An approach to narratology in music analysis

Narratology

- Narratology: the "science of narrative" and its techniques. This has underlain many modern approaches to music analysis, in different ways.

- In the 1970s, when it began most intensively to be applied to music, it meant structural analysis of narrative, aiming at scientific objectivity. It was hoped that structuralism could provide wholly objective accounts of musical works and musical "languages".

Narrative

- Definition of narrative: “the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way” (Susana Onega and José Angel García Landa, *Narratology*, London: Longman, 1996).
- Such “events” can be defined quite broadly – those together constituting a plot in a novel or movie, or for that matter the facts in a history book, the slides in a PowerPoint presentation, or the formal sections in a Beethoven sonata.
- But narrative is not just the sequence of such events, but their *semiotic representation*: their representation as a system of interrelated signs, in ways studied in structuralism and semiotics.

Structuralism and Semiotics

- Structuralism starts with the notion of a "language", with its own grammatical rules. Schenkerian theory, or any other theory used to understand the musical "language" of tonality and its application in particular pieces, could be seen in these terms.

- Semiotics treats any class of behaviour as communication, dependent on a system of "signs" (the word comes from Greek *semeion*, a sign).

The Historical Background to Structuralism and Semiotics

- Structuralism generally looks back to Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) as its founding father, but began to make an impact in the humanities from the 1960s, first in linguistics, and then by analogy in other fields, including music theory.
- We need not distinguish for our purposes between "structuralism" and "semiotics".
- Semiotics in music has been largely pioneered by the French-Canadian music theorist and ethnomusicologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez, who is still active; his method is epitomized by a famous analysis of Edgard Varese's *Density 21.5*.

Principles of structuralism: internal and external reference

- A basic principle of one variant of structuralism is to regard any "text" (in the widest sense of that word) as embodying a system of interrelated signs each of which derives its "meaning" through *internal* reference to the other signs in the system. This is Nattiez's emphasis.
- Alternatively, the meaning of signs in such a system may be thought of as being derived also from *external* reference to the world outside itself. This is more usually the emphasis in analysis drawing on the so-called New Musicology.

- Roman Jakobson refers to what we might call the "Nattiez" approach as *introversive semiosis* – where each element of the discourse derives its "meaning" only through *internal* reference to the other signs in the system.
- Jakobson refers to the approach including reference to the outside world as *extroversive semiosis*.
- There is no reason, I think, why some elements of the second emphasis should not find a place within a system drawing mainly on the first.
- In any event, the aim of such an approach is to understand the "rules" of the system.

Analysing Narrative Structure

- If narrative is the representation of a series of events, then any narrative text is a composite entity, capable of being segmented into its constituent events, and these events can be analysed in terms of the relationship of these events to one another.

