

Rebecca Perry*¹

*Lawrence University, United States of America

¹rebecca.a.perry@lawrence.edu

Vanishing S Themes: Recapitulatory Truncation in Prokofiev's Early Instrumental Concertos

ABSTRACT

Prokofiev's sonata expositions often proceed in seemingly formulaic accordance with eighteenth-century models, leading most commentators to dismiss his formal process as unimaginative and unfit for close scrutiny. While these views are in step with the largely exposition-focused nature of the *New Formenlehre's* conceptualization of sonata form, they give short shrift to Prokofiev's often unpredictable treatments of post-expositional material, overlooking the manner in which his development and recapitulation sections often swerve wildly from the expected *Anlage*. This paper investigates one of Prokofiev's strategies for creative recalibration of the development and recapitulation, namely the post-expositional erasure of all references to the secondary theme. I probe the structural and hermeneutic effects of this strategy in the first movement of his Piano Concerto No. 2 (1913) and third movement of his Violin Concerto No. 1 (1917).

While the strategy of truncating the recapitulation through omission of the secondary theme had a number of precedents in European sonata practice, Prokofiev at times took this practice to extremes, eliminating the secondary theme from all-post-expositional space and thus obscuring the thematic layout to the point of structural ambiguity. The analyses featured here will be shown to have larger theoretical implications, pointing up the need for more contextually and historically sensitive adaptations of the *New Formenlehre* that customize Hepokoski and Darcy's notion of 'norm' and 'deformation' for the analysis of early twentieth-century sonata repertoires.

1. INTRODUCTION

Creative reworkings of the recapitulation — from the witty thematic manipulations of Haydn to the telescoped returns of Brahms and Bruckner — have a long history in Western common-practice-period sonata practice. In the early twentieth century, Prokofiev extended and elaborated upon this tradition through his practice of omitting large swaths of prominent expositional material from the recapitulation, particularly the S theme. While this strategy of recapitulatory truncation through erasure of S had various precedents in European sonata practice, Prokofiev at times took this practice to extremes, omitting the S theme from all post-expositional space, including the development, and thus obscuring many of his formal layouts to the point of ambiguity. I will draw upon the first movement of Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 2 from 1912–13 as one particularly striking instance of the deep structural and hermeneutic ramifications of this practice. This analysis will be shown to have larger theoretical implications for the analysis of twentieth-century sonata forms generally, pointing up the need for more contextually and historically sensitive adaptations of the *New Formenlehre* that customize definitions of 'norm' and 'deviation' — or 'deformation', in Hepokoski and Darcy's terminology — for the historical moment and repertory at hand.

First, I want to mention a relatively straightforward instance of recapitulatory truncation from Prokofiev's early works to serve as a baseline against which to compare the more extreme, form-obfuscating examples that I will discuss in a moment.

The energetic G-minor fourth movement of Prokofiev's Second Piano Concerto (1912) features a generically unproblematic exposition and development that are followed by an abbreviated recapitulation that omits all references to the S theme. This truncated recapitulation comprises only 42 of the movement's 317 measures (roughly 13%). Its frenzied cobbling together of P- and C-theme fragments behaves more like a coda, serving up a dizzying collage of expositional bits and pieces rather than an ordered presentation of expected themes. The recapitulation's brevity and thematic incoherence relative to the exposition generates a sense of disorienting disproportion and imbalance for the listener.

This practice was in keeping with a tradition of recapitulatory shortening in Austro-German chamber and symphonic music of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A number of string quartets of Haydn; dramatic overtures by Mozart, Beethoven, and Weber; symphonic slow movements of Brahms; and programmatic works by Liszt and Strauss omit the S theme from the recapitulation. This practice became markedly more pervasive in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as in Bruckner's symphonic finales, Bartók's string quartets, works by Debussy and Ravel, and Schoenberg's *Klavierstücke*, particularly Op. 33a.

This could be said to be in step with a larger ethos of innovation and aversion to repetition among *fin-de-siècle* composers. Mahler was vocal about his antipathy for repetition: in a 1900 critique of Schubert, he wrote that 'he repeats himself so much that you could cut out half the piece without doing it any harm. For each repetition is already a lie. A work of art must evolve perpetually, like life' (Bauer-Lechner 1980, 147). Schoenberg was famously averse to repetition as well, instructing his students to 'never do what a copyist can do' (Leibowitz 1979, 59). Though less dogmatic in his rhetoric, Bartók also avoided direct repetition: 'I do not like to repeat a musical thought identically and [...] I never bring back a single detail exactly as it was the first time' (Dille 1937, 3–6).

It is thus apparent that Prokofiev was not pulling this practice out of the ether but rather working against a backdrop of rich historical precedents. He at times carried the practice to extremes, however, by omitting the S theme not only from the recapitulation but even from the development, wreaking structural havoc and rendering formal layouts ambiguous.

