American Transcendentalist Philosophy and Symbolism in the Text and Music of Dominick Argento's *Walden Pond*

R. Ryan Endris

The text excerpted from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* in Dominick Argento's *Walden Pond* is filled with American Transcendentalist ideology. Congruently, Argento has musically highlighted and reinforced those philosophies through musical symbolism in the work. A close examination of both Thoreau's text and Argento's music reveals allusions to American Transcendentalist philosophy. In addition to identifying American Transcendentalist influence in Thoreau's text, an analysis of each movement demonstrates how Argento musically reinforces those Transcendentalist ideals held by Thoreau with specific text-painting examples and leitmotifs[1] and captures the overall imagery, mood, and atmosphere of the text (*Stimmung*) through texture, instrumentation, and topics.

Thoreau and American Transcendentalism

An understanding of Thoreau, the American Transcendentalist movement, and the relationship between the two is necessary for recognizing and identifying these elements in the excerpted text from *Walden*. In 1845 at the age of twenty-seven, Thoreau borrowed an axe from Ralph Waldo Emerson and built a log cabin on some land—Walden—which was owned by Emerson.[2]

Thoreau went to Walden in March of that year to see if he could achieve a suitable balance between labor and leisure by living life as simply as possible.[3] Following in the footsteps of European Romantics, Thoreau moved to Walden to observe and write about nature; however, he also sought to teach a lesson to society about the value of work.[4] Thoreau did write specifically about his own motivations for inhabiting Walden: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,

[1] Leitmotifs in this article are defined as recurrent referential sonorities and motives that carry extramusical meaning. Like the harmonic leitmotifs of Wagner and Strauss, many of the leitmotifs in *Walden Pond* are chords. Likewise, many of the leitmotifs occur in the accompanying instruments. Leonard B. Meyer's books *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (1956) and *Explaining Music* (1973) have served as guides in identifying motivic structures. Argento's implementation of musical topics is discussed in Robert Hatten's use of the word in his book *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (1994).

[2] James. Thorpe, *Thoreau's Walden* (Pasadena: The Castle Press, 1977), 9.

[3] Paul F. Boller, *American Transcendentalism, 1830-1860: An Intellectual Inquiry* (New York: Putnam, 1974), 206.

[4] Robert Sullivan, *The Thoreau You Don't Know* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 123.

The CHORAL SCHOLAR
The Online Journal of the National Collegiate Choral Organization

Volume 4, Number 1 *Fall 2014*

to front only the essential facts of life, and to see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover I had not lived."[5]

Thoreau spent precisely two years, two months, and two days at Walden, although he did make regular trips into town to visit friends.[6] While he was there, Thoreau wrote most of *A Week* and *Walden*, but he left in 1847 because he "had other lives to live and could spare no more time for that particular life."[7] Although he had written the majority of *Walden* while living there, Thoreau spent nearly six years continuing to write and edit the book, finally publishing it in Boston in 1854.[8]

American Transcendentalism can be described as a religious, philosophical, and literary movement that promoted free thinking in religion and both Romanticism and individualism in literature [9] This ideology began as a movement against traditional, historical Christianity out of the Unitarian Church in New England in the 1830s.[10] The American Transcendentalists were quite concerned with the "organic metaphor," which is interpreting reality in terms of analogies to the natural world (that is, plant life and animal life).[11] The ideas of many writers, such as Emerson and Thoreau, include "the divinity of nature, the glory of human aspiration and freedom, the power of intuition as opposed to reason, [and] the creative energy of the poetic imagination."[12] More specifically, the American Transcendentalists envisioned a divine power or energy that creates all that is good and beautiful in the universe.[13] For the Transcendentalist, nature keeps understanding and reason in balance and, according to Emerson, serves as a source of resources, an unblemished world of beauty, and inspiration for writing.[14]

Within this philosophical mindset, the American Transcendentalists focused on creativity, sociality, and most importantly, individuality—Emerson said, "Nature never rhymes her children, nor makes two men alike."[15] They believed that the individual—not society—was the source of all inspiration, creativity, and originality, and although society may exert a certain amount of influence, it cannot create as the individual can.[16]

Of the American Transcendentalist philosophies, Thoreau concerned himself primarily with two in writing *Walden*: nature and the individual. He did not leave behind any manuals on theories, philosophies, or aesthetics,[17] but his views on such matters were not entirely unknown. Of all the American Transcendentalists, Thoreau most ardently rejected establishment, religion in particular, although he did not consider himself an atheist. He once said that he preferred the sound of cow bells to the sound of church bells.[18] He did not believe in personal immortality and wrote that there was "no heaven but that which lies about me."[19] For Thoreau, nature

[5] Thorpe, 10.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Boller, 207.

[8] Thorpe, 17.

[9] Boller, xix–xx.

[10] Ibid., xviii–xix.

[11] George Hochfield, "An Introduction to Transcendentalism," in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. Brian M. Barbour(Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1973), 41.

[12] Ibid., 36.

[13] Boller., 67.

[14] Ibid., 50.

[15] Ibid., 190.

[16] Ibid., 191.

[17] Verena Kerting, *Henry David Thoreau's Aesthetics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 5.

[18] Boller, 29.

[19] Ibid., 30.

was his religion. He did not align himself with traditional Romanticists that viewed nature as a supernatural or imaginative realm; rather, he believed that "truth could only be derived from an empirical contemplation of the actual, phenomenal world."[20] Richard Schneider sums up this philosophy quite well: "For Thoreau, the purpose of life's journey is to explore this [spiritual] potential, and nature provides the world, the moral landscape, in whichto explore it."[21]

Personally, Thoreau wanted to bridge the gap between body and mind, the physical world and the spiritual realm.[22] While Emerson viewed nature as a "physical means to a spiritual end," Thoreau found spirituality *through* nature.[23] In fact, Thoreau felt such a deep connection with nature that he achieved an ecstatic state that overwhelmed his consciousness.[24] He became unified with nature, and he had become acutely aware—through all of his senses—of everything surrounding him.[25] But for Thoreau, senses alone did not grasp or capture full knowledge and understanding of an experience; they merely introduced the phenomenon to the intellect, and together they would form an understanding.[26] It was through nature that Thoreau sought to understand not only the world around him, but also to know more thoroughly his own being. In his essay "Resolution at Walden" Sherman Paul writes, "In Walden Pond, [Thoreau] saw the image of his purified self—that pristine, eternal self he hoped to possess."[27]

Through *Walden*, Thoreau aimed to give an account of nature based on his experiences, since fixed theory does not suffice with nature constantly changing.[28] He marketed this book as a travel book (a very popular genre at the time) with himself as the tour guide, but *Walden* is not simply an account of his travels; rather, the writing serves to inspire people to explore and be seekers of truth.[29] A common myth about *Walden* is that it is a text about a hermit, a man who isolates himself from society for two years and spends that time meditating in nature. On the contrary, Thoreau is more interested in change than stasis, exploration than observation.[30] In fact, Thoreau adopted a view of life with mankind as transient and nature as permanent.[31]

For Thoreau, nature did not need to be idealized in art; to do so would only reflect a shadow of its true beauty and only a mere snapshot—not a video—of the experience.[32] Kerting expounds upon this idea: "Instead of producing poetry that conveyed merely the shell of an experience and that was mainly determined by his self, Thoreau wished to capture and convey the vividness and characteristics of the objects themselves."[33] Nature was already perfect, and he did not believe it needed a poet to make it perfect. Instead, he thought that people needed to learn how to open themselves up to be able to perceive nature.[34] From a very basic perspective (one that Thoreau himself would likely adopt),

[20] Kerting, 1.

[21] Richard J. Schneider, "Walden," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thoreau,* ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 100.

[22] Kerting, 61.

[23] Schneider, 100.

[24] Boller, 195.

[25] Kerting, 97.

[26] Ibid., 70

[27] Sherman Paul, "Resolution at Walden," in *Critical Essays on Henry David Thoreau's Walden*, ed. Joel Myerson (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988), 61.

[28] Kerting, 61.

[29] Schneider, 93.

[30] Ibid., 92.

[31] Thorpe, 14.

[32] Kerting, 96.

[33] Ibid., 109.

[34] Ibid., 2.

Walden is a book about purity and innocence as represented by nature and about the need for individuality as human beings.[35]

Thoreau draws his inspiration for *Walden* from nature, which then serves as tropes and metaphors that represent his observations and concepts.[36] Through his choice of language, he strategically draws the reader toward the self, society, nature, and God—all at the same time.[37] Thoreau draws upon the images and scenes of the natural world in and around Concord in his writings and poems, and "applies the high standards of his idealism to aspects of the human condition—love, friendship, memory, the transitory nature of life."[38] In his essay about the deeper truths of *Walden*, Joseph Boone writes, "One of Thoreau's overriding purposes in writing *Walden* involves his effort to educate his audience of the difference between the conventional life that merely skims the surface of existence and the fully-experienced life that fathoms its depths."[39]

To emphasize on a global level the process of death and rebirth in the reader's own journey, Thoreau represents *Walden* chronologically through the cycle of seasons, condensing his roughly two-year stay into one year.[40] On a local level, the morning and the light of the breaking dawn represent rebirth and human potential for abundant life.[41] Although Thoreau did not share many of the Romantic views of nature as supernatural or magical, "in style as well as structure, in language as well as idea, then, Thoreau recapitulates the archetypal Romantic theme of rebirth."[42]

Analysis of No. 1—"The Pond"

Thoreau incorporates allegories, metaphors, and other rhetorical gestures that superimpose added meaning to the text. In the first paragraph, Thoreau refers to the pond as a "well." The use of this word evokes an image of a body of water that provides sustenance to those creatures that draw from it. In this instance, given his Transcendentalist ideology, Thoreau most likely is alluding not to just a physical sustenance, but also a spiritual one.

He also refers to the pond as a "perennial spring," which plays on the multiple meanings of spring as both a fount of water and a season of year. Again, the word "spring" connotes life, both as a source of potable water and a season of the year when new life emerges from winter's sleep. Joseph Boone concurs: "If actually a spring, the pond would then be, as a source fed solely from the earth's interior, an origin of pure life."[43] Ironically, the pond itself is a water-table pond; that is, "Walden has no springs or streams running into or out of it, above or below the surface. Water is added to the pond's volume by seepage, rainfall, and snowmelt; it is subtracted through

[35] Thorpe, 22.

[36] Elizabeth Hall Witherell, "Thoreau as Poet," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thoreau,* ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 57.

