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BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS IN WESTERN ART MUSIC*

Jonathan D. Kramer

Beginnings and Endings (and Middles)

Every musical performance starts and, some time later, stops. This statement is of course a truism. But it does not follow that every composition necessarily has a beginning and an ending. Some musics, notably certain ritual compositions of non-Western peoples and many contemporary Western art works, sound more like arbitrarily bounded segments of eternal continua than like closed statements. Although such open-ended species of music offer fascinating insights into the meanings of time in the societies that produce and utilize them, this paper concentrates on another type of music. Music which exhibits closure, a minority of the music on this earth, is more familiar to most Western ears.

Musical closure is usually connected with tonality. Although pieces composed prior to the tonal period (roughly 1600-1910) exhibit some degree of closure, that closure became more fully established when rudimentary tonal procedures were introduced into the compositional styles of the sixteenth century. Only once tonality became fully developed was it possible for an entire composition to be a realization of a single tonal process. Similarly, the twentieth-century music which most obviously exhibits high degrees of closure is that in which some aspects of tonal thinking still function. Most music, whether closed or open, contains phrases, which have clearly defined beginnings, middles, and cadential endings. This internal rhythm of musical

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phrases is traceable ultimately to the physical breathing patterns of singing. The degree to which a composition is closed depends on the manner in which successive phrases relate to one another. A composition in which the cadence of one phrase is appreciably stronger than the cadence of a previous phrase is a piece that exhibits a greater degree of closure than one in which each successive cadence is of equivalent finality. A strong cadence ends not only its phrase but also several preceding phrases. A phrase group is created in this manner. The final cadence of the piece is of course strongest, since it must bring to a close the entire work. Thus closure, like tonality itself, is hierarchical. Non-tonal systems of pitch organization, in vogue before and after the tonal period, exhibit some degree of closure, but no music is as richly or unequivocally hierarchical as tonal music. Tonality is not necessarily the only possible system of organization that can completely order a piece, but it is the most thorough and pervasive example we have. Hence tonal pieces, more than others, demand well-defined beginnings and endings. Satisfaction of this demand has led, not surprisingly, to stylistic conventions of beginnings and endings.

The finality of cadences is the most obvious, but not the only, determinant of structural hierarchies in tonal music. There are also degrees of beginning — does a certain gesture begin just the phrase it starts, or does it function as the beginning of a phrase group, subsection, section, movement, or piece? Most importantly, the relationships of the middles of these segments — their points of greatest tension — determine the multi-leveled complexity of the hierarchy.¹

The relative finality of tonal cadences depends on text (in vocal music), accentual pattern, orchestration, dynamics, textural density, and degree of tonal and rhythmic stability. The degree of stability is particularly significant. Composers of tonal music utilize ready-made pitch and rhythmic hierarchies. For example, a rhythmically well prepared authentic cadence on the tonic is far more stable and hence more potent for closure than a premature deceptive cadence on the submediant of a non-tonic key. Terms like “authentic cadence” and “deceptive cadence” are names for some of the conventions of tonal music. They are some of the many musical shapes that serve so often as cadences that they are heard as such even without reference to their context. Of course there are more cadential formulae than there are names for them, especially when we consider also non-pitch elements, which in

tonal music are understood as secondary structural parameters. Tonal closure, then, depends on four factors primarily: (1) degree of finality implied by the cadential formula; (2) local stability of the cadential chord as determined by its tonal proximity to its tonic; (3) relationship of the key of the cadence to the key of the piece or movement; (4) rhythmic strength of the cadence. Only the first of these factors is independent of context; consider, for example, the fully orchestrated closing formula in Example 1, which anyone even modestly well acquainted with the conventions of tonal music should recognize as such:

Example 1. Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 5 in E Minor, Op. 64 (1888), IV: Andante maestoso, mm. 463-71.

