Repetition and Developing Variation in terms of Derrida's Concept of the Trace

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the functions of the motive in terms of identity and intention, which, in fact, are also the functions of the personal signature; they both share the characteristics of repetition or iterability. This study first introduces the common features found in Jacques Derrida's idea of "the structure of the remnant or of iteration" and Arnold Schoenberg's concept of developing variation: repetition and trace. Schoenberg's process of "developing variation" presents two aspects of motivic elements: the repetitive and new material. My theory explains the relationship between exact and modified repetition and the two functions of the motive –identity and intention. Using Schoenberg's Piano Piece op. 23, no.1, I explore motivic identity and three types of intention, INTOCT (modification by octave displacement), INTONE (modification of one pitch interval), INTQUA (modification of interval quality), and their possible combinations.

Keywords

Derrida, Repetition, Schoenberg, Developing Variation, Trace

1. Introduction

Schoenberg's term 'developing variation' refers to the 'endless reshaping of a basic shape' through thematic regeneration. Scholars like Frisch and Haimo, have attempted to define this term, but ultimately not been able to dispel the confusion that surrounds Schoenberg's concept of the endless reshaping. In this paper, I seek to clarify the concept of *developing variation,* using Derrida's concept of the trace as the structure of repetition. Schoenberg explicitly states, "Whatever happens in a piece of music is the endless reshaping of the basic shape.… There is nothing in a piece of music but what comes from the theme, springs from it and can be traced back to it; to put it still more severely, nothing but the theme itself" [1]. This famous statement is significantly complemented by Jacques Derrida's assertion, "no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation. What I am referring to here is not richness of substance, semantic fertility, but rather structure, the structure of the remnant or of iteration" [2]. Schoenberg is focused on the frequent repetition of a basic motive, which he clearly implies as being *traced* back to the theme, while Derrida's assertion reveals the structural concept of the *trace*. Derrida's explanation of the "remnant" refers to the trace of a substance, and iteration refers to repetition. In other words, meaning exists in the structure of iteration, which is recognized by its trace. Thus, the two concepts shared by both theories are that of the trace and repetition.

2. Schoenberg's Concept of Repetition and Derrida's Concept of the Trace

Schoenberg classifies two different repetitions: exact repetition and modified repetition. Schoenberg argues that repetition will sometimes be exact, as in transpositions, inversions, and retrogrades, diminutions, and augmentations [3]. However, it is more often related to variation, in which all important features of a motive are not strictly sustained. Modified repetition provides variety and produces new material for subsequent use. Schoenberg calls this process "developing variation [*Entwickelnde Variation*]." He emphasizes variation as repetition "in which some features are changed and the rest preserved," and thus repeated [4]. Derrida's notion of the trace is not only applicable but also explanatory in studying Schoenberg's concept of *grundgestalt*. I engage it here in order to clarify Schoenberg's own use of the word. The concept of the trace is carried in Derrida's term *différance*, which contains the two meanings of defer (time) and differ (space). Difference is related with the concept of presence; it provides the otherness of the non-originary origin. Deferral comes from the concept of the present as being-in-motion. Thus, *différance* describes "being" in terms of presence/absence. The trace is the mark of the past and the future in the present moment. Moreover, the trace is also the absence of presence. According to Derrida, "The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace."[5]

Since the trace is inseparable from the concept of *différance*, it should be examined in two ways: difference (space) and deferral (time). First, in terms of space, the trace is the absence of presence. What is presence in music? As seen in Schoenberg's assertion, "there is nothing in a piece of music but what comes from the theme," Derrida's concept of the non-originary origin is seen in the theme or motive itself, which consist of *Grundgestalte*n [6]. Thus, we easily observe the absence of presence in music; motivic ideas are in the process of developing variation, so they have lost the figures of their initial ideas. Throughout a piece, the trace provides the remnant of the basic idea in difference. Second, in terms of time, the trace is, at once, the mark of the past and future. Derrida's notion of the trace is not chronological, while music appears to be so. However, the trace in music, that is, the remnant

of the basic idea in a piece is not in chronological order. The remnant is interpreted in a modified present moment. For example, when we analyze a piece, the features examined in the analysis are not always presented in the order of time. Rather, according to the features, the analyst describes a part of the piece. In performance, when a piece has a repeat sign, s/he can analyze the music before it is repeated or the music in its repetition. Thus, the act of analysis does not correspond to time, and is, thus, deferred. The moment could be either the marked past or the marked future.

