

## CLASSICAL SONATA FORM IN SERBIAN MUSIC TEXTBOOKS

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**Abstract.** *The paper analyzes the way in which the classic sonata form is dealt with in the music textbooks by Serbian authors, serving as basic literature for teaching music in high schools and faculties. The objective is to critically examine the theoretical basis and to point to some aspects that, in the author's opinion, are not the best for understanding this type of musical form. Teaching practice has shown that setting the sonata form as a norm, and then transposing that norm "forwards" and "backwards" in the historical context, not only fails to show the features of the mature classical sonata form, but also blurs the concept of sonata form in different stylistic epochs.*

**Key words:** *sonata form, classical style, textbook*

The sonata form is one of the most important types of forms taught within the subject called *Musical Forms* at music high schools and faculties, as well as within the subject *Musical Analysis* taught at the faculties of arts. An insight into the curricula underlying high school musical education (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, Educational Gazette, 1996) indicates that the issue of the sonata form is allocated the largest amount of classes, namely 10 for the historical development of sonata and the classical sonata movement, 2 for revision (in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the music high school), as well as an additional 6 classes for the field of complex forms of the sonata movement after Classicism (in 4<sup>th</sup> year), making up a total of 18 classes. So, it is already within the high school musical education that a stride toward the sonata form of Romanticism is made.

One of the first textbooks appearing in this region was *The Theory of Musical Forms* by Karel Boleslav Jirak (1948). Due to the lack of appropriate literature for high school musical education, teachers were advised to adapt the contents of the existing textbooks to serve the needs of their teaching: "A Czechoslovakian textbook '*The Theory of Musical Forms*' written by K. B. Jirak was translated to our language and the book with the same title written by Dušan

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Skovran and Vlastimir Peričić was printed in 1961. Since the textbook is primarily intended for students, high school teachers will have to adapt the material to the requirements and needs of professional high school education, as well as to the pupils' capabilities" (Živković 1979, 112).

The first Serbian textbook intended for music high schools was published as late as 1989. The textbook was entitled *Musical Forms for the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Study Years of Job-oriented Music High Schools* by Milan Mihajlović. In the last decades the textbooks by Milan Mihajlović (1989) and *The Theory of Musical Forms* by Peričić and Skovran (1991) are used at both high school and faculty levels.<sup>1</sup>

The similarity between these books in terms of their structure and concept are obvious: the authors start from the elements of the form – motive (Peričić and Skovran) or musical sentence (Mihajlović), and then move to the specific formal types – (simple) two-part and three-part form, rondo, variations, sonata form etc. The textbook of Milan Mihajlović follows the requirements of the curriculum to a large extent, although it should be emphasized that the aforementioned teaching topic – complex forms of sonata movement after Classicism – is not present.

When we generally talk about the sonata form, the only examples taken into account are the examples of the musical Classicism, most frequently piano sonatas or Haydn's, Mozart's and Beethoven's symphonies (Mihajlović 1989, 54–71). We are of the opinion that this textbook has certain shortcomings in that sense, because it should contain everything necessary to meet the requirements of the curriculum: "A textbook is a basic and necessary study book, structured so as to comply with the current curriculum, and designed in such a way as to assist independent learning, both in the didactical-methodological and visual-graphical sense" (Pedagoški leksikon 1996, 522).

In the textbook co-authored by Peričić and Skovran, certain teaching topics are explained in more detail and contain more examples in accordance with the targeted educational level, but the concept of presenting the sonata form itself is rather problematic. The authors uphold the same opinion when they present the general characteristics of the sonata form. This form consists of three parts (exposition, development and recapitulation), wherein the most important characteristic is the appearance of two themes in the exposition with the key ratio tonic – dominant (or if the movement is in minor, the key of the second theme is the relative major or dominant minor), and the appearance of two themes in the basic key in the recapitulation. The first subject, transition, second subject and closing are stated as the main parts of the exposition. The development part consists of the introductory part, the central part and the closing section, while the recapitulation repeats the exposition with the aforementioned tonal modifications (See: Mihajlović 1989, 53–57, Peričić and Skovran 1991, 197–235).

