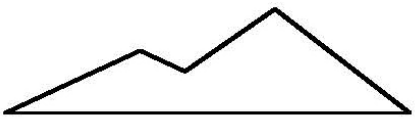
In Search of the Sublime

in the late works of Bruckner, Mahler, & Sibelius

Daniel Goode



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This book is dedicated to

Katie Detwiler

Jody Diamond

Rebecca Ariel Porte

and to my late wife

Ann Snitow

with love

For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror
which we are barely able to endure
and are awed
because it serenely disdains to annihilate us.
Each single angel is terrifying.
And so I force myself,
swallow and hold back
the surging call of my dark sobbing.
Oh, to whom can we turn for help?
Not angels, not humans.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Half god, half imbecile

is how Gustave Mahler characterized

his older contemporary,

composer Anton Bruckner.

A symphony should be like the world,

it should embrace everything,

said Gustav Mahler to composer Jean Sibelius.

Sibelius was very impressed

by Bruckner's symphonies

when he visited Vienna.

So there is the context for all three.

Bruckner's material comes from the so-called "common practice" period: the 18th and 19th centuries. But his rhetoric is his own. He can go from any chord to any other, but has certain routes that he especially travels in his late symphonies. One of these routes is a sequentially upward motion, either within his present key, or transposed as it rises. Less often the motion is downward. In the Adagio of his Sixth Symphony there is a downward sequential motion of twelve iterations.

The iteration style and the sequential motion tendency caused me to see Bruckner as a precursor to minimalism. I called him a "maximalist minimalist." Or in composer Barbara Benary's phrase, a "process composer."

Mahler, on the other hand, is a much more sophisticated composer with a larger palette. Yet he valued and performed Bruckner.

Compared to Bruckner and Mahler, late Sibelius symphonies would almost read out as "neo-classic." But the last, his Symphony No. 7, is in one movement, perhaps the first modernist one-movement symphony. This is a huge esthetic leap into the concept that a one-movement piece can contain a complete and varied repertory. That lends an avant-garde tinge to a work which is really late-Romantic stylistically.

In today's world, most composers seem to do complex one-movement pieces.

A one-movement symphony from the mid-1930s, Roy Harris's Symphony No. 3, presages this, but also maps onto Sibelius's Seventh Symphony in an almost one-to-one way—an interesting historical detail.

The one-movement form

requires complex process-thinking

if it is to unite all the diverse things that are found

in the traditional four-movement symphony.

The sublime is not just sweetness and light and extreme beauty. It is also awe and terror and the inexpressible (in words of course). But expressible in music, maybe. Surely these composers aimed for the sublime in music.

Many composers, I believe,
have reached for the sublime.

In some cases, that would be God in respect to religious composers; in others, it may be a mixture. In the case of determined atheists like Frederick Delius, or pantheists like Mahler, the sublime, with its cross-over between religious and philosophical concepts, can only be guessed at.

To summarize the sublime in the late works of

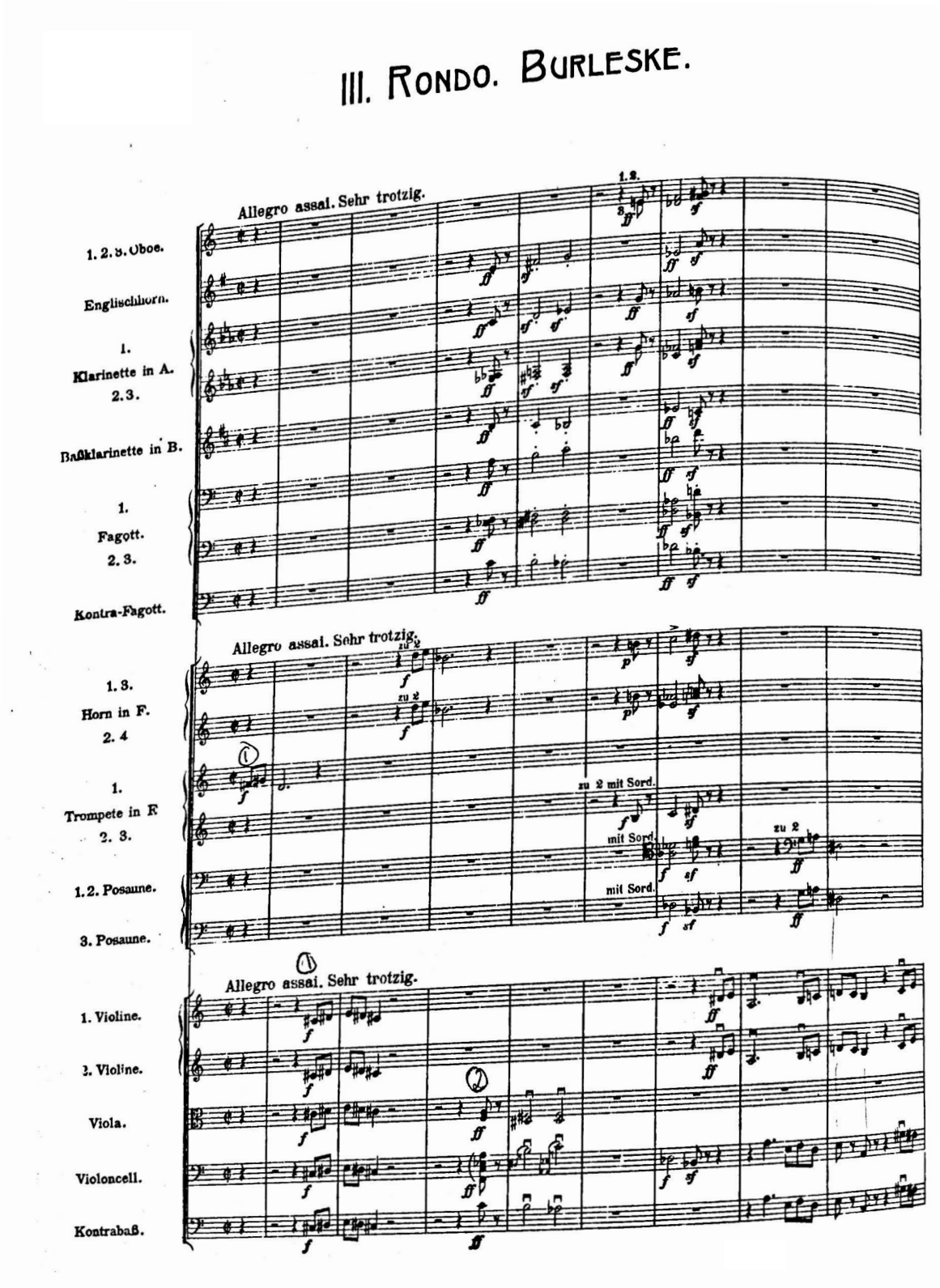
Bruckner, Mahler, and Sibelius,

I find it necessary to call on

Nietzsche's duality of the

Apollonian and Dionysian in culture.

Certainly, Sibelius in his symphonies aimed at the Apollonian. Bruckner, too, was in a more naïve way an Apollonian composer. And just as certainly, Mahler was a Dionysian. He even makes that explicit in the first movement of his Third Symphony, with the entrance of Pan and his huge march to the end of the movement. But, yet in every one of Mahler's symphonies, I think you could say there are both Apollonian and Dionysian elements. The slow movements are certainly Apollonian possibles. The scherzo-type movements are Dionysian candidates. And the big complex first movements often contain both elements.



Mahler Ninth Symphony, 3rd Movement

Orchestral magnification in Mahler's Ninth Symphony, first movement

You can imagine the various melodies, usually stated in the violins, as song melodies in Mahler's oeuvre. In piano or orchestral settings, these melodies, sweet or acid, would tend to pass more lightly than in the symphony, which adds weightiness to the experience.

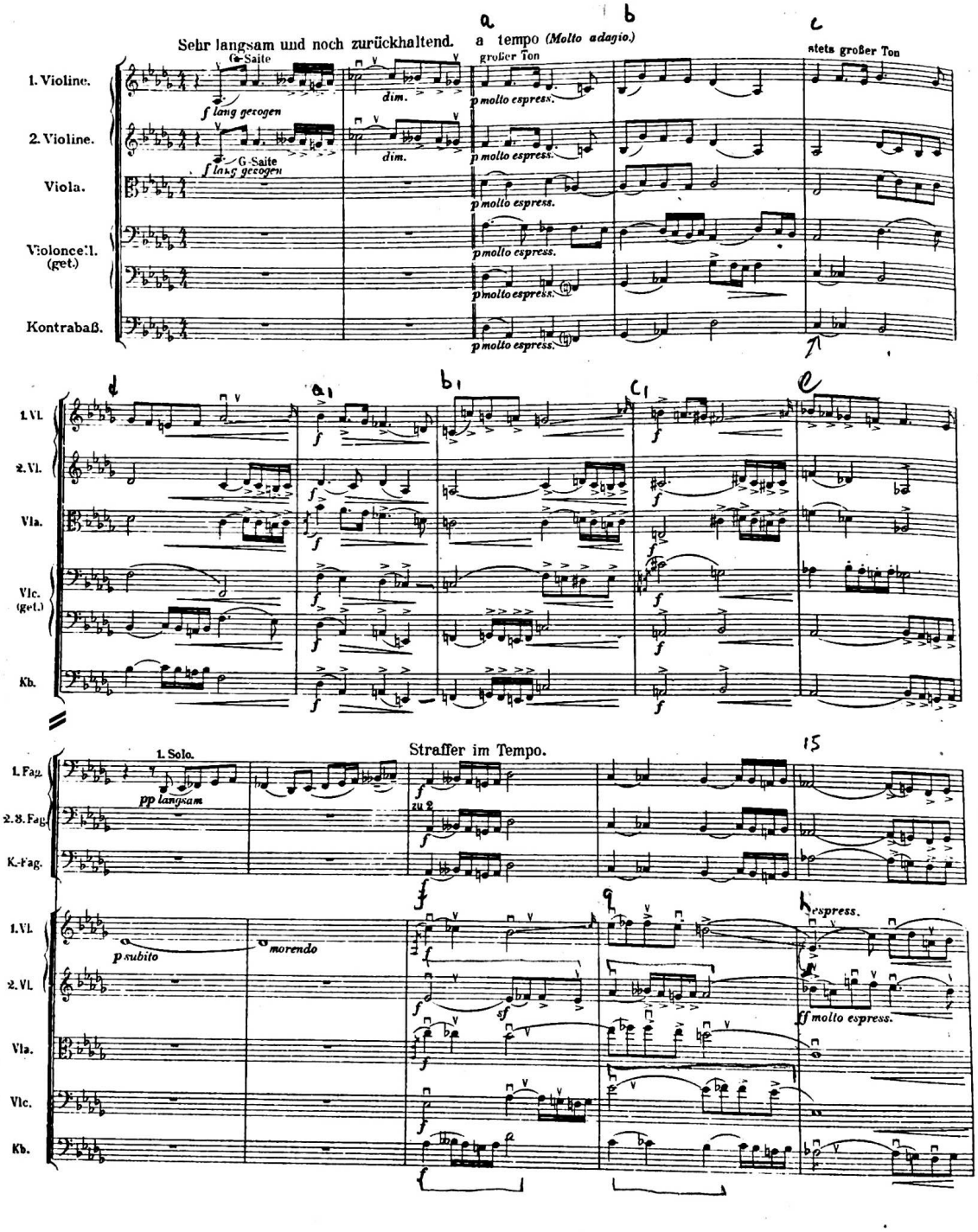
When they occur in orchestral settings there is a kind of magnification, an impression of grandeur that a song melody might not have. The net effect is to etch more deeply into the listener's mind, even their body.

