

# MusicTeachers.co.uk Background Notes

## An overview of the Sonata from Classical to Romantic Periods

By about 1770, most of the specific changes that dictated the shift from Baroque sonata to Classical sonata were firmly established. Through the work of the Neapolitan school of opera led by Domenico Scarlatti's father Alessandro (1660-1725), the operatic *sinfonia*, or overture, had streamlined the traditional *sonata da chiesa*. It omitted the opening slow movement and abandoned the fugal manner that was the first *allegro's* link with the past. In the new three-movement pattern, a minuet sometimes replaced the fast, abstract finale. In other cases, the inclusion of both minuet and finale brought the number of movements back to four. The south German Mannheim school of composers – most notably Johann Wenzel Stamitz (1717-57) and his son Karl (1745-1801) – developed the technique of the orchestra, whose resources now provided an ideal laboratory for experimentation, with the dramatic effects of tonal contrast.

By this time the Classical sonata proper (i.e., with at least one movement in sonata form), whether in the medium of sonata, trio, quartet, quintet, or symphony, could provide a vehicle for consolidating the process begun nearly two centuries earlier by the revolution from equal-voiced polyphony to monody, with its emphasis on melody and harmony. The Rococo style of the mid-eighteenth century, generally known as the *style galant*, had attained a halfway stage in which counterpoint had been virtually dropped and tunes had occupied the forefront of interest. But now, in the mature Classical style of Haydn and Mozart, superficial melodic interest was in turn subordinated. In this style, the value of tunes lay in their role as functions of tonality. Key by this time had assumed a central role as the fundamental articulator of form. As a consequence, musical themes were often, though not always, reduced to the status of mere motives, or tags. The theme's harmonic implications, which contribute to the feeling of key, took precedence over its attractiveness as melody.

The new musical principle – that of contrast of key – reached full expression in Haydn and Mozart through their use of sonata form as a principle of musical organisation. Haydn's most valuable work in the sonata form is found in his series of over 80 string quartets, over 100 symphonies, 52 keyboard sonatas, and 31 trios for piano, violin, and cello. Unlike Haydn, Mozart was perhaps at his greatest in the fields of opera and of the solo concerto. (The latter, though it shared with sonata form such elements as the central principle of key contrast, was a medium that evolved, through the Baroque concerto grosso, from the fundamentally different source of the solo vocal aria and the vocal-instrumental concerto.) But in the last six symphonies, the last ten string quartets, about a dozen keyboard sonatas, and several trios, quartets, quintets, and serenades, Mozart achieved outstanding examples of sonata structures. The formerly prominent sonata for violin plays a relatively minor part in both men's output: the violin had been eclipsed by the rise of interest in keyboard instruments. It was reintroduced almost surreptitiously as a distinctly subordinate partner and regained a leading role only toward the end of the eighteenth century, at first in Mozart's later violin sonatas, and then in Beethoven's.

The strikingly individual details in Haydn and Mozart's handling of sonata form are all features consonant with the general outlines of the form. Examples of different approaches include Haydn's taste for combining dualistic key schemes with monistic thematic material (that is, the use of the same basic theme in both keys). He also frequently set slow movements in keys only distantly related to the key of the first movement. Mozart preferred strongly differentiated themes, and he often reshaped his second subjects drastically when they reappeared in the recapitulation. Beethoven, in his sonata compositions (pre-eminently, the 32 piano sonatas, the sixteen string quartets, the trios, the nine symphonies, and the sonatas for violin and for cello), retained the basic sonata form. But he vastly extended its scale; e.g., by increasing the importance of the coda, or concluding section, and by using unusual keys in the exposition, which was greatly increased in length. He also introduced extra-musical implications of a profound philosophical nature. In his later sonatas and quartets he began to move away from the dualistic sonata principle and back to the monistic approach exemplified in variation form and fugue.