3. Methodology

3.1 Derrida's Concept of the Personal Signature
I go on to apply Derrida's concept of the personal signature, comprised of **identity** and **intention,** to the repetitive object in music, that is, the motive. The traditional function of a personal signature is to give evidence of the provenance of a document as the identity and the intention of an individual with regard to this document. In order to enable a signature to function in this way, it must be repeatable. A signature, which makes a check or a document legally valid, must match a model of the original and reappear as a repetition. Even though the identical person signs a given check, if the signature does not match the original, the check is not cashable. It has no value, no meaning. Thus, iterability is the essential feature of the structure of the signature. Therefore, repetition exists as the common feature in the signature and the motive. Accordingly, I expand the function of identity and intention to motive and idea.

3.2 The Functions of Identity and Intention in Music
First, what is the function of identity in a motive or an idea? Identity presents the motive itself. Thus, repetition is in the exact form and includes transposition, inversion, retrograde, augmentation, and diminution. When we hear an unfamiliar voice on the phone, we are only able to identify personhood. Likewise, identity in a motive reveals its basic existence. Thus, if a motive is not modified, it functions as the identity.

Meanwhile, intention is related to the process of motivic development. If I use Schoenberg's term, intention is related to "developing variation." According to the context, the initial motive can possess different appearances. After the motive establishes its identity, it then must function to show its intention. Moreover, when the context of a motive is modified, we see its relation to the function of intention. Thus, in many cases, intention presents a change of context.

Repetition in a motive is related to the function of identity. Without repetition, the basic shape of the motive, that is, its identity is not recognizable. Thus, the function of identity requires the repetition of the basic shape of the motive. On the other hand, change in a motive is related to the function of intention. According to the musical context, a motive often requires variation. The composer's plan or intention of a piece varies the musical context. Therefore, the change in a motive reveals the tendency of intention.

4. Analysis: Schoenberg's Piano Piece op. 23, no. 1
I examine motivic functions using Schoenberg's Piano Piece op. 23, no. 1 to clarify the concept of *developing variation*, as my example. Example 1 illustrates the motivic relationship in mm. 1-3. I look at three-note motives, which are the smallest unit containing characteristic intervals of this piece, one semitone and

three semitones. The interval relationship of motive *a* is a descending semitone (-1) and ascending three semitones (+3) [7]. That of motive *b* is a descending three semitones (-3) and a descending semitone (-1). This section consists of motive *a*, motive *b*, and their repetitions in the form of a retrograde and retrograde inversion.

4.1 The Function of Identity
The repetition of a motive derives from the function of identity. In other words, the various repetitive forms of a motive, such as transposition, inversion, retrograde, and retrograde inversion, are considered to be the function of identity. Thus, the motives in sub-section A1 in section A, which consists of motive *a*, *a*r, and *a*ri and motive *b*, *b*r, and *b*ri, operate to present the identity of the piece.
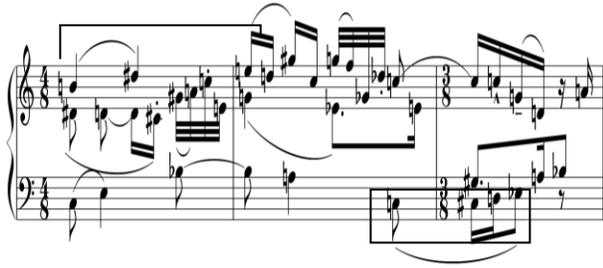
Example 1 Motive *a* and Motive *b* in Schoenberg's Piano Piece op.23, no.1

