

Introduction

Formenlehre, Genre, and the Romantic Turn

“Musical *Formenlehre*,” Carl Dahlhaus once wrote, “is always also a theory of genre.”¹ That may seem self-evident. The musical forms that are the subject of *Formenlehre* are, in a general sense, genres: codifications of norms and conventions that guide the interpretation of individual pieces and facilitate the generation of analytical meaning. But such “formal genres,” as they may be called, are not what Dahlhaus had in mind with his comment, which appeared in a discussion of Adolf Bernhard Marx’s *Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition*. The *Formenlehre* in the third volume of that book, Dahlhaus pointed out, is a thinly veiled theory of form in piano music, even though it is presented as a comprehensive theory of form.² What Dahlhaus meant, therefore, was that Marx’s *Formenlehre* is limited in its applicability to a specific *musical* genre, and that the choice of genre conditions the theory: had Marx focused on another genre – had he written about symphonies or string quartets rather than about piano sonatas – his theory would have looked different. For Dahlhaus, an abstract theory of form that transcends the differences between musical genres was “a fiction.”³

It is instructive to confront Dahlhaus’s assessment of Marx’s *Formenlehre* with what is arguably one of the great success stories in the recent history of music theory, namely the “new *Formenlehre*” of William E. Caplin’s *Classical Form* and James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy’s *Elements of Sonata Theory*.⁴ The historical and geographical focus of

¹ Carl Dahlhaus, *Die Musiktheorie im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert. Zweiter Teil: Deutschland*, ed. Ruth E. Müller (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), 222. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

² Adolf Bernhard Marx, *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition, praktisch-theoretisch*, vol. III (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1845), 15–328.

³ Dahlhaus, *Die Musiktheorie*, 222.

⁴ William E. Caplin, *Classical Form: A Theory of Formal Functions for the Instrumental Music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). I borrow the convenient

both treatises is largely the same as Marx's: Viennese instrumental music from the high-classical era. And like Marx, both Caplin and Hepokoski and Darcy aspire to a comprehensive theory of classical form. What distinguishes the new *Formenlehre* from the old is that its claim to comprehensiveness, at least in terms of genre, is at first sight more convincing. Caplin's theory of formal functions and Hepokoski and Darcy's sonata theory are demonstrably based on a wide variety of instrumental genres. Dahlhaus's fiction, so it would seem, has become reality. Yet the price both theories have paid to achieve this comprehensiveness is considerable. Differences between musical genres – the ways in which, say, a sonata form in a string quartet differs from that in a symphony – are marginalized. Genre plays practically no role in Caplin's theory, and while both genre theory and formal genres are front and center in Hepokoski and Darcy's approach – sonata form for them is "a constellation of norms and traditions" – musical genres paradoxically form only a minimal part of that constellation.⁵

The question of musical genre poses itself with renewed urgency in view of the recent developments in the new *Formenlehre*. In the last five years, scholars have increasingly turned their attention away from the classical core repertoire of Caplin's and Hepokoski and Darcy's theories to the music of composers who came of age in the second, third, or fourth decades of the nineteenth century – composers such as Schubert, Chopin, Robert and Clara Schumann, and Mendelssohn, to name only the ones Janet Schmalfeldt discusses in her study of form in the early nineteenth century, *In the Process of Becoming*.⁶ This "romantic turn" in the new *Formenlehre* – "romantic," for the purposes of the present book, referring to music written between ca. 1815 and 1850 – at the same time constitutes a turn away from comprehensiveness. Schmalfeldt, for example, warns her readers that her book is "composer- and piece-specific rather than typological or taxonomic"; others, too, have focused on individual works, individual composers, or individual genres.⁷ No one to date has

term "new *Formenlehre*" from Matthew Riley, "Hermeneutics and the New *Formenlehre*: An Interpretation of Haydn's 'Oxford' Symphony, First Movement," *Eighteenth-Century Music* 7 (2010): 199. What makes it especially attractive is its resonance with the roughly contemporaneous rise of the "new formalism" in academic literary criticism. On the latter, see Fredric Bogel, *New Formalist Criticism: Theory and Practice* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

⁵ *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 606.

⁶ Janet Schmalfeldt, *In the Process of Becoming: Analytic and Philosophical Perspectives on Form in Early Nineteenth-Century Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷ Schmalfeldt, *In the Process of Becoming*, 9. Recent examples of all three categories include Peter Smith, "Cadential Content and Cadential Function in the First-Movement Expositions of

presented what could be called a “theory of romantic form” that aspires to anything close to the broad applicability that Caplin or Hepokoski and Darcy claim for their theories of classical form.

