The Solo Organ Music of Gunther Schuller (b. 1925)

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"Dr. [Tertius] Noble was not only my first musical mentor---besides my father---but, by choosing me to turn pages for him for his weekly Sunday afternoon organ recitals, he introduced me at a tender age to the wonders of the literature of the "King of Instruments," not only the great masterpieces of Bach, Handel, Couperin, Frescobaldi, but the "moderns" as well, such as Messiaen (then a virtually unknown composer in America), Duruflé, Peeters, Maleingreau, Sowerby, Hindemith, etc."

-Gunther Schuller, from Preface to Triptych, 1976

Works

solo
Triptych (1976) ca. 23', premiere Yuko Hayashi, AGO Convention Boston 1976, Old West Church.
Organ Symphony (1981), premiere of four movements by Clyde Holloway, House of Hope Presbyterian, St. Paul, 1981. Scherzo has yet to be performed.
Orgelwalzer (published 1986) ca. 14', premiere David Shuler, Church of the Ascension, New York, 1985.

ensemble
Organ Concerto (1994), premiere James Diaz, Calgary Philharmonic.
Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis (1994) (SATB+organ)
Sacred Cantata, Psalm 98 (1966) SATB, strings, percussion, & organ, premiere AGO Convention Atlanta, 1966.

Musical Language

Melody

-Schuller's compositional style is strongly conditioned by traditional, tonal conceptions of melody and harmony.

Figure 1. *Meditation* (mvt. 1) from Symphony for Organ, mm. 1-4.

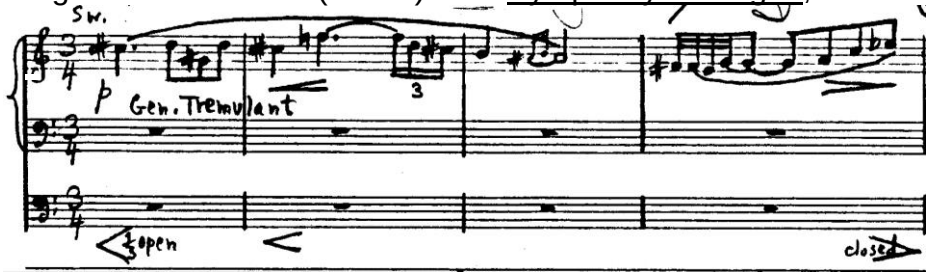
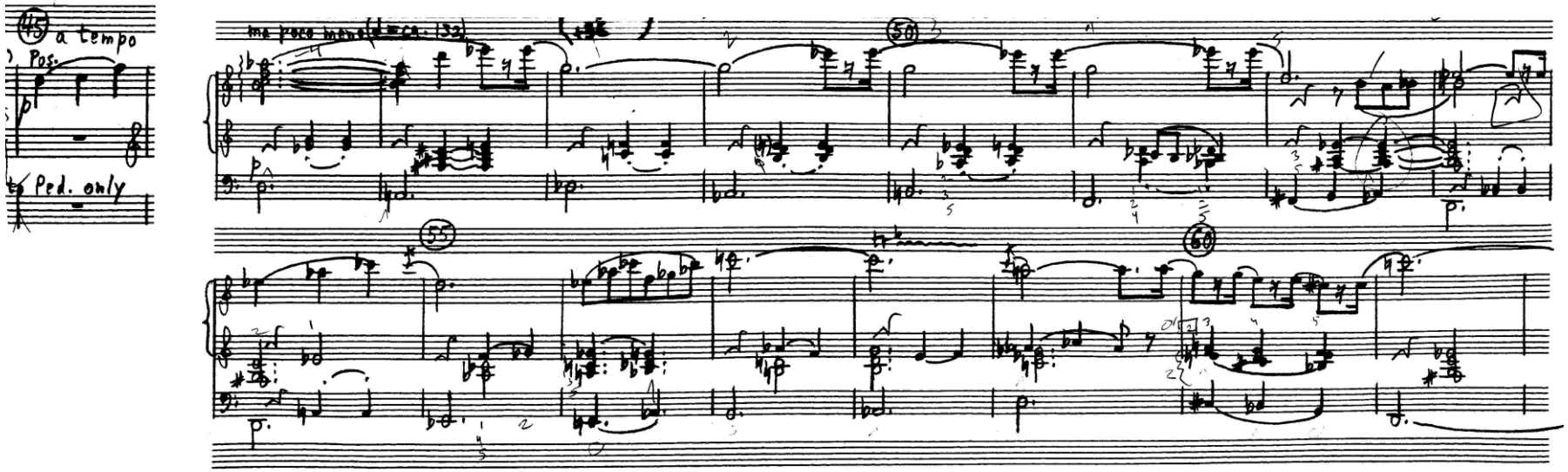


