Sonata form

Sonata form is the most important form of the Classical and Romantic periods. It came into being soon after the middle of the eighteenth century and remained in use at least to the middle of the twentieth, with various modifications. What we call "sonata form" is as much a style, or a way of thinking, as a structure. It evolved to accommodate the musical idioms of its time, as all musical forms have done; its basic ground-plan is not a mold into which the composer pours his ideas, adapting them to fit a pre-existing model, but a natural outcome of the character of the ideas themselves. A sonata-form movement falls into three main sections: Exposition, Development and Recapitulation. This is the ground-plan:

Exposition	Development	Recapitulation
A B	A/B	A B
T D	various	T T

There may be an introduction to start with and a coda to end with, but these do not affect the basic outline or the principles of the movement's structure.

The *exposition* "exposes", or lays out, the thematic material of the movement. This divides into two groups of themes, A and B, or two *subjects*, as they are sometimes called. Depending upon the scale of the movement – and movements in sonata form can last anything between one minute and half-an-hour – each subject may be simply one melody or a group of melodies, or an assemblage of motifs with

Plate 1 *Opposite* King David playing a positive organ, with hurdy-gurdy and cymbalum: miniature from the *Rutland Psalter*, English, *c*1270 (the type of lavishly illustrated manuscript mentioned on p. 87). British Library, London.

very little melodic character at all. Several examples of sonata form are discussed later in this book, with detailed listening notes; in each the treatment and approach to the nature of the subject matter is quite different (they are Haydn, Symphony no. 104, p. 236; Beethoven, Symphony no. 3, p. 268; Brahms, Symphony no. 1, p. 361; and Tchaikovsky, Symphony no. 4, p. 372). The one thing common to all of them is that the first-subject material is in the main key of the work and the second is in a complementary key: normally the dominant, in a major-key work, or the relative major, in a minor-key one. There may be contrast between the themes themselves (some composers tended to use brisk, "masculine" themes in the first subject and gentler, more lyrical, "feminine" ones in the second); but there is always contrast between the keys of the two groups.

The exposition normally ends in the secondary key, and the *development* follows. This generally uses material from the exposition (it may equally be first-subject or second-subject material, or both), and "develops" it. There is no set procedure. Themes may be broken up into fragments, and used as material for dialogue; they may be treated contrapuntally; phrases from them may be repeated at different pitches; they may be used as starting-points for new ideas. The music is likely to range into different keys, perhaps even quite distant ones. Often the development section provides a climax of activity and excitement.

It may, however, be the arrival of the *recapitulation* that forms the principal climax, with the "double return" to the home key and the music that began the movement. The essential feature of the recapitulation is that, within it, the second-subject material returns, now in the home key. By doing so, it resolves the tension that has been set up by its original presentation, in the exposition, in a key other than the home one. The experienced listener is made aware of the sense of homecoming that this embodies, and realizes that the end of the movement cannot be far off. In an extended movement – the first one of Beethoven's Third Symphony is a good example – there is often a substantial coda (or tailpiece), which helps provide a proper feeling of finality.

The principle behind sonata form – the presentation of material in two keys, and the resolution of the resulting tension by the re-presentation of the secondary-key material in the primary key – runs through many other musical forms in the Classical and the Romantic periods. One important example of this is sonata-rondo form, of which the plan shown as (2) on p. 64 is an example. There the *B* material is presented first in the dominant and second in the home key; if the second and fourth appearances of the *A* material were omitted (and composers did sometimes omit one or the other), and if the *C* material were akin to a development, the plan would correspond exactly to that of sonata form. Another variant plan, somewhere between sonata and rondo, takes this form:

material *A B A C B' A*   V – various
    key   T D T V T   T

Ritornello

Another form to which the sonata-form principle came to be applied is ritornello form, the standard form of Baroque concerto first movements. This has something in common with rondo in that it is based on a recurring theme. Here, however, the theme does not always recur in the home key; in fact – as in sonata form – its