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

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Introduction

The history of music theory is full of concepts that work in practice before they are understood in principle. "Cyclic form" is one of them. For nearly two centuries, the term has guided the analysis of a vast repertoire – from Beethoven to Franck, from Liszt to Sibelius – without ever receiving a definition stable enough to be applied consistently. Scholars use it, composers have pursued it, performers interpret it. Yet, asked to say precisely what it is, there are big hesitations.

This paper takes this hesitation seriously. The inconsistency in the existing literature reflects a genuine epistemological difficulty. Cyclic form is not the kind of concept that yields to purely musicological analysis, because the question it raises (notably, what makes a work formally unified across its movements) is ultimately a philosophical one. Answering it requires moving across disciplinary boundaries and accepting that some of those boundaries have been drawn too narrowly.

The contribution is structured in three parts. The first surveys the existing literature such as reference works and specialist monographs and identifies the common limitations of the available definitions. The second addresses the epistemological core of the problem: why the concept of cyclic form is philosophically loaded and what traditions of thought are needed to analyse it? The third turns to the organ repertoire as a case study, combining analytical observation with the perspective of a performing organist. A brief conclusion draws together the main findings and indicates the directions that future research will pursue.

1. The term and its definitions

A musicological inquiry into cyclic form naturally begins with the existing literature. A useful starting point is provided by the major music reference works. Two entries, among many, deserve particular attention.

Hugh Macdonald, in *Grove Music Online*, defines cyclic form as a compositional principle "in which a later movement reuses thematic material of an earlier movement."[2] More generally, he adds, it "describes

[2] Hugh Macdonald, "Cyclic form," *Grove Music Online*, 2001, accessed June 2, 2026, https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000007001.

those works where thematic links bind more than one movement."[3] These two parts of the definition, while complementary, are not equivalent. The first identifies a specific compositional procedure, while the second gestures towards a broader principle of thematic coherence whose boundaries remain undefined. Macdonald does not address this tension explicitly, nor does he propose criteria for distinguishing between the two. The historical examples he provides, from seventeenth-century sonatas through Bach and Mozart to Beethoven, Franck and the Romantic tradition, make the problem plain: if cyclic form can be equally applied to pieces of very different periods and style, the term is meant to lose its analytical precision and therefore utility. What we are left with is a definition simultaneously too narrow to account for the variety of ways in which cyclic thinking manifests across history, and too broad to serve as a reliable analytical tool.

The entry compiled by Ludwig Finscher for *MGG* is more ambitious. The German term *Zyklus* is analysed in both its formal and historical dimensions, and the general definition is correspondingly richer: a cycle is "a group of self-contained entities (works or movements) which are related to each other in form and content in such a way that a greater unity unfolds, and the form and content of the cycle mutually illuminate each other."[4] The definition proceeds along two lines. In the broader sense, cyclic form designates any collection of works unified by a common idea or musical function – but this approach proves problematic since it would include works as heterogeneous as Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, where the unifying principle is purely tonal and systematic.[5] In the narrower sense, the term applies to multi-movement instrumental works in which the basic alternation of fast and slow movements is enriched by changes of intensity, character, time signature and key.

This second path is the most promising, and Finscher traces its development through the German Romantic tradition. Its roots lie in the reception of Beethoven's innovations: E.T.A. Hoffmann, reviewing the Fifth Symphony, was among the first to articulate how its themes function not as isolated fragments but as interconnected elements contributing to a unified whole. Mendelssohn, fascinated by Beethoven's linking strategies in the quartets Op. 130 and 131, realised the same idea in his

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[3] *Ibid*.

[4] Ludwig Finscher, "Zyklus," *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart online*, 1998, accessed June 2, 2026, https://www.mgg-online.com/articles/mgg16281/1.0/mgg16281.

[5] *Ibid*.

string quartets Op. 13 and Op. 12.[6] The Wanderer Fantasy by Schubert, following Finscher, is "the prototype of this four-movement form in a single movement with thematic development from a central theme", and Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor "takes up Schubert's idea on a higher level, combining it with Liszt's developed technique of motivic transformation."[7] Schönberg and Sibelius appear as the tradition's later heirs.

Finscher's entry represents a significant step forward: it is historically grounded, attentive to national traditions, and sensitive to different levels of cyclic organisation. Yet the fundamental tension remains unresolved. The broader and narrower senses of the term coexist without a unifying criterion, and the historical narrative does not ultimately answer the question of what cyclic form is as an analytical concept. The organ repertoire, notably, is absent.

