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The *Sinthome* in Instrumental Music: The Case of Schubert

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Abstract

The concept of the *sinthome* (or 'sinthom' in English) - the construction which provides a unique structuring of *jouissance*, but which is divested of any symbolic meaning - arrived late in Lacan's work, in his seminar on 1975-6. The sinthom's most notable application in Žižek's output is found in Part I of his *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, in which he explores the homology between the form of commodities and of dreams. It has since been used widely in discussions of literature, art, and cinema, but is missing from musicology, aside from the occasional remark from Žižek himself. This paper demonstrates that the medial caesura which deflects the tonal trajectory of a sonata exposition, and not the themes themselves, should be identified as the locus of this aspect of Schubert's compositional voice. Drawing on ideas emerging from Žižek's critique of Hitchcock, the aim is to demonstrate how the Lacanian concept of the sinthom reveals a deeper, more fundamental intertextuality in Schubert's compositional project than has hitherto been available.

Key Words: Sinthom; Schubert; Sonata Theory; Lacan; Psychoanalysis; Medial caesura; Analysis

The concept of the *sinthome* (English, 'sinthom') - the construction that provides a unique structuring of *jouissance*, but is divested of any symbolic meaning - arrived late in Lacan's work, in his seminar of 1975-6. The sinthom's most notable application in Žižek's output is in Part I of his *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in which he explores the homology between the form of commodities and of dreams. It has since been used widely in discussions of literature, art, and cinema, but not so far in musicology, aside from the occasional remark from Žižek himself. One of the aims of this article to find ways of doing this, using the large-scale instrumental works that Schubert composed in the 1820s. These include the String Quintet in C major, D. 956, the Piano Trio in B-flat major, D. 898, the Piano Sonata in B-flat major, D. 960, and the Symphony in B minor, 'Unfinished', D. 759.

Analysis of Schubert's instrumental music, a pursuit that only truly began to be taken seriously after James Webster's work in the 1970s, has been of continued interest in recent years, most notably in book-length studies by Wollenberg and Clark.¹ Schubert is, however, still comparatively lacking in current theoretical writing. In particular, Hepokoski's and Darcy's *Elements of Sonata Theory*, which has had such an impact on British and American musicology and which has largely become the new orthodoxy of sonata-form theory, is lacking Schubertian exemplars of form; the authors prefer the familiar and ostensibly safer Beethovenian and, above all, Mozartian corpus. It is therefore an aim of this article to supplement and critique this orthodoxy, and to add a new critical edge to the study of Schubert's music.

In psychoanalytic discussions of cultural artifacts such as paintings and films, sinthoms are typically identified in the small details - mannerisms and identifying features that continually appear above and beyond the immediate content of the work in question. It is for this reason that Hepokoski's and Darcy's *Elements of Sonata Theory* stands out as an appealing lens through which to identify such small details in pieces of instrumental music, not least in terms of the emphasis their theory puts on a small number of cadential cruxes. One such crux is the 'medial caesura', which, the authors argue, is treated more-or-less conventionally in the eighteenth century as a matter of grammar but which takes on a new and expressive content in the decades after 1800. This article examines the medial caesura in fine detail through a Lacanian lens, and in particular it will scrutinise its manifestations in Schubert's work. The reason for giving such strong focus to the medial caesura is the remarkable treatment of this moment that we find in a collection of Schubert's overtures and 1st-movement sonata forms. *Sonata Theory*, more than any other recent theory of sonata form, I argue, is the

most precise analytical tool for a discussion of this moment and, as I shall argue in this paper, a Lacanian interpretative strategy is particularly useful when approaching such formal cruxes. In this article, I will therefore be using the terminology employed in Hepokoski's and Darcy's *Elements of Sonata Theory* (2006, hereafter referred to as 'EST'), which is used in much North American music theory. The basic abbreviations are: P (primary theme), TR (transition), S (secondary theme), C (closing theme or themes), PAC (perfect authentic cadence), HC (half cadence or half close), MC (medial caesura), EEC (essential expositional closure, i.e., the PAC that provides structural closure to the exposition of a sonata form), and ESC (essential structural closure, i.e., the PAC that provides structural closure to the recapitulation and therefore the whole sonata form).

The Medial Caesura in General

In their *Elements of Sonata Theory*, Hepokoski and Darcy define the medial caesura as follows: 'The *medial caesura* is the brief, rhetorically reinforced break or gap that serves to divide an exposition into two parts, tonic and dominant.'² Their conception of the medial caesura first emerged in their 1997 article 'The Medial Caesura and Its Role in the Eighteenth-Century Sonata Exposition' wherein they explain that the origins of the idea, which they consider to be 'one of the linchpins of Sonata Theory,' are found in the music theory of the period under discussion.³ Their point of departure is Heinrich Christoph Koch's *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Composition* (1778), in which Koch emphasises how 'varying degrees of rhetorical articulation - especially hierarchically ordered cadences, pauses, and breaks - are central to the mid- and late-eighteenth century sense of form.'⁴ The authors make clear at this point, nine years before the eventual publication of their complete theory, how important the medial caesura is in the context of their work when they write that 'It is our contention that an analysis of major punctuation-breaks (structural caesuras) leads one into the heart of a productive, defensible sonata-form theory.'⁵ While this claim is not new - the authors mention Ratner, Berger, Rosen, and Rothstein as making important contributions to the model - a structural caesura they consider to be critical, the one that sometimes divides the exposition into two distinct parts, takes on a new level of importance, the authors argue.⁶

