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The Role of the Medial Caesura in Schubert's Over-Determined Transitions

ABSTRACT

Background

Many of Schubert's transitions conform to the norms and conventions prevalent in the late eighteenth century. As Susan Wollenberg has pointed out, 'as early as 1813, in various instrumental works, Schubert showed himself fully conversant with a range of "Classical" transitional gestures' (2011, 61). Instances of Schubert's Classical handling of crucial stylistic elements such as rhetoric, texture, form, and tonal structure are found in the first movements of his First and Fifth Symphonies, D. 82 and D. 485, respectively.

Despite his fondness for the Classical tradition, throughout his career, Schubert broadened the boundaries defined by late eighteenth-century composers, gradually incorporating many non-normative procedures into his compositional practice. He developed a preference for 'wrong-key' and *non sequitur* MCs, for example, increasing the possible ways to set up the entrance of the S-theme; he treated the V:PAC MC as a first cadential choice along with the more traditional HC MC options; he broadened the available cadential arrangements within MC pairs in declined-MC situations, exploring the expressive potential of the normative/non-normative dual opposition; and he developed a preference for three-key trimodular blocks that visited a Classically non-normative key before reaching a more traditional one, a practice that seems related to his treatment of declined MCs. Among the many non-Classical compositional strategies explored by Schubert are his *tonally over-determined transitions*; i.e., transitions that overemphasize the tonic area, introducing formal and expressive complications to the work's unfolding.

Despite the non-necessity of modulation, transitions are expected to be harmonically active. A transition that overemphasizes the home key, or more precisely, its tonic, should be conceived as 'deformational', a conscious departure from an internalized tradition, and consequently be subjected to interpretation. Hepokoski and Darcy affirm that '[the appearance of one or more I:PACs within TR] suggests an interpretation whereby TR is understood to begin with the decision to reaffirm or over-determine the tonic key' (2006, 114). In such cases, the analyst must consider the formal and rhetorical reasons for, as well as consequences of, TR's penchant for the tonic area, a search for the 'poetic impulse' and the resultant 'emotional properties' of such determination (Wollenberg 2011, 50). Punctuating the end of TR, the medial caesura arises, in this context, as the final statement of a tonally 'deficient' module and, consequently, serves as a reference point for interpretation. It may confirm or deny TR's obsessive tendency towards the tonic, it may retrospectively define the function of a formally ambiguous passage, or it may yet correct a formal complication.

Schubert's penchant for TRs that struggle to leave the tonic area is well documented in the literature. As stated by Webster, 'Schubert hates to leave the tonic in the classical manner [...] indeed his first group may close with a full cadence in the

tonic' (1978, 24). Wollenberg regards such reluctance to leave the tonic 'not in the sense of an inability to launch into the necessary processes of modulation, but rather as showing a poetic impulse, endowing the departure from the tonic with emotional properties' (2011, 50). Indeed, a tonally over-determined TR may affect the MC in different ways: in extreme cases, the transition may end with a I:PAC, failing to properly prepare the secondary key; in others, the persistence of the tonic may result in a quick modulation to the secondary key, perhaps a 'poetic' outcome of TR's over-determination.

Most studies devoted to Schubert's transitions regard all tonal, rhetorical, and formal deformations surrounding the MC as transitional complications. A glance at the literature reveals that topics such as TR's shortness or abruptness, TR's reluctance to leave the tonic area, 'wrong-key' and *non sequitur* MCs, and modulatory CFs are all conceived as transitional in function (Tovey 1949, 118–27; Hascher 1996, 10; Webster 1978, 22–6; Wollenberg 1998, 16–61; and *ibid.* 2011, 47–98). This flexible approach has often precluded a deeper understanding of the causes and effects associated with TR's tonal over-determination.

Aims and repertoire studied

Favoring a more rigorous approach, I interpret the MC-complex as comprising four stages: 1) TR's energy-gaining process, 2) the cadential articulation (and subsequent dominant prolongation), 3) the MC gap itself (and CF), and 4) the appearance of an appropriate S-theme. This approach distinguishes clearly among pre-cadential, cadential, and post-cadential procedures, allowing one to focus exclusively on non-normative events taking place within TR, and consequently affecting the MC. In addition, I organize the following discussion based on TR's tonal behavior, regarding rhetorical and formal anomalies as byproducts of the underlying harmonic activity.

Through the lens of Sonata Theory, this paper examines the impact of tonally over-determined TRs on the function, perception, and meaning of the MC in Schubert's sonata forms, demonstrating how TR's penchant for the tonic area may ultimately define the MC's formal and expressive roles.

