A sense of the elementary pervades Nicolaus A. Huber’s music. A strive to find complexity in the realm of the simple, and to bring this complexity forth by the most varied means available. Nicolaus A. Huber’s music sets itself apart from any other kind in mastering this very fragile duality. At times his music may seem to border the banality, but it is precisely in those very same moments that its fundamentality comes most clearly across, and this sense of the fundamental is something hard to find in the over-saturated world of contemporary music.

This comes no doubt first and mostly from a preference for simple, elementary gestures (“I believe I have a special affinity for the elemental per se” and his reluctance, shared with his teacher Luigi Nono, to make use of decorative or superfluous means (“I don’t care for linguistic gibberish and ornamentation...”).

It might, then, seem contradictory that such a compositional persona would make such widespread use of the repetition, which at first could appear as the most gratuitous of gestures, that of repeating a statement twice. My aim throughout this essay is to expose the use of the repetition in different works and to consider how it shapes, or is used to mold the musical discourse in Huber’s music. In order to do so I will discuss mainly three of his works: *Darabukka* and *Beds & Brackets*, both for piano solo, and *Doubles mit einem beweglichen Ton*, for string quartet. The function of repetition in these three pieces is very different, as is its weight in the musical discourse.

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1 Reinhard Schulz, *The composer Nicolaus A. Huber*

2 I will use the word *discourse* throughout this essay to refer to the microformal aspect of a given music; that is, the conditions of possibility that govern it and bind (or tear apart) the different elements at play, but always from the point of view of the specific, rather than that of the whole, which would be the macroform, generally referred to as form.
Music is inevitably linked with the phenomenon of repetition, all the way from its material aspect (physically considered, tones are created by repetitions of events per second, repetition is the base on which rhythm can be thought) to the implementation of this materiality into larger forms, where basically every musical creation leans on repetition to a certain degree. It has been stated that repetition is more prominent in popular music than it is in its cultivated counterpart, and that we may take as proof of its elementariness, which is not to be equated with simplicity.

While the need for a certain practicality may account for the pervading presence of repetition in popular music (specially dance music, as the needs of the choreography were in earlier times very demanding), that doesn’t explain in itself its importance in western classical music.

Repetition has taken on many faces and fulfilled many roles in the history of what we now call western music: from the medieval isorhythms, through to the concept of motif developed in the classical style, and encompassing the baroque imitative procedures, among which we could quote the canon, which is in itself nothing but a repetition slightly out-of-phase. Repetition presides both constructive levels as well as the more direct, perceptible ones. In fact, every musical context defines what is to be considered “the same” and what different.

And yet, the western musical world has seemed to show a much keener interest on “real” repetition (that is, repetition that is not defined through context, but absolute instead) throughout the twentieth century, especially in its later half, an interest that crystallized in organized movements such as the repetitive minimalists (Steve Reich, Terry Riley, La Monte Young...) or the New York school (Feldman and Cage being its leading representatives). Probably a reaction against the oversaturated textures of serialism, these (and other) movements resorted to a certain economy of means and as a result endowed detail with an increasing weight in the musical discourse. It was John Cage, among other musicians, who organized the world premiere of an iconic work concerning repetition, and one that would (in Cage’s own words) change their perception of the world in many ways: Vexations by the French composer Erik Satie. The score of Vexations comprises a theme and two harmonizations (with another repetition of the theme in between), and it covers little more than a page. And yet, playing the piece in its entirety can take up to 21 hours, since this four-part structure is to be repeated 840 times. Cage described his impressions after the premiere in a letter to the Dutch writer Berlef:

In September, 1963, we had ten pianists to play one of Satie’s Vexations in relays, including me and one music critic who thought he could play the piece and wanted to get in the act. I forget his name. He was very friendly, but he made more mistakes than the others. Viola Farber, the dancer, played the first twenty minutes. While she played, someone on her left was sitting on the bench ready to slide over and pick up the piece so there wouldn’t be a hitch in it.

The effect of this going on and on was quite extraordinary. Ordinarily, one would assume there was no need to have such an experience, since if you hear something said ten times, why should you hear it any more? But the funny thing was that it was never the same twice. The musicians were always slightly different with their versions, their strengths fluctuated. I was surprised that something was put into motion that changed me. I wasn’t the same after that performance as I was before. The world seemed to have changed. I don’t know quite how to say it. A moment of enlightenment came for each one of us, and at different times. People would say, “Oh!” as it would suddenly dawn on them what was happening.

I hadn’t realized Andy [Warhol] was there. But even if he wasn’t it doesn’t surprise me that his work followed the same lines. Of course, artists are encouraged by other things that happen, but mostly by what is either in the air or already inside them. Andy has fought by repetition to show us that there is no repetition really, that everything we look at is worthy of our attention. That’s been the major direction for the twentieth century; it seems to me.

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3 Middleton
4 For a closer examination on these developments and their relation, see Alberto Bernal, “Principio Rothko”
This is a very enlightening text, since it raises a question which is central to the idea of repetition in music as it was put forth in the different movements throughout the twentieth century: it questions the very possibility of its existence.

As I will reason all through this essay, the preconditions for the existence of literal repetition in music are intimately linked with the context the music creates for itself. If we take a work from the XVIII or XIX centuries, characterized by their use of a tonal harmonic discourse and a strong linearity, such as, for example, the beginning of the A major sonata by W. A. Mozart, and just consider the first phrase,

![Tema Andante grazioso](image)

we might feel tempted to talk about an exact repetition, or at least as exact as repetition can be (we should perhaps remember Deleuze’s phrasing of the fundamental paradox of the repetition, that of being defined by the difference it produces on the spirit that observes it\(^5\)): its components retain their functions in the harmonic discourse, and as such they remain unaltered the second time around, the difference stemming from our own perception (in that we understand it to be a repeat), and not from the score itself. Within the given context it most certainly is an exact repetition\(^6\). The same may be said of the Sonata exposition repeats, menuets, suite movements, and so on.

