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The Piano Sonatas of Schumann and Brahms: Approaching Analysis Through Aesthetics

ABSTRACT

Seemingly divergent iterations of sonata form such as the early piano sonatas of Schumann and Brahms can be viewed as emanating from a limited set of principles when analysis concerns itself with more than musical materials. This analysis is in its essence an eclectic 'close reading' of a small number of movements comprising two broad steps. First, I survey early 19th-century writings on art and music to discern what characteristics were considered defining in sonata form. Then, keeping these characteristics in mind, I analyse the early piano sonatas of Schumann and Brahms, using elements of Formenlehre (Caplin) and Schenkerian linear analysis to see how these young composers were responding to the aesthetics of the time. A comparison of these sonatas with masterworks of the previous generation, or even with later works by the same composers inevitably highlights the flaws and inconsistencies of Schumann and Brahms' early sonatas. However, when viewed through the lens of their response to prevailing aesthetics, these same early sonatas gain a coherence that depends less on internal structural factors and more on their relationship with other works and with the arts in general. In the end, this allows us to reflect on how we distinguish between the internal coherence of an analytical framework and that of a musical object, and how to avoid confusing the two.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a 1991 article, Linda C. Roesner analyses several movements early of Schumann piano works from the perspective of what she terms 'parallel forms'. Essentially, Roesner's claims about these pieces boil down to the simple fact that, in his quest to experiment with large-scale form, Schumann radically redefines sonata form — to the point where the parallelism that she detects in these movements overwrites traditional sonata form procedures as their main organising principle. While I do not dispute that parallelism plays a significant role in the organisation of this movement, I do believe that Roesner overstates its role when she claims that it replaces sonata form as the underlying idea of the piece. Instead, I prefer to see it as one possible choice among many that composers made that helped to renew sonata form in the 19th century.

I propose to look at a few sonata form movements of Schumann and Brahms piano sonatas through the lens of the aesthetics of the time, work drawn from my dissertation (Godin 2017). Youthful works such as these are particularly responsive to an aesthetic analysis since they represent a fresh, spontaneous view of form. Early works such as these are often neglected, and yet they can reveal a great deal about a composer's frame of reference and later compositions. In a time when novelty, spontaneity, and surprise were highly valued in art, it seems relevant to examine works from a composer's early career. I will first give a brief overview of my methodology, before moving on to a discussion of the aesthetic concepts I uncover, two short case study analyses, and my conclusions.

2. METHODOLOGY

Music does not exist in a vacuum; it is influenced by, and in turn influences, everything around it. Gershwin put it nicely: '[T]rue music […] must repeat the thoughts and aspirations of the people and the time' (Gershwin 1926). This study takes that claim to heart, making aesthetics a key component of music analysis. To accomplish this, I employ a relatively simple two-step process that begins with a close reading of texts written between roughly 1790 and 1860 that deal with music in some way — philosophical aesthetics, music criticism, literary works, and composition/harmony treatises — to retrieve the core concepts invoked in discussions of sonata and other large-scale musical forms. Then I proceed to an analysis of several sonata-form movements from early 19th-century piano sonatas, using a variety of tools: Schenkerian linear analysis, formal functions, sonata theory, analysis of rhythm and meter.

In following these two steps, I aim to discover what 19th-century writers thought about and valued in instrumental music written using large-scale forms, and how composers may have responded to, or even influenced such writers. Similar work has already been undertaken, by Janet Schmalfeldt (2011) and John Daverio (1997), among others. It is important to note at this point that unlike Schmalfeldt, I do not seek to map aesthetic concepts onto specific compositional practices; my aim is rather to show the value that a deeper awareness of aesthetic principles can add to our analytical practice. In other words, thinking about such aesthetic concepts can inform how we evaluate compositional choices made by these composers.

3. AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES

The aesthetic principles of musical Romanticism are wide-ranging and often contradictory. Before enumerating the aesthetic principles that particularly interest me here, a brief look at the literature I surveyed is in order.[1] It includes philosophical treatises dealing with aesthetics by Kant, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel, and Hanslick; literary works (both novels and short stories) by the usual German romantic suspects, and including the philosophically oriented works of the Jena school; French, English, and German-language music criticism

[1] In order to save space, I am not including references to all of these materials within the text here. Instead, I have listed the most important sources in the attached bibliography. Where I refer to specific philosophical texts that have been translated multiple times from the original language, I will use chapter or paragraph references rather than page numbers and avoid date references, to allow for easy reference to whichever translation is available.

from 1790 to 1860 (for a total of 492 reviews and articles dealing with sonata form or piano sonatas), and composition treatises by Koch, Reicha, Momigny, Marx, and Czerny. These sources describe a great variety of musical possibilities, and quite divergent aesthetic opinions — sometimes even contradictory aesthetic or value judgments within a single text. However, it is possible to unpack a certain number of aesthetic criteria that apply to large-scale formal structures in the early 19th century.

None of the aesthetic principles summarized here are new in the literature, though some may be surprised to see them related to music of the early Romantic period. For the purposes of this paper, I will discuss four of these principles.

3.1 Abstraction

The first aesthetic principle is the abstract nature of music, and especially of musical form. This principle is of course essential to the new value placed on instrumental music, and so-called 'absolute music' in the 19th century. Schopenhauer and Hanslick are particularly strongly attached to these concepts. Indeed, Schopenhauer's equation of music with Will (Chapter 52) brings the concept of musical autonomy and abstraction to its peak, not to mention Hanslick's famous formalist position (Hanslick 1986, 29). Without such a concept of musical abstraction, *Formenlehre* theory would hardly be possible. That is, the notion of music as abstract underlies its autonomous and self-referential nature, and thus allows a move away from the older rhetorical metaphor of musical form. For example, when Koch first talks about the symphonic allegro movement (Koch 1983, 199–201), he does so from the point of view of a specific genre, with all its attendant requirements. However, as the century progresses, form — and in particular sonata form — sheds its generic associations and becomes the locus of an abstract way of considering music. When Czerny associates sonata form with the piano sonata (Czerny 1979, 53–5), he does so more for pedagogical reasons than anything else. In Reicha or Marx, form takes its place as a separate parameter of music entirely.[2]

3.2 Coherence

Like the concept of abstraction in music, and indeed linked to it, is the concept of coherence over the large scale. Perhaps more than any other, this concept has always been at the core of sonata form, and it remains not only relevant, but also central to 19th-century aesthetics of the sonata. Given their propensity toward vast systematic constructs, it is hardly surprising that German idealist philosophers would so highly value this type of large-scale coherence. In any case, thinkers from Schelling to Czerny agree that coherence over a longer span is necessary for large-scale forms. When Schlegel writes, 'It is equally fatal for the spirit to have a system and to have none. It must therefore resolve to combine the two', (Fragment 53)[3] he neatly summarizes one of the larger dichotomies facing sonata form in the early 19th century: given an aesthetic that values the incomplete, the fragmentary, the unusual, how do we reconcile a large-scale, coherent, clearly organized form? Writers and composers perceive this coherence in the works of Beethoven and Mozart, and want to reproduce it, all the while doubting the usefulness or even the possibility of achieving such coherence given their new musical ideals.

3.3 Organicism

A third aesthetic concept that is key to properly recognizing how composers approach form in the 19th century hardly needs mention here: namely, organicism. Since this concept has been widely discussed, let me simply point out that organicism naturally underlies both the concept of musical abstraction and of large-scale coherence in many ways, not to mention its central place in many analytical systems developed in the 19th and 20th centuries. In music, this concept is often related to motivic detail and other types of workings-out of musical material, what Schlegel may have called 'properly musical ideas', and which Hoffmann admires in his landmark review of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (1810). Such motivic working out, and the organic metaphor that underlies it, is likely also behind Schelling's claim that art has its own way of leading to an understanding of the world.

