

DO I PLAY THE REPEATS IN MY MUSIC?

Or, “Play It Again (And Again) Sam”

By Douglas Niedt

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A subscriber emailed me a question about playing the written repeats in the music he was playing. He said he had gotten into the habit of not playing the repeats because he thought it sounded boring. So how about it? Why do composers put all those repeats in their music? Do we need to observe them?

Consider these points made by Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis, director of the music cognition lab at the University of Arkansas, a trained concert pianist, and the author of *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind* (2013).

Musical repetitiveness isn't really an idiosyncratic feature of music that's arisen over the past few hundred years in the West. It seems to be a cultural universal. Not only does every known human culture make music, but also, every known human culture makes music in which repetition is a defining element.

Music relies primarily on repetition to help it make sense to the listener. In popular music and children's songs, the repetition is often very literal and direct, making the music more immediately accessible. In art-music (classical music), the repetition is often varied and transformed.

The stunning prevalence of repetition in music all over the world is no accident. Music didn't acquire the property of repetitiveness because it's less sophisticated than speech, and the 347 times that iTunes says you have listened to your favorite album isn't evidence of some pathological compulsion – it's just a crucial part of how music works its magic. Repetitiveness actually gives rise to the kind of listening that we think of as musical.

Ninety percent of the music we listen to is music we've heard before. We return again and again to our favorite songs, listening over and over to the same musical riffs, which themselves repeat over and over inside the music. It carves out a familiar, rewarding path in our minds, allowing us at once to anticipate and participate in each phrase as we listen. We are better able to recognize, anticipate, and hear the nuances of the sequence of sounds. The experience for the performer and listener is not one of us playing the music, but instead, of us being played by the music. If the repetition is pleasing the mind says, “I like this. This is a good tune or piece. I want to hear it (or play it) again.”

When Beethoven uses “da-da-da dah.....” in the first movement of his *Symphony No. 5*, it becomes the defining melodic and rhythmic element of the entire movement. It is “the hook” to use the parlance of pop music, but of course he takes it way beyond what a pop musician would.

However, my purpose in this technique tip is to focus on the larger aspect of basic written repeat commands, not the use of the repetition of motifs, rhythmic germs, or harmonic repetition as compositional elements.

So do we observe the repeats or not? Well, maybe.

We are too close

As performers, I think one of the problems we have is lack of objectivity. We are too close to the piece we are playing. We have practiced it over and over (repetition!) and we know exactly how the piece goes. Therefore to us, observing all the specified repeats seems like overkill.

But to a new listener, especially one who has never heard the piece before, as explained by Margulis above, hearing repeated passages or sections can be crucial to their enjoyment and understanding of the piece. It could be the critical element to their liking the piece or being hooked by “the hook”.

Historical information

One writer points out that during the baroque and classical eras, concerts were uncommon events. Usually, if an audience member heard a piece of music they liked, they would be unlikely to hear it again or at best would hear it infrequently. “Musicians had to think of a way to make the music sink in. Therefore, they would repeat parts of their song at times, making music like sonata-form very repetitive, without being dull.”

I doubt composers consciously worked at finding ways to “make the music sink in”. They instinctively used repetition (as Margulis says) because it is a defining element of music and so helps make the music make sense to the listener, and because it satisfies the innate craving for the repetition of good things. But, the end result was that yes, the music sank in.

Repeats used as an opportunity to show off

In the Baroque and early-Classic eras, performers were expected to play repeats, but to embellish (ornament) them the second time. In other words, the first time they would play the section as written. But the second time they would add ornamentation, runs, passagework, or even alter harmonies.

At first this was done to vary the content, but oftentimes became contests of who could add the most complex ornaments and fast virtuoso passagework to impress their listeners. In some instances it was difficult to hear what the real melody was. Often this embellishment was improvised, but sometimes it was worked out in advance.

Not too many performers today can improvise this kind of embellishment, but it can be worked out in advance. In my [Technique Tip on Cross-String Trills](#), I gave this example of embellishing the repeat of Bach’s *Bourée* from his *Lute Suite No. 1 (BWV 996)*.

