Hybrid Themes: Toward a Refinement in the Classification of Classical Theme Types

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Three fundamental concepts dominate the theory of form at foreground levels of a musical work: motive, phrase, and period. Almost all North American textbooks see the motive as the smallest unit of form and then describe the phrase as a collection of motives. A pair of phrases, termed *antecedent* and *consequent,* constitute the period, the principal category of thematic organization.[1] Although these traditional terms are still widely used, many theorists and historians find them to be poorly defined and overly extended in their range of application. All too often antecedent and consequent are used in reference to such a wide variety of formal situations that the terms eventually mean little else than any first phrase followed by any second phrase, irrespective of their internal content and organization.

This overgenerality in terminology has sparked interest in another category of form regularly taught in German-speaking countries—the sentence (*Satz*). Early in this century, Arnold Schoenberg defined the sentence as an eight-measure unit

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1. Some theorists introduce the concept of "phrase group" or "phrase chain" to describe combination of phrases that do not make up a period, but there is little consensus about the precise meaning of these terms (see Douglass Green, *Form in Tonal Music* [2nd edn. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979], pp.53–54; Wallace Berry, *Form in Music* [2nd edn. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1986], pp.24–25). At the next higher level of formal organization, most theorists treat the binary and ternary "song forms."

and established it and the eight-measure period as the two structures that customarily articulate "a complete musical idea or theme."[2] The sentence has indeed proven to be a powerful concept for the analysis of lower-level form. Numerous simple themes can be described with relative ease, rather than being excluded, or uncomfortably accommodated, by the category of period.

The notion that a simple theme can be described as either a sentence or a period was further propagated in the writings of Schoenberg's students, especially Erwin Ratz in his *Einführung in die musikalische Formenlehre*.[3] Indeed, Ratz presents these two forms as distinct not only structurally but also aesthetically:

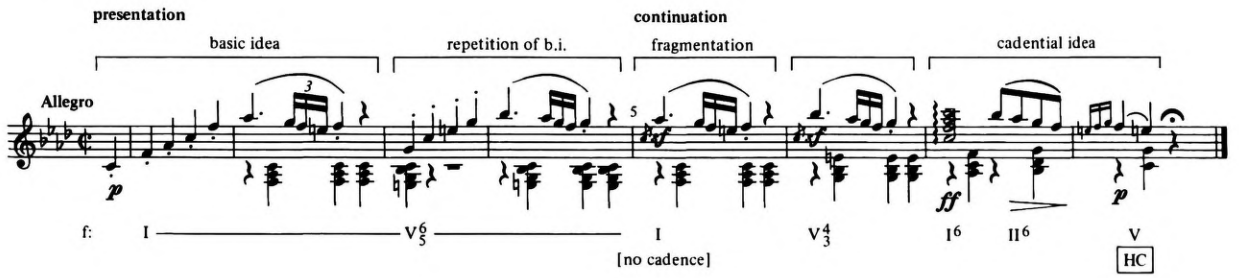
> In the case of the period we have a symmetrical structure that has a certain "repose in itself" due to the balance of its two halves, which are more or less equal. . . . The eight-measure sentence, however, contains a certain forward-striving character due to the increased activity and compression in its continuation phrase [mm.5–8], making it fundamentally different in construction from the symmetrical organization of the period.[4]

Despite this distinction between two fundamental theme types, the actual musical situation is often more complex than suggested by these remarks. Indeed, many themes are difficult to classify within the sentence/period model: although some themes bear little relation to either form, a sizable number clearly combine features of both types. These latter themes have, up until now, received little theoretical discussion. At best, someone familiar with Schoenberg's ideas might observe that a given theme is "more like a sentence than a period" (or vice-versa) but would not have the means of describing with precision just how the theme fits into that theoretical framework.

2. Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition,* ed. Gerald Strang and Leonard Stein (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p.20. Schoenberg uses the term "theme" to refer to a complete formal unit (normally lasting eight measures) and not, as frequently used in English-language writings on form, to a fragmentary melodic idea or "tune." Schoenberg's notion of theme will be retained in the present study.

3. Erwin Ratz, *Einführung in die musikalische Formenlehre* (3rd enl. edn. Vienna: Universal Edition, 1973). See also Anton Webern, *The Path to the New Music,* ed. Willi Reich (Bryn Mawr, Pa.: Theodore Presser, 1963), pp.27, 30–31; Erwin Stein, *Form and Performance* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), pp.93–95; and Josef Rufer, *Composition with Twelve Notes,* trans. Humphrey Searle (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1954), pp.32–33. More recently, Carl Dahlhaus examined the logical status of these categories and reaffirmed the sentence and period as fundamentally opposing theme types ("Satz und Periode," *Zeitschrift für Musiktheorie* 9 [1978], 16–26).

