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David Gable
Morris Brown College

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Keywords
Giuseppe Verdi
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David Gable

If I speak of a musical development as dramatic when it is strongly directional . . . then I could use the term lyric to describe music in which the forming process is instantaneous. In . . . Carré . . . I tried for the first time to concentrate on instantaneous forming, or the forming of moments . . . I worked on the basis of starting with the here and now, and then we will see if there is any past and future.

Karlheinz Stockhausen

The lyric implies an orientation to the present, a dilution of the experience of the moment. We can only dream or pine or brim with joy, experience an overwhelming sense of awe or well-being in the face of nature, in the present, and the resulting states of mind are all familiar lyric states, the stuff of poetry and song. Romanticism embraced all of these states: with its emphasis on subjectivity, self-consciousness, and individual experience, the Romantic is often all but synonymous with the lyric. Individual experience is the experience of the moment and the mood of the moment, and the Romantics explicitly acknowledged the momentary nature of lyric experience. In The Prelude, for example, Wordsworth describes states of heightened feeling provoked by scenes of nature or memories of childhood, states characterized by fundamental feelings of oneness with nature or a sense of connectedness to all of being, as "spots of time."

Available to monsters and to the monstrous in ourselves, the lyric is also the mode for brooding, fantasizing about revenge, and dwelling obsessively, whether on the unattainable beloved or on the guilt and remorse that haunt us. In short, lyric states are states of absorption, reverie, or meditation characterized by an essentially "momentary" structure: when we experience any of these states we are commonly said to be lost in the moment.

Lyric expression is the raison d’être of Italian opera. The structure of Italian opera was organized specifically to provide periodic opportunities for lyric reflection, and the language of Italian opera reflects an orientation to the experience of the moment. Where Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven developed a dynamic and strongly directional language, Italian composers exploited patterns that to some extent countered the strong directional tendencies of late eighteenth-century tonality in creating effects mimetic of the experience of lyric states. Among these patterns are the holding pattern, a repeating melodic pattern supported by tonic and dominant harmony, but motionless in the aggregate, and the groundswell, a type of peroration or climactic period span out of a holding pattern. The holding pattern already played a role in late eighteenth-century music, but it held a very different significance for Mozart than for Verdi. The groundswell probably originated with Rossini but gained wide currency only in the 1830s with Donizetti and Bellini, composers whose interest in a more direct and intense form of lyric expression made it a mainstay of the genre. Both the holding pattern and the groundswell were used in depicting the experience of the moment characteristic of lyric states, and examining their underlying mechanisms affords a glimpse of presuppositions distinguishing the language of ottocento opera from Haydn’s or Mozart’s.

One means of suspending the forward drive characteristic of tonal music is the creation of a temporary “holding pattern.” With the holding pattern from the closing section of Mozart’s Piano Concerto in C Major, K. 503, i, mm. 82-89 (Example 1, p. 22), there is motion from dominant to tonic from downbeat to downbeat, but the pattern is motionless overall. With its oscillating harmonies, repeating melodic pattern, and relentlessly periodic rate of chord change, a holding pattern enacts the harmonic equivalent of treading water. Tonic and dominant are held in a state of dynamic equilibrium, motion at any higher level is suspended, and the dynamism of the tonal system is contained. For that very reason, a holding pattern cannot be used to effect closure. Like a pattern on wallpaper, a holding pattern is mechanically spun out of a repeating motive to fill a given space, and the pattern has to be transformed for closure to be effected. In Mozart’s holding pattern, the
momentum necessary for the drive to the cadence is generated by an acceleration in the rate of chord change.

For Mozart, a holding pattern was a comparatively perfunctory device serving to fill out the form. For Verdi, the state of equilibrium generated by a holding pattern was a goal in its own right, one of the fundamental conditions of tonality, a privileged state. Implicit in Verdi’s reliance on the holding pattern is a conception of tonality in which the consonance of the tonic triad is displaced from its central position by the state of equilibrium implicit in the oscillation of a holding pattern. In certain contexts, the goal is no longer the consonance of the tonic triad—a quantity dynamically defined by the dominant—but the state of motionlessness attained when tonic and dominant are held in a state of equilibrium.

