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Thomas Adès and the Dilemmas of Musical Surrealism

This essay traces the emergence and subsequent development of the notion of surrealism as it has been applied to Thomas Adès's (b. 1971) music and seeks to map out the boundaries of such a conceptual terrain for Adès's work. The idea of surrealism has been one of the most consistently recurring themes in public (and, to a lesser extent, scholarly) discussions of Adès's significance.[1] Adès stands virtually alone as a major composer, living or dead, whose music has occasioned ongoing commentary regarding its perceived surrealist qualities.[2] Commentators who recruit the paradigm in search of a vocabulary for discussing Adès's music have been known to arrive at a descriptive language that seems as rich in allusion and euphemism as Adès's music itself. In particular, surrealist frameworks have provided a way for critics to consider various layers of "queerness" in Adès's music (including but not limited to gender and sexuality) while

[1] Articles about Adès (from both newspapers and academic journals) which mention surrealism include Timothy Mangan, *From Strauss to Avant-Garde*, «Orange County Register», 19 December 1999, p. F38; Mark Swed, *Ojai's Two-Nation Summit*, «Los Angeles Times», 5 June 2000, https://lat.ms/2qBliYV (accessed on May 14, 2018); Mark Swed, *Sense and Nonsense at Ojai Festival*, «Los Angeles Times», 6 June 2000, https://lat.ms/2JOV519 (accessed on May 14, 2018); Nadine Meisner, *Pick of the Week*, «The Independent», 24 May 2003, p. 24; Judith Mackrell, *Invisible Dance in Glasgow*, «The Guardian», 2 June 2003, p. 20; Mark Swed, *Keep Everyone Guessing*, «Los Angeles Times», 12 February 2004, https://lat.ms/2qCJCcQ (accessed on May 14, 2018); Anthony Holden, *A Truly Prosperous Prospero*, «The Observer Review», 15 February 2004, p. 12; Christopher Fox, *Tempestuous Times. The Recent Music of Thomas Adès*, «The Musical Times», CXLVIII, 1888 (2004), pp. 41-56; David Gillard, *It was a Dark and Stormy Night...*, «Daily Mail», 16 March 2007, p. 58; Neil Fisher, *BCMG/Adès*, «The Times», 27 March 2007, https://bit.ly/2JM1rOy (accessed on May 14, 2018); Vivien Schweitzer, *Great Expectations, and Versatility to Match*, «The New York Times», 23 March 2008, https://nyti.ms/2KXtDi9 (accessed on May 14, 2018); Tom Service, *A Guide to Thomas Adès's Music*, «The Guardian», 1st October 2012 (A Guide to Contemporary Classical Music), http://www.theguardian.com/music/tomserviceblog/2012/oct/01/thomas-ades-contemporary-music-guide (accessed on May 14, 2018).

[2] Any number of composers have had individual works or a small cluster of works which have been considered surreal while at the same time not acquiring the marker of a surrealist composer across the entirety of their output. Maurice Ravel (with *L'enfant et les sortilèges*) and Virgil Thomson (with *Four Saints in Three Acts* and his *Exquisite Corpse* collaborations with John Cage, Henry Cowell, and Lou Harrison) are two such examples. As for successors to Benjamin Britten, George Benjamin and Oliver Knussen have also been put forward at various times. For one example of this historical stock-taking in Britain, cf. Ivan Hewett, *He's Brilliant, but Can He Deliver?*, «The Telegraph», 2 February 2004, https://bit.ly/2ENg5BD (accessed on May 14, 2018).

avoiding a rhetoric which uses alterity and identity politics as its primary argumentative fulcra.[3] Such metaphorical approaches to writing make sense given Adès's body of work: he possesses remarkable skill at composing music which conveys several simultaneous striations of musical meaning that has allowed him to construct sonic worlds in which multiple subjectivities might be seen to loom, but are seldom directly asserted.[4]

Behind all of these issues lies the fact that surrealism is emphatically not new. In other words, we are currently in a situation where a composer who commands considerable popular and scholarly respect is largely understood in terms of debates shaped by events that occurred between forty and one hundred years ago. Such circumstances are not problematic in absolute terms: consider the long shadow cast by Beethoven over the nineteenth century.[5] The fact that Adès's music is framed through such wide-angle lenses following a century of radically accelerated technical innovation like the twentieth – where "new" and "significant" were used virtually interchangeably for so many historiographical purposes – is only the first indication of how his case might help us to come to terms with the changing dynamics of life in the concert hall over the past twenty years.[6] Put another way, the case of Adès and surrealism asks us to reevaluate newness as a critical frame in the present moment.

For Adès himself, the allure of surrealism as a concept does not necessarily rest solely in its ability to convey multiple meanings at the same time, nor in its connection with the musical past, but also in its apparent rhetorical effectiveness in dodging questions of signification altogether. In an interview with Vivien Schweitzer from 2008, he allowed that

[3] Following other scholars, I use "queer" here as an umbrella term to refer to an array of non-heterosexual subject positions and expressions thereof, mainly in order to allow this essay to embrace one of the main appeals of the term in both academic and popular spheres – its deliberate lack of specificity. For an introductory exposition of the term, its additional resonances, and some of its more important theorizations, cf. Lloyd Whitesell, *Britten's Dubious Trysts*, «Journal of the American Musicological Society», LVI, 3 (2003), pp. 637-694: 638, note 1.

[4] Cf. Edward Venn, *"Asylum Gained"? Aspects of Meaning in Thomas Adès "Asyla"*, «Music Analysis», XXV, 1-2 (2006), pp. 89-120; and Kenneth Gloag, *Thomas Adès and the "Narrative Agendas" of "Absolute Music"*, in *Dichotonies. Gender and Music*, ed. by Beate Neumeier, Heidelberg, Winter Verlag, 2009, pp. 97-110 for discussions of how musical meaning unfolds in Adès's works, especially *Asyla*.

[5] Philip Rupprecht has argued that there was a more general «time-lag» trope in British musical historiography in the 1950s, wherein British composers were seen to be «catching up» to established practices on the continent. While Adès's technical means are diverse, one could argue that efforts to understand Adès vis-à-vis Britten and surrealism are vestiges of this trend towards framing British composers in terms of earlier debates. Cf. Philip Rupprecht, *"Something Slightly Indecent". British Composers, the European Avant-Garde, and National Stereotypes in the 1950s*, «Musical Quarterly», XCI, 3-4 (2008), pp. 275-326: 290 ff.

[6] Carl Dahlhaus provides a consideration of the durability of, and problems with, the prestige of the new in Carl Dahlhaus, *"New Music" as Historical Category*, in *Schoenberg and the New Music*, trans. by Derrick Puffett - Alfred Clayton, Cambridge (UK), Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 1-13.

surrealism is «the only "ism" that I at all feel comfortable with».[7] But the reasons he provided for this attitude suggest that he is attracted to surrealism precisely because of its conceptual nebulousness: «writing and playing music at all is completely surreal. You are sort of sculpting in air, which gives you complete freedom to do what you want».[8] The way in which Adès characterizes surrealism here points to one central aspect of his own aesthetic worldview: music's consistently elusive methods of signification. In an interview with Peter Cumshaw, Adès suggested a more general disinterest in trying to specify the actual qualities of a musical experience: «When people start talking about atonal or tonal or postmodern, or whatever – I'm not being weird, but I really don't know what they are talking about».[9] Even though Adès is willing to devote considerable energy to writing about music himself, his book *Full of Noises* often points not to metaphor but rather the stunning presence of great music as its signal characteristic. As I will argue in this essay, listening for surrealism in Adès's music is a way for us to cast experience in a new light, or, as he put it in *Full of Noises*, «to make the real world real again».[10]

Adès is not alone in recognizing surrealism's apparent inscrutability when it comes to music. As we shall see, more than one writer has noted that surrealism proves to be a surprisingly sheer surface on which to stake a critical discourse, far more resistant to musical analogy than other movements from early twentieth century modernism such as expressionism and neoclassicism which might prove relevant for situating Adès's music within a historical context. But this may ultimately be the point: the tension between the apparent specificity of surrealist aesthetics and their ultimate ambiguity in music is both the cause and effect of some of the most defining and characteristic moments in Adès's reception and his music. Moreover, as I will discuss at the end of this essay, Adès's surrealism – and its limits – also places him squarely within larger contemporary debates of a

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[7] Adès quoted in V. Schweitzer, *Great Expectations, and Versatility to Match*, cit.

[8] Breton also celebrated unfettered freedom in creative thought: «The mere word "freedom" is the only one that still excites me», André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)*, in Id., *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver - Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1972, pp. 1-47: 4. Cf. also the corresponding discussion in Raymond Spiteri - Donald LaCoss, *Introduction. Revolution by Night: Surrealism, Politics, and Culture*, in *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture*, ed. by R. Spiteri - D. LaCoss, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003 (Studies in European Transition, 16), pp. 1-18: 6.

[9] Adès quoted in Peter Culshaw, *Don't Call Me a Messiah*, «The Telegraph», 1st March 2007, https://bit.ly/2viune9 (accessed on May 14, 2018). As his book *Full of Noises* amply demonstrates, Adès's preferred method of talking about music is through elaborate and vivid metaphors rather than by means of established analytical paradigms.

[10] Thomas Adès, *Full of Noises. Conversations with Tom Service*, New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012, p. 54.

global art world that is struggling to find a more tractable critical vocabulary than the ones offered by postmodernism in its multiple manifestations.[11]

How Adès Became Surrealist

Despite the role of surrealism in many different artistic media, and despite the fact that the very term surrealism was coined in reference to a ballet (in Guillaume Apollinaire's program note to Erik Satie and Jean Cocteau's *Parade*), Surrealists historically did not engage with music as an equal to the other arts. This lack of interest has been partially attributed to the attitudes of André Breton, the movement's fountainhead.[12] Non-programmatic instrumental music, with its perceived autonomy from the phenomenal world, has proven particularly resistant to recruitment into the surrealist habitus.[13] As a result, accounts of surrealism in music have tended to limit themselves to considerations of musical works with text, usually becoming rather unsatisfying tallies of the degree to which the music underscores the more readily perceivable surrealist quality of the text (or in the case of opera, plot).[14] Alternately, some scholars have placed an emphasis on the significance of automatism – action without conscious intervention – within the movement, which has tended to lead to the conclusion that only musical improvisation is true musical surrealism.[15]

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[11] Cf. John Roeder, *Co-Operating Continuities in the Music of Thomas Adès*, «Music Analysis», XXV, 1-2 (2006), pp. 121-154, for a discussion of how Adès's «co-operating continuities» form musical effects which place him within one stream of postmodern thought. Of course, postmodernism, like modernism, has meant so many things that no single composer could be expected to address all of its facets. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker propose four main threads in postmodern art and its corresponding discourse: «a transformation in our material landscape; a distrust and consequent desertion of metanarratives; the emergence of late capitalism, the fading of historicism, and the waning of affect; and a new regime in the arts», Timotheus Vermeulen - Robin van den Akker, *Notes on Metamodernism*, «Journal of Aesthetics & Culture», II, 1 (2010), pp. 1-14: 4.

[12] Breton wrote in *Surrealism and Painting* that music was «the most deeply confusing of all forms», and that music is «not destined to strengthen the idea of human greatness. So may night continue to descend upon the orchestra», André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. by Simon Watson Taylor, New York, Harper & Row, 1972, p. 1. In *Silence is Golden*, he allowed that there might be a "recasting" of the relationship between poetry and music, but hardly fought against what he saw as poets and visual artists who were generally indifferent to music, André Breton, *Silence is Golden*, in *What is Surrealism?*, ed. by Franklin Rosemont, New York, Pathfinder Press, 1978, II, pp. 348-354. Cf. also Sébatien Arfouilloux's contribution in the present issue.

[13] Leon Botstein articulated this problem in an introductory essay to a 1992 concert at Carnegie Hall, which was organized alongside an exhibition of Magritte's work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Botstein wrote: «The difficulty, of course, is that music, unlike writing and painting–the most familiar surrealist media, was never constructed on an illusion of realism; on the imitation of nature, strictly considered. Even when musical realism became an accepted notion in the 18th and 19th centuries, it was clearly an artificial convention», Leon Botstein, *Surrealism and Music? The Musical World around René Magritte, 1930-1975*, http://americansymphony.org/surrealism-and-music-the-musical-world-around-rene-magritte/ (accessed on April 16, 2018).

Yet some of the stated objectives of Breton, at least, seem to suggest that music might be an ideal for exploring elements of the surrealist project in more than just a few limited ways.[16] Surrealism promised its practitioners a direct expression of interior life, unadulterated by conventions of verisimilitude to everyday experience. In Breton's formulation, surrealism was «psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express [...] the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern».[17] This description, from Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto*, is not only in keeping with Breton's disdain for the novel as a genre that is too realistic. It also points to the fundamentally intersubjective quality of Breton's vision for surrealism; if one "proposes to express" anything it must be directed at an audience, real or imagined. Although inwardly focused, in this formulation surrealism leans more towards a rhetorical mode than a meditative practice. Surrealism is social.

Adès too has suggested that music has at least the potential to reflect Breton's «pure functioning of thought» when he commented in *Full of Noises*, his book of interviews, «my work is the only way I can try to understand what it might be like to be in someone else's

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[14] Daniel Albright limits his discussion almost exclusively to works for the stage in his discussion of surrealism in *Modernism and Music*, considering Darius Milhaud's *Le bœuf sur le toit*, Les Six's *Les mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, Francis Poulenc's *Les mamelles de Tirésias* and Paul Hindemith's *Cardillac.* Similarly, Nicolas Slonimsky predominantly focuses on opera, as well, including Hindemith's *Hin und zurück*, Ernst Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf,* and Britten's *Turn of the Screw* in his discussion of archetypical musical surrealist works. Cf. Daniel Albright, *Dadaism and Surrealism*, in *Modernism and Music. An Anthology of Sources*, ed. by D. Albright, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 309-318: 309-311; Nicolas Slonimsky, *Music and Surrealism*, «Artforum», V, 1 (1966), pp. 80-85. Annette Shandler Levitt put it bluntly in a letter to «The New York Times»: «I am not convinced that music, per se, can even be surreal: lacking representational elements, music cannot create the disjunction that is a requisite of surrealism. There must first be a realism before there can be a surrealism», quoted in Richard Taruskin, *A Surrealist Composer Comes to the Rescue of Modernism*, in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009, pp. 144-152: 151.

[15] For explorations of the "automatic" elements which might be read as surreal in different repertoires, cf. Anne LeBaron, *Reflections of Surrealism in Postmodern Musics*, in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, ed. by Judy Lochhead - Joseph Auner, New York – London, Routledge, 2002 (Studies in Contemporary Music and Culture, 4), pp. 27-73; Michael Szekely, *Jazz Naked Fire Gesture. Improvisation as Surrealism*, «Papers of Surrealism», 9 (2011), pp. 1-12. Of course, automatism and composition are not necessarily mutually exclusive: in his autobiography Virgil Thomson described his composition of the first act of *Four Saints in Three Acts* as a kind of frozen improvisation, where he improvised to Gertrude Stein's libretto until it came in to shape, only then committing it to paper, cf. Virgil Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, New York, Knopf, 1966, p. 104. Cf. also Nicole Marchesseau's contribution in the present issue.

[16] Readers steeped in the history of surrealism will note that I am drawing on a rather narrow and well-known slice of the movement in this discussion. If Adès's music is to be meaningfully interpreted as surrealist for a broad audience, I would argue this is a necessary dimension of its framing. Insofar as surrealism swirls around Adès in the popular press so that it might initiate a listener into his sonic world, I choose to restrict this discussion to texts and works that a casual listener might know.

[17] André Breton, translated and quoted in D. Albright, *Dadaism and Surrealism*, cit., p. 310 (original in André Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, 4 published vols., ed. by Marguerite Bonnet, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1988-, I, p. 328).

head. When I'm writing music, I'm partly asking, "is it like this for you?"».[18] Breton's notion that surrealism stood apart from reason, aesthetics, and morals might also be compared to Adès's view of music as an art whose humanity lies precisely in its lack of reference to everyday life. In *Full of Noises*, Adès used the notion of absurdity – a recurring effect of so much surrealist artwork – as a rationale for the fundamental significance of music, especially opera:

> Most of the time I sit there and watch operas and think: this is all absurd. Really we shouldn't all be here! [...] [But] that is the point, the more absurd, the more indefensible, the more it makes sense! [...] Operas should instead be absurd in a way that is truer than reality. But that's just the most absurd form of something that is absurd from the start: music. Music should have no excuse, other than itself. Music is its own excuse.[19]

Although Adès doesn't make it explicit, we can sense here an affinity with the self-justifying dimension of Breton's thought, and the emphasis from both men on creating artwork that is not mediated through or stifled by rationality.

In the hands of Breton and his circle, the moral and aesthetic vacuum in which surrealism lived was nevertheless avowedly political. Breton, Louis Aragon, Antonin Artaud, Paul Éluard and others made no secret of where their political sympathies lay, arraying themselves in their writings along a spectrum from anarchy to communism to a more general anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism.[20] For his part, Adès seems to have little use for this aspect of the movement. Adès has carefully cultivated his own stance of disengagement with larger questions of ethical meaning. Some of his most definitive statements on this front were made in an interview with Ian Bostridge in June of 2011:

> Adès: I just think it matters utterly whether you choose one note or another, but it's not moral or political. It's simply to reach the truth of the idea as fully as possible.
> Bostridge: All art is political, isn't it?
> Adès: I am absolutely incapable of understanding that idea! I really don't know what that means. [...] I don't think politics is going to write your piece for you. What could be more political than Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* [...]? The politics of saying everybody's equal is so banal – though it wasn't banal then – but when it is put with that force, it becomes the most enormous truth. It's far beneath or above politics. Politics just seems to become irrelevant when something's put that powerfully.[21]

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[18] T. Adès, *Full of Noises*, cit., p. 100.

[19] *Ibidem*, p. 13.

[20] For an overview of the intersections of surrealism and politics, cf. *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture*, ed. by R. Spiteri - D. LaCoss, cit., pp. 1-36, 300-336.

[21] Ian Bostridge - Thomas Adès, *From a Conversation between Ian Bostridge and Thomas Adès, June 2011*, in *Adès. Anthology*, EMI – Warner Classics, © 2011, 2 cd, 5099908856029, p. 8.

It has been a consistent goal of Adès to create a space for his music – for all music – which is fully autonomous from the concerns of the world from whence it springs. In this sense Adès's surrealism might be more accurately aligned with the eerily still worlds of René Magritte or Giorgio de Chirico rather than the more politically engaged forms of surrealism emanating from Breton's innermost circle, or even Salvador Dalí's wildly vacillating politics.[22] Nevertheless, even though Adès does not tend to reach for the extremes of the various dimensions of the Surrealists' aesthetic universe – either by developing an "automatic" writing style, or seeking to foment a revolution – much of his music can be (and has been) aligned with the sightlines surveyed by the Surrealists in the second quarter of the twentieth century. But how?

Given the frequent use of surrealism as a descriptor of Adès's sound, and given that a number of Adès's earlier works are now described as surrealist, including *Living Toys* (1993) and *Powder Her Face* (1995), it is perhaps surprising to find that Adès's work was not couched in a surrealist context until the end of 1999. Even earlier that year, one critic specifically noted that the Alameda Opera's then-current revival of *Powder Her Face* used staging that «leads us to expect a surrealism *that is utterly absent in the libretto*».[23] In the fall, though, commentators became hungry for a narrative to help frame one of the major achievements of Adès's early career, his receipt of the Grawemeyer Award for composition for his orchestral work *Asyla*. Two newspaper articles which were published within a week of the Grawemeyer Award ceremony formed the opening salvos in the public discussion of Adès's surrealist affinities. The first article was a short announcement by Patrick O'Connor about Adès's Grawemeyer, which mentioned in passing that Adès was working on an opera which used a libretto by Jean Cocteau and Raymond Radiguet (presumably *Paul & Virginie*).[24] This libretto was abandoned by Satie, and abandoned by Adès, as well, since he went on to write *The Tempest* (2003) and *The Exterminating Angel* (2015).[25] Just as scholarship on musical surrealism has emphasized works with text – and specifically with plot – so too was Adès's musical surrealism initially understood chiefly in terms of his operatic projects.[26]

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[22] For one overview cf. Jordana Mendelson, *Of Politics, Postcards and Pornography. Salvador Dalí's "Le Mythe Tragique de l'Angélus de Millet"*, in *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture*, ed. by R. Spiteri - D. LaCoss, cit., pp. 169-178: 174-175.

[23] Paul Levy, *An Encore for England's Hottest Composer*, «Wall Street Journal», 9 July 1999, https://on.wsj.com/2HqVf0h (accessed on May 14, 2018). Emphasis added.

[24] Patrick O'Connor, *Composer has $200,000 to Spend on Silence*, «National Post», 1 December 1999, p. 4; Robert Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. xxxv.

[25] Melissa Lesnie, *Thomas Adès. Composing the Impossible*, «Limelight», 14 April 2013.

