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The Harmonic Analysis of Max Reger's »Four Tone Poems after Arnold Böcklin«, Op. 128

Nowadays somewhat forgotten, Max Reger was considered one of the most influential and controversial composers of his time. His voluminous work is a real challenge for music analysts since it contains the elements inherited from classical-romantic tradition, but also reflects both the profound *fin de siècle* transformations in music and the revolutionary compositional innovations of *modernism*.

In the recent decades, the 19th century chromatic music – sometimes even harshly distinguished from the diatonic music as the *second harmonic practice*[1] – has become the theoretical entity with its own identity.[2] Abandoning the prevailing analytical models' rigid considerations of chromatic music as a mere elaboration of diatonic structures, D. Kopp, J. Horton, J. Hepokoski and W. Darcy, to name but a few theorists, developed the remarkably sophisticated conceptual frameworks for their analytic approaches to harmonic language of 19th century music. However, when it comes to the compositions that stand almost at the border of tonality dissolution, traditional and new *harmonielehre* fail to cope entirely with their audacious harmonic solutions. Adhering to Schoenberg's standpoint that distinction between diatonic and chromatic music is a matter of style, rather than substance, this analysis is based on his key concepts of harmony. Such approach to Reger's piece, the embodiment of extended, eventually chromatic tonality, will show that, in analytical terms, there is no strict division between these two styles. Due to time limitations, research of numerous analytical issues has to give way to more general consideration of the piece. The primary goal of the analysis is to demonstrate that readily noticeable tonal unity of *Four tone poems,* which begins and ends in the same key, is also expressed at all structural levels through tonal regions.

1 Gregory Michael Proctor, *Technical Bases of Nineteenth-Century Chromatic Tonality. A Study in Chromaticism*, Princeton 1978.

2 David Kopp, *Chromatic Transformations in Nineteenth-Century Music,* Cambridge 2006, 1.

Let us first examine the structural frame and overall organization of the tonal plan.

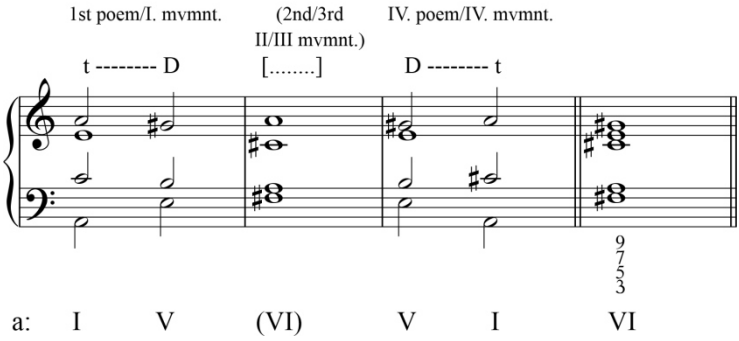
On the grounds that the piece manifests a sufficient number of symphony sonata cycle attributes I will consider the poems as the movements. The 1st and the 4th poem are based on T or the I scale degree, while the interior movements are, at first glance, non-T because they are based on the VI and the III degree. Since T function and region prevail in the course of the 2nd poem or movement, which is based on sm, the cycle could also be regarded as another variant of a typical romantic model: T – T – non-T – T.

The tonal plan indicates a sonata-like form, understood as ternary design, with an obvious reference to A. B. Marx. The relation between the beginning and the end of the 1st and the 4th poem, based on a *tonally directed motion*[3] I-V-V-I, is schematically outlined as:

1st poem/ I mvmnt.	(2nd/ 3rd poem/ II/III mvmnt.)	4th poem/ IV mvmnt.
t ----------HC:D	[…..]	D ----------t

In this context, two middle poems should represent the development part. However, they do not manifest typical features of contrasting middle section in respect of the rest-motion-rest pattern. The effect of the motion is not entirely achieved since the 2nd poem is based on sm region or the VI degree which is not only one of T representatives but the resolution in relation to V or D. The 3rd poem or m region, which is T and D representative, could equally be perceived as tension or resolution in relation to the tonal centre. Since the fundamental of m is already contained in sm chord as its fifth, we can see and hear only one chord – namely sm, regardless of the upper layer, its 7 and 9, from where this chord is only neighbouring harmony in relation to the frame of the 1st and the 4th poem, i.e. T-D-D-T.

3 Michael Spitzer, »Sonata Dialogues«, in : *Beethoven Forum* 14/2, (2007), 150–178:151.



Example 1: Harmonic Frame.

