

Mozart's secular trinity

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Abstract

This article examines the second movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 2 in F, KV 280¹ and shows how the number 3 manifests itself on multiple levels in the movement, ranging from the most fundamental interval of harmonic progression to melodic motifs on the surface. The symbolic significance of the number 3 is considered in light of Mozart's religious upbringing.

Introduction

In this paper I examine the role of three-part structures in the second movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 2 in F, KV 280.² This movement is written in "sonata-exposition" form, which comprises three parts: Exposition, Development and Recapitulation. It is written in the key of F minor, which is the home or tonic key. The number 3 is significant as a musical concept in secular Western music owing to its symbolising the Holy Trinity.

Exposition (bars 1–24)

The Exposition opens with the first subject in the tonic. In terms of texture, the Exposition divides into three discrete parts. Part 1, comprising the first eight bars, emphasises two musical figures or motifs: the first, a dotted-quaver figure (bar 1, in the right hand); and the second, a figure consisting of regular quavers (bar 2, in the right hand). The progression of motifs from one bar to the next is elegant, evoking the grace and adroitness of a skilled dancer.

Part 2, bars 9 to 20, is distinguished by an "Alberti bass," which comprises continu-

ous semiquavers. This motif opens on A_b. This may suggest that A_b is to be the new tonic key, a logical modulation for a piece set in F minor, as it is the "relative major" key. However, it is only an anticipation of the later modulation at this point as the left hand outlines a triad, a chord of three notes comprising two intervals of a third, in the weak form of the second inversion of A_b (E_b, A_b, C).

Bar 14 announces a key stage of the harmonic journey in the movement by stating E_b, the dominant of A_b. While the E_b triad (E_b, G, B_b) has sounded more than once commencing in bar 9, in bar 14 it stands out for the right hand's outlining of its second and third notes in a higher register. The second subject, in the key of A_b, is reached in bar 17. While the Alberti bass continues, a new motif consisting of a pair of repeated quavers is heard in the right hand. Part 2 thus yields a three-part division: (i) bar 9; (ii) bar 14; (iii) bar 17.

In Part 3, bars 21 to 24, the harmonic progression from bar 21 (second chord) through to bar 22 (penultimate chord) is repeated at

1 See the Digital Mozart Edition, at <https://dme.mozarteum.at/en/> [Ed.]

2 The score is available online, https://dme.mozarteum.at/DME/nma/nmapub_srch.php?l=2. A video with score of the Sonata, with the second movement starting at 4:27, is available on YouTube, <https://youtu.be/vLRslNG6TPE>.

the lower octave, giving rise to a bipartite division.

Part 1 offers abundant examples of quaver figures outlining the interval of a third in the right hand. As an example, observe the second figure in bar 2. In bar 3, the second figure not only outlines the interval of a third but comprises vertical intervals of thirds. In Part 2, the interval of a third defines linear relations between longer notes in the right hand part. Bars 14 to 15 offer two examples.

Development (bars 25–36)

The Development contains a crystal-clear division into three parts. Part 1, bars 25 to 28, recalls the first subject from the Exposition in bar 1. The specific harmonic progression, however, is different. Part 1 of the Development opens on A \flat , the relative major key, and closes into B \flat , the subdominant of F minor. Part 2, bars 29 to 32, incorporates the most contrapuntal texture of the movement. It is based on a new motif first heard in the right hand part of bar 29. The right hand's repetition of this motif is juxtaposed with a transposition of the motif down an octave plus a third in the bass, yielding a succession of parallel intervals of tenths between the two hands. Parallel intervals of this nature continue through to bar 31. In bars 29 to 31 there is a contrapuntal texture within the right hand part: a sustained note in one voice is juxtaposed with the new motif in the other voice. The motif's stepwise descent in bar 31 leads to a minor-third chord (B \flat , D \flat) in the right hand on the first beat of the next bar. The final note in this bar, G, in the bass, confirms that the harmony is now anchored in G major, the dominant of the

dominant of the home key. Mozart is clearly setting his sights on returning to the tonic by announcing the start of Part 3.

Part 3, bars 33 to 36, opens with an exact transposition of the first subject from bar 1 by the interval of a fifth. What was previously heard in the tonic of F minor now sounds in the key of the dominant minor, C, confirming that Mozart is preparing a large-scale return to the tonic. In bar 36 the left hand gives the thematic motif starting on the note C, which is identical to the opening motif from the Exposition now sounding two octaves lower. This constitutes what is known as a "false reprise," a device that can be traced as far back as JS Bach.³

Recapitulation (bars 37–60)

Like many of Mozart's recapitulations, the Recapitulation of the second movement of KV 280 stands out no less for its contrast with than for its similarity to the Exposition.

Like the Exposition, the Recapitulation divides into three discrete parts. Part 1, bars 37 to 42, represents a compressed version of its homologue in the Exposition.

As was the case in the parallel section of the Exposition, Part 2 of the Recapitulation, bars 43 to 56, yields a three-part division as defined by key harmonic steps: (i) F minor (bar 43); (ii) C major (bar 48); (iii) F minor (bar 51).

Bar 51 announces the second subject transposed to the tonic. From bar 53, Mozart deviates from a precise transposition; bar 20 from the Exposition is then transformed and expanded into a three-bar group.

Part 3, bars 57 to 60, comprises a varied transposition of its homologue from the

³ A case in point is Bach's Sonata for Flute and Harpsichord in A Major, BWV 1032. The third movement is based on three-part binary form. The false reprise of the opening theme occurs towards the end of the middle section in bar 188. The real reprise, marking the start of the third section, occurs in bar 209.

Exposition, evoking yet again the grace and skill of a dancer's step.

Conclusions

In the second movement the number 3 manifests itself on multiple levels. Mozart's decision to cast the movement in sonata form results in a three-part division: Exposition, Development and Recapitulation. Moreover, the Exposition's most fundamental harmonic progression (F minor to A \flat) is defined by the interval of a third. In terms of texture, the Exposition itself divides into three discrete parts. The same applies to the Development and the Recapitulation. The middle part of the Exposition is itself susceptible to a tripartite division. The same applies to the parallel section of the Recapitulation. In the Development, the form is not only three-part but ternary, comprising three parts: Parts 1 and 3 are based on the same thematic material.

All three principal sections (Exposition, Development and Recapitulation) incorporate networks of motifs in which the interval of a third comprises an integral part.

At the smallest level, the number 3 prevails. The harmony is defined by the triad.

The meter is 6/8, comprising two groups of three notes or two triplets.

While it has become standard practice for analysts to consider individual movements of pieces from Mozart's era in isolation, the division of Mozart's Sonata KV 280 into three movements cannot pass unnoticed.

Given Mozart's strict Catholic upbringing, he was imbued with the symbolic importance of the Holy Trinity from a young age. In light of this background, it is conceivable that Mozart, in suffusing the second movement of his Sonata KV 280 with the number 3 at multiple levels, was influenced — consciously or subliminally — by the symbolism of the Holy Trinity.

References

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