

# Schubert's Non-Normative Treatment of the Medial Caesura in the Exposition of *Quartettsatz*, D. 703

## COMUNICAÇÃO

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**Abstract:** This paper examines Schubert's treatment of the medial caesura in the exposition of his String Quartet in C minor, *Quartettsatz*, D. 703, demonstrating how the complications derived from his non-orthodox practice modify the piece's structural and expressive layout. Hepokoski and Darcy's Sonata Theory forms the basis of the theoretical approach, enabling a comparison of Schubert's MC practice with the norms and conventions developed in the late 18th-Century.

**Palavras-chave:** Sonata Theory. Medial Caesura. Hepokoski and Darcy. *Quartettsatz*. Schubert's sonata form.

**O tratamento não-normativo da cesura central na exposição do quarteto de cordas em Dó menor n. 12, *Quartettsatz*, D. 703, de Franz Schubert**

**Resumo:** Este artigo estuda a função das cesuras centrais presentes na exposição do quarteto em Dó menor, *Quartettsatz*, D. 703, de Franz Schubert, demonstrando a maneira pela qual as complicações formais, derivadas de sua prática não ortodoxa, modificam a organização estrutural e expressiva da obra. Tomamos como referencial teórico conceitos desenvolvidos na obra *Elements of Sonata Theory* de Hepokoski e Darcy, o que nos permite uma comparação direta do tratamento da cesura central de Schubert com as normas e convenções desenvolvidas no final do século XVIII.

**Keywords:** Sonata Theory. Cesura Central. Hepokoski e Darcy. *Quartettsatz*. A forma sonata em Schubert.

## 1. Introduction

### a. The medial caesura

Central to current research on sonata form is the concept of the articulation of a mid-expositional break, or *medial caesura*, that divides an exposition into two parts: the first part comprising the primary theme zone (P) and the transition (TR), and the second the secondary theme zone (S) and the closing section (C). Hepokoski and Darcy introduced the concept of medial caesura (MC) in their 1997 article “The Medial Caesura and its Role in the Eighteenth Century Sonata Exposition.”<sup>1</sup> There they define it as a “brief rhetorically reinforced break or gap that serves to divide an exposition into two parts, tonic and dominant. Its effect is usually that of an emphatic pause for breath before launching the exposition's second part” (DARCY; HEPOKOSKI, 2006: 123). They

discuss the importance of the MC as a formal articulator, enabling the opening of S-space, and determinative of the sonata's expositional type: "before the non-tonic S can unfold, a musical space for it must be opened ... S-theme must be forcibly manufactured through a common device of structural punctuation" (ibid, 121). Indeed, "if there is no medial caesura, there is no secondary theme" (ibid, 52). Thus the medial caesura functions as a rhetorical and structural punctuation that marks the end of the transition (TR), opening S-space and determining the course of the second part of the exposition (S – C).<sup>ii</sup>

The MC is always associated with a sequence of events that defines its rhetorical strength, harmonic quality, and, ultimately, its formal role. The process begins with the onset of TR, typically an area of increased rhythmic activity in which a sequence of energy-gaining modules drive towards a structural half cadence. Once the structural dominant is achieved, it may be prolonged by reiterations of the just-sounded HC or by neighboring motions. Hepokoski and Darcy emphasize that this "dominant lock" does not release the energy accumulated through TR. Indeed, any energy-loss or attenuation of dynamics in the space between the HC and the actual MC is "counter-generic" (ibid, 122). The MC is often marked by several *forte* "hammer blows" on the final dominant chord, typically followed by a general pause or rest in all parts, a rhetorical caesura. This, according to Sonata Theory, "is one of the main hallmarks of an unequivocal MC, and it usually signals the precise moment of the MC" (ibid, 125).

