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Anomalies in Formal Functions and the ‘Lyric Impulse’ in Schubert’s Late Sonata Forms

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the motivic handling of opening harmonic gestures in two of Schubert’s late sonata forms: the first movement of the String Quintet in C major, D. 956, and the first movement of the String Quartet in G major, D. 887. In both cases the way in which these gestures are developed across the movement generates a form marked by numerous structural anomalies, especially in thematic construction, key relations and modulatory processes. The fact that these movements are so unconventional in form yet also intensely lyrical raises questions about the underlying characteristics and effects of lyricism in Schubert’s mature music. James Webster, for one, has proposed that Schubert’s ‘lyric impulse’ is associated with ‘a tendency towards symmetrical periods or closed forms such as ABA’—designations that imply conventional, stable, and essentially self-sufficient melodic structures. The two cases studied suggest that the harmonic intensity of the opening gestures is also an important element of Schubert’s lyricism and that this element is disruptive with respect to the unfolding of the form—according to William E. Caplin’s theory of formal functions in particular—creating unconventional thematic structures and unusual harmonic and tonal motion. The themes that emerge from this process, while deeply lyrical, are neither closed off nor self-sufficient melodies, but are intricately involved in the motivic harmonic development which begins with the first harmonic event of the movement.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the last few years of his life, Schubert created a number of highly original sonata-form movements which radically reinterpret the form’s conventional elements and processes. In each case, the underlying cause of these innovations is the music’s concentration on one overriding issue—what might be called a motive, but in a broader sense than is usually meant by the term. This motivic idea arises from the voice leading of a marked harmonic event and is expanded upon to become a dominant force in the form, affecting thematic structures, key relations and the general manner in which the movement unfolds.

From the perspective of William E. Caplin’s theory of formal functions, such movements are unconventional on all levels of their structure. Furthermore, their anomalies challenge established notions about Schubert’s approach to sonata form as articulated by James Webster. For Webster, Schubert’s first impulse is lyrical, from which flows ‘a tendency towards symmetrical periods or closed forms such as ABA’ (Webster 1978, 20). This view not only emphasises the melodic over the harmonic, but the terms ‘symmetrical periods’ and ‘closed forms’ also imply a thematic stability and thus self-sufficiency—periods or ABA structures that are closed off from the rest of the movement.

The late sonata forms we will be discussing contradict this characterization: here Schubert’s starting point is harmonic,

rather than melodic, and the resulting thematic structures are dynamic in character, rather than static or closed, in that they are deeply involved in the movement’s overall development process. Yet the initial generating motive of the music still resides within the realm of lyricism, for it contributes a crucial lyrical attribute to the music—harmonic intensity. Such intensity arises from the unusual nature of the motivic progression and its treatment in the movement.

Essentially, Schubert’s generating motive is disruptive with regard to what Caplin has established as the norms of sonata form. Its first statement relies on a slow harmonic rhythm with sustained notes in order to make the special qualities arising from its voice leading audible to the listener. This momentary suspension of time, a generally accepted attribute of lyricism in Schubert’s music (Burnham 2000; Mak 2006), creates ambiguities concerning the controlling meter of the music. Furthermore, since the focus is harmonic, the melodic content is often rudimentary. Thus the motive’s construction is quite different from that of the initial basic idea of a Classical sonata form, which is designed to clearly define the music’s meter and principal melodic material.

Schubert’s unusual opening motive engenders an equally unusual process of development in which the broader implications of the motive’s voice leading are pursued across the movement in a way that affects the conventional character of theme types and formal sections. This process will be illustrated by two late sonata forms, the first movement of the string Quintet in C major, D. 956, and the first movement of the String Quartet in G major, D. 887. In both cases we will concentrate on the exposition. Let us begin with the Quintet.

2. THE FIRST MOVEMENT OF THE STRING QUARTET IN C MAJOR, D. 956

Here the generating motive is the harmonic background to the initial compound basic idea of the main theme, which consists of the shift from the tonic chord to its common-tone diminished seventh and back (mm. 1–6). The motive’s particular voice leading involves internal chromatic motion (E–E \flat –E in thirds with G–F \sharp –G) against upper and lower sustained tones (C in both violin 1 and cello 1). This causes a change in color of the upper sustained tone, a phenomenon which itself becomes a motivic feature of the movement. The expansive and rhythmically still character of the harmonic gesture directly affects the structure and temporal quality of the compound period it initiates (mm. 1–20): each phrase, expanded to ten measures, has an introductory quality due to the effect of this expansion. (Martin and Vande Moortele 2014 discuss this quality in some detail.)

