

Web Feature 21.1

Sonata form in context—Mozart's Symphony no. 40 in G Minor, K. 550 (1st mvt.)

Mozart composed his fortieth symphony in 1788. Unusually for a classic-era multi-movement work, three of its four movements are in G minor and three (not the same three movements) are in sonata form. The first movement remains one of Mozart's best-known works and is remarkable for its motivic concentration. You will find the full score to the first movement online from the International Music Score Library Project at the following link:

[http://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony_No.40_in_G_minor,_K.550_\(Mozart,_Wolfgang_Amaeus\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony_No.40_in_G_minor,_K.550_(Mozart,_Wolfgang_Amaeus))

You are encouraged to download the score, add measure numbers, and make annotations as you read through the analysis that follows.

The piece begins with the primary theme, in the tonic G minor; there is no introduction. Like our Beethoven example, Mozart immediately and definitively situates the tonic with a phrase pattern of T – PD – D – T ($i - ii^{o4} - V_5^6 - i$, mm. 1–9). The primary theme is notable for its anapestic eighth-eighth-quarter rhythmic motive and its descending minor-second melodic motive; both of these features will be exploited heavily in the development section.

Where does the transition begin? One might be tempted to point to measure 28: the texture certainly gets busier at that point, and there is a sudden change of dynamics. To answer the question of where the transition begins, however, it is necessary to first determine where the primary theme ends. It should end on a cadence of some sort, and it should not vary in its restatement in the recapitulation. Looking ahead to the recapitulation, we find that it begins in the pickup to measure 166. Compare the beginning of the exposition with the beginning of the recapitulation. At what point do they diverge?

Both the exposition's primary theme and that of the recapitulation remain the same through the half cadence (measure 20 in the exposition and measure 183 in the recapitulation). Following the half cadence, both passages *begin* alike, with a reference to

the primary theme's opening (suggesting that perhaps some large parallel period is about to unfold), but soon thereafter the two sections go their separate ways; compare measures 22–27 with 185–190. Mozart frequently does this in his transitions; unlike Beethoven, who concluded his primary theme with an authentic cadence and then proceeded to introduce new transitional material, Mozart ends his primary theme with a half cadence and then begins the transition with a reference to primary theme material, “fooling” the listener into believing that he or she is hearing more of the primary theme when the transition is in fact underway. Where does the transition end? Is there a caesura?

The secondary theme begins at measure 52, in the relative major key of B \flat . Note Mozart's unusual scoring in this passage, as the theme is passed from strings to winds and back to strings in its first phrase, followed by the textural inversion of this process (winds – strings – winds) in the second phrase. The theme is also primarily chromatic, as opposed to the mostly diatonic primary theme; here the motivic minor second of the primary theme is used to build a flowing descending line. Like our Beethoven example, the secondary theme is somewhat more elaborate in its structure than the primary theme: The second phrase of theme extends its circle-of-fifths harmonization one step “too far,” pausing on the dominant of A \flat major (measures 58–61) before surging upward through a vii⁰⁷/V (measure 63) to a perfect authentic cadence (measures 65–66); there then follows a phrase extension in measures 66–72.

The closing section begins in measure 72, and here we see Mozart drawing upon elements from both the primary and secondary themes. From the former we see the return of the anapestic rhythmic motive, and from the latter we see the return of the alternating interplay between strings and winds in their use of the motive. In measures 88–100 various cadential phrase extensions bring the exposition to a close.

As mentioned earlier, it is usually not as simple to return to the minor tonic from the relative major as it is to return to the major tonic from the dominant. Mozart's transitions back to the beginning of the exposition and onward to the development are both abrupt and dramatic. In returning to the beginning of the exposition, a simple V₃⁴ of G minor seems to suffice; in moving on to the development, Mozart adds a couple of extra chords, including an unusually spelled fully diminished seventh chord in measure 101. This diminished seventh—a g \sharp ₂⁰⁴—cannot function, as spelled, in either G minor or B \flat major, since the chord G \sharp tonicizes would be diminished in either of those keys. By choosing this spelling, Mozart seems to be placing the chord in a “neutral” context—that is, not belonging to either key. Respelled, however (with the F \sharp spelled as E \sharp), the chord does function as a vii⁰⁷ in F \sharp minor—the first key (and an unusual choice at that) that Mozart visits in the development section.

In the development section (measures 101–165), Mozart chooses to not develop the secondary theme at all. Instead, the characteristic motives of the primary theme become his main focus throughout. Mozart does, however, draw upon the interchange of parts that we have seen in the secondary theme as a *compositional process*. For example, in measures 114–129, the opening of the primary theme is juxtaposed in the lower strings against a counter-theme derived from the transition’s ascending arpeggio figure (see measures 30–31) in diminution in the upper strings; these parts switch in a kind of invertible counterpoint every four measures, taking us through the circle of fifths as they do. Ultimately we arrive at a half cadence of D minor (measures 134–138) moving to the V7 of B \flat through a common-tone modulation (measure 140); from there the motive is more and more fragmented, with brief sequencing modulations until the retransition occurs in measures 153–165.

Of the return of the primary theme in the recapitulation we do not need to make much comment; we have already observed how Mozart deceives the listener by beginning the transition with material from the primary theme, and he does so again here (measures 183–186). This time, however, he veers unexpectedly toward E \flat major (measures 188–191). The turbulent episode from the transition is actually extended this time around, with Mozart reprising the double counterpoint that had been a substantial part of the development section; after measures 191–197, for example, the parts switch roles in measures 198–202. Then we move rapidly through the circle of fifths as the ascending arpeggio figure is subjected to **stretto** (overlapping imitation between parts). Finally, the circle of fifths brings us around to the tonic at measure 201. Measures 191–210, then, are a kind of parenthetical diversion, added by Mozart for dramatic interest (certainly the recapitulation would be more predictable, and arguably less interesting, without this addition). The remainder of the transition continues without substantial alteration until the caesura at measure 226.

The secondary theme at measure 227 is rather unusual in that Mozart recasts it in the minor tonic rather than the parallel major. This time, coming out of the “stuck” dominant seventh chord (measures 241–244, a reprise of measures 58–61), the chromatic ascension is extended by five extra measures. The closing section begins at measure 259, and Mozart adds a coda to this movement (again with a tonic pedal, as in the coda to Beethoven’s Piano Sonata Op. 14, no. 2, analyzed in the text) beginning in measure 287.