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A Theory of Tonal Alterations in Sonata Recapitulations

ABSTRACT

Background

Despite differences in critical alignment, studies of sonata-like structures tend to share one feature in common: they devote the least amount of time to recapitulations. Two theoretical presuppositions may explain this neglect: first, that the recapitulation is an exact (or near-exact) thematic restatement of the exposition, and second, that one obligatory tonal alteration is all that is needed to make a tonic-recapitulating sonata conclude in the key in which it began. This paper complexifies the second of these presuppositions in hopes of painting a more complete, and analytically adequate, picture of the ways tonal alterations are made in practice.

I begin with some brief remarks about the position tonal alterations occupy in current theoretical discourse. I then identify six compositional strategies for making tonal alterations, and consider an example of each from the piano music of Schubert. The examples move from less to more involved — from the concealment of tonal alterations on one end to, on the other, their highlighting as actors in a tonal drama. My conclusions address the role tonal alterations may have played in the reception histories of individual movements and composers.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

Because they are large-scale repetitions of musical paths already plotted, recapitulations are most often presented as *mere* repetitions, with one obligatory tonal alteration occurring somewhere in the recapitulatory transition. Charles Rosen's description is paradigmatic (1988, 2): 'The *recapitulation*', he writes, 'starts with the return of the first theme in the tonic. The rest of this section 'recapitulates' the exposition as it was first played, except that the second group and closing theme appear in the tonic, with the bridge passage *suitably altered* so that it no longer leads to the dominant but prepares what follows in the tonic'.

But how much is hiding in the modifier 'suitably altered' rendered in bold above? What complexities of recapitulatory practice, and what opportunities for interpretation, lie dormant beneath its explanatory power? It is true: one 'suitable' tonal alteration is all that is necessary to bring most sonata recapitulations back to their tonic keys and thus satisfy their main tonal 'task'. But to stop there is to refuse to engage the range of possibilities available for making those alterations in practice.

In this paper, I use the recapitulations of DD. 157, 557, 958, 959, and 960 as lenses through which to view the range of strategies employed by common-practice composers to enact a sonata's obligatory tonal adjustment. Along the way, I mention further pieces by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Rossini, and Brahms.

Methods

My approach to the analysis of musical form is informed by the taxonomic and narrative style of Hepokoski and Darcy. As mentioned, I identify six possible strategies for making tonal alterations and describe their effects on the recapitulation in musico-dramatic terms. The six tonal-alterations strategies are: 1) alterations in silence; 2) immediate alterations; 3) thick alterations; 4) multiple alterations; 5) impotent alterations; and 6) self-effacing alterations. The following six paragraphs give brief descriptions of the strategies and adduce an example of a piece in which they may be found, and sketch some interpretative possibilities.

Some recapitulations make their tonal alterations *in silence*. In this relatively common approach, every musical parameter, thematic and tonal, is preserved from the onset of the recapitulatory primary theme to the medial caesura, and again from the onset of the second theme to the end of the recapitulation. The tonal alterations happen in the silence of the MC gap. The Finale of Schubert's Piano Sonata D. 557 offers a textbook example. By enacting their obligatory tonal alterations in silence, such pieces conceal the one piece of tonal labor that every on-tonic recapitulation must make. The alterations are hidden from view by prestidigitation, composerly guile, or the logic of commodity form. They erase the traces of their manufacture; they refuse to show how the adjustment is negotiated. And they have sometimes suggested a lack of compositional effort or imagination — especially, but not only when they are composed by Schubert.

Another common strategy involves making an *immediate* tonal shift at some point in an ongoing recapitulation. Though still relatively 'uninvolved', such a strategy is nevertheless qualitatively different than the last, since the alterations here, if 'immediate', are nevertheless audible. The finale of Schubert's late A-Major Piano Sonata D. 959, houses a familiar example. By virtue of their immediacy, such alterations can suggest uninvolvement, an easy solution (on the part of the composer) or an easy traversal of musical space (on the part of the virtual protagonist or wanderer).

