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What is a Sonata?

JH: Emails to Warren Darcy, 9-13 May 1994, sent at the beginning stages
of the Sonata Theory Project (retyped and lightly edited here, June 2019)
(retrospective footnote commentary in red from 2019)[1]

Proto-Thoughts on Sonata Form

1. Before its first reification (that reification *in practice*, with later Haydn and Mozart, and especially Beethoven) , the grand binary design came to be forged as a practical, mid-eighteenth-century rhetorical machine, one capable of constructing/shaping/organizing/disciplining emotional experience, as the theorists of the time suggest.[2] One of its goals was to contain otherwise raw, free-flowing emotional [or sensual] experience . . . to shape it in ways that doubtless have (or that doubtless invited its audience to sense) social/political/cultural resonances.

That it arose simultaneously with the set of old-world/new-world tensions that we call the Enlightenment can hardly be a coincidence. Perhaps this rhetorical machine (the grand binary design

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[1] However loosely organized, rudimentary, or unclear here—these were emails, after all—these 1994 speculations were relevant to my developing concept of sonata form and Sonata Theory as a hermeneutic genre and also relevant to the concept of how to interpret deformations and idiosyncratic mid- and later nineteenth-century sonatas as "sonatas." At the time, I was at the University of Minnesota and Warren Darcy was at Oberlin. For me at the University of Minnesota, 1989-94 were also years of intense reading into more current literary theory, cultural criticism, philosophy, and aesthetics—all of which was lurking behind and underpinning my then-current Dahlhaus, Sibelius, and Strauss work. My red-font footnote commentary seeks to clarify or comment on my inchoate thoughts from 1994. Passages in square brackets in the text above were added in 2019.

[2] On "reification": In the early 1990s, I was pursuing the later-suppressed concept of the "centering" of the sonata-form genre, c. 1770, 1780?, following a few decades of its freer formal experimentation with expanding the "binary" or "grand binary" format. The "centering" referred to the genre's relative stabilizing, its focusing into a clearer, more consistent set of generic norms. Sonata Theory was to address and describe the still-flexible norms of this more stabilized, centered phase of the genre—the phase that subsequently became the core of the historical tradition into the nineteenth century. (I was thinking of three historical phases of the genre: pre-centered (1740s-1760s?), centered (1770-1790 or 1800, 1810s?), and post-centered (post-1820?—or earlier?). The concept of "reification" (or "first reification") is more or less the same thing as this centered phase. The concept was intended to suggest that what we call "sonata form" had by mid-century or shortly thereafter become a quasi-automatic or reflexive "thing," a schema or ready-to-hand tool for use for practical composition. ("Ready to hand" in the Heideggerian sense—hence the description of the taken-for-granted practical tool as a "machine" or "rhetorical machine" whose products did not call for any extended act of interpretation: they just self-evidently "were.")

that came to be called "sonata form") was constructed as a way of articulating and containing those tensions. (The current jargon: it was a "space" or "site" for the articulation of oppositional social and personal tensions.)

There are at least two simultaneous aspects in play here, each checking the force of the other. Neither aspect works alone.

A) To some extent, the central role of periodicities/balances/symmetries/resolutions is an Enlightenment illustration of how supposedly "natural" emotions could be [coordinated], balanced, and brought into a just set of proportions, especially through a language featuring the interplay of differing rhetorical topics ([which, considered by themselves, could] have centrifugal tendencies [if multiplied at length]). . . .

B) Working in tandem with the above are the central roles of emotional fluidity and an increasing prizing of "naturalness," coupled with a grandly *teleological* sense of form and scale, in which the final proportional section (the "recapitulation") gets significantly more weight because of its ideological function of resolution. Thus from the beginning the sonata process becomes something capable of being construed as a narrative journey, one that seeks fulfilment or resolution in a teleological accent placed at or near the end of the structure, what Sonata Theory calls the ESC. *And nothing is fully secured before this point*. The sonata seeks that point, therefore, in a socially constructed quest that becomes more and more important and evident as we approach the last decades of the eighteenth century [when that quest becomes more emphatically *dramatized*], in the end-accented recapitulation. The moment of truth for all sonatas is precisely the return of S in the recapitulation and its eventual resolution at the ESC.