On the other hand, if we shift our focus from the formal scale to the level of the discourse, we find that repetition is avoided as much as possible, at least in the current performance theory: every skilled musician knows one is expected to extract as much difference as possible from the repetition when confronted with it; so a good player by today’s standards, when playing this excerpt from Debussy’s *La danse de Puck*

\(^5\) Gilles Deleuze, *Difference et repetition*, Continuum, 2004

\(^6\) Of course it is very possible to listen to the opening phrase of the Variations with attention to the detail and the slight differences in performance, but that is not what stems from the construction: luckily for the music (or for us), it can only hint to possible listenings, it cannot force them on the listener.
would introduce, on top of the inevitable differences in performance that result from his human condition, a recognizable degree of difference, so as to keep the music flowing: a slight dynamic or color change, or a varied articulation pattern. Repetition somehow distorts the illusion of continuity brought about by the tonal system, and the system “needs” to somehow subvert this phenomenon and bring it “back on track”. It is interesting to note that Debussy, who is quite prolific on writing repetitions of the kind presented above, had already started to diffuse and distort the functionality and the continuity of the harmonic system, bringing to his music a certain sense of fragmentarity, to which no doubt this use of the repetition contributed.

With the disappearance of the tonal harmonic functionality, and the linearity inherent to it, the possibility of thinking different musical contexts started to arise. As I previously mentioned, the use of much more reduced materials (as in the schools mentioned above, but as well in pieces as the Quattro Pezzi by Scelsi or the early works of Louis Andriessen) was one of these possibilities. It is against this background that we can place the first of the pieces I would like to look at, Darabukka.
Repeating the element

*Darabukka* is a solo piano piece, composed by Huber in 1976. Its title, the name of a vase-like drum very popular in Arab countries, seems to give away the extremely percussive character of the piece. It is in fact one of the first *Rhythmuskompositionen* (rhythm compositions, a term Huber coined himself to refer to a certain compositional technique he used during the seventies), and the piano is indeed treated like a percussion instrument for the most part of the piece.

The role assigned to repetition in this particular work is, one could argue at first, somewhat incidental. It does seem to occur mainly as a result of a severe restriction of the material, rather than as a means in itself. This self-inflicted limitation does, however, set up a context where it is possible for us to discuss the repetition of the elements and its consequences for the piece. As opposed to the examples we saw above, where the repetition applied to a closed, self-contained unit (be it an 8- or a 2-bar structure), it is the repetition of the element that prevails in *Darabukka* (though there are examples of repetition on different levels). The piece is constructed around just one tone, the middle c-sharp on the piano, with some other tones appearing more sporadically and under certain circumstances. Unlike pieces like *Quatro pezzi*, where the pitch is treated as a relative, meaning it might be used in all different registers, in *Darabukka* the middle c-sharp of the piano is absolute. No other c-sharp is directly played (except in a small section that actually works as a negative of the piece), something that has very important implications for the development of the piece, since this one tone becomes somewhat of a sound object, a sculpture-like tone material. The question we need to pose is, where does this apparently severe constraint lead to. It has been widely argued that the kind of restriction present in the *Quatro Pezzi* was part of a move towards the inner world of sound, a direction which was also being pursued by other composers using different means (for example the spectralists), but it is hard to imagine this would be Huber's purpose, since the piano seems to be very restricted from the point of view of tone color. He does, however, explore the "inner" regions of the piano sound, but there is a departure towards different directions as well. Let us exemplify all this by looking at fragments from the score:

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7 Rhythm composition is a technique Huber developed which has as main characteristic that submits all musical parameters to rhythm, subverting the usual preponderance of pitch.

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Huber himself, in his own account of the piece, talks about three different textures that occur throughout the work, and states they always appear as individual entities and never in overlap (he describes Darabukka as being a 15 minute hocket of these 3 textures).

The first texture, labeled A here, is no doubt the most classical, in that it presents not only the c-sharp but also six other tones, extracted from the c-sharp harmonic and subharmonic series, but compressed into an octave, above and below c-sharp respectively. The C-sharp is indeed repeated, with varied dynamics and durations, and accompanied by some of these tones, sometimes appearing as a chord, and sometimes as a counterpoint. Though the material is quite restricted, the rhythmic motifs form the “phrasing” of this type, and the discourse is rather linear, even if based on perhaps much more limited musical elements than usual. Huber calls this type in his sketches for Darabukka a “movement towards the outside”.

The second type of texture (B) presents what Huber terms “movement towards the inside”. It is easy to see (hear) why. This texture is characterized by the use of sympathetic resonance, extracted from all the lower strings that count the middle c-sharp as one of their harmonics. Where the first type moved in a rather linear way, this one is essentially fragmentary, formed by “blocks” of music triggered by f to ff thrusts of the c-sharp from which the different resonances arise. These disappear in turn following rhythmic patterns that closely resemble those used in A, but even though the material might seem very close (after all it is still a c-sharp and fairly similar rhythmic patterns), the context has radically changed. The movement of the discourse has become skew, i.e., it has shifted direction from “ahead” towards “inside”. If we were to depict the movement in A with a horizontal line moving to the right (the classical way of representing a time line) we would have to depict B as a line moving obliquely towards a vanishing point. The weight of the materials in the discourse has been radically altered, and so has the discourse itself. The inner sound world of this c-sharp (of the piano) becomes the most important feature of this texture. This, in turn, taints the whole temporal development of B, which differs from A radically even if the materials are almost the same, because they are presented from a different perspective, and in this new texture, what was predominant in A (i.e. rhythmic patterns) becomes secondary in B, behind the timbrical aspect. It is interesting to note that the rhythmic patterns are really almost transferred from A to B, and yet because of the perception and the different parameters to which they apply this transfer is not perceived as such, but as a substantial change.

