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Arranging Beat Furrer's *Aria*: Issues with Repetitions

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A listener, whether informed or not, first encountering Furrer's works of the late 90s is likely to be initially drawn towards the repetitions presented. These repetitions are extremely sophisticated and they show a wide range of inventiveness. During the course of this paper the full extent of the effect and result will become clearer and clearer. Furrer uses repetition as a means to create three things:

- Drama;
- Continuity; and
- Regularity.

Moreover, he actually enjoys confrontation. We will be investigating this very concept of two opposing ideas in some detail. And in a work written towards the end of the 20th century, he has achieved all the above with great success.

Repetition in Furrer's music rarely involves exact duplications. We would hear certain rhythms/rows/textures/features, some salient, some less salient, keep coming back at certain points within a work. Furrer's *Aria* (1999) is scored for Soprano and six instruments (clarinet in B, percussion, piano, violin, viola and cello). Its text is from Günter Eich, a German poet and writer, whom was sent to prison during World War II and later became one of the founders of Gruppe 47. The premiere of *Aria* took place in Witten, Germany on 24th April 1999, by ensemble recherché. Furrer was the conductor. The work is divided into seven sections (Figure 1), namely A, B, A1, B1, A2, B2, and Coda.

As we shall see from the following table that both Section A and B will repeat three times. As the piece progressed, the duration of each of the sections shortened. Moreover, within Section A (and, too, in A1 and A2), the music repeats itself. Repetition plays a vital part in holding the piece together. This is evident both locally (within one instrument or voice) and globally (within the whole ensemble). And it serves as a structural cue, we as audiences can easily identify and establish links across the work.

Section	mm.	No. of mm.	Timings ¹	Duration	Notes
A	1-160	160	00'00'	05'06"	Virtuosic and Polyrhythmic. Repetition of short motives throughout (repeated note, scalic pattern, 'continuous transition between 2 consonants).
	1-49		00'00"		'Exposition' of material. Piano: muted c'''' to give the effect of a typewriter.
	50		01'34"		3/16 empty measure.
	51-76		01'34"		Re-start, a '2 nd attempt'. 'False climax' at the end (mm.73-76). Piano: figuration is changed after m.66.
	77		02'22"		3/16 empty measure.
	78-96		02'23"		Moment of reflection: much softer dynamics. 'False climax' at the end (mm.94-96).
	97		03'00"		3/16 empty measure.
	98-138		03'01"		Re-start, a '3 rd attempt'. Piano: muted c''''; figuration is changed after m.123.
	139-160		04'20"		Preparation for Section B: texture is thin out, gradual decrease in dynamics. Violin: repeated 'pizz. with fingernail' pitch c#'''' (separated by 4 sixteenth notes).
B	161-174	14	05'06"	00'34"	Complete change of mood: sparse, no sense of rhythm/meter, Lachenman-like (musique concrete). Fermata is placed above barline. Piano: repeated gesture marked mp with and accent on score (separated by 5 eighth notes). Strings: pizz. and harmonics.
A1	175-231	57	05'40"	01'52"	Re-working of Section A: more concentrated.
	175-199		05'40"		2 x 'False climax' at the end (mm.189-192 and mm.198-199).
	200		06'33"		3/16 empty measure.
	201-214		06'34"		Moment of reflection.
	215		07'01"		5/16 empty measure.
	216-222		07'02"		Percussion: arco on music stand until m.242.
	223		07'16"		3/16 empty measure.
	224-230		07'17"		
	231		07'31"		5/16 empty measure.
B1	232-262	31	07'32"	01'06"	Lachenman-like (musique concrete). Violin: repeated 'pizz. with fingernail' pitch d#'''' (separated by 6 sixteenth notes). Viola: repeated quintuplet pizz. (separated by 9 eighth notes).
	232-240		07'32"		
	241		07'51"		5/16 empty measure.
	242-261		07'51"		Clarinet: repeated soft multiphonic (separated by 13 sixteenth notes).
	262		08'33"		1 st fermata above empty measure.
A2	263-313	51	08'38"	01'49"	
	263-283		08'38"		Piano: muted db'. 'False climax' at the end.
	284		09'18"		2 nd fermata above empty measure.
	285-312		09'21"		Extra fermata inserted between mm.291 and 292 (above barline).
	313		10'22"		3 rd fermata above empty measure.
B2	314-334	21	10'27"	00'51"	Lachenman-like (musique concrete).

Coda	335-405	71	11'18''	03'42''	At the beginning of the coda, the soprano and clarinetist both leave the stage. However, they sing/play until the very end. The mood is similar to that of Sections B, B1 and B2. From m.356 to the end, all performers speak out the consonants.
End			15'00''		

Figure 1. Table of structure of Beat Furrer's *Aria für Sopran und sechs Instrumente*.

Confrontation

What is more remarkable about the use of repetition or repetitions in *Aria* is the result, the overall effect. One hears the same material/section keeping coming back, each time the music would appear sooner and sooner, and the duration of each of the repetitions shorter and shorter. Therefore there is a strong sense of acceleration, direction and urgency towards the end. Curiously though, there is less and less music being played or sung as time progressed. The texture becomes so thin that one would 'get lost' easily, especially after Section A2. The concept of confrontation is best to be understood by the following graph:

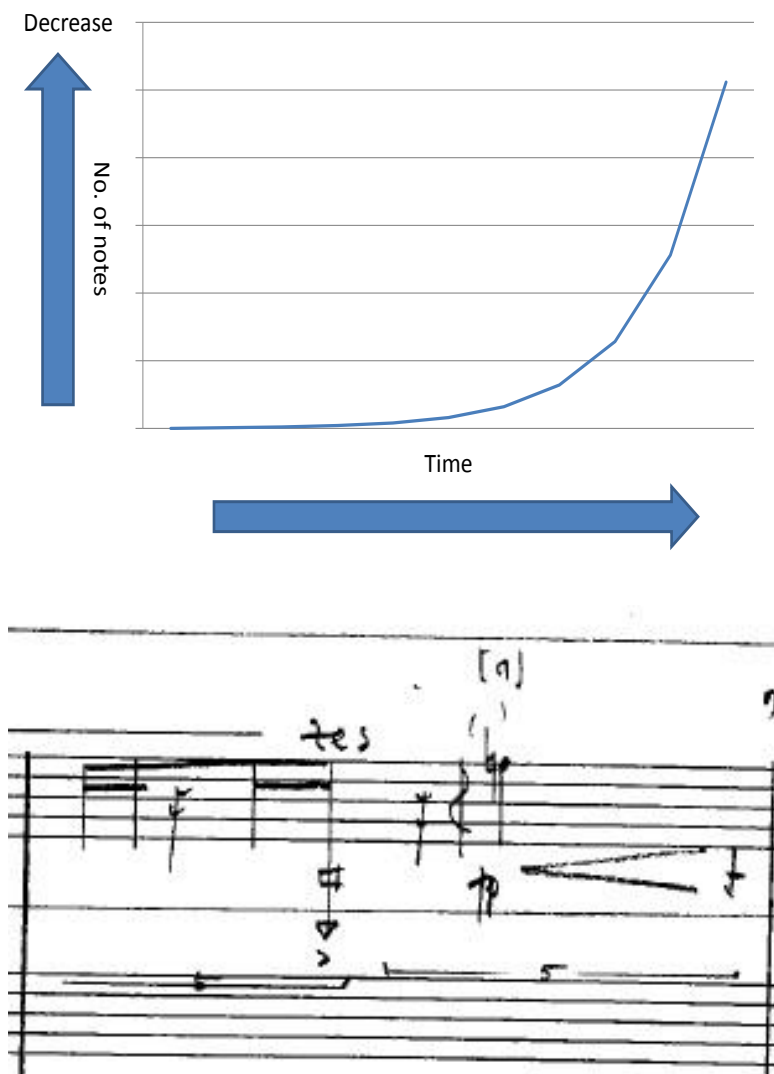


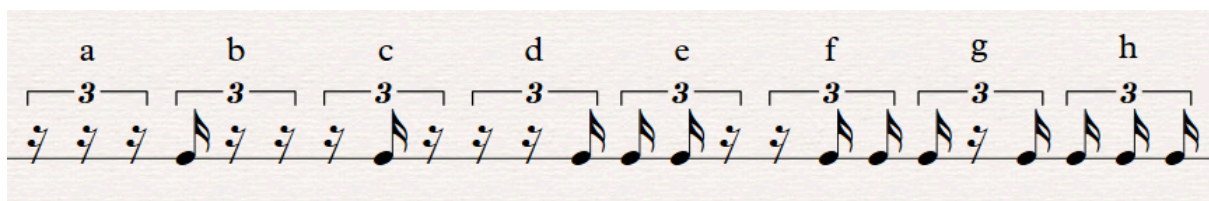
Figure 2. Beat Furrer, *Aria für Sopran und sechs Instrumente*, m.84, soprano.

The Typewriter

From the very beginning of the work, we hear a number of layers¹ superimposed over each other. It is worthwhile to point out that Furrer is well known for his nuanced exploration of the human voice and its relationship to instrumental sound.² The opening of *Aria* is a case in point. He treats the soprano voice as an instrument, perhaps like a violin. The singer is asked to mutter constantly from one consonant to another. This part is particularly demanding as the figuration is written in quintuplet sixteenth notes. We do not hear a real sustained pitch sung by the soprano until m.84 (Figure 2 on p.4).

Both the soprano and piano play a rather prominent role in Section A. They both possess restless energy in terms of number of attacks. On one hand, they provide the basic pulse (not in the traditional sense) for the rest of the ensemble. On the other, they are very independent, as if each of them is a solo. In fact, the piano part will not fade out until m.139.

I will first examine the rhythmic pattern of the right hand of the piano (up to m.65). Then I will compare part of this series (mm.1-12) with the same figuration later on in the piece (mm.112-122). One way to begin this investigation is to split the sextuplet figuration into two halves, i.e. $6/2=3$, triplet would be the basic unit. There will be eight different patterns, thus:



In order to find the pattern in Furrer's work (if one does exist), I have identified and labelled each of the triplets with the corresponding letters (Figure 3 on p.6). Now, we can investigate in detail as we have a set of letters instead of some complicated rhythms. There is, however, no apparent pattern arise with three exceptions. Firstly, the row 'd g c a' is repeated (see m.45 and 64). Secondly, row 'f g

¹ Nine in total if we treat the soprano as two layers (continuous transition between consonants and the sudden Sprechstimme within the transition), and same for the piano (each hand has a different figuration).

² Furrer, 'Biography (English)' in *Beat Furrer* (accessed on 16 July 2015).

g' is also repeated (see m.5 and 25). Lastly, pairs of letters are too repeated, namely 'c c', 'd d', 'e e', 'f f', and 'g g'. Although a good number (and of much interest!) of 'rows' can be produced from this sextuplet figuration, surely, Furrer would soon exhaust this process. Moreover, he wants to re-start Section A, to have somewhat multiple attempts, with the same material (m.98). What else could be done with this rhythm? How to develop the music from this point? How to keep the listeners' attention?

mm.				
1-4	f g h d	h d e e	g h f e	g g e e
5-8	e f g g	f e h g	f f b h	b e f c
9-12	h g h c	e f d h	a e e g	g f e g
13-16	d g f e	h g f f	f a f b	b g d c
17-20	a g f a	e a e d	d f a b	d c c d
21-24	b g b f	b f e h	g f f b	f b h c
25-28	c f g g	d d a e	a e d d	c a e d
29-32	c c g b	d g c c	b f a c	b b f a
33-36	f a b g	c c a g	g a e d	e f d c
37-40	c b d c	c d e d	b c c b	f a c e
41-44	b f c f	a e g a	e a g g	a e b e
45-48	d g c a	b d c e	d b g b	c e b d
49-52	b c b g	³	b h a h	f c h g
53-56	f c e f	d h d e	e d h f	c f ⁴ d d
57-60	f e f g	b b f a	h a b g	a c b g
61-64	d b e a	e a g g	a e b e	d g c a
65	⁵			

Figure 3. Rhythmic Pattern of the piano part, r.h., of Beat Furrer's *Aria für Sopran und sechs Instrumente* (mm.1-65).

