Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Wagner: Dramatic works

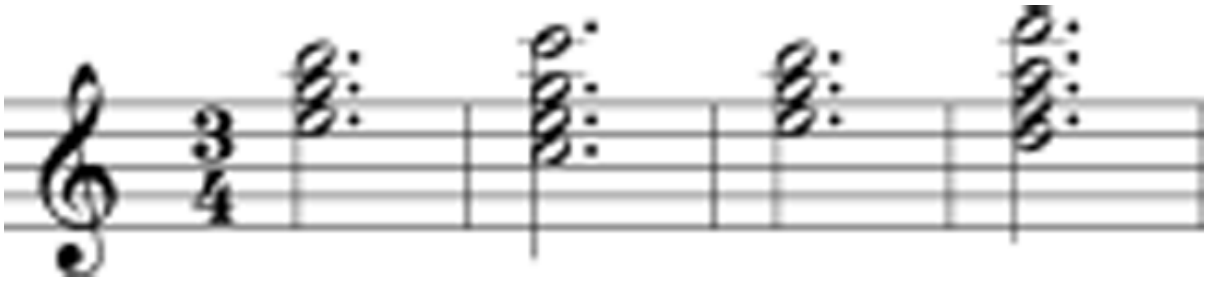
Götterdämmerung

Dmitri Shostakovich

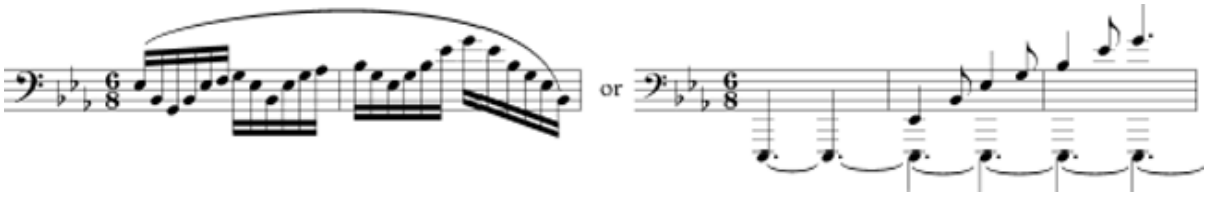
THE TEXTURE OF TENSELESS TIME

Chapter: CHAPTER 10 Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class of 1813, I)
Source: MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY
Author(s): Richard Taruskin

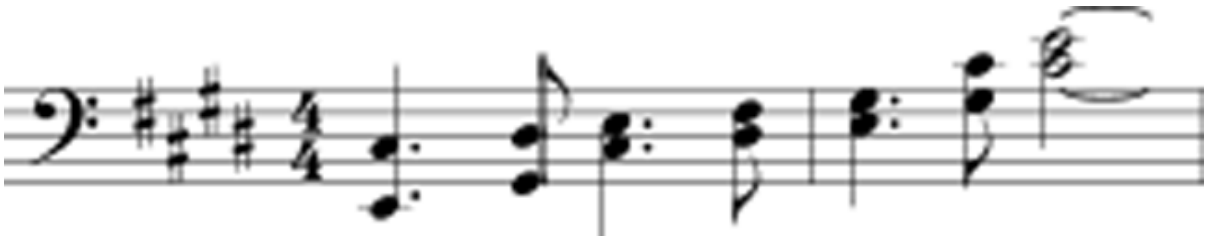
The obvious place to make contact with the mature Wagnerian magic is the Prologue to the first act of *Götterdämmerung*, which opens with the somber scene of the Norns and continues with the ecstatic morning-after duet of Siegfried and Brünnhilde. These, of course, are the very scenes with which Wagner had begun his abortive attempt to compose *Siegfrieds Tod* in 1850. He finished them around two decades later, in 1870, after having provided the past in music he had lacked the first time around. Because of these circumstances, and because the scene of the Norns at their weaving remained the most extended and "universal" narrative in the *Ring cycle*, this Prologue contains perhaps the most densely woven tissue of leitmotives Wagner ever produced. The Norns' colloquy, moreover, does not introduce a single new leitmotif; it is a ceaseless warp and woof of well-worn tunes.



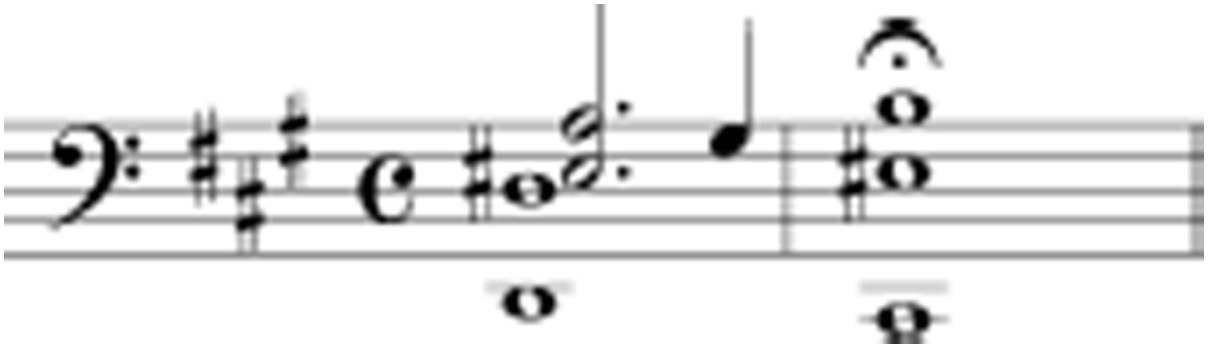
ex. 10-2a Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Revival" leitmotif



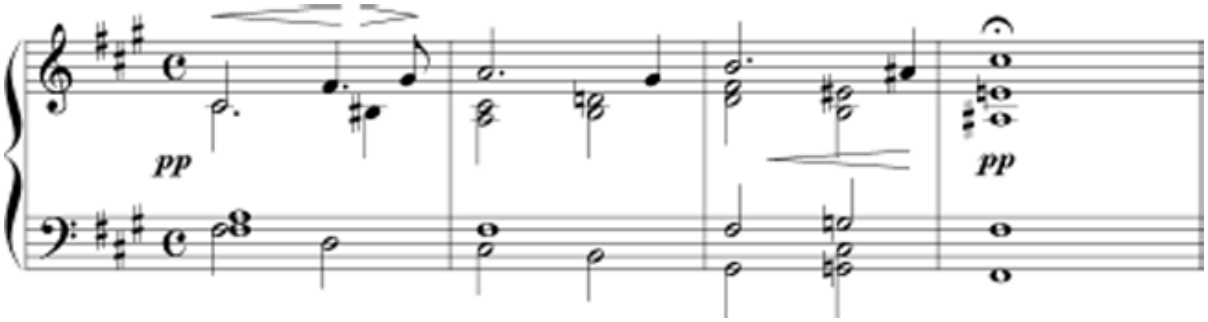
ex. 10-2b Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Rhine" leitmotif



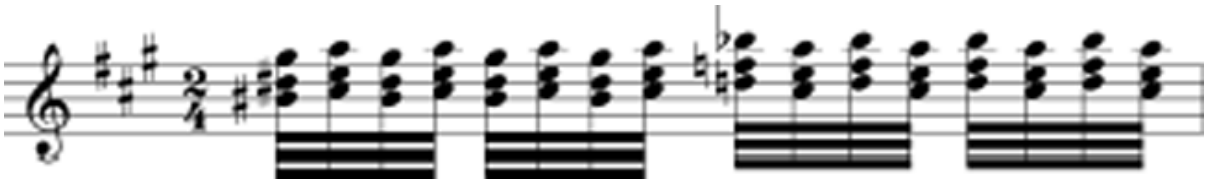
ex. 10-2c Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Erda" leitmotif



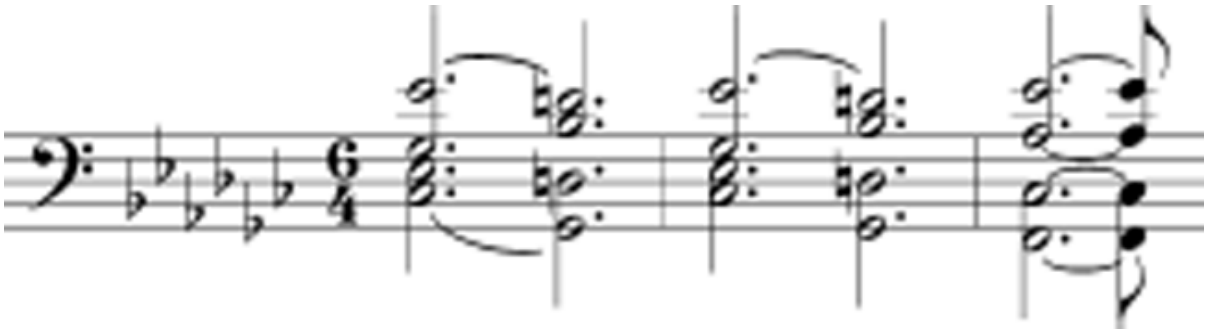
ex. 10-2d Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Fate" leitmotif



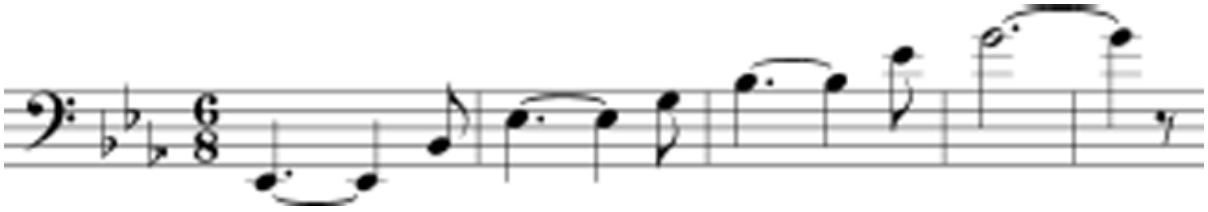
ex. 10-2e Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Death" leitmotif



