CHAPTER V

STRING SEXTET, OP. 47

In the standard instrumentation of two violins, two violas, and two cellos, only a half-dozen works for string sextet, all from the Romantic tradition, enjoy a place in the standard repertoire today. These are: the two sextets of Johannes Brahms, op. 18 in B♭ and op. 36 in G; Dvorak's Sextet in A, op. 48; and the program works of the Romantic era, Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*, Tchaikowsky's *Souvenir di Florence*, and Richard Strauss's Prelude to *Capriccio.* The efforts by Vincent d'Indy and Joseph Joachim Raff, as well as a handful of their lesser-known contemporaries, have fallen into obscurity. In the post-Romantic era, contributions to the genre have come from Frank Bridge, Erich Korngold, Bohuslav Martinů, Darius Milhaud, Walter Piston, Quincy Porter, and Max Reger, along with a few dozen works from lesser-known composers.[1]

Part of the reason for this sparsity of repertoire can be attributed to the overwhelming popularity of the string quartet, which since Haydn's time has been the accepted proving ground for composers of chamber music. Another factor, in the post-

[1] Margaret K. Farish, *String Music in Print*, 2nd ed. (New York, R.R. Bowker & Co, 1973), 289–90; 1984 Supplement (Philadelphia: Musicdata, Inc., 1984), 99–101; 1998 Supplement (Philadelphia: Musicdata, Inc.), 101–4. This periodically updated catalog offers the most complete listing of string chamber music available in the last thirty years.

tonal era, is the exploration of new and atypical sound combinations, which has led to a great proliferation of untraditional mixed ensembles, including acoustic and electronic instruments. Furthermore, there are practical considerations which performances of string sextets less common. There are virtually no established ensembles which exist primarily to perform sextets, no doubt due in large part to the lack of repertoire, which in turn can be blamed on the lack of ensembles to perform the works. The commercially available recordings of the handful of popular sextets mentioned above are performed either by an established quartet supplemented with guest artists, or by chamber soloists drawn from a larger orchestral ensemble.

Given these circumstances, the musicians undertaking the preparation and performance of a string sextet must bear in mind that certain inherent characteristics will require an adapted approach. Octave doubling, which is a notable feature when it occurs in quartets, is commonplace in music for in larger ensembles, and ample time will need to be spent on intonation where these doublings occur. Softer dynamics will need to be exaggerated when the full group is playing, or the performance will suffer from a lack of dynamic variety. The larger forces demand more attentive listening and careful evaluation of the importance of one's own part in relation to the overall texture.

Even considerations as mundane as rehearsal space must be addressed in advance. A living room which offers ample space for a quartet may be quite cramped when

another violist and cellist are added. Finally, if the ensemble consists of a regular quartet and two guests, all parties involved should prepare for the elements of compromise and negotiation which are an integral part of the experience of chamber music making.

Rosner's String Sextet, op. 47, was written in 1970, significantly revised in 1997, and was first performed in 1998 at Northwestern University. Rosner's spoken remarks at the premiere offer insight into the revision process:

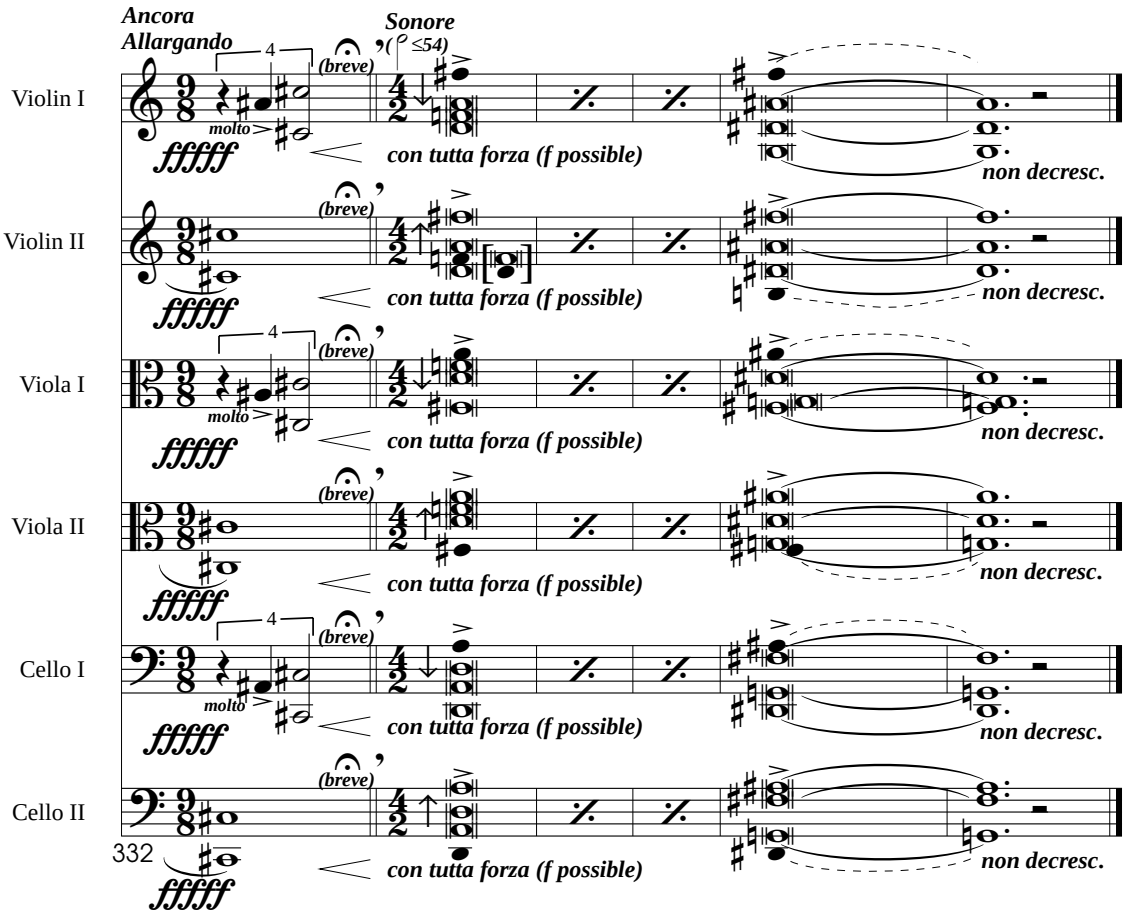
> I looked back at my string sextet of 1970, which had never been performed…and [I] decided two things: it's not a bad piece, but it needs a fix. Now you have to understand, when you're in your twenties and totally obscure (and in my twenties I was totally obscure), you write pieces awfully fast. Nobody's going to listen to them, so you just…[audience laughter]…the basic bottom line is: compose in haste, revise at leisure. And revisions always take me longer than the composition.
>
> Now, you may ask, when you revise a piece that's twenty-seven years old, how do you know what the heck you were thinking of, and who the heck you were at that time? Good question…I looked at the piece, and I decided that the themes were okay, and a lot of the big moments were okay; and I decided the overall structure…was equally as okay, emotionally and technically; but that the connecting stuff, from here to there, was sometimes a little bit workaday, a little bit mechanical. You can get from here to here and the structure can hold it, but I decided that stuff could be made better, so that's essentially what the fix was.[2]

[2] Rosner addressed the audience prior to the premiere of this work on 26 February 1998.

Briefly examining differences between the original and revised versions reveals two trends which point to the experience gained in the intervening years. Musically, the overall flow of the music is improved, sounding more spontaneous and less studied. Pragmatically, many of the changes indicate a more acute understanding by the composer of the instruments and of the instrumentalists. Frequent enharmonic respellings serve to make intervals easier to read, and the technical demands on the performers are much more realistic in the revision, particularly in regards to chordal playing.

