

Richard Strauss' *Eine Alpensinfonie*: A Culmination and Rejection of Nineteenth Century

Philosophical Influences

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## ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is two-fold: on one hand, exploring how *Alpensinfonie* both challenges and stays true to traditional symphonic idioms, and on the other, examining how it fits into Strauss's compositional career, personal religious journey, and the greater landscape of early 20th century leanings towards modernism. This paper is part analysis, part biography, and part historical analysis. Strauss clearly had a unique (and changing) perspective on Friedrich Nietzsche's writings, and this often drew sharp contradictions in his life; one can view evidence of how this plays into *Alpensinfonie*, especially when contrasted against *Zarathustra* (1896), which shares many motives with *Alpensinfonie* (which, coincidentally, was sketched out as early as 1899, before Strauss's operatic career took off). While *Un Alpensinfonie* is not his definitive - and far from his final - work, it is an important landmark in Strauss's ever-changing compositional perspective. In *Un Alpensinfonie*, Strauss overturns norms of the early twentieth century by constructing an intense, one-movement symphony that all but replaces lofty reverence of deity figures with a more universal reverence of nature, adding to the collection of earth-conscious masterpieces (e.g. *Rite of Spring*, *La Mer*, *The Planets* for instance) that inspired a irreversible large-scale shift to programmatic and agnostic-leaning music in the European modernist movement to follow.

## INTRODUCTION

Richard Strauss' final tone poem, *Un Alpensinfonie* (An Alpine Symphony) is largely overlooked in the analyses of his tone poems. Sketched out as early as 1899, and finished in 1915, it has the longest gestational period of all of his works. It is an anomaly in the height of Strauss' operatic career, and a far more personal work than it is often given credit for. While *Un Alpensinfonie* is not his definitive - and far from his final - work, it is an important landmark in Strauss's ever-changing compositional perspective because it is his ultimate rejection of the philosophical values of his time. In the same vein, he overturns musical norms of the nineteenth century by writing this intense, one-movement symphony that all but replaces lofty reverence of all that is holy with a more universal reverence of nature and the agnostic encouragement of self-reflection.

## STRAUSS' PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES

Alexander Ritter (1833-1896) left a lasting influence on Strauss, and has a posthumous presence even in *Alpensinfonie*. Ritter had originally introduced Strauss to Franz Liszt's symphonic poems, which are similar in concept to this work.<sup>1</sup> Catholicism, the music of Richard Wagner, and Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophical musings also were ingredients in Ritter's guiding principles, which undoubtedly permeated his interactions with the young Strauss. Their relationship was "close, intense, and vital, though it remains problematic for several reasons: the host of undocumentable conversations and, of course, the lost correspondence."<sup>2</sup> Both Ritter and Schopenhauer, who argued that the divine could be realized through music, would have concluded that much of *Alpensinfonie* brings one as close as one could be to witnessing the majesty of god, or at least, something on that elevated level. After all, what could be closer to the sublime than a lofty mountaintop?

While this is one way to view *Alpensinfonie*, Strauss likely saw it a different way. *Guntram* (1894), Strauss' failed opera, marked a shift in the composer's allegiance from Schopenhauer to Friedrich Nietzsche.

"[Strauss] realized that his view of the denial of the Will and Ritter's could never be reconciled, and indeed, he was moving beyond Schopenhauer altogether. This revised final act, where Guntram seeks redemption by abandoning his fraternal order and his art, can be read as an abandonment of Wagnerian metaphysics - at least that is how a horrified

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<sup>1</sup> Gilliam, Bryan. *The Life of Richard Strauss*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 36

<sup>2</sup> Gilliam, *The Life of Richard Strauss*, 35.

Alexander Ritter interpreted it, and as a result, his intense friendship with Strauss was seriously damaged.”<sup>3</sup>

The opera’s original ending was to have Guntram seek penance in the Holy Land, but instead, he sets off on his own to seek redemption in lonely conditions. Strauss’ solitary *Übermensch* figure re-appears in *Alpensinfonie*, and they meet a similar lonely fate, which will be discussed in the following section of this study.