The third type, C, is defined by Huber as the type presenting a very virtuoso-like texture with an equally virtuoso treatment of the playing technique(s) as well. In C, just as in B, only the c-sharp is used, but in here we move once again in a more continuous fashion, characterized by a relatively dense flow of eighth or sixteenth-notes. Many of the times this flow also happens to be regular, so on top of the repetition of the c-sharp Huber adds the repetition of a certain duration, which leads to the phenomenon of pulse (very present in Huber’s pieces and no doubt related to this sense of the elementary we discussed in the beginning) and to an even starker restriction of the materials. This restriction is counterbalanced by the inclusion of another aspect into the musical discourse, namely the gesture of the pianist. During these perfectly regular flows the fingerings and thus modes of attack (by which I mean whether the tones are played with a movement of the finger or a stroke of the arm or the hand) vary, and seem to take on the role of organizing the musical phrasing, forming a layer to a certain extent independent of the sounding result and actually contradicting it (the contrast that yields the same). The corporeal aspect of the piano playing has taken over as the most musically significant feature in the discourse. This is, in my mind, another move towards the outside, this time even broader, towards encompassing the musician and his physical presence into the piece.

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Nicolaus A. Huber, *Durchleuchtungen, Darabukka*: ein Versuch über Bedeutung, Breitkopf & Hartel, 2000
and the musical discourse. And at the same time C also yields a stronger move towards the inner world of the piano sound, which becomes apparent in points such as this:

As we can see here, the fingering remains constant as well and the pedal sets in, and this changes the hierarchy of the elements in the texture yet again. With the fingering now being frozen, as well as the durations and the pitch, the dynamics seem to take on the lead role. But, because of the use of the pedal, the evolution of the dynamics is really not all that clear, as moments blend into each other, and a new perception possibility is opened, namely that of the sound spectrum. The constant repetition on the surface of the music makes it possible to draw the attention towards the wandering spectrum, constantly varied by the conjunct action of the pedal and the attack on the c-sharp. The rit. that follows enhances the effect, since it reduces the number of attacks and therefore allows the listener to follow the development of the spectrum.

By the time we get to the end of the rit., this sustained tone takes on another significance: because of the very peculiar material, its structuration and the possibilities of focusing on the detail it offers, we can perceive this one tone as a very complex event, namely that of the typical envelope of the piano sound. In this context, the envelope becomes almost an electronic composition, and an event that would be regarded as static under other circumstances seems to function here as a very intricate process. Rather than working on the sound world per se, Huber rearranges the elements of the musical discourse and focalizes them to unveil the richness of the sound in an instrument that many regard as being timbrically poor.

The work that underlies this piece is one of re-signification. By using very restricted materials Huber can focus on creating the different contexts and different possibilities of listening that revolve around this ever present c-sharp, that re-signify this (apparently) one physical impulse. One concept is of capital importance to Huber concerning the piece, that of the Prin. The term stems from XIV/XV century theory, and it had been brought up again in relation to contemporary music by the Austrian theorist Hermann Pfrogner (1911/1988). It was used to refer to a particular tone, in which several voices converged due to a voice-crossing, as in the following example (prims are marked by Huber):

This name would designate essentially an interval formed with different occurrences of the same (or very much alike) sound, that bear a different meaning (meaning here being equated with function in the discourse). It is interesting to note how the term unisono, that also describes two voices playing the same tone, views the phenomenon from the opposite standpoint, that of connecting two separate entities by means of pitch (or other means, as in the case of a rhythmical unison).

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9 Nicolaus A. Huber Durchleuchtungen, Darabukka: Ein Versuch über Bedeutung, Breitkopf & Härtel, 2000
It is easy to see how the idea of the prim absolutely permeates Darabukka. In it, repetition acts as the force that binds these contexts together, and so the repeated c-sharp opens up to fulfilling different tasks, to performing different functions depending on the role it fulfills in the discourse. The aim of the piece is, in my eyes, to extract multiplicity out of the simple, to create different, unrelated worlds (dimensions) of different musical significance that do not bear so much relation to each other, and make this c-sharp a link, an axis between them. This context calls into question the idea of repetition (c-sharp = c-sharp?), but it goes even further, it challenges the idea of identity (what is c-sharp?), it relativizes musical material and turns its attention to the 'system of the elements', and 'the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another'. Repetition is, in this piece, impossible.

The work is now in our eyes representative of a first period in Huber's music, where we could also place pieces such as "Informationen über die Töne E-F", his first string quartet, and a piece with a title as significant as "dasselbe ist nicht dasselbe" (the same is not the same) for snare drum, in many ways related to Darabukka rather directly. All these pieces share a relatively high degree of restriction in the musical materials employed (higher in the case of Darabukka and Dasselbe) but, contrary to other musics dealing with restriction, Huber uses it to address questions of musical context, to focus his compositional efforts towards the thin line that binds musical events together. This is the work that started to shape up in a piece such as Darabukka, where restriction is used to allow the music to concentrate on an aspect that hadn't been brought to the fore of the music before, but, as I exposed in the introduction, it is not the question of timbre, but rather that of discourse, of music itself.

Huber stated that creating material wasn't enough for a composer, and that statement still holds valid today. Since the move away from tonality in the beginning of the previous century there has been a sort of growing hysteria that tried to over-structure the material in the hope that that, in and of itself, would suffice to make up for the lack of tonality. The analytical approach disregarded questions of musical context, phrasing, or basically any aspect that wasn't pitch and/or durations (occasionally bringing timbre into the discussion as well). This context sheds some light on the importance of Huber's statement and a work such as the one developed in Darabukka, and that is the reason his music stood somewhat alone in the contemporary music world and remains, up to this day, powerfully individual. Even his rhythmical compositions, and the system that underlies them, subjugating pitch to rhythm, represents a move away from establishing pitch as central parameter, a reality in much of European music, with or without tonality. This re-signification of the musical elements is what enables his music to be inherently modern, while at the same time strangely familiar.

