

# REPETITION AND STRUCTURE IN COMPOSITION: GUILTY PLEASURES: THE INFLUENCE OF MUSEMATIC AND LARGE-SCALE DISCURSIVE REPETITION

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I describe the interdisciplinary origins of the influence of the kinds of repetition I use in my music. Drawing on the definitions of the terms 'discursive' and 'musematic', used in association with aspects of repetition cited by Richard Middleton in his book *Studying Popular Music* (Middleton, 1990), I have attempted to create a personal compositional method that offers opportunities for exploring the repetition of structural components of music in a variety of ways. In doing so, my intentions are to provide a link between art music and popular music through the performances of my own compositions. While musematic repetition (the use of melodic riffs, sequences, rhythmic ostinatos etc.) may occur within different sections to give each a clearly audible identity, the overall structure is made apparent through the repetition of these sections at the discursive level. My interpretation of these terms, and their effects on my own work, can be demonstrated through the analysis of a score of one of my recent compositions; in particular, the second movement of a chamber work entitled *Guilty Pleasures*, composed in 2007. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will not discuss in any detail my use of musematic repetition, although I will refer to it as part of my analysis, but will focus primarily on a detailed analysis of my use of discursive repetition in this score. In doing so, I will demonstrate how I have been influenced by ideas and theories of repetition that stem from linguistics, and analogies with the structure of language, but also how I have had to necessarily depart from linguistic rules to satisfy aesthetic goals.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

High levels of repetition of musical material is sometimes cited as the reason why some popular music styles are not considered an art form, and when Western art music, especially the music of composers such as Philip Glass and Steve Reich, for example, resorts to a seemingly excessive use of repetition it too becomes an impoverished form. For this reason, Western art music and popular music are often seen as mutually exclusive genres. However, aspects of repetition inform all types of music and often function at various levels within any one composition. On one level, the repetition of melodic material, harmonic progressions, and rhythmic patterns, can be found in some form or another in almost all musical styles. On another level, and this is the case for both Western 'art' music and for other popular music styles, identification of any repetition of particular sections within a work

is an important aspect of musical analysis, and is often useful when attempting to establish the overall structure of a composition.

I have always been interested in trying to combine the aesthetics of art music with the aesthetics of popular music in some way and, in many of my recent compositions, I have attempted to use structure as a way of linking these two, seemingly diverse, musical genres. Prior to undertaking tertiary-level music studies in 1986, most of my early musical experience came from my appreciation and understanding of how repetition appeared to be used in the popular music styles with which I was most familiar. The structures of popular song forms may be quite varied but are often comprised of several short sections of material that are repeated and combined in various ways to create a coherent overall plan. Popular song forms might make use of various sections, sometimes labeled as a verse (A), a chorus (B), a middle eight (C), and a pre-chorus (or bridge) (D). Thus, a song that makes use of only the first two types of these sections might produce the following overall structure: A-A-B-A-B-B (the B section, or chorus, is usually the most recognizable part of the song and might be repeated many times towards the end of the song). Similarly, a song that includes a 'middle 8' (C) section, as well as sections A and B, might produce the following type of structure: A-A-B-A-B-C-B-B. If a pre-chorus (D) is used in addition to the previously mentioned sections A, B, and C, the song structure has the potential for becoming quite complex, and such combinations might produce the following types of structure: A-A-D-B-A-D-B-C-A-B-B. Alternatively, the popular 'Tin Pan Alley' song form has no separate chorus section, using only a refrain (A) and a middle eight (B) to create an AABA structure.

From the very beginning of my compositional career I have found myself, almost instinctively, preferring the implementation of a 'sectional' approach to the creation of large-scale musical structure. Since that time, I have continued to use sections of musical material to create my own musical structures. These sections are, as in song forms, generally discreet, self-contained units that are then juxtaposed in various ways to create what I believe is an overall coherent structure. The main difference between my structures and popular music structures lies in the number of sections utilized in any particular composition. In popular music, the number of sections is usually limited to two or three (sometimes four) within any particular work in order to retain firm control over the structure, and to avoid the creation of a structure that might appear to be too complex for the intended audience. Similarly, the sections in popular song forms are generally repeated intact: that is, while there may be different lyrics, and small changes to melodic contours to

accommodate the syllables of the new lyrics, most of the musical elements of each section are repeated exactly within each repetition of the appropriate sections.