Figure 2. *Valse Noble* from Orgelwalzer, mm. 45-61.



Harmony

Figure 3. *Valse Diabolique* from Orgelwalzer, mm. 1-2.

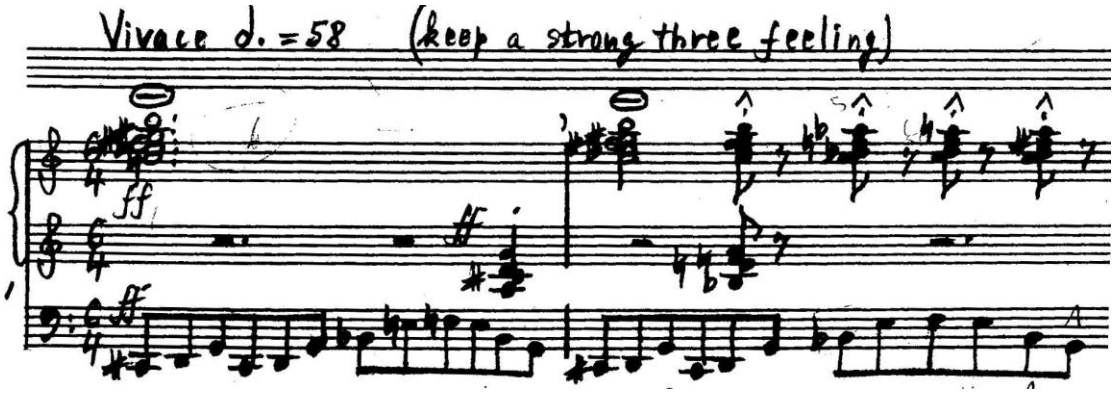
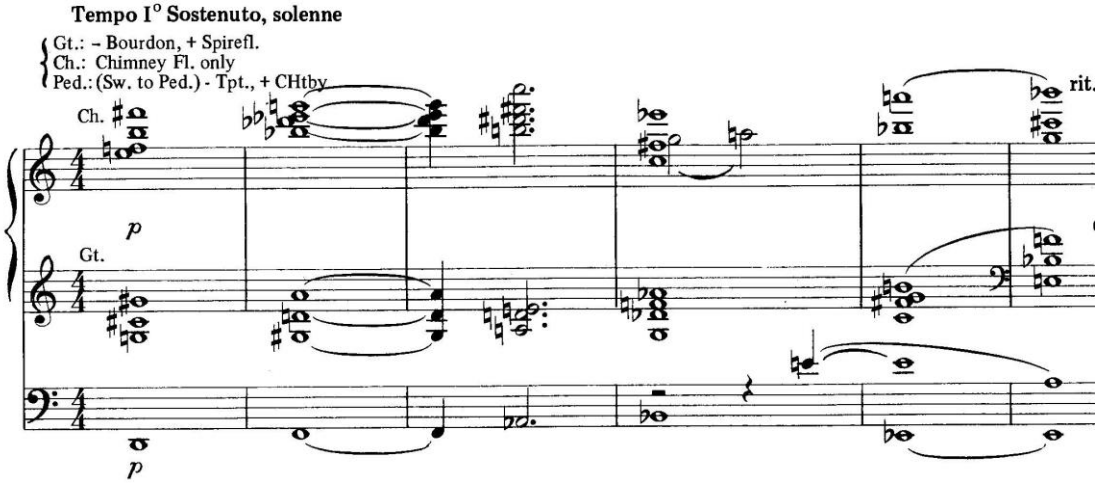


