Negative Catharsis as Rotational Telos in Mahler's First *Kindertotenlied*

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In the first weeks of 1834, scarlet fever robbed the poet Friedrich Rückert of his two youngest children, Ernst and Luisa. In the coming months, he wrote over four hundred "Kindertodtenlieder" as a form of private mourning; they were only made public in 1872, several years after his death.[1] Their appeal for Gustav Mahler, some thirty years later, was not a matter of first-hand experience. In 1901 he was still unmarried and six years shy of losing his own daughter Maria to diphtheria. On the contrary—it was, in all likelihood, the composer's *own* mortality that drew him to these dark texts. Earlier in the year, harried and overworked, a bout of ghastly internal bleeding had felled and nearly killed him.[2] The impact on his art and outlook was profound: that summer's efforts included the Fifth Symphony's funeral march—a stoic valediction to the fairy-tale innocence of his early works—and several of Rückert's more melancholy texts.

The poem that would eventually open his cycle of five *Kindertotenlieder* is built from four couplets, each of which is organized around a basic binary of light and darkness, as shown in Example 1.[3] The first couplet sets the scenario: here, the darkness and light are literally night and day, times of tragedy and aftermath. The second couplet clarifies the deeply *personal* nature of this "misfortune," drawing out the grieving father's alienation from the

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[1] See Russell (1991, 29–39) for a full account of the poem's genesis and early reception.

[2] As Feder argues (2004, 74), this brush with death may also have moved Mahler to procreate, since his feverishly impulsive proposal to Alma Schindler came only a few months later. If this is true, then the same incident that attuned him to Rückert's sorrow would ironically set into motion the events that led to his own paternal grief some years later.

[3] Example 1 shows the poem as Mahler set it—minus textual repetitions but including several minor departures from the original. Schmierer (1991, 211) and Russell (1991, 45) reproduce Rückert's text exactly.

world at large, which is illumined by a sun that cannot warm him. The third couplet, with its curious second-person injunction to "immerse" the night in "eternal light," brings us to the crux: here, the darkness takes on its full symbolic value as the spiritual malaise of the bereaved, and the light shows itself as the chance for salvation. The final couplet, in turn, effects this "immersion" with a shift of both tone and perspective. Once again, the protagonist's grief is set against the all-illuminating sun. But now that pain is made relative through a juxtaposition of scale—the flickering death of a candle flame versus the inexhaustible radiance of divine light—allowing the poem to conclude on a note of acceptance, even optimism.

Example 1. Text and translation of "Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n," as Mahler set it

Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgehn,	☼	Now the sun will rise as brightly
Als sei kein Unglück die Nacht geschehn!	☽	as if no misfortune had come in the night!
Das Unglück geschah nur mir allein!	☽	The misfortune befell me alone!
Die Sonne, sie scheinet allgemein!	☼	The sun, it shines for everyone!
Du mußt nicht die Nacht in dir verschränken,	☽	You must not bury the night inside you;
Mußt sie ins ew'ge Licht versenken!	☼	you must immerse it in eternal light!
Ein Lämplein verlosch in meinem Zelt!	☽	A little light has gone out in my tent!
Heil sei dem Freudenlicht der Welt!	☼	Hail to the joyous light of the world!

Friedrich Rückert (1788–1866)

As Peter Russell notes, such moments of affirmation are rare in Rückert's collection and may well have spurred Mahler's choice to begin his cycle here.[4] And yet critics have long noticed how his

[4] He writes that "In very few poems in all the *Kindertotenlieder* is the affirmation of 'the eternal light' as explicit as it is here; and at no other point is the juxtaposition of personal loss and universal salvation so sharply and succinctly stated as in the final couplet of this poem" (Russell 1991, 45; see also 69). Though Russell also concedes that in these last two couplets, the poet might be heard "not so much

musical setting works to undermine this ostensible uplift, ending on a darker, less conclusive note than the text alone might imply. Indeed, the song is rife with such incongruities and misalignments—some subtle, some less so—and the question of how to interpret them puts us in the midst of a longstanding debate. In the later twentieth century, critics eager to distance Mahler from the Romantic *Lied* tradition insisted that he used his texts only superficially, as quasi-disposable "pretexts for [purely] musical structures" (*Vorwand für musikalischen Bauformen*) rather than as objects of nuanced psychological interpretation.[5] At its most extreme, this odd strain of approbation paints Mahler as a "naïve dilettante," one who chose his texts in fits of opportunistic caprice and then "misused" them with cavalier indifference.[6]

In what follows, I fall in with analysts of the opposite tack, those who find Mahler's Rückert settings to be closely attentive—and intimately responsive—to the psychological and expressive implications of his source texts. From this more traditional perspective, tensions between music and text would open hermeneutic windows rather than slam doors on Mahler's Schubertian lineage.[7] Indeed, my aim in this short study is to show how fine-grained analytical inquiry can give greater depth and substance to a well-worn but still powerful interpretive conceit: the idea that the *Kindertotenlieder* might be heard as musical renderings of their poetic protagonist's inner (i.e., experiential, emotional, contemplative) life. In such a view, developed most famously by Edward T. Cone, the music at large—not just the singer, but the vocal/orchestral totality—can be understood as part of an emergent, synthetic "persona," one in which the poetic and the

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embracing the eternal light as exhorting his suffering soul to believe in it" (1991, 74). Schmierer also draws out ambiguities that stand to darken the poem's final lines (1991, 222).

[5] Mayer (1966, 151).

[6] Ibid., 146, 151. Russell documents the impact of Mayer's claims on later German-language writers such as Hans Eggebrecht and Wolfgang Schreiber (1991, 20–21).

[7] Though embraced by most mainstream critics—in Mahler's century as well as our own—this view was also, notably, held by Adorno (1971), who rebuked Mayer shortly before the end of his life.

sonic merge into single, semantically multivalent presence or agency.[8]

My specific analytical interest will be the interaction of *form* and *gesture*. I begin by examining the song's overall design, showing that its apparent AABA form masks a remarkably sophisticated varied strophic or rotational design. I then examine a number of long-range musical processes—many of them grounded in strophe-to-strophe contour transformations—that allow us to hear the pivotal Strophe 3 as the culmination of an ongoing narrative rather than merely as a contrasting interior. And I close by putting these insights in the service of a more nuanced hearing of the song, one that gives clearer voice to its complex psychomechanics of grief, denial, and hope.

Strophic Structure, Strophic Transformation

Analysts agree that the song's basic framework is some kind of varied strophic design, with Strophes 2 and 4 (mm. 22–40 and 64–84) altering the first only superficially—or so it seems. But opinions have varied on the third and penultimate strophe (mm. 41–63), which veers into seemingly new territory to deliver the song's expressive climax. Understandably, analysts have often emphasized the striking *difference* of this music from what surrounds. Mary Dargie, for instance, calls it a "contrasting middle," while Zoltan Roman reads it as the B section of a large *Reprisenbarform*.[9]

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[8] See Cone (1974, 1994). Throughout Cone's writings, the line between this poetic-musical persona and the real-life composer was routinely—and often problematically—blurred; see Monahan (2013, esp. 354–55). With time, he would also argue that a song's musical persona was inherently and self-consciously *performative* and *poetic* in nature—i.e., that such personae must be understood to be extemporizing *in verse*, in real time (1994, 179). With this, his "persona" shades into some fictional amalgam of a song's two authors, the composer and the poet. Though interesting and occasionally fruitful, such a view can hardly be taken as axiomatic. In the present case, I prefer to imagine both music and poetry as emanating from the consciousness of a more abstract fictional character, one who is neither poet nor composer and who—to revive Cone's celebrated conundrum (1974, 30)—"knows" neither that he is singing nor uttering verse.

[9] Dargie (1981, 302); Roman (1970, 323).

Others have heard Strophe 3 as the "development section" of a song-spanning sonata form. One can certainly see the appeal of this view, since it builds a bridge between Mahler's song and symphonic corpuses and accounts for the unusually strong sense of return in Strophe 4. (On this point, the position of the song as the *first* station of a multimovement structure—precisely where the sonata form would fall in a symphonic design—can hardly be overlooked.) But this interpretation also raises a number of concerns. One is the question of whether it is appropriate to use sonata-form terminology with songs in this corpus at all, even by analogy—especially since, as I have argued elsewhere, "sonata form" seems to have meant something far more concrete to Mahler in these years than just a loose, tonally underdetermined ABA patterning.[10] Another, more pointed concern is that to apply the catch-all category of "development" is to risk recusing oneself from further, more careful inquiry and comparison. And this can lead, in turn, to incautious overstatements like that of Donald Mitchell, who declares that in this so-called "development section" the "established strophic pattern is virtually abandoned."[11]

For the casual listener, Mitchell's comments might well make sense. But on closer inspection, one sees that this apparently new contrasting section does a great deal more than "use…the same material" as the preceding strophes:[12] it transforms those materials in toto. As a number of German-language writers have pointed out, Mahler's setting of couplet three includes *all five* of the song's basic strophe sections (as per Example 2), and in their original order.[13]

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[10] Monahan (2015a); see also Monahan (2011). These studies argue, against received wisdom, that Mahler's pre-1905 sonata forms are vigorously engaged with the *tonal* trajectory of classical sonata form, even when the required tonal resolution is not actually achieved.

[11] Mitchell (1986, 190; cf. 103–8; see also 1999, 218–19). The comments quoted above appear in a discussion of "Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde"—the opening of *Das Lied von der Erde* and another ostensible four-strophe "sonata form" (see n21 below). Mitchell's purpose is to link the later song back to "Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n," its ostensible template and one whose third strophe bears an "almost identical" (i.e., developmental) relationship to the formal whole.

