Concinnity: The Growth Principle of Classicism

JAN LARUE

A Centennial Tribute to the Great Scholar

Professor Jan LaRue (31.7.1918-17.10.2004) was one of the most influential theorists and musicologists of the twentieth century. A Professor of Music at New York University, he is the author of *Guidelines for Style Analysis* (1970), and the expanded edition with *Models for Style Analysis* on a disc included with the main volume (ed. Marian Green LaRue, 2011). He is also the complier of *A Catalogue of 18th Century Symphonies*, Vol. I, *Thematic Identifier* (1988), which lists 16,558 works, demonstrating the overwhelming importance of the symphony in the 18th century. A collection of eight key articles appeared in the *Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Spring 2001), pp. 219-373. LaRue believed in comprehensive style analysis, with consideration of Sound, Harmony, Melody, Rhythm, and Growth as an approach that could be applied to any style.

The paper reprinted here was presented in Israel during his visit in 1980. At that time, Professor LaRue also gave an intensive seminar on style analysis at Bar Ilan University attended by many students and faculty. The paper presents ideas and terms introduced by Professor LaRue and is offered as a centennial tribute to this great scholar. It is reprinted here with permission of the LaRue Estate.

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Abstract: This article discusses stylistic characteristics and compositional processes, which define Classicism in 18th-century music. While early Classic music may seem simple and uninteresting in comparison with Baroque pieces written during the same years, composers working during this period were actually experimenting with new and complex processes, which later came to define the Classic style. Three major innovations include:

1) Expansion of the musical blocks;
2) Creating long-term directionality;
3) The development of concinnity, a conscious process of coordinating the musical elements of a piece so that they underline together significant places in the piece, thereby allotting them more power.

By expansion, LaRue explains how quarter note modules may expand to half-measure modules, to full measures, and then to two measure grouping. This expansion of the rhythmic structure is new.

Keywords: Classicism in music, concinnity, Classic module, harmonic rhythm, surface rhythm, phrase extension, textural activity, musical peaks.

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I have tried for years to find analogies between classicism in music and classicism in other arts and in life styles, and I am very dissatisfied with what I have been able to find. I am not sure that there are analogies of any depth, and I would like to examine a couple of these so that we can perhaps get into the spirit of musical classicism, which is a very complicated thing. Not many parts of it can be equated with parts of classicism in art or otherwise.

We often hear that classicism is symmetry, and if we look at musical phrases we find two two-bar phrases. We might say: this is symmetrical. In fact, many people have said that that is symmetrical, but that is the least you can say about these two phrases. It is probably the least interesting and most unimportant thing that you can possibly say about it, so if it is utterly unimportant, then you can see that we are not really saying anything very important if we say that this is the same symmetry that we have in a Greek temple. To draw an analogy like that really does not help us very much. What I want to show today is that it is more balance than symmetry that we want to be looking for, and balance can mean that these two is very different from this one. It is differences of that sort that we will be working on and trying to hear in the musical examples.

I'd like to do a blitz history of the development of expressive means in music. It is such an over-simplification that I'm almost ashamed to use it. It is as if we traced the history of the Roman Empire in a paragraph, to make an historical parallel. Just the same it emphasizes things that we need to know.

We start off in music with chant, a single line… In the Middle Ages we have development of two and three lines and the beginning of considerable complication in relating these lines. In the Renaissance, we find four to eight lines and great sophistication in the combination of these lines, with many interesting and complicated ways in relating them. It makes me think that a composer in the year 1600 must have said to himself, "What can I do next?" In other words, there have been great composers who have exploited the possibilities of linear combinations so thoroughly that a young person, coming up, may well have scratched his head unusually hard in that year. The results of this head-scratching for the Baroque were the addition of rhythmic variety and the unifying of tonality. In the Renaissance, the phrases of a composition would often move into different key areas which gave a lot of variety but very little centering. The problem of a piece not being centered [in a home tonality] was that if you don't know where home is, you can't figure out how far away from home you are. Expressively, until you know where home is, that distance—that expressive distance—is not very meaningful. You get what I call itinerant tonality—tonality that shops around in various directions. There is a lot of interest to it, but since it does not center in any one place, it does not have the full force. Now the Baroque period develops this tonal centering.

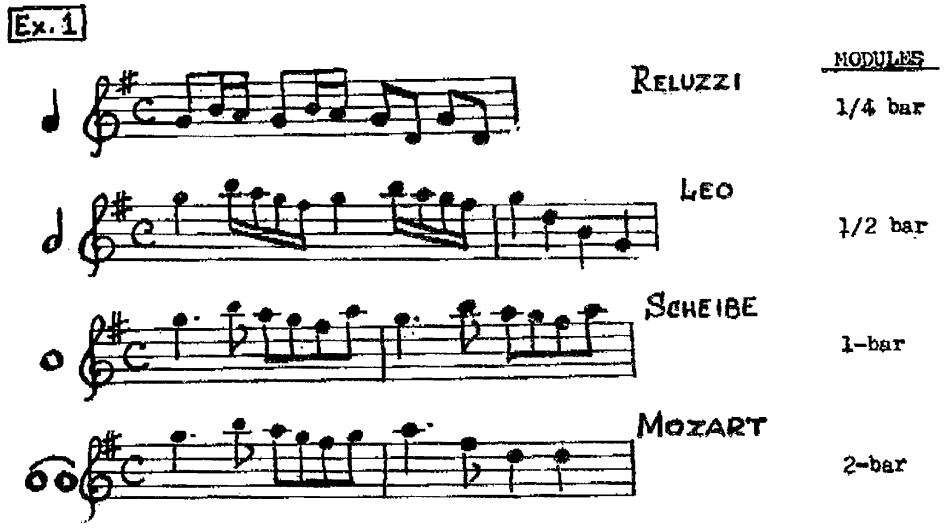
We now come, in this rush through the centuries, to the 18th century and the problems the composer had there, and what was left for him to do. The 18th century composer really took music apart and rebuilt it from the beginning. A great deal that had been accomplished in other centuries was temporally put in the attic. We got what is seemingly a rather simple

style, but as we look at it we see that it is not simple, because it is trying to do some very new things and those new things are what we are going to talk about tonight.

There are basically three points here: the expansion of the building blocks; the idea of direction in the music, that is, a plan for these building blocks, and finally, a process that I call concinnity, a relating of the parts in a meaningful way so that they are co-ordinated and make their points together rather than separately. All through the earlier periods the ideal had been that these parts, independent even more here in many ways, bring greater variety, and make possible still more independence, as will be seen in a Bach example tonight.

But the Classicists were working in the other direction and concinnity refers to this idea of the "mutual adjustment or parts," as Webster puts it, so that the musical forces can be martialed to a single conclusion, to emphasize a single point, to build a single area into the strong area of a composition.

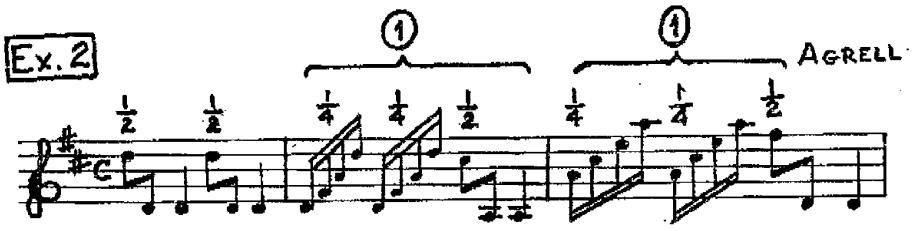
I want to look first at expansion. If you look at Ex. 1, on the left-hand side, you will see the module. (On the far left you have a quarter note and on the far right you have what I call modules, that is the building block). The size of the building block is a quarter bar. For our purpose, we can equate module with pattern size. A pattern goes by quarter notes. To make this example, I looked in the Union Catalog (that's my big catalog of symphonies that I've collected in archives). I have collected the incipits of these for purpose of identification and bibliographical control, and, with the help of a friend, we have just finished a count of this.



I think that you will be astounded at how many symphonies there are in the 18th century. Roughly between the dates 1720 and 1810, we have collected 12,386 symphonies. No one has ever suspected that there are that many.

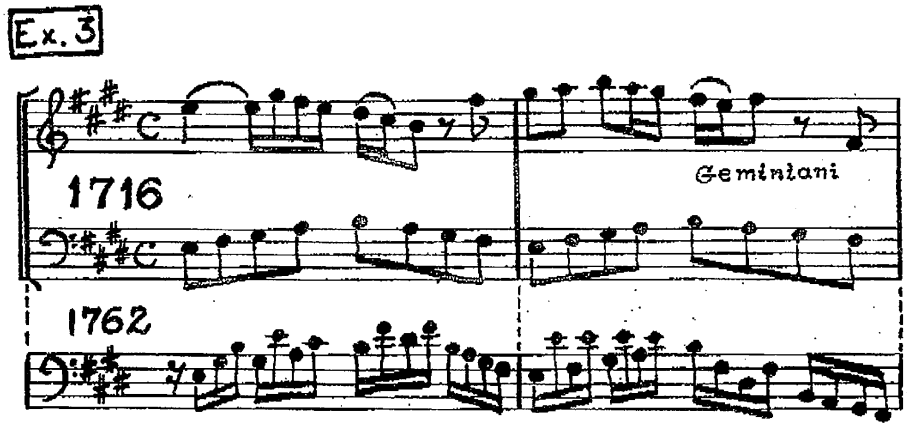
There is tremendous activity in this area, you can see why I am interested in working in it. There is a great deal of work to be done. What I did was to look through the G major drawer of the symphony and pick out how various symphonies had expanded the same notes. I began with that pattern: We had a quartet-note idea, now we have a half-note

module, expanded to half a bar, now to full bar, and finally an early Mozart work, a two-bar idea. This sort of expansion was going on all over the European world of the symphony from about 1710 onwards. You find composers building larger and larger blocks. In Ex. 2 we will see how they are building these blocks. What they do is, they take one motive, and either repeat it or add it to another motive which they may be repeating. They have some growing pains doing this and they don't always produce very interesting results. This is one of the chief charges against early Classicism compared to the parallel Baroque music that is going on (there are two layers: the Baroque is finishing off, Classic is starting up) and the early Classic seems very dull by comparison to this very sophisticated linear style of the Baroque. But classicism catches up in its own ways.



We are looking now at Ex. 2 and we see Agrell beginning with a half-bar module. He repeats it and adds to that a quarter-note module. Then he repeats the whole thing. I want to try a little experiment with all of you here so that you will begin to feel what we might call the hierarchy of modules—of pattern sizes—in the early classic style. I want us all to say together: quarter, quarter, half. Let us begin by realizing the movement of the music on three different levels. Each time you say it, tap your knee. You can begin to feel that you are listening on several levels, you are moving on several levels. It is an interesting thing that classicism has produced in the rhythmic sphere things that were happening in the linear sphere in the earlier period, so that we are getting an organization of the rhythmic structure that hadn't existed earlier. That's the main idea that they talk about when they talk about hierarchy in the Classic period. It's not first theme and second theme. It's much more basic.

There is a marvelous example of how this expansion affects other parts of music and one of the new things about Classicism is that it is affecting all of music. It is not just the linear, not just the harmonic, it is organizing everything. One of the things that is very clear, is the expansion of harmony. How does harmony expand? By using longer values. The Baroque tends to have a very active bass and a rapidly shifting harmonic style. Classicism uses larger harmonic values and then short ones as appropriate. We have a very lucky accident of fate. The great composer, Geminiani, noted for his discussions of violin playing and composer of very fine concerti grossi and sonatas of many sorts, brought out a volume of keyboard sonatas in 1716. Then he lived a very long life and at the end of his life he brought this out again in a revised version, in 1762. The changes are almost unbelievable too, and here they are in front of you, the beginning of the sonata in the two versions. What I have done is to put the 1716 bass and the 1762 bass under each other (Ex. 3).

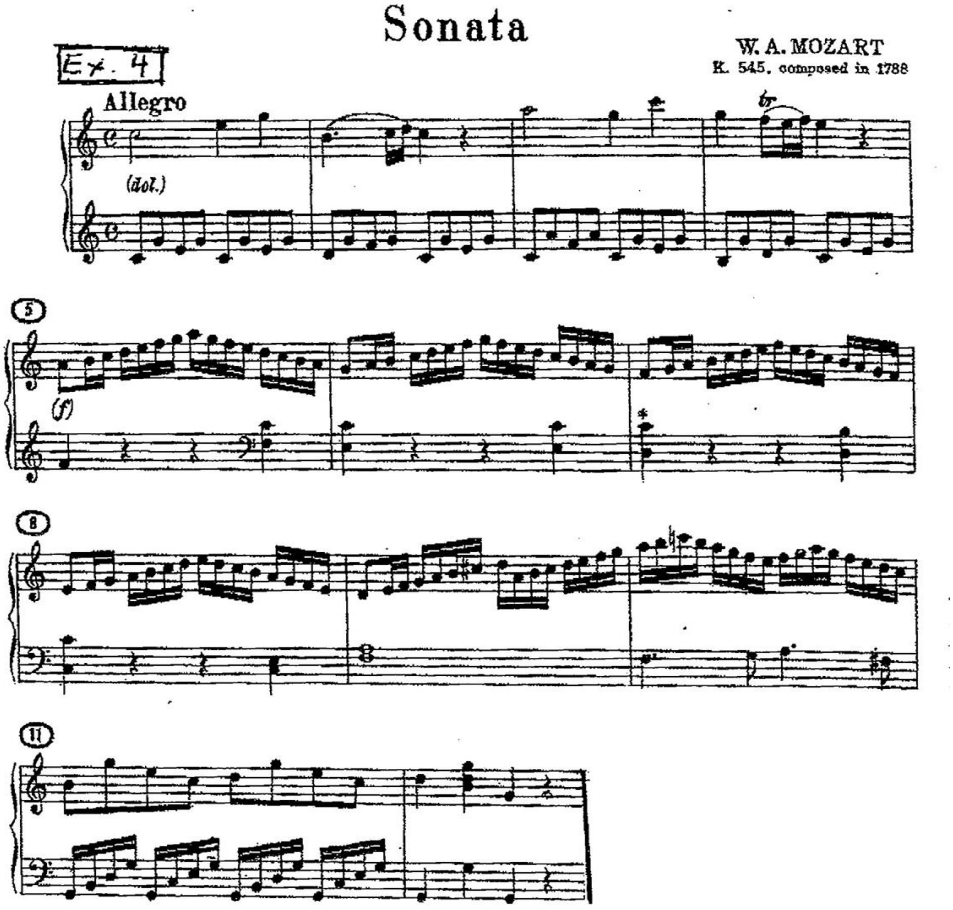


This is the basic skeleton. It starts off with the typical Baroque setting for bass, what we call the Baroque walking bass: constant movement and a great deal of harmonic change implied … To me this has a very Baroque sound from this independent steadily walking bass. What happens to it in 1762? The bass line is moving faster in notes, but slower in harmony. The harmonic motion is being slowed down here and it has a valuable result for the composer in that if you begin with this more stable slower-moving harmony at the beginning of the piece, then you have somewhere to move, to speed up the harmonic motion later on. Here is the 1762 effect. If I play these two in turn you will see that there is quite a difference in feeling between the Late Baroque (1716) and the later style, beginning to reach into the slower harmonic treatment. There is another point about this that bears on the whole attitude of Classic composers: the idea of coordination. In the 1762 version, the upper part is moving in coordination with the sixteenth notes found in the lower part. In the earlier piece, the lower line is a more distinct tick-took. In the later version, the motion has already been set up in the bass and it is similar to what you hear in the upper part.

