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# Beethoven's Thematic Processes in the Piano Sonata in G Major, Op. 14: "An Illusion of Simplicity"

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"An Illusion of Simplicity"

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In the midst of a movement during which great advances were made in science, philosophy, art, and music, an emphasis on “natural” expression emerged (Burkholder, Grout, & Palisca, 2010). The notion that music should capture the wide range of human emotions resulted in the creation of a new musical style (Burkholder et al., 2010). Music of the new Classic Period could be characterized by features such as balanced phrasing, a strong tonic-dominant relationship, a clear sense of melody, and an “illusion of simplicity” (Burkholder et al., 2010). These characteristics reflected the view that music was a “universal language” that all members of society could enjoy (Burkholder et al., 2010). During the latter part of the Classic Period, Ludwig van Beethoven wrote his Piano Sonata in G Major, Op. 14, No. 2, I, around 1789 (Kerman et al., 2012).

From the surface of the first movement of the piano sonata, it appears as though Beethoven is merely following the guidelines of a traditional sonata-form movement (see Figure 1), creating a remarkable “illusion of simplicity” appropriate for the time (Burkholder et al., 2010). Upon further investigation, however, Beethoven has created a highly complex plan of musical action through his use of key schemes that allows for smooth transitions from theme to theme and from section to section throughout the movement.

### **An Introduction to the Hierarchy of Key Schemes**

As noted by William Caplin (1998), a hierarchy of key schemes forms the deeper structural outline of the piano sonata (see Figure 3). The *home key* of G Major in which the sonata commences rests at the top level of the hierarchy and is the one to which all other tonalities relate (Caplin, 1998). It is typically established by an authentic cadence during the first

theme of the exposition (Caplin, 1998). Beneath the *home key* is the *subordinate key* of D Major, or the dominant of the *home key*, which is confirmed by an authentic cadence during the second theme (Caplin, 1998).

The next level of the hierarchy includes the *development keys*, which, true to their name, are explored within the development section of the first movement of the sonata (Caplin, 1998). Unlike the previous two levels, however, the *development keys* do not need to be confirmed by a cadence; a "dominant arrival" or a half cadence would suffice (Caplin, 1998, p. 140). These keys can be further subdivided into *primary* and *secondary development keys*. The *primary development key* (in this case, g minor) is typically the key in which the development ends and may be confirmed by a strong cadence, receiving the most "durational, dynamic, and textural emphasis" within the section (Caplin, 1998, p. 140). *Secondary development keys*, or all of the other keys in the development, are introduced earlier in the section and may be confirmed by weaker cadences (Caplin, 1998).

The next level of the hierarchy includes *tonicized regions* (Caplin, 1998). Although these key areas are not established by a cadence, they are of some importance by virtue of their connection with a basic musical gesture (Caplin, 1998). These tonicizations can be further subdivided by level of importance, including tonicizations (via sequences), and then *local tonicizations*, or "chromatic inflections" (Caplin, 1998, p. 140).

By the conclusion of the development, the second level of the hierarchy, or the *subordinate key*, is then prolonged until the *home key* (and thus, the top of the hierarchy) is confirmed by the beginning of the recapitulation, which remains in this key (Caplin, 1998). Through the reappearance of the initial statement throughout the sonata (see Figure 4b),

Beethoven is able to connect these various levels of the hierarchy, allowing for a smooth transition from theme to theme and from section to section.

### **The Exposition**

From the very beginning of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in G Major, it is evident that he plans to take the listener on an exciting journey. The exposition commences with a motive comprised of six notes (see Figure 4b) that ultimately outline the G Major triad (Green, 1965). The use of these thirds serves as a foundation for future musical action throughout the sonata, as seen in *Figure 4c* (Drake, 1994).

### **The Establishment of the *Home Key***

Within this same gesture, or statement, Beethoven foreshadows what is to occur in the development section with his use of A#, an enharmonic of Bb, that implies the key of g minor. The initial motive is then transposed up a step, serving as a continuation of the statement. It is then spun out until a perfect authentic cadence is reached (m. 8). The first theme forms a sentence whose initial statement will reappear throughout all three sections of the movement, establishing a sense of unity and creating a vast number of connections within the musical action (see Figure 4a). Upon the completion of this sentence, Beethoven confirms the *home key* of G Major with an authentic cadence (m. 8), resting at the top of the hierarchy of key schemes (Caplin, 1998).