One obstacle to a theory of romantic form is, paradoxically, the very success that the new *Formenlehre* has had in the realm of classical music. It is virtually impossible to start talking about romantic form without first saying something about classical form. Even though neither Caplin’s nor Hepokoski and Darcy’s theories seamlessly fit romantic music, both are obviously relevant to it, and must therefore be taken into account. Perhaps it is not impossible to construct a theory of romantic form that ignores both the theory of formal functions and sonata theory and that instead starts from scratch by devising a new typology and taxonomy solely based on an empirical investigation of the romantic repertoire itself. But such an enterprise would be as tedious as it would be inefficient, simply because so much of its outcome would overlap with what we already know from classical form.

A second obstacle has to do with the nature of the repertoire itself. A defining characteristic of Caplin’s and Hepokoski and Darcy’s theories is their heavy reliance on the universality (real or imagined) of the Viennese classical style. They manage to be comprehensive (as reflected by the phrases “classical form” and “the late-eighteenth-century sonata” in the titles of their respective treatises) in spite of the fact that they center on the sonata-style music of only three composers working for the most part in or near only one Central European city. Some would no doubt argue that classical form is less monolithic a practice than Caplin’s and Hepokoski and Darcy’s treatises suggest, and that differences not only between genres but also between composers and between geographical regions are considerable. Yet few would dispute that romantic form is an even more fragmented phenomenon than classical form. Form in, for instance, a lyrical piano piece written in Paris by Chopin works differently than form in a monumental symphony movement written for Leipzig by Schumann, and the differences are arguably more drastic than those between genres, regions, and composers in the final decades of the eighteenth century. A *Formenlehre* for romantic music, it seems, has to be either

Schumann’s Violin Sonatas,” *Music Theory & Analysis* 3 (2016): 27–57; Julian Horton, “Formal Type and Formal Function in the Postclassical Piano Concerto,” in Steven Vande Moortele, Julie Pedneault-Deslauriers, and Nathan John Martin (eds.), *Formal Functions in Perspective: Studies in Musical Form from Haydn to Adorno* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2015), 77–122; and Andrew Davis, “Chopin and the Romantic Sonata: The First Movement of Op. 58,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 36 (2014): 270–94.

composer- or piece-specific (as in Schmalfeldt's book), or it has to limit itself to a single musical genre (as Dahlhaus suggests).

Romantic Overtures and Romantic Form

I have opted for the latter path. This book is as much a study of a musical genre as it is a study of musical form. As a study of a musical genre, it investigates the romantic overture (defined broadly to include overtures written for concerts, operas, ballets, oratorios, or plays) in the context of German musical culture between roughly 1815 and 1850. As a study of musical form, it focuses on aspects of large-scale formal organization in those romantic overtures through a dialogue with existing theories of classical form. Both threads in the book are intertwined. The study of romantic form is embedded in the study of genre, so that the study of form is the central aspect of the genre study and the non-analytical aspects of the genre study enrich the study of form. Together they amount to a kind of "analysis in context," to appropriate Jim Samson's classic phrase.⁸

The topic of large-scale musical form in romantic overtures is largely uncharted territory. Only a handful of analytically or theoretically oriented studies exist that are devoted to individual overtures or to a specific composer's contribution to the genre. The most recent study of the genre as a whole, moreover, appeared in 1973 and is now dated in content and method.⁹ The dearth of literature on overtures is symptomatic of a broader tendency. With few exceptions, music theory has long remained ambivalent at best about romantic orchestral music. This ambivalence is not limited to music theory in the strict sense, as Charles Rosen's voluminous study *The Romantic Generation* illustrates.¹⁰ Rosen's book is about piano music, songs, and chamber music (in that order of importance). To a smaller extent, it is also a book about opera. It is, however, manifestly not a book about orchestral music. Except for a few pages on the first movement of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* and one sentence on

⁸ Jim Samson, "Analysis in Context," in Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (eds.), *Rethinking Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 35–54.

⁹ Susanne Steinbeck, *Die Ouvertüre in der Zeit von Beethoven bis Wagner: Probleme und Lösungen* (Munich: Katzschler, 1973). A more recent (and methodologically more sound) study deals comprehensively with a repertoire that predates the chronological focus of my book: Matthias Corvin, *Formkonzepte der Ouvertüre von Mozart bis Beethoven* (Kassel: Bosse, 2005). Corvin's book includes thirty-two short analyses of individual overtures by twenty-three different composers from Germany, Austria, Italy, and France written between 1775 and 1811.

