

Parsing Mozart, 1782-84

In his landmark article, "On Mozart's Rhythm," Edward Lowinsky (1956) parsed the opening Allegro of Mozart's C minor Serenade, K. 388, as follows:

The first movement shows a pattern unusual for Mozart in its irregularity of phrase groupings and use of uneven numbers. The first theme section and bridge are grouped in nine, three, four, six, six, six, and seven measures; the second theme and epilogue in six, six, seven, eight, eight, four, four, four, four.¹

This breathtaking breakdown is insightful as far as it goes, but I believe one could be more specific and more precise in parsing Mozart's various thematic groups here, while also providing a rationale for their seemingly irregular length. In this article I should like to reexamine K. 388's grouping (using the more compact string quintet version of 1787/88, K. 406), and to address briefly similar grouping issues in the opening ritornellos from the keyboard concertos in G, K. 453, and in F, K. 459.²

K. 388/406. Three hypermetrical hammer strokes—on c^1 in bars 1-2, on c^2 in bars 3-4, and on g^1 in bar 5 (Example 1a) suggest a reading of triple hypermeter

(Example 1b), in which the original sixth measure (the second part of the third

¹ Lowinsky 1956, 163.

² I use Mozart's string quintet version both to save space and to bring out the durational issues under consideration with greater clarity. Violist and music theorist John Paul Ito (2020) follows the same strategy.

hypermeasure) is taken over by the beginning of an overlapping, apparent five-bar phrase (bars 5-9). The result *looks* like a pair of complementary, overlapping five-bar phrases (bars 1-5 and 5-9). It is more likely, though, that the opening two phrases are duple in origin (Example 1c): a four-bar group that simply closes into the fifth bar, and a subsequently displaced four-bar group (see the brackets in Example 1c). The initial, preliminary impression of an opening, underlying six-bar group (namely bars 1-6) cannot entirely be ignored or erased, however, and indeed six-bar groups later do become a major durational feature of Mozart's Allegro.

At bar 10, a process of foreshortening begins: the group that now enters is only three measures long (bars 10-12; Example 2a), and the two succeeding groups are two measures long (bars 13-14 and 15-16; Example 2b). Before the opening theme's cadential group can begin, though, a pair of single measures intervenes (bars 17 and 18, Example 2c). The foreshortening complete, a pair of two-bar cadential progressions finally arrives (bars 19-22^a, Example 2d).

Mozart's foreshortening, along with the dramatic pauses in bars 12, 14, 16, 17, and 18, is perhaps the most remarkable among the many arresting durational features of this opening theme. The theme is indeed driven by the kind of liquidation characteristically found in sentence structures, but it can in no way be described as a bona fide sentence (see the durational reduction in Example 3). The foreshortening it displays is, rather, an unabashed reference to Baroque ritornello practice: not so much to the division to into *Vordersatz*, *Fortspinnung*, and *Epilog*, but rather to the ritornello's tendency to shrink (or, elsewhere, to expand) its components, one step at a time, from within. In an earlier study, I referred to this

phenomenon (not entirely in jest) as the *self-truncating ritornello* (STR).³ Mozart must have encountered many such ritornellos and truncations in the course of his extended contact with the masterworks of Bach, Handel, and Domenico Scarlatti.⁴

Notwithstanding the perfect authentic cadence in bars 21-22^a and the absence of sentence construction, the opening theme as a whole may still be regarded as a long antecedent.

Before the unsettled transition (bars 28-40) begins, the Allegro's opening five measures—or is it now six measures?—return in the bass as a kind of dissolving consequent,⁵ a "transition to the transition" or even a "pretransition" (bars 22-26/27, Example 4). It is set against a new, agitated counterpoint (three-eighths upbeat, quarter-note downbeat— similar to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony) in the upper voices. A connective measure, bar 27, leads from this "5 or 6 measures" quote to a true transition group (bars 28-41). Slurs, as well as an ongoing chromatic descent, bind bar 26 to bar 27 (see again Example 4). Consequently, bars 22-27 are heard and interpreted as a six-bar, not as a five-bar group. The opening theme's potential six-bar length has now been properly reified.

And so it is that the ensuing transition (bars 28-41) can consist persuasively of two six-bar phrases (bars 28-33, 34-39), plus a two-bar connective to the subordinate theme (bars 40-41; see the annotations atop Example 4).⁶ These six-bar phrases quite clearly reduce to two groups of three hypermeasures, with a two-bar,

³ Willner 2020. To expanding ritornellos I refer as *self-expanding ritornellos* (SER).

⁴ Gloede 2016. See also Willner 2010, with further references.

⁵ Hepokosky and Darcy 2006, 101.

⁶ For a differently nuanced take on bars 26-39 see Ito 2020, 113-16, Example 7.3.

one-hypermeasure suffix. The three *forte* markings in bars 28-33, and the two *sf* markings in bars 34-39, coupled with the emphatic statement of B \flat in bar 39, confirm both aurally and visibly the larger triple grouping.

Under the circumstances, it is perhaps no surprise that the subordinate theme also begins with two six-bar groups (bars 32-37, 48-53, Example 5). What is new and surprising is the two groups' internal division— into 2 \times 3 rather than into the transition's 3 \times 2 (see the durational reductions in Example 6)—and the seeming absence of an immediate consequent: both six-bar groups are antecedents. But two six-bar consequents now do follow (bars 54-59, 60-65, also Examples 5 and 6), closing into an extra measure, bar 66, which acts as a vamp to the closing theme.

The closing theme, for its part, restores duple grouping, the grouping so tentatively proposed in bars 1-9. It consists of two eight-bar sentences (bars 67-74 and 75-82, Example 7a): the first sentence closes in the new tonic, E \flat , and the second sentence overlaps a shorter, second closing theme (bars 82-89, Example 7b). The last-named closing theme comprises two open-ended four-bar groups (bars 82-85, 86-89). A five-bar codetta follows (bars 90-95, Example 7c): it divides into 3+2, providing a last-minute reminiscence of the Allegro's triple grouping.

Going back to Edward Lowinsky's 9+3+4+6+6+8+6+7 and 6+6+6+7+8+8+4+4+4+4, we can now regroup them as follows:

Opening theme	Antecedent	4+4 (displaced,=5); 3; 2+2; 1+1, 2+2
	Dissolving consequent	6
Transition		6+6+2
Subordinate theme	Antecedents	6+6
	Consequents	6+6
Closing theme	Sentences	8+8

Second closing theme	Additions	4+4
Codetta		5

In sum, Mozart's is a carefully mapped, step-by-step journey from duple meter and hypermeter to triple hypermeter, and back.

K. 453. The opening Allegro of the G major keyboard Concerto, *K. 453*, presents more features worthy of study than could possibly be accommodated in one paper.⁷ Here I should like to focus briefly on the orchestral exposition's three-bar groups, and on the gradually diminishing size of its opening theme's constituents. The theme offers another notable example of a Mozartean theme inspired by the high Baroque's self-truncating ritornellos.

Marked *p*, the opening theme is clearly a sentence:⁸ Presentation (bars 1-8), Continuation (bars 9-12), and Cadential group (bars 13-16), the last-named overlapping with the tutti's *forte* at bar 16 (Example 8). Even so, the subgrouping emphases within the theme bring to mind the foreshortenings of the self-contracting ritornello more than they suggest Schoenberg's *liquidation*—thus: 8 = 4+4 (Presentation), 4 = 2+2 (Continuation), and 4 = 1+1+1+1 (Cadential group; the last of these 1's is elided). While the *cantabile* quality of the theme differs greatly from the *Sturm und Drang* tribulations of *K. 388/406*, the two opening themes share the same type of gradual contraction.

⁷ See Willner 2021, Part I, for a schematic account of the entire exposition's tonal structure.

⁸ Hepakowski and Darcy identify it as a compound sentence (2006, 475), Benjamin as a sentence (2006, 345-57).

The lyrical, singing quality of K. 453's theme extends to another feature of its metrics, namely to the accentual emphasis on the second measure of its four-bar and two bar groups (see the arrows in Example 8).⁹ This emphasis is suggested at the outset by the contrast between the unaccompanied first violins' motive in bar 1 and the accompanying strings' nervous figures in bar 2; then by the winds' comments in bars 4 and 8 (comments that close into bars 5 and 9); and finally by the *fp* markings and interjections in bars 10 and 12. Such counterstresses on weak measures probably derive from or are inspired by end-accenting in the Italian language and by vocal music set in Italian.¹⁰ They are emblematic of a wide range of phenomenal stresses on even measures in eighteenth-century instrumental settings.

The tutti's *forte* entrance in bar 16 abbreviates the familiar *Jupiter motto*¹¹, which rules bars 16-21, from four measures to three measures across bars 16-18, and then again from four measures to three across bars 19-21 (Example 9a and 9b). Three-bar grouping subsequently evolves into the salient durational feature of the dialogic outburst that immediately follows in bars 22-24 (see again Example 9b).¹² Duple grouping resumes at bar 25, but the four-bar group in bars 25-28 emphasizes two-bar subgroups; it is not a true four-bar group (Example 10). Freestanding two-bar grouping does indeed follow (bars 29-30, again Example 10), but for its part it emphasizes a division into discrete one-bar units, a division that is taken up also by

⁹ My discussion here in some ways follows and in other ways differs from Benjamin's (2006, 256-57).

¹⁰ Rothstein 2008, with further references. Notwithstanding copious phenomenal end-accenting, the *metrical* patterns strong-weak, strong-weak prevail. For a detailed account of end-accenting, with further references, see Ng 2021.

¹¹ Gjerdingen 2007, 116-17.

¹² Benjamin (2006, 354-59) describes these as "three-bar 'waves.'"

the ensuing four transitory measures (bars 31-34). These transitional measures lead to the subordinate theme (bars 35ff.; see the annotations in Example 10).

The decrease in grouping emphasis within the subgroups across bars 16-34—three, two, and one bars—mirrors the decrease in grouping in bars 1-16 (see again Example 8), and brings to mind once more the Baroque self-contracting ritornello. Curiously, neither the remaining passages of the orchestral exposition nor the solo exposition makes much use of this old-time but timeless practice, nor do they supply three-bar grouping. Rather, they remain expressly quadratic, if none the worse for it. (I have already explored the issues with which they are occupied in an earlier study.)¹³

K. 459. Both the solo and the orchestral expositions of the F major keyboard Concerto's opening Allegro contain several remarkable instances of *tonal rhythm*, whereby composed-out enlargements of the opening gesture's rising fifth (Example 11) translate into five measures and bring about a temporary subgroupings of 5+2 and 5+3 (see the arabic-number annotations in Examples 12a and 12b). Also enlarged, if more informally, is the descent that responds to the rising fifth's enlargements (compare the square and curly brackets throughout Example 11).

These tonal *qua* durational enlargements begin as soon as the orchestra's *forte* statement of the opening theme is done, in bars 17-20 (repeated in bars 21-24; see Example 11b).¹⁴ A second enlargement follows in bars 25-26 and 27-28, in the

¹³ Willner 2021.

¹⁴ Here the rising fifth becomes a sixth (the square bracket in Example 11b); a falling fifth responds (the curly bracket).

context of a rising sixth (Example 11c). Only the first of these enlargements (Example 11b) sustains duple grouping: it takes place within the quadratic frame of 4+4. The second enlargement, by contrast, goes on to express 2+2+2 grouping, adding up to a six-bar group (Example 11c). The six-bar group is abbreviated by elision in bar 30, though, where a two-bar group (bars 30-31; see again Example 11c) brings the resulting 5+2 phrase to a close.¹⁵

It is at bar 32 that the most substantial tonal and durational enlargement of the opening fifth begins (Example 11d): each tone of the rising fifth— f^2 , g^2 , a^2 , bb^2 , and c^3 —occupies one measure (bars 32-36), resulting in a five-bar group that owes its existence to tonal rhythm. Three identical measures —bars 37-39—round up the group into a quadratic eight measures (quadratic, that is, at a deeper level; see Example 12b, which places the first five bars of Example 11d in a larger context).

The following group—the last to be considered here—opens with a three-bar orchestral subphrase (bars 40-42, the first curly bracket in Example 11d) that is interrupted by the winds' emphatically displaced, arpeggiated descent (bars 43^b-48), repeated three times (the subsequent curly brackets in Example 11d). A six-bar group (bars 48-53, closing into bar 54, Example 12c) now leads to the closing theme (bars 54ff., not shown).

The purpose of the winds' jagged and intrusively displaced arpeggios in bars 43^b-48 (see again Example 11d) is to countermand the exposition's signature rising

¹⁵ Given the drastic change in texture and thematic design at the turn of bar 32, I would read an interruption rather than a cadence at that point.

fifth and its growing enlargements in a much more forceful way than the previous descents have done, thereby allowing the orchestral exposition to close, and the solo exposition to begin.

Like many of the subordinate themes in Mozart's orchestral expositions, the displaced arpeggios of bars 43^b-47—a prominent thematic feature, if not an outright subordinate theme¹⁶—are absent from the solo exposition. But just like those themes, they return in the recapitulation, reinforced by new figurations and rising dynamics, and they are given over to the solo keyboard (Example 13). Here, too, they have the task—underlined by the reimagined solo passagework—of reversing the earlier enlargements of the opening fifth as they recur throughout the entire movement. This is as good an illustration as any that the meaning of unusual durational features may reside in the characteristic tonal and thematic features with which they are inextricably allied.

¹⁶ One could argue that the arpeggios stand for what William Caplin (1998) calls the orchestra's subordinate theme (as opposed to the solo's).

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