SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No.15





Symphony No. 15 in A, Op. 141 by Dmitri Shostakovich

Stage 5 & 6 Teaching Resource
Sydney Symphony Orchestra

Acknowledgements

© 2025 Sydney Symphony Orchestra Holdings Pty Limited All rights reserved

Except under the conditions described in the Copyrights Act 1968 of Australia (the Act) and subsequent amendments, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means., electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Educational institutions copying any part of this book for educational purposes under the Act must be covered by a Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) licence for education institutions and must have a given a renumeration notice to CAL.

Licence restrictions must be adhered to. For details of the CAL licence contact:

Copyright Agency Limited, Level 12, 66 Goulburn Street, Sydney, 2000.

Telephone: (02) 9394 7600 Facsimile: (02) 9394 7601 Email: info@copyright.com.au

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra would like to express its gratitude to the following for their generous support of the Learning & Engagement program and the production of this resource kit:

Simone Young, Chief Conductor, Syndey Symphony Orchestra Craig Whitehead Chief Executive Officer, Sydney Symphony Orchestra

Resource Development

Writer: Dr Jim Coyle

Editor: Daniella Garnero

Production: Alice Jarman-Powis, Sally Zwartz

Design: Amy Zhou

Contact

For information concerning the Sydney Symphony Orchestra's Learning & Engagement program, contact:

Email: schools@sydneysymphony.com

Online: www.sydneysymphony.com/learning

"Your life can be changed and enriched through all sorts of music; music from now, music from the past, music from the very distant past and music from as recently as yesterday.

Through intensive listening students become involved in one of the highest orders of thinking.

As a teacher, by bringing students to a concert and studying music in the classroom, you are providing your students with a special pathway to musical knowledge through direct experience of and contact with live music."

Richard Gill AO

(1941-2018)

Conductor, notable educator and advocate. Richard was the founding Artistic Director of Education at the Sydney Symphony. He has inspired generation of musicians through his work and continues to inspire new generations through his legacy.

Syllabus Links

NSW Curriculum

Symphony 15 in A by Dmitri Shostakovich covers a range of topics from the NSW syllabuses:

Years 7-10 Elective

Art Music of the 20th and 21st Centuries Music for Large Ensembles

Music 1 Preliminary and HSC

Music of the 20th and 21st Centuries Music for Large Ensembles

Music 2 Preliminary

Additional Topic: Music 1945 – 25 years ago

Music 2 HSC

Additional Topic: Music 1945 – 25 years ago

Syllabus Outcomes

The activities included in this kit cover a range of outcomes across the NSW Music Syllabus stages, as mapped below:

Stage 4 and Stage 5 Elective Music

Activities	Syllabus Outcomes	Ideas for assessment
Activity 1: Aural and Musicology	4.7, 4.8, 4.9, 4.11, 4.12 5.7, 5.8, 5.9, 5.11, 5.12	Notation responses Short written responses
Activity 2: Performance	4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.11, 4.12 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.11, 5.12	Group performance
Activity 3: Listening	4.7, 4.8, 4.9 5.7, 5.8, 5.9	Written responses
Activity 4: Performance	4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.11, 4.12 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.11, 5.12	Group performance
Activity 5: Listening and Composition	4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8, 4.9 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, 5.7, 5.8, 5.9	Notated Composition Critical discussion
Activity 6: Aural and Musicology	4.7, 4.8, 4.9, 4.11, 4.12 5.7, 5.8, 5.9, 5.11, 5.12	Critical discussion Research presentation

Stage 6 Music 1

Activities	Syllabus Outcomes	Ideas for assessment
Activity 1: Aural and	P2, P4, P5	Croup performance
Musicology	H2, H4, H5	Group performance
Activity 2: Performance	P1, P9, P10	Notation responses
Activity 2. Feriormance	H1, H9, H10	Short written responses
Activity 2: Lietoping	P9, P10	Written responses
Activity 3: Listening	H9, H10	
Activity 4: Performance	P1, P9, P10	Group performance
Activity 4. Performance	H1, H9, H10	Group performance
Activity 5: Listening	P7, P8, P9, P10	Notated Composition
and Composition	H7, H8, H9, H10	Critical discussion
Activity 6: Composition	P7, P8, P9, P10	Critical discussion
and Musicology	H7, H8, H9, H10	Research presentation

