

Analysis of WA3 submissions for F2015

A. Brief Description of WA3

This assignment asks the students to analyze the form of a particularly thorny string quartet (Haydn, op. 76/2, I) and, ultimately, determine whether or not it's an example of sonata form. I'm not all interested, in the end, about a "yes" or "no" right answer (scholars make arguments for both in this piece), but rather, how effectively a student can argue for their answer.

B. Three Examples of Student Work

1. Here's an excerpt of strong student work from WA3:

The string quartet has a clear exposition, development, and recapitulation, each separated by either a repeat sign or fermata rest. Two themes, one starting m. 1 and the other, the subordinate key, starting m. 13, are introduced in the exposition. In the development, Haydn experiments with the two themes from the exposition and harmony to great extent by featuring a theme in inversion and presenting new harmonic colors with tonicizations of keys more foreign to the home key of D minor including A minor(m. 80) and C major(m. 93). However, the recapitulation fails to reintroduce both themes —only the first theme can be heard in m. 99, and the closest the recapitulation gets to restating the second theme in the tonic key is the fragmented entrances in m. 126, but the harmony is hardly the same, disqualifying this as a reintroduction of this theme. Without this key element, this piece is not a sonata.

The student accurately describes a number of standard (modification of previous themes in the development) and abnormal (omission of the second theme from the recapitulation) features of this particular sonata. His recognition of subtle musical nuances (e.g., inverted themes, fragmentation of themes) also displays profound musical sensitivity. The prose suffers slightly from usage issues (e.g., "to great extent") and punctuation ("D minor including A minor"), but the tone is mostly measured and scholarly. ^{Student}₁ is both right and wrong about m.13—it *is* in the subordinate key (F major), but m.13 is *not* the subordinate theme, but rather a transition to that theme, which occurs much later.

2. Here's an example of a student (^{Student} 2) who showed improvement from WA1 (85) to WA2 (89), but who backslid on this paper (WA=83)

From the beginning of the piece, the possibility of sonata form seems possible. The exposition (mm.1-56) is set up with the main theme in tonic- and whether or not a transition is actually there- the STA is set up later in the subordinate key of F major in m.13. The further into the piece we go, however, the farther from normal sonata form theory the piece gets. For the rest of the exposition it is unclear where certain motives become themes or transitional material. As we delve into what could only be described as the development section in m. 57, it becomes less clear cut as to where new entries merge with existing ones. There is too much new material for what is considered normal in a development.

...

Overall, this movement of Haydn's String Quartet is a confusing one. With the many deformations from "normal" sonata form, it is difficult to associate it with that sonata form as a whole.

First of all, ^{Student} 2 shows the same analytical shortcoming as ^{Student} 1 (m.13). Two misunderstandings regarding the *process* of analysis are present here as well: 1) Distinguishing motives from transitions is a false dichotomy (transitions have motives); 2) it's unclear why the author would disqualify "new" material from constituting a development (this is quite common in development sections). Finally, the paper ends with faulty reasoning. There is no normal (read: Platonic) sonata form—every piece displays a number of deformations relative to a set of imagined family resemblances that link the corpus of all sonatas. The point, better articulated, might state "there are too few sonata characteristics present in this movement to associate it with the sonata tradition."

3. This submission, from ^{Student} 3 (WA1=93, WA2=94, WA3=89), shows some faulty reasoning, but also some prose that leaves much to be desired in terms of scholarly style:

To pin the first movement of Haydn's string quartet "Quinten" as a sonata form would be outlandish, as the piece thwarts too many expectations to be considered structurally sound.

...

Following this, the transition is not restated, and is replaced by a passage sounding similar to a coda, bringing in small fragments of what seems to be drawn from the STA in mm. 121, and this measure does not contain an exact restatement, but rather a hint toward this idea from the exposition.

...

The exposition also showed qualities that deviate too far from regular sonata form to be considered as such. From mm. 45-50, the original TR is quoted briefly, but to bring the piece to the codetta. Transitional material traditionally is not restated again in the exposition, and especially not just a fragment. Overall, this movement is much too deformative to be considered in a sonata form.

This passage would earn a B in the leftmost column of my rubric (scholarly style misunderstood). Usage of the term “outlandish” in the first passage is not only unnecessarily inflammatory, but also an unfair assessment, since several reputable scholars consider this piece a sonata. The second passage has too many independent clauses, and suffers from an informal tone. An abrupt, and isolated shift to the past tense in the third passage is an example of clumsy prose, one that was either not caught by his three peer reviewers (that seems unlikely), or, more likely, one that somehow survived the revision process. The informal tone of the second passage persists into the third.

C. Reflection on the Assignment Design and Outcomes for WA3

In determining “what went wrong” with WA3 that reversed the student improvement from WA1 to WA2, I think the problem rests mostly with the difficulty of the subject matter. Student writing quality was comparable between all 3 assignments. However, even these three samples from WA3 reveal that Haydn’s string quartet is a difficult piece to analyze. Even at a point in the semester when students have completed their 6-week unit on sonata form, the fact that this piece gives scholars difficulty suggests that perhaps it is too difficult for undergraduates to tackle.

Does this mean I should keep the assignment, or replace the Haydn example with something more “textbook?” Replacing the Haydn with something more straightforward would seem to dilute (if not destroy) the primary objective of the assignment—to stake an analytical claim in muddy territory. To make the grades fit the quality of student work, should I then simply

overlook the oversights in musical analysis? I certainly should not relax the rigors of good prose writing. Perhaps I should look at the analysis of the score and, no matter how reasonable that musical analysis is, assess the *soundness* of their prose judgments following from this analysis? This would still assess their ability to make a sound argument based on musical evidence, however valid that evidence may or may not be.

If this were the case, ^{Student}₂ would not lose points for asserting that the subordinate theme starts at m.13, but would still lose points for faulty cause/effect relations (e.g., motives in transitions, new material in developments). ^{Student}_{3's} analysis actually leaves nothing to be desired in terms of musical reasoning, but his prose expression would still be penalized. The net result of the change in my grading practices for WA3 would likely bring enough of the grades (but not all) up so as to better assess an individual student's improvement in crafting a sound written argument over the course of the semester.