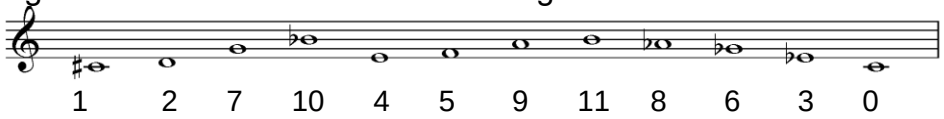
Figure 4. Triptych, Part II, mm. 113-118



The Row and its Employment

-Schuller has used the same twelve-tone row in every piece since the 1976 *Violin Concerto*.

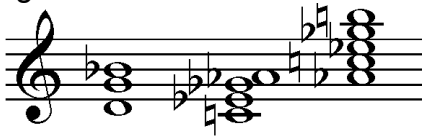
Figure 5. Prime form of Schuller's "magic row"



Some Important Tonal Components of the Row

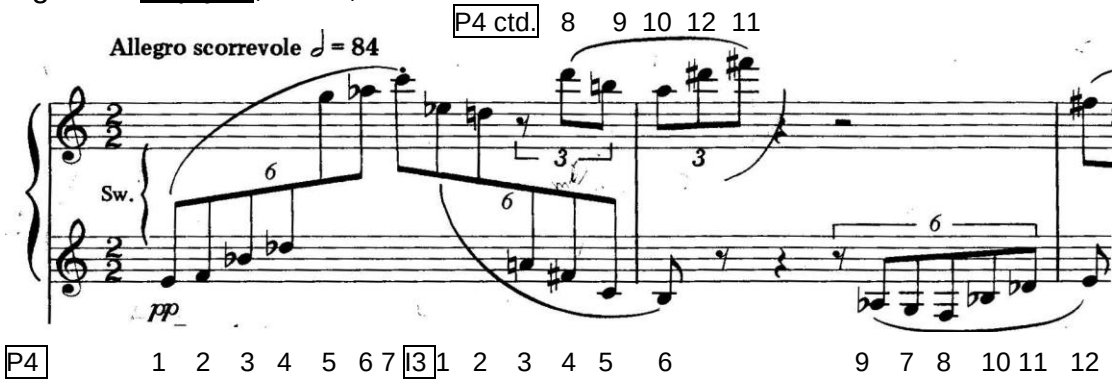
"…the retention of tonal elements, either subtly or overtly, either harmonically or melodically, can be a composer's choice. And perhaps that is the most fundamental, most personal choice that a composer can make." –Gunther Schuller