Richard Taruskin provided the first thoroughgoing consideration of Adès's surrealist affinities in an article that appeared in «The New York Times» on 5 December 1999.[27] *A Surrealist Composer Comes to the Rescue of Modernism*, the headline thundered.[28] Characterizing modernism as a set of competing priorities and focusing on two of them, Taruskin explored the tension between formalism (what he called the «sad side of the story, the one the textbooks have been telling») and eclecticism (a series of «polymorphously perverse joinings and copulations»).[29] Within this context Taruskin situated Adès's music in terms we can recognize as describing the surreal: «It achieves its special atmosphere, and projects its special meanings, through improbable sonic collages and mobiles: outlandish juxtapositions of evocative sound-objects that hover, shimmering, or dreamily revolve, in a seemingly motionless sonic emulsion».[30] In Taruskin's mind, Adès's music (he mentions the *Chamber Symphony*, *Asyla*, and *Powder Her Face* by name) reflects the distortions of the representative field that characterize the paintings of Dalí, de Chirico, and Magritte.

Taruskin's essay was also one of the first to lay out explicitly the biographical rationale for viewing Adès as a surrealist composer – namely that his mother Dawn Ades is an art historian who has specialized in surrealism:[31] «I swear that this study in bottomless sinking and lassitude had already reminded me of Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory* (yes, the wilting watches and recognizable if unidentifiable carcass) before I put two and two together and verified the agreeable surmise that the composer's mother was in fact Dawn Ades, the author of important books on Dalí, Duchamp and the dada and surrealist movements».[32] Moving from biographical skepticism to certainty in three sentences, Taruskin writes:

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[26] Although *The Exterminating Angel* may initially appear to loom large in an account of Adès's relationship with surrealism, in my forthcoming book on Adès I argue that this opera is best framed as an engagement with larger questions of meaning and existence that he has been exploring in works such as *Tevot* and *Totentanz*.

[27] Richard Taruskin, *A Surrealist Composer Comes to the Rescue of Modernism*, «The New York Times», 5 December 1999, https://nyti.ms/2H7IZ1h (accessed on May 14, 2018).

[28] Headlines are known to be editorial, but this title was retained without comment when it was reprinted in Taruskin's volume *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays*, cit.

[29] In retrospect this newspaper article was something of a dry run for the larger redrawing of the historiography of musical modernism that Taruskin sought to effect in his *Oxford History of Western Music*. Cf. Richard Taruskin, *Oxford History of Western Music*, 6 vols., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, IV, § "Preface", p. xx.

[30] R. Taruskin, *A Surrealist Composer Comes to the Rescue of Modernism*, «The New York Times», cit. Taruskin wrote a postscript to this essay for *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays*.

[31] Only Thomas adds the accent to the family name, as an aid to pronunciation. P. Levy, *An Encore for England's Hottest Composer*, cit.

[32] R.Taruskin, *A Surrealist Composer Comes to the Rescue of Modernism*, «The New York Times», cit.

> What to make of this all-too-suggestive family connection is anybody's guess. But it does invite one to imagine that growing up surrounded by the captivating if academically disreputable imagery of dream realism during abstract expressionism's waning days might have given a gifted young composer the confidence to resist what was still a powerful and entirely comparable conformist pressure during his tutelary years. Mr. Adès was thus able to buck sterile utopia while avoiding the opposing pitfall of ironic pastiche.[33]

If we were to continue to ask about the possibilities of the influence of Adès's immediate milieu on his ostensible surrealism, other suggestive links beyond his mother's academic specialization materialize. His brother, Robert Ades, is a psychotherapist who has given papers on the epistemological origins of Freudian psychotherapy, and Freud's theories about the mind in turn formed part of the intellectual edifice of surrealism in the first place. His father, the translator and poet Timothy Ades, has named the surrealist poet Robert Desnos «the most exciting French poet of the last century».[34]

By the time Adès's *The Tempest* was first performed in 2004 – a mere five years after Taruskin's article – his surrealism seemed practically taken for granted. Anthony Holden fell back on Dalí to describe the staging for *The Tempest*.[35] In his review, Mark Swed wasn't sure where Adès stood as a composer – «Did he really have a musical identity, and, if so, was he a restless romantic, modernist, surrealist, postmodernist or what?» – but did allow that Prospero's character was a distorted archetype: «Adès's pompous chorales, underpinned by tubby brass and double basses, make him a caricature of Wagner's Wotan».[36] Ivan Hewett, writing in «The Telegraph», suggested that surrealism is not only an explanatory device but also a way of identifying Adès's limitations: «The comparison with Dalí is more revealing than Taruskin intended, as it points to a facile cleverness and an emotional chilliness that for me can sometimes be the aftertaste of Adès's undeniable brilliance and magic».[37] In a scholarly article, Christopher Fox noted that Adès's «scores regularly transpose elements of the surreal into music», again comparing Adès to Dalí and Magritte, «the compelling strangeness of whose works depends for its success on the evenness of painted texture and the preservation of the integrity of the picture plane and marriage of clear pictorial design

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[33] *Ibidem*.

[34] Timothy Ades's homepage, www.timothyades.co.uk (accessed on April 18, 2018).

[35] «Text apart, Adès and director-designer Tom Cairns have between them conjured up a magical island entirely persuasive as Prospero's. From the moment the hieroglyph-strewn curtain rises on Cairns's surreal, primary-coloured, Dalíesque landscape, to brooding brass and strings that swiftly whip up the requisite storm, one is musically and visually convinced that the spirit of Shakespeare's play is in safe, caring, imaginative hands», A. Holden, *A Truly Prosperous Prospero*, cit.

[36] M.Swed, *Keep Everyone Guessing*, cit.

[37] I. Hewett, *He's Brilliant, but Can He Deliver?*, cit.

with bizarre detail».[38] By 2004 a number of Adès's most important works had been retrospectively incorporated into an Adès-as-surrealist narrative.[39]

Surrealism has appeared as a watchword in the vocabulary of Adès and his immediate circle as well, suggesting a symbiotic relationship between the reception of Adès's music and Adès's own language for discussing his music.[40] But Adès's use of the word, for all the weight that critics have put on it, suggests that he sees surrealism more generally. His use of the term in interviews reflects a range of possible meanings that surrealism has acquired in casual conversation, to the point where it can now be used to signify just about any event which is odd, unexpected, or out of the ordinary. In 2011, Adès remembered visiting Los Angeles for the first time in 1996 and being intoxicated by what he called its «surreal charms».[41] In a different vein, Adès's student, Francisco Coll, considers himself a surrealist, although he cleaves more closely to the idea of distorting a recognizable world. Describing his work *Piedras*, Coll commented: «When I write music I try to create impossible worlds in a very realistic way. This is a kind of surrealist concept».[42] Similarly, Gerald Barry, the Irish composer who has been described as Adès's «favorite colleague», relied on surrealism at a few points to describe his opera based on *The Importance of Being Earnest* in a joint interview with Adès, Stephen Fry, and Fiona Shaw.[43] Barry thought that Wilde's play itself anticipated the style: «It's obviously clearly incredibly funny, but also has all these dark, surreal qualities. The mysteriousness of it is why it is the only one of its kind».[44] Barry's use of the word here and elsewhere in the same interview suggests that he and Adès sometimes deploy surrealism as a stand-in for ideas of the uncanny and general weirdness.[45] Hence, to avoid being merely trivial, any effort to situate Adès's music within a surrealist discourse faces significant challenges of meaning.

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38 C. Fox, *Tempestuous Times*, cit., p. 43.

39 These works include *America. A Prophecy*, *Living Toys*, and *Asyla*. Cf. C. Fox, *Tempestuous Times*, cit., pp. 42-43; Arnold Whittall, *James Dillon, Thomas Adès, and the Pleasures of Allusion*, in *Aspects of British Music of the 1990s*, ed. by Peter O'Hagan, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003, pp. 3-27.

40 In *Full of Noises* Adès puts some distance between himself and his critical reception, using "critics" in a generally disparaging way; cf. T. Adès, *Full of Noises*, cit., pp. 82, 89, 117, 123, 154.

41 Adès quoted in Matthew Erikson, *Thomas Adès Takes the Reins...*, «Los Angeles Times», 6 March 2011, p. E8.

42 *London Sinfonietta & Francisco Coll*, London Sinfonietta, 22 November 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oIbnRtBpEzU (accessed on April 18, 2018).

43 Mark Swed, *It's Earnest, Yes, and Funny, Too*, «Los Angeles Times», 9 April 2011, p. D1.

44 Barry's statements in, *"The Importance of Being Earnest", an Opera by Gerald Barry*, Barbican Centre, 30 January 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gINiIybn6SM (accessed on April 18, 2018).

Hearing (and Seeing) Adès's Surrealism

Before beginning a consideration of how surrealism might be seen to manifest itself in Adès's music, it is worth reiterating the fundamentally intersubjective quality of musical surrealism. Put another way, it is in general far easier to agree on when and how a poem or a painting is functioning surrealistically than it is with a piece of music. While a viewer could easily see that a melting clock in Dalí's *Persistence of Memory* is "wrong", most audience members would have a difficult time articulating what a "normal" musical texture ought to be in the first place. In Daniel Albright's words, «surrealist music [aspires] to mean wrong; and in order to mean wrong music must mean something».[46] There have been a number of efforts to define a lexicon of surreal signifiers in music, ranging from free improvisation, to polytonality, to a more general notion of dissonance as potentially serving surrealist ends.[47] Here, though, I take a less definition-driven approach, seeking to align my reading of Adès's musical surrealism along a spectrum ranging from the more readily perceptible moments (which, in practice, means ones that are reinforced by a text) to the more subtle. Given the irreducible problems of music's meaning, musical surrealism is present in the music itself only insofar as the listener perceives it to be, or in terms of what Robert Hatten has called their «stylistic competence».[48] Put another way, the actual surrealist qualities of Adès's music – or any music for that matter – can only be argued for, never decided upon.[49] Surrealism is situational.

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[45] Speaking of the paired love duets between the characters Gwendolyn and Jack, and Algernon and Cecily, Barry alluded to surrealist automata as well: «[Barry:] So it's as if they were almost cardboard, cutout things, that the same tune is used for both passionate – the same music is used for both passionate outpourings of the two acts. As if passionate outpourings are beside the point, really, and are as surreal as anything else. —[Adès:] A little bit of formality —[Barry:] Yeah, Formality. It's as if it is a ritual thing —[Adès:] They're not real emotions —[Barry:] Exactly, yeah. —[Adès:] I mean that's one of the things. I'm sure it's true that the sheer sense with the words that the audience would have laughed themselves silly, I'm sure, but it never really touches the ground, that you're sort of skating on thin ice. They must have somewhere in their subconscious thought "is this ok?" [laughter]. There's a feeling of getting away with something but you don't quite know what», *ibidem*.

[46] D. Albright, *Modernism and Music*, cit., p. 312.

[47] N. Slonimsky, *Music and Surrealism*, cit., and A. LeBaron, *Reflections of Surrealism in Postmodern Musics*, cit. are two of the most thoroughgoing efforts in this direction.

[48] Cf. Edward Venn's discussion of the issue of stylistic competence in the third movement of Adès's *Asyla* in Edward Venn, *Thomas Adès's "Freaky, Funky Rave"*, «Music Analysis», XXXIII, 1 (2014), pp. 65-98: 68-70.

[49] Put yet another way, I treat surrealism here as a discourse, rather than a style. In such a context, surrealism is a series of debates and conversations (rendered in multiple media), rather than a fixed collection of signifiers. One essay that plumbs the consequences of such a distinction (albeit in architecture, rather than music), is Sarah Williams Goldhagen, *Something to Talk About. Modernism, Discourse, Style*, «Journal of the Society for Architectural Historians», LXIV, 2 (2005), pp. 144-167.

The *fait divers*, or the journalistic telling of an extravagantly violent event, is a recurring form in surrealist art that is relevant for Adès's works from the 1990s. One method of writing surrealist stories involves reassembling words from a newspaper, such as in Roger Roughton's *Final Night of the Bath*, which was put together from the 6 June 1936 edition of the *London Evening Standard*. In the opening sentence Roughton manages to move from dull news to a strange cliffhanger: «Over two thousand people had taken tickets for this season's murder».[50] A similar effect was achieved in Raymond Roussel's story *The Greenish Skin*, which drew on his technique of selecting words with double meanings (or which were only one letter apart), and assembling them to create fantastical texts. *The Greenish Skin* opens:

> The greenish skin of the ripening plum [*La peau verdâtre de la prune un peu mûre*] looked as appetizing as anyone might wish. I therefore chose this fruit from amongst the various delicacies made ready on a silver platter for the *señora*'s return.
> With the point of a knife I made an imperceptible hole in the delicate peel, and taking a phial from my pocket, poured in several drops of a quick working poison.
> «You betrayed me, Natte», I said in an expressionless voice. «Now meet your fate».[51]

The cool distance of the narrative voice in both of these stories heightens the impact of the already bizarre facts they recount. Similarly, Jeanette Baxter has discussed a visual version of the *fait divers* at the beginning of her essay on James Graham Ballard's *Running Wild*, offering René Magritte's painting *The Threatened Assassin* (Figure 1) as an emblem of surrealist fascination with enigmatic criminal moments.

> For copyright reasons, please follow this link to access the figure:
> https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79267 (last accessed on November 5, 2018).
> Fig. 1: René Magritte, *L'assassin menacé*, 1927, oil on canvas, 150,4 x 195,2 cm, New York, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

At first glance the narrative of the painting seems self-evident: a woman has been murdered, and the killer himself is about to meet his own end. Baxter notes that questions seem to pile on top of one another as we continue to contemplate it: «who is the female

[50] Roger Roughton, *Final Night of the Bath*, in *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, ed. by R. Roughton, London, Frank Cass, 1968², p. 166 (orig. ed. Vaduz, Kraus Reprint, 1936).

[51] Roussel's and Roughton's stories are both discussed and quoted (and in the case of Roussel, translated) in *A Book of Surrealist Games*, ed. by Alastair Brotchie - Mel Gooding, Boston (MA) – London, Shambhala Redstone Editions, 1995, pp. 39-40.

victim? Why does the presumed murderer pause next to his victim in order to listen to music? Who are the three figures in the background?».[52] The gruesome murder takes on an eerie stillness as we allow the tableau to sink in. Similar depictions of crimes somehow chilled by neutral retelling could be found in Max Ernst's *Open Your Bag, My Good Man* (Figure 2) and in the journal *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution*, which carried a section of «fait divers» recounting strange stories from the news.[53]

For copyright reasons, please follow this link to access the figure:
https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Andre-Breton--La-Femme-100-tetes--editio/0965841B2E37AEF9 (last accessed on November 5, 2018)
Fig. 2: Max Ernst, *Défais ton sac, mon brave* (Open Your Bag, My Good Man), in *La femme 100 têtes*, Paris, Éditions du Carrefour, 1929.

For Adès, one point of connection with the *fait divers* tradition is his first opera, *Powder Her Face*. This opera revisits moments in the life of the Duchess of Argyll, whose divorce case in 1963 caused a tabloid sensation in the UK. While there is no murder in *Powder Her Face*, the luridly hypersexual exploits of the Duchess form a departure from the ostensible dignity of her social rank in their own way. *Powder Her Face* is organized around a series of flashbacks while the duchess's eviction from her hotel room looms; in real life the Duchess owed some £33,000 to the Dorchester Hotel in back rent by 1990, and died in a nursing home three years later.[54] In the opera, her departure from the hotel in the final scene marks her decisive fall from society, but the music performs a symbolic role above and beyond that. With the inclusion of creaking fishing reels in the score at this moment in the action, Adès also provides wordless imagery of fate finally drawing the Duchess home to death's rocky shore.

The use of fishing reels at the end is only one example of Adès's reliance on musical onomatopoeia at other pivotal moments in the opera's plot, particularly in the vocal lines. I would argue that these moments of vocal onomatopoeia contribute in part to the surreal effect of the work overall. The dramaturgical history of opera has emphasized the idea that a theater piece which is sung would somehow engage a more elevated sphere of rhetoric

[52] Jeanette Baxter, *The Surrealist "Fait Divers". Uncovering Violent Histories in J.G. Ballard's "Running Wild"*, «Papers of Surrealism», 5 (2007), p. 1, https://bit.ly/2Fd85tF (accessed on April 24, 2018).

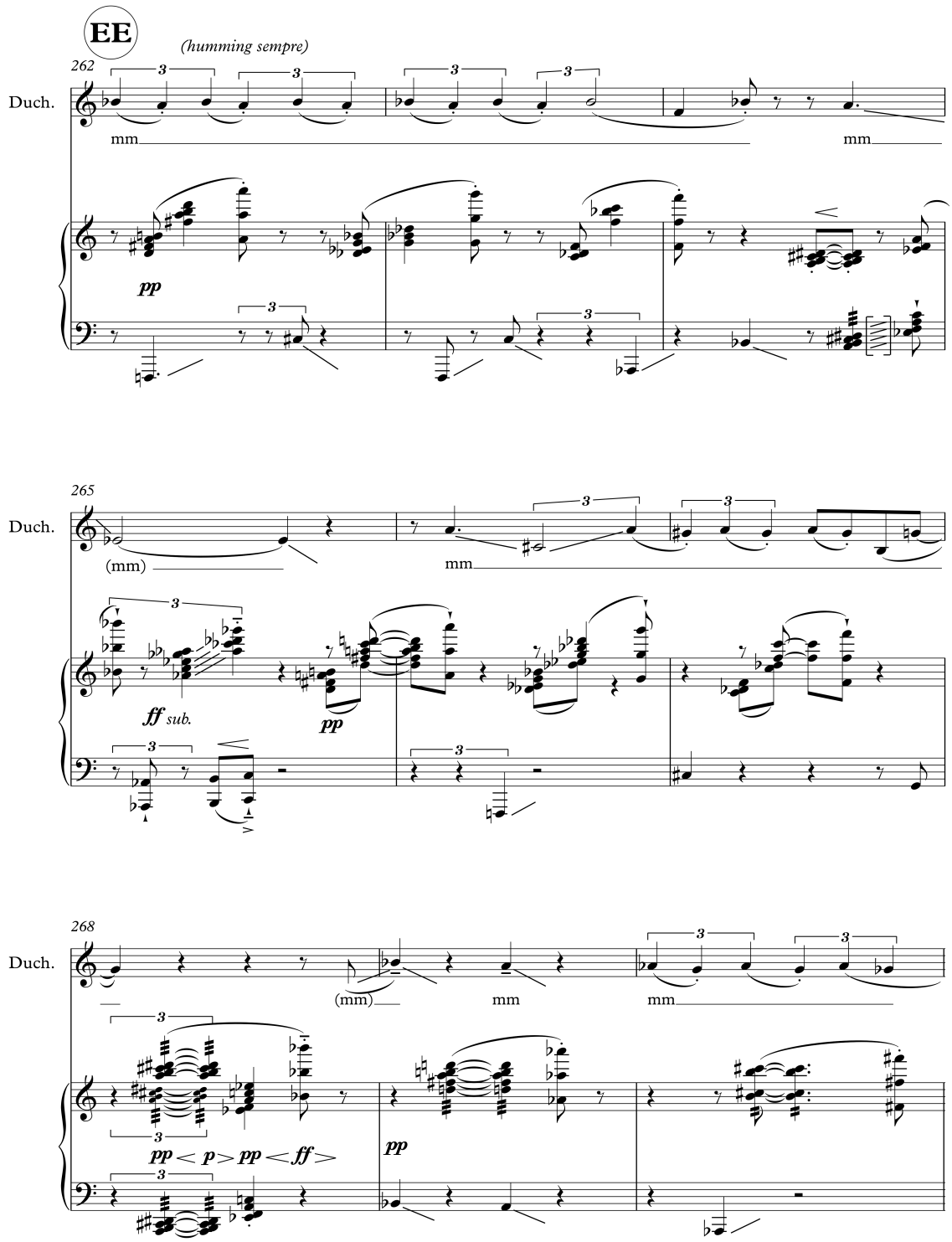
[53] J. Baxter, *The Surrealist "Fait Divers"*, cit., p. 4, note 25.

[54] P. Levy, *An Encore for England's Hottest Composer*, cit.

than the merely spoken; disrupting the sung fabric of the opera can be used for striking effect. This is often the reason provided for why Samiel, the evil character is Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz*, speaks rather than sings, or why Puck's role is spoken in Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. So for Adès to drop down to "lowly" unsung vocalizations at several crucial moments in the action ought to engender a sensation of "sous-"realism rather than "sur-"realism. Yet some of the moments of musical onomatopoeia in *Powder Her Face* have precisely the opposite effect, because their rupture of the diegetic frame bursts forth to the audience at moments of maximum dramatic effect.[55]

The fourth scene is the most famous example of this phenomenon, as the duchess fellates a waiter in a vowel-less aria (ex. 1).

[55] One might contrast Adès's approach here with *Singspiel* or even musical theater, where the sung plane of musical existence is frequently interrupted (or alternately, the spoken plane is interrupted by the song) in order to keep the dramatic action unfolding expediently.



Ex. 1: Thomas Adès, *Powder Her Face*, 1995, scene 4, mm. 262-270 (London, Faber, 1996, pp. 109-110).

