

How useful is textbook sonata form for the analysis of the outer movements of Elgar's symphonies? Illustrate your argument through detailed reference to at least two movements.

Note: All numbers refer to rehearsal figures. Subscript following a number indicates the number of bars after a particular figure. Thus, 135<sub>7</sub> means the seventh bar of Figure 135 (inclusive of the figured bar).

Textbook sonata form can be seen as the presentation of, and struggle between, two opposing forces of character and key, with a final reconciliation. James Webster describes the basic outline of the form as:

‘the exposition, consisting of a (‘masculine’) main theme in the tonic, a transition to the new key, a contrasting lyrical (‘feminine’) second theme, and perhaps a closing group; the development, whose function was to attain a climax by developing the material in remote keys; a full recapitulation; and a coda.’<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, the first subject would establish a tonic key, while the second would be centred on the dominant, or, where the first subject is in a minor key, the relative major. The recapitulation would bring back both subjects in the tonic key. However, nineteenth-century composers, most notably Beethoven, had vastly expanded the range of key relationships used. By the time Elgar wrote his First Symphony (Op. 55) in 1908, tonality, via the chromaticism of Wagner and Schoenberg, had almost reached the limits of ambiguity. There could be no question of an early twentieth-century symphony following the harmonic ideals of the Classical period. But key contrast remained fundamental to the sonata style throughout its history.

It should also be remembered that textbook sonata form was defined by theorists only in the second quarter of the nineteenth century (the term was coined by A.B. Marx), in an attempt to explain the works of composers in the preceding century. The basis of sonata form was therefore a generalisation of those compositional procedures seen as most useful to nineteenth-century composers; or, more specifically, a generalisation of the methods of Beethoven and Mozart.<sup>2</sup> Thus, to take the critical view, what we know as ‘textbook sonata form’ is actually an idealistic construction based upon the works of a select number of canonic composers. It was principally an aid to composition and analysis.

According to James Hepokoski, for the ‘modernists’ of the late nineteenth century (including Sibelius, Mahler, and Elgar himself), a central feature of their aesthetic was ‘implicitly or fragmentarily to refer to the generic formal conventions, perhaps as lost gestures or the founding gestures of the game, but then to override them.’<sup>3</sup> However, his post-modern analysis seems to transpose, slightly disingenuously, such post-modern views to the composers themselves. To what extent did composers see sonata form as a construct rather than objective ideal? What is true is that the sonata style was indeed there to work against, but it only ever was. Hepokoski’s suggestion that sonata form was always handled ‘as though in quotation marks’ tends to diminish the role it played in the compositions, whereas in fact, despite many modifications and the presence of concurrent larger scale (and smaller scale) tensional processes, the sonata ideal remains at the heart of both Elgar’s symphonies.

<sup>1</sup> James Webster, ‘Sonata Form’, Grove Music Online, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 22/03/04), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Rosen, *Sonata Forms*, (London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1980), p4.

<sup>3</sup> James Hepokoski, ‘Sibelius and the problem of “modernism”’ in *Sibelius: 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), p5.

I propose, then, to explore how Elgar deviates from the textbook standard of sonata form in the outer movements of his symphonies with respect to their formal outline and their tonal and thematic relationships, while discussing how each of these aspects contribute to and affect the over-arching tensional processes. This should illustrate both the extent to which 'sonata form' is useful as an analytical tool, and its limitations.

