"Predominantly of a cheerful character"?

Irony in the Final Movement of Mahler's Seventh Symphony

Essay

Abstract

Mahler's Seventh Symphony, and particularly the finale, has been much criticised. For Adorno, the apparent move from dark to light across the symphony is too easy. According to Julian Johnson, the Finale is "neither an ironic subversion of the lyrical voice nor a merely constructive game." In fact, this movement should most certainly be read as an ironic mockery of the symphonic finale. This understanding of the piece draws on Booth's analytical discussion of irony: in particular through the cruel exaggeration of tropes surrounding the nineteenth-century conclusion, and the destruction of any sense of coherent teleological narrative.

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Cover Photo: Mahler rehearsing for the premiere of Symphony No. 7

Essay

Premiered in 1908 to a mixed response, Mahler's Seventh Symphony has ever-since been dogged by ambivalence. Somewhat sidelined in both performing and scholarly reception, those who have considered it have often found it to be troubling, identifying various structural 'issues'. This essay will first consider the nature of these 'problems' in the Rondo-Finale, primarily from harmonic, thematic, and rhetorical standpoints, and then contextualise these in an ironical reading, founded on Booth's discussion of literary irony in his seminal book, *The Rhetoric of Irony*.[1]

Though scholars tend to agree on the basic 'issues' with the form, they have responded in a plethora of different ways. As Peattie points out, the overall form resembles a series of tableaux much more than a single discourse.[2] Thus, for Johnson, this movement "accrues rather than develops [...]. It is not shaped [...] by an inner drama, a programmatic or novel-like direction. [...] It makes for a kind of structural polyphony, as if several musical trajectories were going on at the same time."[3] Meanwhile, for Scherzinger, there "is neither a single telos, nor is the movement a mere sequence of sections: rather, the very ideas of telos and sequentiality are put into a mere dialogue with each other".[4] Kramer, by contrast, draws attention to the disparity between the different parameters at play and their non-coincidence, arguing instead that the movement questions "formal structuring by means of coinciding harmonic, tonal, and thematic recapitulation", and indeed 'overthrows' recapitulation.[5] Evidently, all of these authors are of the opinion that there is a self-awareness to these formal features; that this sort of structural interplay has a specific communicative and ideological function. Likewise, they all largely agree that this movement both initially implies, and then categorically rejects the conventions of the rondo-finale. Where they differ, and indeed where this essay disagrees with them, comes in the hermeneutical understanding of these features.

First, however, a brief discussion of the theory surrounding irony, and its potential application to music. Though it is no longer controversial to assert that music can have meaning(s), it is a much more significant step to suggest that music can propose something which not only contains a surface meaning, but also includes an obscured meaning. And yet, this is exactly what we assume when we think of music as functioning ironically. As Samuels puts it, there is "a contradiction between the contexts of the signifying and signified s-codes": although the code identifies a signifier which implies expectations, the context contradicts these expectations.[6] Though the literature includes some useful criticisms of elements of Booth's theory, his basic framework for analysing irony holds firm, and his rhetorical stance is particularly useful in transferring this to music, hence using it as the foundation of this essay. Mahler's music is particularly responsive to this sort of analysis due to its intimate

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[1] Booth, *The Rhetoric of Irony*
[2] See Peattie, *Gustav Mahler's Symphonic Landscapes*, for further discussion, especially 133-138
[3] Johnson, *Mahler's Voices*, 119
[4] Scherzinger, 'The Finale of Mahler's Seventh Symphony', 78
[5] Kramer, 'Postmodern Concepts of Musical Time', especially 30-48
[6] Samuels, *Mahler's Sixth Symphony*, 116

relationship with generic conventions and their implications. Indeed, concepts like Hepokoski & Darcy's 'deformations', and Newcomb's 'narratology' are crucial here in discussing matters of listener expectations.[7] Though Horton has questioned the reality of this theorised normative practice, from which composers supposedly diverged, suggesting that it simply did not exist, formal and generic conventions can be understood to have existed in the contemporary imagination, and indeed can be seen as engaging with Newcomb's 'paradigmatic plots'.[8]