[37] Joseph J. Moldenhauer, "The Extra-Vagant Manuever: Paradox in Walden," in *Critical Essays on Henry David Thoreau's Walden*, ed. Joel Myerson (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988), 98.

[38] Witherell, 57.

[39] Joseph Allen. Boone, "Delving and Diving for Truth: Breaking through to Bottom in Thoreau's Walden," in *Critical Essays on Henry David Thoreau's Walden*, ed. Joel Myerson (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988), 164.

[40] Schneider, 97.

[41] Ibid., 103.

[42] John C. Broderick, "The Movement of Thoreau's Prose," in *Critical Essays on Henry David Thoreau's Walden*, ed. Joel Myerson (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988), 84.

[43] Boone, 170.

seepage,through evaporation, and through uptake by trees and plants."[44]

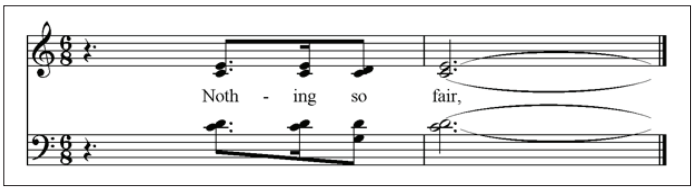
Giving even more lifelike qualities to the pond, Thoreau personifies it in two specific instances. He refers to it as "earth's eye, looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature."[45] If one's eyes are, as anecdotally considered, the "windows of the soul," then Thoreau's personification of the pond surpasses that of mere physical human qualities. Richard Schneider writes, "As a metaphor for the writer's own artistic eye, the pond's 'crystalline purity' …also suggests a moral purity against which the writer or reader can 'measure the depth of his own nature.'" In yet another reference to the aliveness of the pond, he refers to the steam or mist rising from the water as its own "breath" floating as clouds high above its surface, the act of breathing being the most rudimentary action of a living being.

The reflective qualities of the pond pervade Thoreau's writing; in addition to being the "earth's eye" that the beholder looks into to measure his own character, Thoreau also calls it an unbreakable mirror, a "mirror which no stone can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off," once again recalling the eternal nature of this place. He also describes the magnification and the distortion of things that lie below its surface but that are viewed from above it.

The most obvious musical observation one can make about this movement is its setting as a barcarolle. A folk song sung by gondoliers in the canals of Venice, the barcarolle is set to a slow triple meter, most commonly 6/8. It is fitting, then, that this text be set to a music that would be sung on water, as the unevenness of compound meters mimics the gentle waves rippling through water. The sparse orchestration of a cappella choir, three cellos, and one harp embodies Thoreau's Transcendentalist philosophy of rejecting modernity for simplicity and society for nature.

Argento magnifies Thoreau's poetic text and his rhetoric through pitch and harmony. One of the most prominent features of this movement is the use of leitmotifs or referential sonorities. The most pervasive of referential sonorities is the "Reflection" chord, which first occurs in mm. 1–2 (see Example 1). At the most superficial level, it is simply a C major chord with an added second; upon further study, it is the pitch D reflecting the C and E which are equidistant from that central pitch, like a ripple in the water after tossing in a stone. This conjecture is bolstered by the fact that D remains a common tone throughout mm. 1–11; with the exception of one chord, the pitch appears in every chord.

Example 1: Reflection chord; *Walden Pond*, movement 1, mm. 1–2.



[44] "The Walden Woods Project," http://www.walden.org/Library/About_Thoreau's_Life_and_Writings:_The_Research_Collections/Walden,_the_Place (accessed December 30 2011).

[45] Richard J. Schneider, "Walden," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thoreau*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 101-102.

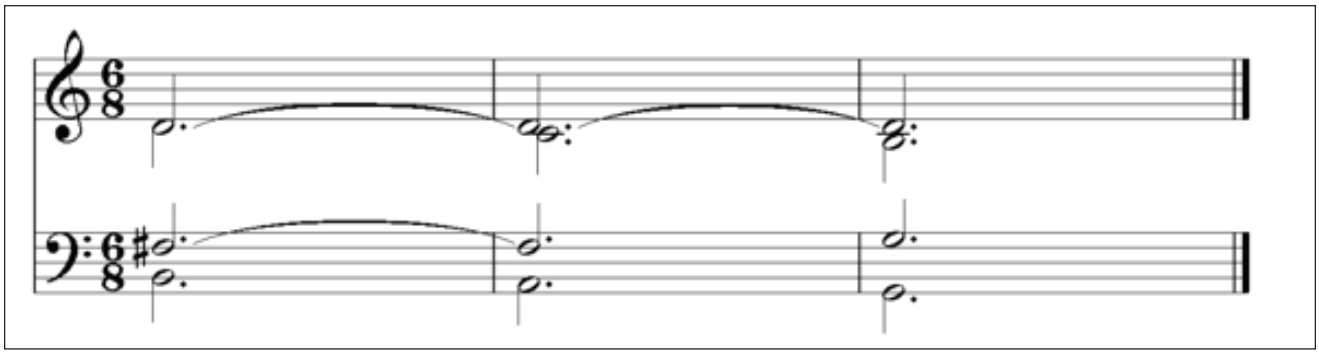
The Reflection chord occurs in mm. 1–2, mm. 14–15, mm. 21–22 (in the harp), m. 26, m. 42, and m. 62. The chord occurs at three different pitch levels: C, B, and B♭. In contrast to the initial Reflection chord, the chord that follows in m. 4 at first glance seems anything but "pure." Read either as an augmented chord with an added ♯2 or enharmonically respelled as F sharp major with an added ♭6, this chord does not negate the Reflection chord or the text; rather, it evokes a higher "consonance" than a major or minor triad could possibly effect.

The Reflection chord refers not only to the water itself, but also to what those who look into the water see (e.g. the beholder measuring his or her own nature). This leitmotif occurs six times in the movement, but it is not until the penultimate instance that it appears literally on the word *reflected*. On the last instance of its use, Argento employs the Reflection chord on the word *Michelangelo*—this is the first time that it has not been used in reference to the pond or the actual reflection of an image. While it is possible its implementation here serves only a structural purpose, it is possible that Argento is emphasizing the reflection of the human physique in the Mannerist art of Michelangelo. Additionally, one might consider that Thoreau's description of "monstrous effects" and distorted, magnified limbs suggests that the water not only reflects our humanity, but also reveals our inhumanity.

The second significant referential sonority is the chord progression in mm. 8–11, the "Acceptance" sonority (see Example 2). The progression is a move from iii to V4/3 to I by means of a 4-3 suspension, and it provides resolution to major sections of this movement. The Acceptance sonority, too, has a reflective nature in that structurally, it has a feeling of being both the beginning and the end of sections. Argento employs this progression to delineate the form of the movement.

In every instance, the augmented +♯2 chord that follows the reflection motive precedes this sonority. The first time, Argento separates the two with several measures of other musical material, but in subsequent iterations, the augmented +♯2 directly precedes it. This chord progression, however, is slightly undermined by the repeated 4-3 suspension that occurs beneath it in the harp and cello. Because most of the harmonies and rhythms leading up to this progression are in a state of flux, this chord progression relaxes the seemingly unmetered rhythms and harmonic tensions with functional tonal harmonies.

Example 2: Reduction of Acceptance sonority; *Walden Pond*, movement 1, mm. 8–10.



The 4-3 suspension plays a crucial role in this movement, especially in conjunction with the Acceptance sonority. Argento makes the Acceptance sonority move forward through a 4-3 suspension, while subtly undermining its resolution with a repeating 4-3 suspension that lurks beneath the surface in the cello and harp. As it was used in the Romantic period, Argento employs the 4-3 suspension here to evoke an affect or topic of religiosity or, within this context, spirituality. Romantic composers often used the 4-3 suspension in this manner, as it recalls the typical motion of cadences in Renaissance motets, as well as the plagal "Amen" cadence. Argento reinforces the significance of this musical topic in the fourth movement in m. 47 with a 4-3 suspension set to the word *heaven*. Given the transcendental nature of Thoreau's writing, it is no surprise that Argento alludes to a hint of spiritual enlightenment through man's connection with nature.

In addition to evoking an affect of religiosity in this movement, Argento evokes an affect of antiquity in one specific instance. In mm. 50–51, Argento employs flatted scale degrees 6 and 2, which give an aural impression of modal mixture (Phrygian) or a shift in mode (see Example 3). Additionally, the false relations of D♭/D♮ and G♭/G♮ hearken back to the Renaissance era. The church modes, long-associated with the music of the early church, create a sense of temporal distance, and the use of modal mixture to evoke antiquity here references the long existence of the pond.

Throughout the movement, both Thoreau and Argento seek to capture the pureness, the tranquility, and the permanence of Walden Pond. Thoreau achieves this by describing its "crystalline purity" in several instances and specifically referencing its existence ("a thousand years ago"), while Argento succeeds through the creation leitmotifs that continuously recur throughout the movement (the Reflection chord serves as a common thread throughout the entire composition), providing both structure and musical realization of Thoreau's Transcendentalist philosophies.

Analysis of No. 2 – "Angling"

Thoreau's text for this movement abounds with Transcendentalist philosophical ideas, ironies, and metaphors. One of his most deeply held ideals, finding spirituality or a connection with a divine creating energy through nature, permeates the entire text, principally through his use of personification. He first personifies the moon, giving it motion as it is "travelling over the ribbed bottom [of the boat]." The owls and the foxes assume roles as both spectators and participants with their serenades to Thoreau and his deaf companion. He even suggests that he is "communicating" with the fish in the pond through his fishing line, which inherently implies they are communicating back. Perhaps the more appropriate word—although probably less poetic—would be "communing," as finding communion with nature was his ultimate goal.

Joseph Boone offers several insights into the meaning of fishing—both literal and spiritual—for Thoreau in his essay "Delving and Diving for Truth: Breaking Through to Bottom in Thoreau's *Walden*." At the most basic level, fishing is an exercise in meditation, and the fishing line is Thoreau's tool.[46] At a deeper level, fishing, the exploration of the depths of the water, serves as an analogy for soul-searching.[47] Boone takes that

[46] Boone, 170.

