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Repetition as a Principle of Mythological Thinking and Music of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

Art of the 20th century is characterized by the rise of the mythical thought and transformation of the myth into an artistic creativity. In music we can encounter manifestations of conscious and unconscious neo-mythologism in various forms. The methodological foundations of our text are concepts by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Carl Gustav Jung, Gilles Deleuze or Victoria Adamenko. The text focuses on the basic identification of the repetition as a mythological sign and its manifestation in the music of the 20th century (Arnold Schoenberg, George Crumb, minimal music etc.). Constitutive principle of repetition in music is connected with categories such as musical space and time, contrast, difference, musical thought.

Keywords

repetition, neo-mythologism, myth, archetype, musical symbol, contemporary music, Carl Gustav Jung, Gilles Deleuze, Claude Lévi-Strauss, dodecaphony, minimal music

1. Neo-Mythologism in Music

The advent of the 20th century saw a significant transformation of artistic culture into a dynamic and complex system for which current scientific methods and systems are insufficiently sensitive for comprehensive description and explanation. The fragmentation and complexity of the transformations of artistic expression in the previous century and present day bear a necessity for specialisation, and thus also a more narrow view of the art forms, styles, and directions that disallow the ability to capture the overall cultural movement in its entirety. The search for generalised and applicable analytical and interpretive approaches to art led to theoretical reflections (i.e. the Humanities), and to the return to, and rebirth of mythological thought, among other things. Joseph Campbell labelled the era of the 20th century as the apex of social and cultural disintegration, and sees the exact opposite in myth – the disintegration of society and culture is simultaneously accompanied by the integrative creativity of modern myths.¹ This outlined tendency is characteristic for the wider area of culture, and, at the same time, this reflects the explicit presence of myth, mythological structures, and symbols in art, originating from the reinterpretation of individual authors and in the receptive processes of society. In order to identify returns to mythology, one can refer to the literary terms, “re-mythification” or “neo-mythologism” from Eleazar M. Meletinsky’s *The Poetics of Myth*, where he describes the new paradigms of the revival of myth in European culture, specifically in literature and the novella: “*Beginning with the second decade of the twentieth century, re-mythification became an unstoppable process that in the end came to dominance different sectors of European culture.*”² According to Meletinsky, culture returns to myth in a transformed form while preserving the differences between authentic myth and its contemporary form. This is a new trend, manifesting in the individualistic search for the mythical, in individual work with mythological elements, and their evocation in diverse manners.³

Adapted by Victoria Adamenko,⁴ the term “neo-mythologism” in musicology is based on the assumption that the radical shift in musical paradigm in the 20th century is related to the disintegration of tonality—a traditionally dominating structural principle of European music. According to Adamenko, the demise of tonality in musical expression allowed the hitherto sidelined musical qualities of a mythological nature that are principal (i.e. primary structuralising elements) to come to the forefront: “[...] *the basic structural ideas on which mythic thought has traditionally belief, such as opposition, symmetry, variability, and repetition.*”⁵ We should add that neo-mythologism became evident not only in the afore-mentioned “unveiling” of the mythological qualities of music and their accentuation in musical compositions, but also in the focus of composers’ attention on previously

1 CAMPBELL, Joseph. *Creative mythology*. Reissue. New York: Arkana, 1991.

2 MELETINSKY, Eleazar M. *The Poetics of Myth*. New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 17.

3 Ibid., pp. 339-340.

4 ADAMENKO, Victoria. *Neo-mythologism in music: from Scriabin and Schoenberg to Schnittke and Crumb*. Hillsdale, NY: Pendagon Press, 2007.

5 Ibid., p. xii.

somewhat neglected components and aspects of music, their emancipation, and mutual combination. Qualities of music that were singled out in the foreground include such elements as texture, timbre, and kinetics, as well as new forms and tectonic designs, etc.

