

and more broadly, what aesthetic implications are raised by a compositional approach in which closure is problematized. This paper is an attempt to sort out some of these questions, using two works by John Adams, *Phrygian Gates* and *The Chairman Dances*, as models and examples, with brief reference to other works by Adams along the way. I intend to demonstrate that closure in these works is ambiguous and problematic, and that the ambiguity demonstrated by closure in these works, and in this period of Adams's music as a whole, is one of several facets of Adams's compositional aesthetic that can be considered post-modern.¹

Broadly speaking, three categories of musical organization contribute to the construction of closure. Primary among these is tonal organization. In tonal music, the surest sign of closure is the return to the "home" tonic key after departures to "foreign" key areas, or the final motion of the *Ursatz* from $\hat{2}$ to $\hat{1}$ over a V – I harmonic progression.² With Adams's music, however, the tonal language is not as neatly defined and predictable as that of common-practice tonality, so our expectations for tonal closure are not as strong, or even nonexistent. Proving or disproving tonal closure in such a context could prove to be an exercise in solipsism. Nevertheless, the examples below demonstrate that tonal patterns emerge relatively readily from Adams's music, and that the completion (or lack thereof) of these patterns contributes significantly to the construction of closure in these works.

Form is a second category of organization that contributes to closure. The completion of a well-known formal prototype signals to the listener the conclusion of a work. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith has demonstrated for poetry and Robert G. Hopkins has demonstrated for music, however, form cannot in and of itself generate closure. The completion of a formal pattern requires additional thematic or tonal elements for closure to be convincingly demonstrated.³ The examples discussed below demonstrate that for Adams's music, form is the least definitive element in generating closure.

Finally, rhetorical elements of music can generate the impression of closure, or at least of stereotypical "ending" gestures, even when there is no tonal or formal closure at all. This is what happens when we turn the radio on and hear the last moments of a Beethoven symphony. We recognize the rhetorical gestures of an ending and understand that closure is occurring, even though we have not heard all the music that leads up to this moment and contributes to that closure. In Adams's music, rhetoric has a complicated relationship with tonal and formal closure. Sometimes closural gestures end a work in which other types of closure are absent or ambiguous, and sometimes the rhetoric of closure is not present, even

while the completion of a tonal pattern strongly suggests tonal closure. The interactions between these three categories of closure are what makes closure in Adams's music so problematic and so fascinating.

TONAL ORGANIZATION

I begin with tonal organization for two reasons: first, in the works to be discussed below, it provides the most multifaceted perspective on the issue of closure; there is more material here than in the other two categories of inquiry. And second, it is generally the first factor, if not the only factor, considered in examinations of closure in tonal music. Form, as a closure-generating phenomenon, frequently collapses into tonal structure, and rhetoric's closural properties are generally considered last, if at all, in analyses of tonal music. It makes sense, therefore, to consider tonal organization in Adams's music first, and then to proceed to form and rhetoric.

As the examples from *Phrygian Gates* and *The Chairman Dances* will demonstrate, Adams does not use a consistent, readily analyzable tonal language in his works from this period. Unlike works based on functional tonality or serial procedure, there is no single, all-encompassing explanation for the tonal organization of these works. In fact, there are many passages that seem to defy any sort of rational explanation. Still, there is evidence of logic of a sort in some parts and aspects of these works, and that logic generally emerges as some model of pattern completion. In the analyses that follow, my principal mode of inquiry will be to attempt to discern evidence of patterns, and then to determine whether or not those patterns are completed, the completion of a pattern indicating a degree of tonal closure.

PHRYGIAN GATES (1977)

The tonal materials in the work as a whole are governed by a series of tonal centers in rising fifths, combined with alternating Lydian and Phrygian modes. To illustrate: the opening section, measures 1–113, is based on the Lydian mode on A. The following section, measures 114–36, consists of the Phrygian mode on A. This section is followed by the Lydian mode on E (measures 137–235) and the Phrygian mode on E (measures 236–65), and so on, until the final section, measures 977–1092, which alternates between the Lydian and Phrygian modes on E \flat

and D \sharp .⁴ Throughout the work, pitch materials are drawn almost exclusively from the diatonic scales indicated by the modes.

This tonal pattern, while perfectly systematic, does not provide tonal closure for the work as a whole. If the end of a work is to be experienced as closure and not simply as an arbitrary stopping point, the nature and placement of the point of closure must be anticipated. In other words, for closure to occur, the tonal organization of the music must either define its own endpoint or participate in a system in which a given endpoint is already defined. (In Schenkerian terms, scale-degree $\hat{1}$ over the tonic harmony is the predefined endpoint for a tonal work.) The pitch organization of *Phrygian Gates* does not suggest how or where it will end. Nothing about the final section of the work implies that the tonal progression must end there, and may not proceed on to the next link in the series of ascending fifths. The only natural endpoint suggested by the pattern of mode and key center changes is the completion of the cycle of fifths, returning to the beginning point after cycling through the Lydian and Phrygian modes on each of the twelve pitch classes, but this is not where *Phrygian Gates* ends. In this respect, the tonal structure of *Phrygian Gates* resembles a stanzaic poem, which does not present any particular necessity for closure after each of its stanzas. Instead, the repetition inherent in the stanzaic form generates a desire on the part of the reader/listener for a significant alteration in the pattern that would suggest closure.⁵

In addition to the pattern of tonal collections and modes that governs the whole work, *Phrygian Gates* is divided into four movements by changes of tempo and figuration.⁶ The third movement (measures 640–808) explores certain narrowly-defined voice-leading transformations of a basic chord. These transformations provide the basis for the harmonic organization of the movement, but they do not generate any convincing closure. The basic chord first appears in measure 640, where it contains the pitches C \sharp , E, G \sharp , and B. In the next articulated chord (measure 643), one of the E's from the first chord moves down a diatonic second to D. In the third chord, the G \sharp from the second chord moves down a diatonic second to F \sharp . In the fourth chord, the B from the previous chord moves down a diatonic second to A. The next chord, in measure 650, reverts back to the original basic chord. Example 1 summarizes the voice-leading motions involved in these measures.

