

Class Notes**Class 8, Tues June 26**

In this session we covered sonata form, the most complex kind of movement a composer can write in the Classical period, and we talked a lot about Beethoven.

Sonata Form

Sonata Form (or Sonata-Allegro form, as the book calls it) is the most important and complicated kind of movement in the Classical era. It is the one kind of form that can really be said to tell a “musical story.”

In order to understand sonata form we must first talk about **modulation**. Hopefully you remember that a scale has a sort of “home note” called the tonic. This is the “most important” note in the key and it is where a typical melody wants to end.

Modulation is when a composer simply moves to a new scale with a different tonic in the middle of a piece. It gives us a sense that we are traveling to a “different place” than where we started.

It is basically a law in Classical music that you must eventually return to your original home note, so a typical Classical piece will base the beginning on a certain scale, then establish one or more *new* keys, and then eventually make its way back to the opening key.

Some of the pieces we have already looked at actually have a change of key in them – our Minuet and Trio from *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* does it, for example. But the Sonata Form makes modulation part of the story – it couldn’t work without it!

The three main parts of sonata form

On the large scale, sonata form consists of three sections:



The **exposition** presents at least two important melodies, called *themes*. First, one or more of these themes will be presented in the *home key*. Then, one or more will be presented in a *contrasting key*. The existence of themes at two different pitch levels is treated as though it is a “problem” that needs to be “solved.” (It isn’t really a problem. Many of the other forms also

have melodies in different keys and it doesn't really generate a lot of tension, but this is the particular "story" that sonata movement wants to tell.)

The **development** is where this conflict explodes into chaos. The themes from before are manipulated in many different ways. They will probably be presented in multiple new keys, and they are frequently chopped up, altered, or combined into new configurations.

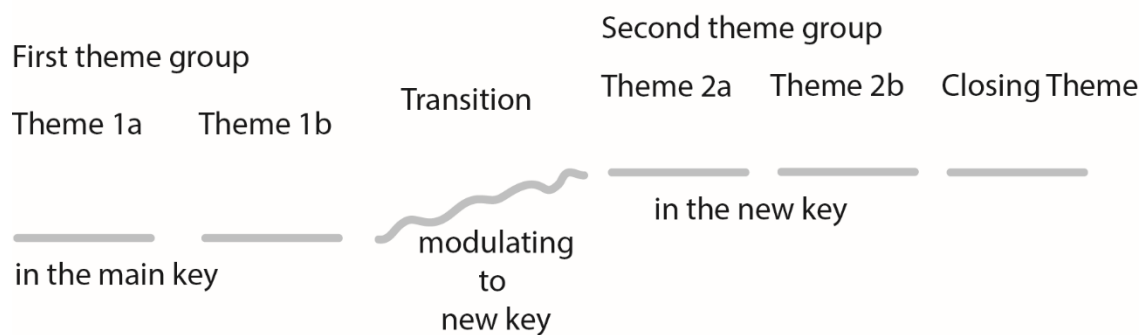
Then, we come out the other side with the **recapitulation**. Here the "problem" has been solved. The themes are presented in the same order as in the exposition, only the themes that were originally in the "wrong" key will now be "fixed."

[This might be a good point to review our example for a sonata-form piece, Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* first movement, to get the gist of the three big sections.]

A more detailed look

There are certain "small parts" of sonata form that are also very important. Let me talk you through a complete movement from beginning to end.

Typical sonata-form exposition



EXPOSITION

The first theme / first theme group

Traditionally we like to discuss Sonata Form in terms of a "first theme" in the home key versus a "second theme" in a contrasting key.

However, many pieces actually present a few different ideas in the home key before modulating. (*Eine kleine* first movement does this, for example.) In these cases we speak

somewhat awkwardly of a “first theme group” (= everything in the home key) and a “second theme group” (= everything in the contrasting key.)

Transition (or “Bridge Theme.”)

