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Understanding Sonata Form through Model Composition

Sylvia Parker

Introduction

Composition is an important aid to musical understanding. The NASM handbook states that "musicians benefit significantly from study and experience in the creation of musical works. . . . It also develops the musical mind, hones analytical capacities, and develops sensitivity to the possibilities of musical structure."[1] This paper describes a plan for guiding intermediate music theory students to hone their understanding of classical sonata structure through composition.

Sonata-allegro is arguably the quintessential form in tonal music, certainly the most elaborate and prescriptive in terms of its component parts. It is deservedly the premiere form addressed in a music theory curriculum. Its study normally emphasizes description of tonal and thematic aspects, paired with analysis of selected works by master composers.

The average undergraduate student comes to an understanding of the contrasting functions of the sonata's thematic, transitional, and developmental sections only with difficulty. Students who compose such sections themselves acquire a better understanding of the form than they who limit their study to analysis. Given the typical time constraints, composing a sonata may seem too large a project for an undergraduate class in form and analysis where rondo, song forms and chromatic harmony vie for equal billing. Yet such a project was indeed completed, with great success, in an intermediate theory class at the University of Vermont. More than a success, the experiment culminated in three students presenting their projects at a recent conference of the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences. In this article I shall recount how the project began as a multi-part homework assignment with drafts and revisions spreading over several weeks, continued in a take-home segment of the midterm exam, and concluded in presentation of compositions by the most successful students in a scholarly venue.

[1] *National Association of Schools of Music, Handbook 2003-2004*, "Notes for Music Faculty and Administrators: Standards for Composition/Improvisation, History/Repertory and Technology in Undergraduate Professional Degrees in Music," http://nasm.Arts-accredit.Org/index.Jsp?Page=brochures+and+advisory+papers (accessed January, 2006).

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Background

An Internet search of "teaching music form through composition" yields thousands of websites including grade school projects, college course listings, bibliographies, journal articles, textbooks, and more. Among the many sources are several offerings with especially thoughtful approaches to the use of composition as a teaching tool that have influenced the project in the present paper.

Arnold Schoenberg observes in *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, "Without organization music would be an amorphous mass."[2] Before proceeding to discuss and provide examples of compositional elements from the smallest (The Phrase and The Motive) to the largest (The Sonata-Allegro), Schoenberg asserts:

> No beginner is capable of envisaging a composition in its entirety; hence he must proceed gradually, from the simpler to the more complex. Simplified practice forms, which do not always correspond to art forms, help a student to acquire the sense of form and a knowledge of the essentials of construction. It will be useful to start by building musical blocks and connecting them intelligently.[3]

Nicholas Cook's *Analysis through Composition* provides a delightful approach to understanding music writing.[4] It may be used either as a textbook or an "ideas bank" (Cook's words) for supplementary materials. He states:

> The purpose of [this] book is to create an environment of varied musical activity that will inculcate and nurture basic analytical concepts in a practical context. It is organized round a series of assignments that involve (among other things) writing arrangements, realizing accompaniments, composing variations, and expanding small pieces into larger ones.[5]

2 Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition* (Great Britain: by the Estate of Gertrude Schoenberg, 1967), 1.

3 Ibid., 2.

4 Nicholas Cook, *Analysis Through Composition: Principles of the Classical Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

5 Ibid., vii.

His assignments are often based on actual works by famous composers, bringing composition to life in a most engaging way. Some examples are:

> Assignment 25: Here Mozart has written only the first half of a minuet, but he has provided three alternative bass lines of increasing complexity. . . . Add inner parts to each version, basing what you write on Mozart's figures, and complete the minuet.[6]

> Assignment 35: . . . Example 77 shows all that exists of [a] piece . . . written in Leopold Mozart's hand. . . . It was presumably intended to have a second half. . . . Construct a second half by using the same materials in the same order as in the first half, transposed as necessary. You need only write two new bars of music: a second-time bar for the first half . . . and the final bar of the second half.[7]