In the following three chords, three individual voices move down a diatonic third. In measure 661, the basic chord returns, and in the following three chords, three voices move down a diatonic fourth. After the return to the basic chord again in measure 668, three voices move down a diatonic fifth, and the basic chord returns again in measure 682. The

basic chord basic chord

EXAMPLE 1: *PHRYGIAN GATES*, THIRD MOVEMENT,
CHORD PROGRESSION

pattern of transformation in these forty-two measures establishes what I call a “cycle.” There are four cycles in the movement, each of which begins with a basic chord that contains one more pitch-class than the previous basic chord. (The first basic chord is C#, E, G#, B; the second is C#, E, G#, B, D; the third is A, C#, E, G#, B, D; and the fourth is A, C#, E, G#, B, D, F#, or the complete diatonic set.) Example 2 summarizes a cycle.

basic chord	basic chord	basic chord	basic chord
one voice falls a 2nd	one voice falls a 3rd	one voice falls a 4th	one voice falls a 5th
another voice falls a 2nd	another voice falls a 3rd	another voice falls a 4th	another voice falls a 5th
another voice falls a 2nd	another voice falls a 3rd	another voice falls a 4th	another voice falls a 5th
revert to basic chord			

EXAMPLE 2: A “CYCLE” FROM THE THIRD MOVEMENT OF *PHRYGIAN GATES*. READ EACH COLUMN FROM TOP TO BOTTOM AND BEGIN WITH COLUMN AT LEFT

Tonal closure based on the harmonic process in the movement is difficult to determine, because the pattern of cycles does not imply its own ending point. But the point at which the cycles end can be considered a logical one. Once all seven pitch classes have been incorporated into the basic chord, the sequence cannot continue to add pitch classes to the basic chord without going beyond the diatonic set, an option not allowed by the exclusively diatonic nature of the work as a whole. The ending point is logical, then, but not implied by the structure in the same way that the final tonic chord is implied by a tonal work. The third

movement of *Phrygian Gates*, like the work as a whole, demonstrates a clearly-defined pattern of organized tonal materials that does not produce strongly articulated closure.

The fourth movement of *Phrygian Gates* breaks from the pattern, established in the first and second movements, wherein a single Lydian section on a particular tonal center is followed by a single Phrygian section on that same tonal center. Instead, in the fourth movement key signatures reflecting the Lydian and Phrygian modes alternate frequently. In addition, within each key signature, the focus is not on the finals of the two modes, $A\flat$ and $G\sharp$, but rather on the fifths of the modes, $E\flat$ and $D\sharp$.⁷ This emphasis, while present throughout the movement, is made explicit by measures 947–53, which contain only the single pitch $E\flat 5/D\sharp 5$, alternating back and forth between enharmonically equivalent notations.

These seven measures, consisting entirely of one pitch, are the axis point of a palindrome that spans the entire movement, beginning in measure 809 and ending in the final bar. The palindrome is also governed by a pattern of systematically diminishing durations in the first half of the palindrome, and systematically increasing durations in the second half. Beginning in measure 809, there is a segment of thirty measures in $A\flat$ Lydian (measures 809–38), followed by thirty measures in $G\sharp$ Phrygian (measures 839–68). Then it returns to Lydian for fifteen bars, and Phrygian for fifteen bars. Up to measure 923, each presentation of a modal pair is half the length of the previous presentation. Example 3 summarizes the palindromic structure of the whole movement.

3 \flat :	30	15	8	4	3	3	1.5	1.5	3/4	3/4	3/8	3/8
3 \sharp :	30	15	8	4	3	3	1.5	1.5	3/4	3/4	3/8	3/8
3 \flat :	3/8	3/8	3/4	3/4	1.5	1.5	3	3				
3 \sharp :	3/8	3/4	3/4	1.5	1.5	3	3					
							2 \flat :	4	8	15	30	
							5 \sharp :	4	8	15	30	

EXAMPLE 3: *PHRYGIAN GATES*, FOURTH MOVEMENT RETROGRADE STRUCTURE. NUMBER OF MEASURES IN EACH KEY SIGNATURE

In measure 923, Adams abandons key signatures and uses accidentals to generate the pitches needed for the modes. Also at this point, the metrical pattern changes slightly. The first segments after the key signatures

disappear are three bars long, instead of the expected two, and from this point until the axis of the palindrome, each modal pair will appear twice at each duration before proceeding on to the next duration in the series. The pattern of each duration diminishing by half is maintained; after the three-bar segments, the next segments are one and a half bars long, and so forth.

The axis point of the palindrome, as mentioned above, is in measures 947–53. The pitch content of the segments leading up to the axis gradually diminishes until we are left with the single pitch-class $E_b/D\sharp$. These measures clearly demonstrate that the focus of the movement is the alternation between $G\sharp$ Lydian and A_b Phrygian, and the enharmonic equivalence between $D\sharp$ and E_b . There is no other reason why Adams would have notated this pitch in two different ways, other than to make this point. The enharmonic equivalence between $D\sharp$ and E_b indicates that there is an underlying conceptual justification for this unusual notation.

When the second half of the palindrome reaches the point at which the key signatures disappeared in the first half (measure 978; corresponds to measure 923 in the first half), the key signatures return as expected, but instead of reintroducing the old key signatures, the disruption in the pattern of durations prompts a move to the next link in the cycle of ascending fifths. Beginning in measure 978, we have key signatures of two flats and five sharps, representing E_b Lydian and $D\sharp$ Phrygian, respectively. The new key signatures break the symmetry of the palindrome, but do not destroy it entirely. The pattern of key signatures and durations proceeds exactly as it would have done, but transposed up a perfect fifth.

The palindromic organization of the fourth movement provides a strong theoretical basis for closure in the fourth movement of *Phrygian Gates*. A palindrome naturally defines its own ending point as the point at which the mirror symmetry is complete. Heard in time, a palindrome is finished when all the material in the first half has been repeated backwards. But, again heard in time, no palindrome is identifiable as such until the midpoint has been reached and the symmetrical repetition of the first half begins. Until this point, the only closure that could be anticipated in this movement is suggested by the decreasing duration of each modal pair. The structure presents a sort of musical equivalent of Zeno's paradox: if each modal pair is half as long as the previous pair, how short can the pairs get before they disappear entirely? Once the axis is reached and the reversed repetition begins, however, the astute listener will be able to anticipate both the nature and the placement of closure at the conclusion of the palindrome.