Nietzsche’s self-deterministic worldview extended to how he viewed Christianity, the great social leveler. In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche writes:

“And let us not underestimate the disaster that Christianity has brought even into politics! Nobody is courageous enough for special privileges these days . . . for a pathos of distance . . . The aristocraticism of mind has been undermined at its depths by the lie of the equality of souls . . . Christianity is a rebellion of everything that crawls on the ground against everything that has height.”<sup>4</sup>

Strauss had just finished *Der Rosenkavalier* - one of the greatest spoofs on aristocracy in the history of music - a year before he sat down to write *Alpensinfonie*. While he had been influenced by Nietzsche as early as the time of *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1896), it is safe to say that Strauss’ atheism and jaded view of society truly set in during the *Rosenkavalier* and *Alpensinfonie* years. Strauss’ new views went beyond even Nietzsche’s writings, by the obvious irony: Strauss chooses to depart from humanity by assuming the highest position on a mountaintop in his final tone poem, while inviting the audience to an individualistic journey. It is not Schopenhauer or Ritter’s mountain that is sublime, nor is it the *Übermenschian*

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<sup>3</sup> Gilliam, *The Life of Richard Strauss*, 57.

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. Edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman. Translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 40.

rise of a valiant climber - it is Strauss himself, in an elevated position that allows for imagination of the sublime in a moment of ecstatic rapture, while simultaneously rooted on an Earthly peak.<sup>5</sup> The “post-Nietzschean synergy of ego, elitism, and aesthetic autonomy”<sup>6</sup> created a perfect storm for *Alpensinfonie*'s creation.

### CONCEPTION OF *ALPENSINFONIE*

Gustav Mahler and Strauss were kindred spirits in many ways. The friends had prolific careers launched by strict and overbearing fathers; curiously enough, both married ambitious women who found themselves quietly suffering in their husbands' shadows. In 1911, the death of Mahler prompted Strauss to return to his earlier sketches of *Alpensinfonie*. Reflecting on Mahler's perpetual fascinations with religion, Strauss wrote, “I don't know what I am supposed to be redeemed from . . . When I sit at my desk in the morning and an idea comes into my head, I surely don't need redemption.”<sup>7</sup> While Mahler found his redemption through composing, Strauss could not fathom the concept. However, Strauss thrived on having much to do at once, and his spiritual redemption - so to speak - was through his never-ending motivation to compose.

Sketches for *Alpensinfonie* that date back to the summer of 1899, originally titled “Künstlertragödie” (Artist's Tragedy), followed by the subtitle, “Sonnenaufgang im Gebirge” (Sunrise in the mountains).<sup>8</sup> In 1902, similar musical ideas appeared in a sketch with the heading, “Der Antichrist. Eine Alpensinfonie.”<sup>9</sup> In a way, Strauss could have considered this

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<sup>5</sup> Morris, Christopher. *Modernism and the Cult of Mountains: Music, Opera, Cinema*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, 64.

<sup>6</sup> Morris, *Modernism and the Cult of Mountains*, 60.

<sup>7</sup> Gilliam, *The Life of Richard Strauss*, 29-30.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, *Modernism and the Cult of Mountains*, 51.

<sup>9</sup> Morris, *Modernism and the Cult of Mountains*, 51.

as the other half of a oeuvre that includes *Zarathustra*, following Strauss' pattern of composing works in pairs. This pair works as the ultimate renunciation of German (read: Schopenhauer) metaphysics. In the study, "The Alps, Richard Strauss's *Alpine* Symphony and Environmentalism," Brooks Toliver writes:

"Nietzsche did not envision an easy exit from metaphysics; nature itself was free of them, as would be the *Übermensch* when he arrived. But other humans would always risk backsliding into metaphysics and the doubt, pessimism, and the attitude of renunciation Nietzsche associated with it. The struggle against relapse was central to his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and consequently to Strauss's tone-poem by that name."<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, Strauss thought to renounce metaphysics with *Alpensinfonie*. The day after Mahler's death, Strauss wrote in a diary entry:

