SONATA FORM IN THE FIRST MOVEMENT OF EDVARD GRIEG'S STRING QUARTET IN G MINOR, OP. 27

David Orvek
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A rough outline of the musical events encompassed within measures 17-202 of the first movement of Edvard Grieg's string quartet in G minor, op. 27 is presented below in figure 1. I find it quite easy to hear this passage as a sonata exposition, but it is not immediately apparent how this experience can be justified given what is actually presented in the music. For one thing, the sheer number of distinct subsections within this passage and the musical similarity of many of these musical ideas makes it difficult to articulate the exact role they play in the sonata narrative. Which of the B^{b} major themes, for example, should be considered the second theme? The lyrical theme (what I have called "B") seems a promising candidate, but then what are we to make of the remaining material? There is also the problem that many of the musical events we would expect to find in a normative sonata exposition simply do not seem to be present in this excerpt. Where, for example, is the transition from G minor to B^{b} major or the structural/harmonic articulation that sets up this second key area? The movement thus seems to contain many of the broad characteristics of a sonata but is significantly deformed in the finer details. What is needed to make sense of this movement is a lexicon of terminology for classifying these deformations. I find that the writings of Hepokoski and Darcy—though targeted at music of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries—provide just such a lexicon. In fact, when understood in these terms, one finds that the movement is not quite as deformed as it might at first appear and that the deformations that do occur play important dramatic roles in the narrative of the quartet.

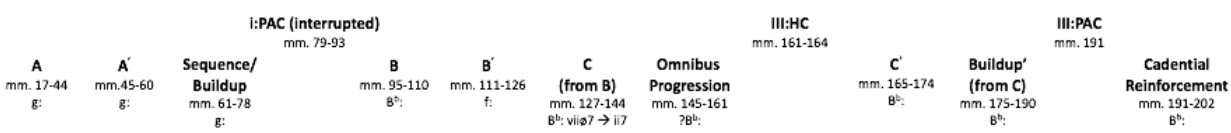

Figure 1. The musical events in measures 17-202

Returning to figure 1, I direct the reader's attention to the cadences, which I have set above the other musical elements. Cadences, and the structural junctions they articulate, are the crux of Hepokoski and Darcy's Sonata Theory because they allow us to divide the larger sonata narrative into smaller groups of similar rhetorical function.[1] The most important of these cadences from a dramatic standpoint is the first PAC attained in the secondary key area. This PAC is *the* essential moment of the exposition, what the entire exposition works towards, and Hepokoski and Darcy thus dub it the "essential expositional closure" (EEC).[2] A PAC in B^{b} major (the relative key of G minor and the expected secondary key of a minor-key sonata) is not achieved until measure 191, very nearly the end of the exposition. The fact that the EEC comes so late in the exposition implies that the S space—which the EEC brings to an end—has been postponed or expanded.

The most common way of accomplishing such a delay or extension of S is by playing in some way with the cadence that "opens up" the musical space for this new rhetorical/tonal area: the "medial caesura."[3] For Hepokoski and Darcy, "a medial caesura is usually built around a strong half cadence . . . that has been rhythmically, harmonically, or texturally reinforced."[4] The first likely candidate we find for such a medial caesura (MC) occurs in measures 161-164, but this is well after the arrival of B^{b} major in measure 95 and the beginning of the lyrical "B" theme. Obviously then, this cannot be the true MC. The only other cadence large and accented enough to produce an MC is the interrupted i:PAC in measures 79-93. Though certainly not

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[1] James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, "The Medial Caesura and Its Role in the Eighteenth-Century Sonata Exposition," *Music Theory Spectrum* 19, no. 2 (Autumn, 1997): 115-17.

[2] Hepokoski and Darcy, "The Medial Caesura," 119; James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 18.

[3] Hepokoski and Darcy, "The Medial Caesura," 121.

