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Repeats and Refrains

A

Achieving a balance between musical repetition and musical contrast has long been of great importance for making music in a wide variety of traditions and genres. Composing, improvising, and performing in a group requires us to evaluate continually whether to maintain or change existing musical ideas; if we are to change them, we in turn have to decide whether to initiate a new direction or respond by adopting, augmenting, or contrasting what is already taking place (Wilson & MacDonald, 2016:1035). These decisions are accordingly influenced by our desire for musical coherence and understanding. Listen to John Cage's *Music for Piano* (1952-62) and Steve Reich's *Piano Phase* (1967). How could these pieces undermine our sense of coherence and understanding? What is the effect of incessant musical variation or continual musical repetition? As John Paynter and Peter Aston describe, 'part of the art of musical 'construction'' should involve the use of repetition to help the listener take in musical ideas:

'your ability to understand the composer's argument will depend to a large extent on your capacity to remember the sounds and relate those heard later in the piece to those heard near the beginning' (Paynter & Aston, 1970:83)

Over time, musical genres from across the world have developed forms and structures which help musicians achieve a careful balance of repetition and contrast, so that listeners are able to follow their musical 'argument' while also remaining interested in the music's development. Traditional western forms including ritornello form, ternary form, rondo form, and theme and variations all capitalise on the use of one primary theme (A) which recurs throughout the piece, either in alternation with other themes (B, C, ...) or with variation on its own original material. In Hindustani classical music, the Dhrupad uses a four-stanza form in which the opening theme returns in the closing stanza to create an arch-like structure. In jazz music, the 'head' of a piece refers to the main theme, which often recurs several times throughout the piece, at the beginning, end, and in between solos. And popular songs predominantly use verse-chorus form to balance repetition and contrast, with the chorus acting as a refrain and the verses allowing for variation in melody and lyrics.

B

The forms outlined above demonstrate how musical structures can be created, composed, or improvised around a single unifying theme. The following assignments can all be carried out using one short melody (with or without accompaniment, depending on the assignment), chosen by the teacher or the class from a musical style or genre of their choice.

- (i) As a whole class, improvise around one short melody which acts as a refrain. One person begin by singing or playing the refrain on a keyboard or tuned percussion instrument. Everyone else then take it in turns, one by one, to improvise a response. After each response repeat the refrain, before the next person takes their turn. This will generate an A | B | A | C | A | ... structure.

Responses could be based on the original refrain, using similar pitches or rhythms. Depending on the ability of the class, characteristics of potential responses could be delineated in advance: a set duration (such as eight beats) or choice of pitches (such as the five notes of the pentatonic scale) could be helpful. Alternatively, after the improvisation discuss as a class which responses were most effective in creating a suitable balance between repetition and contrast with the original refrain. Make a note of how different musical characteristics (pitch, tempo, note values, phrase length, rhythm) influenced this balance.

- (ii) Using a longer refrain, work individually or in pairs to compose a response. You could:
 - (1) Write an unaccompanied melody, as in assignment (i).
 - (2) Write a melody and accompany it using a limited choice of chords determined by the refrain (such as the tonic, dominant, and subdominant).
 - (3) Write a melody and accompany it with your own harmonisation.
- (iii) Having completed assignment (ii), compile everyone's responses into one or two collective compositions (depending on the size of the class). As a class, discuss which order the responses will appear in, and how often the refrain will be repeated. Will it occur just at the beginning, like the theme in a theme and variations, or will it occur between every response, like in a rondo form? Maybe it could act more like a chorus, with different responses making up verses or bridges. Once the class have decided how best to structure the composition(s), work at it together using one or both of the following suggestions:

- (1) Using a similar arrangement to assignment (i), play through the composition together. One person (or the whole class together) play the refrain, and then everyone else take it in turns to play their response. Practise together as a whole class until everyone is able to join in with their response and the piece moves smoothly between refrains and responses. To further evaluate or edit the piece as a class, take a sound recording and listen back to the performance. What could be changed in the next performance? Is the balance of repetition and contrast sufficient to ensure musical coherency and maintain a sense of interest and variety? If not, how could it be improved?
- (2) Write up the collective composition into music notation software which allows playback to the class. If pupils are able to use the software, encourage groups or individuals to take turns to notate their own finished response into the final composition. Then listen back to the composition. Share feedback about how the composition achieves a balance between repetition and contrast. Any suggestions for improvement can be incorporated into the composition in real time by rewriting sections, adding or removing parts to aid the transition between refrain and responses, or rearranging the order of the sections. Accompaniment parts (such as those outlined in assignment (ii), if they have not already been completed) or countermelodies could also be added to generate a larger-scale piece of work.