[12] de La Grange (1995, 833).

[13] See Korte (2011), Odefey (1999), and Schmierer (1991, 2005). Odefey recognizes the underlying varied strophic design but also draws a comparison

But their transformation is extensive enough that the correspondence is easily missed. Indeed, so far-reaching are Mahler's alterations here, and so profound is their effect on our perception of the form, that they seem to edge us beyond the boundaries of mere "strophic variation," toward a related technique that is basic to Mahler's symphonic writing: what Hepokoski and Darcy call *rotational form*.

To view a form "rotationally" is to regard its initial presentation of materials as a reference against which all later sections of the work might be assessed—the assumption being that this initial "ordered succession" of materials would be cycled through repeatedly, often with various sorts of modifications or substitutions, for the remainder of the work.[14] And in the most interesting specimens—including the present song—the changes between successive rotations can be heard to progress purposefully toward some larger goal or telos.

The range of rotationally-based forms is broad, and naturally includes such inherently cyclical genres as variation and varied strophic form. But its most remarkable instantiations tend to appear in more ambitious, elastic, and internally diverse genres—especially those that are not self-evidently cyclical, such as large-scale symphonic movements. Mahler's symphonies suggest rotational designs at various levels of scale, from the local (as in the development section of Symphony no. 4/I) to the global (as in the opening movements of Symphonies nos. 3 and 6).[15] But few pieces stand to demonstrate Mahler's rotational ingenuity more concisely than this first *Kindertotenlied*, where presentational order is the one constant that links the otherwise wayward Strophe 3 to its siblings. So let us first look closely at the components of the first strophe

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between the resulting structure and sonata form (1999, 233); Schmierer, by contrast, suggests that sonata-form terminology—especially that of "development"—may be inappropriate (2005, 254).

[14] Hepokoski and Darcy (2006, 611).

[15] See Monahan (2015a), Chapters 4–6. My own pursuit of rotational designs in Mahler's music follows on the heels of Warren Darcy's pathbreaking work on Bruckner (1997) and Mahler (2001), as well as Hepokoski's own unpublished Mahler analyses.

and then examine their material and form-functional transformation in the third.

As Example 2 shows, Mahler's opening strophe (mm. 1–21) falls into five parts: two vocal sections, each devoted to a single line of Rückert's text, are divided by a brief interlude and framed by introductory and concluding music for orchestra alone.[16] The introduction, a spare two-part counterpoint for winds, establishes the song's overall mood—one in which, as Julian Johnson writes, "the emptiness of bereavement borders on the catatonic"[17]—while also establishing a suggestive link with the nineteenth-century *Lied* tradition.

Example 2. The five basic sections of "Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n," Strophe 1

Strophe 1.1	Instrumental	Introduction	mm. 1–4
Strophe 1.2	**Vocal**	**Rückert's Line 1**	**mm. 5–8**
Strophe 1.3	Instrumental	Interlude	mm. 9–10
Strophe 1.4	**Vocal**	**Rückert's Line 2**	**mm. 11–15**
Strophe 1.5	Instrumental	*Nachspiel*	mm. 16–21

During the summer of the present song's composition (1901), Mahler had been particularly taken with Schumann's *Lieder*, rhapsodizing to Natalie Bauer-Lechner that:

> Schumann is one of the greatest composers of songs, to be mentioned in the same breath with Schubert. Nobody has mastered the perfected, self-contained form of the *Lied* as he did….[A] profound melancholy pervade[s] his songs, of which the dearest to me are precisely the less well-known ones, which aren't forever being sung, as are those of the *Frauen-Liebe und -Leben* cycle.[18]

And as it happens, these opening bars echo one of Schumann's most melancholic essays in the genre, the grim "Zwielicht" from

[16] For reference, the Appendix to this article features a complete, annotated vocal score of the song.

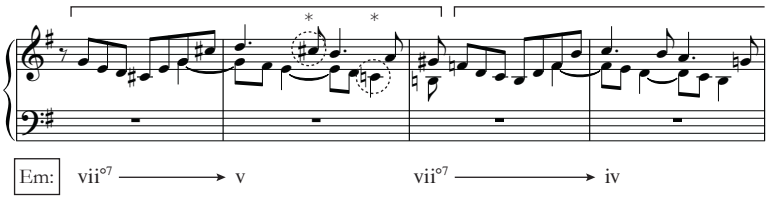
[17] Johnson (2009, 72).

[18] Bauer-Lechner (1980, 169).

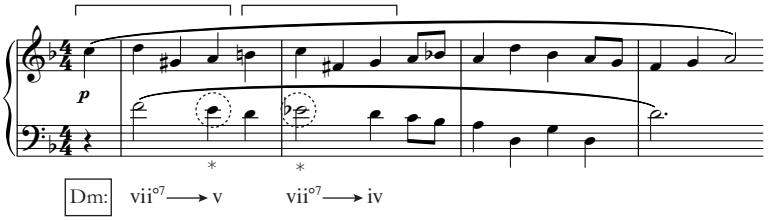
the op. 39 *Liederkreis*. Example 3 compares the two songs' introductions, showing not just superficial similarities (the naked two-part counterpoint, the descending sequence, the jagged chromatic-semitonal relations, marked with asterisks [*]), but a deeper harmonic correspondence as well, their striking successive tonicizations of the minor dominant and subdominant.

Example 3. Comparison of instrumental introductions: Schumann's "Zwieliecht" and Mahler's first Kindertotenlied

*a) Schumann, "Zwielicht" (*Liederkreis *op. 39 no. 10*), mm. 1–4



b) Mahler, "Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n," mm. 1–4



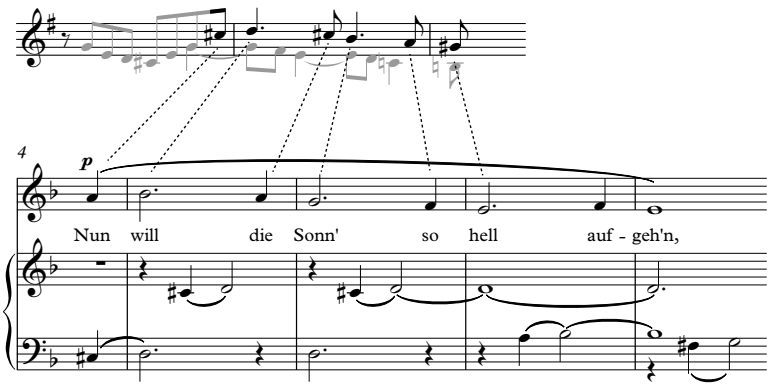
It is not by chance that this, of all Schumann's Eichendorff songs, would be the one to creep into Mahler's setting. Its scene is similar—daylight's somber threshold—and it, too, views darkness as a threat ("much is lost in the nighttime…beware") while brooding over the vulnerability of our most precious charges ("if you love one roe above all others, do not let it graze alone…hunters roam the forest"). [19] And yet the narrators'

[19] "Manches bleibt in Nacht verloren—Hüte dich…" (lines 15–16); "Hast ein Reh du lieb vor andern, Laß es nicht alleine grasen, Jäger ziehn im Wald…" (lines 5–7). David Ferris notes that night is most often "a time of peaceful solitude" and clarity in Schumann's Op. 39 songs and surmises that here it is the *twilight* in

opposing positions on the day/night cycle—the one enfolded in dusk, the other facing down the dawn—are clearly palpable in the musical settings. Where Schumann's introduction churns portentously, anticipating future ills, Mahler's moves with anhedonic evenness, stricken by a nocturnal loss already past. Where Schumann's counterpoint obscures its grounding harmonies in a crepuscular haze of dissonant suspensions (mm. 2, 4), Mahler's lines unfold a series of crisply sunlit consonances—albeit one whose careless lapse into parallel octaves (B♭–A, mm. 2–3) betrays a certain insomniac exhaustion.

Remarkably, "Zwielicht" reverberates into Mahler's second strophe-section as well. Example 4 shows the singer's entrance, Strophe 1.2, set against an accompaniment of bare semitones.

Example 4. Strophe 1.2 (vocal entrance), showing similarity to Schumann's "Zwielicht"



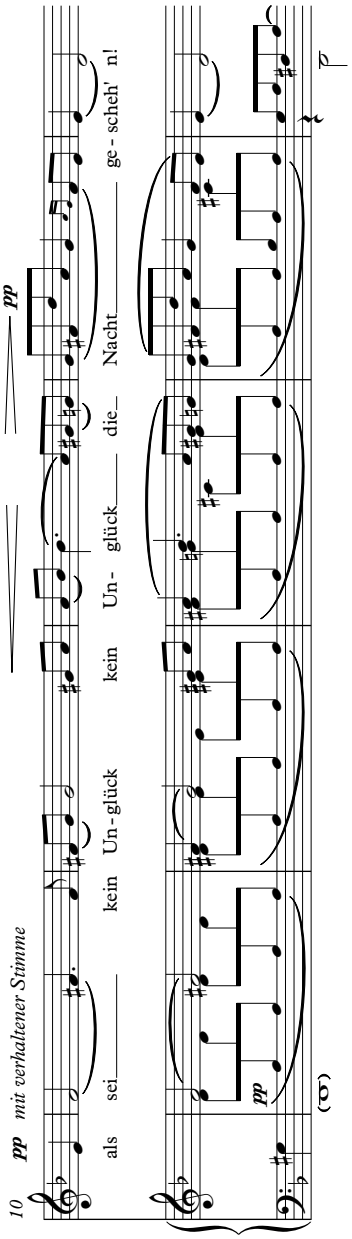
particular that is meant to be so menacing. For it is, by contrast, "a time of confusion and terror, when we are easily deceived" (2005, 139).

