



# WRITING ABOUT SHOSTAKOVICH

## Shostakovich's Sonata Forms and the Piano Sonata in B minor, op. 61

by Andrew Schartmann

**D**mitri Shostakovich's relationship with sonata form is a complex topic that warrants discussion if we are to come to terms with his innovative use of tradition in a highly modernised language. On the one hand, his prodigious musical memory allowed him to absorb the works of classical masters independently, and at an incredible rate. On the other hand, his rigorous conservatory training under the tutelage of Maximilian Steinberg exposed him to a theoretical perspective on musical form that was heavily influenced by the writings of German theorist Adolph Bernhard Marx[1]. The present study explores the first movement of Shostakovich's Piano Sonata in B minor, op. 61, in light of Marx's philosophical outlook on musical form. It is hoped that this example will serve as a springboard for more generalizable conclusions about the composer's seemingly unusual sonata forms.

There is little doubt that sonata form was conceived of differently in the main conservatories of early-twentieth-century Russia than in today's North American academic institutions. Modern-day theory, for instance, has trouble making sense of a work once considered by some to be exemplary of the form: Shostakovich's Piano Trio in C minor, op. 8. This work was lauded by faculty members at the Moscow Conservatory when Shostakovich applied to study there. The composer describes the enthusiasm with which his performance of the work was received:

'Konyus, an official old chappie, asked Myaskovsky, "Will you take him in your class?" Myaskovsky replied, "Without question." Konyus: "You accept him in the class of Form?" Myaskovsky: "Why form, when he already is a complete master of form? I'll take him immediately on the free composition course. What he has just played can be considered his test piece for sonata form." In Leningrad they would never have accepted the Trio as my sonata-form test piece. What stupid formalists.'

[2]

Although the Piano Trio was accepted as a sonata-form movement, it is highly deformational from the perspective of James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy's *Sonata Theory*[3]. The would-be recapitulation, for example, does not bring back the P-theme (i.e., primary theme) – an omission that contradicts one of the fundamental tenets of sonata form. In addition, Shostakovich's coda marking at the return of P, post-S (i.e., *after* the secondary theme), eschews discussion of a reversed recapitulation, since codas, by definition, are understood to lie "outside" of sonata space (i.e., they reside beyond recapitulatory boundaries).

Notwithstanding these formal oddities, both members of the Moscow Conservatory and Shostakovich himself understood the movement as a perfectly acceptable example of sonata form. This fact, combined with the composer's disdain for Leningrad's 'stupid formalists', suggests that Shostakovich regarded sonata form in general as a considerably flexible model rather than a rigid ordering of specific musical events. But what was the source of this flexibility? Why were such deviant forms, at least by today's standards, so unsurprising to the faculty members in Moscow and perhaps elsewhere? It is reasonable to suspect that the impetus behind this less restrained conception of form was the work of A.B. Marx, whose influence in the Russian conservatory system was far-reaching.

Yuriy Kholopov's article on form in Shostakovich's instrumental works testifies to the prevalence of Marxian (as opposed to Marxist) thought throughout Russia's conservatories[4]. Kholopov, a professor at the school during the second half of the twentieth century, notes that 'for a better understanding of the logic of Shostakovich's forms one must bear in mind that when he was being taught in Russia, it was the classical system of forms according to Adolph Bernhard Marx which was accepted[5].' According to Kholopov, however, Marx was but a starting point for the twentieth-century composer who 'turned towards the world of traditional forms. The point of this path was "to be old in a new way[6]."' But what did it mean to be old in a new way? And does the answer to this question explain the broad definition of sonata form that was accepted by Marxian disciples in Russia?



The answer to the first question lies not in Marx's technical treatment of sonata form, but rather in his philosophical musings on the art of composition. Despite the frequently cited diagram that shows Marx's derivation of musical forms as an increasingly long chain of distinct modules, his conception of form is much more fluid. At the heart of his theory lies the belief that composition, if it is to attain the status of art, requires the full engagement of "a person's *whole spiritual being*, rather than the merely isolated tendencies of one's spiritual activity (e.g., one's intellect or one's emotion)[7]." Likewise, the isolated components of a musical composition must fuse into an organic whole – a single idea – whose seamless coherence is the principal compositional aim.



