Climbing Monte Romanesca: 
Eighteenth-Century Composers in Search of the Sublime

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In his analysis of the exposition of the Andante of Mozart’s Symphony in G minor, K. 550, Robert O. Gjerdingen shows how the melodic, rhythmic, and contrapuntal content of the opening measures returns several times, each time in the guise of a different schema or combination of schemata. In Table 1 is a summary of the schematic content of measures 1–36. We hear the opening idea, with its imitative entries, each higher than the last, and its repeated eighth notes, three times: first with the Jupiter, the Le-Sol-Fi-Sol, and the Prinner. Then the Jupiter, the Lully, and the Prinner. Later, after an unexpected modulation to the distant key of D flat major, we hear a third version of the opening passage, this time as an elaboration of a pattern that Gjerdingen has named the Monte Romanesca (Example 1). Gjerdingen writes of the passage in D flat: “In the late 1780s the Monte Romanesca was an archaism, and the overlay of the descending scales [in the winds] gives this remarkable passage a Handelian grandeur.”

Mozart seems to have incorporated elements of variation technique into this sonata-form movement. But these variations—transformations, as Gjerdingen calls them—contradict the basic principles of variation form. What we expect to change from variation to variation (melody, rhythm, counterpoint) stays much the same; what we expect to stay the same (the theme’s key and its underlying schematic framework) changes. Mozart made similar transformations in another late movement in sonata form:

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2 Except where otherwise noted, all names for voice-leading schemata are introduced and explained in Gjerdingen, *Music in the Galant Style*. On the Le-Sol-Fi-Sol see Vasili Byros, *Foundations of Tonality as Situated Cognition, 1730–1830: An Enquiry into the Culture and Cognition of Eighteenth-Century Tonality with Beethoven’s “Eroica” Symphony as a Case Study* (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2009) and several subsequently published articles.
the Andante of his last string quartet in F major, K. 590.\textsuperscript{4} Perhaps it is no accident that that movement begins with the same bass line (up a fifth, down a fourth) as the passage in K. 550 that Gjerdingen calls a Monte Romanesca (Example 2).

The term “Monte Romanesca” alludes to features of the patterns to which Gjerdingen applies it that resemble features of the Monte and the Romanesca. Like the Monte, the Monte Romanesca is a rising sequence. Like one kind of Romanesca, it has a bass that leaps from scale degree 1 to scale degree 5. Despite these similarities, Gjerdingen acknowledges that the Monte Romanesca “could equally well be treated as a separate schema.”\textsuperscript{5} I would go a little further, saying explicitly that the Monte Romanesca is neither a Monte nor a Romanesca but a schema with its own long history and its own set of expressive connotations.

Table 1. Mozart, Symphony in G minor, K. 550 (1788), Andante, Exposition, Schematic Content of the First Theme and Bridge (based largely on Gjerdingen 2007, pp. 122–126)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Major Formal Divisions</th>
<th>Schematic Content</th>
<th>Keys</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–8</td>
<td>First theme, beginning</td>
<td>Jupiter</td>
<td>E flat major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Le-Sol-Fi-Sol</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prinner</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Half Cadence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9–19</td>
<td>First theme, conclusion</td>
<td>Jupiter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lully</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prinner</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cadence-Evaded</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Full Cadence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–28</td>
<td>Bridge, beginning</td>
<td>Aprile</td>
<td>B flat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fonte</td>
<td>C minor - B flat major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Clausula Vera</td>
<td>V of B flat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Clausula Vera</td>
<td>D flat!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29–36</td>
<td>Bridge, conclusion</td>
<td>Monte Romanesca</td>
<td>D flat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Long Comma</td>
<td>G flat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Half Cadence with Augmented Sixth</td>
<td>V of B flat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\textsuperscript{5} Gjerdingen, Music in the Galant Style, 99.
Terminological Challenges

But how exactly are we to define the Monte Romanesca? Putting it another way, to what musical phenomenon should we apply this term? Gjerdingen uses the term both broadly and narrowly. Used broadly, it corresponds (more or less) to what is today known as a rising-fifth sequence; when such passages use root-position triads, the bass typically alternates between rising fifths and falling fourths. Used in this sense, “Monte Romanesca” applies to both Examples 1 and 2. Using the term more narrowly, Gjerdingen refers to a particular kind of rising-fifths sequence that features one or more of the following: canonic imitation in the upper parts, 4-3 suspensions, and a melodic line in which a rising fourth leap alternates with a descending scalar third. Used in this sense, “Monte Romanesca” applies to Example 1 but not Example 2.