Still, tonal alterations need not be dispatched with so quickly as they are in alterations in silence and immediate alterations; often, they exhibit temporal thickness. In *thick alterations*, a recapitulatory passage is tonally mobile where the exposition was static, static where the exposition was mobile, or otherwise different than its referential tonal layout for some time, while nevertheless tracking its thematic layout exactly. An excellent example of thick alterations is found in mm. 170–181 of the first movement of Schubert's first Piano Sonata D. 157 (cf. mm. 23–34). These are not the economical and effective 'immediate' alterations we heard in the A-Major Sonata. Thick alterations suggest, by contrast, an amount of 'labor' to be performed by a composer or a virtual protagonist. In D. 157 the thick alterations are successful in bringing about the tonal crux;

we will perhaps be inclined to hear a narrative protagonist as being successful in her or his performance of a virtual task.

Felicitous about D. 157 is that it also illustrates another alterations-strategy, this one involving making *multiple* discrete sets of tonal alterations severally (see mm. 16–170; cf. mm. 15–23). In such cases an initial set of tonal alterations proves incapable on its own of bringing about a tonal resolution. For whatever reason this provisional set 'defers its duty', conscripting later sets to help it in accomplishing a movement's tonal task. Later sets are then charged with the task of completing or correcting an earlier, tonal misstep. However we choose to characterize the behavior, what is important is that 'multiple alterations' suggests error and subsequent correction: later alterations must be deployed to correct an inadequate initial alteration that moves to a 'wrong key'. (It seems to me astonishing that music theory has focused so intensely on the notion of the recapitulatory 'wrong key' without identifying its condition in this behavior.) If later alterations move closer to tonic, the effect can be one of chipping away at a task, of teamwork, or even of the lack of a plan or the ability to carry it out. Later alterations can accrue a sense of the correctional or even salvational if they succeed in carrying out what a sonata presents as a difficult task.

Impotent alterations are thick alterations that set out to achieve a sonata's tonal adjustment but, for whatever reason, cannot, and result ultimately in no change in tonal level. Such passages suggest inability, as if they *ought* to have brought about the obligatory tonal shift. A straightforward example of impotent alterations is found in the first movement of Schubert's late C minor Sonata D. 958 (see mm. 162–170). Tonal alterations like these stage inability — they thematize their impotence. And note well: because of this impotence, movements like this one must perform at least one further set of tonal alterations, down the line. Impotent alterations *eo ipso* lead to multiple alterations; they demand correction via the application of further work.

Self-effacing alterations come to a similar end via multiple — not thick — alterations. In this strategy a later alteration — instead of correcting the work done by an initial one — erases that work by returning to the tonal level that had preceded it. This radical corrective behavior suggests an irreparable error in judgment; seeing no other way forward, the only way to proceed is first to nullify the effect of an earlier alteration. 'Self-effacing alterations' suggests either the illusion of work performed, or the revocation of such work: a protagonist imagines tonal motion towards a goal, only to discover this motion was illusory; or she or he succeeds in carrying out some of the required tonal task, only to have this achievement pulled away by forces outside her or his control. Adding to the amount of work to be performed: any pair of self-effacing alterations calls for a *third* tonal alteration, down the line. The alterations in the opening movement of Schubert's last Piano Sonata D. 960, are exemplary. Here, a first set of alterations (mm. 235–244) moves to A major, thus performing part but not all of the piece's tonal adjustment. A second set of tonal alterations, however, at mm. 252–256, nullifies them, choosing instead to move back to the global tonic B-flat major and forcing a third set of alterations. In so doing, these self-effacing alterations tie beautifully into the narrative of lostness that this movement has projected to so many listeners. The characteristic Schubertian wanderer, always advancing, nevertheless gets nowhere.

Implications

My study shows that though tonal alterations be 'obligatory', they are not for that reason deployed by composers *pro forma*. Indeed, Schubert and others composed them in sophisticated and dramatically appropriate ways. (The *alterations in silence* of the finale of D. 557, for instance, is appropriate to its evocation of musical 'mechanism'. The *self-effacing* alterations of the first movement of D. 960 beautifully project the feelings of lostness and the expense of effort so often heard therein.) Tonal alterations play an important role in the recapitulatory tonal drama. If we have been tempted to gloss over them, attributing to them an obligatory tonal function and nothing more — 'the mundane dictates of tonal machinery', in Deborah Kessler's phrase — this may be because the vast and fascinating range of strategies for making alterations has not yet been sufficiently excavated.

Keywords

Form, Recapitulations, Sonata Theory, Schubert, Interpretation.

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