When in his earlier chamber music compositions Rosner would make unrealistic requests of string players, it was generally not so much an issue of difficult technical demands on the individual player as it was a sound concept better suited to an orchestral ensemble than a small chamber one. In the original version of the Sextet, for example, he writes rapidly repeating four-note *pizzicato* chords, marked ***p***, throughout the fifth variation in the second violin and second viola. Here it seems he is aiming for a "rainfall" orchestral effect, an effect which is most successful with multiple players on each part. In the transition from the sixth variation into the seventh (fig. 5.1), he requests dynamics of a magnitude which are simply unattainable, especially considering the slow tempo indicated in m. 333. This is only slightly tempered by his footnote in the score which reads, "all parts hold as many strings as possible." The revised version of the Sextet

FIGURE 5.1. Excerpt from first version of Sextet, op. 47, i.



consistently reveals the hand of a composer with more direct experience with stringed instruments.

Performance instructions, such as indications of tempo and expression, are consistently less verbose in the revised edition, and often less dramatic, suggesting that the mature Rosner places more confidence in the musical judgment of the performer. For example, in the fifth variation, which features the first cellist as soloist throughout,

Rosner writes *molto appassionata, sempre legato e sostenuto* in the original version, whereas in the revision a mere *espressivo* suffices.

Certain aspects of the revision resulted in significant musical changes. The length and balance of movements remained similar, with the revision shortening the first movement to 338 measures from 352. Meanwhile, the theme and the second variation underwent substantial changes, and the revised seventh variation bears almost no resemblance to the original except in its *funebre* character. Where variations have been transposed, many of the transpositions are by only a semitone between original and revised versions. The second movement remains much closer to the original, the most notable change being the addition (in the revised version) of the three-measure chorale statement which closes the entire work.

The title page bears the subtitle “Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland,” which is a Lutheran chorale melody based upon the Gregorian Advent hymn “Veni redemptor gentium.” The chorale has been adapted numerous times throughout the past four hundred years; in addition to Bach’s well-known settings (two cantatas, BWV 60 and 61 and an organ prelude, BWV 699), Praetorius, Schütz, Schein, Buxtehüde, Telemann, and Pachelbel all used this chorale as the basis for compositions. The Sextet approaches, or aspires to, the theme gradually over the course of the work, reaching a fully prominent

statement of the chorale tune only a few minutes before the conclusion of its twenty-four-minute duration.

The Sextet is in two movements, titled “Variations” and “Motet.” Rosner’s remarks illuminate the overall structure:

> The design was: two movements of roughly equal length and weight, roughly twelve minutes each. The first one is variations, which is in principle an instrumental form; it happens throughout music history but it thrives in the classical period, and it's sort of based on development. The second movement [is a] motet, which is in principle a vocal form, and it thrives in the Renaissance period, and it relies on counterpoint. But the more important contrast is: I wanted the first movement to be tense, to be dark, to be searching…this one's *agitato*, this one's *funebre*, so that's sort of the searching side. And [I wanted] the second movement to be religious, spiritual, ecstatic here, tranquil there, and so forth.[3]

FIRST MOVEMENT: *VARIATIONS*

Because the formal structure of the first movement is both an overriding and a generating force, I will digress from the rhythm–melody–harmony–structure model of the previous (and following) movements, and discuss these elements in combined form on a section-by-section basis.

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[3] Ibid.

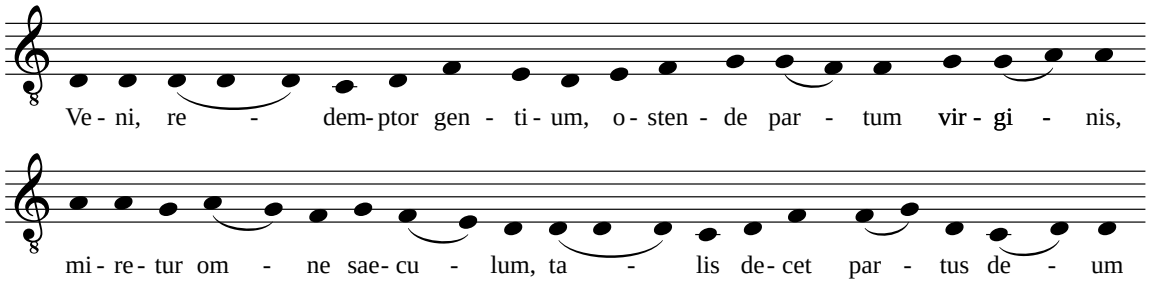
The tempo is different in each variation, and observing these indications is vital to the overall shape and flow of the movement (Table 5.1 outlines the tempos of the first movement). As always, Rosner provides these markings with a "≈" sign, but the basic temporal proportions between variations should be preserved. For example, Variation 6 is in 9/8 meter, and marked ♩.≈156; Variation 7 bears the indication ♩≈50. Whatever the actual tempo of Variation 6 is in performance, the final variation must have a tactus slightly slower than the bar-to-bar hypermeter of its predecessor. Many of the tempo changes cannot be so easily calculated by subdivisions in this manner. In rehearsal, it will be beneficial to rehearse the variations separately to develop a clear sense of tempo and character for each, before working on the transitions between variations.

Table 5.1. Op. 47, i, tempo indications

Section	Measure	Tempo	Metronome
Tema	1	***Adagio***	♩≈76
Var. 1	26	(no marking)	♩=♩
Var. 2	51	***Allegro molto***	♩≈144
Var. 3	107	***Maestoso***	♩≈84
Var.4	131	***Andante moderato***	♩≈110
Var.5	172	***Moderato con rubato***	♩≈72
Var. 6	208	***Allegro agitato***	♩.≈156
Var. 7	318	***Adagio funebre***	♩≈50

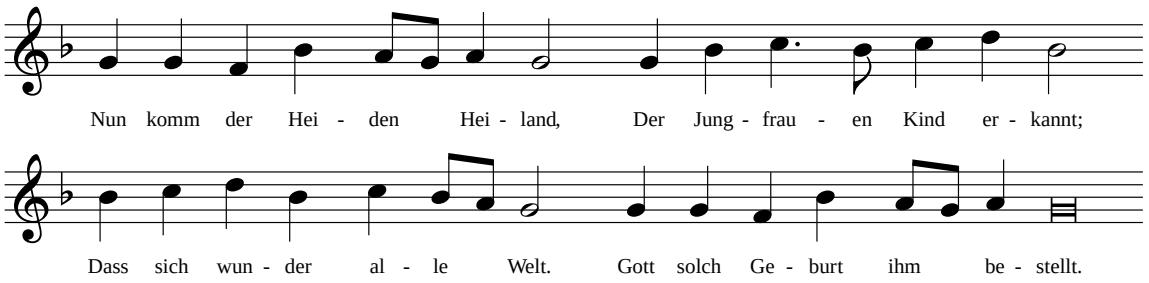
TEMA. Scholars and enthusiasts of the music of Edward Elgar perenially ponder the mystery of the source for his "Enigma Variations." In his Sextet, op. 47, Rosner divulges his source at the outset, but the connection between the chorale melody and the theme is obscure and elusive. Even attempting to identify the complete theme itself is a futile challenge, as it is continually transformed as the piece progresses. Only the opening two subphrases recur with enough consistency to be considered part of the "real" theme.

