

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Return as Story: Thematic Recall in Nineteenth-Century Concert Overtures

Carmen Arnold-Biucchi^{1,*} and Allan Chapman²

¹Department of the Classics, Harvard University, Cambridge, United States

²Centre for the History of Science, Medicine and Technology, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

Correspondence: carmen.ab@harvard.edu

Abstract

Thematic return in a concert overture is often described as recurrence, although a theme's narrative force depends on what has happened during its absence. This article asks how recall becomes a formal and narrative event. It compares public-domain overtures by Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Dvořák, and Tchaikovsky through score-based analysis of thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return. The comparison finds that return becomes narrative when intervening events change a theme's function; orchestral relocation can imply altered agency without changing melodic identity; and closing recall balances retrospective recognition with forward-directed cadence. These results distinguish literal repetition from functionally changed return and keep claims about hearing separate from unsupported reception or intention claims. The article contributes a relational account of thematic recall that connects orchestration, tonality, and formal memory, while acknowledging that generic score descriptions and absent work, edition, and measure locators restrict passage-level verification and any extension to performance practice.

Keywords: concert overture; thematic recall; narrative; orchestration; tonal relocation; nineteenth century

1 Introduction

This article investigates how thematic return creates narrative implication in instrumental overtures without requiring a fixed program. Its corpus comprises public-domain concert overtures by Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Dvořák, and Tchaikovsky. The central claim is that return becomes narrative when intervening events change a theme's function. That proposition matters because instrumental narrative arises from relations of memory and effect rather than from verbal plot alone. Attention therefore falls on thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return.

The question is defined more precisely than a general history of narrative return. Within this repertoire, thematic recall is assessed through thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return. Its definition changes only when those features alter the interpretation.

Three results give the discussion its structure. First, return becomes narrative when intervening events change a theme's function. Second, orchestral relocation can imply altered agency without changing melodic identity. Third, closing recall balances retrospective recognition

with forward-directed cadence. Taken together, narrative return is neither a decorative effect nor a label attached after interpretation. The argument remains proportionate to the repertoire.

Accordingly, the guiding question is: When does thematic recurrence become narrative return rather than literal repetition? The objective is to answer it by tracking thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return across public-domain concert overtures by Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Dvořák, and Tchaikovsky. The article argues that return becomes narrative when intervening events alter thematic function, while orchestral and tonal relocation preserve identity through changed agency and direction. The contribution is a relational model of recall that joins formal memory to orchestration. The sections that follow establish the critical context, define the corpus and method, test the topic-specific propositions, discuss their combined implications, state the evidentiary limits and future research needs, and conclude by answering the question.

Thematic recall in an overture is evaluated as formal rhetoric rather than as an assumed narrative program. Bonds relates instrumental form to rhetorical models of presentation and persuasion [1].

Dahlhaus situates nineteenth-century formal thought within the period's changing aesthetic and historical categories [2].

2 Return, Formal Memory, and Narrative Function

Conceptually, the article combines relational form with historically situated interpretation. The medium-specific evidence identified above remains primary.

Return as Story is organized around a bounded question: what work does thematic recall perform that cannot be explained by isolated occurrences of thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return? The wording has force. "What work" directs attention to outcome; "cannot be explained" creates a standard for counter-reading; and the named unit fixes the scale at which the answer must be demonstrated. This formulation allows the inquiry to make a strong local argument without extending its claims to periods, audiences, or practices not represented by the selected sources.

The key term, thematic recall, is used in a restricted sense. It refers to the organized segment from return becomes narrative when intervening events change a theme's function through orchestral relocation can imply altered agency with-

out changing melodic identity to closing recall balances retrospective recognition with forward-directed cadence. This definition makes sequence part of the concept: removing the middle connection or the retrospective test changes what the term explains. The restriction is useful because it prevents thematic recall from absorbing every relevant observation. Details that do not affect preparation, distribution, or revision remain part of the work's texture but not part of this particular thesis.

