A Different Approach to Teaching Melodic Dissonance

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The subject of nonharmonic tones is usually introduced sometime during the first semester of collegiate freshman theory.[1] There are two time-honored ways of presenting this material. In many harmony texts, all of the various specific types of melodic dissonance (passing tones, anticipations, escape tones, and so forth) are lumped together and provided with appropriate definitions and accompanying musical examples.[2] In more linearly oriented harmony books, on the other hand, the presentation proceeds along principles laid down in species counterpoint. Passing and neighboring motion, which falls on weaker metric positions (second and third species), is contrasted with the rhythmic delay of consonance, where suspensions fall on strong beats (fourth species). Once these primary dissonances are assimilated, the remaining nonharmonic tones, relegated to a more decorative status, are then added to complete the picture (via third and fifth species). This approach is carried out to some degree in the Aldwell/Schachter text.[3]

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[1]Some theorists have reservations about the term "nonharmonic tones;" for instance, Kostka/Payne uses "nonchord tones" while Forte prefers "submetrical embellishment." Although I prefer the expression "melodic dissonance," the former has such wide usage and its meaning is so well known that I see no reason to discard it.

[2]For instance, see Stefan Kostka and Dorothy Payne, *Tonal Harmony,* 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995); Walter Piston, *Harmony,* 5th ed. expanded by Mark DeVoto (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987); and Robert Ottman, *Elementary Harmony: Theory and Practice,* 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989), to cite but several. In his abbreviated presentation, Turek omits any reference to neighbors or incomplete neighbors (Ralph Turek, *The Elements of Music: Concepts and Applications,* 2nd ed. (New York, McGraw Hill, 1996).

[3]See Edward Aldwell and Carl Schachter, *Harmony and Voice Leading,* 2nd ed. (San Diego/New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1989), 9-11 and 43-44.

The first method has always seemed to me less than satisfactory. The student is not only forced to memorize at least seven different patterns, each with their own specific contour and accentuation features, but also is immediately asked to distinguish one from the other in subsequent analyses. The initial task of keeping all of these terms straight is frequently confusing to the student, partly because no relationships are established that categorize the various nonharmonic tones according to *similar* or *shared* characteristics.

The second method does have the advantage of setting up hierarchical levels of dissonance. However, the resulting distinctions are based largely on structural considerations. Couched in the rather abstract context of species counterpoint, freshmen often have a hard time understanding *why* passing motion is more structurally significant than a mere decorative anticipation. This distinction may become apparent only after extensive work in foreground reductive techniques, a process that is time consuming.

In my opinion, neither of these methodologies sufficiently comes to grips with the *affective* nature of melodic dissonances. Yet it is their very affective characteristics that guide composers in choosing whether a neighboring tone or a suspension is more musically appropriate for their particular need. This approach is in marked contrast to the typical way that undergraduates tend to employ melodic dissonances in their melody harmonizations; following an initial block-chord version, they usually end up by sprinkling dissonances indiscriminately throughout the exercise. Is it possible to group nonharmonic tones into categories that not only illustrate their shared topographical features but also reveal their affective similarities?

One problem in the past has been the tendency to classify dissonances primarily by their melodic contour, while giving only secondary consideration to their metric positioning. Yet I would argue that the question of accentuation versus nonaccentuation should be our *first* criterion for classification. At the foreground level of the music, with which freshman classes are most concerned, unaccented dissonances tend to function in an embellishing or decorative capacity—they are rhythmically driven. At normal tempi unaccented passing tones, neighboring tones, and anticipations have a way of falling "into the cracks" of the rhythmic surface, resulting in a de-

emphasis of their pitch dissonance. It is only when we slow the music to a snail's pace that we begin to notice their dissonant character. If we take a typical chorale harmonization that utilizes these nonharmonic figures and proceed to remove them, it is the forward rhythmic propulsion they impart to the music that we eliminate rather than the attendant loss of dissonance. In contrast, the accented nature of suspensions or appoggiaturas immediately brings their dissonant nature to the fore at the musical surface, since their resolution displaces the normally accented consonance onto weaker metric positions. If we now proceed to remove them from a harmonization, the affective character of the music is completely changed—they are more "essential" to our aesthetic appreciation of the passage in question.

