THE COMPOSER'S QUEST FOR UNITY:

Development of Cyclic Form

by David Larson

It is necessary at the outset of an inquiry into cyclic form to set forth the two meanings which the term may carry.   In the very general sense, any succession or series of events is said to constitute a cycle, hence a musical composition in several movements – – a suite, sonata, string quartet, symphony, cantata, oratorio – – is said to be written in cyclic form, However, the term today is commonly understood to denote the form of composition, usually sonata or symphony, in which the same thematic material, or fragments thereof, appear in all or some of the movements. It is in this latter context that cyclic form will be considered in this paper.

Cyclic form is not so much a well defined form as it is an idea, a principle.   It may be employed consciously by composers as a special device or may find a very subtle natural expression in which case it cannot be said whether its use is consciously intentional or not. Usage of cyclic form can be traced in composers' works from the fourteenth century, but not until the late nineteenth century does the form attain its highest development.   The nineteenth century romant-icists often employed the cyclic principle to bring to their works that unity and oneness for which they longed.   In some contemporary works the cyclic principle continues to be utilized.

To trace the development of the cyclic idea in detail through all its phases would entail many years of study.   Certain high spots of rather recent application of the cyclic method often so dazzle an observer that he misses the greater general continuity, of which a certain masterpiece is but one composer's untilization and expression of the idea.   It is the purpose of this paper to broadly survey the field, hoping that a basic perspective may be gained which will make

possible an understanding of the cyclic idea.[1]

The earliest application of cyclic form yet discovered is found in the fourteenth century *Messe Notre-Dame* of the French composer, Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300-1346). Although this Mass gains its primary historical importance from being the first complete polyphonic setting of the ordinary of the Mass to be written by one man, it is also interesting to note how the Mass is bound together. The following motive

Example 1.

"may be regarded as the generating cell of this vast composition : not only does one encounter it in each of the sections, but in addition it gives rise to imitations, to fugal entries, to repetitions, to counter-melodies in long time values (Kyrie), well proving that Machaut made of it the basic material of his Messe Notre-Dame."[2]

Almost a century passes before composers follow Machaut's lead in writing complete settings of the Mass, but in the period of Mass composition beginning with Dufay and climaxing with Palestrina there are numerous examples of cyclic style. The most common examples are the cantus firmus masses of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In a cantus firmus mass all, or several, of the movements are based on one given melody. This cantus firmus is often a plainsong, e. g. the Mass *Veni Sponsa Christi*, or a Latin hymn, e. g. *Aeterna Christi Munera*, but the composer may write on his own themes, on those of a contemporary composer, or even on a folksong. The use of secular melodies as cantus firmi probably shows the cantus firmus style most interestingly and clearly. Some of the popular tunes utilized by composers were, *Adieu mes Amours*, various basse danses, *De plus en plus*, *Fortuna Desperata*, *Je ne demande*, *L'homme Armé*, *Malheur me bat*, and *Western Wynde*.

One of the most popular of these tunes was *L'homme Armé*, there being more than thirty masses based on this folksong melody.

Example 2. L'homme Arme

The first composer to use the tune in a polyphonic setting was
Busnois, he being soon followed by others -- Dufay, Ockeghem,
Regis, Obrecht, Brumel, Vacqueras, Compere, Senfl, Morales, de la
Rue, deOrto, Tinctoris, diBrugis, LaFage, Des Pres, Caron, Mathurin,
Forestyn, Pipelaere and Palestrina.[3]   The cantus firmus Mass is seen
to be a popular vehicle by which composers were able to show their
skill in the manipulation of contrapuntal devices and it served well.
Following the Council of Trent (1543-1563), which endeavored to
restore dignity to the service after the corruption and secularization
that had crept in during previous centuries, the use of secular cantus
firmi was forbidden.   From this time we find no more masses with
titles denoting the use of a secular cantus firmus.   However, secular
cantus firmi continued to be used; the title simply omitted mention
of the fact, e. g. Palestrina's second *L'homme Armé Mass* (1582)
titled *Missa Quarta,* this title simply indicating the mode in which it
was written.