### **The Establishment of the *Subordinate Key***

Beneath the *home key* of G Major is the *subordinate key* of D Major, which is established during the latter part of the transition in measure 15 (Caplin, 1998). In order to create a smooth transition from the *home key* to the *subordinate key*, Beethoven creates a stepwise ascent in the bass (see Figure 2), beginning in G Major, but then transitioning to the dominant of D Major

(mm. 15 - 25). With the repeated use of A<sup>3</sup> in the bass line, Beethoven proceeds to prolong A Major, foreshadowing the next key area that is to come. With his use of a simple four-note motive in the soprano (see Figure 5), Beethoven foreshadows the key that is to follow. He then sequences this melodic material and by the second theme, the dominant harmony of D Major has been established. However, upon the additional repetition of the aforementioned sequence, Beethoven has accelerated the musical action with his use of sixteenth notes. The four-note motive has thus been expanded, resulting in the second theme that forms a more complicated version of the musical gesture that precedes it.

Over the next twenty-one measures (mm. 25 – 43), a stepwise descent in the soprano line proceeds from A<sup>5</sup> down to G<sup>4</sup>, preparing for the introduction of the closing theme (see Figure 2). The second theme is in the *subordinate key* of D Major whose melodic material forms a period that is comprised of two phrases (see Figure 1). The first phrase ends with a half cadence (m. 29) and the second phrase ends with an authentic cadence (m. 33). Upon the final cadence of this theme, Beethoven establishes D Major, the second level of the hierarchy of key schemes, as seen in *Figure 3* (Caplin, 1998). After a restatement of the melodic gesture seen earlier in the transition, Beethoven presents the closing theme in the *subordinate*, or dominant, *key* of D Major (mm. 43 - 63). Through his repeated use of D in the bass, Beethoven establishes a sense of stability (Caplin, 1998).

### **The Development**

The sense of stability that Beethoven has created by the conclusion of the exposition is only temporary, however, for the journey has only just begun. The exposition ends in the key of D Major, the dominant of the key in which the development begins (g minor). Moving to the next

level of the hierarchy, Beethoven explores the *development keys* which reside beneath the *home* and *subordinate keys* (Caplin, 1998).

### ***The Primary Development Key***

The development commences with the restatement of the initial motive (see Figure 4b). However, the motive is now in the key of g, the parallel minor of the original key and the *primary development key* within the hierarchy of key schemes (Caplin, 1998). As previously presented in the exposition, this six-note gesture forms the g minor triad (Green, 1965). Once again, Beethoven's use of thirds provides a foundation for the musical action that is to follow (Drake, 1994).

It initially appears as though Beethoven is simply moving from key to key, with no destination in mind. Unlike in the exposition where the bass descended by step and from which one could infer the next key (see Figure 2), such a descending pattern is not evident in the development. Upon further examination, however, amidst the illusory madness is a descending line in the soprano that begins at the modulation through which Beethoven uses a pivot chord (III), which is the tonic chord of the key that is to follow: the relative major of g minor, or Bb Major (m. 74). This key is a *secondary development key* within the aforementioned tonal hierarchy (see Figure 3).

### ***Secondary Development Keys***

In his exploration of the *secondary development keys*, Beethoven maintains a sense of order through the restatement and *fragmentation* of abbreviated versions of the themes seen in the exposition (Caplin, 1998). Within the first ten measures of the development (mm. 63 – 73),

Beethoven repeats, modulates, and expands upon the initial motive that was introduced at the beginning of the exposition (see Figure 4a). Instead of completing the sentence, however, he takes a fragment of the initial motive from which he creates a sequence, repeating it three times (mm. 67 – 70), engaging in the process of *fragmentation* (Caplin, 1998). Following this sequence, Beethoven restates the second theme from the exposition in the key of Bb Major. As seen earlier in the exposition during which the four-note motive (see Figure 5) foreshadowed future musical action, this motive has been reduced to a three-note motive in the dominant of Bb Major (m. 77).

This simple preparation motive (see Figure 5) provides a clue concerning the next *secondary development key* that is about to be explored. In moving to this new key, Beethoven creates a parallel period similar to the one created in the second theme of the exposition (see Figure 1). He repeats the phrase in the new key of Bb Major, ending with a half cadence (m. 77). Upon restating the second phrase of the period, instead of ending with an authentic cadence, Beethoven presents a surprise. Using a pivot chord that is the tonic of the new key, he modulates to the key of Ab Major in which he proceeds to restate the original statement in the bass line (mm. 81 – 98). The three-note preparation motive that has previously foreshadowed future musical action (see Figure 5) reappears yet again in the bass (m. 97) in the dominant of the key (Bb Major). It can thus be assumed that another modulation is about to occur.

