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Peut-être que la sonate veut un conte de fées?

The article discusses the similarity between textbook sonata form and the structure of the fairy tale as revealed and formulated by Vladimir Propp in his classic study *Morphology of the Folktale*. The general parallels between the two are characters and functions. While in fairy tales, the characters are dramatic personae, and the functions are their actions and situations, in a sonata, the characters and functions are analogous, respectively, to the musical themes and the tonal development (whether motivic or otherwise). The article also argues that the formation of the classical sonata form in the mid-eighteenth century was prepared by a decades-long flourishing of the fairy tale as a genre of Parisian salon literature. Beginning with Charles Perrault in the 1690s, who wrote or arranged folk tales as part of his polemics with the Ancients (led by Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux) and the Moderns (represented by Perrault), the genre underwent a massive development far into the first half of the eighteenth century. Its popularity greatly impacted public consciousness. Considering that both fairy tales and sonatas existed at the same salons with the very same audience, the perception of the sonata form as a playing out of familiar conflicts in musical works could be fully prepared.

Keywords: sonata form, fairy-tale structure, eighteenth-century Parisian salons, Vladimir Propp, Peter Gilet, musical theme as literary character, tonal modulations as functions.

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Может быть, сонате хочется сказки?

В статье рассматривается сходство формы хрестоматийной сонаты со структурой волшебной сказки, выявленной и сформулированной Владимиром Проппом в его классическом исследовании «Морфология сказки». Общие параллели между ними – это образы и их функции. Если в сказках субъектами являются драматические персонажи, а функциями становятся их поступки и ситуации, то в сонате аналогом персонажей выступают музыкальные темы, а функций – тональное развитие (возможны мотивное и другие виды преобразований). В статье также утверждается, что формирование классицистской сонатной формы в середине XVIII века было подготовлено десятилетиями расцвета сказки как жанра парижской салонной литературы. Начиная с Шарля Перро в 1690-х годах, который сам писал или аранжировал народные сказки в рамках своей полемики между «древними» (во главе с Николя

Буало-Депрео) и «современными» (представленными Перро), жанр получил массовое развитие в первой половине XVIII века. Его популярность оказала глубокое влияние на общественное сознание. Учитывая, что и сказки, и сонаты существовали в одних салонах с одной и той же публикой, восприятие сонатной формы как обыгрывания знакомых коллизий в музыкальных произведениях могло быть вполне подготовленным.

Ключевые слова: сонатная форма, структура сказки, парижские салоны XVIII века, Владимир Пропп, Питер Жилет, музыкальная тема как литературный персонаж, тональные модуляции как функции.

The famous mysterious phrase by Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle "Sonate, que me veux-tu?" was quoted by Jean-Jacques Rousseau at the end of his article on the sonata for the French *Encyclopédie* [17, pp. 348-49] (1765) and reflected a certain bewilderment of contemporaneous musical thinkers.[1]

This article offers a new version of the author's hypothesis[2] that suggests a possible connection between the classical sonata form and the structure of fairy tales, as revealed and formulated by Vladimir Propp in his seminal study *Morphology of the Folktale*.[3] This connection occurred in the mid-eighteenth century when two seemingly independent cultural processes intersected – one musical, the other literary.

Two basic historical factors enabled musical form to transmit a literary narrative: *a theme,* as a musical personification of a character, and *tonal development*, according to the principles of functional harmony, which can represent changing situations and transformations of the theme. These factors are well-known, but in analytical discussions of the sonata form, one can observe certain preferences for either thematic or functional approach [6, p. 677] – to the detriment of both. According to my hypothesis, thematic and functional factors are inseparable, by analogy with Propp's structure of folktales, where dramatis personae and their functions (situations, actions, and transformations of the characters) are the same basic and indivisible factors. In fairy tales and sonatas alike, we thus have, as in grammar, *a subject and a predicate* that make a meaningful sentence.

The Sonata's Path to its Intersection with the Folktale

In mature classical forms, the opening themes represent a kind of *façade* to the composition and usually appear more than once. As soon as the listeners had learned to recognize a theme upon its return, composers saw an opportunity to associate it with a literary protagonist and structure their composition following an imagined sequence of events.

The earliest genre that presented a simple dance-song tune as a character (a single one) was Theme and Variations. Once stated, a theme returned many times in different guises, only to reinstate its original form at the end of the composition. In old variations, a theme never left its home key (except for the episodic use of a parallel key).

The Rondo form dramatically enlarged the cast. The subject, no longer the only character in the piece, became the protagonist, encountering other characters but upholding its status throughout the composition. The rondo also established an association between the main theme and the main key

by introducing contrasting keys and thematic materials in the episodes.

