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Re-examining the Loosely-Knit Subordinate Theme in the Classical Style: A Phrase Rhythmic Approach

ABSTRACT

Background

In his book *Classical Form: A Theory of Formal Functions for the Instrumental Music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven* (1998), William Caplin describes the subordinate theme as more loosely organized in comparison to the tight-knit main theme. Caplin acknowledges that this is not his original idea; rather, he is building on the theory of Arnold Schoenberg and Erwin Ratz. Caplin believes that by adopting Schoenberg's and Ratz's view on the subordinate theme, his theory can then embrace a wider variety of musical parameters other than just tonality and harmony. In his book, Caplin proposes seven criteria to classify whether a musical passage is more tight-knit or loosely-knit, and these criteria include tonality, harmony, cadence, grouping structure, functional efficiency, motivic material, and thematic conventionality. Based on these criteria, Caplin illustrates many loosening techniques that can be commonly found in the subordinate theme of the Classical style in Chapter 8 of his book. However, a very important musical parameter, namely rhythm and meter, is not recognized by Caplin as one of the possible criteria to contribute to the looseness of the subordinate theme. Therefore, it is my goal for this paper to investigate how rhythm and meter, particularly phrase rhythm, can contribute to the loose organization of the subordinate theme in the Classical style.

Phrase rhythm, as defined by William Rothstein (1989), is the musical phenomenon that embraces both phrase structure and hypermeter. Therefore, phrase rhythm is somewhat related to Caplin's fourth criterion of grouping structure, but now with an additional metrical awareness. In several recent studies of musical form, music theorists have suggested that phrase rhythm indeed holds an important role in the articulation of formal structures in sonata movements. David Temperley (2003) observes that a particular type of phrase rhythm, the less common end-accented phrase, is especially prominent in the closing themes of sonata movements. Temperley points out that a closing theme usually begins immediately after the arrival of a strong authentic cadence on a hypermetrical downbeat, the phrase structure is then lagging slightly behind the hypermeter with its end coinciding with the next hypermetrical downbeat, thus creating the typical end-accented phrase structure in this part of the musical form.

In his other study on hypermeter, Temperley (2008) investigates the phenomenon of hypermetrical shift in common-practice music. Due to changes in different musical elements such as harmony and phrase structure, the hypermetrical downbeats of a piece of music would often shift from odd measure to even measure, or vice versa. Temperley identifies these shifts and categorizes them into two different types:

sudden shift and gradual shift. In a sudden shift, one hypermetrical downbeat moves abruptly to another hypermetrical downbeat through the process of metrical reinterpretation or successive downbeat; whereas in a gradual shift, there is a smooth and usually longer span of transitional materials between the two hypermetrical downbeats. Such shifts between odd-strong and even-strong hypermeter are often utilized in emphasizing the formal division between different sections of a piece, and so Temperley suggests that 'hypermeter can play an important role in articulating the form of a piece, and in conveying a trajectory of tension and stability' (305).

Based on the analytical tools developed by Rothstein and Temperley, Samuel Ng (2012) integrates the phenomenon of phrase rhythm with Hepokoski and Darcy's Sonata Theory. Ng argues that since the end-accented 'closing-theme schema' observed by Temperley could be regarded as a norm in the closing zone of a sonata movement, it is then the first-level default according to the compositional preference hierarchy in Sonata Theory. In addition, Ng also proposes that the three phrase rhythmic scenarios commonly found between the primary-theme and transition zones can inform and complement the nine types of transition as described in Hepokoski and Darcy's Sonata Theory.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

Despite their important contribution to understanding sonata form through the lens of phrase rhythm, particularly in the closing theme and the transition, Temperley and Ng do not provide any systematic analysis regarding phrase rhythm in the subordinate theme. Therefore, besides observing the common phrase rhythmic strategies that classical composers utilize to enhance the looseness of the subordinate theme, it is also my goal to collect the necessary data to formulate the various phrase rhythmic norms and default levels within the subordinate theme. In this paper, I will report the preliminary results of this ongoing project, based on my analyses of the sonata form first movements in all of Mozart's piano sonatas and also the first twelve piano sonatas by Beethoven. The next stage of the project will cover all the sonata form first movements in Haydn's piano sonatas.

Methods

From my analyses of the Mozart and the Beethoven sonatas, I have identified four main types of phrase rhythmic techniques that promote the loose organization in the subordinate theme. The first of these techniques illustrates how Mozart and Beethoven set up the arrival of the subordinate theme regarding hypermeter. There are four subcategories to this first technique, and they are represented by the 4-S: the 'smooth' arrival, the 'subtle' arrival, the 'successive downbeat' arrival, and the 'short intro/anacrusis' arrival.

