

Theories of Sonata Form: A Brief History

So as you know, Carl will be talking about his SMT seminar that he took on "Sonata Theory." As you probably also know, that seminar is based on the book that James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy published last year called "Elements of Sonata Theory."

Now in order to best setup Carl's talk, I thought it would be a good idea to give you guys a little background on the history of sonata theory. In the introduction to their book, Hepokoski and Darcy outline four main trends in the way that scholars have approached theorizing about form in sonatas. As another viewpoint, I want to mention that if you look up the article on "Form" in the Cambridge History of Western Music Theory, it is basically a history of theories of sonata form. Scott Burnham writes: <quote> The sprawling tradition of the so-called *Formenlehre* obviously involves a welter of forms and even of methods, but the analysis of what we call sonata form has surely been the central strand. To tell a story of the codification of sonata form is by and large to tell a story of the theory of musical form in the last two centuries.<endquote> . So I think we can assume for now that by talking about form in sonatas, we are wrestling with some of the most essential questions about musical form in general.

Before we start looking at these specific trends that Hepokoski and Darcy outline, I want to first identify some basic issues that seem to run throughout these trends. I have a little list of seven oppositions or contradictions at the top of your handout. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but these issues seem to pop up a lot when talking about sonata form. Now most of these issues should be self-explanatory, like two-part versus three-part. And some of the issues are kind of just issues with theory, not just theories of form, like the scope of music that the theory covers.

But I'd like to spend a moment to explore the last pair of terms. Among theorists, there seems to be a basic question of whether pieces "conform" to a model or whether pieces are "generated" from the thematic elements of the individual work itself. Theorists usually refer to this as an opposition between the conformational perspective and the generative perspective.

The difference between the generative and conformational approaches is also analogous to the difference between what theorists call "inner" and "outer" form. The "outer" form of a piece of music, like the conformational view, is what elements that work shares in common with a number of related works. The "inner" form of a piece of music, on the other hand, are those unique qualities of the work that make it different than any other piece of music. A generative approach obviously aims at explaining this "inner" form.

What these last couple terms bring up is what Mark Evan Bonds calls "the paradox of form." Form is a paradox, according to Bonds, because we basically have two opposite definitions of the word "form." On one hand, we typically use the term "form" to refer to how a piece of music is similar to some other group of music, while on the other hand, we use the word "form" to refer to the individual structure of a specific work (Bonds, 1).

With these issues in mind, let's turn back to Hepokoski and Darcy's four main trends. I have those trends briefly outlined there on the first page. I've also given you some representative theorists or musicologists within each trend and then also a representative text. I also put below these four trends an outline I made of Scott Burnham's article from CHOWMT. I think it's worth comparing these two ways of viewing theories of sonata form and seeing how they are alike yet where they differ.

Now in order to start talking about these various theories of form, though, I think it's best to compare them to what they are not. In other words, we should start with what we already

know, which is our standard <quote-unquote> textbook sonata form. But what is textbook sonata form? It seems that our tacit agreement on what textbook sonata form is derives from the theories of A.B. Marx. Marx was the first theorist, it seems, to actually coin the phrase "sonata form." Moreover, Marx was also the first theorist to conceive of this "sonata form" as basically a ternary structure. Marx didn't use the terms Exposition, Development, and Recapitulation, though. He just called them first part, second part, and third part. These three parts fit nicely with Marx's overarching philosophy of rest-motion-rest. This rest-motion-rest philosophy is something Marx saw happening at all levels of musical structure. Even a simple phrase starts at rest on tonic, goes through motion, and then reaches a point of rest at a cadence.

You'll notice that I have a table there of how Marx proposed the derivation of sonata form from smaller, rondo-like forms. According to Burnham, Marx's evolution of form was not an attempt to show how the sonata form historically came about from shorter forms. Marx was trying to set up more of a logical progression, almost like a streamlined reconstruction of an ideal history. At the right of each form on the handout is an inherent flaw which Marx uses to argue for the form below it. As you can see, the form is anthropomorphized to some extent: it "desires" balance, it "requires" unity. Musical form to Marx is like an organism that grows of its own accord. And sonata form is at the pinnacle of that growth; for Marx, all instrumental forms led to the sonata.