> Assignment 47: Example 105 is the first half of a sonata movement by Antonio Soler, a Spanish composer who died in 1783. The original is in a fully-fledged sonata form as described in this chapter. Try to reconstruct it. . . . [T]here is no need to write out all the music that is simply transposed from the first half, but you should say whether it is to be transposed up or down.[8]

Miguel A. Roig-Francolí's textbook, *Harmony in Context,* presents a well-ordered sequence of the essential topics in a comprehensive undergraduate music theory course.[9] Roig-Francolí provides excellent homework assignments such as:

> Chapter 20 (Small Forms: Binary and Ternary): Compose two modulating periods (melody and accompaniment in keyboard style) based on the given motives. The modulating periods by Haydn in the worksheet and workbook for chapter 19 may serve as models. You may compose the melody first and then write the accompaniment, or write both at the same time.[10]

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6 Ibid., 72.
7 Ibid., 111.
8 Ibid., 174.
9 Miguel A. Roig-Francolí, *Harmony in Context* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003).
10 Ibid., 613.

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> Chapter 22 (Modal Mixture; Variation Forms): Write a brief binary piece for a single instrument . . . using the theme provided below. 1. Begin by composing a modulating period, which will be your first reprise. The modulation should be to the relative major (III). 2. After you are satisfied with your initial period, continue writing the second reprise of the binary piece. First write a short developmental phrase on the given theme, perhaps used sequentially. This section will lead to V, which in turn will lead to a return of the tonic. 3. Then write again the initial phrase (the return), only now it should not modulate, but it should instead remain in the tonic key.[11]

Earl Henry and Michael Rogers' text, *Tonality and Design in Music Theory*, theorizes "from the listener's perspective," drawing from "the well-established tradition of Comprehensive Musicianship in choosing and organizing topics." Its methodology is "intentionally eclectic."[12] Chapter-end exercises include timed self-tests on facts and techniques, analysis projects and essays, and compositions. The chapter on Sonata Form assigns a sonata exposition, with notated examples by the authors for each step in the assignment:

> Compose the exposition of a sonata for piano that is designed for younger performers. Begin by choosing tonic and polar keys, then compose a simple theme in both keys or plan a monothematic work in which one theme serves both tonic and polar roles. An appropriate theme will be a double period in length and might be repeated with an alternate accompaniment pattern. This sample theme is a sectional double period that comprises of parallel and contrasting phrase groups. [Example in B♭]
>
> Our sample second theme is in F major and is another sectional double period. [Example]
>
> Before composing the linking transition, consider accompaniment figures that will be appropriate for the first and second themes. Alberti bass is usually a good

[11] Ibid., 662-663.

[12] Earl Henry and Michael Rogers, *Tonality and Design in Music Theory*, vol. 2 (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson-Prentice Hall, 2005), xi.

choice; reiterated chord tones and a quasi-contrapuntal texture (as in the next three examples) are additional possibilities. [Examples]

There are many approaches to composing the transition. Because harmonic momentum is so important, you might begin with a chord progression such as the one that follows. [Example]

Compose a simple melodic line for the transition that includes sequence and employs scalar figures. As we have discussed, many different accompanying patterns are appropriate. [Example]

Now, put the three pieces together for a sonata exposition through the statement of the second theme. Observe that only the last four measures of the first theme and first four measures of the second theme are shown. [Example][13]

Sonata

The model composition project described in this paper, akin to one of Schoenberg's simplified practice forms, resembles the carefully detailed assignments of Cook, Roig-Francolí, and Henry and Rogers. It is conceived as a large project made up of small parts, each within the grasp of intermediate undergraduate theory students who have not yet put their minds to composition. Its precise but simple instructions are designed to focus students' attention on the structural and functional elements of sonata-allegro. The project requires students to review concepts, work out new ideas particular to sonata form, and link the parts together into a cohesive whole. A supplementary goal is to provide a "road map" so that students can engage in composition with a measure of creativity and a high degree of confidence. The author's model form provides an experience that, if nothing else, will help students appreciate the far more sophisticated accomplishments of master composers. Included in this paper are examples of student compositions, student comments, and descriptions of problems and suggestions along the way.

