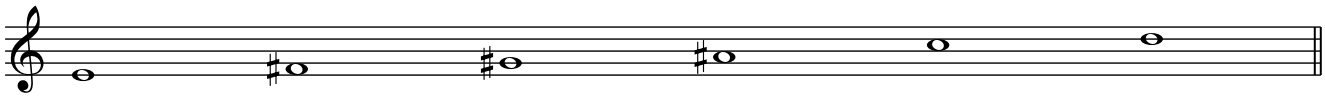
How to create structure using the whole scale, a study on "Nacht" by Alban Berg

Alban Berg’s piece "Nacht" from Sieben frühe Lieder (c. 1905-1908) is a great study in creating direction using an a-directional scale such as the hexatonic scale that Berg employs in this work. We will consider a small phrase, similar patterns can be found throughout the composition.

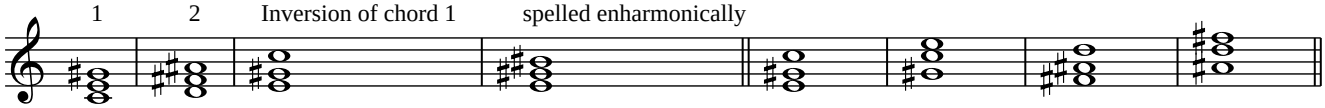
1) On the whole tone scale

The whole tone scale is constructed using whole steps only, this results in the octave being devided in six parts. It’s an example of a hexatonic scale. A scale like this is considered symmetrical because moving in either direction along the scale, the intervals are the same. This means that no tones are of special importance and there generally is no sense of direction like having a target note such as the C in CMajor, that would be a suitable end for a piece of music. To convince yourself, test the above statements by playing the following scale on the piano. Play it up and down, play it in thirds and bigger, or even random, intervals.



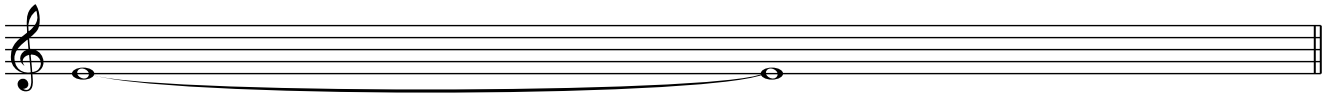
One further point of interest is that chords based on this scale tend to give you the augmented sound. Consider a few possible combinations based on thirds and their inversions.

Here are some more inversions based on the same scale. See if you can give an enharmonic spelling to produce an augmented chord on the lowest note.

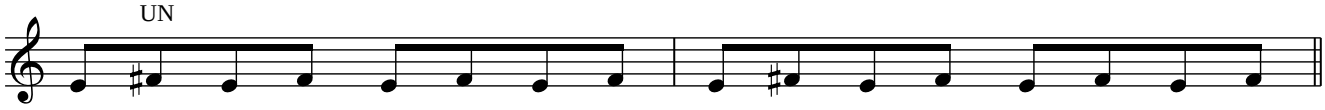


2) Recomposing the accompaniment in the opening of Nacht

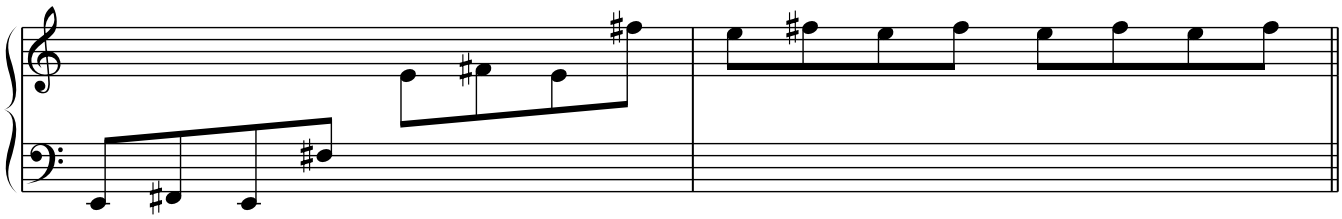
The first phrase in Berg’s piece "Nacht" can be seen as a prolongation of tone E, both in harmonic and melodic terms.