"The death of this aspiring, idealistic, energetic artist [is] a grave loss . . . Mahler, the Jew, could achieve elevation in Christianity. As an old man the hero Wagner returned to it under the influence of Schopenhauer. It is clear to me that the German nation will achieve new creative energy only by liberating itself from Christianity . . . I shall call my alpine symphony: Der Antichrist, since it represents: moral purification through one's own strength, liberation through work, worship of eternal, magnificent nature."<sup>11</sup>

Eventually, the Antichrist idea was dropped; Strauss' childhood love of nature takes over the movement masterpiece. It was as if *Alpensinfonie* was written as a tribute to one of Mahler's final works, *Das Lied von der Erde*.

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<sup>10</sup> Toliver, Brooks. "The Alps, Richard Strauss' Alpine Symphony, and Environmentalism." Green Letters, 2011. <http://www.ecomusicology.info/wp-content/uploads/Supplementary/GL%20Toliver%20Article%20Original.pdf>, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Gilliam, Bryan and Charles Youmans. "Strauss, Richard." Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed November 9, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.rice.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/40117>.

## MUSICAL FEATURES AND COMPARISONS TO ZARATHUSTRA

Based on the 1902 sketch, *Alpensinfonie* was originally to be in four movements (described below), but Strauss's ultimate creation solely focuses on the first movement, which creates his longest and final symphonic tone poem.

### I Night: Sunrise

Ascent: Forest (hunt)  
 Waterfall (alpine sprite)  
 Flower meadows (shepherds)  
 Glacier  
 Storm  
 Descent and Rest

II Rural celebrations. Dance, festival, procession.

III Dreams and ghosts (after Goya)

IV Liberation through work: artistic creation. Fugue

Most likely, it was Nietzschean thought that prompted Strauss to abandon the original four-movement sketch. In *Human, All Too Human*, which Charles Youmans asserts is the ultimate inspiration for *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche compares Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to the type of lofty idealism that he sought to strike down.<sup>12</sup> Youmans continues, analyzing:

“Here [the Ninth Symphony's] very perfection as a symphony implicated it in the diseased idealism opposed to the Earth . . . [C]omposers interested in promoting an anti metaphysical or “earthly” worldview would have to overcome this fundamental tendency of their art . . . Nietzsche's discussion presented Strauss with an opportunity by identifying the symphony as a symbol of musical metaphysics and thus by setting up a clear target for someone with post-metaphysical aspirations.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Youmans, Charles. "The Twentieth-Century Symphonies of Richard Strauss." *Musical Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2000): 242

<sup>13</sup> Youmans, "Twentieth-Century Symphonies of Strauss," 242-243.

The final sequence of scenes in the one-movement work are as follows, with asterisks marking which ideas were retained from the early sketch:

*Nacht* (Night)  
*Sonnenaufgang* (Sunrise)  
*Der Anstieg* (The Ascent)  
*Eintritt in den Wald* (Entry into the forest)  
*Wanderung neben dem Bache* (Wandering by the brook)  
*Am Wasserfall* (At the waterfall)  
*Erscheinung* (Apparition)\*  
*Auf blumigen Wiesen* (On flowering meadows)\*  
*Auf der Alm* (On the alpine pasture)\*  
*Durch Dickicht und Gestrüpp auf Irrwegen* (Through thicket and undergrowth on the wrong path)  
*Auf dem Gletscher* (On the glacier)\*  
*Gefahrvolle Augenblicke* (Dangerous moments)  
*Auf dem Gipfel* (On the summit)  
*Vision* (Vision)  
*Nebel steigen auf* (Mists rise)  
*Die Sonne verdüstert sich allmählich* (The sun is gradually obscured)  
*Elegie* (Elegy)  
*Stille vor dem Sturm* (Calm before the storm)  
*Gewitter und Sturm, Abstieg* (Thunderstorm, descent)\*  
*Sonnenuntergang* (Sunset)  
*Ausklang* (Fading away)  
*Nacht* (Night)