In time, with expanded developmental sections, it would be an obvious inference that the central section (the development) could become a space of relatively free, dramatic [and contrasting] action, with the implication that that action could be construed as that which made possible the supposed resolution of events in the development (or, better, that the ESC resolution has finally overcome the threats of the development).

In short, sonata form, as originally constructed in the mid-eighteenth century, was a practical [yet moderately flexible] template, a rhetorical machine whose function seems to have been to produce

(or represent) a self-contained, self-sufficient, "perfect" action, presumably in the service of a larger social function of the creation and individual and group subjectivity.

This gets even more historically interesting when the sense arises that the sonata in itself <u>cannot fulfill its discursive mission unaided</u>—that accretions must be added to it for various expressive or ideological purposes: introductions (for example) that call attention to the artifice of the machine—to its constructedness.[3] When an introduction is present, a "not-sonata" accretion is called upon to set up or to stage the sonata to come. Hence introductions are even more personalized as representations of narrators—though introductions themselves are constructed entities [that generated their own sets of conventions].

2. After the first reification of the sonata (that is, once the "grand binary design" had been codified, expanded, and more or less standardized as a clear genre [or expected schema for practical use in composition])—or perhaps as part of the process of that reification, c. 1770-1810?)[4]—<u>the sonata, it seems to me, becomes something different</u>, conceptually. [It takes on a new potential role]. This is relevant to the issue of construing an unusual or non-normative structure as a deformation of some reified ideal type (or set of types) lurking somehow in the background in the pre-A.B. Marx world.[5]

In short, by around 1800 (and perhaps even a decade or two earlier), it can be argued that the sonata takes on another important meaning. That is, apart from its decades-old function as a straightforward "rhetorical machine," the very concept of a sonata could now also be construed not solely as a practical, ready-to-hand set of guidelines for composition *per se* but also as <u>a conceptual, interpretive tool, a lens, a set of questions that permit a coherent reading to emerge from an otherwise anamorphic structure</u>.[6] (This would apply to musical exemplars that have extravagantly unusual or transgressive things in them.) Thus the argument is that <u>the concept of a sonata gradually changes in</u>

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[3] The claim here was overstated. Not all accretions ("parageneric spaces" in the *Elements*) exist because the sonata proper is "unable" to secure its rhetorical and tonal missions. The following remark, though, about introductions calling attention to the artifice of the sonata that follows still seems reasonable to me.

[4] In this document—and indeed to this day—I am uncertain about the dates or decades that I should cite here and elsewhere.

[5] 2019: I now think that even early Beethoven sonata forms—so eccentric and often deformational—must have presupposed—or begun to presuppose—the idea proposed in the following paragraphs.

[6] I was using the term "anamorphic" and "anamorphosis" here in a free, metaphorical way—and perhaps too cavalierly. In the world of art, "anamorphosis" refers to a distorted image, or portion thereof, that from the normal, straight-on perspective of the viewer is misrepresented, askew, or occasionally unrecognizable, until the viewer shifts position to view it from a specific, different (and non-normative) angle. Just so, portions of a sonata-oriented musical structure can seem distorted, transgressive, or inexplicable until they are processed through a productive hermeneutic lens—such as Sonata Theory—that can interpret the significance and potential purpose of that deformational moment.

historical time from being merely an observable "structure" or structural pattern following historically established norms (the "machine") to being a conceptual device that, when properly applied to actual structures within utterances, permits large-scale meaning to happen.[7]

In Chopin's First Ballade, for example, one could not argue that this "is" a sonata in any standard sense.[8] Yet [Douglass] Green's *ad hoc* forms (or anyone else's special structures) are obviously inadequate, because they don't mean anything. Abstract patterns for the sake of abstract patterns are empty. But maybe the issue is this: Given a seemingly unique or at least notably unusual structure, how can *any* sense be made of it? The answer is often: by interpreting what we *do* find there in terms of reified sonata expectations. Thus the curious game at hand is that in such cases we are not given a sonata of any normative kind, but the discourse that we are given can become coherent (or can spring free from its anamorphosis) only when viewed from the sonata angle—from the special device, position, or lens through which its anamorphic aspect becomes readily legible as [part or all of] a recognizable picture [or, more clearly, becomes readable as a still-coherent structure]. In short: certainly by the time of [Beethoven? Late Beethoven? Schubert?] A.B. Marx,[9] the historical concept of the sonata stopped being only a practical, ready-to-hand structure or schema guiding [the production of] normative composition and began to be primarily an interpretive device.[10]

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[7] The claim in this and the next paragraph are the pivotal ones: the shift of the sonata from merely being a ready-to-hand formula for composition to becoming a lens for interpretation to be used by the listener, performer, or analyst. The paragraph resonates with the then-emerging concept of dialogic form, which perhaps, stated the issue more clearly (or at least less abstractly).