The remainder of this article proposes a method by which the points raised in the preceding argument can be incorporated into a more meaningful presentation of nonharmonic tones. In freshman classes that I have taught, I first begin by introducing the term *melodic figuration*. Given a phrase that consists of a bare-bones block chordal progression, melodic figuration implies the way in which meaningful melodic lines are created through the process of elaboration—in other words, through the use of chordal and nonchordal tones. I do not mean to suggest that composers begin with a harmonic background first and then subsequently derive their melody from the chords, although this process does occasionally occur, as in jazz improvisation. Rather, it represents a possible model to illustrate the process of melodic elaboration or figuration. The tones of the primary (or secondary) melodic lines will consist of pitches that either belong to the supporting harmonies (chord tones) or create dissonances to those chords (nonchord or nonharmonic tones). Obviously, the former category should be explored first. Single chordal skips, broken chords, or arpeggiations are standard ways of prolonging a supporting harmony while creating melodic shape. Such devices can also occur in the lower voices in the form of an Alberti bass. Even 5-6 or 6-5 patterns illustrate ways to incorporate stepwise motion without resorting to dissonance.

Our main thrust, however, deals with the second category of melodic dissonance. I divide nonharmonic tones into four basic groups that are dependent on *both* their accentuation (or lack thereof)

and on melodic shape or contour. In the case of contour, the criteria for our selection center on the presence of conjunct (by step) versus disjunct (by leap) motion. If a melodic dissonance proceeds exclusively by step or common tone, it belongs to the former, while the presence of a single leap will relegate it to the latter. Thus the categories emerge as follows: unaccented-stepwise (abbreviated as US), unaccented-leap (UL), accented-stepwise (AS), and finally accented-leap (AL).

The various nonharmonic tones are parsed out to their respective classifications in the manner shown below:

1. Unaccented-stepwise (US): unaccented passing and neighboring tones and anticipations (which by their very nature are unaccented).
2. Unaccented-leap (UL): unaccented incomplete neighbors, such as escape tones (step-leap), "leaping tones" (leap-step)[4], or even Hindemith's "free tone" (leap-leap).[5]
3. Accented-stepwise (AS): accented passing and neighboring tones and suspensions (which by their very nature are accented). Obviously, the topic of suspensions will require considerable amplification at a later time.
4. Accented-leap (AL): accented incomplete neighbors, such as accented escape, leaping, and free tones.

It will be noted that the term *appoggiatura*, used in its correct historical sense as an accented melodic dissonance that resolves stepwise, encompasses all of the nonharmonic tones in the last two categories except the accented escape and free tones, both of which are very rare. Although we do not customarily think of a suspension as an "appoggiatura," it nevertheless fits the definition.

This classification allows us to group the various melodic dissonances by their actual "sound" in the surface of the music. Thus the

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[4]There is no available term to describe an *unaccented* melodic dissonance that first leaps and then resolves by step. The appoggiatura is historically incorrect in this context, since by nature its dissonant note is always accented. I therefore resort to the phrase "leaping tone" for want of anything better.

[5]See Paul Hindemith, *The Craft of Musical Composition* Book I, trans. Arthur Mendel (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1942), 173.