The wild, over-the-top orchestral counterpoint in the 3rd movement of Mahler's Ninth, which he dedicated to "my brothers in Apollo," is so complex, yet is it parody? Or in anger, which is how it sounds to me—with constant overlaps of the material. When these vistas clear, usually by going to the treble register, a foretaste of the final Adagio movement enters.

Nothing in the orchestral repertoire is so overactive as this movement. It could serve as an example of the sublime in music. There is awe, and if not terror, certainly an aggressive attack on the possibility of terror.

Both the 3rd and 4th movements of the Ninth Symphony are rondo-variations. In the 4th movement, the Adagio,

IV. Adagio.



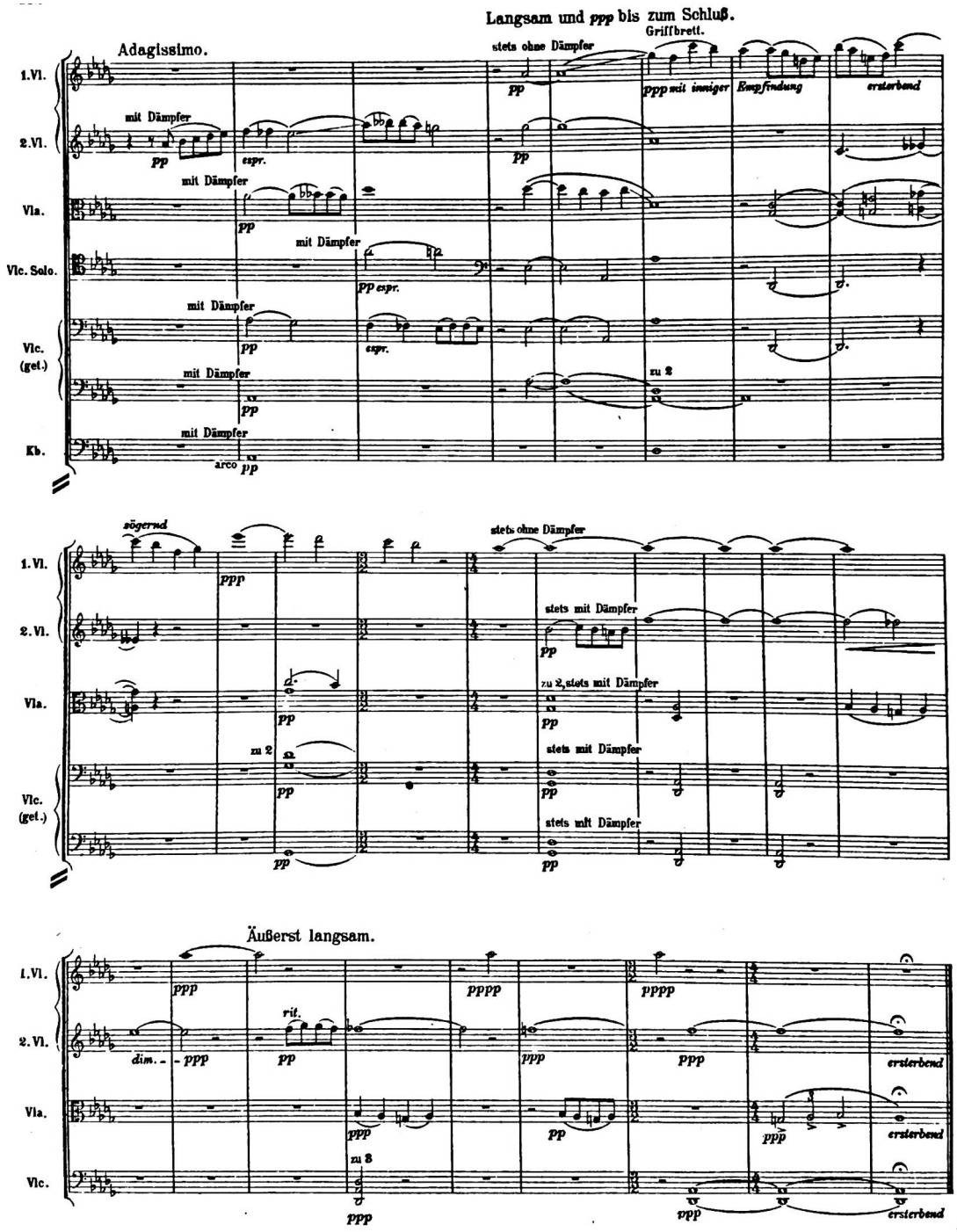
Mahler Ninth Symphony, 4th Movement

there are, let's say, three main themes. Each has to be varied in each rondo-return. The iterative-ness is the issue. How many times? Each is a new variation, so in essence, there is no end. And as Schubert's music was characterized by his fan, Robert Schumann, as having "heavenly length," we have to say these movements are super-heavenly in length. If Mahler had lived to perform them, how would he have dealt with length? Bruno Walter, who premiered the Ninth after Mahler's death, did what the score says. And that's what we do.

The turn: sometimes called the "Wagner turn," because composer Richard Wagner used it a lot.

In the final Adagio of Mahler's Ninth Symphony, the turn is omnipresent in all voices. What does it do? To surround a note with an "upper neighbor" and "lower neighbor" gives the note more presence in the orchestral counterpoint, singles it out, draws the ear to it. In the final and slowest cadence of the movement, only the upper note of the turn appears, and in triplet half-notes, dying away.