Direction is the growing and lessening of musical activity. In the Classic period you get very frequently parabolic effects, where the activity grows to a certain point, giving us a feeling of direction. Another way that we can express it is not necessarily in terms of loudness, but in terms of the intensity we feel from this growth. Before the end of the phrase we back off in intensity while continuing to be loud. If you look at line 1 of Ex. 4, you will see that the action is mostly in slower values, quarter and half-notes, and in the bass, eighths. If you look down to the next line you will notice that it is more black. That blackness we call sixteenths. Below, we have quarter notes and this goes on for two lines and then in the fourth line we have more blackness. You can see a very clear arithmetic progression there. It isn't symmetrical at all. Mozart is building a very powerful motion here as he starts the sonata. It's not well balanced—yet.

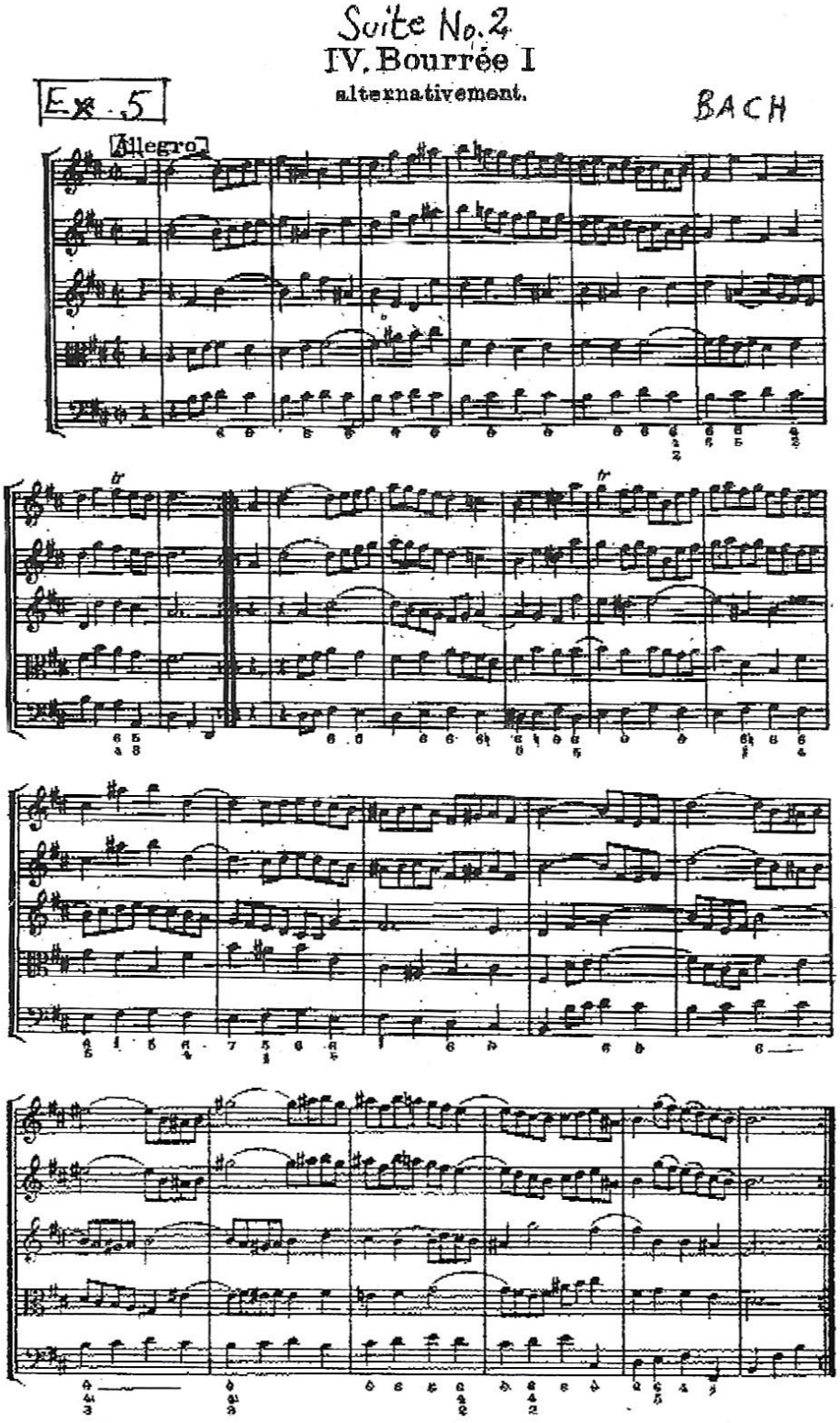
The whole point about Classicism is balance. But at what level? At what distance? The best classic composers are trying always to extend the balance. They are trying to set up a trajectory that demands more and more projection outward. Looking at these ideas, let us try to feel Mozart's growth in intensity: the reduction in the size of the module here as

it gets faster and faster, and the strong sense of direction that it gives us, the rhythmic direction in this case (Ex. 4).



