

Building a Solid Structure: Introducing the Sonata Allegro Form*

by Barbara M. Siemens

The sonata allegro form can be a complex and confusing concept for some students. Depending on the pupil's age and level of study, the building blocks used to create its structure may be too abstract to grasp immediately. Yet if these same building blocks are introduced in an accessible manner, a deeper understanding of a piece is possible; in turn, this can facilitate the learning process and make memorization of the work much easier.

One approach to the sonata allegro form is to use the analogy of a house. This process links a familiar concept to a foreign one, and helps the student grasp the formal structure more quickly. The beauty of this particular analogy is its flexibility. It can be applied to a myriad of sonatina/sonata movements and at the same time, it can be as colourful and imaginative as the student wishes.

To introduce the analogy, begin with a drawing of a house similar to the one in the diagram on page 2. Discuss how a builder uses tools and wood to create the house. Be sure the student understands that all houses have main elements (roof, walls, floors), as well as a mixture of secondary elements (rooms, colours, hallways, staircases). Remind them that houses can look very different and yet still be considered homes as long as they have a combination of these main and secondary elements.

Next, discuss how a composer uses form and musical ideas to create a piece in sonata allegro form. Be sure the student understands that all sonata allegro forms have main elements (exposition, development, recapitulation), as well as a mixture of secondary elements (themes, keys, bridges, closing passages). Remind them that pieces can sound very different and yet still be considered in sonata allegro form as long as they have a combination of these main and secondary elements.

To complete the analogy, apply the main and secondary elements for a specific piece in sonata allegro form to the diagram of a house. Adapt the drawing to the piece by using colours to represent the tonal centers and furniture to represent the thematic material.

Example: *Sonatina in C major Op. 20 No. 1, 1st Movt. - Kuhlau* The exposition has theme one in C major, a bridge moving from C major to G major, theme two in G major, and a closing passage in G major. The development has theme one material developed in C major, bridge material developed briefly in C minor, then scales in G major and C minor taken from the closing passage. The recapitulation has theme one, the bridge, theme two, and the closing all in C major.

Drawing the House - The top floor has a red room containing a piano, a red and blue hallway with a coat rack, a blue room with a chair, and a blue staircase with pictures on the wall. The middle floor has the piano moved into a red room, then the coat rack in a green room, and finally the pictures moved into a blue and green room. The bottom floor has the piano back in a red room, the coat rack in a red hallway, the chair in a red room, and the pictures on red walls in the staircase.

* The handout will be available for downloading at www.pianoworkbook.com after the Conference.

Sonata Allegro Form/House Diagram

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THE HOUSE

Main Elements

- roof
- floors
- walls

Secondary Elements

- multiple rooms
- multiple colours
- hallways, staircases

SONATA ALLEGRO FORM

Main Elements

- exposition
- development
- recapitulation

Secondary Elements

- multiple themes
- multiple keys
- bridges, closing passages

