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Amériques by Edgard Varèse:

Romanticism and Modernism in the Late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Amériques is said to be Edgard Varèse's response to the new world, which for him was New York City in 1915. The piece was composed between 1918 and 1922, although some sources claim the composition was started as early as 1915. *Amériques* did not receive its premiere until 1926 where it was performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra on a Friday matinee concert under the direction of Leopold Stokowski[1]. Although the piece is only twenty-four minutes long, it made a big impact on the world of modern music. *Amériques* highlights the interest Varèse had in new ways of producing sounds and motivic development through unconventional means; both of these characteristics are what make *Amériques* reflective of the concepts associated with Romanticism and modernism. Varèse's interests in new sounds are discussed at length in his transcribed lectures titled, *The Liberation of Sound,*[2] in addition to comments made in this paper. Varèse began a new movement in orchestration and composition that focused on the use of noise instead of pitches, and even helped form a new genre of music, electronic music. This paper will discuss in detail Varèse's use of motives, rhythmic ostinato, cluster chords and sound masses, new and unique instruments, and intervallic content throughout

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[1] James M. Keller "About *Amériques*." *Oxford University Press*, 2011 accessed February 20, 2017, http://americanmavericks.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/About-Ameriques.pdf
[2] Edgard Varèse, and Chou Wen-Chung. "The Liberation of Sound." *Perspectives of New Music* 5, no. 1 (1966): 11-19. Accessed February 18, 2017.

the piece, and how they relate to Romanticism and modernism. The score examples are from the revised and edited edition of *Amériques* from 1929 by Chou Wen-Chung.

Edgard Varèse spent the majority of his early life in Paris and Berlin before moving to the U.S. in 1915. While in Europe, Varèse spent a great deal of time studying composition and conducting. Before he left for the U.S. Varèse had made acquaintances with major artists such as: Satie, Debussy, and Cocteau. He left Europe because he was not able to find the full-time employment he desired. Upon his arrival in the U.S. Varèse found himself immersed in a new world, a new music circle, and a completely new sound environment. He made his conducting debut not long after arriving to the U.S. conducting Berlioz's Requiem. Varèse also founded the International Composers Guild with Carlos Salzedo shortly after arriving to the U.S. This guild put together performances of the leading modern composers of the early twentieth century such as: Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Berg, and his own compositions[3].

A major aspect of *Amériques* that puts it in the category of both Romantic and modern music is the instrumentation. The original score called for as many as 142 players, which was reduced to 125 after revisions were strongly encouraged by Stokowski who premiered the piece. The instrumentation is as follows:

3 piccolos (3rd = alto flute) – 2 flutes | 3 oboes – English horn – heckelphone | 3 clarinets – bass clarinet – E-flat clarinet | 3 bassoons – 2 contrabassoons | 8 horns | 6 trumpets | 3 trombones – bass trombone – contrabass trombone | 2 tubas (one bass and one contrabass) | 2 timpani (2

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[3] Paul, Griffiths,. "Varèse, Edgard." *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press*, accessed February 14, 2017, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/29042

players) | percussion (9+ players) – bass drum, chimes, cymbals, gong, siren, low rattle, lion's roar, orchestra bells, snare drum, sleigh bells, tambourine, triangle, whip, xylophone | 2 harps celesta | strings.

There are unique instruments heard in *Amériques*, most notably in the percussion section. The size of this ensemble is one of the characteristics that fit into Romanticism and on the other hand, the variety of instruments is what makes this piece fit into the modern category. The most notable differences between this piece and others of its time is the use of alto flute, heckelphone, contrabassoons, contrabass trombone, two tubas, two harps, two sets of timpani, and of course, the lion's roar and the siren in the percussion section. It was also Varèse's use of the instruments and his orchestration that led people to believe the piece was about his arrival in New York City, and his response to the new world. Varèse became infatuated with the sounds of the city and it is evident throughout *Amériques*. Varèse creates an orchestral rendition of the bustling streets, cacophonous noise that he undoubtedly experienced upon his arrival, and the constant sirens of emergency vehicles that seem to go off at any point of the day or night. The lion's roar sounds like bellowing trucks caught in traffic or even the sound heard underneath a bridge while vehicles are crossing over. Varèse's use of symbolism with instrumentation is an example of Romanticism found in *Amériques.*