With reference to Schoenberg's standpoint that any larger composition can be considered as more or less big and elaborated cadence,[4] we can regard the synthesis of *Four tone poems* not even as PAC – because of the absence of genuine progression – but more radically as merely T prolongation. In other words, its tonal regions I-VI-III-I represent only T prolongation based on I-VI-I. Furthermore, consideration of two chords as one, resulting from harmonic intervals of the VI 6/5/3 or the Ist with 6 *ajoutée*, has the same outcome – we see and hear it as T chord.

From the formal structural point of view, the piece does not suggest a I-V-x-V-I kind of symmetry, because of diverse structural features of its poems; the 1st and the 2nd are a composed ternary form, the 3rd is a binary form and the 4th is theme and variations. Based on this, I will denote the poems in the order as: a, a1, b and c. Before we continue, let me briefly note that Schoenberg, as Reger's contemporary, highly praised his innovations in musical language, particularly his avoiding monotony that comes from exact repetitions of the same material. In that sense, the 4th poem is a paradigmatic example of such compositional practice. Here, the thematic material is, so to say, scattered through the variations in a way that its transformed content is hardly recognizable. Only at the beginning of the 5th variation, in SD region, the main

4 Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, Berkley and Los Angeles 1978, 290.

motif of the theme based on t: V-VI recurs transposed on Np: V/V-V and slightly modified in its repetition in m. 61–62.

In the repetition-contrast-recurrent form – a a1 B a2 – of the 1st poem, the hierarchy of formal units results from customary placement of conclusive and inconclusive cadences, most of the HC being in the middle part B or precisely in its interior sections b and c. The same does not hold for the rest of the composition. Actually, the situation in the 2nd poem is reversed. In its ternary ABA form, the focus of tonal confirmation, T, is displaced from the exterior parts to interior part B. In the 3rd poem, the predominance of half cadences and permanent postponement of the conclusion, eventually reached in the 4th poem, give the sense of motion to Reger's piece regarded as a sonata cycle. The interpretation of the 2nd poem as the sequel of the 1st one could be justified by the fact that the latter has an open ending with HC: IV/IV-IV-I-V (cf. example 2).

Consequently, the beginning of the 2nd poem with the VI degree or sm opens the possibility that its link with the end of the 1st one could be heard as DC (V-VI). This kind of connection is frequent at lower structural levels, especially in the course of the 4th poem where the initial chord of the next section brings the resolution in relation to the tension implied by the inconclusive cadence, precisely HC of the previous section. The connection itself forms a new type of cadence, namely conclusive or relatively conclusive cadence – PAC, IAC or DC – while in terms of formal functions, it produces the fusion of ending and initiating function (cf. example 2a).

There are also variations without cadences, connected with the previous and the next variation in the same way. This fact softens the effect of changes of direction and regions.

Despite the conspicuous simplicity of harmonic expression manifested at a large scale structural level, the harmonic progressions inside the poems produce more significant dynamic growth.

Gradual development of harmonic syntax throughout the cycle starts with relative simplicity of harmonic progressions in the 1st poem with prevailing diatonic structure.

Development of the harmonic rhythm coincides with the four poems' tempo: in the 1st one it is slow, as a kind of a slow introduction,

and in the other three poems it is fast. In the 1st, the harmonic rhythm is accorded with the pulse or more pulses or even entire measure, while in the 2nd and the 3rd it is relatively accelerated and generally more frequently modified, culminating in the 4th poem. Due to harmonic density combined with accelerated harmonic rhythm and fast tempo, at the first hearing we can hardly perceive many occurrences within the last three poems. We hear the main and extensively developed tonal regions, as well as the beginnings and the ends of parts and sections, while the harmonic progressions within the sections and subsections are heard as passages. However, the analysis also examines some of these harmonic prolongations and progressions which cannot be perceived clearly in the continued hearing.

It might seem peculiar that *Four tone poem*, a paradigmatic example of extended tonality, is distinguished by transparent tonal coherence, especially through the balance between the elements of stability and instability or, in Schoenbergian terms, the centrifugal and centripetal tendencies. But for those familiar with Reger's work and his belief that the music without clear tonal centers could not make any sense, it comes as no surprise.

With respect to chord structures, chord progressions and permanent interchangeability of major-minor in the course of *Four tone poems*, I will determine its tonality as A without major or minor. All of the mentioned factors contribute to and eventually result in the fusion of major and minor. The 1st poem begins in a-minor but ends in A-major, the 2nd and the 3rd are in A-major, while in the course of the 4th, the interchangeability is constant, even intensified, particularly at its end where we hear T and t simultaneously. However, the major T chord prevails because t minor comes from the bass line, where the second and third notes of melodic figure are in fact passing notes, not the chord base (cf. example 3).

