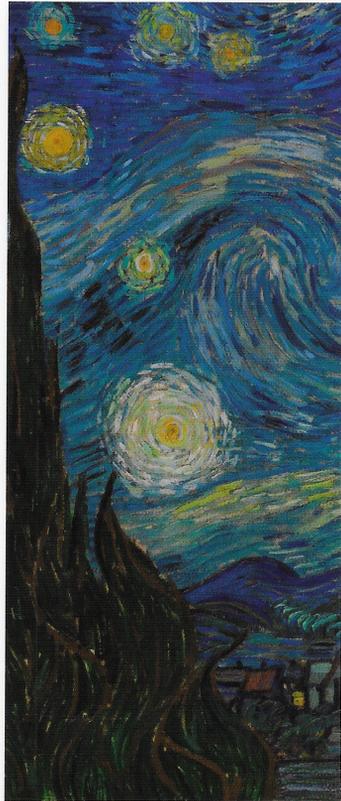


THE TOTAL WORK OF ART: MAHLER'S
EIGHTH SYMPHONY IN CONTEXT

EDITED
BY
ELISABETH KAPPEL

Klaus Aringer
Jeremy Barham
James Deaville
Andreas Dorschel
Elisabeth Kappel
Oliver Korte
Hartmut Krones
Stephen McClatchie
Karen Painter
Peter Revers
Zoltan Roman
Christian Wildhagen
John Williamson
James K. Wright



STUDIEN ZUR WERTUNGSFORSCHUNG

OLIVER KORTE

Macrocosm – Microcosm: About the Influence of Gustav Mahler's Eighth Symphony on the Work of Anton Webern

Six days after the death of Gustav Mahler, on 24 May 1911, Anton Webern wrote a letter to his teacher Arnold Schönberg, still very much under the spell of Mahler's funeral, in which he states:

Mahler's death saddens me more day by day, but it was surely meant to be so. [...] Never to see him again! That time in Munich, when the train departed, he gazed back at us through the window for a long time. This was the last time I saw him.¹

The experience Webern refers to occurred in September 1910. Webern had travelled to Munich to hear the world premiere of Mahler's Eighth Symphony conducted by the composer himself. Webern concludes his letter to Schönberg with the words:

The past few days are of extreme importance to me: Mahler's death and the certainty that I'll have your friendship forever. Gustav Mahler and you. That's where I clearly see my path. I will not deviate. God bless you.²

Schönberg's immense influence on Webern's compositional development is uncontested and has been the subject of a multitude of studies. Also Webern's admiration for Mahler, which after initial reserve increased exorbitantly, is well known.³ But the concrete influence of Mahler on Webern's music has not been the focus of too much attention up to this point, maybe because the obvious stylistic discrepancies between the two composers don't suggest significant influences at first sight: Mahler's fame is based on his large scale symphonic works: he didn't hesitate to use cosmic metaphors of revolving planets and suns⁴ to characterize his Eighth Symphony, his gargantuanly scored emphatic main opus. Compared with this, Webern's work seems to be the exact opposite: he created aphoristic

works of only a few seconds length, for a very limited number of players, and bordering on silence.

But remarkable parallels disclose if one delves into the structural details. Recently, Federico Celestini was able to show that a “screaming sound” in Webern’s *Piece for Orchestra* op. 6, no. 2 is inspired by very similar constellations in Mahler’s symphonic works.⁵ In this paper I will show that Webern’s attendance of the first performance of Gustav Mahler’s Eighth Symphony left definite traces in his *Five Pieces for Orchestra* op. 10, which he composed right after Mahler’s death, and that these traces by no means point back to the Romantic period. It is such that Webern recognized structures in the work of the some 23 years older Mahler, the innovative potential of which clearly points towards the technique of sound-composition (*Klangkomposition*) in the 1960s.

At the turn of the 19th century, the Viennese tendency towards representative monumentality in all arts had reached its climax. At the same time the hypotrophy of this development, the void within and its weakening became increasingly obvious. An example from the field of architecture may illustrate this. It can be read as paradigmatic for the epoch that of all building projects at the Wiener Ringstraße the most representative, the Kaiserforum, could not be completed. The completion of the last extension of the Hofburg, the Neue Burg, in 1913 nearly coincides with the outbreak of the First World War that eventually led to the demise of the k & k monarchy.