6 In Gjerdingen, Music in the Galant Style, see the passages by Fenaroli on p. 98, C. P. E. Bach on p. 99, and Durante on p. 102.
7 Gjerdingen, Music in the Galant Style, refers to the Monte Romanesca’s 4-3 suspensions on p. 103 and p. 458. Canon is present in the passage by Quantz (p. 103) and 4-3 suspensions are implied (and made explicit by Gjerdingen with an added bass line). 4-3 suspensions are present in a passage in Mozart’s Attwood Studies that Gjerdingen identifies as a Monte Romanesca (p. 103). In his online edition of Durante’s Partimenti diminuiti (partimenti in which the composer supplied brief passages for the right hand to give the student hints about how to realize the bass), Gjerdingen refers to several instances of the “up-a-fifth, down-a-fourth movimento” in the bass without using the term “Monte Romanesca,” presumably because these lack 4-3 suspensions and the other features of the Monte Romanesca in the narrow sense: http://faculty-web.at.northwestern.edu/music/gjerdingen/partimenti/collections/Durante/diminuiti/index.htm Gjerdingen uses the term “Monte Romanesca” in reference to a passage in François Bazin’s harmony treatise of 1857 that includes all the melodic and contrapuntal elements of the Monte Romanesca (in the narrow sense) in “Musical Grammar,” Oxford Handbooks Online (published online, January 2015): http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190454746.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190454746-e-2
Music that nicely exemplifies the fluidity of the line that separates the Monte Romanesca as defined broadly and narrowly, and helps to explain why Gjerdingen sometimes applies a single term to both, is in a set of variations in A minor by Domenico Zipoli, published in 1716 as part of a set entitled *Sonate d’intavolatura per organo e cimbalo*. The *seconda parte* of the binary theme begins with a rising-fifths sequence. Although the up-a-fifth, down-a-fourth bass *movimento* is clear, the right-hand part lacks the other characteristic features of the Monte Romanesca in the narrow sense. But the analogous passage in the first variation presents a “textbook” example of the Monte Romanesca as narrowly construed (Example 3).

Ex. 3. Domenico Zipoli, Partite in A minor, from *Sonate d’intavolatura per organo e cimbalo* (1716), mm. 1–16 (theme and variation 1). In this and most subsequent examples, asterisks mark the beginning of canonic parts of the Monte Romanesca. Performance: Susan Alexander-Max on piano by Bartolomeo Cristofori (1720), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85x5RK3Hbv8

The Monte Romanesca in its broad sense was an important part of the eighteenth-century musical language. The frequency with which it appears in pedagogical treatises suggests that musicians considered a mastery of the rising-fifths sequence to be one of the essential first steps in the education of musicians. Friedrich Erhard Niedt (1674–1717) showed how the basic up-a-fifth, down-a-fourth bass *movimento* could be elaborated in various ways (Example 4), then how the beginner could use figuration appropriate to the...
keyboard to improvise over the bass (Example 5). Note that none of the suggested realizations involves the characteristic features of the Monte Romanesca as narrowly defined. Johann Andreas Sorge (1703–1778), a musician of the next generation, introduced his students to a variant of the rising-fifths sequence that (for reasons to be discussed below) skips the third stage of the sequence (Example 6). Again, his realizations lack the contrapuntal features of the Monte Romanesca in the narrow sense (Example 7).

Ex. 4. Friedrich Erhard Niedt, a bass exemplifying the up-a-fifth, down-a-fourth bass movimento with four variations, from Handleitung zur Variation (Hamburg, 1706), chapter 4

In this paper I will use the term Monte Romanesca (henceforth MR) in the narrow sense, limiting myself to examples that contain, in addition to the bass that rises a fifth and falls a fourth, at least one of the contrapuntal/melodic elements mentioned above and exemplified in Zipoli’s Variation 1.

Gjerdingen is right to hear “Handelian grandeur” in the passage in Example 1 in which Mozart used the MR. He also points us in the right direction when he describes the MR elsewhere as “an important part of the ‘strict’ or sacred style taught in many partimenti.”8 Inspired by Gjerdingen’s insights, and also by the work of Vasili Byros on the Le-Sol-Fi-Sol and the Stabat Mater Prinner and Olga Sánchez-Kisielewska on the Romanesca/Hymn topic,9 I will explore the historical background of the MR, in the hope

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8 Gjerdingen, Music in the Galant Style, 103.
of reconstructing the network of meanings that eighteenth-century composers might have wanted to convey with their use of this pattern.

Ex. 5. Niedt, keyboard figuration used in the realization of the up-a-fifth, down-a-fourth movimento (from Handleitung zur Variation, chapter 6)

Romanesca Case,” paper given at the meeting of the Society for Eighteenth-Century Music, Austin, Texas, 25–28 February 2016
Corelli’s MR

Even in a historical survey, it is generally a mistake to try to identify the first use of a schema. Since my focus is on the eighteenth century, it may suffice to say that Arcangelo Corelli (whose first set of trio sonatas was published in 1681 and who died in 1713) used the MR often and with great effect. As a composer revered in the eighteenth century, his frequent use of the pattern probably encouraged later musicians to follow his example.

One of the earliest examples of the MR in Corelli’s oeuvre is in Op. 1, No. 3; and already here it serves a purpose that it will serve in many of Corelli’s later works—or, to be more cautious, works published later. It sounds only once, late in the movement; it sets up the final cadence. After a series of striking and beautiful passages it offers something new, something fresh. In this sense, it goes beyond what we have heard so far, serving as the movement’s climax (Example 8).

Corelli often turned to the MR in quasi-fugal fast movements to enhance their energy and excitement as they approach their conclusion. In the second movement of the trio sonata opus 3 No. 1, an imitative Allegro, an MR gives the end of the movement an unexpected jolt (Example 9). In the Concerto Grosso Op. 6 No 2, Corelli built on the momentum generated by a leapfrog ascent, using it as a platform from which to launch an MR (Example 10; No. 2, Allegro); again it comes quite close to the end of the movement.
Ex. 8. Arcangelo Corelli, Trio Sonata in A major, Op. 1 No. 3 (1681), Grave (complete). Performance: Musica Amphion, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tis4Gt5LnE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tis4Gt5LnE)

The Concerto Grosso Op. 6 No. 7 shows Corelli once again using the MR as a pre-cadential climax (Example 11).