The Fugue made an even greater breakthrough toward the sonata form by allowing its subject to visit other keys, except for the initial and final statements. The subject thus went through the dynamics of tonal transformations (alongside many contrapuntal artifices) in its development. In this, the fugue foreshadowed one of the main features of the classical sonata.

As a universal form for conveying dramatic action in music, the sonata form was thus well-prepared.

How did fairy tales attain public cognizance by the mid-eighteenth century?

Although scholars sometimes associated Propp's theory with the classical sonata form, they viewed the connection through narratology, signification, and hermeneutics. [11, 15, 19] The history of fairy tales in early eighteenth-century Parisian life has typically escaped their notice, although, by that time, its impact on social consciousness was fundamental. [22]

The key figure was Charles Perrault (1628–1703), a chief representative of the Moderns in their academic polemics with the Ancients (led by Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux). Arguing that every era has its right to its mythology (contrary to Boileau, who bestowed this privilege only to Antiquity), Perrault took practical steps: in the 1690s, he produced his world-classic collection of fairy tales, familiar to every child in Western civilization. Partly original and partly arranged from the folk tradition, the work triggered the massive development of the salon literary genre far into the eighteenth century. It was widely read at salons from then onward.

Remarkably, although Charles Perrault is commonly remembered, he was only one of sixteen writers who were part of the first wave of fairy-tale writing. Two-thirds of them were written by ladies, including two major writers: the adventurous Baroness Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy (ca. 1650–1695) and Comtesse Loise d'Auneuil (? – ca. 1700). The popularity of their collections is illustrated by the fact that Mme d'Aulnoy's was reprinted ten times between 1708 and 1785 [1].*

Studies [18, 22] show that the fairy tale, as a primary secular source of spiritual wisdom, was to become a universal cultural entity shared by all social sectors, ages, genders, and European nations. Its moralizing role in constructing a utopian consciousness was invaluable. Lewis Seifert argues that "it is hardly an exaggeration to conclude that fairy tales, both in spite and because of their liminal status as literary works, present major cultural themes more succinctly and more accurately than many if not most other literary forms" [18, p. 2].

The Intersection

There is thus quite a firm ground to suggest that the generation of those who had invented and crystallized classical eighteenth-century sonata form in the 1750s had grown up in a reality in which the fairy tale was an indispensable element of their consciousness. Moreover, the period from 1730–1758 witnessed the second wave of fairy-tale publications. It is of little wonder that the mentally absorbed structure of the fairy tale could be reproduced in the structure of musical narration. Alan Dundas noted: "Culture patterns normally manifest themselves in a variety of cultural materials. Propp's analysis should be useful in analyzing the structure of literary forms (such as novels and plays), comic strips, motion-picture and television plots, and the like." And further: "How precisely is fairy-tale structure learned?

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* To be precise, in 1708, 1710, 1711, 1715, 1725, 1742, 1774, 1775, 1782, and 1785.

Does the child unconsciously extrapolate fairy-tale structure from hearing many individual fairy tales? Do children become familiar enough with the general nature of fairy-tale morphology to object to or question a deviation from it by a storyteller?" [12, pp. 14–15].

Two details in the classical sonata's early history situate it in the same social context as the fairy tale. The first is that in its early phase, the classical sonata functioned as a genre "personal and domestic, intended more for the individual player and a few listeners than for public ceremony or concert stage" [6, p. 677]. The second detail is that sonatas were composed mostly as instructive material [7, p. 679]. Instructive literature is normally written for beginners, and its thematic material typically does not stray far from the idiom of the popular song. One can see that the sonata's instructive purpose and social context coincided with those of the fairy tale.

Propp's formulation of fairy-tale structure and classical sonata form correspond with each other to a striking degree. Schematically, it can be formulated as follows:

1. The fairy tale's two basic constituents are dramatis personae and functions, while the sonata's two basic constituents are themes and tonalities. Since a theme can be compared to a protagonist, we associate literary characters and musical themes with *characters*. In the *wh*-questions analytical approach, they both answer the question "*who*".

Next, we connect the function in a fairy tale with the tonality in a musical composition in relation to the characters' *actions*. This association would answer some of the other *wh* questions: *when*, *where*, *what*, *why*, and *how*.[4]

2. Fairy tales may feature more than one dramatis personae (up to seven), while Sonatas may feature more than one theme (up to five).

3. The functions (situations, actions, interactions, transfers, motivations, etc.) of

fairy tales appear in an invariable sequence regardless of their number in a tale. Comparably, the principal sequence of keys in sonatas is subjected to the principal order of the functional harmonic system.

