

ON PERFORMING CHOPIN'S BARCAROLLE

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(BUHF Fellows: please read the prologue first!)

Chopin's incomparable Barcarolle, op. 60 (pub. 1846) poses particular challenges to the performer. Despite its many virtues, it presents a sprawling, idiosyncratic formal plan; a certain uniformity of texture and melody for roughly the first two-thirds of the piece, and a succession of short but dense, powerfully expressive subsections toward the end, all culminating in similarly strong cadential arrivals. This talk views aspects of the piece from several analytic perspectives bearing on these issues: form; harmonic structure; a landmark opening motive; the fate of a referential pitch-class motive and pair; Chopin's dynamic and tempo indications and their variants; and an extramusical association stimulating the analytical imagination. John Rink's comprehensive analysis of the Barcarolle from 1988 will serve as a useful foil for the presentation, although present concerns are different.

Example 1 shows Rink's representation of the Barcarolle's form. A short introduction is followed by a tripartite section in tonic F# major, built around what Rink calls Theme A. Its tonal structure exemplifies what Edward Cone cites as Chopin's idiosyncratic adaptation of the sonata principle in this piece. Its thirty bars comprise more than a quarter of the Barcarolle. A transition carried by a single line leads to a subsequent section of roughly equal length, whose tonal center is A major, a chromatic mediant key about which I will say more later. This section contains two different themes, Rink's B(1) and B(2), grouped together more by their occurrence in the same section than by any similarity of structure; in fact, Theme B(2) has notable similarities with Theme A, as I will show toward the end of this talk. This second main section is followed by an interlude that moves from an insistent local dominant pedal on E through staggered descending chromatic motion to settle on the global dominant, C# major, although only as a pedal point, not quite a full-fledged key. Nearly three quarters of the way through the piece, this brief, serene interlude contains the only music that actually centers on the dominant. It culminates in a dramatic return to material from the first

two principal sections, all in tonic F# major, and strikingly attenuated here: both the first and second main sections of the piece are represented by their last parts only, Theme A' and Theme B(2)', each no more than ten measures in length. Despite their brevity, these reprises are considerably more grandiose than their original appearances and carry considerable structural and rhetorical weight. They are identified by Rink as the locus of the principal structural descent and cadence, as well as what Edward T. Cone defined as apotheosis – “a special kind of recapitulation that revels unexpected harmonic richness and textural excitement in a theme previously presented with deliberately restricted harmonization and relatively drab accompaniment.” Their appearance is followed by an extended tonic pedal of similar length, built on a fragment of Theme B(1). Following typical practice as well as his formal graph, Rink calls this passage the coda; it leads to some more explicitly closing material, a coda to the coda as it were, to end the piece. Rink's graph of the Barcarolle's background structure is shown in Example 2. I will ultimately question his identification of structural cadence and the formal conclusions that follow therefrom.

In his essay, Rink mentions Hugo Leichtentritt's observation that the introduction seems to have no connection to the rest of the piece. Kofi Agawu has suggested to me that this claim was made with tongue firmly in cheek, but Rink at least took him seriously, providing examples to refute Leichtentritt's claim, based on linear motivic content and other factors, and I will argue this further here using evidence of a different kind. First, though, let me relate my personal extramusical, quasi-hermeneutic association. The barcarolle as a genre is of course, a Venetian boat song. I was in Venice only once, long ago in my early graduate student days, traveling with a composer friend. One of my most lasting impressions of the trip is of a sultry summer night which happened to be the festival day of a favored saint. Over the canals, fireworks repeatedly lit up the sky. Not until years later did this image occur to me as I played the opening of the Barcarolle: shot from below, the music lands high in the sky in a burst of predominant energy, its sparkling parts slowly floating down through the air at slightly unequal speeds projected by Chopin's contrapuntal strands.[PLAY] Since then

