The Non-Modulating Transition in Late Eighteenth-Century Expositions

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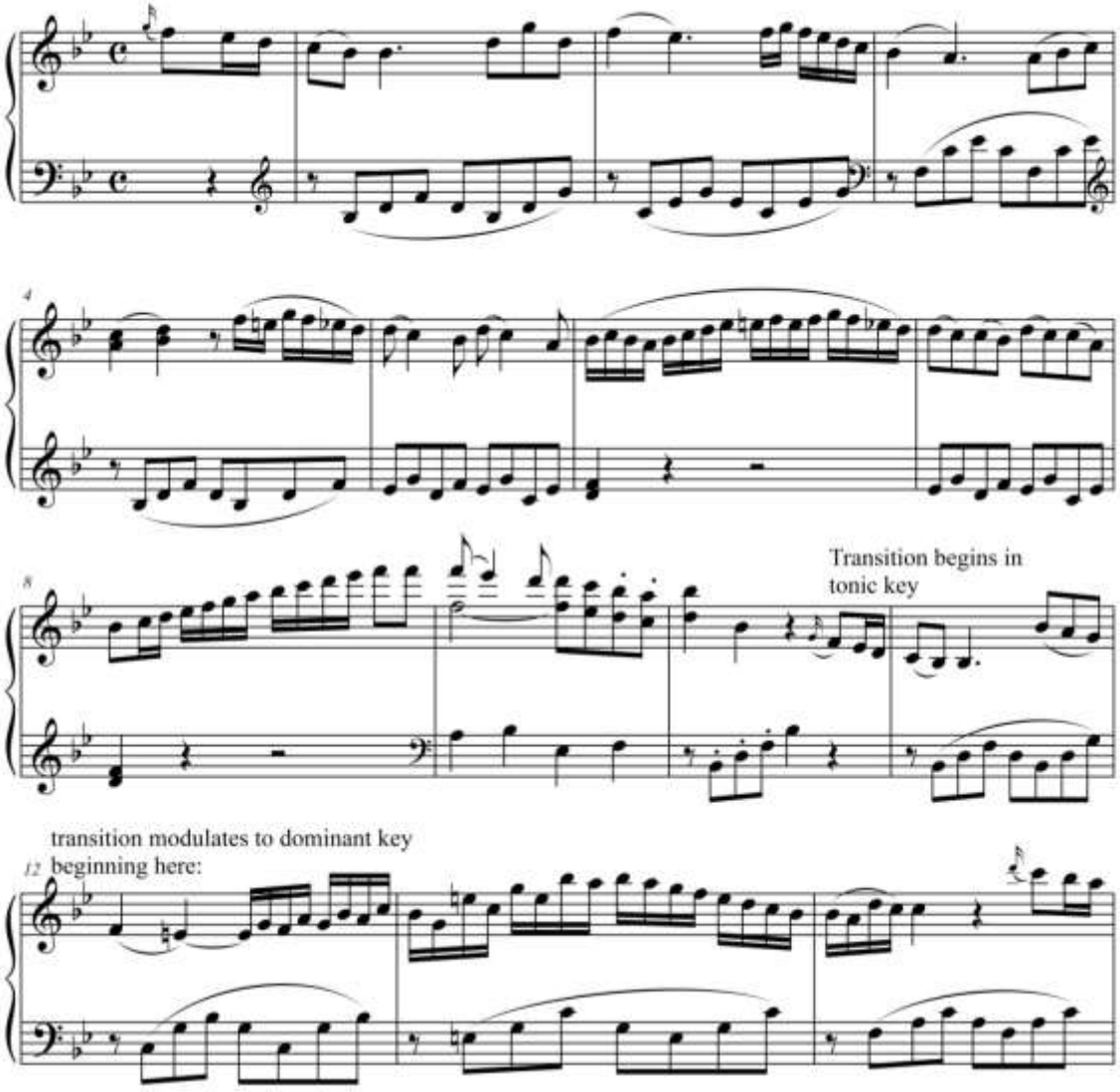
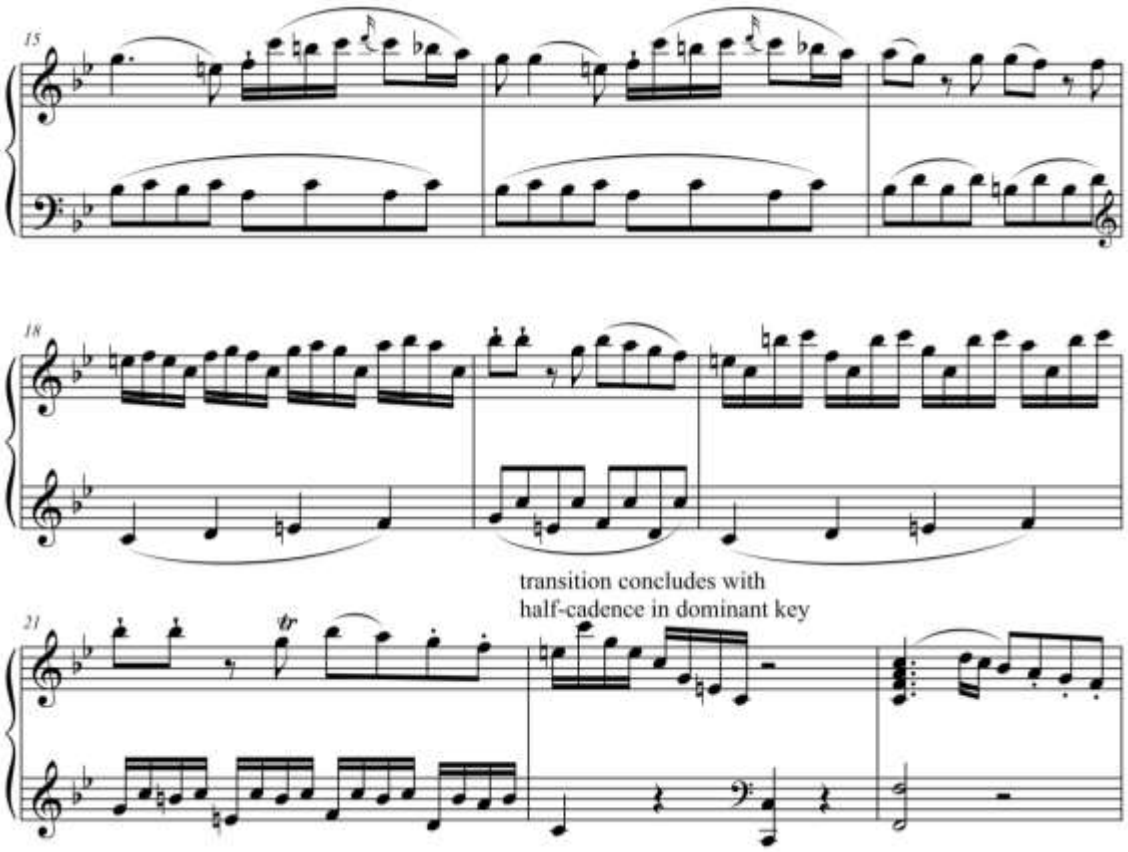
Descriptions of late eighteenth-century sonata-form expositions often include a section called the "transition." Although there is widespread agreement that transitions exist, there seems to be less agreement as to what kinds of passages can serve as transitions. In particular, there appear to be differences of opinion regarding the "non-modulating transition." Some theorists (notably William Caplin on the one hand, and James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy on the other) argue that transitions exist in late eighteenth-century music, even in the absence of a modulation. Others disagree. I am among the latter. In this paper, I examine this topic in detail.

