

Progressive Tonality in the Finale of the Piano Quintet, Op. 44 of Robert Schumann

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Through the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth, when one thinks of tonality in instrumental music, tonal closure is assumed. That is, a work or a movement of a larger work begins and ends in the same key. Simple? Certainly. That this is not the case with, among other genres, opera in the nineteenth century is a well-documented fact. In the Classical operas of Haydn and Mozart and the early Romantic operas of Rossini, tonal closure over an entire opera or at least within significant sections such as finales was the norm. However, by the time of Donizetti operas rarely ended in the key in which they opened and in act finales or other large scenes, places where Mozartean tonal closure might seem to have been an idea worth continuing, progressive tonality was the norm. Apparently, the structural unity brought about by tonal closure was not felt to be necessary: dramatic unity of plot was sufficient.

One particularly significant exception to the rule of tonal closure in instrumental music is the finale of Robert Schumann's Piano Quintet, Op. 44. This work is a product of his extremely fertile chamber music

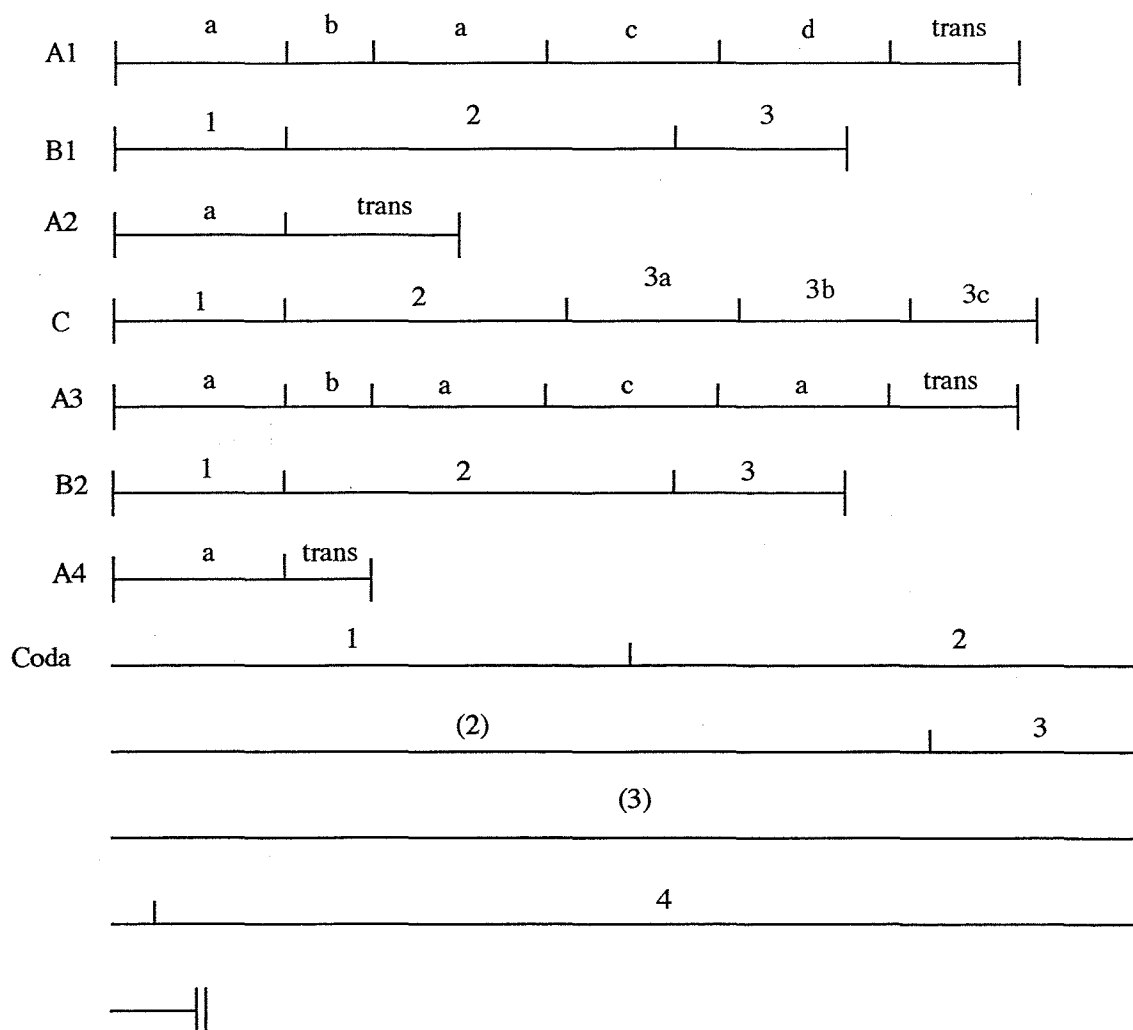
year of 1842, a year which also saw the composition of the three string quartets of Op. 41 and the Piano Quartet, Op. 47. This finale, unique in his instrumental music, is tonally progressive, opening in G minor and reaching its ultimate tonic of E-flat only at the return of the B episode, and even here its finality is challenged severely.

