

Method

1. Preheat the oven to gas 6, 200°C, fan 180°C. In a large roasting tin, toss the potatoes with 1 tbsp oil and some seasoning. Roast for 20 minutes.
2. Heat 1/2 tbsp oil in a pan. Add the onion and cook for 5 minutes, or until softened. Add the garlic and fennel with a little seasoning, and cook for 2 minutes more.
3. Spoon the fennel mixture over the potatoes. Top with the tomatoes, dill and chilli, then return to the oven for 5 minutes. Arrange the plaice fillets, skin-side down, over the veg mixture. Squeeze over half the lemon, then drizzle with the remaining oil; season well. Cut 4 lemon slices from the remaining half and sit two on each fillet. Return to the oven for 8 minutes, or until the fish is cooked through and the veg is tender.
4. Scatter with parsley to serve.

Tip: Any flat white fish, such as bass, bream or sole, would work just as well in this dish. Or you could use salmon or cod, and cook for 2-4 minutes longer.

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ANYONE WHO PICKS up a book on sonata form very likely thinks he already knows what it is; and he is probably right. Since sonata form was defined by theorists in the second quarter of the nineteenth century on the basis of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century practice, it has been the most prestigious of musical forms. Here, for the purpose of reference, is the traditional description found in most musical dictionaries, encyclopedias, and textbooks; I give the description in a relatively full and elaborate form so that it will help in recalling the standard terminology.

Sonata form, as that term is most frequently encountered, refers to the form of a single movement rather than to the whole of a three- or four-movement sonata, symphony, or work of chamber music. It is sometimes called *first movement form*, or *sonata allegro form*. In its standard meaning, it is a three-part form, in which the second and third parts are closely linked so as to imply a two-part organization. The three parts are called exposition, development, and recapitulation: the two-part organization appears most clearly when, as often happens, the exposition is played twice (the development-and-recapitulation section is also sometimes, but more rarely, repeated).

The *exposition* presents the principal thematic material, establishes the tonic key and modulates to the dominant or to some other closely related key. (In works in the minor, this will generally be the relative major.) The first theme or *first group* of themes is stated at the tonic. The statement is sometimes immediately repeated (*counter-statement*), and this counter-statement often leads without a break into a modulation or

bridge passage: this section ends either on the dominant or, more often with a half-close on V of V. The second theme, or *second group*, is stated in the dominant: it is traditionally supposed to have a more lyrical and tranquil character than the first group, and is sometimes said to be more "feminine." At the end of the second group, there is a *closing theme* (or several closing themes) with a cadential function. The final cadence of the exposition, on the dominant, may be followed by an immediate repetition of the exposition, or by a short transition leading back to the tonic, then followed by the repeat, or—if the exposition is not repeated—by the development.

The *development* section may begin in one of several ways: with the first theme now played at the dominant; with an abrupt modulation to a more remote key; with a reference to the closing theme; or—in rare instances—with a new theme. (In prescriptive accounts of sonata form, generally one new theme is allowed in development sections.) It is in this part of sonata form that the most distant and the most rapid modulations are to be found, and the technique of development is the fragmentation of the themes of the exposition and the reworking of the fragments into new combinations and sequences. The end of the development prepares the return to the tonic with a passage called the *retransition*.

The *recapitulation* starts with the return of the first theme in the tonic. The rest of this section "recapitulates" the exposition as it was first played, except that the second group and closing theme appear in the tonic, with the bridge passage suitably altered so that it no longer leads to the dominant but prepares what follows in the tonic. Longer works are rounded off by a *coda*.

This is what all lovers of "serious" music correctly understand as sonata form. Most of them know, too, that the heyday of the form was the late eighteenth century, and many of them realize that the foregoing description applies rather badly to many eighteenth-century works, and in general misrepresents the practice of that century. They would like to find out from a book on sonata form, I should imagine, what the form actually was in the eighteenth-century, and what its history was—its origin, development, and fate.

These questions seem reasonable enough, on the face of it; but as they are generally put, they are doomed to remain unanswered because they make untenable assumptions. They assume that we can define sonata form so that it will accurately reflect eighteenth-century works, but it is very dubious that a unique sonata form can be so defined even for a single decade of the late eighteenth-century. They assume that a form has a history—in other words, that it is subject to change: but if a form "changes," it is not clear when it would be useful to consider it the

same form, although changed, and when we must think of it as a new form altogether. This is not merely a philosophical quibble: there is no biological continuity among sonata forms, and there are many sonatas more closely related to concertos, arias, and even fugues than to other sonatas.

The problem of finding an origin and a history for our form would be well on the way to resolution if we could find a definition for it that would be apt for the eighteenth century. The difficulties one finds with the traditional definition above arise from the conditions in which it was first formulated. It was elaborated principally by Antonin Reicha in the second volume (1826) of his *Traité de haute composition musicale*;¹ by Adolph Bernhard Marx in *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition*, vol. III (1845); and finally and most influentially by Carl Czerny, in the *School of Practical Composition* of 1848. As we can see from the titles of these works, the purpose of the definition was not the understanding of the music of the past but a model for the production of new works. The definition does not work well for the eighteenth century because it was never intended to.

All three of these writers of compositional guides have something important in common: their contact with Beethoven. Reicha, like Beethoven, was born in 1770. He was a close friend of Beethoven when they were young, and they both played in the orchestra at Bonn; some years later, in Vienna, they saw each other again. According to Reicha, they were in contact with one another for a total of fourteen years. Their musical culture and education were very similar.² Czerny was Beethoven's most famous pupil, and the most influential teacher of his time: in his theoretical works he claimed to be passing on what he had learned from the masters. In his analysis of sonata form, he relied heavily on Reicha's description. A. B. Marx devoted his life to the deification of Beethoven, and was, indeed, one of the most important agents in the creation of that indispensable myth, the supremacy of Beethoven. This is why sonata form as it is generally known is more or less those compositional procedures of Beethoven which were most useful to the nineteenth century, which could be imitated most comfortably and with the smallest risk of disaster.

The term "sonata form" itself is the invention of Marx. His codification of the form helped to establish its nineteenth- and twentieth-century prestige as the supreme form of instrumental music,

1. Reicha had already given an earlier sketch of the form in his *Traité de mélodie* of 1814. For all these questions of priority in describing the form, see W. S. Newman, *The Sonata since Beethoven*, New York, 1972, pp. 29-36.

2. Berlioz, who studied with Reicha, wrote in his memoirs that he did not think that Reicha and Beethoven had much sympathy for each other; nevertheless, what Reicha described as "la grande coupe binaire" is much closer to Beethoven's procedures than to those of any other composer.

its supremacy guaranteed by Beethoven. Largely a generalization of the procedures of Beethoven before 1812, the description was normative and intended above all as an aid to composition. As the basis for generalization, those aspects of Beethoven (and of Mozart—not of Haydn) which had the greatest interest for the nineteenth-century composer were isolated; these were, principally, the order and the character of the themes. Harmonic and textural matters were consequently pushed into the background, as subsidiary to the thematic structure. The description is essential for an understanding of nineteenth-century music; it gave a model for producing works that is still in force today, although its influence on composers has been on the wane for some time.

The method of defining a form by taking the works of a famous composer as models is rightfully discredited today. Even for the teaching of composition it is a dubious procedure, and it is no help at all in understanding history. What has taken its place is the attempt to define the general practice, what most composers did most of the time within a given generation or decade and within a limited space, a country, region, or even city. Sonata form in the Italy or Mannheim of the 1760s would therefore be what was most commonly done there in that period. The change in the general practice over the years gives us the history of the form.

I may as well lay my cards on the table at once and say that I find the new method as unsatisfactory as the old. The general practice of a period is naturally interesting, but unmediated and uninterpreted it can define nothing. The belief that by itself it has some historical significance is based on a false analogy of music with language (although the relations of music and language are indeed in many other respects intimate and powerful) as well as on a false psychology of the composition and reception of music.

The justification of this method of study is rarely made explicit, merely assumed as self-evident, but it was once put to me forcefully by a music critic on the very subject of sonata form itself. "Take the practice of Haydn in the 1780s," he said. "In the exposition of a symphony, when the dominant is finally established, most composers of the time introduced a new theme. Haydn, on the other hand, reintroduced the opening theme in the new key. Surely in the context of the style of that period, this is a remarkable effect; those who listened to the first performances must have expected a new theme at the dominant and consequently must have received a considerable surprise when the first one reappeared. Without knowing the general practice of the time, and replacing Haydn's works within that context, we shall never be able to understand the effect they made and were, in fact, intended to make."

Let us, in fact, replace Haydn's symphonies within the context of

their original performance, and try to put ourselves into the skin of one of the original listeners. In the late 1780s, Haydn wrote nine symphonies for Paris, all commissioned by the Comte d'Ogny: symphonies 82 to 87 (called the *Paris* symphonies) and 90 to 92. The six *Paris* symphonies were all played by the two principal musical societies of Paris, the Concert de la Loge Olympique and the Concert Spirituel: the *Mercur de France*³ reported in April 1788, that in 1787 "a symphony by Haydn was performed at every concert." They were all printed in Paris in 1788. The later symphonies, 90 to 92, must have been played the next year, as Haydn's popularity was immense at that time, and they were all three printed in Paris in 1790.

