

Notes on Sonata Form

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The following notes have three parts:

- 1) Derivation of Sonata Form (18th Century)
- 2) Terminology from Hepokoski and Darcy's Sonata Theory (p. 4)
- 3) Summary of Sonata Form Features (p. 4)
- 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 'recapitulation'. 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 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. 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. In most cases FDC 2 is the first PAC following FDC 1; the exception comes when material from the second theme group repeats after the first PAC following FDC 1.

There is almost always some music that follows FDC2, either a simple post-cadential extension or else something more elaborate. 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.

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 usually 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, there 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) Terminology from Hepokoski and Darcy's Sonata Theory

Examples 1 and 2 show several of the terms used by Hepokoski and Darcy in their *Sonata Theory*.

They call both exposition and recap (and sometimes the development) **rotations** – this term emphasizes that several distinct pieces of musical material return in a fixed order, though with other features (especially key relationships) variable. We will see rotations in several contexts over the course of the semester.

They use the term **primary-theme zone**, or simply **P**, to describe the first theme group from the start of the exposition until the start of the transition. The transition may be based on P material, but they do not consider this to be part of the P zone.

Their term for the transition is the usual one, abbreviated **TR**.

They use the term **medial caesura**, or **MC**, for what was called FDC 1 above.

They call the second theme group the **secondary-theme group**, or **S**.

They use the term **essential expositional closure**, or **EEC**, for FDC 2 in the exposition, that is, when it is not in the tonic key. In the recap, FDC 2 is called the **essential structural closure**, or **ESC**.

The closing theme group is called the **closing zone**, or **C**, it includes everything from the **EEC/ESC** until the end of the exposition.

The retransition often coincides with the start of the strong dominant, which they call the **dominant lock**.

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 (**P** lasts until start of **TR**, ends with a cadence)

Tonic key

Often not strongly closed; if there are strong cadences, they are probably early in the first theme group – but it does end with a cadence.

Transition (**TR**, ends w/ **MC**)

The transition modulates to the contrasting key (V in major, III or v in minor)

In some cases the transition may be based, either fully or partially, on P material.

Ends with FDC1.

Second Theme Group (**S**, extends from **MC** to **EEC/ESC**)

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 (**C**, **EEC/ESC** to end of exposition)

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 (final part of **C**)

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 Retransition, 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 (**dominant lock**)

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

SONATA FORM CHART

Name _____

INTRO: Yes / **No** mm.: _____ Noteworthy features:EXPOSITION Exposition repeats (presumed to repeat): **Yes** / No

	P	TR (MC mm: 18-22)	S (EEC m. 38)	C	Codetta?
Measures:	1-10	11-22	23-38	39-63	59-63
Key(s):	B-flat	B-flat -> F	F	F	F
Noteworthy features:		Based on P	Double period		

DEVELOPMENT (mm.): 64-93 Main sections of the development and factors that define them:

mm.	Factors that create the grouping boundaries and other noteworthy features, including thematic material used
64-71	Based on P, ends PAC
71-81	Florid runs, ends HC
81-93	False and real retransition; false retransition pointing toward g minor, mm. 81-86, sits on V, moving away to VI, back by turning VI into +6.

Retransition: mm.: 87-93 Noteworthy features: sits on V7 in B-flat, decorated by raising root to make vii7RECAPITULATION Development/Recapitulation repeats? **Yes** / No

	P	TR (MC mm: 115-118)	S (ESC m. 134)	C	Codetta?
Measures:	94-103	104-118	119-134	135-165	161-165
Key(s):	B-flat	B-flat	B-flat	B-flat	B-flat
Noteworthy features:		Slightly longer. Transient modulation to IV where modulation to V occurred before, only a few measures are altered (other than key, after modulation).	Alterations mainly in playing more with register, picking up on register issues present since the beginning of the movement.	Even more octave play, more florid than in exposition.	

CODA: Yes / **No** mm.: _____ Noteworthy features: