The Performer's Response as Symbolic Space: Exploring the piano music of Charles Griffes

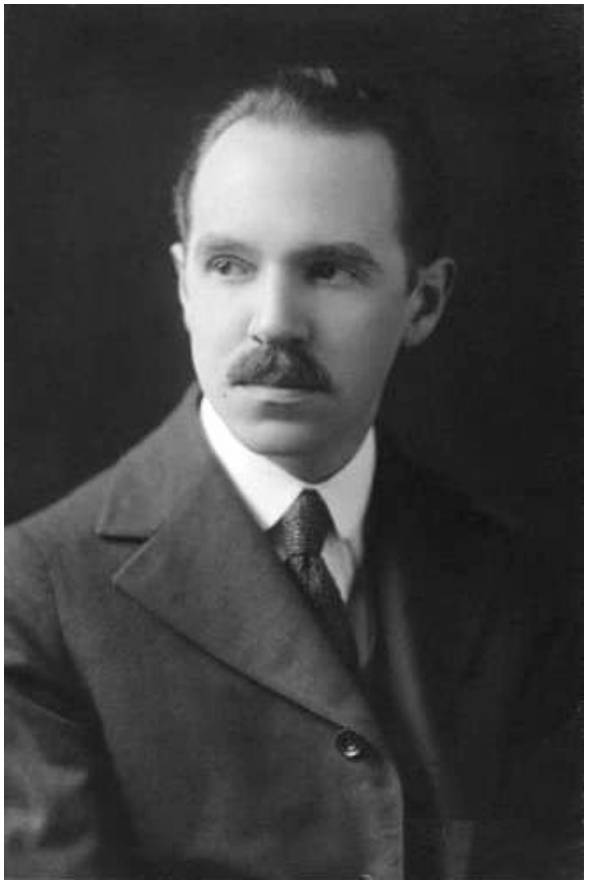
Performers(') Present Symposium

29 October 2016

Abigail Sin

Biographical overview

- Born September 17, 1884 in Elmira, New York
- 1903-1907 Studied at the Stern Conservatory, Berlin. Enrolled as a pianist. Composition lessons with Philipp Rüfer and later briefly with Humperdinck
- 1907 Took up a position at a boys school in Tarrytown, NY but frequently commuted into Manhattan
- On the recommendation of Busoni, taken on by Schirmer.
- Started to gain significant recognition from 1918. Important premieres by the Boston Symphony (Monteux) and Philadelphia Orchestra (Stokowski)
- Died April 8, 1920



“The Night Winds flies up and down the keyboard in a shimmering spray of notes, the sighing left hand melody surrounded by a torrent of wholetone based arpeggios. A sort of "baby" Feux d'Artifice (Debussy), the ending is reminiscent of that of Ravel's Scarbo.”

Lewin, CD liner notes 1999

The languid, sensuous music of "The White Peacock" and its subject were strongly reminiscent of "The Afternoon of a Faun“

NY Tribune, 11 March 1921

“Debussyesque harmony predominates, with however a rather firm chiselled melodic line close to Ravel” (On Griffes’ 1912 Oscar Wilde songs)

Hitchcock, Music in the United States: a historical introduction (2000)

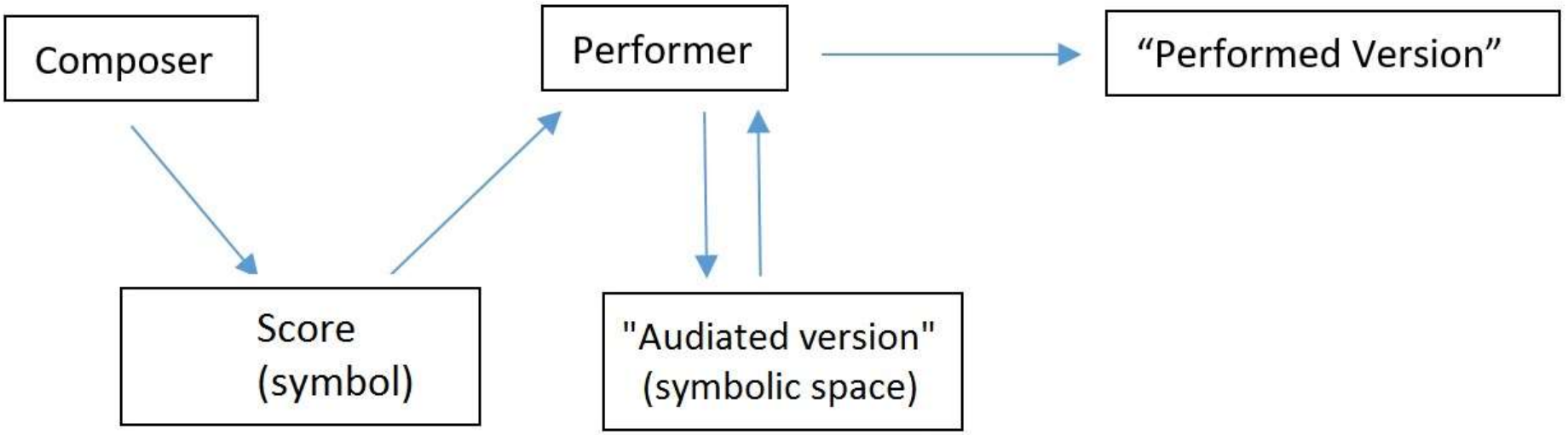
“His use of harp, piano, and celeste evokes colors later used by Bartok; the wind writing is sometimes like Ravel's in Daphnis and Chloe--as well as Stravinsky's in Petrouchka--and solo clarinet lines remind one of Olivier Messiaen”

American Record Guide, 1998

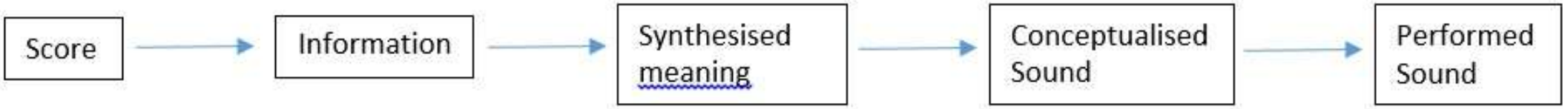
“In about 1911 Griffes began to abandon the German style. The works written from then until about 1917 are highly coloured, free in form, and generally reflect many other elements of musical Impressionism. The piano pieces, for example, are pictorial and employ descriptive titles and/or poetic texts (e.g. *Three Tone-Pictures and Roman Sketches*). But as often as not Griffes added the texts and titles after he had completed the works. Impressionistic moods are established by gliding parallel chords, whole-tone scales, augmented triads, ostinato figures across the bar-line, and other devices.”

Anderson, D. K. (n.d.). *Griffes, Charles T.* (Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press)

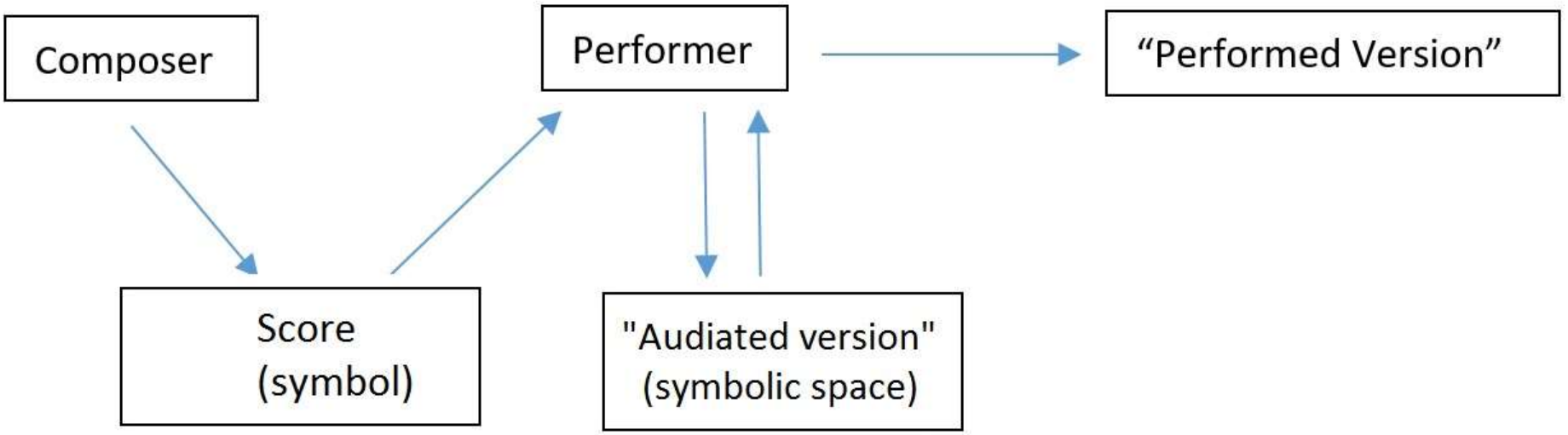
The Performer’s Response: The “Audiated Version”



Processes of a performer's response



The Performer’s Response: The “Audiated Version”



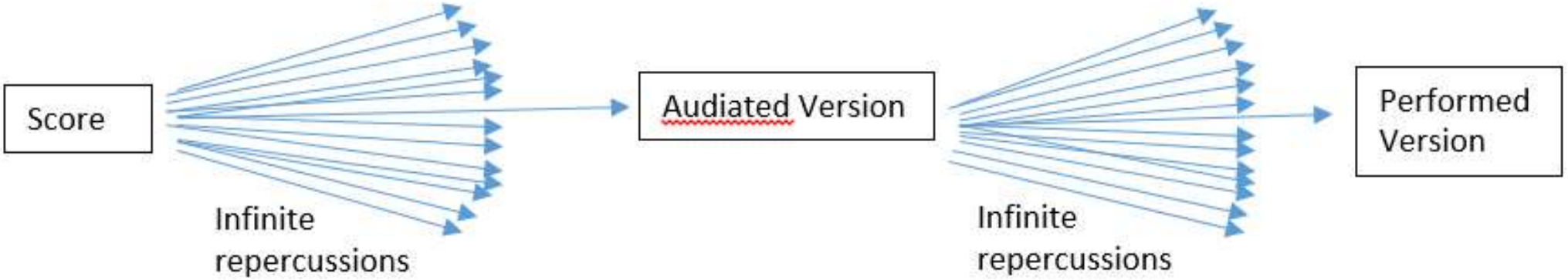
Goethe's definition of a symbol

A symbol is that which

"transforms the phenomenon into an idea, and the idea into an image, and does this in such a way that the idea in the image has infinite repercussions, and remains intangible."