[47] Ibid., 172.

concept a step further, suggesting that fishing is a metaphor for life, with the sliding surface [the current] passing by representing time.[48] For Thoreau, fishing is a connection to God through the fishing line, with the other side of the line being both deep and mysterious.[49]

Thoreau mentions his own "philosophy," and while he does not delineate exactly what that philosophy encompasses, he does mention that the silence between him and the older man and the psalm tune the man hums "harmonize well enough" with his philosophy. The silence allows Thoreau the opportunity to seek a deeper connection with nature; he accepts the psalm tune because the man is humming it—that is, he is not singing any prescribed religious words or texts. This fits in neatly with the American Transcendentalist rejection of the traditional religious establishment.

Related to these ideas, Thoreau juxtaposes two contrasting ideas in this section of the text: external music versus internal music. The external music is quite obvious, as he describes playing the flute, the creaking bird, the serenading owls and foxes, and the humming old, deaf man. At the same time, an internal music exists, both between Thoreau and nature and between Thoreau and his companion. The external music of the flute creates an internal musical dialogue between Thoreau and the fishes, and the songs of the owls and foxes also achieve the same dialogue with him. His internal "harmony" with the old fisherman is actually a silent discourse, which Thoreau actually prefers to an "intercourse… carried on by speech."

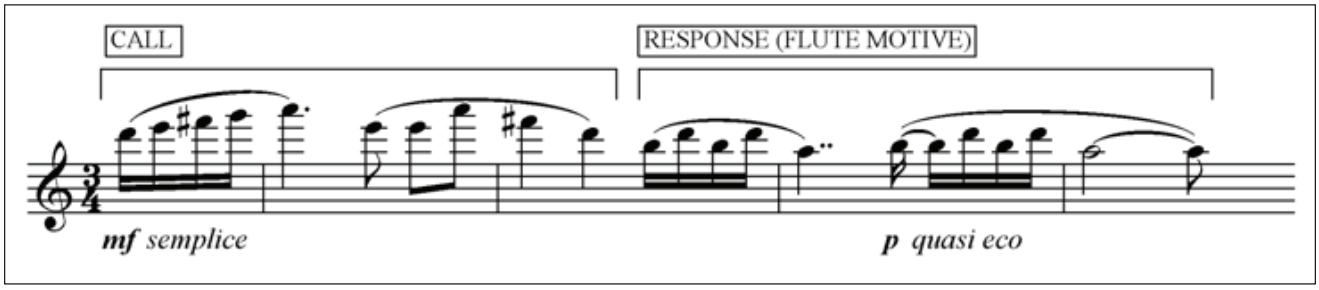
As in the first movement of this piece, Argento's musical setting of Thoreau's poetic prose depicts the philosophical ideas and imagery that fill the text. Along with a number of rhetorical devices and specific instances of text-painting, Argento establishes two primary leitmotifs that serve as anchors and musical reference points throughout the movement.

The first leitmotif, the "Flute" motive, opens the second movement as an example of external music in the movement. Played by a solo cello as string harmonics, the ethereal quality of the cello evokes the sound of the woodwind instrument, which Thoreau mentions specifically in the first sentence. Argento fragments the "flute" solo, using the last five pitches as the actual motive; he reinforces this leitmotif through repetition, an echo of the same pitches by a second, solo cello (see Example 3). The Flute motive recurs several times throughout the first twenty-eight measures of the movement, most notably two times while the chorus sustains the word *flute*. Argento saves the motive's next and final reprise for the end of the movement, when it occurs once again with the "Permanence" chord.

[48] Ibid., 166.

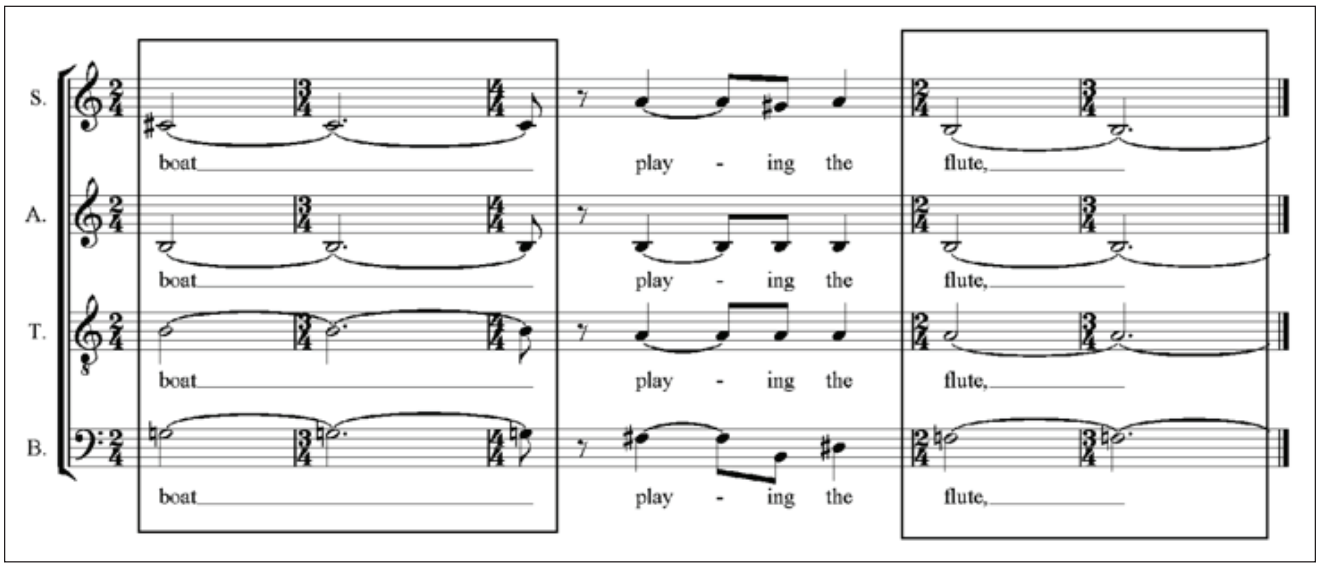
[49] Ibid., 170–171.

Example 3: Flute Motive; *Walden Pond*, movement 2, mm. 1–4.



The Permanence chord, in contrast to the Flute motive, occurs throughout the entire movement in both the chorus and the accompanimental forces. The chord first appears in m. 12 in the chorus and is reinforced by its repetition at a lower pitch level in m. 15. This leitmotif, the "Permanence" chord, is suggestive of stasis in three principal ways. First, the chord first appears in connection with the text that refers to sitting in the boat, which is in itself a static action. Second, Argento always sustains the chord for at least four beats in a slow tempo, which suggests inactivity. Third, the pitch collection itself suggests stasis in that it does not have an apparent resolution (see Example 4). The three-note chord is built upon a major third, with an added augmented fourth above the lowest pitch. While tritones in tonal music typically exhibit a tendency for resolution, this tritone exudes a sense of balance, marking the middle of the chromatic scale, much like the center of gravity needed to sit stably in a rowboat. Additionally, the pitch set comes from the whole tone collection, which itself is an immovable and self-reflexive sonority.

Example 4: Permanence chord; *Walden Pond*, movement 2, mm. 12–16.



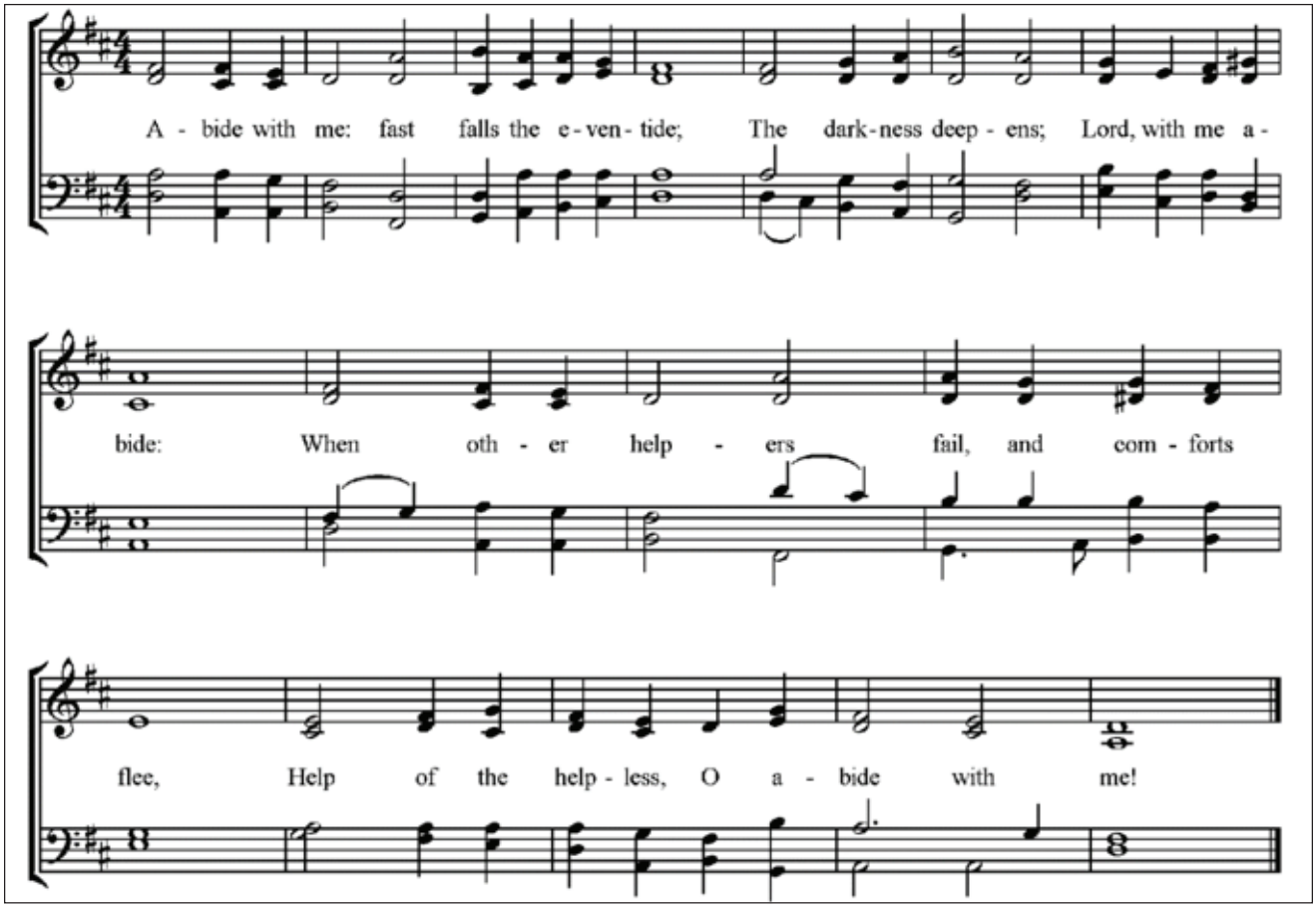
This leitmotif, as previously stated, occurs throughout the movement. After its first two instances in the chorus (mm. 12 and 15), it returns twice in mm. 55–61, the second time at a pitch level one step lower than the first instance. Here the motive appears in the accompanying celli, while the chorus, by no coincidence, declaims the text "we sat together on the pond, he at one end of the boat, and I at the other…" This further bolsters the argument that Argento has associated the motive with the boat and permanence. The Permanence chord returns one final time in the last three measures of the movement in tandem with the Flute motive.

In one specific passage, Argento effectively captures the silence, the external music, and the internal music Thoreau describes in his poetic text. The composer combines soft, unison declamation of the text "for he had grown deaf in his later years" in m. 62, while the accompaniment completely drops out of the texture, musically depicting the silence that enveloped the older man and the silence between him and Thoreau. The accompaniment

resumes in m. 63, this time assuming the role of the internal music between Thoreau and the man, and Thoreau and nature. This internal music foreshadows the external music, the humming of a psalm, in mm. 69–76, a literal depiction of the text.

The tenors do not hum a psalm, but they do hum the first half of the hymn tune "Eventide," which is also known as "Abide with Me" (see Example 5). Composed by a British organist contemporaneously with Thoreau's composition of *Walden*, "Abide with Me" likely alludes to the evening setting of both this movement and the hymn itself, one abiding with God in nature, and simply the two people abiding together in the boat.

Example 5: Hymn; *Abide With Me*, William H. Monk (1823–1889).



Analysis of No. 3 – "Observing"

As in the previous two movements, Thoreau's personification of his surroundings, the fish and the pond itself permeates the text. Instead of depicting a fish simply leaping out of the water, he writes of "a fish [that] describes an arc of three or four feet in the air." The fish in Walden Pond also take part in an exclusively human action: murder. Thoreau describes a pickerel or a shiner capturing an insect for food as "piscine murder," essentially placing the wildlife on the same level as humankind.

Again, Thoreau has given life to Walden Pond through his personification of the body of water. He portrays the lifeline or heartbeat of the pond through the circular ripples in the pond's surface, referring to "the gentle pulsing of its life, the heaving of its breast." He also gives the "trembling circles" the ability to consciously elect to "seek the shore."

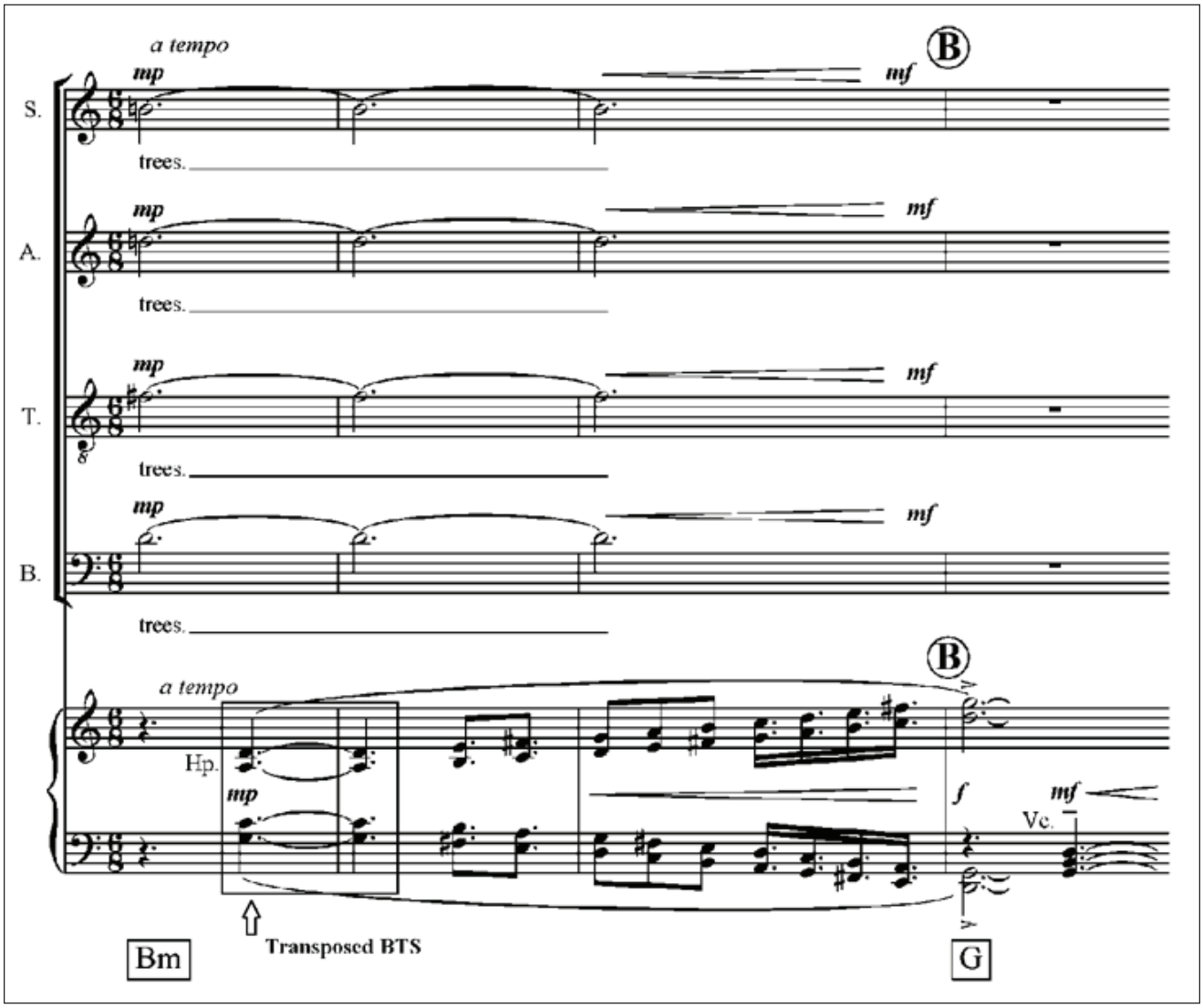
From a philosophical standpoint, this passage from *Walden* focuses on dualities: the pond as both a static body of water and a living, breathing entity, and Thoreau's perception of himself as both an observer and a participant in nature. In some respect, one might consider these two examples of dualities one in the same: both a static body of water and an observer of nature are passive and inactive, while a living being and a participant are engaging and active.

Thoreau's difficulty in distinguishing the surface of the water and the sky—the water reflects the image of the sky—exemplifies his own inability to distinguish his role in this environment. Thoreau sees his reflection in the water, yet he speaks as though he is actually *in* the water ("I was surprised to find myself surrounded by myriads of small, bronze-colored perch"). At the same time, he sees the clouds reflected in the water's surface and envisions himself "floating through the air as in a balloon." Thoreau most effectively sums ups this ambiguity, this duality, when he compares the fish to birds in the final clause of the last paragraph; for him, it is unclear where the sky ends and the water begins, whether he is viewing his image in the water or whether he actually is in the pond.

In this movement, Argento reprises the two principal sonorities of the first movement: the Acceptance sonority and the Reflection motive. In both instances, Argento has slightly altered and recontextualized the leitmotif, but the listener's ear can still recognize them and make a connection to their initial introduction. The first of the two sonorities to appear is an altered form of the Acceptance sonority in mm. 19–22. Here the chorus arrives on a B minor chord, followed by a quartal, outward expansion in the harp that yields to G major (see Example 6). In hindsight, one realizes that mm. 8–11 feature the exact same harmonic and melodic material a step higher—a transposition of the Acceptance sonority. These reworkings of the Acceptance sonority do not seem to carry any specific additional extramusical meaning; rather, they most likely serve to reinforce the establishment of this sonority as a leitmotif.

Example 6 on next page.

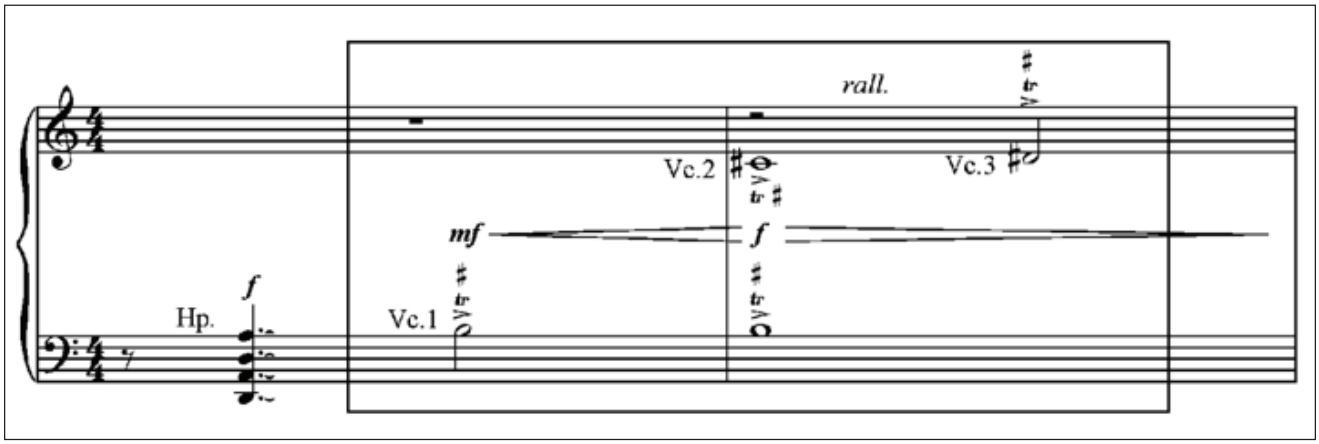
Example 6: Altered Acceptance Sonority; *Walden Pond*, movement 3, mm. 19–22.



Argento also reworks the Reflection chord from the first movement in mm. 67–68, as Thoreau describes seeing his own image surrounded by perch in the water. The original three-note sonority originally consisted of the pitches C, D, and E, although later in the first movement, Argento presented the leitmotif one half step and one whole step lower.

Here, the cellos introduce each pitch separately, this time with a trill on each note, so that by the end of m. 68, the listener hears the Reflection chord. Example 7 shows a reduction of the cellos' entrances, which form the leitmotif.