After the first theme group we get a transition – this is where we leave the home key and modulate to a new one. The transition usually sounds dynamic and unstable – the composer makes a big deal out of the fact that we are modulating.

Second theme / second theme group

After we arrive safely in the new key we’ll get one or more new themes. Sometimes the new theme is also contrasting in other ways – if the first theme was loud and fast, the second one might be soft and gentle, et cetera.

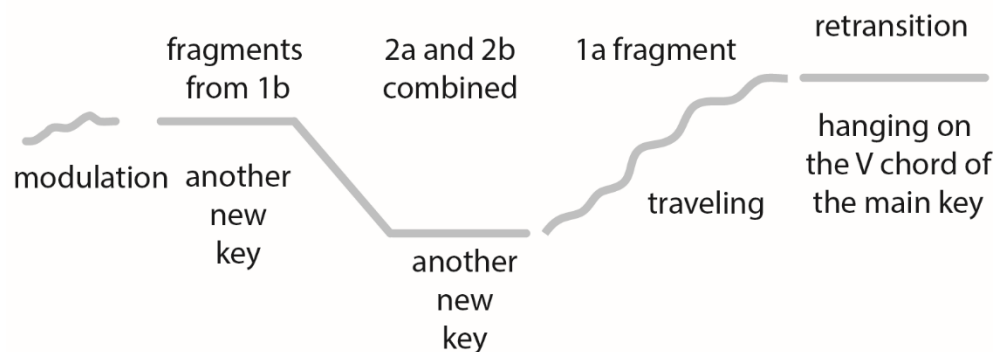
Closing theme(s)

Towards the end of the exposition we hear some material that sounds like it is “trying to wrap up.” Sometimes there are even more than one of these themes, as though it was somehow difficult to make the exposition come to a stopping point.

Remember that there are usually repeat signs around the exposition, so we will go through all of this twice!

DEVELOPMENT

Typical development

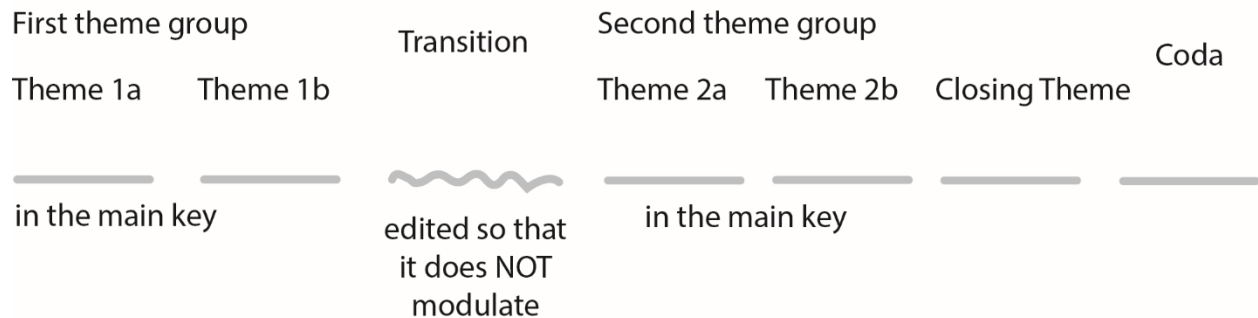


In general, there aren’t many standard special parts to the development. Each one tends to be fairly creative and unique, so there are many different techniques we might see here. The only distinct “little part” that people frequently note is the retransition.

Retransition

This is where we get ready to go back to the recapitulation and back to the home key. The composer will usually sit on the V chord of the home key and draw it out for a little bit. This creates an impression of suspense and expectation as we wait for the recap to kick off.

Typical recapitulation



RECAPITULATION

The recapitulation tends to repeat all of the parts we heard in the exposition, in the same order. However, the *transition* must be altered in some way so that it does not modulate to a new key. After that point all of the material that appeared in contrasting keys will be moved to the home key, and it all sounds at least slightly different.