Each of the tonal processes described above for *Phrygian Gates* is substantially different from the others: the work as a whole is governed by

an open-ended progression of tonal centers; the third movement works through an intricate voice-leading algorithm; and the fourth movement is both a palindrome and a process-oriented metrical structure. The organization of the final movement and the work as a whole both are loosely related via the common concept of the pattern of modal centers, but the voice-leading algorithm in the third movement seems wholly unrelated to either of the other two organizational systems. Likewise, the first and second movements are difficult, if not impossible, to explain in the terms laid out here. Finally, of the three different, internally consistent tonal structures in *Phrygian Gates*, only one of these (the fourth movement) produces convincing closure.

THE CHAIRMAN DANCES (1985)

The tonal organization of this orchestral work is dramatically different from that of *Phrygian Gates*, and poses a substantial challenge to the analyst. Like *Phrygian Gates*, *The Chairman Dances* is based on diatonic collections, but this later work makes use of considerably more chromaticism within an apparently diatonic framework. Unlike *Phrygian Gates*, *The Chairman Dances* does not reduce easily to any simple overall tonal pattern. Diatonic collections, harmonic areas, and even individual chords are combined and juxtaposed in a highly idiosyncratic and intuitive manner. Nevertheless, over the course of the work certain themes emerge as being, in a broad sense, what the tonal construction of the work is “about.” Borrowing a term and some related concepts from narrative theory, I will discuss these themes as enigmas: puzzles presented by the work or narrative, the definitive solutions to which provide a degree of narrative or thematic closure.⁸

The first puzzle or enigma presented in *The Chairman Dances* involves a conflict between the major second and the minor second as motivic elements. The major second permeates the texture of the work in a number of ways, the most obvious of which is a staccato, oscillating motivic idea that begins the movement, continues through measure 185, and reappears briefly in measures 415–34 (see Example 4). The major second also appears as the principal interval-class in the sweeping melody beginning in the violins in measure 160. In this melody, the major second is frequently inverted or compounded, but an analysis of the ic content of the melodic line (see Example 5) from measure 160 to measure 207 shows that ic 2 saturates the melody.

The major second is also the primary melodic motive in the section that closes the work, beginning in measure 401. Here, the alternation

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Bassoon and Viola. The Bassoon part is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a 2/4 time signature. The Viola part is written on a single staff with an alto clef and a 2/4 time signature. Both parts play a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The notes are beamed together in pairs (G-A, B-C, D-E, F-G) with eighth-note values. There are various rests and articulation marks throughout the sequence.

EXAMPLE 4: *THE CHAIRMAN DANCES*, MAJOR SECOND MOTIVE

IC	Occurrences
1	11
2	61
3	23
4	5
5	8
6	2

EXAMPLE 5: INTERVAL CLASS CONTENT OF *THE CHAIRMAN DANCES*, MELODY MEASURES 160–207

between pitch classes B and A in the piano chords and piccolo generates the “melody” of the section (see Example 6). By the very end of the piece, in measures 448–65, the B-A oscillation is the only tonal motion in the texture. Major seconds, often between the pitch classes F and G, also appear at several points throughout the work as parts of accompanimental figures, most notably at measure 295 and measure 324.

These presentations of the major second are the relatively straightforward, unambiguous ones. The enigma appears when the major second motive overlaps with a second enigmatic aspect of the work, a conflict between the pitch classes F and F \sharp .⁹ In measures 59–90 (and also in a similar section in measures 125–59), the staccato eighth-note figure from the opening of the work (now appearing in the clarinets and bassoons)

424

Bn.

Hn.

Tpt.

Fgco.

Sn. D.

Hihat

Perc. BLD.

Sandp. Bl.

431

Vn.

BASS

4 Solo Vn.

(Bottom 1/2)

The musical score consists of ten staves. The first staff (Bn.) begins with a measure number box containing '424'. The second staff (Hn.) has a measure number '4' above it. The third staff (Tpt.) has a measure number '4' above it. The fourth staff (Fgco.) has a measure number '4' above it. The fifth staff (Sn. D.) has a measure number '4' above it. The sixth staff (Hihat) has a measure number '4' above it. The seventh staff (Perc. BLD.) has a measure number '4' above it. The eighth staff (Sandp. Bl.) has a measure number '4' above it. The ninth staff (Vn.) has a measure number box containing '431' and the instruction '4 Solo Vn.' below it. The tenth staff (BASS) has a measure number '4' above it. A dashed line is drawn between the third and fourth staves. A bracket labeled '(Bottom 1/2)' is positioned below the ninth and tenth staves.

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EXAMPLE 6: THE CHAIRMAN DANCES, MEASURES 424-34

The final section of the work proposes a third puzzle or enigma, which also defies a definitive solution (and thus prevents closure). The major second oscillation between B and A, introduced in measure 401 and emphasized prominently in measures 423–64, appears along with the pitch-classes D and F \sharp (or F) in the piano chords and string accompaniment. This combination of pitch classes results in an alternation between B-rooted and D-rooted triads.¹⁰ These two roots, B and D, compete for dominance as the primary tonal center for the conclusion of the work, with strong analytical arguments possible for either tonal center.¹¹

The evidence for B as the tonal center begins with the accompanimental parts in the strings, clarinets, and bassoons in measures 401–7, which emphasize a B-rooted triad. This establishes B as the tonal center at the beginning of the section; B is positioned as the original tonal center, the “incumbent,” and it will be up to D to challenge B’s initial dominance. The rhythmic organization of this section also supports B as the tonal center; B-rooted triads are consistently presented on strong beats or parts of beats. Triads rooted on B are also consistently presented in root position, while D-rooted triads, because of the voicing of the piano and string parts, always appear in second inversion after measure 423.