Sonata Theory offers three cadential options as standard MC articulators: a half cadence in the new key (V:HC MC in major mode sonatas, and either III or v:HC MC in minor-mode ones); a half-cadence in the home key (I:HC MC); and a PAC in the new key (V:PAC MC). Hepokoski and Darcy rank these according to their frequency of occurrence in the Classical repertoire as first-, second-, and third-level defaults respectively (ibid, 25-36). They additionally propose a timeframe within which an MC must be articulated, anywhere from 15% to 75% of the way through an exposition: "Any strong caesura falling outside these boundaries is either an exceptional MC ... or, more often, no MC at all" (ibid, 39). The rhetorically weaker second-level default I:HC MC is the first option available to the composer, usually articulated between 15% and 45% of

the way through an exposition. The first-level default V:HC MC is the second temporarily available option, from 25% to 50% of the way through. The much rarer third-level default V:PAC MC is the last option available to the composer, at around 50% to 75% of the way through the exposition (ibid, 39-40).

## **2. The medial caesura in Schubert**

### **a. Overview**

Schubert's treatment of the medial caesura differs on many levels from that of the Classical tradition. He problematizes many of the norms of that tradition, introducing complications to the course of his sonata movements. Much research has been devoted to Schubert's approach to sonata form, his large-scale formal deformations as well as his innovative harmonic language.<sup>iii</sup> However, few of these writings have addressed the importance of the medial caesura to his sonata form works: Donald Tovey is one of the first authors to pen a loose, but comprehensive discussion of Schubert's sonata forms, indirectly touching on some MC procedures (TOVEY, 1949: 118-127). In a much more detailed study, James Webster examines Schubert's treatment of sonata form, exploring some of the complications surrounding the MC juncture (WEBSTER, 1978: 18-35). The most comprehensive study of Schubert's MCs is found in Susan Wollenberg's research on Schubert's transitions (WOLLENBERG, 1998: 16-61; 2011: 47-98). Despite not approaching the music from Hepokoski and Darcy's Sonata Theory perspective, she touches upon important formal and expressive issues associated with the articulation of the MCs.<sup>iv</sup>

Through the lens of Sonata Theory, this paper examines Schubert's treatment of the medial caesura in his String Quartet in C minor, *Quartettsatz*, D. 703, demonstrating how the complications derived from his non-orthodox practice modify the piece's structural and rhetorical layout. Due to the limited space available here, we have decided to narrow the scope of this investigation to the quartet's exposition.

### **b. Analysis**

*Quartettsatz* was composed in 1820, a period of crisis in the life of Schubert, and is considered to be one of his most important works.<sup>v</sup> It has been examined from several

different perspectives, but not yet from that of the medial caesura.<sup>vi</sup> As stated above, the goal of this analysis is to illustrate the kinds of formal complications that may arise from Schubert's non-normative treatment of the MC. We demonstrate how each section of the exposition functionally relates to the articulation of the MC and how the rhetorical emphasis accorded the MC affects the complete form. Hepokoski and Darcy's Sonata Theory will form the basis of the theoretical approach, enabling a comparison of Schubert's MC practice with the norms and conventions of the Classical period. In addition, William Caplin's theory of formal function will be invoked whenever dealing with smaller formal units (periods, sentences and hybrids) (CAPLIN, 1998).

The character of the P theme (m. 1–13) is turbulent, agitated, and dark.<sup>vii</sup> It is constructed as a sentence: The basic idea is presented in a crescendo through successive entrances in all four instruments, culminating in a Neapolitan sixth chord (m. 9), emphasized by a *sforzando* marking and a sudden change of texture.<sup>viii</sup> P comes to a PAC in measure 13, eliding with the onset of TR (m. 13–27) as a dissolving restatement of P. Generic TR activity, never materializes, however, and the section projects little, if any, sense of transitional function. In this case, one could speak of a transition that is formally present but rhetorically absent. Because of its continued tonic prolongation, TR might alternatively be regarded as an expansion of P space. Nevertheless, it does fulfill its vital role of leading us into S space through a concise modulation:  $bII^6$  in C minor (m. 23–24) pivots as  $IV^6$  in  $A^b$  major, preparing a non-normative VI:PAC MC (m. 27). Here a closer examination of the complications surrounding this medial caesura will be helpful. The MC occurs only 19% of the way into expositional space. In Classical terms, the only available cadential option at this point would have been the second-level default, i:HC MC. However, the move to the submediant enables Schubert's deployment of a PAC, eliding the end of TR with the beginning of the S theme. While a PAC in the key of the dominant would have sounded excessively conclusive at this point in the exposition, the appearance of  $A^b$  major injects a degree of uncertainty, raising questions as to the harmonic course of the piece.