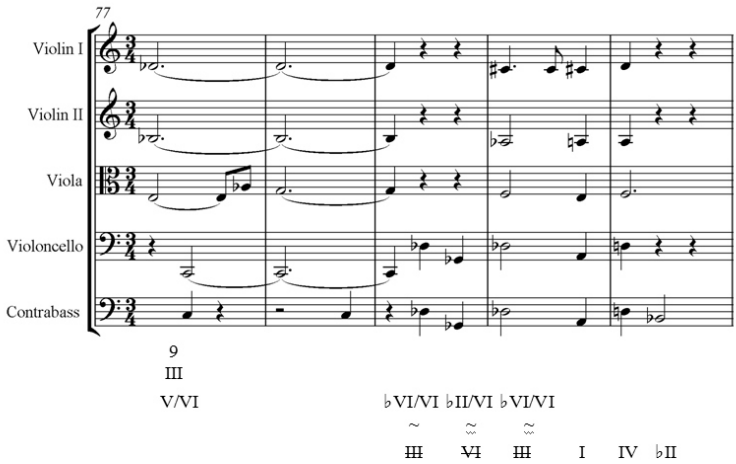
In determining the tonal centre mode with regard to harmonic punctuation, major-minor distinction is introduced by, in Riemannian terms, the first plain minor cadence V-IV-I (m. 7–8), followed by an IAC (imperfect authentic cadence) although with v-minor (m. 9–10), from where in the third cadential progression, introduced in the course of the extension, v (fifth minor) before the I degree is not interpreted

as connection which produces PAC or IAC, but as a mere neighbouring harmony within the plain minor cadence V-IV-I (cf. example 4).

If we consider only the structural frame of *Four tone poems*, the beginning and the end of the 1st poem in succession with the begining and the final plagal cadence at the end of the 4th poem could wrongly lead us to perceive the preponderance of a-minor in the cycle, not because of the chord structures but because of their progressions. Such determination of tonality would overlook the diverse harmonic motions of the piece.

The close links, originating from the harmonic syntax construction, are readily noticeable between the regions, whether they belong to the same or different functions. In the latter case, the distribution of the functions frequently coincides with the functional cycle order T-S-D-T and its transposition at any degree. Consequently, complementary rather than contrasting relations between the units at all structural levels are evident in the whole cycle and in each poem separately.

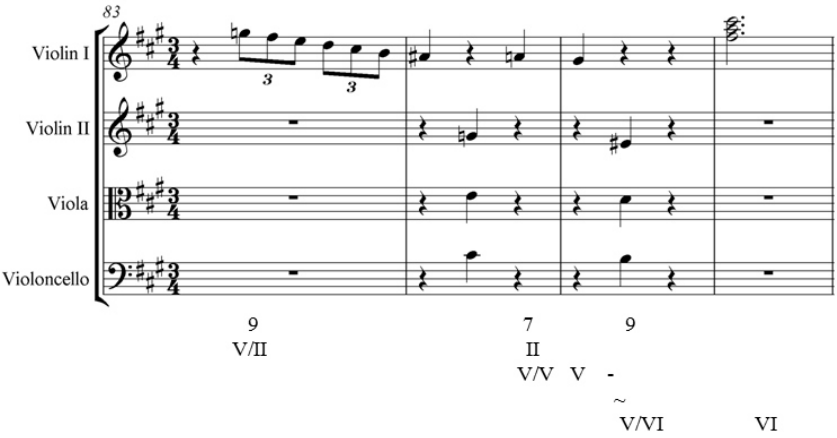
The 1st poem, being based on T region, is the most homogenous since all chords and harmonic progressions, even the substitutes, are actually subordinated and oriented to the confirmation of the tonic region. Furthermore, the enharmonic reinterpretation in measures 77–81:



Example 5: 1st poem, m. 77-81.

that stands out in prevailing diatonic progressons, also reconciles the flat and sharp chords making a kind of passage between ♭S and its S (S♭S) and M#. Simultaneously, these progressions equally emphasize the passage from S function towards D-T. Contrary to this occurence, the establishment of different regions and modifications of directions of harmonic progressions are relatively frequent within the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th poem. In the 2nd poem the changes of regions are accorded with changes of sections, except in the section a of the middle part B which starts in the sm region and ends in confirming T with IAC. In the course of the 3rd poem, modifications of directions are more frequent even within the sections and the contrast between sharp and flat regions and chords is underlined (for example: m or III# and III♭ within m prolongation).