Methods

The study is divided here into four categories that take into account the position, function, and strength of the I:PACs articulated within pre-MC space:

The I:PAC MC: It involves transitions that fail to leave the tonic, ending in a I:PAC MC – a procedure that may introduce structural and expressive complications, releasing a 'poetic effect' that can be detected well past the MC articulation. As Wollenberg has noted, 'the poetic resonances of these transitional moments extend far beyond their immediate impact' (*ibid.*, 67). For Hepokoski and Darcy, the I:PAC MC implicates 'a "failed" (or gesturally weak? or obstinate?) TR that, still in the grip of the grounding tonal principle of the P-zone, dwells on an unusually static tonic' (2006, 29). They

then go on to say that ‘this emphasis, in turn, demands analytical and hermeneutical interpretation’ (ibid.). Searching for an understanding of the procedure’s ‘poetic outcome’, I examine five additional formal characteristics that often accompany Schubert’s I:PAC MCs: a) the complete or apparent absence of TR; b) the overemphasized MC articulation; c) the ‘transitional’ CF; d) formal and rhetorical complications in the course of S; and e) the recapitulatory compensation.

Clarifying MC: This category features a much more localized procedure. While the examination of the I:PAC MC depends upon the broad apprehension of structural and expressive events across the entire movement, the study of this deformation focuses exclusively on the TR’s formal complex. Here, TR’s function is only retrospectively clarified by the articulation of the MC as well as the subsequent appearance of a convincing S-candidate. In other words, the P-theme, closed by a I:PAC, is followed by a module that does not manifest any transitional rhetoric but that eventually manages to secure the MC, retrospectively elucidating the passage’s transitional role.

Doubly Corrective MC: In this category, a convincing TR fails to move away from the tonic, ending with a I:PAC. The cadence, which might initially impress the listener as the MC, triggers a second transitional attempt that, despite its rhetorically ‘deficient’ module (TR²), eventually attains the real MC. The final punctuation combines elements of both categories introduced above, incorporating a doubly corrective role: it clarifies the transitional function of its immediate preceding passage (TR²) and compensates for TR¹’s over-determination.

Liberating MC: In this category, TR begins as a tonally over-determined module and ends with a quick and abrupt modulation to the secondary key. The brusque harmonic motion is often paired down to essentials, barely preparing the articulation of the MC that, despite its sudden arrival, manages to ‘liberate’ the exposition from the tonic’s ‘oppression’.

In contrast to the three categories discussed above, TR’s over-determination is not expressed here by the articulation of one or more I:PACs within its course; instead, tonic harmony is extended by localized contrapuntal motions or failed cadential attempts that hinder the typical increased harmonic activity. In early works, a clear, rhetorically active TR extends the home key until the arrival of the MC. Conversely, in late works, TR expresses no transitional rhetoric; indeed, it often comprises a slightly intensified reprise of P, prolonging the tonic through mere repetition. The absence of any transitional activity within TR often introduces formal and expressive complications to the course of the exposition, affecting the MC and consequently the organization of the S-theme.

The combination of an extended emphasis on the tonic and a final brief modulation has led many commentators to characterize the transitions featured in this category as short and abrupt (Hascher 1996, 10; Tovey 1949, 118–27; Webster 1978, 22–6; Wollenberg 1998, 16–61; and ibid. 2011, 47–98). Contrary to this view, I interpret them as comprising a long and two-staged single module that begins by overstating the tonic and ends with a quick and underprepared modulation.

Implications

The conclusion shows that the ‘poetic resonances’ released by Schubert’s tonally over-determined TRs indeed extend well beyond their realization and, in most cases, involve the MC as protagonist: 1) The MC may arise as reacting against a tonally over-determined module, liberating the remainder of the ex-

position from the tonic’s control, or retrospectively ‘correcting’ a tonally and/or formally ‘defective’ passage. 2) Conversely, the MC may be regarded as accepting TR’s expressive choices, releasing ‘poetic’ properties with broad formal and rhetorical consequences. 3) Lastly, the MC may serve to clarify a formally ambiguous passage, often obscured by the non-traditional arrangement of tonal, textural, formal, and rhetorical elements. In most cases, the blurring of boundaries and functions of the MC’s adjacent formal zones implicates a complex process of formal reinterpretation.

Keywords

Sonata Theory; Sonata Form; Medial Caesura; Tonal Over-Determination; Schubert’s Instrumental music;

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