Katarina Markovic: The Strength of the Weak in Music. Power Structures and their Subversion
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The Strength of the Weak in Music

Power Structures and their Subversion

The two definitions of ›Power‹ that come out of the Oxford English Dictionary, namely one which focuses on the ability, capacity, empowerment of a subject, and another which focuses on the act of submission, limitation of a subject's power, outline the essential and necessary dialectic inherent in the concept of power.[1] Is it even possible to limit the definition of power only to its first, expanding, liberating, ascending meaning, without the inclusion of the elements which have been expanded upon, repressed and pushed down by the ascendancy, liberation, and ascension of the powerful?

Power can be seen therefore as a complex process in which the hierarchical elements act according to a mutually agreed upon, albeit tacit relationship. If we take the cue from Thomas Jefferson's statement in the Declaration of Independence of 1776 that the governments exist by the consent of the governed we can observe a similar pattern of consensus in any functioning government, be it in a literal political sense, or in a more metaphorical sense such as any functioning, multi-part entity such as social structures or even artworks. That pattern involves a certain social contract between the rulers and the ruled, the strong and the weak, which may not be a conscious, public agreement, but one whose role-distribution is tacitly accepted by both sides.

Paradoxically, a relativity of psychological hierarchy is inherent in this relationship – the strong, while regarding the weak with contempt never-

[1] Def.: 1. Ability to act or affect something strongly; physical or mental strength; might; vigour, energy; effectiveness. 2. Control or authority over others; dominion, rule; government, command, sway; capacity to direct or influence the behavior of others; personal or social influence. In: *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://www.oed.com. Accessed on 6 / 10 / 2007.

theless fear them, while the weak, envying and obeying the strong simultaneously threaten them. The compliance of the weak is therefore absolutely necessary for the maintenance of the body of the government. What happens then, when this delicate balance is disrupted – when the weak stop supporting this contract and start subverting and disrupting the balance, starting with withdrawal, refusal to participate to subversion, rebellion and overturning of the powerful? A collapse of the hierarchical system ensues, followed often by a state of chaos and confusion, but in the process of stabilization a new re-ordering of the constitutive elements establishes a new tenable hierarchy of power.

Looking at music, which in itself is part of a wider system of power relationships within a society – it is often relegated to a second-citizen position even in comparison to other arts (literature, theater, visual arts), and especially neglected in the contemporary mass-media and instant-gratification consumer society –, we can observe the same patterns of government, as Jefferson defined it on a number of different levels. The music theorist Robert Hatten looks at music through a semiotic framework of binary oppositions, where stylistic choices either support or subvert a dominant stylistic type.[2] Stylistic succession – from medieval, renaissance, baroque etc. – may be viewed therefore as a continuous dialectic pattern of establishing the ›normal‹, dominant trope and its subversion by the weaker, anomalous, deflecting element.

Similarly, we can observe the deceptiveness of the concepts of strength and weakness in music through the perspective of the redistribution of the dominating genres through music history, where the once-dominant sacred genres such as the mass and the motet, were replaced by secular genres such as madrigals, opera, symphony, or where the absolute social and economic dominance of so-called ›high‹ or elite musical genres was slowly first infiltrated and then relativized by the so-called ›low‹ or popular musical genres. Both of these aspects of music, along together with the question of performing mediums, are, of course, directly dependent on broader, extra-musical considerations such as the particular social, political, historical, religious, economic, ideological, and broader cultural circumstances surrounding the musical work in question, the role of music

[2] Hatten, Robert: *»Metaphor ›In‹ Music«*. In: *Musical signification: Essays in the semiotic theory and analysis of music*, editied by Eero Tarasti, Berlin 1995, S. 373–391.

within the given society, issues of patronage, reception and consumption, as well as educational models, institutional and organizational structures and gender roles.

The inner realm of music, its web of interconnected elements which make up its expressive language, is perhaps harder to immediately comprehend in terms of a metaphorical government structure. Listening to a piece of music, once we manage to distance ourselves from all the extra-musical circumstances, it might appear that in the inner workings of this organism a perfect balance, even an utopian egalitarian democracy exists among its constitutive parts and contributes to the smooth narrative which leads us through the musical narratives of our favorite compositions.

