6. WHO WROTE THIS?

For a (particularly a-cute) case of the refusal to ask “what if”, consider the rhythmic neume in Ex 1.

Think durations only (measured from “attack” to “attack”).

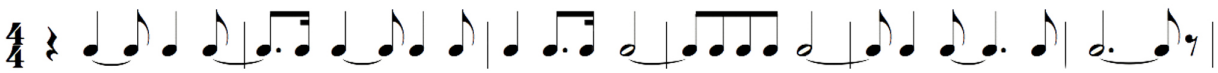
Nothing else.

Who might have utilized, or desired, such an Ex.1?

Ex. 1

Compare Ex. 2 with Ex.1.

Ex. 2



What are the differences?

Ex. 2 has a time signature, and starts with a quarter note rest. Thereafter:

Ex. 1 first shows a dotted quarter note worth six 16th-notes. Ex. 2 also shows a dotted quarter note (but written as a quarter-note tied to an eighth- note).

After the dotted quarter note, Ex. 1 shows a quarter note. So does Ex. 2.

Ex. 1 then shows a quarter note followed by a + (meaning five 16th notes). Ex. 2 notates this with an eighth-note, tied to a dotted eighth note; and so on.

In short, the examples are nominally arithmetically identical, the difference being the use (in Ex. 2) of a time signature, and barlines; vs. an unencumbered, durations-only, style. Both examples are the opening bars of Wagner's "Vorspiel" to "Parsifal" (*Ex.1 is NOT a quote from Messiaen!*).

How should one think about, play, these examples?

"Musicians" there are who hold that one should indicate the beats, or at least the downbeats, of Ex. 2; as opposed to having no such *davens* in Ex. 1.

How is one supposed to indicate the beats of Ex. 2?

With genteel swells, constipated grimaces, or little vomitings?

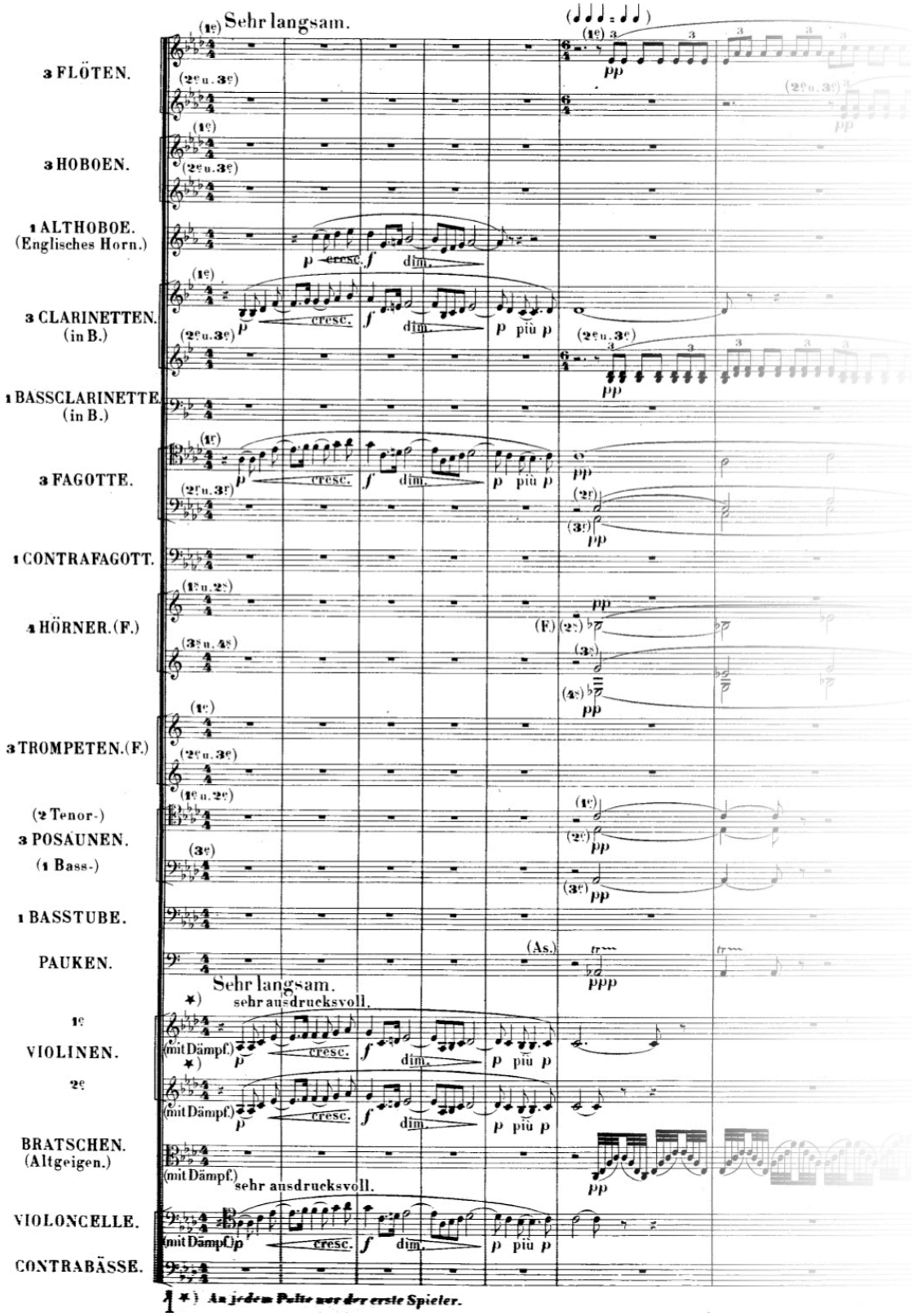
None of these exist in the original score; and as Wagner was capable of at least notating small cresc/dim, why assume that Wagner wanted such swells, grimaces, or vomits?

