

Sonata Rondo form:
An introduction, based on Brahms String Quartet
Op.51 No. 2

by

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(Resources required: Score and recording)

Numerous examples of so-called sonata form (exposition-development-recapitulation) can be found within the classical and romantic periods, as reflected elsewhere in the musicteachers.co.uk resources page. There is one example of the ritornello form: Bach's 4th Brandenburg Concerto. A rondo differs from a ritornello in that a musical section or idea repeats in the same key, whereas in a ritornello form it often moves around the keys. The sonata-rondo blends this aspect of the rondo with exposition-development-recapitulation of the sonata.

A typical sonata-rondo form is:

AB AC AB' A

This formal scheme can indicate the presence of a repeating section, A, but is less specific about the relationship between couplets: What is the difference between AB and AC?

To answer this we need to examine the progress of the small themes Brahms uses during this movement. This movement responds well to such detailed analysis, being constructed in a very logical fashion. We can understand the differences between AB and AC by isolating the themes Brahms uses, and what happens to them; it may be helpful to copy each of the themes presented in the first couplet out.

1st couplet	R	S	T	U	V	W
Bar	1	25	39	58	75	91

2nd couplet	R	S	T	U	R ₁
Bar	116	129	143	161	186

R₁ is a short repeating motive, derivative of R. Something similar is also to be found at bar 293. Because the second of the above tables has no V and W, we can group R, S, T and U together as 'A'. There is therefore a difference of omission between AB (RSTU-VW) and AC (RSTU-R₁), although as C is motivically related to A, labelling the first two couplets each AB and AC is something of an oversimplification.

The third couplet includes themes V and W, so can perhaps be labelled AB':

3rd couplet	R	S	T	U	V	W	R ₁ A (Coda)
Bar	198	222	238	251	268	284	293

There is another fundamental similarity between the first and third couplets, as the table of tonalities below indicates:

Bar	R	S	T	U	V	W	R ₁ /R ₁ A
1	a.....	C,G	g	d	G	
116	a		F	d/e			e
198	a.....	A,E	e	b	E	A

One can see that R comes round each time in its home key of A minor, but there is significant variance in the transition between R, S and T. The first and third couplets are broadly similar, with the first difference occurring at 232 (compare bar 34). This leads to a presentation of T a third lower than in the first instance. Themes U V and W are presented in tonalities a third lower, although the textures within the scoring are revoiced.

The second, truncated, couplet sticks much less rigidly to the material of the first couplet, something easy to hear by playing the opening of the movement but following the score from bar 116. Its character is more that of a development, the final couplet one of a recapitulation.

We can therefore conclude that, vertically, this movement is a Rondo, and horizontally, it is a sonata movement:

R o n d o	Exposition
	Development
	Recapitulation

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Brahms finished this piece in the summer of 1873, along with its companion work, op.51 no. 1. These were the first string quartets he deigned to publish, despite working in the genre for some years previously, and their gestation began at least as early as 1865. Whilst not programmatic op.51 no. 2 has a deeply personal expressive element – the first movement opens with the quotation F-A-E and later combines this with F-A-F, in each case ‘Frei aber einsam’ – free but lonely, for his friend and mentor the violinist Joseph Joachim and ‘Frei aber froh’ – free but happy, for himself.