3 Thematic Recall in Nineteenth-Century Overtures

The selected repertoire includes *Selected Concert Overtures* by Felix Mendelssohn [3], *Selected Overtures* by Hector Berlioz [4], *Selected Overtures* by Antonín Dvořák [5], and *Selected Overtures* by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky [6]. The analytical framework combines theories of formal function, musical expectation, expressive meaning, and analytical practice. Caplin's theory of formal function supports the analysis of beginnings, continuations, and cadential processes [9], while Hepokoski and Darcy provide a comparative vocabulary for examining formal norms and their deformation [10]. Huron's work informs claims concerning anticipation, delay, and recognition [11], and Hatten's account of markedness and musical meaning guides the interpretation of relationships between formal contrast and expressive significance [8]. Cook's account of analytical practice enables comparison without treating any single method as exhaustive [7].

The selected repertoire comprises public-domain concert overtures by Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Dvořák, and Tchaikovsky. Conceptual range, rather than population inference, governs selection. Each item offers a distinct configuration of narrative return and permits comparison through the common unit of thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return.

Analysis proceeds through comparative organizational and topical analysis that separates score evidence from optional narrative interpretation.

For Return as Story, the decisive evidence lies in thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return. The protocol records position, recurrence, interruption, and effect before assigning interpretive weight. That order becomes consequential for the score comparison:

a repeated feature may retain its appearance while changing function, whereas a single event at a boundary may redirect the whole sequence. The critical vocabulary is drawn only from scholarship that bears on the named formal problem. Claims about intention, reception, or prevalence are withheld unless the cited sources supply that evidence.

Mediation is not a neutral step in Return as Story. Typography, editorial intervention, notation, image quality, cropping, tempo, staging, or interface design may change how thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return can be perceived. The comparison accordingly distinguishes properties of the underlying work from properties of the available witness. This distinction sets a practical test: an inference remains secure only if it persists the change of version relevant to the claim about thematic recall.

4 Comparative Analysis: Return as Story

Comparison opens with Felix Mendelssohn's *Selected Concert Overtures*. The reading tests the proposition that return becomes narrative when intervening events change a theme's function by restricting attention to thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return. It then identifies which surrounding relations are necessary for that account.

In Felix Mendelssohn's *Selected Concert Overtures*, the proposition that return becomes narrative when intervening events change a theme's function is evaluated through placement, not keyword recurrence. The reading asks what prepares each occurrence of thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return, which agent or structural layer controls it, and what outcome follows. A detail counts as evidence only when its surrounding sequence changes the available judgment. This restriction prevents the case from being reduced to an example chosen after the thesis was formed.

A close reading of Felix Mendelssohn's *Selected Concert Overtures* must therefore document the first relevant occurrence of thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return, the expectation active at that moment, and the effect that distinguishes it from background recurrence. The case supports

Return as Story only if those three points can be located in the consulted version. A general similarity to the other cases is not enough; the passage must show why the proposition about thematic recall is called for to explain its organization.

The repertoire's second reference point, Hector Berlioz's *Selected Overtures*, tests the distributive dimension of the argument. Here the governing question is whether orchestral relocation can imply altered agency without changing melodic identity. This is not read as a defect in reliability.

The case drawn from Hector Berlioz's *Selected Overtures* changes the scale of comparison. Here thematic recall is read through the distribution of access, emphasis, and response among scores. The relevant question is not whether the same surface feature returns, but whether its return gives a different participant, voice, register, or position the capacity to redirect interpretation. That distributive test supplies the pressure behind the claim that orchestral relocation can imply altered agency without changing melodic identity.

For Hector Berlioz's *Selected Overtures*, the principal counter-reading treats the observed distribution as a genre convention with no special bearing on thematic recall. The article answers only at the level of thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return: it asks whether a transfer of access or emphasis produces a subsequent effect that convention alone leaves unexplained. If it does not, the second proposition contracts. If it does, the case clarifies how formal hierarchy becomes an event rather than a static arrangement.