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10 Michel Foucault, Les mots et les choses ("The order of things"), Vintage books, 1994
Repetition as a constructive means

“Doubles, with a movable tone” is a work for string quartet written in 1987. Eleven years separate this piece from Darabukka, and in them a noticeable change has taken place in the surface of Huber’s music. But many of the ideas and substantial preoccupations of the music remain, even when conveyed through different means. Doubles doesn’t really resemble Darabukka at first sight, nor is the idea of repetition they entail the same at all. In his notes to the piece Huber briefly discusses the use of repetition:

Doubles, originally a baroque term describing the embellished diminished repetition of a dance movement in a suite, describes in my piece—which uses the plural form doubles—the intention of building the music mainly from the principle of the varied repetition. This is not achieved by means of fixed, constantly recurring characteristics (as for example in Darabukka), it occurs instead within much more elementary, and subsequently much more flexible and open compositional phenomena.

Silecki notes that the term doubles, because of its recurrent and extensive use in the history of music theory, refers only to general principles and so defines the field of action of the piece while keeping it open enough (as opposed to a term such as sonata, that not only designates an overall procedure, but as well a formal plan and to a certain extent characteristics of the material). So, while we could speak about variation as a main theme in the piece, the title “variations” would be deceptive, since it has certain formal implications that the music doesn’t fulfill.

Musical variation (the general procedure, not the form) is closely linked to the phenomenon of repetition: we could define it as the recognition of repetition within the difference (or vice versa). When we say a certain motif, theme, or aspect in a piece is varied, we mean it is far enough from the original so as not to be called a repetition, but at the same time something in it keeps us from deliberately labeling it as different. It is thus a difference that bears at the same time significant parallelism with whatever serves as the original. Once again the musical context defines what is susceptible of being perceived as significant and therefore predisposed to variation, for in order to keep the feeling of repetition the feature that remains must have a certain weight in the discourse (for example a general dynamic level f as a means of connecting two given fragments would be a rather weak link, unless the rest of the piece only uses mp to pppp dynamics, in which case a f would become a significant gesture).

In Beethoven’s 32 variations in c the harmonic skeleton that structures the theme remains for the most part unchanged, perhaps slightly colored (changed to major for example in variation number XII); the most significant changes occur on the surface of the music, the figurations, motifs, general textures... this duality, interaction of the difference and the identity, is what’s put at play in a context such as this one: we have to take into account that the theme of the 32 variations is rather short, only comprising 8 bars, so the different movements flow into each other relatively quickly; this keeps the harmonic structure short enough to be apprehended as a unity and as such deemed fit to be repeated and function as a structural element. The ‘surface’ elements then serve as different means to express this common background, and so this dichotomy is established: in this particular example the background bears a greater weight in the general discourse, with many of the variations being virtuosic representations of the harmonic scaffolding. The apparent changes in the music submit to the harmonic function, they are understood within its context, and therefore able to vary significantly without losing their relation to the original.

For the most part then, an example such as this, to a certain extent archetypical of the classical variation, could be described as an arborescent form, with a trunk serving as a referent more or

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12 When comparing the different approaches towards variation form I allude to terms present in *Rhizome*, the introduction to *Mil plateaux* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, namely those of arborescent form and
less throughout the whole set of variations, and the variations themselves being extensions of this central trunk or branches. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari note in their *Rhizome*,

“…multiplicities are only apparent, […] Arborescent systems are essentially hierarchical, and they imply centers of significance and subjectivization.”

And so it is. While at first sight the score of the 32 variations may look like unconnected fragments, the stark structure underlying their construction plays a very important role in the musical discourse and discloses the hierarchy and oneness behind the apparent change. The dichotomy of variation and original is the one at play in this kind of form.

Huber uses many ideas and techniques derived from the domain of the variations, but it’s as well interesting to consider the points that separate his conception of the variation from that we have briefly sketched of the classical variation, and to therefore speculate about what took him to choose a name such as *Doubles*, with everything it implies (or rather, everything it doesn’t imply). His piece is divided in 16 sections, a Simple and 15 Doubles. The mere structuring tempts us to draw a parallelism between this form and the classical variations, and to consider the Simple a theme, with all that such a statement implies. Before we take a look at the general form and try to establish to what an extent is this assertion plausible, I would like to consider some of the *Doubles* and their construction:

![Musical notation image]

This is the beginning of the quartet, the Simple. It is in itself formed by a rhythmical pattern repeated three times, each one with a different chord. Interestingly enough, the pattern itself comprises as well three bars, each of them with a different structure when we look at them closely, so we could speak of three different pitch materials and three different rhythmical patterns being presented. The repetition that takes place in this opening section allows us to separate pitch from rhythm, as one changes while the other remains constant. Dynamics play a different role each time: they remain static the first time around, they underline the rhythmical structure in the second repeat, and they...

form a somewhat independent layer on the third, contradicting to a certain extent the rhythmical construction. Thus from the very beginning we can see a certain sense of ‘assembly’ that Huber mentions in his notes to the piece: all the parameters seem to retain to a certain extent their individuality. In Huber’s own words:

Repetition creates interest, attention, fuses together or even separates, when it appears bearing the role of quotation marks. Repetition challenges to compare, it drives the listening towards the difference, i.e., it separates and enhances the variation capacity of every single parameter in its assembly, for example:

- same note / different durations / always same part of the bow / different bow speeds.

Repetition serves here as a means of ‘slashing’ the different components (parameters) of the discourse, to underline their individuality and therefore their assembly. This kind of construction endows the materials with a sense of the combinatorial, in that they remain to some extent individual parts, and thus interchangeable. In the same way as two words/terms slashed depict this dual unity, the elements conforming this musical discourse can be apprehended as individual parts, even if they function as a whole. In the level we are dealing with, repetition equates thus to the ‘freezing’ of a parameter, that somehow separates the different components and draws attention to them separately.