Despite Corelli’s frequent use of the MR to signal the approaching end of a movement, the schema is also distinctive in the variety of ways in which it could end: a variety that is related to the fact that, at the third stage in the sequence, composers encountered dissonance, both melodic and harmonic, that essentially blocked them from going further. They reacted to this roadblock by breaking off the sequence and preparing a cadence, either in the same key as that of the schema or in some other key, sometimes


quite distant from key in which the MR began; or they simply skipped the third stage of the sequence, moving directly from the second stage to the fourth (as Sorge did in Examples 6 and 7). When the MR begins, there is no way to know for sure where it will lead.

Johann Philipp Krieger demonstrated the tonal adventurousness that the schema allowed in the first of the twelve trio sonatas that he published in Nürnberg in 1688 (just seven years after the publication of Corelli’s Opus 1 and exactly 100 years before Mozart wrote the Symphony in G minor; Example 12). The passage starts in B flat major and ends in A minor.

Often, as in the examples 8–11, the breaking off of the sequence involves a particular kind of Long Comma that begins with a 6/5 chord—what I call the Corelli Long Comma, a schema that coexisted with the MR for many decades.

**The MR in J. S. Bach and Handel**

The MR’s potential for canonic writing and the variety of tonal destinations that it offered were among the features of this schema that endeared it to composers of the generation that followed Corelli, such as Handel and J. S. Bach.

I’ve yet to find an example in Corelli of the MR at the beginning of a movement, that is, the schema being used as a movement’s principal thematic material. But Bach obviously liked to use it this way. We find it works from several parts of his life, from the the very early cantata “Der Herr denket an uns” (Example 13). In the Notebook for Wilhelm Friedemann, J. S. made sure his son had command of the schema (Example 14). In the cantata “Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin” (Leipzig, 1725) the wonderful duet “Ein unbegreiflich Licht” makes repeated use of it (Example 15).

Ex. 13. J. S. Bach, *Der Herr denket an uns*, BWV 196 (1708?), “Der Herr segne euch,” mm. 8–15. Translation: “May the Lord bless you more and more.” Performance: Jos van Veldhoven, cond., [https://youtu.be/H6mAsmggmxs?t=6m38s](https://youtu.be/H6mAsmggmxs?t=6m38s)

Ex. 15. Bach, Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin, BWV 125, “Ein unbegreiflich Licht” (1725), mm. 1–6. Performance: Nico der Meel, tenor; Bas Ramselaar, bass; Netherlands Bach Collegium, Peter Jan Leusing, cond., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zy2VqjG5OZM
Two of these examples are duets; possibly the strong association between the MR and canon led Bach—and many later composers—to use this schema in duets.

Handel also used the MR at the beginning of a movement—and as part of a ritornello whose repetition ensured that the schema would be a dominant feature of the movement—in the Andante of his Organ Concerto, Op. 4 No. 4 (Example 16).\(^{10}\) He deployed the MR with great gusto, three times in three different keys, with repeated sixteenth-notes that intensify the effect of the suspensions, in the Allegro of his Concerto Grosso in D, Opus 6 No. 5 (Example 17).

Another German member of Bach and Handel’s generation, Gottfried Stölzel, also used the MR thematically, in his German Te Deum. In the brief opening chorus we hear the schema twice: right at the beginning (Example 18), and about half-way through.

The use of the MR in vocal music by J. S. Bach and his contemporaries encourages us to start thinking about what this particular pattern might have meant to them beyond its canonic potential and its appropriateness for duets. First of all, the vocal music is mostly sacred; I’ve found few examples of the MR in opera, cantatas, and other kinds of secular vocal music. The music in which it occurs is predominantly festive. It is music for celebration, praise, and thanks-giving.

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\(^{10}\) William Jones, *A Treatise on the Art of Music* (Colchester, 1784), 33, cites this passage as “a good example” of a bass that “proceeds by Fourths descending or Fifths ascending”; but in typical eighteenth-century fashion he does not mention the contrapuntal and melodic features that make this passage an example of the MR.

a) mm. 9–12: Monte Romanesca in D

b) mm. 23–26: Monte Romanesca in A

c) mm. 52–56: Monte Romanesca in G/D
The Galant MR: Porpora, C. H. Graun, and C. P. E. Bach

Early galant composers were equally fond of the MR, and they continued to use it often in duets. But in placing it within movements, they came closer to Corelli than to Handel and Bach. It rarely pervades whole movements as in the music by Handel and Bach. Galant composers often used it only once in a movement, and treated it as a special effect. They continued to associate the MR with sacred music, but not just festive music; they found it appropriate in the setting of somber, even tragic texts.
Nicola Porpora, despite being born just a year after Bach and Handel, played an important role in the spread of the galant style. His *De profundis*, written for the young women at the Ospedeletto, one of the famous Venetian conservatories, contains a chorus, “Quia apud te,” in which the MR comes late in the movement and plays a climactic, pre-cadential role (Example 19). Porpora used the MR again, in a more somber context, in the *Sei duetti sulla passione del Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo*, composed in Vienna in 1754 (Example 20); the text refers to the nails holding Christ to the cross.


\begin{music}
\begin{example}
\begin{music}
\title{Nicola Porpora, De profundis (1744), “Quia apud te,” mm. 20–24 (out of 30)}
\translation{Lord.}
\performance{Vocal Concert Dresden, Peter Kopp, cond., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wikR4Hb0t0M}
\end{example}
\end{music}
\end{music}

A rare operatic use of the MR shows how closely galant composers continued to associate this schema with duets. Act 2 of Carl Heinrich Graun’s *Cesare e Cleopatra* (1742) ends with a quartet in da-capo form. The B-section begins with a passage for Cleopatra and Cesare alone, and Graun contributed to the duet-like character of this passage by having his prima donna and primo uomo sing an MR (Example 21).

