

**THE
CLASSICAL
STYLE**

**Haydn, Mozart,
Beethoven**

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An articulate movement to the dominant (or its substitute) is all that is required harmonically of a sonata exposition: how it is done is completely free, or, rather, bound only by the nature and material of each individual work. There is a movement toward the dominant in most Baroque music, too, even in the early Baroque, but it is rarely made either articulate—that is, decisive—or dramatic. What the late eighteenth century did was to intensify this movement toward the dominant and give it a stronger feeling of direction.

A clear hierarchy of tonal strength was demanded by the classical style. Tovey and others have commented on the difference between being *on* a tonality and being *in* it. In reality, a subtle series of degrees is set up by the classical composers: stronger than being *in* a key, is its establishment as a secondary key, a weaker pole of force reacting against the tonic. Still stronger, of course, is the tonic itself. This hierarchy (a continuous one, with each stage blending into the next) explains how Mozart's G minor Symphony K. 550, for example, can have a development section which goes through a kaleidoscopic succession of keys, without ever reaching the stability achieved by the relative major at the end of the exposition. As an example of even greater resourcefulness, the first tutti of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto also goes through a series of tonalities but without once really leaving the tonic. It is a mistake to speak of classical modulation without specifying an order of magnitude; unfortunately, we lack a concise technical language. A Baroque *composition* moves to another tonality in much the same way that a late eighteenth-century *phrase* goes normally from tonic to dominant or back. In the classical style, modulation is given a power commensurate with its role.

In short, the larger harmonic structure was transformed in order to make it fit the proportions as well as the nature of the classical phrase. It had, indeed, already been remarked in the eighteenth century that a sonata exposition was an expanded dance-phrase. This expansion was accomplished not merely in the Baroque fashion of extending and repeating the motion of individual motifs, but by dramatization as well.

The Baroque and classical styles are sometimes contrasted as decorative and dramatic respectively. This leads to misunderstanding only if taken to refer to expressive character rather than to the technical procedures of the two styles. A Baroque work is undramatic in that its tension remains fairly constant until the final cadence, and only rarely rises above the level set at the beginning. Nothing can be more dramatic in character than the opening chorus in E minor of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, yet it achieves its dramatic affect by transcending the variation (chorale prelude), a decorative form, and the concerto grosso form (which, like the Baroque rondo, works by alternation and generally does not build to a specific area of climax). This chorus moves like a sonata from the minor to the relative major, but the cadence on G major actually lowers the dramatic energy, which is recaptured only with the entrance of the third chorus singing the chorale. Through its throbbing rhythm, anguished harmonies, and the cumulative effect of its three choruses, the music acts as a dramatic image, not as a scenario. On the other hand, in a classical sonata in a minor key the apparent relaxation of the relative major is always compensated for by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, who make certain that the tension is raised, not lowered, at this point. The second subject of Beethoven's *Appassionata* is both more lyrical and more nervous than the opening; it moves faster and the bass steadily mounts. There were, of course, no rules about second subjects in the late eighteenth century, nor were second subjects even necessary, but when they occur in Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, they are usually more intense than the first subject. The dramatic character of the sonata calls for contrast, and when the main theme is vigorous, some of the succeeding themes generally take on a softer character. But then their harmonic movement tends to be faster (as in Beethoven's opp. 53, 57), more agitated (Mozart K. 310, Beethoven op. 31 no. 2) or more chromatic and passionate (Beethoven op. 109). Haydn prefers themes of equal intensity and relies on harmonic movement for the necessary dramatic effect. It is true that in Schumann and Chopin, the second themes are generally more relaxed in every way than the first, but by that time the sonata was an archaic form, fundamentally unsuited to contemporary style, with the initial tonic section so unstable emotionally that a decrease in tension was inevitable.

The stability and clarity of the opening and closing pages of a classical sonata are essential to its form, and they make the increased tension of the middle sections possible. The difference between the Baroque movement toward the dominant and the classical modulation is not only one of degree: the classical style dramatizes this movement—in other words, it becomes an event as well as a directional force. The simplest way to mark this event, to articulate it, in fact, is by a pause on the dominant of the dominant before continuing, and sophisticated versions of this device can be found even in the latest works of Beethoven.

This event can be further articulated in two ways: it can be emphasized

by the introduction of a new theme (the practice of Mozart and the majority of his contemporaries), or by the repetition of the opening theme, preferably in such a way that its new significance at the dominant is clear (the device preferred by Haydn). Beethoven and Haydn often combine both methods, first restating the main theme with changes and new details that show how it is reinterpreted by being transposed from the tonic, and then adding a new theme. The presence or absence of a new melody is of less moment than the extent to which the new key is dramatized, and how continuity is achieved to offset the articulated structure.

This moment of dramatization and where it occurs make an essential contrast with the Baroque style. Modulation already exists in all dance-forms of the early eighteenth century; but in High Baroque style a pause to mark the arrival at the dominant is hardly ever placed in the middle of the first half but at the end of it; the music is a gradual flow to the dominant with a resolution at the end of the section. Early in a sonata, however, there must be a moment, more or less dramatic, of awareness of the new tonality: it may be a pause, a strong cadence, an explosion, a new theme, or anything else that the composer wishes. This moment of dramatization is more fundamental than any compositional device.