Hepokoski's and Darcy's view of the eighteenth-century conception of form as punctuation is positive, but cautious. Unlike Berger, who elevates the punctuation

model above the other three factors of musical form that he identifies - key, theme, and voice - deliberately aligning himself with eighteenth-century precedents, Hepokoski and Darcy adopt a far more critical stance. They argue that 'original theoretical writings - Koch, Galeazzi, Reicha, and so on - are to be taken into account, but as massively reductive generalizations they ultimately prove to be of secondary importance.'⁷ They also note that 'The basic notion of a musical caesura [...] is elementary enough: the term may refer to any break or pause, however mild, in the texture. Our concern here is with the specially privileged, generically stylized *medial caesura*.'⁸ This implies, as a minimum, that the MC is at or near the top of a systematised hierarchy of musical punctuation, and is treated in the repertoire with some degree of uniformity, in contrast to any number of combinations of musical caesuras which emerge in the music of the period. My own view is that late-eighteenth-century punctuation theories, while of paramount historical importance, are best treated as a product of their time, that is to say, as composition treatises and not as analytical theories. In any case, the ones that emphasise the punctuation model most, especially Koch's, emerged decades before Schubert's sonata forms, which are of a quite different mould altogether. The inductive approach advocated in *Sonata Theory* seems to be significantly more flexible than the much more prescriptive punctuation theory, and it offers a considerably more precise language for discussing structural caesuras. In any case, although *Sonata Theory* privileges the caesura that separates the two parts of an exposition above other, presumably subordinate cadential cruxes, Schubert's treatment of the MC in a number of cases is remarkable enough to demand special treatment.

What can Lacanian theory bring to this element of *Sonata Theory*? Stephen Rumph has already mentioned, albeit briefly and *en passant*, that a Lacanian reading of particularly deformational musical cruxes might be possible and beneficial. In his discussion of the moment of recapitulation in the Andante of Mozart's Piano Concerto in G, K. 453, he notes the highly unusual return from C-sharp minor to C major, asking if the 'enharmonic shortcut to the reprise represent[s] Mozart Bourgeois submitting to social forces or Mozart Composer indulging in a bit of harmonic *jouissance*?'⁹ Although the concepts of retransition and medial caesura differ markedly in function and treatment in the repertoire, they are comparable as form-defining moments, and carry potential for deformational treatment. In the Mozart example used by Rumph, and in the collection of Schubertian examples I set out below, it is the treatment of surrounding harmonies that invites such a Lacanian reading, and that are, moreover, more readily approachable through a neo-Riemannian conception of tonal space than the type of Classical 5th-space set out by Rosen. My view is that such grammatical

cruxes, in the instances to which I refer below, become the vessels for a particular kind of expressive end as a result of their deformational treatment, but that such expression remains fluid and, ultimately, elusive. The etymology of 'caesura' (from the Latin *caedere*, to cut down), noted by Hepokoski and Darcy in their 1997 article, seems to lend itself to such a Lacanian reading.¹⁰ It does not imply simply that the music stops and resumes after a short silence, but that it has somehow been cut, that there is a conceptual tear in its fabric. The Lacanian response to this is that such a tear is understood as a rupture or inconsistency in the symbolic order, allowing the Real momentarily to intrude.¹¹

The medial caesura sets the internal boundaries of the two-part exposition and, therefore, is pivotal to the structure of the piece as a whole.¹² Sometimes, the way that Žižek describes the relationship of the Real to the Symbolic could be directly applied to a discussion of the medial caesura and the musical structures that surround it:

Why must the symbolic mechanism be hooked onto a 'thing,' some piece of the real? The Lacanian answer is, of course: because the symbolic field is in itself always already barred, crippled, porous, structured around some extimate kernel, some impossibility. The function of the 'little piece of the real' is precisely to fill out the place of this void that gapes in the very heart of the symbolic.¹³

Understanding the medial caesura as the 'little piece of the real' which sets the symbolic network into motion may seem counterintuitive. Common sense would suggest that the Real would be located somewhere 'before' or at least 'outside' the space of the sonata, from which point it could set the music in motion. Actually, locating the hard kernel of the Real deep within the symbolic fabric of the sonata is in line with the Lacanian and Žižekian understanding as something that comes 'from within' but is nevertheless detached, foreign. It stands to reason, then, that in *Elements of Sonata Theory* the chapter on the medial caesura, rather than being presented in the chronological order of events within sonata form, is presented at the very outset, before the chapters on the primary theme and the transition. We therefore arrive at the counterintuitive conclusion that the void of the medial caesura, rather than being the result of the surrounding themes, is actually their cause. This is in line with the analogous example, sometimes used by Žižek, of the theoretical differences in physics between Einstein's special and general relativity:

While the special theory already introduces the notion of curved space, it conceives of this curvature as the effect of matter: it is the presence of matter that curves space, i.e. only an empty space would not be curved. With the passage to the general theory, the

causality is reversed: far from *causing* the curvature of space, matter is its *effect* and the presence of matter signals that space is curved. What can all this have to do with psychoanalysis? Much more than it may appear: in a way that echoes Einstein, for Lacan the Real - the Thing - is not so much the inert presence that curves symbolic space (introducing gaps and inconsistencies in it), but, rather, an effect of these gaps and inconsistencies.¹⁴