The staff above shows that this descending lament is an exact augmentation of Schumann's second bar. Repeated in diminution by the oboe (mm. 9–10), this lament-tune also forms the basis of the interlude (Strophe 1.3), which prepares a decisive shift in tone and timbre. For in Strophe 1.4 (mm. 11; see Example 5), Mahler disbands the spartan wind choir to make way for a lush string/harp *Wiegenlied* that carries the music into the parallel major, with a rough retrograde of the lament tune and an ornate descent into its final cadence (mm. 14–15). And the strophe ends with a brief *Nachspiel* (Strophe 1.5) in which the luminous tonic major fades back into minor (mm. 16–21; see Example 9 below).

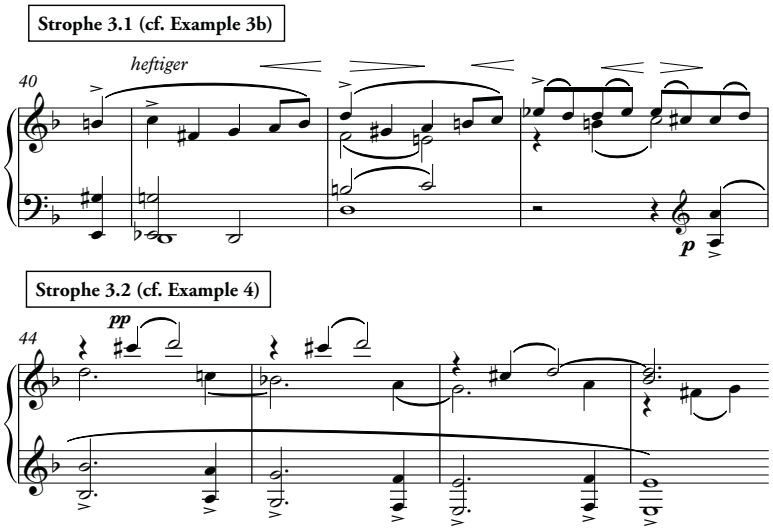
Mahler's second strophe cycles through each of these five sections, but with some telling changes to be examined later. For now, let us look at how the much-discussed *third* strophe transforms this basic schema, both in terms of its structure and its formal functions. As Example 6 shows, Strophe 3.1 is not just briefer and harmonically denser than its Strophe-1 counterpart (cf. Example 3); it also (crucially, as we'll see) sequences *upward* rather than downward, through a simple reordering of its one-bar melodic units. And now it elides into an orchestral statement of what was once the vocal entrance, harmonized in thirds with the former tenor line floating high above (Strophe 3.2; see Example 6). Lacking any functional bass—and thus the strong tonic articulation of Strophe 1.2 (cf. Example 4)—and emerging sequentially from the end of the previous section (Strophe 3.1), this formerly initiatory passage now seems merely to extend the strophe's introduction.

Curiously, this sense of postponement continues even *after* the voice enters in Strophe 3.3 (mm. 48–51). Now the tables turn: the formerly orchestral interlude has been "vocalized," the singer shadowing the solo oboe in mirror-image counterpoint. And yet the sustained vacuum in the bass register, along with the tense prolongation of $ii^{\circ 7}$, continues to generate a sense of expectancy, the impression of a process still waiting to get underway. It is only in Strophe 3.4 (m. 52; see Example 12 below), with its arpeggio-enriched texture and powerful tonic downbeat, that Mahler finally grants us a strong sense of initiation. From here, the transformations become more extreme. Strophe 3.4 preserves the contour, chromatic

Example 5. Strophe 1.4 (mm. 11–15)



Example 6. Strophes 3.1–3.2 (mm. 41–47)



ascent, and opening rhythm of 1.4—and here too, the voice moves only by step until the cadence. But after the opening tonic (the first since the beginning of Strophe 3), the harmony is thoroughly changed. And though the tonic is inflected briefly to major, as before (m. 53), it gradually corrodes into an eerily bleak D *phrygian*, where it cadences (m. 59). Like the music that precedes, Strophe 3.5 (mm. 59–63; see Example 11 below) also stands more firmly on its own than its Strophe-1 counterpart. It, too, begins with a strong tonic downbeat (rather than V, as in Strophe 1.5), and its restless, pointilistically scored texture dwells almost exclusively on a single motive, the florid "Nacht" melisma that closed Strophe 1.4. The effect is less of an elegiac *Nachspiel*, per se, than that of a developmental interlude, one that divides the piece at the highest level of form.

In this sense, Strophe 3.5—the expressive climax of the entire piece—actually has very *little* in common with the close of Strophe 1. Rather, it vastly elaborates a portion of the *second Nachspiel*, Strophe 2.5 (shown in Example 10 below), where Mahler first introduces the chromatically corrupted "Nacht" motives that cluster ominously here (mm. 60, 62), its roiling eighth-note rhythms

spilling over into the Strophe-4 introduction (mm. 64–67), which is repurposed into a kind of retransition.[20]

It is worth noting that this degree of strophic transformation is without parallel in Mahler's early and middle-period songs. Rather, Mahler broaches here a formal problem he would confront more fully only in his late works: how to preserve strophic continuity while shaping the rhetorical surface with broader strokes, creating *trans*strophic contrasts and teleologies. In other words, the present song finds Mahler asking how to produce a cyclical form that doesn't just string together closed units, but rather gives the impression of a larger, top-down structure. In this regard, it is but a trial run for the dizzyingly complex opening movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*, whose four rotations have also inspired a number of "sonata-form" interpretations.[21]

As mentioned above, I am not the first to notice Mahler's preservation of the basic strophe-design in this contrasting section. However, I seek to go much farther than past analysts in teasing out a distinct *purpose* behind these transformations. In this, I hope to make good on Adorno's suggestion that such cyclical teleologies are in fact a cornerstone of Mahler's art. Adorno heard a kind of "varied strophic" design underlying much of Mahler's symphonic music, as a large-scale instantiations of what he termed the composer's "variant" technique.[22] And he believed that these

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[20] Note that I am perfectly happy to use sonata-form vocabulary to describe, via analogy, certain isolated features of the song. My objection, noted above, is to analysts forcing the analogy by applying sonata-form terms to parts of that do *not* warrant such comparisons—as when they refer to the nonmodulating first strophe as an "exposition." (On this point, I do not find Mitchell's argument convincing that the tonic/dominant dualism in this "sonata form" has been replaced by the D-minor/major *modal* dualism [1999, 218–19].)

[21] See Floros (1993, 249–50); Hefling (2000, 82–83), de La Grange (2008, 1328–29), Mitchell (1986, 444), Odefey (1999, 233n29), and Schmierer (1991, 213)—though critics variously emphasize its "strophic" character as well. The song's rotations begin in mm. 1, 90, 203, and 329. Remarkably, its third ("developmental") rotation can be understood *either* (1) as a very loose structural variant on the model strophe, one that dwells extensively on the strophe's opening and closing materials; or (2) as a birotational contrasting interior comprising an orchestral interlude (203–60) and a rotationally equivalent vocal section (261–328)—each of these being themselves divisible into two subrotations.

[22] See Monahan (2015a, Chapter 2).

transformations were governed by a "certain organic teleology which can be studied down to the very last interval." In such a conception, "[n]othing is unaffected by succession. What happens must always take specific account of what happened before."[23]

These are bold words, to be sure. But they are also a beacon for those who wish to penetrate this music in greater depth. In the next section, I will offer a more specifically teleological view of mm. 1-63, by examining the rather subtler changes between the first two strophes, to ask how these are predictive of what happens in the third. In other words, I shall aim to hear Strophe 3 not just as departure or contrast but as the climax or culmination of an ongoing process.

Contour and Rotational Teleology

For me, the most compelling teleological view of this song is one focused on *contour*. On this point, we should note from the outset that Mahler's textures seem designed to bring contour to the foreground. Most of the song is built from simple, directed stepwise motions over pedal points—often harmonized at the third or sixth, as we saw in Strophe 1.4 (Example 5 above). And in Example 7, which summarizes all such instances, we see that several melodies first heard as solo lines are later harmonized in parallel motion over pedals: compare Strophe 3.2 (m. 44) to the original vocal entrance (m. 5), or Strophe 4.1 (m. 64) to the opening oboe melody. As a result of this tendency toward textural simplicity, rising and falling motions—and more importantly the *opposition* of such motions—take on greater importance in this song than in most, including the others in the cycle. So let us look now at how these directed motions change as the song progresses.

[23] Adorno (1998b, 95; 1992, 52).

Example 7. Pedal points and notable instances of directed stepwise motion (harmonized or not) in "Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n"

	x.1	*x*.2	*x*.3	*x*.4	*x*.5	
Strophe 1		PEDAL D3 stepwise *no parallels*	stepwise *no parallels*	PEDAL A3 **parallel 3rds** (mm. 11–13)	PEDAL A2 **parallel 6ths** (m. 17)	PEDAL A2 **parallel 3rds** (m. 19)
Strophe 2		PEDAL D3* stepwise *no parallels*	stepwise *no parallels*	PEDAL A3 **parallel 3rds** (mm. 32–34)	PEDAL D2 **embellished parallel 6ths** (mm. 37–40)	
Strophe 3	PEDAL D2	PEDAL D6 **parallel 3rds** (mm. 44–46)	stepwise *no parallels*	PEDAL D2 (mm. 52–56)	PEDAL D2 parallel 6ths implied in compound melody	
Strophe 4	PEDAL D4 **parallel 6ths** (mm. 64–65)	PEDAL D3* stepwise *no parallels*	PEDAL D4 stepwise *no parallels*	PEDAL A3 **parallel 3rds** (mm. 71–72)	PEDAL A2 **parallel 6ths** (m. 79)	PEDAL A2 **parallel 3rds** (m. 81)

Example 8 offers an aerial view on what I hear as the most salient contour characteristics in each of the song's twenty strophe-sections. And as the top row shows, the opening strophe begins with a series of descents that eventually gives way a rising impulse. The introductory sequence falls conspicuously, as do the melodies of sections 1.2 and 1.3. But the second couplet reverses course at the shift into major (cf. Example 5). As Matthew L. Baileyshea notes, the *Nachspiel* that follows (m. 16) echoes that long-range ascent twice, though each time with less energy: the first beginning with the solo horn leap and the second (m. 19) at the final cadential dominant, with all voices ascending into tonic.[24] I show these ascents in Example 9; annotations beneath the staff reveal both gestures to be built around parallel stepwise thirds or (enharmonic) sixths over pedal points.[25]

[24] Baileyshea (2012).