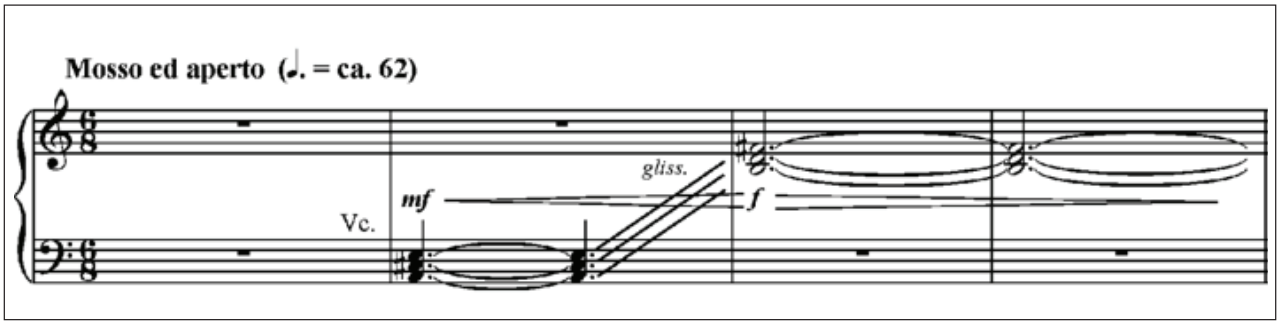
Example 7: Reworked Reflection chord; *Walden Pond*, movement 3, mm. 67–68.



On a global level, Argento recreates the *Stimmung* of Thoreau's recorded experience principally through orchestration. Throughout the movement, the sliding triads in the accompanying celli serve to represent the surface of the pond; after sliding from one triad to another, the celli remain melodically and harmonically still, depicting the calm surface of Walden Pond.

Because this musical material returns at the end of the work, it merits identification as a leitmotif, identified as "Pond's Surface" (see Example 8). Argento affirms the meaning of this leitmotif by incorporating a glissando between the words *smooth* and *surface* in the soprano voice in mm. 39–40.

Example 8: Pond's Surface; *Walden Pond*, movement 3, mm. 2–4.



In mm. 61–73, Argento employs paired voices (soprano and tenor, alto and bass) in combination with alternation between chromatic pitches (D♭versus D♮ and F♮ versus F♯). The accompanying harp plays a descending, melodic Q4 harmony,

which Argento has used throughout the movement. This sparse accompanimental texture, with the paired voices in the chorus and the chromatic alternations, creates a dreamlike atmosphere.

While effectively evoking the imagery of Thoreau's text at both a local and global level, Argento goes a step further by bringing the duality of Thoreau's experience to the surface in several ways. The dreamlike *Stimmung* that Argento creates through sparse orchestration, paired voices, and chromatic alternations reflects Thoreau's uncertainty of whether he is physically in the water or merely seeing his own reflection. Argento also portrays the dichotomy of Thoreau as observer versus participant in nature through the interchange of accompanimental forces; rarely in this movement do the celli and harp play simultaneously. It is not until the final two measures of the movement that the celli and harp truly come together. Perhaps, Argento aims to create resolution not only for the listener, but also for Thoreau.

Analysis of No. 4 – "Extolling"

In the text of this fourth movement, Thoreau's text employs extended metaphors to an even greater degree than in the text from the preceding movements. Thoreau employs a number of poetic devices, including hyperbole and personification, to give life and meaning to his poetic text. He writes that "Successive nations perchance have drank at, admired, and fathomed it, and passed away" and "Who knows in how many unremembered nations' literatures this has been the Castalian Fountain?" In both of these instances, Thoreau surely uses the word *nations* in hyperbole to refer generally to people. This hyperbole suggests that people of entire nations have benefitted from this pond, both reinforcing Thoreau's idea of Walden Pond's eternal existence and reiterating that it serves as a fount of both life and inspiration.

As in all of the other passages examined thus far, Thoreau again gives life and agency to Walden Pond through personification. The pond, according to Thoreau, "had clarified its waters and colored them of the hue they now wear, and obtained a patent of Heaven to be the only Walden Pond in the world." This sentence carries particular significance, as Thoreau has personified not only the pond, but also the waters in the pond. This suggests that to Thoreau, Walden Pond is more than just the waters contained within it—it is an entity in and of itself.

The greatest poetic device that Thoreau utilizes in this passage is metaphor. The first three phrases, "Sky water. Lake of light. Great crystal on the surface of the earth," all serve as metaphors for the pond. Again, Thoreau uses metaphor to demonstrate the reflection of the sky in the water. He also alludes again to the dual nature of both the pond itself and his own participation in nature.

To an even greater extent, Thoreau creates two extended metaphors that deal with antiquity and religion through allusions to Greek mythology and the beginnings of Judeo-Christian theology. In the second paragraph, he calls the pond "the Castalian Fountain" and also refers to the "nymphs that presided over it in the Golden Age." Both of these quotations refer directly to Ancient Greek mythology and thinking. Jeffrey S. Cramer writes that in Ancient Greek mythology, the Castalian Fountain is "a fountain on Mount Parnassus sacred to the Muses and a source of [artistic] inspiration."[50]

[50] Henry D. Thoreau, "Walden," ed. Jeffery S. Cramer (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004), 174.

In his annotated edition of *Walden*, Cramer explains that the Ancient Greek and Roman authors divided history from the beginning of the universe to the present into segments or ages, with the Golden Age being an era of sheer perfection. The Greek poet Heriod wrote that after this Golden Age of perfection, the universe entered into and continues to be in an era of progressive decline.[51] This decline that Heriod writes of harmonizes well with Thoreau's own philosophies on the state of religion and society during his lifetime.

In the final paragraph, Thoreau mentions the Biblical story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, which the Bible dates back to the beginning of the world, and he suggests that perhaps Walden existed at that time. He also writes that the pond "obtained a patent of Heaven to be the only Walden Pond in the world." This sentence holds multiple implications and possible interpretations in regards to the extended metaphor Thoreau has created. First the use of the word *patent* implies an exclusivity that Walden Pond is the only place that possesses these unique features and characteristics. This implication meshes well with the Transcendentalist philosophies of having a focus on the individual and viewing Nature as unique and asymmetrical in every facet. Second, the phrase establishes a connection among the Garden of Eden, Heaven, and Walden Pond, essentially equating the three locales. Third, the phrase suggests a question, more than it does an answer: is Walden Pond a patent obtained from Heaven, or is it a piece of Heaven on earth?

In combination, Thoreau's allusion to both Ancient Greece and Judeo-Christian theological roots create two extended metaphors: one that suggests the eternal and permanent existence of the pond and one that equates Walden Pond with spirituality and divinity.

On a global level, Argento uses harmony and modal mixture with new and old leitmotifs to convey the philosophical message of Thoreau's poetic prose. The first two measures, whose harmonic material recurs throughout the movement at various pitch levels, feature an arpeggiated polychord comprised of C sharp major and A major. Within the key of C sharp major (the significance of this chord/key area is discussed later in this section), the polychord creates a split third, a conflict between the E♮ of C sharp minor and the E♯ of C sharp major. The split third results in modal ambiguity, which previously and currently evokes a feeling of antiquity. These triadic relations also lend a mysterious, magical quality to the *Stimmung* of the movement. As Richard Cohn writes in the abstract for the second chapter of his book, there is an "oft-observed affiliation of major-third relations with supernatural phenomena in nineteenth-century music,"[52] which in this piece creates a mysterious atmosphere related to ancient mythology.

In this movement Argento establishes the root-position C sharp major chord as a leitmotif, labeled herein as the "Eternal Divinity" chord (see Example 9), given the pervasiveness and combination of the extended metaphors of antiquity and spirituality throughout Thoreau's text, as previously discussed. This leitmotif is marked by its extreme length in comparison to the surrounding rhythmic durations, its compact voicing as a root position triad, and its

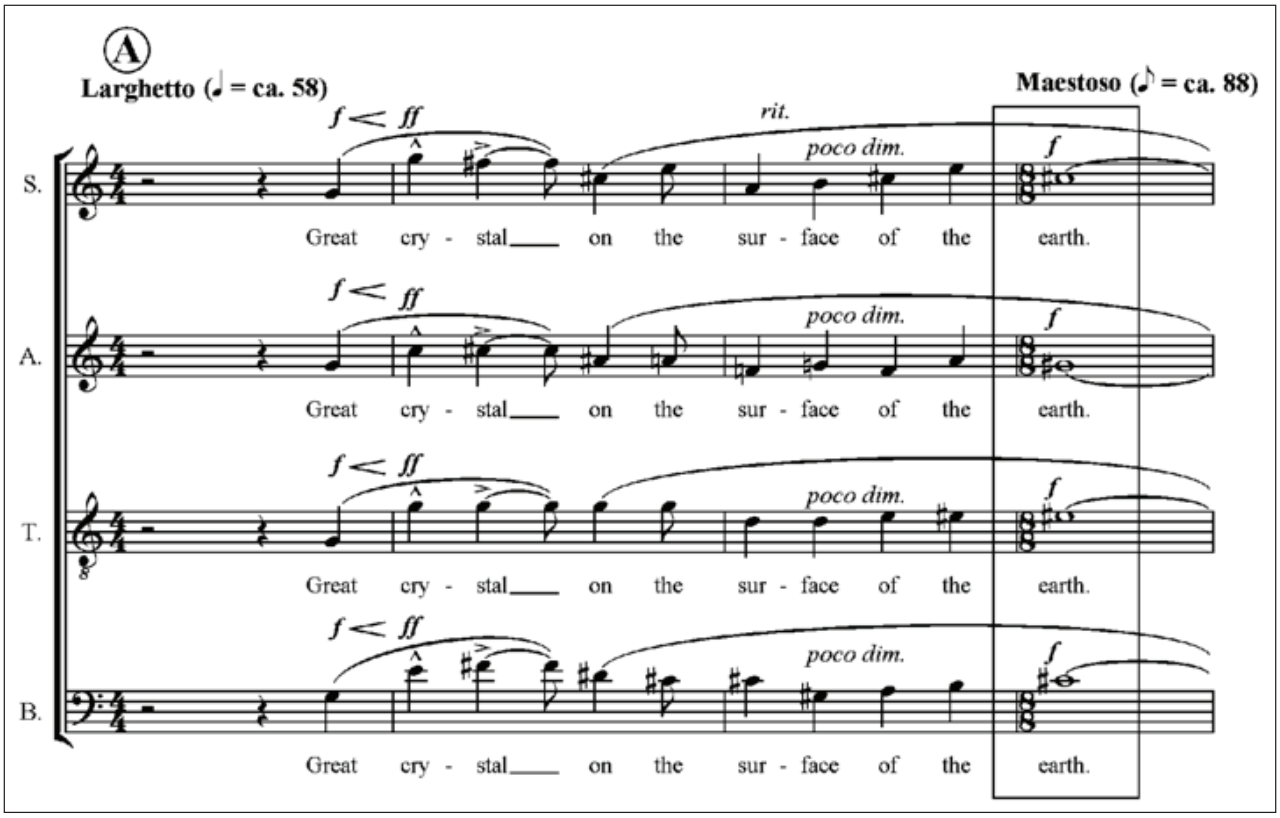
[51] Ibid.