Structurally, the finale is uncomplicated—a straightforward seven-part rondo with a middle section exhibiting many of the composer's favorite developmental processes. To get some indication of the tonal complexities of the movement (interesting, isn't it, how tonal complexity is so often found within structural simplicity?) let us look at the opening section in some detail. The themes of the refrain are shown in Example 1a-1c. Figure 1, a time line of the movement, with subsections identified, should also be consulted.

Example 1. Refrain, principal themes.

The image displays three musical staves, each representing a principal theme of the refrain. All three staves are in G minor, indicated by two flats (B-flat and E-flat) in the key signature. Staff 1a, labeled 'Aa', shows a single melodic line in treble clef. Staff 1b, labeled 'Ab', shows a single melodic line in treble clef. Staff 1c, labeled 'Ac', shows a single melodic line in treble clef. The notation includes various note values, rests, and accidentals, with some notes beamed together in staff 1c.

Figure 1. Time-line of Finale.



The opening key of the movement is sometimes considered to be C minor. The confusion probably stems from two things. First, Schumann uses a 3-flat key signature, hinting at the ultimate key. Second, the movement begins with a strong C minor chord and the melodic line in the piano clearly outlines a C minor chord. It is clear on listening, however, that the tonal focus of the opening motive is unambiguously G minor. One of Schumann's more interesting harmonic clichés is a tendency to treat a rhythmically weak tonic chord as a dominant upbeat to a rhythmically strong subdominant chord. A simple cognate of this practice is his frequent use of subdominant harmonies to open a phrase, a device found throughout the quintet, most notably in the Scherzo.

Schumann begins the finale with a refrain which is itself a miniature five -part rondo. Its *a* section (Example 1a) comprises the first eight bars, themselves a four-bar phrase with immediate repetition, clearly in G minor. The first "episode" (Example 1b) is based on the opening arpeggio motive and teases us with both E-flat major and C minor as keys; the refrain returns without change. The second episode (Example 1c) introduces a motive that will play a role later in the work; more importantly, we have here the first significant hint of the true tonic. There is no reason for any listener to recognize this now—it becomes apparent only after study. The first section concludes with a second return of the opening eight bars, now, however, in the key of D minor, thus giving us another example of the kind of modulatory refrains found throughout the Finale of the third string quartet.

It is evident already that Schumann is not going to give us an easy tonal path to follow. Example 2 consists of a simple harmonic reduction of the movement. Referring to the first section of the harmonic reduction, you can see how Schumann has designed the tonal flow of the refrain. The *a* section presents a prolongation of the tonic following an introductory subdominant chord. The *b* episode presents a passing motion within the same subdominant chord, leading back to the tonic for the return of *a*. The *c* episode gives us a brief prolongation of E-flat, acting, as can be seen by the second-level reduction, as passing motion between I and V. The latter is prolonged during the return of *a*.

Example 2. Tonal Reductions.