Such a suspicion is confirmed by a brief prolongation of the supertonic harmony. The initial sentence seen at the exposition is then restated in the key of Eb Major. Instead of ending the sentence with a cadence, however, Beethoven commences a dramatic prolongation of the dominant harmony (D Major). By this point, Beethoven has returned to the *subordinate key* of the hierarchy, or the dominant of the *primary development key*, and has expanded the three-note



motive seen prior to the arrival of new keys (see Figure 5). This extensive dominant prolongation (mm. 107 – 124) prepares the musical action for the return of the initial key in which the development began (g minor).

As such, on the surface, it appears as though Beethoven has merely transitioned from key to key throughout the development. Nevertheless, Beethoven applied the simple notion of a descending bass line to his use of key schemes. As seen in *Figure 1*, following the establishment of Bb Major (m. 74), the music descends by step through several keys, including Ab Major (m. 81), g minor, f minor, and then Eb Major (mm. 98/99). Within each *secondary development key*, Beethoven sequences both the melodic material and the initial motive from the exposition. This occurs not only in the specific key area, but also with subsequent tonicizations that form a descent within the hierarchy of key schemes, as seen in *Figure 3* (Caplin, 1998). Near the conclusion of the development (mm. 107 – 124), the musical action has proceeded upward in the hierarchy to the dominant, or *subordinate*, key of both the *primary development* and *home keys*, as seen in *Figure 3* (Caplin, 1998). In this way, Beethoven provides a smooth transition from g minor to its parallel key of G Major.

### **The Recapitulation**

After a seemingly chaotic exploration of various *development keys*, Beethoven engages in an extensive prolongation of the *subordinate key*, or the dominant of G Major (Caplin, 1998). In addition to this prolongation, fragments of the sonata's initial motive reappear multiple times in preparation for the return of the *home key* (Caplin, 1998). Finally, the *home key* returns at the beginning of the recapitulation (pickup to m. 125).

### **The Return of the *Home Key***

The recapitulation commences with the sentence in which the sonata began (see Figure 4a). Within this sentence, the original motive is restated, outlining the G Major triad, as seen in *Figure 4b* (Green, 1965). The use of these thirds has served as a foundation for future musical action throughout the sonata and is thus presented again (see Figure 4c); this time, however, Beethoven's use of thirds foreshadows a sense of closure (Drake, 1994). At this point in the sonata, Beethoven has returned to the *home key* of G Major, or the top of the hierarchy of key schemes, and remains in this key for the remainder of the first movement of the sonata (Caplin, 1998).

The full sentence that introduced the sonata (pickup to mm. 1 – 8) reappears at the beginning of the recapitulation (pickup to mm. 125 – 132). The initial themes that were introduced in the exposition and restated in the development are present in the recapitulation as well, including the first theme (pickup to m. 125 - 132), the transition (pickup to m. 133 - 152), the second theme (m. 153 - 173), and the closing theme (m. 174 - 200).

Upon completion of the initial sentence (m. 132), Beethoven creates a stepwise descent in the soprano and a stepwise ascent in the bass (see Figure 2), allowing for a smooth transition into the second theme (mm. 153 – 173). With his use of a simple four-note motive in the soprano (see Figure 3), one would expect Beethoven to transition into the dominant of D Major by the arrival of the second theme (m. 153). Although this key is tonicized, Beethoven remains in the *home key* of G Major. Beethoven then sequences this melodic material and by the second theme, the *home key* of G Major has been fully established with an authentic cadence (Caplin, 1998). Upon the additional repetition of this sequence, Beethoven has accelerated the harmonic rhythm with his use of sixteenth notes.

The second theme is in the *home key* of G Major whose melodic material forms a period that is comprised of two phrases (see Figure 1). The first phrase ends with a half cadence (m. 156) and the second phrase ends with an authentic cadence (m. 160). After a restatement of the melodic gesture seen earlier in the transition, Beethoven presents the closing theme in the *home key* of G Major (mm. 174 - 187). Through his repeated use of G in the bass, Beethoven establishes a sense of stability (Caplin, 1998).

After the initial themes of the sonata are restated in the *home key*, Beethoven reaches the Codetta (pickup to mm. 188 - 200). Unlike near the end of the development where the dominant was prolonged, Beethoven prolongs the tonic throughout the final fourteen measures of the movement. The initial motive that appeared at the beginning of the sonata (see Figure 4b) reappears yet again in the Codetta. Instead of completing the sentence as he had done in the exposition, Beethoven sequences a fragment of this initial motive and ends the sonata with an authentic cadence (mm. 199 - 200).