The effect of a suspension or cessation of motion created by a holding pattern held great programmatic potential for Verdi: it could be used to create fundamentally “anti-Classical” effects mimetic of the experience of various lyric states. In “Madre, pietosa Vergine,” Leonora’s cantabile from the opening of Act II, scene 2, of La forza del destino, Verdi uses a holding pattern in a recreation of the religious sublime. In this scene Leonora comes to a mountainous region near a remote village monastery seeking refuge from “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” As if an emanation of nature, the distant sound of monks chanting fills the mountain air. As Leonora prays to the Virgin, agitation gives way to a mixture of resolution, fervor, and inner tranquility, and Leonora’s change of heart is marked by the advent of a holding pattern (Example 2, p. 23) that opens up an oasis of calm in the texture: the slow periodic oscillation of the holding pattern is an ideal mimesis of the experience of eternity in the moment. In the overture, Leonora’s melody is harmonized with alternating tonic and dominant harmony. In the cantabile there is a dominant pedal, but the effect of the holding pattern is not undercut: its oscillations are built into the arpeggiations in Leonora’s melody, the roots of the dominant and tonic triads appearing on alternate downbeats.

This spot of time fulfills both a programmatic and a formal function. “Madre, pietosa vergine” is an instance of a pattern common in Italian opera, the slow movement in the minor mode with a maggiore concluding section. With this pattern, the overall harmonic design is determined by a change of mode rather than large-scale harmonic motion. The overall form of “Madre, pietosa Vergine” is characterized by motion from instability to stasis, from the relatively declamatory vocal line of the minore section to the full-blown melody of Leonora’s holding pattern, from a relatively rapid tempo to a more expansive one, from the relative instability of the minor mode and the restless ostinato patterning of the minore section to the inherently greater
Example 2

de! non m'abbandonar, pietà, pietà di me, Signore, deh! non m'abbandonar, ah!

CORO interno di FRATI.

Venite, adoremus

Venite, adoremus
Holding Pattern and Groundswell: Verdi's Mimesis of the Lyric

stability of the major mode and the state of equilibrium that a holding pattern affords. Rather than stability in any traditional sense, the goal of Verdi's form, and Leonora's goal too, is the "timelessness" of the lyric state.

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The sense of motionlessness created by a holding pattern is ideally mimetic of the experience of timelessness characteristic of the lyric state, but its application is obviously limited: a holding pattern cannot be prolonged indefinitely. A larger-scale pattern that accomplishes a similar goal is the groundswell. According to Kerman and Grey, a groundswell opens with "a regular alternation of tonic and dominant harmonies," in other words, a holding pattern. The holding pattern gives way to "sequential harmonic progressions with rising treble and bass lines," and the groundswell is capped with "a grandiose cadential descent." This series is then repeated "for an added sense of weight and expansiveness."7 Minus the rising bass line, the groundswell that caps "Sangue a me," the largo concertato from the finale of Act II of Macbeth, conforms to this pattern.

Unfolding at a crucial juncture in the drama, "Sangue a me" falls into three periods. In the opening period, Macbeth, imagining that he has seen the ghosts of Banquo and Duncan, is wracked with guilt. His erratic behavior comes as a revelation to the members of the court, who mutter among themselves in disbelief in the second period. Unable to deny the evidence of their senses, they draw the obvious conclusion. Struck by this revelation, they quietly reflect in the final groundswell.

Like Leonora's slow movement, "Sangue a me" depends on a modal opposition. The first period opens in E major but ends with an abrupt change of mode (Ricordi piano-vocal score, p. 154, m. 7, to p. 156, m. 1).8 The second period opens in E minor and modulates to the relative major, G (p. 156, m. 2, to p. 163, m. 1). The tonic major is restored at the end of the second period and is retained throughout the final groundswell (p. 163, m. 2, to p. 180).9 The dynamic of the movement is bound up with the modal opposition played out in its key structure, the return to the original key owing much of its effect to the definitive appearance of the tonic major in the wake of so much G natural. The key of G is entirely represented by a holding pattern (pp. 158-159), while the tonic major is definitively projected for the first time in the groundswell by means of another holding pattern.10 The two most stable passages in the movement, the G major holding pattern and E major groundswell paint a very clear picture of Verdi's conception of tonal stability.