There are strong arguments in favor of D as the tonal center as well. The most compelling of these is that the final chord of the work is a D major triad (albeit in second inversion), in the piano in measures 461–4. D-rooted triads also appear as the final chords of phrases and are often held for longer durations than the B-rooted triads (e.g. measures 436, 442, 445, etc.). Finally, the alternation between F and F \sharp , which happens concurrently with the conflict between B and D as tonal centers, produces a B diminished triad whenever F \sharp is in effect. The traditional prohibition against a diminished triad as the tonic in functional tonality weakens the sense of B as a tonal center whenever F \sharp appears. F \sharp does not weaken D as a tonal center, however, because it merely changes a D major triad to a D minor triad. These arguments for D and for B as tonal centers do not suggest a clear predominance of one tonal center over the other. At best, B may be slightly more prominent, due to its rhythmic placement and root-position triads, but it is strongly challenged by D, which appears as the cadential chord for phrases and for the work as a whole. The enigma, then, is not solved conclusively, and closure based on the resolution of the enigma is avoided.

In both *Phrygian Gates* and *The Chairman Dances*, the picture of closure that we get when we examine the tonal organization of the works is decidedly ambiguous. Although tonal organization is usually the primary, if not the exclusive, category in which closure is constructed, form and rhetoric also play crucial roles in developing or undermining our percep-

tion of closure. The following sections of this essay examine the ways in which form and rhetoric interact with tonal organization to create or inhibit closure.

FORM

Musical form, or the completion of well-known formal patterns, is not wholly definitive in generating closure. As the work by Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Robert G. Hopkins cited above proposes, the simple completion of a formal pattern cannot in and of itself produce closure. Smith addresses issues of closure in poetry, and demonstrates that not only does a stanzaic form not produce closure (as discussed above with reference to *Phrygian Gates*), but even a closed form such as a limerick also cannot generate convincing closure without cooperation from thematic elements.¹² With regard to music, Hopkins proposes that even with a straightforward formal scheme such as a ternary form, the formal pattern itself only aids the perception of closure on the part of the listener, insofar as he or she expects the return of the *A* section to end at the same point and with the same tonal closure that the initial *A* section ended.¹³ The ternary form is only capable of enhancing whatever tonal closure is already present in the *A* section. If the initial *A* section does not contain strong tonal closure, the simple fact of its repetition cannot make up for its lack of closure. Formal closure, therefore, often (if not always) collapses into tonal closure.

Nevertheless, the fact that form and formal paradigms make up an important part of our theories and perceptions of closure, even when they cannot independently produce it, would seem to warrant an investigation of the formal characteristics of Adams's music. Unfortunately (from the perspective of an analyst attempting to find evidence of closure), such an investigation turns up decidedly ambiguous results. Adams's music, like that of many twentieth-century composers, does not engage with traditional formal models or principles at anything more than the most superficial level.

Phrygian Gates, as mentioned above, is loosely modeled on the Romantic four-movement piano sonata, with a fast movement, a faster movement (representing the traditional scherzo), a slow movement, and a concluding fast movement. Beyond this rough association with a traditional form, however, little formal organization can be discerned in *Phrygian Gates*. The four movements do not demonstrate any of the characteristics that we normally associate with musical form: repetition of material, familiar patterns of modulation, or even any kind of phrase

structure. Material is not, for the most part, repeated in this music in the same sense that it is in 18th- or 19th-century art music. Themes do not return, passages are not repeated, either exactly or with elaboration. Repetition saturates the texture of the music, but it is repetition of a very local variety, produced by the constantly repeating and minutely changing figural patterns typical of Adams's so-called minimalist style of this period (see Example 8).

The musical score consists of five systems of piano music. The first system is marked 'Piano' and includes a tempo indication of $\text{♩} = 90$. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The first system includes the instruction 'una corda' and dynamic markings 'p' and 'ff'. The second system includes 'ff' and 'p'. The third system includes measure number '10' in a box and 'ff'. The fourth system includes 'ff'. The fifth system includes measure number '20' in a box and 'sempre p'. The score shows a constant eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand and a melodic line in the right hand with occasional accents.

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EXAMPLE 8: *PHRYGIAN GATES*, MEASURES 1–20

The fourth movement of *Phrygian Gates*, with its palindromic organization, is the one part of the work that could be considered either as an example of a traditional or recognizable formal type, or at least as a structure that involves the large-scale repetition of material. But, as we have seen, the palindrome of the fourth movement is constructed not by a literal retrograde at the note-by-note level—although the central part is a literal palindrome—but by a retrograde of the pattern of alternating modes. Thus, the palindrome, while a formal device or technique, is constructed entirely on the basis of tonal organization. Form again collapses into tonal structure.

The usual modulatory schemes (from tonic to dominant in the major mode, and the like) are replaced in *Phrygian Gates* by the all-encompassing modal scheme of alternating Phrygian and Lydian modes. Thus, the overall tonal impression presented by this work is not the traditional “journey” away from a “home” key to “foreign” territory and back again, but instead, a constantly progressing, though predictable, pattern of changing modal centers.

Finally, because the only “melodic” material in this minimalist work is the constant motion of the figural patterns, and because there is no harmonic progression on a scale smaller than the changing modal centers, no analysis of anything like phrases is possible. In addition, the lack of anything like a cadence in the work prevents a division of any particular passage into phrases. In the fourth movement, the alternation between Phrygian and Lydian modes nearer to the center of the palindrome occurs on a scale that might approximate that of a phrase-level analysis, but the figural texture and lack of cadences precludes an understanding of this movement on the basis of phrases. The minimalist texture changes in the third movement, but an analysis of phrases is equally impossible here, both because there are again no cadences, and because the texture again contains no recognizable melody. Instead, it is entirely taken up with long extended chords that stretch the sustaining capabilities of the modern piano. Thus, form as we understand it, defined in terms of tonality, repetition, and phrase, does not operate in *Phrygian Gates*.

The Chairman Dances presents a different set of difficulties than *Phrygian Gates* does, and the end result with regard to the analysis of form is somewhat more ambiguous. Like many other works by Adams from the 1980s, *The Chairman Dances* falls neatly into sections defined by orchestration, tempo, texture, and dynamics. Often the boundaries between these sections are marked by a double barline or a boxed measure number in the score, suggesting the intentional demarcation of a section.¹⁴ The most dramatic section changes occur in conjunction with a change

in tempo, as with the shift to a slightly slower tempo and a clearly articulated string melody in measure 160, and the change to a much slower tempo and a suddenly rather mysterious, slinky texture at measure 251.

