

Marco Targa

The Romantic Sonata Form in Theory and Practice

One of the most important legacies left by the “Wiener Klassik” to composers of the Romantic generation was a set of musical genres and forms constituting the main core of their compositional practice. They acquired knowledge of these forms by direct emulation of the masterpieces of the past (particularly Beethoven’s) and through orally transmitted composition lessons based on principles in dialogue with contemporary theoretical writings – *Formenlehre* – which had a clear pedagogical purpose at that time. As Thomas Christensen has pointed out in the opening paper of this conference, “Music Theory” is a complex discipline in which practice, theoretical speculation and oral tradition (what he calls *verborgene Theorie*¹) are strongly interwoven, so that it is not easy (perhaps even impossible) to say which influenced the other. One thing that is clear, however, is that the nineteenth century saw a prototypical image of sonata form emerge that in many respects did not coincide with the sonata form known from the late eighteenth century.

In this paper I would like to analyze how the formal conception of the sonata form changed during the passage from the Classical to the Romantic generation and how the theoretical speculations of the *Formenlehre* mirrored this change and, vice-versa, how it could have influenced the new production of sonata forms. The recent rethinking of sonata form principles proposed by Hepokoski and Darcy has helped us to better understand some fundamental issues about musical form in the Classical age and to better realize which of our traditional beliefs about sonata form are merely a derivation of theoretical speculations of the Romantic age, and which are in fact truly connected to classical compositional practice.² Sonata form is a conceptual object which underwent many changes throughout its history; like any musical form, it is not an abstract construction, but must always be considered in relation to the historical period at issue.

For example, a description of the sonata form by Koch tends to be more suitable for Haydn’s works, one by Reicha is more relevant for the works of Chopin, one by Marx for Brahms, and so on. Hence the purpose of my paper is to highlight some differences between the sonata form of the late eighteenth century and of the Romantic age and to try to demonstrate how these differences are mirrored in the *Formenlehre* of the same period.

1 Thomas Christensen: *Monumentale Texte, verborgene Theorie*, pp. 21–31 in this book.

2 James Hepokoski/Warren Darcy: *Elements of Sonata Theory. Norms, Types and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata*, New York/Oxford 2006.

For the present inquiry I will focus on three aspects of the sonata form: the role of the transition (TR); the waning of the *medial caesura* (MC) and of the continuous exposition (exposition without the secondary theme); and the five types of sonata form.

Transition I shall start with one of the main differences between the two conceptions of the sonata form: the structure of the exposition. In Koch's theory, the exposition of a sonata form (the "first period") is made up of four different melodic parts (*melodische Theile*).³ Each part has a particular thematic content and none of these contents is thematically more important than the others. Of course, the first part contains the principal motive from which the composer will extract the motivic cells that will be developed during the unfolding of the piece, but there is no particular hierarchy between themes. They are, instead, only put into sequence: First part/Second part/Third part/Fourth part.

The same can be said about Galeazzi's description of sonata form. He divides the first part (our Exposition) into seven sections, in which not only the first (the traditional main theme) and the fourth (the traditional secondary theme) contain thematic ideas, but the others also have a thematic character. The seven sections are:

1. Introduction
2. Principal Motive (our P),
3. Second Motive (our TR),
4. Departure to the most closely related keys,
5. Characteristic Passage or Intermediate Passage (our S),
6. Cadential Period,
7. Coda (our C)⁴

In the latter descriptions of the sonata form the exposition begins to be described as a union of two main themes connected by a passage (the transition) and closed by a coda. In the classical sonata form, TR very often has an independent melodic content and its onset is perceived as the beginning of a new section and not the continuation of the preceding theme it grows out of. This thematic conception of TR in the classical sonata form is in dialogue with the concerto form, where, after the first ritornello, the solo very frequently begins with a new theme, starting a new thematic section.

- 3 Heinrich Christoph Koch: *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Composition*. Dritter und letzter Theil, Leipzig 1793, Reprint Hildesheim 1969, p. 128; see also Wilhelm Seidel: Haydns Streichquartett in B-Dur op. 71 Nr. 1 (Hob. III:69). *Analytische Bemerkungen aus der Sicht Heinrich Christoph Kochs*, in: Joseph Haydn *Tradition und Rezeption*. Bericht über die Jahrestagung der Gesellschaft für Musikforschung, Köln 1982, ed. by Heinrich Hüschen and Ulrich Tank, Regensburg 1985 (*Kölner Beiträge zur Musikforschung*, Vol. 144), pp. 3–13.
- 4 Bathia Churgin: Francesco Galeazzi's Description (1796) of Sonata Form, in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 21 (1968), pp. 181–199.