Amériques contains numerous quotations and references to contemporary composers of the early twentieth century. The most obviously referenced composers are Stravinsky and Debussy. The opening alto flute melody is reminiscent of Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* (fig. 1) and the rhythmic ostinato heard in the final section of the piece (fig.11) is eerily similar to Stravinsky's music for the ballet *The Rite of Spring*. The original score for *Amériques* called for a very large off-stage band, which was changed to a smaller and more economically

friendly size before the piece's premiere in 1926[4]. Calling for an off-stage ensemble was not unheard of at that time and there are a couple possible influences for this decision. The first and most likely influence is the Berlioz Requiem, which features four antiphonal brass ensembles. Berlioz's Requiem was the first piece that Varèse conducted in the U.S., and since *Amériques* is thought to be Varèse's response to the new sounds and experiences in America, it's not far-fetched to think he included this reference because of the impact it had on his life. Another likely influence is the work of Gustav Mahler, whom Varèse had met early in the 1900s and was most certainly familiar with his compositions.

There are many qualities of *Amériques* that fit in to the style of Romanticism. Romantic music contains lyrical melodies, an expanded orchestra, free or wandering form, large contrast in dynamic and pitch range, the use of extended harmonies and chromaticism, and references to nature or the human condition.[5] All of these Romantic characteristics can be found in *Amériques.* Starting with the first measure, the alto flute plays a melody that will be heard throughout the piece in a variety of ways. The melody, or motive as it will be referred to from now on, can be heard in its original form at least 7 times in this work. This motive acts almost as a memory of simpler times, because it is usually presented after a cacophonous passage or a passage that takes the piece in an entirely new direction (fig. 4). Varèse re-states the motive, usually as a solo, as a way of calming things down again. The motive is also present in the Eb clarinet, the trumpet (fig. 8), and the violas.

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[4] James M. Keller "About *Amériques*." *Oxford University Press*, 2011 accessed February 20, 2017, http://americanmavericks.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/About-Ameriques.pdf

[5] Jim Samson. "Romanticism." *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. *Oxford University Press,* accessed February 14, 2017 http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/23751.

Numerous examples of extended harmonies and chromaticism can be found in this piece. The first example is found in the bassoon in m. 3 (fig.2). In this passage the bassoon chromatically ascends a minor third. In the beginning of the piece, specifically in the trombone, diatonic harmonies are present. In this particular example the trombones play a c minor triad in inversion. Such harmonies do not sound functional or cadencial mainly because they are typically in inversion and not accented. Diatonic harmony fades away and cluster chords become more present as the piece progresses. Another example of chromaticism and the use of motive in a Romantic way is seen in m. 32 in the piccolo, Eb clarinet, and the trumpets (fig. 5). This motive occurs in the trumpets numerous times and each time it is presented it sounds like a fanfare. One final example of chromaticism and use of motive is found at rehearsal 8 in the bassoons and horns (fig. 7). The melody heard is much lower and stretched over multiple bars, emphasizing the chromaticism. This 3rd motive is used as a transition other times throughout the piece. It generally serves as a bridge to a slower section. This technique is consistent with Romantic ideas because it is using a melodic idea multiple times not only for musical interest but to also help unite sections of music that would otherwise be unrelated. There are more motives used in the piece, and each of them has their own function and process that is applied to them.

Another Romantic characteristic is the constant change of tempo and mood in the piece. There are over thirty-five changes in tempo and the majority of them are not prepared. The constant tempo changes leads to quick mood shifts, which is another characteristic of Romantic music. One final Romantic characteristic is found a quirky passage found in the trombone (fig. 9). This passage indicates for the trombone player to play with a laughing quality. This type of passage can found in Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* where the sound of a rolling head or sardonic laughter is represented sonically. The "laughing trombone" is thought to represent a

certain person in Varèse's life. This idea is reference in the music of Luciano Berio with his trombone *Sequenza*.

Referring back to the opening motive (fig.1), Varèse uses modern techniques to create unity throughout the work using the opening motive specifically. The motive consists of a major 7^{th}, followed by a perfect 5^{th}, then a minor 2^{nd}, then a perfect 4^{th}, then another perfect 5^{th}. The relationship between the starting pitch and the ending pitch is a perfect 5^{th}. Different presentations of this motive have intervals inverted or retrograded but it is still clear that Varèse is using this motive, applying some sort of algorithm to it, and orchestrating in a way that is reminiscent of the first statement. By doing this, Varèse creates a sense of continuity while also creating contrast throughout the work.

