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The Formal Repeat

JONATHAN DUNSBY

THE music of many cultures is characterized by lengthy musical repetitions, especially where ceremony, text and dance determine the amount of music needed.¹ In Western Classical music, formal repetition is an especially prominent feature. Considering the number of pieces in the customary concert repertoire which include repeats, even the casual observer may be surprised to see only a dozen column inches devoted to the topic in *The New Grove Dictionary* of 1980, with only five bibliographical references, all to peripheral sources. The dictionary entry is, however, well focused, with examples to support its general theme that 'the evolution of the notation, its exact interpretation and the practice of making repeats . . . raise certain problems, not all of which have obvious solutions'.²

One reason why the solutions are not obvious, nor even all of the problems, is that they appear to be so different to each of the sub-disciplines of musical research. The musicological editor, responsible for reproducing a composer's notation in a would-be authentic version, must retain notational inconsistencies and ambiguities of intention. However, the historical musicologist cannot begin to explain some of the mysteries of compositional intention without a great deal of primary research – of which there is no tradition in the particular topic of the formal repeat. Furthermore, judgment in these matters must rely on coherent theory and consistent analysis, yet the theorist of tonal music is unlikely to be able to advise either musicologist or performer, since in the tradition based on German theory (which is still the most seminal one) there has been little concern to explain the formal repeat. The lack of concern is captured drily by the authors of a recent textbook on certain tonal analytical techniques, where it is observed that 'the repetition of the exposition is not trivial'. 'This aspect of repetition in the sonata form', however, 'is usually ignored.'³

Not only is it ignored by theorists, but critics tend to throw up their hands in despair, legitimizing a casual approach in those likely to be less discerning than themselves. 'There is no rule', writes Charles Rosen in his influential book *The Classical Style*: 'some repeats are

¹ This article is a revised version of an inaugural professorial address delivered in the Palmer Theatre, University of Reading on 4 March 1986.

² Michael Tilmouth, 'Repeat', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, 1980), xv, 746–7.

³ Allen Forte and Steven E. Gilbert, *Introduction to Schenkerian Analysis* (New York, 1982), 278.

dispensable, others absolutely necessary.’⁴ And Alfred Brendel elaborates similarly in *Musical Thoughts and Afterthoughts*, claiming that it can be ‘positively damaging’ to repeat the exposition if it is nearly identical to the recapitulation, appealing to the ‘arbitrariness’ of some Classical repeats, and suggesting that composers did not count on the execution of repeats even though to omit them would be to omit transitional passages not heard elsewhere in a piece.⁵ Theory and practice seem to be as seriously adrift on this issue as many perceive them to have been in the eighteenth century. *The New Grove Dictionary* recommends cautiously that ‘before suppressing a composer’s written indications in a sonata-form movement the performer must consider whether the proportions of the movement will suffer as a result’.⁶ Brendel had already written contemptuously of such thinking: ‘That repeats are inevitably a matter of proportion is nothing more than a fashionable belief.’⁷ Yet at least 40 years earlier the allegedly ‘fashionable belief’ had been codified in the theories of Brendel’s Austrian precursor Heinrich Schenker, who noted the following in his last book:

The actual performance of repeats is indispensable for establishing correct balance within the form. . . . The omission of repeats which is so widespread today must be viewed as a violation of form.⁸

Before pursuing a wider historical quarry, it is appropriate to consider Schenker’s approach a little more fully, for Schenker was not only a leading performer and teacher in early twentieth-century Vienna, but also – as is now well known – its most influential theorist of the structure of Classical music. In Schenker’s theory, the Goethean concept of ‘organic’ connection is all-important, and embraces not only the radical notion of fundamental progression of which all ‘masterpieces’ are unique expressions, but also the finest detail of the musical surface or ‘foreground’. Schenker was fascinated by detailed connections between the variations in variation form, and also by those between short, collected pieces. But he viewed such connections as motivic, as the means by which in the musical foreground the ear is led melodically from one stage of a composition to the next.

