

The Skills Of A Composer
An Analysis of *Piano Sonata No.1*
By David Mitchell

It is important for a composer to study and write pieces in the style of the greatest composers of each period and type of music. This is what all of the greatest composers have done to improve their skills. When Simone Fontanelli was here in February, he recommended that we thoroughly study the music of Bartok, Legeti, Hindemith, and Schoenberg, and then write a piece in the language of each of these great composers. Mozart and Haydn thoroughly studied Bach to improve their skills. When Morten Lauridsen was here in March, he said his composition instructor would begin his lesson each week by randomly giving him a date, such as 1812, and then ask him who were the significant composers, what works did they write and discuss the theory and form of their pieces. Morten Lauridsen said he eventually developed a tremendous knowledge of music and composition, and migraine headaches. Each semester the faculty members of the composition department at UGA choose a piece and we write a three-page analysis on that piece and composer. We cannot know our place in the continuum of music's history or break new ground unless we understand what the great composers have already accomplished. This class has helped me begin to understand Classical period form and some of the great works by Beethoven, Haydn, and Mozart.

Piano Sonata No. 1 is a synthesis of many of the concepts and pieces we've studied throughout the semester. This piece is based on the formal functions of Caplin, Beethoven's *Piano Sonata Op.2, No.1*, Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor*, and the articles by Ratner, and the introduction from Cadwallader and Gagne's book, *Analysis of Tonal Music*. In the process of writing this piece and applying the concepts that we've

studied this semester, I believe my skills as a composer have improved a great deal. The skills I have learned will help give my pieces greater continuity and a much clearer form.

The motivic content of my Piano Sonata no. 1 is based on concepts from Beethoven's *Piano Sonata Op.2, No.1* and the introduction from Cadwallader and Gagne's book, *Analysis of Tonal Music*. In the introduction, Cadwallader and Gagne demonstrate how portions of Beethoven's *Piano Sonata Op.2, No.1* are based on a descending sixth interval. Beethoven uses the descending sixth as a basis for chord progressions on a lower level. I based some of my piece on this type of motivic parallelism. For example, bar 2 (see figure 1) contains a descending fourth motive that becomes the root notes of the harmonic progression in bar 5. In bar 36, there is an ascending fourth progression that starts on beat 2 and finishes on beat one of bar 37. I plan to work with this aspect of motivic parallelism to create more harmonic continuity with the basic idea in the main theme.

Figure 1

There is a second motive in this piece that creates thematic continuity. In bar 1, the basic idea of the main theme arpeggiates an ascending perfect fifth. Then it leaps down a perfect fifth (see figure 2). This is the basis for the main theme, subordinate theme one, and subordinate theme two. The arpeggiation of the ascending perfect fifth interval creates a sense of opening up. Bar 19 is theme one of the subordinate theme in Bb major. It arpeggiates an ascending Bb major chord and then leaps down a perfect

fifth. This is similar to bar 1 of the main theme. Theme two of the subordinate key area begins at the pick up note to measure 29. Theme two is an inversion of the ascending arpeggio of subordinate theme one. Bar 29 also contains a liquidation of the stepwise descending fourth from the basic idea (see figure 3).

Figure 2

Figure 3

This same descending fifth motive is used to create a second area of motivic parallelism in the development. I based my development on Mozart's development from *Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor*. Mozart begins his development in the subordinate key and tonicizes a falling descending fifth key progression to reach the dominant of the home key. The development from *Piano Sonata No. 1* starts in the subordinate key of Bb major. I tonicized an arpeggiation of the descending fifth interval from theme two of the subordinate theme. The pre-core quickly modulates to the key of C minor in bar 46, the

minor subdominant of the home key of G minor. Then it tonicizes Ab major beginning in bar 56 using theme two from the subordinate theme. F minor is tonicized in bar 60 with a variation of the continuation from theme one of the subordinate theme. This tonicized progression, C minor, Ab major, F minor, creates an arpeggiation of an F minor chord. This arpeggiation is an inversion of motivic parallelism from the basic idea in bar one.

Based on Ratner's article on the development section of sonata form, the point of furthest remove is bar 56. This bar tonicizes the key of Ab major. Ab major contains two more flats than the home key of G minor. Ab major is a just half step away from G minor. It is also a major key, which contrasts strongly with the home key of minor. After bar 56, this piece starts working its way back to the dominant of the home key in G minor. This is how Ratner defines the point of furthest remove.

There is one more area of melodic interest that I added to this piece, which is the use of compound melody. There is one melody in the lower part of the statement that is carried over into the response. And another melody in the upper part that also carries over into the response. In continuation portion of the transition, I also used a compound melodic idea.

The main theme is an eight bar tight-knit sentence structure based on Caplin's definition of tight-knit themes. The presentation phrase features tonic prolongation that ends on count 3 of bar 4. The continuation phrase features increased rhythmic activity and harmonic acceleration, but one could almost consider it a continuation of the tonic prolongation because the harmonies are tonic and passing/neighborhood chord dominants. This continuation relies on increased rhythmic

activity to destabilize the tonic. The cadential idea begins in bar 7 and is a complete cadential progression with dominant embellishment confirming the home key of G minor.

The transition starts in bar 9 and it is a 10 bar modulating sentence structure. It begins with the main and quickly modulates to the relative major of Bb. The modulation is achieved in bar 10 by using a C minor subdominant chord in G minor that becomes a minor supertonic in the key of Bb major. The continuation is primarily standing on the dominant because there is a dominant pedal point throughout the continuation. The continuation is expanded through the uses of melodic sequencing. There is a dominant seventh arrival at bar 17. And the medial caesura is in bar 18.

The first theme in the subordinate key area is a 10 bar hybrid theme type, antecedent plus continuation. Its antecedent phrase features dominant prolongation with a dominant pedal point in the bass. This leads to a half cadence in bar 22. The continuation destabilizes tonic Bb by prolonging the supertonic C minor with a series of dominant neighboring chords. This leads to an imperfect authentic cadences that elides with the second theme in bar 29.

The second theme is an 11 bar loose knit sentence structure that ends in bar 40 with a dramatic perfect authentic cadence. This occurs after a dramatic prolonged dominant that starts in measure 37 and is highlighted by a cadential trill. This helps to emphasize the essential expositional closure.

Following the second theme, there is a 4 bar closing section that is based on motive A of the basic idea. Motive A is used to create a series of codettas that prolong Bb tonic. This dissipates the energy that has built up and prepares the way for the development.

Studying Caplin's formal functions, all of the articles, and pieces we have looked at this semester has really given me a clearer understand of classical form. It has improved my skills as a composer. The insights we have gained into the thought processes of these great composers will continue to influence my compositions. In *Piano Sonata No. 1*, I tried to incorporate all of the concepts we covered in Classical Form and Analysis. I will continue to work on this piece, and would like to include it on my master's recital. I may even compose a second and third movement based on five-part rondo and sonata rondo. This class has definitely helped me develop my composition skills.

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