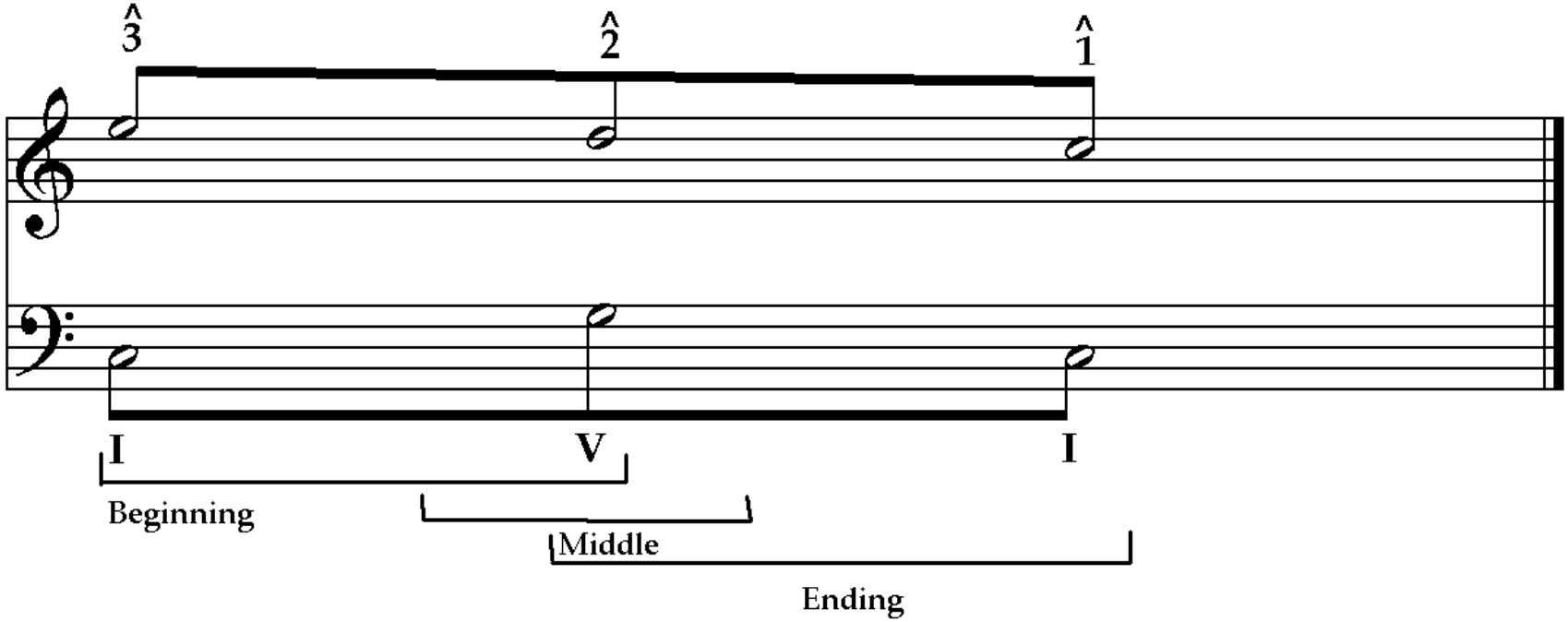
- Most simply such events can be categorized at least as belonging to “beginnings”, “middles” and “ends”.

- Thinking about a narrative in these terms implies a progress through time, which is more fixed in music (which is bound, at least in the Classical repertory, to unfolding continuously through real time), than in other arts.

- This “horizontal” aspect of the unfolding of a “narrative” in a musical composition is analogous to syntactic analysis in language and linguistic studies, and is called the *syntactic axis* in semiotic and narratological analysis, which defines the way in which the music unfolds through time.
- It is contrasted with the *paradigmatic axis* – vertical, if you like – which defines the work in terms of its vocabulary of elements and their meaning in relation to one another outside their chronological order.

- Today I will be drawing on Kofi Agawu's *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).
- Agawu's categorization of beginnings, middles and ends can be taken as a rudimentary example of the paradigmatic axis.
- He discusses beginnings in his Chapter 3 in terms of *introversive semiosis* – in other words, regarding the signs within the system of signs of which a piece can be thought to be constructed as self-referential, rather than as referring to the outside world.

Here is his mapping of the paradigmatic axis on to a Schenkerian *Ursatz:*



But the same principle can be applied to any of the paradigms themselves, since tonal music is basically hierarchical in structure.

