



TIME, MYTH AND NARRATIVE IN BEAT FURRER'S *NUUN*

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Abstract: The title of Beat Furrer's *nuun*, for two pianos and chamber orchestra (1996), invites two principal readings. As a pun on the German 'nun', meaning 'now', it invokes a presentist mode of musical thinking, whereby each moment is heard to exist in a continuous state of development. It also invokes myth, as suggested by Wolfgang Fuhrmann, in its palindromic reflection of the name of the Breton goddess Nu, who, in medieval mysticism, 'had the power to let time stand still'. In this article, I use Byron Almén's 2017 theory of musical narrative as the basis for a narrative analysis of *nuun*, aiming to reconcile these allusions with the aesthetics and formal processes of the piece, as well as Furrer's documented preoccupation with notions of storytelling in music. In doing so, I expand upon the hermeneutic readings of the piece proposed thus far, establish connections with textural archetypes in Furrer's oeuvre, both pioneered by and preceding *nuun*, and consider lines of dialogue with broader discourse on time in contemporary music.

Introduction

Beat Furrer's *nuun*, for two pianos and chamber orchestra (1996), begins with extremes of volume and activity that were uncharacteristic of his compositional style until that point, leading Daniel Ender to cite a 'profound shift in compositional facture' and the manifold emergence of 'new paths within his oeuvre'.¹ This vigorous aesthetic is sustained with varying degrees of intensity and textural variety until the piece's midpoint, marked by a general pause. Following this, punctuated textures, quiet dynamics and the airy timbres of non-traditional instrumental techniques predominate – more reminiscent of Furrer's early-career aesthetics – providing a new sonic backdrop for recollections and transformations of textural, rhythmic and melodic materials from the first half.²

¹ 'Tatsächlich ereignet sich mit *nuun*... eine tiefgreifende Veränderung in der kompositorischen Faktur, mit dem in mehrfacher Hinsicht neue Wege innerhalb von Furrers Oeuvre beschritten werden'. Daniel Ender, *Metamorphosen des Klanges: Studien zum kompositorischen Werk von Beat Furrer* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2014), p. 117. Ender's monograph delineates four compositional phases in Furrer's career, characterised by issues of form and aleatoric composition (1982–86), dynamic restraint and the shaping of sound (1987–94), compression and expansion of textures – heralded by *nuun* (1995–2001) and interest in the timbral spectra of voices and instruments (2002–10).

² See *ibid.*, pp. 24–26 for more on Furrer's early reception.

nuun's gnomic title invites two central readings. As a pun on the German 'nun' (now), it invokes a mode of presentist musical thinking, according to which the whole piece can be heard and understood as a single 'extended moment', as signified by the doubling of the central vowel.³ It also invokes myth, a common theme and source of inspiration in Furrer's work, most notably in the operas *Narcissus* (1992–94), *Begehren* (2001) and *FAMA* (2004).⁴ Unlike the classical inspiration of these works, Wolfgang Fuhrmann cites the significance of the Breton goddess Nu in his introduction to *nuun*, 'who had the power to let time stand still', and, in late-medieval mysticism, symbolised 'the moment that comprises all time, the moment of union with the god'.⁵ Fuhrmann's mythic allusions, echoed in Ender's analytical monograph, are thus reconciled with the all-encompassing temporal allusions of *nuun*'s title.⁶ These readings are appealing, inviting contemplation of the relationship between myth, temporality and musical action, yet neither accounts for the formal complexity of the piece, which may be better understood through the lens of narrative theory.

Storytelling is a recurring theme in Furrer's writing, described by the composer as 'presenting itself in each piece anew'.⁷ Thinking of *nuun* in this context may aid understanding of its themes, aesthetics, processes and structures. In this article, I consider the applicability of Byron Almén's theory of musical narrative to the formal and developmental characteristics of *nuun*: its block-like assembly of materials, arrangement of instrumental forces, use of interlocking temporal strata and small- and large-scale processes of transformation.⁸ In doing so, I illustrate how more traditional aspects of Almén's theory may be mapped on to works of contemporary music, helping, in this instance, to understand and expand upon the mythic, temporal and philosophical contexts of *nuun*, while providing a toolkit for hermeneutic engagement with Furrer's work and notions of time in contemporary music more broadly.

Byron Almén's Theory of Musical Narrative

Narrative theory is a broad and complex area of study, with a correspondingly wide range of applications and theoretical positions relating to music. Almén provides an extensive survey of these positions, arguing for the status of musical narrative as a sibling rather than a descendent discipline to that of literary or dramatic narrative.⁹ Rather than lacking in relation to these media, he recognises:

³ Ibid., p. 119.