What is a "transition"? In contexts other than music, there appears to be a consensus. The *Random House College Dictionary* (1973) defines "transition" as "movement, passage, or change from one position, state, stage, subject, concept, etc. to another." Nearly identical definitions appear in other dictionaries.

If so, then modulating transitions would appear to be characteristic and representative examples. In its most typical manifestation the modulating transition begins in the tonic key, tonicizes the secondary key, and concludes with a cadence in the secondary key. There is a distinct section where there is a clear movement—or passage or change (modulation)—from one state (the tonic key) to another (the secondary key). By way of illustration, consider the beginning of the exposition from the first movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata in B-flat Major, K. 333 (Example 1).

Example 1 Mozart, Sonata in B-flat Major, K333, beginning of first movement





As can be seen in this example, there is a modulating transition in mm. 11-22. This section starts in the tonic key, modulates to the dominant key, and then concludes with a half cadence in the dominant key. After the transition is over, other than local digressions, we remain in the dominant key until the end of the exposition. Thus, the transitional function of the modulating transition is clear. Before the transition, we are in the tonic key. The transition takes us from the tonic key to the dominant key. After the transition is over, we are in the dominant key and remain there. Ergo, the section between the tonic and dominant sections does exactly what transitions do: it takes us from one state, position, subject, concept, etc. to another.

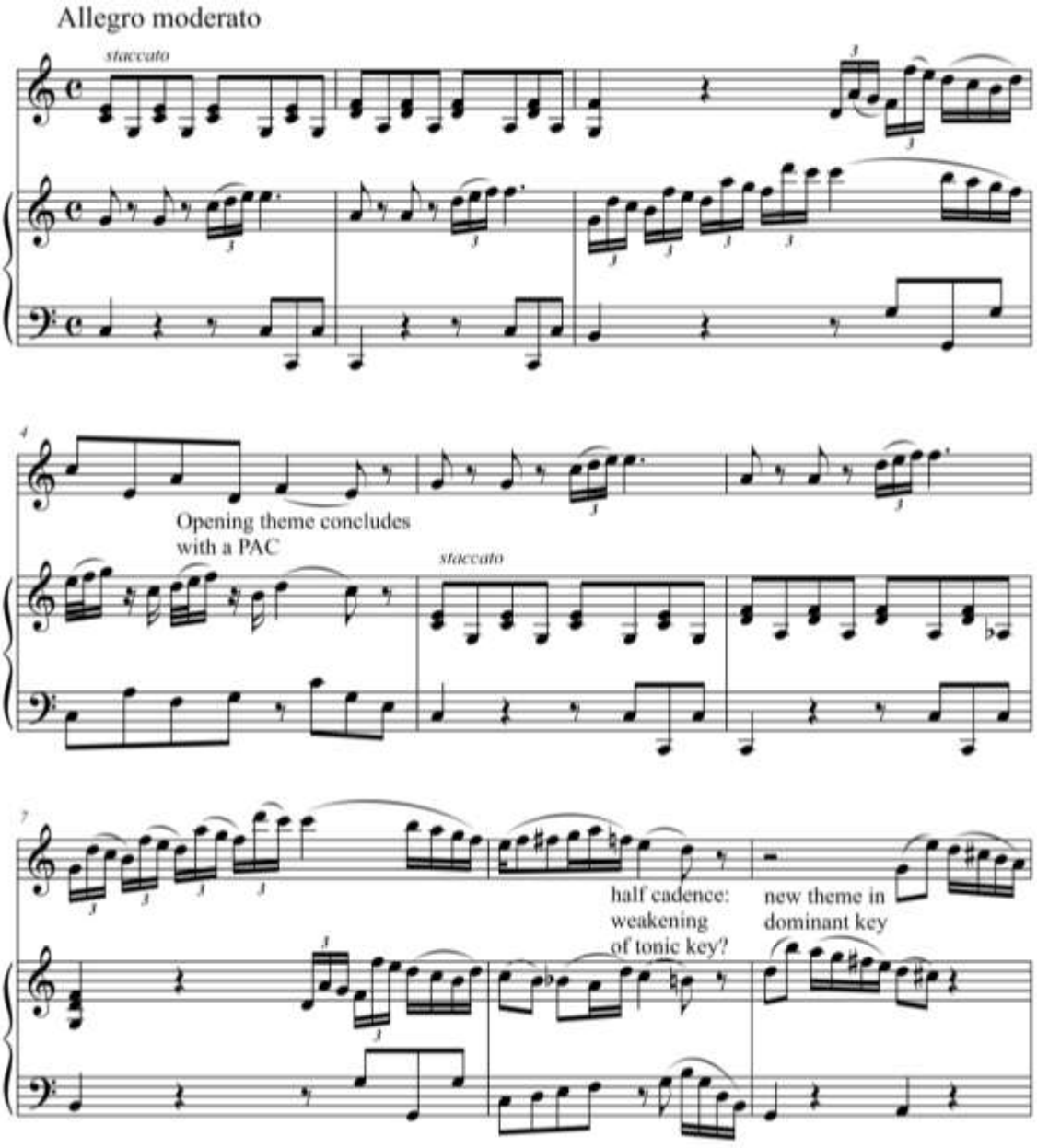
However, two important studies of sonata form argue that it is mistaken to insist that modulation is a *sine qua non* for transitions. In his book *Classical Form*, William Caplin asserts that there can be both modulating and non-modulating transitions.