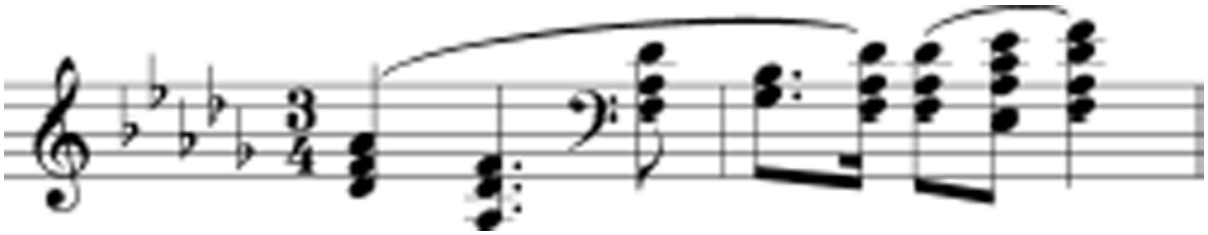
ex. 10-2f Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Loge" leitmotif



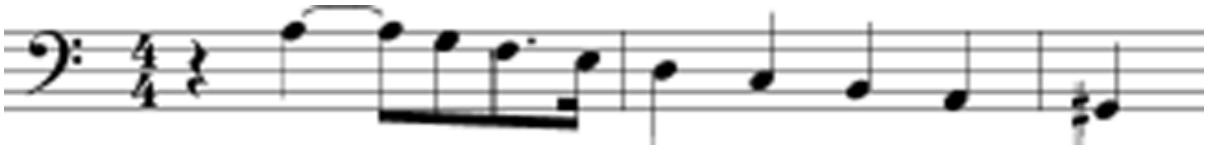
ex. 10-2g Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, Norns' ballad refrain



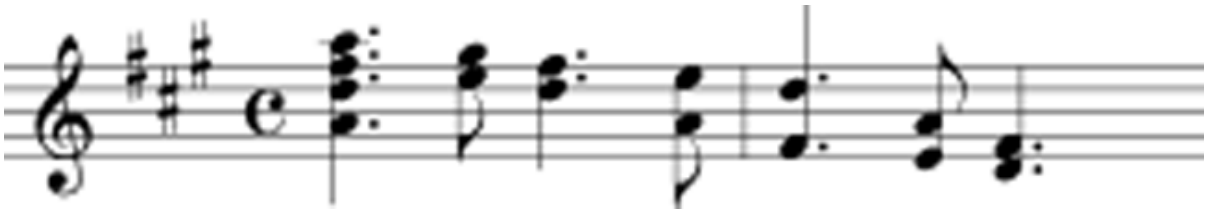
ex. 10-2h Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Genesis" leitmotif



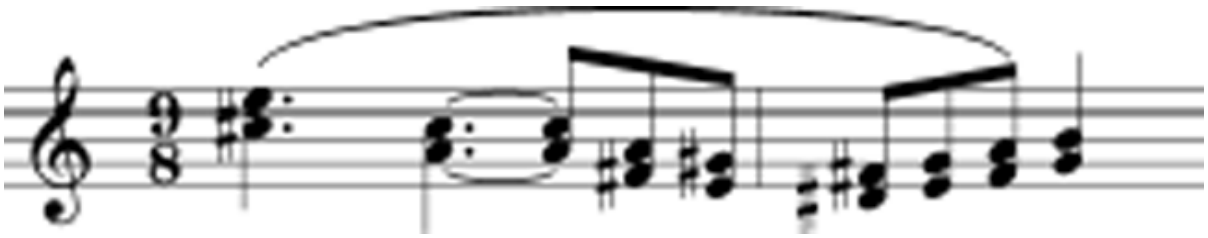
ex. 10-2i Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Valhalla" leitmotif



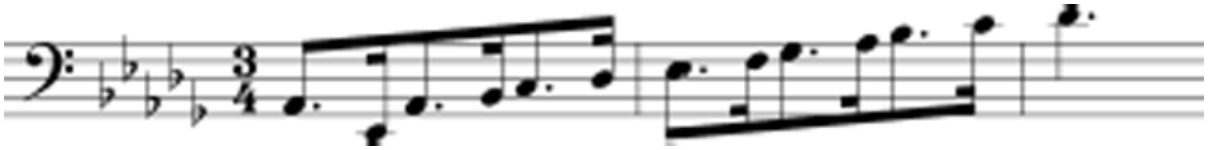
ex. 10-2j Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Treaty" leitmotif



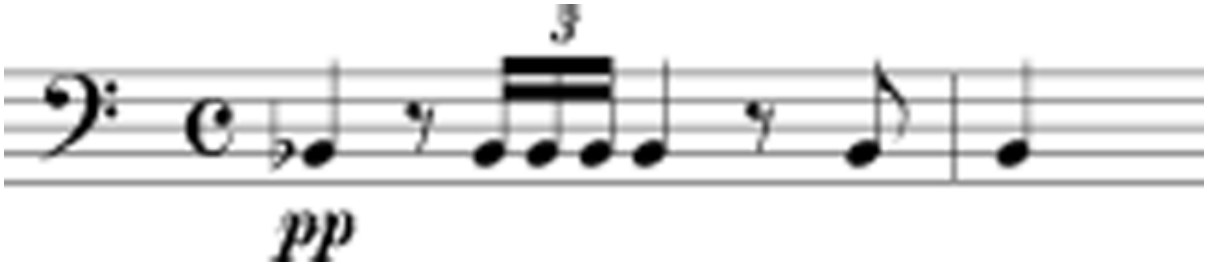
ex. 10-2k Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Götterdämmerung" leitmotif



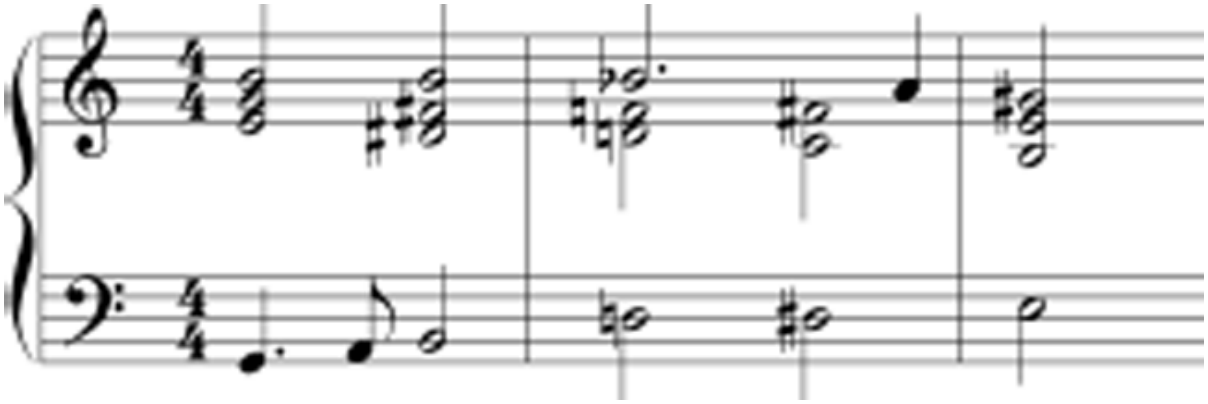
ex. 10-2l Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Ring" leitmotif



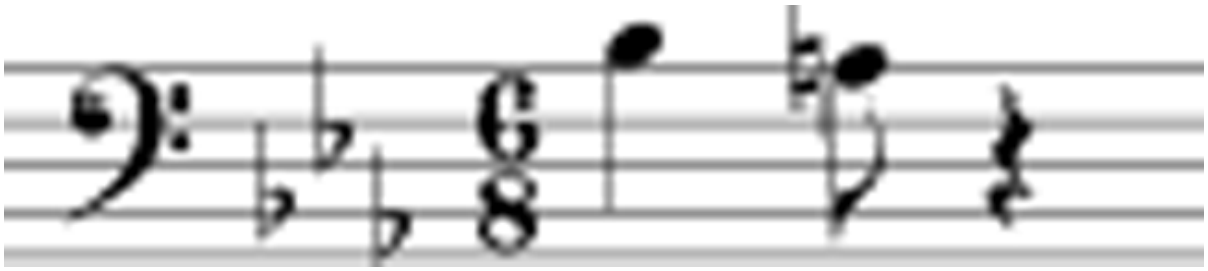
ex. 10-2m Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Authority" leitmotif



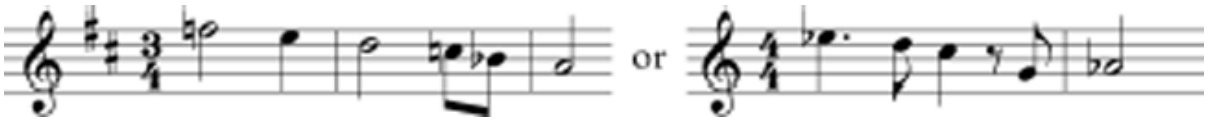
ex. 10-2n Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Omen" leitmotif