Varèse takes a modernist approach to instrumentation, orchestration, and pitch technique in this work. The first example is the use of the alto flute in the first measure (fig. 1). Also heard in the opening measures is a peculiar use of the harp. The score indicates for the harpists to play a series of minor 3rds, while tapping the soundboard of the instrument to create a percussive effect (fig. 3). This is another way that Varese is making use of the minor 3^{rd} in this composition. For the first half of the piece it seems that he is using the minor 3rd interval as a sort of building block for his motives.

Amériques takes chromaticism to a new level and introduces the audience to the idea of sound masses. These are created when no sense of pitch only texture can be heard. An example of this is heard leading into rehearsal 15 (fig. 10), also frequently towards the end of the piece. There are occasions when Varèse will compose sustained chords that include a chromatic cluster of six and even up to ten pitches. With all of these pitches sounding in different registers and by all instruments of the orchestra a truly unique sound is produced. Add to that the army of

percussion instruments and a cacophonous sound is heard. This technique is used by Varèse frequently in *Amériques* and is also used in the orchestral works of Ligeti, Penderecki, and others after him. The piece ends with a cacophonous, driving, sound mass lead by the siren that surely would have shocked the audience on 1926. The pulsating rhythmic ostinato and low brass melody is eerily reminiscent of the Stravinsky's music for the ballet *The Rite of Spring* (fig. 11), except much louder. In the last three measures the entire orchestra, with the exception of some percussion and the harp, are playing a unison rhythm and a 10-note chord is heard (fig. 12). The only pitches missing from this harmony is G and Ab. This particular example shows Varèse's interest in sound masses and dense textures. This kind of harmony can be found in some of Varèse's contemporaries such as the operas of Strauss, and some of the later symphonies of Gustav Mahler. The use of the ten-note chord also shows Varèse's connection to the ideas of Romanticism and Maximalism. Varèse uses these tone clusters often throughout the piece. The fact that this technique shows up so often in the piece is more indicative of Modernism and Varèse's push towards noise music and machine-like sounds.

Varèse made his biggest impact in the world of electronic music and his percussion ensemble music. His most famous compositions, or at least best known outside of the contemporary music world, are *Ionisation* (1929) for percussion ensemble and *Poème électronique* (1958) for electronic playback. "An artist is never ahead of his time, but most people are behind their own time.[6]" This quote from Varèse encapsulates his relationship to new sounds and how he perceived that art around him. The kind of sound Varèse is able to achieve with such a large and sonically diverse ensemble in *Amériques* is indicative of his obsession with noise and machine sounds. His thoughts on this subject can be found in *The Liberation of*

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[6] James M. Keller "About *Amériques*." *Oxford University Press*, 2011 accessed February 20, 2017, http://americanmavericks.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/About-Ameriques.pdf

Sound[7]. He along with Luigi Russolo and others, were interested in pushing acoustic and electric instrument to the extremes of sound production. Varèse's use of acoustic instruments was very forward thinking and helped lead to the creation of entirely new forms of artistic creation such as: noise music, electronic music, and electroacoustic music.

After studying Varèse's use of motives, rhythmic ostinato, cluster chords and sound masses, new and unique instruments, and intervallic content, one can see that *Amériques* exhibits characteristics of both Romanticism and modernism. The description of *Amériques* as a Varèse's response to the new world is fitting. It makes sense that the piece responding to an immigrant's first years in the U.S. during the early twentieth century was as innovative and forward-thinking as New York City was at the time. *Amériques* highlights the interest Varèse had in new sounds and motivic development through unconventional means; both of these characteristics are what make *Amériques* reflective of the characteristics associated with Romanticism and modernism. With this piece and others he composed after Varèse began a new movement in composition and orchestration that focused on the use of noise instead of pitches, and even helped form a new genre of music called electronic music.

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[7] Varèse, Edgard, and Chou Wen-Chung. "The Liberation of Sound." *Perspectives of New Music* 5, no. 1 (1966): 11-19. Accessed February 18, 2017.

