Organic Structure in Sonata Form

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To effect an agreement between general concepts and specific details is one of the most difficult tasks of human understanding. In order to reduce the world of appearances to only a few concepts, knowledge must seek general truths. At the same time, one must examine the particulars to the last detail, in all their secrets, if one wishes to grasp correctly these general concepts, which are, after all, supported by particulars. The task is difficult because generalities, however arrived at, easily

† This essay was originally published in Das Meisterwerk in der Musik (Yearbook II), Munich: Drei Masken Verlag, 1926, pp. 45-54.
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Sonata Form

HEINRICH SCHENKER

TRANSLATED BY ORIN GROSSMAN

mislead men into a premature satisfaction which spares any further effort concerning specifics. Through continuous disregard for detail, knowledge of general truths is impaired; it does not ripen into truth, but remains limited to a schema.

Thus it was not really difficult for theorists to gather together the general characteristics of many sonatas.† They believed that the last generality had been found and they left it for the composer to apply their theory in actual composition. They were so sure of the correctness of their definitions that the theory dismissed every doubt. Even when sonatas composed

† Schenker is referring to the rather sterile and academic descriptions of sonata form by such 19th century theorists as A. B. Marx.

along these outlines had obviously unmasked their idea of sonata-form, rather than revise their concepts, they concluded that sonata-form as such was obsolete. The theory was satisfied too quickly with an inadequate abstraction, even before it had developed the ability to cope with those particulars which are the distinctive features of a work of genius. Otherwise recognition of those particulars would certainly have prevented the formation of that schema and facilitated a more accurate grasp of the general truths.

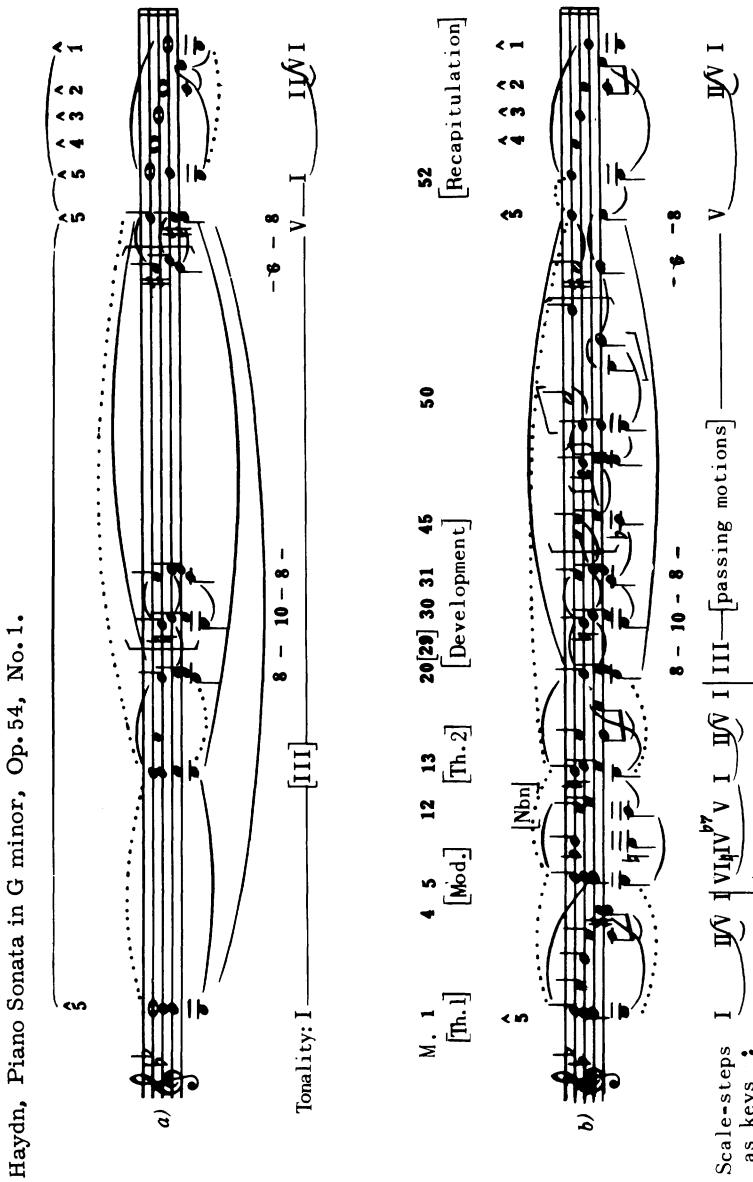
Of course it has been observed that the tendency toward a three-part division with a modulation and a contrasting key in the first part is characteristic of the sonata form. But the true significance of this has not yet been grasped. The concept of sonata-form as it has been taught up to now lacks precisely the essential characteristic – that of organic structure [organischen]. This characteristic is determined solely by the invention of the parts out of the unity of the primary harmony [Hauptklang]† – in other words, by the composing-out of the fundamental line [Urlinie] and the bass-arpeggiation [Bassbrechung]. The capacity to have such a perception of the primary harmony is a prerogative of genius, derived from nature. Genius transforms the triad into the melodic progressions of the fundamental line and at the same time, into a few basic chords [Einzelklänge] which are subdivided again and again. This perception cannot be developed in an artificial way, which is to say that only what is composed with the sweep of improvisation [aus dem Stegreif] guarantees unity in a composition. Therefore in order to express the general idea more clearly, one should add to the concept of sonata form that the whole must be discovered through improvisation if the piece is to be more than a collection of individual parts and motives in the sense of a schema.*1 As confirmation of the crucial hallmark of improvisation I wish to add the following particular examples to the many which I presented in the "Tonwille" pamphlets and the first yearbook.