There are conventionalized beginnings as well as endings. But stock beginnings are fewer than stock endings, because tonal pieces start from a vast variety of places motivically, melodically, rhythmically, and texturally, but they all move toward the common goal of resolution, stability, and triumph of the tonic. Anything is possible at the beginning but by the end the nature of the piece dictates the nature of its ending procedures. It is these strategies of ending more than the conventionalized last-thing-heard that are suggested by the piece's internal processes, and thus there are many routes to closure. A tonal composition reaches its goal — the return of the tonic as stable — before the actual close. The tonic must then be extended, or prolonged, for a sufficient amount of time for its stability to be felt fully and for the momentum that brought the music to that goal to be dissipated. This process of re-achieving the tonic is individual to each piece; the prolongation of the final tonic, on the other hand, is harmonically rather standard, since the ending must not wander very far from home; the actual closing gesture is very often a stock convention, loosely linked or actually unrelated to the processes or materials of the composition. Some analysts call the transition

from strategic ending to closing formula “liquidation” — the motivic, melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and contrapuntal details are gradually simplified as the music moves from the particulars of one piece to the generalities of ending. By the very end there is often little melodic relationship to the preceding music, but no disparity is felt because the liquidation process has been gradual. The reason for simplification and convention rather than contextual reference at the end is to avoid any implications toward the piece’s future which would work against coming to a close. Perhaps the most famous example of liquidation is the ending of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, where the thematic content gradually disappears in a triumphant alternation of tonic and dominant harmonies, followed by reiterated tonic chords and, finally, by a sustained unison tonic note.

There are more procedures of beginning than of ending, but there are more stock ending gestures than stock beginning gestures. Nonetheless, certain profiles are obviously not good candidates to open compositions. Example 1 would hardly do for a beginning. There are, of course, typical openings, such as the assertive tonic affirmation known as the “Mannheim rocket” or the gradual growth from nothingness that commences, for example, the Ninth Symphonies of Beethoven and Bruckner. Even such conventionalized beginnings seem to operate as much by their processes as by their profiles. An ending, on the other hand, must announce (first by process and then by profile) that the composition is coming to a close; it does not work if we have to experience the post-composition framing silence before we realize that the piece has ended.² On the other hand, anything heard after the pre-composition framing silence is, tautologically, a start, whether or not it happens to be a conventionalized beginning. Virtually every tonal composition closes with a tonic-affirming profile, whereas works may start away from the tonic. Such pieces seem to be starting somehow in the middle — in the middle of a process of achieving the tonic. There are several works of Beethoven, for example, that, by opening on a non-tonic harmony, seem not to be starting at the beginning. Some such pieces are the First Symphony, the final String Quartet, the Piano Sonata in E flat (Op. 31, No. 3), and the *Prometheus Overture*. In the latter work the first four measures sound like the close of an introduction rather than like its beginning. After these measures are played, the real introduction starts, with its own typical beginning, and the curious four-bar opening is never again referred to in any overt sense.

In addition to the conventions of ending and beginning, tonal music utilizes gestures that sound characteristically like transitions, climaxes, contrasts, etc. Listeners experienced with tonal music can recognize these functions even if they are heard out of context. In fact, a sensitive and well-educated listener hears a tonal composition as an intricate web of conventions. In particular, certain themes are appropriate sources for subsequent variations; there is a recognizable character for a contrasting theme, even without our knowledge of the music with which it is to contrast; we know a development section by its tonal instability and motivic fragmentation, etc. Many entire compositions (usually by less than first-rate composers) contain nothing but conventions, and some of the more brilliant strokes in the music of true masters achieve their effect against the backdrop of convention. Many witticisms in the music of Haydn, for example, work as unexpected twists of the conventions of the style; anyone who does not know these conventions cannot appreciate the humor.

A particularly relevant example is the ending of Haydn's String Quartet, Op. 33, No. 2. The composer plays on the conventions of ending by placing so many closing formulae after one another that we do not quite believe in the finality of the last one until we suddenly realize that there is nothing more to come.

There are other examples of music that plays on the conventions of ending. Ives's *Over the Pavements* is a thoroughly dissonant, rhythmically complex piece that unexpectedly becomes tonal for its final two measures, and here the witticism is compounded by the dominant-chord ending. Dvořák's *Carnival Overture* is a seemingly unintentional exaggeration of tonal endings, as the music tries again and again to find a suitably bombastic closing. Stravinsky's *Octet*, on the other hand, ends with a delightful understatement — a single *staccato* tonic chord that seems the equivalent of all Dvořák's overstatement.

An example of a work that plays on the conventions of beginning is Berlioz's *Corsaire Overture*. The music starts with a headlong opening figure, which soon dies away, as if the music has suddenly realized that it forgot its slow introduction. The *adagio* is then played. It leads, as expected, to the *allegro*, which eventually works its way back to the original opening. This Overture really has two beginnings.