The principal sections of *The Chairman Dances*, as defined primarily by double barlines and boxed measure numbers, are summarized in Example 9. Since these sections do not form any clearly recognizable formal pattern such as a ternary or rondo form, evidence of large-scale formal organization, and the large-scale closure that goes along with it, must be sought in the repetition of tonal or motivic materials. Such evidence is readily forthcoming in *The Chairman Dances* in a way that it was not in *Phrygian Gates*, but the picture of closure that it illuminates is less than unequivocal.

Measures	Description
1–58	opening foxtrot
59–90	minor-mode foxtrot
91–124	opening foxtrot again
125–59	minor-mode foxtrot again
160–220	violin melody
221–50	unstable
251–66	much slower, “slinky”
267–86	slightly faster, violins <i>col legno</i>
287–305	return to minor-mode foxtrot
306–474	final section, M2 melody in piano and strings

EXAMPLE 9: FORMAL SECTIONS OF *THE CHAIRMAN DANCES*

As the chart in Example 9 shows, the first large part of *The Chairman Dances* consists of two types of music—the opening foxtrot, and a slightly different foxtrot tinged with the minor mode—in alternation. In measure 287 (a formal boundary marked by changes in tempo, orchestration, and texture, as well as a double barline and boxed measure number), aspects of the second, minor-mode foxtrot return. Example 10

gives an excerpt from the score beginning in measure 289; compare this excerpt with that in Example 7. The most obvious connection, at this point in the work, between the section at measure 287 and the earlier section is the return of the staccato major-second motive, here on the pitch classes G and F in flute, clarinet, and bassoon.¹⁵ The bass line, which oscillates between pitch classes a minor third apart (G/B \flat , and B/D), is another clear link between the two passages. Finally, the pitch classes in the remaining elements of the texture, B \flat (later B \natural) and D, in the flute and clarinet (and later bassoon)¹⁶ echo those used in the earlier passage.

Based on this evidence, it seems that a clear reference to the earlier passages is being made in this section. Several factors lessen the immediacy of the reference, however. First among these is the tempo; the earlier passages are marked $\text{♩} = 84-8$, while this passage begins at $\text{♩} = 92$ and accelerates rapidly from there. In addition, the conflict between pitch-classes F and F \sharp , so prominent in the initial passages, is not present in this later excerpt. In fact, the consistency of the major second motive between G and F is emphasized by the motivic pattern that begins in measure 295. But more importantly, the length of the later section argues against its being heard as balancing the two earlier passages. This section lasts for only 19 bars (until the boxed measure number at measure 306) before it changes rapidly into another section, as compared with 32 and 34 bars for each of the passages at the beginning of the work. And the sense of rounding-off and completion suggested by the return of the minor-mode foxtrot materials is weakened by the fact that measures 287–305 do not in fact end the work. A lengthy and formally significant passage follows this one and provides the true conclusion to the work.¹⁷

Even if the aural and structural connection between the passages were not compromised by these factors, there would still be a question as to whether this association is sufficient to generate closure in and of itself. As it was discussed above, the simple return of material from the beginning of a work cannot create closure. The material that returns must itself contain tonal or structural closure. In the first presentation of the minor-mode foxtrot material, the principal tonal issues were the enigmas surrounding the major-second motive and the conflict between F and F \sharp . Both of those enigmas are resolved in this section; the major second and F \natural are used to the exclusion of their competing motives. This would suggest, therefore, that closure is achieved in this section. The actual final section of the work, however, undermines that closure by again calling the F \natural /F \sharp enigma into question, and by failing to provide a definitive solution.¹⁸

289 Gradually accelerate *Fl. 2 change to Picc.* $\text{♩} = 132$ *Fl. 1*

Fl. 1, 2
Ob.
Cl. 1, 2
Bn. 1, 2
Hn. 1, 2
Tpt.
Ttb.
Pno.
Hp.
Vib.
Xyl.
Tgl.
289 Gradually accelerate $\text{♩} = 132$ (mutes off) *pizz.*
Vn. 1, 2 (mutes off) *pizz.*
Vla.
Vc. (top 1/2)
Bass (Bottom 1/2) Tutti

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EXAMPLE 10: THE CHAIRMAN DANCES, MEASURES 289-96

Measure 306 contains the last structural marker (boxed measure number or double barline) of the work. The section that begins in this measure and ends the work nevertheless contains three distinct subsections,

defined primarily in terms of tonal stability and melodic material. The final subsection, beginning in measure 401, was discussed above with regard to its participation in the enigmas in the work (see Example 6). Material from this subsection, primarily the chordal material in the piano and the melody that circles around B and A in the upper strings, also appears in measures 306–23.¹⁹ In between the initial presentation of this material and its substantially expanded return in measure 401 is a contrasting section dominated by a sprawling melody in the French horns and violas.²⁰ In contrast with the relative tonal stability of the outer subsections, which hardly move from the alternation between D-rooted triads and B-rooted triads described above, this inner subsection is tonally unstable, moving rapidly to the flat side of the tonal spectrum in measure 334 and circling back around to the sharp side by measure 355, remaining there (though with rapidly changing harmonies) until the conclusion of the subsection.

The brief section in measures 306–23 does not have the structural weight to balance the final section sufficiently. Its structural importance is easily missed, particularly by a listener unfamiliar with the work; only after hearing how the work ends can the listener go back and reinterpret the significance of the first subsection. This leaves us with a rather unbalanced ternary shape, with 18 measures at the beginning of the section balanced by 75 at the end. In fact, it is unbalanced in exactly the opposite direction that the minor-mode foxtrot sections were unbalanced, where the return section was significantly shorter than the initial sections. A rough graphic interpretation of the patterns of association materials might be as shown in Example 11.



EXAMPLE 11: GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF ASSOCIATIONAL PATTERNS IN *THE CHAIRMAN DANCES* (FIGURE NOT DRAWN TO SCALE)

Where does this leave us with regard to formal closure in *The Chairman Dances*? Unlike in *Phrygian Gates*, principles of form seem to play an active role in our understanding of closure in this work. An analysis of the work based on its formal characteristics does not, however, present us

with an unequivocal picture of closure. Sections return, but with unbalanced structural weights and sometimes in inconvenient locations. And tonal issues that appear to be resolved in the return of the minor-mode foxtrot section are again undermined in the final passage of the work.