It is with Reicha that the exposition begins to be described in the modern way as a bi-thematic construction. In his *Traité de haute composition musicale* (1824–26 translated in German by Czerny in 1832) the scheme of the exposition is: *Motif* (*Première idée mère*) – *Pont* – *Seconde idée mère* – *Idées accessoires*. The four segments are divided into two main themes and two accessory themes: one is a bridge between the two main ideas (*pont*, composed with “*idées accessoires*”) and the other is a closing theme. Reicha makes a strong statement about how the second main idea must not be confused with the other accessory ideas: “*la seconde idée mère est parfois si courte, ou si peu apparente, qu’elle se confond avec les idées accessoires; ce qu’il faut chercher à éviter.*”⁵ It must be clear where the second main idea begins. This is surely a warning not to compose a so-called “continuous exposition” – a very common option in the 1770s and 80s – in which the transition shifts into a *Fortspinnung* passage which leads to the essential expositional closure (the cadence which closes the secondary theme), without a proper secondary theme. As we shall see, this kind of exposition disappears in the Romantic sonata form.

In Adolf Bernhard Marx’s theoretical writings, *Allgemeine Musiklehre* (1839) and *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition* (1837–1847), this bi-thematic view of the exposition becomes more radical. One of the concepts at the core of Marx’s view of musical form is the distinction between *Satz* and *Gang*, the former being a musical statement with its own individual melodic content and independent musical logic, the latter a passage which has the function of connecting two different *Sätze*. The exposition contains a *Hauptsatz* and a *Seitensatz* and in Marx’s view these two themes are set in opposition; they are the thesis and antithesis that will have their synthesis in the sonata as a whole. As is well-known, they are also gendered; the *Hauptsatz* is considered the male pole and the *Seitensatz* the female one.⁶ The scheme of the exposition is: *Hauptsatz*, *Seitensatz*, *Gang*, *Schlusssatz*.

That the transition should be a sort of continuation of the first theme is also stated very clearly in Czerny’s treatise, where the exposition of sonata form is described like this:

1. The principal subject;
2. its continuation or amplification (*italics mine*), together with a modulation into the nearest related key;
3. the middle subject in this new key;
4. a new continuation of this middle subject;

5 Antoine Reicha: *Vollständiges Lehrbuch der musikalischen Composition*, transl. by Carl Czerny, Vol. 4, Wien [1832], pp. 1164f.

6 See Scott Burnham: *A. B. Marx and the Gendering of Sonata Form*, in: *Music Theory in the Age of Romanticism*, ed. by Ian Bent, Cambridge 1996, pp. 163–186.

5. a final melody after which the first part thus concludes in the new key, in order that the repetition of the same may follow unconstrainedly.⁷

This kind of theorization is strongly mirrored in the compositional practice, and one of the most evident differences between the sonatas of the Classical period and those of the Romantic period is that the transition begins to lose its own melodic content. In Romantic sonatas the transition very rarely introduces a new theme that is different from the primary theme. In Marx's theory it is important that the primary theme goes on in the *Gang*-passage, developing its internal material without introducing new material.⁸ Marx praises the *Hauptsätze*, which are not closed within themselves but tend to develop into the transition, and he illustrates many possible ways to connect the *Hauptsatz* to the *Gang* through an organic growth from one to the other.

In the sonatas of Romantic composers the transition almost always grows out of P as its own development. The examples are countless: we can see this in Chopin's Sonata No. 2 in b flat minor, where TR begins at measure 25 with the repetition of the "presentation" of P in f with strong accents on the upbeats; the continuation of TR (measure 33) keeps the motive of the basic idea, leading it through a brief sequential transformation that very soon arrives at the beginning of S at measure 41 (see example 1).

