[2]

Beginnings Are Everything

The difficulty for me is beginning an opera, finding, that is, its musical atmosphere. Once the beginning is fixed and composed, there is nothing more to fear: the opera has been determined and it goes.

—GIACOMO PUCCINI

A poem assumes direction with the first line laid down.

—ROBERT FROST

Beginnings matter. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins." Like great first lines in literature, the opening measures of a piece can instantly draw us in and create a musical environment with a particular style of speech, tone, and vocabulary. Take the following well-known openings.

In each case it takes no more than a few seconds for these pieces to create their distinctive musical atmosphere. How do they do it? What makes a great opening idea?

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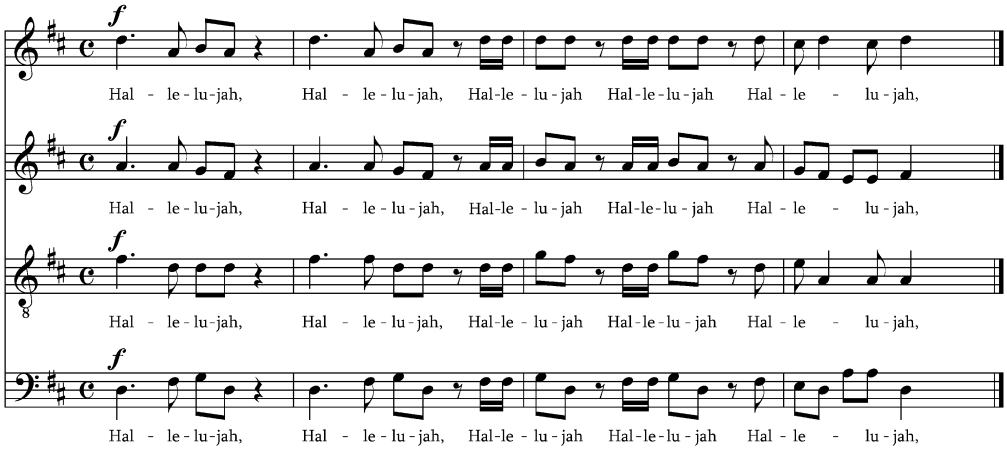

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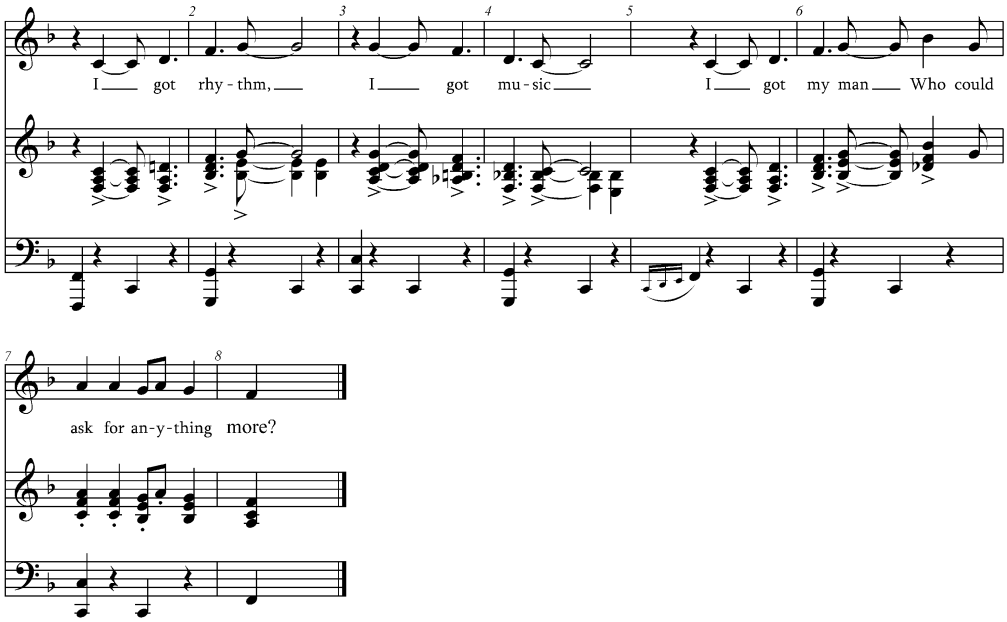