This impression, however, could not be further away from the actual state of affairs. A clear and traditionally established hierarchy exists even between what Wilson Coker categorizes as ›congeneric‹ and ›extrageneric‹ types of musical meanings, where until the end of the 19th century the only acceptable inquiry into music was the congeneric one, which examines the concrete elements of melodic, rhythmic, and formal elements, and where attempts at extrageneric approach, or interpretations of musical meaning, became more relevant only with Hermann Kretschmar's application of hermeneutics to musical analysis.[3] And further, the persistent hierarchical distribution of power certainly exists within each of these respective types of musical meaning.

Looking at the congeneric aspect, namely the relationship between parts of a given medium – in this case within a musical composition – we are dealing with power-structures within its formal structure (the hierarchy between thematic and developmental and transitory sections of sonata form for example) or the hierarchical order of elements of syntax (the rules of harmonic progressions, scalar patterns, musical motives, sentences, periods, and other specific musical elements). Even within these particular musical elements, for example rhythm, there exists a differentiation between, for example, strong downbeats and weak upbeats of a bar, or in the case of harmony – strong consonant and weak dissonant sonorities, or within a scale of strong tonic and dominant pitches and weak subdominant or leading-tone pitches and functions. It is within this realm that perhaps the most interesting upheavals and revolutions have happened in the musical

[3] Coker, Wilson: *Music and Meaning*, New York 1972, S. 61.

world, which have conversely shaped the dramatically changing affective character of music in the last 150 years. In the following section of this paper, I will discuss several examples where we can observe the changing roles of power in music and examine the strength (or weakness) of deeply ingrained ideas about these categories.

The traditionally strong musical elements, the ones which were designated to carry the basic content of the musical work, were until the 19th century melody, rhythm, harmony and certain selected portions of the performing ensemble (namely melody-carrying string and woodwind instruments). The main theme of a ›strong‹ musical work, for example a symphony by Mozart or Beethoven, will usually have a very prominent, clear, memorable melody in the violin or oboe for example, developed in various ways throughout the musical work. It will often be rhythmically well-defined with a clear distinction between the strong downbeats and weak upbeats of the measure, and it will be syntactically well-defined with a harmonic progression which culminates with a full authentic cadence (IV – V – I) aligning itself with the tonic on the downbeat and the melody reaching scale degree 1. Throughout the work, whatever happens to the thematic content of the work will be primarily dealt with within these main elements, while the others, the ›secondary‹ ones such as dynamics, timbre, texture, articulation, tempo, will be there to support and enable the working of the first-tier elements. The rulers – melody, harmony, rhythm – therefore exert their power and successfully lead the government of the musical work only with the consensus, the informal contract that they have with the secondary, supporting elements, which can enhance and support their aims.

This kind of musical work exists as a stable system within which even the most unstable human emotions can be expressed, such as was the case with Beethoven's symphony no. 3, the Eroica. These elements participate in the creation of the other layer of musical meaning, namely the ›extrageneric‹ one, in which we can infer references to non-musical events, objects, moods, ideas, processes etc. Therefore, observing and interpreting the interrelationship between the specific musical elements within a musical work may indicate certain patterns of the music's ›behavior‹ – its gestures, its dramatic curbs, its narrative strategies. The development of the 19th century symphony, for example, was deeply affected by the legacy of the

Beethovenian hero-narrative, where the hero (the theme from the beginning of the piece) is faced with an apparently unsurmountable assault of obstacles and only through exhausting battles where its melodic, rhythmic and harmonic organism is almost annihilated only to be resurrected with the sheer will power of these same dominating elements (the uniqueness of the melodic-motivic content, the persistance of a harmonic progression and the relentlessness of a rhythmic figure). In this narrative pattern, not only is there a hierarchy among the innermost elements of music which bring forth the ›story‹, but the overall dramatic curb reflects the idea of the strength of the individual's will and a clear power-struggle between the ›hero‹ and his adversaries, where the hero emerges victorious.[4]

This narrative pattern, as well as its constitutive distribution of inner musical hierarchies started falling apart already in the early 19th century with composers such as Schubert and Chopin, often labeled ›weak‹ or ›effeminate‹ in the contemporaneous circles of music criticism exactly because of their probing of the traditional hierarchical congeneric relationships.[5] The music theorist Edward T. Cone in his article Schubert's Promissory Note describes one such example, where a seemingly insignificant anomaly – an unresolved E natural within a stable A-flat major context – at first ignored, treated as a weak, foreign element, slowly usurps the tonal stability of the piece, taking completely over and eventually dominating its middle section.[6] The original A-flat is now reinterpreted and reduced to a mere enharmonic G-sharp, the third degree of the newly established reign of E-major. The attempt to ›tame‹ it, or regulate it comes too late – when we hear the E natural again within the A-flat major context in m. 62, there is an attempt to assimilate it into the home key, but only then does it become clear that the subverting effect of this pitch has become inescapable

