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The Relation of Structure to Materials in Anton Webern's *Five Pieces for String Quartet* Op. 5, No. 2[1]

The second movement of Anton Webern's *Five Movements for String Quartet*, a subdued *adagio*, is striking for a number of reasons. Among them is the peculiarity that there are only three brief instances in which all four quartet members play together, and that the dynamic level rarely rises above *pianissimo*, maxing out at an indefinite point above *piano*. But perhaps the most curious aspect of this short piece is the haziness of structural divisions within its overall form. At several moments during the piece, a prominent silence seems to indicate a structural delineation; however, this interpretation is muddled by the continuation of a preceding musical texture and/or motive. Following an examination of basic musical materials, I will propose an interpretation of the form which derives from the nature of melodic statements in the opening measures as well as the relationship between melody and accompaniment during this passage.

Measures 0-4

I would first like to make specific remarks regarding the opening of the piece, observations which will factor significantly in my subsequent interpretation of overall form as well as an argument regarding the relationship of musical materials to that form. The music in mm. 0-4_1 is governed by a fairly conventional device: melody supported by chordal accompaniment.[2] The melodic line, presented in the viola, is comprised of three statements separated by eighth rests.

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[1] I confess that this title is an homage to Simon Emmerson's article "The Relation of Language to Materials," which concerns how structure the electroacoustic medium is often abstracted from salient features of the *objets sonores* used as musical material.

[2] Measure 0 refers to the two-beat anacrusis beginning the movement. Additionally, any measure number followed by a subscript numeral refers to a specific beat within that measure; e.g., mm. 5-7_2 refers to the music beginning on the downbeat of measure 5 and continuing through beat 2 of measure 7.

The first of these statements outlines {046}, a member of set class [026]. The third statement, beginning on the second half of beat 3 in m. 2, is the longest of the three statements and is divisible into two halves: its first four notes form the first half and its last four notes form the second. The Fn in the middle of the phrase serves as a fulcrum – a note shared between the two halves of the melodic statement. This segmentation reveals that the first half of the musical statement (ending on Fn) projects set [0126] while the second half (beginning on the same Fn) projects [0125]. The unique construction of this musical statement – two consecutive Q-related tetrachords linked by a shared pitch – factors significantly into my interpretation of the movement's overall form, which I will explore later. Additionally, we will see how the "resolution" of [0126] to [0125] contributes toward a sensation of closure at the end of the piece.

The accompaniment in mm. 0-4_1 is comprised of three- and four-note sustained chords spread across the 2nd violin and cello. Only three distinct sonorities are asserted, the second and third of which are both members of set class [026], connecting them to the viola line unfolding simultaneously. In examining the harmonic rhythm, one notices that these three sonorities do not exactly correspond one-to-one with the three melodic statements in the viola.

In **Figure 1** (see next page), the top line shows the onset and duration of each viola statement; the previously discussed segmentation of the third statement into two tetrachords linked by a shared pitch is also reflected. The lower line, representing the supporting chordal accompaniment, ignores rests between changes of harmony, extending each chord across silences. This takes into account a common perceptual phenomenon: that, once a sonority has sounded, the listener will continue to recognize that sonority as the underlying harmony – even across relatively short silences – until a harmonic change occurs. One sees clearly that the second accompanimental sonority begins during the viola's second melodic statement and is maintained through tetrachord

1 of the third statement before resolving downward, during the registral peak of tetrachord 2, to C#-B-G. Remarkably, these are the same pitch classes forming the viola's first melodic statement.

Thus, the most critical observations regarding mm. 0-4_1 are in regards to the unique construction of the viola's third melodic statement and the relationship between the onset of each melodic statement and changes in the supporting harmony. Both of these musical phenomena will factor significantly into my interpretation of the overall form.