Endings as Process and Product

The conventions of tonal closure allow us to explain musical

beginnings and endings in two different ways: by context and by formula.³ An ending can be defined as the place at the close of the piece where all of its tensions have been resolved, where all issues it has dealt with are laid to rest, where all threats on the stability of the tonic have been defeated, where the melodic and bass lines have achieved the tonic note on all structural levels. But an ending can also be defined by the actual shape or profile of the final sounds — a thing (or product) rather than a process. According to the second definition, the ending of a piece is the place where we hear a gesture that is known by convention to be an ending profile.

In most pieces the ending comes last, whichever way we define it. But it is possible for our two definitions not to coincide. A conventional closing formula can, in some works, be found elsewhere than at the place where the piece stops. The archetypal ending in Example 1 does not, in fact, come from the close of the piece. Example 2 places it in its proper context:

The musical score for Example 2 consists of two systems. The first system is for the piano, marked *Molto vivace* and *fff*. It shows a series of chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand, all in E minor. The second system is for the timpani, marked *Riten. molto* and *fff*. It shows a series of chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand, all in E major. The final chord of the timpani part is in E major, which is the tonic of the key.

Example 2: Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 5 in E Minor,
Op. 64 (1888), IV: Andante maestoso, mm. 456-71.

Could this be the close of a piece? For anyone who knows how to listen to tonal music the answer is “no.” The answer is “no” because the closing profile is in the “wrong” place — both tonally and rhythmically. I have heard audiences applaud at this juncture in the finale of Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony. We tend to

call such audiences unsophisticated, by which we mean that they (even more than those who miss the humor in Haydn) have not learned the conventions of tonal concert music. (They may, of course, be sophisticated listeners to styles with different conventions, such as, for example, acid rock.) In context we know that the cadence is on the dominant and hence cannot conclude the piece. Furthermore, the move into the final harmony is too rapid and its dominant too brief (see bracket in Ex. 2) for true closure. The subsequent tonic statement (not shown in Ex. 2) is the real arrival, the real structural downbeat.⁴

It is even possible to find a cadential formula contextually supported as an ending even though the music continues. In Weber's *Invitation to the Dance* (orchestrated by Berlioz), the context allows even well-trained listeners to hear an ending prior to the music's stopping. The rationale here is not internal to the music, as in the Tchaikovsky example, but rather it lies with the program — the story — associated with the piece. The work is a grand waltz, which is framed by slower music representing the couples walking to and from the dance floor. Often radio announcers — who presumably know tonal conventions quite well — are fooled into end-announcing this piece after the big waltz cadence, with the result of eliminating the final minute from the music.

Beginning and Ending Ambiguity

The minuet movement of Mozart's *Jupiter Symphony* is a *tour-de-force* of meaningful manipulation of temporal expectations. Not only is the movement extraordinary for its utter lack of unequivocal tonic downbeat,⁵ but also its trio section plays witty games with closing profile versus opening placement. The trio starts with as simple as imaginable a statement of the archetypal ending — a V-I cadence (bracket B in Ex. 3).

The accentual relationship of these two chords is strong-weak. This fact neither supports nor contradicts hearing the progression as a cadence. It is the convention of V-I, not its accentual pattern, that suggests closing. V-I is inherently neither strong-weak nor weak-strong. The relative unaccent of the tonic in measure 61 is perfectly consistent with the harmony and with the simplicity of figuration; these elements conspire to declare unequivocally that these two measures are a conventional ending. An ending to what, though? Since the minuet proper has just closed, this progression is heard as a harmonic reiteration of the

Minuet

The musical score is written for a full orchestra and is divided into six systems. The first system (measures 52-60) is marked *f* and features the *orchestra*. The second system (measures 60-68) is marked *p* and features *winds* and *oboe e strings*. The third system (measures 68-76) is marked *f* and features *winds*, *oboe e strings*, and *orchestra*. The fourth system (measures 76-84) is marked *p* and features *strings*. The fifth system (measures 84-92) is marked *p* and features *winds*. The sixth system (measures 92-100) is marked *f* and features *strings e oboe*, *winds*, and *strings e winds*. The score includes section markers A, B, C, D, E, and F, and dynamic markings *f* and *p*.

Example 3. Mozart: Symphony No. 41 in C Major, K.551
("Jupiter") (1788), III: Minuetto, mm. 52-87.

