitioning to other formal sections. This addition and removal therefore acts as an almost “rhythmic counterpoint” in which layers and tracks overlap and interlock in a fashion not unlike traditional counterpoint. Arrival points are indicated by embellishments, or lack thereof, of the strong pulse inherent in EDM—a result of the interaction between the rhythmic activity in each layer that is added or removed.

With this perspective in place, it is possible to adapt Caplin’s theory of formal function in which the relative density of texture acts as initiating, continuing, and concluding functions in lieu of thematic units. In a genre where exact repetition, both melodically and harmonically, is often the norm, the factors more closely associated with EDM, such as the drop and the build-up to this event, may serve as better indicators of one’s position within a song. This again does not dismiss the importance of melody or harmony within this subgenre, but instead seeks to emphasize the other factors that contribute to our sense of closure. The release of built-up tension serves to mark the end of a formal section far better than a melodic phrase. Although these melodic phrases, when isolated, can provide a degree of closure, they are often repeated frequently throughout the song; thus, their hierarchy is unclear without the context in which they are underscored. The continuing function associated with developmental musical material is, in this genre, analogous to the prechorus. Where we might typically interpret this formal section as a development and driving force towards a cadence, we find this material building to the drop, which offers a different type of closure with a similar feeling of gratification. This momentum intensifies the

addition or removal of layers within the texture, as opposed to melodic and harmonic developments towards a point of closure.

The application of formal functions to a non-classical genre is not exclusive to this project. Nicole Biamonte has posited that this theory applies nicely to the concept of metric dissonance in rock music as well.⁸ Although music should be considered within its original context, regardless of genre, there is merit to viewing any genre through an analytical lens. Biamonte writes:

Metric dissonances can be interpreted as expressing the Caplinian formal functions of introduction, initiating, medial, cadential, and postcadential, on one or more levels. Small-scale metric dissonances that disrupt only a few bars or even a single bar typically function in one of three ways: as an initial ambiguity or irregularity that draws attention to the beginning of a phrase or section, as a cadential hemiola that creates a sense of accelerating motion toward the end of a phrase, or as a truncated link at the end of a formal section that provides momentum into the following section; the functions of these techniques are initiating, concluding, and transitional, respectively.⁹

This Caplinian style of analysis applied to techniques and concepts in rock music provides a framework through which we can similarly position the pop-drop.

To summarize, a large number of today's chart toppers that involve a collaboration between singers and EDM artists feature a structure in which the momentum of the song builds to what has been referred to as the "pop-drop." The singer is given a memorable and melodically interesting "hook" that acts functionally as the song's prechorus. The percussion, intensity, and density continue to build through this section, letting its listeners know that there is a "drop" coming, which will announce the arrival of the most important part of the song. This section does not

⁸ Biamonte 2014, 7.1

⁹ Biamonte 2014, 7.1

include vocals (other than perhaps a short vocal motive), although it often incorporates most of the melodic material from the singer's hook.

Let's look at another example in order to solidify all of these concepts. "Stay," a collaboration with esteemed EDM artist Zedd and singer Alessia Cara, is a model example of this new, standard form in popular music and can provide some insight into the inner workings of a pop-drop.

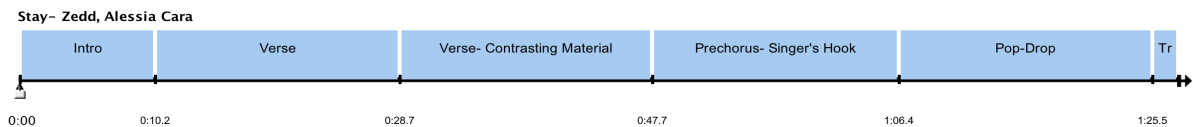


Figure 2 Formal Outline of "Stay"

"Stay" opens with a four bar intro (0:00-0:10) which presents a sampled vocal riff,¹⁰ acting as an underlying motive used throughout the verse. The first verse (0:10) starts off softly with no percussion. A contrasting section of the verse (0:29) opens with an interesting percussive riff, indicating forward motion. The percussion dramatically cuts out for the singer's hook (0:48), which signifies an important shift. Slowly, a "ticking clock" begins to keep time behind the vocals (0:57). This sound effect ties neatly into the lyrics (*The clock is ticking, so stay*), but also seems to signal a sort of urgency or countdown, which lets the listener know that something more profound is coming. A single, unaccompanied drum hit signals the beginning of the

¹⁰ Riff from "Poltergeist" by BANKS, see also "Zedd and Alessia Cara's 'Stay' - Discover the Sample Source," WhoSampled

drop (1:05). The pop-drop features the same melodic material as the singer's prechorus but is almost entirely electronic.