A a b a c a

B₁ 5 4 3 3 5 5 5 4:3 3 4:3

A₂ C A₃ A₄

b: i (E: V) g#: V i Eb: iv V I V I

A₁ A₃ NB

G: I I bVI V I Eb: I bVI V I

A brief transition begins with the rising four-note pattern of episode *c*. Its B-flat harmony suggests a preparation for E-flat, but instead the B-flat chord acts as a passing harmony between D minor at the end of the section and G major which opens the first episode.

Example 3. Episode 1, mm. 43-47, 51-53, piano.



In this episode, Schumann demonstrates as well as anywhere his characteristic formal and tonal style. Two-bar units predominate; four-bar units are found only in the last eight measures. The piano, as always in this movement, presents the first two rhythmic motives: the four-note rising scale from the first section in diminution and a figuration based on a slow trill (Example 3a). These alternate in an abab fashion for eight bars while the strings attempt to fabricate a lyric melody. The viola presents the first statement of the completed melody (Example 3b) which is taken up in turn by the other strings over a contrary motion counterpoint in the cello and piano (the melodies in the strings are almost always being doubled by the piano). This melodic treatment continues for 18 measures before the final subsection begins.

Harmonically, this section is also structured in mostly two-bar units. The opening eight bars have two four-bar tonal motions, the first from G major to E minor, the second from C major to A minor, with two bars devoted to each key. Following this, the tonal flow of the lyric section becomes more erratic as the sequential pattern moves slowly toward the dominant of G major. Most of these sequences are

supported by melodic motion to inverted “tonics” as will be noted in the discussion of the tonal reduction. The sequential pattern has as its goal E-flat as flat VI of G. These final statements of the lyric melody lead to the dominant which is deceptively resolved to E minor. This in turn resolves back to the dominant, and the section concludes with a final cadence on G.

Referring to the reduction, part B, you will note first of all the descending third motion at the opening of the episode. At the conclusion of this motion, Schumann moves not to a root position G minor to complete the motion, but instead to a first inversion tonic. This is followed quickly by a tonic 6/4 chord to complete an arpeggiation of the tonic. Six statements of the theme provide a prolongation of the first-inversion G chord leading to the predominant chord and the extended dominant. Briefly, then, the first episode provides an extended I-V-I prolongation continuing and completing the I-V motion of the refrain.

The second A of our large rondo, in keeping with a rondo design in which sonata elements are stressed, is shortened to only eight measures, here in B minor, followed by a fanfare-like transition which can be seen as a prolongation in major of the previous tonic. That this transition ends on a B major chord could be taken as a clue that the middle episode will be in the key of E. The key signature of 4 sharps further hints at this. However, E is present only in the form of a prolonged dominant that provides the opening to an extended passage of dominants in several key areas that makes up the second half of the episode.

Melodic material from the first episode predominates in this central quasi-development. An A-sharp o7 chord leads to nine bars of piano figuration resolving to B. A progression of B7 - G-sharp introduces a similar passage of figuration, shortened to only four bars, leading to C-sharp. The same piano passage work, showing similar shortening—three bars then two bars—leads to a sustained D7 chord which is resolved deceptively. The lyric theme from the first episode returns, quasi staccato, as support to a new lyric theme (Example 4) heard twice in the first violin over the prolonged V7 of E major alluded to earlier.

Example 4. Episode 2, mm. 115-18, violin 1.



A complementary passage with the theme in second violin and viola takes place over a similarly prolonged V7 of G-sharp minor. The accompanying melody, heard twice more in unison, concludes the episode and leads directly to the return of A.

Schumann, in his chamber music especially, feels no need to return rondo refrains in the tonic. This has already happened in the Quintet as the first, abbreviated, return was in the remote key of B minor. He continues this tonal exploration by opening the recapitulation section of the rondo in G-sharp minor. The design of this refrain is exactly that of the first: a five-part rondo plus a brief linking passage to B. After eight bars of G-sharp minor, the brief *b* part leads to a return of the *a* theme now in D-sharp minor, paralleling the *i-v* relationship of the first section, but bringing the dominant in at the second rather than the third *a*. The *c* part continues the rising fifth progression, being in B-flat minor (enharmonic A-sharp minor). The brief linking passage is built over a G-flat pedal which acts as a third-related passing harmony between B-flat minor and the E-flat major of the episode. Referring again to the final part of the reduction, you will find the tonal plans of the first and third A sections superimposed. Note that by introducing the dominant of G-sharp minor early, as it were, when compared with the first A, the remainder of the latter refrain is an exact transposition of the former. This leads inevitably to the V of E-flat to prepare for the last episode. The primary tonality of this refrain, then, can be seen as an extended enharmonic minor subdominant of E-flat, another illustration of Schumann's fondness for this area.

