Rest in Music

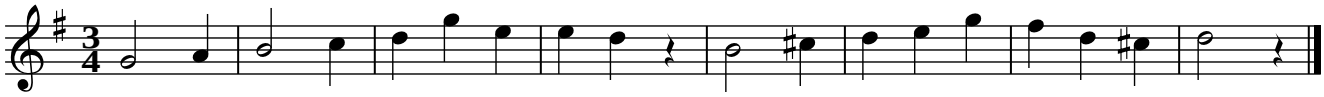
The rest in music has several functions:

- phrasing a musical sentence (also breath mark)
- breaking off a musical unit as expression of an ’Affekt’, of meaningful words like ’death’ or ’fear’ (cf. word painting)
- stressing the importance of an musical idea (like ’holding your breathe’ or in the saying ’Don’t go there, or else...!’)
- closing a musical part
- structuring form

Some examples will demonstrate these functions.

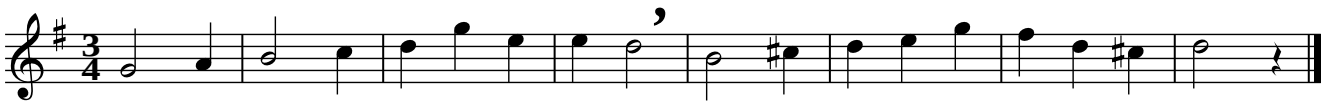
1. Rest in classical music

a. Rest and structure sentence



Example 1

Without rest, you would probably take a breathe after measure four:



Example 2

A more subtle application can be found in Schubert’s ’Der Doppelgänger’: each phrase starts with a pause.

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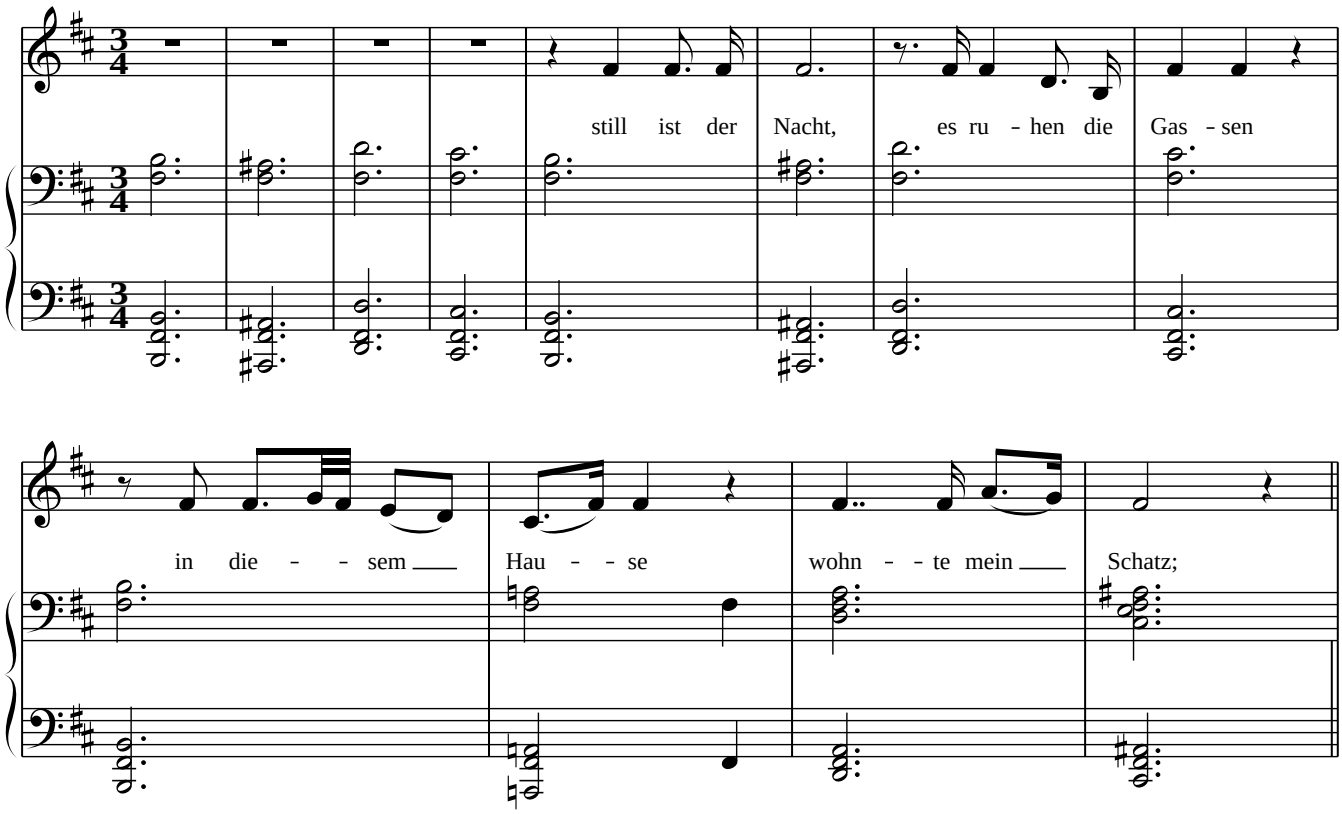