13 Ibid., 227-229.

The Project

The project, compose a single movement for piano in classical sonata-allegro form, comprised intermediary assignments:

1. a) Choose principal and secondary themes from your sight singing text.
   b) Optional: Compose a closing theme of your own.
2. Transpose the themes to appropriate keys for both exposition and recapitulation.
3. Provide accompaniments in classical piano style.
4. Compose transitions for exposition and recapitulation. These should sound the same although they serve different modulatory functions. They may be dependent or independent.
5. Compose a development:
   a) Label the thematic material in the exposition that you are developing.
   b) Begin in the key in which the exposition ended.
   c) Modulate to at least three different keys.
   d) End the development on a prolonged dominant harmony (i.e., the dominant preparation for the recapitulation).

Themes

In order to make the project possible within limited time, students were instructed to select themes from their sight-singing text.[14] They chose, but did not compose, two melodies in the same meter, with tempos adjusted to accommodate a unified piece. Everyone understood that this "short-cut" omitted valuable steps in composition, but enabled completion of the sonata movement in the allotted time-frame.[15] For the optional closing theme, some of the more creative students composed their own cadential passages. Those less comfortable with their compositional skills proceeded to the next step of the project.

[14] Robert W. Ottman, *Music for Sight Singing*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001).

[15] The author addresses concerns about this efficiency in the "Variations" section later in the article.

Students then were asked to transpose their secondary themes to the dominant or relative major for their expositions, and tonic for their recapitulations. If the sonata was to be in a minor key, the recapitulation's secondary theme also required a change of mode. The exercise of selecting and transposing melodies helped students internalize the form-defining harmonic outline.

Complications arose when a few students, predisposed to think of sonata as a long piece, initially chose the longest melodies they could find. They quickly realized, however, that longer melodies often contain internal modulations that would frustrate the harmonic objectives of their sonata-allegro. This in itself was a valuable lesson.

Next came the task of supplying accompaniments. This provided an excellent review of concepts from prior courses in theory and piano. Repeated-chord or broken-chord patterns were usually appropriate and most students composed Alberti basses or similar left-hand piano parts for their right-hand melodies.[16] The writing of accompaniments reinforced the fundamental concepts of chord progressions supporting melodic pitches, preservation of the tonic-predominant-dominant-tonic phrase model, and awareness of the voice-leading implications of arpeggiations. Up-to-tempo performance (by the teacher or on computer if necessary) helped students hear the importance of placing strong notes, such as root or lowest pitch, on strong beats. Students also came to understand the advantage of maintaining a repeating pattern in their accompaniments. They had earlier analyzed Mozart's repetition of patterns across phrases, and had also practiced accompanying folk melodies with repeated patterns in their piano classes. But now with pencil in hand, some students felt that they were not really composing, not really doing enough, unless they changed patterns frequently. In periodic consultations with their instructor, students learned to focus on the clarity of the classical style that they were attempting to emulate.

Example A shows the principal, secondary and closing themes, with accompaniments, of one student sonata. Vickie explains to a scholarly audience of non-musicians:

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[16] One example of providing such accompaniment was cited in Henry and Rogers, *Tonality and Design in Music Theory*, above. Roig-Francolí suggests a plan for composing a left-hand keyboard accompaniment for a melody in *Harmony in Context*, 370. Most intermediate music students will also have learned to accompany folk melodies with broken-chord patterns in their piano classes.

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Principal Theme

Piano

Secondary Theme

Closing Theme

Example A
Principal Theme: Ottman #137; Handel, *Judas Maccabeus*, bass clef, C meter, key of E♭, Allegro.
Secondary Theme: Ottman #131; Mozart, Serenade K. 237, bass clef, C meter, key of C, Allegro.