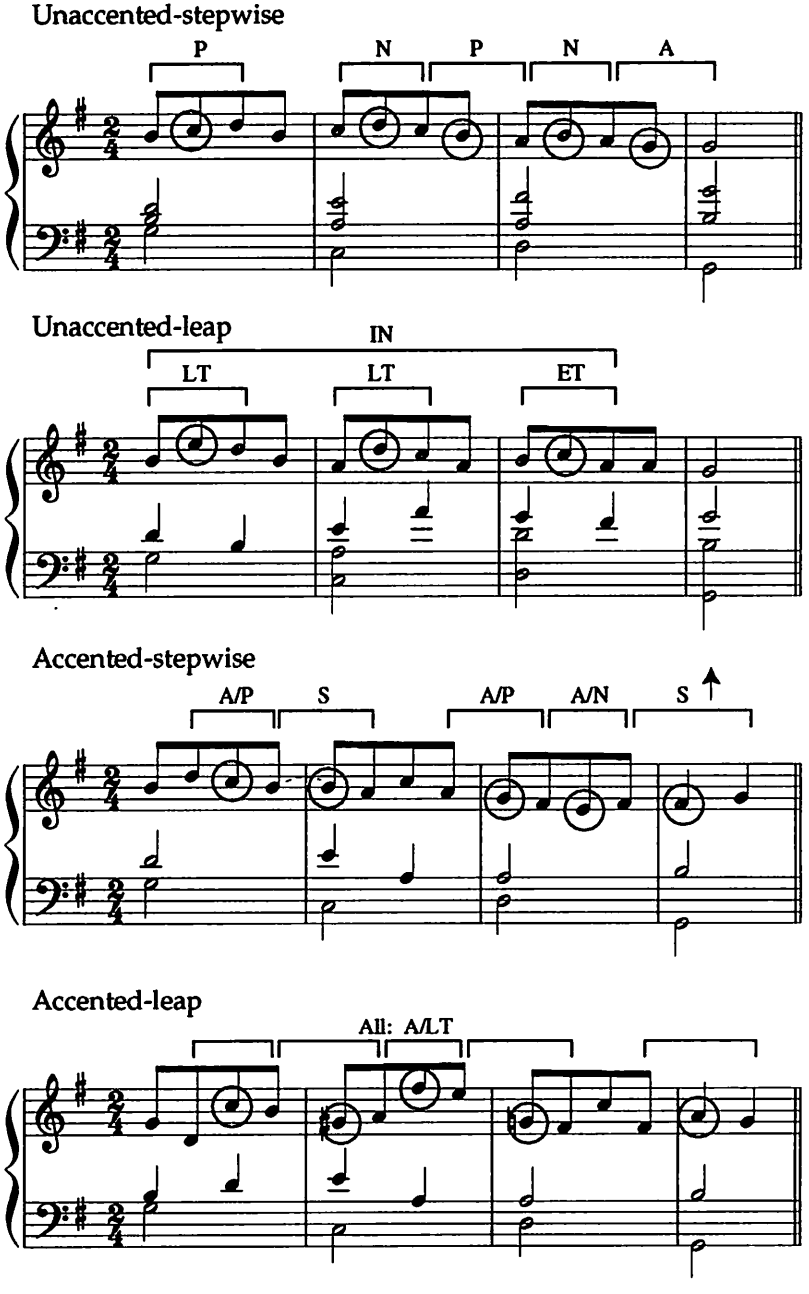
nonharmonic tones in a particular group have a similar sound, a fact that is verified by taking down in dictation all the parts of a four-voice texture. In such instances students commonly have difficulty distinguishing between unaccented passing and neighboring motion in the inner voices, since they both belong to the same grouping.

In addition, the above categories represent a sliding scale of affective function. The unaccented-stepwise group is the most decorative in nature, while the unaccented-leap group is slightly less so, since the melodic leaps tend to call our attention to the dissonances, even though they remain unaccented. Our perception of the accented-stepwise group, on the other hand, is considerably different due to the metric placement of the dissonance. The subsequent delay of the consonant note recalls some of Leonard Meyer's notions about how such procedures give rise to emotional responses in music. Therefore the dissonance now becomes more essential to the affective meaning of the passage in question. Finally, the accented-leap group is even more extreme, as we now factor in the ingredient of disjunct melodic motion. The continuum exemplified by these groupings may even be applied to style systems in general. The polyphony of the late Renaissance features a highly regimented treatment of dissonance that is largely controlled by stepwise motion (our categories 1 and 3). On the other hand, it is easy to see the relationship of category 4 to Late Romantic practice.

In Example 1 I have taken a common chord progression (I ii^6 V I) and composed four tunes above it, each of which features only those melodic dissonances belonging to each category. Individual nonharmonic tones are circled and identified with an appropriate abbreviation. The degree of stylistic consistency within each is remarkable.