Ambiguity of Structural Divisions

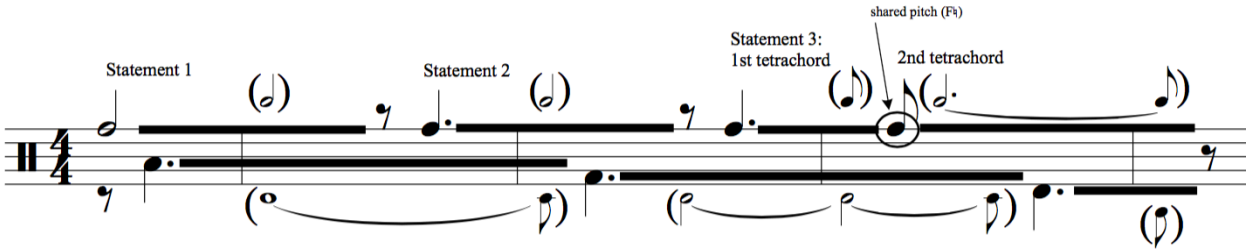


Figure 1: Relationship between the onset/durations of the three viola statements and changes in supporting harmony.

I shall now proceed by identifying possible structural markers within the piece: moments which signal the end of one section and the beginning of another. Measure 4 is the first such moment. The introduction of a new rhythmic subdivision – the 16th note – is an audible cue that something new is afoot, as is the break in sound between beats one and two, provided by an eighth rest. Additionally, m. 4 introduces an [01] motive (D-Eb) in both the cello and viola (under the operation T_4I); this motive is then recalled six times in mm. 5-7, both in original and transformed versions (see **Example 1**, included as a separate page). Thirdly, the four-note *pizzicato* sonority in the viola and cello articulates pitch set [0134], the first appearance of this collection. This plucked chord prepares the first two beats of the following measure, whose harmony is drawn

from the hexachord [013467] of which [0134] is a member set. Together, these pieces of evidence strongly support m. 4 as the start of a new passage.

On the other hand, it is equally reasonable to hear m. 4 as a bookend to the first four measures of the piece based on its prominent rhetorical effect. The *ritardando* at the end of the bar engenders a sense that things are winding down toward a temporary resting point. That resting point is the short *pizzicato* sonority in the viola and cello, given prominence by virtue of being flanked with silence. The spiky gesture punctuates the musical statement provided by the first four measures of the piece, albeit doing so with a marked meekness and quizzicality.

If one were to accept this latter interpretation of m. 4, that it functions as a musical bookend rather than a fresh start, then the resulting implication would be that m. 5 marks the onset of a new section. However, several aspects of the music prompt one to one to question whether or not there has even been a "new section" thus far in the piece. Firstly, mm. 5-6 see a return – after merely *one* measure of respite – to the chordal texture of the opening music. Secondly, the 2nd violin's *molto espressivo* statement is meticulously constructed of concatenated trichords drawn from set class [026], the collection which features so prominently in mm. 0-4_1. These occurrences prompt one to question whether or not there has even been a "new section" thus far in the piece. Does the composer intend for mm. 0-6 to be received as a unit?

The end of m. 6 and beginning of m. 7 is another moment which one might identify as a structural division. Following two measures of the most dense musical texture thus far – with all four quartet members finally playing together, if ever so briefly – the musical fabric thins out to two monophonic lines, a stark contrast to the thick two- and three-note chords of the preceding music. The 1st violin line which blooms across mm. 7-10, much like the viola's third melodic statement in mm. 0-4_1, is constructed of two consecutive tetrachords linked by a shared pitch (D#). In this instance, the two tetrachords are not Q-related but both strongly project [026] (A-B-D#

followed by D#-A-C#, respectively). The undulating 2nd violin line's back-and-forth between Eb and F engenders a static feeling as opposed to the previous music, whose shifting chordal accompaniment maintained a sensation of moving forward, albeit perhaps glacially.