RHETORIC

If the perception of tonal and formal closure requires a certain degree of structural hearing, the perception of the rhetorical aspect of closure does not. Closural rhetoric is what enables us, upon turning on the radio to the last thirty seconds of a Beethoven symphony, to know that what we are listening to is indeed the close of the work, despite the fact that we have not heard any of the work up to this point. Rhetorical characteristics of closure are generally defined in terms of conventions and excess.²¹ Typical closural conventions include repeated dominant-to-tonic cadences, repeated and accented tonic chords at the end of a work or movement, or the trill that often signals the impending end of a cadenza in a late eighteenth-century concerto. Another type of rhetorical convention involves an ending in which tension, dynamics, and rhythm all decrease in intensity, fading away into oblivion.²²

Both of these paradigms of closural rhetoric involve the concept of excess, but the former illustrates it more clearly. Excess in this case refers to an ending that in some way goes “over the top,” moving beyond the ranges of dynamics, tempo, register, or orchestration that have been utilized throughout the musical work. A conclusion that exhibits closural excess is louder, higher, and/or faster than most of the music in the rest of the work. A conclusion that fades out also engages in strategies of excess, but instead of being louder, higher, and faster, it is softer, lower, and slower. In this case, the excess itself is less obviously distinctive than the almost clichéd rhetorical gesture. In either case, however, a listener can easily grasp the rhetorical signals of closure; they are, perhaps, among the most well-known gestures in the canonical repertoire.

The two works under discussion here represent both paradigms of rhetorical closure. *The Chairman Dances* gradually fades away, diminishing down to nothingness, while *Phrygian Gates* ends in a loud, exuberant “finale” passage. Loud endings in Adams’s works further divide into two categories: those with some kind of articulation of the last chord or chords, and those without any articulation, in which the work simply ends after the last chord. The endings that exhibit the strongest closure in Adams’s music are those that fade away. Loud endings without articulation are the least closural, because they give no warning whatsoever that

the end is approaching, and in order for closure to be perceived as such, rather than as simply a ceasing of sound, it must be anticipated. Loud endings with articulation fall in between the other two types in terms of the closural strength of the musical rhetoric.

The Chairman Dances is a good example of one of John Adams's works in which the rhetoric of closure is based on the fading-out paradigm. Three aspects of the rhetorical organization of the music—dynamics, duration, and orchestration (in terms of the number of discrete components in the musical texture)—all strengthen closure in the final section, which begins in measure 401 (see above, Example 6). The decreasing dynamic levels begin to take effect in measure 423, the point at which the piano re-enters the texture after a brief absence. From here to the end of the work, the dynamic markings in the piano decrease steadily from *f* to *mf* in measure 430, *mp* in measure 435, *p* in measure 457, and *pp* in measure 460. Between measure 423 and measure 435, the bassoons, horns, trumpets, solo violins, and bass all diminuendo down to *pp* or *ppp* before dropping out, leaving only the piano and percussion from measure 435 to the end. While the percussion crescendo to *ff* in measure 467 (a crescendo that dovetails with the piano's decrescendo down to *pp* and out in measure 464), this crescendo in performance is often not played to a full *fortissimo*. The percussion also decrescendo down to *p* or *pp* in the final three bars of the movement.

Duration begins to affect closure in measure 436, when the chordal part in the piano begins to articulate musical phrases with extended final chords (measures 436, 438–9, 442, etc.). These final chords gradually increase in length from two and a half quarter notes in measure 436, to nine and a half quarter notes in the final chord, measures 461–4. As with the diminishing dynamic levels, the increasing rhythmic durations, particularly in the context of phrase-ending long tones, contribute to an easing of tension and arrival at a state of rest by the end of the work.

Finally, the number of discrete components in the orchestral texture decreases from measure 401 to the end, leaving only the percussion from measure 465 forward.²³ In measure 401, the full brass section departs (half of the horns and the trumpets re-enter briefly in measures 411 and 415, respectively) and the violin section is reduced to half its original number. Instrumental parts drop out quickly between measure 423 and measure 435, with the upper woodwinds leaving entirely, and the string section reduced to four solo violins, finally leaving only the piano and percussion are left in measure 435. These two components continue to measure 464, when the piano drops out, but the diminishing dynamic levels and increasing durations continue the general trend of fading away during these measures.

Although the tonal and formal elements of closure in *The Chairman Dances* are decidedly ambiguous, as we have seen above, the rhetorical gestures and signals for closure are clear and unmistakable. Other works by Adams from the late 1970s to the late 1980s that end with these same rhetorical characteristics include all three movements of *Harmonium*, *Tromba Lontana*, *The Wound-Dresser*, the first and second movements of *Grand Pianola Music*, the second movement of *Harmonielehre*, *Common Tones in Simple Time*, *Shaker Loops*, *Nixon in China*, and *Fearful Symmetries*. *Fearful Symmetries* also provides an interesting example for study, in that it appears to end twice: once, softly, at the very end of the work, but just before that, a crashing false “finale” occurs that exemplifies the “faster, higher, louder” aspects of closural rhetoric, despite the deeply unstable sonority around which it rotates. The fading-away ending represents by far the most common type in Adams’s works through the 1980s, and the fact that it is also the most conclusive in terms of closure probably contributes to the frequency with which Adams used it.

Phrygian Gates contrasts with *The Chairman Dances* in that it provides little or no rhetorical indication of closure at the end of the work. Rather, *Phrygian Gates* is one of a number of Adams’s works that ends loudly and abruptly. In the general discussion of paradigms of rhetorical closure above, a distinction was drawn between those loud endings where the final chord is provided with some articulation, and those where it is not. *Phrygian Gates* falls into the former category, and as a result the rhetorical closure at the end of this work is particularly problematic. Loud endings without articulation, in which the final musical event is not in any way distinguished from those preceding it, are the least conclusive of the three types of closure in Adams’s music. This type of ending tends to give the impression that the work has not actually ended, but instead that the listener’s experience of it has abruptly terminated—rather like turning off the radio in the middle of a work.

