The "Presto Mormoroso" from Ginastera's Cello Sonata in Light of his Other Palindromes: *Don Rodrigo* and "Interludio Fantástico"

by Marcelo Sanches

Ginastera's "Presto mormoroso" from his Sonata for Cello and Piano (1976) is a musical palindrome that invites comparison with two other palindromes he wrote nearly two decades earlier: his opera Don Rodrigo (1961) and the "Interludio fantástico" from his Cantata para América Mágica (1960). Don Rodrigo is built as a kind of narrative palindrome, in which the first scene relates to the last, the second to the penultimate, and so forth. In contrast, the palindromes in the Cantata and the cello sonata are purely musical; they reverse the order of notes from the middle of the composition onwards. I propose that Don Rodrigo's narrative palindrome can be superimposed onto the "Presto," dividing this movement into "acts" and "scenes," and thus shedding light on its rigorous construction. I further propose that as the "Interludio fantástico" alludes to Mayan symbolism, the "Presto" has a magical, ritual significance related to the Mayan cycle of death and rebirth. In an analogy to the ritualistic symbolism of the Mesoamerican ball game, I propose that the axis of the palindrome in the "Presto" corresponds to the human sacrifice in the game. Both comparisons point to an essential aspect of palindromes, the antithetical oppositions that exist between the two palindromic halves. It can be said that the forward statement and its retrograde stand in opposition to each other, while the axis balances the dualistic nature of a palindrome.

Opposing ideas are vital to the narrative structure of Ginastera's opera *Don Rodrigo*. In his own words:

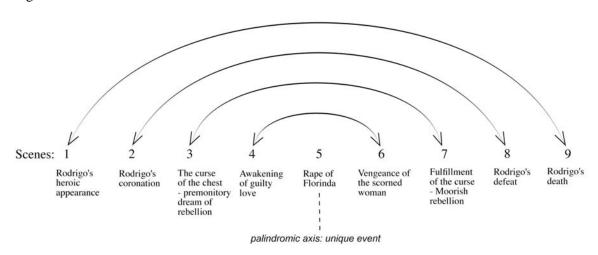
In "Don Rodrigo" we confuse the real and the unreal, the factual and the illusory, the habitual and the inconceivable, the common and the extraordinary, the human and the divine.¹

¹ Alberto Ginastera, "A Proposito de 'Don Rodrigo," *Buenos Aires Musical* 19, no. 310 (1964): 1. "En 'Don Rodrigo' se confunden lo real y lo irreal, lo verdadero y lo imaginario, lo habitual y lo insólito, lo común y lo extraordinario, lo humano y lo divino."

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The opera has three acts with three scenes each, in a total of nine scenes. The dualistic palindromic narrative can be summarized by the following scenic scheme:

Figure 1



The rape of Florinda, which according to legend, changed the course of Spanish history, stands alone at the center of this structure; it is the axis of the palindrome.² The presence of this unique event serves as a gravitational center for the narrative.

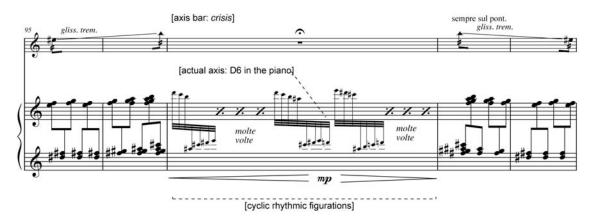
Pola Urtubey superimposes another plan onto the narrative scheme of *Don Rodrigo*.³ In her analysis, the acts have an arch-form narrative of exposition (Act I), crisis (Act II) and dénouement (Act III). Moreover, they each possess this arch-form within themselves, for in each act the first scene is an exposition, the second a crisis, and the third a dénouement or unknotting of the narrative. Crisis is the focus of this dramatic structure, standing at the center of every act, as well as at the palindromic axis – the crisis scene in the crisis act. The rape of Florinda defines the opera and balances the dualities of love and hate, life and death; it hangs in the balance the future of Spain.

² It is possible to devise a palindrome without an axis, one with an even number of elements.

³ Pola Suares Urtubey, "Alberto Ginastera's 'Don Rodrigo,'" *Tempo*, New Ser., 74 (1965): 12.