A passage in C. P. E Bach’s Magnificat seems to acknowledge his father’s love of the MR and use of it in duets. But Bach, immersed in the galant aesthetic, used it just once, saving it for a special moment—in this case the expression of a single word, a single idea: “exaltavit.” Bach skillfully set up the MR with a three-stage Monte; the rise of the Monte Romanesca is all the more spectacular becomes it builds on the rise of the Monte directly before it. Again, as in the passage from Porpora’s “Quia apud te,” the MR sets up an important cadential arrival (Example 22).
Ex. 21. Carl Heinrich Graun, *Cesare e Cleopatra* (1742), “All’armi,” mm. 46–58 (duet-like passage at the beginning of the B-section). Translation: *Cesare* “You’re weeping, my dearest.” *Cleopatra* “Sadness overwhelms me.” *Together* “I will (May you) be victorious fighting for you (me).” Performance: Rene Jacobs, cond., [https://youtu.be/MVj0Dw9O04s?t=1m30s](https://youtu.be/MVj0Dw9O04s?t=1m30s)
Like his father, C. P. E. associated the MR with sacred celebration; but there is surely something else going on here. This is such an intense and expressive passage that it naturally raises the question of what the MR itself is contributing to it, what the MR itself means. It seems to take us into a new realm. We get an almost palpable sense of a door that opens and reveals something astonishing—something that I’m tempted to call the sublime.

The MR as a Signifier of the Sublime

The sublime was one of the most important concepts in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, and is the subject of a vast amount of scholarship. Under the title Traité du Sublime (Treatise on the sublime) the French poet and critic Nicolas Boileau published in 1674 a translation with commentary of an obscure treatise on rhetoric by an ancient Greek writer so obscure that we don’t even know his name; today he’s know as Pseudo-Longinus. Boileau made “le Sublime” (the English “sublime” is borrowed directly from the French) an aesthetic category that fascinated the eighteenth century. For Boileau the sublime was primarily a literary concept. Later writers, primarily in England, went further afield, finding the sublime in all the arts, the natural world, mathematics, morality, and religion. The most famous of the English writers on the sublime, Edmund Burke, author of Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757) presented the beautiful and the sublime as two mutually exclusive categories. Written in plain English, reprinted often, and translated quickly into French and German, Burke’s treatise ensured that the sublime continued to be a hot topic throughout the rest of the century.

There was much debate about what actually constituted the sublime, and Burke himself had some eccentric ideas on the subject. But a certain amount of consensus emerged. John Baillie’s pamphlet “An Essay on the Sublime” published in 1747, defines the sublime in terms of its effect on the person who perceives it. A passage heavily indebted to Pseudo-Longinus presents a view with which many eighteenth-century readers would have agreed:

Few are so insensible, as not to be struck even at first view with what is truly sublime; and every person upon seeing a grand object is affected with something which as it were extends his very being, and expands it to a kind of immensity. Thus in viewing the heavens, how is the soul elevated; and stretching itself to larger scenes and more extended prospects, in a noble enthusiasm of grandeur quits the narrow earth, darts from planet to planet, and takes in worlds at one view! Hence comes the name of sublime to every thing which thus raises the mind to fits of greatness, and disposes it to soar above her mother earth; hence arises that exultation and pride which the mind ever feels from the consciousness of its own vastness. That object only can be justly called the sublime,

11 For an authoritative study with up-to-date bibliography, see Robert Doran, The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant (Cambridge, 2015).
12 Quotations below are from the fifth edition (London, 1767).
13 John Baillie, An Essay on the Sublime (1747), transcribed in http://www.earthworks.org/sublime/Baillie/index.html All quotations below are derived from this transcription.
which in some degree disposes the mind to this enlargement of itself, and gives her a lofty conception of her own powers.

This exalted sensation, then, will always determine us to a right judgment; for wherever we feel the elevated disposition, there we are sure the sublime must be.  

Baillie’s definition is wonderfully practical. If you feel “this exalted sensation,” then whatever caused it is sublime. If we, listening to C. P. E. Bach’s MR, feel an “exalted sensation” then the music is, by definition, sublime. That some of Bach’s north-German contemporaries described his music (especially the late choral *Heilig*) as sublime could serve to strengthen the validity of our perception.  

We could leave it at that, but I’d like to go further. Let’s consider (without any attempt at comprehensiveness, and limiting ourselves to the treatises of Baillie and Burke) some of the characteristics of the sublime as understood in the eighteenth century:

**Magnitude.** Burke: “Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime.”

Baillie: “Vast objects occasion vast sensations, and vast sensations give the mind a higher idea of her own powers.” The “immense expanse” of the nocturnal sky, filled with stars, conveys the sublime. Small size, in contrast, is (for Burke) a crucial feature of the beautiful.