To follow this to its conclusion, we may speak of the Real void of the medial caesura as an effect of the fact that sonata space is inconsistent. It signals the fact that there is a rupture. The MC is the Thing in sonata form which, in Sean Homer's words, 'is "objectively" speaking *no-thing*; it is only something in relation to the desire that constitutes it [...] It is the desire to fill the emptiness or void at the core of subjectivity and the symbolic that creates the Thing, as opposed to the loss of some original Thing creating the desire to find it.'¹⁵ This is homologous with old Yugoslav joke cited by Žižek about Montenegrins (who were stigmatized as lazy in the former Yugoslavia). The joke, as it appears in *Less Than Nothing*, goes: 'Why does a Montenegrin guy, when going to sleep, put two glasses, one full and one empty, at the side of his bed? Because he is too lazy to think in advance whether he will be thirsty during the night.'¹⁶ In this joke, Žižek explains, 'the absence itself has to be articulated', and the same is true of the medial caesura. There was nothing ever 'in' the medial-caesura gap, but the impulse to question it leads us to regard it as a Thing, an objectal presence. The presence of the MC, therefore, can be said to be 'desirable' in the context of the music that surrounds it. The medial caesura is, 'objectively' speaking, an arbitrary void, but we experience it as a positive presence to which the transition aims, and from which the secondary zone (and the rest of the sonata) results. To use Žižek's terms, we could say that the medial caesura is the Thing, the little piece of the Real, onto which the themes are 'hooked'. They are generated by it, rather than the other way around, and from this perspective, we can consider the medial caesura as an extimate object of desire.¹⁷

The 'Schubertian' Medial Caesura

During their discussion of the caesura-fill, Hepokoski and Darcy make this brief remark:

[The caesura-fill] may even, in rare cases (particularly from Schubert onward), be called upon to accomplish a modulation to the generically proper new key following a deformationally ‘wrong-key’ or other problematic sounding MC.¹⁸

This, in a truncated and partial way, identifies the main object of this article: the particular deformational treatment of the medial caesura in Schubert’s music, whose preparation is

	Medial Caesura	Secondary Theme	Essential Expositional Closure (EEC)
Overture ‘In the Italian Style’, D. 590	V: PAC	bIII	V
Symphony No. 8, D. 759	i: PAC	VI	VI
‘Rosamunde’ Overture, D. 797	vi: PAC	V	V
String Quartet in G, D. 887	III: HC	V	V
Piano Trio in B flat, D. 898	III: HC	V	V
Symphony No. 9, ‘Great’, D. 944	I: PAC	iii	V
String Quintet in C, D. 956	i: HC	bIII	V
Piano Sonata in B flat, D. 960	I: HC	bvi	V

Table 1: The deflecting medial caesura in Schubert’s sonata forms.

achieved through a HC or PAC and is followed, usually immediately, by the launch of an otherwise satisfactory secondary zone *in a key other than the one that was prepared by the cadence*, hereafter referred to as the ‘deflecting medial caesura’ (DMC). Examples of this occur in the opening movements of the following works: Overture in D ‘In the Italian Style’, D. 590; Symphony No. 8 in B minor, ‘Unfinished’, D. 759; Overture ‘Rosamunde’, D. 797; String Quartet in G major, D. 887; Piano Trio in B-flat major, D. 898; Symphony No. 9 in C major, ‘Great’, D. 944; String Quintet in C major, D. 956; and Piano Sonata in B-flat major, D. 960 (see table 1).

Within the category of the deflecting medial caesura, three sub-categories can be identified. In the first sub-category, the transition is normative and achieves a rhetorically reinforced V:HC or, more typically, a I:HC which establishes the medial caesura. The secondary zone that follows is then immediately presented in the ‘wrong’ key, usually at the interval of a major or minor third. It is then, usually, the task of the secondary zone to establish a satisfactory EEC in the normative key (i.e. the dominant). This means that the secondary zone, often of a lyrical nature, does not cadence in the key that it started in, and is likely to give rise to the impression

Example 1: Schubert String Quintet in C major, D. 956, first movement expositional medial caesura, bb. 57-62.

that it is always either ‘searching for’ or ‘moving towards’ the dominant EEC, albeit often in a way that continuously defers this motion. This is the case in the String Quintet (see example 1) as well as the Piano Sonata in B-flat.

The second sub-category is the reverse of the first. It exhibits the ‘correct’ key at the outset of the secondary zone (V in major-mode works and III in minor-mode works), but the transition establishes a rhetorically reinforced cadence in the wrong key, typically a III:HC. The effect produced here is that the normatively ‘correct’ key (the dominant) is cast in a light that is, for want of a better word, *unheimlich*. Nicholas Marston has written about this effect in reference to Schubert’s B-flat Piano Sonata, D. 960, but in relation to the tonic in the recapitulatory rotation, rather than the dominant in the exposition. This ‘unseating’ of the dominant as a stable key, creating the illusion of a deformationally ‘wrong-key’ secondary zone, can lead to repercussions in the

remainder of the sonata. This category addresses the cases of the G major String Quartet, D. 887, and the Piano Trio in B-flat major, D. 898.

