

Sonata Form

We can view the Classical sonata form as expanding the tonal structure and thematic design of the continuous rounded binary forms of the classical period. Refer to the attached diagram, which compares a typical rounded continuous binary form with a typical sonata movement. As you recall, the rounded continuous binary is divided into two large parts, usually demarcated by double bars. The A section (a) corresponds to the *exposition* of the sonata. The B section is divided into two parts: the digression (b) corresponds to the *development*, and the thematic/harmonic return (a') corresponds to the *recapitulation*. A detailed discussion of the sections in sonata form follows.

Introduction. A slow introduction, when present, acts as an extended upbeat to the Allegro proper. This is accomplished by a tonal motion from tonic to an arrival on the dominant, creating a large-scale half-cadence.

- I. **Exposition.** In addition to “exposing” the basic thematic materials of the movement, the Exposition sets up a polarity between tonic and dominant (or relative major). The resulting tonal conflict must be resolved before the movement ends. In the Classical period, the Exposition is almost always repeated. There are four important parts of the Exposition:
 - A. **First Tonal Area (FTA).** This section, also known as the first theme group, states one or more themes in the tonic key.
 - B. **Transition (tr.).** This section initiates tonal motion to a contrasting key, usually V or III. We will refer to two types of transitions. A *dependent transition* begins with thematic material from the First Tonal Area, while an *independent transition* begins with new thematic material. The harmonic goal of the transition is usually V (half cadence) of the new key. Thus in a major key the goal of the transition is usually V/V, and in a minor key it is usually V/III. This half cadence sets up the expectation of a structural downbeat on I of the new key at the beginning of the second tonal area. Occasionally a composer will use an authentic cadence instead of a half cadence in the new key as the goal of the transition. This is sometimes called a “harmonically incomplete” transition.
 - C. **Second Tonal Area (STA).** This section, also known as the second theme group, states one or more themes in the new key. The thematic material usually contrasts with that of the FTA; sometimes, however, themes from the FTA will appear transposed to the new key at this point. A sonata in which the main theme of the Second Tonal Area is a transposition of the primary theme of the First Tonal Area is called a “monothematic” sonata. Haydn is fond of this device. (See the first movement of Symphony 104, for example).
 - D. **Closing Section (cl.).** The closing group usually maintains the key of the STA, and provides strong harmonic closure in the second key. It is often subdivided into several parts, which may be thematic or purely cadential. Closing themes are often characterized by short melodic ideas and repeated V–I (cadential) tonal motion. A codetta may follow harmonic and melodic closure. This extension of the final cadence often features cadential figuration and/or a “tonic” pedal.

II. **Development.** The Development is characterized by sequencing and modulation, which serve to intensify the tonal conflict created in the Exposition. Thematic material from earlier sections is often presented in new ways, although new thematic material may also be introduced. The development is often sectional, with division based on the thematic material presented and/or tonal area explored. Contrary to appearance, the tonal scheme of the Development is usually highly organized: although the specific key scheme will vary from piece to piece, the ultimate goal is the dominant of the original key. This dominant, which is usually prolonged, is referred to as the **Retransition**, and it prepares the return of the tonic harmony. *Harmonic interruption* occurs at this point.

III. **Recapitulation.** The Recapitulation restates the material of the Exposition, but with important differences. Material that was stated in the dominant or relative major during the Exposition is now transposed back to the original tonic key, thus resolving the tonal conflict of the movement.

A. **First Tonal Area (FTA).** This section restates the thematic material from the corresponding part of the Exposition, either literally or with minor alterations.

B. **Transition (tr.).** Unlike the earlier transition, this section does not initiate a modulation. While the material of this section corresponds to the earlier transition in design, its function is ultimately to return to the tonic. Thus the harmonic goal is usually a half cadence (V) in the tonic key. It is often interesting to study this section carefully, since the composer must do more recomposing of this section than others, which are sometimes merely transposed to the tonic key.

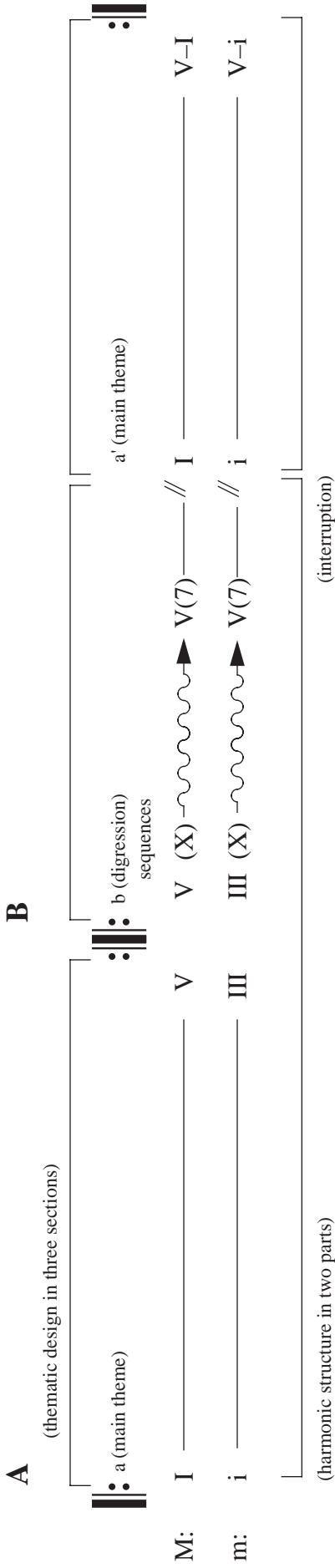
C. **Second Tonal Area (STA).** This section restates the thematic material from the corresponding part of the Exposition, but now transposed to the original tonic. Composers sometimes do considerable reworking of material here as well.