Jarocinski, Stefan, *Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism,* trans. from the French by Rollo Myers (London: Eulenberg Books, 1976), 23.

“Infinite repercussions”



The White Peacock, from Roman Sketches Op. 7

Here where the sunlight
Floodeth the garden,
Where the pomegranate
Reareth its glory
Of gorgeous blossom;
Where the oleanders
Dream through the noontides;
. . . . . .
. . . . . Where the heat lies
Pale blue in the hollows,
. . . . . .
Here where the dream-flowers,
The cream-white poppies,
Silently waver,
. . . . . .
Here as the breath, as the soul of this beauty
Moveth in silence, and dreamlike, and slowly,
White as a snowdrift in mountain valleys
When softly upon it the gold light lingers:
. . . . . .
Moves the white peacock, as tho' through the noontide
A dream of the moonlight were real for a moment.
Dim on the beautiful fan that he spreadeth,
. . . . . .
Dim on the cream-white are blue adumbrations,
. . . . . .
Pale, pale as the breath of blue smoke in far woodlands,
Here, as the breath, as the soul of this beauty,
Moves the White Peacock.

WILLIAM SHARP

Griffes's piano works and orchestration

- The piano version always precedes the orchestra version

White Peacock: Piano version (1915), orchestra version (1919)

- Both scores are complete and self-sufficient
- Piano score is first point of contact with the work and has primacy over orchestra score in my practice

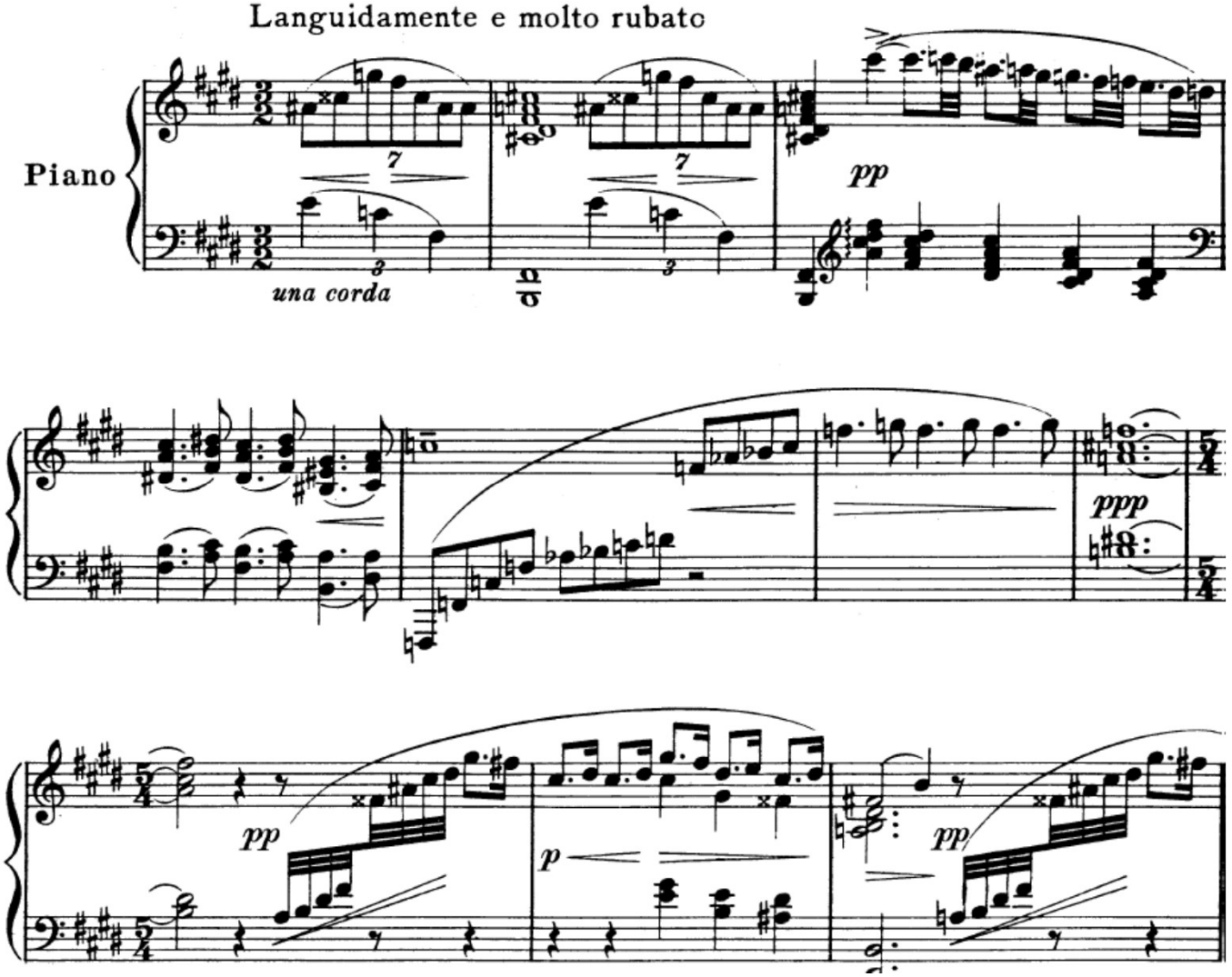
- to **explore the tension and implications** of the differences between the two scores, to **challenge, confirm and enrich the response** that I have already had to the piano score, to **form a synthesised conceptualisation** of Griffes's soundworlds to be **translated** into actual sound

Defining Sound

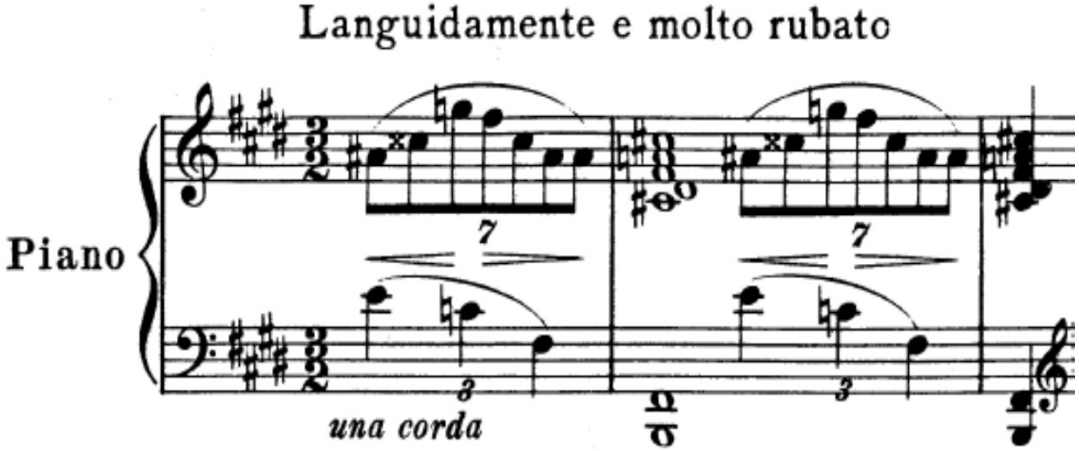
- Delineating layers of texture
- Assigning timbral identity (to melodic material, harmonies, expression markings etc)
- Axis of brightness
- Establishing sound worlds

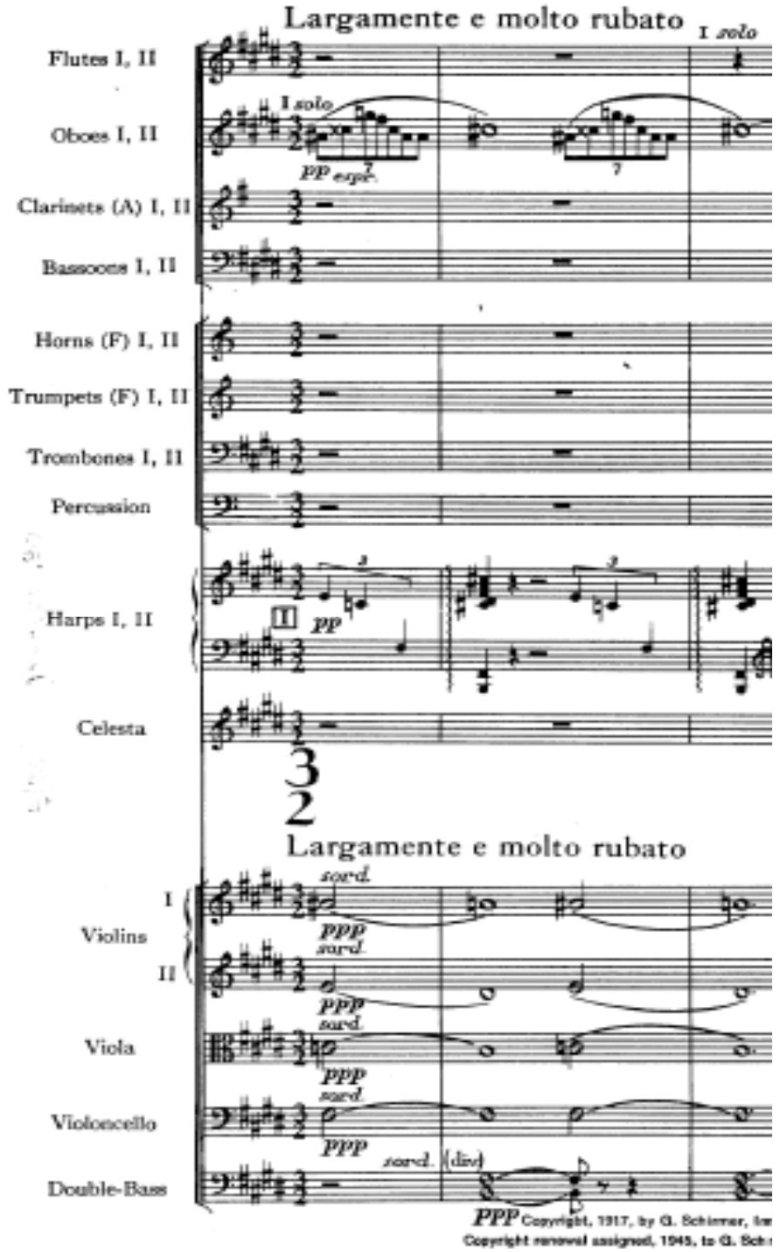
Enhancing Sound

- Audiating harmonies
- The illusion of altering sound through a held note
- Engineering shine
- Imagining and manipulating layers of resonance
- Expressive resistance
- Orchestral crescendo