I haven't been able to shake the image. When I describe this to colleagues they often tend to be skeptical at first. (I have better success in class with my students, who are more apt to believe what I have to say.) At the least, the image helps me to articulate two different approaches to performing the introduction: does the Barcarolle begin in the water, or in the air? Does the introduction set the background character for the opening section, or does it provide useful contrast against which the opening section defines its character? For me, the water imagery of the Barcarolle is conveyed in no small part by its lilting compound triple meter. Thus a hydrocentric introduction would initiate this lilt through various accents and temporal stretching of the initial notes of each triplet group, defining a flexible dotted-quarter pulse to be transmitted to the left-hand accompanimental figure supporting Theme A. On the other hand, air is undifferentiated; it has no lilt, no pulse. Thus an aerocentric introduction would accordingly proceed in even, unaccented values governed by an overall temporal shape, with the left hand accompaniment later initiating the lilt as if from elsewhere. I wondered if there might be hydro-intro and aero-intro camps out there in the recorded legacy of the piece. Eagerly I collected about a dozen different recordings, mostly historical, to serve as my basis for comparison. The two recordings I knew best, the legendary Dinu Lipatti recording from 1948, and an Artur Schnabel recording from about 1962, were exemplary. Lipatti is clearly hydro, and Schnabel is definitely aero. Now, all of the recordings I listened to were unique and wonderful, containing marvelous pianism (occasionally at the expense of the music), so for me to advocate for one approach over the other using an analytic argument must, as many recent writers on performance and analysis have reminded us, be understood in the context of the many other factors involved in making a performance decision. Personally, I'm aero rather than hydro, given my summer image of Venetian fireworks. But I can attempt to support my orientation analytically. Looking at the introduction's structure, we find a descending series of $\frac{6}{3}$ sonorities outlining the ii_3^6 chord over dominant pedal that Rink identifies. Chopin's single slur over the entire passage suggests uniformity of the entire gesture rather than the later half-measure later quarter-measure slurs giving impetus to the lilt of the left-hand accompaniment. Looking

more closely, we find a series of different intervals and contrapuntal states, contracting and expanding, lines moving in parallel and contrary motion. These do eventually coalesce into a half-measure pattern about halfway through, but in their linearity and constantly changing pitch-class content, dissonance and consonance constantly superseding each other, they still fall well short of the consistent pitch-class repetition and consonance on the beat, and the triadic outlining, characterizing all of Chopin's lilting accompanimental figures. Applying the same lilt to the introduction as to the accompaniment masks these differences and limits the power of an association I will describe later on.

The introduction terminates with a conspicuous, unresolved A#4, whose destiny we will trace as we proceed. Note that the left-hand accompaniment enters with a series of rising fifths, echoing the beginning of the introduction. At the entrance of Theme A, Chopin writes a notable dynamic marking: rather than rising and falling with the broad outlines of the meandering line, the entire first gesture is to be played within a diminuendo, in apparent contrast to the standard doctrine of phrase arching, in which registral rise and fall toward and away from a climax point are amplified by crescendo and diminuendo. This opening diminuendo can feel peculiar, and most of the recordings I listened to did not respect this direction, until we look at the rest of the theme and discover that Chopin is tailoring his dynamics here to the hypermetric level, rising to the metric phrase arch at the downbeat of the theme's fifth measure. Taking heed of the diminuendo forces the performer to think more globally.[PLAY] The greater abundance of diminuendos to crescendos throughout the piece also serves, in principle, to encourage the performer not to succumb overly to the music's innate attraction toward playing bombastically. Chopin's own playing, from all reports, tended strongly toward the softer end of the dynamic spectrum, eschewing any harshness. It also traced a constant ebb and flow of dynamic rises and falls, rarely sustaining a single dynamic level. Thus his markings reflect his approach to performing the music, although it may be preferable to say that they respond to its structure rather than comprising a part of it. Nevertheless, a contemporary report on one of Chopin's own performances of the

piece marvels that he played the entire final section of the piece, from mm. 84-110, marked from *forte* to *fortissimo*, completely in *piano*, succeeding in a way that only he could. We could take this to justify the performer's *carte blanche* to disregard Chopin's performance indications, as some of the historical recordings, particularly from the earlier part of the twentieth-century, attest. But thoughtful consideration of the sheer abundance and care given to these indications, and their intimate relation to the musical narrative, quickly discerns that they represent more than mere suggestions to be ignored. The performer has much to learn from them without slavishly following them all.