**Height.** We look up at the sky; thus height is another characteristic of the sublime. Magnitude and height together make great mountains sublime objects. Baillie: “A flowery vale, or the verdure of a hill, may charm; but to fill the soul, and raise it to the sublime sensations, the earth must rise into an Alp, or Pyrrhenean, and mountains piled upon mountains, reach to the very heavens.”

**Infinity.** If something is so big or so far away that we cannot see its end, it has the appearance of being infinite, and thus the potential for expressing the sublime. Burke: “Infinity has the tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime.” Elsewhere Burke refers to the starry sky (obviously a *Leitmotiv* for eighteenth-century discussions of the sublime): “The stars lie in such apparent confusion, as makes it impossible on ordinary occasions to reckon them. This gives them the advantage of a sort of infinity.”

**Uncommonness.** Baillie: “Though it does not constitute the sublime of natural objects, [uncommonness] very much heightens its effect upon the mind... Admiration, a passion

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16 Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 127.
20 Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 129.
21 Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 140.
always attending the sublime, arises from uncommonness, and constantly decays as the object becomes more and more familiar.”

**Contrast.** Burke: “To make an object very striking, we should make it as different as possible from the objects with which we have been immediately conversant...” Contrast and uncommonness are related: the more uncommon an object is, the more contrast between it and adjacent objects.

**Difficulty.** Burke: “Another source of greatness is Difficulty. When any work seems to have required immense force and labour to effect it, the idea is grand. Stonehenge, neither for disposition nor ornament, has any thing admirable; but those huge rude masses of stone, set on end, and piled each on other, turn the mind on the immense force necessary for such a work.”

**Loudness.** A sublime sound is more likely to be loud than soft. This is also related to magnitude, since large objects tend to be louder than small ones. Burke: “Excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror.”

**Suddenness.** Burke: “In everything sudden and unexpected, we are apt to start; that is, we have a perception of danger, and our nature rouses us to guard against it.”

**Religion and the supernatural.** Several of the characteristics of the sublime cited above led eighteenth-century writers almost inevitably to think of objects of religious devotion, and supernatural objects more generally, as themselves sublime. Burke’s long disquisition on power as a source of the sublime concludes with a consideration of the sublime feelings evoked by the Judeo-Christian God and other deities: “But whilst we contemplate so vast an object... we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him.” “In the scripture, where-ever God is represented as appearing or speaking, every thing terrible in nature is called up to heighten the awe and solemnity of the divine presence.”

The sublime was such a crucial part of the eighteenth-century Zeitgeist that composers were probably just as aware of it as any of their contemporaries, and just as interested in exploiting it as were painters, architects, poets, playwrights, and novelists. During the last thirty years or so, many music historians and music theorists have turned to the Sublime as a way of understanding music of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The appendix consists of a list of some of the articles and books dealing with the musical sublime published since 1980. The publications are presented in chronologically arranged groups to demonstrate the explosion of interest in the musical

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23 Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 139.
24 Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 151.
25 Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 152.
26 Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 119.
27 Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 121.
sublime in the 1990s. That interest probably resulted, in part, from the availability of primary sources (including German sources in English translation) in Peter le Huray and James Day’s anthology *Music and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1981; abridged edition, 1988). In what follows I will contribute to the conversation by proposing the MR as a device that composers sometimes used to convey the sublime.

A challenge facing all those who seek the sublime in eighteenth-century music is that writers of the period made relatively few remarks about the musical sublime. Baillie pleaded ignorance: “I know so little of music, that I will not pretend to determine the sublime of it.” That didn’t keep him from proposing one feature of the musical sublime: “Wind instruments are the most fitted to elevate [the mind], such as hautboy, the trumpet, and organ.”

Burke said little about the musical sublime, but he was effusive in describing what he heard as the beautiful in music. It is characterized by “softness,” “winding surface,” “unbroken continuance,” “easy gradation.” To these characteristics we might add features that, according to Burke, are typical of the beautiful in general: small size (perhaps equivalent in musical terms to a small ensemble), smoothness, delicacy, and gracefulness. He wrote: “The beautiful in music will not bear that loudness and strength of sounds, which may be used to raise other passions; nor notes, which are shrill or harsh, or deep; it agrees best with such as are clear, even, smooth, and weak. . . . Great variety, and quick transitions from measure or tone to another, are contrary to the genius of the beautiful in music.” Since elsewhere Burke described loudness as characteristic of the sublime, we might reasonably conclude that the loudness, shrillness, harshness, and quick transitions that are foreign to the beautiful can, at least in some contexts, serve as elements of the musical sublime.

If we accept loudness as an element of Burke’s musical sublime, we might also admit magnitude. A big orchestra is louder than a small ensemble; a harpsichord louder than a clavichord.

Turning from the musical sublime in general to the more limited problem of how a schema might embody elements of the sublime, it is useful to return to Boileau’s translation of pseudo-Longinus. Focusing his attention primarily on literature and rhetoric, Boileau emphasized in his preface that the sublime does not necessarily characterize whole works. It can be found “in a Thought only, or in a Figure or Turn of Expression” (dans une seule pensée, dans une seule figure, dans un seul tour de paroles). The sublime “is something extraordinary and marvelous that strikes us in a discourse and makes it elevate, ravish and transport us.” (cet extraordinaire et ce merveilleux qui frappe dans le discours, et qui fait qu’un ouvrage enlève, ravit, transporte).