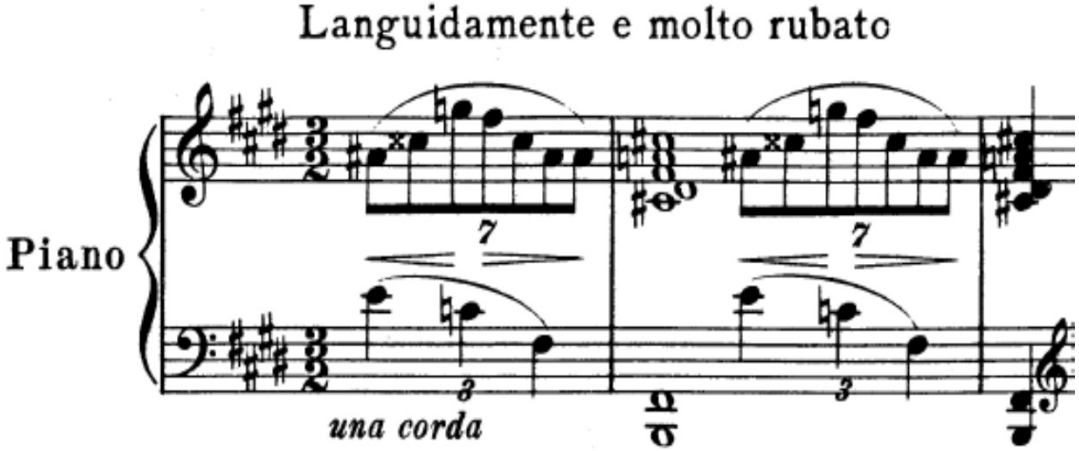

Languidamente e molto rubato
Piano
una corda
pp
ppp
pp
p
pp

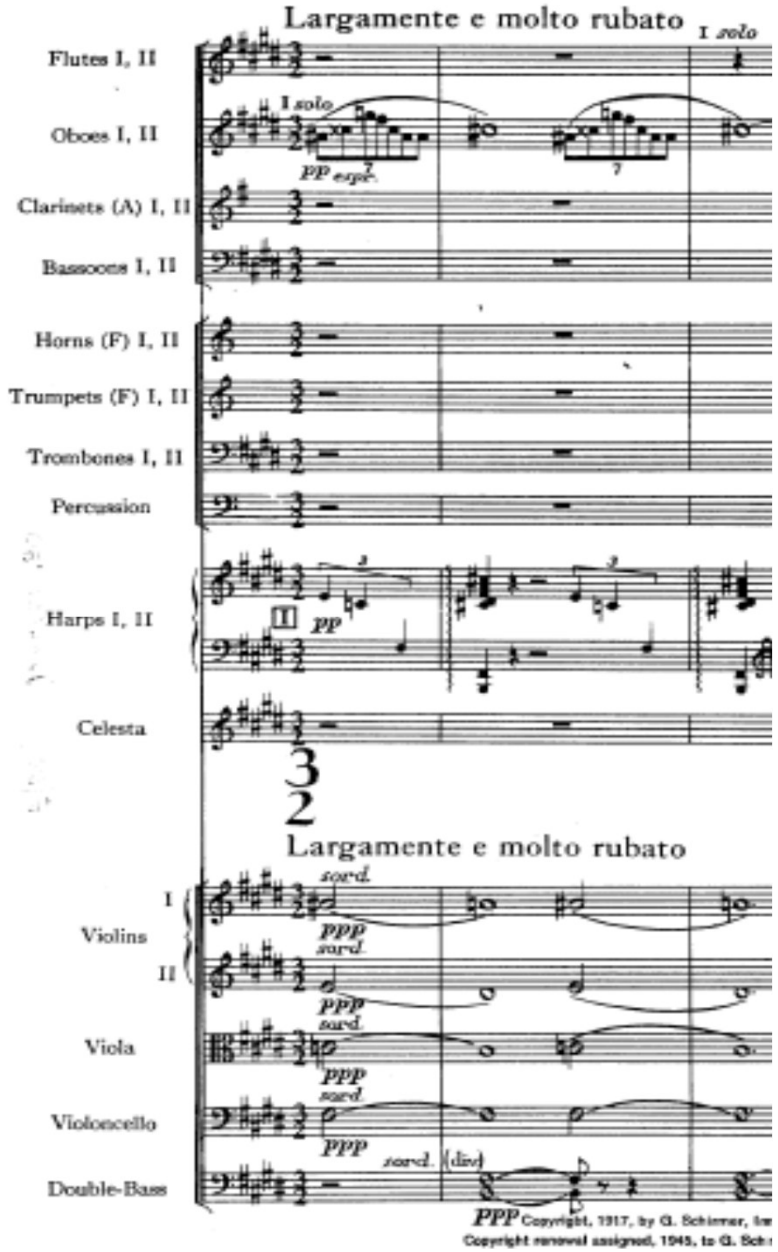
Defining Sound:
Delineating layers of texture





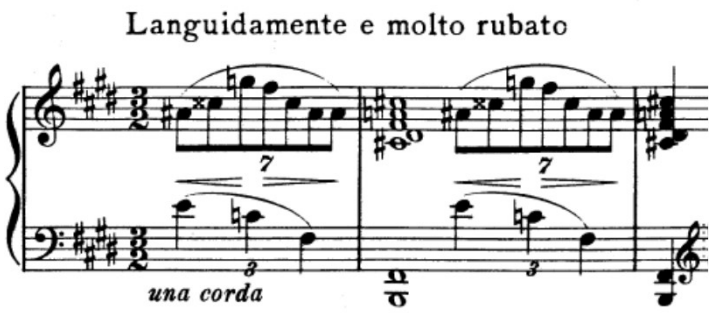
Enhancing Sound: Audiating harmonies

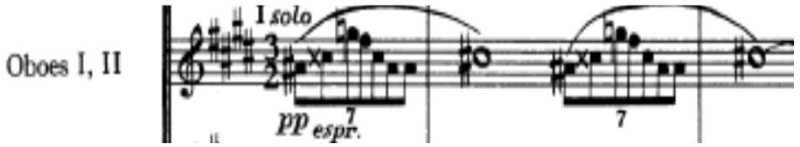




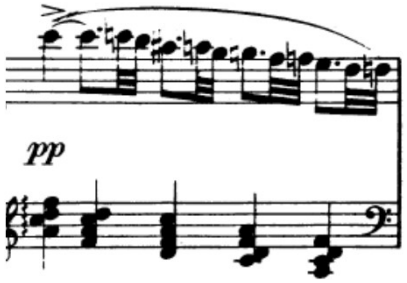
Defining Sound: timbral identity of melodic material

