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Choose Your Own Sonata Form: Adventures in Analysis

ABSTRACT

Many of us as music theorists have struggled to find the best way to help our undergraduate students critically explore sonata form. Students are often only taught one primary template for sonata theory instead of exploring the rich history of theoretical approaches and resulting debates that have continued into the twenty-first century. Rather than relying on a single textbook approach and seeking a predetermined outcome, experience with the writings of selected music theorists enables students to both apply critical thinking skills in music analysis and have a sense of autonomy, leading to a deeper engagement with and understanding of music theory. This paper will draw upon the approaches to sonata form presented during the last century by Donald Francis Tovey, Leonard Ratner, Charles Rosen, and James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy in order to expose students to a variety of different analytical techniques. We will present repertoire that poses the kinds of analytic questions and choices students would face. By exposing students to multiple approaches to sonata form, we hope to expand their analytical and historical understanding. When students have multiple analytic options to explore, critical thinking and listening skills are necessary for making difficult choices. Practicing these skills in the music theory classroom will help students in their daily tasks as musicians in multiple ways, including learning and memorizing repertoire, writing about music, and teaching music. Sonata form becomes not just an exercise in prescriptive labeling but an adventure in analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding sonata form in its many guises is one of the more significant and challenging tasks required of most undergraduate music theory students. The importance of sonata form in the Classical- and Romantic-period repertoire is inescapable, but the bewildering variety of viewpoints presented on the subject over the last 150 years impacts the ability to teach it — and to learn about it — in a musically sound and pedagogically effective manner. While this analytical variety can negatively complicate the pedagogy, it also provides an invaluable opportunity for students to improve their musical understanding by comparing various writers' approaches to the same composition. They can, as the title suggests, choose their own analytical adventures.

Instructors can introduce multiple theories of sonata form to students by comparing the writings of different analysts to Beethoven's early- and middle-period piano sonatas and string quartets, some of which have been analyzed numerous times. This paper will concentrate on the approaches of Tovey, Ratner, Rosen, and Hepokoski and Darcy as applied to the exposition of the first movement of Beethoven's Op. 10 No. 3 Piano Sonata and the exposition and recapitulation of the first movement of the Op. 18 No. 4 String Quartet. These particular authors were chosen because of both the significance and the diversity found in their analytical theories and the variety of instructional activities it allows in the music theory class-

room. There are, of course, many other viewpoints on sonata form, but for the purpose of time, we have limited our discussion to these four approaches.

2. CHOOSE A SONATA FORM: BEETHOVEN'S OP. 10 NO. 3

2.1 Donald Francis Tovey

Donald Francis Tovey's approach to sonata form is clearly seen in his *Companion to Beethoven's Pianoforte Sonatas* (1931), which is subtitled 'a bar-by-bar analysis'. As the subtitle suggests, Tovey uses a bottom-up approach that emphasizes motivic and thematic content within an overall ternary structure. His book deals systematically with all thirty-two sonatas and has the added benefit of effectively tracing the overall development of Beethoven's compositional style. Sometimes off-putting to recent analysts is his period-typical emphasis on descriptive writing, to the perceived detriment of larger-scale analytical relationships. Despite their limitations, Tovey's insightful analyses of the Beethoven piano sonatas are still of use both to the performer and the analyst.

Tovey's analysis of the first movement of Beethoven Op. 10 No. 3 presents the exposition as consisting of a first group that begins in the tonic, but ends on a half cadence in the submediant (mm. 1–22), followed by two transition themes. The first of these moves through both the submediant and mediant keys (mm. 23–30) before giving way to a new transition theme in the dominant (mm. 31–53). The second group is in the expected dominant; Tovey identifies two primary thematic ideas here, along with motivic figuration from the first group. He discusses the recapitulation in only cursory fashion, pointing out that the end of the first group moves this time to a half cadence in the supertonic. This change allows 'exact recapitulation of bars 22/23 [to] 112, with the transition-themes in [supertonic] and [submediant], leading to [the] second group in tonic' (Tovey 1931, 58). In short, his analysis of the sonata form is ternary, with primarily thematic and phrase-based analysis and selected emphasis on key relationships. Also note his choice of the terms 'first group' and 'second group' to show these concepts.

2.2 Leonard Ratner

Leonard Ratner's theory of sonata form is presented comprehensively in his *Classic Music* (1980). Ratner demonstrates how knowledge of music history and historical music theory can help to inform a modern analytical theory. Drawing on the writings of numerous eighteenth-century theorists, he proposes a tonal approach to sonata form based on the fundamental polar opposition of tonic and dominant key areas and its eventual resolution. Further, he argues for a dynamic binary-based view of sonata form rather than a static ternary-based one. His conception of sonata form as well as its various extensions and

interpretations have become widely influential in music theory instruction.