Each section is weighted fairly equally in terms of its balance and duration. The first half of the verse (0:10-0:28), the contrasting section within the verse (0:29-0:47), the singer's prechorus (0:48-1:06), and the pop-drop (1:07-1:25) are each eight bars in length. There is a one bar extension between this thirty-two bar verse-chorus unit and the next (labeled in Figure 2 as *Tr*), which allows the song to subside after its climax and relax into the lower, softer, and more sparse verse section. This time through, there is some added instrumentation in each section, but the overall format and contour remain consistent.

Although the melodic material in this song creates important connections between formal sections, it is clear that the momentum-building devices within the song drive the formal structures from one to the next. The usage of pitch risers, increased speed of percussion during the singer's hook, and the addition and removal of layers and instruments in order to dramatize key moments function as better indicators of opening or concluding gestures than melody and harmony. The melodic gesture used in both the prechorus and chorus, for example, is almost identical, and the melody as an isolated entity does little to indicate formal hierarchy. Rather, the way that this melodic material is treated—that is with varying instrumentations and textures—signals formal changes most directly for the listener.



Figure 3 Melodic Material of Stay Prechorus

Figure 3 demonstrates how melodic material can be an unreliable indication of form in “Stay.” The downward motion at the conclusion of this melodic figure, ending on the minor tonic, does not work to build any sort of tension towards the drop. In fact, this figure appears to give a degree of closure when isolated from its context. Additionally, the near exact repetition of this melodic phrase during the drop, this time distorted and backed by a full orchestra of electronic sounds, is heightened only by its timbral contrast and increased density of texture. The musical material itself, however, remains constant through these two formal sections.

The harmonic progression that underscores this melody predictably repeats as well, containing just four chords (see Figure 4). The song’s tonal center appears to alternate between minor and its relative major, but the chorus seems a bit more definitively set in F natural minor, utilizing D-flat major, E-flat major, F minor, and A-flat major. Although the pop-drop features a more robust sound, the chords that underpin each section, pop-drop and prechorus alike, remain almost entirely constant. There is one substitution during the repeat in the drop section, in which a C7 chord

(1:19) leads into the next D-flat chord, creating doubly deceptive motion. This substitution, however, does not take place at a significant moment, and is used for contrast and color; it does not change the function of the progression. Again, the formal distinction is drawn not by factors such as chord quality or cadence, but by the density of the instrumentation that carries out these harmonic elements. This does not mean that the chords aren't syntactically appropriate, but perhaps more static than necessary to propel each section into the next.

The image displays a musical score for the 'Stay Prechorus' section. It consists of two systems of music, each with a melody line (treble clef) and a bass line (bass clef). The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. Chord symbols are placed above the melody line: D-flat major, E-flat major, F minor, and A-flat/C major. The lyrics are written below the melody line. The first system contains the lyrics 'Stay a min - ute, just take your time. The' and the second system contains 'clock is tick - ing, so stay.' The bass line is mostly static, with whole notes and rests.

Melody

Bass

3

Stay a min - ute, just take your time. The

clock is tick - ing, so stay.