> The primary function of a transition—to destabilize the home key—can be achieved without necessarily abandoning that key. If the main theme ends with tonic harmony of an authentic cadence, the home key can still be significantly weakened by allowing the transition to conclude on dominant harmony. The subordinate theme then begins directly in the subordinate key.[1]

[1] William E. Caplin, *Classical Form: A Theory of Formal Functions for the Instrumental Music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 127.

The example Caplin provides as an illustration of a non-modulating transition is the beginning of the first movement of Mozart's Sonata for Violin and Piano in C major, K. 403 (see Example 2).

Example 2 Mozart, Sonata for Violin and Piano in C Major, K. 403. Beginning of first movement



As can be seen, the first four measures present a thematic statement in the tonic key that closes with a perfect authentic cadence. This is followed by what starts out as a repetition of the first phrase. However, in m. 8 the parallels break down and, instead of closing again with another perfect authentic cadence in C, the phrase concludes with a half cadence in the tonic key.

Caplin describes this process as follows:

> The main theme, built as an eight-measure sentence (R=1/2N), ends with a perfect authentic cadence in measure 4. The theme begins to be repeated in the following measures, but when the sentence closes instead with a half cadence, we perceive a distinct weakening of the home key in a manner that suggests transition function. (p. 127)

Is that true? Do we perceive a "distinct weakening" of the home key in examples like this? And, if we do, where does that weakening begin?

In a modulating transition, the weakening of the home key starts in the course of the transition section, often well before its closing cadence, as we saw with Mozart's B-flat major Piano Sonata, K. 333. In effect, the weakening begins as soon as the raised fourth degree replaces the diatonic fourth degree of the original key. Thus, while we are within the section itself, we recognize that a transition is in process.

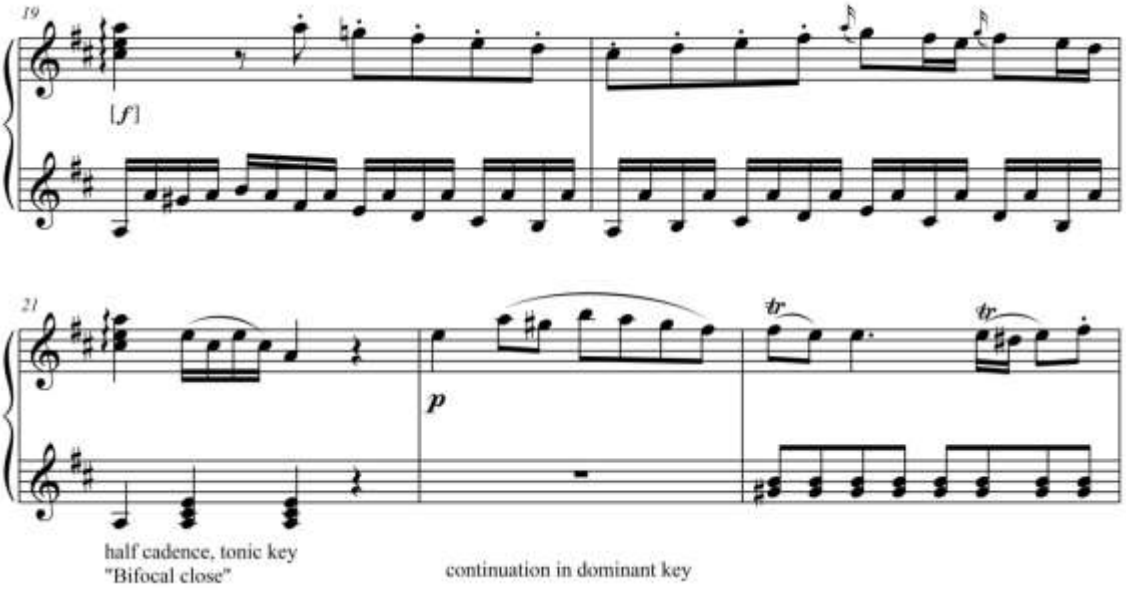
By contrast, in K. 403, since we remain resolutely in the tonic key in mm. 5-8, we have no basis for knowing that there is any weakening at all. It is not until after the next phrase begins (m. 9), that we have any idea that we have left the tonic key. Thus, I find it impossible to hear mm. 5-8 as a transition section—this section begins and ends in the tonic key without any indication to the contrary.