Philip Hensher, the librettist, wrote in 2008 that this scene is what gave *Powder Her Face* «a life beyond the first run».[56] He continued:

> The notorious photographs of the Duchess of Argyll "performing" (I loved the word) fellatio on a stranger was at the centre of her divorce case. From day one, I had told Tom [Adès] that the opera had to contain «a blow-job aria – you know, it begins with words and ends with humming». When he had recovered, he agreed, though a little nervously.[57]

This scene has sat at the center of the opera ever since, both for its advocates and its glossators («This opera blows», David L. Groover dourly punned in a negative review of a 2011 production in Houston).[58] At least two productions have used this scene's departure from the "normal" narrative style of the opera (i.e., sung drama) as an occasion for the staging to take on surreal elements, as well. In the 2008 production from the Royal Opera House, a single supernumerary nude emerges from a bed (which, itself, is surreally shaped like a makeup compact), standing above the character of the Waiter, played in this production by Iain Paton (Figure 3).[59]

Fig. 3: still from Royal Opera House Production of *Powder Her Face*, 2008.

This strategy was taken to an extreme in the New York City Opera's production in 2013, when some two dozen nude men circulated on stage during the scene (Figure 4).

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[56] Philip Hensher, *Sex, Powder, and Polaroids*, «The Guardian», 28 May 2008, https://bit.ly/2r0o5LF (accessed on April 24, 2018).

[57] *Ibidem*.

[58] David L. Groover, *Fellatio and Fishing Reels in "Powder Her Face" from Opera Vista*, «Houston Press», 11 November 2011, https://bit.ly/2HXusqi (accessed on April 24, 2018).

[59] The visual pun is arguably two-fold, insofar as surrealists (and their dadaist forebears) were known for repurposing found objects in new contexts. Hence the compact-as-bed stage setting echoes both Dalí's lobster-as-telephone objects and Duchamp's urinal-as-fountain found sculpture.

Fig. 4: still from New York City Opera production of *Powder Her Face*, 2013.

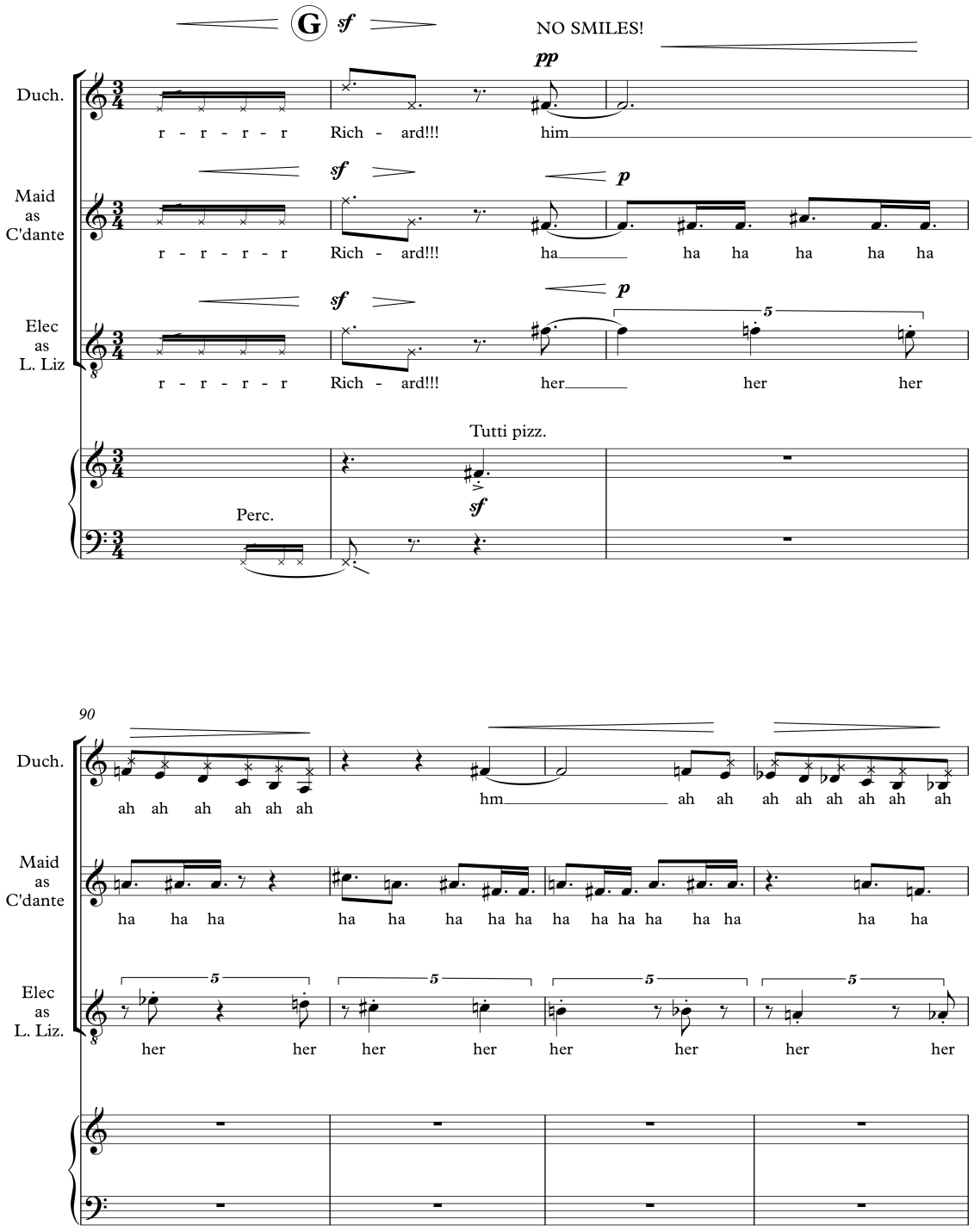
The director Jay Scheib and his creative team explained in the program that the waiter is but one instance of the Duchess's liaisons, describing the supernumeraries as «memories of many, many affairs» who «crowd the room».[60] Yet neither the Duchess nor the Waiter ever acknowledge the supernumeraries during this scene in the production. If they are «memories», Scheib's production invites the interpretation that they are somehow repressed, submerged beneath the plane of the Duchess's conscious thought. Such an approach is only the first example we will see of the subconscious, or even more generally the mind's inner dialogue, providing the animating cognitive dissonance for a surrealist experience.

This scene's sensationalism has become something of a shorthand for the so-called antics of the entire opera. But the particular musical technique of onomatopoeia is anticipated in the second scene of the opera by the pervasive laughing notated throughout. In this scene, the Lounge Lizard, the Duchess, and the Confidante are waiting for the arrival of the Duke, and the *ennui* is palpable. Musically, the existential boredom of the three characters progresses through the scene as the Lounge Lizard and the Confidante gossip about the Duchess's first divorce, and ultimately the Lounge Lizard offers a "pantomime" to the Duchess, performing along to a recording of a song that apparently has been written

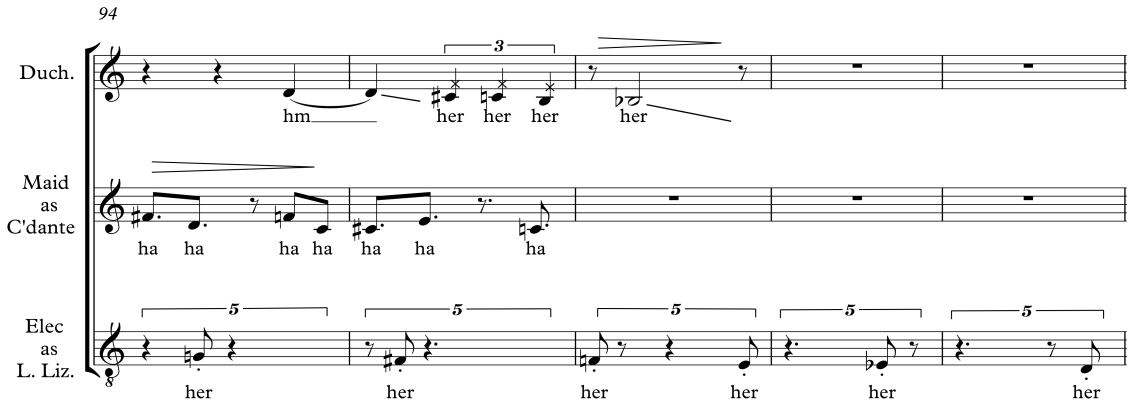
[60] Thomas Adès, *Powder Her Face* [program note], New York, BAM – New York City Opera, 2013.

about her.[61] Yet the running-down-the-clock quality of the scene is perhaps musically best represented by the trio's progressively more joyless laughter in the first half of the scene (ex. 2), which lurches to a halt as the characters seem to become aware that they themselves are the cause of their own boredom.

[61] The pantomime in this scene refers to the fact that the actual Duchess of Argyll was referenced in Pelham Grenville Wodehouse's alternate version of the lyrics for Cole Porter's song *You're the Top* from *Anything Goes* for British audiences.

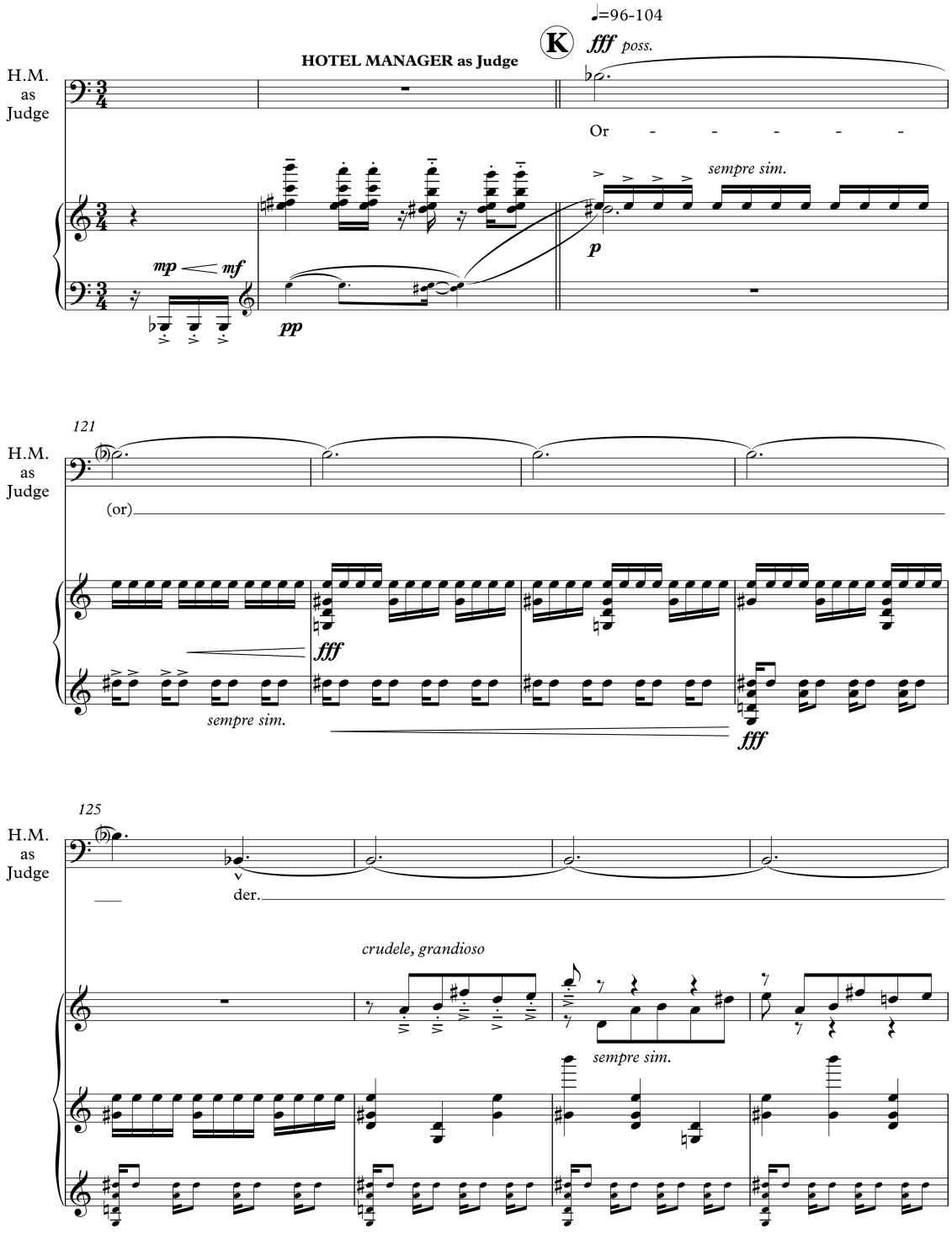


Ex. 2 (beginning): Thomas Adès, Powder Her Face, scene 2, mm. 88-98 (p. 50-51). Continues on p. 105.

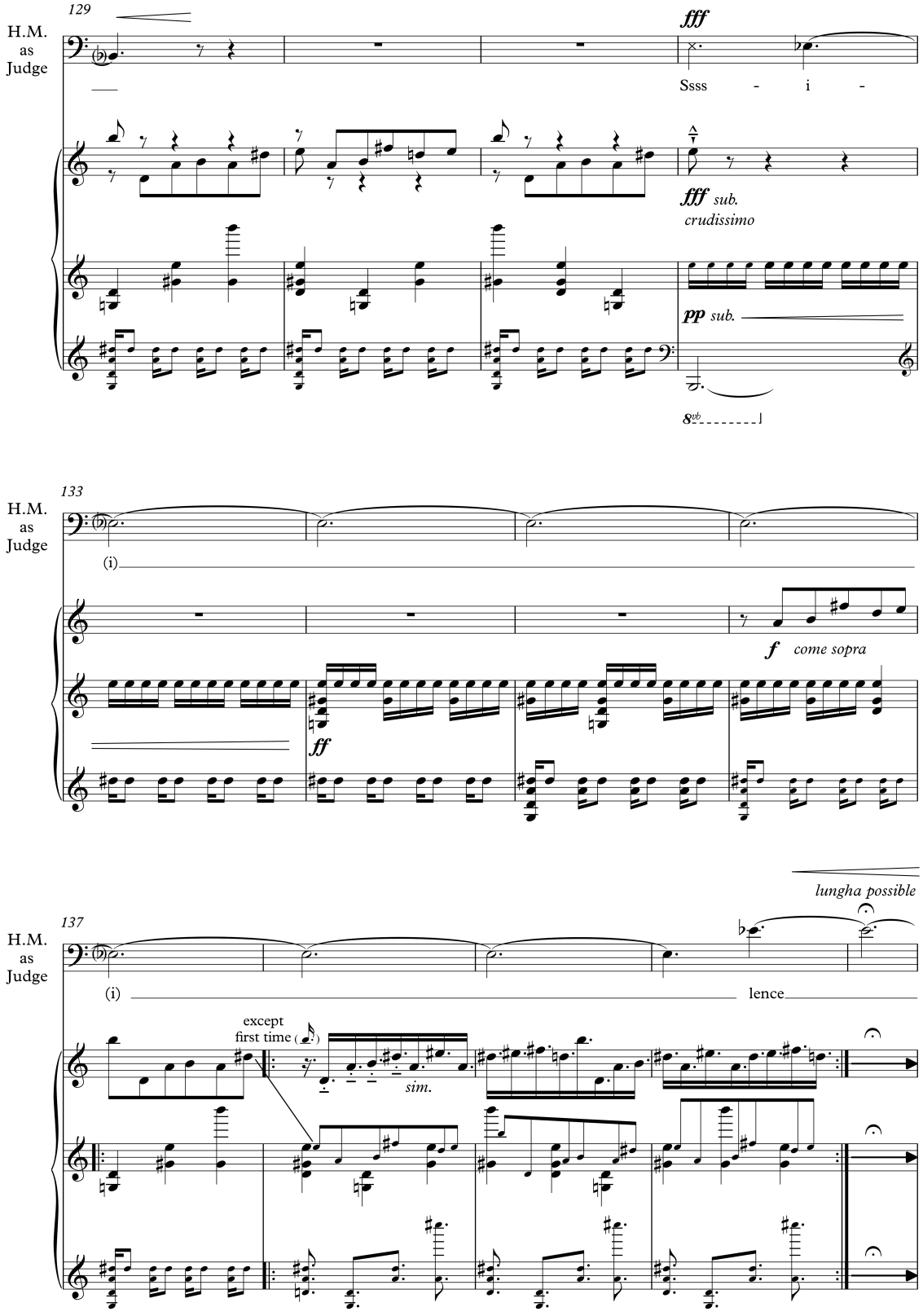


Ex. 2 (end): Thomas Adès, *Powder Her Face*, scene 2, mm. 88-98 (p. 50-51).

Similarly, the staging and music in the sixth scene work together to give this vocal onomatopoetic strategy its apotheosis. In this scene, the Judge reads his verdict at the divorce trial, with exaggerated bellowing in octaves opening the scene (ex. 3).



Ex. 3 (beginning): Thomas Adès, *Powder Her Face*, scene 6, mm. 121-141 (pp. 161-162). Continues on p. 107.



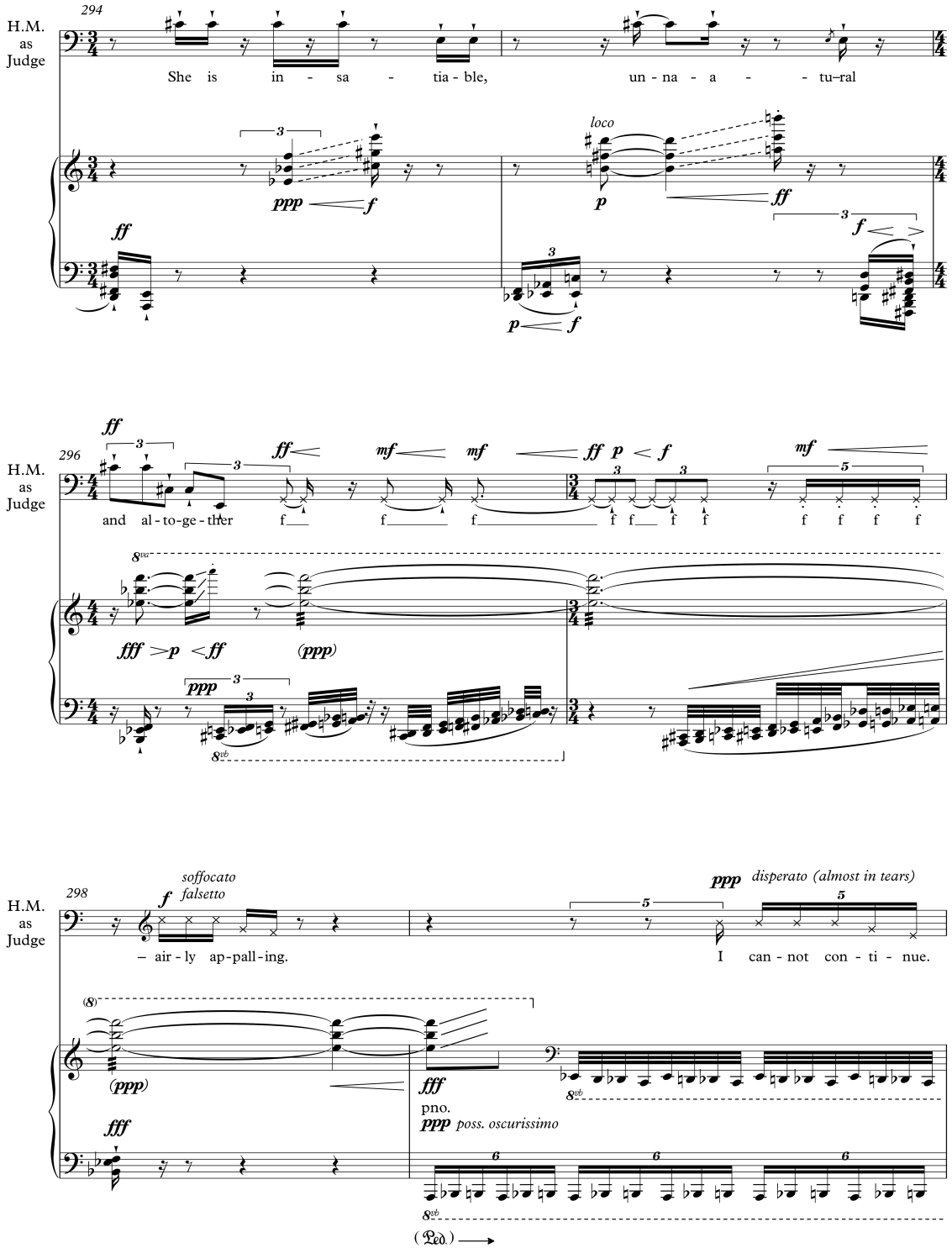
Ex. 3 (end): Thomas Adès, *Powder Her Face*, scene 6, mm. 121-141 (pp. 161-162).