D \flat E \flat Fm A \flat /C

Figure 4 Harmonic Outline of Stay Prechorus

Chapter 3

CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES: THE “BONES” OF THE ARGUMENT

Although the pop-drop has only recently been recognized within the past few years, there are already theorists who disagree with the idea that it should be understood or categorized as the formal climax of a piece. In his blog post entitled, “How to Write a Postchorus,” Asaf Peres takes a detour from his overarching discussion on the art of the modern popular postchorus to discuss why he views the pop-drop as a postchorus section, rather than a main event.¹¹ Peres concedes that there is “merit” in citing the pop-drop as a chorus “from a pure production standpoint.” as it “correlates three sonic functions--setup, buildup, and climax--with their traditionally respective song sections.” Peres, however, maintains that production and songwriting are not as collaborative as they may appear within the finished product. “Labeling the section [the songwriter’s chorus]...as a prechorus ignores the fact that it contains the main vocal hook, as well as the title of the song. From a songwriting perspective, this is the central section of the song, which merits naming it the chorus.¹²”

Peres also argues that the verse in these songs often has two melodic ideas, one which could be labeled as a prechorus. In his argument, he creates a fictional “Joe,” who hypothetically believes that the pop-drop functions as a chorus:

In addition, labeling [the chorus] as a prechorus played a role in Joe's decision to lump the previous two sections...as a single verse. While Joe is right to observe no significant sonic separation between these two sections, there is a clear melodic contrast, and the lyrics ...repeat

¹¹ Peres 2018

¹² Peres 2018

as-is in the next cycle, which is common in prechoruses and almost unheard of in verses. Recognizing the postchorus, however, makes all the other pieces fall into place. The prechorus and chorus are recognized for what they are, and the structural sequence becomes more straightforward.¹³

Through this lens, the pop-drop's musical material submits to the singer's catchy hook by way of lyrical hierarchy. Here, the elements of text and melody are prioritized in determining musical significance. This perspective also prioritizes the songwriter's process and agency as a structural determinant over the isolated musical material. This is a viable perspective, particularly within this realm of songwriting that Peres discusses; this perspective, however, chooses to value the singer over the EDM artist, despite the context of their joint musical contributions.

Although one could concede that the singer's hook in a song that features a pop-drop has more significance than a typical prechorus would have, it is problematic to overlook the buildup of tension throughout the formal section from a musical perspective. It is important to note that this form grew out of a specific type of collaboration between pop singers and EDM artists. The chorus and the drop vie for supremacy within this merger, and if we take build up of tension as the determinant factor, it would seem that the drop has won out. Using tension as the determinant factor makes sense aesthetically and functionally, as many typical listeners are experiencing the song as a whole, rather than considering lyrical fragments or the genesis of the song. Obviously, there is a degree of ambiguity throughout all of this, but the pop-drop generally has too many factors pointing towards its significance in order to be simply written off as a postchorus. An electronic interlude between chorus and verse would not have the same momentum-building devices in place.

¹³ Peres 2018

Of course, this formal section is both relatively new and significantly different from more conventional forms that would feature typical postchoruses. Perhaps it would be unfair to squeeze these sections into preconceived labels; this is, in fact, a good argument for why popular music scholars established the term “pop-drop” in the first place. Rather than asserting that a pop-drop is a chorus, it is better to state that a pop-drop functions most similarly to a chorus. This connects well with Caplin’s theory of formal functions; rather than starting with preconceived notions of formal section based on their origin, we can look at how these sections operate within a song’s overall structure and determine its formal function based on these elements.

Another scholar who has discussed the formal role of the pop-drop is Alyssa Barna, who posits the function of the structures from an ethnographic perspective before their musical implications. The cultural purpose of the drop is drawn from the context from which EDM originated: live performance. The drop in a typical EDM song lasts approximately thirty seconds, the average amount of time that a person can jump and dance until they become tired.¹⁴ Combining EDM with pop means combining two unique cultural contexts, and neither of these contexts have been diminished by the resulting conglomerate. She writes:

The issue lies in the fact that rhetorically, both chorus options seem important and significant enough to be the chorus and differ enough that we cannot simply understand the second chorus as a repeat of the first. I propose that the difference in these sections lies in their function in live performance; they can coexist as choruses with similar rhetorical value, but they differ in function.¹⁵

¹⁴ Butler 2012

¹⁵ Barna 2018, 1

This stance helps to balance and mediate the discourse, assigning value to both formal sections. Crediting each section with its own functional role minimizes the need for an established hierarchy. What this perspective does not address, however, is the musical issue of tension. One chorus lends itself to singing and another to dancing, but this distinction once again does not consider the momentum-building devices that are in place. The emphasis on the context of live performance helps frame the different functions, but the most common ways listeners of pop experience their music does not involve live performance at all. The reality is that with music streaming services so readily accessible, these songs are often played in static solidarity for an inactive or disengaged audience. We should account for the wide range of contexts in which this music is experienced and situate the theoretical analysis within the cultural one; however, the analysis of this subgenre should also consider how often these songs are removed from their original context.