Parallel to the latest Romantic overabundance, progressive artists began to traverse new paths. In 1906 not only Mahler wrote his Eighth Symphony, but Arnold Schönberg composed his *Chamber Symphony* op. 9, whose scoring with just 15 soloists resembles the skeleton of an orchestra – a radical alternative draft to Schönberg’s own extremely large scored *Gurrelieder* (1900–1911). Anton Webern did not immediately follow this direction initiated by Schönberg. Despite the modernity of its musical language his *Pieces for Orchestra* op. 6 from 1909 still utilize the large body of a late Romantic orchestra:

Fig. 1: The scoring of Schönberg's op. 9, Webern's opp. 6 (first version) and 10 and Mahler's Eighth Symphony.

Schönberg: <i>Chamber Symphony</i> op. 9 (1906)	Webern: <i>Six Pieces for Orchestra</i> op. 6 (1909)	Mahler: <i>Eighth Symphony</i> (1906; world premiere 1910)	Webern: <i>Five Pieces for Orchestra</i> op. 10 (1911–13)
1 flute 1 oboe, 1 english horn 3 clarinets 2 bassoons 2 french horns	4 flutes 2 oboes, 2 english horns 5 clarinets 2 bassoons 6 french horns 6 trumpets 6 trombones 1 tuba	5 flutes (doubled) 4 oboes, 1 english horn 5 clarinets (doubled) 5 bassoons 8 french horns 4 trumpets 4 trombones 1 tuba 2 harps (doubled) 1 celesta 1 harmonium 1 piano 1 organ 1 mandolin (doubled)	1 flute 1 oboe 2 clarinets 1 french horn 1 trumpet 1 trombone 1 harp 1 celesta 1 harmonium 1 mandolin 1 guitar
	2 harps 1 celesta 1 harmonium 1 piano 1 organ 1 mandolin (doubled)	timpani (2 players) glockenspiel	glockenspiel xylophone cow bells low bells triangle cymbals side drum bass drum
2 violins 1 viola 1 violoncello 1 double bass	low bells triangle cymbals side drum bass drum twig brush tam-tam strings	low bells triangle cymbals bass drum tam-tam strings	1 violin 1 viola 1 violoncello 1 double bass
		4 trumpets, 3 trombones (off-stage) 8 vocal soloists 2 mixed choirs, 1 boys' choir	

Apart from the vocal parts, the scoring of Webern's op. 6 proves not to be much smaller than that of Mahler's Eighth Symphony.⁶ The shift towards small and smallest scoring that originated with Schönberg was first picked up by Webern for his next orchestral composition: *Five Pieces for Orchestra* op. 10. The earliest source in which Webern mentions some orchestral pieces that later are to become part of his op. 10 is a letter to Schönberg dated July 1911, in which he writes:

I have already written two orchestral pieces. They are very short. I can't think of anything long. There will be a number of short pieces that I will call chamber pieces for orchestra to designate that they should not be performed in a large hall. Up to now the scoring is minute. That gave me the idea. It really is your own. In a large hall you will hardly be able to hear any of it.⁷

"It really is your own [idea]", Webern writes to Schönberg. He professes that the idea to minimize the scoring is originally not his own but Schönberg's. But compared to Schönberg, Webern kept much more consistently to the reduced ensemble size with its transparent, analytical sound. Examples of this can be found in his *Symphony* op. 21 and his *Concerto for 9 Instruments* op. 24. With Schönberg and Webern you can easily observe the beginning of a tradition that continues in Igor Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale* from 1918, and in the 1920s in Alban Berg's *Chamber Concerto* for Piano and Violin with thirteen Wind Instruments and Paul Hindemith's *Kammermusiken*, a tradition that is still alive today in the manifold special chamber ensembles for contemporary music.

Figure 1 shows the scoring of both Schönberg's *Chamber Symphony* op. 9 and Webern's *Five Pieces for Orchestra* op. 10. The *Chamber Symphony* requires ten solo wind instruments (one flute, one oboe, one cor anglais, three clarinets, two bassoons and two French horns) and string quintet. Webern makes do with even less. He uses only seven wind instruments and four strings, but with that Webern's scoring is not yet complete. He makes use of first, a rich selection of percussion which requires at least three players, and secondly, some unusual keyboard and string instruments.