Loud endings with articulation, as in *Phrygian Gates*, do nothing to allow the listener to anticipate the point of closure, but at least provide some indication, once the closure has occurred, that the end of the work is marked in some way. Unlike endings without articulation, the listener does not get the sense that the radio has simply been turned off in the middle of the work. The articulation that signals closure in a loud ending may take several forms. It might be simply a final chord that is either more consonant or extended longer than the chords that precede it, or the final measures may bear resemblances to the repeated V – I cadences or repeated tonic chords that are characteristic of closural rhetoric in tonal music. Another method of articulating the point of closure is to interrupt a rhythmic, melodic, or harmonic pattern that has been estab-

lished in the measures leading up to the point of articulation, signaling that a change in a static system has occurred.²⁴

In *Phrygian Gates*, the articulation that ends the work is a fermata over the final chord, with the indication “let ring until sound fades.” Since the rhythmic pattern leading up to this moment has been one of block chords repeated in uninterrupted sixteenth notes, the sudden change to a sustained chord is both more extended than the chords that precede it, as well as an interruption in an established rhythmic pattern. Other movements or works that close with loud, articulated endings include *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, which mimics the rhythmic gesture (if not the actual harmonies) of a ii – V – I cadence; the first movement of *Harmonielehre*, which ends by interrupting an irregularly accented rhythmic pattern with an extended minor triad, followed by the same triad in a final short, extremely accented note; and the third movement of the same work, which ends in a manner similar to that used in *Phrygian Gates*.

It is interesting to note, however, that while the tonal organization of *The Chairman Dances* seems to deflect or avoid closure, the rhetoric of the ending is strongly clausal. At the same time, the palindromic tonal organization of the fourth movement of *Phrygian Gates* suggests closure, while the rhetoric seems to deny it. Is Adams making up for a lack of tonal closure with rhetoric in *The Chairman Dances*, while taking advantage of the tonal closure in *Phrygian Gates* to craft an ending that is more ambiguous in its rhetoric? What kinds of general conclusions about closure in Adams’s music can we draw from these two examples?

The first and most obvious conclusion that can be drawn is that closure is problematized in Adams’s works from the time period that includes *Phrygian Gates* and *The Chairman Dances*. In examining the various ways in which tonal materials, form, and rhetoric influence the perception of closure in these works, we have found both clear evidence that closure is constructed, as well as evidence that it is also (often simultaneously) undermined. In *Phrygian Gates*, we saw that although the palindromic organization of the last movement offers the potential for strong tonal closure, the third movement of the same work is much more ambiguous and open-ended, and the system of alternating modes and tonal centers that governs the work as a whole is undeniably open-ended, reaching no logical conclusion by the end of the work. And as we have just described above, rhetoric provides little additional support for a perception of closure at the end of the work. Closure in *Phrygian Gates*, therefore, is rather haphazard: some aspects of the work are closed, while others are not, and there does not appear to be a logical or purposeful interaction between the closed and the open aspects.

In *The Chairman Dances*, we saw that several enigmas were posed by the tonal materials of the work, only one of which, the major second as opposed to the minor second, is resolved conclusively, even while the music fades out in a stereotypical rhetorical gesture of closure. The formal construction of the work seems to engage with principles of formal closure by bringing about the return of familiar musical materials in two separate instances, but the reinforcement of closure that form provides is weak at best, as the returns are unbalanced and not always at the expected moment in the work. As with *Phrygian Gates*, some aspects of the work are strongly closed while others are not, and there does not seem to be any association between the closed and open aspects.

As with any aesthetic principle, there are three straightforward ways that a composer can react to the ideal of closure. He or she may adopt it, striving in his or her works to construct syntactically closed structures. The composer may dismiss it as irrelevant, and pay no particular attention to whether his or her works are closed or not. Or the composer may actively challenge it, producing works that deliberately deny or negate the principle of closure.²⁵ Adams takes none of these straightforward positions. He does not subscribe to the traditional aesthetic tenet that a work of art must be a closed, self-contained entity, but neither does he subscribe to an experimental approach that deliberately challenges all closed and self-contained art works. And his works clearly engage with strategies of closure—sometimes with obviously stereotypical ones like the fading-away ending—so he is clearly not ignoring the issue entirely. Closure, in Adams's compositional aesthetic, appears to be merely one option among many, to be selected or not, or to be participated in to a greater or lesser extent. In this regard, Adams's aesthetic position with regard to closure is fundamentally postmodern.

There are many characteristics of Adams's style and works, particularly from the period 1977–89, that can be identified as postmodern. Among the more obvious characteristics are his promiscuous mixing of styles, particularly styles borrowed from popular musics;²⁶ his evident sense of playfulness and whimsy, particularly notable in his choice of titles and subtitles for his works;²⁷ and his explicit rejection of the serious, the self-referential, and the inaccessible in music, qualities that so clearly characterize musical modernism.²⁸

What is significant about Adams's postmodern take on the subject of closure, however, is that it is not a surface characteristic like those described above. Rather, closure, and a composer's relationship to it, lie far beneath the surface of the art work, where it is difficult to “fake” a particular position. Adams can say what he likes about his own aesthetic position, and he can give his works outrageous titles, all without really

affecting the content or the aesthetic principles behind his music.²⁹ But when a straightforward investigation into “the music itself,” as this paper has attempted, turns up such ambiguous results with regard to closure, one of the first principles of traditional and modernist aesthetics, we can say with greater certainty that the music engages with postmodernism at a fundamental level.

In establishing the postmodernism of Adams’s music, we open doors of inquiry in many different directions. What additional characteristics and strategies of postmodernism can we find in his music, and what can we learn—both about his music and about the time, place, and circumstances under which it was composed—by identifying these characteristics and strategies? Adams’s techniques of tonal organization are often bafflingly difficult to decipher; can postmodern methodologies and modes of inquiry offer insights into the internal organization of his music that traditional, formalist analytical methods cannot?³⁰ What might we learn about his music, and that of other postmodernist or post-minimalist composers, through such modes of inquiry? How can we account for the unprecedented popularity of Adams’s music, as well as that of his post-minimalist colleagues Philip Glass and Steve Reich? Does postmodernism play a role in this popularity, and if so, what is that role and what does this say about the divide between “popular” and “high” art at the turn of the twenty-first century?