Before outlining Booth's analytical methodology: the question of agency. We typically think of two main agents in any ironical situation: the ironist, and the audience. Indeed, one of the shortcomings of Booth's approach is that he tends to assume that any irony is intended by the ironist: that irony functions as a manner of deliberate communication.[9] This is largely Evan Bonds' perspective too: he considers irony a way for Beethoven to consciously communicate with an audience of connoisseurs.[10] As Hutcheon discusses, however, it is crucial to acknowledge that ironies can both go unrecognised when intended, and perceived when unintended.[11] On a local level, this should assuage any concerns about an ironical reading of this movement given Mahler's description of it as "predominantly of a cheerful character", if we read this statement as both 'straight' and true, and view his words as having some authority over 'the music' (whatever this means). Of broader interest is Hutcheon's point that the irony comes as much through the interpretation of the audience as through the intentions of the author (surely a better term than 'ironist', given these qualifications).[12]

In analysing irony, Booth sets out various stages to first identify and then decipher the irony at work:

1. Identify the given proposition, and establish whether to read it as 'straight' or ironic. Booth establishes a dichotomy between 'overt' and 'covert' ironies in a statement's presentation, though in the context of music it is near-impossible to think of an equivalent to the sort of explicit clues he ascribes to overt irony.

2. Assuming something is found to prompt an ironical reading, establish alternative readings of the meaning of the original statement, that will likely clash with, if not fully contradict, the apparent meaning of the proposition.

3. Attempt to fit one or several of these to the given proposition.

Applying this to the Finale, though it seems fair to posit that the music does not express a proposition with determinate truth values,[13] it does seem accurate to suggest that this movement appears to present

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[7] Hepokoski & Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory*; Newcomb, 'Schumann and Late Eighteenth-Century Narrative Strategies'

[8] Horton, *Bruckner's Symphonies*, 153-154

[9] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, xi

[10] Evan Bonds, 'Irony and Incomprehensibility', 286-287

[11] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 10-14

[12] Ibid., 11

[13] See Cross & Tolbert, 'Music and Meaning', 34-36 for discussion of this

victorious music, largely through the confluence of various 'conventional' signs:[14] the success of the move from darkness to light through struggle that is the culmination of the entire symphony. The question we find ourselves asking, then, is whether this victoriousness is genuine, whether the movement really does achieve this success, or whether something else is going on. In asking this question, we have to consider the potential structural 'problems' of the movement, especially in terms of its varying deformations of expected practice.

On a surface level, it would appear that any doubt would be seriously misplaced: the final major section of this work (bb539ff.) appears to be insurmountably successful. Indeed, this final section is almost archetypal of the successful symphonic conclusion, with loud dynamics, an apparently unquestioned major key, emphasised by arpeggiated melodic writing, and rich orchestration including both church and cow bells. As Fig. 1 shows, this section largely recapitulates the opening section: indeed, though not a perfect reprise, the number of bars is identical, and the ordering of events fairly similar. Nonetheless, this final section certainly doesn't stand on its own: for this sense of success to be genuine, it has to be achieved across the course of the preceding movement (to fulfil the victory-through-struggle paradigm, which tends to be associated with this symphony). We have to consider, then, to what extent this final celebration feels the result of the preceding 'work', and if not, what alternative strategies Mahler might be employing.

