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Repetition in Shostakovich's Ostinati: Interplay of Meter and Context

ABSTRACT

Music scholars have addressed Dmitry Shostakovich's compositions from many perspectives, tackling issues such as extended tonality, neo-modality, form, and hermeneutics. Yet sparse analytic attention has been given to Shostakovich's treatment of rhythm and meter, even though his works are often adventurous in this respect. In this paper, I focus on the metric implications of a particular formal type: ostinato. In Shostakovich's oeuvre, such movements appear in various guises and genres, but all feature a melodic or harmonic repeated pattern that — based upon underlying contextual shifts — acquires varying structural and affective significance. Of particular interest are ostinato-based movements in which the recurring unit contains an inbuilt metric indeterminacy. I examine two such movements: the 'Largo' entr'acte from *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* Op. 29 (1932) and the 'Adagio' from String Quartet Op. 118 No. 10 (1964).

Consider Example 1, which presents a piano reduction of the ostinato theme from the 'Largo' — Shostakovich's first entirely ostinato-based movement:



Ex. 1. The ostinato theme from *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* Op. 29.

This ground bass cycle — with its tonality lingering between C-sharp minor and D minor — has been a subject of much debate among Russian and Anglophone scholars. As a criterion for choosing between the two tonal centers, scholars often point at the first C-sharp's hypermetric status: a downbeat reading suggests a C-sharp-minor tonic, while an upbeat interprets C-sharp as the leading tone to a D-minor tonic. Patrick McCreless clarifies: 'however we might interpret the first few bars metrically, it is difficult to imagine hearing the final three bars as anything but weak-strong-weak', which implies an unambiguous C-sharp minor at least in the 'tail' of the theme (McCreless 2010, 123). Yet interpreting the last three bars as weak-strong-weak implies a duple hypermeter, which proves problematic in a nine-bar phrase. Because the last and first C-sharps of each theme overlap, the weak-strong-weak reading of the last three bars entails an upbeat C-sharp at the onset of the next repetition and thus, transforms the C-sharp into the leading tone of D minor. To disentangle the issue of the theme's opening, I suggest that Shostakovich's rehearsal numbers — which are placed above each C-sharp in the theme throughout the movement — favor the C-sharp downbeat reading. This, in turn, leads to a three-bar hypermetric unit. Such a simple solution, however, is far from satisfactory due to the metric dissonances that it creates between the surface metric events and the deeper three-bar hypermeter.

The metrical surface with its 'phenomenal accents' (a notion developed in Ler Dahl and Jackendoff 1983), such as the syn-

copations on beat two in mm. 3 and 5, challenge the sense of a downbeat and, more critically, disrupt the dotted-half-note hypermetric pulse. Example 2 demonstrates the resultant possible interpretations of the metrical surface



Ex. 2. Metric interpretations of the ostinato theme from *Lady Macbeth*.

Given the metric and tonal instability of the theme, how — if at all — does it provide a foundation for the unfolding variations? Is the dotted-half-note pulse clarified or challenged when placing the theme in context? Do alternative hypermetric readings arise? To answer these questions and to offer an overall formal interpretation of the 'Largo', I place the relationship between the recurring thematic unit and its surrounding context under close scrutiny.

However ambiguous, in the case of the 'Largo', surface metric irregularity is only implicit as the 3/4 meter signature is maintained throughout the movement. By contrast, Shostakovich's 'Adagio' from the String Quartet No. 10 presents an ostinato unit in which explicit metrical shifts between 3/4 and 4/4 meters are written out as shown in Example 3



Ex. 3. The opening ostinato pattern from Quartet Op. 118 No. 10.

Such shifting meters echo the concept of modal mutability characteristic to the music of Russian composers. Ellen Bakulina notes that while modal mutability is 'generally defined as a fluctuation between two or more diatonically related tonal centers', in later Russian theoretical writings it refers 'a general notion of weakened gravity' (Bakulina 2014). By extension, in the 'Adagio', the meter fluctuates between 3/4 and 4/4, but these gravitational metric poles are weakened when Shostakovich alters this already feeble pattern by introducing, for instance, an unexpected measure of 5/4. Valentina Kholopova clarifies that the 'freely mutable meter' in Shostakovich's works 'is a common, normative aspect', and as a result, 'the steady rhythmic counting is guaranteed in the first place not by the unit of measure, but its beats, which maintain their constant value' (Kholopova 1983, 247). Kholopova calls such metric organization *monomernost* — single-measuring. Thus, in the case of the 'Adagio', employing the single-measuring method suggests relying on the steady quarter-note pulse when re-

garding the non-isochronous deeper-level pulses, which drift from a dotted-half to whole-note. Accounting for the surface quarter-note pulse, my analysis aims to provide a viable deeper-level hypermetric interpretation of the theme and its interactions with the challenging contra-metric activity in the accompanying variations.

While both, the ‘Largo’ and ‘Adagio’ employ metrically indeterminate themes with subsequent hypermetric ambiguity, the themes contribute to and impact the overall structure in different ways. To illuminate these differences my paper touches on cognitive aspects of repetition in ostinato movements, in addition to the metric and formal analyses it presents. Based on her experience of teaching Dido’s Lament, Elizabeth Margulis notes: ‘In general, repetition functions with this kind of obliqueness; it gives rise to some impression that registers as an expressive quality, rather than as explicit recognition of repetitiveness’ (Margulis 2014, 35). I suggest that ‘explicit recognition of repetitiveness’ can aid the listener in understanding the metric and formal organization of an ostinato movement.

Incorporating cognition scientist Jamshed Bharucha’s two types of expectation — schematic and veridical — I consider the role of listener expectation and entrainment in shaping musical form. Bharucha’s schematic expectation ‘arises from familiarity with typical practice’, whereas the veridical from ‘familiarity with what happens in a specific piece, even if the thing that happens is odd’ (Margulis 2014, 92). In an ostinato movement, the schematic and veridical expectations are tangled when it comes to the recurring theme: schematic expectation guarantees the listener familiar with the ostinato form that the theme will reappear without alterations, while the veridical expectation in a normative ostinato movement simply reconfirms the schematic. In the ‘Largo’, despite the implicit metric irregularity, the theme reappears without alterations, which allows it to serve a viable point of metrical reference. On the other hand, in the ‘Adagio’, the recurring ostinato unit with its explicit metrical shifts is altered throughout the movement. Thus, the unstable identity of the theme in the ‘Adagio’ weakens its potency for a metric foundation.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

This paper addresses issues of rhythm, meter, and repetition in Shostakovich’s ostinato movements, with a close focus on the ‘Lento’ from *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* and the ‘Adagio’ from String Quartet No. 10.

Methods

Metric and formal analysis with consideration of issues of perception and cognition.

Implications

By addressing broader issues of repetition’s impact on perception, and in attempting to disentangle the complex dichotomy between temporal linearity and cyclicity, my comparative analysis points to new avenues for the analysis of ostinati — in Shostakovich but also in other repertoires.

Keywords

Shostakovich, Rhythm and Meter, Repetition, Ostinato.

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