[4] Hepokoski and Darcy, "The Medial Caesura," 121.

normative, this cadence does create a rather significant textural break if for no other reason than the nearly two measures of rest that follow it. The fact that this cadence is interrupted, rather violently, by the interpolation of C7 and E^b between the dominant and tonic significantly undermines its finally, which, to my ear, causes this moment to imply continuation rather than closure. The cadence is also preceded by a passage of intense rhythmic vitality, registral and dynamic extremes, dissonance, and chromaticism (mm. 45-78). All of this provides the energy needed for this cadence to accomplish its caesural task despite the fact that we have not yet left G minor. In fact, when we understand that modulation "is better regarded as only one common way of energizing the texture" and that "many transitions do not modulate at all," it seems quite legitimate to consider measures 45-78 the transitional zone (TR).[5] Though admittedly rare, Hepokoski and Darcy do note one significant instantiation of a i:PAC functioning as an MC: the first movement of Mozart's string quintet in G minor.[6] The fact that both these works are in G minor might be purely coincidental, but it is interesting nonetheless.

The definition of the i:PAC in measures 79-93 as an MC does not necessarily disqualify the more normative III:HC in measures 161-164 however. In fact, I think we are able to account for far more of the expositional events and tell a more interesting formal "story" if we consider *both* cadences to be fully functional medial caesuras. Hepokoski and Darcy refer to such a situation as a "mid-expositional trimodular block" and describe six defining elements:

> 1) the presence of a moment of structural punctuation (usually a GP HC-gap) that seems to be taken (or mistaken) for a proposed MC; 2) the onset of a lyrical theme (S1), usually *piano*, in the proper second key (thus suggesting that the prior HC, however weak or non-normative, has been accepted as an MC); 3) the inability or unwillingness of S1—sometimes presented as weakened or flawed in some respect—to lead directly to a PAC in the second key (or at least the inability to produce a PAC that is convincing as the EEC); 4) the decay of S1 or its reinvigoration of TR-rhetoric; 5) the setting up of a

[5] Hepokoski and Darcy, "The Medial Caesura," 122.

[6] Hepokoski and Darcy, "The Medial Caesura," 150.

> second MC candidate (usually an HC, since a third-level-default PAC could be interpreted as the EEC); 6) the statement of another theme **with S-rhetoric (S2)**, which now provides the PAC that attains the EEC.[7]

Save the bolded phrase, this quotation describes perfectly the situation from measures 95-191, and we may thus graph the form of the exposition in terms of a TMB as seen in figure 2.