The same procedure is also adopted by Chopin in the first movement of his Sonata No. 3. In general, Romantic sonata forms with new thematic material in TR are very rare and the transition is almost always treated as a space for the development of motives presented in P. This is a notable difference to the formal conception of the Classical sonata form, which more often introduces new themes in TR. This happens in particular in Haydn's works, where the exposition often uses the same theme for P and S (of course transposed into the new tonality), so that different themes are required in TR and C in order to create variety. We can observe, for example, the two completely different themes in P and at the onset of TR in the first movement of Haydn's String Quartet op. 33 No. 1 (see example 2).

MC and the continuous exposition Another crucial difference between Classical and Romantic sonata form is the moment of the medial caesura. Hepokoski and Darcy have

⁷ Carl Czerny: *School of Practical Composition in Three Volumes*, London 1848, Vol. 1, p. 33.

⁸ Adolf Bernhard Marx: *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition, praktisch theoretisch. Dritter Theil*, Leipzig 2nd 1848, pp. 247 f. Marx devotes one paragraph of his writing to the case of transitions with new thematic content, which is not rare, in particular in Beethoven's sonata forms, but he admits it only in cases where the motive of the *Hauptsatz* has been repeated too many times before the beginning of the transition, or in cases where the idea is not suitable to be further developed so that a new melodic idea is required for TR.

introduced this innovative analytical device, which helps us understand and describe the rhetorically important moment of the exposition that ends TR and precedes S. It is named “caesura” because there is normally a pause between the cadence of the transition and the beginning of the secondary theme. This pause can be filled in by a so-called “caesura fill” (CF), an ornamental melodic figuration that connects the downbeat of the cadence to the beginning of the new theme. Another way of articulating this MC is through the use of hammer blows – a variable number of repeated tutti chords – which have the rhetorical function of indicating the end of the transition and the imminent launch of S.

All these elements tend to disappear in the Romantic sonata, where the medial caesura loses its rhetorical strength. It is not surprising, therefore, that this particular moment of the exposition is not mentioned in any of the nineteenth-century treatises: theorists explain how the composer should reach the new tonality of the exposition by means of different types of modulation, but nothing is said about how to articulate the end of the transition after the pedal on the dominant chord (or dominant lock). This lack of theorization underlines the fact that Romantic composers tend to abandon this practice, MCs becoming rarer and playing a minor role in the rhetorical plan of the exposition. The exposition of the Romantic sonata is frequently a unified flow of musical ideas that goes through P, TR, S, C without any interruption. Very often TR is directly linked to S, without any pause dividing them. Example 3 shows how Schumann directly connects TR to S in the first movement of his Piano Sonata No. 1 op. 11: the dominant lock (on the V of A major) is reached at measure 141 and is maintained for six measures, after which S enters on the downbeat of measure 147. No caesura is present and measures 145–146 are a continuation of the motive of the dominant lock which cannot be seen as a proper CF (see example 3).

Another frequent option is to articulate a kind of caesura fill which uses thematic content from P or TR (this almost never happens in Classical sonata form). In this case,



EXAMPLE 3 Robert Schumann: Piano Sonata No. 1 op. 11, first movement, measures 137–151

the interruptive function of MC is completely lost because the impression is that of the transitional space not yet being closed. CF does not give a clear signal for the arrival of S, which seems to be connected to TR in a single musical stream. An example of this can be found in the first movement of Mendelssohn's Third Symphony: TR ends at measure 124 with a V:HC; the space between the end of the cadence and the onset of S (initiated by the clarinets at measure 126) is filled by a melodic motive derived from P and played by violins. This motive – which will serve as a contrapuntal accompaniment to S – forms a connection between TR and S, thus diffusing the rhetorical power of MC by creating a musical break that “makes room” for S. In the recapitulatory rotation MC is even weaker because P is connected directly to S and TR is completely erased.



EXAMPLE 4 Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Symphony No. 3 op. 56 (“Scottish”), first movement, measures 122–127 (piano score)

S is no longer introduced by a caesura in the musical flow. Moreover, even if there is a caesura within the exposition, it no longer has the Classical function of signalling the beginning of S. See, for example, the caesura at the end of P in the first movement of Brahms’ Piano Sonata No. 3 op. 5 at measure 22 (it is also anticipated at measure 6). We find a I:HC followed by a *Nachschlag* chord and a pause. It has all the features of a classical MC, but it is not used to introduce S. The real S at measure 39 is introduced without a caesura.