Example 3

The next example show word painting: on the word ’nichts’(= nothing) the musical flow is discontinued. In addition, its meaning is stressed by repetition and dynamic contrasts.

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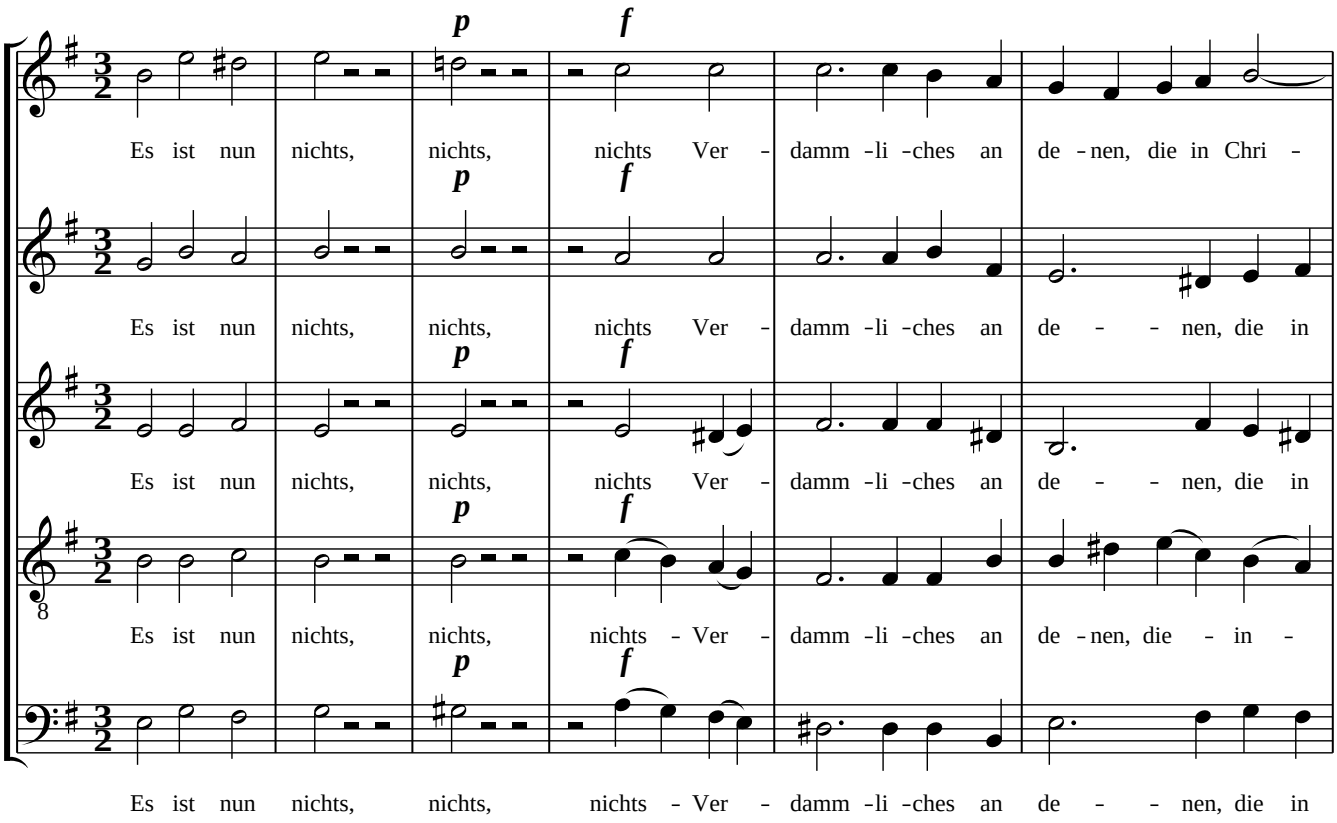
b. Rest and Affekt

