THE GROTESQUE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY OPERA

by

JAMES GRAEME FULLERTON

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Music in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2006

UMI Number: 3205003

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Music in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

_____ _____

Date

Barbara R. Hanning
Chair of Examining Committee

_____ _____

Date

David Olan
Executive Officer

Professor Allan W. Atlas

Professor Ellie M. Hisama

Professor Daniel Gerould

Professor Philip Rupprecht

Professor Ora Frishberg Saloman

_____

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

THE GROTESQUE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY OPERA

By James Graeme Fullerton

Adviser: Professor Allan W. Atlas

The grotesque is a juxtaposition of two or more elements that are typically considered discrete, but when mixed together generate a complex reaction: the reader, viewer, or listener finds the combination simultaneously ludicrous and horrifying. In the twentieth century, composers consistently created grotesque moments that are truly striking and effective, either by using new musical languages or by expanding upon existing ones. The study focuses on five operas, each one representing a different musical idiom: Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, Krzyztof Penderecki's *Die Teufel von Loudun*, Harrison Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy*, and Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*.

Few operas sustain a grotesque mood for extended periods of time; usually it is a scene, a brief situation, or an individual character that provides the grotesquerie. And though many grotesque moments are built into and set off by the libretto, my main focus will be on the music. More specifically, I hope to demonstrate how the music operates as part of the archetypal horror-comic equation that epitomizes the grotesque. At times the music comments on the situation presented in the text; at other times—and more effectively—it participates as an equal partner in the equation, by being either humorous when the text is horrific or horrific when the text is comic.

The majority of studies on the grotesque are in the fields of literature, theater, and the visual arts; therefore, I survey a selection of the primary and secondary sources from those fields in order to establish guidelines for recognizing the grotesque that will then serve as the basis for the subsequent analyses. These analyses demonstrate how composers use different elements to portray the grotesque: rhythm, pitch, timbre, and the subversion of familiar genres.

Finally, as many critics have argued, the grotesque is largely in the eye, or ear, of the beholder. Accordingly, this study spells out the reasons for considering a particular moment a grotesque one, and, at the same time, provides the tools that permit the reader to form his or her own opinion.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am truly indebted to the patience, constant encouragement, and fastidious editing of my advisor, Allan W. Atlas. Ellie M. Hisama, my first reader, graciously agreed to be on my committee several years after it had been formed, and I thank her for her advocacy. Daniel Gerould, my second reader, greatly helped in shaping my understanding of the history of the grotesque. I would also like to thank the chair of my committee, Barbara R. Hanning, and my two other readers, Philip Rupprecht and Ora Frishberg Saloman, for bringing helpful suggestions to the defense. Stephen Sondheim kindly read the chapter on *Sweeney Todd*, providing corrections and clarifications. I would also like to thank Peg Rivers for her eternally positive attitude and Barbara Dobbs Mackenzie and the staff of RILM Abstracts of Music Literature for the enjoyable employment that was my main support throughout the years.

A special thank you goes to my friends, both near and far, who were so supportive of my endeavors. They always boosted my spirits and listened patiently to my concerns. My parents, Judy Mostardi and Jim Fullerton, and my sister, Christine, constantly encouraged me, and I thank them for always saying that they were proud of me and that what I was doing was worthwhile. All the generations of my family encouraged my love of music, and I would like to dedicate this dissertation to them, and to the memory of my two musical grandmothers, Shirley Fullerton and Marguerite Onions.

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LIST OF EXAMPLES

The examples were created using the commercially available scores. For *Wozzeck* and *Lulu,* I used the complete orchestral scores engraved by Universal Edition. *Sweeney Todd* is available in a voice-piano edition; some comments regarding orchestration have been given when appropriate. The *Punch and Judy* score is a facsimile of the handwritten, two-piano manuscript. I have recreated it in a similar format, putting in notes about instrumentation when relevant. Stage and performance directions are also reproduced in all cases.

The Penderecki score engraved by Schott is a "cut-away" score, where the only complete bars in the score are the ones where an instrument or voice has notes; all other bars are left out. Penderecki's intention is to make it easier to follow the musical flow so as not to get lost in a sea of rests. This collage-type effect, however, is difficult to reproduce with any skill outside of a professional print shop. In order to have all the examples for every opera be as uniform as possible, I have rendered the Penderecki examples in a more standard score style, including the use of rests. In addition, while Penderecki uses time signatures, occasionally there are bars where an instrument has fewer or more notes than normal. I have tried to reproduce these as accurately as possible. Finally, Penderecki's score order is unusual, and it has been preserved here: he puts the choir above the woodwinds and the alto and baritone saxophones where the clarinets should be, while he leaves the solo voices in their normal location above the strings.

Chapter 2: Music and the Grotesque

Chapter 4: Creating the Musical Grotesque (I): Rhythm and Pitch

Chapter 5: Creating the Musical Grotesque (II): Genres

Chapter 6: Creating the Musical Grotesque (III): Orchestration

Chapter 7: *Sweeney Todd*: A Case Study of the Grotesque in Music

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THE WORST PIES IN LONDON

BY THE SEA

NO PLACE LIKE LONDON

GOD, THAT'S GOOD

A LITTLE PRIEST

Music and Lyrics by STEPHEN SONDHEIM

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Ravel SÉRÉNADE GROTESQUE

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LADY MACBETH OF THE MTENSK DISTRICT

By Dmitri Shostakovich

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Act I, Scene 2: measures 1-7

FROM JEWISH FOLK POETRY, OP. 79

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Bars 1-5 of Schast'ye (Happiness)

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INTRODUCTION

Although grotesque themes, images, and characters have a long history in opera, it is in twentieth-century opera in particular that grotesque moments become truly striking and effective. This is partly because of a greater interest in the grotesque in all the arts—and greater societal license to explore the darker sides of humanity with which it is typically associated—but also because of new and expanded means of musical expression that have permitted composers to underscore the grotesque in powerful ways. As an aesthetic concept, the grotesque is a juxtaposition of two or more elements that are typically considered discrete, but when mixed together generate a complex reaction: the reader, viewer, or listener finds the combination simultaneously ludicrous and horrifying. The humor found in an image or idea may manifest itself as a slight guffaw or a full belly laugh, while the horror may provoke true physical revulsion or simply aesthetic distaste. Since the conflicting elements coexist in such a way that they cannot be separated, the spectator cannot formulate a single interpretation and is reduced to fluctuating between poles of possible reactions in a state of general unease. Perhaps the most powerful locus for the grotesque is the human body, particularly when it is presented as abnormal or absurd, or somehow involved in a situation with direct ramifications for its well being, such as torture, sickness, cannibalism, or death. When some aspect of the body-in-crisis strikes the observer as concurrently ludicrous, this may momentarily balance or alleviate the feelings of dread and disgust, but after that moment of relief passes, the sense of horror inevitably returns. It is, then, this never-ending cycle of opposing reactions that is the epitome of the grotesque.

Another aspect of the grotesque is that even so basic a matter as whether it is or is not there must be judged by the receiver. For example, Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" (1729) is a parody of a government tract, full of well-reasoned arguments for cannibalism as the solution to the population explosion in England and Ireland.[1] While many people find this work both ludicrously funny and harrowingly disturbing—and thus grotesque—it is conceivable that others will find it completely repugnant and without any humor, in which case it is not grotesque for them. Indeed, this is one of the persistent issues of the grotesque, and one with direct ramifications for this study: the grotesque is largely in the eye, or ear, of the beholder. In the end, then, all the critic can do is try to convince the reader of the validity of one point of view, and, at the same time, provide the tools that permit the reader to form his or her own opinion.

PURPOSE

I propose to look at how music and libretto interact to create grotesque moments in five twentieth-century operas. First, aside from an article on nineteenth-century opera by Rodney Stenning Edgecombe that deals with the musical grotesque in rather general terms,[2] a few studies on Penderecki's opera (discussed below), and Esti Sheinberg's book-length study on irony, satire, parody, and the grotesque in the music of Shostakovich,[3] the use of the grotesque in opera, or in any other musical genre, for that matter, has hardly been studied. And second, I have chosen to look at twentieth-century operas because they engage the grotesque more consistently than do their predecessors.

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[1] Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal and Other Satires* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995).

[2] Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, "The Musical Representation of the Grotesque in Nineteenth-Century Opera," *Opera Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Winter 2000), 34-51.

[3] Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich: A Theory of Musical Incongruities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

Although many of the grotesque moments are revealed, at least on the surface, primarily in the text, my main focus will be on the music. More specifically, I hope to demonstrate how the music operates as part of the horror-comic equation: does it merely comment on the grotesque situation presented in the text, or does it provide one half of the equation, such as being humorous or lyrical when the text is horrific, or horrific when the text is comic? I believe that the grotesque moment can be—and has been—expressed both ways. The idea of the grotesque *moment* is also an important element, for few operas sustain a grotesque mood for extended periods of time. It is usually a scene, a brief situation, or an individual character that provides the grotesquerie. Finally, I will investigate how the music of the grotesque moment relates to the music that both precedes and follows it, for although the grotesque can be disruptive, it must be integrated into the larger context of the opera.

A Summary of the Chapters

The grotesque has long been a subject of keen interest in literature, theater, and particularly the visual arts. Chapter 1, therefore, serves to summarize a large selection of the primary and secondary sources from those fields, with the goal of creating a set of guidelines for the grotesque that will then serve as the basis for the subsequent chapters. Since there are a few discussions of the grotesque in music, including somewhat under-qualified uses of the term to describe certain musical works or passages, I will examine these in Chapter 2 as I weave music into the guidelines developed in Chapter 1. In Chapter 3, I will identify the grotesque moments in the operas selected for this study, emphasizing those that will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Using the concept of the musical grotesque as developed in Chapter 2, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 will examine how composers use different elements to portray the grotesque. Chapter 4 explores the use of rhythm and pitch, Chapter 5, the use—and subversion—of familiar genres, and Chapter 6, the use of timbre, a particularly fertile ground for twentieth-century composers. Throughout these three chapters, I will also address issues of performance when appropriate. Finally, Chapter 7 is a case study of a single work, Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, since, more than any of the other operas discussed, it maintains a level of grotesquerie almost throughout its musical portrayal of its anti-heroes and their actions.

THE SELECTED OPERAS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The operas explored here are Alban Berg's expressionist *Wozzeck* (1925) and his more lyrical *Lulu* (1935; completed by Friedrich Cerha in 1979), Krzyztof Penderecki's sonically avant-garde *Die Teufel von Loudun* (1969), Harrison Birtwistle's epigrammatic *Punch and Judy* (1968), and Stephen Sondheim's tuneful yet dark *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979).[4] Each of the five operas contains a number of striking examples of the grotesque and is quite different from the others in terms of subject matter and musical language.

[4] Given the large number of possible choices, this is admittedly a short list. A number of works originally considered for inclusion were ultimately dropped for one reason or another. The operas of Shostakovich have been ably treated by Esti Sheinberg (see note 3). Ligeti's alternately bizarre, ludicrous, and frighteningly strange *Le Grand Macabre* is an unfortunate omission, but score materials were not readily available. Other works are too similar to the ones chosen in terms of subject or compositional style. Thus Prokofiev's *Ognennïy Angel* (1923), like Penderecki's *Die Teufel von Loudun*, treats religion, exorcism, and sexually obsessed nuns, while Penderecki's later operas, *Die Schwazre Maske* (1986) and *Ubu Rex* (1991), are more straightforward than *Die Teufel* in terms of musical language. Finally, though Gian Carlo Menotti himself called his *Old Maid and the Thief* (1939) a grotesque work, its tonal language and tuneful vocal writing resemble Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, while the opera as a whole offers less in the way of overt and musically interesting grotesquerie.

Of the operas selected, Berg's *Wozzeck* is probably the most frequently performed: it is a staple of the operatic stage. *Lulu* also receives a fair number of productions, especially since its completion by Friedrich Cerha; and both operas are now viewed as representative works of two particular (albeit related) compositional techniques: atonal expressionism and serialism. More relevant to the present study, though, is that both are the subject of numerous studies, among them George Perle's book-length analyses of their musical language and formal structures,[5] and Douglas Jarman's Cambridge opera guides, which present sociological and psychological aspects of the plots and characters along with some discussion of the musical elements and written commentaries by Berg himself;[6] in addition, there are studies of the autographs and other sources,[7] as well as studies of Berg's overall musical language in which the operas obviously play a major role.[8] And while the literature on *Wozzeck* occasionally refers to the Doctor as being grotesque and some of the music for the Captain as ludicrous or ironic, only Sheinberg goes into any detail, and even then she discusses only a few passages.[9] Yet I will show that grotesque moments permeate both works.[10]

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[5] George Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg. I: Wozzeck* (Berkeley: University of California, 1980) and *II: Lulu* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985).

[6] Douglas Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and *Alban Berg: Lulu* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[7] These include Patricia H. Hall, *A View of Berg's Lulu Through the Autograph Sources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Thomas F. Ertelt, *Alban Bergs Lulu: Quellenstudien und Beiträge zur Analyse* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1996); Beat Hanselmann, *Alban Berg, Wozzeck: Libretto mit musikalischer Analyse, Dokumentation zur Entstehung, Kommentare, Diskographie, Aufführungstabellen, Bibliographie, Zeittafel* (Munich: PremOp, 1992).

[8] See, among others, Harald Goertz and Otto Kolleritsch, eds., *50 Jahre Wozzeck von Alban Berg* (Graz: Universal Edition, 1978); Karen Monson, *Alban Berg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Press, 1979); Anthony Pople, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Berg* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[9] Sheinberg, *Shostakovich*, 268.

[10] I will omit a list of recordings as there are numerous available for both operas.

Penderecki's *Die Teufel von Loudun*, his first foray into opera, was highly anticipated because of his rapid emergence as a new voice in the mid-1960s.[11] The opera met with critical success and received numerous productions in the years following its premiere. For our purpose, *Die Teufel von Loudun* represents a very different compositional style from either Berg or any of the other operas considered here. Penderecki's musical language from 1959 to 1967 is often referred to as "sonorism."[12] Wolfram Schwinger, one of Penderecki's chief biographers, invokes the terms "*Klangfarbenmusik* (tone-color music)" and "*Klangflächenmusik* (sound-mass music or tonal-surface music)" to describe the music.[13] David Cope writes that, "sound-mass, in contrast to serialism, minimizes the importance of individual notes and their order, while maximizing the importance of texture, rhythm, dynamics, and/or timbre of broad gestures."[14] In fact, with the music of this period, one might say that timbre is the dominant feature, with rhythm and thematic development being secondary. Yet aside from Schwinger's few comments on the music in his account of the gestation of the opera and a few early reviews,[15] only recently have scholars written about the opera in much

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[11] The Hamburg State Opera commissioned the work and gave the premiere on 20 June 1969. Two days later another production bowed in Stuttgart, reflecting the interest in Penderecki and this project. The Hamburg production yielded the only recording of the work: *Die Teufel von Loudun*, conducted by Marek Janowski (Philips 6500 051, 1970 [LP]; 446 328-2, 1995 [CD reissue]).

[12] Ray Robinson, "Penderecki's Musical Pilgrimage," *Studies in Penderecki*, vol. 1 (1998), 37; Regina Chłopicka, "Stylistic Phases in the Works of Krzysztof Penderecki," *Studies in Penderecki*, vol. 1, 55-56; Danuta Mirka, *The Sonoristic Structuralism of Krzysztof Penderecki* (Katowice: Akademia Muzyczna, 1997), and "Texture in Penderecki's Sonoristic Style," *Music Theory Online*, vol. 6, no. 1 (January 2000), www.societymusictheory.org (Accessed 5 January 2005).

[13] Wolfram Schwinger, "Changes in Four Decades" The Stylistic Paths of Krzysztof Penderecki," *Studies in Penderecki*, vol. 1, 69.

[14] David Cope, *New Directions in Music* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1998); see Chapter 3, "Sound-Mass and Microtones," 53-79.

[15] Schwinger, *Krzysztof Penderecki: His Life and Work—Encounters, Biography and Musical Commentary* (London: Schott, 1989), 20-25; Winton Dean, "*The Devils of Loudun*," *The Musical Times*, vol. 114, no. 1570 (Dec. 1973), 1251.

depth. Thus a recent book of essays on Penderecki's theater works contains two essays that address the grotesque aspects of the opera: Stephen Downes examines the role of grotesque laughter and Zofia Helman discusses the comic and tragic character types.[16] Many of the studies of Penderecki's compositions focus primarily on the role of timbre and orchestration, and the main discussion here will also deal with the sound world he creates. Moreover, I chose *Die Teufel* in order to examine how a composer can depict the grotesque even within the framework of a largely unfamiliar musical language.

Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy*, subtitled a "A Tragical Comedy or A Comical Tragedy: Opera in one act," presents humans enacting the roles of the archetypal puppets in a highly episodic and quasi-nonsensical drama. As a chamber opera with a small number of both singers and pit instruments, it achieves its effects on an intimate scale, and so provides an interesting contrast to the grand scope of the Berg and Penderecki operas. A biting, crystalline quality permeates the score, a direct result of the preponderance of the constant dissonance (seconds and tritones abound), large leaps or extended dissonant arpeggios in every part, and the spare sound of a small group of instruments playing essentially as soloists. At present there is little in the way of literature on the opera: reviews (mostly of the recording that came out years after the opera's premiere), some brief commentary on the opera as a pre-cursor to Birtwistle's more ambitious works (such as *Gawain*), and an article by Jonathan Cross that uses the

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[16] Stephen Downes, "Daughters of Kundry? Laughter and the Grotesque in Penderecki's *The Devils of Loudun*," in *Krzysztof Penderecki's Music in the Context of 20th-Century Theatre: Studies, Essays, and Materials*, ed. by Teresa Malecka (Kraków: Akademia Muzyczna, 1999), 95-106; Zofia Helman, "*The Devils of Loudun* by Krzysztof Penderecki: Genre-Form-Style," in *Krzysztof Penderecki's Music*, 81-94. An additional article in the collection discusses the opera in connection with other operatic developments of the twentieth century, and briefly mentions its grotesque content; see Robert S. Hatten, "Penderecki's Operas in the Context of Twentieth-Century Opera," in *Krzysztof Penderecki's Music*, 15-25.

opera and *Secret Theatre* to discuss Birtwistle's compositional style.[17] The music is a collection of swift strokes and shows how a limited palette can be used to convey the grotesque.

The fifth opera and final opera I will examine is Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*. Sondheim's score has its roots in the Broadway musical tradition, but it contains complexities more typically found in operatic composition, and therefore rewards in-depth analysis. It is worth examining—and I do so at greater length than any of the other operas—because it demonstrates how the grotesque can be depicted within the scope of relatively familiar musical means, that is, with traditional diatonic tonality and rather tuneful songs. The literature on the opera includes many reviews of performances (both the Broadway original and the many subsequent productions by opera companies, university music and theater departments, and regional theaters), descriptive accounts of the genesis of the work or its overall construction,[18] and discussions of whether or not it qualifies as an opera.[19] Considering its gruesome subject matter, the work is full of

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[17] Harrison Birtwistle, *Punch and Judy*, conducted by David Atherton (Etcetera KTC 2014, 1989); David Murray, "Recording Review: *Punch and Judy*," *Tempo*, new series, no. 175 (Dec. 1990), 53; Antony Bye, "Birtwistle's *Gawain*," *The Musical Times*, vol. 132, no. 1779 (May 1991), 231-33; Jonathan Cross, "Lines and Circles: On Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy* and *Secret Theatre*," *Music Analysis*, vol. 13, no. 2-3 (July-October 1994), 203-25. Two reviews of the premiere include Gordon Crosse, "*Punch and Judy*," *Tempo* 85 (summer, 1968), 24-26, and Michael Nyman, "Harrison Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy*," *The Listener* (10 October, 1968), 481.

[18] Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1986); Joanne Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy: The Achievement of Stephen Sondheim* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 207-54; Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 281-310.

[19] George Whitney Martin, "On the Verge of Opera: Stephen Sondheim," *Opera Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 3 (Spring 1989), 76-85. In addition to the two complete recordings of the work, a number of the songs, particularly the ballad "Not While I'm Around," have been recorded individually. *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street—A New Musical* RCA 3379-2-RC (1979) and *Sweeney Todd Live at the New York Philharmonic*, NYP 2001/2002 (2002).

comedy and it never fails to make an audience laugh; it is thus eminently suited to this dissertation.

These operas present very different opportunities to observe how the grotesque functions in musical terms. As with all grotesques, readers may find some of the selected moments unequivocally disgusting or only funny. I try, however, to provide clear reasons as to why I find them grotesque, even when there is only a hint of horror or a glimmer of comedy. While it is not my intention to extract a prescriptive definition in order to identify grotesque passages in any given work, certain musical techniques do succeed rather well, and the selections clearly epitomize the grotesque.

CHAPTER 1

THE THEORY OF THE GROTESQUE

INTRODUCTION

Act II of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1978) opens with a scene both funny and horrifying. As the curtain goes up on the garden of Mrs. Lovett's pie shop, a young man serenades a large and hungry clientele by extolling the virtues of her meat pies, even though she had confessed in Act I to making the worst pies in London. The audience cannot digest this praise easily, however, because they know of the plot to slit the throats of unsuspecting customers and grind the bodies into pie filling that Mrs. Lovett and Sweeney Todd had developed in the Act I finale, "Have a Little Priest." Yet the scene rarely fails to amuse simply because of the presentation: the manic customers demand "More hot pies!" and effusively proclaim "God, that's good;" while Mrs. Lovett babbles on about her success and vaguely hints about the ingredients of the pies (an old family recipe, all to do with herbs). In all, the lengthy scene sustains a balance of horror and comedy, reaching a pinnacle of ludicrousness toward the end when, having run out of pies, Mrs. Lovett turns, sees a new customer heading into Todd's shop, and exclaims, "Bless my eyes/Fresh supplies!" Not only does this moment make manifest the human-into-pie reality for the audience, it invariably gets a solid laugh.

How can this scene be described? The subject is alternately gross, macabre, and disturbing, but the presentation elicits laughter, albeit uncomfortable laughter, as the audience knows instinctively that it should not find it funny. A particularly fine example

of black comedy, the whole scene is best described as "grotesque," a term that we use in "everyday" parlance to describe comically or repulsively distorted things. But this is to dilute its meaning, for the grotesque is more than a simple adjective: it is a complex concept with a definite structure. My goal in this chapter will be to establish a more precise understanding of the term in order to show why this scene and others like it are best labeled grotesque.

A Basic Model of the Grotesque

The scene from *Sweeney Todd* introduces many of the elements of the grotesque upon which modern critical writers agree.[1] This contemporary understanding takes as its starting point the idea that grotesque things or situations incorporate elements both terrifying and ludicrous in a juxtaposition that cannot be easily resolved as either only comic or only frightening. Additionally, the grotesque is directly concerned with aspects of the real world (invariably the body), and contains a degree of abnormality, distortion, exaggeration, and extravagance, all of which can be found in the scene from *Sweeney Todd*. To be sure, there is room for interpretation within this framework, but I will argue that the simultaneity of horror and comedy must be present.

Etymology and Uses of the Term

The term "grotesque" originated in Italy, circa 1500, as a denoter for the decorative wall paintings discovered during the excavations of some Roman ruins (for example, the Domus Aurea of Nero). The word comes from the Italian word for cavern, "grotte," so that "grotesque" literally refers to the "cave-like" atmosphere of the digs and

[1] The majority of writings on the grotesque concern the pictorial arts, literature, and theater. As we will see in Chapter 2, there is a much smaller body of criticism about the grotesque in music.

the artwork therein, though the latter is often anything but dark and dreary.[2] The paintings found among the ruins depicted plant tendrils that flower into human or animal heads, or develop into architectural ornaments, such as columns or scrolls. After their discovery, it became fashionable to have artists decorate homes and churches with paintings emulating the Roman ones, as Raphael (1483-1520) was commissioned to do in the Vatican (circa 1515). In addition, the term also came to be applied to the likes of the ancient sphinxes and such artworks of the more recent past as the griffons and gargoyle decorations on medieval churches.

Finally, certain paintings created around the time the term was coined eventually came to be considered grotesques; they helped shape the modern understanding of the genre's characteristics. For example, Hieronymus Bosch (1450?-1516) and later Pieter Bruegel, the Elder (1525?-1569), depicted the human body in disturbing ways, and also blended serious, frightening, and comic elements in their canvases. Bosch's Hell panel from the triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1504-1510) contains both ant-like people crawling over severed ears and human-like figures with bat wings, while Bruegel's *Dutch Proverbs* (1559) places a man with a deformed squash sprouting branches for a head in the very center of the canvas. The influence of such images can be found right through the twentieth century, particularly in the works of Goya, certain Romantic painters, and the Surrealists.

The word also began to appear—slowly at first—in conjunction with literature, particularly in connection with outlandish, repulsive, and comic passages that both

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[2] Etymologies can be found in Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. by Ulrich Weisstein (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966); Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965); and Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, The Critical Idiom, no. 24 (London: Methuen, 1972).

titillate and disturb the reader. In France this occurred as early as the sixteenth century (François Rabelais in particular), and then arrived in both England (Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope) and Germany (Jean Paul, E.T.A. Hoffmann) in the latter part of the eighteenth century.[3] By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the term can be found consistently to describe art, literature, theatrical offerings, and, very occasionally, musical works.

The grotesque has been both praised and scorned. Although the Roman critic Vitruvius did not know the term, he complained of the unnatural aspects of the paintings now known as grotesques, calling them monstrous.[4] Such complaints reappeared during the late eighteenth century when a more Classical ethos once again prevailed, one that valued order and logic over abnormality, extravagance, and other characteristics now typically associated with works considered grotesque. Thus at this time the term merely meant something crudely funny and perhaps a bit bizarre, and with connotations of negative aesthetic value. This watered down meaning endures, and can be found even today when "grotesque" is used rather casually as synonymous with unnatural, incongruous, or absurd. Conversely, another pervasive meaning, one synonymous primarily with the monstrous, vulgar, or disgusting, removes the comic or ludicrous

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[3] Works by Swift, Pope, Jean Paul, and Hoffmann were called grotesque during the authors' lifetimes, even if they did not use the term themselves. Jean Paul, for example, writes about the annihilating idea of humor in his *Vorschule der Ästhetik* (Hamburg: Perthes, 1804; reprint, Munich: Hanser, 1963), but avoids using the word grotesque. Kayser suggests it was because Jean Paul considered the term too ambiguous (*Grotesque*, 54).

[4] Vitruvius' writings, particularly on architecture, became quite well known in the Renaissance. He writes as follows: "For our contemporary artists decorate the walls with monstrous forms rather than reproducing clear images of the familiar world. Instead of columns they paint fluted stems with oddly shaped leaves and volutes, and instead of pediments arabesques; the same with candelabra and painted edifices, on the pediments of which grow dainty flowers unrolling out of robes and topped, without rhyme or reason, by little figures. The little stems, finally, support half-figures crowned by human or animal heads. Such things, however, never existed, do not now exist, and shall never come into being" (quoted in Kayser, *Grotesque*, 20).

potential, limiting the grotesque to only things that repulse. Thus the range of meanings and applications has been both very wide and sometimes contradictory. In the end, I would suggest that the fundamental meaning of the term lies somewhere between the poles, in a middle range that can account for the simultaneous use of humor and horror; otherwise the term lacks strength and is meaningless.[5]

A SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE ON THE GROTESQUE

The following survey will focus on selected writings drawn from the eighteenth century to the present (Vitruvius' condemnation has already been cited). The writings range from aesthetic studies, artistic credos, and attempts at systematic analyses to narrowly focused monographs and dissertations. Typically, the authors follow one of four basic approaches: they (1) examine the artistic temperament or the act of creating grotesque art; (2) consider the psychology of reception; (3) compare the grotesque to other modes (i.e., irony, the bizarre, the absurd, parody, satire); or (4) gather examples of literature and art labeled grotesque and distinguish common characteristics. Sometimes there is a combination of approaches. Additionally, different perspectives on the subject emerge depending upon the medium with which the writer is concerned: the visual arts, literature, or theater (which could be considered an extension of literature).[6] Although earlier authors tend to focus on only one medium, later writers tend to draw upon examples from all three in order to provide a broader overview.

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[5] I follow Thomson, *Grotesque*, in merely suggesting as opposed to defining. As he himself suggests in the final sentence of his study, the word "definition" is too concrete: rather, there should be guidelines for understanding the grotesque (61).

[6] As mentioned in the Introduction, I will treat music in Chapter 2.

We may divide the literature on the grotesque into two broad groups, with one study, Wolfgang Kayser's *Die Groteske: Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung* (1957), standing as a pivot between them.[7] Prior to Kayser, writers rarely engaged the existing literature on the subject; instead, they typically provided personal thoughts and opinions on the works of art they viewed as grotesque or on the nature of the artist who creates such works. Writers influenced by Kayser, on the other hand, explore the history of the term largely by compiling and comparing the observations of earlier authors with the purpose of analyzing the grotesque as a structured aesthetic genre. The survey, then, will be divided into two parts: pre-Kayser and post-Kayser. By summarizing each critic's views about the grotesque, my goal is to move toward a set of guidelines for understanding the grotesque that can then be applied to music in general and subsequently to the five operas that are the subject of this study.

Finally, if there is a central thread that runs through these views—especially those of the post-Kayser period, my own included—it is that reception plays an important role in the grotesque; indeed, perhaps it is the most important element. For if the artist intends something to be grotesque but the audience does not receive it as such, can it really be considered grotesque? The reverse is also true: the author cannot refute what someone finds grotesque even if it was not intended. As Kayser writes: "[i]t remains true that the grotesque is experienced only in the act of reception. . . it is entirely possible that things are regarded as grotesque even though structurally there is no reason for calling them

[7] Kayser's book first appeared in German (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1957). The 1966 English translation cited in footnote 2 is the version used for all citations in this chapter.

so."[8] For Kayser, then, the grotesque is what and where we want it to be, and this subjectivity makes it all the more difficult to define.

Pre-Kayser Literature

Friedrich Schlegel's *Athenäum* (1798) and *Gespräch über die Poesie* (1800), particularly the latter work's subsection "Brief über den Roman," can stand as starting points for understanding the modern concept of the grotesque (while still retaining connection with the Roman paintings). His comments on the subject are few, but what he does say approaches the modern concept of the term. In *Athenäum*, fragments 75, 305, and 389, as Kayser succinctly summarizes them, Schlegel states that, "grotesqueness is constituted by a clashing contrast between form and content, the unstable mixture of heterogeneous elements, the explosive force of the paradoxical, which is both ridiculous and terrifying."[9] In the slightly later "Brief über den Roman," however, Schlegel presents a different, somewhat vaguer definition, wherein he seems to equate the grotesque with the arabesque, a more playful, ornamental, or fanciful genre that subsequently was distinguished from the grotesque by its lack of troubling or disturbing aspects. I would agree with Kayser that the discussion in the "Brief" is insufficient, specifically because Schlegel no longer addresses the abysmal quality of or the insecurity caused by the grotesque. Kayser does allow, however, that Schlegel acknowledges an ominous aspect in the grotesque, one that "reveals the innermost secret of existence, and thus a new meaning is added to the concept."[10] Schlegel also discusses the genre of

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[8] Kayser, *Grotesque*, 181.

[9] Kayser, *Grotesque*, 53.

[10] Kayser, *Grotesque*, 52.

tragicomedy, something that is important to Victor Hugo and his concept of the grotesque.

Hugo was a strong champion of the grotesque as a multi-faceted mode intimately linked to nature and humanity. In his preface to the play *Cromwell* (1827), Hugo writes of a modern literature of truth, different from the age of epics that predate the founding of Christianity: "everything in creation is not beautiful from the standpoint of mankind. . . the ugly exists beside the beautiful, the misshapen beside the graceful, the grotesque beside the sublime, evil with good, darkness with light."[11] He further asks if the artist has the right to attempt to correct or perfect the Creator's vision, and therefore questions the ideals of Classicists, which embodied concepts such as the graces, good taste, and the practice of ennobling nature (making it better).[12] Ugly, horrible, and comic events and images are as omnipresent in real life as beauty and sublimity; in fact, one cannot exist without the other: "as a glass through which to examine the sublime, as a means of contrast, the grotesque is, in our judgment, the richest source of inspiration that nature can throw open to art."[13] Hugo's statements were designed in part to promote and justify his own work, and while he suggests that a study of the grotesque in art would be welcome, his own approach is less than rigorously analytical.[14]

John Ruskin wrote two analyses of the grotesque, first in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) and again in *Modern Painters* (1856). In the chapter "Grotesque Renaissance"

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[11] Victor Hugo, *Oliver Cromwell*, trans. by I.G. Burnham (Philadelphia: Rittenhouse Press, 1896), 25.

[12] Hugo, *Cromwell*, 25-27.

[13] Hugo, *Cromwell*, 32.

[14] Hugo, *Cromwell*, 32. One example of how Hugo applies his ideas can be found in his novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), where, despite his kindness, Quasimodo is considered a monster because of his physical deformity, while some of those regarded as respectable are the true monsters.

from *The Stones of Venice* he presents a four-part definition of the grotesque. It is composed of ludicrous and fearful elements, resulting in two types of grotesques, the sportive and the terrible, depending on which element prevails: the ludicrous or comic prevails in the sportive, the fearful in the terrible.[15] There are few examples, however, of just one or the other, as they are usually combined to some degree. This agrees with the concept of the grotesque advanced so far, only parsed into smaller pieces. Ruskin also explores the idea of true or noble versus false or ignoble grotesques: noble grotesques reflect man's understanding of his tragic and imperfect nature, and the perceiver knows that at one moment it may seem grotesque, at another truly terrible or sad (the ludicrous element fades), whereas ignoble grotesques only mock, knowing nothing beyond their own jesting.[16] True grotesques are the product of a "*serious* mind," but false are "the result of the *full exertion* of a *frivolous*" mind.[17] Ruskin associates the terrible aspect with anger, awe, or fear of human nature, while the sportive or ludicrous aspect he associates with playfulness in art. He later says that the mind can "*play* with *terror*," summoning images that in another mood would only frighten, but "either in weariness or in irony, [the mind] refrains for the time to acknowledge the true terribleness."[18]

In *Modern Painters*, Ruskin revisits the subject, first by referring the reader to his own "Grotesque Renaissance," and then by providing a modified definition based on three basic psychological conceptions of the grotesque: "healthful but irrational play of the imagination in times of rest," "irregular and accidental contemplation of terrible

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[15] John Ruskin, "Grotesque Renaissance," in *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 2 (London: John W. Lovell, 1851), 126-127.

[16] Ruskin, *Stones*, 141.

[17] Ruskin, *Stones*, 143, his italics.

[18] Ruskin, *Stones*, 140, his italics.

things; or evil in general," and "the confusion of the imagination by the presence of truths which it cannot wholly grasp."[19] As with the sportive and terrible categories, these cannot be considered completely separate processes. Continuing with the idea of play, he adds that "the imagination, when at play, is curiously like bad children, and likes to play with fire" and can be inclined toward evil and the forbidden or inexpressible.[20] In both works, his paths of exploration focus mainly on the actions of the artist, who can create anything from useful grotesques all the way down to art designed merely to excite or frighten, but he also comments on the nature of the people receiving the art and what it means for them to appreciate the different types of grotesques.

It is important to understand the framework of Ruskin's concept of the artist and the receiver, for religious and moral commentary permeates the discussions. He refers continually to the Divine in art, an evil born of sin and fear of death that is opposite to Godly truth and beauty, and—in a strain of unabashed elitism—the mental refinements necessary to either produce or understand true or serious art. These aspects are hard to reconcile with a secular conception of aesthetics. Additionally, he did not feel grotesque art to be the most ideal type of art.[21] Noble men who possess true spiritual awareness, such as Dante in literature or Bosch in art, can produce sublime and serious works that, while grotesque, rank among the highest examples of art (although still not among the

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[19] Ruskin, *Modern Painter*s, vol. 2 (New York: Hurst, 1873), 112.

[20] Ruskin, *Modern Painter*s, 131

[21] To give two examples, Ruskin spares no vitriol in describing Raphael's decorations in the Vatican as "art of great minds debased," and he continues: "no Divine terror will ever be found in the work of the man who wastes a colossal strength in elaborating toys" (*Modern Painters*, 144). In other words, they were created as false grotesques, and to appreciate them as great works of art suggests a lack of seriousness and mental capacity. His opening comments of "Grotesque Renaissance" in *Stones of Venice* consist of withering remarks on the architectural travesties of late-Renaissance Venetian churches built by men seeking to praise themselves rather than God (113ff).

very highest). As Michael Steig writes about Ruskin's basic theory: "the grotesque is an imaginative playing with the forbidden or the inexpressible" and his theory can serve as a solid foundation for understanding the grotesque, provided that Ruskin's concept of evil and other elements of the supernatural are equated with the modern understanding of the unconscious or the Id and can be understood as residing within the human conscious.[22] Thomson regards as noteworthy Ruskin's emphasis of play and how his conception of the terrible appears again in Kayser's own guidelines, although curiously Kayser only mentions Ruskin briefly in a footnote to his chapter on the grotesque in the nineteenth century.[23] In the end, Ruskin can be seen as an important precursor of modern studies of the grotesque.

Walter Bagehot presents one of the more negative statements about the grotesque in his essay "Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; or, Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in English Poetry" (1864).[24] While Bagehot recognizes that real life provides examples of the grotesque, he feels that art, whether visual or literary, should only present the grotesque in order to provide a contrast to pure or true art, which is beautiful, uplifting, educational, undistorted, and clear, with every part drawing attention not to itself but to a cohesive whole—that is, the antithesis of the grotesque.[25] Ornate art, which occupies the middle ground, has excessive detail, but it has value because it can describe things that

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[22] Michael Steig, "Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 29, no. 2 (Winter 1970), 255.

[23] Thomson, *Grotesque*, 15. Kayser, *Grotesque*, 102, endnote 3 (201). Kayser's relegation of Ruskin to an endnote underscores his reliance on German sources and examples.

[24] Bagehot's article originally appeared in *The National Review*, vol. 1 (November 1864); reprinted in *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot*, ed. by Norman St. John-Stevas, vol. 2 (London: Economist, 1986), 321-366.

[25] Bagehot, "Wordsworth," 333.

pure art cannot (through an abundance of adjectives and allusions).[26] Grotesque art presents things that are abnormal, purposely displaying them—images or actions—as difficult or incongruous.[27] Pure art cannot overcome the problems of describing the abnormal, and therefore should not attempt to depict such things. Perhaps Bagehot's most vitriolic statement is the following attack on the naturalism of Browning: "An exceptional monstrosity of horrid ugliness cannot be made pleasing, except it be made to suggest—to recall—the perfection, the beauty from which it is a deviation."[28] Although Bagehot's concept of art harkens back to Classical ideals, he does not deny the admixture of opposites found in the grotesque: he simply feels that art should not celebrate such things.

There are several pre-Kayser studies that seem to form a coherent group because they approach the grotesque from a similar point of view: the grotesque as a merely vulgar form of comedy. The earliest of these, Justus Moser's *Harlekin oder die Verteidigung des Groteske-Komischen* (1761), does not treat the grotesque as the complex type of art that most others acknowledge it to be. As the title suggests, Moser uses the commedia dell'arte character of Harlequin as a prime example of the grotesque, and while some of Harlequin's behavior could qualify as grotesque, he mostly provides uncomplicated, if sometimes vulgar, humor.[29] Thomas Wright's *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1865) is one of the first attempts to assemble many

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[26] Ornate art "is to pure art what a painted statue is to an unpainted one" (Bagehot, "Wordsworth," 344).

[27] Bagehot, "Wordsworth," 353.

[28] Bagehot, "Wordsworth," 360.

[29] Justus Moser, *Harlekin oder die Verteidigung des Groteske-Komischen*, ed. by Dieter Borchmeyer and Ricard Octavia Huch (originally published anonymously, 1761; reprint, Neckargemünd: Mnemosyne, 2000).

examples of art considered grotesque, either by Wright himself or through tradition. Wright clearly presents his thesis by yoking the terms caricature and grotesque in the title, and his analysis consists primarily of describing the comic or satiric aspects of the works cited. He calls various images "monstrously ludicrous," "gleefully malicious," and "fantastically comic."[30] He concludes that caricature always incorporates the ridiculous while the grotesque emphasizes the ugly or fantastic along with the comic, but the bulk of his examples demonstrate that he nevertheless keeps the grotesque primarily in the realm of caricature. John Addington Symonds's essay "Caricature, the Fantastic, the Grotesque" (1890) seeks in many ways to reduce the power of the grotesque completely, choosing essentially to ignore the problematic relationship of comedy and horror by reducing it to merely vulgar humor. More interestingly, he raises the issue that familiarity can reduce the sense of disharmony or incongruity that one initially finds in grotesque images, such as the original Roman paintings or even the fantastical animals of the past (e.g., sphinxes and griffons).[31] Another discussion of the grotesque as a special type of exaggerated caricature appears in Heinrich Schneegans's *Geschichte der grotesken Satire* (1894), which is largely a study of Rabelais. Schneegans states that the "grotesque image must always be intelligible" and that "the satire must not only be clear and transparent, but also striking."[32] For Kayser, Schneegans keeps the grotesque in the lowlands of comedy, and therefore does not advance the discussion of the grotesque as a genre, while Mikhail Bakhtin lambastes Schneegens's implication that the grotesque is

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[30] Thomas Wright, *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Art and Literature* (London: Virtue Brothers, 1865; reprint, New York: Frederick Ungar, 1968), 54, 298.

[31] John Addington Symonds, *Essays Speculative and Suggestive* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1890), 158-59.

[32] Heinrich Schneegans, *Geschichte der grotesken Satire* (Strassburg: Trübner, 1894), 307.

merely about negation and the pursuit of exaggeration for the purposes of satire.[33] Since, as I will argue, ambivalence and an irresolvable blending of horror and humor are the hallmarks of grotesque art, to imply that all grotesques must be transparent or only serve one type of art (satire) reduces its other effects, the very effects other authors so admire about it.

Finally, we may close our discussion of the pre-Kayser critics with G.K. Chesterton, who approaches the grotesque in his monograph *Robert Browning* (1903): first as a reflection of the real world, whereby the poet simply and objectively describes a real side of nature that is both odd, bizarre, or frightening and comical or ludicrous; second as an artistic device that allows the reader to experience the world anew; and third as a particular type of temperament, one that specifically likes "horse-play," however inappropriate it may be to the subject.[34] The artist can use the grotesque in a serious way or in a playful way, although this suggests that the grotesque is approached through the artist's temperament. However, as with Ruskin, Chesterton does not ignore reception since his main point is that an artist can use the grotesque to present the world to the receiver in a truthful way, a relatively positive assessment that is similar to Hugo's feeling that art must reflect and express all that is around us.

I have omitted a number of other pre-Kayser writings on the grounds that most of them provide similar views on the subject and add little that is new. Moreover, there are more exhaustive surveys in a number of the post-Kayser studies discussed below.

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[33] Kayser, *Grotesque*, 104; Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 304-308.

[34] G.K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (New York: Macmillan, 1905), 149-53.

Wolfgang Kayser's *Die Groteske: Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*

As mentioned at the beginning of this survey, Wolfgang Kayser's 1957 study and its English translation, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1966), represent a shift in the study of the grotesque, specifically because his study is more a historiography than a collection of personal observations, although it includes a number of those as well. Kayser begins by offering an etymology of the word, and then by delving into some of the existing critical studies on the grotesque. He discusses examples of art, folk tales, and literature that are generally considered to be grotesque, using them to derive common characteristics of the grotesque. And though he favors German sources, which skews his definition somewhat, he succeeds in developing the first real generalized theory of the grotesque's structure that can be applied when discussing other examples.

Kayser's theory of the grotesque consists of three main concepts. First, "the grotesque is the estranged world."[35] In other words, the grotesque presents a familiar world in a different perspective, thus making it alien or estranged. The reaction to this strangeness can be laughter, horror, or both. Kayser claims that this estranged world is a place in which we do not want to stay, and that it arouses anxiety about life, rather than a fear of death. What causes this alienation is an impersonal force, the psychologically impersonal (like the "it" in "it is raining"; "das es" in German), that Kayser also labels the uncanny, by which he seems to suggest the supernatural. Second, "The grotesque is a play with the absurd," which refers mainly to the creation of grotesque art: the artist

[35] Kayser, *Grotesque*, 184.

plays with the nature of existence, sometimes with laughter and sometimes with horror.[36] Successful grotesques will have some trace of such playfulness, which provides liberation from the "dark forces which lurk in and behind our world and have power to estrange it."[37] Kayser's final observation is that the grotesque is "an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world."[38] Kayser essentially substitutes the demonic for the terrible or fearsome quality discussed elsewhere, and thus seems to place those aspects in the realm of the irrational or even supernatural, although he discusses the aspect of dreams and the blending of images one finds there. The invocation of the demonic, however, would seem to rob the grotesque of its link to the familiar world and partially negates Kayser's own statement that the grotesque is the known world made suddenly strange. Nevertheless, he feels that laughter, or the recognition of something ludicrous, helps the receiver confront and conquer the alienated world of the grotesque.

Although Kayser's theory is really the first to offer concrete analytical methods regarding the grotesque, it did not escape criticism. Thus both Clayborough and Steig, both of whom are interested in the psychology of the grotesque, argue that Kayser is too subjective and, in particular, does not follow through on two important points: (1) how the terrible and the comic function in the grotesque structure, and (2) the nature of reception and creation. Indeed, Kayser's treatment of the reception issue is puzzling. Though he refers to it, he dismisses the issue by saying that his study is not the place to

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[36] Kayser, *Grotesque*, 187. Kayser also provides an interesting quote from a poem by Goethe (from *West-Östlicher Divan*): "And to him who plays gaily with the absurd/The absurd is likely to be suited," suggesting that too much frivolity may result in the artist becoming frivolous. This comment is similar to Ruskin's views on the ignoble grotesque and the wasting of great talent, such as Raphael's, on pointless decorations. Johannes Wolfgang von Goethe, *Poems of the West and the East: West-Eastern Divan/West-östlicher Divan: Bi-Lingual Edition of the Complete Poems* (Bern and New York: P. Lang, 1998).

[37] Kayser, *Grotesque*, 188.

[38] Kayser, *Grotesque*, 188.

discuss it.[39] On the other hand, Thomson, despite some misgivings, properly credits Kayser with being the first to treat the grotesque as a meaningful aesthetic category, one with a coherent and a comprehensive structure of its own—which was Kayser's stated goal.[40]

Post-Kayser Literature

Our discussion of the post-Kayser literature will focus on the work of seven critics, all of whom show Kayser's influence to one extent or another. In *The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose* (1963), Lee Byron Jennings begins his discussion of the grotesque by citing examples drawn from various sources (books, newspapers, etc.) in which items have been described as grotesque: gargoyles, body modifications, Picasso paintings, cartoons, movie roles, plays, animals, a building, and the contorted corpse of a crash victim, among others, along with a variety of synonyms for the term that can be inferred from the examples, including preposterous, comic, eccentric, odd, absurd, freakish, ugly, deformed, monstrous, and gruesome.[41] He proposes to answer the following question: What might the common denominator be? For Jennings, it must reside somewhere between the two poles represented by the range of synonyms—frightening to comical—and this appears to be a most logical conclusion. His conclusions are worth quoting:

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[39] See the criticism in Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, 63-69, and Steig, "Defining the Grotesque," 253-54.

[40] Thomson, *Grotesque*, 19.

[41] Lee Byron Jennings, *The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 3-5.

> [T]he grotesque object always displays a *combination of fearsome and ludicrous qualities*—or, to be more precise, it simultaneously arouses reactions of fear and amusement in the observer.[42]
>
> [T]hese seemingly contradictory tendencies are combined in the phenomenon itself and…the mechanism of their combination is the key to its understanding.[43]
>
> [I]n view of the disturbing nature of the fear current and the well-known capacity of the playful, comic tendency for providing relief…it seems reasonable to suppose that…there is a *disarming mechanism* at work. The formation of fear images is intercepted, at its very onset, but the comic tendency, and the resulting object reflects this interaction of opposing forces.[44]

For Jennings, then, the perception of the combination of horror and comedy is located both in the receiver and in the item itself, an idea already found in the other critics, though not always as explicitly. Jennings also addresses the concept of play that others have used, saying that "the playfulness is constantly on the verge of collapsing and giving way to the concealed horror."[45] In all, Jennings' constant theme is that the ludicrous functions as a disarming mechanism, which at least implies that he feels the comic potential is the dominant one, even though he fails to explain exactly how the disarming is achieved. And if his assertion that "[t]he grotesque is *the demonic made trivial*" seems to point away from his statement about play, such contradictions are, as we have seen, prevalent in discussions of the grotesque, and reinforce the complex nature of the mode.[46]

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[42] Jennings, *Ludicrous Demon*, 10, his italics.

[43] Jennings, *Ludicrous Demon*, 11.

[44] Jennings, *Ludicrous Demon*, 14-15, his italics.

[45] Jennings, *Ludicrous Demon*, 16.

[46] Jennings, *Ludicrous Demon*, 17, his italics.

Like Kayser, Jennings has his critics. Thus Steig states that Jennings does not adequately define some of the terms, and that the terms fearsome and ludicrous are at best questionable in terms of their being "adequate to account for all artistic phenomena whose grotesqueness seems evident."[47] Jennings, Steig claims, merely uses these terms to denote the extremities between which the grotesque can be found. Despite his reservations, however, Steig states that Jennings' theories come closest to the mark.

A very different opinion concerning the psychology of the grotesque appears in Arthur Clayborough's *The Grotesque in English Literature* (1965). Clayborough too provides an etymology of the term along with a sizable survey of the literature before presenting his own theory of art, one greatly indebted to Jungian psychology. His theory consists of dividing art into two axes: progressive-regressive and positive-negative. In terms of the grotesque, the progressive tendency—associated with directed thinking, the conscious, and the rational—rejects disharmony, while the regressive—associated with dream thinking, the unconscious, and the contemplation of the eternal—enjoys the incongruities.[48] Both exist simultaneously within our psyches, just as they do in the grotesque. The progressive-regressive axis explains why we are both fascinated and repelled by grotesque things. And whereas Kayser says we do not want to live in the alienated world, and therefore want to find ways to dismiss the demonic (primarily through laughter), Clayborough says we enjoy the oppositions.[49] The second pair, the positive-negative axis, delineates a line between art that has no inner conflict and art that

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[47] Steig, "Defining the Grotesque," 255.

[48] Clayborough, *English Literature*, 73, 79-80. The concepts of directed thinking and dream thinking come from Carl Jung, *The Psychology of the Unconscious*, trans. by B. M. Hinkle (London: Kegan Paul, 1933), and *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (New York: Pantheon, 1959).

[49] Clayborough, *English Literature*, 74.

is highly conflicted. From these two axes, Clayborough proposes four types of art: progressive-positive, progressive-negative, regressive-positive, and regressive-negative. It is the progressive-negative and regressive-negative types that have the most affinity with the grotesque. An example of the former is grotesquerie used for its shock value, such as in caricatures and satires designed to educate or from which a progressive-minded person will seek explanation.[50] Because the regressive-minded person enjoys the dream-like state and seeks escapism (particularly from the limits of the material world), regressive-negative art is associated with ambivalence and the subjective, and there is no need to find specific meaning beyond the experiences themselves.[51] Yet as always in connection with the grotesque, assertions gather critics, and Thomson states that Clayborough's theory must be approached with caution, that it does little other than restate (with much elaboration) that the grotesque involves disharmony, conflict, and a sense of dislocation, and that it can be used as an aggressive tool in other modes, particularly satire.[52]

One of the most extravagant appreciations of the grotesque appears in Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1966).[53] Bakhtin's writings on the grotesque have been very influential in many fields of study, but for the purposes of this study I have

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[50] Clayborough, *English Literature*, 101. One example would be Swift's "A Modest Proposal." The progressive-minded reader will seek an explanation, and one can be found in realizing that Swift's cold, analytic approach is a parody of a government document, and that the whole is meant as an ironic attack on the British government and its treatment of Ireland's problems.

[51] Clayborough, *English Literature*, 88-89. To return to Swift's "A Modest Proposal": the regressive-minded person may simply enjoy Swift's images of child rearing and cooking. Clayborough devotes the main portion of his book to applying his theories to the work of Swift, Coleridge, and Dickens, authors known for their satirical agendas.

[52] Thomson, *Grotesque*, 71, 18.

[53] The original Russian edition appeared in 1966. The first English translation, by Helene Iswolsky, was published in 1968 (Cambridge: MIT Press) and subsequently reprinted in 1984 (see note 33).

decided to embrace Kayser's viewpoint more closely, as I feel it pertains more strongly to the operas under discussion. A study of twentieth-century opera through the lens of Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque would certainly be worthwhile, and I will say more on this in the Epilogue.

For Bakhtin, Kayser's conception of the grotesque is too pessimistic, while he views it as carnivalesque. Since Bakhtin is looking primarily at sixteenth-century France, his conception of the grotesque is embedded in the Middle Ages. His term is "grotesque realism" and he associates it with folk culture; its roots are in Carnival and its topsy-turvy world in which the customary hierarchies are overturned. In the chapter "The Grotesque World of the Body," Bakhtin uses Rabelais as an example of the unfettered exuberance of the grotesque. For Bakhtin, the grotesque is about ambivalence, the union of negative and positive reactions, the pleasure in making fun of things, and the delight in recognizing the skills of the artist.[54] He further celebrates the grotesque body—bodily functions, its orifices, and protuberances—as something integral to human nature, not something obscene that needs to be cleaned up and made presentable. The grotesque body is about becoming something else, forever transforming, and so grotesque art can continually provide new reactions and fuel new interpretations. The grotesque body is open, incomplete, and unfinished. Grotesque laughter is liberating and life affirming, not static, but dialectic. The grotesque seeks genesis of life; its growth is constant. Imperfection and renewal are integral parts, just as birth and death are its contradictory poles.

[54] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 304.

Bakhtin begins by criticizing those who do not accept the grotesque in all of its possibilities and limit it to either a branch of comedy or a debasing of true art (Schneegans, for example). He then draws on examples from Rabelais to demonstrate the grotesque in action. In terms of the ideas of other critics we have examined, such as Ruskin's invocation of noble and serious grotesques or Kayser's opinion that the grotesque involves the world made estranged, a place in which no one wants to linger, Bakhtin's world encompasses everything all at once. Nothing is truly foreign, estranged, or inexpressible; rather, it is all there, if we just choose to look at it, and artists should be admired for presenting it. Only Hugo is as enthusiastic in his appreciation of the genre, though Bakhtin rejects the Romantic grotesque, including Hugo, as being elitist and negative.

Bakhtin's writings on Rabelais have been enormously influential, not just in the field of sixteenth-century French studies, but in other areas of literary study, other art forms, and popular culture in general. Richard M. Berrong tries to address the broad ramifications of Bakhtin's interpretation of the grotesque, carnivalization, and dialogism, and states that, "to assess (or even summarize) the influence of Bakhtin's Rabelais book on criticism in general (both literary and extraliterary) is completely beyond my competence."[55] *Sweeney Todd* is one work in particular where Bakhtin's theories have particular relevance, simply because it is a work that revels in all aspects of the body. For many scholars, Bakhtin and Kayser form the two main threads for discussing the

[55] Richard M. Berrong, *Rabelais and Bakhtin: Popular Culture in* Gargantua and Pantagruel (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 4.

grotesque;[56] however, since Kayser provides a few more guidelines and addresses a broader scope of examples, I have chosen to focus more on him for the present discussion.

Frances Barasch provided a very useful forward to the 1967 reissue of Thomas Wright's *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Art and Literature*.[57] Barasch begins by presenting an overview of the literature on the grotesque in order to place Wright's approach in context (Wright thought of the grotesque principally as a branch of caricature), and then sets forth her own guidelines for understanding the grotesque, touching on the issues of disharmony, comedy and horror, and a number of other concepts already mentioned. Barasch's own comments on the genre are worthwhile, but her concluding section—in which she attempts to demonstrate, through selective citations, that Wright was actually not as far off the modern idea of the grotesque as he may at first seem—does not convince, mainly because Wright so clearly believes that the grotesque is simply part of the comic genre and does not necessarily find anything of horror or genuine disgust in his examples.

In his brief article "Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis" (1970), Michael Steig's goal is to provide a definition that encompasses the psychological issues surrounding reception that he feels others did not thoroughly address. Steig advocates Thomas Cramer's statement that, "the grotesque is the feeling of anxiety aroused by means of the comic pushed to an extreme," and conversely, that "the grotesque is the

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[56] In addition to Berrong's book, Bakhtin's writings on the grotesque are addressed by a number of other authors. Peter Hitchcock, "The Grotesque of the Body Electric," *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences: No Last Words*, ed. by Michael E. Gardiner and Michael M. Bell (London; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 78-94, and Ralf Remshardt, *Staging the Savage God: The Grotesque in Performance* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 46-48 in particular.

[57] Frances Barasch, introduction to Wright, vii-lvii.

defeat, by means of the comic, of anxiety in the face of the inexplicable."[58] Again, as with Jennings, a near paradox forms part of the definition. Steig writes:

> the complementarity of the fearsome and the comic allows us to move beyond the rather mechanical notion of the comic as solely a defensive measure against anxiety: in the grotesque they are more complexly related, in that the extravagant use of the comic can *create* anxiety, as well as relieve it.[59]

And if, as we have seen, these ideas, or the threads of them, are presented by some of the other critics, Steig differs by choosing not to parse out the structure but rather to view it as a whole. When Steig finally presents his definition, it is, in its attempt to cover many bases, necessarily complex and should be given in full:

> The grotesque involves the managing of the uncanny by the comic. More specifically: a) When the infantile material is primarily threatening, comic techniques, including caricature, diminish the threat through degradation or ridicule; but at the same time, they may also enhance anxiety through their aggressive implications and through the strangeness they lend to the threatening figure. b) In what is usually called the comic-grotesque, the comic in its various forms lessens the threat of identification with infantile drives by means of ridicule; at the same time, it lulls inhibitions and makes possible on a preconscious level the same identification that it appears to the conscience or superego to prevent. In short, both extreme types of the grotesque (and there are many instances in between) return us to childhood—the one attempts a liberation from fear, while the other attempts a liberation from inhibition; but in both a state of unresolved tension is the most common result, because of the intrapsychic conflicts involved.[60]

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[58] Thomas Cramer, *Das Groteske bei E.T.A. Hoffmann* (Munich: Fink, 1966), 26, quoted in Steig, "Defining the Grotesque," 256, with his translation.

[59] Steig, "Defining the Grotesque," 256.

[60] Steig, "Defining the Grotesque," 259-260.

Steig's psychological referents—the superego, the uncanny, the invocation of childhood, and the ideas of tension and liberation—place his understanding of the grotesque strongly under Freud's influence.[61] Steig believes that his definition, admittedly ungainly, accounts for the source of the demonic and illuminates the role of the uncanny, caricature, and comedy, as well as presenting the processes involved in receiving the grotesque. He accounts for the dual function of comedy, noting that it produces both free and inhibited (or defensive) laughter and the possibility of hysteria in reaction to extreme grotesques, but in hanging on to the word "uncanny," he recalls Kayser's references to the demonic and the supernatural.

Thomson contra Steig: Thomson believes that Steig's intensely psychological approach ignores the possibility that the conflicting elements are sometimes obvious on the surface level, and therefore do not require plumbing the depths of the psyche, although that does not mean that they are not still perplexing or disconcerting.[62] Steig ends with an exhortation to test the applicability of his definition on other grotesques, as he uses only a few characters from Dickens' novels as examples.

Philip Thomson's short book *The Grotesque* (1972) offers the most basic, and yet in many ways the most helpful, introduction to the grotesque.[63] He summarizes and evaluates dozens of primarily English and German studies from the eighteenth century through 1970. And while he gives each one only cursory attention, he draws from them areas of agreement, which he subsequently presents as the chief components of the

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[61] Another point of reference is Freud's influential 1919 essay "The Uncanny [Das Unheimliche]," trans. by James Strachey, *Standard Edition*, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 217-256.

[62] Thomson, *Grotesque*, 61.

[63] The book is part of a series of short studies designed to introduce various literary modes and genres through a survey of the existing literature on each topic.

grotesque: disharmony, a yoking of the comic and the terrifying, extravagance and exaggeration, and abnormality.[64] Admitting that these elements overlap, he nevertheless separates them in order to examine each of them individually, as opposed to Steig, for example, who pursues a more holistic approach. Thomson subsequently defines the grotesque as:

> *the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response*. It is significant that this clash is paralleled by the ambivalent nature of the abnormal as present in the grotesque: we might consider a secondary definition of the grotesque to be '*the ambivalently abnormal.*'[65]

This definition accounts for both the content and the reception of the grotesque: the incompatibles are disharmony and the yoking of terror and the comic; work refers to the actual item as created by the artist; and response is located in the receiver. And by twice referring to the abnormal, Thomson emphasizes its importance in the grotesque, for there is abnormality in the content (the confusing play between disparate elements present in the artwork) and there is the receiver's opinion of what is considered abnormal, a question that we will examine below.

Along with the plentiful citations of works on the grotesque, Thomson incorporates as examples a number of familiar and not so familiar literary works (there are a few images) to demonstrate how the grotesque operates and where it can be identified. Concomitantly, he pursues another agenda: distinguishing the grotesque mode from other literary modes, among them irony, satire, burlesque, parody, and the bizarre. While there may be grotesque moments in a parody or satire, deciding which

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[64] Thomson, *Grotesque*, 20-27.

[65] Thomson, *Grotesque*, 27, his italics.

mode best describes a work becomes an issue of which label is most accurate. As Thomson points out, most other modes permit the receiver to resolve the disparity between what is presented and what is meant, whereas in the grotesque this disparity remains unresolved. The grotesque can be used as a tool to advance the satire, increase the irony, or strengthen the parody, but if the grotesque overwhelms the other mode it is serving, the whole becomes grotesque.[66] To simplify this distinction greatly: the grotesque generally involves emotional or visceral reactions while the other modes are usually more rational—even the absurd, where the point is to be anti-rational but not necessarily comical or terrifying.[67] As we saw, one of Kayser's definitions of the grotesque is that it is a play with the absurd. But whereas Thomson's absurd is rather literal, meaning contrary to reason, Kayser's is broader, more in line with Thomson's idea of the abnormal.

Thomson's final objective is to discuss the functions and purposes of the grotesque, that is, the effects it can have on the receiver. He proposes several: it can be used aggressively, it can alienate, it can create tension through its irresolvable nature, it can be merely playful, and it can be unintentional. These roles, along with a fleshing out of Thomson's other elements of the grotesque, will be discussed in more detail below, as I believe they come closest to expressing the nature of the grotesque.

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[66] Again, the reader is reminded of Swift's "A Modest Proposal," where grotesque ideas are used to further a specific agenda that can be understood rationally, unless one becomes so engrossed in the grotesque aspect that the larger purpose disappears.

[67] Some absurdist dramas definitely achieve grotesque proportions because of the aggressive presentation of the subject matter, with characters conversing in apparently random responses to each other's statements concerning distressing themes (e.g., incest in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*, 1964).

Of the studies on the grotesque that have followed Thomson, all are indebted to the writers already discussed, and need not be summarized at length.[68] I would, however, single out Geoffrey Galt Harpham's *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (1982). Harpham focuses primarily on reception, and after a survey not unlike the one presented here, he concludes that, although the idea of what is grotesque varies from one generation to another (something to which Symonds also alludes, but for different purposes), there are some constants, particularly in terms of how the audience reacts. In addition, he provides a succinct observation relevant to any study of the grotesque in any particular field:

> As an adjective [the word "grotesque"] has no descriptive value; its sole function is to represent a condition of overcrowding or contradiction in the place where the modifier should be. This place can never be occupied by any other single adjective but only by a number of adjectives not normally found together…The word designates a condition of being just out of focus, just beyond the reach of language." [69]

But yet language is what we must use to describe what is found within things called grotesque. Therefore I will continue by setting up a series of guidelines that will be used in this study for understanding the grotesque.

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[68] Recent studies include Dieter Meindl, *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), and John R. Clark, *On the Modern Satiric Grotesque* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991). Elisheva Rosen's *Sur le grotesque: L'ancien et le nouveau dans la réflexion ésthétique* (Saint Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1991) is a call for further study of the rich history of the grotesque in France.

[69] Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 3.

GUIDELINES FOR THE GROTESQUE

Of what, then, does the grotesque consist? What follows attempts to sum up its salient characteristics, with the caveat that there is one feature that stretches over all of them: reception.

The Components

Disharmony

One of the primary features of the grotesque is disharmony, more specifically, disharmony that cannot be resolved. The Roman paintings that gave rise to the term usually incorporated at least two elements that cannot exist together in nature: for example, a plant tendril blooming into the body of a man or animal or bearing the weight of a column or temple. While not frightening *per se*, especially since we have become accustomed to such embellishments, these images are not found in nature and therefore present some degree of disharmony. Similarly, art works going back as far as the ancient sphinxes and medieval griffons (long before the term was coined) can be considered grotesque, even though they do not necessarily provoke laughter or fear; at the time of their creation, however, they were intended—as were the gargoyles on medieval cathedrals—to inspire awe and terror or be ridiculous.[70] The disharmony found in paintings and sculptures that blend more overtly frightening and comic elements is more in keeping with the modern concept of the grotesque. In literary or theatrical works, the disharmony involves the mixing of genres, particularly horrible or distasteful situations or elements with comedic ones, as with the scene from *Sweeney Todd*.