In their theory, Hepokoski and Darcy propose certain axioms, one of which is about the MC: “if there is no MC, there is no S”.⁹ It is a very strong statement, the value of which has already been widely discussed.¹⁰ As demonstrated, this axiom has absolutely no validity for Romantic sonatas in which the MC is rarely present. Must we therefore think that an exposition without MC is a continuous exposition in a Romantic sonata? According to the Hepokoski and Darcy axiom, we should. However this is not the case. In Romantic sonatas there are always at least two clear thematic ideas: as argued above, the principle of the bi-thematic exposition was one of the strongest mandatory rules of the

⁹ Hepokoski/Darcy: *Elements of Sonata Theory*, p. 117.

¹⁰ For example by Neuwirth in an article about Sonata Theory and Haydn: Markus Neuwirth: Joseph Haydn’s “witty” play on Hepokoski and Darcy’s *Elements of Sonata Theory*, in: ZGMTH 8 (2011), H. 1, www.gmth.de/zeitschrift/artikel/586.aspx (2 December 2016).

sonata form. In fact, the continuous exposition disappeared completely from the Romantic repertoire. For a mid-nineteenth-century composer an exposition without the secondary theme would not have been admissible. According to Marx's dialectical view of sonata form,¹¹ S represents the necessary antithesis to the primary theme and must always be present. The disappearance of these important Classical sonata practices (MC and continuous exposition) appear to be related to the lack of attention that theorists paid them: in general, we can say that almost all the features of the Classical sonata form that are not described and theorized in the treatises tend to disappear in the Romantic sonata.

Sonata Types This argument leads us to the last point I would like to consider: the different types of sonata form. In their theory, Hepokoski and Darcy describe five types of sonata form. Type 1 is the sonata form without development; type 2 is a sonata form with only two rotations and with the second rotation beginning inside the developmental space; type 3 is the standard sonata form; type 4 is the sonata-rondo; and type 5 is the concerto form.¹²

Of these five types, nineteenth-century *Formenlehre* describes only the last three. One could easily imagine that the first two types, neglected by theorists, were also gradually abandoned by composers. It is not difficult to imagine why type 1 was underrated by theorists and gradually forgotten: in the course of the Romantic period an overall gradual shift of attention occurred away from the section of exposition towards the section of development. Reicha, for example, dedicates many pages of his treatise to explaining how the musical ideas of the exposition can be developed in what he calls the first section of the development (our modern development). Furthermore, he suggests an interesting exercise for the pupil: to try to write a development for classical pieces that do not have any development.¹³ He takes, for example, the overture of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* and writes three different developments to show which development techniques could be used. Reicha also offers an explanation of why Mozart left his overture without any development: in his opinion the composer did not want to waste musical ideas for a piece that would be played by the orchestra while the public would still be speaking loudly and making noise in the theatre, as was common in nineteenth-century opera houses. According to Reicha, this bad habit was much more widespread in Italy which might be the reason why Rossini did not write any developments in his Italian opera overtures. Nowadays this argument makes us smile, but Peter Hoyt has demonstrated how im-

11 Gianmario Borio: *La concezione dialettica della forma musicale da Adolf Bernhard Marx a Erwin Ratz. Abbozzo di un decorso storico*, in: *Pensieri per un maestro. Studi in onore di Pierluigi Petrobelli*, ed. By Stefano La Via and Roger Parker, Torino 2002, pp. 361–386.

12 Hepokoski/Darcy: *Elements of Sonata Theory*, pp. 343–345.

13 Reicha: *Vollständiges Lehrbuch der musikalischen Composition*, p. 1107.

portant the concept of *développement* was for Reicha, who used it for the first time, and how it was connected with the contemporary theory of classical drama with its triadic structure of exposition – *développement* – *dénouement*.¹⁴ As we have already seen, Marx also assigns a particular importance to the developmental process, which becomes the most important feature of his dialectical conception of musical form.