In the percussion section of Webern's op. 10, one can find the first definite instrumental reference to Gustav Mahler: the cow bells which Mahler used in his Sixth and Seventh Symphonies (this instrument will be discussed below).⁸ Webern scores five further instruments, namely harp, celesta, mandolin, harmonium and guitar, the last three of which he had not

used in any of his preceding works. He knew mandolin and guitar as orchestral instruments from the fourth movement of Mahler's Seventh Symphony, the serenade-like second *Nachtmusik*, but the harmonium was known to him from the Eighth Symphony.

It can be shown that the way Webern combines harp, celesta, mandolin, harmonium and guitar in his score is modelled after their use in Mahler's Eighth Symphony. A remarkable source to confirm this is Webern's letter to Schönberg dated 12 September 1910, written after the experience of the final rehearsal of the Eighth Symphony. Webern writes:

I can not express with words how beautiful Mahler's [Eighth] Symphony is. Such a flood of meaning, such intensity of feelings, the most sublime feelings.

In the second part there is a silence and tenderness: 6 harps, celesta, mandolins, piano, harmonium with smooth woodwinds and dampened brass [...] continually softer up to the *ppp* entrance of the Chorus Mysticus – it's impossible to describe.⁹

Naturally Webern also delves into other aspects of the symphony, e.g., the “incredibly magnificent” first part of the symphony, but he is especially impressed by the “tenderness” of the work. He describes in detail the way the music grows ever more soft and quiet right before the entrance of the Chorus Mysticus.

If one studies the employment of the instruments Webern mentions in the Eighth Symphony, Mahler proves to be extremely farsighted by saving most of these colours for the final phase of the work. Mahler uses instruments like the celesta and the mandolin at the end of the *Faust* scene – and only there – as acoustic symbols of transcendence and salvation.¹⁰ Even the harps are neither played during the first part of the symphony (based on the medieval hymn “Veni creator spiritus”) nor in both sections of the second part (based on the final scene of Goethe's *Faust*) which are equivalent to the slow movement in the *Scherzo*. Their first entrance – in *ff* – comes exactly at the beginning of the third and last section of the second part, bar 639. From this point on, Mahler progressively makes use of increasingly ethereal sounds. One can describe this development as a progressive substitution of the sonic palette of the Romantic orchestra by new and uncommon instruments. The culmination of this progression occurs just before the entrance of the Chorus Mysticus:

Fig. 2: Mahler, Eighth Symphony, part 2, bars 1421–1428.

The musical score for Mahler's Eighth Symphony, part 2, bars 1421–1428, is presented in a standard orchestral format. It includes parts for piccolo, clarinets, harmonium, celesta, piano, 1st and 2nd harp, and strings. The tempo is marked 'Langsam' (Ad libitum). The key signature has two flats (B-flat major). The score shows a delicate texture with a sustained bass line in the harmonium and various textures in the upper registers of the other instruments. Dynamics range from *pp* to *ppp*. Performance instructions include 'poco' and 'molto' markings.

This passage is based on a remarkably long pedal point on B-flat of 69 bars (bars 1380–1448), which turns out to be the dominant of the E-flat major entrance of the Chorus Mysticus. But instead of increasing the energy of this passage, Mahler chooses to sculpt the passage in a way that makes it increasingly light, soft and tender, as if to depict the music becoming less and less earthbound; it loses its “earth’s residue” (“Erdenrest”) under which even the ‘More Perfect Angels’ are still suffering in the final scene of Goethe’s *Faust*. Towards the end of the development, hardly any ordinary instruments can be heard. What remains is a singular combination of sounds: broken chords of celesta and piano grounded by a continuous stream of sound in the harmonium and coloured by harp-chords and airy string harmonics. High above all a lone piccolo flute can be heard. Later clarinets enter with the initial fourth’s-motif of the symphony (B-flat–F–E-flat) and still later the sound of muted brass instruments is mixed into the sustained chords of the harmonium. This phase of the Eighth Symphony garnered Webern’s greatest admiration. In the above mentioned letter to Schönberg, he concludes in quite religious pathos: “I am deeply touched by the highest. You yourself wrote: the work of art, god’s most treasured creation.”¹¹

About eight months after the first performance of Mahler's Eighth Symphony and directly after Mahler's death, Webern began to compose several tiny orchestral pieces, the first of which were completed after approximately one month. The final compilation of the orchestral pieces op. 10 took a bit longer. In 1913, Webern selected five out of altogether no less than eighteen movements. The piece in the central position, no. 3, both begins and ends with a gently pulsating field-of-sound (*Klangfeld*). The following example shows the concluding field:

Fig. 3: Webern, *Five Pieces for Orchestra* op. 10, third movement, bars 7–11.