"*Esterbend*."


Langsam und ppp bis zum Schluß.
Adagissimo.
stets ohne Dämpfer
Griffbrett.
1. Vl.
2. Vl.
Vla.
Vlc. Solo.
Vlc. (get.)
Kb.
mit Dämpfer
pp
espr.
ppp mit inniger Empfindung
ersterbend
zu 2
arco
sögernd
ppp
stets mit Dämpfer
zu 2, stets mit Dämpfer
Äußerst langsam.
rit.
dim.
pppp
ersterbend

Thought Experiment: the end of Mahler's Ninth Symphony

Mahler's Ninth Symphony (1909), in which the final movement—unusually, an adagio—ends with a disintegration into fragments (which get even slower—adagissimo getting even more *langsam und ppp bis zum Schluss. . .aeusserst langsam*) as it moves toward a classicism-required final cadence. Is it as cliché would have it: death, as truth content? Or as I now think of it: the emerging of the ambience of the listener through "holes" composed into the music: our corporeal selves, our coughs and sneezes, creaks of seats, and possibly other sounds outside concert hall.

This I will call the ***truth content*** of this music. Put in words it would be something like: the musical transport of the individual, or the whole audience, modulates into the body of the world at large.

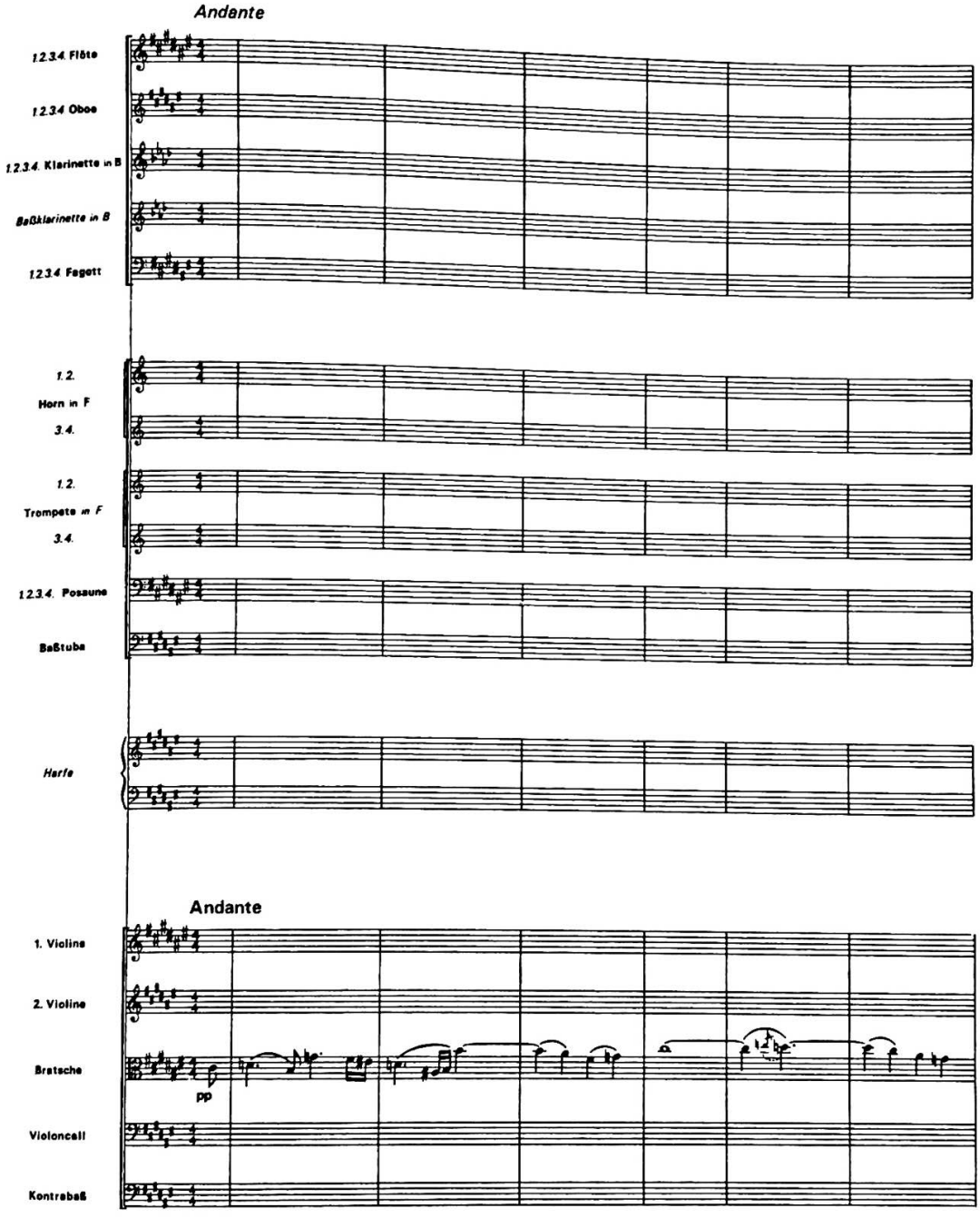
The ending is this transformation. The only hint that Mahler felt the first movement was a final good-bye is his scrawl on the manuscript: "*Lebewohl*" or, farewell. But he wrote on to the end of the Tenth Symphony, though the Tenth is only partly orchestrated. The first movement, also an Adagio, is a touchstone of the sublime. It's been with me since I was in my early 20s.