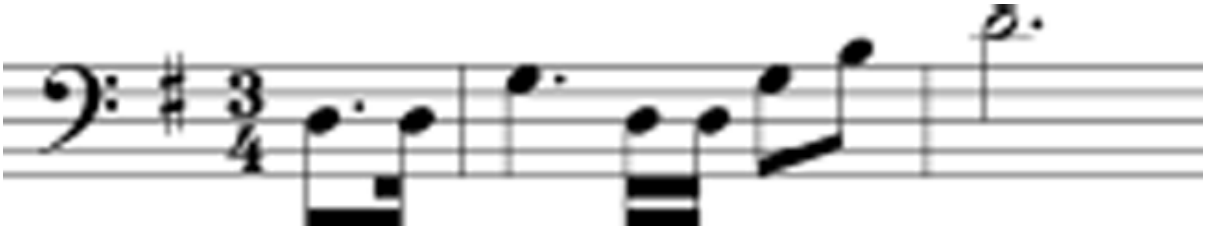
ex. 10-2o Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Oblivion" leitmotif



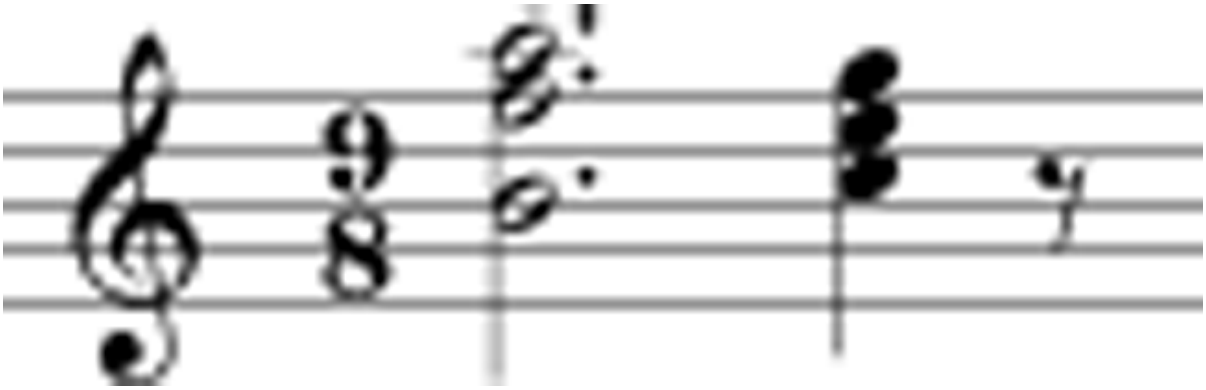
ex. 10-2p Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Grief" leitmotif



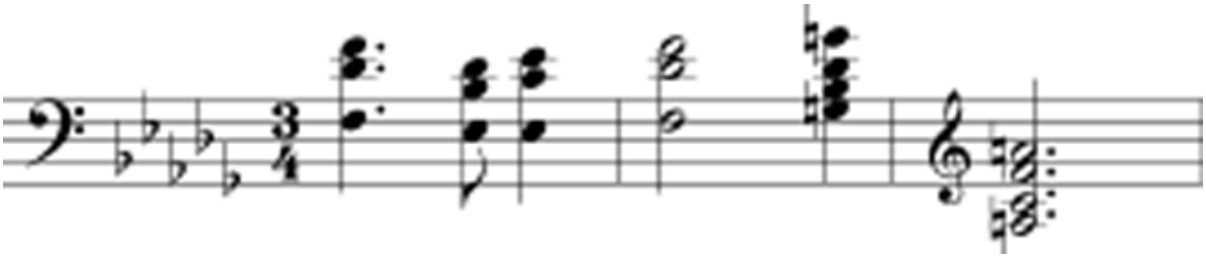
ex. 10-2q Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Liebe-Tragik" leitmotif



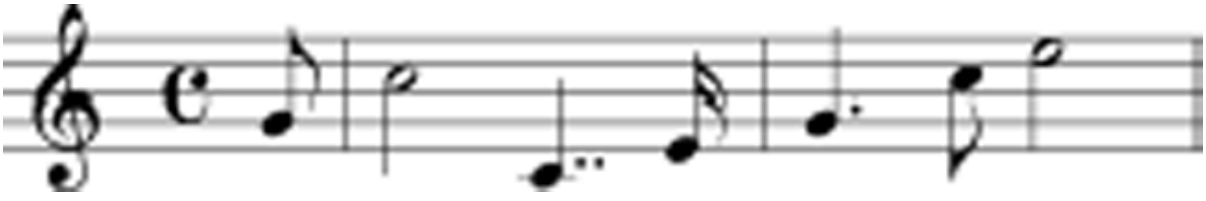
ex. 10-2r Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Rhine gold" leitmotif



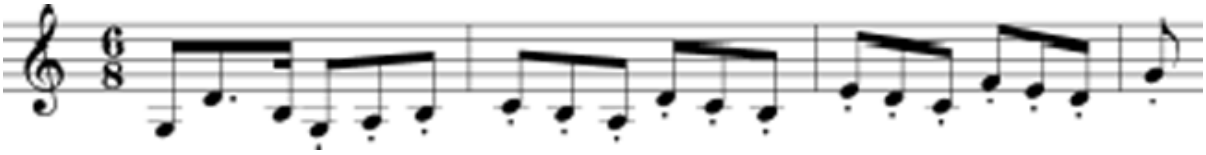
ex. 10-2s Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Joy" leitmotif



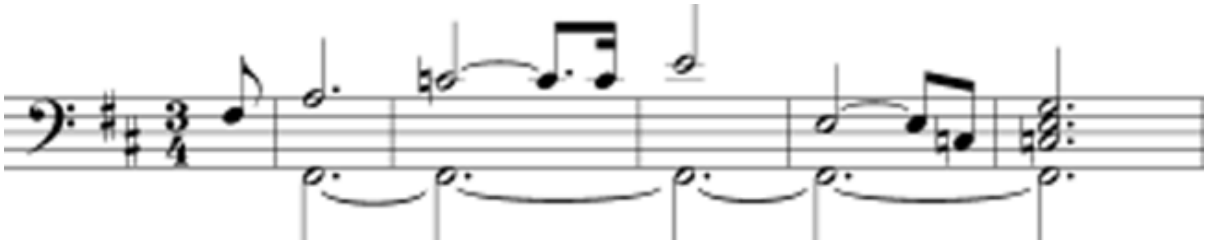
ex. 10-2t Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Gold's dominion" leitmotif



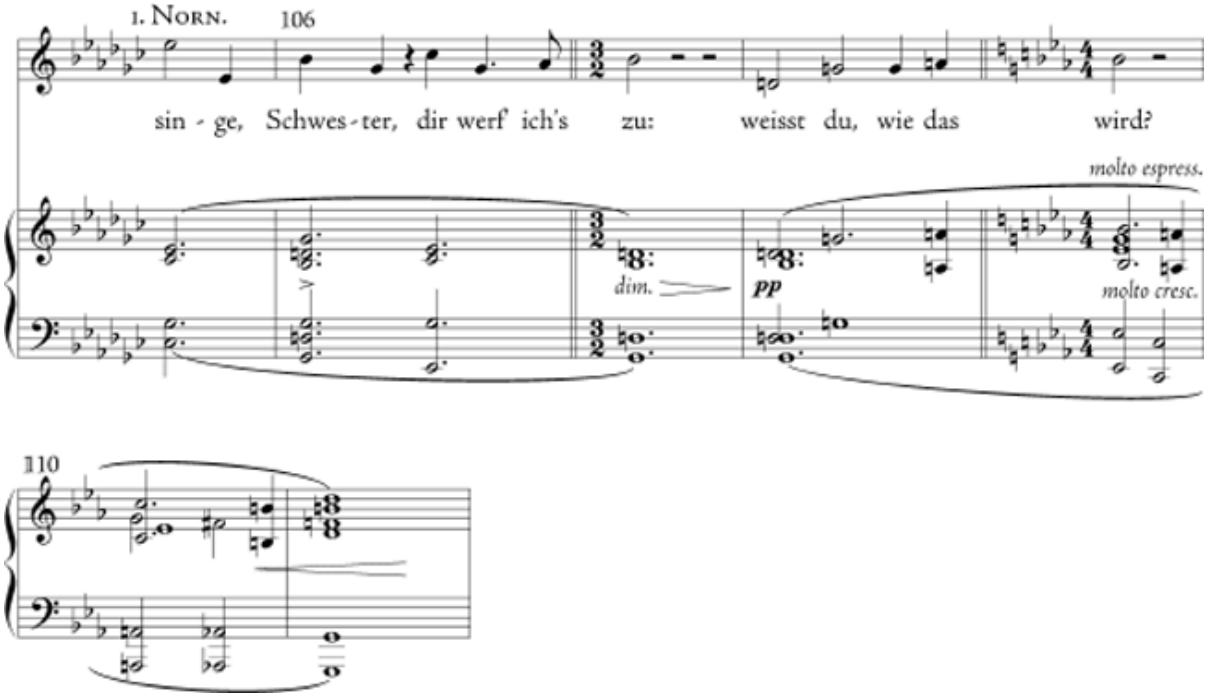
ex. 10-2u Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Sword" leitmotif



