

Class Notes

Session 15, Thurs Oct 19

In this session we discussed three things:

- I. Sonata Form
- II. Beethoven, Part I
- III. Metric Subdivisions

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 their 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, 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.

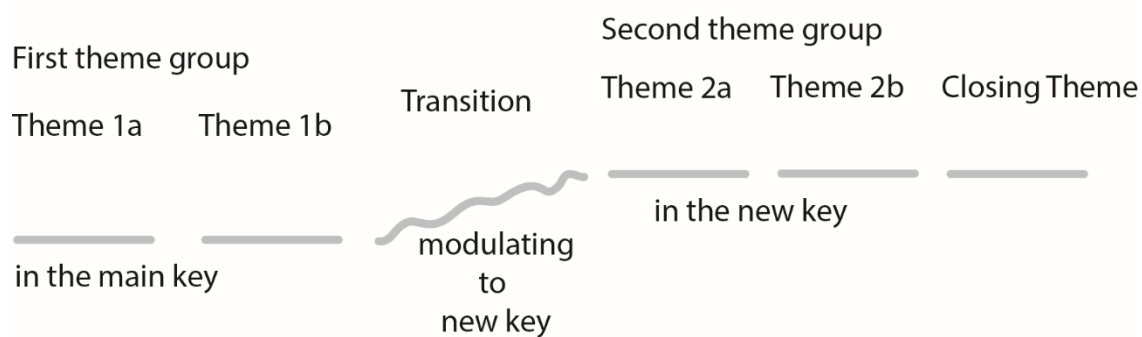
Then, we come out the other side with the **recapitulation**. Here the “problem” has been solved. The themes are presented in the same order as in the exposition, only the themes that were originally in the “wrong” key will now be “fixed.”

[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.

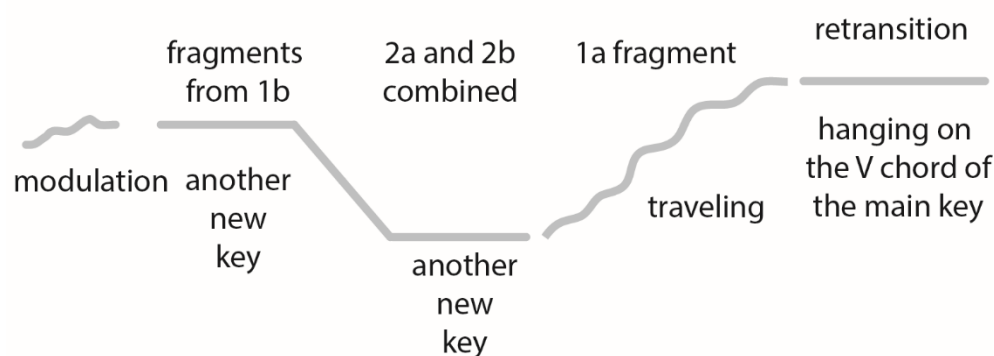
Closing theme(s)

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

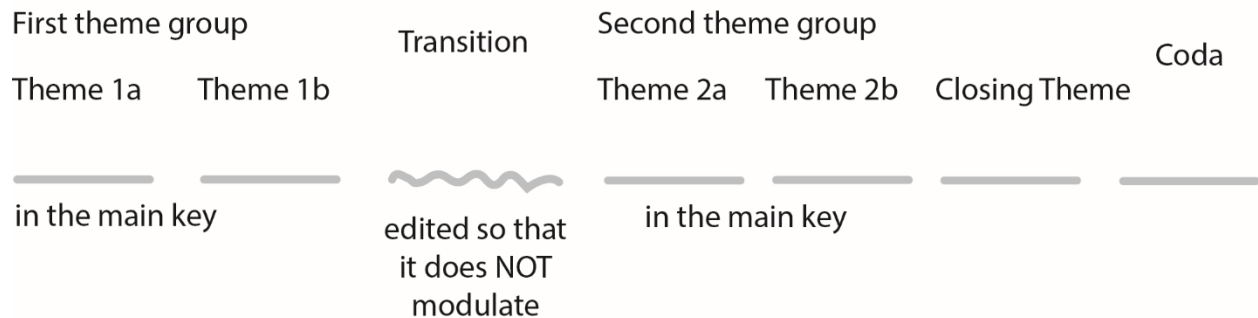


In general, there aren’t many standard special parts to the development. Each one tends to be fairly creative and unique, so there are many different techniques we might see here. The only distinct “little part” that people frequently note is the retransition.