Furrer, perhaps, really is an adherent of repetitive principle. If we now turn to mm.112-122, we shall see what Furrer did with the above rhythmic pattern. Compare mm.112-122 and mm.1-12 (Figure 4 on p.7), at first glance, the two passages do not seem to be related. But when taking a closer look at it, we do see certain rhythms appear in both passages⁶. He took the original rhythmic pattern, and with further modifications, he has created the piano part for the 3rd attempt of Section A. What is

³ m.50 is a 3/16 empty measure.

⁴ There seems to be a mistake/typo in the score. There should be either one less sixteenth note rest or a sixteenth note.

⁵ m.65 is a 3/16 empty measure.

⁶ See especially the 2nd system from the top.

remarkable is that Furrer adopts repetition as a compositional component for the creation of comprehensible sound relationships. As we have observed from this particular comparison that, at times, he would avoid repetition completely (mm.1-2 and 2nd half of m.111-1st half of m.113). But he would also quote the exact pattern (mm.6-8 and 2nd half of m.116-1st half of m.119).

Figure 4. Rhythmic Pattern of the piano part, r.h., Beat Furrer's *Aria für Sopran und sechs Instrumente* (mm.1-12 and mm.112-122).

More Piano: Normal Sounds

Furrer uses the very principal from last chapter in a number places throughout the work. Let's us now turn to a different figuration of the piano part. If we compare the piano part of mm.68-72 and mm.127-131 (Figure 5, excerpt), we see the two passages are really similar in terms of rhythm and pitches. Once again, Furrer takes the original pattern, and with modifications, he repeats it later on in the work. Within the passage it is apparent that the intervals of augmented unison and major 7th keep coming back⁷.

Another example is from Section A1 (Figure 6 on p.9). Here, the basic unit is a thirty-second note, and both hands are playing from the bass clef.

Yet another example of repetition base on the same principal is from Section A and A1: compare mm.79-92 and mm.201-214 (Figure 7 on p.9, excerpt). What is different here is that the passage in Section A1 is shifted by one sixteenth note.

Figure 5. Beat Furrer, *Aria für Sopran und sechs Instrumente*, mm.68-70 and mm.127-129, piano.

⁷ These two intervals are of the same type: Interval-Class [1,11]. See Lester, *Analytic Approaches To Twentieth-Century Music*, pp.66-80, for an in-depth explanation of Interval, Complement, Pitch-Class and Interval-Class.

Figure 6. Beat Furrer, *Aria für Sopran und sechs Instrumente*, mm. 183-186 and mm.194-197, piano.

Figure 7. Beat Furrer, *Aria für Sopran und sechs Instrumente*, mm. 86-88 and mm.208-210, piano.

Repeated Rests (Empty Measures)

So far, we have discussed the use of repetition in rhythms and pitches. Now, let us consider the empty measures up to the 1st fermata (mm.1-262). From the table of results (Figure 8 on p.10), it is apparent that Furrer inserts these empty measures into the music deliberately; the number of beats (the 'gaps') between all the empty measures can be divided by four with one exception⁸. These empty measures are there for a reason. As the texture and mood of different sections in *Aria* are

⁸ The number of beats between mm.146-200 is 191.5.

often extremely contrasting, and at times juxtaposing each other, these measures provide sufficient break in sound and space between them.

mm.	Time Signature	No. of mm.	No. of beats (eighth note)	Empty measure	No. of beats until next empty measure (eighth note)
1-49	4/8	49	196	N/A	196
50	3/16	1	1.5	Y	
51-64	4/8	14	56	N/A	100
65	3/16	1	1.5	N	
66-74	4/8	9	36	N/A	
75	3/16	1	1.5	N	
76	5/8	1	5	N/A	
77	3/16	1	1.5	Y	
78-96	4/8	19	76	N/A	76
97	3/16	1	1.5	Y	
98-145	4/8	48	192	N/A	192
146	3/16	1	1.5	Y	
147-180	4/8	34	136	N/A	191.5
181	7/16	1	3.5	N/A	
182-188	4/8	7	28	N/A	
189	5/8	1	5	N/A	
190	4/8	1	4	N/A	
191	5/8	1	5	N/A	
192-197	4/8	6	24	N/A	
198-199	6/8	2	12	N/A	
200	3/16	1	1.5	Y	
201-214	4/8	14	56	N/A	56
215	5/16	1	2.5	Y	
216-222	4/8	7	28	N/A	28
223	3/16	1	1.5	Y	
224-230	4/8	7	28	N/A	28
231	5/16	1	2.5	Y	
232-240	4/8	9	36	N/A	36
241	5/16	1	2.5	Y	
242-261	4/8	20	80	N/A	80
262 ⁹	unknown	1	unknown	Y	

