Sonata Form

The chief structural plan in classic music was the extended two-reprise form. This form came into prominence after 1750 through the confluence of many style trends; it is the structural basis of most first movements, of overtures, and of many slow movements and finales; elements of this form are present in many arias. Today, it is known as sonata form.

During the past century sonata form has received more critical and historical attention than any other form in the history of western music. Its sudden rise to prominence in the mid-18th century without a clear prehistory and its universal application in the classic era as well as later have fascinated musicologists. Aesthetically, its breadth, its ability to encompass a great richness of content, and its finely balanced proportions are objects of wonder. Analytically, it is a complex and rich object for investigation.

Most analysis of sonata form has taken its thematic content to be the principal parameter; this has been explained as being constituted from two principal themes which are presented, developed, and restated; this results in a three-part form. Classic theorists, on the other hand, explained the form of a long movement as a harmonic plan, with two large phases of action, resulting in a two-part form. In this chapter these two views are evaluated.

THE HARMONIC PLAN; THE KEY-AREA FORM

Classic theorists described the form of a long movement as a tour of keys. The following, from Kollmann, 1799, summarizes the scheme, also described in Koch, 1787 and 1793; Portmann, 1789; Löhlein, 1781; Momigny, 1806; Galeazzi, 1796; and Reicha, 1813.

In its outline a long movement is generally divided into two sections. The first, when the piece is in major, ends in the fifth of the scale, and the second in the key; but when the piece is in minor, the first section generally ends in the third of the scale and the second in the key. Each section may be divided into two subsections, which in the whole makes four subsections.

The first subsection must contain the setting out from the key to its fifth in major, or third in minor, and it may end with the chord of the key or its fifth, but the latter is better. The second subsection comprehends a first sort of elaboration, consisting of a more natural modulation than that of the third subsection; it may be confined to the third, or fifth, of the key, or also touch upon some related or even non-related keys if only no formal digression is made to any other than the said fifth in major and third in minor. The third subsection comprehends a second sort of elaboration, consisting of digressions to all those keys and modes which shall be introduced.
besides that of the fifth (or third); and being the place for those abrupt modulations or enharmonic changes which the piece admits or requires. The fourth subsection contains the return to the key, with a third sort of elaboration, similar to that of the first section.

The above is the plan of modulation, which is to be found attended to in most sonatas, symphonies, and concertos. . . . But it may be varied almost to the infinite. For the different sections and subsections may be of any reasonable variety of length and the said sorts of modulation and elaboration may be diversified without end.7

The two sections in Kollmann's outline correspond to the reprises of a two-reprise form; the harmonic scheme is I-V (III), X-I for both the small and large versions of this generic pattern. The surest way to achieve mastery of the larger form was to develop skill in handling the smaller, according to the leading classic theorists.8 This plan is here designated as the key-area form, to reflect its harmonic layout. It represents periodicity on the broadest level; each part becomes a macroperiod as it carries its harmonic drive to the closes in V and I. A tabulation of classic sonata form movements, whatever their scope and style, will show the I-V (III), X-I plan to be a structural common denominator.

**DISTRIBUTION OF MELODIC MATERIAL**

In the thematic view of sonata form, the principal elements are the "first" and "second" themes, presented in the exposition, worked over in the development, and restated in the recapitulation. The first theme is held to be "masculine" in character, the second "feminine," and their opposition creates the conflict that gives sonata form its scope. While many sonata forms have two salient themes, often contrasted in style, many others contain but one main theme, and still others contain three, four, or more. If bithematism were taken as a norm, hundreds of exceptions would have to be acknowledged, reducing the validity of this view.

The actual role of thematic material in form, as viewed in the classic era, is expressed by Koch, 1802:

As the theme or principal idea in an oration specifies the actual content and must contain the material for the development of primary and secondary thoughts, so must music hold to a single sentiment through the possible modifications of a principal idea, and as an orator passes from the main thought by means of rhetorical figures to accessory ideas, contrasts, analyses, etc., all of which reinforce the main thought—so must the composer be guided in his treatment of his main idea, working out the harmonies, modulations, repetitions, etc. in such relationships, that he constantly maintains novelty and increase of interest; and so that the episodes and accessory ideas that are especially necessary in composition do not disturb the prevailing sentiment and hence damage the unity of the whole.9

This view retains something of the baroque idea of a ruling idea or affection. A movement with many themes, such as the first movement of Mozart's *Prague* Symphony, 1786, or the first movement of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony, 1803, is unified by contrasting its main well-timed recall of the main theme of his melodic material from a series of arrangements, unity was no problem. At the finale of his F major Quartet, Oeein, Mozart wrote the finale of his major Quintet, K. 614, 1791, following a well-timed recall of the main theme of his symphony, unity was no problem. At the finale of his C major Quintet, K. 515, 1787, following a well-timed recall of the main theme of his symphony, unity was no problem.