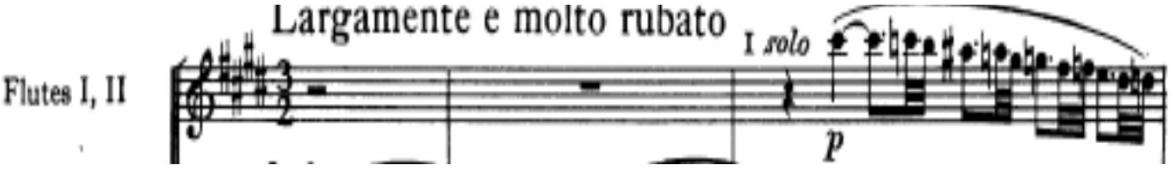
Motif 1



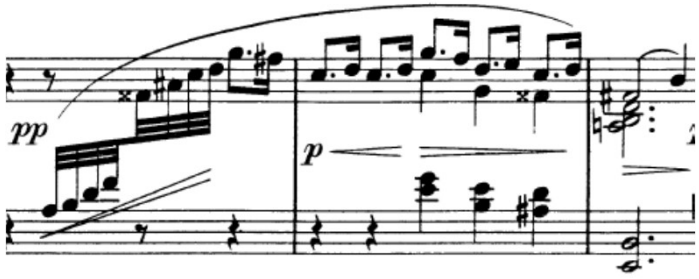


Motif 2



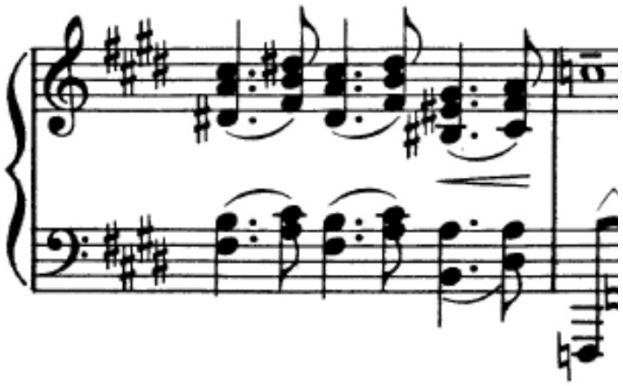


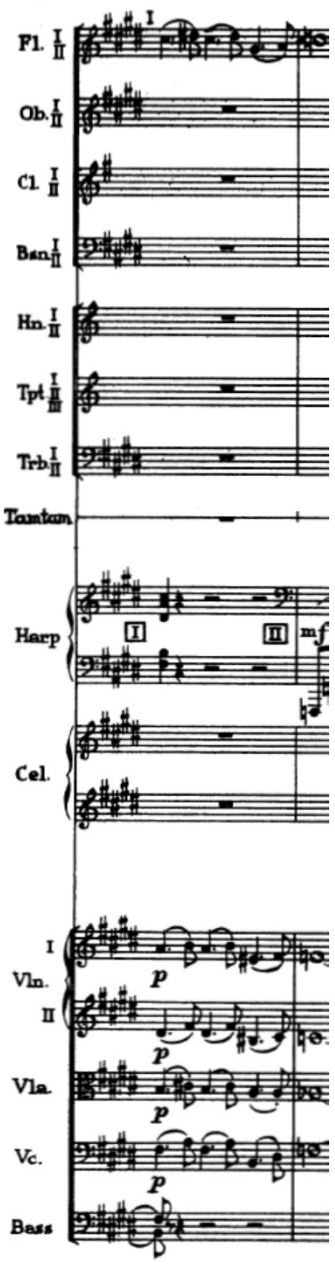
Motif 4



Defining Sound:
timbral identity of melodic material

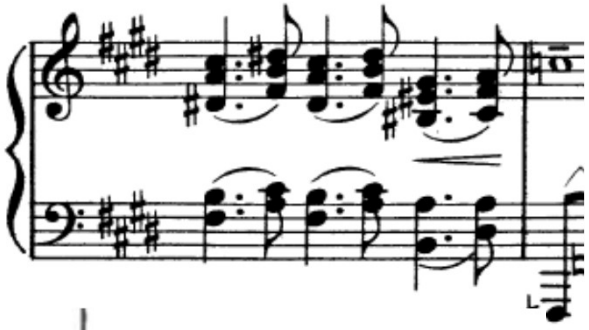
Motif 3

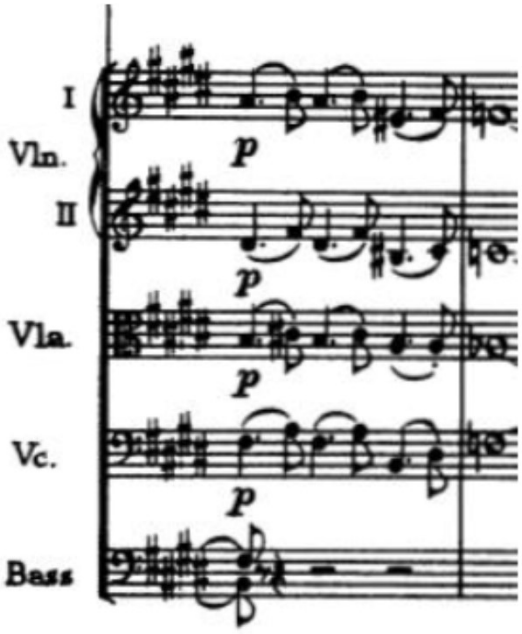




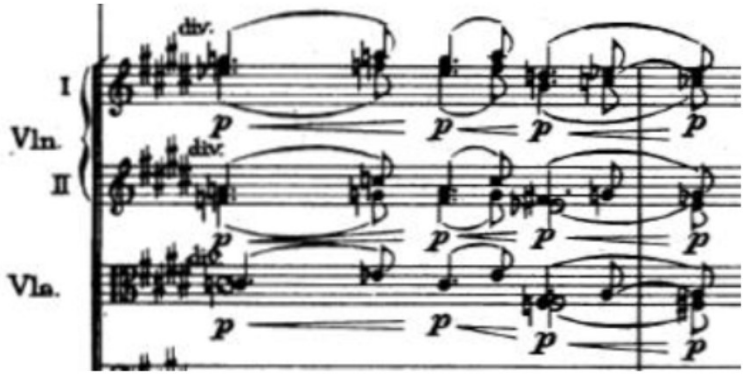
Enhancing sound: The illusion of altering sound through a held note