Figure 8. Empty measures in Beat Furrer's *Aria für Sopran und sechs Instrumente* (mm.1-262).

⁹ Fermata above empty measure.

Climax, or not?

Perhaps it is worthwhile to mention a few words on the 'false climax'¹⁰. It is apparent that Furrer wants to intensify the drama at various points in *Aria*. He achieves this by changing the texture deliberately and instantly. We shall see that during the 'false climax' the features will always include the following:

- upward (modified) chromatic/octatonic scalic figure in the piano¹¹;
- sustained real pitch sung by the soprano; and
- repeated dyads played by the strings

One might ask how can a climax be 'false' as opposed to 'real'? And why is this so? From the texture and harmonic point of view, the following passage (Figure 9 on p.13) is well qualified for being a real climax. The implied harmony is very unstable. Firstly we hear a chromatic scale is executed by the pianist (m.94). Secondly, both violin and cello play repeated dyads of augmented unison. These pitches, with the a# and b played by the viola form a four-note cluster. From the structure/form point of view, however, this passage is merely a simple sentence in an everyday conversation (for a liberal mind, it may perhaps considered to be a statement) since we hear this passage more than once. I think in any piece of music, be it Western or non-Western, there can be and should be more than one climax. But for Furrer, and in this particular work, the 'climax' is treated differently. Its function is much more than purely creating tension and release. It is somewhat philosophical and existential. I would like to quote Wuorinen here, for his view on form:

'In Western music.....the overall shape of a work seems to be perceived largely in terms of its development toward a focal or high point, or climax, whether the work is

¹⁰ This happens 5 times during the course of the piece: mm.73-76, mm.94-96, mm.189-192, mm.198-199 and mm.274-283.

¹¹ One exception of this is in mm.274-283 where the pianist dampened the strings and play repeated dyads.

a single line that rises to a high point shortly before its end, or a large symphonic piece with its climactic intensification at the close.¹²

To return to the technical issues of the features: further explanation is needed for the modified chromatic and octatonic scales. In m.95, we hear an octatonic scale played by the piano. The octatonic scale is based on a trichord cell¹³ that recurs four times; it contains four tritones. The one used by Furrer has one extra note – f#’ (m.96), thus:

E F F# G G# B B C# D

[0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10]

This very f#’ is reinforced by the soprano. In fact, the soprano has been singing this pitch since m.86. Moreover, the upper note of the repeated dyads played by the violin of mm.94-96 is a c’’, hence we get another tritone.

There are two missing pitches in the chromatic scale of m.94, namely a d and a d#. But Furrer has a thoughtful approach to his work; other instruments would fill in for the piano part.

¹² Wuorinen, *Simple Composition*, p.145.

¹³ Interval-Class [0,1,3].

The image shows a handwritten musical score for measures 94-97 of an aria. The score is written on ten staves. The top staff is for the Soprano voice, with lyrics in brackets: [e], [c], [e], [a], [e], [c]. The second staff is for a woodwind instrument, possibly a flute or clarinet. The third staff is for a violin, marked 'vlna II'. The fourth staff is for a cello, marked 'leggero'. The fifth staff is for a double bass. The sixth, seventh, and eighth staves are for three different percussion instruments, each with a circled 'C' and a 'sim.' marking. The bottom two staves are for a keyboard instrument, possibly a harpsichord or piano, with various markings and dynamics. The time signature is 3/16, and the key signature has one sharp (F#). The score is written in a clear, legible hand.

Figure 9. Beat Furrer, *Aria für Sopran und sechs Instrumente*, mm.94-97.

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