Figure 6. Characteristic "Tonal" Sonorities



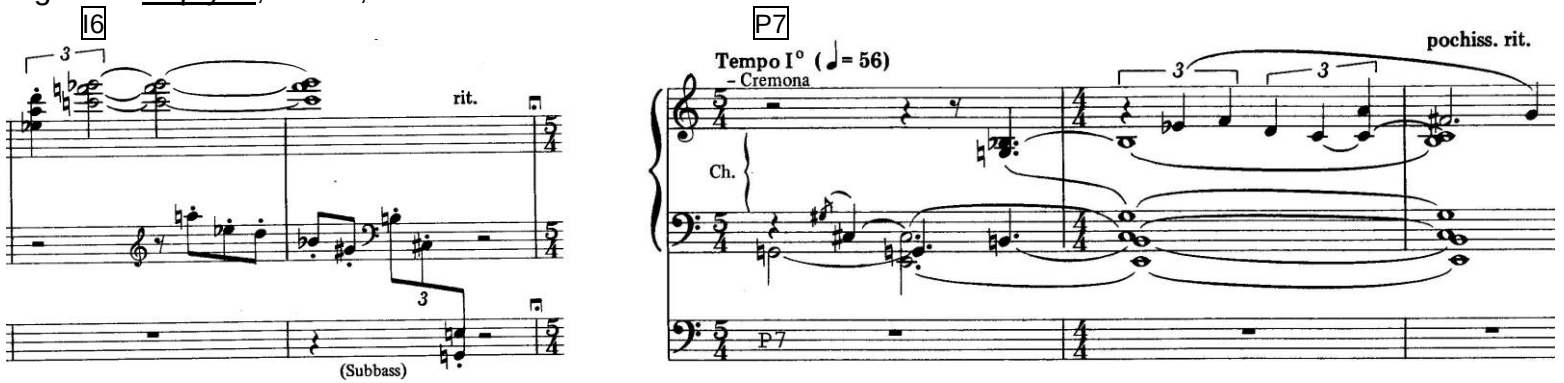
Inversional Combinatoriality

Figure 7. Triptych, Part I, mm. 1-2



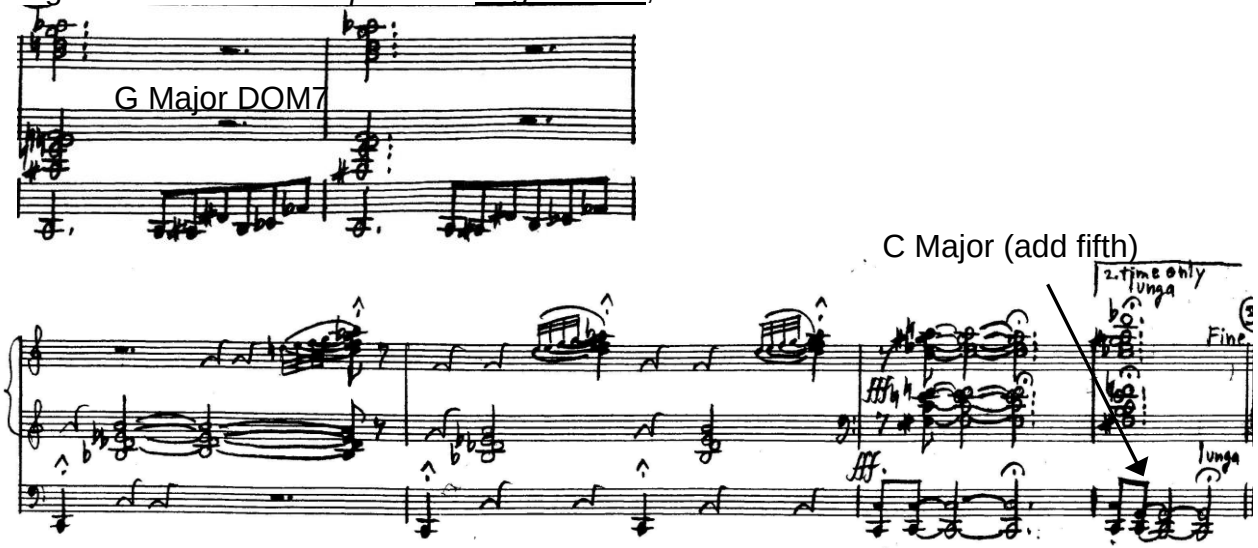
P4 4 5 10 1 7 8 | 0 2 11 9 6 3
I3 3 2 9 6 0 11 | 7 5 8 10 1 4

Figure 8. Triptych, Part II, mm. 13-17



Embedding V-I in the Row

Figure 8. *Valse Diabolique* from Orgelwalzer, mm. 25-30



Form

-Often traditional, typically very clear forms with extensive repetition, either literal or varied.
-Through composed movements figure prominently (Triptych I, *Finale-Toccata* from Symphony). Influence of jazz on formal structures.
-Every organ piece has a waltz.
-Organic developments culminate in brassy climaxes.