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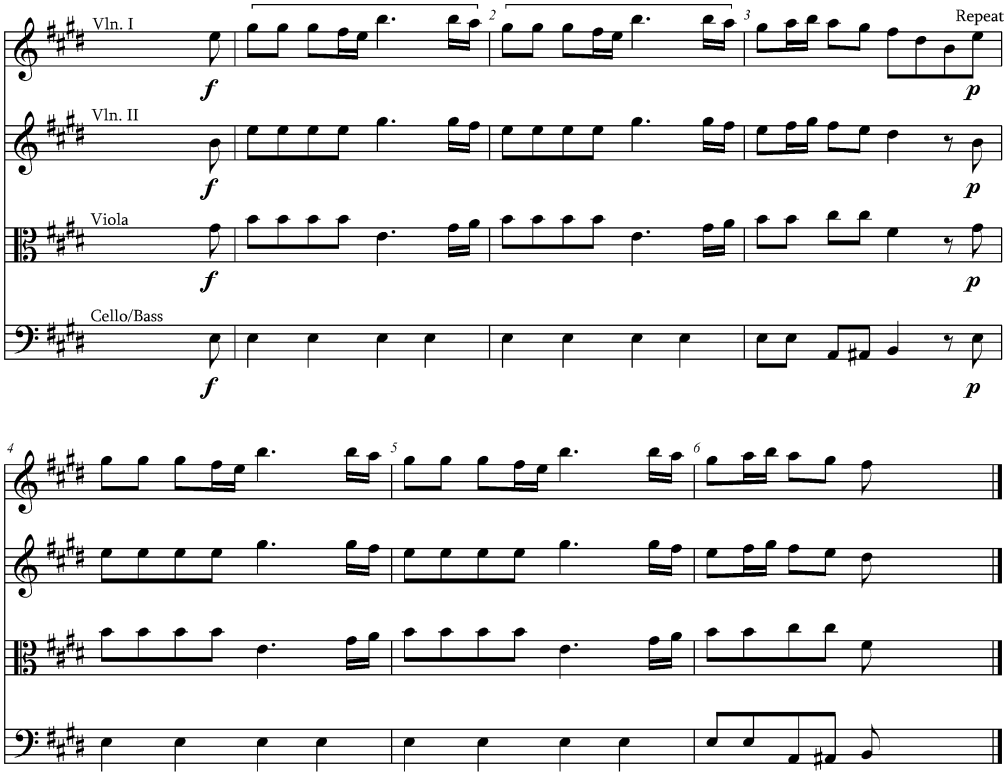


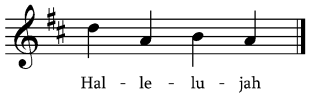
"Sticky" Ideas

In his book *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell talks about how advertisers are always searching for "sticky" ideas, ideas or logos that will quickly "stick" in the public's mind and be easily remembered. For example, "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should," in which both the rhyme (good/should) and the incorrect grammar ("like," not "as") help make the phrase memorable. In a similar way, great musical openings are often generated by musically sticky ideas.

In a vocal work like George Frideric Handel's *Messiah*, a sticky idea is one that is not only musically memorable but also somehow manages to convey the essence of the text's meaning in just a few notes. The subtitle of Gladwell's book is *How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, and often the tiniest differences can turn an ordinary idea into an unforgettable one. If you take the four famous first notes of

Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" and alter their rhythm so that every note lasts one beat, it would sound like this.

EXAMPLE 5



"Hallelujah," in this square, wooden version is utterly non-ecstatic. If we keep the rhythm of "Ha-le" but double the speed of "lu-jah," the idea becomes slightly more interesting but still is nothing special.