3.4 Tradition vs. Innovation

The last of the aesthetic principles I discuss is perhaps the most interesting and important: the tension between tradition and innovation. One of the key features of 19th century artistic practice is the newly gained consciousness of past practice coupled with a desire to preserve great artworks of the past. Hegel introduces the concept of history to art and aesthetics (Introduction, §3), and there is a push in German-speaking Europe to create a canon of great musical works, with an eye to supporting artistically the move toward a unified German nation-state (Applegate 1998; Pedersen 1994). Yet this consciousness is always coupled with a desire to create something new, usually something that expresses the artist's own individual viewpoint or emotional state. How then to reconcile a musical form so dependent on convention and tradition with an aesthetic of the individual, personal, innovative? Music journals are replete with articles participating in a lively debate on how to reconcile inherited musical models with the new expressive needs of music. Schumann, for one, has a complex relationship to sonata form composition and criticism (Sterk 1992). In some cases, he categorically opposes sonata composition, calling it old-fashioned and claiming that it only serves to impress stuffy critics and professors (Schumann 1969, 65). In a review of Chopin's Piano Sonata in B-flat minor, Op. 35, he clearly recognizes that a piano sonata can be a successful vehicle for bold and original musical thinking (Schumann 1969, 140–2). Then of course, there is his review of early Brahms piano works, which surely included one or two of the piano sonatas that Schumann lauds as 'veiled symphonies', clearly perceiving them as successful adaptations of classical models (Schumann 1969, 253). Nor can we forget that many composition treatises of the period were based on a pedagogy by imitation: students would adopt the proportions, key relationships, and other parameters from older and well-respected works and try to compose new material to fit these parameters.

[2] Marx in particular takes great care to separate musical form from harmony and melody, introducing his theory of form in the third volume of his four-volume composition treatise.

[3] 'Es ist gleich tödlich für den Geist, ein System zu haben, und keins zu haben. Er wird sich also wohl entschließen müssen, beides zu verbinden'.

4. ANALYTICAL CASE STUDIES

With these four aesthetic principles in mind, we can turn to three analytical case studies. The first pair concern parallelism in Schumann's sonata forms. Along with the first movement of the Piano Sonata in F minor Op. 14, analysed by Roesner in the previously cited article, I will also discuss the first movement of the Piano Sonata in F-sharp minor Op. 11.

4.1 First Case Study

Figure 1 summarizes in table form my analysis of the F-minor sonata. Like Roesner, I believe that parallelism plays a key role in this movement. Unlike Roesner, I do not believe that Schumann composed any development section in this movement (successful or otherwise) and that the movement is in dialogue with sonata form principles, specifically the Type 1 or sonata form without development. As Peter Smith points out about a group of later Schumann works, the composer was well aware of formal models beyond the Type 3 or complete sonata form (Smith 2014). The later works analysed by Smith relate to the Type 2 form.

The relationship to sonata form without development shown in the table does not yet sufficiently account for the new key area of the subordinate theme in the recapitulation. This subordinate theme does not stay in the home key, as would be expected, but instead moves to D-flat major, or flat-VI, a key more common in the development of a sonata form.

We can make certain claims about what Schumann may have been attempting to accomplish in this movement by referring to the aesthetic principles outlined above. Firstly, the large-scale coherence of the movement is clear. Schumann's use of parallelism helps to structure a movement that otherwise has at least one major flaw when compared to sonata form conventions, namely the D-flat key area of the recapitulation. We might however claim that Schumann is attempting to mediate between tradition, or sonata form convention in the form of the Type 1 sonata, and innovation in his addition of a new key area where one is not expected. We might also claim that Schumann is exploring an inherent, if abstract property of sonata form, namely the parallels between exposition and recapitulation, in order to attempt to escape some of the constraints of the form without entirely abandoning it.

Two other features of this movement are worth pointing out. First, the reuse of motivic material within the exposition. As the table in Figure 1 indicates, Schuman crafts what I have called the subordinate theme by reintroducing most of the material from the main theme and transition, transposed into the subordinate key area of A-flat major. To my ears, this procedure is clearly in dialogue with earlier, so-called monothematic, sonata form composition processes. Once again, Schumann mediates between innovation and tradition in his compositional choices. Second and perhaps a little more controversial, the use of D-flat major in the recapitulation may signal a type of two-dimensional form at play here (Vande Moortele 2009). Only, rather than a single movement exhibiting the properties of an entire sonata cycle, or telescoping out, as it were, the movement as a whole telescopes in to encompass the characteristics of a single repeated exposition. The movement can be heard as exploring two different tonal paths through a single exposition, with a coda tacked on for local tonal closure, but essentially remaining open toward the rest of the cycle, as my graph in Figure 2 shows. The movement is therefore more strongly integrated to the rest of the cycle, which would need to explore different key areas before regaining and strongly confirming the home key in the finale.

