Signs and Silence: a Formal Approach to John Cage's *4'33"* and Three Concept Pieces

By

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Music

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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2023

Abstract

Conceptual music has for decades posed intractable analytic issues for musicians and music theorists, forming a category defined by strangeness and esotericism with seemingly nothing paradigmatic uniting works as diverse as John Cage's famous *4'33"* or Johannes Kreidler's *Minus Bolero.* What concept music seems only to have in common is some form of disruption or provocation, with most forms of analysis unavailable to these works. What these works do share however is a rejection of fundamental axioms, a rejection that manifests as a peculiar form of musical grammar. The grammar of concept music is non-syntactical, unable to be iterated and standardized the way all other musical grammar is. As a result, concept music retains a historic formal and social potency. Through a denial of syntax and the logic of the broader canon, works like *4'33"* bring social conflict into the material of the works themselves. This embodiment of social conflict through negation and contradiction work to create a peculiar form of structure of concept music, built not on constitutive elements but out of tension amidst competing forces.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation has been a labor of research, inquiry, humility, and love, and I owe much to my colleagues and friends who guided me through the often agonizing journey of thinking deeply about concept music. Tracy Monaghan provided a crucial voice of skepticism and academic rigor that helped keep my research in bounds. Trey Makler provided a consistent counter-ballast when my claims and arguments veered into polemics, as well as invaluable advice and input on the social life of music. Leanny Munoz both helped keep me and my project grounded while shepherding me through much of this process. And C.J. Higgins lent a crucial perspective from outside of music, which strengthened the more philosophic elements of this project while keeping my theoretical ambitions in check.

I am deeply grateful to my committee members Beth Levy and Julia Simon, for reading drafts and providing crucial edits and remarks to keep my more ambitious claims viable.

Finally, this project would not have at all been possible without the guidance, advice, and patience of committee chair Sam Nichols. My conversations with Sam helped shape the entirety of this dissertation, and his insights into music and musical life fundamentally shaped my approach to concept music. More than anything, Sam exhorted me to approach this project with humility and charity, to turn the proverbial swords of academic debate into plowshares (I'd like to think I did my best). I am grateful for his guidance and indebted to his mentorship.

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Introduction

"To simply describe what 4'33" is, at this point, requires almost a philosophical treatise." [1]

Of the offspring of the Enlightenment, music theory often seems an estranged cousin, caught between the natural sciences (the grand unifying theories) and the fine arts (the cults of creative singularity). But music theory is neither art nor science: it is instead a constant and sensitive balance between these two poles, between universality and particularity, between iconic structure and idiosyncratic invention. The particular entails those fleeting moments of transcendence which theorists seek to isolate and explain, while the general entails the lofty ambition of unity, as theorists attempt to describe how celebrated music and composers uphold (or more interestingly, disrupt) general paradigms. As Adorno demonstrates in *Aesthetic Theory*, these two poles have a complex and dialectic relationship: music necessarily "has a singularity to it that also marks its distance from the universal, while any artwork that perfectly instantiated its genre would be a failure."[2] To describe Wagner's Tristan chord as only a mysterious, haunting sonority overlooks its formal potency. Likewise, to describe that chord as only an embellished cadence misses the singular magic of the harmonies and voice leading in question. The music theorist must be sensitive instead to both the universal and the particular for their analysis to be both accurate and insightful.

The impulse toward universality and the goal of unity compels analysts to describe under a standard system as much music as possible, to configure music as an art form as a diverse but coherent relationship of genres whose elements, structures and general traits are understood rationally by the theorist.[3] The curricula for teaching Western music are often designed chronologically, equipping students with the means to rationally interpret music from the Medieval era into the twenty-first century with a diverse set of techniques able to accommodate the disintegration of common practice in the Modern era. Yet some types of music are so strange, so genre and category defying, that they resist and frustrate all attempts by conventional[4] music theorists, not to mention audiences, to understand. These works do not break with expectations in the historically precedented sense, the way Schoenberg broke with the conventions of tonal harmony; rather, these works break with the axiomatic principles of Western music culture itself, defying nearly all expectations for what music even is. Such provocative works may have no clear beginning or end, may challenge what it means to compose, or may have no notated sound at all. The impulse toward particularity tends to take over in all such cases, and the conventional music theorist can only describe their unique attributes, situating such music as edge cases, with almost no general insights or formal paradigms.

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[1] Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence* (Yale University Press, 2010), 167.

[2] Peter E. Gordon, "13 Universal and Particular", *Theodor W. Adorno: Ästhetische Theorie,* ed.Anne Eusterschulte and Sebastian Tränkle (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 188.

This group of music is inherently heterogenous and difficult to describe under a single category, often tempting us with the "I know it when I see it" concession. Exemplars of the category are *Minus Bolero*[5] from 2015, in which German composer Johannes Kreidler had the Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra perform Ravel's titular classic without the melody – causing much consternation before and after the premiere; *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ* from 1965, in which Yoko Ono gradually wraps the members of a performing orchestra in gauze; and of course *4'33"*, the infamous silent piece from John Cage premiered in 1952, a paragon of experimental music and the main focus of my project here. These works are in one sense easily categorized together on the basis of their strangeness, but "strangeness" alone is not a sufficient or meaningful descriptor for music theory purposes, or aesthetic analysis of any kind. Perhaps more satisfying for some, these works also tend to share as a category an evocative, question-raising nature. Are they, despite their strangeness, just odd members of the repertoire, black sheep of the Western music family but nonetheless best treated as we treat a Beethoven sonata? Or are they, as they often seem to insist, categorically distinct works for which conventional theory is inadequate? If these works can be said to share anything, they at least all tend to make such provocative demands of audiences.

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[3] Efforts for musicians to understand music through a rational system can be traced at least into the Renaissance, as exemplified by treatises like Zarlino's *Le Istitutio Harmonische* from 1558. Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum* of 1725 represents as well a more refined rationality; both treatises through their description of perfection in music necessarily exclude more and more aesthetic potential. In this way, the Enlightenment effort to impose rationality across music simoultaneously narrowed the genres eligibile for "perfection".

[4] For this project, I will use "conventional" to refer to those practices and methods shared across contemporary Academic Western music culture; for my purposes "conventional" thus refers to traditional tonal harmony as well as serial and minimalist techniques, et cetera.

[5] Alternatively called *–Bolero.*

In most instances these questions seem integral to the experience of the works themselves, and certain approaches to this sort of music seek to "rescue" these works from their ambiguity by reclassification outside of music entirely. Faced with apparently irreconcilable aesthetic problems, some seek a sort of analytic refuge through the more open possibilities of theater or performance art.[6] Yet despite the heterogeneity of this group, my intuition tells me there is something binding these works together beyond their provocations, some sense that despite their diverse approaches to disruption, their disruptions share some general and important qualities – as *music* – worthy of and available to analytic investigation. This investigation, however, must be flexible enough to capture both the universal paradigms and the diverse particulars, the essence of what makes each work "strange" in its own way.

The label "Concept Music," the most common descriptor for this category, implies a sort-of-consensus by musicians and theorists on this group of pieces: that the medium in question is *ideas*, and that this music is to be appreciated intellectually, rather than aesthetically. Despite this, the works in question do have aesthetic qualities (real sonic content), as much as traditional works have intellectual qualities (abstract organizational logic). The real sonic experience of *4'33",* despite the silence of the performer on stage, entails of course all the ambient sounds which Cage invites us to appreciate; likewise, Bach's playful "crab canon" from *Musikalisches Opfer*, a deeply layered aesthetic experience, has an obvious intellectual dimension in the interlocking and reversible contrapuntal design. Analysis of concept music looking only to the intellectual domain is therefore a form of tautology: having decided a work is "conceptual" and therefore without meaningful aesthetic properties, the theorist analyzes the intellectual aspect alone to justify this very categorization. Likewise, analysis of only the aesthetic domain represents a form of naïveté: one certainly *can* analyze the aesthetics of a performance of *4'33"* as if it were phenomenologically fully akin to a performance of *Musikalisches Opfer*, but this obviously misses much of what makes the experience of *4'33"* so provocative and noteworthy. If there is something categorically distinct about concept music, something paradigmatic binding these works together, locating whatever that is solely in either the aesthetic or intellectual aspects is too ambiguous and unsatisfying, and fails to capture the fundamental *weirdness* of this group.

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[6] cf. Gann's *No Such Thing as Silence* for an efficient overview of such attempts.

This qualification, of being able to satisfyingly account for the uncanny experience of concept music, will be an important benchmark as I attempt to construct a formal theory for this domain. Because of the inherent ambiguity to concept music, and because of the chance-dependent nature of much of the real aesthetic content of the category, whatever is generalized about this domain must not be about *only* aesthetic content, the way formal analysis in the Western canon tends to be, nor *only* about the intellectual content, which fails to capture the actual experience of this music. Rather, the general paradigm must be related to the *ways* in which the ideas of the works, the conceptual engines, break from the standards of our musical culture *through* their respective aesthetic aspects. Ultimately, I hope to show that this dialectic is the actual structure of concept music, the fundamental, universal trait which exemplifies the genre.

To fully capture the uncanny experience of concept music, I will first use a linguistic perspective to examine the grammar of concept music, a grammar which ultimately is too weird to integrate into the standardized canon. This approach focused on grammar is a particularly useful lens given the communicative power of Western music through various systems of convention that come to resemble language. Because so much of conventional music analysis is focused on the interaction of gestures and formal units in a way that resembles grammar, looking to the grammar of concept music provides a clear avenue into what is analytically most interesting about the category. I will show that because the grammar of concept music defies both the standardization and the sublimation into ordinariness undergone by all other kinds of musical grammar, it retains historic potency and resists the frame of the concert hall, detonating the assumptions about art works which underly all other Western music. In doing so, concept music makes as part of its material the social forces facing off in this dialectic process; this I hope to show is the heart of its weirdness.

To narrow my focus to a manageable level, I will attempt a formal analysis of one work: *4'33"*, an exemplar of the category, one of its most iconic instances and one with a particular conceptual clarity. I hope to show that there exists a satisfying interpretation of the work beyond what Cage himself articulated and beyond the consensus understanding of the piece, which certainly explains the immediate experience of the landmark work but fails to account in the end for its deepest formal properties and social nature. This will mean looking beyond what the author or even the audience say or feel about the music itself, instead treating the text of the work as seriously as we treat the text of the *Waldstein* sonata. In other words, I aim to find an interpretation of *4’33"* derived from the score, an analysis which describes the actual structure of the work in the same way we understand the structure of a conventional string quartet (despite the unpredictable way any individual may hear any music, especially concept music).

I will therefore be differentiating between two aspects of concept music: the *real* content of concept music, and the *actual*. The *real* denotes the aesthetic content as it happens in real time during a performance – like the ambient sounds of a concert hall during *4'33"*, or the haunting procession of accompaniment parts in *Minus Bolero*. The *actual* denotes that which is analytically relevant or important about concept music, going beyond the real aesthetic content to include the interplay of social forces; this relationship between the real and actual content of concept music will be the primary dynamic I hope to track in this project. Ultimately, the *real* is open to subjective evaluation by individuals as much as any music is, while the *actual* (at least, I hope to convincingly show) is the best[7] interpretation for a given work, the balance of particularity and universality which captures both the potency and weirdness of concept music.

Ultimately, conventional music theory approaches alone cannot account for this interplay between real and actual content in concept music: to fully capture this dynamic, I turn to the aesthetic philosophy of Theodor Adorno. Engaging with Adorno in any way is an inherently fraught adventure, and the Frankfurt theorist nearly always raises more questions than he answers. Nonetheless, Adorno provides an essential model for understanding the social dimension of Western art music, a dialectic model which interprets historical social relations within art music, appreciating their material reality as the products of labor and ultimately objects which are subject to the totalizing force of capitalism. Because concept music necessarily makes the social forces of a concert performance *part* of the music itself, only a model attuned to the sociality of music can adequately capture the universal formal properties of this domain. This model will reveal the political potential of concept music, as it challenges prevailing aesthetic and social regimes through its integration of social forces, becoming in effect a necessary foil to the ossifying force of the canon.[8]

This project requires a degree of faith from the reader, as at nearly any stage in analyzing concept music, resignation to the particular can seem the most fruitful avenue. More so than any other art, conceptual art flickers in and out of comprehension, at one moment seeming within grasp and in the next seeming more esoteric than ever. This analysis will be as linear and sequential as possible, yet the dialectic nature of the music in question and the heterogenous models used to describe it may not seem to fully fit together until the end.

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[7] The pursuit of the “best” interpretation is necessarily narrowing, yet necessary to discern the genuine social and political potentials of concept music - potentials obscured by diffuse and ambiguous understandings of the genre.

[8] I will from here on out use “Canon” to refer to the Western repertoire of art music.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter I

I first borrow from Lydia Goehr to demonstrate the validity of the work-concept for *4'33"*, as opposed to the more nebulous interpretations of the piece as an open-ended activity (like the sort endorsed by the composer himself). The work-concept identity of the silent piece enables a reading of the work as a *text* – that is, through its score; focusing my analysis to the score (rather than the manifold iterations of the work in performance) enables a linguistic perspective focused on the grammar of the work *as* expressed in the score. To further bolster this interpretation, I will borrow from Matteo Ravisio's analysis of concept music in which *4'33"* is understood as "parasitic," necessarily working in relation to (and against) the frame of concert music culture.

Before assessing the grammar of *4'33"*, I will demonstrate that the grammar of conventional music – such as the techniques deployed by Messiaen and Carter, but also nearly all "canonic" composers – always undergoes what I term the "sublimation into the ordinary", as such techniques are iterated and routinized by successive generations and thus ossified into the ever-expanding canon of Western grammar. This, I will show, is *not* the case for the grammar of concept music, which is non-syntactical and thus resistant to iteration, derivation, and standardization. This resistance to standardization renders *4'33"* fundamentally apart from the rest of the canon and in conflict with the patterns of Western concert music writ large.

Interlude

In this briefer interlude, I will discuss two "silent" predecessors to *4'33"* and examine the objections these raise to my claims about the unique nature of *4'33"* and its grammar. I will then turn to details of the texts of these predecessors to argue that despite the chronology, Cage's work is *the* singular instance of a "silent work" in the Canon. This is critical for my claims about the grammar of Cage's silent piece: it cannot be an instance of non-iterating, non-standardizing grammar if its itself the second or third instance of such grammar. To show the singular place of *4'33"*, I again use the model of grammar to demonstrate the ways in which of these three "silent" contenders, only Cage's silent piece is actually relevant as a "conceptual piece".

Chapter II

In this chapter I will analyze the sociality of *4'33"* and how it relates to the broader corpus of classical music, ultimately making the case that concept music like *4'33"* renders social forces *part* of the work in a way conventional music does not. I will first borrow from Howard Becker's *Art Worlds* to clarify my conception of genre and the ways in which genres interact, ultimately advancing the notion of "aesthetic regimes" as the dominant genres in an art world. Concept music, I will then show, through its internalization of social forces, is necessarily in conflict with the prevailing aesthetic regimes of concert music. I will argue that the strange grammar of concept music and its embodiment of conflicting social forces represents a form of irrationality, a challenge to the dominant regimes of reason represented by conventional art music. Through this irrationality, concept music confronts the reasoning rational order inherent to the aesthetic regime of "serious" concert music.

Chapter III

In this chapter I will synthesize my arguments from the preceding chapters to demonstrate the essence of form – for reasons I will explain, I will commit to using only the term "structure" – of concept music. I will show that the weird, non-syntactical grammar of *4'33"* and its resulting embodiment of social forces in the work itself create structure via negation, rather than through the constitutive process by which structure is understood for conventional music. I will use the metaphor of a suspension bridge to show how the structure of concept music is an embodiment of the conflict inherent to the genre as it negates the historical and canonical rationality and culture from which it develops.

Conclusion

In this final section, I will discuss notions of sincerity and fraudulence in art as represented by two unlikely compatriots: ordinary language philosopher Stanley Cavell and Binky, friend of the aardvark Arthur from the latter's titular PBS program. Both in their own ways articulate what I take to be common objections or complaints about modernism and abstraction in art (especially music), issues which are heightened to an extreme with concept music. I ultimately hope to show how the formal analysis I have done in this project does not avoid or deny this alienation, but rather provides a satisfying cultural account of the role of concept music in keeping Western aesthetic culture and discourse vital.

Chapter I: Identity and Grammar

The Problem of Weirdness

One of the most immediately evident properties of concept music is its *weirdness:* the silence of *4'33"*, the bandaging of *Sky Piece*, the hollow cavity left by the absent melody in *Minus Bolero.* This phenomenon, and the resulting discomfort many feel in the concert hall as concept music happens[9] in front of them, is the aesthetic manifestation of the concept piece's idea, the mediation by which the audience experiences the conceptual element of a given work. The use of "weird" as a descriptor reflects my intuition that this core aspect of concept music is of a distinct class, an aspect fundamentally foreign to the rest of the canon – I will later show that this weirdness, and subsequent resistance to standardization, is essential to the structure of concept music. Sometimes it very much seems that this weirdness renders concept music unavailable to conventional music theory. The tension between the idea of a work and the expectations of its context (as with the tension of seeing a pianist sit idly at the piano in a concert hall) sometimes seems to make a mockery of theory: why bother analyzing a work which by its nature seems to reject all the axioms of Western music anyway? Furthermore, it quickly becomes unclear what really is up for analysis: the idea of a work like *4'33"*, or the actual sounds of a given performance – or some nebulous middle-ground between material and idea? Worse still, as this ambiguity sets in, so does uncertainty over the stakes: what does an analysis of a silent work even tell us?

I of course remain committed to analysis of concept music, yet in the face of this tension between conceptual work and the canon, theorists must make a necessary qualification for the weirdness of concept music: that we at least need to analyze these works *as texts.* This enables us to analyze a fixed document instead of the infinite multitude of subjective interpretations of any given performance. Rather than get lost in the miasma of ambiguities regarding what constitutes the piece, adrift in questions of what is fixed or mutable, we can look to the score of *4′33″* much as we look to the score of the *Waldstein* sonata as our interpretive locus. The score (i.e. the authorial text of the work) will therefore be key to approaching a meaningful interpretation of *4′33″* which balances its particular features with general paradigms. This qualification of requiring a text does not, I hope, seem like a concession, or an admission that concept music is in some ways less available for analysis than conventional music and therefore less serious. Rather, it is out of respect for the seriousness of concept music and *4′33″* that I invoke its score; in fact, I hope to reinvigorate the score as more than a mere visual accessory, but rather an integral element of concept music in general.

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[9] I use "happens" here not in the derogatory sense but to accommodate the multitude of valences which a conceptual performance could be.

The Identity Problem of *4′33″*

While I am inclined to treat concept music pieces as "works" in the discrete sense, bounded in a frame and subject to the same kind of analytic scrutiny as a single piano sonata, not everyone, least of all the composers in question, may share this view. Many musicians involved in the sort of experimental music relevant to this project in fact deliberately seek to reformulate concept music *away* from specific executions of specific works. Such perspectives opt instead toward the more diffuse understanding of music as an activity, not packaged for production and analysis as neatly as the work-concept demands. This discursive account of concept music avoids analytic issues by devolving to a subjective, individuated accounts; this flexibility comes at the expense of any meaningful analytic insight of the sort I am seeking. To analyze the score of the piece as a discrete record of a composer's choices, putting meaningful analytic insights back in reach, I must account for the piece itself as a discrete work bounded by a frame; a perspective of *4’33″* as a more nebulous process or activity renders this kind of analysis impossible.

Cage, it certainly seems, would have objected to the work-concept characterization of his piece, describing *4'33"* thirty years after the premiere as an "act of listening" which he partakes in daily, transcending even the need for a performer.[10] The various versions of the score – including the original David Tudor score in 4/4 time, the proportional-timing score, and a C.F. Peters edition without a title[11] – cast further doubt onto the notion of a single *4'33"* "work", as the composer himself apparently changed several details of the piece between 1953 and 1958.[12] Most damning for the work-concept, Cage was even willing to change instrumentation, as the C.F. Peters edition does away with the grand-staff, inviting any kind of performer and instrumentation.[13] The inherently nebulous nature of the music itself (i.e the real sounds which make up any performance), the competing scores and Cage's own editorializing tempt many to abandon the work-concept for *4'33";* Gann closes out his chapter on the score of the piece waxing thus:

> "Ultimately, we are left with the conundrum that *4'33"* has expanded into an infinite river of a piece into which any of us can dip at any time we please. Someone can frame it, in performance or on recording, to draw attention to it. But for those who have an affinity for Cage's appreciation for the physicality of sound, even that is no longer necessary."[14]

To the extent that they may describe *4'33"* as a "work" at all, Cage and Gann both thus demonstrate what Lydia Goehr refers to as the Platonist view of the work-concept, in which musical works are universals which

> "lack spatio-temporal properties and exist everlastingly...they exist even if no performances or score-copies are ever produced. To compose a work is less to create a kind, than it is to discover one".[15]

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[10] Gann, 186.

[11] Ibid, 180-185.

[12] Ibid, 185.

[13] Ibid, 182.

[14] Ibid, 187.

[15] Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Clarendon Press: Oxford. 1992), 14.

One can imagine Cage finding this description quite satisfying, but it presents obvious problems for the type of analysis I am attempting here. To be subject to any sort of analytic and linguistic scrutiny, there must be a satisfying account of *4'33"* as a discrete work, some single record to examine. Goehr sufficiently demonstrates, however, that by the twenty-first century "no form of musical production is excluded *a priori* from being packaged in terms of works",[16] regardless of competing interpretations. In part, Goehr attributes this to the "conceptual imperialism" of the Romantic aesthetic, so dominant that "its constitutive elements are taken for granted."[17] Despite the popularity of the discursive account for the silent piece, Goehr describes how "it is possible for musicians to look at a practice...and to classify the music derivatively as works. This is possible because they can identify composers, represent the music in adequate notation, specify determinate set of instrumental specifications, etc."[18]

Thus despite the disruptive challenges *4'33"* presents to the conventions of Western music and its provocations to how we listen to and appreciate sound, the bounded nature of the performance and the features of the scores of the piece enable a reading of the music as a discrete *work*. The piece is ultimately situated (just as canonical pieces are) in a frame, with concrete compositional decisions, however minimal, made by a single composer. Because Cage's disruption takes place *within* the institution of classical music, "[w]hatever changes have come about in our material understanding of musical sound, the formal constraints of the work-concept have ironically been maintained."[19]

This derivative deployment of the work-concept is not mutually exclusive with other interpretations, nor do imperfections in the application of the concept negate the work-concept here. The derivative application of the work-concept is, in Goehr's account, more a matter of the observer than the properties of the observed:

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[16] Ibid., 244.

[17] Ibid., 245.

[18] Ibid., 255.

[19] Ibid., 264.

> "If the relevant features are lacking in the first place, they can be assigned to the example [i.e. *4'33"*] so that it can be regarded in the right way. If this is not possible in any adequate manner at all, the attempt fails. Only then do we exclude the example from falling under the concept."[20]

The way we treat *4'33"* thus comes to feel like a problem of quantum mechanics: when unobserved, perhaps the piece does best exist as the "infinite river" of Gann's description, more an ideal than a grounded, discrete object. Yet under observation, the silent piece can in fact be regarded as a discrete work, available for analytic scrutiny as a discrete work with a bounded frame and attributes open to analytic scrutiny.

As with much of the canon, competing scores do present an obstacle for analysis, but not insurmountable for the work-concept here, as several key features of the work are consistent across the scores and together constitute a coherent, stable record of the work. The multi-movement structure and of course the *tacet* are consistent across the printed versions of the score and reflect the fundamental compositional choices that constitute the work-product *4'33"*. We can therefore imagine for this project an "*ur*-score" for *4'33"*, a document that specifies "the essential properties a performance must have to belong to the work",[21] filtering out the more superficial changes that Cage made to his landmark experiment. Most importantly, this *ur*-score embeds a fundamental tension: the "disparity between the absolute 'openness'...that characterizes its realizations and the unshakable precision demanded by its score."[22] This tension is essential to the strange grammar of the silent piece.

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[20] Ibid., 256.

[21] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols, 2nd edition* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976), 212.

[22] G. Douglas Barrett, *After Sound: Toward a Critical Sound* (Bloomsbury Publishing: 2016), 32.

Insofar as works of concept music may be understood as *works* or *texts*, with a fixed document or record, they are subject to the sort of linguistic scrutiny to which we often subject conventional music texts. As aforementioned, this perspective is deliberately blind to audience reaction: we are here only concerned with the concrete decisions made by composers, including especially the decisions to abdicate decision making. Interpreting those decisions through the lens of grammar will reveal what I deem the non-syntactical grammar fundamental to concept music. This grammar defies syntax and thus standardization as well as iteration, and therefore is resistant to integration into a tradition or canon of techniques. Such grammar can never be rendered "ordinary" or "conventional," and instead will always keep its formal and social potency. The potency, as I will show in the third chapter, is the crux of the structure of concept music.