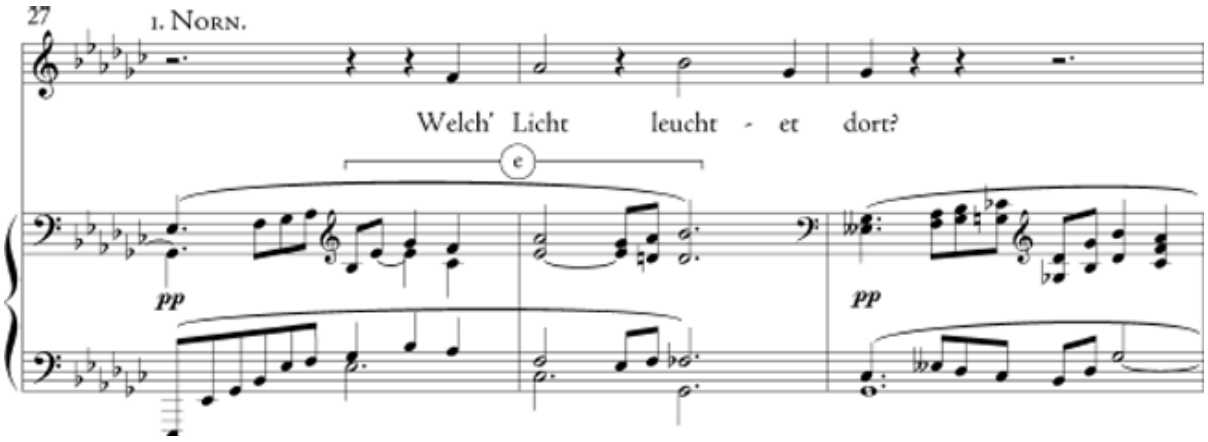
ex. 10-2v Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried's horn call leitmotif



ex. 10-2w Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, "Curse" leitmotif



ex. 10-3a Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* in vocal score, leitmotives labeled (on first occurrence only) as in Ex. 10-2, mm. 105–111



ex. 10-3b Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* in vocal score, leitmotives labeled (on first occurrence only) as in Ex. 10-2, mm. 27–29

The denseness of the motivic weave is in itself an illustration of the poem, which (to recall the setting of 1850, sampled in Ex. 10-1) concerns the weaving of the rope of destiny. As Wagner put it in an exultant letter to King Ludwig on finally finishing the scene where it had all started in May 1870, "I contemplated the Norns' scene with real horror, and for a long time I refused to get involved in it. But now, at last, I have woven this horror into the fabric of the rope, and I admit that it is a unique webbing."[34] And yet for all its complicated webbing the Norns' weaving song is still a ballad-narrative, just as it had been the first time around. Wagner, the epic bard, sings his tale in the manner of his medieval predecessors. Its refrain—

singe, Schwester,	Sing, my sister,
dir werf ich's zu:	I throw [the rope] your way:
weisst du, wie das wird?	Do you know what will be?

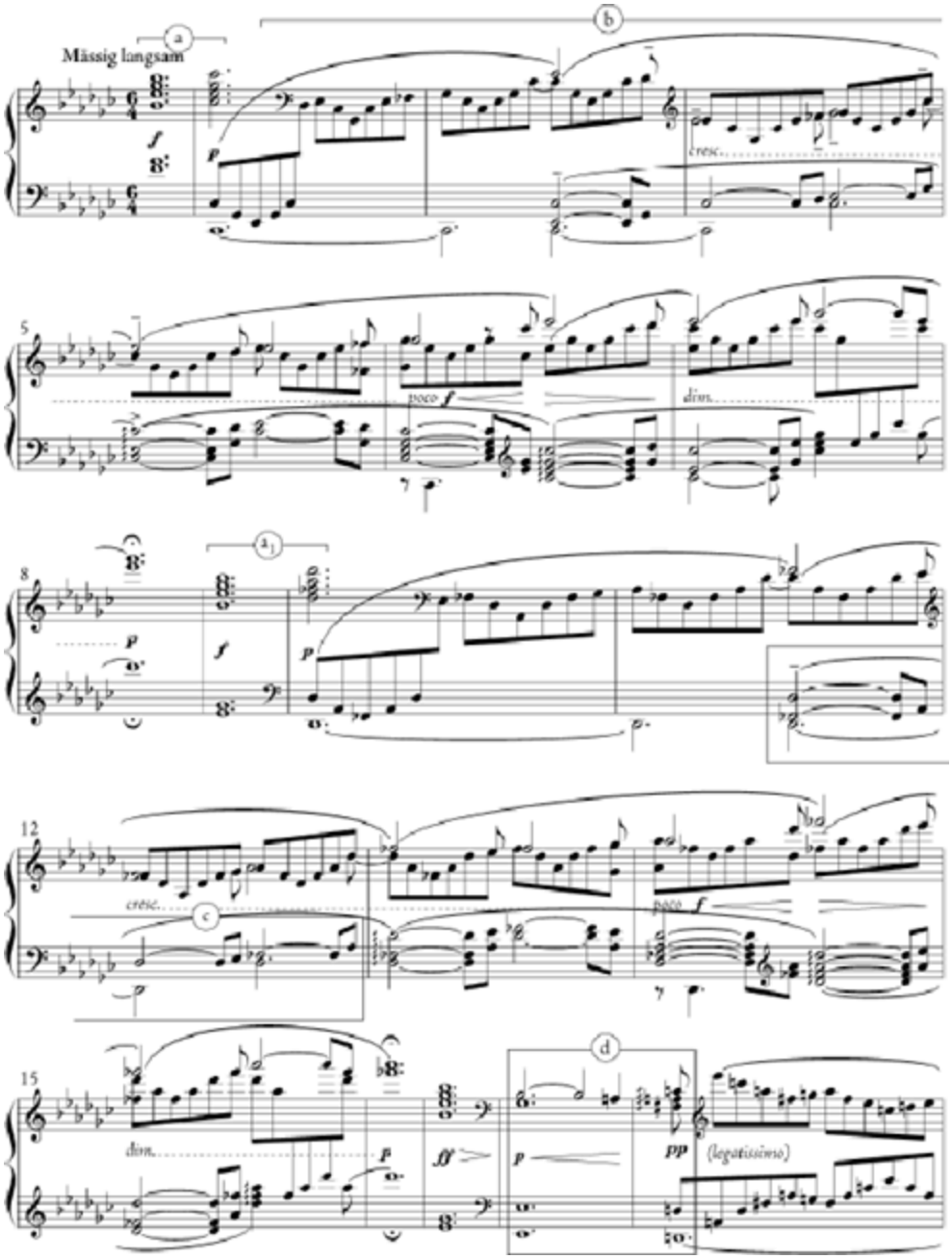
—is an excellent example of Wagnerian Stabreim incantation with its patterns of S's and, most obviously, W's (Ex. 10-3a). An even more striking example is the first line in the scene (Ex. 10-3b), sung by the Third Norn, which sets the tone for the whole opera: "Welch' Licht leuchtet dort?" ("What glow glimmers there?" in the translation by Rudolph Sabor,[35] who summons apt alliteration's artful aid). But Wagner's alliterations are not confined to initials. The combination *-lch-* at the end of *Welch*' is expanded first to *Lich*t and then to *l*eu*ch*tet, while the new combination *-cht* at the end of *Licht*, also repeated in leu*cht*et, is echoed in the final *t* of *leuchtet* and *dort*. These combinations and recombinations correspond on the verbal plane to the tissue of combining and recombining leitmotives in the music.

The verses assembled out of the shifting alliterative patterns, together with the music that carries it aloft, serve to reconstitute the Wagner world in the mind of the spectator, and to recapitulate its history up to the point at which the action of the final opera will begin: that is, the point immediately preceding the catastrophic dénouement. The Norns' song in its final version does not correspond exactly to the story of the three preceding operas, since it begins at an earlier point in time. Rather, it is a summary of the all-encompassing world-epic that the four *Ring* dramas each partially enact. Here is a somewhat straightened-out and filled-in summary of the summary:

> Long ago, as they worked, the Norns had slung their rope upon the world ash-tree, at the foot of which a spring whispering wisdom welled up. One day Wotan, king of the gods, came to drink from the spring and hacked himself a branch from the tree with which to make himself a shaft for his spear, upon which he inscribed the runes of binding treaties honorably respected, by virtue of which he made himself ruler of the world. Later, Wotan commissioned the giants Fasolt and Fafner to build him a stronghold, Valhalla, which was to be garrisoned with the souls of heroes fallen in battle. It was the duty of the Valkyrie maidens, daughters of Wotan and the earth-goddess Erda, to bring in these heroes from the battlefield. In payment of the giants' labors, Wotan promised Fasolt and Fafner Freia, the goddess of youth, which promise, however, trusting to the specious cunning of Loge, god of fire, he did not intend to honor. When called upon to do so, he tricked Alberich, lord of the dwarf Nibelung smiths, out of his hoard of gold, and with this he then bought off the giants. From this moment of Wotan's perfidy, the world ash-tree began to wither and the spring to dry up.
>
> The Nibelung hoard contained a magic ring, the gold for which had been stolen from the daughters of the Rhine by Alberich, who had been able to fashion it only by forswearing love. Mastery of this ring would eventually lead its possessor to mastery of the world. When deprived of it by force, Alberich had laid a curse on it: death to whoever possessed it; a great deal of the story of the *Ring* is the story of the workings of this curse. Realizing that he had only escaped death himself by a technicality—that he had only briefly held Alberich's ring on its way to the giants (one of whom immediately kills the other for its sole possession)—Wotan has resolved that it be returned to the Rhine whence it was originally filched.
>
> Because she attempted to execute her father's *secret* desire in defiance of his *expressed* wish (with respect to the outcome of a battle of heroes), Wotan was obliged to imprison his Valkyrie daughter Brünnhilde, locked in sleep, on a rock surrounded by Loge's fire. There she was to remain inviolate until such time as a hero who knew not the meaning of fear should come to wake her. Siegfried, son of the Volsung twins Siegmund and Sieglinde, appeared, set upon accomplishing this. Siegfried, however, was tainted by possession of the fateful ring, which he won by killing the surviving giant (in the guise of a dragon) at the behest of his foster father Mime, the brother of Alberich, who had raised Siegfried in hopes of gaining the ring for himself. With his spear, Wotan attempted to bar the young hero's passage to the flame-girt rock upon which Brünnhilde slumbered. The spear's might was shattered by the sword that Siegfried had inherited from his pure