We are talking just about rhythm. Let us look at a couple of other things. We start with the piece in a medium area and then Mozart pushes it outward. The piece starts here and unfolds in range. This direction is the major point that Classicists are concerned with.

Now an anomaly. I have been talking to you about direction and I am talking to you about how a piece speeds up and slows down and shows characteristics that are Classics. Ex. 5 is a piece by Bach. What does this piece do? It starts mainly with quarter notes and it speeds up. You can see that it is speeding up and moving in eighth notes and then, towards the end of this little first part is slowing down again. So Bach is classical? No way! It is the module. What are the units that Bach is working in? They are very small units. I am breaking it down as I play this, but it is mostly two-note units. That means that we are operating with small modules and a great amount of activity, a tremendous amount of activity. No time for stopping at all, no time for contemplation, no thinking where we are going next. A terrific energy is developed by these small active motives, but the motives are very much the same all the time. They are the same values. There is not really as much variety in values as you get in Classicism. What does this mean? Energy without specific direction.



I want you to listen also while I play it to the bass line and you will notice something very odd about the bass line. There is no Classic piece that I am aware of that has a passage like that. This is Bach's brinksmanship.

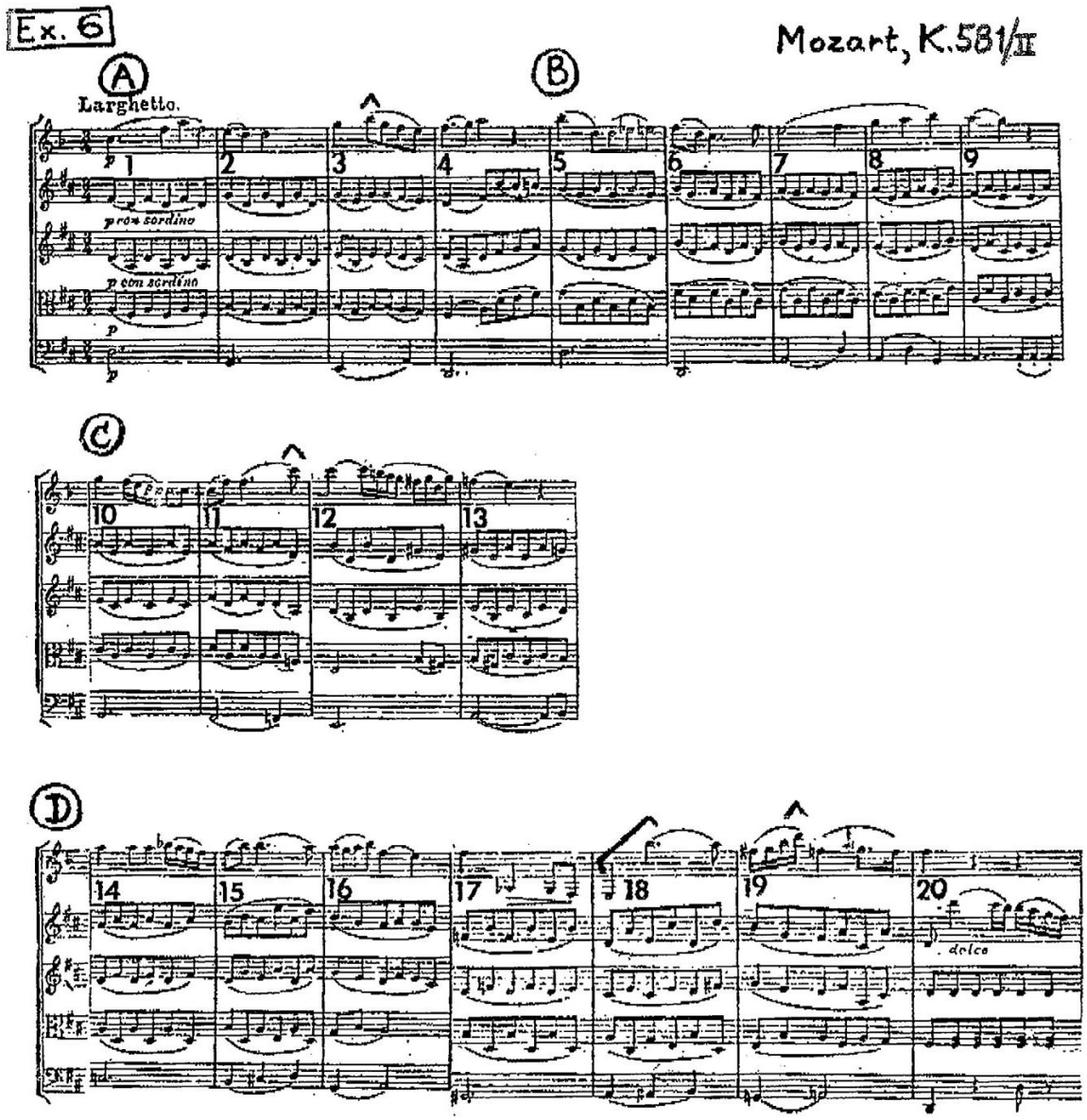
Very few composers would dare attempt anything like that. What Bach does is to say: "How many times can I repeat this figure before the audience will die?" Beethoven says: "How loud can I make this *crescendo* before the ladies will faint?"

