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A genre in crisis?

The symphony and the 'canon'

The **symphony** is viewed traditionally as the most important genre in classical music. More than any other musical genre from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the symphony – an extensive work for large ensemble – embodies the abstract ideas of music for its own sake: seriousness, transcendence, unity, even universality. This is more than can be claimed for other public genres such as **opera** with its reliance on text, or the **concerto** which hinges on the virtuosity of the soloist. This book will approach the symphony, not via the linear narrative that we are familiar with, but from a number of different perspectives: analytical, historical, and critical.
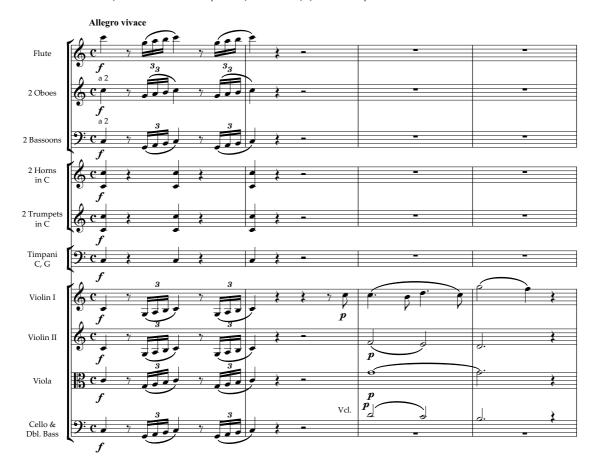
It is easy to construct a history of the symphony that only includes a handful of well-known composers, and it is even easier to write a history of the symphony that only includes male composers from the German-speaking area of Central and Northern Europe. Such histories were common during the twentieth century, and we therefore have a small group of big names that form a core repertoire (which we refer to as a **canon** of works). The vast majority of symphonies that were composed in the period 1750–1900 are invisible even to regular concert-goers, let alone the general public, and of the thousands of symphonies composed during this time, we regularly hear only a handful of them (for instance, many people have heard music by Mozart and Beethoven, but few have heard Wagenseil or Reicha). It is also important to acknowledge the extreme underrepresentation of women in the symphonic canon. This comes as a result of many complex social and economic factors. The access that most women had to a professional musical education was virtually non-existent outside the context of the opera house. Though many middle-class women received education as amateur musicians, a career as a symphonist would have been unthinkable in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even for Clara Schumann (1819–1896) and Fanny Hensel (1805–1847), two of the most successful female composers of the nineteenth century, the public genre of the symphony was out of reach.

Unlike the traditional view of the symphony as a fixed genre on a pedestal, in reality it has been constantly in flux since its development in the middle of the eighteenth century. It began as a hybrid of the Italian orchestral concerto and the opera overture, and this fusion of influences is expressed in the great diversity of works that were composed around 1750. As overtures became longer and more structurally complex, sometimes incorporating music at different contrasting tempi, there seemed to be as many different ways of writing symphonies as there were composers interested in writing them. Before conventions had been established, a definition of the symphony would have been virtually impossible.

Clear examples of the juxtaposition of topics abound in **Mozart's 'Jupiter' Symphony**, which stages a continued struggle between a normative symphonic style with its military associations signalled by prominent use of trumpets and timpani, and the somewhat more reflective 'singing style' and *stile antico* topics. Even within the first few bars of the symphony we can hear the opposition of the militaristic and heavily scored Mannheim hammer strokes alternating with the more lyrical *cantabile* figures in the violins.
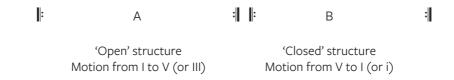
EX. 2.11 MOZART, SYMPHONY NO. 41 IN C, 'JUPITER', I, BARS 1–4

This juxtaposition is intensified in the finale, which begins quietly with the *stile antico* topic, summoning the idea of the ancient sacred style. Somewhat like a piece of plainchant, the melody is set in semibreves and is subject to devices such as imitation and especially imitative polyphony. This is set against a more raucous and rhythmically active symphonic texture, giving the impression of a struggle between the two styles. The movement's coda finally saturates the *stile antico* topic by setting the plainchant theme against four other themes from the movement *at the same time*, as a double fugue (see **EX. 2.11**). Eventually the military–symphonic texture engulfs the plainchant theme, winning out and ending the work in triumphal fashion.

first half. It therefore produces quite a concentrated focus on a single mood while generating contrast through its key structure. The convention is to repeat each of the two parts of the binary form, and so it is usually quite easy to identify by looking at the score or by listening to the repeat structure (**FIG. 5.1**).

FIG. 5.1 SCHEMATIC DIAGRAM OF BINARY FORM

‘Open’ structure
Motion from I to V (or III)

‘Closed’ structure
Motion from V to I (or i)

Ternary form is quite different from binary form because it is fundamentally a way of generating thematic and tonal contrast, rather than maintaining a single mood for the duration of the movement. Ternary form consists of an opening section – let's call it the ‘A’ section – which is closed in its key. This is followed by a contrasting ‘B’ section in a different key and with new thematic material. This B section is sometimes closed in its own key, but is frequently left open, ending on an imperfect cadence and preparing the return of the A section, which will usually have some significant variation on the second hearing. Ternary form is therefore understood as being in three sections – ABA – in which the middle B section contrasts with the surrounding A sections in terms of key, mode, theme, mood, and even tempo in some cases (**FIG. 5.2**).

FIG. 5.2 SCHEMATIC DIAGRAM OF TERNARY FORM

A	B	A
‘Closed’ structure beginning and ending in I	‘Open’ structure exploring contrasting keys ending on V as a chord	‘Closed’ structure beginning and ending in I

Rounded binary, and Minuet and Trio

Rounded binary form is one of the most important building blocks in eighteenth-century music. It is the basis of the most common forms found in the symphonic repertoire, which include the Minuet and Trio, variation form, and rondo form (but not sonata form, which will be covered in Chapter 6). Rounded binary contains a mixture of ideas drawn from binary form and ternary form. Like binary form, it is divided into two parts that are usually easily identified because they are separated by double bars with dots. The first part presents the main idea of the piece. Let's call this ‘a’.[1] After the double-bar a new idea is presented, which we'll call ‘b’. Before the end, however, ‘a’ returns, usually in a modified or shortened format – in **FIG. 5.3** this

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1   Upper-case letters are used for sections of a whole movement. Lower-case letters are used for the smaller building blocks of larger sections. The ternary form ABA would normally be a whole piece of music, whereas the rounded binary form aba’ is usually a building block of a larger form.