The passage from mm. 10-13 returns to the the musical fabric of mm. 0-4_1 – a slinky melody grounded by sustained chords. In contrast to the opening section, however, these chords are no longer shifting downward but settled into an [037] harmony. The melody, shared between the two violins, is constructed of two statements split between the two instruments. The first and second of these statements is a variation, respectively, on Statements 3 and 1 present in the viola in mm. 0-4_1 (I will examine their exact relationship shortly).

A Proposed Formal Outline

Based on the preceding observations, I propose the following sectional divisions:

Section A: mm. 0-6
Section B: mm. 7-10_1
Section C: mm. 10_2-13

This interpretation allows for m. 4 to function **both** as a bookend to the opening passage and as an introductory link to the following two measures: It is a crucial, shared unit between two musical paragraphs, terminating that which spans mm. 0-4 while providing a glimpse into the next (the *pizzicato* assertion of [0134] links directly with the [013467] sonority beginning m. 10). The latter musical paragraph shares commonalities with the former – particularly the dense chordal accompaniment and melodic projection of [026] – while at the same time emphasizing a new musical direction (i.e., the [01] motive). Thus, mm. 0-6 constitute a section divisible into two parts – mm. 0-4 and 4-6 – which are linked by a shared, singular unit (m. 4). This description of Section A connects directly with our observation regarding the viola's third melodic statement in mm. 0-4_1, which we have segmented into two consecutive, highly similar (Q-related) tetrachords linked

by a shared pitch. It is my contention that this unique melodic construction, appearing a total of three times in the piece (again in mm. 7_3-8 and mm. 10-12_1, both instances in the 1st violin), informs the unique structural assemblage of mm. 0-6.[1]

Furthermore, that the three melodic statements of the opening bars may be used to represent the three sections I've defined, Statements 1, 2, and 3 mapping, respectively, onto Sections A, B, and C in reverse.[2] Finally, that the relationship between the onset of each melodic statement and changes in the supporting harmony provide a fertile metaphor which may be used to explain the continuity of certain musical materials across sectional divisions. **Example 3**, included as a separate page, details the correspondence between the harmonic rhythm of Section A and the continuation and/or shifting of certain musical materials. It is helpful, while considering this point, to refer back to **Figure 1** (and to keep in mind that the events of mm. 0-4_1 map onto the overall musical structure in reverse!).