In the third sub-category the transition does not move from the tonic. It concludes with a perfect authentic cadence in the home key, and the caesura fill, through common-tone relationship, accesses the key for the start of the secondary zone. This final category addresses the cases of the two symphonies - No. 8 in B minor, D. 759, and No. 9 in C major, D. 944. Perhaps an improvement to Hepokoski's and Darcy's short remark above, which addresses the deflecting medial caesura, might read:

The caesura-fill may, in rare cases (particularly from Schubert onward), be called upon to accomplish a modulation to a key other than the one that was prepared by the cadential progression that preceded it. Such cases may involve EITHER establishing the generically proper new key following a deformationally 'wrong-key' medial caesura, OR, conversely, establishing a deformationally 'wrong-key' S-zone following a tonally normative TR and MC.

This construction incorporates the first sub-category of deflecting medial caesura (normative TR with S subject to deformation) as well as the second (half-close effect subject to deformation but normative S). Music of the later nineteenth century would demand even further nuancing of this particular sonata deformation. Bruckner, in particular, experimented in his symphonies with the deflecting medial caesura with a doubly deformational structure in which neither the cadential construction nor the eventual launch of the secondary theme are normative. See, for example, the finale of Bruckner's Symphony No. 7 in E, in which a $bII:HC$ is established by the transition, but the secondary zone is launched up a minor 3rd in III (enharmonically written in A-flat major).¹⁹ Cases of the deflecting medial caesura in Schubert's music, however, always exhibit either a normative TR complex, or a normative secondary zone launch.

The above formulation of the deflecting medial caesura is, as far as I know, almost entirely unrepresentative of sonata composition before Schubert.²⁰ Even though Beethoven is often (and rightly) compared on equal terms with Schubert for pioneering new expositional plans (introducing intermediate keys between tonic and dominant, for example), his harmonic treatment of the medial caesura moment itself is usually conventional. The principal examples of this practice are the first movements of the piano sonatas Op. 31, No. 1 in G, and Op. 53 in C, 'Waldstein'. In both cases the tonal trajectory is from I to III, but S is set in the same key as the medial caesura, and prepared through its own dominant, producing a $III:HC$ MC. Structurally, the tonal plan is innovative and experimental in a comparable way to much of Schubert's music, but

Schubert's local harmonic handling of the MC is very rarely seen in the work of his contemporaries. This is supported through reference to the late-eighteenth-century conceptions of musical punctuation mentioned above. Mirka has noted that 'the sense of a phrase can be understood only at its end', and she draws on Kirnberger's comparison of musical phrase structure and speech, in which he writes that 'In speech one comprehends the sense [*Sinn*] only at the end of a sentence [...] the same is true in music. Not until a succession of connected notes reaches a point of rest at which the ear is somewhat satisfied does it comprehend these notes as a small unit.'²¹ In the group of Schubert's forms given above, the structural caesura achieves just this effect - of reaching a 'point of rest at which the ear is somewhat satisfied' - only to be radically undermined and reinterpreted by what follows.

It should be mentioned at this point that Mark Richards's recent study of Beethoven's handling of the MC provides a compelling demonstration of the many and varied innovations made by Beethoven in what Richards coins the 'obscured medial caesura'.²² He argues that Beethoven increasingly through his compositional life tends to complicate the medial caesura in various ways, with the effect of creating a stronger sense of continuity in his sonata expositions. As he puts it:

To use a linguistic analogy, if the typical classical-style MC can be likened to the punctuating and anticipatory effect of a colon, then increasingly obscured MC categories would be similar to the progressively softer punctuating effects of the semicolon and the comma. In some cases, the MC might even be compared with a dash that interrupts the flow of a line despite its connectivity.²³

The problem in the context of Schubert's music is that the effect described here is to blur the formal lines, making it unclear after the moment has passed whether the music 'really is in the secondary zone'. In the Schubert works outlined above the opposite seems to be the case: the formal outline seems to be brought even more sharply into focus. In the C major Quintet, D. 956, for example, the secondary zone in E-flat major seems even more distant from the transition, rather than the equivalent in Beethoven where, as Richards argues, the two parts of the exposition are being brought more closely together, overlapping, being joined up, and so forth. So for Beethoven, the effect of 'obscuring' the medial caesura moment is to create continuity, to reduce the punctuative effect of the break, whereas Schubert, by deflecting into an unprepared key, makes the sense of a punctuative break even more apparent.

The narrative that this particular handling of the medial caesura has generated has become deeply entrenched in Schubert criticism and can be traced in the analytical

literature at least as far back as Tovey in the early twentieth century. The most commonly accepted interpretation of Schubert's excursions to distantly related tonal regions is that of the 'dream sequence', involving the association of modulation to a mediant key with a lyrical, song-like thematic area. The tradition of the dream narrative in Schubert's instrumental music is a long one and has been promulgated by a range of contributors. The two strategies that have been used in more recent years are both empirical. The first is to observe a particular musical structure, motif or other device in a song, and to use the text as a guide to what the equivalent device in the instrumental music might be aiming to communicate. Examples of this can be seen in some of Wollenberg's work on Schubert. She has written that:

It is possible to view selected instrumental movements as textless equivalents to specific songs or song-types, not only in Schubert but in nineteenth-century music as a whole. With Schubert this relationship between song and instrumental music - both between the two genres and between individual works - is very close. His instrumental writing becomes altogether quite unlike that of other composers of the period, so illuminated is it by his own experience as a song writer.²⁴

Wollenberg directs attention to various aspects of Schubert's style, formal, melodic and tonal, but one of her main concerns is that of episodic forms, in which the lyrical, song-like dream episode is enveloped by music of a more dogged, stoic, or violent nature symbolising 'reality'. Although little is said of how this strategy relates to sonata form, it may perhaps be said that the contrast between the more dramatic, rhythmically vital music of first part of many of Schubert's sonata expositions contrasts thematically with the more lyrical, dream-like second part, separated by a deflecting medial caesura. The second method, also textual in nature, was demonstrated by Pesic in his article 'Schubert's Dream', in which he equated Schubert's short literary text *Mein Traum* to the structure of the B-flat Piano Sonata, D. 960.²⁵ Such a reading also hinges on the separation of a dreamy, lyrical theme from a more violent one by means of a deflecting medial caesura.

