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Form, Syntax and the Problem of Late Style in Mendelssohn's Op. 80 String Quartet

ABSTRACT

Background

The paper contributes to three areas of research. Its Mendelssohnian focus relates to the discourse on Mendelssohn's sonata forms that includes Dahlhaus (1974), Krummacker (1974), Vitercik (1989), Taylor (2011), Schmalfeldt (2011) and Wingfield and Horton (2012). The analysis' theoretical context invokes recent attempts to theorise Romantic and post-Romantic sonata form, primarily applications of sonata deformation theory understanding the form in the aftermath of its reification after 1800 (Hepokoski 2012; Monahan 2011), and attempts to conceptualise nineteenth-century formal functions stimulated by William Caplin's theory of classical syntax (Caplin 1998 and 2013; Schmalfeldt 2011; Vande Moortele 2009, 2013, 2014 and 2017; Martin and Vande Moortele 2014; Horton 2011 and 2016). Finally, its focus on Mendelssohn's last major instrument work brings this literature into dialogue with recent debates about late style, notably in the music of Beethoven (Chua 1995; Spitzer 2006), Schubert (Byrne Bodley and Horton 2016) and Brahms (Notley 2007).

Aims and Repertoire Studied

This paper presents an analysis of the first movement of Mendelssohn's String Quartet in F minor Op. 80, formulated as a case study of the problems that early nineteenth-century sonata forms pose for *Formenlehre* and that Mendelssohn's last music poses for our concept of late style. Op. 80 constitutes fertile territory for exploring these issues. Completed within two months of Mendelssohn's death on 4th November 1847, its expressive terseness has been variously interpreted as a response to his sister Fanny's passing in May of that year, as an elegy for *Biedermeier* culture on the eve of the year of revolutions (Knepler 1961), as a new stylistic path or a nascent late style (Todd 2003; Krummacker 1984). Despite his pivotal role in mediating classical form and post-classical style, the extent of Mendelssohn's syntactic experimentation and its formal implications has received only sporadic attention. And although his last works raise important questions about late style, the idea of 'late' Mendelssohn awaits sustained analytical attention. I explore these issues via close reading of the first movement's manifold formal and syntactic ambiguities. The movement employs a variety of strikingly post-classical devices, including functional transformation ('becoming' as conceived in Schmalfeldt 2011), structural non-congruence (especially the non-alignment of subordinate-theme function and bass progression) and the failure to establish normative cadential goals (Hepokoski and Darcy 2006). The treatment of subordinate-theme and clos-

ing-section functions is especially evasive. In the exposition, the subordinate theme begins over V/III, and this dominant is never adequately resolved, being replaced by a passage of closing-section rhetoric in the aftermath of an interrupted cadence. This section, in turn, flows into the development without structural articulation, reflecting the overture variant of sonata form explored in Vande Moortele (2017), referenced in Hepokoski's notion of the 'Brahmsian deformation' (1993). The movement's subsequent trajectory addresses the fundamental problem of how to articulate recapitulation function in the absence of expositional closure. These tactics raise crucial questions about the way Romantic syntax compels changes in sonata strategy, as well as prompting investigation of their meaning, mindful of Op. 80's position in Mendelssohn's oeuvre.

Methods

The paper explores these issues by mobilizing concepts of parametric non-congruence, syntactic proliferation and cadential deferral developed for the analysis of Romantic syntax in Horton (2011; 2016 and 2017), drawing additionally on the survey of Mendelssohn's sonata practice undertaken in Horton and Wingfield (2012), and on concepts advanced in relation to Mendelssohn's music in Schmalfeldt (2011). It relates these features to ideas of lateness as stylistic self-critique, as proposed in Adorno (2002), and further in Chua (1995) and Spitzer (2006).

Implications

I argue that Op. 80's first movement expresses lateness through an extreme, self-critical distillation of principles that inform Mendelssohn's music as far back as the Octet of 1825. Drawing on Hepokoski and Darcy's consideration of minor-mode sonatas and sonata process failure (2006), I locate the work's 'tragic' expressive stance in a dialogue between rhetoric, form-functional dislocation and the dismantling of the cadential trajectories underpinning the high-classical sonata. At the same time, the movement's lateness is evident neither in its tragic affect, nor in its syntactic departures from classical style, all of which are readily apparent in Mendelssohn's earlier works (the first movement of the Trio Op. 66, for example), but in the extremity of their application. Mendelssohn in effect pushes his established sonata style to the limits of its functional applicability, generating expression from the critical strain that this style is made to endure. The analysis consequently has implications for the interpretation of Mendelssohn's sonata-type music, for the understanding of late style as an aesthetic and analytical category, and for the theory and analysis of Romantic form in general.

Keywords

Form, Mendelssohn, Formal Grammars, Music Aesthetics.

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