Notes on Sonata Form
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The following notes have three parts:

1) Derivation of Sonata Form (18th Century)
2) Sonata Form in the Early 19th Century (p. 4)
3) Summary of Sonata Form Features (p. 5)
4) Sample Chart of Mozart K. 333, i (p. 7)

1) Derivation of Sonata Form

Largest Level: Binary form, AB (defined by repeat signs, generally present through classical era), specifically rounded binary, A=a₁, B=ba₂

Central Feature: The A section ends in a contrasting key. In almost all cases, this is V if the piece is in major, III or v if it is in minor. This modulation drives the form – it is its most important feature.

At level of the lower case letters, where we have the a₁ – b – a₂ of the rounded binary, each section gets a special name: a₁ is called the ‘exposition’, b the ‘development’, and a₂ the ‘racapitulation’. See Example 1.

EXPOSITION:

Understanding the exposition well is the most difficult aspect of analyzing sonata form. We will approach it in stages. Example 2 shows the finished chart that we will be heading toward.

First, the internal form of the exposition is defined by two form-defining cadences (FDC’s).¹

FDC1 strongly prepares us to hear in the new key. It usually follows the modulation, and may be either a strong HC or a strong authentic cadence of some sort (PAC or IAC). If it is an authentic cadence, there will usually be an overlap with the beginning of some new

¹ The term is newly coined, but the concept derives from 18th century theories of sonata form.
melodic idea. In pieces in major, this cadence may on occasion (especially in works of Mozart) be a strong HC in the original key. This HC is then is then followed by a phrase modulation into the key of the dominant – though there has been no modulation before this cadence, the emphasis on the dominant chord has prepared us to hear in the dominant key. (Note that FDC1 is always a strong cadence – there may occasionally be a weak cadence in the new key preceding FDC1.) FDC1 is the midpoint (functionally if not in number of measures) of the exposition.

FDC1 is generally followed by some thematic material. FDC2 is generally a PAC, and it concludes this thematic material. There is almost always some music that follows FDC2, either a simple post-cadential extension or else something more elaborate.

The material that is found between FDC1 and FDC2 is called the second theme group. ‘Group’ because though this is sometimes only a single theme, it sometimes consists of several, quite distinct melodic ideas.

The material that follows FDC2 is called the closing group. It is always similar in spirit to a post-cadential extension – its purpose is to reconfirm the importance and stability of the arrival in the new key, and to extend and give further weight to FDC2. Because the closing group has many of the attributes of a post-cadential extension, there are a couple of slightly tricky issues related to locating its precise beginning and end.

The beginning of the closing group: When there is a main theme within the closing group, it is sometimes possible to identify a few measures following FDC2 as post-cadential extension within the second theme group, preceding the closing group. This amounts to stating that FDC2 has been extended in time, beginning where it was first identified, but understood to “last” for a few bars longer. When this happens, several criteria will be met: 1) the post-cadential extension of FDC2 will be short, especially relative to the closing group; 2) the post-cadential extension of FDC2 will behave like a prototypical post-cadential extension; 3) the closing group will begin with music that is significantly more stable than the post-cadential extension of FDC2. Criteria for stability include melodic interest, regular phrase structure, and repetition.

The end of the closing group: The end of the closing group often contains a brief codetta. Even though all of the closing group resembles post-cadential extension in spirit, when there is a codetta there will be a very strong PAC near the end of the closing group, followed by music that even more clearly has the character of post-cadential extension. This music following the strong PAC is called the codetta. It gets a separate label but it is a part of the closing group.