Topics in Analysis

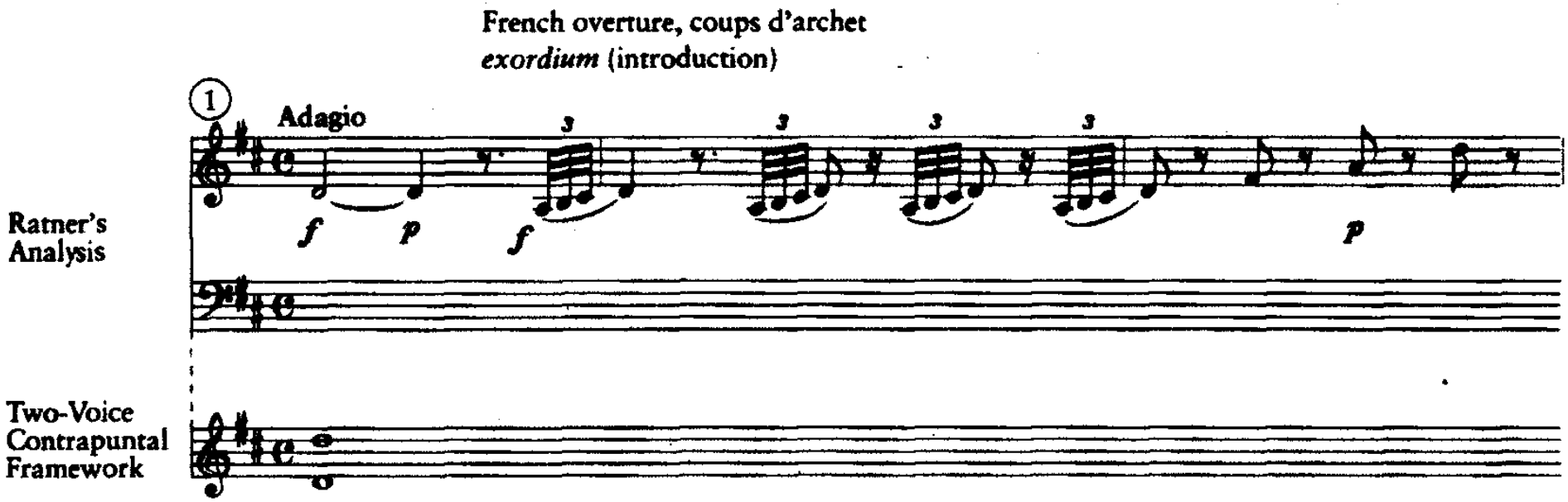
- Agawu's approach gives a central place to so-called "topics".
- To see how this works, it will be enough to look at the example he draws on in his introduction, the first 16 bars of Mozart's "Prague" Symphony in D KV504, which draws on an analysis by Leonard Ratner.
- Here Ratner uses concepts drawn from Baroque rhetoric in music to identify *topics*: "meanings" of various different kinds of musical gesture in Baroque and Classical music, derived from styles and conventions outside any particular piece and *external* to it.