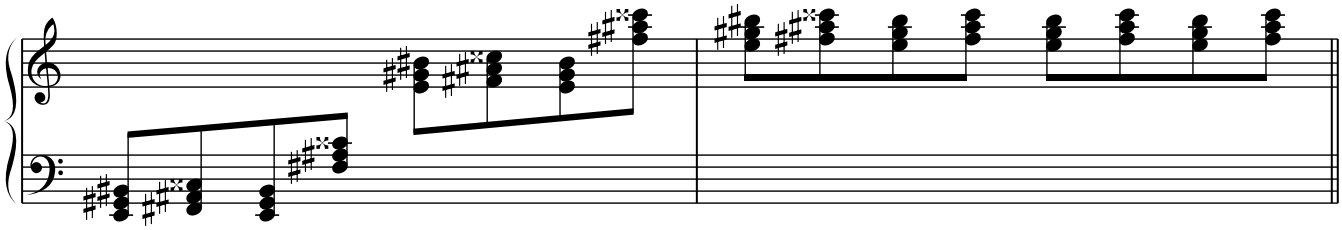
This prolongation can be conceptualized as a continuous, alternating movement between main tone E and a contrasting tone, i.e. here the upper neighbourtone (UN) F# .



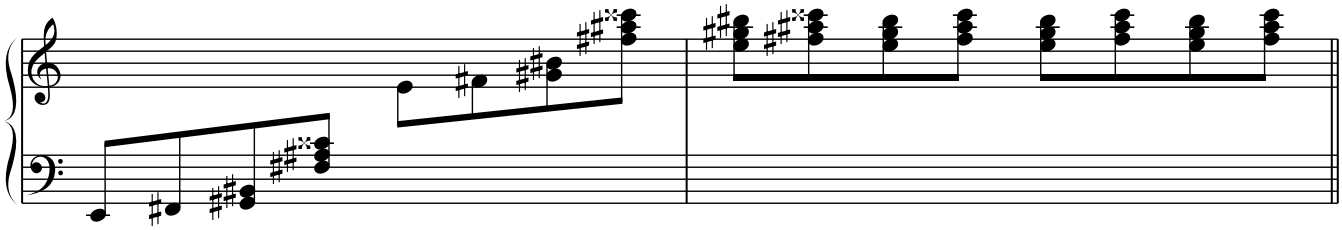
The effect can be enhanced by simple octave changes.



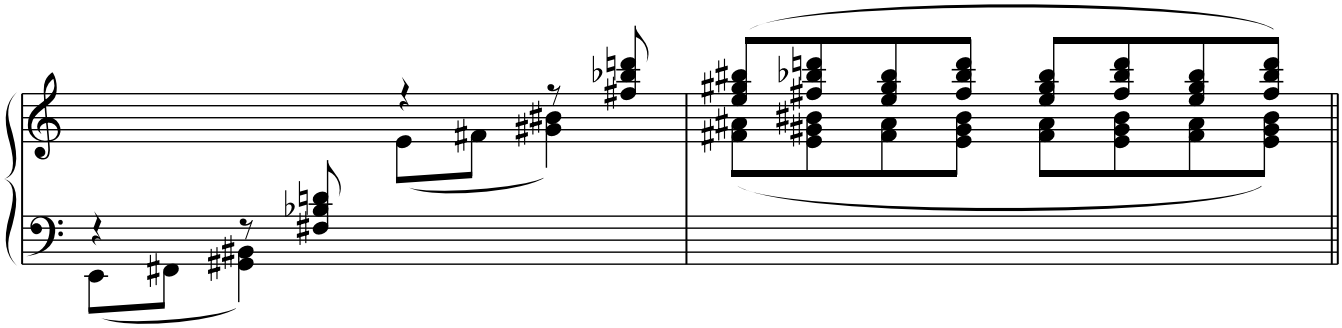
Using the augmented triads discussed earlier, we can create harmonies on each of these notes.



Here is the selection that Berg made.

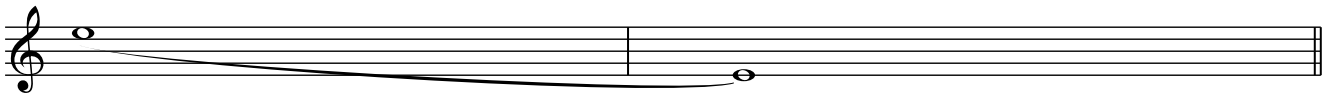


And here is the final version by Berg. Can you explain the differences with our last version?