In the film of the opera the staging becomes gradually more perverse: the Judge is shown wearing fishnet stockings and red high heels, and then reappears in the duchess's hotel room, slashing at his chest with a tube of lipstick and staging a mock crucifixion of himself above the Duchess's fireplace as he ends his aria (Figure 5).[62]

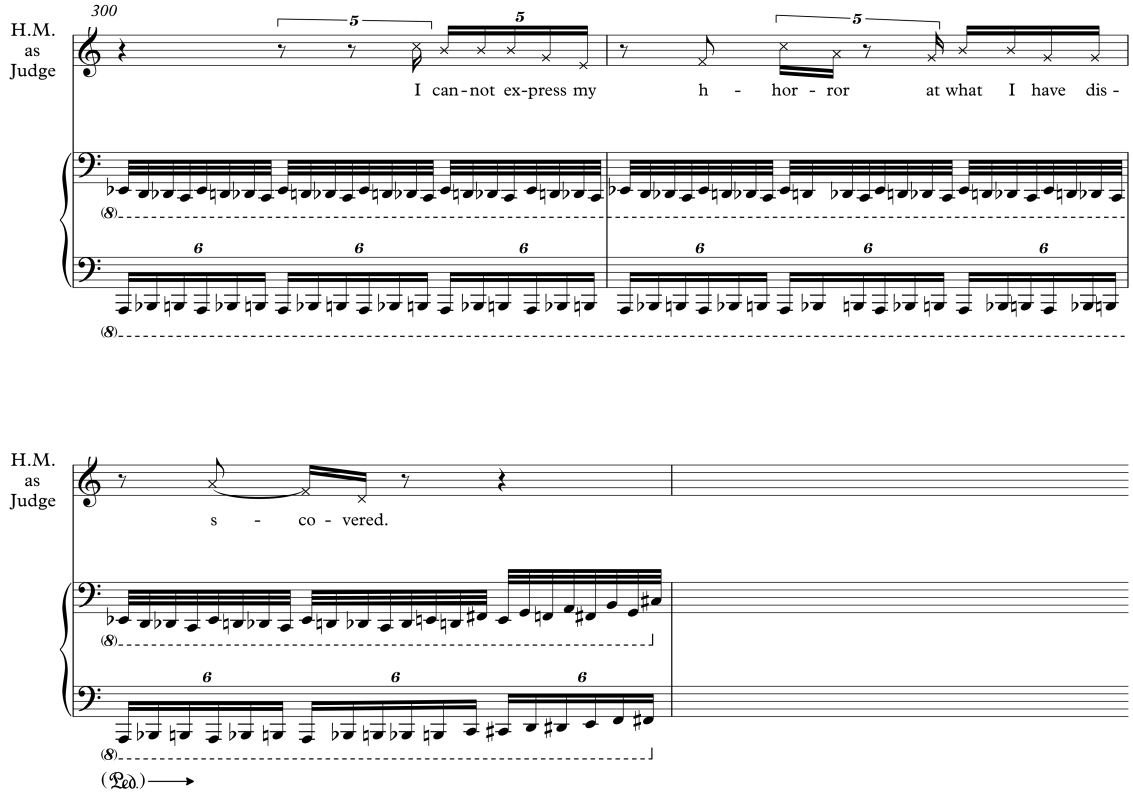
Fig. 5: still from film production of *Powder Her Face*, Kultur International Films, DC 10002, 1999.

The lofty musical plane of the opera is momentarily shattered at this moment as the Judge abandons song altogether and, following a passage of stuttering, finally splutters: «I cannot express my horror at what I have discovered» (ex. 4).

[62] This staging is borrowed from Almeida's staged version, cf. P. Levy, *An Encore for England's Hottest Composer*, cit. Furthmore, this is only one way that the scene has been queered in its staging. While the medium of film allows for this montage, in the New York City Opera production from 2013 the judge reads his verdict while himself receiving oral sex from a clerk.



Ex. 4 (beginning): Thomas Adès, Powder Her Face, scene 6, mm. 294-302 (pp. 175-176). Continues on p. 110.



Ex. 4 (end): Thomas Adès, *Powder Her Face*, scene 6, mm. 294-302 (pp. 175-176).

These passages in *Powder Her Face* pursue their surreal signification not by attempting to reveal a plane of experience which floats above the normative one of the opera, but by stomping on the conceit of opera itself. It is the musical equivalent of the opening scene in Luis Buñuel's film *Un chien andalou* where a woman's eye is held as if to be sliced open. The film then cuts to show a thin trail of cloud passing in front of the moon. Just as we think the moment of violence will be depicted in this symbolic way, the metaphor is trampled as the film cuts back to show the woman's eye being gruesomely slit open on screen, leaving nothing to the imagination.

The expressive potential of the non-sung, or semi-sung, vocal writing in *Powder Her Face* does more than merely momentarily rupture the diegetic frame of the opera. In Hensher's discussion of the origins of the fellatio scene, he explained some of his conceptual influences:

> I had been reading, I think, Wayne Koestenbaum's books on opera, all very keen on the idea that opera is both a way of giving women a voice and a sexual statement, but only as a means of ultimately silencing them. The image of a woman being brutally silenced through sex was, I thought, a powerful one, and the Duchess, in the opera, is specified as being silenced twice: first by sex and then by death. That second silencing, with a microphone being dragged round a gong and fishing reels being wound in the orchestra, turned out to be the easier one for music critics to admire.[63]

Hensher's précis of Koestenbaum's book *The Queen's Throat. Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* is true up to a point insofar as Koestenbaum does consider at length female roles in opera. But *The Queen's Throat* is perhaps more accurately described as a memoiristic exploration of the history of gay men as devotees of opera, and the role of silence looms throughout the book less as a symbol of misogyny than as one of gay repression. Writing about the experience of watching one of his friends lip-synch to a Callas recording, Koestenbaum writes «In the era of Silence = Death, the opera queen's silence is freighted with fatality. The silent opera queen, drowned out by Callas, is an image of gay helplessness, the persistence of the closet, and a tragic inability to awaken the body politic».[64] Elsewhere Koestenbaum makes the queer significance of a silenced soprano even more explicit:

> The tendency of a diva's voice to break down makes queer people feel at home. Collapsing, the diva says, «I am discontinuous. I am vulnerable. I cannot bear the martyrdom of performance and exposure». In crisis the vocal organ calls attention to its schisms, narrates its own history, and reveals to the queer subject that voice or identity is always torn in half, broken, dispossessed.[65]

By citing Koestenbaum, Hensher is ultimately dropping a hairpin, offering the means to a gay reading of this scene without naming it, and in doing so pointing to another dimension of the fellatio scene, namely to its potential to serve as a site of identification for queer audiences. The collision of the queer with the surreal in the fellatio scene is but one example of how surrealism can provide a proxy discourse for the not-quite-said.[66] Hensher and Adès are both openly gay, yet have avoided conspicuous markers of difference or explo-

[63] Philip Hensher, *Sex, Powder, and Polaroids*, cit. Hensher's use of the plural «books» here suggests he was probably also familiar with Koestenbaum's *Ode to Anna Moffo and Other Poems* (New York, Persea Books, 1990), but his discussion suggests he is referring primarily to *The Queen's Throat*, which was published in 1993.

[64] Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat. Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire*, New York, Poseidon Press, 1993, p. 45.

[65] *Ibidem*, p. 126. Koestenbaum could practically be writing about the fellatio scene when he later notes that «as long as singing is considered natural, however, some vocal techniques will be deemed degenerate; and "degeneration" was the rhetoric used in the nineteenth century to create the "homosexual" as a pathological identity», *ibidem*, p. 167.

rations of intensely homoerotic subject matter (at least by the standards of a writer like Wayne Koestenbaum). Adès has noted that he has «thought about doing an opera with two male leads, but that would be too gay, too contrived».[67] As we shall see, this is not the only moment where Adès chooses to stay in the shadowlands of the not-quite-said, thereby retaining the expressive power of the distortion of the notional frame that is so central to surrealist effects. Yet Adès does have a work with two male protagonists, although it is not an opera.

Adès's song *Life Story* deals in the hazy intersection of homosexuality and surrealism in ways that are at least as laden with signification as *Powder Her Face*.[68] The grim inevitability of *Life Story* – which sets Tennessee Williams's poem about a sexual encounter in a seedy hotel room immediately before two men burn to death in one another's arms – approaches its surrealism (and recapitulates the *fait divers* genre) in a somewhat different way. The cover of the sheet music for the piece (designed by a third party but presumably in consultation with Adès) already suggests a visual allusion to the language of Magritte's *La reproduction interdite* (Figures 6 and 7). It reproduces a photo by Brassaï (Gyula Halasz), *Mirrored Wardrobe in a Brothel, Rue Quincampoix*, with a slightly off-kilter portrait of two figures, one clothed, one nude, facing a mirror, both with their backs to the frame. A close look reveals the nude figure to be female (the faint outline of a necklace and high heels can be discerned), but Brassaï's photo is remarkable for its chilling anonymity, in part because of the faceless androgyny of both the nude and, to a lesser extent, the clothed man in his blousy shirt. This cover begs the question of what will be shown and what will be hidden on the pages its glossy cardstock contains.

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[66] The Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacies (of which Dawn Ades is a co-director) undertook a three-year project on surrealism and non-normative sexualities. In 2010 both of Adès's parents participated in a conference at West Dean College titled *Querying Surrealism/Queering Surrealism*, offering another thread in the intersections of Adès's own work with that of his parents. If we are to take Taruskin's claim of the impact of Adès's parents on his own sensibilities at face value, this project indicates that it may be an ongoing conversation between parents and son.

[67] Adès quoted in P. Culshaw, *Don't Call me a Messiah*, cit. Adès's comments are prescient since the season after *The Tempest* was produced at the Metropolitan Opera, the company mounted Nico Muhly's *Two Boys*, with revolved around an attack of one boy on another after a lengthy and labyrinthine relationship online. The critical reception was mixed, and writers from «Opera News», «The New Criterion», and «The New York Review of Books» all complained that elements of the work were, in their minds, «contrived». Cf. F. Paul Driscoll, *Two Boys*, «Opera News», LXXVII, 7 (2014), https://bit.ly/2I8etF2 (accessed on May 10, 2018); Eric C. Simpson, *"Two Boys" Premiers at the Met with Much Fanfare but Little Fire*, «The New Criterion», XXXVI, 9 (2013), https://bit.ly/2L48Fxm (accessed on May 10, 2018); Geoffrey O'Brien, *Alone in a Room Full of Ghosts*, «The New York Review of Books», 29 October 2013, https://bit.ly/2xq0SI8 (accessed on May 10, 2018).

[68] Drawing on Susan McClary's scholarship, Kenneth Gloag has ruminated about how gender and sexuality might be projected in Adès's *Asyla* and the *Piano Quintet*, cf. K.Gloag, *Thomas Adès and the "Narrative Agendas" of "Absolute Music"*, cit.

For copyright reasons, please follow this link to access the figure:
https://www.wikiart.org/en/rene-magritte/not-to-be-reproduced-1937
(last accessed on November 5, 2018).
Fig. 6: René Magritte, *La reproduction interdite* (Not to Be Reproduced), 1937, oil on canvas, 81,3 x 65 cm, Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.

Fig. 7: Brassaï (Gyula Halasz), *Mirrored Wardrobe in a Brothel, Rue Quincampoix* (used in cover for Thomas Adès, *Life Story*, for soprano and piano, 1994, London, Faber, 1997).

Williams's text is discreet yet unmistakable in identifying the encounter as specifically between two men. Narrated predominantly in the second person (the poem begins: «After you've been to bed together for the first time»),[69] Williams relies on genderless pronouns and subject phrases throughout («the other party»; «they say»; «one of you falls asleep»),[70] lending an air of mystery to the situation upon a first gloss of the poem. Only

[69] Tennessee Williams, *Life Story*, in *The Collected Poems of Tennessee Williams*, ed. by Nicholas Rand Moschovakis and David Ernest Roessel, New York, New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2002, pp. 52-53: 52.

[70] *Ibidem*, pp. 52-53.

twice, when the bodies of the characters are referenced, does Williams specify a gender («[...] one of you rises to pee / and gaze at himself with mild astonishment in the bathroom mirror»; «and the other one does likewise with a lighted cigarette in his mouth»),[71] and does so practically in passing. Even at these moments of gender specification, there is just enough ambiguity (perhaps Williams found the phrase "gaze at *them*selves" too awkward?) to provide an air of plausible deniability to the gay subtext of the poem, and, therefore, the encounter that it narrates. As Philip Brett and many others have explored at length elsewhere, the politics of labeling – and of resisting labels to – same-sex relationships has been a battleground of the cultural politics of homosexuality in the twentieth century, and Williams's poem, published in 1956, is an artifact of that phenomenon.[72]

For its part, Adès's musical setting of *Life Story* develops this brooding unease of post-coital anonymity that Williams's poem evokes. The opening piano gesture (ex. 5) is inherently ambiguous, refusing in its low register to allow any decisive key to establish itself, with trills clouding the part as it develops. This lurching passagework in the piano grates uncomfortably against the long lyrical melodies of the soprano, which slink and slide chromatically through the vocal line.

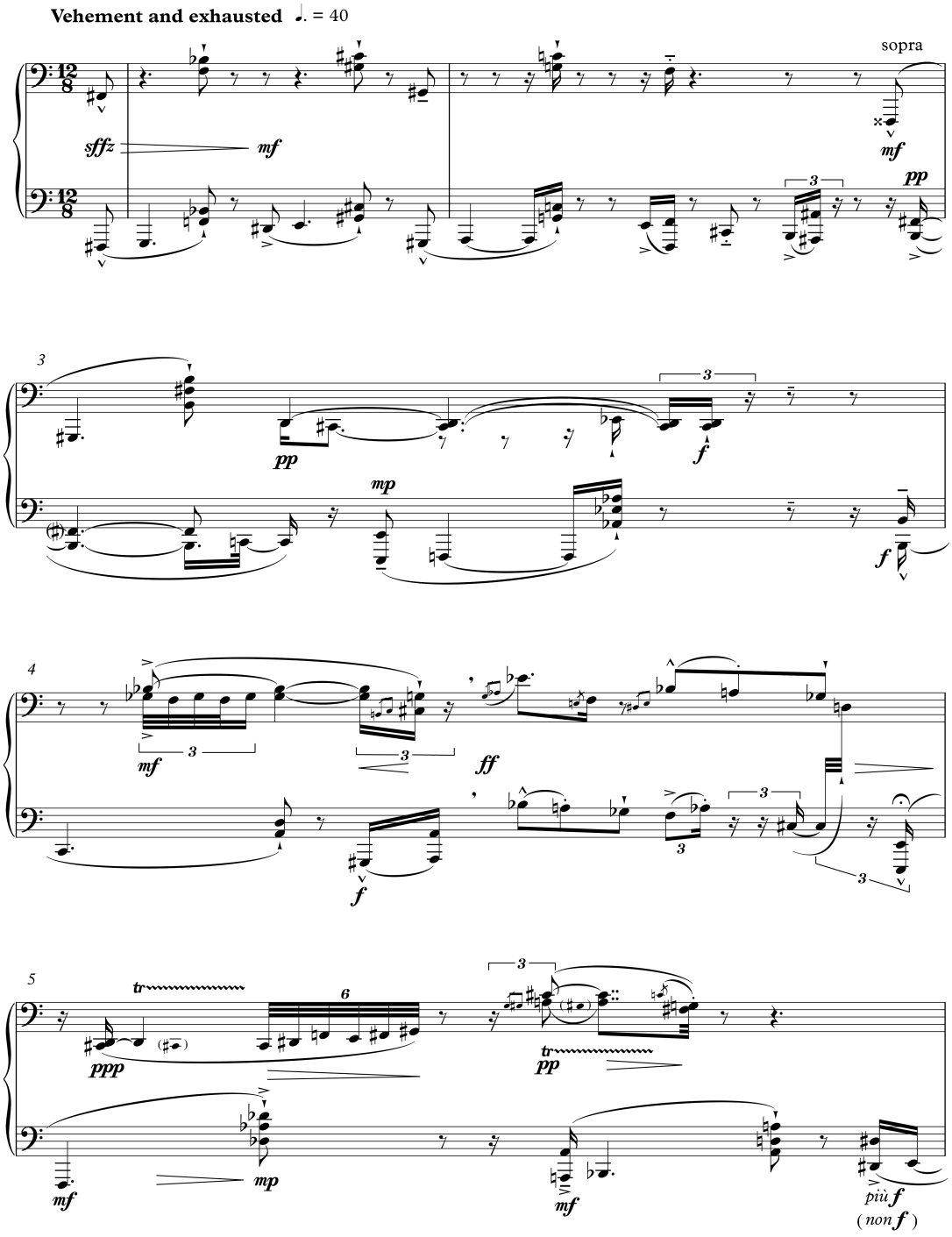
[71] *Ibidem*, p. 53.

[72] To name just one example of Brett's interest in the dynamics of labeling, cf. Philip Brett, *Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet*, in *Queering the Pitch. The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. by Ph. Brett, Gary Thomas and Elizabeth Wood, New York, Routledge, 1994, pp. 9-26.