[25] Clearly, the reduction in Example 9 (especially mm. 16–17) would be hideously ill-formed by any Schenkerian standard. But its aim is not to reconcile Mahler's passage to a more conventional voice-leading structure. (It is beholden more to the meter than to a harmonic hierarchy, and often doesn't distinguish between chord- and nonchord tones.) Its purpose is to tease out certain *sonorities*—namely,

Example 8. Summary of contour impulses in "Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n"

	x.1	*x*.2	*x*.3	*x*.4	*x*.5
Strophe 1	Descent sequential	Descent	Descent	Ascent w/cadential descent	2 Ascents w/dividing plummets
Strophe 2	Descent (attenuated)	Descent	Ascent (mild, sequential)	Ascent w/cadential descent	Descent
Strophe 3	Ascent sequential	Ascent registral	Ascent melody inverted	Ascent / Descent	Descent
Strophe 4	Descent sequential	Descent	Descent	Ascent w/cadential descent	2 Ascents w/dividing plummets

In Strophe 2, the vocal sections remain more or less the same. But the directional qualities of the instrumental units begin to change, and in ways that directly anticipate the events of Strophe 3. So now let us look *vertically* through the grid in Example 8, downward from Strophes 1.1, 1.3, and 1.5 respectively. Mahler begins Strophe 2.1 (m. 22) by trimming the opening sequential unit from his introduction, strongly attenuating its descending character and giving more contextual emphasis to the apex-notes C5 (m. 23) and D5 (m. 24). In this, it looks ahead to the explicitly ascending sequence that we saw introducing Strophe 3 (Example 6 above). And the interlude, Strophe 2.3 (m. 28), now contains an internal repetition (m. 30) that finds its still-descending line reaching higher

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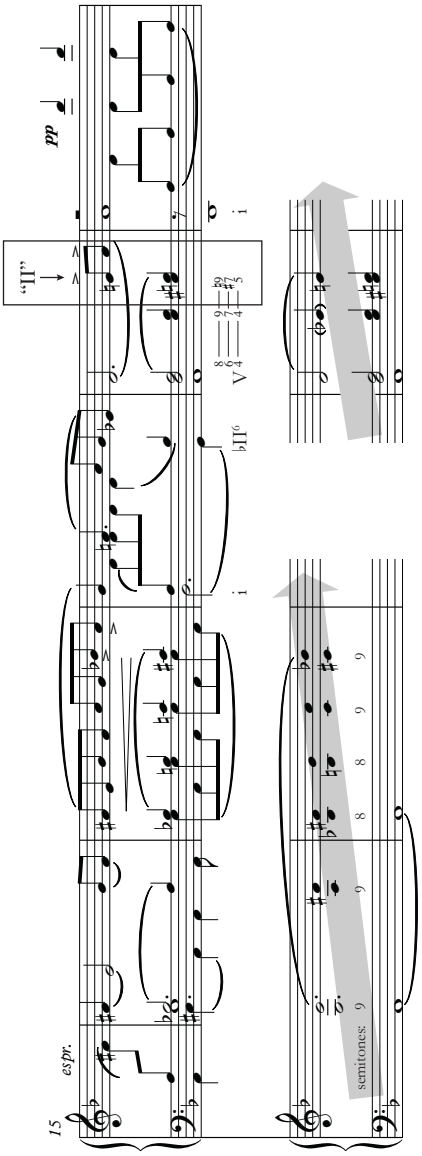
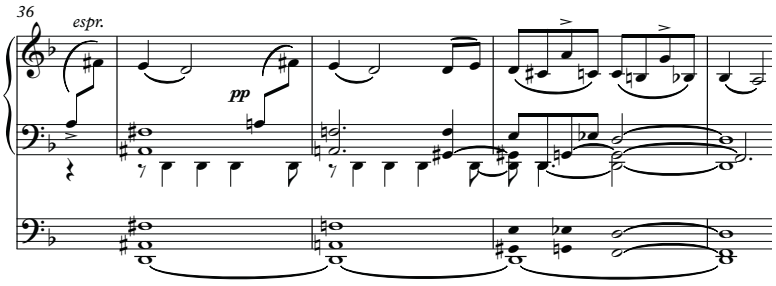
vertical enharmonic sixths—and to link them linearly, for comparison with other, less abstract instances of the same voice-leading pattern in the song.

*Example 9. Strophe 1.5 (*Nachspiel *1), showing harmonized linear ascents toward tonic*



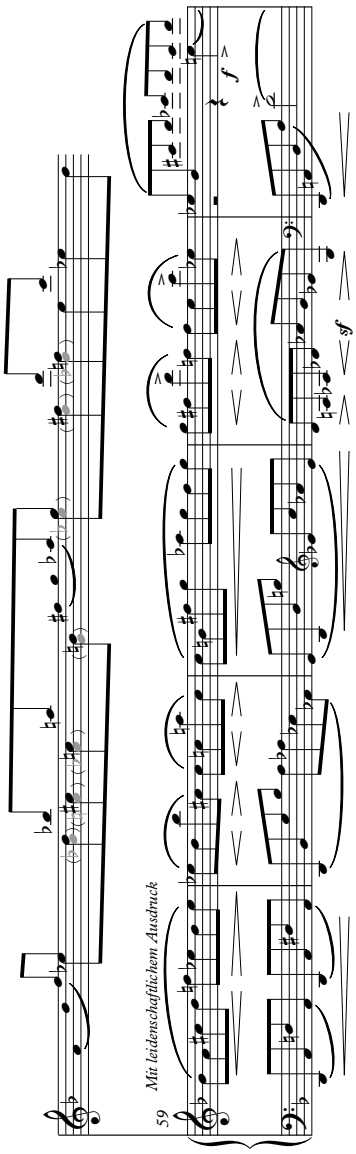
in pitch space than previously (C5 vs. B♭4). Though the change is notionally superficial, the effect is powerful—for it suffuses the otherwise inert line with a new upward-directed yearning, a palpabledesire to stretch beyond its former limits. With this subtle inflection, Strophe 2 paves the way for the Strophe 3 variant (m. 48), whose inverted melody pushes *explicitly* upward, also with repetition.

*Example 10. Strophe 2.5 (*Nachspiel *2), showing underlying parallel-sixth descent*



The most extensive and interesting change in the second strophe comes with its *Nachspiel*, however (Strophe 2.5; compare the music in Example 10 with *Nachspiel* 1 in Example 9). Notice first that the opening horn call—which used to conclude on E—now descends gloomily to tonic (m. 37). And the line it sets into motion trails chromatically downward, through several distorted iterations of the "Nacht" motive from Strophe 1 (m. 39; cf. m.14). As in the first *Nachspiel*, these directional gestures are reinforced by parallels over a pedal point—only here, of course, the sixths *descend* rather than rise. This is a crucial moment on the road to Strophe 3. Because while it clearly echoes aspects of the first *Nachspiel*—especially in its plaintive horn call—its descending voice leading and distorted "Nacht" motives point *forward*, to the climatic *Nachspiel* 3, where the same motives (mm. 60, 62) are borne along a series of overlapping chromatic cascades. Example 11 teases out

*Example 11. Strophe 3.5 (*Nachspiel *3), showing overlapping chromatic descents*



some of these descending lines, using gray notes to show where the bass voice implies parallel thirds with the lower strand.[26]With the contour transformations of the odd-numbered strophe units fully traced, let us now examine what happens in the even-numbered sections, asking how the vocal portions of Strophes 1 and 2 (1.2/1.4 and the near-identical 2.2/2.4) relate to their Strophe-3 correlates. In each case, we find some degree of directional reversal. The first is a descent that becomes a kind of ascent. Above, I noted that Strophe 3.2 (m. 44; see Example 6) is an orchestral setting of the opening lament melody (Strophes 1.2/2.2). Though the tune itself still tends downward in Strophe 3, the entire texture—shorn of its bass line—is shifted *upward* into a brilliant new register. In this sense, the passage manifests the quality of "ascent," but more abstractly, and in a manner curiously opposed to what one hears in Strophe 2.3 (m. 28–31; discussed above): where the latter realized its ascending impulse as pure potentiality—as an as-yet unfulfilled striving to creep higher (which would be fulfilled in Strophe 3.3)—Strophe 3.2 is suffused with the sense of an "ascent" already accomplished, a sense of elevation or buoyancy for its having been shifted from its original register and even, perhaps, stripped of its dolorous texts.[27]

And if we find some appeal in the idea that a downward-tending melody could nevertheless vibrate with disembodied weightlessness, a quality of *having ascended*, then we might wish to

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[26] Once again, the analytical beams in Example 11 are not meant to show prolongational spans and do not give chordal status—to the extent that one can even determine such a thing—special priority. Schmierer (1991, 217) hears Strophe 3.5 *continuing* the rising tendencies of the preceding sections, in that mm. 62–63 transpose the preceding two bars upward by third. I prefer this transposition as evidence of an ultimately unsuccessful *resistance* to the prevailingly downward-tending voice-leading.