Minuet's final cadence (bracket A in Ex. 3) — it is significant that Mozart made the somewhat unusual choice of casting the minuet and the trio in the same key, thus making this reiteration possible. But, as the music goes on (bracket C in Ex. 3), we hear what seems to be the phrase whose ending we have just experienced. This paradox — first the ending, then the phrase — is further confused by the return of the cadence figure (bracket D in Ex. 3). Is it functioning now as reiteration of the initial cadence figure (bracket B), as the real ending to the phrase just heard (bracket C), or as the start of the next phrase (bracket E)?

The answer is that it is functioning in all these ways. And this delightful ambiguity Mozart has engendered is not yet to be resolved; there are still more games to be played. As the trio goes on, we hear the cadence profile again and again (note the repeats in Ex. 3), so that we never become sure of whether it is functioning as a phrase ending or beginning. Later on the irony increases, when the cadence gesture comes as a circle-of-fifths sequential outgrowth of a small developmental passage (bracket F). It functions simultaneously as the ending of the development and the beginning of the return to the trio's opening. The harmony and counterpoint follow smoothly and logically; it is only the change of instrumentation from strings to winds, plus the attendant slight change of figuration, that underlies the recapitulatory function of the cadence profile. A thoroughly charming passage!

Starting with an Ending

An ending gesture placed elsewhere than at the close of a piece can be a clever play on the listeners' expectations, as in the Tchaikovsky, Weber, and Mozart examples. The effect is almost the reverse of a false recapitulation — a false ending. A piece that starts with something other than a beginning, on the other hand, may also be a witty exercise, but such a compositional strategy can also have profound consequences for the way the remainder of a piece unfolds. It can be disorienting to be presented at the very first with a discrepancy between the non-beginning function of the start of a piece and the fact that it is heard first. The development and resolution of such a disorientation can become the major force in the work. Beethoven's last completed composition, the Quartet in F, Op. 135, opens with a non-tonic sonority and contains a decisively closing profile as soon as the tenth measure of the piece:

Example 4. Beethoven: String Quartet No. 16 in F Major,
Op. 135 (1826), I: Allegretto, mm. 1-10.

To hear an ending so early in a piece that has started with no beginning profile is striking. The subsequent movement develops the implied temporal discontinuity. It contains frequent unexpected harmonic moves, sudden changes of texture, continuities broken off only to be picked up later, or even, in some extreme instances, progressions interrupted and continued earlier.⁶

Bach's A Major Fugue, from the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, has an ambiguous opening — a single short note:

Example 5. Bach: Fugue in A Major from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I (1722), mm. 1-10.

Surely this is not a typical opening gesture, especially for a fugue. Perhaps that lone note is a closing gesture, although a single tone is probably not a gesture at all. It is followed by silence, which serves to heighten the ambiguity. The subsequent figure seems already to be the upbeat of the countersubject, which in the next measure simply continues the figure. Does this mean that the fugue subject is a single note? As the remaining voices enter, we come to accept the single note as a beginning, although its strangeness never disappears. Eventually the inevitable happens: in the ninth measure the single note serves as the cadence to the preceding phrase (bracket A in Ex. 5). At last its potential as closing is realized; but here, as elsewhere in the fugue, it has a double function. That single cadential note also initiates the next statement of the subject (bracket B in Ex. 5).

Aesthetic Consequences

Examples 1-5 demonstrate an important principle. Tonal music defines its temporality in at least two ways: by order of succession and by conventionalized meanings of gestures. This duality makes musical time rather special. The past-present-future qualities of moments may be determined by their gestural meaning rather than by their placement within the linear succession of the piece. While we are hearing a composition, its past is represented by its beginning profile(s), its future by its ending profile(s). These temporal identities retain their conventional functions no matter where in the piece we encounter the profiles. Thus in a real sense the tenth measure of the Beethoven String Quartet does contain its ending. As we go on into the eleventh measure, we start to hear a present whose future we have already experienced. The future is earlier than the present! Such a paradoxical statement is possible because music can divorce the past-present-future from the earlier-simultaneous-later. The earlier-simultaneous-later depends on memory, perception, and anticipation, but the past-present-future can be determined by strongly stated conventional profiles of beginning, middle, and end. Thus a future can be earlier than a present, a past can succeed a future, etc. The time structure of music, at least of tonal music, can in this way become profoundly multi-meaningful.