These sorts of connection are, inevitably, an analytical issue in the case of formal repeats. The music at the end of the repeated section must lead into the repetition, but must also either lead into new music which follows the second time around or, presumably, form a satisfying close if nothing follows. The very case of the Brahms Waltzes op. 39, which intrigued Schenker because of the motivic connections

⁴ (London, 1971), 395.

⁵ (London, 1976), 60.

⁶ See above, note 2.

⁷ See above, note 5.

⁸ *Free Composition (Der freie Satz)*, trans. Ernst Oster (New York, 1979), 129.

Example 1

(a) *p espresso*
I — $V^{\#} \text{ of IV}$ — $I^{\#4}$

(b) 8b 9 24 9b

(c) I — $(IV^{\#}_5)$ — $V^{\#}_1 (\text{---} ?)$

between one waltz and the next,⁹ offers numerous examples of compositional subtlety in the control of connections at the point of formal repetition. Example 1 provides an illustration. The first eight bars of op. 39 no. 9 – a waltz in D minor – move to a dominant, V of IV, which is the major version of the tonic triad. With the effect of isolating this dominant and avoiding an ordinary harmonic resolution, Brahms contradicts it modally by the tonic minor (see Example 1(a)), which begins the repeated first phrase. This is a most extreme form of harmonic opposition – in fact the sort of ‘bad’ progression which would attract appropriately bad marks in a university examination, out of artistic context. Example 1(b) shows how within the body of the piece the dominants at the ends of both the first and second halves resolve through chromatic voice-leading; and Example 1(c) shows how the end follows up the musical logic of the end of the first half at its first appearance, by means of another unresolved dominant. Critical evaluation – that the piece fails when played without its formal repeats – is matched by an analysis which shows that the structure of the music relies significantly on the harmonic effect of those repeats. And there is even more to it contextually, since the unresolved ending of the waltz is ‘solved’, as it were, by the beginning

⁹ Clear examples are presented by one of Schenker’s most reliable apologists, Ernst Oster, in *Introduction to the Theory of Heinrich Schenker*, trans. John Rothgeb (New York, 1982), Examples 114 and 215.

of no. 10, V of G major (the same harmony as at bars 8a and 8b of no. 9), of which the A major shown in Example 1(c) is a secondary dominant.

It would be harsh to say that Schenker's theory is flawed because he often fails to recognize that formal processes of this kind are hardly superficial. What matters is that we should recognize the potential of his theoretical distinction between musical form and musical structure and apply it, as I shall try to do later, even in those areas which he perhaps underestimated. The confidence with which analysts now distinguish between surface form and underlying structure suggests that our aesthetic sensibilities are well primed for engagement with late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century music, in which poise and drive became so powerfully enlaced.

Yet enough has already been said here for it to be clear that our response to music nearly two centuries old is a mediated response. The formal repeat is a challenge because in this feature of the repertoire we feel most distant from its contemporaneous aesthetic. (By and large, works are not enjoyed nowadays, especially long works, when formal repeats are observed, perhaps because the modern listener concentrates more.) Something has been gained in our sensibilities; yet the experience of the twentieth century militates not only against the High Classical aesthetic, but also, in my view, against the formality of subsequent, early organicist sensibility. Schoenberg in particular addressed this issue in his sustained campaign to establish that, although repetition is an aid to musical comprehensibility, a mature and progressive musical style might do without it. The twentieth century has mostly done without formal repetition, and often without immediate, foreground repetition.