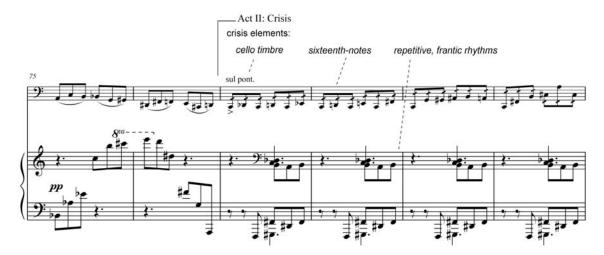
The palindromic scenic structure of *Don Rodrigo* and Urtubey's arch-form plan for this opera can be superimposed onto the "Presto mormoroso" from Ginastera's cello sonata. The first half of the "Presto" displays the following overall progressions: increase of activity, ascent in register, growth of cyclic rhythmic figurations, and increasing regularity of motion. In other words, the forward statement manifests a progression from sparseness to density and from discrete events to continuous motion. The axis of the palindrome is the culmination of these processes, it seems to depict an inevitable and catastrophic event; thus, it fits the role of crisis in Urtubey's arch-form narrative.

Example 1: palindromic axis



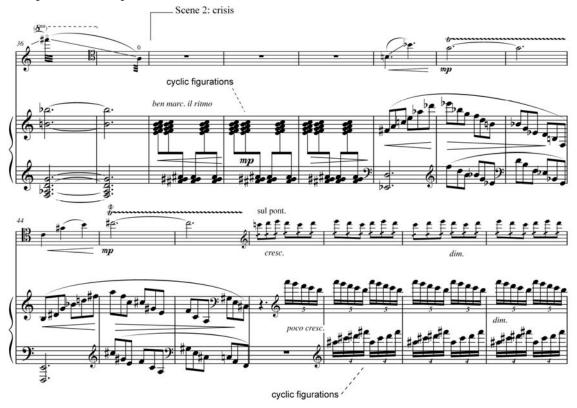
Crisis in the "Presto mormoroso" can be correlated to the appearance of ever shorter values, to the "sul ponticello" timbre in the cello, to cyclic rhythmic figurations and to the repetitive, frantic rhythms in the piano (see Ex. 2 below). If the crisis act, or act II, is delineated by the continuous sixteenths in the cello from m. 77 until m. 117, then act I comprises mm. 1-76 and act III comprises mm. 118-194.

Example 2: beginning of act II in the "Presto mormoroso"



The three acts of the "Presto" can themselves divided into nine scenes following the same crisis-finding method. Agitated, cyclic figurations signal the boundaries of the central scene (the crisis scene) in act I (mm. 38-52) and act III (mm. 142-56). The following example illustrates cyclic activity in scene 2.

Example 3: act I (exposition act), scene 2 (crisis scene)



The axis bar (see Ex. 1 above), which also contains cyclic figurations, corresponds to the rape of Florinda (scene 5). It is possible to deduce all nine scenes from these three central crisis scenes.

In table 1 below I correlate each act and scene in *Don Rodrigo* to specific sections in the "Presto."

Sparse Irregular Discrete mm. 157-194 Scene 9 Dén. Fall DÉNOUEMENT mm. 118-194 mm. 142-156 ACT III Scene 8 Cyclic Crisis mm. 118-117 Scene 7 Expo. Fall Scene 6 mm. 98-117 Dén. Fall Dense – Regular Continuous mm. 77-117 Scene 5 Cyclic ACT II CRISIS Crisis m. 97 Scene 4 Expo. mm. 77-96 Rise Scene 3 mm. 53-76 Dén. Rise EXPOSITION Scene 2 Cyclic Crisis mm. 38-52 Sparse – Irregular Discrete Scene 1 Expo. mm. 1-37 Rise Narrative Types mormoroso" Don Rodrigo "Presto Patterns

Table 1. Superimposition of Don Rodrigo's structure onto the "Presto mormoroso"

I move now from the purely formal considerations raised by *Don Rodrigo* to the philosophical considerations raised by the "Interludio fantástico." The fourth movement of Ginastera's *Cantata para América Mágica*, the "Interludio" is an instrumental interlude in a six-movement work for soprano and percussion ensemble based on pre-Columbian texts. The "Presto mormoroso" and the "Interludio fantástico" are linked not just because they are the only musical palindromes Ginastera ever wrote, but also because they share an extra-musical inspiration in pre-Columbian civilizations. Ginastera admits to going back to this theme at the end of his career:

But at the moment I am evolving... This change is taking the form of a kind of reversion, a going back to the primitive America of the Mayas, the Aztecs and the Incas. This influence in my music I feel as not folkloric, but – how to say it? – as a kind of metaphysical inspiration. In a way, what I have done is a reconstitution of the transcendental aspect of the ancient pre-Columbian world.⁴

Malena Kuss describes the "Presto mormoroso" as portraying "the magic of a lost aboriginal America, conjured up in sound as elusive as the mystery of the continent's buried past." In the following discussion of the "Interludio" and the "Presto" I pursue ever more detailed interpretations for this elusive aboriginal past buried in Ginastera's palindromes.

The forward statement of the "Interludio fantástico" advances toward the axis in three steps, three big waves of motion in which instruments cluster with increasing density, peaking in ever more complex and faster rhythmic patterns, until they achieve enough momentum to arrive at the axis. In the Maya creation tale, the god Hurakan attempted to create the world three times, succeeding only in the last attempt. A connection can be traced between the three waves of motion in the first part of the "Interludio fantástico" and Hurakan's three attempts at creation. The following passage describes this god:

Hurakan is the ancient Mayan god of wind and storm... He is a creator god who according to legend dwelt in the mists hanging over the primeval flood, in the form of the

⁴ Lillian Tan, "An Interview with Alberto Ginastera," *The American Music Teacher*, 33, no. 3 (1984): 7.

⁵ Malena Kuss, notes to Alberto Ginastera, *Homage to Alberto Ginastera* (Washington: Organization of American States, 1981), long play record, OAS-015. [no page numbers]

wind, ceaselessly repeating the word "earth" until the solid world rose from the seas. When the gods became angry with the first human beings, Hurukan [sic] unleashed the deluge which destroyed them. From his name the word 'hurricane' is derived.⁶

The "Interludio fantástico" begins with incredibly soft brushed suspended cymbals, resembling the above "mists hanging over the primeval flood." For forty bars, only this "windy" percussion sound is used. In m. 41, the second piano's low register takes on the "ceaselessly repeating" pattern, and the more earthy sounds of xylophone, marimba, and the first piano resemble a "solid world" rising from the seas. Each wave of motion toward the axis peaks with greater intensity, perhaps conveying the gods' increasing anger toward the first humans. The third and final attempt at creation, starting in m. 94, arrives at increasingly homophonic textures that finally lead into the frenetic tremolo at the axis bar, which could symbolize Hurakan's flood. If so, the retrograde of the interlude would be the deluge, the destruction of creation.

There are also three waves of motion in the "Presto mormoroso": mm. 1-22 have a very similar profile to mm. 1-56 in the "Interludio fantástico," representing Hurakan's first attempt at creation; mm. 23-37 correspond to mm. 57-93 in the interlude, representing the second attempt at creation; and m. 38 (m. 94 in the interlude) starts the third attempt, which eventually leads into the axis of the movement. The depressed piano chord in the beginning of the "Presto mormoroso" resembles the hanging mists or the primeval flood in the "Interludio fantástico," and the rising figure in mm. 13-6 could illustrate the rising of the solid world. The increasing activity in the forward statement conveys the escalating anger of the gods and the frenetic cyclic rhythms at the axis captures the destructive power of Hurakan's flood. Just as in the "Interludio," the retrograde of the "Presto," with its overall falling outline, exemplifies the consequence of this deluge, the downfall of the world erected in the first half of the palindrome.

We can pursue the Hurakan connection to the Mayas further, correlating it to the cyclic temporality of palindromes, and to the apocalyptic message of death in their creation tale. As

⁶ "Hurakan," Encyclopedia Mythica Online (Accessed 11 March 2008),

http://www.pantheon.org/articles/h/hurakan.html

Gerald Whitrow notes, "of all people known to us, the Mayas were the most obsessed with the idea of time." Just as our experience of time is intrinsic to our lifespan, making time precious to us because of the knowledge of our impending death, the Mayas had an acute awareness of the time-span of their culture; they predicted their ultimate demise with precision, incorporating this grim knowledge into their rituals and daily lives. The Mayas also viewed time as cyclical, as nearly all civilizations did "prior to our own of the last two or three hundred years." Whitrow concludes that "our conception of time is as exceptional as our rejection of magic." In sum, cyclic time, death, and magic are pivotal to the Mayas and to my interpretation of Ginastera's "Presto mormoroso" in light of their culture.