Some theorists might go as far as to argue that labels like verse and chorus, when applied to this repertoire, are more generally problematic, due to the weight of the hierarchical implications that they carry. The connotation of the word “chorus” asserts a sort of dominance over other formal sections, which could potentially detract from a listener’s experience and consideration for all sections within a song. Certain lyrical tropes might also color the listener’s perception, such as the idea that the verse is where the story is told and is therefore more important or interesting than the chorus.

There is, however, a difference between lyrical and musical hierarchy. The verse often contains more lyrics. Therefore, it *should* be less sonically interesting, as not to detract from the storytelling component. As previously noted, artists and

songwriters do not always bend to convention, making ambiguity in their songs inevitable; however, certain conventions will appear frequently. The terms verse and chorus exist because so many songs follow this formal expectation. To label a formal section a chorus, or to seek to do so, is analytically beneficial, despite the implications and connotations that may follow.

Previously, this paper has weighed the validity of labeling certain sections as a chorus, and one could absolutely concede that new trends and patterns create issues for our current terms and definitions. Consider what it would mean to embrace ambiguity and change within this context. Using the word “chorus” and subsequently placing that word into an understood formal hierarchy is not meant to diminish other formal sections within the song. Rather, there is typically a clear formal hierarchy in songs that contain a pop-drop, and that is both expected and accepted. When the chorus (or in our case, the pop-drop, which is understood to function as a chorus) is described as important, it is done so within the context of this musical hierarchy, where it is understood to be the most significant section of *musical* material.

The song “Bones” by Galantis and OneRepublic is an interesting case in terms of form which can help demonstrate the idea of musical and lyrical hierarchy coexisting. It is also an interesting case for the direction in which the pop-drop is headed.



Figure 5 “Bones” Melodic Hook



Figure 6 “Bones” Title Lyric

The excerpt in Figure 5, sung on the lyric “whoa” by OneRepublic’s lead singer Ryan Tedder, is without a doubt the “hook” of the song. The song opens with this theme, and it is heard throughout the entirety of the song at various and predictable intervals. This melody is also central to the song’s “pop-drop.” This is perhaps at odds, however, with the song’s most repeated phrase: “*I feel it in my bones*” (Figure 6). This is clearly where the title is derived from, and it easily champions the lyrical hierarchy of the song. These two fragments compete for dominance, but they are not formal sections on their own. Both Tedder’s melodic hook and title lyric are integrated throughout the song, pre, post, and mid pop-drop. Both phrases signal significance; the melodic hook occurs at the beginning of several sections (0:00, 0:56, 1:12, etc.) whereas the title lyric closes several sections (0:55, 1:11, 1:26, etc.). This is

a good example of how musical and lyrical hierarchies can clash without discrediting the overall formal hierarchy. The build-up and the drop both contain these phrases, but due to density of texture, we clearly know which section is which (Figure 7).

	Intro		Verse								Verse- Contrasting				Prechorus		Pop-Drop				Postchorus				
Measure:		4		8		12		16		20		24		28		32		36		40			44		48
Melodic Hook:																									
Title Lyric:																									