Haydn's piano sonata in G minor, Op. 54, no. 1 [Hoboken (XVI) No. 44] reveals the following fundamental structure [Ursatz] (see Fig. 1):†† To be sure, Fig. 1b makes use of the customary

† By this term Schenker means the tonic triad, which governs both the fundamental line and the bass-arpeggiation.

†† Although there are problems associated with Schenker's analysis of this sonata, they do not detract from the central point of the essay. One must realize that Schenker was in the process of formulating many of his ideas at the time this essay was written and that the analyses contained herein do not represent his ideas in their final form.

FIGURE 1



indications of formal parts: first theme, modulation, second theme, development, and recapitulation. However, the sketch also reveals the deeper significance of the motion, since this motion derives from the first composing-out of the fundamental structure (Fig. 1a). It is not enough just to enumerate the key changes as they occur in the foreground, as conventional theory does; it is also necessary to know what force brings about the modulation and assures the unity of the whole. Haydn knew no treatises on form as we know them today. It was the life of his spirit which generated the new life of his music. The fundamental line and bass-arpeggiation governed him with the power of a natural force, and he received from them the strength to master the whole as a unity. Where in the prevailing theory do we find even a hint of such a path to unity? To be sure it preaches tirelessly about organic structure, but only with cheap words, which are no more than a pious wish. Actually, theory does not yet comprehend the nature of organic structure in music, and therefore cannot specify those phenomena which contribute to it.

Let us go on, however, to the diminutions in this sonata. The direction which the master's fantasy takes in the first part is briefly shown in Figure 2. Scarcely is d^2 played on the upbeat, when it ascends by a fourth to g^2 on the downbeat of m. 1. The question is, should d^2 or g^2, $\hat{5}$ or $\hat{8}$, be the first note of the fundamental line? In m. 1-2, in spite of the higher g^2, there develops the motion of a sixth downwards, from d^2 to $f\sharp^1$ (see Fig. 3), a descent which supports the claim of d^2, that is, $\hat{5}$, as the first note. The two neighbor-note motions d^2-$e\flat^2$-d^2, which hover above the progression of a sixth, also lend credence to this claim (see Fig. 3). However, in m. 3, there suddenly appears a $b\flat^2$ above the g^2; this entrance weakens the first supposition, particularly since a progression of a third, $b\flat^2$-a^2-g^2, is formed in m. 4. Already the first arpeggiation of the bass is at an end and we still grope in darkness.

In m. 5 the voice leading rises surprisingly out of the deep with the arpeggiation d^1-g^1-$b\flat^1$. We immediately recognize a shortened repetition of the previously travelled path. A chain of overlapping motions [Übergreifzüge] leads upward to d^3 in m. 8. Subsequently this d^3 descends through $d\flat^3$ in m. 9-12, to c^3 in m. 12. With the greatest astonishment we finally recognize here that, although c^3 is not once expressly stated, the whole content of m. 1-12 is only the octave transfer from d^2 to d^3 an octave above. Thus d^2, not g^2, is the first note of the fundamental line. Furthermore, this one ascent creates an arc which connects all the formal parts designated by the prevailing

FIGURE

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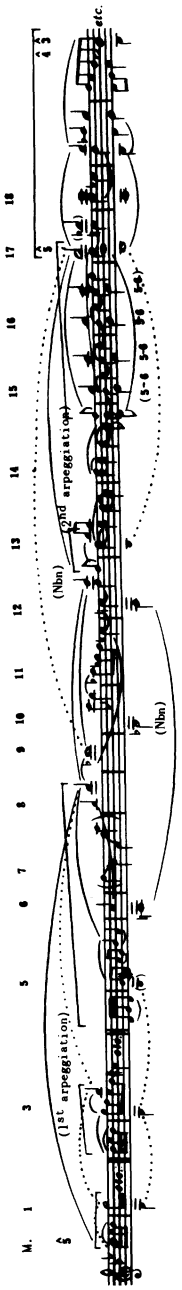

theory with the terms first theme, consequent, and modulation!

