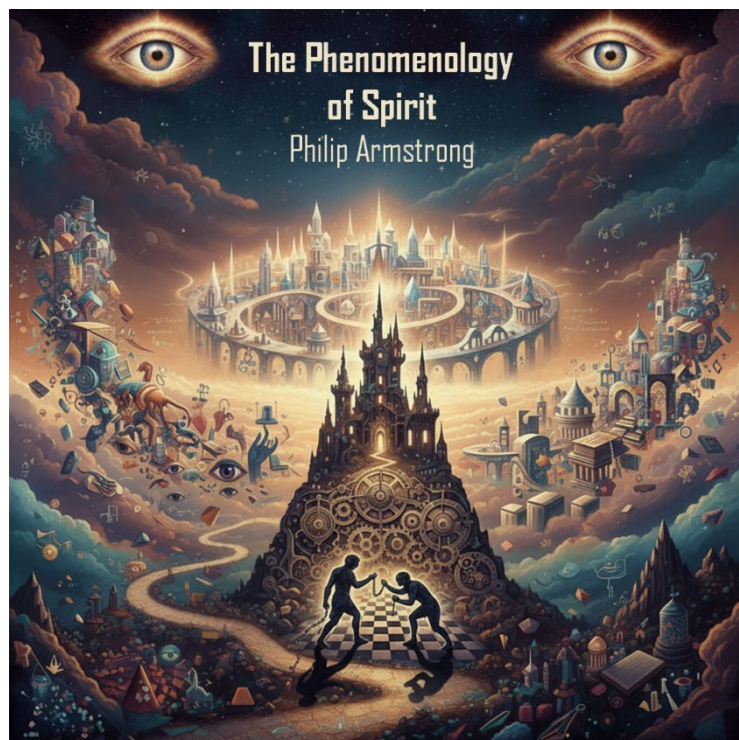


# The Phenomenology of Spirit

(Phänomenologie des Geistes)

Philip Armstrong (2025)



1. A Phenomenology of Variations
2. Of Music, Mind and Matter (for solo piano and media)
3. A Breath of Reconciliation
4. Antigone and the Bacchanalian Revel
5. The Teleological Labyrinth

## 1. A Phenomenology of Variations

The music finds a starting point in 'The Phenomenology of Spirit' (Phänomenologie des Geistes), an extensive text written by Hegel in 1806 while he was a resident in the Duchy of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach alongside Goethe and Schiller, the latter who died only the year previously, and working alongside philosophy department colleagues at the University of Jena, including Schelling and Schlegel.

The region had become a hub for literary figures, artists, musicians, and philosophers who together made it the most pivotal cultural and intellectual nexus in Europe of the time. In particular, Hegel had joined activities at the centre of German Idealism and its quest to examine how each feature of reality and of the physical world might be explained in terms of the mind, its exploring of strategies to further advance the epistemology of Kant and others with new ideas and insights.

Hegel's text addresses a range of related topics, including metaphysics, ethics, and philosophy of mind, developing notions such as the dialectic unravelling of concepts and accordingly of social structures, the nature of absolute idealism, and the paramount position of communal morality. It continues to influence Western philosophy today, both of the more sociological 'continental' and the more rationalising 'analytic' traditions, and also to inspire profound commentaries, including that of Robert Brandom's 'A Spirit of Trust', which in turn motivated this music work.

The text epitomises what was a new age of critical analysis. If Hegel sought to interpret the semantics associated with knowledge in terms of dynamic pragmatics, then the political approach of the Duke Karl August in Weimar was equally adaptive, focused upon the principles of liberty and egalitarianism, in contrast to the traditional Prussian ethos of privilege and hierarchy centred around the reign of Frederick William III and the royal residence at Potsdam. Hegel was putting the final touches to his book in October 1806 as Napoleon's army of liberation faced Prussian troops in the Battle of Jena, fought on the rolling landscapes not far from where he lived. On the day before the huge battle, in which the casualties were to amount to more than 50,000, Hegel was impressed when he saw Napoleon ride into the university town of Jena on horseback. Setting aside scepticism about this figure having recently crowned himself as emperor and indulged in excessive entitlements himself, Hegel joined with other liberal and tolerant residents welcoming Napoleon, and thereby refuting the values and injustices of the past.