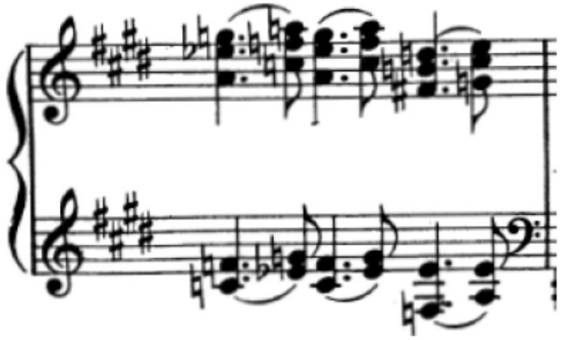
Bar 4



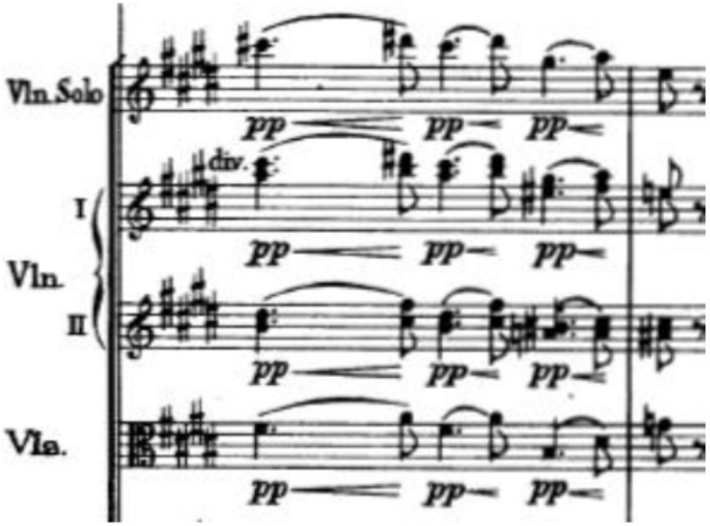


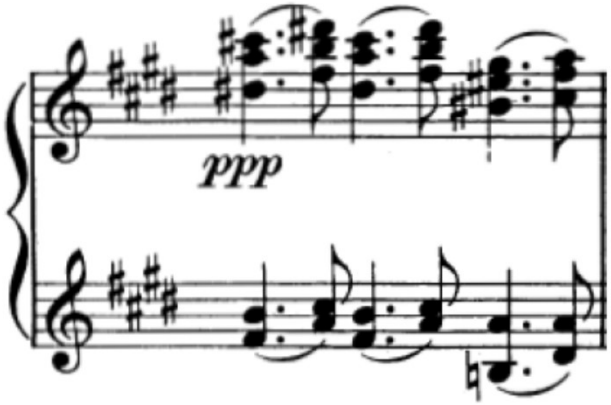
Bar 37



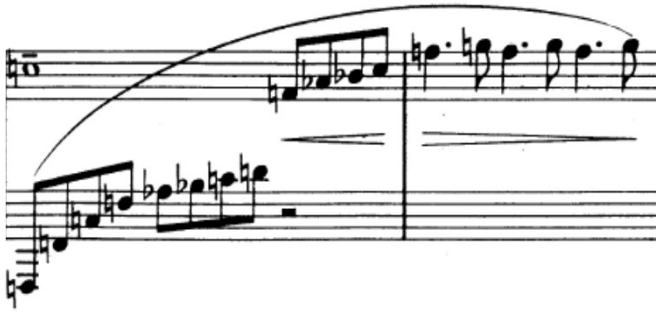


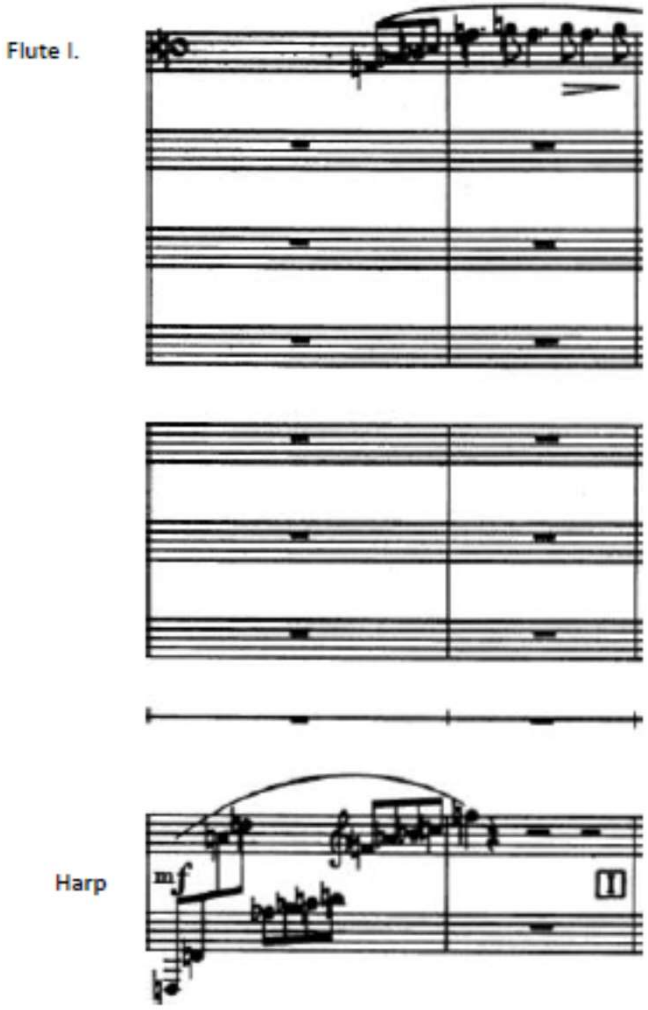
Bar 49



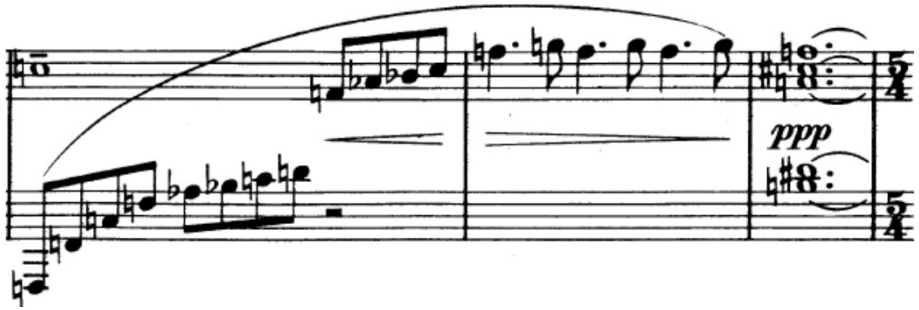


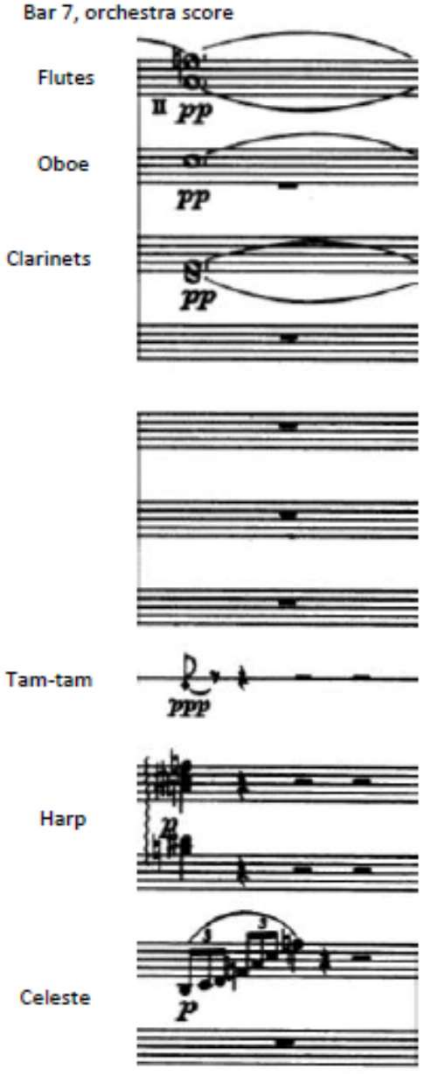
Defining Sound - Axis of Brightness (bar 5-6)



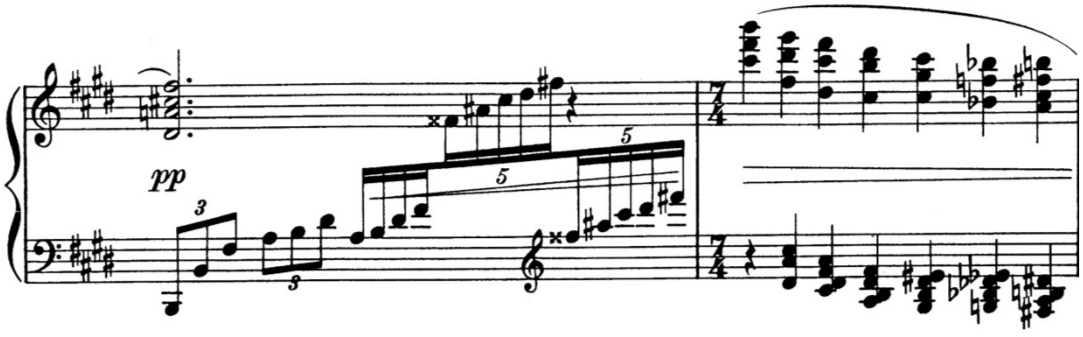


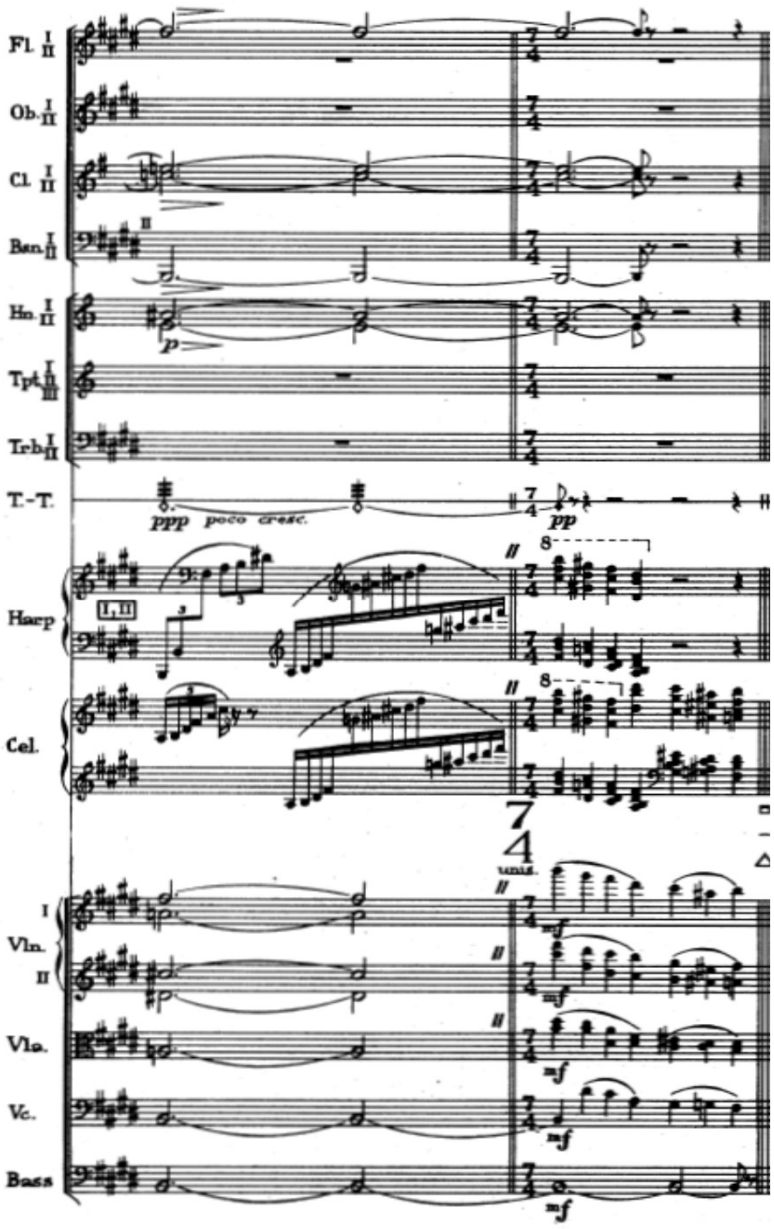
Enhancing sound: Engineering shine (bar 7)





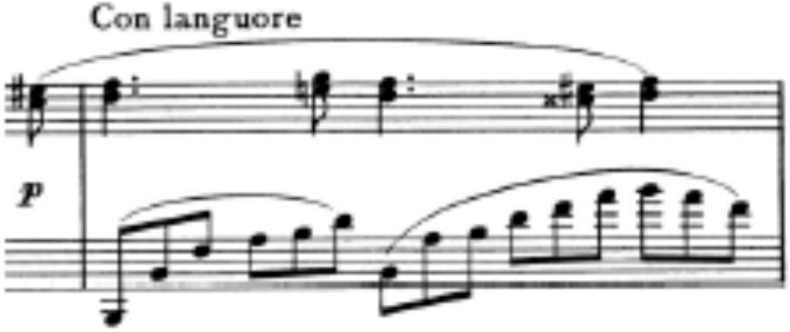
Enhancing sound –
engineering shine (not directly applicable)
bar 16-17