4. Ratz, *Einführung,* p.24 (my trans.).



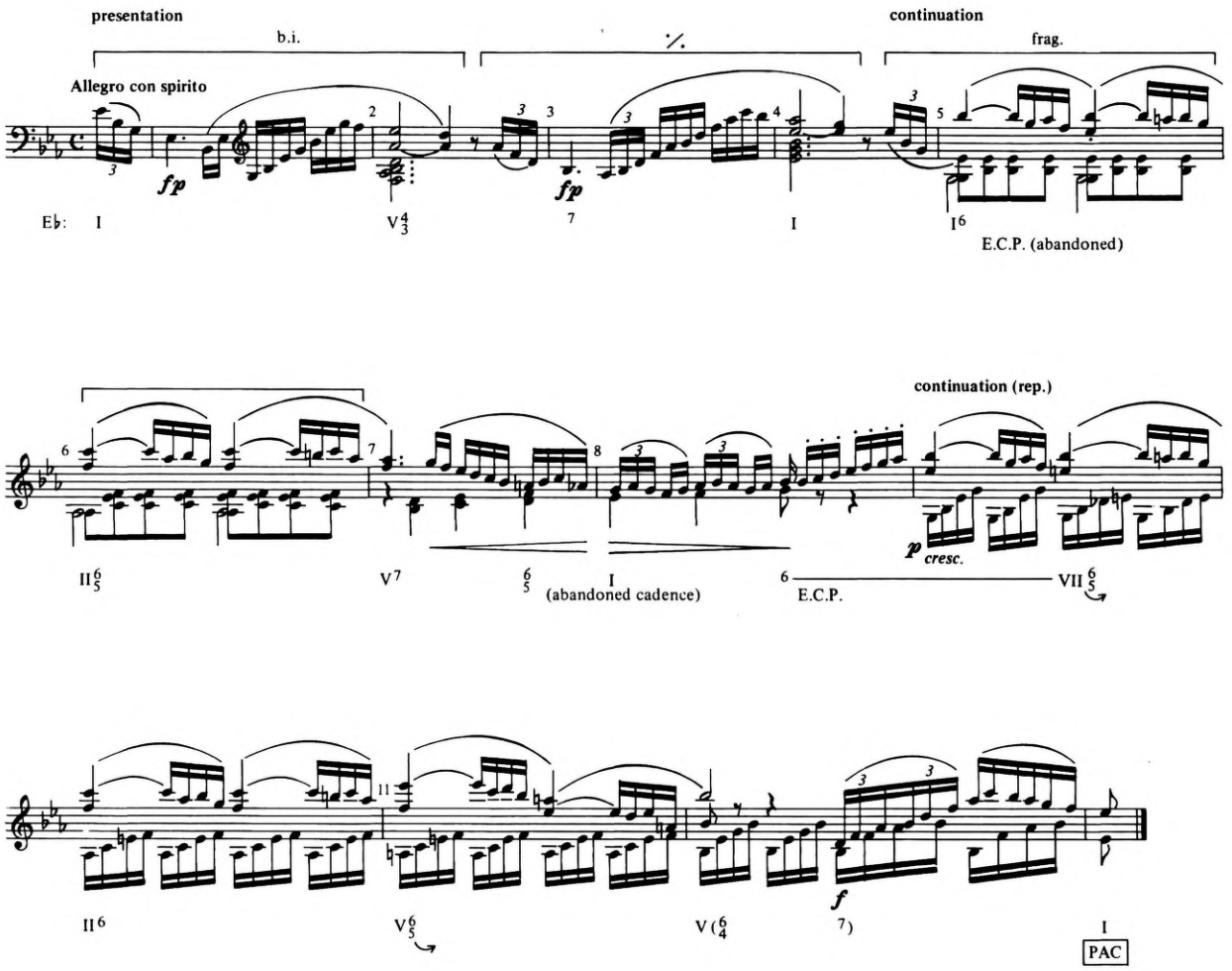
Example 1: Piano Sonata in F Minor, op.2, no.1, movt.I.

In this essay, I shall introduce, and rigorously define, the idea of "hybrid" themes and provide a variety of theoretical tools for the precise analysis of such themes. I shall establish a set of four categories within which hybrid themes can be classified and consider the larger formal contexts in which they tend to occur. I shall conclude by discussing how the concept of hybrid themes raises some broader issues for the theory of musical form. Illustrations of hybrids will be taken from themes that Beethoven wrote during his early years in Vienna. But since similarly organized themes appear throughout the repertories of Haydn and Mozart, hybrid themes must ultimately be understood as an important element of Classical form in general.

Before discussing hybrid themes directly, I must set forth the main characteristics of the sentence and period.[5] The opening of the Piano Sonata in F Minor, op.2, no.1 (ex.1), is the archetypal sentence as described by Schoenberg and his followers. This eight-measure theme consists of two four-measure phrases.[6] The first phrase, a *presentation,* opens with a two-measure *basic idea.* This idea is then immediately repeated in a way that prolongs the initial tonic harmony of the theme and thereby deprives the phrase of cadential closure. The second phrase, a *continuation,* begins by fragmenting the two-measure idea into one-measure units and accelerating the rate of harmonic change. The continuation ends with a cadence, in this case a half cadence, which structurally closes the theme.

5. For a more detailed discussion of these forms, see my "Funktionale Komponenten im achttaktigen Satz," *Musiktheorie* 1 (1986), 239–60; and idem, "The 'Expanded Cadential Progression': A Category for the Analysis of Classical Form," *Journal of Musicological Research* 7 (1987), 215–57.

6. The eight-measure length of the sentence (as well as the period and the four hybrid types) should be understood primarily as a theoretical norm: although many sentences (periods and hybrids) in the Classical literature last eight measures, many others contain a greater or lesser number of measures due to various phrase-structural techniques such as contraction, extension, expansion, interpolation, etc.