Figure 5.2. a) *Veni redemptor gentium*



Source: *Monumenta monodica medii aevi*, vol. 1, ed. Bruno Stäblein (Kassel: Bärenreiter–Verlag, 1956), pp. 273–4.

b) *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*

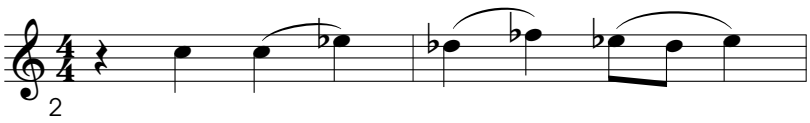


Source: Johannes Zahn, *Die Melodien der deutschen evangelischen Kirchenlieder*, vol. 1 (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1889), p. 314.

Before examining the theme of the Sextet, let us observe the relationship between the Lutheran chorale "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland" and the Gregorian Advent hymn "Veni redemptor gentium" upon which the chorale was based (fig. 5.2). The obvious similarities are the phrase balance, the melodic contour, and the melodic ambitus. Only the ranges of the first phrases are the same (a perfect fourth) in the two sources, yet the melodic position of the notes relative to the final of the dorian mode (D in the hymn, G in the chorale) makes it clear that the two are related.

In the same manner, there exist subtle yet distinct connections between the opening theme of the Sextet (fig. 5.3) and the chorale. Rosner's opening subphrase has the ambitus of a fourth, albeit a dimished one.[4] The chorale emphasizes the third degree of the dorian scale (which in the "Nun komm" example above is B♭) by placing it atop

FIGURE 5.3. Opening phrase of op. 47, ii, *Tema*



the melodic contour in the outer phrases, by approaching it with non-stepwise motion, and by repetition. Rosner exploits this relationship between tonic and minor mediant

[4] The alteration in no way diminishes the connection between Rosner's *Tema* and its chorale source. Bach makes an equivalent alteration in the initial continuo statement of the chorale in his cantata BWV 61: the bottom note of the first phrase is raised by a half-step, creating a melodic range of a tritone, from G♯ to C♮.

through repetition of the E♭, and reinforces it with the use of two ascending minor thirds. The second subphrase expands the melodic range to that of a minor sixth, which is the ambitus of the entire "Nun komm" chorale. Finally, the characteristic motivic figure from the outer phrases of the chorale, a descending and returning whole-step in anapest rhythm, becomes a motivic cell in the Sextet theme.

The piece begins with a soft, sustained open-fifth chord played by four of the six voices. The second viola and second cello play an open C string, which raises two important considerations. Obviously, intonation in this opening will be determined by the tuning of the instruments. Comparing individual C strings, which is always an advisable practice in string ensemble playing, becomes absolutely crucial in this context.[5] The other consideration is that of tone color in the second violin and first viola, which are both playing fingered notes (as opposed to open strings). Playing this opening chord *senza vibrato* will reinforce the organ-like character of this opening pedal chord. If vibrato is sparingly applied, it should be a very narrow vibrato, but not overly fast.

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[5] One must not let associations with grade-school orchestra tuning proceduresinterfere with this practice. Even the finest ensembles make this a regular part of their operation. Guarneri Quartet violist Michael Tree is quoted as saying, "I find that if I don't tune my C string to match perfectly with the cello's before the piece begins, there's a major risk of [an open-string] octave sounding out of tune." (Blum, *Art of Quartet Playing*, 27.)

Following the opening cue, the second cellist must make a smooth yet rapid transition from the (up-bow) whole note to a pizzicato note on the downbeat of the second measure. Counting this whole-note chord accurately and without distracting visual (or worse, aural) cues, will present a fascinating challenge for any group. There are many ways to address this facet of ensemble playing. One revealing exercise is as follows: Play two measures in slow common time (≈40–60 beats per minute) consisting of only a pizzicato note, played ***f***, on each downbeat. Choose a player to give the opening cue, and all players must close their eyes after plucking the first downbeat, and place the second downbeat where they feel is accurate. The initial results may be quite unsettling, and the absence of a metronome as arbitrator reveals much about the concept of individual perception of pulse.

The countermelody in the cellos (mm. 2–8), features the second cello reinforcing the first by pizzicato doubling an octave below. This can be rehearsed by both cellists playing pizzicato, then both arco, then pizzicato on the upper octave and arco below, and so forth, until the two players share a single musical conception of the line. As a general rule, such swapping of lines is a good method of practice whenever octave duplication exists, which in the Sextet is rather frequently.

There exists a strong presence of the octatonic scale collection in both the theme and the countermelody, although the melodic interest of the lines obscures this somewhat.

That the first four measures of the countermelody are drawn strictly from an octatonic scale is not musically significant at this point, but will become a prominenet feature in the second and sixth variations.[6]

Throughout the Sextet, Rosner achieves a constant variety of tonal colors by using different combinations of instruments. Care must be exercised to prevent an automatic correlation between scoring and dynamics. The first passage to use all six players together is found in mm. 19–27, an expansive scoring spanning over five octaves at its greatest breadth (*C♯* to *e*''' in m. 20). Here, the melody is is given to the first viola, and is marked only ***mp***. All accompanimental dynamics are ***p*** or ***pp*** throughout this passage, and continue so through the seven-note chord pedal which begins the first variation. Unless the accompanimental parts are sensitive to the melody, it can be easily lost in the texture. Such non-equivalent dynamics are common throughout the work, and each players' score study should include attention to this matter.

Variation 1. The first variation begins with a vi–I cadence on an open-fifth B chord, although the D♯ from the previous chord imparts a major-triad flavor to the arrival. The symbolic *l'istesso tempo* marking must be strictly observed. Imitative counterpoint

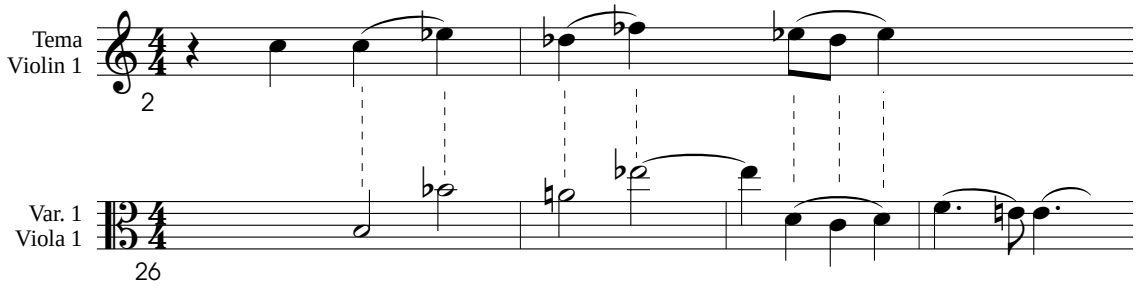
[6] The opening gesture of this countermelody, a five-note descending octatonic scale from a tonic pedal, is reminiscent of the beginning of the second movement of Brahms's Symphony No. 2 in D, op. 73.

makes its first appearance in this variation, with five of the six voices stating the varied theme in direct transpositions. The statements enter in progressively louder dynamic levels, staggered by four measures except the last entry, which is delayed one additional measure. While the description sounds like textbook fugato writing, the transposition scheme is anything but traditional, with the entries beginning on the pitches B, C♯, G♯, F♯, and E. This pentatonic collection, often called the "tonal pentatonic" scale because of the absence of semitones, is in this context merely a curious coincidence, as the mode has little or no influence upon the work as a whole.

The melodic connection between the first variation and the *Tema* is obscure. Only the first three measures seem thematically related. The two pairs of ascending half notes (mm. 26 and 27) correspond to the ascending pairs in the opening theme (fig. 5.4).[7] These ascending intervals, however, have transformed from the mundane (a pair of minor thirds) to the eccentric (diminished octave and diminished fifth). Following these pairs, the three slurred quarter notes proceed intervallically like the anapest grouping from m. 3, but with an octave displacement and rhythmic change as well.