It was not unusual for composers of the Netherlands School in
the fifteenth century, in using a cantus firmus as the basis of a
composition, to try to avoid letting the cantus firmus stand out too
prominently.[4]   They would not always utilize the cantus firmus in all
the movements, and, when a canon became too complex, the cantus
firmus was dropped completely. There also can be found instances of
one composer writing a setting using another composer's alteration of
a cantus firmus !   The actual cantus firmus was of minor concern.

R. O. Morris, in his discussion of sixteenth century polyphonic
settings of the Mass, notes the similarity of the cyclic principle then
in use with the cyclic idea of nineteenth century Romantic composers:[5]

The sixteenth-century Mass on a *Canto Fermo* has, indeed, a close affinity with the modern theme and variations, and also with such 'cyclic' symphonies as Liszt's 'Faust' Symphony and Berlioz's Symphonie Fantastique, in which a single thematic germ reappears in various transformations throughout all the movements of the work.

Morris goes on to recommend a careful study of D'Indy's String century Quartet in E, Op. 45, as an interesting modern adaptation of sixteenth century structural principles, showing convincingly "how much a modern composer may learn from Palestrina"[6].

Following the cantus firmus method of fifteenth and sixteenth century choral music were the early variation forms of seventeenth and eighteenth century instrumental music, in which a short melody was used as the basis of an extended composition. These variation forms are expressive of an idea quite different trom that of the cantus firmus Mass.

The history of variations has its origin in the rise of lute and keyboard music in the sixteenth century, mainly in Spain and England, spreading to the continent, to Italy and Germany, around the beginning of the seventeenth century. The forms associated with this development are the ostinato, ground, chaconne and passacaglia, all of these being sooner or later influenced by the dance. And being of a continuous variation character, these forms are closer in sentiment to the rhythmic dance forms than to the more refined Mass settings we have previously considered.

The seventeenth century composers of the North German school made an important contribution towards the development of the variation (dance) form and the suite by expanding the suite through progressive variation. They were the first to conceive of the suite as a unified and definite musical form, instead of as a combination of dances. It was the combination of two "varied-couples", consisting of two contrasting dances – – a pavane and galliard, or an allemende and corrente – – that led to the organization of the variation suite.

This cyclic form was unified not only by the use of the same key for each movement, but especially by the use of the same thematic material for all the dances of the suite.[7] The first variation suites were contained in the *Neue Paduan* (1611) of Paul Peuerl. In Schein's *Banchetto musicale* (1617) the variation suite assumed its classic form. Other composers of variation suites in this period were Franz Neubauer, Andreas Hammerschmidt and Isaac Posch. An interesting example of character variations, another closely related style, is found in Johann Froberger's partitas *Auff die Meyerin.* Both of these seventeenth century forms are indicative of the trend towards merging the form of variations with that of the suite. Indeed, the Baroque era is one of variations, and it is through variations that it speaks most convincingly.

Attempts have been made by some writers to find cyclic unity in the works of such Baroque and Rococo composers as Vitali, Corelli, Tartini, K. P. E. Bach, J. S. Bach, Handel, Mozart and Haydn. It is really very difficult, if not impossible, to say whether or not these composers utilized cyclic form. Once such a writer makes the assumption that a certain composer used a cyclic approach and sets about to show how in several works "the first motives of each movement are the same,"[8] he soon finds fimself to be on shaky ground when he tries conclusively to prove his thesis. It must be mentioned, however, that the cyclic principle is found in opera finales beginning with Mozart (see *Cosi fan tutte*), and so the idea cannot be said to be completely foreign to the period.[9] In his article, *The Pursuit of Unity*,[10] David Cherniavsky traces the composer's persistent problem of achieving unity in diversity claiming that cyclic form, through a gradual evolution, is one answer. Concerning the origin of cyclic form, he says:

> Even as early as in the sonatas of Vitali, Corelli, and Tartini,
> we find the basic principle of cyclic form already in existence.
> A theme may not only be changed from its position as first

subject to that of second subject, or even be transferred from one movement to another, but sometimes each of the movements might be founded on transformations of one constant theme. In this way, an extraordinary homogeneity of material has been gained even if often at the expense of variety, richness and breadth of expression.[11]

It is difficult to determine the origin of something which exists more as an idea or principle rather than as a definite, concrete form. Such statements concerning cyclic form in the seventeenth and eighteenth century are to be accepted only after a careful and thorogh invesitgation of much of the literature of that period. Cherniavsky then continues with some sound reasoning :