Would the vomits help or hinder the impression of time illimitable, so fundamental to “Parsifal” (and for that matter to Cage’s “Nearly Stationary”)?

Music exists in sound. How that sound is coded on paper is an interesting exercise, perhaps a clue as a means towards an aural end; but the coding is not the same as the solution.

Ex. 3

VORSPIEL.



What utility do Wagner's meters serve (other than keeping a large group of players more or less together)?

What function can the meters serve, especially when they cannot, indeed should not, be heard?

Ex. 3 shows the full score.

For the first 5 bars all is unison. No grid or marker(s) allow one to aurally measure how the opening "chant" might be plotted.

All is inchoate; rhythmically "without form, and void" ("…And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters")[i].

And the first real "arrival point" of the work (the A flat major chord in the middle of meas. 6) does NOT occur on a downbeat!

So how does one indicate, let alone convey, "beats"?

If one must, one can think of them internally; but what one thinks, and what is heard, are not the same!

Speaking of downbeats:

how many "pitch-classes" (of these first measures) actually occur on a downbeat?

Only two!! G natural on downbeat bar 3 (cleaving the opening phrase into 7 + 12 quarter notes); and the final "landing" C natural (bar 6). Other than for these, there are no downbeats!

Beyond the above two “pitch-classes” that occur on a downbeat, how many occur on any whole beat?

Five!
First A-flat bar one, beat two.
F natural, bar 2, beat 2.
C natural, bar 3, beat 2.
E flat, bar 3, beat 3.
D flat, bar 4, beat 4.

So obeisance is required to a series of artificial “mileposts” that exist solely in imaginary Cartesian; “mileposts” imposed upon a simulacrum of plainchant (which is a thing without rigid bar-lines, or even precisely defined individual note-values)?

In what rational (even irrational) world does that make any sense?

And then there is the high probability that Ex. 1 is almost certainly far closer to Wagner’s “intent” than is Ex. 2.
Once again, a composer was trapped between the accepted notational possibilities of the time[ii] and an exploration, and chose the former; but that is no excuse for us to not see the future peeking through “the face of the waters”.

Paul Zukofsky
Hong Kong
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[i] “and darkness was upon the face of the deep.”

[ii] And the practicalities of holding together an orchestra — although given the unison, a conductor “could” just cue each attack, thereby obviating the need for barlines.