[7] In the 1970 version the first note began a half-measure earlier and was double in length, thereby resembling the opening theme more obviously.

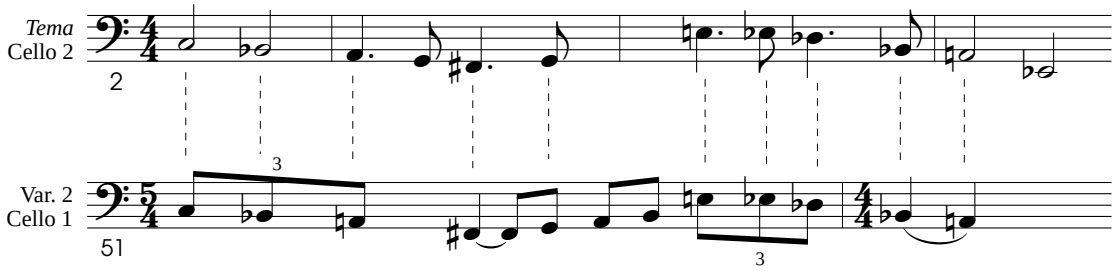
FIGURE 5.4. Melodic comparison, *Tema* and Variation 1



The first variation is unexpectedly brief, with its imitative style providing only a taste of the fugal passages which are to follow later. The dynamic outline is essentially one gradual crescendo over the twenty-five measures of the variation. The concluding cadential idea in measures 49–50 reinvokes the major/minor dichotomy which was such a present force in the op. 32 quartet, heard here in the descending augmented-octave motion from E to E♭ in second viola and second cello, coupled with a sustained pedal C in first viola and first cello.

Variation 2: ***Allegro molto.*** Both the beginning and end of this variation are delineated by brief pauses, which merits mention only because all of the of the other transitions between variations are *attacca*, and involve either an elided phrase or held notes, or both. This variation is based primarily upon the opening countermelody rather than the theme itself, as seen in figure 5.5. The opening eight bars of the variation are stylistically atypical for Rosner, with irregular rhythms (although within a clear and

FIGURE 5.5. Melodic comparison, *Tema* and Variation 2



regular tactus) and an angular contour. As difficult as this thorny line is to play, the octave doubling between first viola and first cello increases the challenge. The generally accepted rule in octave playing is to give slight dynamic prominence to the lower octave; certainly this is an advisable practice here. The parts diverge only slightly in mm. 5–7, and the balance between the lines should be adjusted accordingly when they are not in octave duplication.

The cascading triplet motive becomes the central melodic feature for the first half of this variation, through m. 85. When these figures are followed by rests (e.g., mm. 62–4 or 84–5), the phrasing should lead forward into the rest. In instances such as these, the ensuing beat completes the four-note gesture (from the beginning of the variation) with a longer note in a different voice.

Aside from brief and incomplete references in the accented quarter-notes of m. 3 and mm. 5–6, the *Tema* makes its first significant appearance more than halfway through the variation. Examining this variant, which appears initially in the first violin and first

viola in m. 86, reveals that the metric position of weak–strong notes is shifted so that the theme begins on a downbeat, and an extra note (another ascending minor third, although spelled here as an augmented second) restores the metric emphasis at the beginning of the triplet figure on the fourth beat.

Two rhythmic features are of particular interest. The ostinato figure in the upper three voices in mm. 88–94, a triplet eighth followed by a quarter note, is pitted in Shostakovich-like fashion against the lower voices, which join in triple unison (with the viola an octave above the cellos) to attempt to topple the discordant wall of sound. This divisive struggle, the first fifty/fifty split of instrumental forces in the work, will be more effective if the upper three voices allow the dynamic to taper the slightest amount on the triplets, and play a crescendo on the quarter notes. In addition to permitting more of the countermelodic theme to be heard, this will also improve bow distribution among the ostinato voices, thereby aiding a consistent reiteration of each repeated unit.

Finally, the syncopated tremolo chords (mm. 98–100) are potentially problematic, as this largely orchestral device is scarcely employed in chamber ensemble music, particularly in non-accompanimental fortissimo passages. It is essential that the group communicate the beat clearly, and make no attempt to emphasize the beginning of each new note. The right hand should execute the tremolo without regard for the notes changing, and the left hand must simply place each new note precisely in time (and tune).

Each player will have to make accomodations in the surrounding measures to allow for the proper place on the bow for a fast and smooth tremolo stroke.

Variation 3: *Maestoso*. For the first time, the *Nun komm* chorale melody appears, cloaked in what the composer has referred to as a "devil's harmonization."[8] The ensemble is split into two equal trios, and the phrases are assigned antiphonally; the first and third phrases are played by first violin, first viola, and first cello, with the second and fourth phrases played by their counterparts. At each phrase cadence (where fermatas would appear in a Bach harmonization), Rosner writes highly dissonant, accelerating, scalewise passages in the non-melodic voices.

Intonation in these chorale phrases is challenging, and the ensemble will make more efficient use of time by actually dividing into two groups and rehearsing these passages in separate rooms. The scoring is at times unwieldy, with each trio playing chords of up to six notes. Identifying the dissonant notes and rehearsing the chords first without them will also aid in solidifying intonation. For example, in the first chorale phrase, the dissonant pitches are all in the first violin part; the second E in m. 107, the G

[8] Remarks, 26 February 1998. The harmonization includes an abundance of minor and major seconds, and diminished and augmented fifths.

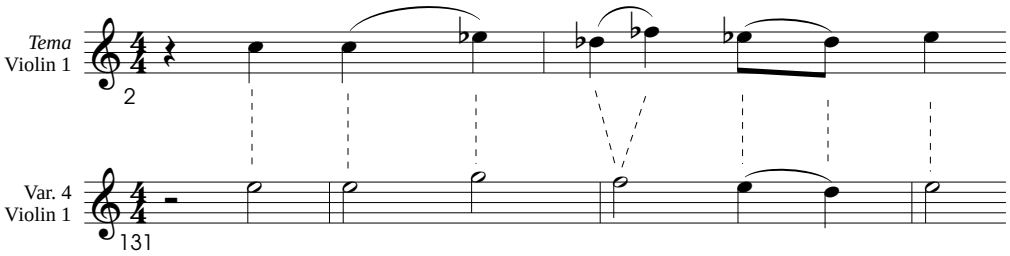
in m. 108, and the first F♯ in m. 109. The time spent identifying these pitches will be well invested.

The first three of the ascending fermata-like interjections are chromatic scales; the fourth (mm. 127–30) introduces the octatonic scale, which will play a more central role later in the work. This final chorale cadence further divides the group into three subgroups; the second violin and second cello sustain a four-note fermata chord, while the scalar interjections appear separately in dialogue between pairs of voices. The held chords are intended to lessen slightly in intensity to permit the scalar material to become prominent. These chords must remain *forte*, however, and bow changes need to be staggered and inaudible.

Variation 4: *Andante moderato*. This variation begins with the held chords sustained from the previous variation, and presents a challenging transition. Responsibility for determining the tempo falls entirely to the first violinist, and it is not a simple task. The final octatonic scale statement of the previous variation concluded with a rhythmic acceleration (the triplet, quadruplet, and quintuplet of m. 130) followed by two "empty" beats, save for the sustained chord. No musical event marks the downbeat of the fourth variation, and the first violinist must sense the change from ♩=84 to ♩ =110 during this hold in the musical action.

All six voices enter in fugal imitation, evocative of the sixteenth-century canzona. The melodic line is a truncated and rhythmically augmented version of the *Tema*, utilizing the first four notes and the anapest figure, as illustrated in figure 5.6. The note on the downbeat of m. 133 combines the functional roles of the first two notes of m. 3. This usage of the anapest motive, where the first of the three notes is metrically

FIGURE 5.6. Melodic comparison, *Tema* and Variation 4



emphasized, is new. Rosner introduces an unusual effect here: with each new entry, the overall dynamic indication *decreases*. This diminuendo must be somewhat exaggerated in each part, because too subtle a drop in dynamics will be negated by the addition of each new voice.