This exercise suggests counterparts in actual music literature. Composers will often create a sense of stylistic consistency by utilizing nonharmonic tones from a single category. For instance, Beethoven's insistence on accented-stepwise dissonance in the opening section of his F major Violin Sonata Op. 24 ("Spring") is but one of countless examples. In addition, the prior use of a certain nonharmonic tone will set up a future implication that is then realized. The little phrase in Example 2 incorporates Gjerdingen's Clas-

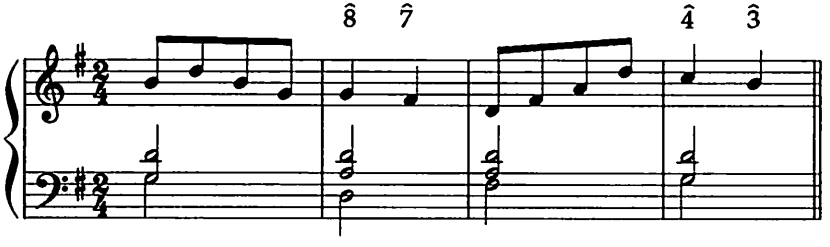
Example 1. The four catagories of melodic dissonance



See Legend in Example 3

sical schema of $\hat{8}$ - $\hat{7}$ followed by $\hat{4}$ - $\hat{3}$.[6] Since the first is set with an accented-stepwise dissonance, we naturally expect its consequent to be set in the same manner. What is interesting here is that although the first uses a suspension, the accented passing tone on the second is perfectly satisfying, since both belong to the same group.

Example 2. A setting of the $\hat{8}$-$\hat{7}$/$\hat{4}$-$\hat{3}$ schema using accented-stepwise dissonance



I employ a simple reduction notation to denote the various nonharmonic tones. All melodic chord notes appear as stemmed quarter notes, while all melodic dissonances are indicated with unstemmed note heads. Appropriate slur marks indicate their stepwise characteristics. These are illustrated in Example 3.

The use of melodic dissonance in certain contexts may prove problematic to students. I cannot resist quoting a passage that Michael Rogers has employed in a similar instance.[7] In the opening of J.S. Bach's F minor Three-Part Invention, most students will ana-

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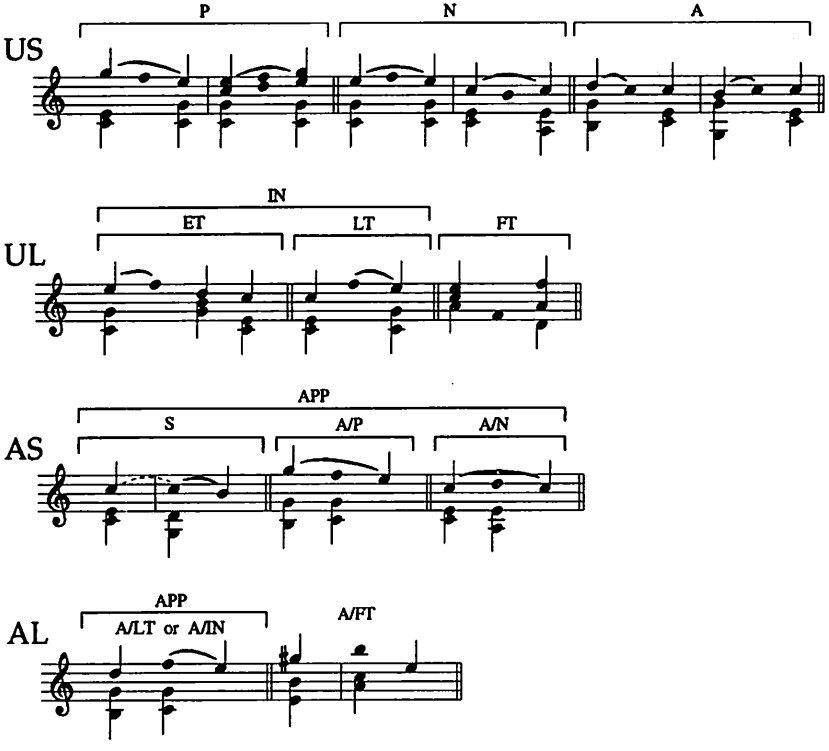
[6]Robert O. Gjerdingen, *A Classic Turn of Phrase: Music and the Psychology of Convention* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

[7]See his illuminating article "The Rich Messiness of Music: Teaching Theory in Music with Contradiction and Paradox," *College Music Symposium* 30/1 (Spring 1990): 131-141.