> Composing in sonata form is not as daunting as it sounds. Our first assignment was to find two simple melodies using one of our class text books, *Music for Sight Singing* by Robert W. Ottman. These short melodies, for which we provided piano accompaniment, would be used as the basis for our compositions. . . . In the exposition the first theme is in an original key (I) and the second theme is in the dominant key (V) or the relative major key (III), while in the recapitulation the first theme is still in the original key (I), but the second theme does not change keys and maintains the original key (I). . . . [The melodies] in my sonata are very simple, something easily hum-able. The selected themes are crucial to the entire sonata. They act as a kind of glue for the piece, both by opening and closing the piece, and by representing sections of them [i.e., by supplying motivic material that may reappear] throughout the transitions and the development.[17]

Transitions

After students had completed their themes, they focused on transitions in the exposition and recapitulation. To ensure understanding of the similarities yet differences between the two transitions, students were asked to compose them back-to-back (rather than writing their sonatas beginning to end). Transitions needed to be only a few measures long, but multiple concepts were involved: they needed to modulate, use either freestanding motives or thematic material from the principal theme (but not the secondary), announce the arrival of the secondary theme, and resemble each other in the exposition and recapitulation.

Students who found themselves at an impasse were advised to begin the transition with a partial restatement of the principal theme followed by sequential repetition of fragments (as in repertory already analyzed in class). Other students relished the opportunity to be creative, and they received only the gentlest curbing of their overly elaborate efforts. Their goal was to understand the process

[17] Victoria Drew, University of Vermont, class of 2005: Remarks from Intercollegiate Student Symposium of the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences, April 24, 2004.

of transition, not necessarily to compose an expert sonata. Most saw that a small adjustment could facilitate modulation either to the dominant or relative major: for example, a strategically placed accidental might provide the new leading tone or transform a diatonic triad into an applied dominant.

The concept of announcing the secondary theme proved most difficult. While students had practiced composing modulations in their keyboard lab exercises, application of this skill set to their sonatas revealed that they did not yet fully understand the utility of modulation within the sonata structure. Reminding them of repertory analyzed earlier in class, the instructor hinted that they should end the transition on a half cadence, deferring arrival of the new key until the secondary theme.

Another challenge was to create a non-modulating transition for the recapitulation that would resemble its modulating counterpart in the sonata's exposition. To their great delight, students discovered that they could essentially recycle the earlier transition. Minus accidentals, similar materials led instead to a half cadence in the tonic key.

Example B shows Michael's transitions, first in mm. 10-21 between his principal theme in D♭ and secondary theme in A♭, then in mm. 81-94 where both themes are in D♭.[18] He explains:

> A sonata has two primary themes within the exposition. The first theme is in the tonic key while the second theme is in the dominant, or a fifth higher than the tonic. To make this *transition* from the first theme to the second you must find a way to modulate to the dominant key. My transition begins at measure 10 and starts in the key of D♭ major and needs to modulate to A♭ major. I include hints of A♭ major within my melody by including G naturals which would be the leading tone or 7th scale degree of A♭. The majority of my transition is focusing on an E♭7 chord which would be the dominant or V chord of A♭ major, the key which we are trying to reach. I begin my dominant harmony at measure 15 which starts a feeling of a driving force rhythmically and harmonically toward something new our ears have not heard, and prolong the dominant until the half cadence in measure 21.

[18] Michael Gorgone, University of Vermont, class of 2006: Remarks from Intercollegiate Student Symposium of the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences, April 24, 2004.

Example B
Principal Theme: Ottman #407; Beethoven, Quartet Op. 135, treble clef, 6/8 meter, key of D♭, Lento.
Secondary Theme: Ottman #397; Schubert, Canon for 3 Voices, treble clef, 6/8 meter, key of E.

> It is common to have thematic material from the principal theme included within the transition of a sonata. At measure 13 I use the same exact idea I had for measure 6. I then changed it slightly at measure 14 to make it a major B♭ chord instead of a minor B♭ chord. It is also possible to have an independent transition where there is no thematic material taken from the principal theme and all the ideas are new.
>
> The recapitulation includes a transition as well as the exposition but it varies slightly. This time our principal theme is still in the tonic key, but our secondary theme this time is also in the tonic key. The transition during the recapitulation ties the two themes together smoothly seeming as if it is going to modulate once again but truly stays within the tonic key. I use the same rhythmic idea during the dominant chord which in this case is A♭, the dominant of the original tonic key starting at measure 89. I also use thematic material from the principal theme again from measures 85-86. This transition acts the same way as the original transition yet it stays in the tonic key.

