

## Chapter 1

### Definitions

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Everyone who plays a musical instrument has come across sonatas, and certain composers and particular works spring most readily to mind. Pianists are likely to think of Beethoven (perhaps also Haydn, Mozart, Brahms, Liszt); organists, of J. S. Bach (and perhaps Mendelssohn); violinists – depending on whether they are more interested in earlier or later periods – of Corelli and Vivaldi or of (again) Mozart and Beethoven, possibly also of Brahms and César Franck. The list continues with composers who may be less familiar to the general public than to instrumentalists: again J. S. Bach for viol players, Quantz and Poulenc for flautists, perhaps Brahms for clarinetists and Paul Hindemith for violists.

Those who have studied music theory in school or elsewhere will also be reminded of ‘sonata form’ – that elusive combination of exposition, development and recapitulation that has allegedly informed instrumental music since the late eighteenth century but that seems to consist more of exceptions than of rules. And of course: even if we could confidently define ‘sonata form’, sonatas were composed in abundance even before its advent. Giovanni Gabrieli composed ensemble sonatas as early as the late sixteenth century; Arcangelo Corelli’s and Henry Purcell’s trio sonatas are considered to be paradigmatic of Baroque instrumental style and texture. However, the only feature they share with the classical sonata is the fact that they consist (most frequently) of four movements; these movements follow their own traditions of texture, form and style, and the description of such works as ‘dance suites’ or ‘church sonatas’ is almost as fraught with ambiguities as the dreaded ‘sonata form’ itself. It is hardly surprising that a genre (or maybe just a collective term) which has survived – and thrived – for more than four hundred years should have undergone many transformations and modifications during its lifespan; one can hardly expect that one formal type or one set of rules should suffice to define or satisfactorily describe its totality.

The lowest common denominator of a ‘sonata’ would thus appear to be very low indeed. William S. Newman, whose three-volume, 2,200-page compendium *History of the Sonata Idea* (New York, 1959–69) is still the standard study of the genre, summarises this denominator as follows: ‘The sonata is a solo or chamber instrumental cycle of aesthetic or diversional purpose, consisting of several contrasting

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movements that are based on relatively extended designs in “absolute” music.<sup>1</sup> The following criteria can be distilled from his definition:

1. The sonata is purely instrumental, without the (prescribed or optional) participation of voices.
2. The number of players is limited, and every player plays his/her own part.
3. The sonata is not written to serve a specific function; it is art for art’s sake or art for entertainment.
4. The sonata consists of several contrasting movements or sections.
5. The underlying musical structure is relatively extended and complex.
6. The sonata is ‘absolute’ music, i.e. not based on a programme or other extramusical content or model.

Over the course of this book, we shall test this definition against a multitude of repertoires that have been called ‘sonatas’ by their makers – and it will turn out that even this rather general definition occasionally falls short. While the definition of a sonata as a composition for solo or chamber ensemble will meet with few objections, we shall see that the smallness of the ensemble and the multi-movement form did not as a rule crystallise until the late seventeenth century; and both the function and the ‘meaning’ of the sonata are often less clear-cut than Newman’s definition might imply. As a point of departure (and it was never meant as more than that), Newman’s definition is nevertheless highly useful as an indication of why a composition might have been called a ‘sonata’ and not something else. This will become apparent as we compare the sonata with other genres and types.

Why, then, are some compositions called ‘sonatas’? Like most other musical terms, ‘sonata’ or ‘suonata’ is Italian. It is the past participle – turned noun – of the verb *suonare*, which means ‘to sound’ or, by implication, ‘to play an instrument’. Literally, a ‘sonata’ is thus something that is sounded or played, a ‘sound piece’ or ‘a piece to be played instrumentally’. The requisite performer is the *sonatore* or *suonatore*. This very general meaning of the word in relation to music is quite old, much older than the sonata as a musical genre or type with definable characteristics. Already around 1370, the Italian author Piero da Siena writes in his epic *La bella Camilla* about instrumental playing: *E tesi v’eran tre padiglioni | e di stormenti v’ave gran sonate* (‘And three pavillions had been erected | and there was great playing on instruments’).<sup>2</sup>

From early on, *sonare* is used in opposition to *cantare*, to sing. Correspondingly, the *sonatore* is set against the *cantatore/cantore*, the ‘sonata’ against the *canzona* (‘song’); the term ‘cantata’, as the immediate etymological counterpart of ‘sonata’, does not enter common usage until the seventeenth century, when it contrasts very aptly with the latter as a multi-movement composition of considerable scale. This contrast is made explicit probably for the first time by the great Italian poet Giovanni