This knowledge is confirmed by the further course of the voice leading. In m. 12-17, there occurs the upward arpeggiation f^2-$b\flat^2$-d^3. The d^3 harkens back to the d^3 in m. 8, and from here, it descends through c^1 to $b\flat^1$ in m. 17-20 – the $\hat{2}, \hat{3}$ of the fundamental line (in the foreground key of B♭ Major). The second arpeggiation coincides with the second theme of the accepted theory. Has conventional theory even considered, however, what function such an arpeggiation serves – that it not only holds together the second theme as a unity, but also recognizes and expands upon the organic structure of the first idea by imitating the first arpeggiation through the parallel structure and the motion to the same high point (d^3)? Has the theory even suggested such a function for the second theme? Has it not rather demanded the opposite from the second theme? It follows that Haydn could never have written this sonata if he had had to conform to our theories, which have allegedly thoroughly explored the essence of sonata form.

Now we come to the main question: Would it have been possible for Haydn to compose both arpeggiations in such a manner if the sweep of improvisation had not shown him the way? The downbeat has scarcely indicated d^2 when in m. 1 the arpeggiation begins. Surely this idea must have necessarily been present from the first. Where, in the work of a non-genius, is there a similar motion, a similar arpeggiation, which bridges several formal parts?

If theory were to take cognizance of these relations it would have to value the arpeggiation as a motive of the highest order (Jhrb. I 64ff.). Only then would it have to deal with the less significant motives which are there: the linear progressions of a sixth in m. 1-2, of a third in m. 3-4, of a seventh from $d\flat^3$ to e^2 in m. 10-11, and of a rising sixth in conjunction with a 5-6 replacement pattern in m. 14-17. There is also the change of diminution in m. 5 and m. 6-8 (here, the chain of overlapping motions), as well as the second theme at m. 12 and following. Does the theory follow such a procedure? No. For conventional theory, melodic successions are important at best as motives which sooner or later reappear in exact repetition.

Thus in Fig. 3, for example, the important motives would be the upbeat triplet and the following eighth-notes on the first and second beats of m. 1. On the other hand, the theory would not be able to deal with the neighbor-note motive in these measures. Observe the bracketed notes in Fig. 3. The middle

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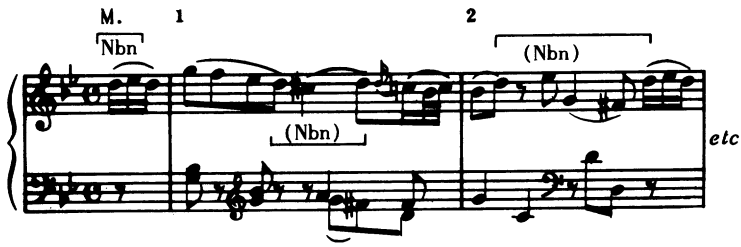


group employs the lower neighbor-note for the sake of contrast. The last group extends into the next neighbor-note group, thus binding together the two smallest formal parts. The theory does just as poorly with the remaining contents because it does not recognize such repetitions and does not grasp the motivic nature of the higher ranking motion of a sixth from d^2 to $f\sharp^1$.

The present theory also does not recognize the unity of the motive, for example, in the neighbor-note formations of m. 5-12 (see Fig. 2). The overlapping, the ascending register transfer, and the linear progression of a seventh in these measures obscures the more central c^2 to $b\flat^2$ in m. 6-8 and the d^3-($d\flat^3$)-c^3 in m. 8-12, not to mention the fact that the theory could observe the same neighbor-note motive in the second theme. There, for example in m. 13, f^2-$e\flat^2$ and d^2-c^2 are placed together to form a fourth (Haydn suppressed the c^3 in m. 12 on account of the d^2 to c^2 in m. 13). The theory does not hear the connection between the fourths d^2 to g^2 from the upbeat to the downbeat of m. 1 and at the change from m. 2 to m. 3, and the fourth f^2 to $b\flat^2$ at the change from m. 12 to m. 13. As a result, it perceives no motivic significance for these fourths.