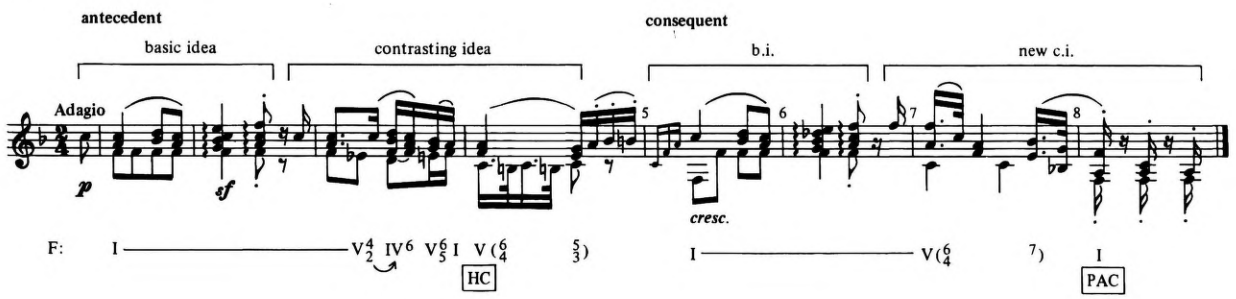


Example 2: Violin Sonata in E♭, op.12, no.3, movt.I.

A somewhat more complex sentence is found at the beginning of the Violin Sonata in E♭, op.12, no.3 (ex.2). The presentation phrase is similar in organization to that of op.2, no.1,[7] and the continuation phrase also features fragmentation into one-measure units and an accelerated harmonic rhythm.[8] But the cadence expected at m.8 is "abandoned" when the cadential dominant in root position is

7. Despite what appears on the surface to be a "cadential" V–I progression in mm.3–4, the downbeat of m.4 is not a cadence: the dominant harmony initially sounds in second inversion (m.2), thus undermining the potential of this dominant to function with true cadential force.

8. Unlike the previous example, the fragmented units are not motivically related to the basic idea. Such motivic connections are not essential to the notion of fragmentation, which exclusively concerns the size, not the content, of the musical units.



Example 3: Piano Variations in F, op.34.

inverted at the end of m.7.[9] This lack of cadential closure motivates a repetition of the phrase, which, after being expanded by one measure, finally concludes with a genuine perfect authentic cadence at m.13. The harmonies supporting the continuation phrase are noteworthy because they make up a single cadential progression, one that is enlarged to cover the entire phrase. This *expanded cadential progression* (E.C.P. in the score) significantly augments the cadential component of this continuation in relation to, say, the more typically compressed cadential ending of almost all themes, such as that of ex.1.[10]

Period form is well illustrated by the opening of the theme of the Piano Variations in F, op.34 (ex.3). Like the sentence, the period begins with a two-measure basic idea. But rather than repeating this idea, a new, *contrasting idea* leads to a weak cadence, usually a half cadence, thus effecting partial closure at the end of this four-measure antecedent phrase. The following consequent phrase represents a repetition of the antecedent but closes more strongly, almost always with a perfect authentic cadence. In order to project the sense that the consequent is restating the antecedent, the original basic idea must return in mm.5 and 6 of the theme.[11] The

9. In an earlier study (" 'Expanded Cadential Progression'," p.243), I referred to a similar kind of cadential situation as a "foiled" cadence; I now prefer the term "abandoned" cadence. The idea of foiling suggests the interposition of some outside force standing in the way of the cadence. But in the situation being described here, the weakening through inversion of the dominant harmony suggests more the notion of the dominant harmony itself "giving up" its promised cadential function. An abandoned cadence can be distinguished from an "evaded cadence," where the dominant remains in root position but the final tonic never appears, and from the "deceptive cadence," where the final tonic is replaced by some other harmony (usually VI).

10. For a more complete discussion of this harmonic technique, see my " 'Expanded Cadential Progression'."

11. Some theorists permit the consequent phrase to begin with entirely new materials, speaking thus of a "contrasting period" (Green, *Form*, p.66). As will become evident below, such themes are much better analyzed as hybrids, whereby the specific function of the second phrase can be determined more exactly (as continuation or cadential).

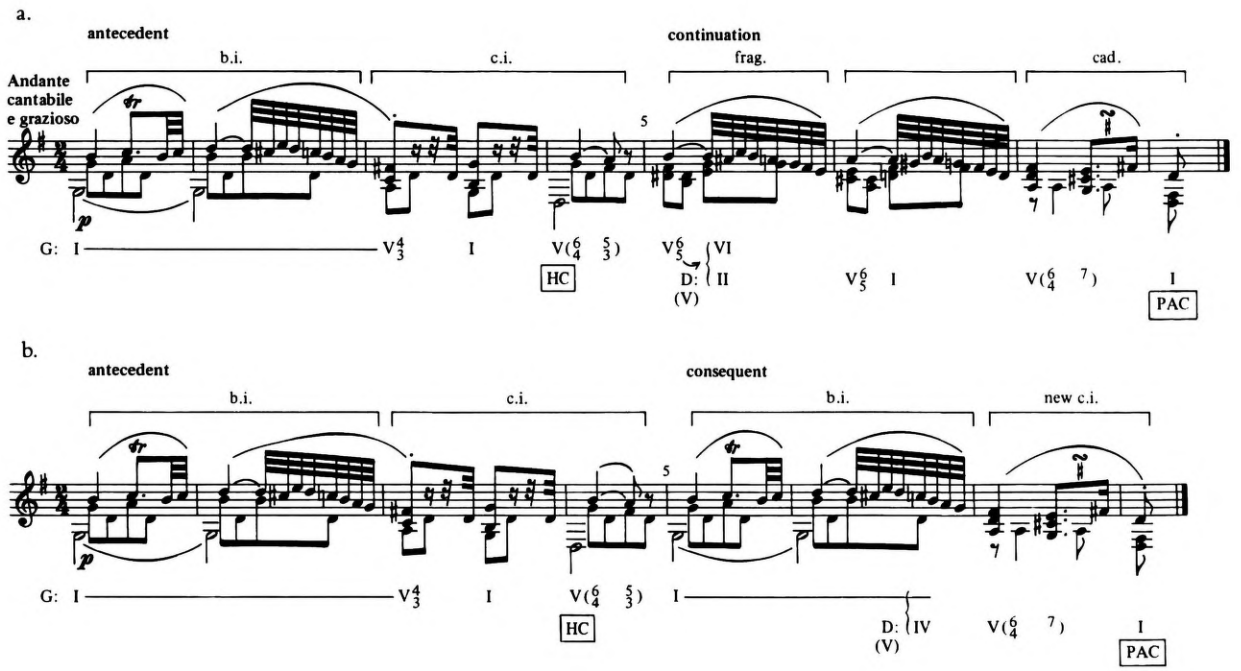
earlier contrasting idea may also reappear, but different contrasting materials are frequently found in mm.7 and 8, as in this example.

