György Kurtág,
Samuel Beckett: What is the Word, op. 30b (1990/91)

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> Folly – folly for to – for to – what is the word – folly from this, all this – folly from all this – given – folly given all this – seeing – folly seeing all this – this – what is the word,

thus begins the text of Samuel Beckett composed at the end of his life. These words are a last outcry of a writer as he realizes the incapability of humans to express anything in words, or perhaps, to express anything at all.

The anxiety over self-expression is probably as old as civilization. Yet it seems that the artists of the modern era were especially troubled by the incongruity of thought and its expression in words. Language made everything seem transparent and explicable whereas they lived in a world that became less and less transparent. At the beginning of the century, the circle of Karl Kraus in Vienna, Webern and Schoenberg struggled constantly with the incompatibility of 'style and idea.' Hofmannsthal, a natural literary talent and a contemporary of Schoenberg, collapsed under the weight of this realization: "I have lost completely the ability to think or to speak coherently," he wrote. "For me, everything disintegrated into parts, these parts again into parts; no longer would anything let itself be encompassed by an idea."[1]

The text of Beckett and the music of Kurtág were born from this same feeling, from the artists' feeling of helplessness in face of a reality that one is no longer able to comprehend. I believe that Kurtág's art in general and *What is the Word* in particular deals with this anxiety in a radically new manner, and through this novel attitude, brings also a new direction into our thinking about form and expression in music.

[1] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'The Letter of Lord Chandos,' in *Selected Prose*, trans. Mary Hottinger – Tania and James Stern, New York: Pantheon 1952, p. 134.

Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae 43/3–4, 2002, pp. 397–409
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Already in Beckett's text, the question "What is the word?" supersedes its everyday cognitive meaning. The half-spoken sentences and the meaninglessness of the words, which are piled upon one another, suggest an anxiety deeper than the problem of verbal communication. This surplus of meaning we feel already in Kurtág's first version of the piece for voice and piano. It was the orchestration that really opened up the possibilities toward new directions. In the orchestral version, Kurtág created, from the powerful but linear monologue, a conceptual polyphony of contrasting emotions. The topic is no longer merely the anxiety of expression – it is the problem of existence. Behind the question "What is the word?" lie the deeper questions: "What is man?" "What is the ego?" and "What is the world around it?" This conceptual expansion brought a new musical style, technique and form.

In order to explain what I mean, it is necessary to look at a few sections of the piece more closely.

What is the Word is formally a varied rondo, but I would rather call it *a study of free associations on the variation of a theme*. The musically varied recurrences of the question "What is the word?" are like a journey in the world of emotions: the question alternately hesitates, pleads, weeps, laments, whispers, cries out in despair, stutters, looses all hopes, and calms down. The reactions of the orchestra and chorus to these questions are as varied and unpredictable as life. The answer may be an echo, a sonorous resonance, and a mirror image of the question, a neutral noise, a caricature, or a dramatic counter-statement. The variations of questions are like a study exploring the multiple ways in which one can ask, "What is the word," and the answers are like a study of free associations. Similar to the series of verbs in Endre Ady's poem "My bed calls" (*Az ágyam hívogat*, 1909),[2] here questions and answers grasp the circle of human life, leading from awakening and hope to resignation and death.

Kurtág thinks of an answer like an autonomous action. This transcends the issue of verbal communication, and questions the traditional basis of the musical process. Normally, a question contains somewhat its answer, like in the question-answer pair of a musical period. In this work, the answer is freed from any constraints; it is like a living creature that acts without limits and rules. It has the right to do anything: to ignore the question, to speak about something irrelevant, to tell its own story, or even to answer properly.

[2] See interpretation in my *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest*, pp. 213–215. Berkeley: California University Press 1998, [2]2000.

It appears that the basic compositional issue for Kurtág was the exploration of what is an answer (*Example 1,* see pp. 405–407).

The piece opens with a resonating chord depicting a grand explosion, and after it, the actress recites the first two units of the Hungarian text: "Mi is a szó? Hiábavaló" (measures: a–d). Strange instrumental noises resonate together with or respond to each syllable. As if one were walking in a forest at night, or in an empty cave: each step makes a noise and each noise echoes in the space. How are we supposed to react emotionally to these sounds? Are they the sounds of resonating objects of an indifferent world that surrounds us? Or noises of strange creatures from our nightmares awakened by our intruding steps on a forbidden land?