In m. 150, the *Tema* reappears in its unabridged form, but here the metric position is shifted by a half-bar, so that the melody begins on a downbeat, and the melodic intervals have been altered. This is followed immediately by a return to the *Tema* in original note values and positions, and here the texture switches to a largely homophonic one. This continual varying of revisited material provides another level of ongoing

variation, one perhaps best described by the term “diferencias,” a popular variation form in 16th-century Spanish instrumental music. Note that Rosner is also using the ancient device of achieving dynamic contrast by varying the number of instruments playing. The functional ensemble swells from a quartet in m. 154 to a quintet in m. 156 and a sextet in m. 158; then backs down to a quintet again in m. 161 and finally a quartet to conclude the movement, beginning in m. 165.

Variation 5: ***Moderato con rubato.*** This variation spotlights the first cello in what is essentially a fantasia on ideas drawn from the source materials. The upper four parts sustain bowed or fingered tremolo patterns throughout, creating a soft, restless accompanimental texture. The overall effect of the texture is reminiscent of that found in the slow movements of Bartók’s Sixth String Quartet, or Kodaly’s *Serenade*, op. 11, for two violins and viola.

Aside from the demanding solo line, the capricious nature of this variation presents a challenge to the accompanimental players as well. It is essential that all players become familiar with the solo line, at least to the extent that the melodic shape and rhythms are understood. Ideally, each part would have a second staff, preferably in miniature, providing the solo line. In lieu of this, copious pencilled cues will be a great aid to all. Most of the harmonic changes in the long, sustained tremolo chords coincide

with the second cello's downwardly arpeggiated pizzicato chords. In practical terms, this serves two important functions. First, the second cello can assume the primary responsibility for following the first cello's line, and cue the other players. Second, the pizzicato chord will serve as "mortar in the cracks" between the chords, hiding what slight imperfections might exist.

Variation 6: *Allegro agitato*. This extraordinary variation, the longest of the set at 110 measures and two-and-a-half minutes, stands as the centerpiece of the first movement. It is also the most demanding of player, ensemble, and audience, with an atypically (for Rosner's style) high level of technical difficulty, ensemble challenges, and dissonance.

Because this variation is so rhythmically and harmonically complex, the standard slow approach to intonation work will be inefficient. The nearly constant presence of scalewise passing tones, often in multiple voices simultaneously, would require hours of analysis to determine the non-chord tones. In such a context, the shortcomings of any individual will limit the quality of the ensemble's overall intonation. Individual preparation time is vital here; this simply cannot be learned "on the fly." The group rehearsal time on this variation, which will likely exceed that of any other, will be best spent on rhythmic and temporal work.

The tremolo *c*' in the first violin provides a bridge into the rollicking fugue. The subject combines elements from both the theme and the primary countersubject, and twists them into a lively 9/8 jig-like dance. The arch-shaped subject reaches its apex exactly midway, with a diminished-fourth leap across the barline to the third measure. The interval is a difficult one to hear in the mind's ear, and the performer may well find the high note of the subject more easily and securely by thinking of its enharmonic equivalent (in the 1970 version, the leap is sometimes spelled as a major third). When heard against the pitch C, which is made prominent by the tremolo pedal in the violin as well as by repetition in the melodic line, the *f♭*' and *e♭*' at the start of the measure invoke once again the major/minor dichotomy so common to Rosner's style (figure 5.7).

Figure 5.7. Op. 47, sixth variation, fugue subject in second cello

In order to play the rhythm of the fourth measure accurately, it is necessary to subdivide the beats into duple eighths rather than the triplets inherent in the time signature. The player may note a tendency to maintain the regular subdivision, and to play these two notes in a 5:4 ratio. While such an approximation will not be problematic,

nor even noticed, at the beginning of the variation, this cross-metric relationship assumes increasing importance as the variation progresses.

All six voices present the subject, entering at irregular intervals (four, five, six, six, and four measures, respectively). There is a humorous aspect regarding the entrance of the second viola in m. 217. At the end of m. 215, violin and cello lines merge, so that in m. 216 the cello line sounds like the continuation of the violin subject (compare mm. 211–2 in the cello part), and the violin line sounds like a new entrance of the subject. When the second viola enters in m. 217, the dynamic level is raised to ***mp***, perhaps suggesting that the player is a bit indignant to have been preceded in such fashion.[9]

The ternary meter provides for yet another metric placement of the *Tema*, and it appears in the first cello in mm. 235, 248, and 251. The same dotted augmentation later appears in multiple voices; first cello in m. 271, second viola in m. 274, and second violin in m. 277.

At this point, the variation has reached its most frenetic state yet, and cross rhythms suddenly make a continual presence beginning in m. 279, with dotted-eighth duples marked ***fff*** against a mere ***mf*** in the running triplets. This marks the beginning of a

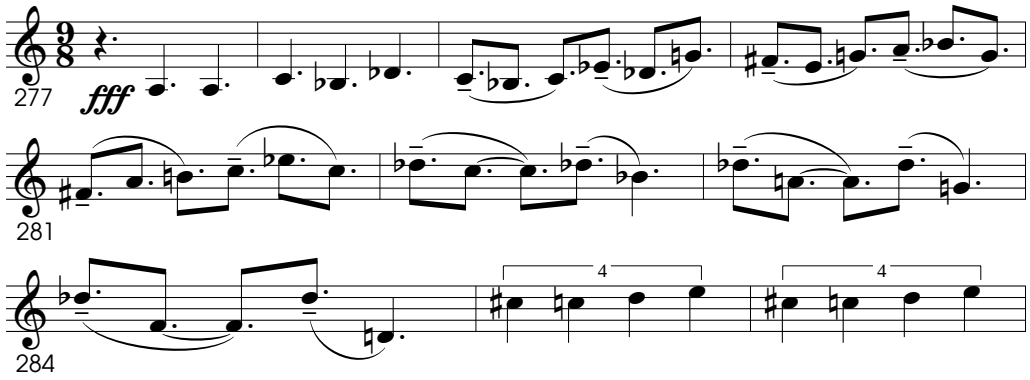
[9] This good-natured toying with listeners' expectations brings to mind the "early" entrance of the first horn, four measures before the recapitulation of Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony, first movement.

metric transformation which is perhaps the most remarkable textural feature of the entire work.

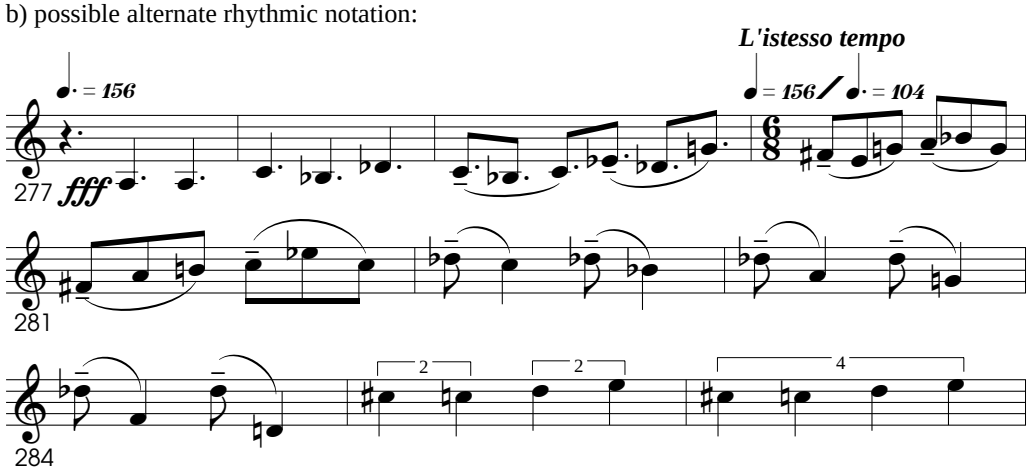
As figure 5.8 illustrates, a metric modulation occurs in these ten measures. The rhythm shown here begins in second violin and second cello, and by m. 285 four of the six voices are playing the quadruplets, while the first violin and first cello persist with the 9/8 jig. This cross-rhythm, nine against four, requires of all players a highly developed

Figure 5.8. Op. 47, i, second violin, mm. 277–86

a) as written:



b) possible alternate rhythmic notation:



rhythmic sense. If an ensemble is wishing to evaluate this work in terms of its level of difficulty relative to the players' abilities, this variation alone will suffice.