Appendix

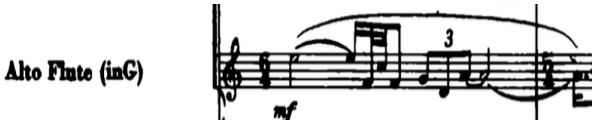

Figure 1: The opening motive played by the alto flute

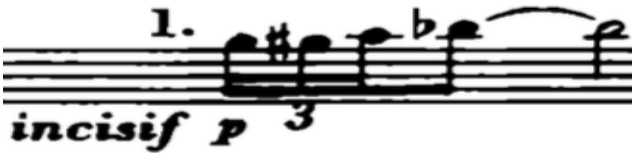

Figure 2: m. 2, a chromatic ascent to a minor 3rd found in the bassoon

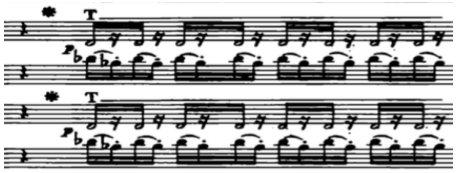

Figure 3: m. 2, harp tapping the soundboard while playing.

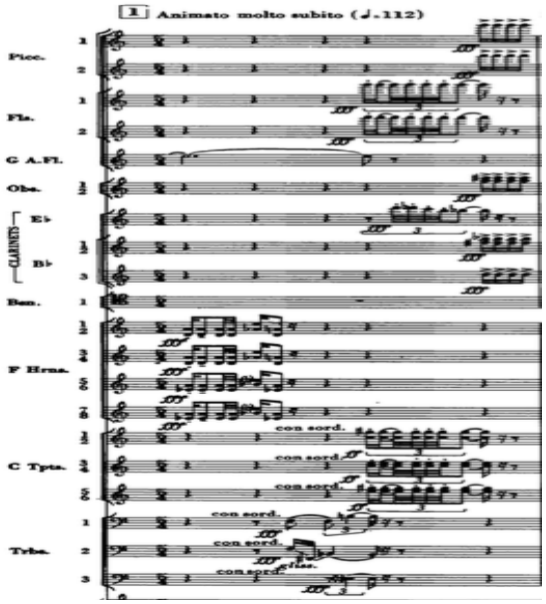

Figure 4: An example of a loud interjection and sudden change of tempo.

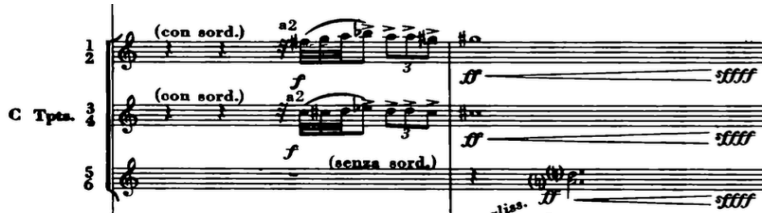

Figure 5: The first statement of the second motive, a chromatic trumpet fanfare.

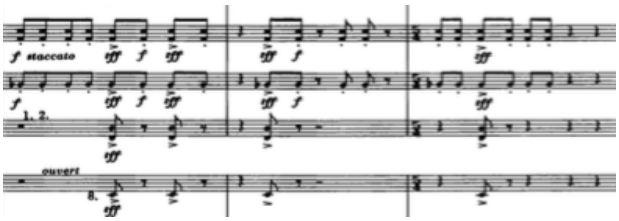

Figure 6: The first presentation of a Stravinsky-like rhythmic pulse found in the bassoons and horns.