Noticeably, the ‘Descent and Rest’ concept was scrapped for a more ambiguous ending, which, in some ways, is a reference to *Guntram*. In the final act of *Guntram*, the title character abandons civilization and society for redemption in the shadows of his guilt. Similarly, the climber in *Alpensinfonie* drifts away in the night after viewing all of humanity from the mountaintop, leaving the unanswered question of his fate. In one scenario, the climber has decided he has seen too much of the world from his alpine perch, and decided to quietly live out his days as a hermit. In another, the lone adventurer inevitably perishes in the darkness, symbolized by the work’s opening theme being reversed and dragged down by the violins in a final, fading glissando. More



likely, though, the final fading away simply depicts the mountain's gradual oneness with the night as daylight fades. (Appendix A)

In the same vein, the ending rebukes *Zarathustra*, further proving that *Alpensinfonie* was Strauss' farewell to Nietzsche. Both works are cyclical - rising and falling into the depths. However, it is suggested by Christopher Morris in *Modernism and the Cult of Mountains: Music, Opera, and Cinema* that *Zarathustra* maintains a sense of hopeful energy with major thirds in the woodwinds, while *Alpensinfonie* fades away into a dark abyss.<sup>14</sup>

The last tone poem employs musical ideas that quote from some of Strauss' earlier works, but most importantly, it is an homage to Richard Wagner. Wagner's presence is extremely tangible throughout the work, and these references are a symbol of Strauss' earlier compositional and philosophical notions. "[A] recurring portentous brass chorale, labeled "mountain" in the sketches, summons Wagner by way of a theme from *Guntram*," Morris asserts.<sup>15</sup> The most obvious reference of all is the unusual, non-melodic opening of *Alpensinfonie*, which is not unlike the beginning of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. *Rheingold*, of course, is the first of Wagner's Ring Cycle operas, and begins with Eb and Bb drone tones in bassoons and basses that stabilizes the slow, ascending E-flat major triad in a canon of horn hunting calls. Strauss copies this after the initial eight-bar descending line introduced by the bassoons and strings with simultaneous drone tones on Bb and C, creating an aura of uncertainty as the bassoons begin B-flat minor triads under the shimmering strings, finally giving way to hunting calls in the brass and woodwinds. Of course, both of these musical introductions can also be compared to *Zarathustra*, which features a similar rising sunrise motive.

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<sup>14</sup> Morris, *Modernism and the Cult of Mountains*, 71-72.

<sup>15</sup> Morris, *Modernism and the Cult of Mountains*, 56.

A more indirect reference to Strauss' early inspirations comes in the form of a Max Bruch quotation. Bruch, who resuscitated *Aus Italien* with a successful performance in 1889, two years after its catastrophic premiere. Writing to Strauss after the performance, Bruch notes:

“As an honest man, I will not conceal from you that I find it impossible to like certain details; I would give you the full grounds for my opinion if we were able to meet to talk about it, although I do not expect you to attach any importance to the judgment of an older artist who adheres to a different direction from you.”<sup>16</sup>

Strauss, who had been strictly educated by his father, early teachers, and later, Hans von Bülow, likely appreciated this self-critical musing from Bruch, who was more than twice Strauss' age at the time. On the letter, Strauss noted, “[Bruch] is absolutely right there.”<sup>17</sup> As an act of appreciation for the old master, Strauss lovingly quotes the sighing theme of the first movement of Bruch's Violin Concerto in the tone poem's scene, *Am Wasserfall* (Appendix B). Curiously, Strauss transposes the quotation from d-minor to D-Major, under whirling winds and strings, creating a point of transformation as the wanderer finds a waterfall, and presumably basks in its beauty for a moment. One can read into this transformative quote and easily draw their own conclusions on how Strauss viewed Bruch. In the following scene, *Erscheinung* (Apparition), Strauss again draws from the violin concerto, using the violas to quote the fully-developed sighing theme that is found in the horns in the adagio. In a 1910 sketch for the tone poem, Strauss writes the words “wie schön” (how beautiful) under the descending third, and gives the