It would appear, therefore, that the entire basis for suggesting that there is a weakening of the tonic key is that the passage concludes on a dominant chord (in a half cadence) instead of on a tonic chord (in an authentic cadence). Is this enough to weaken the tonic key? There is evidence suggesting that it is not.

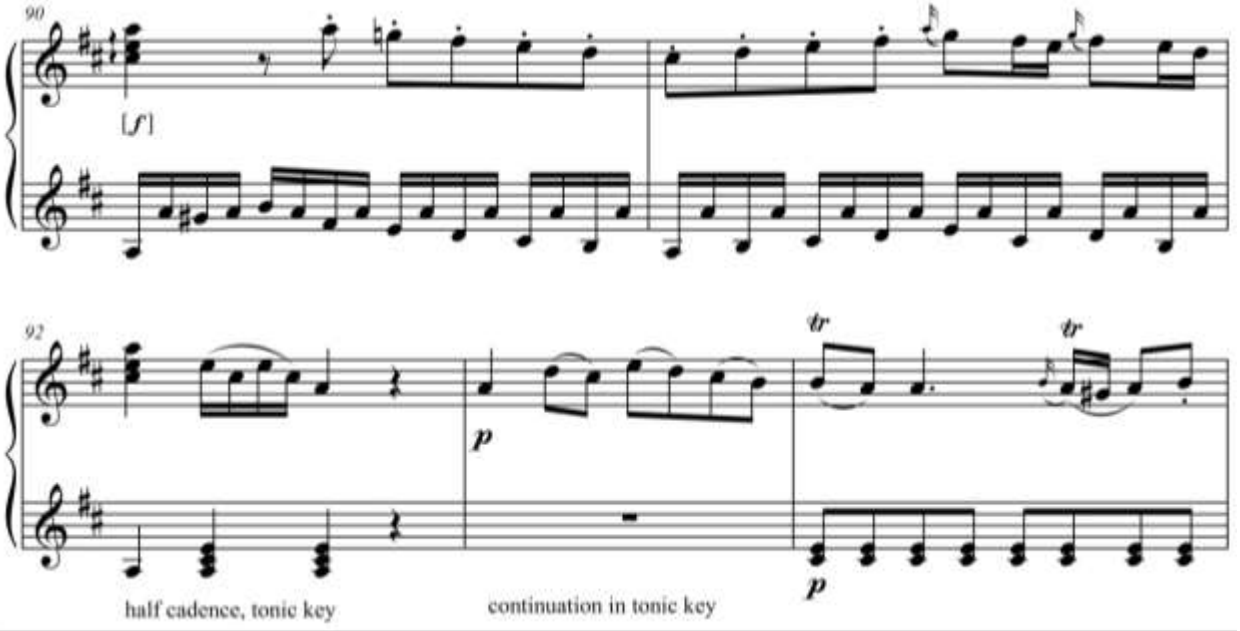
Robert Winter has described passages like that of Example 2, where the tonic region ends with a half cadence and the dominant region begins immediately thereafter, as having a "bifocal close."[2] For our purposes, it is important to note that exactly the same passage can also appear in the recapitulation where it remains in the tonic key.[3] That does not happen in the Violin and Piano Sonata, K. 403, but it does happen in many of Mozart's sonata forms where there is a bifocal close in the exposition. One such example is the first movement of the Piano Sonata in D, K. 284. As can be seen in Example 3a, in the exposition, we arrive in m. 21 on a half cadence in the tonic key. Immediately afterward, in m. 22, there is a new theme in the dominant key. In m. 93 in the recapitulation, exactly the same passage leads to exactly the same half cadence (Example 3b). However, in the recapitulation, the theme that follows that half cadence is in the tonic key, not in the dominant key. If the half cadence caused a weakening of the tonic key when it occurred in the exposition, then, by all rights, that same half cadence ought to cause an identical weakening of the tonic key when it recurs in the recapitulation. But, of course, it does not. For these reasons, I am not convinced that a half cadence is enough to effectuate a non-modulating transition.

[2] Robert Winter, "The Bifocal Close and the Evolution of the Viennese Classical Style," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 42 (1989): 275-337.
[3] Winter, ibid., p. 278, refers to that as "complementary bifocal close."