What is clear by now, then, is that the contrast between the two action zones - the transition and the secondary zone - is the locus of the dream narrative that has been established. However, as is demonstrated in works such as Schubert's B-flat Piano Trio, D. 898, it is not a foreign key that generates the dream-like effect, but the relationship between the cadence and the start of the secondary zone, usually separated tonally by a 3rd. What *Sonata Theory* brings to this discussion, then, is that it

is the medial caesura that deformationally deflects the established tonal path, and not the themes themselves, that generates this effect.

***Le Sinthome* in Cinema**

The sinthom is an important concept that emerged late in Lacan's work. It has also arisen at varied levels of theoretical complexity in Žižek's writing. The most succinct evaluation of the term is presented in Žižek's *How to Read Lacan*:

One of the many neologisms in late Lacan is the notion of *le sinthome* ('sinthom', which strikes up a whole series of associations, from 'Saint Thomas' to 'healthy tone' to 'synthetic man'). In contrast to symptoms (coded messages of the unconscious), sinthoms are a kind of atom of enjoyment, the minimal synthesis of language and enjoyment, units of signs permeated with enjoyment (like a tic we compulsively repeat). Are sinthoms not *quanta of enjoyment*, its smallest packages? Are they not, as such, a Freudian equivalent of superstrings, destined to reconcile the two faces of modern physics, relativity theory and quantum mechanics? Although Lacan is often reproached for neglecting the link between psychoanalysis and the natural sciences on which Freud always insisted, this link is alive and well in his work.²⁶

What is to be made of this? Throughout Žižek's work, the point of difference between symptoms and sinthoms is constantly emphasised. A symptom, as he writes in the quotation above, is something that can be de-coded. It is something with a hidden meaning that, when uncovered, gives the analyst a level of access to the unconscious on the basis that it is structured like a language. Far from being coded messages that are registered symbolically, sinthoms determine the end of this symbolic process. They are a kind of 'excess' or 'leftover' that emerge as an intrusion of the uninterpretable Real.

As is typical in Žižek's writing, discussion of the sinthom has been concentrated on cinema, and, in particular, on Hitchcock. Cinematic analogy is useful here because psychoanalytic theories usually rely on secure human agents. As Rumph has pointed out, 'without stable musical agents who can embody the bourgeois individual or its collective antagonist, dialectical interpretation becomes more than a little problematic.'²⁷ In contrast to opera, *Lieder*, and other literary media, instrumental music is not directly approachable from the perspective of psychoanalysis because the concept of agency is considerably more complex. Given that cinema shares with music an explicitly temporal dimension, and that it is a favoured medium of both Freud and

Žižek, it proves to be a useful mediator for the discussion of instrumental music in psychoanalytic terms.

Žižek's distilled offering on the topic of the *sinthom* can be found in his short chapter, 'Hitchcockian *Sinthomes*.'²⁸ His aim is to address the presence of a 'continuum of motifs' that persists from film to film in spite of wildly divergent narrative contexts. The few that he cites include 'the woman who knows too much', and 'the glass full of white drink'. The former is the intellectually superior but sexually unattractive woman - a kind of female Poindexter - who has an advanced insight into events in the film. The latter - the conspicuous glass of white drink, but not, necessarily, milk - occurs first in *Suspicion* (1941), then in *Spellbound* (1945), then soon after in *Notorious* (1946), and finally in *Psycho* (1960). The most important of these extended motifs, however, is 'the person who is suspended from another's hand', which occurs in no fewer than five films between 1942 and 1959: *Saboteur* (1942), *Rear Window* (1954), *To Catch a Thief* (1955), *Vertigo* (1958), and *North by Northwest* (1959). The context of this motif is different each time. In *Saboteur*, it is the villain who is suspended at the top of the Statue of Liberty. In *Rear Window*, by contrast, it is the hero who is desperately clinging on, with the villain trying to push him out of his own apartment window. In *North by Northwest* our hero is trying to save the heroine from falling off Mount Rushmore.

