

OVERALL DESTINY*

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Abstract

The overall destiny of a piece of music—how the ending relates to the beginning—is a crucial dramatic and expressive feature. In a strong roundtrip, the music returns with strength and security to its origin. In a weak roundtrip, the return is incomplete, ambivalent or insecure. In a one-way progression, the music ends in a far different place than it began.

NOTE: Please note that you must have the most recent copy of Macromedia's Flash plugin installed to play the musical examples.

In Musical Form¹, we compared the layout of a composition to the topography of a city. This metaphor was helpful for illustrating such concepts as unity and contrast and the boundary between sections. However, it has an important limitation: You are free to enter a city from any direction and explore it at will, exiting wherever and whenever you choose. However, there is only one way to enter a composition—the beginning—and one way to exit—the end. It is music's time-dependent nature that enables it to be dramatic. Now we will refine our conception of form to highlight this time-dependent quality: We will do so by focusing on the work's overall destiny. Just as in a narrative, such a novel or film, the overall destiny of a composition—its progress from beginning to end—is crucial to the music's dramatic and expressive intent. In a narrative, we follow the twists and turns of the plot as the story progresses to its ultimate outcome. Similarly, all of the myriads of details in a composition are in the service of a larger trajectory.

Both narratives and musical forms can be grouped according to three basic destinies. The first is a **strong round-trip**. In Dr. Seuss' famous children's story "The Cat in the Hat," a mother leaves her children alone at home for the day. When she departs, the house is clean and orderly. The Cat in the Hat shows up, and proceeds to create an extravagant mess. Belongings and a particularly vocal fish are strewn madly all over the place. Then, just as the mother's feet are visible walking down the path, the Cat in the Hat uses a magic cleaner-up machine to restore the house to order. By the time the mother walks in the door, the Cat-in-the-Hat has disappeared and the house is exactly as it was, with nothing out of place. No matter what has happened in the interim, the house has returned to its original state.

In musical terms, a **strong round-trip** describes a piece that returns to its starting point with security and confidence.

Example 1

Aaron Copland's setting of the hymn tune *At the River* is an example of a strong round-trip. It returns with unshakeable conviction to its starting point.

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¹"Musical Form" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11629/latest/>>

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http://cnx.org/content/m11607/latest/http://music.cnx.rice.edu/Brandt/overall_destiny/Copland__At_the_River.mp3

John Cheever's story *The Swimmer* tells of a suburban man decides to return home from work by swimming through all of his neighbors' pools along the way. He walks from pool to pool, visiting a former mistress and other emblems of a bitter, frustrated life. At each pool, he glides through the water, has a brief encounter, and continues on his way. He is a suburban Ulysses, completing his epic day's journey. However, when he arrives home, there is a note pinned to the door from his wife: She has taken the kids and furniture and left him. The swimmer has made it home; but too much has changed. His return is ambivalent and insecure. This is a **weak round-trip**.

In musical terms, a **weak round-trip** returns to its starting point, but in a way that is ambivalent, insecure or incomplete.

Example 2

Charles Ives also composed a setting of the hymn tune *At the River*. However, unlike Copland, Ives adds a questioning after-image, which is more open-ended and suspensive. The music has undeniably returned to its starting point; however, it is not completely stable, making it a **weak round-trip**. Whereas Copland ended with an affirmation, Ives ends with a question.

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The "Sound of Music" is a third type of destiny. At the start of the story, the widowed Colonel Von Trapp is a lonely and demanding father; subjecting his children to a strict and joyless regimen. The threat of Nazi Germany hovers over his village. Little by little, the Colonel falls under the spell of the nanny, Maria, who brings joy back to the household. Meanwhile, the Nazis move in. Finally, the Colonel and Maria are married and the Von Trapp family makes a daring escape into the Austrian Alps, never to return. This is a **one-way progression**, in which the outcome of the plot is far different from its starting point.