Figure 7 “Bones” Phrases and Structure

Chapter 4

THE “NEW RULES” FOR POP-DROPS

The repeated use of this formal pattern has begun to create a certain expectation as it has crept into many mainstream pop hits. So much so, in fact, that songs are beginning to feature a pop-drop without collaborating with EDM artists (although there are still many collaborations). Take, for example, Dua Lipa’s chart topper, “New Rules.” This song exhibits all of the typical behaviors of a song containing a pop-drop. The stepwise scalar accompaniment of a synthesizer slowly ascends during the singer’s prechorus (refer to Figure 8), the percussion builds in intensity, and just before the drop, all tracks cut out besides a singular, distorted vocal, creating contrast and anticipation. All of these momentum building devices are in perfect place; the track, however, has no credited DJ on it. In fact, one of the songwriters on this song, Ian Kirkpatrick, has written for a wide variety of pop singers from Britney Spears to Justin Bieber, perhaps proving his capability to tap into a moment’s idiosyncratic musical trends.¹⁶ Clearly, imitating this new form is an effective strategy for writing a current hit, as “New Rules” hit number one on the U.K. charts¹⁷ and number six in the U.S.¹⁸ This trend has been acknowledged by Charlie Harding, who cites a variety of other songs by artists such as Maroon 5 and Kiiara that have also borrowed this format, despite the absence of an EDM collaboration.¹⁹

¹⁶ All Music 2018

¹⁷ Official Charts Archive 2018

¹⁸ Billboard Archive 2018

¹⁹ Harding 2016

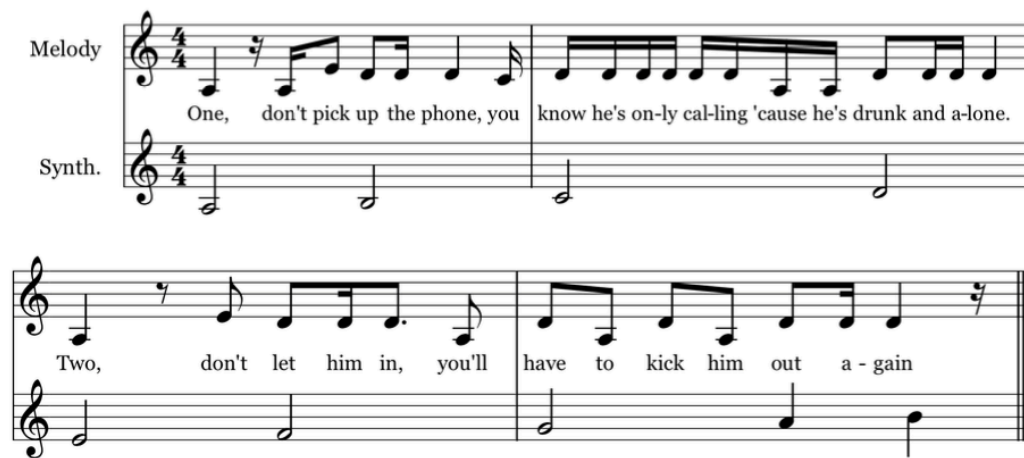


Figure 8 Melody and Synthesizer, New Rules Prechorus

Despite this apparent lack of a collaborator, Dua Lipa's hit is almost formulaic in its structure, closely following the prototypical pattern (see Figure 9). The song begins with a brief four bar introduction (0:00-0:08), followed by a soft verse (0:09-0:25), with low and sparse instrumentation backing the vocals. The second half of the verse (0:26-0:42) features the addition of bass and new percussion accents, as well as contrasting melodic material, which drives the verse forward. The build to the drop is evident in the section following the verse, which could be deemed the prechorus, or the singer's hook (0:42-1:00). The accompanying synthesizer ascends stepwise, building intensity towards a climax (see Figure 8). As in many songs that feature a drop, the backing instrumentation cuts out just before the drop occurs (0:58), and one of the vocal riffs that will be used throughout the drop is introduced, unaccompanied.

The second verse (1:17-1:40) is abbreviated slightly, creating an unexpected push forward and thus, adding urgency to arrive at the drop. The second verse-chorus unit is otherwise parallel to the first, despite added instrumentation and vocal riffs. The

bridge (2:17-2:33) is made apparent, both by its new melodic material and its brevity compared to the other sections within the song. Unlike “Stay,” discussed above, “New Rules” features an outro (3:08) that uses new material, creating another distinct section. The song’s general format, however, follows a very similar pattern; considering the song’s success on the charts, it seems that this was not a bad choice.