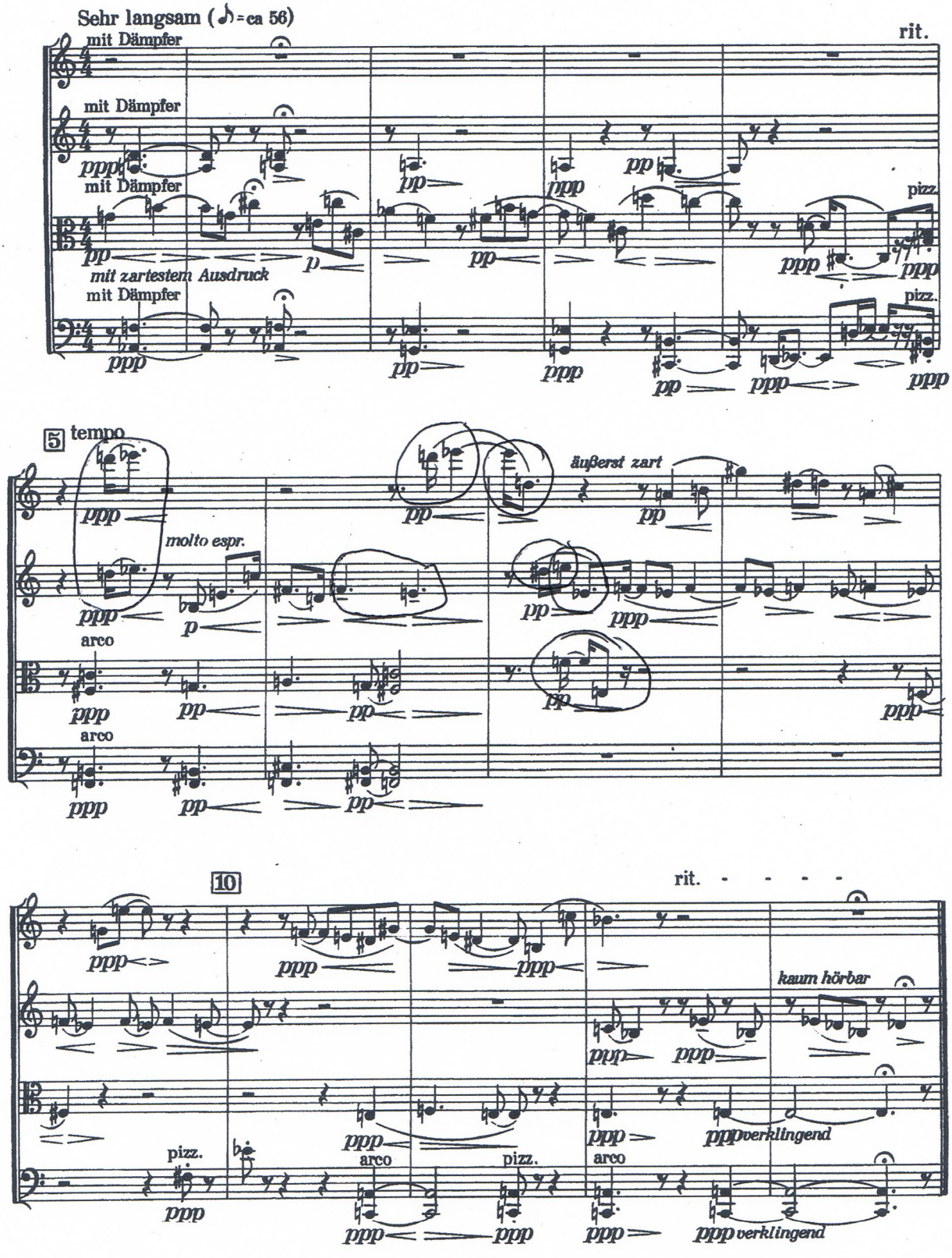
One might question why the three melodic statements of mm. 0-4_1 map onto the three sections of the movement in reverse? It would seem the motivation for this compositional strategy is to facilitate the mapping of the piece's opening statement onto the final section (mm. 10-13), a particularly rich connection given the last two bars feature a 2nd violin melody which is a variant of the viola's opening melody in mm. 0-1. Thus the composer references the very beginning of the piece while creating a sense of finality on several levels: 1) Where the opening viola statement was lyrical and continuous, the 2nd violin line is fragmented and sputtering; 2) Where the viola statement reached upward questioningly, the 2nd violin line crawls downward in resignation; 3) Where the viola statement outlined [026], the 2nd violin line projects the Q-related set [025]. One