For the second type of sonata form we can also find reasons to explain the theorists' silence which contributed to its decline: Beethoven in his mature style used this second type just very rarely, and all of the most important *Formenlehren* based their reflections on Beethoven's mature production of sonata forms. Nineteenth-century theorists saw Beethoven as the ultimate step in the evolution of the sonata form, and therefore every compositional practice that was eccentric compared to the Beethovenian canon was considered an expression of a not fully-developed state. Among the theorists who describe sonata form, Hepokoski and Darcy affirm that only Francesco Galeazzi mentions the possibility of composing a sonata form with a recapitulation that begins with the secondary theme, erasing the primary theme. While most other theorists ignore this possibility, Reicha also writes in a small footnote about this possibility: if the development is based entirely on the thematic content of the *première idée mère*, then the second section of the *développement* (in other words the recapitulation) can begin directly with the *seconde idée mère*.¹⁵ Indeed, we can find some sonatas by French composers of the Romantic age who apply this option. The locus classicus are Chopin's two major sonatas, in which it is well-known that the composer chose to begin the recapitulation with the secondary theme, thus erasing the primary. However, these kinds of recapitulations are a minority representing the last examples of a tradition destined to wane and fade out over the course of the century.

On the contrary, the sonata-rondo of type 4, remained firmly within the set of formal options available to Romantic composers and was widely described in the *Formenlehre*.¹⁶ Marx even created a particular link between the sonata form and the rondo form: according to his theory, the sonata form was the most elaborate form of rondo, in which the principle of organic unity was applied to every section of the piece.

The concerto form of type 5 was also widely discussed by theorists.¹⁷ During the nineteenth century, however, the concept underwent some important changes, most

14 Peter A. Hoyt: The Concept of *développement* in the Early Nineteenth Century, in: *Music Theory in the Age of Romanticism*, ed. by Ian Bent, Cambridge 1996, pp. 141–161.

15 Reicha: *Vollständiges Lehrbuch der musikalischen Composition*, p. 1163.

16 Malcolm S. Cole: Sonata-Rondo, the Formulation of the Theoretical Concept in the 18th and 19th Centuries, in: *The Musical Quarterly* 55 (1969), pp. 180–192.

17 Jane R. Stevens: Theme, Harmony, and Texture in Classic-Romantic Descriptions of Concerto First-Movement Form, in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 27 (1974), pp. 25–60.

notably the passage from a structural principle based on an alternation between tutti and solo sections to a structure based on the sonata form.¹⁸ Indeed, Marx describes the concerto as a sort of symphony with a solo instrument in which the alternation between the soloist and the orchestra has no formal importance for the division of the three parts of the sonata form.¹⁹ This important change in the new conception of the concerto form is largely mirrored in the compositional practice – Schumann's Piano Concerto op. 54 is one of the best examples of this.

We could continue like this, comparing Classical and Romantic sonata form and the relations between the *Formenlehre* and the practical composition. The emerging results would confirm the thesis that the sonata form in the Romantic period was subject to a process of normalization, whereby composers focussed on fewer compositional options than in Classical period, and tended to adhere to the standard descriptions of sonata form proposed by the treatises. This was the result of a process of reception of the Classical form through a Beethovenian lens. Furthermore, we can say that in the nineteenth century, composing a sonata form was no longer a spontaneous and direct expression, as it would have been in the Classical age, but a way of showing refined composing skills and knowledge of the established rules in a highly-rated academic genre.

Since music theory today can no longer defend a merely prescriptive approach, but rather depends on descriptive aims as well, the discipline is increasingly connected to its temporal and historical dimensions. Every theorization concerning a particular musical genre must refer to the particular time span to which it applies, beyond which the theory loses its validity. Sonata theory offers a very refined device to comprehend and interpret one of the most important principles of composition in the history of Western art music: the sonata form. Nevertheless, this theory is limited to the last three decades of the eighteenth century. Now it appears necessary to broaden this theory and put it into a larger historical context. Some contributions to sonata theory for the pre-Classical period have started to appear²⁰ and others are required for the Romantic period in order to describe a musical form that is different in so many ways from its previous classical versions. In this endeavour, it is crucial to appreciate how contemporary music theory evolved and how it mirrored and influenced the composition of sonata forms.

18 See also Simon Keefe: *Theories of the Concerto Form from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to the Concerto*, ed. by Simon P. Keefe, Cambridge 2005, pp. 7–18, and Stephan D. Lindeman: *The Nineteenth-Century Piano Concerto*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 93–117.

19 Adolf Bernhard Marx: *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition, praktisch theoretisch. Vierter Theil*, Leipzig 1847, p. 439.

20 See, for example, the contributions presented at the conference “Luigi Boccherini (1743–1805)”, 1–3 December 2011, Lucca, www.provincia.lucca.it/uploads/news/file/boccheriniprogramme.pdf (3 March 2016).

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