

Criteria of “Success” and “Failure” in Mahler’s Sonata Recapitulations

Paper Proposal for the 32nd Annual Meeting of the Society for Music Theory
Montréal, Quebec, October 28—November 2, 2009)

PROVISIONAL ABSTRACT

One of the most powerful concepts in James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy’s *Sonata Theory* is the idea that the eighteenth-century sonata is structured around a set of generic musical *tasks* or *goals*—an image that refashions the genre as kind of a paradigmatic musical plot. This plot hinges on the attainment of two special perfect authentic cadences by the sonata’s secondary theme (S): the non-tonic moment of *essential expositional closure*; and the correlative tonic PAC, the moment of *essential structural closure*, which cinches the recapitulation. The authors’ action-oriented view of the genre entails a strong hermeneutic component, since when either load-bearing cadence is not attained, they propose that we hear this as a mode of processive “failure,” typically with ramifications on what follows.

This study shows that “recapitulatory failure,” as a formal/dramatic category, has tremendous purchase in the interpretation of Mahler’s symphonic sonata movements. I show that through the Sixth Symphony, Mahler links expression and formal process with striking regularity: all of his early- or middle-period sonata movements that end affirmatively, in a major key, feature properly functioning recapitulations—those that bring non-tonic expositional material into the tonic (or a “redemptive” coda that amends a failed recapitulation). By contrast, the sonatas that end tragically, in a minor key, show themselves incapable of such tonal resolution. Just as strikingly, the pattern changes in Mahler’s late maturity: I show that from the Seventh Symphony onward, Mahler seems less inclined to dramatize the tonic/non-tonic tensions basic to eighteenth-century sonata rhetoric.