

## Wagner's Last Sonata

Richard Wagner (1813-1883) is best known for his revolutionary music dramas, but he also composed five sonatas for piano, three of which are extant today. The final one, written in 1853, is titled *Eine Sonate für das Album von Frau Mathilde Wesendonck*, WWV 85, colloquially referred to as the *Album-Sonata*. As the title reflects, this single-movement sonata was written for Wagner's friend (and possibly paramour) Mathilde Wesendonck as a gift of sorts to repay debts to her and her husband Otto. The sonata is, remarkably, the first piece of music Wagner wrote after *Lohengrin*, leaving a compositional gap of six years during which he wrote a substantive portion of his political literature.

The style is clearly different from his earlier two sonatas and symphony, which were written in a Beethovenian manner. While the previous works are more adherent to classical sonata form, this final sonata in A $\flat$  major breaks farther from the tradition, foreshadowing Wagner's later forays. Most notably, the sonata is chiasmic in that the second theme group is recapitulated before the first. Aside from this breakaway from traditional form, the harmony is quite free from the strict tonic-dominant confines of the classical sonata. Refer to the table below for a concise structural analysis.

<b>Exposition</b>	mm. 1-74	$A\flat \rightarrow (E\flat) \rightarrow A\flat \rightarrow (D\flat) \rightarrow C/a \rightarrow (A\flat)$
1 <sup>st</sup> Theme Group	mm. 1-38	$A\flat \rightarrow (E\flat) \rightarrow A\flat \rightarrow (D\flat) \rightarrow (C)$
2 <sup>nd</sup> Theme Group A	mm. 39-53	C
2 <sup>nd</sup> Theme Group B	mm. 54-74	$a \rightarrow C \rightarrow (A\flat)$
<b>Development</b>	mm. 75-205	$A\flat \rightarrow f/A\flat \rightarrow C \rightarrow D\flat/(B\flat) \rightarrow E\flat \rightarrow (A\flat)$
1 <sup>st</sup> Part	mm. 75-157	$A\flat \rightarrow f/A\flat \rightarrow C$
2 <sup>nd</sup> Part (recap. of 2 <sup>nd</sup> theme + devel.)	mm. 158-205	$D\flat/(B\flat) \rightarrow E\flat \rightarrow (A\flat)$
<b>Recapitulation</b>	mm. 206-239	A $\flat$
1 <sup>st</sup> Theme Group (w/ embellishments)	mm. 206-239	A $\flat$
<b>Coda</b>	mm. 240-257	A $\flat$

Ignoring the bracketed modulations, which are implied or otherwise insignificant, the basic harmonic plan is  $A\flat \rightarrow C \rightarrow A\flat \rightarrow f/A\flat \rightarrow C \rightarrow D\flat/(B\flat) \rightarrow E\flat \rightarrow A\flat$ , and going even further to ignore repeated keys and keys functioning primarily to tonicize the following key, the skeletal harmonic plan is  $A\flat \rightarrow C \rightarrow E\flat \rightarrow A\flat$ , outlining an A $\flat$  major triad.

The sonata begins with a motive of a simple dotted rhythm followed by a perfect fourth up, a semitone down, and a minor third up. The first phrase ends on a rather unconvincing tonic chord with the third (C) as the highest note. The twelve-beat phrase (disregarding the fermata) is given a perfect twelve-beat response in the style of a contrasting period, although an elision to an elaboration of the consequent phrase after twelve beats makes the subtly symmetrical structure less obvious. The consequent phrase picks up with a C falling downward to an E $\flat$  in the same dotted rhythm and continuing to modulate to E $\flat$  major before returning to A $\flat$  major to undergo some fragmentation of the very first motive, not unlike fragmentation typically found in a period. The pedal point A $\flat$  starting in m. 23 continues for thirteen bars with harmonies implying a move to D $\flat$  major, but then a chromatic step in the pedal point up to A $\natural$  abruptly establishes C major (although not with a firm cadence) as the key of the second phrase. This modulation to the mediant scale degree is already a departure from sonata form, and perhaps this is a nod to Beethoven. Quite remarkably, Wagner manages to avoid an authentic cadence in C major for twenty-six bars! Nonetheless, the primacy of the note C is maintained melodically with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Theme Group B starting on a C.