Looking further at the individual phrases which comprise the theme, we find that the first three all end on the same A#4 that ended the introduction. What may initially strike one as potentially tedious repetition appears different, though, if one approaches this mid-nineteenth century music with a mid-nineteenth-century mindset, epitomized by Moritz Hauptmann's theory, in which a sense of harmonic motion may be transmitted through the change in identity, or chordal meaning, of common tones. I would add intervallic relation to the bass as a factor in melodies where chords are not in root position. The harmonic recontextualization of prominent melodic common tones as an agent of motion is a common ploy of composers like Schubert and Chopin. Here at the beginning of the Barcarolle, as shown in Figure 1, A# appears first as consonant sixth above the bass, although dissonant at the same time within a dominant sonority with whose seventh it forms the interval of major seventh — a typical mid-19th century instance of musical paradox enhancing an event. In the first two phrases of Theme A, the A# becomes third of tonic F#; in the third phrase it moves again, becoming fifth of D# minor. The performer would do well to be sensitive to these changes in quality, coming as they do at successive phrase endings. A# continues to surface at key moments as the piece progresses, becoming a pervasive pitch-class motive. (Patrick McCreless, in a talk on the pitch-class motive concept prepared for the New England regional society meeting last spring, and soon to appear on the NECMT website, attributes the origin of the term to Steve Laitz's 1992 dissertation, and advocates for its use to describe pitch-

classes or pitch-class pairs that assume narrative or structural importance over the extent of a work.) Rink, in his Figure 2 analysis, identified C# as the Barcarolle's *Kopfton* and stresses the importance of C# and F# as structural pitch classes in the pieces, so it was interesting to me that in a conversation I had with him a couple years back, he told me, without knowing the content of my talk, that he has reconsidered his analysis and now thinks of the Barcarolle's *Umlinie* as a $\hat{3}$ -line with A# as its *Kopfton*. As you listen to the piece later on, you will also notice several localized instances of common-tone redefinition, but only A# really becomes motivic throughout the piece.

At the end of Theme A, the prominent A# gives way to a C#, continuously redefined in relation to its bass and accompanying voice exchange, leading to the piece's first cadence, one of its most beautiful moments. At some point I realized that its melody feeds directly off the opening of the introduction: the leap C#-G# is answered here by its inversion G#-C#, in the same rhythm, completing the octave, and followed as in the introduction by a kind of terraced floating. In this way the introduction and the cadence on C# frame all of the music so far. Recognizing this relationship, and projecting the cadential leap as an answer to the initial leap, could help the performer to begin to delineate what Rink elsewhere calls the overall shape of the music. This can be done by underplaying the grace notes leading to G#, as well as the E# below the C#, rather than playing the sonorities fully as is more commonly done. Listening to my group of historical recordings, I found only a couple of pianists who do this, notably Ashkenazy, but to me it works. Besides reviving the motive, this voicing of the climatic cadential $\frac{6}{4}$ also helps to better project the melodic arch and further to prepare the texture of parallel sixths that immediately follows.[PLAY]

Moving along, the music next moves sequentially through B major to land on an extended A# pedal, first heard as V/vi, with the melodic A# now in root-meaning. This A# major triad resolves, however, directly back to F# major in a chromatic third relation that pegs it as what I call the upper sharp mediant, located a third above the tonic with content sharp to the

diatonic set, and melodic A# accordingly reverting to third-meaning. I'll have more to say about this presently. This progression is shown at the end of Figure 1 but the beginning of Example 4.

Theme A returns, in a somewhat heightened setting, this time ending up back on the tonic, and involving some new meanings for A#, as shown in Figure 2. The repeated tonic chord following the cadence has its inner-voice A# emphasized by a grace note, like a chime. On its fourth appearance, our significant A#4 is transformed prominently into Ab, and the music takes a meaningful turn. A solitary line emerges, first relatively unmeasured, meandering to and fro until gradually acquiring the lilt and settling into A major, as if floating through the air until it lands on water in a new location, shown at the beginning of Example 5. The long section that follows establishes A major as the Barcarolle's principal secondary key. To Schenkerian analysis, this is fairly unremarkable: Ab, like A#, functions perfectly well to represent the III *Stufe* as third-divider in a tonic arpeggiation. But for nineteenth-century harmony, Ab and A# are hardly interchangeable here; they represent very different relationships to the tonic. The earlier move at m. 24, the descending major third from A# major to F# major, is the most common of all chromatic mediant moves, due to the close relation of the chords: the tonic of the first is preserved in the second as common tone, and the fifth of the first functions as leading tone to the new root. On the other hand, the ascending minor-third move from F# major to its upper flat mediant A major, mediated here by F# minor, defines a much different relation. The root of the first chord, in fact its entire scale step, vanishes, while the root of the second chord is reached by descending chromatic semitone and lies completely outside the previous diatonic set. The effect is of much greater distance — A major sits farther away from the tonic than A# major. Nonetheless, A major, as a chromatic mediant, represents a stable key within nineteenth-century chromatic tonality, as I have argued at length elsewhere. The independence of A major from F# major is accentuated here by the tenuous single-line connection between sections. This view has bearing on performance, since Theme B(1) is itself harmonically