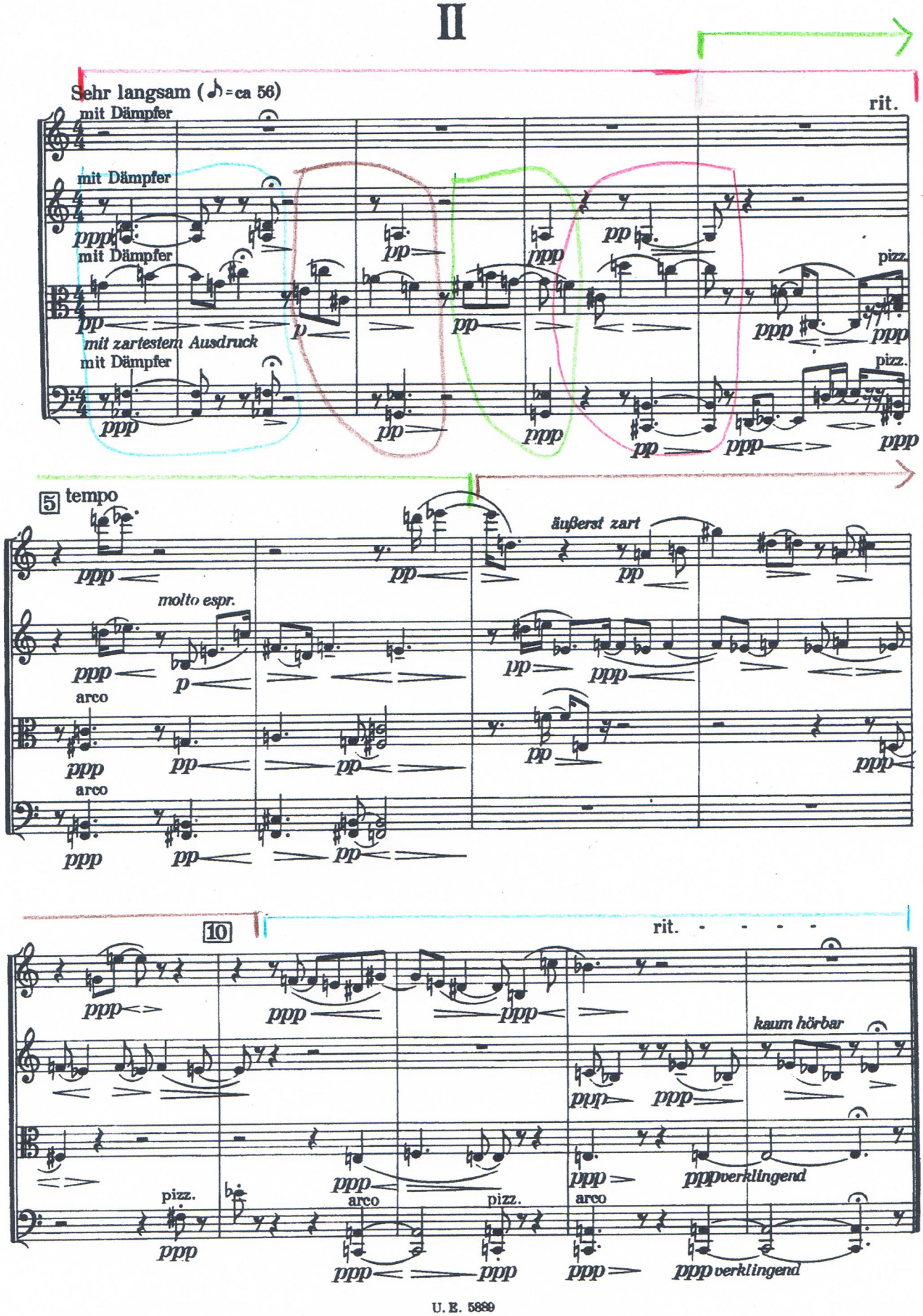
[1] The melodies in mm. 7_3-8 and mm. 10-12_1 are each comprised of linked tetrachords drawn from the **same** set. The first melody joins four notes drawn from [026] to four notes also drawn from [026]; the second melody draws both tetrachords from [025]. More on this soon.