For the ‘smooth’ arrival, assuming a 4-bar hypermeter, the transition ends on a hyperbeat 4 [TR-4], and the music connects smoothly to the hypermetrical downbeat of the subordinate theme [S-1]. This ‘smooth’ arrival pattern, however, does not provide much sense of loosening for the subordinate theme; instead, it provides a baseline for us to compare the other types of arrival patterns which will contribute to the looseness of the subordinate theme. Next, there is the ‘subtle’ arrival pattern, where the transition ends on a hyperbeat 2 [TR-2] and the following hyperbeat 3 marks the onset of the subordinate theme. However, due to Rothstein’s Rule of Congruence (1995, 173), this hyperbeat 3 is now being perceived and reinterpreted as hyperbeat 1 of the subordinate theme [S-1]. I call this the ‘subtle’ arrival because both hyperbeat 1 and 3 are relatively strong beats, and this reinterpretation will not affect the flow of the meter that much. In addition, a reinterpretation will not even be needed in a 2-bar hypermeter reading. Compared to the ‘smooth’ arrival, this type of ‘subtle’ arrival is therefore less tight-knit. The third type of arrival is the ‘successive downbeat’ arrival. For this arrival pattern, the transition either ends on hyperbeat 1 or 3 [TR-1 or TR-3], and then the subordinate theme begins immediately on another hyperbeat 1 [S-1]. This type of arrival disrupts the flow and the continuity of the hypermeter, and therefore creates a sense of instability as well as looseness going into the subordinate theme. Besides, this arrival pattern ‘modulates’ the hypermeter from odd-strong to even-strong, perhaps providing a new dimension to the contrasting nature of the two themes in the sonata exposition. The final arrival pattern is the ‘short intro/anacrusis’ type. It is actually somewhat similar to the ‘successive downbeat’ arrival type, but this arrival type does not occur across the boundary of the transition and the subordinate theme. Rather, there is usually a clear medial caesura with rests, and then a short segment of music functioning as a short introduction or as anacrusis to the subordinate theme. These extra measures before the subordinate theme proper will therefore disrupt the flow of the hypermeter. Also, this technique would often shift the hypermeter from odd-strong to even-strong.

I believe that the usage of these various arrival patterns to the subordinate theme is an important compositional decision for the composers to make when writing a sonata. After all, unless a slow introduction is present, there is nothing much for a composer to manipulate regarding hypermeter in the main theme. Therefore, the tight-knit main theme almost always begins with an unequivocal hyperbeat 1; whereas in the subordinate theme, composers can be creative on how to begin the phrase metrically and can perhaps instill a sense of instability and looseness into the music through different types of phrase rhythmic arrival to the subordinate theme.

The second of these loosening techniques is the use of end-accented phrases in the subordinate theme. Besides appearing very often in the closing theme, end-accented phrases are also common in the subordinate theme, especially towards the end of this formal section. End-accented phrases are caused by the misalignment of phrase grouping structure and hypermeter, and this rarely occurs in the main theme. But in the subordinate theme, the misaligned end-accented phrases are very appropriate as a loosening device, and it is regularly used by Mozart and Beethoven. In addition to utilizing end-accented phrases in the subordinate theme, another loosening technique is the use of irregular phrase rhythm within the subordinate

theme. There are three ways to achieve irregular phrase rhythm, and they are metrical reinterpretation, successive downbeat, and phrase expansion. Finally, the last loosening technique is the placement of local dominant harmony on strong hyperbeats. It is very rare to find this combination of strong hyperbeat with dominant harmony in the main theme, but this phrase rhythmic technique can be effective in enhancing the looseness of the subordinate theme.

Implications

Looking at the data from the 30 sonatas analysed for this paper, Mozart utilizes all four types of arrival pattern rather evenly in setting up his subordinate themes. In contrast, Beethoven strongly prefers not to interrupt the hypermeter when he sets up his subordinate themes, and he almost exclusively uses only the ‘smooth’ and the ‘subtle’ arrival types. Next, this corpus analysis also shows that the vast majority of the subordinate themes begin with a relatively tight-knit opening, typically lasting at least two complete hypermeasures. It is only after these two hypermeasures we begin to see more irregular phrase rhythm appearing. With this knowledge in mind, the four hypermetrical arrival methods for subordinate themes seem even more crucial if a composer wants to loosen up the subordinate theme right from the beginning. Finally, there is an interesting observation for the three Beethoven sonatas that have the trimodular block design. In these sonatas, Beethoven always uses two different arrival methods for the two medial caesuras in the trimodular block design. Perhaps Beethoven is fully aware of these hypermetrical implications in his music, and he wants to create variety and contrast by using different types of arrival methods for the loosely-knit subordinate theme.

Keywords

Phrase Rhythm, Hypermeter, Sonata Form, Instrumental Music, Classical Style.

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