These and other questions are obviously well beyond the scope of the current project. I list them primarily as an indication of the directions and possibilities opened up by a seemingly straightforward inquiry into the nature of closure in Adams’s music. By opening up the investigation of Adams’s music—and by extension other late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century music—to categories of postmodernist inquiry, we greatly expand the kinds of questions we can ask of the music and the kinds of answers we can find. The investigation of closure conducted here, while valuable in and of itself, was also the most direct path that would allow us to arrive at this point.

NOTES

1. That time period would be from 1977 (the date of *Phrygian Gates*) to roughly 1989. In the very late 1980s Adams's works took a turn in a more modernist, dissonant direction that marked a significant stylistic and aesthetic change. Compare, for example, *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* (1986) with *The Wound-Dresser* (1989) and the *Chamber Symphony* (1992).
2. Patrick McCreless, "The Hermeneutic Sentence and Other Literary Models for Tonal Closure," *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (1991): 65.
3. Robert G. Hopkins, *Closure and Mahler's Music: The Role of Secondary Parameters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 15; Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 45–6.
4. Adams explains this pattern of modes in the liner notes to an early recording of *Phrygian Gates*, 1750 Arch Records LP S-1784, 1980.
5. Smith, 52–3. Eric Drott also notes the same phenomenon occurring in a strongly minimalist-influenced work by György Ligeti. The processes that structure the work's tonal organization are "unable to designate either its origin or its termination as 'logically' necessary." (Drott, "Process and Allusion in Ligeti's *Selbstportrait mit Reich und Riley (und Chopin ist auch dabei)*," unpublished paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Society for Music Theory, Chapel Hill, NC, December 1998, 5.)
6. In the liner notes cited above, Adams explains that these four movements correspond roughly to those of a four-movement piano sonata: fast, fast, slow, fast (Adams, 1980).
7. None of the previous sections of the work gave any particular emphasis to the final of the mode, or to any other scale degree, making the emphasis on E \flat and D \sharp here more notable.
8. The concept of the enigma as a syntactical element that can create closure originates in the literary criticism of Roland Barthes, and is described in McCreless, 35.
9. The fact that the F-F \sharp conflict is a separate motive from the major second is made clear by several passages in which F and F \sharp are placed in conflict with each other, without affecting the major second. The clearest of these examples is the concluding section of the work,

- beginning in measure 401, in which F and F \sharp alternate without disturbing the major second between B and A. Another example of the F-F \sharp conflict appears in the accompanimental parts in measures 160–90.
10. The term “B-rooted triad” is used here because, depending on the status of the F-F \sharp conflict, the triad may be B minor or B diminished. “D-rooted triad” refers to either a D major or D minor triad. A similar technique is used at the end of the first movement of Grand Pianola Music. Beginning in measure 629, the vocal parts alternate back and forth between D major and F \sharp minor triads, a chord change accomplished by neighbor motion between D and C \sharp in the lowest voice.
 11. This conflict between two triads whose roots are a third apart is very similar to the tonal axis theory described by Joseph N. Straus for the music of Stravinsky (see Joseph N. Straus, “Stravinsky’s Tonal Axis,” *Journal of Music Theory* 26/2 (1982): 261–90).
 12. Smith, 45–6.
 13. Hopkins, 15.
 14. In the printed score, boxed measure numbers appear at the beginning of every system. Additional boxed measure numbers, presumably indicating important formal articulations and frequently accompanied by a double barline, appear at scattered points throughout the work. The use of boxed measure numbers as evidence of a formal articulation will be important in the analysis to follow.
 15. This major second motive was discussed above as it pertains to enigmatic aspects of *The Chairman Dances*. It should be noted that this motive is present at least through measure 184, at which point it fades from the texture and is absent until its reappearance at measure 287.
 16. The bassoon pitch E in measures 291–4 appears to be an aberration. It moves to D in measure 295 and remains there (though passed to other instruments in the ensemble) for the remainder of the section.
 17. The formal and closural properties of this final section are discussed below.
 18. As the discussion of enigmas above pointed out, the major second motive does in fact emerge triumphant over the minor second, but the other two enigmas are not solved.

19. The elements identified here, while prominent, are not primary in the whole texture, as the contrasting melody in the French horns is marked “to the fore.”
20. Although Adams (or his editors) does not mark the boundaries of these sections with double barlines or boxed measure numbers, there is nevertheless a change of tempo and texture at measure 324, and a rather dramatic orchestral and textural shift at measure 401 that clearly indicate these points as structural junctures.
21. McCreless, 47. McCreless in turn refers to the works of the Roman orator Quintilian for the concepts of convention and excess.
22. The former set of closural conventions are described in McCreless, 51. The latter set are described in Hopkins, 34–59 passim.
23. The concept of orchestration defined in terms of discrete components is borrowed from Hopkins’s description of closure in Mahler’s music. See Hopkins, 58–9.
24. Smith, 50–6.
25. Examples of this kind of structure might include some of the more radical experimentalist works of the 1960s, such as La Monte Young’s *Piano Piece for David Tudor #1* (October 1960), in which a bale of hay and a bucket of water are brought onto the stage for the piano. The composition is over when the piano has eaten or decided not to. (The score is reproduced in Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 84.)
26. Examples include his use of the foxtrot in *The Chairman Dances*, and the jazz-influenced works *Century Rolls* (for piano and orchestra) and *Road Movies* (for violin and piano).
27. Examples include the triptych *American Standard* (named after a popular brand of toilet), the final movement of *Grand Pianola Music*, entitled “On the Dominant Divide,” and many of the works on the compact disc *Hoodoo Zephyr*.
28. See in particular Adams’s interview with Edward Strickland, published in *American Composers: Dialogues on Contemporary Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 181 and 188; and his interview with Tom Darter in *Keyboard* 19/11 (1993): 108 and 115.

29. Indeed, some of Milton Babbitt's works exhibit the same humorous titles as Adams's—Babbitt's *Minute Waltz* and *It Takes Twelve To Tango* spring to mind—and I can hardly imagine anyone venturing to call Babbitt a postmodernist.
30. Two recent attempts to apply postmodernist categories of inquiry to Adams's music are David Schwarz's articles "Postmodernism, the Subject, and the Real in John Adams's Nixon in China," *Indiana Theory Review* 13 (1992): 107–35 and "Listening Subjects: Semiotics, Psychoanalysis, and the Music of John Adams and Steve Reich," *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 24–57.