Propp identified thirty-one functions in fairy tales. In chapter III of his *Morphology of the Folktale* "The Functions of Dramatis Personae", Propp enumerates the functions of the dramatis personae in the order dictated by the tale itself. For each function, he gives (1) a brief summary of its essence, (2) an abbreviated definition in one word, and (3) its conventional sign. Each function is provided by examples from fairy tales. [12, pp. 25–65]

One could correspond some of the functions or their groups to particular sections in the sonata form, first of all to the protagonist's territorial location, which would relate to the sonata's tonal dramaturgy: Home, exit, the way to the Other World, events in the Other World, return Home.

Since the publication of Propp's book in English in 1958, scholars have applied his analytical method to different literary genres. Peter Gilet extrapolated Propp's method to non-Russian fairy tales of peoples who had no early cultural contact with Europe, such as North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, China, and the Americas [5]. Like some other scholars, Gilet also found that Propp's 31 functions could be "liberalized" (as Will Wright noted in his structural study of the Western, *Six Guns and Society*) [20, p. 25]. Gilet simplified and transformed Propp's 31 functions into five key functions, which summarize and organize any fairy-tale discourse:

1. The initial situation (the lack of something in the Hero's life; Propp's functions I–XI).

2. Interaction with the Helper (functions XII–XIV).

3. Interaction with the Prince/ss (function XV).

4. Interaction with the Adversary (the Mistress or Master of the Other World; functions XVI–XIX).

5. The return of the Hero (with the Prince/ss; functions XX–XXXI).

This five-function framework bears an obvious structural relation to the classical sonata form:

A fairy tale begins and ends at the protagonist's home, while the sonata form begins and ends in the home key.

A fairy tale begins by presenting a protagonist at his/her home, while the sonata form begins with an exposition of the main theme in the home key.

In the fairy tale, the protagonist leaves home and goes to the Other World, while in the sonata, there are tonal transitions away from the home key.

In the fairy tale, the interaction with the Princess takes place in her domain, the Other World, while in major-mode sonatas, the second theme appears in another key, the dominant. This was the rule even in early monothematic sonatas. Unlike the move to the Dominant in major-mode compositions, the tonality in minor-mode sonatas gravitates to its relative, contrasting mode. It thus refers to the Other World even more spectacularly than the Dominant in major-mode sonatas.

In the fairy tale the interaction happens with the Antagonist: the Master or Mistress of the Other world, while in the sonata form this is the sphere of the development section. The first theme (the protagonist) undergoes motivic and textural transformations and tonal modulations to remote keys. The tonal sphere of the development is generally characterized by the absence of the Tonic and by going through the keys of Subdominant functions. The Subdominant function represents a powerful threat to the Tonic, because it turns the Tonic into its own Dominant, forcing it to surrender to the new power. That is why the end of the Development is the most dramatic and climactic moment in sonata dramaturgy. It is at this very phase that the tension accumulates: the Subdominant sphere is replaced by a prolonged Dominant harmony in a strong anticipation of the Tonic.

In the fairy tale the Hero returns with the Princess, bringing her from the Other World to his own original home, while in the sonata the main theme arrives triumphantly on the Tonic key, the recapitulation symbolizing the Protagonist's return home. Further, the second theme appears in the recapitulation in the Tonic. Like the Princess, it changes its identity from Dominant to Tonic, representing her new function, home, and identity. *This is the only and crucially important condition that distinguishes sonata from all other forms.*

More specific similarities

While the above concept may seem too general to be convincing, there are more interesting even precise parallels between the fairy tale structure and the sonata form. For example, there is a discernible similarity between the sonata's false recapitulation and Propp's functions XXIII–XXVIII [12, p. 60–63]. False recapitulations seem to be a main point of contention between two approaches to the sonata form: thematic and tonal. A recapitulation is considered false if the main theme returns after a properly fostered anticipation but not in the home key. Something is thus perceived as wrong with the Hero's return: either he is not the Hero, or this is not his home. In the sonata's terms, it is neither a part of the development, nor a true recapitulation.[5]

A comparison with the above Propp's functions would present the variety of possible dramatic situations:

Function XXIII: "The Hero, unrecognized, arrives home or in another country" [12, p. 60].

Function XXIV: "A false hero presents unfounded claims" [Ibid].

The parallels with false recapitulation are that all three variants in these two functions prevent the hero from openly and lawfully return home. Hero and Home do not match, just as Theme and Tonality do not match. The Hero's true place is occupied by the False Hero, and the task of the true Hero to prove himself is still ahead.

Function XXV: "A difficult task is proposed to the Hero" [Ibid, p. 60–61].

Function XXVI: "The task is resolved" [Ibid, p. 62].