Complicating a reading of concept music as text, however, some perspectives on concept music hold that it is inherently multimedia, encompassing obviously aural yet also necessarily visual and theatrical elements. Kreidler himself advances this perspective, especially as it concerns concept music, arguing that conceptual music is "actually multimedia by definition, because there is the concept and then the possibility of manifold physical versions."[23] But this perspective that concept music can only be understood through the manifold potentials of its aural and visual components makes meaningful discussion of the works inaccessible, the same way that going through a grocery store scrutinizing every available item would making shopping impractical. Or, more germanely here, attention to the manifold possibilities of *any* piece of music would render analysis fruitless: how could we speak with conviction on the strictly defined formal properties of a fugue if there always exists the possibility for variations in intonation, timing, dynamics, and every other aspect of the piece? Of course, theorists *do* recognize these potentials, yet speak with conviction of the formal properties of fugues all the same. Thus, while the full, actual experience of any concept music does entail some multimedia aspect, I hope to show how the real content of the *text* of the work alone is sufficient for explaining its fundamental nature and alienation from the conventional canon, and ultimately, its structure.

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[23] Johannes Kreidler, "Unit 7: New Conceptualism", MUTOR, June 2021, https://mutor-2.github.io/HistoryAndPracticeOfMultimedia/units/07/#references.

Musical Grammar and Syntax

Because is colloquially described as a type of language (or more problematically, as a "universal language"), there exists the temptation for theorists to understand music through linguistic perspectives. By comparison with language, the analyst hopes, as Joseph Swain puts it, "to make the better known reveal secrets of the lesser known."[24] My interest here in comparisons with language (and specifically grammar and syntax) is not to build or engage with a unified theory of musical language; I only hope to show that through the lens of grammar, we can understand that which makes concept music technically distinct from all other music. Concept music, I hope to show, has non-syntactical grammar which defies the standardization attendant to all other forms of musical grammar. This distinct nature of concept music, I will later show, is the crux of the social and political nature of these works and integral to its structure.

The two pillars of Western music theory – harmony and counterpoint– are indeed two broad domains which may be understood as closely related musical grammars, composed of many specific elements with prescribed relationships. Modulation through applied dominants, the use of certain cadences to close phrases, and the forbidden parallel fifths are all ultimately formal conventions with a grammatical character, analogous to the use of language. Students sometimes struggle to learn these prescribed relationships as much as I struggled to learn the grammar of Latin, while for those deeply versed in this style these relationships are intuitive and even subconscious, just as adjectival ordering is for native English speakers. The standardization of these relationships and elements is in fact so sedimented that we refer to a long, greatly heterogenous and diverse span of Western music history nonetheless as the "common-practice period". In this way, we may understand that Mozart and Mahler, despite enormous differences across their music, were ultimately speaking the same Western music language, utilizing (and in their own ways, disrupting) the same grammatical systems. Thus, when we analyze common-practice music through harmony and counterpoint, as when we scrutinize the voice leading of a fugue or the vertical sonorities of a chorale, we are in effect looking to understand the organization of these particular elements, the "discrete events bound by rules in hierarchical organizations."[25] When composers in the common-practice period are said to "break rules", what is actually meant is that they disrupt normal grammatical relationships and instead impose their own; as these disruptions become widely accepted and normalized, as seen in the broadening of chromatic harmony in the Romantic period, what were once "broken rules" become instead alternative grammars, just as English has evolved to encompass a huge multitude of variance across its dialects. Over time, some alternative grammars fold into the grammars they disrupted, blurring previously more concrete distinctions – thus both Mozart and Mahler are now understood as composers working within tonality, contra atonal composers such as Weber and Boulez, while all four together now represent a coherent genealogy of Western composers contra non-Western musical styles.

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[24] Joseph P. Swain, "The Concept of Musical Syntax", *The Musical Quarterly,* Summer 1995, Vol. 79, No. 2: 303.

Thus the analogy to grammar holds even in styles beyond the common-practice period – in fact, other styles may have even more rigid grammars, as with Second Viennese School serialism. Having rejected the grammar of diatonic tonality, composers in this school instead developed their own grammar concerned not with functional harmony but instead with a form of tonal equality, imposing strict rules governing the interaction between pitches in a fixed system. Total serialists would take this to its logical conclusion, creating a style dominated by predetermined orderings. The historical development of style is thus in large part the standardization and routinization of certain elements and hierarchies: we identify music as belonging to certain styles through, among other methods, identifying its particular grammatical elements and their relationships, as much as we identify elements of spoken language to recognize language and dialect. When I hear an English speaker ask a question with a downward inflection, my ear identifies them as speaking British English; likewise, when I hear a solo piano piece with block chords, rubato rhythmic figures and abundant whole-tone material, I identify it as "French impressionism". The "rules" of any style are best understood as a syntax, a standardized context through which individual elements of grammar are understood and convey meaning. Just as syntax is essential for communicating in natural language, syntax is essential for creating cohesion within a style in music. When analysts describe generalities of Western classical music, they are often describing the contours of the common-practice syntax, the standard within which both Mozart and Mahler were able to communicate as well as express individuality.

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[25] Swain, 288.

A concept of syntax in Western music theory dates back to the eighteenth-century, yet despite the best efforts of theorists to explore this analogy, the mapping from linguistics onto music is always bound to be a messy and controversial process. As I conveniently ignored in the passages above, music and natural language entail distinct differences in the ways information is encoded and in how information represents things in the actual world. Mario Baroni in a 1983 paper makes a valiant effort to catalogue as precisely as possible the grammatical units of Western art music and to map their relationships, illustrating the sort of hierarchical relationships that begin to constitute a generative grammar as described by Chomsky and his allies. Baroni only begins to sketch out what such a large-scale project may look like, and he limits his work to chorale melodies; what is important here is not necessarily building or improving upon a strict empirical model for musical grammar, but rather that such an effort is at all possible. Even with the constraints and qualifications of Baroni's project, he demonstrates that fundamental aspects of Western art music entail enough iteration and standardization that an attempt to classify them as generative grammar is even possible at all.

It is important here to recognize that efforts to map the techniques and models of linguistics onto music theory may never be fully successful enough to satisfy both linguistics and traditional music theory. As Baroni acknowledges, explaining music as a language requires an understanding of music as "a relationship between two different types of phenomena, conventionally termed the "plane of expression" (audible structure) and the "plane of content" (semantic structure)."[26] Furthermore, as Swain demonstrates, models of linguistics for music such as Baroni's depend on a sense of syntax that is not context dependent, a weakness sure to frustrate music theorists. Swain argues that "if [context dependent] syntax were exported to music, considerations of extramusical reference, emotional content, expression, social usage, genre, historical origin, and other semantic aspects which until just recently have been politely ignored in formal theory might yet find a place."[27] I here sidestep this obstacle in treating concept works purely as texts, without regard for the potentially abundant qualifying contextualization some may wish to bring (especially for works by Cage). Furthermore, musical syntax and natural language have among others a crucial distinction evident in the relative degree of redundancy enabling intelligible speech, as opposed to the perfection of detail often called for in performance. As Swain puts it, because the syntax of music "is tied to an immensely important aesthetic effect – tension and resolution – a mistake [in performance of Bach] seems like the vitiation of perfection, as glaring as a chip on the face of a fine marble. "[28]

As a way forward in interpreting music theory through a linguistic lens, it will be useful to delineate clearly the scope and objectives of why we are invoking models of grammar or syntax at all. If I can, in other words, avoid the temptation to use linguistics as a unifying model for understanding all music, I may be instead able to use it as a useful and narrow tool for illuminating certain features of music-as-text. To provide a practical and manageable use of linguistics, I will delineate between a strong and weak sense of syntactical grammar in music: while a strong sense requires empirical arguments ranging from music to linguistics to psychoacoustics to show how music is truly understood in the mind, a weak sense of grammar is concerned only with formal and structural analogies in how music is analyzed as text. To discuss the weak grammar of counterpoint, in other words, we do not need to prove that listeners encounter the ordering of voice leading elements as they encounter the elements of speech; rather, we need only reference the large body of music theory which treats these contrapuntal elements as essentially syntactical elements for the purposes of analysis.

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[26] Mario Baroni with Simon Maguire and William Drabkin, "The Concept of Musical Grammar", Music *Analysis*, (Jul., 1983): 181.

[27] Swain, 282.

[28] Swain, 302.

The Sublimation of Grammars

Often the craft of composition is taught as an unfolding history in the development of *techniques*, ranging from formal design to fine details of performance. Despite the implications of vernacular music education, these techniques are not phenomena "discovered" in nature: they are deliberate and ultimately arbitrary decisions by musicians responding to previous musicians, with certain techniques "winning" over others through integration into a canon and longevity through documentation. When certain techniques experience enough sedimentation, such as through widespread adoption or use by a particularly notable composer, they develop into specific musical grammars, gaining through this sedimentation a generalized character with prescribed relationships both internally (as with the relationships among intervals in strict counterpoint) and externally with other grammars (as with the contrast between the symmetry of the whole-tone collection and the asymmetry of the diatonic collection). In all cases, the force of history and the ossifying effect of the canon render (almost) all novel grammar *ordinary*, with any initial potency and disruption lost as the grammar is rendered into a neutralized, fixed historical position. The disruption to functional harmony which the whole-tone collection generated in the Impressionist period has, in the century-plus since, faded entirely; this disruption is a phenomenon now only of history. The whole-tone scale in the twenty-first century has the same sort of character as the functional harmony it initially challenged: both are available to composers, with an attendant network of implications, yet their relative potency against each other or against the general state of musical language is neutralized. Both the usurped and the usurper lose their social potency as they ossify into fixed elements of Goehr's imaginary musical museum.

The linguistic perspective recognizes this mutual intelligibility as *syntax*, a network of prescribed relationships with standardized uses and normalized characters. These techniques are available to iteration, re-deployable by successive composers in new contexts, while still retaining their syntactical identity. When a composer deploys such a syntax in their work, as when minimalists use diatonic harmonies, the grammar and its elements are recognizable outside of their initial context, having been integrated into a distinct work, while retaining their internal relationships. In this way, the diatonic arpeggiations of the opening of Glass's *Satyagraha* retain the functional identities and relationships they have in Romantic-era music, despite Glass's repositioning of them in a distinctly new aesthetic context. Composers do often attempt to "update" certain grammars, as when composers apply the techniques of serialism to timbre or physical space; in such cases, the use of the specific grammar retains its identity as a specific technique used to achieve whatever the piece itself actually strives for, and not just as an homage to or quotation of a previous style.

Every generation of composers reconciles with some form of novel grammar, with previous generations' novel techniques having been sublimated into ordinariness. These techniques are not necessarily endorsed or embraced by successive generations, as the references American composers still make to the "Dark Ages" of high modernity would suggest. Nonetheless, embraced or rejected, the techniques of this period are *understood* by successive generations of composers, integrated into the same language if rejected in favor of other dialects. Whether or not a student composer today, for example, embraces or rejects twelve-tone serialism, they understand what it is they are rejecting or embracing: the rationality, the control over the material, and the rigidity of the grid, for example, are all aspects of this grammar that are mutually understood by composers.

A full catalogue of techniques would be exhausting and beyond the scope of this project; several monumental Western composers, however, have specific innovations attributed to them which nonetheless have become standardized, conventional techniques over the intervening generations. We have in fact a significant single document illustrative of this very process in Messiaen's *Technique de mon langage musical* from 1944. In this landmark treatise, the composer deploys the rigorous approaches of academic music to catalogue and demonstrate many of the novel techniques for which his music is known. For twenty-first century readers, many of these innovations will seem banal or trivial; yet in his own lifetime, of course, such techniques were evidently novel enough to warrant this treatise. Therefore, this document represents in fact a repository of once novel techniques that have come to find standardized, *syntactical* roles in contemporary classical music.

Consider a core element of this treatise, non-retrogradable rhythms. Messiaen not only catalogues distinct features of this class of rhythms, but also details their analogous relationship to the modes of limited transposition, deliberately articulating a weak syntactical relationship by which rhythm and pitch material complement one another to create the "strange charm of impossibilities."[29] These rhythmic techniques are, by definition, evident throughout Messiaen's musical texts and by explicit instruction of the composer are available for redeployment by future composers in their own texts. They are, in other words, elements of conventional musical grammar with a deliberate trajectory towards standardization. In cataloguing these techniques via his treatise, Messiaen is not simply explaining his style: he is explicitly contributing to the development of Western music grammar, deliberately adding his specific innovations (or rather, innovations attributed to him) to the already vast repertoire.

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[29] Olivier Messiaen (trans. John Satterfield), *The Techniques of My Musical Language* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1956), 21.

We find a similar situation with the music of Elliott Carter, noted for elaborate and often arcane deployment of intervallic designs and elaborate formal structures. Carter in particular looms large in the discourse on novel musical techniques given the credit accorded to him for "metric modulation." This technique is perhaps one of the most specifically purposed elements of twentieth-century style, enabling specific transformations to the metric and rhythmic fabric of music. It is also endlessly re-deployable, becoming over the decades since Carter a grammatical element of composition as available as hemiola. It is therefore a *standard* instance of grammar, a novel technique that experienced sublimation into ordinariness by elevation into the standard library of techniques (in some cases literally, as books record and document composers' technical advances). In this way, metric modulation is of the same class as the Picardy third: both are specific elements, with specific relationships to other technical elements, which any composer may deploy in the composition of their own works.

To some this phenomenon of sublimation may seem like a banal observation. Yet the banality is symptomatic of music's relationship with the world and our social organization: the primacy of progress and technical advancement born out of the Enlightenment form a cultural backdrop into which the chronology of Western art music neatly fits. As with all such social phenomena, it is the deviances that catch our attention and in so doing challenge the banality of the norms. Thus concept music, through its defiance of standardization, defies too the social organization surrounding art music. Concept music such as *4'33"* confronts the standardization of art music with grammars that refuse to be neutralized through iteration and routine; later I will show how this denial charges such works with social and political potency crucial to understanding their structure.

4'33" and the Grammar of Silence

` Cage's quintessential instance of concept music is undoubtedly, one way or another, about silence. Yet belaboring whether *4'33" is* silence, *frames* silence, *invites* silence, or some other interpretation obscures formal analysis of the piece. A perspective focused on grammar can, I hope to show, make formal analysis of the text itself insightful enough to reveal the fundamental nature of the work and its distinction from conventional Western music. Treating the work as text leaves us free to look beyond questions of how an audience uses the experience of the work to construct the piece themselves; focusing instead on the text alone provides the necessary analytic clarity through which we can best understand what is fundamentally, analytically important about Cage's "silent piece".

Among those familiar with the work, there exists a sort of consensus understanding: the piece, through silence, invites audiences to appreciate all the ambient noises usually discarded or excluded from the aesthetic experience of a concert. The coughs and sneezes which our ears have been taught to filter out of the aural experience of a symphony become, through Cage's invitation, a new sound world for the audience to appreciate. This is the consensus which supports Gann's formulation of the piece as an "infinite river," and even Cage's own interpretation of the work as a daily listening practice, but it does not strike a balance between general and particular in the way necessary for meaningful analysis. Although the traditional consensus is for most people accurately descriptive of the performance experience, something more about the work must be understood to capture its particular relationship with the general paradigms of the Canon.

Matteo Ravasio provides a crucial perspective for interpreting the work-as-text, treating *4'33"* not just as concept art but as *parasitic* concept art. The notion of parasitic conceptualism perfectly encapsulates the most important features of the work, without falling down rabbit holes often placed by Cage himself in his own exegesis of the piece. In Ravasio's formulation,

> "Parasitic conceptual art creates expectations by parasitizing art forms that typically prescribe some form of aesthetic attention, and thwarts such expectations by presenting us instead with nothing that warrants the sort of aesthetic attention appropriate to the appreciation of the parasitized art form."[30]

This account of the silence in *4'33"* is immensely satisfying because it is so *modal*, able to accommodate any of the competing interpretations of the work's silence. Whether *4'33"* is silent, "sonically replete,"[31] conceptual performance art, or music organized by an audience rather than performer, the silence is prominent *because and only because* it hijacks (to borrow again from Ravasio) the frame and expectations of Western concert music. This perspective necessarily shifts our attention from a perhaps myopic focus on the piece alone to its relationship to the concert hall, the host of the parasitic relationship; in terms of the text, this perspective focuses us in on the relationship between the score of the work and what a *score* itself represents. The score of *4'33"* is necessarily in conflict with the conventions of Western score notation, as this notation is predicated on the documenting of sound (even the most liberal understanding of what the silence of the piece means must concede the score does not and cannot accurately describe the sonic experience of the work). This is the aforementioned tension between the complete aleatory of a performance and the technically exacting score; the record of *4'33"*, in other words, makes as specific demands on a performer as any conventional score – and yet the *tacet* disrupts the expectations of what a score is ordinarily supposed to do in encoding actual sound.

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[30] Matteo Ravasio, "What 4'33" also Is: A Response to Dodd", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 97:2: 399.

[31] A coinage from Julian Dodd.

The parasitism of the work is thus embedded into the score itself as a document of this contradiction. The strength of any concept work is, according to this parasitic model, "dependent on [its] relation to an established art form that typically engages us aesthetically."[32] The established nature of the parasitized art form itself is key, providing a proverbial ground against which the charge, the potency of the idea of the concept work, acts and conflicts. The parasitism of *4'33"* is therefore strengthened by the grammatical element of the score which *does* represent the standardization and ossification of the canon: the tripartite form essential to the sonata. Cage's decision to construct the work in sections of differing timings creates a formal and conventional bond with the canon, embodying one of its most historic designs in structure while negating the very axioms of concert music in its substance through the *tacet*. Concept works, and especially the silent piece, are thus necessarily dialectic, as the key to their interpretation entails this conflict between the idea and the frame, a conflict embedded in the score itself. Thus the aptness of the term parasitic, loaded with hostile connotation yet capturing the centrality of conflict to the nature of concept art. It is this conflict, this dialectic nature, which makes concept music so fundamentally social.

On the surface it may seem impossible to ascribe any sort of grammar to a piece that is "about" silence, but just as much as rests indicate a decision by the composer, so too does the *tacet*. Yet while rests form conventional syntactical relationships with the notes surrounding them, the complete *tacet* of *4'33"* creates an immediately and fundamentally *weird* sort of non-syntax. The distinction between the complete *tacet* of Cage's piece and the banal "rest" is not always clear to critics; Douglas Kahn argues that when performers in an ensemble are at rest musically, "they join a tableaux as still and mute as their instruments and sheet music. The only difference between them and the performer of *4'33"* is that the latter is performing solo."[33] Yet Kahn disregards the context of the rests: the solo performer, such as Tudor at the premiere, is silent *the whole duration* of the work; performers in an ensemble of a conventional work are at rest only temporarily – otherwise their parts would not be in the score at all.[34]

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[32] Ravasio, 397.

[33] Douglas Kahn, "John Cage: Silence and Silencing", *The Musical Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (1997): 561.

In her account of Goodman's theory of the work-concept, Goehr references a grammatical frame in which "a notional language consists in *atomic* characters which in their modes of combination form *compound* characters of greater and lesser complexity."[35] These compound characters themselves have relationships prescribed by their syntax – such as the typical Classical forms – with "no upper limit", meaning even the score itself can serve as a compound character.[36] Yet in the silent piece the peculiar nature of the complete *tacet* evaporates the distance between the atomic and the compound, in effect short-circuiting the expectations of grammar in the Western notational system. The score, in other words, is at once a compound character, by its very nature *as* a score, and yet also a single atomic element: the silence of the *tacet.* The timings of the movements serve to provide enough structure to support the work's parasitism of the concert hall frame, but they are not sufficient to create any form of syntactical relationships among whatever the isolated, atomic units of a long silence might be.

There may be a strong temptation to defer to the real sonic experience of the work to understand its grammar, in which case the incidental noises of the concert hall form the atomic and subsequent compound units of the work. But these incidental sounds, while for many the "point" of *4'33"*, are not encoded in the score. The relationship of the incidental sounds of a performance to the identity of *4'33"* is the same as the relationship a cough has to the identity of a Chopin etude, despite the consensus understanding of *4'33"* as elevating such incidental sounds. In both cases, incidental noises necessarily impact the actual experience of the work, that *particular* realization of the score, but they do not have a deeper, structural relationship with the score. The effect of the silent piece in calling attention to incidental sounds is a *consequence* of its score and grammar, not the grammar itself. Even if the incidental sounds of a performance of *4'33"* are taken to be the constitutive elements of the work, their integration and subsequent elevation from incidental to constitutive is only possible due to the single atomic element of the score, the complete *tacet*.

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[34] This is, in fact, the central tension of *Minus Bolero*, as the principal players of the orchestra *do* sit silently for the duration of that work. In this way, Kreidler achieves the same sort of parasitism and non-syntax as Cage: while Cage's denial of syntax comes through the total facet, for Kreidler it comes from the impish "prank" on Ravel (and the audience).

[35] Goehr, 22.

[36] Goehr, 23.

This peculiar grammar, the collapsed space between the atomic and the compound, is furthermore resistant to any sort of iteration in future works, and resistant therefore to the sublimation into ordinariness which always awaits conventional forms of musical grammar. Unlike the tripartite nature of the score, which is of course deeply sedimented into the canon, the *tacet* cannot be integrated as a fundamental grammatical unit. As much as composers may be inspired by Cage's work, there is no way to integrate the grammar of *4'33"* into a new work without reproducing *4'33"*. Even if a composer were to rework the surface-level details of the work, changing the number and timings of sections or the instrumentation and staging, the result would still have the *identity* of *4'33"* as a work-product, with the same fundamental grammatical weirdness. The weird grammar of the work, in other words, produces a weird binary: either a work *is* a direct derivation (and thus copy) of the silent piece, or it *is not* derivative at all. Either a work borrows the same grammar, with the same collapsed space between atomic and compound units through a total *tacet*; or it breaks away from the *tacet* and becomes a categorically distinct sonic experience and work-product. This is quite a different situation from conventional works with conventional grammar, in which the spaces between derivation, direct copy and originality are opaque and ambiguous. To say a composer was inspired by and derivative of Ligeti is often itself a dissertation project, yet to say a piece is derivative of *4'33"* is to identify it as either a simulacrum or a completely conventional work in which at some point there are rests.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have used as technical a perspective as possible to analyze the unique features of *4'33"*, using the lens of linguistics and grammar to shed light on the implications of Cage's total *tacet*. The formal approach for a piece like *4'33"* is clearly not as straightforward as it would be for more conventional instrumental music: I have in fact spent this chapter attempting to finesse the peculiar nature of *4'33"*, with both a score (in fact, several scores) and thus a literal document to analyze, yet with an aural nature which cannot be fully pinned down and described the way Western theorists tend to do with aesthetic objects.

The linguistic perspective reveals the strange grammar of *4'33"*, the way that the simple, provocative feature ("the performer is silent") gives the work a unique, formal potency. Cage's innovation becomes, in fact, the means by which his piece escapes the sort of iteration and standardization which awaits nearly every other landmark work in the canon. Because the work has no regular grammatical elements – only the *tacet* – *4'33"* resists syntax, the network of standardized relationships which describes the formal language of the common-practice period, the twentieth-century, and much of Western "new music"; this defiance will return in the third chapter as the means by which concept music escapes the strictures of style altogether.

A technical analysis of the grammar of *4'33"* can only go so far, however, in fully describing and analyzing what the piece *means*. The nature of its strange grammar and its defiance of syntax are central to my analysis, yet the linguistic lens does not account for another element of the uncanny nature of concept music: the social. In Chapter II, I examine how *4'33"* integrates social forces and their conflicts into the material of the work itself, and the consequences this integration entails for the silent piece's relationship to the rest of the canon.

Interlude I: The Silent Piece(s)

It bears mentioning at this stage a rather inconvenient historical detail: Cage's "silent piece" is not the first recorded silent piece in the Western tradition.[37] At least two predecessors threaten to complicate, if not erode my analysis, for if Cage's silent piece is not in fact a first-of-its-kind, my claim on the potency of its grammar seems in jeopardy: how can I argue that *4'33"* has a weird grammar which resists iteration, when that piece is apparently *itself* an iteration? To overcome these complications, I will show that in the case of one predecessor, an abundance of superficial detail renders the piece not actually conceptual, but conventional, and thus subject to the standardization and sublimations of all conventional Western music. The other predecessor presents a more difficult challenge, yet I hope to show that the force of history and the ossifying effect of the canon have already elevated Cage's work to a "first"-ness, even if artificial. In both cases, a clear sense of humor made explicit in the score of the works by the composers lends a valence of frivolity which Cage stridently avoided for his landmark piece. Irony and humor are of course often times major components of conceptual works, especially with Kreidler; yet for the identify of the silent pieces as entrants into the canon, a certain seriousness seems to have elevated *4'33"* above other contenders.

In Futurum

Sitting at the center of Edward Schulhoff's 1919 jazz-inspired collection *Fünf Pittoresken*, the third movement *In Futurum* represents a decidedly Dada-ist approach to silence. Rather than a complete *tacet*, Schulhoff represents total silence through an elaborate series of rests, alongside other more absurdist elements including contradicting time-signatures in different staves and performance markings like question marks, exclamation points and even proto-emojis. The score of the piece is thus decidedly more complicated than the score for *4'33"*, with an abundance of superficial detail

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which communicates an explicit sense of humor and irony (cf. Appendix B). It does seem that one can easily imagine a performance of *In Futurum* unfolding much like a performance of its more famous successor: a pianist enters the stage, sits at the piano, opens the lid, and sits silently for a fixed duration (determining this duration would be itself a project, however, given the competing time-signatures). Audiences would, just as Cage had intended of his Woodstock premier, have only the incidental sounds of the concert hall environment to contemplate as the pianist sits idly. From this perspective, the pieces have obvious similarities – but from the perspective of the works-as-texts, they are in fact essentially separate categories. The abundance of surface-level details, while ultimately serving to create silence, nonetheless represents decidedly conventional grammatical elements that situate the piece firmly alongside less ironic conventional works.

