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# Beyond Becoming: Applications of Goethe's Progressive and Retrogressive Metamorphosis in Fanny Hensel's Piano Sonatas

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## Abstract

Janet Schmalfeldt's concept of "becoming" has transformed how music analysts understand form in music of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Becoming provides a valuable perspective to evaluate ambiguous musical moments that are not easily explained with reference to traditional formal functions. Schmalfeldt invokes Hegel's dialectic, supplemented with Dahlhaus's and Adorno's "Beethoven-Hegelian" perspectives and aesthetic theories, to explain "*the special case whereby the formal function initially suggested by a musical idea or phrase, or section invites retrospective reinterpretation within the larger formal context.*"<sup>1</sup>

My examination of large-scale formal transformations in the nineteenth-century sonata focuses on the sonata-form first movements of Fanny Hensel's piano sonatas: C minor (1823), A major (1828),<sup>2</sup> and G minor (1843): a formidable corpus of three works. The bulk of analytical work on Hensel has focused on her smaller works; discussions of her large-scale works, particularly her sonata-form movements are less common.<sup>3</sup> Yet these works are astonishingly

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Schmalfeldt, *In the Process of Becoming: Analytic and Philosophical Perspectives on Form in Early Nineteenth-Century Music* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Angela Mace-Christian for her work to correctly attribute Hensel's A-major sonata and for creating a performance edition of Hensel's manuscript. A link to the score is available in my Selected References.

<sup>3</sup> Relatively little scholarship has addressed Hensel's treatment of large forms. See specifically Angela Mace-Christian's discussion of the A-major sonata in her 2013 dissertation: "Fanny Hensel, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, and the Formation of the Mendelssohnian Style" (PhD diss, Duke University, 2013), chapter 2; Susan Wollenberg, "Fanny Hensel's Op. 8, No. 1: A Special Case of 'multum in parvo?'" *Nineteenth Century Music Review* 4, no. 2 (2007): 101–17; Samuel Ng, "Rotation as Metaphor: Fanny Hensel's Formal and Tonal Logic Reconsidered," *Indiana Theory Review* 29, no. 2 (2011): 31–70; Larry Todd, *Fanny Hensel: The Other Mendelssohn* (New York,

innovative in their approach to sonata form. While playing these pieces myself, I noticed that novel and consistent formal transformations appear in each sonata, bringing to mind Leonard Meyer's statement, "It is not primarily the *advent* of novelty that needs to be explained, but its *use* and, even more importantly, its subsequent replication."<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I address these "subsequent replications" using a synthesis of Janet Schmalfeldt's "process of becoming" and Goethe's botanical studies to investigate what I suggest to be Hensel's personal norms, and then conclude this paper with an analysis of her G-minor sonata.

Schmalfeldt applies becoming to describe a theme's progression from one formal function into another. Beethoven's "Tempest" Sonata Op. 31/ii epitomizes a gradual thematic change in function and the consequences that such a process has on an entire form—a process that Schmalfeldt explores in detail, using the concept of becoming to describe the slow introduction's shift to primary theme (P). Thematic change in function is an experiential phenomena; only after the listener is able to reconsider the entire movement does the functional reallocation occur—in the Tempest's case, what *was* considered introduction *becomes* P theme—which affects the entire formal trajectory.<sup>5</sup> But what processes can motivate an introduction to retrospectively emerge as a primary theme, and is there a way to pinpoint specific ways that a theme might assume new formal features?

This is where Goethe's plants prove to be helpful. In *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, Goethe describes how a plant grows into "a great variety of forms through the modification of a single organ." *Formenlehre* has embraced and enacted similar concepts since A.B. Marx, in his

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NY: Oxford University Press, 2010); Matthew Head, "Genre, Romanticism, and Female Authorship: Fanny Hensel's 'Scottish' Sonata in G Minor (1843)," *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 4, no. 2 (2007): 67–88.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Meyer, *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 135.

<sup>5</sup> See Schmalfeldt, chapter 2 (23–57) for her application of "becoming" to Beethoven's "Tempest" Sonata, Op. 31/ii.

*Die Lehre von der Musikalishen Komposition*, suggested that a “fundamental form” exists and evolves.<sup>6</sup> However, Scott Burnham notes that Marx does not fully grasp Goethe’s philosophy with his application. For Marx, “each stage is an autonomous form,” while for Goethe, “each stage is not autonomous, but is part of the growth process of an *individual* organism.”<sup>7</sup> If the sonata is dependent on non-autonomous stages—exposition, development, and recapitulation—then the potential wealth of modifications occur from a single formal blueprint. The modifications in Hensel’s sonatas come from her treatment of primary and secondary themes. To describe the primary and secondary theme narrative in Hensel’s sonatas, I use two categories from Goethe’s general metamorphosis: *progressive* and *retrogressive* metamorphosis. In short, these categories describe an organism’s transformation as occurring naturally forward or backward; tracing change from inception to a final goal, *or* from semi-realized to increasingly malleable.