Boccaccio in his *Decameron* (c. 1350), where he describes the musician Minuccio as a '*finissimo cantatore e sonatore*' ('outstanding singer and instrumentalist') and recommends his readers to listen to him '*sonare e cantare*'.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, a sonata is in the first instance neither more nor less than a composition to be played on an instrument or instruments, whatever the actual form and scoring might be. In the sixteenth century, therefore, the term refers to the (not very numerous) instrumental pieces which were not derived from pre-existent vocal models: brass fanfares or non-chant-based entratas and interludes on the organ, for example. (Most tablatures, by contrast, are transcriptions or arrangements of vocal compositions.) In a period in which autonomous instrumental music was restricted to these few contexts, the generic term 'piece to be played' as opposed to 'piece to be sung' would have appeared sufficient; when independent, non-vocally-derived instrumental music began to flourish around the turn of the seventeenth century, however, it became necessary to find different terms for different manifestations of this practice. 'Sonata' may have appeared rather too unspecific to serve as a useful term for any or all of these manifestations, but nevertheless survived alongside other, more specific terms. It thus appears useful to try to define the sonata c. 1600 not according to what it was, but according to what it was not.

## 1.1 Sonata and canzona

As already mentioned, *canzona* originally referred to a piece of vocal music, a 'song'. From the middle decades of the sixteenth century, however, it had become common in Italy to designate instrumental pieces that were based on highly popular French chansons ('*canzoni francesi*') with that same label, *canzona*. The first to do so was probably Marc'Antonio Cavazzoni, in his *Recerchari, motetti, canzoni . . . libro primo* (Venice, 1523). This was often clarified by the seemingly contradictory label '*canzona da/per sonar*' ('song to be played instrumentally'), first probably by Nicola Vicentino, who called the final piece in his *Madrigali a cinque voci* (Milan, 1572) '*Canzone da sonare*'. Over time, the *canzona* became rather more independent of its vocal model; often, all that was retained is the rhythmic and melodic character of the opening *soggetto* (the 'subject' of imitation), which preserves traits of 'vocality'; most common is an opening long–short–short rhythmical gesture typical of French chansons of the time.

Ex. 1.1 clearly shows this typical opening gesture of the '*canzona alla francese*' – but it also demonstrates that the rest of the movement is entirely instrumentally conceived. The phrases are not regular and rounded, as if corresponding to a notional poetic structure; on the contrary, the phrase length and counterpoint are free and (after the introduction of the twelve-note *soggetto*) open-ended; the intervallic

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The image displays a musical score for Giovanni Gabrieli's 'Canzon septimi toni' in eight parts. The first system shows the vocal parts: Cantus (soprano), Altus (alto), Tenor (tenor), Sextus (bass), and B. per l'org. (bassoon/organ). The second system continues the vocal parts, with a red '4' marking the start of a new phrase. The third system continues the vocal parts, with a red '8' marking the start of another phrase. The score is written in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings.

**Ex. 1.1** Giovanni Gabrieli, 'Canzon septimi toni' in eight parts, from *Sacrae symphoniae* (Venice, 1597), bars 1–11 (only first choir shown here)

structure – with many wide leaps and broken chords – appears instrumentally conceived as well. The only aspect still reminiscent of the French chanson is the switch from duple to triple metre and back, which occurs frequently in canzonas; the composition under examination here contains no less than three such *tripla* episodes. This switch often corresponds to one from imitative counterpoint (in duple metre) to homophony (in triple metre) and the juxtaposition of rhythmically very agile passages with broader ones.

Gabrieli's sonatas – possibly the first compositions ever to bear this designation – stand alongside his canzonas in the two collections: *Sacrae symphoniae* (1597) and *Canzoni et sonate* (published posthumously in 1615). At first glance, the two genres sound and look very much alike, with a massed polychoral texture of up to twenty-two parts. However, the sonatas are largely lacking the typical formal and contrapuntal traits of the canzonas: an imitative beginning, frequent triple-metre episodes and rapid, virtuoso scale passages. The overall character of the sonatas is more sedate and more solemn than that of the more lively canzonas. This is confirmed by the German theorist Michael Praetorius in his *Syntagma Musicum* of 1619:<sup>4</sup>

*Sonada.* Sonata à sonando, wird also genennet, daß es nicht mit Menschen Stimmen, sondern allein mit Instrumenten, wie die Canzonon, musicirt wird; Derer Art gar schöne in Ioh. Gabrielis und andern Autoren Canzonibus und Symphoniis zu finden seyn. Es ist aber meines erachtens dieses der unterscheyd; Daß die Sonaten gar gravitetisch und prächtig uff Motetten Art gesetzt seynd; Die Canzonon aber mit vielen schwartzen Notten frisch, frölich unnd geschwinde hindurch passiren.