Ratner does not specifically deal with the first movement of Beethoven Op. 10 No. 3, but based on his analyses of other contemporaneous works it is logical to assume that he would adopt a polar two-part approach to the overall tonal structure. Ratner argues that by the last decade of the eighteenth century this tonal view was so commonly understood that theorists could provide not only stereotypical harmonic plans, but also recommendations for the distribution of melodic content. He views part I of the form as encompassing the exposition, with part II containing both the development and recapitulation. Key area I of part I establishes the tonic and may either provide closure in that key or may be more open-ended, leading to a point of departure (transition) and the eventual establishment of key area II. Ratner would likely end key area I at the previously discussed half cadence in m. 22, followed by the transition in mm. 22–53 and then the polar dominant, his key Area II.

2.3 Charles Rosen

Charles Rosen explored the structure of late eighteenth-century music in two books: *The Classical Style* (1972) and *Sonata Forms* (1980). The latter book focuses on the development of multiple Classic-period sonata forms from their Baroque-period antecedents. It also includes a discussion of sonata-form development throughout the nineteenth century after Beethoven. Rosen's analytical approach generally falls in the middle between that of Ratner and of Tovey, eclectically melding Ratner's significant historical perspective and emphasis on tonal relationships with Tovey's attention to smaller-scale form and motivic/thematic structure. It is clearly influenced by his familiarity with the literature not only as an analyst, but also as a performer.

Rosen views the first movement of Beethoven Op. 10 No. 3 as an early example of a three-key exposition, which he says 'first appears in the last decade of the eighteenth century as a manifestation of the expansion of all musical forms of that time' (Rosen 1980, 234). As such, Beethoven does not fully establish the second key. Instead, he argues that 'it is conceived above all in relationship to the dominant that will follow' (Rosen 1980, 235). Rosen does not see this move to the submediant as either surprising or unusual. Instead it is merely an expanded version of a typical harmonic progression leading from tonic to dominant. As he concludes, 'It is very well done, but there are no surprises; we simply stop on the road to V' (Rosen 1980, 236). Rosen sees the mature three-key exposition as more of a Romantic-period concept developing after Beethoven's time.

2.4 James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy

James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy examined hundreds of sonata forms in their *Elements of Sonata Theory* (2006) to determine normative patterns and expectations. They explore what happens when these norms are altered, replaced, and ignored, resulting in deformations. This approach leads to a culmination of the earlier discourses of sonata form that is historically informed, hermeneutic, and dialogic. Their analysis emphasizes large-scale structure through important cadential moments, further melding Ratner's tonal aspects with

Tovey's motivic details. The result is an analytic narrative that is often dramatic and engaging.

Hepokoski and Darcy call the first movement of Beethoven's Op. 10 No. 3 'highly problematic' (Hepokoski and Darcy 2006, 176) while also acknowledging that this makes the movement open to multiple interpretations. They view the move to the submediant, and the resulting medial caesura half cadence arrival, as a 'wrong key medial caesura-effect' (Hepokoski and Darcy 2006, 176). From there the sonata continues with a life of its own, as the submediant section 'misinterprets the situation' or 'follows the lead of the 'wrong' medial caesura' (Hepokoski and Darcy 2006, 176). This section is labeled as the first module in a trimodular (TM) block, what they define as 'an especially emphatic type of multimodular structure in an exposition or recapitulation, always associated with the phenomenon of apparent double medial caesuras' (Hepokoski and Darcy 2006, xxvii). The movement continues without a clear TM² to a more normative medial caesura in the dominant key at m. 53, followed by a normative TM³ that gives the impression of being S.

3. ADVENTURES IN ANALYSIS: BEETHOVEN'S OP. 18 NO. 4

What would students think about these differing analyses? All of these writers are clearly discussing some version of sonata form, but their approaches lead to very different outcomes. Yet all of these analyses can contribute to our understanding of Beethoven's Op. 10 No. 3 in some meaningful way. If students were familiar with these different approaches, how would they choose to analyze another challenging sonata form such as the first movement of Beethoven's Op. 18 No. 4? What choices would they have to make and how would they defend their decisions? Which of the four analyses would be most easily applied to another work, and which ones would present more difficulties?

Students would likely begin by analyzing the opening C minor theme, noting that it is sentential in structure, with an evaded cadence in m. 8 that leads to a consequent phrase, culminating in a perfect authentic cadence with a cadential extension. The home key of C minor means students will likely be anticipating a secondary key in E-flat major or G minor.

The next passage will pose the first challenge to students. Where is the transition and where is the medial caesura? There is certainly a tonic half cadence in m. 25, but what will students call it? Is this phrase still part of the first theme, since it is in the home key and has primary material motives? Or is this section a transition, since it follows the first perfect authentic cadence of the primary material, gains energy, and stands on the dominant? Is this half cadence the medial caesura?

The material following this cadence does not bring any more clarity, only more questions. A shift in key to the submediant, much like Op. 10 No. 3, with new melodic material, appears to be something new. Is this a transition? The second key of a three-key exposition? The beginning of a trimodular block following a declined medial caesura? The material is then sequenced down to the subdominant before finally arriving on the expected half cadence in the relative major. Is this half cadence the medial caesura? If so, then what was the tonic half cadence earlier? How do these decisions impact the interpretation of the material following m. 33?