To summarize: both the sentence and the period consist of two four-measure phrases. The internal organization of these phrases, however, is entirely different for each theme type. The presentation of the sentence contains a repeated basic idea with no cadential closure. The antecedent of the period states a basic idea juxtaposed with a contrasting idea, which leads to a weak cadence. The continuation of the sentence, which is essentially different from the presentation, features fragmentation, harmonic acceleration, and a concluding cadence. The consequent of the period is largely a restatement of the antecedent with stronger cadential closure.

Hybrid themes, like the sentence and period, are normally constructed as eight-measure units divided into two four-measure phrases. Four different types of hybrids can be identified based on the internal organization of these two phrases. Many hybrids begin as though they were going to be constructed as a period, but end like a sentence; they consist of a four-measure antecedent followed by a four-measure continuation. The opening of the Rondo in G for Piano, op.51, no.2 (ex.4a), clearly illustrates this first category of hybrid themes. The first four-measure phrase brings a two-measure basic idea followed by a two-measure contrasting idea leading to a half cadence. This antecedent is followed by a phrase containing characteristics typical of a continuation: fragmentation into one-measure units, acceleration of the harmonies, and a concluding cadence—here, a perfect authentic cadence in the dominant region.[12] (Beethoven could easily have written a regular period form, whereby the opening antecedent would be restated in the form of a consequent, as reconstructed in ex.4b. I shall offer a possible explanation below for why he does not do so.)

In the second category of hybrid themes, an antecedent is followed by a phrase that is built over an expanded cadential progression, like the one seen in ex.2. The finale of the Violin Sonata in D, op.12, no.1, begins with such a hybrid (ex.5). Note that the second phrase does not exhibit the standard characteristics of a continuation. Since the new melodic material continues to group itself into two-measure units, like the antecedent, there is no sense of fragmentation. Moreover, the harmonic rhythm does not accelerate at the beginning of the second phrase; in fact,

12. This phrase also contains another typical characteristic of a continuation: a sequential progression of harmonies supporting a sequential repetition of a model. In this case, a descending-fifths sequential progression of harmonies supports a one-measure model and its stepwise-descending sequence.

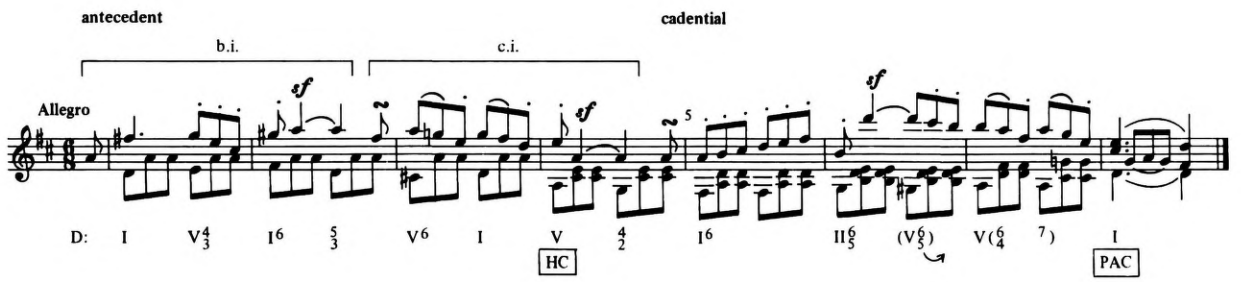


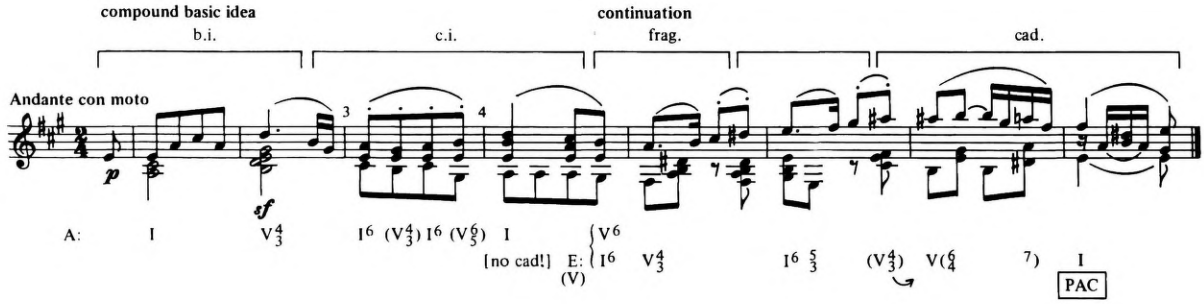
Example 4: Rondo for Piano in G, op.51, no.2.

the rate of harmonic change slows down somewhat. Due to the lack of these features and the prominence of the expanded cadential progression, this four-measure unit can more accurately be considered an exclusively *cadential* phrase rather than a continuation.