"Introduction"	Exposition						
MT¹	MT²	Tr¹	Tr²	Tr³	ST		CT
A	B	C	D	E	B	D	E
1-7	8-22¹	22²-26¹	26²-38¹	38²-62¹	62²-69	70-76¹	76²-112
f	f	V/c	c → B♭	E♭ → A♭	A♭	A♭	A♭ → V/f
i		v	(IV	VII	III)	III	= Exposition Key
"Intro"	Recapitulation						
MT¹	MT²	Tr¹	Tr²	Tr³	ST		CT
A	B	C	D	E	B	D	E
113-120¹	120²-142¹	142²-146¹	146²-158¹	158²-182¹	182²-189	190-196¹	196²-226
f → V/b	b → c → V/f	V/f	f → E♭	A♭ → D♭	D♭	D♭	D♭ → V/f
i	v i		(VII	III	VI)	VI	= Development Key

"Intro" ⇒	Coda
I	(ThP)
A	(B)
227-234	235-250
f	f

Fig. 1. Schumann, Piano Sonata Op. 14, I, summary.

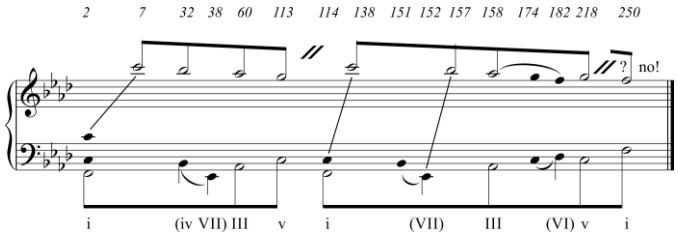


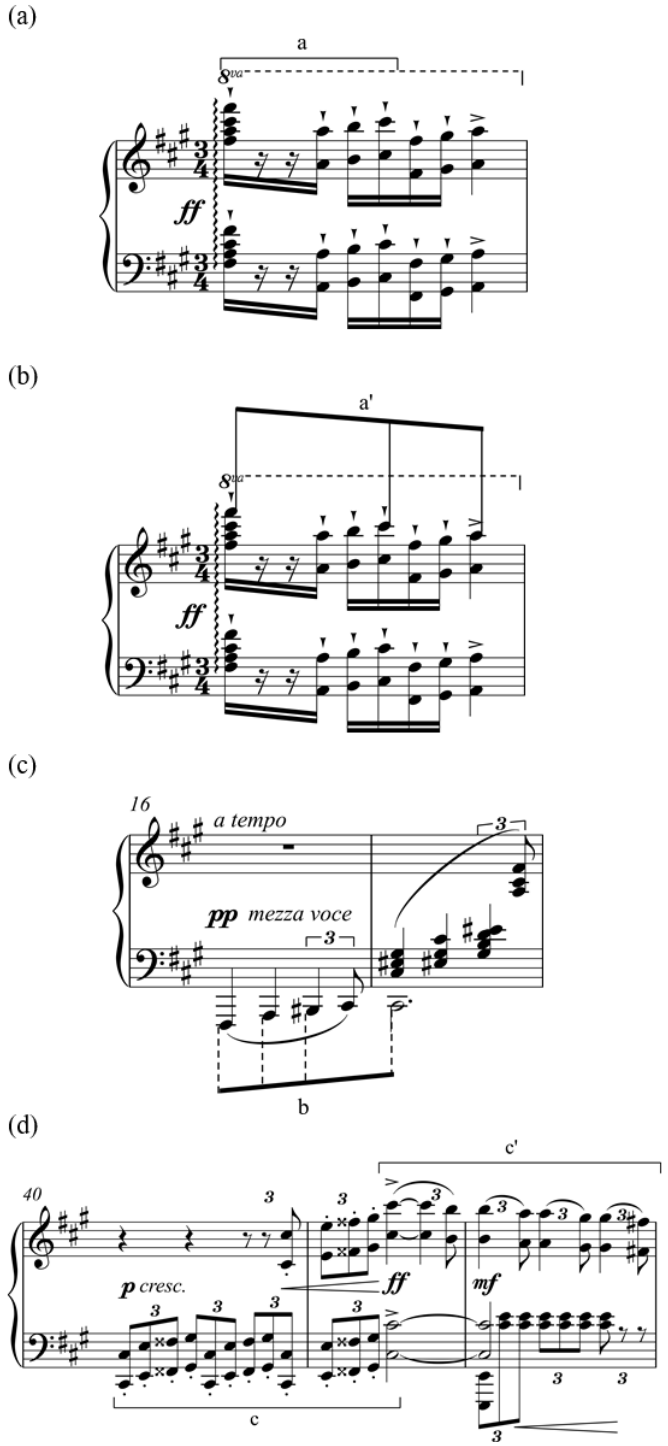
Fig. 2. Schumann, Op. 14, I, reduction.