If students learn only one way to prescriptively label sonata form, they may simply follow that specific formula instead of grappling with these analytic decisions. By contrast, students who are exposed to a variety of analytical viewpoints, such as those discussed earlier, can make more informed choices. Once students choose how to analyze this passage they would need to defend their position, either against conflicting arguments from their peers, questions from their teacher, or in the case of Op. 18 No. 4, the music itself.

The primary area's cadential extension is extended further through sequencing and proceeds directly to the relative major material in the tonic major key. The material we just discussed from mm. 17–33 is completely omitted. An observant student may notice that the previous submediant material does return after the end of the original closing area in the tonic minor in m. 208. How might this return change a student's outlook on the exposition? One explanation might be that the declined medial caesura, due to the wrong submediant key, was a mistake later corrected in the recapitulation. When the 'wrong key' returns in the recapitulation in the form of minor tonic after the closing section, that same material returns. Thus, this material could be interpreted as a signal for 'wrong-key' material. Perhaps the recapitulation is simply out of order, progressing from the primary theme straight to the secondary theme and closing theme before the transition theme reappears.

What would a discussion like this look like in a class? How would we even go about teaching multiple sonata theories? The previous discussion of Op. 10 No. 3 would serve as a wonderful introduction, since students could read the short analyses by Tovey, Rosen, and Hepokoski and Darcy. Sonata form could also be presented as a problem-based learning activity or unit, where students encounter the repertoire first, are given a problem, — in this case, to explain the form of Op. 10 No. 3 — and then must think creatively to locate and identify patterns, themes, keys, and more. After individuals or groups explore the piece on their own, they can be introduced to the other analyses discussed, giving them the opportunity to compare their observations with experts in the field, much like the beginning of this paper. Finally, after experiencing the different approaches to sonata form, students could apply what they have learned by analyzing new repertoire of varying difficulties. This process emulates what Ramsey Musallam and Robert Karplus call a learning cycle:

an initial 'Explore' phase, where pupils work through guided inquiry exercises is followed by an 'Explain' phase, a more teacher-centered moment where necessary and tailored information is transferred. The cycle concludes with an 'Apply' phase where the concept is extended to new and unique situations'. (Musallam 2013.)

Of course, this process could be modified for more straight-forward repertoire initially or saved for when students are ready for the types of situations we are discussing here.

Much has been said and written about teaching sonata form. Most recently, Seth Monahan argued for the adoption of Hepokoski and Darcy's sonata theory in undergraduate pedagogy due to its dynamic, dramatic, and expression-oriented aspects, while still being agreeable with the more traditional perspectives of Rosen and Ratner. His article suggests that:

the nuanced refinements of [textbook sonata form] are not often suited to the core curriculum. Charles Rosen's challenge to the viability of any overriding schematic practice...leads directly away

from any tidy pedagogy. Similarly, Leonard Ratner's welcome restoration of an eighteenth-century (i.e. harmonic) conception of the genre did little to diminish the didactic value of thematic 'contrast' for those navigating these larger forms for the first time. (Monahan 2011, 109–110.)

However, learning can be messy, and Maha Bali argues that:

critical pedagogy [...] is about putting faith in our learners to take control of their learning, and teach us, each other, and themselves in the process. Very often, we become better pedagogues by learning from our mistakes [...] accepting and even embracing the uncertainties, unpredictability, the messiness of learning. (Bali 2014.)

This messiness in learning has additional benefits for our students. Allowing students to make these critical decisions about sonata form is one way to promote their agency and autonomy in a course. This sense of autonomy is directly linked to Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's self-determination theory: 'providing choice and acknowledging feelings [that] can enhance the sense of self-initiation [...] provides satisfaction of the need for autonomy and results in more positive outcomes' (Deci and Ryan 2000, 234) like an increase in intrinsic motivation, more creativity, and improved problem solving.

4. CONCLUSION

Exploring multiple interpretations of sonata forms allows students to make their own decisions about what to value when examining form. In this way, they are not only learning how to label and understand sonata form, but also how to critically analyze it. This kind of critical analysis also enhances aural skills and the ability for students to hear and understand sonata form in real time as it unfolds. Such correlation between the cognitive and aural aspects of music theory ultimately improves musical understanding. As Steve Larson describes, 'when we respond to music aurally [...] we are thinking in music; when we respond to music intellectually, we are thinking about music' (Larson 2012, 30). How a student hears, interprets, and chooses to analyze sonata form will help to connect the skills they learn in the music theory classroom to the skills they will practice as musicians outside of the classroom. Not only will they be able to make performance decisions about interpretation, but this thinking both in and about music can also help them memorize repertoire, write about music, and teach music. Sonata form truly becomes not just an exercise in prescriptive labeling, but an adventure in analysis.

KEYWORDS

Musical Pedagogy, Form, Musical Hermeneutics, Instrumental Music.

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