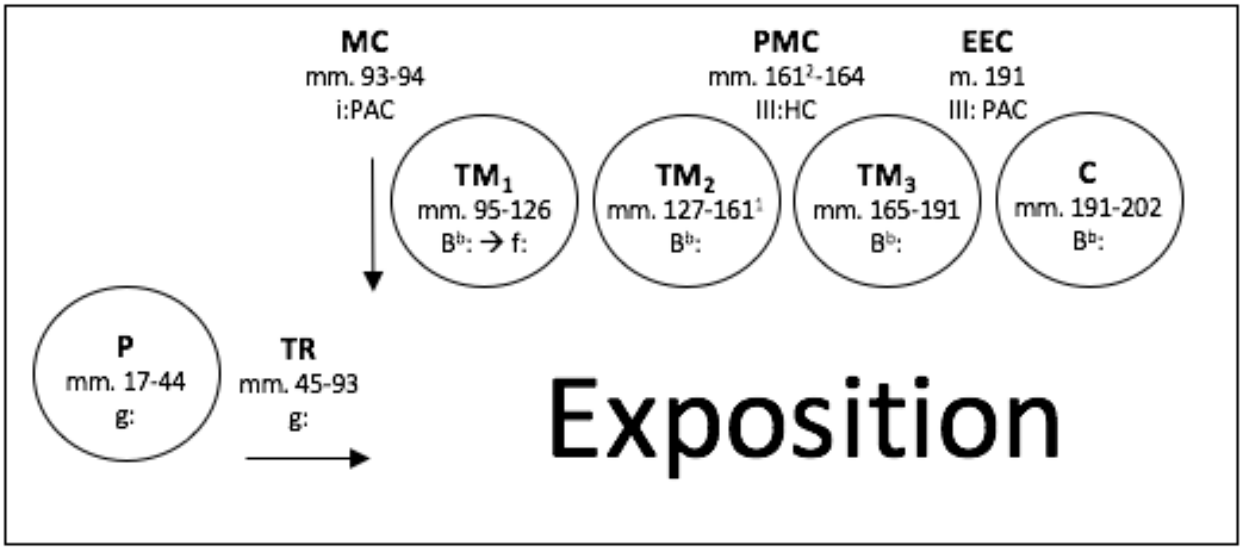

Figure 2. The exposition labeled in terms of a TMB

Instead of stating "another theme with S-rhetoric" after the second MC to "solve" the "deficiencies" of the first S theme, however, Grieg appears to attack the problem at its heart by recycling and modifying the theme from measures 127-134. This theme is a derivation of the original S theme of measures 95-106, which is also stated in the introduction (mm. 1-16). The theme originally comes from *Spillemænd,* the first of six songs on texts by Henrik Ibsen, which Grieg wrote in 1876; the year before he began work on the quartet.[8] *Spillemænd* is based upon an old Norwegian folk tale of a man who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for the ability to play the fiddle well enough to capture the heart of his beloved.[9] According to Sandra Jarrett:

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[7] Hepokoski and Darcy, "The Medial Caesura," 146; see also Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 150-179

[8] Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: Chamber Music* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1993), 63.

[9] Sandra Jarrett, *Edvard Grieg and His Songs* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 58-59.

> The symbolic theme of the poem, that the artist must follow his demon, with great sacrifice of personal happiness and a 'normal' life, was one which echoed in Grieg's thoughts, words, and actions throughout his life. Again and again he went through emotional crises, when he despaired of being able to fulfill his calling as a composer because of the mundane demands of daily life. He often expressed his need to escape from his personal responsibilities in order to have some chance of achieving the promise of his talent and his art, even though this rejection of a normal existence would bring its own pain and dissatisfaction.[10]

The fact that this beautiful theme is not "good enough" to achieve a cadence until it has been modified and stripped of much of its lyricism is quite suggestive. This theme will continue to be a motto for the rest of the movement (and, indeed, the whole quartet[11]) and its treatment implies important things about the dramatic narrative of the movement.

Turning now to the recapitulation (graphed in figure 3), we note that the TMB modules are presented in E^b major rather than the expected G minor. E^b is potentially significant for several reasons. First, E^b major (along with C7) was the chord that interrupted the would-be PAC in measures 79-85. If a PAC in the tonic key is to be considered the tonal goal of a sonata, then this interruption is, essentially, what prevented the movement from coming to a close in measure 79. The key of E^b in the recapitulation and its eventual move to G minor thus addresses that immense tension and potentially brings it to some sort of resolution. E^b is also the diatonic inversion of B^b around G, or, put a different way, these two keys are diatonically symmetric about the tonic. Grieg can thus use E^b as a counterbalance to B^b. This relationship is first explored in the first half of the development by a gradual chromatic ascent from B^b minor in measure 207 to E^b minor in measure 270. After reaching E^b, this axis of diatonic symmetry about G is then made abundantly clear by stating the keys of B^b and G in succession (see figure 4).[12]

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[10] Jarrett, *Edvard Grieg and His Songs*, 59.

[11] See Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: Chamber Music*, 63-71.

[12] E^b also belongs to the same hexatonic system as G minor, but it does not appear to me that hexatonicism plays an important role in this movement.