Example 3. A reductive notation for non-harmonic tones

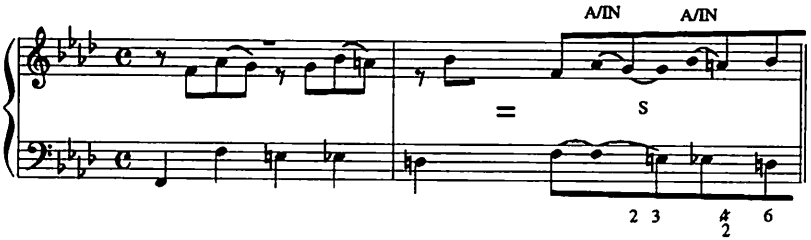


Legend:

P	= unaccented passing tone
N	= unaccented neighboring tone
A	= anticipation
IN	= incomplete neighbor
ET	= escape tone
LT	= leaping tone
FT	= free tone
S	= suspension
A/P	= accented passing tone
A/N	= accented neighboring tone
APP	= appoggiatura
A/LT	= accented leaping tone
A/FT	= accented free tone

lyze the G and A in the soprano as the more obvious nonharmonic tones, when in actuality it is the Ab and Bb that are dissonant, as shown in the reduction of Example 4. Bach's use of slurs clearly marks these as appoggiaturas. Another good example for class use is the opening of Bach's familiar chorale prelude *Wachet auf.*

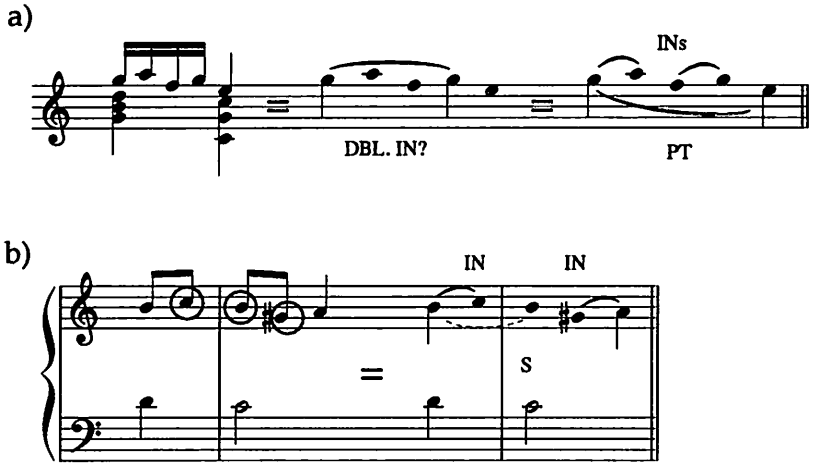
Example 4. J. S. Bach: Three-Part Invention in F minor, mm. 1-2



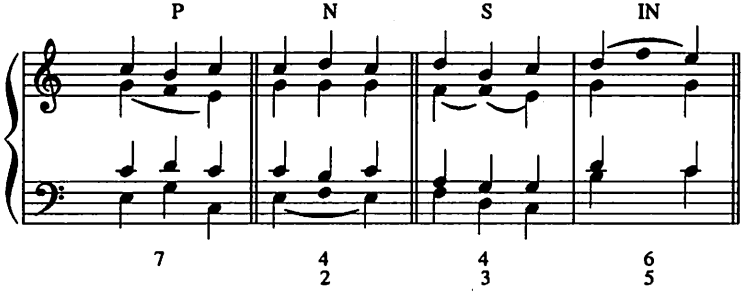
Instances may arise where two levels of melodic dissonance occur simultaneously. Upon visual inspection, a student might initially identify the first figure in Example 5a as a changing note or double neighbor figure. In performance, however, it is readily apparent that the four notes consist of an underlying passing motion (G-F-E) with embellishing incomplete neighbors at the surface level. A similar problem occurs in Example 5b, where three consecutive dissonances appears. Once the underlying suspension is revealed, the remaining nonharmonic tones merely serve to embellish it.

Melodic figures associated with passing motion, neighboring motion, and suspensions also occur at deeper harmonic levels, appearing not only in "passing and neighboring" harmonies, such as I-(vii^{o6})-I^6 or I^6-(IV)-I^6 respectively, but also in the preparation and resolution of seventh chords. It is an easy matter to demonstrate how the chordal seventh originated from dissonance figurations during and immediately following the Renaissance. The few models in Example 6 are sufficient to illustrate these procedures; notice that in the last case the appoggiatura-like leap to the seventh occurs over the same harmony.