The movement in which Elgar remains most faithful to the sonata ideal is the finale of the Second Symphony.<sup>4</sup> Yet even here there are modifications. An important theme enters at Figure 139 [Ex.1], after the first subject. Some critics<sup>5</sup> label this the second subject (David Cox even goes as far as to call it the 'second subject proper'), and yet its subdominant harmony, rhythmic resemblance and reference to the melodic contours of the first theme (note the gradual climb from E flat to F to A flat to B flat, matching a similar ascent in the cellos in the first two bars) suggest it to be a transitional theme (Tovey and Anderson concur<sup>6</sup>). Composers would often introduce new material into the transition between first and second subjects, but this theme adopts an equal, if not superior, importance in the rest of the movement, forming the basis of the development between 145 and 152. (This is not without precedent for Elgar; in his First Symphony, some of the most important motifs appear in the transitional section between figures 9 and 12). A further new theme is introduced later, at the end of the development (152) [Ex.2]. Although it is clearly based on the second subject, its contrasting funeral march-style character and straightforward presentation - as if expository - introduces a new element into the contest. In Hepokoski's terms, this is a 'breakthrough deformation', for this is not an independent gesture: it may affect the course of the rest of the movement (its presence is certainly felt at the start of the recapitulation, and perhaps it contributes to the less-than-optimistic atmosphere of the Coda). Importantly, this episode seems unprecipitated by the preceding music.

Such episodes abound in both symphonies. The first movement of the Second Symphony features a 'ghostly' new theme [Ex.3] at the start of the development (Figure 24), the oscillating tritones of its accompaniment upsetting the tonal trajectory. The actual development section at 35 is concise, with so much of the material already having been explored - almost to its limit - in the exposition. Robert Anderson suggests a 'false-recapitulation' in E major at 37, meaning that the actual recapitulation can be even shorter.<sup>7</sup> The Coda (52) is highly important, acting as an extra development section by which to return us to the tonic of E flat (61). This illustrates a separation between thematic contrast and tonal opposition. The two processes, so often conjoined in traditional sonata movements, have been shifted to different planes, occasionally coinciding for the climaxes. This separation is necessary given the chromaticism of the music and the self-modulating nature of each theme; one theme can hardly represent a particular tonal area (within a single protagonistic unit) if it is ambiguous in its tonality.

The First Symphony uses a significant device by which to unify the structure of both its outer movements and the work as a whole. Hepokoski labels it the 'Introduction-Coda frame'. Whereas in the Second Symphony, the first subjects of each movement launch the music, here it is a 'motto theme' [Ex.4] that provides the initiation. In the first movement, the motto theme makes appearances at key structural junctures, returning before the development (18) and recapitulation (30<sub>15</sub>). It is this diatonic motto theme, epitomising the tonic A flat, with which the ensuing turbulent, chromatic music is juxtaposed and to which all things return, at the end of the

<sup>4</sup> Diana McVeagh, *Edward Elgar: His Life and Music*, (London: J.M. Dent, 1955), p166.

<sup>5</sup> See, David Cox, 'Edward Elgar' in *The Symphony - Vol. 2: Elgar to the present day*, ed. Robert Simpson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p27; Jerrold N. Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life* (Oxford: OUP, 1984), p609.

<sup>6</sup> Donald F. Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis*, Vol. 1: *Symphonies* (London: OUP, 1935), p120; Robert Anderson, *Elgar*, (London: J.M. Dent, 1993), p338.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, *Elgar*, p336.

movement, and, more triumphantly, at the end of the symphony. This Manichean struggle between diatonicism and chromaticism - between nobility and instability - exists outside of the movement's sonata structure; the symphony as a whole could be said to be based on a sonata trajectory: from an assured tonic towards conflict and back again.

In contrast with the terseness of development sections in the Second Symphony, the first movement of the A flat Symphony features a developmental passage of more than one-third the length of the movement. For this reason, coupled with the brevity of the recapitulation, contemporary writers criticised Elgar for imbalance<sup>8</sup>. Certainly, with regard textbook sonata form, the proportions of these sections are unusual, and yet such a lengthy development seems necessary, according to Maine<sup>9</sup>, given the 'fertility' of the themes: in a sense, there is so much developmental potential in his themes that it would be untimely to curtail its progress. And further, the proportions of the sonata structure seem to matter less here, for the motto frame provides the sense of overall balance that may be missing within.

In the fourth movement of the First Symphony, Elgar introduces a march-like theme [Ex.5] during the slow introduction. Here we have another element that seems to exist outside of the traditional sonata boundaries, for it makes an appearance at the end of the exposition (118) and then forms a key part of the development. It is rhythmically augmented at 130 to form a gloriously romantic, dreamy episode in E flat minor before the recapitulation (there showing more explicitly its resemblance to the motto theme [See Ex.6]).