[4] For more detailed studies of the Beethovenian hero-narrative see: Bonds, Mark Evan: *After Beethoven. Imperatives of Originality in the Symphony.* Cambridge 1996, Brinkmann, Reinhold: *›In the Time(s) of the Eroica.‹* In: *Beethoven and His World*, editied by Burnham, Scott and Steinberg, Michael P., Princeton 2000, S. 1–27, and especially, Burnham, Scott: *Beethoven Hero.* Princeton 1995 and Comini, Alessandra: *The Changing Image of Beethoven. A Study in Mythmaking.* New York 1987.

[5] See Kallberg, Jeffrey: *Chopin at the Boundaries. Sex, History, and Musical Genre.* Cambridge 1996.

[6] Cone, Edward T.: *›Schubert's Promissory Note. An Exercise in Musical Hermeneutics.‹* In: *19th Century Music*, Vol. 5, no. 3 (Spring 1982), S. 233–241.

and it bursts out with a tremendous force, revealing itself as basically inimical to its surrounding, which it proceeds to demolish. (see example no. 1 in the Appendix)

A step further is taken by Gustav Mahler, the ultimate outsider, the in vain converted Jew in a Germanically and anti-semitically minded finde-siècle Viennese intellectual climate always labeled ›weak‹, ›sickly‹, ›nervous‹, unstable, confusing, impure (both stylistically and racially) by his Viennese critics, even when he succeeded with Beethovenian, Promethean will power to achieve positions of power and success that no other Jew had in his time. Mahler challenges the power-relationships in music on a number of different levels.

Looking at his symphonic style, Theodor W. Adorno among other observations emphasizes the ›collapsing tendency‹ of Mahler's musical prose.[7] This collapsing tendency can perhaps most poignantly be viewed in the so-called *Durchbruch* gestures, which exist in almost everyone of his symphonies. The *Durchbruch* in Mahler's symphonies occurs usually in culminating points of the musical development, often close to the expected point of the recapitulation of the main thematic material, where a very long dominant pedal accompanied with motivic and rhythmic implications and a general build-up of tension strongly points towards a monumental arrival of the tonic key and the return of the main theme. What occurs instead, however, is something completely unexpected – there is a harmonic anomaly, an explosive subversion of the expected resolution (often by a leap and an extremely dissonant harmony instead of a stable, consonant tonic chord), followed by a melodic and rhythmic fragmentation, dying out of all the announced elements of musical resolution and an overall nihilistic atmosphere. This gesture in some cases occurs several times, such as in his First and Second Symphonies, and even across the space of several movements, where each time this disruptive explosion occurs, there is the same process of tension build-up, hope, expectation and a sudden reversal, sabotage, disappointment and annihilation which leads into a new state of calmness and stillness.

Even though Adorno was the first modern scholar to discuss this gesture and to relate it to Mahler, this particular musical situation originates

[7] Adorno, Theodor W.: *Mahler. A Musical Physiognomy*, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Chicago 1971.

with Beethoven, and his aforementioned symphony *Eroica*. Here, after the tremendous dissonances and build-up of tension in the development section of the first movement, often described by contemporaneous writers such as E.T.A. Hoffmann or Griepenkerl as apocalyptic biblical scenes, or horrors of the battlefield, the crash that ensues in fact suddenly opens up the door for a new world – a world of revelation and a heavenly glimpse into the realm of the absolute.[8] In the Beethovenian *Durchbruch* narrative (and even the term *Durchbruch* appears in 19th century criticism tied to this particular moment)9, the suffering and sacrifice of the hero are not in vain – through sheer will power he overcomes his enemies, and even in death attains transcendence.

Mahler's *Durchbruch*, which repeatedly fails, and which is ultimately shown as the completely wrong way into transcendence, however, points in a very different direction, one that shows the untenability of the Beethovenian hero narrative in the context of late-19th-century symphony, especially one written by the eternal outsider, forever intruder. In the Mahlerian symphonic dramaturgy, the forceful will power of the Durchbruch gesture, the affirmation of the personal strength and assembly of powers, appears as the representative of the destructive force, one which will open the wrong door behind which there is basically nothing – where all the constituent elements of the symphony will be destroyed. It will be only after repeated failures, and the acceptance of one's position of weakness, of inferiority, of powerlessness, that the entrance into the higher realm will be open.