What I want you to listen for now is that although we gave this parabola of activity, because it is all built in the same size of units, we have a very fine-grained effect, that's energy all the time. It's not directional.

We spoke about direction in range, and how the range expanded in the Mozart example. One of the things that is very different between the Baroque and the Classic, is the treatment of peaks, that is the top notes that you reach in the piece. Many Classic composers are extremely sensitive to peak notes. You find Haydn coming back 50 bars after he has reached a high point and taking it up a bit farther and finally, later in the piece, still farther. This is not so common in Baroque composers. It is very interesting to see what Bach does with this problem because each time he approaches the peak it is the same note, no higher. The peak note in Ex. 5 is *b* and it is interesting to see what Bach does to keep the *b* interesting. He does not do what a Classic composer would do, that is, concentrate all forces to put the finger on that note. On the contrary, he makes the peak itself do something more and more interesting and complicated, but he does not reinforce this from the other lines. They are busy doing their own thing. The first peak is on beat 1 of m. 4, and the next time when you listen to it, I want you to notice that this beat, surely from the point of view of peakness, is the strongest one. It's on the strong beat and it does not have much of a complication against it to take our ear away from it. The second peak, in the second phrase in m. 14, is on beat 3, which is a less stressed beat in most cases, the third one on beat 4, in m. 20, and the fourth on beat 2, in m. 21, still less strength. The point for Bach is that he does something more and more interesting—most obviously to lay it out on the first beat, a little more subtle to put it on the third beat, and on the fourth and second beats in smaller notes, in eighth notes, it is a still more interesting thing to do with it. However, the Classicism which we saw in Mozart is creating a clearer expansion in range. When we look at the next example, we will see a peak climbing through a long period of bars, constantly higher. Before we listen to the Bach, I want you to listen to the bass and be conscious of this energetic action and the three ways in which the peak is treated. The first one is especially effective as the peak (Ex. 5).

The third main idea of Classicism is concinnity. This is an all-embracing idea and the most important concept because it means that the composer attempts to control all the musical elements in one channel of expression. In earlier periods the perfection of the linear quality meant by definition that you wanted to direct the ear, now to the top line, now to the bass line, now to the internal parts, all of which had lives of their own. The Classicist is concerned to make a coordinated point, a concinnist treatment of all the musical values. Has he completely abandoned all the linear elements that were seen before? By no means. You might say that what had been vertical interest (the lines at different levels taking our attention), for the Classicist is now put out horizontally and the subtleties of the structure, which were mainly vertical, are in these modules and in this structure as it extends through time rather than as we hear it, in a given moment.