The major mode's effect is one of relief, as if suddenly released from the highly oppressive minor mode. However, the choice of a non-normative key and the lack of

preparation by a generic transition activity render the new theme unstable and fragile, susceptible to a collapse at any moment. At this point, one could perhaps argue that, instead of opening S-space, the key of A<sup>b</sup> major extends the failed TR, giving it a second opportunity to succeed. This reading would nullify the MC status of the VI:PAC, perhaps a reasonable interpretation in view of its temporal and tonal complications. On the other hand, the lyrical “S-ness” of the theme introduced in measure 27 retrospectively confirms the proposed MC.<sup>ix</sup> As shown below, our interpretation of the A<sup>b</sup> major section will also depend on our apprehension of its role in the larger context, a trimodular block.<sup>x</sup>

Measures 27–61 are structured as a large period whose consequent phrase (m. 39–61) restates the whole antecedent, expanding its cadential appendage in order to end with a PAC. The expected cadence is evaded in measure 54 by the return of the cadential appendage. This cadential delay perhaps reflects a fear of the imminent return of the minor mode, as if the composer was enjoying his moment of joy and did not want it to end. But the major mode cannot stand the pressure and finally collapses to minor (vi:PAC, m. 61).

The minor mode brings with it a return to a dark, stormy character, but more importantly belatedly supplies the hitherto missing TR-rhetoric. The following P-based section (m. 61–93) destabilizes the key of A<sup>b</sup> major, leading through a series of sequences to a half cadence in the tonic C minor (m. 77), which readily suggests a new MC effect. One could perhaps argue that, as in an attempt to compensate for the “defective” VI:PAC MC, the new MC effect belatedly realizes the cadential option rejected at the end of TR, i:HC MC. However, the cadential articulation is followed by active caesura-fill, which, after briefly confirming the cadential arrival, takes control of the passage, overriding the proposed MC. The caesura-fill has the effect of correcting the harmonic course of the exposition towards the more normative key of G minor. However, chromatic alterations transform the expected minor-dominant key to its parallel major, an unorthodox secondary key for a minor-mode sonata. The arrival of the major dominant is strongly articulated by a V:PAC MC, marking the end of TM<sup>2</sup> and the onset of TM<sup>3</sup>.

The use of the major dominant as a key in a minor-mode sonata has lately been the focus of some discussion. According to Boyd Pomeroy, “in the nineteenth century, the major mode as a key area emerged as another option, albeit a highly unorthodox (even deformational) one” (POMEROY, 2011: 60). Hepokoski and Darcy interpret the key of the major dominant as “a delusion, a denial, a false major – pathetically seeking to overturn the negative implications of the initial tonic” (DARCY; HEPOKOSKI, 2006: 315). In *Quartettsatz* the key of G major emerges as a temporary illusion, constantly under threat from incursions of the minor mode.

The third part of the trimodular block (m. 93-125) is structured as a large compound sentence. Repeated evaded cadences, and the frequent appearance of the Neapolitan, often tonicized by its own dominant, suggest the weakness of the major mode. The theme finally achieves the Essential Cadential Closure (EEC) in measure 125, a V:PAC that closes S-space and releases the major mode from its constant oppression by minor.<sup>xi</sup> The closing zone (m. 125-141), of the codetta-module type, confirms the key of G major in a V-I alternation, bringing the exposition to an end.

### **3. Conclusion**

Schubert’s treatment of the medial caesura in *Quartettsatz* illustrates well the non-conventional approach typical of his movements in sonata form. Each of the stages surrounding the MC’s articulation is problematized in a particular manner, resulting in structural and expressive complications that ultimately transform the exposition’s formal layout. First, the natural energy-gaining process expected of TR, never materializes; instead, Schubert’s transition, lacking in typical TR-activity, consequently fails to articulate a normative MC. Secondly, the VI:PAC at this point denies the more orthodox option, i:HC MC, in turn determining the harmonic course of the S-zone, and influencing its structure as a TMB. Third, the subsequent music introduces a new lyrical theme, a convincing S-candidate that retrospectively confirms the status of the MC just sounded (fig. 1).