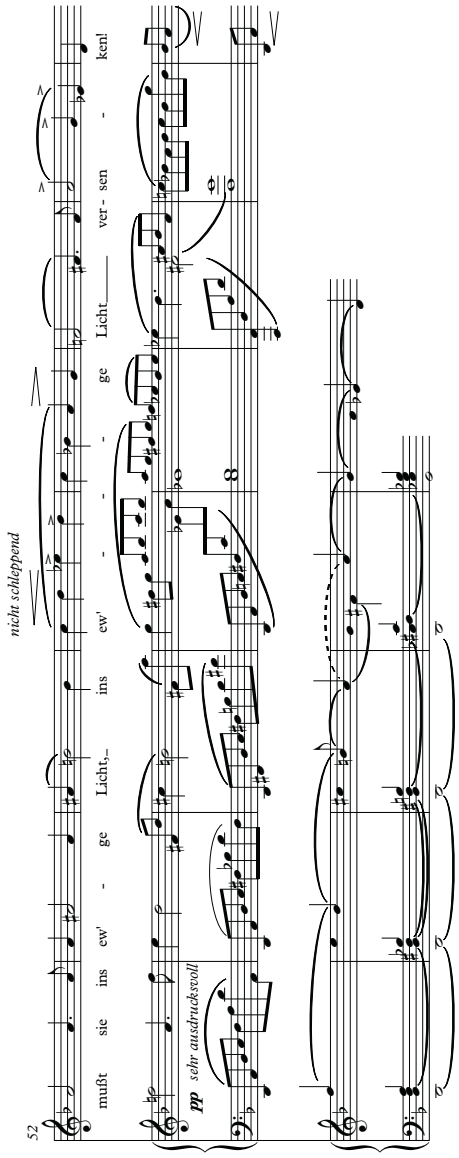
[27] As long as I'm allowing "elevation" to shade from a registral meaning to an expressive one, it is worth noting that the placement of the original lament tune in the lowest voice (alto/tenor, m. 44), harmonized in thirds, allows the downbeat B♭—formerly an upper-neighbor embellishment within a clear D-minor triad—to assume the qualities of a chord root. Thus there might be a fleeting impression that Strophe 3.2, unlike its rotational correlates, is in *the major mode*, or at least "on" the major submediant of D minor—a striking feature in a song whose sectional onsets are all hued darkly by minor or diminished/half-diminished harmonies.

hear comparable—though opposite—tensions in Strophe 3.4 (see Example 12). On the one hand, this climactic passage rises and then falls, like its earlier rotational correlates (Strophes 1.4/2.4; cf. Example 9). Indeed, its arc seems to be far more balanced now, in that the decent is not merely a cadential figure, but an excruciatingly drawn-out decline through a minor ninth (mm. 55–59). (This accounts for the excerpt's singular rendering with *two* directed arrows in Example 8.) On the other hand, this rising impulse is subtly undermined from its second bar onward. As the voice ascends, the harmonies implied by the harp's arpeggios follow suit: the bass staff below Example 12 shows that the most efficient rendering has all voices upshifting by semitone, one or two at a time. But the treble staff just above highlights a powerful counterimpulse in the violins. Despite its surge of upward-directed energy at the moment of the singer's climactic melisma (on "ew'ge"), the underlying voice leading continues the pitch-space decline initiated in mm. 52–53, when the violins spin a quasi-sequential line from the second *Nachspiel*'s horn call (cf. Example 10). So the actual contour impulses here are more complex, since the singer's initial ascent must compete with a descant that inclines inexorably, if sometimes abstractly, downward.

Let us step back now to see the broader pattern at hand. Scanning the first three rows of Example 8, one sees that with each new strophe, the ascending impulse begins earlier—such that by the time we've arrived at Strophe 3, the directional tendency of Strophe 1 has been *completely reversed*. In other words, while the song's opening tends downward then reverses course, the climactic strophe begins with several effortful ascents, only to culminate in a series of marked declines. And because Strophe 4 is a near-exact reprise of Strophe 1, these contour transformations are more or less entirely undone as soon as they are accomplished.

Though compelling in their own right, these contour processes interest me mainly for their interpretive potential. In the next and last section, I offer a more comprehensive reading of the song, one that hears Mahler undertaking a kind of psychological excavation of the grieving *Lied*-subject, and which ultimately forecloses entirely on Rückert's promise for salvation. Central to this reading is the idea that, within a persona-centered reading such as mine,

Example 12. Strophe 3.4, showing conflicted directional impulses in harmony and orchestral melody (mm. 52–55)



contour gestalts like those teased out above might serve as psychodramatic signifiers, with pitch-space ascents signaling arousal, exertion, or expectancy and descents connoting lethargy, dread, or despair. This is a simple, even simplistic idea, to be sure. But it is fundamental to nineteenth-century opera and theatrical genres, and one that critics have often brought to bear on the present song.[28] In what follows, it will allow us to hear Mahler's music doing more than just setting the *mood* for this somber poem. Instead, we shall view the song as a window onto the musical persona's evolving inner state, which may or may not correspond to the text we hear him reciting.

Grief, Denial, and Negative Catharsis

Mahler's setting of Strophe 1 presents us with a striking modal/directional paradox: while the singer hails the rising sun, his vocal line descends darkly (mm. 5–8)—only to rise again, warming into D *major*, at the revelation of his nocturnal anguish (mm. 11–15). Under some modernist regimes, such a "rough juxtaposition" (*harten Nebeneinander*) of music and text might be taken as evidence that Mahler "no longer thought in terms of accommodating himself to the flow of a poem as its comprehending, interpreting servant."[29] As mentioned above, I find this line of argument deeply unconvincing, whether it is meant as a compliment or not. For it rules out rather prematurely the chance that Mahler, the master ironist, may be up to something subtler here than just ignoring the implications of Rückert's text.

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[28] Many writers have, e.g., heard the opening vocal lament as an expression of morbid lethargy, thanks to its slow tempo and declining contour, which follows from a single effortful semitone ascent (see Dargie [1981, 302–3] or Russell [1991, 69]). In another essay (Monahan [2015b]), I explore the use of contour gestalts as psychodramatic signifiers in depth, with regard to voice-leading (in both pitch- and pitch-class space) in Wagner's late style.

[29] Mayer (1966, 150–51). ("Schon hier dachte Mahler nicht mehr daran, dienend dem Ablauf eines Gedichtes sich—verstehend und deutend—anzupassen.") The quoted comments refer to Mahler's style at large, not this song or passage in particular.

For me, this pointed rift between music and text brilliantly reveals the stricken father's own detachment from reality and even from the words he speaks. His gaze may fall on the rising sun, but his vocal lament makes clear how grievously loss has chilled his soul. He cannot be warmed from without. But he *can* be from within, which is precisely what happens in the strophe's second half (m. 11), as fact yields to fantasy and the tonic minor blooms into major. Hanging every hope on the hypothetical "als sei"—"*as if* no misfortune had befallen in the night"—the musical persona rouses his line into a tender ascent (m. 11), the gently rocking accompaniment seeming to breathe life itself back into the empty cradle. And yet its climax embroiders the word "Nacht"—the very symbol of his misery—with such incongruous fondness as to suggest not acceptance but rather a *repression* of harsh reality (mm. 14–15). In the *Nachspiel* that follows, however, fantasy falters and the cold light of empty dawn returns. Twice the music stirs, seized by an ever-weakening impulse to draw itself erect (mm. 17, 19). But after the first ascent collapses into a tonic-minor six-four (m. 19), the best it can achieve is an exhausted climb by third to F, at the imperfect cadence where the strophe comes to rest (m. 20).

We know already that Strophe 2 reuses the falling and rising vocal units of Strophe 1. But now—critically—they go *with* the grain of Rückert's text, suggesting a more sober outlook and a more frank recognition of the inalterable. This time, the protagonist's "Unglück" is coupled directly to the lament-phrase (m. 25), while the major mode consequent (m. 32) turns outward, offering bittersweet tribute to the sun that shines "on everything" ("die Sonne, sie scheinet allgemein!"). This D-major cadence (m. 36) is spurred not by fantasy, but rather by sympathy with those more fortunate—and even perhaps with unfeeling nature itself. But by comparing himself to those less wretched, the narrator is clearly drawn into a crisis. For while the first *Nachspiel* (m. 16) could still hold its head high, the second (m. 38) yields entirely to wrenching grief, with the once-mellifluous "Nacht" motive showing its true colors now as a sinister chromatic aberration (m. 39).

The new directional profile of Strophe 3—its commencement with several linear and registral *ascents*—suggests a marshaling of resolve at the approach to the denouement. After the rising

inaugural sequence (mm. 41–43) establishes a new primary register, far removed from the murk of the second *Nachspiel*, the original lament issues forth, but transformed (m. 44). Accepting the lament tune—like the tragedy it symbolizes—as inalterable, the music nevertheless seeks to cast off its morbid burden: first through registral elevation and a brief harmonic tilt toward the major submediant (Strophe 3.2; see above); and then, at the declaration that "you must not enfold the night within you," with a simple but epiphanous contrapuntal inversion, one that suffuses the line with a new, unforeseen optimism (Strophe 3.3, m. 48).