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[70] As noted above, John Addington Symonds, in order to advance his theory of the grotesque as a form of caricature and therefore mainly about humor and mockery, declares that such images are no longer grotesque owing to their familiarity (*Essays*, 158-59).

Comedy and Terror

Further, there is a tendency among critics to view the grotesque not only as a mixture of comedy *and* terror, but, more specifically, a mixture in which the relationship between the two cannot be resolved. The two interpenetrate each other, with the full impact of the horrible being mitigated by the presence of something that causes laughter, while the urge to laugh is tempered by the realization that it is probably inappropriate because of the simultaneous presence of something terrible. This describes an almost circular route of reaction; and items that are purely humorous or frightening cannot be considered grotesque because they do not sustain this. Nevertheless, as we observed above, there are those who have linked the grotesque with only the comic or the terrible, and to some degree those views persist.

First, there is the equating of the grotesque with base, exaggerated, or vulgar comedy and caricature, a view that does not account for any real sense of horror or repulsion. This association persisted mainly in nineteenth-century Germany and, to a lesser degree, in England, though it can still be found to some degree today. Through exaggeration, however, the images that would be only comic in one situation can take on terrifying elements, as when playing with a child by making faces: at first the child laughs, but eventually, if the face is contorted enough, the child will cry or scream in fright.[71] Second, the use of the word grotesque as synonymous with gross, disgusting, macabre (dealing with death), or bizarre, with no recognition or mention of the possibility of humor, is perhaps its most common colloquial use today. Yet the grotesque loses any

[71] This example describes the effect of the grotesque very well. Thomson uses it when describing abnormality (*Grotesque*, 24-25), but as the components of the grotesque are so interconnected, it can be used to illuminate all the facets of the grotesque.

sense of distinction or purpose if allowed merely to substitute for such a broad—and single-minded—spectrum of meanings. As a result, the theoretical consensus is that if the text or image can be shown to be simply comic or terrifying, usually by the discovery of additional material, it cannot be labeled grotesque. As Thomson points out, "the *unresolved* nature of the grotesque conflict is important, and helps to mark off the grotesque from other modes or categories of literary discourse."[72] To be sure, other literary modes have conflict, primarily expectation versus realization, but upon further development, the conflict is usually resolved. For example, most theories of comedy explain the comic as something in which expectation is flouted; but once the joke has played out, there is resolution.[73] Even terrifying things can eventually be explained, whether to comforting or tragic ends; but then there is resolution as well. The truly grotesque maintains that irresolvable quality.

Extravagance and Exaggeration

The grotesque typically involves some extravagance and exaggeration, whereby features or situations are distorted. But here, too, there is a caveat: most post-Kayser critics discuss how the grotesque functions within a recognizable framework of familiar concepts that are some how altered, or as Kayser states, it is the familiar made estranged. The pre-Kayser critics are less explicit, but one can infer from their examples that the elements comprising the grotesque image or situation are taken from the real world. Thus the grotesque rarely partakes of the truly fantastic, as does science fiction, but it can

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[72] Thomson, *Grotesque*, 21.

[73] This forms the basis of Freud's analysis of comedy. See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. by James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1960).

introduce dream-like images, which are generally amalgams of everyday items and events.[74] If, however, the author of a fantastic story tries to create parallels with the known world in these realms, the resulting disharmony between what is symbolic, real, or purely fantastic may develop into something grotesque, provided both contingents—horror and comedy—are also present. This is the situation with puppet shows, for example, particularly the Punch and Judy-style entertainments. Even though the audience knows that they could never act as Punch does in civilized society, they can relate to how Punch's childish whims escalate into murder (it plays into the psychological Id). Through the use of inanimate objects mimicking real people, actions are alienated and somehow suddenly laughable, and thus inimitably grotesque.

While exaggeration lies at the heart of many items considered grotesque, particularly in how everyday things or occurrences are transfigured, extravagance is a more surface detail found in the actual presentation. In the scene from *Sweeney Todd*, we see a familiar world—diners at a small restaurant enjoying their food—but we see it from a different perspective because of the additional information not known to those being observed. Nevertheless, the scene is also amusing because of the exaggerated enthusiasm of the patrons (who at a restaurant really gets that worked up over meat pies?) and their extravagant repetitions of "God, that's good" and "More hot pies!" Dwelling upon ideas or images pushed beyond the limits of normal physical properties or accepted decorum and restraint is also emblematic of the exaggeration and extravagance found in many

[74] Most fantasy stories establish their own worlds, where different rules—either physical or behavioral—reign. Within these set paradigms of normality, anything is possible because the author controls all parameters (called "world building"), and it becomes more difficult to judge if something is horrific or comic. Gerhard Mensching, in "Das Groteske im modernen Drama," Ph.D. dissertation (Universität Bonn, 1961), suggests that the possibility of the play between the real and the unreal in a story of fantasy can be a source of the grotesque (37).

grotesques. Thus exaggeration comes in the form of the level of distortion used, while extravagance is the bravado with which the artist pulls off the effect. Both have a powerful effect on the audience because we recognize what is being exaggerated even if we cannot always pinpoint exactly why it provokes the dual reaction of comedy and horror.

Abnormality

Some type of abnormality lies at the heart of most grotesque things, although agreeing upon what is "normal" is difficult because it will vary somewhat from person to person and dramatically from culture to culture. For example, a European may find a sacred African mask grotesque, a caricature of a face with distended or awkwardly realized features according to Western standards of representational art, and therefore both disturbing and laughable. Africans, however, regard the mask with awe, as a symbol of the spirit world, perhaps frightening if it represents a vengeful god or comic if a mirthful god. Conversely, though a state portrait of a royal personage is designed to impress in Western society, someone unfamiliar with the conventions may find the elaborate clothing, jewels, and frozen-stiff pose ludicrous and frightening. Abnormal things can be funny or fearsome; and the degree of abnormality influences what the reaction will be. Where the line between fear and amusement blurs is where the grotesque lies.[75] Again, think of making faces to a child: the more exaggerated, and therefore abnormal, the face is made, the more extreme the child's reaction. The degree of abnormality can result in the work being considered offensive, gratuitous, ludicrous, or frightening. It is this ambivalence about the exact nature of the abnormality in the image

[75] Thomson, *Grotesque*, 21.

or situation that Thomson refers to when he defines the grotesque as the ambivalently abnormal. As we saw, some critics—especially the "classicists"—question the reasons for creating such works of art in the first place, claiming that they diminish the concept of art, which should strive to attain nobility through beauty and perfection. The grotesque, though, delves into darkness, madness, dreams, instability, and chaos, but always presents something ludicrous at the same time.

Functions and Purposes of the Grotesque

Finally, there is the question of why an artist employs the grotesque. Surely, the grotesque can shock, bewilder, and disorient, or, no less effectively, alienate the receiver. As Kayser states, it is the familiar world suddenly made unfamiliar (though still recognizable). The grotesque can liberate, inhibit, or produce some combination of the two, as we saw with the idea that comedy pushed to an extreme can be frightening; but it can also render the disturbing aspects less harmful. And here, then, is the paradox of the grotesque: laughter liberates the receiver from the full impact of the horrible, but the laughter is defensive (except in Bakhtin's interpretation, where it is fully life affirming) and therefore creates additional tension, so that there is no resolution. This accounts for the difficulty of explaining the nature of laughter in the grotesque and why hysterical laughter is one reaction to extremely grotesque things. Yet there are playful grotesques, where an artist invents or experiments with bizarre or abnormal ideas for their own sake,

producing works of nonsense that may veer toward the grotesque.[76] Such purely playful grotesques are few and far between.

Finally, there is the possibility of the unintentional grotesque, when the audience perceives something as grotesque even though it was not intended to be so. Images painted with poor technique and distorted perspective or a romantic poem with excessive description and containing awkward metaphors that bring to mind unexpected mental images can be unintentionally grotesque. The world of theatrical performance can also have its share of unintentionally grotesque moments: examples would include a part marred by amateurish acting or a performer who does not physically suit a role.

CONCLUSION

In the end, although there are clearly recognizable features that need to be present, the grotesque relies primarily on the perceptions of the audience, on the receiver's inability to resolve the simultaneity of the comic and the horrible. Although the contents of the grotesque—the specific images or ideas that are juxtaposed—can be analyzed with the hope of discovering the equation, what audiences do or do not perceive as being grotesque will come down mainly to personal opinion and feeling. And there will be disagreement! For what I find grotesque may seem only funny or only distressing to another. Yet I hope that the analyses that follow will convince others that particular scenes in Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd,* Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu,* Penderecki's *Die Teufel von Loudun,* and Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy* can be described as grotesque.

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[76] Examples would include the nonsense verses of Lewis Carroll in the *Alice in Wonderland* books. For example, the "Jabberwocky" from *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1872; London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971): "Twas brillig, and the slithy toves/Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:/All mimsy were the borogoves,/And the mome raths outgrabe."

CHAPTER 2

MUSIC AND THE GROTESQUE

INTRODUCTION

Of the critics surveyed in Chapter 1, only two extend their discussion of the grotesque to music, Wolfgang Kayser and Philip Thomson, and even their comments are extremely brief. In his preface to *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, Kayser states that he cannot begin to write an exhaustive history of the grotesque, and has, therefore, chosen to focus on literature and the visual arts. About music he writes the following: "compositions like Ravel's 'Grotesques,' Alban Berg's 'Wozzeck,' certain characteristic passages in the works of Richard Strauss, and Orff's 'Carmina Burana' repeatedly tempted me to study the nature of the grotesque in music."[1] Of the pieces Kayser mentions, Berg's *Wozzeck* will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 and Ravel's *Sérénade grotesque* for piano will be discussed in this chapter.[2] It is unfortunate that Kayser did not include even a few brief comments on the nature of grotesque music, but his decision to make this exclusion is understandable: such a discussion would have lengthened the book and required introducing musical terminology to non-musicians. In addition, perhaps Kayser himself lacked the musical-analytical background, in which case it is fortunate that he did cut the discussion short.

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[1] Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, 10.

[2] There is no piece by Ravel entitled *Grotesques*. Ravel did, however, identify an early piano piece—entitled *Sérénade* in his autograph manuscript—as *Sérénade Grotesque* in his short autobiography, and perhaps Kayser read about it there ("Esquisse autobiographie," ed. by Roland-Manuel, *La Revue musicale*, no. 187 [December, 1938], 20 [211]). If this is not the piece that Kayser had in mind, perhaps he considered some of Ravel's works grotesque in general (*La valse* and "Scarbo" from *Gaspard de la nuit* would be prime examples).

Thomson's single reference to music in his book *The Grotesque* appears at the end of his chapter on the terms related to the grotesque. This is the entire passage:

> The often intensely physical nature of the grotesque is logical when one recalls that the term was originally applied to the visual arts. Although the extension of 'grotesque' to the verbal arts occurred fairly early, the word has always been applied to the visual rather than the purely verbal. There is nothing abstract about the grotesque. I do not know of a grotesque piece of music, nor does it seem likely that the term could be legitimately applied to music, except in a very extended sense.[3]

While music—particularly instrumental music—may be abstract, Thomson's denial of the possibility of the grotesque is unfortunate and demonstrates a lack of understanding of how affective, emotionally and even physically, music can actually be. music offers as much possibility as any other artistic medium for presenting the incongruity of simultaneously frightening and ludicrous elements, which, as we have seen, is the crux of the grotesque equation in both the visual arts and literature. Every art form has a vocabulary of commonly understood genres and traits that have evolved over time; they become familiar to an audience through exposure. Through innovation, artists develop new ideas typically based on existing paradigms, and by doing this the artists provide a potential audience with a framework in which to process the new elements; conversely, the audience may also rail against the innovations (and the artist), feeling that the existing paradigms do not need to be altered. Thus, just as an artist or writer treats familiar images or ideas in new ways or juxtaposes them with novel concepts, a composer manipulates sounds, forms, and genres. Moreover, music is sound in motion, a very physical property, and as Lee Byron Jennings notes, grotesque ideas have more

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[3] Thomson, *Grotesque*, 57.

prominence when they are in motion.[4] In all, to analyze music in terms of its ability to express the grotesque is to build on our understanding of the possibilities of the genre and of music itself.

In order to explore how music can be grotesque we will first revisit the guidelines of the grotesque developed in Chapter 1 and then delve into the few existing studies of the grotesque in music to see how the writers explain why they hear certain musical passages as being grotesque. We can then compare their understanding of the grotesque with ours to see if their selected passages truly have the hallmark combination of horror and ludicrousness or if they represent a more diluted understanding of the term. Finally, we will evaluate four groups of pieces for their depiction of the grotesque: (1) pieces called grotesque by their composers; (2) pieces so labeled by critics; (3) questionable applications of the term grotesque; and (4) my own observations about a work heretofore not called (to my knowledge) grotesque.

MUSIC AND THE GROTESQUE

To reiterate the guidelines presented in Chapter 1, the grotesque resides mainly in the realm of reception; it is the audience, viewer, or reader that ultimately decides what is and is not grotesque. While the grotesque generally consist of incongruous elements blended together, the hallmark of the genre is the essentially opposite and unresolvable reactions of fear and amusement that they produce. Moreover, the grotesque invariably involves the familiar—images or concepts—not the fantastic. One particularly productive site for the grotesque is the body, as physical characteristics are readily identifiable and can elicit sympathetic reactions in the form of humor and shock.

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[4] Jennings, *Ludicrous Demon*, 19-20.

Translated into musical terms, the grotesque may be expressed through dynamics, pitch/range/register, rhythm and tempo, and timbre or instrumentation (especially through the extended techniques that emerge in the twentieth century). These musical elements can then be manipulated to achieve the kinds of incongruity, distortion, extravagance, or exaggeration found in literary and visual grotesques.

Through these means, the music can achieve some of the purposes discussed in Chapter 1: aggressiveness, playfulness, alienation, etc. Nevertheless, no matter how the composer treats these musical elements, it is the listener who ultimately interprets them. It is the listener who must be able to understand how the music is conveying the grotesque; therefore, there must be some concept of "normal" in order for a listener to judge something else as "abnormal." Finally, text or other extra-musical associations, such as a title, can also help reveal which conventions are being distorted or reworked.

Before continuing, however, we should note that true fear or horror as generated by a musical sound or combination of sounds is not always present in the examples we will examine here and in subsequent chapters. Though some loud or unexpected sounds are frightening in and of themselves, we must allow a certain liberty in understanding the concept of horror as expressed in music because while music can produce visceral reactions, it is not as direct as a visual image or description. Although the "horror" part of the equation is found in something incongruous, disconcerting, disturbing, wrong, or awkward, all of which are aspects of the grotesque as introduced in Chapter 1, it is more likely to take the form of an aesthetic reaction to something that goes against "good taste" or what is expected. And perhaps it is this lack of purely physical reaction that led Thomson to suggest that music cannot be grotesque.

A few abstract examples will help illustrate how music might express the grotesque. The sarabande is a courtly dance in triple meter with a particular rhythmic character (an emphasis on the second beat) and tempo (generally slow). If the composer maintains the characteristic meter and rhythm, but increases the tempo to presto and exaggerates the emphasis on the second beat, perhaps by using sudden leaps in the melody or too loud chords in the bass along with unexpected dissonances, the dance loses its courtly character and becomes ungainly and ludicrous. It would seem impossible to imagine actually dancing the proper sarabande steps to it. The music has become aggressive where it is expected to be sophisticated. To take another example: a funeral march typically has a lugubrious chordal accompaniment, but pair that with a melody full of lively, skipping rhythms in a major key, and the grave is turned into the irreconcilably trivial, as though the music, in a typically grotesque paradigm, is mocking death.

The composer may also confuse or alienate an audience by first presenting a passage with comfortable musical parameters, such as a major key, a lyrical melody with a narrow range, and a simple accompaniment, and then distort it in subsequent statements by altering some elements while keeping others the same; if the changes are substantial and shocking or ludicrous enough, the result could be considered grotesque. Thus the composer guides the listener. We should note, however, that the new—whether entirely (as in the case of a new piece) or in relation to what has just been heard within the same work—cannot be considered automatically grotesque just because it is unusual (although this is possible). For example, although some listeners may label such radical developments as the advent of serialism or Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (at least at its first or early performances) grotesque simply because the music is so unfamiliar, this would

be tantamount to using the term "grotesque" to mean nothing more than alarming or distressing, for there is nothing terribly humorous, ludicrous, or incongruous about these developments in and of themselves.

THE LITERATURE ON THE GROTESQUE AND MUSIC: SHEINBERG AND EDGECOMBE

The literature on the grotesque in music is remarkably small. Although the term can be found in passing in commentaries on works, movements, or melodies, in many cases it is hard to determine if the critics are using the word merely as a synonym for the likes of "strange," "disturbing," or "bizarre," or if they are indeed invoking the term as we have defined it in Chapter 1. A search through the online version of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* yields hundreds of instances of the word, including descriptions of individual pieces, themes, the stories of operas or ballets, and certain genres as a whole.[5] Some examples include a description of Tchaikovsky's use of the grotesque and its psychological implications in his operas, the grotesque fugatos in Act II, Scene 2, of Rimsky Koraskov's opera *Mayskaya noch* (May Night), and the general characteristics of parody and humor in instrumental burlesques.[6] In general, the adjective is merely attached to a musical element, such as the grotesque fugatos mentioned above, with no explanation as to why they are grotesque; presumably interested readers can examine the score and make their own assessment.

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[5] Note that the search function of *Grove Music Online*, ed. by Laura Macy, www.grovemusic.com, also searches for synonyms of the given term (except for Boolean searches): for example, for grotesque it also finds terms like "exotic," "monstrous," and "fantastic."

[6] Richard Taruskin, "Piotr Il'ich Tchaikovsky" and "Nicholay Andreyevich Rimsky Korsakov"; Erich Schwandt, "Burlesque: (1) Instrumental Music," *Grove Music Online*, www.grovemusic.com (Accessed 26 June 2004).

There also exist some discussions of the grotesque in music that are concerned primarily with the text of a work and, therefore, are not relevant to our discussion here.[7] Finally, there are two studies that take a detailed look at how music conveys the grotesque: Esti Sheinberg's *Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque in the Music of Dmitri Shostakovich: A Theory of Musical Incongruities* and Rodney Stenning Edgecombe's "The Musical Representation of the Grotesque in Nineteenth-Century Opera,"[8] both of which we will now examine in some depth in order to evaluate how Sheinberg and Edgecombe understand both the grotesque and its expression in music.

Sheinberg: Shostakovich and the Grotesque

Esti Sheinberg explores Shostakovich's music in relation to Russian art and culture from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Shostakovich had a fondness for incongruities in his works, and his music has long been studied for its contradictions and hidden meanings, most of which are believed to be statements against the Soviet regime.[9] Sheinberg takes this idea as her starting point and examines the musical means through which Shostakovich expressed irony, parody, satire, and the

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[7] See, for example, Reed Merrill, "The *grotesque* in music: Šostakovič's muse," *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, vol. 23 (1990), 303-14. Merrill compares the libretto for Shostakovich's opera *Nos* with Gogol's original story.

[8] Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich: A Theory of Musical Incongruities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Edgecombe, "The Musical Representation of the Grotesque in Nineteenth-Century Opera," *Opera Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Winter 2000), 34-51.

[9] Some studies that explore Shostakovich's works in terms of their hidden meanings and anti-Soviet polemics include Joseph Darby, "Dmitri Shostakovich's Second, Third, and Fourth Symphonies: Problems of Context, Analysis, and Interpretation," Ph.D. dissertation (City University of New York, 1999); Dorothea Redepenning, "'And Art Made Tongue-Tied by Authority': Shostakovich's Song-Cycles," in *Shostakovich Studies*, ed. Philip Furia (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 205-28; Richard Taruskin, "Public Lies and Unspeakable Truth: Interpreting Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony," in *Shostakovich Studies*, 17-56; and Karen Kopp, "Form und Gehalt der Symphonien des Dmitrij Schostakowitsch," Ph.D. dissertation (Universität Bonn, 1990; Bonn: Verlag für Systematische Musikwissenschaft, 1990).

grotesque. Her approach is based in the field of semiotics, but she provides a primer in the Introduction in order to familiarize the reader with the terminology and concepts of that field, such as cultural units, topics, exemplification, and contradiction.[10] In order to flesh out the meanings of the topics she assigns to Shostakovich's music and the cultural units that she thinks influenced him, she introduces lengthy discussions of the artistic milieu in which he worked, including the writers, artists, and actors he knew, as well as the literature, paintings, and dramatic productions with which he was familiar.[11]

Although the chapters on irony, parody, and satire are interesting studies in themselves, we will examine only Sheinberg's chapter on the grotesque. Her understanding of the grotesque is based on the Aristotelian concept of either/or pairs of aesthetic units, in which something is considered one thing or the other. The three sets of pairs are tragic/comic, ugly/beautiful, and terrifying/ludicrous. Anything that is both at the same time is an unresolvable hybrid, and can be called grotesque in modern parlance.[12] In addition, Sheinberg connects the grotesque directly to a type of irony known as existential irony, which is characterized by an inability to be resolved. She writes that both the grotesque and existential irony "have two layers of contradictory meanings, neither of which is to be preferred: both regard doubt and disorientation as the basic condition of human existence."[13] Sheinberg pursues two paths concerning the irony of the human condition: infinite negation, resulting in a form of nihilism (a type of irony

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[10] Sheinberg, *Shostakovich*, 3-33.

[11] One problematic issue in Sheinberg's book is that she makes conjectures about what or whom Shostakovich *may* have seen, *might* have heard, or *could* have known. She bases these inferences mainly on where he was living or visiting, his social circle, and what literature or art was being discussed in the newspapers and pamphlets of the time.

[12] Sheinberg, *Shostakovich*, 207.

[13] Sheinberg, *Shostakovich*, 208.

embraced by Kierkegaard), and the additive process of affirmations (akin to Bakhtin's celebration of the grotesque).[14] She concludes that unlike irony, which appeals to the intellect, the grotesque stimulates sensual reactions, and where the reaction to infinite irony is intellectual despair, the reaction to the grotesque is emotional despair because of the difficulty in accepting the two conflicting responses: laughter and a sense of dread.[15] Her guidelines, therefore, are similar to Kayser's focus on the feeling of the alienated world, but arrived at through a comparison with the processes that typify irony.[16]

Sheinberg approaches the grotesque in music by focusing on hyperbole, a type of distortion. She introduces the valuable idea that the exaggerations and distortions of the grotesque are applied to a sound world comprised of "anthropomorphic sound-analogies"; these analogies are "a possible conceptual projection of the human body on the soundscape."[17] In other words, the normal soundscape consists of what the body can comfortably produce or enjoy: moderate range (not too high or too low), dynamics, tempos, etc. Altering these boundaries produces distortions, and the more this is done the more grotesque the music becomes, especially if there seems to be violence or awkwardness involved. To cite a type of dance: a waltz is generally a refined social dance; the music is light and graceful, and should make the listener think of dancing. A grotesque waltz, however, will be heavy and unrefined, even while retaining certain characteristics of the waltz, such as the triple meter with an emphasis on the first beat of

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[14] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with a Continual Reference to Socrates*, ed. and trans. with an introduction and notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 261; Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 310-12.

[15] Sheinberg, *Shostakovich*, 209-10.

[16] While Sheinberg cites Bakhtin, she is not particularly interested in the sense of celebration he finds in the grotesque.

[17] Sheinberg, *Shostakovich*, 211.

each bar. Key elements will be pushed to an extreme, making the prospect of actually dancing to it seem ludicrous. Among the possible distortions would be too fast a tempo, an insistent accompaniment (perhaps even an ostinato) with an exaggeratedly emphasized bass line, a frenetic melody (perhaps in a very high register), and a dynamic level that thunders; all these parameters help keep the music full of tension, the antithesis of grace. Thus while recognizable as a waltz, it is simultaneously a harrowing version of it. The violence of the music makes it a satirical and grotesque commentary on the social status of the waltz.[18]

One aspect of Sheinberg's idea of anthropomorphically comfortable elements must be clarified: not everything that is fast, loud, or extremely high- or low-pitched is necessarily grotesque. At times, the listener will accept any or all of these features without finding the music uncomfortable (and therefore grotesque). Such moments might include the climax of a movement, a dance that is expected to be quick, or a thunderous entrance that is in fact meant to frighten or impress. Such situations do not contain the hidden opposite that produces a secondary reaction (although they can). One instance in which Sheinberg discusses the use of loud or high-pitched music that is not grotesque is in her analysis of the first movement of Bartók's *Two Portraits*, the "Ideal Portrait" (1907). She writes that when Bartók takes the solo violin into a very high range or loud dynamic level, he keeps the other instruments within the parameters of "normal" volume and range, and, with the Andante tempo, this keeps the piece from sounding distorted.[19] (We will look at the second piece in the set, "Grotesque Portrait," below.)

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[18] Sheinberg states that Shostakovich, following the lead of Mahler, uses grotesque versions of social dances in his symphonies and operas in order to produce tension (*Shostakovich*, 233-34).

[19] Sheinberg, *Shostakovich*, 211-12.

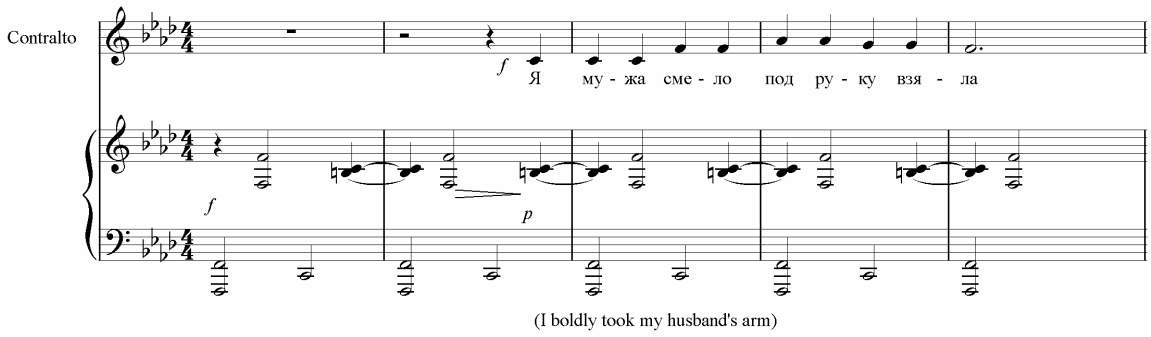
Turning to Shostakovich, Sheinberg believes that he uses the grotesque primarily as a tool of satire, and that his satire is directed at something or someone, such as the actions of a government or the mores of a particular class of people (represented by a single person). As she writes about the satirical grotesque: "the apparently incorrigible physical deformities function as reflections of some other spiritual and behavioral deformities, which are the actual object of the derisive comment."[20] Her examples, therefore, focus on how Shostakovich employs humor and horror simultaneously to underscore certain aspects of Russian society: beggars, the wealthy, the government, and the aspirations of the common people, among others. Most of her examples are from texted music, specifically the songs and operas that Shostakovich wrote on poems or stories by writers known for their grotesque wit, especially Gogol. She argues that Shostakovich uses the musical accompaniments to underscore the ideas found in the text or to provide an aural commentary on how contemporary Russian society would perceive the different characters or situations.

One example of Sheinberg's musico-cultural dissection is her analysis of "Schast'ye" (Happiness) from the song-cycle *Iz yevreyskoy narodnoy poėzii*, op. 79, 1948/op. 79a, 1964 (From Jewish Folk Poetry) (Ex. 2.1). The piece is discussed several times in the book, as an example of satire, parody, the grotesque, and existential irony. The speaker in the poem is a Jewish cobbler's wife who has delusions of wealth and position: she forces her husband to buy the most expensive seats in the theater so that she can be seen. She announces her pride in her doctor son and says that a star shines over

[20] Sheinberg, *Shostakovich*, 229.

her head. For Sheinberg, it is Shostakovich's parody of a heavy ceremonial march that portrays the ludicrous nature of this pathetically self-assured matron.[21]

Ex. 2.1: Shostakovich, *Iz yevreyskoy narodnoy poėzii*, "Schast'ye," mm. 1-5.

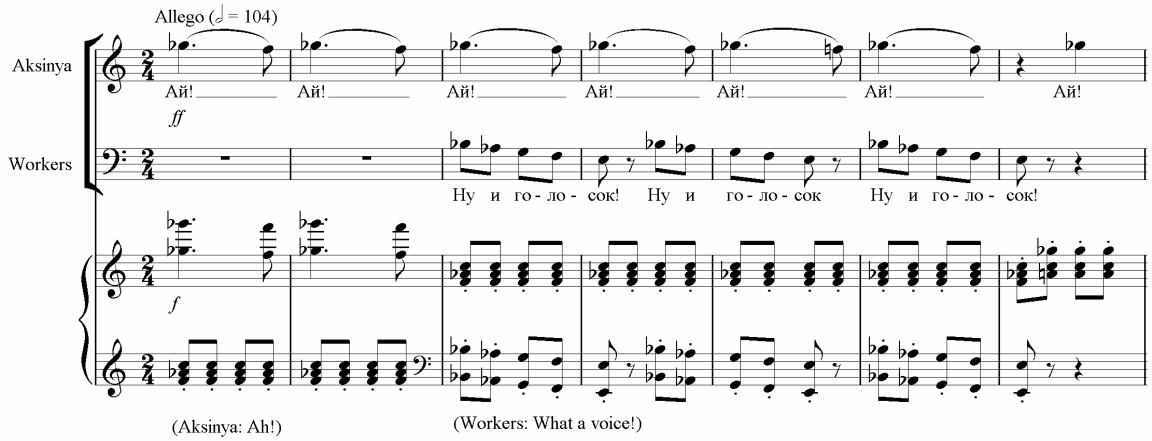


While Shostakovich could simply be making fun of the wife's aspirations and nothing more, Sheinberg explores what she sees as the grotesque purport hiding in this poem by explaining how frightening it would be for the Jewish population: the star would remind them of both the Nazi's coding system for the Jews during World War II (six-pointed) and its use by the Soviet state (five-pointed). In addition to these symbols, Sheinberg also proposes another grim undercurrent: the woman is proud that her son is a doctor, but in the Doctors' Plot of 1952, Stalin had Jewish doctors and other intellectuals rounded up and executed. Obviously, this last comment about the text is problematic, since Shostakovich originally composed the song in 1948; nevertheless, for an audience hearing the work in the 1950s or 1960s, such political resonances would be present, and Sheinberg's interpretation demonstrates that the grotesque really is located in the receiver.

[21] Sheinberg, *Shostakovich*, 240.

Another of Sheinberg's examples of the grotesque is the rape of Aksin'ya in Act I, Scene 2, of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (Ex. 2.2). Here the musical setting of the men's laughter is contrasted with Aksin'ya's screams.

Ex. 2.2: Shostakovich, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, Act I, Scene 2, mm. 1-7.



According to Sheinberg, the audience enjoys the men's music because of its folk-like qualities (tonal harmony, stepwise motion) and comfortable rhythms, but wants to silence Aksin'ya's "aesthetically repellent" screams. Here the grotesque contains a dose of moral irony, for the scene should incite moral outrage against the men, not against the young woman.[22]

Sheinberg's idea that there is a general sense of what is normal upon which listeners base their perception of the abnormal is, for her, the defining concept for understanding the grotesque in music. It not only permits us to discuss that which draws on and distorts the characteristics of a known genre, but allows us to recognize familiar topics in unfamiliar settings—the folk-like music in the rape scene of *Lady Macbeth*—or even wholly new music that the composer is creating for a particular situation that

[22] Sheinberg, *Shostakovich*, 246.

explores new combinations of sound. In all, Sheinberg's major contribution is, perhaps, her argument that music can have a "normal" and an "abnormal" cast, and can express them simultaneously in a way that we can call grotesque.

Edgecombe: Nineteenth-Century Opera and the Grotesque

Rodney Stenning Edgecombe begins his discussion of the grotesque by citing Kayser's statement that "the grotesque is experienced only in the act of reception."[23] As stated in Chapter 1, something perceived as grotesque in one culture or time period may have a perfectly logical explanation in another. This can be said for music, as Edgecombe notes in connection with the naked fourths and fifths of organum: "their harshness [is] a 'grotesque' resource for composers situated in the landscape of diatonicism, but, for an eleventh-century ear, an image of heavenly perfection, of order retrieved from chaos."[24]

Edgecombe's conception of the grotesque has two main pillars. First, there needs to be a context or order against which to transgress, an idea similar to Sheinberg's concept of the normal and the abnormal. Edgecombe pursues this aspect by showing how composers artistically bound by a particular musical language—diatonicism in the Classical period and more chromatic diatonicism in the Romantic period—create transgressive moments that convey the grotesque. Second, the grotesque consists primarily of unusual juxtapositions, as in the ancient Roman paintings, where two or more elements that are anachronistic, physically impossible, or otherwise incompatible are blended together. On the other hand, the humor-horror equation does not play an

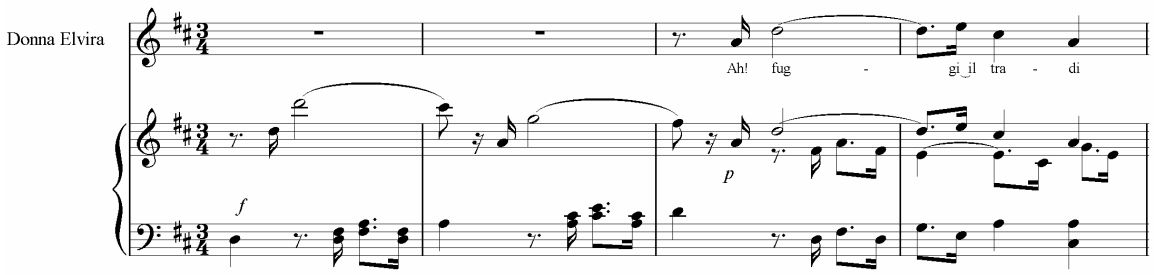
[23] Kayser, *Grotesque*, 181, cited in Edgecombe, "Musical Representation," 34.

[24] Edgecombe, "Musical Representation," 34.

important role in his discussion, although some of his examples do display ludicrousness along with something sinister. Edgecombe's definition follows the edict that if one can find something grotesque, it is grotesque. We will now examine a few of Edgecombe's examples in order to see what he finds grotesque.

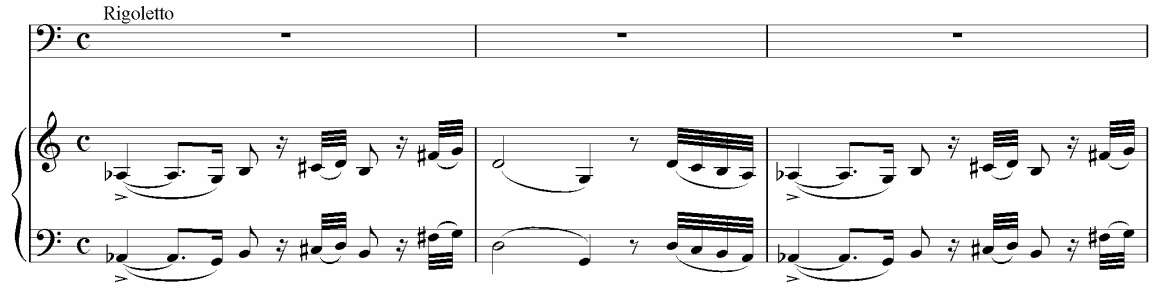
One technique Edgecombe cites as a formula for the grotesque is the integration of older styles of music into a new piece in order to mock a character or situation. For example, Mozart uses a Handelian dotted-rhythm accompaniment in Donna Elvira's aria "Ah! fuggi il traditor" (Ah! Traitor, you flee) from *Don Giovanni*, Act I, Scene 3, to suggest that she is a rather old-fashioned woman (Ex. 2.3). Edgecombe argues that Mozart's audience, in accordance with the hardened attitude of eighteenth-century society toward jilted women, would have ridiculed—not sympathized with—her rage, and that by quoting music that is no longer in fashion, Mozart provides a suitable mocking of Donna Elvira.

Ex. 2.3: Mozart, "Ah! fuggi il traditor," *Don Giovanni*, Act I, Scene 3, mm. 1-4.

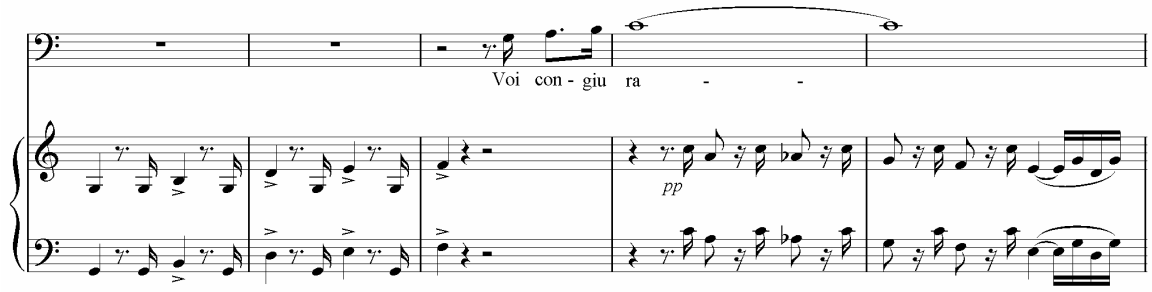


Edgecombe considers this a type of grotesque, related more to pastiche, where things are temporally and stylistically out of sync.[25] To be sure, this is a very loose interpretation of the grotesque, as there is nothing particularly horrifying about this music, whether in the social context or otherwise. Continuing with the idea of rhythm, Edgecombe highlights its ability to emphasize something that is awkward or unnatural. Dotted rhythms in the accompaniment or melodic line help make the music unsteady or jerky, as in the music that leads up to the taunting of Monterone in Verdi's *Rigoletto*, Act I, Scene 1 (Ex. 2.4).

Ex. 2.4: Verdi, *Rigoletto*, Act I, Scene 1, *Sostenuto assai*, mm. 1-9.



[25] Edgecombe, "Musical Representation," 36-37.



Edgecombe refers to Rigoletto's taunt as lopsided and rhythmically deformed. This contrasts with the rhythmically less agitated, and therefore normal, material of the lyrical waltzes Rigoletto sings to his daughter, and therefore establishes Rigoletto as a grotesque because he is capable of both a jester's savage humor and a father's warmth and humor.[26]

Among other techniques that Edgecombe associates with the grotesque are various aspects of chromaticism, orchestration, and formal design. Composers working within the diatonic system can, according to Edgecombe, use chromaticism to great effect in order to increase the frightening aspect of the music: for example, crushed seconds (*acciaccature*), dissonant neighbor notes, and open fifths. This last sonority holds a strange fascination in diatonic (triadic) music, and appears in works such as the opening of Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz* for piano or Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre*. The open fifth also signals the tuning of a violin, and Edgecombe offers the further analogy that, stripped of the third, it sonically represents the skeleton stripped of its flesh, yet still able to perform: monstrous in concept but also amusing (a dancing puppet, operated by invisible strings).[27] Orchestration and overall formal designs can also contribute to a sense of the grotesque. Thick and low-pitched orchestration can enhance the feeling of the monstrous

[26] Edgecombe, "Musical Representation," 44-45.

[27] Edgecombe, "Musical Representation," 46. Franz Liszt's *Totentanz* and *Mephisto-Walzer*, Modest Musorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain*, and Camille Saint-Saëns's *Danse Macabre* employ the sonic cue of the open fifth throughout the pieces, in alternation with the more tumultuous passages which are intended as dances of death, skeletons, demons, etc.

or frightening, as can its opposite, shrillness.[28] Finally, Edgecombe argues that a piece made up of small, contrasting sections represents the heterogeneous nature of the grotesque, as in the ancient Roman paintings. He writes: "to flare and fade in a properly demonic fashion, the grotesque must favor designs that are multiform and various; it loves to twist and tangle the melodic line."[29] Thus works such as keyboard fantasias and even tone poems could be considered grotesque solely because of their construction. Clearly, such a view loosens the interpretation of the grotesque to the point of being almost meaningless.

Edgecombe's article sometimes verges on the "poetic" and lacks clear explanations of phrases like "crow's-nest alerts," *valse infernale*, and the like (presumably the reader can infer his meaning). More to the point, however, he allows for such a broad definition of the grotesque that virtually any musical trick or technique that strikes him as fanciful, bizarre, or exotic is grotesque. For example, he does not explain why an orchestral storm is grotesque, except that it often contains inventive orchestration and allows for the novel use of dissonance. In fairness, though, Edgecombe begins his study by saying that the grotesque is in the eye (or ear) of the beholder. But one of my purposes in the present study is to demonstrate that not everything that is novel is necessarily grotesque. Therefore, in accordance with the more precise idea of the grotesque offered in Chapter 1, I will now examine several pieces of music in order to show how they express the grotesque in terms of a the juxtaposition of the ludicrous and the frightening or horrific.

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[28] Edgecombe, "Musical Representation," 47.

[29] Edgecombe, "Musical Representation," 50.

MUSIC AND THE GROTESQUE: AN INVESTIGATION IN FOUR PARTS

Both Sheinberg and Edgecombe offer their views about the grotesque in music by concentrating either on one composer or one genre. Moreover, Sheinberg defines the grotesque according to a rigorous application of the theory of irony, while Edgecombe seems to forego "theory" altogether in favor of an intuitive interpretation. In the analyses that follow, I will widen the parameters of composers/genres and try to identify moments of musical grotesquerie using the model developed in Chapter 1 (and reiterated at the beginning of this chapter). The discussion will be in four parts and draw on pieces from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries: (1) two pieces titled grotesque by the composers themselves, (2) an opera labeled grotesque by critics, (3) a work that, I believe, the composer has mistakenly titled grotesque, and (4) a piece that has heretofore not been called grotesque that could be considered as such.

The Grotesque According to the Composer: Ravel's *Sérénade grotesque* and Bartók's *Deux Portraits*

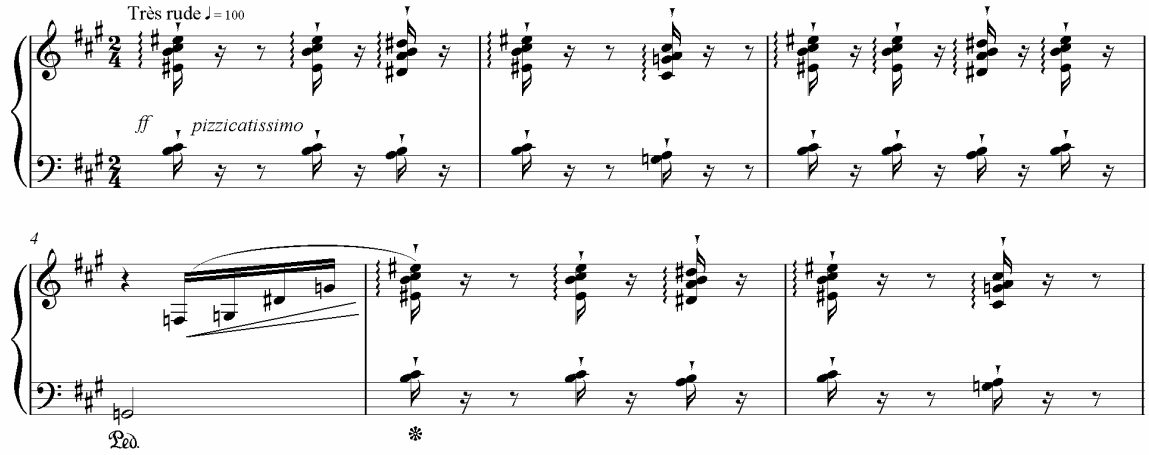
Around 1893, while studying harmony at the Paris Conservatoire, Ravel composed a piano piece titled *Sérénade*: he never submitted it for publication. In his short autobiography, written at Roland-Manuel's request in 1935, Ravel gave the piece a more complete title, *Sérénade grotesque*, which more accurately describes its character.[30] A serenade is usually an amorous song of evening, and certain musical features have become standard characteristics or tropes of the genre: soft dynamics, a lilting melody, a triple or compound duple (6/8) meter, and a guitar-like accompaniment usually

[30] Ravel, "Esquisse autobiographie," 20 [211]. There is an edition of the *Sérénade grotesque*, ed. by Arbie Orenstein (Paris: Éditions Salabert, 1975).

comprised of broken-chord figuration. Ravel distorts these familiar gestures while leaving traces of what the gestures should have been. There is irony, humor, and a degree of distress in Ravel's ludicrous treatment of such a typically romantic genre.

Ravel establishes the wrong mood immediately (Ex. 2.5): the meter is 2/4, the performance indication is "Très rude," and the opening chords, though rolled in the manner of a strummed guitar, are dissonant and played fortissimo.

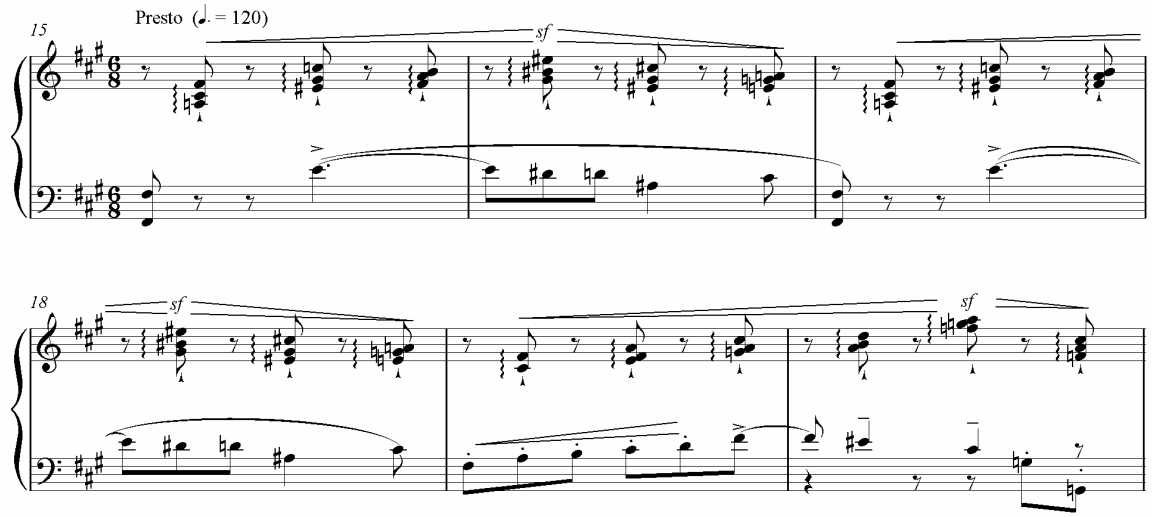
Ex. 2.5: Ravel, *Sérénade Grotesque*, mm. 1-6.



The introduction ends with an accented trill in the low bass before leading into the main part of the piece, which is in 6/8, but marked *presto*—hardly conducive to a love song (Ex. 2.6). The melody is presented in the left hand, perhaps a nod to the tenor voice, but as a grotesque mimicking of a lyrical line, it is full of chromatic passing notes and outlines a minor seventh in its first phrase. The highest note of the melody is accented, and in order to balance the indicated dynamic contours in the right hand the melody must be played quite loud. Moreover, though the accompaniment in the right hand continues with its imitation of rolled guitar-like chords, these are full of dissonances, played

staccato with crescendos to sforzandos, and so disposed rhythmically as to sound as though the are in a metrically conflicting 3/4.

Ex. 2.6: Ravel, *Sérénade grotesque*, mm. 15-20.

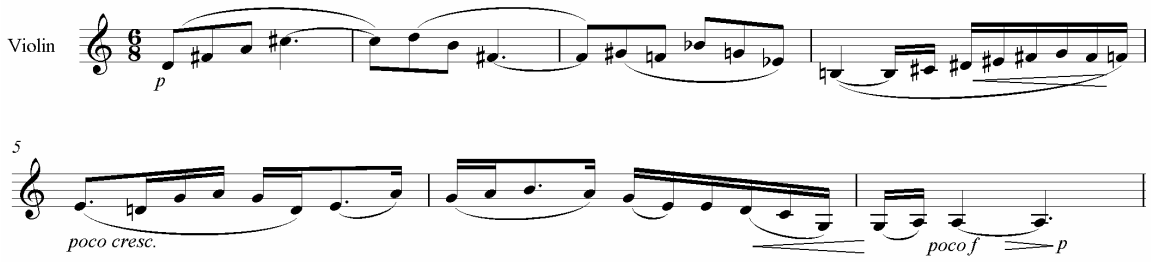


After the melody is repeated several times at higher pitches, a new gesture appears at measures 34-35: a thumping bass figure redolent of the knocking on the body of the guitar found in music for Spanish flamenco dancing. A slower interlude that could have brought a sense of calm is overshadowed both by complex alternations of rhythms (triplets and duplets) and by major seconds, along with additional appearances of the thumping bass figure. And though a later section achieves some semblance of a serenade-type atmosphere (meas. 57-74), even it is characterized by dissonance and the occasional interruption by the knocking figure. The second part of the piece repeats the material of the first, but with added figuration, mainly in the guise of ornamental arpeggios in the treble part. The piece ends with a repeat of the introduction, alternating with the knocking bass figure, and ends with a *marcato* phrase marked *largo*, followed by a rapid *a tempo* flourish—yet another ironic gesture for a love song. The piece, then, is a

ludicrous reinterpretation of a serenade because it references serenade conventions and combines them with more distressing elements. It fits with Sheinberg's concept of the grotesque as ironic statement, one filled with ridiculous distortions, while also, one could argue, fulfilling Edgecombe's concept of the grotesque as being structurally diffuse.

Bartók titled the movements of his orchestral work *Two Portraits*, op. 5, "Ideal" and "Grotesque."[31] The titles programmatically describe how Bartók presents and develops the thematic material with which both movements begin. Through this pairing, we hear how music can be first ideal, then grotesque. The "Ideal Portrait" is essentially a violin concerto, beginning with a solo presentation of the theme (Ex. 2.7). Although quite chromatic, the rhythm (in 6/8 meter) is stable, the dynamics are *piano*, and the tempo is *andante*, all of which Sheinberg argues are within the realm of normal sound properties.[32] The piece begins on the violin's open D and slowly expands away from this center.

Ex. 2.7: Bartók, "Ideal Portrait," mm. 1-7.



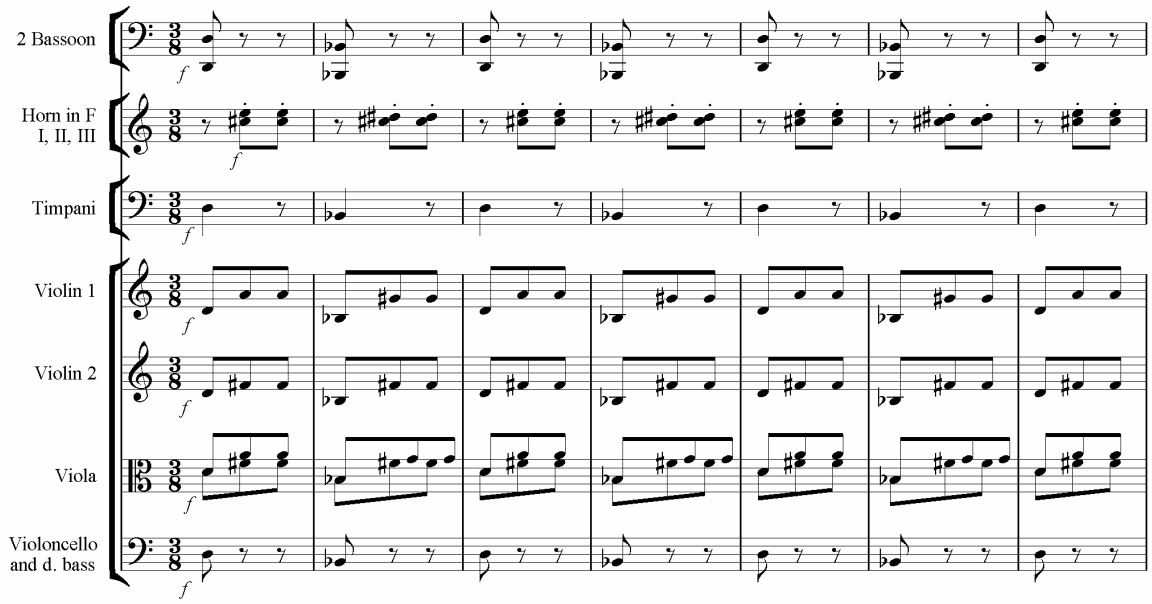
After these seven bars, additional string lines enter to create a dense polyphonic texture, which continues through the movement.

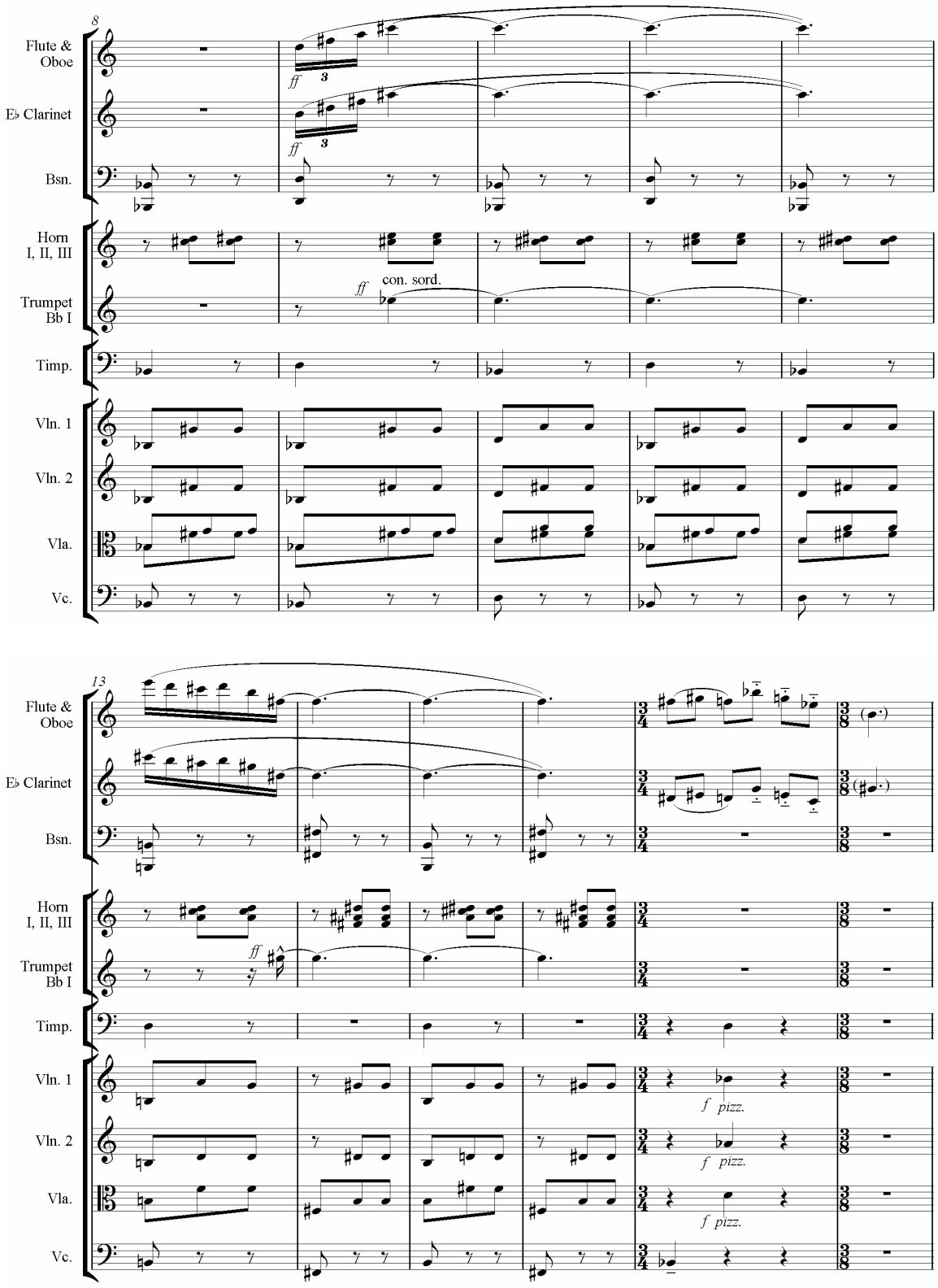
[31] "Ideal" was written in 1907, "Grotesque" in 1908. Bartók orchestrated them in 1910.

[32] Sheinberg also uses the second movement as a reference to the grotesque in music before moving on to Shostakovich's music (*Shostakovich*, 151).

In contrast, the "Grotesque Portrait" begins with an eight-bar introduction played *forte* and *presto*; it is a fast waltz in 3/8, essentially a *danse macabre* (Ex. 2.8). Flute, oboe, and clarinet enter with the "Ideal Portrait" theme at measure 9, but up an octave and *fortissimo*, with a muted trumpet providing an additional accent on the highest note of the phrase. Just as striking is the rhythm, which is completely altered: gentle eighth-note arpeggios and slightly emphasized quarter notes in the "Ideal Portrait" have become rapid flourishes and ludicrously elongated held notes in the "Grotesque Portrait," altering the rhythmic proportions of the theme.

Ex. 2.8: Bartók, "Grotesque Portrait," mm. 1-18.




8
Flute & Oboe
E♭ Clarinet
Bsn.
Horn I, II, III
Trumpet Bb I
Timp.
Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vc.
ff
3
con. sord.
13
f pizz.

Thus while the opening themes of the two portraits are virtually identical, the "Grotesque" Portrait turns the "normality" of the "Ideal" Portrait into an abnormal romp. As for the remainder of each movement: although the "Ideal" Portrait reaches an intense climax, with loud dynamics and the solo violin in a very high register, it does so through seamless development, and then gently returns to a more serene ending. Continuing on the abnormal side, the "Grotesque" Portrait lurches through dramatic and sometimes awkward shifts of tempo, rhythm, volume, texture, and orchestration, finally coming to a fitful and loud ending. Bartók manipulates all parameters of the music to illustrate their respective programs.

A Piece Labeled Grotesque by Critics

As mentioned above there are many places in which writers use "grotesque" to describe musical works. Here, we will concentrate on a piece appropriately labeled grotesque by a number of critics: Rameau's opera *Platée* (1745; libretto by Adrien-Joseph Le Valois d'Orville).[33] Most studies of *Platée* refer to the work, or some aspect of it, as grotesque. These include Nicholas Anderson's "Rameau's *Platée*: Burlesque or Grotesque," Ronald Crichton's "Nymph of the Marsh," Paul-Marie Masson's comments in his book *L'Opéra de Rameau*, and Cuthbert Girdlestone's chapter on the opera in his biography of Rameau.[34] Graham Sadler's entry for *Platée* in the *New Grove Dictionary of Opera* uses the term "grotesquely" only once, to comment on the circumstances of its

[33] The opera is based on Jacques Autreau's play *Platée*, *ou Junon jalouse*. Rameau called it a *ballet bouffon*, but it is also identified as a *comédie lyrique*.

[34] Nicholas Anderson, "Rameau's *Platée*: Burlesque or Grotesque," *Early Music*, vol. XI, no. 4 (October 1983) 505-9; Ronald Crichton, "Nymph of the Marsh," *Opera*, vol. 48, no. 8 (August 1997), 904-9; Paul-Marie Masson, *L'Opéra de Rameau* (Paris: H. Laurens, 1930; reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1972), 59-60; and Cuthbert Girdlestone, *Jean-Philippe Rameau: His Life and Work*, revised edition (New York: Dover, 1969), 400-42.

first performance: the 1745 wedding celebration of the dauphin of France and Princess Maria-Theresa of Spain, who was generally considered unattractive.[35] Reading through the plot (see below), we will be able to see why this is a truly grotesque choice of subject for such an occasion, as it would seem to invite laughter at the bride's expense.

The plot itself is quite cruel by modern standards.[36] The main character, the nymph Platée, is not only unattractive and ungainly—something of a "crime" in eighteenth-century French court life—but also extremely vain, and therefore the subject of extreme ridicule by the other characters in the story (none of whom, including the gods, however, manages to escape Le Valois d'Orville and Rameau's ridicule). The plot is as follows: In the hope of curtailing Juno's jealousy, Jupiter woos Platée at the suggestion of King Chitaeron (Chitaeron is Platée's object of affection). Misled into believing that Jupiter is having yet another affair, Juno flies to Athens, leaving Jupiter to court Platée with the help of Mercury, Momus (the god of laughter), Folly, and Cupid. The courtship is full of comical and exaggerated gestures, with Platée's appearance and behavior the source of merriment. In Act III, an enraged Juno returns to find the wedding of Platée and Jupiter underway. Platée, heavily veiled, arrives by frog-drawn carriage. After Jupiter begins his vows for the third time, Juno, who had been hiding, rushes up and tears off Platée's wedding veil; upon discovering the ugly Platée, Juno reconciles with Jupiter. Platée leaves incensed, but returns in the final moments of the opera to

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[35] Graham Sadler, "Platée," *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. by Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1992), III, 1030-32.

[36] Anderson, "Rameau's *Platée*," 504, cites a review of the 1754 revival (*Mercure de France* [March 1754]) in which the unknown critic praises the work and the performers, but does not comment on the nature of the plot. Interpreting this lack of commentary as symptomatic of the time, Anderson explores the reasons why the plot would be accepted without commentary. Anderson states that it is the only substantial account that exists from the time.

denounce the conspirators and their cruel joke, at which point they merely commend her charms in the same satiric vein as when they were helping Jupiter woo her. In his biography of Rameau, Girdlestone writes, "But as an unlovely physique is a crime in the erotic and hedonistic world of opera, this is as it should be."[37]

Although Anderson and Sadler both discuss the music, they do not, curiously perhaps, describe the music of the opera as grotesque, applying that term to the plot and/or the circumstances of the first performance. Anderson calls Rameau's music for the character of Platée elegant and warm.[38] Crichton says little about the moments he calls grotesque and is content to merely enumerate some of the onomatopoetic animal noises (there is a chorus of frogs in Act I who cruelly mimic Platée) and awkward melodies.[39] Masson calls the opera a pure comedy with a carnival-like succession of scenes; the Act I chorus of frogs is the only thing he singles out as grotesque.[40] Girdlestone, however, immediately identifies most of the music as grotesque:

> The heroine's grotesque appearance is the foundation of the humour, if one can call it thus; much of the comedy in the music consists in suggesting ridiculous attitudes and movements; the most lively choruses are mocking and the opera closes with scoff and impotent rage.[41]

He then proceeds to outline all the ways in which the music, particularly that for Platée, is extravagant, distorted, ugly, silly, and uncomfortable for the listener—all the characteristics of the ways music can portray the grotesque as I have discussed them.

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[37] Girdlestone, *Rameau*, 401.

[38] Anderson, "Rameau's *Platée*," 505.

[39] Crichton, "Nymph," 908-9.

[40] Masson, *L'Opéra de Rameau*, 59-60.

[41] Girdlestone, *Rameau*, 404.

What makes the music grotesque? First, the role of Platée is written for a countertenor, thus providing visual and sonic distortions intended to emphasize the character's awkwardness. Secondly, the spirit of the music is humorous throughout, so that Platée does not stand out as the only figure of parody, even if she is the chief focus of the humor. In order to achieve this pervasive air of comedy, Rameau uses a variety of approaches: frequent passages of repeated notes (as, for instance, in the overture) establish a tone similar to that of chattering conversation; onomatopoetic animal sounds, such as those that portray frogs and a donkey, appear throughout;[42] and serious musical forms are the subject of parody, as with an excessively long chaconne that is danced by Jupiter and Momus before the wedding.[43] It is in Platée's melodies, however, that Rameau's distortions and exaggerations take on a truly grotesque aspect. These include ungainly leaps, incorrect textual accentuation (articles and conjunctions receive undue rhythmic or melodic emphasis), heavy accents, awkward rhythms, what seem to be wrong notes in the melody (often unprepared upper or lower neighbor dissonances), and awkward melismas. Girdlestone cites examples of each of these. Examples 2.9a-b provide a sample of the awkward leaps, strange accents, and convoluted melismatic writing. The leap to "beau," a relatively unimportant word, sounds like a hiccup, while the syncopated rhythms, leaps, and final trill on the word "adorable" over a simple bass structure are purposefully difficult to perform in order to make Platée sound awkward.

