

From Masterpieces—The Development of the Sonata as a Genre

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Abstract: *This study examines the development of the sonata as a genre in the nineteenth century through two contrasting yet complementary works: Franz Liszt's Sonata in B minor, S.178, and Johannes Brahms's Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5. Against the historical background of the Classical multi-movement sonata tradition established by Haydn and Beethoven, these compositions represent two divergent Romantic responses to formal innovation and continuity. Liszt's groundbreaking single-movement sonata expands the boundaries of the genre through cyclical integration, thematic transformation, and an uninterrupted developmental process, reflecting the aesthetic ideals of poetic unity and formal freedom. Brahms, by contrast, engages intensively with Classical models while enriching the traditional multi-movement structure through motivic coherence and structural complexity. By comparing these works, the study highlights how Romantic composers reinterpreted inherited forms in distinct ways: Liszt through radical condensation and formal fusion, Brahms through historical dialogue and motivic craftsmanship. Ultimately, the sonata emerges not as a fixed scheme but as an evolving concept shaped by stylistic, intellectual, and artistic challenges of the nineteenth century.*

Keywords: Sonata genre development; Romantic sonata aesthetics; Franz Liszt — Sonata in B minor, S.178; Johannes Brahms — Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5; Single-movement sonata and cyclic form; Multi-movement structure and motivic integration; Formal innovation in nineteenth-century piano music; Tradition and transformation in musical form.

1. Introduction

The term sonata originally did not denote the clearly defined genre of the classical sonata in its later sense, but rather referred in general to an instrumental musical work. During the Baroque period—such as in the works of Domenico Scarlatti or Jean-Philippe Rameau—the term was used with considerable flexibility. It was only in the course of the Viennese Classical period, particularly through the work of Joseph Haydn, that the sonata acquired its canonical form: a multi-movement structure typically consisting of a first movement in sonata-allegro form, a slow lyrical movement, and a virtuosic finale, often in rondo form.

With Ludwig van Beethoven, this structure was further developed through the insertion of an additional movement—either a minuet or a scherzo—between the slow movement and the finale. In the nineteenth century, the sonata underwent not only formal expansion but also aesthetic reinterpretation; within the Romantic period, Johannes Brahms even composed sonatas in five movements.

Against this historical backdrop, Franz Liszt's Sonata in B minor (1849–1853) represents a radical turning point in the history of the genre. In contrast to the traditional multi-movement sonata, Liszt conceived a large-scale single-movement work that nonetheless retains internal formal references to the classical sonata structure. With this composition, the concept of the sonata was extended to its very limits. The single-movement sonata exerted a lasting influence on subsequent generations and was taken up by composers such as Alexander Scriabin and Sergei Prokofiev. Although precursors of cyclic integration within a single movement can already be found in Beethoven and Schubert, it was Liszt who brought this development to a consistent conclusion.

The period during which the B minor Sonata was composed coincides with a particularly formative phase in Liszt's

biography, both artistically and intellectually. Having already passed the peak of his career as an internationally celebrated virtuoso, Liszt increasingly turned toward religious and literary interests. Goethe's Faust played a central role during this time and became closely associated in Liszt's thinking with religious ideas of the inner struggle of modern humanity. This intellectual constellation is reflected—explicitly or implicitly—in many works from these years, such as the Fantasia quasi Sonata after Dante and the Harmonies poétiques et religieuses. The B minor Sonata has likewise been interpreted by numerous performers and music theorists, including Alfred Brendel, Claudio Arrau, and Jorge Bolet, in connection with a so-called “Faust trilogy” in Liszt's oeuvre.

In deliberate contrast to Liszt's radical redefinition of the sonata genre stands Johannes Brahms's Sonata in F minor. Brahms's engagement with the sonata is characterized by an intensive dialogue with tradition, particularly with Beethoven's formal models. His F minor Sonata outwardly adheres to the multi-movement structure and operates within a clearly articulated formal framework. This attachment to tradition, however, should by no means be understood as mere conservatism. Rather, Brahms's sonata writing reveals a highly reflective historical consciousness in which traditional forms serve as vehicles for concentrated motivic work, structural complexity, and inner drama.

Especially in comparison with Liszt's single-movement B minor Sonata, it becomes evident that Brahms articulates a different yet equally consistent response to the question of the sonata in the nineteenth century. While Liszt achieves formal unity through cyclical integration within a single movement, Brahms creates cohesion primarily through motivic interconnection and thematic transformation across multiple movements. The F minor Sonata thus appears not as a regression to the past, but as an independent and equally valid further development of the genre under altered aesthetic conditions.