I believe that I have been clear enough. Nevertheless I will state my conclusion once more. Until now, theory had no way of dealing with the organic structure of sonata form. The characteristics which the theory stresses do not deal with the inner nature of sonata form. The heart of the theory is lifeless, and works which have been nourished by it are stillborn. In short, until now theory has lacked the means for discussing the improvisation-derived driving force [Stegreif-Zug] in sonata form.

Here is another example – the first part of the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 10, no. 2 (see Fig. 4). The present theory uses the standard designations even for contents such as these. It only describes the state of the developed material [den Zustand des Gewordenen] in a superficial and shallow way and clearly reveals that it knows nothing about the principle of development of particular characteristics [Gesetz des besonderen Werdens]. Yet the general specification of form depends solely on that principle. Even a fleeting glance at the sketch (h) suffices to reveal that here, just as in the Haydn example already cited, the first theme, consequent, modulation, and antecedent of the second theme are elevated to the status of an organic whole by the force of the melodic progressions and arpeggiations. The first fifth-progression, f^2 to b^2, extends up to m. 31 and alone unites the first theme, consequent,

modulation and antecedent of the second theme. Since this fifth represents a motion into an inner voice, f^2 is established as the main tone of the fundamental line. Therefore the top voice begins new progressions from the f^2 (see i): the second fifth-progression (m. 39ff), which spans the consequent of the second theme, and the third progression (m. 47ff) [actually a fourth-progression], which finally includes the tones $\hat{7}, \hat{6}$, and $\hat{5}$ of the fundamental line. It is the succession of all these motions which creates coherence out of the parts and the organic nature of the contents. This succession is called into being by the law of retention of the main note.

It should be said here that it is possible to invent such a progression of a fifth as in m. 1-31 only through improvisation. The first fifth inspires the next progression, so that we hear this storm of spontaneity with true devotion as it rushes along creating life and coherence from progression to progression.

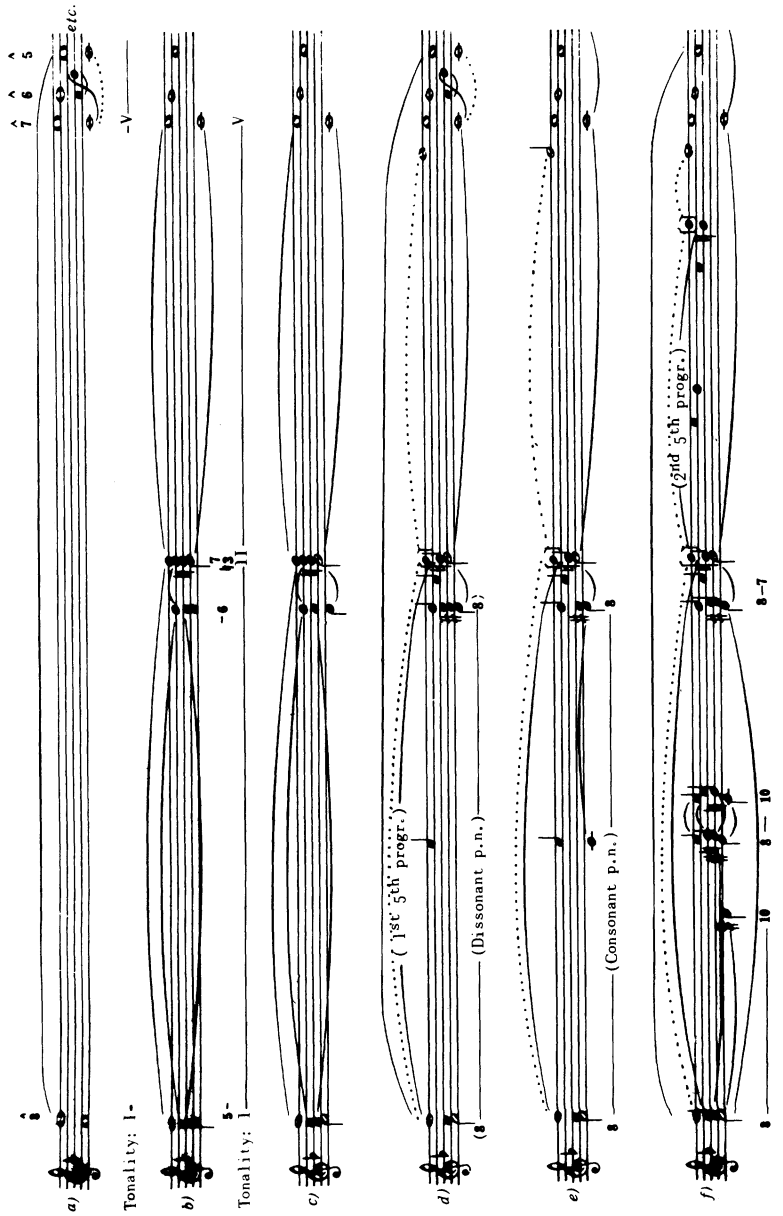
To this we shall add the figurations, which offer further proof of that natural force. Individual arpeggiations unfold the chords and unite them (g). A four-note motive enlivens the arpeggiations (see the brackets in h). It also encompasses contractions in (i), and is even interwoven with the large scale neighbor-note motion of the development section [Fig. 5]. Thus everything is, level after level, a world in itself. This unity cannot be explained, however, except by the miracle of improvisation, which creates the whole as one configuration.