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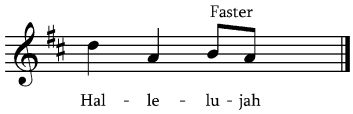
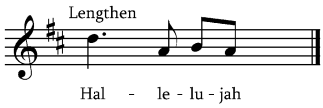


What makes it magic is Handel's lengthening of the first note. The sustained "Ha" grows in energy until it spills over into the excited, quicker-by-contrast "le-lu-jah" (with a fantastic syncopated "le"), and the four-note combination is classic Handel: musically memorable and a perfect depiction of the word's meaning.

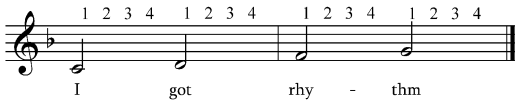
EXAMPLE 7



It's Got Rhythm

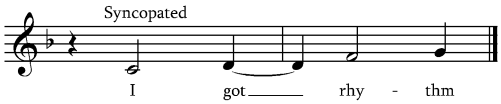
Musical "stickiness" knows no genre boundaries. Though George and Ira Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm" might be less religious than Handel's *Messiah*, its opening is equally sticky, and the technique used by the two composers is remarkably similar. The song is defined by the fact that its main idea "has rhythm"—that is, it "swings"—and this highly distinctive rhythm dominates the piece. Once again, little things make a big difference. If we alter the first four notes of the Gershwins' opening the same way we altered Handel's so that every note lasts one beat, it would sound like this.

EXAMPLE 8



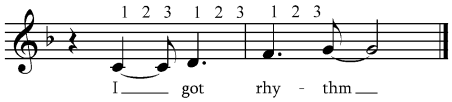
This boring version has no rhythm. If we give the idea *some* rhythm and make it somewhat better by syncopating it slightly, we could turn it into an almost-Gershwin version, which would sound like this.

EXAMPLE 9



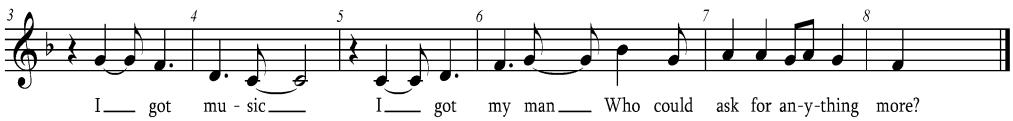
What makes the Gershwins' version so fantastic is that unlike in these square versions, where each note lasts four quick, ordinary, sixteenth-note beats, in the real version each note lasts only three beats, making its syncopation unusual, surprising, and great. It has rhythm!

EXAMPLE 10



This catchy syncopated rhythm is the key to the entire song. The Gershwins use the same rhythm for the next lyric—"I got music." (Sing it to yourself.) And the next—"I got my man." (The B section is made out of the opening rhythm as well. Clap "Old man trouble," then "I don't mind him," then "You won't find him," and you'll see that they all have the identical rhythm of the opening idea.) But instead of finishing the opening phrase with the same rhythm one more time, the Gershwins give us the musical equivalent of a punch line. The only new rhythm in the phrase—eight notes for "Who could ask for anything more?"

EXAMPLE 11

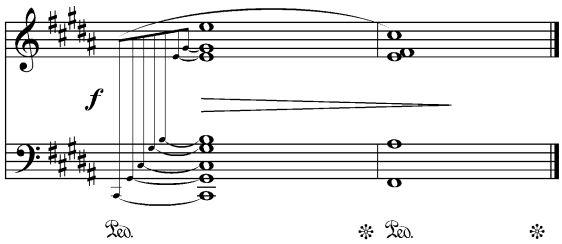


It is not only rhythm, however, that makes this opening great. The pitches complement the rhythm in an amazing way. The song opens with four ascending notes: C–D–F–G. "I got music" uses the same four notes backward: G–F–D–C. Then it's back to the original version, C–D–F–G, for "I got my man." And then after nothing but the same four notes (C, D, F, and G) forward and backward for the first three lines of text, the notes, like the rhythm, change for "Who could ask for anything more?" They complete the plot.