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<sup>16</sup> Wilhelm, Kurt. *Richard Strauss: An Intimate Portrait*. Translated by Mary Whittall. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Wilhelm, *Strauss*, 40.

passage the subtitle “das Verweilen” (Lingering).<sup>18</sup> Bruch’s sighing horn statement returns in the climber’s *Vision*, finally orchestrated by Strauss in the horns.

An obvious reference to Mahler’s Sixth Symphony appears in “Auf der Alm” (On the alpine pasture), with unruly cowbells playing against the bleating of sheep (the woodwinds’ flutter-tonguing). For Mahler, the cowbells disrupt the organization of the orchestra’s serenity in the symphony’s second movement (“Andante”), representing the nonchalant ways of nature. For Strauss, the cowbells contribute to his “postcard” vision of pastoral life, without any real emotional gravitas.<sup>19</sup> This movement is arguably nonessential to the rest of the tone poem given that it does not introduce any new material, aside from a calm in the otherwise unrelenting pace of the work.

This would hardly be a Strauss analysis without touching on the tonal centers of the work. However, the discussion of this subject could span the length of an entirely separate study<sup>20</sup> of *Alpensinfonie*, yet it is crucial to mention another *Zarathustra* reference that comes by way of tonality. It surfaces in the C-G-C motive at top of mountain (“At the summit”), which is the pinnacle of the climber’s journey, but not the musical pinnacle of the work. Here, the key of C Major is firmly established as the climber overlooks all of humanity from the top of the mountain. The “Vision” is not meant to be noble or pure, though - in fact, Strauss’ “lingering motive” of descending thirds is overlaid with some of the most dizzyingly chromatic passages in the work in the strings, suggesting that the view is horribly intoxicating, in a sinister fashion.

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<sup>18</sup> Morris, *Modernism and the Cult of Mountains*, 68.

<sup>19</sup> Morris, *Modernism and the Cult of Mountains*, 75.

<sup>20</sup> Such a study of tonality in *Alpensinfonie* has yet to even be published, it seems.

As alluded to before, the peak of the mountain is not the musical climax of *Alpensinfonie*. Instead, Strauss reserves the strongest dynamic marking (a triple forte) for the thunderstorm that occurs while the climber is descending the mountain.<sup>21</sup>

## NATIONALISTIC CONCEPT OF WORK

With this evidence, it is near certain that *Alpensinfonie* was not simply an adoration of nature or a representation of the divine in nature. Strauss, of course, did not live in isolation, and was extremely aware of the rapidly changing environment in the early twentieth century. Composed as World War I was unfolding, the piece is a declaration of German nationalism. On Strauss, in a letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal on October 8, 1914, writes, “Amidst all the unpleasant things which this war brings with it - except for the brilliant feats of our army - handwork is the only salvation.”<sup>22</sup> Of course, this reminds one of the original conceived fourth movement of *Die Alpen*, titled, “Liberation through work: artistic creation.” This draws attention to the high value that Germans in Strauss’ world placed on physical work. Morris highlights that German philosophy at the time equated work with good morals, while idleness led one down the road to temptation and despair.<sup>23</sup> Naturally, a mountain climb is the pinnacle of hard, physical, and dangerous work, and this was Strauss’ antivenin to metaphysics. Now, the artist’s place was not that of a sage opening the portal to worlds unknown, but as a laborer, tirelessly producing pieces that represent ideas and thought. The aesthetic trumped mental indulgences.<sup>24</sup> The

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<sup>21</sup> Toliver, "The Alps, Richard Strauss' Alpine Symphony, and Environmentalism," 8.

