

A Cyclic Musical Composition from the Theoretical Perspective

The concept of the musical cycle, present both in a cyclic musical composition and in a cycle of musical compositions, seems to be one of the most common research questions undertaken during musicological analyses. Cyclic musical works appeared in various periods of European musical history, and they are still composed in the present day. All this suggests that the actual idea of a cyclic composition is one of the immanent features of musical creativity. It is no wonder musicologists try to understand this phenomenon in their essays and articles. Unfortunately, it seems humanly impossible to study all these musicological writings: when we enter the word *cycle* in the RILM electronic base, the most important bibliographical source for musicologists, we find more than 3200 records! These are mainly various studies devoted to particular cyclic compositions and the authors generally present the results of their musicological analyses of these compositions. However, it is reasonable to expect that some of these writings contain theoretical considerations suitable for our present subject. In fact, when we take the huge amount of texts into consideration, it seems impossible to find any convincing methodological criteria that could help us in limiting this bibliography. Therefore, I decided to choose another procedure – I looked through all the available musicological reference books (encyclopaedias and lexicons) published after the Second World War and analysed the encyclopaedic entries devoted to the category of cyclic musical composition. Such entries appear in 21 encyclopaedias – from among the total of 27 that I looked through – so it can be stated that the notion of a cyclic musical composition is quite popular in musicological writings¹. Although particular reference books propose different definitions, several recurring ways of defining the term can be distinguished, as can also some typical understandings of cyclic composition in particular language traditions.

In the encyclopaedias the entries regarding the musical cycle take the form of a short definition or of a larger article; the entries proper are formulated as: *cycle*, *cyclic form*, *cyclic* (form, composition, etc.) or *cyclic principle*. It needs to be stressed that the understandings of these terms are often interrelated. In order to propose a theoretical description of these categories, we should mainly take into consideration those definitions which are similarly formulated in various reference books. In this way we will be able to establish the most common ways of understanding the cyclic principle in music. In the majority of encyclopaedias either the entry *cycle* or *cyclic form*, or both, can be found. This means that these two terms are the most important notions connected to our subject.

In most encyclopaedias, the term *cycle* is understood as a set or sequence (English *set* [5], *series* [18], *sequence*, *pattern* [16]; German *Gruppe* [20], French *ensemble* [13, 17]) of musical works or their consisting parts². Already at this level of definition we see two types of understanding – the term *cycle* could describe either a series of separate, independent works (a cycle of musical compositions) or an individual, single work (a cyclic musical composition). Actually, these two ways of understanding the term are also found in musical practice, since we have, for example, both a sonata cycle and a cycle of etudes. The authors draw attention to the fact that a cycle should be performed together [18], they underline as well that the cycle is regulated by a linking compositional idea such as the same unchangeable cast in the whole cycle, a gradual complication of technical means utilised [14] or extra-musical titles [17]. However, opinions differ as to whether a cycle should be a joint musical substance or whether this is not necessary [13, 14, 18, 20].

The term *cyclic form* (sometimes also – *cyclic composition*) appears as the most important terminological category regarding on this subject in the reference books. The articles corresponding to this entry contain a lot of theoretical considerations such as describing the rules governing the presence of a cyclic idea in a musical composition. In the most common type of definition a *cyclic form* is a form in which repeated musical material appears in two or more parts of a composition [6, 9, 10, 16, 18, 21]. In a similar group of definitions the necessity of constructing the whole piece from essentially similar musical material is discussed. The authors [2, 3, 7, 8, 10, 17, 18, 19]