Music without Words

Great openings are not limited to music with words, of course, and sticky beginnings are not only created by means of distinctive rhythms and melodies. Sometimes pure harmony, irrespective of melody or rhythm, can make an equally irresistible opening. Frédéric Chopin's *Nocturne in B Major*, for example, begins with a lush, beautiful chord, built up one note at a time. The chord's overtones, held by the piano's pedal, gloriously resonate, then die away for four beats until a second chord, almost prim in comparison, played all notes at once, resolves the opening gesture. This magical opening is a storyteller's beginning, a two-chord "Once upon a time" introduction whose rich harmony casts a spell that lures us into the world of the melody that follows.

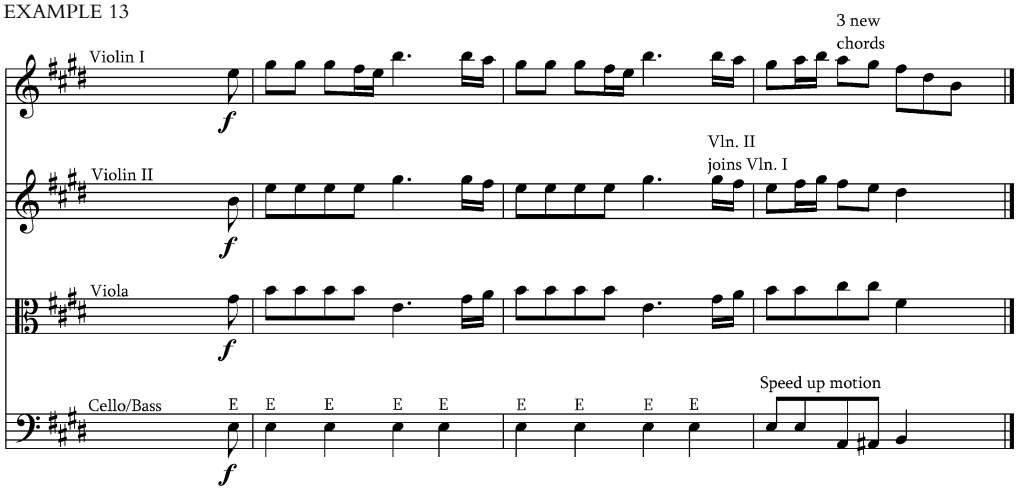
EXAMPLE 12



If Chopin's opening instantly creates a context of rich harmony, Antonio Vivaldi's "Spring" Concerto from his *Four Seasons* begins with the plainest harmony imaginable. Two measures of nothing but basic E-major chords. (Look at the bass line and you will see E's repeated over and over again.) Because Vivaldi's opening is so simple harmonically, the speeding up of the bass line and the three new quick

chords in measure 3 make an enormous impact. They become, in the context of this opening, a significant event. And as in "I Got Rhythm," the melody perfectly complements the excitement caused by the new and faster harmony. The melody in the first two measures is played by the first violins, with the second violins clearly in an accompanying role. However, as the harmony speeds up and new chords are added, the second violins join the first violins in beautiful parallel motion and play the conclusion of the phrase with them at a slightly lower pitch, as if the solo melody had become a duet to close the thought. Though Vivaldi and Gershwin have completely different styles and vocabularies, their musical punch lines function in nearly identical ways.