This was a ground-breaking era, and Hegel sought to build upon the assertions of Kant that human apperception of political hierarchies, and of all knowledge, conforms to a structure of concepts and meta-concepts, whereby it is the latter that determines the development of the former, articulating judgments and abstractions. The realm of deduced reasoning that is justified *a priori* provides the speculative structure for intentional concepts which are explanations and arguments based on observation and that are justified *a posteriori*. Brandom described the model as one of semantic descent.

However, Hegel sought to differ from Kant in asserting that this structure is not a fixed one with static boundaries, but rather something bound up with constant change and enhancement. Even the realm of meta-concepts is subject to revision. Just as the reign of the Prussian king (and the new emperor) was not endowed with a divine authority that was fixed and categorical, so knowledge itself could not be accorded non-adaptive edifices.

The music, also entitled 'The Phenomenology of Spirit', similarly acts to articulate music development within shifting background structures. The first movement makes reference to Beethoven's 'Thirty-Two Variations for Piano', also written in 1806, adapting frames of reference in a playful manner. The music seeks to bring an original approach to the notion of variation, just as Beethoven sought to bring change to the conventional structures of classical music of his time, having recently finished his revolutionary Eroica Symphony, with its complexity of music language and structural elements, and its dedication to Napoleon (although in this case, the dedication was retracted after the French leader had himself crowned as emperor and seemingly abandoned the liberating ideals of the French Revolution).

The template score for this movement is attached below.

## **2. Of Music, Mind and Matter**

**(for solo piano with media - video with sound: the score is available upon request)**

The opening section of Hegel's text 'The Phenomenology of Spirit' addresses the structuring of mental realms, in particular the conceptualisation of facts. It introduces a fictional narrative to explain the seeming paradox of objectivity that underpins this structuring, that it's not possible to evaluate conceptualisations without overcoming the restrictions of concepts themselves. Hegel's account chronicles a human mind reflecting on how its own consciousness and accordingly its own being is restricted. The figure struggles with the insight that its own competence and efficacy is finite. Its substance is unfixed and imperfect, in complete contrast to the enduring and unassailable realms of the absolute that lie beyond it. Existence is unlimited in space, and continues forever in time, but the place of its own mental capacities within that unbounded essence is minimal and arguably worthless. Living with these limitations makes the mind feel despondent and aggrieved.

In Hegel's narrative, the mind begins its confrontation of this challenge by attempting to achieve some reconciliation through various stoic and sceptic approaches derived of the ancient past, looking to self-denial, and then to resolute work, and then to faith and devotion. However, always any sense of attainment and of overcoming these restrictions is limited and futile. It must concede that these approaches merely reinforce the separation felt by the mind between its imperfect self and the perfection of its desired goals, further reinforcing the dejected state.

Hegel guides the mind in seeking a solution to its quandary by way of the philosophical tradition. He starts by acknowledging that the epistemological emphasis of recent scholars, from Descartes through Kant, and of his counterparts thriving in the duchy of Weimar, has flaws. It aspires to the insurmountable when it refutes the paradox of objectivity and necessitates an infinite regress. If a perspective upon knowledge supposedly requires a special objective standpoint upon knowledge, then a perspective upon that special standpoint requires its own special objective standpoint upon knowledge. Indeed, the extraneous perspective of Kant's transcendental idealism, outlining a schema for the mind-dependence of empirical objects, requires a further extraneous perspective for its validation. It is an approach that is self-contradictory and impossible.

Hegel argued that for the mind to advance in its understanding of self, and thus to grasp meaning and purpose, there is the need to examine knowledge as it emanates in knowledge-forming processes. To advance this approach, he used the term "phenomenology", based on the Greek term

for "appearance", whereby a phenomenology of mind is oriented not on a detached perspective but on the study of how mind or consciousness appears to itself. Philosophy of Mind addresses the development of appearances within consciousness, which gradually, from the age of childhood and onwards, constructs a comprehensive and integrated structure of knowledge. Indeed, Hegel pointed out that, while observational judgments of mind and matter can be derived by methods beyond direct inference, still they must stand in relation of material consequence and compatibility with other content. This constructive process requires that everything of empirical perception must be construed as conceptually coherent. It must be mediated to make sense to the mind.