sometimes express the opinion that the most successful fulfilment of the idea of a cyclic form was achieved in the instrumental music of late romanticism. Typical examples are: *Symphonie fantastique* by Hector Berlioz (with its *idée fixe* present in all parts of the work) and, in particular, certain instrumental pieces by César Franck and Vincent d'Indy that are based on homogeneous musical material. In many lexicons the opinion can be found that the theoretical foundation of such an understanding of the cyclic form was proposed by d'Indy in the second volume of his treatise *Cours de composition musicale* published in 1900. In his description of the history of the sonata, d'Indy distinguished a separate category called the *cyclic sonata (la sonate cyclique)*. The construction of the cyclic sonata is regulated by repeated musical themes or motifs (*thèmes permanents, motifs conducteurs*)³. In d'Indy's opinion, a musical piece consisting of several parts – such as a sonata, string quartet or symphony – is not always a cyclic composition. On the contrary, it can become a cyclic composition only when it is wholly based on repeated motifs or themes that lead the integration of the piece as a whole. According to d'Indy, the themes in a cyclic musical work play the function of characters (*personnages*) in a literary work and a musical composition constructed in keeping with his rules can be compared to a "sound cathedral" (*cathédrale sonore*). These repeated motifs and themes of a cyclic work can be transformed in certain ways: rhythmically, melodically, harmonically. Thus, new sound qualities can be generated but the common motif cell (*cellule*), still present in every transformation of the initial theme, determines the coherence and integrity (*cohésion*) of the whole piece.

Although d'Indy's proposal can be regarded as the most thoroughgoing theoretical background of the cyclic form, a conviction often appears in the lexicons that tendencies towards cyclic forms were present in earlier stages of musical history – in the Renaissance (e.g. in the masses based on a single *cantus firmus*), Baroque (thematic relationships between particular parts of the works of Corelli, Handel, Vivaldi or J. S. Bach) or in the first part of the 19th century (Berlioz's *idée fixe*, Liszt's thematic transformations) [3, 10, 16, 18].

In the manner of defining of both terms – *cycle* and *cyclic form* – some differences can be found between particular language traditions. In the English lexicons, both the terms *cycle* and *cyclic (cyclic form)* are found [6, 16, 18] and the authors pay attention to the different understanding of these categories in English and French musicology. The English authors treat the cyclic form mainly (*in general sense*) as created by any series of following parts [5, 7, 9, 10] and they add that such an understanding is typical of English writings. However, they notice that sometimes the term cyclic form has a particular, specific sense, identified with d'Indy's ideas.

The French and Italian authors, on the other hand, are almost completely conditioned by d'Indy's treatise. In some cases, they identify the cyclic musical composition with such pieces whose musical form is created by related motifs and themes [1, 2, 3, 8, 12, 17]. It appears interesting that the Italian encyclopaedias do not include any musical entry connected to musical cycle; the idea of a cyclic work is described entirely in the entry *cyclic (ciclica)*, understood as an attribute and used together with such words as form or composition [3, 8, 12]. It seems clear that the Italian musicologists use the term *cyclic piece* only where a coherent, integral composition is considered.

In contrast to the very similar ways of defining the idea of cyclic composition in various Italian and French lexicons, individual German encyclopaedias present very particular definitions of the musical cycle. However, many fundamental lexicons do not contain such terms as *cycle* or *cyclic form*; for example, we cannot find them either in succeeding editions of the Riemann-Lexicon or in the older version of the MGG (*Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*). Other encyclopaedias propose an understanding of the cyclic form that is completely different from English, Italian or French sources. The German authors define the cyclic form as being generated by an arrangement of succeeding parts [15] or identify it with a general rule of a settlement of parts within a multi-part musical piece [14]. It is curious to observe that prominent examples of this last case are not to be found in Franck's or d'Indy's pieces. On the contrary, the most typical model of the cyclic form is identified with the cyclic structure of the sonata in the classical era. The most extensive and comprehensive study of the musical cycle is presented in the entry *Zyklus* in the new edition of the MGG encyclopaedia [20]. In this entry by Ludwig Finscher various aspects and connotations of the term *musical cycle* are discussed.