> father Siegmund, after which the young superman continued on his way to Brünnhilde unopposed. Thwarted in his attempt to recover the gold for the Rhine maidens, foreseeing Siegfried's and Brünnhilde's deaths from the ring, and knowing that the world was doomed, Wotan dispatched heroes from Valhalla to hew the withered trunk and branches of the world ash-tree in pieces and pile them up around Valhalla so that they might catch fire, when the time came, from Siegfried's funeral pyre.
>
> The spring of wisdom has dried up forever. Wotan sits in Valhalla surrounded by all the gods and heroes, awaiting the coming of the end. The Norns, deprived of their former abode, have moved to Brünnhilde's rock, where they have resumed their weaving, attaching the rope to the branch of a pine tree and to a promontory on the rock. The second Norn prophesies that Wotan will kill the cunning Loge, who led him fatally astray, with the shards of his shattered spear and will hurl it onto the pyre. These somber imaginings, coupled with the thought of the stolen gold still unreturned to its rightful guardians, trouble the minds of the Norns and cloud their vision. They fail to see that the rope is fraying against the rock until it is too late. Heaving on it to tighten its twist, they cause it to snap. Terrified, crying that eternal wisdom is ending and that they can speak to the world no more, the Norns sink down to their mother Erda, and vanish forever.[36]

The whole narrative is about the rupture of linear time and about the fatal necessity that interrelates and intermeshes past, present, and future, producing the tenseless time that myths inhabit. This, of course, was the very thing the tissue of leitmotives was devised to portray, and Wagner's music starts right out by proclaiming it. The majestic opening chords are a near replay of the music to which Brünnhilde greeted the sun after receiving the title character's awakening kiss in the third act of *Siegfried*, the finale of the previous drama (“Heil dir, Sonne,” Ex. 10-2a). The allusion is no mere reminder of where the previous drama had left off, however, but a “transformation” (à la Liszt, it is fair to say) of the earlier passage.


a
Mässig langsam
b
cresc.
5
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8
a1
12
cresc.
c
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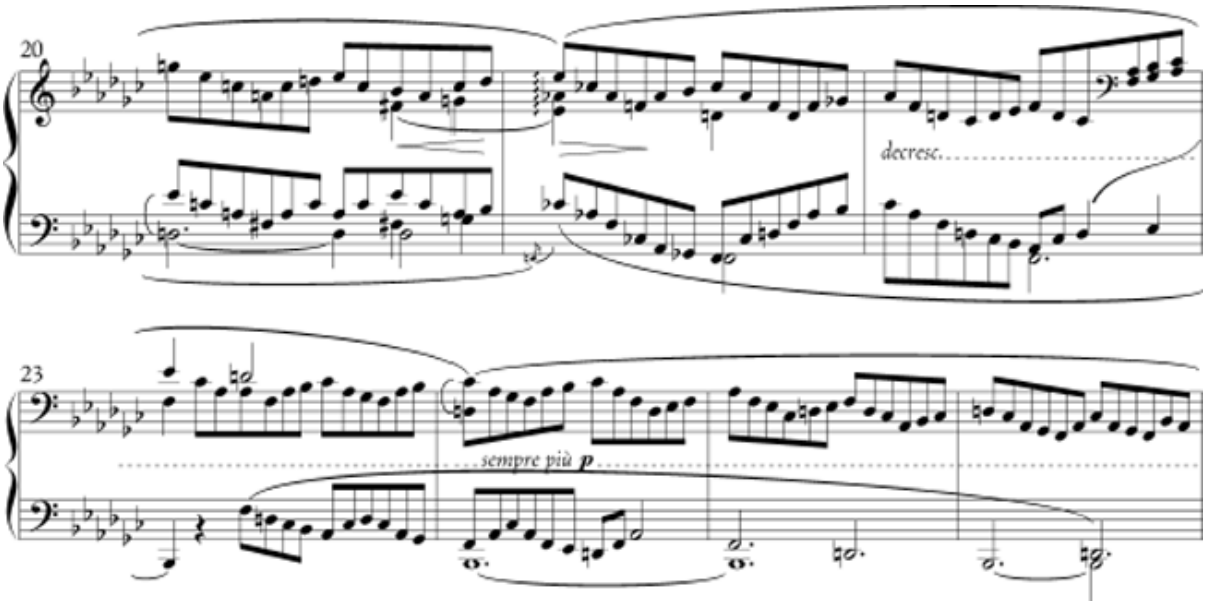
(legatissimo)



ex. 10-4 Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* in vocal score, leitmotives labeled (on first occurrence only) as in Ex. 10-2, mm. 1–26

Where at the end of *Siegfried* these chords made a gleaming progression from E minor to C major, at the beginning of *Götterdämmerung* (Ex. 10-4), the tonality is darkened considerably by transposition down a half step: E ♭ minor and C ♭ major. (In effect, it has been transposed to the key of Wagner's early sketch for *Siegfrieds Tod*, nor will this be the only instance of Wagner's uncanny recall of that twenty-year-old sketch which, scholars have determined, was no longer in his possession when he finally returned to the scene.) In tone-color, too, the sound is muffled, and in an especially Wagnerian way. The trumpets and horns heard in *Siegfried* are replaced by horns and "Wagner tubas."

The latter—more formally, tenor tubas in B ♭ and small bass tubas in F, each pitched an octave lower than the corresponding French horn—were first built to Wagner's specifications for the earliest performances of *Das Rheingold*, which took place in 1865, although the parts for them were composed in 1854. Adapted from the "saxhorn" (French band instruments manufactured beginning in the early 1850s by the Paris firm of Adolphe Sax, the inventor, somewhat earlier, of the saxophone), the Wagner tuba was meant to fill the gap between the horns and the standard contrabass tuba with the softened and covered timbre of conical-bore brass, rather than the thinner, more penetrating cylindrical-bore timbre of trombones.

Trumpets and trombones remained, of course; the Wagner orchestra, with its standard complement of seventeen brass instruments (from four to eight horns, up to four "tuben," four trumpets including the otherwise rare bass trumpet, four trombones, and standard tuba), complemented by fourteen woodwinds and a specified minimum of sixty-four strings, was the largest ever. But it was not large merely for the sake of volume. The "cushioned" sound of the Wagner orchestra, on its soft bed of brass—and especially when played, as Wagner further specified, in a covered pit such as the Bayreuth theater possessed—produces a sound of unprecedented pliant sensuality. The opening chords of *Götterdämmerung*, unlike their shining predecessors in *Siegfried*, are sublimely tranquilizing, trance-inducing. In this, they accomplish what countless accounts of actual bardic recitation describe as the function of the instrumental prelude that invariably preceded the singing of the tale.

But the most potent and (literally) telling part of the chords' transformation is what follows the first and accompanies the second; for here Wagner displays his mastery of what he called "the art of transition"—the bringing of musical entities into harmonious juxtaposition and the seamless passing from one to another. It is nothing less than the eternally rolling Rhine itself (Ex. 10-2b), as originally set forth in the Prelude to *Das Rheingold* at the very beginning of the *Ring* cycle (or even more primevally, in the accompaniment to the Norns in the early sketch as shown in Ex. 10-1), to which all will return at the end of *Götterdämmerung*.

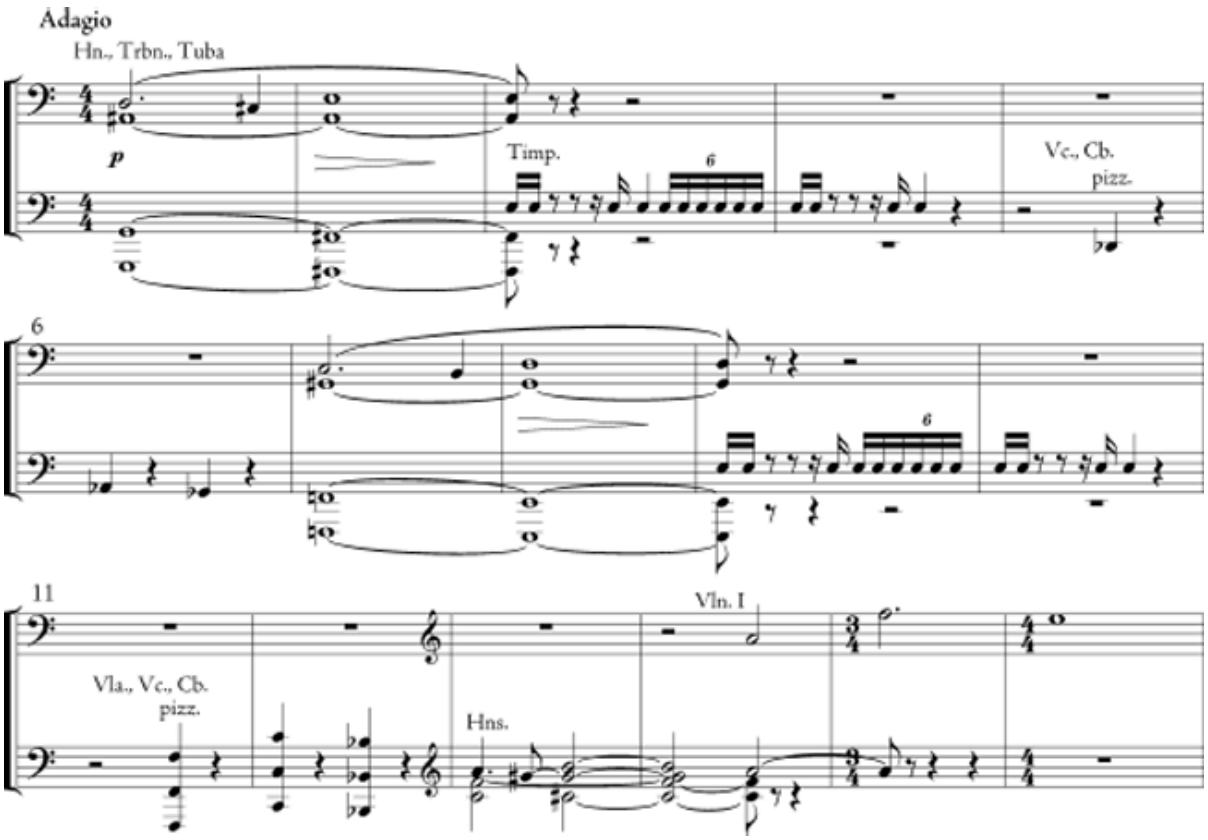
This fluent commingling of primeval origins and eventual destiny with the moment at hand evokes what the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) would later term the "epic chronotope" or epic time-mode, the "timeless past" or "time out of time" of myth.[37] As Bakhtin described it in his essay *Epic and Novel* (1941), the epic chronotope is a wholly alien, sealed-off quality of time that is understood to be an "absolute past" unfolding not as a linear development potentially leading to the present

but as a completed, closed “circle” on which “all points are equidistant from the real, dynamic time of the present, as if the fullness of time were contained in a world in which we cannot participate,” but in which we are easily absorbed. Bakhtin wrote with reference to Homer. Wagner's *Ring* is the supreme modern embodiment of this ancient time mode, and it is the musical texture that seals it off and makes it so perfectly and untouchably whole.