Traditional Formal Types in the Solo Organ Music
Strophic song forms with varied reprises (*Valse noble*, *Valse triste*, Triptych II)
Ternary forms (*Valse diabolique*, *Scherzo* from Symphony)
Five-part rondo (Triptych III)

Rhythm

-Varied use of polyrhythm, but less extensive than other composers of his generation
-Syncopations (sometimes humorous), meter play, unusual hypermetrical organization
-Subset division of row sometimes reflected also in rhythmic organization

Figures 9-10. *Valse Noble* mm. 1-28, *Finale-Toccata* from Symphony mm. 1-27 (see attached).

Jazz Influences in the Solo Organ Music
Syncopation, harmony, texture/orchestration, fast tempi, through-composed movements, improvisatory types of variation, ornamentation

Reference and Quotation

-Fully aware of the rich tradition of organ composition and of typical types of organ figuration
-Schuller's vast knowledge of orchestral repertoire manifests itself in a multitude of ways.

Figure 11. from Dupré: Preludio from Symphony II; Schuller: *Finale-Toccata* from Symphony, mm. 58-65.

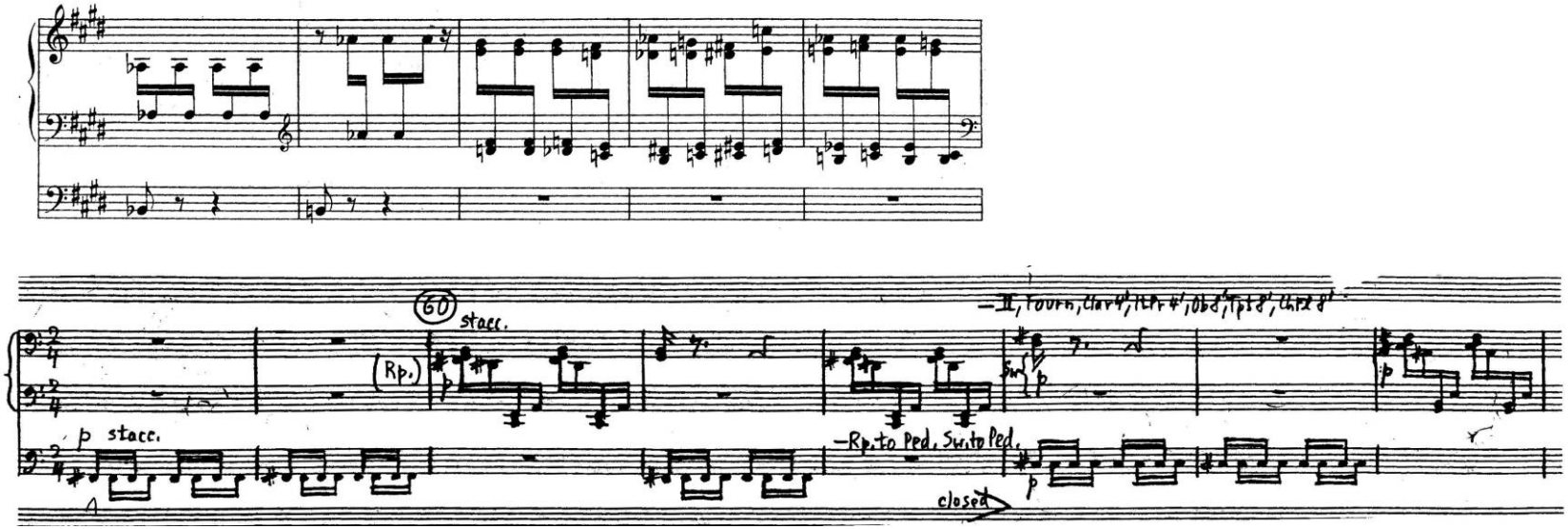
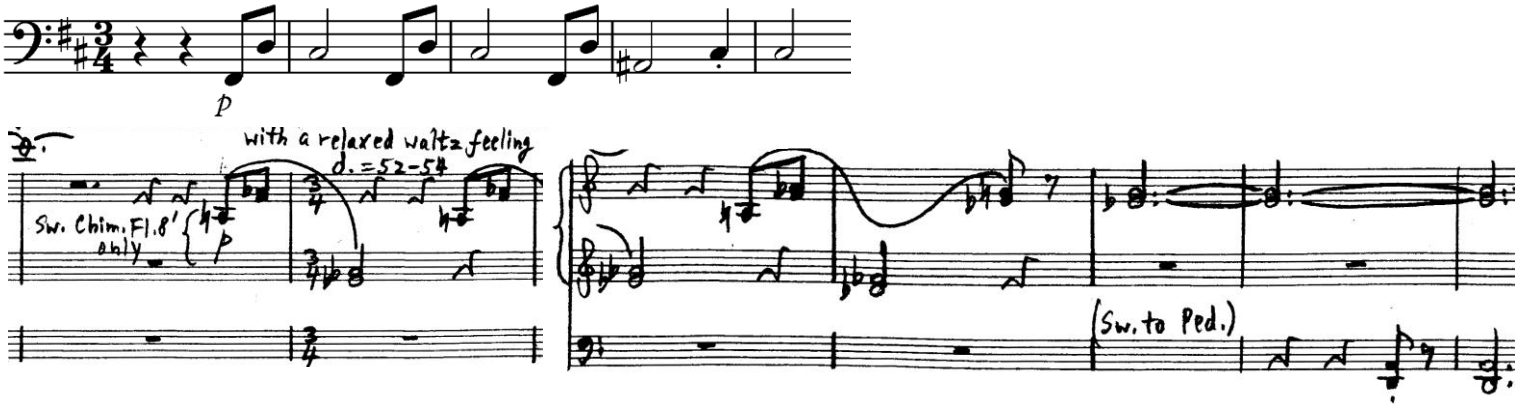