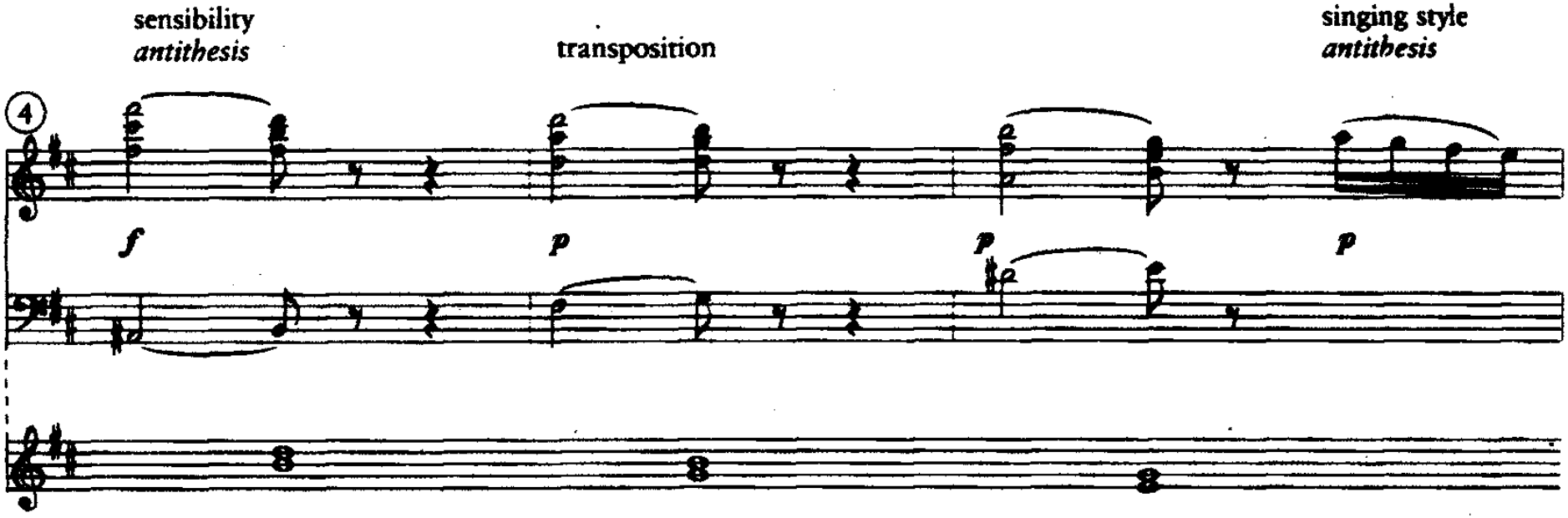
Rhetoric and Music

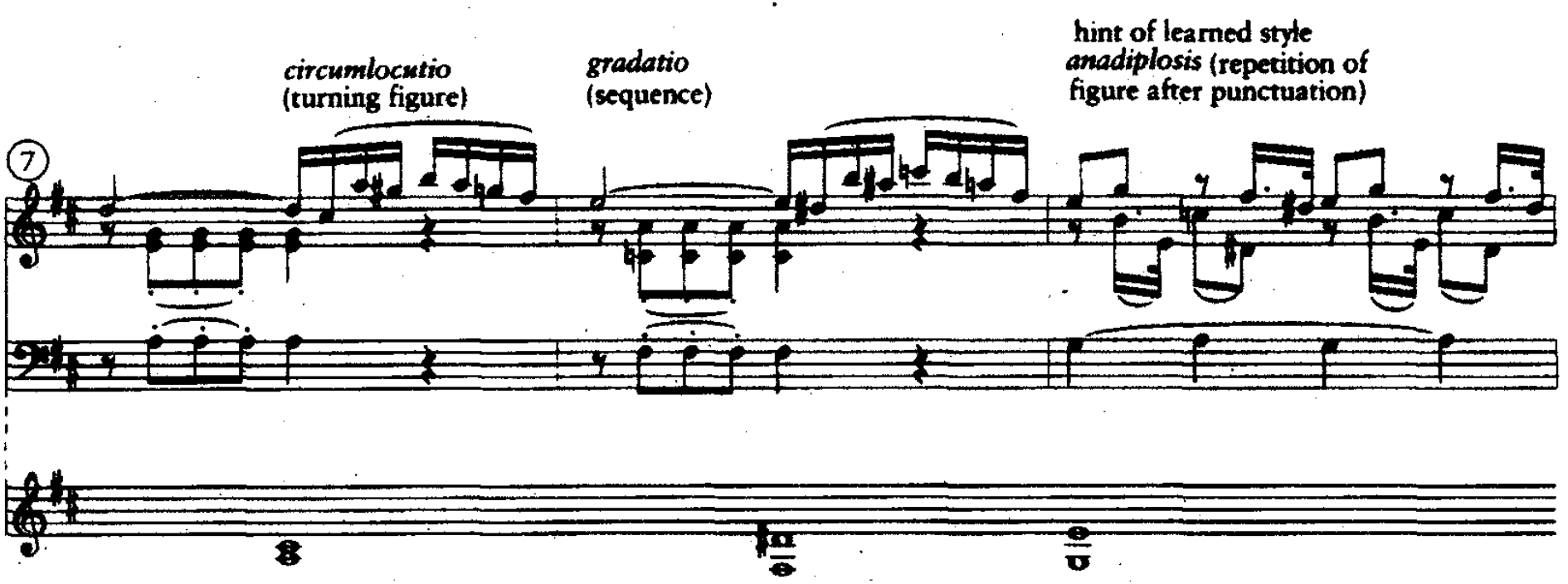
- From about 1600 terms drawn from the *rhetoric* of Greek and Latin antiquity came to be used in music analysis, though never forming a comprehensive or complete system. Treatises were written to introduce aspiring composers to the potential of using them.
- Some relate to formal analysis – introductions, beginnings, middles, endings and codas; some to expressive devices ("hypotyposis", meaning word painting, for example); some to technical devices (fugal imitation, chromaticism, fauxbourdon effects, etc.)
- Ratner draws on the terminology of the 17th and 18th centuries for names for his "topics" – allusive clichés, if you like. For analysis these may be useful though there is no theoretical reason to draw literally on them.