Further considerations of the sonata form comprise a series of deviations from the standard characteristics on three primary musical plans (thematic, tonal and structural), leading to a considerable number of conceptual 'exceptions' which are differently treated in the two textbooks: while the textbook for music high schools (Mihajlović 1989) integrates them into a single text about the characteristics of the sonata form, the textbook of Peričić and Skovran deals with them in a separate subchapter (compare Peričić and Skovran 1991, 239). These issues are most often dealt with in the light of omissions of the individual

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<sup>1</sup> The textbook by Milan Mihajlović has a second edition (1998), while the textbook by co-authors Peričić and Skovran has multiple editions.

sections of the exposition, development or recapitulation, or an even larger section (the sonata form without the development part), as well as from the aspect of their irregular order of presentation or inadequate characteristics of the tonal plan.

What lacks in such theoretical approaches refers to the consideration of the possible reasons causing certain changes, because unsubstantiated itemized listing of possible 'irregularities' does not provide the insight into the concept of the sonata form, i.e. its dramaturgy. Besides, a pressing question that arises at this point also concerns the very pattern itself: to what referral model do the conclusions about regularity and irregularity actually apply? The issue opened at this point is the question about the historical development of the sonata form, that we are not going to treat in depth, but it is important to mention that the question on 'regularity' is linked to a certain historical moment in the process of developing the sonata form; what is in a certain period labelled as normative and regular, gets the status of an 'exception' in a different period. According to Ivana Stamatović (2004), standardization of the sonata form is, for instance, carried out in the theory of music of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the manner that reflects the understanding of the music characteristic for that particular period. However, the standard thus created, having its own aesthetics and (ideological) background, cannot be automatically transferred backwards and applied to a different period which was governed by its own aesthetics (and some other ideology).

In connection with this, it is important to shed more light on the previously mentioned textbook by Peričić and Skovran. The chapter entitled *Sonata* contains the subchapter *The Classical Sonata Form* (Ibid. 205) in which the author deals with the relationship between the themes in the exposition, as a starting point in explaining the characteristics of the mature classical sonata form, pointing to their contrast in the thematic contents and character, as well as to the contrast between the keys in the exposition. However, the examples from the literature cited in order to clarify these characteristics do not cover only the pieces written by the representatives of the classical period (Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven), but also the examples of the instrumental music of Chopin, Frank, Brahms, Dvorak and Shostakovich (Ibid. 206–207).

The same principle is used to further clarify the integral parts of the sonata form – exposition, development and recapitulation. Moreover, the examples from the musical heritage of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are also used in the considerations regarding the 'exceptions' in the sonata form (Ibid. 239). Such an approach based on deriving the aesthetical principles of one stylistic epoch and their transposing 'forwards' or 'backwards' causes confusion: aside from the fact that the meaning of the adjective "mature" (classical sonata form) remains rather unclear, this approach opens a whole array of questions regarding the treatment of the sonata form in various stylistic epochs. For that reason teachers are compelled to constantly comment on numerous examples from the literature and to additionally clarify the differences regarding the concept of sonata form.

The literature dealing with the sonata form in greater detail (Rozen 1979) clearly shows that viewing it as a standardized model with certain 'exceptions' is not the most trustworthy standpoint for understanding this formal type. "(...) The most dangerous aspect of the traditional theory of the sonata form is in the very qualification 'standard'. The definition is basically the most applicable to Beethoven's works composed under the direct influence of Mozart. The assumption that the deviations from the pattern are in fact irregularities is mentioned as often as the opinion that the versions of the sonata form of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century represent an 'inferior stage' out of which the 'multilayered stage' developed" (Ibid. 36).

It can be noted that Charles Rosen is trying – in many ways and in different places in his study – to draw attention to the negative consequences of the ‘school-like’ approach to the interpretation of the sonata form. Instead of that kind of approach, he takes a standpoint that it is better to understand the sonata form “as a term for the form used by the majority of composers in a certain period of time. Such an approach is much better as it takes into account the historical development of the ‘sonata’, not to mention that it is of a more scientific nature when it comes to describing and classifying this musical form” (Ibid. 36).

From this point of view, the principle of recapitulation as a relief could be considered as the primary and most radical innovation of the sonata style. As long as that principle exists, any amount of diversity within the form is possible; for instance, there can be only one thematic material exposed in the original and dominant key, or a theme may appear in the ‘wrong’ key, or the new thematic material may appear in the development. The fundamental rule is, simply, that the whole thematic material must in the end appear in the original key – with no restriction regarding the number of versions of the form that can adjust to this fundamental principle.

