

Trevor de Clercq
Music 383 Webster
December 4, 1994

Overview of the Nineteenth-Century
Piano Sonata Genre

The principle of sonata form appeared early in the development of eighteenth-century classical music. Composers relied on the tonal goals of sonata form as a helpful musical skeleton which could be easily fleshed out through their creativity. The most famous composers of the classical era, such as Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven, often used sonata principles to guide the first movements of works for a wide variety of instruments. Among all those different instruments, however, one seemed to emerge as a favorite for (in particular solo) sonata writing: the piano. The reasons for this development are fairly obvious and numerous: 1) the piano, having the ability to play up to ten notes at a time, was one of the few instruments which could support itself; 2) a composer's main instrument was usually the piano, making solo piano works a very facile medium in which to write; 3) the piano also served as a useful pedagogic tool for which "amateur" or "instructional" music needed to be written (an example being many of Clementi's piano sonatas). Newman explains the nineteenth-century attraction more spiritually: The piano

"provided the most direct and universal answer to the Romantic penchant for 'sheer sound' as an aesthetic fact in itself--for the mystical depths and highs of new sonorities, for a mysterious 'withdrawal' from the specific 'word' of a text into the greater but more occult truth of 'wordless music'".

(The Sonata Since Beethoven. Chapel Hill, 1969. pg. 87)

Other reasons abound; basically the piano had become the instrument of choice for most composers. Of all these geniuses writing piano sonatas in the classical style, though, Beethoven rose to the top. His thirty-two piano sonatas still serve today as absolutes in this art. Romantic composers of the nineteenth-century were very much aware of this towering giant in piano sonata music. But like any ambitious composer, these romantics sought to compete, improve, and even challenge the standards of piano sonata writing that existed in the 1700's. Of course, in a century when a composer was supposed to be in touch with his muse, to be swayed more by feeling than reason, and especially to be highly original, the romantic composer was a bit out of place copying the musical practices of the previous century. But as such masterworks as Schubert's Sonata in B-flat, Liszt's Sonata in B minor, and Brahms's Sonata in F minor all reveal, great nineteenth-century composers were more than merely repeating musical clichés; these greats found their own voice in an already existing genre. Working within this genre, though, tied them to musical practices and techniques created before their time. Therefore, while being continually stretched and developed beyond its original framework, the romantic piano

sonata was a vehicle which preserved classical order and logic in an era of emotion and impulse.

The principles which guide sonata writing are not as complex as these thirty minute pieces may suggest. A typical sonata is written in four movements, each movement having its own characteristic forms, tempi, key areas, etc. The first movement is usually an allegro with key areas and form being suggested by "sonata form". This "sonata form" is based on the simple desire to contrast two different tonal areas in the course of one movement. A first group will be in the tonic, followed by a transition leading to a second group in the dominant for the tonic major or a second group in the mediant for the tonic minor. After a developmental section in which the opening motives are worked out through various remote keys comes the recapitulation. The key to sonata form is this recapitulation, where the second group, preceded by the first group, appears now in the tonic instead of the contrasting key as it did before. A simple coda will usually close of the movement. The second movement is usually a slow tempo (largo, andante) with a simple ternary form (A B A). Often the B section appears in the subdominant or submediant key area. The third movement usually retains the formal and tonal simplicity of the second movement but plays with the tempo. Dance forms (minuet and trio) and other lively tempi in three-four (scherzo) characterize this movement. Finally, the fourth movement closes the work with a grand finale, most commonly a rondo in six-eight. Many other possibilities within the repertory exist for

any of the movements. A very common variation on the model, however, is to give one or two of the movements following the first a structure which plays upon the principles of sonata form.

These sonata characteristics proved a useful model for the music of the 1700's. But as the society of the eighteenth-century changed slowly into the society of the nineteenth-century, the functions, conditions, and contexts of music such as the piano sonata changed too. And with these changes in function came a change in the forms and styles of the music as well. In the eighteenth-century, music had a more mundane purpose than the high art of the nineteenth-century. Music functioned as a pleasant diversion for the court, as a spiritual aide in the church, or as a dramatic tool for the theater. In this sense, music needed to be produced in continuous quantities for which the tonal plan of sonata form proved to be a useful tool. Similarly, concerts of a large public nature were fairly rare, and most musical performances were restricted to the chamber salon. Therefore, a musician counted mainly from the profits of publishing a sonata, not performing it. Since the average person did not have a very high proficiency at his instrument, solo piano sonatas had to stay at a relatively simple technical level. The emergence of a middle-class bourgeoisie in the nineteenth-century changed much of this picture.