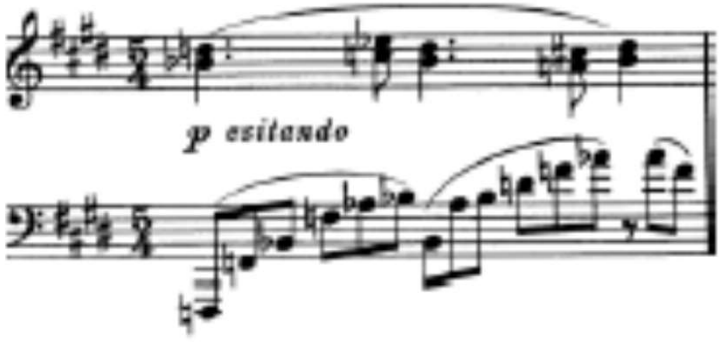


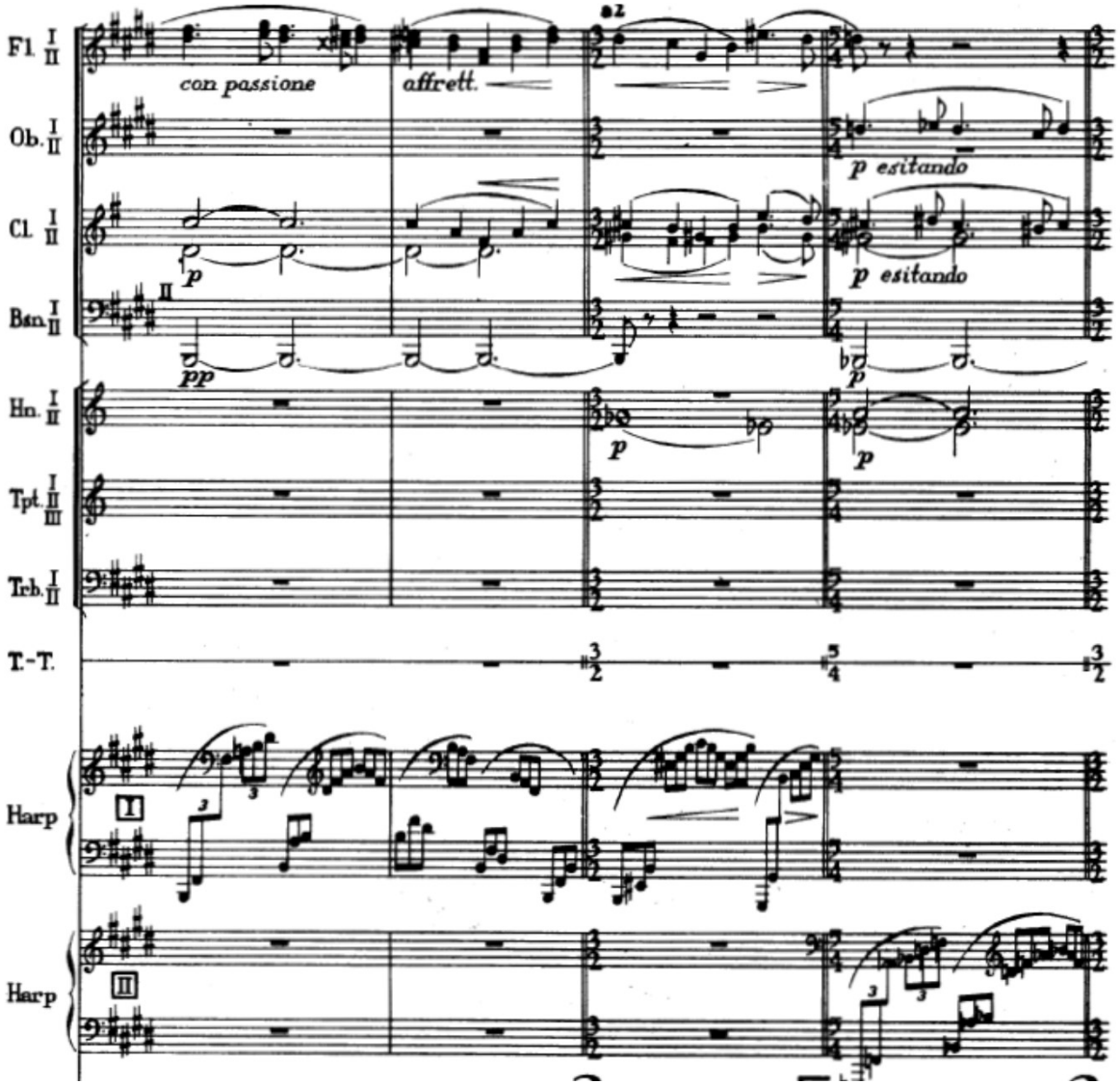
Defining Sound: timbral identity of harmony and expression markings