Example 3a Mozart, Sonata in D Major, K. 284, first movement, mm. 19-23



Example 3b Mozart, Sonata in D Major, K. 284, first movement, mm. 90-94



Although I do not believe that the evidence supports the assertion that there is a weakening of the tonic key in mm. 5-8 of Mozart's K. 403, this does not mean that the tonicization of the dominant in m. 9 comes as a surprise. To the contrary, the stylistic norms of the period encourage us to expect that m. 9 will begin in the dominant key. That is, when the opening theme concludes with an authentic cadence (as it does in m. 4 of K. 403), and when the following

passage remains in the tonic key and closes with a half cadence (as it does in m. 8 of K. 403), then composers from this period (late eighteenth century) almost never remain in the tonic key for the equivalent of mm. 9ff. Rather, at that point, they jump to the secondary key. This does not mean that the tonic key is weakened in mm. 5-8. Nor does it mean that there is anything transitional about the passage in question (as per the definition above). In works like K. 403, however, when we arrive on a half cadence in m. 8, the listener knows that there will most likely be a statement in the dominant key beginning in m. 9.[4] For these reasons, I think it best to understand expositions like this as having no transition section. There is a tonic section (in K. 403, mm. 1-8) and there is a dominant section (mm. 9-24), but there is no transition between them.

Caplin is not alone in arguing that there can be a transition in the absence of a modulation to the secondary key. In their book, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy also argue that modulation is not a necessary condition for a transition.[5] However, their approach differs considerably from that of Caplin. Here is what they say at the very beginning of their chapter on the transition:

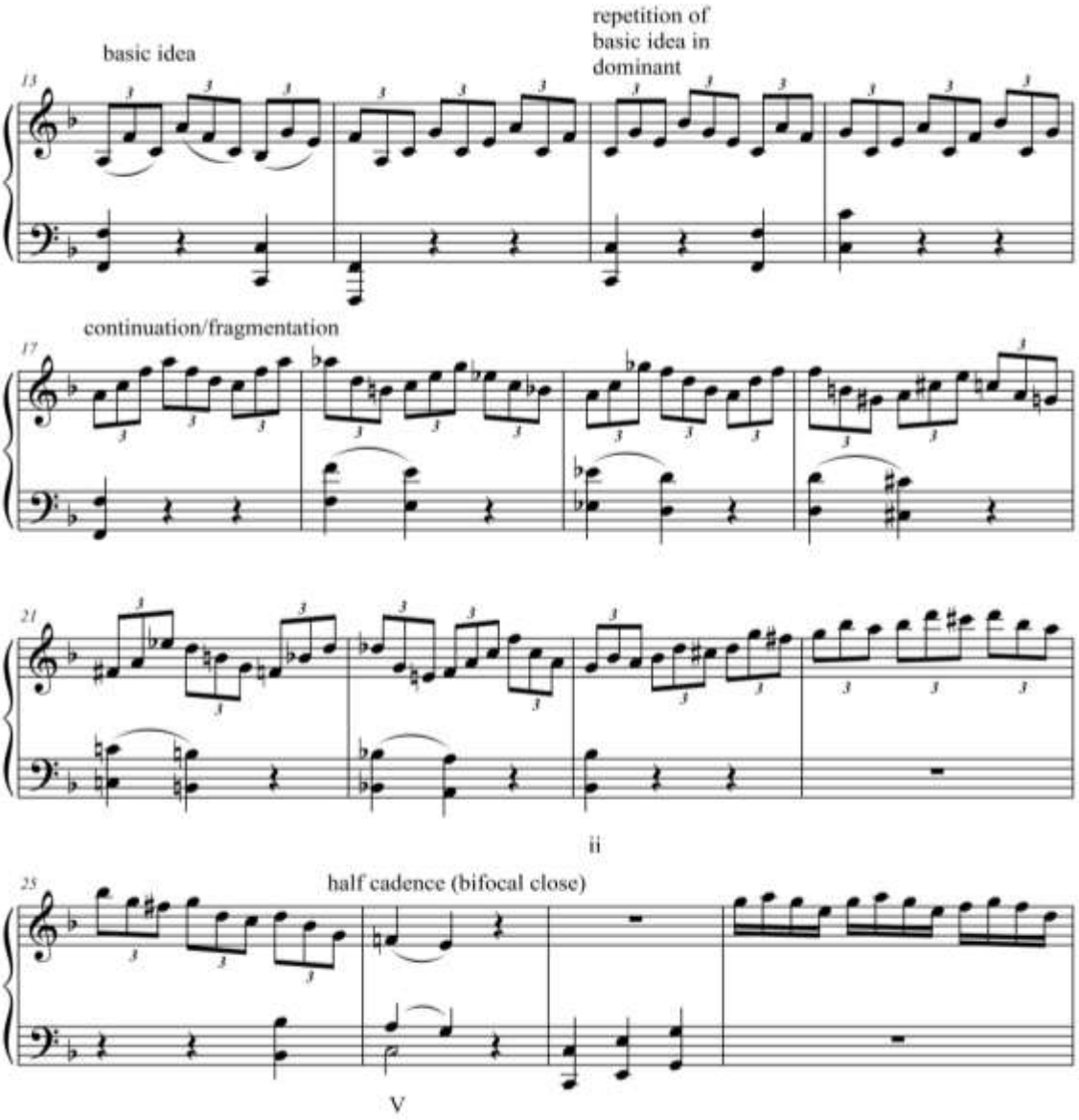
> Here we are concerned with the zone that brings the initial idea, P, to the moment of relaunch at S…. The standard designation for this music, *transition* (or *bridge*) is problematic, at times misleading. It can be particularly deceptive within analytical contexts that assume as a first principle that tonal considerations trump all others, thus suggesting that the term means a transition or bridge from one *key* to another. This view inappropriately sidelines such other factors as texture, dynamics, thematic ordering, and rhetoric…. TR-zones are characterized mostly by dispositional location within a system of generic expectation (where they occur in the exposition; their functional drive to the MC) and by texture (energy-gain). It is mistaken to define a transition primarily in terms of an expectation of modulation. Some transitions do not modulate at all—for example, those leading to a I: HC MC. (p. 93)

Hepokoski and Darcy's first illustration of a transition is from the first movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata, K. 280 (see Example 4). As can be seen, there is no modulation in the section that they identify as the transition (mm. 13-26).