The aim of this study is to reconsider the sonata as a genre in the nineteenth century, taking Liszt's B minor Sonata and Brahms's F minor Sonata as points of departure. In doing so, both the structural and aesthetic similarities and differences between the single-movement and multi-movement sonata will be examined, along with their implications for formal thinking, stylistic development, and pianistic realization.

2. Etymology and Early Development of the Sonata

The word sonata derives from the Latin verb *sonare*, which literally means "to sound" or "to produce a tone." In its original meaning, the term thus merely refers to the sounding of music and initially stands in a purely functional contrast to the cantata, which is sung. Remarkably, the traditional Chinese rendering of the term conveys this etymological content with particular clarity, as it explicitly emphasizes the act of instrumental performance and the production of sound as the defining elements of the genre. Compared to this unusually concrete semantic framing, the term sonata itself appears surprisingly abstract and unspecific, considering the complex and extensive genre that developed from it over the course of music history.

This conceptual openness demonstrates that the sonata was never a clearly defined form from the outset, but rather a historically evolving concept. Like all art forms, music is subject to continuous change shaped by aesthetic, technical, and social developments. For the performer, it is therefore essential to understand the historical development of the sonata not as a rigid set of rules, but as a dynamic process in which form, style, and musical thinking mutually influence one another.

This openness was particularly evident during the Baroque period. The sonata existed in a wide variety of manifestations and was not yet bound to a fixed formal scheme. Among the most important types were the solo sonata and the trio sonata, first systematically described in 1610 by Giovanni Paolo Cima. Both forms were based on the combination of one or more melodic instruments with basso continuo. The specific instrumentation could vary greatly, such that neither the number of performers nor their roles were clearly defined. The term trio sonata thus referred less to the number of performers than to the three-part texture.

In addition to these basic forms, other types such as the sonata da chiesa and the sonata da camera developed. The sonata da chiesa, usually consisting of three or four movements, was often contrapuntally conceived and primarily intended for ecclesiastical contexts. The sonata da camera, by contrast, was more closely related to the dance suite and consisted of several movements—often five or more—of differing character. Both types illustrate that questions concerning the number and sequence of movements were open issues from the very beginning of the sonata's history.

It is precisely this openness that is central to understanding the later development of the genre. Baroque sonatas could be single-movement or multi-movement works without presupposing a fixed order or hierarchy of movements. This structural freedom endowed the genre with an individual and

experimental character that was only gradually standardized during the Classical period. The later fixation of the sonata as a multi-movement large-scale form should therefore be understood not as an original characteristic, but as the result of a long process of historical consolidation.

3. The Definition of the Classical Sonata and Innovations in the Nineteenth Century

Following the Baroque period, the arts increasingly turned away from opulent, ornamentally saturated modes of expression in the spirit of the Enlightenment, seeking clarity, balance, and structural intelligibility. In this phase of aesthetic transformation, numerous rules and conceptual definitions for musical forms and genres emerged—including those of the so-called classical sonata.

In general music-historical understanding, the classical sonata is most closely associated with the name of Joseph Haydn. This definition, however, should not be understood as a sudden invention, but rather as the result of a prolonged developmental process. Domenico Scarlatti had already taken decisive steps toward thematic and motivic concentration in his single-movement keyboard sonatas, thereby laying essential foundations for the later sonata principle. Subsequently, composers such as Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Haydn contributed significantly to the gradual transformation of the sonata from an open musical form into a structurally well-organized genre.

A central feature of this development was the establishment of the tonal tension between tonic and dominant as the core formative principle. This made possible a new kind of dramaturgy within a single movement and formed the basis of what later became known as sonata-allegro form. Through the combined contributions of Muzio Clementi, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven, the multi-movement sonata with a sonata-form first movement eventually became the generally accepted model of the genre. This model subsequently served as the normative reference framework for later generations of composers.

4. Innovations in Romantic Sonata Development

Despite this standardization, the sonata always remained a means of musical expression for great composers rather than an end in itself. Even Haydn experimented with double thematic groups and formal "irregularities" that repeatedly called the seemingly fixed schema into question. Beethoven carried this development further and radicalized it: in addition to expanding the sonata to four movements, works such as the Sonata quasi fantasia Op. 27 No. 2 ("Moonlight Sonata") deliberately blurred the boundaries between sonata, fantasy, and other genres. This aesthetic openness had a lasting impact on later composers and can be clearly observed, for example, in Liszt's Fantasia quasi Sonata after Dante.

