

# STRUCTURAL LANDMARKS IN THE EVOLUTION OF THE SONATA FORM

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**Abstract:** *The astonishing process of the sonata-form crystallisation has been achieved through a sinuous path along music history, from the timid formal prefigurations to its own accomplishment, from monothematism to bithematism, from bistrophic to tristrophic form, from polyphonic to homophonic support, from early Baroque to Viennese Classicism, from Romantic to modern sonata; the entire path having been marked out by the personalities of the composers: Philip Emmanuel Bach, Johann Christian Bach, Leopold Mozart, Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti, on one hand; and Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven, on the other hand.*

**Key words:** *instrumental sonata, baroc, classical, form.*

## 1. Introduction

No other musical form of all times has enjoyed as much prestige as the sonata. The sonata form and genre are important landmarks within universal-music values, of dynamic nature, intrinsically connected to the evolution of the philosophical, musical thinking and to the development of the compositional technique.

This way, the sonata, as genre and form, has played a significant part in the evolution of the universal composing art, has undergone a long crystallisation process for four centuries.

Vasile Herman, in his work "*Probleme de formă în sonata contemporană*" [*Form-Related Problems in Contemporary Sonata*], distinguishes the following stages in the evolution of the sonata genre and form:

1. Genre genesis and search for formal patterns (late XVI-th century – XVII-th century).

2. Crystallisation of Baroque, Scarlatti's sonata (early XVIII-th century).

3. Sonata maturation, as formal pattern and movement cycle, in the Viennese Classics' creation (late XVIII-th century).

4. Formal evolution, focused on the classical pattern, with enrichments of a cyclical nature, applied to the set of themes or motives, with the association of programatism elements (XIX-th century).

5. Pattern transformations, form enlargements, imposed by the attainment of new language elements (XX-th century). [1]

If, at the beginning of its introduction in the musical language, the term *sonata* referred, in Italian, to a musical work destined to be played (*suonare*) unlike a musical piece destined to be sung (*cantare*), as its use takes hold, a differentiation within its semantics also occurs, according to the type and characteristics of the work. Thus, *canzone da suonare* or *canzone sonata* represents

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vocal melodicity transferred to the instrumental melodic line, while a denser work, with polyphonic imitative structures, played at one or several instruments, would be called *sonata* or *simfonia*. Withal, the musical piece was composed with a view to being played either in a church or in the secular environment, which purpose was explained by the denomination of *sonata da chiesa* and, respectively, *sonata da camera*, which required a certain scoring and, especially, which conveyed the nature of the respective work: polyphonic, sober, for the former; and dancing, composed of a succession of contrasting movements, for the latter. [2]

All these endeavours to accurately define a certain typology specific to the compositions of the time, resulted in the apparition of the sonata genre; and the consolidation, over time, by continuous improvement, of a specific construction pattern for the pieces of the respective genre, engendered the sonata form.

## 2. Contents

Derived from the alternating succession of the dance rhythms entering into the constituency of the instrumental suite, in early XVI-th century, the first formal attempts appeared under the name of *sonata*, in the creation of the Italian composers Marco Fabrizio Caroso and Giovanni Gabrielli. Their works were structured into several well delimited parts, by tempos, rhythms and contrasting characters. By the end of the century, the number of the parts reduced to three - four, and distinct profiles loomed for each part.

Another stage in the form consolidation is the Baroque sonata. In the completion of its form, a major contribution is allegedly brought by the Italian composer A. Corelli who, in the XVII-th century, imposed the form of the Trio Sonata, based on the

principle of tonal unity, on the contrast between its parts and especially on the beauty of the melody and on the equilibrium between the latter and the continuous bass.

Composers such as: F. Couperin, F. Geminiani, G. Martini, Jean-Marie Leclair, H. Purcell, A. Vivaldi, G. Ph. Telemann, had resorted to that formal pattern until the early XVIII-th century [3] but the following classical-sonata form stemmed from the kernel imposed by Domenico Scarlatti, who brought visionary compositional innovations in his perennial sonatas for harpsichord, humbly entitled, "*30 Exercises for Harpsichord*" (with over 500 works for pipe organ, called sonatas).

