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The *Fantasia for Solo Cello*: A Close Reading, with Reference to the Sketches and the Compositional Process

Graham Hair

Thomas Wilson composed his little *Fantasia* for solo cello in 1964 (completing it on July 30th, according to the manuscript). The following remarks offer a ‘close reading’ of ‘how the piece goes’, and in particular attempt to outline how a listener might interpret the structure of the piece, but I hope they will also illuminate some aspects of how I think the composer went about composing it, since he left some sketches as well as the final version, and we can follow the trail of evidence left by these sketches to ascertain a few things about the compositional process. Nevertheless, in my opinion, what the sketches reveal is best understood in the context of a knowledge of the final version, so I shall cast my references to them in the context of some remarks on that broader topic.

None of this is to deny the poetic, philosophical and even visionary qualities of Wilson’s work, about which other contributors to this volume have written so eloquently. But one of Britain’s greatest mid-twentieth century composition teachers, Matyas Seiber, used to assert that creating a musical work was above all like cobbling a pair of shoes, a practical matter of craft and skill, and in this contribution, I shall try to demonstrate these qualities in Thomas Wilson. The choice of the *Fantasia* was dictated by two factors: reducing the task to manageable proportions, and the existence of a few sketches, which permit a metaphorical glance over the shoulder of the composer at work.

Overall Design

Although the title ‘Fantasia’ might lead one to expect an improvisatory type of piece, it is in fact designed according to a standard ‘ABA’ format (36 + 41 + 25 bars). But as with most such designs, especially perhaps in the twentieth-century, the return to the ‘A’ section is by no means literal and the ‘B’ section material is not totally independent of the material heard in the ‘A’ section. Some ‘spontaneous’ musical decision-making about the concatenation and combination of musical materials was clearly involved, at least with regard to the small and medium scale.

Variety of Material

The shop-worn old compositional saw about ‘unity within variety’ (or was it ‘variety within unity’?) is probably not one to which Wilson would have objected *per se*. Most of his pieces manifest a varied collection of ideas, subjected to a rather rigorous process of integration. However, for the old dictum to have any meaning at all left in its old bones, we need to know not *that* there is ‘disparate’ material, but the precise basis of its disparateness, including how to tell what *is not* unified as well as what *is*. Moreover, we need to know not *that* varied ideas are integrated, but *how, when, why, at what level* (and so on) they are integrated. So let’s start with the ‘varied collection’ notion. At one or two strategic points in this *Fantasia* there are musical statements which are, in some sense, more or less unique: the opening few bars, for example, where we hear a kind of ‘head-motif’ (to borrow terminology from a much earlier period of music history): with a ceremonial, fanfare-like character, which then (except for the immediately following phrase) drops out until it is heard again at the opening of the repeat of the ‘A’ section (*Tempo Primo*, bar 78), and once or twice more in the body of this ‘repetition of A’

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section.

Mesto, poco rubato (♩ = c MM48)



Example 1: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, bars 1-2

Centuries of music history tell us that this is a kind of ‘fanfare’. Clearly, it also embodies an element of the ‘Scotch snap’, and I am indebted to Musica Scotica’s general editor, Dr Kenneth Elliott, for the suggestion that it could be heard as recalling the proud and dignified character of a specific Scottish dance-genre: the slow Strathspey. It is heard only in the ‘A’ section of the *Fantasia* (and its repeat at bars 78ff), but stands out of its context there too, contrasting as it does with most of the rest of the ‘A’ section material. It is clearly intended as ‘beginning’ material, even though in the repeat of the ‘A’ section (bars 78ff) it recurs fragmentarily in the body of the section (bar 97) as well as in the opening phrase; nevertheless, this repeated fragment is marked ‘da lontano’ that is, clearly intended as an ‘echo’, reminding the listener of its ‘beginning’ function.

There is another rhythmic figure in the *Fantasia* with a similarly ‘unique’ character. This is (no surprise!) another ‘head-motif’: the figure which occurs at the beginning of the ‘B’ section.

Poco più mosso (♩ = c 96)



Example 2: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, bars 37-38

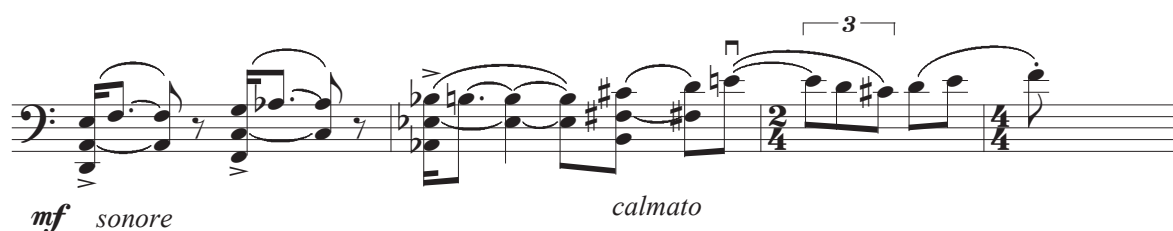
Just as Example 1 is an archetypal ‘fanfare’ figure, Example 2 is an archetypal *scherzo appassionato* one. Its rhythm is that of a ‘French overture’, of course, though in this register and instrumentation we are unlikely to hear it in that frame of reference. Like the ‘slow Strathspey’ figure, the *scherzo appassionato* figure appears at the beginning of a section and then fades away and is (by and large) heard no more. It is clear that these two figures are responsible to a large degree for the fact that we can actually hear this piece as an ‘ABA’ design at all, for ‘A’ and ‘B’ sections share quite a few other materials. But the ‘head-motifs’ proclaim the different characters of the ‘A’ and ‘B’ sections definitively, though both sections have two sides to their character: on the one hand, the declamatory, exclamatory and rhetorical character of the ‘slow Strathspey’ head-motif in section ‘A’ is immediately complemented by a ruminative, rhapsodic phrase (see Example 11, page 88), while on the other hand, my description *scherzo appassionato* for the ‘section B’ head-motif indicates references to two distinct types of scherzo; Example 2 suggests more the wild urgency of the Chopin scherzos in B \flat minor and C \sharp minor, whereas the complementary figure which follows (see Example 13, page 89) suggests more the Beethovenian model: skittish and playful, but with a leaning toward the rumbustious.

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Nevertheless, despite these different characters, we can notice straight away that the ‘fanfare’ figure is built on five notes (F \sharp , G, A, B \flat and C) of which the *scherzo appassionato* figure picks up four (G, A, B \flat and C). There’s unity in the variety, after all, perhaps? Variety of rhythm, unity of pitch? But, clearly, there’s variety of pitch as well. In the case of the *scherzo appassionato* figure we might think: the first four notes of the G minor scale. But the ‘fanfare’ figure says otherwise: five notes from the *octatonic* scale. In the event, the interplay between minor and octatonic play an integrative role in other ways as the piece unfolds.

Octatonic Scale, Minor Triad

Consider, for example, the phrase which follows on immediately from the opening ‘fanfare’.



Example 3: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, bars 4–7

Setting aside the last recurrences (for now) of the ‘slow Strathspey’ rhythm, what we’re hearing is an octatonic scale with the notes grouped principally in pairs: E–F, G–A \flat , B \flat –B, C \sharp –D, E–F below which we hear a succession of minor triads. D–F–A (with the E as an appoggiatura), F–A \flat –C (with the G as an appoggiatura), A \flat –C \flat –E \flat (with the B \flat as an appoggiatura) and finally B–D–F \sharp (with the C \sharp as an appoggiatura).

It is thus in this ‘octatonic’ context that this second phrase of the ‘A’ section introduces the minor triad as an integrative motif, and the minor triad turns out to be a fragment of material which recurs many times during the course of the piece, in a variety of different contexts.