All the same, Mahler's reconfigured formal functions make clear that the *next* line is the decisive moment—Rückert's paradoxical imperative to "plunge" the night in "eternal light" (Strophe 3.4, m. 52). As the violins revive the *Nachspiel*'s hopeful horn call, the singer pushes resolutely upward, inching ever closer to the "eternal light" and its promised salvation. But then it all unravels: at the approach to "versenken," the vocal line literally plunges downward through a minor ninth, its decent broken only by an anemic deflection of F to F♯ at the last sounding of "Licht." The extraordinary terminus that follows—a kind of "phrygian authentic cadence" whose dominant is actually a *half-diminished* chord—makes clear the depth of the crisis.[30] The moment of affirmation has slipped away: rather than submerging the darkness in light, the music unleashes the darkness itself, as if to purge the menacing "Nacht" motives, which pour forth here in demonic torrents (mm. 60, 62).[31]

But to fully grasp the tragic depth of Mahler's climax, we need to look back to the very first *Nachspiel* (Strophe 1.5, m. 16), and in particular to its dynamically charged opposition of supertonic chords. Baileyshea has written insightfully about its *ersatz* dominant, E major over A, and the curious burst of ascending energy that lifts

[30] Or, alternately, if one hears the upper-voice B♭ as harmonic, the "dominant" would be a Neapolitan triad superimposed over $\hat{5}$ in the bass.

[31] Curiously, and despite the prevalence of motives associated with the term "Nacht," Mitchell hears *Nachspiel* 3 as an "eruption of 'light'"—albeit one that is "by no means…wholly confident" thanks to its modal instability (1986, 93).

it into tonic (m. 19, boxed in Example 9).[32] I hear this rising supertonic chord as a direct response to—indeed, a kind of willed *revocation* of—the Neapolitan that precedes, with its vertiginous nose-dive into the minor tonic (mm. 18–19). Thus, the first *Nachspiel* can be heard to set two kinetically-vectored supertonics against one other—the rising E major and the sinking E-*flat* major. There is no mistaking that the sinking impulse reigns triumphant when Strophe 3 arrives at its own climactic postlude. Not only does the singer's terminal plunge into "versenken" revive the "phrygian nose-dive" from *Nachspiel* 1 at pitch (mm. 58–59; cf. mm. 18–19); the entire interlude that follows (Strophe 3.5) is saturated with Neapolitan chords and phrygian harmonies—most of which move directly to the local tonic G minor or the concluding tonic D.

As this paper's title suggests, I hear this climactic outpouring in Strophe 3.5 as a kind of *negative catharsis*—an event that Eric Bentley describes as an "expenditure of emotion" that leads "not to a new beginning but to the admission of exhaustion."[33] The stricken father has called forth the night out of himself to "immerse it in eternal light." But the promised light never comes, and the effort leaves him empty and spent, left to trudge stoically through the fourth and final strophe.

Despite the trailing persistence of the interlude's nervous eighth-notes, which lend its first couplet a halting, vaguely asthmatic character, this fourth strophe itself hews closely to the original template. Mahler's well-meaning apologists tend to see this faithful reprise as a deference to purely musical logic.[34] I hear

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[32] Baileyshea (2012). This striking dominant substitute might be heard to vary a more common progression, II-i in minor over a tonic pedal point (itself a one-note displacement of a common-tone diminished-seventh embellishment). Well-known examples include the singer's entrance in Hugo Wolf's "Die Bekehrte" (mm. 5–9), or in the first two chords of Mahler's primary theme from the Finale of the Sixth Symphony (mm. 114–15).

[33] Bentley (1962, 54).

[34] See, e.g., Schmierer (1991, 216) and Dargie (1981, 302). Schmierer makes a great deal out of Hermann Danuser's distinction between "Liedstrophes" and "symphonic strophes"—the latter being more inclusive (i.e., not limited to the vocal sections per se), more internally diverse, and generally less beholden to the text where their structure or development is concerned (212–13). She hears the similarities between Mahler's Strophes 1, 2, and 4—despite a changing of textual

something more disturbing: a compounded presence of absence. Not only are we made to feel the emptiness of the cradle, we are also privy now to the vacancy of Rückert's promise for salvation: the *Lied*-subject's emotional efforts have accomplished virtually nothing; we end right where we began. Serving as a cataleptic postlude to the song as a whole, Strophe 4 finds him treading the same fruitless cycle of effortful optimism and enervated dejection that closed the first strophe. And in this light, the poem's closing salute to the "joyous light of the world" may well ring ironically, even bitterly, as many critics have pointed out.[35]

But if the musical persona is "bitter," we are not obliged to hear him as broken. By repeating the poem's final clause ("[Hail] to the joyous light of the world") precisely as the final *Nachspiel* sinks into minor, Mahler certainly underscores the depths of the narrator's alienation. But he also shows us—critically, I think—that there is still fight in him. For his last gesture is to draw himself upward, again defying the Neapolitan's nihilistic pull with an energetically rising supertonic. And, being contrapuntally "imperfect," the minor-mode cadence that follows (IAC, m. 82) cannot claim ultimate finality; however subtly, it leaves open the question—raised but by no means settled here—of whether the tonic D will be delivered, once and for all, into the parallel major. (The cycle's final song will famously answer this in the heartrending affirmative.)

This being said, darker interpretations also abound. In his much-read essay on "Mourning and Melancholia," Sigmund Freud explained that in the former, "it is the world which has become poor and empty," while in the latter—a graver pathology by far—it is "the ego itself" that loses all value.[36] In Strophes 1 and 2, the protagonist's alienation from the newly dawnlit world was paramount. But now, if we choose to hear his final, unlikely salute to the "joyous light of the world" in the most negative possible

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meaning from couplet to couplet—as a function of their being "symphonic" rather than "Lied" strophes (216).

[35] Mitchell, e.g., writes of Strophe 4 that it is a "powerful, retrospective, and doubting commentary" on the illumination promised in the preceding couplet (1986, 93).

[36] Freud (1953, 246).

sense—i.e., as a bitter diminishment or erasure of the self, a zero-sum validation of the Other at the expense of his own personhood, rather than as the strained hope that salvation might actually be attained—then we might well hear a persona on the tipping point, a mourning soul poised to lose himself in the abjection of melancholy.

Whatever our interpretive leanings, one thing is clear: Mahler's decision to end the song with a revival of Strophe-1 materials hardly needs to be taken as a concession to "purely musical" logic, a deliberate *dis*engagement with, or subordination of, Rückert's text. Indeed, any such argument strikes me as paper-thin—and not simply because the whole enterprise of rescuing Mahler from the degradations of text fidelity smacks of rearguard absolute-music partisanship. True, it is typical for Mahler's songs to return, after some digression, to the same topical/tonal world as their opening, and often in a way that lends the final strophe a kind of reprise-effect. In this, they might be heard as beholden to principles of musical, rather than poetic, form—if one believes such distinctions can ever be made with confidence. Placed in such company, the first *Kindertotenlied* becomes unremarkable, its powerful sense of return in Strophe 4 entirely predictable.

But we can look at it another way. Rarely do Mahler's texts conclude on a note so starkly removed from that of its opening. And when they do, he is most often inclined to render this journey audibly in the music: one thinks here of the second and fourth *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, "Um Mitternacht" from the Five Rückert Lieder, or, perhaps most strikingly, the conclusion of the present cycle.[37] Each of these songs ends in a different musical universe than its opening, whether or not its initial tonic as been

[37] Less dramatic cases include the *Wunderhorn* songs "Der Tambourg'sell" and "Zu Straßburg auf der Schanz," both of them ballades of the condemned, and each of which moves into a new key for its valedictory epilogue. None of this is to imply, however, an overly strict correlation between directed modulation and dramatic contrast. The first and third *Wayfarer* songs, like the second *Kindertotenlied* and "Das himmlische Leben" from the Fourth Symphony, feature different starting and ending keys. But they do so without an abiding topical or textual shift like those in the songs above.

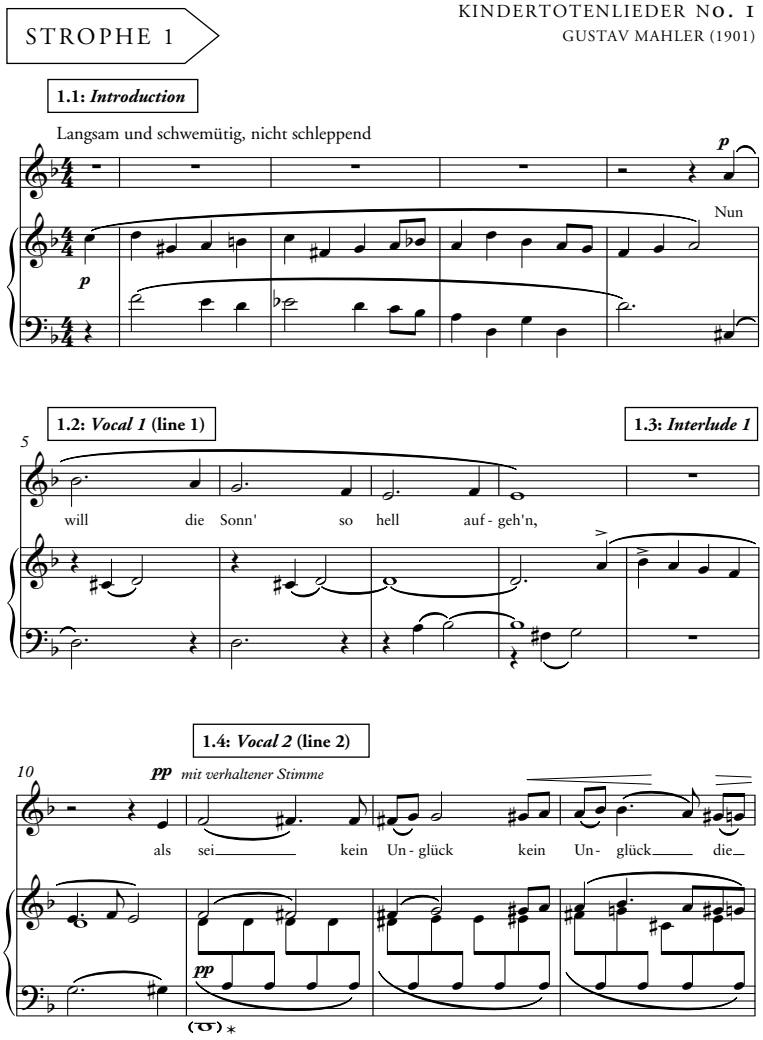
transfigured into major or simply discarded.[38] Knowing that such designs are basic to Mahler's song grammar is precisely what makes the present ending so harrowing. For it vastly increases the likelihood that the return to the song's opening material—and thus the juxtaposition of the doubting, suffering music we hear with the ecstatically hopeful words Rückert wrote—was *chosen*, not arbitrary, and certainly not the product of Mahler's knee-jerk deference to some unsullied, autonomously hovering sonata pattern. And this very incongruity, in turn, underlines the tensions between the linearity of Rückert's text—its gradual crossing from despair into deliverance—and the sobering circularity of Mahler's musical vision.