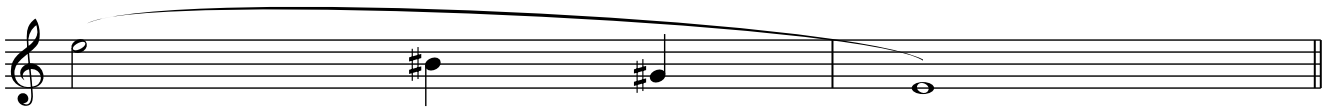


3) Recomposing the opening melody of Nacht.

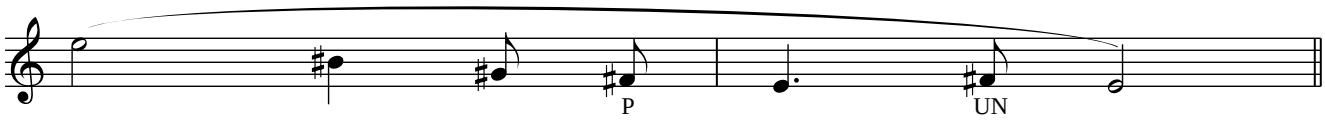
The melody is, just like the harmony, a prolongation of tone E. It ends one octave lower than is starts off on.



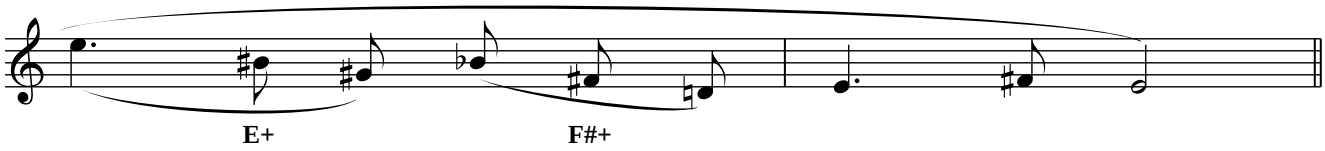
For the basic structure we employ the augmented triad again.



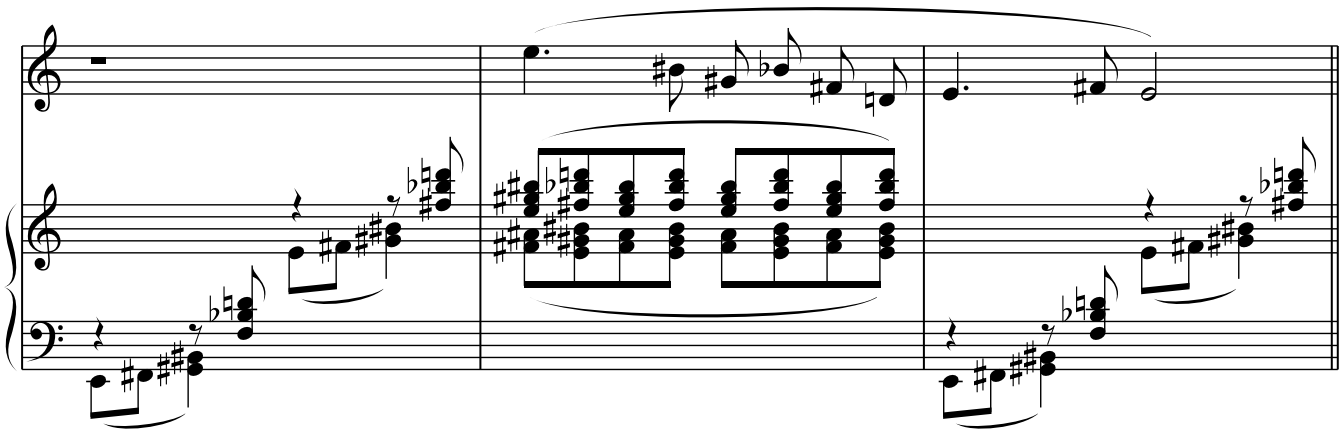
Berg embellishes the last E with the upper neighbourtone (UN) F# once more. He also introduces a passing tone (P) F# before arriving at E.



The use of the neighbourtone F# allows us yet again to consider the augmented triad F#-Bb-D (enharmonic: F#-#A-Cx). But since this is a line for voice it has to have a melodic manifestation rather than a harmonic one.