“A Thought only,” “a Figure,” and “Turn of Expression” all mean more or less the same thing, and they all have an obvious counterpart in eighteenth-century music, namely the voice-leading schema. It seems reasonable to suppose that composers, in

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29 Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 233.
30 Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 234.
31 Quoted in the original and translation, with commentary, in Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime*, 111.
looking for ways to express the sublime, should have gravitated toward a particular schema that they perceived as being somehow appropriate for this purpose.

Several features of the MR, and of the way composers used it, suggest analogies with eighteenth-century conceptions of the sublime, and make the schema particularly effective in passages that composers might have hoped would “elevate, ravish and transport” their listeners.

Mostly obviously, the MR rises, presenting an audible version of the height that is an important characteristic of the sublime. It doesn’t go straight up, but ascends with a jagged contour, reminding us of Baillie’s words: “mountains piled upon mountains, reach to the very heavens.”

The uncertainty about where the schema will end, and to what key it will lead, calls to mind the quality of the infinite that Burke attributed to the sublime. There is something infinite about a passage whose ending we cannot predict.

The canonic upper parts so typical of the MR and the suspensions contribute to what some eighteenth-century listeners might have perceived as “difficulty”—yet another feature of the Burkean sublime. Audiences might have heard its dissonant 4-3 suspensions as “harsh” and consequently foreign to the beautiful in music.

The rarity with which composers (after the Bach/Handel generation) used the MR (as I’ve mentioned, usually just once in a movement) corresponds to the “uncommonness” typical of the sublime. In C. P. E. Bach’s Magnificat, in which another schema, the Romanesca, occurs about seventeen times, the MR occurs only once.

Finally the association that Burke and other eighteenth-century writers perceived between religious feeling and the sublime is analogous to the tendency of composers of vocal music to use the MR primarily in settings of sacred texts.

Returning to the words of the Magnificat that Bach set as an MR, we find them remarkably appropriate for a musical gesture that conveys the sublime. “Et exaltavit humiles” reminds us of the “exalted sensation” that, according to Baillie, the sublime arouses. God exalts the humble, just as the sublime object (in this case the MR) exalts the mind of the person who perceives it (in this case the listener).

The MR in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century: Church Music and Oratorio

Fedele Fenaroli, as both Gjerdingen and Giorgio Sanguinetti have emphasized, served as an important conduit through which the compositional lore of the first half of the eighteenth century was passed on to later generations of musicians. The up-a-fifth, down a fourth movimento (rising-fifth sequence) was one of the patterns that he expected his students to master. One of the realizations he provided is a textbook MR (Example 23). Thoroughly indoctrinated by such passages, composers continued to use the MR in the second half of the eighteenth century. They did so mostly in church music, and mostly in passages with a climactic pre-cadential function.

32 I say “about seventeen” because in some cases there may be disagreement about what constitute examples of the Romanesca.

Mozart was as familiar with the MR as he was with other galant schemata. In his setting of the Psalm “Confitebor,” from the Vespers, K. 339, composed in 1780, he used the MR twice. After a quick modulation to the dominant, a flamboyantly executed MR precedes the first full cadence in the new key (Example 24).

Mozart’s repeated use of the MR in the compositional exercises he assigned to Thomas Attwood shows that even in the 1780s he considered it an essential part of a composer’s toolbox. Another student to whom Mozart may have taught the MR was Johann Nepomuk Hummel, thirteen years younger than Atwood. For Hummel the MR remained an effective compositional tool into the nineteenth century. His Missa Solemnis in C (1806) begins with a large-scale Kyrie in sonata form. After cadences that bring the exposition to a close in G major, a modulation down a third, to E flat major, signals the beginning of the development, the movement’s brief emotional climax (Example 25). The presentation of the movement’s gentle opening theme in the new key constitutes a moment of repose, before an MR, in coordination with a sudden increase in activity in the orchestra and a shift to *forte*, takes the music in a new, unexpected direction. An expertly deployed Long Comma keeps the MR from rising beyond the second stage of the sequence; and a Le-Sol-Fi-Sol bring us to the dominant of C, in preparation for the recapitulation.

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Allegro moderato

MONTE ROMANESCA

Chri...
The sense of sublimity and antiquity that the MR contributed to church music made it also appropriate in oratorio, particularly in choruses. Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf wrote *La liberatrice del popolo giudaico nella Persia, o sia L’Ester* for performance by the Tonkünstler-Sozietät in Vienna in 1773. In the chorus “Per noi quel core s’agita” the furies of the underworld take credit for the evil deeds of Haman, the main enemy of the Jews in Persia. The text-setting is primarily syllabic; but the word “santo” (holy) caused Dittersdorf to compose a long melisma, using the MR to emphasize the word’s meaning (Example 26). By taking the sequence through three full stages and tonicizing the third scale degree (counting up from E flat), Dittersdorf came very close to duplicating Fenaroli’s version of the MR (see Example 23).
The MR in opera: Mozart and Dittersdorf

The MR’s association with sacred music was strong enough that it belonged among the schemata that, when used in secular music, brought with them a kind of sacred aura. Vasili Byros has written of this phenomenon in relation to the Stabat Mater Prinner and the Le-Sol-Fi-Sol, and Olga Sanchez has made similar points in connection with the Romanesca. In the case of the MR, the sacred aura that surrounded its appearances in secular music enhanced its effectiveness as a conveyer of the sublime.

