



MASCULINE–FEMININE

In the light of the current controversy over the ‘gendering’ of musical forms, James Hepokoski argues for a more nuanced approach to the interpretation of ‘male’ and ‘female’ sonata elements

Several dozen pages into Adolf Bernhard Marx’s lengthy discussion of sonata form – the term that he had coined in 1838 and was now expanding in a revised, third volume (1845) of his landmark textbook on musical structure – one comes across three sentences about the frequent contrast between the first and second themes (*Hauptsatz* and *Seitensatz/Gegensatz*). As is well known, the construction of gender that he suggested here would become one of his most influential assertions, one that, for us, has become both disturbing and deeply problematic:

In this pair of themes... the first theme is the one determined at the outset, that is, with a primary freshness and energy – consequently that which is energetically, emphatically, absolutely shaped... the dominating and determining feature. On the other hand, the second theme... is the [idea] created afterward [*Nachgeschaffne*], serving as a contrast, dependent on and determined by the former – consequently, and according to its nature necessarily, the milder [idea], one more supple [*schmiegsam*] than emphatically shaped, as if it were [*gleichsam*] the feminine to that preceding masculine. In just this sense each of the two themes is different, and only with one another [do they constitute something] higher, more perfect.¹

Thus by 1845 the gendered-theme concept bobs up into the written tradition, here, strikingly, as an Adam-and-Eve norm of masculine first themes and (as afterthoughts) feminine second themes. And clearly, to pursue Marx’s biblical metaphor (Genesis 2: 4-25), it is the Composer Himself – assumed to be masculine – who is playing the role of God the Creator. This is high rhetoric, and it is manifestly implicated in characteristically ‘modern’ issues of patriarchal power and status. To be sure, the norm of thematic contrast was anything but new: several late-18th-century writers had noted the distinction between stronger and gentler themes. Still, by way of comparison, we might recall the lower temperature of Koch’s assertion in 1793 that the form’s second thematic portion was merely the *cantabler Satz* (‘cantabile theme’) – or of Galeazzi’s description of it in 1796 as the *passo caratteristico*.

It is important to realize that Marx was primarily addressing the matter of thematic character here, not that of the tonic key as a supposedly ‘patriarchal ruler’, as Schoenberg would later construe it in the *Harmonielehre*.²

But why did Marx include such a remark at all? This is not an easy question. It would be rash to assume that he was proposing his gendered metaphor as an instrument of invariable and universal hermeneutic application. On the contrary, his protracted discussion of sonata form reverberates with gestural variants and musical subtleties, intermixed with appeals for individual, not generic, analysis. Saturated with enthusiasm for Beethoven (and perhaps with the Ninth Symphony and its *creatio ex nihilo* on his mind), Marx may in part have used this cosmogonic language as a rhetorical strategy to suggest his belief in the spiritual importance of instrumental music.

Whatever Marx’s motivation, this metaphor seems to have spread like wildfire in midcentury Europe. With his authority amplified by his professorship at the University of Berlin, Marx’s massive textbook would be widely studied and adapted in the emerging institution of art music: by 1875 each of its four volumes had gone through from four to eight editions each.³ The gendered metaphor was frequently echoed by others, though sometimes with added nuances. In 1855, for example, the Leipzig theorist Johann Christian Lobe outlined a formula for dramatic overtures whereby each theme was interpretable as a character: the first theme represented the principal hero of the story (‘*den Haupthelden der Geschichte*’) and the second theme (‘*Gesangsgruppe*’) the principal heroine (‘*Hauptheldin*’), while other portions of the exposition could concern themselves with lesser characters.⁴ After Marx, evidence of this sort is easily multiplied.

That the supposedly abstract 19th-century sonata-pattern was actually a cultural text intertwined in ‘narrative agendas’ of sexuality is hardly a surprise. (Perhaps needless to say, the pattern was also caught up in other sociocultural webs as well: personal status, ethnicity, nationality, class, politics, religion, demonstration of technique, relation to the tradition, and so on.) The problem for us has become not whether sonata structures are capable of encoding

social constructions of gender, but rather how and to what extent they do so – and how we might steer clear of the temptation to seize onto Marx’s masculine-feminine metaphor as an ideological grid for crudely politicised, reductive analyses. As it turns out, Marx and his successors do not provide us with easily applicable solutions. Instead, we are given a set of problems.