Has the theory spent even a word on this natural phenomenon of organic structure? Can its designations of form specify even the limits of the second theme or the contents of the development section? Has a performance of this sonata ever impressed upon us this miracle?

In the first movement of the Piano Sonata Op. 10, no. 1 Beethoven writes [the following] (see Fig. 6). In spite of the differences between legato, staccato etc., the relationship between all the skips from m. 28 on (see b) can be seen at a glance. However, the one who is really able to recognize the relationship is the one who sees the derivation of the skips from those in the first theme (see (a) of Fig. 6 and compare with Jhrb. I 189, Fig. 2). Only this person will perceive the unity of the diminutions from the shape of the whole.

We see that the diminutions could not possibly blossom into such unity – the unity and synthesis of the whole which flows from the fundamental line and the bass-arpeggiation – were it

FIGURE 4



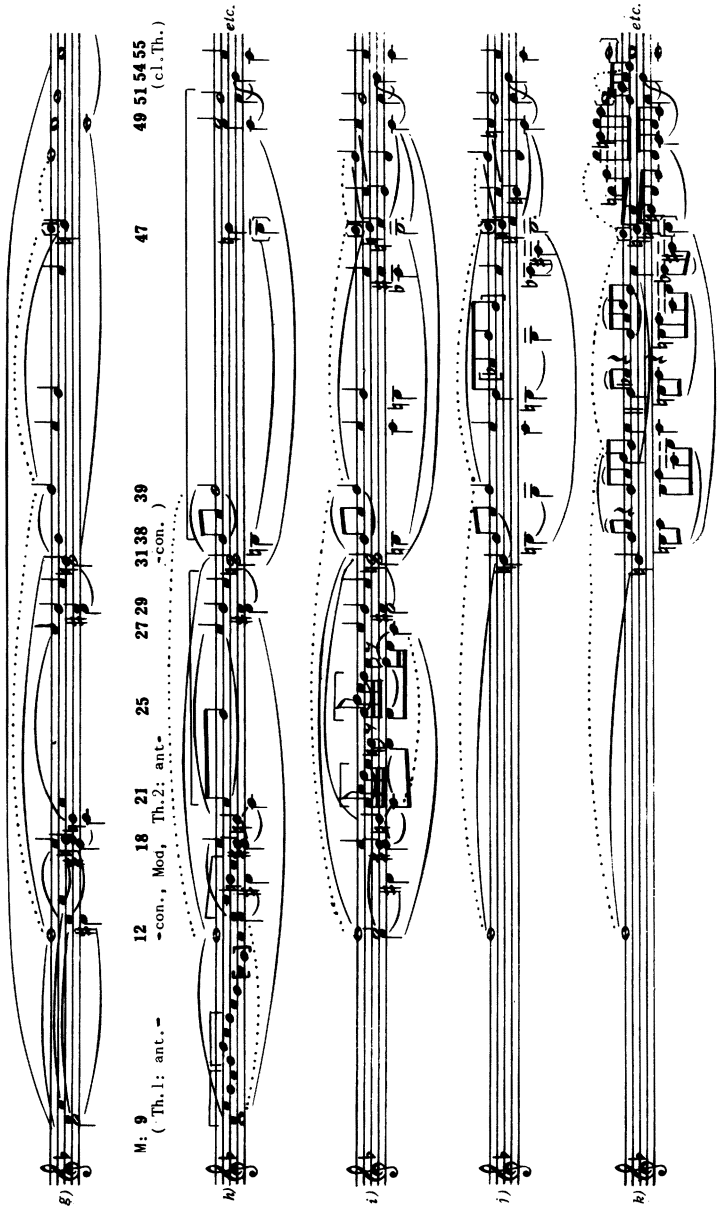
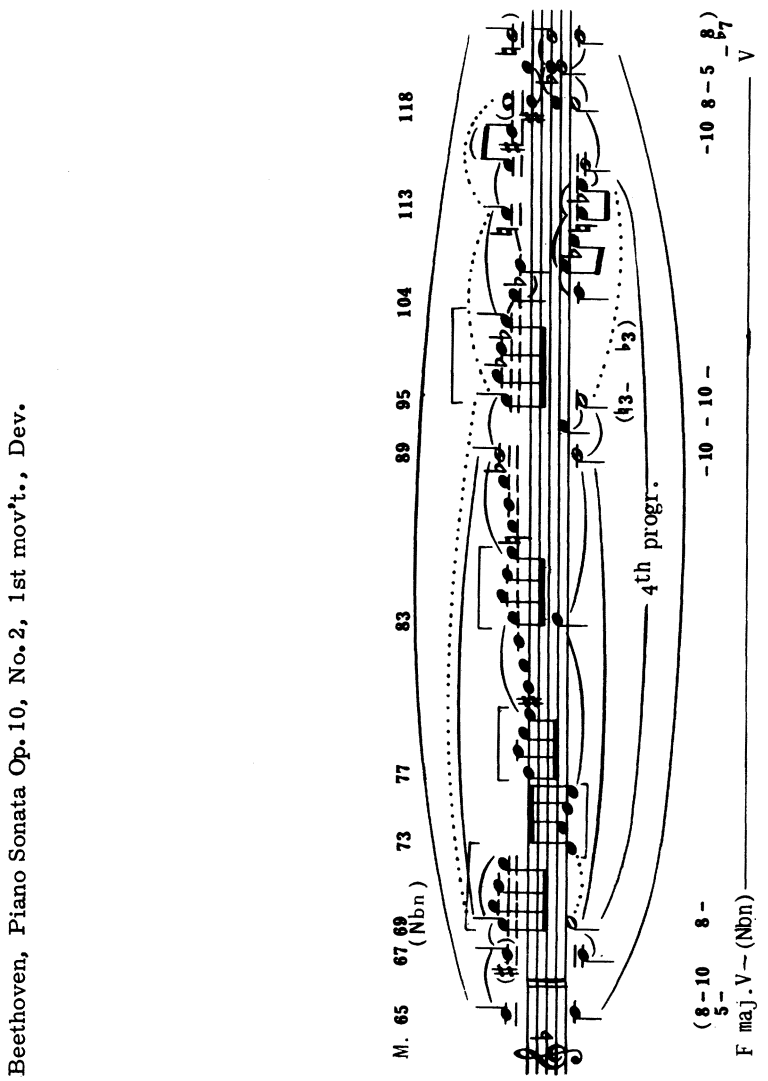