### **Establishing a Sense of Stability**

At first glance, Beethoven presents a remarkable "illusion of simplicity," as though there is no destination in mind for the musical action (Burkholder et al., 2010). However, upon further investigation, it is apparent that Beethoven has had a plan all along. After removing the veil of simplicity, as seen in *Figure 2*, further analysis reveals a striking hierarchy of key schemes (Caplin, 1998). Through the reappearance of the initial statement and the use of other such devices (i.e., descending bass/soprano line) throughout the movement (see *Figure 2*), Beethoven is able to connect these various levels of the hierarchy. Consequently, he creates a sense of unity throughout the entire movement, revealing a vast number of connections within the musical action. Further, by beginning and ending the movement in the *home key* of G Major, Beethoven

is able to connect both the beginning and the end of this sonata-form movement, allowing for all loose ends, in a sense, to be tied (Caplin, 1998). In the grander scheme of things, by ending the sonata with the prolongation of the tonic, Beethoven establishes a sense of stability, bringing the musical journey to a close.

## References

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## Appendix

*Figure 1.* Diagram. From its very basic structure, Beethoven follows the traditional guidelines for a sonata-form movement.

*Exposition*

<i>Measures</i>		<i>Keys</i>	<i>Phrase Type</i>
Theme One	(Pickup to) mm. 1 - 8	G Major	Sentence
Transition	(Pickup to) mm. 9 - 24	G Major, D Major	Phrase
Theme Two	mm. 25 - 42	D Major	Parallel Period
Closing Theme	mm. 43 - 63	D Major	Phrase

*Development*

Key	G	Bb	Ab	(g)	(f)	Eb	g
Measure	64	74	81			98/99	107-124

*Recapitulation*

<i>Measures</i>		<i>Keys</i>	<i>Phrase Type</i>
Theme One	(Pickup to) mm. 125 - 132	G Major	Sentence
Transition	(Pickup to) mm. 133 - 152	G Major	Phrase
Theme Two	mm. 153 - 173	G Major	Parallel Period
Closing Theme	mm. 174 - 200	G Major	Phrase
Codetta	(Pickup to) mm. 189 - 200		Phrase

Figure 2. A foreground reduction of the soprano-bass voice leading. Beethoven uses descending and ascending patterns in the soprano and bass when moving from one key to another.

Exposition

The Exposition section is divided into five systems of music, each with a soprano and bass staff. The first system (mm. 1-8) is in G Major, I. The second system (mm. 9-25) shows a key change to D Major, with various chordal annotations like  $I^6$ ,  $D:V$ ,  $V^5$ , and  $I$ . The third system (mm. 26-32) is in D Major, I. The fourth system (mm. 33-39) is in D Major, I, with annotations for  $V^5$  and  $I$ . The fifth system (mm. 40-51) is in D Major, I, with annotations for  $IV$ ,  $I$ ,  $V$ , and  $I$ .

Development

The Development section is divided into three systems of music. The first system (mm. 64-124) is in g minor, with annotations for  $i$  and  $vii^{\circ}7$ . The second system shows a key change to B-flat major, with annotations for  $B^{\flat}:I$ ,  $V$ ,  $ii^{\circ}7$ ,  $VII$ ,  $I^{\circ}5$ ,  $IV^{\sharp}$ , and  $vii^{\circ}7$  (g m). The third system shows a key change to E-flat major, with annotations for  $E^{\flat}:I$ ,  $ii$ ,  $iii$ , and  $V$ .