Court, church, and theater functions for the solo sonata began to disappear. Taking the place of these defunct social purposes

was the public concert, funded by the new disposable incomes of the middle-class. In order to attract larger audiences to the concert hall (and thus more profit), the solo piano sonata started to undergo some changes. The most obvious changes were technical advances. Performers in the nineteenth-century, who were oftentimes the composers as well, needed to amaze and bedazzle their audiences to keep them coming back. And as the technical complexity of these solo piano sonatas increased, so too did the level of the average performer's technique. Virtuosi of the eighteenth-century equaled in technique the common nineteenth-century professional due to an increase in pedagogy and an increase in the playability of the concert piano through technological advances. The nineteenth-century virtuoso, therefore, was a performer with truly exceptional skill. His solo sonatas were unplayable by the common public, forcing the audiences to return to the concert hall for their favorite pieces.

Schubert's Sonata in B-flat, written in 1828, reveals some of the early developments of romantic writing. The opening theme of this sonata (bars 1-8) is written in a lyrical, singing style. This quality finds its roots in Schubert's song-cycles, for which he is most famous. But this lyrical theme, as opposed to the motivic clusters of Beethoven's opening themes, is also born out of general nineteenth-century musical values. The romantics began to view sonata form not as an opposition of two tonal areas, but rather an opposition of two different themes. Where the classical model served as an aide to guide tonal

direction, the romantic model served as a method to organic writing. Assumably, too, romantic audiences would rather listen to the development of tunes rather than the cerebral, classical treatment of motives. This desire for melody also led to longer, more expansive phrases. In bar 21, Schubert quickly jumps into thematic development, extending the range and scope of his opening melody over a simple pedal. Schubert's organic technique requires some variety to keep melodic interest, however--variety which comes in the form of a quick change in tonality. The move to bVI keeps this interest and also allows Schubert to chromatically alter the melody for added variety. His singing style, though, does not stretch the rhythmic clichés of the previous century. The opening theme sticks to eighth-note accompaniment, and the theme of bar 21 is supported by Alberti bass sixteenth-notes reminiscent of galant practices. When this theme returns in bar 37, though, Schubert avoids a cadence by keeping the F in the bass, showing his desire for balancing organicism with forward momentum. Schubert needs to begin his transition to the second group, though, and like Beethoven, uses a simple pivot chord. Bar 47 is the measure of change: a B diminished seventh chord is enharmonically respelled as an E-sharp diminished seventh chord. But although the method of change is similar to Beethoven, the destination is not. This chord leads Schubert to F-sharp minor in bar 49 (flat-vi), a remote key area. The transitional nature of this key area is called into question, though, for in bar 71 Schubert has returned to B-flat major. For most of the rest of the

exposition, V never really asserts itself as a key area until 109. The E-flats (mm 81, 87, 107) are too persistent. Schubert's themes, as in bar 71, seem more important than the key areas. Only at the last moment does Schubert give in to the classical cadence in the dominant. Even when the dominant is reached in bar 111, this new key area is not heralded by a dominant (of the dominant) pedal as Beethoven usually does, but by figuration leading nowhere (bars 81-103). Schubert, therefore, searching for romantic lyricism, breaks some classical clichés of the sonata, but is finally bound by sonata principles to reach his tonal goals.

The other movements in this sonata see Schubert using many similar techniques, beginning with a very organic second movement. The A sections (bars 1-42 and 90+) stay with an ostinato bass figure throughout and infrequent chord changes, some chords lasting eight bars as in the opening. This slow rate of harmonic change is uncharacteristic of classical slow movements where chords generally change with the measure or the beat. These stagnant chords, however, lead to expansive lyricism, stretching simple progressions over the course of many bars. The B section (mm 43-89) drives for the same lyricism and organicism as in the A section. The four bar phrase in bars 43-46 is repeated seven or eight more times in this section before the piece returns to A. True, mm 59 and 76 present the theme in a dominant context, but these sections are merely transition sections serving as a break between the unmodulating, continuous variations on bars 43-46. Schubert is therefore again more

concerned with the lyrical quality of his piece rather than any specific harmonic goals. The transition from the A section to the B (mm 41-42), as another example, was basically non-existent. Even in the final A section, where Schubert explores complicated key relationships, the transitions are fairly simple. Bar 103, a foreshadowing of the closing tonic major, is approached by common-tone relationships from the previous bar. No dominant needs to trumpet its arrival. Schubert is concentrating on the organic flow of the movement, and avoiding obvious dominants makes his texture more seamless.