Mahler dramatizes this narrative quite clearly in his Second Symphony, where in the fourth movement he even includes a brief vocal dialogue between the ›hero‹ and an angel, who blocks his way to god. The hero is resolute that he is from god and he will return to god and he will not allow the angel to block his way, only to be faced with the futility of that position

[8] Bekker, Paul: *Beethoven*. Berlin 1912, Griepenkerl, Wolfgang Robert: *Das Musikfest oder Die Beethovener*. Braunschweig 1841, Hoffmann, E.T.A.: *›Old and New Church Music.‹* In: *E.T.A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings. Kreisleriana, the Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism,* edited by David Charlton, Cambridge (1814) 1989, S. 351–376.

[9] For more on this see Markovic-Stokes, Katarina: *›The World of Mahler's Early Symphonies. From Idea to Form.‹*, (Ph.D., Brandeis University, 2004) and *›To Interpret or to Follow? Mahler's Beethoven Retuschen and the Romantic Critical Tradition.‹* In: *Beethoven Forum 11*, no. 1 (2004), S. 1–40.

in the fifth movement, where a series of failed *Durchbruch* gestures brings the symphony to a state of complete disarray. It is only after all has been destroyed, all has been abandoned and the crushed soul still has only the power to believe (the sole ›surviving‹ thematic material of the symphony being the theme associated with the text ›*Glaube*‹), that quietly and almost surprisingly the musical elements finally align, all becomes resolved and transcendence is finally granted (see example 2 in the Appendix, which is an outline of thematic and tonal areas of the Finale of the Second Symphony). Granted – not won, not grabbed from the enemy, not overtaken, but granted after accepting humiliation of failure, after realizing and embracing one's own weakness. This reversal of power structures and narrative pattern in the symphonic genre is mirrored in Mahler's relationship as a perfomer to Beethoven as a creator. The performer / creator relationship is another interesting power-play which has been challenged the most through music history.

Starting from the Middle Ages, when the creator hid behind the label ›Anonymous‹, through the Renaissance and Baroque, where improvisation and freedom of the performer was an essential part of the musical creative process, the roles have changed several times culminating in the late Classical and early Romantic period, where the cult of the creator-genius was such that the performers were reduced to their mere mouthpieces. The situation starts changing, according to Wagner, with Liszt, who was the first performer who at each performance ›created anew‹ and not merely reproduced the musical old work.[10] This new approach enabled Wagner to pronounce that he had to make certain critical adjustments to Beethoven's 9th symphony, in order for it to reach its audience in the fullest intention of its creator.[11] Of course, the question is here who Wagner considers as the ›real‹ creator of the 9th – Beethoven, or himself. This, in turn gave Mahler good arguments to defend himself against the vicious attacks that ensued when he radically intervened into the scores of Beethoven's symphonies, overtures and the opera *Fidelio*, sometimes dramatically increasing the size of the orchestra, adding new instrumental lines, re-writing existing ones,

[10] Wagner, Richard: ›*Beethoven.*‹ In: *Wagner's Prose Works*, edited by Ellis, William Ashton, New York (1870) 1966, S. 57 – 126.

[11] Wagner, Richard: ›*On Performing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.*‹ In: *Three Wagner Essays*, edited by Jacobs, Robert L., London (1873) 1979, S. 97 – 123.

adding thousands of dynamic, agogic, articulation markings, even deleting entire sections of certain movements.

Mahler's reevaluation of such powerful Beethovenian symphonic conventions, both creative and interpretive, points to a general attitude of subversion, which he had toward authority, an attitude which may be observed in the first moments of the disruption of the social contract between the powerful and the weak. Paradoxically, at the time of these Beethoven performances and the writing of his early symphonies, when in his creative output as a conductor and a composer he was actively undermining and redefining the concept of power and weakness in music, his biography was moving along an opposite trajectory. Until the first years of the 20th century, and especially around 1897/8 it appeared that indeed the Beethoven hero narrative was applicable to Mahler's own life – against all odds he succeeded to became one of the most powerful forces in the European musical world, and all that primarily through enormous energy and will power.