Žižek dismisses the 'official' reading of Hitchcock's person suspended above the precipice that is offered by some French theorists. Žižek writes:

If we search in them for a common core of meaning (reading the hand that pulls the subject up as a token of deliverance, of spiritual salvation, for example), we say *too much*: we enter into the domain of Jungian archetypes, which is utterly incompatible with Hitchcock's universe; if, on the other hand, we reduce them to an empty signifier's hull filled out in each of the films by a specific content, we *don't say enough*: the force that makes them persist from one film to another eludes us. The right balance is attained when we conceive them as *sinthoms* in the Lacanian sense: as a signifier's constellation (formula) which fixes a certain core of enjoyment, like mannerisms in painting - characteristic details which persist and repeat themselves without implying a common meaning.²⁹

The way that the *sinthom* works in film is to create an intertext that exists below the surface, narrative meaning, and also below a deeper symbolic meaning. In Žižek's analysis of Hitchcock's *The Birds*, the birds in question do not merely symbolise the oedipal tension between mother and son. This would be achieved merely by making

their presence conspicuous, and the plot would be a simpler one of social relations. Instead, the birds *are* the raw, incestuous energy that tears apart symbolic reality, owing to the absence of the Name-of-the-Father - the sign that opens the gateway to the symbolic order, allowing normal social relations - and the resultant vacuum is filled with the obscene maternal super-ego. In this context, we are momentarily subjected to *jouissance*, pure enjoyment in its stupidity and meaninglessness, but in a way that somehow collides with the signifier. For Žižek, 'if we are to take the films seriously, we can do so only if we take them serially.'³⁰ He argues that the tension between the immediate 'official' (symbolic) content of the totality of a film and the surplus that is apparent in the small details requires a departure from such an official content. And the 'sudden leap' away from the official content of a text is usually executed intertextually.

In his documentary *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, Žižek makes a comment concerning the Hitchcockian motif of 'the person suspended from another's hand' with a carefully worded and somewhat opaque conclusion:

I think it's wrong to look for a common deeper meaning [...] I think that what we are dealing with is with a kind of a cinematic materialism: that beneath the level of meaning - spiritual meaning, but also simple narrative meaning - we get a more elementary level of forms themselves communicating with each other, interacting, reverberating, echoing, morphing, transforming one into the other, and it is this background, this, as it were, background of proto-reality, a real that is more dense, more fundamental than the narrative reality - the story that we observe - it is this that provides the proper density of the cinematic experience.³¹

The main thing to draw from this comment is that we are not dealing with something 'meaningful' when we talk about sinthoms - note the way that Žižek carefully avoids the word 'meaning' when he says 'we get a more elementary level of forms themselves communicating with each other' - it is enough that the sinthom is there, that the intertext exists. This is what is important, and not whatever meaning it may or may not be carrying. Unlike symbolism, which can be interpreted this way and that, the sinthom, which is an intrusion of the Real, is an inert, fixed presence - an excess.

Žižek's comment about 'cinematic materialism' is also worth unpacking, as it refers directly to the first part of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, which focuses on the close relationship of psychoanalysis and Marxism. With the concept of the sinthom, we arrive at a kind of brute materiality. As Žižek is keen to explore, the dream-form and the commodity-form are strongly linked. He explains that 'there is a fundamental homology between the interpretative procedure of Marx and Freud - more precisely, between

their analysis of commodity and of dreams.³² On accepting this homology, we arrive at the conclusion that such an example as a person suspended over a precipice in cinema is an 'excess' over and above the narrative or symbolic meaning of a film, and corresponds closely to Marxist 'surplus-value' and Lacanian 'surplus-enjoyment'. So, *sinthoms* are an excess, a signifier that is not 'enchained in the symbolic order' and 'without representing anything or anyone.'³³

A Schubertian *Sinthome*?

There is a certain interpretative value in understanding Hepokoski's and Darcy's concept of the medial caesura as an intrusion of the Real. It is an empty space in its brute reality, which is elevated in *Sonata Theory* to the level of objectal presence, signalling that sonata space is inconsistent, and corresponding to the sign of inconsistency in the structural order on Lacan's Graph of Desire.³⁴ This formulation does not, however, account for the multifarious ways that the MC moment is treated in the repertoire. To give proper credit to Schubert's idiosyncratic treatment of the MC as a recurrence of the atom of desire, it needs to be treated as an example of the Lacanian *sinthom*.

If the deflecting medial caesura is to be regarded as an example of the *sinthom* in Schubert's sonata forms, then, while we can still accept its symbolic function within sonata space, we must simultaneously be able to isolate it, to understand it as a partial object in any given work, echoing and reverberating with its many other instances, which are related inasmuch as they hold the same imaginary power of attraction over us but do not share a common core of symbolic meaning. What this process involves is something quite brutal in the context of the normal, 'official' content of the work - in the case of Schubert, the 'dream', or the concept of escape, or even the parity of lyricism and distant tonal relations more broadly. 'What we must do', to use Žižek's precise words, 'is to *isolate* the *sinthome* from the context by virtue of which it exerts its power of fascination in order to expose the *sinthome*'s utter stupidity. In other words, we must carry out the operation of changing the precious gift into a gift of shit (as Lacan put it in his *Seminar XI*), of experiencing the fascinating, mesmerizing voice as a [...] meaningless fragment of the real.'³⁵