The entries in question rarely appear in encyclopaedias written in other languages. The Polish *Encyklopedia muzyki* [19] defines the cyclic form as contrary to single-part form; it seems that the

cyclic form means the same as multi-part form. In the Russian *Enciklopedičeskij slovar* [11] cyclic forms contain more or less independent parts, as in the case of a cantata.

Sometimes the lexicons introduce original or even controversial understandings of the cyclic pieces. One may read in the *Harvard Dictionary of Music* [7] that looking for a coherence of motifs or themes in Beethoven's cyclic pieces is not adequate as "the idea as such was certainly foreign to him". *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* [21] suggests that, in a strict understanding, a cyclic form is created when the initial musical material appears again in the last section of a composition. Surely such an opinion is borrowed from the very origin of the term *cycle* (Greek: *kyklos* = circle). Surprisingly, the author of the entry *ciclica* in *La Musica – Dizionario* [12] speaks of a cyclic structure in one-movement pieces such as fugues; the lexicon *Science de la musique* [13] confronts the cycle with such musical genres as the suite, sonata, or concerto: "That which contrasts the cycle with the suite, sonata, and symphony, is the constant presence of a certain literary or poetic idea" („Ce qui oppose le cycle à la suite, à la sonate et à la symphonie, c'est la présence constante d'une idée littéraire ou poétique").

The above-presented survey of encyclopaedia definitions reveals the variety and multitude of ways of understanding the cycle in music. As some definitions are similar in various lexicons and some of them are too controversial to be proper, it seems useful to propose here a methodological order that could improve the understanding of the subject in question. It seems that the lexicons supply three main aspects ruled by three fundamental terms:

- *the cyclic idea* – the general precondition that suggests the existence of an idea (rule) that sets in order consistent elements of a musical piece (or pieces); this precondition makes it possible to treat these consistent elements from the point of view of a unity or a whole;
- *the cycle* – a set or series of individual compositions joined together by a musical idea (e.g. a key relationship) or an extra-musical sense (e.g. subject matter in songs). In order to make it absolutely clear that the term *cycle* refers to several compositions (not to one!), I propose the term: "a cycle of musical pieces";
- *cyclic form* – a category covering the structure of an individual musical piece (not a cycle!). The term *cyclic form* is treated in the lexicons in two main meanings: (a) as a general outline of the movements, and (b) as a structure joined by a common musical element. For methodological precision, I propose replacing the term "cyclic form" with "a cyclic musical piece". The term *form* has various meanings – it can be identified both with a structure of a work and with its genre.

A more thorough analysis of the cyclic element in music leads to a further conclusion that can also be treated as a methodological proposal. From the theoretical point of view, the difference between a separate cyclic musical piece and a cycle of musical pieces is no longer important. A cyclic musical piece can be composed as a series of individual units (e.g. an opera as a series of airs, recitatives and ensembles; a symphony as a 3- or 4-movement series; a suite as a series of dances etc.). It would be strange to assume that the composers treat their particular symphony or opera as cycles of pieces; there is no known case in which each movement of a symphony could obtain a different opus number. On the other hand, a cycle of songs or preludes should be also treated as one piece (*opus*), although performances of separate songs or preludes (borrowed from a cycle) are possible as are also performances of one particular air from an opera or – less commonly – of one movement from a symphony or concerto. Musical tradition brings another argument for ignoring the difference between a cyclic musical piece and a cycle of musical pieces: in the 18th century a few (normally six) pieces were joined into sets that were sometimes called cycles as well. Since that time composers have been accustomed to give one opus number to several pieces that do not create a particular whole (e.g. Beethoven's chamber music; Richard Strauss's songs etc.).

In order to establish whether a musical composition is cyclic or not, we may look for the presence (or absence) of any musical element that ensures the coherence of the composition. According to this criterion, two types of musical works can be distinguished:

1. Compositions, whose particular movements/links/fragments are set together without applying the principle of integrity (or wholeness) of the piece or on the grounds of some conventional traditions (e.g. the four-movement classical symphony; prelude and fugue etc.). For these works no theoretical backgrounds regarding the cyclic element can be established – it is only possible to

describe various historical understandings of the musical cycle. Looking for a general idea must be limited to some general considerations such as the principle of contrast or variability.