The enharmonicism is of particular significance in the 2nd poem. I will illustrate it with one example: in m. 83–86



Example 6: 2nd poem, m. 83–86.

the leading tone chord – D9 without its root – determined as such by the preceding progressions, in light of its resolution is enharmonically reinterpreted as the secondary leading tone chord – secondary D9 without its root – of sm, precisely of the VI degree whereby sm like-

wise affirms T function. The fact that any secondary representative affirms tonal centre equally as the main degrees (I, IV, V) proves the denial of the hierarchy between the main and the secondary functional representatives .

The main functional representative can be subordinated to its own secondary representative (that is: T as SM of its m, or S as M of its sm or IV as III of II) depending on the context of successions of harmonic progressions and their directions. These relations are of the same kind as the ones of paradigmatic cadential progressions, considered exclusively in terms of the main representatives, where T is either D of S or S of D.

The displacements of the articulatory pillars both from T to S and D and from main to secondary degrees intensify centrifugal tendency which does not destabilize, but on the contrary, confirms the tonal centre T. Depending on duration of the displacements, the region other than T can be established even without cadential progressions. Let us examine just one of the many examples. Considering the chord structures, the ascending progressions sm-s-Np, or ♭SM of s, are based on chromatic and diatonic third relations from which s is perceived as sm of sm. On the other hand, at the end of the 1st and the beginning of the 2nd poem, sm is surrounded by two progressions: preceding D-sm and the following sm-s. In this context bifunctionality of sm is particulary emphasized. According to the preceding progression, sm is resolution instead of T, and in relation to the following progression, sm is m of s.

Despite the generally prevailing meaning of sm as T representative, this succession underlines its reorientation toward S. The course of reorientation is instantly interrupted by HC which should have redirected the harmonic motion toward T confirmation. Instead, the extension that comes immediately after HC redirects the harmonic motion again towards S which is confirmed by the following section starting with dor (cf. example 7, 7a, 7b).

From here arises the following reinterpretation of the elaborated succession: instead of D, we hear it as S of dor followed by D of dor and dor (m. 10–12, p. 16). The bass line, namely the roots of the progression of the first 3 chords produces the chord of augmented 5 - f#-

d-b♭ which implicates m♭ of D or the s of s, that is g-minor chord as resolution, while in relation to the 1st chord of the following section, b-minor chord, the considered chord f#-d-b♭ can be enharmonically reinterpreted as f#-d-a# requiring the resolution that follows. The identical procedure is demonstrated by the following example. The succession of chords b-g-e♭, implicates m♭ or s of ss as its expected resolution.

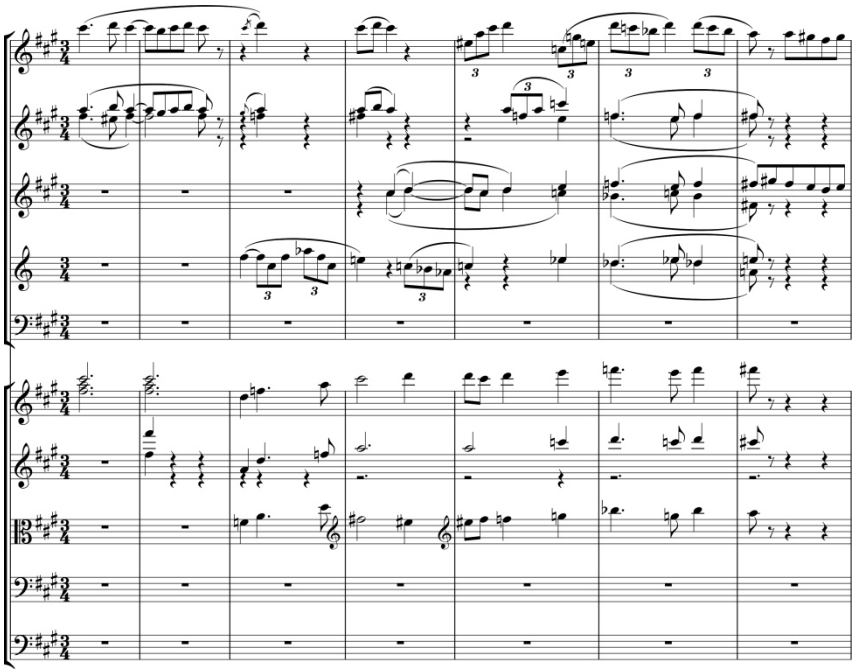
Nevertheless, since the succession is followed by D, the resolution requires its enharmonic reinterpretation as: b-g-d#. This enharmonic modification highlights the relation between major 3 and diminished 4. Subsequently, it illuminates the relation between two chromatic variants of one chord, for example e♭ and e, as well as chromatic relation between the chord which would have been the resolution of augmented fifth, for example c-minor in relation to e♭ augmented fifth chord and the chord which is the actual resolution, e minor, of this diminished 4. I could add, if the last chord is minor, we would have a chromatic relation, but if it is a major variant, we could perceive the disjunct relation, for exemple c-minor and E-major.