In Fig. 1, it is immediately clear how much of this movement is in C major. The tonality repeatedly returns to this key, approaching it from all angles. This is not in itself unusual: a conventional part of a Rondo design is a return to the tonic key coordinated with a return to the thematic material of the opening section; indeed, a lack of tonal motion is often a characteristic feature of the Rondo. Nonetheless, for almost half of the movement to be in this key rejects the conventional ideas of long-term tonal progress that tended to structure contemporary symphonic movements, either in an away-and-return sense, or in terms of so-called 'directional tonality', resulting in what Floros terms "oppressive dominance".[15] Indeed, directional tonality is particularly relevant here: this whole symphony is typically understood as progressing from the E minor first movement (which itself begins in B minor, before modulating to E minor) through to the C major of this Finale.[16] There is a hint of this long-term motion within this movement: though the opening six bars are firmly in E minor, these are followed by an abrupt slip into C major. Though this might initially suggest E minor as an important secondary key, it never returns: it is little more than a recollection of the first movement, drawing attention to this movement as the culmination of the preceding music.

Following the exposition of the Rondo-theme, Mahler firmly establishes Ab major as the key of the second theme. This sort of tertial harmonic move was not unusual for Mahler, and mirrors the opening shift from E minor to C major, each time via parsimonious voice-leading (Fig. 2). Coupled

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[14] See Ibid., 34

[15] Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*, 211

[16] E.g. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, 27-28

with new thematic and textural material, the movement appears to be functioning as a conventional rondo design, which is supported by the ensuing return to material from the A section, and the shift back to C major.   Listeners' expectations are thus primed by Mahler for a conventional final-movement Rondo or Sonata-Rondo form. So far, so good, then. However, Mahler's establishment of this typical structure is only temporary: having encouraged us to hear in this way, the structure is then significantly deformed.

As Fig. 1 suggests, the majority of the movement is built on the thematic material that comprises the Rondo-theme (Section A). At first, it might seem plausible that we should understand only part of Section A as the Rondo-theme, and the rest as a related episode. Despite the large variety of thematic material, however, the firm C major tonality and comparative fluidity of sectional changes during this passage make it impossible to subdivide this section (Fig. 3), and we must conclude that it all 'counts'. This is an important structural phenomenon: if most of the music is derived from the Rondo-theme, we lack the contrasting episodes that form the basis of the Rondo structure.

In fact, rather than juxtaposing clear sections of Rondo-theme music with alternating episodes, Mahler instead carries out a process of gradual breakdown in thematic identity over the course of the movement, as is hinted at by Kramer.[17] The first approach concerns the standard symphonic practice of thematic manipulation. Considering the passage from bb87-99, for example, this has two main thematic elements: the capricious violin melody, and the more stately theme introduced in the winds in b92. Fig. 4 shows their derivation, from A4 & A5 respectively. In both cases, the disparity between the original presentation of the theme and this one is huge: new rhythm, different orchestration and accompaniment, polar-opposite dynamics, new tempo, and initially even a new metre. Admittedly, the phrasing is essentially retained: in the first theme, for example, the new 3/2 metre, rather than 6/4, emphasises the A, even if the stress of the melody might naively be understood to fall on the G. This mimics the barring at b24, where the A comes on the downbeat and is emphasised by sudden repeated semiquavers. These two themes helpfully present the different results Mahler creates: in the case of the first of these, the derivation, whilst not obscure, is perhaps difficult to perceive immediately: the new presentation is significantly different. In the case of the latter, it is really only the first note, and the elaboration of the final two bars, that is different. Of course, A4 & A5 are themselves very similar: the structure is identical, with two two-bar sequentially-constructed cells, each built from a descending one-step-up-two-steps-down pattern, followed by a continuing phrase. In fact, it is easy to see the similarities between these themes (particularly A4) and A3 (Fig. 5).