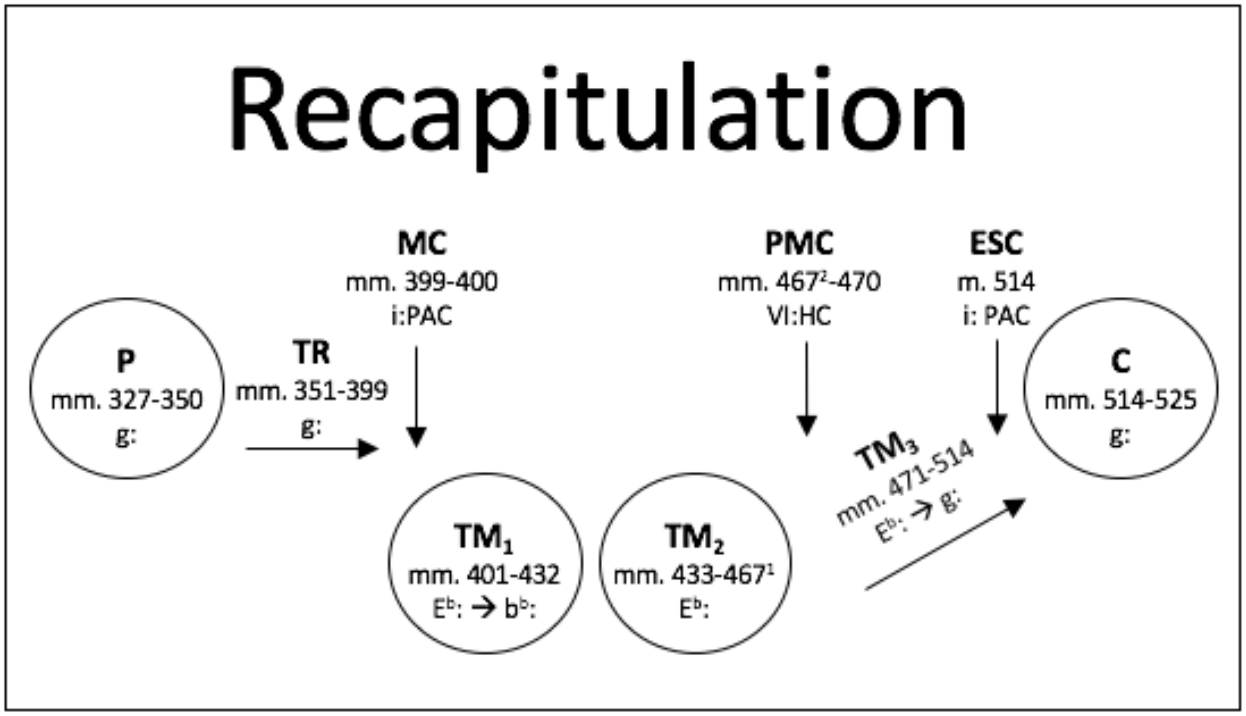

Figure 3. The recapitulation labeled in terms of a TMB

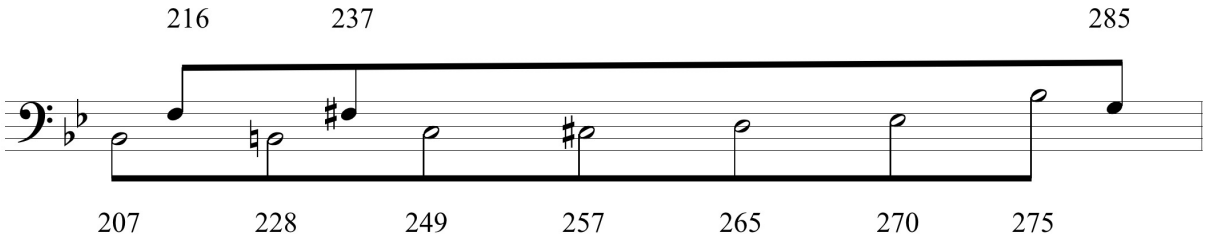

Figure 4. Key centers of the development. Numbers indicate measure numbers

Placing the TMB modules of the recapitulation in E^b necessitates a modification of one of the modules so that the essential PAC can now take place in the tonic. Interestingly, Grieg chooses to alter TM_3, the "second S" that, in the exposition, was the stable theme that brought us to the EEC. Placing the modulation at this point leaves the very important lyrical theme of TM_1 unstated in the tonic key and also means that TM_2 and the second MC at measures 467-470 drive toward and prepare a non-tonic key. In fact, G minor is not really prepared in any sort of normative way. Instead, the music merely slips into G minor, almost without our notice, during

the extended TM_3. The extensive chromaticism that builds to the ESC ("essential structural closure")[13] in measures 498-513 and sudden texture shift at the actual moment of cadence (m. 514) also significantly undermines the finality of this moment. Since the ESC is arguably the most significant moment of the entire sonata, this is a rather dramatic deformation, one that will require some sort of resolution. The recapitulation ends in measure 525, however, with many of these questions unanswered.

