

## Cambridge Introductions to Music

### The Sonata

What is a sonata? Literally translated, it simply means ‘instrumental piece’. It is the epitome of instrumental music, and is certainly the oldest and most enduring form of ‘pure’ and independent instrumental composition, beginning around 1600 and lasting to the present day. Thomas Schmidt-Beste analyses key aspects of the genre including form, scoring and its social context – who composed, played and listened to sonatas? In giving a comprehensive overview of all forms of music which were called ‘sonatas’ at some point in musical history, this book is more about change than about consistency – an ensemble sonata by Gabrieli appears to share little with a Beethoven sonata, or a trio sonata by Corelli with one of Boulez’s piano sonatas, apart from the generic designation. However, common features do emerge, and the look across the centuries – never before addressed in English in a single-volume survey – opens up new and significant perspectives.

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## Cambridge Introductions to Music

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## Preface

What is a sonata? Literally translated, a ‘sonata’ is simply a ‘sounding piece’, or, more specifically, a piece written purely for instruments. On the face of it, little else seems to link an ensemble sonata by Giovanni Gabrieli and a piano sonata by Beethoven, or a Corelli trio sonata and John Cage’s *Sonatas and Interludes*. This study sets out to define characteristics of compositions which were called ‘sonata’ that set them apart from other types of instrumental music and allow us to outline the development or history of a musical genre – a history marked by diversity more than uniformity, by change more than continuity.

The focus of the second chapter – the central part of the book – is on the ‘form’ of sonatas, their musical structures and textures. These include not only the familiar ‘sonata form’, although that will receive its due share of attention, but also those ‘forms’ chronologically preceding it – such as the canzona movement, the dance, the fugue, the figured bass texture in general – and those following it (serial, postmodern, historicist structures). The third chapter considers the sonata as a social and aesthetic phenomenon, considering the purpose of sonatas and who composed, played, bought and listened to them. Finally, the fourth chapter examines the scoring of sonatas, addressing such questions as: what, exactly, is a ‘trio sonata’ and how many musicians are required to play one? Why are there no keyboard sonatas before the eighteenth century? What distinguishes a sonata for piano and violin from a sonata for violin and piano?

Crucial to the study of the history of the sonata are, of course, detailed analyses of selected works and movements, and a substantial part of the main text is dedicated to them. These analytical sections are visually offset by different print in order to provide a clear visual distinction between the historical narrative and the case studies. The analyses concentrate on works by the better-known composers. This is not only because the salient features of a style or period can best be observed in their works, but also because the scores are more readily available in modern editions. Quotations are always given in the original language and in English translation; all translations are mine, if not otherwise specified.

*The Sonata* is an adapted translation of *Die Sonate*, originally published in German by Bärenreiter Verlag in 2005, in the *Studienbücher Musik* series; it was then the first

single-volume monograph on the sonata ever to be written in German, as the present volume is the first in the English language. My thanks go to both Bärenreiter and Cambridge University Press for allowing the study to be published in English translation, and for including it in the *Introductions to Music* series.

A number of people have contributed substantially to the completion of this book, both in its German original and in its English translation. In particular, I would like to thank Silke Leopold, Rüdiger Thomsen-Fürst, Joachim Steinheuer and Norbert Dubowy at the University of Heidelberg where this book originated, and Ian Rumbold, who has not only immeasurably improved the prose of the translation but also remedied numerous inconsistencies in the argumentation. Needless to say, all remaining errors are entirely my own.

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