In musical terms, a **one-way progression** describes a piece that ends in a significantly different place than it began. A one-way progression may be achieved when the ending seems to "forget" or contradict the opening. For instance, consider the third movement of Webern's *Drei Kleine Stucke* for cello and piano.

Example 3

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Most of this brief work is concentrated in the low register, with the piano and cello alternating short gestures. At the end, the piano stops playing, leaving the cello alone to play three harmonics in a row—which it has never done before. For the first time, the work ascends into a high register. The ending is an unexpected apotheosis.

Example 4

Gyorgy Ligeti created a particularly extreme one-way progression out of a mechanical process in his *Poème Symphonique*. The piece is scored for 100 metronomes, all wound up identically but set to different speeds. Once all the metronomes are in motion, listeners are invited into the hall.

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Gradually, the metronomes wind down, the fastest ones first. The texture gets thinner and thinner until finally only one metronome is left. The piece ends when the last metronome finally ceases beating.

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1 Suspense about the Outcome

Both narratives and musical forms often create suspense about the outcome. Even when the outcome is not in doubt, suspense may be created by delaying the destiny's fulfillment until the last possible moment.

City on the Edge of the Forever, an episode of the original *Star Trek* series, suspensefully dramatizes the contrast between a round-trip and a one-way progression. Because of an accident, the future is altered, and the Starship Enterprise ceases to exist. Marooned, the Enterprise's Captain Kirk and First Officer Spock travel through time to try to return the future to its original form. Drawn to 1930's Chicago, Kirk meets and falls in love with Edith Keeler, a humanitarian leader. He and Spock ascertain that the future hinges on Keeler's fate: If she were to die in a car accident, everything would follow its intended course. However, if she were to live, she would organize a pacifist movement that will keep the United States out of World War II, irrevocably changing history. The future would no longer lead to intergalactic travel and the Enterprise would vanish. At the story's climax, Keeler is crossing a street with Kirk at her side when an on-rushing car swerves towards her. Kirk must choose whether to save her—thereby altering history—or to let her die. It is a potently dramatic moment: Kirk is faced with the romantically devastating consequences of a strong round-trip. He watches helplessly as the car strikes her. At the story's end, the Enterprise is restored intact.

Musically, composers may also withhold the ultimate arrival until the last possible moment, making it more dramatic.

Example 5

After a slow introduction, the main portion of the first movement of Beethoven's *Harp Quartet* begins:

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Later, the movement appears to draw to a peaceful close. However, rather than ending as expected, Beethoven builds to a passage of unparalleled intensity, featuring frenzied passage-work by the first violin. It places the work's outcome in doubt. Finally, at the crucial moment, the work's main theme returns beneath the violin figuration, and the work completes its strong round-trip.

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2 Local Details and Overall Destiny

Example 6

Beginning with an awareness of the overall destiny has several advantages: First, it encourages you to take in the entire "story" of the composition; second, you will begin to evaluate how local events contribute to the overall destiny. For instance, the suspensive ending of the Ives is foreshadowed earlier in the song:

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Example 7

At the opening of the Webern cello piece, there is a single cello harmonic woven into the texture: This helps to prepare the ending, in which the cello is left alone, playing a group of harmonics.

3 Conclusion

In the narrative examples, the meaning and significance of the story hinges greatly on the ultimate outcome. If the Cat-in-the-Hat were to leave the house in total disarray, Dr. Seuss' tale would have a different import. If the Van Trapp family were to be captured by the Nazis, the "Sound of Music" would take on a totally different emotional cast.

Similarly, the ultimate outcome of a composition is decisive to its meaning and interpretation. If the work returns to its starting point with strength and conviction, then the overall outcome speaks to the music's underlying unity, continuity and stability. If the work's return is more unsettled, then ambiguity and instability have clouded the ending. If the piece ends in a significantly different place than it began, then impermanence and flux have had a decisive impact. When you listen to a work, try to analyze its overall destiny by comparing the similarities and differences between beginning and end. This will reveal the basic "story-line" of the composition. Next, study how local details contribute to the work's overall destiny.