4.2 Second Case Study

Schumann uses the parallelism principle in a different way, and in a different place, in the first movement of his Sonata for Piano in F-sharp minor Op. 11. This movement begins with a fairly long slow introduction, itself in a loose ternary design and closing in the home key of F-sharp minor. When the exposition proper begins, Schuman writes a tonally ambiguous opening, creating a strong link between the two sections. Near the end of the development, Schumann brings back certain motivic elements from the introduction, and ends the development on a rhetorically strong tonic chord, using the fifths motive from the beginning of the exposition, fortissimo in full octave chords in both hands. Charles Rosen hears in this moment a failure of sonata form construction, as the rhetorical strength of this gesture seems to render the recapitulation superfluous (Rosen 1995, 704–5). I again prefer to hear Schumann attempting a new way of creating large-scale coherence by focussing on the inherent, abstract parallelism between these two sections of the form. In returning to development motivic material near the end of the development and concluding this section with an emphatic tonic, Schumann refers to the introduction that precedes the exposition, and neatly recreates the searching, unstable quality of the exposition at the beginning of the recapitulation.

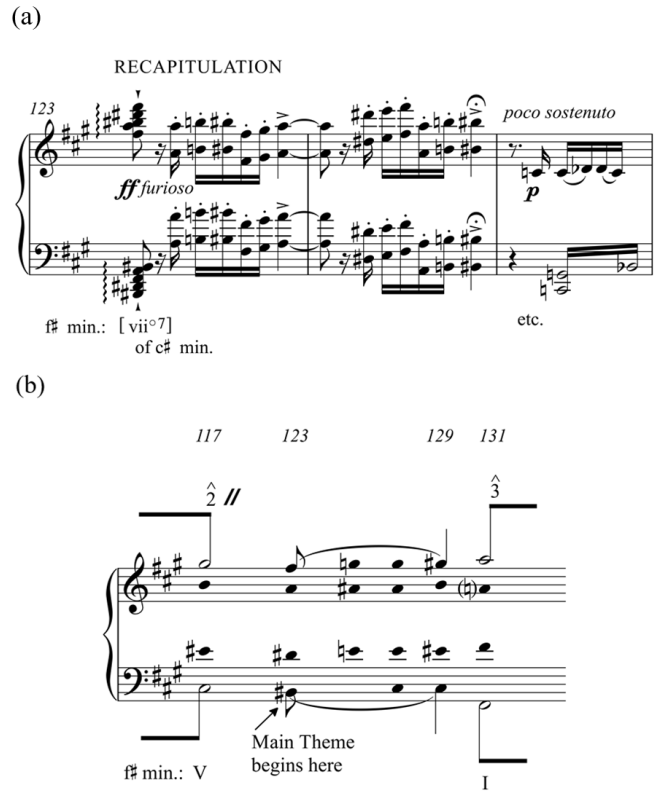
4.3 Third Case Study

In Brahms' Piano Sonata in F-sharp minor Op. 2, we first notice its indebtedness to many models: Beethoven, Schubert and even Chopin. The organic style of motivic development of this sonata is immediately perceptible. As Example 1 summarizes, Brahms uses two simple motivic cells drawn from the opening bars to structure a large part of the movement, from relationships between themes to the tonal plan of the movement itself. More striking is the beginning of the recapitulation, where Brahms generates a certain level of ambiguity through form-functional and tonal means. Example 2 shows the very beginning of the recapitulation; immediately noticeable is the off-tonic beginning. Brahms indeed does not align the return of thematic material with the return to the home tonic. As we can see from the graph in Example 2b, the prolongation of dominant harmony that concludes the development section continues beyond that formal boundary and overlaps with the beginning of the recapitulation. Tonic harmony is eventually re-established when the opening material returns in the second part of a loosely formed periodic structure (m. 131). Brahms is in fact quite fond of this particular technique, as Peter Smith has demonstrated with a number of later chamber works (Smith 1994); this early example demonstrates to what extent Brahms was looking to forge a new path in large-scale formal organization, and this is a surprisingly successful early attempt at the technique. It also shows how Brahms is learning to manipulate the listener's conventional expectations to create a new effect at the moment of recapitulation.



Ex. 1. Brahms, Piano Sonata, Op. 2, I, motives. (a) m. 1; (b) m. 1; (c) mm. 16–7; (d) mm. 40–2.

In these few examples drawn from early Brahms and Schumann piano sonatas, we see a composer attempting to claim sonata form as his own, in his own way. The tension between the value placed on convention and on the work of his predecessors on the one hand, and the need to forge a new path, on the other, can be easily felt from the very beginning of the movement. Both composers are also clearly engaged in composing a coherent large-scale form.