When the recall of Brünnhilde's awakening reaches its fourth chord (D ♭ minor), the slower Rhine motif is transformed into the leitmotif associated with Erda, the Norns’ mother, who is as primeval as the Rhine itself (Ex. 10-2c, quoted from its first appearance in *Das Rheingold*). In its original form, Brünnhilde's awakening motif circled back on itself with a repetition of the opening pair of chords. In *Götterdämmerung*, the second chord in this final pair is preempted, in a stunning example of “transition-art,” by the weird progression that ever since the second act of *Die Walküre* has been associated with the concept of fate (Ex. 10-2d). It acquired this association from the original dramatic context: Brünnhilde appearing to Siegmund on the eve of battle to tell him that Wotan had been compelled to decree his death. And in its original context the motif was followed by another that is traditionally associated with the death itself, as decreed by fate (Ex. 10-2e). It first reappears in *Götterdämmerung* to provide the shuddering accompaniment to the beginning of the Norns’ colloquy, already quoted in Ex. 10-3b.

The fate motif, it could be (and has been) fairly argued along lines noted above, has a wider relevance in the unfolding of the *Ring* drama than its facile label would allow. In the very next scene in *Die Walküre*, for example, it is heard when Siegmund recalls the apparition of Brünnhilde and the *comfort* that she brought him. In the next act, it accompanies Brünnhilde's reminder to Wotan that her outward defiance of his will (in trying to save Siegmund's life) was in fact her *obedience* to his secret wish. In the third act of *Siegfried*, it accompanies Erda's rebuke, on being awakened by the importunate Wotan, that he has only himself and his perfidy to blame for his predicament—a fixing of responsibility and just deserts that suggests the very opposite (or so one could maintain) of blind fate as controller of destiny. Indeed, most of the leitmotives in the *Ring*, if subjected to a similarly detailed census, would need to be interpreted in light of similar contradictions and paradoxes—all of which, it should be emphasized, only increases the yield of meaning (the way detailed study always does).

But to argue from such evidence that the famous label should be revoked would be to ignore the motif's wider relevance in the unfolding drama of modern music history. It was as the Fate motif—a widely recognized musical symbol with a potential range of relevance that far outstrips its original context in the *Ring*, vast as that may be—that the Soviet Russian composer Dmitry Shostakovich cited it at the outset of the somber finale of his Symphony no. 15 (1971), his last major orchestral work, and (by giving it a sequential treatment that hooked it up with the ancient *passus duriusculus*, the chromatically descending bass line of lamentation) helped give it that wider relevance (Ex. 10-5).



ex. 10-5 Dmitri Shostakovich, Symphony no. 15, beginning of fourth movement

As it functions in Shostakovich's symphony, the motif relates only indirectly, if at all, to the events of *Die Walküre* or *Götterdämmerung*. Indeed it could be argued that in its new context its relevance to the *Ring* no longer matters. The only reference that counts is to the oft-despised conventional label that Wagner himself never attached to the phrase. Only through the label could the motif now reflect so poignantly on the life of the symphony's composer, thence on the lives of all who were fated to live and work in the turbulent middle of the twentieth century, in a place where that turbulence had been focused through a lens of totalitarianism.

That “universal” message was something Wagner never anticipated, but it is no less real for that. Meaning is the product of history—in the case of art works, of a “reception history”—that in the case of the Fate motif includes at least two appropriations: first Wolzogen's, through which the label was attached in the first place, then Shostakovich's, through which the label was given a new association, unrelated (except through collateral descent) to its original context. Neither Wagner nor Wolzogen—nor Shostakovich for that matter—finally owns the motif's meaning. Like all symbols (like words, to pick the most obvious example), it responds to new conditions and contexts with new significance.

To return now to the *Götterdämmerung* Prologue, and proceed to the Norns’ narrative: the leitmotif that accompanies their reaction to the dawn, and their decision to take up their spinning, is the one associated ever since *Das Rheingold* with Loge, the god of fire and light (and by extension, of intelligence), who, acting in a sense as Wotan's lawyer, tricked Alberich out of his hoard and set in motion the catastrophic sequence of events the outcome of which the Norns are about to foresee (Ex. 10-2f). The rocking chord progression that accompanies the Second Norn's “Wollen wir spinnen und singen” and launches the ballad-narrative on its way (Ex. 10-2g) is the only theme that is new to this scene (and therefore, very strictly speaking, not a leitmotif, especially since it will recur in no later scene). It is very important, however, since it comes back to accompany (hence identify) the refrains, and also because its ending “half-diminished” chord (F–A ♭ –C ♭ –E ♭), already foreshadowed in the wake of the Fate motif (Ex. 10-4, m. 21), assumes such an independent significance in the course of the Prologue that it might even be thought of as a “Leitharmonie” in its own right.

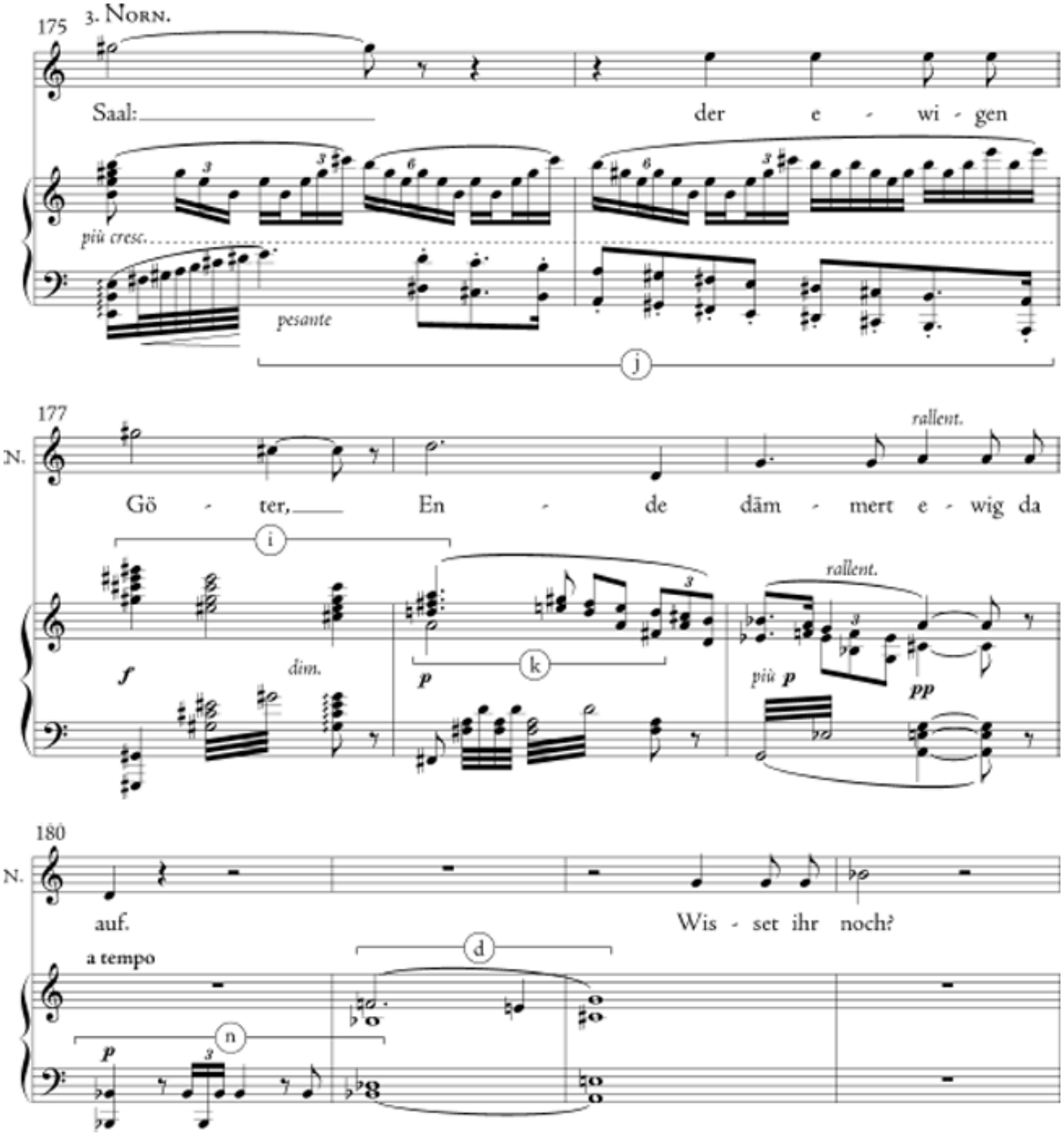
When the first Norn begins to recount the tale of the World-Ash, the mother of all leitmotives is sounded, the “natural” horn signal that portrays the primeval Rhine at the very start of the cycle (Ex. 10-2h)—sometimes, in an aptly biblical figure, called the