The third category of hybrid themes can be illustrated by the beginning of the slow movement of the Violin Sonata just discussed (ex.6). In many respects this passage resembles the first type of hybrid, namely, an antecedent plus continuation. The initial phrase brings a basic idea followed by a contrasting idea, and the second phrase is a typical continuation. A closer look at the end of the first phrase reveals, however, that the contrasting idea does not lead to a genuine cadence of any kind:

Example 5: Violin Sonata in D, op.12, no.1, movt.III.



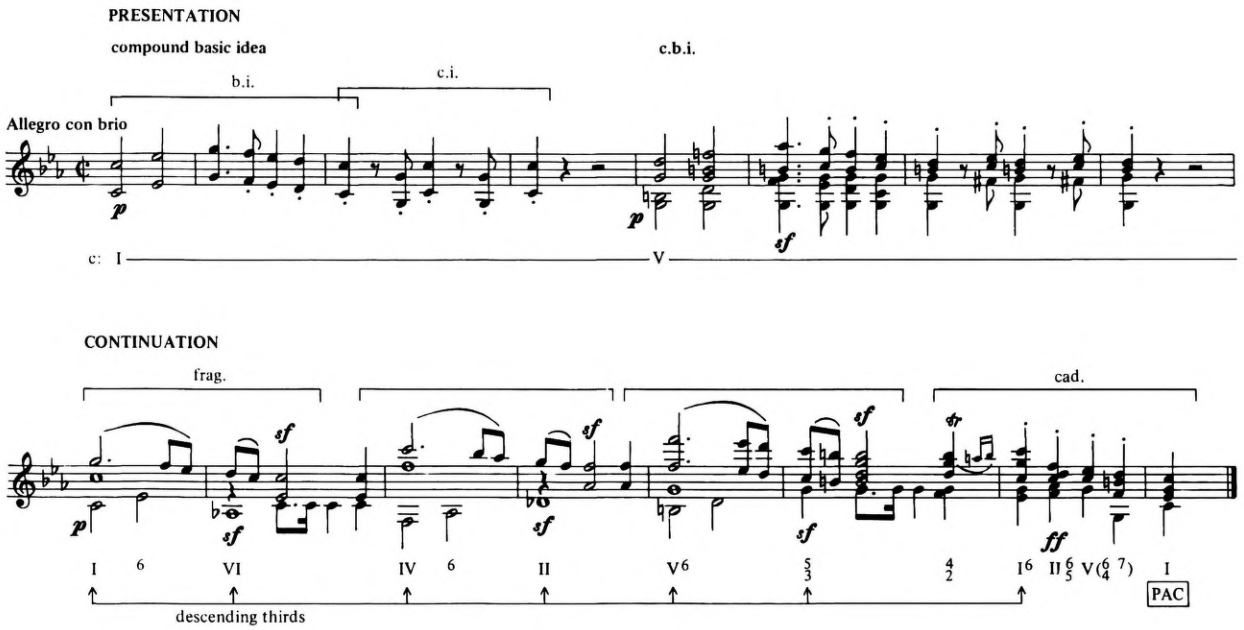


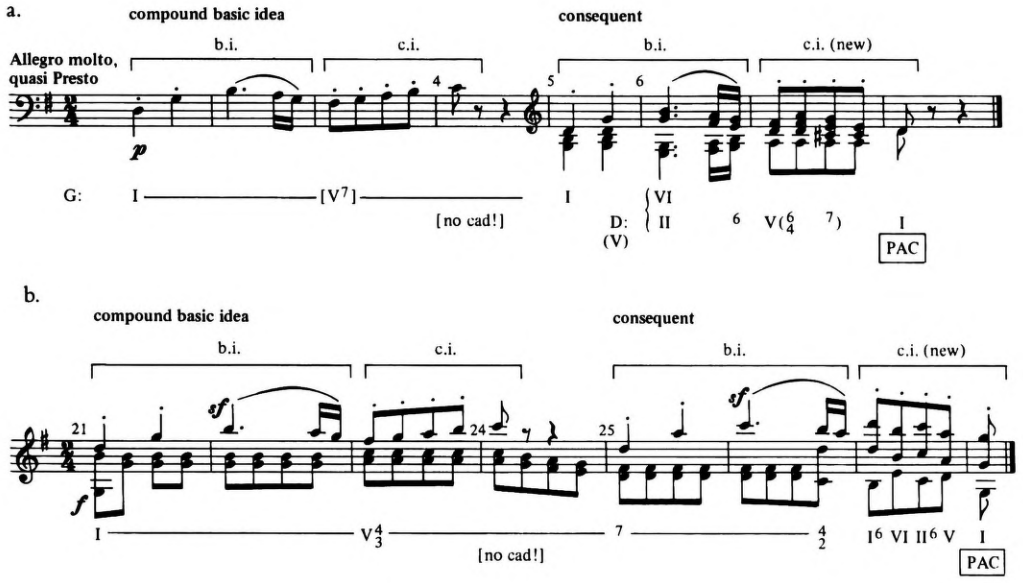
Example 6: Violin Sonata in D, op.12, no.1, movt.II.

the inverted dominant harmony at the end of m.3 prohibits us from speaking of a cadential progression here; instead, the harmonies of the entire phrase prolong root-position tonic from the beginning of the theme.

In order to distinguish this kind of phrase from both an antecedent and a presentation, I shall label it a *compound basic idea*. By virtue of its melodic-motivic content, a compound basic idea resembles an antecedent phrase. But in light of its underlying harmony and lack of cadence, the compound basic idea resembles a presentation. Thus, this four-measure unit itself represents a true hybrid of antecedent and presentation characteristics. The choice of the term compound basic idea is justified by the appearance of this kind of phrase within a more complex type of sentence

Example 7: Piano Concerto No.3 in C Minor, op.37, movt.I.





