

Meghan Naxer,^{*1} Richard Devore^{*2}^{*}*Kent State University, USA*¹*mnaxer@kent.edu*, ²*rodevore@kent.edu*

Choose Your Own Sonata Form: Adventures in Analysis

ABSTRACT

Background

Scott Burnham suggests “that the entire sweep of the *Formenlehre* tradition coheres around the need to understand sonata form...” Many of us as music professors have struggled to find the best way to help our undergraduate students critically explore sonata form. Do we dress it up in conservative tonal garb and constrain our approach to the late-eighteenth century? Do we open the doors to thematic thinking and the cyclic excesses of the late-nineteenth century? Or do we somehow sift through all the theories since A. B. Marx and try to discover an eclectic approach that takes the best from both the past and present?

This paper will draw upon the approaches to sonata form presented during the last four decades by Leonard Ratner, Charles Rosen, William Caplin, and James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy. Students are often only taught one primary template for sonata theory instead of exploring the rich history of theoretical approaches and resulting debates that have continued into the twenty-first century.

Aims and repertoire studied

The diverse, though sometimes overlapping, approaches to theories of sonata form listed above will serve as the basis for pedagogical applications in undergraduate curricula to promote critical thinking and analytical understanding. This paper will demonstrate differing analyses of selected first movements by Beethoven including Piano Sonata Op. 10 No. 3 and String Quartet Op. 18 No. 4.

Methods

The repertoire listed above will be used to highlight similarities and differences in various music theorists’ analytic interpretations of challenging sonata forms. We will present repertoire featuring the kind of analytic questions and choices students would face. Some of these questions could include: Where do transitions begin? How do cadences define the form? How does thematic material align (or not) with expected tonal areas? How do unexpected or unorthodox events create an analytic narrative? How are these sonata forms in dialogue (or not) with other sonata forms?

Beethoven’s Piano Sonata Op. 10 No. 3 provides a clear example of how various analysts approach a first-movement sonata form in significantly different ways. The piece has been widely discussed in the analytical literature by a number of writers since Tovey, including Rosen, Ratner, Caplin, and Hepokoski and Darcy. The contrasting material referred to above has been variously interpreted as a transition theme, as the product of a three-key exposition, as a modulating subordinate theme, and as the first module of a trimodular block (Hepokoski 2002 94). The movement begins in D major and

eventually arrives in the expected dominant key of A Major, however, Beethoven’s route to the dominant is anything but direct. Instead, his journey takes him to submediant and mediant before eventually settling into the dominant tonality.

Beethoven’s Op. 18 string quartets were composed shortly after the Op. 10 piano sonatas and pose similar analytical challenges. The first movement of Op. 18 No. 4 provides an excellent opportunity to expose students to a debatable sonata form. A tonal approach to sonata form in the style of Rosen would conclude that the first tonal area ends in m. 25 with a strong half cadence, followed by a transition that moves predictably and sequentially to the relative major. This interpretation works well in the exposition, but becomes problematic when the same material reappears in the recapitulation. Beethoven now expands the mm. 13–16 material—what seemed to be a parenthetical part of the first tonal area in the exposition—and uses it as a transition instead.

An analysis of Beethoven’s Op. 18 No. 4 inspired by Hepokoski and Darcy’s analytic writing produces a contrasting interpretation of mm. 17–34. Because the first perfect authentic cadence is achieved in m. 13 (and extended through m. 16), a transition begins in m. 17, even though it contains primary material motives and does not modulate. The medial caesura is declined in the following measure by a shocking move to the submediant, initiating a trimodular block that continues through a sequence in m. 30 before arriving at the more appropriate medial caesura in the relative major in m. 33 (Hepokoski and Darcy 2006 46). When this material returns in the recapitulation, the problematic first medial caesura and trimodular block are removed, thus correcting the deformation found in the exposition. The first trimodular block material returns in tonic in mm. 208–213, thus preserving that material in the recapitulation.

Implications

In the analysis example above, students would have to make their own decision about how to interpret mm. 17–34. Would they determine that the tonal area is most important and place the transition at m. 26? Or would they prefer to place the transition after the first perfect authentic cadence in tonic at m. 17? As discussed in the example above, both of these views have larger implications when considering the return of this material in the recapitulation. Both approaches are valid, and exploring multiple interpretations allows students to make their own decisions about what to value when examining form. In this way, they are not only learning how to label and understand sonata form, but also how to analyze it.

By exposing students to multiple analytical approaches to sonata form, we hope to expand their analytical and historical understanding. When students have multiple analytic options to explore, they develop their critical thinking and listening skills. Practicing these skills will help students apply their knowledge in multiple facets of musicianship, including learning and

memorizing repertoire, writing about music, and teaching music. Sonata form becomes not just an exercise in prescriptive labeling but an adventure in analysis.

Keywords

Musical pedagogy, Form, Music hermeneutics, Instrumental music.

REFERENCES

- Caplin, William E., 1998. *Classical Form: A Theory of Formal Functions for the Instrumental Music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hepokoski, James, 2002. 'Beyond the Sonata Principle', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 55/1: 91–154.
- Hepokoski, James, and Darcy, Warren, 2006. *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Monahan, Seth, 2011. 'Sonata Theory in the Undergraduate Classroom', *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 25: 63–127.
- Ratner, Leonard G., 1980. *Classical Music: Expression, Form, and Style*. New York: Schirmer Books.
- Rosen, Charles, 1980. *Sonata Forms*. New York: W. W. Norton.