Genesis motif. Her ballad-narrative proceeds to its own theme as long as events preceding the beginning of *Das Rheingold* are its subject. But at the mention of Wotan, the motif associated with his fortress lodge Valhalla (Ex. 10-2i), the trophy of his greed and the cause of his fateful breach of contract, is sounded. And it is immediately followed, in a conjunction that goes all the way back to *Das Rheingold*, with the leitmotif associated with the broken treaty, or rather with the reminder Wotan receives from his wife Fricka "that contracts must be kept" (Ex. 10-2j). The consequences are hinted when the Norn recalls the death of the Ash: the motif that accompanies Erda's dire prediction, near the end of *Das Rheingold*, that Wotan's greed will bring about "a day of doom" is heard (Ex. 10-2k). Now usually (and somewhat confusingly) called the Götterdämmerung motif, it is obviously derived by inversion (and "crab"—reverse—motion) from the Genesis motif, as if undoing all that had in primeval times been wrought. Its mysterious Lydian character (with a sort of "raised fourth degree") arises from its invariable occurrence on a flat-sixth or Neapolitan harmony, the tonal remoteness of which cannily enhances its aura of uncanniness.

The cause of it all—the object of Wotan's greed and of Erda's warning, from which the whole colossal cycle takes its name—is finally adumbrated when the First Norn refers to the dark sadness of her song: the Ring motif (Ex. 10-2l), which consists always of a downward+upward arpeggio (sometimes outlining a triad, sometimes, as on its first appearance, a mere concatenation of thirds) that never manages to rise all the way back to its starting point. The end of the ballad refrain, which marks the transition to the Second Norn's narrative, is once again forebodingly accompanied by the Death motif.

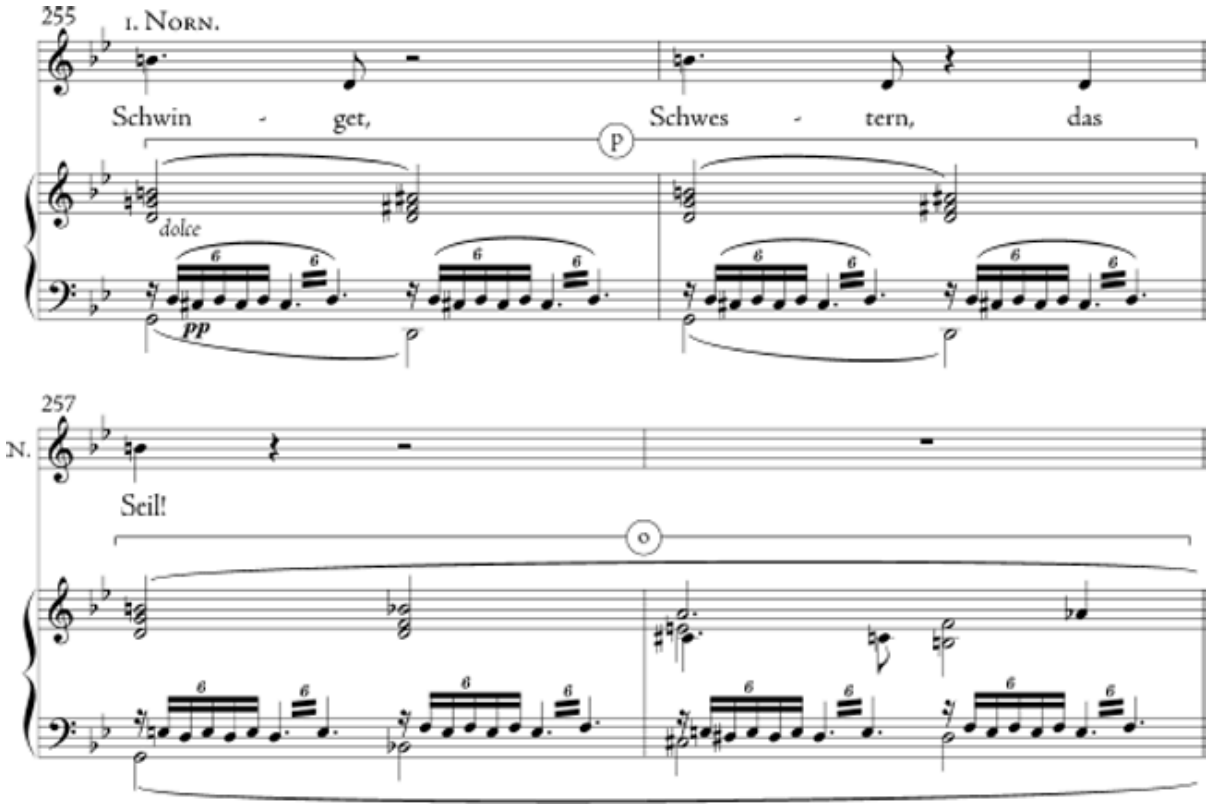
To the skein of leitmotives already woven by the First Norn, the Second adds only one new item: the pompously dotted motif originally associated in the first act of *Siegfried* with Wotan's proud reference to the power of his spear, on which the laws of the world are engraved (Ex. 10-2m; compare Ex. 10-2j). It is usually called the Authority motif, and accompanies the Second Norn's reference to the sacred runes that, once transgressed, could no longer ward off Siegfried's conquest of Brünnhilde.

The Third Norn, again taking up the rope to the ominous strains of the Death motif, weaves the longest and densest motivic skein by far, full of ingenious juxtapositions in both the melodic ("horizontal") and harmonic or contrapuntal ("vertical") dimensions. So, for example, when she foretells the disastrous end of the drama, when flames shall in predestined retribution engulf Valhalla and consume the once-eternal gods, the orchestra sounds the Treaty, Valhalla, Götterdämmerung, and Fate themes in close succession, their progress punctuated by a timpani tattoo (Ex. 10-2n) of which the rhythm, ever since the entr'acte following the first scene of *Das Rheingold*, had played the role of a bad omen (Ex. 10-6). Among the grisly events it had helped accompany or foretell were Fafner's murder of his brother Fasolt in fulfillment of Alberich's curse on the Ring (in *Das Rheingold*), Siegmund's death on the battlefield (in *Die Walküre*), and Siegfried's slaying of Mime, his Nibelung stepfather (in *Siegfried*). Later in *Götterdämmerung* it will bear witness to the murder of Siegfried himself.



ex. 10-6 Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* in vocal score, leitmotives labeled as in Ex. 10-2, mm. 175–83

When she resumes her prophecies after some anxious discussion with her sisters, the Third Norn invokes a few more motivic recollections, putting the future in direct contact with the musicalized past and giving it the kind of musical reality that will ensure its accomplishment. Most balefully, the chord progression first associated in the third act of *Die Walküre* with Brünnhilde's entrancement (*Zauberschlafe* or “Magic sleep” according to Wolzogen) and associated thereafter with oblivion (Ex. 10-20) follows the news that the logs from the World-Ash are piled up around Valhalla, and is itself followed by the Fate motif. A wonderful example of Wagner's “art of transition” is the interpolation of the Oblivion motif between the strains of the final ballad refrain (Ex. 10-7): their common element, the falling semitone, is of course an ancient symbol of grief. As such it had actually been commandeered by Wagner to symbolize Alberich's grief (thence grief in general) in the first scene of *Das Rheingold* (Ex. 10-2p), which adds another resonance both to the Norns’ refrain and to the Oblivion motif. Ultimately, as is becoming clear, hard and fast distinctions between Wagner's “particles” inevitably break down. All interpenetrates all, which is precisely the point.