Previously [referring to musical composition in the period preceeding Beethoven], just as there is not to be found so striking a difference between the various personalities of contemporary classical composers, between their separate works written in the same formal category, or even between different themes written in approximately the same tempo, so too, there cannot be found that same contrast of mood and character between the movements of each complete work. Pattern, or perfection, of form, rather than mood or expression, had been the most vital element in music, and variety within pattern naturally implies a far less fundamental type of diversity than does variety of mood and exprssion.[12]

With the advent of Beethoven, the cyclic idea takes a new turn ; it becomes of age. The problem of establishing coherence in a complete work did not really arrive with any great insistence until Beethoven began to infuse each of the movements with a strongly marked character of its own, thus inviting a real diversity and sometimes even a deep sense of contrast between their expression.

Before Beethoven, the development of a long work was based upon antithesis of distinct tunes and concrete lumps of

subject representing separate organisms, either merely in juxtaposition, or loosely connected by more or less empty passages. There were ideas indeed, but ideas limited and confined by the supposed necessities of the structure of which they formed a part. But what Beethoven seems to have aimed at was the expansion of the term "idea" from the isolated subject to the complete whole; so that instead of the subjects being separate, though compatible items, the whole movement, or even the whole work, should be the complete and uniform organism which represented in its entirety a new meaning of the word "idea", of which the subjects, in their close connection and inseperable affinities, were separate limbs. This principle is traceable in works before his time, but not on the scale to which he carried it, nor with his conclusive force. In fact, the condition of art had not been sufficiently mature enough to admit the terms of his procedure, and it was barely mature enough until he made it so.[13]

From the time of Beethoven onwards, composers have gradually come to realize not only a more ambitious contrast between the characters of the individual movements, but also between their tonal centers as well as between the keys within each movement. At the same time thay have been faced with a far more intense and more deliberate struggle to retain an equal correspondence between them.[14]

In his book, *Beethoven, the Man Who Freed Music*, R. H. Schauffler has devoted two chapters to an interesting study of Beethoven's usage of "source motives" and "germ motives". Vincent D'Indy used the term "theme-personnage" referring to Beethoven's thematic conception and likened it to the principal character of a legend.

In only four of the later works of Beethoven have I conclusively detected cyclic unity: the piano sonatas Op. 101 and Op. 110, and the symphonies No. 5 and No. 9.[15] In these works only has the thematic material been definitely interchanged between movements.

This is not to disclaim the possibility of any "inner" unity between the movements of other works.

Beethoven did much to further the cyclic idea, all succeeding composers tracing the device from him. It was he who broke the bonds of form and pattern which had bound composers, but having marked out the new road, he travelled not far along it but left it open for those who came after.

An early example of cyclic treatment, following Beethoven, is found in Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasie* (1825) Op. 15, which the composer founded on a motive from his song *Der Wanderer*, it being worked into the beginning of each of the four movements forming the principal thematic material of each movement.

A conspicuous utilization of cyclic form is found in the *Symphonie Fantastique* (1828), Op. 14, of Berlioz. In this work Berlioz tried to enhance the expressiveness of his music by founding the symphony on a theme, to which he gave the name "l'idéa fixe". This melody, taken from his cantata *Hermine*, typifying the heroine, appears in some guise in each of the movements. Although the melody he uses cannot be classified as great, it serves the composer's purpose admirably well – that of dramatization.

In Schumann's *Symphony No. 4 in D Minor* (1853), Op. 120, we find a refined, though interesting, usage of the cyclic principle. He takes the arpeggio-like main theme of the first movement and employs it in the introduction of the finale and then lets the figure serve as an accompanying motive to the main theme of the finale.

It remained for Liszt to contribute a significantly new interpretation of the cyclic principle. He introduced the "metamorphosis of themes" idea as new dramatic out-working of the cyclic principle. This idea is embodied in his twelve symphonic poems, the best of which, unfortunately, are no longer often heard. Also we find a metamorphisis of themes in his *Faust Symphony* and in his *E-flat Piano Concerto*, the latter being, perhaps, the best known example. Liszt carried on the movement rooted in Beethoven and Berlioz – – that of developing

effective dramatic music. Through his contribution of the symphonic poem he did much to establish what might be called a poetic basis to program music, and through his metamorphisis of themes principle he did much to further the cyclic style of thematic development.