4.2 Three Types of Intention: INTOCT, INTONE, and INTQUA
There are largely three types of intention, that is, modification. The first type of intention retains the most characteristics of the initial motive, but gives a little variation by octave displacement. I call this modification "Intention 1," or INTOCT [8]. As seen in Example 2, G_2, $B\flat_2$, A_3 in the left hand is the variation of RI of motive *a*. If A_2 is used instead of A_3 after G_2 and $B\flat_2$, it is RI of motive *a*. The use of the octave higher note becomes the ordered pitch interval +3, +11, instead of +3, -1. The pitch-class sets of G_2, $B\flat_2$, A_3 and G_2, $B\flat_2$, A_2 are the same, but the contours of these melodic lines are different. It is not easy to immediately discern the motivic characteristics. Thus, although this case presents the same pitch-class sets of motive *a* and its modified repetitions, it is better to classify it in the category of modification, rather than exact repetition. Also, because this case reveals the least variation of the original, it is "Intention 1."

Example 2 "Intention 1," op. 23, no. 1, m. 8

Example 3 "Intention 2," Op. 23, no. 1 mm. 4-6

Figure 1 Possible Variations by Intention 2

Motive a A♭$_3$ G$_3$ B♭$_3$
          -1 $+3$

			Resemblance			
A♭$_3$	G$_3$	B3	The most	A$_3$	G$_3$	B♭$_3$
-1	$+4$			-2	$+3$	
A♭$_3$	G$_3$	C$_4$		B♭$_3$	G$_3$	B♭$_3$
-1	$+5$			-3	$+3$	
A♭$_3$	G$_3$	C#$_4$		B$_3$	G$_3$	B♭$_3$
-1	$+6$			-4	$+3$	
A♭$_3$	G$_3$	D$_4$		C$_4$	G$_3$	B♭$_3$
-1	$+7$			-5	$+3$	
A♭$_3$	G$_3$	E♭$_4$		D♭$_4$	G$_3$	B♭$_3$
-1	$+8$			-6	$+3$	
A♭$_3$	G$_3$	E$_4$	The least	D$_4$	G$_3$	B♭$_3$
-1	$+9$			-7	$+3$	
A♭$_3$	G$_3$	F$_4$		E♭$_4$	G$_3$	B♭$_3$
-1	$+10$			-8	$+3$	
A♭$_3$	G$_3$	F#$_4$		E$_4$	G$_3$	B♭$_3$
-1	$+11$			-9	$+3$	
A♭$_3$	G$_3$	G$_4$		F$_4$	G$_3$	B♭$_3$
-1	$+12$			-10	$+3$	
A♭$_3$	G$_3$	A♭$_4$		F#$_4$	G$_3$	B♭$_3$
-1	$+13$ (or $+1$)			-11	$+3$	
A♭$_3$	G$_3$	A$_4$		G$_4$	G$_3$	B♭$_3$
-1	$+14$ (or $+2$)	The most		-12	$+3$	

The second type of modification, Intention 2, changes one ordered pitch interval among two interval relationships, such as -1 and $+3$ in motive a, or -3 and -1 in motive b. There are two types of modification in this case. In the first type of Intention 2, two intervals still exist and only one is modified. That is, the ordered pitch interval -1 and $+3$ could be changed to -1, $+4$, or $+1$, $+3$ or $+2$, $+3$. See Example 3. As an example of Intention 2, in mm. 4-5, the ordered pitch interval of the highest voice B$_4$-D#$_5$-E$_5$ is $+4$, $+1$. This is the changed form of ar $(-3, +1)$. The intervals between the first and the second note are transformed from -3 to $+4$, and the intervals between the second and the third notes are the same. However, this change could relate all 22 trichords to a single *Grundgestalt*, as shown in Figure 1. The trichords on the left side of the Figure are generated by the change of the second interval of motive a, and those on the right are by the change of the first interval. Figure 1 presents the interval variations where the contour remains constant. In changing the contour of the motive, we are able to generate numerous variations. This aspect of multiple productions could be considered to be a defect in the theory. However, we must recall Schoenberg's assertion: "Whatever happens in a piece of music is the endless reshaping of the basic shape. Or, in other words, there is nothing in a piece of music but what comes from the theme, springs from it and can be traced back to it; to put it still more severely, nothing but the theme itself." According to this assertion, every musical idea is related to the *Grundgestalten* in some sense. When a *Grundgestalt* only varies a little, it is easy to perceive the musical figure in its original form. When a figure varies greatly from the *Grundgestalt*, it is more difficult to recognize its origin. However, the figure is only ever generated from the *Grundgestalt*. Thus, the initial musical ideas, motives, or *Grundgestalten* leave their trace in the transformation.