The formal pattern is bistrophic, monothematic. As the cyclic character of the sonata genre is conveyed by the succession of dances, in the pre-Classical suite, the Baroque-sonata form was influenced by the first movement of the suite the - *allemande*. It consisted of two verses, related by their thematic content; the latter taking over, with variational elements, the content of the former; the tonal plan called for a modulation in the dominant or the relative, at the end of the first verse, and the return to the initial tonality, in the end of the second verse.

Along the path of the sonata to its own accomplishment, an important part was held by the genre-specific works of the composers Ph. E. Bach, J. Ch. Bach and Leopold Mozart.

They resorted, in their compositions, to the succession of three-four parts, of similar structure to the classical sonata. The novelty is that, although the form is bistrophic, an enlargement, even doubling of the sonorous material occurs in the second verse, which fact opens the path towards the tristrophic form. Withal, the second idea gradually differentiates, taking individualized shape – which process will lead to the bithematism of the classical

sonata. Not least, note that, starting with Domenico Scarlatti's works, the enlargement of the treatment upon the first idea in the beginning of the second verse is initiated, which element constitutes the germ of the next verse split, leading to the apparition of a freestanding section, the development and hence tristrophic nature, typical to the classical sonata.

Formally, structurally and semantically brought to perfection by the three great Viennese classics: J. Haydn, W. A. Mozart and L. van Beethoven, in their majority, classical sonatas (as genre) represent instrumental cycles in several motions, contrasting as tempo; but the first movement, part I, also called *Allegro of sonata*, by its distinct qualities, by its special technical-emotional potential and by its highly expressive valences, was primarily the most conservatory and also dynamic, transmitted to the next generations of composers. This rapid movement forms a distinct pattern, characterized by tristrophic nature and bithematism.

The brief scheme of the first part of classical sonata has the following aspect:

1) *Exposition*: Presentation of the two contrasting themes, separated or not by a bridge, which section ends with a conclusion.

Tonal plan: Tonic-Dominant in major tonalities, Tonic- major Relative for minor tonalities.

2) *Development*: Complex treatment of the themes 1 and 2 (in the form of thematic group), development of the elements in the bridge or conclusion, bringing new elements, according to the section dimensions.

Tonal plan: Dominant-Tonic, respectively major Relative-Tonic

3) *Reprise (re-exposition)*: Return of the two themes to the initial tonality, conclusion.

Tonal plan: Tonic-Tonic (the modulating

elements are not excluded, yet without installing a new tonality)[4].

The defining elements for the classical sonata are:

- expressive (in terms of character) and tonal contrast of the two themes;
- thematic block-aspect of the second theme, usually split into three components;
- thematic structural symmetry (simple, composite, complex closed periods, with or without enlargements);
- thematic-elaboration nature of the development (fragmentations; rhythmical, melodic, harmonic variation and spectacular modulations);
- climax-nature of the development;
- presence of the static or streamlined reprise (with variation elements);
- disappearance of the tonal contrast between the elements in reprise, as compared to the exposition. [5]

In early XIX-th century, along with the assertion of the instrumental virtuosity, the apparition of the improvisational elements in the oeuvres of the composers F. Chopin, R. Schumann, J. Brahms and F. Mendelssohn Bartholdy, determines searches for a new equilibrium between tradition and modernity, between classical form - brought to perfection by predecessors, and the new aesthetic ideology of the stormy Romanticism. A series of new tendencies is therefore conspicuous:

- liberties in the morphology of the themes, extensions or abbreviations;
- influences of the improvisational style or of the lied melody in the elaboration of the themes;
- apparition of the treatment elements in the exposition;
- chromatising reaching the level of estrangement from the tonal system;
- merging of the component parts by *attacca*, or even existence of a single extensive part;
- influence of the programatism on the form.[6]

This way, during this time, the composers H. Berlioz, F. Liszt, G.Fauré and C. Saint-Saëns bring to their sonatas an original pattern, where the various movements are ideally fulfilled, by the return, in the end, of the main theme, without the delimitations of the three sections, the genre bearing the name of cyclical sonata.