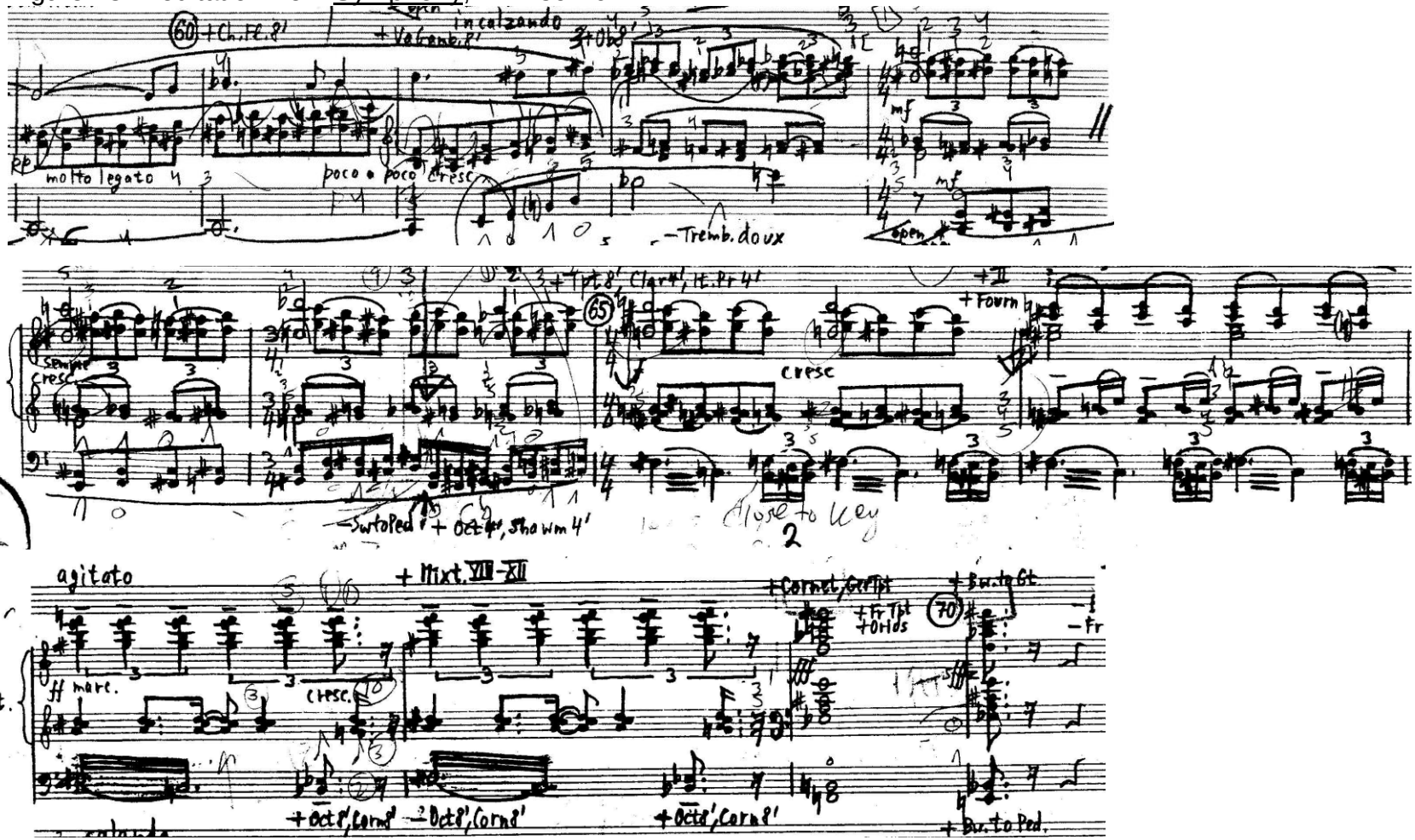
Figure 12. from Ravel: *La valse*; Schuller:*Valse Diabolique*, mm. 73-79