The second type of Intention 2 uses only one interval and repeats it. The left hand of the piano in m. 6 shows this second type. The progression starting with the last note of m. 5, C$_3$, C#$_3$, D$_3$ to E♭$_3$ consists of one semitone in upward motion, which is the ordered pitch interval $+1$. In Figure 2, as shown earlier, the motives that include the order pitch interval $+1$ are ar and br. Therefore, we can view the progression of C to E♭ by a semitone as the developing variation of either ar or br. This is the second way of changing an ordered pitch interval by omitting one. I will call the motivic function of changing one element "Intention 2," or INTONE [9].
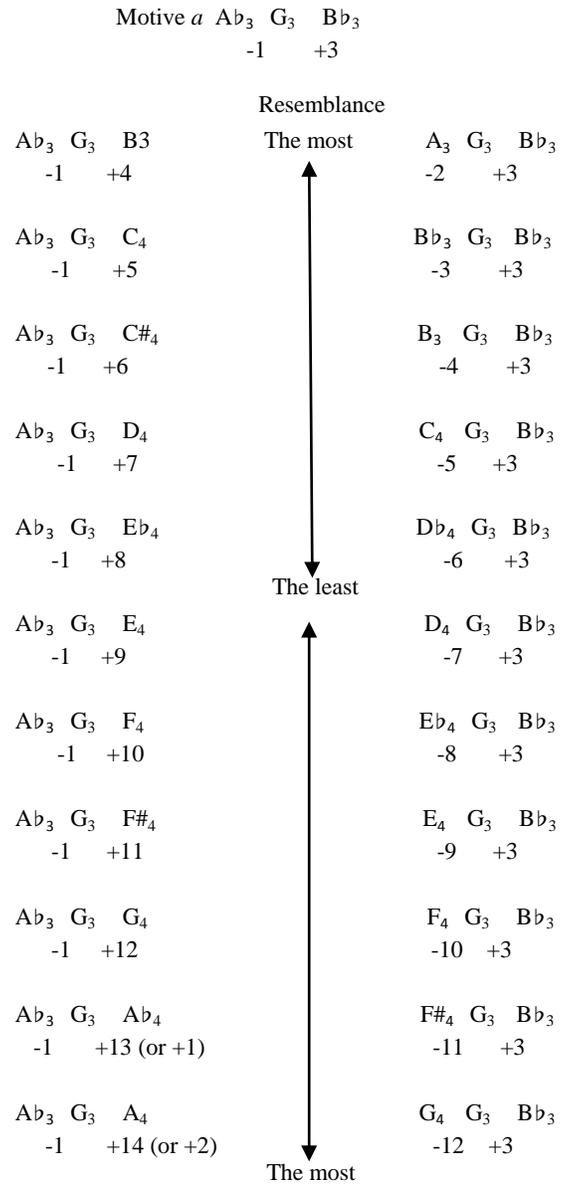
The third type of modification changes the interval by one semitone, which in turn transforms its quality. For example, when an interval of three semitones is modified to that of four semitones, it belongs to the third type; in reverse, when an interval of four semitones is modified to that of three semitones. This modification is derived from the mixture of major and minor intervals in a tonal sense. For instance, in sub-section A2, mm. 4-6, Schoenberg uses the interval of a major third (four semitones), instead of a minor third (three semitones), which is the most important interval in combination with a minor second (one semitone) in motive a, b, and their modified repetitions (see Example 3). It looks like a part of the motive, since it contains the third. However, its quality is different. I call this type "Intention 3," or INTQUA [10]. In atonal music, naming intervals in tonal way, such as a major third, creates a notational problem in the case of diminished and augmented intervals. Thus, I use the number of semitones in order to explain this modification. However, this