Bar 19, piano score

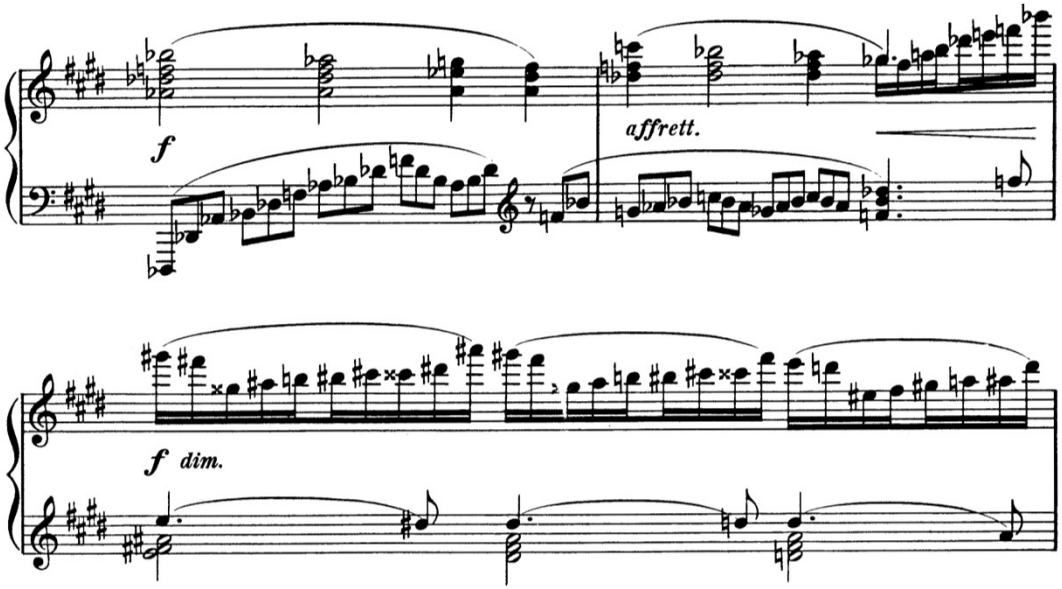


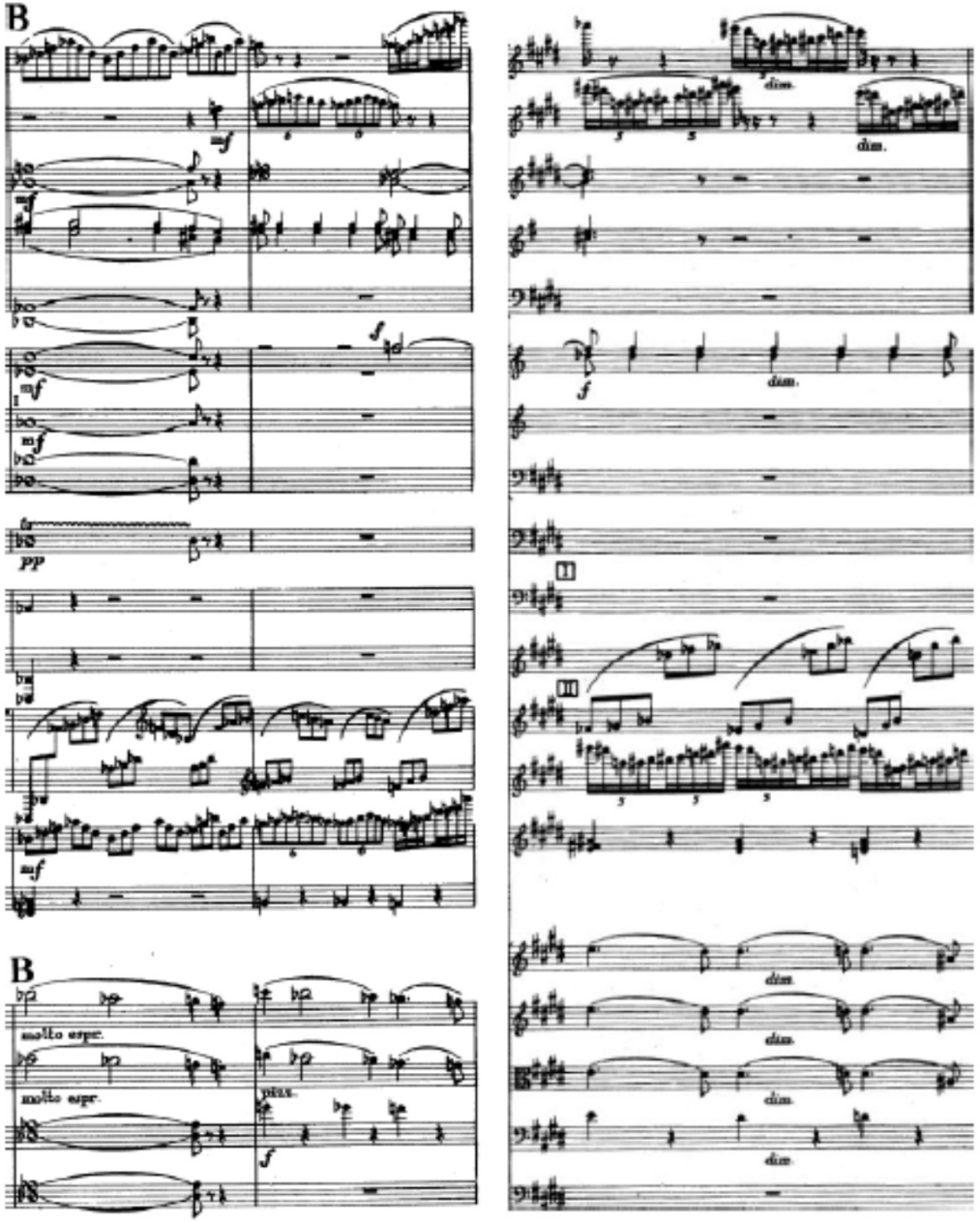
Bar 22, piano score



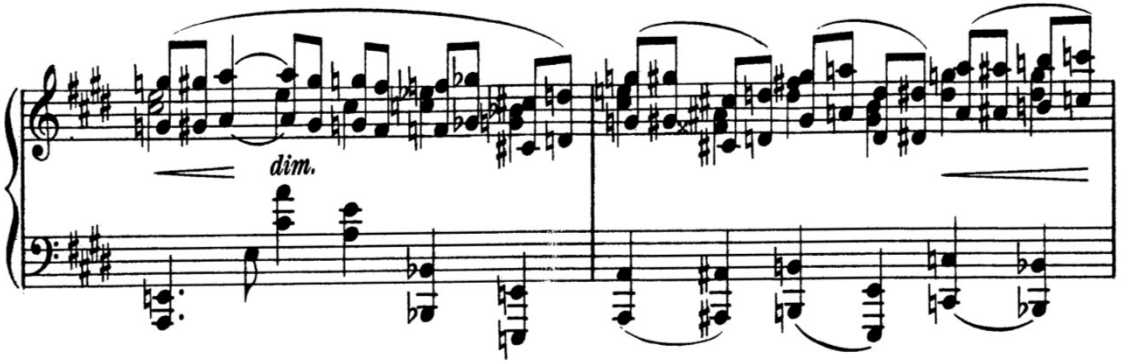


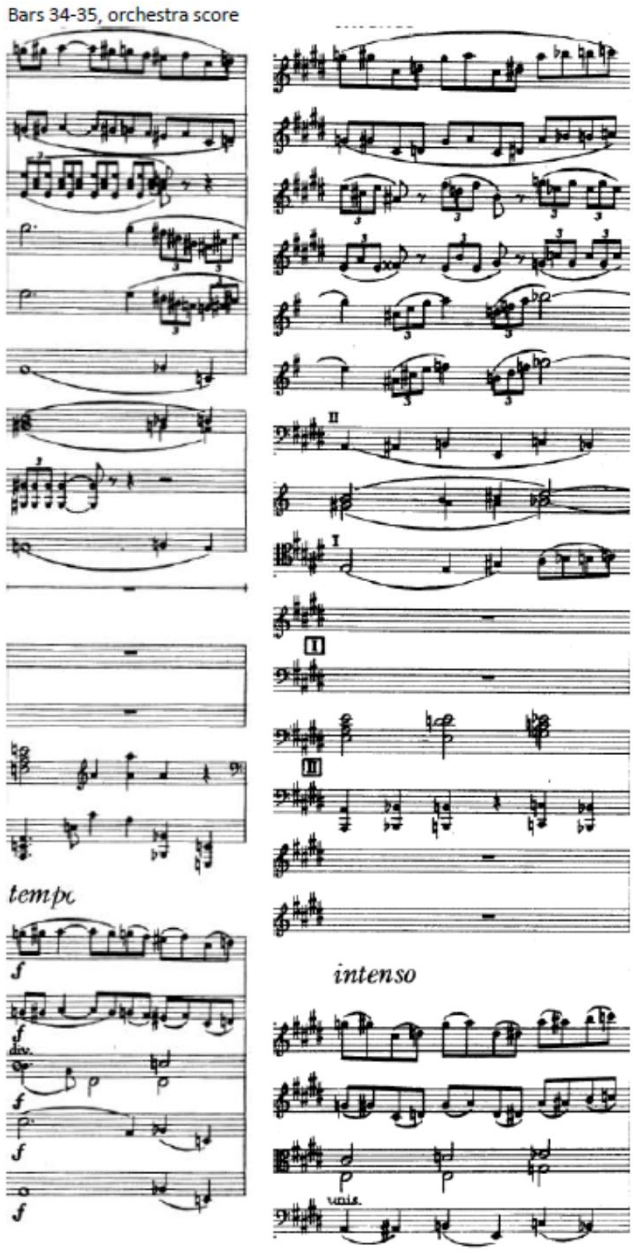
Enhancing sound: imagining and manipulating resonance (bar 24-26)



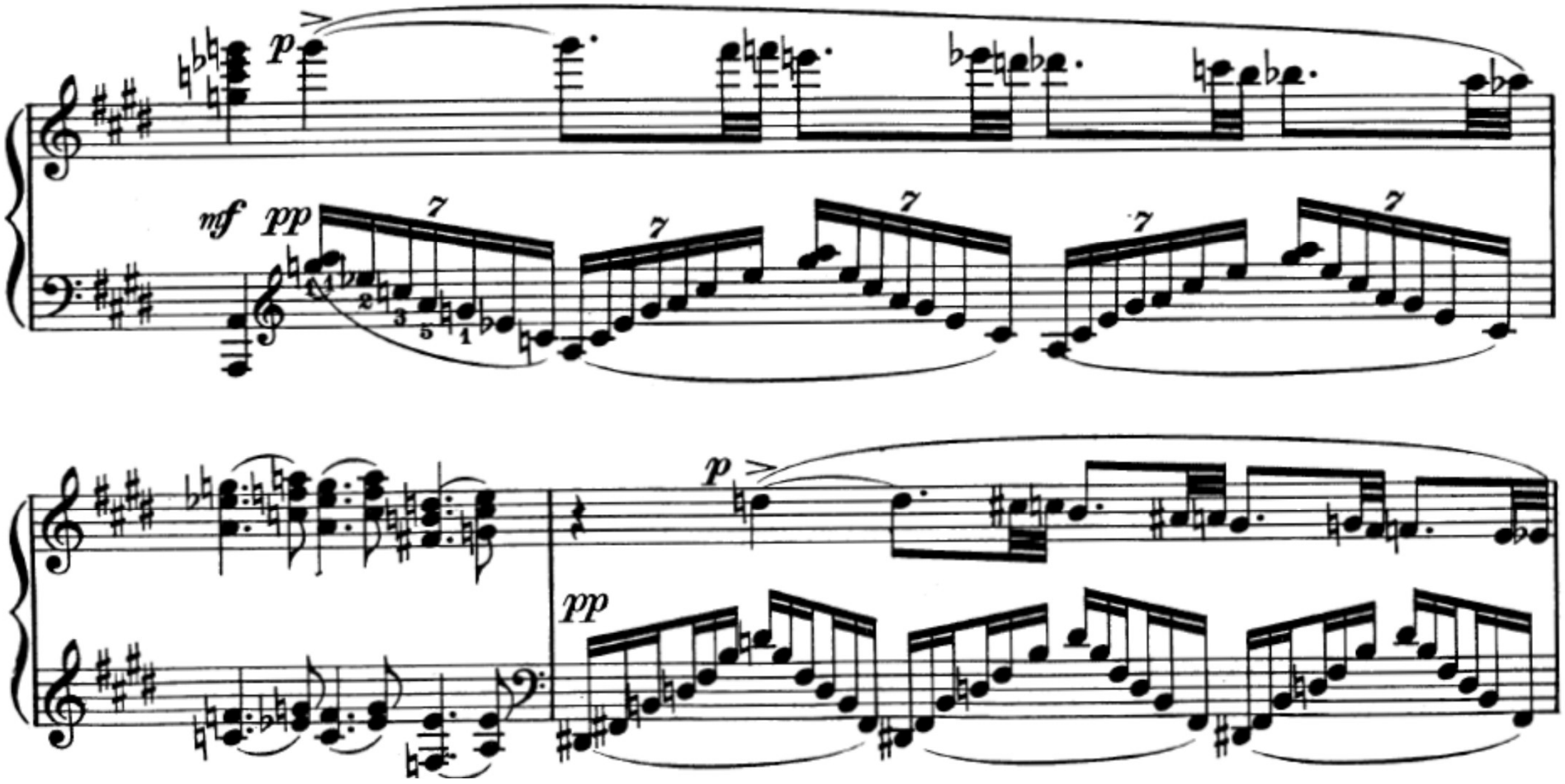


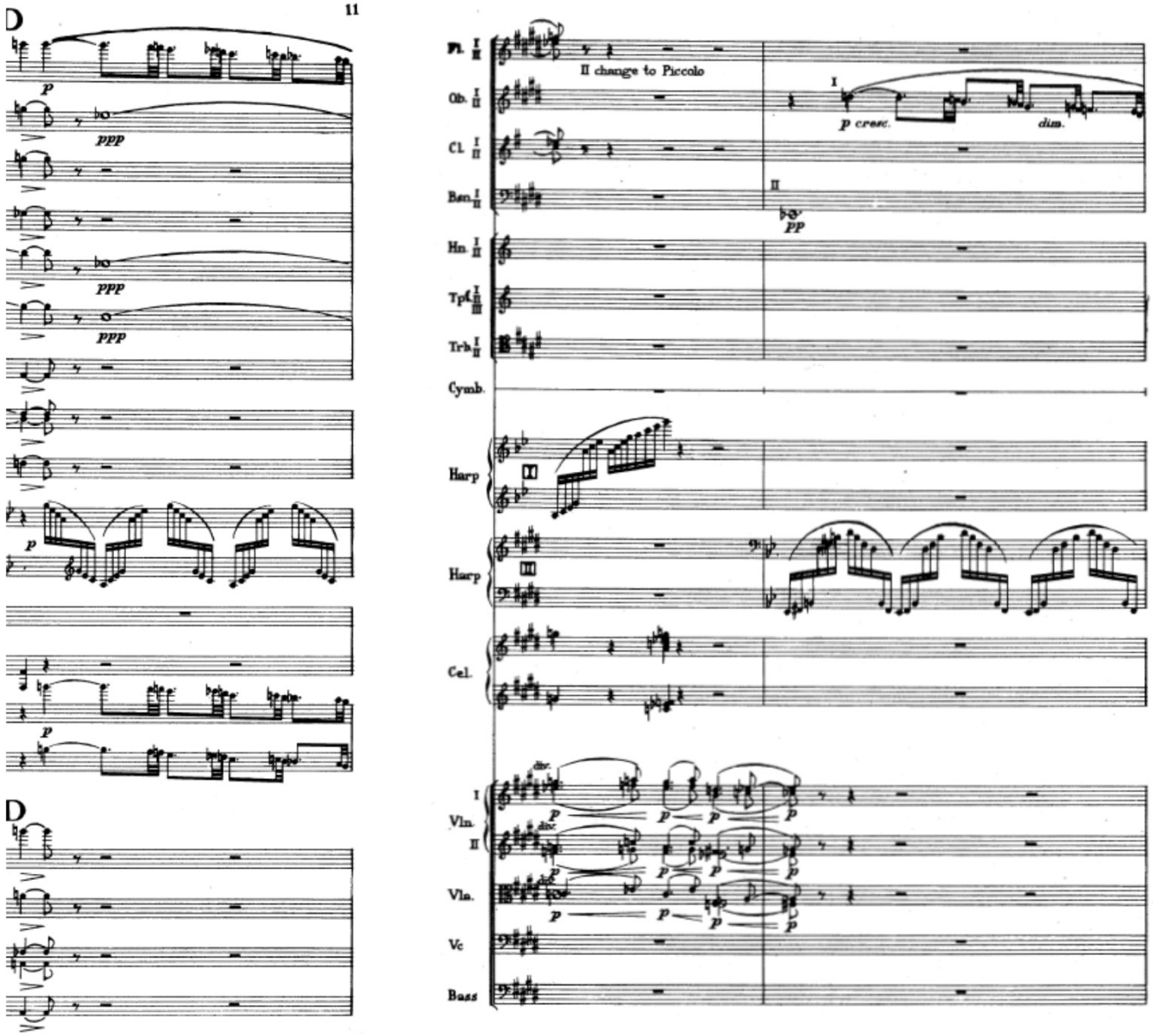
Enhancing sound:
expressive resistance (bars 34-35)

