# SPOHR'S SECOND SYMPHONY

by Clive Brown

For more than thirty years after the death of Beethoven until his own death in 1859 Spohr was considered by many eminent musicians and critics to be the greatest living composer. Even those who might have favoured Mendelssohn's claim to this position in the 1840s generally awarded Spohr the palm on the grounds of seniority. In an obituary Spohr was described as 'the last of the Teutonic family of musical giants' by a critic who clearly regarded German music as superior to that of other nations. In England during the 1840s his reputation was at its height. After he had conducted a triumphant performance of his latest oratorio The Fall of Babylon in London in 1843, The Musical World enthused:

> Spohr - the great Spohr - the immortal, while yet living, founder of a new feeling, if not of a new school in music, - Spohr, the mighty master, who has stamped upon the hearts of his contemporaries that impression to which we are rarely susceptible but through the medium of an age's authority, the comprehension of a man's merits - Spohr, whose name conveys more to the minds of those who feel its import than any words can signify, has been acknowledged by the people in a manner that does them, no less than him, the highest and the proudest honour. (xviii (1843),253)

His Second Symphony had been written in London 23 years earlier, in the remarkably short time of three weeks, during his first visit to England. It was dedicated to the Philharmonic Society and he directed its first performance with them on April 10th 1820. Reviewing this concert The Morning Chronicle felt that it was 'on the whole, a brilliant performance, and owed much of its éclat to a new symphony by M.Spohr, performed for the first time, which places him amongst instrumental composers of the highest class, being as remarkable for the elegance and vocality of its melody, and the consistency of its design, as for the scientific knowledge which it exhibits throughout.' (4:V:1820)

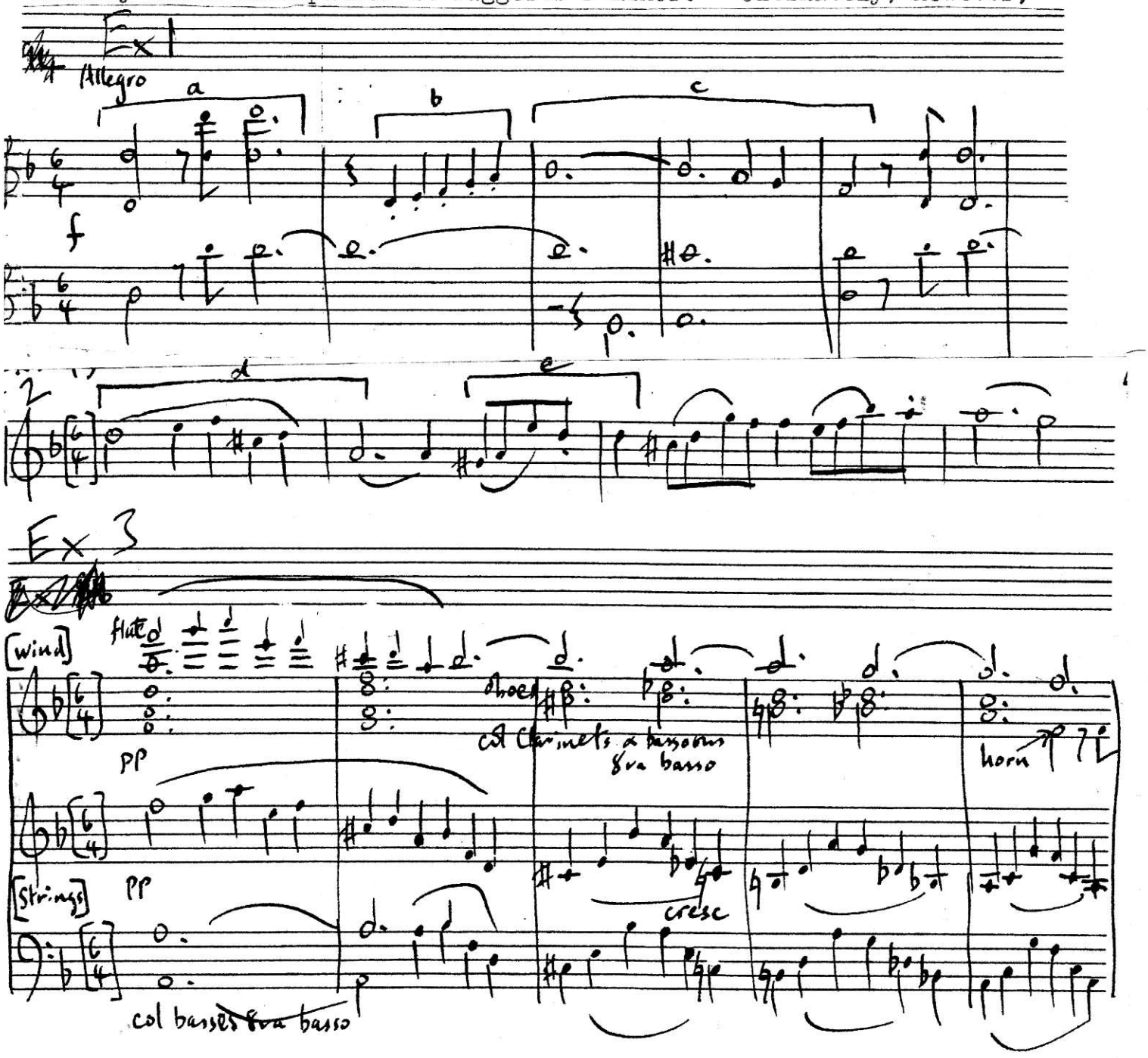
Over the next twenty years the Symphony established itself as a particular favourite with English musicians, and in 1842 J.W.Davison, later music critic of The Times, wrote: 'This symphony is, beyond comparison, the most perfect orchestral composition that has proceeded from the pen of Spohr. Whether we consider it as the result of profound musicianship, or as the outpouring of prolific genius, it stands alone, as an incomparable specimen of one of the two great modern styles.' (Musical World,xvii(1842),51)