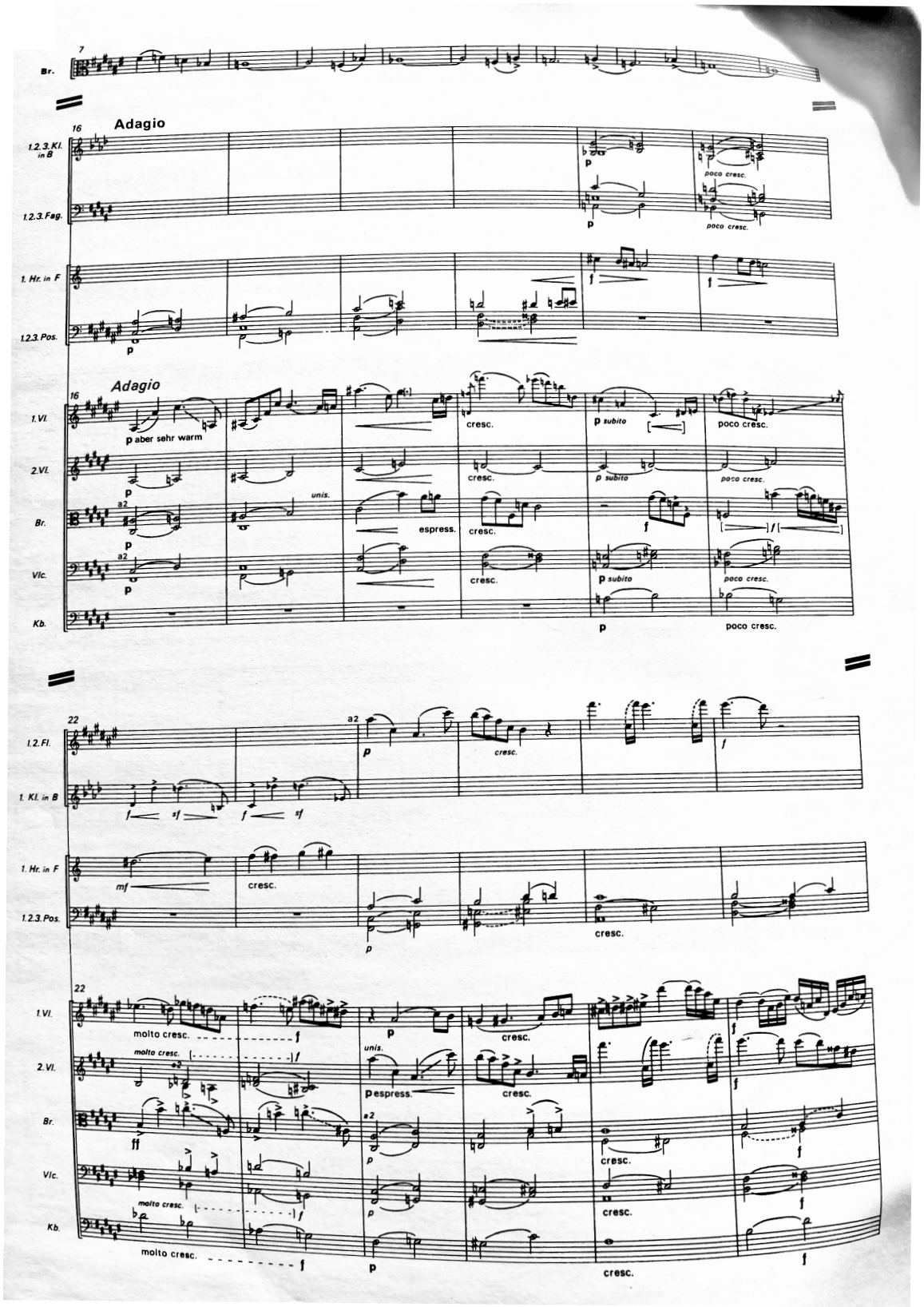
(next two pages, Mahler's Tenth Symphony, 1st Movement)