FIGURE 5



FIGURE

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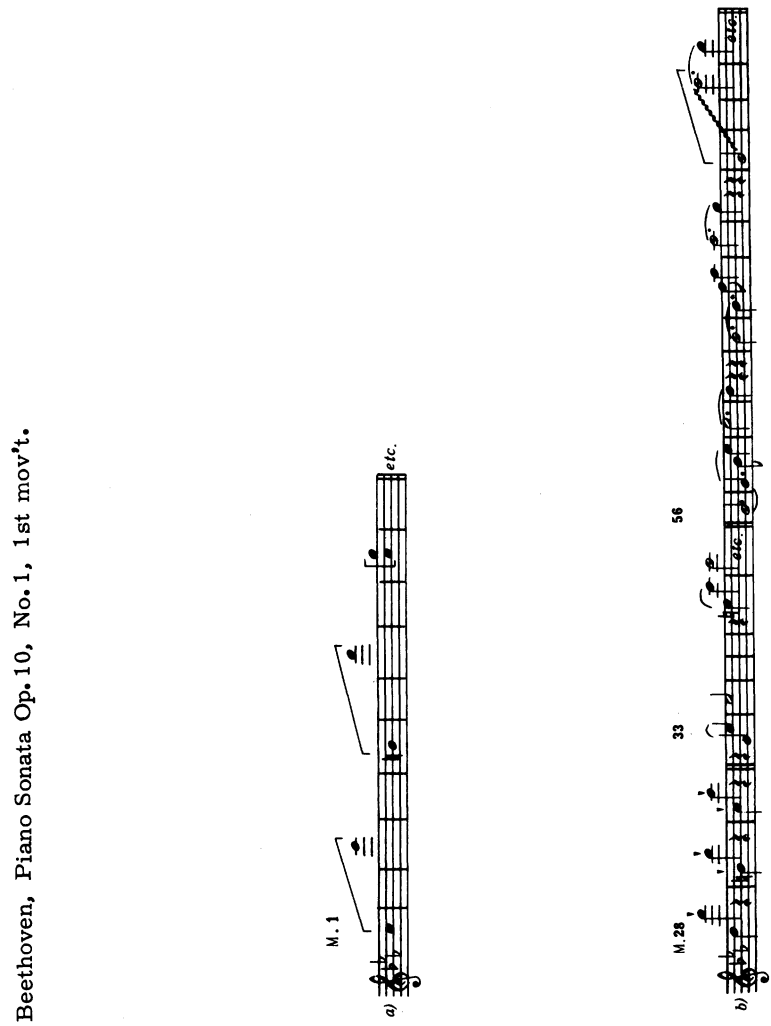

not for the miracle of improvisation!