255
1. Norn.
Schwin - get, Schwes - tern, das
p
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257
N.
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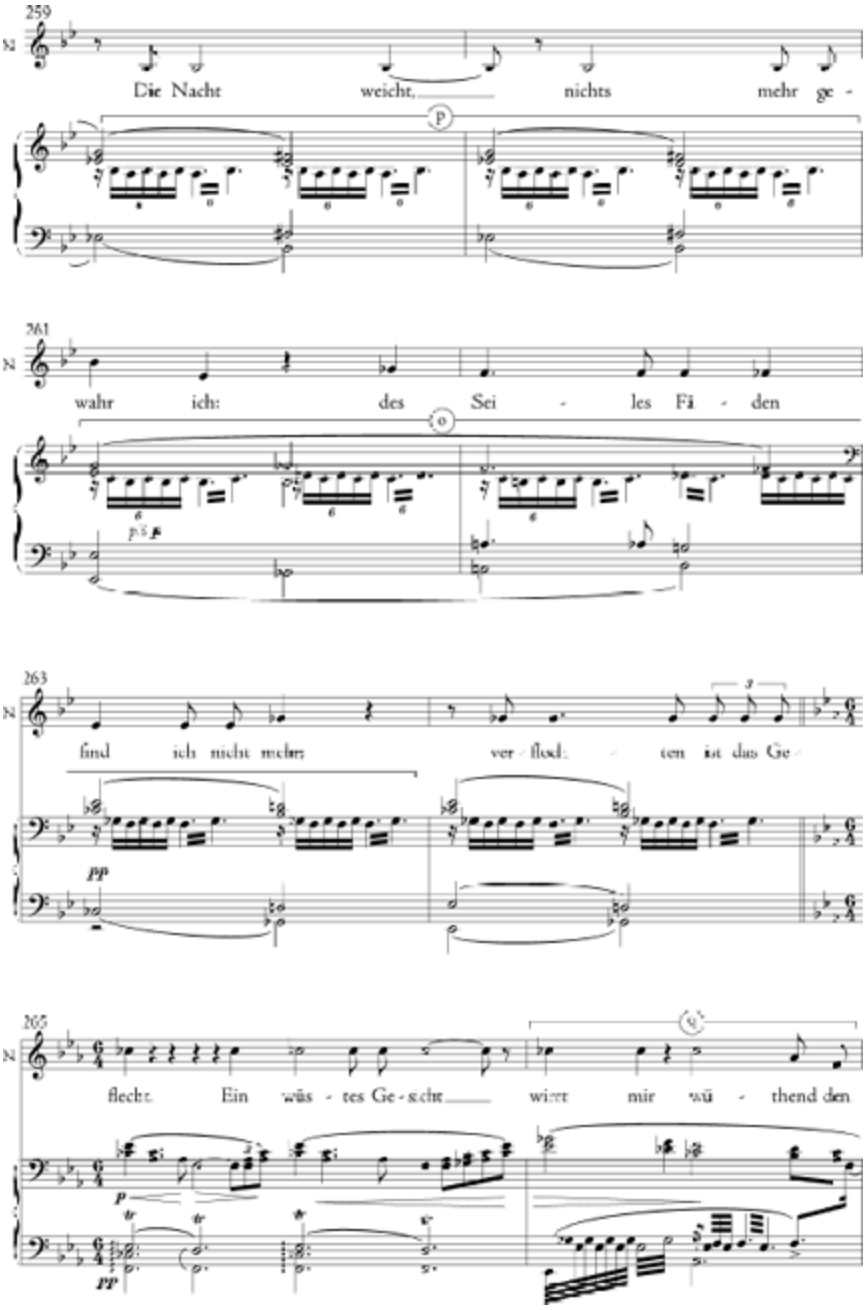
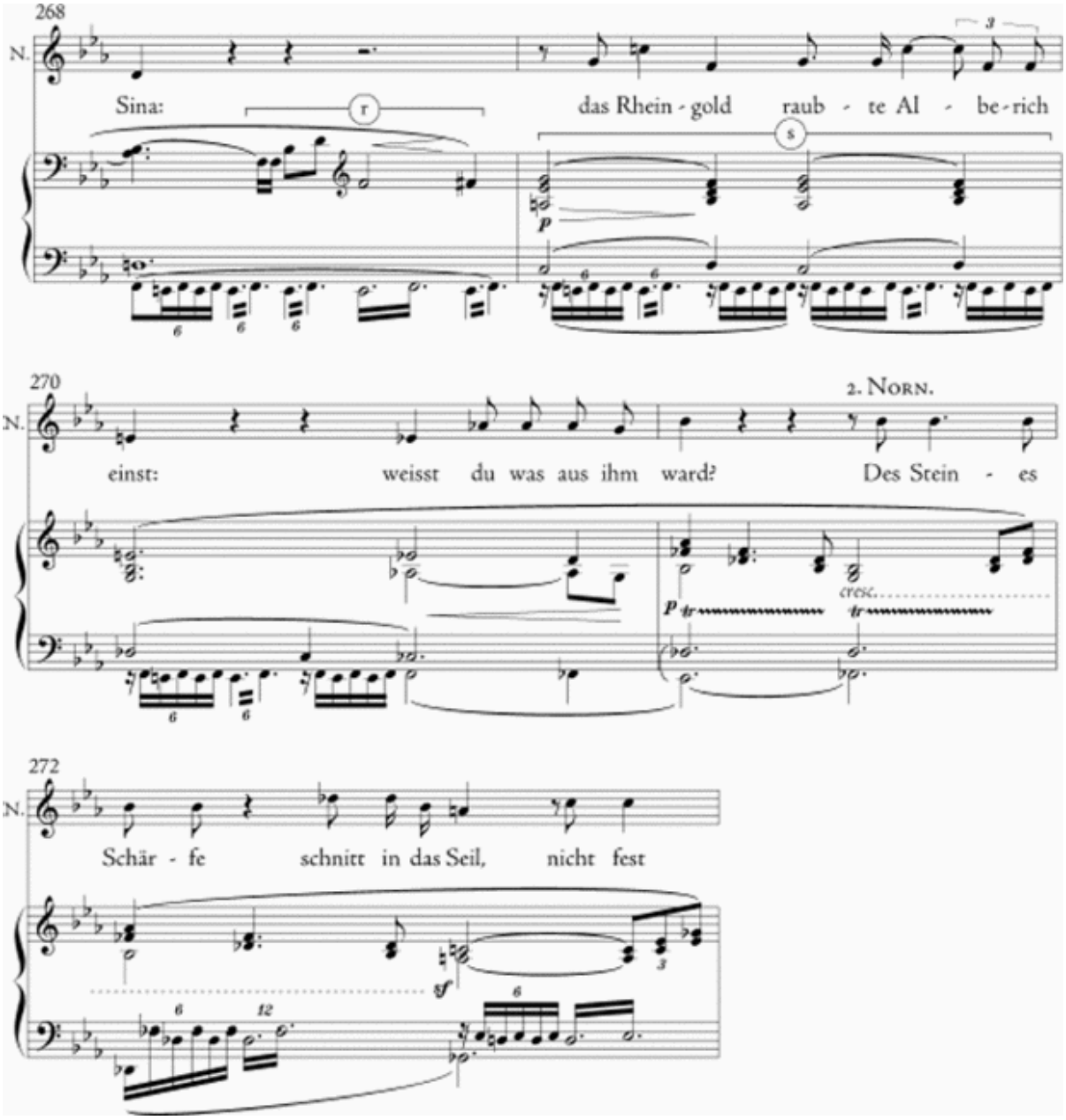
o


259
Die Nacht weicht, nichts mehr ge -
261
wahr ich: des Sei - les Fä - den
263
sind ich nicht mehr ver - flod - ten ist das Ge -
265
flecht. Ein wüs - tes Ge - sicht wirrt mir wü - thend den



ex. 10-7 Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* in vocal score, leitmotives labeled as in Ex. 10-2, mm. 255–72

The interpenetration of Grief and Oblivion with the final Norns' refrain is almost too dramaturgically apt, for it is precisely here, at the end of Ex. 10-7, that the First Norn chimes in, aghast, with the news that the rope of destiny is fraying. Impending ruin puts the First Norn dimly in mind of Alberich's curse, as we are warned by a quick fourfold concatenation of motives. First there is the Ring itself. Next there is the motif somewhat cryptically but evocatively christened *Liebe-Tragik* ("Tragedy of love") by Wolzogen (Ex. 10-2q; he claimed that this one label actually stemmed from Wagner himself), which first appears in *Das Rheingold* when the ugly Alberich is rebuffed by the Rhine maidens. Next to be alluded to is the Rhine gold that Alberich then stole (Ex. 10-2r), a motif first associated in *Das Rheingold*, by specific indication, with a lighting effect that transfixes Alberich and inspires his deed. And finally, in ironic commentary, there is the motif first associated with the Rhine Maidens' joy in possessing the gold, and then with Alberich's at stealing it (Ex. 10-2s). In effect we have been given a wordless four-measure précis of the whole first scene of *Das Rheingold*.

When the Second Norn notices that Brünnhilde's rock, on which the rope is hung, is cutting through its threads, the leitmotives begin associating Siegfried, the unwitting avenger of Wotan's ancient misdeed, with the invincible power of the gold. As the Norn watches her rope unravel, the orchestra combines a motif (*Goldherrschaft* or "Gold's dominion" according to Wolzogen; Ex. 10-2t) first heard in the third scene of *Das Rheingold* as Alberich commands his enslaved fellow-Nibelungs, with that of Siegfried's

sword, his legacy from his father Siegmund, with which he had shattered Wotan's spear (Ex. 10-2u). As the Third Norn misguidedly pulls on the rope to tighten its weave, Siegfried's horn call, the accompaniment to all his heroic deeds in the preceding opera, is heard with fell irony (Ex. 10-2v).

The sword motif, it is worth noting, has had an especially telling interpretive history. Associated with the sword beginning with the first act of *Die Walküre*, it had actually been heard originally near the end of *Das Rheingold*, as Wotan joyfully contemplated Valhalla. It has been left to exegetes to reconcile these contradictory associations through a sort of Christianizing commentary, which though now an integral part of the *Ring* tradition (as the nonbiblical Talmud, a commentary on the Torah, is now an integral part of the tradition of Jewish law) nevertheless did not originate with Wagner. As one commentator, Rudolph Sabor, explains, the first occurrence of the Sword motif establishes the moment "when Wotan resolves to create a free hero: someone who is not tainted by the god's pragmatic dealings and who therefore carries neither guilt nor responsibility. To him will Wotan bequeath a conquering sword. This hero shall, of his own accord, right Wotan's wrongs."[38] (Wotan's resolve is Sabor's contribution to *Ring* lore, not Wagner's.) Finally, to the searing strains of the title character's curse, the most dissonant motif in all of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (Ex. 10-2w), the rope of destiny snaps, to the Norns' ineffable horror. They sink into the earth to join their mother Erda to a concatenation of Curse, Oblivion, Fate, and, of course, Götterdämmerung motives.

Notes:

(34) Wagner to King Ludwig II of Bavaria, 5 May 1870, quoted in Richard Wagner, *Götterdämmerung*, translation and commentary by Rudolph Sabor (London: Phaidon, 1997), p. 23.

(35) *Ibid.*

(36) Adapted from the synopsis of *Götterdämmerung* by Peggy Cochrane in booklet accompanying the London/Decca recording under Georg Solti (1965).

(37) See Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 419–23.

(38) Richard Wagner, *Das Rheingold*, translation and commentary by Rudolph Sabor (London: Phaidon, 1997), p. 169.