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Beyond the Sonata Principle

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Sonata form has traditionally taken – or, rather, been given – the role as one of the primary devices that carries the function of reflecting on the formal structures of novels that in one way or another possess musical qualities. Word and music critics have often asserted that the sonata form model more or less successfully fits the formal scheme or narrative structure of a particular novel, and the reader is then left to wonder what this may signify regarding the work in question – and indeed what it implies regarding our understanding of such works more generally. This essay contends that sonata form is something that cannot be isolated from other musical properties; that it is a musical feature that necessarily belongs to the unique musical design. While the essay does not make claims for a general solution to the problems that arise from direct analogical comparisons between the art forms, it does offer the view that at least in some music-novels, the notion of music-literary gesture can facilitate a better understanding of the collaborations between music and the novel than the sonata form model provides.

During at least the last half-century of research in word and music studies, huge claims have been made for sonata form as a device that can facilitate reflection on the formal similarities between music and the novel. The Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians describes sonata form as “the most important principle of musical form, or formal type, from the Classical period well into the 20th century” (Grove: entry ‘Sonata Form’). It is not surprising, therefore, that this particular musical form should also play a pivotal role in word and music studies. Novelists have been inspired by sonata form, and scholars have researched these works in various ways, for various reasons, and with varying success. However, sonata form in the novel is based in a prevalent understanding of musical form as something that can exist outside of music: something that can adequately be described in words. This approach remains remarkably resilient, as literature continues to define itself through music, and critics continue to investigate musical qualities in novels – perhaps
hoping to find in literature, as in music, what Lawrence Kramer has called the “almost universal understanding that music appeals to the emotions, moods, the senses, the whole array of interior states of mind and body, with unmatched immediacy and power” (2003: 8).

Sonata form as the theoretical abstraction we know can be traced at least to Anton Reicha’s *Traité de haute composition musicale* (1826), Adolph Bernhard Marx’s *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition* (1837-47), and Carl Czerny’s *School of Practical Composition* (1848-49). The basic outline goes something like this: a typical sonata form movement consists of a ternary structure (or three main sections) comprising the exposition, a development section, and the recapitulation. An introduction may or may not be included, and a coda may or may not round off the composition. The structure is embedded in a two-part tonal design. The exposition consists of a first theme, also called the first group, in the tonic, and a second theme, or second group, in another key – usually the dominant. The exposition is usually repeated. In the development section the various themes undergo transformation, usually involving a high degree of modulation and other re-workings of the material. Towards the end of the development section, the recapitulation is prepared harmonically for the tonic. The recapitulation restates most of the material from the development section, and second-subject material returns explicitly, if usually undramatically, in the tonic.

This model has demonstrated remarkable tenacity and exerted great influence over analytical practices in word and music studies. I shall give a few examples that are by no means exhaustive. In 1949, Calvin S. Brown discussed the form and its potential in literary analysis in *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts*; in the 1960s and early 1970s, Robert Boyle and Don Noel Smith applied it to each their analyses of *Ulysses* - following a comment Ezra Pound made in 1922 that *Ulysses* was written in sonata form (cf. 205); in the late 1970s and 1980s, Robert K. Wallace got caught up in sonata form in his comparisons between Beethoven’s *Pathétique* sonata and Poe’s ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, and in other writings I shall return to shortly; in 1999, William E. Grim described musical form, and sonata form specifically, as one of three levels at which music may influence literature – the other two being the inspirational and the metaphorical levels; and in 2008, it featured in Gerry Smyth’s book titled *Music in Contemporary British Fiction – Listening to the Novel* - a book that is theoretically informed by Grim’s approach to sonata form as an abstract model (cf. 2008: 44-47).

Most of these critics have expressed concerns in their comparisons between the sonata form model and literature. Calvin S. Brown, for instance, notes on the relationship between sonata form and literary forms that “certain very general analogies can be worked out easily. But they are so general that they involve only processes which have been independently established in literature already.” (1949: 176). Robert Boyle and Don Noel Smith had doubts too, regarding the analytical efficacy of using this model in their respective music-literary readings – the case in point for both critics being *Ulysses* as sonata form. Boyle seems sceptical, or dismissive, even, of his undertaking which he presents as “the necessity to reduce the complexity of the novel to some kind of manageable order for an interested but overwhelmed class” (1965: 247). Don Noel Smith, on the other hand,
begins more confidently: “Since I first saw the resemblance of Ulysses to the sonata form independently of Pound, Levin or Boyle, I must conclude that it is rather obvious.” (1972: 81) He too, however, ends up disillusioned and concludes: “The analogies music provides are teasing, remaining no doubt more interesting than convincing” (1972: 92). In a similar vein, Gerry Smith finds that “The question of form in the music-novel is extraordinarily complex, because there are a number of different forces operating constantly (although not necessarily equally) upon the text” (2008: 44); and finally, in the proceedings from the first WMA conference William E. Grim asserts that “sonata form is a musical procedure that is not easily adaptable within a literary context and that its critical use in musico-literary studies should be regarded with a healthy degree of skepticism” (1999: 241-242).