The case of Franz Schubert (1797-1828) is quite different. The first movement of the *Symphony No. 5 in B-flat Major* (written when he was nineteen) is one among several places that illustrates a changing attitude to sonata principles. In the recapitulation of this movement,

the first theme is given in the subdominant key (the key whose keynote is five tones below that of the tonic, or home key, as F-C, just as the tonic's keynote is five tones below that of the dominant key, as G-G). This device enables Schubert to place the second theme in the tonic key (the goal of the recapitulation) without altering the transition between the two themes; for the same passage that, in the exposition, took the music from the tonic to the dominant serves, in the recapitulation, to take it from the subdominant to the tonic. This essentially labour-saving procedure is evidence of a certain lack of patience with the workings of sonata form as hitherto practised. Up to this time, sonata form, first treated as a textbook study after Schubert's death, was not a set of rules codified by theorists and followed by composers. Rather, it was a principle of composition that grew out of earlier forms and that can be generalised from an examination of the actual work of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and their contemporaries.

Schubert's interests lay in new directions, and the first steps in two such directions are to be found in the greatest of his instrumental works. His later sonata-form compositions in all media-when they follow the rough traditional scheme of exposition, development, and recapitulation-modify it substantially. He frequently expanded the number of tonal centres (central keys) in the exposition and sometimes the number of basic themes, from two to three. This tendency to expansion affects the whole subsequent course of the Austro-German symphonic tradition. It is the direct ancestor of the expositions of Anton Bruckner (1824-96), with their three distinct thematic groups, and of the vastly extended sonata structures of Gustav Mahler (1860-1911). At the same time, Schubert's *Fantasy in C Major (Wanderer)* for piano (1822) exemplifies an opposite nineteenth-century trend toward contraction, through the fusion of the sonata's formerly separate movements in one closely integrated whole: the four movements of the fantasy are based on transformed versions of a single theme. Similarly, in France, Hector Berlioz (1803-69) in his *Symphonie fantastique* transformed the theme representing the artist's beloved (the *idée fixe*, or fixed idea) so that it took different forms in each movement. In this case the transformation was affected by the program or 'plot' of the symphony. This was a departure from the abstract, or plot-less, character of the Classical sonata. The tendency to fusion-that is, to thematic unity between movements-was the source of the thematic transformations used in symphonic poems, such as those of Franz Liszt (1811-86), as a basic principle of musical structure. But in these works the program rather than any abstract musical form suggests the particular course of the transformation of the themes. For this reason their specific form does not depend, as did that of the Classical sonata, on the exposition-development-recapitulation principle of contrast, conflict, and reconciliation of keys. A corresponding evolution away from the Classical form of the sonata for one instrument occurs in Liszt's one-movement *Piano Sonata in B Minor* (1853). In this work he used a single extended movement with subdivisions analogous to the sections of sonata form. But the specific use of his four themes, which are transformed and combined in free fashion, departs from the usual order of the classical Sonata.

Robert Schumann (1810-56) likewise experimented fruitfully, especially in his *Symphony No. 4 in D Minor*, with the Schubertian idea of fusing movements together. The tendency to use thematic transformation in a manner that moved away from the Classical sonata form was complemented by Cesar Franck, who adhered to the basic form but from 1841 utilised a "cyclic" approach; that is, one of fusion, or thematic relationships between movements. Brahms, on the other hand, carried the more familiar Classical sonata form to its highest point of complexity. In addition to making valuable innovations in rhythmic structure, he gave the role of counterpoint a new lease of vigour and interest and used the concept of thematic relationships between movements in a particularly subtle way. Chopin's three piano sonatas are concerned more with lyrical expression than with innovative formal methods. Similarly, the sonata compositions of Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826) and Felix Mendelssohn (1809-47), which generally followed the patterns of their Classical predecessors and were highly regarded in their day, contributed little to the evolution of sonata form away from its Classical state. This evolution, illustrated by the works of Berlioz and Liszt, was carried forward by Mahler. In his symphonies expansion, through inclusion of more than two tonal centres and groups of themes, and fusion, or the creation of unity between movements, are combined. This gives rise to expansive compositions held together by complex interrelationships between themes. Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), in such works as his *First String Quartet* (1904), carried the idea of fusion of movements to its logical conclusion: this is a one-movement work with contrasting sections in which all the themes used are derived from a few basic motives.