Franz Schubert occupies a key position in the transitional phase between Classicism and Romanticism. On the one hand, his large-scale four-movement sonatas continue Beethoven's legacy; on the other, works such as the Wanderer Fantasy

open new perspectives for the cyclic integration of multiple movements within a unified formal trajectory. Although this work is labeled a fantasy, its internal structure can clearly be analyzed as a four-movement sonata. Owing to the close thematic and formal interconnections among its movements, the Wanderer Fantasy may thus be regarded as an early precursor of the single-movement sonata.

5. Two Romantic Responses to the Question of the Genre

Following Schubert, around the middle of the nineteenth century two works emerged almost simultaneously that exemplify different yet equally valid further developments of the sonata genre: Johannes Brahms's Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5, and Franz Liszt's Sonata in B minor. In his Third Sonata, the young Brahms expanded the traditional four-movement structure into a monumental five-movement form by integrating an intermezzo into the formal context. This expansion testifies not only to compositional self-confidence, but also to a conscious historical dialogue with tradition.

Liszt's B minor Sonata, by contrast, represents the opposing model. As a mature late work, Liszt condensed the musical material with extraordinary consistency, eliminated many of the virtuoso-extravagant elements of his earlier compositions, and shaped the richly layered, poetically charged music into a single, formally unified movement. This radical condensation elevated the single-movement sonata into a symbolically charged expression of Romantic formal thinking and simultaneously marked a new pinnacle in the history of the genre.

6. The Single-Movement Sonata

The analysis of the single-movement sonata remains controversial in music-theoretical scholarship to this day. The core of this controversy lies primarily in the question of whether the term sonata is understood by the composer primarily as a formal structure or as a genre designation. In the case of Franz Liszt's B minor Sonata, this issue becomes particularly evident: while some scholars interpret the work as a sequence of multiple interwoven movements, others regard it as a large-scale, unified sonata-allegro form.

With regard to Liszt's B minor Sonata, an analysis within the framework of sonata-allegro form appears especially convincing. In contrast to many multi-movement sonatas, the work exhibits an exceptionally high degree of internal coherence. The motivic material is consistently developed, transformed, and interconnected from beginning to end, without clear formal caesuras typical of traditional movement sequences. It is precisely this continuous development and intensification of the musical material that lends the B minor Sonata a sense of unity and density, grounded less in contrasting movement characters than in ongoing motivic and thematic processes.

This approach to material corresponds particularly closely to the developmental principle of sonata-allegro form. Its specific strength lies in its ability to generate intense tonal and motivic tension while simultaneously offering the composer

extraordinary freedom for formal imagination. Exposition, development, and recapitulation are not to be understood as rigid sections, but rather as flexible functional zones that interpenetrate and reflect one another. In Liszt's B minor Sonata, this principle enables a continuous musical flow in which the energy of the work unfolds without interruption until the final cadence.

Regardless of the specific analytical classification, it can be stated that the single-movement sonata—through its simultaneous fusion of formal freedom and structural tension—was taken up by numerous significant composers, particularly those standing on the threshold of musical modernism. Works such as Sergei Prokofiev's Third Piano Sonata and Alexander Scriabin's Fifth Piano Sonata represent outstanding examples of this development and demonstrate that the single-movement sonata concept shaped by Liszt remained influential far beyond the Romantic period.

7. Conclusion

For the performer, knowledge of harmony, formal theory, stylistic conventions, and the historical and aesthetic context of a work constitutes an essential component of the learning and interpretative process. This knowledge, however, remains incomplete as long as it does not enter into a living dialogue with practical musical realization. Interpretation emerges only where theoretical understanding and sonic execution become inseparably intertwined.

The development of the sonata demonstrates in exemplary fashion that composers in different historical periods have held distinct conceptions of form and genre. What is decisive is less the adherence to normative models than the creative courage to question and extend existing boundaries. Both Liszt's single-movement B minor Sonata and Brahms's large-scale F minor Sonata attest that the sonata in the nineteenth century was not a static concept, but an open mode of thought that allowed for individual artistic responses.

For the performer, this implies that the score should not be regarded as a final, closed object, but rather as a condensed expression of compositional thinking. It captures only a portion of the musical intention and demands active engagement. Standing between the notated text and the sounding result, the musician serves as a mediating agent whose task is to perceive formal relationships, motivic processes, and stylistic tensions consciously and to shape them artistically.

Interpretation therefore requires both respect for the work and the willingness to explore the boundaries of musical expression within the framework of compositional intent. In this field of tension between tradition and individual responsibility lies the true artistic freedom of the performer. Curiosity and courage thus prove to be central prerequisites through which musical genres and forms have been continually renewed throughout history—and through which musicians today can once again infuse art with new life.

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