In a palindrome, cyclic time can be perceived by imagining the palindrome's ends as tied together like the ouroboros serpent. In the "Presto," Ginastera ties the ends of his composition by using a non-retrogradable formula: two eighth-note D2s separated by five eighth-note rests. These repeated Ds sound the same whether in the beginning or at the end of the work. Cyclic time also implies a preordained future, and the retrograde of a palindrome is preordained. That time may be regarded as cyclic is not surprising, since time is measured by the revolution and rotation of astral bodies, which are cyclic events. The return voyage of a planet around the sun is much like the retrograde of a palindrome: it is a mirror shape of the original voyage; as such it is also the opposite of it, since terrestrial spring and summer become fall and winter in the return trip. Thus a seasonal analogy can be applied to Ginastera's "Presto mormoroso." In the beginning of the

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⁷ Gerald Whitrow, "From Cyclic Time to Linear Time," *The Listener* 83 (1970): 39.

⁸ Ibid., 39.

⁹ Ginastera also ties the ends with the center of the piece, since the axis of the palindrome is also a D (the D6 in the piano in m.97, see Ex. 1).

¹⁰ In Berg's opera *Wozzeck* the palindromic structures are associated with predestiny. [Misha Donat, "Mathematical Mysticism," *The Listener* 83 (1970): 458 and Douglas Jarman, *Alban Berg: 'Wozzeck'* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 65.] The idea of predestiny is at the core of Nietzsche's revival of cyclic time in his theory of the 'Eternal Return.' Morgan clarifies this relationship between Berg's obsession with cyclical time and Nietzsche's "notion of 'eternal recurrence.'" [Robert P. Morgan, "The Eternal Return: Retrograde and Circular Form in Berg," in *Alban Berg: Historical and Analytical Perspectives*, ed. David Gable and Robert P. Morgan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 147.]

movement, the sparse notes could signify the return of spring, the buds blossoming just as single notes grow into more complex motifs, always rising from the ground up. After the rain, the falling sixteenth-note flurry in mm. 19-20, these seeds sprout more vividly, as depicted by the jumping "gettato" figures in the cello, mm. 23-8. A full-blown spring is signaled by mm. 38-40 and arrives at m. 41 with rising glissandi and flowering trills. The heat increases as the forward part progresses and summer arrives. After the intense heat of summer (the axis, m. 97), the movement slows and cools down as we reach winter, and the original buds freeze. The extra bar at the end (m. 194) with its frigid depressed chord is devoid of any sign of life.

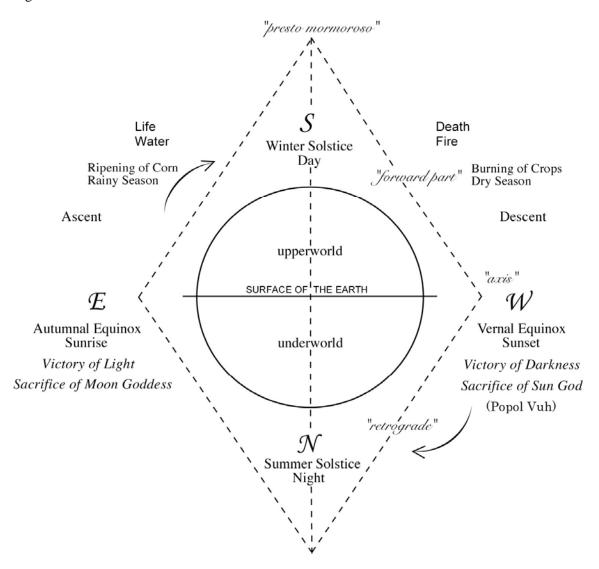
The seasonal analogy can be supplemented with an analogy to the sun's journey through the sky in a single day. The beginning of the piece would be the sunrise, the middle of the piece midday, where the axis note itself -- the non-repeated piano's D6 in m. 97, could represent the sun at its zenith, and the retrograde could represent the sun's path of descent through the sky until it sets. This interpretation, however, describes only half of the cycle. It does not cover the nocturnal half, and thus it cannot properly be correlated with the annual cycle. Thus, in the brief cultural study that follows I will be emphasizing the annual cycle, while considering the palindromic structure of the "Presto mormoso" in light of a sophisticated model of Mayan religious symbolism that provokes a wealth of further associations.