C

The following example in *Figure 1* demonstrates part of the process of collective composition used in assignment (iii) with a class of fourteen pupils, aged twelve and thirteen. Pupils worked in pairs at keyboards to compose a response to the A section with which they had already familiarised themselves. Pairs composed and notated responses comprising both melody and chordal accompaniment. They aimed to make the melody fall into two- or four-bar phrases and use similar melodic patterns to the A section, and worked out the appropriate triads to accompany each bar by identifying repeated notes in their melodies. With help from the teacher, pupils then copied their own work into music notation software to create a rondo form with the structure A | B | A | C | A | D | A | E | A | F | A | G | A | H.

Figure 1: Extract of a rondo form composed for assignment (iii)

The image displays a musical score for a rondo form, consisting of four systems of music. Each system includes a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The first system is labeled 'A' and spans measures 1-4. The second system is labeled '5' and spans measures 5-8. The third system is labeled 'B' and spans measures 9-12. The fourth system is labeled '13' and spans measures 13-16. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor), and the time signature is 4/4. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand. The vocal line consists of two-bar phrases, each ending on a tonic note.

The pair who composed the B section shown here effectively re-used rhythmic and melodic motifs from the A section: bar 10 reflects the rhythm of bars 2 and 4, while the descending major scale in bar 11 reflects that of bars 5 and 7. Each of their two-bar phrases ended on the tonic, therefore reinforcing the key area defined by the A section. However, they also added

variation of their own, developing a new melodic motif involving four repeated semiquavers (bars 11, 13, and 14), adding a sequence in bars 13 to 14, and introducing a new dotted rhythm in bar 15. They also chose to vary the harmonic rhythm more than the A section, sometimes harmonising one bar at a time, and sometimes changing chords every quaver.

Their section was later edited during class discussion and evaluation of the collective composition. *Figure 2* below shows how after listening to the piece, pupils decided to change

Figure 2: Changes made to the B section



the pitches of bar 9 to create a smoother melodic (and harmonic) transition from the end of the A section. Changes that were made to other sections as a result of class discussion included removing some chromaticism, adding some variation into a melodic sequence, and reharmonising some transition sections.

D

Recent examples of pieces which uses recurring refrains to achieve a balance between musical repetition and contrast can be found from traditions all over the world. Listen to an extract from the second part of Uday Bhawalkar's 2011 performance of the *Dhrupad Raag Bhimpalasi* at the Darbar Festival. How would you expect to identify where the four stanzas begin and end? What characteristics of the opening would make it possible to identify when it returns in the final stanza?

You can hear the use of a head in jazz fusion in *Thing of Gold* (2012) by Snarky Puppy. The head initially occurs in the synthesiser after the saxophone introduction. Identify where it recurs throughout the piece. How is it changed each time to create variation? Listen out for new instrumentations and modal changes. Pay careful attention to the sections in between the head too. How do they contribute to creating a good balance between contrast and repetition?

It is notable that in the western classical tradition, the prevalence of structures carefully balancing musical repetition and contrast greatly reduced during the rise of modernism. For serialists, repetition and the generation of expectation was something to be avoided at all costs. For experimentalists, aleatoric music offered an escape from the

constraints of formal musical structure. And for minimalists, maximising musical repetition created a listening experience which did not require memory or anticipation.

Yet the so-called ‘postmodern’ turn, around 1970 (Taruskin, 2005:412), led to a number of composers re-embracing the possibilities of traditional musical forms and structures. The earliest example of this postmodern approach can be heard in George Rochberg’s 1971 String Quartet No. III. Though the first two movements adopt a highly modernist style, the third movement employs a traditional theme and variations form, using a neo-romantic tonal palette which Rochberg claimed would renew opportunities for expressivity:

‘music can be renewed by regaining contact with the tradition and means of the past, to re-emerge as a spiritual force with reactivated powers of melodic thought, rhythmic pulse, and large-scale structure’ (Taruskin, 2005:433)

In the theme and variations form, Rochberg takes his initial adagio theme and repeats it several times, each time with some degree of variation. Listen to a recording of this movement, and consider the ways in which Rochberg introduces contrast into the material from the opening theme. How does the structure of this movement compare with the modernist style of the first and second movements of the same string quartet?

A similarly ‘postmodern’ or ‘neo-romantic’ composition by Thomas Adès also demonstrates the use of a traditional musical form with repeating sections. The third movement of his Violin Concerto *Concentric Paths* (2005) is in rondo form. Like other rondo forms, the opening section acts as a refrain, alternating with contrasting sections: A | B | A | C | A | ... Listen to this movement, which is called *Rounds*. Why does Adès use a rondo form to represent ‘rounds’? See if you can identify the A section and its reprises. Adès changes the instrumentation each time the A section recurs. How does this affect our perception of the balance of contrast and repetition in the piece?

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