*Sonada.* The sonata, from 'to sound', is so called because it is not executed by human voices, but solely on instruments, like the canzonas; very beautiful specimens of this are found amongst the canzonas and sinfonias of Giovanni Gabrieli and others. But I think the difference is the following: sonatas are written very solemnly and magnificently in the manner of motets; canzonas, on the other hand, go by crisply, merrily and rapidly with many black [= short] notes.

This is indeed a very apt characterisation of Gabrieli's sonatas. These polychoral ensemble sonatas are, however, a short-lived phenomenon. From the early decades of the seventeenth century onwards, a new type of sonata begins to predominate which shares few, if any, traits with these works. In these compositions in the new style (expressly called *stile moderno* by contemporaries), the contrapuntal texture and notional equality of all voices is replaced by the hierarchically structured continuo texture, with one to three upper voices carrying the melody over a bass voice whose function is primarily to provide structural and harmonic support, potentially expanded (by means of figures) from a single line to a succession of chords. One of the earliest examples of this continuo style is Gabrieli's own *Sonata con tre violini* from the *Canzoni et sonate* of 1615.

The ensemble sonatas of c. 1500 operate with a rudimentary harmonic bass, often labelled *basso per l'organo* ('organ bass') (see Ex. 1.2), which presumably means that it could be fleshed out with chords as well. This bass, however, is not a true structural and independent voice, but a *basso seguente*, doubling whatever voice happens to be the lowest in the ensemble texture. Gabrieli's *Sonata con tre violini*, on the other hand, the composer's only work in the *stile moderno*, features an independent bass

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The musical score is presented in four staves. The top three staves are labeled 'Canto Primo', 'Canto Secondo', and 'Canto Terzo', and the bottom staff is labeled 'B. per l'org.'. The music is in a key with one sharp (F#) and a common time signature. The bass line (B. per l'org.) is continuous, while the vocal parts (Canto) have more varied rhythms and rests. The score is divided into three systems, with bar numbers 6, 10, and 13 indicated at the beginning of each system.

**Ex. 1.2** Giovanni Gabrieli, 'Sonata XXI con tre violini', from *Canzoni et sonate* (Venice, 1615), bars 1–13

part – its main characteristics (which are seminal for the seventeenth-century sonata for small ensemble) can be summarised as follows:

1. The bass is always the lowest sounding voice (against three upper voices) and always the harmonic foundation.
2. The bass plays continuously, apart from some very brief rests; this means that at no point does another voice need to act as harmonic support.
3. At the same time, the bass does participate in the motivic interplay. In the opening point of imitation, it even initiates the polyphonic process. Immediately afterwards, however, it reverts to playing held notes that provide harmonic support. Over the course of the composition, the bass, time and again, takes on a motivic/contrapuntal role, if only briefly (e.g. in bars 13, 16 and 24).

4. The *basso per l'organo* (even in this 'modern' texture, the bass still carries the traditional label) is supplemented by an almost identical further part, printed in a separate partbook: the *basso se piace* ('bass if desired'). The keyboard instrument could thus optionally be doubled and supported by a melody instrument, such as a lute or a string bass.

In contrast to received opinion, then, the bass could from the outset play its part in the unfolding of the melodic or motivic counterpoint. In general, imitative counterpoint remains extremely common in the *stile moderno* sonatas, particularly those with a motivic bass, but it is no longer compulsory. As the model for the *stile antico* (polyphonic) sonata had lain in the polyphonic motet, madrigal or canzona of the sixteenth century, the model for the new texture is likewise a vocal one: in madrigal composition, too, the integrated texture is replaced by the juxtaposition of one or more solo voices over a figured bass.

In instrumental music, the term 'sonata' becomes closely associated, almost synonymous, with this new texture. Given the novelty of the *stile moderno*, it apparently seemed an obvious choice to label compositions in that style with an equally new term, one that lacked the stylistic, formal and contrapuntal associations of 'canzona'. In a sense, then, sonata and canzona, which had overlapped substantially in the early seventeenth century, grew ever further apart. To be sure, a fair number of *stile moderno* compositions are still called 'canzona'; presumably the reason why Tarquinio Merula's *Sonate overo canzoni* of 1637 use both terms interchangeably is precisely because they combine small-ensemble *stile moderno* texture (= sonata) with imitative counterpoint and the alternation of duple- and triple-metre sections (= canzona) – a combination which remained extraordinarily popular until mid century. On the other hand, however, 'sonatas' in *stile antico* (i.e. for larger ensemble and with *basso seguente* instead of *basso continuo*) practically disappeared altogether; these compositions were almost invariably called canzonas. Conversely, the trend away from the patchwork structure and towards larger, clearly contrasting sections (= movements) in the latter half of the century is restricted to sonatas (the canzona then being on the way out, in any case). A late remnant of the canzona's association with contrapuntal writing is the practice of labelling the fast fugue movements of sonatas themselves as 'canzonas' (e.g. in Henry Purcell's sonatas).

