

Turning Inward – Turning Outward – Turning Around: Strong Subordinate Themes in Romantic Overtures

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Abstract

The article presents analyses of four romantic overtures by Felix Mendelssohn, Hector Berlioz, and Richard Wagner, taking Adolf Bernhard Marx's relational view of a sonata form's themes as starting point. The common element between these works is the use of what the author proposes to call a "strong" subordinate theme: an unusually striking subordinate theme that eclipses or overrules the main theme.

By using the example of the subordinate theme of Mendelssohn's overture *Die Hebriden* (1830/32), Janet Schmalfeldt's notion of subordinate themes that "turn inward" to a symphonic context is transplanted. The subordinate theme of Berlioz's overture *Les Francs-juges* (1826) seems to do the opposite, namely "turn outward," surpassing the main theme in length, melodiousness and memorability. In Berlioz's concert overture *Le Carnaval romain* (1844) and in the overture to Wagner's *Tannhäuser* (1845) the subordinate themes' form-functional roles are reversed ("turned around") over the course of the form, as the strong subordinate theme from the exposition seems to assume main-theme function in the recapitulation – due to the programmatic aspect implied by the title in the first case and due to the opera's dramatic action in the second.