In an illuminating article on the ritual symbolism of the Mesoamerican ball game,
Marvin Cohodas demonstrates how Mesoamerican cultures superimposed the yearly and daily
cycles just as I have attempted to do. In a graphic depiction of his hypothetical model of
Mesoamerican religious structure, Cohodas combines the four cardinal directions with the
equinoxes and solstices, with the Mesoamerican upperworld and underworld, with daytime,
nighttime and the surface of the earth. ¹¹ He explains the significance each of these cardinal points
and the temporal and spatial connotations they carried for Mesoamerican cultures. Since the

¹¹ Marvin Cohodas, "The Symbolism and Ritual Function of the Middle Classic Ball Game in Mesoamerica," *American Indian Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1975): 121.

following explanations are quite detailed, please refer to the part of figure 2 below that is Cohodas's model; namely, the circular pattern (the triangular pattern is my superimposition of Ginastera's palindrome onto his model).

Figure 2



In Cohodas's model, the east-west axis represents the surface of the earth; south represents the upperworld and north the underworld. As the sun rises in the east, daytime begins (south hemisphere), and as it sets in the west, nighttime begins (north hemisphere). This daily cycle is expanded into an annual cycle, where the east-west axis is correlated to the autumnal and

vernal equinoxes, and the south-north axis to the winter and summer solstices. East is correlated to the autumnal equinox, the beginning of the rains, the agricultural cycle and the ripening of the first ears of corn. The journey of the sun through the day (upperworld) brings it past the zenith, or south, which is correlated to the winter solstice. West is correlated to the vernal equinox, the sunset, dry season and burning of the fields. The sun's journey through night or the underworld brings it past the nadir, or north, which is correlated to the summer solstice.

During its classic apogee, when the Mesoamerican ball game was still ritualistic and symbolic of these temporal cycles, the game was played only during the equinoxes. In the autumnal equinox the forces of light triumph against the forces of darkness, and a player representing the goddess moon was sacrificed (was literally beheaded), symbolizing the death of the moon and rebirth of the sun (sunrise). In the vernal equinox the forces of darkness triumph, and a player representing the sun god was sacrificed, symbolizing the death of the sun (sunset). The Mesoamerican cultures that played this game believed that through sympathetic magic, the sacrifice of a player would cause the sun to rise or set, and by extension into the annual model, cause the beginning of the agricultural cycle or the fertility cycle.

The game played in the vernal equinox, when the forces of darkness triumph, is the subject of the *Popol Vuh*, "a sixteenth century Quiche Maya poem which constitutes the most elaborate ball game myth known." This poem is vitally connected to Ginastera, since during the writing of his Cello Sonata (1979) he was midway through a much larger project for orchestra, *Popol Vuh*, *The Creation of the Maya World* (1975-83), which remained unfinished when he died in 1983. In the *Popol Vuh*, Ginastera was working with creationist concepts that its movement titles illustrate: The Everlasting Night; The Birth of the Earth; Nature Wakes; The Cry of Creation; The Great Rain; The Magic Ceremony of Indian Corn; The Sun, the Moon, the Stars;

 $^{\rm 12}$ Cohodas, "Symbolism and Ritual Function," 109.

and The Dawn of Mankind. In light of his view that one is a creator all one's life, ¹³ it is not unreasonable to propose that these ideas permeated the conception of many of his works in this last compositional period.

In Cohodas's article we learn that there are two main orientations for the Mesoamerican ball courts, the east-west and the south-north. Cohodas explains how this simple difference in orientation corresponds to a significant difference in symbolism. Through observation of designs carved in stone markers and panels of figural reliefs found on benches in these courts, and also by comparison with other art of these civilizations, Cohodas arrives at two types of narratives: one which encompasses only half of the solar year (a two-part, unidirectional narrative); and another, which encompasses the whole year (a three-part, bidirectional cycle studied below). Two-part, unidirectional narratives are found in the art of courts with an east-west orientation, such as the Tajin courts. Three-part, bidirectional narratives are found in the art of courts with a south-north orientation, such as the Maya courts. In my interpretation of the palindrome through an analogy with the diurnal cycle, I proposed that the beginning of the movement be connected to the east and the end of the movement to the west. This flawed diurnal interpretation coincides with the unidirectional type of narrative symbolized by Tajin courts, which have an east-west orientation. Now I propose an interpretation of the palindrome that coincides with the cyclic narrative symbolized by the south-north orientation of the Maya courts.