Motivic Unity

The idea of the minor triad *per se* (that is, its pitchclass content) as a ‘motif’ may seem a little hard to swallow. After all, in (say) Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*, the C minor triad recurs hundreds of times, yet we don’t normally identify it as a motif there. By ‘motif’ we usually mean something distinctive enough to jump out at us from the general context, and usually – in practice – something to do with rhythm and shape, not just pitchclass content, although – of course – the idea of a specifically ‘harmonic’ motif has been with us at least since Wagner’s ‘Tristan’ chord, and Schoenberg’s ‘emancipation of the dissonance’ is intimately bound up with the ‘motivicity’ of harmony.

Actually, what makes the minor triad ‘motivic’ here is indeed something to do with shape, viz the voicing (spacing), for it is specifically a minor triad with the root at the bottom, the fifth above it and then the tenth, in that order (that is, a triad in ‘open’ position). It is also a motif which recurs in more than one rhythmic/textural guise, that is, after its ‘declamatory’ incarnation in the ‘A’ section it is often articulated by a particular pattern of arpeggiation, using repeated notes, especially in the ‘B’ section of the work.

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Example 4: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, some of the various versions of the minor triad

Octatonic Scale, Diminished Seventh

One of the features to which the conjunction of minor triad and octatonic scale in Example 3 draws attention is the diminished seventh, that is, we hear the octatonic scale in the top line, while the bass of the four minor triads moves through the succession D, F A \flat and B. However, the diminished seventh and the octatonic scale too are surely, *per se*, too ‘generic’ in nature to constitute ‘motifs’ in any traditional sense, and unlike the situation with the minor triad, the treatment of the factors of rhythm and shape don’t impose sufficiently clear ‘gestural’ characteristics to override these ‘generic’ qualities. The use of the diminished seventh and octatonic scale in the *Fantasia* is, by and large, directed to other ends, I believe: large-scale structural ones. Again, however, we need to show not *that* the diminished seventh and octatonic scale appear, but *how, when, why, at what level etc.*

Diminished Seventh

The fact that (to within enharmonic notation) just three different diminished sevenths can be extracted from the tempered chromatic scale has cast a considerable influence on the structure of a great deal of music before that of Thomas Wilson, of course. Think of Liszt, Wagner, Stravinsky, Bartok and scores of other composers. Here, in the context of Thomas Wilson’s *Fantasia*, it is enlightening to consider the way in which the roots of our open-position minor triads are chosen from one or other of these diminished seventh collections.

In what follows, I shall refer to the three diminished-seventh collections as numbers I (D, F, A \flat and B), II (C, E \flat , F \sharp and A) and III (E, G, B \flat and C \sharp), and, by extension, allocate the 12 open-position minor triads to one or other of these three collections.

In the opening passage (bars 1–11) of the ‘A’ section we hear open-position minor triads of D, F, A \flat and B (‘Collection I’, see Example 2), and in its terminal passage (bars 27–36) open-position minor triads of E, G, B \flat and C \sharp (‘Collection III’, see Example 5):

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Example 5: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, bars 33–37

This might lead us to expect that the ‘A’ section’s middle passage will be devoted to assertions of Collection II by means of open-position minor triads on C, E \flat , F \sharp and A. Well: sort of ! After a couple of transitional bars (12-13) comes a passage which, indeed, asserts a recurring open-position triad on C, but it is C *major*, not C minor (bars 14–18), and there are no subsidiary open-position triads (major or minor) on E \flat , F \sharp or A appended to this striking feature. Exchange of minor for major is almost as old a device as the history of tonality, of course, but Wilson has found a new slant on – a new context for – even one of the hoariest old items in the repertoire of compositional devices.

Example 6: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, bars 14–15

Even here, Wilson looks for an integrative device which will draw the exceptional event into the context of the discourse of the whole. In this case, we need to recall the octatonic context of the preceding Collection I passage (for example, in bars 4–7): D E F G A \flat B \flat B \sharp C \sharp D, and Wilson relates his C major triad to it by placing it too in an octatonic context. But transposing the D scale onto C would generate C D E \flat F G \flat A \flat A \sharp B C, which contains no E natural at all. Wilson therefore chooses for the context surrounding his C major triad the alternative form of the octatonic scale on C, which does contain the E natural, viz C D \flat E \flat E \sharp F \sharp G A B \flat C.