The challenge for me, as a composer of contemporary 'art' music, was that I wanted to use more numerous sections within a work, and thus move away from the simpler song-like structures, but I also wanted to try to retain the links to popular music by ensuring that the audience is still able to recognize, in an audible way, a convincing form within a more complex overall structure. This aspect, the importance of the perception of an orderly structure, is outlined rather succinctly in Ockelford's book *Repetition in Music: Theoretical and Metatheoretical Perspectives*. As paraphrased by Joshua Mailman, "The theory goes like this: music is judged aesthetically pleasing to the extent it is perceived as orderly. It is perceived as orderly to the extent it seems to imitate itself; this impression of orderliness intensifies to the extent the imitation coordinates between several perceptual attributes simultaneously or occurs at multiple levels of structure. Analysis finds and depicts the orderliness." (Mailman, 2007, p.363). In my own music, where it is instrumental rather than vocal in nature, I find that, in order to sustain interest, I need to incorporate some form of musical variation into the repetitions of the sections. While this may take many different forms, covering the gamut from subtle to more extreme forms of variation, the varied sections must, in my opinion, retain some audible connection to the original material so that the audience does not feel that the structure has become unwieldy and incomprehensible.

In 1998, following tertiary musical studies, I began to formulate a more coherent understanding of this process and to seek new ways of using repetition to influence the musical structures of my own compositions. Although trained as a composer of contemporary 'art' music, my interest in popular music remained strong and I found myself drawn towards the academic study of popular music in order to try and perpetuate a connection between my own 'art' music and popular music. In order to do this, I found Richard Middleton's use of the terms 'discursive' and 'musematic', when applied to the techniques of repetition outlined in his book *Studying Popular Music* (Middleton, 1990), to be singularly useful for my purposes. Middleton describes 'discursive repetition' as repetition at the level of the phrase, the sentence, or complete section; while 'musematic repetition' occurs where small melodic or rhythmic cells, or even short harmonic patterns, are repeated (Middleton, 1990, p. 269). Middleton himself adopted the term 'museme' from the writings of Philip Tagg, who put forth the argument that a 'museme' may "...be broken down into component parts which are not in themselves meaningful within the framework of the musical language...but are nevertheless basic elements (not units) of musical expression which, when altered, may be compared to the phonemes of speech in that they alter the museme (morpheme) of which they are part and may thereby also alter its meaning." (as quoted in Middleton, 1990, p. 189). Within the realms of this paper I am not necessarily interested in the connections between these terms and the study of language, although I do recognise the importance of such connections. On the other hand, I am particularly interested in the concept that repetition of sections of musical material might be used in a 'discursive' manner in order to enhance the understanding and recognition of coherent musical structures. Therefore I am focusing primarily on Middleton's interpretation and use of these terms within a musical context. As such, Middleton describes each type of repetition in the following

manner: "Musematic repetition is far more likely to be prolonged and unvaried; discursive repetition to be mixed in with contrasting units of various types (as in the AABA structures of the classic Tin Pan Alley ballad form). The former, therefore, tends towards a one-levelled structural effect; the latter to a hierarchically ordered discourse." (Middleton, 1990, p. 269). Thus, in the 'Tin Pan Alley ballad' form, the four sections (AABA) are each eight-bars in length, and the melodic lines, and the harmonic progressions that accompany them, within each 'A' section are identical (while lyrics, on the other hand, may change). The 'B' section creates contrast to the 'A' sections by making use of a different melody and, usually, a different harmonic progression (and lyric). While musematic repetition, involving the use of melodic riffs, sequences, the juxtaposition of harmonies, and other elements, may occur within the different discursive sections, its effect is often perceived as enhancing the particular aural identity of that section. This aspect, that of the cognition and the ability to recognise individual sections of music in an audible manner, is important, as the overall structure is made apparent through the repetition of these sections at the discursive level.

My interpretation of the terms musematic and discursive, and their effects on my own work, can be demonstrated through the analysis of my own compositions. This paper will focus primarily on my use of discursive repetition within a representative score; specifically, the second movement of a chamber work titled *Guilty Pleasures*, composed in 2007. *Guilty Pleasures* was written especially for the Australia Ensemble, the professional chamber music ensemble resident at the University of New South Wales, and I will be using a recording of the premiere performance of this work by that ensemble to illustrate various points throughout the presentation of this paper. The instrumentation for the work is an octet consisting of flute/piccolo, clarinet/bass clarinet, two violins, viola, cello, piano, and percussion. For the purposes of this paper, I will not discuss in detail my use of musematic repetition, although I will be referring to this aspect of repetition in order to discuss the way in which each particular section of music in this movement of *Guilty Pleasures* is defined.