We have seen, then, that Elgar used a number of techniques to somehow 'blur' the formal outline of his symphonic movements: by introducing new themes in unconventional places; by disrupting the proportions of the conventional divisions; by altering the functions of sections; and, importantly, by introducing dialectics that operate on a broader plane of interest compared to the inner sonata structure.

Tonal relationships in Elgar's symphonies are particularly interesting. He almost completely eschews the traditional contrast between tonic and dominant or relative major, though this is to be expected in any composer post-Beethoven. Instead, we have a vast collection of subdominant, submediant, tritonal and semitonal relationships. What is fascinating, however, is not the choice of keys to contrast, which few listeners would have found particularly unusual in themselves given the highly chromatic nature of the musical idiom, but the way in which key contrast is used in relation to the structure and overall trajectory of each movement and symphony as a whole.

As we have seen, the key of A flat 'frames' the First Symphony, yet by the calculations of Robert Meikle<sup>10</sup>, less than half the bars of the first movement and only around eighty out of four hundred bars in the final movement bear any allegiance to this tonic. Instead, the first subject 'has a feeling of A minor' (according to Elgar, despite the key signature of one flat), while the second begins in F major. It is, of course, tempting to see the Allegro (at 5<sub>2</sub>) as starting in D minor, an antithetical (and no doubt devilish) tritone away from the motto's noble A flat, especially given that the finale begins in D minor, but this is not really evidenced by the first subject itself (the first chord of the second bar can only realistically be heard as a dominant 7<sup>th</sup>; to read the theme in D minor would require it to be a secondary dominant). We can have no doubt, though, that the A flat is the prevailing key, given its influence on the recapitulation: by the time the second subject returns at

<sup>8</sup> Judging by the defence given by Maine (1933)

<sup>9</sup> Basil Maine, Elgar, (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1933), p128.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Meikle, "The True Foundation." *The Symphonies* in Edward Elgar, Music and Literature, ed. Raymond Monk (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), p48

38, we have been dragged back, in preparation for the coda, to the tonic, rather than the theme's original key.

It is easier to draw the tritonal dichotomy in the finale, with its opening in D minor and triumphant return of the motto in A flat at 146. Here the relationship between first and second subject is a submediant one, the first in D minor; the second in B flat. In the recapitulation, however, the first subject returns in E flat minor – a semitone away from its original form, and the second returns in G flat, the submediant of its original key. Our march theme, in F minor at 141, allows for a return to the all-conquering tonic by way of an immense - twenty-two bar - descending bass line, from 143. Such examples go to show, not that Elgar was particularly innovative in his choice of keys, but that his tonal structures operate on a different level than the sonata form.

The Second Symphony presents a slightly different story, for this time there is no overriding motto theme. The E flat tonality is established firmly in the second bar by arpeggio, but there is an immediate move to the subdominant in bar 3, and a further shift to D flat (IV of IV) in bar 6.<sup>11</sup> These subdominant inflections are reflected in the rest of the symphony. The recapitulation, interestingly, seems to commence from the second bar of the first subject (at 42), on the chord of A flat, (the preceding bar, outlining the first of this subject, avoids any firm chord of E flat; Elgar is trying to avoid by any means possible a premature return to the tonic). To give one further example, in the finale, the transitional theme, (or first theme of the second subject group) upon which much of the development is based, is in the subdominant.

The use of the subdominant suggests a tonal relaxation, for the polarisation between the tonic and its subdominant is not so (conceptually, or audibly) great as that between tonic and dominant. Elgar himself recognised atypicality of this: 'most folks run through dominant modulations.'<sup>12</sup> It is an interesting choice for a composer to make, then, to move twice to a position of tonal relaxation within the first 6 bars of a symphony, when surely he should be generating tension. From where is the opposition to come? Once again, this exemplifies the separation of tonal structures from thematic opposition. In a way, each subject group contains enough opposition within itself to generate forward motion, and, as we have seen, the exposition is long enough for the material to develop significantly, even before we reach the 'development' section. This perhaps explains the need for the 'ghost' theme at 24 [Ex.3]. It destroys the spirit of the opening, and we do not reach the tonic again until 61.