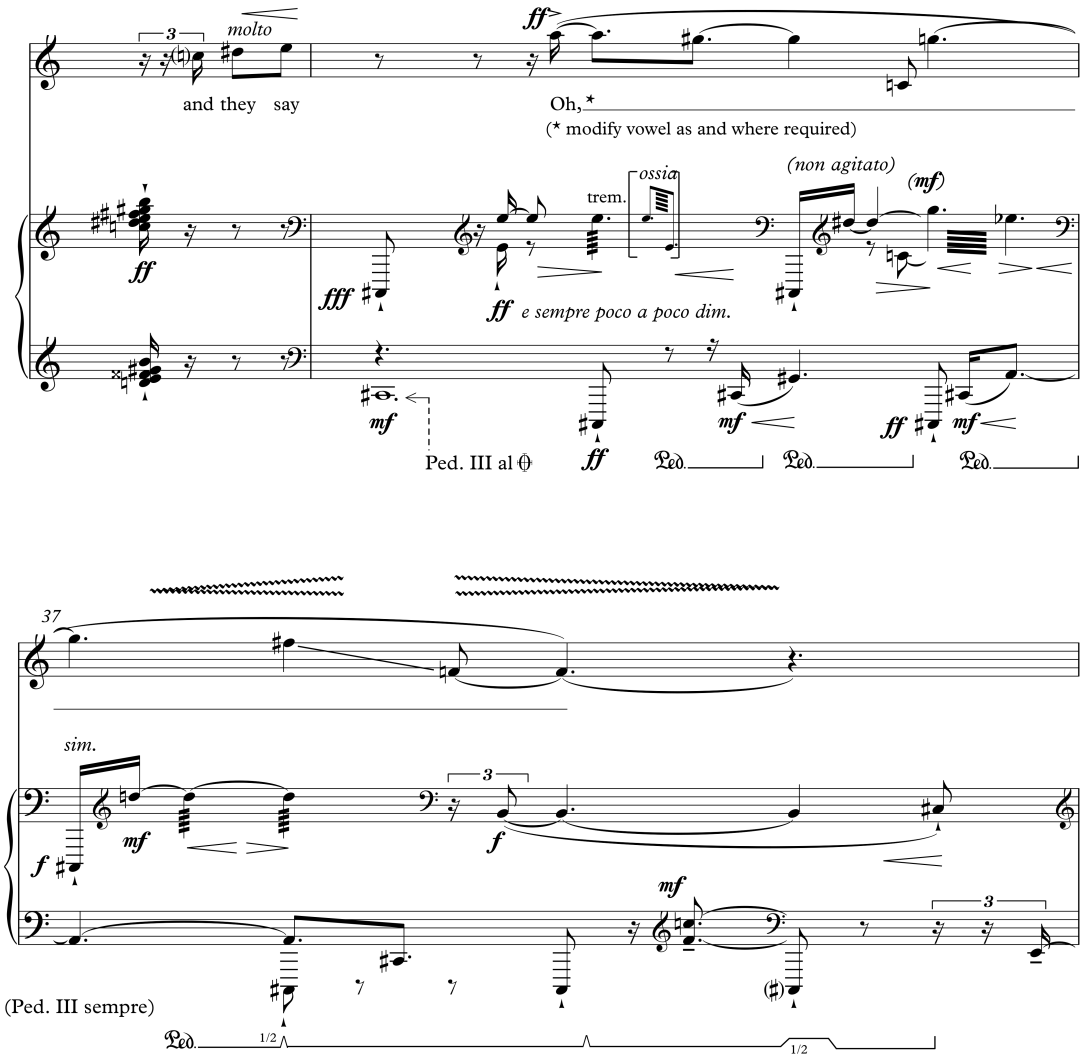
LIFE STORY

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

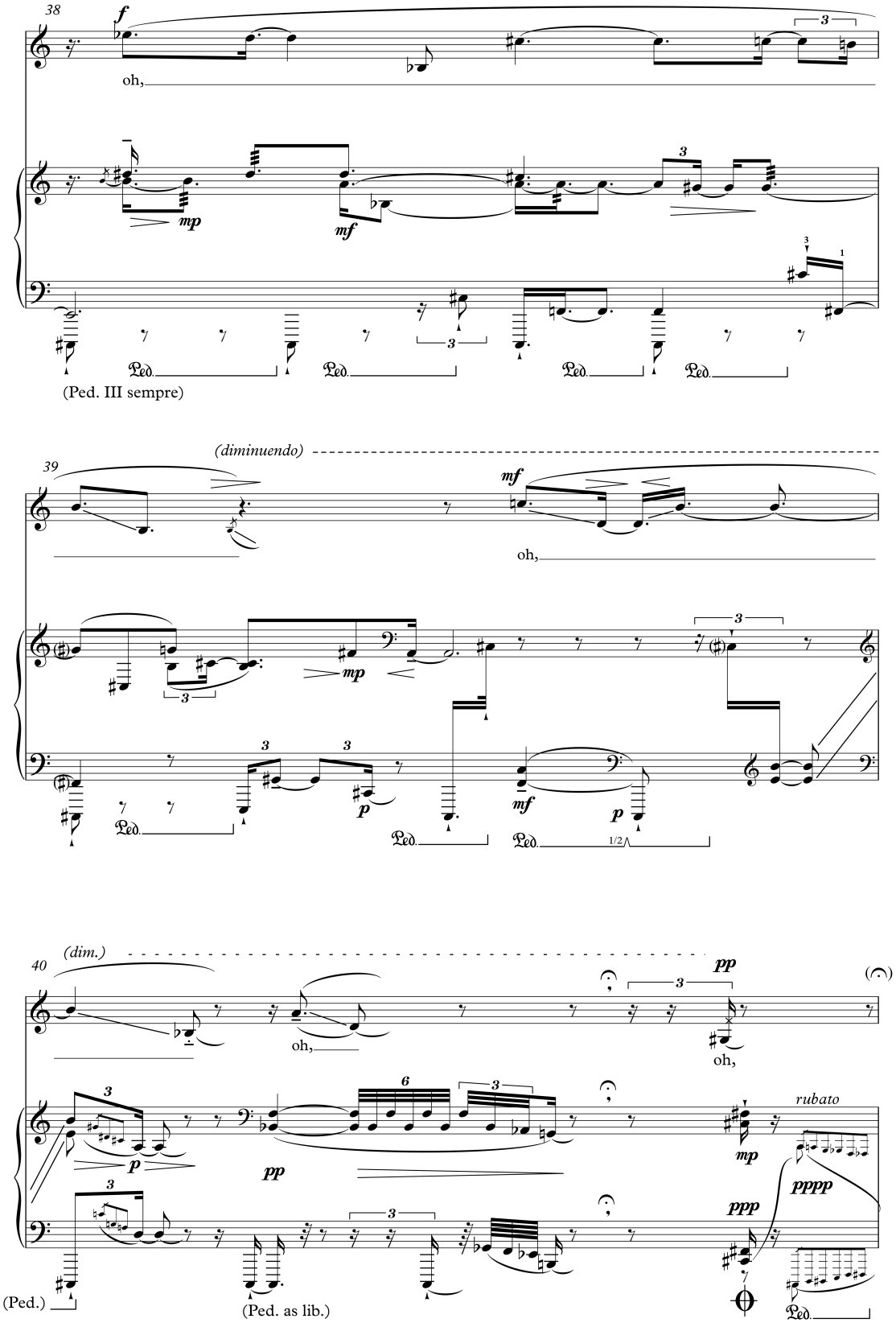
THOMAS ADÈS



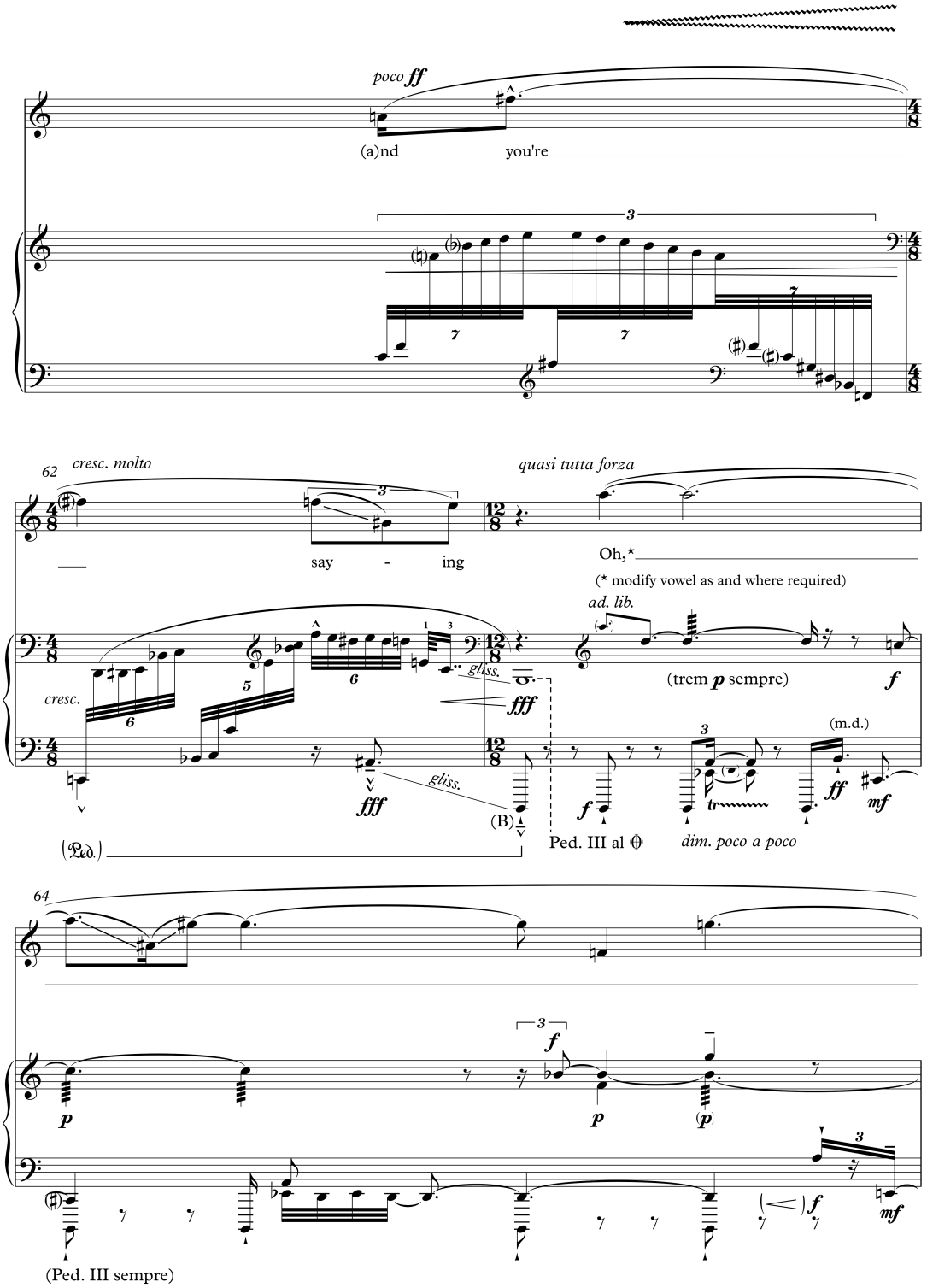
Ex. 5: Thomas Adès, *Life Story*, mm. 1-5 (p. 1).



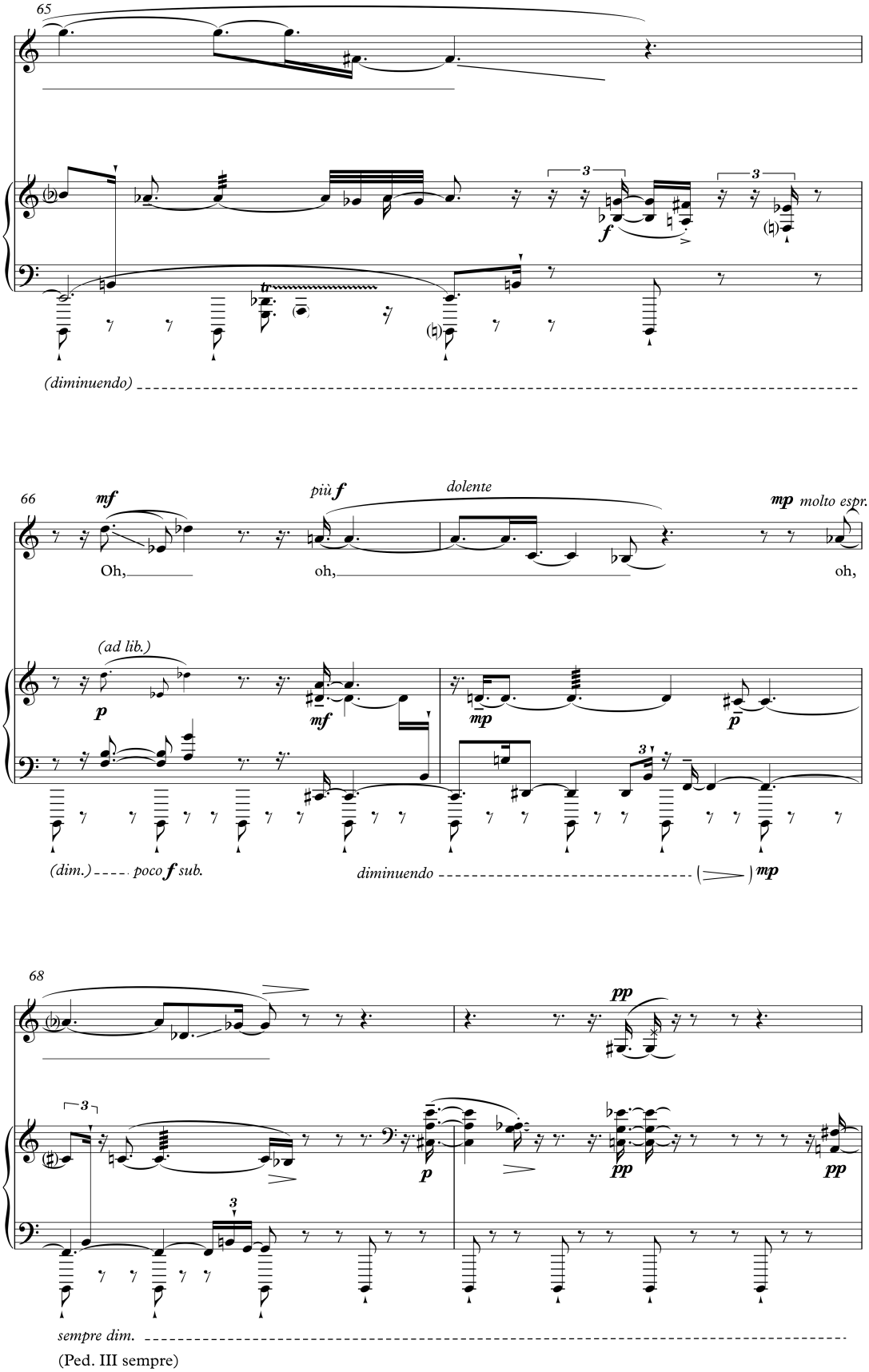
Ex. 6a (beginning): Thomas Adès, *Life Story*, mm. 36-40 (pp. 10-11). Continues on p. 117.



Ex. 6a (end): Thomas Adès, *Life Story*, mm. 36-40 (pp. 10-11).



Ex. 6b (beginning): Thomas Adès, *Life Story*, mm. 61-69 (pp. 16-18). Continues on p. 119.



Ex. 6b (end): Thomas Adès, *Life Story*, mm. 61-69 (pp. 16-18).

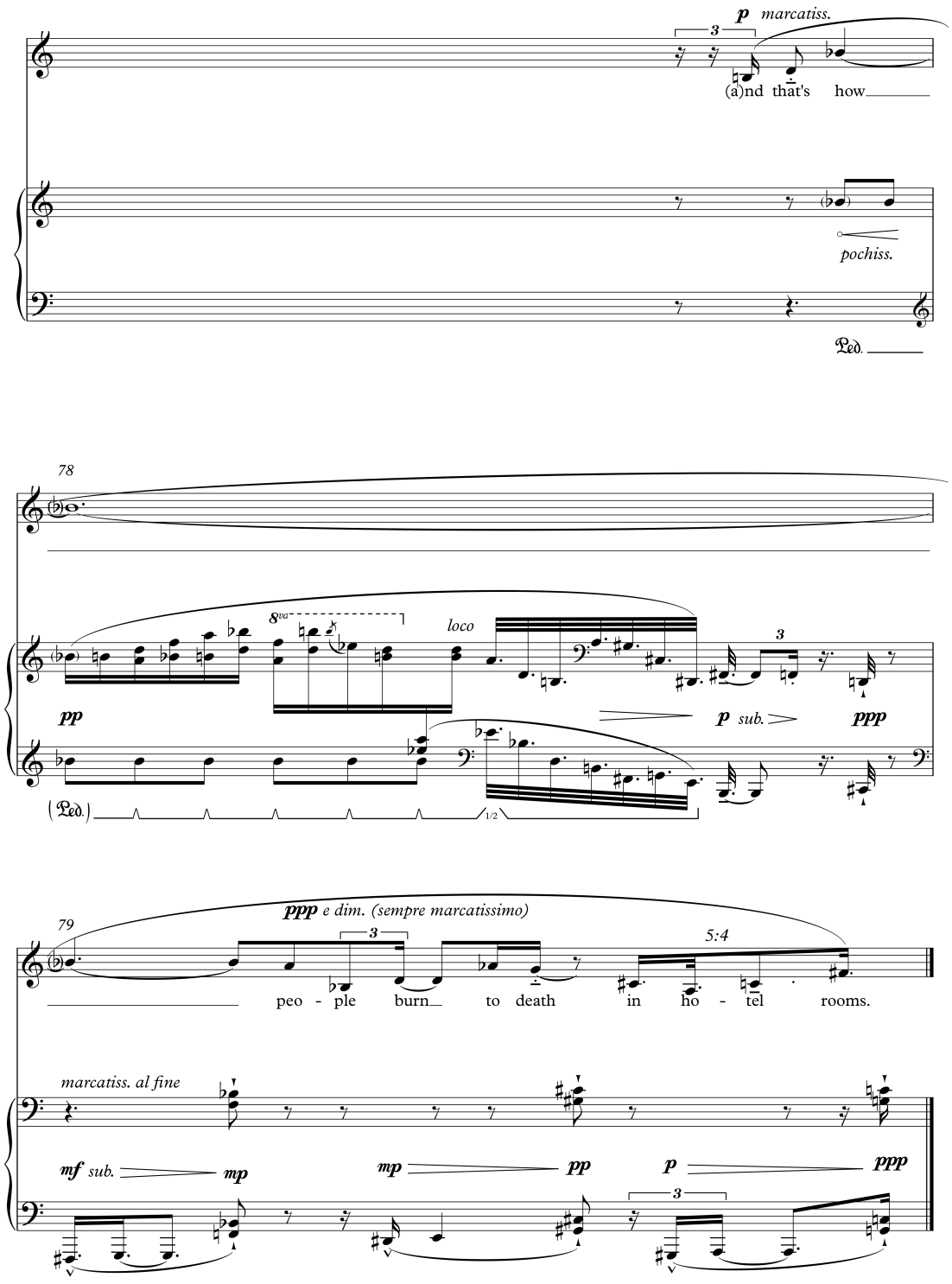
The structural centers of the work are two extended melismas on «oh», together consuming 12 measures of the 79 for the song (ex. 6). On their own the melismas perform a narrative trick, since on the one hand they are the only lines in the poem that directly quote a character's speech («And they say /Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh / [...] / And you're saying Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh»)[73] but on the other hand they are extended to such length they become pure vocalization, two existential howls puncturing the otherwise matter-of-fact vocal part. Both melismas, like the laughter in the aforementioned second scene of *Powder Her Face*, lurch awkwardly to a halt. In this sense we might hear these melismas as "surreal" moments in texture of the song overall, since they lift us out of the frank narrative style of the rest of the setting. Adès further invites distortion of the pure melisma by instructing the singer that «the late style of Billie Holiday is recommended as a model»[74] throughout and to «modify vowel when and where required»[75] during the melismas. The melismas are also undergirded by a peculiar pedal point, the first on C sharp and the second on B. In both cases the damper of the second lowest instance of the pitch is held down with the sostenuto pedal, while the lowest instance is forcefully struck at roughly even intervals, creating a ringing and thunderous accompaniment to the vocal line which is unlike anything else in the work, and reinforcing the sense that these melismas are somehow separate from the prevailing diegetic frame of the rest of the song.[76] *Life Story* ends with a practically whispered final line of Williams's poem, which recasts the entire meaning of the work in retrospect (ex. 7). In this way, Adès breaks down the sung vocal line in a manner not dissimilar from his handling of key moments in *Powder Her Face*.

[73] T. Williams, *Life Story*, cit., pp. 52-53.

[74] Thomas Adès, *Life Story, for soprano and piano*, 1994, London, Faber, 1997, p. IV.

[75] *Ibidem*, p. 10 (see ex. 6).

[76] In the version for double bass and two clarinets the bass plays these low notes pizzicato, creating a similar effect.



Ex. 7: Thomas Adès, *Life Story*, mm. 36-40 (pp. 10-11); mm. 61-69 (pp. 16-18).

Taken together, these moments from *Life Story* and *Powder Her Face* raise the larger questions of the interpenetration of surrealism with not only the idea of queerness but also with the notion of the uncanny in music. Conceptually, surrealism and the uncanny are at least partially coextensive, insofar as both ideas claim automata, the eerie, and the abnormal within their purview.[77] The notion of a "the double" plays a central role in both. Historically, the first discussion of the uncanny in the arts was roughly contemporaneous with the advent of surrealism, receiving its signal exposition in Freud's eponymous essay published in 1919.[78] As Richard Cohn put it, a «central component» of uncanniness for Freud was «the tendency of the repressed familiar to emanate in a strangely defamiliarized form».[79] Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann's story *The Sandman* performs important work in Freud's argument, the recurring malevolent character of Coppela/Coppelius/the Sandman being one of the key elements of the story's uncanny effect. From there, Freud extrapolates the idea of an ominous *Doppelgänger* as one harbinger of the uncanny. The doubles of the preceding examples from Adès's music – the paired melismas of *Life Story*; the doubled nude bodies in the staging of the fellatio scene in *Powder Her Face* – fit snugly with notion of doubling as a harbinger of the uncanny.

Perhaps the most powerful instance of doubling in *Powder Her Face* can be located in the simple fact that only four singers perform all of the roles in the opera, so that the Lounge Lizard in scene two is performed by the tenor, who reappears as the Waiter in scene four, and the same bodies are constantly presented anew over the course of the opera. On the one hand this is a practical expedient to staging an opera with a limited cast; on the other hand we have characters strangely embodying one another such that it is not always clear how they do or don't relate. Consider the disorientation, for example, of watching the Duke, as Judge, read the verdict at his own divorce trial. Similarly, the Waiter's sneering humiliation of the Duchess at the end of the fourth scene is placed in relief as we recall the

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[77] Cf. Nicholas Royle's analysis of this trend in his book Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 97.

[78] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, in *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. by James Strachey, London, Hogarth Press, 1955 (The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 17), pp. 217-252.

[79] Richard Cohn, *Uncanny Resemblances. Tonal Signification in the Freudian Age*, «Journal of the American Musicological Society», LVII, 2 (2004), pp. 285-324: 287. In Freud's formulation: «If psychoanalytic theory is correct in maintaining that every emotional affect, whatever its quality is transformed by repression into morbid anxiety, then among such cases of anxiety there must be a class in which the anxiety can be shown to come from something repressed that *recurs*» (original emphasis), S. Freud, *The Uncanny*, cit., p. 241, mentioned in R. Cohn, *Uncanny Resemblances*, cit., p. 287. Cf. also the discussion in Michael Cherlin, *Schoenberg and "Das Unheimliche". Spectres of Tonality*, «The Journal of Musicology», XI, 3 (1993), pp. 357-373: 361.

same singer performing the sycophantic pantomime from the second scene.[80] We can only see the Judge as a new character if we willfully forget – that is, repress – the memory of having seen the very same performer only one scene prior, as Duke, carrying out his own extramarital liaison.

Adès's most recent opera, *The Exterminating Angel*, draws on striking repeating sections to achieve part of its surrealist effect. Some of these repetitions are present in the original film by Luis Buñuel. In Buñuel's film, the characters must restage exactly the piano performance of Blanca in order to finally escape the room that they are trapped in; they also apparently arrive at the dinner party twice, without further explanation. Finally, the end of the film mirrors the beginning with its implication that the entire village now, rather than merely the guests, are about to become trapped within the church. Adès adds to this fabric of uncanny resemblances by adding structural parallels in each act of the opera. Blanca's piano playing in the first and third act is also eerily reflected in the middle act by the *Over the Sea* aria. The two lovers, Beatriz and Eduardo, punctuate the action of each act with duets – first love, then desperation, then death – which stand apart from the rest of the action.

Lloyd Whitesell has explored how strange characters, and strangely repeating characters, can engender uncanny moments in opera which, in his words, also «reinforce the implication of an emboldened queer presence».[81] Whitesell focuses on the operas of Britten, providing examples of this phenomenon from *The Turn of the Screw* and *Death in Venice* and hence making explicit the interplay between uncanniness and queer readings. Put another way, the surreal, the uncanny, and the queer can overlap in ways that mutually reinforce one another, and while they can ostensibly be pried apart, they function as a chord in moments like the fellatio scene, adding up to more than the sum of their individual parts. Other scholars have emphasized two other aspects of Freud's ideas about the uncanny – a persistent uncertainty as to whether an object is alive or dead, and the uncanny's

[80] The doubling of apparently unrelated characters in *Powder Her Face* can be distinguished from the more common practice of having a singer reappear in disguise, an operatic strategy with numerous examples, such as Jove appearing as Diana in Cavalli's *La Calisto* and Wotan presenting as the Wanderer in Wagner's *Siegfried*.