The striking enharmonic changes, expressed in more explicit manner, which result from the relation between the elements of chords and chord progressions from one side and the elements of bass melodic line from the other, are presented in example 8 (cf. example 8).

Note that the twofold meaning of the chord from measure 54 justifies the second possibility from the previous example (m. 12–24). Independently of the melodic lines, *Four tone poems* also involves other enharmonic reinterpretations originating from the chords themselves and their connections in respect of what precedes and succeeds them. These enharmonic homonyms reflect both classical unquestionable T confirmation and, at the same time, romantic characteristic based on the third relations – T and its sm and m.

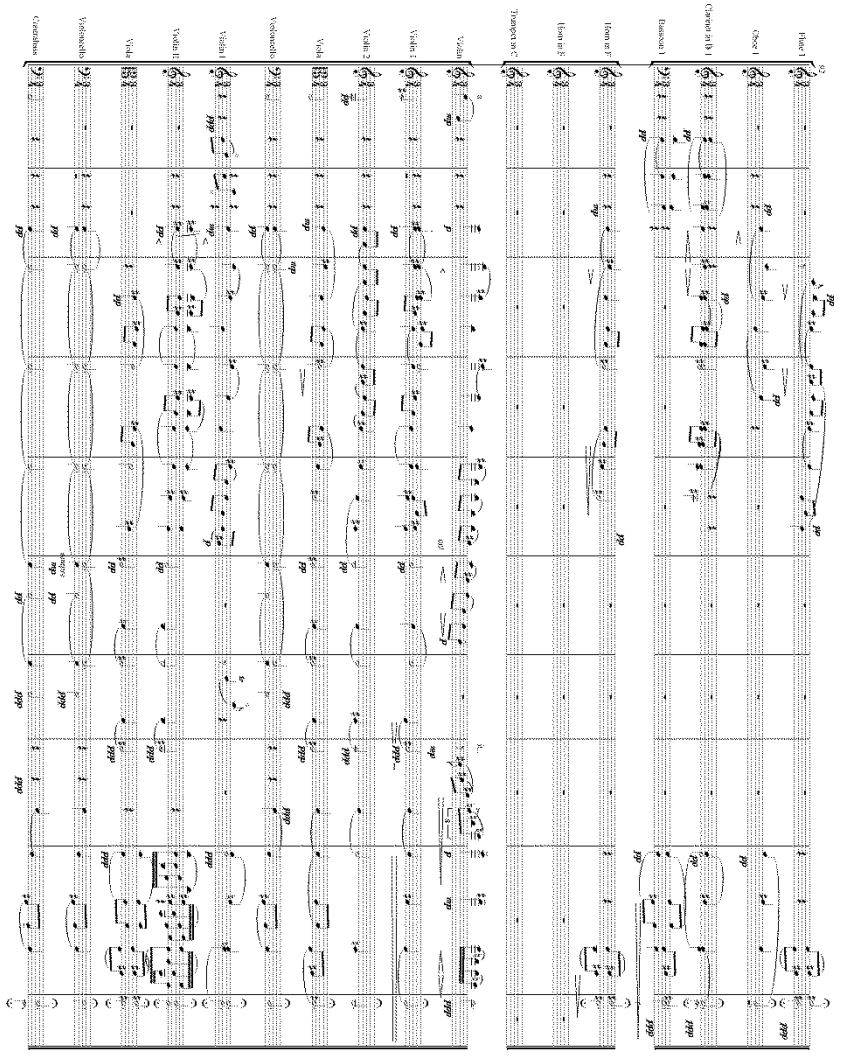
Despite the harmonic and structural elements' diversity of the piece, the continuity is its prevailing constructive principle rather than juxtaposition. The already mentioned equality between I, IV, V and all secondary degrees and their chromatic sharp and flat variants is also transferred to any chord and/or its region, not only to their D and S but also to their II, III, VI, VII and their substitutes. However, all

these extensions do not deny tonality. I will dare to go a step further claiming that even what Schoenberg referred to as vagrant harmonies[5] are to be perceived as chords and regions closely or remotely related with the tonal centre or at least with some of the three harmonic functions.