In this field, harmonium and celesta *staccati* with harp and cello harmonics and a mandolin tremolo are combined with the melodic gesture of a muted trombone. Here again we find nearly the same combination of instruments that so inspired Webern in Mahler's Eighth Symphony: "Harps, celesta, mandolins, piano, harmonium with soft woodwinds and muted brass [...]" it's impossible to describe." The only instruments missing in Webern's field-of-sound are woodwinds and piano. Indeed, Webern doesn't use a piano in his op. 10 at all, but at least a woodwind has its appearance in the third movement in the form of an expressive gesture by the clarinet right before the discussed field-of-sound.

One instrument, the mandolin, is present in Webern’s field-of-sound (fig. 3) but not in Mahler’s (fig. 2). While Mahler does make use of the mandolin in the last section of the Eighth Symphony, it only appears sparingly, mostly associated with the character of penitent Gretchen. The following example (fig. 4) shows a field-of-sound in which Mahler uses the mandolin, again embedded in the above described combination of harmonium, celesta, piano and harp:

Fig. 4: Mahler, Eighth Symphony, part 2, bars 1344–1351.

The musical score for Mahler's Eighth Symphony, part 2, bars 1344–1351, is presented in a multi-staff format. The tempo is marked 'Adagio'. The instruments and their parts are as follows:

- woodwinds:** Two staves, playing a melodic line with dynamics *pp* *espress.* and *pp*.
- harmonium:** One staff, providing a sustained harmonic background with dynamics *p* and *f*.
- piano & celesta:** One staff, playing a rhythmic pattern with dynamics *mf* and *f*.
- mandolin:** One staff, playing a melodic line with dynamics *mf* and *f*.
- harp:** One staff, playing a complex, arpeggiated texture with dynamics *p*, *f*, *p*, and *f*.
- choir soprano:** One staff, singing the lyrics 'Wer - - - de - - - je - - - der bes' - re - - - Sinn - - - dir zum Dienst er - i-boigt'.
- strings:** Two staves, playing a rhythmic pattern with dynamics *pp*, *f*, *pp*, and *f*.

Webern’s fields-of-sound in op. 10 no. 3 clearly reflect the unique combinations of instrumental colours in Mahler’s Eighth Symphony.¹² Building on this observation, we can now examine the use of two more colours that participate in Webern’s field-of-sound shown in figure 3: the nearly inaudible ringing of deep bells and cow bells. The idea to use cow bells can only be traced back to Mahler who was the first ever to use them in an orchestral context within the Sixth Symphony. Mahler himself explains their appearance in his Seventh Symphony as “fading earth sounds” (“verhallendes Erdengeräusch”) “to symbolize solitariness far away from the world” (“zur Symbolisierung weltferner Einsamkeit”).¹³ The cow bells appear for the first time in the opening movement of the Sixth

Symphony, in a phase, beginning in bar 199, that Theodor W. Adorno labelled as ‘suspension’.¹⁴ In this episode, time and space appear to have been removed and the everlasting can be sensed. According to Constantin Floros, the deep bells in Mahler’s music also symbolize eternity.¹⁵ Webern transfers Mahler’s sound symbols into his own music. Like Mahler he composes quasi-‘timeless’ fields-of-sound, similar to the phases of suspension in Mahler’s symphonies, but extremely shortened.¹⁶ The composer Helmut Lachenmann writes about the fourth movement of Webern’s op. 10: “This is Mahler as seen from bird’s eye perspective, radically reduced to signals of extreme brevity”, and he concludes: “therefore the music of Webern is quite probably as broad in its inner experience as the symphonic world of Gustav Mahler, namely infinite”.¹⁷ Webern translates Mahler’s tonal field-of-sound before the entry of the Chorus Mysticus into his own atonal language by composing a chromatic cluster with a range from c-sharp³ to f³ (see fig. 2). Webern is way ahead of his time, anticipating the technique of sound-composition common in the 1960s which is heralded by Ligeti, Cerha und Penderecki. Not only with regard to serial techniques, but also in the matter of the organization of sound, Webern’s music represents a stepping stone for composers after the Second World War.