[81] L. Whitesell, *Britten's Dubious Trysts*, cit., p. 645. Despite the frequent comparisons of Adès and Britten, I am reluctant to assign much significance to Britten's operas as a historical model here, if only because of Adès's surprisingly voluble rejection of *The Turn of the Screw* in *Full of Noises*. One could always speculate that Adès's violent dismissal of Britten's opera as «dilettantish» conceals, in a Bloomian sense, a deeper debt (T. Adès, *Full of Noises*, cit., p. 123). But to drive that point home would require a full exposition of the Britten-Adès dynamic, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

(*unheimlich* in Freud's original German) conceptual rapport with the notion of "home" (*heimlich*) – which I will explore in due course.[82]

Uncanny or not, Adès's engagement with surrealism goes beyond the depiction of queer moments in opera and song. We might also locate surrealism in Adès's vocal music through more elusive manipulations of stylistic conventions.[83] In these contexts the "not-quite-said" element of musical surrealism sheds the (homo-)erotic tinge of *Powder Her Face* and *Life Story* and becomes a more abstract process of detecting and interpreting musical signifiers. Of course, such an approach requires us to acknowledge the escalating problem of apprehending musical meaning as we move away from the comfortable terrain of text-music relationships.[84] In a reply to a letter to the editor about his «New York Times» article, Taruskin responds to this issue by pointing out that music need not necessarily have a textual or programmatic reference point in order to achieve a "surreal" quality. «Surrealism achieves many of its effects by juxtaposing items of ordinary experience in extraordinary ways», Taruskin writes, offering the example of polytonality in the hands of Milhaud as one example of a way this can be achieved in an instrumental texture.[85] Mere juxtaposition, however, is obviously not a meaningful criteria in isolation, since Adès is hardly the only composer to use distorted conventions for expressive ends. Many early twentieth century composers – including Mahler, Ives, Debussy, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, to name only a handful – reimagined existing genres and norms in novel ways.[86] In the 1980s the Polish composers Stanisław Krupowicz and Paweł Szymański coined the term «surconventionalism» to describe their approach, and in so doing offered a further refinement of ways in which musical genres can function surreally. Szymański described his *Sonata* (1982) as being composed of «a set of elements belonging to a certain convention, governed by rules which

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82 R. Cohn, *Uncanny Resemblances*, cit., p. 290.

83 As Taruskin points out in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays*, music has also struggled against the idea that it lacks «representational elements», an issue that Annette Shandler Levitt raised in a letter to the editor of «The New York Times» following Taruskin's 1999 article (R.Taruskin, *A Surrealist Composer Comes to the Rescue of Modernism*, in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays*, cit., p. 151).

84 This is a larger problem of intrageneric musical meaning in general, and has been explored by music theorists from a variety of angles. Cf. Kofi Agawu, *Music as Discourse. Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2008; Robert Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes. Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2004; Byron Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008.

85 R.Taruskin, *A Surrealist Composer Comes to the Rescue of Modernism*, in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays*, cit., p. 152.

86 For one overview of this trend, cf. William Bolcom, *The End of the Mannerist Century*, in *The Pleasure of Modernist Music. Listening, Meaning, Intention, Ideology*, ed. by Arved Ashby, Rochester (NY), University of Rochester Press, 2004 (Eastman Studies in Music, 29), pp. 46-53.

have nothing to do with this convention, [like] elements of reality which appear in surrealistic paintings as an extraneous order to this reality».[87] For his part Krupowicz describes convention as «what is known, what the listener registers as known», and posits that surconventionalism, therefore, is «an art of composing contexts».[88]

We might understand Adès's song *Brahms* (2001) for baritone and orchestra as a work which "composes context" for a setting of an Alfred Brendel poem through exaggerated use of some of Brahms's own signature techniques. Edward Venn has explored this work at length in an article in the «Journal of the Royal Musical Association», emphasizing what he called the «hauntological» elements of Adès's setting, considering how the specter of Brahms, Schoenberg, and others loom in Adès's composition.[89] The song sets a poem from Brendel's volume *One Finger Too Many*, which describes the ghost of Brahms arriving in the dead of night, smoking, singing, and playing the piano.[90] We might expect Adès's setting to latch on to Brendel's description of Brahms playing the family piano («Even worse though / is his piano-playing / This wading through chords and double octaves / wakes even the children from their deep sleep»),[91] but Adès instead draws on other sounds characteristic of Brahms. Most obviously, Adès's exaggerated use of descending thirds harken back to Brahms's heavy use of thirds in his *Fourth Symphony* (ex. 8).[92]

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87 Szymański quoted in Adrian Thomas, *Polish Music Since Szymanowski*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 300.

88 Krupowicz quoted in Anna Granat-Janki, *Surconventionalism in the Interpretation of Paweł Szymański and Stanisław Krupowicz*, «Musicology Today» (Bucharest), IV (2010), https://bit.ly/2JcXGB5 (last accessed on June 4, 2018), pp. 1-14: 2.

89 Cf. Edward Venn, *Thomas Adès and the Spectres of "Brahms"*, «Journal of the Royal Musical Association», CXL, 1 (2015), pp. 163-212.

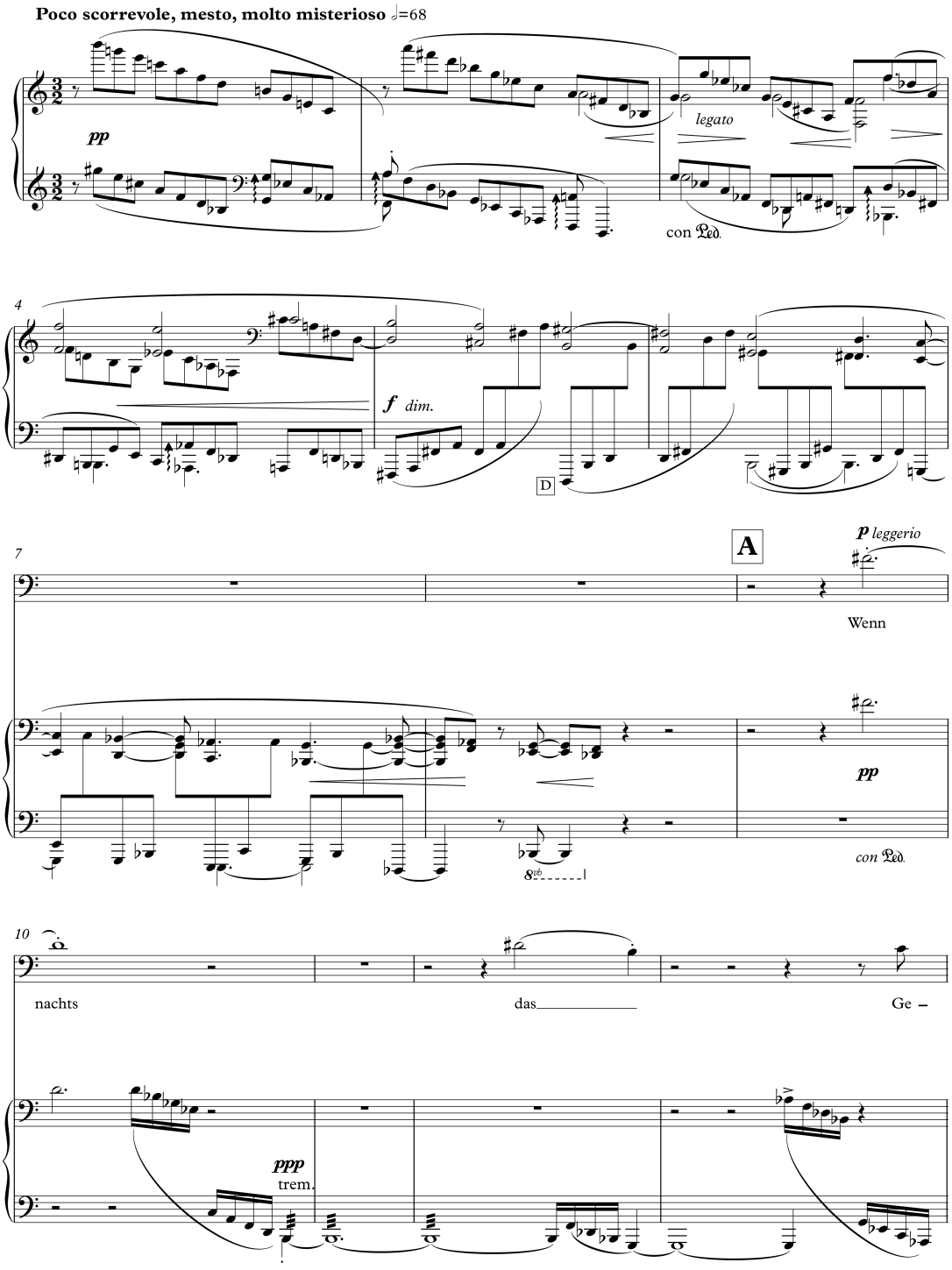
90 Alfred Brendel, *One Finger Too Many*, London, Faber and Faber, 1998, p. 29.

91 *Ibidem*.

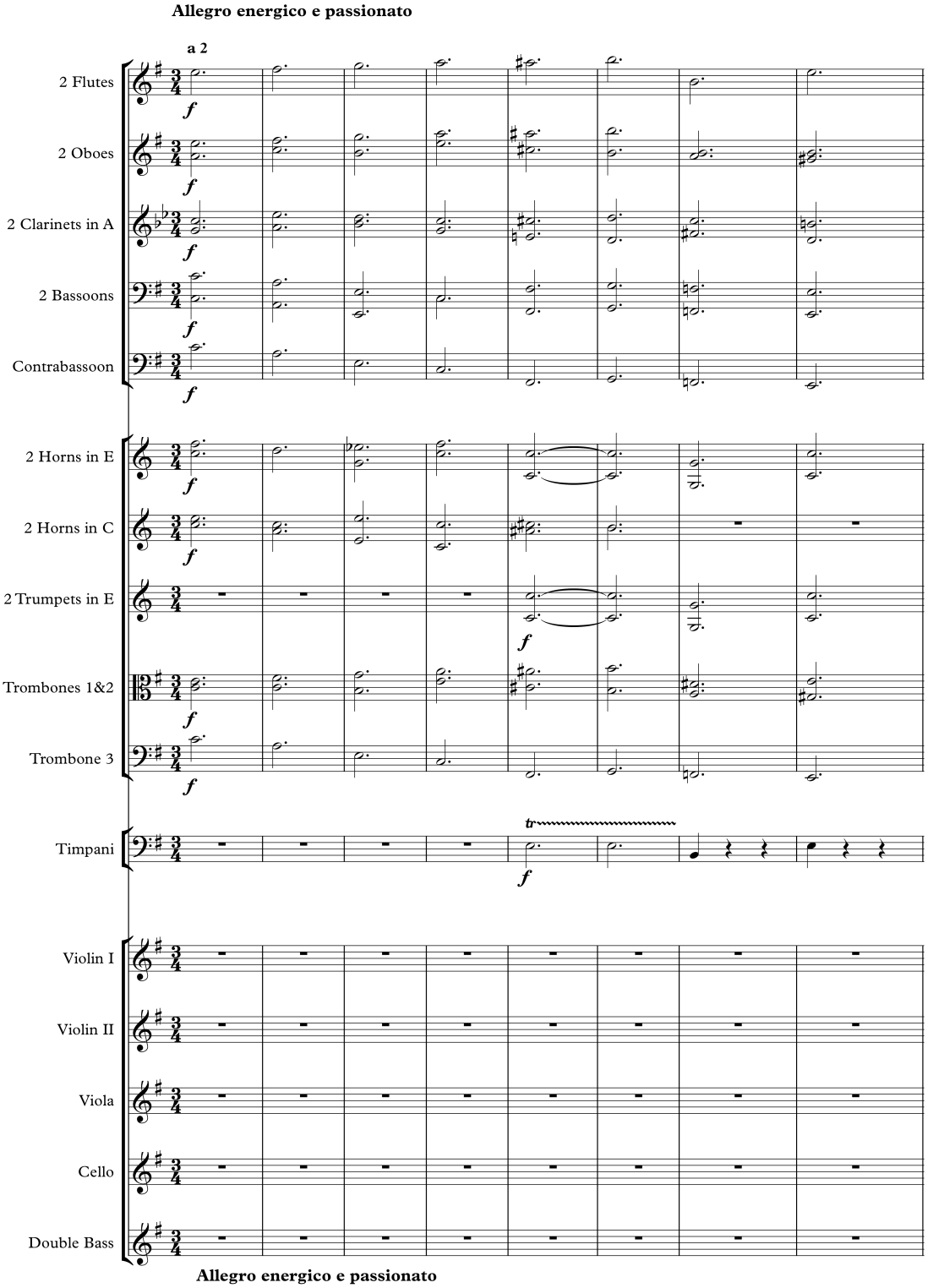
92 This is only one of the most striking examples from *Brahms*; Venn provides an exhaustive network of reference points between *Brahms* and works by Brahms in his article.

Brahms

ALFRED BRENDEL THOMAS ADÈS

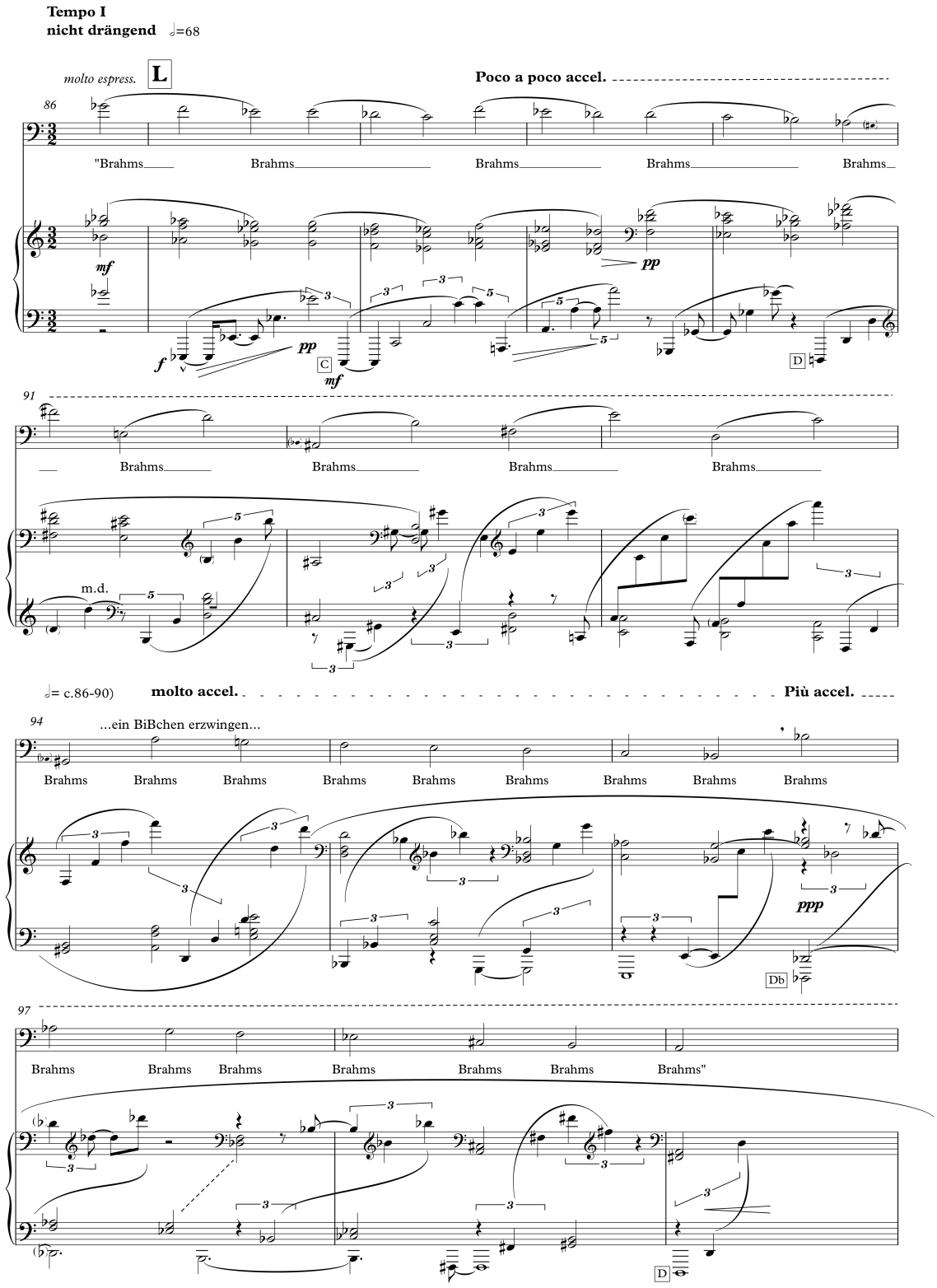


Ex. 8a: Thomas Adès, *Brahms*, 2001, mm. 1-13 (London, Faber, 2001, pp. 1-2).

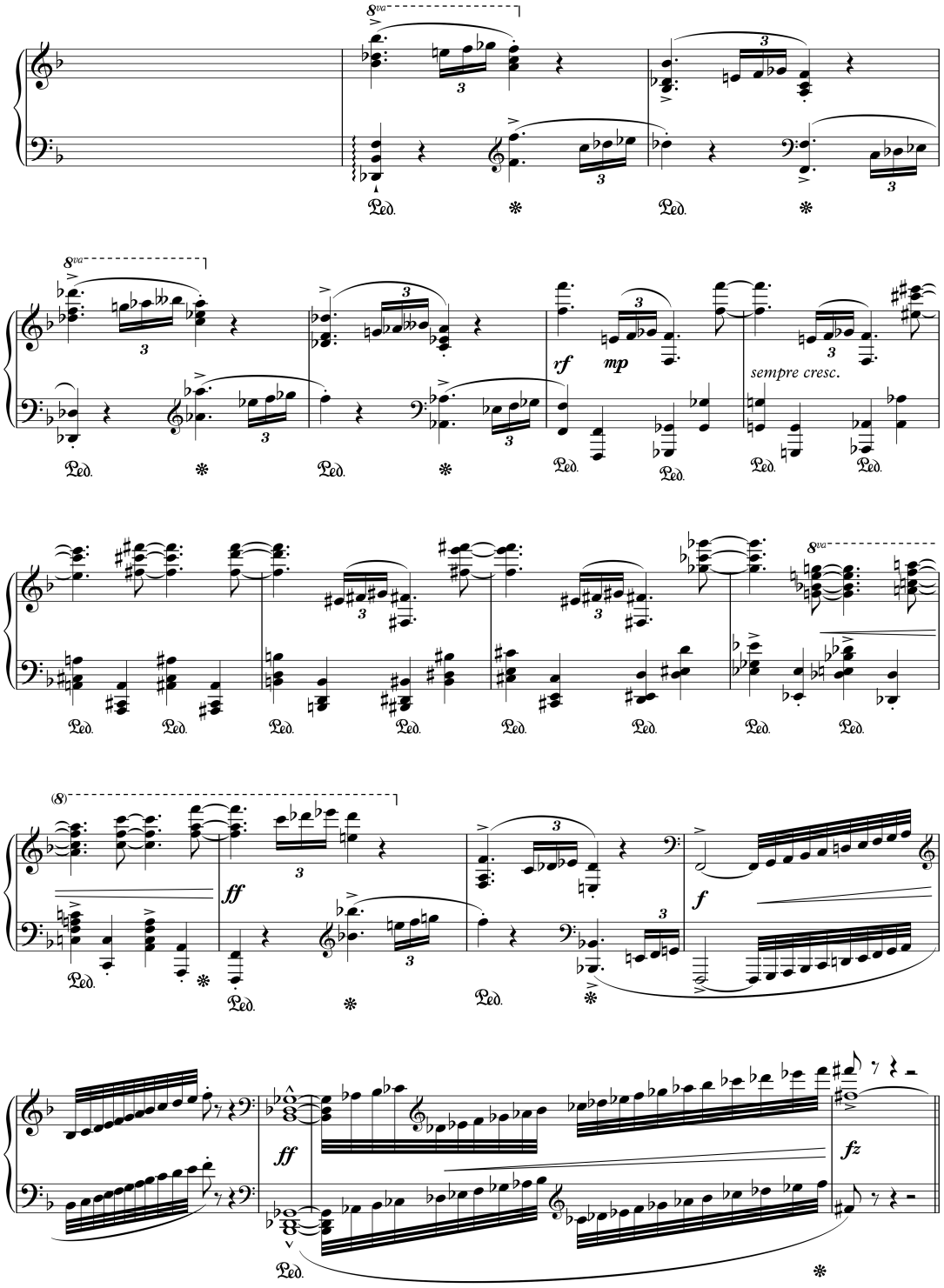


Ex. 8b: Johannes Brahms, *Fourth Symphony*, Finale, mm. 1-8.

Similarly, Adès's melodic line relies on a careful development and liquidation of thematic material, as Brahms often did at climatic points in his music (ex. 9).



Ex. 9a: Thomas Adès, *Brahms*, mm. 86-99 (pp. 9-12).



Ex. 9b: Johannes Brahms, *Rhapsody in B Minor*, op. 79, no. 1, mm. 49-63.