These two functions offer a parallel to the continuation of the development after the false recapitulation. They correspond to a short fragment of a Dominant preparation, presenting a mixture of such feelings as stress, uncertainty, and impatient anticipation of the denouement of drama.

Function XXVII: "the Hero is recognized" [Ibid].

Function XXVIII: "The False Hero or Villain is exposed" [Ibid].

The combination of these two functions provides the ground for a "true recapitulation."

The conclusion from the above could be that two factors – the fairy tale and functional harmony – met in the eighteenth-century sonata.

From Vladimir Propp's other book *Theory and History of Folklore* [13] we can learn why any scenario based on a fairy-tale scheme (including Hollywood films) never fails. The answer is that this scheme is a paradigm of initiation rites, which formed a deep matrix in human consciousness. The long eighteenth-century fairy-tale culture activated this matrix in an individual's mindset, tapping their secularized belief in reason, in the victory of good over evil, and in the individual as a self-becoming hero, a master of his own life achieving his own goals.

Not coincidently, functional harmony received its foundational conceptualization in the 1722 *Treatise on Harmony* by the Cartesian Jean-Philippe Rameau [14]. Based on mathematical laws on the one hand, and a mysterious connection to the human physiology of musical perception on the other, functional harmony inscribed both music and humankind into a universal order based on gravitation and stability. The sonata, inseparable from the foundations of functional harmony, could ideally retell immortal fairy-tale schemes through its musical medium.

Afterthoughts

While my argument was based on French fairy-tale culture of the long eighteenth century, it demands some modification. Indeed, if the immediate cultural sources for sonata form were in France, where the fairy tale blossomed, and where programmatic harpsichord pieces proliferated with the same speed, then why did the actual development of the sonata form mostly associated with the first Viennese school?

A more accurate approach, however, would point to Italy. The fairy tale, before being institutionalized in France, and the sonata form, before its standardization in Germany and Austria, were both rooted in Italy.[6] Therefore, Italian aristocratic culture must have been responsible for the initial formatting of the pattern connecting the fairy tale with musical narrative.

It could be an interesting combination of factors that made the Viennese school the champion of the late eighteenth-century mature sonata. Jack Zipes devoted a whole chapter in his book *Beauties, Beasts and Enchantment. Classic French Fairy Tales* to "The German obsession with fairy tales" and emphasized that "Germans have repeatedly used fairy tales to explain the world to themselves" [22, p. 75]. Their affinity with functional tonality enabled them

to manipulate with keys in the same way that storytellers operate with fairy-tale functions, and thus to build a protracted musical plot without escaping the orbit of the main key.

Heda Jason, who studied the folktales of many cultures using Propp's method, noted elsewhere that Propp perceived the fairy-tale genre as source "materials" on the one hand and a "law of composition" on the other.[7] Moreover, in both discussions – of the fairy tale and of the sonata – one might encounter one and the same expression: "filling in the form".

It is remarkable that Propp, whose origins as a Russified German might have been responsible for his breakthrough in the field of fairy tales, had a good musical education and was enthusiastic about domestic music-making. As Izaly Zemtsovsky, who happened to be Propp's adopted son, asserted, he loved German music, but only up to Schumann; Mozart was the god of his youth [21, p. 397]. Did his dealing with the sonata form unconsciously help him with his understanding of fairy tales, or maybe vice versa?

NOTES

[1] For a recent discussion of sonata perception in the mid-eighteenth-century, see [9].

[2] The author has developed this hypothesis over many years. An earlier version of this article was presented in 2001 at the conference of the International Semiotics Institute in Imatra and later published in abridged format [16].

[3] Propp wrote this book in 1928, basing his study on the collection of 106 Russian folktales published by the nineteenth-century Russian Slavist and ethnographer Alexander Afanas'ev. Propp's book was first translated into English in 1958, and despite its imperfect translation, received worldwide recognition. It was subsequently retranslated in 1968 [12].

[4] Tonality, of course, cannot be associated with all of these questions. Only one of them, where, really pertains, being possibly associated with a territory. For instance, the main theme in the home key indicates a protagonist being at home, and this theme in other keys can be interpreted as his being in the Other World. However, other circumstances like what, why, and how might be considered too.

[5] Ambivalence in the perception of sonata-form recapitulation has been substantially discussed by Mark Evan Bond [2].

[6] Citing two Italian writers, Giovanni Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile, who "set an example for what the French were accomplishing, Zipes notes: "The Italians did not "institutionalize" the genre because the literary culture in Italy was not prepared to introduce the tales as part of the civilizing process, nor were there groups of writers who made the fairy tale genre part of their discourse." [23, pp. 11, 163]. On forming the new sonata form in Sammartini's and D. Scarlatti's work see [3, 4, 10].

[7] See, for example, here [8].

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