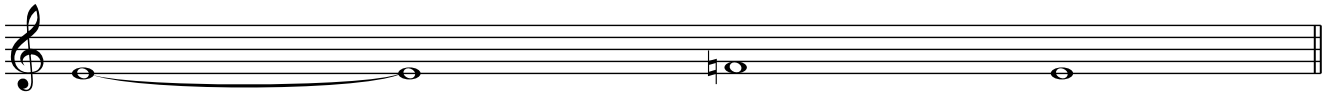
4) Combining the melody with the accompaniment



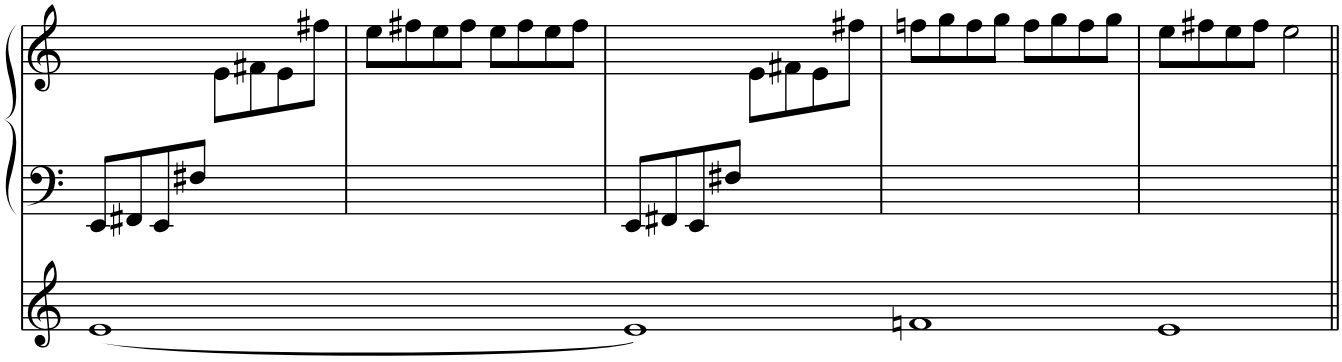
Notice how the end of the melody coincides with a new start in the piano phrasing.

5) Finishing the phrase

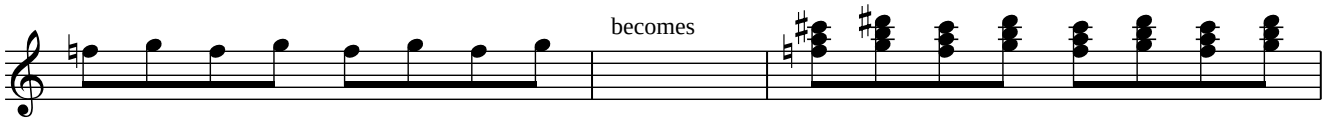
To develop this phrase and bring it to a satisfying conclusion, we will go back to the most basic structure and prolong tone E with an F. The tone F creates a tension that can be resolved by moving back to E.



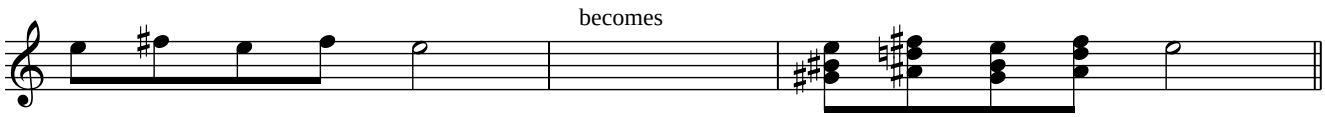
When we express this idea in the same way as before, using an alternating pattern with the upper neighbourtone, we get the following.