¹⁰ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

Schumann's *Manfred* overture, orchestral music might as well, if Rosen's book were to be believed, have been nonexistent during the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

Admittedly, much of Rosen's study is older than its cover date suggests, and within the new *Formenlehre*, younger scholars such as Stephen Rodgers and Julian Horton have started to redress the balance by giving romantic orchestral music the attention it deserves.¹¹ But this is offset by the repertoire selection in Schmalfeldt's *In the Process of Becoming* – a study otherwise notable for its eclecticism. Of the 21 nineteenth-century pieces Schmalfeldt discusses in sufficient detail to warrant the inclusion of a musical example, only one involves an orchestra (coincidentally, it is an overture: Mendelssohn's *Ouverture zum Sommernachtstraum*). By no means do I want to fault Schmalfeldt for writing about the music she knows best, nor, more generally, do I wish to take individual authors to task for things they do not do. My point is that this is about more than individual authors' choices. By focusing primarily on non-orchestral instrumental music, theoretical and analytical scholarship on romantic music has tacitly perpetuated the stubborn prejudice that orchestral music is not what romantic composers did best.

The lack of attention for romantic orchestral music has influenced the traditional understanding of romantic form. A focus on small-scale genres such as the lyric piano piece or the Lied has led to the widespread assumption that what happens in those genres is what romantic form is all about. That is true to a certain extent. In their "miniatures" and "fragments," romantic composers did new and fascinating things that were unheard of in the music of their classical predecessors. Yet this is only one aspect of romantic form. It would be a mistake to brush aside these same composers' large-scale forms by suggesting that they by and large perpetuated the practices established by an earlier generation.

For one thing, it would be wrong to equate large-scale form in the nineteenth century with sonata form (and therefore, to narrow *Formenlehre* to "sonata-form theory"). This matters more for a study of romantic overtures than for a study of, say, first movements of romantic symphonies. For a composer of overtures between 1815 and 1850, using some variant of sonata form was only one of several available options (although admittedly a central one). It was equally possible to write an

¹¹ Stephen Rodgers, *Form, Program, and Metaphor in the Music of Berlioz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Julian Horton, "John Field and the Alternative History of Concerto First-Movement Form," *Music & Letters* 92 (2011): 43–83; id., "Formal Type and Formal Function."

overture that was not in sonata form at all, or that was only partly in sonata form, or that combined sonata form with some other principle of formal organization. This also means that when it comes to the overture, the relationship between musical genre and formal genre is complex. The genre “overture” is not a subcategory of the genre “sonata form” (whereas the genre “symphonic first movement,” for all practical purposes, is).

An additional complication is that the overture genre itself exists in two incarnations, or subgenres: overtures that were intended as standalone pieces, and overtures that were part of a larger work. While there was considerable overlap between both in some respects, generic conventions and horizons of expectation were different for each. This double “symphonic-theatrical” identity of the overture genre contributed to its centrality in nineteenth-century musical life. Straddled between the theater and the concert hall, the overture can even be considered the only truly European instrumental genre of its time. From a Germanic perspective, it bridges the gap between Beethoven’s symphonies and Liszt’s symphonic poems in an era plagued by recurring doubts about the viability of the symphony. From a broader European point of view, its close association with opera allowed the overture to flourish even in those countries where independent traditions of instrumental music were otherwise marginal, such as France and Italy.

Repertoire

The overture repertoire studied in this book is the repertoire that would have been familiar to a musician or connoisseur in the northern German cities of Leipzig and Berlin between 1815 and 1850 – a writer or theorist such as Marx or a composer such as Mendelssohn, Schumann, or the young Wagner. This may not seem an obvious choice. Leipzig and Berlin were provincial cities compared to the cosmopolitan centers of London and Paris. While visiting the British capital, Mendelssohn wrote to his family that he had not seen “so much contrast and so many different things in the past half year in Berlin as in these three days [in London].”¹² Nonetheless, music arguably played a more central role in everyday life in these German cities, in spite (or perhaps because) of their smaller scale. On his first visit to Berlin, Berlioz famously marveled that “there is music in

¹² Letter from 25 April 1829 in Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, *Sämtliche Briefe*, vol. I, ed. Juliette Appold and Regina Back (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2008), 269.