unstable, moving twice quasi-sequentially from A major through G# major to F# major, and thence to C# major, before returning to A major. The accompaniment, now articulating in quarter measures rather than half-measures, underlines these choppy waters. If one thinks, along conventional lines, of A major as dissonant within F# major, then this section embodies the tendency of the foreign key to be drawn back to the tonic, or more likely toward the dominant. Thus one would play the sequence as a progression from instability toward stability, hijacked back at the end. However, if one thinks of A major as a stable key, then the passage takes on a different cast, as if the home key of F# major repeatedly, and unsuccessfully, tries to pull A major back into its orbit. How this might translate into performance: at mm. 41-42, A major gives way to G# major through the agency of a French augmented sixth chord. If A major were unstable, then it should yield easily, as one hears on the majority of recordings.[PLAY] But if it were stable, then it would need to be pried away, while respecting Chopin's decrescendo marks.[PLAY] In the move to F# major, through the agency of a less dissonant dominant seventh chord, the arrival could be emphasized to show F#'s dominance, or deemphasized to show its contextual subservience to A major. In its second iteration, Theme B(1) returns in a heightened setting, as did Theme A the second time around. These returns constitute more a foreshadowing than full-blown instances of Cone's apotheosis.

Theme B(2), shown in Example 6, now entirely in A major, follows on the repetition of theme B(1). There are important similarities with Theme A: besides motivic resemblances in the melodies, the accompaniment returns to half-measure units, and most of the melodic phrases again end on the same note, the tonic third, which is now C#. At the theme's end, A major simply dissipates into the air, an exceptional upward gesture in the piece that never comes back down. This dissolution again underscores the independence of A major from tonic F#; entering at first from nowhere on a thread, it now goes away rather than going back.[PLAY] A dominant pedal on E ensues, in a new texture and character; its end is shown in Figure 7. After so much A major, this pedal hardly implies a tonic return. Instead, it

follows the music in its key and leads away from it rather than introducing it, further demonstrating the tenacity of A major within the formal scheme. A major is only relinquished through a chromatic descent that frames another process of melodic common-tone redefinition, shown in Figure 4, that drives a transformation of the tone's melodic tendency. Here F \flat begins as a downward-tending ninth (although it's the bass which descends), then is redefined as a neutral minor third, and finally as an upward-tending leading tone – but as E \sharp leading to F \sharp . Harmony is deflected only at the last moment to dominant C \sharp . You'd think this all would be worth projecting in performance, but the way Chopin has written the passage, other factors, particularly meter, make the arrival to C \sharp sound more natural than it may appear to superficial analysis. It's hard to show that twist at the end, and its meaning might well not be clear to the listener in any case. Bill Rothstein has noted that once we know something is there, we still have to figure out if it's beneficial or not to bring it out. The theater scholars Judith Milhous and Robert Hume, writing about the applicability of analytic insights to theatrical performance, have coined the expression “producible interpretation” to distinguish between those insights that are meaningfully communicable in performance, and those whose abstraction precludes transmission in performance, or whose meaning can't profitably be made apparent. This deflection to C \sharp may be an unproducible interpretation. However, Chopin takes care of this in another way: the chromatic approach to C \sharp major just a few moments later serves to frame the harmonic arrival as something earned.

