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The Minor-Mode Rondo Finale as Expressive Subgenre

ABSTRACT

Background

Classical rondo finales are often viewed as more straightforward than finales in Type 3 sonata form. James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy describe the rondo as ‘an expressive world that is more elemental, rustic, direct, or folk like — more fundamentally natural or stable — than was that of the first movement’ (Hepokoski and Darcy 2006, 334). Major-mode rondo finales tend to be tuneful and repetitive structures that bask in the major tonic. For minor-mode finales, however, the stakes are much higher: how do we reconcile this natural, rustic, or simple form with the eighteenth-century belief that the minor mode was artificial in nature, always striving towards the major mode? Indeed, finale movements determine whether the piece as a whole will end in tragic minor or convert to triumphant major, a choice that Hepokoski and Darcy refer to as the ‘extra burden’ of minor-mode sonatas (Hepokoski and Darcy 2006, 306). As a result of this inherent modal conflict, minor-mode rondo finales differ greatly from their major-mode counterparts in many regards, including overall harmonic plan, rhetorical strategies, and formal construction. In this paper, I examine the structural and expressive characteristics of three nineteenth-century minor-mode rondo finales by Beethoven, Brahms, and Clara Schumann, focusing on the tonal, formal, and affective trajectories that can lead to drastically different minor-mode and major-mode conclusions.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

Minor-mode rondo finales were quite rare in the eighteenth-century repertoire, even as their major-mode counterparts became the default finale form of the time. Mozart wrote only three minor-mode rondo finales, and only a single, formally dubious example exists by Haydn. Instead, these composers concluded their minor-mode works in one of two primary ways: either with a major-mode rondo form, or with a major- or minor- mode Type 3 sonata form. The minor-mode rondo finale only fully emerged in Beethoven’s corpus. It continued to develop throughout the nineteenth century, even as the use of rondo forms declined on the whole.

This paper considers three nineteenth-century minor-mode rondo finales in detail: Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in C Minor Op. 13; Clara Schumann’s Piano Concerto in A Minor; and Brahms’s Piano Sonata in F Minor Op. 5. These three examples demonstrate the variety of modal trajectories that are possible for minor-mode rondo movements.

Methods

My analyses build upon Hepokoski and Darcy’s characterization of minor-mode pieces as striving to reach major, a process that they describe as being mediated by sonata norms.

In a multi-movement piece’s finale, this is heightened as a result of its obligation to close the entire work. How does this modal narrative interact with the unique formal aspects of rondo and sonata-rondo form? The intersection of this modal narrative with essential closure is in fact more complex for rondos than for Type 3 sonatas. In a typical sonata-form movement, the S theme bears sole responsibility for essential closure, leading directly to the coda after achieving a PAC in tonic. In sonata-rondo form, however, the refrain is required to return for a final iteration after the recapitulation. As such, Hepokoski and Darcy hypothesize that two points of essential closure occur in a sonata-rondo. This means that if the refrain of a minor-mode rondo returns unaltered — meaning in the minor key — it can undo the modal shift created by a major-mode subordinate theme episode in the recapitulation. My analyses demonstrate that either or both of these points of closure are often attenuated or missing in the nineteenth-century rondo finale, in which the sections are often much less independent than in its eighteenth-century counterparts. As a result, many combinations of cadential, formal, and modal patterns are available.

How can we account for the important differences between major-mode and minor-mode rondo finales? Matthew Riley offers a model in his recent book *The Viennese Minor-Key Symphony in the Age of Haydn and Mozart* (2014). He suggests that minor-mode symphonies in the eighteenth century, although relatively rare, merit being considered as their own analytic category, or *expressive subgenre*. The minor-mode symphony, he says, often deploys a variety of compositional techniques not typically present in major mode pieces, including driving rhythms, syncopations, dramatic pauses, and Baroque gestures such as imitative textures and fast moving bass lines. Even more importantly for the present study, he suggests that minor-mode pieces are more likely than their major-mode counterparts to feature deformational characteristics, defined according to Sonata Theory. Riley asserts that the minor-mode subgenre dissolved in the 1790s, as minor-mode pieces became less rare in the repertoire. I will suggest, however, that because the minor-mode rondo emerged later than the minor-mode sonata form, it holds onto subgenre status well into the nineteenth century. Minor-mode rondos of the Romantic period continue to feature unique formal deformations, and further, many of these deformations can be directly attributed to modal interplay.

Implications

In this study, I demonstrate that many of the structural and expressive characteristics unique to the minor-mode rondo finale arise due to tension between the home key and its parallel major, which can simultaneously and paradoxically play both a redemptive and a destructive role in a rondo-form finale movement. Additionally, I show that the parallel major can

emerge in a much wider array of formal locations in rondo finales than it can in sonata form movements, with widely varying harmonic and affective implications. Finally, I assert that although rondo form as a whole declined in importance in the nineteenth century, the minor-mode subgenre emerged in the works of Beethoven and continued to evolve in the Romantic finale, making it a uniquely nineteenth-century expression of the form.

Keywords

Form, Minor Mode, Rondo Form, Beethoven, Clara Schumann, Brahms.

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