Two important nineteenth-century developments tended to weaken the effectiveness of the Classical sonata form as an organising principle. One, exemplified by Richard Wagner (1813-83), was an increasing use of chromaticism; that is, of notes and chords foreign to the key in which a passage of music is written. Chromaticism, when used extensively, broke down key feeling. Instead of being heard as a contrast to, or special modification of, the key, it became so prominent that the key itself was not heard strongly enough to establish itself in the listener's mind. Secondly, Liszt and his followers weakened the sonata form by using in their symphonic poems musical organisations based on program rather than on contrast of keys. But although the effectiveness of key as a basis for musical organisation was weakened by the late nineteenth century, Mahler and Carl Nielsen (1865-1931) provided a modification of the sonata form that made use of tonality in a new way. This innovation, progressive tonality, used the home key as a goal to be worked toward from more or less distant key regions, so that a work ends in a different key from the one in which it began. Mahler and Nielsen arrived at the same notion independently at the same time. Nielsen's *First Symphony* and Mahler's *Second Symphony* (both 1894) are the first to use progressive tonality, and both composers forged highly individual new forms from it.

Most compositions written in sonata form after Wagner's era, however, lack a certain sense of vitality. Frequently, because the effectiveness of key or tonality has been weakened, such compositions centre on melody without the strong contrast of tonality that underlay the Classical sonata. Some composers made stylistic compromises. Schoenberg's *Fourth String Quartet* used his twelve-tone (dodecaphonic) approach to composition, an approach that began with a 'row,' or series, of the twelve tones of the chromatic scale, chosen by the composer to serve as the melodic and harmonic basis for the composition. In this work, he fits the twelve-tone style into the outlines of sonata form. The result is based on contrasting themes, rather than on the Classical sonata principle of key contrast, because twelve-tone music, being atonal, deliberately avoids the creation of a sense of key. In a comparable way, though in the context of a different style, some of the sonatas of Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) use the outward formal divisions of the classical sonata form but stress the interest of melody as such, leaving tonality-still present in this case-to play a decorative rather than a structural role.

### **Sonata Form**

Sonata Form, the most important musical form of the Classical period (c. 1770-c. 1820), used up to the late nineteenth century in the first movement of symphonies, concertos, and chamber music genres as well as sonatas. It has come to be regarded as the pre-eminent expression of tonal music, because it functions on the contrast and eventual resolution of opposing keys.

During the mid-eighteenth century, composers began to organise their music according to a scheme of key relationships known as sonata form, so called because it evolved first in the Baroque *sonata da chiesa*. This scheme can be analysed as either a two-part or a three-part form. The early, Pre-Classical history of the form (1720-1760) tends to support a two-part analysis. According to this analysis, the first part establishes a principal key centre, called the *tonic* in the terminology of functional harmony, and then modulates to a secondary centre, usually the *dominant* (the key whose scale begins on the fifth degree of the scale of the principal key). The second part begins on the dominant, digresses into other keys, and concludes in the tonic. The melodic material consists of one or more motives or themes stated in the different keys; sometimes the tonic and dominant keys each have their own themes. The key relationships in the two-part concept of sonata form were already common in vocal and instrumental music of the late seventeenth century. The major eighteenth-century innovation was the increasing co-ordination between melodies and keys. The analysis of sonata form as a three-part scheme is supported by modifications in the scheme that took place during the Classical period (late eighteenth century). The key scheme remained the same as before, but increasing emphasis was placed on the character of the melodic material and on a more consistent co-ordination between melodies and keys. Instead of one theme or set of themes in the first section, two distinct groups of themes emerged, one in the tonic key and one in the dominant key. The tonic-key themes tended to be vigorous in character, with perhaps quick and strongly accented rhythms; the dominant-key themes tended to be more lyrical. In addition, the first section of many Classical sonata-

form movements began with a slow introduction and concluded with a short coda. The second and third parts of the Classical sonata form both grew out of the second section of the earlier Pre-Classical sonata form. The new second section extended the opening of the old second section, which contained brief digressions into other keys. The digressions became longer and more numerous, and the melodic material from the first section began to be extensively developed through fragmentation, alteration, recombination, and other means. The third section consisted of a restatement of the principal and secondary themes, both of them in the tonic key (or beginning in the subdominant so that the modulation up a fifth for the second theme returns the music to the tonic). During the mid-nineteenth century, the three sections were given names corresponding to their functions: exposition, development, and recapitulation. The sonata-form scheme has continued to be used by composers writing in a tonal idiom, down to the present time, although with less and less frequency since the early twentieth century, when tonality ceased to be such a dynamic force in Western art music. The twelve-tone system was developed to give formal cohesion to atonal music, effectively fulfilling the role that sonata form had played in tonal music.