[4] There are, however, exceptions. See, for example, Haydn's Keyboard Sonata, Hob. XVI/30/i. The opening theme (a sentence) concludes with an authentic cadence in m. 8. This is followed by another theme that concludes with a half cadence in m. 16. But the tonic key continues in m. 17.

[5] James Hepokoski & Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Example 4 Mozart, Sonata in F Major, K. 280, first movement, mm. 13-28



Although there is a fair degree of chromaticism in this passage, Mozart stays within the tonic key of F major, concluding with a half cadence in that key in m. 26. Immediately after that half cadence—a bifocal close—Mozart states a prominent theme in the secondary key of C major.

If we take seriously the definition of transition as "movement, passage, or change from one position, state, stage, subject, concept, etc. to another" then it is difficult to see how this passage is transitional in character. Since there is no modulation here, we remove that parameter from consideration as a possible transitional feature. Perhaps other factors have transitional function?

Theoretically, a composer could use dynamics in a transitional manner. For example, if the dynamic level of the tonic section had been *forte* and the dynamic level of the dominant section *piano*, then one could imagine a transition that was a *decrescendo* from one to the other. The use of dynamics in that manner to effectuate a transition is relatively common in nineteenth-century music.[6] However, that does not happen here (or, to my knowledge, in late eighteenth-century music in general).

The same holds true for tempo. Theoretically speaking, tempo could also play a transitional role. If tempo were to be transitional in character (as per the above definition of "transition"), then there would be something like this: a fast opening theme and a slower secondary theme with a *ritardando* transition connecting them. Of course, that does not happen here. Nor do I know of a composition like that from the late eighteenth century. (However, it is relatively common in the nineteenth century.)[7] The same would be true, *mutatis mutandis*, for other parameters such as rhythm or texture.

In the quotation cited above, Hepokoski and Darcy acknowledge that the term "*transition* … is problematic, at times misleading." They elaborate further on this topic:

> Because the term "transition" spawns analytical pseudo-problems that are merely terminological, not musically substantive, we have from time to time been tempted to abandon it altogether—to substitute for it something like *post-P continuation modules*. For the present we have concluded that the word "transition" is too ingrained into the current analytical tradition to dispense with.

From what we have seen thus far, however, the term "transition" is perfectly appropriate in sections where there are modulations. As we saw in Example 1, there is a clearly transitional aspect to the harmonic structure. Therefore, there is no reason to refrain from using the term "transition" in such circumstances. In the case of other parameters, however, there most definitely is good reason to refrain from using the word "transition," at least in works from the late eighteenth century. In the music of Haydn, Mozart, and early Beethoven, dynamics, tempo, rhythm, and texture are not used in the way that would be needed to have transitional function. Thus, we can conclude that, in the late eighteenth century, "transition" is not an appropriate term for sections where there is no modulation. Moreover, since words matter, we should not resign ourselves to the continued use of an inappropriate term. To the contrary, we should search for an appropriate term that more accurately describes the characteristics of the passage in question.

Hepokoski and Darcy do exactly that: they suggest two possible solutions for this terminological problem. The first—"post-P continuation modules"—was included in the quotation above. In addition, they state: "Another of A.B. Marx's descriptions of this zone, *Der Fortgang zum Seitensatz* (the continuation or advance toward the secondary theme), conveys the fundamental idea more accurately."[8]

Alas, I am not convinced that these two suggestions are an improvement. By describing this section as "post-P continuation modules" or "continuation or advance toward the secondary

[6] See, for example, the *decrescendo* transition from the aggressive opening theme to the lyrical contrasting theme in the first movement of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 ("Pathetíque"), ca. mm. 76-89, or the *diminuendo* transition in mm. 73-74 of the first movement of Bruckner's Symphony No. 4 ("Romantic").

[7] See the Tchaikovsky example cited above, especially mm. 84-88.

[8] Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements*, 93. "Seitensatz" probably is better translated as "secondary section," not "secondary theme."

theme," Hepokoski and Darcy appear to suggest that the section between P and S is not a theme and thus can readily be distinguished from P and S—which are.

The problem with this is that, in most cases, there is no reason why we should declare the zone in question a "non-theme." There seems to be nothing that distinguishes the passage in question from other passages that are called "themes." For instance, in Example 4, the passage in question could be described as a sentence, one of the most common thematic types in the Classical Era. As Caplin has described in careful detail, the sentence begins with a basic idea, usually two measures in length. The basic idea is repeated in the next two measures, either at pitch or in its dominant form. The two statements of the basic idea are followed by a section that Caplin terms continuation/fragmentation, in which the motives are broken into smaller units and repeated. The sentence closes with a cadence, either half or authentic. Opening themes are often "tight-knit" eight-bar symmetrical units. However, other themes, such as the subordinate theme, are usually asymmetrical.[9]

If we look back at Example 4 in light of this definition, it would appear that there is a clear, asymmetrical sentence in mm. 13-26. There is a basic idea in mm. 13-14, followed in mm. 15-16 by a repetition of that basic idea, this time outlining the dominant. In mm. 18-22 there is fragmentation into one-measure units that are strung together into a quasi-sequence. In m. 23, Mozart breaks off from the sequence and slows the harmonic rhythm, preparatory to the clear half-cadence in m. 26. This is a paradigmatic example of an asymmetrical sentence.