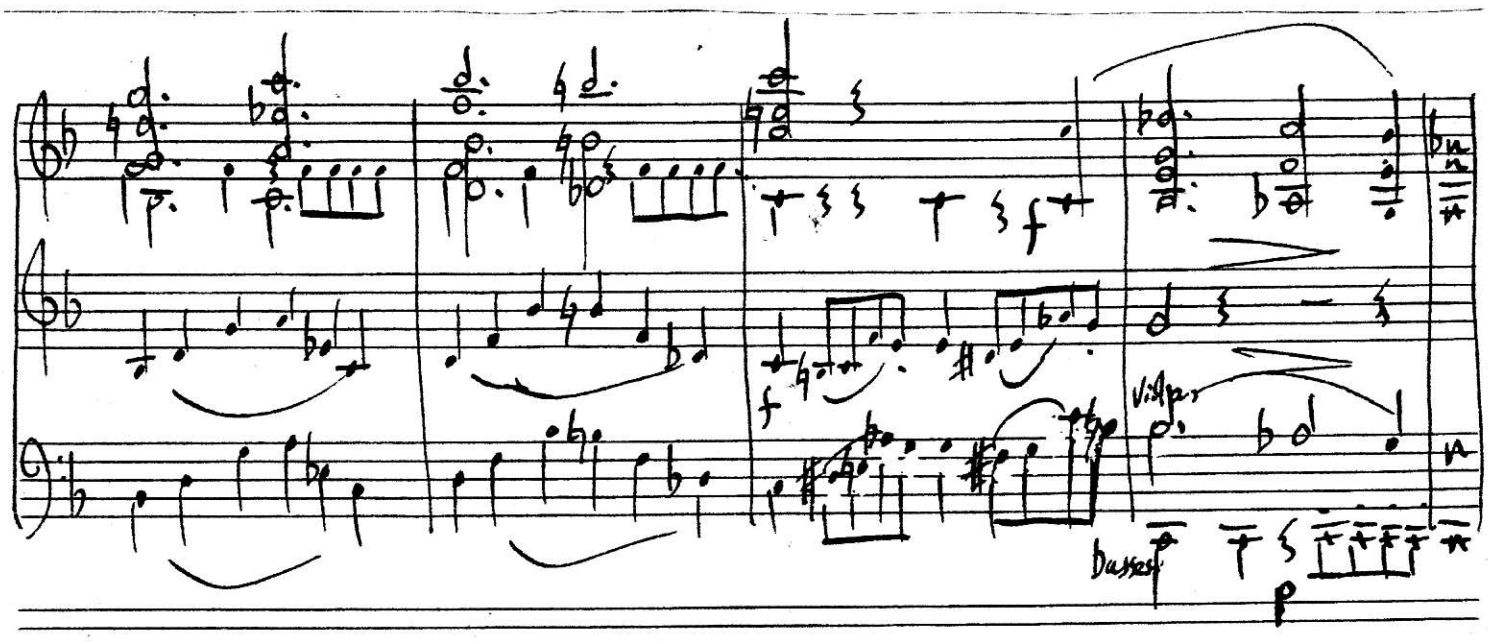
It retained its place as a regular item in the repertoire, along with Spohr's Fourth Symphony, Die Weihe der Töne, until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, after which, together with the bulk of his music, it fell into neglectful obscurity.

The Symphony is in the usual four movements:-

Allegro - Larghetto - Scherzo: presto - Finale: vivace.