The development adopts the sixteenth note figurations concluding the 2<sup>nd</sup> Theme Group B and places them in both hands, largely alternating between C minor and A $\flat$  major chords, both of which prominently feature the tone C. In mm. 118-123, a descending octatonic C scale is sounded in the right hand, further suggesting the importance of C. Measure 130 begins an extraordinarily protracted passage of angrily repeated fully diminished seventh chords implying a resolution to C major, increasing in dynamic and register relentlessly. This is perhaps the most recognizably Wagnerian element of the sonata, and it even hints at the ruthlessly prolonged resolutions in *Tristan und Isolde* to come just a few years later. Only by m. 151 (some twenty

bars of fully diminished chords at full volume!) does Wagner establish C as a tonal center, and not even with a perfect authentic cadence, only melodically.

Seven bars later, D $\flat$  major is established and a section that could be described as the recapitulation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Theme Group or secondary development begins. If indeed it is to be taken as the recapitulation (which is a perfectly sensible deduction, given that what is unambiguously the recapitulation later on *does not* recapitulate the second theme), then the chiasmus that Wagner is utilizing here by switching the order of recapitulation marks his command of sonata form. Wagner was not the first to do this (Chopin's second and third piano sonatas employ similar reversals of recapitulation), but it nonetheless echoes the zeitgeist of Romanticism to go beyond the strict limitations of Classicism. The choice of D $\flat$  major reflects a peculiar bias toward subdominant modulation, which is seen again shortly to imply B $\flat$  major in preparation for a move to E $\flat$  major (which is not only the dominant key of the sonata, but also serves to complete the tonic triad of A $\flat$  major established earlier by the modulation to C major). Wagner comes to E $\flat$  major in measure 184 through a deceptive cadence (which seems to be his favorite kind) in the previous key of D $\flat$  major, a jarring tierce de picarde to change the B $\flat$  minor chord to a B $\flat$  major chord, and a subsequent "supertonic" cadence to weakly establish E $\flat$  major. More deceptive cadences follow, now in E $\flat$  major, and a brief excursion to C minor concludes the recapitulation/secondary development to lead into the recapitulation of the first theme in measure 206.

The recapitulation of the first theme, an exact restatement of the opening phrase in unambiguous A $\flat$  major, comes as a comforting change to the seemingly endless deceptive cadences in the development. Some sequences ensue featuring the melodic interval of a major sixth (as featured in the consequent phrase), and the coda begins at m. 240 with an A $\flat$  pedal not

dissimilar to the pedal point in the 1<sup>st</sup> Theme Group. Wagner characteristically writes some ninth chords and other difficult-to-analyze harmonies in the progression to the much-awaited tonic, but at least now one can be sure there are no more tricks up his sleeve. The eight bars of tonic A $\flat$  chords ending the piece are calm and gentle enough to almost forgive Wagner for the rampant ‘deception’ in the preceding sections.

Wagner’s affinity for obscenely protracted dissonances and prolonged resolutions is already quite evident in this seemingly innocuous piece written for Frau Wesendonck. There is much evidence and speculation surrounding the reasons why Wagner never returned to the genre of the piano sonata (or the symphony) after this final work, and much of it is corroborated by Wagner’s self-proclaimed ambivalence about the purpose of absolute music. But aside from his own rationalizations, one can perhaps wonder how longer dissonances and roving harmonies could hold their own weight without the cover (or pretense) of drama. Perhaps Wagner’s exclusive turn to programmatic music following the *Album-Sonata* was an inevitable consequence of his compositional style.

#### Works Cited

O’Connor, Cameron. “Wisst ihr wie das wird?: The Album-Sonate for Mathilde Wesendonck as Prototype for Richard Wagner’s Unrealized Symphonies.”

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