## 1.2 Sonata and sinfonia

It was, however, not only with the canzona that the sonata had to compete in the field of seventeenth-century instrumental composition. Another potential source of interference was the 'sinfonia'. From a modern point of view, this may seem

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counter-intuitive, as we tend to associate ‘symphony’ with the traits this genre assumed from the late eighteenth century onwards that are incompatible with ‘sonata’, namely the use of a large ensemble and of multiple players on the string parts; but these traits were not yet present in the seventeenth century. The Greek term *sym-ponia* means simply ‘sounding together’ or ‘playing together’ – i.e. the interaction of several voices or instruments in a polyphonic texture. In that, it is ultimately identical to ‘sonata’, if possibly with a stronger implication of ‘togetherness’, i.e. multiple parts. Correspondingly, Gabrieli’s previously mentioned *Sacrae symphoniae* of 1597 include compositions for many parts in many different combinations, both vocal and instrumental.

The main association, however, was, from the very beginning, that of instrumental composition. Let us read once again what Praetorius has to say on the matter:<sup>5</sup>

*Sinfonia: rectius vero Symphonia* [. . .]  
 wird von den Italiänern dahin  
 verstanden, wenn ein feiner  
 vollständiger Concentus, in Manier  
 einer Toccaten, Pavanen, Galliarden  
 oder andern dergleich Harmony mit  
 4. 5. 6. oder mehr Stimmen, allein uff  
 Instrumenten ohn einige  
 Vocalstimmen zu gebrauchen,  
 componirt wird. Dergleichen Art von  
 ihnen bißweilen im anfang (gleich als  
 ein Praeambulum uff der Orgel) auch  
 offft im mittel der ConcertGesängen  
 per Choros adhibirt und gebraucht  
 wird.

*Sinfonia*, or, more correctly,  
*Symphonia* [. . .] is a term used by the  
 Italians to designate a fine and  
 complete ensemble, composed in the  
 manner of a toccata, pavane, galliard or  
 the like in 4, 5, 6 or more parts, solely  
 for instruments without any vocal  
 parts. Pieces of this kind are sometimes  
 placed and performed at the beginning  
 of concerted vocal works (like a  
 prelude on the organ), but frequently  
 also in their midst.

While the first of Praetorius’s defining features is not terribly helpful, since it applies to any polyphonic instrumental piece, the second is crucial for the further development of the *sinfonia* in the seventeenth century. While the distinction between *sonata* and *canzona*, if it can be made, is one of texture and form, it is separated from the *sinfonia* by its function. A *sinfonia*, more often than not, did not stand on its own, but formed part of a larger compositional context, as a prelude or interlude of a larger vocal work (an oratorio, a cantata, or indeed an opera, all of which regularly opened with ‘*sinfonias*’) or instrumental work (like a suite). In a sense, the same situation applies as with the *canzona*: most sonatas of the seventeenth century could pass for a *sinfonia*, but not every *sinfonia* for a *sonata*. On the one hand, we find collections of independent instrumental compositions, such as Adriano Banchieri’s *Ecclesiastiche sinfonie dette canzoni in aria francese per sonare et cantare* (1607) – practically a compendium of all the terms hitherto explored – and



Salamone Rossi's collection *Sinfonie et galliarde a tre, quatro, & a cinque voci* of 1607 ('Sinfonies and galliards in three, four, or five parts'), of which the last 'sinfonia' is entitled 'Sonata à 4'. As in sonatas, the style of the sinfonia is a mix of the imitative canzona with *stile moderno* continuo texture. In Rome in particular, the term 'sinfonia' for free small-ensemble compositions had a long life: the multi-movement works by Alessandro Stradella (1644–82) and Lelio Colista (1629–80), that are the direct formal and stylistic predecessors of Corelli's equally Roman trio sonatas, are invariably called 'sinfonias'.

