

The Formal Structure and Biographical Significance of Mozart's Sonata No. 8 K. 310 Movement I *Allegro Maestoso*

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The opening movement (Allegro Maestoso) of W. A. Mozart's Sonata no. 8 in A minor, K. 310, represents a departure from traditional sonata form which can be found in his previous seven sonatas. Sonata no. 8 is Mozart's first experiment in writing a large piano work in a minor key, and features a number of unique compositional devices that were uncommon to Mozart's style up to that point in his compositional career, such as, unrelenting pulsating rhythms, odd and asymmetrical melodic phrasing, as well as irregular and unclear cadences. Composed under traumatic circumstances, Sonata no. 8 was written in 1778 shortly after his mother passed away from an undiagnosed illness while accompanying her son on a tour through France. In reaction to this, Mozart's father, Leopold, blamed the young composer for his wife's death, which in turn strained the relationship between father and son. Although no clear reference is ever provided by the composer himself connecting the death of his mother to the conception of Sonata no. 8, when analyzed using the methods of sonata theory proposed by Hepokoski and Darcy, it is clear that Mozart intentionally deviates from traditional norms to display his feelings of emotional turmoil. The purpose of this research is to compare and contrast how Sonata no. 8 is different from Mozart's conventional approach to sonata writing as seen in his previous seven sonatas, and to draw a connection between the unique compositional devices used by the composer in correlation to major biographical events.

A unique monument in the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's career, Movement I *Allegro Maestoso* of Piano Sonata No. 8 K.310 represents a stylistic departure from the composer's traditional use of form as seen in his previous seven sonatas. Written under traumatic circumstances, Sonata No. 8 K.310 was composed directly after the unexpected passing of his mother, Anna Maria Mozart, in the summer of 1778, who was accompanying W.A. Mozart on a keyboard tour through France. For reasons unknown, the death of Anna Maria Mozart caused Wolfgang's father, Leopold Mozart, to blame young Wolfgang for her death. Emerging from this time of emotional instability came Mozart's Sonata no. 8 in A minor. In contrast to Mozart's previous seven sonatas, which are all written in major keys, Sonata no. 8 is Mozart's first experiment with writing in a minor key within sonata form, a device he only returned to once later in Sonata no. 14 in C minor. Sonata No.8 is unique in the fact that it features a strong emphasis on chromatic melodic embellishments, a relentless motion of pulsating rhythmic figures, irregular phrase structures, as well as unclear section beginnings and endings. I argue that the the biographical events which overwhelmed Mozart in the summer of 1778 may be the cause for this stylistic departure from the composer traditional tendencies, and therefore an analysis of Mozart's Sonata no. 8 and its unique aspects is incomplete unless the biographical events which influenced the conception of the composition are taken into account.

As stated, Sonata no. 8 is Mozart's first experiment in writing a sonata in a minor key. Besides experimenting with a new mode, Mozart also experiments with the melodic phrasing and tonality within the first movement. The movement begins with a chromatic grace note (D sharp, marked in red in the diagram below) which leads to the fifth scale degree (E), a concept which had

previously been unexplored in his seven earlier sonatas (Figure 1, Figure 2 for comparison to Mozart's previous sonatas). Because Mozart begins on a chromatic pitch, a feeling of disorientation and unsettledness is placed in the ears of listeners. Due to the fact all of Mozart's previous sonatas begin on either an arpeggiation or complete statements of the original tonic chord, the fact that Sonata no. 8 begins on a chromatic tone is of great relevance when speaking of how Mozart may have translated his feelings of confusion and anger into the music. In addition to the chromatic grace note, the use of consistent rhythmic motion is an essential element of what makes this sonata unique. As you can see from the opening measure marked in green in the diagram below (Figure 1), the piece features an obsessive pulsating left hand which resonates throughout the piece. Providing no significant resting point throughout the primary theme, this relentless eighth note pattern in combination with consistent rhythmic motion, adds to the feeling of emotional instability which pervades the piece.

Figure 1-Opening of Sonata No. 8



Figure 2-Openings of Mozart Piano Sonatas 1-7

Sonata no. 1



Sonata no. 2



Sonata no. 3



Sonata no. 4



Figure 2-Openings of Mozart Piano Sonatas 1-7 (continued)

Sonata no. 5



Sonata no. 6



Sonata no. 7



Mozart also uses unusual phrase structure during the primary theme area. By structure, I am referring to the period (consequent and antecedent) phrase structure which is commonly used in the primary theme of sonata form. Mozart provides a clear cut antecedent phrase in A minor in the first 8 measure of the primary theme, but the consequent phrase does not end on an authentic cadence. Instead, it progresses directly into the transition section before the secondary theme, a compositional technique previously unseen in Mozart's earlier sonatas. Mozart deceives the listeners expectations of concluding with an authentic cadence, and instead moves to a G major chord in order to modulate to the key of C minor where he remains for the transition. The use of a chromatic grace note, combined with unusual phrase lengths and unclear section endings and beginnings, strengthens the impression that Mozart may have been channeling his feelings of confusion and anger by deviating from the traditional practices of sonata form writing to which he had conformed in his previous seven sonatas.