<sup>22</sup> Strauss, Richard. *A Working Friendship: The Correspondence between Richard Strauss and Hugo Von Hoffmannsthal*. Translated by Hanns Hammelmann and Ewald Osers. London: Collins, 1961, 211.

<sup>23</sup> Morris, *Modernism and the Cult of Mountains*, 65.

<sup>24</sup> Morris, *Modernism and the Cult of Mountains*, 66.

instrumentation of the mountain climbing sections furthers this laborious, military idea of work. It is worth mentioning the brass fanfare that permeates the second hiking theme, and the march-like qualities of both the first and second hiking themes.<sup>25</sup> By this argument, it is implied that the greatest ecstasy can be achieved through work, which circles back to Strauss' thoughts on Mahler's concept of redemption.

#### *ALPENSINFONIE* AS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMMENTARY

Strauss himself was a slave to his work, producing a prodigious number of lieder, operas, tone poems, and other works in his lifetime. While *Alpensinfonie* is certainly a culmination of cultural influences on Strauss at the time, it could also be seen as an autobiographical account. There is strong reason to believe that he intended *Alpensinfonie* to be his final tone poem; he lived another thirty years without writing another, instead turning to the world of opera composing. In this important work, he disengages from old battlefields of politics and philosophical headiness by retreating to the mountains and observing humanity from the distance, reveling in the beauty of nature around him. Despite all of the layers explored in this study, it is hard to ignore the fact that the whole work, at its core, is inspired by a boyhood journey up (and down) a mountain. With this perspective, the final horn calls are heard as an ode to his father, the horn player to whom Strauss owed so much of his musical talent, while simultaneously announcing the funeral of Strauss' career as a tone poet - a farewell, of sorts. Strauss probably knew that he was heading into a largely operatic career for the rest of his life, as his operas generated a lot of revenue and fame. This sort of self-funeral is the spiritual

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<sup>25</sup> Toliver, "The Alps, Richard Strauss' Alpine Symphony, and Environmentalism," 7.

introspection that is impossible to find when in the metaphysical frame of mind that limits imagination.

Regardless of whatever personal motivations Strauss had for writing his last tone poem, the immediate historical effect of *Alpensinfonie* is easy to see. Ironically, it was his mountain - “an antidote to modernity, controlling it with absolute autonomy”<sup>26</sup> - that contributed to the immense number of nature-oriented, nontraditional, modernist symphonic works of the early twentieth century, including Holst’s *Planets* (1914-16), Stravinsky’s *Sacre du Printemps* (1913), and Debussy’s *La Mer* (1903-05). With *Alpensinfonie*, Strauss bridges the gap between Wagnerian and modernist conceptions of the divine with his nods to the traditional symphonic norms that mix with novel programmatic elements. He creates a neutral (yet powerful) depiction of nature that is neither holy nor trivial, and departs from any sort of philosophical pandering to a superior mindset. By doing this, the composer invites the audience to depart from the obvious temptation to survey the external from the mountain, and instead, turn to reflect upon the internal.

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<sup>26</sup> Morris, *Modernism and the Cult of Mountains*, 59.

## Appendix A

The image displays a musical score for the final bars of the 'Nacht' movement from 'Eine Alpensinfonie'. The score is arranged in a system with six staves, each representing a different instrument. The instruments are labeled on the left as follows: I. Viol. (geteilt), II. Viol. (geteilt), Br. (geteilt), Violine, and C. B. (geteilt). The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'ppp' and 'p'. The score is written in a key signature of one flat and a time signature of 3/4. The final bars show a complex texture with overlapping lines and a sense of resolution.

Final bars of *Eine Alpensinfonie*, "Nacht"

Appendix B

Selection from *Am Wasserfall*,  
*Alpensinfonie*, Rehearsal [41]-3 mm.

Selection from Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1, Rehearsal [B]

Comparisons of the full “sighing theme” found in Bruch’s Violin Concerto, II. Adagio at Rehearsal [B] with *Alpensinfonie* quotes.