A Darker Turn: Post-Transition Minor-Mode Excursions as Stylistic Device

[Slide 1: Title Slide]

In the first movement of Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Sonata in C Minor, op. 13, also known as the "Pathetique" sonata, the music after the medial caesura, which should inaugurate a secondary theme in the mediant, E-flat major, instead initiates a thirty-eight-bar excursion in E-flat minor that takes place over a dominant pedal. A similar situation occurs in the first movement of Louise Farrenc's Trio for Flute, Cello, and Piano in E Minor, op. 45 where a six-bar phrase prolonging the dominant in the minor mediant follows the medial caesura. Both of these minor-mode interjections are followed by secondary themes in the major mediant which lead to authentic cadences in their respective keys.

Although these excursions may seem like formal quirks, they are both instances of an earlier practice found in early- and mid-eighteenth century sonata forms. In movements where this practice occurs, a transition prepares for a major-mode secondary key but that key's arrival is postponed by a passage in the parallel minor. The minor-mode passage is usually brief, frequently begins with the minor tonic harmony, and almost always concludes on the dominant. This dominant provides a point of contact with the parallel major and enables a smooth shift to that key. After this dominant, the secondary theme arrives in the prepared, major-mode secondary key and leads to a PAC in that key. Although one finds this device primarily in major-mode movements, a minor-key adaptation of it occurs in Carlos Seixas's Sonata in E minor. This paper recognizes the historical precedents for the examples by Beethoven and Farrenc and transforms them from seeming anomalies to updated versions of a well-established structural and stylistic device. I begin by providing some background information on the early-Classical precedents to the later examples. This leads to a discussion of Seixas's Sonata in E minor. This movement provides a reference point and flows into closer examinations of the examples by Beethoven and Farrenc. The paper concludes with a comparison of the three examples as well as some discussion of how the use a minor mode excursion appears to have changed over time. **CLICK**

[SL2: MinorMap] In early- and mid-eighteenth-century compositional practice, it was not uncommon to find the parallel minor used at points where the major mode would be expected. The diagram presented as Example 1 provides a roadmap applicable to the mid-exposition minor-mode excursions I am discussing today. In major-mode expositions, the inclusion of a passage in the unexpected minor mode creates a strong contrast with both its major-mode surroundings and with one's expectations. In minor-mode movements, the passage represents what Hepokoski and Darcy have called a "lights out effect", a generic term used to describe the effect of an unexpected passage in the minor mode at various points in a sonata form movement. Although it doesn't create as much contrast with its surroundings because of the movement's minor key, the use of a minor-mode excursion in a minor-mode movement is particularly striking. It suggests that the one expected reprieve from the minor has been withheld and that even a temporary escape to the major mode will not be possible. The eventual shift to the major mediant for the secondary theme seems even more tenuous and temporary than usual given the uncertainty of mode that followed the medial caesura. **CLICK.**

[SL3: MECPractice] For the curious, I've listed some representative movements in the major mode that contain such excursions here. Michael Talbot has discussed the use of shifts from the major to the minor and back again in the music of Domenico Scarlatti. Talbot points to an Italian practice of inserting short, minor-key passages into sections in the parallel major. This practice became popular in the 1710s and 1720s and may have been a precedent for Scarlatti's use of such passages. Talbot's article discusses all such shifts, regardless of their location in a musical form. But Talbot argues that unprepared shifts at the exposition's midpoint **quote** "help[ ] to dramatize this important point of articulation" **end-quote** (Talbot, 38). Charles Rosen recognized this practice's occurrence in major-mode movements as one of his mid-eighteenth century "stereotypes," but argued that its use waned later in

the eighteenth century because the use of the minor dominant weakened the polarization between the tonic and dominant. **CLICK**

[SL4: Seixas] Carlos Seixas's Sonata in E Minor presents a rare example of this practice in a minor-mode, early-eighteenth century work. Please see Example 2 or the screen. Apart from the movement's key, Seixas's exposition presents a relatively usual example of the early- and mid-eighteenth century practice. Following a medial caesura at measure 19 built around a half cadence in the mediant, G Major, a passage in G minor occurs in measures 20 through 25. The passage is organized as a presentation phrase and cadential progression. This was not an uncommon method of organization. The first movement of Boccherini's String Trio in A Major, G. 79 uses a similar structure. In Seixas's sonata, this passage establishes G minor with an expansion of tonic and then leads to a half cadence in that key. The concluding dominant allows the piece to pivot immediately to the major mode and a passage leading to a PAC. Let's take a listen to what the exposition sounds like. **PLAY**.