EXAMPLE 13



As you can already see from these few examples, there are as many different ways of beginning a piece of music as there are individuals, and each beginning requires something different from the listener. Each opening transports us into a world that has its own unique vocabulary. It might be the harmony that is distinctive, or the melody or rhythm. But it also might be the orchestration, as in the opening of Igor Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. Or the register, like the extremely low-pitched beginning of Henryk Górecki's Third Symphony. It might even be the tempo, like the glacially slow opening of Richard Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, in which each gesture (including the pauses between phrases) is stretched out and becomes almost surreally

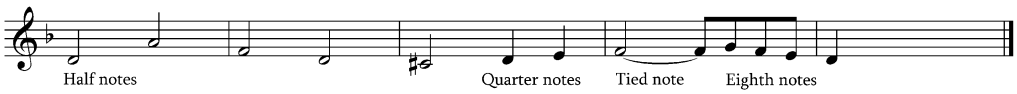
heightened. The piece's mythic timescale is established by the end of this first, slow-motion phase.

First Impressions

When you begin a conversation with someone you haven't met before, you quickly try to get a feel for how he speaks, for his basic vocabulary. The same is true when you encounter a new piece of music. Compositions, like individuals, tend to reveal a great deal about their personalities the moment they enter a room. However, though many pieces do in fact begin with catchy, attention-grabbing ideas like the ones we have been discussing, there are a whole group of utterly non-spectacular beginnings that make no attempt to seduce whatsoever. These openings not only do not make a dazzling first impression, their non-impressiveness is precisely their point, and they require a completely different kind of listening.

Take the opening of *The Art of the Fugue*—Johann Sebastian Bach's famous collection of fourteen fugues and four canons all based on this opening idea:

EXAMPLE 14



Though this theme does have some narrative drive—notice the way it gradually moves from slow notes to fast notes with the tied note in the middle of the phrase, avoiding mechanical squareness while making a subtle rhythmic climax—it is fundamentally *not* a flashy idea, nor is it designed to be. Bach deliberately chooses a theme that is plain enough to be subjected to the enormous variety of contrapuntal treatments it will receive in the course of his tour-de-force demonstration of fugal technique. (There are many other Bach fugues with non-catchy openings that function similarly.) Its meaning lies not in what it is, but in what it will become. When we hear the theme played at the opening of the first fugue, it is almost unimaginable that the next forty-five minutes of complex music could possibly be created out of its simple structure. Similarly, when we listen to the banal

waltz tune by Anton Diabelli that opens Ludwig van Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, it seems equally inconceivable that the sublime music of the thirty-three variations could possibly be hidden in this trivial melody. Pieces like these make us ask, "How could this come from that?" Arnold Schoenberg said that Bach taught him "the art of creating the whole from a single kernel," and it is the dazzling difference between the whole (the entire *Art of the Fugue* and the entire *Diabelli Variations*) and the kernel (the *Art of the Fugue* theme and Diabelli's waltz tune) that is the essence of these pieces.

Beginnings like these, in which the meaning of an opening becomes clear only over time, often over the entire piece, take extraordinary compositional courage and a deep belief in an audience's intelligence. They ask the listener to do something that is almost inconceivable in today's fast-paced, hyperkinetic world: they ask the listener to wait.

It is important to understand just how radical and challenging that request is, yet how central it is to so much of classical music. Like other kinds of great art, great music asks us not to judge by first impressions, but rather to assume that the meaning of an idea is almost never immediately apparent. Only after a theme has been developed, varied, extended, and placed in multiple contexts over the course of an entire piece can we begin to grasp its sense. Even sticky beginnings like those of the "Hallelujah Chorus" and Vivaldi's "Spring" Concerto ask the listener to wait for their full meanings to be understood as their material is integrated into the ongoing narrative of the piece. These openings do more than just seize the listener's attention; they become part of the work's core material and are altered, developed, and transformed as the piece progresses.

The opening gestures of these pieces, like the events of our lives, acquire their meanings over time—as we see how things turn out, as "a single kernel" turns into "the whole." I mentioned in chapter 1 that every piece of music has embedded in its content a belief about the identity of its audience and what they will or will not be able to follow. Great music, like the music we have been looking at in this chapter, requires an audience that is willing to stay with the journey of a composition as significance and meaning accumulate. An audience that believes that first impressions and beginnings are only part of the story. An audience that is willing to wait. Beginnings may be everything—they matter enormously—but they are only the beginning.