[52] Richard Cohn, "Audacious Euphony: Chromatic Harmony and the Triad's Second Nature," abstract, *Oxford Scholarship Online*, http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199772698.001.0001/acprof-9780199772698-chapter-0002 (accessed June 30, 2012).

consonance in comparison to the harmonies that precede it.

The chord appears four times in the movement, each time at structurally and philosophically important places. The chord appears first in m. 12 at the end of the first, brief paragraph, which ends with "Great crystal on the surface of the earth." Argento also ends the movement on the Eternal Divinity chord over the same polychordal arpeggios in the harp that begin the movement.

Example 9: Eternal Divinity chord; *Walden Pond*, movement 4, mm. 8–12.

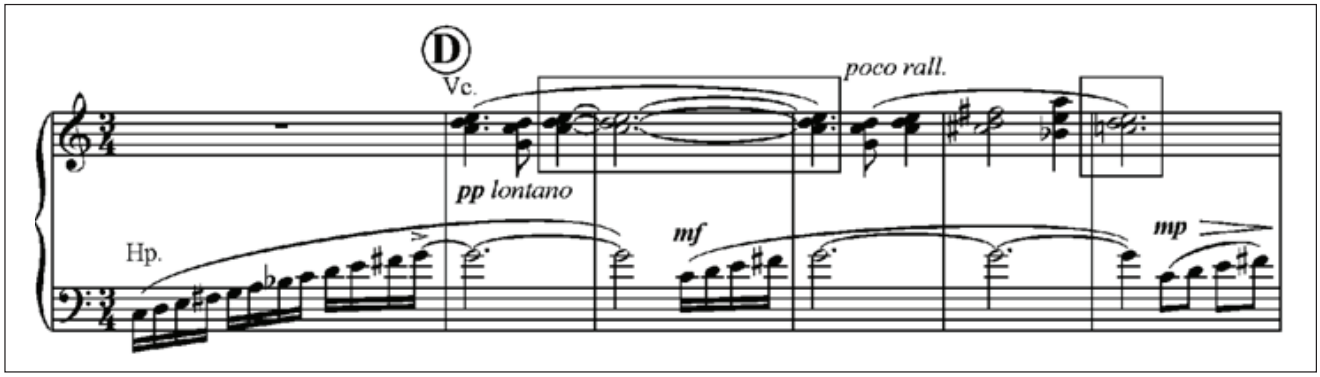


Argento concludes the text of the middle paragraph on an F sharp major chord. At first glance, this does not seem to be the Eternal Divinity chord, but considering that F sharp major is the subdominant of C sharp major, the transposed Eternal Divinity chord creates a large-scale plagal motion, again evoking the topic of religiosity. The chord's penultimate appearance occurs in mm. 40–41 at the end of the phrase "Walden Pond was already in existence," which associates with the leitmotif a feeling of immortality or eternity.

Argento does not create any additional leitmotifs in this movement, but he does reprise the Reflection chord from the first movement. The chord first reappears in mm. 31–35, played softly and distantly by the three solo celli (see Example 10). The chorus then enters in m. 36, repeating the leitmotif with the words "Walden Pond."

Argento's reintroduction of the Reflection chord not only establishes it as a significant leitmotif, but it also the reaffirms the pond's dual nature as both water and reflector of the sky. Argento also implements the Reflection chord in m. 48 with the chorus singing the same text, "Walden Pond."

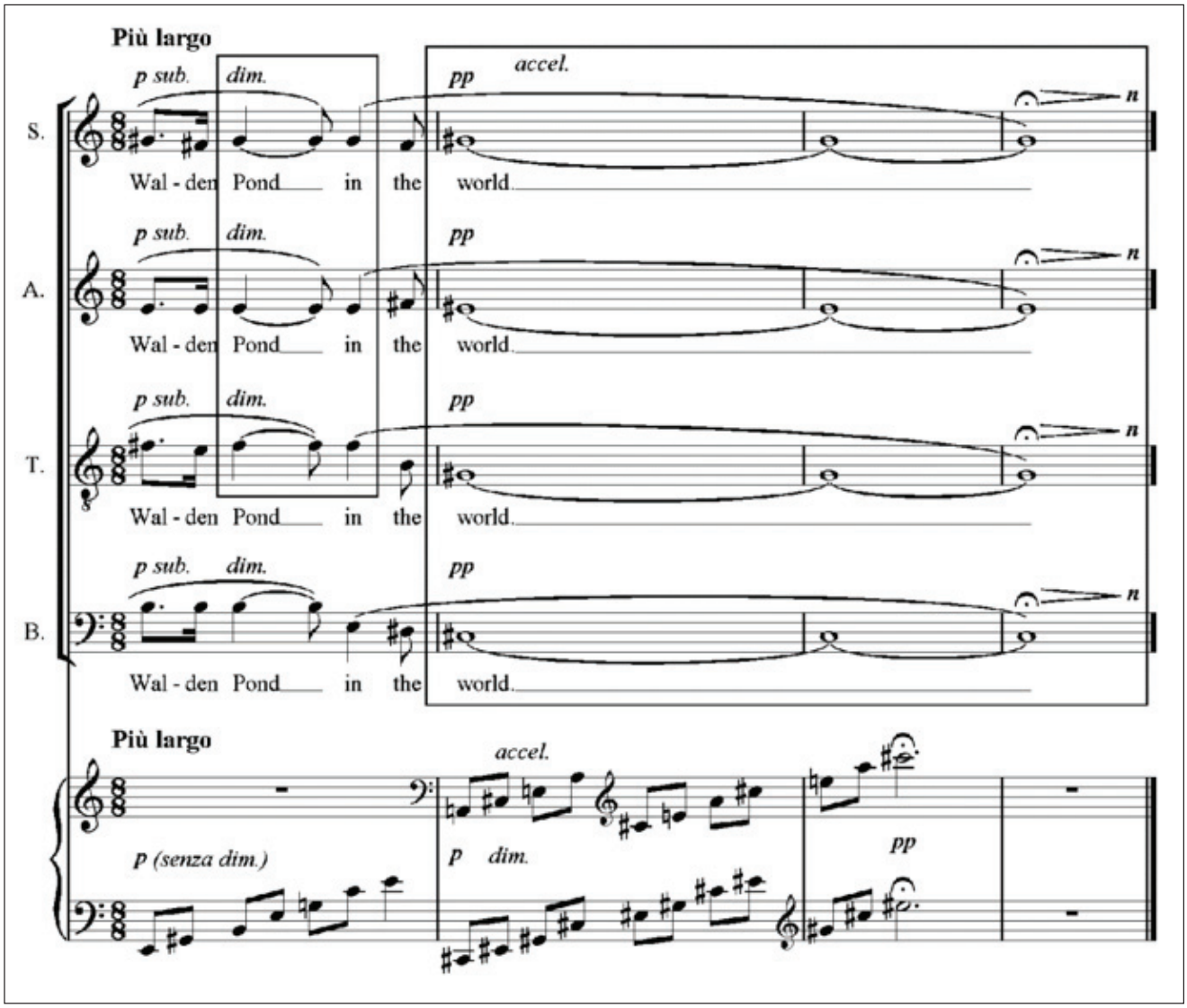
Example 10: Reflection chord; *Walden Pond*, movement 4, mm. 30–35.



In this movement Argento has added significance to the Reflection chord by placing it each time in close proximity to the Eternal Divinity chord. Both times Argento uses it, the Reflection chord actually progresses and transforms into the Eternal Divinity chord (see Example 11). By combining the two leitmotifs within one larger musical unit, Argento musically establishes a connection between the pond (Reflection chord) and a higher being (Eternal Divinity chord). At the same time, he reinforces the reflective and supernatural nature of the major third with third relations in the accompanying harp. The first measure of Example 11 juxtaposes E major with C major (the original key of the Reflection chord), and the remaining measures juxtapose A major and C sharp major, the very same harmonic relationship from the opening measures of the movement. All of this reasons well with Thoreau and the Transcendentalists' philosophy of finding God in and through nature.

Example 11 on next page.

Example 11: Combined use of Reflection chord and Eternal Divinity chord; *Walden Pond*, movement 4, mm. 48–51.



By the end of the fourth movement of the work, one can clearly see the musical and philosophical journey that Argento has created. By combining previous musical gestures (modal mixture and the Reflection chord) with a new leitmotif, Argento has not only continued to exemplify and expound upon the Thoreau's Transcendentalist philosophy, but also he has given added significance to the existing musical gestures. Argento bolsters Thoreau's extended metaphors of ancientness and religion through orchestration. For the majority of the movement, the only accompaniment to the chorus is the harp. Many recognize the harp as an instrument with ancient origins—dating back thousands of years, while also associating the harp with the accompaniment of choice for the angelic choirs of Heaven. Argento calls upon the solo celli sparingly, often using string harmonics that create the effect of a halo, most noticeably on the final pluck of the harp in m. 50.

Analysis of No. 5 – "Walden Revisited"

Thoreau's text in this movement abounds with deeper meanings and philosophical ideas. For starters, the text itself is a reflection on, a recollection of the time he spent at the pond. In describing the time he spent "floating over its surface," Thoreau most likely intends to convey more than just a literal interpretation of the action. Given his later use of the paradoxical self-description of "dreaming awake," one certainly could surmise that "floating" actually refers to the ecstatic state he experienced while at the pond. He describes his experience as having occurred "so many years ago," but knowing that he published the book only seven years later, Thoreau exaggerates temporal distance to convey his spiritual and physical distance from Walden Pond.

Thoreau exploits the double meanings of several words in the text selected for this movement to further imbue it with his philosophical ideas. Thoreau writes that he had "spent many an hour floating over its surface as the zephyr willed," with "the zephyr" meaning "wind". Given his previous allusions to Greek mythology, it is no wonder that he elected to use this specific word. In Ancient Greek and Roman mythology, Zephyr was the god of the west wind,[53] again evoking a sense of antiquity in his description of Walden Pond. Thoreau again plays on the double meaning of the word *spring* in the sentence "where a forest was cut down last winter another is springing up as lustily as ever." He uses the word not only to depict new trees quickly growing, but also to reference spring, the season of rebirth and awakening, which contrasts with his reference to the winter.

[53] Merriam-Webster Online, s.v. "zephyr," http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/zephyr (accessed January 4, 2012).

On a global level, Thoreau effectively and explicitly connects his own emotional being with nature. He writes, "where a forest was cut down last winter another is springing up as lustily as ever; the same thought is welling up to its surface that was then; it is the same liquid joy and happiness…" Here he employs an extended analogy, where his feelings of joy and happiness are like the "welling up" of a fountain within the pond, which in turn is like the springing up of new trees. Thoreau also explicitly connects the pond with a divine "Maker," who "rounded this water with his hand, deepened and clarified it with his thought." Again, the depths of the water serve as a metaphor for the depths of one's soul. Finally, he employs the ultimate personification of the pond when he speaks directly to Walden Pond, saying, "Walden, is it you?"

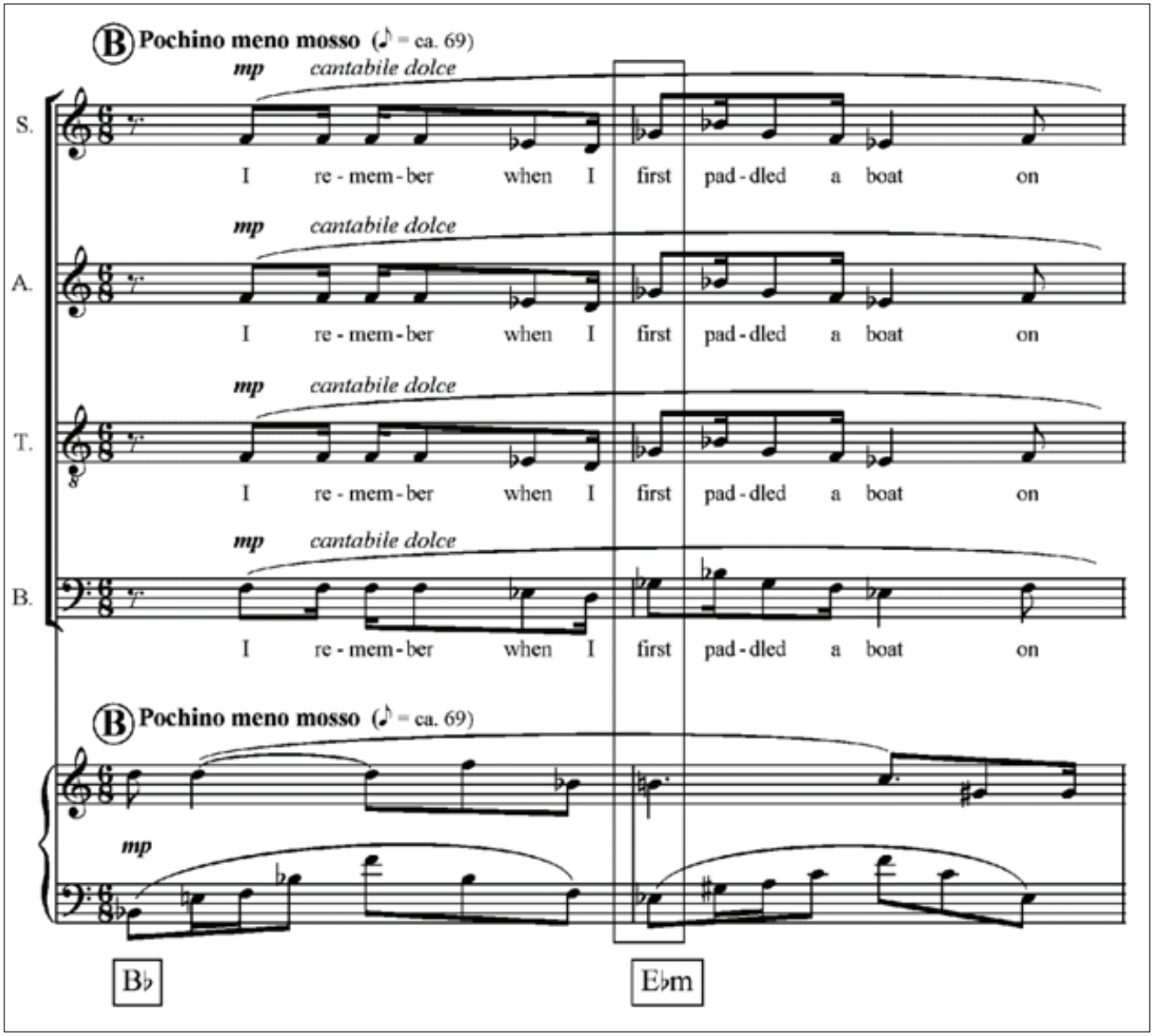
Most important to the composer in this movement is capturing Thoreau's own recollection of his time at Walden Pond, which Argento achieves primarily through the reprise of previous musical gestures and leitmotifs. The use of modal mixture in this movement again creates an association with the past, particularly due to his careful placement of it. Argento employs this technique in the very first measure; with an initial tonicization of C sharp major for the text "Since I left those shores," the use of the minor subdominant immediately recalls prior uses of modal mixture associated with the past. One briefly hears and sees the use of the minor subdominant again in m. 18 as Thoreau remembers when he "first paddled a boat on Walden (see Example 12). Argento also moves from G major to G minor in mm. 39–40 when mentioning his experience "so many years ago."

In addition to his continuing use of modal mixture to create a connection with the past, Argento reprises musical material from earlier movements, both leitmotifs and in one instance, a

direct musical quotation. In mm. 45–49 Argento quotes verbatim the unison vocal line from mm. 16–20 of the first movement in a solo cello line (see Example 13).

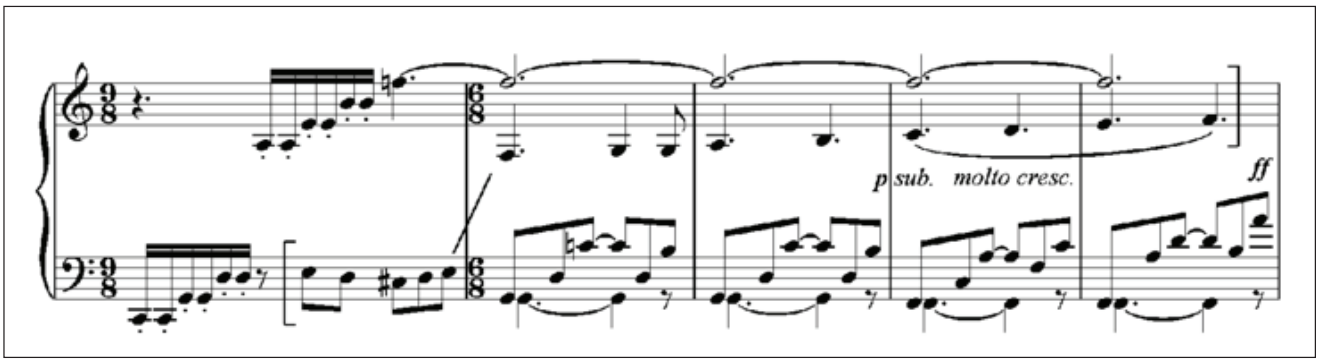
The text from the first movement at that point referred to "a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak woods," which is fitting, given that Thoreau now writes of his feeling of joy and happiness "welling up to its surface." This is especially significant, since water does well up from a spring, and the line does ascend in a scalar fashion; also, he creates a "perennial spring" with a return to the music from the beginning of the piece, like flowers blossoming in spring after dormancy in winter.

Example 12: Modal mixture; *Walden Pond*, movement 5, mm. 17–18.

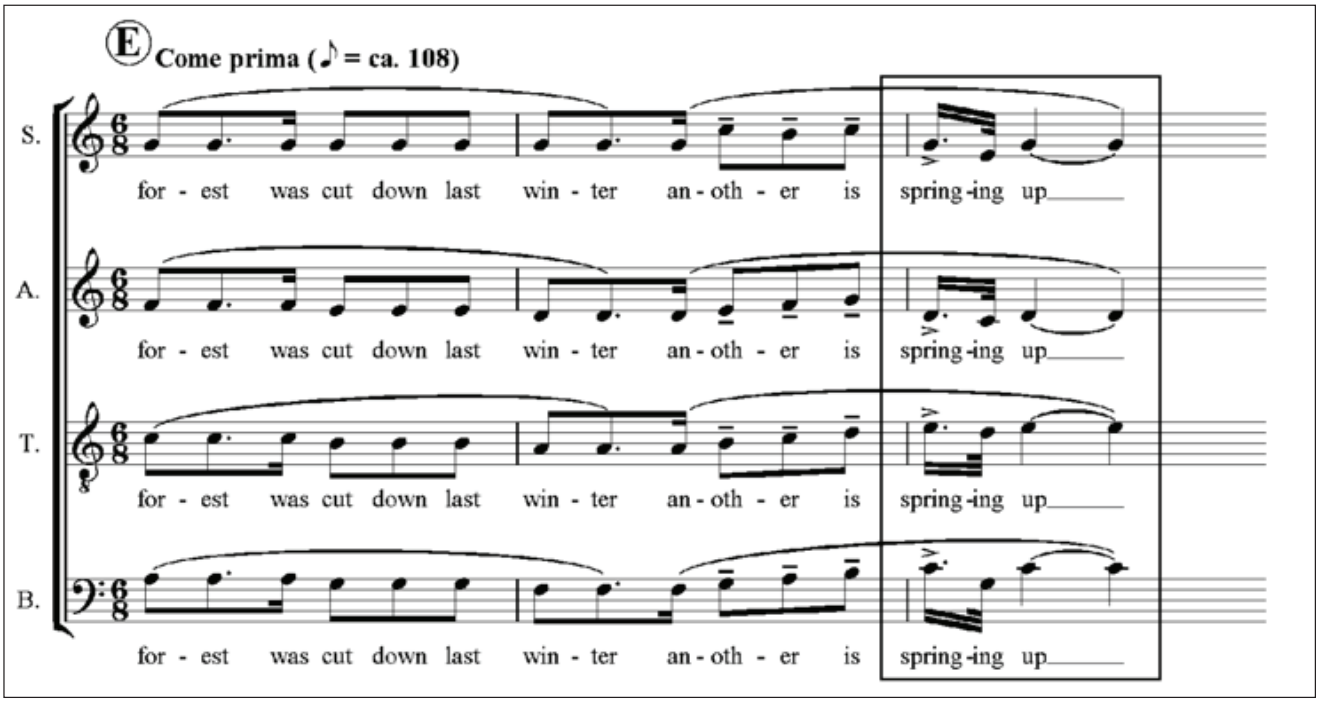


The most prominent feature of the movement, which summarizes both Thoreau's and Argento's messages, is his extensive use of the Reflection chord in the final twenty-two measures of the piece. He briefly introduces it in m. 43 on the words "springing up" (referring to the new tree growth after winter), affirming Thoreau's comparison of the regrown forest to the welling up of the pond (see Example 14).

Example 13: Quote from movement 1; *Walden Pond*, movement 5, mm. 45–49.



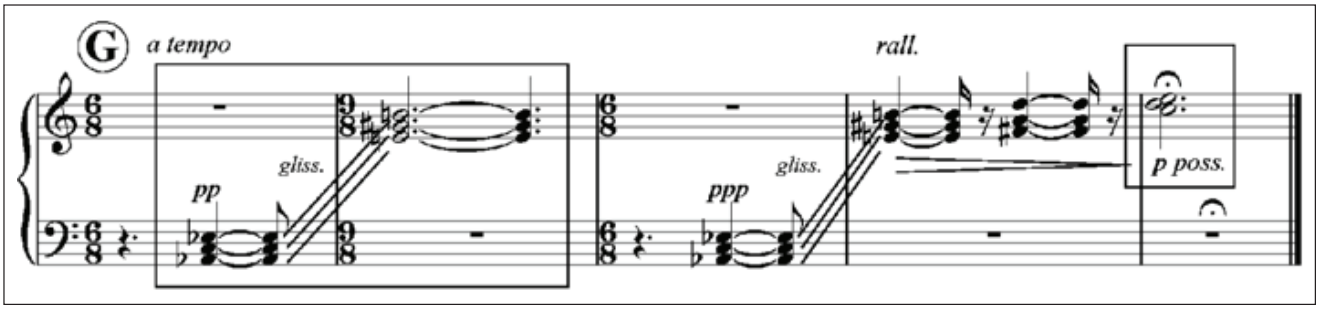
Example 14: Reflection chord; *Walden Pond*, movement 5, mm. 41–43.



Argento then uses the leitmotif exclusively, at different pitch levels and in minor mode, from mm. 50–58. The chord first appears quite noticeably on the downbeat of m. 50 on the word *Maker*; he follows this with a minor version of the chord. Again, the minor variety of this leitmotif, which up until this point Argento had never employed, recalls the antiquity the listener has come to associate with mixture of minor modes. Most likely Argento is interjecting his own commentary on how long ago the Maker formed Walden Pond. He solidifies the meaning of the Reflection chord leitmotif and its significance by setting it again with the word *reflection* in m. 57 and utilizing it as the final sonority of the piece in m. 58.

The last five measures of the movement end with an unexpected reprise of the Pond's Surface motive, which was last heard in the third movement. In the final two measures of the work, the Pond's Surface motive quietly yields to the Reflection chord; this chord that began the piece now brings it close (see Example 15). Argento emphasizes the significance of the major third one final time in these last five measures. First, the chords of the Pond's Surface motive are now related by chromatic mediant. More importantly, the root pitches of the final three chords are E, D, and C, the three pitches of the Reflection chord.

Example 15: Pond's Surface and Reflection chord; *Walden Pond*, movement 5, mm. 58–62.



The text of this movement is unlike the text of the other movements, primarily in that it serves not as an account of Thoreau's daily activities and observations; rather, it is a recollection of his time at Walden Pond, a reflection on the place that drew him closer to God through nature. As Thoreau summarizes his experience at Walden, Argento also summarizes his own insight into Thoreau's writing through the return of previous musical gestures and leitmotifs. In addition to firmly establishing the Reflection chord as the piece's most important leitmotif, Argento reaffirms the significance of modal mixture as a musical gesture that represents the past—both distant and recent.

Conclusion

The excerpted texts from Walden present three main larger philosophical ideas: the cycle of life, principally the idea of rebirth; the pond as a mirror that reflects the heavens and a deeper understanding of oneself; and the pond and nature as a means of connecting with a higher being.

Argento musically represents the cycle of life, death, and rebirth primarily through the recurrence of musical materials and leitmotifs. The composer rounds off the end of each movement with music that he presented earlier in the movement, usually a leitmotif and music from the beginning of the movement. While the final movement does not begin and end with the same musical material, he does begin with Eternal Divinity chord that ended the previous movement, and he concludes the movement with the Reflection chord. His use of the Reflection chord as both the first and last sonority of the entire work represents the American Transcendentalist idea about life and rebirth on the largest scale possible.

Throughout his text, Thoreau regularly describes the reflective qualities of the pond. From above, the pond reflects the sky, the heavens, and the beholder himself—sometimes so perfectly that one cannot distinguish the actual object from its reflection—but from within the waters, objects are both magnified and distorted. In the same contrasting manner, one can perceive the idea that as a person digs in search for truth (here, through a fishing line), truth is ascending to the surface like a spirit.[54] Additionally, for Thoreau, the water's reflections are not just mirror images of the scene around him; rather, the air and water always reflect something additional or new.

[54] Boone, 169.

Veronica Kerting sums up a deeper philosophical interpretation of the pond:

> The pond became an analogy for the poet's eye. Walden Pond functioned as a mirror that received the images of light reflected by the natural objects and modified them in the medium of its water to reflect them as new, idealized images to the beholder. The pond mediated between heaven and earth, it was part of both, and they seemed to melt into each other in the reflection of its waters.[55]

Argento captures the importance and prevalence of this philosophical idea through the most prevalent leitmotif in the entire work: the Reflection chord. The chord, which appears in several movements and both begins and ends the piece, itself is a reflection of a core pitch, with "ripples" of a major second surrounding it. Argento does not leave interpretation of this leitmotif to chance; he intentionally sets it to the words "Walden Pond" and various forms of the word reflection to solidify its meaning in the listener's mind.

Perhaps the most important philosophical idea held by the Transcendentalist Thoreau is his desire and ability to find spirituality in and through nature. Thoreau makes frequent references to floating and seeing the heavens reflected in the water's surface. As the text of the piece progresses, allusions to the Divine become less vague and more concrete, from the humming of a psalm in the second movement to the "Maker [who] rounded this water with his hand, deepened and clarified it in his thought," at the end of the final movement.

[55] Kerting, 63–64.

Argento, through careful implementation of leitmotifs, makes a musical connection between Walden Pond and a creating, divine being. The Reflection chord and the Pond's Surface motive become musical symbols of the pond itself; as the piece progresses, Argento begins placing these leitmotifs near other leitmotifs (such as the Eternal Divinity chord) and textual references associated with a divine maker.

In *Walden*, Thoreau immediately follows the last line of text used for Argento's Walden Pond with a poem that sums up both the poetic music and philosophical ideas of this piece of music:

It is no dream of mine
To ornament a line;
I cannot come nearer to God and Heaven
Than I live to Walden even.
I am its stony shore,
And the breeze that passes o'er;
In the hollow of my hand
Are its water and its sand,
And its deepest resort
Lies high in my thought.[56]

[56] Thoreau, 187.

Works Cited

Argento, Dominick. *Catalogue Raisonné as Memoir*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

_____. *Walden Pond*. New York: Boosey & Hawkes, Inc., 2010.

Blake Wilson, et al. "Rhetoric and Music." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/43166 [accessed January 7, 2012].

Boller, Paul F. *American Transcendentalism, 1830–1860: An Intellectual Inquiry*. New York: Putnam, 1974.

Boone, Joseph Allen. "Delving and Diving for Truth: Breaking through to Bottom in Thoreau's Walden." In *Critical Essays on Henry David Thoreau's Walden*, edited by Joel Myerson, 164–177. Boston:G.K. Hall & Co., 1988.

Broderick, John C. "The Movement of Thoreau's Prose." In *Critical Essays on Henry David Thoreau's Walden*, edited by Joel Myerson, 77–85. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988.

Carter, Tim. "Word-Painting." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/30568 [accessed January 7, 2012].

Ellefson, Deborah. "The Choral Works of Dominick Argento." Dissertation, Arizona State University, 1990.

Gauldin, Robert. "The Theory and Practice of Chromatic Wedge Progressions in Romantic Music." *Music Theory Spectrum* 26, no. 1 (2004): 1–22.

Hatten, Robert S. *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Hochfield, George. "An Introduction to Transcendentalism." In *American Transcendentalism*, edited by Brian M. Barbour, 35–51. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1973.

Kerting, Verena. *Henry David Thoreau's Aesthetics*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.

Meyer, Leonard B. *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956.

_____. *Explaining Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.

Moldenhauer, Joseph J. "The Extra-Vagant Manuever: Paradox in Walden." In *Critical Essays on Henry David Thoreau's Walden*, edited by Joel Myerson, 96–106. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988.

Paul, Sherman. "Resolution at Walden." In *Critical Essays on Henry David Thoreau's Walden*, edited by Joel Myerson, 56–67. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988.

Pinsky, Robert. *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998.

Saya, Virginia. "Argento, Dominick." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online.* http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/01222 [accessed December 27, 2011].

Schneider, Richard J. "Walden." In *The Cambridge Companion to Thoreau*, edited by Joel Myerson, 92–105. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Sullivan, Robert. *The Thoreau You Don't Know*. New York: Harper Collins, 2009.

The McKnight Foundation. *Dominick Argento*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: The McKnight Foundation, 1998.

Thoreau, Henry D. "Walden." edited by Jeffery S. Cramer. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004.

Thorpe, James. *Thoreau's Walden*. Pasadena: The Castle Press, 1977.

Witherell, Elizabeth Hall. "Thoreau as Poet." In *The Cambridge Companion to Thoreau*, edited by Joel Myerson, 57–70. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

"The Walden Woods Project", http://www.walden.org/Library/About_Thoreau's_Life_and_Writings:_The_Research_Collections Walden,_the_Place (accessed December 30 2011).