The last two movements share similar characteristics as well. While Schubert's phrase structure in the scherzo are even, he chooses the subdominant as a stopping point in bar 16 as opposed to the classical dominant. His key areas for the B section of this movement are a little more remote than classical convention, too: bVII in bar 21 and bIII in bar 28 both support a lyrical tenor melody. And his methods of transitioning back home to the tonic are as simple as before: Enharmonic respelling in bar 50 leads to a classic circle of fifths, and the b minor chord in bar 67 easily slides to Bb major through common-tone relationships. The transposition in bar 77 of bar 9 shows an interesting play on traditional sonata form, leading him home to the tonic instead of the subdominant for the close. This play on sonata principles occurs in the last movement as well: Bar 95 in the exposition gets transposed down a fifth in the recapitulation at bar 358. But here again, the musical emphasis is on theme, not key area. Schubert's second theme

spans bars 85-152 with no change in ultimate tonal orientation. Schubert's desire for organicism keeps the same musical figuration throughout, the only variety in the texture being a subtle off-beat versus on-beat pattern in the bass part. This figuration, though, stays pretty much within the standards set by Beethoven in his piano sonatas. Schubert was never known for his abilities as a virtuoso pianist.

Liszt, however, was known for his abilities as a virtuoso pianist. His Sonata in B minor at times seems more like a vehicle with which to display his technical prowess than a vehicle with which to develop themes and motives. Which is not to say that themes and motives do not abound in this piece. The unconventional sonata form of this piece is based around the development of a few themes. However, this piece still poses an analytical dilemma because it is merely one movement. Should the piece be analyzed as a seamless string of four movements or as one extended example of sonata form? The arguments for the four movement example, while interesting, do not seem to hold as much weight as the one movement argument. The key areas are actually quite clear: Exposition First Theme bar 8, Second Theme bar 105, Development, Recapitulation bar 460, and Second Theme Recap bar 600. The recapitulation does not exactly begin in the correct key (a half-step too low in b-flat minor) but the second theme's exposition (in the characteristic III) and its recapitulation (in tonic major) are the binding forces that keep this piece in sonata form.

This wide-ranging effort at a one movement sonata embodies many characteristics of romantic sonatas as compared to classical sonatas. Solo piano sonatas tended to get longer in the nineteenth-century and also have interlocking movements. As well, the romantic desire for thematic interrelations between movements makes a one movement sonata seem inevitable. Liszt championed this high romantic style, therefore, through his choice of form, but also through his figurations and transitions.

After the initial statement of the opening themes, m 18 shows dramatic arpeggiations sweeping through both the right and left hand parts. The writing is very sequential in this section, for the emphasis is on the virtuoso techniques. But no real transition is needed because the piece finally lands on a solid tonic cadence in bar 32. Without further ado, Liszt plunges into thematic development in bar 33, something a classical sonata may hold off until the developmental section. This early development increases the organic nature of the piece and allows the composer to splash his quick arpeggios overtop. These arpeggios which show up throughout the piece always serve as displays of exceptional technique and also conveniently outline the harmony of the bar in the same way as the Alberti bass. In the sense, Liszt's revolutionary techniques can be seen as outgrowths of classical clichés. Some of Liszt's transition techniques look back to earlier styles, too. Notice the enharmonic respelling in bar 51, similar to the methods of a simpler Schubert. More thematic development abounds in bar 55,

this time in the form of thematic compression. It seems in the desire for extreme organicism, Liszt must rely on many various compositional techniques. Already in bar 57 the theme has been transposed into Bb, a remote key area. The octave doublings in bars 72-80 are more virtuoso qualities thrown into the composition to awe the listener of the 1800's; these mind-numbing triple-fortissimos serve to blur tonality a bit, thus easing Liszt's quick moves between key areas. Liszt, though, unlike Schubert, has blurred his tonality such that he needs a strong dominant to herald his second theme. Bars 81-104 are this dominant pedal, complicated with more mixture than Beethoven ever used.