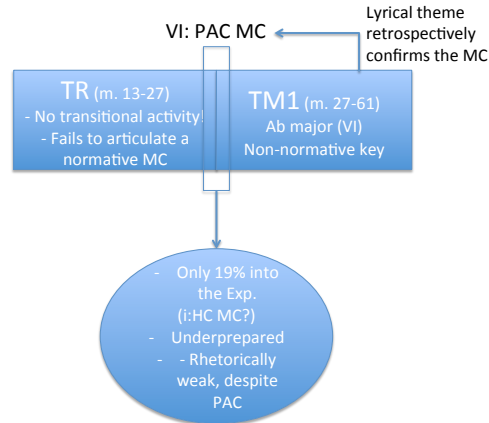


Figure 1: The rhetorically absent TR, the defective MC and its retrospective confirmation

TM<sup>1</sup> eventually collapses into TM<sup>2</sup>, which belatedly supplies the hitherto absent TR-activity, driving towards a more normative MC. The arrival at a i:HC suggests a new MC, one that could “compensate” for the first articulated MC. However, the proposed MC is denied by an active caesura-fill that takes control of the passage, eventually leading to another MC candidate, V:PAC. One could argue that Schubert assigns a “corrective” role to the newly articulated MC. This interpretation is not only supported by the fact that the latter MC introduces a more normative cadential option, but also by the rhetorical emphasis that prepares and marks its articulation: First, unlike the earlier “defective” transition, the new one is characterized by generic energy-gaining processes; secondly, despite its elision with the onset of TM<sup>3</sup>, the V:PAC MC is preceded by modulating caesura-fill that expands the MC area, better preparing the final cadential articulation (fig. 2).

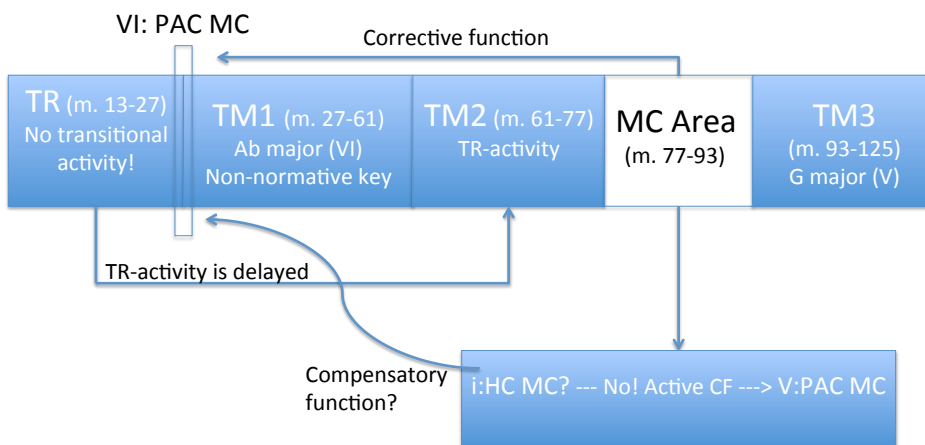


Figure 2: The corrective role of the second MC

It seems clear that an accurate formal reading of Schubert's *Quartettsatz* depends on the apprehension of his unorthodox treatment of the MC. His practice establishes a dynamic relation between expressiveness and structure, which in turn defines the course of the work.

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<sup>i</sup> References to this formal procedure (the medial caesura) have appeared in the literature since the late 18<sup>th</sup>-Century. See Koch (1983: 2, 19–40, 197–199, and 213–214), Marx (1997: 92–96 and 115–132) and Rosen (1988: 229, 230, 238 e 236).