A moment’s reflection on the repertory surrounding Marx’s metaphor reveals the need for a nuanced understanding of the concept. Berlioz, for example, thought of the first expositional theme of his *Symphonie fantastique* as a construction of the feminine, not of the masculine, as would apparently also be true, much later, of Wagner’s *Siegfried-Idyll*.⁵ Moreover, many expositions subdivide into multiple characters or situations, not merely into a binarily oppositional two. Consider Mendelssohn’s Overture to *A midsummer night’s dream* from 1826 – whose composition Marx himself had supervised: here it may be (though it is not certain) that the second theme was meant to evoke the feminine (Tovey suggested Hermia and Helena), but the subdivision of the first theme(s)

among the fairies and Duke Theseus and the rude appearance of a braying Bottom toward the end of the exposition at least complicates the matter, as Lobe had noticed. And where might the masculine and feminine representational elements be located in the themes of *The Hebrides*? How can we know?⁶

Still, in 1845 Marx was doubtless pointing to tendencies in certain types of Beethoven and post-Beethoven sonatas, or in certain well-known examples from the preceding few decades. Marx’s smoke suggests a thriving fire somewhere: he must have been reifying metaphors that, more loosely, had been in place in segments of the music community for some time (Schubert? Chopin? Schumann?). Perhaps the earliest explicit model that survived as a repertory piece – a model about which there could be no disagreement – was Weber’s influential Overture to *Der Freischütz* from 1821. Here listeners were encouraged to identify the operatic characters: the first theme, in C minor, was meant to call up the image of the distressed Max (Ex.1a), while the heart of the second theme, in Eb major, represented Agathe and her potentially redemptive love (Ex.1b) – a love ‘from outside’ of the protagonist that would prove to be triumphant in the recapitulation.

EX.1 WEBER: OVERTURE TO *DER FREISCHÜTZ* – (BELOW) FIRST THEME AND (OVERLEAF) SECOND THEME

The image shows a page of musical notation for the Overture to *Der Freischütz*. The top system is labeled 'Molto vivace' and includes staves for Clarinet (Clar.), Violin (Viol.), Viola (Viola), Bassoon (Fag.), and Corno in C (Corni in C.). The bottom system includes staves for Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Clar.), Bassoon (Fag.), Corno in C (Corni in C.), Violin (Viol.), and Viola (Viola). The notation includes various musical symbols such as clefs, time signatures, and dynamic markings like *mf*, *p*, *cresc.*, *ff*, *decresc.*, and *pp*. The first theme is in C minor and the second theme is in Eb major.

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system features a Clarinet (Clar.) part on a single staff, a Bassoon (Fag.) part on a single staff, and a Piano accompaniment consisting of four staves (treble and bass clefs). The Piano part includes markings for 'arco', 'dolce', and 'p'. The second system continues the same instrumentation, with a 'pp' marking appearing in the Clarinet part.

Was Weber's overture the first work unambiguously to treat themes in this gendered way? Or was he merely making explicit certain masculine-feminine tendencies that had long been understood to be potentially present, especially in minor-key sonatas? Once we have absorbed the *Freischütz*-model and Marx's metaphor, it is all too easy to suppose that Beethoven, too, must have had the masculine-feminine dichotomy clearly in mind, but the evidence for this is not as secure as we might imagine. Not surprisingly, the most suggestive candidates would seem to be minor-mode 'heroic' overtures. One is Beethoven's Overture to *Coriolan* (1807), whose major-mode, short-lived second theme Wagner would interpret in a 'programmatic explanation' from 1852 as the repeated entreaties of Coriolan's mother and wife that he not launch a military attack on his home city, Rome – a gendered identification passed on by Tovey. (Wagner's pronouncements were accompanied by sweeping assurances that 'almost all the master's symphonic works' can be conceived expressively as 'representations of scenes between man and woman'.⁷) Another is

the Overture to *Egmont* (1810), in which the brief, lyrical elements of the second-theme complex have occasionally been taken (again, for example, by Tovey) to represent the futile pleas of Clärchen – although the presence of these response-phrases alone hardly seems sufficient to justify the consideration of the entire second theme as uniformly feminine.