It is this integrated feature of mind that allows the easy transfer of concepts beyond their immediate context. While the empirical methodology of psychology, involving empiricism and objectivity, as well as testability (coupled with falsifiability) and predictability, seeks to establish the causal links between phenomena, in contrast mental processes within consciousness look to the correlational by way of metaphor.

In the case that the mind addresses not things in themselves but only what is present in its own consciousness, then it will perceive what it previously saw as stable and fixed forms become part of a dialectical movement. Even space and time do not have an existence beyond the mind but are rather constructed forms of sensibility, the transcendently ideal rather than of independent noumenon. The concepts describing the empirical realm are based on meta-concepts providing underlying structure, which in turn are contingent. Accordingly, the mind comes to appreciate how philosophical analysis cannot merely advance arguments in terms of deductive reasoning. Rather, it must consider the role of consciousness itself in determining the developing realm of perceptions and the objects within that realm.

The music addresses in its own realm of parameters how the process of ascertaining objects is not a fixed one. In the context of the fast-paced rhythms and synthesized basslines of electronic dance music, and then the aesthetics of contemporary classical music, the criterion for observing any object is not established objectively and externally, but rather from within consciousness itself. It must be accepted that the "object" that the mind distinguishes as separate to its knowledge, in music as in all understanding, is really just an entity perceived in terms of its own consciousness. It is envisioned by the mind's own development of consciousness, with each new "object" developed from consciousness's ongoing constriction of the world.

### 3. A Breath of Reconciliation

Hegel argued that the construction of concepts in consciousness, and the development of governing laws encapsulated by meta-concepts, is influenced by the social aspect of normativity and its historical component, which he viewed as the recollective rationality. He asserted that the obligations embodied by deontic structures are largely the product of the respective social practices of authority and responsibility.

Hegel examined the nature of authority and responsibility in terms of the lordship and bondage confrontation in his chapter on Self-Consciousness. He introduced 'The Allegory of the Master and Slave' to demonstrate this phenomenon. He described the juxtaposition of two minds, each supposedly asserting independence by seeking to debase the other. He argued that a status struggle of this kind typically ends not in anything decisive, but in the establishment of a mutually-dependent relationship of master (lord) and slave (bondsmen). He posited that in the case that a dominant person has authority over a subservient person, then this second person is answerable to the first, but also the first is answerable to the second. There is a dependence upon each conforming to their role.

While both seek a sense of purposiveness and repute by way of the other, Hegel went on to add that it is the Master role that, in the long run, is the less edifying, given that its would-be elevation is inherently compromised. The power of authority is ultimately fruitless and demoralizing because the slave's recognition of the master is forced and dependent. In contrast, through fear of death, and through its devoted labours, the subordinate acts to improve the world and, in the process, transforms and elevates consciousness. By perceiving mind reflecting in its own creation by recognising restraints pertaining to the impermissible rather than the impossible, the slave achieves a legitimate sense of independence, ironically becoming the one with greater potential for self-consciousness development and freedom.

Just as Hegel treated all knowledge structures as dynamic, whereby the *de dicto* effectuates the *de re*, so furthermore he refuted the conventional approach of treating the obedience/subordination model as fixed. Traditional normativity had previously asserted a static hierarchy; religion viewed this hierarchy as supernaturally ordained and linked to a Great Chain of Being, which resulted in unyielding directives as regards behaviour requirements and status-dependence. In contrast, the modern approach underlying the Enlightenment asserted there is no normativity beyond what

society and individuals conjure. Practices and attitudes institute practices of responsibility and authority. Hegel built upon this arguing that if the perceived condition is not a necessary one, then this is because there is pragmatism applied to the semantic protocols of how the mind sees itself in the context of a community of minds. It is this factor above all else that contributes to the changing structure of meta-concepts and accordingly to the supervenient experiences of phenomenal consciousness.

The music addresses this issue by considering the relation between different components of the music, and of their authority over and responsibility to one another. The alternation of different instruments, the interconnections between form and melody, the varying application of voice, all play a role in informing and influencing the other, even while acting as an integrated dynamic, together seeking to establish an elevation of music consciousness. Always there is the breath of reconciliation enabling reproachment and new understandings.

#### 4. Antigone and the Bacchanalian Revel

The chapter on Spirit in Hegel's *Phenomenology* further examines the development of consciousness, and with it of social ethical norms, encompassing the responsibility shared by the collection of all minds and the idealised aggregation of all knowledge. As in other chapters, he used a narrative to describe a conceptual framework, in this case outlining the experiences that the collective spirit of society encounters on its journey towards enhanced understandings.