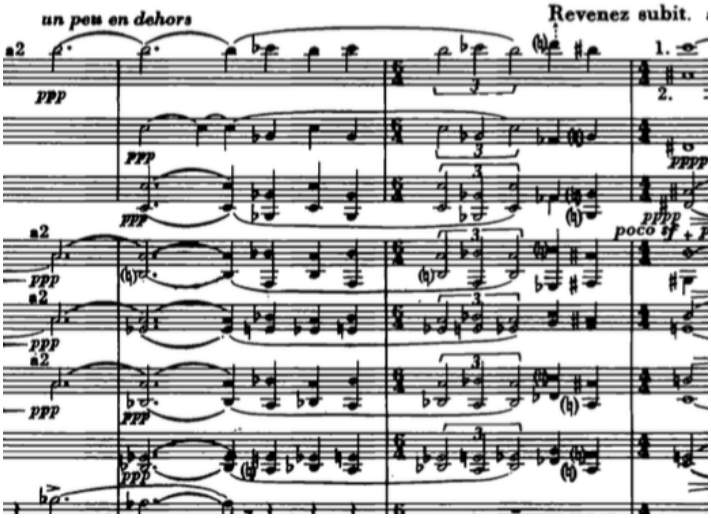

Figure 7: 3rd motive, which is found in horns and bassoons and is used as a transition throughout the piece.

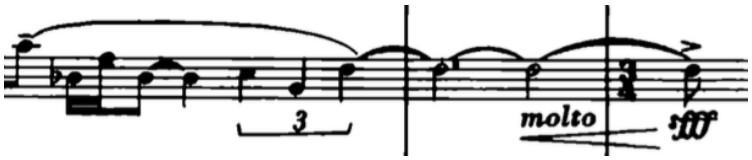

Figure 8: Variation on the opening motive heard in the trumpet.

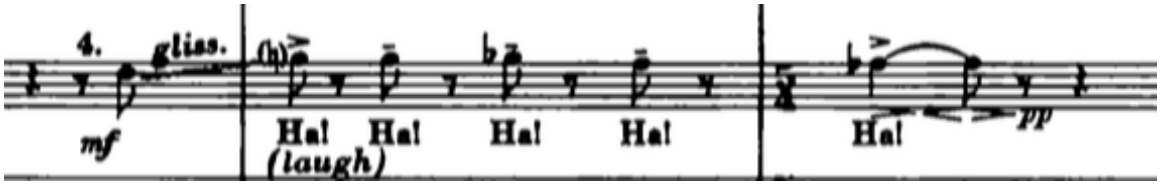

Figure 9: Trombone "laughing" gesture.