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While the two-part I-V (III) form, it did not provide guidelines for Sonata forms, as well as other forms, must have been put together by masters. Conventions of harmonization upon the most effective form, part of the theory of form. The 18th century, when theorists composed some recommendations for the ornamentation.

Koch, 1793, refers to a "canto istico" (characteristic passage) in which the melody generally has two main movements, one vigorous, the other throughout the form.10 The gentle cantabile, probably a characteristic music, permeates classic long-range thematic contrast, as it begins to crystalize only toward the final contrast has a more powerful. Nowhere is the play of local contrast of the first movement of Moz
is unified by contrasting its main theme against intervening material and by well-timed recall of the main theme. With Haydn, who preferred to evolve most of his melodic material from a single main idea placed in different rhetorical arrangements, unity was no problem, but variety became the challenge, as in the finale of his F major Quartet, Op. 77, No. 2, 1799. In the same monothematic vein, Mozart wrote the finales of his F major Quartet, K. 590, 1790, and E♭ major Quintet, K. 614, 1791, following Haydn's lead.

Melodic contrast was indeed an essential aspect of classic melodic rhetoric, but it took place principally at short range, with rapid changes of affect and topic among figures and motives. Long-range melodic contrast, between salient themes in the tonic and dominant sections, was frequently incorporated; this helped to stabilize the principal harmonic areas of the form. The opening theme represented the home key. To secure the effect of the second key, a clearly defined symmetrical period, a tune with a striking melodic profile, could be introduced at some point. This generally took place when V was established, as in the first movement of Mozart's E♭ major Quintet, 1791. On the other hand, such a tune might appear somewhere in the middle of the dominant section, as in the first movement of Mozart's Prague Symphony, 1786; or, as often with Haydn, at the end of part I. (See the first movement of his Symphony No. 103 in E♭ major, 1795.) But the salient dominant theme need not stand in contrast to the opening; Haydn typically uses the same theme for both keys, setting each off by local contrasts of material and texture. (See his Symphony No. 104 in D major, 1795, first movement and finale.)

While the two-part I–V (III), X–I plan was the ultimate control in sonata form, it did not provide guidelines for the detailed working out of a movement. Sonata forms, as well as other forms, written by the thousands in the classic era, must have been put together partly by paraphrase and parody, even by the great masters. Conventions of harmonic progression and melodic distribution, centering upon the most effective formulas, became common property and, eventually, part of the theory of form. This is clearly seen in the last decade or so of the 18th century, when theorists could provide, in addition to the harmonic plan, some recommendations for the distribution of melodic material and its differentiation.

Koch, 1793, refers to a "cantabler Satz" (singing theme) when the dominant is reached after a vigorous passage. Galeazzi, 1796, specifies a "passo caratteristico" (characteristic passage) in the dominant. Vogler, 1778, says that a symphony generally has two main ideas, one stronger, the other gentler. Kollmann, 1799, analyzes his Symphony where he employs two subjects for the movement, one vigorous, the other cantabile, but places them in juxtaposition throughout the form. The contrast between the brilliant–vigoros and the gentle–cantabile, probably a continuation of the tutti–solo relationship of baroque music, permeates classic rhetoric on every scale of magnitude, but the long-range thematic contrast, an essential feature of 19th-century sonata form, begins to crystallize only toward the end of the classic era. For classic music, local contrast has a more powerful effect, contributing to the thrust of periodicity. Nowhere is the play of local contrast more brilliantly managed than in the Allegro of the first movement of Mozart's Prague Symphony, 1786 (see pp. 27–28).
Classifications of melodic material were given by Momigny, 1806:

A. Principal periods
   1. Periods of début (opening)
   2. Periods of verve (vigorous action)
   3. Melodic periods
   4. Brilliant passages
   5. Subsidiary periods

B. Subsidiary periods
   1. Intermediary periods (episodes)
   2. Complementary periods (rounding off a main period)
   3. Connecting periods (liaison between main periods)

Periods of début open a piece; periods of verve end a grand reprise; melodic periods are not precisely located but occur somewhere in the middle of a reprise.