Unlike with *4'33"*, the silence of *In Futurum* is the result of an elaborate system of rests; there is therefore quite a large space between the atomic grammatical elements of the work and the compound structure of the resulting tacet. Rather than a collapsed space as in the score of *4'33"*, *In Futurum* invites performers to more deeply engage with the *tacet* through its manifold phrasings via rhythmic notation. While the score of *4'33"* represents a meditative approach to silence, with only the tripartite structure and titular timing to frame the experience, the score of *In Futurum* is more akin to a Ferneyhough score, as performers engage with a dizzying array of specific and syntactical notations. While *4'33"* has in effect no syntax, with no atomic elements combining into a compound structure, *In Futurum* has an elaborate syntax, albeit one full of apparent contradictions and "errors."

This may seem a moot point, especially given that the sonic result of both scores is a duration of total silence by the pianist. Yet I argue that the details of the texts are deeply significant for their identity *as works*. By virtue of its elaborate surface, *In Futurum* is a conventional (if humorous) piano piece which results in silence, while by virtue of its genuinely empty score, *4'33"* is conceptual, in a category apart from its predecessor. The score of *In Futurum* is buzzing with sonic implication, as the rhythmic sequences and implied lines conjure the very jazz-like potentials of the other movements of *Fünf Pittoresken*. Although a skeptic may point out that the surface level rhythms are an obvious humorous device, and that silence is "the point", the surface nonetheless provides a specificity that renders the work conventional. *4'33"* instead is alive not with specific sonic implication but with conceptual implication: the complete *tacet* conjures not a specific genre of sound but instead the tensions between cultural forces which drive the uncanny experience of the work in performance.

Funeral March for the Obsequies of a Deaf Man

French humorist Alphonse Allais made a career of ironic works which would presage some of the major innovations of modernity in both visual art and music, including *4'33"* and even Rauschenberg's all-white paintings. His silent piece, more so than Schulhoff's, does threaten Cage's as the first instance of a silent *score*: his 1897 *Funeral March for the Obsequies of a Deaf Man* has a score of nine blank measures, with only the title and the performance marking "*lento rigolando*" (cf. Appendix C). As a text, then, Allais' piece does seem to have the same grammatical weirdness of *4'33"*, with a collapsed space between atomic and compound signifiers. Certain key distinctions between the two, however, render Allais' a mere curiosity of history rather than a "serious" entrant into the canon.

Structurally, the funeral march lacks the requisite amount of reference to its frame to have the same kind of parasitic relationship as *4'33"*. While the tripartite structure of *4'33"* and its performance in the concert space at its premier facilitate a sufficient parasitism on the frame of the concert music genre, Allais' piece does not have enough tethering it in this way, rendering it more a curiosity than a genuine "work" in the canonic sense. It is, in other words, not a complete score in the way *4'33"* has; it instead functions more akin to a visual gag, a joke utilizing the conventions of notation to sell its punchline without the same adherence to norms which Cage uses to situation his piece within (and against) the Canon. Finally, the name of the work obviously contributes to its ironic nature, while Cage gave no indication of irony to his work beyond the consequences of its total *tacet*.

Chapter II: The Sociality of Concept Music

> *"The work of the midcentury avant-garde vastly magnified and purified the romantic notion of esthetic* [sic] *autonomy, and among the midcentury avant-garde it was Cage, in his compositions of the early fifties, who reached the most astounding, self-subverting purism of all."*[38]

In Chapter I, I used the lens of grammar to demonstrate how the weirdness of *4'33"* is rooted in a denial of syntax, a refusal to standardize into routine techniques or sublimate, through iteration and standardization, into ordinariness. A strictly technical lens, however, cannot fully describe the experience of concept music: this type of music is, more so than any other music, inherently *social*. The sociality here extends deeper than the social aspects of conventional concert music, such as the interactions between and among performers and audiences; concept music instead makes social forces, and social conflict, a *material part* of the work itself. As *4'33"* denies conventional technical syntax, it invites in the social axes underlying any concert performance, and in doing so forces their conflicts to the foreground. Cage does not, through the silence, generate or articulate new social dynamics: he merely brings in social forces which were and are always underlying Western music culture; for musicologist Richard Taruskin, it "was always vexingly clear that this disconfirming presence was not only in the music world, but oh, so tellingly and chillingly of it."[39] This experience of concept music, the manifestation of social forces and their conflicts alongside or even above the sonic experience, is what generates the uncanny experience of the genre. The tension of background, or the cultural environment, and foreground, what concept music brings to the performance frame, is in fact crucial to both its technical aspect and its ultimate social and political potential: the tension is what generates concept music's autonomy, the means by which it challenges our regimes of reason.

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[38] Taruskin, 273.

[39] Richard Taruskin, *The Danger of Music and other Anti-Utopian Essays* (London: University of California Press, 2009), 261.

In this chapter I will first describe the position of concept music as a genre relative to other genres and genre hierarchies. I will next show how *4'33"* makes the social forces of the classical music world a material part of itself as a work. In the end, I aim to show how the resistance of concept music to the standardizing norms of the prevailing genres in Western art entails the same sort of social potency as described by Adorno for genuinely authentic art, art with an ultimately utopian aspiration.

Genres and Aesthetic Regimes

The presentation of concept music in the concert hall, such as the inaugural performance of *4'33"* in 1952 at Maverick Hall in Woodstock, implicitly tasks the audience with reconciling whatever they are about to experience with their expectations for *genre*, informed in this case by the cultural norms of the concert space.[40] The decision by Cage and Tudor to premiere the piece in a traditional concert setting necessarily invoked of its audience all the rigid expectations of a conventional piano recital: the piece had a single author, was premiered by a highly skilled pianist, and was framed by the pianist entering and exiting the stage (alongside opening and closing the piano lid at movements). Audiences thus were primed with all the expectations they would have for any other piano recital. Therefore, despite all its provocation, as Taruskin puts it, "Cage's radical conceptions were as much intensifications of traditional practices, including traditional power relations, as departures from them."[41] *4'33"* thus immediately at its premiere embodied an essential conflict between concept and genre, as Cage situated his silent piece against all the norms and expectations of the genre "concert music". This conflict is the analytic heart of concept music and crucial ultimately to its structure.

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[40] In the case of this 1952 premiere, "genre" refers to "concert music" writ large; I will discuss later in this chapter why genre has such a weakened and general quality here.

[41] Taruskin, 275.

Genre itself is an enormous and vague concept, yet a working and manageable understanding is important for understanding the social element which underlies the experience of works like *4'33"* . Even if it is difficult to describe with certainty what "genre" means, or what any one genre fully entails, when we as audiences encounter any music, we necessarily do identify it with some existing genre, or we recognize the music as existing outside our frame of reference. The features which constitute genre are numerous and may include aspects of harmony, rhythm, instrumentation, and even historical moment or performance context; genres are of course inherently diffuse and mutable, and many artists make careers by combining elements from previously distinct genres into new ones. Many artists likely would bristle at (or outright reject) confinement within one or several genres, seeing their work as transcending this kind of categorical description. Yet despite these objections and the inherent ambiguity and amorphous nature of genre, it is still a coherent question to ask of any particular music: "what genre is this"? It is, in other words, impossible for a music to be "genre-less"; such a music merely has yet to have its genre conceptualized or identified. When we encounter music beyond our frame of reference, we do not say "this music has no genre": rather, we acknowledge "this music belongs to a genre unknown to me."

Identifying a specific work with a specific genre is, however, more than taxonomical, as Jim Samson observes:

> "underlying tendency of genre is not just to organize, but also to close or finalize, our experience. This implies a closed, homogeneous concept of the artwork, where it is assumed to be determinate and to represent a conceptual unity".[42]

This tension, between the implicit objective of genres to constrain experiences and the efforts of concept music like *4'33"* to open them, plays an essential role in the structure of concept music.

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[42] Jim Samson, "Genre", Grove Music Online. 2001, Oxford University Press.
We already have a closed conception of the work-concept at play here, established in the preceding chapter in borrowing from Goehr. The identity of *4'33"* is a fixed object available to scrutiny, and thus so is its relationship to genre.

This tension is furthermore an aspect of the dialectical relationship between the nominalism of art works and the universality of genre identified by Adorno:

> "The individual work does not do justice to the genres by subsuming itself to them but rather through the conflict in which it long legitimated them, then engendered them, and ultimately canceled them".[43]

This sense of conflict, nearly ubiquitous across Adorno's aesthetic philosophy, is more than Adorno's personality manifest in his writing: it forecasts the extent to which conflict is essential to concept music. In other words, *all* works of music entail a degree of conflict with their genre; concept music exacerbates this conflict and through the reification of social forces explodes it to the foreground.

Because genre is itself inherently a social phenomenon, with cultural, historical and often economic implications, genres exist in a peculiar sort of hierarchy, with certain genres enjoying a privileged status while others exist in the margins. To help clarify the social dimension of genre and the subsequent sociality of concept music in its interaction *with* genre, I will differentiate between genre and art-worlds, borrowing from Howard Becker. While a genre refers to a collection of stylistic, formal and material attributes, an art world is the entire sphere – social, material, ideological and aesthetic – in which genres exist and interact. Genres may overlap, enclose other genres (as the category "rectangle" encloses "square"), and participants may disagree on what constitutes a single genre. Art worlds likewise entail overlaps, but their nature is more concrete: even as *4'33"* challenged notions of genre at its premiere – is it music, or is it performance art, or even theater – the art world of the Woodstock premiere is less ambiguous, entailing all the people and materials that enabled the performance at all, from Cage and Tudor, to the audience, to the staff of the concert hall.

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[43] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 202.

While genres on their own are value-neutral with respect to other genres, hierarchies inevitably form as art worlds evaluate genres and allocate resources and attention across them. These distributions are not done by aesthetic judgement alone; rather, innumerable social and economic variables necessarily impact how art worlds devote their (often scant) resources across what they consider deserving genres and works. This is observable in the ways institutions like opera houses and symphony halls program their seasons, especially as they respond to market pressures or political developments. Rather than one linear hierarchy, however, genres exist in a complicated and interconnected network of art worlds, meaning a genre privileged by one may at the same time be disregarded by another. Participants in nearly any art world can observe this on some scale, and in the already relatively niche world of contemporary classical music numerous competing hierarchies interact: the summer music festival at Darmstadt, a prestigious event of the European scene, is known to showcase especially avant-garde works, while the Bang-on-a-Can Festival in Massachusetts, fostered by members of the "downtown" American scene, is known to privilege post-minimalism. Nonetheless, in certain art worlds – especially including the worlds of symphonic music and opera – the dominant and respected genre, despite its obscurity or irrelevance in other art worlds, enjoys such a boon of resources and attention that thinking of it as merely one genre among others in an art world seems incomplete. Because of the hierarchical dimension to genre, I will here refer to such genres which enjoy privileged status in an art world as *aesthetic regimes*. Aesthetic regimes, by virtue of their privileged status in socially prestigious art worlds like opera and symphonic music, elevate their constitutive grammatical elements into the fabric of their art worlds. In this way, for example, the cadenza – a historically and culturally contingent aspect of specific instrumental repertoire – has become a standard and iconic element of the language of the symphony hall itself. Concept music, through its disruption of conventional grammars, challenges in turn aesthetic regimes and their aesthetic and ideological dominance.

The history of an art form is the history of one aesthetic regime (or a group of competing regimes) ceding relevance to others, as Renaissance polyphony ceded to the Baroque and the Classical style waned as Romanticism rose. But the twentieth century proved so destabilizing after the collapse of high modernism that composers found themselves not under the hegemony of a singular aesthetic, but rather in a diffuse patchwork sometimes referred to as "post-genre". Furthermore, after the experiments of the twentieth century (including of course by Cage), academic musicians are especially reticent to categorize anything involving sound as "not music". Without an aesthetic regime to place new music in reference to, the art world of contemporary classical music is left in a near constant state of ambiguity and even tension, as status and resources are afforded without the clearer parameters of previous eras. In Becker's analysis, the ways in which art worlds confer "art" status rely on consensus:

> "the constraints on what can be defined as art which undoubtedly exist in any specific art world arise from a prior consensus on what kinds of standards will be applied, and by whom, in making those judgements".[44]

Becker's commitment to this consensus reflects a faith in the reliability of judgements through the "systematic application of similar standards by trained and experienced members of the art world."[45] We can reframe Becker's argument here using the linguistic model, in which grammar represents the "conjunction of the characteristics of objects and the rules of classification current in the world in which they are proposed as art works."[46] The consensus central to Becker's analysis is in other words a form of syntax: works which adhere strictly to syntax, such as a student's string quartet in which they emulate Lachenmann, have little trouble being identified as "serious" entrants into the relevant art world (bearing in mind what is at hand here is merely the conferral of "art" status and not the evaluation of quality).

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[44] Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 155.

[45] Becker, 155.

[46] Becker, 156.

Other works such as Natascha Diels' *Panik(bread)* (2012), in which the ensemble at one point watches a recording of themselves as they eat potato chips, stray from established syntax and therefore prove more challenging in the conferral of "art" status. Because the techniques of *Panik(bread)* are so beyond the syntax of more conventional art music, audiences must refer to other aspects of the work, such as the status of the composer or the venues in which the piece is performed, to associate the work with the "art" category. Thus, elements of this discourse on art status are purely social: along with visual art, particular institutions in classical music act as arbiters of art status, able to unilaterally condone changes to an aesthetic regime or implement a new one entirely. That Radio Symphony Orchestra Stuttgart even performed *Minus Bolero*, regardless of its controversy, lends the work a degree of institutional credibility, just as a performance of *4'33"* at Carnegie Hall would lend the piece, controversial upon first listening for many, an immediate art status. Becker describes the efforts of visual aestheticians to incorporate conceptual works into "serious art" as the *institutional theory* of art, in which the qualities of art are found "in the relation of the objects to an existing art world, to the organizations in which art was produced, distributed, appreciated, and discussed."[47] By the institutional theory of art, Duchamp, Warhol and others had their exalted status in gallery culture "justified" against complaints of both less established and firmly established participants in the art worlds in question. Likewise, the institutional theory can "justify" the inclusion of *Minus Bolero* and such works which take as their material the social relationships of their art world.

Aesthetic regimes, and the attendant discourse of how an art world allocates resources and attention across competing aesthetics, are crucial for understanding the nature and potential of concept music. The value of "art status" and the resources art worlds confer to privileged aesthetics are inexorably a part of the experience of concept music, as such works deliberately confront and defy the conventions of syntax which art worlds prioritize. As Becker acknowledges, aesthetic judgement of this sort is inherently charged with a moral urgency and experienced across the participants of an art world in large part due to the implicit and inherently unequal distribution of resources at play. Audiences to Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise* or to an exhibition of Ellsworth Kelly are immediately confronted with an implicit statement: these works, and not many, many others (including those to which you, the ticket-paying customer, might relate more), are worthy of these resources and your attention. Concept music exacerbates these tensions and forces nearly all members of the art world to experience this dissonance. The strength of the institutional theory begins to erode the more bizarre the conceptual work gets, and perhaps the most controversial element of much concept music is a cliché of the visual art world: that "anyone could have made this." In other words, concept music tends to bring to established participants of the classical music art world the sort of dissonance less established participants face with Boulez or Stockhausen.

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[47] Becker, 146.

This is the fundamental tension of concept music: the conflict between the reigning, rational aesthetic order – constituting a coherent and standardized musical discourse – and the rebellious, irrational force of concept art. The disruptive potential of *4'33"* emerges as its parasitic grammar confronts the reigning regime of "serious" concert music. The uncanny experience of hearing the piece is the discomfort of a dialectical conflict: Cage's piece both needs the concert frame (the universal) and yet rejects it (through its particular weirdness), challenging the aesthetic regime of Western art music and daring audiences to allow the frame to collapse around them.

The Social Element of *4'33"*

The peculiar sort of vacuum in *4'33"* left by the absence of syntax (this is the more technical way to describe the silence for which the piece is notorious) both lays bare and incorporates into itself the social axes which underlie any other conventional work. This phenomenon does not of course happen in one palpable, discrete moment; rather it emerges through the fluid dynamic by which an audience, in the setting of the concert hall, experiences the strangeness of the work and its lack of communicable grammar. The first phase of the dynamic occurs at the surface level of mannerism and etiquette, as the silence of the piece makes unusual demands of a classical music audience. *4'33"* extends the silence requisite in some way (i.e. the silence of rapt attention) to conventional forms of music performance into the piece itself, in doing so bringing the social dimension of audiences as spectators into the experience of the piece. Douglas Kahn describes the expectations of the audience when going into a performance as a "culturally specific mandate to be silent, a mandate regulating the behavior that precedes and accompanies musical performance."[48] Cage's piece does not relieve the audience of this mandate as the piece begins; in fact, the by-now traditional norms of the piece's performances in which a performer enters and leave the stage in a conventional manner reinforces the mandate of silence and normal concert expectations. Yet the silence of the performer renders any sound from the audience audible, acknowledging in effect the reversal of concert norms: the performer now sits and remains silent while the audience (as well as the environment) generate the aural content. Kahn ultimately describes the experience of the work as one by which Cage

> "muted the site of centralized and privileged utterance, disrupted the unspoken audience code to remain unspoken, transposed the performance onto the audience members both in their utterances and in the acts of shifting perception toward other sounds, and legitimated bad behavior that in any number of other settings (including musical ones) would have been perfectly acceptable."[49]

The social dimension of the work has other, deeper facets as well, however, extending beyond this conflict of mannerism into a conflict of both aesthetic expectation and a defiance of the prestige (or at least the pursuit of it) inherent to the practice of classical music. The silence of *4'33"*, more than defying expectations that a performer *do* something, defies expectation that also a composer do something, dismantling the assumed preconditions of a concert performance. Ordinarily, audiences of a concert hall expect the careful and deliberate execution of a careful and deliberately designed aesthetic object; what Cage instead gives them is the apparent lack of technique, craft, or deliberation entirely. Writing on Cage and his provocations, Taruskin describes works like *4'33"* as exercises in "heroic powers of renunciation, and what [Cage] had to renounce were the very things ('education and theory,' as Cage once put it) that normally gained you prestige."[50] The canon is in many ways a lineage of "geniuses," a genealogy of so-called masters of the body of techniques we in academic music now refer to as the "common-practice period"; Cage confronts the social prestige of this lineage by, having assumed the privileges of the aesthetic regime, presenting to the audience nothing – at least, nothing that could be interpreted as technique or craft in the traditional sense.

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[48] Douglas Kahn, "John Cage: Silence and Silencing", *The Musical Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (1997), 60.

[49] Ibid.

This axis of social dynamic is manifest in the score as well, as a record of the piece which borrows the infrastructure of Western notation without recording any actual technical elements of the sort Western notation has evolved to articulate and describe. This is distinct from scores with elements of aleatory, such as Ligeti's box notation or a jazz chart, as these are instances of composers and arrangers flexibly manipulating Western notation to accommodate their designs and techniques. Cage's notation instead deliberately presents itself as a score in the conventional sense, then just as deliberately subverts the intent and function of the score; what the score thus records is the *tacet* alongside the tension against the prevailing norms of classical music embodied in its performance.

In both simultaneously embracing and rejecting the frame of classical music, *4'33"* also invites the tensions of production, capital and labor into the concert space: audiences of Cage's provocation must reconcile the presentation of an aesthetic object, with its attendant economic value and productive history, with its apparent lack of *value* of the sort they would associate with a more conventionally "beautiful" or "moving" piece. *4′33″* trades on its institutionally verified art status while denying much of the technical or narrative means by which people themselves tend to qualify objects as "art." This is, to be sure, the same sort of tension inherent to many works of modernism and abstraction across all media – yet just as with Rauschenberg's *White Painting* series, Cage's silent piece exacerbates this tension to an extreme through its complete negation of syntax. Here a certain irony emerges, too: the claim "my child could do this!" would probably have delighted Cage, aligning well with his discursive account of *4′33″* as a daily practice. Yet through its total negation, *4′33″*, like the white paintings, does more than call attention to the economic dimension of art: it confronts audiences, daring them to interrogate the distribution of resources across art worlds and challenging the allocation afforded to reigning aesthetic regimes.

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[50] Taruskin, 263.

The Irrationality of Concept Music

The denial of syntax which typifies concept music is ultimately a denial of a specific rationality, the regime of reason which has shaped the trajectory of Western compositional technique since the Renaissance. Through its willful resistance to comprehensible syntax, concept music like *4′33″* denies the assumption of meaningful organization underpinning much of the experience of both creating and appreciating Western "art music." The result is a peculiar form of irrationality: concept music does not, through its denial of syntax, reject *reason* altogether; it rather poses alternatives to the reigning form of rationality that has governed Western musical culture for centuries. These alternatives are not of the sort posed by music from other cultures and aesthetic paradigms: they instead challenge from within more fundamental aspects of the social and aesthetic organization of the reigning cultural order. By rejecting the fundamental axioms of Western music, concept music like Cage's silent piece explicitly poses a challenge to the rationality organizing these axioms and invites consideration of alternative modes of reason (whatever those may be).

The engagement of irrational and rational in concept music is dialectic and fluid, as through parasitic interaction (e.g. the situating of *4'33"* within a concert hall) the conceptual work both embraces and rejects the forms of reason attendant to conventional music. The idea of a concept work is the attempt by the irrational to pierce through the rationality of the frame, encoded in all the expectations of the audience. Yet an idea alone is itself not necessarily irrational, and indeed if the idea of a concept work were entirely irrational it would not be understandable at all. There is not, in other words, anything necessarily irrational about "a piece in which the performer is silent", or "Bolero, without the melody". Rather, the irrationality – the challenge to the regime of reason – is the result of this dialectic process: the idea of a concept work, through its conflict with the frame, produces the irrational as a product. The text of concept music, such as the score for *4'33"* , contains this irrationality: while the internal logic of conventional art music has a fundamental rationality expressed in the notation of the text, such as the structure of development and variation, or serial organization (or any other such organization), concept music's immanent logic is in a sense self-contradicting, recognizing the rational assumptions of the genre ordinarily encoded by notation and through the idea (such as Cage's *tacet*) denying them.

This conflict between idea and frame is fragile, as the author of the work must be careful not to overly-influence the dialectical relationship and collapse the experience into an ultimately banal, syntactically comprehensible work. The regime of reason governing conventional music is so totalizing, the force of the canon and its history so intense, that small interventions by the composer risk creating a piece that conforms to this rationality, becoming ultimately fully conventional. Thus Sol LeWitt, in his *Sentences on Concept Art* (1969), declares:

> "Once the idea of the piece is established in the artist's mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly. There are many side effects that the artist cannot imagine. These may be used as ideas for new works."[51]

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[51] Sol LeWitt, *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999), 28.

To compose *Minus Bolero*, Kreidler need only determine the idea, the absence of melody – the implementation is from then completely trivial, or in LeWitt's formulation "mechanical."[52] Likewise, Cage need only determine the idea of the silent piece; the adjustments and chance-dependent operations surrounding the movement timings are, in the LeWitt formulation, auxiliary means to the already determined end. I suspect some people might regard Cage's specific timings as instances of authorial intervention which might threaten this fragile dynamic between idea and frame; I address these objections in the next chapter as it concerns structure. What matters here is not the timings themselves as such, but rather the tripartite division, by which Cage accesses the frame of the reigning aesthetic regime and introduces the parasitism of the silent piece.

Just because the implementation of the idea – the specific means by which the composer manifests the concept work – is mechanical and subordinate to the idea, the method the conceptual artists uses is not, however, irrelevant. The aesthetic (or, in Kreidler's formulation, "sensual") dimension of the piece is the arena in which the idea and framing compete, the site of the dialectic process by which both its irrationality, and (as I show in the next chapter), structure, emerge. The nature of this dimension, the uncanny experience minimally disturbed by the author, enables this dialectical conflict between concept and convention, and thus the entire potency of the work itself. Once the composer oversteps, influencing the work beyond the restraint of LeWitt's paradigm, they risk the collapse into convention, becoming a standard work without the formal or social potency of concept music. This is the situation of *In Futurum*, in which convoluted intervention by the composer on the surface layer of the work, through elaborate rests, collapses the piece into convention and even banality.

The concept artist therefore must not interrupt what Kreidler calls the "powerful independently running machine, the independent force" of the concept work.[53] What is ultimately at stake in this process, and what the concept artist must ensure they do not violate, is the social potency of the work. This function is in fact the underlying concern for both LeWitt in his *Sentences on Concept Art,* and for Kreidler's response *Sentences on Musical Concept Art*, even if not explicitly stated in either. Both recognize the primacy of the idea for concept music, and through this primacy both imply the potential for concept music to be a foil against the extant regimes of reason, liberated fully from the weight of both rationalism and representation. If concept music like *4'33"* reflects social antagonisms the way Schoenberg's modernism did in Adorno's account, it is through this rejection of rationality – a rejection ultimately of the canon itself. This negation is essential to the structure of concept music; indeed the formal properties of concept music must necessarily be born of its social character and internal contradictions: as Adorno writes, "The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form. This, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society."[54] Having established the strange grammar and denial of syntax as well as the deep social character of concept music, I now turn to the question of form in pursuit of those general, paradigmatic insights which can reveal the essential nature of conceptual art as a category.

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[52] LeWitt, 29.

[53] Kreidler, MUTOR, unit 4.