<sup>ii</sup> Many scholars have questioned the validity of Hepokoski and Darcy's theory, especially regarding the formal function accorded such cadences as the MC and the EEC. A clear instance is found in the work of William Caplin, who has declared that a medial caesura is not a necessary condition for the existence of a secondary theme. For him, all expositions contain a subordinate theme, defined by the presence of initiating, medial, and concluding formal functions (CAPLIN, 2011). Despite not granting the MC a structural role, he does acknowledge its importance as a rhetorical punctuation device: "In most late-eighteenth-century sonata expositions, this important boundary is demarcated clearly, not only through appropriate form-functional devices ... but also through a marked change in melody, rhythm and texture" (CAPLIN, 1998: 201). Hepokoski and Darcy have also been criticized for relying on a restrictive system of default levels, which often lead them to interpret "common" events—non-normative in the view of Sonata Theory—as deformational. It is not our intention to mediate this ongoing debate; in fact we believe this kind of disagreement is necessary and highly beneficial to the field of music theory. However, it is important to note that we stand alongside Sonata Theory, interpreting musical form not exclusively as "a property of the individual piece, an attribute to be uncovered once and for all by the analyst as a substantive thing, nor [as] an abstract shape or *ad hoc* design to be charted or culled from the works audible surface" (HEPOKOSKI, 2010: 72). It should instead be conceived as a processual dialogue between an individual work and the network of generic norms, guidelines, expectations, and limits provided by the implied genre at hand. In

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other words, it is “something to be produced—an engaged act of understanding” (ibid.). In this paper, the dialogic approach favored by Hepokoski and Darcy allows an accurate comparison of the MC procedures featured in Schubert’s *Quartettsatz* with those of the tradition directly inherited by the composer, justifying our preference. Further on this debate, see Caplin, Hepokoski and Webster (2009b), Hepokoski (2009a: 181-212), Caplin (2009a: 87-125), Hepokoski (2010) and Caplin (2010).

<sup>iii</sup> See (selectively) Tovey (1949: 103-133), Webster (1978: 18-35), Su Yin Mak (2006: 263-306), Pomeroy (2008: 19-58), Beach (1993: 1-18), Wollenberg (2011) and Clark (2011).

<sup>iv</sup> Other noteworthy studies: Pomeroy (2008: 19-58; 2011: 59-103), Hunt (2009: 65-119) and Clark (2011).

<sup>v</sup> For a discussion of Schubert’s period of crisis, see Chusid, (1971: 3–11).

<sup>vi</sup> See (selectively) Pomeroy (2011: 67-71), Hunt (2009: 91–92), Fieldman (2002: 99–146), Lockwood (2004: 204-18), Su Yin Mak (2008: 145-53) and Wollenberg (2011: 52-57).

<sup>vii</sup> The expressively negative connotations of the minor mode play an important role in the piece. The minor-mode sonata form in general has been characterized by Hepokoski and Darcy as “a sign of a troubled condition seeking transformation (emancipation) into the parallel major mode.” (DARCY; HEPOKOSKI, 2006: 306). For a lengthier discussion of the topic, see *ibid.*, 306-317.

<sup>viii</sup> On the role of the Neapolitan in Schubert’s music, see Webster (1978: 23) and Tovey (1949: 147–51).

<sup>ix</sup> For more on formal reinterpretation, see Schmalfeldt (2011).

<sup>x</sup> The concept of the trimodular block (TMB) was devised by Hepokoski and Darcy to precisely define the stages of what was commonly explained as a three-key exposition: “Considered as a whole, the TMB (trimodular block) situation conveys the impression of a flawed or unsatisfactory first S-idea, TM<sup>1</sup>, followed by some sort of TR-texture-based corrective action, TM<sup>2</sup> [which is followed by the articulation of a new MC], and a ‘better’ S-idea, TM<sup>3</sup>” (DARCY; HEPOKOSKI, 2006: 172). For a more comprehensive definition of the trimodular-block, see Darcy and Hepokoski (2006: 170-77). On the three-key exposition, see Webster (1978: 19–31).

<sup>xi</sup> Hepokoski and Darcy define the EEC as “the first satisfactory PAC that occurs within S and that proceeds onward to differing material” (2006: xxvi).