Bach, Jesu meine Freude, second movement



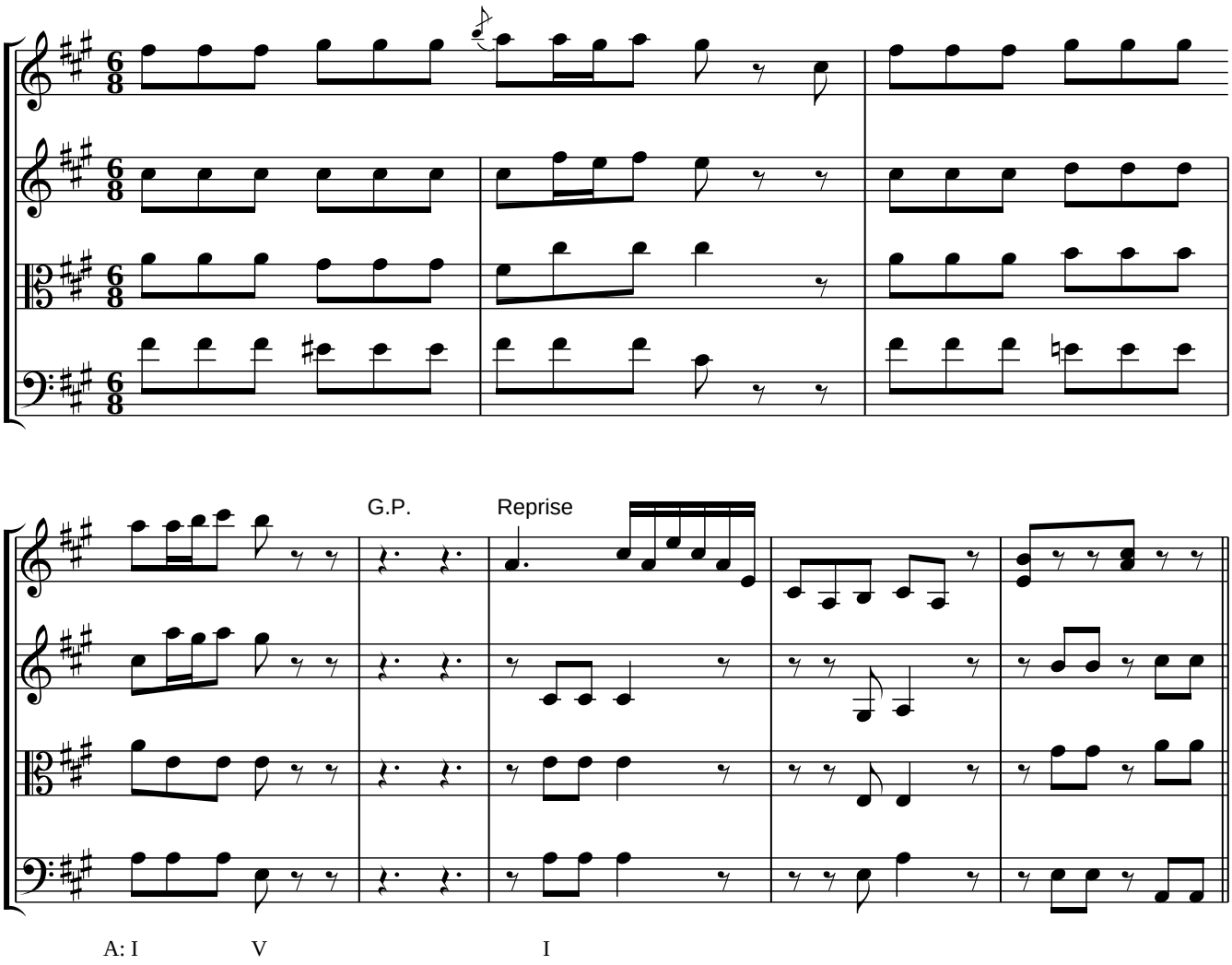
Example 3

In the seventeenth and eigtheenth century, the pause is used to indicate loss and death, in the antique oratory however the pause was placed just before the most effective argument, namely before the climax of the speech. Comparable with:

Don’t go there, or else...!