At this point we may reflect back of Oscar Wilde's comment that ›Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.‹ It was only after musically explicating the untenability of the Beethovenian hero narrative for his own symphonic vision, that Mahler's life crashed in a series of *Durchbruch*-like gestures – the death of his daughter, the discovery of a dangerous and almost crippling heart-condition, his forced expulsion from the Vienna Hofoper, humiliation and rejection by the Viennese critics and musical establishment, repeated failures of his compositions, and finally a tortured return, in a state of admitted failure and weakness to the city that destroyed him with the sole purpose of dying in it.

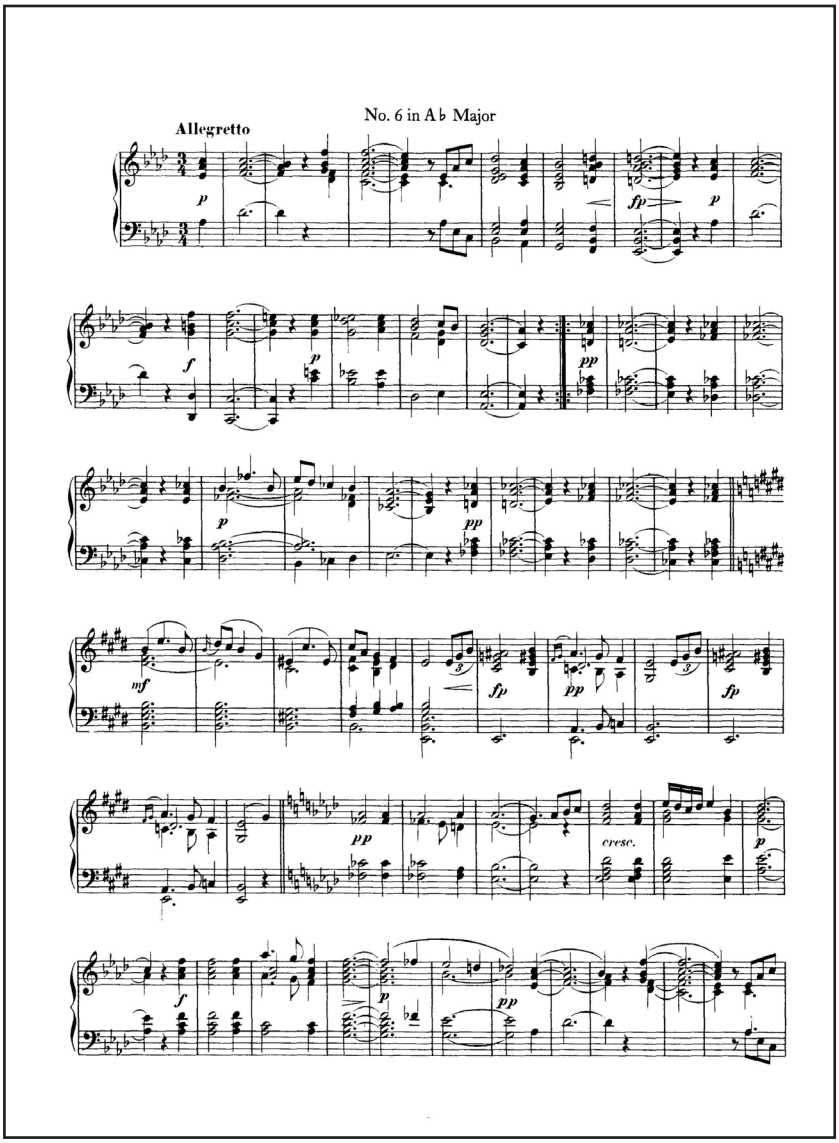
Observing all this was Arnold Schoenberg, another in-vain-converted Jew, who took the cue from Mahler, especially his late pieces such as *Der Abschied* from *Das Lied von der Erde*, and embarked on a process of radical severing of relations between the ruled and the rulers in music. His emancipation of the dissonance was the first step towards a vision of an utopian, democratic musical organism, where all the different elements of the musical language, the ones constituting the congeneric layer of meaning, stand in equality. Before accomplishing that in his idea of the 12-tone system, where all the pitches of a chromatic scale have equal importance and equally contribute to the construction of musical material, he first disrupted the accepted hierarchy of musical elements on a broader level

through his concept of Klangfarbenmelodie. In his short orchestral piece Farben, op. 16 no. 3, Schoenberg relegates the traditionally strong elements such as melody, harmony and rhythm to an almost insignificant role, ceding instead the power to the traditionally overlooked, supportive elements such as orchestral timbre, texture, dynamic, density, articulation. This approach culminates in Ligeti's textural and micropolyphonic music, where not a clear melodic, rhythmic, harmonic progression of thematic material, but the most minute fluctuations of density, texture, register, and intensity create the musical flow.