Moreover, the example in question is not unusual. To the contrary, in the vast majority of similar cases, the "post-P continuation" passage could be described better not as a succession of non-thematic "modules," but as "themes." In Mozart's music, see, for instance, the first movements of the Piano Sonatas K. 281 (mm. 8-17), K. 283 (mm. 16-22), K. 284 (mm. 9-21), K. 311 (mm. 7-16), and K. 576 (mm. 16-27), all of which have themes constructed as asymmetrical sentences. Expositions of this sort are somewhat less common in Haydn's works, but here too we can find a good number of examples where the zone in question can best be regarded as a "theme," often (but not always) an asymmetrical sentence. A few examples from first movements of Haydn's Keyboard Sonatas include Hob. XVI/19, mm. 9-18; Hob. XVI/27, mm. 13-24; XVI/37, mm. 9-16; Hob. XVI/41, mm. 13-20. Similar examples can be found in his other instrumental genres (e.g. String Quartet, Op. 17/5/iv, mm. 20-9).[10]

It appears, therefore, that the term "transition" is inappropriate for the zone in question. If we take the definition of "transition" seriously, then there is nothing transitional about this zone. Hepokoski and Darcy recognize this, but their two terminological alternatives are not helpful because they disguise the reality that there frequently is a theme at this point.

Clearly, we need to coin a new term for this zone, one that accurately describes its principal characteristics. So this begs the question: what are the principal characteristics of the zone that follows the opening theme and precedes the dominant key section?

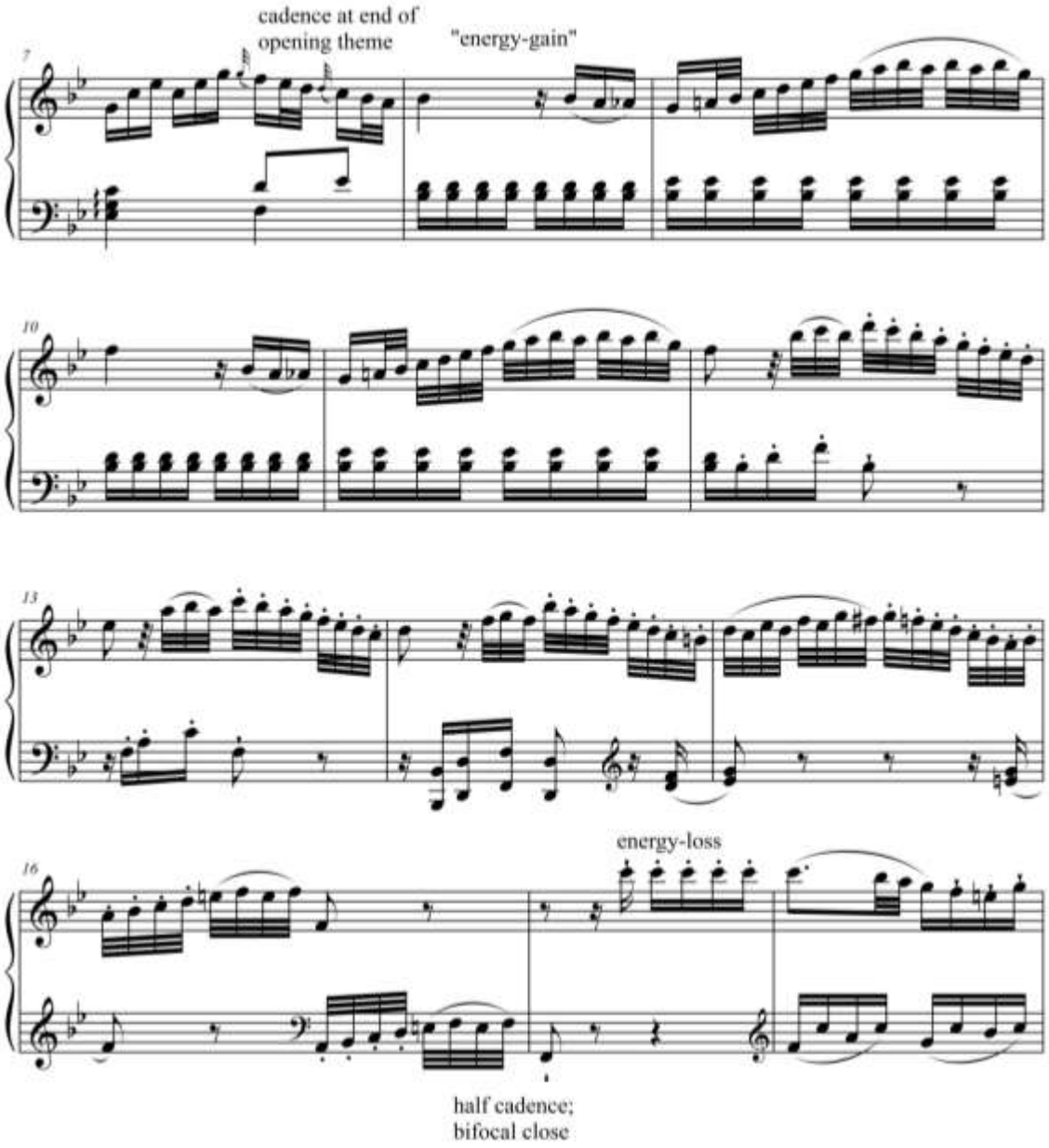
Hepokoski and Darcy suggest that, in this zone, the principal theme is "followed by a series of continuation modules, the upshot of which was to provide the energy-gain needed to produce an effective MC."[11] Although they do not further define "energy-gain," it seems reasonable to assume that it could include factors such as increased volume, faster and more continuous surface motion, faster harmonic rhythm, thicker texture, and so forth.