Galeazzi, 1796, gives a precise formula for the order of melodic material, including a "motivo" (theme) in the home key; "uscita" (exit), shift to the second key, "passo caratteristico" in the second key, and a cadence in the second key. He does not specify the styles to be used, although he requires that the "passo caratteristico" be expressive and gentle in almost all kinds of compositions for the sake of greater beauty. Galeazzi's example is 54 measures long, comparable to an extended minuet; his formula is remarkable for the precision with which it differentiates the rhetorical functions of melodic material in the form.

According to Koch, part I presents the "plan" of the form, "the principal melodic members in their original order"; part II rests upon this plan, drawing material first optionally, and later, to end the movement, in more or less the "original order." The implication of this melodic arrangement and the options available are discussed below (pp. 228 and 229).

**TWO-PART VERSUS THREE-PART DIVISION**

The two-part division of sonata form arises from its harmonic contour, represented by a movement away from the tonic and then an answering return to it. The three-part division rests upon thematic layout—exposition, development, and recapitulation of themes. The two-part harmonic division recognizes the dynamic aspect of the form, since it focuses upon harmonic periodicity; the three-part melodic division is static, concerned with identifying and placing themes. Moreover, it does not account for the unique rhetorical elements of the classic style that enabled sonata form to attain its breadth and organic unity.

Classic theorists all describe the form as bipartite. Nevertheless, the separation of part II into two major sections was recognized. Koch, 1793, divides part II into two "Hauptperioden"; Momigny, 1806, while retaining a basic two-part division, compares the form of a movement to an architectural configuration of a dome and two wings. The three-part division, as well as the probable first use of the term sonata form, was set by Lobe, 1858, while the majority of theorists have emphasized the close of major sizes opening statements.

**Ex. 13-1. Two- and three-part plans**

**Two-part**

- **Part I**
  - Home key; key area I
  - 1. Establishment
  - 2. Optional close
  - Shift to second key
  - Second key; key area II
  - 1. Establishment
  - 2. Close

- **Part II**
  - Harmonic exploration
  - Point of furthest remove
  - Return to home key
  - Close in home key

To place these two plans in part I establishes a two-phase basis into which are interlocked.

**PART I: THE EXPOSITION**

Part I carries the harmony forward in I to the close in V. This is by Vogler, 1778:

When the passion must rise then it goes not downward, for example, in this manner:

As the rise and fall of the passion wax and wane. There [Vogler is discussing an aria] is carried forward with greater energy...
of the term *sonata form*, was sponsored by Adolph Bernhard Marx, 1841-1851, his views were decisive in establishing the thematic view of sonata form. The two-part versus three-part controversy continued through the 19th century. Lobe, 1858, and Tovey in the present century represent the former, while the majority of theorists have adopted the latter.

In summary, the two plans are outlined in Ex. 13-1; note that the two-part plan emphasizes the close of major sections, while the three-part plan emphasizes opening statements.

### Ex. 13-1. Two- and three-part plans of sonata form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Two-part</th>
<th>Three-part</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part I</strong></td>
<td><strong>Exposition</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home key; key area I</td>
<td>Main theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Establishment</td>
<td>Subsidiary theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Optional close</td>
<td>Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift to second key</td>
<td>Development of themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second key; key area II</td>
<td>Recapitulation: themes restated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Establishment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Close</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To place these two plans in perspective, we can say that the harmonic plan establishes a two-phase basis into which the three-phase thematic superstructure is interlocked.

**PART I: THE EXPOSITION; I-V**

Part I carries the harmony forward in an unbroken line of action from the opening in I to the close in V. This represents a rise in intensity of feeling, expressed by Vogler, 1778:

> When the passion must rise then the progression must move a fifth upward, not downward, for example, C, G, D, A. . . .

As the rise and fall of the passions express themselves, so does the declamation wax and wane. Therefore, one cannot end the first part in G major [Vogler is discussing an aria in D major] since the declamation must be carried forward with greater energy. . . .