A groundswell is a stereotype mimetic of a particular kind of experience, of the loss in the moment characteristic of that experience, and there is a kernel of naturalism at its core. As Kerman and Grey point out, groundswells unfold at moments of "stupore universale," "frozen moments" when the actors in the drama are caught up in lyric reflection; they are mimetic of the gradual and seamless processes of time as they are dilated in our experience. The groundswell from "Sangue a me" consists of a single undivided period characterized by continuous patterns of motion, and every parameter is pressed into service in depicting the experience of the moment as a single seamless and consistent process. A consistently sustained continuity governed by a carefully controlled rate of chord change contributes to a comparative leveling of harmonic tension, while the overall harmonic structure is linked to a gradual pattern of acceleration and deceleration that mirrors the incremental processes of time.

In composing his groundswell, Verdi depended not only on a familiar stereotype but also on fundamental features of ottocento style. In late-eighteenth-century common practice, there is a fairly direct relationship between melody and harmony, a relationship approaching a one-to-one correspondence. The melody may move more rapidly than the supporting harmony (and very often does), but melody and harmony are synchronized at crucial points in every measure. In the opening of "Se vuol ballare," Figaro's cavatina from Act I of Le nozze di Figaro, for example, the correspondence of melody to harmony is absolute. Every change of pitch in the melody is supported by a change of harmony except in mm. 4 and 8, where the melody arpeggiates the root and third of the supporting chord. In short, melody and harmony are indivisible, reinforcing each other at every point.

Melody and harmony are coordinated in a similar fashion in the music of the ottocento, but in Italian opera there is generally a greater degree of polarization between melody and harmony. Especially when they are heavily ornamented but even when they are not - Verdi's melodies lie closer to the surface than Mozart's, while the harmony is brushed in with broader strokes. In the tempo d'attacco of the trio from Act I of Il trovatore, for example, a lean and active melody (for violins) advances with a controlled fury against a background of slowly shifting harmony (Ricordi piano-vocal score, p. 57, mm. 4ff).11 With the stock accompanimental patterns of Italian opera - the polonaise, waltz, and bolero rhythms, and so forth - the rate of chord change is tied to an isorhythmic pattern. An isorhythmic accompaniment defines the meter, and chord changes either coincide with a bar line defined by the pattern or occur within the measure at periodic divisions defined by repetitions of the pattern.12 There are often isorhythmic patterns in the melody as well, if only for a
measure or two. The melody of the *tempo d'attacco* from the *Il trovatore* trio, for example, is isorhythmic for five measures before giving way to a second isorhythmic pattern (p. 57, m. 10, last beat). In short, in Italian opera it is very often an isorhythmic or quasi-isorhythmic pattern that propels the listener across the expanses of time opened up by the slowly shifting harmonies. The result is a sense of pacing distinct from the more variegated pacing found at the most immediate level in Mozart's operas.

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Budden's metaphor is extraordinarily apt. A groundswell at sea advances steadily toward the shore, gradually increasing momentum as it approaches, finally breaking when it reaches the shore. A "groundswell" from Italian opera exhibits a similarly inexorable and monolithic progress, gradually accumulating tension as it accelerates, "breaking" only near the end.

The sheer single-mindedness with which a groundswell unfolds generates a sustained tension qualitatively different in impact from the tension-release patterns characteristic of a Beethoven symphony or a Mozart ensemble. With the more varied pacing of eighteenth-century music, the different weights of the various chords are directly exploited, rhythm and harmony are facets of a single system, and rates of chord change seem to be directly motivated by the relative weights of the various chords. In a groundswell, the rate of chord change at the most immediate level is controlled by a regular and periodic system in the interests of a new kind of larger shape.

Nine measures long, the first of two statements of the groundswell from "Sangue a me" is given as Example 3 (p. 26) (pp. 163-170 of the Ricordi piano-vocal score; see note 8). The groundswell unfolds from the second beat of m. 1. Within the initial holding pattern, the harmony changes only at the bar lines (Ex. 3, mm. 1-4). The listener is given ample time to revel in the sheer phenomenological presence of the slowly oscillating harmonies. While each chord is restructured to hypnotic effect on every beat, syntactic relationships are relegated to the long separated downbeats, and attention naturally focuses on the essentially ornamental patterning unfolding on the surface. The tempo is so slow that the rate of chord change remains slow even when it is doubled in m. 5 and doubled again in m. 8, and a strictly periodic rate of chord change is maintained with each change of harmony: we are never given less than one statement of the "oom-pah-pah" pattern in the accompaniment to absorb a change of harmony.