The historical quarry mentioned above lies partly in the musicological response to the challenge of the formal repeat. The most recent historical consideration of the issues is by Hugh Macdonald. He concludes:

Nothing encourages us to believe that repeats in classical music are anything other than what all textbooks say they are: instructions to repeat a passage of music, equivalent in force to the instructions which determine tempo, phrasing, dynamics and the notes themselves. There is no ground for believing them to be options, to be taken or left at will. If composers wanted them played, they wrote them in; if not, they left them out. As they liked them less, they wrote them less.¹⁰

Certainly there is evidence of various kinds that during a considerable period of late eighteenth-century composition repeats were intended and were observed in performance to the same degrees of accuracy or inaccuracy as were other kinds of notation – the late eighteenth-century performer, trained as an improvisatory artist, was perhaps by

¹⁰ 'To Repeat or Not to Repeat?', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 111 (1984–5), 136.

modern standards rather careless in interpreting composers' specific notations, just as publishers took a cavalier approach to their printed form. C. P. E. Bach published three sets of keyboard music, in the 1760s, with written-out varied reprises, recording concretely what was the performer's customary, extempore practice. Daniel Türk in the *Klavierschule* (1789) records the various signs for formal repetition and provides some advice for teachers:

The teacher should insist that his students accustom themselves to playing every repeated section immediately for the second time without interruption. For if they are allowed to linger longer in making the repeat than the value of the notes or rests require (as commonly occurs), the continuity naturally suffers, and consequently, when more persons are playing together, there results all manner of confusion.

If the modern reader experiences confusion reading Türk, it will be in interpreting his next, puzzling remark:

In some pieces, every so often there are two vertical lines . . . without added slurs or dots. Generally, by these the composer means that at this place a major section has been concluded, which if need be, the player can repeat.¹¹

This may refer to the Baroque notational convention of using an undecorated double barline to signal possible repetition; but it is extraordinarily late in the day, and it raises the spectre that Classical players indulged in formal repetition even more often than in the present-day anti-authenticist's worst fears. Heinrich Koch, in the third volume of his influential *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Composition* (1793), notes that in binary sonata form the two parts may or may not be repeated – a prerogative, one must assume, of the composer, not the performer. An especially interesting observation concerns the dramatic function of repetition and indicates the beginnings of theoretical recognition of late eighteenth-century organicism:

After this second section (of an aria) there was formerly a modulation into the main key again by means of a short ritornello, and the entire first section was always repeated. But now more often the transition is made so that only the second main period or a section of it is repeated, or the most important material of the entire first section is gathered into a single period in the main key and written out completely.

This form is indeed the most appropriate when the poet has portrayed the essentials of the feeling in the first section of the aria and only a special modification of it in the second, which immediately leads back to the representation of the first section.¹²

Somewhat in the manner of Koch, it is compositional evidence that Michael Broyles examines in his 'Organic Form and the Binary Repeat', an essay of fundamental research published two centuries, it

¹¹ *School of Clavier Playing*, trans. Reymond H. Haggh (Nebraska, 1982), 115–16.

¹² Introductory Essay on Composition: 'The Mechanical Rules of Melody', sections 3 and 4, trans. Nancy Kovaleff Baker (New Haven, 1983), 171–2.

may be noted, after the events in question.¹³ Broyles surveyed 347 instrumental first movements which are of certain date and for which accurate text survives, by 19 composers, including a large number of works by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. His statistics are impressive. Of the pieces examined which were composed before 1780, 98.5% have formal repeats. Of those composed between 1800 and 1810, only 12% have formal repeats. This is surely evidence of a change in compositional habit. It can hardly support, though, such a firm interpretation as Broyles offers. He argues that the Enlightenment 'aesthetic' was supplanted by an organicist approach in which formal repetition was deeply intolerable. Yet this fails to account for the apparently genuine tolerance of the 'older aesthetic' in works which theorists have come to regard as flagships of early-Romantic musical organicism. Consider only the case of Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony and his brother Carl's report – that Beethoven felt the first movement would be too long if the exposition were repeated but became convinced after frequent performances that to omit the formal repeat would be detrimental to the effect of the music. The doubt which has lingered, doubt about just when and where Beethoven was able to hear the Eroica frequently enough to be certain that the repeat was right, is dispelled in evidence uncovered by Volek and Macek: Beethoven's patron Prince Joseph Lobkowitz actually paid for private performances, with large orchestra, of Beethoven's new and, to the contemporaneous ear, baffling score.¹⁴ Beethoven's publications and sketches make it clear that he thought intensively about the function of the formal repeat in one work after another: this musical feature had become drawn into the most profound levels of compositional process. But it does not follow that the Classical concept of formal repetition had disappeared without trace.