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[54] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 6.

Chapter III: Structure and Style

> *"The higher music's relation to its historical form is dialectical. It catches fire on those forms, melts them down, makes them vanish and return in vanishing. Popular music, on the other hand, uses the types as empty cans into which the material is pressed without interacting with the forms. Unrelated to the forms, the substance withers and at the same time belies the forms, which no longer serve for compositional organization."*[55]

For modernists like Adorno and Schoenberg, structure is an essential (perhaps even *the* paramount) aspect of music, the locus of its social and moral character and the rational basis for certain composers' otherwise alienating styles. In appreciating structure, as Adorno would have it, we appreciate the ways by which a work of music (and to be clear, only a certain type from this perspective) develops and adheres to its own logic, unfolding an intricate and replete compositional design through which it can gain a relevant social and political character. Ultimately, through an attentiveness to structure, we can in this view recognize the "concretely unfolding logic that can vouch for the value of the music."[56] Structure is thus relevant for Adorno not only technically, but socially and even morally as the barometer of a work's autonomy and rigor. Adorno's pre-occupation with structure has always seemed to me a natural consequence of the Western tradition of formal analysis, and thus my intuition leads me to assume a structuralist position for interpreting the social dimension of concept music and how the social nature of the genre is a component of the work itself. I am not fully persuaded by Adorno's position that the extramusical significance of a musical work – that is, its social content – can only be ascertained through an awareness of structure; yet an emphasis on structure, on the organizing principles of a work, seems especially useful for analysis of a category of music that consistently defies organizational norms.

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[55] Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to th Sociology of Music* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 26.

[56] Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Deconstructive Variations: Music and Reason in Western Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 154.

Yet the structuralist account of music is one of many, and the further music strays stylistically from the works which interested Adorno and which typified Schoenberg's modernism, the more objectionable the structuralist account becomes (bear in mind, even Stravinsky is marginalized by Adorno's perspective). In this chapter, I will examine the structuralist perspective as it regards concept music to demonstrate how a dialectical approach between both structuralist and stylistic listening reveals the form of concept music, the general trait which concept music as a group, despite its diverse particulars, nonetheless shares.

Rather than an interplay between musical content and form as concerned the structuralists, however, concept music instead entails an interplay between the abstract idea and the materially manifest frame, a conflict through which structure, through negation, ultimately emerges. The real aesthetic properties of concept music, in other words, are not actually the constitutive elements of structure: they are instead the catalysts for the dialectical conflict between the social forces through which structure is born. Because concept music does not have constitutive elements in the conventional sense, style and structure collapse into one. This unique property is the most defining, general trait of concept music, and the heart of the uncanny experience which typifies the genre.

Structure, Form and Design

The analysis of "form" is inherently controversial and fluid, especially for musical works of modernism and post-modernism. Skeptics of the importance of form argue that form is ultimately a pedagogical tool with a fairly limited theoretical utility; Rose Subotnik notes especially how notions of form for the pre-tonality of Renaissance and Medieval Europe are only useful as the "shifting stylistic hallmarks that can be named and dated on an exam."[57] Like Subotnik, I recognize that the formal education of Western music theory biases me toward analysis of "form" over other modes of appreciating and analyzing music, with "sonata," "fugue" and others living atop academic pedestals at the expense of approaches better suited to other ways of music making. I appreciate that this formal bias is a potential obstacle, especially for this type of analysis of a highly esoteric genre.

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[57] Subotnik, *Deconstructive Variations*, 161.

To be sure, an unhealthy overemphasis on form is necessarily myopic, risking an overcommitment to the generalities of music and losing sight completely of the messier particulars. Writing for the Oxford Grove Dictionary, Arnold Whittall cautions that "when the subject is that of particular, and valued, compositions, the critical discussion of musical character and style...tends to have priority over considerations of form."[58] In other words, "form" is a suitable entryway into thinking deeply about certain music; the truly interesting insights, however, tend to come not from the ways a work typifies a formal pattern, but in how it *breaks* from it (a view Adorno himself endorses often). Nonetheless, because form speaks to the fundamental organization of a work, the relations between and among the elements of music, I share the modernist sentiment that formal analysis is able to reveal important insights into the logical organization (and ultimately, moral character) of music, even at the particular level of a single work, such as *4'33"*.

To avoid certain connotations which may weigh down this analysis, I will use only the tern "structure" to refer to the logical organization of a work of music, the organization of its grammatical elements and their relationships among each other. "Design" seems a suitable alternative, but for me it is too laden with connotations of surface-level features and implications of authorial intent, an issue for works of concept music which adhere to LeWitt's paradigm of minimal authorial intervention. Likewise, "form" seems as suitable as "structure," yet is too laden with connotations of specific historic forms concerned with sectional relationships. This chapter therefore is concerned with the structure of *4'33"*, and the best methodology for revealing it. Because of the ambiguity inherent to the piece and the experience *of* the piece, revealing the structure will take some creativity. Earlier in this project I located my analysis only on the work-concept and its record, the score, to reveal its essential strange grammar; for structure to become apparent, however, I will have to allow for the experience of the listener and how they organize the work. I will attempt to do this in a very limited fashion, focusing on the form of listening by which we as listeners organize the sonic and social experience of *4'33"*. This will also allow me to in good faith counter objections to the analysis of structure itself – objections I must imagine Cage himself, among others, would endorse.

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[58] Whittall, A. (2001). Form. Grove Music Online. Retrieved 31 Oct. 2023, from https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000009981.

The Traditional Approach to Structure

We have for conventional music centuries of precedent for analyzing, interpreting and describing the structure of a work, but for a piece like *4'33"* these procedures are insufficient, as any of our standard approaches to concert music break down in the face of the weirdness of concept music. The score alone cannot guide analysis of structure as it can for a Webern string quartet: while the latter consists of clearly identifiable elements in specific, logically coherent organizations, the text of the former is of course technically (in terms of sonic symbolism) blank, without identifiable elements beyond the section timings and the *tacet*. A traditional formal analysis of a score would look to its various signifiers – pitch content, rhythmic content, horizontal and vertical organization, distribution of material across parts, and performance indicators – as a way of interpreting structure; obviously the score of *4'33"* offers no information of this kind. A satisfying account for structure here (if one exists) must account for what is left to interpret of *4'33"*, in lieu of traditional notational signifiers and the conventional elements which combine to create structure.

The text of *4'33"* itself is perhaps deceptive, offering the exact timings for movements which would, in one sense, seem to satisfy a demand for formal elements of analysis. If I were to apply only the techniques available to conventional Western analysis, I might then be satisfied to describe the structure of *4'33"* in terms of section durations, the way students would describe a classical tripartite piece, with discrete sections bounded by the timing given by the title and framed by the opening and closing of the piano lid. This perspective borrows the same sectional, formal approach which best suits conventional, regimented forms, such as the parallel period or *de capo* aria. The chance-dependent operations by which Cage generated these section timings are then the means by which he achieves formal necessity of the sort which concerned Adorno.

This perspective, focused on the sectional timings, might advocate for the experience of *time* itself as integral to interpreting the structure of the work (or simply, for understanding the work at all). *4'33"*, both as experienced in concert and as manifest in the score, certainly is in a way about time, both at the superficial level indicated by the title, and also at a subcutaneous layer, in which our experience of the resulting sonic environment in necessarily conditioned by our awareness of time. If one has ever felt the sensation of checking their watch during a concert, *4'33"* magnifies this sensation – not in a pejorative sense, but rather through calling attention to the inevitable and often concealed relationship between music and the passing of the time. Because of the work's place within the frame of the Canon – whether metaphorically, as the score's relationship to other scores, or literally, when experienced in a concert hall – Cage through the *tacet* implicitly demands an attention to the temporal dimension of music, usually filled with signals but in this case laid bare as the performer sits idly. The nakedness of the temporal experience, in this sense, is the crux of the work, and thus an analysis of its structure consisting solely of sectional timings seems coherent. Cage's innovation, then, is really about time, and the structural analysis of the work is concerned with how he organized not sonic materials but time itself.

From this perspective, the sectional structure of *4'33"* is in fact quite analogous to a conventional tripartite work; only instead of being constituted by material in the conventional sense, the sections and structure of *4'33"* instead are built on Cage's manipulations of time alone, constituted by the resulting sounds in the performance space which serve as sonic indicators for the passing of time. This perspective necessarily takes Cage very seriously for the exact timings he chose, treating the chance-dependent operations from which he derived the timings not as arbitrary but logically necessary, the way the calculation and manipulation of a row is necessary for the coherence of a Second Viennese style string quartet.

Yet a traditional approach is insufficient to this work, and analysis of the work concerned only with timings and performance instructions willfully misses what is most important about the work – the silence. Certainly, for any conventional work the constitutive grammatical elements are essential for determining its structure, and if we are serious about an analysis of the structure of *4'33"* we must treat this silence – and its *lack* of constitutive grammar – seriously; not as an artifact of the piece, but as *the piece*. A satisfying structural account of *4'33"* must account for the *tacet* of the performer as a quintessential grammatical element, just as a satisfying account of a fugue must account for the subject as an essential aspect of its grammar. This is not to deny any relevance to this perspective on time; indeed, calling attention to a hidden dimension of time is certainly one virtue of the work and could very well be the crux of the experience for many. Yet my goal here is not just identifying possibilities for interpretation, but rather identifying the most appropriate interpretive method for revealing the structure of the work.

A further issue with a traditional structural perspective focused on timings is the tremendous importance this perspective places on the timings in performance, in a way that I feel is incongruous to the actual experience (and actual substance) of the work. That is, were a performance to go over by one second, the structural perspective on time would declare the structure changed, and introduce the sort of issues of identity and authenticity which I sought to evade through my use of Goehr's work-concept in my first chapter. The model of the work-concept which I am using here in fact precludes this strict notion of structure based on time, precisely for this reason. The timings are certainly important in the sense that they *do* bind the experience within a single frame; what is relevant about them, however, is not their exact durations, but rather that they represent Cage's adherence to the LeWitt paradigm of an uninterrupted idea brought to full fruition.

The piece could, in other words, be *4'34"*, and I would be analyzing it in exactly the same way. If timings are an aspect of structure and integral to the experience – and it is of course relevant that the piece is not four hours and thirty-three minutes – they serve a subordinate role to the more relevant grammatic feature, the *tacet*. *4'33"* thus has much in common with a long Feldman quartet: while time is of course a crucial aspect of many of Feldman's pieces, and the experience of time passing remains crucial to the experience of such pieces, it would be insufficient to analyze the structure of such a piece *only* along temporal lines, without regard to the other grammatical elements which constitute the piece. For Feldman, these other elements are conventional, while for Cage there is only one element: the *tacet*.

Just as timings alone are insufficient for understanding form, so too are the chance-dependent sounds which make up the real content of a performance of *4'33"*. There certainly is a strong temptation to defer to the aleatory of the piece as a way of flattening the work into a more conventional object of scrutiny, allowing for aleatory to substitute for the conventional elements by which we would assess structure. This approach would describe the structure of any particular performance of the piece as the specific unfolding of *that* performance, the formal properties and structure emerging over the span of the duration alone, with each instance of the piece setting this process anew. Such structure exists not in the ossified way we think of structure for conventional works, but rather in a fluid, living way, contingent upon the chance procedures determining the real content of the piece as experienced in the concert hall over a single performance. This may be a more satisfying account for some, and certainly for many interpretations of Cage's landmark piece a fluid and dynamic notion of structure seems fitting. This discursive structure of *4'33"* does account for the fundamental grammatical unit, the *tacet*, while also remaining open to conventional methods of interpreting signals and their organization.

Yet this fluid understanding comes at the expense of generality: for this notion of structure to accommodate the potentials entailed in the chance character of the *tacet*, the structure must lose any of the features that make it meaningful as a general analytic concept. The fluid model may provide a satisfying account for structure for *one* instance of the work, but it does not generalize onto the work-concept as a whole. This type of structure would therefore be as instructive for understanding *4'33"* as the acoustic properties of a particular concert hall, describing with some determinacy and insight real aspects of the experience of the piece without any actual general insights about the work or concept music as a genre. More troubling, an account of structure predicated on aleatory must necessarily *not* have the sort of logical necessity which concerned Adorno and Schoenberg and is, to the critical theorist, an essential aspect of the work's social and moral content.

If we cannot turn to conventional means of analysis for the structure of *4'33"*, it is certainly tempting to abandon the pursuit altogether – nothing about *4'33"* seems to imply it *must* have a structure available to analysis. I am not deterred, however: my intuition still tells me there is something about Cage's piece, and something about concept music as a genre, which is structurally relevant. To reveal this, then, I must dive deeper into the basis of structure, to demonstrate how concept music's structure is the result not of an additive process organizing elements, but of a negative process, a unity born of tension.

Structural And Stylistic Listening

Recognizing and appreciating structure entails a mode of perception that biases itself *toward* structure in the first place. Schoenberg's bias is transparent, describing music without a perceivable structure as being "as unintelligible as an essay without punctuation, or as disconnected as a conversation which leaps purposelessly from one subject to another."[59] This emphasis on "purpose" is essential to Adorno's preoccupation with structural listening as well. Cage's notion of *4'33"* as a daily practice, a mode of appreciating sound itself, does not lend itself to appreciating structure –

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[59] Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), 1.

rather, it seems to preclude notions of structure, form and design altogether. In other words, appreciating the organization of a piece of music entails listening *for* organization, listening *across* the presentation of local elements to hear their organizational logic. In contrast, appreciating the sensual (again borrowing from Kreidler) elements *for* their sensuality misses the organizational level as it focuses on the aesthetic content for its own sake. The former approach steps back to gaze at the full scale of the cathedral and its design, while the latter approach takes in the contour and curve of every buttress and the strength and straightness of every column without looking for the entirety of their formal combinations.

Skeptics of form and structuralism raise an important objection to formal analysis of concept music like *4'33"*; as Subotnik puts it,

> "to the extent that structural listening encourages concentrating on the perception of formal relationships at the expense of maintaining an active... sensitivity to sound itself, structural listening constitutes a cultural violation of [Romantic instrumental music] and many other styles."[60]

The discursive, processual listening mode encouraged by Cage for his silent piece does seem inextricably at odds with structural listening concerned with organization, and it is certainly true that structuralist accounts such as Adorno's do not demonstrate a universal application across all modes of music and music culture. Schoenberg himself seems to preclude a structural perspective for a work such as *4'33"*, warning that "if one lets the sounds run as they please, [the material] remains a children's game."[61]

One of the virtues of structural listening that Subotnik describes is its ability to place listeners within the context of music in a way that attempts to escape cultural relativism: "structural listening is an active mode that, when successful, gives the listener the sense of composing the piece as it actualizes itself in time."[62] The sensation of "composing the piece" in listening reflects the sort of rational spirit which is essential to serialism; despite the obvious and often extreme difficulty for many in perceiving the rows, matrices and other rational schemes of a Webern quartet, the importance of structure for the compositional process itself implies the possibility of perceiving the logical necessity of the piece, the rational organization by which Webern mastered his material (even if this possibility is quite remote). The apotheosis of the structuralist perspective is the primacy of "developmental variation," an integral aspect for Adorno by which works of music develop and adhere to their own logic. Through developmental variation, composers like Schoenberg and Webern are able to "establish the internal "necessity" of a structure" which in the structuralist perspective acts a "guarantee of musical value."[63] Formal autonomy "requires that a composition have some technique for projecting itself as self-determining over time."[64] This requires that music at least "project" the sensation of self-determination, by which development (as emphasized by Schoenberg and Adorno) provides a quintessential pathway.

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[60] Subotnik, *Deconstructive Variations*, 163.

[61] Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea* (Belmont Music Publishers, 1975), 253.

[62] Subotnik, *Deconstructive Variations,* 150.

This seems to be an intractable problem for a structuralist perspective on concept music. *4'33''* does not have any sort of developmental content to organize into a coherent structure, nor does it seem to have *any* predetermined content which could suggest a logical inevitability. The piece leaves only the field of ambient sounds to appreciate, an array of deconstructed elements without any unifying scheme besides the experience of sitting in the concert hall to hear them. The *tacet* of the piece leaves only scattered fragments: there are no buttresses or columns to fully appreciate, let alone an entire unified cathedral. It thus seems impossible to suggest that any interpretive mode is better suited for this piece than Cage's own, and it seems as well that the analysis of structure for this work (and thus perhaps all concept music) is a fool's errand.

Yet the potential for structure returns in light of the prominence of the idea in concept music; rather than an intractable issue for structural listening, with some dialectic thinking, the primacy of the idea becomes the avenue through which we appreciate structure in lieu of conventional, organizable material. Despite his transparent hostility for "unorganized" music like *4'33"* (and I have to imagine he would extend this disdain to nearly the entire genre of concept music), Schoenberg – like LeWitt – advocates for the total realization of idea: "An idea is born; it must be moulded, formulated, developed elaborated, carried through and pursued to its very end."[65] This resonates with LeWitt's 28th sentence on concept art, that once an idea is established, "the process is carried out blindly."[66]

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[63] Ibid., 159.

[64] Ibid., 158.

Schoenberg's notion of "idea" here is obviously based in musical material, described as "the method by which balance is restored" to the destabilizing effect of tones presented in sequence (and more colloquially understood as "theme, melody, phrase or motive").[67] LeWitt in contrast of course is referring to the much more abstract ideas which are the essence of conceptual work like *4'33"*. Nonetheless, it seems to me both share an understanding of what it means to follow an idea fully, to let a process with an initial impulse fulfill its own internal logic. In this way, *4'33"* does have a "self-determining nature" analogous to the intricate rationality of twelve-tone music; rather than expressed through constitutive elements, however, the self-determination is expressed through the tension between the idea and the frame – the parasitic model of concept art discussed in the first chapter. The timings of the piece, the only real means by which Cage intervenes in the process of the work, are the practical means by which Cage sets the idea of silence within the frame. Their origin in chance-dependent operations verifies Cage's efforts to not "adulterate" the idea with excessive authorial intervention.

If structural listening based on organizing content into a rational system is ill-suited for concept music, perhaps a better alternative is a mode of listening attuned to how the idea of the piece, rather than specific sonic material, is self-determining. Just as the structure of a conventional quartet unfolds through a perspective attuned to the development of its ideas in the conventional sense, so too might the structure of *4'33"* emerge through a perspective attuned to how its idea asserts itself, not as specific sonic material, but as an agent of tension against its frame.

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[65] Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, 124.

[66] LeWitt, *Sentences on Conceptual Art.*

[67] Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, 123.

The Critical Approach to Structure

Structure in music – especially as described by Schoenberg and Adorno – emerges (or is made manifest) over the duration of a piece, a conceptual whole formed from the sum of parts in the content of the music. Structure in this way is analogous to an arch, deriving its coherence and strength from the relationships binding its constituent elements. The whole manifests only as the parts emerge and act upon each other in a process of internal reconciliation. Conventional formal analysis is thus concerned with the immanent aspects of a work which constitute the structure in question, such as motif, harmony, rhythm, and proportion; this conception of structure thus unfolds through the relationship of particular, syntactical grammars. The strength of the arch is in part related to the strength of the syntax, as the organization of local elements emerges through their standardized relationships. Developmental sections in sonatas, for example, are described as "destabilizing" precisely because their distant key relationships to the tonic and dominant are in the syntax of the common-practice period understood (and allegedly thus heard by audiences) as destabilizing. For concept music, structure cannot be understood this way because its grammar is non-syntactical and prevents the unfolding process quintessential to the common practice period. There are no relevant parts with which to sum to a whole; a positivist interpretation of structure for *4'33"* would depend on chance operations of the resulting sounds in the space that cannot be generalized or iterated meaningfully the way a coherent conception of structure must, as discussed above.

Instead, structure in concept music must be conceived not as an arch but as a suspension bridge, born not of coherence and compression but of tension amidst competing forces – the idea and the frame. In this way, we do not appreciate the structure of *4'33"* through the unfolding of its constituent elements; rather we appreciate the structure in the tension and conflict between the expectations of concert hall aesthetics and the *tacet* of the performer on stage. Structure for concept music is thus dialectic, manifesting as the idea (silence) and the frame (the concert hall) act upon and against each other. The real, particular elements of any single performance of the work – the coughing, shuffling and lozenge unwrapping which typify the real aural experience of the piece – are not in this conception relevant structurally the way a *Nebenstimme* part is relevant structurally for the Second Viennese style. They instead are the conduit through which the idea resists the concert hall frame. This conflict generates the actual structure of the work, that which gives the piece both immediate and general coherence. No matter what the *tacet* offers as potential for real sonic experience, the idea of the piece remains constant, the "self-determining" aspect which gives the work coherence. The structure of *4'33"* is therefore not to be located in the unfolding of the real aesthetic content as might be true of a traditional model: rather, structure here emerges through the conflict between real *social* content, between the expectations provided by the concert hall and the denial of those expectations by the artist. The aesthetic content is the medium in which this denial – the total *tacet* – confronts its frame, the aesthetic regime of Western concert music; structure is thus born of this dialectic conflict.

Inhalt **and the Negation of Style**

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno describes "form" as located "precisely there where the work frees itself from being simply a product of subjectivity."[68] Although he positioned Schoenberg's dense modernism as the exemplar of rationality and autonomy in music, I see potential for this conception of structure as it interacts with conceptual music like *4'33"*. Because the process of the work follows the LeWitt paradigm – because the idea maintains its logical integrity, with minimal authorial intervention – Cage's work too attains the coherence and even unity of the repertoire which was Adorno's focus. Through the process of silence – of compositional *negation* – Cage attains the sort of truth-content which fascinated Adorno:

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[68] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 142

> "In general, then, the hermeneutics of artworks is the translation of their formal elements into content [Inhalt] . This content [Inhalt] does not, however, fall directly to art, as if this content only needed to be gleaned from reality. Rather, it is constituted by way of a countermovement. Content [Inhalt] makes its mark in those works that distance themselves from it. Artistic progress, to the degree that it can be cogently spoken of, is the epitome of this movement. Art gains its content [Inhalt] through the latter's determinate negation."[69]

4'33", even more so than conventional works, distances itself from its own content through the *tacet*. In fact, through the silence of the performer, Cage distances his work from its own content more than any work of serialism, which is inevitably and inextricably bound up in the individual composers and their aesthetic designs. *4'33"* instead is completely freed from its own real content, the sounds in the hall, as these are merely a consequence of its actual grammar, the *tacet*. In other words, while even works of total serialism are necessarily implicated in the baggage of conventional music grammar (including the now *passe* techniques which the Second Viennese composers pioneered), *4'33"* is able to refuse style altogether through its rejection of syntax, distancing itself from its own content. The lack of style is, in fact, *the* defining characteristic of the aural experience for this work. No matter how one approaches the work – through structural listening, through Cage's own discursive lens, or an analysis of a particular performance's aleatory – "style" never emerges, precisely because style depends on some sort of syntactical intelligibility. This conspicuous lack of style, the negation of a fundamental attribute of all conventional music, is part of the essence of structure for the silent piece.

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[69] Ibid., 139.

Rather than a structuralist or discursive approach to listening, *4'33"* (and certainly other concept works like it, such as *Minus Bolero*) requires a critical (or even dialectic) perspective, listening to the *real* content and its interaction with the *actual* content (the negative space where style would be and the resistance against the frame of reigning aesthetic regimes). This sort of listening encompasses both structural and non-structural impulses; from the former, the approach borrows the emphasis on judging a work "in terms of the work's own chosen premises",[70] while from the latter the approach borrows the sensitivity to the various nominally stylistic elements, the "metaphorical and affective responses based on cultural association, personal experience and imaginative play"[71] which serve as the conduit for the interaction between idea and frame.

Through such a critical listening, a piece like *4'33"* in fact seems to *force* its listener to engage with it structurally, as a unified whole, as the defiance of syntax in the real content of the piece and the subsequent negation of style simulates a "great cultural distance"[72], the kind of alienation which Schoenberg's contemporary audiences faced from his music. The denial of syntax makes the cultural distance for concept music even greater, and from this distance, it cannot be engaged with stylistically: it can only be engaged with as an idea (silence) competing against an entire aesthetic regime (concert music). Moreover, while the simulation of a cultural distance for Schoenberg's dense style acts on only certain audiences, but not, say, a seminar of undergraduate music majors, the simulation of cultural distance, and the ensuing alienation, by *4'33"* (or *Minus Bolero*, or many other conceptual works) acts upon *everyone*. While an experienced Western music listener can detect the stylistic elements of Schoenberg, Berlioz, Czernowin or Saariaho, they cannot detect stylistic elements of *4'33"* because there are none: there is no syntax to catch onto, no matter how experienced, educated, or initiated the listener is. The negation of style in concept music seems to me like an aesthetic black hole, creating through its potent rejection of style the same measure of distance and alienation for everyone.

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[70] Subotnik, *Deconstructive Variations,* 161.

[71] Ibid., 170.

[72] Ibid., 169.

The provocations among audiences (such as at its premiere) which the piece often elicits are not therefore deviations but instead exemplars of this perspective, as for many the experience of this tension reads as a hoax, or somehow insincere. If read as sincere, however, this tension is what provides the piece unity and coherence. If there is a magic to *4'33"* and conceptual works like it, I contend it is precisely this: the reification of an idea and its competition with the social life of classical music, the embodiment of those very social antagonisms which are the crux of Adorno's aesthetic philosophy.