One could certainly speculate as to whether Adès relied on these as specific signifiers for *Brahms* – both techniques appear in Schoenberg's landmark essay *Brahms the Progressive* as evidence of Brahms's significance for twentieth century music – in an effort to deliberately nod to a modernist conception of Brahms's compositional approach.[93] Nevertheless, these moments are decidedly "surconventional" insofar as they extend and elaborate a technique in a way that is at once identifiable and distorted. The absolute disintegration that Adès achieves by having the baritone sing the word «Brahms» twenty-five times in a row near the end (first in groups of three, then awkward pairs of leaping sevenths and ninths, and then in a pair of descending scales) is demonstrative to the point of comedy.[94]

But what of Adès's purely instrumental work, and its possible rapport with surrealism? Writers have already noted that Adès's *Piano Quintet* grotesquely distorts sonata form.[95] The single, massive movement which makes up the work proudly wears its sonata form on its sleeve, replete with a full repeat of the exposition. Yet the recapitulation is ruthlessly foreshortened, leading to what Christopher Fox has called a «spectacular contraction»[96] and Tom Service named a «black hole».[97] Philip Stoecker has recently published an extensive analysis of the pitch material of the *Piano Quintet*, focusing on Adès's disciplined use of three-voice aligned interval cycles.[98] Fox has suggested that this economy of pitch material can, in its way, be considered surrealist. He notes that, when it comes to painting:

> What is depicted may be fantastic nonsense but there is a logic within the depiction itself which is reassuringly reminiscent of codes of visual representation familiar from earlier schools of narrative painting. A similar process takes place within Adès's music: he presents us with an extraordinarily inventive wealth of melodic and harmonic detail but virtually all of it can be related to a few intervallic relationships, usually introduced at the beginning of the work.[99]

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[93] Arnold Schoenberg, *Brahms the Progressive*, in *Style and Idea*, ed. by Leonard Stein, trans. by Leo Black, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984, pp. 398-441. See in particular the discussion of thirds (pp. 405-407) and cellular quality of Brahms's motivic development (pp. 429-441). Venn also provides a discussion of how Schoenberg's ideas percolated through British compositional circles in the second half of the twentieth century, providing a intellectual lineage for Adès's responses to both Brahms and Schoenberg.

[94] Venn also explores at length how *Brahms* engages the notion of the uncanny in music. It is an especially rich example since Brendel's poem is not only about ghosts, but also because, as Venn demonstrates, so many ghosts – of Brahms, of Schoenberg, of tonality – also loom in Adès's song.

[95] Tom Service, *Piano Quintet (2000) by Thomas Adè*s [program note], London, Faber Music, http://www.faber-music.com/repertoire/piano-quintet-3267 (accessed on May 11, 2018).

[96] C. Fox, *Tempestuous Times*, cit., pp. 46-53.

[97] T. Service, *Piano Quintet*, cit.

[98] Philip Stoecker, *Aligned Cycles in Thomas Adès's Piano Quintet*, «Music Analysis», XXXIII, 1 (2014), pp. 32-64.

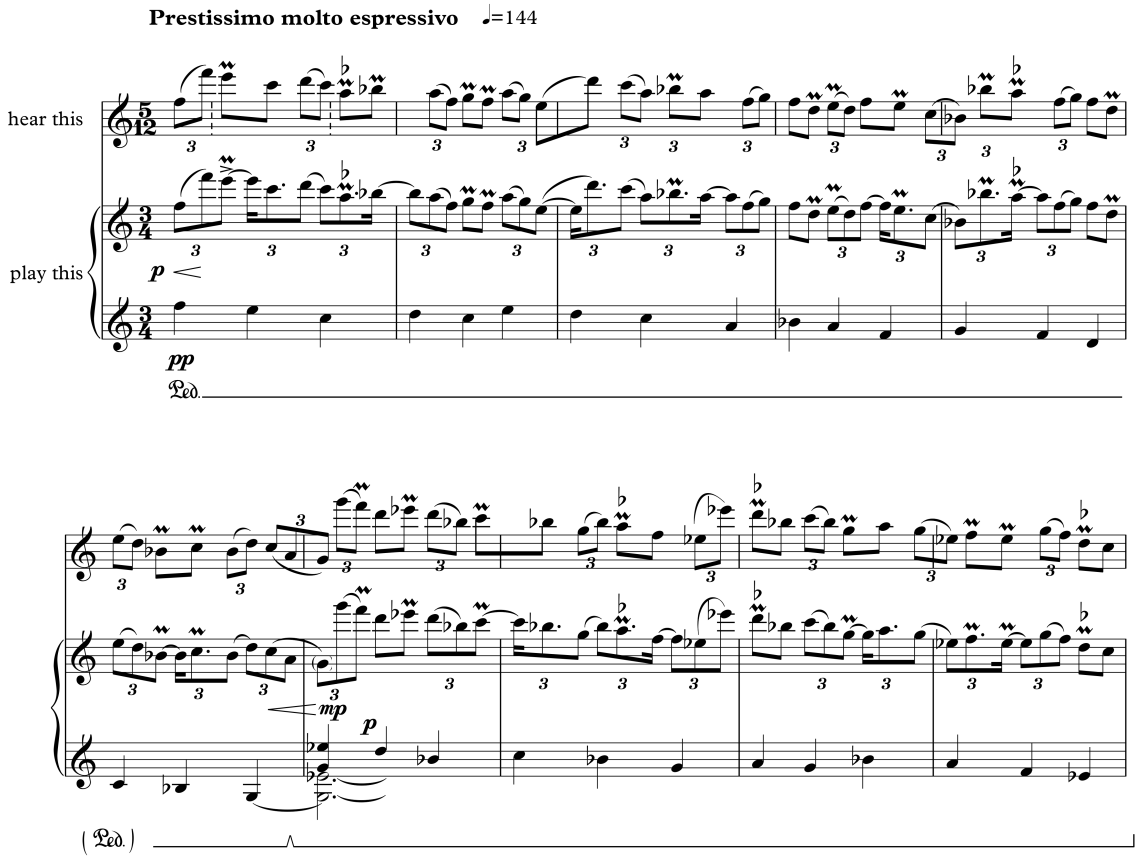
The surrealism in a work like the *Piano Quintet* may also be more readily perceptible than the sometimes arcane pitch processes that Stoecker explores. Fox described the «palpable shock of disbelief [that] ran through the avantgardiste audience [at the premiere] when Adès turned back 16 pages of score to begin the repeat».[100] The moment of recognition – coupled with incomprehension – that Fox reports turns the listener's expectations back on themselves in a manner similar to the previously discussed scene in Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* or Magritte's *La reproduction interdite*. By doing nothing – by merely carrying out the mundane imperative of repeating the exposition – Adès reflected back to the audience members their own insatiable thirst for the new. Adès's repeat was, by the perverse logic with which new works are so often heard in the contemporary concert hall, a surrealistically confrontational way to skew an audience's expectations.

Adès's *Mazurkas* include an alternate, more private form of musical surrealism. The second Mazurka provides two staves for the right hand. «Play this», instructs the one; «hear this», instructs the other (ex. 10). In a reductively literal sense, here Adès asks the performer to imagine a layer of music which is unheard but floats above – "*sur*" – the sounding work. In this sense, Adès's surrealist moments span the range from the public to the private, allowing the possibility for moments which do not fully engage the audience, but are rather meant for either the reception of the performer even for Adès's own private amusement.

[99] C. Fox, *Tempestuous Times*, cit., p. 45. John Roeder has made a similar argument about Adès's *Lieux Retrouvés* in a working paper on rhythmic canons in recent music.

[100] C. Fox, *Tempestuous Times*, cit., p. 48.

Second Mazurka

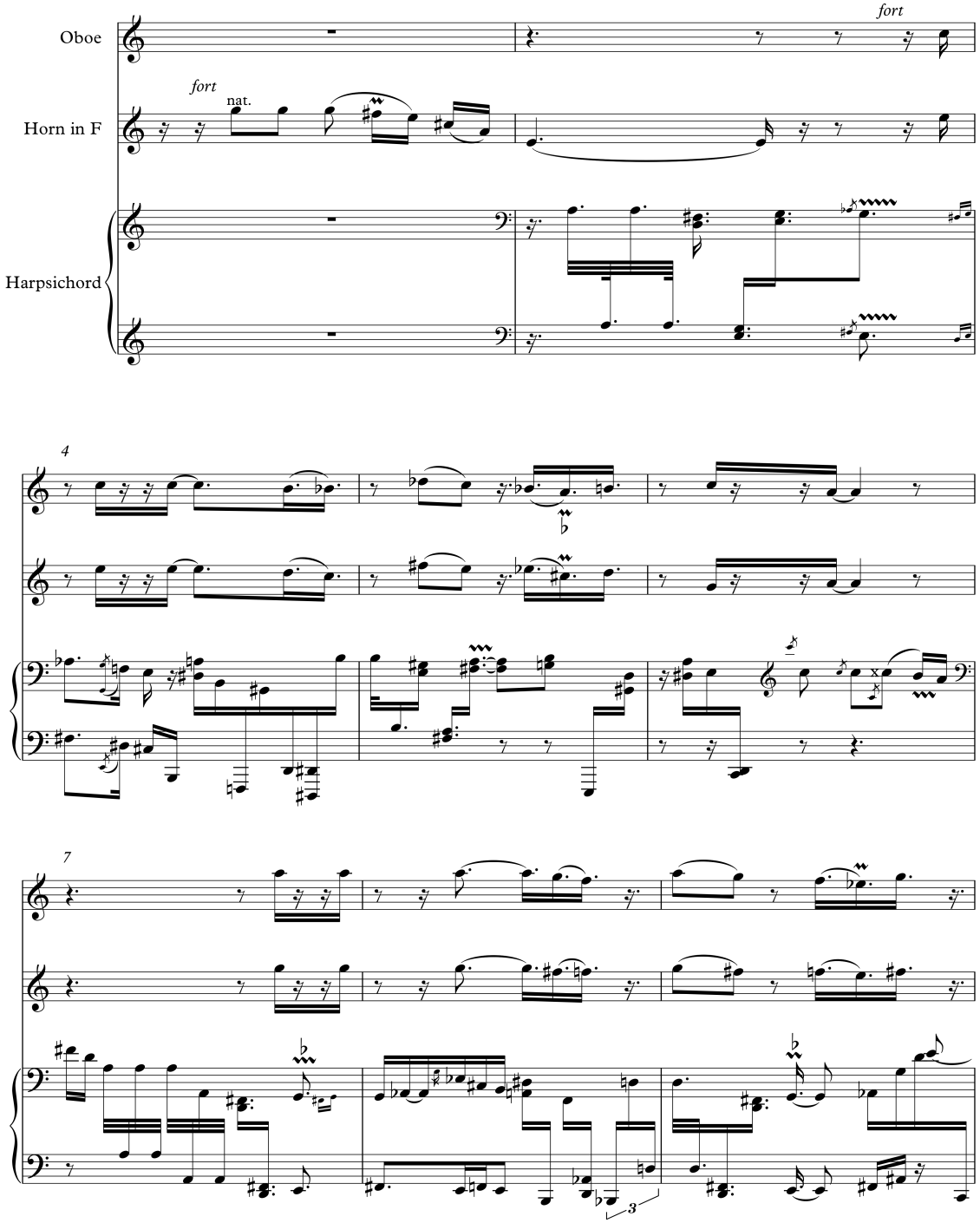


Ex. 10: Thomas Adès, *Mazurkas*, 2009, no. 2, mm. 1-6 (London, Faber, 2010).

The private and public may be mutually exclusive distinctions. But in some of Adès's works, multiple ways of understanding or identifying the bending of convention can be simultaneously deployed. The *Sonata da caccia* at first blush seems firmly neoclassical in its orientation. It is a two-fold neoclassicism, since Adès's choice of instrumentation – baroque oboe, horn in F, and harpsichord – is taken from Debussy, who had planned the same instrumentation for his unrealized fourth instrumental sonata, and Adès writes that the *Sonata da caccia* «could be imagined as a "homage" to Debussy and Couperin, in the manner of the latter's *L'apothéose de Corelli* or *L'apothéose de Lulli*».[101] It is an homage to an homage. At the

[101] Thomas Adès, *Sonata da caccia* [program note], London, Faber Music, 1993, http://www.fabermusic.com/repertoire/sonata-da-caccia-2371 (accessed on May 11, 2018).

same time, the *Sonata da caccia* can be situated along surrealist lines by considering it alongside Adès's other compositions which look to the past for their inspiration. For example, the external reference in *Darknesse Visible* is Downland's song *In Darknesse Let Mee Dwell*. Yet Dowland's original is so distorted here as to be absorbed beyond recognition in Adès's texture – the real seems to have been sublimated, making a surreal affect impossible. On the other side, Adès's *Three Studies from Couperin* seem most intelligibly understood as arrangements of Couperin's *Pièces de Clavecin*, even though they too depart significantly from the original in certain moments (for example at the clangorous end of the second movement, *Les tours de passe-passe*). Yet in *Sonata da caccia,* what we might consider these opposing poles of absorption and distortion are held in balance, so that the work never completely surrenders to Adès's own predilections, nor does it ever settle into mere stylistic imitation. One emblematic moment of this is the opening of the second movement, where Adès writes a lilting tune for the horn and oboe (ex. 11), doubled in thirds.



Ex. 11 (beginning): Thomas Adès, *Sonata da caccia*, 1993, II, mm. 2-11 (London, Faber, 1994).

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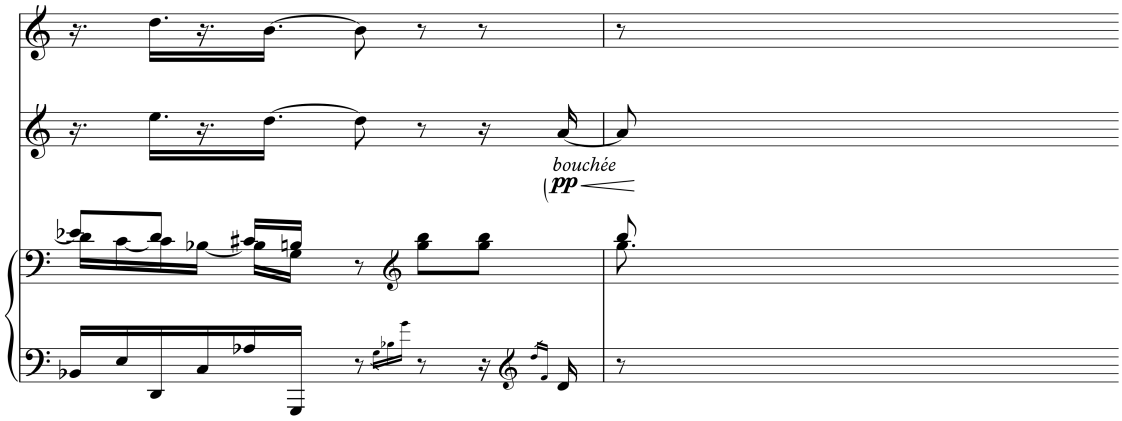

Ex. 11 (end): Thomas Adès, *Sonata da caccia*, 1993, II, mm. 2-11 (London, Faber, 1994).

Despite its highly syncopated look on the page it sounds relatively straightforwardly when heard. At the same time, this carefree tune is accompanied by a harpsichord line in the lowest reaches of the instrument, a distorted gurgling that undercuts any sense of classical balance to the texture. This passage might be more constructively described as neoclassical if only Adès had transposed the harpsichord part up an octave or two. In its actual incarnation, it serves as an example of the surrealism that a purely instrumental passage can achieve when it deliberately flouts an expectation (in this case, the range of the harpsichord). Put another way, what we hear is not the nominally neoclassical harpsichord part, but its sinister double, rumbling in the bass. It is a musical *Doppelgänger*, which brings us back to the notion of the uncanny.

Surrealism from the Inside Out

Up to this point my approach has been to presuppose that certain works by Adès have a surrealist dimension and then consider how we might locate them in the musical text. In Edward Venn's discussion of musical meaning in *Asyla*, he notes that this style of analysis, by no means uncommon, ought to be balanced by an approach which considers the

musical text and asks how it might yield other potential readings.[102] The final two examples in this essay are an effort to do just that.

In Richard Cohn's essay about musical representations of the uncanny, he exhaustively explores the signifying potential of a curious chord progression – E major to C minor (and all its transpositions) – which has been understood by numerous commentators and composers as possessing a particularly "uncanny" quality. Cohn called this progression a «hexatonic pole», and provided examples of it ranging from Gesualdo (in *Moro Lasso*) to Strauss (in the opening of *Salome*) and Schoenberg (at the beginning of his *String Trio*).[103] For Cohn, as for Freud, the uncanny is a multifaceted and opaque experience, rather than a simple signifier. Cohn emphasizes that Freud's notion of a «defamiliarized home» is central to the musically uncanny effect of this progression. Cohn also notes that the German antonym to uncanny, *heimlich*, itself denotes not just the familiar, but also the «private, secret, [and] clandestine». In this sense the *unheimlich* is not only the opposite of *heimlich*, but also, paradoxically, its extreme intensification. As Cohn puts it, we experience the uncanny when «the clandestine is transformed into something so interior, so familiar, that it is hidden from the viewing eye and inquiring mind».[104]

For Cohn, these opposing qualities exist in a series of irreducible tensions. When it comes to actual progressions of hexatonic poles in music, he notes that the chords «both are and are not triads; they both are and are not consonant. In terms of the music theoretic writings of Freud's contemporaries, their status as entities is both real and imaginary, both alive and dead».[105] This stems in part from the fact that the two chords, since they come from separate diatonic collections, cannot both be heard within the same tonal context. Cohn also points out that even in a «tonally indeterminate environment», it is impossible to decide which of the two triads is more important, since each chord contains the other's leading tone, as well as the flattened sixth scale degree above the opposing chord, leading to what Cohn called «double leading-tone reciprocity».[106] He continued:

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[102] E. Venn, *"Asylum Gained"?*, cit., pp. 94-98. Venn is drawing on Nicholas Cook's 1998 study *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998); my «against the grain» readings (to borrow Venn's phrase) here are of a somewhat different nature insofar as they consider a swath of Adès's output, rather than a single work, as their plane of analysis.

[103] For a discussion of how Cohn arrived at this terminology cf. R. Cohn, *Uncanny Resemblances*, cit., p. 286, note 4.

[104] *Ibidem*, pp. 289-290.

[105] *Ibidem*, p. 303.

[106] *Ibidem*, p. 307.

> Each triad of the pair powerfully "summons" the other. Their relationship constitutes an exceptionally potent instance of [...] reciprocal exchange. Each triad destabilizes the other; Lendvai writes that they tonally «neutralize» each other. Such relationships are among «the weirdest cases that arise»: they are the musical equivalent of Escher's hands, which draw each other's cuffs.[107]

Such weirdness posed significant problems in the history of music theory, and, as Cohn argues, also engaged larger metaphysical issues insofar as it became impossible for theorists to determine which one of the chords in a given hexatonic pole was «real» – that is, had a bona fide tonal function – and which one was an «appearance» – that is, constituted a foreground feature incidental to the larger tonal fabric of a work.[108]

Hexatonic poles, then, have historically held significant potential for purely formal uses, but have also become laden with extramusical significance. It is fair to ask, therefore, how we might interpret their status as the building blocks of the third movement of Adès's piano concerto *In Seven Days* (2008). This concerto depicts the creation myth of the *Book of Genesis*, and its movements, all played *attacca*, are titled as follows:

i. Chaos – Light – Dark
ii. Separation of the Waters into Sea and Sky
iii. Land – Grass – Trees
iv. Stars – Sun – Moon
v. Fugue: Creatures of the Sea and Sky
vi. Fugue: Creatures of the Land
vii. Contemplation

Adès describes *In Seven Days* as a set of variations, in which the theme is presented in its simplest form at the end.[109] At its core, the theme is a sequence of twelve chords, with numerous symmetries and tonal implications, and is borrowed from Adès's opera *The Tempest*.[110]

In the third movement – the moment where life appears on earth – Adès rearranges the material into a serialist framework. As Adès explained in *Full of Noises*, the statements of the row are elided, so that the final pitch of the first statement of the row becomes the first note of the second. Since the row ends a fifth higher than it begins, all twelve transpositional levels are heard before the original one repeats. This has the ultimate effect of

[107] *Ibidem*.

[108] *Ibidem*, pp. 314-315.

[109] Thomas Adès - Tal Rosner, *Thomas Adès and Tal Rosner in Conversation*, video interview, in Thomas Adès, *In Seven Days*; *Nancarrow Studies nos. 6 & 7*, Signum Records, © 2011, cd and dvd set, SIGCD277.

[110] T. Adès, *Full of Noises*, cit., p. 100, pp. 30-31.

creating a 133-note nested series, creating an even greater constraint for the pitch material than a 12-note row. This elided, 133-note row is stated three times, and this very structure reflects both the strictness and the obscurity that Adès embraces here. Adès described this movement as an «organic flowering, the dry land and the trees, a spiraling series. It's a series that can be felt as counterpoint and harmony at the same time, [...] an image for organic growth».[111] In a different context, he kept the metaphor of a spiral but also elaborated on the biological symbolism describing the movement as «sort of cell division [...] a slow repeating thing which always spirals upwards or downwards [...] starting with something huge, like the earth, and then bit by bit it divides, and then you end up with a tiny cell, a blade of grass».[112]

The tone row for this movement is nothing more than an outlining of one hexatonic pole nested inside another.[113] In its initial statement, B major-G minor sits inside a D flat minor (spelled C sharp minor)-F major progression (tab. 1 and ex. 12).