⁴ For discussions of myth in relation to the stage works see Susanne Kogler, 'Klingender Mythos: Zur Antike-Rezeption in der Neuen Musik', in *Beat Furrer*, ed. Ulrich Tadday (Munich: R. Boorberg, 2016), pp. 58–76.

⁵ Wolfgang Fuhrmann, *Beat Furrer: Nuun; Presto con fuoco; Still; Poemas* liner notes. 2000, Kairos, 0012062KAI, p. 15.

⁶ Ender, *Metamorphosen des Klanges*, p. 119.

⁷ 'Immer wird erzählt. Aber wie? Diese Frage stellt sich mir von Stück zu Stück immer aufs Neue'. Beat Furrer, 'Nacktheit der Stimme. Fama. Theater der Stimmen. Wüstenbuch. Die Text-Maschine. La Bianca Notte', in *Beat Furrer*, ed. Ulrich Tadday (Munich: R. Boorberg, 2016), p. 80.

⁸ Byron Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

⁹ Ibid., pp. 11–36. Almén is particularly critical of writers such as Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Carolyn Abbate and Lawrence Kramer, who have questioned the applicability of narrative to music, citing misguided confluences with the semiotics of literature. The breadth of this discourse is illustrated by the number of unique sources cited in Vincent Meelberg's 2006 theory of narrative in contemporary music. Vincent Meelberg, *New Sounds, New Stories: Narrativity in Contemporary Music* (Amsterdam: Leiden University Press, 2006). Meelberg's theory is valuable in the music it considers, including serial and minimalist

the relative freedom from descriptive specificity in music [that] allows the dynamic interactions between events to be foregrounded, interactions that are fruitfully homologous with psychological and social dynamics and emerge all the clearer and with greater force in the absence of a descriptive milieu.¹⁰

These dynamic interactions, central to Almén's conception of narrative, are illustrated via the recurrent case studies, among others, of Chopin's Prelude in G major and Susan McClary's well-known narrative analysis of Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto.¹¹ The former is used as a demonstration of how 'the topical environment' – in this case the bucolic, water-like accompaniment of the continuously rippling left-hand of the Prelude – can play a significant role in suggesting narrative context – that is, in framing and bestowing value on material oppositions that emerge and play out during the temporal span of the piece.¹² The latter is used to illustrate how the dialectic relationship between opposing elements – in this case the harpsichordist and the ensemble – may 'isomorphically reflect', and thus invite critical reflection upon, certain cultural, political, psychological or social realities.¹³

Almén's theory advocates three stages of analysis. First, one must delineate 'semantically meaningful units and the pattern of relationships between them'; then one must track 'their interactions over time'; one can then determine an 'expression of the narrative pattern thus articulated'.¹⁴ These processes are explicated with recourse to the theory and terminology of musical narratologists Eero Tarasti (himself influenced by the linguistic theory of Algirdas Julien Greimas) and Robert Hatten, and literary narratologist James Jakób Liszka.¹⁵

In defining 'semantically meaningful units', Almén borrows Tarasti's use of the term 'isotopy', first coined by Greimas to account for the semantic consistency of different segments of a text.¹⁶ In music, isotopies occur when segments of a composition contain 'a shared collection of common characteristics, allowing them to serve as fundamental narrative units'.¹⁷ Isotopies may be simple or complex, and static or dynamic in nature, reliant for their identification on the consistency of certain temporal, textural, timbral, harmonic or spatial characteristics – as well as their distinction from neighbouring isotopies.¹⁸ Almén draws on Tarasti's delineation of isotopies in his narrative analysis of Chopin's Ballade in G minor to illustrate these principles. In the context of a work of contemporary music such as *nuun*, the traditional characteristics expounded in Tarasti's and Almén's theories, such as tonality, harmony, metre and rhythmic or melodic profile, may be expanded to include characteristics such as

works by Stockhausen and Reich, but it lacks the technical precision necessary for application to the narrative trajectory of *nuun*.

¹⁰ Almén, p. 13.

¹¹ Susan McClary, 'The Blasphemy of Talking Politics during a Bach Year', in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception*, eds Susan McClary and Richard Leppart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 13–62.

¹² Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative*, pp. 3–10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 23–27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁵ See in particular Eero Tarasti, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); and James Jakób Liszka, *The Semiotic of Myth: A Critical Study of the Symbol* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

¹⁶ Paul Bouissac, 'Isotopy', in *Encyclopaedia of Semiotics* (Oxford University Press, 2007), www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195120905.001.0001/acref-9780195120905-e-54 (accessed 26 June 2023).

¹⁷ Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative*, p. 57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 57–8.

periodicity, perceptibility, polyrhythmic density, traditional and non-traditional timbre and the presence or absence of motivic material.