The structure obtained by concept music of this sort is then, it seems, even more politically potent than Schoenberg, as its resistance to sublimation into ordinariness at the grammatical level translates to a robust resistance to the stagnating impact of history. Adorno located the ability of Schoenberg to evade neutralization through a "jagged physiognomy," the challenging listening which for many typifies the Second Viennese style;[73] concept music – and Cage, perhaps unwittingly – evades neutralization instead by escaping the strictures of style, as it negates rational syntax, altogether. As long as there are social antagonisms embedded in the sociohistorical life of Western music, these antagonisms will be manifest in the structure of *4'33"* and concept works like it.

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[73] Ibid., 165.

Conclusion

> *"But objects of art not merely interest and absorb, they move us; we are not merely involved with them, but concerned with them, and care about them; we treat them in special ways, invest them with a value which normal people otherwise reserve only for other people—and with the same kind of scorn and outrage. They mean something to us, not just the way statements do, but the way people do."*[74]

Binky and Stanley

A 2013 episode of the PBS children's program *Arthur* ("Binky's Music Madness") takes head-on an intractable issue which almost every formally trained composer faces when a well-meaning relative or friend asks to hear their music: "this is music"? This is rarely explicit, communicated instead as audiences scramble for the vocabulary to describe their responses, grasping to note the elements of style to which they *can* relate amidst a sea of material to which they cannot. The world of new music is in many respects still very niche, and despite the best intentions, the most prestigious music often requires at least a primer of sorts, which *Arthur* sets out to provide. After a performance by Bang on a Can stirs controversy among the eponymous aardvark and his friends, music aficionado and skeptic Binky learns – in fact, he has his entire aural sense reoriented – to embrace the approach of Julia Wolfe and David Lang (who appear and play themselves). Understandable for the scope of a children's show, the issue is presented without much nuance, yet the important features are there, and while its ultimate message is both banal (be open minded, especially musically) and weirdly specific (embrace the approach of the early 2000's downtown scene), it crystalizes important issues in contemporary concert culture and provides two archetypes for audiences: Muffy and Binky, the pretender and the resistor.

The episode beings with Francine and Muffy sitting in the audience of a Bang on a Can Allstars performance, exchanging a befuddled glance in the midst of a highly rhythmic yet dissonant moment of Wolfe's *Big Beautiful Dark and Scary.* After the show, Muffy apologizes for bringing

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[74] Cavell 416

Francine along, bemoaning that "with a name like Bang on a Can Allstars, I thought we were going to hear something danceable." Muffy is a clear stand-in for what I suspect is most audiences' reaction to "new music": she brought into the concert space a series of assumptions – such as danceability – and was unable to access the musical material beyond the immediate contradictions (the irregular rhythmic environment, among others) she experienced. Francine, however, is an immediate convert, noting especially that she "never knew what was going to happen next" and that it was unlike anything she had heard before, containing not just dark and scary but even funny elements. Julia Wolfe and David Lang then enter the scene to affirm Francine's reception and correct her hunch that the music was improvised (belying yet another assumption – that the organization of music is always readily audible). Wolfe then remarks she'd like to visit the "uniquely average" hometown of the main cast, deliberately or not playing into the Ivory Tower elitism of academic music.

We next see that Arthur is an immediate convert as well ("I feel like I was on another planet") while Muffy is eager yet not fully convinced, insisting to the skeptical Binky that she is *trying* to enjoy it. Here Muffy articulates the social dimension at play, teasing Binky that he is not sophisticated enough for the music without a "very refined ear." While obviously meant as a simple dialogue for a children's show, the choices here nonetheless reflect key issues: while Francine's and Arthur's embraces seem genuine, Muffy seems motivated more by the prestige attached to the music. Why *should* Muffy work to enjoy any form of music, after all? Merely demonstrating a refined ear seems one of the more shallow and disingenuous motivations, yet it is presented by PBS as uncontroversial.

Listening more on his own, Binky still dislikes the music yet finds himself "noticing sounds" in a way which he suspects represents an "infection", with dripping water and bus engines drawing his focus as he walks along the street. Later, Muffy's conversion is finally complete, stating she "*actually* is starting to like it," reminding us that in some cases mere persistence can teach us to learn how to appreciate such sophisticated music. Binky is still unconvinced, asserting the episode's counter-thesis: "that stuff isn't music!"

The crux of the episode comes as Binky decides to perpetrate a Sokal Hoax, recording apparently random noises from around his home and playing them for his friends, to catch them celebrating through their "enlightened" perspectives what he has determined is objectively "awful" music. Ultimately, Binky is shown to have hoisted himself on his own petard: his attempt to create awful music is, of course, composition in its own right, and once Wolfe and Lang reappear to encourage Binky and offer constructive notes, he becomes a full convert at last, playing with the ensemble as they jam alongside his composition.

The goal of this episode as a children's show is obviously noble, and composers of new music need all the allies we can find. Yet my issue is less with the episode and more with the attitudes which it, perhaps unconsciously, manifests. Binky represents the attitude of "what the hell is that – my five-year-old could do that!", a common refrain in the arts but primarily in visual culture as people explore modernist galleries. His attempt to trick his friends reflects the attitude that the emperor has no clothes – that they are all as disingenuous as Muffy and are feigning an appreciation for the sake of social status. His background as the cast's music expert reaffirms this stance, as he brings the most informed assumptions about music to conflict with new aesthetics (reminding me of one music instructor who referred to the entire twentieth-century repertoire as a "gimmick"). Muffy likewise represents an important, if pernicious, attitude – that the music must have something to it by virtue of its social position. Muffy's initial understanding of Bang on a Can is that they are a prestigious, sophisticated group; her appreciation for the music itself comes only later. This raises a persistent, nagging issue in contemporary music culture: do composers *need* the social prestige – and all its attendant baggage – to spark initial interest? How can Western music culture escape its ugliest dimensions if we still need the sacred frame of the concert hall and the allure of the conductor in black tie dress to attract a crowd at all?

Cavell on Sincerity

Stanley Cavell, in his mid-century writings on modernism in music, seems to be like Binky, only all grown up, bringing a training in both philosophy and music to the issues of meaning in the arts, especially the sort of dense, angular music of his contemporaries who according to Cavell "feel compelled to defend their work in theoretical papers" in light of the resistance from audiences.[75] Cavell brings an earnest and grounded perspective from his field of ordinary language philosophy, and he identifies as one of the crucial obstacles for modernist composers the issue of *sincerity*. For Cavell (and it seems Binky, too) sincerity – the genuineness with which a composer, painter or poet shapes material – is a necessary, if often fraught, barometer which artists *must* meet. Cavell is not persuaded by the common lines of defense for the avant-garde, that the "point" of a piece must simply be felt or heard, or finally grasped with the right training and context. Instead, Cavell describes the problem modernism in art poses for audiences as

> "...not one of escaping inspiration, but of determining how a man could be inspired to do this, why he feels this necessary or satisfactory, how he can mean this. Suppose you conclude that he cannot. Then that will mean, I am suggesting, that you conclude that this is not art, and this man is not an artist; that in failing to mean what he's done, he is fraudulent."[76]

I do not necessarily endorse Cavell's account of the problem, although I do find some lines of his argument compelling, and his rejection – bucking what was for many mid-century academic composers an aesthetic orthodoxy – is at least refreshing. Yet despite my reservations, his preoccupation with "fraudulence", which he describes as central to the experience of in fact *all* art,[77] gives a sophisticated articulation to what composers, musicologists and the rest of the initiated so often seem to want to dismiss as a lack of sophistication. Cavell's emphasis on the importance of sincerity buttresses Binky's own skepticism: both wish to ask of what is presented as art, "how was this meant sincerely? How am I to treat this object as art?" Binky's unrest is quelled by the soothing validation of the composers, learning not how to appreciate new music, but rather that his engagement with the material (even if antagonistically) brings him to the level of the composers themselves. It does not seem Cavell's skepticism can be so easily relieved.

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[75] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 462.

[76] Cavell, 425.

This issue of sincerity is brought to its zenith with concept music, provoking audiences not with just an unusual palette of sounds and techniques, but defiance of axioms about music which go far beyond "it can't be danced to". My interest in concept music essentially began here, first sparked by a performance of Kreidler's *Fremdarbeit* (2009), a piece which openly dares its audience to challenge its sincerity – even seeming to forfeit the pretense of sincerity altogether. In this especially provocative multi-media piece, Kreidler describes the process of outsourcing a commission first to a composer in China and then to a programmer in India, with an ensemble playing the results, explicitly bringing global economic and labor issues into the concert space. The tension of a white German composer describing the cheap labor by which he could generate passably modern music lends the piece an especially fraught atmosphere and brings the question of sincerity to its apex. I wanted to take this type of piece seriously – the way I saw it being taken seriously at the institutional level – without settling for explanations built on a resignation to the infinite possibilities of art, the sort which ultimately wins over Binky – or worse, settling for Muffy's resignation to the social prestige of institutions. I wanted to explore with a genuine academic rigor the nature of concept music as a serious and sincere category of the canon, the way we explore more conventional music whose sincerity is less in question.

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[77] Cavell, 400.

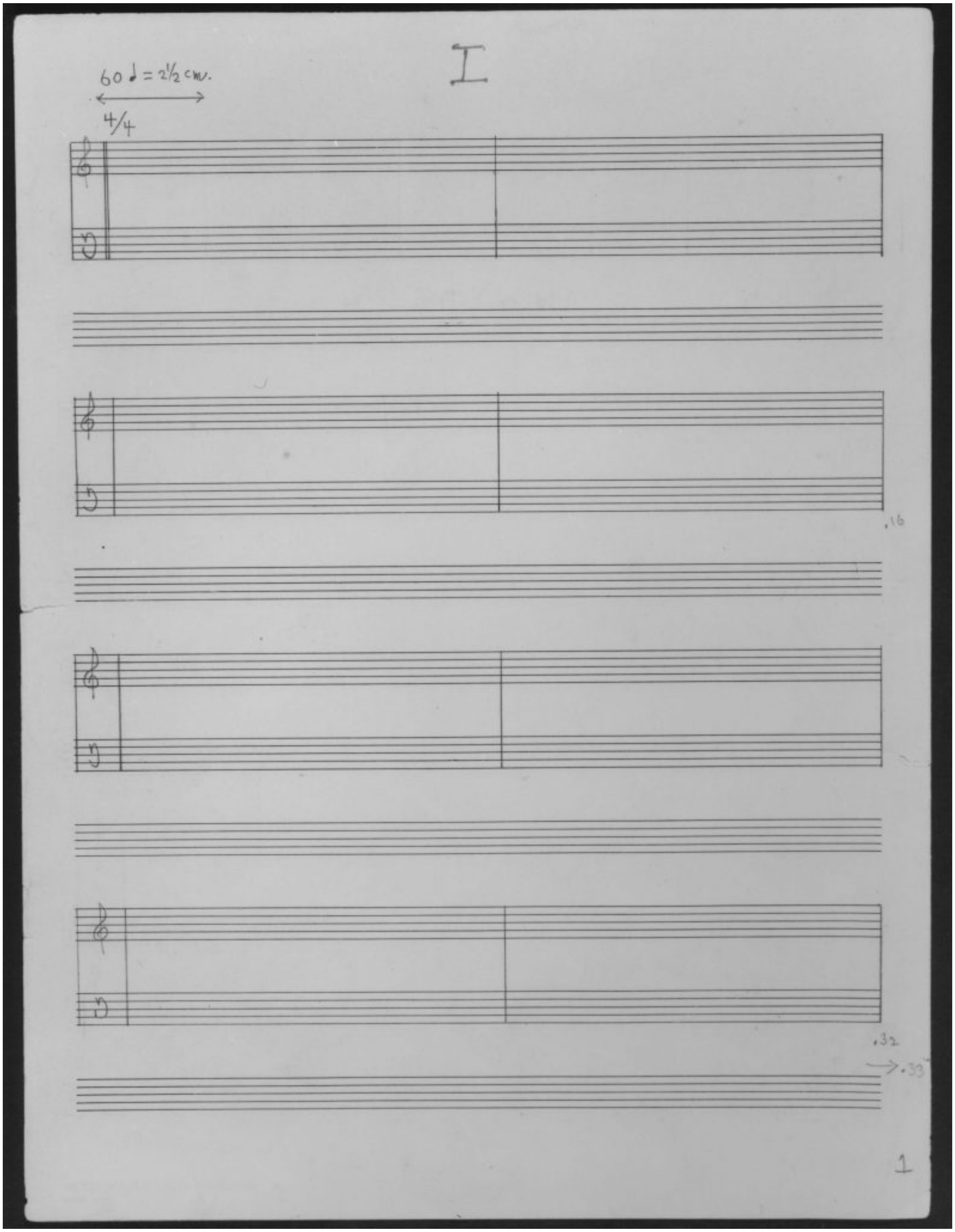
As part of my research, I tried to "walk the walk," too: I wrote a number of pieces best described as conceptual, both to explore the technical and conceptual demands of the genre and to experience the social dimension of these works which, as I hope I have showed, do have deeply social characters. I must admit I found myself questioning my own sincerity at times, as the demands of the LeWitt paradigm went against nearly all the conventional, formal compositional logic I had spent the past decade trying to master. The premieres of these works, perhaps unsurprisingly, always felt different than with conventional pieces: I no longer felt the buttressing of the canon, the binary of "successful" versus "unsuccessful" as judged against the history of music and compositional technique which American composers share. Some of the pieces, I felt, were successful, others not; the judgment of audiences, however, I feared would be like Binky's and Cavell's, even among my peers in the academy. I learned the peculiar sort of courage it takes to work within the genre, the armor artists like Cage, Kreidler, Diels and Ono (and in a way, any composer) must don before they subject themselves again and again to the same question: "is this music"?

Much Ado About Silence

This project, more than anything, has been my attempt to treat seriously this genre of music that sometimes seems to do its best to resist being taken seriously. Following my intuition about the unique technical features of *4'33"*, I have explained both particular and general features of the work and its category, respectively, beginning the project of formal analysis for the category of music which defies the axioms upon which formal analysis was largely built. Formal analysis is usually part of a project of legitimization: just as Adorno's account of Schoenberg can be read as an apologia for serialism, my efforts here may be read as an apologia for conceptual music, the works which seem to most alienate and bewilder audiences. I have, however, taken pains to not speak on the *value* of concept music: I have instead taken its value for granted as represented by its institutional legitimacy.

I cannot, nor could anyone, speak to the sincerity of Cage, Diels, Kreidler and any other conceptual artist in the executions of their work. To the extent that their works seem to be successful, and do leave an impact on the cultural landscape, however, I am interested in methods of formal analysis that can communicate clearly about this genre. Ultimately, I feel a certain optimism about concept music and its practitioners, those who chose to don the armor and submit themselves and their works to our volatile contemporary landscape. Adorno and others in critical theory often wrote about the utopian prospects of art, about art's ability to represent new and better worlds. I hope the sort of formal analysis I have begun here can contribute to this utopian envisioning. Concept music remains a vital aspect of Western music culture, the necessary foil to the otherwise unrelenting standardization into the canon. To the extent that music and art *can* change the world, I feel works like the silent piece are an essential part of that adventure.

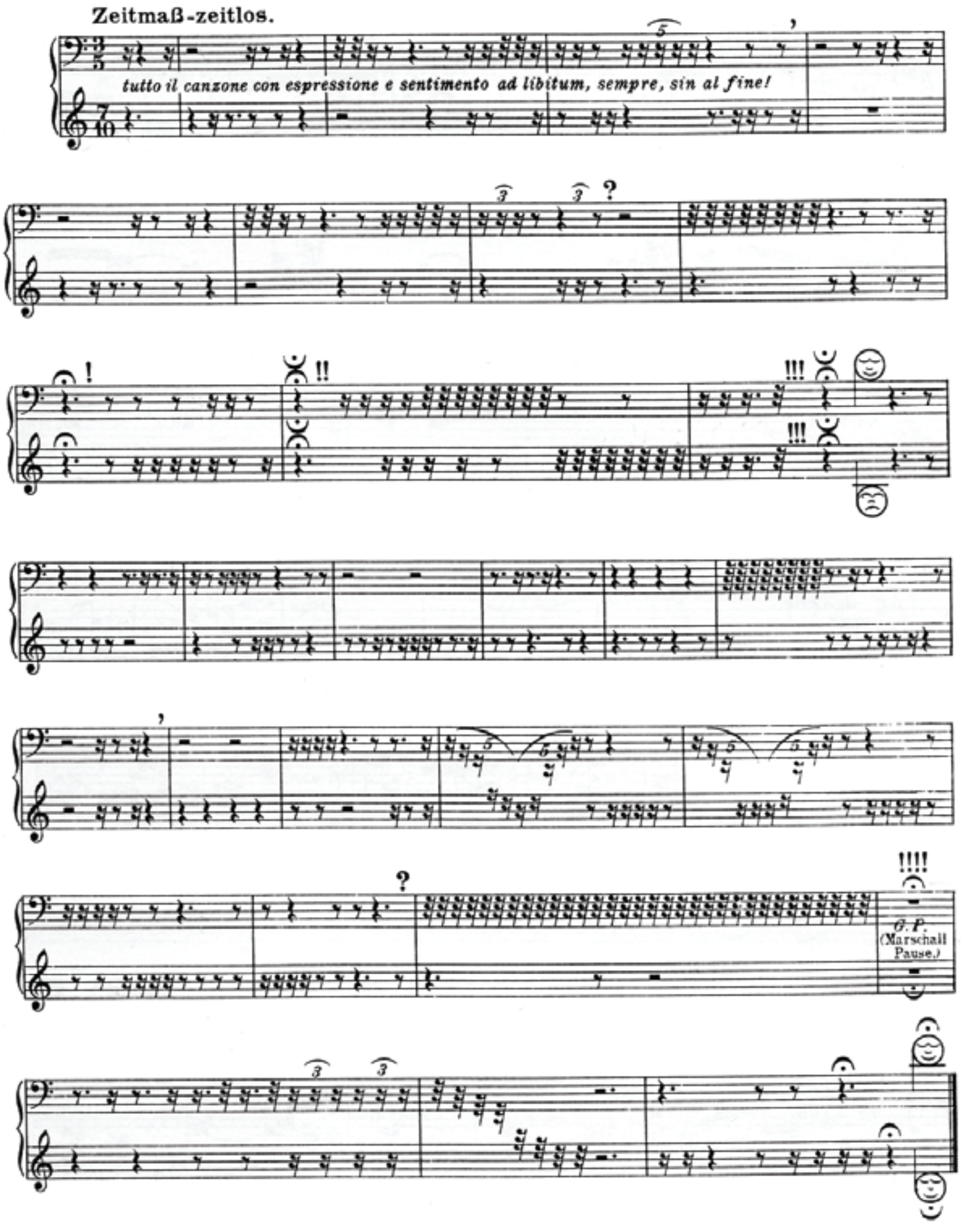
Appendix A: *4’33”* excerpt (proportional notation)


I
60 ♩ = 2½ cm.
4/4
.16
.32
→.33
1

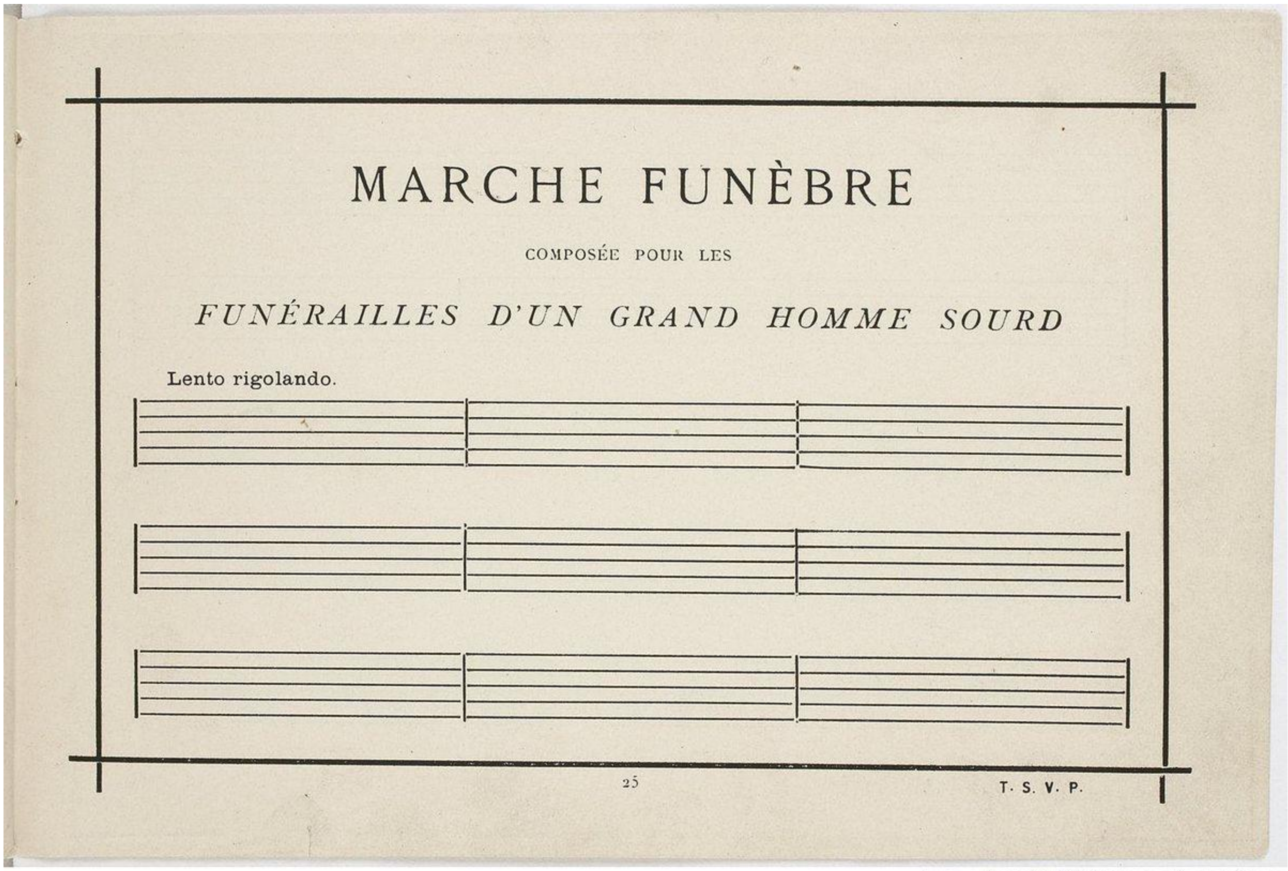
Appendix B: In Futurum

5 Pittoresken

III. In futurum.


Zeitmaß-zeitlos.
tutto il canzone con espressione e sentimento ad libitum, sempre, sin al fine!
5
3
3
?
!
!!
!!!
!!!
5
5
5
5
?
!!!!
G.P. (Marschall Pause.)
3
3

Appendix C: Marche Funébre



MARCHE FUNÈBRE

COMPOSÉE POUR LES

FUNÉRAILLES D'UN GRAND HOMME SOURD

Lento rigolando.

25

T. S. V. P.

Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

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adam j strawbridge

ohrwurm

for piano four hands

11 sections following PowerPoint, corresponding to marked sections of score

For section 4:
Written tempi are ideals; just accelerate gradually at each tempo change, accelerating more each time.