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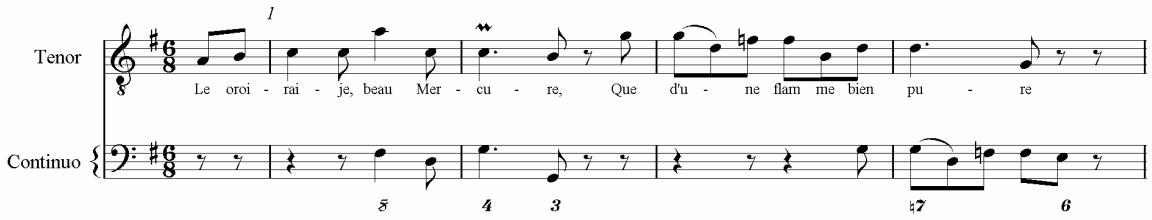
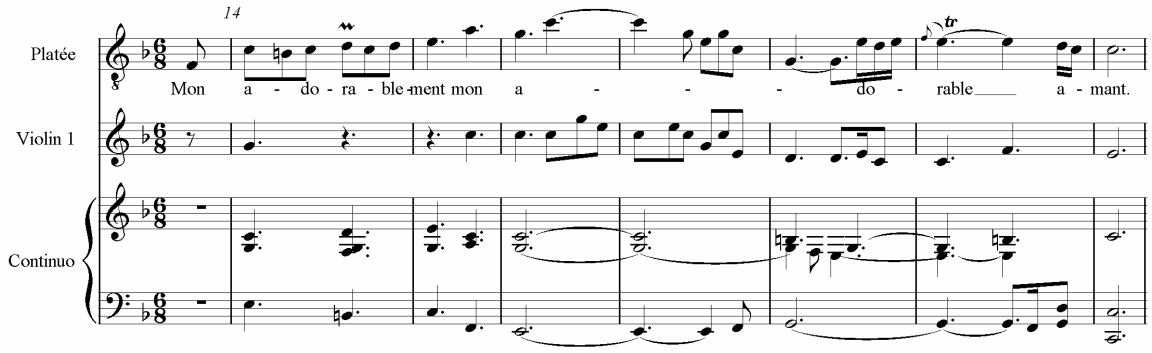
[42] Girdlestone writes that the frogs are pure stylistic imitation and not grotesque, contra Crichton's citing of them as grotesque (*Rameau*, 407; "Nymph," 908-9).

[43] Designed to stall the wedding, Platée grows very irritated by it, as may the audience. Anderson points out that an educated audience would know that a chaconne would never appear in such a position, never mind one of such length and pompous seriousness, and that it is therefore funny ("Rameau's *Platée*," 509).

Ex. 2.9: Rameau, *Platée*: (a) Act I, Scene 5, "Air," mm. 1-4.



(b) Act I, Scene 4, "Air," melisma on "adorable," mm. 14-20.



Platée does occasionally express true feeling or concern, but it is debatable whether Rameau chooses to mock her musically when she does. For example, Girdlestone feels that Rameau sets some of these sentiments with unsentimental music, and he cites the line "Puis-je en être assez sûre pour soupirer tout bas?" ("Can I be sure enough of this to sigh gently within me?")[44], from Act I, Scene 5, as an example. The text is reflective, but the music is a light 6/8 dance, and Girdlestone says this use of dance makes fun of her feelings. But the use of a dance idiom does not necessarily make it comic, and therefore grotesque; in fact, the short arietta seems quite poignant.

Rameau's music for this opera is considered some of his best, and some of his skill is most clearly demonstrated in the way he characterizes Platée as an ungainly and

[44] Translation by John Sidgwick in the notes that accompany the CD *Platée*, conducted by Marc Minkowski, Radio France/Erato-Disques/WDR, 2292-45028-2 (1990), 85.

awkward character. He gives her some music that engenders a degree of pity, but treats her mainly as a ridiculous, and inherently grotesque, figure.

A Questionable Application of the Term Grotesque: Gottschalk, *The Banjo*

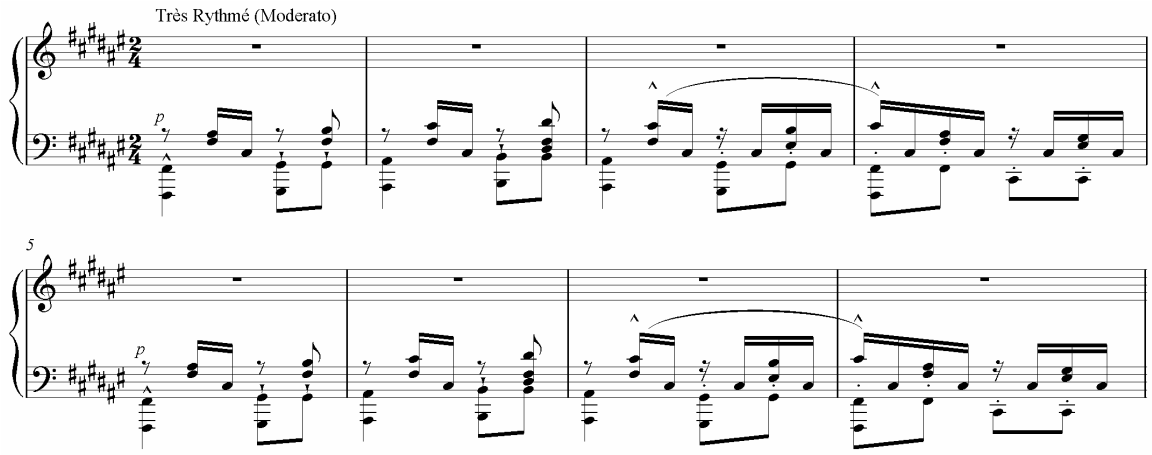
Though some composers have used the word grotesque in titles for works that truly are just that, not all pieces that include the term in their title can be considered grotesque, no matter what the composer's intention.[45] Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-69) often provided colorful titles for his piano works, presumably to put the audience in the correct frame of mind: some examples include *The Dying Poet*, *Meditation*: *Morte!! (She is Dead)*, and *Lamentation*. The title of another of his popular piano pieces contains a similar programmatic suggestion: *The Banjo, Grotesque Fantasie, American Sketch* (1854-55). Written in Europe to demonstrate American musical idioms, *The Banjo* evokes a minstrel banjo picker performing at the extreme edge of virtuosity. The piece, however, contains little that can be considered grotesque, except in an extraordinarily extended and watered-down sense of the term.

The Banjo begins with rhythmic passagework, primarily in the bass, followed by a highly ornamented melody in the upper register. After two repetitions, Gottschalk introduces, via alternating chords in both hands, a melody similar to Stephen Foster's *Camptown Races*, which then becomes the basis of a *presto* coda full of repeated chords. The tempo varies only for the coda, and the texture remains constant throughout (either alternating chords or bass chords with melody on top). The coda provides the logical climax in terms of dynamics and tempo. Moreover, the piece is almost entirely in F#

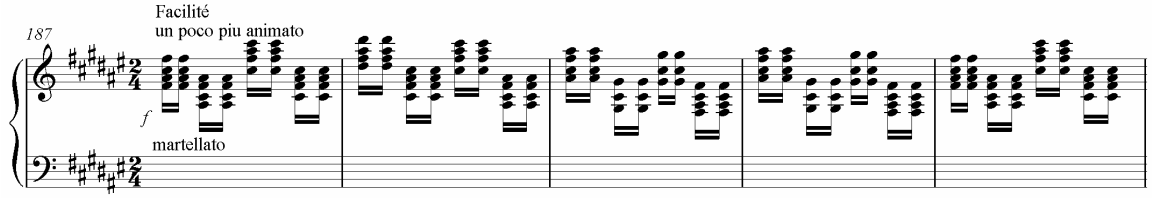
[45] In addition to the Ravel and Bartók works discussed above, there are numerous works with grotesque in their titles, including Christian Sinding, *Sechs Stücke für das Klavier: 1. Grotesque Marche* (1896), Lukas Foss, *Grotesque Dance* for piano (1938), and Gian Carlo Menotti, *The Old Maid and the Thief: A Grotesque Opera in 14 Scenes* (1954); the term seems valid in each instance.

major with a strong pentatonic feeling (there is a brief section in C# major). Example 2.10a-b shows the opening passagework and the beginning of the coda, where the texture changes dramatically.

Ex. 2.10: Gottschalk, *The Banjo*: (a) mm. 9-16.



(b) beginning of Coda, mm. 187-91.



There is nothing frightening about the work, unless the finger-breaking difficulty scares the pianist. Nor is there anything particularly funny or ludicrous about the piece. So if the piece is neither frightening nor ludicrous, perhaps Gottschalk's use of the term corresponds to a looser interpretation of the grotesque: nothing more than either a heterogeneous form or a juxtaposition of opposites. The former is easily disputed by the fact that the piece adheres to a simple binary form, with coda. As for a blend of opposites, there is none, unless it is the evocation of the banjo on the piano, but this seems far-fetched, and could lead to a racist subtext lurking behind Gottschalk's use of

the term: the piano as the culturally high-brow instrument of the white salon imitating—and simultaneously raising the stature of—the banjo, a popular instrument that was often associated with African-American musicians.[46] Further, if Gottschalk used the term grotesque simply to mean bizarre, absurd, or comical, then the racist subtext continues, for we could interpret that as Gottschalk himself portraying the features of banjo playing as bizarre, absurd, or comical in and of themselves. This, however, is a highly problematic reading given Gottschalk's lifelong interest in African-American musical styles and his support of the North and the abolition of slavery during the Civil War. Instead, it seems far more likely that Gottschalk simply used the term as still another, watered-down synonym for the unusual. In the end, *The Banjo* may be exotic, but is not grotesque, not, at least, according to the guidelines formulated in Chapter 1.

Osmin's "Rage" Aria: Is it Grotesque?

The pieces discussed above were either titled grotesque by their composers (incorrectly, I believe, by Gottschalk) or described as such by critics. I will now turn to a piece that, as far as I can tell, has heretofore not been labeled grotesque, but could be considered as such given the criteria being advocated in this study: Osmin's "rage" aria, "Solche hergelauf'ne haffen," from Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782), Act I, No. 3.

In the first part of the aria, Osmin is arguing with Pedrillo, and expresses his desire to see him killed. After two lines of spoken dialogue, in which Pedrillo calls

[46] The banjo is an adaptation of an African instrument brought over by slaves; it became popular with white performers in the middle of the nineteenth century. Jay Scott Odell and Robert B. Winans, "Banjo," *Grove Music Online*, www.grovemusic.com (Accessed 29 June 2004), and Philip F. Gura and James F. Bollman, *America's Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

Osmin a cruel man and Osmin calls Pedrillo ugly, Osmin breaks into the coda of the aria, the text of which is as follows:

Erst geköpft, dann gehangen	First beheaded, then hanged,
Dann gespießt auf heiße Stangen,	Then spitted on hot skewers,
Dann verbrannt, dann gebunden	Then burned, then bound
Und getaucht, zuletzt geschunden.	And drowned, and finally skinned.[47]

The ordering of tortures that Osmin proposes is ludicrous even while the tortures themselves are gruesome, for the point of burning or binding is to punish a living person who can feel the pain, so it is pointless—and bizarrely comical—to think of torturing someone already dead. As for the musical grotesquerie found in both parts of the aria, it is worth citing Mozart's letter to his father of 21 September 1781:

> Osmin's rage is rendered comical by the accompaniment of the Turkish music…as Osmin's rage gradually increases, there comes (just when the aria seems to be at an end), the *allegro assai*, which is in a totally different measure and in a different key; this is bound to be very effective. For just as a man in such a towering rage oversteps all the bounds of order, moderation and propriety, and completely forgets himself, so must the music too forget itself. But as passions, whether violent or not, must never be expressed in such a way as to excite disgust, and as music, even in the most terrible situations must never offend the ear, but must please the hearer, or in other words, must never cease to be *music*…[48]

The opening measures of the coda (Ex. 2.11) are where, as Mozart puts it, the music must "forget itself."

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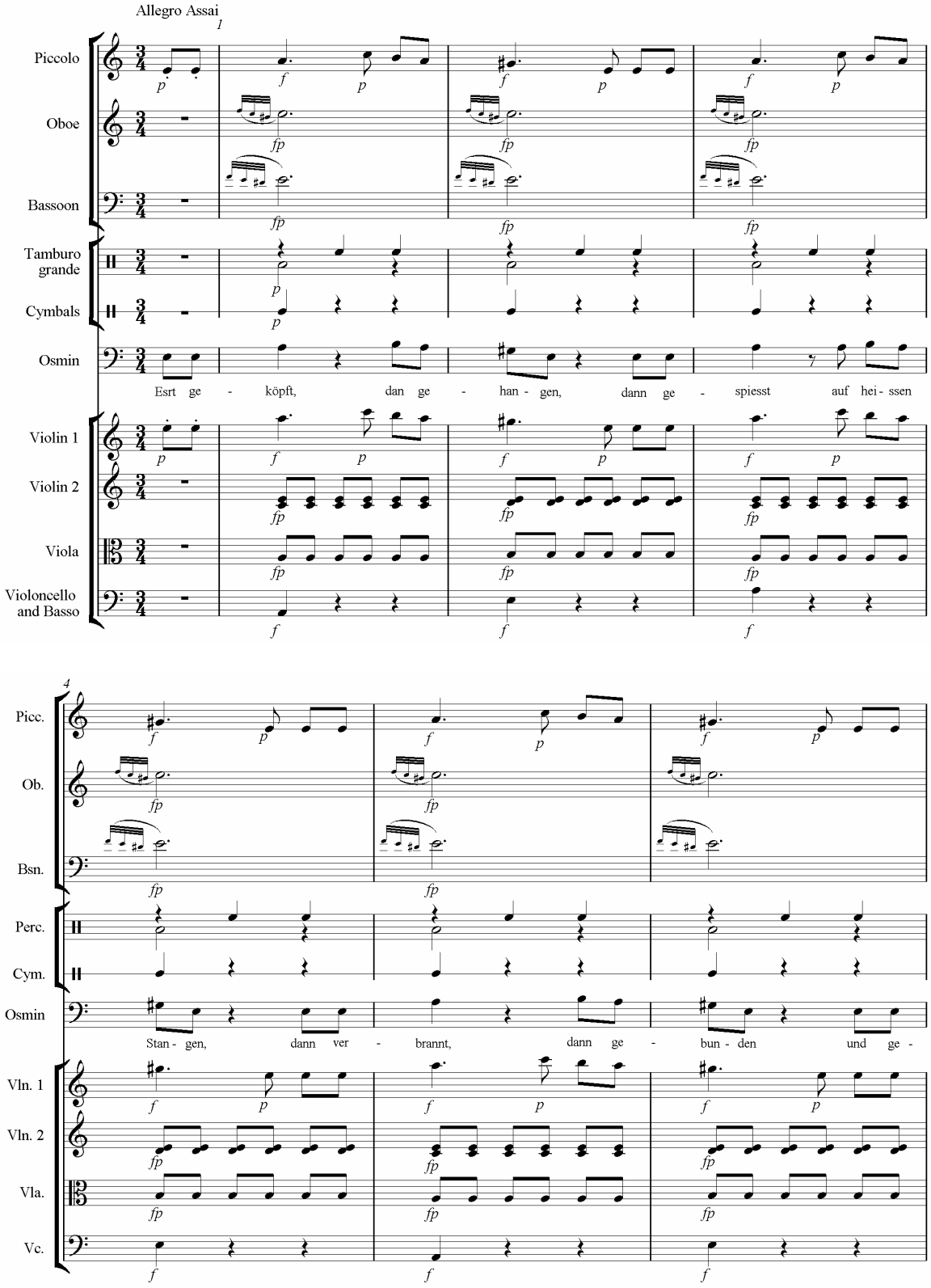
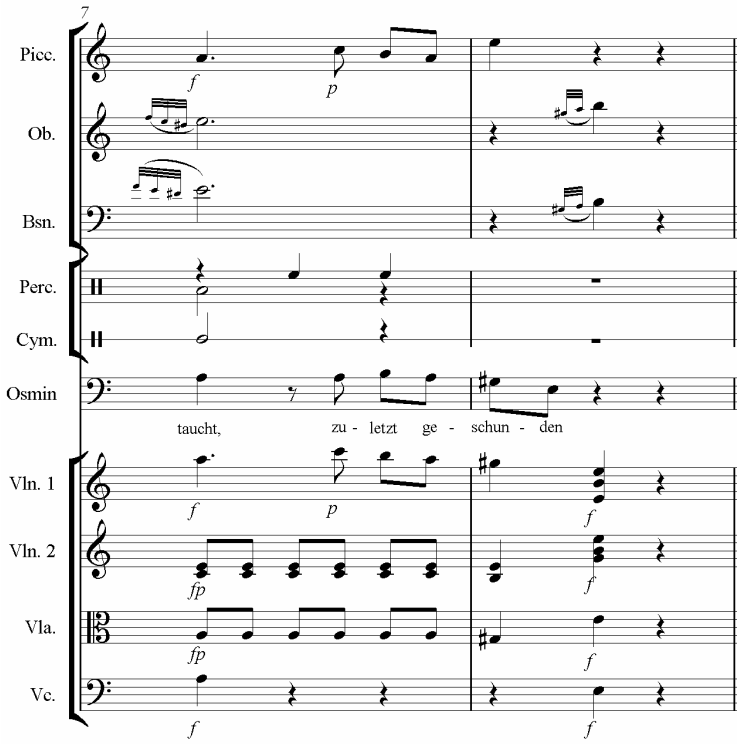
[47] My translation.

[48] *The Letters of Mozart and His Family*, ed. and trans. by Emily Anderson (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966; reprint, 1989). The emphasis on the word "music" is Mozart's.

Ex. 2.11: Mozart, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, Act I, No. 3,
"Solche hergelauf'ne Laffen," coda, mm. 1-8.





While Osmin's desire to be rid of Pedrillo and the specter of his tortures are very real and horrifying, Mozart's setting elicits laughter for several reasons. First, the harmonies never go beyond tonic and dominant, bouncing back and forth from one to the other as if they are stuck. Second, the text setting is highly declamatory, and Osmin eventually gets stuck and stutters on the word "geschunden" ("skinned"), underscoring his laughable attempt to appear formidable. Third, the Janissary-like orchestration (cymbals, drums, and ornamented whole notes in the double reeds) is used to emphasize the downbeats, which coincide with the main torture words. As the piece moves along, it slowly builds in both volume and density of orchestration, and if this conveys Osmin's increasing sense of rage, it also threatens to drown him out, so leaving him to bluster to himself. In the end, Pedrillo is safe; Osmin is ultimately impotent, stupid, and ludicrous.

And the horrifying words bang against the simple comedy of the music in a way that defies being reconciled. Osmin's rage is grotesquerie of the highest order.

CONCLUSION

Music can play a role in creating something grotesque, usually when the composer manipulates familiar genres or presents something unfamiliar that can be considered aggressive, bizarre or abnormal when compared with conventions. By playing with the familiar and the unfamiliar, with distortions and contradictions, composers can create music that is awkward, ludicrous, extravagant, disturbing, and frightening. The goal is to have the audience hear and appreciate how the music represents a yoking of something that is ludicrous with something that is "wrong"—wrong notes, uncomfortable registers, extreme tempos—in order to attain the simultaneously frightening and comical. This type of distortion is clearly achieved in Bartók's pairing of the "Ideal" and "Grotesque" Portraits. With texted music, the composer has an additional tool, for the music can be made to contradict the words or to emphasize what is hidden within them, and thus bring new meaning to the whole, as Sheinberg finds in Shostakovich's song "Schast'ye." It can also render a character like Platée simultaneously pitiable, embarrassingly awkward, and monstrously vain, yet ultimately both annoying and humorous (she is not truly frightening, but we would not want her company; however, observing her antics amuses us). Along the same lines, the seeming cruelty of a character like Osmin is softened and rendered comical despite the very real nature of his threats. In the hands of a composer who understands convention and knows how to "play" with it, purely instrumental music can provide instances of the grotesque as well, something Ravel achieves in his *Sérénade grotesque* with its

distortions of familiar tropes. In all, music can, despite Thomson's skepticism, express the grotesque. Moreover, it has done so across the centuries, in diverse genres, and with a wide variety of musical techniques.

CHAPTER 3

THE SELECTED OPERAS: THE PLOTS AND THEIR GROTESQUE MOMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Grotesque moments in an opera are typically not random events, but are interwoven within the context of the story. Thus a casual reminder of an earlier violent act can cast a frightening shadow on an otherwise romantic situation. Likewise, a dinner invitation is ludicrously out of place when made while observing a corpse or other macabre scene. These juxtapositions can, of course, be heightened by music, as an otherwise straightforward comic or frightening scene can be undercut by the music that accompanies or even "drives" it. But before turning to the analysis of how composers present the grotesque musically, I will lay out brief synopses of the plots of Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, Penderecki's *Die Teufel von Loudun*, and Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy*.[1] The summary of the plot of *Sweeney Todd* appears in Chapter 7. Moreover, I will focus mainly on the grotesque moments that will be examined from a musical perspective in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

WOZZECK (1925)[2]

Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* is the tragic story of a mentally unstable soldier who is degraded and humiliated by his officers and his doctor, and eventually becomes fixated on the idea of killing his common-law wife. It is based on Georg Büchner's play

[1] If I pay more attention to the summaries of *Die Teufel von Loudun* and *Punch and Judy* it is because they are less well known than Berg's operas.

[2] Alban Berg, *Wozzeck* (Vienna: Universal, 1955). Complete synopses can be found in several places, including Jarman, *Wozzeck*, and Perle, *Wozzeck*.

Woyzeck (1837), particularly Karl Franzos's edition.[3] Büchner created the roles of two grotesquely comic characters, the Captain and the Doctor, both of whom are direct descendents of *commedia dell'arte* clowns. Despite ostensibly trying to help Wozzeck financially, they are quite cruel to him, and their interactions with Wozzeck and what those interactions reveal about their own psyches—their neuroses and desires—must strike the audience as monstrously humorous. For brief moments, then, these characters alleviate the overall pathos of the story.

Wozzeck first appears with the Captain, who, in Act I, Scene 1, while seeming to offer Wozzeck guidance, reveals his own fear of mice, wind, and, in particular, time. And not only are these fears irrational, but since a captain should represent the epitome of male courage, they are also humorous. The Captain also attempts to trick Wozzeck with nonsense questions and chastises Wozzeck's morals. Act I, Scene 4, begins with the Doctor upbraiding Wozzeck for coughing in the street, a rather comical reprimand considering the nature of the act.[4] As the scene progresses, however, we learn that the Doctor is studying diet and bodily control, using Wozzeck as a subject. When Wozzeck

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[3] The first edition of the play was edited by Karl Franzos, *Wozzeck: Ein Trauerspiel-fragment* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1878; reprint, 1987). More recent editions have returned to the original manuscripts; see Egon Krause, *Woyzeck* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1969). English translations continue to appear; see *Woyzeck*, trans. by Dan Farrelly (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2004).

[4] In Büchner's manuscript of the play, Wozzeck urinated in the street. Franzos presumably effected this change to make the scene more palatable; and it was a 1913 production of Franzos's version that inspired Berg to write *Wozzeck*, though he altered the order of some scenes and deleted six others (see Perle, "*Wozzeck* and *Woyzeck*," *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 53, no. 2 [April, 1967], 206-219). About Berg's fidelity to the Franzos version (even though a more complete version of the play was known at the time of the premiere), Karen Monson writes, "this bit of censorship on the composer's part makes very little sense in the opera, since Berg allowed Wozzeck to go on to speak of heeding 'nature's call,' but the inconsistency bothered neither Berg nor his audiences" (*Alban Berg*, 163). Perle adds, "one regrets the consequent weakening of the sense and motivation in the operatic version of the Doctor's lines" (*Wozzeck*, 56). While proscribing coughing is rather comical, proscribing urination is far more grotesque.

expresses irrational thoughts about the fiery sun and says that voices are talking to him, the Doctor thrills at this discovery and tells Wozzeck to cultivate this *idée fixe*. The Doctor then becomes more maniacal as he passionately expounds upon his imminent fame and immortality, which will come as the result of his experiments on Wozzeck. The Doctor's distinct lack of interest in actually helping Wozzeck makes a grotesque mockery of what it is to be a doctor.

A number of sustained grotesque passages occur in Act II, Scene 3, where the Doctor's gleefully macabre fascination with death and disease emerges as he first tells of his fascination with a series of sudden deaths from uterine cancer, but then turns on his new subject, the Captain, offering an impromptu diagnosis of him based on his weight and appearance. The Captain is more than distraught over the Doctor's initial comments, and tries to get the Doctor to stop, but the Doctor resumes with even more gusto, predicting apoplexy and paralysis, with the suggestion that the Captain's lower torso could be affected. The sudden appearance of Wozzeck, resulting in a shift of power dynamics, saves the Captain from completely collapsing, for now both the Doctor and the Captain have a new subject. These moments demonstrate that Wozzeck is not the only unstable person on the scene, but simply and unfortunately the one who suffers the most because of his circumstances.

Lulu (1935)[5]

Lulu contains many preposterous—and sometimes quite grotesque—situations, and as a depiction of a demimonde it succeeds in being garish and titillating. Based on

[5] Berg, *Lulu* (Vienna: Universal, 1995). Act III was completed in 1978 by Friedrich Cerha and revised in 1995. Synopses of the opera are offered in several places, including Jarman, *Lulu*, and Perle, *Lulu*.

Frank Wedekind's plays *Erdgeist* (1895) and *Die Büchse der Pandora* (1904),[6] the plot concerns the femme fatale Lulu whom men adore, typically to their undoing, and whose fortunes rise, then fall, during the course of the opera. In the first half she marries two men, one of whom dies while the other kills himself, and then becomes engaged to another before she finally marries Dr. Schön, her mentor of sorts, whom she murders at the end of Act II, Scene 1. After being put in jail, her admirers help her escape, and with them she flees to Paris, where a combination of stock market failure and the threat of blackmail leaves them all penniless and fleeing the police once again. Arriving in London, Lulu decides to earn money as a prostitute, only to be killed by Jack the Ripper.

The two most grotesquely ludicrous moments in the opera involve Lulu and Alwa. In Act II, Scene 1, Alwa comes to visit Lulu at the home she now shares with Dr. Schön, Alwa's father. A phalanx of admirers—Countess Geschwitz, Rodrigo, and the Schoolboy—are in the room, but they hide when Alwa arrives. In addition, Dr. Schön has covertly returned to spy on Lulu in order to see what she does during the day. After the servant leaves, Alwa begins to seduce Lulu, who, familiar with the tropes of seduction, innocently plays along. But to his confession of "Ich liebe dich," she responds, while holding his head, "Ich habe deine Mutter vergiftet. . ." (I poisoned your mother). The situation following this confession continues in a darkly comic vein, as Dr. Schön storms down and tries to get Lulu to shoot herself (though his gun is already drawn, she coyly asks him if he likes her dress). Like a slapstick scene in a silent movie, the whole situation generates laughs despite the dire circumstances: Schön's anger is

[6] Wedekind, *Erdgeist; Die Büchse der Pandora Tragödien* (Munich: Goldmann, 1962). Among English translations, see *Frank Wedekind: Four Major Plays*, trans. by Carl R. Mueller (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, 2000).

very real, and the other characters, Lulu excepted, are truly frightened. In the midst of the bedlam—the hidden admirers emerge, Lulu fiddles with the gun that she says does not work but fires a bullet into the ceiling—Lulu responds to Schön's threats with her pivotal aria, "Wenn sich die Menschen um meinetwillen umgebracht" (Although for my sake a man may kill himself). Rodrigo's appearance distracts Dr. Schön from trying to get Lulu to shoot herself, and she fires repeatedly at Dr. Schön, even after the gun is empty. Having been shot, Schön asks for water; Lulu brings him champagne—even more ludicrous. The scene ends with Lulu offering herself to Alwa if he will keep her from the police, and with the Schoolboy worrying that he will be expelled from school—all the while a man lies dead.

There is a second grotesque moment at the end of Act II, Scene 2, when Lulu and Alwa are reunited. Their conversation is ridiculous. Having just kissed Lulu, Alwa says he will write a sonnet in her name. Directed by Berg to act as if nothing has happened, Lulu offers this *non sequitur*: "Ich ärgere mich nur über das scheußliche Schuhwerk" (I'm bothered by this unspeakable footwear).[7] Alwa tells Lulu that she is still charming, and even her subsequent comment that she shot his father does not sway him; he counters that only her childish eyes keep her from being a designing whore who purposely brings men to their doom. Resuming his attempt at seduction, Alwa tells her that her ankles are "grazioso" and her knees "misterioso," and then addresses the "grandioso" power of her thighs over men. Lulu asks him if he will come away with her, to which he says she has robbed him of all thought. She then responds, "…ist das noch der Diwan,—auf dem sich—dein Vater—verblutet hat?" (Isn't this the sofa on which your father bled to

[7] Presumably she is referring to Geschwitz's shoes, for they had swapped clothing as part of the plan to break Lulu out of prison.

death?). Alwa tells her to be quiet, but this does not dispel the discomfort. Few responses to romantic proclamations could rival these for their sense of grotesquerie, especially since Lulu herself has caused both deaths. That Alwa is unfazed is even more distressing. In the end, uncomfortable laughter (generated by the shock) is the only real response for the audience.

PUNCH AND JUDY (1967)[8]

The traditional "Punch and Judy" show is essentially little else but a string of comically violent episodes, a truly grotesque entertainment in which the Punch doll lashes out at whomever annoys or impedes him and is never punished.[9] For adults the show conjures up memories of childhood, when the world seemed so vast and incomprehensible. We know that Punch's behavior is unacceptable in a civilized society, and the show's humor and appeal perhaps comes from our identification with his base behavior, for everyone has an "Id" moment in which the desire to strike out at someone or something is strong. Performed as an opera with real people, though, there is a secondary grotesque strain, for although the audience knows the performers are supposed to be puppets, which provides a layer of distance, still they are real actors and actresses who are enacting roles; and so the humanity of the performers is present, and the possibility of real violence cannot be overlooked. Puppets have a role in the history of the grotesque precisely because they ape certain human characteristics while being

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[8] Harrison Birtwistle, *Punch and Judy* (London: Universal Edition, 1968).

[9] The earliest recorded script, that of Giovanni Piccini's version, was made by John Payne Collier, who published it as *The Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy of Punch and Judy* (London: Prowett, 1828); see Robert Leach, *The Punch & Judy Show: History, Tradition, and Meaning* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), and George Speaight, *Punch & Judy: A History* (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1955; reprint, 1970).

differentiated from them at the same time.[10] This layering of distancing and theatrical artifice adds to the complexity of the show.

Birtwistle and his librettist Stephen Pruslin did not want to create a children's opera that simply set an existing version of the show to music. Their goal was to produce a "stylized and ritualistic drama for adults that used all of the imagery, the trappings and paraphernalia of the original."[11] To this end, they made several important decisions. Pruslin made up an artificial language of nursery rhymes that resembles the doggerel typically found in Punch shows, but also allowed for more complex expressions. They added the character of Choregos, derived from ancient Greek plays, to act as both an extra figure in the story and an all-purpose narrator. They also felt that a show that only followed Punch's escalating violence would lack depth, so they added a secondary plot wherein Punch pursues Pretty Polly, thus balancing the story and giving Punch a more complex nature. By doing this, they make Punch's atrocious acts all the more unfathomable because we also see his desire for love and romance. As Pruslin notes, however, Punch's successful wooing of Polly should not be read as the positive outcome of his numerous murders. Instead, Pruslin's and Birtwistle's goal was to expand upon the mythic status of the Punch and Judy narrative, in such a way as to leave the story intact while making it capable of supporting many interpretations.[12]

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[10] Kayser states that puppet theater is not grotesque in itself, but that "the puppets of the marionette theatre would be grotesque only if they gained a life of their own and exchanged their world for ours" (*Grotesque*, 195, n. 26). In the case of Birtwistle's opera, the puppets have moved into our world while maintaining many of the elements of the puppet world, although the action will be more stylized (in standard Punch and Judy shows Punch kills most of his victims by beating them with a stick).

[11] Pruslin discusses the genesis of the opera in the booklet that accompanies the recording *Punch and Judy*, conducted by David Atherton (Etcetera KTC 2014, 1989), 2. I know of no other publication of the libretto or synopsis of the opera.

[12] Pruslin, *Punch and Judy*, 2.

The opera is in one act and is divided up into many discrete "numbers" (in the manner of a Baroque opera), some of which recur several times, and thus provide a certain cyclic structure. Thus there are two "Passion Arias," three "Proclamations," four "Weather Reports," etc. This design acts as a meta-commentary on the structure of the opera, the nature and history of opera in general, and also helps fulfill the goal of creating a stylized opera.

In the "Prologue," Choregos establishes the tone of the show by first singing "Let the tragedy begin," adding, a few lines later, "If we make you laugh, then we you need not pay."[13] Punch enters, and after singing a lullaby he throws Baby into the fire. His wife Judy enters and accuses Punch of killing Baby, so Punch kills Judy, with commentary by Choregos, the Doctor, and the Lawyer. Punch then goes on his first "Quest for Pretty Polly," but she turns down his gift. Punch returns and kills the Doctor and the Lawyer. In the second "Quest," Polly dismisses his gift again. Undaunted, Punch kills Choregos, but when he goes in search of Polly for a third time, he has a "Nightmare," during which his victims turn on him. After he recovers from a "Fainting Spell," he searches again for Polly, but she is gone. Choregos returns as Jack Ketch, the hangman who has come to punish Punch, but in a verbal sparring match Punch turns the tables and hangs the hangman. Once more Punch seeks out Polly, and this time she accepts him, at which point all the victims return to congratulate the couple. Finally, the "Epilogue" has Choregos telling the audience that the events of the story will linger, and the last line of the opera, "this comedy is at an end," doubly inverts the opening one.

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[13] This is the line verbatim: "…then we you need…". Grammatically awkward sentences are found throughout the opera, designed to mimic childish speech.

The grotesque moments we will examine are Punch's "Lullaby," the "Murder Ensemble III," which includes "Recitative and Passion Aria II" and "Proclamation III," and the pairing of "Cries" and the "Adding Song" from the "Nightmare" section. Punch's "Lullaby," sung to Baby, is full of words akin to "baby talk":

> Dancy baby diddy
> what shall Daddy do widdy?
> sit on his lap, give it some pap.
> Dancy baby diddy.
>
> Dancy baby dancy.
> How it shall gallop and prancy.
> Sit on my knee, now kissy me.
> Dancy baby dancy.
>
> Dancy baby wincy.
> Shall Daddy chop and mincy?
> Step on its back and watch it crack.
> Dancy baby wincy.
>
> Dancy baby turny.
> Watch Daddy singe and burny.
> Into fire throw and watch it glow,
> So bouncy baby burny.

Punch then throws Baby into the fire while emitting his "War-Cry," the nonsense line "Roo-it-too-it-too-it," which recurs with most of the murders. The lullaby seems normal at first, completely congruous with the conventions of lullabies, and even the third stanza is not so gory when compared with the rather terrible end in the traditional "Rock-a-bye baby on the tree top," which ends with the line, "down will come baby, cradle and all." Yet when Punch actually kills Baby, the act is horrifying and concrete. As we will see, the musical setting reinforces the frightening aspects of the song, while the humor resides mostly in the words and Punch's vocal line.

Before each murder, except that of Baby, there is a "Proclamation." The first (for Judy) invokes religious concepts ("Punch, that high priest of pain,/Consecrates the altar of arrogance and the pulpit of pride/For the holy sacrament of murder. . ."), the second (for the Doctor and the Lawyer), mathematical idioms ("Punch, that mathematician of misery,/Juggles axioms of arrogance and logarithms of lust/In a double equation of death…"), and the third (for Choregos), musical terms:

> Punch that virtuoso of villainy
> Plucks pizzicato of panic and glissandi of gore
> In a toccata of torture.
> With downbeats of destruction and ponticelli of pain,
> He turns tones of terror into a song of suffering,
> While his victim, filled full with fulfillment,
> Pronounces principles of transposition.

For an opera that is simultaneously about Punch and Judy and the nature of opera itself, the text of "Proclamation III" conjures up many associations; but to use musical terms to express violent actions is ludicrous, even more so because Choregos is murdered in a musical fashion: he is inside a bass viol case, and Punch essentially saws him in half by pretending to play the case with a bow. Immediately preceding this murder is Judy's "Recitative and Passion Aria II," which she sings while Punch directs Choregos into the case. The text of this number is also full of musical terminology and alliteration, but this time twisted in two directions, for the connotations are both horrifying and romantic, as Judy still loves Punch.

> Recitative: Witness, avenging Gods,
> My Choregos in stringent suffering strung
> On a violent viol vile!
> Have mercy, murderer!
> Unstring your bow, which, like an arrow, pierces my heart.

Aria: Be silent, strings of my heart.
The rainbow on this bridge reveals suspensions of eternal harmony
Be silent, strings of my heart! Be still.

As with the "Lullaby," this number parodies a Baroque opera aria, and the effect is a heightening of the grotesque nature of the text.

Finally, in "Cries" and the adjoining "Adding Song," five characters, four of whom were killed by Punch earlier in the opera, recite a series of tortures that they want to bring down upon Punch. They cite four in "Cries," and add another three in the "Adding Song," with the full lyric eventually reading, "a fractured skull/a bleeding face/a severed limb/an oozing eye/a twisted neck/a gangrene foot/a burning sore." Yet unlike the tortures catalogued in Osmin's aria (discussed in Chapter 2), a person would live to feel each of these quite acutely. On the other hand, the "Adding Song" recalls children's songs and poems, some of which have pain, suffering, or other grotesque ideas as their subjects, but always with the ability to make a person laugh even in the face of injury or torture.[14]

DIE TEUFEL VON LOUDUN (1968)[15]

In *Die Teufel von Loudun*, Penderecki, who wrote both music and libretto, explores the confluence of religion, politics, gossip, and sexual hysteria. The opera

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[14] The many children's songs and poems with rather gruesome subjects include *Alouette* (a song about pulling the head, wings, nose, eyes, etc. off of a lark), *Found a Peanut* (a child finds a rotten peanut, but eats it anyway and gets sick and dies), and *There was an Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly* (the old woman eats progressively larger animals, hoping that each will eat the previous one). There is also the urban myth that *Ring Around the Rosie* refers to the Black Death, or bubonic plague, but this theory has been refuted (see J. Allan Varasdi, "Claim: The nursery rhyme 'Ring Around the Rosie' is a coded reference to the Black Plague," www.snopes.com/language/literary/rosie.htm [Accessed 1 November 2004]).

[15] Penderecki, *Die Teufel von Loudun* (Mainz: Schott, 1969). A complete libretto and summary of the plot accompany the recording, *Die Teufel von Loudun*, conducted by Marek Janowski (Philips 446 328-2, 1971).

dramatizes the real events that took place in 1634 in the small French town of Loudun (150 miles southwest of Paris) and presents an unflattering picture of the political power that the Catholic Church wielded at the time.[16]

The opera begins with Sister Jeanne praying to God but subsequently dreaming of Father Grandier, the town priest after whom she lusts despite never having met him. Grandier is a vain and licentious priest who has enemies both political and personal, the former because he opposes the king's edict to remove the town's fortifications, the latter owing to his vanity and sexual activities. Jeanne claims that the Devil is trying to possess her through Grandier, and the priest's enemies use this accusation as a means to remove him. Jeanne is then subjected to two exorcisms, the second of which is a town spectacle, though a visiting nobleman with a fake relic proves she is merely hysterical. Nevertheless, Grandier is found guilty, and though he acknowledges his faults, he refuses to sign a confession even under torture. In the final scene Jeanne and a broken Grandier finally meet: she says that he is beautiful, and he tells her that she is responsible for what has happened to him.[17]

Most of the physical acts depicted in the opera are unambiguously sexual, violent, or otherwise "private" in nature: orgasm, enema, *post coitus*, pregnancy, flatulence, breaking of legs and removal of fingernails, demonic voices, and burning at the stake. Since the body is frequently the site of the grotesque, it would seem possible that the

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[16] Penderecki based the libretto on Erich Fried's German translation of John Whiting's play *The Devils* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), itself based on Aldous Huxley's 1952 historical novel *The Devils of Loudun* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971). Huxley's novel draws on the existing court records from Grandier's trial. In addition to the novel, play, and opera, there is a movie, *The Devils*, directed by Ken Russell (1967).

[17] In addition to having had his legs broken and fingernails pulled out, his head is shaved clean; having thought of his hair, beard, and mustache as his glory, he asks for one last look before it is all removed.

entire opera could be susceptible to a grotesque interpretation; however, as noted in Chapter 1, the grotesque requires, if not explicit humor, then at least a sense of ambiguity as to how the physical is to be received. In most scenes, Penderecki offers no such ambiguity in either the text or the music, presenting the material with utmost seriousness. He does, however, offer some comic relief in the form of the apothecary Adam, the surgeon Mannoury, and the three novice nuns from Jeanne's convent. In their brief scenes we find elements of the grotesque as the story moves inexorably toward its brutal climax. In addition, the two exorcism scenes and the scene of Grandier's torture are overwhelming, and the audience may find themselves laughing out of discomfort and shock, another typical reaction to the grotesque. In fact, at the end of the second exorcism, Penderecki directs one of the children on stage to laugh, perhaps as an indication to the audience that such a reaction is understandable.

Adam and Mannoury are the town gossips, direct descendants of the Doctor and the Captain in *Wozzeck* both dramatically and musically.[18] In Act I, Scene 2, Adam and Mannoury leave Grandier's church and discuss the priest's sanctimonious behavior in the light of his vanity and indiscretions. The recently widowed Ninon walks by, and Mannoury suggests that a recent examination proves that her manner of walking is the result of her recent sexual activity with Grandier. Continuing on their way, Adam and Mannoury come upon a body hanging from the gallows, and while Mannoury calls it a compelling sight, Adam interrupts him with an invitation to dinner. That they treat the corpse as a common enough object could have two explanations: first, public executions were commonplace at the time; and second, they both had professions in which they

[18] Aldous Huxley describes Mannoury and Adam as "at once absurd and pretentious, solemn and grotesque"; *The Devils of Loudun* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 32.

would see dead bodies (Mannoury more so than Adam). But the gruesomely comical segue into the dinner invitation is pure grotesquerie, for it is as though seeing the body made Adam hungry. Thus their cavalier attitude provokes uncomfortable laughter.

In Act I, Scene 4, Mannoury now has the head of the hanged man in a box, and with some reverence calls the head "der Wohnsitz der Vernunft" (the site of reason). Grandier approaches, and, upon learning about the head, asks how much it cost, as though it were a common enough object, like a piece of meat for dinner. At only nine gröschen, Grandier proclaims it a bargain, asks to see it, and then refers to it as "armes Pöckelfleisch" (poor pickle flesh), thus reintroducing the connection between food and death. Adam reiterates Mannoury's comment about the head being the site of reason, and Grandier laughs at them before saying goodnight. His laugh perhaps suggests that he has a different idea of where reason is located: the colloquial axiom that a man's head resides in his genitals. Once Grandier leaves, the sexual gossip returns, as Adam comments that he could smell Ninon on him, and with Mannoury speculates that Grandier stimulates himself while listening to the confessions of young girls. Although the pair appears in other scenes (usually as part of ensembles), the two scenes discussed above are the ones that most strongly establish Adam and Mannoury as grotesque characters.

The other comic figures, a group of young nuns, do not have Adam and Mannoury's capacity for malevolence; instead, they are lazy and more titillated by Sister Jeanne's exorcism and infamy than concerned with her ordeal. They appear only a few times in the opera, but on two occasions their frivolous comments can be perceived as grotesque because of the circumstances in which they utter them. In Act II, Scene 7,

following Jeanne's first exorcism, the nuns complain that no one comes to the convent to help them with the housework. The quotidian takes on a grotesque air when Sister Jeanne suddenly laughs and tells them to ask the devils to help with the housework, after which they state that they have mocked God. Although it is Jeanne's comment that provides the main grotesque element, it is merely the punctuation point to the nuns' whining.

The nuns next appear in Act II, Scenes 9 and 10, during Sister Jeanne's public exorcism. Either out of mass hysteria or simply owing to a desire to be noticed, the young nuns also claim to be possessed. But as the exorcism ends and the crowd disperses, the nuns quickly return to their idle chatter and, as though nothing unusual had occurred, discuss their inability to pray, as well as their fame and future. Penderecki's stage directions call for them to sound gay. Louise asks if the other two are worried about their souls, to which Claire responds, "Nicht mehr, seit deine schönen Beine so bewundert worden sind!" (Not since your lovely legs have been so greatly admired!). Louise then asks Claire what she has been thinking about in chapel, to which Claire responds, "Ach, dies und das, was man so tun könnte" (Ah, this and that, what one can do). And finally, Gabrielle asks "Um sich zu vergnügen?" (New ways to amuse?); and after an affirmative response, they run off laughing. Coming on the heels of the exorcism and the sexual undertones of Sister Jeanne's accusation of Grandier, the three nuns' countenance and this glib exchange, along with the implied lesbianism, seem most irreverent and even sacrilegious. Moreover, the scenes are problematically humorous—and thus grotesque.

CONCLUSION

In all, there are thematic similarities between many of the scenes and moments that I have isolated as being grotesque, for as we saw in Chapter 1, the grotesque often involves the human body, disfigurement, torture, violence, and death. Yet there is also abundant variety in terms of how these disturbing or frightening elements are combined with the ludicrous elements: torture presented as children's games, murder as lover's talk, capital punishment as incentive for dinner, and the thrill of a terminal diagnosis. And as we shall see in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, Berg, Birtwistle, and Penderecki, despite their stylistic differences, often draw upon similar techniques to underscore these grotesque moments musically.

CHAPTER 4

CREATING THE MUSICAL GROTESQUE (I): RHYTHM AND PITCH

INTRODUCTION

Having identified the grotesque moments in the librettos of our operas, I now turn to the ways in which the composers have underscored these moments musically. At the risk of isolating and separating musical elements that form a sonic whole, I will divide the discussion over three chapters. The present chapter will focus on aspects of rhythm (including duration, meter, and tempo) and pitch (including range, register, and the construction of melodies). Chapter 5 explores how familiar genres or genre markers (for example, we need little more than a combination of triple meter, a strong downbeat, and a lively tempo in order to recognize a waltz) can be juxtaposed with unexpected subject matter or musical gestures in order to create something grotesque. Finally, Chapter 6 will treat orchestration and timbre, as there are many examples of particular sounds or sound effects—whether instrumental or vocal—that can emphasize the grotesque. Dynamics also play a role, and they will enter the discussion at different points in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Finally, since twentieth-century composers have greatly expanded the parameters of what instruments and voices can produce, I will, when appropriate, also address matters relating to performance practice.

RHYTHM AND TEMPO

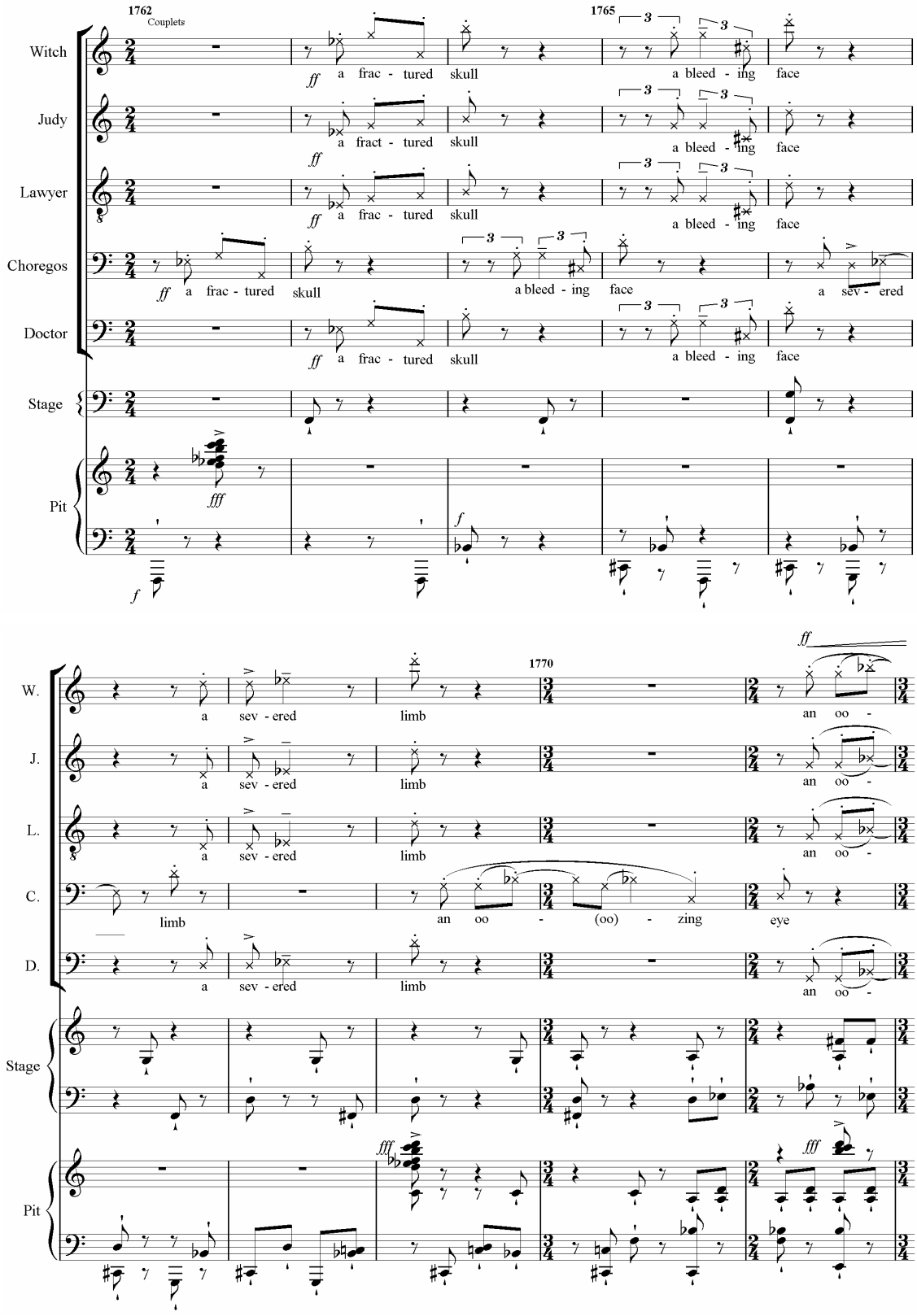
While the primary purpose of varying the durations of the notes that make up the surface rhythm of a passage is to create motion, it can also be a powerful tool in subverting or emphasizing the text, perfect for grotesque situations in an opera. Tempo

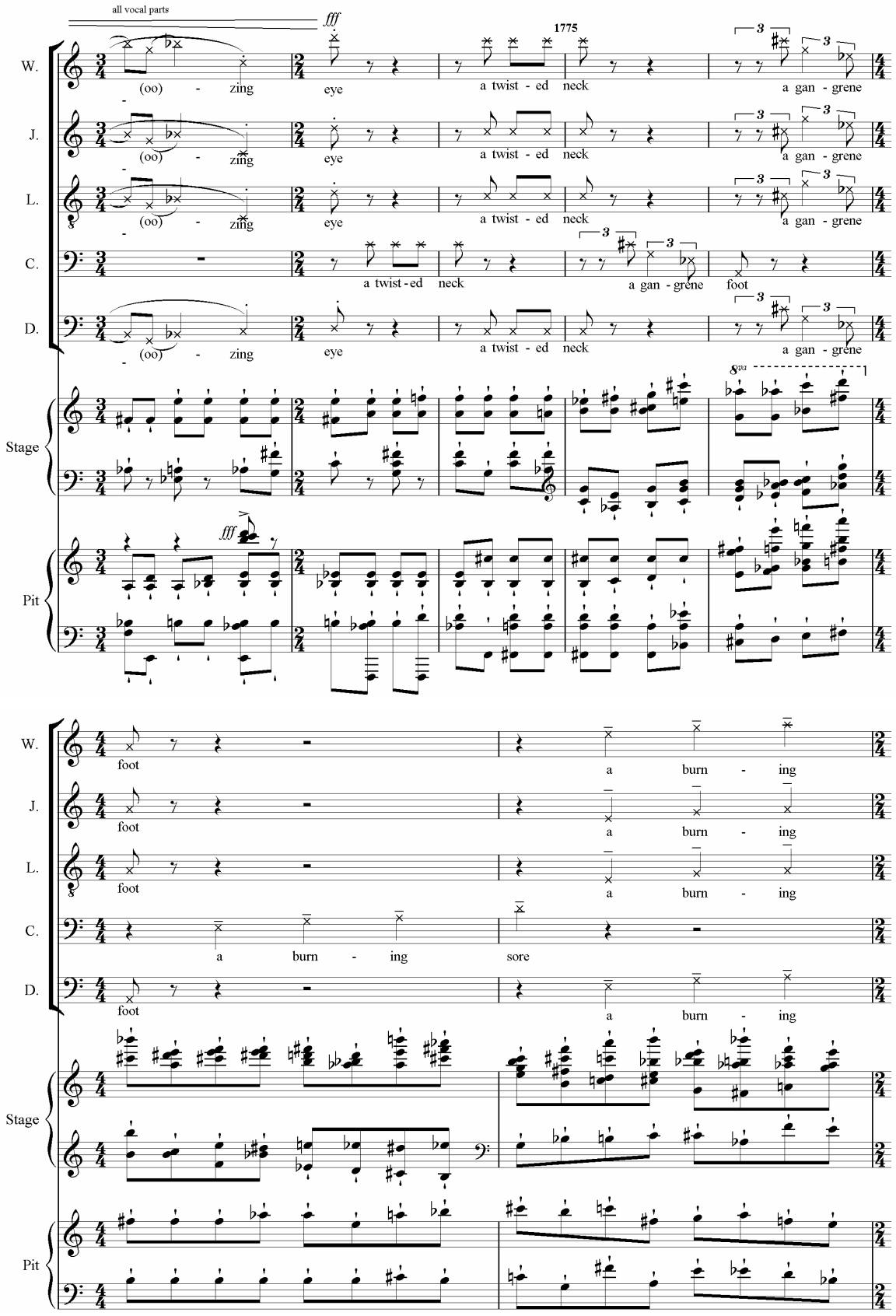
too can suggest the grotesque, as the "wrong" tempo can contradict the meaning of the words and turn a frightening situation into one that is funny or a comic (or tender) moment into one that is frighteningly sinister. Here we will concentrate on examples from *Punch and Judy*, *Lulu*, and *Wozzeck*.

A clear example of the use of rhythm and tempo to punctuate the grotesque is the "Adding Song" in *Punch and Judy* (mm. 684-797).[1] It is the longest choral number in the opera and is performed by (in descending order of vocal range) the Witch, Judy, the Lawyer, Choregos, and the Doctor. Birtwistle turns the presentation of the seven tortures—a fractured skull, a bleeding face, a severed limb, an oozing eye, a twisted neck, a gangrene foot, and a burning sore—into a comic game-song by using a call-and-response format: Choregos calls out an injury, and the remaining characters repeat it, using the same rhythms (and pitches, albeit in different octaves). The reason it is called the "Adding Song" becomes clear as the song develops: two injuries are given at the start, followed by the refrain; then the first two are repeated and a third is added, followed once again by the refrain, with this pattern continuing until all seven are listed. Example 4.1 provides the final presentation and includes all seven of the injuries as well as the final "Refrain."

[1] *Punch and Judy* has no acts or scenes; instead, the opera is divided into discrete sections, each with its own title, such as "Adding Song." In the score, the measure numbers always 1 after every 1000 measures; the "Adding Song" therefore, technically runs from measure 1684 to 1797. In the two-piano/vocal score, it begins on page 169.

Ex. 4.1: *Punch and Judy*, "Adding Song", mm. 1762-82.

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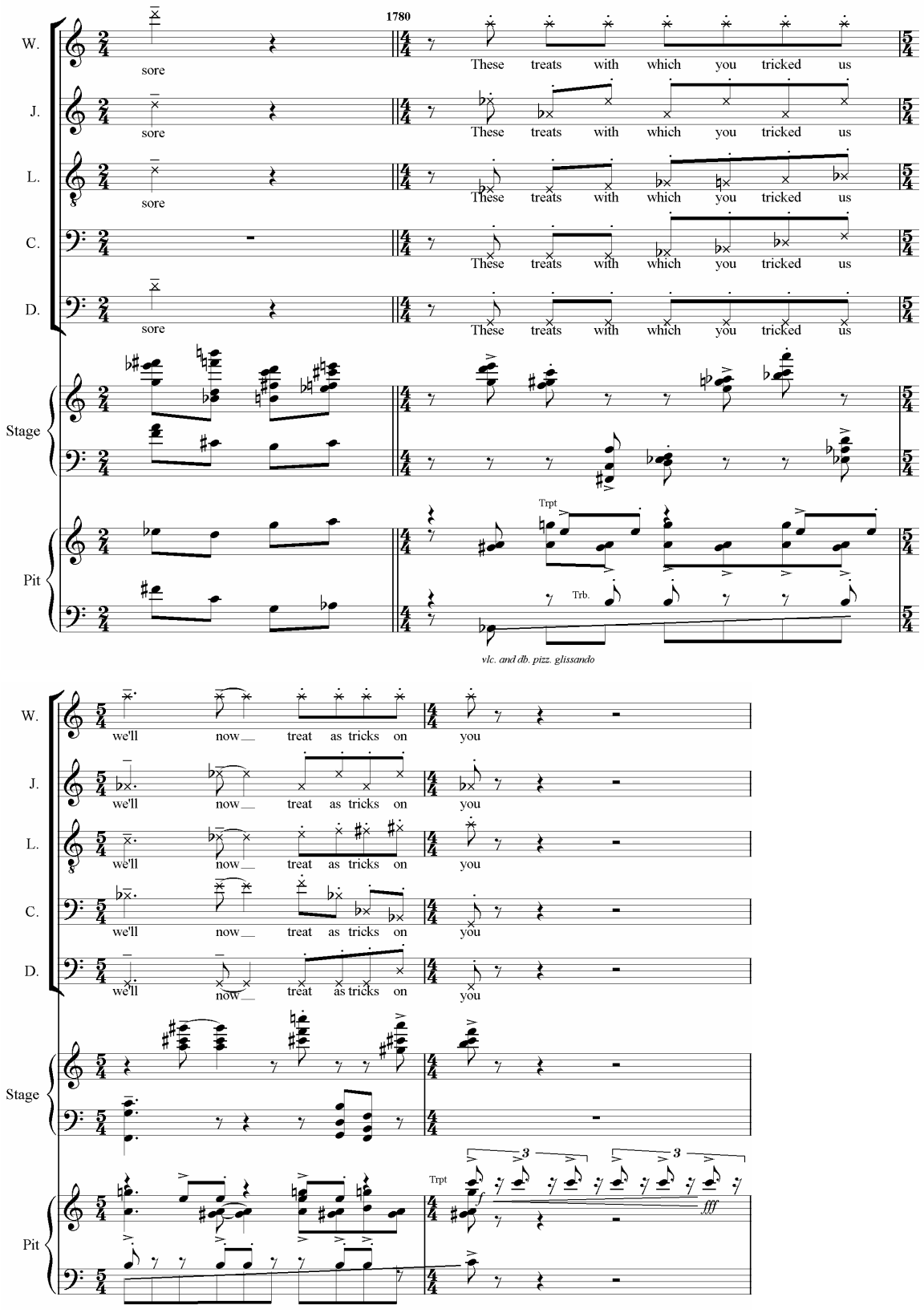
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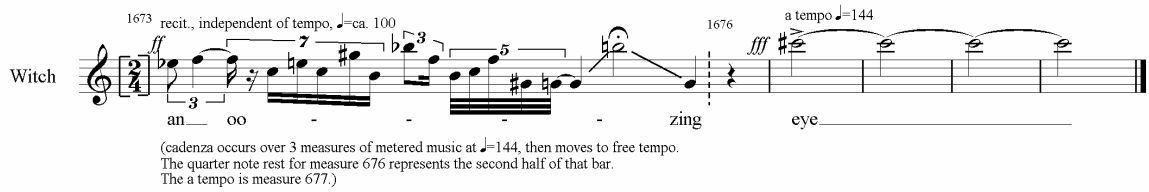
we'll now treat as tricks on you
fff

Each injury consists of three words that total four syllables and comprise two iambic feet. Birtwistle exploits this inherent rhythmic pattern musically by placing the unstressed syllables on upbeats, the stressed syllables on the beat, with the body parts falling only on downbeats (with the exception of Choregos's "limb"). Eighth-note and triplet rhythms dominate, and almost every note is staccato save those for "oozing," which will be discussed below. By doing this, and in combination with a lively tempo (quarter note = 152), Birtwistle creates a headlong rhythmic propulsion and succeeds in making the characters sound disturbingly giddy. In addition, he specifies that the singers use Sprechstimme, an effect that enhances the clipped rhythms and projects the text more clearly. As the short and choppy rhythmic motives accumulate into longer phrases and gain momentum, the performers seem to grow ever more hysterical. For the audience, the entire number is quintessentially grotesque, as the lively, rhythmically hyper music forces the characters to project a comically enthusiastic zeal for bloodshed.

Birtwistle's rhythms also create interesting examples of word painting. Thus the words "severed" and "limb" are cut off from one another by a rest (mm. 1766-69 of Ex. 4.1), while "an oozing eye" seems to quite literally ooze over the course of six slurred quarter notes, a longer span than that used by any of the other injuries (mm. 1769-73 of Ex. 4.1). The setting of "an oozing eye" also recalls a moment heard in "Cries," the number that directly precedes the "Adding Song." There we hear the first four injuries, the most memorable being the Witch's extravagant melisma on the word "oozing" (Ex. 4.2); though its length and range may well strike us as ludicrous, it is a wonderful example of word painting to produce a grotesque effect.

Ex. 4.2: *Punch and Judy*, "Cries," mm. 1673-79.



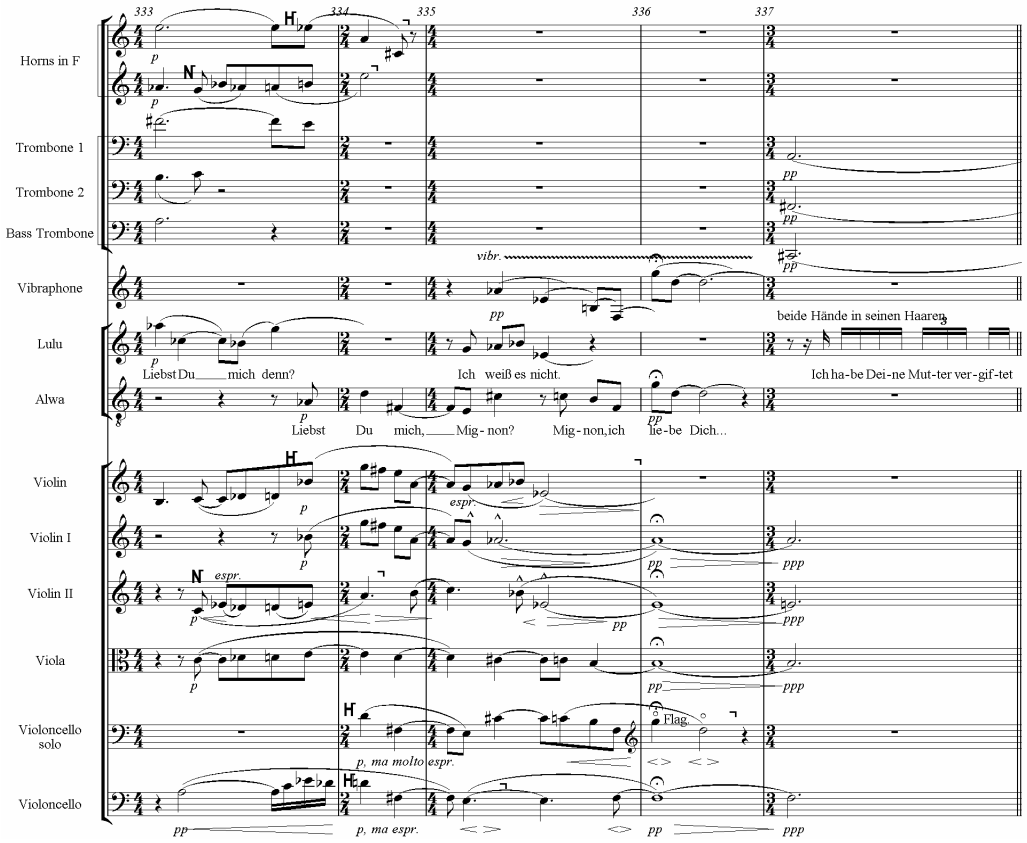
Finally (to return to the "Adding Song"), Birtwistle sets "a burning sore" (mm. 1777-79) with four quarter notes; and with their *sostenuto* effect, they emphasize that particular torture and impress it upon us as no other. Now, a burning sore is a prime symptom of syphilis, so that Punch's sexual behavior is now fair game, and presented as the final item in the litany. Moreover, with its malicious yet comic manner, it provides yet another instance of grotesquerie.