All but one of the essential germs from which the first movement grows are stated within the initial 22 bars. The first 5 bars contain three important motifs (ex.1), the oboe in an expressive solo then contributes an important variant of these, before the strings alone state a new theme at bar 19 (ex.2),,which is typical of the Romantic melancholy quality so often alluded to by contemporaries. The music builds up by degrees to a strongly dissonant minor ninth on the dominant at bar 44 sustained for four bars before resolving in the fifth, then after a marvellously effective passage with the string section in octaves (ex.3) the music reaches a C pedal, in preparation for the expected relative major, though the dissonant diminished harmony which accompanies it suggests F minor. Ultimately, however,

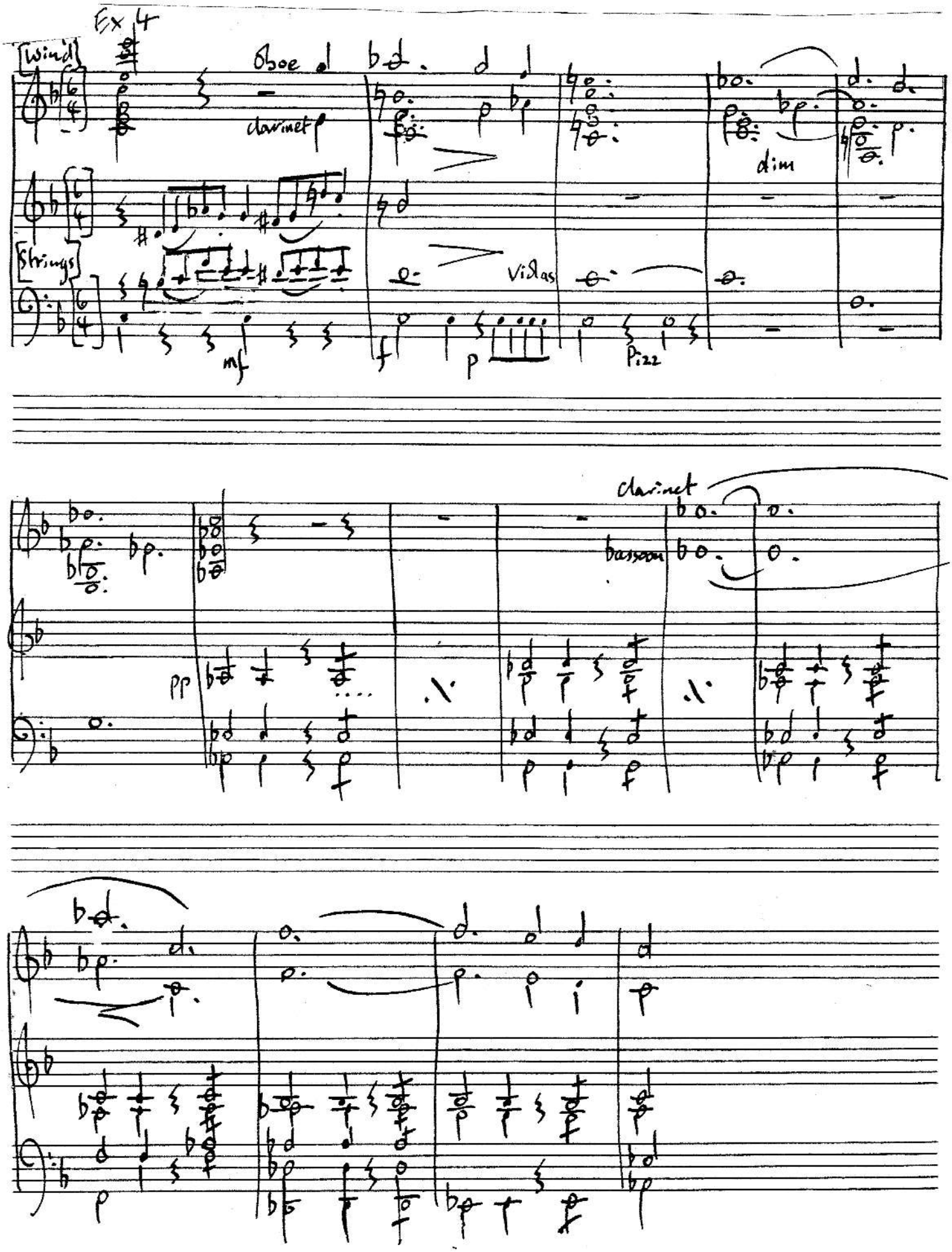


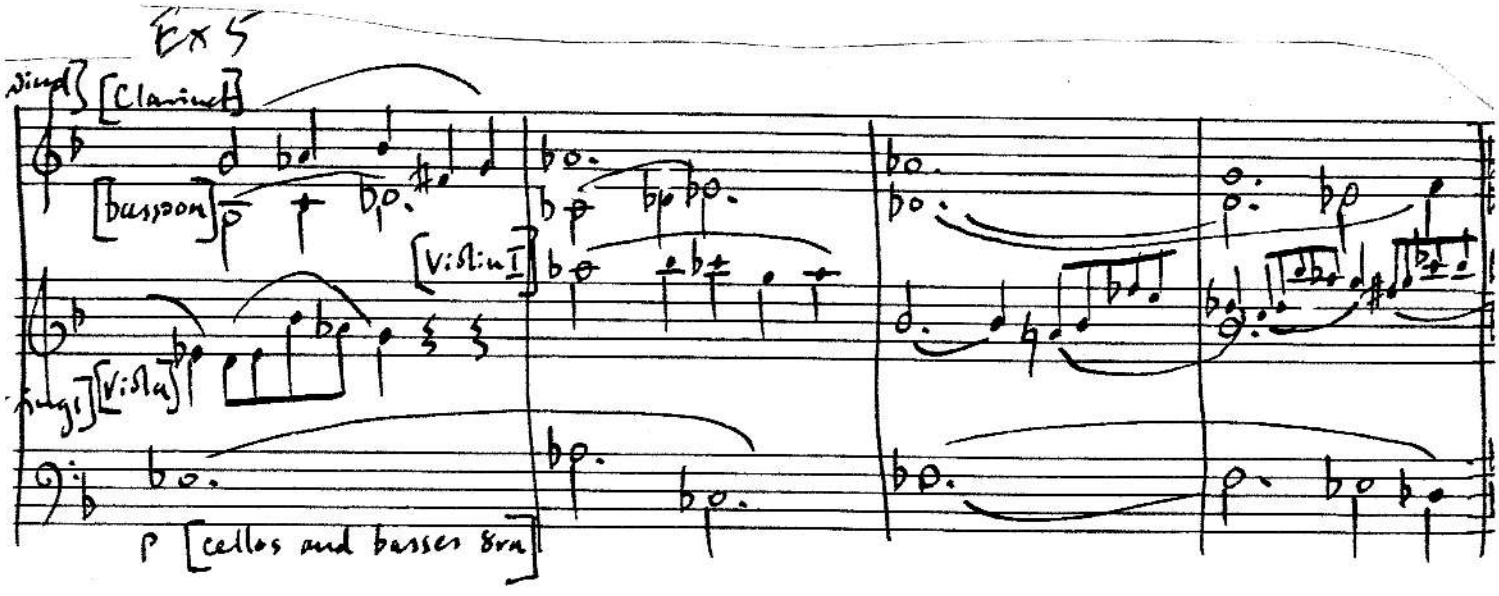


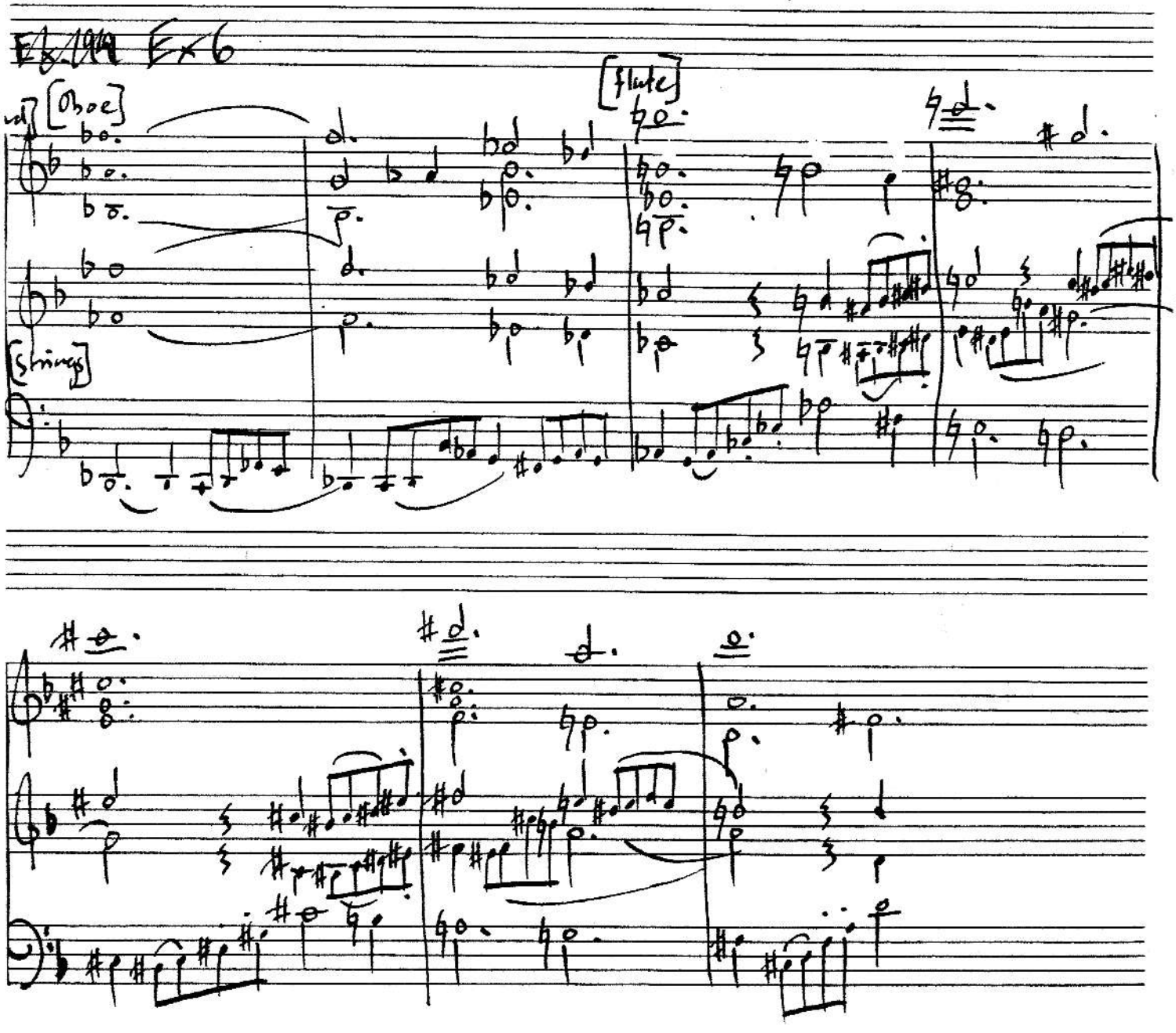

at bars 76-79 all expectations of F are dispelled in a fine passage which seems to arrive at a 'second subject' in the 'wrong' key (ex.4). The first phrase of the clarinet and bassoon theme is new, providing the final motif from which the movement is built, but the second phrase links the theme with the previous material. From here the music gradually makes its way to the relative major and a brilliant string passage developing e combined with d in the wind, which drives the music purposefully towards the double bar. These ideas continue to be combined in a variety of ways in the development section (ex.5) which beginning another characteristic mediant shift to A flat major changes mode after a few bars to A flat minor, then modulates enharmonically through a number of keys. The descending whole tones in the bass at this point have a striking and prophetic effect (ex.6). Spohr eventually arrives at dominant preparation for D minor which utilises the music of the movement's opening bars, but slips at the last moment into D major for a magically transformed reappearance pianissimo of theme d - e. A powerful D minor coda concludes the movement.