You should also notice that Marx identifies parts of the form as either *Satzes* or *Gangs*. I think a useful translation of *Satz* is theme, especially when Marx talks about main theme and closing theme. This identification of thematic areas or thematic content is also, I think, part of our collective understanding of what we call textbook sonata form. I'd just like to remind you about my talk on Anton Reicha, who was ostensibly the first theorist to discuss sonata form from a thematic perspective.

So it's from theorists in the early to mid part of the 19th-century that we seem to have received our "textbook" view of sonata form as a three-part design that pits themes against one another in the dramatic battle of the development section. Charles Rosen wrote, <quote>Except for a few small and unimportant details, sonata form will be for all eternity what Czerny said it was,<unquote>. And I've got part of Czerny's definition right there so you can see for example how Czerny describes the exposition section.

So now we have a better context in which to place the first trend that Hepokoski and Darcy point out, that is the "eclectic and analytical writing" trend epitomized by Donald Tovey and Charles Rosen. I'll quote Tovey to start of with: <quote> "There are no rules whatsoever for the number or distribution of themes in sonata form." <endquote>. Obviously, Tovey is reacting strongly to our textbook notion of first theme and second theme, etc. Notice on your handout that Tovey made this statement in an essay called "Sonata Forms," which is the exact same title that Charles Rosen adopts for his 1980 book. Notice, too, that important pluralization: sonata "forms." For Tovey and Rosen, there is not nor can there be a single form that one can label "sonata form." Rosen writes <quote> it is very dubious that a unique sonata form can be so defined for even a single decade of the late 18th-century<endquote>. Many instrumental genres and vocal genres, especially concerto and aria for Rosen, overlap with the musical forms and techniques that are seen in sonatas from the late 1700s.

So how did Tovey and Rosen present their readings of sonata movements? Well, Tovey's analyses are much like outlines or summaries of the music. Tovey sketches out where phrases end and new sections begin and so on. However, and here I'm quoting Burnham, "Because Tovey refuses to generalize about musical form and process, his analyses are sometimes

regarded as mere descriptions, a kind of bar counting <endquote>. It's kind of like the "guided tour" approach, as Dave Headlam would say.

Since Rosen and Tovey reject the 19th-century view of sonata form as a container for working out two contrasting themes, they inherently end up adopting a more harmonic orientation toward the sonata. Rosen insists that the real conflict in sonata is derived from the two contrasting harmonic areas. Rosen calls this a "polarization." The concept of opposition with Rosen is very different than thinking about two key areas as being complementary or as one being the natural outgrowth of the other. According to Rosen, this polarization of key areas creates a "large-scale dissonance". Rosen writes <quote> A theme that has been played only at the dominant is a structural dissonance, unresolved until it has been transposed to the tonic.<endquote>. So even though Rosen has evoked the aspect of theme, here, he seems to believe that themes are basically ways to articulate harmonic factors within the piece. Something also to note about Rosen's viewpoint is that even though he has shifted from a thematic approach to a harmonic approach, he still basically conceives of sonata form as a three-part form. He's still using the terms Exposition, Development, and Recapitulation in his writing, which are terms we associate I think with thematic areas.

This harmonic approach that Rosen takes actually goes back to the original way that theorists in the 1700s conceived of the sonata. So now we're brought to the second category of trends in Hepokoski and Darcy, which is a more historically-informed view of the sonata. In 1949, Leonard Ratner wrote an apparently eye-opening essay that was harshly critical of the prevailing bi-thematic approach to sonata form. In this essay, Ratner basically trots out examples of poly-thematic works, like Beethoven's Eroica, and Ratner also points to the many monothematic symphonic first movements by Haydn. Now presumably, Ratner could have developed some modified approach to sonatas that was still thematically-oriented but was more flexible with regard to the number of themes, but Ratner instead brings out a long list of theorists from the 1700s, none of whom talk about the sonata from a thematic approach.