Broyles contends that it is wrong to apply current 'conceptualization' in assessing an earlier period. However, his distinction between Enlightenment and organicist 'aesthetics' is itself nothing more than a current 'conceptualization'. Historically, organicism was not a negation of the Classical musical tradition, but an immediate development from it.¹⁵ Organicism took that curious and critical step of absorbing the inherent logical contradiction between surface repetition and structural continuity – poise and drive as I called it earlier. This is expressed effectively by Willy Hess in his volume of *Beethoven-Studien*, where he intimates that the ambivalencies of musical logic are simply different from those of conceptual logic, a fact which musicologists and theorists alike must face squarely.¹⁶ On sonata-form repetition, his central point, rooted in a thematic-tonal view of musical structure, is this:

¹³ *The Musical Quarterly*, 66 (1980), 339–60.

¹⁴ Tomislav Volek and Jaroslav Macek, 'Beethoven's Rehearsals at the Lobkowitz's', *The Musical Times*, 127 (1986), 75–80.

¹⁵ I use the word 'immediate' to specify the exact area in which Broyles raises controversy. More generally, pre-Classical 'organicism' would have to be accounted for.

¹⁶ The indebtedness of such a formulation to Hans Keller should be obvious, but also recorded.

The sequence exposition–development–reprise represents an arch form (A–B–A') . . . for which the repeat of the exposition is evidently superfluous. On the other hand, the repeat of the exposition creates a bar form (A–A–B) . . . to which the reprise is irrelevant. In other words, each contravention of the one formal principle is validated by the other. The whole form is an equilibrium of conflicting processes, and it really cannot be captured as a whole by means of a conceptual formula.¹⁷

Hess is correct to say that a conceptual formula cannot capture the ambivalencies of music, which make it quite unlike a verbal language. Yet it would be a sour musician indeed who felt that therefore no representation of music is possible, no representative analysis, no real theoretical understanding. Perhaps such unwarranted pessimism informs Lawrence Kramer's *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After*. In his first chapter of substance, 'Romantic Repetition', he reflects on Beethoven's 'Appassionata' Sonata, with its repeated-note motivic figures, its developmental, as well as variational, repetitive slow movement, and its finale where the second half is repeated, but not the first; and his reflections draw in Wordsworth's 'The Thorn'. He judges that:

Beethoven and Wordsworth are able to contain the destructiveness of repetition in their work without succumbing to it because they present repetition as the dark aspect of an available transcendence, something that later artists increasingly lacked.¹⁸

Much as one might sympathize with this author's attempt to come to terms with the fusion of poetic and musical urges in the nineteenth century; much as one might even sympathize with his apparent inability to come to terms with the potential in poetics to show one path for music analysis (of the kind presented in, for example, Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss's analysis of Baudelaire's *Les chats*);¹⁹ much as a number of apologies might be considered, it is nevertheless a central irony of Kramer's narrative that in his first item of musical criticism, about Beethoven's Bagatelle in C major, op. 119 no. 8, he strictly ignores the composer's repeat signs, but for the parenthetical comment 'both sections repeated'.²⁰ Kramer's whole ecstatic reading of the Bagatelle, and indeed his equation of its structure with that of a Hölderlin poem, could be sustained only if one of the following were true (and neither is): either it would have to be the case that Beethoven's repeat signs in this music were some kind of casual or even impish gloss; or it would have to be the case that we have some theory to explain how a musically continuous structure, of the kind which Kramer describes, can be interrupted, not by extraneous and inherently discountable material – like a cough at a concert – but by

¹⁷ (Munich, 1972); 'Die Teilwiederholung bei Beethoven', 214–24 (p. 216 – my translation).