What would a music lover at that time in Paris have heard in Haydn's expositions? In the first movements (generally the most elaborate), they would have heard Haydn return to the opening theme in the new key of the dominant in symphonies 82, 84, 85, 86, 90, 91, and 92; in 82, he uses the first theme to continue the establishment of the new key, in 90 he uses it at the end of the exposition as a cadential theme, and in all the others it returns at the point when the dominant is fully confirmed, at the center of the exposition. In the finales, this practice is even more consistent: the first theme reappears at the dominant in all nine symphonies—except for 85, 86, and 92, and in the finales of these three symphonies, a clearly derived variant of the first theme appears in its place.

By the late 1780s most composers used a new theme at the arrival at the dominant (and many already used another theme to initiate the modulation to the dominant as well): Haydn's procedure was markedly eccentric to general practice, and it was remarked as such. In the article already quoted, the *Mercur de France*⁴ praised "this vast genius, who in each one of his pieces knows how to draw developments so rich and varied from a unique theme (*sujet*)—very different from those sterile composers who pass continually from one idea to another for lack of knowing how to present one idea in varied forms. . . ." This is the origin of the myth of Haydn's so-called monothematicism—a myth because every one of these movements contain several themes, even if a new theme is not always used to confirm the new key in the exposition. The relative consistency of Haydn's procedure, however, is significant.

A music lover in Paris heard one of these works at every important concert of the season: they were inescapable, and anyone interested in music would probably have heard most of them. The first time he heard the opening theme return at the dominant—just where the average symphony produced a new theme—he may indeed have been sur-

3. See H. C. Robbins Landon, *Haydn at Esterháza 1766-1790 (Haydn Chronicle and Works, II)*, Bloomington, Ind., 1978.

4. Quoted Haydn, *Symphonies*, vol. IX, ed. Robbins Landon, preface, page xvi.

prised. If he was slow-witted, he may have been surprised a second or even a third time. After hearing half a dozen symphonies in which this happened in at least one movement (and generally in both the first and last ones), he would have had to be an idiot if he continued to be surprised. In short, the average music lover in the 1780s—as today—listened to Haydn not against a background of general practice but in the context of Haydn's own style. He did not expect Haydn to sound like anybody else; by the 1780s his music was accepted on its own terms. We might, in fact, claim that the more Haydn was heard against general practice, the less he was understood: it is interesting to account for the misunderstandings of the past, but a musicology which seeks to revive and perpetuate them ought not to go unchallenged.

The stylistic unity of the late eighteenth century is often overstated: no doubt, there was then no contrast in style quite as great as that today between, say, Gian-Carlo Menotti and John Cage. Nevertheless, there were many composers in the 1780s whose style was further from Haydn's than that of Benjamin Britten from Igor Stravinsky's, and no experienced amateur of music ever went to hear a new piece by Britten expecting it to sound like Stravinsky. Statistically defined, "general practice" is pure fiction.

Notice that the critic of the *Mercure de France* did not present Haydn as eccentric but as superior: it is not that Haydn and the inferior (according to the critic) composers are working in different traditions or styles, or even producing different forms, but only that Haydn's way of realizing the *expected* symphonic form is more successful. That is because the critic's norms were determined less by what was generally done than by what individual composers were trying or hoping to do, by the stylistic ideals of the period which determined the various possibilities of sonata form. Thematic unity—an expression of affective unity—was still an influential ideal in the 1780s.

If we wish today to describe that late eighteenth-century form which could be realized in such different ways by Haydn and by his contemporaries, then it will clearly not do to use the number and position of the themes as defining characteristics; nor, on the other hand, will it be reasonable to dismiss the thematic structure as merely a surface manifestation of a deeper harmonic structure (although this too has been proposed in our time); the themes and their order clearly had an important role to play.

We may, however, ask what was the function of the second theme appearing at the dominant, and see whether this same function could be achieved by Haydn with a single theme. The device of a "second theme" at the dominant was used often enough by Haydn himself, and the movements in which he used this procedure do not differ significantly in form or nature from the "monothematic" examples. They were

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in many respects equivalent, and the possibility of that equivalence is one of the determinants of the sonata form of the 1780s. The function, the significance of the "second theme" is, therefore, of greater importance than the frequency of its occurrence. An investigation of the *function* of the elements will enable us to examine the work of all the composers of a period without regard to their deviations from a supposed norm, and will also avoid two traps: first, the definition of form on the basis of a predetermined set of masterpieces, an absurd way of trying to understand music of a large number of composers even if it produced a useful neoclassical model for the nineteenth century; and, second, the postulation of a meaningless statistical abstraction which does not help us to see how the music worked in its own time and still works today (when it does).