The crux of the challenge is this: in order to coordinate the nine-against-four rhythm, the faster rhythmic part should fit into the slower one. However, establishing the four quarter notes spaced across three beats is a challenge in any context, and when those three beats are trisected as is the case here, the potential for inaccuracy is considerable.

The alternate notation provided in figure 5.8(b) has the decided advantage of reducing the metric shifts to two against three, which is a skill in most every accomplished musician's arsenal. For example, m. 279 places two dotted eighths in the span of three eighths, and m. 285 places two quarters in the span of three eighths. The tradeoff for this ease of reading in the alternate notation is the complication of calculating the temporal shift at the time signature change, and the time signature change itself. Furthermore, this would require different time signatures in different voices, which is an atypical compositional technique for Rosner.

This passage, from m. 277 to the end of the variation, will be best rehearsed in two separate groups. The first violin and first cello double each other at one, then two octaves, playing a relentless frenzy of eighth-note triplets which conclude with octatonic scale descents, which are increasedly difficult when written in three-note groupings.

Plenty of slow intonation practice will be in order, as well as achieving a strict metronomic sense.

The other four players have a homophonic, largely homorhythmic (in mm. 285–308, nearly everything is in quarter notes) chorale, a succession of chords with unexpected harmonic twists at every turn. In typical Rosnerian fashion the large majority of these chords are in root position, but the presence of dissonant notes is higher than usual. Surprisingly, not a single seventh–chord, dominant or otherwise, appears in this passage. The four voices converge to play the opening *Tema* beginning in m. 302, in an unharmonized, three-parallel-octave statement. The upward glissando markings compound the intonational difficulties inherent in such octave replication.

Once both groups of players have achieved a relatively comfortable level of ease with their parts, the task of combining them awaits. For this, a loud metronome should be set to one beat per bar. It would be advisable to begin with the slowest setting (40 beats per minute, or 35 if available), and gradually work up to the indicated tempo, which equals approximately 52 beats per minute. Visual cues are also very important; fortunately, most downbeats correspond with a change of bow direction in all parts, and this will prove indispensable in keeping the ensemble together.

The transition into the seventh and final variation harbors an interesting effect. The final octatonic descent (mm. 314–5) is harmonized by a sustained dyadic dissonance,

widely spaced (*B*, *b*', and *b*" against *c*' and *c*"). This interval, heard as a major seventh because of the lowest note, is reminiscent of the first variation. When the first violin and first cello finish their octave scales, the dissonance persists, and the interruption of the scale points out that C and B were the next two expected pitches in the scale. The effect Rosner creates across the barline of m. 318 is dependent upon the second violin and second cello executing the indicated *crescendo possibile* to its fullest extent, which requires copious bow usage and inaudible bow changes, as well as a carefully coordinated release. The sound at the very beginning of the seventh variation should seem like a mere memory of the previous measure.

Variation 7: *Adagio funebre*. Because this variation begins with the tied-over dissonance, with only a negative event (the release of the second violin and cello) happening on the downbeat, establishing the tempo is an important task which should be shared by the first violin and first cello, who move together. An unexpected element needs to be factored into this seemingly simple task: the excitement and difficulty of the sixth variation tend to increase the players' adrenaline, making the *dolce* character of the seventh variation surprisingly elusive. Furthermore, the length of the sustained dissonant chord which concluded the sixth variation, compounded by the memory of the nine-against-four cross rhythms, makes it difficult to calculate any temporal relationship

between these two variations. Therefore, it is recommended that all players memorize the tempo and character of this variation.

This variation serves primarily as an epilogue to the movement, providing refuge from the turbulence of the previous variation. The *Tema* reappears, but is now truncated to its first eight notes, and the first note is now a pickup to the downbeat. The half-note descent in the first violin and cello recall the original countersubject. Only one reference to the earlier variations is obvious; the figure played by the first viola in mm. 324ff., and by the first cello in mm. 326ff., was originally heard in the lower three voices in the second variation in mm. 101ff.[10] Finally, a true sense of harmonic arrival is felt in the downbeat of m. 329, as the G♯-minor chord of the previous measure survives challenges from F-major and G-major triads in the violas, and yields easily to an E-major triadic chord, accompanied by a descending fifth motion in the lowest voice (first cello), which is seldom seen in Rosner's cadences.

The last ten measures, which never stray far enough for the tonic pitch E to be forgotten, present the main theme in yet one last permutation, triplets with the first note placed on the beat. Deceleration is written into the ending, and no additional slowing is necessary. In the penultimate measure, the harmonics in the violins must connect with,

[10] In the 1970 version, this figure was the principal subject of the second variation. The triplet-based material which predominates the variation in the revised version is entirely new.

but not overlap, the final pizzicato E in the four lower voices, concluding the movement with an unexpected definition.

SECOND MOVEMENT: *Motet*

In his remarks quoted above (see p. 2), Rosner credits "the study, at the graduate level, of Renaissance music in general and the works of Josquin des Pres in particular" with having a profound effect on his compositional approach, moving him away from a more traditional neo-Romantic style. The Sextet was originally composed during the same graduate year that Rosner received the M.A. in composition.

In Renaissance vocal music, the motet was second in importance only to the Mass. The practice of preparing arrangements of vocal works for instrumental ensembles, which became increasingly popular as the era progressed, was responsible for the vast majority of instrumental Renaissance music. The second movement of Rosner's sextet clearly displays the influence of the Renaissance era in all aspects, melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and structural.

For the most part, the movement presents melodic ideas which are typical of Rosner's melodic style as previously discussed, and develops them through imitative counterpoint in a Renaissance fashion. This is similar to the manner in which Max Reger's *Preludes and Fugues,* op. 117 for solo violin offer Romantic melodic ideas

worked out in Baroque style. Accordingly, this movement is rather easy to play from a purely technical standpoint. Aside from a few measures requiring some slow, careful ensemble rehearsal, which will be discussed in detail below, the challenges of the last movement lie largely in the domains of intonation and large-scale motion.

RHYTHM. Because of the simplicity of the rhythm, it is all the more important that the ensemble be cognizant of larger-scale motion, such as subphrases, phrases, and sectional growth. The task of sustaining directed motion to a projected goal becomes a respectable challenge when note values are slower. Consider, for example, the opening of the movement. A subject is stated and imitated for a total of six iterations. Each of the six appearances of the subject is varied from the others in some way other than mere transposition; subtle dynamic and melodic differences exist as well. The entire passage, however, is unified by a gradual crescendo that ranges from ***pp*** at the beginning to ***ff***, which is reached in m. 27 and sustained until a *subito* ***pp*** at the end of m. 31. Despite the obvious partitioning of the section into six smaller units, and the use of terraced dynamics, the performers must hold the five-measure ***ff*** plateau as a common goal for the entire passage, and convey a sense of growth for the entire section.