Once isotopies have been identified, their component materials are assigned differing degrees of 'markedness' and 'rank', as theorised by Liszka and Hatten. For Liszka, markedness involves the assignment of asymmetrical value to opposing elements within a system, while rank involves valuations of relative 'importance or subordination in a system'.¹⁹ Markedness thus refers to distinctions of value, and rank to gradations of value, while narrative organisation 'tracks the changes of these markedness and rank relations over a temporal span'.²⁰ Hatten then cites the cultural dimension of musical narrative as a transvaluation of hierarchical structures of different kinds. 'Tracking the effect of change and conflict upon these structures', Almén summarises, reveals 'the implications of narrative organization as a locus for critical and hermeneutic inquiry'.²¹ The lack of descriptive specificity in music is a boon in this regard. Yet the process of valuation is often more challenging, given the absence of words, with their ability to explicitly state or strongly imply narrative and ideological context.

Almén's response to such challenges is to incorporate topic theory in the analytical paradigm.²² For Almén, topical details 'cue interpretation, much as the light and sound design of a film can influence the viewer's understanding of events'.²³ Returning to the Chopin G major Prelude, he notes how the left-hand accompaniment, 'redolent of murmuring streams and gentle breezes, creates a benign, peaceful background environment that strongly influences how a listener might interpret the piece as narrative'.²⁴ 'The very ubiquity and continuity of the topical material,' he argues, 'locates the entire work within a particular referential and affective space'.²⁵

Musical topic can thus provide large-scale context for interpretation, acting as the starting point for assignments of markedness and rank within a semantic musical system. Changes of topic may also serve to articulate global characteristics or 'expressive turning points', with the potential to 'reinforce, highlight, or even constitute the primary oppositions within a narrative trajectory'.²⁶ Understanding the contrasting topical environments that distinguish the two halves of *nuun* in these terms can assist in assigning markedness and rank to the characteristic elements of their constituent isotopies and, ultimately, in understanding the narrative trajectory of the piece.

Almén labels these progressive stages of narrative analysis using technical language appropriated from Liszka and the music-specific theory of Tarasti and Hatten. At the agential level, 'musical-semantic units are identified, characterized, and located in time'.²⁷ These units, or isotopies, can then be assigned markedness or unmarkedness values according to the positionality of the work in question, the analyst's proclivities and, where relevant, the semantic contribution of the

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 41.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 43.

²² Topic theory was pioneered by Leonard G. Ratner in *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York, London: Schirmer, 1980) as a means of cross-referencing styles and genres of eighteenth-century music.

²³ Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative*, p. 68.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 70. Mozart's Fantasia in D Minor, K. 397 is cited as a textbook example of this phenomenon.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 74.

topical environment. The actantial level articulates the dynamic relationship of these markedness characteristics, as manifested in ‘an increase or decrease of a certain expressive quality or characteristic in successive appearances of related isotopies’.²⁸ The relative status of musical units thus changes as the narrative unfolds, breaking through ‘the inherently bounded quality of units at the agential level (or of any expressive units per se, including individual topics)’.²⁹ The narrative level then interprets these interactions as ‘the playing out of tensions between an order-imposing hierarchy and a transgression of that hierarchy’, with potential for mapping on to any number of political, social, interpersonal, psychological or ideological systems of real-life power, conflict and tension.³⁰ Thinking in this way, Almén concludes:

reveals the link between the interplay of musical events and the cultural function of the resultant temporal pattern. If one can articulate the prevailing oppositions within a work, and if one can observe how they are transvalued within that work, then one is articulating its narrative trajectory.³¹

A Narrative Analysis of *nuun*

nuun’s narrative trajectory is defined by the progress and interaction of two principal elements: upwards chromatic movement (the chromatic element) and rhythmic periodicity (the periodic element). Each element is paired with the antithesis of the other, such that upwards chromatic movement, principally enacted by the strings, appears in different aperiodic or irregularly inflected rhythmic configurations, while rhythmic periodicity, principally enacted by the two pianos, appears on static pitch centres. Both elements are marked, in that they transgress the chaotic yet static harmonic and rhythmic state of the opening isotopy (bars 1–4; see [Example 1](#)).³² It is the relative markedness of each element that gives rise to a hierarchical order, whose balance shifts across the two halves of the piece, thereby enacting a complex yet coherent narrative.

The relative rank of each element is determined according to certain criteria. Greater rank is conferred, for example, by textural salience. The salience of each element depends first and foremost on the density of the orchestral texture, which may illuminate, reinforce or detract from their respective harmonic or temporal markedness characteristics, or simply obscure them. Speed also plays a key role. Expressive tempo directions and changes of metronomic tempo appear in *nuun*’s second half, with a bearing on narrative developments; proportional tempi, however, are dictated throughout by Furrer’s characteristic use of temporal layers.³³ These range from crotchet octuplets (that is, demisemiquavers) through septuplets, sextuplets and quintuplets – whose superimposition in isotopy 1 establishes the chaotic topical environment from which the order-

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 66.

³² A full score can be accessed at www.universaledition.com/beat-furrer-241/works/nuun-3916?form=reprint (accessed 17 November 2023). ‘Scroll to the bottom of the page to view and enter ‘presentation mode’ for optimal sizing’ or something similar as it is not immediately visible/obvious when the page loads and it is very important for the reader to have access to the score.

³³ For more on Furrer’s use of temporal layers, see Stefan Jena, ‘Hörend durch die Welt: Furrer und die Musik seiner Zeit – Berührungen und Anziehungskräfte’, in *Beat Furrer*, ed. Ulrich Tadday (Munich: R. Boorberg, 2016).

♩ = 84

fl 1
 picc
 ob
 cl 1
 cl 2
 b-c
 sax
 bar
 brass 1+2
 trpt 1+2
 trbn 1+2
 pno 1
 pno 2
 marimba 1
 marimba 2
 2 metal rath
 2 cow bell
 vla 1
 vla 2
 vla 3
 vla 4
 vc 1
 vc 2
 db

Example 1:
 Beat Furrer, *nuun*, bars 1–4. ©
 Universal Edition.

imposing transgressions of the two principal elements emerge – to the presence of extremely long durational intervals between chromatically ascending attacks in the final isotopy of the piece (bars 316–21; see [Example 2](#)). If rates of chromatic change or periodic repetition surpass a certain threshold, their divisible characteristics become more

Example 1:
Continued.

difficult to perceive; they become qualitative rather than quantitative and thus less distinct as narrative agents. The duration and consistency of these states of textural and temporal markedness is also important, with longer, stable appearances asserting greater dominance.

These general criteria are supplemented by the specific instrumental, textural and figurative presentations of each element. The chromatic

Example 2:

Beat Furrer, *nuun*, bars 316–21 (only the active instruments are shown). © Universal Edition.

element, for example, is principally defined by its varied modes of textual presentation in the two pianos. Two archetypal characters are established in isotopy 1, emphasising the tonal centre of B, first in hocketing double-octave quintuplets (bars 1–7), and then in turbulent octuplets, spanning the keyboard (bars 8–16). The development of the former can be traced in two different stages: (1) a morse-code-like character, either on rising chords (see, for example, pianos I and II in bars 34–45) or a single low tone (see, for example, piano II in bars 46–51); and a punctual character (see, for example, pianos I and II in bars 89–91), for which gaps between the interlocking parts become increasingly pronounced. These transformations are further coloured by changes in temporal layer, such that faster base values, such as punctual octuplets, effect an increased sense of stuttering, then pointillism and, ultimately, disintegration, generally conveying a loss of assurance and rank. Development of the turbulent octuplets, meanwhile, can be heard in the introduction of rapid chromatic scales (see bars 86–88), whose overlap in the pianos creates the circular effect of Shepard tones, and later in the narrow ambitus of flowing legato sextuplets (see bars 127–31), both of which weaken the rank of the chromatic element by denying it ascendant progress.³⁴

³⁴ For more on the history of pitch circularity in music and its association with notions of infinity and timelessness, see Ira Braus, 'Retracing One's Steps: An Overview of Pitch Circularity and Shepard Tones in European Music, 1550–1990', *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 12, no. 3 (1995), pp. 323–51.

Table 1
Character key

Instruments and element	Code	Character
Pianos (chromatic element)	H5	Hocketing quintuplets
	H8	Hocketing octuplets
	T	Turbulent
	MB5	Morse bass quintuplets
	MC5	Morse chords quintuplets
	MC6	Morse chords sextuplets
	P5	Punctual quintuplets
	P6	Punctual sextuplets
	P8	Punctual octuplets
	SH	Shepard tone
	SHC	Shepard tone chords
	L	Legato sextuplets
	EXT	Extended
	Strings and orchestra (periodic element)	TI
TO		Toneless
MO		Motoric
MOS		Motoric slowing
EXT		Extended

The periodic element has two principal modes of presentation: ‘ticking’ on a repeated pitch centre, first enacted by pizzicato violins and violas in isotopy 2 (bars 24–33); and motoric series of accented chords, first appearing in isotopy 3 (bars 34–45). Unlike the timbral consistency and contrasting figurations of the varied piano textures, the character of these presentations is distinguished by orchestral arrangement and speed. This is particularly significant in the second half, which features overlapping series of relatively rapid toneless attacks in the strings, brass and percussion, and, later, manually damped attacks in the pianos. These characters are summarised in [Table 1](#) with codes to be used in subsequent tables.

The way in which Furrer shifts between these elements and their characteristic presentations is fundamental to the narrative trajectory of the piece. In the first half, shifts are typically block-like, often accompanied by sudden changes in dynamic (hear, for example, the opening shift from hocketing to turbulent pianos in isotopy 1). Shifts are often heralded by the transitional signal of brass swells, crotales or other pitched percussion, and crescendi (hear, for example, the first and most striking example of this in bars 17–19). Within the stable context of the opening isotopy, these signals constitute a secondary marked element, foreshadowing shifts in rank in the principal elements. The second half, meanwhile, is characterised by a prevailing sense of drifting development, punctuated by sudden

Table 2
nuun first-half isotopy, character and element status scheme

	Isotopy	1	2	3	4	5
	Bars	1–19	20–33	34–45	46–60	61–76
Chromatic element	Status	Neutral	Ascendent	Weak	Ascendent	Weak
	Character	H5—T	T	H5	T+MB5—T	T—MC5
Periodic element	Status	Neutral	Weak	Strong—Declining	Weak	Strong—Declining
	Character	—	TI	MO—MOS	TI	MO—MOS
	Isotopy	6	7	8	9	10
	Bars	77–96	97–126	127–43	144–64	170–88
Chromatic element	Status	Unstable	Unstable	Developing	Ascendent	Declining
	Character	T+MB5—H5—SH—P6—MC5	T—SH—P6—P5—P6	L+MB5—MC5	L+MB5—T	SHC—H8—SHC—H8—SHC—P8
Periodic element	Status	Ascendent	Strong—Declining	Absent	Absent	Absent
	Character	TI	TI	—	—	—

interjections, with textural changes heralded by increasingly clumsy and less discernible transitional signals.

Having defined these elements and their potential for markedness on the agential level, it is now time to explore their actantial interaction within and between different isotopies (see Table 2 for a schematic summary of the first-half analysis). Following the establishment of a normative state of chaotic stasis in isotopy 1, the introduction of new tones to the undulating piano texture in bar 20 signals the emergence of the transgressive chromatic element in isotopy 2 (bars 20–33), ascending in four-bar sequence from B to D^b, a steady increase in rank, subtly mitigated by the swirling textures and tonal conflicts within the piano parts. Ticking on C begins in bar 24 in the violins and violas, seemingly triggered by the first salient shift of the chromatic element. This staggered appearance signals the hierarchical precedence of the latter, whose textural character is established in isotopy 1, with the seed of chromatic movement similarly sown by the persistent semitonal tension between A[#] and B in the opening orchestral salvo. The rank of the periodic element is further mitigated by the polymetric friction between the two groups of strings, ticking at five- and seven-semiquaver intervals respectively.

The sequential progress of the chromatic element in isotopy 1 is interrupted after two bars of emphasis on D by a fourfold motoric presentation of the periodic element in minim septuplets, re-emphasising the A[#]–B harmonic tension of the opening tutti attack. Isotopy 3 (bars 34–45) thus begins with a strong statement

of order by the periodic element – following the transgressive progress of the chromatic element in isotopy 2 – accentuated by powerful orchestration, optimal temporal salience and the reinforcement of a striking, morse-like rhythmic motif in the brass. The chromatic element, appearing in hocketing quintuplets, subsequently emerges from the orchestral texture (bars 36–40), followed by the attempted reassertion of the periodic element (bar 41), whose failure is signalled by weaker orchestration in the woodwinds, augmenting note values (affecting a *ritardando*), *diminuendo* and the underlying persistence of the chromatic element.

Isotopies 4 and 5 (bars 46–60; bars 61–76) echo these processes with some structural changes. The ticking on C now starts at the beginning of isotopy 4, still mitigated by the same polymetric friction. The chromatic element, meanwhile, progresses further to E \flat , though with a diminution in duration for each chromatic shift, signalling a heightened anxiety to secure hierarchical progress. Isotopy 5 then begins with sixfold repetition of the motoric septuplet groups, conferring an increase in rank from their fourfold appearance in isotopy 3. This time, the turbulent texture of the pianos continues, signalling an increased stability that counterbalances the ascendant rank of the periodic element. The latter makes a final, motoric fourfold appearance in bars 68–69, now dislocated from the reinforcement of the brass morse motif, which subsequently accompanies the resumption of hocketing quintuplets in the pianos.