The rapid succession of currents, styles and attitudes that characterize the XX-th century also sets its print on the sonata form, aiming, in broad lines, regardless of the language resorted to, at the following aspects:

1. Persistence or absence of the thematism; absolutization of the microstructure, of the tonal-modal cell.

2. Existence or absence of the bithematism, of the thematic contrast; the thematic antithesis either turns into expression antithesis or disappears altogether.

3. Re-evaluation of the tonal-modal report; the tonality is enriched, yet not denied; the modal asserts itself.

4. The working technique in the development sectors, their place and importance in the overall form; the apparition of the variation elements in the exposition.

5. Relation between form and cycle. Traditional strophicity loses its outline. [7]

Modern sonata still influences, in our century, the creation of some composers, being perpetuated in the genres and forms they approach (M.Ravel, B.Bartók, P. Hindemith, S.Prokofiev, I.Stravinski, G. Enescu) or only in the denomination of some works that, strictly in terms of form, no longer fall under these patterns – in other composers' light (A.Schönberg, A. Berg, C. Debussy, A. Webern).

The form-related problems closely bind to the musical language. This way, the pattern remains recognizable, with more or less substantial transformations - in tonal, modal, neotonal, neomodality music – or undergo a disfigurement, owing to deeper

transformations – serial, random, concrete, electronic, stochastic music. For the composers, P.Boulez, C. Ives or E.Carter, the term of *sonata* loses its formal signification and keeps the instrumental-piece signification.

In the Romanian creation, the sonata form, relatively close to the classical pattern, is refreshed by the implementation of the autochthonous-folklore valences. The phase of the thematism, either symmetrical or asymmetrical, is characteristic of the time.

Vasile Herman notes, however, that “the existence of a so-called thematism with transformations [...] often consequential, of this notion, is being attested in almost all examples of sonata, in contemporary music. Hence the idea of contrast, individualization (relative or allusive of (thematic) blocks in antithesis. Moreover, it is one of the essential conditions for achieving or suggesting the pattern”. [8]

This category includes the works situated on the lineage of the great tradition of European symphonism and solid construction, in chamber-music forms, which naturally fall under the classical-sonata pattern. These are works of obvious thematic nature, built in traditional forms, wherein the microstructure is directly subordinated to the form scheme, with thematic developments based on tension curves, on the obvious functional delimitation of the component parts in the form. We refer to those compositions of G. Enescu, Z.Vancea, T. Ciorte, P. Constantinescu, S.Drăgoi, S. Toduță, C. Silvestri and so forth, who offer an original vision in taking over and processing these patterns.

The localization in time and space of the Romanian sonata, especially of the one destined for violin and piano, requires an overview of the defining elements for the national music patrimony, which fall under the trinomial “peasant folklore, urban

folklore, Byzantine music". The period to which we refer constitutes the second historical stage (1920-1950) of the Romanian composition school. It is the emergence period of genuinely creative individualities, such as: G.Enescu and his generation – M.Jora, S.Drăgoi, M. Andricu, M.Negrea, F. Lazăr – as well as the post-Enescian generation – C. Silvestri, D.Lipatti, Z. Vancea, P.Constantinescu, S. Toduță, T.Ciortea, I. and Gh. Dumitrescu.

The autochthonous implications of the sonata form in the genre-specific creation for violin and piano stand under the sign of that global aesthetic climate defined by the classical "immanence", typical to interwar Romanian compositional thinking, embedded in the general coordinates of equilibrium and symmetry, of sobriety and economy of means. Not out of date, the sonata form has proved that, far from having exhausted its resources, it may be refreshed by the infusion of new language elements, apparently incompatible, with its operational principle. Removing it from pure musical expression and bringing it closer to musical picturesque, this infusion, particularized in a musical characteriology specific to folkloric genres, enfaces a specifically Romanian content to the traditional characteriologic sectors of the form and agogic, of the sonata cycle. [9]

Therefore, in the Romanian compositional landscape, subsequent to the 1920s, certain sonata-symphonic dramaturgy principles crystallize – along with all they imply in the fields of the musical language – which enter thereby a first stage of confrontation with universality.