The treatment of these ‘diminished-seventh-related’ open-position triads changes as the *Fantasia* progresses. We could summarise the situation in section ‘A’ by saying that Collections I and III are represented by all four open-position triads, all minor, but Collection II by a single open-position triad, which is – surprisingly – *major*.

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The contrasting 'B' section (bars 37-77) is almost entirely devoted to Collections II and III, which alternate like this: III (bar 37) > II (44) > III (47) > II (51) > III (60 then 71). There is but one reference, *en passant*, to Collection I in this 'B' section, at bar 49, and it is by no means highlighted dramatically by repetition and gestural isolation, as was the exceptional C major triad in the 'A' section. So we can say that, practically speaking, the 'A' section makes play with all three diminished-seventh collections, but the 'B' section with only two of them (II and III). If we follow this line of musical logic through, we might deduce that the return of the 'A' section at bar 78 will refer exclusively to Collection I (D, F, A \flat and B), and this is in fact what happens.

So to summarise this 'structural narrative', we could think of the 'A' section of the *Fantasia* as laying out a diverse bunch of materials and sections 'B' and 'repetition of A' as exploring different facets thereof. Alternatively, perhaps we might think of the piece as beginning (Section 'A') with a statement of all three Collections, reducing this to two in Section 'B' and reducing this further to just one in the 'repetition of A' section. The latter might provide a better clue as to how the sense of tonality is 'enacted' in Thomas Wilson's *Fantasia*, for the piece is surely tonal in some sense or other. In this latter reading, tonality is expressed by a process of gradually focussing more narrowly on 'D' as the piece proceeds. To be sure, the piece begins and ends in D (or better: on or around D). But the sense of the centrality of D is really only achieved by the end of the piece. The piece *as a whole* expresses the centricity of D, not really particular parts of it.

Another implication here is that Collection I can be thought of as 'on' D (to which F, A \flat and B are subsidiary). Likewise Collections II and III are subsidiary to the one on D. Collections II and III may have their own internal hierarchy of course. For example, my remarks on the prominent C major triad at bars 14ff embody my assumption that C is the principal tone in Collection II, and I have accorded E the primacy in Collection III. There may be internal reasons to accord this primacy to E; more on that question later. But the sketches lend weight to such a reading too, for they show that, after the first statement of the E minor version of the minor-triad motif (bar 27), the composer's first intention at the repetition of this motif (bar 31) was to move up to G minor, but in fact, he changed his mind and decided on a repetition of E minor. Above the relevant point in the sketches he wrote 'Bis ??' (two question marks) and – presumably later – 'E min ??' (two question marks and underlined twice), and underneath that again, 'Yes' (underlined three times!).

Pulling all this together, it might not be going too far to see C and E as 'neighbour tones' to the D: 'embellishing' tones, whose prominence fades as the piece proceeds.

Octatonic Scale, Chromatic Scale, Aggregate

Naturally, although we have focussed on these three diminished-seventh collections, this is not the only material which appears in *Fantasia*. Nevertheless, the other material which appears in the three sections of the work can often be regarded as an outgrowth of them.

So let us now return to a re-consideration of bar 4, which opened up the discussion of the role of both minor triads and the diminished seventh in *Fantasia* – through consideration of the octatonic scale. As noted, we have the diminished seventh: D, F A \flat and B (now christened 'Collection I') in the bass, with the same four tones plus four more (E, G, B \flat and C \sharp = Collection III) summing to the octatonic scale

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(E, F, G, A \flat , B \flat , B \natural , C \sharp and D) in the top line. Obviously, the fifth of each chord (A > C > E \flat > F \sharp) adds Collection II into this mix, making an aggregate of all twelve tones overall.