On the other hand, we find numerous sinfonias which serve as preludes or interludes and whose style clearly reflects this position and function. These pieces are usually short and clear-cut, and often homophonic – their introductory character is attested by measured rhythms and succinct, often fanfare-like motives. Like the canzona, which found its way into the sonata as a contrapuntal inner movement, the sinfonia too forms part of many sonatas as an entrata-type first movement; on its own, however, it would hardly have been recognised as such. An exception to this occurred in Germany, where introductory movements to larger vocal works which would have been called a sinfonia elsewhere are sometimes labelled 'sonata', whether written as an entrata or as a canzona-type contrapuntal movement. The *Kurtzgefaßte Musicalische Lexicon* ('Concise Musical Dictionary') of 1737 puts it this way: 'Others say that the sonata is almost like a *symphonia* or like a musical prelude which precedes a vocal piece.'<sup>6</sup>

Even though the function and use of 'sinfonia' are largely restricted to an introductory piece for a larger vocal work from the early eighteenth century onwards, the separation from the sonata becomes completely unambiguous only with the clear association of 'symphony' with a larger ensemble and with multiple players per string part, that is to say, from the middle of the century. A last attempt to confuse matters in this regard are the *Six sonates à trois parties*, Op. 1 (Paris, 1755), of Johann Stamitz (1717–57), that are '*faites pour exécuter ou à trois, ou avec toutes l'orchestre*' ('made to be played in three parts, or by the whole orchestra'). But this remains the exception.

### 1.3 Sonata and concerto

The next collective term for instrumental ensemble music is 'concerto'. The Latin verb *concertare* means either 'to contest' / 'to fight' or, paradoxically, 'to co-operate' / 'to co-ordinate'. Either way, the term arises in relation to music in the sixteenth century and originally refers (not unlike 'sinfonia') to any combination of voices and instruments, denoting both the actual performers and music they performed. A '*concerto di voci*' is a vocal ensemble, a '*concerto di viole*' a viol consort, and so on. From the end of the century onwards, the term is restricted to refer to

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musical compositions rather than to performing ensembles, at first more vocal than instrumental. In particular, the new type of *stile moderno* composition for one or more solo voices with continuo is called ‘concerto’; the model for the entire century is Lodovico Viadana’s collection *Cento concerti ecclesiastici* (Venice, 1602) for one to four solo voices plus basso continuo (b.c.). The association of a contest as applied to this type would have appeared particularly apt to contemporaries, given the contrast between the upper voices and the instrumental bass as well as the discursive (dialogic or alternating) character of the vocal parts. Some theorists, such as Johann Mattheson in his *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* of 1739, explain *concerto* in precisely these terms: ‘the term “concerto” is derived from “certare”, to contest – as if in such a concerto one or more selected voices waged an artistic contest with the organ, or amongst each other, as to who could make the most lovely music.’<sup>7</sup>

The *stile moderno* concerto for solo voices and b.c., however, is only one of many manifestations of this ubiquitous term. Even polychoral vocal compositions in the old style are occasionally labelled concerto (e.g. Banchieri’s *Concerti ecclesiastici* of 1595); here, the polychoral texture may have suggested the association of a ‘contest’. As far as the sonata is concerned, it is far more relevant to observe that instrumental ensemble compositions were likewise called concertos with increasing frequency in the second half of the seventeenth century – and the line between them and the sonata is again imperfectly drawn. Examples of this are Marco Uccellini’s *Sinfonici concerti . . . per chiesa, è per camera*, Op. 9, for one to four string instruments and b.c. (Venice, 1667; to make matters worse, the individual pieces are entitled ‘sinfonia’), Giovanni Maria Bononcini’s *Concerti da camera à trè*, Op. 2 (Bologna, 1685) and Giuseppe Torelli’s *Concerto da camera à due violini, e basso*, Op. 2 (Bologna, 1686) – all important milestones in the development of the ‘sonata’ in the sense of the small-ensemble, multi-movement form. The modern association of the term with the juxtaposition of a solo instrument (or small group of instruments – *concertino*) and an orchestral tutti (*ripieno*) was slow to gain a foothold, and was by no means the exclusive scoring for a concerto even in the middle of the eighteenth century – although the ambiguity by then was less with the sonata than with the symphony. By this time, the scoring for larger ensemble in both these genres sets them clearly apart from almost any sonata (regardless of the presence or absence of a soloist or group of soloists in these larger ensembles). The distinction between sonata form (or its predecessors) and ritornello form (as the most appropriate form for pitting a soloist/concertino against the tutti) is secondary in this regard.

## 1.4 Sonata and suite/partita

While the development of the sonata over the course of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries helps to disambiguate it from other genres (like the *sinfonia*