Consider now the first major portion of the exposition, which ends with FDC1. The latter part of this first major portion is called the transition. The transition always concludes with FDC1. If there is a modulation, the modulation is always contained within the transition. The transition always starts with a significant grouping boundary. There is often some kind of cadence just before it starts, and it always starts with some significant sense of initiation.
Finally, we arrive at the beginning of the form: the **first theme group**. Again, it may be a single theme, but it may also consist of several themes, hence the term ‘group’. The body of the movement (following the introduction, if any), always begins with the first theme group. The confusing thing about the first theme group is that its end point can be quite variable. It never ends sooner than the beginning of the transition; that would leave a formal ‘no-man’s-land’ between first theme group and transition. But if the material of the first theme group continues within the transition, the may be either a full or a partial overlap between the first theme group and the transition. The first theme group ends at the soonest with the start of the transition, and at the latest at FDC1. It may end in the middle of the transition if: 1) material from the first theme group continues into the transition, 2) this material concludes with a cadence during the transition, and 3) it is followed within the transition by some clearly new material.

**DEVELOPMENT:**

The development section is unstable. It often uses thematic material from the exposition, though it occasionally introduces new melodic ideas. It very rarely includes stable structures like periods or double periods. It often modulates frequently, and typically includes such things as fragmentation of main themes, sequences, and fugal texture (fugato).

The development section, like any grouping unit, can be divided into either two or three parts. You should decide how the development section divides into large subsections.

The development section concludes with the retransition. The retransition prepares for the return of the first theme group in the tonic key – it often emphasizes the V chord in the tonic key and builds a sense of anticipation. The retransition is often not a grouping unit, because it may well begin in the middle of a phrase. The beginning of the retransition is defined not by the beginning of a formal unit but by the beginning of the sense that the recapitulation is right around the corner. It’s like smelling rain coming in the air. Two listeners may well legitimately hear the retransition beginning in different places.

Some development sections include false retransitions – passages that sound like retransitions, but that prepare the wrong key.

Some development sections include false recapitulations, passages that feature a very solid, stable return of the first theme group, but in the wrong key.

**RECAPITULATION:**

The recapitulation follows the same basic course as the exposition, now bringing back all of the major theme groups in the tonic key. (If the movement is in minor and modulated to III, the second theme group may return in either tonic minor or tonic major – if in tonic major, it will generally modulate back to minor before the end of the closing group.)
The major point of variance between exposition and recapitulation is, of course, the transition. Sometimes the transition is shortened, because there is no need to modulate. But at least as frequently it is lengthened, modulating away from tonic but then modulating back again in time for the second theme group. If you are in doubt about the location of FDC1 or of the beginning of the transition, consulting the recapitulation will in some cases help in resolving uncertainties.

Compositionally, the primary challenge of the recapitulation is how to retain the dynamism of the form when, supposedly, the listener knows what’s coming as soon as the recapitulation starts.

2) Sonata Form in the Early 19th Century

Sonata form became quite variable and flexible in the 19th century, and it is not possible to chart here all of the strands of this history. There are two developments from early in the century that are important to note, however.

The first is that the strong cadence confirming the new key sometimes moved from the end of the second theme group to the end of the closing group. Talking about 18th-century practice, I defined the second theme group as that which is found between FDC1 and FDC2 – the second theme group took its identity more from its position relative to important cadences than from its melodic content. But around 1800, as he was entering his so-called middle period, Beethoven began in some compositions to distinguish the second theme group from the closing group primarily in terms of melodic content, deferring strong cadential closure until the end of the closing group. In such movements there is often a “second transition” between the second theme group and the closing group – less stable music that has the character of a transition, but that does not end in a key different from the one in which it began (it may, in the middle, suggest other tonal centers). This option is graphed as Example 3.