During a set time period in music and musicology, we begin to see mythological elements, specifically in the thematic aspects of musical works, in texts set to music, and in musical structures. Myth plays an important role in the aesthetics of musical modernism and post-modernism through the transformation of ancient mythological symbols into new musical contexts. We can even label some composers as mythological: Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin, Igor Stravinsky, Karlheinz Stockhausen, George Crumb, Einojuhani Rautavaara⁶, and many others. One can divide neo-mythologism into two mutually permeable areas: a thematic (textual) reflection of myth in the music of the 20th century, and the structural (compositional) quality of music, without reference to myth. In certain senses, the complex development of modern music also has a mythological aspect, thanks to new manners of musical creation and specific compositional techniques. Behind the rational compositional processes and complex organisation of music in various components and aspects, one can perceive mythological movement, in the sense of a narrative shaping of musical expression; it is an attempt at creating a unifying and holistic narrative, a new world with rules and logic.⁷ Equivalences between mythological and musical thought cannot be naturally imposed. One cannot overlook the fact that, in the musical art of the last century, there is an increased manifestation of analogous – or, at the very least, suggestively similar – principles and phenomena that we see in world mythologies across cultural and temporal diversification. General mythological principles such as repetition (periodicity), identity, contradiction (contrast), variability (variation), unity (coherence), are imposed next to similarly labelled basic principles of musical composition. Regardless of whether we label these phenomena in Jungian terms, i.e. structural, thematic, principle musical archetypes;⁸ unconscious logic of the sensory qualities of structural anthropology with the mediation of binary opposites and mythologems;⁹ formulas of musical narrative; manifestations in music as a phenomenally diverse invariant of the mythological disposition.

In the following text, I will trace the general principle of repetition that historically previously manifested in myth and areas closely related to it, and which is naturally

6 See STEPIEŃ, Wojciech. *The Sound of Finnish Angels: Musical Signification in Five Instrumental Compositions by Einojuhani Rautavaara*. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2011.

7 This mythological-narrative creation in the music of the 20th century is perceptible, for example, in the compositional system of the Second Viennese School with the “messianic” role of Arnold Schoenberg and further post-Webern development; in composers whose opus and personality are, as a whole, mythological (Igor Stravinsky); or in the cases of those who create their own compositional worlds with rules and systems (Olivier Messiaen); furthermore, we can include post-modern inter-textuality not dissimilar to the process of creating networks of mythological stories. Composers of the music of the 20th century liked to mythologise their artistic poeticism with references and reinterpretations of past legacies, create individual myths that are supported by a culturally broader trend.

8 See KOZEL, David. Mythological Archetype in Music and Principles of its Interpretation. *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 2016, vol. 47, no. 1, pp. 3–15.

9 See KOZEL, David. A Musical Analysis of Mythical Thought in the Work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. *Musica Olomucensia*, 2015, vol. 22, pp. 61–78.

inherent to music during the course of its development. In the music of the 20th century, the principle of repetition contributed intensively to the creation of musical expression in diverse forms; it relates to musical principles such as identity and contrast, and new understandings of musical time and space. I will focus in greater detail on selected manners of expression of the principle of repetition in music, with detailed examples of references of musical directions and compositional methods or specific musical works. For the purposes of this document, the concept of repetition is understood as a characteristic of musical structure that does not have to be accompanied by textual mythological references. Naturally, the topic at hand cannot be exhausted in the given scope; the aim of this document is to outline at least some subjects that can serve as an introduction to more detailed analyses and comparisons.