Hegel looked to Sophocles' tragedy 'Antigone' as a pivotal example of the contradictions faced in the ethical life in a community, in this case that of a Greek city-state from the classical era, and its resultant quest for deontic solutions. There is a conflict between, on the one hand, the obligations established by social authority, expressed in terms of Creon's law of the state and public life, and, on the other hand, the obligations established in terms of personal responsibility, expressed here as Antigone's sense of duty to her family, and also to the dead.

Antigone is required by law to refrain from burying her deceased brother, given his previous involvement with traitorous acts towards the king, but she feels impelled by her own sense of responsibility to do this anyway. The impossibility of coupling both of these requirements creates impossible contradictions and compels her to take her own life. Hegel argued that Sophocles' account of the story is intended as a contribution to the reconciliation of society, demonstrating how the ethical order of the Greek state, while presenting itself as coherent and harmonious, was based on a precarious separation of what he considered to be the patriarchal (public authority, human law) and matriarchal (private, transcendent law) spheres. Sophocles' play shows that, when the claims of both sides are unable to encompass the other, they reveal the limits of established ethical structures. The scenario results in tragedy, but also points towards a more insightful form of moral obligation. A self-consciousness gained from phenomenological recollection makes possible a new form of practical normativity. A new level of spirit (*Geist*) is available whereby norm-establishing recognition practices take the form of norm-acknowledging recollection practices. Brandom wrote that "When recognition takes the magnanimous form of recollection, it is forgiveness, the attitude that institutes normativity as fully self-conscious trust." (Brandom 2019, 19)

Hegel insisted that, given the dynamic nature of the collective mind that is spirit of consciousness, society cannot ever rest on its laurels. It must recognise it has come thus far by a dialectic process of reconstructing deontic norms, and must continue to pursue further renewals to move towards a

better world, those more in accord with the ideal notion of an absolute truth. Hegel posited that the True is thus revealed in circumstances akin to a Bacchanalian revel, with not a single participant remaining sober. After each subject has collapsed and passed out, the revel is discernible as part of the progression towards an adjusted web of commitments.

The music addresses these matters of compromise and arbitration, these endeavours to assert human dignity and integrity, in terms of the coupling together of simple programmatic designs. Antigone is represented by flutes, with their beautiful yet melancholic melody, harmony and timbres. The Bacchanalian revel is represented by recorders playing joyfully over the chimes of a large bell. The depths of despair resulting from the grim paradox are represented metaphorically by the depths of undersea resonances, and also ironically by children singing and imitating those natural sounds. The piano, and the commentary (including an English translation of Sophocles' text), acts as an outside perspective, watching and responding, experimenting, but trying to find some concession and resolution despite its exterior role.

## 5. The Teleological Labyrinth

Hegel's Phenomenology emphasised the historical dimension of dynamic dialectics. It is the social process of recognition and recollection, and of experience progressively determining language and its conceptual content, testing it and adjusting it in the changing circumstances. It is a process that amounts to a conferral of meaning by use, gradually establishing the boundaries of knowledge in terms of a developing rationality, a gradual move to more explicit definitions.

Hegel argued that experience of error and contradiction should not be interpreted as a pathway to scepticism or futility, but rather a breakdown of the meta-conceptual categories enabling cognitive self-consciousness to achieve greater 'sense certainty' and 'perception', and thus to establish 'understanding', a non-psychological conception of the conceptual.

Hegel considered each property of every object as surrounded by contrary properties that define it by contrasting with it, and which offer a range of alternative possibilities. Just as the Sorites Paradox - characterising the indeterminacy involved in a collection of sand becoming a "heap" as part of a function of adding one grain at a time – can be overcome by a process equivalent to heuristics, so consciousness is able to achieve the same clarity with all vague idealised concepts.

Furthermore, there is teleological impetus in this movement of imminent critique, a purposiveness underlying the continual striving for new and improved outcomes. Repeatedly, consciousness experiences a mass of contradictions, the metaphysical constraints placed upon even intrinsic notions such as logical negation, but then there is the emergence of new understanding, even if there is no sure validation of how the new conceptualisations have been achieved, and the phenomenological spirit of collective mind comes closer to the goal of absolute knowledge. Brandom wrote that this is a place of responsibility and trust. This is the absolute, a place of uncompromised forgiveness, and of respect. The culmination of the dialectic process is a single, far-off, transcendent event, to which the whole of creation moves.