This idea of ‘slashing’ will prove incredibly important for the formal development of the piece, because right from the start, there is a significant departure from the classical discourse in that the Simple in itself already functions as something essentially multiple, because the individualization of the different parameters. This idea will be expanded throughout the quartet in a variety of ways, of which I’d now like to present a few.

Let’s take an excerpt of the twelfth double:

The rhythmical connection to the Simple is here quite obvious, there is an elaboration of the pattern presented in the first bar of the piece (A). Even though the general texture is still a rhythmical

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14 I use the term ‘slashing’ as presented by Paulina Aroch in her discussion on Gayatri Spivak’s language, “Reading language slashed in Spivak”: “[...]the slash introduces simultaneity. Although occupying two different places along the printed line, words which are slashed together simultaneously occupy one and the same place at the level of syntax and at the level of formal logic.”
unison, the sound color has changed, as have the treatment of dynamics and the harmony and register. It is closer to a cluster, and is quite frantic in its activity, nothing to do with the ‘spherical’ character of the opening moment. If we now compare this example with the fifth double:

We can again appreciate overt relations with the twelfth double, namely the soundscape and the rhythmical patterns underlying the movement of the different voices, which are actually those presented in the simple. A closer analysis will also reveal that the pitches themselves are extracted from the pitches presented in the Simple (plus the b-flat which appears for the first time in the first double), and they are all treated as absolutes, i.e. their registers are fixed. The overall texture has changed, however, and what was a rhythmical unison is in this example a pitch unison, turned into a sort of quasi-canonic structure by the rhythmical patterns being out of phase with each other. The same materials present in the Simple and the double 12 are used here to create a different musical idea, where they have a different weight and function in the discourse.

The melody in the first violin had appeared previously in the second part of the third double, this time as a viola solo, and following a descending occurrence of the same pitches. In this case the relation is of a different kind, namely that of identity, because the melody in the third double is the same one that the first violin plays in the fifth, but again, the main point here is the context. The same is not the same when presented in a different environment, circumscribed by different musical events, or when having a different function in the ‘vertical’ context. The melody played by the violin in the fifth double acts as a part among equals in a canonic structure that somehow shifts attention from the rhythmical component per se to the difference among the three rhythmical constructions, enhanced because of
the unison canonical structure, which in turn dissolves when moving towards the highest part of the spectrum where the canonical idea turns into more of a sound texture. The solo viola melody, on the other hand, acts in a way as a negative of the opening section of the third double (where all other three instruments play the descending melody), and, because of its solo character allows all of its components to be apprehended as such. The rhythmical relation to the simple, still fresh in the mind of the listener, also plays a role here.

The eleventh double does not bear such a straightforward parallelism to any of the ones previously considered, but, if we consider the pitch structure, we will see that it is simply the inversion of the pitches we found in the Viola solo (i.e., the pitches of the chord in the simple as well) starting from the low G (the highest tone in both previous examples). The ascending idea is present here as well, even though the interplay among the members of the ensemble seems to take here a greater weight in the discourse. Unisons are known to us already from several spots in the piece, but they seem to be under the spotlight in this particular double, while they were almost taken for granted in the previous ones.

The beginning of the eighth double looks as well slightly unrelated, and formally it does fulfill a different function (this is one of the doubles where the “movable tone” mentioned in the title plays a significant role), but still, if we take a close look at the highest note in every couple of pitches presented (you will notice all pitches have either an octave unison or a real unison) we can easily see that they correspond to those same exact pitches and registers of the original chord in the simple. This goes to prove the relations between doubles range from almost a quotation to fainter, more constructive, underlying ones.
This, of course, is just a general view of the piece, mainly focused in the role of repetition in its construction, but it serves to give us an idea on how the piece works as a whole.

The formal aspect of *Doubles*

We can now go back and compare the structure of *Doubles* to that of the classical idea of the variation, already referred to in the beginning. Let us first present a diagram of the piece, from the formal point of view:
Every color in the diagram stands for a feature that these sections share, and when the feature turns rather abstract I use a dotted line to express there is a constructive relation among the sections, even if it is not an auditory relationship. This graph is by no means exhaustive, as there are many possible relations among the different sections, but it serves to view the formal idea at play. The pattern that stems from this ‘formal map’ is hardly an arborescent one. Even though the simple shares many features with other sections, we have to bear in mind some of these features have different weights in the different doubles, and as a result for example while the downwards/upwards scale in the third double extracts its pitch content literally from the simple, its gestaltic character makes it a stronger point of reference for doubles five and nine, even though these both will still share intervallic content with the opening section. That is why I feel inclined to speak of the form of this quartet more as a rhizomatic form (“[…] any point in the rhizome may be connected with any other, and must be.”) than a variation form.

The rhizomatic form is a concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in the introduction to their book *Mil plateaux*, and the rhizome is in its turn a concept borrowed from herbology: A rhizome is namely “a continuously growing horizontal underground stem that puts out lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals”. The key concepts stressed by Deleuze in Guattari when making
use of the term are the multiplicity, the lack of center and/or hierarchy, as well as the apparent lack of
structure (“A rhizome [...] doesn’t have beginning nor end.”). These they oppose to the arborescent
structure, which is in their minds a “faded, most conservative” form of thought, as well as the most
predominant in western culture.

My intention when linking Huber’s formal process to the French philosophy is simply arguing that
even though Huber starts from a rather classical conception of repetition, he extends it and employs
it to depart from its usual usage, erasing, so to speak, the idea of unity and coherence as a reifying
means and opening up the question of difference and heterogeneity in the music, ideas analogous to
those of John Cage, even if presented from a radically different perspective.