¹⁸ (Berkeley, 1984), 56.

¹⁹ Widely available in English, for example in *Structuralism*, ed. Jacques Ehrmann (New York, 1970).

²⁰ Kramer, *Music and Poetry*, 13.

the very music the organic drive of which we are supposed to be experiencing.

I turn, then, to a source in which historical and musical evidence is taken at face value, Edward Cone's outstanding essay 'Beethoven's Experiments in Composition'.²¹ Aside from his penetrating comments on the harmonic reinterpretation of the 'mysterious octave B flat' which introduces, twice, the second half of op. 119 no. 8 (see Example 2), it is refreshing to ponder Cone's implicit assumption – and it is central to his analysis – that the formal repeats are an integral part of Beethoven's musical argument. Cone's thesis amounts to this: that the repeat of the second half of the Bagatelle clarifies the obscurity of the harmony when it is heard for the first time. The mysterious octave B $\flat$ introduces a passage which could, Cone wishes to demonstrate, lead to a full progression in the key of B $\flat$ major (IV of IV). But in the repeat, after the C major cadence, B $\flat$ can be interpreted only as the flat seventh degree of the tonic, heralding a straightforward move to the subdominant.²²

From a critical point of view, Cone's account could be taken to imply that Beethoven's procedure here is not really successful, in the sense that the harmonic implications set up after the double bar are not exploited or resolved within the piece. However that may be, there is another and more widely relevant aspect of his study. Cone implies, unequivocally if only by omission, that the second-half repeat has a special function, whereas the repeat of the first half does not. While we may agree or disagree about the music in question, it should be allowed in principle that this is quite plausible – that there are more and less structurally effective formal repeats.²³

Example 2 is a voice-leading reduction of the Beethoven, necessarily though not wilfully idiosyncratic when measured against orthodoxies of Schenkerian analytical techniques. It is unusual in that it analyses each hearing of the second half differently. It conforms with Cone's description in general terms, while giving a closer view of the various functional changes in the second-half repeat. Perhaps the most striking of these changes is the strong linear motion of the upper line which follows bar 20. And indeed it emerges from this particular approach, which concentrates on the underlying contrapuntal lines of the piece rather than on harmonic implication, that if the compositional key to this music is what Cone suggests – Beethoven's concentration on 'the reinterpretation of a single note'²⁴ – then D in bar 10 has a structural and expressive claim to be considered. It is this

²¹ *Beethoven Studies I*, ed. Alan Tyson (London, 1977), 84–105.

²² For a different reading of Beethoven's op. 119 no. 8, see Nicholas Marston, 'Trifles or a Multi-Trifle', *Music Analysis*, (1976), 193–206. Marston discusses the probability that the last five op. 119 Bagatelles (nos. 7–11) were conceived as a unified set by the composer, in which case discussion of an individual number should be regarded as provisional. I have argued elsewhere that organic coherence is not necessarily to be expected in the elements of a multi-piece.

²³ Theorists should note that I do not question Schenker's dictum that repetition is not to be found at the levels of fundamental structure or background.

²⁴ Cone, 'Beethoven's Experiments', 92.

D after all which picks up the top voice from the cadence of the first half and provides the melodic and harmonic continuity across a point of foreground articulation. Yet after bar 20, when the final cadential C has been established unambiguously, the D must be understood as ornamental: the repeat is a kind of peroration or coda. As Schenker

Example 2. Beethoven, op. 119 no. 8.

Moderato cantabile

molto legato

4 6

9 12

p cresc.