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<th>mm./section</th>
<th>4</th>
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<td># chord changes/measure</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>mm. 1-4</td>
<td>mm. 5-7</td>
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The slow and periodic rates of chord change contribute to a diffusion of harmonic tension, muting the phenomenological impact of harmony, and specifically of the dissonant chords. In a Beethoven symphony, a dominant pedal "acts as an irritant, works on the nerves," as Charles Rosen once put it: because of the tonal and motivic processes the pedal supports, the longer it sounds, the greater the tension it generates. Although resolution is delayed until the downbeat, no comparable tension is generated with the arpeggiation of dominant harmony in mm. 2 and 4 of Verdi's groundswell because the delays are due, not to any harmonic process, but to the periodic rate of chord change and the mechanical regularity with which the quasi-isorhythmic melody unfolds.

Following Kerman and Grey, the legs of Verdi's groundswell are 1) the holding pattern (from the middle of m. 1 to the downbeat of m. 5); 2) a quasi-sequential progression (from the middle of m. 5 to the downbeat of m. 8); and 3) a climax and descent to a cadence (from the downbeat of m. 8 to the cadence at m. 10). The engine in Verdi's groundswell is the kind of sequential motion characteristic of Baroque music. We are propelled to the climax by a quasi-sequential pattern of resolutions and the isorhythmic patterning that articulates it, both of which contribute to the sense of inevitability characteristic of the arrival at m. 8. The final statement of the motive (marked "extended statement" in Ex. 3) extends from its point of origin in the second half of m. 7 across m. 8 to the second beat of m. 9. With this extension, the climax at m. 8 is subsumed under the larger continuous pattern of the groundswell as a whole.

From the point of view of harmony, the three pillars of Verdi's form are the tonic triad projected by the initial holding pattern, the climactic return of the tonic at the apex of the form in m. 8, and the cadence to the tonic in m. 10. As summarized in Example 3a (p. 28), the structure underlying Verdi's melody is a descent from the third to the root of the tonic triad. The upper neighbor motion at m. 8 is the point where the tension generated by the groundswell is first released and most strongly felt, and it divides the period into unequal halves. Unfolding in the wake of the climax, the descent from 3 largely serves to drain accumulated energy. Pushed to the end of the period, it cannot be considered the motor force in the period as a whole.

The rise and fall of this form is reinforced by an overall pattern of acceleration and deceleration (see diagram):

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<td>mm. 8</td>
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<tr>
<td>mm. 9</td>
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Example 3 (continued)

quasi-sequential: \( \text{vii}^0/\frac{4}{3} \)

extended statement
Example 3 (conclusion)

Example 3a

m. 1 holding pattern  m. 7  m. 8 climax  m. 9  m. 10 cadence
As the underlying progression accumulates tension, reaches a peak, and subsides, its character and function gradually change. Tension is accumulated or drained with a greater or lesser intensity with each seamlessly elided segment depending on the nature of the harmonic support, and every shift in character and function is reinforced by a shift in the rate of chord change. Each increase or decrease in the rate of chord change is a "timed release." Separated from the others by the duration of at least one measure, each change of rate occurs in relative isolation, and the new state attained with each change is then maintained. The impact of the accelerations and decelerations is not direct but cumulative, within the constraints of a metric grid approximating a smooth and gradual process.

Carefully controlled and given ample space in time, the release of accumulated tension in m. 8 is another gradual process. A quasi-sequential and isorhythmic pattern is set up in the first quarter of the measure, and — with resolution of the accented upper neighbor on the second triplet in each group — tension is released in steady increments across the bar.

Unfolding along a continuous curve with a clear and distinct profile, Verdi's groundswell is a self-contained "moment," but the continuous patterns that constitute it are metric patterns. Mimetic of the continuous experience of time, Verdi's patterns depend on unbroken streams of attacks occurring at discrete points along a metric grid. In that sense the patterns are not literally as seamless as time. With the climax at m. 8, we finally break through to the seamless experience of time.