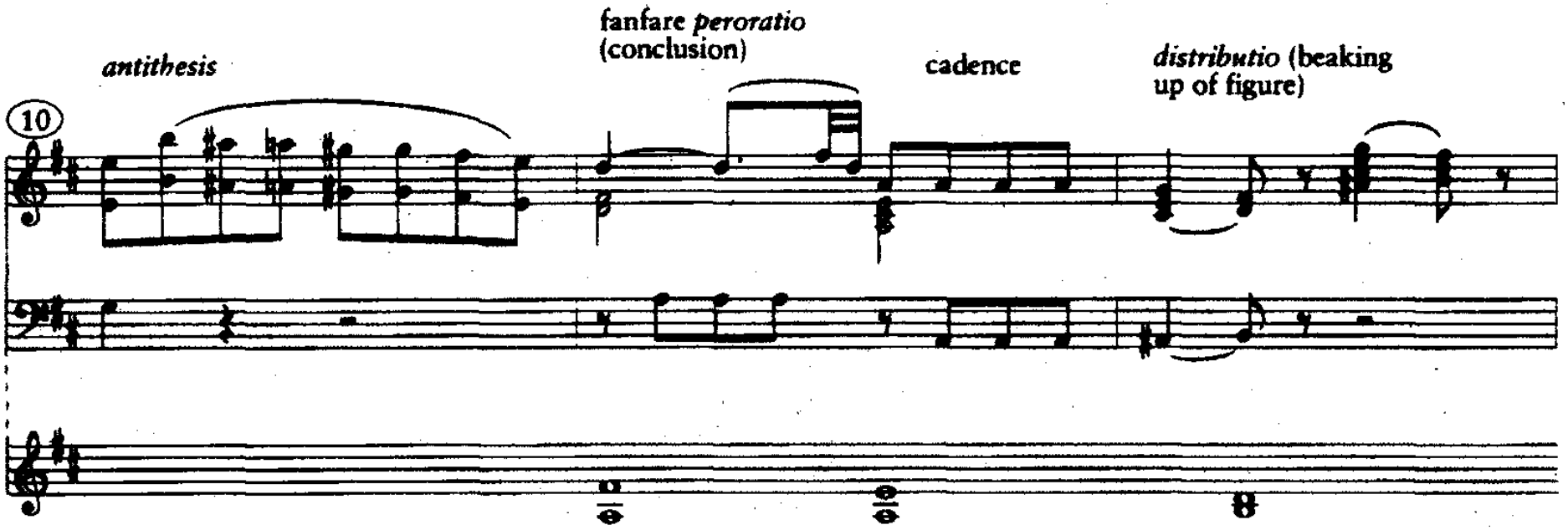
Mozart, "Prague" Symphony in D KV504, 1st movement