Cohodas explains how the Maya ball court had a "three-part bidirectional cycle emphasizing the descent and ascent of the sun." ¹⁴ By three parts, he meant that this cycle could start at the south, the first point in the journey, cross the east-west axis which represents the surface of the earth, the second and most significant point in the journey, and end at the opposite cardinal point, the third point in the journey. By bidirectional, he meant that the journey could

¹³ "But as I tell my students, if one is a creator, one is a creator all one's life. Creation is like sainthood. One can't be a saint from eight to ten, and from four to six. One is a saint of [*sic*] all one's life." [Tan, *Interview*, 7.]

¹⁴ Cohodas, "Symbolism and Ritual Function," 120.

start at either the south or the north end, representing a cycle with two halves, a descending half (S-W-N) and an ascending one (N-E-S). The midpoint of the journey is the most significant because it represents the equinoxes, when the ball games were played and the sacrifice would happen, causing the sun to set or rise (to cross the surface of the earth).

Interpreting the "Presto mormoroso" in light of Cohodas's hypothesis for the symbolism of Maya courts, I propose that the beginning, middle and end of the movement correspond to the S-W-N half-cycle, and that, in retrograde, the end, middle and beginning of the movement correspond to the returning half-cycle, N-E-S. By reversing the movement we end up with the same movement – it is indeed a palindrome. An analogy with the S-W-N half-cycle is believable because the sun's descent into the underworld (sunset) at W (vernal equinox) is depicted by the falling outline of the retrograde, while an analogy with the N-E-S is equally convincing since this falling outline could represent the arrival of winter. The ascending outline of the forward part demands a more conceptual understanding of the narrative. In the S-W-N half-cycle, the ascending part could represent an intensification of mood given the impending sacrifice of the sun god, and in the N-E-S half-cycle, it could represent this same intensification, but in connection to the arrival of the sun. In both cases, the main event is the sacrifice, the crossing of the surface of the earth. This sacrifice happens in the axis bar, and the axis itself, the D6 in the piano, could represent the death of the sun god or moon goddess. It could be said that the D6 in the piano passes through the cyclic or circular figurations in the piano at the axis bar. Thus, this D6 could represent the ball passing through the ring in the Mesoamerican ball game. This event carried great significance in the game; it supplanted the need for a sacrifice, since it signified the sun crossing the surface of the earth (the plane of the ring). By representing the ball, the axis D would also represent the sun itself. Taking this analogy further, it could be said that the cello D that starts and ends the "Presto" signifies the sun at its zenith or nadir.

Just as with the narrative structure of *Don Rodrigo*, we find antithetical oppositions in Cohodas's model for Mesoamerican religious symbolism: death and rebirth, dry season and rainy

season, fire and water, descent and ascent, sunset and sunrise, among others. The palindrome in "Presto mormoroso" mirrors its halves, creating a structural opposition that seems to seep into a semantic opposition. The patterns of ascent, growth, expansion and complexification in the first half of the palindrome could signify life, the rainy season (water) and the agricultural cycle, while the patterns of descent, decay, contraction and simplification in the second half could signify death and the dry season, when crops were burned (fire). This fusion of form and expression represents the achievement of a lifetime of search for synthesis; it reveals the ingenious craftsmanship of a mature composer of the highest caliber.

An alluring characteristic of Ginastera's palindrome, apart from the antithetical oppositions and their possible dramatic connotations, is the turning point of the whole structure: namely, the axis, which balances these dualities and, in a sense, decides the future of the movement. The axis is the last event that is new; it is unique not only because it does not repeat, but also because it contains the knowledge of death, perhaps the most profound knowledge about time. The frenetic repetitions in the axis bar of the "Presto mormoroso" appear almost cognizant of their uniqueness, their purpose and their demise:

But this uniqueness is the equivalent of death which lies in every step, at every moment. Now, the repetition of an event, its reproduction as faithfully as possible, corresponds to this struggle against disappearance, against nothingness. As if the entire universe fought desperately to hang on to existence, to being, by its own tireless renewal at every instant, at every death. 15

¹⁵ Iannis Xenakis, "Concerning Time," trans. by Roberta Brown Perspectives of New Music 27, no. 1 (1989): 91.

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