A coda then follows at measure 526 to address many of the issues left by the sonata space (exposition, development, and recapitulation). The C7 with which the coda begins immediately recalls to my mind the C7 that interrupted the PACs in measures 79-86 and 385-392, particularly because of the distinct way that these chords are voiced. Instead of interrupting a cadence, however, this chord and the tension associated with it is now transformed and resolved into a half cadence through a magical progression of chords that includes E^b major, which was also involved in the cadential interrupt. This progression even happens twice (mm. 526-537 and 542-552) to account for both instances of the interrupted cadence. The inner-voice descent from E (or E^b, depending on one's point of reference) to B^b that accomplishes this transformation also nicely reverses the chromatic ascent in root motion form B^b minor to E^b minor in the development and references these pitches' role as secondary keys. This progression also recalls a very similar moment that bridges the gap between the development and recapitulation (mm. 321-326). Sounded in the first violin during all this is a modified version of the theme from introduction (mm. 1-16), which later became the lyrical theme of TM_1. It is not an exaggeration, then, to see this moment as a summation of the entire movement.

[13] Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 20.

To my ears, however, TM_1 still has not been adequately dealt with. For one thing, by the end of the recapitulation (m. 525), this version of the theme has never appeared in the tonic because the TMB modules were in E^b for the recapitulation. Furthermore, the original form of this theme—its form in *Spillemænd*—has always remained tonally open, never able to progress beyond the establishment of a half cadence. It was only through great sacrifice to its lyricism and beauty that it was able to find closure as the theme of TM_3. Just as Grieg often wondered if it might be possible to have personal happiness and professional success, we may wonder if it might be possible to have both lyricism and tonal closure. Measures 560-587 seem to take the first step toward answering this question. Here, the *Spillemænd* theme returns in all of its lyrical splendor, now in the key of G major. Most importantly, it is reharmonized as a plagal cadence, which finally brings the theme to a weak sort of closure. But this cadence does not appear strong enough to end the conflict, and the music quietly slips back into G minor at measure 592. This tug of war between major and minor, between the *Spillemænd* theme and its various derivatives will continue to plague the music for the rest of the quartet just as the demands of normal life and of art continued to pull at Grieg for most of his life. The drama finally comes to a head in the fourth movement beginning at rehearsal X. A detailed study of the whole quartet would probably be needed to determine which (if either) side "wins," but I have included these final pages of the fourth movement in the appendix so that the reader might draw their own conclusions.

My hope is that this discussion, though necessarily brief, has revealed the care with which Grieg approached the form of this movement and the intricate ways in which many of the seemingly disparate elements are, in fact, deeply connected. Indeed, in a letter to Gottfred Matthison-Hansen in 1877, Grieg reveals that form was foremost in his mind while writing: "You have no idea what difficulty I have with the forms . . . "[14] Though certainly unorthodox in many of the surface details, the handling of the sonata form in this first movement falls well within the norms of the late-eighteenth century. What may at first appear as a crudely constructed collage of unrelated musical ideas is actually organized by deep formal and narrative logic, and I believe this logic allowed Grieg to tell a powerfully dramatic story through the quartet. This quartet came at an important time in Grieg's life: "He had lost both parents in 1875, and his relationship with Nina [his wife] was undergoing severe pressure. In addition [sic] he was questioning, as he did periodically, whether he as a creative artist was paying too high a price to lead a 'normal' life. He wondered whether he should ever have married, and whether this didn't hinder his creativity."[15] All of this came to the fore in the quartet, as Grieg wrote to Iver Holter in 1897: "I know that I had a big spiritual battle to fight, and I used a great deal of energy creating the first movement of the quartet there among the dark mountains of the Sörfjord in that sad summer and autumn."[16] That Grieg chose to work out such intense personal conflict through a sonata movement testifies to the form's continued power and versatility well into the nineteenth century.