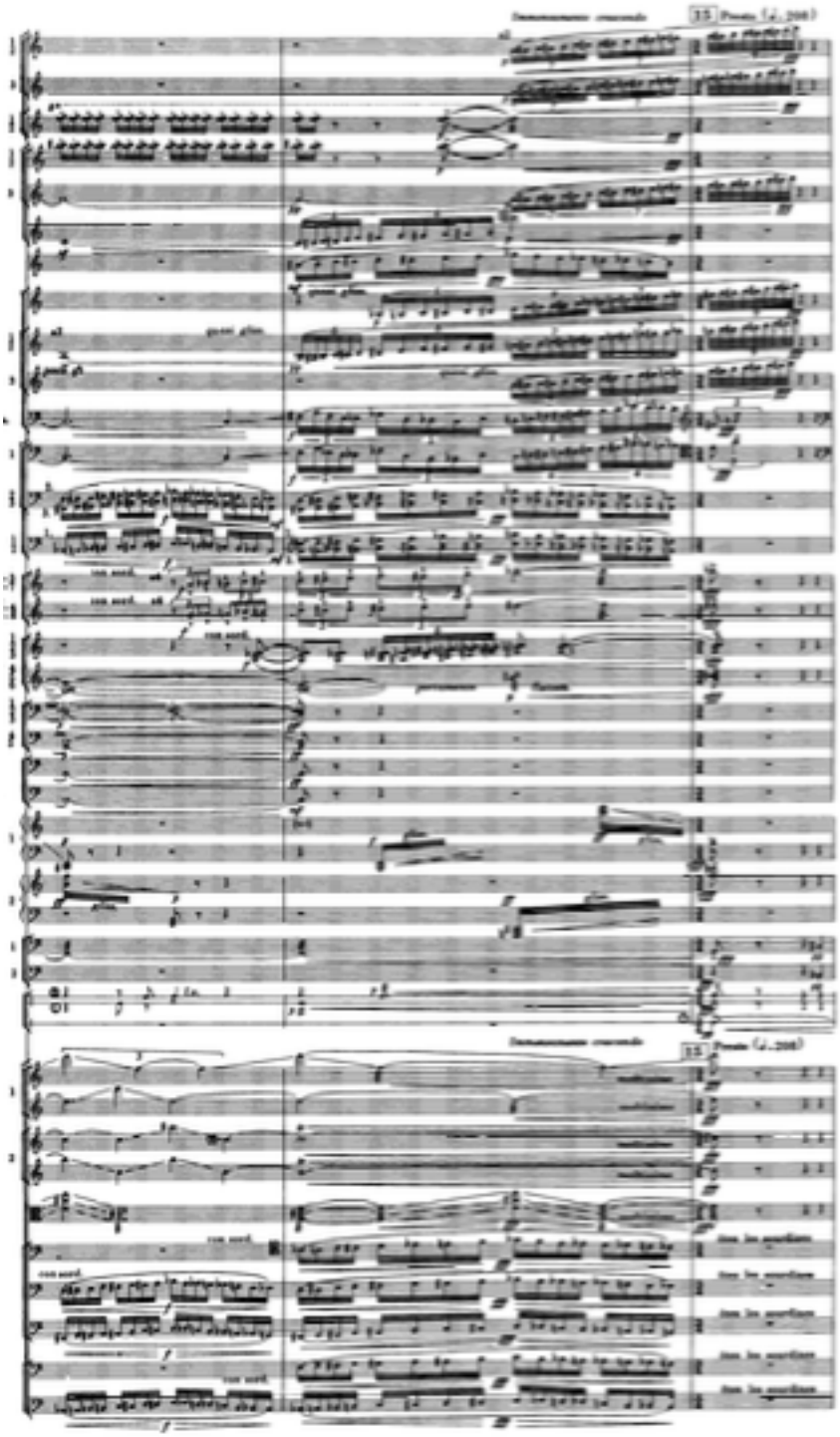

Figure 10: Cluster chords and chromaticism used to create a sound mass leading to rehearsal 15.