I've given you a short list of some of the names of theorists that Ratner refers to. As you can see, all of these theorists were roughly writing around the same time as Haydn, Beethoven and Mozart. Ratner's basic presumption, implicitly, is that if the theorists of the time did not conceive of the sonata in the way that we do today, then the composers themselves must not have conceived of it that way. Ratner writes, <quote> "One searches in vain through these and other writings of the time for the familiar thematic outline found in today's textbooks....At the most, there is some recognition of the element of thematic contrast....However, these thematic conditions are superimposed on the usual harmonic substructure; they represent a secondary level of organization, controlled by – and not controlling – the harmonic aspects of the form.<endquote>

Ratner goes on to point out that all of these theorists, and even many theorists in the 1800s, viewed the sonata as a two-part form, not a three-part form. Again, I remind you of my discussion of Anton Reicha, who called his sonata form the *grand coupe binaire*, or large binary division. Often, this two-part scheme is based on the view of a sonata that it moves from tonic to some foreign key in the exposition and then from this foreign key back to tonic after the double bar, much like a binary form except in a much bigger scope.

One main criticism of Ratner's approach is that, although he is open to modern scholarship on sonata form, Ratner is unwilling to allow for modern readings that are "incompatible with 18th-century thought." (Hill 80). From this standpoint, it makes it difficult for Ratner, ostensibly, to see the changes of compositional approach to the sonata form from the

mid-1700s to the late 1700s to the early 1800s as his views are anchored to the views of theorists at the time, who were often slow to respond to the changing compositional climate. And also, I mean, just because 18th-century theorists did not talk about sonata form from a thematic viewpoint, wasn't it possible that composers viewed sonatas that way? Most of the theory textbooks from the 1700s had a strong pedagogical slant, so talking about harmonic areas may have merely been the easiest not necessarily the best way theorists had of explaining form.

I'd like to transition now and spend just a little time talking about another harmonically-oriented trend in sonata form theory – specifically, the theory of Heinrich Schenker. Now I won't spend too much time on Schenker since we take classes devoted exclusively to his theories. The main thing to emphasize right here is Schenker view of sonata form as a two-part form, specifically an "interrupted" form. This two-part approach gives Schenker basically a similar outlook to 18th-century theorists on some level. But Schenker, of course, puts the end of the first section near the end of the development, not at the beginning. So there's an analytical tension thus even between those theorists who believe in the two-part model.

Thus so far, we can see that three out of the four main trends that Hepokoski and Darcy identify have been reactions to the 19th-century theories of form. Let's turn now to William Caplin, who is the last remaining theorist that Hepokoski and Darcy focus on. Instead of reacting against the 19th-century *Formenlehre* tradition, Caplin has seemed to rather try and modify it and to improve upon it.

Before discussing Caplin, let's talk a little more about the theoretical history of the 1800s. As I've mentioned, there was a tendency in writings from the 1800s to view musical form as the result of an organic process. It's kind of ironic that A. B. Marx, who proposed a generative evolution of sonata form from smaller forms, is credited with what has become our textbook, i.e. conformational view of sonata form. Later 19th-century theorists, like Riemann, Schenker, Schoenberg, and Ratz, took this conception of musical pieces the product of organic processes to an even further extreme. Schoenberg, for example, developed the notion of *Grundgestalt*, where a basic musical idea could be the source of all material in the rest of the work. The level of generative material, therefore, has been shrunk down from Marx's *Satz* to potentially just a small motive within the *Satz* itself. In a sense, organicism is taken to its extreme in Schoenberg and Ratz's views.