Indeed, given this impetus, Hegel argued it is reasonable to consider an end to the dynamic process of constructing knowledge where each object has been fully "spiritualized" by successive cycles of renewal. The mind will come to fully know the object and, accordingly, fully recognise the underlying truth of absolute idealism that the object is none other than itself.

However, Hegel said the development of new ideas as a part of achieving the fulfilment of this impetus is akin to a labyrinthine passage. There are situations where it has potential to instigate the pathological alienation of individuals, not least those struggling with the contradictions associated with mixing liberty and authoritarian norms. Indeed, if it is merely human subjects constructing the norms, rather than some infinite authority, then there are going to be questions as regards how ordinances can necessarily bind. Hegel argued the solution even to a paradox such as this is associated with the teleological impetus and the recognition that the dialectic process is not akin to a maze, like a 3D space where matters are haphazard and undirected. Rather it is akin to a labyrinth, and to the single dimension of time, where matters are always moving forwards towards a positive outcome.

The music is also not a random maze, despite its frequent changes of texture and design. It appears as a complex labyrinthine structure, yet always it is moving forward towards a final conclusion. In heading to this culminating point, it is the teleological focus of purpose and meaning created by the mind, and by the spirit of phenomenal consciousness, that guides it forward. Time itself makes it an unambiguous route to the centre, without any navigational challenge, akin to a pilgrimage ascending towards a final unveiling of the absolute.

## **References**

Brandom, Robert B. (2019). *A Spirit of Trust; a Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*. Belknap Press.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (2018). *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated: Michael Inwood. Oxford University Press.

# A Phenomenology of Variations

template score

Philip Armstrong (2025)

Allegretto ♩=120

Piano

*f* *p*

7

A

*mp*

18

B Piano

*mp*

25

*mf*

2

30

C

Musical score for measures 30-35. The system includes a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. Measure 30 starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The right hand plays a melodic line with triplets and slurs. The left hand has rests until measure 31, then enters with a bass line of triplets. Dynamics include *p* (piano) and *mp* (mezzo-piano). A box labeled 'C' is positioned above measure 31.

36

Musical score for measures 36-40. The system includes a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The right hand continues the melodic line with slurs. The left hand plays a steady bass line of triplets. Dynamics include *mf* (mezzo-forte).

41

Musical score for measures 41-49. The system includes a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The right hand features complex chords and slurs. The left hand continues with triplets. Dynamics include *p* (piano).

50

D

Musical score for measures 50-52. The system includes a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. Measure 50 starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The right hand plays a rapid melodic line with slurs and triplets. The left hand plays a bass line with triplets. Dynamics include *mf* (mezzo-forte). A box labeled 'D' is positioned above measure 50.

53

Musical score for measures 53-59. The system includes a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The right hand continues the rapid melodic line with slurs and triplets. The left hand plays a bass line with triplets.

56 E

*mf*

60

65 F

*p*

75 G

84 H

92 **I**

*mp*

96

*mf*

101 **J**

*mf*

107

112 **K**

116

Musical score for measures 116-119. The system consists of two staves. The upper staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lower staff has a bass clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music features complex rhythmic patterns with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes, often beamed together. There are several rests in both staves.

120

L

Piano

Musical score for measures 120-127. The system consists of two staves. The upper staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The lower staff has a bass clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The music is marked "Piano". There are two boxed "L" markings above the upper staff and one below the lower staff. The music features a mix of quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, with some rests.

128

Piano

Musical score for measures 128-135. The system consists of two staves. The upper staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The lower staff has a bass clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The music is marked "Piano". The music features a mix of quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, with some rests.

136

Piano

Musical score for measures 136-143. The system consists of two staves. The upper staff has a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb). The lower staff has a bass clef and a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb). The music is marked "Piano". The music features a mix of quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, with some rests.

M

Musical score for section M, measures 144-151. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of three staves: Treble, Middle, and Bass. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The piece begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The Treble staff features a melodic line with a long slur over measures 145-151. The Middle staff provides harmonic accompaniment with chords and some melodic fragments. The Bass staff has a steady bass line with a long slur over measures 145-151.