Changes of tempo along with rhythmic gestures play important roles in conveying the frenzied atmosphere of the grotesque roundelay of romance, flirtation, and murder in Act II of Berg's *Lulu*. Though the metronome markings themselves do not always indicate fast tempos, Berg qualifies them with such adjectives as *furioso* and *tumultuoso*, and uses ritardandos and rubatos to great effect in order to achieve changes in mood, several of which are quite grotesque. As Alwa embarks upon his awkward seduction of Lulu in Act II, Scene 1, Berg slowly adds quicker rhythms in both Alwa's vocal line and the orchestral accompaniment, thus building up the texture and creating a sense of approaching climax. Lulu innocently plays along, and her response of "Was findest Du daran…" (What do you find next…) also becomes more rhythmically active with each repetition, suggesting coquettish flirting. Upon finally realizing that Alwa is not playing a game, however, Lulu commands him not to look at her so passionately. The passage reaches its climax when Alwa tells her to destroy him. Following this, the tempo

gradually slows down and the durations lengthen; although no longer rapturous, the music nevertheless remains warm as Lulu tentatively asks Alwa if he loves her. He returns the question and she answers that she does not know; he then quietly says that he loves her.

Up to this point, Berg has fulfilled many of the conventions of an operatic love scene; the slowing down seems a mere pause on the path to an ecstatic declaration of mutual love (Ex. 4.3). Berg even echoes Wagner, using strings to double the vocal lines and having the strings pause on the "Tristan" chord (m. 336). Considering this setup, then, we expect Lulu to confess at least some feeling for Alwa, even though she is married to his father. Instead, we get a truly shocking confession: she casually states that she poisoned his mother (Ex. 4.3, m. 337).

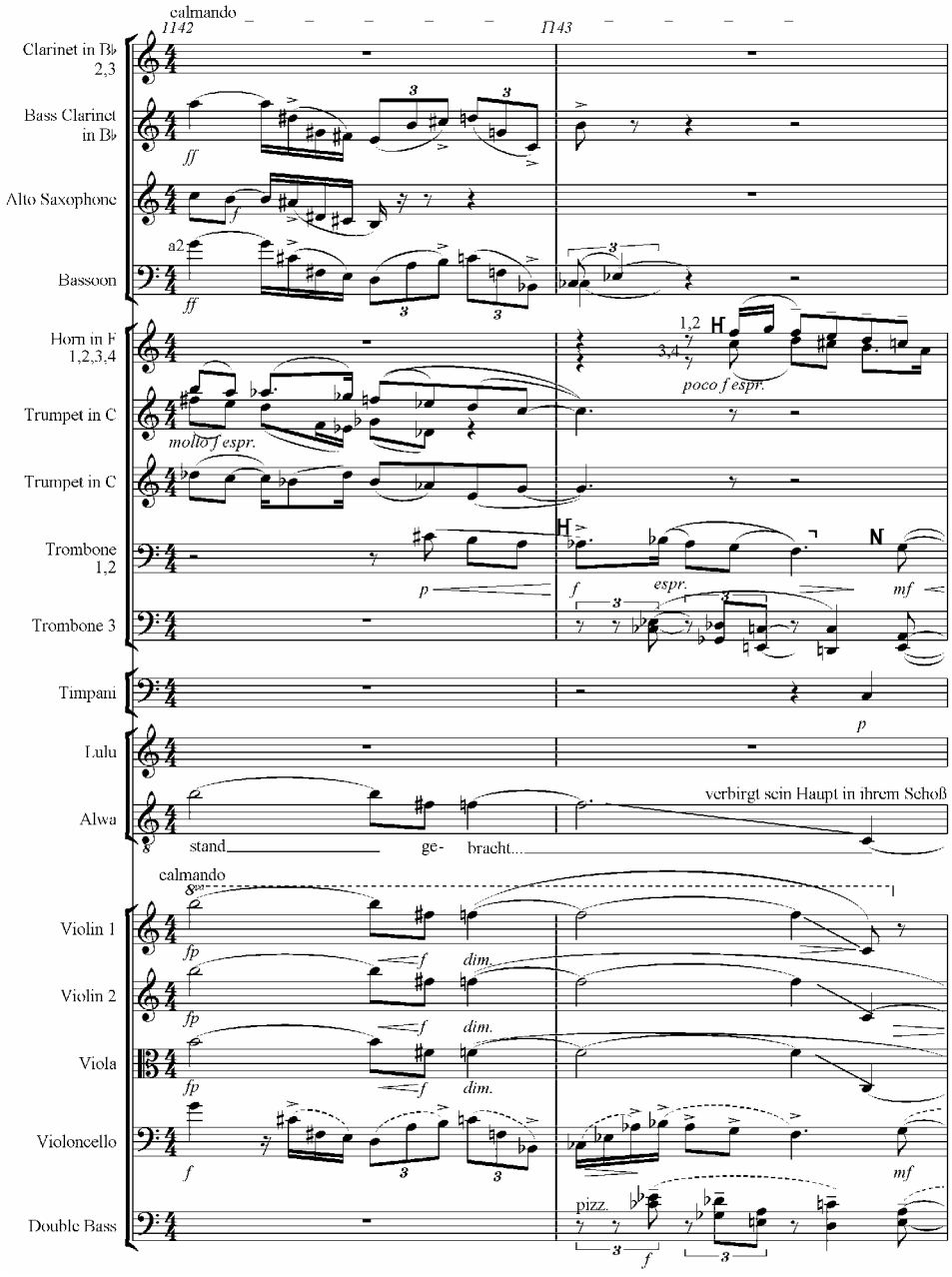
Ex. 4.3: *Lulu*, Act II, Scene 1, mm. 333-37.

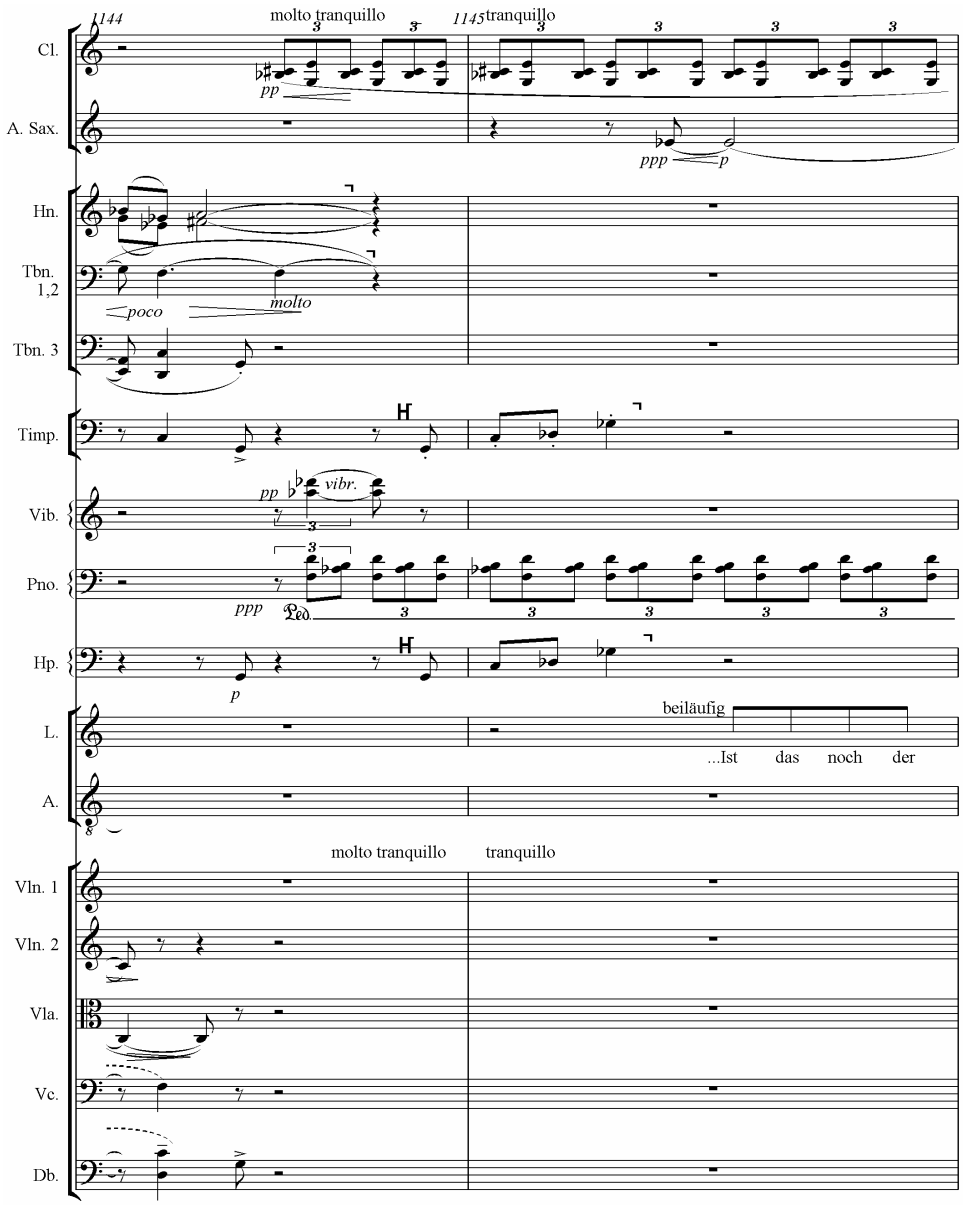


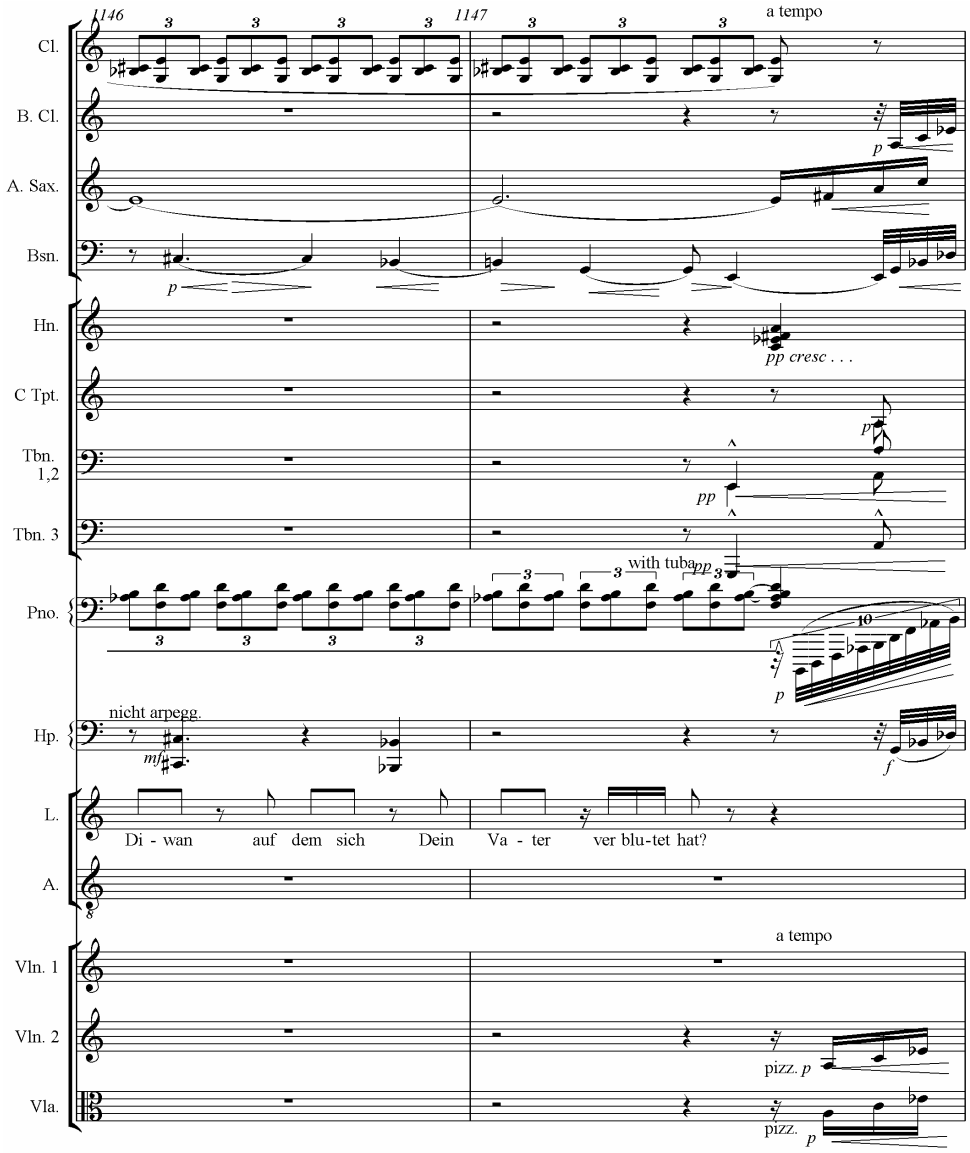
Completely inappropriate and violently brutal in its honesty, the incongruous juxtaposition of the motionless strings and trombones with Lulu's incisive sixteenth notes is disarmingly grotesque.

At the end of Act II, Scene 2, Berg creates a musical setting that is parallel in many ways to the moment just discussed. Alwa is again ardently seducing Lulu, and the music surges as he likens her body parts to quasi-musical terminology (her ankles are "grazioso" and her knees "misterioso"). Lulu, more focused on practical matters, simply wants to know if he will come away with her. The intensity builds, reaching a climax when, after Lulu's question, "Kommst Du?!" (Are you coming?!), Alwa responds, "Du hast mich um den Verstand gebracht…" (You have robbed me of reason). As he finishes the line, Berg's indications of *calmando* and *molto tranquillo* help release the tension by slowing the music down (Ex. 4.4). Once again Berg flouts the chance for Lulu to offer reciprocal sentiments, despite her holding Alwa's head in her hands. Over an undulating accompaniment of slow triplets, Lulu asks, "Ist das noch der Diwan, auf dem sich Dein Vater verblutet hat?" (Is this not the sofa where you father bled to death?).

Ex. 4.4: *Lulu*, Act II, Scene 2, mm. 1142-47.




1144
molto tranquillo
1145tranquillo
Cl.
pp
A. Sax.
ppp
p
Hn.
Tbn. 1,2
poco
molto
Tbn. 3
Timp.
Vib.
pp
vibr.
Pno.
ppp
Hp.
p
L.
beiläufig
...Ist das noch der
A.
molto tranquillo
tranquillo
Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vc.
Db.

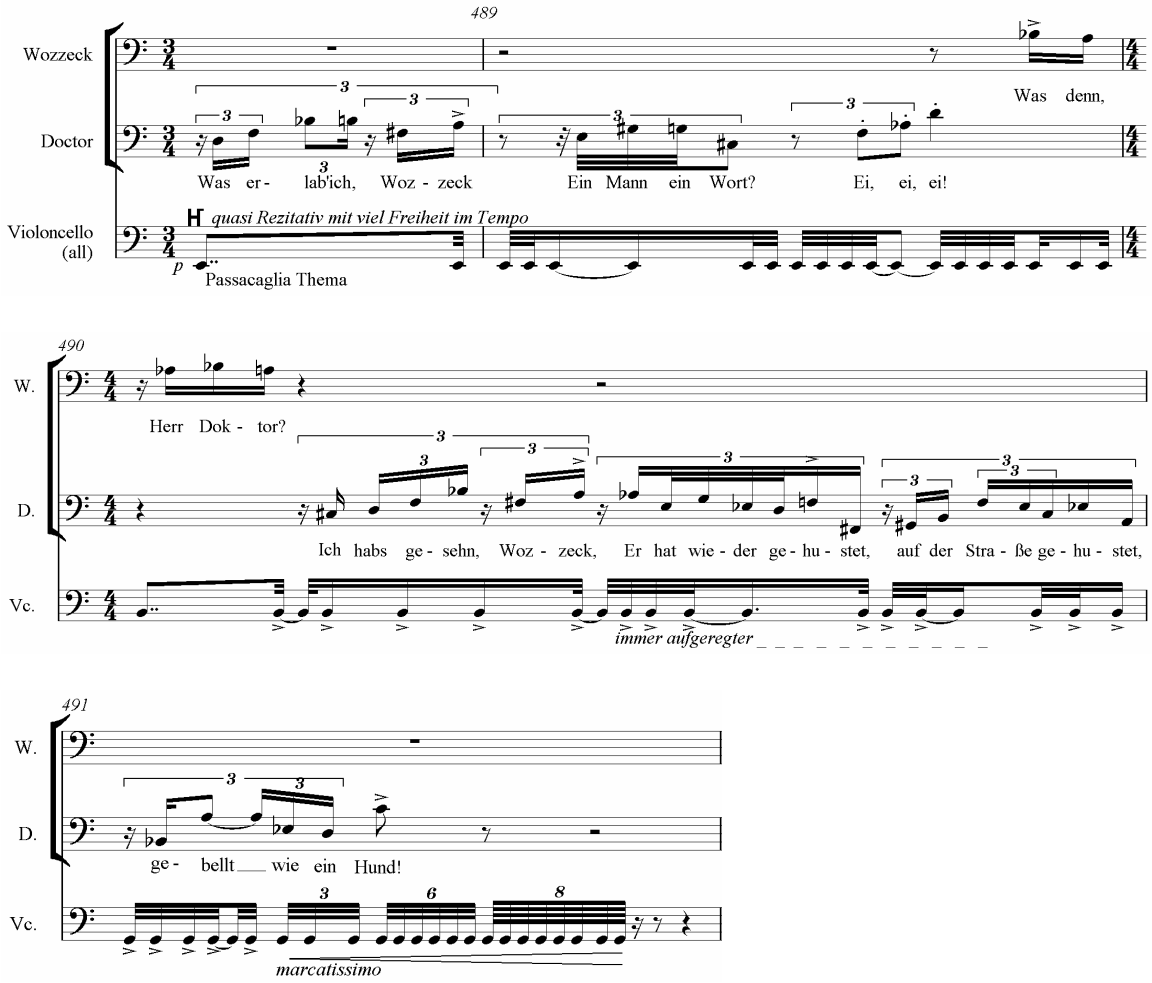


Again, the orchestra's gentle, undulating triples seem inappropriate as an accompaniment for Lulu's sinister question, and the juxtaposition may well confuse and discomfort us. It is yet another grotesque moment.

Berg also uses incongruous rhythms and changes of tempo to emphasize grotesque moments in *Wozzeck*. Two particular moments are Wozzeck's encounter with the Doctor in Act I, Scene 4, and the exchange between the Doctor and the Captain in Act II, Scene 2. (The latter scene, which Berg sets as a waltz, will be discussed in Chapter 5.)

In the former scene, the rhythm of the Doctor's line is extremely complex as he scolds Wozzeck for coughing in the street and compares him to a dog (Ex. 4.5). In addition, the quirky yet insistent rhythm of the Passacaglia theme adds to our perception of the Doctor's instability.

Ex. 4.5: Wozzeck, Act I, Scene 4, mm. 488-91.



This opening exchange provides only an introduction to the full nature of the Doctor's inhumanity toward Wozzeck. As the scene develops, and the Doctor outlines his bizarre yet horrifyingly arbitrary designs on Wozzeck, Berg continues to use rhythm and tempo to underscore the Doctor's grotesque nature.

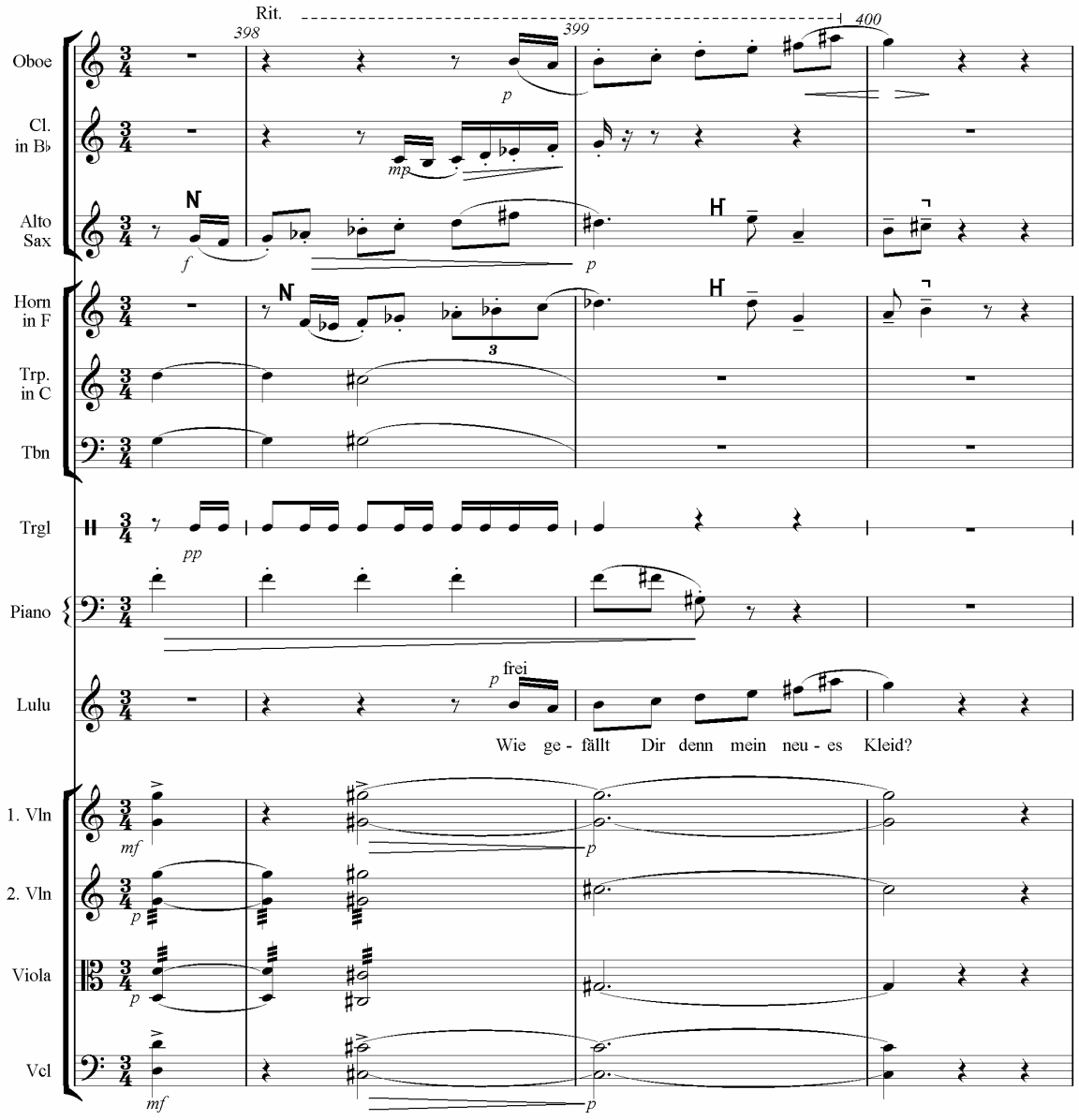
PITCH AND MELODY

Pitch and melody are intrinsically linked, and in the following discussion we will approach them from several different vantage points to see how they can be used to represent the grotesque. These include the shape of a melodic phrase, extremes of range and register, and the interaction of melodic material exchanged between two or more characters. Another important feature is the way an instrument or voice moves from one note to another, that is the manner of articulation, since this can dramatically affect the quality of the sound, particularly if the shift is not an easy one or if a glissando is indicated. (The latter, however, will be discussed in Chapter 6).

Melody and Motive

Another notably grotesque moment from Act II, Scene 1, of *Lulu* occurs when Dr. Schön confronts Alwa and Lulu and announces his intention to have Lulu kill herself. Lulu interrupts Dr. Schön's tirade—conveyed through a rhythmically active vocal line that covers a large range—to blithely ask, "Wie gefällt Dir denn mein neues Kleid?" (How do you like my new dress?) (Ex. 4.6). By itself, this flirtatious question is grotesquely comic given the circumstances, for she should fear for her life. Yet there is potentially a method to her madness.

Ex. 4.6: *Lulu*, Act II, Scene 1, mm. 398-400.



Her phrase is strikingly different from the surrounding material, principally because the melody is comprised of stepwise motion (with the exception of the penultimate $a^{\#}$'', Lulu sings a G-major scale). In fact, her ascending line for this question recalls the inflection typically found in a spoken question, and thus draws on a tradition that reaches back at

least to the eighteenth century.[2] Berg anticipates Lulu's entrance by giving the melody and variations thereof to the alto saxophone, French horn, and clarinet (the oboe doubles her), creating a canonic texture that could imply that she is her gathering her wiles in order to distract Dr. Schön. Once again, Berg uses a ritard and sustained notes for the other accompanimental instruments in a manner akin to the examples discussed above. But Lulu does not succeed, and when Dr. Schön responds, the music leaps back to tempo (quarter = 132). This moment is a strangely comic respite in the overall portrayal of his anger.

Excepting some of the longer soliloquies, Penderecki's *Die Teufel von Loudun* uses a small vocabulary of melodic gestures for most of the characters. The motives are rarely more than a few beats long and typically consist of dissonant intervals, large leaps (often major sevenths and minor ninths), or rapidly repeated single pitches. Nevertheless, by manipulating these elements in different ways, Penderecki is able to differentiate among characters, particularly the grotesque Adam, Mannoury, and the young nuns. Adam and Mannoury are characterized as bumbling yet malevolent clowns who share a single perverse mind, while the young nuns appear more as flighty girls who are not really aware of the inappropriateness of their actions.

Adam and Mannoury first appear in Act I, Scene 2, following Jeanne's long opening soliloquy, and immediately jar us with their short phrases that abut one another. They barely allow each other to finish a sentence, as they constantly overlap and interrupt each other or say the same things at the same time. Penderecki has them speak this way

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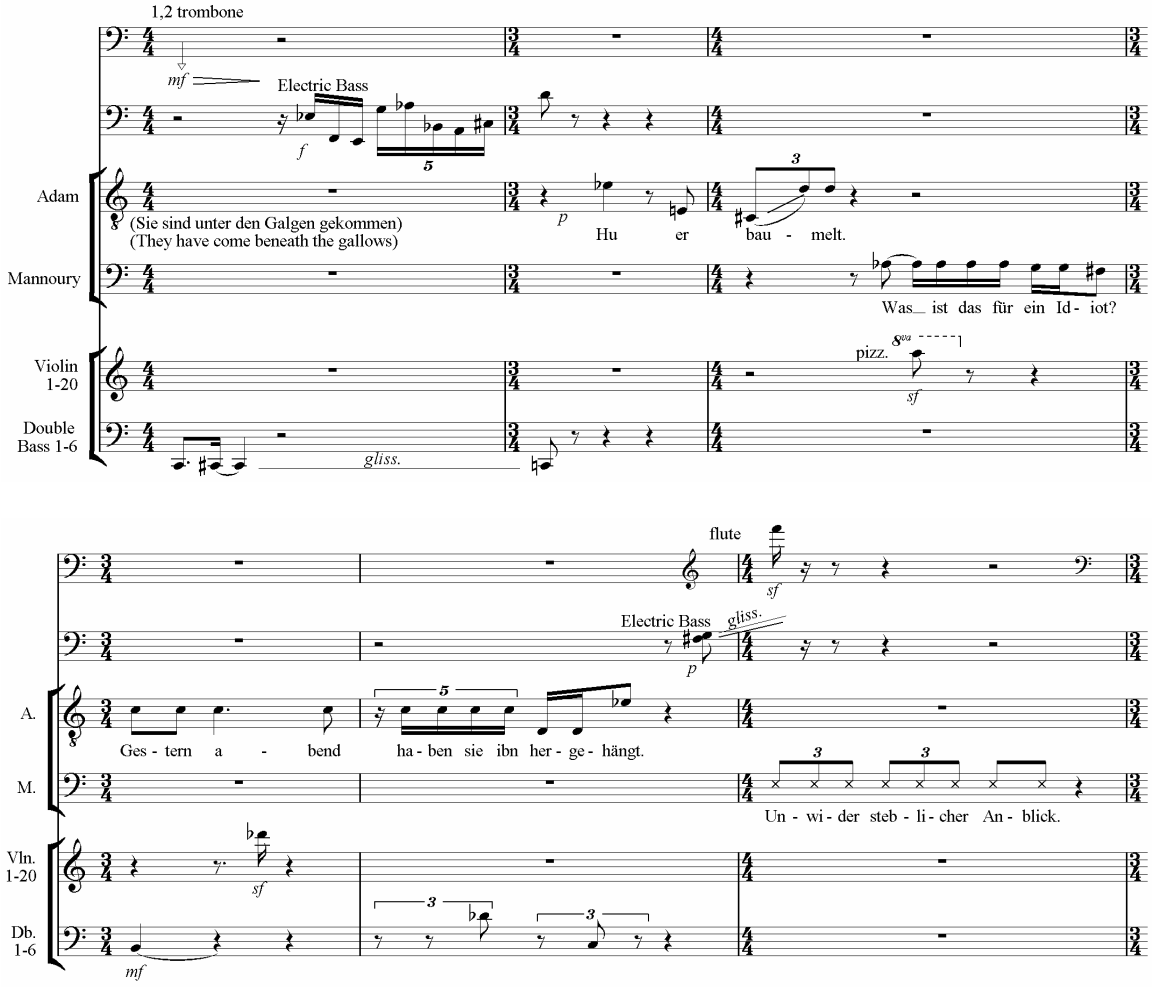
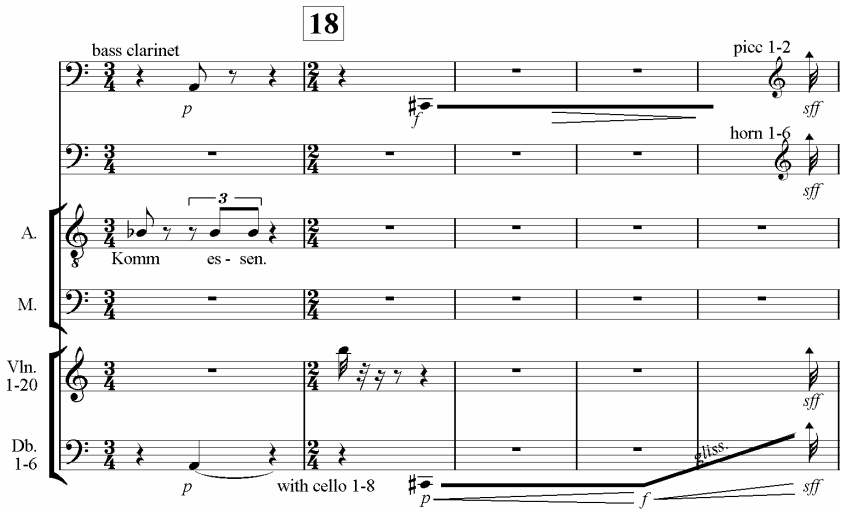
[2] In Johann Scheibe's *Der critische Musikus* (Leipzig, 1745; facs. ed., Hildesheim: Olms, 1970), he labeled this type of figure "interrogatio"; see Dietrich Bartel, "*Musica Poetica": Musical-Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 312-14, 316.

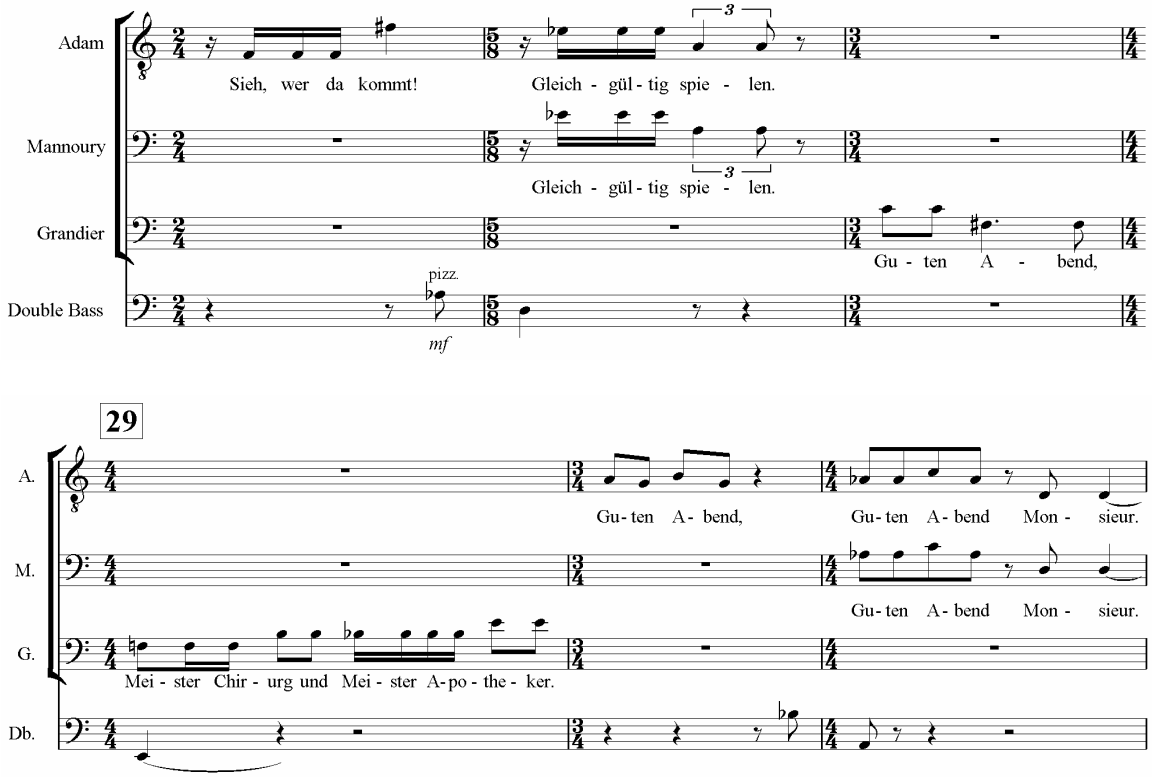
in order to highlight grotesque moments or to make them seem more absurd, particularly when they are around Grandier. For example, at the end of Act I, Scene 2, Mannoury makes a contemplative comment about the hanging body, and Adam abruptly invites him to dinner (Ex. 4.7a). In Act I, Scene 4, when they run into Grandier after Mannoury has purchased the head of the hanged man (Ex. 4.7b), the two conspirators behave like frightened schoolboys, while Grandier, demonstrating an ability to communicate with anyone, appears quite comfortable conversing with them (his material is not much different from theirs).

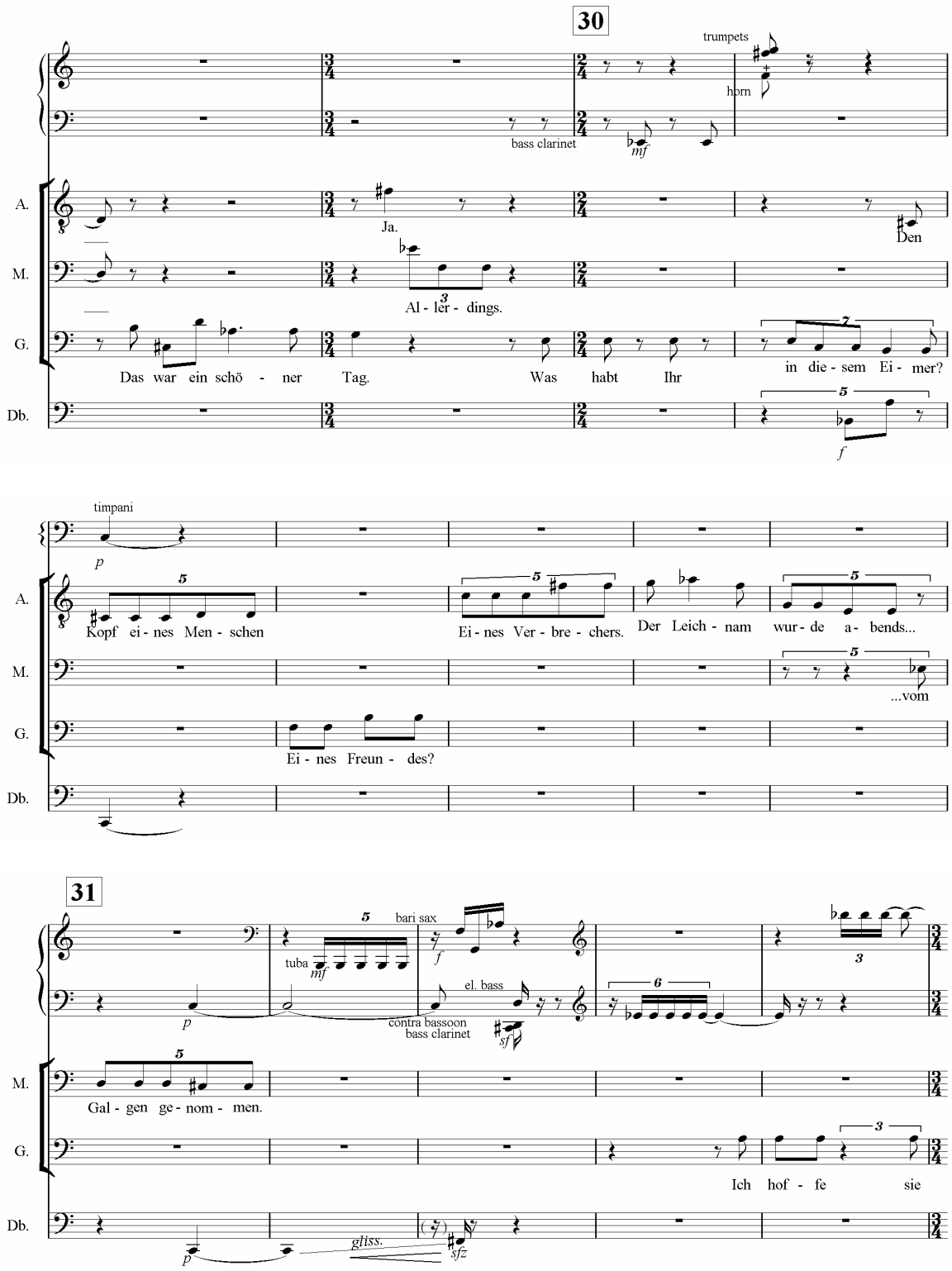
Ex. 4.7: *Die Teufel von Loudun*, Act I, Scene 2: (a) RH 18-7 to RH 18.

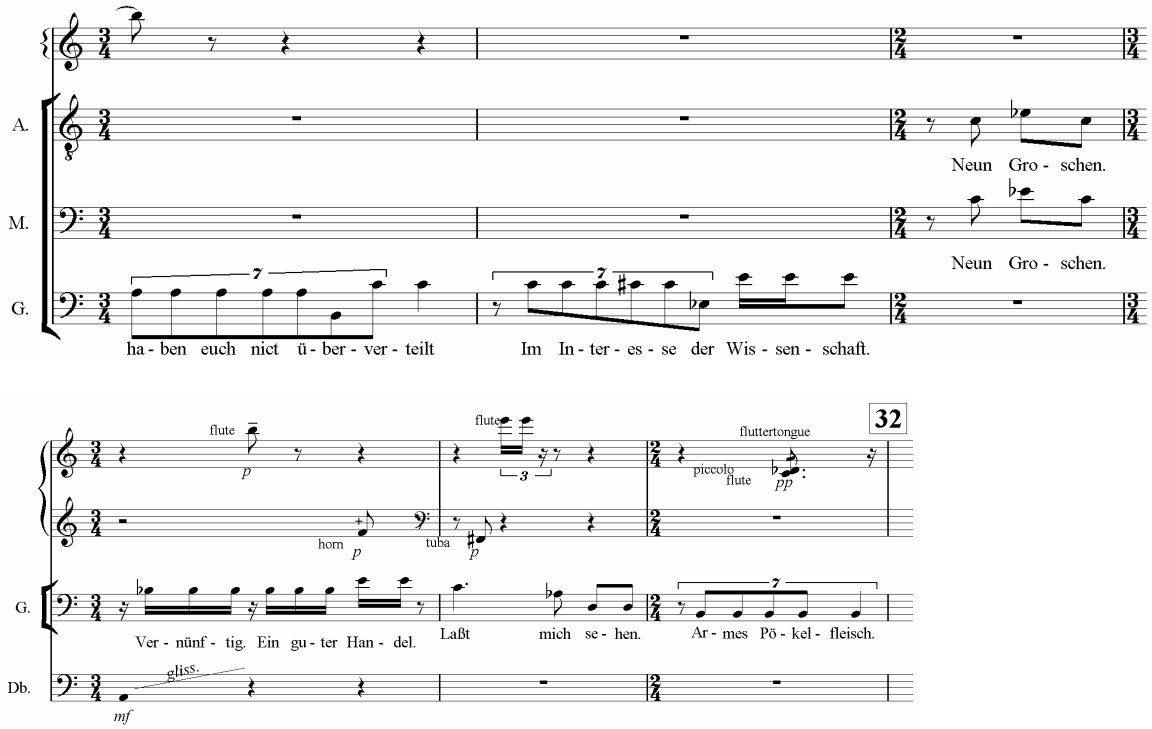




(b) *Die Teufel von Loudun,* Act I, Scene 4, RH 29-3 to RH 32.




30
trumpets
horn
bass clarinet
mf
A.
M.
G.
Db.
Ja.
Den
Al - ler - dings.
Das war ein schö - ner Tag.
Was habt Ihr
in die - sem Ei - mer?
f
timpani
p
Kopf ei - nes Men - schen
Ei - nes Ver - bre - chers.
Der Leich - nam wur - de a - bends...
...vom
Ei - nes Freun - des?
31
tuba
mf
bari sax
f
el. bass
contra bassoon
bass clarinet
sf
Gal - gen ge - nom - men.
Ich hof - fe sie
gliss.
sfz



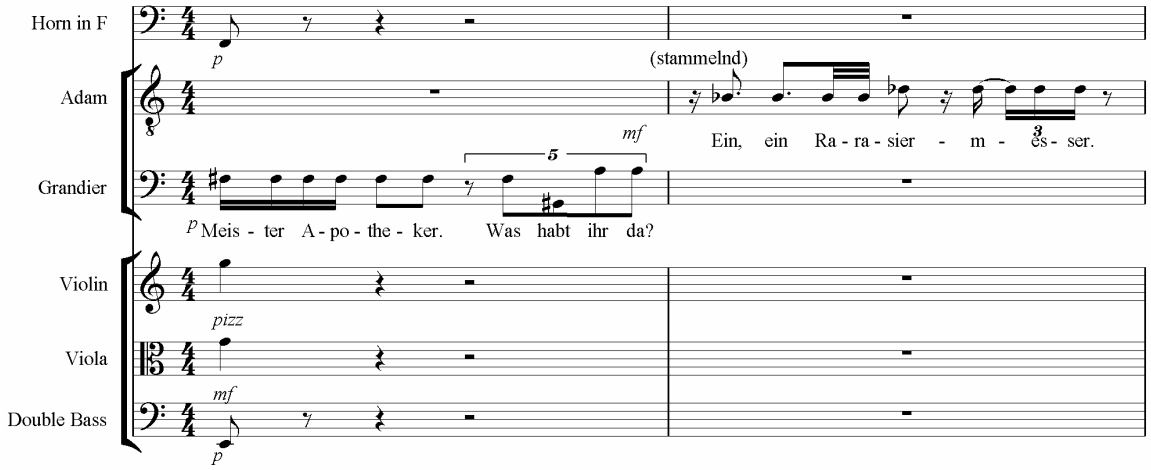
Though both moments demonstrate a nonchalant attitude toward life, and though there is something comical about the cavalier presentation, audiences will surely find them unappetizing, and likely will be unable to reconcile the two elements. Thus the moments are grotesque.

That Adam and Mannoury, who despise Grandier, really do not know how to handle themselves in front of him is demonstrated again in Act III, Scene 2, when Grandier is being prepared for execution. Grandier calmly asks Adam what he has brought, and Adam comically stutters on the word "razor" (Ex. 4.8).[3] Adam and Mannoury have what they want, but are incapable of dealing with it. This is particularly

[3] Stuttering is a trope found in many grotesque stories. For example, in one of the Harlequin episodes, Harlequin tires of listening to a stutterer, and so runs head-first into the man's belly. The stunned man finally gets the word out, or "gives birth" to it. Although mainly buffoonery, this moment combines all the classic elements of the grotesque, for we sympathize with the stutterer, but also understand Harlequin's annoyance and impatience; Harlequin's solution is crude, but also funny. See Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 304-5.

evident when Mannoury refuses to pull out Grandier's fingernails, and so the executioner, ironically name Bontemps, is told to do it.

Ex. 4.8: *Die Teufel von Loudun*, Act III, Scene 2, RH 16+4 to RH 16+5.



Adam and Mannoury's music is consistent throughout the opera, always providing some measure of comical interaction despite their resolve to destroy Grandier, all of which makes them ideal grotesques.

Penderecki employs a similar style of melodic writing for the young nuns, but more so than Adam or Mannoury, they are purely comic figures, providing some measure of relief in the prevailing dread and darkness of the opera. But since their conversations are inappropriate to the situation they are in, they are grotesque. (The orchestration of their few short scenes is noteworthy, and will be discussed in Chapter 6.)

Extremes of Range and Register

Until the twentieth century, composers rarely utilized the entire available range of either instruments or voices. More specifically, they tended to avoid the extremes, whether high or low, reserving them for particular circumstances, especially climactic moments. Yet it is precisely these extremes that Berg, Birtwistle, and Penderecki often

exploit: sometimes to heighten an emotion (the traditional staple), but also to exaggerate single comments or words and—not surprisingly—to express the grotesque. Finally, exploiting the extremes, both high and low, will usually result in a change of timbre, as both wind instruments and voices often find the extremes difficult to produce, and the strain can be heard in the sound itself: a pinched or shrill quality accompanied by a sense that one may break into a squeal when reaching for a high note or disappear into an unfocused growl when descending to a low one. This may seem an aspect of orchestration, but as it is a byproduct of pitch, I will discuss it here. (Some examples of the use of extremes of pitches for their timbral quality will be discussed in Chapter 6.)

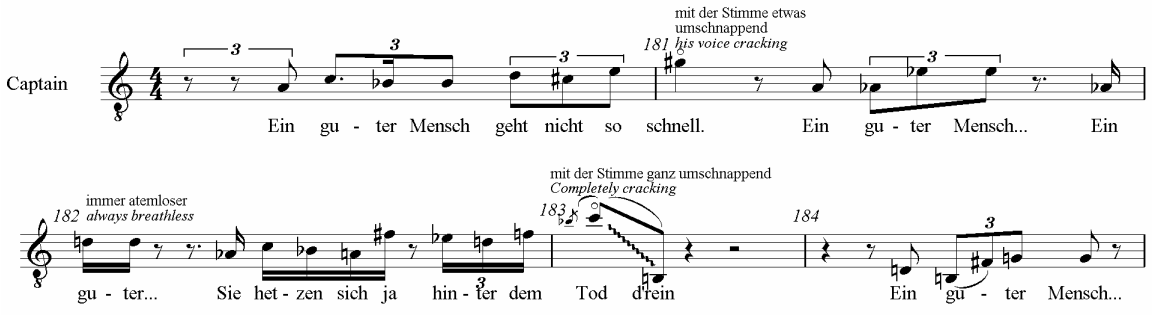
Although the "Adding Song" in *Punch and Judy* relies mainly on crisp rhythms and the brisk tempo to counter the terrors of the text, Birtwistle's use of extremely high notes (in both the vocal and the instrumental parts) and large leaps gives the music a shrill quality that reflects the near hysteria of the characters and their enthusiasm for hurting Punch. A particularly striking passage occurs in the "Refrain," the rhythmically homophonic but harmonically dissonant setting of the phrase "These treats with which you tricked us we'll now treat as tricks on you!" There is a distance of more than three octaves between the highest and lowest notes (see Ex. 4.1, mm. 1780-82), with the Witch's notes being particularly piercing in this context. After the final "Refrain," the seven tortures are sung again, this time in the homophonic style of the "Refrain" and triple forte (mm. 1787-97). The Witch sings *a''* thirty-one times in a row: a veritable shriek. Yet this final statement once again conveys the joy the characters take in the gruesome, and is therefore entirely grotesque.

Another use of pitch to underscore the grotesque in the "Adding Song" appears in the trumpet fanfare that comes at the end of each "Refrain." After the first refrain it plays a *g''* whole note; following the second, two $g^{\#}$*''* half notes, then three *a''* half-note triplets. The notes continues to rise chromatically and decrease in duration until finally the trumpet plays six triplet quarter notes on *c'''* at the end of the final refrain (see Ex. 4.1, m. 1782).[4] This is a relatively piercing note on a trumpet, and it is also accented and accompanied by a crescendo from forte to triple forte. By using this device, Birtwistle provides a cadential flourish to each "Refrain" while intensifying the music and the grotesque nature of the passage.

In *Wozzeck* the Captain must sing very high falsetto notes on several occasions, with the most dramatic examples occurring when he meets the Doctor in Act II, Scene 2, in which virtually every outburst ends with high notes (Ex. 4.9). The Captain's attempt to slow down the Doctor underscores the physicality of the former's obsession with speed. Berg's performance directions require him almost to crack ["umschnappend"] on the word "schnell" (fast) and then to sing with a breathless quality, which Berg manages to portray through rests and repetition of words. Finally—and most dramatically—he must literally "crack" on the word "Tod" (death), and then follow that with an enormous downward glissando, a histrionic display that makes the Captain appear completely and comically unbalanced.

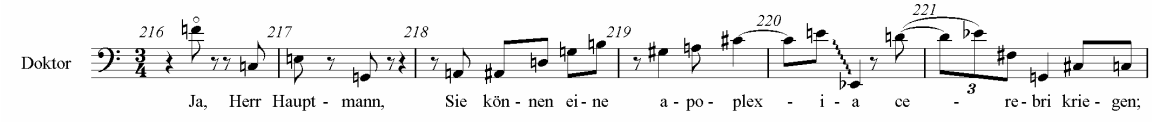
[4] In the example, the trumpet first appears in bar 1780 playing an *e''*.

Ex. 4.9: *Wozzeck*, Act II, Scene 2, Captain's vocal line, mm. 181-84



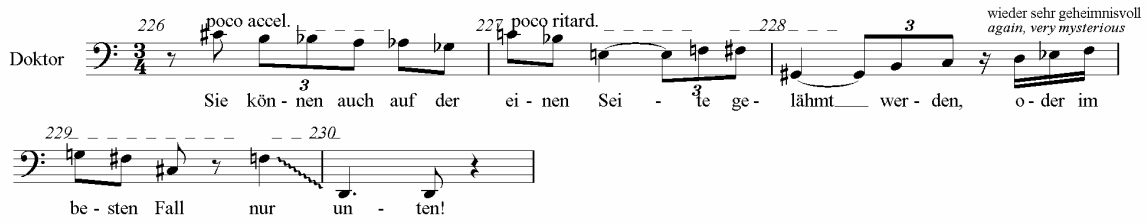
These elements conspire to reveal the grotesque nature of the Captain, since he is trying to save others from their own over-exertion; but his methods demonstrate how his own irrationality affects him, and the vocal line suitably enforces the distortions in his own character. Subsequently, the Doctor's rash diagnosis of apoplexia seems perfectly plausible, even though he only dwells upon it to upset the Captain. Now the Doctor's vocal line approaches the Captain's in exploiting the extremes, particularly at the falsetto on "Ja" and the two-octave glissando on "apoplexia" in measures 219-21 (Ex. 4.10).

Ex. 4.10: *Wozzeck*, Act II, Scene 2, Doctor's vocal line, mm. 216-21.



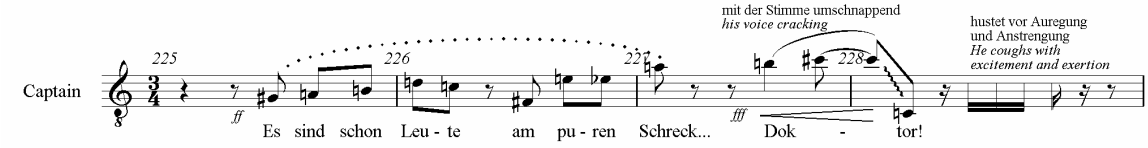
As the Doctor continues to outline the possible course of the disease, he does so with another grotesque glissando into the depths at measures 229-30 in order to say, with salacious emphasis, that the apoplexia might only strike "nur unten" (only below [implying below the waist]) (Ex. 4.11).

Ex. 4.11: *Wozzeck*, Act II, Scene 2, Doctor's vocal line, mm. 226-30.



Finally, the Captain exhorts the Doctor on a triple forte $c^{\#'''}$ (Ex. 4.12).

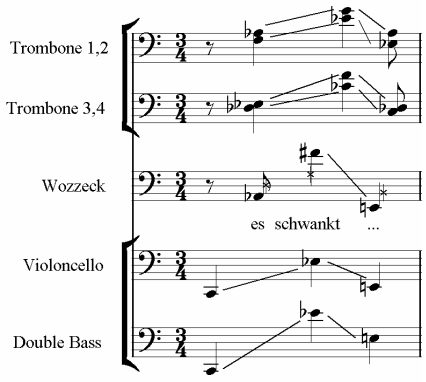
Ex. 4.12: *Wozzeck*, Act II, Scene 2, Captain's vocal line, mm. 256-58.



The Doctor and Captain continue in this manner, making comments about bodies (their own and others), until Wozzeck—a new subject to taunt—wanders by.

Finally, it is worth noting that not all instances of extreme highs and lows are necessarily grotesque. For example, in *Wozzeck*, Act I, Scene 2, Wozzeck and Andres are out in the field. Andres tries to get Wozzeck to join him in a hunting song, but Wozzeck is obsessed with the hollow sound of the ground. When he comments that the ground is shaking, he executes a dramatic pair of glissandi (Ex. 4.13), joined by the trombones, cellos, and double basses.

Ex. 4.13: *Wozzeck*, Act I, Scene 2, m. 269



At this moment, though, Wozzeck is merely pitiable. He is frightened, but not comical, and the high and very low notes (from top to bottom of the baritone's range) together with the Sprechstimme and glissando serve mainly to suggest his psychological imbalance. In all, the exploitation of the extreme registers is part and parcel of twentieth-century style, and can be said to represent the grotesque only when the dramatic situation invites such an interpretation.

CONCLUSION

The passages described here show that certain techniques, particularly incongruity, surprise, and extremes in terms of rhythm and pitch, can effectively convey the grotesque elements already present in the libretto or contradict, in a frightening or comical way, the meaning of a text. To review the examples discussed here from the point of view of the audience, the slowing of the tempo in a love duet would normally imply that a deep confidence will be disclosed, but in *Lulu*, Berg leaves the audience laughing and dumbstruck by using this situation to present Lulu's shocking comments. A rapid tempo usually thrills the audience, but in Birtwistle's "Adding Song," the speed enjoins the audience to become wrapped up in the excitement of torture, creating

uncomfortable laughter. Faltering rhythms will expose a character's uncertainty, as with the comical cowardice of the two vengeful gossips of *Die Teufel von Loudun*, while high or low pitches can be used to reveal the frightening instability or malicious intent of a character, as demonstrated by the Captain and Doctor in *Wozzeck*. In the next chapter we will examine how the use of familiar genres can have a similar impact.

CHAPTER 5

CREATING THE MUSICAL GROTESQUE (II): GENRES

INTRODUCTION

In his article on Mozart's symphonies, concertos, and operas, Stephen Davies writes that to appreciate a composer's individual voice the listener needs to be aware of the conventions of the genre, and that philosophers underestimate the importance of context when discussing musical understanding.[1] In Chapter 2, I discussed Edgecombe's suggestion that combining older musical genres or gestures with more contemporary ones could be considered an example of a grotesque hybrid; however, as I argued there, his examples merely support the idea of the grotesque as a hybrid of contrasting elements rather than as the yoking of things frightening and comical. There are several passages in our operas where familiar genres are used to express the grotesque, particularly as a humorous counterpoint to the horrifying situation found in the text or plot. In each case the composer provides some of the conventions typical of a particular—and easily recognizable—genre, while the action and/or dialogue on stage clashes with the audience's understanding of and associations with the genre in a manner that is irreconcilable, thus creating a truly grotesque situation. This chapter will look at three examples: Punch's "Lullaby" and Judy's Baroque-inspired "Recitative and Passion Aria"

[1] Stephen Davies, "Musical Understanding and Musical Kinds," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 52, no. 1 (Winter 1994), 69-72. See also József Ujfalussy, "Zur Dialektik der Kategorie der Gattung in der Musik," in *Beiträge zur Geschichte und Theorie der Musikkultur*, ed. by Helmut Klein, special issue of *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin: Reihe Gesellschaftswissenschaften*, vol. 37, no. 6 (1988), 557-58. Ujfalussy discusses how genres relate to the societies that create them and how the relationship of form and content can change depending on how fixed or indeterminate the genre is.

from *Punch and Judy* and the Viennese waltz used to accompany the Doctor's malicious diagnosis of the Captain in Act II, Scene 2, of *Wozzeck*.

THE LULLABY

Found among most musical traditions around the world, the primary purpose of a lullaby is to lull a child to sleep, typically through repeated melodies, repetitive rhythms, soft dynamics, and a slow tempo.[2] Brahms's *Wiegenlied*, op. 49, no. 4, Chopin's *Berceuse*, op. 57, and Marie's lullaby in *Wozzeck* (Act II, Scene 1) are well-known examples of how the lullaby has been interpreted by Western composers of art music. The rocking motion is usually achieved through the use of triple or compound meters and repetitive melodic elements. Though Birtwistle uses a number of these elements for his turn at the genre in *Punch and Judy*, the music quickly turns into something of an "anti-lullaby," and as the "Lullaby" is Punch's first number in the opera (it is the first titled section of "Melodrama I," which follows Choregos's "Prologue"), it effectively captures the gleeful malevolence of Punch's character. The complete text is found on page 90 in Chapter 3. The first four measures (Ex. 5.1, mm. 54-57), which may be heard as an introduction of sorts, have Punch entering with his child (a doll) in his arms and emitting a repeated "E" sound over the pit orchestra's slow triple-meter accompaniment (quarter note = 60), which consists of a strong down beat in a low register and two metrically weaker chords in a higher register. The dynamics range from forte to double forte.

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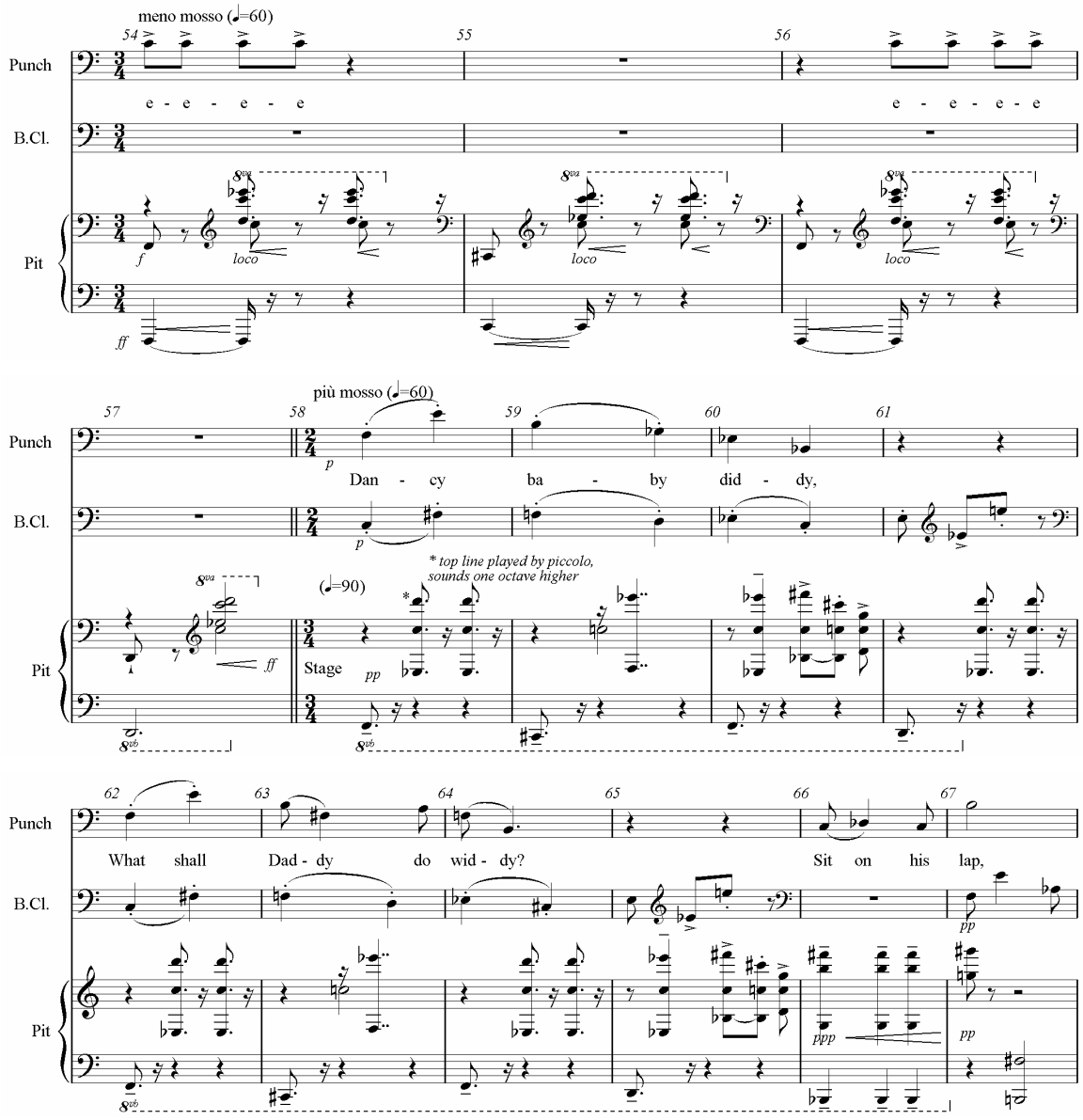
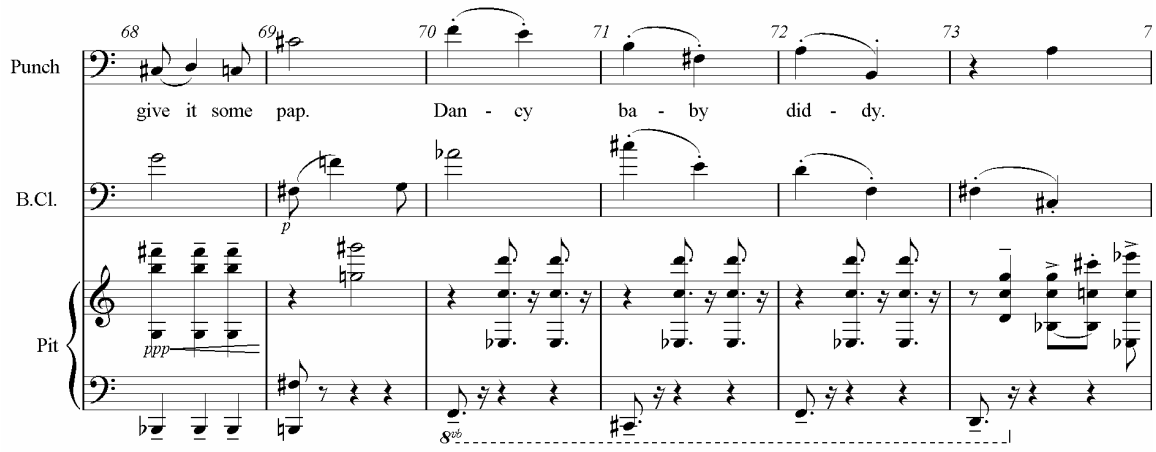
[2] Two studies examine the recognition of certain lullaby characteristics, particularly melody and simplicity: Bernard Lortat-Jacob, "La Berceuse et l'épopée: Questions de genre," *Revue de musicologie*, vol. 78, no. 1 (1992), 8-10; and Sandra E. Trehub, Anna M. Unyk, and Laurel J. Trainor, "Lullabies and Simplicity: A Cross-Cultural Perspective," *Psychology of Music*, vol. 20, no. 1 (January 1992), 15-28. Roh-Kyoung Park, "The Lullaby in Twentieth-Century Opera," DMA dissertation (Indiana University, 1997), discusses how lullabies can be used to define the character of operatic heroines, including Marie in *Wozzeck*.

When Punch starts to sing, however, the dynamics drop immediately to piano and pianissimo, and so begins the "Lullaby" proper (Ex. 5.1, m. 58).

Ex. 5.1: *Punch and Judy*, "Melodrama I: Punch's Lullaby," mm. 54-73.