Caplin is admittedly highly influenced by Schoenberg and Ratz, but Caplin distances himself from the notion that the motive is the generating kernel for the musical work. Caplin writes, <quote> the formal function of an individual group does not depend on its motivic content<endquote> and that <quote> the appearance of a particular melodic motive rarely determines its formal expression<endquote>. Caplin goes on to point out that pieces of music can be saturated with a motive, yet we still understand the function of particular sections of the piece. This idea of formal function is very important to Caplin. Particularly, he separates formal function from grouping structure. A group, for example, may express more than one function at once. For instance, a codetta may have both cadential and continuation functions in that the codetta may close one section but may initiate something else.

Caplin apparently has problems unifying his theory into something that is manageable, however. Warren Darcy, in a review of Caplin's *Classical Form* book, writes <quote> "Caplin's taxonomical machinery was clearly designed with good intentions, but at a certain point it simply spins out of control, classifying and categorizing everything in sight....Deviations from the norm are cited, but if possible, categories are invented to accommodate them.<endquote>. Darcy also criticizes Caplin for the lack of distinction between importance and prevalence of any one of

these many categories. Darcy writes <quote> This neutral attitude towards compositional choice is perhaps the most troubling aspect of the book...Although Caplin excels at explaining *what* a composer does, he rarely asks *why*....Above all, *what is the expressive point of these moment-to-moment compositional choices*. <endquote>

But what is admirable about Caplin's approach, in my mind, is that he seems to have avoided falling into what Leonard Meyer calls "the fallacy of hierarchic uniformity." The fallacy of hierarchic uniformity is defined as the <quote>tacit and usually unconscious assumption that the same forces and processes which order and articulate one hierarchic level are operative, are equally effective, and function in the same fashion in the structuring of all levels<endquote>. Meyer's fallacy seems to me a warning to heed, especially when confronted with these purely organic approaches to form. Recent research in music perception and cognition has shown that we as listeners hear long-term events quite differently than we hear things in the short-term. It is not just of question of whether or not the system is consistent at multiple levels, but whether we as listeners actually perceive music in the same way at multiple levels.

It is also interesting to compare Meyer's fallacy with theorists from the 1700s, who were some of the first to really wrestle with the notion of form before "form" as a term was really put into use as such. For a theorist such as Koch, phrases and small forms could be additively combined and expanded to create increasingly large structures. However, once you reach the level of an entire piece, Koch gives more schematic-type approaches. It is as if form, at least for Koch, works from generative principles at the lower level and then at higher-levels, form becomes a conformational process.

Now that we've taken a quick survey of some of the main approaches to sonata form, let's return to Mark Evan Bonds's notion of the paradox of form. Bonds writes: <quote> There is a disturbing absence of any theoretical basis of form that can reconcile the generative and conformational approaches in a convincing fashion.... What is needed...is a general theory of form that can account for conventional patterns and at the same time do justice to the immense diversity that exists within the framework of these patterns. The issue...is how to reconcile the conventional with the individual, the stereotypical with the unique <endquote> Bonds goes on to ask: although someone like Ratner may be correct in identifying the harmonic opposition of 18-century sonatas as the unifying element, what have we really done except identify the "lowest-common denominator"? Have we really learned or said much about what form really is? Can we tell an undergraduate that a sonata is simply a polarization of keys and that they should go now with this wisdom and write a stylistically-accurate 18th-century sonata? And for all of the debate over exactly what sonata form is, have we learned anything about other forms? Variation technique certainly doesn't operate on a high level as a polarization of keys. Nor do 19th-century sonatas necessarily operate on the same principles that 18th-century sonatas do. And what happens when harmony and themes seem to dissolve, such as in a lot of 20th-century music? Can we have a definition of form in these contexts that at all mimics our definition of form for common-practice tonal music?

So in conclusion, I've given you a little history of the theories of sonata form, and I have presented the history of sonata form as an important or even central case study in the history of theories of form. But despite all the words that theorists have written over the centuries on just how sonatas are formed, it seems to me that theorists are still essentially torn between the two opposing definitions of the word "form" such that we do not have a single unified explanation of formal processes, either for sonata form itself or form in general. Now let's see if Hepokoski and Darcy can get us any closer....

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