Stage 6 Music 2

Activities	Syllabus Outcomes	Ideas for assessment
Activity 1: Aural and Musicology	P2, P4, P5 H2, H4, H5	Group performance
Activity 2: Performance	P1, P9, P10 H1, H9, H10	Notation responses Short written responses
Activity 3: Listening	P9, P10 H9, H10	Written responses
Activity 4: Performance	P1, P9, P10 H1, H9, H10	Group performance
Activity 5: Listening and Composition	P7, P8, P9, P10 H7, H8, H9, H10	Notated Composition Critical discussion
Activity 6: Composition and Musicology	P7, P8, P9, P10 H7, H8, H9, H10	Critical discussion Research presentation

Work: Symphony No. 15 (1971) by Dmitri Shostakovich

Composer Background

Dmitri Shostakovich was a renowned Russian composer and pianist, widely regarded as one of the most important figures in 20th-century classical music. Born in Saint Petersburg, he gained early recognition for his symphonies, string quartets, and piano works, which combined innovation with emotional depth. His career was deeply shaped by the political landscape of Soviet Russia, where his music was both celebrated and censured by the authorities, particularly under Joseph Stalin's regime. Shostakovich's compositions often reflected his complex relationship with Soviet power, blending satire, irony, and personal suffering. Despite facing frequent denunciations, he continued to produce music that was both technically masterful and emotionally profound, with works like his Symphony No. 5, String Quartet No. 8, and the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* standing as some of his most enduring contributions to the classical canon.

Work Background

Dmitri Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 15 in A major*, composed in 1971, stands as one of his most enigmatic and complex works. Written during a period of relative political stability in the Soviet Union, it marked a striking contrast to the turbulent, often overtly defiant symphonies of his earlier career. At the time, Shostakovich was in his mid-60s and grappling with personal and artistic reflection. The symphony itself is a deeply introspective and multilayered composition, with moments of both triumph and dark irony, often seen as a reflection of the composer's philosophical and emotional state in the later years of his life. The work blends elements of lightness and playful gestures with the profound seriousness characteristic of much of Shostakovich's music, creating a work that is at once cryptic and rich in meaning.

The symphony is known for its unconventional structure and the way it mixes orchestral colour with references to various genres and styles, including quotations from Wagner, Rossini, and even some of Shostakovich's own earlier symphonies. Its four movements are a mixture of serenity, mockery, and tension, leading some to interpret the symphony as a meditation on mortality and legacy. The pervasive sense of irony – evident in the juxtaposition of light-hearted passages and darker, more sardonic motifs – has led many to view the symphony as a farewell to both life and music. While it may not bear the political weight of some of his earlier works, Symphony No. 15 remains a powerful testament to Shostakovich's ability to weave personal and artistic reflection into the broader context of his complex relationship with Soviet society.

Instrumentation of Work

Woodwind	Brass	Percussion	Strings
Piccolo	4 Horns in F	Timpani	Violin I
2 Flutes	2 Trumpets	Triangle	Violin II
2 Oboes	3 Trombones	Castanets	Viola
2 Clarinets	Tuba	Woodblock	Cello
2 Bassoons		Whip	Double Bass
		Tom-tom	
		Cymbals	
		Snare Drum	
		Bass Drum	
		Tam-tam	
		Glockenspiel	
		Xylophone	
		Vibraphone	
		Celesta	

Listening Guide

Overview

The symphony is in four movements: fast, slow, fast, slow. It is the last of Shostakovich's symphonies and has many features typical of his style including rapid changes of mood, sardonic humour and episodes of profound reflection.

Movement 1 - Allegretto

The First Movement is in a lively tempo throughout and is in 2/4 time. It broadly follows the two-theme Sonata form structure of many symphonic first movements.

The movement opens with two notes on the glockenspiel introducing a nimble theme played by first flute accompanied by strings in pizzicato.



At Figure 4, the bassoon takes over the theme followed by cellos and bases at figure 6 then the violins.

At Figure 9, the trumpet introduces a new theme alternating with the strings.



This symphony has many musical quotations and allusions, and at Figure 12 the brass quote the gallop theme from the *Overture* to *William Tell* by Rossini. This is followed by a very distorted version of the B music from that overture played by the strings.

At Figure 15, there is a snare drum roll and solos from the trumpet, xylophone, piccolo and the clarinets. This passage is lively and colourful. It has a rather circus-like feel, but underlying it is a Shostakovian darkness.

This passage is followed by some very rapid unison string playing, again a gesture typical of this composer.

At Figure 26, we hear the *William Tell* theme again, then a violin solo (based on the opening material) played by the concertmaster.



The music continues in the same tempo throughout, but this passage has a less frantic atmosphere.

At Figure 30 there is a trumpet-led *fortissimo* with some consonant brass chords, followed by a trombone solo and the return of the glockenspiel signaling the imminent recapitulation.

At Figure 35 there is a very eccentric duet between one violin and one double bass:



After this, the recapitulation of the opening material is passed around the orchestra.