The chorus answers each of these two verbal fragments by singing back the words in English. On the last syllable of the fist textual unit "Mi is a szó?" the chorus begins to whisper, "What is the word?" extremely fast and in imitation (*Prestissimo, geflüstert*, measure b). The meaning of this response and the emotions it is supposed to evoke are as ambiguous as were those of the instrumental noises. Is this the sound of the wind? Is it the resonance of the hollow space? Is it the voice of a group of people watching secretly from a hiding place? Is the imitative texture an allusion to the choral responses in Bach's passion? Is this a sympathetic crowd that naively wonders about what the word really may be? Or is this a mass of wicked people caricaturing the actress?

To the next textual unit "hiábavaló," the bass echoes on a very low voice "folly" – the English translation of the word "hiábavaló" – in a strange theatrical manner, like: "fooo-a-lly?" (*sehr tief gesprochen*, measure d), to which the chorus responds with bleating (*kichernd, meckernd*); with the soprano singing "iiiii," the contralto "éééé," and the tenor "eee." Are these really the sounds of a bleating goat? Or noises of creaking wood? Or the voice of the wicked that ridicules human suffering? Is the "folly" of the bass a forgotten sigh from another world? Or a yawn? Or the sound of a dragon from fairy tales?

The music does not respond to these questions. The true face of the surrounding reality remains an enigma.

Towards the middle of the piece, the actress suddenly breaks down under the weight of the unknown, the impossibility of communicating, understanding and reaching out to the outside world (*Example 2,* see pp. 408–409). She is no longer able to finish her sentence "Mi is a szó?" She stutters the first word of the question "mi" hysterically, faster and faster (measures ff–gg).

Like a grotesque mirror, the chorus repeats the word "what," the English equivalent of "mi," faster and faster (measure gg).

This seemingly faithful mirror-translation reveals that words are not what they mean. The hysterical repetition of "mi" is like a spontaneous human utterance: a child or a paralyzed patient cries out: "mimimi." The chorus's mirror response, however, sounds like dog barking: "what what what". *Immer lauter und erregter werden, wie ein Hundebellen*, the score instructs us. The frightened soul cries out for help and the dogs' barking responds to her cry. This is a familiar scene evoking historical and musical associations. Dogs bark at the inmates in the lager. Schubert's poet-wanderer arrives in the village and dogs greet him with their barking.

Already these few brief examples are sufficient to indicate, that in *What is the Word?* Kurtág reconsidered conventional notions about three aspects of music: 1. musical process, 2. musical motive, and 3. emotional content.

Let me turn first to the the question of the musical process. Previously, musical processes were based on the composer's play with the listeners' expectation. In a traditional composition, a given section of the music creates an expectation through its metric, rhythmic, tonal, melodic and harmonic shape, and the listener confronts each new section with such an expectation in mind. The complex interplay of coincidences and clashes between expectation and what really happens in the music is the source of the structural and emotional energy of traditional compositions. This is what is often called in music analysis "the law of good continuation." The law of good continuation means a global sense of balance between the unexpected and the expected, and the use of this relationship in order to create the desired narrative and effect.

In this piece, Kurtág rejects this law of good continuation and creates a different system of musical process. This process is based on associations. The idea is not entirely new but as far as I know it has never been carried so far and used so consistently in Western music. In this musical process, the listeners can predict relatively little but they are drawn into a game of rich musical and contextual associations. To a certain extent, fantasy and meaningful association takes the place of expectation.

Yet the composition does not fall apart, it is not a conglomeration of arbitrary fragments. This is because, first, these musical associations are integral, meaning that although they come about unexpectedly, retrospectively we understand the structural and emotional connection between materials. Second, the series of associations becomes integrated into a larger structural

plan. It is, of course, not an accident at which point of the piece Kurtág exploited the contrast between "mimimi" and "what what what" in such a dramatic manner. What may seem as an almost arbitrary series of fragments is really part of a larger and carefully planned musical process.