modification only includes the change of interval quality. Therefore, the interval of one semitone can be changed to an interval of only two semitones, and vice versa (see Figure 2). Three semitones can only be changed to four semitones, and vice versa. Perfect intervals, a fourth (five semitones) and a fifth (seven semitones) can be change to a triton (six semitones). Since in Schoenberg's op. 23, no. 1, the motives consist of one semitone and three semitones, the third type of modification presents the intervals of two semitones and four semitones. By using semitones to determine change in quality, we avoid specific problems in notation, as for example when an inter al of four semitones is notated as a diminished fourth.

Figure 2 Changeable intervals by Intention 3

One semitone	Three semitones	Five and Seven semitones	Eight semitones	Ten semitones
↕	↕	↕	↕	↕
Two semitones	Four semitones	Six semitones	Nine semitones	Eleven semitones

I only presented three possible intentions, but we can make the combination of these intentions. Example 4 shows how these motives are repeated and developed. This is the last part of section A in Schoenberg's Piano Piece Op. 23, no.1.

Example 4 Subsection A4 in Section A, mm.11-12

5. Developing Variation and Chronological Order

We have examined the motivic functions as identity, the three types of motivic intention, and their combinations in pitch (not rhythm). The process of developing variation, which presents motivic intention, has not occurred in chronological order. The motivic variation by Intention 1, the least variation of the motive, occurs in measure 8, while the variations by Intention 2 are shown in mm. 4-6. Also, the mixtures of Intention do not follow the time order. Thus, this fact supports the application of Derrida's non-linear notion of the trace to music; the trace in music, that is, the remnant of the basic idea in a piece does not unfold in chronological order. The remnant is interpreted in a modified present moment. Due to the word "developing," it is easy to misunderstand the concept of "developing variation" in time order. It is not analogous to the several stages that transform a caterpillar into a butterfly. In other words, developing variation does not

follow the feature of a set of discrete "variations," which presents a more complex and decorated style, according to time order – especially the most transformed last variation. The process of developing variation is based on short motives, and these motives are developed depending on the context. The motivic remnants, which are the remaining original features of the motive in varied repetition, leave the trace of the motive, and this trace leads to an initial motive. Therefore, in the concept of variation, the time order matters less as long as the trace leads to a fundamental motive.

6. Conclusion

In examining a given fragment, and focusing on the motivic remnant (the repetitive element), we are actually following the trace of the motive. Conversely, closely looking at the new material, we are following the process of developing variation. Thus, the same fragment can be differently described according to the focus. Moreover, this process of developing variation creates a web of possibilities of variation from the beginning *grundgestalten*.

7.References

[1] Arnold Schoenberg, "Linear Counterpoint," in *Style and Idea* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), 290.

[2]Jacques Derrida, "Living On: *Borderlines*," in *Deconstruction and Criticism,* ed. Harold Bloom, (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1979), 81.

[3]Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), 9.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London and New York: Routledge , 1978), 403.

[6] Here, I use the term "theme" and "motive" interchangeably, since this assertion is from Schoenberg's article, "Linear Counterpoint." Thus, Schoenberg used the term "theme," and when we apply the assertion to non-contrapuntal pieces, the term "theme" can be understood as "motive."

[7] I describe motives using the ordered pitch interval, instead of pitch class set, in order to interpret the contours of motives.

[8] INTOCT is derived from the synthesis of intention and octave. Interestingly, the name of motivic function, INTOCT itself connotes identity and intention. INT (Intention) represents the identity as a motivic function. OCT (Octave) represents the intention as a method how to modify or develop motives.

[9] INTONE is derived from the synthesis of intention and one.

[10] INTQUA is derived from the synthesis of intention and quality.