

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 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



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,

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 *ternary*. 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!