At this point it must be mentioned that many romantic composers, in their eagerness to impart meaning to music, in their uninspired moments often fell into a shallow superficiality, becoming slaves instead of masters of the idea. Cyclic treatment is something that cannot be easily or lightly embodied in a work. This brief survey shall be concerned to mention only significantly successful applications of the cyclic principle.

Cesar Franck was the great musical architect of the latter part of the nineteenth century. Although not by nature a great adventurer, he does in many respects follow in the tradition of Beethoven. Vincent D' Indy, however, makes far too large a claim in stating that Franck took up the art of construction precisely where Beethoven left it.[16] More than one composer can be said to be the successor to Beethoven, in as much as they have captured an element of his spirit, for it is the spirit which Beethoven released into the world that has motivated composers to follow in his footsteps. Franck fashioned his own distinctive style.

His idea of form was that of a visible outer covering of the idea, which he called the "soul of music". He had a deep conception of the cyclic method, in that he considered not the technical expression but the enlargement and unification of musical expression resulting therefrom to be of greater importance. In his *Sonata for Violin* and in the *Trio in F-sharp Minor* are excellent examples of his use of "generative phrases", in which the principal themes of each work are derived from one or two chief themes. The *Symphony in D Minor* is based on this same idea and may be considered the outstanding example of this style of cyclic treatment. In his highly unified *String Quartet* is another effective inter-relationship of movements.

Tchaikovsky was well aware of the idea of cyclic form as evolved

by Berlioz, Liszt and Franck. Concerning his use of cyclic form one writer has remarked :

> This technique [use of cyclic thematic material] was, of course, only another instance of the substitution of repetition for development. Tchaikovsky makes a certain limited use of it by opening all his symphonies, except the first, with a solemn, intensely "atmospheric" passage of unmistakable character, which returns in some cases throughout the first movement, in others right through the whole work.[17]

In his last three symphonies, Tchaikovsky develops this idea to the fullest, his modification of the cyclic idea being referred to as the "motto" theme.

Brahms binds several of his works into a greater unity through cyclic treatment in the usage of a motto. Examples of this style are to be found in his string quartets, Op. 51, No. 1 and Op. 67 ; also in his first two piano sonatas, in the First Violin Sonata and in the First Symphony. One of the most sublime usages of the "motto" style is found in his Third Symphony in which the melodic motive of the prncipal theme of the first movement reappears at the end of the coda of the final movement, in effect ending the work as it began.

In all of Bruckner's symphonies there is an inter-relationship of movements to some degree. It is quite possible that the ideal fulfillment of this relationship was one of Bruckner's goals in symphonic writing :

> We can safely say that Bruckner's ideal finale is one in which all that has happened in the preceeding movements is synthesized. Such a synthesis is symbolized in the citation of themes from previous sections of the work . . . .[18]

In more recent times, other composers have applied the cyclic principle to one or more of their compositions. Mahler uses the cyclic mothod in his symphonies, as does Dvorak in his *Symphony* *"From the New World"* and Chausson in his only symphony.

Debussy was not a great architect such as would be likely to have opportunities for usage of cyclic form; nevertheless, in his *Fantasie for Piano and Orchestra*, in *Iberia*, in his *Suite Printemps* can be found fair examples of the application of cyclic treatment. His *String Quartet in G Minor* provides one of the most interesting and thorough applications of the cyclic style in the present century.[19] Other French composers who have applied the cyclic idea to their works are Saint-Saëns, in his *Symphony No. 3* and his *Third Piano Concerto*, and Faure, in his *Fantasie For Piano and Orchestra*.