This is typically the way in which ‘twelvetone-ness’ finds a place in Wilson’s scores: by the occasional strategic concatenation of other materials which, in themselves, are *not* twelve-tone. Other concatenations of similar materials may sum differently. For example the four ‘diminished-seventh-related’ minor triads, without the top-line ‘appoggiaturas’ of bars 4–7 produce ‘eight-tone’ (octatonic) aggregates. The following outlining (bars 84–85) of the ‘Collection I’ rising bass with the minor triads attached produces a representation of the octatonic scale on D, though not the same octatonic scale as at bars 4–7:

Bars 4–7 (see Example 3): D E F G A \flat B \flat B \natural C \sharp

Bars 84–85 (see Example 7): D E \flat F G \flat A \flat A \natural B C

Example 7: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, bars 84–86

A more extended passage of this kind, outlining Collection II in the bass, and producing an eight-tone octatonic aggregate, occurs at bars 51–56 (F \sharp G \sharp A \natural B C D E \flat E F (F \sharp)). Note that this time the collection neither starts nor ends on C and that the C-triad which appears is the ‘normative’ minor, not the ‘exceptional’ major.

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[poco piu mosso (♩ = MM c96)]

Example 8: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, bars 51–56

Finally, consider the passage at bars 36–37, which outlines Collection III in the bass, but adds the passing notes C (between B \flat and C \sharp), D \sharp (between C \sharp and E) and F \sharp (between E and G), thus producing an eleven-tone aggregate; only the omission of the passing-note A between G and B \flat inhibits the completion of the twelve-tone aggregate.

Of course, aggregates, whether eight-tone or twelve-tone, or of some other character, are sometimes created by means other than the concatenation of minor triads. Consider, for instance, the way in which the aforementioned and afore-celebrated statements of the C major triad are complemented and extended.

Example 9: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, bars 19–24

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The attachment of a perfect 5th below six notes of the D octatonic scale (in bars 19–20):

D	E	F	G	G#	Bb
G	A	Bb	C	C#	Eb

..... produces the ten-note collection D Eb E F G G# A Bb C C#; the attachment of a perfect 5th above each note of the diminished seventh containing D (in bars 20–21):

F#	A	C	Eb
B	D	F	Ab

..... produces an eight-note (octatonic) collection D Eb F F# Ab A Bb C.

This little ‘development section’ which follows the assertions of the C major triad could also be considered to stem from the ‘open-position triad’ motif, first by prolonging its bottom interval, the perfect fifth, in a passage based exclusively on that interval, and then, a few bars later, prolonging its top interval, the minor sixth, in a passage based exclusively on it. Thus, the third subsection (bars 27–36) of the ‘A’ section is extensively pre-occupied with these minor sixths, just as its second subsection (14–26) had extensively featured the perfect fifths (see Example 10).

Example 10: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, bars 27–34

Contrasting Material

We have come quite a long way down the track towards an integrated overview of the structure of the *Fantasia* with just these few scraps of material:

- (i) the three transpositions of the diminished seventh and of the octatonic scale
- (ii) a particular voicing of the minor triad and a major variant
- (iii) two contrasting gestures: the ‘slow Strathspey’ figure and the *scherzo* figure.

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This is not in any way to suggest that this tightly-unified character excludes the use of contrasting material. Elsewhere in this volume, the essay by William Sweeney outlines the role which dialogues between two contrasting types of material, and contrasting states more generally, play in Wilson's *Symphony No. 3*. John Maxwell Geddes's survey also refers to this characteristic of other Wilson works. We see this here in the *Fantasia* as well. Both the principal thematic ideas are developed by being set against contrasting material. Thus the 'slow Strathspey' figure in the 'A' section, with its jerky rhythm and double and triple stopping (bars 4–6), is treated as an antecedent and extended by the addition of a contrasting consequent (bars 6–10) which is a rhapsodic melodic phrase, characterised by flowing triplet/duplet juxtapositions.

Example 11: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, bars 4–10

This whole antecedent-consequent pair (bars 4–10) is then repeated in varied form (bars 10–13).