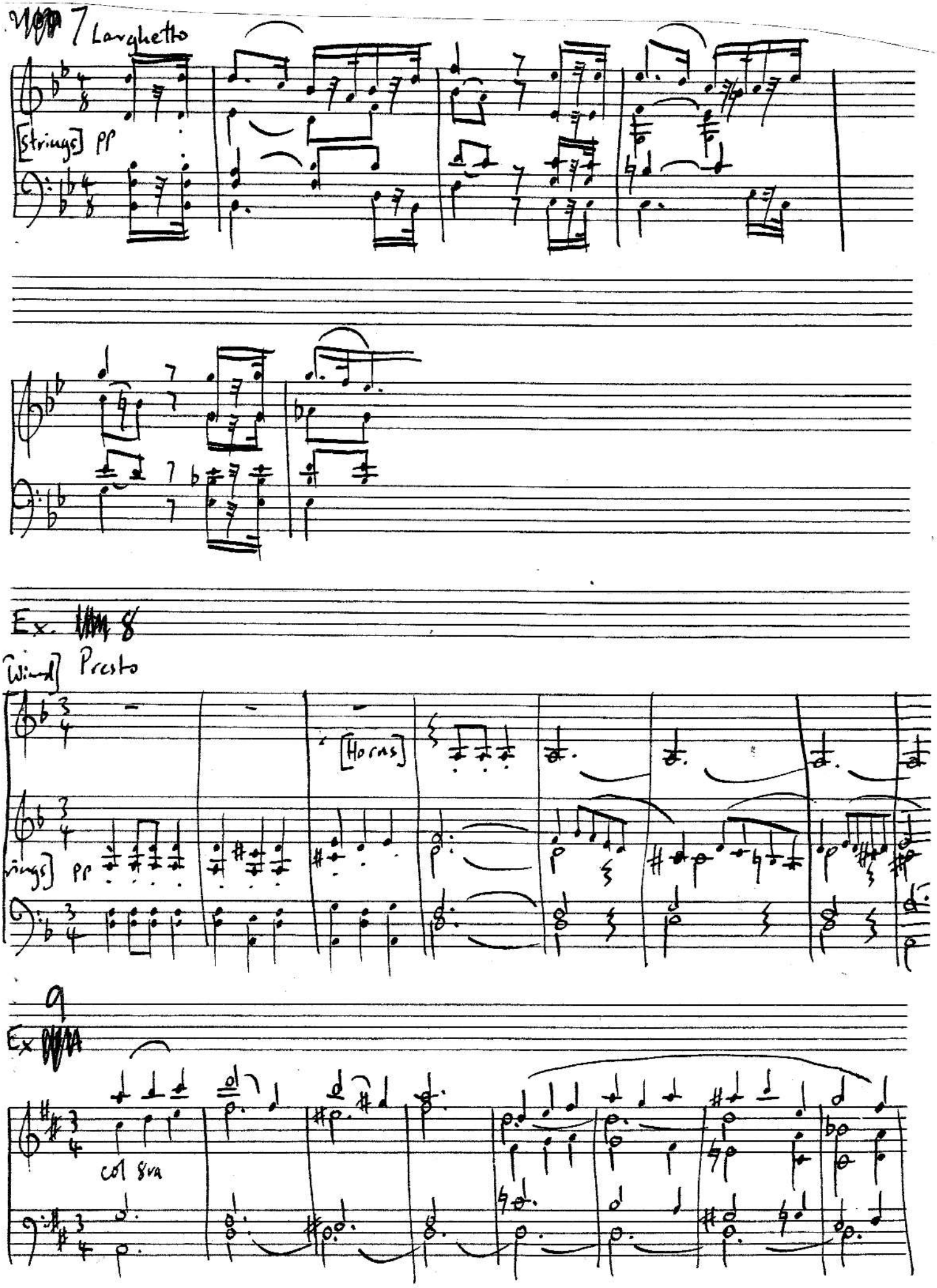
The Larghetto second movement in B flat begins with a gently yearning theme, luxuriantly harmonised (ex.7). Clarinets and bassoons are used in chorus to good effect and towards the close of the section the cellos are freed from the basses and soar above the violas in a manner increasingly characteristic of Spohr's orchestration. At bar 32 trumpets and horns herald a new section in G minor in which a rapidly ascending flourish assumes prominence. This essentially stormy section is punctuated by a calmer passage in which the flourish is heard only as a distant murmur while the woodwind are given expressive pianissimo solos. After a further outburst building to a tremendous climax the opening section of the movement is repeated in a slightly elaborated form.

The Scherzo is one of Spohr's finest. Formally it is interesting in that the Trio is repeated, but with different orchestration and its repetition leads straight into an exciting coda. The Scherzo begins in a breathless pianissimo (ex.8), the theme being taken over successively by solo bassoon, oboe and flute before the repeat. In the second section the music, which has never risen above piano subsides again to pianissimo over a dominant pedal before finally crescendoing in an exuberant release of tension fortissimo in D major with trumpets and timpani entering for the first time. An abrupt return to pianissimo


Ex 4
[Wind]
Oboe
clarinet
dim
[Strings]
Violas
mf
f
p
Pizz
clarinet
bassoon
pp


Ex 5
[Clarinet]
[bassoon]
[Violin I]
[Viola]
p [cellos and basses 8va]


Ex 6
[Oboe]
[flute]
[strings]


7 Larghetto
[Strings] pp
Ex. 8
[Wind] Presto
[Horns]
[Strings] pp
9
Ex
col 8va

Ex 10

[oboe] [flute] [clarinets] [horn] [bassoon] [Tutti] [timps]

pp f f f

and solos from clarinet and oboe lead to the double bar. The Trio in D major is of an entirely different character, seeming to recall the Ländler which Spohr must have come to know during his time in Vienna (ex.9). The theme is stated by wind and timpani alone, and repeated by strings; the same procedure being followed for the second section. In Trio 2, after the repetition of the Scherzo, strings and wind combine to give a full-bodied account of the theme. In the Coda a particularly fine effect is created by a solo timpani passage accompanied by wind, which precedes the final cutburst from the full orchestra (ex.10).

The Finale, as in the First Symphony, is a more lightweight movement. Spohr, mindful perhaps of the frequently reiterated charge that his music was too often inclined to the elegaic, seems to have decided to send his listeners away in a good humour. The principal theme, with its warm harmonisation, has something of the amiable flow that is characteristic of later nineteenth-century D major symphonic Finales (eg. Brahms and Dvorak) (ex.11). The second subject has a humorous quality (ex.12), especially when its second phrase is later given to the horn.