Example 8: String Quartet in G, op.18, no.2, movt.IV.

structure regularly found in the Classical literature. The beginning of the first movement of the Piano Concerto No.3 in C Minor, op.37, illustrates this *sixteen-measure sentence* (ex.7). The initial four-measure compound basic idea (itself made up of a simple basic idea and contrasting idea) is repeated to make a large eight-measure presentation. An eight-measure continuation, featuring a descending-thirds sequential progression, completes the theme.[13]

In the fourth and final category of hybrid themes, a compound basic idea is followed by a consequent phrase rather than a continuation, as in the previous category. Thus, the opening basic idea returns in mm.5 and 6, and the theme ends with a strong authentic cadence. Hybrids of this type differ from periods in only one respect: they lack the weak cadence in m.4. The finale of the String Quartet in G, op.18, no.2 (ex.8a), illustrates this hybrid type well. The movement begins with the solo cello sounding a two-measure basic idea, followed by a contrasting idea. There is no cadence at m.4 despite the rhythmic stop because the note C is the seventh of an implied dominant-seventh chord, a harmony too unstable to func-

13. The sixteen-measure sentence seems to be a favorite theme type for beginning a Classical concerto. Beethoven uses the form to open the first three piano concertos and the violin concerto. In this respect, he was most likely influenced by Mozart, who uses the sixteen-measure sentence at the start of four of his mature piano concertos (in B♭, K.450; in G, K.453; in D minor, K.466; and in C, K.503).

tion as the final chord of a cadential progression. The second phrase brings back the basic idea, and new contrasting materials create a quick modulation to the dominant region, as confirmed by the closing authentic cadence.

Following a contrasting middle section not shown here, a different version of this hybrid appears at m.21 (ex.8b).[14] Here the lack of cadence at m.24, the fourth measure of the theme, is made even more explicit by the want of any harmonic activity leading into this measure.[15] The return of the basic idea in m.25 is now supported by dominant harmony, with the result that the music does not modulate, but rather remains firmly in the home key.

Having identified and illustrated the four categories of hybrid themes, I want now to situate them within a spectrum of formal possibilities, where the sentence and period occupy the two extremes positions (fig.1). Hybrid no.3, consisting of compound basic idea plus continuation, is much like a sentence, except that the basic idea is not repeated. Hybrid no.4, compound basic idea plus consequent, closely resembles the period form, lacking only an internal, weak cadence. Hybrid no.1, antecedent plus continuation, brings aspects of the sentence and period in equal measure, whereas hybrid no.2, antecedent plus cadential, is somewhat more periodic as true continuational features are missing.

sentence	hybrid #3	hybrid #1	hybrid #2	hybrid #4	period
pres. + cont.	c.b.i. + cont.	ant. + cont.	ant. + cad.	c.b.i. + cons.	ant. + cons.

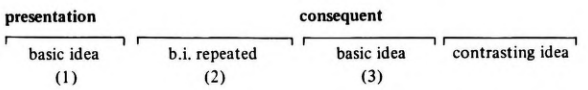
Figure 1

Of the possible ways in which the various phrases of the sentence and period forms can be combined to make a hybrid, one pattern is conspicuously absent: namely, a theme that begins with a presentation and ends with a consequent (fig.2). Note that such an arrangement of phrases brings a threefold statement of the basic idea. The resulting redundancy of material within an excessive tonic prolongation is the likely explanation for why Beethoven rarely, if ever, writes this type of potential hybrid.

14. The complete main theme of this movement is in small ternary form (also known as "rounded binary" in some texts). The passage in ex.8a functions as the A section of this ternary; the contrasting middle (B) is not shown; and ex.8b serves as the recapitulatory A′ section. For more discussion of the small ternary form, see Schoenberg, *Fundamentals,* chap.8.

15. And consequently, we can presume that the implied harmonic support for mm.3–4 of ex.8a is also best understood as a single dominant-seventh harmony, as shown in the brackets.