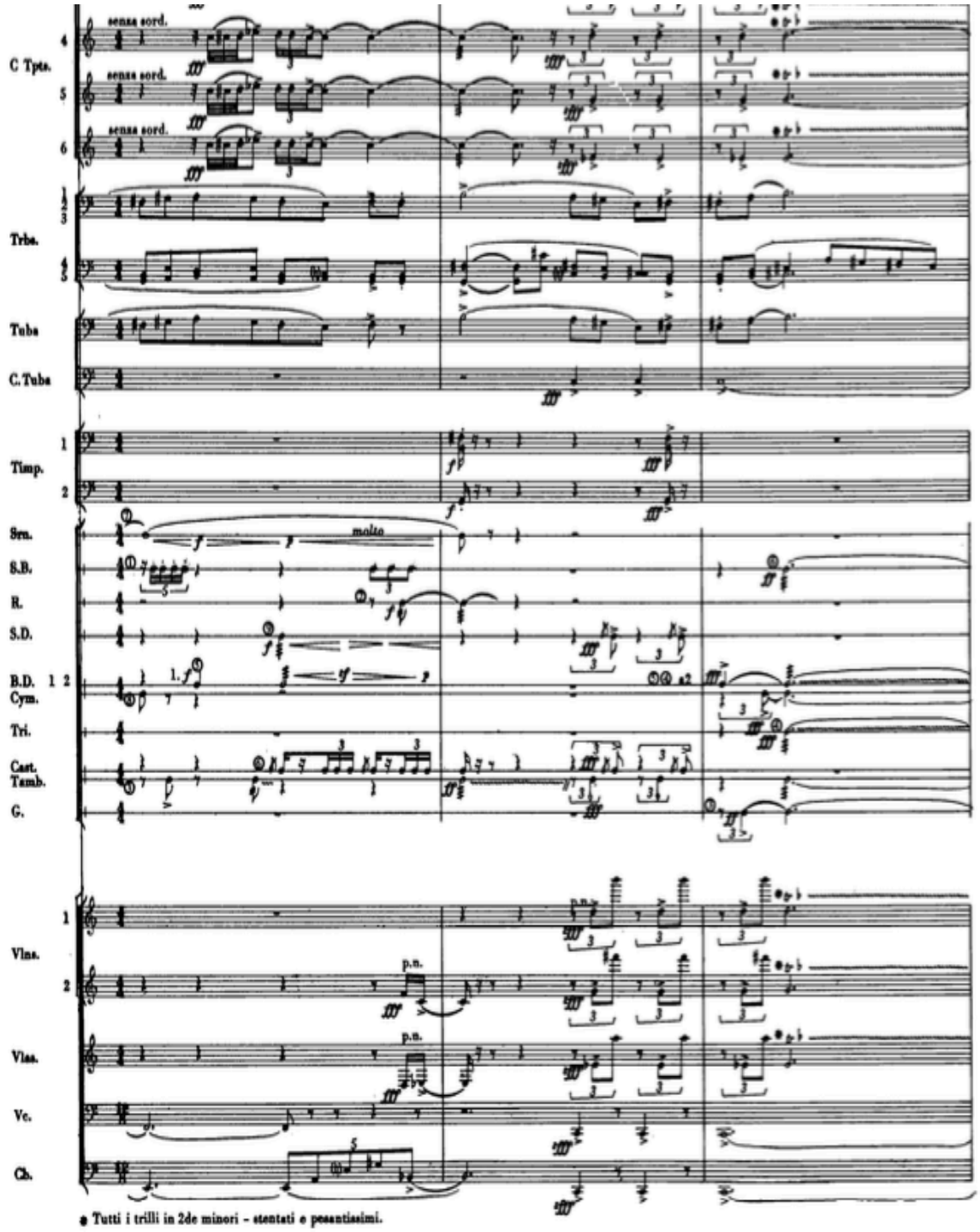

Figure 11: Low brass melody (trombones and tubas) with the rhythmic ostinato in the strings that leads into the final section of the piece. Also shown is the final statement of the 2nd motive, also referred to as the chromatic trumpet fanfare.

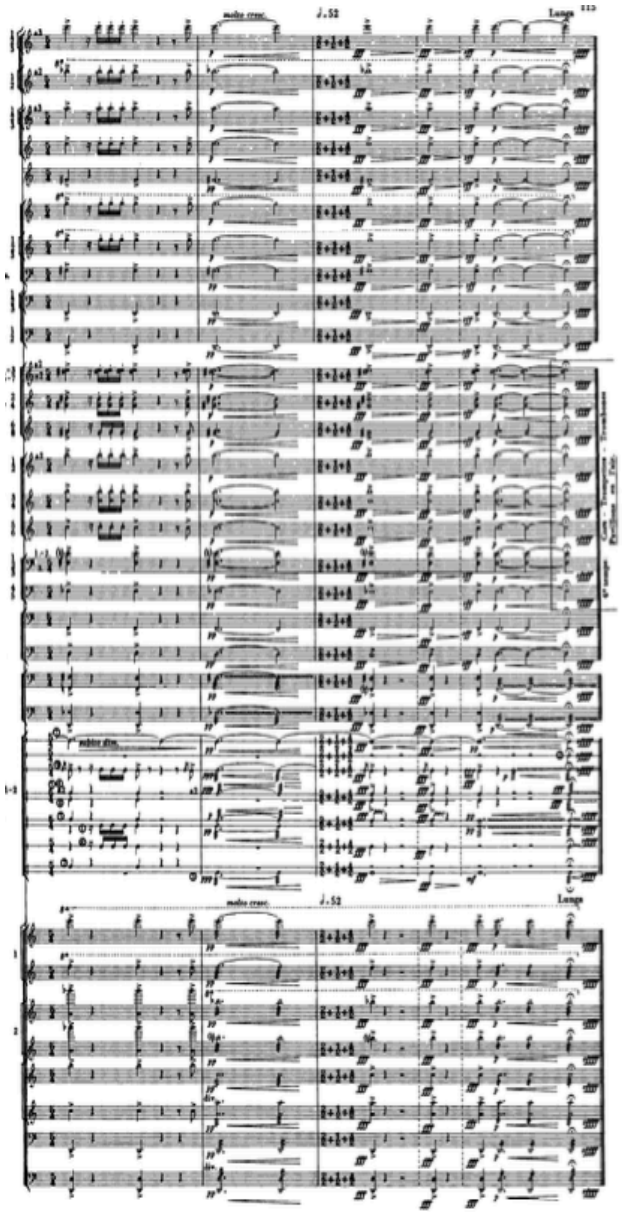

Figure 12: The final measures of the piece. This example showcases the use of sound masses, cluster chords, and the rhythmic ostinato that drives the piece to its end.

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