Indeed, it is precisely this cellular thematic construction that easily allows Mahler to create new themes from previous cells. Continuing discussion of the same passage, the theme at b100 (A8/C) demonstrates exactly this. According to Floros, this is the 'second secondary theme', which he

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[17] Kramer, 'Postmodern Concepts of Musical Time', especially 34

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describes as a 'variant' on the ritornello.[18] This is broadly an accurate description, but it is worth exploring how this variation works. Fig. 6 provides a paradigmatic analysis demonstrating various possible cellular links to earlier themes: some of these are clearly meant to be explicit, such as the opening head motif (coming only nine bars after its parent-motif); others, such as the descending four-note theme, rhetorically marked out with quaver rests, are more obscurely linked to earlier material (indeed, though four consecutive stepwise notes are not typically a defining melodic feature, the relevance of this cell to two earlier themes justifies their significance).

The final manner in which Mahler collapses elements of thematic identity is by mixing themes, again manipulating their cellular content in order to do so. The passage from bb153-196 provides a good example of this: mixing the head-motif from the B section (Fig. 7a) with the opening gesture from A5 (Fig. 7b), a continuation from the latter half of A4 (Fig. 7c), and a motif derived from the start of A4 (Fig. 7d). Fig. 8 shows the density of the contrapuntal interplay, by highlighting each appearance of these different cells across the course of the passage as a whole.

We are left wondering, then, what the structural relevance of this extensive thematic manipulation is. In isolation, much of what is happening feels like developmental sonata procedures, which would certainly be relevant in a sonata-rondo form. However, there is little else that would prompt such a formal reading. Instead, the 'point' is that whilst initially Mahler uses clearly differentiated themes to articulate different sections of the form (in particular, between the A section and the B section), and thus prompts the listener to hear a rondo form, as the music progresses, the different themes lose their individual identity, and as a result, so do the larger sections of the music.

In a sense, this is 'inbuilt' into some of themes themselves: though their initial presentation is often starkly contrasted, there are cellular similarities ripe for exploitation. Fig. 9 gives a paradigmatic analysis of bb7-46 demonstrating some of these, with two main axes: the opening descending fourth, and its later transformations and elaborations, and the four consecutive steps notes. These two axes are evidently very simple, and this certainly contributes to the ease with which Mahler is able to combine, superimpose, and develop these themes such that they lose their own identity. Though the fairly straightforward return of the Rondo-theme at b539 might suggest some sort of 'recapitulation', the previous breakdown of individual themes leaves this feeling somewhat 'forced', as if the music is trying to confidently assert a successful point of arrival, without justifying it - almost the reverse of a Sibelian process. One of the characteristic features of the symphonic finale against which this movement is set is the idea of the central narrative, often understood anthropomorphically, in which the protagonist personally struggles to attain the victoriousness of the conclusion. In this reading of the movement, however, we are left without this sort of unifying dramatic thread. Instead, we have a sense of various different paths juxtaposed in a quasi-collage manner.

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[18] Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*, 207

One of the most important ways in which Mahler achieves this is his frequent refusal to allow sections either to transition smoothly, or to conclude successfully. There are three primary alternative ending-types, other than a fluid transition, as outlined in Fig. 10. Firstly, in the case of interruptions, the new section suddenly begins, often midway through a phrase, typically differentiated by harmony and orchestration, and aggressively manoeuvring onto the surface of the music. Bb51-53 present a good example of this: from b45, the music has been prolonging C major harmony (the F#s are chromatic neighbour-notes, not affecting the harmonic content). Mahler establishes 2-bar phrases through the thematic material and the orchestration, such that when we arrive at the affirmative C major chord at b51, the expectation is that it will be prolonged for at least a bar, if not two. Indeed, on a larger level, the music has been operating in fairly clear 8-bar phrases. However, instead of waiting for the implied structural downbeat, Mahler instead introduces bold Ab major harmony, almost crudely reinterpreting the C as it is presented in a simple root-position triad, and likewise marked out by the different instrumental palette of treble winds. It is this harmony that is then sustained to the end of b52, setting up the new theme in Ab major. According to Adorno, this sort of rapid harmonic shift is not unusual in Mahler's music, and so should not be seen as particularly significant.[19] Here, however, the rhetoric is unmistakably an interruption.