This philosophical position brings two of Marx's central concepts to the fore: the Satz-Gang binary and the rest-motion-rest formula. Satz refers to a closed-ended, coherent musical utterance at any level of structure, and Gang refers to an open-ended, transition-like passage. These opposing phenomena give rise to a perpetual playing out of a rest–motion–rest cycle up to the level of an entire piece (i.e., exposition–development–recapitulation). In this way, the formal process is 'a kind of energy flow, subject to various checks and enlargements, until it is finally grounded at the end of a movement[8].'

In this light, it is erroneous to paint Marx as 'the fallen angel who first foisted upon us the whole idea of normative and schematic "textbook" forms'; to do so is to misunderstand the most basic tenets of his musical thought. In truth, the letters of the schematic are but an outline, subservient to the ebb and flow of a composition in which 'each part brings forth its own continuation[9]'. Musical content drives the form at every stage, and as Marx himself writes, 'even the soberly conceived intention to execute a piece of music in this or that form often ignites, in the process of working on it, a fire of inspiration within the composer's spirit, a fire that was not in fact present at the outset, or was only perceived subconsciously, glimmering under the ashes[10].' For Marx, the concept of sonata form can still be present at the foundation, even though the surface portrays a highly distorted version of it.

The opening movement of Shostakovich's Piano Sonata in B minor is viewed fruitfully in this regard and demonstrates how a more flexible notion of sonata form, in the spirit of Marx, demystifies some of Shostakovich's seemingly sonata-deformational choices. David Haas, in his analysis of the movement, does convincingly parse the work into a regular sonata form structure, but a second interpretation – one of a Marxian ilk – better highlights the ideals with which Shostakovich was familiar given his conservatory training[11]. First, let us turn briefly to Haas's reading of the work, a summary of which is given in Fig. 1[12].

Exposition			Development		Recapitulation		Coda	
P	TR	S	P/S complex	P	P/TR fusion	S	P/S complex (limited S)	P
1	17	55	97	140	168	188	228	259
b		Eb	e	Bb	b	Eb/b → Bb	b	b

Fig. 1 – Sonata Form Interpretation of Shostakovich's Piano Sonata in B minor, op. 61, i

The movement begins with a 17-measure primary theme (P) that cadences in the home key of B minor at m. 17 and leads to an extensive P-based transition (TR) of the dissolving restatement type, which exhibits a noticeable energy gain[13]. This passage gives way to a secondary theme (S) in E-flat Lydian at m. 55. The presence of a medial caesura (MC) is debatable, since no clear textural break precedes the onset of S[14]. To further complicate matters, the lack of an HC or dominant arrival to end TR casts doubt on any interpretation that finds caesura fill before the downbeat of m. 55. That said, it would be misguided to interpret the exposition as continuous given the general lack of traditional cadences in Shostakovich's music[15]. Kholopov offers some insight into the matter:

'Unlike the youthful sonata writing of the Viennese classics, which had a rich enough fund of dialectic contrasts of functional tonality, the modern composer feels the lack of harmonic fuel for the engines of such large-scale forms. In this situation a great help is the coupling-up of powerful means of emotional pressure offered by contrasts of tempo, texture and dynamics.[16]'





In this respect, the S-theme is delineated clearly: it is marked by a change in dynamics, tempo, time signature, and texture, and its character and melodic materials are palpably different than those of the transition.

A similar situation arises at the onset of the development section in m. 97, where both the lack of essential expositional closure (EEC) in the exposition and the seamless way in which the music melds into the development blur the formal boundaries[17]. One must rely on the following features to identify the beginning of the development: a return to the P-theme, a change in texture and gesture, and a diminuendo to pianissimo. The development begins with P-material in E minor and eventually gives way to S-material that brings the section to B-flat major. A variant of the P-theme then sounds in B-flat before the recapitulation is reached at m. 168. The rest of the movement, according to a sonata-form reading, proceeds as follows: P/TR fusion (mm. 168–187), S (188–228), Coda (228–284).