Here we can no longer operate with our traditional notion of the musical motive. We can no longer base relationships only on pitch content, rhythm and other structural aspects of music. Connection manifests itself less in a concrete musical-structural aspect than in the connection among attitudes, gestures, theatrical motions and so on. Melodically different fragments may be the same motive because both are whispered or because both are shouted. The connection in this case is the phenomenon of whispering or of shouting, rather than the pitch content. In this manner, Kurtág draws into the network of motivic connections various aspects, such as performance or musical gestures. These aspects have an independent life so to speak, no less or more independent like any other musical parameter considered traditionally. The possible connections among motives thus multiply and create a much more dense context of references then is usual in a musical piece.

This network of connections changes also the emotional content. The associations are sometimes a playful game, at other times traumatic discoveries of hidden emotions, and often both together. The response to a musical fragment may bring out, like a mirror in the Luna-park, the grotesque side of the serious or it may turn playfulness into pain. Drama and play, seriousness and humor, irony and sympathy are together throughout the composition.

The associations that emerge out of the infinite possibilities, and the emotions they evoke are part of a highly individual game of both the composer and the listener. Those who have heard Kurtág teach, might have noticed, that for him, music lives and becomes meaningful in its infinite associative potential. With every new encounter of a section of a composition, one discovers new meanings and new associations. This associative potential of a musical idea does not mean that a musical fragment may mean anything. It is rather that one can dig out the inner meaning of a musical gesture only if one approaches it from many directions, listening to its multiple associations and connections.

This means also that I was not entirely precise when I called the form of the piece *a study of free associations*. The process should be called rather *a study of free associations in order to explore, first, the original gesture, and second, the widest possible contextual meaning of a musical event.* These

two purposes lie behind Kurtág's technique. On the one hand, he strives for finding and bringing to the surface the spontaneous, primeval gesture behind the musical phrase. This is a kind of de-stylization, a search for the emotional, gesture-like origin of musical motions that is almost covered by the stylistic and structural layers of music. It is in this way that a musical phrase becomes with Kurtág a 'real' outcry, weeping, or laughter. This road leads inward: composer, performer and listener descend deeper and deeper into their own inner emotional world in order to create, form this depth, the original, the really-felt motion that hides within all musical event.

On the other hand, these associations also lead outward; they open up the world of the piece. Associations play with our memory of the history of music, of its known techniques, styles and compositions. Because of such multiplicity of inward and outward associations, it is not meaningful to ask what is the 'real' emotional content of a section. A musical motive means all that it is possible for it to mean. In this theater, a gesture is not tragic or grotesque but tragic and grotesque, loving and hateful, sympathetic and rejecting at the same time. Kurtág teaches us that when we descend to ourselves hoping to find the root of an emotion, we find multiplicity and opposition. It is this inherent and irresolvable opposition at the depth of all feeling that Kurtág wants to grasp.

The scope of this lecture does not allow me to elaborate on the large-scale narrative of the piece. I cannot describe here how the piece, in spite of all novelties, proceeds in some sense in a traditional manner from exposition to dramatic climax and to solution. But perhaps the message of *What is the Word?* lies less in the global dramatic process that resolves our initial anxiety to some extent. The message is not in the question and not even in the answer, but in the *relation* between question and answer.

This message is so complex that it seems almost blasphemous to summarize it in a few words that are hurried through at the end of a lecture. Nevertheless, without this message, the musical technique I described above is meaningless. So I ask your patience and understanding as I embark on this brief and sketchy concluding section. I do it only in order to raise a point, to open a door toward further interpretations, without presenting proofs and arguments.

In the question "What is the word?," the notion of 'word' evokes more than the problem of speech. 'Word' here is the symbol of the primeval utterance: we are because we have a voice. The word is the original motion of the soul to express itself. It is the motion toward the World – the original gesture.

The word that cries into the wilderness is the original expression of existence. It is the painful, happy and hesitant cry: "I am." One speaks, because one hopes to break through one's loneliness, because one wants to be seen.

This feeling of loneliness and the desire to break through have permeated modern life and within it, modern thinking, and especially poetry.

We can think of Mihály Babits when he wrote:[3]

> Perhaps there is nothing outside of me,
> and if there is: who and how? I am:
> Blind walnut closed in its shell
> tired of waiting to be broken.

Or a poem by Endre Ady:[4]

> I am, like every man: dignity,
> North Pole, secret, alien,
> Lonely, faraway light,
> Lonely, faraway light.
>
> But, oh, I do not want to remain thus,
> I would like to show myself,
> So to be seen,
> So to be seen.

