

Web Feature 21.2

The sonata principle in popular music

Can one find sonata form in popular music? Not exactly, but there are some tantalizing parallels. Here, we can make a distinction between *sonata form* and the *sonata principle*. Both of the pieces examined in this chapter would stand as representative examples of sonata form; the sonata principle, however, is broader than that, allowing for differences in its specific application. Among the hallmarks of **sonata principle** are its bipartite tonal structure (usually also with a bipartite thematic structure), in which two tonal areas are reconciled at the end, and its emphasis on motivic development. Occasionally one can find examples of sonata form in which the specifics of the form are not followed to the letter; the first movement of Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata in C major (Opus 53), for example, uses the chromatic mediant key of E major rather than the dominant for its second tonal area (we have already noted Beethoven's predilection for chromatic mediant key relationships). It also has an extensive coda with a generous amount of motivic development and modulation, evocative of a second development section. The general aspects of sonata principle are still followed, however.

The sonata principle (if not the literal form) can be found in some examples of popular music, especially the genre influenced by art music that came to be called "progressive rock" or "art rock" in the 1970s. The song "Close to the Edge" by Yes (1972) approaches twenty minutes in length, with four named subsections within the song; it has been variously analyzed as sonata form or at least as a hugely distended AABA song form.¹ A more contemporary example of sonata principle—specifically in its bipartite tonal structure and its motivic development below the surface—can be found in Radiohead's song "Paranoid Android."

"Paranoid Android" is structured around three different versions of a motive, all of which span a minor third in range (Web Example 21.1). The original motive is C – B – A, labeled *a* in the example. Motive *b* (C – B \flat – A) is a retrograde inversion of *a*—in other words, it is *a* upside down and backwards. Putting these two motives together gives us the chromatic descent C – B – B \flat – A. Notice that for all of these motives the boundary tones are C and A.

¹ See, for example, John Covach's study "Progressive Rock, 'Close to the Edge,' and the Boundaries of Musical Style," in John Covach and Graeme Boone, eds., *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 3–31.



Web Example 21.1. Radiohead, “Paranoid Android,” hidden motives.

The first section of the song, which might be likened to the first tonal area, consists of two alternating ideas. The first idea, the opening vocal theme at [0:18–0:28] (“please could you stop the noise. . .”), traces an arc that includes two statements of motive *a* in retrograde, or *b* in inversion (C – D – Eb, G – A – Bb) and a statement of motive *a* in its original form (Bb – A – G) appended onto motive *b* (G – F – E). An electric guitar statement of motive *a* (Bb – A – G) answers the vocal line [0:26–0:35]. At the same time, the bass in this section consists of an elaborated statement of motive *b* (C – Bb – [F] – A) and a retrograde statement of motive *a* (G – A – Bb). The second idea (“what’s that?” [0:47–1:07]) features motive *b* in the bass (G – F – E) in the accompaniment, along with a chromatic inner-voice movement (Bb – A – G#) in the electric guitar. The second verse (“when I am king” [1:08]) begins with motive *b* (C – Bb – A), the inversion of the opening notes of the first verse (but still starting on C).

The second section, starting at [1:57], could function like the second tonal area. It alternates between A minor and a riff centered on C (mostly major but with a lowered sixth and seventh scale degree [2:09]). The transition from C to A is accomplished by the chromatic line shown in Web Example 20.1 as motive *c* (e.g., see [2:40]).

In other words, C and A function as important and opposing key areas in “Paranoid Android.” The opening section (“Please could you stop the noise,” 0:00–1:57) starts in C minor. The second section begins in A minor, with secondary references to a hybrid modal form of C.

The “rain down” third section (3:34–5:36) could be interpreted to be a “development” section—although it appears to be all new thematic material, closer inspection reveals that the contrapuntal texture is suffused with the three-note motive (thus, the development here is arguably more motivic than thematic). An abbreviated recapitulation section, bringing back the second section (5:36–6:23), concludes the song.

It is important to note here that in all likelihood the members of Radiohead did not set out to create a “rock sonata,” and, in fact, the form of “Paranoid Android” *differs* from classical sonata form in several important respects. For example, the first section or tonal area is repeated before we get to the second section or tonal area, whereas in sonata form both tonal areas are heard, and then both are repeated. The second section is

similarly repeated all by itself—in fact, it is heard four times overall (an instrumental introduction, a quieter verse, a louder verse, and then an instrumental version with a guitar solo). The “recapitulation” also lacks a return of the first section. Nevertheless, even if “Paranoid Android” is not literally sonata *form*, it manifests the sonata *principle* in its employment of two tonal areas and its alternation of two major thematic sections with a contrasting section that develops motivic material.