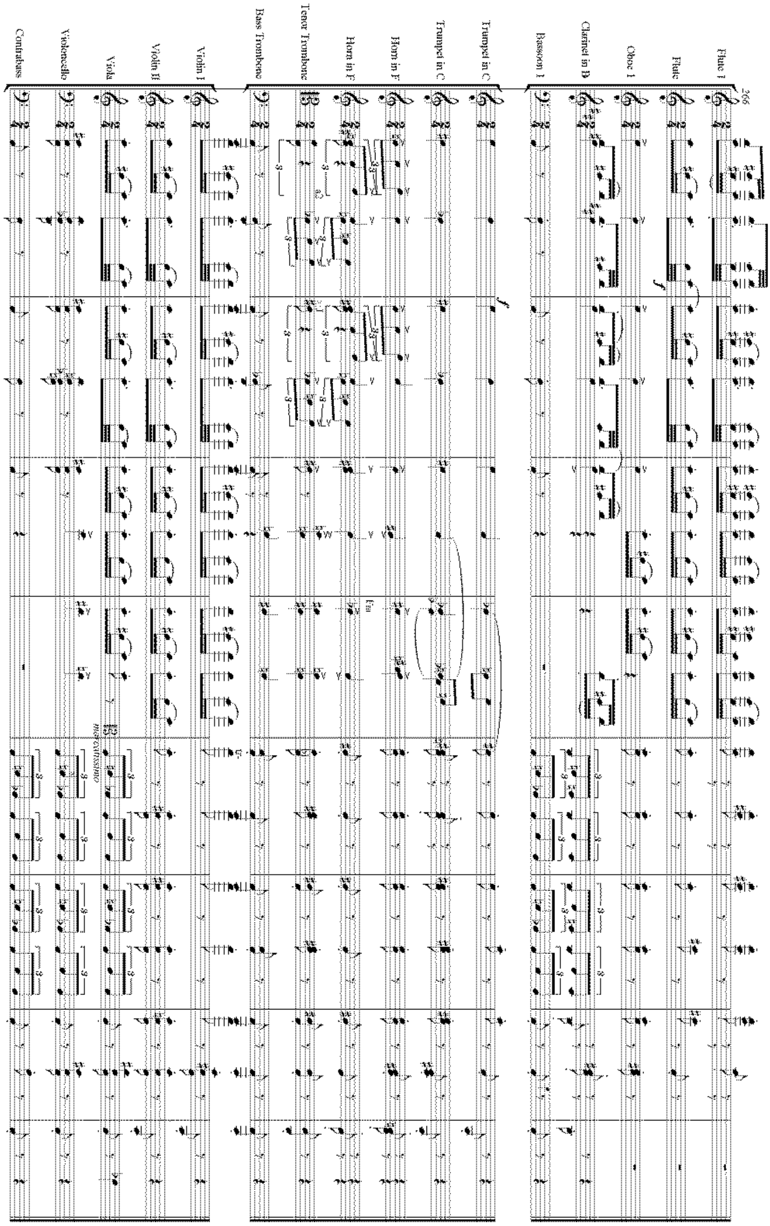


Example 2a: 2nd poem, m. 1–7.

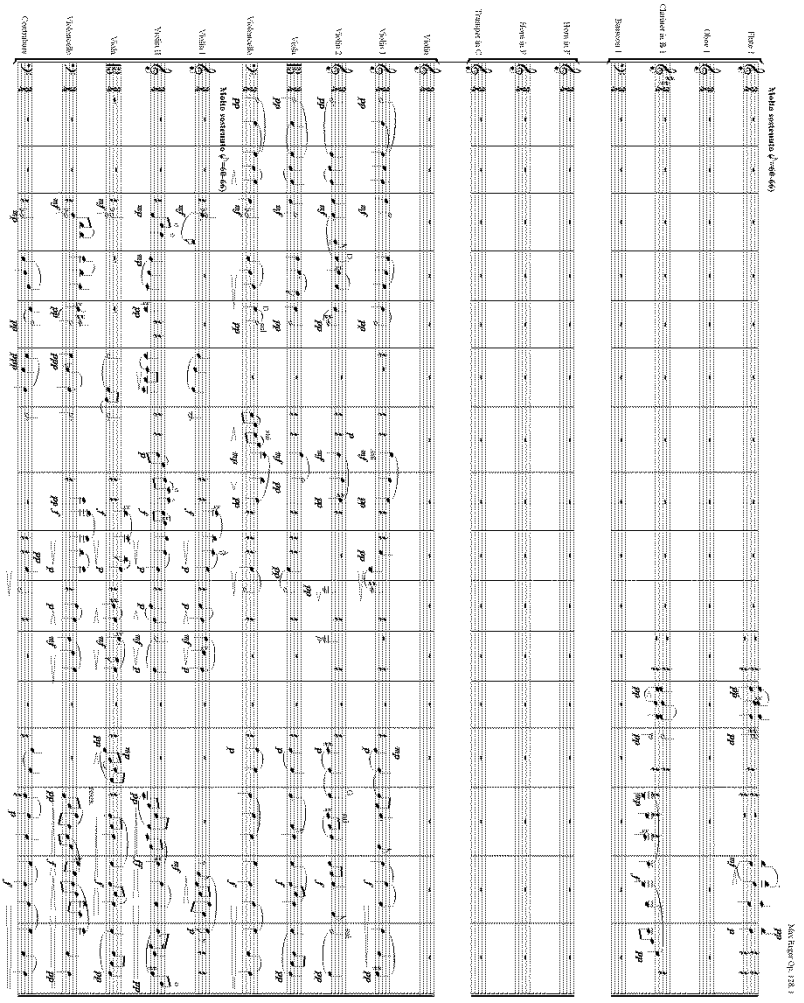
5 Arnold Schoenberg, *Structural Functions of Harmony*, New York 1969, 44.