Healthy skepticism indeed. Of course, the model itself can be useful in its musical context. It is certainly true that an outline like this can be observed in many musical compositions, and it is also true that such an outline is probably the best we can do in terms of a general description. A general description, that is, of a particular kind of musical composition that demonstrates a set of similar features, or patterns, across scale, type, historical periods, etc. It is a theory that helps us understand the fundamentals better. It generalizes, just as practice particularizes. Nothing more, nothing less.

The problem is that the model belongs to the fields of musical analysis and composition, in actual music. It is a pedagogical and theoretical construct that cannot meaningfully be isolated from these contexts. Therefore, when we apply it to novels, it is not musical form itself that is being compared to literature. Rather, it is a model that consists of words, not of musical elements. It is an abstraction removed from what is musical. If we take the model to be representative of musical form, therefore, we will be misguided: we will inevitably be looking first for a critical and intellectual condensation of how music should behave, and second for how this reduction is expressed in novels. But when the model is distilled from actual music and applied to literary analysis – the novel being an art form for which it was not intended in the first place – it has by definition already undergone several steps in its reduction to an abstract formal pattern. A pattern that is no longer music.

A brief digression to Ian McEwan’s 1998 novella Amsterdam may elucidate my point thus far. In this work, originality and musical composition in the context of Beethoven’s legacy permeate the plot and contextualise an overarching discussion of the value of art and morality at the turn of the millennium. The point of view alternates between two protagonists, a seasoned composer and a newspaper editor. On a structural level the work consists of five lean parts, each divided into a number of sections. If we wanted to explore the structural analogies between sonata form and this particular novella from the critical practice I have discussed thus far, we would probably begin by looking at which parts of the work we could designate exposition, development and recapitulation. In that process we would have to dismiss the repetition of the exposition in sonata form music as unrelated to form (a matter of performance practice, for instance) or simply ignore it altogether (the latter is by far the dominating tendency in the criticism I have discussed thus far). We might then move on to talk about analogies between musical themes and the two narrators. Here, we would probably attempt to show that the sections and subsections
in the literary work correspond to themes, transitions, etc. in the sonata form model. Ultimately, however, we would most likely reach the conclusion that this analytical approach raises more questions than it answers.

There are also studies that investigate parallels between novels and specific musical compositions. Robert K. Wallace compared Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma* and *Persuasion* to W. A. Mozart’s Piano Concertos nos. 9, 25 and 27, respectively; and in *Emily Brontë and Beethoven: Romantic Equilibrium in Fiction and Music* (1986), he constructed a similar argument. Wallace’s readings were subjected to extensive criticism, amongst other things because he failed to make convincing claims for his parallels. In *Amsterdam*, too, the validity of drawing specific parallels would pose a significant challenge: the composer in the novella is inspired by Beethoven’s 9th, and his plagiarism of *Ode to Joy* ultimately results in his professional, moral and personal end; at the same time, however, a crucial event in the Lake District reflects the composer’s musical influence and underscores the pastoral mode that proves vital for the large-scale points McEwan produces on morality and art. The novella is structured in five parts like Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony*. So, which Beethoven symphony should we choose for our comparative reading – the 9th or the 6th? Perhaps more troubling, and even if we could make a convincing argument for either choice, we would still be faced with a comparison between two distinct works of art separated by almost two hundred years. Works by Beethoven and McEwan reflect very different values, ideals, and cultures, and I would be curious to see a comparative reading that can adequately encompass, rather than do violence, to either.

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For all its apparent problems, we may wonder why the sonata form model is so widely used. I believe the answer is to be found, not primarily in music, but in its immediate narrative potential. In addition to what A. B. Marx has described as its male and female characters (1845: 221) - the first and second themes, respectively - the sonata form model provides a clear beginning, middle, and an end (more recent musicological research has problematized this, of course, noting that beginnings and middles have cadences, even PACs, too). The form provides predictability and recognition; and if we accept that one of the distinguishing qualities of narrative is time, or at least sequence, the attraction to musical form becomes understandable. But the attraction of sonata form is not the traditional overall shape. The appeal lies in other features of classical and romantic instrumental music; features which are present in sonata form music, and which have been noted by musicologists, but which are not encountered for in the traditional description of the sonata form model.