2. Compositions based on the cyclic idea and revealing the presence of the integrity and wholeness of a musical cycle. Such a notion of the musical cycle could be found as early as in the works of Beethoven but its culmination – and also its theoretical background – was achieved in the above-mentioned treatise by d'Indy. The musical compositions of d'Indy and of his circle can even be treated as a peculiar hypertrophy of the very idea of a cyclic piece. At the same time, they are the most consistent manifestations of the compositional technique conditioned by the idea of the musical cycle.

References

1. *Larousse de la musique*, ed. by N. Dufourcq, vol. 1, Paris, 1957, p. 243 [cycle, cyclique].
2. *Encyclopédie de la musique*, ed. by F. Michel, vol. 1, Paris, 1958, p. 615 [cyclique].
3. *Dizionario Ricordi della musica e dei musicisti*, ed. by C. Sartori and F. Broussard, Milano, 1959, pp. 298–299 [ciclica].
4. *Collins Music Encyclopedia*, ed. by J. Westrup and F. L. Harrison, London, 1959, p. 173 [cyclic].
5. P. A. Scholes, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, vol. 1, London, 1960, p. 271 [cyclic form].
6. A. Jacobs, *A New Dictionary of Music*, London, 1961, p. 90 [cycle, cyclic form].
7. *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ed. by W. Apel, Cambridge, 1961, p. 197 [cyclic].
8. *Enciclopedia della musica*, ed. by C. Sartori, vol. 1, Milano, 1963, p. 479 [ciclica].
9. P. A. Scholes, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*, London, 1964, p. 143 [cyclic form].
10. *The International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians*, ed. by N. Slonimsky, vol. 1, New York, 1964, p. 477–478 [cyclical form].
11. *Enciklopedičeskij muzykal'nyj slovar'*, ed. by B. S. Štejnpress and I. M. Jampolskij, Moskva, 1966, s. 563 [cikličeskie formy].
12. *La Musica. Dizionario*, ed. by G. Gatti, vol. 1, part II, Torino, 1968, p. 404 [ciclica].
13. *Science de la musique*, ed. by M. Honegger, vol. 1, Paris, 1976, p. 275 [cycle, cyclique].
14. *Das grosse Lexikon der Musik*, ed. by M. Honegger and G. Massenkeil, vol. 8, Freiburg, 1982, pp. 422–423 [Zyklische Form, Zyklus].
15. F. Hirsch, *Das grosse Wörterbuch der Musik*, Berlin, 1984, p. 530 [Zyklische Form, zyklisches Prinzip].
16. *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ed. by D. Randel, London, 1986, p. 218 [cycle, cyclic form].
17. *Dictionnaire de la musique*, ed. by M. Vignal, Paris, 1987, p. 208 [cycle, cyclique (forme)].
18. *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, ed. by M. Kennedy, Oxford, 1993, p. 178 [cycle, cyclic form].
19. *Encyklopedia muzyki*, ed. by A. Chodkowski, Warszawa, 1995, p. 173 [cykliczna forma].
20. *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart (MGG). Sachteil*, ed. by L. Finscher, vol. 9, Kassel, 1998, pp. 2528–2537 [Zyklus].
21. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. by S. Sadie, vol. 6, London, 2002, pp. 797–798 [cyclic form].

Notes

¹ The list of encyclopaedias is placed at the end of this text.

² The numbers in square brackets correspond to the entries on the list of encyclopaedias.

³ V. D'Indy, *Cours de composition musicale*. Vol. 2, part I. Paris, 1900, chapter 5: *La sonate cyclique*, p. 375–433.

Santrauka

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