## 2. ANALYSIS

The second movement of *Guilty Pleasures* is a multi-sectioned work, with each section defined by the repetition of small fragments of musical material. A regular periodicity is achieved throughout via the use of two-, four-, eight-, and sixteen-bar phrase constructions, something that is also directly related to popular music forms. Repetition, at the musematic level, defines larger sections of the music. For example: the melodic figure marked 'a' below is repeated and juxtaposed with repetitions of variations of 'a' (marked 'a<sup>1</sup>', 'a<sup>2</sup>', and 'a<sup>3</sup>') before the appearance of entirely new musical material.





These repetitions of 'a'-based material thus form a self-contained section, indicated below as an upper-case A.

Section A: a – a<sup>1</sup> – a<sup>2</sup> – a<sup>3</sup> – a<sup>1</sup> – a<sup>3</sup> – coda 1\*

\* See explanation of 'coda' material in the paragraph following Figure 1.

Similarly, the section that follows is constructed out of repetitions of new musical material, the main elements of which are marked as 'b' and 'c' below:



This then forms another new section, now marked B:

Section B: b – c – b – c – c<sup>1</sup> – coda 2

This process continues throughout the movement in the following manner:

Section C is formed from the following materials:



Section D from the following material:



Section E from the following material:



After Section E, the previous sections are repeated to form the latter part of the movement. Figure 1 indicates the order of the individual sub-sections, and shows how they create the overall structural form of the movement (according to the musematic repetition of material within each section).

- Section A: a – a<sup>1</sup> – a<sup>2</sup> – a<sup>3</sup> – a<sup>1</sup> – a<sup>3</sup> – coda 1
- Section B: b – c – b – c – c<sup>1</sup> – coda 2
- Section C: d – e – c.f. 1 – d – e – c.f. 1 – coda 3
- Section D: f – c.f. 2 – f – c.f. 2 – coda 4
- Section E: g – g – c.f. 1
- Section A<sup>1</sup>: a<sup>4</sup> – a<sup>1</sup> – h – a<sup>4</sup> – a<sup>1</sup> – h – a<sup>4</sup> – a<sup>1</sup> – h – a<sup>3</sup>
- Section C<sup>1</sup>: d<sup>1</sup> – d<sup>1</sup> – c.f. 1
- Section B<sup>1</sup>: b – c – b – c – c – c.f. 1 – coda 2
- Section A<sup>2</sup>: a<sup>2</sup> – a<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1:** Sub-sections of *Guilty Pleasures*, Mvt 2.

All of the lower case letters listed in Figure 1 indicate *musematic* repetitions of the riff-like melodies listed as musical examples above, as well as other melodic ostinatos, figurations, and harmonic progressions that might be used simultaneously, and that also enhance the distinctive, and thus recognisably individual, nature of the larger sections. The superscript numbers merely indicate that some variation of the basic material has been utilised but that the individuality, and especially the aural identity, of the original has not been destroyed. It is important to note, however, that variations in the manner of orchestration of the ensemble are not reflected in this analysis. Thus, any lower case letter and superscript number combinations that appear repeatedly throughout Figure 1 indicate literal repetitions of the musical material, but changes in orchestration will not be taken into account. Some short passages of music are meant to link some sections together (as a 'cadential' figure) or create a more substantial conclusion to some sections (in the form of a 'coda'). These are usually quite distinctive passages in their own right and are important to the structure of some sub-sections and/or to the structure of the work as a whole: these are marked in Figure 1 as "c.f.", meaning 'cadential figure', or 'coda'.

When Sections A, B, and C return in the latter part of the movement, the repetition of melodic material is varied in order to detract from the potentially predictable nature of the structural plan. Section A<sup>1</sup> is somewhat similar to the opening Section A in structure but also contains some significant differences. Section A<sup>1</sup> is comprised of three repetitions of the same group of material (a<sup>4</sup> – a<sup>1</sup> – h), although most of that material is derived from the opening music

but in a varied form. Section B<sup>1</sup> is almost, but not quite, exactly the same as the original section B; while section C<sup>1</sup> omits the use of 'e' material in an attempt to create variety within an overall unity. Section A<sup>2</sup>, the final reference to the original A section material, is very short and does not develop in any new ways. This final reference to A material does not balance the overall structure in a proportional sense (the first section having many more bars than the last section and thus a different duration in time), but the reference to that material is sufficient to remind the listener, in an audible fashion, of that original material and thus bring the work to a close with a feeling that the structure of the work has been unified in some way.