Haas justifies his reading of mm. 228–284 by invoking the classical procedure of modelling codas after development sections, and he cites the opening movement of Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata as a likely model for Shostakovich's formal choices. As Haas writes, 'Shostakovich's coda, no less than Beethoven's...parallels the course of his development [section].[18]' A sleight of hand in Haas's argument becomes clear, however, upon close inspection. Beethoven's coda is indeed modelled after the development section, but it is in no way parallel to it: following a statement of P-material that is very similar to that in the development, Beethoven changes course and writes a highly varied version of S that leads to new material. Conversely, Shostakovich's so-called coda is a near *reproduction* of the development space. But by framing Shostakovich's work in terms of Beethoven's ('no less than'), rather than the other way around, Haas is able to avoid this crucial observation.

Perhaps paradoxically, the concept of rotation developed in *Sonata Theory* facilitates an analysis that fully acknowledges the homologous nature of Shostakovich's development and coda (see Fig. 2)[19]. Let us first consider the exposition and development as a single rotation that comprises five distinct modules, where the latter two modules comprise the development section: P, TR, S, P/S complex, P (in B-flat), labelled 1–5. From this perspective, the recapitulation and coda act as a second pass through the five-module referential layout with slight, but significant, alterations. To fully understand the value of such an approach, we must return to the Marxian concept that content determines form. More specifically, we must identify the agent that transforms an apparent sonata form into a bi-rotational binary structure through the process of composition (i.e., the merger of spirit and music). What is the element that 'glimmers beneath the ashes', as it were? A return to the P-theme provides the answer.

First Rotation					Second Rotation				
1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
P	TR	S	P/S complex	P	P/TR	fusion	S	P/S complex (limited S)	P
1	17	55	97	140	168		188	228	259
b		Eb	e	Bb	b		Eb/b → Bb	b	b

Fig. 2 – Bi-rotational Analysis of Shostakovich's Piano Sonata in B minor, op. 61, i

In the very first measure of the *Allegretto*, a surface-level iteration of B-flat infects the B-minor P-theme (see Ex. 1 over-leaf). Note how Shostakovich draws attention visually to the B/B-flat feud, as it were, in the score: the descending arpeggio – B-flat–F–D–B-natural – from mm. 1–4 is written out specifically for the left hand. This detail becomes more prominent in the left-hand melody at mm. 7–8 and continues forth into the transition, where B-natural and B-flat are juxtaposed in consecutive soundings of the main theme's basic idea (mm. 47–49). One might argue that this B-flat is in some way responsible for the S-theme's unusual key of E-flat, but either way, a bi-rotational reading brings forth a parallelism that emphasises the problematic B-flat, thus acknowledging it as a driving force behind the form.



The image shows the first eight measures of the 'Allegretto' movement from Shostakovich's Piano Sonata in B minor, op. 61. The music is written for piano in 3/4 time. The right hand plays a melodic line with a 'p legato' dynamic, while the left hand provides a bass line. The tempo is marked 'Allegretto' and the style is 'semplice'. The score is divided into measures 1 through 8, with measure numbers 5, 7, and 8 explicitly labeled.

Ex. 1 – Shostakovich, Piano Sonata in B minor, op. 61, *Allegretto*, mm. 1–8

A comparison of the parallel sections yields a convincing narrative for the form, one that highlights important key relationships and seeks to purge the intrusive flats. The return of modules 1 and 2 (mm. 168–87) brings about P–TR fusion – a common enough procedure in classical recapitulations – that acts to diminish the prominence of B-flat. This sets the stage for the anticipated resolution of the E-flat S-theme to B minor. Rather than submitting to the reigning tonic, however, module 3's return showcases a battle between E-flat and B minor through the harmonic language of bitonality: the right hand sings away in E-flat while the left hand sounds P in B minor (m. 188ff). In the end, neither of these keys wins out, and instead B-flat Lydian emerges victoriously at m. 218. With B-flat still on the run, so to speak, it is left to modules 4 and 5 to reign in the infectious key/note and quash it once and for all. Module 4 begins promisingly in B minor, and by omitting most of S from the P/S complex, avoids the flattening scourge of the troubled subordinate theme. After resisting modulation flat-wards, the passage leads to the return of module 5 at m. 259 in the home key of B minor – a resolution of the module's B-flat tonality in the first rotation and a final sense of rest for the movement as a whole.