Sections “titles”

1
”O Ewigkeit du Donnerwort” by J.S. Bach (BWV 20)

2
”O Ewigkeit du Donnerwort” by J.S. Bach (BWV 20) but played in two registers

3
”O Ewigkeit du Donnerwort” by J.S. Bach (BWV 20) but backwards, except the last cadence

4
”O Ewigkeit du Donnerwort” by J.S. Bach (BWV 20) but every time there’s a stressed dissonance it gets 1.1 times faster

5
”O Ewigkeit du Donnerwort” by J.S. Bach (BWV 20) but played in two registers, missing every other beat, except the last cadence

6
”O Ewigkeit du Donnerwort” by J.S. Bach (BWV 20) but the notes are sorted by frequency, lowest to highest

7
”O Ewigkeit du Donnerwort” by J.S. Bach (BWV 20) but played in two registers, and the higher register is actually “Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott” by J.S. Bach (BWV 80)

8
”O Ewigkeit du Donnerwort” by J.S. Bach (BWV 20) but without any cadences

9
”O Ewigkeit du Donnerwort” by J.S. Bach (BWV 20) but played in two registers, in canon, and the pitches have been randomly re-ordered

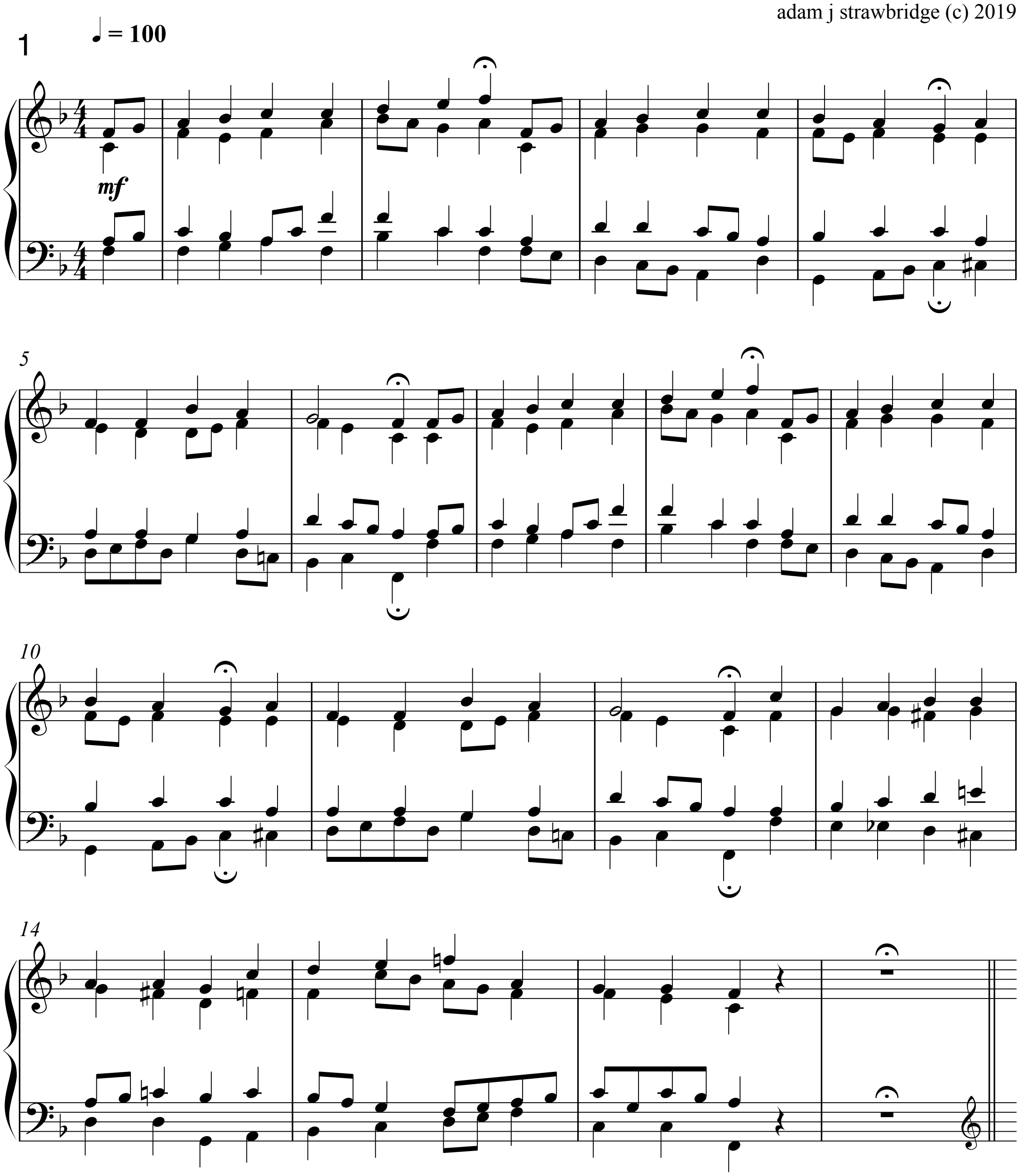
10
”O Ewigkeit du Donnerwort” by J.S. Bach (BWV 20) but after every cadence it transposes up a semitone

11
”O Ewigkeit du Donnerwort” by J.S. Bach (BWV 20) but played in two registers, and the players must try to make as little noise as possible, except on the last cadence