17

3

6 5 3

2

3

Example 2. Continued.

puts it succinctly in his essay on form, 'with the arrival of (the structural close) the work is at an end. Whatever follows this can only be a reinforcement of the close – a coda – no matter what its extent or purpose may be.'²⁵ This can surely be the case in shorter pieces with repeated halves; and there seems to be no logical or theoretical reason why any adherent of Schenkerian analysis should object to the suggestion. Schenker, like any fine theorist, in any field, left not only fully worked-out codification, but also tracks which may never become permanent highways, but which nevertheless show the best route to understanding.

There is a meeting point in the labyrinth of tonal voice-leading, between Edward Cone's incontestable perception that formal repetition may sometimes involve structural development, and Schenker's incontestable perception that, if a piece is clearly tonal and if no musician can be found who would claim otherwise, then the nature of its tonality must be describable in ways which represent some if not all of its musical reality, without necessary reference to particular

²⁵ See above, note 8.

foreground features such as repeats. Not only is there a meeting point, but in Schenker's hierarchical explanation of tonal structure lies the opportunity for thorough enquiry into the nature of the formal repeat. In the Beethoven example (Example 2), there is an exact correspondence between formal and structural articulation. This is rare, especially in Beethoven,²⁶ and when it occurs there is every chance that what appears to be a conventional, Classical formal repeat of no middleground significance may prove to be a feature of structural reinterpretation. Where immediate formal and remote structural articulation do not correspond in time, there can rarely be a basis for arguing that the foreground, formal repetition specially affects the underlying structure. Schenkerian theory, then, offers a simple classification. The classification which distinguishes between foreground and background articulation is familiar enough, and it reflects everyday musical understanding – that deeper connections may support apparent discontinuities. A new kind of classification which distinguishes, in cases of coincident foreground–background articulation, between repeat and reinterpretation of repeat could not fail to enhance our understanding of Classical and early-Romantic scores. I offer this as a challenge to the specialists.

If theorists could claim with conviction and technical demonstration that some repeats are musically essential and some are essential only if the apparent wish of the composer is to be respected, my next point would be dealt with. Historically, the non-observance of Classical repeats is largely indefensible. Yet, as Macdonald points out in different words, historical evaluation cannot hope to overcome current ideology – where the two are in conflict – and it can be said with confidence that the time will never come when every performer observes all notated formal repeats in tonal music. The theorists' traditional prejudice has been to ignore the issue and, in a sense, to pretend that the formal repeat is a responsibility of the performer, which is certainly a nonsense: performers do sometimes complain that theory fails to serve the immediate needs of music-making, nearly always for preposterous reasons, but that is one legitimate grievance.

Finally, to put the issue in a wider context, and one which should be as familiar to the amateur as it is to the professional, I turn to the quest for 'authenticity' in musical performance. Authenticity is a concept which we tend to associate above all with instrumentation, with the natural curiosity which has developed in recent years to hear pieces, especially masterpieces, of the past played on the instruments of the time. Yet many trivially fastidious courses have been hunted in the name of this trend. To think of only the most banal example: important though it is to hear Beethoven on the fortepiano, his piano concertos will never be performed as a matter of routine with this key

²⁶ Such a comment cannot be substantiated in this context, and it would be as interesting to see it proved wrong as proved right – though of course I believe it to be right.

element of authenticity in the large concert halls of our day. It is the march of science and art that has produced such a residual problem. We have vast auditoria, astonishing technological achievements like the modern piano, and music like Beethoven's which from certain points of view seems more and more distant the more we embrace contemporary developments. Whether we accept Beethoven's repeats, and even more challengingly those of his predecessors, is only a small component in our struggle with the past and the future; but it tells. Formal repeats no longer suit us, in the main, so we tend to suppress them in those cases where we no longer understand them. Optimistically, let this serve as an index of how fundamentally modern, how thoroughly inauthentic, even the most conservative audience has become: we think we are listening to Classical music, but often we are listening only to a thoroughly up-to-date reinterpretation of the repertoire. Modernism is in this respect as much the preserve of late twentieth-century listeners as it is of their perceived, specialist rivals.

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