Or an early writing of György Lukács:[5]

> There is something somewhere, that perhaps I will melt into; there is a mirror perhaps that will reflect my rays; there is a deed in which I will discover myself. Is there really? I do not know what it could be. I only know that I am journeying toward it and everything is merely a wayfaring station along the way.

On a basic level, *What is the Word?* speaks about the insurmountable duality embedded in our vision of our existence. One exists when one is seen, noticed and answered to. Yet one wants to hide at least as much as one wants to be seen. The duality of the desire to speak and the renouncement of speech is the absolute original relationship between the individual and the world.

This basic human experience, which is at the core of Romantic and modernist art, gains in this piece a new dimension. It is significant, that in the orchestral version, the singer is not alone, but it is also significant that there is no sense of communication between her and the rest of the 'actors.' The soloist does not direct her questions to the musicians who surround her in the hall; indeed she does not address her questions to anyone. She is oblivious to

[3] The epilogue of the lyricist [*A lirikus epilógja*], 1904.

[4] Longing for love [*Szeretném, ha szeretnének*], 1909.

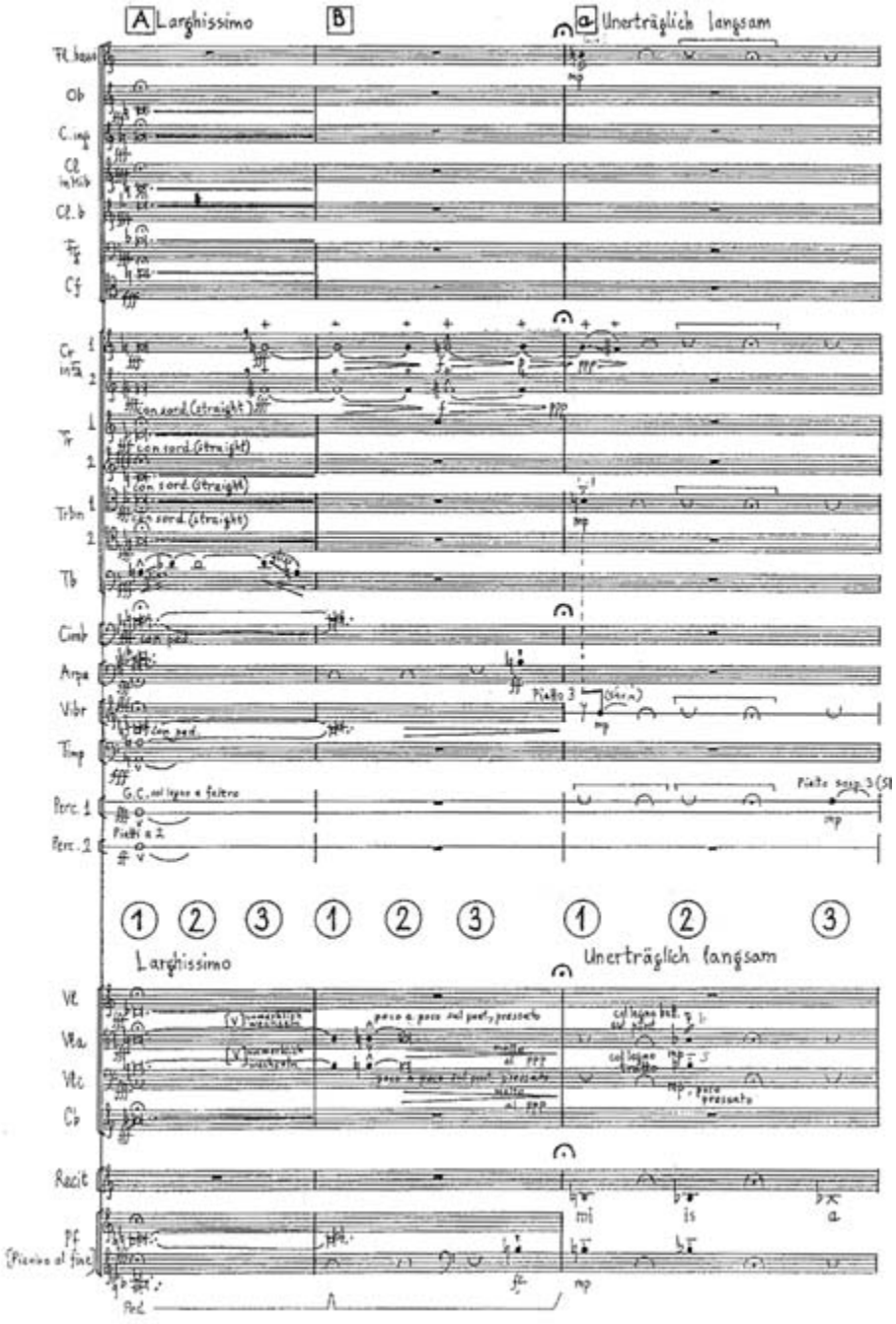
[5] This diary fragment is quoted in Mary Gluck, *Georg Lukács and his Generation: 1900–1918*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1985, pp. 122–123.