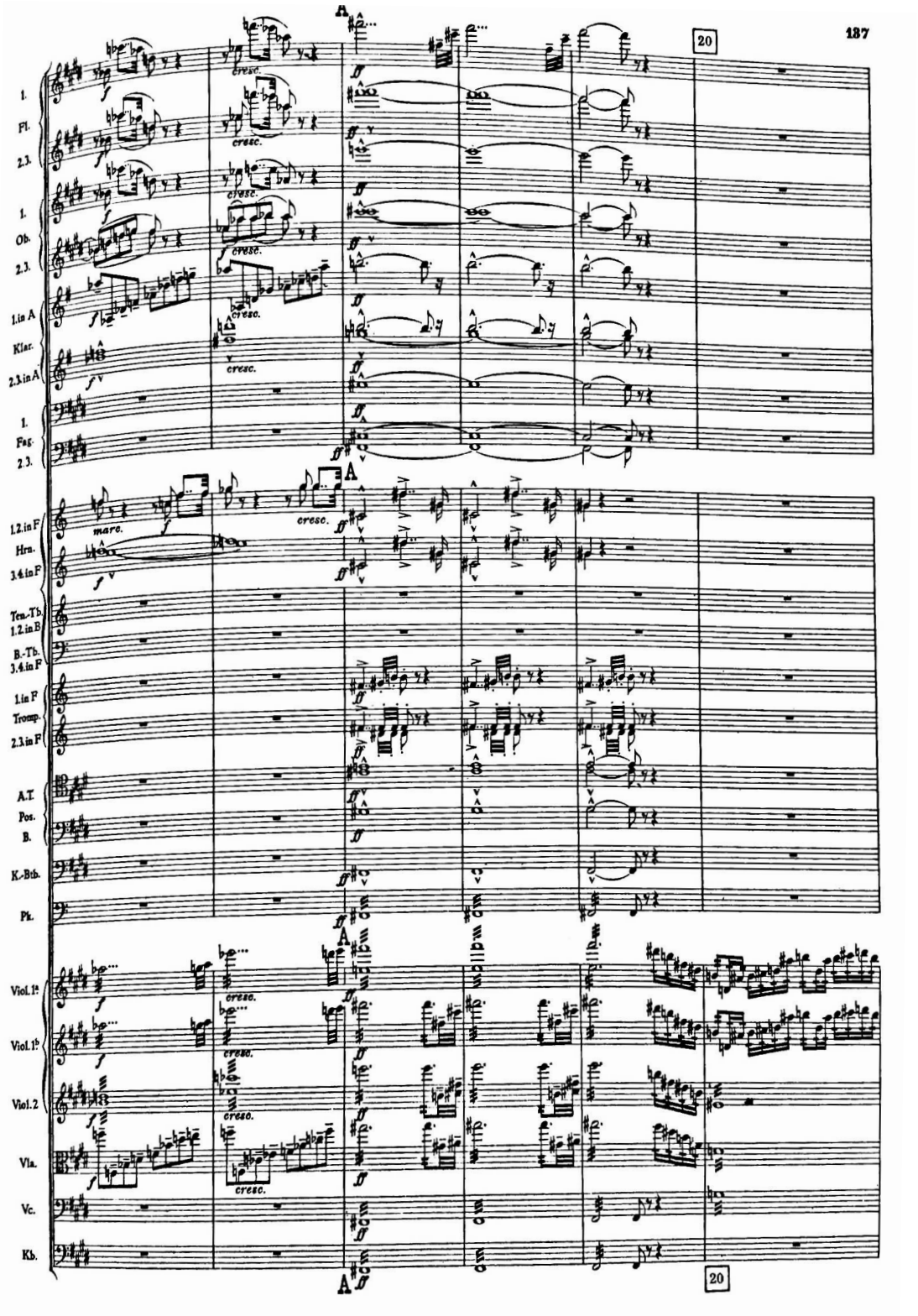
SYMPHONIE Nº 10

Gustav Mahler
(1860 - 1911)

I. ADAGIO




Br.
Adagio
1.2.3.Kl. in B
1.2.3.Fag.
1. Hr. in F
1.2.3.Pos.
Adagio
1.Vl.
2.Vl.
Br.
Vlc.
Kb.
p aber sehr warm
cresc.
p subito
poco cresc.
unis.
espress.
1.2.Fl.
1. Kl. in B
mf
molto cresc.
pespress.



Bruckner Ninth Symphony, 3rd Movement

"to the beloved God" (dem lieben Gott)

Anton Bruckner dedicated his unfinished Ninth Symphony to God!