Emerging on the surface, the accented upper neighbors in m. 8 have far greater phenomenological impact than any of the dissonant chords in the harmony, and the accented upper neighbor on the second triplet of the measure is the one with the greatest impact in the entire groundswell: Verdi's climax hinges on its effect. (Despite the consonant support it receives from the harmony, the G-sharp on the second triplet of the second beat in Ex. 3, m. 8, effectively functions as an upper neighbor within the context of the melody, exhibiting a strong tendency to return to F-sharp.) The function of a dissonance is not discharged until it is resolved, and its impact necessarily extends through time: the expressive use of dissonance characteristic of so much nineteenth-century music from Bellini to Mahler intrinsically depends on this fundamental fact. With the accented upper neighbor at the apex of Verdi's melody, the seamless passage of time is rendered intensely palpable, the moment of climax heightened and drawn out. As we break through to the surface with this dissonant note and experience its extension in time, the metric framework is momentarily transcended, and we submit to the qualitatively different rhythms of real time.

Verdi consciously capitalizes on the dissonance of his accented upper neighbors, supplying them with written-out fermatas. Acting as a brake in the face of increased speed, each upper neighbor is suspended into the space of the third triplet of the beat, and performers rightly sustain them slightly longer than suggested by the notated values, reining in the tempo with the second triplet in each group for maximum expressive effect. (This may not respect the letter of the score, but it is entirely responsive to Verdi's exploitation of the phenomenological structure of dissonance for expressive purposes.) As the bar unfolds, the impact of the accented upper neighbors gradually fades in the manner of all the groundswell's processes, and in performance each successive appoggiatura is generally sustained a little less long than its predecessor.

With the increasing naturalism characteristic of the operas of his middle period, Verdi could paint a loss in the moment more economically and naturalistically. In Rigoletto, Verdi's anti-hero broods on Monterone's curse, and the motive associated with the curse recurs whenever the memory of it obtrudes unwelcome on his consciousness (e.g., p. 85, m. 4, of the Ricordi piano-vocal score).15 Mimetic of the experience of a momentary and disturbing pang of memory, the motive associated with Monterone's curse is formed of the resolution of a German sixth chord — by the tonic minor triad in the prelude, by the tonic major in the body of the opera. As we wait for the sustained German sixth to be resolved, we are caught up in the same space of time and memory as Rigoletto.

The influence of the pattern of the groundswell extended well beyond composers active in Italy in the 1830s and 1840s. Perhaps the greatest groundswell of the primo otto­cento is the final stretto from Bellini's Norma, "Exhibit A" in Kerman and Grey's discussion of the groundswell.16 Like the groundswell from "Sangue a me," Bellini's is in E major, rising to a climax on a dissonant A resolved by G sharp, although Bellini's A is an appoggiatura rather than an accented upper neighbor. The extent of the influence of the groundswell can be gauged from the influence of Bellini's on the Liebestod from Wagner's Tristan und Isolde.17

While the groundswell from "Sangue a me" is the work of a relatively young composer in the early stages of his career closely following established models, the Liebestod is an apotheosis of the dynamics of the groundswell by a composer at the height of his powers. Beginning thirty-six measures before the end of the opera, the final crescendo from the Liebestod is a groundswell, although this requires some qualification. While Bellini's and Verdi's groundswells contribute decisively to the larger forms of the movements
they cap, they are independent periods. Wagner’s is subsumed under the larger quasi-seamless continuity of the Liebestod as a whole. Nevertheless, the quasi-sequential and quasi-isorhythmic ascent to the Liebestod’s final climax is spun out of the holding pattern embodied in the motive given as Example 4a, which oscillates between the root and fifth of the Liebestod’s B-major tonic.