There are interesting details surrounding tempo that require advance attention. Most of the movement progresses at the opening tempo (♩≈110). There are two

interruptions of this tempo in the third section, which extends from m. 85 to 108. These interruptions, beginning in m. 91 and again in m. 101, are both marked ♩≈90, and are four and eight bars in length, respectively. In both instances, Rosner marks *poco ritardando* two bars prior to the new tempo, and *poco meno mosso* at the change, stressing that this is more of a character shift than a real tempo change. The returns to the original tempo, in mm. 95 and 108, are both sudden returns on the downbeat.

At the beginning of the coda (m. 190), the new tempo can be difficult to ascertain, owing partly to the long G major chord, which is ten quarter-note beats in duration. The meter of the previous section can easily be felt as 3/2, or as 6/4. The meter at m. 190, however, is clearly 3/2. The tempo indication, *poco piu mosso grazioso,* assumes that the half-note tactus reigns prior to m. 190. This has far-reaching implications; to preserve continuity of flow, the half-note tactus needs to begin with the chorale harmonization in m. 159. If this is observed, then the tempo change at m. 190 increases from 𝅗𝅥≈55 to 𝅗𝅥≈80. For any player (or listener) still attuned to the quarter-note tactus, the new tempo at m. 190 creates a decided *meno mosso* feeling, as the pulse shifts from ♩≈110 to 𝅗𝅥≈80.

In mm. 235ff, the texture returns to a homophonic one, recalling the material that closed the fourth variation. Here the *tenuto* stresses delineate two and three-note units, and usurp the importance of the barlines in shaping the subphrases. The performers should mold these lines with an emphasis on phrasing over tempo; although the Tempo I

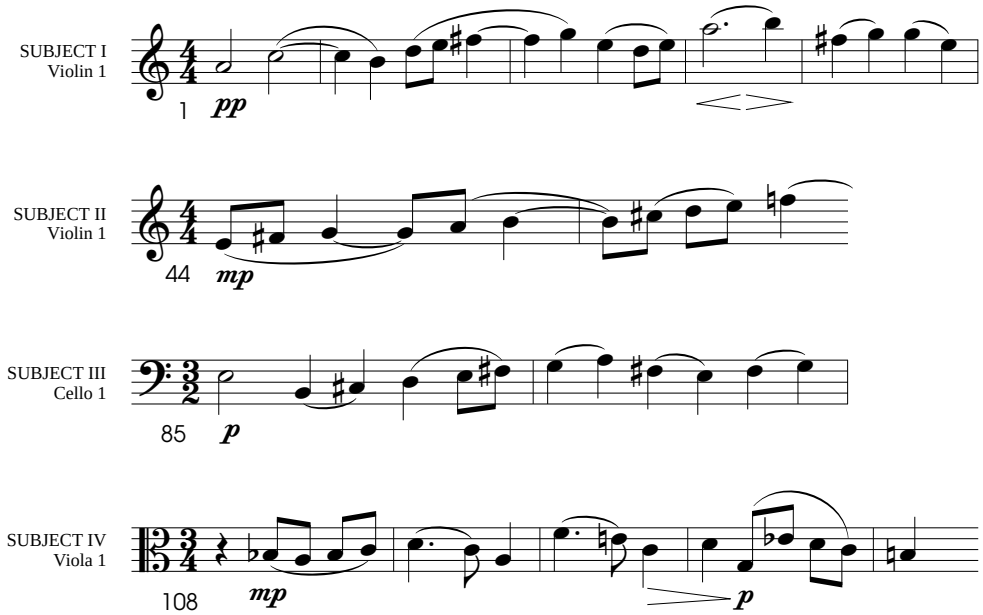
indication must be respected, this rhapsodic, retiring melody should not sound metronomic. Eventually, the three-note groupings become the norm, and 3/4 meter predominates for the remainder of the section (mm. 243–62).

MELODY. A typical Renaissance motet sets lines of text individually, developing each melodic idea in imitative counterpoint before continuing on to the next line of text, which is set to a new melodic idea. The text is generally delineated by cadential motion, textural changes, or rests.

Although no words are involved in Rosner's motet,[11] the movement follows the same general framework; one idea is presented and explored contrapuntally, followed by another (fig. 5.9 reproduces the initial appearance of each subject). The sections for each of the four main melodic subjects are separated by non-contrapuntal transitional passages, and at no point are the various subjects combined. There is little resemblance between these subjects and either the "Nun komm" chorale, or the first-movement *Tema*.

[11] Rosner once shared with me a silly phrase that lyrically fits the first subject: "I love asparagus, especially with an herbal mustard!" It was not until a year later that I recalled playing in the world premiere of Alan Hovhaness's Symphony No. 40, in 1982; in rehearsals for the performance, Hovhaness told the orchestra that the motive for the second movement theme occurred to him at a restaurant where he had ordered a bowl of clam chowder. Musical heritage is sometimes perpetuated in diverse and unexpected ways.

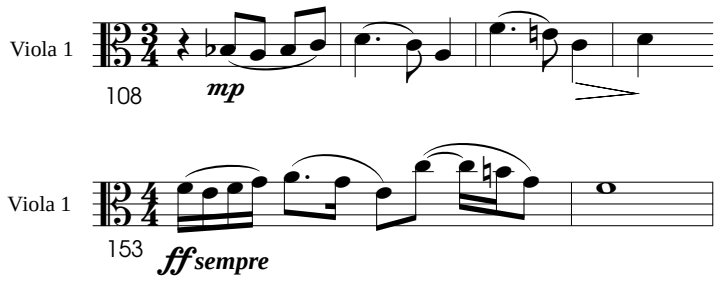
Figure 5.9. Initial appearance of motet subjects, op. 47, ii



Another Renaissance device which Rosner employs is the use of a preexisting melody as a *cantus firmus*, in this instance the complete "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland" chorale melody. Typically these melodies were not the focus of attention, but appeared in a lower voice in long note values. The chorale melody in the Sextet begins after the second subject is underway, with whole-note values in the first viola beginning with the *e*' in m. 50. The words "canto firmo"[sic] appear in the viola part and score at the start of the chorale, and the dynamic marking is ***f*** against ***mf*** in the other parts. Every note of the *cantus firmus* receives both an accent and tenuto marking. These devices serve to adjust for the inherent handicaps the chorale faces, by virtue of the long rhythmic values (whole notes and half notes, corresponding to the *longa* and *brevis* of mensural

notation), and the intentional harmonic and metric displacement of the chorale (i.e., the chorale phrases do not correspond with cadence points of the rest of the texture). The first viola should play with sufficient presence to keep the chorale from being hidden, but not to the extent that it becomes the principal musical feature of the passage.

FIGURE 5.10. Melodic comparison, mm. 108ff. and mm. 153f.