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 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'll discuss the first part, "Early Beethoven."

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! We'll talk about this middle period in the near future.

Meter II: Subdivisions of the beat

Up until now our task in identifying meter has had two steps:

- 1) Find the beat
- 2) Decide whether it makes more sense to count the beats as "1 2 1 2" (which is duple), "1 2 3 1 2 3" (which is triple) or "1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4" (which is just a fancier version of duple.)

Now we are going to focus on what happens within each beat. Most music includes lots of faster notes that happen between each beat – you could say that we are subdividing each beat into little parts and using those. Like with the "big" pattern of meter, subdivisions tend to be duple or triple.

In order to explain this I used examples from music notation. You don't need to remember the notation part, but it might help.

In general, whoever made up our musical terms in English seems to have decided that music "in four" is the normal order of things. The typical piece of sheet music begins with the 4/4 time signature, meaning that you will put four "quarter notes" in each measure.



This is subtly mathematical, as four "quarters" = "one whole."

DUPLE SUBDIVISIONS

If we decide to divide each of these beats into two parts, we would use “eighth notes.”



These are duple subdivisions. I’ll give you some verbal cues to remember what this sounds like. You could simulate a string of eighth notes by saying “takka” on each beat (takka takka takka takka...)

If we decide to cut the beat into *four* parts, this makes sixteenth notes.



You could simulate the sound of sixteenth notes by saying “takedimi” or “diggadigga.” I even once taught with a textbook that recommended you say “peanutbutter” when you saw this rhythm.

So, like with the “big” patterns, subdivisions of two or four are duple. Music with duple subdivisions will tend to mix the two rhythmic values together, so you’ll get a sprinkling of eighth notes and sixteenth notes here and there.

Most music you hear (including most rock music) has duple subdivisions – it is pretty much the “normal” version of meter.

TRIPLE SUBDIVISIONS

You can also divide the beat into three parts, and this creates a much different feeling than duple subdivisions do. I like to describe it as “rolling” or “bouncy.”

Some everyday examples of tunes that use triple subdivisions are the “Mister Softee” ice cream truck music and “Pop Goes the Weasel.” Pop and rock tunes that do it are perhaps still a bit unusual (though it is easier to find rock with triple subs than it is to find rock in slow triple meter, like in the last unit.) I’ve made [YouTube](#) and [Spotify](#) playlists of some examples.

So, dividing our quarter notes into 3 parts would mathematically produce “twelfth notes,” but nobody says that. Instead we tend to call them “triplets.”



Verbal cues you can use to create this sound would be “tri-puh-let,” “taketa,” or “diddily.”

Say that on each beat and you will be rolling with triple subdivisions!

(You musicians out there may also be aware that there is another common way to notate triplet subdivisions, with the 6/8, 9/8, and 12/8 time signatures. This can be super-annoying to talk about, even when you are a professional, since there is often confusion over which part is a beat. For the purposes of this class we will just ignore these so-called “compound” time signatures.)

So, we will practice detecting whether sound clips feature duple subdivisions or triple subdivisions. There is a [“free practice” exercise on our website](#) to help you study.

My general recommendations would be

Before you even play any music, practice saying our nonsense cues like “takka,” “diddily,” “takedimi” to a beat, at different speeds.

Then, the procedure is similar to our old meter exercise

- 1) Find the beat (tap along!)
- 2) Test whether the music seems based on “takka,” “diddily,” or “takedimi” subdivisions. See which word pattern seems to fit with the music, say the verbal cue along with the track, maybe drum along with your hands. That will tell you the answer.