Punch's first words, "Dancy baby," inform us that this is a song for a child, and the slow tempo, soft dynamics, and persistent triple-meter accompaniment—now in the stage orchestra—imply that it is a lullaby, an association further reinforced by simple, four-square phrases and rhyming couplets. But all is not quite lullaby-like. First, against the triple-meter accompaniment, Punch sings in duple meter, with his two quarters per measure moving at quarter = 60 while the orchestra's three quarters per measure move at quarter = 90 (or three against two); but if the conflict between the two meters is not particularly jarring, it is not typical of the lullaby's customary gentle, rocking motion. Second, Punch's melody consists primarily of dissonant leaps, which, if not yet necessarily grotesque—perhaps they can even be heard as an approximation of an untrained singer—nevertheless rub against our usual idea of a soothing melody. And finally, the bass clarinet offers an almost-distracting obbligato counterpoint.

The music grows even less lullaby-like in subsequent stanzas. Given its function, a lullaby traditionally gets softer as it goes along, all but fading out in the end, as it succeeds in lulling the child to sleep. Punch's "Lullaby," however, moves in the opposite direction: the music becomes more aggressive. The triple-meter introduction returns as a

refrain between verses, each time louder and more heavily orchestrated. By stanza four, the traces of the original lullaby elements are irrelevant, blotted out by the aggressive obbligato melody (now played on an E^b clarinet) and the ferocity of Punch singing his duple-meter melody, double forte, over the still churning triple-meter accompaniment, which has also grown in volume. The final word, "burny," is presented as two half notes, rather than with the quarter notes found at the same point in the other stanzas, surely in order to set up and draw out what happens immediately thereafter: Punch bursts forth with his "War Cry." Over a raucous accompaniment, Punch swoops from a low note (Birtwistle indicates that it should be the performer's lowest possible note) up to a high *g'*. He sings the nonsense syllables "Roo-it-too-it" near the top of his range (only approximate notes are given) and then throws Baby into a fire. The loud introduction to the "Lullaby," and its return as the refrain, can now be understood as foreshadowing this climax. Although the moment is gruesome and disturbing, there is an underlying sense of comedy, for all along the piece hung desperately to its lullaby-like features even while it developed in a fashion contrary to the conventions of the genre. In the end, Punch's "Lullaby" is fundamentally grotesque.

THE *DA CAPO* ARIA

Da capo arias were a staple of Baroque operas, but fell from favor in the second half of the eighteenth century because rather than advancing the plot, they tended to merely comment on the action.[3] Birtwistle parodies the form in Judy's "Recitative and Passion Aria" (mm. 1187-235), giving her an *accompagnato* recitative, the standard

[3] See Ellen T. Harris, "Metastasio and Sonata Form," *Händel-Jahrbuch*, vol. 45 (1999), 19; Marita P. McClymonds, "Aria. 2: 18th Century *(i) The Da Capo Aria*," *New Grove 2*, I, 171-172. Judy's "Aria" contains only a few repetitions of the text.

A-B-A *da capo* form, extravagant ornamentation, word painting, and an obbligato accompaniment played by the oboe d'amore (see Chapter 6, page 155). Her aria is also an example—albeit a grotesque parody—of a "simile" aria, for the text (found on page 91-92 of Chapter 3) contains direct comparisons with the singer's situation, as the aria specifically mentions string instruments while Choregos, trapped inside a bass viol case, is being sawed in half with a bow.[4] Birtwistle uses these conventions, which a listener familiar with Baroque operatic traditions will grasp, in order to exacerbate the distance between the relatively silly text with all its musical puns and the exigencies of the plot.

Judy begins the recitative sounding like a scorned woman, loudly exclaiming "Witness avenging gods!" over an orchestral fanfare. But then she immediately subsides into a softer dynamic, revealing her actual lack of power in the situation. When the "Passion Aria" begins, it is gentle and quiet, not unlike a love song, which is itself completely grotesque since Punch is killing Choregos (and has already killed Judy herself). Without the on-stage situation to complicate things, this aria, if set in a Baroque opera, would garner sympathy for the plaintive Judy as she bemoans her situation. But the grotesque is never uncomplicated, and Judy appears to be ludicrous, especially with her extravagant ornamentation for the musical terms found in the text. A good example occurs at the phrase "The rainbow on this bridge" (Ex. 5.2). The "-bow" in the second iteration of "rainbow" is set to a lengthy, wide-ranging, and rhythmically complex

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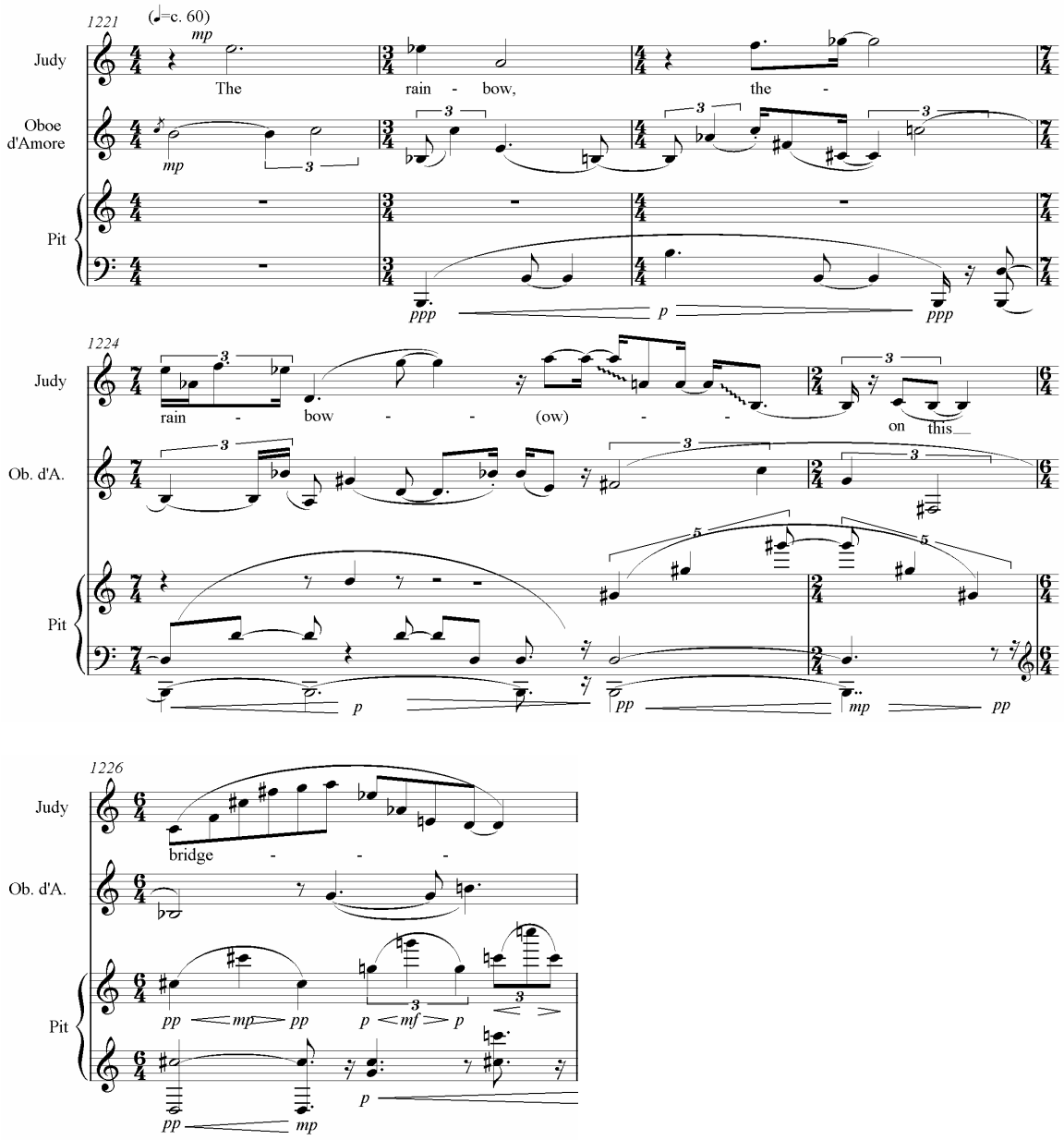
[4] Jack Westrup, "Simile Aria," *New Grove 2*, XXIII, 398. Handel embraced the *da capo* aria form, and in particular the "simile" aria, including them in the thirty-six operas he mounted in London; see Xavier Cervantes, "Les Arias de comparaison dans les opéras londoniens de Handel: Variations sur un thème Baroque," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, vol. 26, no. 2, (December 1995), 147-166. Perhaps there is a model for Judy's "Passion aria" in Handel's *Ode to St. Cecilia*, where he uses word painting to suggest particular characteristics of the instruments being described: for example, a sequential pattern of sixteenth notes for the word "warble" in the soprano aria "The Soft Complaining Flute" (mm. 39-44) and an ascending arpeggio for the words "With Shrill Notes of Anger" in the tenor aria "The Trumpet's Loud Clangor" (mm. 17-18). *An Ode to St. Cecilia* (Ridgewood, NJ: Gregg Press, 1966).

melisma, and "bridge" is set to an arpeggio that spans the interval of a thirteenth, the same interval—surely not by coincidence—formed by the lowest and highest open strings on violins, violas, and cellos; it thus traverses the arc of the bridge of these instruments from one end to the other.

Ex. 5.2: *Punch and Judy*, "Passion Aria," mm. 1221-26.



Both of these settings imitate the act of bowing a string instrument and are particularly appropriate given that Judy has already sung, in the A section of the aria, the line, "Be silent, strings of my heart." And since Punch is also imitating the motion of a bow across the strings of a viol as he saws Choregos in half, Birtwistle has created a grotesque simile, thus further parodying the idea of a simile aria.

THE WALTZ

The dialogue between the Doctor and the Captain in the first half of Act II, Scene 2, of *Wozzeck* is essentially grotesque throughout, as the Doctor revels in upsetting the Captain. And if their encounter is already grotesque in terms of the dramatic situation, Berg's music serves to emphasize the key moments. The most explicitly grotesque section of the scene is Berg's setting of the Doctor's impromptu diagnosis of the Captain as a waltz.[5] Mosco Carner writes that this interaction is absurd and ludicrous, but he does not call it grotesque; rather: "Berg's sense of irony is further seen in the fact that the Doctor's gloomy prognosis for the Captain is in waltz tempo!"[6] The scene is, however, quintessentially grotesque, with the comic potential of the situation fully exploited by the conventions of the waltz.

Apart from its musical characteristics, which will be discussed below, the waltz has (or at least had) specific cultural associations, the most dominant being that it is a romantic dance in which a couple sustains their embrace for the duration of the number. When the dance first appeared in the late eighteenth century, however, it was considered scandalous because the partners held each other close and did not switch partners with the

[5] Act II of *Wozzeck* is a symphony in five movements; Scene 2 is the fantasy and fugue movement, with the waltz being part of the fantasy section. See Perle, *Wozzeck*, 25-30; Jarman, *Wozzeck*, 18-22.

[6] Carner, *Alban Berg: The Man and the Work* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1977), 176.

other couples on the floor. During Büchner's lifetime and that of the real Woyzeck, the waltz gradually became socially acceptable.[7] By using the waltz, then, Berg equates the interaction of the Captain and the Doctor with that of a dancing couple, with the Doctor definitely leading. Carner writes that the number can be called a duet, but it is a "farcical, almost *outré*" one.[8]

In terms of its music, the waltz is typically in triple meter with a strong downbeat and two weaker secondary beats. Both music and the couple move at a relatively brisk tempo, sometimes with slight ritards that allow time for the couple to dip or pose. Berg provides all of these markers, most notably the fluctuating tempos, which highlight the Doctor's more distressing comments and make them more grotesquely comic. What follows describes the music in some detail in order to show how Berg constructs his dance.

The waltz (or at least its introduction) begins at measure 201, as the Captain reacts to the Doctor's comments about the case of a woman who died of uterine cancer in four weeks (Ex. 5.3). The downbeat is provided by the Doctor's phrase-ending syllable ("-rat"), upon which the Captain enters with his sighs, and the trombones mark the articulation with a sustained chord (which sounds all the more heavy as it bounces off an upbeat). Two solo violins answer with the Captain's theme presented in parallel fifths, with glissandos.[9]

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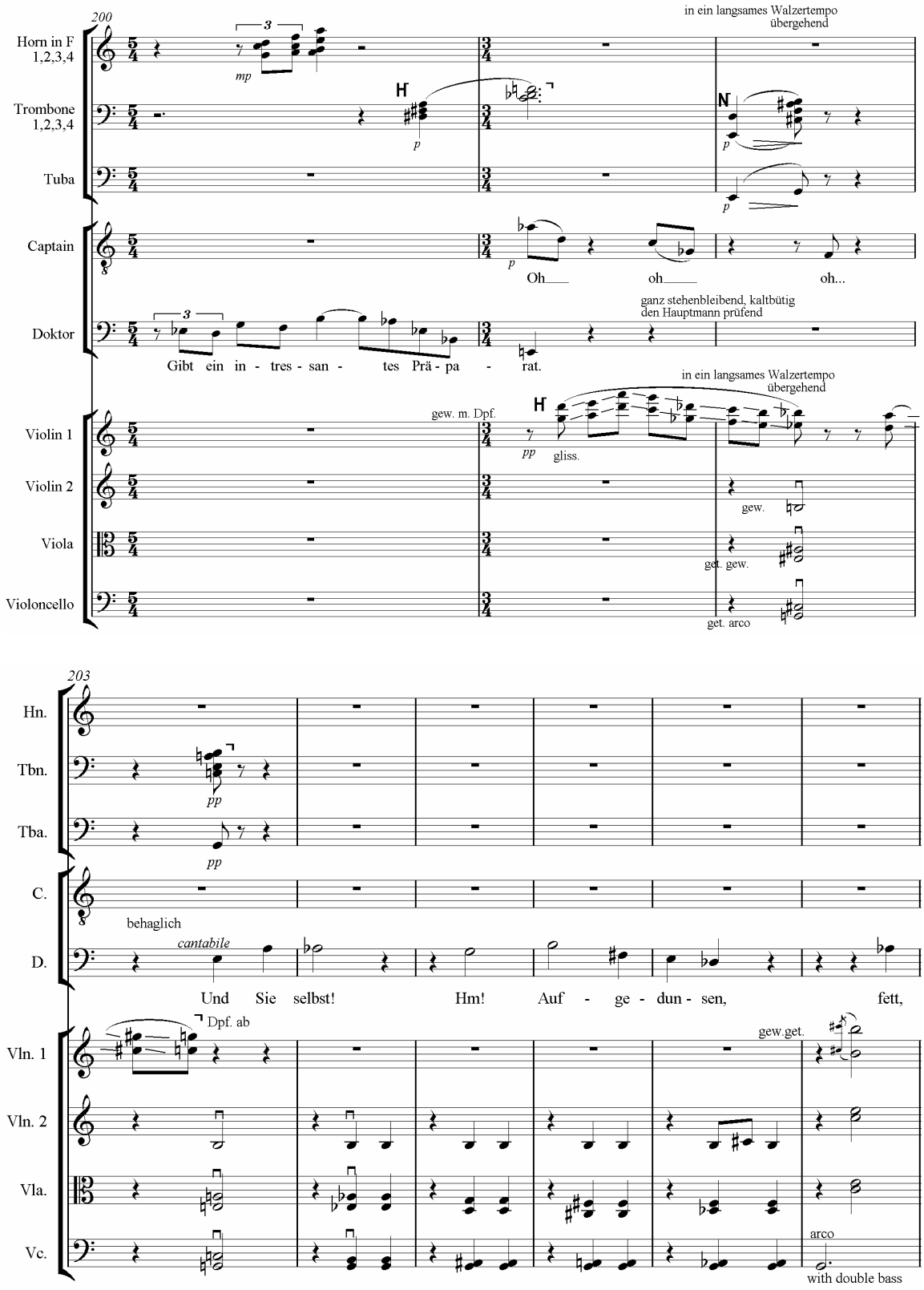
[7] Sevin Yaraman, *Revolving Embrace: The Waltz as Sex, Steps, and Sound* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002), 6-9. Yaraman discusses the waltz of the Doctor and Captain (109-110), but only as a precursor to discussing the waltz danced in the Tavern scene, where Wozzeck observes Marie dancing with the Drum Major. That scene contains elements of tragedy, but it is not grotesque.

[8] Carner, *Alban Berg*, 176.

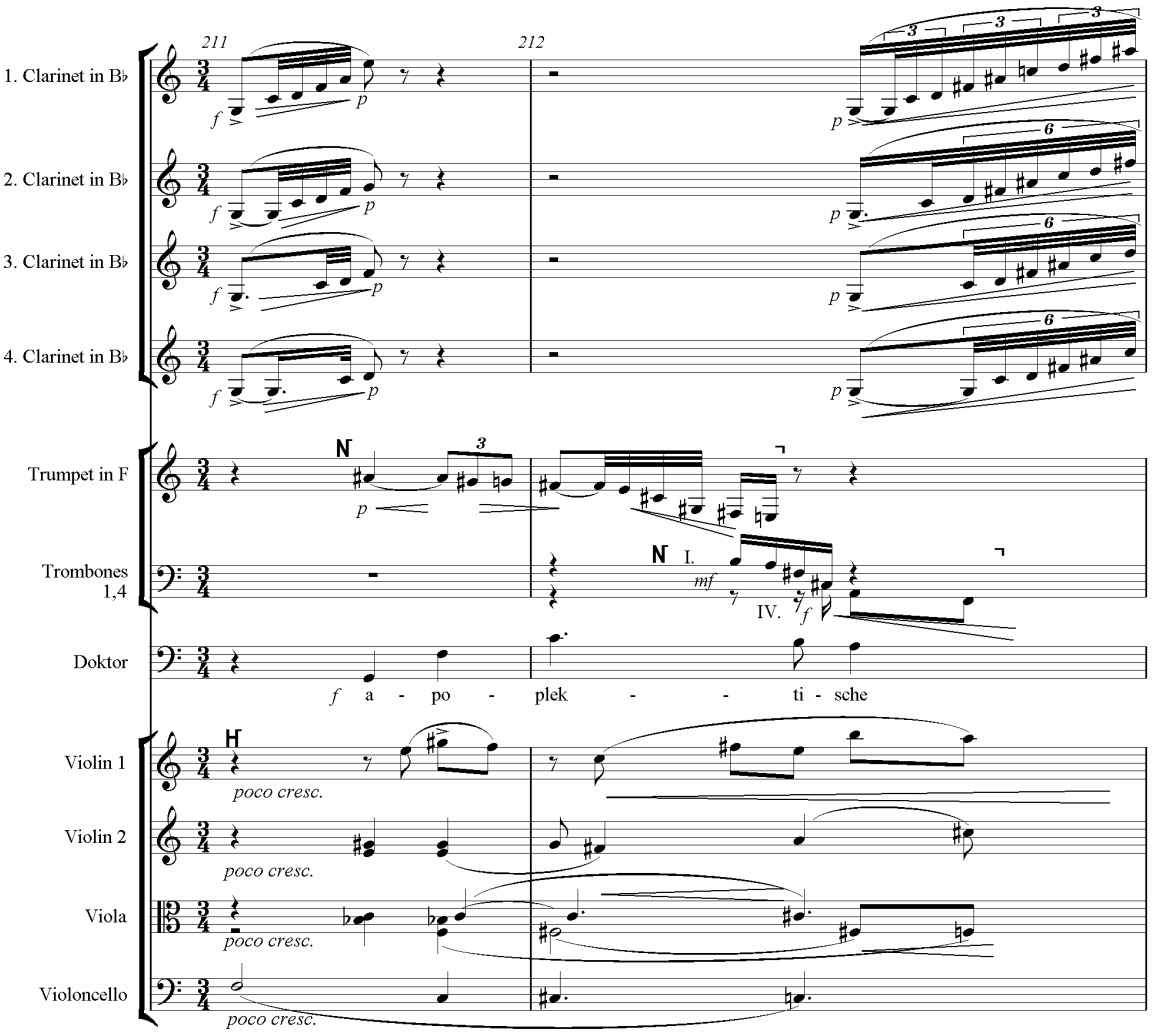
[9] This theme is first heard in Act I, Scene 1, m. 4, just before the Captain sings for the first time; see Perle, *Wozzeck*, 50.

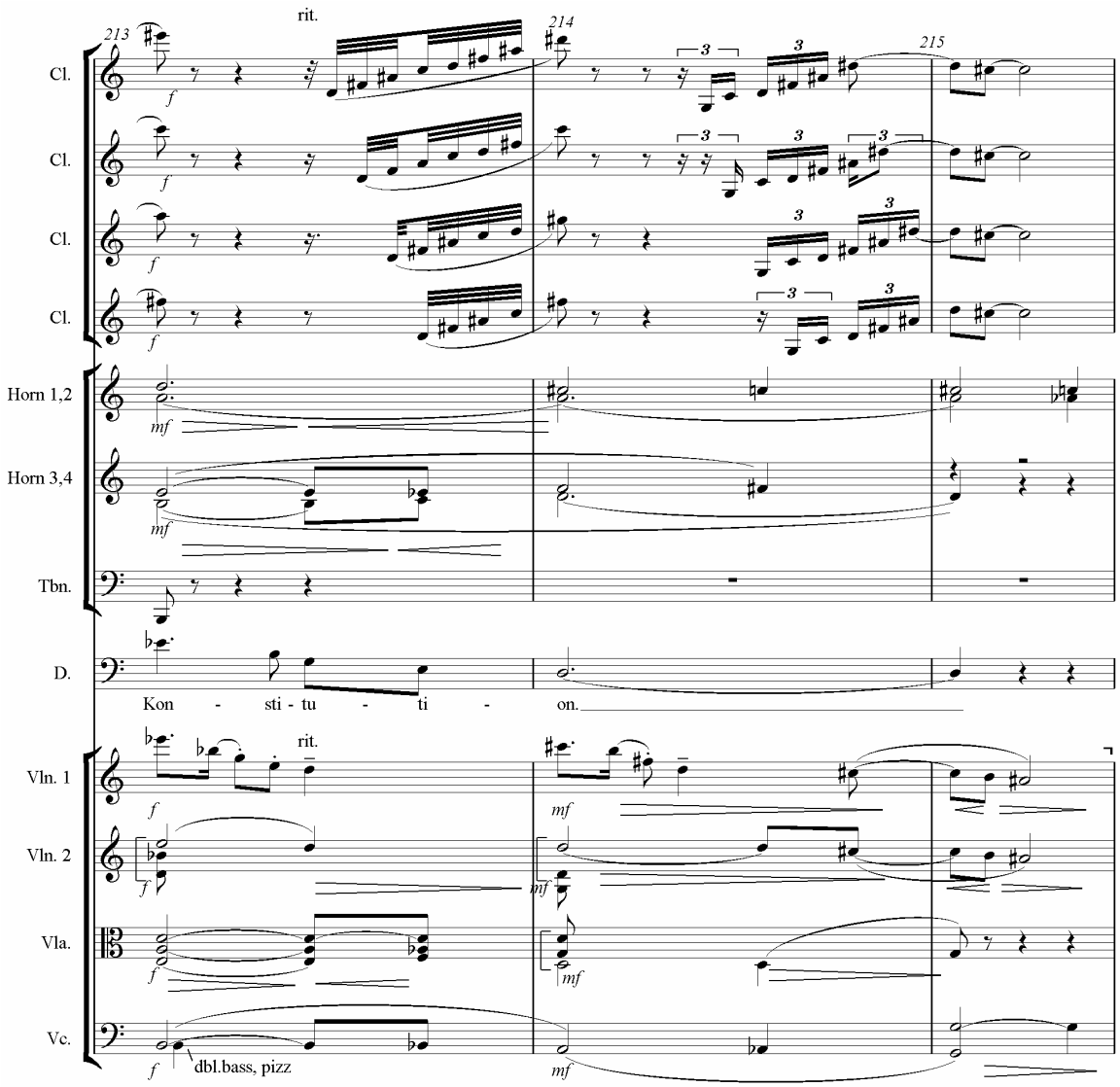
Ex. 5.3: *Wozzeck*, Act II, Scene 2, mm. 200-08.



These measures act as an introduction, with which waltzes often begin, as if the dance is warming up. Berg directs the Doctor to stand still and observe the Captain coldly ("ganz stehenbleibend, kaltblütig den hauptmann prüfend"), but when the Doctor enters at measure 203, he is pleasantly singing cantabile. His melodic line is tentative (interrupted by rests), however, and suggests that he is gathering his thoughts and trying to find the best attack. The accompaniment, too, is restrained. Yet once the Doctor has determined his tack, the clarinets provide sweeping ascending arpeggios and the trumpet and trombones descend in a similar manner. Upon the Doctor's diagnosis that the Captain has an "apoplektische Konstitution" (apoplectic constitution; Ex. 5.4 mm. 211-215), Berg slows the music slightly and quotes the passage from the moment when the Doctor first diagnosed Wozzeck's *idée fixe* in Act I, Scene 4 (mm. 565-567).

Ex. 5.4: *Wozzeck*, Act II, Scene 2, mm. 211-15.



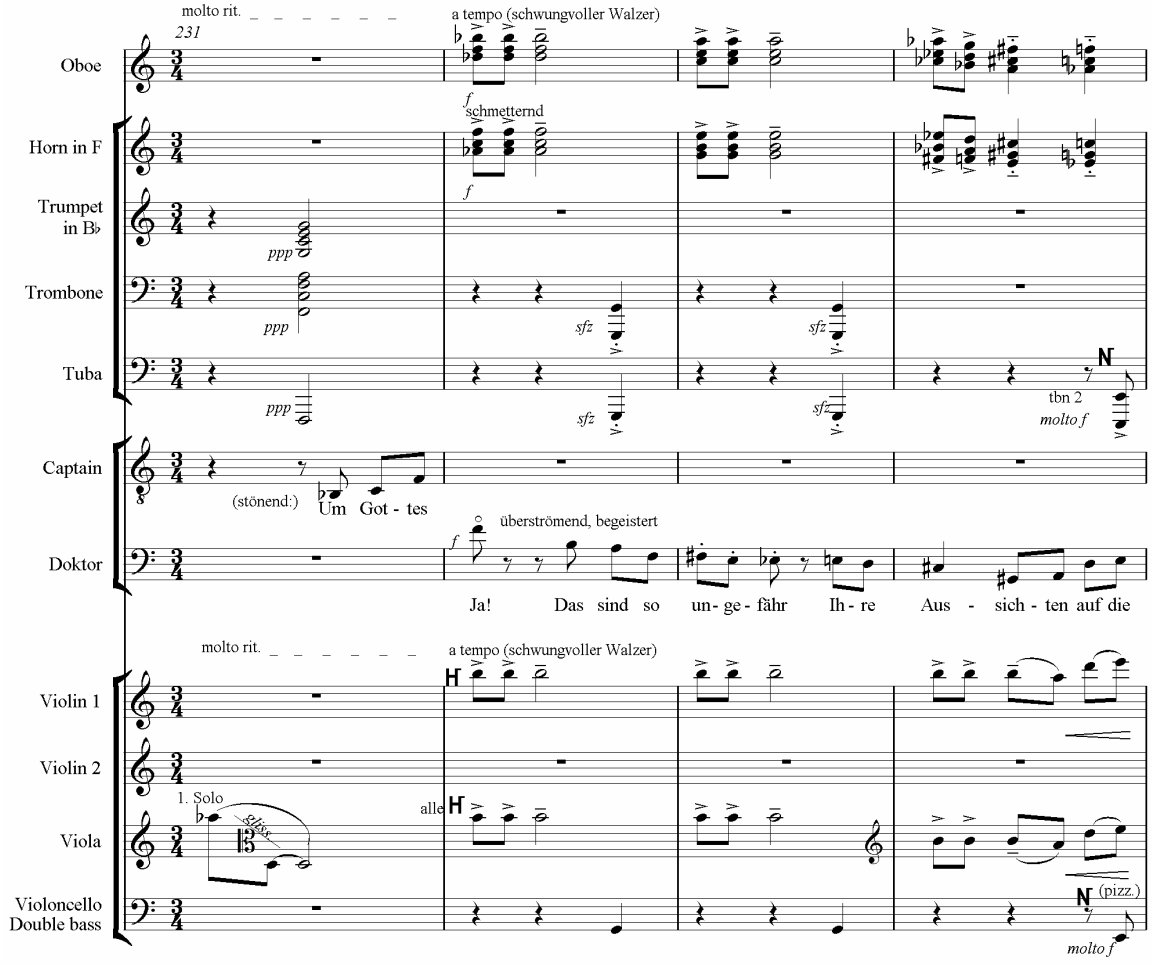


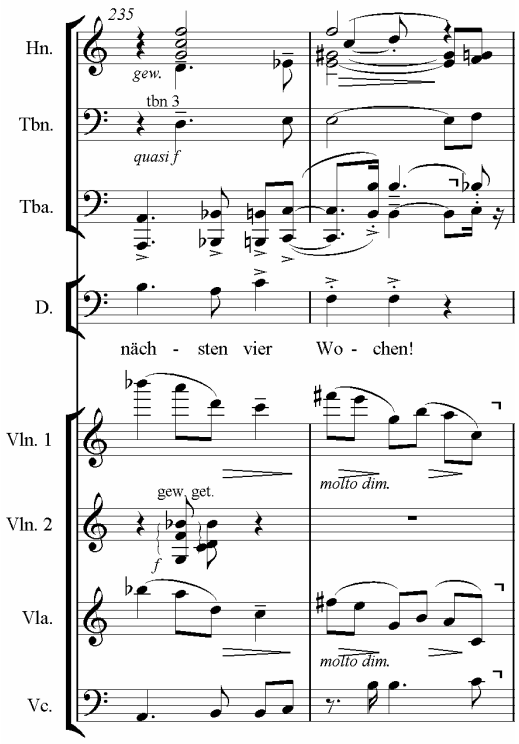
This subtle reminder demonstrates that, just like Wozzeck, the Doctor has his own obsessions.

As the Doctor proceeds with the worst of his diagnosis (mm. 215ff.), the duration of the notes grows generally shorter and the rests less frequent; at the same time, his vocal line widens in range, and the accompaniment becomes fuller and more complex. Finally, when the Doctor comments that the paralysis might hit only “nur unten” (only below [the waist]), the music slows down again in order provide him with a moment to

gloat (see Ex. 4.11). The Doctor is posing, as it were—just as a dancing couple might do—and doing it on his cruelest point. After the Captain reacts briefly, slowly groaning "Um Gottes" (For God's sake), the waltz resumes with a faster tempo ("schwungvoller Walzer" [a waltz full of energy]; Ex. 5.5, m. 232), and Berg supplies the direction "überströmend, begeistert" (enthusiastic and in full swing) for the Doctor.

Ex. 5.5: *Wozzeck*, Act II, Scene 2, mm. 231-37.

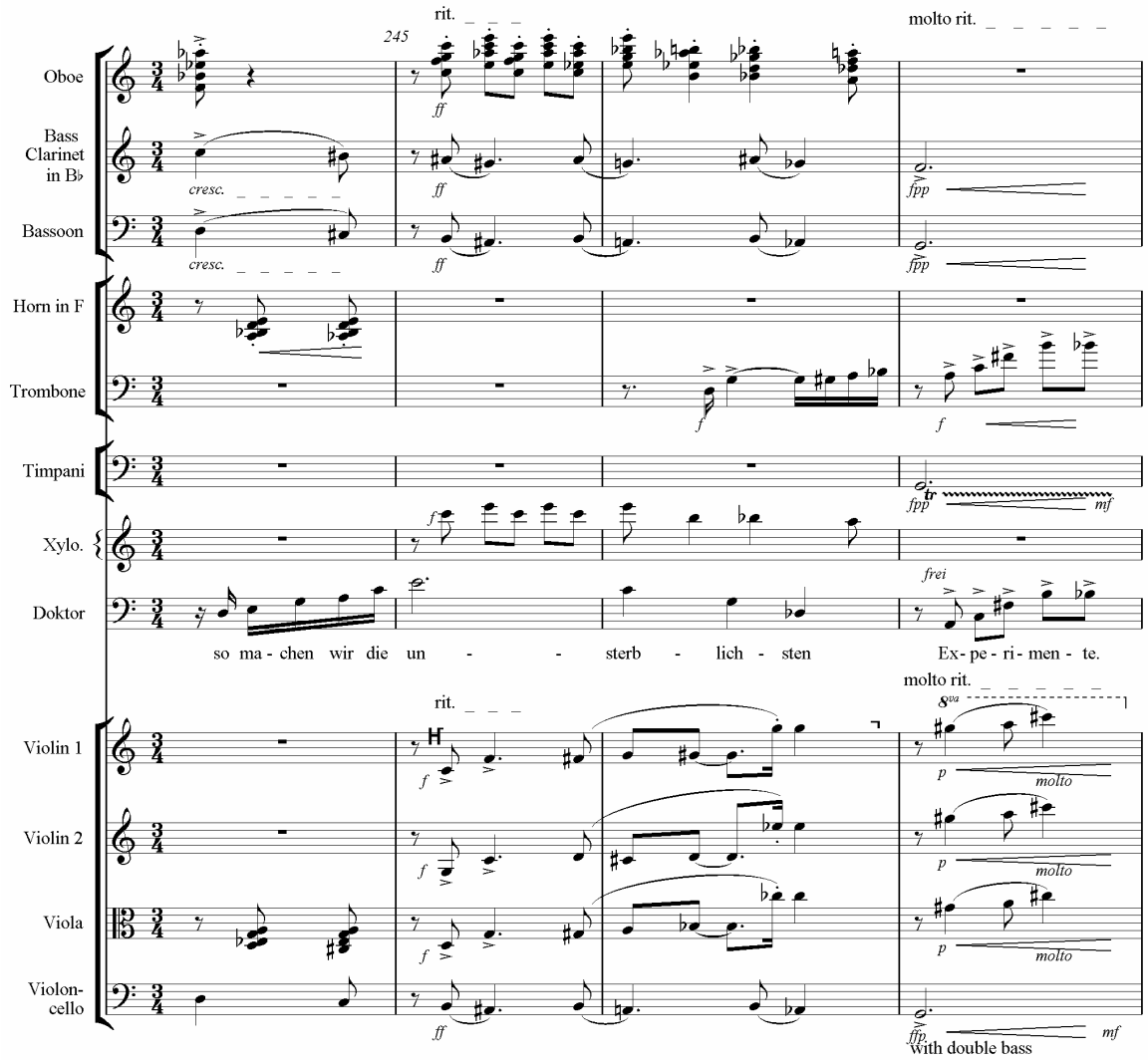




At this point, the waltz is as lively as it will get. The Doctor's melody surges forward, and he finally arrives at the words "so machen wir die unsterblichsten Experimente" (then we will do the most immortal experiments; Ex. 5.6). Here it is his thoughts of immortality that are most important for him, and the setting of the word "unsterblichsten" displays almost exactly the same contour as that for the final, and most enthusiastic, statement of "Unsterblich" (Act I, Scene 4, mm. 638-641).[10] Yet again a ritard accentuates the moment.

[10] The orchestration of this passage will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6 (see Ex. 6.8).

Ex. 5.6: *Wozzeck*, Act II, Scene 2, mm. 245-47.



As often happens after Lulu's macabre comments in her opera, the music quickly resumes its tempo with a flourish. When the Captain finally joins in, the music becomes more disjointed and loses its waltz-like character altogether (though it remains in triple meter). Although the nature of the text is such that virtually any setting of the lyrics would approach the grotesque, Berg, by using the waltz and yoking it with such a

ludicrously enthusiastic purveyor of macabre information, conveys what Jarman calls the Doctor's "malicious glee" and creates a sustained grotesque passage.[11]

CONCLUSION

In all, these three examples demonstrate how a composer can conjure up the grotesque by overturning our expectations of a genre and yoking it to a seemingly contrary dramatic situation. Because we do not normally associate lullabies and waltzes with fear, such a combination can effectively establish the grotesque. As for the *da capo* aria: here, the situation is less clear-cut. Though a museum piece of sorts, it can still bring enough connotations to mind—at least for the knowing listener—to puzzle us when used as a vehicle for a situation as extreme as the one found in Judy's aria. The "misuse" of a genre can be a powerful tool in expressing the grotesque.

[11] Jarman, *Wozzeck*, 35. "Malicious glee" could easily stand as a synonym for grotesque.

CHAPTER 6

CREATING THE MUSICAL GROTESQUE (III): ORCHESTRATION

INTRODUCTION

Although the most basic elements of a composer's musical language are undoubtedly harmony, melody, and rhythm, perhaps a majority of listeners find that the element most immediately perceived and comprehended is timbre, especially when the composer uses harmonies and rhythms that they find complex and unfamiliar. Imaginatively used, the orchestra can effectively create a variety of moods, from lush and serene to passionate and agitated. The voice can also produce a great variety of sounds. Carefully chosen sonorities can produce a momentary shock or a sudden laugh, generate a growing sense of unease or build to a thrilling climax, and reinforce character traits, establish atmosphere, and propel the plot. It can also express the grotesque. And it was during the course of the twentieth century, as composers became increasingly fascinated with and began to employ unusual, complicated, and abrasive sounds, that orchestration became an important—and in many cases the most important—compositional element for expressing the grotesque[1]. This chapter deals with the role of orchestration in four of the operas considered in this study (the orchestration of *Sweeney Todd* will be addressed in Chapter 7), and explores how, together with the text, it can express the grotesque by

[1] Beginning with the title of his treatise, *Grand Traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes* (Paris, 1843), Berlioz distinguishes between instrumentation, or the selecting of instruments, and orchestration, the art of blending and balancing the instruments. On twentieth-century orchestration and use of instruments, see Gardner Read, *Contemporary Instrumental Techniques* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1976), and Walter Gieseler, Luca Lombardi, and Rolf-Dieter Weyer, *Instrumentation in der Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts: Akustik, Instrumente, Zusammenwirken* (Celle: Moeck Verlag, 1985). A standard textbook of orchestration that comments on extended techniques is Kent Wheeler Kennan and Donald Grantham's *The Technique of Orchestration*, 6th edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2002).

underscoring either the ludicrousness or the horror of a situation (in general the text provides the other half). Indeed, I would argue that, in most instances, even small changes in the orchestration would render the grotesque moments far less effective; many of them would even be completely lost.

As I will demonstrate throughout this chapter, composers frequently employ appropriately harsh and transgressive sounds to convey the grotesque either by using instruments in new ways or extending the palette of conventional techniques. Both approaches can produce sounds that are abnormal when compared with more traditional practices. One way of achieving such sounds involves using the extreme high or low ends of an instrument's range or the orchestra as a whole. Most wind and brass instruments, at least as employed in the pre–twentieth-century standard orchestral repertoire, use only a small portion of their total range; typically, composers focus on the middle registers of these instruments, where they produce their most characteristic sound.[2] Yet by displacing melodic lines and using the upper or lower extremities of these instruments' ranges, composers can play with and distort the familiar. Thus in their highest registers the piccolo can emit piercing squalls and the E^{b} clarinet can produce shrill squealing, while in its lowest register the oboe squawks coarsely unless highly controlled. Although the contrabassoon is capable of executing rapid filigrees in its lowest register, it is a particularly incongruous effect given our association of low sounds with the slow and cumbersome. Trombones can revel in playing raucous glissandi in any part of their range. Even the strings can leap up into ever higher harmonics that sound

[2] Treatises on instrumentation and orchestration, whether by Berlioz or others, typically offer two ranges for each instrument: the complete range and the standard "usable" range. For the winds and brass, the usable range comprises about three-quarters of their available range, typically avoiding the tops and bottoms. String instruments customarily traverse a greater portion of their full range.

eerie and glassy, aggressively rasp on the bridge, and play aggressive spiccatos. In addition, large intervallic leaps and jumps to very high or very low notes become quite common.

Besides using extremes of range and register, composers can achieve special orchestral effects by changing the conventional context of the way an instrument is used: for example, a single instrument, such as a piccolo or violin, playing by itself double forte in its highest register is more prominent than when it plays in the same manner with full orchestra, where it will blend into the overall texture. Strange—even grotesque—effects can result from the combination of certain instruments and ranges, when their timbres fail to blend: thus a high piccolo with a very low bassoon, with little or nothing sounding in the middle, produces an eerily empty sound that forces listeners to wonder about what the gap in the texture might mean.[3] Similarly, several instruments playing by themselves in unison is an atypical practice that can raise questions about what it means in conjunction with the drama. In addition, certain effects, particularly glissandi or the introduction and highlighting of instruments not commonly found in the orchestra, will immediately pique the listener's interest, as will greatly expanded orchestras or small, chamber-like ensembles.

Finally, the voice is a particularly potent area of exploration for twentieth-century composers, who call upon myriad techniques to create unusual, distorted, or bizarre sounds, many of which can be used in the service of the grotesque.[4] These sounds run

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[3] In his discussion of blending the instruments, Walter Piston writes that, "Doublings embracing two or more octaves may be used, and for special effect two instruments may play at a distance of two or more octaves apart." He does not, however, describe the "special effect," although it is clear that an empty or hollow sound would be produced; Piston, *Orchestration* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1955).

[4] Especially in connection with the voice, composers will often provide special performance directions on how to achieve particular sounds, just as they sometimes do for instrumentalists.

counter to the concept of "bel canto" singing, as men are called on to sing in their falsetto registers or descend into the gravelly pits and women in their high whistle tones and low chest voices, sometimes with trills, glissandos, and leaps as well.

In opera, I would argue that orchestration serves to express the grotesque when it fails to complement—not to mention fights against—the drama unfolding on stage. We sense that something is amiss: laughable, disturbing, or perhaps frightening, but certainly incongruous. Two entirely fabricated examples that refer to common operatic situations may help to illustrate the point: a triumphant victory signaled by a sluggish double bass and meandering flute, or a maiden's prayer accompanied by blaring trumpets and harsh woodwind trills.[5] In the first example, the instrumental accompaniment may imply the actual toll of lost life incurred by the campaign, no matter how successful it was, and provide the composer's commentary on the folly of war, while in the second the accompaniment would suggest that the maiden's true character runs counter to how she is attempting to portray herself. Conversely, were a simple, diatonic tune, orchestrated in a conventional manner—instruments in their normal ranges, strings carrying the melody, other instruments adding unobtrusive obbligato parts—to accompany violent or horrifying lyrics, the confused yoking of the elements might be called grotesque.[6]

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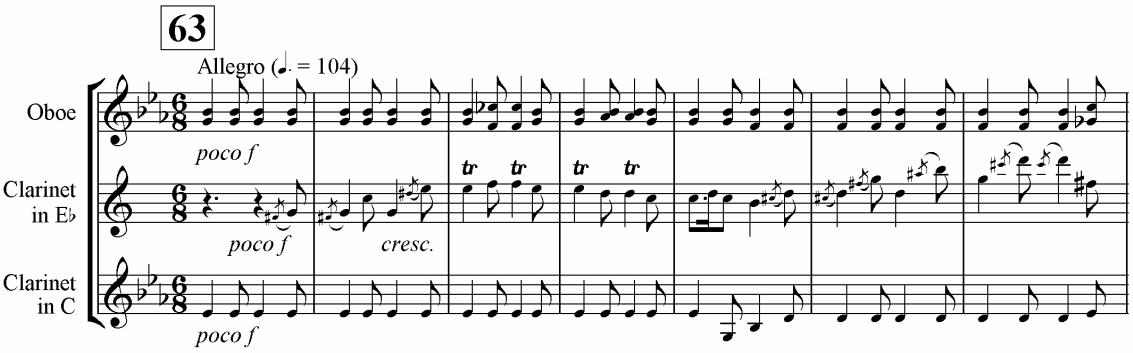
[5] To borrow from two real pieces, imagine the Triumphal March of *Aida* as such a pathetic display and Desdemona's prayer so blasphemed. Verdi could have done either as ironic commentaries on the Egyptians thirst for power and Desdemona's lack of innocence, but in the context of the performance and considering the audience's expectations, both would be grotesque (and the latter untrue to the plot of Shakespeare's *Othello*).

[6] Such a situation arises in Glinka's *Life for the Tsar* (beginning of Act II, the ball given by the head of the Polish detachment), where the Poles sing of their confidence in defeating the Russians, offering violent images to a light court dance played without recourse to sounds (harmony, melody, or orchestration) that truly aligns with their sentiments.

There are numerous historical precedents for the use of unusual instrumentation to conjure up the grotesque. Among the most famous of these is the fifth movement, "Songe d'une Nuit du Sabbat," of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, where the E^b clarinet is used to grotesque effect when it plays a heavily ornamented version of the *idée fixe* in a high register (Ex. 6.1): the composer's beloved is rendered sinister yet absurd at the same time.

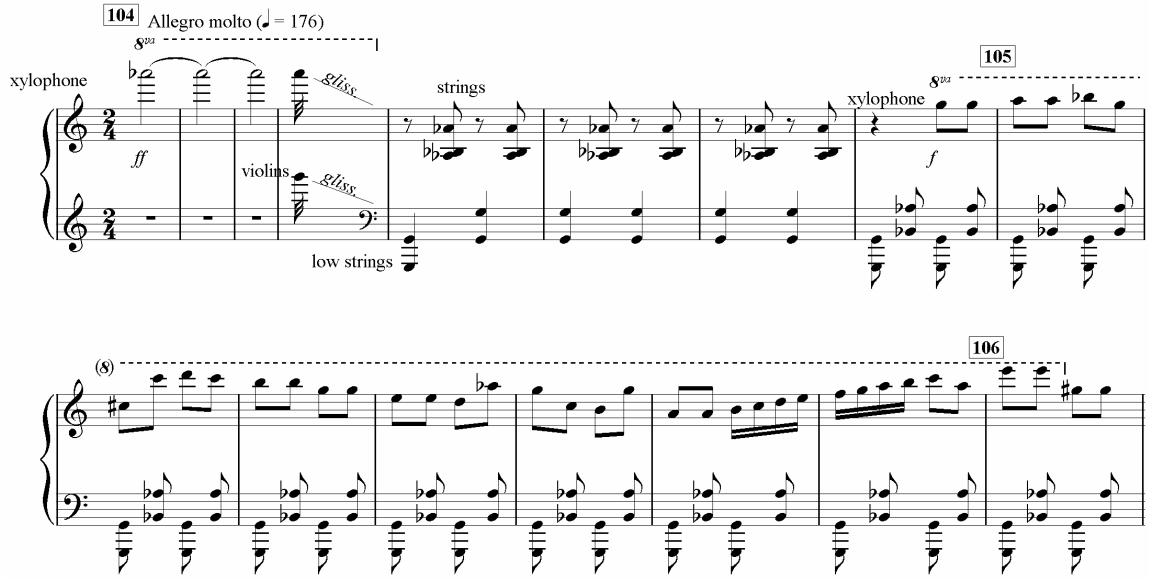
Ex. 6.1: Berlioz, *Symphonie Fantastique*, fifth movt., "Songe d'une Nuit du Sabbat", RH 63.



Bartók's manipulation of the orchestra in his "Grotesque Portrait" (discussed in Chapter 2) focuses on extreme ranges for the woodwinds, very loud dynamics, unusual colors (*fortissimo* muted trumpets, very high woodwind trills), and a dense bass accompaniment. Other instances occur in the orchestral works of Mahler and Shostakovich, both of whom often distort the conventions of such familiar genres as waltzes and other dances into grotesque episodes through tempo, melody, and harmony, and their unexpected orchestrations. For example, Shostakovich might emphasize the bass or place the melody "too high," both of which he does in the "Galop" from the opera *Nos* (*The Nose*). Sheinberg discusses this work in terms of its grotesque purport, aptly discussing Shostakovich's humorous yet aggressively abnormal distortion of this dance genre

(Ex. 6.2).[7] Typically a quick, light dance, this "Galop" combines a very fast tempo and loud dynamics with an exaggeratedly hollow texture owing to the high, frantic melody and excessively ponderous bass, which Sheinberg calls "violent and almost insanely compulsive."[8] What she does not mention, however, is the orchestration, which is an integral part of Shostakovich's approach to grotesquerie. The first statement of the dance theme appears in the xylophone, its crisp but tinny sound highlighting the agitated nature of the melody. Against this, the accompaniment consists of low strings hammering the repeated chords, creating a dense, monochromatic sound.

Ex. 6.2: Shostakovich, *Nos*, "Galop," Act I, Scene 3, RH 104-06.



Likewise, Mahler's Ländler/scherzos often distort their folk roots, as in Symphonies Nos. 1, 5, and 9. Thus while the second movement of the ninth symphony is a scherzo marked "in the tempo of an unhurried Ländler," which would suggest the country dance at its

[7] Sheinberg, *Shostakovich*, 234-35.

[8] Sheinberg, *Shostakovich*, 235.

most archetypal, the orchestration is often thin, and the many trills appear not only in the strings, but also in the horns, where they sound loud and comically bizarre. As a result, the movement becomes a grotesque parody of a folk dance. Clearly, while familiar genres lend themselves to expressing the grotesque because we recognize the disparity between what is expected and what is actually happening, they are not a necessary starting point. In the hands of master orchestrators, unconventional sounds by themselves and in previously unimagined contexts can be just as effective. What follows, then, examines some of the ways in which Berg, Penderecki, and Birtwistle use orchestration to express the grotesque.

THE ORCHESTRAS: INSTRUMENTATION

Composers may be free or limited when selecting their orchestral palette. For a non-commissioned work, they may write for a relatively standard orchestra, hoping that this will improve the chances of a performance, as this is the orchestra that opera houses generally have at their disposal. If they seek to satisfy personal aesthetic goals, they may specify their ideal orchestra, one that incorporates all of their imagined sonorities, even though the need for an especially large orchestra may diminish opportunities for performances because of extra costs.[9] Finally, they may receive a commission to create a work for a specific performing organization, in which case the patron's financial situation

[9] Berg did not have commissions for either of his operas, and in fact had to suspend work on *Lulu* to fulfill commissions (*Der Wein* and the violin concerto). The huge forces he specifies would be difficult to reduce and could have prevented production, particularly since the opera houses would, among other things, have to commit to long rehearsals. He printed the vocal score of *Wozzeck* privately and sent out copies to create interest in the work. As Jarman writes in his handbook on *Wozzeck*, "there seemed to be little reason why any established company should take the risk of mounting the first production of so difficult a work by a composer whose name was hardly known in his native Vienna and almost totally unknown in the outer world" (*Wozzeck*, 23).

may either restrict the size of the ensemble or allow for virtually unlimited resources.[10] In the end, however, the size of the orchestra does not directly influence the composer's ability to express the grotesque, as we will see by examining, in chronological order, the orchestras for the five operas selected for this study.

Berg uses a relatively standard, large, late-Romantic orchestra for both *Lulu* and *Wozzeck*, with woodwinds and brass in threes or fours and expanded percussion sections (plus onstage groups for *Wozzeck*). In *Lulu*, he also includes the alto saxophone, an instrument rarely heard in the opera house; here it plays an important role as a kind of timbral shadow of Lulu, providing a lustrous contrapuntal voice that complements her melodic lines—particularly in her more ecstatic moments, such as the *Lied der Lulu*—or serving as a reminder of her presence and influence when others sing about her.[11] The saxophone also recalls the dance hall, and thus emphasizes the milieu from which Lulu comes and where she is most comfortable: the demimonde of disreputable social connections and her associations with non-bourgeois society (e.g, the Acrobat).[12] Yet despite the saxophone's potential for abrasive sounds, Berg employs it for its silvery tone and shows no interest in having it express the grotesque. Rather, he orchestrates the

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[10] Unlike Berg (see note 9), there was great interest in having Penderecki compose an opera because of his emergent fame in the late 1960s. Therefore, he received *carte blanche* from the Hamburg Staatsoper, which commissioned the composer for an opera on a subject of his choosing; see Schwinger, *Krzysztof Penderecki*, 20-25.

[11] The literature on *Lulu* barely mentions the inclusion of the alto saxophone except to say that it is there, a situation that demonstrates the extent to which orchestration is generally ignored. Articles with such promising titles as Leo Treitler's "The Lulu Character and the Character of *Lulu*" in his *Music and the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 264-305, and Judy Lochhead's "Lulu's Feminine Performance" in *The Cambridge Companion to Berg*, ed. by Anthony Pople (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 227-44, delve into her character and her musical representation, but only in terms of text, harmony, melody, and rhythm, ignoring what could be an interesting discussion about her sonic world beyond the vertiginous tessitura of the role. Perle, Jarman, and David Headlam all focus on the harmonic and rhythmic language, rarely noting which instruments are playing what. See Perle, *Lulu*; Jarman, *Lulu*; Headlam, *The Music of Alban Berg* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[12] The opera begins in a circus tent, thus setting the stage for such associations.

grotesque with sonorities that grow out of the traditional instruments of the standard orchestra.

In contrast to Berg's large orchestras, Birtwistle's ensemble for *Punch and Judy* requires a mere fifteen players divided into a small on-stage group of five and a larger pit orchestra of ten.[13] The on-stage group is essentially a woodwind quintet, though four of the players must cover more than one instrument: player 1, flute and piccolo; player 2, oboe, oboe d'amore, and English horn; player 3, B^b clarinet, bass clarinet, E^b clarinet, and soprano saxophone; player 4, French horn only; and player 5, bassoon and contrabassoon. The pit orchestra consists of trumpet, trombone, harp, two percussion players, two violins, viola, cello, and double bass. In addition, there are only six singers, three of whom play two or more roles each. Because all the instruments are essentially soloists, and there is no standard, large string section, Birtwistle eschews big sounds, and creates a palette of crisp, biting sonorities, usually by arranging disparate groups of instruments to create *tutti*s while giving solo instruments obbligato melodies. The *tuttis* are typically blocks of material that repeat and remain relatively static, against which Birtwistle juxtaposes the obbligato melodies in order to develop the music's linear direction, a compositional technique that Jonathan Cross describes in terms of lines and circles. In several instances, it is the virtuosic writing for the obbligato parts that most evocatively underscores the grotesque. The symmetry of the arcs found in the accompaniment, all invoking the idea of "bridges," is also striking.[14]

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[13] *Punch and Judy* was commissioned as a chamber opera by the English Opera Group for the Aldeburgh festival. Andrew Clements, "Punch and Judy," *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1992), III, 1176-77.

[14] Cross, "Lines and Circles," 220-21.

Penderecki moves to the opposite extreme, as he scores for a massive orchestral and vocal force totaling more than one hundred individual instrumental parts, twenty-six solo voices, and a large four-part chorus. He specifies the exact number of players for each string part (forty-two in total), with the balance of the orchestra consisting of the following: four flutes (two doubling on piccolo and one on alto flute), two English horns, E^b clarinet, contrabass clarinet, two alto saxophones, two baritone saxophones, three bassoons, contrabassoon, six horns, four trumpets, four trombones, two tubas, a massive battery of percussion (requiring four players), harp, piano, harmonium, organ, pre-recorded church bells, and electric bass. Although the total number of players required is not much greater than what a large opera house would use to produce either of the Berg operas or those by other late-Romantic composers (Richard Strauss, for example), what is different is the overall disposition of instruments, including the *divisi* string sections (at times each player has an individual line within the dense texture) and the choir that divides into as many as sixteen separate lines. Notably absent are the B^b clarinets and the oboes, seemingly replaced, as it were, by the four saxophones. But the truly unique instrument is the electric bass, whose role in depicting the grotesque will be discussed in depth below. A pioneer in the use of new sounds and "sound mass" composition, Penderecki underscores the emotionally charged and frequently disquieting extramusical themes of his works with an extremely varied palette of orchestral and vocal techniques. John J. Church writes that "[Penderecki's] expert use of sustained string and brass clusters, rapidly changing instrumental combinations, and short passages for small ensembles or solo instruments, all are evidence of his mastery of texturalism as a defining

concept behind his music."[15] Danuta Mirka offers a more thorough examination of how Penderecki constructs what we perceive as musical form through contrasting sound blocks, rather than the more typical practices of using melody and tonal regions, and shows that orchestration plays a very significant role in creating those blocks of sound.[16] His favorite techniques include long, sustained chord clusters—the hallmark of sound mass composition—and mass glissandos disposed among the various families of instruments (most notably the strings)[17] and short, rapid motives presented in kaleidoscopic fashion. As Schwinger points out, the tone clusters emphasize vertical density while the glissandos provide horizontal density.[18] The latter range from a single staccato note to more developed figures that last several measures. Rarely, though, do they become melodies in the traditional sense, even for the voices; rather, they are as evanescent as the kaleidoscope's shards of color: they enter, either coalesce with other shards or remain solitary, and then disappear. As it complements the story, Penderecki's music can try the ear's tolerance for complexity and dissonance, since it expresses the full range of human actions and emotions. The music invokes a sense of horror to underscore the brutality that human beings can visit upon one another, overwhelming the listener in a way that the type of laughter caused by discomfort can erupt. Or it shocks with a sense of ludicrous humor that undercuts the pervasive harrowing actions of the

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[15] John J. Church, "*Devils of Loudun*," *Opera World*, www.operaworld.com/special/devils.shtml (Accessed 14 September 2000).

[16] Mirka, "Texture in Penderecki's Sonoristic Style."

[17] Penderecki frequently uses the strings for cluster chords because of their ability to play quarter tones and thus densely fill an interval. The number of string parts allows for clusters covering large ranges with a homogenous sound. Similar clusters appear, but with less frequency, in the brass, woodwinds, tuned percussion (piano, organ, tympani), and voices.

[18] Schwinger, "Changes in Four Decades," 69.

opera. With an interest in achieving these reactions as Penderecki's goal, the orchestration becomes the chief—perhaps even the sole—agent of the grotesque.

ORCHESTRATING THE GROTESQUE

Having discussed the overall make-up and dispositions of the orchestras and their general functions, we will move on to the different ways the composers employ their orchestras to convey particular moments of grotesquerie. In each case we will examine whether the orchestration emphasizes the horror of a situation or somehow provides leavening humor—or perhaps contributes to both sides of the grotesque equation. The examples include the use of obbligato instruments, the unusual case of the electric bass in Penderecki's *Die Teufel von Loudun*, specific uses of registral extremes, the glissando, and moments where many elements of orchestration combine.

The Obbligato Instruments

I will look at two examples of the way in which obbligato instruments can help to express the grotesque. In Chapter 5 (Ex. 5.1) I examined how Birtwistle subverts the conventions of the lullaby in order to create Punch's grotesque "Lullaby." In addition to the techniques cited there, Birtwistle uses three clarinets to further stress the horrifying content of the lyrics. First, as noted in Chapter 5, it is the bass clarinet that shadows Punch's vocal line. The bass clarinet continues this role in Verse II, but it is rhythmically more active. In Verse III, the B^b clarinet accompanies Punch's rhyme "Step on its back/And make it crack?" with a series of trills that end with a leap up to $g^{\#'''}$ (a very high note for a B^b clarinet) on the word "crack," at which point the player can hardly do

anything else but just that.[19] In Verse IV, the E^{b} clarinet's shrieking notes—marked *fff*—can be construed as Baby's own cries.[20] Finally, the E^{b} clarinet leads the way in the "War Cry," traversing its full range with rapid figurations that run parallel with Punch's long ascending glissando. The "War Cry" returns before each subsequent murder, and all but one (the relatively subdued murder of Choregos, which will be discussed below) use the same music, with the frantic E^{b} clarinet imbuing the moment with a dose of horror.

Berg uses both single instruments and small groups of instruments as obbligatos throughout *Wozzeck*. A characteristic example—and one that also helps delineate the grotesque nature of the Captain—appears in Act I, Scene 1, at the end of the "Gigue,"[21] where the contrabassoon comes to the fore with large leaps and rapid arabesques, all of which sound cumbersome and ludicrous in this low register (mm. 109-17), and sets up a grotesque atmosphere in advance of the Captain's next tact, his admonishment of Wozzeck ("Wozzeck, Er ist en gutter Mensch, aber… Er hat keine Moral!" [Wozzeck, you are a worthy man, and yet you have no moral sense]) (Ex. 6.3), which leads to his condemnation of Wozzeck for having an unbaptized child.

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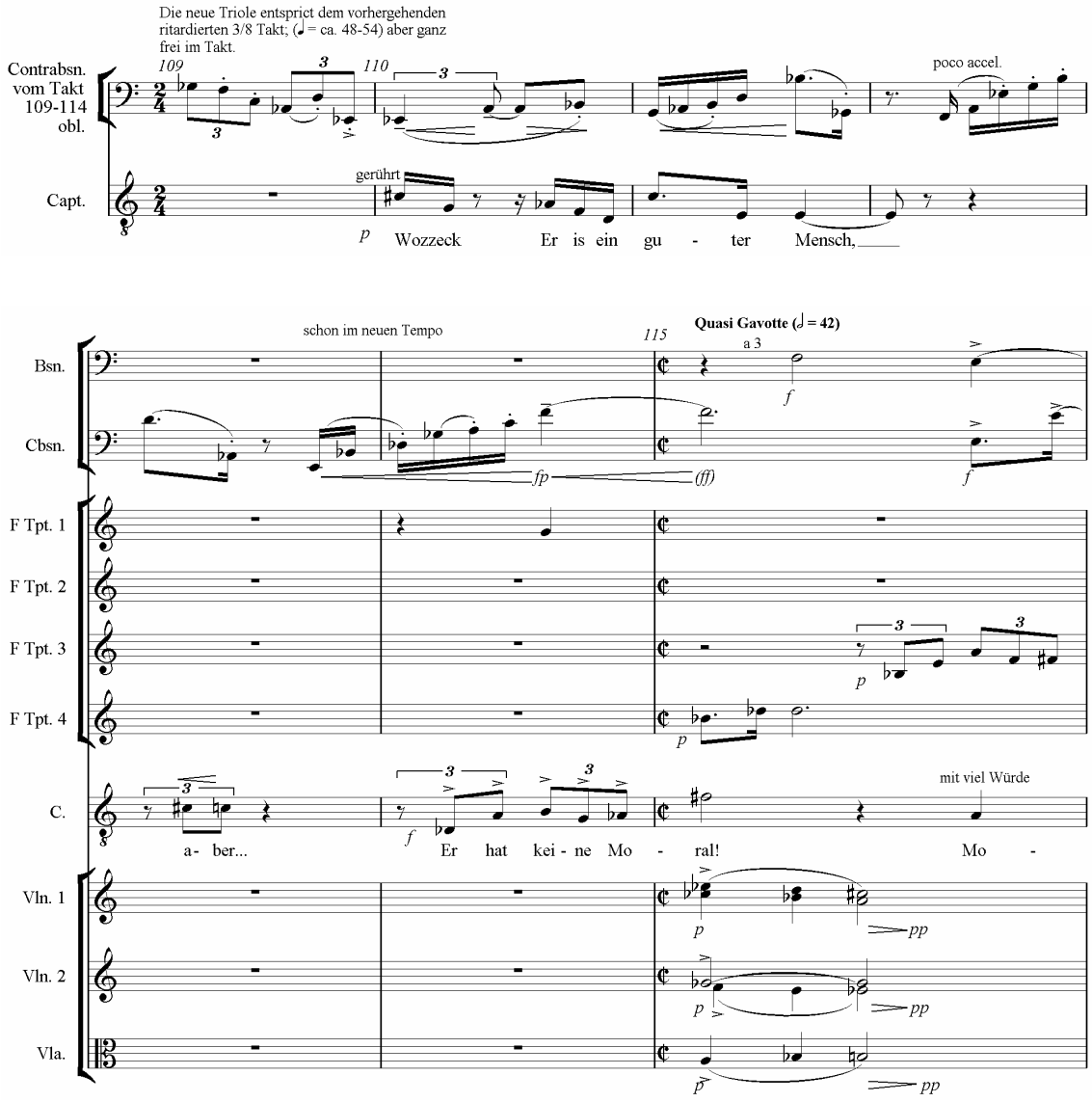
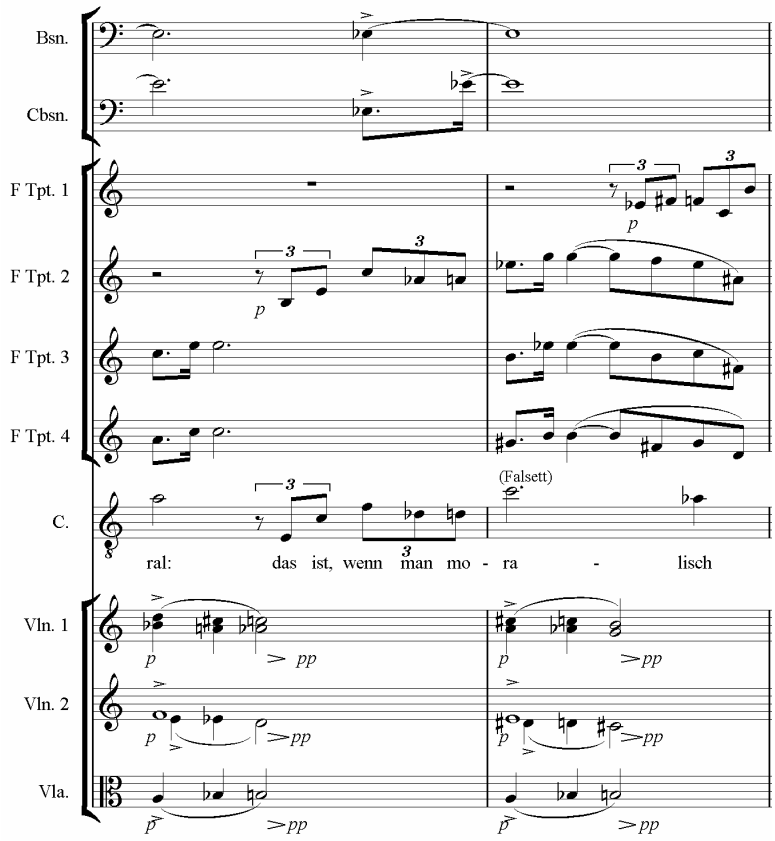
[19] The performer playing the clarinets is able to change instruments during the "Refrain" between each verse.