Let me briefly illustrate what some of these features may be by turning to the first movements from Beethoven’s 3rd and 6th symphonies, the *Eroica* (1804-5) and the *Pastoral* (1808), respectively. The *Pastoral Symphony* contains very few themes that are gradually developed. The themes are light, and they merge into one another so effortlessly that one hardly perceives them as distinct ideas, but rather as different phases of a single melodic
The *Eroica*, on the other hand, consists of more direct contrasts. In this work we encounter sharp rhythmic characterizations that underline various individual features, and there are more strongly contrasted themes. Both movements are examples of sonata form: but in the *Pastoral Symphony*, the sonata form elements – exposition, development, recapitulation – are almost static, or repetitive, over long stretches of time. In the *Eroica*, the elements are elaborate, full of contrasts, and constantly in movement. My point is that even in symphonic works by the same composer, in a time when sonata form was arguably at its highest, and in works that are only few years apart, we may indeed observe that sonata form is the general overall scheme. But these works are very different in so many other ways that constitute them as unique musical compositions. This example is an elementary one, of course. Think only of the differences we would find if we compared various sonata forms across compositional types – piano sonatas, string quartets, and symphonies, for instance – and historical periods with different harmonic aesthetics. Mozart, Brahms, Bartók, Schoenberg. I need hardly go on to demonstrate that in music it is difficult to talk about form in isolation from other properties.

We should also keep in mind that form is not a fundamental category that is somehow above the other properties in a musical work. This is not hard to demonstrate. Should form, for instance, be more important than colour in Debussy’s compositions? Is it somehow more essential than rhythmical figurations in Stravinsky? I would say no. But form has been given priority in the type of prose fiction we are discussing here - arguably because the idea of form holds narrative potential, as I mentioned before, but perhaps also because the notion of ‘colour’, for example, is exceedingly difficult to talk about meaningfully and consistently and therefore does not offer immediate appeal and potential for music-literary analysis. At any rate, it seems to me that when it comes to musical form in novels, we are sometimes willing to disregard what is essentially musical in an attempt to make sense of the relationship between music and literature.

In music, we may interpret sonata form more broadly than its normative and evolutionist usages suggest: we could say, for instance, that sonata form – like other musical forms – is a sense of direction, deeply embedded in a temporal design that also consists of other musical elements such as harmony, rhythm, colour, pitch, etc. It is a design that results from musical ideas and a sense of proportion.

Recent musicology has made advances in our understanding of musical form, and our literary readings of musical form could benefit from these studies. In their comprehensive volume on *Sonata Theory*, for example, James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy touched upon the idea that sonata form may be viewed as a game of chess where each player has a limited number of options at any moment, but where the total number of possible combinations is very high, even within the first few moves (2006: 432). We need to think more generously when we talk about musical form in novels, too, and the analogy to chess is one example of how we can produce the kind of insight we need to understand the relationship between music and novels better. It is, in effect, an example of the metaphorical reinvigoration Eric Prieto and others have advocated as a fundamental prerequisite for meaningful analysis in word and music studies (2002: 51). I sympathise with the view that we cannot – and should not attempt to – get over the threshold of metaphoricity in comparative readings.
I hope it is clear by now that I do not think that the sonata form model constitutes the best level at which to study parallels between music and novels. The examples I have given share the idea that the abstract notion of sonata form can somehow be isolated from other musical properties and transferred to the novel: yet they invariably demonstrate that when we do try to apply to literature the theories and tools that were meant for music, both art forms appear elusive. I do not believe that a solution to the problems posed by analysing
direct analogies can be found by probing further into how we can make sonata form somehow fit the novel. Instead, we need to embrace the differences between the art forms, and in doing so I want to suggest another way of thinking about musical form in novels. An approach that is based in an understanding of sonata form as a dynamic way of organising sound, and a sense of direction imbedded in the individual musical design. An approach, as it were, that more generously considers the underlying principles of sonata form, but not the form itself.

I propose to think in terms of gesture, as a concept that can help bridge the gap between the two art forms. Let me say that by gestures, I am not referring to the linguistic principle that Wittgenstein and others have worked with; nor am I referring to the kind of physical gestures in a musical performance that Karl Katschhaler explores elsewhere in this volume; nor still does my idea of gesture relate directly to the work on musical gesture that Anthony Gritten, Elaine King, and others have undertaken. In music, my idea of gesture is rather simple: when a child begins to learn a musical instrument, he or she may be asked to sing aloud the musical motif or phrase that causes difficulties. In doing so, the gesture becomes clearer. The gesture is immanent in the musical score, and its shape becomes clear(er) when the music is played or sung. A musical gesture may consist of virtually anything that is constituent of the musical idea or impulse – a motif, a melody, a rhythmic structure, an interval, or even a chord (the ‘Tristan’ chord, for instance). Its exact shape and expression, as we have already seen in the Beethoven examples, would depend on the musical work in question.