Indeed, this may be precisely the point. By closing the song with this unlikely (re)traversal of familiar ground, I like to imagine that Mahler is inviting us to consider the inherently, even numbingly cyclical nature of bereavement itself. He may even be treating that sad circularity with a frankness that Rückert, in its very real clutches some seventy years earlier, could never have directly confronted. For grieving bends us to the earth but does *not* break us—and that is our fate: every day, the sun rises again on our sadness; every day, we carry on.

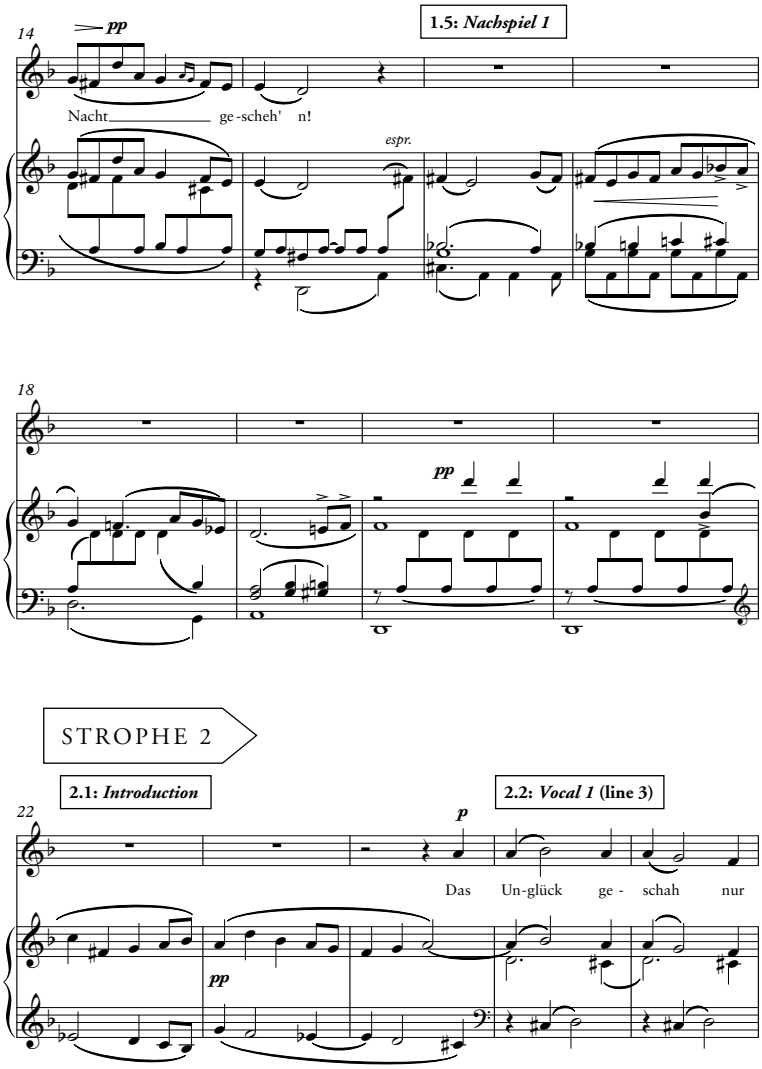
[38] This is not literally true of "Die zwei blauen Augen von meinem Schatz," whose grim two-bar *Anhang* (mm. 66–67) grafts the E-minor march of the song's opening into the blissful F-major sphere of the protagonist's closing suicide/sleep. But the gesture is so wrenching as to suggest a shift to some new perspective—one that no longer reflects the narrator's thoughts and experiences, but represents instead some coldly objective pronouncement of his ultimate fate.

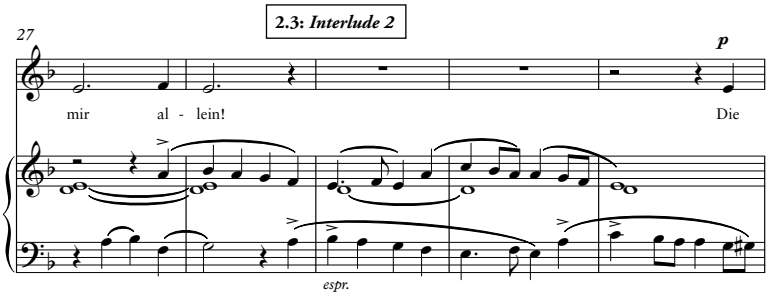
Appendix

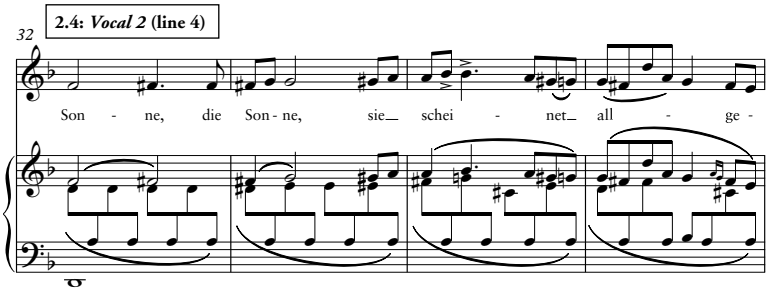
"Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n"
KINDERTOTENLIEDER NO. I
GUSTAV MAHLER (1901)

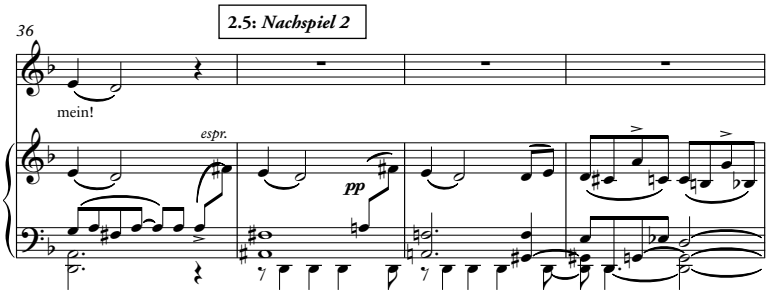


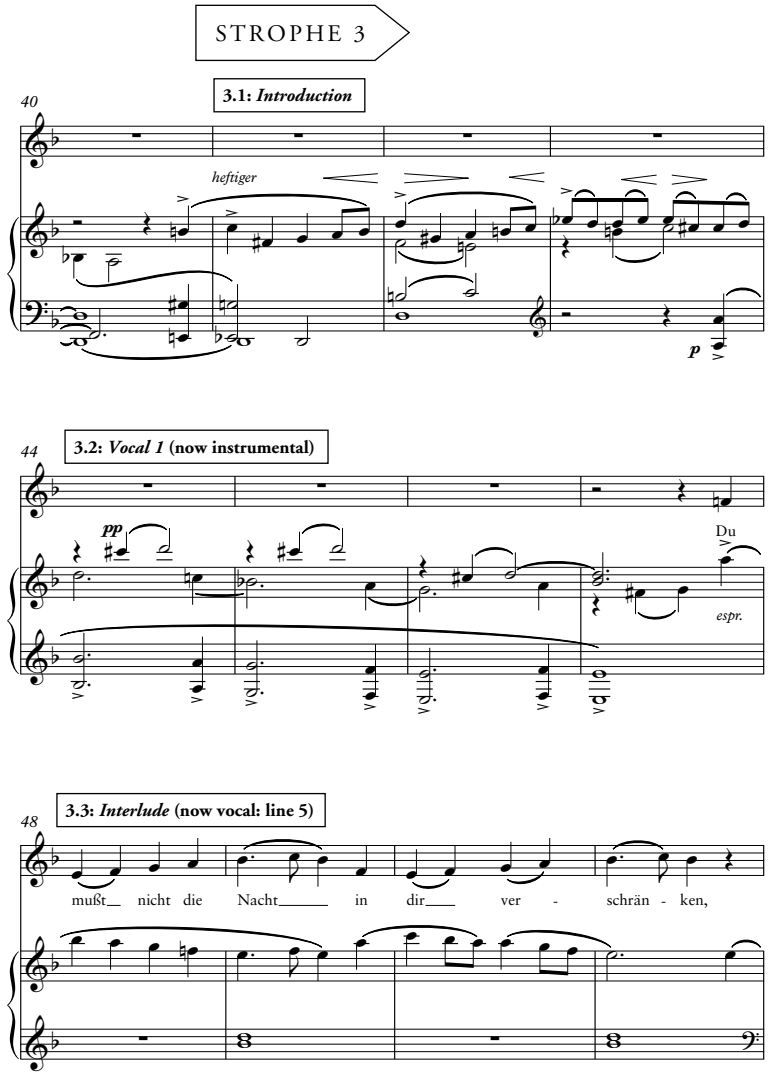
* played by bass clarinet in orchestral version; absent in piano score