Figure 2



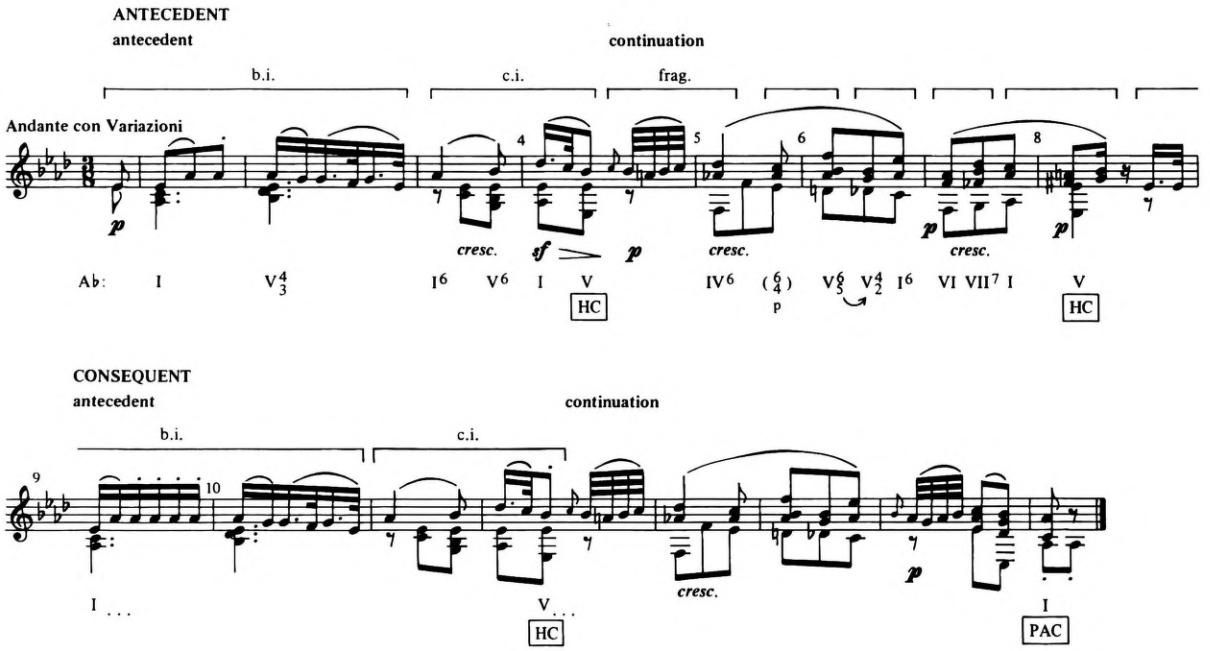
At this point we might inquire why Beethoven, as well as Haydn and Mozart, regularly wrote hybrid themes. An obvious answer, of course, is that hybrids offer the composer more options beyond the sentence or period for shaping a logically satisfying theme. But they also offer something more: the latent ambiguity of a hybrid—is it more like a sentence or more like a period?—renders it especially suitable for assimilating itself to a higher-level unit of more conventional thematic design, such as the small ternary or small binary forms.[16] To be sure, some hybrids stand entirely alone; however, many form part of a larger thematic whole.[17]

Aside from the general sense of structural ambiguity latent in all hybrid themes, a more specific technical feature in the first three categories of hybrids helps explain their tendency to be used in larger forms: with the exception of hybrid no.4, compound basic idea plus consequent, the opening basic idea of a hybrid is stated only once within the theme. This situation distinguishes itself from both the sentence and period, where the basic idea appears twice, either immediately, as in the sentence, or after an intervening contrasting idea, as in the period. Such hybrid themes are thus useful in certain larger-scale formal contexts, where it is desirable that the basic idea *not* reappear within the eight-measure scope of the theme.

One such formal context involves a popular theme type not yet mentioned—the *sixteen-measure period,* consisting of an eight-measure antecedent followed by an eight-measure consequent. Often the antecedent and consequent units making up this form are built as simple hybrids. The opening of the Piano Sonata in A♭, op.26, is a case in point (ex.9). This sixteen-measure theme clearly divides itself into two eight-measure parts: the first part ends with a weak, half cadence (m.8); the second part restates the first but brings a stronger cadence to close the theme. These parts thus clearly relate to each other as antecedent and consequent. The first four-measure phrase of the large antecedent is itself an antecedent, ending with a half cadence in m.4; but the second phrase is a continuation, thus resulting in a hybrid theme. The use of a consequent phrase would be inappropriate here because the

16. The small binary resembles the small ternary in some respects, but differs essentially from the latter in that the opening basic idea does not return in the second part (see Ratz, *Einführung,* p.30).

17. Of the hybrids illustrated here, only that in ex.5 functions independently as the main theme of a movement. Examples 4, 8, and 9 (discussed below) make up the first part of a small ternary; exs.6, and 10 (discussed below), the first part of a small binary.



Example 9: Piano Sonata in A♭, op.26, movt.I.

appearance of the basic idea in mm.5 and 6 would preempt its return in mm.9 and 10, and thus spoil the effect of this return as an essential articulation of the higher-level consequent.[18] As a rule, therefore, the sixteen-measure period is rarely, if ever, constructed out of two eight-measure periods.[19]

The small ternary form also provides a formal context where it can be appropriate to delay restating the initial basic idea in order to mark a higher-level formal division. The hybrid illustrated in ex.4a functions as the A section of a small ternary form. Following a contrasting B section, the reappearance of the initial basic idea, for the first time since the start of the theme, unequivocally signals the beginning of the A′ section (m.17).[20]

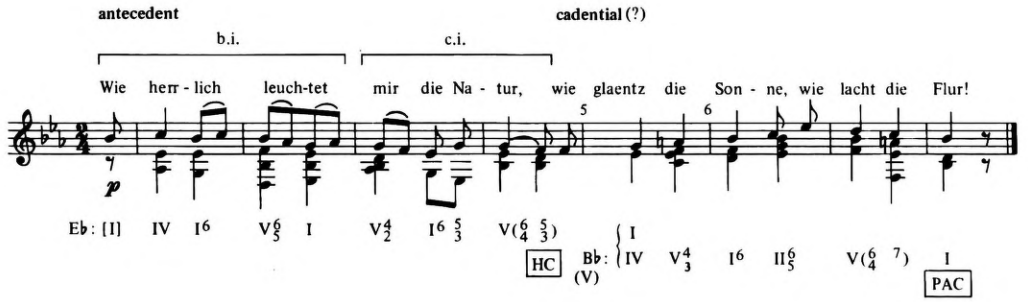
18. Hybrid no.3, compound basic idea plus continuation, is also regularly found as the basis of an eight-measure antecedent (and consequent). With this type of hybrid, not only is the return of the basic idea reserved for m.9, but the weak cadence appears first at m.8 (thus not in m.4, as with hybrid no.1, antecedent plus continuation). Sixteen-measure periods can also be constructed out of two eight-measure sentences without preempting the entrance of the eight-measure consequent; e.g., Piano Concerto No.2 in B♭, op.19, movt.III, mm.1–17.