Here is a quick description of what I mean when applying these terms to sonata themes. First, consider Goethe’s description of *progressive metamorphosis*. He suggests, “Progressive Metamorphosis can be seen to work step by step from the first seed-leaves to the last formation of the fruit.”<sup>8</sup> This occurs when a primary theme evolves beyond its traditional narrative role of setting the “emotional tone” and indicating tonal and thematic return. Instead, P transforms over the course of the movement, usually by taking on characteristics of closure by beginning on a tonic inversion or by prolonging the dominant in the theme’s original pitch space as a cadential 6/4. P material’s progressive metamorphosis alters its narrative qualities from signifying return

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<sup>6</sup> Scott Burnham, “The Role of Sonata Form in A.B. Marx’s Theory of Form,” *Journal of Music Theory* 33, no. 2 (1989), 261.

<sup>7</sup> Burnham, 262.

<sup>8</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, trans. Gordon L. Miller (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 6.

or arrival to imparting *instability*, eventually becoming an element that usurps S material to conclude the movement. In other words, this transformation may be thought of as P (opening function) becomes P (closing function).

I use Hensel's A-major sonata to demonstrate progressive metamorphosis (Ex. 1a). (I provide all examples at the end of this paper.) The first 14 measures of the exposition seem thematic enough from the onset. The phrase is a slightly off-balance sentence, ending with a half cadence in m. 10, followed by a short plagal extension. The meter change in m. 5 might strike us as a bit odd, but the sentential integrity remains; measures 5–10 *still* function as a continuation. Fast forward now to the transition (Ex. 1b). Thematically, Hensel references only P's continuation from m. 22 until the second theme enters. Moving on still, the development refers back to P's continuation material, as if Hensel is hinting that the thematic focus is shifting (Ex. 1c). When we reach the recapitulation, the continuation's transformation into P material becomes clear, but it begins over an unstable  $V^7/IV-IV6/4$ , which retains the continuation's unstable initiating character. Finally, P material returns after S is unable to reach the ESC; the last step of P's *progressive* metamorphosis toward becoming a closing theme.

*Retrogressive thematic metamorphosis* takes on a contrasting function. While Hensel's P themes typically transform *progressively*—from an initiating statement to one providing closure—her secondary themes lack the “inner force” to attain the narrative goals traditionally linked with their function. In Goethe's words, it “takes one or more steps backwards.”<sup>9</sup> Hensel uses S material consistently to establish tonal stability and define formal boundaries. But despite its initiating power, *retrogressive* metamorphosis often causes S material to take a step backward. It loses its way harmonically, and ultimately relinquishes closure to P's progressive

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<sup>9</sup> Goethe, 6–7.

metamorphosis; a notably different strategy than most sonatas where S provides structural closure. In short, these themes lack the inner force to attain closure alone.

I again use A-Major sonata to demonstrate Hensel's use of retrogressive metamorphosis. The contrasting S theme begins solidly in the dominant key in m. 35, constructing what is best described as antecedent plus continuation (Ex. 2). Cadence after cadence is evaded in the continuation (mm. 39–53), eventually concluding with half cadences in m. 53 and 58. S material's closure with a half cadence would lead certain theories to suggest a failed exposition. A similar strategy is found in the recapitulation, where S is unable to arrive at a strong cadence despite beginning in a way that emphasizes the tonic key. Notice the V6/5–I in m. 181 almost sounds like an IAC, yet the cadence is undermined through an elision with additional material, that eventually leads to P's return.

The effects of these metamorphosis categories are seen most clearly in Hensel's recapitulations. S material's retrogressive treatment—such as a strong harmonic beginning—signals the recapitulatory rotation, which is often obscured by P material's progressive metamorphosis—an off-tonic beginning, for example. A *second* effect is seen when S material's retrogressive metamorphosis deflects closure to P material, which gains closing status progressively. A *third* effect sets the themes in equilibrium: for what P lacks in stability when beginning Hensel's recapitulations, S counters with strong harmonic beginnings; and for S being unable to achieve closure itself, P counters through progressive metamorphosis to provide structural closure. These strategies highlight a different narrative within Hensel's recapitulations. Not one that “conquers” a harmonic difference or at last brings a developing theme into focus; but instead, one that builds a narrative showing P and S materials'

interdependence. In effect, Hensel's sonata forms each arrange a few parts in a specific order highlighting how P and S interact to achieve the end goal.

Now that we have covered both becoming and botany, I will spend some time on Hensel's G-minor sonata. I will do a quick overview of the piece, looking at the effects of these thematic metamorphoses.