For this reason, the classical style needed more forcible means of emphasizing new keys than the Baroque, and it used for this purpose a quantity of 'filling' almost unparalleled until then in the history of music except in pieces of an improvisatory character. By 'filling' I mean purely conventional material, superficially unrelated to the content of the piece, and apparently (and in some cases, actually) transferable bodily from one work to another. Every musical style, naturally, relies on conventional material, principally at cadences, which almost always follow traditional formulas. The classical style, however, further magnified and elongated the cadence in order to strengthen the modulation. A Baroque composer worked mostly with vertical filling (the figured bass), and the classical composer with horizontal: long phrases of conventional passagework. Aside from accompaniment figures and cadential ornaments, the two basic forms of conventional material are scales and arpeggios, and they fill classical works to a degree that would only have been possible for a Baroque composer in a toccata, or in a form that tried to sound improvised rather than composed. The means employed by an early eighteenth-century composer to give the impression of freedom were needed by Mozart to organize the form; he used whole phrases of scales and arpeggios the way Handel used sequences—to tie sections of the work together. But in the finest Baroque work the sequence is generally clothed and covered by thematic material, while even in the greatest works of Haydn and Mozart the 'filling' is displayed nakedly, and appears to have been prefabricated in large pieces.

Another reason for the use of large conventional phrases and their deployment in block-form was the increase of instrumental virtuosity, although

it is moot whether the instrumentalist inspired the composer or vice versa: probably both. In any case, the following passage from one of Mozart's finest works, the Sonata for Piano K. 333, is absolutely conventional:



It could be transferred to any work in common time which needs an F major cadence. The passage has a certain amount of brilliance and is obviously derived from concerto style. It also provides a climax by sounding the first high F in the piece, the top note of Mozart's piano. But that is not its only *raison d'être*; it is placed where it is because Mozart needs four bars of emphatic cadence. In fact, less conventional, more thematic material will not do; thematic interest would distract from the essential—which is exactly what it appears to be: four bars of cadence. We have reached a style in which proportion has become a major interest. Starting with conventional passages, such as the one in K. 333, we shall end with the unbelievably long final cadence of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, where fifty-four measures of pure C major are needed to ground the extreme tension of that immense work. But already in Mozart, the length of this conventional material is sometimes astounding.

It should be remarked that this passage in Mozart is not arbitrary but grows logically out of the phrase that precedes it. The block use of conventional material often goes, however, much further in this style. The opening movement of Mozart's C major Symphony K. 338 has no melody at all in the first forty measures. There is nothing but completely conventional march-like flourishes and a harmonic pattern that eventually moves to the dominant, and only at this point are we finally given a melody. Yet it is one of Mozart's most brilliantly laid-out pages, serving not only to define tonality as a Baroque opening would do, but also to set up an area of great stability: much of the power of this opening comes from its avoidance of any thematic expressivity. (This is also why a good part of this first page is reserved for the end and not the beginning of the recapitulation: the classical style demands a resolution midway through the second half of a movement but a resolution of such magnitude would make the remainder of the recapitulation an anticlimax.)

It is the classical sense for large areas of stability, impossible before and lost since, that establishes what might seem to be the one fixed rule of sonata recapitulation: material originally exposed in the dominant must be represented in the tonic fairly completely, even if rewritten and reordered, and only material exposed in the tonic may be omitted. This is, of course, not a rule at all but a sensitivity to tonal relationships. (It is amusing to recall that

Chopin was censured by contemporary academic critics—and called unorthodox even by some in the twentieth century—for omitting the recapitulation of much of the first subject in his sonatas, a well-worn eighteenth-century device.) Material presented outside the tonic must have created, in the eighteenth century, a feeling of instability which demanded to be resolved. When the tonic was reaffirmed in the second half of the piece, the material already presented in the tonic could be, and often was, drastically cut, but the rest of the exposition cried out for resolution in the tonic. Today, our harmonic sensibilities have become coarsened by the tonal instability of music after the death of Beethoven, and the strength of this feeling is perhaps difficult to recapture.

It is worth examining this in some detail, at least briefly. First for an exception to prove a rule. There is one Haydn quartet, op. 64 no. 3 in B flat, in which one of the second subjects appears nowhere in the recapitulation. It is a strange quartet with an eccentric and comic opening. The first melody in the dominant, F major, is also the first regular-sounding melody in the quartet (mm. 33–42). A four-measure phrase, it is played first in the major and immediately repeated in the minor, and it clearly functions in the exposition to reaffirm the dominant. (It is not the only theme so used: the opening theme is replayed in the new tonality, and yet another new theme is then introduced, also in F major.) The repeated four-measure phrase does not, as I said, reappear in the recapitulation, but it does, however, reappear *in its full form* in the development section, *and on the tonic*. This time the phrase is played twice in the minor. In this way the theme is satisfactorily recapitulated, as one half of it was already in minor to begin with; in addition, the tonic major is avoided in the development. All the various classical demands for balance and tonal resolution have thus been reconciled.

A use of the tonic minor after the recapitulation has been reached invariably means a reduction in stability, and this explains Haydn's reluctance to employ it.¹ In another quartet, op. 50 no. 6 in D major, four measures of the exposition (26–29) are in the dominant minor, and again they are not in the recapitulation; again, however, they appear in the *tonic* minor in the development section. In this way, Haydn manages to avert a difficult situation: the tonic minor may be used towards the end of a recapitulation in major only if its effect is successfully countered. In the first movement of the *Waldstein* Sonata, for example, Beethoven has a phrase in the exposition that is played twice in the minor; it is played twice in the recapitulation, but the second time in the major (mm. 235–243).

The danger of using the tonic major in the development is obvious, as it weakens the dramatic effect of its return. Unless it occurs briefly in passing, it, too, needs to be offset, generally by following it with the tonic minor. The

¹ In Symphony no. 85 (*La Reine*), a section of the exposition in the dominant minor is also avoided in the recapitulation, and there are other examples.