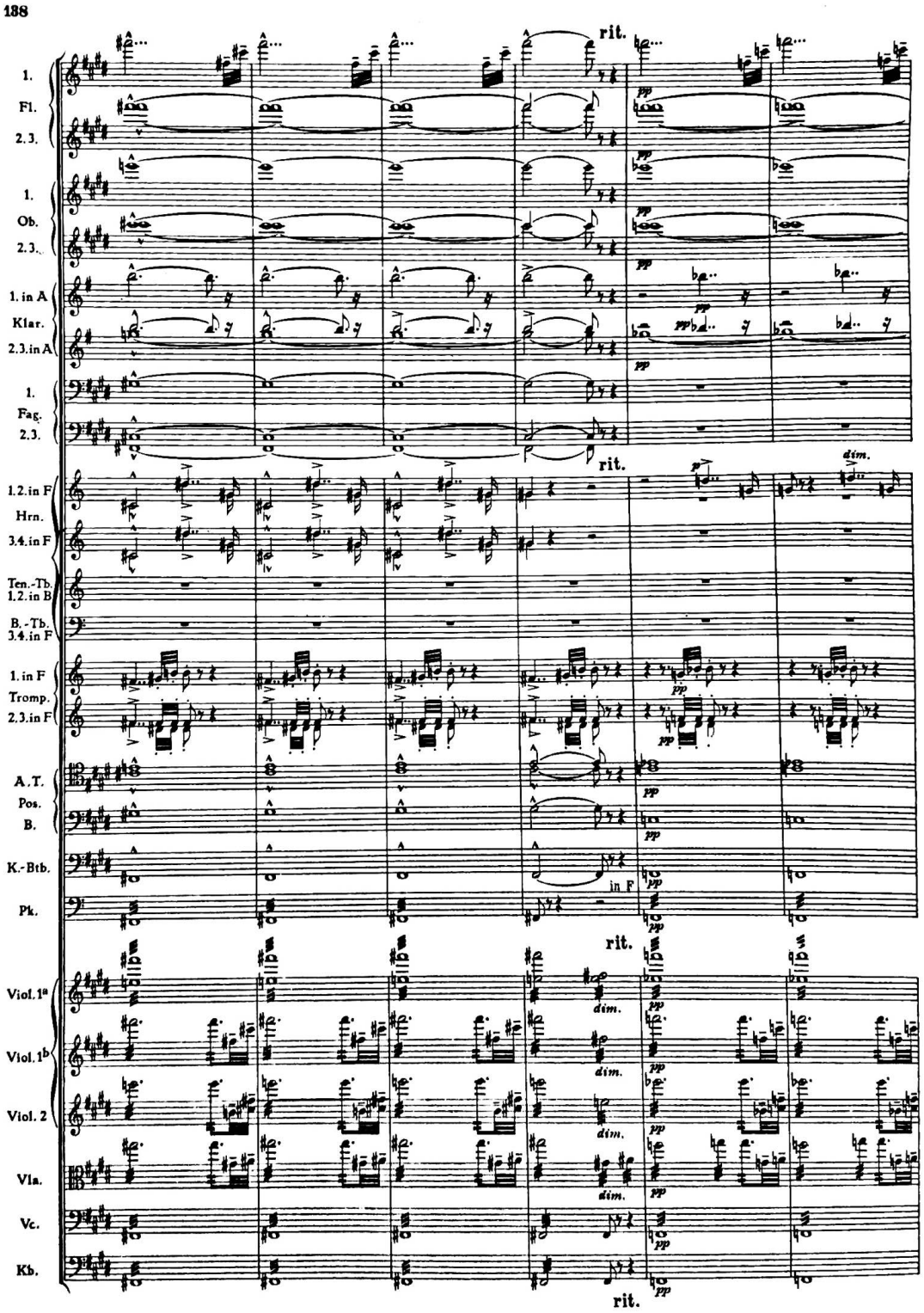
[Let's intervene here and say that for secular folk like myself, we will translate "God" into the nearest equivalent: the Sublime.]

And I'd like to declare a sublime within the Sublime of Bruckner's Ninth Symphony, a chord which gets special treatment through repetition and then subtle modal shading.

It appears at Letter A of the third and last movement, the Adagio, 17 bars from the beginning. We'd probably label this chord as a Dominant 11th, or a "five-eleven." The modal change goes with a softer dynamic, the whole thing incredibly moving.

It's hard to say how many times it is repeated, because after thirteen bars, new lyrical material is introduced by horns and trumpets over the modally-changed chord. Once more towards the end of the movement, Letter H in the score, a shortened version of this same chord progression occurs.