Use of the organ

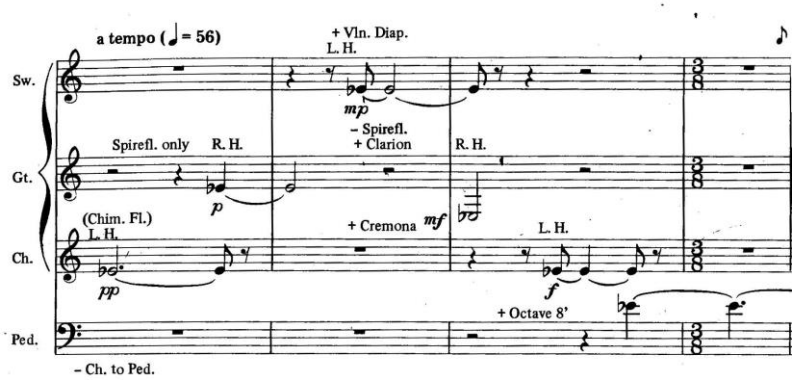
-Highly orchestral in conception: very much interested in organ color.
-Frequent stop changes indicated by composer and based on the instruments that each piece was premeired on.
-Often 8’ pedal (no 16’).

Figure 13. *Meditation* from Symphony, mm. 59-70.



-Exploits separation of divisions in space and explores antiphonal possibilities.

Figure 14. Triptych, Part II, mm. 41-44



Selected Bibliography

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