The analysis in Figure 1 also reveals the true nature of the different types of repetition used within the sub-sections. The A, A<sup>1</sup>, and A<sup>2</sup> sections, for example, are essentially monothematic, being comprised of collections of musematic repetitions of 'a' material only. Sections B and C, on the other hand, are essentially binary in form, comprising the alternation of musematic repetitions of b and c, or d and e, musical material. Sections D and E are also basically monothematic, being comprised of musematic repetitions of the same material. It should be noted, however, that a more detailed analysis of the type of repetitions used at the musematic level within these sections (A, D, and E) would reveal some significant differences in intent and form for these sections, but this is beyond the scope of the current paper. Suffice it to say here, that the A sections form significant structural markers within the context of the work as a whole and serve to create unity and balance for the overall structure.

This analysis also reveals a structure that might be interpreted as vaguely arch-like in form, with Sections A, B, and C, framing the central sections D and E, as shown in Figure 2.

A - B - C - D - E - A<sup>1</sup> - C<sup>1</sup> - B<sup>1</sup> - A<sup>2</sup>.

**Figure 2:** Sub-sections of *Guilty Pleasures*, Mvt 2:

The arch form is a structural device not uncommon in music, and examples of the use of arch-like structures can be found in many compositions, including works by composers such as Béla Bartók and, more recently, Peter Sculthorpe. However, a more traditional arch-like structure, like those used by Bartók and Sculthorpe, is more likely to be formed in one of either of the following ways: (1) A-B-C-D-C-B-A, or (2) A-B-C-A-C-B-A; where the centre of the arch is either a repetition of the A section, or a section comprising new material (D). My structure for this movement is, however, slightly asymmetrical: neither a repeat of the 'A' section nor a single section of new material occupies the centre of the arch. Instead, two sections (D and E) form the centre of the arch. This is made more apparent through an examination of the use of tempo in this piece. While the tempo is fast throughout the movement, there is a significant change in tempo (and mood) at the beginning of section D, and the music comes to a complete stop at the end of section E before resuming the original fast tempo at the commencement section A<sup>1</sup>. Thus, Sections A, B and C, are all performed at the same tempo and can be assumed to be unified through this use of a common tempo and, therefore, create a single larger-scale section. Similarly, sections D and E are unified through the use of another tempo; while the final section begins in the same tempo of sections D and E, but accelerates to the original fast tempo at the end of section A<sup>1</sup>, and remains in that faster tempo until the conclusion of the movement (thus unifying the final section). These

tempo changes become important structural markers, and a revised plan for the overall large-scale structure of the movement reveals a simpler, more concise, tripartite (ABA) form, such as that shown in Figure 3 (with larger scale sections now denoted by a double capital letter).

AA - BB - AA<sup>1</sup>  
(A-B-C) - (D-E) - (A<sup>1</sup>-C<sup>1</sup>-B<sup>1</sup>-A<sup>2</sup>).

**Figure 3:** Large-scale structure:

The use of discursive repetition at various levels in this piece allows for a variety of interpretations of its structure. At a primary, large-scale, level, the structure is a simple ternary (ABA) form; while at a secondary level, the structure is a more complex arch-like formation, denoted by sections defined by aspects of musematic repetition.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The deployment and repetition of sections of musical material in a discursive manner, as defined by Middleton, allows me the opportunity to explore new structural forms for my own music and retain, in my own way, a connection with similar practices in popular music forms. The repetition of sections also presents opportunities to explore aspects of variation that do not overtly disturb the continuity, or unity, of the prevailing structure. This is in contrast to linguistic rules that are structured more by the constraints of denotative meaning rather than aesthetic requirements, and thus is a necessary departure from phonemic and other linguistic influences. In similar ways, I can explore aspects of balance and proportionality within sections, creating asymmetrical arrangements of musical material that are based on repetitions of musemes that are constantly being varied and juxtaposed in different ways in order to create variety within unity. This, in turn, offers opportunities to create structures that appear to go beyond the conventional structures of popular music while simultaneously retaining links to popular music genres.

### 4. REFERENCES

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