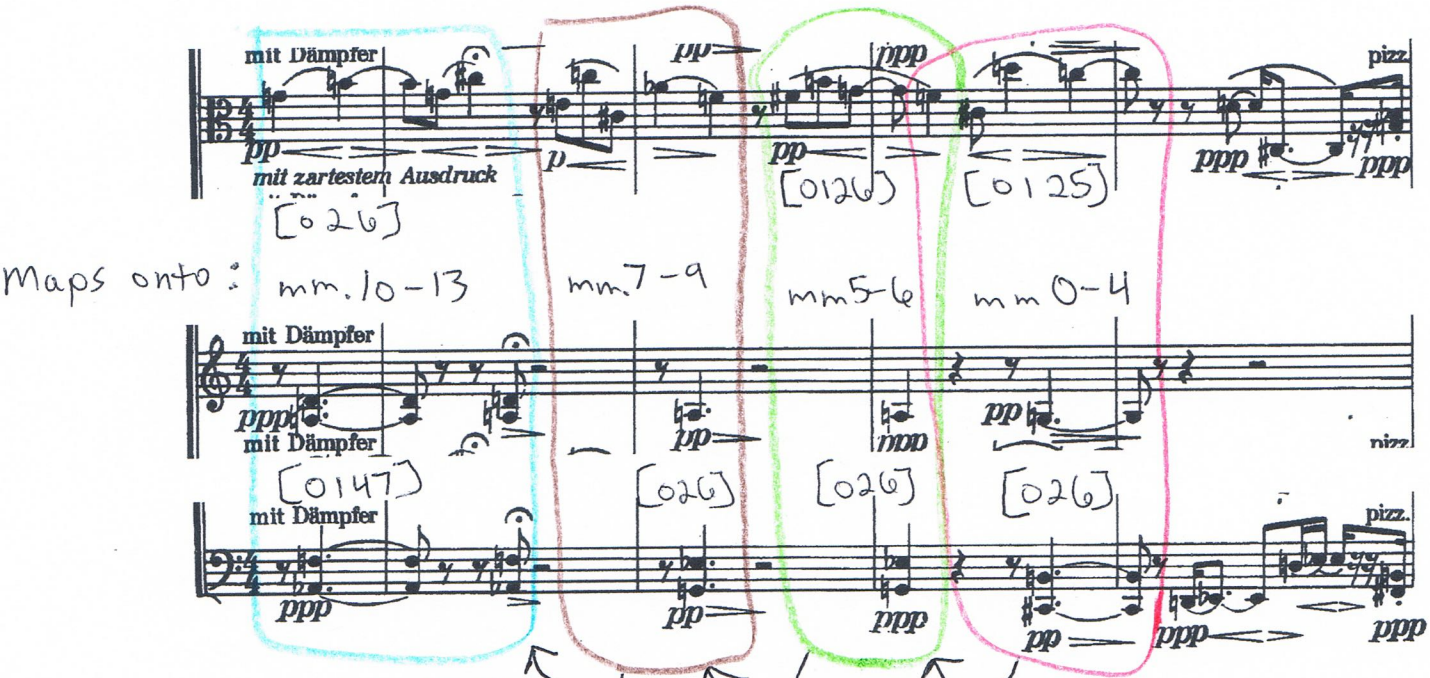
[2] Statement 1 maps onto Section C, Statement 2 maps onto Section B, Statement 3 maps onto Section C. See **Example 2**, attached as a separate page.

might reasonably conclude that this Q-relationship, in which one pitch sinks down by half step, represents a “settling down” into closure. Additionally, the shift from [026] to [025] “resolves” the outward interval of a tritone into the more stable perfect fourth. This “resolution” of [026] into [025] also occurs between Sections B and C, the 1st violin melody in mm. 7_3-8 resolving its two linked [0126] tetrachords into the joined [0125] tetrachords comprising the melody in mm. 10-12_1.

Example 1 : projections of [01] in mm. 5-7

II

Example 2

II

Sehr langsam (♪=ca 56)
mit Dämpfer
rit.
mit Dämpfer
mit Dämpfer
mit zartestem Ausdruck
mit Dämpfer
pizz.
pizz.
5 tempo
äußerst zart
molto espr.
arco
arco
10
rit.
kaum hörbar
pizz.
arco
pizz.
arco
verklingend
verklingend

Example 3

Shift to [0147] signifies/corresponds to a shift to [037] in harmonic support (not coincidentally, [037] is a member of [0147]).

Shift of [026] harmony by simple transposition signifies/corresponds to the continuation of [026] while also introducing change in form of a new motive ([01]).

Continuation of G-E♭-A sonority signifies/corresponds to the continuation of both [026] and the [01] motive, albeit within the context of a new section.