In a novel, the purpose of a gesture would be to help manifest ideas, tropes, or other significant thematic material. It would help bridge the gap between words and music. To give an example, let us return to Ian McEwan’s Amsterdam. In this literary work, Clive Linley, the composer, is heavily inspired by Beethoven and the notion of originality; as the narrative progresses, he becomes increasingly desperate to complete the ‘final song’ for his Millennium Symphony. In the excerpt below, he leaves London and takes the train to the Lake District, searching for inspiration as generations have done before him. And sure enough, as he is walking in nature, it comes to him:

he was relishing his solitude, he was happy in his body, his mind was contentedly elsewhere, when he heard the music he had been looking for, or at least he heard a clue to its form.

It came as a gift; a large grey bird flew up with a loud alarm call as he approached. As it gained height and wheeled away over the valley it gave out a piping sound on three notes which he recognised as the inversion of a line he had already scored for piccolo. How elegant, how simple. Turning the sequence around opened up the idea of a plain and beautiful song in common time which he could almost hear. But not quite. An image came to him of a set of unfolding steps, sliding and descending – from the trap door of a loft, or from the door of a light plane. One note lay over and suggested the next. He heard it, he had it, then it was gone. (84)

I propose to read this sequence as a music-literary gesture because it does several things with music and literature at once: it has musical significance that cannot meaningfully be replaced with something else, and it demonstrates associations that reach beyond the text and points to a (historical) contextualisation.

The notion of birdsong in literature points to a specific poetic tradition, and particularly William Wordsworth, Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge are known for their relationship to the Lake District. Moreover, the countryside in the form of the Lake District alludes to the musical traditions to which the composer belongs, most notably French Enlightenment and Romantic ideals that entail a ‘return to nature’. The sequence also refers to Ralph Vaughan Williams, whose inspiration is instrumental to Clive Linley (21), and particularly Vaughan Williams’ early compositions were inspired by city, nature and the pastoral. But of greater significance is the reference to Beethoven who looms large in the narrative. Linley’s admiration of Beethoven and his sojourn in the Lake District point, not only to a general tradition of pastoral idyll in painting, poetry and music, but also specifically to The Pastoral Symphony and its use of woodwind instruments to resemble birdsong (nightingale, quail, and cuckoo) in the cadenza of the coda in the second movement. The “large grey bird” with its “piping sound of three notes” in the literary work underscores the entries – gestures – in the musical score; nightingale, quail, cuckoo. As the plot unfolds, we learn that the well-known melody Ode to Joy from the last movement of Symphony No. 9 becomes of crucial importance, as Linley’s plagiarism of this particular piece results in his professional fatality. Although he initially regards the birdsong as a gift, it turns out to be elusive and difficult to get hold of, much like the esoteric meaning of music itself. The gesture is strongly associative, and it restates a trope that is already familiar to the reader: Linley’s lack of inspiration and artistic originality has been carefully prepared and increasingly problematized up until this point, and therefore nature’s deus ex machina deliverance from his trials and tribulations will have consequences, no doubt. And indeed, Linley’s romantic self-illusion of the compositional process is used to question notions of beauty, originality, and the value of art in a broader perspective. Ultimately, McEwan interweaves musical tropes with points on the loss of morality and art at the turn of the millennium, as the two protagonists gradually fall victim to each their moral and professional decay.

The music-literary gesture cannot stand alone in our reading of the literary work, certainly; but it does offer insights into the ways in which McEwan constructs his argument on the relationship between morality and the arts. Insights that might have escaped us had we chosen to direct our attention to formal analogies between the arts.

The notion of music-literary gesture could potentially be useful to us because it can begin to describe what sonata form cannot. Gesture is not sonata form, clearly; but if our

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3 For example A London Symphony (Symphony No. 2); A Pastoral Symphony (Symphony No. 3); Dark Pastoral for Cello and Orchestra, The Garden of Proserpine (set to Algernon Charles Swinburne’s 1866 poem of the same name).
The aim is to learn what it is the literary work is trying to communicate by means of music, rather than focus specifically on the similarities between the two arts forms, this does not pose a problem in itself. At any rate, we should not be satisfied with repeating the formulaic outline of sonata form when we work with novels. It will inherently keep us from finding out why literature seems so compelled to draw analogies to music: it will take us away from what is musical.

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