This characterization of musical time as multi-dimensional may seem an extreme response to the existence of tonal conventions. In fact in earlier, less time-obsessed eras, such a characterization might well not have occurred to critics or listeners. But the

obsession of our culture with time has sensitized us, in part because of a wealth of new works of art that use (or even define) time in radically new ways, to perceive non-linear manifestations of the temporal experience even in older music. To hear a music in which a future is earlier than a present is quite possible today. Many contemporary composers purposefully reorder temporal progressions, deny continuity, refuse to determine orders of succession, and work with static sound-worlds. Such new musical temporalities seem to respond more to the shadowy, jumbled, totally personal worlds of our interior thought processes, while the tonal music of earlier centuries seems to symbolize more the order of our external lives, which is determined by cause-and-effect logic on every level from daily schedules to the inexorable march toward the grave.⁷ I have tried to show that in some tonal music the logical progression of harmonies, rhythms, and lines can be contradicted by the temporal displacement of conventional profiles. Twentieth-century music is far less conventionalized. Thus contemporary composers have had to use other means than the disagreement between temporal placement and functional profile to produce music with non-linear temporal logic.⁸ Because our era is obsessed with irrational, subjective time, we are drawn to those works of past eras whose temporality seems contemporary in spirit. The works I have discussed in this essay are hardly the only examples one can find of music in which temporal placement and functional profile disagree; such works are a significant minority in the tonal literature. For gestures to become conventions, most music must use them in a normal, consistent manner. But those works I have been discussing are some of the important exceptions in which contextual and absolute meanings of gestures do not coincide. They seem to us today strangely prophetic, because they appear to deal, as does much contemporary art (though by fundamentally different means), with the irrational time of inner thought processes. Other compositions may retain their meaning for us for other reasons, but the temporal experience of non-linearity is available in some tonal music, and those pieces which provide it are indeed important works of art with peculiarly contemporary relevance.

NOTES

1. Detailed discussion of middles is beyond the scope of this article, but see Epstein 1981.

2. In a lot of recent music, however, in which ending gestures are less (if at all) conventionalized, the framing silence is the first clue that the piece has ended. Anyone who attends new music concerts has surely noticed the often quite long gap between the cessation of musical sound and the onset of applause.

3. This distinction parallels Lewis Rowell's discussion of music as process and product; see Rowell 1981. Tonal music involves a process that moves a composition through time from beginning to end, and it is also a network of conventionalized gestures or profiles — products — that identify such functions as beginning, ending, transition, climax, etc.

4. The increasing durations of silences are heard as a slowing down of the tempo, not as syncopations. Tchaikovsky also used this device at the actual ending of his *Francesca da Rimini*.

5. See Epstein 1981. We must wait until well into the finale before experiencing the immensely satisfying (because long delayed) arrivals of downbeat tonic chords. Measures 20-30 of the last movement toy with tonic downbeats (in a passage that is, significantly, omitted from the recapitulation), but the horns cloud the metric structure; the recapitulation starts, in measure 225, with a subtly understated and thinly orchestrated tonic downbeat; the second theme, now in the tonic key, also starts with an understated tonic downbeat (m. 272); at measure 292 we at last experience a fully orchestrated, loud, accented tonic chord. (Epstein would probably claim, as he does of a similar place in the Minuet, that the overlap here keeps the music moving and hence renders the downbeat ambiguous, but I find that very often structural downbeats occur where there are overlaps that link the extended upbeat to the subsequent music which prolongs and hence stabilizes the downbeat tonic.) Finally, as the coda draws to a close, we hear a series of accented tonic chords, a phenomenon missing since the coda of the first movement. The withholding of fully accented C major tonic chords for nearly three movements is an extraordinary means of propelling musical motion across the seemingly independent movements of this symphony. The need for downbeat stability is established at the onset of the first movement by starting each of the first eight-bar or seven-bar hyper-measures with an accented C major tonic harmony. This congruence of phrase accent and metric accent becomes an expected norm (reinforced elsewhere in the first movement), but it is withheld throughout the non-tonic second movement, the third movement which completely avoids accented tonics, and much of the finale. The eventual return of accented C major tonics brings the symphony to a triumphant conclusion, and this feeling of triumph can be understood fully only if we take account of the establishment, denial, and re-affirmation of structural downbeats.

6. I have dealt with the temporal complexities of this movement at some length in Kramer 1973.

7. I am indebted on this point, and on several others in this article, to Judy Lochhead.

8. For a discussion of new approaches to the non-linearity of musical time, see Kramer 1981.

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