the world. On their turn, the chorus and the instrumentalists do not really attempt to answer her questions. They reflect on them, they resonate them, and they develop fantastic games and plays on the basis of the utterances of the soloist. As if there were an invisible wall between the soloist and her surrounding.

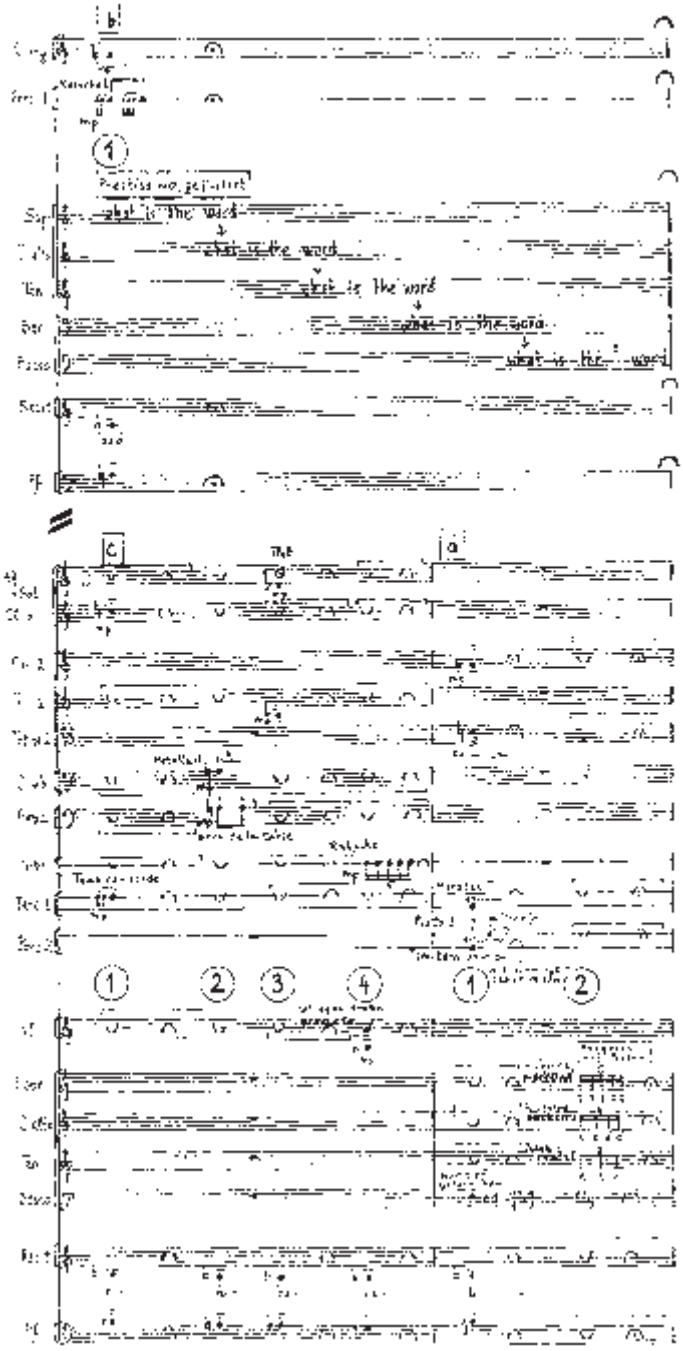
Why does not the actress address directly the world around her, why does not she listen to the voices? One could conceive this stage situation as the reflection of absolute loneliness: the soul no longer hears the voices around her; she lost all hopes that the surrounding world will answer. This interpretation would mean that the starting point of the work is a kind of 'drama after drama.' All is lost, all is over. With Babits's words: "Perhaps there is nothing outside of me… I am blind walnut closed in its shell."