2. Mythological Repetition

Myth as a narrative is temporally determined, and music possesses a dichronic dimension as well. The sequence of events in myth not only return cyclically in its repeated narration, but it also repeats spirally in its various versions as monomyth.¹⁰ Mythological thought has an internally-concealed synchronous dimension; time in myth is historically ambiguous (mythological timelessness), i.e. it is static despite the repetition of ritual acts and mythological narration. The synchronous aspect of myth possesses a vertical direction, and relates to the structure (organisation) of myth in the form of constructional semantic units, referred to as mythologems, archetypes, motifs, etc. In myths, time is cyclical, but it unfolds narratively. Just like music, myth is a synthesis of diachronic and synchronous dimensions.¹¹ In the music of the previous and current century, the cultivation of both of these dimensions can be discerned in intensive and new manners of articulation of musical time and space, in the sense of compositional work with the principle of repetition as a temporal means of developing the musical stream while projecting this temporal dimension of the music onto an image and representation of musical space.¹²

In myth, the principle of repetition is tied to life and its cycles. Mythological narration typically contains cyclically repeated events in cosmology and nature. Repetition is present in the cycles of origin and extinction (renewal, regeneration), the alternation of order and chaos. Psychologically, repetition is tied to ontogenesis (learning) and the creation of behavioural formulas. In myth, we see various forms of repetition as a cycle of specific events, the return of the identical (the image of a circle), as well as a transformed

10 See CAMPBELL, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. 3rd ed. Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 2008.

11 The issue of the synchronous and diachronous aspects of myth and music from the standpoint of structural anthropology is addressed by C. Lévi-Strauss. See LÉVI-STRAUSS, Claude. *The Raw and the Cooked, Mythologiques*, vol. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

12 Compare ROCHBERG, George. The Concepts of Musical Time and Space. In ROCHBERG, George. *The aesthetics of survival: a composer's view of twentieth-century music*. Rev. and expanded ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004, pp. 68–126.

return (the image of a spiral). According to Mircea Eliade, the notion of archetype is – in relation to repetition in archaic ontology – founded upon the sacral value of an object or action, which transcends reality and becomes sacred. Certain human actions repeat themselves, as they repeat the mythological pattern: “[...] *they are repeated because they were consecrated in the beginning* (‘in those days’, *in illo tempore, ab origine*) by gods, ancestors or heroes.”¹³ The repetition of theogony and cosmogony is an imitation of these archetypes, and allows the connection of the profane world with the sacral world in ritual, the symbolism of the centre (axis mundi), the tree of life, etc. According to Eliade this is how the regeneration of time, cosmic cycles, periodic repetition, ad infinitum occurs. From the standpoint of the issue at hand, the principle of repetition in art (music), it is significant that mythical repetition bestows a sacred character upon each action of archaic man, and, according to Eliade, only that which lacks a mythical model is profane.¹⁴ The principle of repetition in the abstracted form was applied in 20th century art, as a structuring principle not only in its own isolation from formerly sacred functions (repetition without the sacred aspect), but its ritual nature became evident as well (mythic symbols in art, the revival of the ritual functions of dance, opera, performance, etc.).

Additional models for explaining the function of repetition in art (music) can be found in Jungian philosophy. Repetition is tied to the archetypes in Jungian terms as unconscious patterns of reception and action that, with the return of life situations, establish themselves into forms new in phenomena.¹⁵ From the series of archetypal configurations, I would like to refer at least to the central archetype of wholeness, the Self – the synthesis of the conscious and unconscious components of the psyche – which are referenced by the motifs of wholeness, the unity of opposites, creation, God, etc. In the process of individuation, one’s self gradually separates from the primordial ambiguousness of the Self, which is primarily the task of the first half of our lives; in the second half, we surrender this clearly defined differentiation, and once again unite with the Self. Edward E. Edinger¹⁶ relativises the schematisation of this process, and presents his cyclical (i.e. spiral) variant: the alternation between separation from and unification with occurs repeatedly, in childhood and in adulthood. Despite the dangers of over-generalisation, the principle of repetition in the described meaning is a universal principle of human activity, and manifests in art thanks to the shared content of the collective psyche. Mythological expressions of the principle of repetition are, of course, modified and governed by the laws of the given genre of art, however, the shared foundation of the symbolic character remains. One culturally universal symbol of the Self is, for example, the phenomenologically rich mandala, referencing wholeness, stability, the crossing of

13 ELIADE, Mircea. *Cosmos and History. The Myth of the Eternal Return*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959, p. 4.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 27–28.