[8] Around 1992-94, we were much preoccupied—and we were not alone in this—with accounting for idiosyncratic, nonconforming structures that seemed somehow sonata-like in some of their characteristics but were obviously transgressive in tonal arrangement, nonresolution (or "wrong-key" effects), or rhetorical arrangement. Among the disciplinary touchstones of oddity (and yet seeming internal coherence) in play at that time were Chopin's First Ballade—the G minor—and the first movement of Schumann's C-major Fantasy: were these pieces "sonatas" or not? (As I have since written repeatedly, this is precisely the *wrong* question to ask.) Or are they merely *ad hoc* or intuitively generative works? (Also a bad question.) And in what sense were they "sonata-like" at all? (This approaches a better question.) And why would any of that matter? What was clear to me from the outset is that to interpret the Ballade as some kind of "arch-form" or as having a "reversed recapitulation" was utterly to misunderstand the piece. Within a few years after 1994 I had resolved to these questions to my own satisfaction, and I have just revisited my readings once again now in 2019, though this is not the place to offer up these analyses. My plan, ultimately, is to post my readings of these and many other pieces on this website. (The Fantasy, as it turned out, is much more challenging than the Ballade—more "anamorphic" [as befits a Fantasy]—but is still legible through the application of the hermeneutic lens/genre of dialogic form and rotation theory.)

[9] Obviously, I'm flailing about here with regard to the centering concept and the date of the rise of this second, hermeneutic function of the sonata concept.

[10] That is, it became something like a persistent, even mandatory, conceptual background of norms grounded in those of the centered history of the genre, an implicit conceptual ground against which individual and idiosyncratic figures (compositions) from later decades were to be set into dialogue.

When I suggest that that device or the sonata-concept permits the resolution of an anamorphic piece into conceptual coherence, I do not mean that we have now arrived at the unequivocal, correct reading of the piece—say, the Chopin Ballade. There is no correct reading in any absolute sense, and doubtless such works have multiple meanings that are beyond us. Instead, what we are producing by the application of the sonata-concept is a historically *reasonable* meaning (one that we hope might be persuasive), one that does preserve a sense of drama, moment-to-moment significance, some sort of narrative and, above all, some sort of coherence. The hope, ultimately, is that Sonata Theory might have stumbled onto a significant part of the game that composers of the time thought they were playing.

JH--Follow-up—10 May 1994

[Reply to WD:] Yes, the lens for resolving anamorphosis must have been crystallizing out at the same time as the sonata is beginning to undergo reification [as a traditional, standardized plan for composition]. One question, obviously, is : is the reification of the sonata (the first reification) simultaneously the equivalent of turning the sonata-concept into (or making the concept of sonata available to become) a lens for resolving anamorphosis? . . .

The essential question might be something like: once the sonata is effectively reified [accepted as a traditional, standard schema or practice for composition], is the sonata form as it is articulated in actual *pieces* "real" at all, or is it only a lens of interpretation, *even in* normative cases? To the extent that it might be the latter, one implication is that the (first/second) reification of the sonata, while representing a gain in potential expressive power and implication, simultaneously suggests a loss in the pure ontological status of the form—if by ontological status I mean something that "is" in material reality. Under the conditions of reification, the form no longer has a purely primary immediacy but is profoundly mediated by intellection or abstraction.