Even in *Coriolan* and *Egmont* these issues become murkier once we inquire more closely into the music's actual thematic, tonal, and textural processes – but what are we to do with Beethoven's more 'abstract' minor-mode expositions? Does the 'Pathétique' Sonata have a second theme whose character we may confidently claim as a feminine representation, one juxtaposed as a stark 'other' to the expressive personality of the first? How about the 'Tempest' Sonata? the 'Appassionata'? Moreover, what distinctions might we wish to draw between typical procedures in minor-mode and major-mode sonatas? When we consider works from the early 19th century, the practice of gender-marking might be easy for us to assert, but the matter is far from clear, and the evidence supporting

OUVERTURE.

Allegro con brio. $\text{♩} = 72$.

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EX.2 WAGNER: OVERTURE TO *THE FLYING DUTCHMAN* – (ABOVE) THE DUTCHMAN'S THEME AND (BELOW) SENTA'S

the notion of an inevitable, cardboard-cutout division of the exposition into a masculine 'self' and feminine 'other' becomes even more uncertain when we move into the 18th century to consider Haydn, Mozart, and their predecessors.

One may wish to bail out of these problems entirely by insisting, with Schoenberg, that it is the tonic key that is inevitably patriarchal and domineering, not always the themes themselves. But the evidence for this as a significant historical construct in the period of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven is at best shaky. The argument on its behalf usually accepts uncritically the familiar notion of the absolute 'polarity' (by implication, the antagonistic polarity) of tonic and dominant (or tonic and mediant). But there are other ways to construe tonal relations that are more helpful – and certainly more sophisticated. Schenkerians, for instance, might argue that tonal moves to mediant or dominant keys are better understood as articulations or extensions of the tonic (or tonic-triad) self, not as anxious encounters with incompatible obstacles or feared 'others' that need to be purged, subjugated, or contained. Issues of gender construction and sexuality may well be vital matters in pre-Freischütz sonatas – indeed, I suspect that they are – but the topic is by no means as self-evident, nor as simple, as it is occasionally made out to be.

Particularly within the sphere of Austro-Germanic compositional practice, the idea of mapping gender differences onto portions of the sonata's thematic areas seems to have taken hold as an increasingly enticing compositional option in 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, the period between *Der Freischütz* and Marx's textbook. The compositional counterpart of Marx's verbal theory was Wagner's Overture to *The flying Dutchman* (1843) – itself something of a recomposition of the sonata portion of the *Freischütz* Overture, several of whose effects it recalls (such as the concluding apotheosis of the feminine theme). Once again, there can be no dispute about the gendering of this most stereotypical of mid-19th-century expositions: the first theme represents the tormented Dutchman (Ex.2a), the second, the long-desired Senta (Ex.2b). Considered together, both images invite listeners – both then and now – to understand the themes as typically romantic,

Goethean metaphors, as ideological constructions of ‘man’ (the restless striver, the creator, the negotiator in public space) and ‘woman’ (the inspirational, the sacrificial, the domestic, private-space, ‘eternal feminine’).

The importance of the *Dutchman* Overture to the subsequent symphonic tradition cannot be overstressed. It is one of the most archetypal, most powerful musical constructions of gender within 19th-century sonata-practice. In the stark simplicity of its expositional space, in the oppositional binarism of its masculine-feminine contrast, the Dutchman-model would be adapted by dozens of composers in the ensuing decades. Its formula – which invariably carries strongly gendered connotations – may be summarised in six principles: (1) The sonata is a minor-mode work seeking resolution into the major, a resolution that is usually granted – emphatically – in the recapitulation; (2) The exposition subdivides cleanly into two separate, maximally contrasting blocks, and the transition between the two blocks is minimised or made very brief; (3) The first theme, in the minor mode, is generally an aggressive, forte image of the tormented male in extreme crisis – restless, agitated, disturbed, or threatened; (4) The second theme, sometimes slower and always piano when introduced (often through a treble-register solo instrument, frequently a woodwind), is the static, major-mode image of the consoling or potentially redemptive female – self-assured, lyrical, ‘beautiful’, often circular, smooth, or rounded in melodic contour, and so on; (5) The exposition introduces us to the two dramatic characters, while the development sets the plight of the masculine hero into frenetic motion; (6) The resolution into the tonic of the feminine second theme in the recapitulatory space signifies a resolution of the hero’s plight, and, to underscore this, the second theme normally appears here in a grand, *fortissimo* apotheosis, as the climax and *telos* of the piece or movement.