The primary theme in mm. 1–22 is supported almost entirely by a relentless tonic pedal. An 8-bar antecedent in mm. 2–9 is followed by an elongated 12-bar quasi-continuation starting in mm. 10 that relentlessly builds momentum until finally reaching the G-minor PAC in m. 22. Reasonably, we expect that the next idea, found in m. 22, to be the TR. This theme's rhetoric and construction certainly evokes transitional character. Like a typical TR, it begins in the tonic, then begins to wander through other keys (D minor in mm. 27–33, E-flat minor in mm. 33–37, B minor in mm. 41–45), eventually concluding with an IAC in B minor in m. 45. By most definitions, an IAC in #iii is certainly not an EEC.

What happens next throws a wrench in the works. In m. 45, the primary theme returns in B minor, initiating what is best described as developmental space. P material is then set in dialogue with the rhetorical TR theme, bringing into question if this material is indeed transitional, or—*retrospectively*—more thematic than we initially thought. Modified P material starts a second developmental rotation in m. 61, first in the mediant, then moving to the subdominant in m. 67. When P returns to tonic pitch space in m. 74, its rhetoric is unmistakably like a recapitulation, but it is *not* a moment of harmonic arrival. Notice that its entire statement functions as a standing-on-the-dominant. Is this a retransition, or the recapitulation's beginning? Formally, we don't know yet, but what we *can* surmise is that the P theme changes from having a strong initiating function to a medial function by standing-on-the-dominant.

The rhetorical TR theme returns in m. 85 as a defined tonic arrival in G major; a move traditionally reserved for an S theme. In effect, this moment *first*, clarifies that this theme is *now* S; *second*, confirms the recapitulatory rotation by its tonic arrival following P over the dominant; and *third*, further demonstrates P material's progressive metamorphosis from initiating to medial, while showing S's retrogressive metamorphosis with this strong harmonic beginning.

As we may expect with retrogressive metamorphosis as I have described it, recapitulatory S is unable to find structural closure alone. It begins to wander towards A-minor in m. 93, but before it can go too far astray, Hensel sends P back in to restore order. In m. 101, P returns for a third time, *again* over a cadential 6/4. For Hensel, the third time's a charm to complete P material's progressive metamorphosis into closing material. We reach the ESC of the movement in m. 119 after an expanded rotation that highlights the primary theme.

To finish, I would like to talk about a narrative possibility that accompanies these thematic transformations. Rhetorically, the sonata narrative in this piece is evident through the thematic interactions, although the form itself is consistently in flux. S material appears to masquerade as a TR through its harmonic and thematic character until its return in the recapitulation; only after this, do we know where the TR is. Then, P material morphs from a theme that cannot detach from the tonic into an idea with dual closing and initiating functions. In short, these themes are dual-role actors within the narrative, each playing a part of the drama that unfolds as the listener reflects on the narrative events. Further, we may also view this movement as an example of perpetual *becoming* where the TR becomes S, and P becomes closing material bringing us to an ESC. To summarize these roles, P material is a character of both initiating and closing function, whose goal is to achieve a tonic arrival, while S material plays the role of the wanderer, settling only long enough to establish itself before backtracking to its transitional

character. The thematic interactions throughout the movement again show the interdependence between S and P material, and although the themes' goals appear manifestly different, Hensel places them together in a manner that solidifies the sonata process's rhetorical narrative.

In Hensel's three piano sonatas, a consistent strategy for thematic and formal transformation becomes evident across a corpus. Identifying these strategies as a formal hallmark of her larger works is a step towards better understanding her compositional language, particularly her work with form. Cases in which comparable transformations of a formal paradigm exist throughout a composer's work in a certain genre beg for our attention, but recognizing similarities is not always enough.<sup>10</sup> The transformations I identify in Hensel's sonatas could be described exclusively from a "becoming" perspective; however, by integrating specific transformation types from Goethe's organic theories with becoming, the process itself gains additional musical meaning and significance. While becoming provides a way to discuss gradual changes in formal function, progressive and retrogressive metamorphosis allow us to describe *how* formal features, or entire forms, evolve. Just as Goethe's seed grows to create a host of individual forms, the nineteenth-century sonata also grows into a genre that invites metaphors that account for individuality and change. The ongoing challenge is to use these metaphors to offer an even richer perspective on the individualism of nineteenth-century sonata forms. Such metaphors are not limited to Hensel's sonatas, but extend outward to any sonata that resists schematization with eighteenth-century models and instead operates according to the composer's own, idiosyncratic norms.

## **Selected References**

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<sup>10</sup> Meyer calls the act of classifying "features replicated in some work or repertory" an acquisition of "brute facts." Attempts to explain repeated stylistic idiosyncrasies, and the "constraints that guide and limit brute facts" are the ultimate goal (Meyer, 10–11).

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## Recordings

Hensel, Fanny. Piano Sonata in A major, H-U 235, *Ostersonate*. Performed by Sofya Gulak. 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ij8JoTj2J1I>

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