We might be facing a situation in which supposedly more normative sonatas post-1840 (or post-1820? [or even post-1770?]) might not be "articulating a form"—that is, not naively or spontaneously, in the mid-eighteenth-century manner. Rather, these utterances might be individual responses to the expectation of the reified lens—that is, to its application in the exercise of hermeneutic understanding. Ultimately, this might cast into doubt the notion of an unproblematic form to be

uncovered in these works. ("Unproblematic" would mean: one demonstrates it, and "there it is.") <u>In short, "form" qua "form" in the usual, everyday sense might not exist; only "form" qua "dialogue" with the institutionalized lens.</u>[11]

I'm not sure that . . . this undermines the concept of sonata deformation. "Sonata deformation" might turn out to be something of a terminological shorthand for an utterance that self-evidently (or otherwise) seems to request or invite special processing via the reified "sonata" lens. Obviously, such utterances/structures can exist in varying degrees on a sliding scale of anamorphosis—including virtually none. Acknowledging this could take care of the more orthodox cases: they too can be readily handled by the lens. It's just that they require less unscrambling. (But [for more or less straightforward or genre-conforming pieces] "why does the composer wish to make them this simple?" remains an essential question. And the answer will presumably have something to do with the sustaining and affirming of the implied art-institution: a social affirmation, etc., as I suggested in my "Theses" draft.[12]

Anyway, what's at stake, I think, is not the concept of sonata deformation but the whole notion of the supposed reality of uttered form in the post-reified sonata world. Form may have less of an ontological status than we might imagine.

JH--Follow-up –13 May 1994

1) On the one and, I have suggested that a sonata deformation is a structure that overrides certain generic defaults (or certain *levels* of generic defaults), thus producing a structure that does not articulate itself in time as a [generically straightforward and/or traditional] "sonata proper"—that is, it does not follow certain sonata aspects that would be either essential or at least highly characteristic of sonata-ness in any moderately extended description of that procedure. . . .

This way of describing "deformation" is not incompatible with the notion of (varying degrees of) anamorphosis. To submit a sonata, or crucial parts of it, to a deformation (or to override important

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[11] This is an early, informal, and somewhat extreme statement of the dialogic form principle. The core idea is that the "real form" of a piece might be something larger and more abstract than what one merely hears on the acoustic surface of the piece. The "real form"—or what the piece is all about—is legible only by tracing out the manner of its dialogue with a traditionally mediated, but flexible, conceptual structure that Sonata Theory would try to outline in the *Elements of Sonata Theory*.

[12] I refer here to a talk that I had given at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Stanford, "Theses on the Sociology of Genres." I recast this talk in 1994-95 and called it "Musicology and Genre: Reflections on Two Texts and a Counter-Text," a paper that I never published. I have now uploaded "Musicology and Genre" to this website, under "Unpublished Writings."

generic defaults in search of special effects or implications) is *ipso facto* to produce something that would be, in a sense, anamorphic [purposefully distorted away from the generic norms]: the C major Fantasy, the First Ballade. I have suggested that a particularly rich or productive way to read such anamorphic structures is to pass the sonata lens through them [read: the Sonata Theory lens]—a conceptual device that resolves the anamorphosis—that is, a device that permits one to understand it as an expressive gesture vis à vis sonata expectations. The difficult part (say, in the Ballade) is to come to the initial conviction that it's the *sonata* lens that should be used, rather than other possible [and historically available] lenses. The same might be said of the Fantasy, though here the multimovement structure more readily calls the sonata pattern to mind.

. . . .

2) In this sense, the "real" Ballade or the "real" Fantasy, strictly considered (as an anamorphic structure, portions of which require unscrambling or resolution [away from purposeful distortion]) would not be coextensive with the structural pattern that is articulated on its acoustic surface—the form that one hears, that just seems to be out there in real time (the form, for example, that other theorists are trying to explain, perhaps as an *ad hoc* or purely generative form). This is similar to an anamorphic portion of a painting or an anamorphic painting itself: viewed straight on it can be a garble, a puzzle (though, of course, we could content ourselves with a straightforward description of its distortion). What this means: The real piece—or at least its manifestly higher reality ["what it means," "how it is to be grasped"]—would exist or be manufactured only by the act of interpreting it—by the use of the lens, etc. This higher reality would not exist in time or space, but only conceptually. In that sense, the anamorphic form presented on the acoustic surface is not real—or not *as* real—at least not in the usual music-theory sense of the term. It was in this sense that I questioned the ontology of form in the period of the high reification of the sonata. The sense of overriding defaults, though, is still relevant. One might argue that in the extreme overriding of defaults, the composer produces the anamorphosis, and this can lead us to question the ontology of form as it is presented to us on the acoustic surface in real time. One must not be a naïve listener, believing in the directness of what is presented directly before one's ears. [Everything is to be grasped by means of a hermeneutic effort on the part of the listeners, on whose shoulders falls the burden of interpretation: trying to understand what is presented to them.]