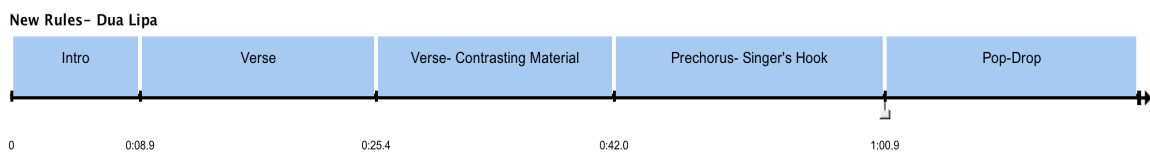


Figure 9 Formal Outline of “New Rules”

Of course, not all examples of this formal trend are as archetypal as Lipa’s hit. Trevor de Clercq’s writings on ambiguity in popular music suggest that, although we enjoy categorizing, labeling, and sectioning the music we listen to, there isn’t always going to be a clear and consistent way to accomplish this.²⁰ While some songs will act as a sort of epitome of a standard form, many songs will draw from this general form, but deviate slightly or foil the expectations of the perceived audience. This isn’t a new practice; Haydn, for instance, was famous for playing with an audience’s formal expectations in his eighteenth-century compositions. Form provides a certain amount of needed structure but can quickly become restrictive. De Clercq’s call to embrace formal ambiguity is a poignant reminder that predictable structures are simply made to

²⁰ De Clercq 2017, 1.1

be broken, in symphonies and in pop anthems alike. Furthermore, de Clercq's analysis of chorus ambiguity in the popular music of the 80s and 90s proves that the pop-drop is not a totally new notion either. Songs that obscure the lines between prechorus and chorus can be heard in pop music from nearly forty years ago.²¹ Arguably, all that has changed is the context in which it occurs and the means by which it is achieved.

The standardization of this "new form," however, poses its own challenge. With hit after hit exhibiting this sort of behavior, it's difficult to posit these tendencies as ambiguity. It seems as if EDM artists have made their expectations clear: the singer is to be featured, and then, the electronic music is to be the focal point of the song. This is most notably shown by the way in which each artist receives credit for the track. EDM artists typically either are listed before the singer, or are listed as the artist, with the singer listed as featured.

²¹ De Clercq 2017, 3.6

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Popular music is a capricious genre, often undergoing drastic aesthetic changes within short periods of time, such that its subgenres seem to retain few parallels. These shifts can be tracked over time, their influences traced back to various cultural factors and their impacts present in the music to come. This idea is in no way unique to pop music, but is inherent to its evolution nonetheless.

The mainstream emergence of EDM on the popular music charts has created a shift in expectations across an array of musical elements. Timbre, beats per minute, and instrumentation have all been affected by this shift, but form has been significantly affected as well. The drop section inherent to the EDM genre has shifted the formal hierarchies of collaborative songs in order to accommodate this expectation. Drops depend on momentum-building devices in order to create enough tension for release. When these momentum-building devices occur during the lyrical hook, rather than preceding it, they shift the musical importance away from the lyrical hook, such that it can no longer be considered the song's chorus or climax, as it may have been otherwise. This has become the standard form for EDM collaborations and influenced hits. The breadth of music on the charts that follows this pattern has warranted its own label: the pop-drop. The original synthesis of pop and EDM—the remix—provided a model for reorganizing form in a way that accommodates both

genres. This framework can be seen in Seeb's remix of "I Took A Pill In Ibiza" and Figure 1. As these collaborations developed into joint projects featuring original material, the form and formal hierarchy solidified into a set of expectations, which can be heard in "Stay" by Zedd and Alessia Cara (Figure 2). This structure relies heavily on density of texture in particular as an important formal cue. More conventional formal cues such as melody and lyrics cannot always serve as a reliable formal cue within this context, demonstrated by "Bones" by OneRepublic and Galantis in Figure 7. Finally, this structure has become such a widespread set of expectations that it has surpassed the need for collaboration, as proven by Dua Lipa with her hit "New Rules" (Figure 9).

The success of EDM in the pop realm has become a mainstay, and success of the pop-drop could lead to a more permanent formal expectation on the charts. Are a string of chart toppers enough to claim this pattern as a new form, though? And is this a passing fad, or a growing movement? The next few years will indicate just how drastically the pop-drop has altered expectations for popular forms.

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