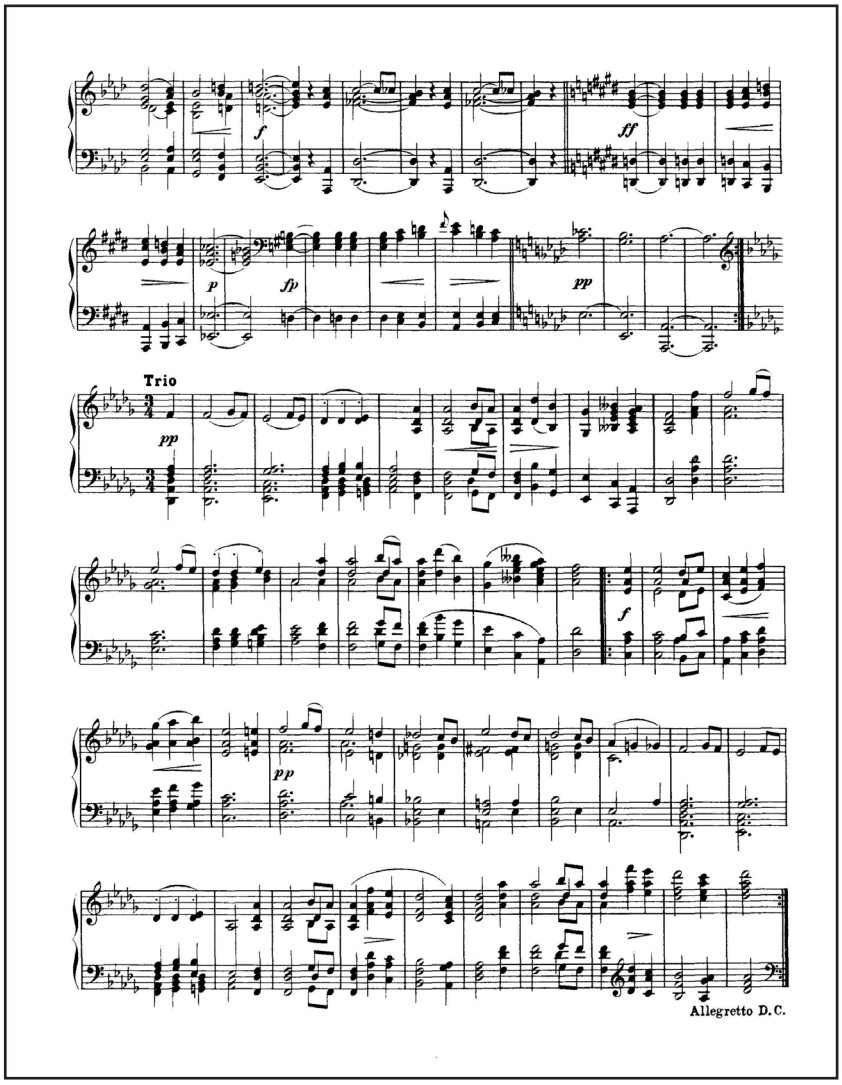
We have seen therefore that the concepts of ›weak‹ and ›strong‹ in music have undergone considerable transformations and even reversals in the course of music and cultural history: the understanding and status of consonances and dissonances, cadences, tonality, hierarchy of musical elements in the creation of musical expression – all these aspects of a musical work have seen radical re-definitions in the period between Perotin and Ligeti.