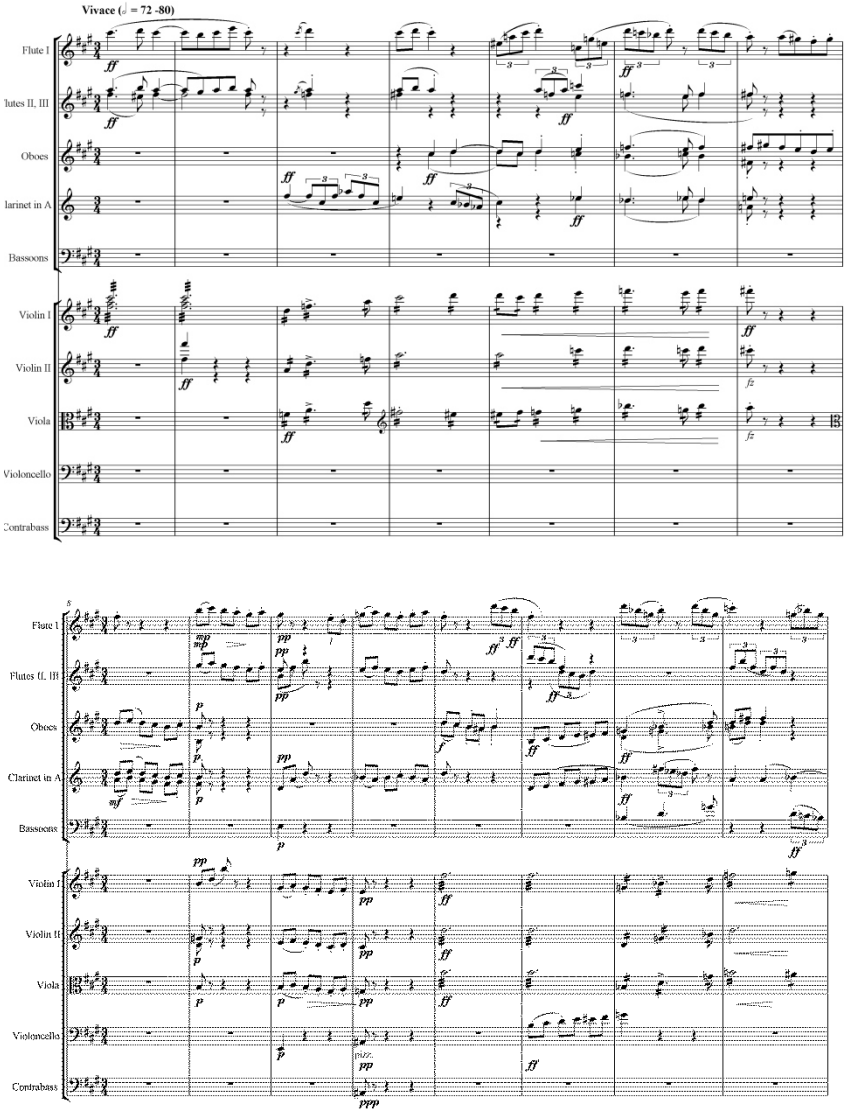
Example 2: 1st poem, m. 92–101.