Those familiar with the examples by Beethoven or Farrenc may already have noticed an important difference here. While the later examples prolong the dominant, the example by Seixas begins with a clear prolongation of the minor tonic. With this in mind, let's turn to the expositions by Beethoven and Farrenc. **CLICK**

[SL5: Beethoven] The passage from Beethoven's "Pathetique" sonata is shown in Example 3 on the handout. It is also shown on the screen, but some of the central measures have been omitted there due to space. A medial caesura built around a half cadence in the mediant, E-flat major, occurs at measure 49. A brief caesura fill connects the end of the transition to a lengthy passage prolonging the dominant of E-flat minor. The passage begins with a cadential six-four, making the mode clear. The proportions here differ from other examples. The excursions from the Seixas, the Farrenc, and other examples are approximately equal to or shorter than the primary theme. The entire passage here is thirty-nine bars long which is the length of the primary theme and transition combined. The conclusion

of the passage is also different. While other examples remain in minor for their entirety, the final bars of this passage, particularly the cadential six-four and root position dominant at measures 87 and 88, prematurely shift to E-flat major. At measure 89, the second half of the exposition finally reaches the tonic of that key. Let's take a listen to this excerpt. **PLAY.**

CLICK.

[SL6: Farrenc] Like Beethoven's sonata, Farrenc's trio also constructs a minor mode passage around a dominant prolongation of the minor mode's dominant. Please see Example 4. Farrenc's work comes closer to earlier examples in terms of the minor-mode excursion's proportions. Following a cadence in the mediant, G major, at measure 45, a six-bar passage in G minor occurs. This canonic passage has a sparser texture than our previous examples. It begins with a melody in the piano's upper voice that is then passed to a lower voice of the same and finally to the cello before the group comes to rest on a dominant chord. In Farrenc's excursion the minor-mode signifiers, namely the lowered third and sixth scale degrees, primarily appear as melodic decorations of the dominant triad until measures 48 through 50 where the minor tonic appears in first inversion **CLICK**, then root position, and finally as a cadential six-four. An anacrusis played by the pianist then carries the exposition into the secondary theme. Let's listen to this passage as well. Consider Farrenc's uses of imitation and whether that use might be understood as a reference to the archaic style which the minor-mode excursion comes from. **PLAY**.

CLICK

[SL7: Recaps] What occurs after the minor-mode excursion is also of interest in these pieces. The minor-mode passages from the expositions of the sonatas by Seixas and Beethoven return during their respective works' recapitulations. In major-mode works employing this practice, the minor-mode passage often returns unchanged, save for the transposition. This does not appear to be the case in minor-mode movements. Although the passages in question return, each is somehow altered. In both

cases, the recapitulation version of the minor-mode passage occurs immediately after an altered version of the primary theme.

Seixas sonata uses the Type 2 sonata form. In this form, the primary theme and transition return as part of the development and the secondary theme returns in the tonal resolution. There is no complete recapitulation of the entire exposition in the tonic key. In Seixas's sonata, the development closes with a half cadence in measure 54. **CLICK.** A rest with a fermata similar to what occurred at the medial caesura in the exposition follows. The minor mode passage then returns, but begins with an expansion of the subdominant that leads to a half cadence in tonic. After this, the secondary theme returns in the minor tonic, leading to the end of the piece. Beethoven and Farrenc both use the "textbook" or Type 3 sonata form, which includes a complete recapitulation. The return of the minor-mode passage in Beethoven's recapitulation also begins in the minor subdominant and ends with dominant of the home key. **CLICK.** One notable difference here is that the medial caesura in Beethoven's recapitulation is built around a half cadence in the minor subdominant, providing a greater sense of that key.