[20] In performance, Baby is a doll, not a performer, and therefore no human scream can be provided. The clarinet screech is probably move evocative anyway.

[21] The formal design of Act I, Scene 1, is known as the Suite in five movements: Prelude, Pavane, Cadenza I, Gigue, Cadenza II, Gavotte, Air, and Reprise; see Perle, *Wozzeck*, 44-46. The contrabassoon extends the double reed sound established at the beginning of the scene. An oboe plays the first motif, answered by the English horn, and then the clarinet, bass clarinet, and bassoon join in. These five instruments are labeled the "obbligato woodwind quintet."

Ex. 6.3: Berg, *Wozzeck*, Act I, Scene 1, mm. 109-17.





This obbligato makes a mockery of the Captain's pious stance, and the irony of the Captain criticizing someone else's morality remains a steady thread throughout the opera.

The Electric Bass in Penderecki's *Die Teufel von Loudun*

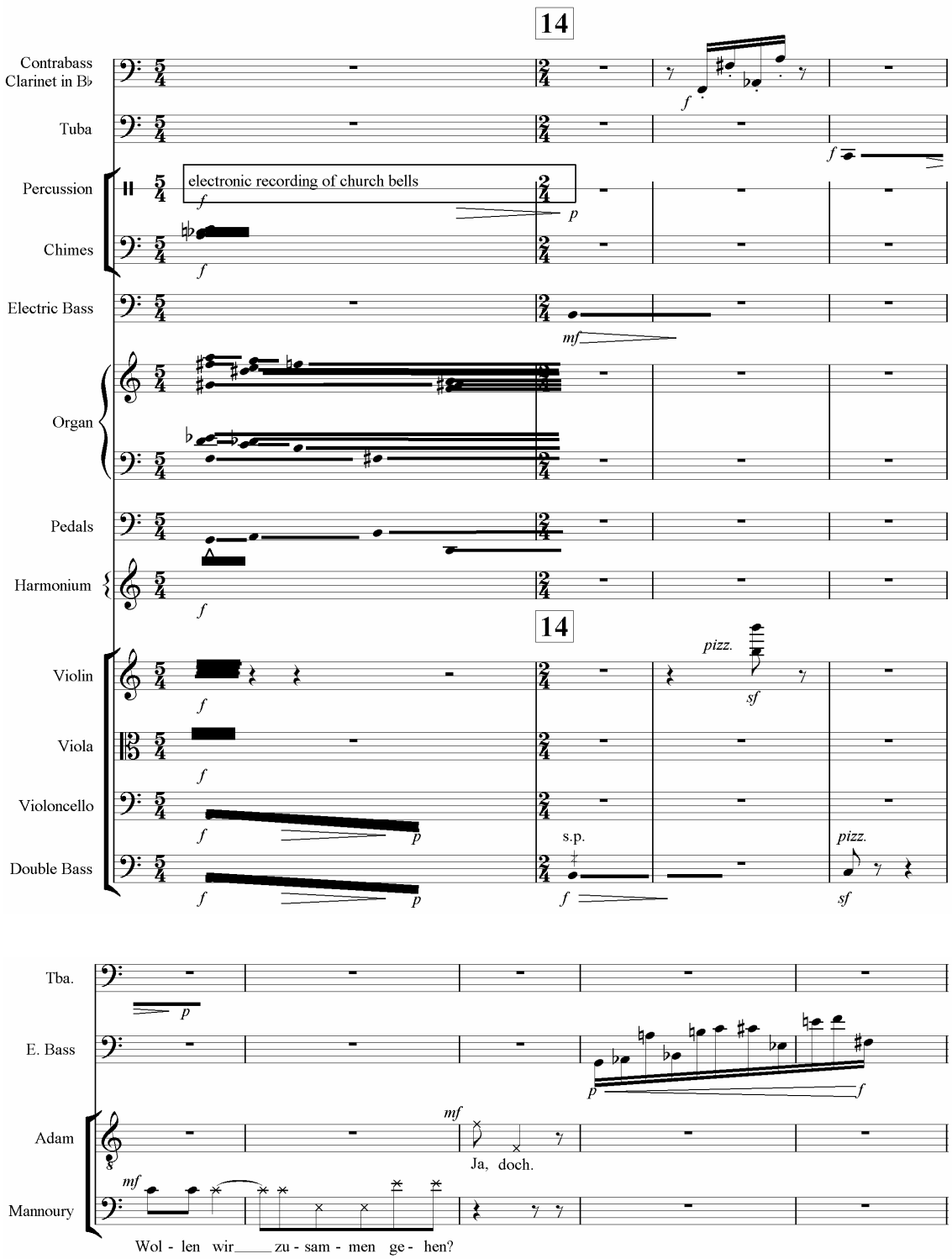
A third example of an obbligato instrument highlighting the grotesque is worthy of separate mention: Penderecki's use of the electric bass in *Die Teufel von Loudun*. He uses it on a grand scale as a kind of overarching grotesque obbligato throughout the opera. The electric bass needs little introduction: it is a staple of rock bands, where it provides the foundation of the harmonic changes, its volume limited only by the wattage of its amplifier. With respect to the symphonic or opera orchestra, it remains a foreigner because its strident sound, a by-product of its amplification, can be likened to a parody of the low strings. Yet Penderecki treats it as another string instrument, writing passages of

dexterous figures, large leaps, varied dynamics, and glissandi. As this is distinctly at odds with our perception of the electric bass as a cumbersome, loud, and unmelodic instrument, the result strikes us as ludicrous, and the instrument jars the listener with each of its entrances.

The first appearance of the electric bass reveals its disruptive, unusual quality. As the church bells of Act I, Scene 1, finish ringing and the dense clusters in the organ, strings, and other instruments die away, a single note, a low *B*, from the electric bass is enough to signal a complete change of mood from the complex textures that dominate Scene 1 (Ex. 6.4).[22] In the opening scene, Jeanne's prayers intermingle with her sexual fantasies of Grandier, and Penderecki uses pedal points, tone clusters, and seemingly aleatoric vocal and instrumental passages to convey her hysterical state. While the sustained *B* is typical enough of what the instrument usually does, the virtuosic flight after Adam's "Ja doch" is not. And it is this incongruous use of the instrument—like that of the contrabassoon in *Wozzeck*—that makes it a major player in Penderecki's use of the orchestra to express the grotesque.

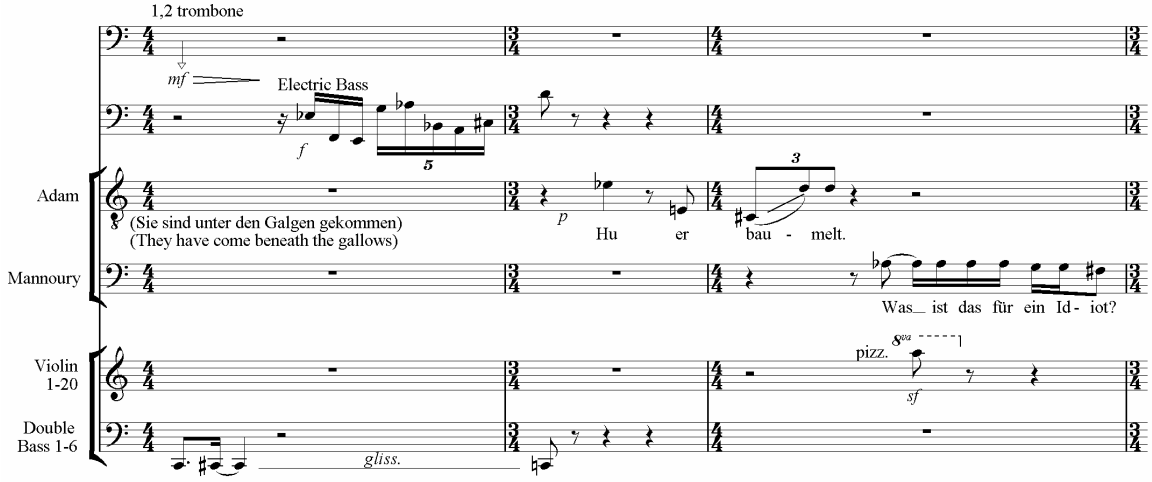
[22] The abbreviation for the instrument in the score is "*cht b*," or, chitarra basso. In the list of instruments at the front of the score, Penderecki calls it an "electric bass guitar," but it is the electric bass common to rock bands, not an amplified acoustic bass guitar, that he wants.

Ex. 6.4: *Die Teufel von Loudun*, Act I, Scene 2, entrance of the electric bass
RH 14-1 to RH 14+7.

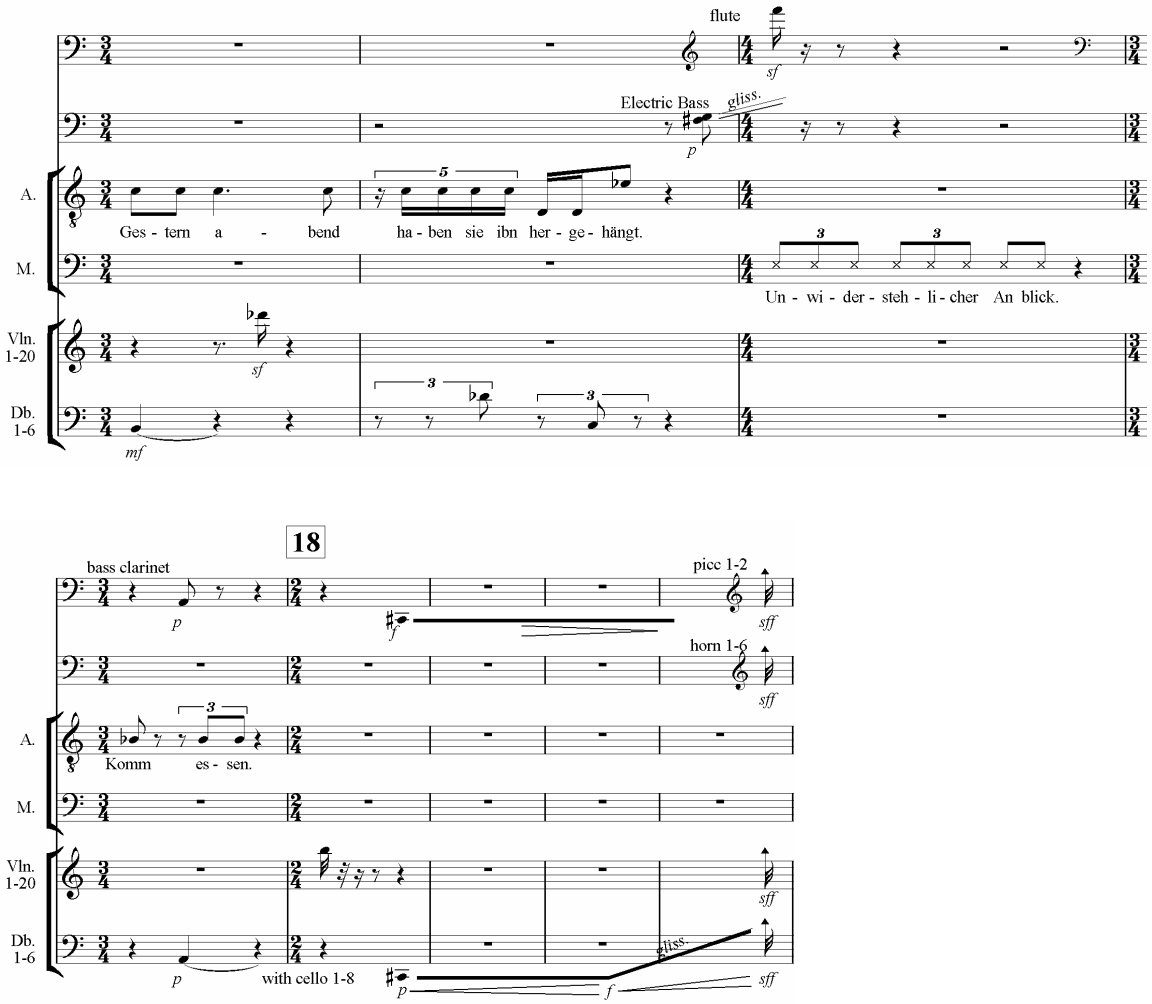


Adam and Mannoury, the opera's two main grotesques, then enter, gossiping about the people leaving the church (Ex. 6.5). The music for this scene and all subsequent scenes in which they appear is quite pointillistic. As Wolfram Schwinger writes: "A novelty is the macabre-ironic manner of speech assigned to the Apothecary and Surgeon, musical telegrams with very transparent orchestra featuring the sharp twang of the electric bass."[23] As they walk along they come upon a hanging body; and just before Mannoury refers to the body as a "Unwiderstehlicher" (compelling or irresistible) sight, the electric bass plays a minor second ($f^{\#}$-g) and begins an upward glissando. (The glissando as a marker for the grotesque will be discussed below.) Immediately thereafter, Adam invites Mannoury to dinner, a rather gruesome suggestion considering the "compelling" sight. A glissando in the strings echoes that of the electric bass and punctuates the invitation.

Ex. 6.5: *Die Teufel von Loudun*, Act I, Scene 2,
RH 18-7 to RH 18+3.



[23] Schwinger, *Krzysztof Penderecki*, 255.



Thus both the electric bass and its glissando are linked with the body and matters physical, but also with the incongruous and ludicrous.

The use of the electric bass and the glissando to herald the grotesque is confirmed in Scene 4. Here, Mannoury has purchased the head of the hanged man. When Grandier learns of the transaction, he calls the severed head a bargain, and double basses join him with a rising glissando. Moments later, the electric bass plays the same to underscore Grandier's laughter about the head being the site of reason. Yet we know why he is laughing: for him the site of reason is probably at the base of the torso. The sexual, physical, and comedic—at least Grandier finds them all interrelated—are pointedly

underscored by the electric bass. Subsequently the instrument begins to permeate the texture of other scenes, particularly those that feature exorcism and torture (many of which have blatant sexual content).[24] Thus the electric bass remains a transgressive and disruptive sound throughout the opera, one that always attracts attention to itself and always keeps the grotesque in the forefront.

Extremes of Range and Register as Timbral Effect

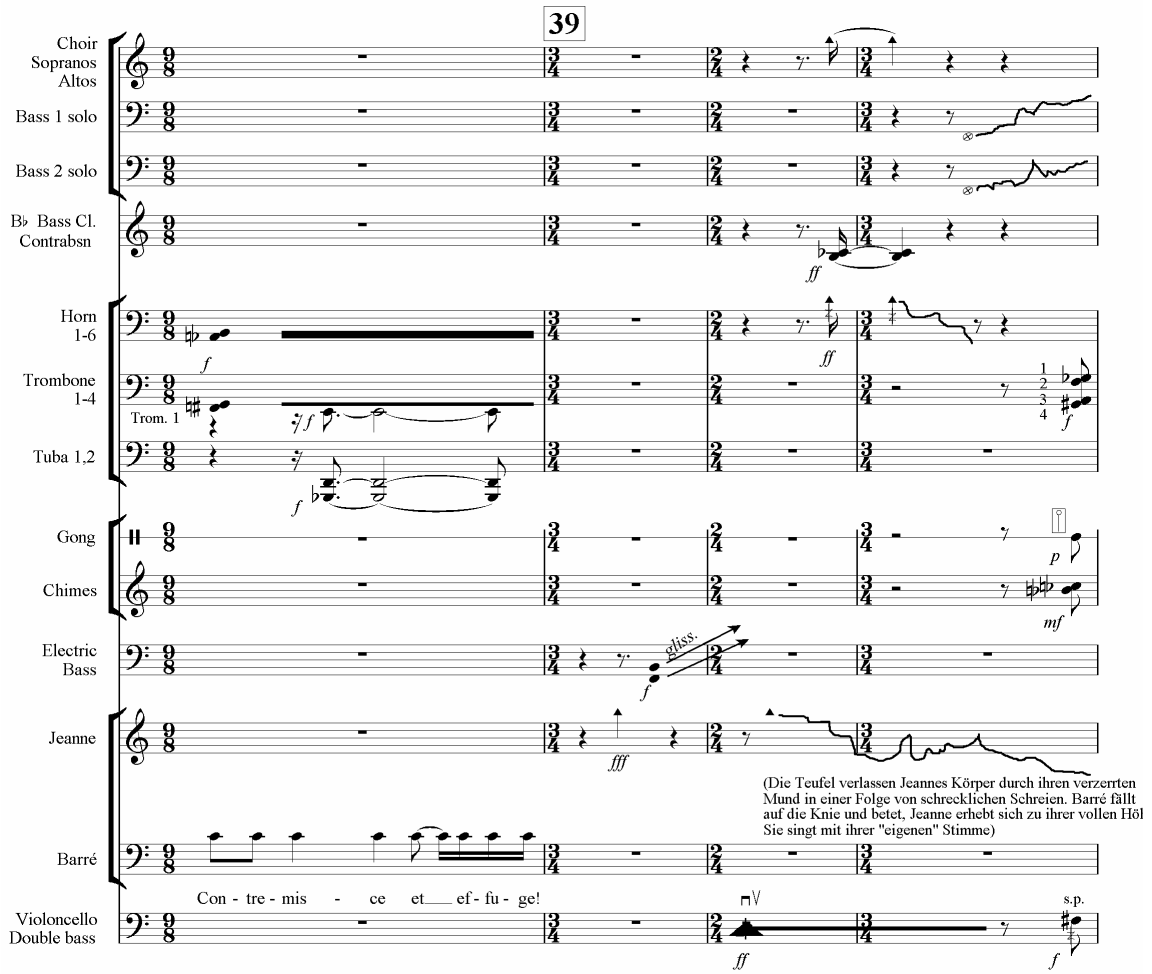
In Chapter 4, I examined a number of ways in which composers have used registral extremes to highlight the grotesque nature of particular characters or dramatic situations. Penderecki regularly requires instruments and voices to move into their highest and lowest registers not so much for the specific pitches themselves but for the quality of the sound produced. This is particularly true in Act II, Scene 10, where Jeanne undergoes her second exorcism. The situation is rather horrific, but ludicrous elements creep in as well. A large crowd observes the exorcism, including Prince Henri de Condé, a minister of the king. De Condé, obviously dubious about the validity of Sister Jeanne's possession, first asks Sister Jeanne her opinion of the king and then presents a relic for the exorcists to use. What follows is chaos: Sister Jeanne claims immediate release from her self-described tormentors, De Condé reveals that the relic is a hoax, one exorcist starts to run in a circle while another neighs like a horse and trots around, and a boy from the crowd suddenly laughs hysterically.[25] Penderecki flamboyantly depicts all of this in

[24] Some further examples of the electric bass appearing in such circumstances can be found in Act II, Scene 10: at RH 35, when Gabrielle, Claire, and Louise suddenly join Jeanne's exorcism with screams of "Ja," and later in the same scene when Jeanne claims the devils are leaving her (RH 39, see Ex. 6.10a). In Act III, Scene 5, RH 41, the electric bass returns associated with Grandier's torture.

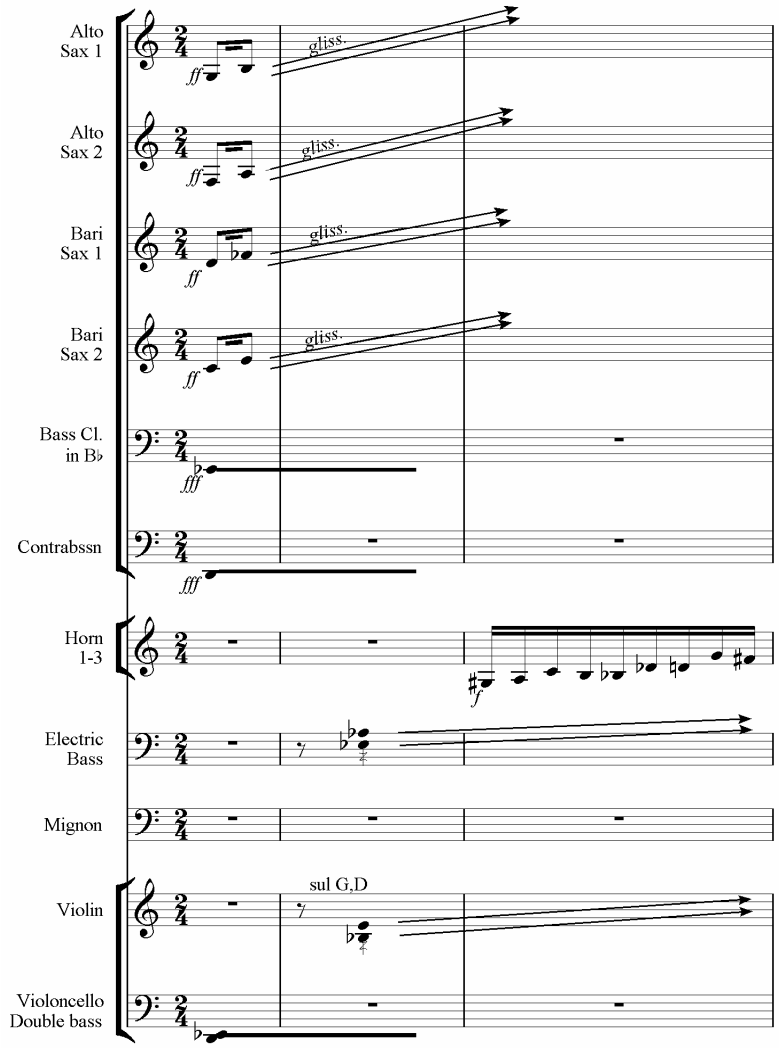
[25] Perhaps the boy is Penderecki's surrogate for the audience, allowing them the opportunity to release some of their discomfort in the form of a laugh.

the orchestration, beginning with Jeanne's excruciating screams, which Penderecki uses as another sound color (Ex. 6.6a), and followed shortly thereafter by a chaotic fanfare in the brass leading to glassy string glissandi (Ex. 6.6b). Throughout this passage, a slew of instruments play their highest or lowest possible notes, depending upon the direction of the arrow.

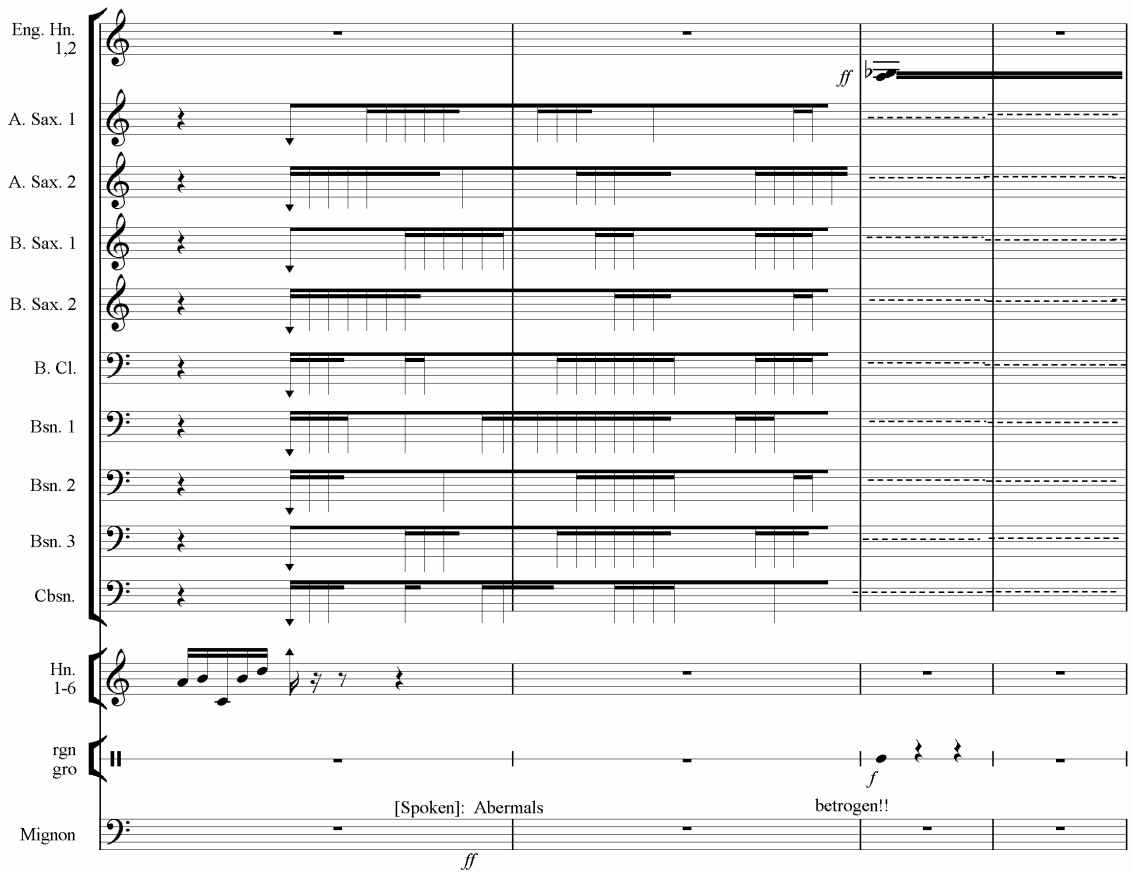
Ex. 6.6: *Die Teufel von Loudun*, Act II, Scene 10,
(a) RH 39-1 to RH 39+2.

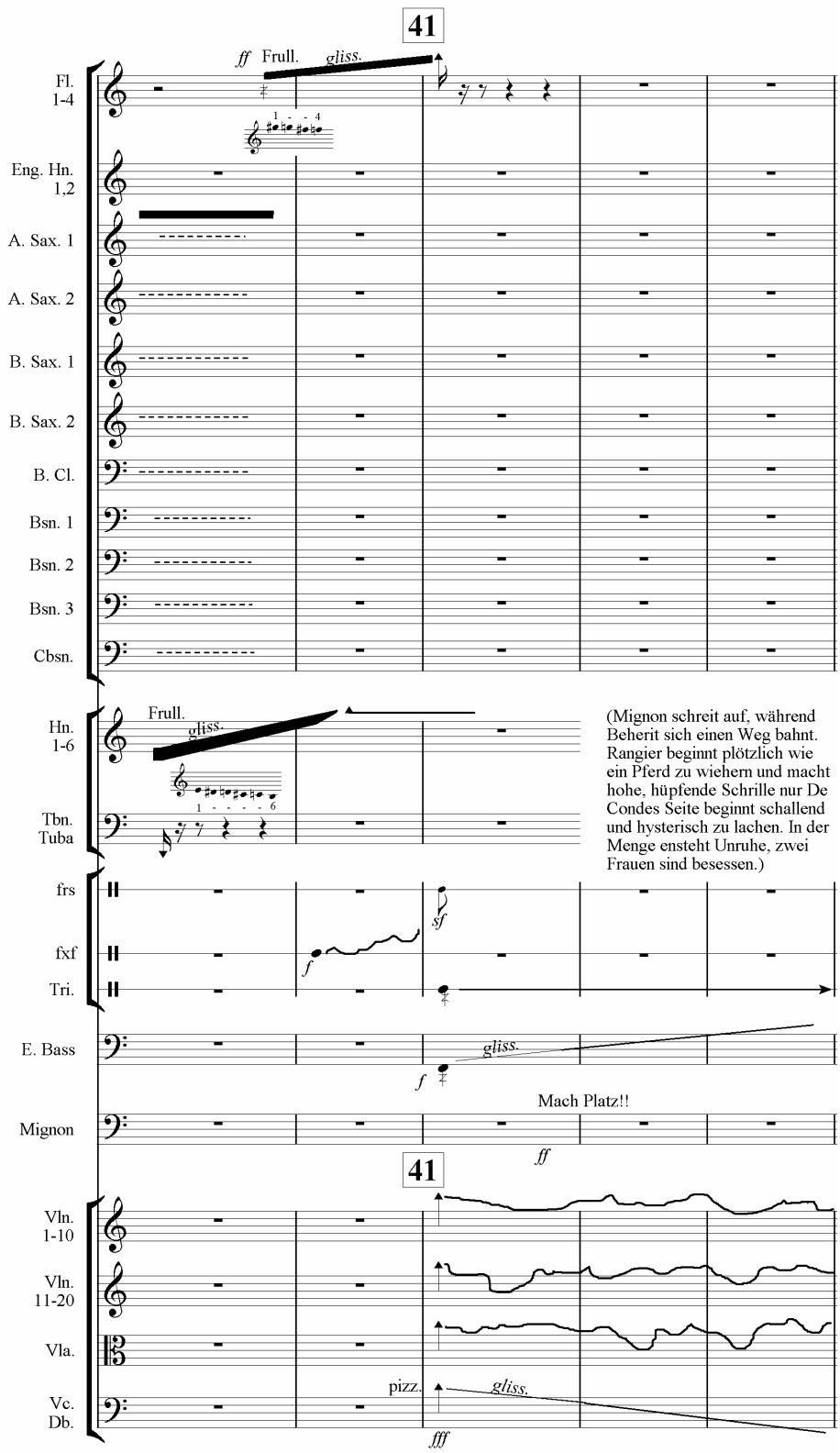


(b) RH 41-8 to RH 41+2.[26]



[26] The instruments are listed in the example according to Pendercki's arrangement (i.e., saxophones above clarinet and bassoon).


Eng. Hn. 1,2
A. Sax. 1
A. Sax. 2
B. Sax. 1
B. Sax. 2
B. Cl.
Bsn. 1
Bsn. 2
Bsn. 3
Cbsn.
Hn. 1-6
rgn
gro
Mignon
ff
ff
f
[Spoken]: Abermals
betrogen!!


41
ff Frull. gliss.
Fl. 1-4
Eng. Hn. 1,2
A. Sax. 1
A. Sax. 2
B. Sax. 1
B. Sax. 2
B. Cl.
Bsn. 1
Bsn. 2
Bsn. 3
Cbsn.
Frull.
gliss.
Hn. 1-6
Tbn. Tuba
(Mignon schreit auf, während Beherit sich einen Weg bahnt. Rangier beginnt plötzlich wie ein Pferd zu wiehern und macht hohe, hüpfende Schrille nur De Condes Seite beginnt schallend und hysterisch zu lachen. In der Menge ensteht Unruhe, zwei Frauen sind besessen.)
frs
fxf
Tri.
sf
f
E. Bass
gliss.
f
Mach Platz!!
Mignon
ff
41
Vln. 1-10
Vln. 11-20
Vla.
Vc. Db.
pizz.
gliss.
fff

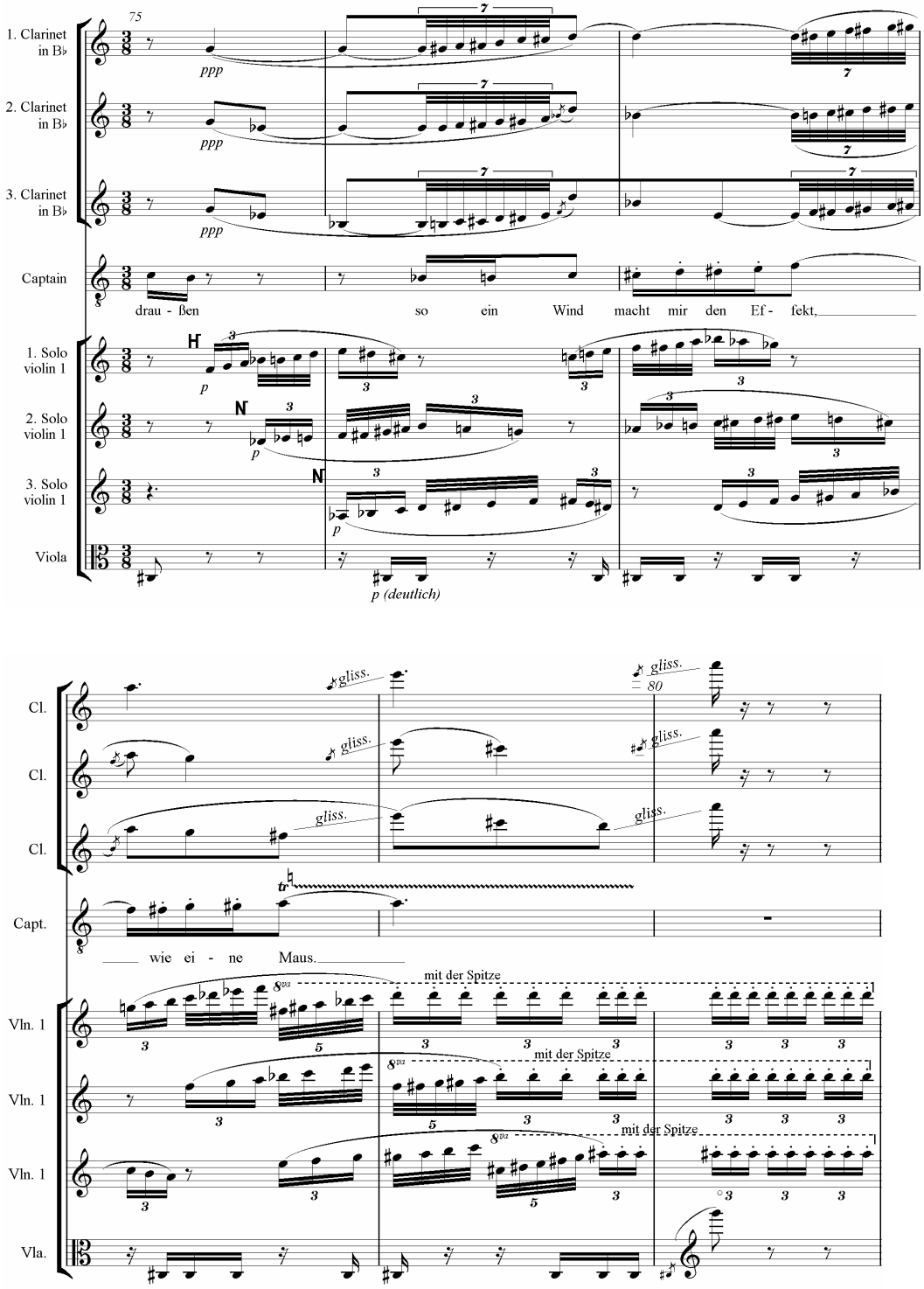
The sonorities are guttural, extreme, shocking, and disquieting, and, most important, perfectly suited to the situation: Sister Jeanne's false claims, the exorcists' ludicrous behavior, and the observers' horrified amusement.

The Glissando

Even a glance at the scores of the Berg, Penderecki, and Birtwistle operas shows that the glissando is an often-used effect that frequently highlights the grotesque. Almost without exception, glissandi intensify instrumental and vocal parts. This of course was also true of their use in the nineteenth century, where they often appear at climactic moments, as, for example, when the strings slide *en masse* to a higher octave during an important restatement of a main theme, or a singer executes a portamento to a exaggerate a move to a high or low note. In these four operas, however, they appear more frequently and perhaps because of preexisting associations, they can seem incongruous and ironic.

An example of the glissando as onomatopoetic word painting appears in Act I, Scene 1 (Ex. 6.8). Once more the Captain is reveling in his obsessions, this time about wind. As he begins a trill on the word "Maus"—an effect that, given the ugly sound of a trill on so high a note (*a'*), makes him appear quite unstable—the clarinets play glissandi of varying lengths in a relatively high register.

Ex. 6.7: *Wozzeck*, Act I, Scene 1, mm. 75-80.

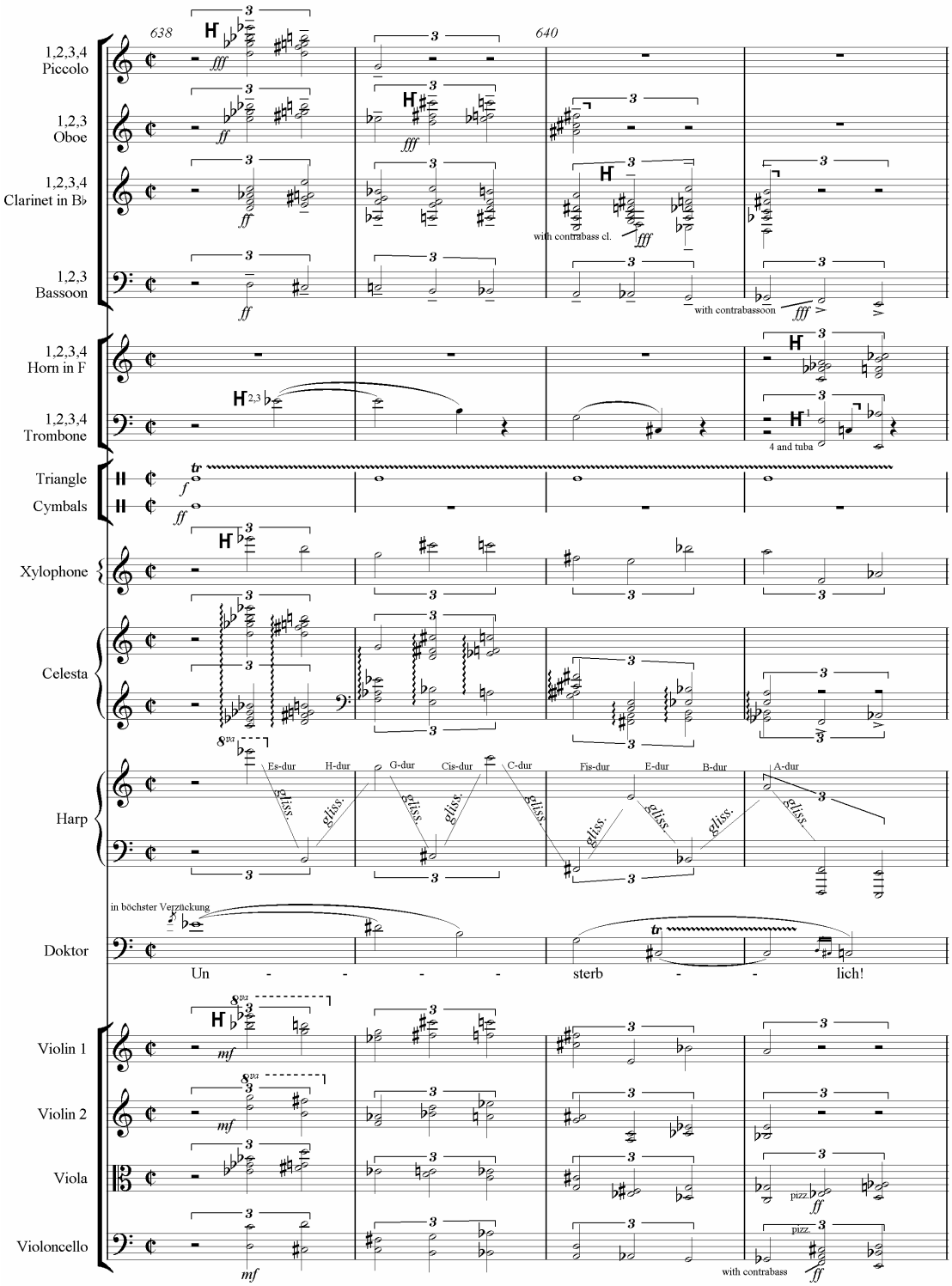


This effectively evokes shrill screams; and the idea of a Captain, a rank suggesting bravery, shrieking at the thought of a mouse, let alone conjuring up its image in

connection with the wind, is absurd. It is, however, immediately after this outburst that the Captain begins to torment Wozzeck, and so perhaps realizes his own ridiculousness for which he now wants to compensate.

Perhaps the quintessential example of the glissando-*cum*-grotesquerie is that at the end of Act I, Scene 4, of *Wozzeck*. Here, after telling Wozzeck to cultivate his "Idée fixe," the Doctor launches into an ecstatic declaration: "Oh! Meine Theorie! Oh mein Ruhm! Ich werde unsterblich! Unsterblich!" (Oh! My theories! Oh my fame! I'll be immortal! Immortal!). Berg underscores the Doctor's disturbing paean to his immortality by employing all the trappings familiar from climactic moments of Romantic operas: a rising vocal line, ever-increasing volume, and increased activity in the accompaniment. Each repetition of the word "Unsterblich" brings more instruments with it, and the chords and arpeggiated figures pile up. The final utterance is the most intense (Ex. 6.7). With the *ff* and *fff* chords thundering in the woodwinds, brass, strings, and celesta, the harp glides through a series of ascending and descending glissandi, eventually descending together with the other instrument groups into the lower registers. The Doctor's vocal line slowly descends an octave and a third over four measures, creating a dramatic denoument.

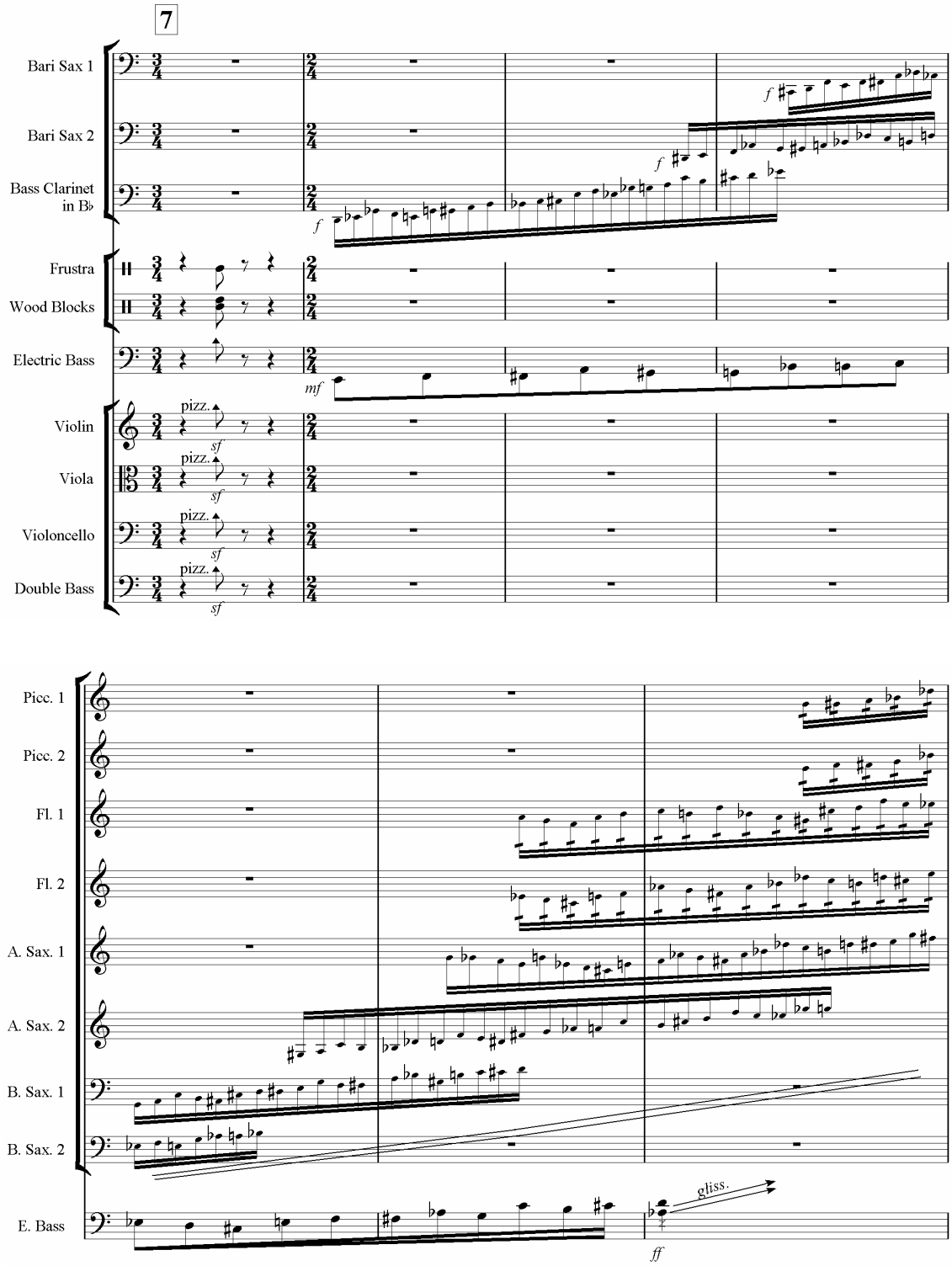
Ex. 6.8: Berg, *Wozzeck*, Act I, Scene 4, mm. 638-41.

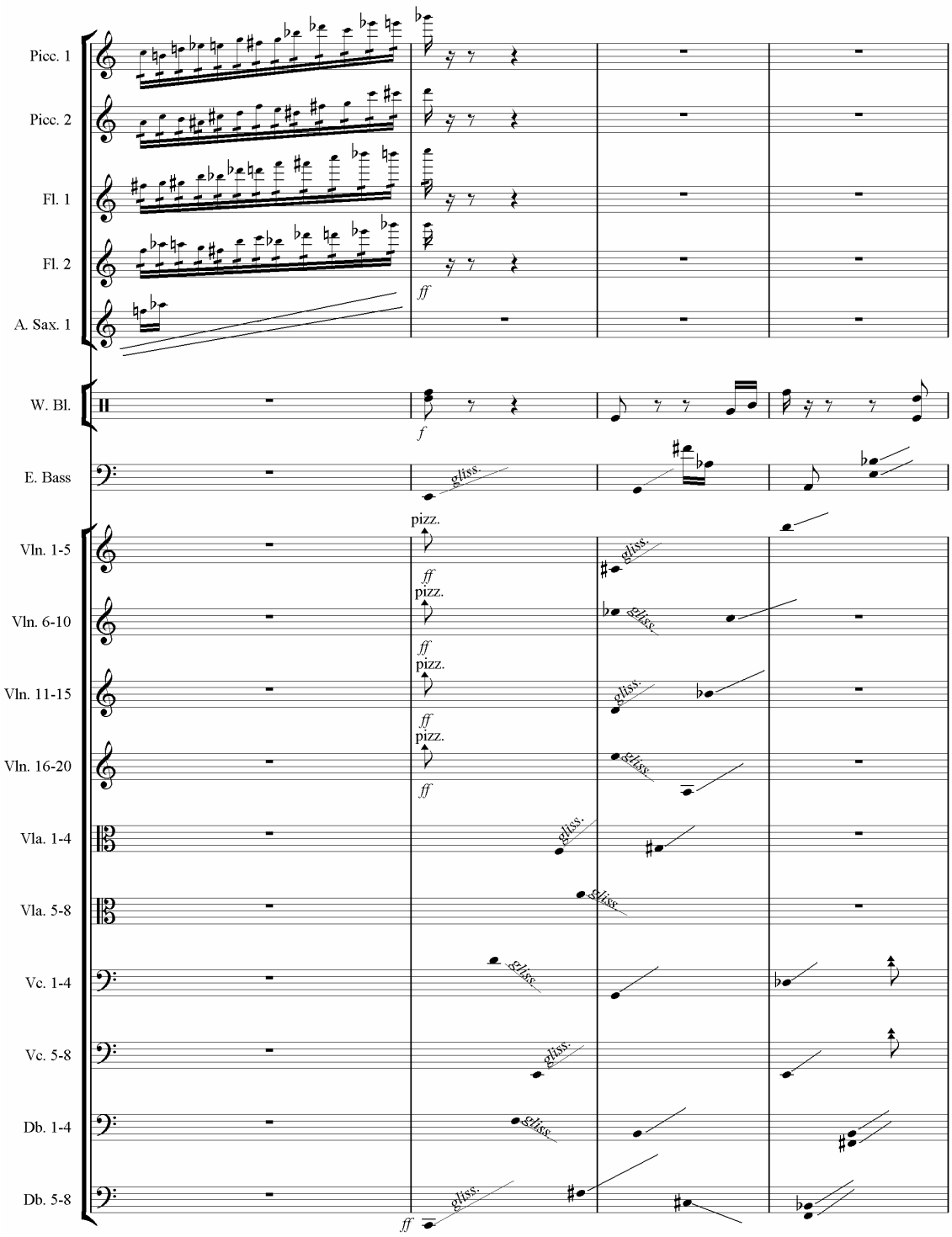


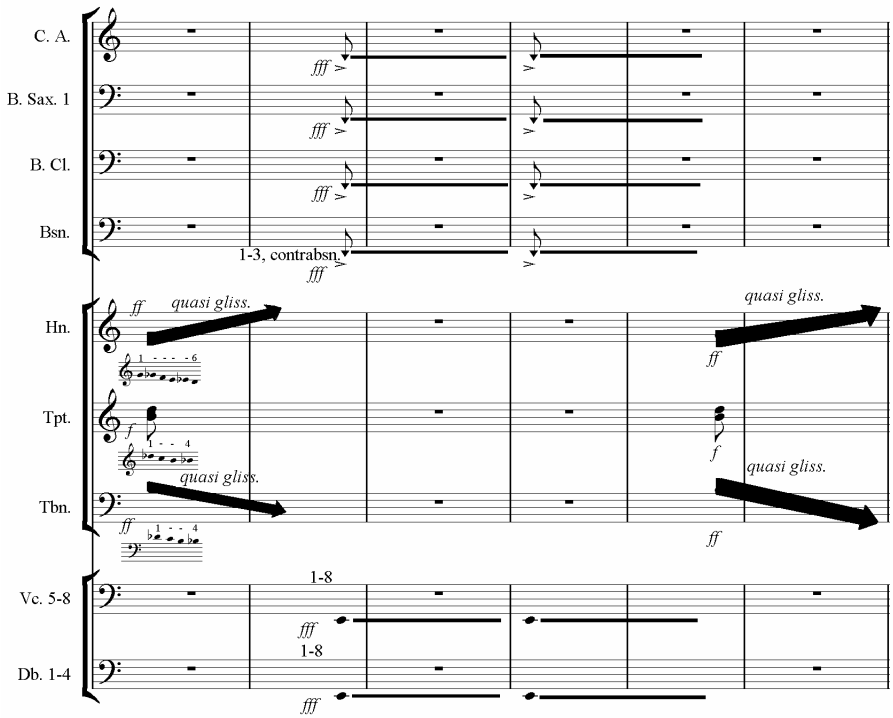
With this moment, Berg cultivates two ironic associations. First, the Doctor's egotism parallels the more familiar scene: the climax of passion between a couple expressing their mutual love. Second, the harp, traditionally associated with images of beauty, is sullied by the continuous changes of key and the excessive number of glissandi, as well as the situation it is accompanying. The overall effect is ludicrous yet disturbing.

It is Penderecki who makes the greatest use of glissandi, deploying them on virtually every page of *Die Teufel von Loudun*, and for every instrument capable of either playing or approximating them (see Ex. 6.6). Moreover, Penderecki uses the glissandi in a number of ways: some swoop over a short distance in fast thrusts, while others stretch out slowly over wide intervals; some begin on either the highest or lowest note of a given instrument's range, while others use that note as the destination point. Some glissandi move between definite pitches, while others seem to begin and dissipate at points of indeterminate pitch. Finally, some glissandi involve whole chord clusters, thus permitting the clusters to mutate (growing or shrinking) or move *en masse* up or down. Although not every glissando can be linked to an expression of the grotesque, those that do seem to function as a type of word painting: the ascending glissandi represent exclamations, such as screams, shrieks or laughs, while those that descend signify either eroticism or exhaustion, references all the more clearly evoked when the glissandi are performed by the voice. On the other hand, perhaps the glissandi that appear during Sister Jeanne's enema scene—a truly grotesque scene for its conjuring up bodily functions and presenting them in a ludicrous yet frightening context—could belong to either type, for Sister Jeanne screams, sobs, and laughs as glissandi run wild and are framed by ascending runs (Ex. 6.9).

Ex. 6.9: *Die Teufel von Loudun,* Act II, Scene 1, RH 7 to RH 8-9.




Picc. 1
Picc. 2
Fl. 1
Fl. 2
A. Sax. 1
W. Bl.
E. Bass
Vln. 1-5
Vln. 6-10
Vln. 11-15
Vln. 16-20
Vla. 1-4
Vla. 5-8
Vc. 1-4
Vc. 5-8
Db. 1-4
Db. 5-8
ff
f
gliss.
pizz.



Finally, some of the glissandi in Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy* reveal a similar function. These include Punch's range-sweeping glissando discussed above in conjunction with the "War Cry," the trombones and horns brutally enriching the repetition of material in Refrain III of Punch's "Lullaby," and Judy and the Witch's tortures for Punch in the "Cries" section of the opera (Act II), which include "a bleeding face" and "an oozing eye," both elaborated with large glissandi as word painting. As the numerous examples attest—and there are many more—Berg, Penderecki, and Birtwistle all recognize the glissando as an essential tool for expressing the grotesque.

Combining Elements of Orchestration

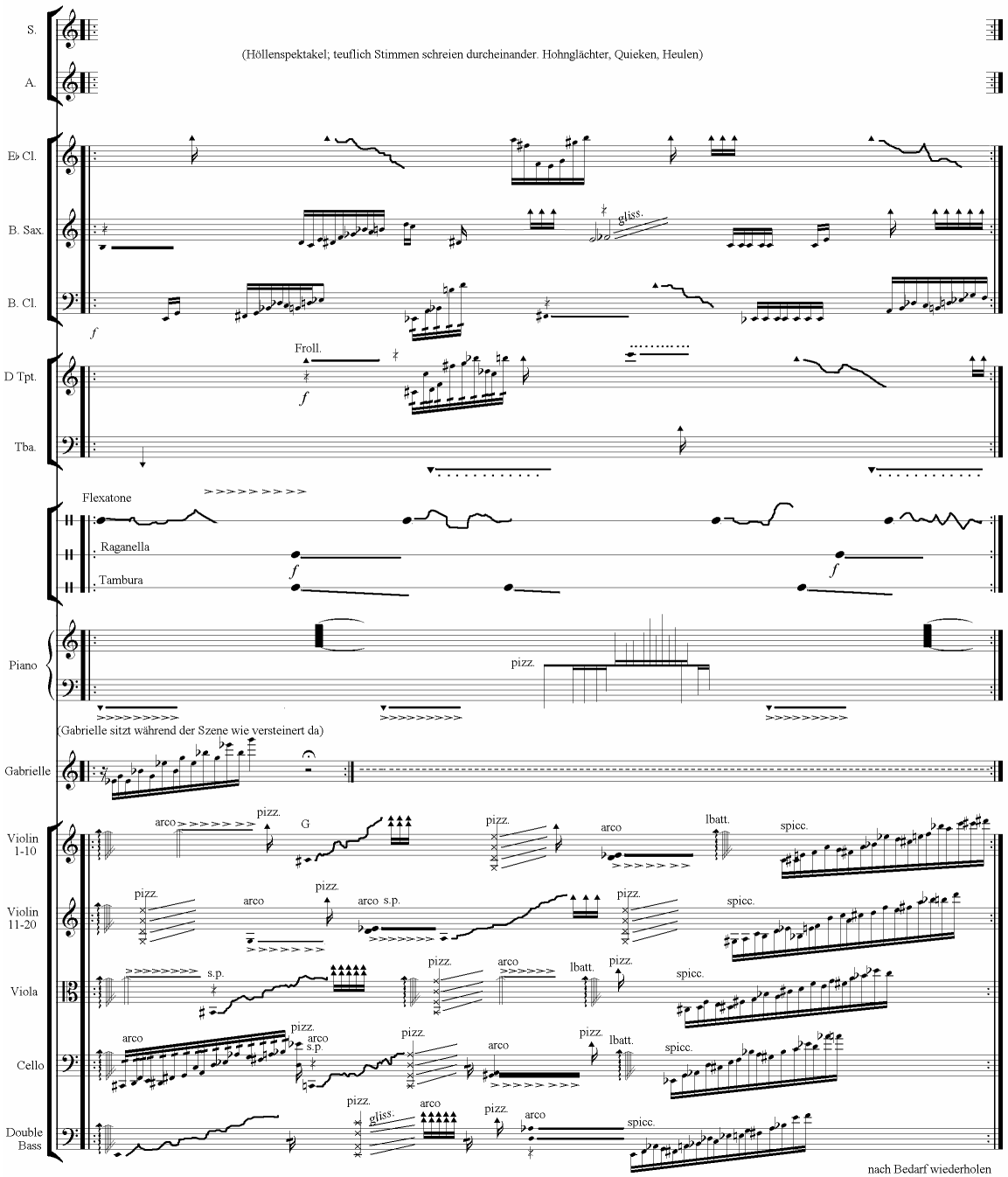
The operas under consideration contain a number of passages that combine all the elements discussed above. Once such moment, from Act II, Scene 9, of *Die Teufel von Loudun*, is an example of orchestral grotesquerie *in extremis*. After Sister Jeanne's

invocation of the devil Beherit, we hear a fart and see the priest Mignon hold his nose.[27] Historically, scatological humor such as flatulence plays an important role in the grotesque: one has merely to look at the works of Rabelais.[28] Penderecki responds to this act first with the ubiquitous glissando in the strings, and then unleashes a battery of harsh sonorities for the strings (playing on the bridge, *col legno*, pizzicato, spiccato, etc.), woodwinds and brass (flutter tonguing, squeals of indeterminate pitches notated with squiggly lines suggesting upward or downward modulation, highest/lowest possible notes, etc.), and percussion (sonic curlicues on the flexatone and downward detunings of timpani). In addition, he directs the onstage audience observing the exorcism to laugh, grunt, squeal, and howl. To describe this moment in words would be futile; indeed, compared with traditional scores the notation itself might be considered grotesque (Ex. 6.10).

[27] "Furzartig" [like a fart] is the performance direction. The sound is produced by buzzing through almost closed lips, and Penderecki also asks for an upward glissando while making this noise. The role of Beherit is performed off-stage by a male singer using a microphone.

[28] Thomson, *The Grotesque*, cites several examples of scatological grotesques: Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker* (London: Penguin, 1967, 45-46), wherein Dr. L-n investigates the reactions to stench, in particular human effluvia (discussed in Thomson, 25-26), and Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (London: Penguin, 1963), which contains a grotesque parody of medical discourses in the form of ever more unlikely methods to achieve anal cleanliness (Book I, Chapter 13; discussed in Thomson, 44-45).

Ex. 6.10: *Die Teufel von Loudun*, Act II, Scene 9, RH 31-1.[29]



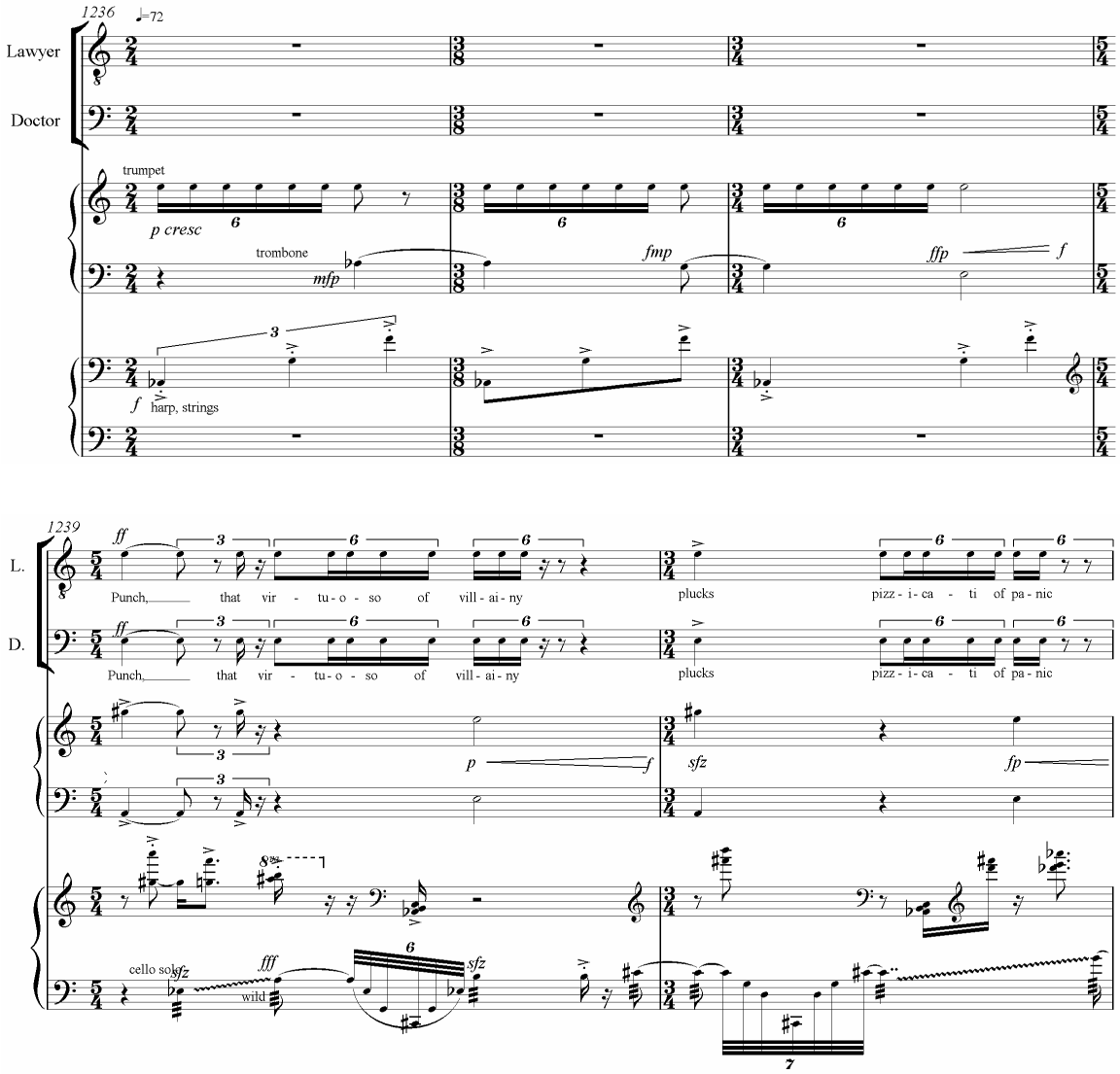
[29] For a full explanation of all the symbols used, see the front of the score.

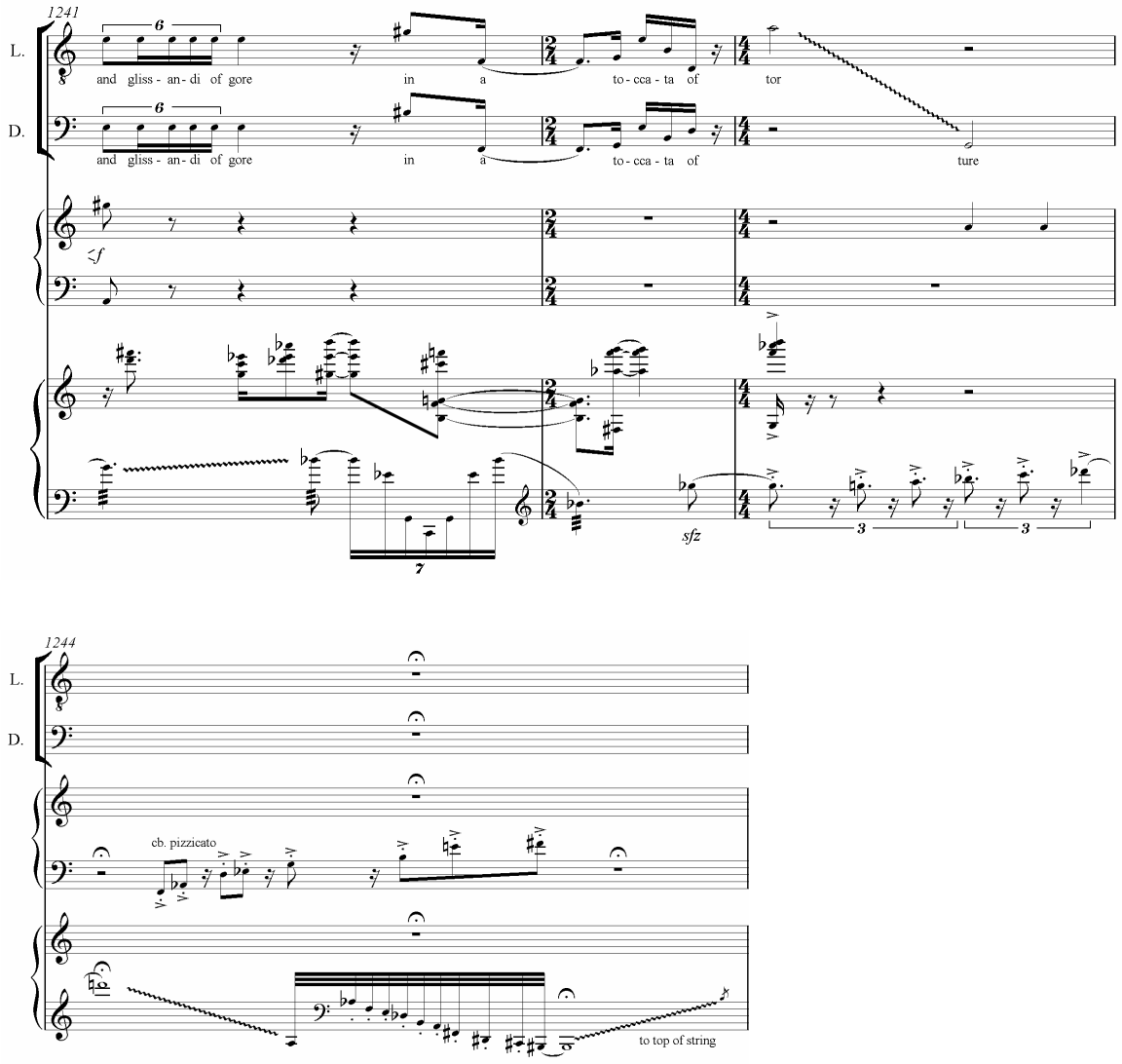
The event ends with one of the exorcists, de Laubardemont, exclaiming, "Gut gemacht!" (Well done!). Although the entire passage lasts only a few seconds, it is the one moment in the opera where total chaos seems to rule, where the grotesque body sonically explodes. Penderecki's note "Repeat if necessary" allows a director to make more of this moment if desired.