Turning to specialist monographs, the situation only apparently becomes clearer. As early as 1955, David Larson observed that cyclic form should be understood not as a rigid formal category but as a flexible principle: "Cyclic form is not so much a well-defined form as it is an idea, a principle."[8] His historical account traces cyclic procedures back to the fourteenth century, while acknowledging that the principle reaches its fullest development in the late nineteenth century, when Romantic composers "employed the cyclic principle to bring to their works that unity and oneness for which they longed."[9] More recently, Andrew Deruchie has described cyclic form as "the practice of reintroducing or developing themes or motives from earlier movements in later ones and thereby establishing large-scale, inter-movement formal relationships."[10] While useful as a starting point, this definition sets aside the question of historical origins and deeper aesthetic implications.

Christiane Strucken-Paland, in her detailed study of Franck's violin sonata, brings the discussion closer to the organ repertoire at the heart of this paper. Following d'Indy's theory, she notes that cyclic technique "contains nothing new in itself; its significant presence can already be

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[6] See Benedict Taylor, *Mendelssohn, Time and Memory. The Romantic Conception of Cyclic Form*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Chapter 4-5.

[7] Finscher, "Zyklus".

[8] David Larson, *The composer's quest for unity: Development of Cyclic Form*, NCID AN00085725, 2, no. 1/2 (1955): 49.

[9] *Ibid*.

[10] Andrew Deruchie, "Saint-Saëns First String Quartet, Cyclic Form and the Aesthetics of Charm," *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, 17 (2020): 75.

found in many works of Beethoven."[11] This raises a question that will be addressed below: whether the cyclic principle should be understood as a codified invention of d'Indy, or as a far older compositional practice that d'Indy merely theorised.

Henri Peter Van Alphen identifies two complementary uses of the cyclic principle: direct quotation of earlier material, which he calls the "motto", and transformation of thematic material, a procedure developed to its fullest extent in the music of Beethoven. Both uses, he argues, "have different functions in a composition, although both have the effect of promoting unity between movements."[12]

Benedict Taylor draws a distinction that sharpens the analytical vocabulary considerably. He differentiates between a work that is simply a cycle and one that is properly in cyclic form, defining the latter as "a particular type of cycle in which the connections between the individual parts are intensified and made explicit."[13] This subtle distinction proves useful precisely in those cases where the boundary between loose thematic recall and fully integrated cyclic architecture is not easy to determine.

Finally, Bryan Jeffrey Proksch most thoroughly problematises the historical question underlying all the above. Dissatisfied with terms such as cyclic form, thematic unity, or organic coherence – all carrying implicit associations with Romantic aesthetics – he opts for the deliberately neutral expression "cyclic integration", defined as "the manner in which movements of a multi-movement cycle relate to one another."[14] By avoiding terminology bound to a specific aesthetic tradition, Proksch demonstrates that cyclic integration as a compositional practice was not born with Romanticism, but can be traced through the Classical period, the Baroque, and beyond.[15]

What this survey reveals is a field that is rich but fragmented. Each scholar shows part of the problem: none arrives at a definition general enough to apply across different repertoires and historical contexts, and at the same time precise enough to be used as an analytical tool for a concrete piece. The reason for this, as the next section argues, is not a lack

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[11] Christiane Strucken-Paland, "La ciclicità nella 'sonata per violino' di César Franck: una revisione critica del concetto di 'principe cyclique' di Vincent D'Indy," *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia*, 41, no. 1 (2006): 135.

[12] Henri Peter Van Alphen, "The Structure of Franck's D Minor Symphony and its Historical Antecedents" (master's thesis, University of Cape Town, 2007), 9.

[13] Taylor, *Mendelssohn, Time and Memory*, 6.

[14] Bryan Jeffrey Proksch, "Cyclic Integration in the Instrumental Music of Haydn and Mozart" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 2006), xv.

[15] *Ibid*.

of analytical rigour, but a deeper epistemological difficulty embedded in the concept itself.

