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Musical Repetition: Preliminary Considerations

ABSTRACT

Despite its fundamental relevance in some form to nearly every kind of music, repetition often seems to escape the grasp of music analysis, both on smaller scales (motive/rhythm/meter) and on larger scales (form) — it tends to be 'reduced away' in analysis before it can be problematized. Traditionally, negative value-judgements have played a role in this marginalization, but even as these prejudices dissipate and scholarly interest in repetition increases, it appears as if researchers were still lacking vocabulary to satisfyingly address repetition as a musical phenomenon in its own right.

Although informed by a specifically Deleuzian critique of 'representational' notions of repetition (Deleuze 1968; Hulse 2008; Hulse and Nesbitt 2010; Ferraz 2012), my meta-theoretical approach frames the problem as one of music-theoretical language: Requirements of communication force us to presuppose distinct identities (of things referred to) and thus tend to impose segmentations on musical processes that can preempt conscious analytical distinctions. For instance, in Bernhard Lang's DW12, the representation in repeat brackets in the score might tempt us to talk of the entirety of m. 1 as being 'that which is repeated' even though this is very obviously at odds with our listening experience, where boundaries between individual repetitions tend to blur due to lack of coinciding segmentational criteria.

In order to bypass some of these problems, I first supply a basic terminology that isolates and makes explicit different aspects of our use of the word 'repetition': Repetition can refer to a *repetitional process* (RP) or a *repetitional event* within such a process (RE) as they happen in time; in this case, the RP is to be taken as ontologically prior to the RE. Our very act of talking about repetition converts REs and RPs into static, 'out of time' representational entities: The *trace* (as the representational correlate of the RE) is now ontologically prior to the *relation* between two such traces; this relation in turn serves as the representational correlate of the process. In unwittingly assigning priority to the *trace* ('that which is repeated') over the process of repetition, we commit to a view of repetition as mere copy.

Thus, in a second step, I address different configurations of the model-copy template underlying our talk of repetition, and show how that template's pervasiveness in music theory has hindered direct engagement with repetition despite scholars' best intentions: It forces us to explain away repetition either by allusion to the limited perceptual or cognitive capacities of listeners (subordinating repetition to information in music cognition research); or as mere carrier of proportion or temporal extension (subordinating repetition to space, number or spatialized time). Third, I tentatively propose an inverted form of that template that departs not from prior fixed identities (models) but from the fact of repetition, and only *retrospectively* endows REs with an 'aspect' (i.e. that property which permits their description as members of an RP); this should permit us to articulate the constant tension between a processual view of music and the representational requirements of scholarly communication. It is my view that this tension should be acknowledged rather than collapsed back into one pole or the other.

I understand this approach as a complement (rather than an alternative) to existing writing on repetition in theory, musicology and music cognition (Margulis 2014; Fink 2005; Tenzer 2006). Its generality should permit a wide range of applications: It can mesh with multiple music theories and thus should facilitate comparison of the use of repetition across stylistic and historical boundaries. In summary, the terminology allows us to dissect the daunting question of 'what does repetition do?' into a complex of more precise questions that foreground different features of the phenomenon, while invariably maintaining a focus on the processual nature of repetition.

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