The exquisite *dolce sfogato* section follows. *Sfogato* means to play lightly and delicately. Out of curiosity I queried Google Translate a couple days ago, and it came up with “vented”, something I'm not sure I know how to do. The section's beginning is familiar: it's the C \sharp – G \sharp leap returning from the beginning. (PLAY) Again the introductory motive frames a significant formal boundary, providing a means to associate this music tonally with the beginning of the piece after such a long digression to a distant key. This connection could be reinforced by the aerocentric version of the introduction, since the *dolce sfogato* equally

suspends meter. Twice it traces the rise-and-fall figure, with a particularly delicate spiral floating through the air following its climax. The music then revs up with a chromatic bass ascent toward the increasingly return of Themes A and B(2) in apotheosis, now further enhanced texturally, dynamically, and in the case of Theme B(2), harmonically. Theme B(2), shown in Example 8, is now stated in tonic F# major. A significant result of this transposition is that all of those repeated phrase endings on C# in the original Theme B(2) now terminate on A#, just like Theme A's do. This provides another slew of new contexts for A#, increasingly more dissonant, shown in Figure 5: dominant seventh of E#; suspended fourth, and finally tritone above E in a pronounced dominant $\frac{4}{2}$, before the music proceeds to its grand cadence, finally bringing A# down to F# in the structural descent of Rink's background sketch. Here I find that it's almost enough to pay attention to the phrase endings and shape them within the diminuendi rather than just letting them go by, although I like to isolate the tritone moment through rubato when I'm able. Note that Chopin writes a diminuendo and ritenuto into the final cadence, precluding a too-ostentatious arrival.

What follows is an extended, highly chromatic tonic pedal point, shown in Example 9. The performance tradition for this passage is to treat it like a coda, like closing material, pulling well back dynamically and expressively from the previous section, and gradually winding down toward the augmented-sixth filigree in m. 110. (Here, for example, is Rubinstein again.) Chopin, however, writes *sempre f* for the passage, without any of the nuanced dynamic markings that characterize virtually every other passage in the piece. Rink notes that this section, which he calls the first coda, contains the Barcarolle's only true four-bar phrases. This hypermetric regularity allows for a process of intensification unmatched anywhere else in the piece. In addition, toward the end, harmony becomes denser, more chromatic and dissonant than ever before. Thus I would argue that formal process is still active here. The filigree of mm. 110-111 as notated makes sense in this view. The usual performance practice is to begin somewhere around *mf* or even *mp*, either relaxing tempo and dynamics on the way up or racing up in a sparking shimmer, and relaxing further so on the way down, to a

very soft landing. At least one edition from the late 19th century even moves the *calando* indication back to the middle of this figure, and some editions from that time expunge the *sforzandi*. But Chopin's own notation indicates otherwise: *sforzandi* at the beginning and end, with neither *diminuendo* nor *ritenuto* expressly indicated: a last, dissonant rocket into the air that lands with a noticeable impact.[PLAY alternatives] Chopin's three first editions, French, German, and English, prepared from three different manuscripts and independently published, vary in their markings, but all have at least some form of the final *sforzando* followed by *piano*.[SHOW on screen]

Whereas the previous cadence at m. 103 provided a dramatic harmonic arrival, mm. 110-111 provide a dramatic contrapuntal arrival, set into motion by the extremely dissonant augmented sixth over octave of resolution.[PLAY PROGRESSION] Interestingly, Jim Samson's formal analysis of the Barcarolle from 1985 differs from Rink's at just this point: he includes the F# pedal in the main section and identifies the coda as beginning in m. 111. Thinking of this section as part of the principal structure of the piece, an extension of apotheosis, rather than as codal material, helps immeasurably in understanding and interpreting Chopin's markings. In fact, instead of identifying a single structural cadence, we could perhaps imagine a distributed cadential process for the Barcarolle, first harmonic, then contrapuntal. I used to play this passage, especially the filigree, as a retreat, but am now training myself otherwise, although I'm still in the phase of trying things out. Among my group of recordings I found a relatively recent one by Alicia de Larrocha from 1995 that comes close to this effect.

After this, a closing tenor theme in the inner fingers of the left hand traces the octave from A#3 to A#4 one last time, a significant reminiscence of the original occurrence of the pitch-class motive worth projecting. A final rise-and-fall figure leads to the conclusion, whose unison rising fourth gives yet another and conclusive answer to the introduction's rising fifth, framing the entire piece.[PLAY] So much for Leichtentritt's assertion, whatever its tone, that

the introduction has no relation to the rest of the piece. It is one of the factors, like the changing fate of the A#, and the situation of A major within its F# major context, whose understanding can help the performer to acquire the most important thing that analysis in the service of performance can help to foster, as Jonathan Dunsby among others has reminded us: a sense of the whole.