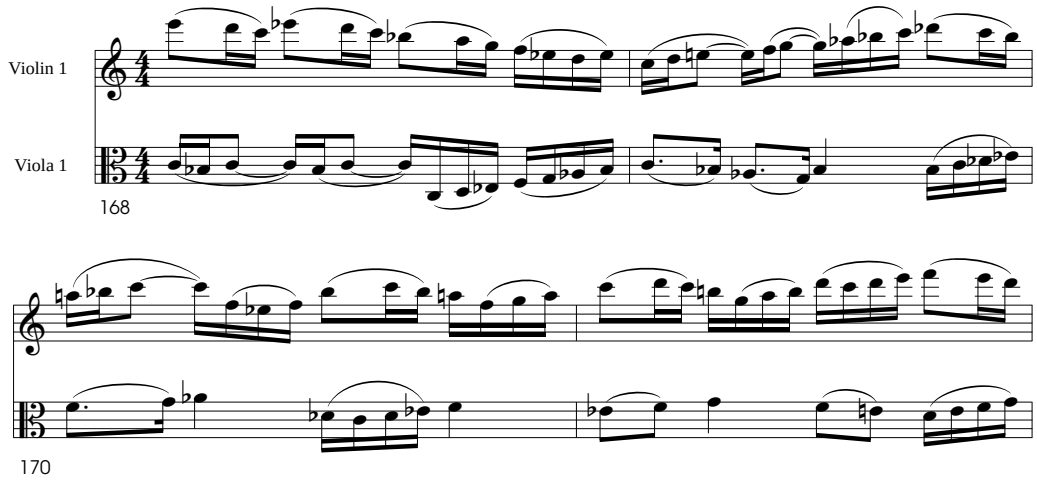


Rosner moves from the contrapuntal sections to a full chorale harmonization by use of thematic transformation. The melodic subject heard first in m. 108 undergoes rhythmic diminution and metric displacement in m. 153 (fig. 5.10) to form the basis for the elaborate melodic filigree that the first violin and first cello weave around the chorale. These lines, which Rosner described as "ribbons of decorative sound,"[12] are in widely spaced counterpoint to each other, at times exceeding a three-octave span, which makes the passage somewhat forgiving of intonational flaws. Coordination of the rhythms

[12] Remarks, 26 February 1998.

should be rehearsed at a slow tempo, especially in places where the rhythms interlock to form a running patter, such as mm. 168ff. (fig. 5.11).

FIGURE 5.11. Aggregate rhythms, op. 47, ii



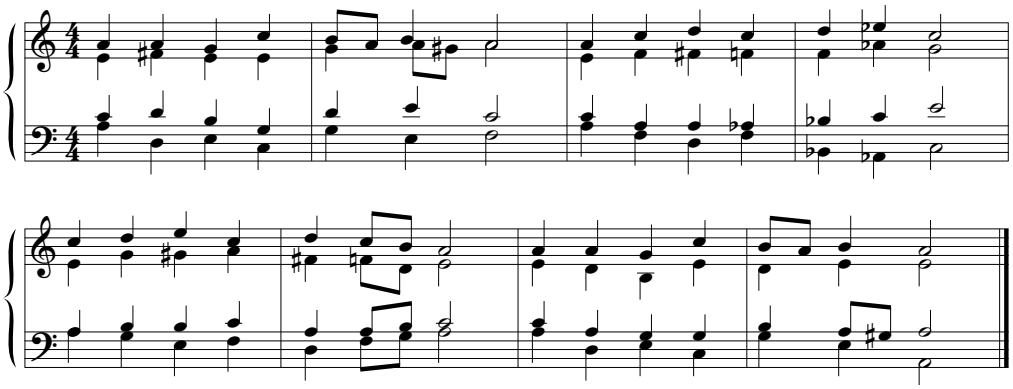
Reminiscent of the fifth variation, the first viola is given a plaintive, wistful melody in the coda, beginning in m. 207, marked ***mp*** over a sustained ***pp*** chord. The association with the cello's cadenza will be strengthened by a *liberamente* interpretation of the melodic line, which consists mostly of descending motivic figures. In the latter half of this section, however (mm. 220ff.), the sense of pulse is restored, with more frequent motion in the held chords, and clear references to Subject I (mm. 225–8) and the chorale (mm. 229–31). The violist must be aware of this and take fewer liberties with the tempo than in the beginning of the section.

HARMONY. Because of the highly contrapuntal nature of this movement, the overall harmonic character tends toward a higher level of dissonance than in the first movement. In a six-voice contrapuntal texture, various passing tones will create dissonant intervals with regularity. However, this is more an incidental byproduct of the compositional procedure than a deliberate attempt to create dissonant music. The propensity toward root-position chords remains as strong a force as in Rosner's other music, and his preference for triadic chords and the rarity of functional dominant-seventh chords similarly remain consistent.

Rosner uses brief homophonic passages to offset the contrapuntal sections, and these will require a different approach and attention to intonation. The three *subito* ***pp*** chords of mm. 31–3 are remote from each other; in the progression G minor–E major–C♯ major (spelled with an F♮), only the last pair share a common tone (G♯). Each chord must be carefully tuned against its root, without thought to voice leading or "expressive" intonation. Similar homophonic passages occur at structural divisions throughout the movement, such as in mm. 41–3, 91–4, 101–7, 152, and extensively in the coda.

The chorale makes three full appearances in the Sextet: the "devil's harmonization" of Variation 3, the *cantus firmus* played by the first viola in mm. 50–81 of the second movement, and the climactic harmonization which appears in mm. 159–83. After being harmonically obscured in the first appearance, and texturally hidden in the

FIGURE 5.12. Four-voice reduction showing Rosner's harmonization of "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland"



second, the impact of the third full statement is an exuberant and glorious declaration of the chorale. Figure 5.12 displays Rosner's harmonic progression in a Bach-like four-voice setting. Note that this is a reduction of the full orchestration, which has mostly six, and at times up to eight, voices, played by the four instruments. Preserving the bass line and the melody in the soprano creates in this example unavoidable parallel fifths and some awkward voice leading. Rosner's words on voice leading are worth repeating: "Each chord or harmonic unit should be stated in the clearest way, even if this entails some parallels (to which I have no objection) or compromises in voice leading."[13]

STRUCTURE. As is typical of text-based forms, the structure of this movement does not fall into any of the standard instrumental categories. The work falls roughly into

two parts. The first part features six-voice counterpoint on four different melodic subjects (see fig. 5.8 above), and the second consists of the fully harmonized chorale tune and a lengthy coda which serves to gradually dissipate the energy built up over the course of the work.

The movement begins and ends in A-dorian mode, dorian being the mode of "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland." As is typical of contrapuntally derived compositions, the first part (mm. 1–158) explores a wide range of harmonic regions. The four melodic subjects begin in A-dorian, E-dorian, E-dorian, and G-aeolian, respectively. These keys do not predominate for the entire sections, however, and to suggest that the first part utilizes tonic and dominant extensively would be misleading. The second part of the movement (mm. 159 to the end) largely confirms the A-dorian tonic.

The performers will find their search for motivic connections is well rewarded in this movement, as it is rich with references to itself, the first movement, and the chorale melody. Prior to the viola *cantus firmus* entry in m. 50, three short, asymmetrical phrases tease the listener with the rhythm of the chorale's first line; first in the second violin in mm. 34–7, then in the first viola in mm. 37–40, and finally in the second violin again,

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[13] Correspondence, 16 June 1999

mm. 41–4. During the first two of these, an interesting cello figuration distracts from the chorale-like lines, but the third is more prominent.

Following the final full chorale statement, several reminiscences occur. Measures 185–9 recall mm. 81–4, the expansive 3/2 theme that serves as connecting material between the second and third contrapuntal subjects. The similarity of the first viola solo in mm. 207ff. to Variation 5 has already been noted, but within this solo, mm. 225–31 foreshadow the final bars by invoking the Subject I melody and the chorale melody in succession. The only first movement variation to be directly quoted is Variation 4, from which the concluding material (mm. 158–71) returns at the Tempo I indication in m. 235 of the second movement.

The entire coda has a narrow dynamic range, from ***pp*** to ***mp***. All details, such as the tenuto stress markings, and the dolce and cantabile instructions, can be achieved without exceeding this range with great sensitivity from all players. The final chord will be most effective if the ensemble coordinates a *decrescendo a niente* with all notes disappearing together. This can be reliably achieved by designating a player to lead the final cutoff, with all players watching and matching bow usage.