However, even if our time has overcome in many ways the traditional expectation of a ›strong‹ musical narrative and has accepted the static planes of textural music and minimalism, deeply ingrained ideas about the expectation-realization sequence in music still affect our characterization of, for example, Beethoven as ›strong‹ and Mahler as ›weak‹. But can this be re-examined? Can there be a perspective in which the relentless pounding of dominant-tonic sequences in the 5th Symphony is seen as a sign of frantic weakness, and the desolate collapses of Mahler's *Durchbruch* as the superior resignation of a strong spirit in the face of the banality of the world's course? Taking the lead from Adorno's observation about the shattered illusion of a happy-ending in Mahler's symphonies, we can look at Mahler's mission as one of uncompromising truth, where one embraces one's status of the weak, the rejected, the eternal outsider and wanderer through the hierarchy of the mainstream. Through the manifest appearance of this image at the surface of one's expression, as is so noticeable in Mahler's music, one refuses to settle, to conceal, to create happy-endings to unhappy lives. In such a world, it is ›the minority‹, either as an individual or as a group or even as an idea – it can be Mahler in fin-de-siècle Austria-Hungary; it can be the Roma people in the Balkans; it can be art itself in the commercially and mass-media-driven cultural climate of con-

temporary Western civilization—that is the sole carrier of hope for truth within the senseless machinery of society.



Appendix: Example no. 1: Franz Schubert, Moment Musical op. 94 no. 6



Example no. 2: Mahler, Symphony No. 2, V, formal and thematic layout.

Section	Tonal area	Thematic content
I Exposition (mm. 1-193)	C ped.	*** Durchbruch (C ped + Bb minor) (**From Scherzo, mm. 465ff **)
	C/c	Rufer (+fragmented material and horn theme), third-related chords
	f/F/f	Dies Irae (transformed) + Resurrection theme (m. 70) + Glory (m. 78) + Rufer (mm. 78+84)
	bflat/f	Glaube (m. 97), chromatic rises, shifts upward, bridge to Db; turning point in the exposition
	Db/f/ C/c	Dies Irae (m. 142, Trombones) + Resurrection (m. 151) + Glory (m. 162), Failed "apotheosis" (mm. 167-173), Rufer (m. 174); collapses and rises

II Development (mm. 194-417)	f	March music: trivial, grotesque (m. 194)
	b-flat	Dies Irae – grotesque (m. 210)
	F	Dies Irae march (mm.220ff) ostinato in strings + Resurrection theme (Tr., m. 229) + (Ab) + bells (mm. 248ff)
	Bb	Dies Irae (mm. 263ff.) grotesque, chromatic ascents, tritone emphasis (m. 275) C# ped. leading into
	F	Dies Irae (from 1st mvt.) + Resurrection (m. 297) – grotesque, trivial
	Db	Sterben Leben (m. 301ff, winds + Tr.) + Resurrection
	Eb minor	*** Durchbruch (m. 310), (** From 1st mvt., mm.291**), (F ped+ bflat minor + E) going into Eb minor and Bbb major
	F ped. (f minor)	Glaube (m. 325), fails, Intensification. Layering (m. 343): 1) Glaube Fl.+ Ob. (dies out) Db
	Db	2) Trumpet fanfares, coming closer (4x) Eb, Db Trivial 3) Glaube (becoming trivial) Vc.+Fg; Waltz-like melody in Vn (trivial) 4) f chord ped. in strings, Glaube (m. 380) Cb.+ Cfg: forceful
	Gb	Intensification of Glaube (m. 395) tritone (Gb-C Trombone), going towards Gb major

III (Recapitulation mm. 418-764)	C# ped Db ped. Gb/ Db ped. Gb bflat minor f ped/ bflat min. Ab Eb dominant Eb major	1) ***Durchbruch (m. 402) (** From Scherzo, mm. 465, and Finale beginning, 1/2 step **) C sharp ped + B minor chord. Dies Irae (Trombone) last time 2) Ascension theme (m. 418), gradual introduction of Resurrection theme Der Grosse Apell (m. 448) 4 trumpets + Rufer (Cor.) + Nightingale (Picc., modal, V°: e natural, mystical) ends on C#/Db – G#/Ab) CHOIR: 1)Resurrection: Aufersteh'n (m. 472) (Db becomes the dominant) + Glory (m. 493); mm. 493ff: Sterben Leben (Ascension theme), Rufer (Cor. in major) goes into Resurrection theme, 2) Glaube (m. 560) Mahler's text, Alt solo, 3) Resurrection (m. 618) Choir "Was entstanden ist, das muss vergehen" "Hör' auf zu beben!" "Bereite dich zu leben" (m. 656) "Mit Flügeln die ich mir errungen" (picks up from end of mov. IV, m.55) (m. 660) Intensification, circle of fifths Durchbruch (m. 664): Eb: V7, VII7… (m. 668) "Licht" on high Eb (Eb: II 6/5) 7) Sterben Leben (m. 696) Eb major: I, Ascension (m. 712)