The general pause before the reprise in Haydn’s String quartet op. 20, no. 6 (movement 1) functions in this way:

c. Rest and ’holding your breath’



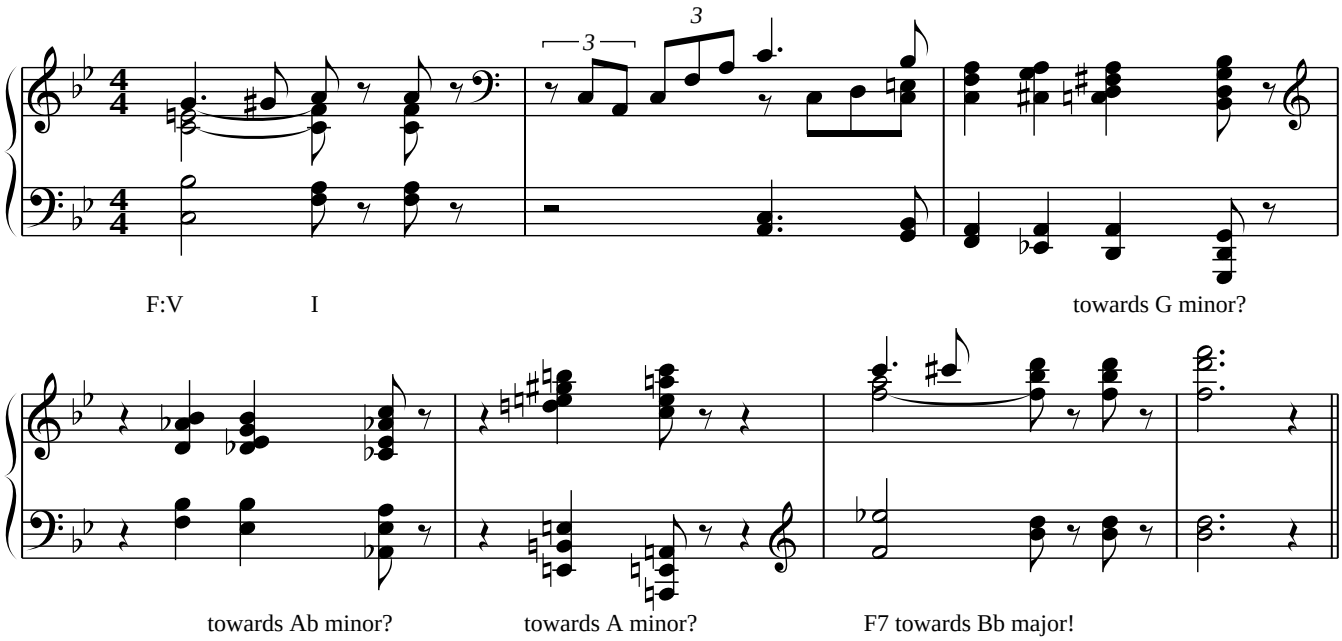
Example 4

Before the general pause, the music ends on the Dominant. The Dominant followed by the long pause, has the effect of ’holding your breath’, not knowing of what is going to happen.

