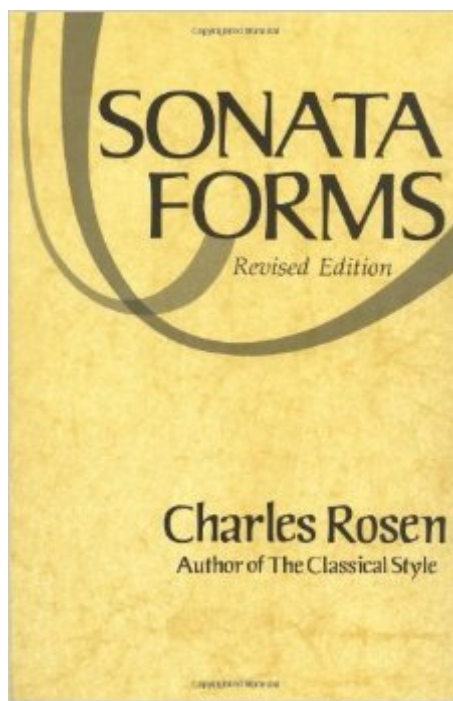


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Sonata Forms (Revised Edition)



Synopsis

"Nobody writes better about music again and again, unerring insight into just the features that make the music special and fine." •The New York Review of Books Charles Rosen says of sonata form: "[It] is not a definite form like a minuet, a da capo aria, or a French overture; it is, like the fugue, a way of writing, a feeling for proportion, direction, and texture rather than a pattern."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Rosen's book, now in a revised edition, is a follow-up to his classic "Classical Style," and it helps to be acquainted with the earlier work, or at least to be somewhat accustomed to the author's elaborate and occasionally repetitive prose and his habit of illustrating the discussion with copious, lengthy musical examples. The early chapters explain the author's choice of the plural for the title and distinguish his view of the sonata structure as opposed to the single form dictated by nineteenth-century authorities such as Czerny. Particularly interesting, if not altogether coherent, is the attempt to relate the rise of use of sonata principles by composers to the rise in prestige of instrumental music. A couple of chapters on sonata-form predecessors (aria, concerto, other works by early Italians such as Scarlatti and Sammartini) are succeeded by generally lucid discussions on motivic development and the component parts of fully developed sonata form: exposition, development, recapitulation, and coda. The last part of the book examines how sonata structure has continued to influence and at times frustrate post-Classical composers. If one looks for it, there are brilliant analyses to be found throughout this book, often in unexpected places: a full-scale and

fascinating dissection of the first movement of Mozart's great "Prague" Symphony in D major is hidden away in the middle of the "Motif and Function" chapter. Therein lies the major problem of this book for me, in that Rosen, ironically enough in a work about form, seems to have trouble ordering and presenting his ideas in a logical fashion. The chapter on concertos seems intended to illustrate pre-sonata principles, but contradicts its purpose with illustrations mainly from Mozart and his contemporaries.

First: this book presupposes a reader who can read music well and knows some harmonic theory--if you know what chord V of V is in any key, you're fine; if that looked like Greek or mathematics to you, look elsewhere for a book on sonata form. That said, if, as I did, you tried to read Rosen's *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* and found yourself confused by his discussion of sonata form there, this could be the place to start. Rosen's analysis of the sonata forms (notice the plural) here gives the reader a much more complete and convincing argument for his analysis of sonatas as dramatic conflicts of tonalities (and yes, that's an oversimplification of his analysis, but it'll have to do) rather than the standard explanation of a sonata as the exposition/development/recapitulation of two themes in different keys so many of us received. Now for the bad news: if Rosen's knowledge of particulars is vast and unimpeachable, his argumentation and methods are iffy, especially at crucial points. Case in point: Rosen dismisses general practice as an explanatory model for why sonata forms developed as they did as relying on "a false psychology of the composition and reception of music." (p. 4) In its place, he wants to put the social history of musical performance and reception at the time of the rise of the sonata forms, which he first employs to devastating polemical effect against an unnamed proponent of the general practice model.

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