On the other hand, some theoreticians are trying to explain the origin of the ‘school-like’ approach by emphasizing that absence of presupposed models actually kills expectations. Accordingly, how can one have expectations, if not on the basis of the forms that have already been met before? Hence, it is maybe purposeful after all to form standard models that would match *that particular* classical sonata, *that particular* classical rondo, etc. because the analysts can examine any sonata or rondo on the basis of a model, and show to what extent it confirms the model or departs from it. Later on, people tried to explain the existing music from the standpoint of textbook models, but a considerable part of such analyses consisted merely of their attempts to fit a composition into the traditional form while ignoring the parts that would not fit the model. That habit brought bad reputation to the traditional approach to the musical form. Still, that approach made it possible at times to investigate the individual qualities of the given composition in a more sensitive way (Cook 1987). Consequently, some composition models were not synchronous with the classical style. They were devised around 1840’s, mainly by the German analyst and aesthetician Adolf Bernhard Marks, who admitted that forms have a tendency to become historically layered, creating traditions of forms. He also explained that he put together the model of *the sonata form*, the term he himself coined. What happened afterwards was that this model was used outside of the context; people started to use it as an analytical means ignoring the wider Marks’s concept about the nature of the musical form (Ibidem).

It turns out that the role of context is exceptionally important in the analysis of the sonata form (understandably, this conclusion does not apply only to this type of the form). A sound trend would perhaps be to admit the fact that no theory can be protected from historical deliberations, and that structural analysis separated from the stylistic, historical and sociological contexts does not give the right results. Only a multi-dimensional and pluralistic ‘attack’ on the musical object can reveal its real nature and unique qualities (Palisca & Bent 1980, 758). That is, in our opinion, the right direction in which the contemporary theory of the sonata form in Serbian musical literature should go.

A comparative review of the sonata form in Serbian literature and the relevant literature of foreign authors can be used to clearly show how far our textbooks actually are from the contemporary way of analyzing musical pieces (the sonata form), as well as to raise some questions of pedagogical nature. The very fact that there is no textbook that embraces all the

topics underlying the teaching curriculum (either for the music high schools or music faculties) and that, except for the teaching material *Methodology of Practical Teaching* published in 1961, there is no other textbook that treats the methodical issues of the contemporary teaching of musical forms, speaks a great deal about the conditions of teaching the subjects dealing with musical forms (similar problems are characteristic for other theoretical subjects, too).

One gets the impression that the problem in the teaching practice regarding the sonata form (e.g. students constantly expect to find in the literature the very sonata form presented in the textbook) has nothing to do with the teaching plans, nor with the number of allocated classes, but primarily with the deficient and outdated literature. The recent works in Serbian dealing with the sonata form (Zdravić Mihailović 2006; 2007a; 2007b; 2010; 2015a; 2015b) point to the various concepts of the sonata form in the works of one composer (Franz Josef Haydn), stressing the negative analytical practice to examine the sonata form on the basis of any rigid model and the recapitulation as ‘regularly’ or ‘irregularly’ conceptualized (recapitulation that contains specific ‘exceptions’). The mentioned works supplement the existing textbook literature and offer a more complete picture of the sonata form, thus giving the students a chance to examine the characteristics of individual styles as well.

Perhaps the right direction in dealing with the sonata form in the textbook literature should rest on the fact that the theory of the form cannot be separated from the historical considerations, and that the analysis of the structure should not be separated from the stylistic, historical and sociological context. This further indicates that it is necessary to redefine the relationship to the sonata form by addressing it in the plural as we cannot talk about one single and unique sonata form (one model, one “design”), but about the **sonata forms** (comp. to Rosen, 1997). By presenting the various forms of its manifestation (rather than ‘exceptions’) it would be possible to establish a much better platform that would throw a much better light on the numerous possibilities in the composing practice and provide for a better insight into what the sonata form essentially is.

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## **KLASIČNI SONATNI OBLIK U SRPSKOJ UDŽBENIČKOJ LITERATURI**

*U radu se analizira način na koji je klasični sonatni oblik predstavljen u udžbenicima srpskih autora koji predstavljaju osnovnu literaturu u nastavi srednjeg i visokog muzičkog obrazovanja. Rad je nastao sa namerom da se kritički razmotri teorijska postavka, te da se ukaže na neke stavove koji, prema našem mišljenju, nisu najbolji put za razumevanje ovog formalnog tipa. U nastavnoj praksi se pokazuje da postavljanje sonatnog oblika kao norme, a zatim transponovanja te norme u istorijskom kontekstu „unapred“ i „unazad“ ne samo da ne pokazuje odlike zrelog klasičnog sonatnog oblika, već dodatno zamađuje koncept sonatnog oblika u različitim stilskim epohama.*

Ključne reči: *sonatni oblik, klasični stil, udžbenik.*