N

Musical score for section N, measures 152-159. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of three staves: Treble, Middle, and Bass. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The piece begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The Treble staff has a melodic line with a long slur over measures 152-154 and a triplet of eighth notes in measure 159. The Middle staff provides harmonic accompaniment. The Bass staff has a steady bass line with a long slur over measures 152-154.

Musical score for section N, measures 160-165. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of three staves: Treble, Middle, and Bass. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The piece begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The Treble staff has a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes in measure 163. The Middle staff provides harmonic accompaniment. The Bass staff has a steady bass line.

Musical score for section N, measures 166-171. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of three staves: Treble, Middle, and Bass. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The piece begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The Treble staff has a melodic line with a long slur over measures 166-171. The Middle staff provides harmonic accompaniment with triplets of eighth notes in measures 167, 168, 169, and 170. The Bass staff has a steady bass line with a long slur over measures 166-171.

173

O

179

P

183

P

188

P

193

*f*

198

Q

*f*

203

*f*

209

R

*p*

218

S

226

Musical score for system 1, measures 226-234. The system includes a vocal line (S) and a piano accompaniment. The piano part features chords and arpeggios. A piano (*p*) dynamic marking is present. The vocal line has a fermata over a note.

T

235

Musical score for system 2, measures 235-242. The system includes a vocal line (T) and a piano accompaniment. The piano part features chords and arpeggios. A piano (*p*) dynamic marking is present. The vocal line includes triplets and a fermata.

243

Musical score for system 3, measures 243-249. The system includes a piano accompaniment. The piano part features chords and arpeggios, with many triplets indicated by a '3' in a bracket.

U

250

Musical score for system 4, measures 250-256. The system includes a vocal line (U) and a piano accompaniment. The piano part features chords and arpeggios, with many triplets indicated by a '3' in a bracket. A forte (*f*) dynamic marking is present. The vocal line includes triplets and a fermata.

Musical score for measures 255-260. The score is written for piano in three staves: Treble, Bass, and a lower Bass staff. Measure 255 features a melodic line in the Treble staff with a slur and a triplet in the Bass staff. Measures 256-259 continue the melodic development with various slurs and triplets. Measure 260 ends with a final chord in the Bass staff.

**V** Napoleon Bonaparte on a horse!

Musical score for measures 260-263. Measure 260 begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The Treble staff has a melodic line with a triplet in measure 263. The Bass staff features a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes with a triplet in measure 263. Measure 261 has a whole rest in the Treble staff. Measure 262 has a whole rest in the Treble staff. Measure 263 ends with a final chord in the Bass staff.

Musical score for measures 264-267. Measure 264 features a melodic line in the Treble staff with a triplet. The Bass staff has a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes with a triplet in measure 264. Measure 265 has a whole rest in the Treble staff. Measure 266 has a whole rest in the Treble staff. Measure 267 ends with a final chord in the Bass staff.

Musical score for measures 268-271. Measure 268 features a melodic line in the Treble staff with a triplet. The Bass staff has a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes with a triplet in measure 268. Measure 269 has a whole rest in the Treble staff. Measure 270 has a whole rest in the Treble staff. Measure 271 ends with a final chord in the Bass staff.

272

Musical score for measures 272-275. The score is in treble and bass clefs. Measure 272 has a whole rest in the treble and a rhythmic pattern in the bass. Measures 273-274 continue the bass line with eighth notes. Measure 275 features a treble line with eighth notes and a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes.

276

Musical score for measures 276-280. Measure 276 has a treble line with a dotted quarter note and eighth notes, and a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes. Measures 277-280 continue with complex rhythmic patterns in both staves, including triplets and sixteenth notes.

281

Musical score for measures 281-287. Measure 281 has a treble line with a dotted quarter note and eighth notes, and a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes. A box containing the letter 'W' is positioned above measure 282. Measure 283 has a treble line with a dotted quarter note and eighth notes, and a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes. A dynamic marking 'p' is placed below measure 283. Measures 284-287 continue with a melodic line in the treble and a bass line with sustained notes.

288

Musical score for measures 288-293. Measure 288 has a treble line with a dotted quarter note and eighth notes, and a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes. Measures 289-293 continue with a melodic line in the treble and a bass line with sustained notes, ending with a double bar line.