5.5: Sonata Form - The Recapitulation

The recapitulation is the goal of the sonata, coming after the exposition and the development (anything that precedes the exposition is introduction and anything that follows the recapitulation is coda). It answers the expectations set forth by the exposition, and it brings the essential sonata closure. Thus, the relationship between the exposition and the recapitulation is the a central focus of a sonata analysis.

In light of the importance of this relationship, an analysis of a recapitulation should always take place in light of the exposition.

Thematic cycle

The recapitulation typically follows the same pattern of modules set forth in the exposition: \{ P TR ' S / C \} for a two-part exposition, \{ P TR ⇒ FS / C \} for a continuous exposition (the apostrophe stands for the MC, the slash stands for the EEC/ESC).

Essential sonata closure

The harmonic goal of the recapitulation (and the sonata movement as a whole) is the essential sonata closure (ESC). The ESC will always be a I:PAC, and will typically occur at the same thematic point in the recapitulation as the EEC in the exposition. It is often the exact same music as in the exposition, but transposed from the secondary key to the home key.
Recomposition

The simplest exposition–recapitulation relationship occurs in a sonata with a I:HC MC in the exposition followed immediately by S in the dominant. In such a sonata, the composer can simply repeat P–TR verbatim in the recapitulation, and then repeat S–C verbatim, but transposed down a fifth. In such a sonata, there is no recomposition. Every bar in the recapitulation directly corresponds to a bar in the exposition, at pitch or transposed by fifth.

In most sonatas, however, some music from the exposition is recomposed in the recapitulation, often to “undo” the modulation that happened on the way to a V:HC MC. In such cases, we use the term correspondence bars (or correspondence measures) to refer to the passages that are the same (or the same transposed) in the exposition and the recapitulation. Referential bars make clear reference to specific bars in the exposition, but the material is changed in some non-trivial way. Alterations are passages in the recapitulation that have no clear reference or correspondence to passages in the exposition.

Correspondence, reference, and altered material tends to happen in the following order in the recapitulation:

- correspondence bars (P and perhaps the beginning of TR or TR ⇒ FS)
- alterations or referential bars (primarily in TR or TR ⇒ FS)
- correspondence bars (S and C, and sometimes the material immediately preceding the MC, transposed to the home key)

Crux

The point in the recapitulation at which alterations give way to renewed correspondence with the exposition is called the crux. This point, along with the MC and the ESC, must be determined before most of the rest of the analysis of the recapitulation can take place. Generally speaking, the crux will come before the beginning of S, with S and C comprised primarily of correspondence bars.

Typically there are no alterations post-crux, but when there are, they should not be overlooked in an analysis.

Hermeneutics

A sonata analysis only begins with the finding and labeling of these modules, keys, and events. Once you have successfully analyzed the sonata structure, move into interpretation (the scholarly term for the study of musical or textual interpretation is hermeneutics). Sonata hermeneutics begins with interpretive questions like:

- What expectations does the exposition set up for the recapitulation (and other passages such as the development and, if present, coda)?
- How does the recapitulation fulfill those expectations?
- How does the recapitulation thwart or mess with those expectations?
- What effects might the expected and unexpected elements in the recapitulation have on listeners?
- How do the unique elements of the piece in question relate to other pieces in its historical context?
When writing, presenting, or discussing a sonata analysis, don't simply catalog structure. Begin with questions like these, and provide structural details only in service of explaining your answers to those questions (and others that are raised by your engagement with the piece).