While the rhizome is a pictorial figure, and as such apprehensible in one grasp, the idea of unfolding a
rhizome through time is much more evasive. There is an inherent hierarchy in the structure of
Doubles, in that the Simple, being presented first, may act as a sort of theme, but I believe this
impression dilutes as the piece moves on, when other figures take on more important musical roles
(as may be the case of the ascending scale we already commented, or the tremolando, that reappears
at different points in the piece). In many ways Doubles doesn’t fulfill the formal idea of the rhizome,
but it is a move towards it. There is a seeming paradox in the strictness of the structuring and the
multiplicity of the form, but that results of the way in which Huber implements this structure,
working on the same object (music) from many different perspectives and on levels that range from
the constructive to the perceptive. The constant change of focus yields a heterogeneity of discourses
that interacts with the structuring of the music, that is multiple as well in that it ranges from the
apparent to the underlying. Working from essentially the dualistic principle that we saw in classical
variation, Huber subverts it and proliferates the connection points, thus erasing this dichotomy of
variation-original.
Epilog 1: other levels of repetition in *Doubles*  

The sort of repetition we have analyzed so far is really more related to formal processes and connecting these different *Doubles*, but there are other levels of the discourse where repetition is present.  

![Musical notation](image)

This excerpt, played by the first violin against a static background of viola and cello playing the e right below it, appears in the middle of *double* number 13, as a sort of separation between the two sections that form it. From the point of view of construction I should probably point that the tempi used in it are actually all the tempi present in the piece, that in turn were chosen from those available in a metronome, in such a way that they’d form a mirror image circling the 100. That explains to a certain extent the repetition that occurs at that particular moment, but it misses the question this whole passage is posing, in a sort of statement. On the one hand we have a very interesting construction, in which an accel. is presented in a stepped fashion: each occurrence of the pattern is as a whole faster than the previous, but they all retain the ratio between both durations. This is very typical of Huber’s musical thinking, a sort of thinking present as well in his rhythmical modulations: we have both rhythmical worlds, the ‘quantized’ world of musical durations, and opposing it the idea of the rhythmical continuum, in which durations dissolve analogous to the way pitches dissolve in glissandi. The dynamics on the other hand evolve in a (more common) continuous manner from ppp to fff. The differences in tempo between one pattern and the next can be extremely faint, and within this stream of ‘repetition’, Huber places a real, exact repetition. This moment is so fleeting and the context so radical (in its reduction) I feel inclined to label this passage a statement, in that it paradigmatically presents different concepts of repetition next to each other. On the one hand the real repetition, presented in the score almost as identity (by means of the double bar) and on the other hand the slightly varied patterns, that nevertheless function as repetitions because of the context they are presented in. The notation echoes this duality, with the varied patterns written out, expressing their continuity, and the real repetition as a rupture of this flow, encompassed by the double bar. Two different levels of repetition are used in this example, with one briefly displacing the other. One cannot help but be reminded of a similar passage in a music that is otherwise very different:
Here Feldman too makes use of the level of almost-repetition and interrupts it with exact repetition. While these examples may have many common points, the context couldn’t be any more different. The excerpt is somewhat of a pause in Huber’s quartet, it is more of an exception than a representative fragment, whereas in Feldman it is the opening of a monumental work devoted to this world of interplay of minuscule details. That is underlined by the linearity of Huber’s presentation and the erratic, contemplative discourse in Feldman.

I have stated that I think of this passage as a statement, but it does present in it as well a feature Reinhard Schulz has pointed out regarding Huber’s music and his debt to Jean Baudrillard’s philosophy. The French philosopher is well known for his work on reality and simulation, and Huber has himself shown some interest at least in the realm of “disorientation, [...] acoustical and optical illusion”. One could indeed think of this opposition of levels of repetition as an acoustical illusion, a momentary disorientation.
Opening doors: the role of the Other in Nicolaus A. Huber

I would like to digress for a moment to touch on a different subject that is related but not part of the matter we’re discussing here, and that is the question of the otherness. In this context of discussing the varying levels of sameness that can be found in different musical contexts, the question of the Other shapes up clearly as its negative, the problem of creating and defining difference. In all three pieces I am commenting on and, in my mind, in all of Huber’s music in general, there is a strive to forge and thrust this Other into the musical discourse, which he does in a variety of ways, depending on the piece and of course, the context the piece itself defines. To me, this attempt is in itself both a musical and a social (political) one, the latter in the sense that it focuses around the notion difference and otherness, a central preoccupation of continental philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century (such as Derrida and Levinas), focused, at least in Levinas’ work, as an eminently ethical question. But musically it defies the notions of coherence and unity, concepts that have been wielded through the twentieth century by musicology as the standard against which to match a musical piece in order to prove its ‘validity’, or its ‘artistic value’. This idea of reducing the apparently varying surface of the music to a deeper structural coherence of the musical material was already present in Schenkerian analysis, and made its way to the core of set-theory, a theory that, when understood as a goal, can only really account for the degree of intervallic coherence of a given piece. The concept of the Other opposes this conception, it confronts it with that which cannot be included or reduced to the same terms, which has to be understood and regarded as else, different, and in that respect, beyond theorization.

The excerpt above, a quotation of a South African song, appears between the doubles number ten and eleven and it is repeated again in between number eleven and number twelve. It is repeated as a block, but because there’s no synchronization the repetition necessarily will be slightly different (there is also a faint difference in the line of the second violin). Again, as a result of the context it is presented in and the function it fulfills, we will most likely perceive it as a literal repetition. The
fragment possesses a number of features that make it stand out right from the start, namely the lack of synchronization among the players (there are some other places in the piece where the musicians do not play together, but they’re mainly playing with rhythmical models and their modulation, in a sort of progress fashion, whereas here the “loop” feeling is much stronger), and its proximity to tonality, coming from both the melody, written in a seemingly A major, and the D major chord (microtonally enriched) formed by the other three strings. These main characteristics, and the manner in which this fragment seems to interrupt the discourse of the piece situate it in a different plane, as an ‘outsider’ in the whole. After its first occurrence the music just seems to continue, unaffected, so the appearance of the loop momentarily acquires the status of a mirage, but the second time confirms its presence, its ‘reality’ so to speak, its existence as an entity and with it its opposition to the rest of the piece. It operates a change in the perception of the piece by momentarily placing the listener in a different situation, thus tainting the flow of the work with this passing deviation. Repetition functions in this context as a means of defining an event almost in statue-like terms, presenting it as a fixed block somehow ‘outside’ the normal course of events in the piece, where, one may add, we have never assisted to such an exact repetition (or almost exact repetition).