Following the primary theme, the secondary theme is in the key of C major, and features an unrelenting pulse of sixteenth notes, marked in green in the diagram below (Figure 3). Aside from being a keyboard virtuoso, Mozart was known for his ability to create memorable themes within his sonatas. In Sonata No. 8, however, Mozart diverted away from his usual tendencies of creating memorable and singable thematic material, and instead has a melody consisting entirely of sixteenth notes accompanied by eighth note chords in the left hand.

Figure 3-Secondary Theme



In comparison to the second theme area of Mozart's previous seven sonatas which predominantly feature melodies just as memorable and distinct as the primary theme areas, this is an unusual compositional technique used by the composer. Because Mozart had such a reputation for writing memorable melodic content, I argue that Mozart's obsessive use of sixteenth notes with few cadential breaks express the feeling of unresolved tension the composer felt after the death of his mother. In the secondary theme Mozart again uses unusual phrase lengths, further defying listeners' expectations in order to express his emotional turmoil. Due to the fact that Mozart consistently uses sixteenth notes as his melodic figure, only four significant cadential breakpoints are provided within the secondary theme, and these occur in measures 35, 40, 45, and 49. Therefore, the phrases used in the secondary theme area comprise primarily five-measure phrases, a highly unusual trait in traditional sonata form.

Another unusual trait that Mozart introduces to the secondary theme area involves cadential register. The first cadence in measure 35 is an imperfect authentic cadence which occurs in the C4 register (Figure 4). This is unexpected because the trill in the measure before leads the listener to believe that the cadence will occur in the range of C5. The other two cadences have fleeting resolutions because the unrelenting stream of sixteenth notes continues to drive the harmony to new places. We can almost call them "drive by cadences," which are cadences that are so brief that the listener is not provided with a break from the relentless rhythmic momentum of the piece (Figure 4). Because his cadences are brief and fleeting and do not typically occur in the expected register, the listener is not provided with a break until the end of the exposition in measure 49, by which time we have modulated back to the original key of A minor.

Figure 4-"Drive by Cadence" found in measure 35



Mozart's obsessive use of sixteenth notes in combination with unusual five measure phrase lengths, and brief cadences, defies what the listener would expect to hear from a typical Mozart sonata. Instead of providing the listener with clear cut themes and obvious cadence points, I believe Mozart is conveying his feelings of unsettledness from the unexpected death of his mother and unresolved tension with his father in the exposition through his use of odd phrase lengths, which transition directly into different sections without a clear stopping point, chromatic grace notes, and continuous sixteenth notes. As the conclusion of the exposition is reached, it is clear that Mozart follows the general guidelines of sonata form, but intentionally defies the rules and general practices, possibly to give vent to certain emotions.

In the development, Mozart continues to use the sixteenth-note patterns seen in the secondary theme area, and the rhythmic and melodic motives seen in the primary theme area. Mirroring the technique used during the primary theme, measure 50, which marks the start of the development section, also starts on a chromatic grace note (Figure 5). In the recapitulation, Mozart chooses

not to normalize the odd phrase lengths previously used in the primary theme, and also chooses not to add a cadence at the end of the consequent phrase in measures 88-97. Once again as in the exposition, the primary theme progresses directly into the transition in measures 97-103. Following traditional sonata form practice, Mozart restates the sixteenth-note theme seen in the secondary theme area, but this time in the home key of A minor. Exactly like the exposition and development, Mozart does not provide cadential relief or a break from the relentless sixteenth notes until the end of the first movement after a short codetta in measure 133, further heightening the emotional turmoil of the movement .

Figure 5-Chromatic grace note found in measure 50



Under close examination, I argue that although Mozart writes within a typical sonata form structure, the composer bends the rules to fit the emotions in which he is trying to express through his music. Mozart's unrelenting sixteenth-note pulse which pervades the piece in combination with unusual phrase structure, lack of clear cadences, and starting on a chromatic grace note, lead me to believe that Mozart's feelings of confusion towards the death of his mother and frustration caused from unresolved father issues are expressed through these unique aspects within the first movement of Sonata no. 8.