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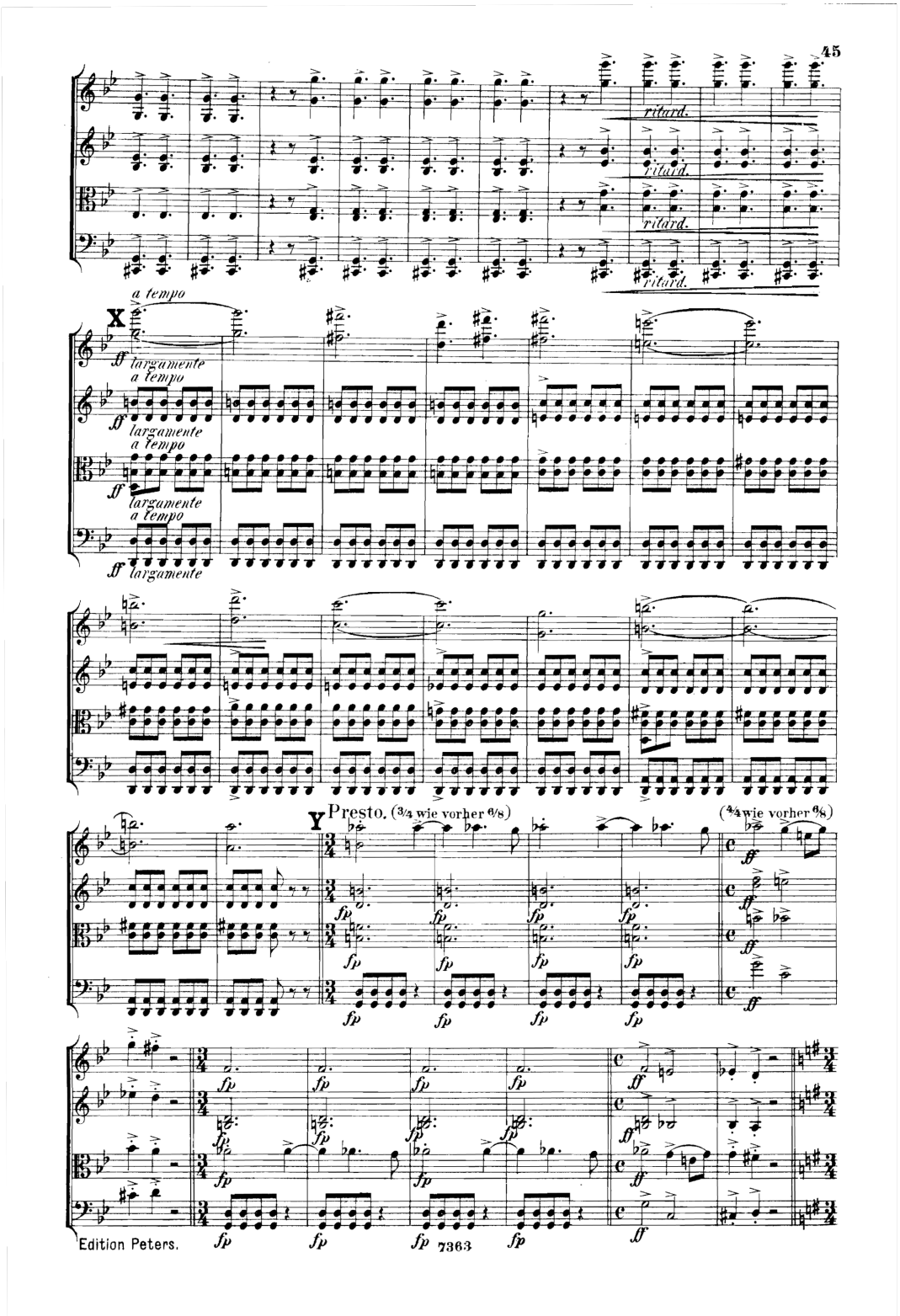
[14] Quoted in Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: Chamber Music,* 62.