An unusual and remarkable example of an MR in opera is in the Great Quartet in Mozart’s *Idomeneo*, in which the main characters express the despair to which fate has driven them. After spending most of the duet expressing their own personal pain, near the end they join together in a communal expression of grief. Throughout the quartet, Mozart responded to his characters’ despair with music of extraordinary expressive power. The end of the quartet, and his characters’ expression of communal pain, presented him with a challenge. How could he provide the quartet with a culmination that would go beyond what he had done already?

Mozart met this challenge with a passage based on several new schemata, including the MR, used twice. It lifts listeners to a new level, bringing them momentarily from the theater into the church, and transforming an operatic crisis into an elemental confrontation of human beings and powers beyond their control (Example 27).

Any musical device that a composer used to enhance the seriousness and grandeur of opera seria was subject to appropriation and parody by composers of comic opera. In 1786, a few months after Mozart presented a performance of *Idomeneo* in Vienna, Dittersdorf used the MR for comic effect in what became his most popular Singspiel, *Der Apotheker und der Doktor*. The finale of act 1, which takes place at night, depicts an attempted elopement by two pairs of lovers. Claudia, the mother of one of the young women, comes to investigate, throwing the lovers into a panic. Darkness, confusion, terror ensue: all ingredients of the Burkean sublime, but presented in a comic context that keeps us from taking them seriously. Dittersdorf’s musical setting of this passage uses the MR and tremolo strings in an amusing parody of the musical sublime (Example 28).

36 For another instance of Dittersdorf using the MR with apparently parodistic intent, see his String Quartet No. 1 in D, Kr. 191. In the finale, a cheerful rondo in the form A–B–A–C–A-coda, both episodes contain stormy passages based on the MR, and delightfully at odds with the movement’s predominant character: https://youtu.be/sJ9GbM5M3WE?t=10m47s

(The Overture schema involves a rising scale segment over a tonic pedal; see W. Dean Sutcliffe, "Topics in Chamber Music," in The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory, ed. Danuta Mirka, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 118–140 [137].)
Corelli Leapfrog

Cadence

Corelli

Long Comma

Evaded

Corelli

Monumento Romanesco

Canon at the fourth below:
Elettra and Idomeneo
Ex. 28. Dittersdorf, Der Apotheker und der Doktor, finale of act 1, mm. 155–71. Translation: Claudia “What the devil is that? I must see for myself.” Leonore and Rosalia “My every limb is trembling; she’s coming; what will become of us?” Sichel and Gotthold “My courage fails me; what will happen to us?”
The MR in Late Eighteenth-Century Instrumental Music

A late eighteenth-century composer who seems to have been particularly fond of the MR was Leopold Kozeluch, a Bohemian pianist and composer active in Vienna during the 1780s and 90s. In his Piano Concerto in D, Kozeluch used the MR and the Romanesca in parallel passages, just as C. P. E. Bach had done in his Keyboard Sonata in A major, H. 186. Gjerdingen, in pointing to Bach’s replacement of one schema with another, suggested that the composer noticed an “affinity” between the Romanesca and the MR. Kozeluch may have done so as well. In the first movement of his concerto, the closing material of Ritornello 1 (the orchestral introduction) includes a Romanesca (Example 29a); the closing material of the exposition (Ritornello 2) includes an MR in the analogous place (Example 29b).

Ex. 29. Leopold Kozeluch, Piano Concerto in D, I. The Romanesca and Monte Romanesca in parallel passages

a) mm. 47–56 (closing material in ritornello 1). Performance: Prague New Chamber Orchestra, Albert Zedda, cond., https://youtu.be/0PFDeFj6T4A?t=1m26s

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1787 was a stellar year for the publication of symphonies in Vienna. Kozeluch issued a set of three symphonies, in F, in D, and in G minor; Artaria published the first three of Haydn’s Paris Symphonies, No. 82 in C, No. 83 in G minor, and No. 84 in E flat. In the following year Mozart wrote three symphonies in the same keys as Haydn (thus also one symphony in the same minor key as Kozeluch), suggesting the possibility that he intended them as a response to the sets by Kozeluch and Haydn, and consequently with
publication in mind. In the first movement of the Symphony in F, Kozeluch used an MR in the modulatory passage in the exposition (Example 30). As Gjerdingen pointed out in the analysis cited at the beginning of this paper, Mozart used the MR in the analogous place in the slow movement of his G minor symphony, namely to prepare for the half cadence that precedes the medial caesura (see Example 1 above). Kozeluch’s MR is entirely different in effect from Mozart’s; with its repeated sixteenth notes it recalls the MRs in Handel’s Concerto grosso in D, Op. 6 No. 5 (see Example 17 above); but Kozeluch’s MR shares with the one in Mozart’s Andante the same pre-cadential function.


Kozeluch reharmonized some of the suspensions, replacing the traditional 5/4 harmonies with 6/5 harmonies that tonicize the following chords. Mozart did much the same in the Quintet for Piano and Winds, K. 452. In the concluding rondo the second episode plays the same structural role and has the same character as the development in a sonata-form movement. Near the end of this episode Mozart used an MR, enriched with secondary dominants, to lead up to a prominent half cadence (Example 31).