D. **Closing Section (cl.).** This section confirms the original key, and harmonic and melodic closure are achieved at this point.

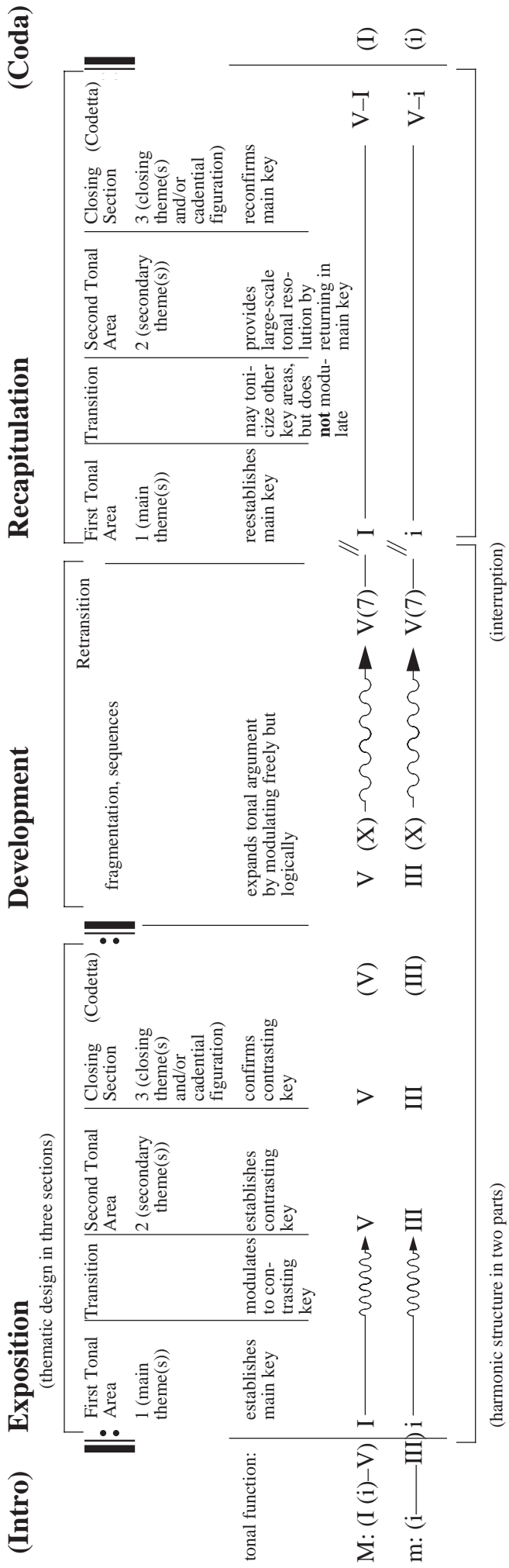
Coda. The Coda corresponds with the Codetta in function; it occurs, if at all, after harmonic and melodic closure. Procedures in the Coda vary greatly from piece to piece: earlier material may be “developed” in new ways, or new material may be introduced. Also, sometimes, the coda is used to resolve tonal issues suggested earlier in the movement. It is sometimes useful to view the Coda as a “second Development,” especially in Beethoven and later composers.

Labeling Themes in a Sonata. In labelling themes in a sonata, it is useful to make a distinction between themes in various groups. In any case you will want labels for themes so that you can show derivation of material in the development. I prefer to label themes in the first tonal area 1a, 1b, 1c, etc., those in the second tonal area 2a, 2b, etc.; and those in the closing group 3a, 3b, etc. New ideas in transitional sections can be labelled t1, t2, if necessary. See the form chart on the last page of this handout as an example. This movement, the first of Mozart’s Sonata in B-Flat Major, K.333, can be found in Laitz, *The Complete Musician*, draft edition, pp.831ff . It is a perfect model of Classical sonata form, and is an excellent introduction to the genre.

Rounded Continuous Binary Form



Sonata Form



Mozart Piano Sonata In B-Flat Major, K. 333 (1778)
First Movement (Sonata Form)

Part	Measure	Function/Derivation	Tonality
Exposition:			
First group	1	1a (parallel period)	I [Bb]
	11	transition (dependent)	I → V/V
Second group	23	2a	V [F]
	39	2b	V
Closing Group	50	3a	V
	59	codetta	V
Development			
Part 1	64	1a	V [F]
Part 2	71	transition + new	v [Fm] → V7/ii [Cm] → V ⁷ /I [Bb] → Gr. ⁶ / ₅ /vi [Gm]
Part 3	81	2a (m. 35-36)	V/vi [Gm]
Part 4	87	retransition	V/I
Recapitulation			
First group	94 [= 1]	1a	I [Bb]
	104 [= 11]	transition (extended)	I → V/I
Second group	119 [= 23]	2a	I [Bb]
	135 [= 39]	2b (extended)	I
Closing Group	152 [= 50]	3a	I [Bb]
	161 [= 59]	codetta	I [Bb]