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CYCLIC FORM BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE: TOWARDS A DEFINITION THROUGH THE ORGAN REPERTOIRE

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Abstract
This paper addresses a fundamental problem in music theory: the concept of 'cyclic form', widely used in the analysis of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century instrumental music, lacks a satisfactory definition. The existing literature, from major reference works (Macdonald in Grove, Finscher in MGG) to specialist monographs (Larson, Proksch, Van Alphen, Taylor, Strucken-Paland, Deruchie), offers a range of analytical frameworks that are either too narrow or too broad, and none arrives at a definition general enough to apply across different repertoires and historical contexts. This deficiency is not accidental: it reflects a deeper epistemological problem. The term 'cyclic form' is not a neutral analytical label but a philosophically loaded one, emerging in the nineteenth century not because the compositional practice was new – cyclic procedures are traceable from early polyphony through the Baroque – but because Romantic aesthetics provided it with an organicist conceptual framework. Understanding what cyclic form is requires moving across three levels of inquiry: historical musicology, philosophical aesthetics, and performance practice. The organ repertoire, systematically absent from most studies, serves as the primary analytical field. The instrument's radical variability in manuals, touch, timbre and registration forces the performer to take explicit interpretative positions on the structural function of thematic return, making the theoretical question unavoidable. The paper concludes that cyclic form is best understood not as a formal schema but as an abstract, historically situated

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principle whose definition remains genuinely open. Recognising this openness is itself a theoretical result.

Keywords
Cyclic form, interdisciplinary musicology, organ repertoire, organicism, performance practice, philosophy of music

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