In *Punch and Judy*, Birtwistle pulls out all the stops—at least as many as his small ensemble will permit—in Murder Ensemble III, the death of Choregos (Ex. 6.11). Directly preceding this, Punch ushers Choregos into the bass viol case and Judy sings a Passion Aria full of tone painting about her feelings toward Punch and his actions. Murder Ensemble III begins with "Proclamation III," with the Lawyer and Doctor singing, "Punch, that virtuoso of villainy, plucks pizzicati of panic and glissandi of gore in a toccata of torture," while Punch pretends to play on the bass viol (or the case that holds Choregos)[30] as though he is bowing a serenade, which would suggest long, slow motions to simulate the sustained notes typical of a serenade. Instead, the sound heard is far from a serenade. With the instruction "wild" (m. 239), the cello plays an obbligato line that covers its entire range and is full of glissandi, the latter effect eventually picked up by both Lawyer and Doctor in overlapping fashion on the word "torture."

[30] The score says Punch bows the bass viol, but the libretto says he bows the case; regardless, the effect is the same.

Ex. 6.11: *Punch and Judy*, "Murder Ensemble III," mm. 1236-44.





Though Birtwistle's texture is almost stark compared with Penderecki's, the combination of effects, especially the ludicrous employment of musical terms to signify acts of bodily harm, creates a wonderful moment of grotesquerie.

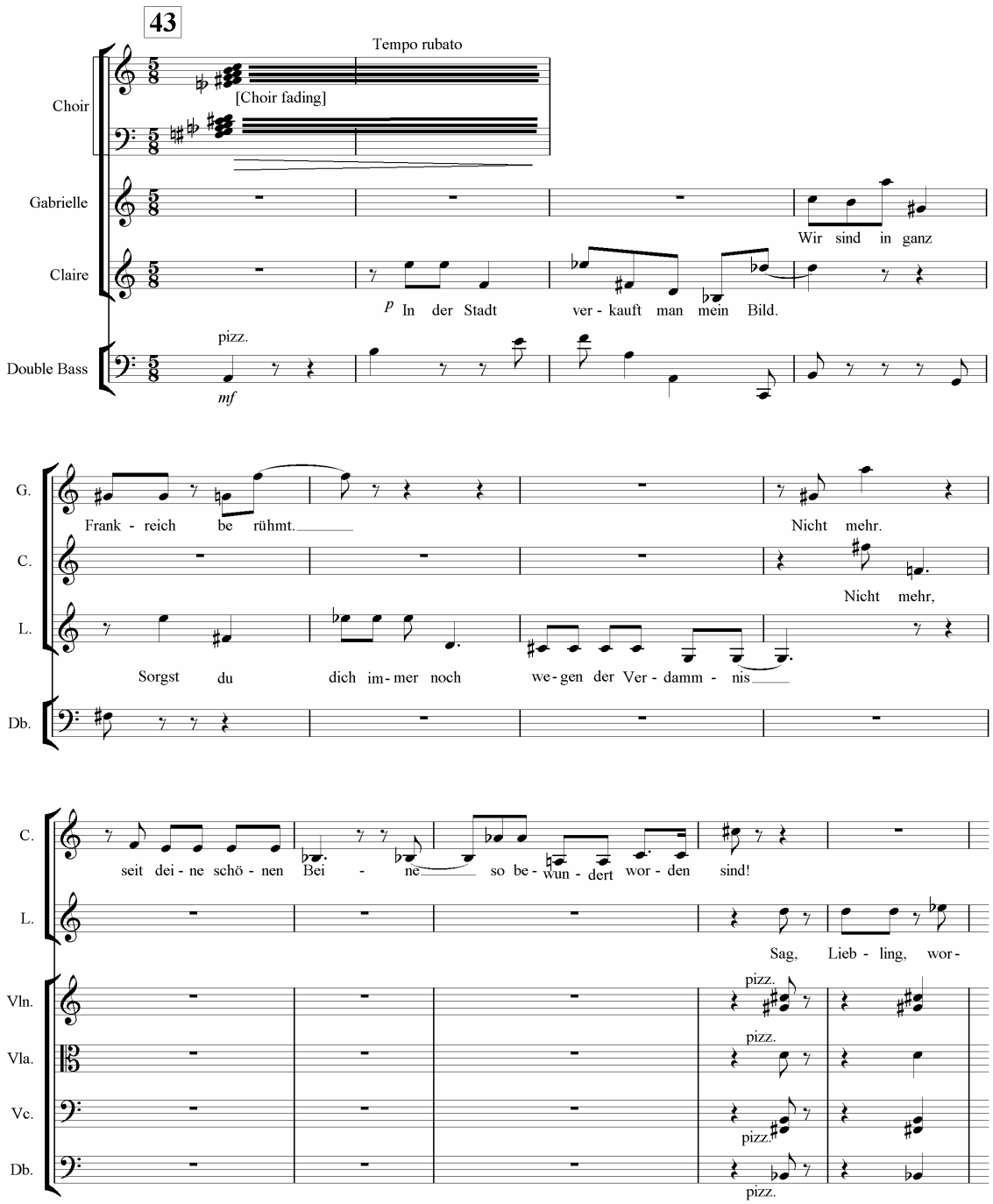
Incongruities involving Orchestration

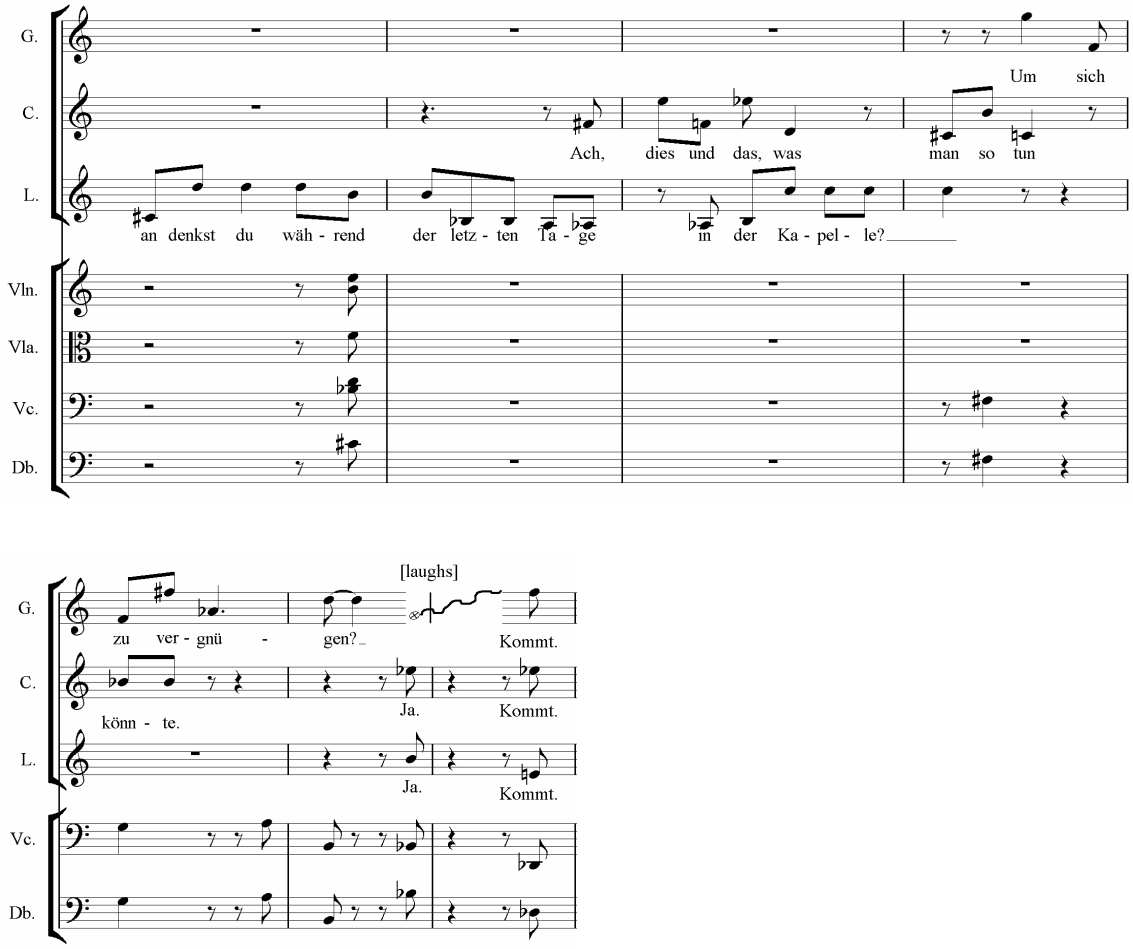
Sometimes the orchestration seemingly fails to fulfill expectations. Two such moments of orchestrational incongruity occur in *Lulu*, both of which were discussed in Chapter 4 from the point of view of tempo (Ex. 4.3 and Ex. 4.4). In these moments, Lulu

speaks her horrifically cavalier lines over simple accompaniments: sustained strings and trombones in Act II, Scene 1, and a slowly rocking motion in Act II, Scene 2. There is no climactic fanfare of the type that usually signals such highly dramatic statements. Perhaps in an effort to relieve this tension, however, Berg does punctuate both moments by immediately increasing the volume and rhythmic activity after she has spoken.

Finally, Penderecki uses orchestration to achieve the opposite shift of sympathies with his young nuns in *Die Teufel von Loudun*. When we first encounter Claire, Louise, and Gabrielle talking to Sister Jeanne in Act II, Scene 7, they seem giddy and childish. Their accompaniment recalls the pointillistic style used for Adam and Mannoury, although Penderecki replaces the heavy sounds of the electric bass and low woodwinds with the lighter harp and strings. This scoring establishes the similarity among the girls and then helps to reveal their true natures following the exorcism in Act II, Scene 10. As Jeanne stands in prayer, the nuns, who have been lustily involved in the exorcism up to this point, slowly walk away, with Gabrielle stating simply, “Zum Beten habe ich nie getaugt” (I was never any good at prayer), over the soft pedals in the strings. We are only minutes removed from the exorcism, and its attendant thick orchestration, but the young nuns have rapidly discarded the mantle of religious fervor/sexual hysteria and begun to discuss their fame and plan future games of pleasure (with implications of lesbianism) (Ex. 6.12). Their accompaniment once again consists of a spare texture and simple string pizzicati.

Ex. 6.12: *Die Teufel von Loudun*, Act II, Scene 10, RH 43 to RH 43+20.





The shift is quicksilver and disturbing, and the audience realizes that for the young nuns the exorcism was simply an amusement, a grotesque way to gain attention, and without care for the horrific outcome that their actions generate. Penderecki directs them to sound gay, and they exit laughing. As a result, the audience has no sympathy for these women and views them as vacuous, grotesque distortions of what true nuns are supposed to be.

CONCLUSION

Though orchestration receives relatively little analytical attention compared with that lavished on pitch and rhythm, it is a particularly forceful element in opera. In fact,

one might argue that, from the vantage point of the audience, it is often the most notable aspect of the music, especially when other elements of the musical language—melody, harmony, and rhythm—are unfamiliar, as they are in many twentieth-century works. Likewise, the orchestra can often serve as the most obvious musical means of expressing the grotesque, as witness the ways in which Berg, Penderecki, and Birtwistle employ similar techniques to achieve similar ends.

CHAPTER 7

SWEENEY TODD: A CASE STUDY OF THE GROTESQUE IN MUSIC

INTRODUCTION

Like that of Penderecki's *Die Teufel von Loudun*, the title of Stephen Sondheim's musical *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street—A Musical Thriller* (1979) refers directly to the demonic. And though the two works share similar themes, including social ills, political maneuvering, despotic acts, vengeance, and sexual depravity, they expose these subjects in different ways, as the two composers draw on different traditions and aim their efforts at different audiences.

Penderecki cultivates heightened realism, presenting the horrors of the situations in his story as visibly and audibly as possible, with the intent that the audience will acknowledge and learn from the evil of which people are capable. The grotesque moments function as punctuation points, partially relieving the tension, and also intensifying the genuinely horrific aspects of the plot.

Sondheim, on the other hand, emphasizes the comic side of the grotesque; specifically, he maintains a grotesque milieu through the use of music, lyrics, and characters, while incorporating aspects of melodrama and the accepted conventions of Broadway musical comedies. This chapter offers a close examination of how Sondheim achieves this. The humor lies primarily in the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic language, which serves as a foil to the terrible subject matter of the lyrics, although occasionally the music itself projects the sense of horror. In addition, the omniscient perspective afforded to the audience by virtue of their being privy to all the action

contrasts with the unwitting participation of the secondary characters and the chorus on stage. This dichotomy itself becomes an important feature in how the grotesque is perceived. Yet despite the pervasiveness of the comic element, Sondheim never loses sight of the mounting horror; indeed, the ending is as bone-chillingly horrific and devoid of humor as Penderecki's work.

THE PUBLICITY CARICATURE AND THE GROTESQUE

Before exploring the plot and music of the show, we should take note of an interesting element associated with the show's publicity; it also allows a detour into the visual arts, which, as noted in Chapter 1, is one of the primary subjects for studies on the grotesque.

The playbill, theatrical poster, and cover of the original cast recording for *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street—A Musical Thriller* all contain a highly detailed caricature of a man and a woman (Fig. 1).

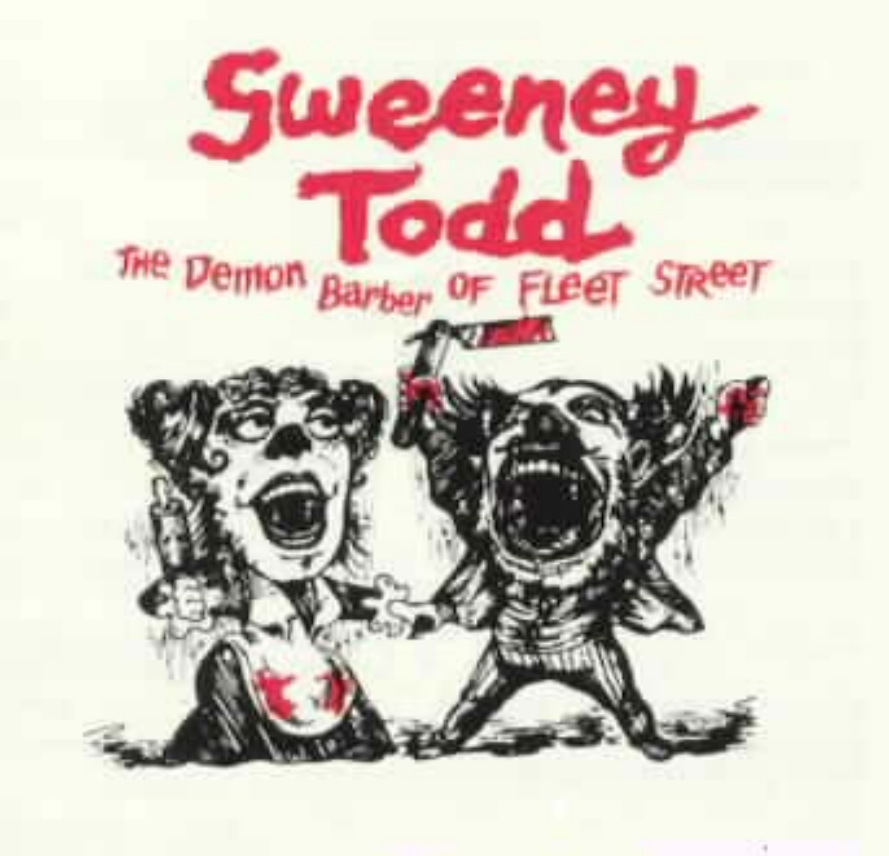


Fig. 1: Caricature for the Playbill of *Sweeney Todd*, ® Fraver[1]

In a caricature, the artist distorts the subject by exaggerating particular features, often beyond the realm of normality, with the intention of provoking insight into the subject's character, usually through humor. The exaggerations can be simplistic or slightly vulgar, but they can also be satirical, cruel, or even frightening.[2] A quick glance at the caricature for *Sweeney Todd* may not immediately reveal its horrifying undercurrents, but enough is

[1] Frank Verlizzo (Fraver), a prolific designer of posters for Broadway shows, created the caricature; see www.fraver.com (accessed 15 July 2005). The original image is in color: the lettering is red, as are the two red marks on the front of her apron, his hands, and the razor. A second version, with blood only on the razor, was also created: Fraver says it was "less bloody for a squeamish audience" (Personal correspondence with Fraver, 9 September 2005). Stephen Sondheim writes that the character of the man is a stock caricature of Todd, while that of Mrs. Lovett is new (personal correspondence, 16 December 2005).

[2] Some studies of the grotesque are primarily histories of caricature, choosing to focus on the comic side of the grotesque and basically ignoring the presence of terrifying elements. These include Justus Moser's *Harlekin oder die Verteidigung des Grotesk-Komischen*, Thomas Wright's *A History of Caricature and Grotesque*, and John Addington Symonds' essay "Caricature, the Fantastic, the Grotesque" (all cited in Chapter 1).

there to catch the viewer's attention. The eye is drawn first to the most notable features, which include the splashes of red (see below), the solid black patches for mouths, the over-sized heads, the rather small bodies, and perhaps the fact that they appear to be holding hands. Had the image consisted of just these features, it could be considered slightly ludicrous, as caricatures with over-sized heads usually aim to reveal specific personality traits through exaggerated facial details; therefore, the most obvious interpretation would be that the large mouths ridicule singers who strain their voices, which would be appropriate considering the image is for a musical. Intrigued by the information gathered so far, the viewer will presumably look deeper. One revelation is that the woman is not holding the man's hand, but rather a coattail flung wide by the man's outstretched arms, and while she is looking at him with her bulging eyes, he is looking straight ahead. This immediately raises questions about their relationship. As the eye seeks in particular to understand the red, the more extreme elements emerge, specifically the man's aggressively held barber's razor that is covered in red—presumably with blood, as razors are wont to cut—and the woman's rolling pin. The red on his hands and on the front of her apron implies further acts of unknown violence, for the blood has been shared and spread. This all begs the question: what have these two done? In the context of these elements, the gaping mouths now suggest screaming, with the clearly depicted teeth suddenly becoming quite menacing. The elements of humor normally associated with caricatures have receded, although they can still be identified.[3]

The viewer seeks to understand this mixture of incongruous elements. The eye is continually drawn back to the heavily inked mouths in the center, each time eliciting a

[3] When this image is rendered only in black and white I would argue that the eye still follows a similar process of discovery.

laugh because of the off-kilter proportions of the mouth-head-body triumvirate and the perversely amusing thought that the mouths seem to suck the viewer in. But as the eye never settles on one element for long, it continues to catch glimpses of the razor and the rolling pin, the blood, and the aggressive stance of the man, provoking disquieting questions about the nature of the show. A rather brilliant piece of marketing, the caricature provokes questions that can only be answered by attending the show. The image is also relevant for the present study as it demonstrates humor and horror conjoined in an unstable and irresolvable relationship.

This caricature relates directly to the tale of Sweeney Todd, brilliantly encapsulating the substance of the show in several specific ways. The story concerns the two people represented in the caricature: the vengeful barber Todd, who begins to kill recklessly, and his accomplice Mrs. Lovett disposes of the bodies by turning them into meat pies to sell in her shop. The larger mouth on the man denotes Todd's enormous lust for vengeance, while Mrs. Lovett's smaller mouth suggests her more circumspect appetite for Todd himself (the bulging eyes do have a certain come-hither gleam, especially since she is staring at Todd, not at the viewer as Todd does). As union with Todd is Mrs. Lovett's primary goal, there are sexual and romantic connotations to be drawn from the black, open mouth. Specifically, the adage "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach" is brought monstrously to mind, especially once the facts of the story are know, because the maxim implies that a woman can win a man through her cooking, and the mouth is the direct passage to the stomach.[4] To interpret the mouths

[4] Bakhtin writes that the gaping mouth is a strong symbol of the grotesque, for it is the gate to the lower stratum of the body. "The gaping mouth is related to the image of swallowing, this most ancient symbol of death and destruction"; Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 325.

even more symbolically: the black is sin, with the holes being the openings to the black pits of not just their stomachs, but their souls, and, by metaphoric extension, to the opening of Hell. This story and its early nineteenth-century setting, not to mention its melodramatic nature, suggest that such a fire-and-brimstone terminology is not far-fetched.

In an apparently vain attempt to hold onto the man, the woman grasps his jacket rather than his hand, an act that parallels Mrs. Lovett's own efforts to attract Todd's attention. In the show, Todd barely acknowledges her presence except as it facilitates his malicious plan to strike back at a world that has struck him down. Her adoring gaze seems to encompass both his face and the razor, with the razor denoting Todd's power, both literally and symbolically, for it can also be read as a phallic image.[5] The razor also emblematizes her eventual economic salvation, for it provides the raw ingredients for her "meat" pies. The rolling pin is an equally important tool for Mrs. Lovett, a metaphor for the business acumen she displays.

Despite their inanimate state, these tools seem comfortably and permanently attached to the characters' hands, as though they had grown into place as natural extensions of their bodies, not unlike the tendrils in the grotesques of ancient Rome. Concerning such a phenomenon, Mikhail Bakhtin writes: "The grotesque body…is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body."[6] Two specific moments in the show demonstrate the figurative growth of Mrs. Lovett and Todd's bodies, and it is to these

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[5] By Act II, in the song "By the Sea," Mrs. Lovett implies that they are having a sexual relationship ("Me rumpled bedding legitimized"), but it is a passing reference and may well refer to past lovers rather than Todd.

[6] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 317.

moments that the caricature directly alludes. First, Mrs. Lovett has kept Todd's razors while he was away, and when she presents them to him near the beginning of Act I, he proceeds to sing a passionate love song to them entitled "My Friends." At the end he cries, "At last my arm is complete again," and the stage directions call for him to raise his arm high, just as the man in the caricature does.[7] The second moment is even more precise. In the middle of Act I, Todd has murdered a potential blackmailer and must remove the body. Mrs. Lovett quickly devises a plan: with the price of meat and the state of her business, she calls the body a blessing because it will fill many pies. Todd will slit the throats of customers—a priest, a grocer, a general, a musician—and she will stuff pies with their flesh, just as her competitor, she accuses, uses neighborhood cats.[8] Todd and Mrs. Lovett then sing about the relationship between a man's career and the concomitant pie flavor in "A Little Priest." Thus while the audience must confront the thought of a barber killing his customers and a pie woman inflicting cannibalism on unsuspecting diners, the witty word play and the catchy tune belie these horrific concepts by giving a patina of humor to the proceedings.

At the end of the song, Mrs. Lovett hands Todd a razor and he hands her a rolling pin, whereupon they raise them while singing the final lines: "We'll serve anyone, meaning anyone, at all." Because of the blending of comedy and the horror of cannibalism and murder, this is probably the most grotesque song in this show—perhaps

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[7] In counterpoint to Todd's love for his razors during this song, Mrs. Lovett sweetly coos "I'm your friend too, Mister T." It is usual to end the song with Mrs. Lovett gazing adoringly at both the razor and Todd, while Todd stares beyond the confines of Mrs. Lovett's shop to the waiting world outside, just as in the caricature.

[8] This occurs in Mrs. Lovett's first song, "The Worst Pies in London," Act I, Song 2: "Mrs. Mooney has a pie shop/Does a business, but I notice something weird—/Lately all her neighbors' cats have disappeared./ Have to hand it to her—/Wot I calls/Enterprise/Popping pussies into pies."

any show.[9] Their tools now in place, Todd and Mrs. Lovett have new bodies in accordance with Bakhtin's concept: they have been extended, they focus on primal human actions (murder and hunger), they are intent on changing the power structure in the world,[10] and they now have weapons with which to wield power. After this moment, the curtain drops on Act I and the audience is left contemplating this powerful image during intermission. True to the tradition of a caricature, which celebrates and exaggerates existing characteristics, this one expresses the essential features of the show while also being grotesque in its own right.

SONDHEIM, *SWEENEY TODD*, AND BROADWAY TRADITIONS

Even though I am considering *Sweeney Todd* as an opera for this study, and it is frequently referred to as Sondheim's opera, he wrote the work for Broadway; as such, the show belongs to the genre of "musical" or "musical comedy," the conventions of which differ from those of opera both musically and theatrically.[11] Nevertheless, both operas and musicals use music and text, and the Broadway musical can therefore present the grotesque through music in ways similar to those in opera. In fact, because the musical language of a Broadway show tends to be simpler than that of an opera, the Broadway

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[9] *Bat Boy—The Musical* (Farley, Flemming, and O'Keefe, 2000), about a half-man/half-bat, rivals "A Little Priest" for this distinction. The climactic love song between Batboy and his girlfriend, "Inside Your Heart," literalizes all those hoary love-song clichés—give me your heart, my love runs through me, etc.—as she offers him her vein so that he can eat.

[10] Other lines from the song that emphasize power inversion include: "It's man devouring man, my dear/And who are we to deny it in here"; "The history of the world, my love/is those below serving those up above/How gratifying for once to know/that those above will serve those down below!"; and "The history of the world, my sweet/Is who gets eaten and who gets to eat."

[11] The history of the musical is inextricably linked with Broadway, although other traditions do exist (English musical hall, vaudeville, etc.). For the purposes of this discussion, the adjective "Broadway" will be used in the interest of clarity and also to avoid confusion when the word musical is used when *not* referring to a Broadway-type show.

musical may, in the end, be more capable of underscoring the grotesque in an immediately recognizable manner.

Considering that we are discussing *Sweeney Todd* alongside works understood to be operas, we should distinguish between the musical elements of the two genres. Of particular note is the handling of the voice, which is generally simpler in the musical than it is in opera. Andrew Lamb, who wrote the article on the musical in *Opera Grove*, refers to the vocal style as being more "direct" or "natural" than the style found in operas and even in operettas, which are the direct precursors of the Broadway musical.[12] Additionally, the smaller orchestras used in operettas and musicals mean the voices can be smaller, too, as they do not have to penetrate dense orchestral textures. To further compare the Broadway style directly with opera, the former generally relies more on the chest voice, and often stays within a narrow melodic range that is roughly equivalent to the normal speaking voice. Thus these melodies typically avoid register breaks (although they can appear for effect) and the more florid, melismatic, and coloratura singing found in opera.[13] The melodic phrases are also generally shorter, requiring less breath control. Coincidentally, the rhythms are generally declamatory, often purely syllabic. Taken together, these features highlight the text and make it far more comprehensible to the audience than most operas do for their librettos. Moreover, the periodicity of the musical's phrase structure and the more consistent repetition of melodic ideas within a

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[12] Andrew Lamb, "Musical," *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, III, 525.

[13] The latter does appear in certain shows where it is appropriate, such as Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera*, which contains coloratura singing and high notes for the lead and her rival. The canonical musicals by Richard Rodgers, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, Jerry Herman, and Jule Styne rarely require voices capable of singing more than a tenth, occasionally a twelfth. They can, however, require stamina and strength, hence the terms "belter" and "belting" to describe the type of singer whose voice can carry to the back of the house, or the act of doing the same. The terms "to belt" and "belter" can be found in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, but otherwise no history of the term seems available; its meaning is part of theatrical lexicon and learned through exposure.

song permit the audience to absorb the melodies easily, quickly recognize them when they return (known as reprises), and follow subsequent alterations without difficulty. Also more readily understood is the generally diatonic harmony found in Broadway musicals: in most cases clear harmonic progressions support melodies of repeated notes, conjunct motion, and small skips, as opposed to the complex, unfamiliar (in most cases) harmonic language of most twentieth-century opera—or even that of the nineteenth century, for that matter.[14] Finally, the musical's orchestration tends to be light in order not to overwhelm the singers (even in this modern age of amplification). In all, comprehensible lyrics sung to memorable tunes are the *ne plus ultra* of Broadway. When skillfully employed, these simpler conventions can work successfully to underscore and express the grotesque.

Some comments should be added concerning Sondheim's work, specifically about how he is viewed in relation to operatic and Broadway traditions. George Martin examines the differences in melody and voice type in his article "On the Verge of Opera: Stephen Sondheim." He writes: "Sondheim writes tunes of limited range because, for the most part, he works with limited voices, and he keeps his phrases short because Broadway voices cannot sustain a long line."[15] Other critics are less flattering about Sondheim's style. In a review of *A Little Night Music* presented by the New York City Opera in 1980, Peter G. Davies of *New York* magazine wrote: "The main problem is the drab, crabbed, and short-winded melodic invention that throws such a mean spirit, brittle

[14] Thus even Leonard Bernstein reserves his most complicated music in *West Side Story* (1957) for the instrumental dances, not the songs.

[15] George Martin, "On the Verge of Opera," 83.

veneer, and stifling gray shroud over every Sondheim show I've seen."[16] Now it must be said that Sondheim's music is harmonically richer than standard Broadway fare, with modulations to remote keys. Yet his melodic style nevertheless falls firmly within the sphere of Broadway tradition, although a recurring motive in Sondheim criticism is that audiences do not leave the theater humming one of the tunes.[17]

If *Sweeney Todd* does not display the complexity of a Berg or Penderecki opera, neither does it fully conform to the standard Broadway show, particularly because of its violent and disturbing subject matter and its consistent exploration of the grotesque. Most Broadway musicals tend to be comedies with a primary and secondary romance, although some do have darker plots, complex heroes with negative traits, and sinister characters.[18] The latter, however, usually have one or two humorous characters or subplots for balance. For example, the sung-through Broadway musical version of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, by composer Claude-Michel Schönberg and lyricist Alain Boublil (1984), prominently features the husband-and-wife innkeepers M. and Mme. Thénardier as comic relief. Their horrific business practices—reasonable rates, but extra charges for such amenities as mice and lice—are comically presented in the strophic song "Master of the House" in Act I. With its rollicking 6/8 rhythm and oft-repeated phrases, the buoyant music underscore the characters' "come-what-may" approach to life, while

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[16] Quoted in Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 347.

[17] Joanne Gordon refutes this criticism, arguing that Sondheim's songs belong so completely within the context of their shows that they are hard to extract. Also, Sondheim's music is more complex harmonically, rhythmically, and formally than the typical Broadway song, and since he rarely reprises a song, a listener usually only has single chance to grasp it; see *Art Isn't Easy*, 6-7.

[18] *Carousel* (1945) by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II is one such show. The leading man, Billy, is a womanizing thug who nevertheless attracts the innocent Julie. Their marriage is marred by physical abuse, a very unusual plot point for musicals. He does achieve a sort of redemption, even though for the second half of the musical he is only a ghost observing his wife and daughter.

the lyrics reveal their casual cruelty. Schönberg could have emphasized the disgusting mendacity of the ideas mentioned above musically within the confines of strophic construction by varying orchestration (the most obvious tool), but instead the grotesquerie resides in how the Thénardiers' horrific ideas roll out gleefully to the catchy melody. Another show with grotesque moments is Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928), a social satire skewering bourgeois morality. Weill's songs are strophic and do not overtly highlight the more unsettling lines of Brecht's lyrics. But as with the example from *Les Misérables*, the strophic setting can balance the lyrical content and create a grotesque moment. For example, in "Die Zuhälterballade" (The Procurer's Ballad) in Act II, Macheath and Jenny sing a wistful reminiscence about Jenny's days as a prostitute under Macheath as her procurer. Overall, the song is a satire of the typical love duet, and the lack of musical change provides the necessary component of humor to balance Jenny's sudden admission that Macheath would beat her on occasion. Because of the strophic setting, the comment comes off as being no different than the one about the furniture in the apartment. Satire is the primary goal, but the grotesque helps to strengthen it, and, as mentioned in Chapter 1, satire is a more intellectual genre than the more visceral grotesque, so when this moment comes it is a bit like a hidden punch within a larger, more amiable joke. *Sweeney Todd*, on the other hand, exists almost entirely in the realm of the grotesque, in terms of both the plot and characters, on the one hand, and the music, on the other. The music warrants a close examination because it plays a large role in establishing this environment, particularly because it is usually the music that disarms the horrific content of the story and creates the ambiguity necessary for the grotesque.

LOCATING THE GROTESQUE IN *SWEENEY TODD*

A brief summary of the plot will serve to establish the general mood of the story and reveal how the grotesque moments fit into it as a whole. Sweeney Todd is a barber who is sent to prison by the corrupt Judge Turpin because the latter desires Sweeney's wife, Lucy. Rescued by the young sailor Anthony, Todd returns to London intent on killing Turpin, and reestablishes as his base a tonsorial parlor above Mrs. Lovett's unsuccessful pie shop, much to her pleasure. When a blackmailer threatens Todd, Todd kills him, but when his chance with Turpin comes, Anthony interrupts: he has met and wants to marry Johanna, Todd's daughter and Turpin's ward and intended bride. Having lost his chance to murder Turpin, Todd has an epiphany and decides that everyone deserves to die. Meanwhile, the ever-practical Mrs. Lovett realizes that instead of disposing of the blackmailer's body, she can use it to fill her pies, a use to which she could put all of Todd's victims. Her shop flourishes because of the ready supply of meat, but a mysterious Beggar Woman roams the streets prophesying doom. The plot twists and turns, with events building to an appropriately gory climax: Todd kills Beadle Banford, dispatches the Beggar Woman (who turns out to be Lucy), attempts to strike down Johanna (who is disguised as a man), and finally slits Turpins's throat. Upon realizing that the Beggar Woman is Lucy, Todd, in a moment of inspired revenge, suddenly throws Mrs. Lovett into the oven for not having revealed to him that Lucy was alive. As Todd mourns over Lucy's body, Toby, the blackmailer's naïve apprentice whom Mrs. Lovett had put to work, slits Todd's throat, for Toby has discovered the secrets of the pie shop. Anthony and Johanna arrive with several bobbies to find Toby grinding meat among the carnage.

The story of a murderous barber was a popular one, appearing in French and English pennydreadfuls—popular, cheap, and sensationalistic serials—in the early nineteenth century. In 1846, Thomas Peckett Prest wrote a serial called *A String of Pearls*, which was quickly dramatized by George Dibdin Pitt (1847). The main characters were called Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett, and their symbiotic relationship of murder and pie-making was established.[19] Throughout the nineteenth century a number of versions of the story thrived in some of the smaller and less reputable London theaters. The most recent version is by Christopher Bond, written in 1974.[20]

Sweeney Todd is a melodrama, a dramatic-literary type characterized by broad strokes of diabolical plots, thrilling action, tawdry locales, and disreputable characters; however, the contrivances of the plot, the desire to shock, the deliberate use of black humor, and the usually extravagant performance style, which requires excessive vocal and physical gestures, can often induce laughter either purposely or inadvertently. Thus the grotesque tends to play a major role in melodrama. Victor Hugo, who, as was discussed in Chapter 1, promoted the grotesque as a genre, nonetheless referred to the melodrama in his preface to *Ruy Blas* (1838), as being "vulgar and inferior" to comedy

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[19] Whether the tale of Sweeney Todd is true or not is hard to verify. In the preface to his play, Christopher Bond states that Todd is a fictitious character and that his play is based on George Dibdin Pitt's version of *A String of Pearls*. Peter Haining, in his book *Sweeney Todd: The Real Story of the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1997), proposes that there was a Sweeney Todd, who went to trial in 1801 for murder, along with an accomplice similar to Mrs. Lovett. Haining's book is written in a journalistic style and is highly problematic for research purposes because despite providing quotes from contemporary newspapers and referring to court records, it provides no bibliography, no dates or issue numbers for the newspapers, or other acceptable documentation. Attempts to find more corroboration led to a column by the journalist Mark Gribben on the Court TV website's gallery of serial killers (www.crimelibrary.com/serial_killers/weird/todd/index_1.html [Accessed 12 January 2000]). Unfortunately, Gribben simply summarizes Haining's work as fact and provides a bibliography that in no way substantiates it. The story of a murderous barber should be considered an urban legend, a cultural bogey man, perhaps created through the conflation of a few incidents involving disreputable barbers and subsequently fictionalized.

[20] Christopher Bond, *Sweeney Todd* (London and New York: Samuel French, 1974).

and tragedy, as it attracts only "[t]he general crowd, interested in an action-filled plot and sensational effects."[21] For Hugo, the melodrama lacks the artful balancing of comic and horrific elements and instead relies on shock and the simplest of effects; it is therefore a "low" version of the grotesque. François Ponsard draws a clearer distinction between tragedy and melodrama:

> I would call any play either a drama or a tragedy if it were primarily concerned with the representation of character, the development of passions, or the re-creation of the spirit and manners of a period, and it subordinated the plot to this dominant idea. Any play, on the contrary, which seeks only to astonish and move the spectator by a rapid succession of adventures and unexpected turns would be a melodrama. Each of these works has its own particular laws which must be observed.[22]

To be sure, Bond pays homage to just these conventions in his own *Sweeney Todd*, but he enriches the story by providing an additional motive, one that helps humanize Todd: revenge. Sondheim saw Bond's play in London, and, convinced that it could become a musical, set about securing the rights, approached Hugh Wheeler to develop a book, and convinced Harold Prince to direct it.[23] In the end, they created a show true to its melodramatic roots, with rapid action, broad strokes of comedy and horror, and larger-than-life—yet two-dimensional—characters.[24] By bending the rules of melodrama, however, Sondheim and Wheeler fashioned more complex characters than

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[21] Victor Hugo, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Club français du livre, 1967-70), vol. 5, 669-70; quoted in Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 213.

[22] François Ponsard, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3 (Paris: M. Lévy, 1865-76), 372-73; quoted in Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre*, 214.

[23] For a detailed history of the show, see Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 243-262.

[24] Sondheim offers his personal opinions on melodrama, the line between laughing and being scared, in his article "Larger Than Life: Reflections on Melodrama and *Sweeney Todd*," in *New York Literary Forum. VII: Melodrama*, ed. by Daniel Gerould (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1980), 3-14.

the simple two-dimensional caricatures typical of the melodramas criticized by Hugo; no character is purely good or evil, heroic or despotic (except, perhaps, Judge Turpin).[25]

The use of the grotesque in *Sweeney Todd* is clearly delineated, and with each climax, except for that in the final scene, humor is employed to relieve the tension. The more playful grotesque elements concern the most extreme horrors in the show, namely cannibalism and murder, and appear in connection with the main plot and characters, particularly Mrs. Lovett and, to a lesser degree, Todd. Johanna and Anthony, in their purity—and insipidity—provide a less complex form of humor, one devoid of the grotesque, unless one is horrified by their overwrought declarations of affection. The Beggar Woman, with her overt sexual propositions, embodies another area of the grotesque, specifically carnality, and appears at first to be more menacing than either Todd or Mrs. Lovett. Finally, the innocent Toby momentarily presents the uncannily grotesque when he suddenly begins to sing one of Todd's melodies. This is a brilliant touch that only music can make tangible and demonstrates the pervasiveness of the grotesque in this world. For each character and situation, Sondheim's music contributes to our understanding and reception of these grotesque moments.

Finally, before considering both the music and how the grotesque functions with respect to music and plot, we should mention another element that helps to establish the framework within which to view the show: the work's subtitle, *The Demon Barber of Fleet Street—A Musical Thriller*, which provides additional clues as to what can be expected. Most new musicals provide a reference to their genre, most commonly "A

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[25] For example, Johanna, who is otherwise presented as the epitome of innocence and empty-headed beauty, is the one who shoots Fogg in the asylum when Anthony is unable to do so, thus insuring their escape. For a discussion of these inversions of expected character traits, see Judith Schlesinger, "Psychology, Evil, and *Sweeney Todd* or, 'Don't I know you, Mister?'" in *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook*, ed. by Joanne Gordon (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 125-141, esp. 130.

New Musical" or "A Musical Comedy," and Broadway musicals generally contain some comedy, if that is not indeed their primary provenance. Consequently, the variant "A Musical Thriller" immediately advertises the work's main materials. "Thriller" implies the presence of sensational elements, with these delivered in the form of horrifying acts related to the body, unexpected twists of the plot, and surprising actions of the characters. Further, the word helps to intensify the image conjured up by the evocative "Demon Barber." Now while Sondheim is known for bending the conventions of musicals, he also knows the value of tradition.[26] Thus what Sondheim does in *Sweeney Todd* is walk a tightrope—and precariously at that—between the comedy and romance that we customarily expect in a Broadway musical and the thrills advertised in the subtitle and caricature.

MUSIC AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE GROTESQUE

Sondheim uses music either to disarm the horrific content of the lyrics or to underscore their horror. In general, he employs only one element—rhythm (and tempo), harmony, or melody (on the issue of orchestration, see below)—to characterize the

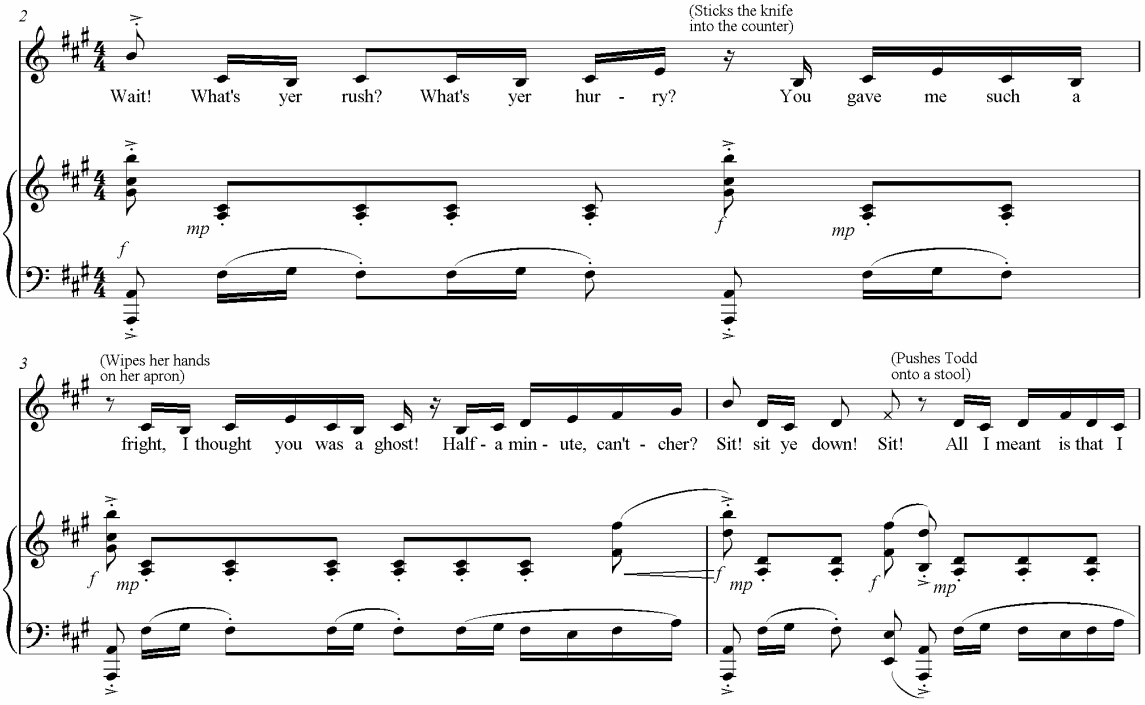
[26] Sondheim was trained in the Broadway tradition by one of the greats: Oscar Hammerstein II, who was Sondheim's neighbor when the latter was a young man. Sondheim provides his own account of his unique relationship with Hammerstein in his article "Theatre Lyrics," in *Playwrights, Lyricists, Composers on Theater*, ed. by Otis L. Guernsey (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1971), 62-63, and it is discussed or mentioned in virtually every book or article on Sondheim. The audience for those shows in which Sondheim wrote both music and lyrics is generally considered to be limited because of the original nature of his works. They are not in the same vein as the popular works of Rodgers and Hammerstein (e.g., *Oklahoma!* or *Sound of Music*) or the populist style of Andrew Lloyd Weber's mega-musicals (e.g., *Cats* or *Phantom of the Opera*). One common indicator of success—economics—bears this out, as few of Sondheim's shows have lasted more than two years in a Broadway theater; on the other hand, most have become staples of repertory companies, university theater departments, and opera companies, reaching smaller, niche markets. The shows for which he contributed only lyrics, particularly *West Side Story* and *Gypsy*, ran longer in their initial runs on Broadway, have received many more subsequent stagings, including Broadway revivals, and were also made into movies. Conversely, of Sondheim's shows as composer and lyricist, only *A Little Night Music* (1979) and A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum (19??) have been made into movies. In winter 2003, Martin Richards, the producer of the film musical *Chicago* announced that he was working with Sondheim to create a film musical of *Sweeney Todd*.

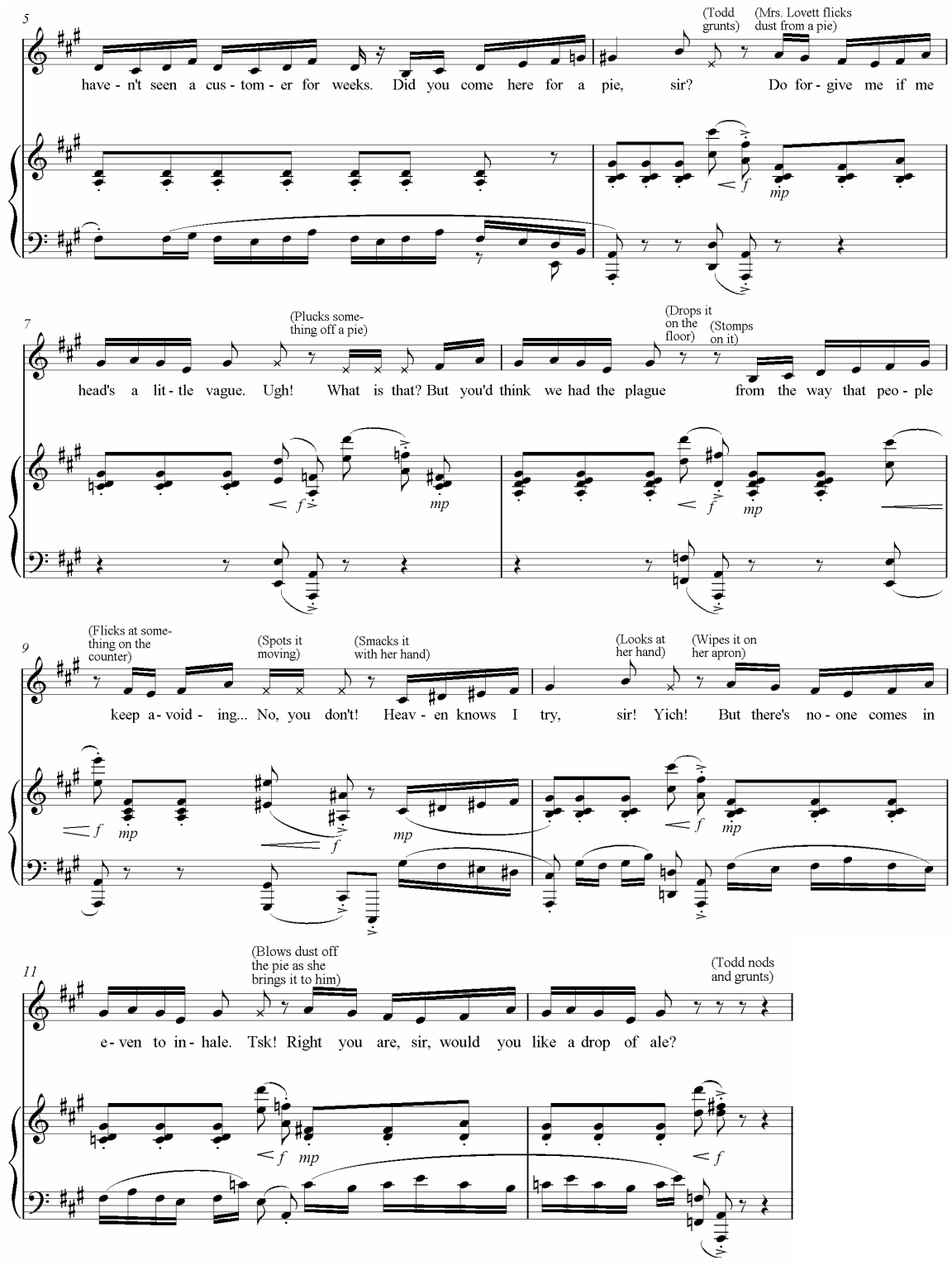
grotesque at any given moment, probably because the simpler musical language of a Broadway show permits a single element to convey the grotesque over a sustained period of time. Thus I will focus on the individual musical elements themselves and will conclude by examining an instance in which the sense of the grotesque results from all the elements working together.

Rhythm and Tempo

When Todd first walks into the pie shop in Act I, No. 2, Mrs. Lovett picks up a knife and cries "A customer!": so begins the rhythmic chaos of "The Worst Pies in London" (Ex. 7.1).

Ex. 7.1: Act 1, No. 2, "The Worst Pies in London," mm. 2-12.





The tempo marking *Allegro agitato* (quarter note=112) sets the music off on a great headlong rush as Mrs. Lovett begins with a command and two questions: "Wait! What's your rush? What's your hurry?" She sings "wait" on the first beat, "rush" on the second,

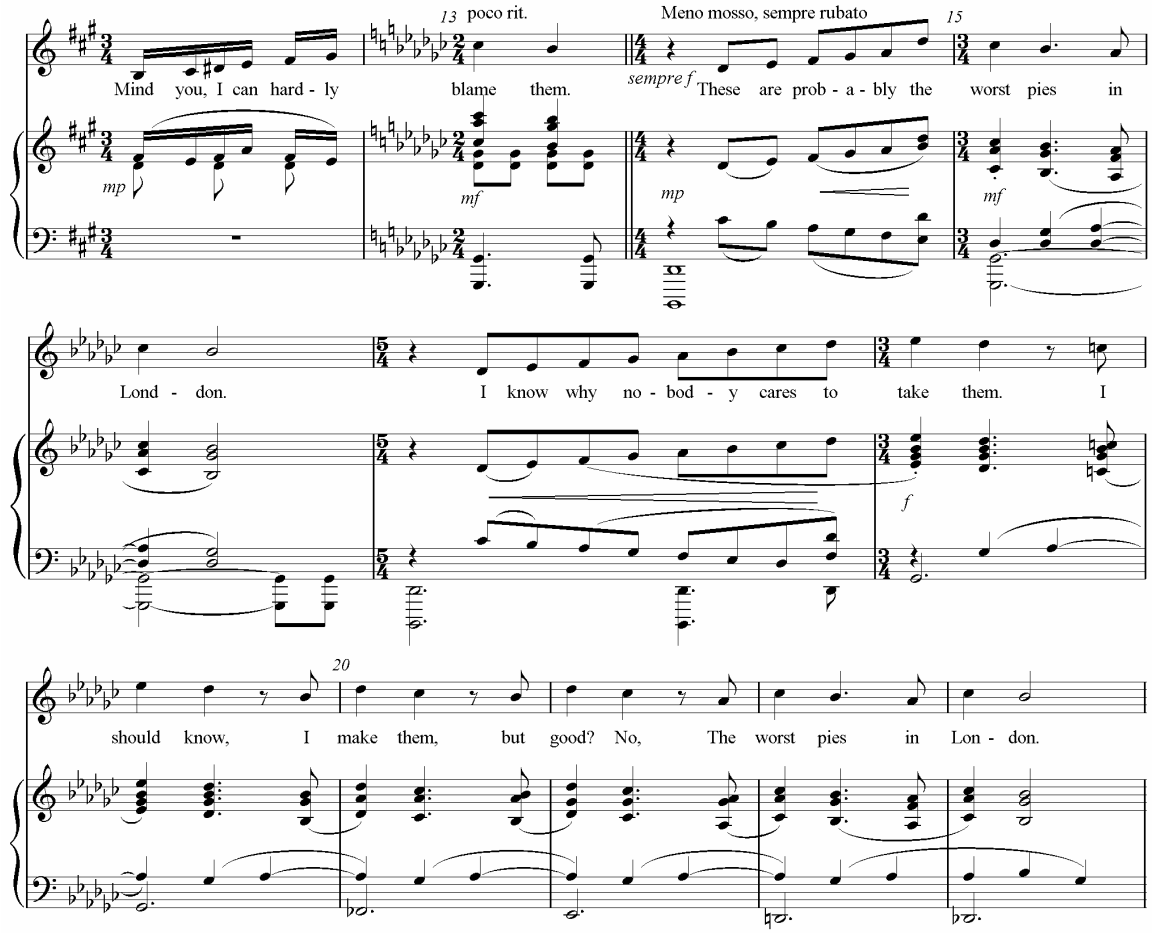
"hurry" on the third, and then jams the knife into the counter on the second half of the third beat. The vocal line consists mainly of alternating eighth and sixteenth notes moving rapidly up and down in a small range. Owing to the irregularly stressed beats, this one measure of music portrays Mrs. Lovett as unstable. Her next statement, "You gave me such a fright, I thought you was a ghost!", confirms this impression, as "fright," expected on the downbeat of measure 3, misses the point of arrival by a half beat, the eighth-note rest occupied by her wiping her hands on her apron. During the course of the next nine measures the stage directions have her push a stool, flick and blow dust, pluck something that she then drops and stomps, and flick then smack something that may be a bug (she spots it moving) off either pies or the counter. Sondheim punctuates each of these actions with dissonant, wide-spaced chords, interrupting both Mrs. Lovett's rhythmic flow and the bustling rhythms of the accompaniment. The opening few chords, A-G#-C#-B spread over five octaves (m. 2: beat 1, second half of beat 3; m. 3: beat 1), establish the effect. Subsequent harmonies are not always as dissonant, but provide the necessary rhythmic impetus because they interrupt the flow of the middle-range accompaniment patterns. Further contributing to the rhythmic instability are the frequent pairs of rhymed (and thus quite audible) words that jerkily end her thoughts on the second beat of each measure: measures 7-8: vague/plague; measures 11-12: inhale/ale.

"The Worst Pies in London" presents Mrs. Lovett to the audience as she presents herself to Todd. She uses the song to explain her situation, the rhythms portraying her somewhat addled, dervish-like personality, as she almost joyously describes her pie shop's disgusting conditions. Ambivalent about her surroundings, she celebrates her situation to the audience's amusement and horror, with the music—the missed

downbeats, the accents on weak beats—participating fully in establishing the humor of this fundamentally grotesque scenario.

After this opening section, Mrs. Lovett launches into the crux of the song in the central, more lyrical section in which she sings "These are probably the worst pies in London" (Ex. 7.2). Here she abandons the frenetic rhythms of the opening section, but sustains a sense of rhythmic instability by changing meters five times in seven measures (mm. 12-18), finally ending up in 3/4 for six measures.

Ex. 7.2: "The Worst Pies in London," mm. 12-23.

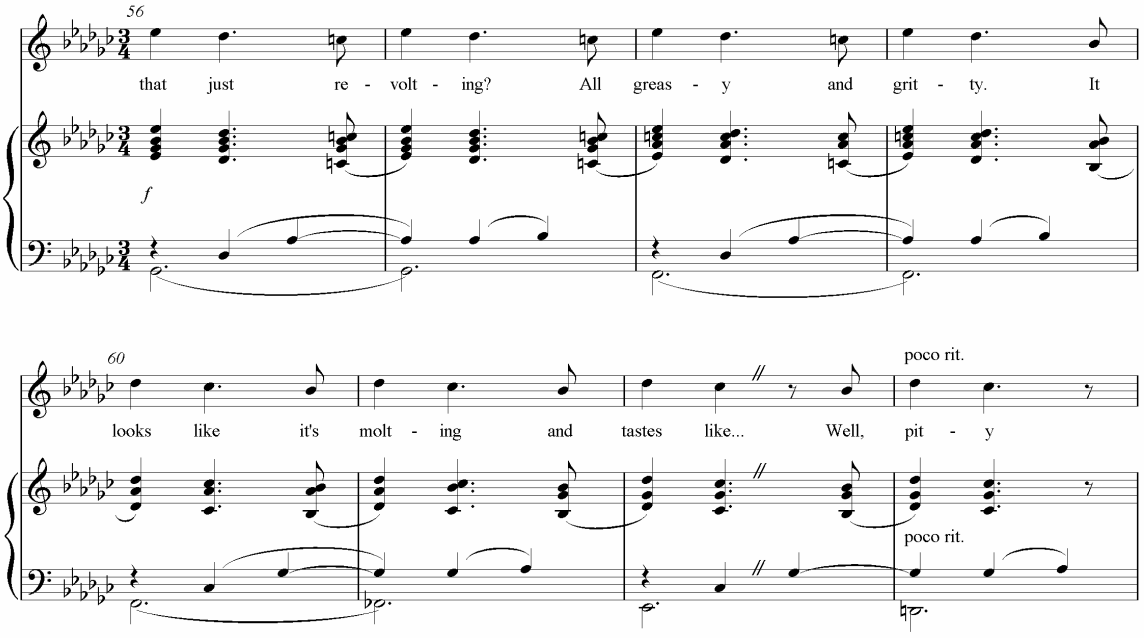


Yet even after reaching a more stable meter, the main words or syllables continue to arrive on the weak second beat. The rhyme scheme helps to emphasize this: "take them"

(m. 18), “should know” (m. 19), “make them” (m. 20), and “good? no” (m. 21). Admittedly these are two-word rhymes, with the first of each placed on the downbeat, but it is the second word that completes each thought and is therefore the more important of the two.

The next section parallels the opening section of the song, complete with pounding dough, and here she alludes to her competitor’s practice of using cat meat in her pies. First she says such a practice “wouldn’t do in my shop,” but then, more tellingly, “I’m tellin’ you them pussy cats is quick,” suggesting that she has tried to emulate the practice (mm. 49-50). After this revelation, Mrs. Lovett once again returns to the lyric 3/4, singing “Is that just revolting/All greasy and gritty./It looks like it’s molting/and tastes like…well, pity” (Ex. 7.3).

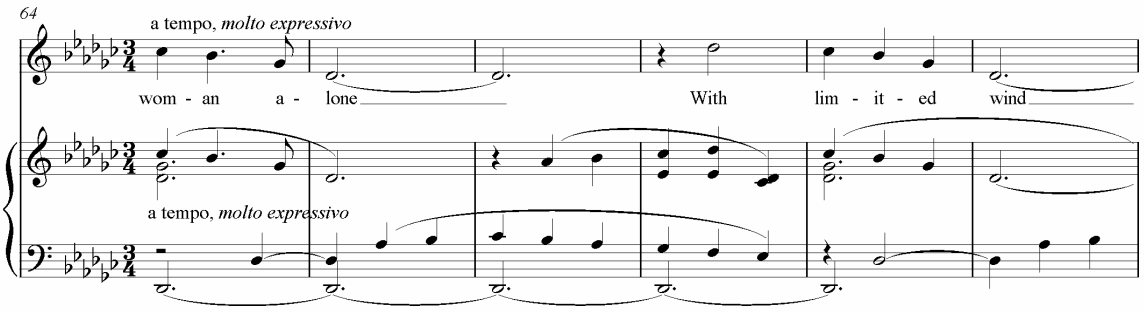
Ex. 7.3: “The Worst Pies in London,” mm. 56-63.



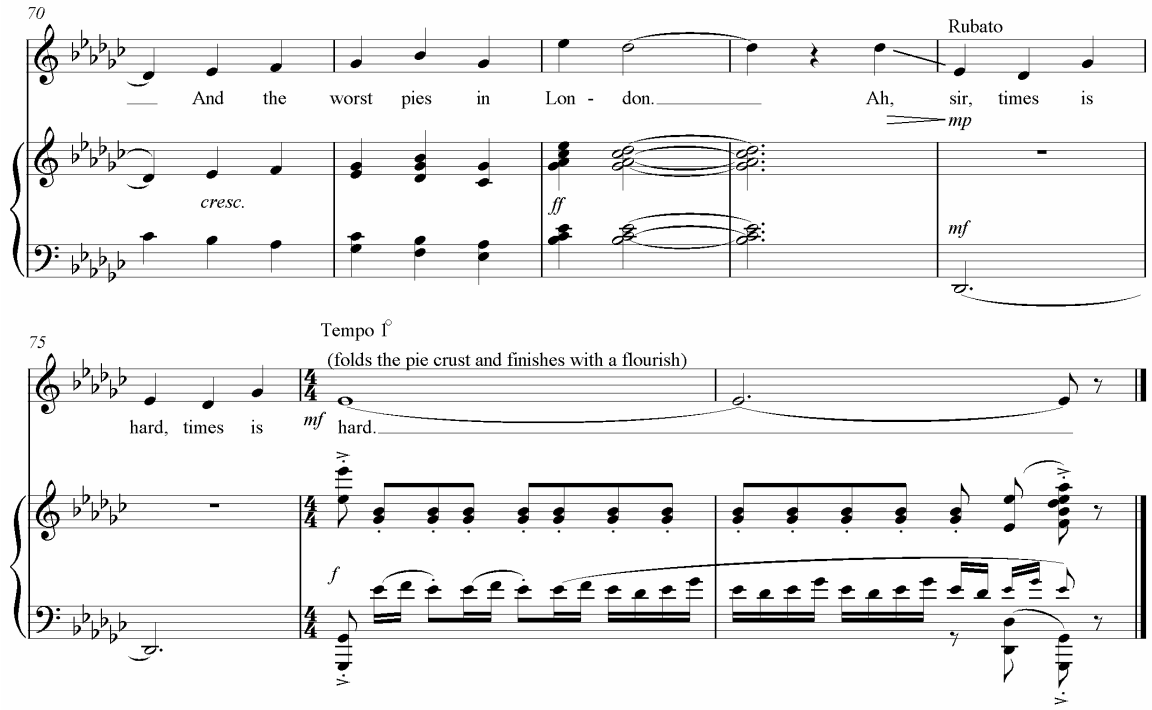
Needless to say, the anticipated word is "shitty," owing to the expectation of a rhyme with "gritty" and the general filth of the place. But the pause and rest in measure 62 give Mrs. Lovett a chance to think, just enough time to suggest that she is grappling with the issue of what word should come next. Her solution to her dilemma is both circumspect and tasteful: "well, pity," which reveals a quick and calculating mind. We are learning that she is not nearly as addled as she first appeared, a notion that will be confirmed toward the end of the song. And with this linguistic sleight of hand, made all the more humorous thanks to the lyrical melody, Sondheim adds another level of grotesque humor; for while Mrs. Lovett has no problem dwelling on cat-stuffed pies or maintaining a dirty shop, she hesitates to use the most logical, but potentially offensive, word.[27]

Mrs. Lovett's final lines are "A woman alone/With limited wind/And the worst pies in London./Ah, sir, times is hard, times is hard" (Ex. 7.4).

Ex. 7.4: "The Worst Pies in London," mm. 64-77.