An MR plays a similar pre-cadential role in the long and eventful development section in the first movement of Mozart’s Piano Concerto in B flat, K. 595. The development begins with the first phrase of the movement’s opening theme in a series of distantly related keys: B minor, C major, E flat major; later a circle of fifths takes the music steadily to the flat side: G minor, C minor, F minor, B flat major (the movement’s tonic), E flat major. As if recognizing that he had gone too far, Mozart launched a MR. It contains all four markers of the schema: the up-a-fifth, down-a-fourth bass movimento, the fourth leap up followed by the scalar descent down a third in the upper parts, the canon at the fifth above, and the 4-3 suspensions. Yet Mozart ingeniously integrated it into the movement by deriving the rhythm and contour of the canonic parts (in the violins) from the movement’s opening theme, already subject to extensive manipulation earlier in the development. Harmonically, this MR reverses the previous circle-of-fifths passage; in terms of a narrative, we can hear it as the ecstatic climax of the entire development (Example 32).

In the dedicatory message that Mozart published with the set of six quartets that he dedicated to Haydn, he claimed that the composition of these works had cost him much labor: “Essi sono, è vero, il frutto di una lunga, e laboriosa fatica.” This set, borrowing an allusion from Burke, was Mozart’s Stonehenge: “When any work seems to have required immense force and labor to effect it, the idea is grand.” The finale of the quartet in G major, K. 387, contains a passage almost calculated to convey a sense of having been composed with great difficulty; and this was not entirely an illusion. The notation of this passage gave Mozart considerable trouble.39

While Mozart placed the MR in the finale of the Quintet for Piano and Winds and in the first movement of the Piano Concerto in B flat, K. 595 near the end of the development section, in the finale of the String Quartet in G he placed it at the very beginning of the development. He continued the sequence much further than normal, taking the “idea” of the MR to an astonishing extreme. The passage moves enharmonically from the sharp side of the tonal spectrum to the flat side, bringing the players into a completely unfamiliar and unexpected tonal realm (Example 33).

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Ex. 32. Mozart, Piano Concerto in B flat, K. 595 (1791), first movement, mm. 215–33. Performance: Andreas Steier, Freiburg Baroque Orchestra, https://youtu.be/1fjYOl8Z2eo?t=5m44s
E flat major

PRINNER

MONTE ROMANESCA in E flat

Canon at the fifth above

Winds

Violas

Strings

CONVERGING CADENCE in G minor

PONTE

Bassoons

Winds
Haydn owned a copy of Burke’s essay on the sublime and the beautiful.40 Burke was still active in London, and his treatise still enjoyed popularity all over Europe, when Haydn came to England in the 1790s to present what turned out to be his last twelve symphonies. Thus it is not entirely surprising that these symphonies should contain music that seems to illustrate, or to present audible analogies of Burke’s division of aesthetic experience into the beautiful and the sublime.41 Indeed the last symphony of all contains a movement that could serve as a textbook example of the beautiful and sublime in music, and in which the depiction of the sublime culminates with an MR.

The Andante of Haydn’s Symphony No. 104, composed in 1795, is in A-B-A’ form. The A-section conforms closely to Burke’s conception of the beautiful in music.

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The choice of an orchestra limited almost entirely to strings could be perceived as a musical analogy to the smallness that according to Burke is typical of the beautiful. An impression of smoothness comes from the mostly conjunct melodic motion. The low dynamic level that predominates helps to convey the delicacy and softness characteristic of the beautiful.

The B-section immediately establishes a new sound world, with wind instruments taking over from strings, and with the minor mode taking over from major. Then suddenly the entire orchestra enters, with trumpets and timpani heard for the first time in the movement, and also the movement’s first fortissimo. The winds and brass remind us of Baillie’s attempt to describe how music can express the sublime: “wind instruments are the most fitted to elevate.” The new dynamic level reminds us of Burke’s statement: “Excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend action, and to fill it with terror.”

With the first few measures of the B-section Haydn had already produced a perfect illustration of the musical sublime, as opposed to the beautiful depicted in the A-section. His stroke of genius was to go further: to intensify this expression of the sublime by using the MR as it had been used since Corelli’s time: as a pre-cadential climax. He introduced the MR directly before a half cadence that sets up the return of the tonic key and the beginning of the A’-section (Example 34).

**Ex. 34** Haydn, Symphony No. 104 (1795), Andante, mm. 57–68. Performance: Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, Frans Brüggen, cond., [https://youtu.be/N1FUw5whO-4?t=13m13s](https://youtu.be/N1FUw5whO-4?t=13m13s)
The A’-section that follows brings together elements of sections A and B, so that we can hear it as a refutation by Haydn of Burke’s claim that the sublime and beautiful were mutually exclusive. But that reconciliation happens only after the B-section presents the musical sublime in its purest and most intense form.

As a young man, Haydn had served as accompanist to the aged Porpora, whose realizations of the MR we saw earlier. Much later he credited Porpora with teaching him the “true fundamentals of composition,” which almost certainly involved the study of partimento.42 From that study Haydn undoubtedly learned how and where to deploy the MR. Going back further, Porpora studied in Naples at the Conservatorio de’ Poveri di Gesù Cristo—where several great composers, including Vinci and Pergolesi, got their start. Thus we can hear the Monte Romanesca in Haydn’s last symphony as the culmination, not only of the sublime passage in the Andante, but of a long tradition that had transmitted this schema through several generations of musicians.

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APPENDIX:
SOME LITERATURE ON THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MUSICAL SUBLIME

1980–1989


1990–1999

Garda, Michela. Musica sublime: Metamorfosi di un’ idea nel Settecento musicale (Milan, 1995)

2000–2015

Allanbrook, Wye J. “Is the Sublime a Musical Topos?” Eighteenth-Century Music 7 (2010), 263–79