ohrwurm

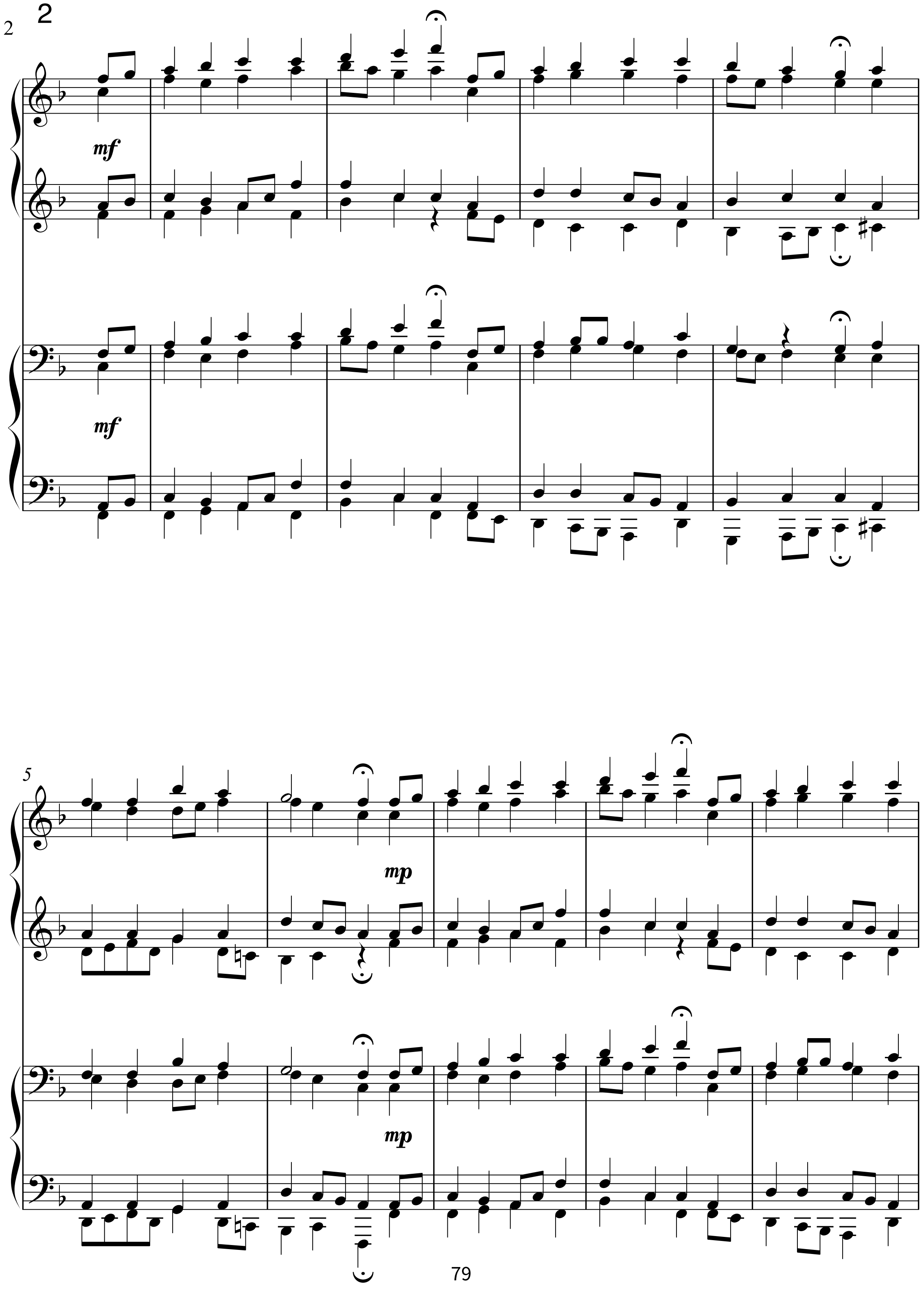
adam j strawbridge (c) 2019

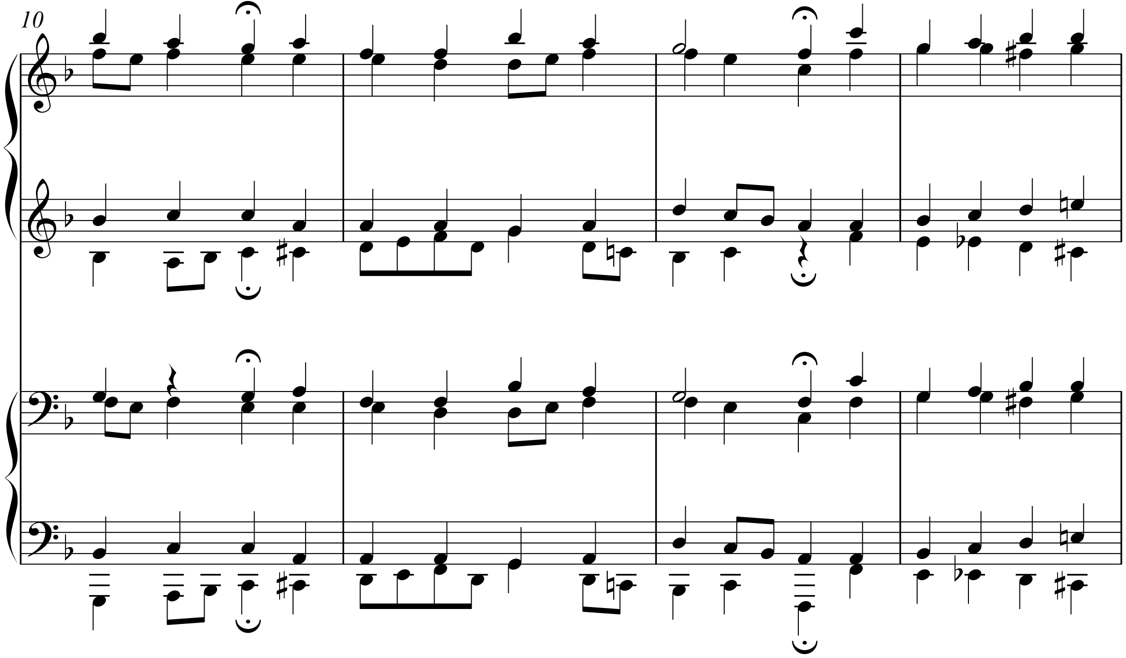
1

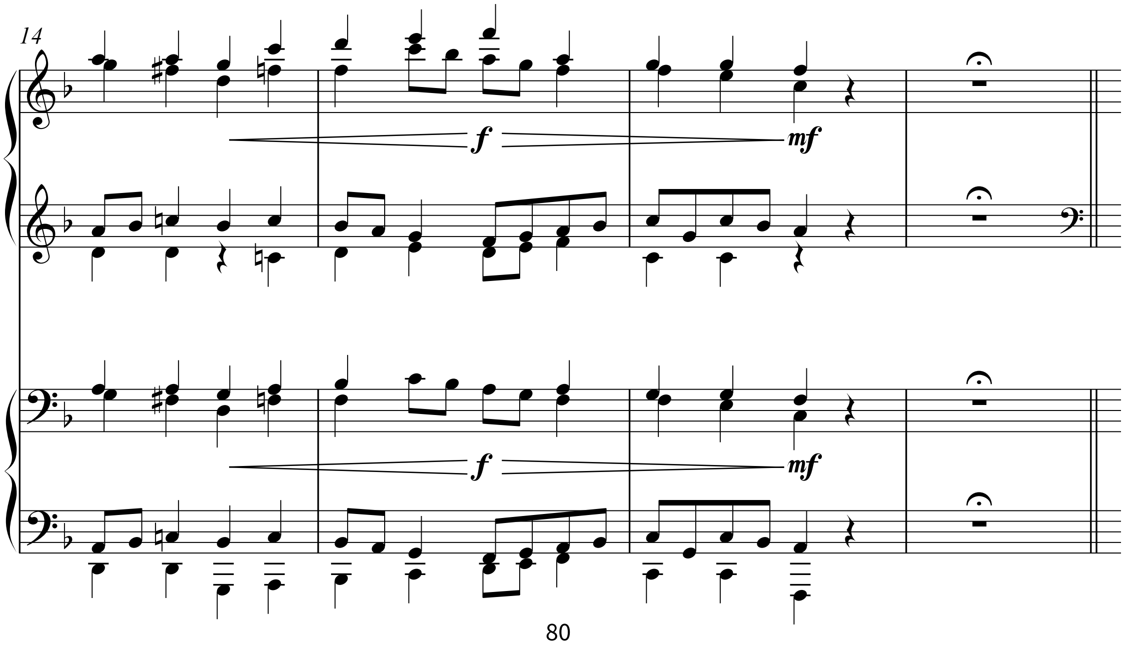


♩ = 100
mf
5
10
14

2

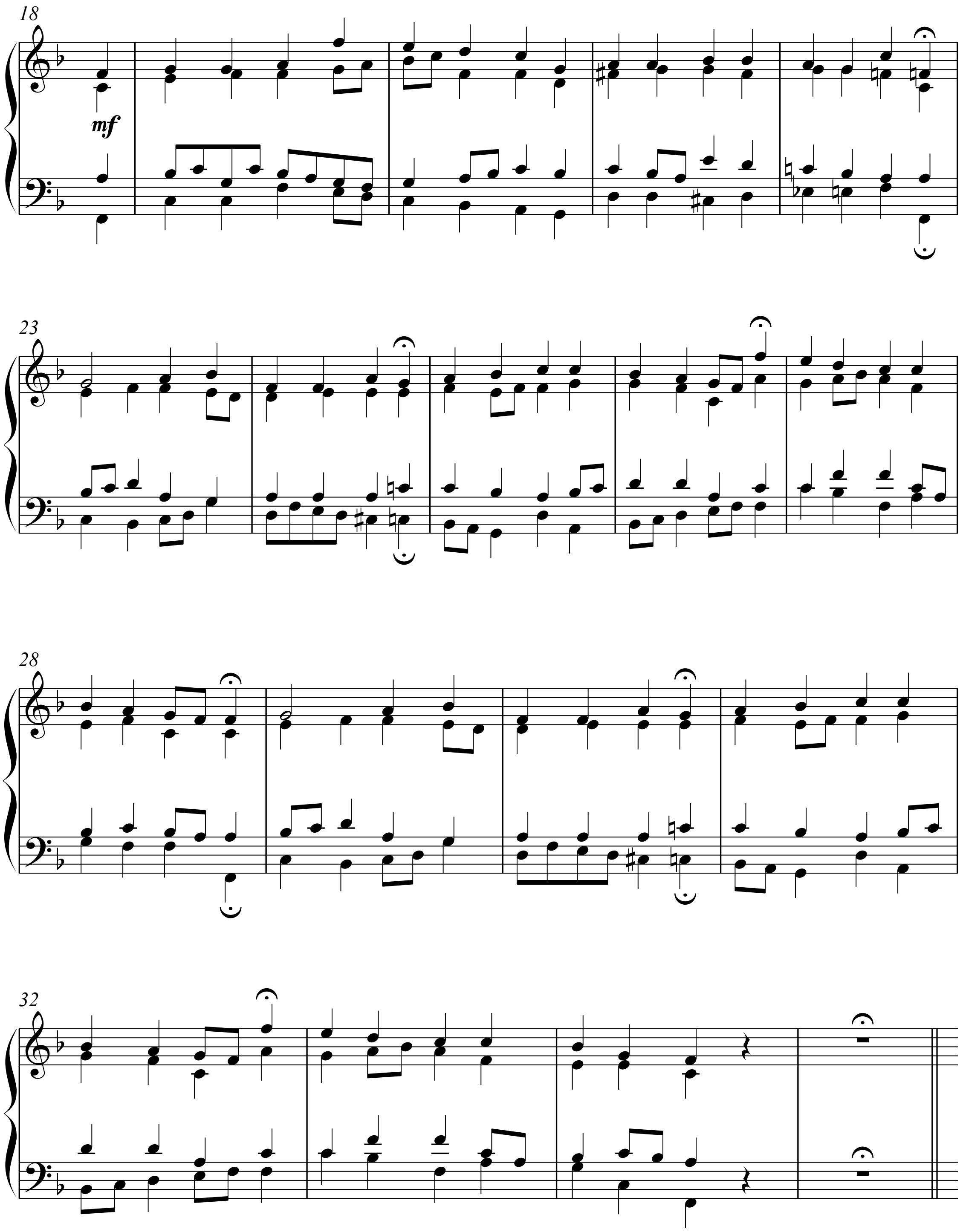

2
mf
mf
5
mp
mp


10

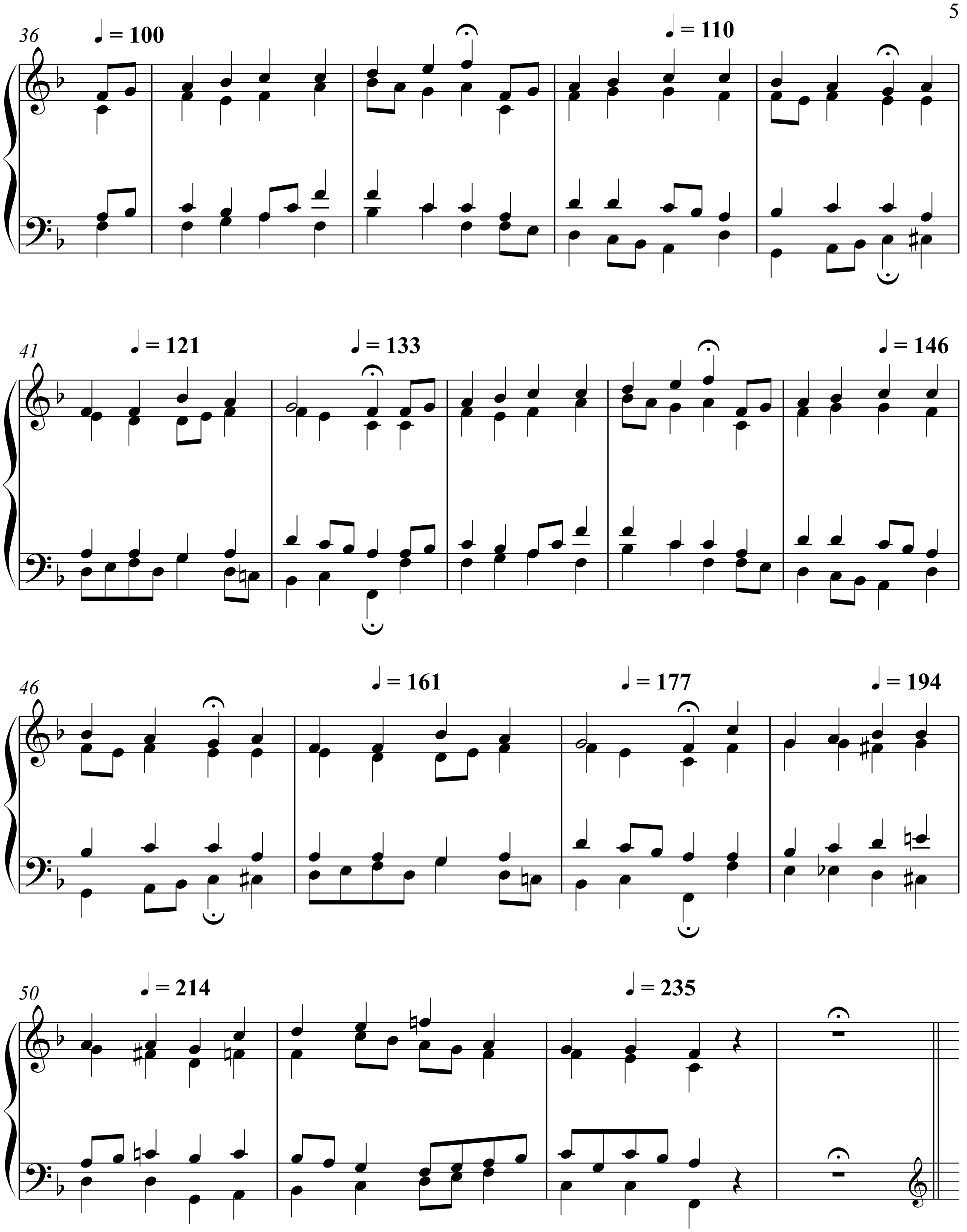

14
f
mf
f
mf

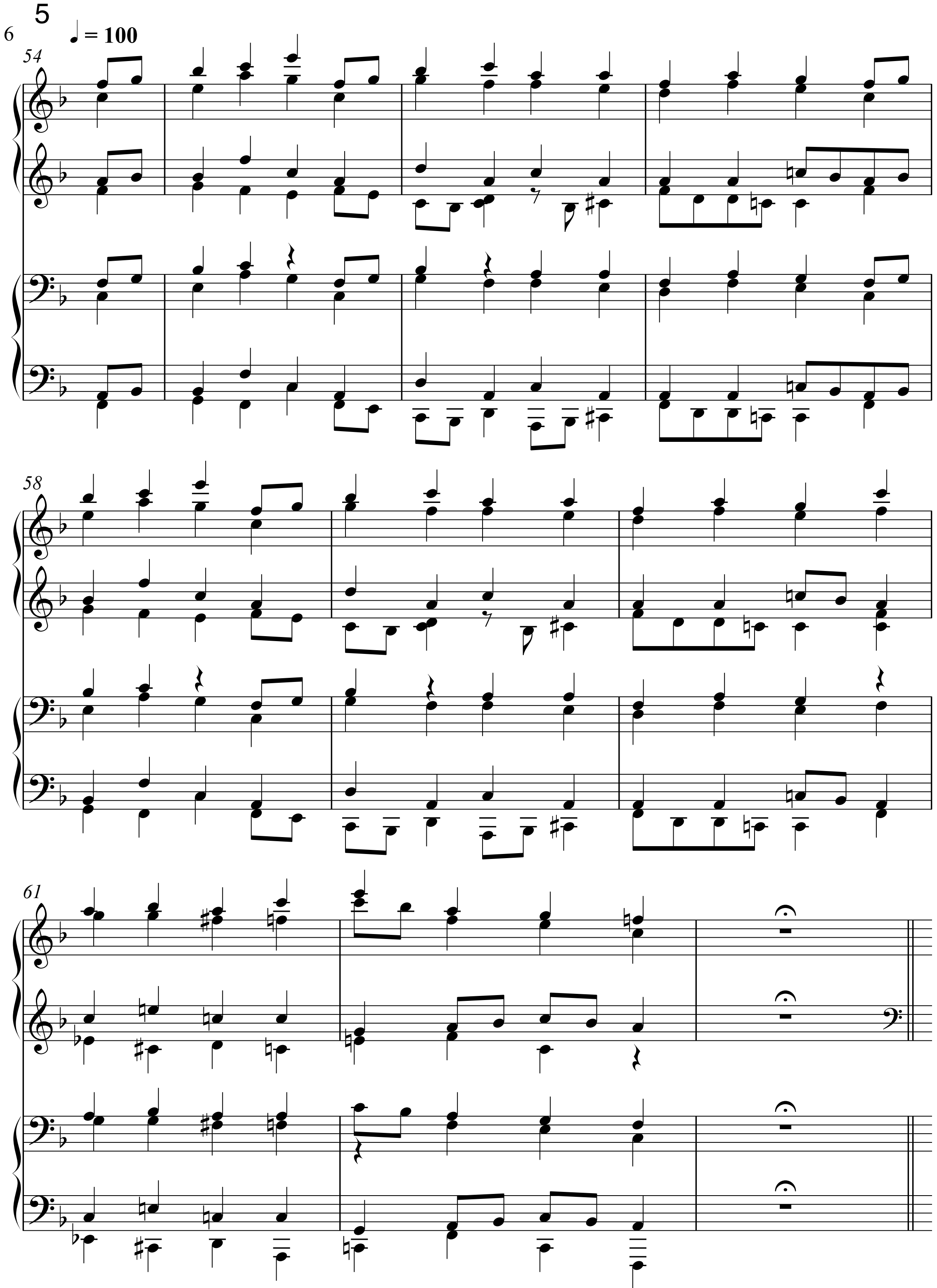
4

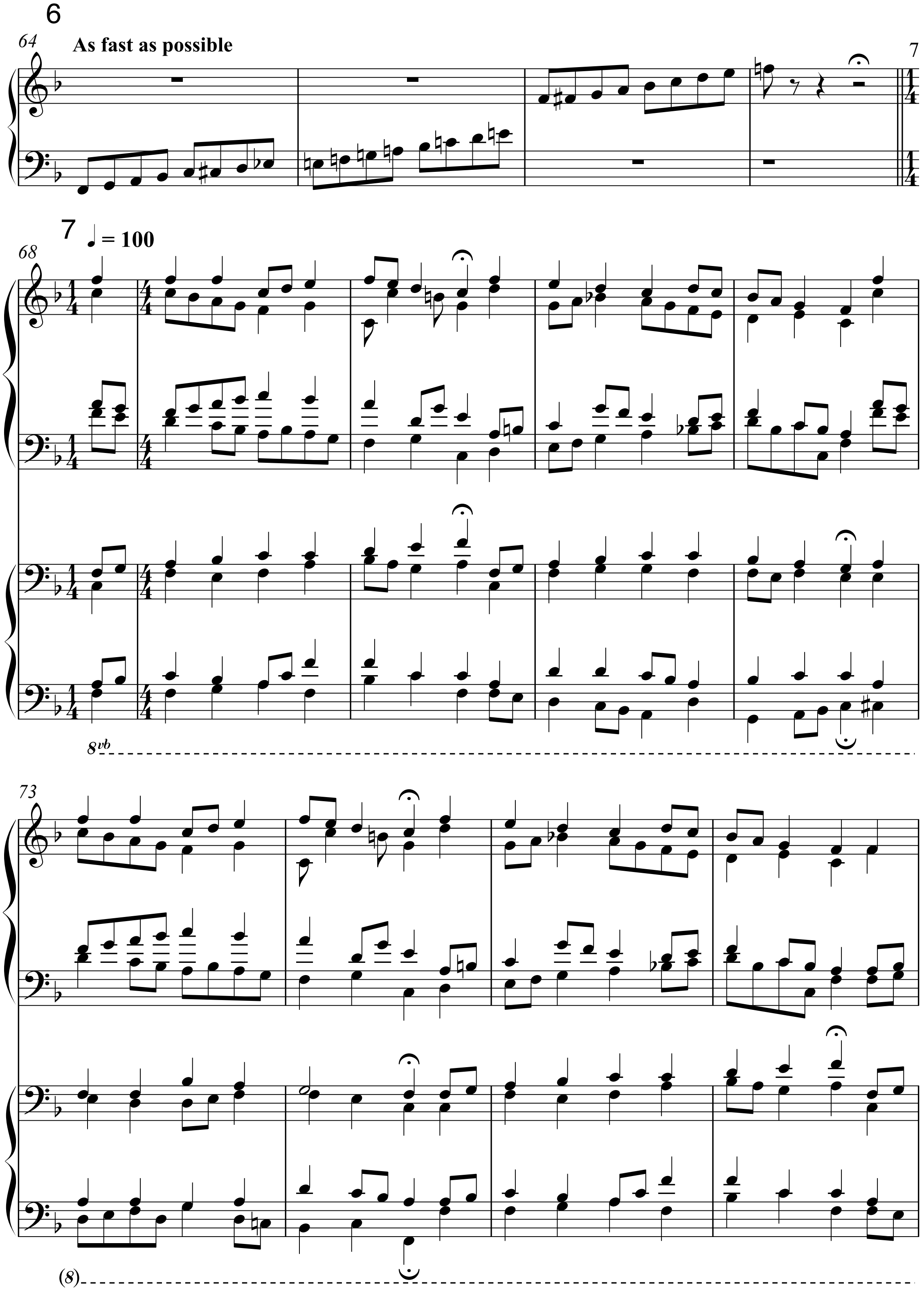
3

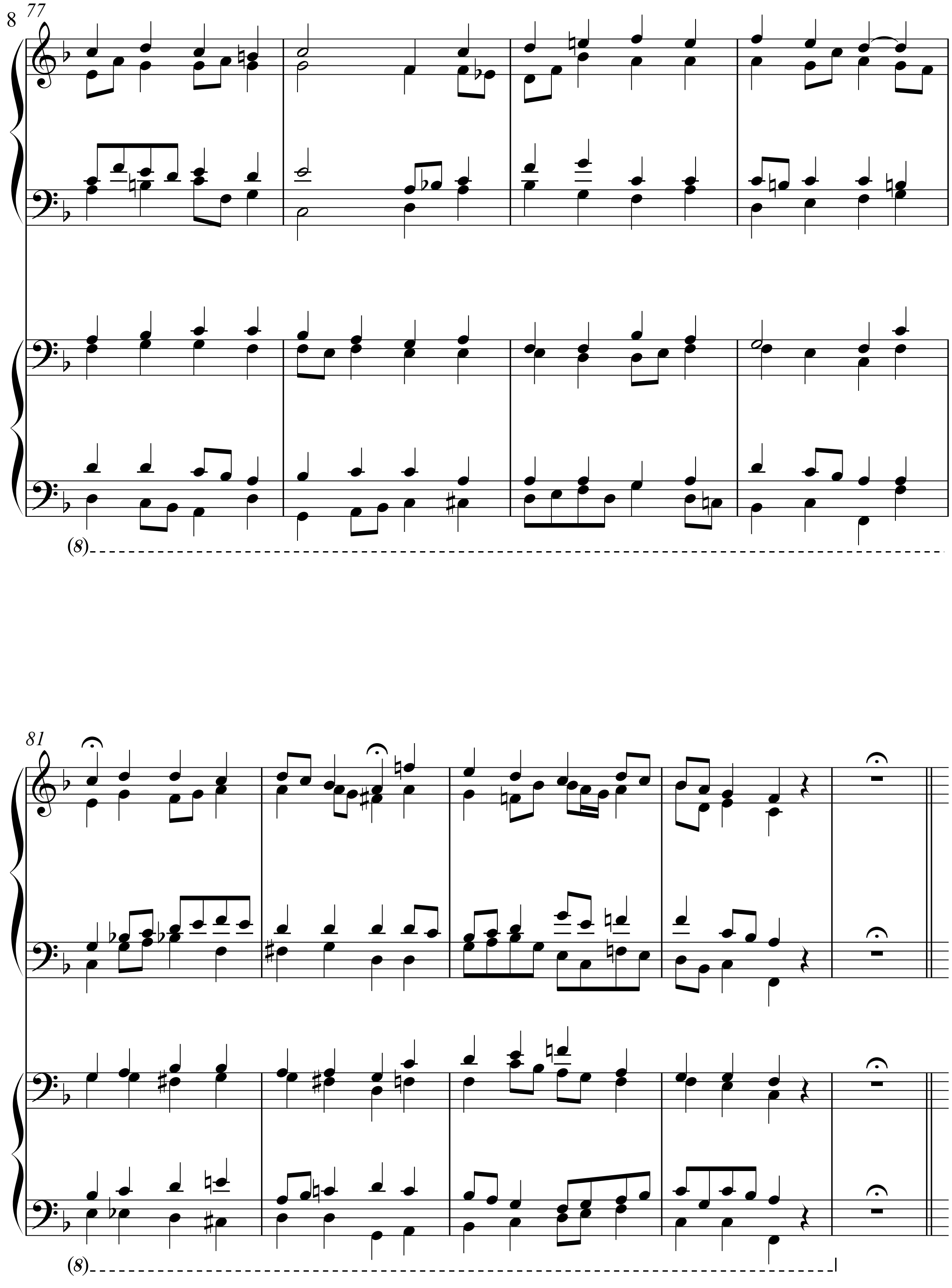

18
mf
23
28
32

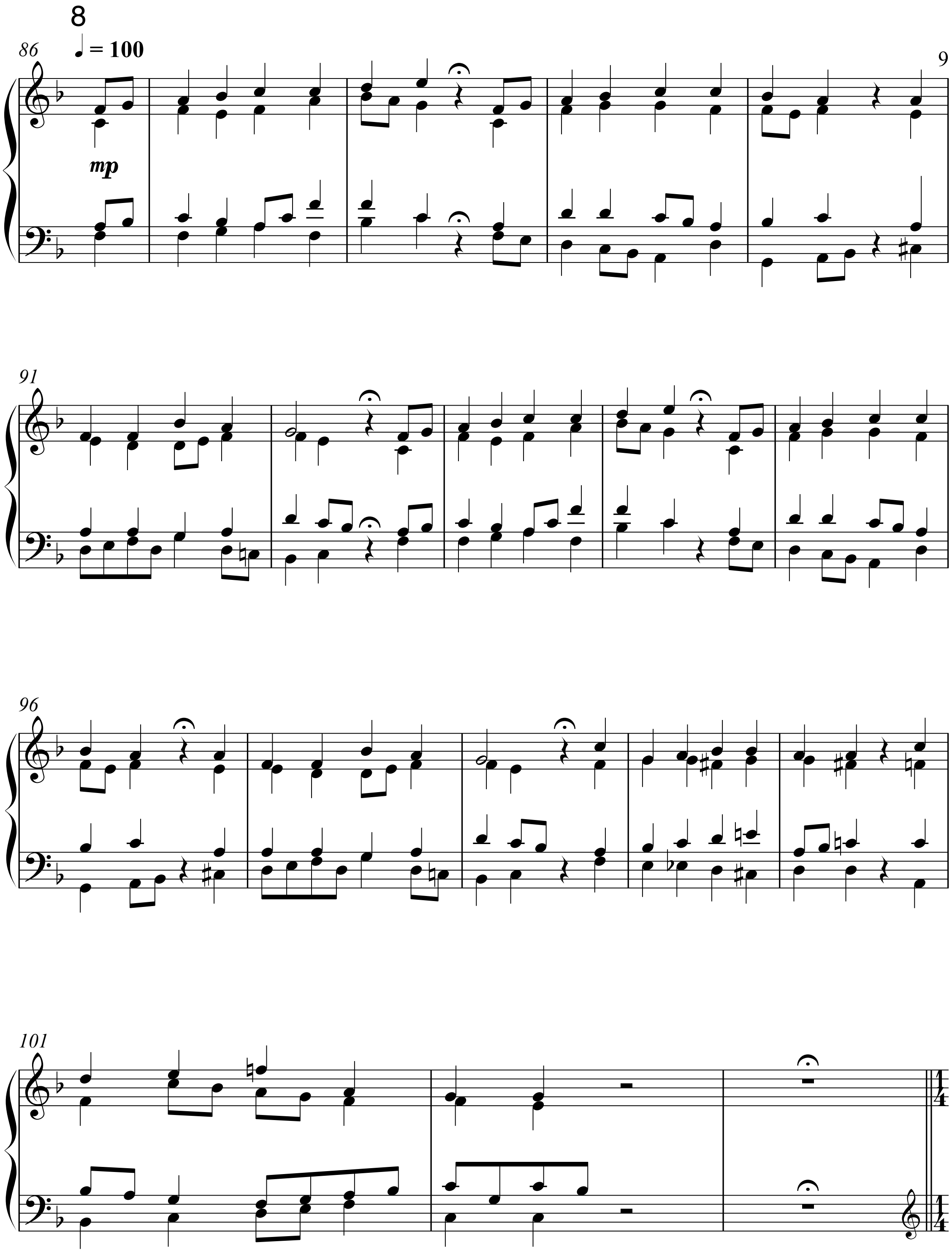
4

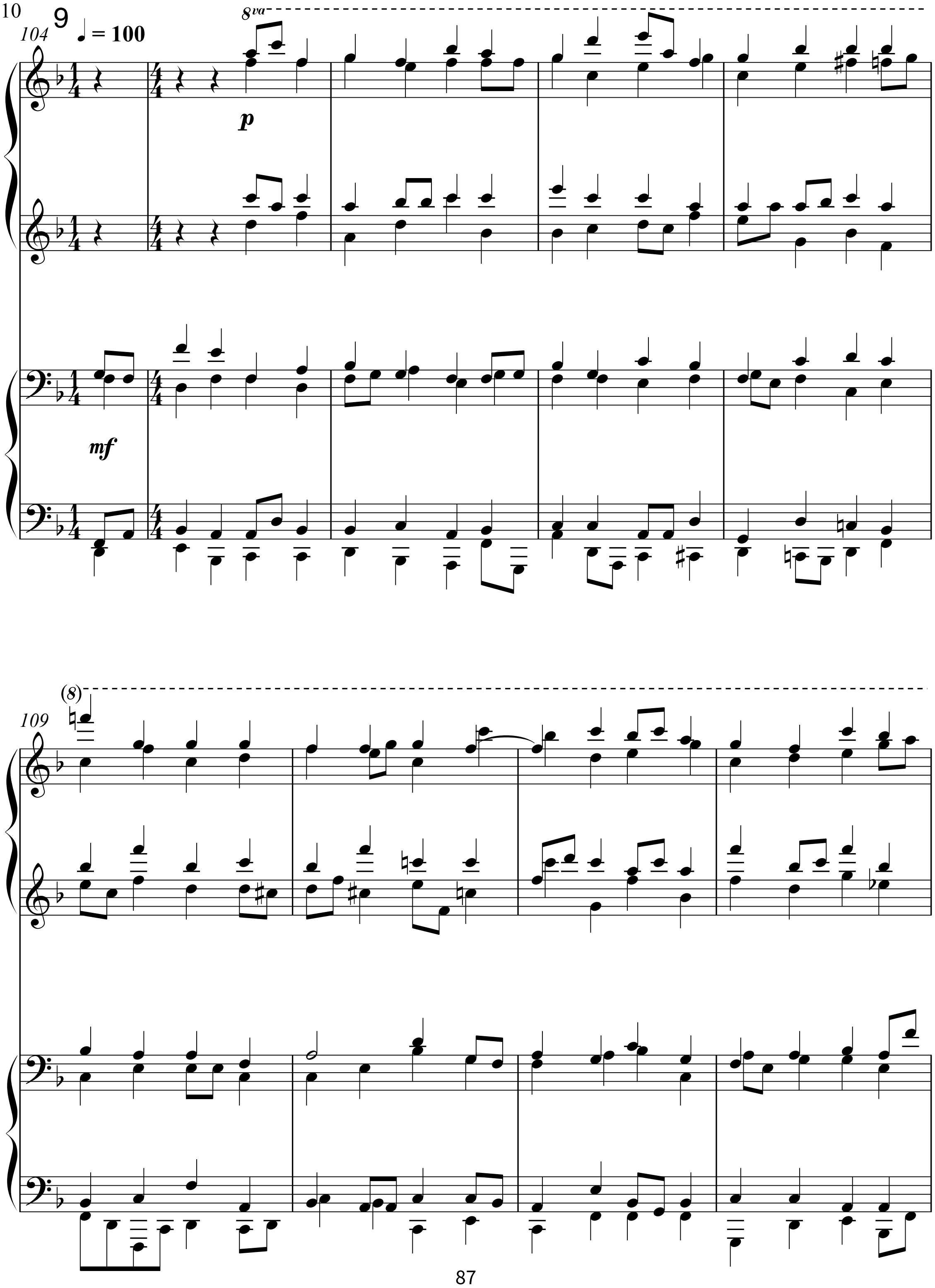

5
36
♩ = 100
♩ = 110
41
♩ = 121
♩ = 133
♩ = 146
46
♩ = 161
♩ = 177
♩ = 194
50
♩ = 214
♩ = 235

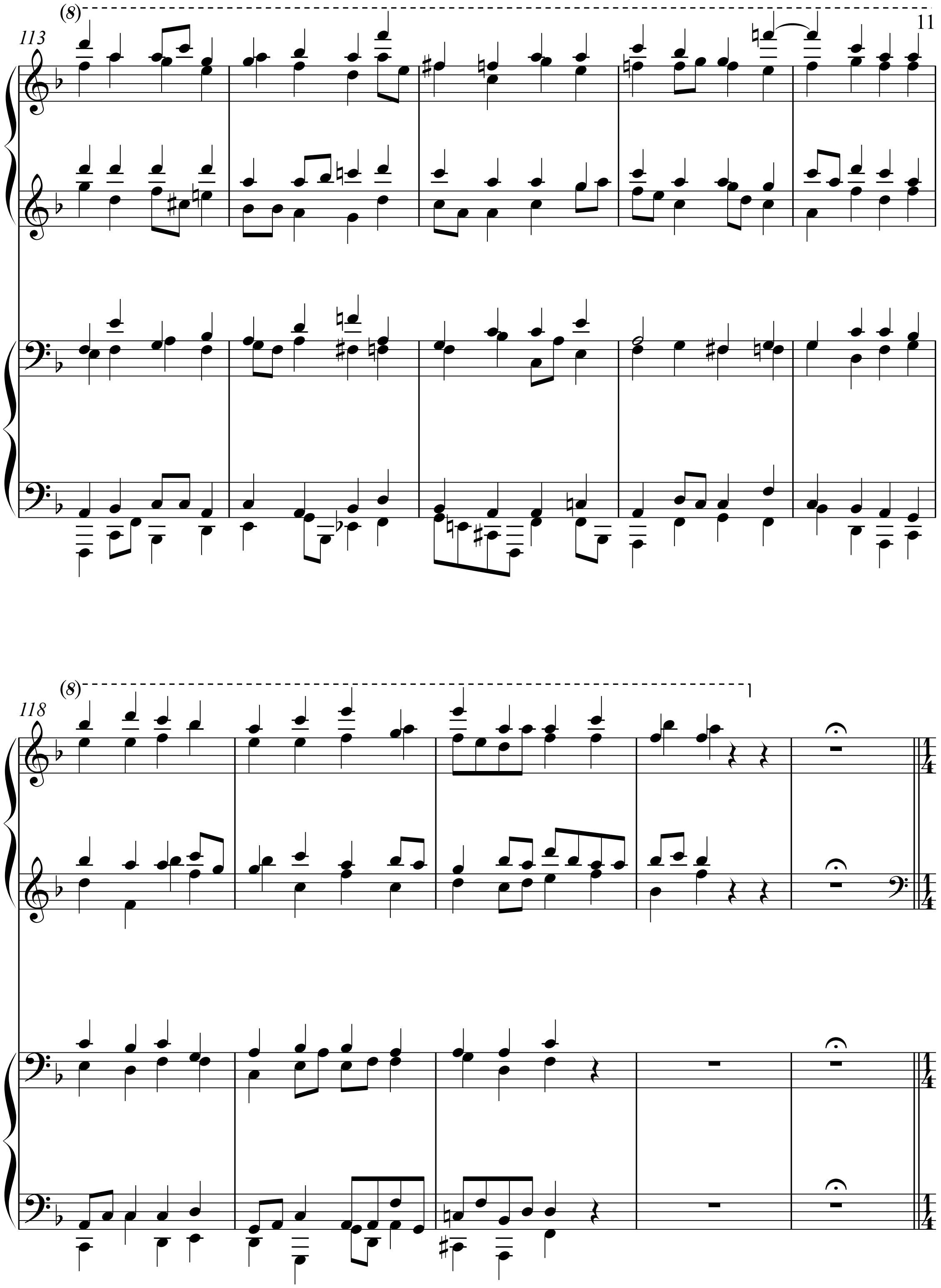

♩ = 100


As fast as possible
♩ = 100
8vb
(8)

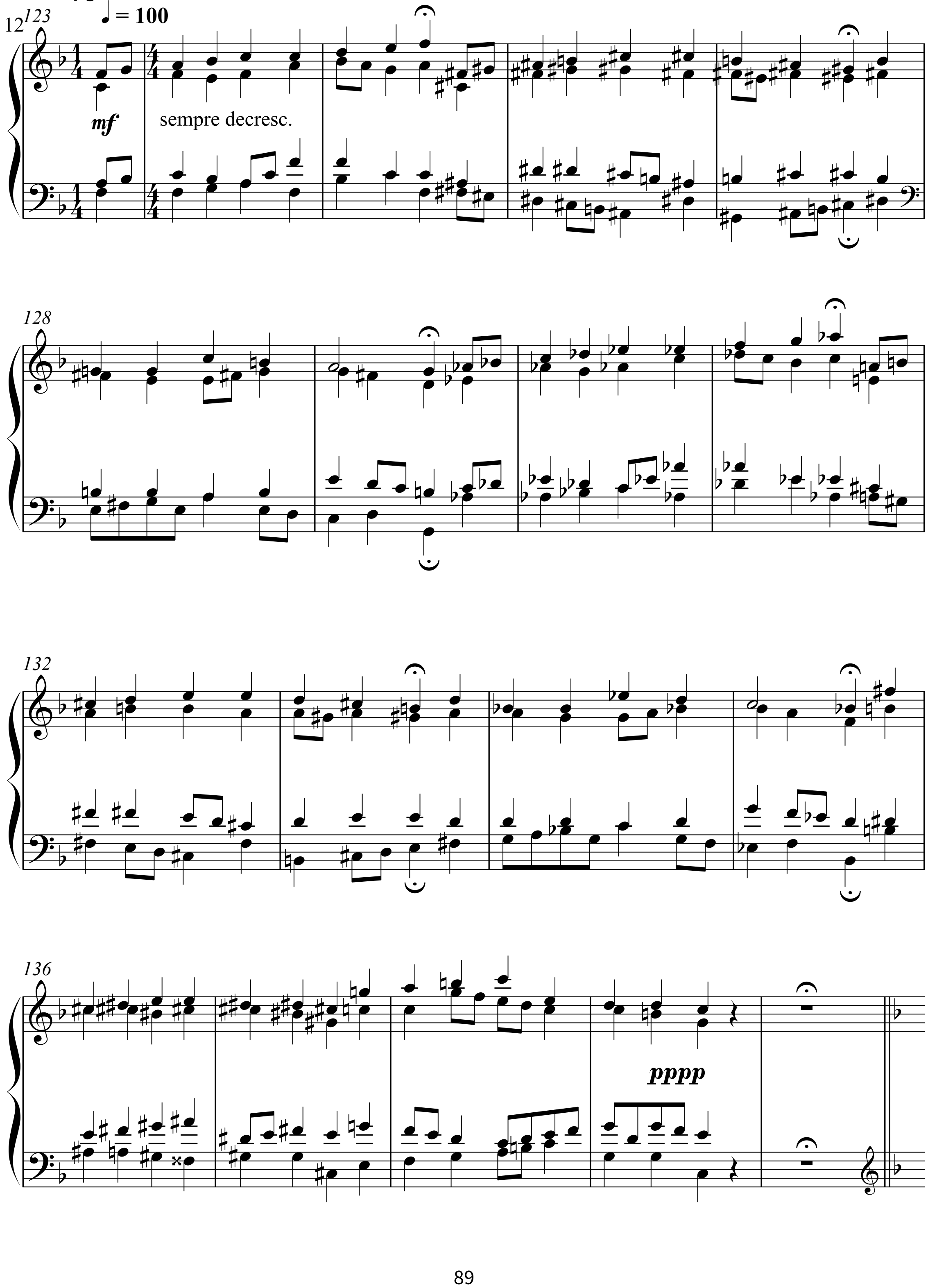

(8)
(8)


♩ = 100
mp


104
9
♩ = 100
8va
p
mf
109
(8)

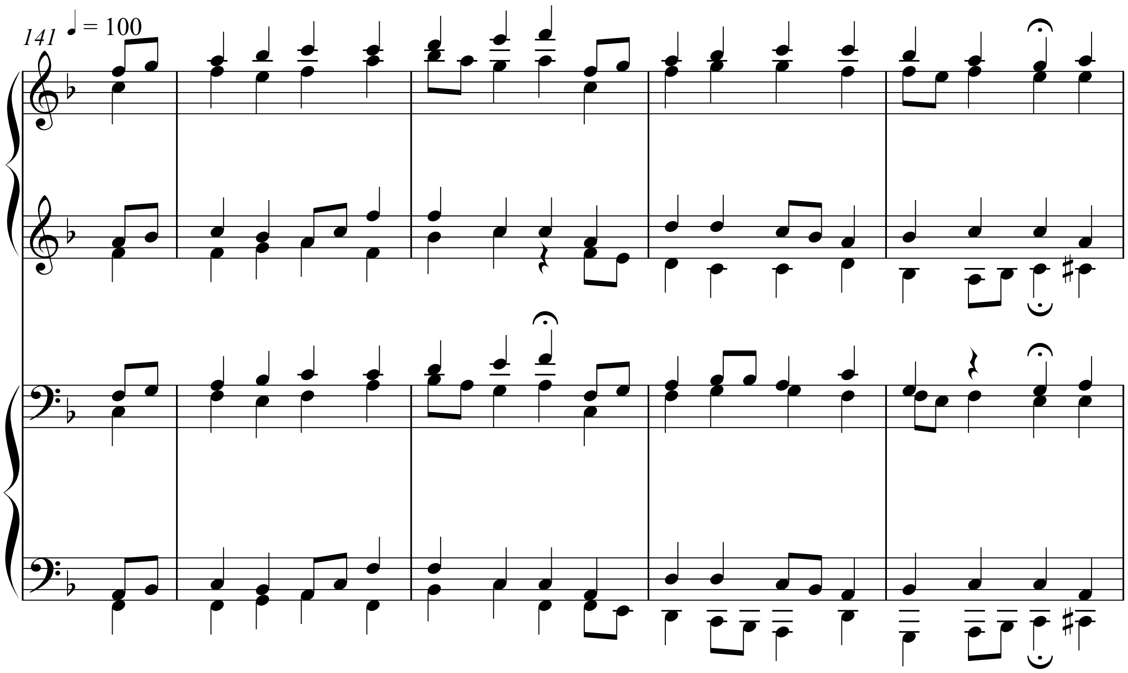

(8)
(8)