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Examples and Figures

Example 1. Formal synopsis of the *Barcarolle*

Bars	Formal Division	Main harmonic area
1-3	Introduction	V (C#)*
4-16	Theme A	I (F#)
17-23	'Development'	
24-34	Theme A'	
35-9	Transition	i → bIII (f# → A)
40-50	Theme B(1)	bIII (A)
51-61	Theme B(1)'	
62-71	Theme B(2)	
72-7	Transition	V (C#)**
78-83	'Dolce sfogato'	
84-92	Theme A'	I (F#)
93-102	Theme B(2)'	
103-10	Coda (B(1)'')	
111-16	Coda	

Example 2. Background

EXAMPLES 1 & 2: Barcarolle, formal structure and background sketch
From Rink, John: "The *Barcarolle*: *Auskomponierung* and Apotheosis,"
in *Chopin Studies*, J. Samson, ed. Cambridge University Press (1988), p. 197.

* This is the dominant of F# major.

** 2nd transition has dominant pedal on E through middle of m. 75.

Allegretto

f *dim.*

p

cantabile

EXAMPLE 3: Barcarolle, Introduction and Theme A

A# as: 6th 3rd 5th rt. → 3rd

meas. 1 4 10 12 14 15 18 20 24

F#: ii⁶₅ V⁷ I vi v⁷/V V v⁷/IV IV v/vi I =USM

C#: ii V⁶₄ I⁶ IV C⁶₄ V⁷ I

FIGURE 1: Barcarolle, harmonic reduction, mm. 1-24; shifting chordal identity of A#

EXAMPLE 4: Barcarolle, Theme A'

meas. 24 28 29 30 31 32 33 35 39

F#: I v7/IV IV v7/V V V7/ii ii V5/IV V I(+ -) UFM A: I

FIGURE 2: Barcarolle, harmonic reduction, mm. 24-39; continued shifting chordal identity of A#/A ♭

EXAMPLE 5: Barcarolle, Theme B(1)

meas. 39 42 46 50 51

A: I Fr⁺G# G#(+ -)= ii - V⁴/F# F#(+ -)- iv -- Ger⁺C# C#(+ -)= iii V I

FIGURE 3: Barcarolle, harmonic reduction, mm. 39-51;
motion away from and back to A major

EXAMPLE 6: Barcarolle, Theme B(2)

EXAMPLE 7: Barcarolle, Transition 2, arrival to C# major

FIGURE 4: Barcarolle, harmonic reduction, mm. 75-76 with shifting chordal identity of E# / F#

92 *cresc.* *ff* *piu mosso*

94

96

98

100

EXAMPLE 8: Barcarolle, Theme B(2)'

A# as: 3rd 7th (4th) 8ve 3rd A4 6th

meas. 96 97 98 99 100 101

FIGURE 5: Barcarolle, harmonic reduction, mm. 96-101;
shifting intervallic identity of A#

The musical score is for Chopin's Barcarolle, Theme B(1)''. It is written for piano and consists of six systems of music, numbered 102 through 111. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 3/4. The score includes various performance instructions and dynamic markings:

- Measure 102:** Starts with a *trmn* (trill) in the right hand, followed by a *ritenuto* section. Dynamics include *ff* and *sempre f*. The tempo changes to *tempo primo*. Fingerings are indicated with numbers 1-5.
- Measures 103-104:** Continuation of the *tempo primo* section with complex chordal textures and arpeggiated figures.
- Measures 105-106:** Features a *trmn* in the right hand and continues the rhythmic pattern. Dynamics remain *sempre f*.
- Measures 107-108:** Further development of the theme with intricate voicings and fingerings.
- Measures 109-110:** A section with a *fz* (forzando) dynamic, showing a more active right hand with rapid sixteenth-note passages.
- Measures 111:** Ends with a *calando* (ritardando) section, marked *fz p* (forzando piano), leading to a final cadence.

The score is annotated with numerous asterisks (*) and circled symbols, likely indicating specific points of interest or technical challenges. Fingerings are meticulously marked throughout the piece.

EXAMPLE 9: Barcarolle, Theme B(1)'' with emphasized intervallic cadence