The thematic ideals of sonata form have proved fertile ground for critical musicologists, with the concept of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' in subject groups under particular scrutiny. It would certainly be tempting to investigate this Edwardian gent's themes with regard these particular 'constructions', but it is perhaps more important to analyse their character with regard the dialectic of each movement and their importance in terms of thematic fertility. To what extent do Elgar's themes fulfil the requirements of sonata form? Certainly, a number of his second subject themes are lyrical in nature (take the violin melody at 12 in the First Symphony's first movement, or the cello theme at figure 11 in the Second Symphony's first movement, for example) while many of his first subjects contain concise, powerful motifs. In this respect, he conforms to traditional sonata style, but this is not the whole story, for the sheer number of themes present within each movement necessitates more than a mere masculine/feminine opposition. Motto themes, transitional themes and developmental episodes all play their role in thematic contrast and development.

<sup>11</sup> Meikle, "The True Foundation." *The Symphonies*, p50.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Meikle, *ibid.*, p50.

The all-pervasive nature of the motto theme in the First Symphony is illustrated not only by its occasional re-appearances during the course of the symphony, but also by the way in which it generates or influences many other motifs and themes within the symphony - most especially in the last movement [Ex.6], though its stepwise descent can be seen in many motifs of the first. In this sense, the motto could be seen as an 'idée fixe' – ever present, though not always explicit, as both the seed of the themes, the starting point and goal of the symphony; once again, Elgar is composing outside the boundaries of the sonata structure.

While the Second Symphony has no motto theme, it is framed by references to the initial theme (returning in an augmented form at the end of the finale). The first movement finds unity in semiquaver oscillation and the descending figure of the first subject (bar 3) [Ex.7; x]. The semiquaver idea stems from the last two notes of bar 2 (violin I) [Ex.7; y], and appears in figures throughout the first subject, is embodied in the major/minor oscillation of the first theme of the second subject group (8), in the 'principal second subject' (11, the second bar of which contains two pairs of falling semitones, separated by a falling tritone) and in the countermelody to the 'ghost theme', in the cellos at 28.

No sense of Manichean opposition or of masculine/feminine contrast could be applied to the finale of the Second Symphony. Here, each of the three exposition themes is simply nobler than the previous. The exposition gives no clue as to possible disruptive elements, so it is not until the start of the development at 145 that conflict occurs. But even here, the only real protagonist is the transitional theme, and some new figures, until some references to the first subject at 149, by which time a climax has already been reached.

The important point with regard Elgar's thematic relationships is that, given their interlinked nature, and that so often they contain as much opposition within themselves as in contrast with others, the traditional sonata method of statement, opposition and resolution is inadequate. His symphonic method seems to be about exploring relationships between themes rather than developing conflict between them. It is very difficult to exploit conflict between themes that have grown out of the same idea. As Basil Maine explains<sup>13</sup>, whereas the sonata norm was to begin with simple statements and work towards complexity, Elgar's approach is to begin with complexity and to work towards reconciliation.

In conclusion, there is no doubting that sonata form rests at the heart of each of Elgar's symphonic movements. I would take the view that it is not merely a nod to convention: the essence of sonata form, that is, struggle and reconciliation, is present throughout each work. What is true, however, is that the composer chose to think in terms of broader strands that stretch over complete movements, and across each symphony. There is a separation of the formal structure of the music from the struggle between keys and themes. Though we cannot assess each strand entirely in itself, for much is interlinked, any analysis of the symphonic movements must observe the conflict between each plane of development as well as the conflict within. Thus, textbook sonata form can reveal quite a lot about the inner construction of each movement, but it is necessary also to stand back and observe greater forces at work.

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<sup>13</sup> Maine, Elgar, p128.

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