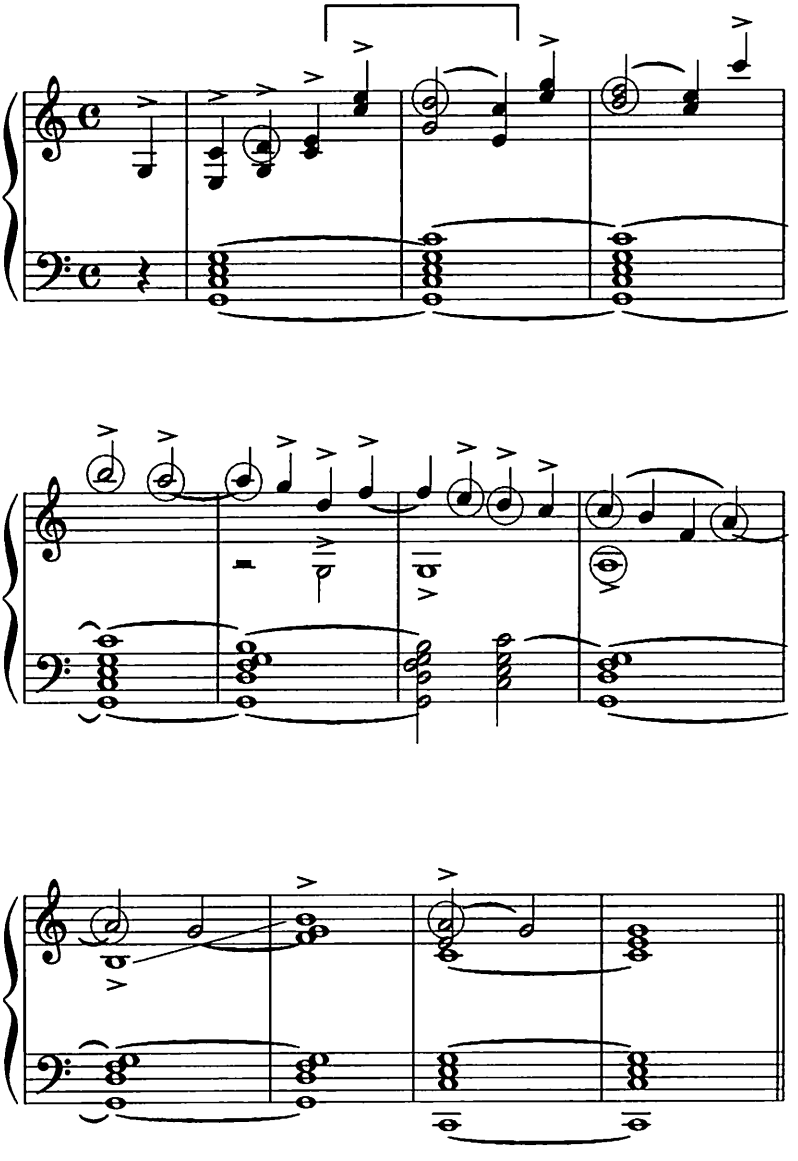
Example 5. Superimposed levels of melodic dissonance



Example 6. Nonharmonic figurations used in the preparation and resolution of seventh chords



In summary, it is hoped that this suggested method will provide an alternative (and perhaps improved) way to introduce the subject of nonharmonic tones to freshmen. The four categories allow the students to see how certain dissonant figurations are related, both in terms of their function within the music and their affective properties. I believe this approach is more in keeping with the manner in which composers utilize these figurations and how we aesthetically respond to them. I close with one final quotation which demonstrates the significance that melodic dissonance plays in the composition of certain passages. Those of you familiar with the climatic portion of Richard Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration* (near the end of that work) can vouch for the overpowering effect this music has on the listener. Yet when we examine the score, given in reduced form in Example 7, we find only the barest of harmonies: a C major tonic triad and its attendant V^7, which are suspended over a dominant pedal, producing an extended six/four cadence. The emotional impact of the music derives *solely* from the use of accented-stepwise nonharmonic tones, arising out of the opening bracketed motive,[8] whose dissonance sometimes stretches over several beats before resolving.

[8]This $\hat{3}$-$\hat{2}$-$\hat{1}$ figure with its dissonant supertonic prevails to the conclusion of the work, occurring on bVI, vi, and finally I successively.

Example 7. Closing section from Richard Strauss' *Death and Transfiguration* (condensed score)