19. Thus, the term "double period," occasionally found in reference to this formal type, is somewhat misleading (Green, *Form*, pp.63–64; Berry, *Form*, pp.22–23).

20. The hybrid of ex.8a, which also serves as the first part of a small ternary, is an interesting counterexample. Not only does Beethoven bring back the basic idea at the beginning of the conse-

Hybrid themes containing a single statement of the basic idea are also useful as the first section of a small ternary or small binary when that section modulates to a related region (usually the dominant). In such cases, a hybrid can often be more effective than a period in consolidating the sense of the new key. With the period, the consequent phrase usually brings tonic harmony of the home key in mm. 5 and 6 of the theme in order to support the restated basic idea; as a result, there is little room left within the eight-measure span of the theme for the modulation to take place. In the case of a hybrid, however, the use of a continuation (or cadential) phrase provides more space within which to effect the change of key. Returning once again to ex.4a, we can see that Beethoven begins the modulation directly with the model-sequence technique at the start of the continuation in m. 5. If he had written a period, such as that reconstructed in ex.4b, the modulation would have been abrupt and the cadential confirmation of the new key considerably weaker.

Strophic song settings provide another fitting context for those hybrids that feature only one statement of the opening basic idea because the single appearance of that idea can then be reserved for articulating the beginning of each strophe. The initial four-measure phrase of the first strophe of *Maigesang,* op. 52, no.4, is a regular antecedent, ending with a half cadence (ex.10).[21] An analysis of the second phrase,



Example 10: *Maigesang,* op. 52, no.4.

which modulates to the dominant region, is more difficult. It cannot be considered a genuine consequent because nothing resembling the basic idea returns. Yet the phrase does not particularly exhibit any clear continuational characteristics. Perhaps the best analysis recognizes that much of the phrase is supported by a cadential

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quent phrase in m. 5, but he also starts every one of the remaining phrases in the theme with that same idea (varied, of course). Indeed, much of the witty effect of this theme derives from the constant formal reinterpretation to which this initial idea is subjected.

21. The passage shown in the example represents the first part of a small binary, the overall form of the strophe.

progression, one which certainly begins with the I^6 (in B♭) at m.6; indeed, the harmonies of m. 5 may be seen as an embellishment of this I^6, thereby rendering the phrase all the more cadential. Thus, the theme that Beethoven wrote here is probably best understood in relation to hybrid no.2, antecedent plus cadential.

Having just discussed how hybrid themes can be useful to the Classical composer, I want to conclude by considering some ways in which they can be useful to the theorist of Classical form. In the first place, of course, the four new types of hybrids significantly enlarge the conceptual framework for identifying Classical thematic organization. Without these types, the themes illustrated in this essay might be branded simply as sentences or periods, thus diluting whatever theoretical precision these original two categories might possess. Or else the themes might be dismissed as deviant, nonconventional structures. Even worse, they might simply be ignored altogether for lack of any theoretical perspective from which they could be considered.

A theory of form that includes hybrids not only allows us to discuss a greater number of themes, but promotes a healthier analytical attitude toward thematic classification. The position of Schoenberg and Ratz, which recognizes only two simple theme types, promotes the search for binary oppositions. The analytical process can all too quickly degenerate into mechanically slotting a given theme into the categories of sentence or period. Adding four varieties of hybrids into the arsenal of thematic possibilities dissuades such flippant analytical pigeonholing. Instead, the analyst is encouraged, indeed virtually required, to examine with utmost care details of harmony, melody, rhythm, texture, etc., thereby gaining a richer understanding of the theme's unique organization.

Finally, the concept of hybrid themes developed here raises some broader issues for the theory of musical form. As I have demonstrated throughout this study, the analysis of hybrids focuses our attention on the constituent phrases of a given theme. In order to classify a hybrid we must recognize that it consists of, say, an antecedent followed by a continuation, or that it contains a compound basic idea and a consequent. This same orientation can be transferred to the two original theme types as well: it is more important to say that a theme consists of a presentation and continuation, or an antecedent followed by consequent, than merely to identify it as a sentence or period.

I am suggesting, in other words, that the analysis of phrase function is of greater significance than the identification of theme type per se. I say this because when we look beyond the very openings of movements and consider the formal organization of transitional units, subordinate themes, development sections, and codas, we discover the same functions of presentation, antecedent, compound basic idea,

continuation, cadential, and consequent, which we have identified in connection with main themes. To be sure, these functions become significantly modified or "loosened" in formal expression, yet their identity is evident even when divorced from the "tightknit" theme types with which they are conventionally associated.[22] Indeed, these functions, along with others not directly related to hybrids, prove to be the principal bearers of phrase-level formal organization in music of the Classical style. The concept of hybrid themes thus not only broadens our understanding of many simple main themes that Beethoven regularly wrote in his first Viennese period, but also points the way toward a more comprehensive attitude to Classical form in general, an attitude that moves us far beyond the haphazard labeling of indiscriminate antecedent and consequent phrases, which for too long has dominated our prevailing theories of musical form.

22. The distinction between "tightknit" (*fest*) and "loose" (*locker*) formal organization is a hallmark of Schoenberg's *Formenlehre* as transmitted by Ratz; see *Einführung*, pp.21–39. Tightknit organization is associated principally with main themes of movements; loose organization with transitions, subordinate themes, and development sections. For a detailed discussion and exemplification of how subordinate themes manifest a loose formal organization, see my " 'Expanded Cadential Progression'," and "Structural Expansion in Beethoven's Symphonic Forms," in *Essays on Beethoven's Compositional Process*, ed. William Kinderman (Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1991), pp.27–54.

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