Webern learned the dodecaphonic method from Arnold Schönberg, but one of the foundations of his sound technique lies in the music of Gustav Mahler. In Webern’s op. 10, the sounding universe of Mahler’s Eighth Symphony is projected into a nutshell.

NOTES

- ¹ “Der Tod Mahlers macht mich von Tag zu Tag trauriger. Aber es war sicher so vorausbestimmt. [...] Nie mehr Ihn sehn! Damals in München, als der Zug fortfuhr, hat er noch lange durchs Fenster zu uns geschaut. Es war das letzte Mal, daß ich Ihn gesehn habe.” Letter from Anton Webern to Arnold Schönberg, 24 May 1911, in Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer, *Anton von Webern. Chronik seines Lebens und Werkes*, trans. Ken W. Bartlett, Zurich 1980, p. 129.
- ² “Die vergangenen Tage sind für mich von ungeheurer Bedeutung: Mahlers Tod und die Gewißheit, daß ich für immer Ihre Freundschaft besitze. Gustav Mahler und Sie. Da sehe ich ganz deutlich meinen Weg. Ich werde nicht abweichen. Gottes Segen über Sie.” Ibid, p. 129.

- ³ Cf. e.g., Friedrich Wildgans, ‘Gustav Mahler und Anton von Webern’, *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 15 (1960), no. 6, pp. 302–306.
- ⁴ “Es ist das Größte, was ich bis jetzt gemacht. Und so eigenartig in Inhalt und Form, daß sich darüber gar nicht schreiben läßt. – Denken Sie sich, daß das Universum zu tönen und zu klingen beginnt. Es sind nicht mehr menschl[iche] Stimmen, sondern Planeten und Sonnen, welche kreisen.” Letter from Gustav Mahler to Willem Mengelberg, 18 August 1906, in Gustav Mahler, *Briefe*, ed. Herta Blaukopf, Vienna²1996, p. 335.
- ⁵ Federico Celestini, ‘Der Schrei und die Musik. Mahlers Klänge in Weberns Orchesterstück op. 6/2’, in Federico Celestini and Andreas Dorschel, *Arbeit am Kanon. Ästhetische Studien zur Musik von Haydn bis Webern*, Vienna/London/New York 2010 (Studien zur Wertungsforschung 51), pp. 195–213.
- ⁶ In later years, Webern created two revised versions of his op. 6. In 1920, he produced a version for chamber ensemble, both for his changed aesthetics as well as for pragmatic reasons, since it was nearly impossible to find ensembles that were able (and willing) to perform such a largely scored work. In 1928, he presented a second orchestral version of the piece, the scoring of which was strongly reduced.
- ⁷ “Ich habe schon zwei Orchesterstücke geschrieben. Sie sind sehr kurz. Es fällt mir nichts langes ein. Es wird eine Anzahl kurzer Stücke werden, die ich, um anzudeuten, daß sie nicht in einem großen Saal gespielt werden sollen, Kammerstücke für Orchester nennen werde. Bis jetzt ist die Besetzung sehr klein. Das hat mich auf diese Idee gebracht. Im Grunde ist sie von Ihnen. Im großen Saal wird man kaum was davon hören.” Moldenhauer, *Anton von Webern* (note 1), p. 175.
- ⁸ The twig brush (*Rute*) in Webern’s op. 6 can also be ascribed to Gustav Mahler, who was the first ever to incorporate this instrument into the classical orchestra in the *Scherzo* of his Second Symphony. This movement traces back to the *Wunderhorn-Lied Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt*, but Mahler did the scoring the other way around: he first composed the piano version of the song and after that the *Scherzo*-movement. Then he arranged the *Scherzo* for orchestra and afterwards he prepared the smaller scoring of the song. So the ‘Rute’ appears for the first time in the Second Symphony as an orchestra instrument. Cf. Stephen E. Hefling, ‘Zweite Symphonie’, in *Gustav Mahler. Interpretationen seiner Werke*, ed. Peter Revers and Oliver Korte, vol. 1, Laaber 2011, pp. 210–288, 251.
- ⁹ “Wie schön Mahlers [VIII.] Symphonie ist, das kann ich nicht sagen. Eine Fülle des Inhalts, eine Intensität der Empfindung, der übernatürlichsten Empfindung. Im zweiten Teil ist eine Stille und Zartheit: 6 Harfen, Celesta, Mandolinen, Klavier, Harmonium mit weichen Holzbläsern und gedämpftem Blech [...] immer