Here is a fully ornamented version of the first eight measures that could be used as the repeat:

Bouree Fully Ornamented

Some possible ornaments for measures 1-8

Red notes are the added or altered notes

J.S. Bach

Ornaments for measures 1-8:

Measure 1: *m i* 1 *m* *m i* *m* *a p* *m i* 2 *m a p i m i m a i m a i m*

Or:

Measure 2: *a i m p* *i m* *i a m* *i a*

Measure 3: *i m* *i m* *i a* *i a*

Measure 4: *i m* *i a* *i a* *i a*

Measure 5: *i m* *i a* *i a* *i a*

Measure 6: *i m* *i a* *i a* *i a*

Measure 7: *i m* *i a* *i a* *i a*

Measure 8: *i m* *i a* *i a* *i a*

Tablature (T, A, B strings):

Measure 1: 0 2 3 2 0 0 4 4 0 2

Measure 2: 5 0 5 0 2 4 5 2 5 3 0 3 5

Measure 3: 3 2 0 0 2 0 3 2 0 2

Ornaments for measures 9-16:

Measure 9: *m i a* *m i* *m i a p* *a i m i* 4 *a i m i m i m* *m i*

Or:

Measure 10: *a i m* *i m* *a i a* *a i m p* *a i m i* *m i a i*

Measure 11: *a i m* *i m* *a i a* *a i m p* *a i m i* *m i a i*

Measure 12: *a i m* *i m* *a i a* *a i m p* *a i m i* *m i a i*

Measure 13: *a i m* *i m* *a i a* *a i m p* *a i m i* *m i a i*

Measure 14: *a i m* *i m* *a i a* *a i m p* *a i m i* *m i a i*

Measure 15: *a i m* *i m* *a i a* *a i m p* *a i m i* *m i a i*

Measure 16: *a i m* *i m* *a i a* *a i m p* *a i m i* *m i a i*

Tablature (T, A, B strings):

Measure 9: 0 5 0 2 0 0 4 4 0 4 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 2

Measure 10: 0 0 0 4 0 4 0 4 7 7 0 4 0 4 2 3 2

Hinge Bar

5 *m i a m a i m a i m i m i* 6 *m i a p i m i m i a m a m i*

a i m i a m
m i m i m i
a i a i a i

Or: *a i m*
m i m
a i a

TAB: 3 7 3 7 3 7 0 0 4 4 0 2 | 0 5 0 5 0 2 4 0 4 3 0 3 5

7 *m a p i m i a i m p a i a* 8 *m i a p m i* //

a i m
m i m
a i a

TAB: 5 0 5 0 2 0 0 0 0 0 0 | 4 0 0 0 0

Now, listen and watch me play it.

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Hinge Bar". The score is written for a single melodic line on a treble clef staff and a bass line on a bass clef staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The melody is highly ornate, featuring many trills, grace notes, and slurs. A large yellow play button is centered over the score. Below the main staff, there is a section labeled "T A B" (Trio, Adagio, Bass) with a different set of notes. The score is labeled "Hinge Bar" at the top left.

Bouree Fully Ornamented

Other Historical Opinions

[Dr. George Fee](#), as part of his doctoral dissertation research on *The Solo Keyboard Sonatas and Sonatinas of Georg Anton Benda*, came across several fascinating points about whether or not to observe repeats. I quote many of his points in the following paragraphs:

Johann Quantz (1697-1773), a German flutist advised players to play the repeats a little faster “in order not to put the listeners to sleep.”

In his *String Quartet, op. 135* Beethoven advised “Repeat the second part if you wish.”

I find a quote by Brahms speaking about his *Symphony No. 2* to be particularly important: “Formerly, when the piece was new to the audience, the repeat was necessary; today, the work is so well known that I can go on without it.” I think familiarity is an important component of this discussion. If a piece is well known to your audience, doing the repeats, especially in a long piece, may not only be unnecessary

but might try the audience's patience and attentiveness. Unless you have a way of playing a repeat in a significantly different way, it may be a good idea to skip it.