1.5: Nachspiel 1
14
pp
Nacht ge-scheh' n!
espr.
18
pp
STROPHE 2
2.1: Introduction
2.2: Vocal 1 (line 3)
22
p
Das Un-glück ge- schah nur
pp

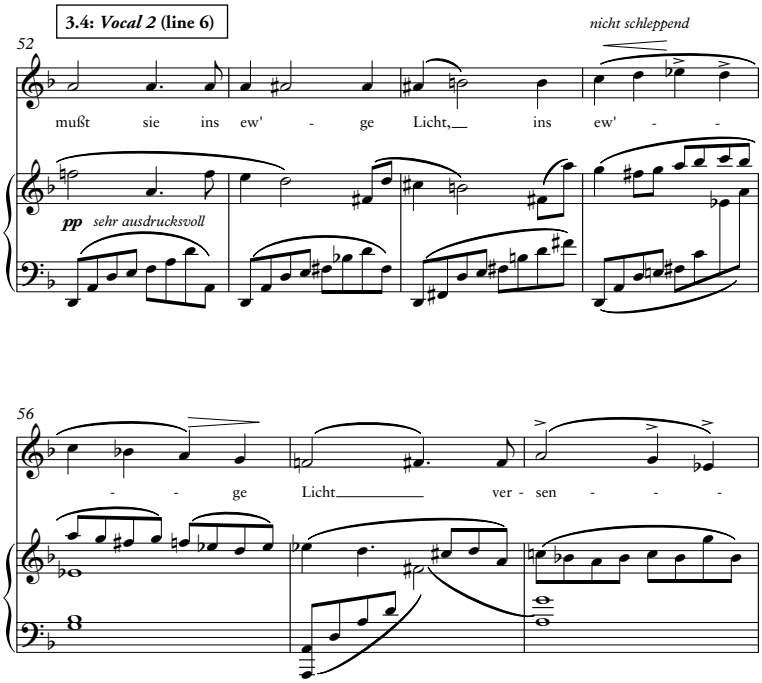

2.3: *Interlude 2*
27
p
mir al - lein! Die
espr.


2.4: *Vocal 2* (line 4)
32
Son - ne, die Son - ne, sie schei - net all - ge -

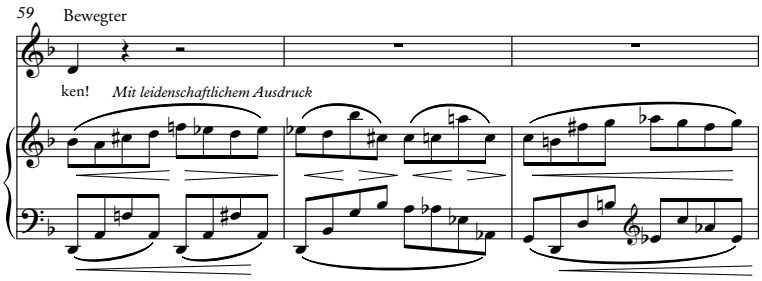

2.5: *Nachspiel 2*
36
mein!
espr.
pp

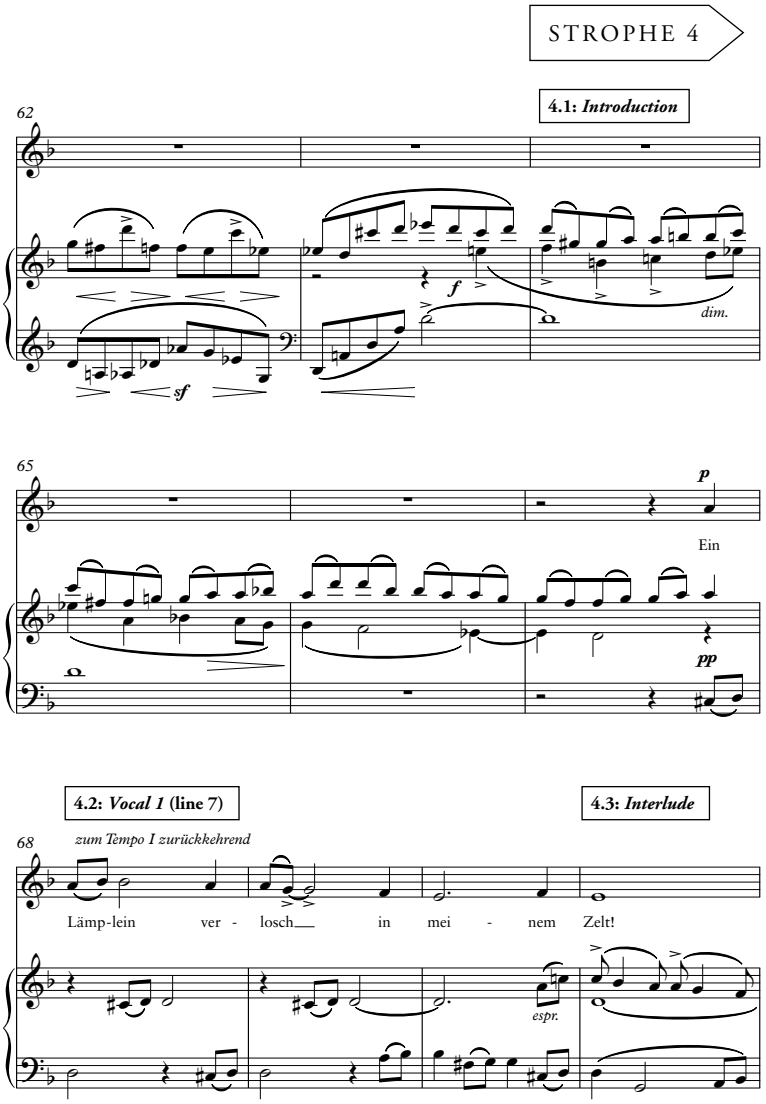

STROPHE 3
3.1: *Introduction*
40
heftiger
p
3.2: *Vocal 1* (now instrumental)
44
pp
Du
espr.
3.3: *Interlude* (now vocal: line 5)
48
mußt_ nicht die Nacht_____ in dir___ ver - schrän - ken,

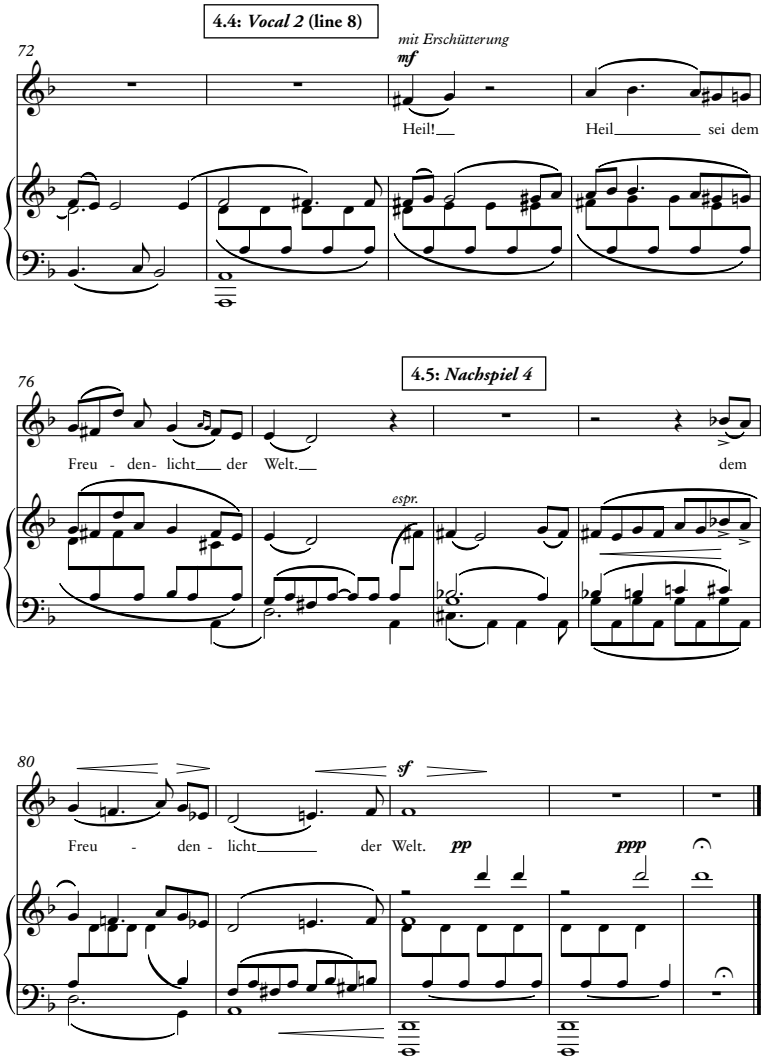
3.4: *Vocal 2* (line 6)



3.5: *Nachspiel 3*




STROPHE 4
4.1: *Introduction*
62
sf
f
dim.
65
p
Ein
pp
4.2: *Vocal 1* (line 7)
4.3: *Interlude*
68
zum Tempo I zurückkehrend
Lämp-lein ver - losch in mei - nem Zelt!
espr.


4.4: *Vocal 2* (line 8)
72
mit Erschütterung
mf
Heil! Heil sei dem
4.5: *Nachspiel 4*
76
Freu - den- licht der Welt. dem
espr.
80
sf
Freu - den - licht der Welt.
pp
ppp

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