Likewise, the *scherzo* figure at the beginning of the 'B' section is extended by contrasting material, though not in quite the same way. The *scherzo* figure is repeated – at various transpositions – between bar 37 and 44, and between each statement Wilson places a contrasting 'arpeggiated minor chord' motif ('interruptions'). We have previously discussed these chords in the context of other appearances of *similar* material (various incarnations of the 'minor triad' motif); at this point it is useful to focus on them in the context of *contrasting* material, in their role of 'interruption'. That Wilson thought of them in this way we know from his sketches, for he wrote out a passage developing the *scherzo* figure without them, and then added them in for the definitive version of the score (see Examples 12 and 13):

Example 12: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, sketches (*scherzo* figure)

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Poco piu mosso (♩ = MM c96)

The first system of music (bars 37-41) consists of two staves. The first staff begins with a *ff* dynamic, followed by *appass*, *p*, *pp*, *ff*, *p*, and *ff*. The second staff continues with *sff* and *ff*. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and articulation marks like accents and slurs.

Example 13: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, bars 37–41

As I noted earlier, the *scherzo* figure, like the ‘A’ section’s ‘slow Strathspey’ figure, is treated as just a ‘head-motif’, that is, it subsequently dissolves away. When it does so, leaving the arpeggiated open-position minor triad to dominate the scene, Wilson brings in a different kind of contrasting figure, characterised by narrow intervals (mainly tones and semitones), in contradistinction to the open-position minor triad, which is characterised by wide ones (fifths, sixths and tenths).

The first system (bars 49-51) shows a cello line with dynamics *f*, *sf*, and *p*. The second system continues with *più f sub*, *cresc*, and *ff*. Above the second system, the markings *non stacc* and *poco accel* are present. The notation includes a change in time signature from 5/4 to 4/4 and features a chromatic scale.

Example 14: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, bars 49–51

Chromatic Scale and Twelve-tone Series

This use of narrow intervals tends indirectly to suggest the chromatic scale, which we have seen lurking in the background several times in our trawl through the other materials (octatonic, diminished, triadic). Indeed, Wilson wrote out a twelve-tone series in the sketches for this piece:

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Example 15: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, sketches (twelve-tone series)

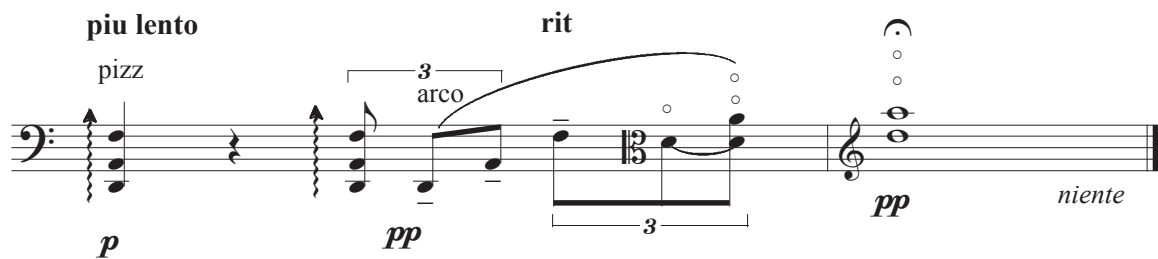
John Maxwell Geddes has described something called ‘foldback’ scales in Wilson (see page 57), and perhaps this ‘series’ could be considered as one of them. At any rate, it doesn’t seem to appear in literal form as a series *per se* in the *Fantasia*, but certainly the idea of combining octatonic or other non-chromatic scalar segments to form chromatic (or near-chromatic) aggregates seems to be one of the specific ways of implementing this generic concept.

It appears spasmodically in the earlier sections of *Fantasia*, but, as one might expect, reaches its apotheosis in the final climactic frenzy (89–93):



Example 16: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, bars 89–93

Thereafter, a rapid roll-call of fragmentary references to earlier material dissolves the piece into a final ‘subsiding’ passage (bars 94–102), which culminates in a return to (or better: a narrowing of focus upon) the ‘tonic’, in the form of the ubiquitous minor open-position triad, on D as at the beginning of the piece in bar 4, but now standing alone and slowly-arpeggiated, in the last two bars:



Example 17: *Fantasia for Solo Cello*, bars 101–102