the air, one breathes it, it penetrates you. One finds it in the theater, in church, at the concert, in the street, in public gardens, everywhere.”¹³ What was characteristic of both cities in the decades between 1815 and 1850, moreover, was the coexistence of a well-established tradition of symphonic concerts and an eclectic operatic tradition. Berlin had the Sinfonie-Soiréen as well as the Königliche Oper (Unter den Linden) and the Nationaltheater (from 1821 in the Schauspielhaus am Gendarmenmarkt), and in Leipzig there were the Gewandhaus concert hall and the Comödienhaus opera, to name only some of the most prominent and long-lived institutions.¹⁴ Both cities offered circumstances that were conducive to the flourishing of the overture as a musical genre. Nowhere in Europe were overtures of all kinds produced, printed, and performed with such frequency as in Berlin and Leipzig during the 1820s, 30s, and 40s.¹⁵ Both cities were also among the main centers for writing about music in the first half of the nineteenth century. Berlin was home to the *Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (1824–30) and *Iris im Gebiete der Tonkunst* (1830–41), edited by Marx and by Ludwig Rellstab respectively. Leipzig had the even more widely read *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitschrift* (with editors such as Gottfried Wilhelm Fink, Moritz Hauptmann, and Johann Christian Lobe) and, from 1834, Schumann’s (and later Franz Brendel’s) *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. Overtures were frequently discussed in all of these periodicals as well as in books about music written by their regular contributors.

In studying the overture in continental Europe through the lens of the specific cultural-historical setting of Berlin and Leipzig between 1815 and 1850, I have no ambition to revive the German cultural chauvinist’s equation of “music” with “German music.” The overture repertoire performed in Germany between 1815 and 1850 is emphatically not the same as the repertoire of German overtures written between 1815 and 1850. Music in Berlin and Leipzig was surprisingly cosmopolitan, even though the cities themselves – and the prevailing ideological winds blowing

¹³ *Journal des débats*, 8 November 1843: [1]. Also in Hector Berlioz, *Mémoires* (Paris: Lévy, 1870), 306.

¹⁴ The most detailed study of musical life in Berlin during the first half of the nineteenth century remains Christoph-Hellmut Mahling, “Zum ‘Musikbetrieb’ Berlins und seinen Institutionen in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts,” in Carl Dahlhaus (ed.), *Studien zur Musikgeschichte Berlins im frühen 19. Jahrhundert* (Regensburg: Bosse, 1980), 27–284. On concert life in Leipzig, see Bert Hagels, *Konzerte in Leipzig, 1779/80–1847/48. Eine Statistik* (Berlin: Ries & Erler, 2009), 32–110.

¹⁵ Naturally the production of opera overtures was higher in an operatic center such as Paris. German composers, however, wrote more concert overtures. Moreover, French (and Italian) overtures found their way to German audiences more easily than the other way around.

through them – were not. The overture repertoire included French and Italian as well as German and Austrian works, and “foreign” pieces were by no means marginal. While it is true that overtures by German or Austrian composers would appear more frequently on concert programs than Italian or French ones, this is entirely outweighed by the prominence of French and Italian music at the opera. On the sheet-music market (always a reliable indicator of an overture’s popularity, because the differences in performance venue become irrelevant), both groups were largely on par.

In order to do justice to this cosmopolitan reality, one has to move beyond music theory’s traditional Germanocentric orientation. I will therefore analyze German, French, Italian, and other overtures alongside each other, hence the phrase “from Rossini to Wagner” in this book’s title instead of the more predictable “from Beethoven to Wagner.”¹⁶ I rely on a corpus of 175 overtures, the core of which consists of operatic, ballet, oratorio, theater, and concert overtures written between ca. 1815 and 1850.¹⁷ Although the selection includes obscure pieces, it is biased toward canonical composers and composers who were popular then even when they no longer are now (Weber, Spohr, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Wagner in Germany; Schubert in Austria; Auber and Berlioz in France; Rossini, Donizetti, and Verdi in Italy). Some of the works on the list are masterpieces, others are not. This core group of works is complemented by a smaller number of overtures from the decade before 1815 (including works by Beethoven) as well as older overtures by Gluck, Mozart, Cherubini, and Méhul that continued to be part of the repertoire through the first half of the nineteenth century. Together, these 175 works form both a plausible (even though still artificial) reconstruction of the mid-nineteenth-century overture repertoire and a workable background for analyses of individual overtures.

The diversity of this repertoire implies that I use the term “romantic overture” in a stylistically broad but chronologically narrow sense. The chronological boundaries of 1815 and 1850 may at first seem to be politically rather than musically inspired: they coincide with the end of the

¹⁶ In this sense, my project resonates with those of William Rothstein and Horton. See Rothstein, “Common-Tone Tonality in Italian Opera: An Introduction,” in *Music Theory Online* 14 (2008), www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.08.14.1/mto.08.14.1.rothstein.html (accessed 1 January 2016), and Horton, “John Field and the Alternative History” and “Formal Type and Formal Function.”

