Course description

This course will offer a sustained investigation of one of the most keenly contested and vibrant fields of music theory: sonata form. As the preeminent formal mode of the late eighteenth century (and for some time after), and as the subsequent proving ground for many music-theoretical constructions, sonata form is intimately tied to the way we think music “ought to go”. An account of writings about sonata form traces its shift from a vital compositional principle to a textbook paradigm, and, eventually, articulates its rise and continuance as a crucial conduit for the presentation of ideas about music.

The first part of the course will constitute a focused study of these ideas and writings, from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through to the most modern contemporary approaches. At the same time, and taking center stage during the second half of the course, there will be a strong analytical component, centering on the instrumental music of the Classical period (principally, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven), but extending through the nineteenth century as well. In the end, then, we shall examine sonata form eclectically, from multiple angles and vantage points, using theoretical and analytical approaches past and present to inform our understanding of the music, and, reciprocally, using specific compositions to sharpen our conceptual apparatus.

“Sonata, what do you want of me?” This famous cry of exasperation from the eighteenth-century French writer Fontanelle has resonated with critics for centuries. Even if the source of Fontanelle’s frustration was not in fact the “concept of sonata form” as we might know it but the apparently impenetrable genre of instrumental music, we might still rally behind the slogan. Why does sonata form exert such a strong hold over us? What sort of musical narratives does it tell, and why do they appear so persuasive? What critiques are possible of the sonata paradigm, and how have participants—theorists and composers—mounted those critiques? What do we want of the sonata?

Anton Reicha, Traité de haute composition musicale (1826): the most celebrated diagram of sonata form. Two parts or three?