Example 4 suggests that rest is an effective means in making modulations special as the next Schubert example demonstrates. The modulation from F major to Bb major could have been done easily by transforming the F major triad into F dominant seventh directly (as Mozart probably would do). Schubert followed this strategy but inserts cadence like fragments, separated by meaningful pauses.

d. Rest and modulation

Schubert, Piano sonata Bb major, 1. movement



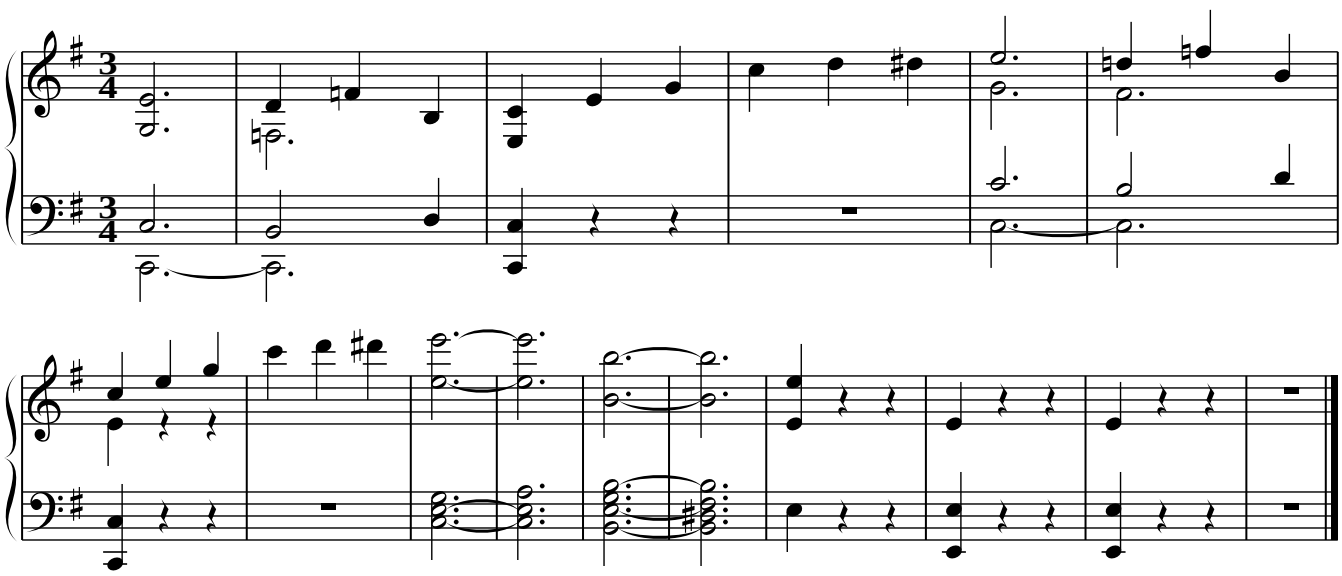
Example 5

Notice how powerful the driving force of a dominant seventh is!

Rest can play a role in closing a musical part. The next example demonstrates not only this feature, but in addition it shows that a pause can stabilize a hidden rhythmical/metrical organization: the last measure makes the 4+4+4+4 complete.