The two mirrored ‘battles’ of isotopies 2–3 and 4–5 are followed by two less semantically coherent pairs of isotopies. Isotopy 6 (bars 77–96) begins with emphasis on D within the turbulent texture in piano I and in a low morse pattern in piano II, signalling chromatic progress gained through the negotiations of isotopies 2–5. The piano textures then proceed through a series of shifts, from vigorously rising hocketing quintuplets (bars 82–85), to the first introduction of octuplet Shepard tones (bars 86–88), to punctual sextuplets (bars 89–91), and finally to a gradually thinning resumption of the quintuplet layer (bars 92–96). Isotopy 7 (bars 97–126) then begins with the reassertion of the turbulent pianos (bars 97–108), emphasising a new high point of F. This then progresses through an extended return of the Shepard tones (bars 109–113) and a series of punctuated textures (bars 114–16; 117–23; 124–26), each gaining in register before ‘resetting’ and gradually losing momentum. The chromatic element thus undergoes a period of instability and progressive failure in isotopies 6 and 7, further accentuated by the looping presence of Shepard tones.

The ticking strings, meanwhile, now stripped of polymetric tension, gain in rank and stability during these isotopies, moving confidently through tonal centres on E (bars 86–91) and G (bars 97–102) at three semiquaver and five semiquaver intervals respectively, before attaining and sustaining the tonally significant highpoint of B at corresponding intervals (bars 104–108; bars 109–14). Having reached this ascendant rank, tellingly achieved at a time of indecision for the chromatic element, the ticking fades into the orchestral texture, as if unsure where now to proceed; it does not reappear until the second half.

Isotopies 8 and 9 (bars 127–43; bars 144–64) see the continued development of the chromatic element, each introduced by legato sextuplets, whose chaotic and narrow ambitus invokes a return to the static ambiguity of the opening. This is followed in isotopy 8 by a slow climb in increasingly punctual piano chords, perpetuating the loss of

rank conferred during isotopies 6 and 7 through gradual thinning. With no interference from the periodic element, however, isotopy 9 witnesses a resurgence in rank in the chromatic element, with the turbulent texture in piano I moving from B through to F# (bars 148–61), with morse double octaves in piano II on E \flat (bars 151–53) and then hocketing in both pianos on the climactic F# (bars 161–64), accentuating the hierarchical significance of this ascent. As with the pyrrhic victory of the periodic element in isotopy 7, however, the dominant hocketing octaves subsequently thin out, giving way in isotopy 10 (bars 170–88) to the uncertain alternation of Shepard tone textures – now in double dyads – and increasingly stuttering chordal ascents in hocketing octuplets. The interruption of this texture by a general pause at the end of bar 187, followed by a jagged alternation of piano chords in the isolated bar 188, is therefore striking, but not entirely unexpected, given the failed progress of both elements in the narrative context of the first half.

Analysis of these processes at the agential and actantial level suggests a coherent arc at the narrative level, whereby competing transgressive elements (chromatic ascent and periodic rhythmic stability) attempt and ultimately fail to impose order over an initial state of chaotic stasis (isotopy 1). This process commences with a phase of alternating dominance (isotopies 2–5), followed by a phase of failed attainment for the periodic element, in which the chromatic element is weakened (isotopies 6–7), and a phase of failed attainment for the chromatic element, in which the periodic element is entirely absent (isotopies 8–9). The final isotopy acts as a coda in this context, accentuating the impotent persistence of the failed chromatic element.

The narrative arc of the second half is characterised by less assertive statements of markedness and rank, with extended passages of drifting development, in which shadowy ideas emerge and disband, lacking the power – or the will, to borrow Tarasti's modal interpretation of isotopic imperatives – to assert themselves (see [Table 3](#) for a schematic summary of the second half analysis).³⁵ This state is notably informed by the shift in topical environment, with the teeming turbulence of the first half replaced by a sparse orchestral landscape, in which ideas are free to develop, while lacking the energetic impetus of a constant rhythmic presence. Most striking in their absence are the pianos, which, following the resumption of stuttering octuplets in isotopy 11 (bars 189–202), abandon their ascendant drive and, with it, the narrative dominance of the chromatic element for the majority of the second half.

Following the failure of the chromatic element in isotopy 11, strong statements of the periodic element in its motoric characterisation announce isotopies 12 and 13 (bars 203–25; bars 226–53). Each of these isotopies can be divided into three sections. Isotopy 12 begins with the decelerating iteration of the motoric characterisation in the woodwind and brass (bars 203–204); followed by a period of developmental ticking in the strings, toneless repetitions in the brass, the shadow of teeming octuplets in the percussion, and isolated points in the pianos (bars 205–17); and then a gradual disintegration, eventually accompanied by a directed *rallentando* (bars 118–225). After superimposing the decelerating and periodic iterations of the motoric characterisation (bar 226), Isotopy 13 cycles these subsections with a passage of disintegration in which the low punctual morse of the two pianos is

³⁵ Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative*, p. 62.