This chord progression is a kind of shorthand to one aspect of the Bruckner sublime.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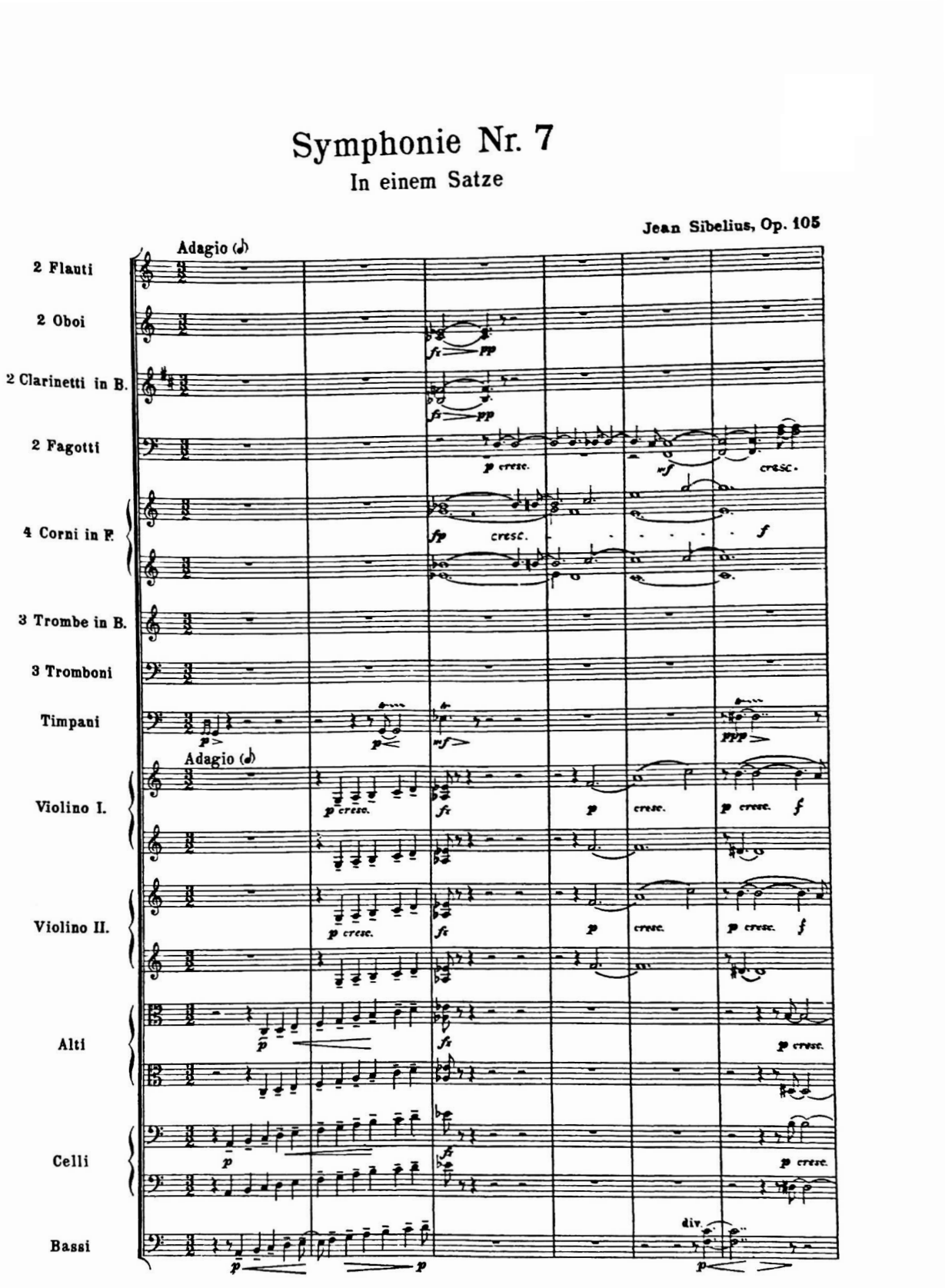
rit.
1.
Fl.
2.3.
1.
Ob.
2.3.
1. in A
Klar.
2.3.in A
1.
Fag.
2.3.
rit.
dim.
1.2.in F
Hrn.
3.4.in F
Ten.-Tb.
1.2.in B
B.-Tb.
3.4.in F
1.in F
Tromp.
2.3.in F
A.T.
Pos.
B.
K.-Btb.
in F
Pk.
rit.
Viol.1a
Viol.1b
Viol. 2
Vla.
Vc.
Kb.
dim.
rit.

Given Bruckner's "Olympian" approach to symphonic composition, it's hard to find the "awe and terror" component of the sublime.

The Scherzo, 2nd movement to his Ninth Symphony, has the only example I have found: at Letter B, or 42 bars in, against pounding Ds in the bass instruments, dissonant notes of E, C#, Bb, G#, are played fortissimo by instruments from high to low, resolving to the tonic key of D-minor.

So, interestingly, both the extreme of beauty and a hard nut of awe and terror are found in his unfinished Ninth.



Sibelius Seventh Symphony, 1st Movement

Sibelius 7th Symphony

That it is in C-major, the most basic key signature that every kid plays in first, is instructive. And begins with the upward scale passage beginning on A, relative minor, and then, interrupted in two bars with a tutti fortissimo chord: half-diminished Ab.

The subsequent movement—surely his tone-poems in one movement gave him plenty of experience with the needs of one-movement thinking—ends in the heart-rending cadence with chords going from Ab, through flats, to A-natural to D to G and the final C-major 7th straining upwards to C in the strings.

His final symphony, with only the tone-poem, *Tapiola*, to follow.

Unlike Bruckner's sequencing upward (towards his beloved God, or Heaven), Sibelius's sequencing passages tend to go down. I think this influenced me in my "Tunnel Funnel" symphony, which moves with minor chords going down by a whole step for many bars.

Perhaps sequencing is the hidden god of minimalism.


sublime