Social climate

Most of us don't live the life of the aristocrats who were the primary audiences for performers in bygone days. The pace of life for the aristocrat was slow—they had spare time for the arts. Their choices for entertainment were limited. Today, for better or worse, people live fast-paced lives with little free time, many distractions, and consequently rather short attention spans. These facts have to be taken into account and tend to point in favor of skipping repeats, especially of long sections.

One more time. Do we observe the repeats or not?

1. Short repeats are usually okay. Even if you don't vary the repeat, it is short so little damage is done.
2. Dr. Fee gives us this nugget of wisdom: "The longer the amount of performance time a repeat takes, the more reason there is to doubt the wisdom of taking it."
3. Repeats can be welcome if the piece is unfamiliar to the audience. Repetition ingrains the music into the mind. It might help the music make sense to the listener and help the listener form an attachment to the music. As Margulis pointed out, it will help us recognize, anticipate, and hear the nuances of the sequence of sounds allowing us to anticipate and participate in each phrase as we listen.
4. Repeats can be unwelcome if the piece is familiar to the audience and you make no attempt to vary the repeats. If the performance is weak or uninspired, who wants to hear that twice? Instead of being dull, it will be twice as dull!
5. Who is your audience? What is their attention span and previous experience with the type of music you are playing? Will you lose the focus of your audience if you do a long repeat?
6. If you are playing a long gig, absolutely do every repeat and then some, to take up time! Heck, if you are playing background music, most of the time no one is listening very closely. In fact, if you play all the repeats of Lágrima including the da capo, and then play the whole thing again with repeats and da capo, someone might actually start to notice what you are playing!
7. If you are playing a short gig with a severe time restraint, alter the repeat scheme to shorten the piece to fit the time frame. If omitting the repeats somehow does damage to the piece, choose something else to play.
8. If the repeats are an organic part of a musical form, such as the repeat structure in a Minuet and Trio form, observe them.
9. As Dr. Fee advises, no repeat "should be taken automatically without thought, solely because a repeat sign appears in the score. A player should have a compelling reason why every repeat is being observed, and also to make it more justifiable, seek variety in the interpretation of the repeated material, which will then shed new light on the music."
10. Finally, again from the venerable Dr. Fee, "Like a good meal, a performance is better served by listeners being left wanting more, rather than having been given too much." Amen.

What can I do to vary the repeats?

Not all of these will work on every song. Don't be predictable or formulaic by overusing the same technique to vary your repeats.

Here are some of my favorites:

1. Play the repeat louder or quieter.
2. Play the repeat with a brighter or darker tone color.
3. Change the fingering of the repeat so it has a different tone color and character.
4. Ornament the repeat. It can be no holds barred with embellishment of every kind all over the place or subtle with just a few ornaments added.
5. If you are using crescendi and decrescendi, vary them on the repeat.
6. Change the use of vibrato on the repeat.
7. Play the repeat faster or slower.
8. Play the repeat with more or less rubato.
9. If it is a popular or folk song, change the harmony, rhythm, bass line, or even the melody.
10. Change the articulation.
11. Change the mood.
12. Fill out (add notes to) chords or intervals.
13. Add glissandi.
14. Change the number of arpeggiated (rolled) chords you use.
15. Change how you arpeggiate chords.
16. Add strummed chords.
17. Change how you strum chords (flesh/nail vs. all flesh).
18. Change your use of rest stroke or free stroke.
19. Change how you use your thumb to play bass notes (flesh/nail vs. all flesh)
20. Change how you use the fingernails (playing straight onto the strings or on the left side of the nails). Or, change how you pluck the strings: pulling across the strings, pulling into the strings, or pulling outwards.
21. On the repeat, use a larger ritard at the end.
22. Add/take away accelerandi.
23. Use more or fewer slurs.

24. Use pizzicato techniques on repeat.
25. Use tambor effects on repeat.
26. Change how you play rasqueado on repeat.
27. Change how you play a scale or stepwise melody. Play as a true melody allowing one note to ring at a time or as a campanela or arpeggio effect allowing the notes to ring together.
28. Change how you play an ornament.

If you don't feel comfortable doing these things, skip the repeat!