CODA

A coda is an “extra” section that is tacked on to the very end of the movement. Sometimes it just gives the ending a little extra “oomph,” and sometimes it seems to revisit a problem that the composer has been dwelling on for the whole movement.

[OK, this is another good moment to go through our Sonata-Form video and note the existence of all of these little parts and how they work. Listening to the music is the best way to understand and remember what these things are.]

The Life of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

The life of Beethoven is traditionally told in three parts. In this session we discussed the “Early” and “Middle” parts of his career.

Beethoven is born in Bonn, Germany, and he moves to Vienna at the age of 21. I like to describe him at this time as a sort of “rock star.” He was making exciting new music with a new intensity that a certain circle of Viennese found very exciting, and on a personal level he was also somewhat stylish, brooding, and mysterious.

During this period he mostly wrote music for the piano, which he would perform himself. We will listen to a few parts from his famous piano sonatas, the “Moonlight” and the “Pathetique.”

This early period lasts until age 30, when he first starts to realize he is going deaf. This creates a major crisis for Beethoven and he withdraws from society for a few years. When he comes back his music is different.

Beethoven Part II – The “Middle” Period

Perhaps the most well-known fact about Beethoven is that he eventually loses his sense of hearing. He notices his increasing deafness around age 30, and this is (quite understandably) a traumatic event for him.

In class we’ll watch some documentary footage about Beethoven’s temporary retreat from society, during which he writes the famous “Heiligenstadt Testament,” a letter which describes his deep humiliation, thoughts of suicide, and eventual resolve to do all he can to make the most of his career as a composer.

After he emerges from isolation he writes new works that surpass anything that had ever been done before. These pieces have some interesting new qualities.

The interest in “Heroism”

The political climate in Europe at this time was quite unstable – the French Revolution was over and Napoleon was conquering new territory in a series of wars with other European nations. Beethoven thought that this was an exciting development that would upend the traditional rule of the aristocracy and transform society. He became obsessed with military action and the concept of heroism. (Later, however, he became disillusioned with his hero after Napoleon declared himself to be an Emperor. He originally dedicated his Third Symphony to him but then crossed out the name on the title page.)

Also, it seems plausible that Beethoven views himself as a sort of hero in this period, as he battles against his encroaching deafness to create revolutionary new music.

Thus, the pieces of this period often have a new hopefulness, rhythmic energy, and militaristic vibe.

Symphony No. 3 (nicknamed the “Eroica”)

This is one of the first works of the middle period and perhaps Beethoven’s first truly revolutionary symphony. Immediately, the first movement of this symphony sounds like we are in the midst of a battle, with hard-charging rhythms in the strings, horn calls in the winds, and a general sense of wandering or modulation that suggests instability. This is the longest, loudest, and most complex symphony anyone had heard at the time, and there are many ways in which the first movement is a technical advancement in sonata form.

Piano Sonata No. 21 in C major, Op. 53 “Waldstein”

This piano sonata is another work that features hard-charging rhythms and an immediate plunge into a “searching” or “wandering” modulation.

Organicism

Another new trend in the middle period is the organization of large works around tiny ideas. In music, a short idea that gets repeated and manipulated in interesting ways is called a *motive*. Beethoven starts to build works in which virtually every musical idea is derived from a very simple motive – thus, the whole work seems to grow “organically” out of one “seed.” Composers who followed Beethoven found this to be a very exciting concept.

Symphony No. 5

The Fifth Symphony is of course Beethoven’s most famous and familiar work – virtually everyone knows that it starts with the very striking “buh-buh-buh-BUUUM” motive. (Beethoven apparently told his one of his assistants that this represented “fate knocking at the door.”)

What you may not have realized is that the entire symphony is permeated with hundreds of copies of this idea. The first movement builds an entire sonata form out of it, and then our slow movement, minuet and trio, and high-energy finale all use it as well.

In class I play parts of all four movements and point out as many instances of the motive as I can.