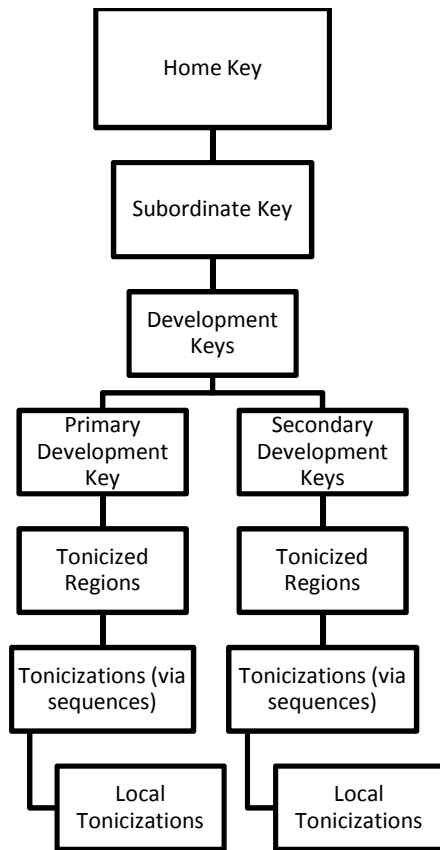
Recapitulation

Handwritten musical score for the recapitulation of the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in G Major, Op. 14. The score is divided into seven systems, each with a measure range on the left. Each system consists of a treble and bass staff with handwritten annotations including dynamics, articulation, and harmonic analysis. The key signature is G Major (one sharp).

- mm. 124-132:** Treble staff has an 8-measure phrase (8-meas.) with an accent. Bass staff has a note with an accent (N) and a dynamic marking (p). Harmonic analysis below: G Major: I ————— 11 12 V<sup>4</sup>/<sub>4</sub> =  $\frac{3}{4}$  I
- mm. 133-153:** Treble staff has notes with accents (N) and dynamics (p, mp, ap). Bass staff has notes with accents (N) and dynamics (p). Harmonic analysis below: (G) I ————— V
- mm. 154-159:** Treble staff has an 8-measure phrase (8-meas.) with an accent. Bass staff has notes with accents (N) and dynamics (p). Harmonic analysis below: (G) I —————
- mm. 160-168:** Treble staff has triplets (3-prg.) and accents. Bass staff has notes with accents (N) and dynamics (p). Harmonic analysis below: (G) I ————— V<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> I ————— IV
- mm. 169-173:** Treble staff has an 8-measure phrase (8-meas.) with an accent. Bass staff has notes with accents (N) and dynamics (p). Harmonic analysis below: (G) I ————— V I ————— V
- mm. 174-187:** Treble staff has an 8-measure phrase (8-meas.) with an accent. Bass staff has notes with accents (N) and dynamics (p). Harmonic analysis below: (G) I —————
- mm. 188-200:** Treble staff has an 8-measure phrase (8-meas.) with an accent. Bass staff has notes with accents (N) and dynamics (p). Harmonic analysis below: (G) I ————— V' I



Figure 3. The hierarchy of key schemes. A “tonal hierarchy” forms the structural outline of the first movement of the sonata (Caplin, 1998, pg. 139).



(Adapted from Caplin, 1998)

Figure 4a. The initial sentence. Fragments of this opening sentence appear throughout the sonata and aid in connecting one level of the hierarchy to another (Caplin, 1998).

Allegro. 1) STATEMENT

10. *p legato*

2) CONTINUATION

3) CADENCE (V-I)

Figure 4b. The initial motive. This opening motive is repeated, transposed, and expanded upon throughout the sonata.



Figure 4c. The building blocks. The use of these thirds (mm. 1 - 2) serves as a foundation for future musical action throughout the first movement of the sonata (Drake, 1994).

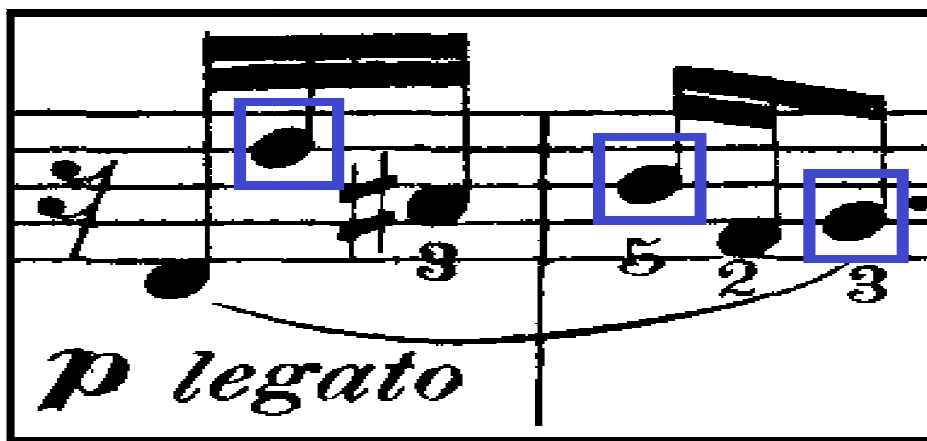


Figure 5. The preparation motive. Variations of this motive are seen prior to transitions or restatements of previous themes.