The generating motive dominates the music following the compound period. Its voice leading, involving an inner chro-

matic ascent from G to A \sharp against a lower C and upper E pedal leads to a surprising HC in E minor (from the up-beat to m. 21 to m. 24). The music then shifts directly from the dominant of E minor to the G dominant seventh (mm. 25–26). The ensuing prolongation of the G dominant seventh relies upon the generating motive on G for its general harmonic framework (mm. 26–32), which features the move to the common-tone diminished seventh in m. 31 and back to the G dominant seventh in m. 32.

The resulting structure (mm. 20–33) is quite unusual. Its emphasis on dominant harmony suggests a contrasting middle, involving the half cadence in E minor (mm. 21–26) followed by a standing on the home dominant seventh (mm. 21–31), as proposed by Martin and Vande Moortele (2014). However, the move to the dominant of E minor is part of a process that begins *with* the IAC in m. 19 rather than *after* it. This process builds on the echo of the cadential tonic chord in mm. 19–20 in such a way that the half cadence in E minor seems to grow out of the IAC in C. More unusual is the main theme group's ending: while the V⁷–I progression in C major at measures 32–3 sounds like a climactic arrival on the tonic, there is no conventional cadential progression leading up to it. In fact, the last such progression in the main theme group is the surprising E minor half cadence (mm. 23–5).

Thus the main theme group is neither conventional nor conventionally closed. And the unusual occurrences within it, which are based on the generating motive, spin off subordinate harmonic motives that play a crucial role in the subsequent unfolding of the form. The most important of these is the progression by a descending major third from the dominant of E minor (mm. 24–5) to the dominant seventh of C major (last sixteenth of m. 25 to m. 26). This progression is derived from the common-tone diminished seventh component of the generating motive, specifically the implied chromatic descent in thirds from F \sharp /D \sharp to F/D in inner voices under a sustained B.

The striking modulation to E \flat major for the first subordinate theme is also based on the motivic progression by a descending major third (cellos 1 and 2, mm. 58–60), although here the movement is not between two dominants. The harmonic intensity of this modulation creates the deeply lyrical space for the ensuing first subordinate theme. The change in colour of the upper sustained G — a motivic characteristic of the movement's generating motive — is now pursued in the new theme, giving it its floating, lyrical quality, while also radically disrupting its phrase structure. (Both Gingerich 2000; Clark 2011 have discussed the changing chordal functions underlying the melodic G.)

The theme is constructed as an asymmetrical period (antecedent, mm. 60–65; consequent, mm. 66–79). Its antecedent ends, very unusually for a subordinate theme, with a HC in the home key (mm. 63–65). This sets up a replay of the initiating G–E \flat progression to launch the consequent (mm. 65–66). In the consequent, a second transformation of the melodic G (cello 1, mm. 68–71) extends the phrase's basic idea to five bars. (Here the colouring progression consists of a descending minor third from E \flat major to C major). The generating motive of the movement returns at its original pitch level on C to provide the harmonic framework for a further extension of the consequent (mm. 71–76), which accomplishes the modulation to G in the phrase's concluding PAC. (For a

discussion of the motivic aspects of this phrase see Black 2009.) The whole period is then repeated with the cello parts transferred to violins 1 and 2, mm. 80–100. All of the phrase-structural and harmonic anomalies discussed in this theme are thus tied into the development of aspects of the movement's generating motive — and these anomalies give the theme much of its lyrical urgency and mystery.

Turning to the second subordinate theme, here the motivic progression by descending major third from E minor's dominant to the G dominant seventh comes to the fore (specifically mm. 105–10). This unusual motive creates both a tonal and phrase-structural disruption of the theme, which is built along the lines of a sentential hybrid: compound basic idea, mm. 100–5; continuation, mm. 106–12. (For a different interpretation of the theme's structure, see Martin and Vande Moortele 2014). Harmonically the theme's continuation suddenly veers aside to focus on the prolongation of the B dominant chord (mm. 105–10). Structurally this prolongation dominates an affecting expanded cadential progression which brightens into G again with the motivic move from the B dominant to the G dominant seventh in m. 110 and the resolution of the G dominant seventh to IV, the ECP's pre-dominant harmony. The whole ECP thus expands the second subordinate theme's continuation phrase, while contributing significantly to the theme's lyrical power through the cadential phrase's special, harmonically intense character. The same harmonic motive is then briefly referenced in the closing section, again as part of an ECP (mm. 138–42, specifically mm. 139–40, repeated an octave higher in mm. 143–4).