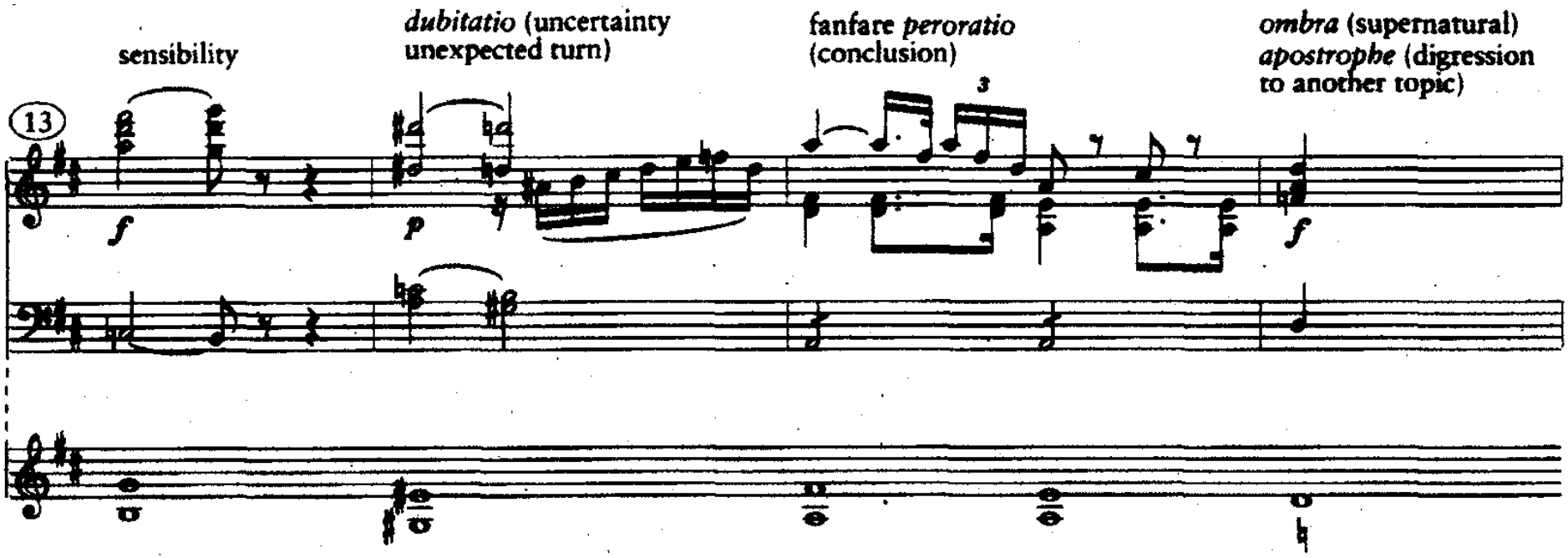
Topical analysis by Ratner, with two-part contrapuntal framework added for orientation by Kofi Agawu




sensibility
antithesis
transposition
singing style
antithesis
4
f
p
p
p


circumlocutio
(turning figure)
gradatio
(sequence)
hint of learned style
anadiplosis (repetition of
figure after punctuation)
7