If this were not concealed, as is every miracle, conventional theory long ago would have seized upon more than the few superficial characteristics which it has applied to every situation. If the theory has not even a hint of this motive of the leap, how is it supposed to encompass the organic structure of the whole?

In the development section of the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 109, the composer establishes the following highpoints (see Fig. 7): The manner in which Beethoven suddenly abandons the high $g\sharp^3$ in m. 21 and jumps down to $d\sharp^2$ has puzzled everyone. What could this leap, this sudden change, signify? Even if one grapples with the problem of discovering a relationship between such widely separated highpoints, namely the ascent from $g\sharp^3$ to b^3 (m. 42) which is to be the main note of the recapitulation, one has not yet gained the highest degree of insight. Understanding results much more from the following connection (see Fig. 8): The improvisational fantasy of the master pursues both tones of the upbeat in the development and in the coda! He must drive after them. They signify to him a motive – the key to a world of unity and coherence. What does the theory of sonata-form care about such a miracle? And yet, the substance of this movement develops only through this miracle.

History and experience teaches us that the improvisational gift comes very infrequently. *2 It will not be otherwise in the future. Let it be said that only he who is granted the power of intuitive creativity will be able to fulfill again the idea of sonata-form like the old masters, and create an organic unity. He who does not possess it can still form some notion of this particular natural gift. We often see someone with a modest talent for this or that instrument. By means of continuous practice, such a person reaches the point where he can play a great number of notes easily in a minute and can, with regard to stress, touch, shadings, and tempo, handle the notes with ease according to the composer's directions or (more frequently) according to his personal conception. On a higher level of musical invention, the image of the spirit of genius shows a similar situation. This spirit of genius, creating mysteriously out of the background of a fundamental structure, masters all the arpeggiations of the many individual harmonies and all the diminutions of the linear progressions in the composing-out process.

This conception of composition, however, seldom satisfies the hasty person. A composition presents itself to the observer

FIGURE

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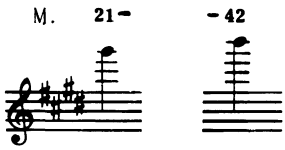
Beethoven, Piano Sonata Op. 109, 1st mov't., Dev.



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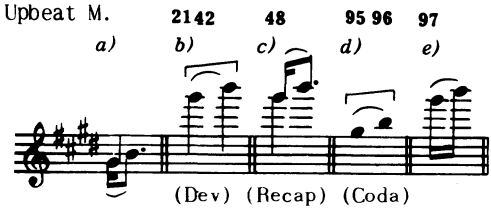
Beethoven, Piano Sonata Op. 109, 1st mov't.



or performer as foreground. This foreground is, so to speak, only its "present" [Gegenwart] taking the dictionary sense of the word. We know how difficult it is to grasp the meaning of the present if we are not aware of the temporal background. It is equally difficult for the student or performer to grasp the "present" of a composition if he does not include at the same time a knowledge of the background. Just as the demands of the day toss him to and fro, so does the foreground of a composition pull at him. Every change of sound and of figuration, every chromatic shift, every neighbor note signifies something new to him. Each novelty leads him further away from the coherence which derives from the background.

Particularly today, when the superficial, raucous, hedonistic life is exalted as the highest goal of existence, even though we would do better to consider how we might save our lives from chaos – particularly today this disposition to the present has become a barrier to the understanding of a work of genius. Such a work differs from life, however, in that its material is derived from improvisation, which gives an unequivocal meaning to the whole. Therefore it is a contradiction, for the sake of life and the present, whose plan remains concealed from man, to deny the existence of a background structure in a work of art. Even if we can not force anyone to understand such a plan, even if we must let the unwilling and incapable move about in the foreground of a masterpiece just as he moves about in a chaotic, superficial day-to-day existence, at least we can force him to realize that a true masterpiece has no connection with his superficial mindless life.