The principle of rotation, when combined with Marx's philosophical musings on composition, challenges the traditional sonata-form reading of the *Allegretto* from Shostakovich's Piano Sonata in B minor, op. 61. Rather than reducing the work to a ternary structure with an appended coda, this fresh perspective brings forth a broader organisational principle that divides the work into two parallel parts. Not only does this viewpoint force us to confront the germinal B-flat as an engine of the form itself, but it also opens the door to a much larger area of inquiry: How does a composer's historical awareness of theoretical trends influence his or her work? Given Shostakovich's training in the theories of A.B. Marx, it is well worth asking whether those forms that *we* consider to be unusual were so in the mind of the composer himself. In the case of sonata form, at least, there is strong evidence to suggest that passages deemed unorthodox by the measure of modern theory formed part of the normative fabric of Shostakovich's compositional practice. For him, the umbrella of sonata form extended its reach far beyond the boundaries tolerated by the theories of today.

## Endnotes

[1] Marx's influence on Russian musical thought is apparent in Yuriy Kholopov, 'Form in Shostakovich's Instrumental Works', in David Fanning (ed.), *Shostakovich Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[2] Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 43. It should be noted here that Steinberg, Shostakovich's mentor in Leningrad, did approve of the piece. *Ibid.*, 37.

[3] James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[4] Kholopov was an influential Russian musicologist who taught at the Moscow Conservatory. His analysis of Shostakovich's musical forms according to the theories of A.B. Marx is indicative of Marx's influence on Russian musical thought throughout the twentieth century.

[5] Kholopov, 67.





[6] Ibid., 58.

[7] Adolph Bernhard Marx, 'The Old School of Music in Conflict with our Times: Selected Excerpts', in Scott Burnham (ed.), *Musical Form in the Age of Beethoven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 29.

[8] Ibid., 10.

[9] Scott Burnham, 'Form', in Thomas Christensen (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 888.

[10] Marx, 28.

[11] David Haas, 'Shostakovich's Second Piano Sonata: A Composition Recital in Three Styles', in Pauline Fairclough and David (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shostakovich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 100–06.

[12] Given that this article analyses the opening movement of op. 61 in its entirety, I have decided to include just one musical example, which illustrates the musical event from which the crux of my analysis draws: the juxtaposition of B and Bb in the *Allegretto's* main theme. The formal schematics provided in Figures 1 and 2 are sufficient to grasp the essence of my argument. Those who wish to delve deeper into the issue, however, are encouraged to follow along with a full score of the first movement in hand.

[13] A P-based transition of the dissolving restatement type has two principal features: 1) it is based on primary theme material 2) it sounds at first like a restatement of the main theme, but is understood retrospectively to constitute the beginning of the transition section.

[14] A medial caesura is the textural break that typically precedes the onset of the secondary theme.

[15] An exposition that lacks a medial caesura is referred to as a "continuous exposition".

[16] Kholopov, 68.

[17] EEC refers to a perfect authentic cadence that satisfactorily closes an exposition.

[18] Haas, 105.

[19] The theory of rotation posits a referential model of ordered modules that a composer works through over and over again. As a composer cycles through material, he sometimes omits individual modules. The order of modules, however, never changes.

### About the author

Andrew Schartmann holds a BMus and MA in music theory from McGill University, where he also taught for several years. In 2011, he won the Schulich School of Music Teaching Award for his course on musical form in the music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. Most recently, his pedagogical interests have led him to explore the ways in which digital technology can improve the teaching of music. His companion site for the forthcoming textbook *Analyzing Classical Form* (Oxford University Press 2013) provides an innovative tool to enhance the learning experience.

Schartmann's most current project, *Playing Beethoven's 32 Piano Sonatas: A Work in Progress*, documents his thoughts (some analytical, some practical) on these seminal works. More on this and other projects can be found at [www.andrewschartmann.com](http://www.andrewschartmann.com).

Beginning in January 2013, Schartmann will be writing a special column for *Music & Vision* magazine. His writing, aimed at a wide-ranging audience, will bring to life some fascinating 'behind-the-scenes' details of selected passages of music – a theorist's view accessible to the general reader.

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