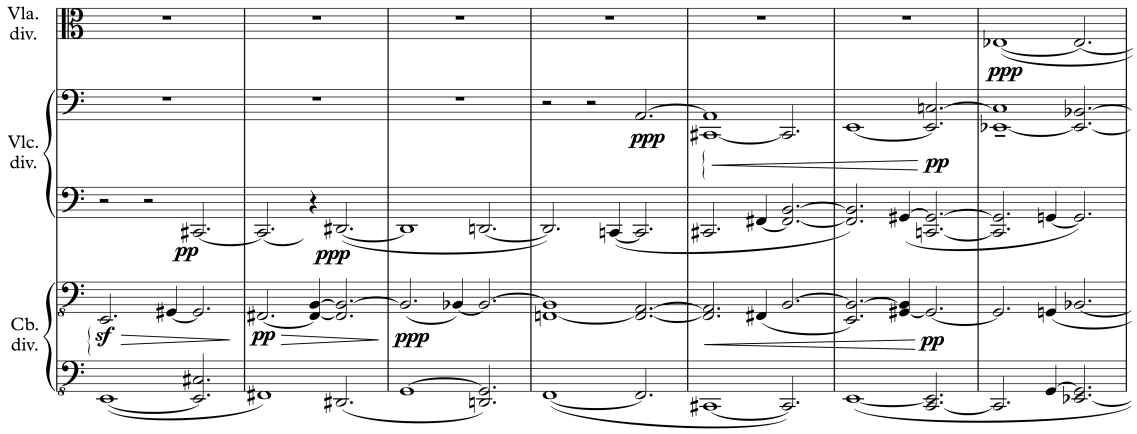
[111] *Ibidem*, p. 151.

[112] T. Adès - T. Rosner, *Thomas Adès and Tal Rosner in Conversation*, cit.

[113] In this respect it is similar to Schoenberg's row for the *String Trio* that Cohn discusses in his article. Also, Cohn's discussion of the precarious balance of hexatonic poles runs in parallel to Adès's more general idea of an «irrationally functional harmony». As Adès explains in *Full of Noises*, even a standard tonic-dominant relationship can be deployed in confounding ways: «Everyone can recognize there is some mysterious charge of energy that happens when you move from I to V [...] or from V to I, some magnetism that makes it appear that the two harmonies have an internal relationship, that creates the effect of one solving the other. But in fact, once you have realised that this in not necessarily inevitable [...] you can't go back», T. Adès, *Full of Noises*, cit., pp. 144-145.

	I_0	I_4	I_9	I_2	I_7	I_{11}	I_3	I_6	I_{10}	I_1	I_8	I_5	
P_0	E	G+	C+	F+	B	D+	G	B-	D	F	C	A	R_0
P_8	C	E	A	D	G	B	D+	F+	B-	C+	G+	F	R_8
P_3	G	B	E	A	D	F+	B-	C+	F	G+	D+	C	R_3
P_{10}	D	F+	B	E	A	C+	F	G+	C	D+	B-	G	R_{10}
P_5	A	C+	F+	B	E	G+	C	D+	G	B-	F	D	R_5
P_1	F	A	D	G	C	E	G+	B	D+	F+	C+	B-	R_1
P_9	C+	F	B-	D+	G+	C	E	G	B	D	A	F+	R_9
P_6	B-	D	G	C	F	A	C+	E	G+	B	F+	D+	R_6
P_2	F+	B-	D+	G+	C+	F	A	C	E	G	D	B	R_2
P_{11}	D+	G	C	F	B-	D	F+	A	C+	E	B	G+	R_{11}
P_4	G+	C	F	B-	D+	G	B	D	F+	A	E	C+	R_4
P_7	B	D+	G+	C+	F+	B-	D	F	A	C	G	E	R_7
	RI_0	RI_4	RI_9	RI_2	RI_7	RI_{11}	RI_3	RI_6	RI_{10}	RI_1	RI_8	RI_5	

Tab. 1: Thomas Adès, *In Seven Days*, Row Matrix.



Ex. 12: Thomas Adès, *In Seven Days*, 2008, III, mm. 1-7 (London, Faber, 2008).

In the movement, only the interior hexatonic pole is actually heard as a progression, since the final triad of the row elides with a transposition of the row. This means that Cohn's chord sequence is heard throughout the movement at all possible levels of transposition. In terms of the music's formal structure, Cohn's discussion of a hexatonic pole's

mutually animating qualities provides another way of understanding Adès's description of the musical "spiral" that the pitch material creates. Furthermore, insofar as major and minor triads are the most familiar sonorities to our ears – the most *heimlich,* in Cohn's formulation– their presence in this serial context can be interpreted as an expression of the repressed familiar sounding out from within the ostensibly disorienting context of a twelve tone composition.[114] The *heimlich*, in a word, has sprung forth from the *unheimlich.* Finally, if we look to add one more work to what Cohn calls his «gallery of hexatonic poles»,[115] the programmatic dimension of *In Seven Days* aligns with the general shape of Cohn's other examples: the hexatonic poles appear at the precise moment where life is created, which is arguably the most fundamental possible example of the uncanny and surrealist trope of the inanimate suddenly becoming alive.

Yet this movement of *In Seven Days* resists a comfortable association with surrealism and the uncanny on both formal and hermeneutic fronts. Intramusically, the hexatonic poles are heard in a "tonally indeterminate environment", effectively "neutralizing" (to borrow Cohn's terminology) their own extraordinary tonal power. Extramusically, it is hard to forget the ghoulish and sinister trappings of the uncanny. Freud's example of «dismembered limbs [...] feet which dance by themselves» is among the most striking instances that he summons in his essay.[116] Although we could force the issue and insist that the moment of life appearing on earth – the stated program of this moment in the work – is the foundational example of supernatural animation, it is still hard to think of the Genesis creation myth as "uncanny" in the way that Freud and others have understood the term, if for no other reason than that the miraculous need not necessarily be eerie.[117] Perhaps the crux of the matter is that Freud's uncanny is fundamentally a subjective state in which there must be an *observer*.[118] Since the third movement of *In Seven Days* depicts a moment before the dawn of human subjectivity, the degree to which is can meaningfully be understood in terms of signifying something uncanny is by definition limited.

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[114] «Nothing in music is better known to us, is more familiar and comforting, than major and minor triads. [...] The world inevitably contains dissonance, falseness, and illusion; the musical home provides the guarantee of resolution, restoration, reconstitution, recuperation», R. Cohn, *Uncanny Resemblances*, cit., p. 319.

[115] *Ibidem*, pp. 290-303.

[116] Freud quoted *ibidem*, p. 289.

[117] The same could be said of the programmatic element of Schoenberg's *Trio*, which the composer wrote as a «memorial to his own momentary death». Cohn seems willing to allow Schoenberg's program to sit within his «gallery» without comment on this front (*ibidem*, pp. 299-300).

From a strictly formalist perspective, the lure of hexatonic poles musically lies in their very instability, their heightened degree of ambiguity. But what about ambiguity of signification? There is one moment in his career where Adès explicitly shied away from a moment of surreal signification, in his decision to disavow the program for *Living Toys* (1993), for precisely the reason that he seemed to see its expressive potential as constrained by too specific a meaning. In its way, therefore, this work is a fitting final example to consider because it shows the limits of the territory in Adès's music which might be surveyed according to surrealist lines. Adès wrote the following epigram for the work:

> When they asked him what he wanted to be, the boy did not name any of the men's occupations, as they had all hoped he would, but replied: «I am going to be a hero, and dance with angels and bulls, and fight with bulls and soldiers, and die a hero in a distant place, and be buried a hero». Hearing this child's words, the men felt small, understanding that they were not heroes, and that their lives were less substantial than the dreams which surrounded him like toys.
> –from the Spanish.[119]

Of course, the notion that dreams might be even more substantive that reality is an idea explored extensively by the Surrealists, Dalí and his "hand-painted dream photographs" being perhaps the most well-known example.[120] Moreover, the program note which Adès has provided for live performances of *Living Toys* – at least until he disavowed the program – further elaborates the work's surrealist program. First, he describes the structure of the piece in terms of a multimedia juxtaposition: «The child/hero's dream-adventures form the five "figurative" sections, offset by three more volatile, dynamic paragraphs: painting versus film, perhaps».[121] In so doing, Adès proposes a pseudomorphism

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[118] In the interview *Thomas Adès and Tal Rosner in Conversation*, cit., Adès notes specifically that the piano represents human subjectivity, which is why it is so prominent in the sixth movement. One could also draw a parallel in Brendel's poem to the ghost of Brahms, frustrated that no one is actually there to see him. As Venn points out at the beginning of his essay on Adès's *Brahms*, «Brahms's nocturnal piano playing is viewed solely as a nuisance that wakes the children and sends the unfortunate instrument out of tune», E. Venn, *Thomas Adès and the Spectres of "Brahms"*, cit., p. 164. He spells out the situation even more pointedly somewhat later in his article: «The narrated response in *Brahms* is to ignore the sensation of being observed: the final minutes of the song (bars 76-114) see the unappreciated and forlorn spirit of Brahms depart to increasingly complex versions of the omnipresent descending thirds. With no observers willing to give the spectre flesh, the spirit is all that remains», *ibidem*, p. 185.

[119] Thomas Adès, *Living Toys*, 1993, Harlow, Faber Music, 1996, epigram, p. [vi].

[120] Childhood was also an idealized trope for the Surrealists. Spiteri and LaCoss make this point when they write, quoting Breton, «unlike the child, for whom the imagination "knows no bounds", in the adult the imagination was "allowed to be exercised only in strict accordance with the laws of an arbitrary unity". In this way the imaginative liberty of childhood was subordinated to the arbitrary authority of culture», R. Spiteri - D. LaCoss, *Introduction*, cit., p. 6.

[121] Thomas Adès, *Living Toys (1993) by Thomas Adès* [program note], London, Faber Music, 1994, http://www.faber-music.com/repertoire/living-toys-2373 (accessed on May 29, 2018).

between the arts which Apollinaire and Satie both recognized as an important element of the original surrealist work, *Parade*.[122]

The program continues steadily through evocative surrealist moments. In the first movement, an aurochs (an extinct forerunner to modern cattle) rather than a bull charges into the ring to challenge the young matador. The "painting" movements rely on anagrammatic wordplay in which the Surrealists would surely have delighted (the movements are respectively titled BALETT [*sic*], BATTLE, TABLET).[123] Later, Adès describes sharp turns in subjectivity: the child/hero goes from experiencing a dream to starring in a film in which he is «dismantling a great computer, whose vast intelligence dwindles to a wilting Vicwardian music-hall waltz»[124] – referencing Stanley Kubrick's *2001*. Given the specificity of this wild program, it poses a problem that Adès later distanced himself from it. «I invented this story, which is in the score, and said it was "from the Spanish": that was after I'd written the piece, and I felt I had to find a way of explaining it. Wrongly, of course».[125] He goes on to explain that «Aurochs and Angels» was a phrase from the last paragraph of Nabokov's novel *Lolita* which appealed to him, nothing more.[126]

The disavowed program for *Living Toys* seems to indicate one limit of surrealist signification in the music of Adès: it can never overspecify. Once the carefully delineated program is set aside (perhaps only *In Seven Days* approaches a similar level of programmatic detail in Adès's instrumental *oeuvre*), we are left with a rather difficult work to parse into its narrative components. The movements of *Living Toys* are performed without pause, making the actual changes of scene described in the program somewhat obscure. It is of course possible to force ourselves to imagine that surrealism might obtain if the work were to be heard with score in hand. Certainly the trumpets, castanets, and clapping in the movement "Aurochs" are at least evocative of a vaguely "Spanish" texture. Yet once the program is removed, *Living Toys* seems to align poorly with the other intersections with surrealism in Adès's music.

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[122] Daniel Albright describes Satie's music for *Parade* as a series of sounds which «took up time without seeming to move forward», and Satie himself famously described it as «furniture music». Cf. Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent. Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000, pp. 190-191.

[123] For a compendium of surrealist visual and verbal play, cf. *A Book of Surrealist Games*, ed. by A. Brotchie - M. Gooding, cit.

[124] T. Adès, *Living Toys (1993) by Thomas Adès* [program note], cit.

[125] T. Adès, *Full of Noises*, cit., p. 72.

[126] *Ibidem*, p. 73.

Musical Surrealism and the Historical Now

Adès's decision to disavow the program for *Living Toys* points towards one of his recurring concerns, the desired sense of instability in his compositions. As he explained in *Full of Noises*: «I don't believe in stability, I don't think it exists, in life [...]. The moment I put a note down on paper it starts to slide around on the page».[127] This quality of instability in music permeates his comments in *Full of Noises*, and in time it becomes clear that instability is enmeshed with what Adès calls music's «fundamental indefensibility» – that it should not have or even require an ultimate rationale or purpose. One of the dangers of revising his music, he worries, is that he «can take it too far and destroy the unpredictability, the indefensibility – and lose the piece and start writing an obituary. [...] To work it's got to have friction in it. Music should be inexplicable and indefensible».[128] Similarly, trying to hear surrealism throughout Adès's music runs the risk of «writing an obituary» for its reception. Others have also noted that overarticulating a particular aesthetic for a composer's work can tend to deaden it. «The nice thing about an ism», Taruskin sharply observed in a different context, «is how quickly it becomes a wasm».[129] Venn, too, is cautious about trying to describe the broad frame of Adès in terms of a single conceptual frame: «such categorisations, whether modernist, postmodernist, surrealist, satirist, mannerist, or the next Benjamin Britten, serve to narrow our frame of reference and thus our responses to the music».[130]

Yet musical surrealism is an extremely malleable and capacious discursive space, and its elusiveness is the main reason why I think it has served the role that it has in shaping the public image of a composer who prizes instability. Despite the conceptual imprecision of the term, surrealism is a concept that is easy for audiences without extensive musical training to grasp. It is a mental model that requires very little musical background, yet engages an audience member's encounter with an abstract work by asking them to contemplate (if only indirectly) what musical "realism" might be in the first place. It upsets, albeit from an unexpected direction, the idea that new music for the concert hall must also be somehow alienating in its abstraction. Surrealism performs other work as well: it

[127] *Ibidem*, p. 25.

[128] *Ibidem*, p. 132.

[129] Richard Taruskin, *How Talented Composers Become Useless*, in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays*, cit., pp. 86-93: 86.

[130] Edward Venn, *Thomas Adès*, mss. in English; published Polish translation in *Nowa muzyka brytyjska*, ed. by Agata Kwiecińska, Kraków, Ha!Art, 2009, pp. 182-201.

provides a biographical backdrop in the guise of Timothy and Dawn Ades; it creates a means for alluding to "queer" moments in Adès's music, be they specifically sexual or more generally uncanny; it provides a way to discuss Adès's juxtapositions in a way that dodges the ostensible superficiality of postmodern pastiche; it challenges listeners to attend to their own notions of musical norms in order to perceive the nature of Adès's reimagination of them.

These largely extramusical qualities of surrealism might lead some to conclude with resignation that it is little more than a clever way to market Adès's music; Venn seems to note somewhat glumly that public conversations about *Asyla* have tended to settle for what he calls a «music appreciation» approach, which discusses everything except the actual music.[131] Insofar as surrealism reveals Adès's numerous dodges, equivocations, and valorizations of instability, however, it points to a more general *oscillation* on Adès's part, between elements of high modernist aesthetics, and postmodern omnivorousness. I emphasize the word "oscillation" here because it is central to a view of the present moment across the arts advanced by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker. Vermeulen and van den Akker have explored the idea that visual artists, architects, and filmmakers are beginning to synthesize elements of postmodernism and modernism into a new set of practices, reflecting new structures of feeling, that are peculiar to the twenty-first century. This body of work, in their formulation, «oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity».[132] Musical surrealism, distinct from surrealism in other art forms, can achieve this oscillation precisely because it provides a means of ricocheting between music's autonomy from reference to the world and concrete points of reference; the "sur" and the "realism," as it were. *In Seven Days*, with its hexatonic poles, nestled inside a serial process, nestled inside a variation form, nestled inside piece of program music, provides just one example of the kind of compositions that can result from such oscillations when Adès refuses to choose a single technical means, rather pursuing numerous ones simultaneously. We can understand Adès's disavowal of the program for *Living Toys* along these lines as well: overspecification made it impossible for the work to oscillate. While this notion of oscillation does not refuse John Roeder's idea of multiple temporalities in Adès's work that aligns it

[131] E. Venn, *"Asylum Gained"?*, cit., pp. 93-94.

[132] T. Vermeulen - R. van den Akker, *Notes on Metamodernism*, cit., p. 6.

with postmodern musical aesthetics, it goes beyond it, reaching into the past in an effort to negotiate what are frequently thought of as mutually incompatible aesthetic strategies.[133]

Other commentators on Adès have used similar terms to describe his music. Recall that Taruskin claimed that Adès had successfully managed to «buck sterile utopia while avoiding the opposing pitfall of ironic pastiche»[134] in his 1999 «New York Times» article. Vermeulen and van den Akker seem to draw largely the same distinction, albeit with decidedly more buzzword-laden terms, when they write of the gap between modernism's «utopic syntaxis» and postmodernism's «dystopic parataxis», arguing that we are now in the age of «atopic metataxis».[135] In a parallel vein, Venn has singled out Arnold Whittall's notion of a «"continuing, intensifying dialogue" between opposing tendencies» as central to an understanding of Adès and other contemporary composers.[136] What all these writers would probably agree upon for Adès is that the representational and the formal, the postmodern and the modern, the "dispersive" and the "unifying" (to borrow the art historian Molly Warnock's terms) seem to be dialectically ensnared, or at least mutually constitutive in many of his works.[137] What it boils down to is that surrealism might be "old", but musical surrealism, when considered as a fully articulated discursive paradigm for instrumental music, is as *au courant* as we want it to be. As such the framework carries out much more

[133] J. Roeder, *Co-Operating Continuities in the Music of Thomas Adès*, cit., p. 121. Roeder quoted Jonathan Kramer as his point of departure: «the multiplicity of musical time – that music can enable listeners to experience different senses of directionality, different temporal narratives, and/or different rates of motion, all *simultaneously* – is indeed postmodern», Jonathan D. Kramer, *Postmodern Concepts of Musical Time*, «Indiana Theory Review», XVII, 2 (1996), p. 21-61: 22.

[134] R. Taruskin, *A Surrealist Composer Comes to the Rescue of Modernism*, «The New York Times», cit.

[135] T. Vermeulen - R. van den Akker, *Notes on Metamodernism*, cit., p. 12. Not all commentators see the resurgence of elements of modernism as necessarily indicative of anything besides the wane of postmodernism: «According to the currently accepted periodiziation, the only way to account for a highly visible portion of contemporary practice is to assert that, with the demise of postmodernism, modernism has survived its successor», S. W. Goldhagen, *Something to Talk About*, cit., p. 154. Goldhagen cites Marianne Thormählen's 2003 book *Rethinking Modernism*, which advances a similar argument for modernist literature (*Rethinking Modernism*, ed. by Marianne Thormählen, Loundsmills, Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

[136] E. Venn, *"Asylum Gained"?*, cit., p. 115.

[137] Vermeulen and van den Akker refer to other late surrealist artwork, especially the films of David Lynch, in their exploration of this sensibility, suggesting that surrealism across media is particularly illustrative of what they call metamodernism. Warnock has explored how the later canvases of Simon Hantaï perform important work in the history of modernist painting along similar lines, writing «Hantaï is a key figure for modernity precisely because he brings together two major problematics we tend to think of as distinct – the surrealist exploration of sexuality and the modernist investigation of medium – and makes them mutually driving for his art», Molly Warnock, *Engendering "Pliage". Simon Hantaï's "Meuns"*, «nonsite.org», 6 (2012): *Intention and Interpretation*, http://nonsite.org/feature/engendering-pliage-simon-hantais-meuns (accessed on May 13, 2018). At the same time, Hantaï's case also shows that at least one artist negotiated a retrospective gaze towards modernism (he was fascinated with the works of Cézanne and Matisse) with an increasing drive towards abstraction well before the turn of the millennium, nuancing the chronology of the emergence of these oscillating moves that are so central to Vermeulen's and van den Akker's argument.

cultural work than merely inviting audience members to gamely try to picture melting clocks, deserted piazzas, or fur-covered saucers while they listen to Adès's music.

Hence the rhetoric of surrealism that has swirled around Adès recruits his music into historical lineage of early twentieth-century modernism while at the same time identifying something new, which is no small feat considering how richly plumbed the consequences of modernism have been. Taruskin's claim that Adès has come «to the rescue of modernism» runs deeper than we might expect for a headline in the Sunday paper. We could also invert Taruskin's comment and note that musical modernism is also helping Adès by allowing him to stand on the shoulders of its giants.[138] Put another way, surrealism provides an aesthetic and historical basis for Adès's prominence today, while being ambiguous enough to leave him plenty of room to maneuver in the future without shedding this marker of canonical belonging. If musical surrealism ultimately survives into the long-term conversation about Adès's music, it is because, in the end, it can be put to so very many purposes. Like Adès's music, it can «slide around on the page»,[139] opening interpretive worlds, without slipping off completely.

NOTE

Concerning the musical examples and the figures, according to editorial guidelines the author has verified, under his own responsibility, that the extracts reproduced in this article are not subject to copyright: where this is not the case, the copyright holder's consent to publication has been obtained.

[138] Adès's encounters with Janáček, Berg, Nancarrow and other twentieth-century composers are an important part of the story of his music, but beyond the scope of this essay.

[139] T. Adès, *Full of Noises*, cit., p. 25.