The question of the other has always seemed to be present in Huber’s musical thought. Even in the earlier pieces, as in Darabukka, where the otherness is perhaps not so much a theme, we see a couple of sections that purposely deviate from the general look of the piece, one where the c sharp, though present, is never played but resonates sympathetically with other tones, and the end of the piece, which again quotes a song, this time “el pueblo unido jamás será vencido”, originally from Chile. This is a particularly telling choice (ending a piece actually opening up the musical material, rather than wrapping it up) that again defies the notion of a closed, all-structured piece in that it cannot be reduced to the terms already stated in the piece. That being said, I do believe that the definition of this idea is higher in the later pieces, but it is interesting to consider how it is already hinted at in Darabukka, even if we may see it as a means of relieving the pressing restriction in the piece.

The Other has many different faces in Beds & Brackets, the last piece I would like to present. On the one hand, Huber speaks of a “piece within a piece”, referring to “Statement zu einem Faustschlag Nonos”, a piece that indeed occurs approximately in the middle of Beds & brackets and that doesn’t really stem from the previous material, but rather forms a parenthesis in the flow of the music. The piece itself consists of a repetition of a rhythmical structure (we could speak of an isorhythmical structure), first with several sounds extracted from the upper strings of the piano, bearing “chance microtonal” relationships to each other, in relatively soft dynamics because of the quality of the sounds, and the second time around using just one cluster, and in ffff. The kind of work here has a certain similarity to what we saw in Doubles, with a parameter being frozen and the rest of the parameters working to resignify it, but this time, because of the length of the underlying structure, it is more of a constructive means than a form-defining one. The moment itself is preceded by an overtly theatrical gesture, closing the piano lid, and playing on the strings with a bottle, all materials that create a clear break with what’s come before.
The fact that Huber refers to this section as a 'piece within a piece' is already very revealing, for it addresses exactly the subject I have been discussing, that is, the creation of difference within an organic structure such as a piece. To talk of a piece embedded in another piece is to try and pin down this idea of difference, to create the space where the Other can take shape, as opposed to what we classically would call a 'contrasting section'.

The other example of the inclusion of the Other is the end of the piece, in many ways a poetic rendering of the otherness idea. The doors and windows of the concert hall are to be opened so that the sounds from the outside can flood the room and share musical protagonism with the piano player and the music he plays, a varied repetition of the beginning of the piece, in pppp. This gesture, that (at least to me) evokes clearly John Cage's musical philosophy, is, to revert to the terminology Huber used to define the different sections in Darabukka, the outer version of the otherness. There was in both our previous examples an implicit reference to the outside world, achieved by means of the quotation. This example however makes explicit use of the outside world and it uses it to re-signify events we had been exposed to previously. It seems to me the presence of the otherness in Huber's music is directly related to the very same idea we saw in Darabukka, that of resignifying a given musical event, but this time not relocating the object in itself in a different musical context, but rather reinterpreting the context through the confrontation with the Other. The object itself doesn't really change, but the perception of the object is altered, sometimes by this passing deviation, or by the inclusion of the music altogether in a newly created context where it serves a different purpose, as is the case at the end of Beds & brackets.
Beds & brackets: repetition as a means of separation

Repetition in *Beds & Brackets*, a piano piece from 1990, also has many different faces, but among them there is one specially characteristic to the piece, that is hinted at in the title. The brackets alluded to there refer to a notation device that Huber implements for this piece only, in order to mark different fragments of the score:

When the numbers themselves appear on the stave, the player is expected to retrace his/her steps and play back the corresponding fragment, but, Huber tells in the notes preceding the score, he/she should do so 'as if it was being heard for the first time'. By this Huber means there should be no elaboration of the material, in the way we spoke about in the introduction of this work, what would be the standard practice of any player. Instead, Huber says, the performer should 'have the sensation of reproducing the situation of the first execution, a live simulated repeat of something past'. The idea is to situate these excerpts somewhere between the past and the present in a manner in which they actually belong to none. In this piece, repetition is used to cut across the flow of the musical discourse and thrust the music back to the immediate past, not as an extension of this linearity, but as opposition to it. Repetition serves here as a means of separating, even introducing this sense of the Other we discussed previously, to interrupt the continuity of the music and bend it back on itself. Thus, the music does not simply move with the time, but rather in a manner askew to its flow, perception-wise, that is.

Most of the brackets repeat fragments of what has come right before them, spanning different lengths, some very short, others repeating whole musical ideas. The relationship they have with the "original" piece (the resultant of playing the music without the brackets) is as well varied, sometimes rather continuous, and sometimes overtly opposing what has just preceded it. Some brackets, however, jump back to previous moments and then jump back again to the original piece, creating sorts of gaps in the development of this piece. The general phrasing is thus created by this tension between an advancing piece and the constant thrusts into the immediate past these brackets represent.

Huber’s choice of notation conveys this idea in the most accurate way possible. Instead of writing the repetitions out, in the manner we have seen is most predominant for classical music when dealing with short repeats, he presents them as ‘gaps’ in the score, gaps the performer has to fill in by tracing his/her steps back and playing again from the same part of the score he/she used the first time.
around. As opposed to the conventional double bar, this notation stresses on the one hand the continuity, in that it reserves a space on the score for the moment the repetition will be inserted, but, on the other, it denies to a certain extent this continuity by not simply copying again the specified fragment on the score. This duality represents the duality of the moments themselves: caught up between something seen as continuing the musical flow but negating it at the same time. Whereas we saw that repetition in works as Debussy’s was immediately integrated into the musical discourse, Huber tries to call our attention to the fact that these moments should erase their own trace to function as sameness, as identity, as much as possible. Of course the idea in itself is very ambitious and fragile, and that is where much of the crux of the outer sections lies. One aspect that contributes to creating this duality of the brackets is the use of the body of the performer during the piece.