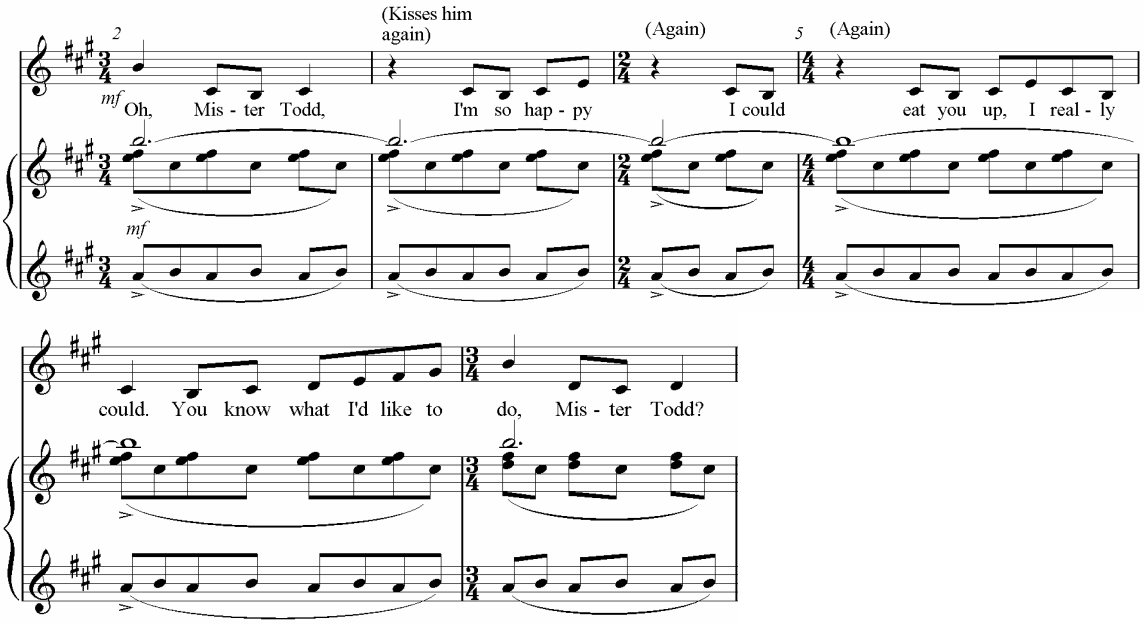
[27] Sondheim is not being prudish, as Todd first uses the word "shit" in a very pronounced way when he describes his opinions of London to Anthony in the song "No Place Like London" (Act I, No. 1, m. 260).



The rhythm again reveals something of her character, for "-lone," "wind," "hard," and most importantly "sir" fall strongly on the downbeats and the dotted rhythms disappear, replaced by solid quarter-note motion, making the music much more rhythmically stable. This moment marks the climax of her entreaty to Todd; she has presented herself as daft and unbalanced, but now she wants to appear in need of protection. She is trying to attract Todd—or any male customer who may come into the shop, for that matter, because the purpose and organization of the song's sentiments do begin to sound rehearsed—to take care of her. Ironically, at the moment when she is trying to appear helpless she appears remarkably capable. The falling gesture in the melody for "Ah, sir" resembles a sigh, but when she sings the final word, "hard," the orchestra undercuts her intended sentiment by returning to the galloping rhythms of the opening, thus revealing the energy and activity of her conniving mind.

This grotesque combination of rhythm and mental imbalance appears again in Act II, No. 3, when the opening music of "The Worst Pies in London" returns as the introduction to "By the Sea." Now, Mrs. Lovett's shop is flourishing, and she is pursuing Todd in earnest. She approaches him with the idea of leaving London and moving to the coast. She broaches the idea with the music from the beginning of "Worst Pies," but instead of the pie-talk and counter-pounding, she smothers Todd with kisses. And in view of the reasons for her prosperity—people-stuffed pies—the lyrics could not be more grotesque: "Ooh, Mister Todd [kiss]/I'm so happy [kiss]/I could [kiss]/Eat you up, I really could" (Ex. 7.5).

Ex. 7.5: "By the Sea," mm. 2-7.

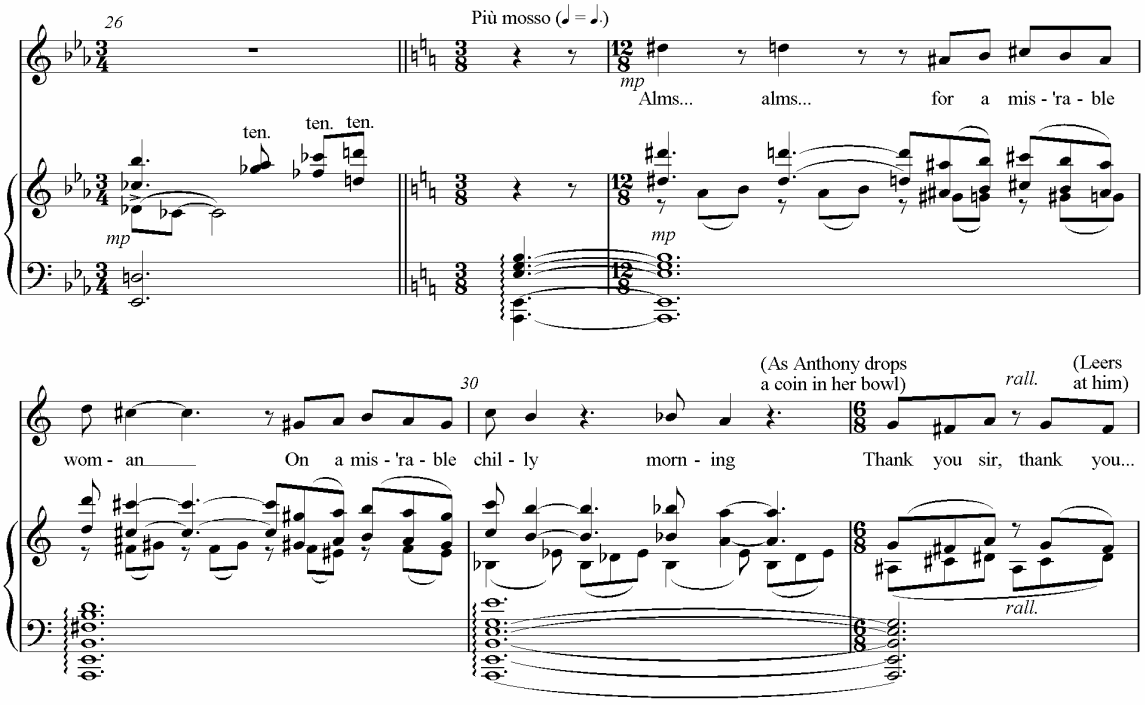


Although the tempo is slower, and the accompaniment a simple spinning patter of eighth notes (lacking the unsettling accented dissonant chords), it is recognizable as the same melody, particularly the upward run. The layering of meanings that have developed since "Worst Pies," specifically that people *are* being eaten up, only highlights the

grotesque nature of these new lyrics and reinforces our interpretation of "Worst Pies" as the song of a calculating woman. In the context of the show, the literal—and grotesque—meaning of the phrase "I could eat you up," otherwise understood to be a metaphor for fondness, is highlighted. After the introduction, the melody of the song is a less active variation on the one from "The Worst Pies in London."

Tempo plays a role in musically depicting the grotesque persona of another character, the Beggar Woman. Her first appearance in Act 1, No. 2, draws directly from the horror tradition (Ex. 7.6).

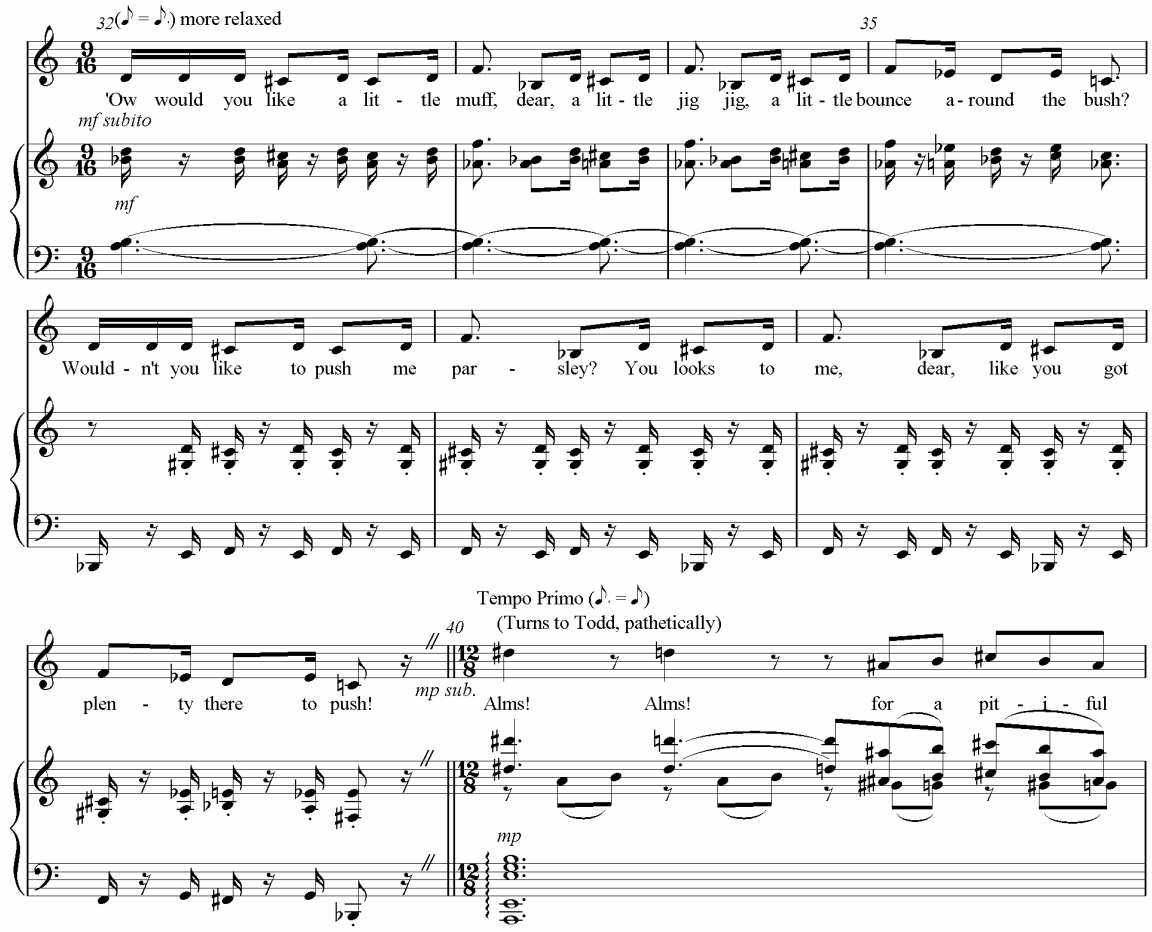
Ex. 7.6: "No Place Like London," mm. 26-31.



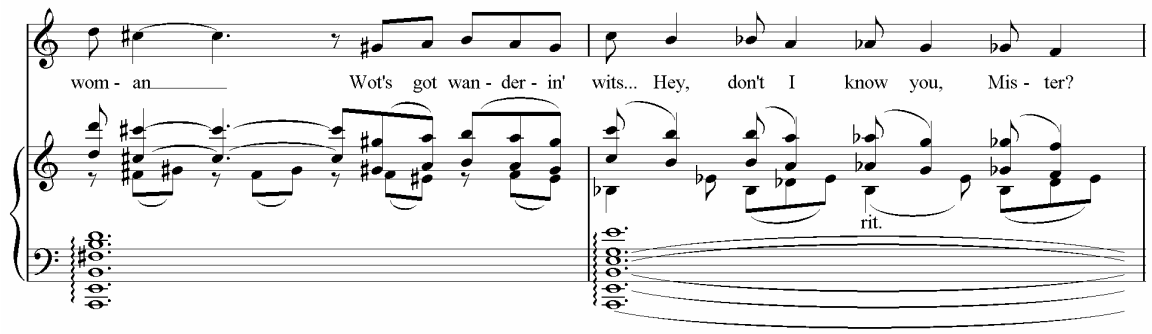
She emerges suddenly from the fog, announced by a sustained A^9 chord (missing its third) in the low strings—thus clashing with the E^b pedal of the previous measures—and startles not only Anthony and Todd, but the audience as well. The relatively slow tempo and chromatic descending line for her plaintive cry of "Alms…alms…for a mis'rable

woman" underscore her sad condition; and once the audience has recovered from her stark, unexpected entrance, her music elicits a sense of pity from the audience. Unexpectedly, however, the tempo picks up, and she launches into a sexually explicit proposition to a lively, jig-like rhythm, albeit in 9/8 rather than the more customary 6/8 (Ex. 7.7).[28]

Ex. 7.7: "No Place Like London," mm. 32-42.



[28] This type of jig is known as a "slip jig." Margaret Dean-Smith, "Jig," in *New Grove 2*, XIII, 118.



This sudden shift achieves two effects: first, it underscores her mental instability; and second, the audience must face the very descriptive sexual content: "a little muff" (mm. 32-33), "bounce around the bush" (m. 35), and "push me parsley" (mm. 36-37) all allude to intercourse and female genitals, while "you got plenty there to push" (mm. 38-39) refers to Anthony's. It is in the sexual frankness that the grotesque is located, for the Beggar Woman revels in the physicality of her unsubtle double entendres. But her manner of presentation invokes squeamish laughter, for she seems unaware of what she says, and the juxtaposition of her sexual innuendos with her pathetic appeals for money is nothing less than violent.

Thus the combination of music and text problematizes the audience's initial reaction to her. They want to pity her and do not want to laugh at her, but they find themselves doing it anyway: the laughter is unintentional and disarming, a way for them to deal with the conflicted feelings people in such circumstances generate. The rapid shifts in tempo and rhythm merely highlight in turn the pity and the revulsion. On a much deeper level, this is the first example of musical foreshadowing in the show: this melody is a faster and more rhythmic variation of the dance theme that appears in the dumb show depicting Lucy's rape by Judge Turpin. Mrs. Lovett describes the scene in the song "Poor Thing" (Act I, No. 5, mm. 139-42), where she also tells how Lucy took

poison, and therefore explains why the Beggar Woman is unstable and falls back to a crazed version of this melody: she is Lucy.

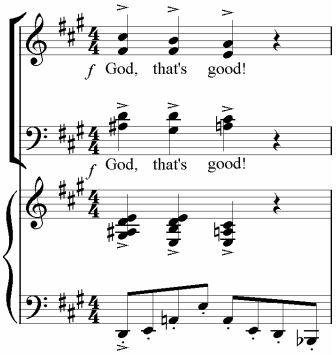
Complicating matters further is the equally sudden return at measure 40 to "Alms! Alms!" (see Ex. 7.7). Once again the music underscores the sense of pity; at this moment the audience may feel rebuked for finding her mental lapse funny. Moreover, at measure 42 she asks her prophetic question: "Hey, don't I know you, Mister?" Todd tells her to leave, and she returns to her propositioning song again, only to slow down for a final round of begging before taking her leave. In all, the rapid alternation of two very different, but related, states of mind, expressed through both text and music, destablizes our perception of her, and thus creates a fundamentally grotesque character.

Harmony

We may consider Sondheim's use of harmony to express the grotesque by focusing exclusively on the chorus, which functions primarily as a Greek chorus that comments on Todd's actions, its main vehicle being the "Ballad of Sweeney Todd," which reappears several times in the show. On several occasions, however, the chorus becomes a player in the action. Act II, No. 1, discussed at the beginning of Chapter 1, is one such place. To summarize, in "God, that's good," the chorus fills Mrs. Lovett's new garden dining area, devouring pies as fast as she can make them. Though the audience is by now fully aware (having heard Act I, No. 2, "A Little Priest") that these pies contain human flesh, the patrons are blissfully ignorant, which sets up the type of extremely uncomfortable situation in which the grotesque can flourish. With two frequently recurring, short homophonic phrases, the chorus exclaims its fondness for these pies, the dissonant harmony underscoring the audience's horror.

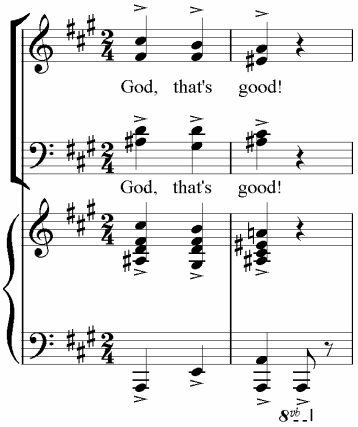
When the choir first sings “God, that’s good,” it collectively punctuates a series of individual requests for pies, service, and ale (Ex. 7.8).

Ex. 7.8: “God, That’s Good,” m. 57.



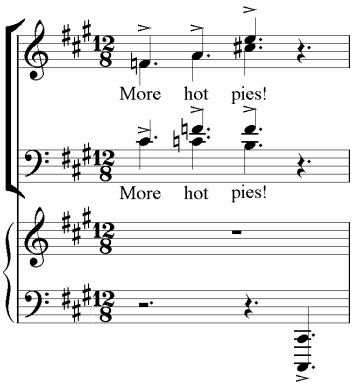
Though the first two chords function simply as IV-V and resolve to an A-major tonic, they bristle with added dissonances that are then piled on each time the chorus expresses its unknowing, passionate appreciation for the people-stuffed pies. For example, at measure 73, what was an A-major chord in measure 57 now has an $A^{\#}$ and an $E^{\#}$ in the bass and alto parts over the A naturals in the bass line of the orchestra (Ex. 7.9).

Ex. 7.9: “God, That’s Good,” mm. 72-73, more dissonant statement.



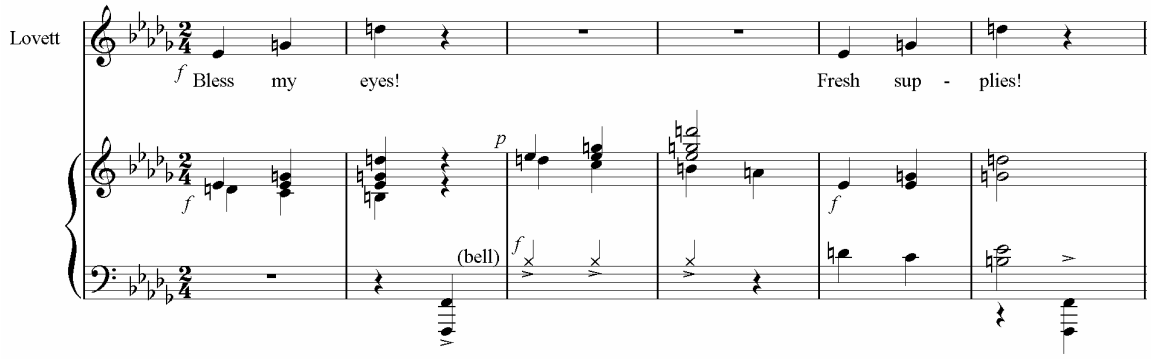
The audience, then, is caught between the chorus's naïveté and the dissonant chords, so that the sense of the grotesque grows through the music. The chorus sings a new line at measure 101, "More hot pies!" (Ex. 7.10).

Ex. 7.10: "God, That's Good," m. 101.



Embedded in the rising soprano line, the *f'-natural-a'-e''* outlines a major seventh that enforces the dissonance. Toward the end of the song, as supplies dwindle, Mrs. Lovett starts to explain the situation to the customers when she suddenly spies a new customer heading up to Todd's shop. Using the soprano line of the "More hot pies!" motive, she exclaims, "Bless my eyes! Fresh supplies!", reinforcing the grotesque use of this harmony (mm. 294-99) (Ex. 7.11).

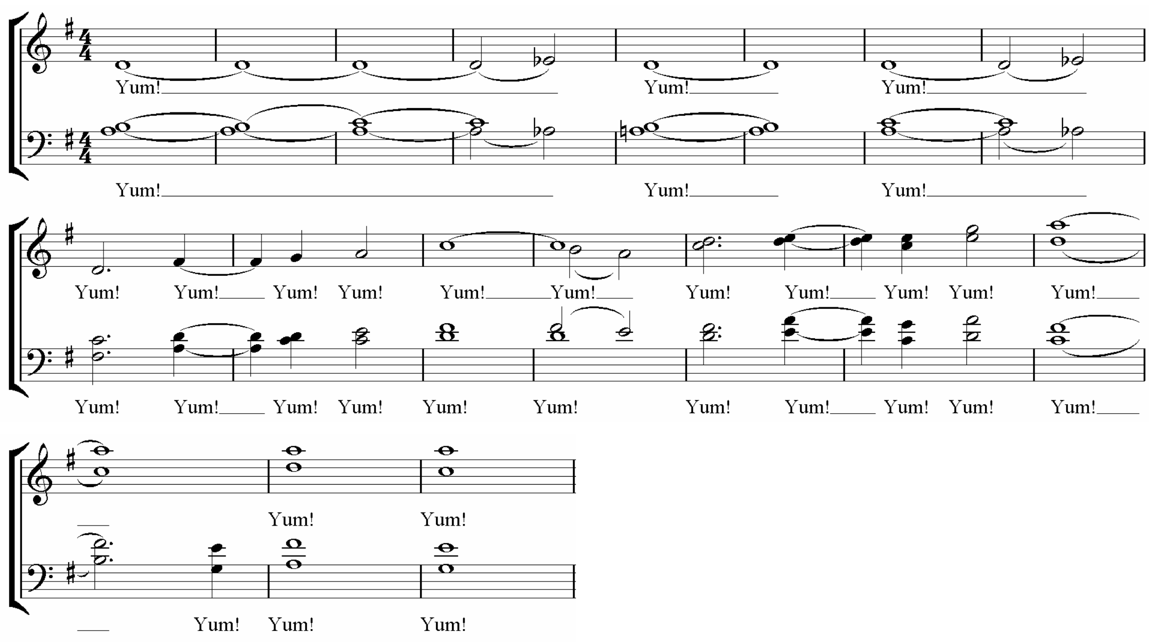
Ex. 7.11: "God, That's Good," mm. 294-99.



As the song continues, Sondheim embellishes both "God, that's good" and "More hot pies" with textual expansions that result in nonsensical wordplay. The song ends with the following text: "God, that's good. That is de- have you -licious ever tasted smell such oh my god what perfect more that's pies such flavor God that's good!", retaining the same level of dissonance throughout (mm. 314-29).

A significant change occurs in the middle of the number when a chorale on the word "Yum!" appears. Harmonically, this passage serves the same purpose as regards the audience-chorus dichotomy as "God, that's good" (Ex. 7.12).

Ex. 7.12: "God, That's Good," mm. 195-214. Chorus only.



The first chord lies in the middle range, rather low for the sopranos. But as Mrs. Lovett and Toby sing about the virtues of the pies, the soprano line constantly rises, the harmony remaining dissonant. By the time Toby extols the "succulent gravy," the sopranos have ascended to a high *a''*, which they hold as Mrs. Lovett chimes in at measures 208-216 with the line, "And then the succulent gravy./So thick it makes you sick." This high *a''*,

supported by *G*s in the bass and orchestra, can only be heard as a scream: the chorus's scream of approval and the audience's silent scream of discomfort.[29] This shriek will be reiterated at the end of the number with an even higher b^{b}'' on the words "God that's good."

Melody

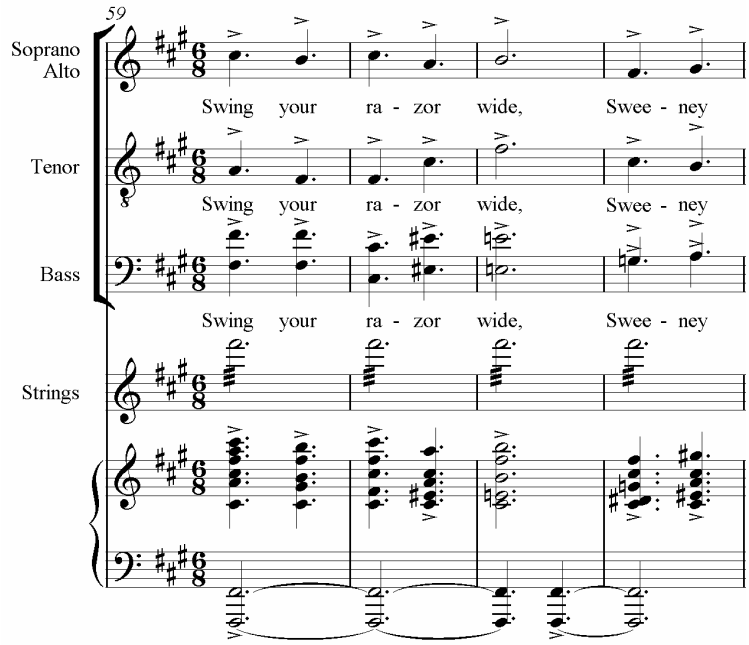
We have already discussed Sondheim's use of melody to underscore grotesque aspects of character in connection with Mrs. Lovett's "The Worst Pies in London" and the pleas of the Beggar Woman. The latter's alternation between the descending chromatic inflections of "Alms!" and the fast, dance-like tune of her sexually overt attempts to entice Todd adds to the illumination of her grotesque character. As for Mrs. Lovett: the two lyrical sections of "Worst Pies" follow, and contrast starkly with, the quasi-non-stop sections of patter. Descriptive—if subjective—terms that could be applied to her lyrical melody include poignant, soaring, or any other word normally used to describe a "beautiful" melody. Heard without the text, the melody has all the characteristics of a love song. That trope is undercut, however, by the subject matter, and in effect, this is an ironic and grotesque love song to her awful pies. Recollections of the song resonate with her new, people-stuffed pies throughout the show.

One very important melody that recurs throughout the show is the Gregorian chant "Dies Irae," sung in the Roman Catholic church as part of the Mass for the Dead. The melody is never heard precisely or in its entirety: when it appears it is embedded in

[29] In the original cast album (RCA records 3379-2-RC, 1979), this choral passage begins very softly and almost disappears at the end. Moreover, Mrs. Lovett's word "sick" is not there. Perhaps there was a need to balance the voices on the recording, with the decision being made to reduce the dynamics of the chorus in order to allow the featured performers to come through. In the 2001 concert recording (NYP 2000/2001 [2001]) the chorus is more prominent, accenting each chord change and then receding dynamically in order for Tobias and Mrs. Lovett to be heard.

the texture, sometimes in the melody, sometimes in the accompaniment. It can be found stretched out over a rhythmic ostinato or in the bare outlines of a sung melody. It is found most clearly in the chorus of the opening number (Ex. 7.13), when the members of the cast, who have been singing single lines of text, finally join together and sing "Swing your razor high, Sweeney/Hold it to the skies./Freely flows the blood of those/Who moralize!" The sopranos clearly sing the main notes of the chant.

Ex. 7.13: "Ballad of Sweeney Todd," mm. 59-62.



Stephen Banfield addresses the permutations of the "Dies Irae" theme in depth, but even he states that there are so many variations it would be difficult to number them all.[30] About another line from the opening number, "They went to their Maker impeccably shaved," Gordon writes, "The irreverent black humor serves to lighten the tone, but the metaphysical reference here introduces an important musical and dramatic theme."[31]

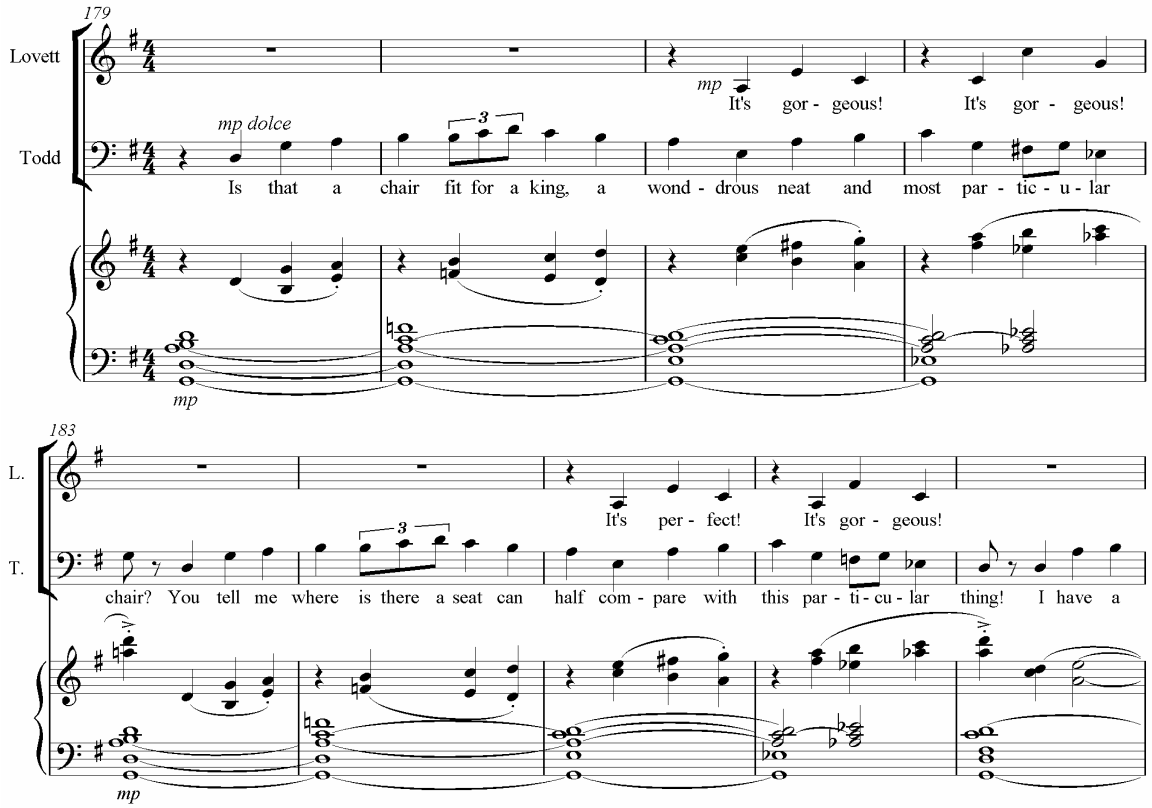
[30] Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, 297-300.

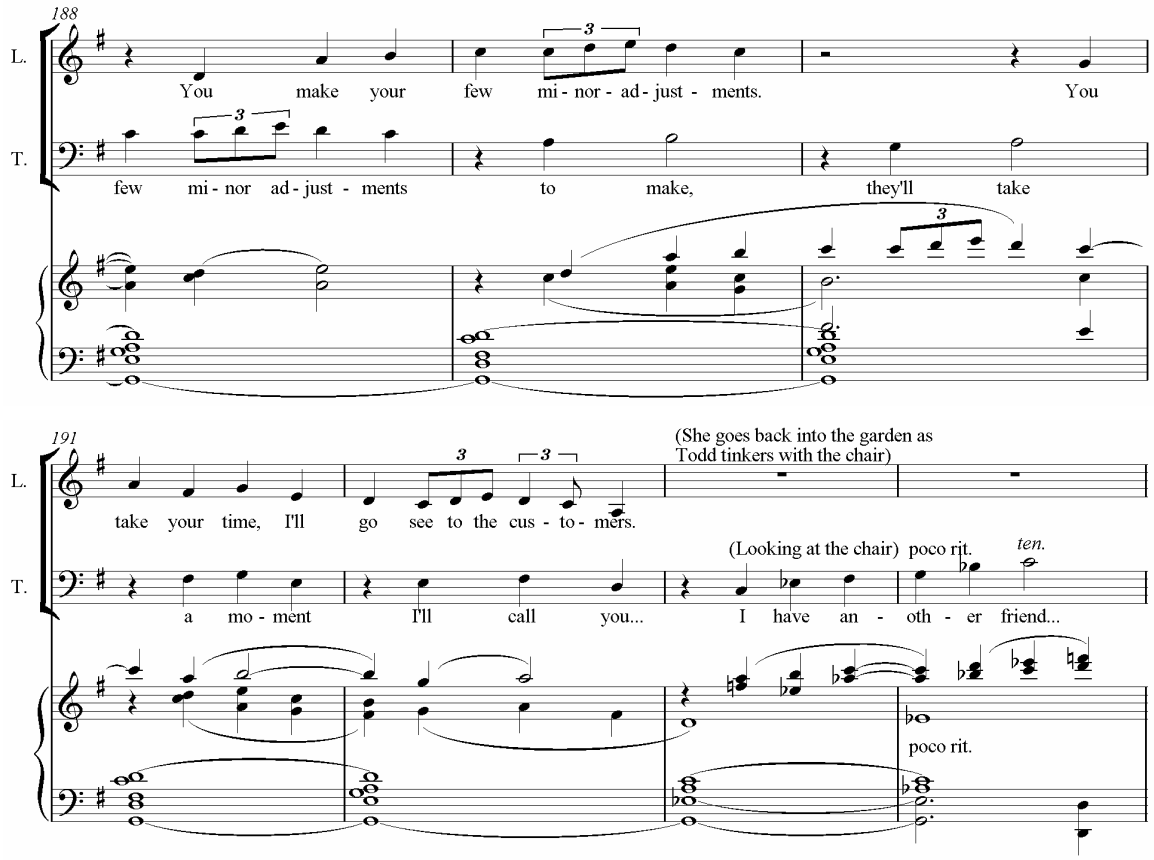
[31] Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy*, 213.

Overall, the effect is quite chilling yet funny, and the fact that a Gregorian chant for the dead underlies most of the musical material demonstrates the level of black humor—or general grotesqueness—Sondheim inserts into the work.

A more complex use of melody to express both the grotesque and the uncanny appears in the midst of Act II, No. 1, "God, that's good," shortly before and then again during the "Yum!" passage discussed above. Prior to this moment, Todd had been waiting for a new barber's chair to be delivered. When the chair finally arrives, he serenades it with a love song—"Is that a chair fit for a king?" (Ex. 7.14)—referring to it as a new friend, for this is the chair that will help him dispose of bodies directly to the basement bake house below.

Ex. 7.14: "God, That's Good," mm. 179-94.





This song expresses Todd's love of objects, a trait that first became apparent in Act I, No. 5, "My Friends," where he sang a paean to his razors: "These are my friends./See how they glisten./See this one shine,/How he smiles in the light,/My friend, my faithful friend." By the time the chair has arrived, however, we know far more about Todd and realize, therefore, that his song is nothing less than an expression of love for an instrument of death.

Todd's short song—lyrics and melody together—is, perhaps, more chilling than grotesque, owing to its lack of explicit humor. But this soon changes, as Toby begins to sell pies to the tune of Todd's serenade to the chair while the chorus proclaims its love of the pies with the "Yum!" passage. Toby's lyrics continue to force the audience to face their revulsion at the contents of the pies: "Is that a pie fit for a king, a wondrous sweet

and most particular thing? You see, ma'am, why there is no meat pie can compete with this delectable pie!" (Act II, No. 1, mm. 195-216). Mrs. Lovett chimes in with the same blithe interjections that she had used with Todd, apparently oblivious to the ghastly connection being made through Todd and Toby's shared melody. And with Todd's love song to his chair having become a love song to the pies, spines tingle when Mrs. Lovett says the gravy is "so thick, it makes you sick." Here, though, Sondheim seems to dispense with the grotesque by concentrating on the heightened musical effect: Todd has reentered the aural picture, the chorus is starting to shriek its approbations, and Toby and Mrs. Lovett are continuing their sales pitches. The words disappear into the morass of sound. Nevertheless, the point is clear, as the layered melodies chillingly underscore the horrible nature of the situation.

By having Toby share Todd's melody, Sondheim also creates a moment of musical foreshadowing, this one less obscure than that connecting the Beggar Woman with Lucy. With Toby and Todd, however, the connection is more prophetic, for it is Toby who will kill Todd. How uncanny it is, then, that they share this grotesque love song that in both instances is directly linked to cannibalism. For the audience, Toby's appropriation of Todd's melody is an aural signal that he is being drawn into Todd's and Mrs. Lovett's web. Words alone could not have been more explicit.

Orchestration

Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* takes us back to a smaller and in some ways more traditional orchestra, compared with those for Berg and Penderecki's operas, though one tailored to the customs of the Broadway musical. Moreover, discussion of a Broadway musical raises the issue of authorship, for Broadway composers rarely orchestrate their

own music, something George Martin uses in his arguments against considering *Sweeney Todd* an opera. He attaches particular importance to the composer as orchestrator:

> From Monteverdi onward part of the definition of an opera composer is that he does his own orchestrating. Mozart, Wagner, and Verdi speak with individual voices partly because each has clothed his drama in his own special sound. But this is not true of Sondheim, as the chapter on orchestration in Zadan's book makes clear.[32]

Banfield justifies the farming out of the orchestration on the grounds that Broadway composers have enough to do in a short space of time and should not have the added burden of orchestration. Further, as Broadway is a highly collaborative field and orchestration is not high on the priorities of producers (out of sight, in the pit, out of mind), it makes sense to delegate the work to specialists.[33] Thus it was Jonathan Tunick, who has orchestrated many of Sondheim's shows and is perhaps the most highly regarded orchestrator currently working on Broadway, who brought *Sweeney Todd*'s sound world to life.[34] Constrained by the size of a Broadway theater's orchestra pit, but also by union rules concerning the minimum number of players that must be used,[35] Tunick calls for twenty-six players. However, the use of amplification can greatly enhance the sound, and allows just a few string instruments to sound like a full-blown section. Because of the prevalence and skill of multi-instrumentalists available to Broadway, Tunick asks for

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[32] Martin, "On the Verge of Opera," 79; "Zadan's book" refers to Zadan's *Sondheim & Co.*

[33] Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, 79.

[34] Jonathan Tunick received the first Tony Award for Orchestration for his work on Maury Yeston's *Titanic* in 1997. Along with scoring most of Sondheim's shows, beginning with *Company* (1970) and most recently the 2001 revival of *Follies* (he also did the 1971 original), he scored Marvin Hamlisch's *Chorus Line* (1976) and numerous other musicals, films, and albums. He has also received Oscar, Emmy, and Grammy awards. His opinions on orchestrating Sondheim's works can be found in Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 154-159.

[35] Tunick discusses the rules of minimum numbers and how it affects his decisions in the "Introduction" to *A Little Night Music* (New York: Rilting Music, 1991), 5.

elaborate doublings in the woodwinds. Thus the five wind players play (1) flute, piccolo, and recorder; (2) clarinet, E^b clarinet, flute, and piccolo; (3) clarinet and bass clarinet; (4) oboe and English horn; and (5) bassoon. The remainder of the ensemble includes one horn, two trumpets, three trombones, two percussionists, electric organ/celesta, one harp, six violins, two violas, two cellos, one double bass,[36] and a single "unusual" instrument: a factory whistle. Finally, the instruments generally play within their "normal" ranges, with the strings carrying the bulk of the material and the brass and woodwinds providing countermelodies or additional color.

As with Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy* and Berg's *Wozzeck*, obbligato instruments express the grotesque in *Sweeney Todd*. During the song "God, that's good," it is a bass drum that is the unlikely obbligato instrument. While promoting Mrs. Lovett's pies, Tobias extols their quality while banging on a drum; in effect he is "drumming up business." This is a clear example of what Carolyn Abbate calls "phenomenal" music, for the people on stage hear Tobias singing and banging.[37] And as the music begins to slip back to the "noumenal" (heard by the audience, but not by the characters on stage), the timpani and other instruments in the pit pick up the banging and magnify it, rendering it as a low—and sometimes loud—accented, offbeat "thud" at the end of each emphatic choral interjection of "God that's good" or "More hot pies!" (see Ex. 7.9 and 7.10), and even Mrs. Lovett's "Bless my eyes!" (Ex. 7.11).[38] The percussive accents become reminders to the audience of just what is in the pies and how gruesomely enthusiastic the

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[36] Additional woodwinds were added for the touring production. See a complete table in Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, 83.

[37] Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 119.

[38] This "thud" is represented in the piano reduction by low notes in the bass.

consumers are. This may be less than subtle, but subtlety is not part of the melodramatic tradition from which *Sweeney* comes.

An even more blatant instance of incongruity appears in the song "Johanna" in Act II. Todd daydreams about his daughter while he casually slays customers in his barber's chair. The song's major key and simple accompaniment, performed mainly by the strings, underscore the banality of the murders for Todd, and the restraint in the orchestration is a conscious decision.[39] Murders notwithstanding, the audience invariably laughs at the parade of victims, even though some people may squirm over how easily they have accepted the situation while also occasionally sympathizing with him.[40] In a show full of grotesquerie, this song, with its almost innocent use of soft strings in the background, adds another layer to the grotesque equation of humor and horror: sympathy, which makes the audience members truly question their own sense of morality.

A Fusion of Elements

While each of the moments discussed above demonstrates how specific aspects of rhythm, tempo, harmony, melody, or orchestration can disarm horrifying subject matter, the quintessentially grotesque song in *Sweeney Todd* is the Act I finale, No. 18, "A Little

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[39] For the concert version of *Sweeney Todd*, Sondheim writes about the problem of traditional concert performances where little of the action is presented. He specifically cites the song "Johanna":

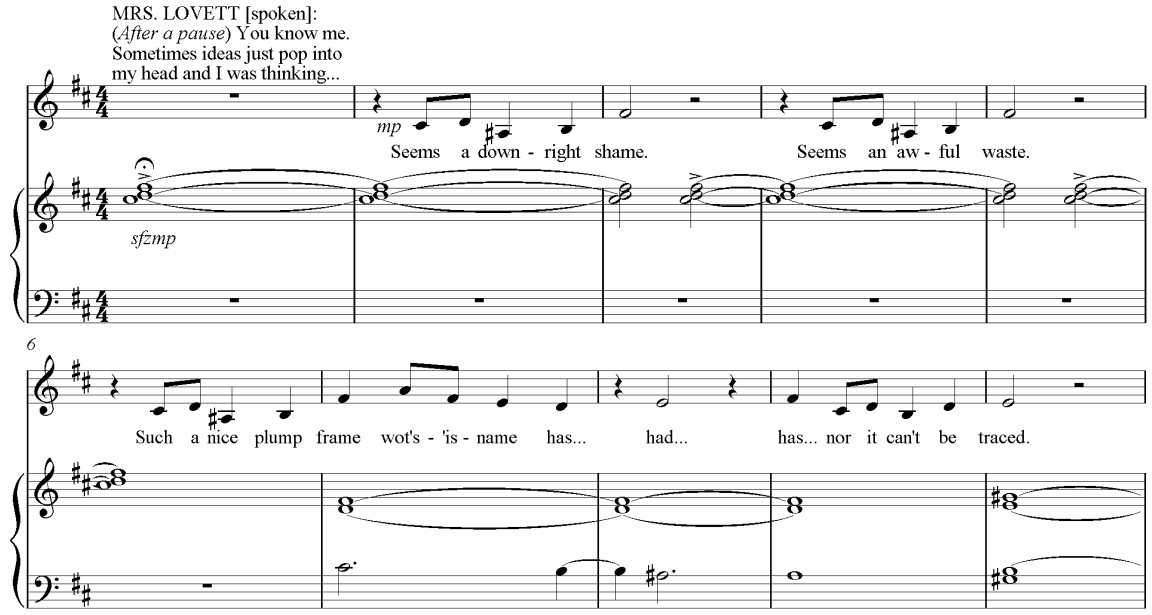
> "How would they [the audience] know that by the time Sweeney finishes singing 'Johanna' in Act Two, the stage is awash in blood? If an audience doesn't see the carnage, they're likely to be mystified, not to say lulled, by the relentless monotony of the rhythm and dynamics in the song, which is of course supposed to mirror the banality (in Sweeney's mind) of his killings." (*Sweeney Todd Live at the New York Philharmonic*, conducted by Andrew Litton, recording NYP 2001/2002 [2002], liner notes, 8).

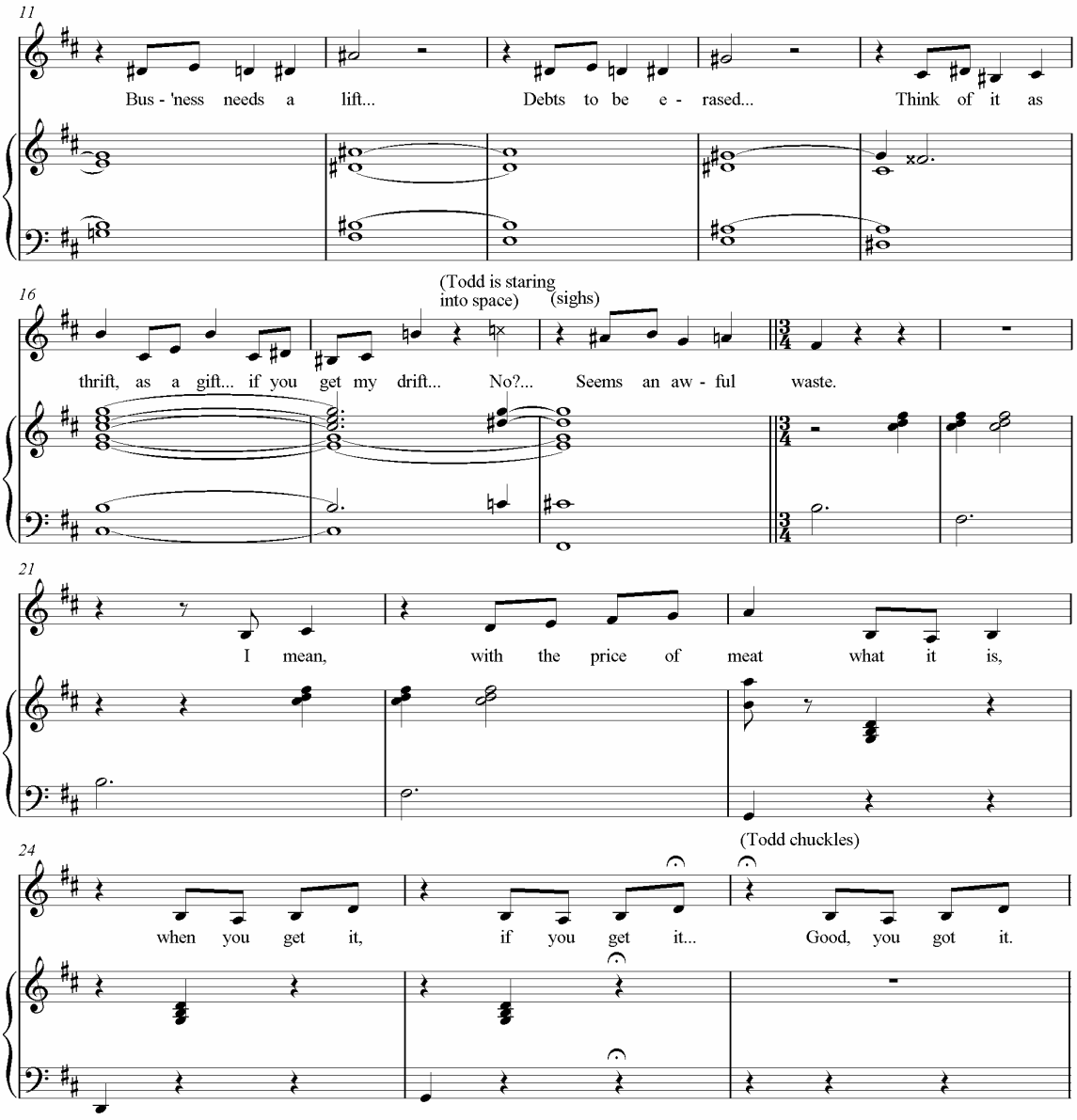
[40] There is almost a sense of disappointment when one man arrives in the shop with his family, and therefore Todd cannot kill him.

Priest." Here Sondheim employs all the musical elements, as well as the lyrics and rhyme scheme, to create a highly memorable deposition on the finer points of cannibalism—specifically, the concomitant relationship of careers to possible culinary characteristics of people-stuffed pies. And if Mrs. Lovett's interest lies primarily in the potential economic gain, Todd, once he understands Mrs. Lovett's plan, finds solace in the sociological aspects of the endeavor. But these are the least remarkable aspects of this rollicking song.

The song consists of several sections in which alternating passages proclaim the social justifications of the plan and the delight in word play concerning the pies themselves; the conclusion of the song is the ironic platitude "We'll serve anyone at all." The number begins with a mildly dissonant chord played by strings, harp, and bells that chimes in like the ubiquitous light bulb that appears when a cartoon character has an idea (Ex. 7.15). Mrs. Lovett, a very cartoon-like figure, then states her idea.

Ex. 7.15: "A Little Priest," mm. 1-26.





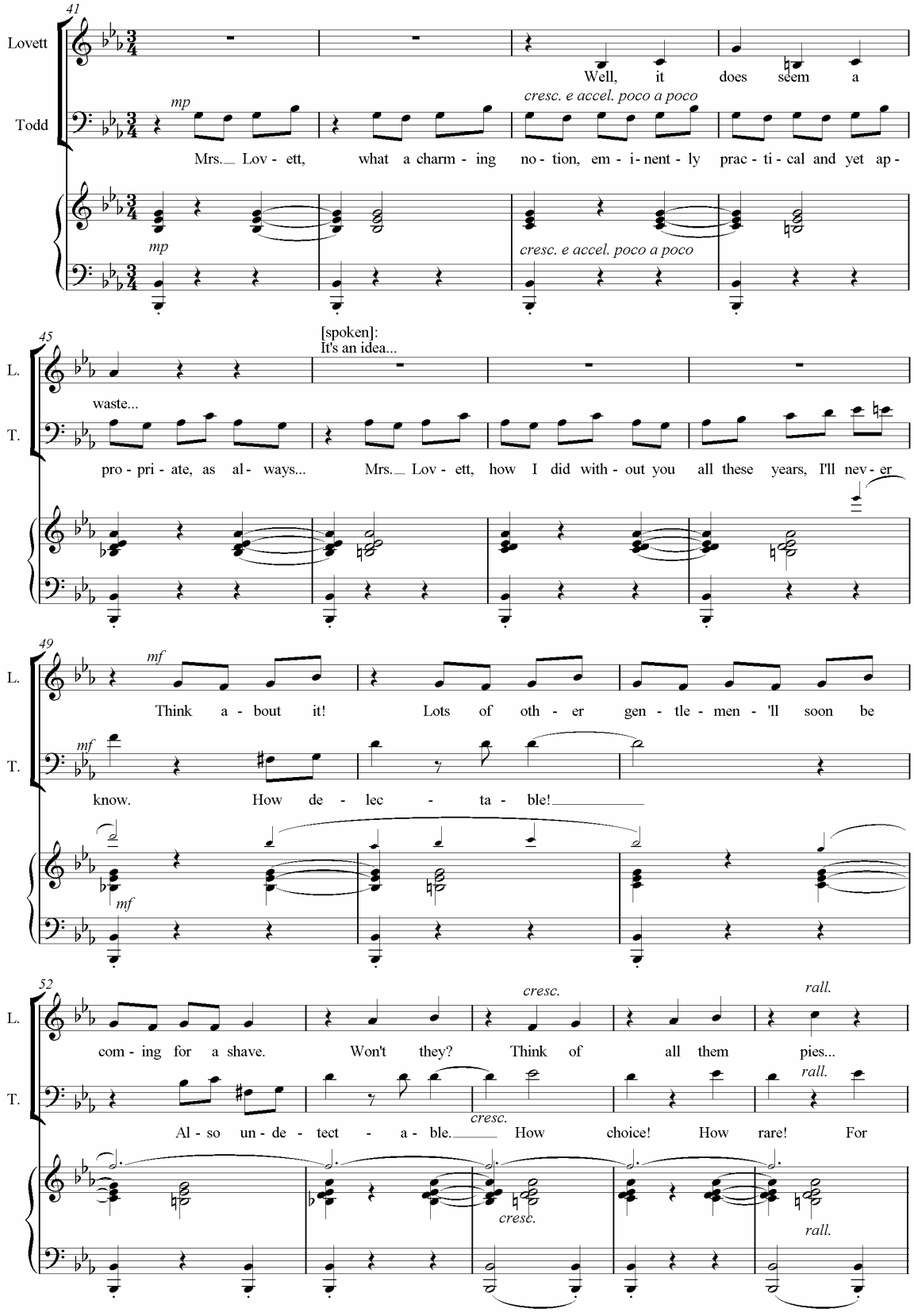
The reiterated motive for these lines always lands on the downbeat (though "has. . . had. . . has" upsets the regularity at mm. 7-9), accentuated by the strong rhymes: shame/frame, waste/traced/erased, lift/thrift/gift/drift. The last three rhymes (thrift/gift/drift, mm. 16-17) are accentuated by upward leaps to the highest notes heard so far. They also come in rapid succession, not separated by rests, and therefore recall the energy of "The Worst Pies in London," though the declamation is simpler, and less harried. Thus Mrs. Lovett's rhythm here demonstrates a firmer sense of purpose; gone is

the flighty, flirtatious personality, which had in fact already disappeared by the end of "Worst Pies" when she stated "Times is hard." Yet when Todd fails to understand her suggestion, she returns to the rhythms of "Worst Pies" for a moment (Ex. 7.15, mm. 22-26), which jars him enough that he grasps her proposal. Shortly thereafter, however, she returns to the more rhythmically solid pattern of arriving on downbeats; at this point, Todd begins to sing with her, and solid arrivals on the downbeat will continue through the song.

With the upward turn at the end of her phrases and the slippery chromaticism introduced at measure 11, Mrs. Lovett seems to be at least half questioning or entreating Todd. Against her vocal line, the bass line in the orchestra descends an octave in mainly chromatic motion. Together the joint instability conjures up a feeling of the horrific, but Mrs. Lovett's solid downbeats disarm it, making it seem almost charming, or at least encouraging an ambiguous reading. With Mrs. Lovett's idea introduced, the body of the song begins. Finally, the dynamics remain soft throughout, with only a slight crescendo on the phrase "Think of it as thrift."

When Todd enters, he borrows Mrs. Lovett's circling melody of continuous eighth notes and proceeds to call her idea "charming," "eminently practical," "delectable," "undetectable," "choice," and "rare" (Ex. 7.16).

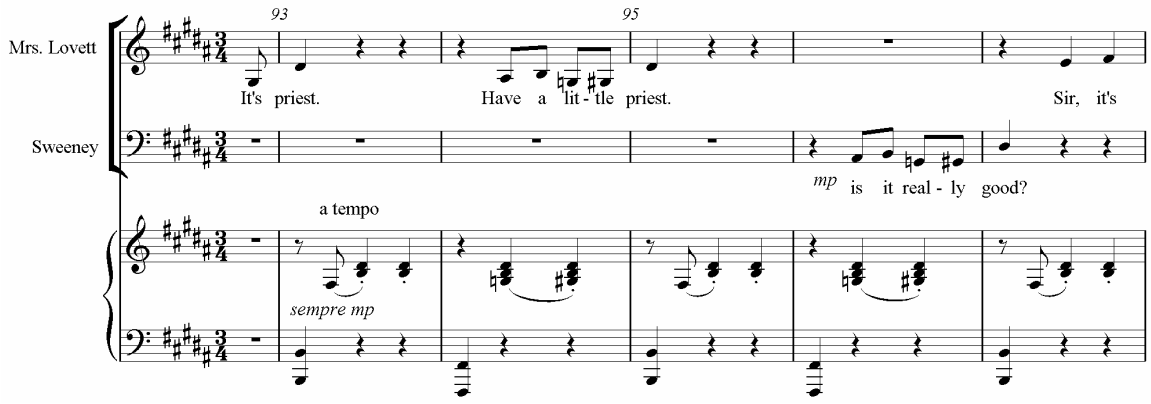
Ex. 7.16: “A Little Priest,” mm. 41-56.

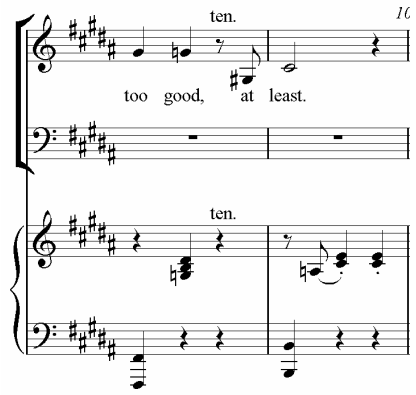


The orchestra accompanies him with a vamp that contains its own inner-voice chromaticism. If his words hardly describe the situation adequately, they do describe it grotesquely, particularly because he introduces words normally associated with food, and more specifically meat (a "choice" cut cooked "rare"). The whole idea is repulsive, but as served up with a breathless melody—and especially when Mrs. Lovett joins with hocket-like interjections (mm. 53-56)—the result is a delicious contradiction between the macabre idea and the lively presentation. For the first time in the show, and in a very clear way, the audience must contend with the grotesque ambivalence of these characters. Todd continues with the following: "What's the sound of the world out there? Those crunching noises pervading the air? It's man devouring man, my dear, and who are we to deny it in here?" Thus Todd is unequivocal, and Sondheim forces us to recognize the literal meaning.

The climax of the grotesquerie arrives with Mrs. Lovett saying "Have a little priest" to a rhythmic variation of her opening motive (Ex. 7.17).

Ex. 7.17: "A Little Priest," mm. 93-99.





That her first victim for the stuffing of a pie was a priest layers sacrilege onto the cannibalism. Here, however, the priest's actions matter only in so far as they affect the taste, and Mrs. Lovett and Todd proclaim him fresh because he did not commit sins of the flesh. The semantic structure of the number is witty, as it alternates between sections that rattle off pies and professions and those that offer sociological explanations for the characters' new course of action. At one point Sondheim revels in strong rhymes by having Todd and Mrs. Lovett engage in a word game over a vamp. Mrs. Lovett cites different professions, with Todd rhyming counter requests: "Tinker." "Something pinker…" "Tailor?" "Something…paler", and so on until Mrs. Lovett thinks of "Locksmith?" Stumped, Todd stops, and the song resumes. Later, Mrs. Lovett offers "The actor that's compacter," to which Todd replies: "Yes, and always arrives over done." This reference to theatrical performance style, particularly the broad, exaggerated strokes of melodrama, demonstrates Sondheim's delight in multiple levels of the text.

Finally, with the orchestra silent, Todd requests a judge. After all the jaunty rhythms of the preceding motives, this moment is particularly sinister, with nothing to disarm it except the return of the sociological tract. Before the final passage of skewed moral rectitude, however, Mrs. Lovett hands Todd a cleaver, and he hands her a rolling

pin. Thus armed—and enacting the caricature on the playbill—they sing their final lyrics, "We'll serve anyone/Meaning anyone/And to anyone/At all!" either for a deadly shave or a delicious pie. The orchestra brings both number and act to a close with a dissonant D flat-major chord with a raised fourth (m. 361), leaving the audience to contemplate during the Intermission the possible repercussions of Todd's and Mrs. Lovett's new plan while humming the memorable tune.

"A Little Priest" will return in the show's final scene after Todd has realized that he has killed Lucy and that Mrs. Lovett had lied about her whereabouts. He suddenly picks up the melody with words of praise for Mrs. Lovett, who joins in, thinking, or at least hoping, all is well. With the lines "Life is for the alive, my dear, so let's keep living it…really living it," he throws her into the open oven and slams the door. Thus Sondheim has taken the most archetypically grotesque song of the show, stripped it of its humor, and transformed it into an expression of utter horror as it accompanies the most shocking murder of the evening. Nothing remains to disarm the horror; and as Todd sinks to his knees beside Lucy, Toby enters singing a children's song and slits Todd's throat.

CONCLUSION

Throughout *Sweeney Todd*, Sondheim uses music to disarm the horrific content of the show or make the quotidian terrifying. Most notably, he uses rhythm and melody to provoke the audience either to laughter, such as with Mrs. Lovett and her "The Worst Pies in London," or to pity marred by disconcerting humor, such as with the Beggar Woman. The interjections of highly chromatic harmony against the diatonic backdrop can either highlight humor, as in Mrs. Lovett's songs, where it suggests her grotesquely

manipulative mind, or underscore moments of pure horror, as in Act I, No. 17, "Epiphany," Todd's exclamation of violence toward the world in general. Moreover, the dissonant harmonies in the chorus's passages on "God, that's good!" and "Yum!" can turn the semantically humorous into the emotionally horrific. And this, in the end, is what makes *Sweeney Todd* grotesque.

EPILOGUE

For this study, I focused on operas written in the twentieth century—mainly because I was interested in how composers used different musical languages to convey the grotesque—and I demonstrated several common techniques that composers employed. There are other directions that the study could have taken, and a variety of avenues that could be explored further, and as a form of conclusion to the thesis, I outline them here.

I did not discuss why the twentieth century was such a fertile ground for creating grotesque art, as my focus was on the music and not the milieu in which each opera was written. The twentieth century was a time of intense social change, including the profound effects of the two World Wars, the Cold War, and countless more localized conflicts. Technological progress advanced at an astonishing pace, creating an appetite for new and better things, but also engendering fear and panic over more negative developments. As Thomson points out, the grotesque is "an appropriate expression of the problematic nature of existence. It is no accident that the grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation."[1] Twentieth-century artists in all genres created works that helped them celebrate or cope with the rapid changes and violent upheavals of the period, opera being no exception.[2] Some examples could include the following: the Italian painter De Chirico reduced humans to faceless automatons dwarfed and alienated by their factory

[1] Thomson, *Grotesque*, 11.

[2] Penderecki's *Die Teufel von Loudun* is an overt commentary on the political corruption of the Soviet Union as well as the power of the church.

surroundings; the author Irish James Joyce blended images of beauty with those of destruction and repulsion in his phantasmagorical stream-of-consciousness novels *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegan's Wake* (1939); and the Swiss playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt confounded audiences with his *Die Physiker* (1962), a comedy in two acts about three nuclear physicists in an asylum who keep killing their nurses (is it because they want to escape and further their research or because the nurses are trying to steal the research and the scientists want to remain in the asylum in order to protect the world?). Other artists simply reveled in the juxtaposition of the repulsive with the comical, for no other purposes than pure—or perverse—pleasure. There are many other operas, too, that could be studied for their grotesque content, but as mentioned in footnote 4 of the Introduction, I did not include them here because of similarities to the operas chosen. A broader study would be able to accommodate them, as well as additional scenes from the operas already discussed.

I elected to follow Wolfgang Kayser's theory of the grotesque, which focuses more on the negative side of the grotesque, particularly since in the operas I selected the grotesque is mainly associated with negatives (death, violence, and torture). The more celebratory conception of the grotesque proposed by Bakhtin would be an interesting direction to pursue, examining the ways in which music can enliven a grotesque moment. Birtwistle and Sondheim demonstrate this in their respective works: the music emphasizes Punch's great glee in killing and exaggerates Todd's and Mrs. Lovett's joyous invocation of cannibalism. Bakhtin declared that grotesque realism degrades and brings down to earth lofty subjects, turning them into flesh,[3] and there are surely more

[3] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 20.

works where composers use music to deride self-important characters, like Adam and Mannoury in *Die Teufel von Loudun* or the masochistic Judge in *Sweeney Todd.*

Another fascinating area of study would be opera productions that embrace a grotesque aesthetic, even if the opera does not have explicitly grotesque scenes or characters. This research would be conducted through reviews, interviews with the performers and directors, and conversations with people who have attended the shows. To give two examples, Calixto Beito and Doris Dörrie have a fondness for shocking their audiences. Beito's recent production of Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (Berlin Komische Oper, 2004) began with comedy (a completely nude Osmin roaming the stage) and social critique (Constanze is brought out in a glass box with the leather collar around her neck), but descended into harrowing violence: while Constanze sang her tour de force aria "Maren aller Arten," a man behind her tortured a prostitute, sliced off her nipples, and then rubbed them in Constanze's face.[4] Is this grotesque? Did anyone laugh? Or was it so disturbing that people merely shut off all reaction? Although soundly booed, the production was mounted again in Fall 2005.

Doris Dörrie's production of Verdi's *Rigoletto* (Munich Bayerische Staatsoper, 2001) fused *The Planet of the Apes* (Rigoletto, a Charleton Heston manqué, and Gilda are humans who crash on the planet) with *Star Wars* (Sparafucile as Darth Vader). Act II took place inside an overturned and open Louis Vuitton clutch bag. Bizarre, absurd, disgusting, and grotesque are some of the adjectives that could describe such productions,

[4] A personal acquaintance saw the production in November 2005, and according to him everyone there froze and was unable to remain engaged in the show from that moment forward. He said the lively woodwind writing and Constanze's coloratura suddenly seemed unbelievably inappropriate.

but as each was reviewed and in some cases well-attended, both provided insights into staging the grotesque.

Finally, there is the issue of how the composers themselves feel about what they have created. For several reasons, I decided not to interview Harrison Birtwistle, Stephen Sondheim, and Krzysztof Penderecki. In the first place, it could have been difficult secure their participation and then maintain correspondence with three very busy individuals. Secondly, to me, shoring up my own opinions with analysis was the most important activity. Trying to account for their opinions, particularly should we not agree (a distinct possibility), could have proven frustrating for me as the writer and confusing for the reader. Lastly, it might have been unfair to Berg, who is not around to explain his choices. Instead, I adhered to the concept of intentional fallacy—that is, what I found in the text was just as valid as what the creator may or may not have intended. For that reason my ideas and my support of those ideas became the focus. Nevertheless, I do believe that a dialogue with composers about their work, and about how they compose "grotesque" music, would be extremely profitable. Such a dialogue could be presented in the form of question and answer, with musical examples provided for clarification, but the interviewer would not try to elaborate further: it would be the composer speaking directly to the issue.

This study is in no way an exhaustive survey, but rather a sampling and an introduction. There are many further directions to take with the material presented here, and also for the study of the grotesque in all genres of music, in particular a theoretical approach to the grotesque in instrumental music. The grotesque in opera, or in any art form, is a slightly bewildering, but always fascinating, subject to study.

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