Development

The final task of the project was to compose the development. By composing their developments last, students saw their goal clearly—to connect the exposition and recapitulation. Having selected one or more motives from their expositions, they were cued to apply sequence, fragmentation, inversion, mutation of intervals or modality, variation in the accompaniment, or replacement of fragments with scales or arpeggios. Some students required continual reminders to use preexisting motives, their tendency being to create new material. Others tended to flit from one idea to another rather than follow through in longer spans. Their tentativeness in composing led many to proceed on the note-to-note level. Nudging them to think on a larger scale may have been one of the greatest benefits of the project.

To help students focus the harmonic plan of their development

sections, they were instructed to begin in the same key in which the exposition ended, modulate to at least three keys, and end with a dominant prolongation. Sensing the purpose and direction of the development proved difficult. Some students wandered aimlessly through the requisite modulations without planning a tonal trajectory that would carry them, logically, to the dominant. Others returned to the tonic prematurely rather than saving its arrival, the punch line, for the recapitulation. The instructor offered critiques guiding them to wait until the end of the development to create the important V chord and hear it take on its dominant function: a chosen triad needed to become major if it wasn't already, it needed a seventh to strengthen its tendency toward resolution, it needed prolongation or exaggeration, and it needed to arrive at, but not before, the end of the development. By constructing their own developments, students internalized the creation of instability and tension that resolve when the recapitulation arrives.

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Example C
Principal Theme: Ottman #331; Germany (Brahms), treble clef, 6/8 meter, key of F# minor, Andante.
Secondary Theme: Ottman #329; Chile, treble clef, 6/4 meter, key of A, Quietly.

Example C *Continued*

Example C shows Rebecca's entire sonata. She explains her development, mm. 40-65:[19]

> In the development, the two main themes are fragmented and woven into a texture of harmonic and tonal instability. It is considered unstable because one does not hear the affirmation and prolongation of a tonal center. Compositional techniques allow the presentation of brief sections in a variety of keys, none being firmly established. My sonata touches on many key areas. . . . [20] The development section is linked to the rest of the sonata through thematic fragmentation and development. A good composition would incorporate the elements of the two primary themes and the transition into the development section. In my sonata, thematic correspondence occurs between measures 1 and 45. The figure in measure 1 is part of the first main theme. The figure in measure 45 is a quoting of the same melodic material of measure 1, only they each start on different pitches.
>
> A pivotal retransition is necessary in order to merge the harmonically unstable development section with the return of the tonic key in the recapitulation. This retransition utilizes the strong relationship between the dominant and tonic. . . . In Western classical music, the chord built on the fifth scale degree of any given key is always followed directly by the chord built on the first scale degree of that key.[21] The development section ends on the "cliffhanger" dominant chord relative to the tonic key of the piece. It is a "cliffhanger" chord because the ear naturally wants this dominant chord to proceed to the tonic key, therefore ushering in the original thematic material. Since my sonata is in the key of F# minor, the dominant chord relative to it is a C# major chord. The

[19] Rebecca Kopycinski, University of Vermont, class of 2005: Remarks from Intercollegiate Student Symposium of the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences, April 24, 2004.

[20] Rebecca's surprising choice of keys reflects, I believe, the fact that the theory course had proceeded, while the project was still in progress, to chromatic modulations and distant keys. She obviously enjoyed incorporating the novel techniques into her sonata. The author offers suggestions regarding keys in the "Variations" section that follows.

[21] Rebecca's purpose here is to explain the concept of authentic cadence concisely to a non-musical audience. She omits possible cadences that were not relevant to her example.

retransition in my piece begins at measure 61 on the second beat and leads to the recapitulation at measures 65 and 66.

Conclusion

By combining the separately-composed sections students produced completed sonata movements, which were then graded as a take-home portion of the midterm exam. The short assignments along the way gave students experience in planning a harmonic and thematic structure, practical application of their piano accompanying skills, review of harmonization and modulation, practice in voice leading, and experience in developing pre-existing ideas. An unforeseen benefit was the boost that students experienced in their confidence and excitement that they—even those "afraid of theory"—really could compose. Several students subsequently enrolled in composition courses including some who, before this experience, had been far too timid to test the waters of creativity.