Table 3
nuun second-half isotopy, character and element status scheme

	Isotopy	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
	Bars	189–202	203–225	226–252	253–258	259–265	266–282	283–297	298–321
Chromatic element	Status	Weak	Absent	Absent	Absent	Strong	Unified	Absent	Unified
	Character	P8	–	–	–	MC6	T1	–	EXT
Periodic element	Status	Absent	Developing	Developing	Strong	Absent	Unified	Absent	Unified
	Character	–	MOS–T1–TO	MO+MOS–T1–TO	T1	–	T1	–	EXT

recalled (bars 227–39). A further passage of development follows, chiefly characterised by toneless repetitions in the brass at two semi-quaver intervals (bars 240–52).

This placid state, signalling a lack of hierarchical struggle, is interrupted in isotopy 14 (bars 253–58) by pizzicato ticking on B in the violins, giving way in isotopy 15 (bars 259–65) to a dramatic morse-like ascent across the full range of both piano keyboards. Isotopies 14 and 15 thus signal final statements of ascendant rank, first in the periodic and then in the chromatic element. With no space left to progress, the latter comes to rest on a damped ticking on the highest C of the piano in isotopy 16 (bars 266–82), thereby morphing into the characteristic presentation of the former. The chromatic element simultaneously appears in the woodwind for the first time – albeit mitigated by microtonal harmonisation – affecting a complementary exchange between the two domains. Both elements then drop out and the music again disintegrates into a state of near standstill (bars 278–82). Isotopy 17 (bars 283–97) resumes with a final muddled development, before spacious, alternating dyads emerge in the pianos at a reduced tempo in isotopy 18 (bars 298–321). The relative periodicity of these attacks, in by far the longest isotopy of the piece, and their meandering ascent to the final high point of double octave Bs in piano I signal the ultimate synthesis of the chromatic and the periodic elements and, with it, the conclusion of the narrative, an increase in volume and momentum in the final bars hinting at the possibility of a dramatic return to action.

A Narrative Interpretation of *nuun*

Narrative analysis in the context of contemporary music calls for an expansion of the traditional purview of markedness analysis to incorporate new conceptions and aesthetic manifestations of temporality, timbre, form, harmony and spatiality. In the case of *nuun*, markedness is afforded to the chromatic element and the periodic element by their contrast with the harmonic and rhythmic stasis of the opening isotopy and by the persistent presence of this chaotic topical environment in the first half of the work. In the second half a contrasting state – much like the negative image of a photograph or the residue of a printing procedure – presides, its competing elements accruing markedness through their relationship to sonic absence.

Transvaluation of this narrative analysis calls for a return to the mythic and temporal allusions of the title. Fuhrmann's reference to the Breton goddess Nu offers a useful starting point, although Furrer's lack of comment leaves open the possibility of alternative readings. One such reading is the better-known myth of the Egyptian god Nu, or Nun as he is sometimes named, who 'personified the primeval waters which existed at the time of creation and from which the creator sun god arose'.³⁶ The principal characteristics of Nu are chaos, inertia and wateriness, corresponding affectively to the turbulent opening and prevailing topical environment of the first half of *nuun*.³⁷ The action of Khepra, meanwhile, a form of the

³⁶ Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017), p. 117. The pagan and Christian adaptations of figures and narrative elements from Egyptian myths do not rule out a possible connection between the Egyptian and the Breton versions of Nu, who are notably related by their association with notions of time and eternity. Daniel R. McBride, 'Nun', in *The Oxford Essential Guide to Egyptian Mythology*, ed. Donald B. Redford (New York: Berkley, 2003), p. 277.

³⁷ In this sense, the framing aesthetic of the first half may be heard as a primordial counterpart to the bucolic water topic identified by Almén's Chopin's G major Prelude analysis.

sun god Ra, who, in naming himself, both came into being and triggered the first act of creation from the watery mass,³⁸ can be identified in the epiphanic quality of the opening tutti chord and the subsequent emergence of the transgressive elements that initiate the narrative trajectory of the piece. As with the mythic narrative of Egyptian cosmology, *nuun* can thus be read as a philosophical reflection on the 'perennial issue of form appearing out of formlessness'.³⁹

The temporal ontology and mutability of this mythic narrative may also inform the philosophical implications of the work's temporal and formal processes. For the Egyptians, the creation myth of Nu and Ra, encompassing the entirety of individual and collective human life, was re-enacted in the daily rising and setting of the sun, and in the yearly flooding cycle of the Nile river.⁴⁰ This cyclical conception of nested temporal states manifests on several levels in *nuun*, not least in the inherent futility of the transgressive elements themselves. Chromatic movement and periodic repetition both affect dynamism, but lack a defined end goal other than looping back on themselves or continuing indefinitely, as reflected in the many failed assertions of rank that delineate the narrative trajectory. Only through synthesis do they reach a state of stable attainment, with the arrival on B and the gradual crescendo at the end of the final isotopy signalling the possibility of a cyclical return to the beginning of the piece. The temporal duality of night and day, further embodied for the Egyptians in the spatial opposition of sky and water, is also reflected in the dualities that underscore the composition, from its two halves, suggestive of primordial and earthly states of being, to the pairing of the pianos and the narrative elements themselves. The imperfect palindrome of *nuun* thus enacts a cyclical process of creation, entropy and rebirth, inviting reflection on different levels of temporal experience and narratives of becoming. Fuhrmann's reading of *nuun* as a mythic transvaluation of 'the moment that comprises all time' fits well within this mutable conception of cosmic experience. Understanding the temporal modality of the piece and its relationship to Furrer's broader practice, however, calls for further interrogation of the titular pun.