15 See JUNG, Carl Gustav. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969.

16 EDINGER, Edward F. *Ego & archetype: individuation and the religious function of the psyche*. Boston: Shambhala, 1992.

polarity, divinity.¹⁷ The mandala as a symbol is linked to the principle of repetition with its circular structure, which is expressed not only in its external shape, but also in the internal arrangement of its visualisation.

The principle of repetition often appears in mythological images as a mythologem in association with geometric symbols such as the circle, sphere, square, triangle, cross, vertical line, etc.¹⁸ One universal mythologem is the Arbor Mundi (the world tree), which expresses the representation of the layers of the universe.¹⁹ The vertical lines of the world tree depict the graduated dimensions of being, linking this world with overlapping phenomena, determining man's place (and that of flora and fauna, gods and demons) in the stratification of the universe. The horizontal lines symbolically express the members and content of each of the layers in their diversity, and here, in the image material of world mythologies, repetition of the displayed elements appear. The vertical line acts as an imaginary line dividing the universe into two halves, with both sides reflecting a trend toward regularity—order. The mythologem of the world tree expresses the mythological principle of repetition in relation to the principle of symmetry.

3. Musical Manifestations

In music, we come across the concept of repetition in various definitions. Aaron Copland understands repetition as a principle whose aim in music is to achieve a feeling of formal balance and unity. Music based on repetition for its core structure is divided into five categories: exact repetition, sectional, symmetrical repetition, repetition by variation, repetition by fugal treatment, repetition by development. Besides repetition, there are other structuralising categories as well, however, these are based on non-repetition – Copland labels these as “free” forms.²⁰

As the root concept of the principle of repetition in the 20th century, one should refer to the influential conception of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of difference.²¹ Repetition is related to the categories of time and identity. Deleuze distinguishes three models of time. The first is circular, characteristic of myth; it is distinguished by the customary repetition of the identical (repetition of natural events and cycles) and it generates the same experience. The second model is causal (Kantian); time is understood as a straight line. Here, repetition cooperates with synthesis and memory, and thus creates a similarly

17 Compare JUNG, Carl Gustav. Concerning Mandala Symbolism. In JUNG, Carl Gustav. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Second edition. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968, pp. 355–384.

18 ADAMENKO, op. cit., p. 20.

19 Examples include the world tree, Yggdrasil, from Northern mythology, or the Siberian shamanist tree that depicts the three planes of the world: heaven, earth, and the underworld.

20 COPLAND, Aaron. Musical Structure. In *A Reader. Selected Writings 1923–1972*. Richard Kostelanetz (ed.). New York, London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 10–11.

21 DELEUZE, Gilles. *Difference and repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

characteristic identity. In the third definition of time, Deleuze turns to Nietzsche's concept of eternal return, in which that which returns is never identical, always different, altered: "*The subject of the eternal return is not the same but the different, not the similar but the dissimilar, not the one but the many [...]*."²² For this reason, Deleuze emphasises the third meaning of the category of time and repetition in the form of eternal return. In music theory and aesthetics, Deleuze's principle of difference was laid out by Edward Campbell in relation to the music of the Second Viennese School and post-war development.²³ Campbell ponders the meaning of identity in music: according to him, it is generated by an experiential and habitual approach (fulfilment of the expectation of development, repeated, confirmational listening). Another example is composers who attempt to stabilise their works with excessively detailed notation and demand strict adherence in their performance. The concept of identity is founded on the preference for the first resonance of a certain musical thought: "(identity thinking) *takes certain enunciations of musical ideas as privileged objects*."²⁴ Classical musical forms are one example; they are based on the assumption of the value of unity, integration, identity to the detriment of contrast, diversity, difference.²⁵ The compositional and aesthetic principle of difference in the form of the principles of variation and non-repetition was developed in the music of Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, and Alban Berg. Their works (primarily the atonal periods of Schoenberg and Webern), employed non-repetition of musical structures, athematism approaches, application of so-called virtual themes, permanent variational development (developing variation) and negation of verbatim returns of ideas and reprises. In this form, the outlined principles of difference in music became inspirational in post-war musical development (Pierre Boulez, etc.), and found their continuity. "*According to Boulez, the entire history of the Western word is caught up in a 'dilemma' involving repetition, variation, recognition on the unknown*."²⁶ At this point, we can move on to the argumentation of the mythological nature of constructivist music of the 20th century. The initial negation of the principle of repetition in its traditional form (see above) can be understood as a direct negation of mythological time and the return of events in myth after their depletion in classical European musical culture.²⁷ Contrary to mythical repetition, difference comes on board with a distinct understanding of identity and time. Emphasis on the diachronous aspect of myth and music shifted into their newly articulated synchronous dimension. After a relatively short era of athematism and atonality, mythological timelessness gives birth to a new principle of the organisation of musical material, once again based on the principle of repetition. According to Schoenberg, working with