Franck's disciple, Vincent D' Indy, was an enthusiastic supporter of his master's ideas on cyclic structure. He devoted a large section of his *Cours de Composition musicale*[20] to its discussion. He mentions the possibility of rhythmic, melodic and harmonic modifications of the cyclic idea Very interestingly, he analyzes Beethoven's sixth symphony as an example of rhythmic modification. He asserts the main function of cyclic form to be the reinforcement of the unity of a work, the return to the point of departure. He built his operas on the Wagnerian leitmotif idea and most of his instrumental works involve some aspect of cyclic treatment. Perhaps the most unique attempt at cyclic application in the entire literature is found in his *String Quartet in E Minor*, Op. 45. In this work, each of the four movements is constructed from a four note plainsong melody used as a generative phrase. D' Indy was a resourceful composer who was able to fuse the spirit of classic forms with the spirit of his times.

Other recent composers deserve brief mention for their application of the cyclic idea. In his *Symphony No. 1* Elgar has constructed a work based on the cyclic "motto" principle. Glazonov's *E Major Piano Sonata*, Op. 75, Ravel's *Rhapsoaie Espagnole* Guy Ropartz's *Symphony No. 4*, Schoenberg's *First* and *Second String Quartets*, vaughn Williams *Symphony No. 1* and *Symphony No. 4*, and Frederick Jacobi's *Third String Quartet* all utilize some aspect of cyclic treatment.

As Vincent D' Indy claimed for Franck, so has Cecil Gray, in his biography of Sibelius,[21] claimed that the Finnish master took up music (from the point of view of formal structure) where Beethoven laid it down. Another claimant for the crown ! Sibelius has utilized cyclic treatment in several of his works, notably in his symphonies, although he has greatly modified the cyclic idea. With him it becomes abstract, more of the character of a metamorphosis of themes. Sibelius achieves a deeper unity in each work through his use of, what may be called, "germ motives", out of which he draws the thematic material for each of the movements.[22] This is born out in the composer's conversations with Mahler when he mentioned that in composing he always experienced a logical inner connection of motives. His first, second, fourth, fifth and sixth symphonies utilize cyclic structure. In his *Seventh Symphony* he has attempted to achieve a greater unity by writing the work in one movement.

"The decline of the classical symphony dates from the destruction and separate autonomy of the separate movements and the introduction of the *leit-motiv* or *idee fixe*," writes Cecil Gray.[23] This is a considerable over-statement of fact. In order to understand the significance of the cyclic idea and approach it is necessary to view its development in proper perspective. Every composer embarks on the quest for unity. The attainment of unity in diversity is the persistent problem of the creative musical artist and it seems not at all strange that the idea of cyclic structure was conceived and applied in various ways. Certainly, cyclic treatment brought freshness and new life to the sonata form. It does not seem highly improbable that cyclic form is unrelated to the cyclical patterns of composition -- the symphony, sonata, and other forms composed of several movements. The idea of relating and binding together of the movements should never have arisen had there been no movements to be bound together. The inter-movement relation of thematic material is but a logical outcome of the evolution of works written in several movements. It is not surprising in any such composition to find certain rhythmic, harmonic or

thematic inter-relationships of material.

However, cyclic treatment must be inherently compelled by a particular work to warrant its use, never something superficially applied. It must reflect the inner spirit of the musical expression. Where a composer's efforts at integration have been confined to merely the conscious and theoretical manipulation of materials, the result is superficial and obtrusive, but where a sense of unity has grown up spontaneously within the actual conception it will be found to embrace all other aspects of the work, radiating life and significance throughout the whole. Unity itself lies beyond our conception.[24]

Composers of all periods are products of, and limited by, their times and it is important to keep this in mind in considering the development of the cyclic idea. The merit of any such form or idea must be arrived at, not on the basis of its weak application by a composer in an uninspired moment, but rather on its successful application by a great composer in an inspired moment, accepting this criterion as an indication of even greater masterpieces yet to be written.

LIST OF REFERENCES

1. See Reti, Rudolph, *The Thematic Process in Music* (New York: MacMillan, 1951). The author postulates that all themes of a given work derive from a central affinity and builds a strong case through a careful analysis of standard works in his closely reasoned and thought-provoking study.
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5. Morris, R. O., *Contrapuntal Technique in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Claredon, 1922), 59.

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22. Cherniavsky, D., "The Use of Germ Motives by Sibelius", *Music and Letters*, XXIII (London, 1943) Jan, 1-9.

23. Gray, C., op. cit., 160.

24. Cherniavsky, E., "The Pursuit of Unity," *Music Review*(London, 1946) Jan., 3-6. An excellent study.