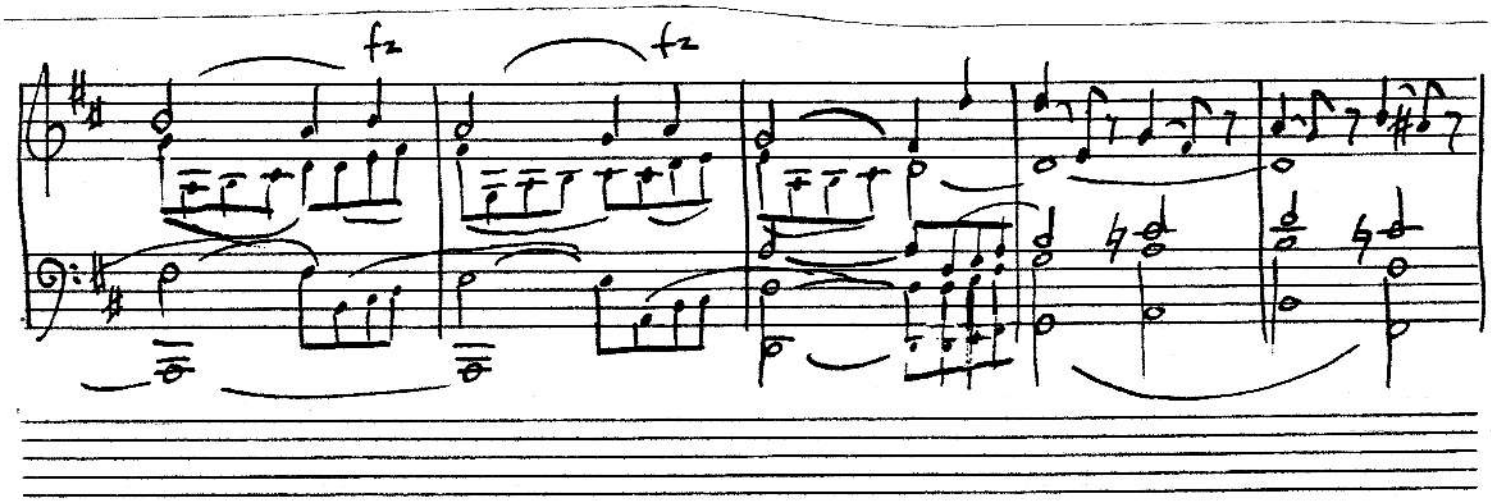
In this symphony Spohr showed his thorough mastery of the orchestra, which he handled almost like a large chamber ensemble. The texture is never misjudged and the variety of timbres which he achieved is remarkable; in this respect the D minor Symphony is unsurpassed by any contemporary work.