Although the *Dutchman*-formula was by no means the only model for minor-mode sonatas and sonata deformations in the ensuing decades, it was clearly an important one, and it was the one whose implications of gender were the most unequivocal. It is an easy matter to cite later examples and adaptations of it. Almost randomly: Liszt’s *Faust symphony*, first movement (actually a more complex case, although the second theme does concern itself with Gretchen); Tchaikovsky’s *Romeo and Juliet* and Sixth Symphony, first movement; Mahler’s First Symphony, finale; Mahler’s Second and Sixth Symphonies, first movement, along with the second movement of his Fifth; Sibelius’s First Symphony, finale; and so on. Most of Strauss’s tone poems may be heard as thinly disguised variants and structural deformations of the *Dutchman*-model. And perhaps because of the opportunity it offered for a spectacular apotheosis of the feminine theme in the recapitulatory space, the formula became a favorite not only for solo sonatas (such as Liszt’s B minor), but for finales of virtuoso concertos, especially piano concertos (Grieg, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, and so on) – works in which the soloist is also to be observed as physically acting out the role of individual, heroic conqueror.

Does this most clearly gendered of 19th-century sonata-types have an invariably ‘correct’ meaning with regard to issues of the exercising of patriarchal power? To insist that it does would be naive: available meanings and metaphorical overlays are always

EX.3 FIRST (ABOVE) AND SECOND (BELOW) THEMES FROM TCHAIKOVSKY’S *ROMEO AND JULIET* OVERTURE

multiple, their persuasiveness socially negotiated. Nevertheless, in the sense that the formula asks us to register ‘what happens’ to the heroic male protagonist (or situation), the narrative is manifestly presented from that perspective. The *Dutchman*-pattern may be read, for example, as a formula facilitating the production of a masculine erotic fantasy – hyperbolically projecting an encounter with and appropriation of the sexually desirable. (Strauss’s *Don Juan*, a complex deformation of the type, and one of the few with a major-mode first theme, explicitly thematises this connotation.)

Still, works adapting the *Dutchman*-model are not always so readily pressed into the service of the Oppressor-Victim Model. In the finale of Sibelius’s First Symphony, for instance (a work that was read as political from the start, despite the composer’s perhaps disingenuous caveats), the masculine space seems more clearly to invite us to imagine a rebellious nation under the con-

ditions of tyranny. In other words, the first theme is itself 'victimised', while the contrasting feminine space might reasonably be taken as the dream of a positive, utopian future. (In this case, the dream is ultimately quashed in the recapitulation, thus confirming the continued victimisation of the condition originally announced by the first theme.) Any single-minded insistence, then, on a unitary interpretation of the *Dutchman*-model as a victim narrative from the point-of-view of the second theme would be grossly inadequate. Within the norms of 19th-century ideology, there is nearly always a strong utopian element present as well, one in which the feminine second theme may be understood as a liberating condition for which the first-theme 'self' longs – not a feared encounter with an incompatible 'other', but a desperate search for an agent of redemption.⁸

Regardless of the level of sophistication with which we are prepared to deal with the gendered aspects of the *Dutchman*-model, discerning its underlying pattern in other works can expose questions that might otherwise be overlooked, particularly when, for expressive reasons, certain defaults in the pattern are overridden. In the sonata portion of Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, the B minor first theme (Ex.3a) is given over to a representation of the feuding families (more clearly, of their masculine combatants), while the Db major (!) second theme (the 'love theme', Ex.3b) is most productively construed not as 'Juliet' *per se*, but rather as the lovers' entry into a static, diffuse erotic field – a common substitution for the strictly feminine at this point, one whose origins within 'gentle' second themes certainly predate the *Dutchman*-model itself. Nor need the concreteness of the *Romeo and Juliet* story limit the horizon of potentially relevant interpretations. In privately Tchaikovskian (personal) terms, for instance, one might also suggest a reading of the second theme's slippage into the 'wrong-key' erotic as an abandonment of the expected or societally 'normal' (both within the terms of the suggested program and within the norms of minor-mode sonatas) in pursuit of forbidden, but irresistible pleasure, a transgressively sensual encounter with the physical, the bodily. When in the recapitulatory space the second theme attempts its apotheosis outside of the tonic (in the mediant, D major, bb. 389ff, not in the expected B major), it is reasonable to infer that something has gone terribly amiss – as in the *Romeo and Juliet* story. And indeed, before long the 'feminine' theme decenters and disintegrates into a turbulent and ultimately funereal post-sonata space, ending wistfully, in the 'proper' B major, with a glimpse of 'what might have been'.