Neither of these recapitulations preserves the modal contrast that the passage created during the exposition. Interestingly enough, Farrenc's recapitulation, though it does not repeat the original minor-mode passage, invokes the modal contrast heard in the exposition (though in a completely different context).**CLICK** Farrenc's recapitulation skips the minor-mode passage entirely and instead launches into the secondary theme at measure 242, now in the parallel major. By measure 289, however, we have returned to the minor mode which the piece ends in. In this way, Farrenc preserves the modal contrast from the exposition despite omitting the original passage. **CLICK**

[SL8: Compare] Let's compare these movements to one another. Each follows the same basic outline: a strong medial caesura in the major mediant occurs, a passage in the minor mediant follows, said passage ends on its dominant, and final, a passage in the major mediant begins and leads to a PAC.

The two later examples differ from the earlier one most notably in their approaches to harmony. **CLICK.** While Seixas's passage opens with a prolongation of the minor tonic, both Beethoven and Farrenc center their passages on prolongations of the minor mediant's dominant. Beethoven's passage is interesting in that it shifts to the major mode before its conclusion, unlike other examples of this practice.

The use of the minor tonic harmony in these passages is also interesting. **CLICK** Seixas begins his excursion with a root position minor tonic, making the unexpected shift in key immediately clear. Although Beethoven avoids the minor tonic in root position, he does open his passage with a minor cadential six-four. This reflects the mode of the passage, but resists the stronger, root-position statement of the minor tonic. While Seixas and Beethoven both use the minor tonic chord at the beginning of their passages, Farrenc uses the canon to establish the mode more subtly through melodic embellishment and saves the minor tonic harmony for the latter part of the passage.

CLICK Beethoven's passage distorts the usual proportions of this practice, enlarging the minor-mode excursion to occupy the same amount of space as the primary theme and transition combined. In most movements, like the Farrenc or the Seixas, the minor-mode passage occupies a number of measures equal to or less than the length of the primary theme. **CLICK.** Farrenc's passage is interesting because of its use of canon. Although not found in the examples by Seixas or Beethoven, the use of imitation has a precedent in other works which Farrenc may have been familiar with in her work as an editor and publisher of earlier music.

CLICK. In the movements' respective recapitulations, Seixas and Beethoven use similar strategies for the return of the passage. Both begin their passages in the minor subdominant and conclude with a half cadence in the tonic. In this way, they repeat the excursion, but omit the modal contrast that originally accompanied it. Farrenc on the other hand omits the passage, but preserves the

modal contrast by having the secondary theme open in the major tonic before shifting back to the minor tonic for the end of the movement.

This paper opened with two examples from minor-mode movements by Beethoven and Farrenc that feature post-medial caesura excursions in the minor mode where the major mode was anticipated. We explored these examples and then turned to their early-Classical precedents. These precedents suggest that the later examples can be understood to grow from an earlier practice of using modal contrast in both major- and, more rarely, minor-mode movements. This investigation shows that, far from merely being isolated events, these later examples are related to an earlier practice.

How far back the practice of using the minor mode for contrast can be traced is still open-ended. Bella Brover-Lubovsky has examined the use of the parallel minor in Vivaldi's works. She suggests that Vivaldi experimented with ways of creating tonal and modal contrast in his works. This included using the minor dominant where the major dominant would be expected. Brover-Lubovsky points to an earlier practice, the mixolydian dominant, as a potential precedent of Vivaldi's use of the minor dominant as a key area in his works. The mixolydian dominant occurred regularly in seventeenth-century works but waned in popularity by the turn of the eighteenth century.

Further research into related Baroque-era practices is warranted as is an examination of how Baroque ideas of modal contrast factor into the incorporation of these minor mode shifts in later eras. Greater study of minor-mode works from the eighteenth century is also necessary and will provide insight into how extensive the practice discussed here. Such research may allow us to further refine our knowledge of when the minor-mode excursion is used, what other circumstances in a work might coincide with its use, and what the origins of this practice might be.

CLICK. [SL9 final] Thank you, and I look forward to seeing everyone at the conference.