At Figure 42 the music reaches a climax with strokes of the whip and the low brass takes the second theme. Around this, is the characteristic rhythm of Shostakovich:

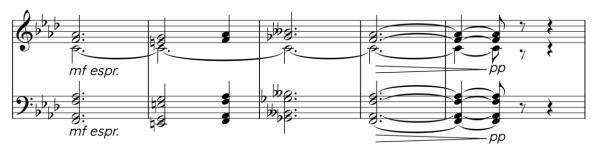


At Figure 47 the tutti passage ends abruptly leaving only flutes, piccolo and percussion quietly chattering. This builds slightly, quoting *William Tell* one more time, and then has a lively, but thinly textured, rush to the end of the movement.

Movement 2 - Adagio

The long second movement is the musical and emotional heart of this symphony. It is somewhat funerial in character, featuring chorales, a theme like a funeral march and instrumental solos conveying a sense of mourning.

The movement opens with a chorale in the brass:



This alternates with a cello solo that moves from the extreme bottom of the instrument's range to its very top. This is a remarkably large range These solo passages are very sparsely accompanied by the other strings.

At Figure 59 the brass chorale's third iteration features a solo from the first trombone which leads to a violin solo. There are some dramatic woodwind and brass chords before a final tragic utterance from the solo cello. This music is all quiet, thinly textured and dissonant.

At Figure 63 two flutes introduce a new theme, sometimes called the funeral march theme, accompanied by pizzicato strings:



At Figure 64 the tempo becomes slower and the solo trombone introduces a modified version of the funeral march theme, initially accompanied only by the tuba and pizzicato basses:



These two related themes are alternated before being interrupted by an unaccompanied violin solo.

At Figure 70 the trombones' theme is presented by the whole brass section playing fortissimo, leading to them playing a chorale with a loud accompaniment in the rest of the orchestra. This is the climactic moment of the second movement.

At Figure 73 the trombone has the solo theme again and it recedes, leading to the trumpet playing a variation on the flutes' funeral march theme.

After this, a woodblock solo leads to the muted strings playing the opening chorale in a full organ-like texture. This is interspersed with solos from celesta, vibraphone, double bass and the viola section.

This relatively rapid textural alternation, chorale then monophony, finally leads to a solo on muted timpani (this *coperto* technique is associated with funeral marches).

Three loud blasts on the bassoons link this movement with the third which is played immediately without a break.

(Movement 3 – Allegretto

The third movement is a lively scherzo. It starts with a clarinet solo which ascends and then descends:



This theme is then repeated by the solo violin. (a musician who has a very great deal to do in this symphony.)

At Figure 85 a second theme is introduced by the clarinet, which is then taken up by the oboe:



There is then a lively and somewhat sarcastic string theme with woodblock. This is periodically interrupted by brass, woodwind and percussion.

At Figure 90 the solo violin plays a variation on the second theme. This is interrupted by the brass and percussion, and that leads to the clarinet playing the second theme at Figure 93.

At Figure 96 the cellos and basses play a variation of the second theme. This is accompanied by a very unusual percussion section including castanets and the snare drum

playing on the rim of the instrument:



This theme then moves from the lowest register of the orchestra to the highest by Figure 99 when it is repeated by flutes and piccolo. A bassoon solo then leads to the solo violin recapitulating the first theme, interspersed with some quieter chordal passages. These chords are often based on the interval of the 5th which is an important part of the structure and harmony of this movement.

The wooden, rattling percussion figure quoted above, this time with added xylophone, finishes this brief and whimsical movement.

Movement 4 - Adagio

The finale starts with a brief and dissonant chorale in the low brass, interspersed with a theme played on timpani and pizzicato strings. This acts as a slow introduction to a longer passage at a faster tempo.

At Figure 113, the first violins introduce a lively melody accompanied by the rest of the strings:



After this, the flute and piccolo join in with a countermelody, then the strings and woodwinds alternate legato extensions of the theme quoted.

At Figure 119 a new theme, played staccato, is introduced in the brass:



There are then a series of duets; flute and oboe, oboe and clarinet, first violin and 2nd violin, bassoon and bassoon. The initial brass chorale then returns. The timpani continues with sparse low strings, then a low clarinet solo exploiting the distinctive *chalumeau* register of this instrument.

At Figure 129 the flute and piccolo take the lead in octaves followed by the 1st horn and violas as the music builds in dynamics and in texture. More and more instruments are added and the crescendo builds to Figure 134. This is a moment of climax with the full orchestra playing triple *forte* with the melody in the bass instruments. At this point the music returns to a slow tempo.

The climax very quickly recedes and the *diminuendo* leaves only cellos and basses playing simple theme with only percussion as accompaniment:



At Figure 138 the music moves back to the faster tempo and a pizzicato passage gives way to the bassoon duet again, followed by an expressive clarinet solo.

At Figure 142 the timpani heralds the recapitulation. The initial chorale theme is presented but with considerable alterations; then the cheerful string theme is reintroduced but has moved from the initial minor to the tonic major.

This is interrupted by some harsh brass chords which lead to the coda at Figure 147. This coda, the final symphonic passage in Shostakovich's long career, is extraordinarily inventive and unusual in terms of colour and texture. The large percussion section is featured heavily but is restricted to very delicate playing. Behind this is a long, held chord, predominantly in the strings, consisting of the open 5th A and E. The C# is added to complete this major chord only at the very, very end and in triple octaves in glockenspiel and celesta. This quiet ending is as creative, arresting and impressive as any triumphant fortissimo in symphonic literature.

Additional Media Resources

Below is a selection of additional third-party media resources teachers might choose to use in supporting their students to engage in concert preparation:

Shostakovich Symphony No. 15

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0iZGMXpquQ

Introduction to Shostakovich

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzNJC5mgi7E

Introduction to Symphony No. 15

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PkN 5RNQ1c

Shosty and Teenagers

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8l2xTsY2yo&t=75s

Shosty the Snowman

https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10156167948319434&id=94754924433&set=a.1 07788769433

Audio Excerpts

Access the Spotify playlist by visiting the following links:

 $\underline{\text{https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0YYq1YcJejMllhdy0HxwGV?si=8205d674422c4e37\&nd=1\&dlsi=3ae8d23d70044a77}$

	Excerpt No.	Movement	Bar No.	Time	Activity
1	1	1	358-362	6'52"-6'56"	Activity 1, Task 1
2	1	1	309-358	5'59"-6'52"	Activity 1, Task 2
3	3	3	1-32	0'00"-0'36""	Activity 3, Task 1
4	4	4	64-89	3'30"-4'35"	Activity 5, Task 1
5	5	5	342-390	15'25"-end	Activity 6, Task 1

Score Excerpts

From Shostakovich, D. *Symphony 15* (Musikverlage Hans Sikorski, Berlin, 2023 (www.boosey.com)

Excerpt	Section	Bars	Activity
1	Shostakovich <i>Symphony 15 in A</i> , first movement	309-358	Activity 1 task 2
2	Shostakovich <i>Symphony 15 in A</i> , fourth movement	64-89	Activity 5 task 1
3	Shostakovich <i>Symphony 15 in A</i> , fourth movement	342-390	Activity 6 task 1

Learning Activities

Activity 1 Aural/Musicology

Task 1

Listen to bars 358-362 of Shostakovich *Symphony No. 15* First Movement, **Audio Excerpt 1**, SIX times.

Notate the trumpet melody (which is Shostakovich quoting Rossini). Some notes are given:



Task 2

Now listen to bars 309-358 **Audio Excerpt 2** SIX times and refer to the score. **Score Excerpt 1** (see page 24).

- 1. What is the first note the trombone plays at bar 309?
- 2. Describe the chord on the first beat of bar 316.
- 3. What is the interval between the viola and the 2nd violins in bar 338?
- 4. The instrument playing the melody from bar 354 is described in the score as 'sil.' What is its name in English?
- 5. Explain the following notations:

	Vc. Bar 310	
0	VI. 1 Bar 319	
+	T-ro. Bar 325	
Pizz.	Strings bar 338	

6. What is unusual about Shostakovich's use of texture and tone colour in this excerpt?

Activity 2 Performance

Perform the classroom arrangement of part of Shostakovich *Symphony No. 15* (Second Movement).

Activity 3 Listening

Listen to the opening of the Third Movement of Shostakovich Symphony No.15, **Audio Excerpt 3** (opening to figure 85). There is no score excerpt for this activity. You will hear the excerpt SIX times.

How does Shostakovich develop musical ideas in this excerpt?

Activity 4 Performance

Perform the classroom arrangement of part of Shostakovich Symphony No. 15 (Fourth Movement):

Activity 5 Listening and Composition

Listen to bars 64-89 of the Fourth Movement, **Audio Excerpt 4** (Figure 120-123), and read **Score Excerpt 2** (see page 28).

Task 1

- 1. Notice how Shostakovich has a series of duets between similar or identical instruments. List these duets in order of appearance.
- 2. Now describe, giving examples, how Shostakovich achieves contrast within these duets.

Task 2

Compose a duet for two identical instruments. You may write for your own instrument if you wish. Make sure you use the elements of music to create contrast between the instruments.

Activity 6 Aural/Musicology

Listen to bars 342-381 of the Fourth Movement, **Audio Excerpt 5** (Figure 148-the end) and read **Score Excerpt 3** (see page 31).

Task 1

The percussion instruments (in score order) in this excerpt are:

Timpani

Triangle

Castanets

Wood block

Tom-tom

Snare Drum (notes with a + are played on the rim)

Glockenspiel

Xylophone

Celesta

Observe the following aspects of this excerpt and make careful notes:

- The texture
- The use of pitch in the strings
- The large number of percussion instruments and their inter-relationships
- Dynamics
- Any sense of resolution at the end

Discuss your findings with the group.

Task 2

- Research finales to great symphonies, including those of Shostakovich. You may like
 to consider those with loud and positive endings, such as Beethoven 5, Shostakovich
 5, Tchaikovsky 4, Mahler 2 and those with quieter endings like Beethoven 6,
 Tchaikovsky 6, Vaughan Williams 5. Find more recent symphonic and other
 orchestral works by diverse composers and look at how these pieces end.
- Write a reflection on unusual symphonic finales and why they sound the way they do.
 In particular, why does Shostakovich's final symphony end in such a striking and unusual way?

Suggested Answers

Activity 1

Task 1



Task 2

- Db
- Very low pitched. E as bass with F, G and Bb above and E in the melody.
 Essentially a cluster
- Perfect 5th
- Xylophone

	Vc. Bar 310	Down bow
0	VI. 1 Bar 319	Harmonic
+	T-ro. Bar 325	Play on the rim of the drum
Pizz.	Strings bar 338	Pluck the strings

Answers may include:

- The texture is very thin throughout this excerpt. It is mostly one instrument playing the melody with either no accompaniment or very sparse accompaniment.
 - Shostakovich chooses unusual tone colours from the orchestra for solos. These
 include trombone, piccolo and xylophone.
- He also uses some unusual techniques to change the tone colour of some instruments, including harmonics on the solo violin and extreme high register, and playing the snare drum on the rim or the use of a tom-tom.

Activity 2

Student activity.

Activity 3

Answers may include:

- The first idea is presented with the clarinet and ascends in one beat notes then dotted notes to a long high note. It then descends in an inversion of itself. This idea is then repeated by the clarinet with some variations.
- The second theme is in two parts, one features a legato passage characterised by stepwise movement and the second part is a series of staccato chords. These two ideas are initially presented by the woodwinds. The strings then take up the first theme as presented by the clarinet and play it twice. The principal development here is the change of tone colour.
- The strings then play the second theme, legato then staccato, with the staccato notes being played pizzicato.

Activity 4

Student activity.

Activity 5

Task 1

- 1. Flute and oboe, oboe and clarinet, violins and violins, bassoon and bassoon.
- 2. Some of these duets contrast in tone colour, for example flute and oboe. Some of them contrast in note values, for example the violins: the top part tends to play longer notes on the lower part quavers. Sometimes there is contrast in articulation, for example at the start of the bassoon duet. The bassoon duet is also a very good illustration of contrast of register.

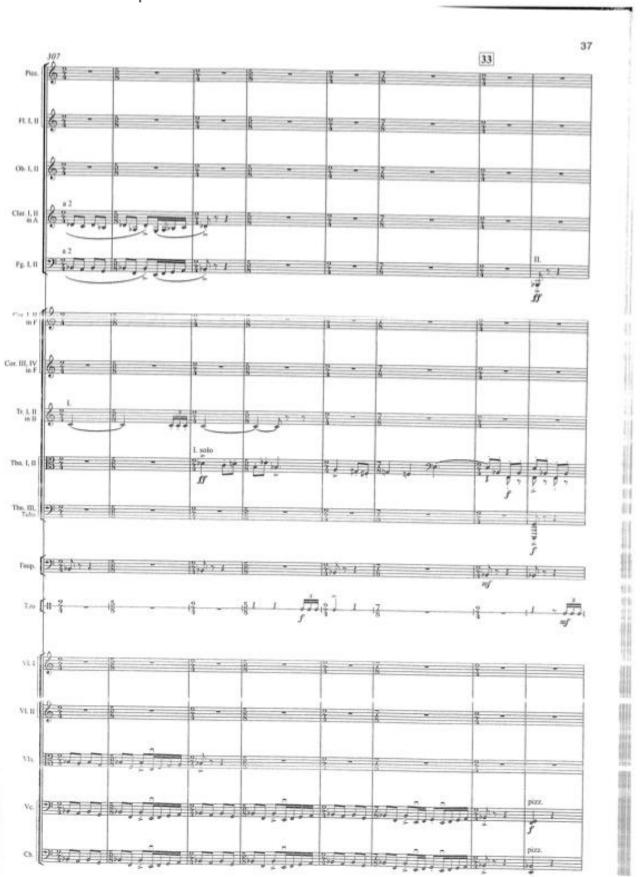
Task 2

Student activity.

Activity 6

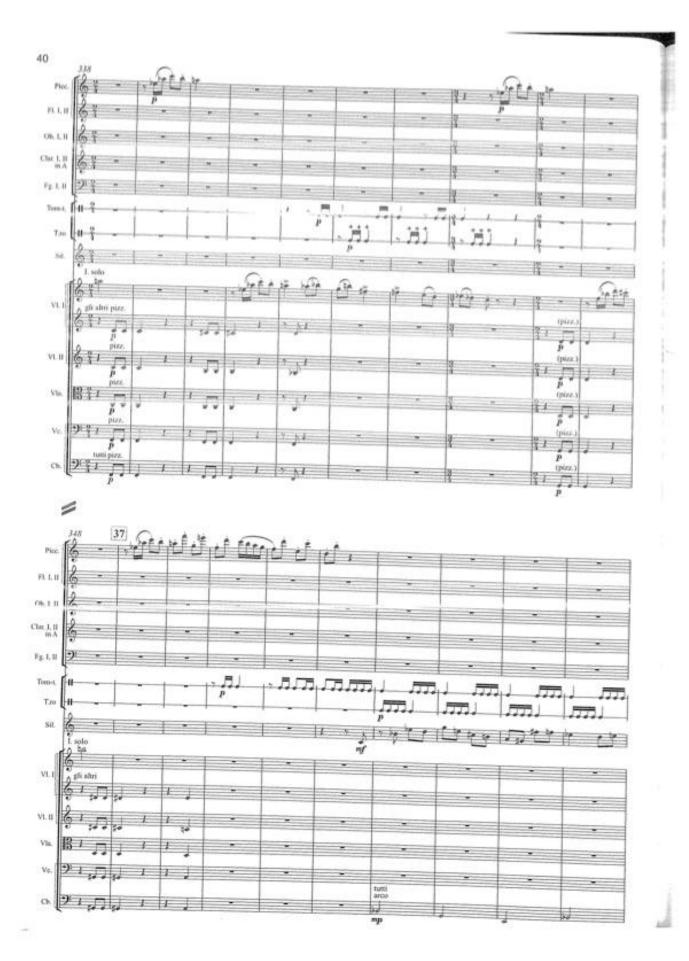
Student activity.

Score Excerpt 1

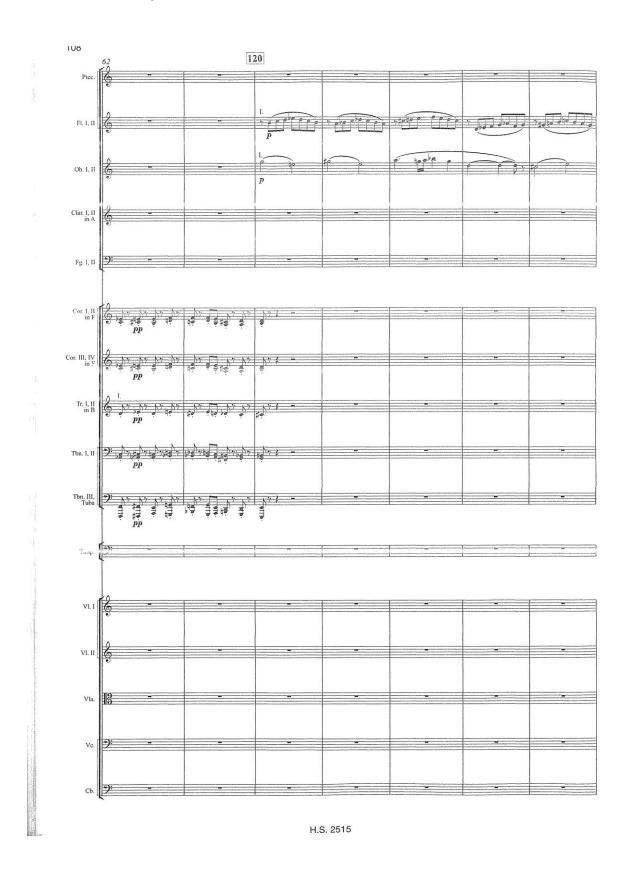




7



Score Excerpt 2

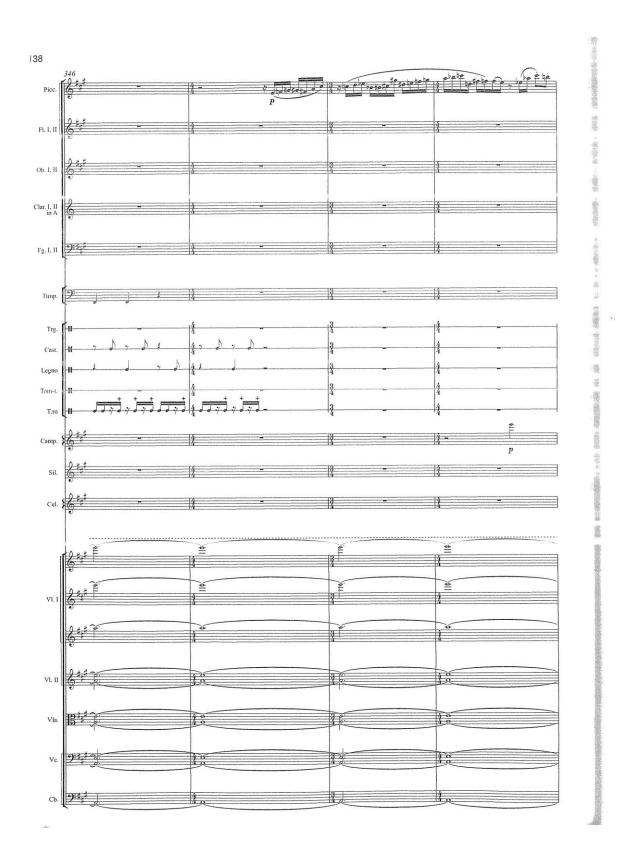




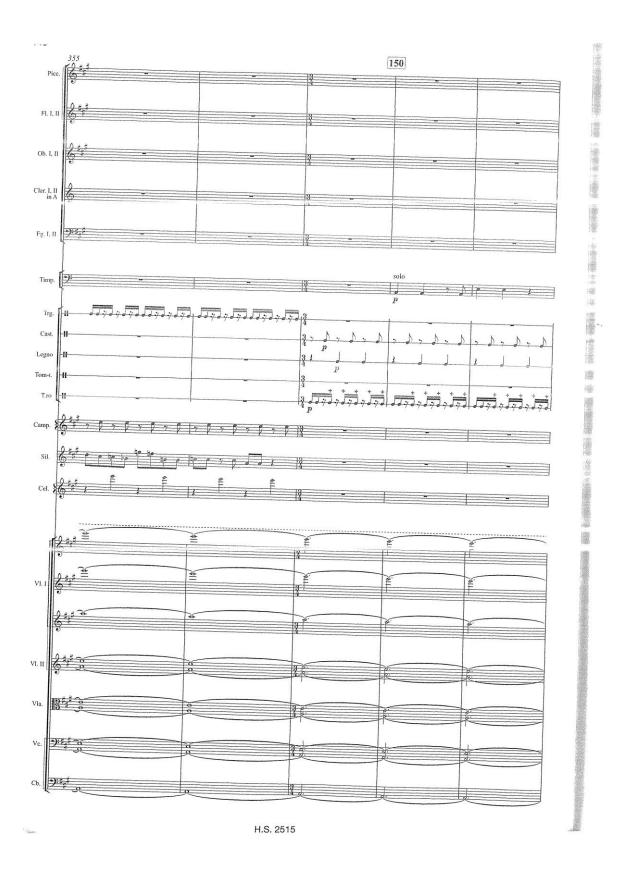


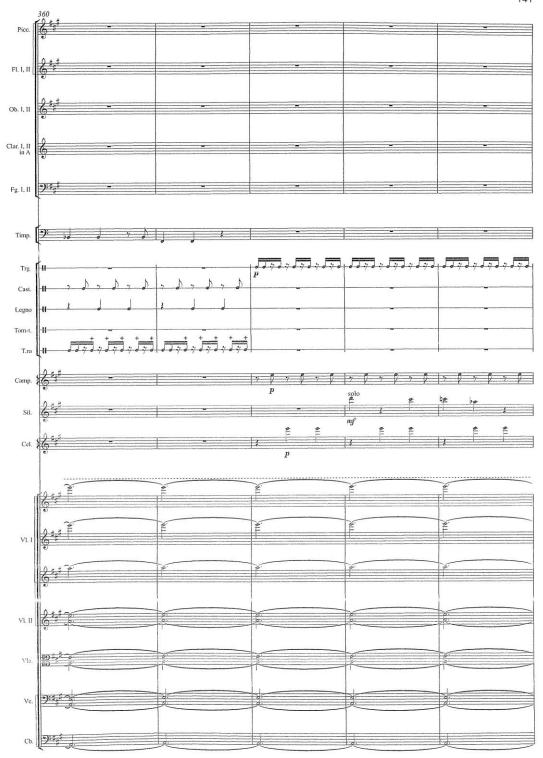


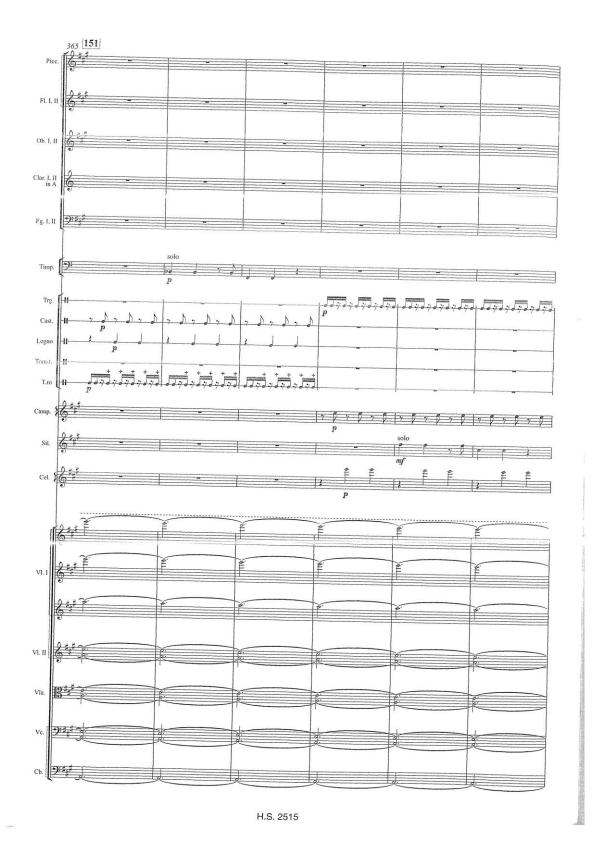
Score Excerpt 3





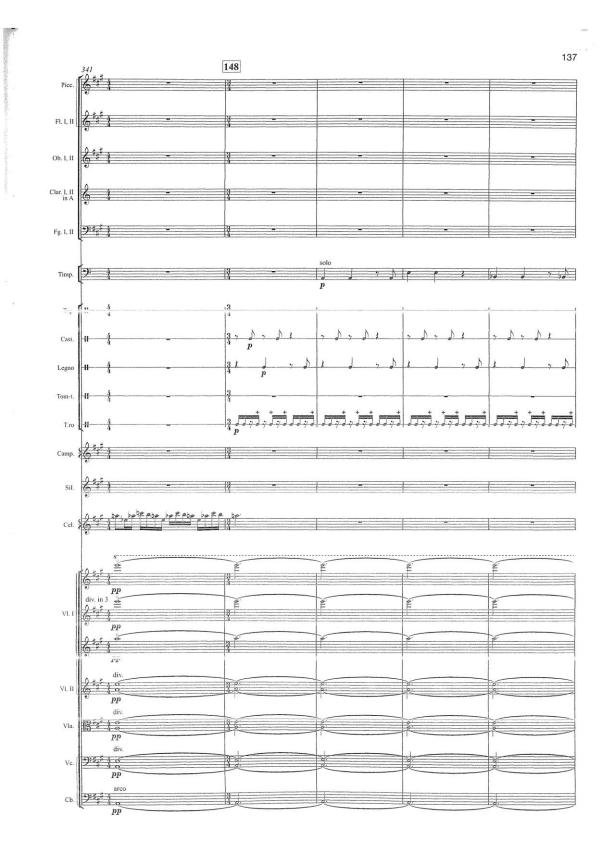


















Melody



Melody in B



Harmony 1 Symphony 15 in A - second movement



Harmony 1 in B



Harmony 2 Symphony 15 in A - second movement



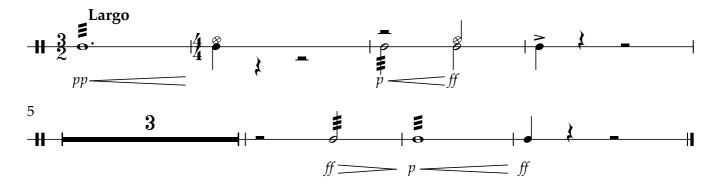
Harmony 2 in E



Bass



$\begin{array}{c} Symphony~15~in~A~-~second~movement\\ Snare~Drum~and~Cymbal \end{array}$













Melody



Melody in B



Harmony 1





Harmony 2





Bass