The dominant pedal leads to a grand second theme at bar 105. The texture used by Liszt for this theme is thicker than any of the classical period. Nine notes are sounding at one time due to a constant use of the pedal. And another triple-fortissimo in bar 109 distinguishes Liszt's dynamics from the classical era. Obviously, "the romantic penchant for 'sheer sound'" is no myth. This second theme shows other developments to the classical style. The romantic use of third-relations between chords (in an effort to avoid the dominant) is seen between bars 109-110. Between bars 110-111, the chords have a doubled third-relation: their roots are a tritone apart. These new progressions allow Liszt to give new life to a classical cliché of the descending bass. Third-relations, in fact, form standard for romantic harmony. Notice the key area relations between bars 114-115. More transitions like Schubert appear,

too: enharmonic respellings in 151, diminished seventh ambiguity in bar 191, direct transposition in bars 182-183. Also the tritone bass jumps in bars 16-162 begin to sound more like Ravel than Beethoven. Soon Liszt needs to bedazzle his audience, again, though. Bar 244+ brings back those virtuoso techniques, this time in the form of sweeping chromatic runs. Unlike chromatic passages by Beethoven, these runs span four octaves in the right hand, a feat only possible by use of the extended range of nineteenth-century pianos. Bars 301-329 show another common nineteenth-century attempt at lyricism: frequent tempo changes, especially to recitative, increase the sense of fantasy and improvisation associated with a sensitive style. The rest of the piece shows similar virtuoso techniques mixed with continuous thematic development. Classical sonata processes appear often, though, rooting the piece into a tradition of form and logic.

Brahms, unlike Liszt, reserved much of the virtuoso passages in favor of more lyrical sections in the romantic singing style. His Sonata in F minor, although written in the same year as Liszt's B minor, also adheres more closely to the sonata forms of the classical period than the experimental forms of Liszt. His slow movement is in simple ternary form with a B section in the subdominant; the first movement has relatively conservative keys for transition (VI-natural in m 31); his scherzo is ternary with the B section in the submediant; the intermezzo is a delicate mini-sonata; and the finale stays in a six-eight rondo/variation format. But in the romantic search

for seamless phrases, Brahms tries his own techniques. The B section of the trio uses a syncopation of the hypermeter to increase the forward momentum (bars 101-108). This opening phrase is close-ended (finishing on the tonic), but by m 133 (six bar phrase), Brahms leaves his phrases open-ended to push the music forward even more. Phrases in this movement also begin to overlap: two four bar phrases begin in m 203 and 207, and another seems to begin in bar 211 but seamlessly leads back to the beginning of the movement. Other movements use irregular phrase structures to offset the listener's sense of balance: the three opening phrases of the piece are grouped 6+5+5. The opening phrases of the finale are grouped 4+4+2, the *a tempo* catching the listener by surprise.

Brahms also relies on nineteenth-century compositional techniques similar to the practices of Liszt and Schubert. Third relations and enharmonic respellings appear between bars 45-46 in the scherzo. Inter-movemental thematic relations appear, showing Brahms's romantic desire for organicism: compare the descending thirds theme of the andante with the descending theme in the intermezzo, particularly bar 47. Remote key areas, such as flat-vi in bar 72 of the first movement, do appear in Brahms, too. Also, in m 88, the characteristic diminished seventh chord leads enharmonically to a dominant of the submediant. Sequencing, a favorite practice in organic writing of the romantic era appears, too. Compare bars 42 and 46 of the scherzo. A few qualities are particular to Brahms, of course: he seems to favor plagal cadences at the end of movements

instead of the typical dominant (mvmts IV and V). And his expansion of the flat-VI/augmented sixth chord as the development of the intermezzo mini-sonata has a beauty similar to Debussy. Brahms, as is well known, was more a more conservative composer for his time. And although he evolved many techniques of the classical sonata, he conserved many of the techniques as well.

Schubert and Liszt, just as Brahms, were creators of new innovative techniques in solo piano sonata writing. And although the romantic "focus on explicit 'contents' of music, on original themes, on continual thematic transformation, and on dynamic processes inhibited the full integration of complex structures along Classical lines," (Webster, Nineteenth Century Music. Garland Press, 1985) the use of the solo piano sonata medium forced composers to conserve tonal techniques and practices of the previous century. The composers looked to Beethoven as their model and attempted to expand the framework of the sonata to accommodate their own love of lyricism and thematic development. According to history, they succeeded.