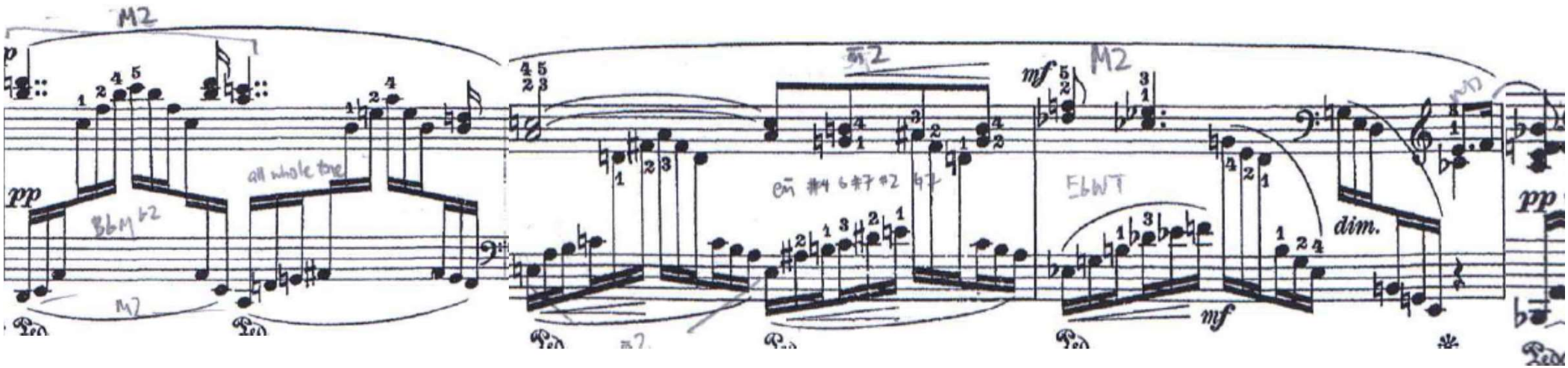




Defining sound: Establishing soundworlds

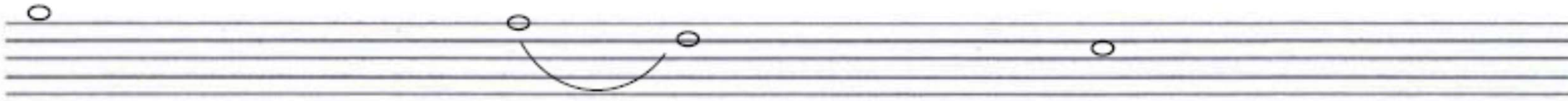


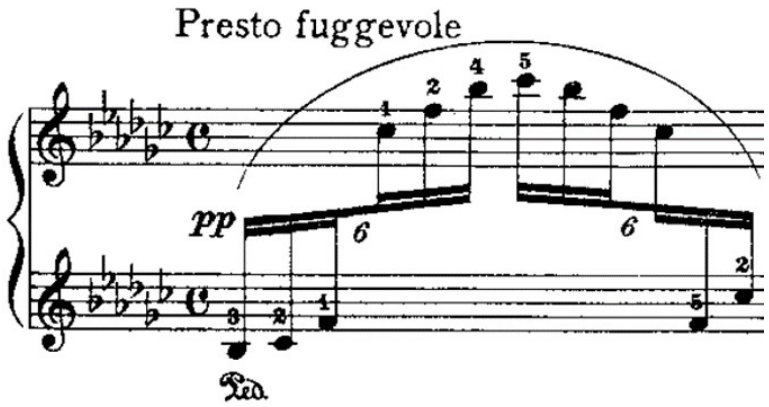

D
p
ppp
ppp
ppp
p
p
D
Fl. I II
Ob. I II
Cl. I II
Bsn. I II
Hn. I II
Tpt. I II III
Trb. I II
Cymb.
Harp
Harp
Cel.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc
Bass
II change to Piccolo
I
p cresc.
dim.
II
pp
div.
p



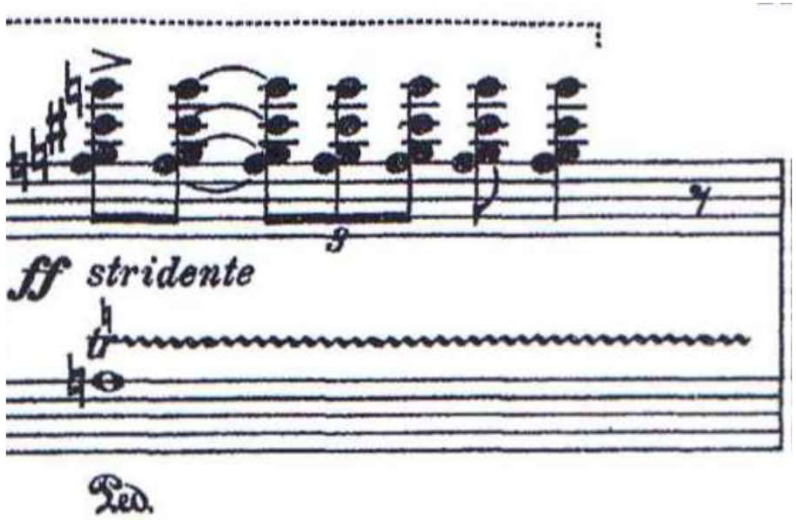
Every note of the chromatic scale represented, except A natural, which is the tonal centre at the start of the middle section

1-2	3-5	6-7	8-13	14-19	20-21	22-24	25-27	28-31	32-34	35-36	37-40	41-42	43
m2	m2/M2 worlds separate	m2	Minor 2 and Major 2 worlds collide		M2 harmonies			E flat min Gravitational pull	Separate m2 and M2 worlds over e flat minor pedal				
wave	motif	wave	motif extended	Motif fragmented/ developed	M2I	WAVE	Motif	Wave	Resolutions	wave	wave	motif + ext	res.	w

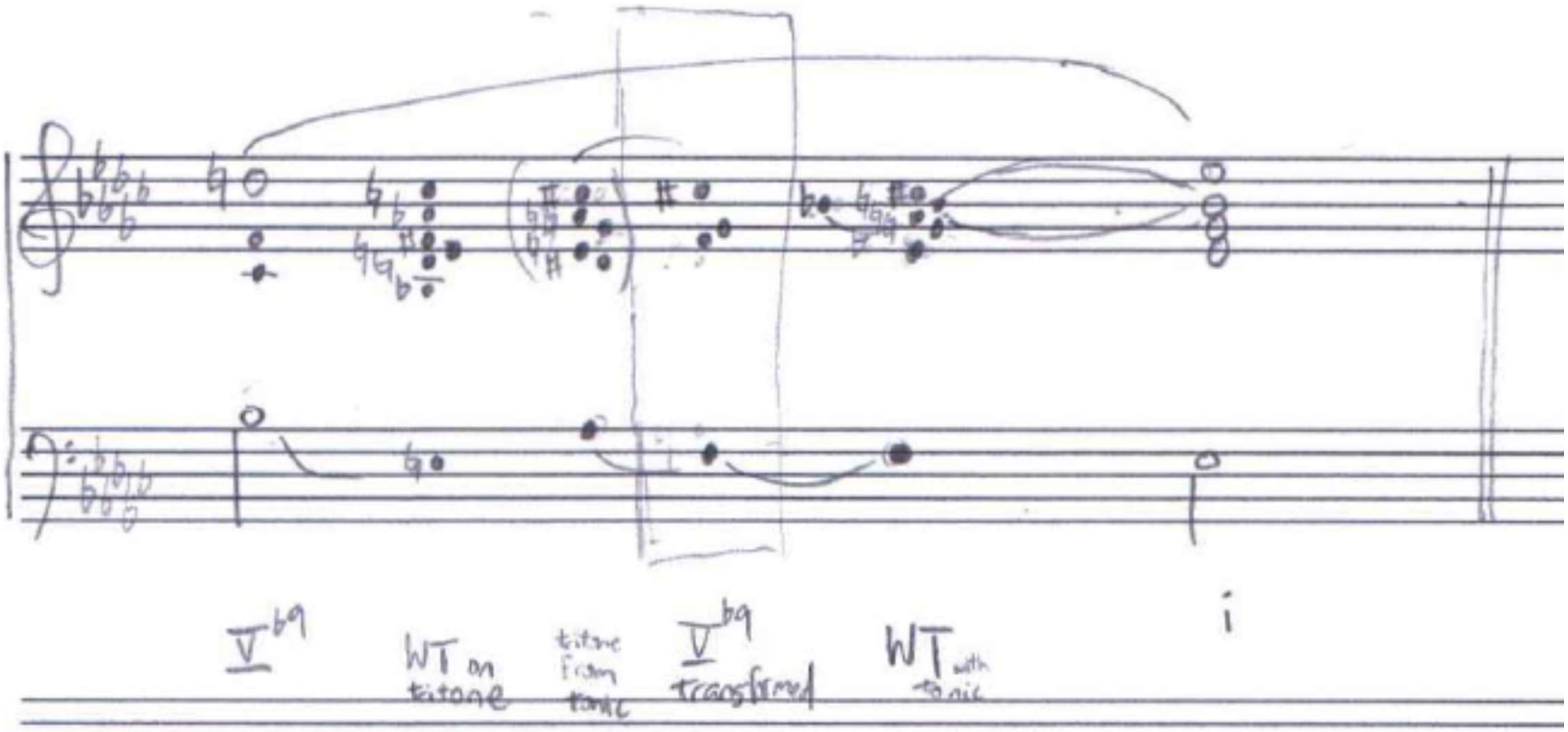




Minor 2nd + Perfect 5th



Major 2nd + Augmented 5th



Harmonic reduction of Night Winds.