What is contained within the deflecting medial caesura in some of Schubert's sonata forms is a break or gap that is no different from any other medial caesura - a 'silence' in its dumb reality, but which is often elevated to a privileged status in readings

that promote the symbolic dimension not only of Schubert's music, but of the sonata form more generally. In such readings, the medial caesura is constructed as the arbiter of a modulation that seems to define the 'official' content of the structure (the String Quintet is 'about' the interaction of two tonal axes, C/G and E-flat/A-flat), whereas when isolated as a Thing that continually returns in other works by Schubert, it can be demonstrated that the exact same Thing is used for quite diverse structural ends. Far from articulating a clear tonal plan for the sonata, in the G major String Quartet the deflecting medial caesura seems actively to derail the tonal plan of the movement, making it difficult to establish the tonality of the secondary zone as it slides evasively between keys. What should be understood when considering the medial caesura gap in these instances of Schubert's music is that, if not considered symbolically (implying an ostensibly official content), they need to be understood intertextually for their registration as little pieces of the Real to become apparent. One of the reasons that such little pieces of the Real are different from other medial caesura gaps is the curvature of tonal space that they generate, which is unsymbolisable and only perceptible in the context of the narrow symbolic corridor through which we hear the surrounding music. And through this deep focus on the Real excess that we perceive in Schubert's sonata forms, we are offered a glimpse of the symbolic economy of a music that dances around its *objet petit a* in a way that cannot be deciphered through symbolisation, but only enjoyed in its utter stupidity.

The value of viewing Schubert's handling of the medial caesura as an example of the Lacanian *sinthom* is found in the way it charts a medial path between an overdetermined intertextuality, which prescribes certain meanings (supported by fantasies) onto varied musical texts, and an underdetermined one that misses the intertextual thread that links the works together. The deflecting medial caesura, in which the cadence construction and the launch of the secondary theme are in different keys, cannot be limited to a single set of meanings established *a priori*, nor can it valuably be described, as Žižek writes, as 'an empty signifier's hull', filled out in each of the works by a 'specific content'.³⁶ By examining the deflecting medial caesura as a Schubertian *sinthom*, an elegant solution to these problems - of 'saying too much' and 'not saying enough' - is offered. As a *sinthom*, the deflecting medial caesura is not obliged to 'mean' anything at all, least of all any of the prescriptive meanings that have been associated with Schubert, including dreams (Wollenberg, Pesic), somnambulism (Brendel), or homosexuality (McClary). The *sinthom* does not necessarily negate such readings. It merely creates a critical distance from them, allowing an intertextuality that flows freely between the works, but without being restrictive to interpretation.

This article has aimed to offer an alternate approach to the interpretation of extended motifs in musical works - one which avoids musical signifiers as catch-all prescriptions on the one hand, and empty shells on the other. The Lacanian repositioning of the deflecting medial caesura offers a more critical stance toward a number of trends in Schubert scholarship which have claimed that his music is somehow more emancipatory, sometimes with direct reference to biographical details. By concentrating on one detail of Schubert's practice, my aim has been to provide a critique of the received wisdom. While the view I have expounded here is specific to a particular detail that can be traced through a number of Schubert's instrumental works, the theoretical apparatus I have outlined and the approach I have adopted could equally well be applied to other works, particularly those that demonstrate a small detail that can be identified in a number of ostensibly unrelated pieces, and potentially a group of works not unified under the output of a single composer. Indeed, these observations could even be applied to a group of composers or a school of composition.

Žižek's own analysis of the finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony employs the same theoretical apparatus, although he does not explicitly acknowledge it, in his investigation of how the 'Ode to Joy' has a seemingly universal adaptability: it can 'mean' almost anything, and has been appropriated for diverse political ends, from its use in the celebration of public events in Nazi Germany through to its use as a socialist song in the communist regimes of Stalin and, remarkably, Mao in an era when most Western music was prohibited. Today it is used as the unofficial anthem of the European Union.³⁷ By treating the Ode to Joy (by which I mean only the main theme of the movement, not its entirety) as another example of the *sinthom*, we can add a theoretical underpinning to the observation that there is clearly nothing inherent in the music that compels demagogues to incorporate it into the apparatus of their propaganda machines. This would be nonsensical, owing to their sharply polarised ideologies being incompatible with each other. But at the other extreme, it is not enough to say that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is simply an empty signifier that can be filled with any ideological content. In doing this, we lose the essence of why it is particularly *that* piece that is used, rather than any other. The argument for a simple universal adaptability is inadequate without the concept of the *sinthom*.

Another example could be the use of seemingly arbitrary musical material borrowed from other sources, which is then used by a composer as the fundamental starting point for a composition. Žižek uses the example of the 'Papillon' motif in

'Florestan' from *Carnaval*, but there could be any number of cases that could be interpreted in this way.³⁸ In such examples, the Lacanian reading helps us to understand the extimacy of the external fragment - a little piece of the Real that forms the core of subjectivity. Yet another instance, one more in line with the main subject of this paper, is the recurrence of a minor detail in a composer's oeuvre. Examples of this might include the 'alternating' figures and flattened 7th sonorities that we find in Nielsen's music, spanning thirty years of productivity, or various composers' obsession with cryptographic methods of generating musical materials, the main examples of this practice being demonstrable in the work of composers as diverse as J.S. Bach and Shostakovich who, by turning their names into small motifs, produced musical materials that are no more than arbitrary, but which form the hard kernel of large works.

In Schubert's case, the MC in the collection of works I have cited acts as the arbiter of a crucial modulation. It is the same every time - either a literal or a conceptual silence - but in each case does markedly different harmonic work. The sinthom helps to navigate around 'saying too much' and 'not saying enough', and offers the conclusion that such moments are quanta of enjoyment without bearing any particular meaning. They stick out as a positive remainder, an excess, which eludes conventional symbolisation. The way this approach is useful in any application to a given work is in the way it isolates the small details, which can be examined with a critical, intertextual underpinning. In the case of Schubert's deflecting medial caesura, without the sinthom, there are two equally undesirable interpretative conclusions: that these moments all share a prescribed meaning, or that each of them can mean anything at all. The sinthom limits this moment, preventing an infinite (and therefore useless) series of interpretations, but without being prescriptive.