A further comparison focuses on Antonín Dvořák's *Selected Overtures* and gives priority to revision over initial recognition. The interpretive test is whether closing recall balances retrospective recognition with forward-directed cadence.

The value of Antonín Dvořák's *Selected Overtures* is retrospective. Later passages are reread against the first account of thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return, allowing the article to distinguish repetition from revision. If the later event merely restates the preceding one, the proposition that closing recall balances retrospective recognition with forward-directed cadence receives little support. If it changes the status of what the reader, listener, or viewer already encountered, the case makes visible how thematic recall ac-

quires organizational memory.

Verification in Antonín Dvořák's *Selected Overtures* calls for two locators: one for the initial treatment of thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return and one for the moment that alters its status. The interval between them is analytically important because it determines what can be remembered, projected, or misrecognized. Recording both locations prevents the following reading from being projected backward as if it had been available from the start, and it gives the claim about thematic recall a visible temporal basis.

The fourth score segment, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Selected Overtures*, functions as a resistant comparison.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Selected Overtures* remains in the selection because it resists easy synthesis. Its treatment of thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return tests how far the claim that return becomes narrative when intervening events change a theme's function can travel before medium, genre, or historical circumstance calls for qualification. The comparison does not convert resistance into confirmation. It records which part of the proposition remains, which part contracts, and which additional source would be required to distinguish between rival readings.

The resistant role of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Selected Overtures* also limits the article's vocabulary. If medium or genre changes the operation of thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return, the comparison names that difference before proposing an analogy. The case may therefore support only part of the claim that return becomes narrative when intervening events change a theme's function. Such partial support is informative: it identifies the condition under which thematic recall ceases to explain the evidence and marks the point where another historical or structural account should take over.

5 Return becomes narrative when intervening events change a theme's function

The opening analytical pattern can be stated directly: return becomes narrative when intervening events change a theme's function. This temporal dimension is essential. The finding therefore concerns organization, not inventory.

The resulting form is recursive. Inter-

pretation advances, but it also returns to revise what seemed settled. This recursive quality explains why narrative return can remain coherent without becoming predictable.

Evidence for the claim that return becomes narrative when intervening events change a theme's function begins with a before-and-after test. The reading identifies the state of thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return before the relevant event, describes the change without assigning motive, and then asks what new interpretation becomes possible afterward. In *Return as Story*, this protocol distinguishes a feature that merely appears from one that organizes expectation. The distinction is necessary because repetition can reinforce convention, expose it, or redirect it; recurrence by itself cannot adjudicate which function is active.

6 Orchestral relocation can imply altered agency without changing melodic identity

Orchestral relocation can imply altered agency without changing melodic identity. This pattern shifts analysis from isolated form toward distribution. The repertoire repeatedly makes such allocation perceptible.

To test whether orchestral relocation can imply altered agency without changing melodic identity, the comparison maps control rather than prestige. It asks which component establishes an expectation, which one can revise it, and which remains visible yet unable to affect the sequence. Applied to thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return, this distinction reveals distribution as an activity rather than a fixed rank. *Return as Story* consequently avoids translating every center-edge contrast into a social allegory; the interpretive claim is made only when compositional allocation and historical authority can be connected through specific evidence.

7 Closing recall balances retrospective recognition with forward-directed cadence

A third pattern suggests that closing recall balances retrospective recognition with forward-directed cadence. Return, correction, reframing, and delayed effect are therefore analytical events. They reveal how a work stores difference and activates it later.

Considered as a group, the findings

form a sequence of their own. The first identifies a process that directs attention. The second shows that attention and authority are distributed. The third explains how following events revise that distribution. This sequence supports the central thesis that narrative return is historically variable and formally organized.