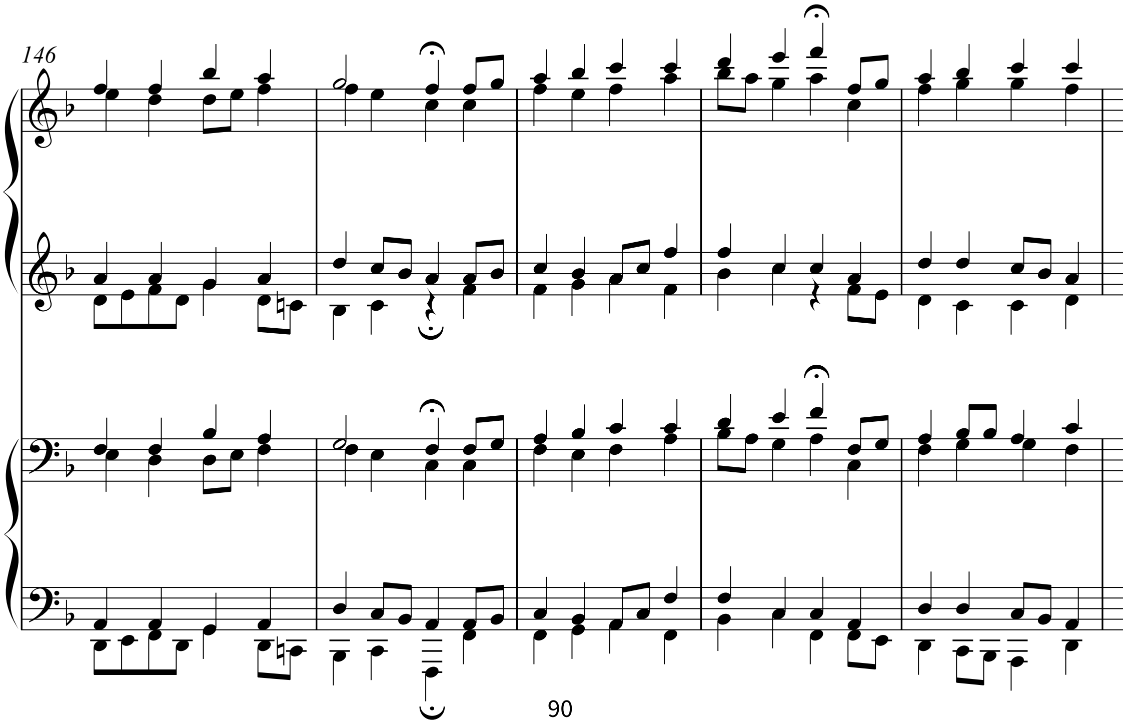
10

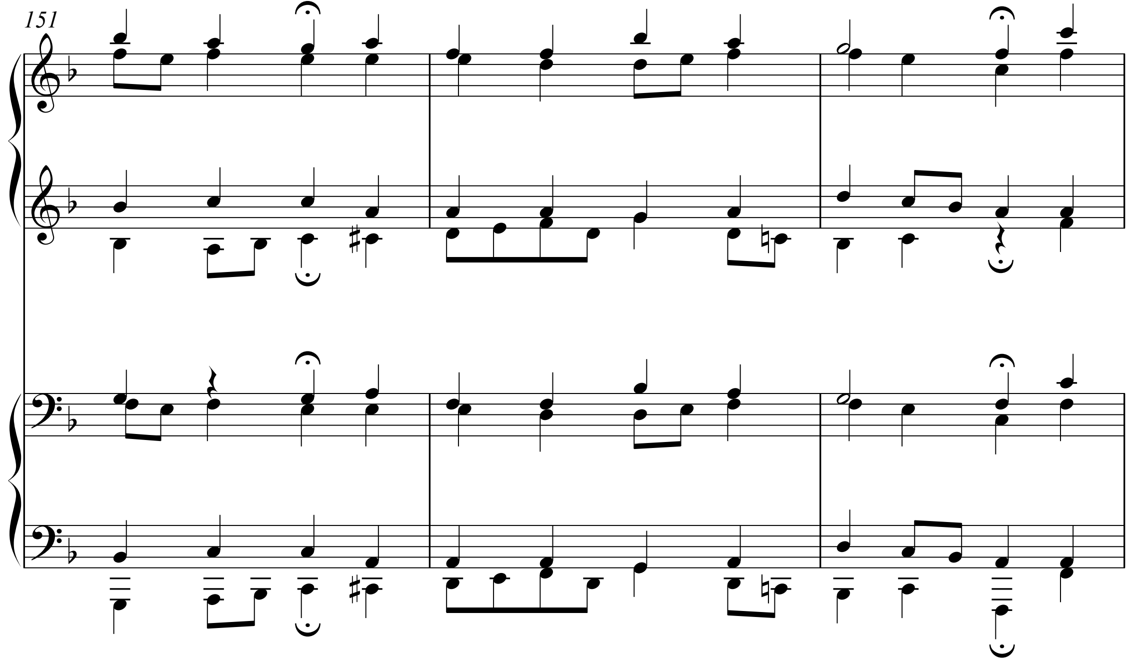

♩ = 100
12
123
mf
sempre decresc.
128
132
136
pppp

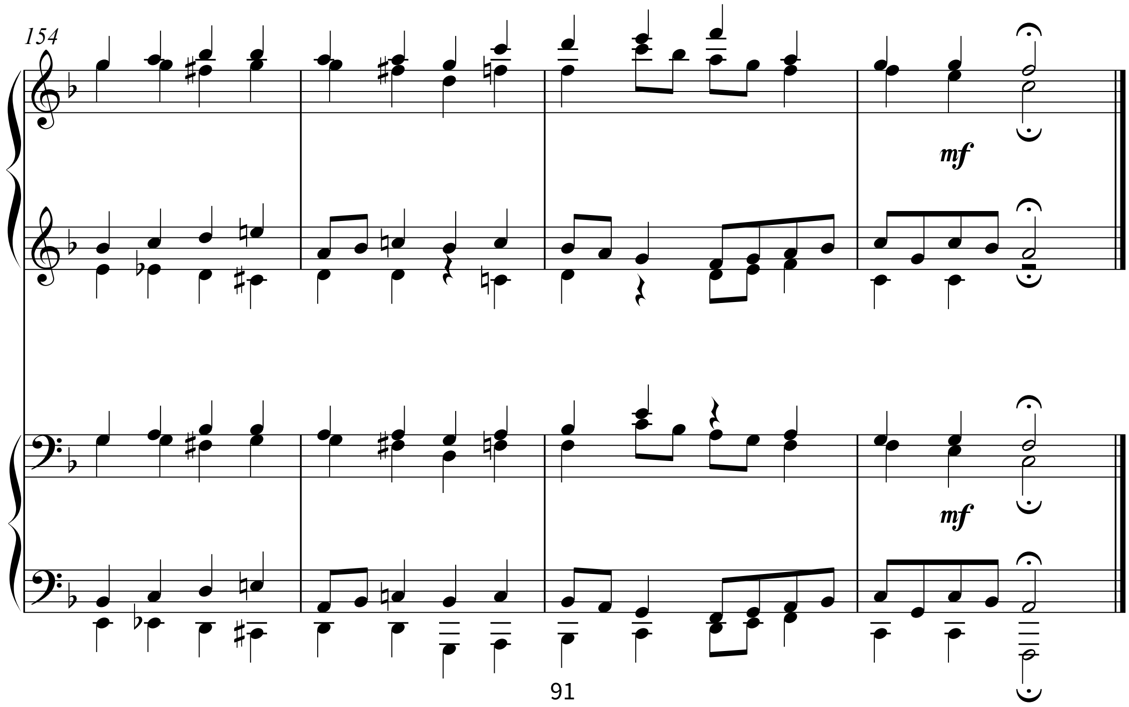
11

play as softly as possible, depressing keys while avoiding sound. Tempi between players may differ, as long as final cadnce is aligned






151


154
mf
mf

counter_culture.exe

for solo percussion

adam j strawbridge 2022

materials:

snare drum

contact microphone (placed on drum)

counter_culture.exe Max/MSP patch

speakers

noise-cancelling headphones (and device to play music)

instructions

pick a piece you can easily and creatively play along to (Music A)[1] and a piece from the classical canon you consider especially emotive or intense (Music B)[2]. load Music A into the counter_culture.exe Max/MSP patch. prepare to play Music B into the noise cancelling headphones.

with headphones on, begin playing Music B and drum along, having fun and working to shape a coherent and interesting form. the patch will use the performed rhythms to create a “negative” of Music A in Music B.

end when you would end after drumming to Music A.

[1] ideally, >5’ minutes long

[2] at least as long as Music A. e.g. Barber’s Adagio for Strings, Cruda Amarilli, Ode to Joy, etc.

---

[1]

[2]

REQUIEM

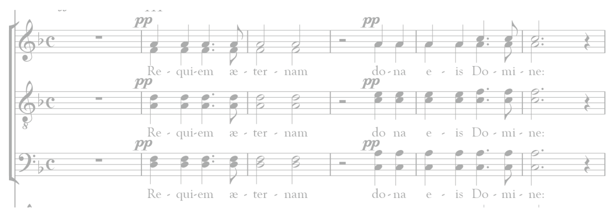
G. Fauré.
Op. 48.

I_INTROÏT et KYRIE

▬ apply pressure with brush and move slowly across head of drum

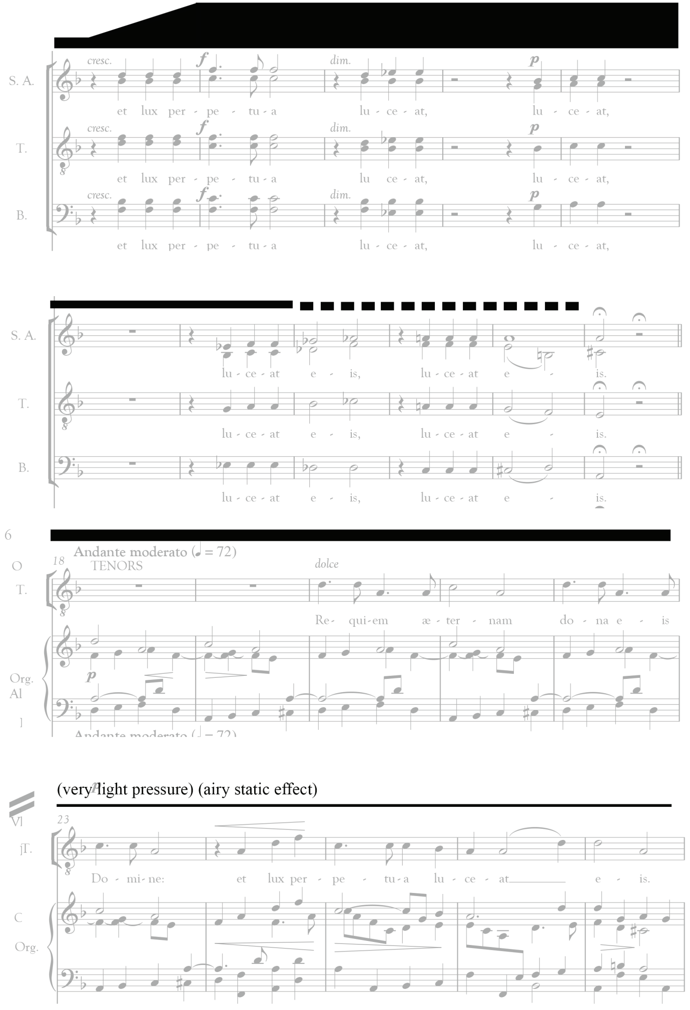
▪ ▪ ▪ ▪ ▪ ▪ ▪ ▪ tap on head of drum with fingers

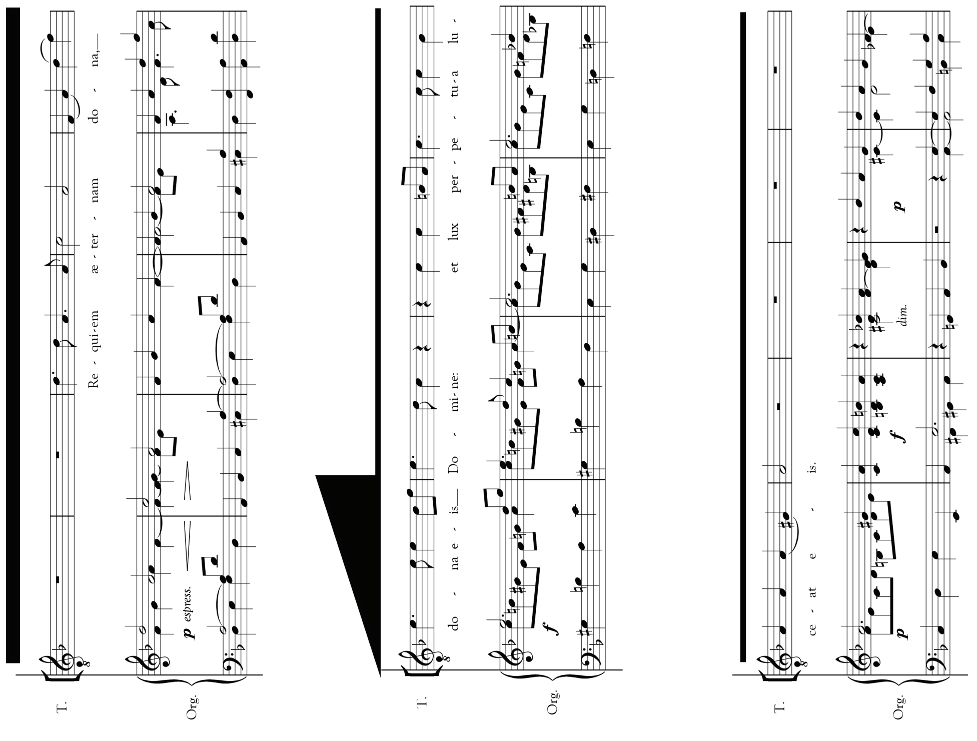
(light pressure) (crackling static effect)

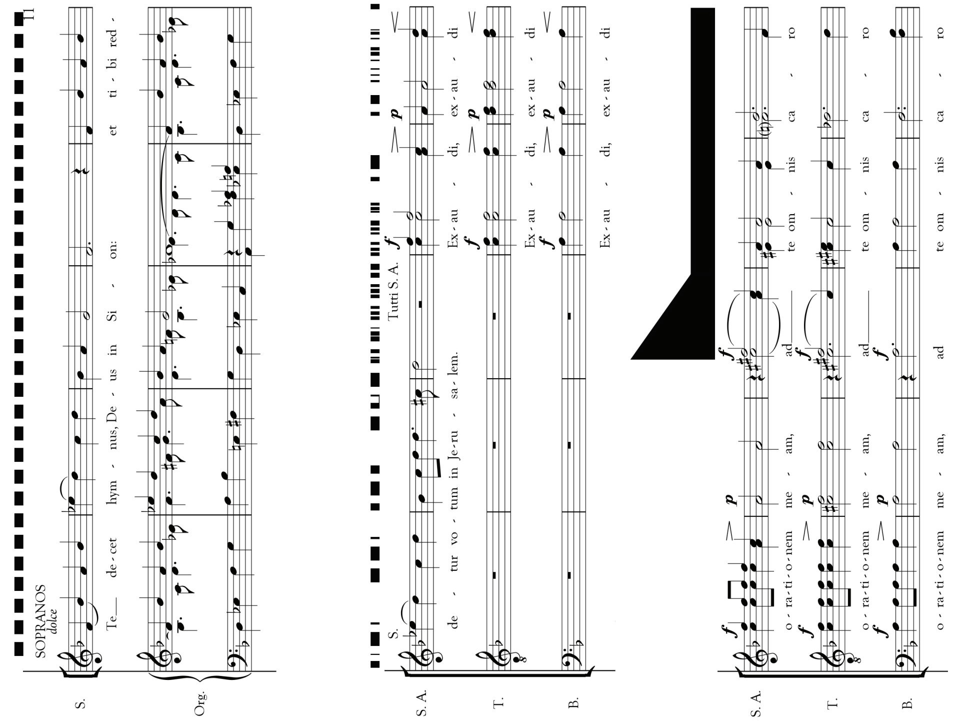

Sopranos Altos
Ténors
Basses
pp
Re - qui-em æ - ter - nam do-na e - is Do - mi - ne:

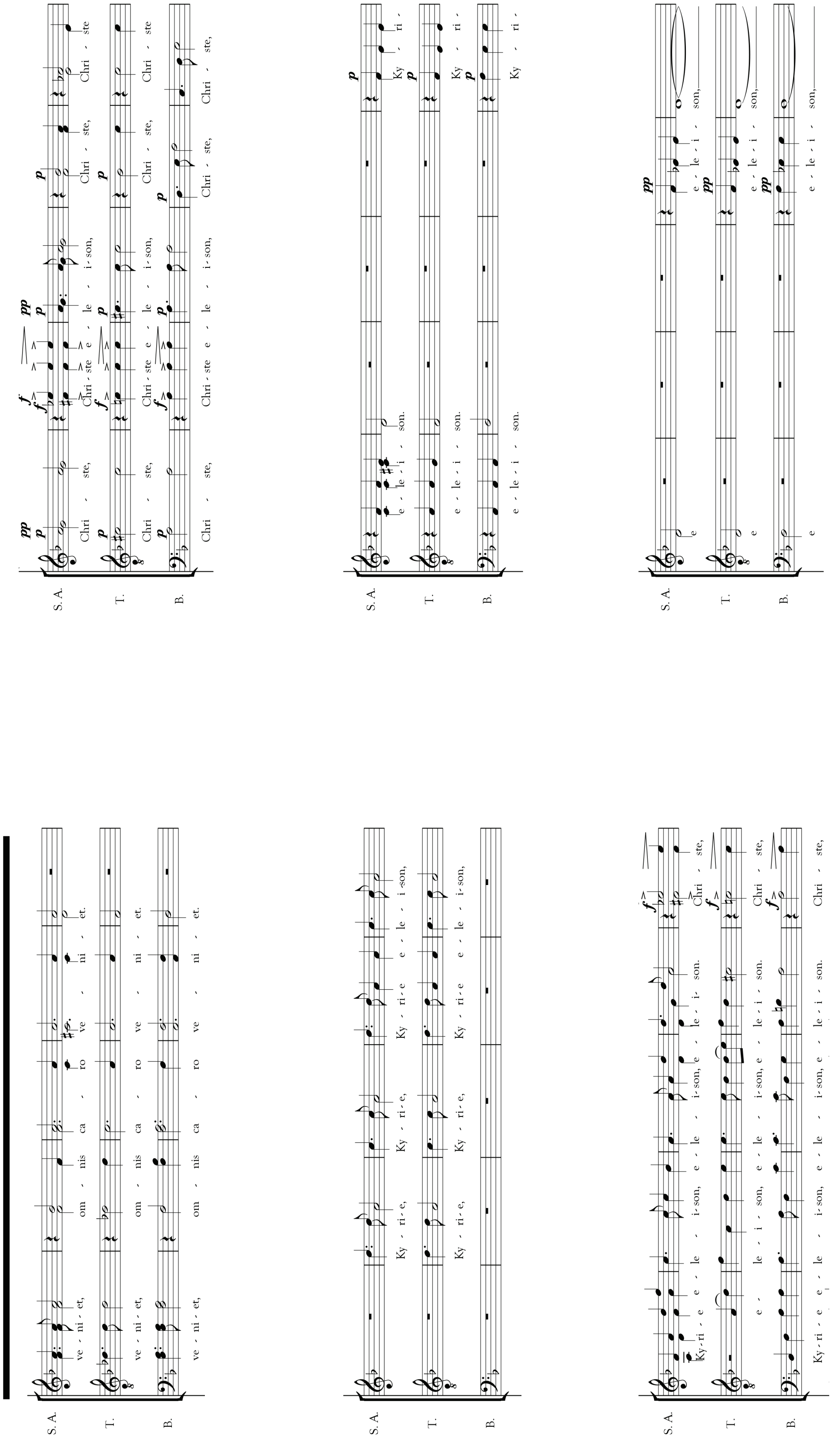
(heavy pressure) (distortion effect)

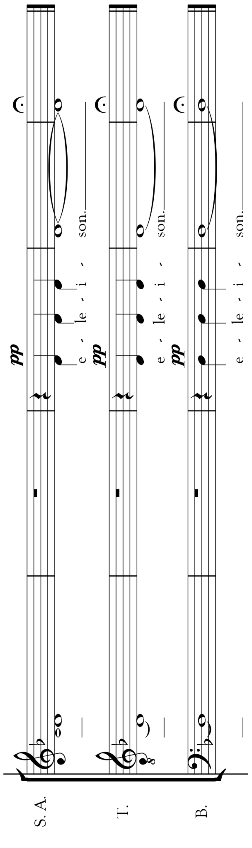
(very light pressure) (airy static effect)

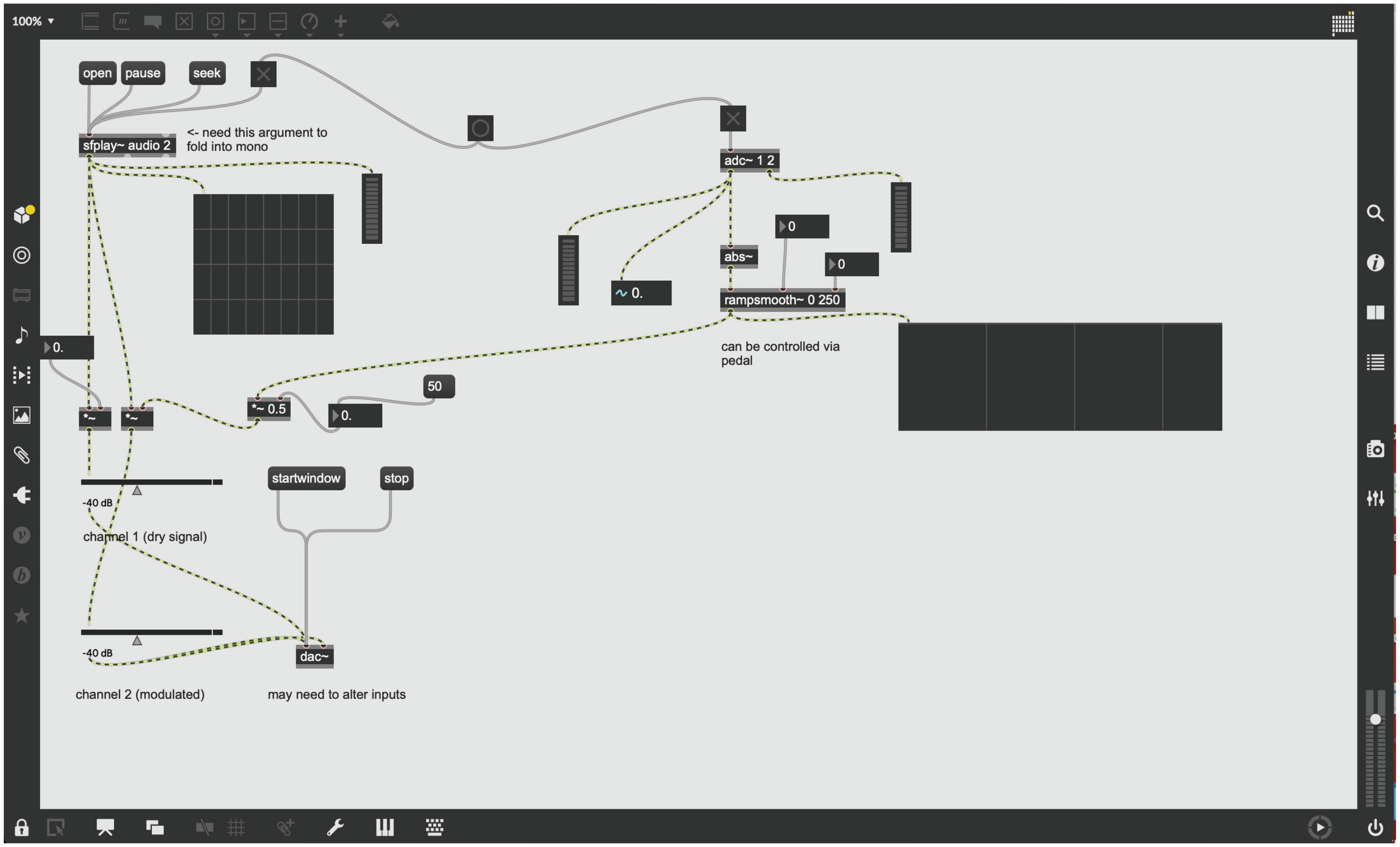

1
S. A.
T.
B.
cresc.
f
dim.
p
et lux per - pe - tu - a lu - ce - at, lu - ce - at,
lu - ce - at e - is, lu - ce - at e - is.
Andante moderato (♩ = 72)
18
TENORS
dolce
Org.
Re - qui-em æ - ter - nam do - na e - is
23
Do - mi - ne: et lux per - pe - tu - a lu - ce - at e - is.


T.
Org.
Re - qui-em æ - ter - nam do - na,—
p espress.
do - na e - is— Do - mi-ne:
et lux per - pe - tu-a lu -
f
ce - at e - is.
p
f
dim.
p


S.
Org.
SOPRANOS
dolce
Te— de - cet hym - nus, De - us in Si - on:
et ti - bi red -
S. A.
T.
B.
S.
Tutti S. A.
de - tur vo - tum in Je - ru - sa - lem.
Ex - au - di, ex - au - di
f
p
o - ra - ti - o - nem me - am,
ad te om - nis ca - ro
f
p


S. A.
T.
B.
ve-ni-et, om-nis ca-ro ve-ni-et.
Ky-ri-e, Ky-ri-e, Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son,
Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son, e-le-i-son, e-le-i-son. Chri-ste,
pp p f
Chri-ste, Chri-ste e-le-i-son, Chri-ste, Chri-ste,
e-le-i-son. Ky-ri-
e e-le-i-son,


S. A.
T.
B.
pp
e - le - i - son.
e - le - i - son.
e - le - i - son.


100%
open
pause
seek
sfplay~ audio 2
adc~ 1 2
abs~
rampsmooth~ 0 250
0
0
0.
0.
*~
*~
*~ 0.5
0.
50
startwindow
stop
-40 dB
-40 dB
dac~

<- need this argument to fold into mono

can be controlled via pedal

channel 1 (dry signal)

channel 2 (modulated)

may need to alter inputs

entro...pie

for four performers

pre-performance: during the dress rehearsal, the ensemble performs any 5-8 minute piece they feel comfortable executing. this can be through-notated or a free improvisation, or another text piece. any style is fine. this performance is video-taped.

performance: the ensemble enters the stage without instruments and sits down in a semi-circle oriented towards the projector screen on Pitzer. the pre-performance recording begins playing. the performers then play the following game:

1) the first person (A) to feel inspired to give a compliment to another player (B) about their performance does so.

2) the performer (B) then gives a compliment to another performer (C or D). each time a player is complimented, they must find and give a genuine compliment to another player.

3) these compliments should begin to overlap, like musical phrases. once a player has started giving a compliment they must finish regardless of what happens next.

4) once a flow of compliments has been established, performers may turn to non-musical compliments (clothes, personality, etc.)

5) the compliments should gradually get more and more unhinged and hyperbolic.

6) the piece ends when the pre-recorded performance ends. each performer gives one final compliment and then departs, one by one.

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