e. Rest and closing function

Beethoven, Piano sonata op. 14,16, second movement

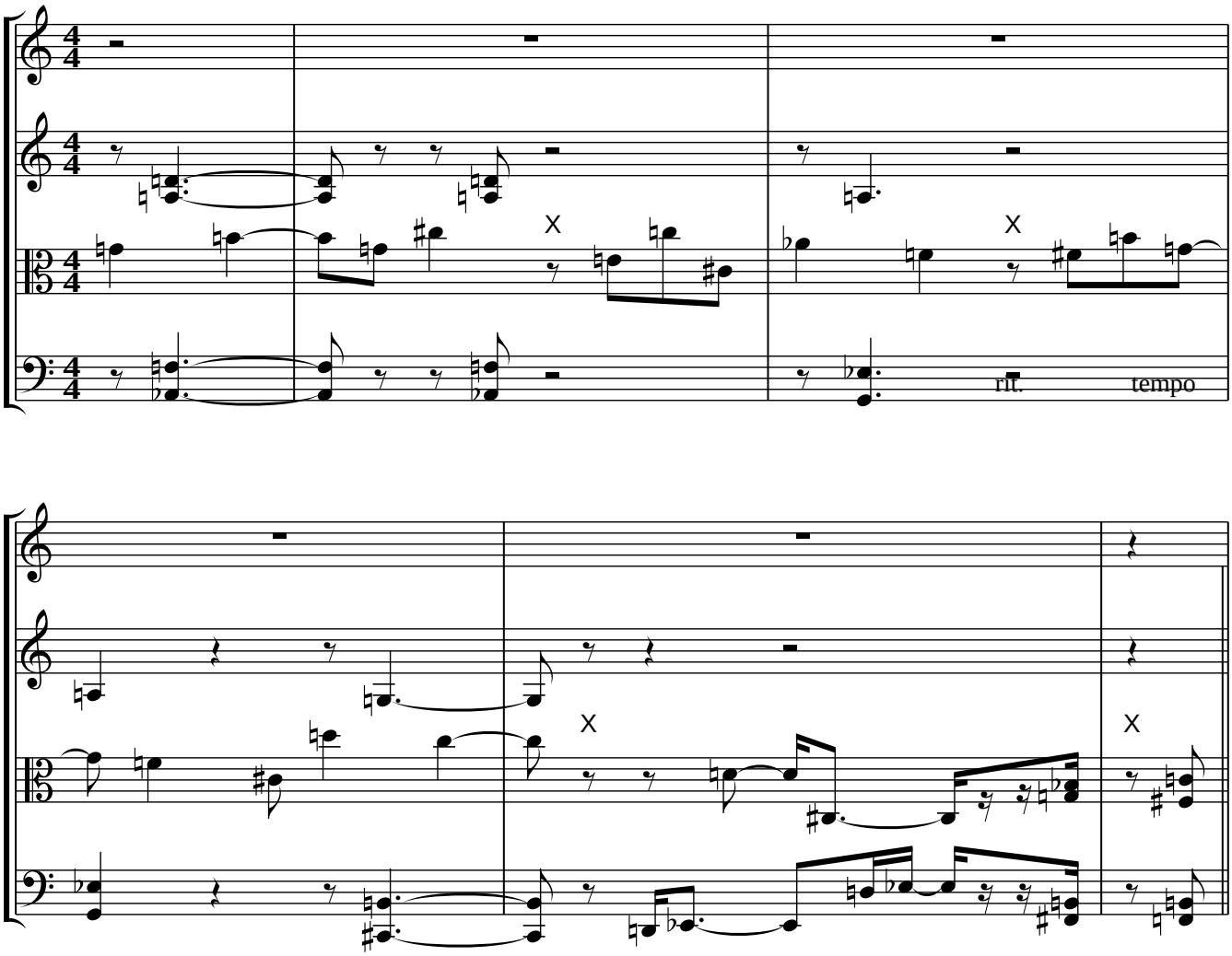


Example 6

A rest can also structure a form, together with other parameters as dynamics, tempo, performance changes etc. Webern's op. 5 provides interesting examples as the opening from movement 2:

f. Rest and form

Webern, string quartet op. 5, movement 2



The first section can be divided into four smaller parts, due to the general pauses (see X).

2. Rest in popular music

Of course, nice examples of effective pauses in popular music can be found, with comparable functions as mentioned above. A few to study.

- The Strokes, ’Hard To Explain’, after ’This place is a zoo/You re right, it s true’
- Queens Of The Stone Age, ’Millionaire’ towards the end
- Monkey Wrench, Foo Fighters, among others, before ’What do you do when all your enemies are friends?’
- Roxette, ’The Look’, towards the end, before some final "’Na na na’s"
- Rush - YYZ, at the end of the intro
- Dream Evil, The Book Of Heavy Metal, before ’In life, I have no religion’
- Cake, Short Skirt Long Jacket, before ’I want a girl who gets up early’
- Whitney Houston, I Will Always Love You, after ’But above all this, I wish you...’
- James Vincent McMorrow, ’If I had a Boat’, intro
- The Beach Boys, ’The Little Girl I Once Knew’, after ’Look out babe’