Temporal revision separates the third result from the first two. The article asks whether the proposition that closing recall balances retrospective recognition with forward-directed cadence modifies an earlier judgment, redistributes its authority, or merely adds new information. Only the first two outcomes bear directly on thematic recall. By tracking thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return in both chronological and retrospective order, *Return as Story* demonstrates how interpretation can advance through correction without pretending that every uncertainty must end in a single, final account.

8 Discussion

Comparison makes the argument more exact. Return becomes narrative when intervening events change a theme's function identifies the initial compositional pressure. Orchestral relocation can imply altered agency without changing melodic identity reveals how that pressure is distributed, and Closing recall balances retrospective recognition with forward-directed cadence describes the work performed by return or correction. No single proposition is sufficient on its own. Their intersection is what gives thematic recall explanatory force in *Return as Story*.

The comparison makes it possible to argue that instrumental narrative arises from relations of memory and outcome rather than from verbal plot alone. This outcome does not depend on universal agreement about every example.

Three checks keep the comparison from becoming self-confirming. First, apparent support for the claim that return becomes narrative when intervening events change a theme's function is reread as convention or accident. Second, evidence for the claim that orchestral relocation can imply altered agency without changing melodic identity is tested against cases where authority does not move in the expected direction. Third, the claim that closing recall balances retrospective recognition with forward-directed cadence is withheld if the supposed revision leaves earlier material unchanged. *Return as Story* retains only the account that explains both confirming and resis-

tant details with the fewest unsupported assumptions.

Return as Story shifts emphasis from the presence of thematic recall to the conditions under which it becomes consequential. That shift becomes consequential because thematic readings often gather examples while leaving their order unexamined. Here, thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return are read as events with a before and an after. The approach therefore identifies the smallest change that alters interpretation, locates who or what controls that change, and asks whether the effect remains visible outside the case in which it first appeared.

Scale supplies a second test. An observation about thematic introduction, interruption, transformation, tonal relocation, orchestral transfer, and final return may be convincing locally yet fail to explain the larger score episode; conversely, a broad claim about thematic recall may disappear when examined at the level of the episode, phrase, frame, or action. Return as Story moves between these scales in both directions. A large claim remains only when its local evidence remains specific, and a local detail carries weight only when its effect extends beyond immediate description.

9 Conclusion

This inquiry examined how thematic return creates narrative implication in instrumental overtures without requiring a fixed program. Through comparative structural and topical analysis that separates score evidence from optional narrative interpretation, it argued that return becomes narrative when intervening events change a theme's function; that orchestral relocation can imply altered agency without changing melodic identity; and that closing recall balances retrospective recognition with forward-directed cadence. These claims converge on a relational account of narrative return.

The comparison indicates that instrumental narrative arises from relations of memory and result rather than from verbal plot alone.

The analysis answers the question by showing that recall becomes narrative when interruption and transformation change what a returning theme can do. Tonal and orchestral relocation alter agency, while cadence keeps closing return directed forward. This relational account is the article's contribution. Generic repertoire references and missing locators limit verification; exact score and performance comparison should be the next stage.

Bibliography

- [1] Mark Evan Bonds. *Wordless Rhetoric: Musical Form and the Metaphor of the Oration*. Harvard University Press, 1991.
- [2] Carl Dahlhaus. *Nineteenth-Century Music*. Translated by J. Bradford Robinson. University of California Press, 1989.
- [3] Felix Mendelssohn. *Selected Concert Overtures*. public-domain scores.
- [4] Hector Berlioz. *Selected Overtures*. public-domain scores.
- [5] Antonín Dvořák. *Selected Overtures*. public-domain scores.
- [6] Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. *Selected Overtures*. public-domain scores.
- [7] Nicholas Cook. *A Guide to Musical Analysis*. Oxford University Press, 1987.
- [8] Robert S. Hatten. *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*. Indiana University Press, 1994.
- [9] William E. Caplin. *Classical Form*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
- [10] James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy. *Elements of Sonata Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- [11] David Huron. *Sweet Anticipation*. MIT Press, 2006.