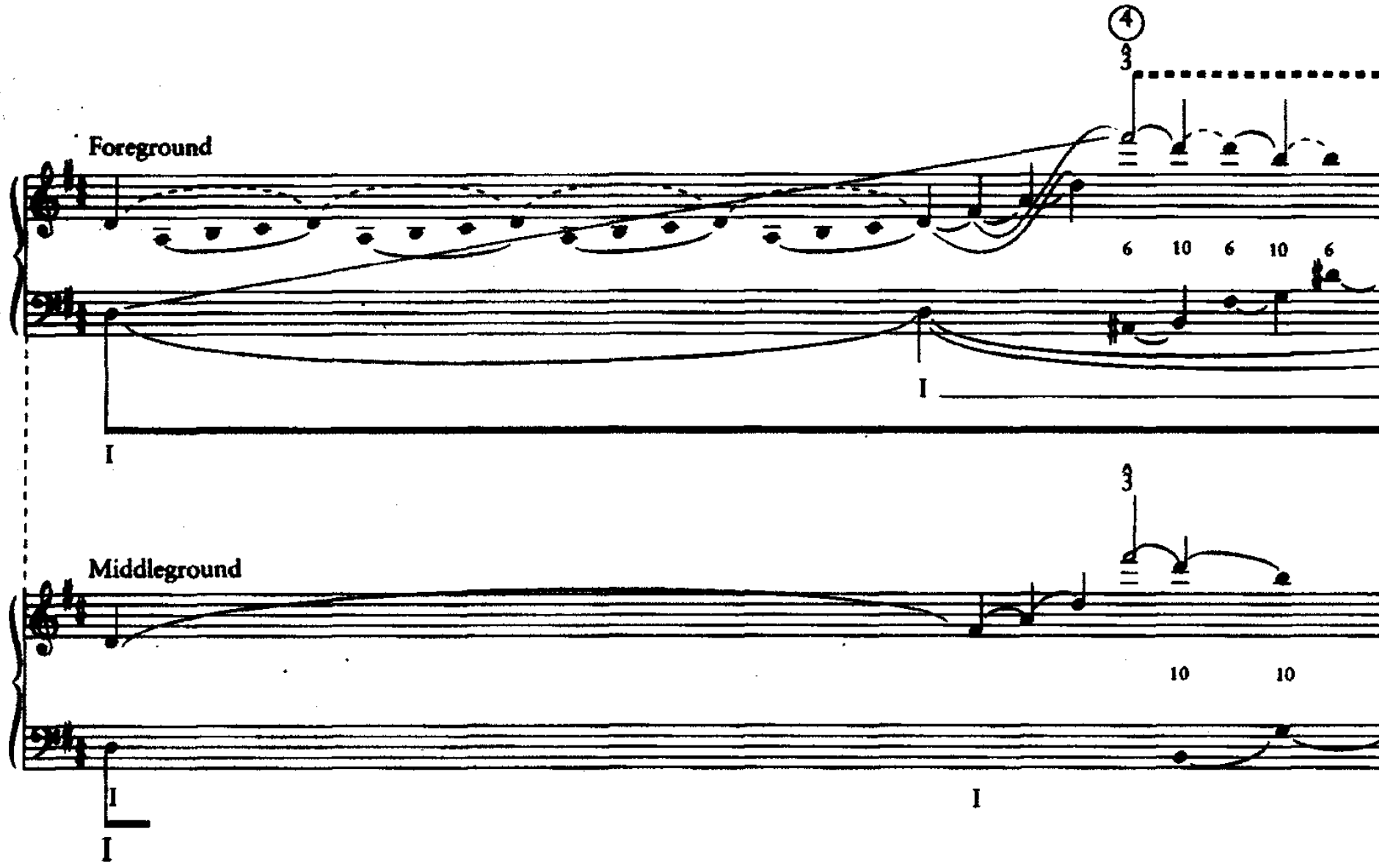

antithesis
fanfare *peroratio* (conclusion)
cadence
distributio (beaking up of figure)
10