I want to use the Mozart Clarinet Quintet to show you in how many ways Mozart is able to control various musical factors, to give us the sense of extremely subtly mounting activity and expressive feeling. I want to play it first without comment, noticing first what a beautiful calm piece it is (Ex. 6).



The first and most obvious way in which Mozart is intensifying the activity in the place is by means of what I call surface rhythm, that is, the rhythmic balance of surface values. By using our black density test, you will see that by going down to phrase C, there are more black notes both here and in phrase D than in A and B. Harmonic rhythm, the speed of chord change is a very notable thing. If you look at the bass line you can see long notes in the cello part, and you can see that as you get down to phrase D that the cello is moving more and more into shorter values. Whilst these are not all harmonic changes, most

of them are. So the harmony, as we go into the piece more and more, is increasingly active. This applies not only to the chord changes but to the character of the chords. Mozart is using more and more complicated harmonies. He starts off with root positions of the most common sort of chord. As he reaches later phrases (the end of phrases B and the beginning of phrase C) we have an inversion. This has a more intense effect on the listener. You want this to resolve. Later on he uses the diminished seventh. You only arrive at these complex chords in phrase D. He saves these special harmonic words until the end. This is the whole gradual process of intensification.

Another point which is harder to explain in a simple way is chromaticism (in the C and D phrases). The chromatics in these phrases also reflect the harmonic situation, becoming more intense, more interesting, more active.

Textural activity, that is, what the parts are doing. The parts begin entirely with a rocking motion, motion in equilibrium. If you look down a little farther in the piece (the second bar of C—bar 11), the parts are moving, not rocking any longer. They are moving out in various directions (bar 16 also).

A more subtle point, but one of great interest that I hope you will try to listen for next time, is phrase expansion. One of the signs of a great composer is his ability to prolong an idea. Four-bar phrases are sizes that we are used to in the Mozart style. If you look at these phrases you will see that: A is four bars, and B is five. I always feel that the point where we go by the fourth bar has a special little tug of intensity (that's bar 4). I expect to come to the end of a phrase and be able to relax for a moment, so to speak. When the composer takes hold of you just here, at that point where you want to sag and relax, and carries you a bar over, that is a part of a great importance to the rhythm of the piece because he has forced you to go beyond where you wanted to go. That motion, that forcing, is a very important source of rhythmic power in the piece. All the good composers try for that identical effect as much as possible. Now he goes back to a four-bar phrases in phrase C, because he is basically thinking in this size of module, two phrases together. What do we do in phrase D? This phrase he has pushed out to seven bars. In each of these three bars which have gone past four, we feel a special tension. This seven-bar phrase is immensely directional and gives us great impetus, great intensity in the piece. What do you see in the phrase? You see more harmonic action, more chromatics, more surface rhythm.

I haven't told you yet about peaks. In phrase A, you see the peak going up to the clarinet's *Bb* (which actually sounds *G*). In the phrase B we can't go any further than that. He goes back to his *Bb*, but he is extending to the fifth bar, so you forget that. In phrase C he goes up to the clarinet's *C* (sounding *A*), and in phrase D, right at the end, he goes way up to the high *D*.

Not only this though; look what's happened to the range in the meantime. The clarinet has been in the upper range all the time. In bar 17 he goes down to the very bottom of the instruments. Once again, this expansion of the whole range that we are listening to gives the piece so much power.

Those who know Weber's *Der Freischütz*, will recognize the same notes being used here, reminiscent in advance, you might say. I don't think that Weber was copying this

piece although he did know the clarinet concerto extremely well, since he wrote two clarinet concerti himself.

The concinnity of activity sources in this piece which seems in perfect repose can be seen in an examination of surface rhythm, chord rhythm, harmonic rhythm, harmonic complication, textural activity, phrase extension, peak and tonal range. That's all that Mozart is controlling.