If we merely point out the themes and melodies in a sonata the way we pursue gratifying moments in life, we are only reflecting a point of view derived from the superficial aspects of life. The layman desires melody as a fulfillment of the moment. Progressions of a fourth, fifth, or sixth, for example, would not constitute a melody for him, although such motions, being horizontal realizations of vertical ideas, are nevertheless also melodies in a higher sense (see "Erläuterungen" Fig. 3). The layman demands still more composing-out, more decorations. He surmises therefore that the art of music – of course he always means only the melody – consists of an abundance of details. But the limitations of his spirit set the boundaries for such an abundance; a large-scale compositional process which he cannot comprehend is not a melody for him. He can only hear so much, and that much is what he calls melody!

It should not astonish us now that the prevailing theory shares

the viewpoint of the layman and also looks for themes and motives understood in the vague sense of the uninitiated. The theory has not yet advanced to a true conception of melody encompassing a whole composition or large sections. It does not recognize the shape of the whole, or the diminution-levels and their motives. Therefore it does not know how its concepts of themes, melodies, and motives contradict true sonata-form.

Melody, in the inappropriate way it is usually understood by the layman and theoritician, derives from the smallest most rudimentary relationships of art. On the other hand the sonata represents a realization of the largest conceivable world of related tones in the most complex form of a highly developed era.*3 Only a few geniuses were able to meet the demands of organic structure in sonata-form. What they accomplished for this structure was because of improvisational gifts. This art was neither perceived nor was it teachable. When the era of the masters had past, there followed talents without the gift of improvisation, who could no longer attain sonata-form. The Italian opera and its melodies were degenerating. Just at this time, however, the ambition of these talents strove after higher and higher goals. They wished to create sonatas and symphonies even greater than those by the masters. And so the inevitable occurred. The talents strove after melodies and sudden effects, thinking that they could fulfill the demands for an organic formal structure if they only filled their supposed form with melodies and themes. The result was sufficiently deplorable. Instead of organic works of art, they created works whose parts are comparable to raisins placed in dough – even in a baked cake the raisins are clearly distinguishable. The sonata, however, is no cake; it is a tonal mass formed from a unitary material in which the raisins are not distinguishable.*4

After this there developed a misconception fostered by Wagner. To be sure his Leitmotiv technique was in accord with a world used to categorizing melodies. On the other hand, because of his overemphasis on the musical foreground (Wagner was no background composer!) due to theatrical requirements, he introduced a heaviness which previously had not existed at all in music. People imagined that they heard a similar heaviness also in the improvisational works of our masters. The desire strongly arose to escape from this heaviness. They clamored for "melody"!

Lack of understanding of this improvisitory quality had disasterous consequences. On the other hand those who like to listen to a whole evolving from a whole rejoice over the radiance

of the improvisational genius in, for example, the late string quartets and symphonies of Beethoven. In these pieces, melody stands in the shadows. Beethoven truly remained to his last breath a composer of connected tones, a producer of tonal wholes which created luminous and floating coherence.

The so-called melodies, themes, and motives of the present theory do not constitute sonata-form. The examples cited above, along with many others, have shown what we mean by diminutional motives in sonata-form. This process involves, among other things, the composing-out of arpeggiations, octave couplings [Oktavkoppelungen], and unities of a higher order established through repetition (e.g. the neighbor-note shapes in Fig. 3, 5, and Fig. 4h etc.).

Without understanding the motive in this sense, we could not attain the breadth and expanse of improvisation*5, which alone creates the organic structure of sonata-form. A tradition of sonata-form is entirely lacking. How could it ever have arisen when the general musical opinion as well as the general instinct was unable to cope with exactly that characteristic, the intuitive, improvisational process, which unites the parts of the form by means of progressions?*6 The sonata-form of the masters, however, will remain preserved for all time by virtue of the integrity of the improvisational style.

REFERENCES

1 Compare Jhrb. I, 127, where I spoke on "Sónaten-Atem".

2 See Jhrb. I, 11ff.

3 "Tonwille", 2nd vol., 3-6.

4 We might also offer the following analogy: The attempt to hear melodies in the sense of the layman and theorist resembles the attempt of certain utopians to transfer the morals, customs and habits of a small group of men to entire nations. They do not realize that for a greater mass of people, new demands and difficulties accompany new suppositions – difficulties which are not found in smaller groups. The same is true for that ever more popular desire to return to the first primitive state of nature. Only one who is incapable of dealing with the higher demands of culture would abandon it for Nature.

5 "Tonwille" 5th vol., 54-57.

6 When someone cites a motive from this or that sonata, for example, and thereby purports to know it thoroughly, this reflects anything but tradition. When an amateur, who has played this or that masterpiece in his youth, later resists going back to it and asserts that he has already done that piece, this also does not demonstrate a tradition. Why should there be talk of a renunciation of a tradition when one does not exist?