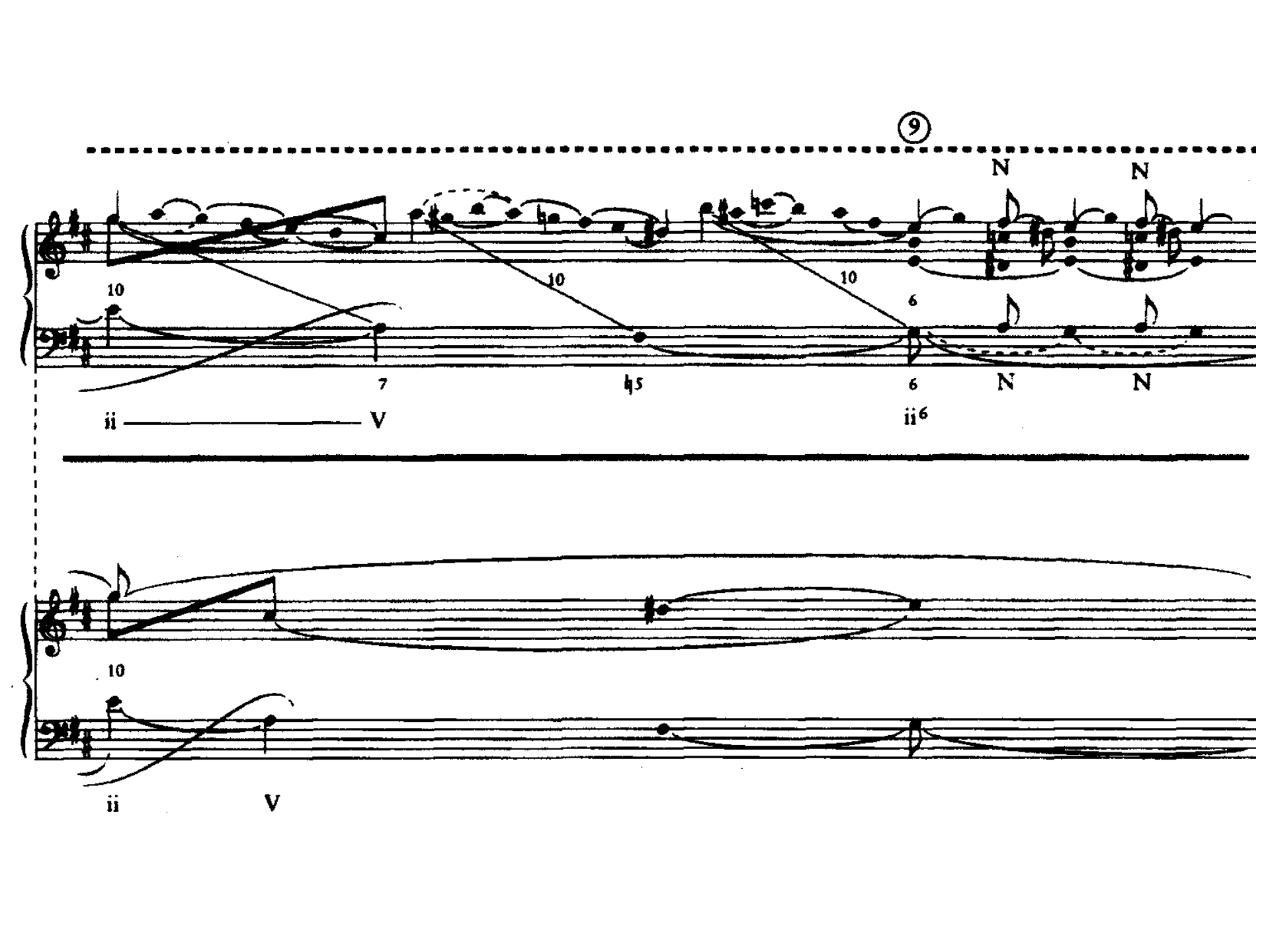

sensibility
dubitatio (uncertainty
unexpected turn)
fanfare *peroratio*
(conclusion)
ombra (supernatural)
apostrophe (digression
to another topic)
13
3
f
p
f

Agawu goes on to suggest that these topics still require a *grammar,* to show their coherence as part of a system of signs.

And he suggests that the best way of doing so is to regard them as elements of *extroversive semiosis* (in other words, deriving meaning from being referential), requiring supplementation with a system of *introversive semiosis* (deriving meaning not referentially but via a network of internal logic).

For him, an ideal way of expressing introversive semiosis is through Schenkerian theory. So he suggests supplementing Ratner's representation with voice-leading graphs, beginning thus:


4
3
Foreground
6 10 6 10 6
I
I
3
Middleground
10 10
I
I
I


9
N
N
10
10
10
6
7
♮5
6
N
N
ii
V
ii6
10
ii
V

Again, the principle is capable of being applied very generally:

- the system of topics used in this way does not necessarily have to draw on Ratner's terminology;
- the system of "abstract" musical analysis used does not necessarily have to be Schenkerian.