

Brian Black

*The University of Lethbridge, Canada*¹brian.black@uleth.ca,

Formal Function Anomalies and the ‘Lyric Impulse’ in Schubert’s Late Sonata Forms

ABSTRACT

Background

During the last few years of his life, Schubert created a number of highly original sonata-form movements that radically reinterpret the form’s conventional elements and processes. In each case, the underlying cause of these innovations is the music’s concentration on one overriding issue—what might be called a ‘motive’, but in a broader sense than is usually meant by the term. This motivic idea arises from the voice leading of a marked harmonic event and is expanded upon to become a dominant force in the form, affecting thematic structures, key relations and the general manner in which the movement unfolds.

From the perspective of William E. Caplin’s theory of formal functions, such movements are unconventional on all levels of their structure. Furthermore their anomalies challenge established notions about Schubert’s approach to sonata form, as articulated by James Webster. For Webster, Schubert’s first impulse is lyrical, from which flows ‘a tendency towards symmetrical periods or closed forms such as ABA’. This view not only emphasizes the melodic over the harmonic, but the terms ‘*symmetrical* periods’ and ‘*closed* forms’ also imply a thematic stability and thus self-sufficiency—periods or ABA structures that are ‘closed off’ from the rest of the movement.

The late sonata forms we will be discussing contradict this characterization: here Schubert’s starting point is harmonic, rather than melodic, and the resulting thematic structures are dynamic in character, rather than closed, in that they open outwards to the movement’s overall development process. Yet the generating idea of the music still resides within the realm of lyricism, for it contributes a crucial lyrical attribute to the music—harmonic intensity.

Aims and repertoire studied

The paper will demonstrate how the initial harmonic gesture of Schubert’s more unusual sonata forms is a powerful structural and motivic force in the music. It will also develop the thesis that the harmonic intensity of this gesture is an important aspect of the music’s lyrical quality, but one that does not engender conventional thematic structures or closed forms. Two examples from his later works will be used to illustrate these points—the first movements of the String Quintet in C Major, D. 956, and the String Quartet in G Major, D. 887. In both examples the focus will fall on the exposition, with particular attention paid to the development of the movement’s initial harmonic idea and the impact this development has on the construction of the main and subordinate themes.

Methods

The approach of the paper is based on the *Formenlehre* tradition and participates in recent applications of William E. Caplin’s theory of formal functions to music of the Romantic era. The unusual harmonic nature of Schubert’s generating idea makes it essentially disruptive with regard to what Caplin has established as the norms of sonata form. Its first statement involves an extremely slow harmonic rhythm with long sustained notes so that the special qualities arising from its voice leading can seep into the listener’s consciousness. Thus there is a momentary suspension of time and a suggestion of mystery in the marking of this strange event—attributes now generally associated with lyricism in Schubert’s music (Burnham, 2000; Mak, 2006). When stated at the beginning of the piece, ambiguities thus arise concerning the controlling meter of the music. Furthermore, since the focus is harmonic, the melodic content is often rudimentary. This construction is quite different from that of the initial basic idea of a Classical sonata form, which is designed to clearly define the meter and principal melodic motives of the music.

The unusual opening idea of these movements in turn engenders an equally unusual process of development in which the broader implications of the generating idea’s voice leading are pursued across the movement in a way that often overturns the conventional structure and character of theme types and formal sections. Here the C-Major Quintet will provide a brief example of how the paper will deal with this topic.

The main feature of the Quintet’s generating idea is the transformation of the initial tonic chord by the internal chromatic inflection of its common-tone diminished seventh (mm. 1–4). The expansive and rhythmically still character of this gesture directly affects the structure and temporal quality of the compound period it initiates (mm. 1–20). Each phrase is ten, rather than eight measures long and has an introductory quality to it in its initial lack of a clearly defined meter (Martin and Vande Moortele, 2014).

The compound period’s concluding IAC launches a spinning out of the harmonic gesture’s voice leading involving an inner chromatic ascent from G to A-sharp against a lower C and upper E pedal (the up-beat to m. 21–m. 33). This progression converts the concluding C major tonic of the IAC to the German 6th of the surprise half cadence in E minor at mm. 23–5. The music then shifts back directly to the home dominant seventh (mm. 25–26), which is prolonged by, once again, the motivic voice leading—here a chromatic ascent from B to G in Violin I against a bass pedal G in the cello (mm. 26–32). This progression in turn culminates with a full statement of the generating motive on G (mm. 29–32) leading directly into a counterstatement of the beginning of the main theme, which serves to launch the transition.

Consequently the whole latter half of the main theme group from measure 20 to 33 is unusual. Its emphasis on dominant harmony suggests a contrasting middle and standing on the dominant in Caplin's theory, and it has been analyzed as such (Martin and Vande Moortele, 2014). However this does not account entirely for its extraordinary features. First, the move to the dominant of E minor is part of a process that begins *with* the IAC in measure 19 rather than *after* it. This process builds on the after echo of the cadential tonic chord in mm. 19–20 in such a way that the half cadence in E minor seems to grow out of the IAC in C. Second, the V⁷-I progression in C major at measures 32–3 sounds like a climactic arrival on the tonic. Moreover this moment represents the culmination and resolution of all the processes launched by the generating idea of the main theme. Yet there is no conventional cadential progression leading up to this moment. In fact, the last clear cadential progression in the main theme group is the surprising half cadence in E minor in mm. 23–5.

Thus the main theme group is neither conventional nor conventionally closed as an entity. And it is not closed in another sense—its unusual occurrences foreshadow later events in the form. To take just one example, the suggestion of E minor in the half cadence on B is realized in the E minor colouring of the second subordinate theme and its closing section (mm. 106–10 and 138–46) as well as the approach to the home dominant through the B dominant at the end of the development section (mm. 248–56). And many of these motivic connections are to passages of lyrical intensity, engendered through particularly poignant harmonic progressions related to the movement's initial gesture.

Implications

The examples this paper will study reveal the importance of harmony both in Schubert's approach to form and in the lyrical nature of his writing. They also demonstrate that such lyricism is a dynamic, rather than a static element in Schubert's sonata forms. The paper thus contributes to the recent reappraisal of Schubert as a composer of instrumental music.

Keywords

Form
Formal grammars
Harmony
Lyricism

REFERENCES

- Burnham, Scott, 2000. 'Schubert and the Sound of Memory'. *Musical Quarterly* 84/4 (Winter): 655–63.
- Burstein, Poundie, 1997. 'Lyricism, Structure, and Gender in Schubert's G Major String Quartet'. *The Musical Quarterly* 81/1 (Spring): 51–62.
- Caplin, William E, 1998. *Classical Form: A Theory of Formal Functions for the Instrumental Music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Clark, Suzannah, 2011. *Analyzing Schubert*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dahlhaus, Carl, 1986. 'Sonata Form in Schubert: The First Movement of the G-Major String Quartet, Op. 161 (D. 887)'. In

- Schubert: Critical and Analytical Studies*, edited by Walter Frisch, translated by Thilo Reinhardt, 1–12. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Frisch, Walter, 2000. "'You Must Remember This': Memory and Structure in Schubert's String Quartet in G major, D. 887". *Musical Quarterly* 84/4 (Winter): 582–603.
- Gingerich, John, 2000. 'Remembrance and Consciousness in Schubert's C-Major String Quartet, D.956'. *Musical Quarterly* 84/4 (Winter): 619–34.
- Hyland, Anne M, 2016 'In Search of Liberated Time, or Schubert's Quartet in in G Major, D. 887: Once More Between Sonata and Variation', *Music Theory Spectrum* 38/1 (Spring): 85–108.
- Mak, Su Yin, 2006. 'Schubert's Sonata Forms and the Poetics of the Lyric', *The Journal of Musicology* 23/2 (Spring): 263–306.
- Martin, Nathan and Steven Vande Moortele. "Formal Functions and Retrospective Reinterpretation in the First Movement of Schubert's String Quintet." *Music Analysis* 33/2 (2014): 130–55.
- Webster, James, 1978. 'Schubert's Sonata Form and Brahms's First Maturity, Part I'. *19th-Century Music* 2 (July): 18-35.
- Wollenberg, Susan, 2011. *Schubert's Fingerprints: Studies in the Instrumental Works*. Farnham: Ashgate.