Turning from the details of the development process, we will now look at a more general expression of the generating motive — its 'dynamic profile' — across the exposition. The motive's move from the tonic to its common-tone diminished seventh suspends the music in a moment of ambiguity which is then gently released in the return to the tonic (mm. 1–6). The same process, involving the motive, occurs on increasingly broader levels of the form. The move to the half cadence in E minor and return to the home dominant seventh in the main theme create a similar outline, though more intense and sustained (mm. 21–6). The build up to the cadence's explosion in the B octave generates tension (mm. 20–4). The sudden shift back to the G dominant seventh releases it (mm. 25–6). On the broader scale, the whole first subordinate theme enacts the same scenario. The unusual modulation to E \flat seems to arrest the music in mid-flight (mm. 58–60). This feeling is maintained throughout the theme in its phrase expansions and tonal ambiguities, and is then released in the final arrival in G major for the second subordinate theme. Thus both the concrete details of the opening generating motive and its overarching dynamic process seem to animate the exposition at all levels, creating an idiosyncratic, highly affecting treatment of conventional structures and formal /tonal expectations.

3. THE FIRST MOVEMENT OF THE STRING QUARTET IN G MAJOR, D. 887

In our second example, the first movement of the String Quartet in G major, D. 887, the generating motive is more abstract than the Quintet's. It consists of both the parallel and relative minor relationship. The harmonic event at the core of this idea consists of the movement's initial shift from major to

minor tonic and its defining semitonal slip from B to B \flat (mm. 1–3). This gesture presents the parallel minor relationship, which, as has been noted by numerous writers, is reflected in many details of the movement. (See for instance, Dahlhaus 1986, 5; Clark 2011, 260–2; Wollenberg 2011, 35–7). The most salient of these details are the reversal of the gesture from minor to major at the beginning of the recapitulation (mm. 278–82) and the combination of both the gesture and its reversal in the coda (mm. 437–41).

The equally important *relative* relationship grows out of the opening major-to-minor shift, centred on the dominant chord (mm. 6–9). The chromatic slip from F \sharp to F natural (mm. 6–8) is expanded in stages to the direct move in mm. 33–38 from the D major to F major chord (the dominants of G minor and its relative, B \flat). A variation of this progression — now originating on F \sharp and moving from the Dominant of B minor to the dominant 4/3 of D major — prepares the arrival of the key of D major for the subordinate theme and continues on to dominate that theme (mm. 64–65, 68–69 and 72–74). As this derivation indicates, the relative and parallel relationships intertwine. The move to the F \sharp dominant of B minor in mm. 58–9 reinterprets the B–B \flat slip of G's *parallel* minor relationship as B–A \sharp (violin 2) within the *relative* minor relationship in D major. A \sharp 's subsequent resolution to A-natural in the subordinate theme (mm. 64–65, 68–69 and 73–74) colours D major with the suggestion of a \flat 6-5 motion (B \flat –A) from its parallel minor.

Schubert's development of these two modal relationships creates an unusual form involving an equally unusual manner of tonal movement. Concerning the parallel relationship, Suzannah Clark has pointed out that the two keys of the subordinate theme region, D major and B \flat major, are the usual subordinate keys of G major and minor respectively (Clark 2011, 260–1). Thus the parallel minor relationship is expressed in the form that the exposition takes, with first G major exerting control in the statement of the subordinate theme in D major, then G minor taking over for the repetition of the theme in B \flat and G major reasserting itself for the final statement in D major. This alternating development scheme explains some of the more unusual features of the movement such as the emphasis on variation and the circling motion identified by Carl Dahlhaus and recently Anne Hyland (Dahlhaus 1986; Hyland 2016). It is first reflected in the extraordinary construction of the main theme complex, whose four phrases alternate in their modal character. Phrase 1 (mm. 1–14) features the major-to-minor transformation of first the tonic, then dominant chord. Phrase two (mm. 15–23) consists exclusively of major chords arising from a descending whole-tone sequence on the lament bass. Its repetition (phrase three, mm. 24–32) is varied by applying diminished seventh chords to each dominant of the sequence, thus introducing the modal semitone slip of phrase one (violin 2, B–B \flat , mm. 24–5, for the model on G; A–A \flat , mm. 26–7, for the sequence on F). Phrase four (mm. 33–41) again features *exclusively major chords* in a combination of the rhythmic-motivic make-up of phrase 1 with the whole-tone sequence of phrase 2.