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Notes

¹ See Webster (1978). See Wollenberg (2011) and Clark (2011).

² Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory* (OUP, 2006), p. 24.

³ Hepokoski and Darcy (1997), p. 117.

⁴ Hepokoski and Darcy (1997), p. 115.

⁵ Hepokoski and Darcy (1997), p. 115.

⁶ See Karol Berger, 'The First-Movement Punctuation Form in Mozart's Piano Concertos', pp. 239-259.

⁷ *EST*, p. 605.

⁸ Hepokoski and Darcy (1997), p. 123.

⁹ Rumph (2012), p. 112.

¹⁰ Hepokoski and Darcy (1997), p. 123.

¹¹ The idea of rupture has been an important theme in Schubert scholarship in recent decades, although no such study has had anything to say about the MC rupture with which I am concerned here. The state of Schubert's mental health in biographical writings has been particularly explicit. Elizabeth Norman McKay's 1996 biography, for example, is littered with references to a mental condition - cyclothymia - of which Schubert is said to have been a sufferer. Countless more directly textual studies have come close to attributing symptoms of psychotic disorder to analytical observations of Schubert's music. Along with Robert Winter's assertion that a section of Schubert's Piano Sonata in A, D. 959, is 'as close to a nervous breakdown as anything in Schubert's output' (Winter, 2001, p. 683), Susan Wollenberg writes of 'Schubert's use of tonal and modal colouring' as being 'characterized by his perception of major and minor as two sides of a divided character' (Wollenberg, 2011, p. 29).

¹² I acknowledge the significant body of instances in which the medial caesura is bypassed altogether in the 'continuous exposition' (see *EST* chapter 4, pp. 51-64) in many works by Haydn. This has also been documented recently by Spitzer (2013, p. 135) in sonata forms from earlier in the eighteenth century, notably those of Sammartini and Stamitz. Although the medial caesura is not strictly essential for the sonata form to emerge, it is so ubiquitous after 1800, and examples of the continuous exposition type are so few, that the two-part exposition can be considered the only realistic option in sonata composition in the nineteenth century.

¹³ *Looking Awry*, p. 33.

¹⁴ *How to Read Lacan*, pp. 72-73.

¹⁵ Homer, Jacques Lacan, p. 85.

¹⁶ *Less Than Nothing*, pp. 766.

¹⁷ I acknowledge that the medial caesura may not be the only possible example of the Real in music, but the Real certainly does not extend to all musical convention. The MC is a 'cut' in the symbolic fabric, and such a cut is not merely a matter of phrase articulation, but a form-articulating (and, arguably, form-*generating*) moment. This is not the same as mere convention because conventions do not necessarily have this generating function, nor do conventions typically emerge as a blot or an objectal presence over and above the music's symbolic surface. On the contrary, conventions often go largely unnoticed and do not register as an interruptive gesture or a break.

¹⁸ *EST*, p. 41.

¹⁹ See Timothy L. Jackson's 'Bruckner's Sonata Deformations', pp. 256-277, especially pp. 271-274, 'The alienated secondary theme zone'.

²⁰ The main exception to this is Mozart's Piano Concerto in C major, No. 25, K. 503, 1st movement, which, in the S1 section, generates a I:HC MC with S subsequently launched in @III. This deformation seems to be demonstrated in a tiny minority of cases, which only become more common in the second half of the nineteenth century.

²¹ See Danuta Mirka, 'Punctuation and Sense in Late-Eighteenth-Century Music', pp. 235-282.

²² Mark Richards, 'Beethoven and the Obscured Medial Caesura', pp. 166-193.

²³ Richards (2013), p. 191.

²⁴ Susan Wollenberg, 'Schubert and the Dream', p. 135.

²⁵ Pesic (1999), pp. 136-144.

²⁶ Žižek, 'Troubles with the Real: Lacan as a Viewer of *Alien*', in *How to Read Lacan*, p. 78.

²⁷ Rumph (2012), p. 114.

²⁸ Žižek, 'Hitchcockian *Sinthomes*' in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan*, pp. 125-128.

²⁹ Žižek (1992), p. 126.

³⁰ Žižek (1991), p. 98.

³¹ Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, Part 3.

³² Žižek (2008), p. 3.

³³ Žižek (2008), p. 82.

³⁴ An intrusion of brute reality in a piece of music may also register itself as any number of interruptive gestures, such as a loud noise, not necessarily an empty space. Classical examples can be found in the titular moment in Haydn's 'Surprise' Symphony, No. 94 in G, as well as the interruptive C# in b. 17 of the finale of Beethoven's Symphony No. 8 in F. Although *EST* does not always directly equate medial caesuras with silences, the authors do write that 'The literal presence of the general-pause gap (the brief rest in all voices before the onset of S) is the most normative option at the medial-caesura point' (p. 40). They go on to describe the *caesura-fill* as a 'filling-in of the generically implied silence' (p. 40).

³⁵ Žižek (1991), p. 129.

³⁶ Žižek (1992), p. 126.

³⁷ See Žižek's *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*.

³⁸ See Žižek (1997), p. 264.