2. VANISHING S THEMES

In the opening movement of his Second Piano Concerto, a thematically normative exposition comprised of clearly demarcated P and S themes is followed by a P-dominated de-

velopment and a drastically truncated recapitulation that hushes to a halt after a mere 12 measures of embryonic P-theme fragments. The development and recapitulation are strangely devoid of even the faintest reference to the S theme. In the analysis that follows, I will argue that this unusual thematic strategy — mirrored also in the third movement of his First Violin Concerto — simultaneously diminishes and magnifies the role of the S theme, creating on one hand a sense of overwhelming P-theme hegemony by expunging the S theme completely while, on the other hand casting the S theme into relief as a novelty, an expositional one-off, a formal hapax legomenon that appears once and then vanishes, drawing attention to itself by the sheer void it leaves in the large formal divisions that follow.

Following a two-bar descending motive in octaves that serves as an introduction, the G-minor P theme commences in the piano over an ostinato triplet accompaniment in the left hand. The broad, weighty character of the melody, in addition to the modal flavour invoked by the open fourths and fifths in the accompaniment, creates an atmosphere of raw primitivism, stripped of such Western-common-practice accoutrements as the 3rd and 7th scale degrees. A P1.2 theme taken up by the solo piano at m. 13 continues the serious character of the former theme; a chromatically ascending transition then connects the end of P space to the beginning of the A-minor S theme in m. 45. Piquant and highly chromatic, the S theme blends staccato and legato articulations in a quirky, off-balance parade of ‘wrong notes’ and unexpected harmonic turns. Oddly unstable for an S theme, it repeats itself several times at different pitch levels: first in A minor, then in D minor, then in D \flat major, then back in D minor. C space then serves as a bridge to the beginning of the development at m. 113.

The development begins unusually as a massive cadenza for solo piano, starting with a repetition of the P theme in its tonic G minor that corresponds nearly bar-for-bar with P’s initial expositional sounding. The writing becomes decidedly more classically ‘development-like’ in m. 133, fragmenting and sequencing bits of the P theme and bursting forth with impassioned romantic gestures, virtuosic scalar figuration, and passages of full-textured *fff* bravura. Tension continues to build with a massive arpeggiated repeat of P1.2, culminating with a powerful return of the introduction in the orchestra beneath arpeggiated figuration in the piano. This reiteration of the introduction acts as a retransition prior to the commencement of the recapitulation in m. 189.

The beginning of the recapitulation is signalled by a drastic thinning of texture, lowering of dynamics, and shift in mood at m. 189. A return to the triplet ostinato accompaniment ushers in the return of the P theme in m. 191. What appears to be the beginning of a full restatement of P, however, devolves into repeating echo-fragments of only P’s first few bars. The recapitulation is thus not a normative restatement of P but a fragmented memory, a rumination on the opening strains of P — over echoes of the introduction in the orchestra. Both themes trail off in m. 198, and the movement comes to a *pianissimo* close in m. 200.

This severely shortened recapitulation comprises only 12 of the movement’s 200 measures, causing one to ask whether it may even be considered a recapitulation at all. Is this simply a recapitulation with a severely docked tail? Or is it possible that the strongly deformational ending might cause us to retroac-

tively view the form as not a sonata at all but something closer to a ternary form with a brief coda tacked on at the end? By this logic, the primary theme space would constitute an initial large A section, the secondary theme space a contrasting B section, and the lengthy P-dominated cadenza the closing A’ section — with a brief coda based on fragments of the opening theme. This argument has much to commend it: the failure of the secondary theme to repeat at any point following its initial sounding, in addition to the P-obsessed section that follows, does seem to strongly suggest a tripartite structure. And the abnormally brief, fragmented nature of the material commencing at m. 189 does perhaps seem better described as a coda than as a recapitulation in the traditional sense.

However, there are several arguments that may be made against this ternary reading. For one thing, using a ternary form as the first movement of a concerto would be highly unusual in the sonata genre. While Prokofiev was demonstrably imaginative in his approach to traditional forms — and in fact derived great pleasure from defying certain norms —, a ternary opening movement is unprecedented even in his own unconventional oeuvre.

In addition to be generically improbable, a ternary reading ignores much of the traditional sonata rhetoric that Prokofiev employs in the early parts of the movement. The primary and secondary themes are clearly demarcated — with a medial caesura effect between them —, tonally and expressively contrasting, and possessed by many of the typical markers of the traditional P and S theme. In addition, thought it would admittedly be unorthodox for a concerto-movement development to begin as a massive instrumental cadenza, the shift into *fortspinnung*-type rhetoric in m. 133 inclines one away from a ternary toward a sonata interpretation.

3. LOOSE ENDS

Thus, while the trappings of sonata form perhaps outweigh any ternary overtones, it is nonetheless an unusual, perhaps even aborted sonata form, one that abandons ship at the close of the development and replaces the recapitulation with what more closely resembles a P-derived coda.