There is a distinction in German, lacking in English, between the substantive 'jetzt', translating roughly as 'right now', and the adverbial 'nun', translating roughly as 'from now on'. In musical terms these words denote two modes of presentist thinking: a Cagean conception of the 'now', as a singular moment of reflection and focus, and a narrative conception of the moment as involved in a state of becoming. For Furrer, 'nun' is the now of storytelling, accounting for both linear processes of transformation and the non-linear interrelationship between momentary details and the compositional whole.⁴¹ Narrative analysis of the kind proposed by Almén can be useful in tracing and comparing these processes and in situating Furrer's instrumental work in a wider range of hermeneutic contexts than have thus far been explored. It may also aid in establishing connections between topical archetypes that are

³⁸ E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians: Studies in Egyptian Mythology*, Vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1969), pp. 291–306.

³⁹ McBride, 'Nun', p. 277.

⁴⁰ 'Nun', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/topic/Nun-Egyptian-god (accessed 26 June 2023). The myth is considerably more complicated, involving numerous complementary male gods and their female counterparts; Nu and Ra, however, remain the central symbolic protagonists.

⁴¹ Ender cites these contexts, unified by the influential themes and narrative qualities of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as central to Furrer's musical development. Ender, *Metamorphosen des Klanges*, pp. 10–20.

both opened up by and precede the 'new paths' explored in *nuun*, such as the juxtaposition of drifting and periodic temporal elements in the First String Quartet (1985) or the block-like assemblage of punctual and racing textures in the Piano Concerto (2007).

Narrative analysis also invites dialogue with broader discourse on time in contemporary music, encompassing, to cite but a few relevant examples, compositional theory,⁴² parsing of temporal modalities,⁴³ comparative analysis of multi-temporal processes⁴⁴ and analytical approaches to temporality in performances of contemporary repertoire.⁴⁵ These abstract, theoretical, perceptual and/or philosophical perspectives may benefit in turn through cross-referencing with, or adaptation to, hermeneutic analysis of the kind pursued here. In this way, progressive models of temporality, such as those exhibited by Furrer's music, may be imbued with meaning and value in a wider variety of cultural, socio-political and psychological contexts.

⁴² Stockhausen's description of moment types in his moment-form theory, for example, bears a striking resemblance to the description of isotopic units and their agential arrangement by Almén, as well as the aesthetic and formal characteristics of isotopies in *nuun*. Karlheinz Stockhausen, 'Momentform', in *Texte I: Texte zur elektronischen und instrumentalen Musik; Aufsätze 1952–1963 zur Theorie des Komponierens* (Cologne: M. DuMont Schauberg, 1963), pp. 189–210.

⁴³ See, for example, Kristina Knowles recent framework for parsing musical conceptions of time and timelessness. 'Music as Time, Music as Timeless', in *The Oxford Handbook of Time in Music*, eds Mark Doffman, Emily Payne and Toby Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 57–76.

⁴⁴ Klaas Coulembier's rhizomatic comparison of temporal processes in Carter and Mahnkopf, for example, could be fruitfully extended to Furrer's work by means of narrative analysis. Klaas Coulembier, 'Multi-Temporality: An Analytical Approach to Contemporary Music, Embracing Concepts of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari', *Music Analysis*, 35, no. 3 (2016), p. 351.

⁴⁵ Christian Utz's 'morphosyntactic' analysis of spatial, processual and presentist temporal modalities in music by Lachenmann, Xenakis and Fernyehough and their contingency on performance decisions, for example, highlights the need for deeper investigation of the relationship between performance decisions and narrative interpretation in contemporary music. Christian Utz, 'Time-Space Experience in Works for Solo Cello by Lachenmann, Xenakis and Fernyehough: A Performance-Sensitive Approach to Morphosyntactic Musical Analysis', *Music Analysis*, 36 (2017), pp. 216–56. While the single recording of *nuun* does not allow for phonomusicological comparison of the kind undertaken by Utz, decisions taken by Péter Eötvös and Klangforum Wien – beyond the investigative scope of this article – particularly with respect to tempo and voicing, will undoubtedly affect listener perception of the micro- and macro-scale beats of the narrative.