Ex. 2. (a) Brahms, Op. 2, I, mm. 123–5; (b) reduction

5. CONCLUSION

In the end, what do we gain from this approach? First and most importantly, by enriching our understanding of the intellectual, philosophical, and general context surrounding the composition of a given work, we gain a deeper, or at least a more complete, understanding of the piece. This is particularly true when applied to early-career compositions such as those that form my case studies. Questions of value often burden discussions of such pieces — assuming they are discussed at all — with the success or failure to achieve certain goals or to create a proper form overshadowing the details of the piece. By bringing aesthetic concepts into the mix, we can sidestep such value judgments and instead focus on what composers are responding to, both musically and intellectually, and better understand the experimental nature of a work without dwelling on its outcome. This approach also takes a different path toward showing a certain commonality between works that employ very different techniques. Schumann and Brahms were both responding to a similar set of aesthetic principles, even though their responses followed different paths in the end. This approach also provides some foundation for a better comparison between classical and romantic sonata form procedures and repertoires. Rather than focussing on specific techniques, and how convincing their application turns out to be, a focus on the broader aesthetic paradigms at plays highlights a certain continuity between these two repertoires that is otherwise easily overlooked. Finally, it helps to bring musical works into dialogue with other arts and ideas, rather than remaining isolated in its own, sometimes too hermetic, sphere.

To return to the quotation from Gershwin with which I began, this paper can answer the following question: how do these sonata-form movements, and others like them, express the thoughts and aspirations of their time? In a period so rich in contradictions, where philosophers seek to resolve the dualism established in Kant's metaphysics that so many perceive as a deep tear in their understanding of the world while at the same time remaining sceptical as to the possibility of actually finding a solution; in a time where huge philosophical systems — that pretend or at least attempt to be comprehensive — are constructed, all the while doubting in the power of words to completely express anything; in an age where reason is celebrated and revered, yet those who revere it also believe that it can only explain a portion of reality; and finally, in a time where the nascent German state is writing its common history in order to create a new nation-state, I believe that sonata form represents a special case. It represents the golden age of German music, a sustained composition, now taken up in a new context, reworked, seeking to create coherent large-scale work yet always evading the complete clarity and formal logic that characterised earlier sonatas. Through their differences, deformations, and failures, these romantic sonatas are perhaps equally as representative of their time as their better-known contemporary miniatures or Lieder.

KEYWORDS

Schumann, Brahms, Sonata Form, *Formenlehre*, Schenkerian Analysis, Aesthetics.

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