22 Ibid., p. 126.

23 CAMPBELL, Edward. *Music after Deleuze*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

24 Ibid., p. 5.

25 Ibid., p. 3–6.

26 CAMPBELL, Edward. *Boulez, music and philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 154.

27 This concept builds upon the thesis of Lévi-Strauss on the adoption of myth structure and forms by art music with the early Baroque, and later also the possibility of the relation between the emergence of serial music and the decline of the novella in literature. See KOZEL, David. *A Musical Analysis of Mythical Thought in the Work of Claude Lévi-Strauss*, pp. 68–71.

dodecaphonic rows would give the musical work an internal unity and cohesion. This, as a generalisation, closes in on monomyth and the structuralist idea that a given myth is comprised of all its possible and existing versions. Still, repetition of the same (i.e. dodecaphonic rows, later series) without preference for a centre in the rising organisational aspect of musical structure can be interpreted as an image of the mythological symbol of unity – the universe with set principles. Anton Webern wrote about Schoenberg's system: "[...] *unity is completely ensured by the underlying series. It's always the same; only its manifestations are different.*"²⁸ The rational aspect of the organisation of musical structure reached its apex, and at its foundation stands the mythological unity of the circle (the mandala) – unity and repetition.

The principle of repetition in the music of the 20th century developed significantly in musical minimalism, primarily in its now classic and stylistically pure form (Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Terry Riley, etc.). Musical minimalism in the aesthetic sense is defined by Elaine Broad as "*the conception of the non-narrative work-in-progress*" or is understood as "*non-representational*" music (Wim Mertens), in which the primary concept is the musical process itself rather than other musical elements that have hitherto traditionally created the targeted (teleological) movement of the musical stream.²⁹ The characteristics of musical minimalism in the form of cyclical repetition of motifs (patterns) and small alterations (shifts) in the individual phases of minimalistic compositions is in conflict with the narrative nature of mythology – musical minimalism is anti-narrative.³⁰ Minimalism expresses the synchronous aspect of music by emphasising repetition and creates a flowing continuum of the musical stream, occurring at first in circles (i.e. a cycle of patterns), but in longer time frames, employs the spiral model (changes, pattern shifts). Both models are typical for myth as well. In this way, it results in the halting of musical time,³¹ the actualisation of the synchronous dimension of myth (music). Another possible mythological plane of musical minimalism is revealed by the afore-mentioned V. Adamenko: "*The meaning of minimalist repetition can be related to archaic ritualistic speech formulas, rather than to logically constructed speech, in which the rules of rhetoric were the recognized counterparts.*"³² Musical minimalism adheres to the typical expressions of neo-mythologism in the music of the 20th century from an aesthetic standpoint, but also through the preference of the principle of repetition as a compositional technique.

The music of the 20th century brought with it the development of working with musical texture in composition. Existing traditional textures such as monophony, heterophony, polyphony, and homophony were complemented by a manner of composition

28 WEBERN, Anton. *The Path to the New Music*. Ed. Willi Reich, trans. Leo Black. Bryn Mawr, PA: Theodore Presser, 1963, p. 40. According to CAMPBELL, Edward. *Music after Deleuze*, p. 14.