In design, the two B episodes are identical, save for some minor instrumental changes in the second. Tonally, they are also the same, except for the second being transposed down a major third to put it into E-flat.

The fourth A is, like the second, reduced to eight bars, returning to the G minor of the beginning in a context which makes it act as if it were iii of E-flat rather than a tonic in its own right as before. A final unison flourish leads once again to E-flat.

At this point an extended coda begins. E-flat major is the key quite clearly; the strength of the tonic is weakened, however, by avoidance of a root position tonic chord for 24 bars. This passage acts more as a link to the first main coda section—a contrapuntal combination of the opening theme, heard at long last in the tonic, and a motive related to that of the B episode. This section, the first of two contrapuntal portions of the coda, continues for twenty-six measures. The combination of the two thematic ideas is treated much like a fugato, complete with “real” and “tonal” entries (Example 5).

Example 5. Coda, mm. 252-56, violin 1, violin 2, piano;
mm. 262-66, piano.

Schumann seems curiously reluctant to let E-flat remain unchallenged as key: the contrapuntal working-out of the motives centers ultimately around the original key of G minor. Following a weak cadence in this key, the main motive of the B episode returns, now in E-flat but with

later strong hints of the traditional coda subdominant. A cadential passage of thirty-two measures follows upon these twelve bars of B material. This passage opens with another hint of the main theme before an extended motion to the dominant of E-flat. At this point the final section of the coda begins with the main themes of the first and last movements in counterpoint. Since the two themes are of unequal length, the overlapping of entries provides considerable contrapuntal interest of a kind not often associated with mid 19th-century music (Example 6). There is a strong subdominant focus to the theme of the first movement, and this combined with “tonal” statements of the theme of the fourth movement gives a strong subdominant color to the whole. A parenthetical note of some interest: this section is the first in the entire movement to have a downbeat phrase beginning. Everywhere else, phrases begin midbar. After thirty-six measures, the dominant is reached and prolonged for sixteen measures as the two themes continue in combination. A nine-bar link brings back the opening idea of the coda, leading to the final cadential flourishes bringing the movement and the work to a firm, at long last, resolution in E-flat.

Example 6. Coda, mm. 319-33.

Having brought our discussion of the Finale to a close, it is informative to relate it to the larger context of the entire quintet. The first movement is a conventional sonata design in E-flat major with the second theme in B-flat. A slow movement, in *Modo d'una Marcia*,

follows. It is in C minor with a characteristic subdominant stress at the beginning. This movement, also a seven-part rondo, has episodes in, first, C major and E minor, then F minor; the first episode is returned in F. It should also be noted that the third refrain has an even stronger subdominant flavor to its opening than had the first. The Scherzo is in E-flat major with trios in G-flat (with another strong opening on IV) and A-flat.

The opening of the final movement in G minor, with its continuance through G-sharp minor to E-flat major, in a sense is anticipated by the third movement's use of G-flat (flat III) and A-flat (IV). In the finale, G-flat is replaced by G (iii) and A-flat is replaced by the enharmonic minor, but the sequence is the same.

In sum, after a typical tonic-dominant key progression in the opening movement, the second movement moves to the third-related submediant keys of C major and minor, alternating with their major and minor subdominant keys (F major and minor). The third movement returns to the tonic, alternating with major flat III and subdominant keys. The last movement opens in the key of the minor mediant with an opening that alludes to the C minor which opened movement two, before moving to the minor subdominant on the way to reestablishing the tonic. Thus, third-related and subdominant keys provide much of the tonal framework for the Quintet with the tonally progressive Finale providing the final emphasis.