The second variant, introduced by Schubert, is what is called a three-theme sonata form. There is nothing new about a sonata form that has three (or more) distinct themes; this variant is named as it is because each of the three themes is in a different key; on the way to the primary contrasting key (still usually V), another key is used as a way station (often iii), and this key is given weight and stability with its own theme. Three-theme sonata form is graphed as Example 4.
3) **Summary of Sonata Form Features (Plus a few extra details...)**

**(INTRODUCTION)**

- Often slower tempo
- Key is tonic, possibly parallel minor
- Usually no obvious thematic relation to body of movement
- Cannot stand alone; incomplete as a chunk of music (and body of music *could* stand alone – would still make sense if introduction were removed)

**(EXPOSITION)** (often repeated)

1st Theme Group

- Tonic key
- Often not strongly closed; if there are strong cadences, they are probably early in the first theme group

Transition

- The transition modulates to the contrasting key (V in major, III or v in minor)
- In some cases (e.g. Clementi sonata and Mozart B-flat sonata in Burkhart) the transition may overlap, either fully or partially) with the first theme group.
- Ends with FDC1.

Second Theme Group

- Contrasting key
- Begins just after (or overlapped with) FDC1.
- Often more closed formally than the First Theme Group. Period structure is likely.
- Concludes with FDC2.
Closing Group

   Begins just after (or overlapped with) FDC2.

   Adds weight to contrasting key with repeated cadential motions.

   Generally has very strong closure, sometimes has little thematic interest (just cadential gestures)

Codetta

   Part of the closing group (the final part, if present).

   Follows very strong PAC, clearly post-cadential extension.

DEVELOPMENT

   Usually plays with material already presented, sometimes also introduces new material

   Unstable in a variety of ways – often tonally unstable, often fragments themes

   Sequences are common, fugato is not uncommon

(False Retranstion, False Recapitulation)

   Apparent retransition and/or recapitulation

   In wrong key, and fairly quickly abandoned

   If present, usually in latter portion of development section

Retransition

   A modulation back to the tonic key

   If the retransition is long, it will probably involve a dominant pedal

RECAPITULATION

   Features all of the components of the exposition in the original order, sometimes with some changes, often with minimal alteration. Main change is that all themes are presented in the tonic.
Transition

Most likely to be changed in the recapitulation, because the second theme group will probably appear in the tonic key.

May be shortened or omitted. If lengthened, will often modulate away from tonic and back again.

(CODA)

If present, mainly in tonic key unless very long; usually in same tempo, occasionally faster

If long, may have the character of a second development section

4) Sample Chart of Mozart K. 333, i

Sonata Form Chart

(INTRODUCTION)

Mm: NONE

Key:

Noteworthy Features:

EXPOSITION repeated? Y/N

1st Theme Group

Mm: 1-22

Key: B-flat -> F

Noteworthy Features:

Includes transition.
Transition
Mm: 11-22
Key: B-flat -> F
Noteworthy Features:

Second Theme Group
Mm: 23-38
Key: F
Noteworthy Features:
Double period

Closing Group
Mm: 39-63
Key: F
Noteworthy Features (mention codetta, incl. measure numbers, if any):
Codetta mm. 59-63

DEVELOPMENT repeated, together with recapitulation? Y/N
Mm: 64-93
Main points of formal articulation, and means of articulation (splitting the development into two or three large sections):
mm. 64-71, based on 1st theme group, ends PAC
mm. 71-81, florid runs, ends HC
mm. 81-93, false and real retransition
Location and Description of Retransition;

mm. 87-93, sits on V7 in B-flat, decorating by raising root to make vii7

Other Noteworthy Features:

False retransition pointing toward g minor, mm. 81-86, sits on V, moving away to VI, back by turning VI into +6.

RECAPITULATION

1st Theme Group

Mm: 94-118

Key: B-flat

Noteworthy Features:

Transition

Mm: 104-118

Key: B-flat

Noteworthy Features:

Transient modulation to IV where modulation to V occurred before, only a few measures are altered (other than key, after modulation).

Second Theme Group

Mm: 119-134

Key: B-flat

Noteworthy Features:

Alterations mainly in playing more with register, picking up on register issues present since the beginning of the movement.
Closing Group

Mm:  135-165

Key:  B-flat

Noteworthy Features (mention codetta if any):

Even more octave play, more florid than in exposition.

Codetta mm. 161-165.

(CODA)

Mm:  NONE

Noteworthy Features: