

Romantic Organ Sonata: The Main Stages

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Abstract

This scholarly article examines the evolution of the organ sonata genre, tracing its trajectory from the late 17th century to its establishment as a distinct musical form in the 19th century. The study delineates the key stages in the development of the organ sonata, starting with Baroque prototypes and culminating in its zenith during the Romantic era's second half.

Keywords: Organ sonata, genre, romanticism, baroque era, cycle, Bach, Mendelssohn.

Introduction

The sonata, a highly popular genre of keyboard music during the 18th and 20th centuries, has undergone significant transformation and attracted scholarly attention for over three centuries. However, the same level of musicological scrutiny cannot be applied to its organ counterpart, despite its equally rich history and complex evolution. While the traditional keyboard sonata progressed towards the piano sonata, charting a continuous path of development, the trajectory of the organ sonata remains less defined and fragmented.

Pinpointing the exact origin and development of organ sonatas proves challenging. The earliest known compilation to feature both "organ" and "sonata" in its title is Giulio Cesare Arresti's **Sonate da organo di varii autori** (Sonatas for Organ by Various Authors), published around 1697 by the Bolognese composer. This collection stands as a significant anthology of Italian organ music from the late seventeenth century, containing only three compositions by Arresti himself. As scholar M. Druskin observes, within this context, "sonata" retains its original etymological meaning (derived from "sonare," signifying the potential for performance on diverse keyboard instruments, including the harpsichord). Notably, the collection does not employ the sonata form commonly associated with later musical periods.

The primary characteristic of these sonatas is their lack of cyclical structure. Comprising eighteen miniature pieces, they were explicitly intended for organ performance by Arresti, despite their two-line texture. This recording method was common at the time due to the prevalence of Italian organs lacking pedal keyboards. Furthermore, a standardized notation system for organ works had yet to be established. Crucially, the organ, alongside other keyboard instruments, was categorized as a type of clavier, blurring distinctions between instrument types. The expectation for performers was versatility across various keyboard instruments, both wind and string-based, such as the organ and harpsichord.

During the Baroque era, Italian composers frequently explored the keyboard sonata form. While the term "sonata" was sometimes used to describe collections of keyboard pieces, the work of Bernardo Pasquini (1637-1710), who likely mentored Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757), demonstrates a shift towards multi-movement keyboard cycles distinct from suites. Pasquini's "Sonate per gravicembalo" (1702) exemplifies this development.

Furthermore, "Grove's Dictionary of Music" documents the existence of four sonatas for organ attributed to Pasquini, three of which were published under the pseudonym "N. N. di Roma" by J. C. Arresti. These compositions are characterized as single-movement pieces.

The works in question are highly sought after in modern musical performance. A notable example is the recording of three sonatas by Pasquini, performed by renowned Italian harpsichordist and organist Lorenzo Ghielmi, an expert in early music interpretation. Ghielmi presents these sonatas consecutively, mirroring their original arrangement in the Arresti collection.

This grouping allows them to be perceived as a unified cycle comprised of three distinct parts. This quasi-cycle adheres to the compositional principles prevalent during the Baroque era: a concise improvisatory introduction followed by a reiteration of the fugue theme in the first part, an "*elevazione adagio*" (slow elevation) in the second, and a "*fuga vivace*" (lively fugue) in the third.

The eighteenth century witnessed a surge in popularity of keyboard instruments, particularly the harpsichord, which significantly influenced the evolution of the Italian keyboard sonata.

Eighteenth-century Italian composers, including Benedetto Marcello, Domenico Zipoli, and Pietro Domenico Paradisi, consistently favored the harpsichord as their instrument of choice. While some exceptions existed, such as Domenico Cipoli, a student of Bernardo Pasquini, who composed "Sonatas in tablature for organ and cembalo" in two parts (1716). The first part comprised pieces intended for liturgical use, mirroring those found in Frescobaldi's "Fiori musicali." The second part featured compositions specifically designed for harpsichord performance. This period marked a time of ongoing experimentation and development within the sonata form.

A prevailing scholarly consensus, supported by contemporary research such as Dean Sutcliffe's seminal work on Scarlatti's keyboard compositions, suggests that only a select portion of Scarlatti's impressive catalog of 555 keyboard sonatas composed in the early eighteenth century are suitable for organ performance.

This contrasts with the ensemble trio sonata, which by the mid-seventeenth century had established two well-defined forms: the sonata da camera and the *sonata da chiesa*. In contrast, the keyboard sonata, including its organ counterpart, remained a fluid and experimental genre for a significant period, lacking the structural stability of the established trio sonata models.

The development of sonata form in Germany encountered similar challenges as elsewhere. Johann Kunau (1660-1722), the predecessor to Johann Sebastian Bach as cantor at St Thomas' Church in Leipzig, stands out as a pioneer. His seven sonatas, titled "Fresh Keyboard Fruits," emulated the structure found in trio sonatas for ensembles. Music scholar M. Druskin suggests that Pasquini may have predated Kunau in utilizing the multi-part sonata format for keyboard instruments. Given Kunau's prowess as an organist, it is plausible that his sonata cycles, including the renowned "Biblical Sonatas," were intended for performance on both harpsichord and organ. These Kunau cycles exhibit a programmatic nature, their structure intricately interwoven with narrative themes.

The organ sonatas composed by Theophilus Andreas Volkmar (1686-1768), a German composer, exemplify the characteristics of the North German Baroque organ tradition. His cyclical works prioritize improvisation and polyphony, frequently incorporating fugues as integral components. Volkmar skillfully leverages the sonic and technical capabilities of the advanced North German organs prevalent during the late Baroque period.

Johann Sebastian Bach's six trio sonatas represent a significant milestone in the evolution of this musical genre. While performers have traditionally associated these works with the organ, the intended instrument – organ or pedal harpsichord – remains a subject of ongoing debate. Bach himself treated the sonata as a developing form with less established conventions than the suite. He recognized distinct varieties of sonatas: clavier, organ, solo violin, and ensemble (combining instruments like clavier and violin, or clavier and flute). Bach approached each sonata type with nuanced understanding, considering the strength of its existing traditions.

While composers before Bach did not establish a definitive structure for the organ sonata, considering it an unstable genre, Bach explored diverse instrumental models, including those for keyboard instruments. This exploration is particularly evident in the contrasting textual organization of Bach's works, as seen in the two-line and three-line notation used for different pieces. Despite the lack of a solidified organ sonata form, Bach continued to experiment and Bach's six trio sonatas exhibit a multifaceted origin and blend genres. While modeled after the Italian Baroque concerto, adhering to its three-movement structure (fast - slow - fast) and precise tempo contrasts, they soften the distinct solo and tutti sections characteristic of concertos. The sonatas for melodic instruments and keyboard present a unique "chamber" interpretation of the concerto genre. Instead of the typical competitive dynamic between participants, Bach employs the transmission of shared thematic material across performers, essentially employing imitation to achieve polyphony and fugue development.

It is crucial to remember that all six of Bach's sonatas are structured as trios. The uppermost two melodic lines engage in an imitative dialogue, while the pedal part, though not devoid of melodic significance from the manual voices, functions as a continuo. This connection highlights the relationship between organ trio sonatas and the prevalent chamber-instrumental trio sonatas of the Baroque era, which typically featured instruments like flutes, violins, and harpsichord.

The expressive and adaptable themes found in the slow movements suggest an affinity with stringed instruments. Furthermore, many techniques employed by Bach in presenting thematic material are more characteristic of bowed instruments than keyboard instruments. This strong influence from string predecessors and contemporaries makes it challenging to categorize Bach's organ sonatas as a definitive model for the genre.

Throughout the latter half of the 18th century, the genre of the organ sonata remained fluid and adaptable. During the period known as the gallant style, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-1788), son of the renowned Johann Sebastian Bach, composed notable organ sonatas intended specifically for performance on the instrument. These works, dedicated to Prussian princess Anna Amalia, exemplify a transitional stage in musical history.

While exhibiting cyclical structures, these compositions predate the establishment of the classical clavier sonata model and the unified sonata allegro form by several decades. Therefore, they defy categorization as typical examples of the genre. Instead, they vividly portray the shift from the emotionally charged Baroque era to the more balanced and harmonious Classicism.

Bach's organ sonatas are characterized by a unique blend of imaginative elements, unexpected juxtapositions of musical ideas, and a nascent exploration of polyphonic textures indicative of emerging stylistic preferences.

Georg Andreas Sorge, a contemporary of Johann Sebastian Bach, composed twelve organ sonatas characterized as "in the new style." This designation reflects an alignment with the burgeoning homophonic-harmonic trends prevalent in mid-eighteenth century music.

Precursors to the Romantic sonata can be found in works such as Johann Melchior Dreyer's "Short or Light Organ Sonatas," alongside compositions by Johann Georg Janisch and Johann Wilhelm Hessler. Notably, Johann Carl Friedrich Rellstab's sonata, adaptable for both organ and harpsichord, adheres to the established Baroque tradition of improvisational performance variations on keyboard instruments. Despite these examples, the sonata form did not achieve widespread recognition among European organ schools during the eighteenth century. The organ primarily served practical purposes within ecclesiastical and educational contexts. However, the genre's eventual ascendancy suggests a promising future for the sonata in the realm of organ music. The nineteenth century witnessed the significant ascendancy of the organ sonata. Its evolution accelerated during the latter half of the Romantic era, culminating in a peak of stylistic refinement within the twentieth century. Examination of this developmental period reveals the enduring popularity and widespread adoption of the organ sonata among musicians deeply invested in the organ performance tradition.

The resurgence of the organ's popularity, particularly within the context of concert performances, contributes significantly to this phenomenon. Furthermore, a notable trend towards secular musical expressions within organ artistry has emerged. Consequently, the sonata emerges as a harmonious synthesis, bridging the divide between traditional sacred organ practices and contemporary secular trends.

The emergence of the romantic organ sonata as a distinct musical form is traceable to Germany in the 1840s. Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's composition of six sonata cycles, opus 65, in 1845, marks a pivotal point in this development. While he initially labeled his works as "*voluntaries*," a term suggested by English publishers, Mendelssohn ultimately embraced the designation "*sonata*." His influence on subsequent composers, particularly those writing within the genre of organ sonata, was profound and widespread. Mendelssohn effectively established a precedent for the romantic organ sonata, shaping its trajectory and inspiring generations of musicians.

During Mendelssohn's lifetime, fellow German composer August Gottfried Ritter, an organist from Magdeburg, inadvertently emerged as a competitor in composing works within the same genre. The temporal difference between the completion of Mendelssohn's sonatas and Ritter's inaugural sonata was negligible, amounting to only a few months. This innovative approach to composition proved highly influential, rapidly gaining traction among composers. As documented by M. Weier, a leading scholar on the romantic organ sonata in Germany, eighty-three composers active over a period of slightly more than fifty years produced sonatas for thThe initial list of authors includes Felix Mendelssohn alongside Johann Reinberger and Max Reger.

The sonata form for organ was remarkably prevalent in Germany, leading to the development of distinct regional schools, each with its own unique lineage and stylistic characteristics. Notably, the Leipzig and Munich schools emerged as prominent centers within this tradition.

The German tradition significantly influenced the development of sonata form in other European musical schools. In France, where sonata composition gained momentum during the latter part of the 19th century, this influence was notably disseminated by Jacques-Nicolas Lemmens (1823-1881), a Belgian musician with strong German musical training. As a student of renowned German organist Adolf Hesse, Lemmens introduced elements of German sonata style into his Parisian performances. Contemporary accounts indicate that Lemmens, the composer of three sonatas himself, frequently incorporated passages from Mendelssohn's cycles into his concerts. A notable example was his performance at the inaugural concert following the restoration of the Saint-Eustache organ in Paris in 1854, where he played the finale of Mendelssohn's First Sonata. One of the leading figures in French sonata composition during the late 19th century was Alexander Gilman, a student of Lemmens who went on to create eight extensive sonata cycles.

CONCLUSION

The organ sonata emerged as a distinct genre during the latter half of the 19th century and the turn of the 20th century, attracting considerable attention from composers across various national schools. Its popularity rivals that of organ works associated with church traditions prevalent between the 17th and early 18th centuries.

The 19th century witnessed a prolific surge in piano sonata composition, showcasing the era's finest stylistic and linguistic elements while drawing inspiration from Baroque and Classical traditions honed through clavier and piano development. This Romantic model led to diverse genre innovations, enabling a nuanced typology of the form.

However, a significant portion of this musical repertoire resides outside the mainstream organ canon, particularly within certain national contexts. While not all compositions possess undeniable artistic merit or bear renowned composer names, they remain worthy of scholarly investigation. Such exploration sheds light on less-explored facets of musical artistry and evolution.

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