This has a profound expressive impact, rendering the role of the S theme particularly complex in the form as a whole. On one hand, the S theme’s omission from all post-expositional space minimizes its role in the sonata. The P theme’s unrelenting domination in both the development and recapitulation causes the S theme to seem like an aberration, an expositional anomaly, something that does not really belong in or play an important function in the sonata. It is significant to note here that we are not dealing with the disappearance of just any expositional material. Very often sonata movements from the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by such composers as Haydn, Mendelssohn, Chopin and others, abbreviated the recapitulation by greatly shortening or omitting the P theme. But there is arguably more at stake with the omission of the S theme, since for many theories of sonata form, the burden of the sonata principle is on the secondary theme, the entire goal of the sonata being the tonic recapitulation of material originally sounded outside the tonic. For Hepokoski, the S theme — along with C — constitutes the exposition’s ‘definitional second half, the very portion that, through tonal resolution [in the recapitulation], is supposed to define what we imagine a sonata form to be’ (Hepokoski 2010, 76). Thus, what is expected to

play a central, irreplaceable role in the sonata disappears after Act I.

We might here invoke an analogue from film history that illustrates the expressive and hermeneutic effect of this kind of unexpected truncation. Audiences came to theaters to see Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 thriller *Psycho* with the expectation that Janet Leigh, a beloved Hollywood icon of the 1940s and 50s, would be the protagonist around which the film's suspense and drama circulated. It came as a tremendous shock to audiences when Janet Leigh was brutally murdered in the shower scene a third of the way through the film, just as the plot is gaining momentum. After the opening scenes, the audience was gearing up for a story about a robbery, but when Janet Leigh is expunged from the plot after such a brief appearance on screen, the audience is understandably shaken.

In the abstract, this is very much the same kind of subversion of expectations that is at work in the concerto: when an entity is expected to play a central role through a work, it is a shock when it disappears, never to come back. Granted, the shock dawns on us more slowly in the concerto — the S theme is not murdered; we do not know that we will never see it again. But the question begins to nag during the development and recapitulation: where is the S theme? It becomes a looming presence, just as the murdered Janet Leigh continues to maintain a sort of eerie presence in the film as investigation of her disappearance overtakes the film's plot. The disappearance of the prematurely expunged S theme lingers in the listener's mind as the sonata unfolds without mentioning it. It becomes an elephant in the sonata room: as the development rolls along, where is S? When the recapitulation suddenly comes to an unexpectedly abrupt stop after twelve measures, where is S? It is as if S's disappearance, in a context in which it is expected to play a starring role, almost brings more attention to it than if it had proceeded as normal, setting it into relief as something isolated and different, a mysterious self-contained episode in the exposition that does not again recur. Its absence becomes an unconventional but oddly effective way of placing emphasis on it: rather than serving as the triumphant or tonally satisfying resolution that the sonata builds toward in the recapitulation, it is set up as a curiosity, a non sequitur, an expositional one-off that vanishes unexpectedly, leaving a host of unanswered questions in its wake.

This practice appears in other of Prokofiev's works. In the third movement of his First Violin Concerto, the omission of the S theme from the development and recapitulation has even more profound structural ramifications than in the first movement of the Second Piano Concerto. This is partly due to the fact that the Violin Concerto finale contains a number of structural idiosyncrasies — such as: 1) the reappearance of P in the tonic key immediately after the S theme;{ and 2) the simultaneous, superimposed recapitulation of the finale's P theme and the first movement's P theme at the movement's close — that are amplified by the failure of the S theme to appear at any point after its initial sounding the exposition. This omission of S becomes a straw that breaks the sonata's back, rendering any definitive formal interpretation difficult indeed.

4. CONCLUSION

These examples give us an opportunity to recalibrate the way we conceptualize the role of the recapitulation in sonata

forms of this period. Recapitulatory reworking and truncation had become common enough in sonata forms leading up to Prokofiev's years in St. Petersburg that they should not be considered deformations but are rather norms in their own right, with more extreme cases like the first movement of Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 2 being the exception. Written more than a century after most of the Viennese classical works these terms were coined to describe, the sonata-form movements of Prokofiev should be evaluated against an adjusted understanding of norm and deformation that situates his works in relation to sibling works within his own corpus and other works from within his larger historical and aesthetic milieu.

KEYWORDS

Sonata Form, Prokofiev, Recapitulation, Truncation.

REFERENCES

- Bauer-Lechner, Natalie, 1980. *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, trans. Dika Newlin, ed. Peter Franklin. London: Faber & Faber.
- Dille, Denijs, 1937. 'Interview with Bela Bartók', *La sirène* 1/1: 3–6.
- Hepokoski, James, and Darcy, Warren, 2006. *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hepokoski, James, Caplin, William, and Webster, James, 2010. *Musical Form, Forms and Formenlehre: Three Methodological Reflections*, ed. Pieter Bergé. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Leibowitz, René, 1979. *Schoenberg and His School: The Contemporary Stage of the Language of Music*, trans. Dika Newlin. New York (NY): Da Capo Press.