2. An epistemological problem

The first step towards understanding the definition difficulty is historical. As Proksch has demonstrated, cyclic procedures are not a Romantic invention. They can be traced back since the birth of polyphony. What changes in the nineteenth century is not the practice, but the conceptual framework brought to bear upon it.[16] Romantic aesthetics endowed musical form with an organic dimension that earlier theoretical traditions had not systematically developed. Themes were no longer understood as melodic units to be deployed and varied, but as living entities: they are born from a germinal idea, then they develop, transform and return altered by their passage through the work. Taylor, writing on Mendelssohn, captures this shift with precision, noting how the organic metaphor becomes central to the Romantic understanding of musical coherence.[17] Cyclicity, in this sense, resonates with broader patterns of experience: the alternation of seasons, the return of the same within difference. The term "cyclic form" is not a neutral analytical label but carries a philosophical charge that precedes and exceeds its musicological usage.

This observation opens a deeper question. The organicist conception underlying Romantic cyclic thinking has its roots in the German Classical philosophy – in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and in Hegel's aesthetics. In Kant, the domain of aesthetic experience is governed by a peculiar mode of cognition that he describes as "schematising without a concept:" the imagination produces representations that exceed conceptual determination, generating a sense of unity that cannot be reduced to a rule or a schema.[18] Applied to music, this framework suggests that a truly cyclic work cannot be captured by any fixed formal template: its unity is felt rather than calculated, and resists the kind of schematic definition that the musicological literature has repeatedly attempted. Hegel, for his part, insists that the work of art must constitute a self-sufficient whole in which every part is necessary to every other – an idea that the Romantic composers absorbed, whether directly or through the

[16] *Ibid*., 3.

[17] Taylor, *Mendelssohn, Time and Memory*, 31-35.

[18] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Alfredo Gargiulo, intro. Paolo D'Angelo, 12th ed. (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2020), §49, §65.

cultural atmosphere of their time, and that gives the cyclic principle its philosophical resonance.[19]

The implication for the present inquiry is significant. The inconsistency documented in the previous section – the coexistence of too narrow and too broad definitions, the unresolved tension between procedure and principle – is not a defect of the existing scholarship. It is, rather, a symptom of the concept's fundamental resistance to schematisation. The cyclic principle manifests characteristics that align it with Kant's notion of the aesthetic idea: a representation that sets the imagination in free play, opening fields of meaning that no concept can exhaust.[20] To define cyclic form would be to betray its nature. What is needed instead is a more precise formulation of the question, one that acknowledges the philosophical complexity of it while remaining anchored to concrete analytical practice. That anchoring is the task of the next section.

3. The organ repertoire as a case study

The epistemological problem outlined in the previous section becomes more visible in a repertoire that the existing literature has almost entirely overlooked: the organ. Despite being historically one of the richest fields for the development of cyclic procedures, organ music is conspicuously absent from the scholarship on cyclic form. The partial exception is the music of César Franck, whose major organ works have attracted some analytical attention in connection with the cyclic principle. Yet even here, apart from Strucken-Paland's monograph,[21] the scholarly focus tends to fall on Franck's chamber and orchestral output, with the organ works treated as a secondary confirmation of conclusions reached elsewhere. Beyond Franck, the silence is almost total.

This silence is not without consequences. Among all instruments, the organ is the one that varies most radically from one instrument to another: the number of manuals, the touch, the timbre, and the available registrations differ so significantly that no two performances of the same work can be entirely equivalent. This variability bears directly on the interpretation of cyclically organised works. How should a recurring theme be presented to remain recognisable across movements? How can thematic return be made structurally audible through registration,

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[19] See Carl Dahlhaus, "Eduard Hanslick und der musikalische Formbegriff," *Die Musikforschung* 20 (1967); Carl Dahlhaus, *Analisi musicale e giudizio estetico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987).

[20] Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §49.

[21] Christiane Strucken-Paland, *Zyklische Prinzipien in den Instrumentalwerken César Francks* (Regensburg: Gustav Bosse Verlag, 2009).

manual changes, articulation? When a cyclic return coincides with a climactic moment, is a gradual crescendo sufficient to convey its architectural significance, or does it require something more deliberate? These are not merely practical questions, but they force the performer to take an explicit position on what cyclic form is and what it is for. The instrument, in other words, makes the theoretical problem unavoidable.

The *Prélude, Chorale et Fugue* by César Franck (1884) offers a particularly illuminating example. The work is cyclically organised around three distinct themes, each introduced in its respective section. In the closing pages of the Fugue, these three themes are superimposed simultaneously, creating a moment of extraordinary formal density in which the cyclic principle is not merely recalled but structurally fulfilled. The following example, transcribed for organ by the author of this contribution, shows this convergence.