- leiser bis zum ppp Eintritt des ‘chorus mysticus’ das ist unbeschreiblich.” Letter from Anton Webern to Arnold Schönberg, 12 September 1910, in *Opus Anton Webern*, ed. Dieter Rexroth, Berlin 1983, p. 121.
- ¹⁰ The celesta enters for the first time in bar 808 in the context of the glorification of Mater Gloriosa. The mandolin is the last instrument to enter in the symphony at all, namely in bar 1095. Mahler saves this colour to accompany the famous monologue of Gretchen (Una Poenitentium): “Neige, neige, / Du Ohnegleiche, / Du Strahlenreiche, / Dein Antlitz gnädig meinem Glück”.
- ¹¹ “[...] ich stehe ganz unter der Einwirkung des allerhöchsten. Sie selbst haben geschrieben ‘Das Kunstwerk, Gottes höchste Schöpfung’.” Letter from Webern to Schönberg, 12 September 1910, in *Opus Anton Webern* (note 9), p. 121.
- ¹² In the first field-of-sound in op. 10, no. 3 (bars 1–3), Webern combines – very similar to the way shown in figure 3 – tremolos and repetitions of mandolin, guitar, celesta, harp, low bells and cow bells with a short melodic gesture of the solo violin.
- ¹³ Edgar Istel, *Mahlers Symphonien*, Berlin/Vienna [1916] (Schlesinger’sche Musik-Bibliothek, Meisterführer 10), p. 72.
- ¹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler. Eine musikalische Physiognomik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 13: *Die musikalischen Monographien*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt a. M. 1997, pp. 149–319, 190 ff.
- ¹⁵ See Constantin Floros, *Gustav Mahler*, vol. 2: *Mahler und die Symphonik des 19. Jahrhunderts in neuer Deutung*, Wiesbaden 1977, pp. 319–321.
- ¹⁶ In the second (and last) volume of *Der Abbruch* (1925), a self-parody of the editors of *Musikblätter des Anbruch* (1919–1937), in the rubric ‘the manuscript’ (‘Das Manuskript’) one can find the following quite clairvoyant mock advertisement: “Anton Webern has written a ‘Symphony of a Thousand’. As we can hear, this work is so extensive that it is only possible to perform it on one evening with stark abbreviations.” (“Anton Webern hat eine ‘Symphonie der Tausend’ geschrieben. Wie wir hören, handelt es sich um ein so umfangreiches Werk, daß die Aufführung an einem Abend nur mit großen Kürzungen möglich ist.”) *Der Abbruch* (1925), no. 2, p. 22. I thank Hartmut Krones very much for his reference to this source.
- ¹⁷ “Dies hier ist Mahler aus der Vogelperspektive, radikal auf knappste Signale reduziert, [...] und so ist die Musik Weberns vermutlich als innere Erfahrung so weit dimensioniert wie die symphonische Welt Gustav Mahlers, nämlich unendlich.” Helmut Lachenmann, ‘Hören ist wehrlos – ohne Hören. Über Möglichkeiten und Schwierigkeiten’, in idem, *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung. Schriften 1966–1995*, ed. Josef Häusler, Wiesbaden ²2004, p. 123.

ABSTRACT

In September 1910, Anton Webern heard the first performance of Gustav Mahler's Eighth Symphony in Munich. His letters reflect the deep impressions that that performance made on him. Shortly after, from 1911 to 1913, Webern composed his *Five Pieces for Orchestra* op. 10. The article deals with the influences of Mahler's work on Webern's music, especially with traces that Webern's Mahler-experience in 1910 left in both the scoring and the musical texture of his op. 10.