The refuge in the form and the recourse to the sonata-symphonic principles appear as sometimes contradictory reactions in the creators' individual style. For some, it is an enhanced-organization method targeting the folkloric material; for others, it is an environment wherein the specifically

classical constraints can be avoided. The first category includes those works (Sonata III for Piano and Violin by G. Enescu, Sonatina by P. Constantinescu, Sonata for Violin and Piano by T. Ciortea) whose starting point is the folkloric factor. The second category comprises those works (*Sonata II for Piano and Violin* by G. Enescu, Sonatina by D. Lipatti and Sonata for Violin and Piano by S. Drăgoi) whose starting point is the classical form.

The correspondence between content and form is being deepened by means of the ethos. Form reconstruction relies on a renewed penetration into the deep layers of the language elements, which aims at rethinking the traditional (universal) modal systems, and at forming modal systems of contemporary specificity. Contemporary modal systems reinstate the concepts of function and modal (or tonal-modal) gravity, assigning to the great forms [...] new footholds, new stability [...]" (W. G. Berger). The limited-transposition modes, the non-octavating modes, as well as proportion and symmetry enhancement leads to the shaping of that distinct ethos, specific to interwar sonata. It is implemented to the classical nature of the form, which is grafted, as already seen, on the sum of the two safe landmarks: Beethovenian form and reasoning bent over Bach's polyphony (especially in Tudor Ciortea's sonata). [10]

The analysis on the parameters of the sonata form within interwar Romanian reasoning, made in the light of the sonata for violin and piano, reveals the following aspects:

The continuous, closed conformation of the themes, on one hand; and the discontinuous, fragmentary conformation of the themes, on the other hand. For the first category, the enlightening example is Enescu's Sonata III. Within its scope, there enter, partially, Sonata for Violin and Piano by S.Drăgoi, with thematic evolutionary elements in the bosom of the

theme exposition, or Sonatina for Violin and Piano by D. Lipatti, in whose case, the unchanged melodic profile of the theme is only valid in its first phase. The set of themes of other works, (Sonata for Violin and Piano by T.Ciornea and Sonatina for Violin and Piano by P.Constantinescu) appear as closed, cursive, monolithic melodic entities, which fact is also reflected on the development sector, where the theme is wholly and not fragmentarily processed. According to the option for either of the two particular cases, the melodic focuses on developed, complex modal formations or binds to the modal microstructure of cellular formation.

The developments generally tend to keep their thematic integrity; the themes resisting decomposition, fragmentation in subunits. The developments only minimally affect the intervallic conformation of the themes and motives, and consist in augmentations, diminutions, sequencing, figurative impetus. Polyphonic procedures are often resorted to (imitation, canon, double counterpoint). Sometimes, thematic inflexibility in the developmental process leads to excessive increase in the number of themes (see "Drăgoi case").

In terms of extensive form - as dominant construction modality - cyclic architectonics, which operates with "peregrine thematic entities", "thematic-portion dislocations, which become, with or without modification, the fulcrum for different parts, sections etc. of the works" (see Sonata II by George Enescu).

The connected parts of the sonata cycle are either bithematic (sonata forma), or plurithematic (rondo form), or monothematic (ornamental and character variation cycle), tritrophic lied forms, fugue or invention. Note form mixes by the implementation of variational sectors, of invention in the bosom of the first movement in the form of a sonata (Lipatti, Drăgoi) or the extension of the sonata form

over the second or final part of the cycle (Enescu). [11]

### 3. Conclusions

The interwar musicians' common goal to advocate for a genuinely Romanian art likewise includes most composers' preoccupation to rethink classical patterns, with a view to achieving the fusion national-universal. In this context, the sonata form and genre are important landmarks on the firmament of universal-music values, with dynamic character, in correlation with the evolution of philosophical and musical thinking and with the development of the compositional technique. Yet its evolution is still in progress ...

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