29 JOHNSON, Timothy A. Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style, or Technique? *The Musical Quarterly*, 1994, vol. 78, no. 4, p. 744.

30 Eero Tarasti states that musical minimalism is, from a narrative standpoint, anti-narrative. Compare TARASTI, Eero. *A Theory of musical semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

31 In terms the concepts C. Lévi-Strauss on music as a device to abolish time, signifying the loss of the temporal dimension of music or myth in favour of the synchronous dimension in listening.

32 ADAMENKO, op. cit., p. 62.

that utilised the employment of independent layers. Additionally, within these individual layers, there was often a repetition and layering of musical ideas and their elements – a multi-layered texture. In some cases, the sound-colour aspect of this texture (aleatoricism) was predominant, in others it was the consequence of constructivistically-founded compositional approaches (dodecaphony, serialism). This multi-layered texture is often joined by polyharmony, polychords, polyostinati, etc. Working with layers in musical texture can also take on the form of the merging of temporally or culturally distinct music (a modern layer versus folk, etc.). Mythology has its own ancient prototype for the outlined phenomena of multi-layered textures; it is the mythologem of the world tree and the principle of repetition in the individual dimensions of its universe. If we use passages from Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (1913) (additionally with a clear reference to pagan culture) as a representational example of this statement, one could say that there are different forms of its manifestation. The opera, *The Mask of Orpheus* (1973–1984), by Harrison Birtwistle (libretto by Peter Zinovieff)³³ is characteristic in its utilisation of the repetitive principle and multi-layered texture, and employs myth's cyclical model of time at the dramatic and scenic level. The famous ancient story of Orpheus is presented on-stage simultaneously in a range of variants in three forms: singer, mime, and marionettes, in synchronous and ritually repetitive archetypal moments of the myth in post-modern fragmentation.³⁴

The principle of repetition is an expression of neo-mythologism, and may be expressed in the synthesis of the visual aspect of the penning of the music and its structures. A typical example of the referenced mythologem is circular notation, seen in 20th century composers as a sort of renaissance.³⁵ This new manner of notation and the discovery of its circular dimension can be interpreted through the symbolism of the archetype of the Self, the mandala. The circle becomes the mythological model of the discovered dimension of music and its symbolism.³⁶

In the previous text, I identified some of the properties of myth in terms of the application of the principle of repetition. Emphasis was placed upon the diachronous and synchronous dimensions of myth, as well as on the psychological (archetypal) meaning and sense. Musical expressions of the intensification of the utilisation of the principle of repetition in the music of the 20th century reference the complex palette of compositional and receptive options and modifications. It is primarily about the application of the principle of repetition in the organisation of the musical material in conjunction with the principle of contrast, the elevation of repetition to the dominating musical principle

33 See ADLINGTON, Robert. *The Music of Harrison Birtwistle*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 12–21.

34 The reconfiguration of myth as a narrative based on multi-modal experience is addressed by Yayoi Uno Everett, using examples from the works of Osvaldo Golijov, Kaija Saariaho, John Adams, and Tan Dun. According to Everett, contemporary opera and theatre are characteristic in their frequent utilisation of non-linear and anti-narrative models. See EVERETT, Yayoi Uno. *Reconfiguring myth and narrative in contemporary opera*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015.

35 Examples can be found in the works of George Crumb (including inspiration from myth and its symbols), K. Stockhausen, etc.

36 ADAMENKO, op. cit., pp. 201–240.

in the sense of emphasising processuality, changes in the area of musical texture, the application of the symbolism of the circle and spiral in notation, and the very concept of musical time and space. The mythological roots of these methods of expression in the music of the previous century and the present do not proclaim dependence on the mythological thinking of today's man, but rather unveil a new dimension of analysis and interpretation of the musical theory of traditionally described musical phenomena.

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