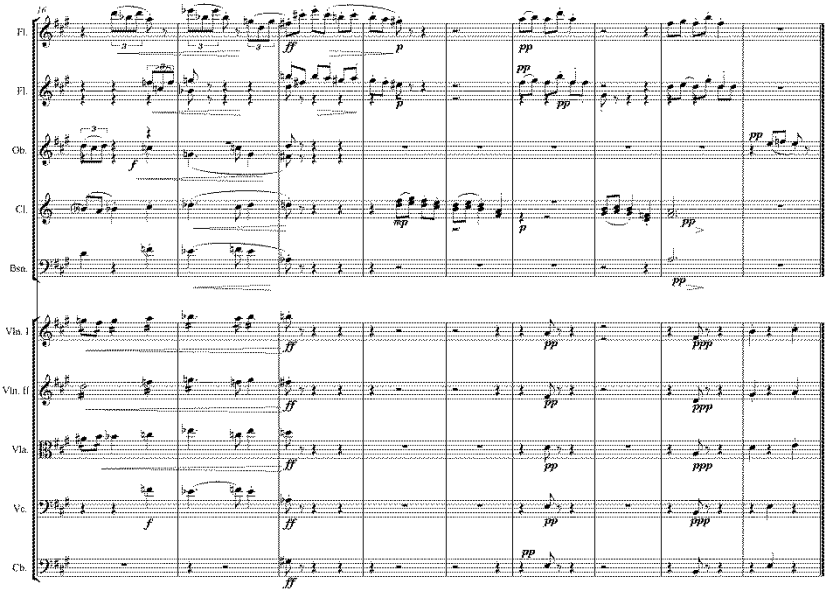
Example 3: 4th poem, m. 266 until the end.



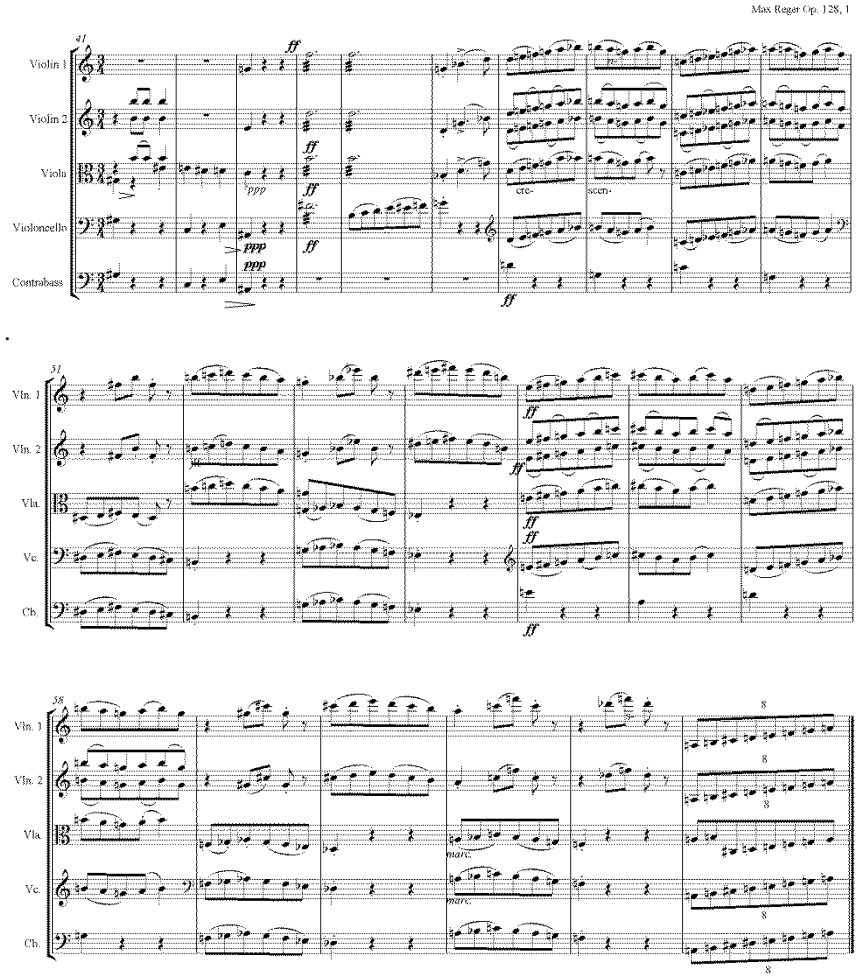
Example 4: 1st poem, m. 1–16.



Example 7, 7a: 2nd poem, m. 1–24.



Example 7b: 2nd poem, m. 1–24.



Example 8: 2nd poem, m. 49–63.

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