Even more interesting is Wagner’s reconception of the climax. The sheer length of the Liebestod demanded a correspondingly expansive climax, and Wagner expanded his by means of a holding pattern. Reharmonized, the holding pattern at the origin of Wagner’s groundswell returns to furnish the Liebestod with a climax (nineteen measures from the end of the opera, Example 4b). Wagner’s climax is marked by a strategically placed appoggiatura and, like Bellini’s, Wagner’s appoggiatura is prolonged by a written-out fermata. In the climactic recurrence of Wagner’s holding pattern the root and the fifth of the tonic triad are preaced with appoggiaturas that unfold on a Wagnerian scale: C sharp and G sharp are sustained five times as long at the climax (Ex. 4b) as in the original motive (Ex. 4a) and generally even longer in performance, giving us ample opportunity to experience their extension through time before they are resolved.

The continuous experience of a climactic appoggiatura or accented upper neighbor at the apex of a groundswell is not fortuitous but intrinsic to its conception. A groundswell exists so that such a moment might well up on the surface where its phenomenological impact can be experienced continuously through time, and the structure of the entire groundswell up to that point serves to prepare it. The technique is mimetic of the lyric, delivering a heightened and continuous experience at the moment of climax and release.

3. The term “holding pattern” is Philip Gossett’s. I am not certain that he has used it in print, but he used it in seminars taught at the University of Chicago.
5. Unlike the short motive out of which Mozart’s holding pattern is spun, Leonora’s comparatively long-limbed melody is not susceptible to treatment as a pattern on wallpaper, and the second statement of Leonora’s melody is altered and intensified. Nevertheless, the

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Example 4a

Example 4b
underlying harmonic pattern is not disrupted. A deceptive resolution enables Verdi to break out of the holding pattern but is not intrinsic to the process. Statements of this pattern elsewhere in the opera, including those later within this movement, cadence on the tonic.


7. The term "groundswell" is Julian Budden's; see his The Operas of Verdi, I: From 'Oberto' to 'Rigoletto' (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 19.


8. Example 3 is reprinted from Giuseppe Verdi, Macbeth, opera completa per canto e pianoforte, ed. Mario Parenti (Milan: Ricordi, 1960), pl. #42311; all references in the text are to this source.

9. The tonality of "Sangue a me" is never in doubt, but at crucial moments in the first period the tonic major is strategically withheld, e.g., the end of the period, where G natural is abruptly substituted for G sharp (p. 156). "Sangue a me" opens with a measure of tonic major harmony against which Macbeth ascends from the root to the third of the tonic triad, but, in his distracted state, he arrives on an unexpected lowered third degree (harmonized with vii07 of V, p. 154, last measure). The lowered form of the third scale degree is also put into play when flat VI and flat III are introduced later in the opening period (p. 155, mm. 4-5).

10. The effect of the holding pattern as such is not undermined by the appearance of the tonic triad in six-four position at the second bar of the pattern. With repetition of the pattern, the last chord is altered, beginning the transition back to E major (p. 159, m. 2, second half).


12. As Verdi has transcribed it, each statement of the bolero rhythm in the accompaniment to "Di quella pira" from Il trovatore defines a measure, and every chord change in the movement proper occurs on the bar line. It could be argued that the measures defined by the bolero rhythm in "Di quella pira" mark the beats in a larger measure. At that higher level, the rate of chord change is not strictly periodic but approximately as varied as the rates of chord change in late eighteenth-century music. At the immediate level opened up by the bolero rhythm, the rate of chord change is strictly periodic to the extent that chord change is tied to a regular pattern.

13. The "demand" for resolution raised when a dissonant chord is struck is a function of syntax, but syntax has a phenomenological impact on the listener. The effect of the chains of suspensions in the first movement of Bach's Violin Sonata in E major, BWV 1006, for example, depends on the sharply contrasting impact of the dissonant suspensions and their consonant resolutions.


15. Score references are to Giuseppe Verdi, Rigoletto, Melodramma in tre atti di Francesco Maria Piave, Opera completa per canto e pianoforte (Milan: G. Ricordi, 1959), pl. #133058.


17. Wagner conducted Norma in Riga early in his career, even supplying an alternate aria for the basso, and he is known to have admired the opera's final streich, declaring, "This Richard Wagner could not have done." Charles Rosen has responded to Wagner's uncharacteristically generous remark, "It was, in fact, the only part of Bellini's art that Wagner ever learned to master, and the final scene of Norma remained the model for much of his music as late as Tristan und Isolde." (Charles Rosen, The Romantic Generation [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995], 635-37).