The tonal trajectories of phrases two to four and the ensuing transition also reflect the major–minor motivic idea: each phrase moves sequentially away from the tonic, but returns

through either the parallel or relative relationship, or a combination of both. In phrases 2 and 3, the descending sequence leads to E \flat which then acts as flat submediant to return to the parallel major G (mm. 19–20 and mm. 28–9). In phrase 4, a modulation to D major is suggested by the arrival and prolongation of its dominant 6/5 (mm. 43–47). The relative minor relationship, however, brings the music back to G: the dominant of D is sidetracked to the augmented sixth of G major's relative minor, E (m. 48), which resolves directly to the G $^{6/3}$ (m. 51) that initiates the final PAC of the main theme (cadential arrival in m. 54). In the transition, the distance sequentially travelled from the tonic to B major (mm. 55–59) consists of 4 ascending fifths (G–D–A–E–B), moving from one to five sharps. However, this distance is reduced to that of one ascending fifth by the side-step to B's parallel minor (m. 58), and the ensuing move to its relative major D, the actual subordinate key.

The continuous process involving parallel and relative relationships that flows across the main theme and into the transition brings with it an unusual thematic structure pervaded by formal ambiguities. The opening phrase (mm. 1–14) suggests an introduction in its lack of rhythmic definition, sudden contrasts and concluding dominant emphasis. However the clear tonic, then dominant statement of its compound basic idea gives it the initial configuration of a presentation. (This analysis has been proposed by Frisch 2000, and echoed by Hyland 2016.) The sequential harmonic background of phrases 2 and 3, and the reduction of the unit lengths from three to two measures in turn suggest a continuation. Combining the opening 'presentation' with the two following 'continuations' creates the antecedent of a large compound period. The return of the movement's initial material at the beginning of phrase 4 (mm. 33–34, etc.) and the phrase's emphatic PAC (m. 54) suggests a consequent to the preceding antecedent (see also Hyland 2016.) However, this 'consequent' is also marked by deliberate functional ambiguity: its 'presentation' (mm. 33–36) consists of the same sequence as that of the two preceding 'continuations', while its stormy character and the central move to the dominant of the subordinate key create the impression of a transition, which is only dispelled by the concluding PAC in G.

The unusual structure of the main theme group reveals the dynamic power of the movement's central idea. The idea's lyrical power is clearly revealed in the subordinate theme. While there are no phrase structural expansions as in the Quintet, the theme's harmonic background creates a profoundly lyrical atmosphere, above all in two progressions which express the relative minor relationship. The first is the F \sharp major to A dominant 4/3 progression outlining the B minor/D major relative relationship. This colours the beginning of the theme's CBI's and the continuation (mm. 73–4). The second is the E minor/G major relative relationship, which marks the end of the two CBI's, the first with E minor (mm. 67–8), the second, G major (mm. 71–2). This last relationship is foreshadowed by the unusual initiation of the Main Theme's final cadence — the German 6th of E minor to the I $^{6/3}$ in G major, which also announces the dominant rhythm and recurring cadential gesture of the Subordinate theme (mm. 48–54). As has been noted by others, the subordinate theme thus spends little time actually in D major (see, for instance, Wollenberg 2011,

pp. 57–9). Its harmonic background creates an intense floating feeling that seems to express the essence of lyrical rapture.

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4. CONCLUSION

Returning now to Webster's comments concerning the 'lyrical impulse' in Schubert cited at the beginning of this paper; such lyricism has long been associated with static, conventional themes that, like jewels in a setting, seem to exist only for their own beauty. The examples we have presented, though, are neither conventional nor static, but instead are animated by the initial generating motive of the music — a harmonic entity — that in its development generates unusual structures and a harmonic intensity that gives these themes their lyrical power at the same time as sweeping them along in the motivic musical flow. Even in a seemingly conventional structure, such as the subordinate theme of the G major String Quartet, the working out of the movement's generating harmonic motive gives that theme a strong, intense character that is crucial to the general motivic unfolding of the form. Thus Schubert's themes do not stand aloof from the sonata processes surrounding them, but are fully engaged in the musical discourse out of which emerge their structure and meaning.

KEYWORDS

Schubert, Lyricism, Sonata Form, Formal Functions, Harmony.

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