Rethinking the “Unthinkable”: Defining Closure in Brahms’s Sonata Forms

Does current research on the Classical sonata apply to Romantic modifications of the form? Although Hepokoski and Darcy amply demonstrate the increasing frequency of ambiguous or missing points of sectional closure, they do not address the possibility that this “extreme” and “unthinkable” Classical technique might not bear the same weight in the Romantic sonata. Even a cursory examination of Brahms’s sonata output, however, clearly demonstrates that a completely different rhetorical strategy is at play. This study compares the structural resolutions in Brahms’s sonatas to those typical of Classical sonatas, asserting that a de-emphasis of the EEC and ESC cadences leads to a broader and less sectionally-defined sonata form. The first piano sonata, the second piano sonata, the horn trio finale, and the second violin sonata exemplify the convergence of thematic and cadential ambiguity to delay structural closure until the coda of the movement, outside of sonata space altogether. This paper thus challenges the use of analytical methods which are grounded in the Classical style for the nineteenth-century repertoire. Each of the movements, while considered to “fail” according to Sonata Theory’s EEC/ESC construct, behaves exactly as expected of Brahms’s music, delaying closure until the last possible moment.