Similarly, one misses the generic point of the second movement of Mahler's Fifth Symphony unless one understands the workings of its colossal deformation of the *Dutchman*-model. Here the initial A-minor 'masculine' writhings lead us to expect, as usual, the appearance of a major-mode, 'feminine' agent of redemption. Instead, what we encounter is a heartsick emptiness filled only by a weary re-invasion of minor-mode, funeral-march motives from the prior movement. This utter reversal of expectations produces one of the bleakest moments in the history of the sonata – a crushingly negative situation that the sonata-process is incapable of reversing: hence the 'outside-chorale' eruptions and attempts at breakthrough later in the movement.

In short, varying realisations abound. And the *Dutchman*-model is only one among many: no single mode of interpretation can solve our hermeneutic problems. The whole topic of the 'romantic'

appropriation of the sonata as an instrument for the construction of gender – that is, for the explicit articulation of differing, socially normative gender roles – needs far more investigation. From the point of Marx and early Wagner onward, however, the concept of the sonata, along with its potential for gender articulation, continued to split into numerous subtypes and deformational patterns. Each needs to be addressed on an individual basis – hopefully, in a manner as unimpaired as possible by the narrative agendas of our own ideological preconceptions.

Notes

1. Marx: *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition*, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (Leipzig, 1845), p. 221. Recent references to this passage in the musicological literature have perpetuated a loose translation: the above, my own, tries to remain as close to the German as possible (although Marx's 'Satz', of course – connoting also 'main section' or 'passage' – suggests more than my 'theme').
2. As cited, e.g., in Susan McClary: 'Introduction: a material girl in Bluebeard's castle': *Feminine endings: music, gender, and sexuality* (Minneapolis, 1991), p.15; and McClary: 'Narrative agendas in "absolute" music: identity and difference in Brahms's Third Symphony' in *Musicology and difference: gender and sexuality in music scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley, 1993), p.331.
3. Birgitte Moyer: *Concepts of musical form in the 19th century with special reference to AB Marx and sonata form*, Diss. Stanford University, 1969, p.74.
4. Lobe's remarks are found in an article on the opera overture published in his own periodical, the *Fliegende Blätter für Musik I* (1855), pp. 361–62. They are cited in Thomas S. Grey, 'Wagner, the overture, and the aesthetics of musical form' in *19th-Century Music*, vol.12 (1988), p.5, n.6.
5. It matters not at all that both of these pieces treat the expectation of sonata form freely: in both cases the sense of an expositional space is clear. Both are instances of what I call sonata deformations, the theory of which (along with a theory of generic and multi-movement conventions) I am currently elaborating in a joint project with Warren Darcy. For an introduction to the theory, see my *Sibelius: Symphony no. 5* (Cambridge, 1993), chapters 1 and 3.
6. An essential introduction to the complex issues of Marx, Mendelssohn, and programme music may be found in Judith Silber Ballan: 'Marxian programmatic music: a stage in Mendelssohn's musical development' in *Mendelssohn studies*, ed. R. Larry Todd (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 149–61.
7. My translation, from 'Beethovens Overture zu "Koriolan"' in Richard Wagner: *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, ed. Wolfgang Golther (Berlin, n.d.), vol.5, p.173. William Ashton Ellis's 1894 translation – in *Richard Wagner's prose works* (rpt., New York, 1966), vol.3, p.225 – is inexact. It omits, for example, the word 'almost'. (I am grateful to Timothy L. Jackson for sharing with me his unpublished typescript, 'The tragic inverted sonata form', which called my attention to Wagner's essay.) Tovey's concurrence with Wagner is to be found in his essay on *Egmont*, not in that on *Coriolan*.
8. Lawrence Kramer's provocative discussion of the 'symbolic immobilization' of femininity and the 'doubling of women into ideal and contrary' – in 'Liszt, Goethe, and the discourse of gender', *Music as cultural practice, 1800–1900* (Berkeley, 1990), pp.102–34 – deals helpfully with some of these issues. As the case of the Sibelius symphony suggests, though, it would be short-sighted – and ultimately, repetitively boring – to collapse the generic issues at hand in each individual work exclusively into a critique of 19th-century sexual politics, even though those politics are ever-present and, in varying degrees, always relevant.