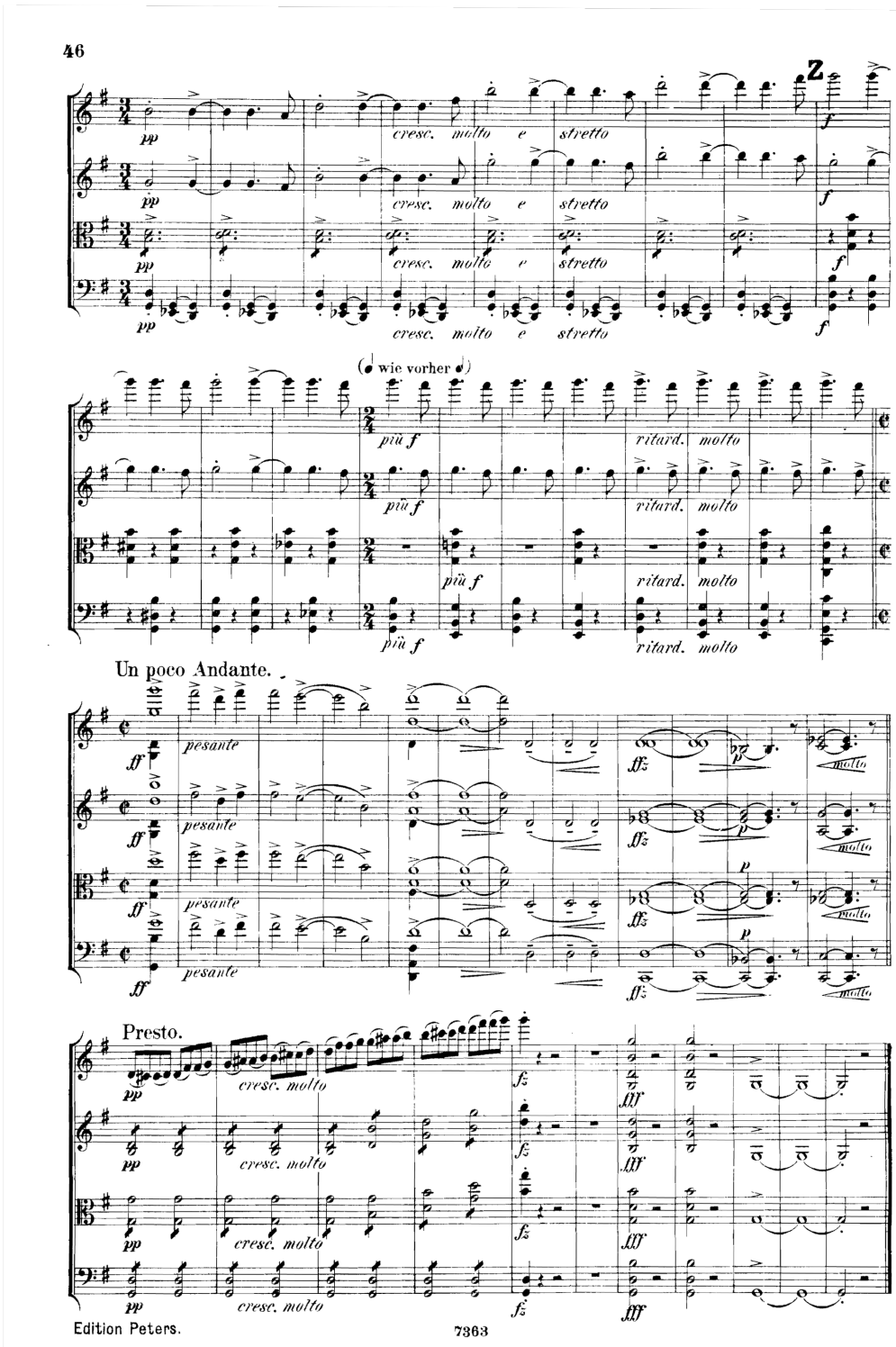
[15] Jarrett, *Edvard Grieg and His Songs*, 58.

[16] Quoted in Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: Chamber Music,* 63.

Appendix

Final pages of the fourth movement




46
Z
cresc. molto e stretto
(♩ wie vorher ♩)
più f
ritard. molto
Un poco Andante.
pesante
molto
Presto.
cresc. molto
Edition Peters.
7363

Bibliography

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