Disintegrating endings are often related, but nonetheless have crucial differences. The new section tends to arrive in a similarly unannounced and unprepared manner, but rather than crashing into the middle of the previous phrase and texture, the previous section is already breaking down. Bb70-79 is a good demonstration. Fig. 11 shows the gradual disintegration of the thematic material, from the fully worked-out theme presented at b56, after three bars of introduction, down to a much-reduced cell extracted from the latter half of the theme. Dynamics are omitted from Fig. 11 due to Mahler's detailed discrepancies between doubling instruments, but the overall trajectory is clear: from b70 there is a gradual diminuendo, right down to the *morendo* marking of b. 78: the music literally fades into nothingness, further illustrated by the general thinning of the orchestration.

Caesuras, variously achieved through fermatas or other markings, are perhaps the greatest disjunction that Mahler creates. At b86, for example, the rhetoric of the passage seems to be implying a significant moment of arrival, with a *rit.* leading into *pesante*, accented quavers, full orchestra playing ***f/ff***, and two-part contrary motion, a favourite gesture of Mahler's for climatic high-points.[20] However, just as we should reach this pinnacle, a fermata on the barline cuts everything off, before a drastic change of texture, tempo, character, and thematic material.

What is the function of all these disjointed sections? Returning to questions of meaning and irony, it would seem fair to posit that the sort of victory suggested as the proposition of this movement 'should', at least according to the teleological conventions of symphonic practice, come out of a basically linear

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[19] Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, 27

[20] See the bars preceding Fig. 45 in the first movement of the Sixth Symphony for an example of how this 'should' have functioned.

process in which this is *earned*. After all, the aim of the dark to light narrative is that light is only achieved through struggle. However, in this symphony we lack this teleological narrative; the light is reached without being earned. It is at this point that we diverge from Johnson, who argues that it "*is* real, not merely propositional. […] neither an ironic subversion of the lyrical voice nor a merely constructive game. It avoids the unilinear narration of the expressive voice and explores instead a way of making that admits of plural voices and binds them together in something that balances, however precariously, multiplicity and structural 'hanging together'.[Johnson's emphasis]"[21] For him, the Finale convinces the listener of its success by 'sheer willpower'. However, the very willpower of the music, trying to assert its success, betrays its fundamentally damaged core, the result of the irreparably fractured structure.

If we understand this apparent meaning to be damaged or delegitimated, then, we are left to ask what the point in this is. According to Booth's framework, if we suspect that there is a secondary meaning lying beneath the superficial success, we should explore what this alternative meaning might be.

At this point, it is worth taking account of the clichéd and exaggerated nature of the music. In virtually every domain, it harnesses tropes of the successful Finale, and expands upon them. Hence, for example, the extensive use of C major (the most 'basic' key); thematic materials that often depend on incredibly simple cells (a descending fourth; four stepwise scalic notes); the hyperbolic orchestration (particularly at the end, complete with church bells). Indeed, even aspects of the structure which fail, such as the interrupted section endings, are often blown out of our expectations of proportion. The climatic build-ups at bb86 & 196, for example, appear to preface some huge structural downbeat, only to be cut off in their prime. The 'meaning', seems apparent then: it is a mockery of the symphonic finale. This is hardly the comic satire of *Ein musicalischer Spaß,* however. In the Mahler, the result of this biting irony is to undermine this sort of post-Beethovenian success, which doesn't quite ring so true anymore. In a further twist of irony, we can thus see this music, which Adorno so criticised, as in fact an Adornian expression, however subconscious, of the very fractured nature of early twentieth century life. Whilst the above analysis is less controversial in its establishment of the fractured nature of the structure of the Finale, this sort of ironical reading is inevitably more subjective, and indeed unprecedented. For many authors and listeners, the 'sheer willpower' identified by Johnson is enough to carry the day. It is often true, however, that those who try their hardest to assert something are those who are least sure of it. Given his well-documented psychological makeup, it would hardly be radical to suggest that this might be true of Mahler. The lady doth protest too much, methinks.