3) But anamorphosis exists in varying degrees, from very little (if any) to the strikingly distorted (as in the Ballade or Fantasy). As we move our way *down* the scale of degree of distortion (moving gradually, say, from the extreme C-major Fantasy, down through nonresolving recapitulations, etc., down to a perfectly normative sonata in the (let us say) post-1780 period, at *which* point can we say that we are ceasing to use the lens to interpret what it is that we are finding? I don't think that there is such a point. Even normative sonatas are perceived to be normative only because we have used the lens to make such a perception possible. (This also, by the way, fits into my theory of genre whereby compositional choices to follow, or to *affirm*, the socially generic are equally as significant as choices to override the defaults. Both are interesting choices to be explicated. Both need the standard of the reified sonata lens in order to be perceived as coherent.) If this is true—that everything in the age of the reified sonata requires the application of the ideal-type lens—then it would seem, as we scale down progressively from massively anamorphic structures to more normative structures, that in each case the reality of the acoustic form would remain essentially the same. In each case the higher reality [what the sonata means or implies, instead of being merely experienced and naively accepted in the flow of time] would be the intellectual or interpretive conclusion in the mind of the interpreter. It's just that the ontological situation is clearer, more manifest, in strongly anamorphic structures, [that is, it is with those structures that one feels more clearly the need to interpret].[13]

4) Once again . . . we should not claim an absolute correctness in these readings. Could one apply another lens . . . to the Fantasy and come up with a different reading that could claim equal legitimacy? [Yes, of course.] . . . For some time now I have been insisting that works permit (even encourage) multiple interpretations, that meaning-potential exists on multiple levels and is, in a sense, multi-directional, open to lenses coming from various angles. I do not want to argue that we have found the single correct way—the "master secret"—that now, once and for all, solves or unlocks these pieces.

That we will have found a richer way to look at them will be, I hope, self-evident. That we will have found a way that is historically sensitive, provocative, and powerful in its implications will also, I hope, be clear. Ultimately I prefer to couch the argument in terms of richness of implication rather than absolute correctness. True, our mode of discourse will of necessity often seem to be one of claiming to

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[13] Once again, what was implied here is something along the following lines: the sonata shifts from Heidegger's "ready to hand" [a practical machine for compositional use] to his "present at hand] [the lens for hermeneutic interpretation], something now not used as a mere tool but actually called forth for attention for its own sake (as when Heidegger's hammer breaks and falls away from "ready-to-hand" existence to become "present at hand" and brought forth for notice and reflection *as such*).

show how pieces work. But I would hope, rather, that what is understood is something more like, "Let us show you how rich these pieces can become what one uses this particular lens [the Sonata Theory lens] for rendering the audible legible." Our method, I hope, can give [listeners and interpreters] more to consider—much more is accounted for—and, in short, we might hope that we seek to manufacture meaning better, or more productively, than [do many other modes of analysis]. This can sound arbitrary, especially to a music-theory establishment that has implicitly claimed that it has accounted for music *wie es eigentlich gewesen*—a claim that in 1994 (alas?) is harder to make.

The main point is that these abstractions do not significantly affect our theory *per se*—the way it is applied in practice.[14] Rather, they only affect the [perhaps tacit] deeper levels of the larger conceptual apparatus in which one might consider the fullest possible implications of what we are saying. So far as the technique is concerned [with regard to practical, published work]—the method of reading pieces, and so on, the notions of reifications and the overriding of defaults—all this stays the same.

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[14] The concern here was that the academic institution of 1990s Anglophone music theory—then still largely locked into Schenker and set theory—would be put off by the abstractions regarding the ontology of form (what is "real form"?) brought up in these sorts of 1994 emails. What I was suggesting is that we were certainly not obliged to bring out these broader, more abstract speculations in what we eventually publish. That is, we could keep some of the broader conceptual or philosophical axioms behind the curtain—or relegated, as I often put it in the 1990s, to the background but unobserved "system folder."