All throughout this piece the body of the piano player is used in a way that draws attention to it and thus renders the movements of the player significant, so they help create the discourse, in a sort of choreography of the piano technique. This adds yet another layer of definition to the musical material, that helps present this discontinuity by including this choreography of arms, hands and body in the repetitive pattern. Huber had already worked with the corporeal before Beds & brackets, but this work gains a new significance in this piece (one not necessarily related to its musical significance, very present as well). He links it to the critique of Jean Baudrillard (presented in books such as Simulacra and simulations, or Perfect crime, where he argues reality has been displaced by virtuality, simulation) and consequently implements this corporeity as a means of defining a private space, where identity and the subject can still develop and be forged. Paradoxically (or perhaps not), it is this very same corporeity that will play a decisive role in stressing the simulations that occur in Beds & brackets. At the same time, this move brings the piece closer to the aesthetics of the simulation and illusion that we related to Baudrillard’s philosophy. The theatricality implied in every musical performance is brought here to the fore in that it is used as a means of creating discourse, of defining musical categories.

We could add yet another level of otherness to the already multiple landscape of Beds & brackets by considering these brackets under the light of the otherness. While we saw in Doubles how repetition was used to create connections among different parts of a piece, in this particular example repetition is, rather paradoxically, a separating means. The contradictory effect of these repetitions, that aim to establish themselves not as such, but rather as sameness, and the way in which they disturb the musical flow open up a different level of discourse. On the one hand, the musical, the piece we hear unfolding in between the brackets, on the other, the meta-musical, considering the performance as a solid whole (not only the music, but as we have seen the presence of the player as well) and working musically from there.

It is in this interplay of musical levels where we can find the other examples of repetition, that permeate Beds & brackets probably much more clearly so than in the case of Darabukka and Doubles. In the example shown above we can already see the many different levels of repetition that shape up the world of Beds in a sort of Russian doll fashion: the repetition of the element, as is for example the e, the repetition of a rhythmical pattern to create a continuity, and the repetition of the whole as a means of breaking this continuity. It is as though the focus of this music is constantly shifting from one level to another, and so at the end of the piece, where Huber reuses the material of the opening section while opening doors and windows, we could never speak of reexposition, but rather think of a new level, in which the first section as a whole is considered deemed of being repeated, and at the same time confronted by the difference of the context.

Another example of these different levels of repetition is the one embodied by the episode of the descending scale. The falling scale is a recurrent section in Beds and Brackets, but both times it occurs it presents a different construction. The first time it is a simple downwards scale, repeating
itself in every octave, whereas the second time around, due to a slight distortion, it is a repeating
interval pattern that yields a slightly different scale (different in terms of notes, but equal in interval
content) every time.

The stable pulse, itself a result of the elemental repetition (that is, the constant repetition of
sixteenth notes), does not but underline this seemingly infinite process (actually the first scale would
repeat itself after thirteenth scales, the question is whether we’d be capable of grasping this
repetition or we’d judge it as difference at that point). This example raises an important question
related to these repetitions we have been discussing, and that is the question of the context and the
listening expectations, so to speak. The difference contained in the second descending scale and its
almost repetitive pattern is contextualized by the first occurrence of the scale, that acts as a model
for the second. It creates a reference of the sort a=a’ (a’ representing here the change of octave)
such that, when the second scale comes, it acts both as a reminder of its difference (in that a no
longer equals a’, since the tones vary) as well as of its similarity (in that a and a’ still share the interval
content). In a context where the attention towards detail and repetition wouldn’t be so prominent
this scale could function as a foreseeable, repetitive pattern, whereas here the musical stress lies on
the constant variation.

In many ways Beds & brackets serves as a summary of the different ways in which Huber implements
repetition in his works, and the resulting musical discourses these different approaches and their
combinations create. Repetition appears at the level of the discourse, formally in the
recontextualized return of the material of the first section, and as a separating means in the kind of
repeats that are specific to the piece, just to name a few examples.

As I reasoned previously in Darabukka, this conscious use of the repetition creates a kind of music
that really centers around the musical discourse and its construction, in the most elementary way
possible. Whereas other kinds of music seem to flow before our eyes, Huber’s, even when flowing,
seems to strive to make us aware of the processes unfolding within it and of their non-linearity. It
doesn’t create a sense of naturalness, but rather makes of the building of linearity, of the creation of
flow, its subject.
Apparently opposing this move towards the inner world of music is the inclusion of external references, and the whole question of the Other I presented earlier, but in my mind it is more a result of this inner, grammatical work rather than a reaction to it. Presenting such abstract ideas as otherness or outside can very easily fall into the realm of the incidental, being devoid of musical significance, but because of the context that Huber creates for his music, where musical relations are enhanced and at times deceptively clear (i.e., clear in some levels while very complex in others), the idea of the Other, as we saw it for example in Doubles, acquires a mysterious, enigmatic character, in that it, while hinting at the idea of significance, an idea present everywhere in these compositions, it doesn’t really seem to have any, and so it is suspended in a sort of paradox.

Repetition in all its levels (quasi-repetition, varied repetition) is probably the most important process in the creation of form and discourse in western classical music (most likely in every kind of music), and thus working extensively with it means working with the musical categories that underlie our musical thinking. Rather than an end in itself it serves in Huber’s music as a means to constantly raise questions of identity, relation, variation, continuity, fragmentarity, and many other musical categories. The focus shifts from the creation of material towards its function within a specific musical discourse and context. Not only is this work extremely musical and fascinating, but, in a century where most of the musical talk has revolved around the material and its structuring, opening up questions of context and of the form- and discourse-generating features of those same materials is not only refreshing from a theoretical point of view, but absolutely necessary if we are to take music beyond the fetishism of the material.
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