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[21] Johnson, *Mahler's Voices*, 119

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"Predominantly of a cheerful character"?
Irony in the Final Movement of Mahler's Seventh Symphony

Figures

Cover Photo: Cartoon of Mahler conducting Symphony No. 1. From Illustriertes Wiener Extrablatt". 25th of November 1900.

Fig. 1

Bar Number			Thematic Content/Derivation	Comments	Key (major unless marked with 'm')
1-52	1-6		A1	Intro	Em
	7-52	7-14	A2	Rondo-Theme	C
		15-22	A3		
		23-30	A4		
		31-38	A5		
		39-44	A6 (drawing on A1 & A4)		
		45-52	A7 (drawing on A3)		
53-78			B	Secondary theme	Ab
79-86			A3		C
87-108	87-99	87-91	A4 /A1)		
		92-99	A5		
	100-105		A8/C	New theme	Hinting at modulating to F, but veers off
	106-108				D
109-119	109-115		A5		
	116-119				Modulates to G
120-152	120-135	120-127	A2		C
		128-135	A3		
	136-142		A4		
	143-152		A7		
153-196	153-185	153-156	A/B		Am
		157-168			
		168-185			
	186-188				
	189-196		A3		Db - F - D - C
197-268	197-219		Intro to 87-99 but then material from 109-119		C
	220-240		A8/C		A
	241-248				Db
	249-268		Transition, using A5		A - F#
268-290	268-287		A2		C
	288-290		A8/C		
291-359	291-310		A2(/A4)		A - Gb
	311-359		B		
360-402	360-367		A2		Bb
	368-402		Cf249ff. (A5)		Modulating
402-445	402-411		Cf268ff. (A2)		
	411-433	411-414	Continuation of 100ff. (A8/C) & A5		C
		415-421			
		422-429			
		430-433			
	434-445		Cf87ff., 249ff., 368ff. (A5)		
446-517	446-454		A2		D
	455-461				
	462-475		A2 & A8/C		V/C#m
	476-485		A2		V/Cm
	486-491		Cf249ff.		V/B
	492-505		Cf462ff. A2 & A8/C		V/Bb
	506-516		A8/C		Db
517-538			462ff./492ff. (A8/C)		C
539-590	539-545		A1/A2	Recapitulation	C
	546-553		A3 but melodic line inverted		

Bar Number		Thematic Content/Derivation	Comments	Key (major unless marked with 'm')
	554-557	A4		
	558-565	A2		
	566-572	A1/A6		
	573-580	A2/A3		
	581-584	A2		
	585-590	A7		

Fig. 2
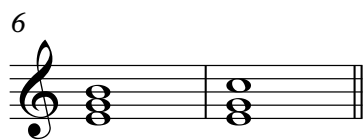
Fig. 3

Bar Numbers	Ending Type
1-6	Interruption
7-14	Fluid
15-22	Fluid
23-30	Fluid
31-38	Fluid
39-46	Fluid