[9] Caplin, *Classical Form*, 35-48.
[10] For examples by Beethoven, see Winter, "Bifocal Close," 330-33.
[11] Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements*, 93.

Is "energy-gain" really a determining feature of this zone? Admittedly, one can find examples that display energy-gain in this section. For example, in the first movement of his Piano Sonata in B-flat, K 281, Mozart completes the opening theme (and eight-bar period) with a perfect authentic cadence on the downbeat of m. 8. Elided with that cadence is the beginning of a ten-bar, non-modulating passage (mm. 8-17) that ends with a half cadence in the tonic key and is followed immediately by a prominent new theme in the dominant key (see Example 5). The intense rush of 32nd notes in this passage suggests energy-gain, particularly by contrast with what comes before and after. Moreover, this is not the only such example in Mozart.[12] Similar examples can be found also in Haydn's works (e.g. Keyboard Sonata in D, Hob. XVI/19, mm. 9-18).

Example 5 Mozart, Sonata in B-Flat Major, K. 281, first movement, mm. 7-18

[12] For representative works by Mozart that display energy-gain leading to a bifocal close, see his String Quartets, K. 160/i, mm. 12-15 and K. 575/i, mm. 23-32; Piano Sonata, K. 283/i, mm. 16-22. On the other hand, there are also works by Mozart that do not display energy-gain at this spot. See Example 1 above (mm. 5-8), and his String Quartet, K. 168/i, mm. 10-18. Sometimes it is not clear one way or the other. See, for example, String Quartet, K. 590/i, mm. 12-15.



However, there are some problems in using energy-gain as a necessary identifying marker for the zone in question. Most telling: it is hardly an invariable feature. Although some works, like K. 281, do have clear energy-gain at this point in the exposition, many other works do not. For example, it is by no means clear that there is energy-gain in mm. 13-26 of K. 280 (Example 4 above). Furthermore, energy-gain is far less characteristic of works by Haydn than by Mozart. In addition, it is less common in slow movements by comparison to fast movements. Moreover, to complicate matters, energy-gain can occur in other locations in the exposition. For example, it is possible to have energy-gain in the approach to any (or all) of the principal cadences of the exposition: the cadence that ends the tonic section, the cadence that ends the modulation to the dominant (if there is such a section), and the cadence that closes the exposition. Indeed, the first movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata in B-flat, K. 333, has energy-gain at all three of those locations (see Example 1 above for examples of energy-gain at the cadences at the end of the

tonic section and at the end of the modulation to the dominant).[13] All of this suggests that energy-gain is not a determining feature. If this is the case, we need to reiterate our question: what are the essential features of this zone?

Consider the passages in Examples 2 and 4. In both cases, we have a passage that follows immediately after the cadence that concludes the opening theme. In both cases, this passage starts and ends in the tonic key. Therefore, a possible term for this zone could be "tonic-continuation section" or "supplementary tonic-section theme." These two options capture the principal function of this passage, which is to extend the tonic region with additional thematic material before moving on to the secondary key.

Moreover, it is important to understand that this is exactly comparable to what happens in the dominant key section of the exposition. As noted by Jens Peter Larsen: "in most cases the dominant region is more extensive than the other two together."[14] The dominant section normally attains its length not by extending a single theme, but by stringing together several themes, each of which concludes with a cadence, usually an authentic cadence.

For example, in K. 280, the dominant section encompasses mm. 27-56. Within that 30-measure stretch, there is a succession of thematic statements, each ending with a cadence: mm. 27-34 (ends with IAC); mm. 35-43 (ends with PAC); mm. 43-48 (ends with PAC); mm. 48-54. The exposition ends with a three-measure closing phrase.

I maintain that an exactly parallel situation occurs in the tonic section of many expositions. Rather than a single thematic statement that ends with a cadence, many expositions have multiple thematic statements in the tonic section, each of which concludes with a cadence—just as we saw for the dominant section.

It is said that one never gets a second chance to make a first impression. If so, the opening of a sonata-form exposition gives us that first impression and sets the tone and character of the work. But in some works, the opening material is not the be-all and end-all, even for the tonic-key zone. Rather, the tonic continuation section can modify that first impression, giving us an additional expressive vision.

Without doubt, the term "transition" is deeply ingrained into our current analytical tradition. Nevertheless, we need not—should not—resign ourselves to that reality. Words matter and, if the words we use do not accurately describe the situation, then we should dispense with them. In late eighteenth-century expositions, if there is a modulation, there is no reason to apologize for using the term "transition"—it is entirely appropriate. On the other hand, where there is no modulation, the term is inappropriate and should be abandoned—and replaced with a term that more accurately describes its function.

[13] Although the exposition ends with a softer codetta, there is clear energy-gain leading to the cadence in m. 59.

[14] Jens Peter Larsen, "Sonatenformprobleme," in *Festschrift Friedrich Blume zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Anna Amalie Abert & Wilhelm Pfannkuch (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1963), 221-30. Reprinted in English translation as "Sonata Form Problems" in Jens Peter Larsen, *Handel, Haydn, and the Viennese Classical Style*, trans. Ulrich Krämer (sic) (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988), 269-79. [Reprinted again as "Sonata Form Problems" in *Haydn: The Online Journal of the Haydn Society of North America* 3, 2 (Fall, 2013), where the credit for the translation is corrected to Jerald C. Graue (1978).] See p. 274.