¹⁷ The Appendix provides the complete list. The list includes all the overtures that were analyzed for this book. For that reason, it excludes several of the works that are brought up only as part of the historical discussion, especially in Chapter I. Conversely, most but not all of the works on the list are explicitly mentioned in the book.

Congress of Vienna and the aftermath of the revolutions of 1848–49, respectively. Yet the demarcation is not irrelevant for the overture genre. The years around 1815 and 1850 brought changes (sometimes directly related to the political events, sometimes not) in the lives and careers of several of the composers who play a prominent role in this study. In that sense, too, the phrase “from Rossini to Wagner” is indicative. It was around 1815 that Rossini rapidly rose to fame, first in Italy, then abroad. And Wagner’s exile after the Dresden uprising of 1849 marks a caesura in his career that was expressed in his works by, among other things, the definitive move from overtures to orchestral preludes or introductions.¹⁸ The rise of Rossini (and the popularity of his overtures) roughly coincides with Beethoven’s move away from orchestral music. After 1815, Beethoven would write only one more overture, *Die Weihe des Hauses* (1822). The same years also witnessed Schubert’s first bout of immense compositional activity; as far as overtures are concerned, the Overture in D major, D. 556, and the two Overtures “in the Italian Style,” D. 590 and 591, all date from 1817. On the tail end of the time period, Wagner’s abandonment of the overture in his operas after 1849 was an indication of a broader change in the status of the genre around 1850. After the completion of *Le Carnaval romain* and *Le Corsaire* in 1844, Berlioz would not write any new overtures until the 1862 *Béatrice et Bénédict*; Mendelssohn died in 1847, Donizetti in 1848; Schumann wrote his final large-scale works in 1853. It is almost symbolic that Liszt in 1856 published several of the overtures he had written in the preceding years under the new generic designation “symphonic poem.”

Theories

The main point of reference for the analyses in this book is the new *Formenlehre* of Caplin’s theory of formal functions (including the contributions to that theory by Schmalfeldt) and Hepokoski and Darcy’s sonata theory. It testifies to the strength of both theoretical systems that much of their vocabulary has so quickly become part of the music-theoretical lingua franca. For that reason I will presuppose on the part of the reader a basic

¹⁸ There are exceptions on both sides of the caesura. *Lohengrin* begins with a prelude rather than an overture, and the “Vorspiel” to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* arguably is an overture in all but name.

familiarity with the central tenets and a working knowledge of the main terminology of both theories.

This is not to say that I adopt Caplin's and Hepokoski and Darcy's theories wholesale. For one thing, the combination of elements from both theories, which are often considered antithetical, already precludes this possibility. As I indicated above, moreover, theories of classical form cannot account for everything that happens in romantic music. If they are to be applied to a repertoire they were not originally intended for, they need to be modified. In undertaking this modification, my emphasis is less on systematically extending Caplin's and Hepokoski and Darcy's theories than on recalibrating them. I do not think that the way forward at this point in the history of *Formenlehre* is the invention of ever more detailed categorizations that allow one to attach a unique label to virtually every formal type imaginable. Instead, I will adopt existing categories when possible, redefine them to make them better fit the realities of romantic form when appropriate, and forge new ones only when necessary.

I make these methodological choices against the background of what I have elsewhere called the dilemma between a "positive" and a "negative" approach to nineteenth-century musical form.¹⁹ Simply put, a positive approach would strive to establish a series of types and norms for nineteenth-century form based solely on what happens in nineteenth-century music itself. A negative approach would measure nineteenth-century form against a set of types and norms that are external to it. The former option would mean redoing Caplin's taxonomic project for a new repertoire, while the latter is already built into Hepokoski and Darcy's theory of norm and deformation.²⁰

In their pure forms both approaches have limitations. A shortcoming of the negative approach is its highly speculative nature. It takes as a starting point a general norm – *in casu*, the Viennese classical repertoire – and uses it as a background against which particular phenomena (early- and mid-nineteenth-century forms) are interpreted. In order to claim that such a norm is in place, one has to reconstruct the repertoire on which that norm

¹⁹ For a more extended version of this and the following paragraphs, see my "In Search of Romantic Form," *Music Analysis* 32 (2013): 408–11.

²⁰ Hepokoski and Darcy are clear about this. "In addition to furnishing a new mode of analysis for the late-eighteenth-century instrumental repertory," they write, "the *Elements* also provides a foundation for considering works from the decades to come—late Beethoven, Schubert, Weber, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, Brahms, Bruckner, Strauss, Mahler, the 'nationalist composers,' and so on. As we point out from time to time, most of [the late-eighteenth-century] sonata norms remained in place as regulative ideas throughout the nineteenth century" (*Elements of Sonata Theory*, vii).