Variations

This project successfully achieved the goal of having students internalize sonata-allegro form through composing. Nevertheless, adjustments might engender an even more beneficial experience. Some variations are suggested here, and readers may envision others.

Using preexisting melodies, efficient though it may be, omits crucial steps required of accomplished composers. In actual composition, one would consider the smallest motivic gestures, repeating, expanding and combining them into a coherent whole. While the students attempted to choose melodies that could be motivically related, such relationships were superficial at best. With advance planning, students might compose phrases or periods of their own with attention to motivic detail and interrelationships between two contrasting examples that would then become sonata themes. Alternatively, the instructor could provide starting material.

In a previous semester, with less course time available, the author provided actual principal and secondary themes from an existing but unfamiliar classical sonata. Students then composed only the transitions and development. Their reward was seeing the original

complete sonata (by Mozart, in this instance) for comparison with their own. Experiencing the process of composing the missing links themselves made them acutely aware of the details of Mozart's "answers."

More guidelines for choice of keys in the development would strengthen the project. While the current assignment of three keys concluding with a dominant preparation provided practice in writing modulations, it yielded an unacceptable number of haphazard harmonic paths. A better strategy would be to specify a plan: for example, a tonal trajectory starting in the dominant or relative major key, moving through a series of descending fifths or thirds to arrive on a structural predominant, and then onward to the dominant preparation. (Students should further be advised to avoid reconfirming the tonic as a structural key if encountered along the way.) In another scenario, students might analyze an existing development and use it as the model.

The project did not address temporal issues. This resulted in such weaknesses as long elaborate transitions between simple themes, short developments barely meeting the harmonic requirements of the assignment, awkward phrase lengths, and inappropriate harmonic rhythms. With more time, more attention should be devoted to helping students balance and link phrases to create the flow of a real composition.

Matters of style beyond the general description of "classical" were not addressed. The singable traits of the sight-singing melodies predisposed sonatas to be of medium tempo, pleasant, and tuneful. Themes chosen instead from piano scores would lead toward more pianistic compositions. An enthusiastic class might even focus on emulating the style traits of a particular composer.

Throughout the project the instructor will need to motivate and encourage timid students while moderating the flamboyant tendencies of the overly-motivated, continually reminding everybody that the goal is to understand sonata form, not to compose a masterpiece. The project focuses on the differing functions of the component sections of classical sonata form. Its purpose is not to

produce perfect compositions, but to provide experience in working with basic formal elements, cultivating thereby a thoughtful appreciation for the masterpieces of sonata repertory.

Coda

The completed sonata movement concluded the class assignment. That would have been the end of the story, except that the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences soon thereafter announced its annual Intercollegiate Student Symposium. The call for papers included, along with instructions for scholars in scientific and humanities areas, an invitation for musicians to submit scores and recordings of original compositions.

While ours was a music theory class (and not technically composition), I felt that the students' efforts at composition and some of their resulting sonatas were worthy of recognition. I proposed to the class that anyone who had fared well on the assignment might like to consider the possibility of presenting at a scholarly conference. Three students volunteered. We subsequently met in office hours weekly for the next month or so, preparing a conference proposal and abstract, correcting any remaining part-writing or spelling mistakes in their scores, producing either computer-printed or neatly hand-written manuscripts, writing a text for the oral conference presentation explaining the project to a scholarly but non-musical audience, preparing overhead projector transparencies of scores, and recording CD performances of their pieces. They rehearsed their collaborative presentation for our theory class and two guest theory professors, receiving critiques and sample questions they might encounter from the conference audience.

The conference was a grand success. The students' rather unusual presentation (featuring not only scholarly work but also musical entertainment) was scheduled as the leadoff event, in plenary session, immediately following opening remarks by the Provost of the host institution and the President of the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences. The students fielded numerous questions after their formal presentation, and audience members continued seeking them out during the day with further questions, compliments and conversation. They clearly captured the attention and admiration of other students and professors alike.

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