But there could be also another interpretation. Parallel to the playing out of distress over loneliness and the incapacity to speak, another play takes place. It is the play of exploration and fantasy. As if the singer would explore her own capacity for speaking, her many voices and emotions. As if Kurtág would explore the infinite possibilities of musical-dramatic responses and associations. Or if we think of the orchestral version like it would be an expanded monologue, then we could say that the actress plays through the painful and joyful exploration of her soul and mind, the exploration of utterances and the exploration of the fantasies evoked by these utterances.

In Kurtág's *What is the Word,* the lonely soul relates to the surrounding world and to herself through association and fantasy. Association and fantasy bring a new element that transforms the basic emotional attitude with which earlier artists lived through the contradictory desires of existence. The liberating force of fantasy deepens but also resolves the anxiety of loneliness. In this piece, the incapability to speak is the source of agonizing pain, but fantasy opens the closed world of the ego toward her own depth. The incapability to speak becomes the protective shell within which one explores, through fantasy, the mystery and the beauty of existence.



Example 1: The beginning of the composition



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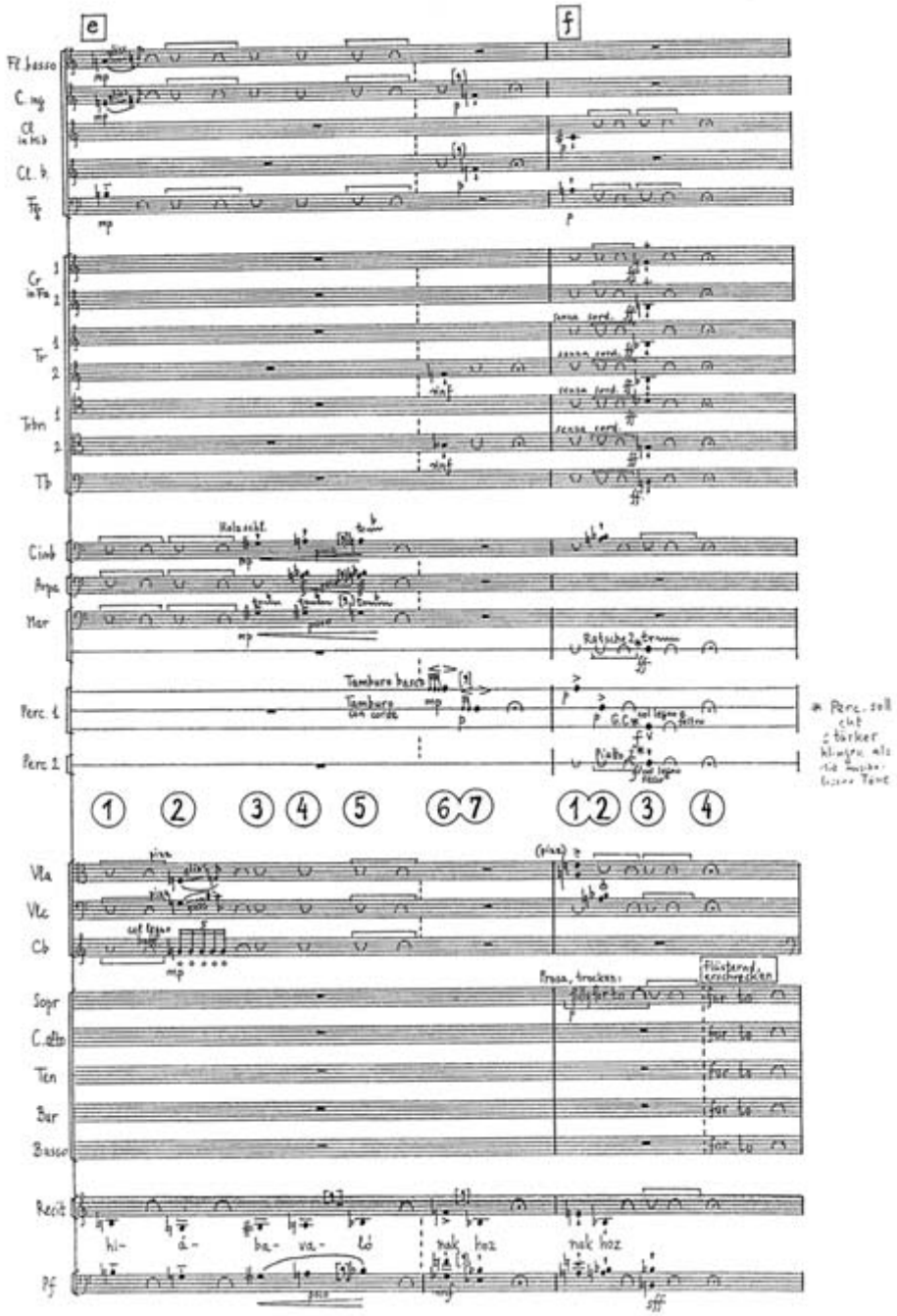