Fig. 4a
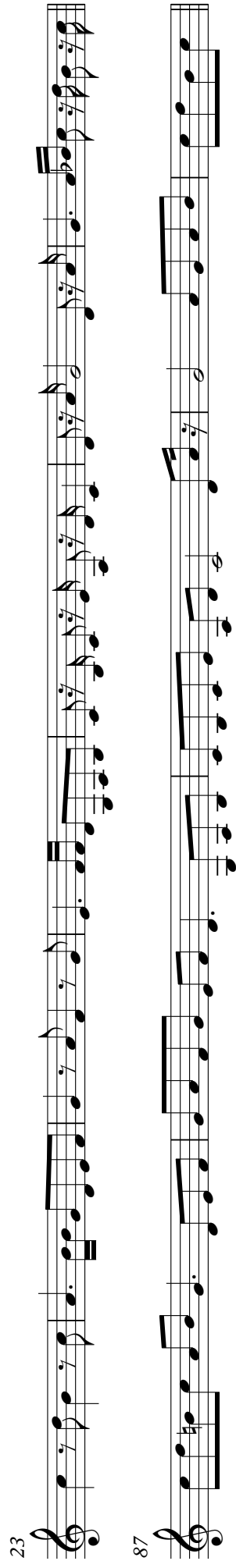
Fig. 4b
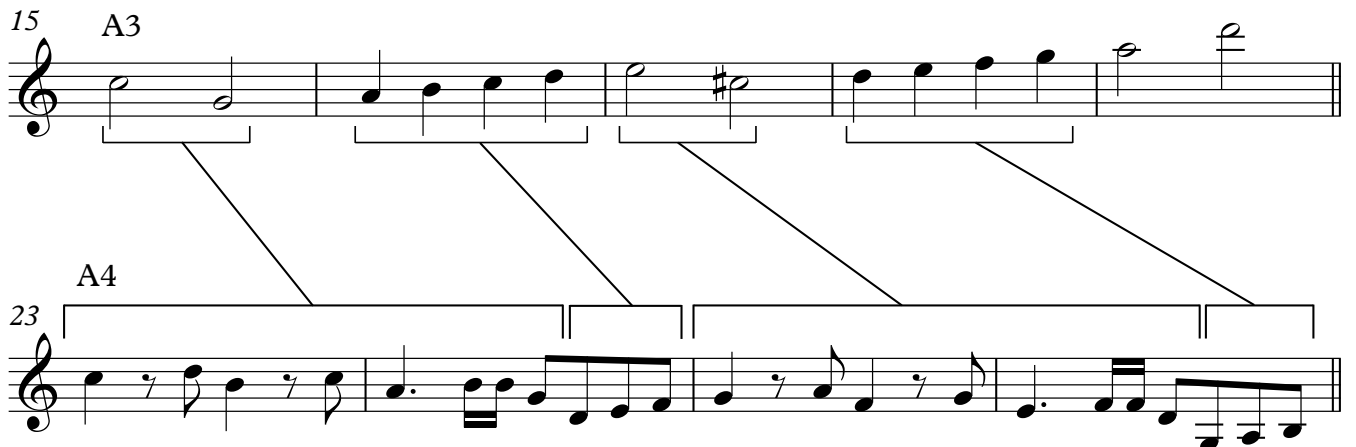
31

31 (Transposed diatonically up a fifth)

92

92 (Harmonic reduction of final bars)

Fig. 5

15 A3

A4

23

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Etwas zurückhaltend

Gemessener (aber immer noch in Halben)

*) in der rechten Hand eine Rute
   in der linken einen Schwammschl.

243

244

Etwas zu-
rückhalten

Noch etwas gemessener, (schon allmählich ins Tempo I übergehen,aber besser immer Halbe)

245

Pesante

Tempo II (subito)

Pesante

Tempo II (subito)

*) Der Sinn dieser Bezeichnung ⌢ ∨ ist, den Eintritt der Violinen, Violen und Celli erst nach dem letzten Viertel zu vollziehen, um ihn deutlich zu machen— also zwischen den letzten Takt des Tempo I und den Eintritt der Streichinstrumente eine unbedeutende „Luftpause" zu legen (ungefähr in der Dauer eines Achtels) eben nur so lang als zur rhythmischen Gestaltung nötig.

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

Bar Numbers	Ending Type
1-52	Interruption
53-78	Disintegration
79-86	Caesura
87-108	Fluid
109-119	Fluid
120-152	Disintegration
153-196	Caesura
197-268	Interruption
268-290	Disintegration
291-359	Disintegration
360-402	Interruption
402-445	Fluid
446-517	Interruption
517-538	Interruption

Fig. 11