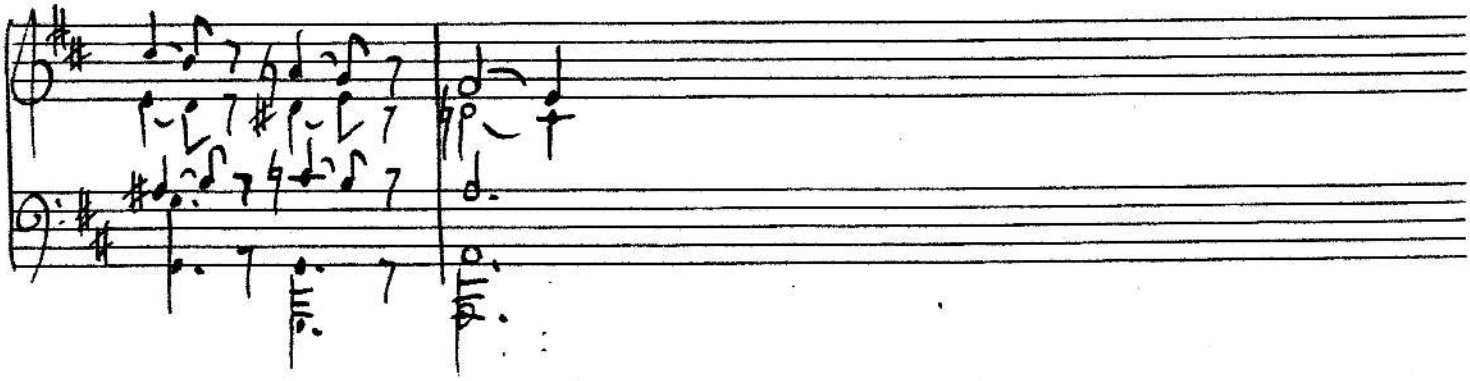
Ex. 11

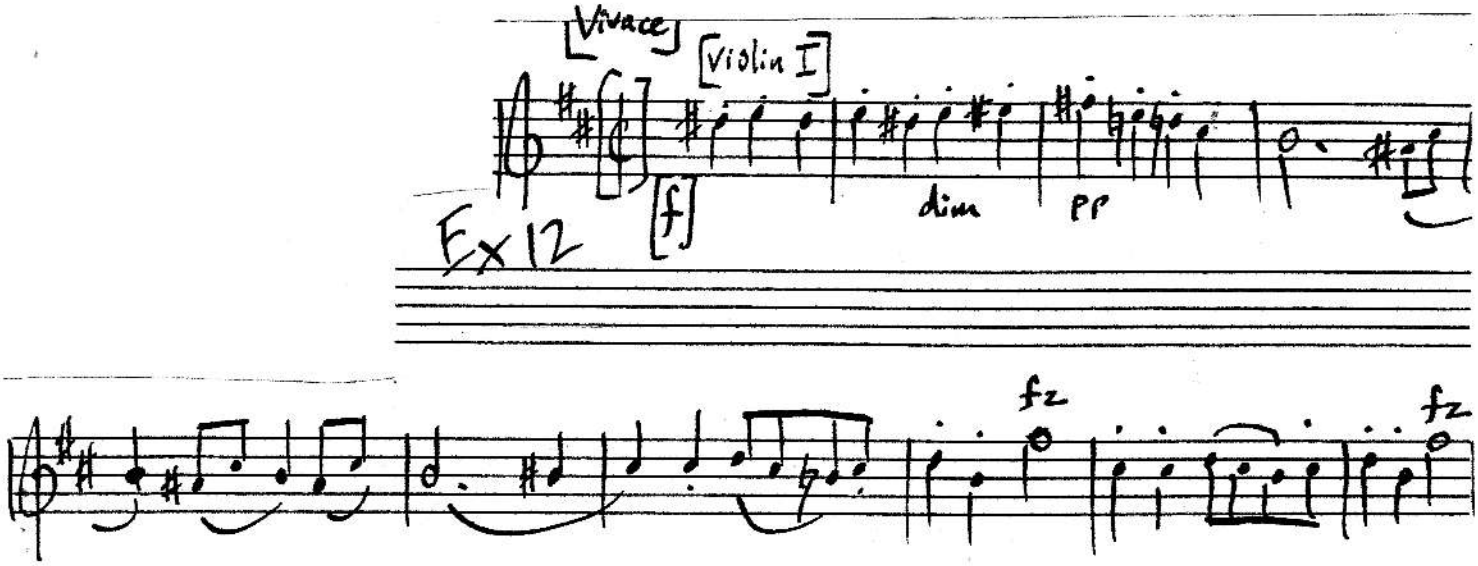
[Vivace]

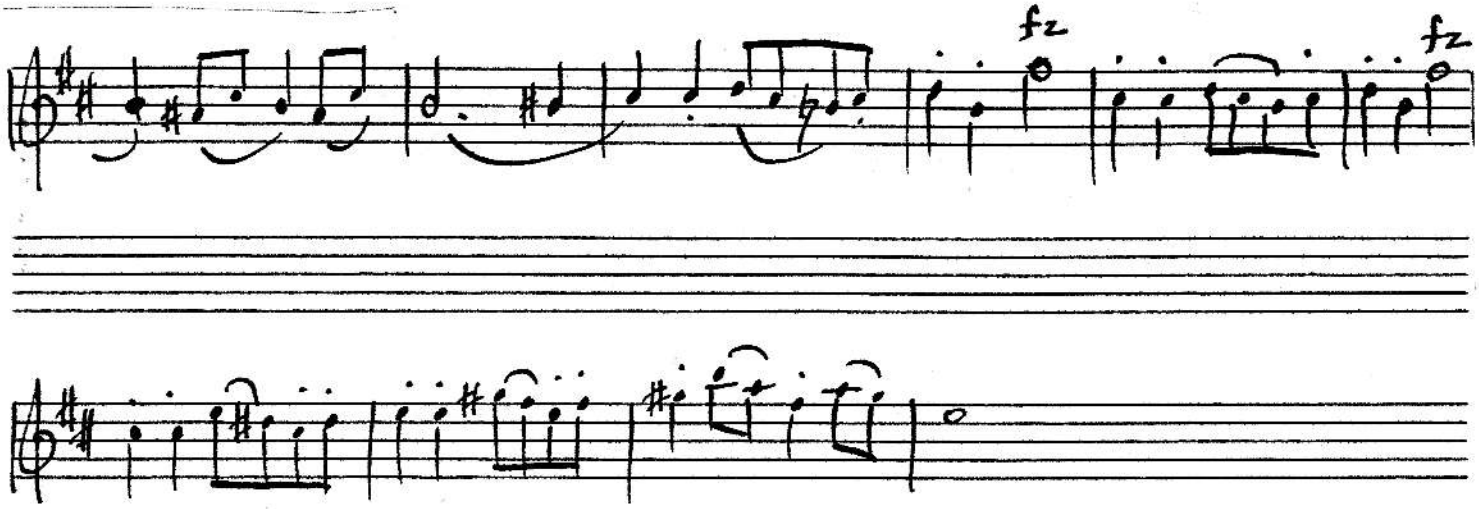
strings

pp fz fz fz






Ex 12