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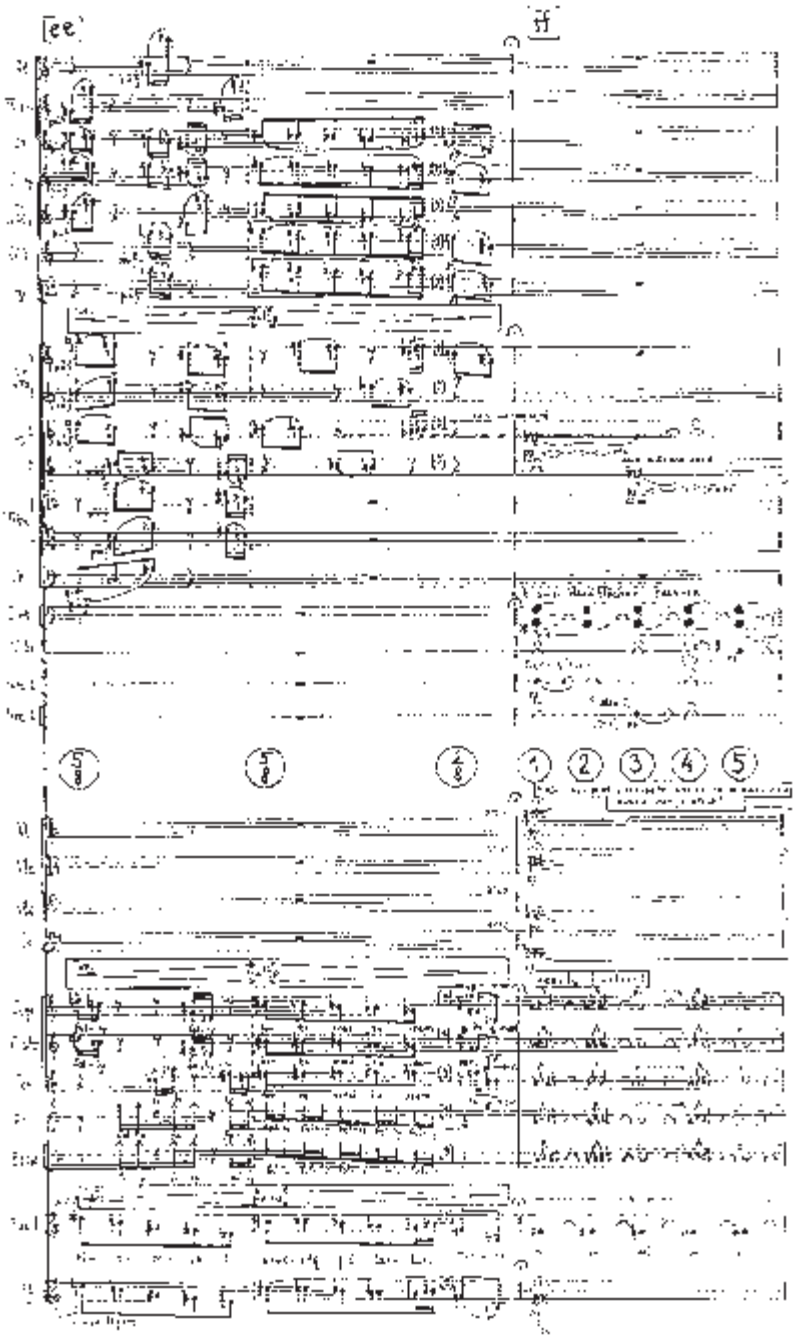
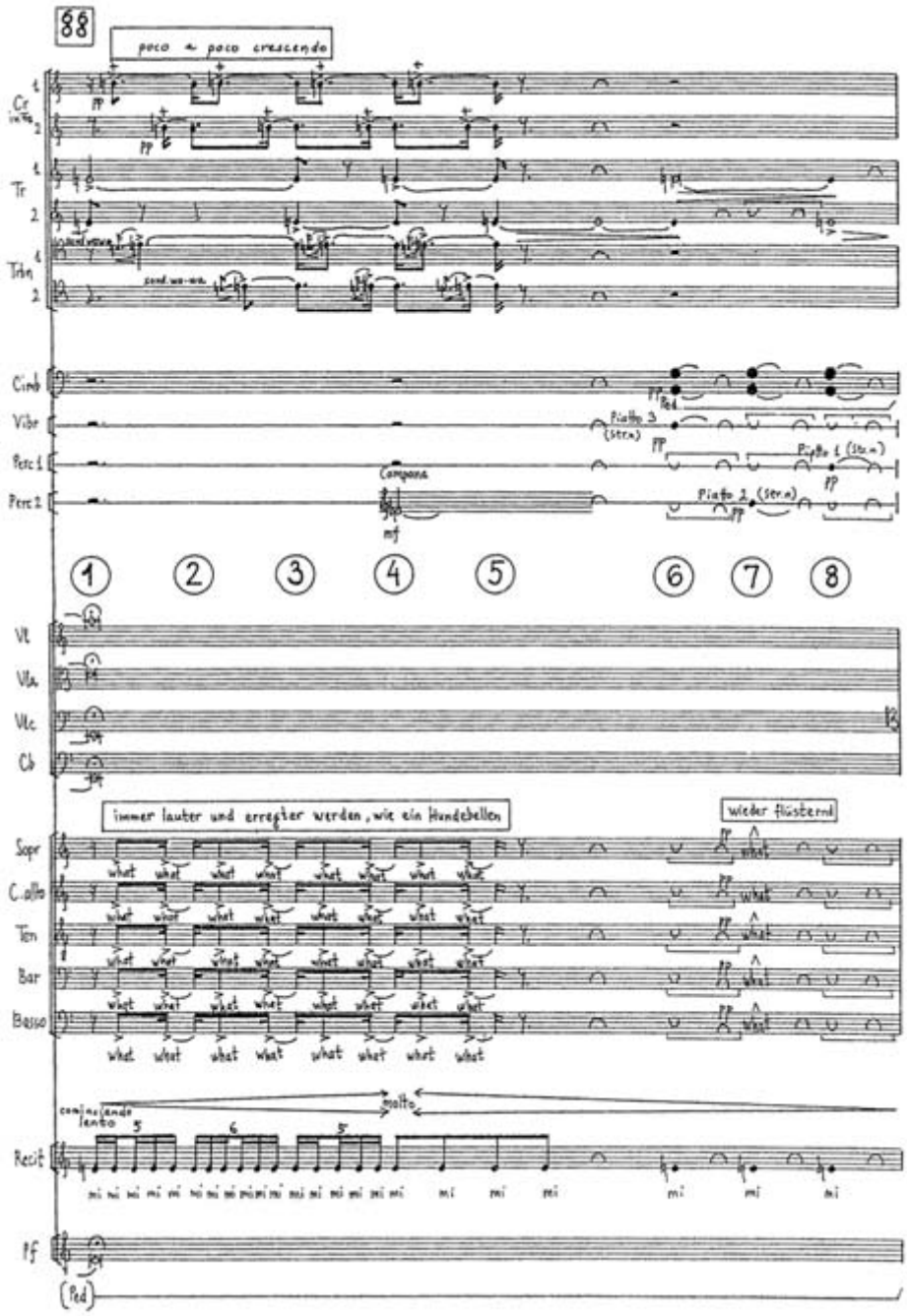


Example 2: The drama of mirror sound-images: "mimimi" and "whatwhatwhat"



Example 2 (cont.)