Active Stasis: Repetition and the Façade of Discontinuity in Stravinsky’s *Histoire du soldat*

**Richard Desinord**  
M.A. Music Theory  
Dr. Maureen Carr, advisor

### Background & Objective
Many of Igor Stravinsky’s (1882-1971) works are characterized by the use of repetitive patterns. In the music of other composers repetition was largely reliant upon differences in successive appearances that provided a sense of growth and direction from beginning to end. Stravinsky, on the other hand, often depended on the recurrence of unchanged fragments and their interactions with other repetitive patterns across larger spans of his works.

Using Stravinsky’s *Histoire du soldat*, a piece about a soldier’s deal with the devil, my thesis focuses on the use of repetition as an agent of progress in order to dispel lingering myths of the composer’s discontinuous elements. I ultimately offer an alternate reading of his compositional process, arguing that his use of repetition contributes to the narrative, development and form.

### Essential Questions
1. How can Stravinsky’s musically inert material be active and/or developmental?
2. Are there any connections to the story or other Stravinsky other pieces? Works of other composers?

### Significance
This analysis disproves the notion of literal repetition and mosaic-like techniques as being discontinuous in the music of composers like Stravinsky. On a larger scale, my analysis could shed light on seemingly discontinuous elements of art or speech that implicitly contribute to form.

### Methodology
My research began with a survey of the various techniques that have been used to analyze repetition and motivic development in 20th century music. After applying these techniques, I then developed my own theory in order to fill in the gaps by existing theories.

**Block form analysis** traces chunks of material through a piece that reappear in their exact form. Compositions using this technique are in essence a musical mosaic.

**Ordered succession** is a theory that reveals the relationship amongst reiterations of the same motive and shows how it relates to previous occurrences.

![Block form analysis](image)

### Analysis & Results

**Block form analysis of “Airs by a Stream,” from Histoire du soldat**

![Graphic representation](image)

The choral of *Histoire* contains a rotation of two chords that create a feeling of stasis. The repetitions in *Histoire* are analogous to the predicament of the main character, the Soldier. He remains the same physically while the world changes around him, he develops through his understanding of the consequences from his deal with the Devil.

### Conclusions & Implications for Future Research

My analysis shows that although discontinuous on the surface, Stravinsky’s repetitions are a series of interactions that contribute to formal development and are connected to the overall narrative. By introducing my new theory of a “static shift,” I show that Stravinsky’s shifting superimpositions are a deliberate effort to signal the end of a composition. Works of other composers that have been deemed “discontinuous” or “static” could have this methodology applied to them in order to analyze form building techniques. This theory could also conceivably have connections to modern art, architecture and rhetoric.