Figure 1. Franck, Prélude Chorale et Fugue, "reprise" movement, Bars 332-335, organ transcription by Stefano Scarpa.

While the theme of the Chorale stands in the upper voice, surrounded by the rhythm characteristic of the Prélude, an augmented version of the same theme gives the solemn ground of the bass. In this frenetic counterpoint, the chromatic subject of the fugue reappears in the middle voice, bringing the cyclic architecture to its fullest realisation.

This moment poses concrete interpretative challenges that illuminate the theoretical problem. The three themes must remain

individually recognisable while merging into a single texture: a balance that requires precise decisions about registration, voicing and articulation. The performer must construct a "local" definition of cyclic coherence each time the work is performed on a different instrument.

This example also exposes the theoretical difficulty from a specific angle. The simultaneous superimposition of the three themes – or better, of two themes and the reminiscence of the rhythm of a third one – is not a simple act of thematic recall, but something qualitatively different and more demanding. The definitions proposed by Macdonald, Finscher, Deruchie and even Taylor do not fully capture what happens in these bars: a moment in which the cyclic principle ceases to be a structural device and becomes, in Kantian terms, an aesthetic idea, a convergence of meaning that exceeds any conceptual formula. The analytical gap is not incidental; it is precisely here, where the music resists description, that the epistemological problem becomes most audible.

The organ repertoire also invites a broader historical reflection. Given the assumption that cyclic procedures may be identified well before the Romantic period, following a hypothetical "franckian style" as a research guide, other organ pieces – at times unexpected regarding their period and geographical origin – seem to show similar formal strategies. One of them surely is the *Recercar* by the Sicilian author Bernardo Storace (1637-1707), rooted in the tradition of polythematic ricercari typical of Baroque southern Italy. The ricercare is divided into three parts, each of them presenting a different theme; the last part, climax of an ingenious architecture, reintroduces all three themes at the same time, developing them until the end in counterpoint with each other. This form clearly anticipates, *in nuce*, the cyclic form used during Romanticism, but as argued, lacks the organicist theoretical background that is explicitly expressed only in the nineteenth century.

The structural parallel with Franck is striking. In both cases, the formal climax coincides with the simultaneous superimposition of all previously introduced thematic material: what for Storace appears as a purely compositional discovery, in Franck is the deliberate fulfilment of an organicist logic. What separates them is not the formal procedure but the philosophical framework that surrounds it: Storace achieves cyclic density as a counterpoint strategy, Franck (theorised *a posteriori* by d'Indy) elevates the same procedure to the status of a compositional and philosophical principle. This contrast confirms the central thesis of the present paper: the cyclic principle is older than its Romantic theorisation, and any adequate definition must account for both its historical breadth and its philosophical specificity.

The historical perspective, however, exceeds the scope of the present contribution and will be addressed in future research. It is sufficient here to note that the organ repertoire, far from being a marginal field, may prove central to a more complete understanding of cyclic form across its full historical range.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that the concept of cyclic form presents a problem that is at once terminological, epistemological and practical. The survey of the existing literature has shown that no definition currently available is general enough to apply consistently across different repertoires and historical contexts. This is not a contingent limitation of the scholarship: it reflects the nature of the concept itself, which resists schematisation in the same way that, in Kant's aesthetic framework, genuine artistic unity resists reduction to a rule.

The organicist tradition that gave cyclic form its theoretical weight in the nineteenth century also explains why a purely musicological approach proves insufficient. The concept carries a philosophical charge that cannot be unpacked without moving across disciplinary boundaries. An interdisciplinary approach, bringing historical musicology, philosophical aesthetics and performance practice into dialogue, is not a methodological preference, but a necessity imposed by the object of study itself.

The organ repertoire has served here as the concrete field in which this necessity becomes most visible. The instrument's radical variability forces the performer to construct, each time and on each instrument, a working definition of cyclic coherence, making explicit what other repertoires allow to remain implicit. The example of Franck's *Prélude, Choral et Fugue* illustrates how the cyclic principle, at its most developed, achieves a density of formal integration that exceeds any purely procedural description. Finally, the preliminary observation concerning Storace's *Ricercare* suggests that the historical range of the phenomenon may extend well beyond the Romantic period that theorised it.

What this paper ultimately proposes is not a definition of cyclic form, but a more precise understanding of why the definition remains elusive and of what kind of inquiry would be needed to advance it. That inquiry, necessarily interdisciplinary and grounded in the full breadth of the organ repertoire, is the work that lies ahead.

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