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‘Non-Viennese’ Sonata Form: François-Adrien Boïeldieu and the French Classicism

ABSTRACT

Background

At the end of the eighteenth century, Paris became one of the most sought-after cultural destinations for musicians and composers from all over Europe and, thanks to the activity of its innovative Conservatoire, assumed a central role in the development of instrumental music. This led me to examine the French piano repertoire, particularly the solo piano sonatas of François Adrien Boïeldieu (1775–1834). Along with Luis Adam, Henry Rigel, Hélène de Montgeroult, and Etienne Nicolas Méhul, Boïeldieu was one of the most important representatives of the newborn French piano school, which brought the piano and its performers/composers to the height of success influencing contemporary European trends and all subsequent generations. This research explores François-Adrien Boïeldieu’s particular treatment of the sonata form. The choice of an analytical approach stemmed, on the one hand, from the intention to fill a still evident gap in the scholarship on this topic. The literature on French music at the turn of the nineteenth century, in fact, mainly provides a framework for a historiography of musical life in France (Mongrédién 1987; Bongrain and Poirier 1999) and a stylistic orientation of the piano repertoire (De Place 1986; Favre 1953) but fails to account for the specific features of sonata form in Boïeldieu and his contemporary group of composers. On the other hand, the analysis will enable the understanding of the author’s compositional techniques and therefore to establish points of contact and divergence between Boïeldieu’s works with the classical Viennese repertoire that inevitably forms the theoretical and stylistic paradigm of reference.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

The main objective of this research is to explore François-Adrien Boïeldieu’s treatment of sonata form in the first movements of his piano sonatas in relation to the classical Viennese repertoire. Mainly known for his theatrical activity as the author of the famous *La Dame Blanche*, Boïeldieu, in the early years of his career as a musician, composer and teacher at the Conservatoire, was also a prolific writer of piano music of all kinds. The *corpus* of his solo piano sonatas consists of nine works in three collections and a single separate work all published in Paris between 1795 and 1802. The individual sonata cycles are mainly divided into two movements (in the same key) the first of which is in a sonata form while the second is a rondo. There are only four sonatas in three movements (Sonata Op. 1 No. 1, Sonatas Op. 2 No. 2 and No. 3 and Sonata Op. 4 No. 2) only two of which, however, follow the more traditional model with a central Adagio, extremely popular during the classical period. In this contribution, I will focus

only on the first movements of Op. 1 No. 1 and No. 3. Although these pieces come from Boïeldieu’s first collection, the main features of the author’s compositional technique are already clearly recognizable, making the Op. 1 a perfect case for the purpose of this research.

Methods

My analysis favors a formal approach essentially based on the principles and typological categories presented in William Caplin’s theory of the formal functions for Viennese classical music. Although this theoretical system is so solidly reflected in the works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, Boïeldieu’s compositional features often diverge from the Viennese paradigm or are ascribable to what Caplin classifies as anomalous or exceptional. Therefore, the Caplanian theory of the formal function was adopted not to merely prove that, aside from the works of the three great Viennese masters, many of the features designed as normative are substantially inapplicable, but rather as to implicitly compare the Boïeldieu’s piano sonatas with the Viennese repertoire.

Implications

The main result of my analysis is the identification of two constant features of Boïeldieu’s approach to sonata form. First, the usual organization of the exposition is reversed: the second theme presents a ‘tight-knit’ periodic form in a cantabile guise, while the first tends towards a ‘looser’ structure missing a strongly profiled thematic content. As a result, the internal dialectic between the two thematic areas of the exposition is primarily rooted in the theme and no longer in the key. The formal structure, then, acquires an almost pioneering character as a forerunner of romantic trends in composition traceable for example in Carl Maria von Weber’s Sonata Op. 70 No. 4 in E minor (1822) and Frédéric Chopin’s later Sonata Op. 35 No. 2 in B-flat minor (1839). The second feature concerns the development section, which is conceived as a discrete block that has no thematic-motivic elaboration and, as in Op. 1 No. 3, that even displays the insertion of a new theme, in the wave of the well-known, although not unique case of the theme in D major in the development section of Joseph Haydn’s ‘Farewell’ Symphony No. 45 in F-sharp minor (1772). As the analysis proves, these seemingly syntactical and formal anomalies stem from a different compositional logic, i.e. the idea of a sonata form based on the principle of the juxtaposition of blocks which, at a spatial level, leads to a paratactic structure, and at a temporal level opposes the teleologically oriented drive inherent in Viennese sonata form. Furthermore, the result of my investigation could enable a more holistic knowledge not only of this central repertoire albeit rather unknown, but also of the Viennese classicism *tout court*. In fact, both the ‘tightly knit’ structure of the second theme and the presence of a new theme

in the development section correspond to what classic paradigm defines as exceptional, presenting the possibility that the origins of some of these irregularities can be found in the French repertoire.

Keywords

Form, Instrumental Music, France, Classicism.

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