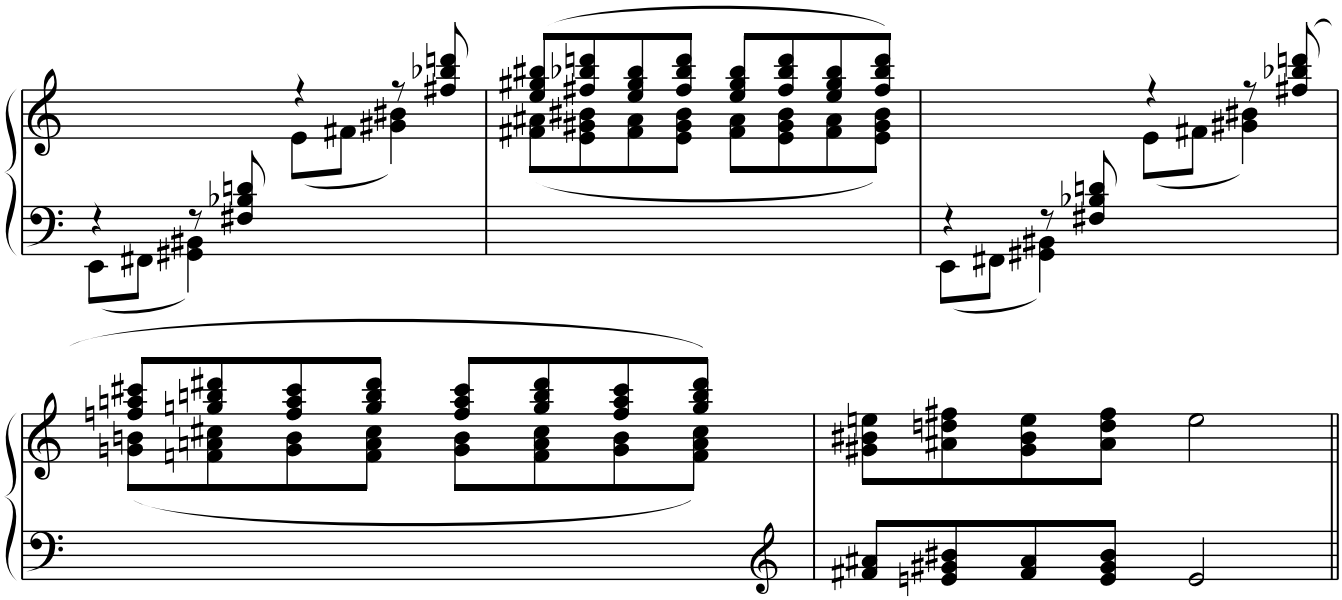
Bar 3 in the example above can then be given the same harmonic treatment as before, using the augmented triads.



The last bar can be seen as a repetition of bar 2, except that the alternating movement stops after 4 eight notes. Berg used inversions of the augmented to chord instead of the root positions this time.

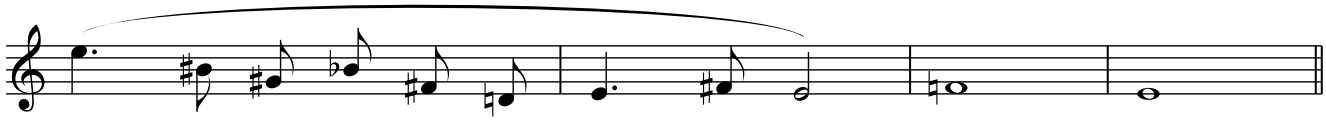


Putting the accompaniment together once again, we arrive at the following.

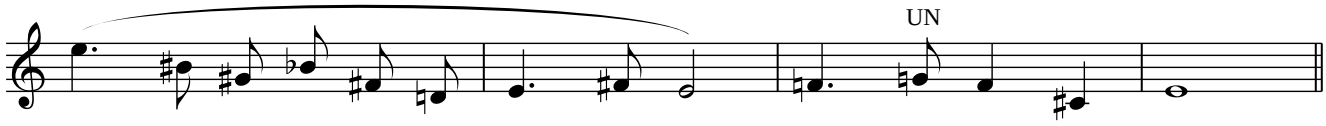


6) Finishing the melody

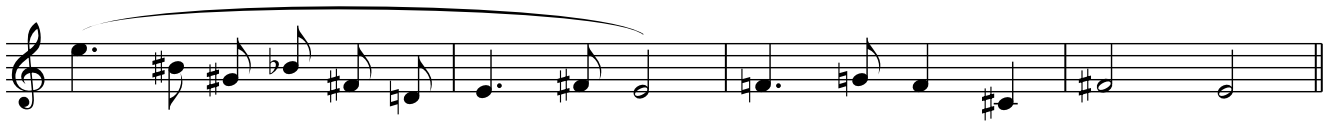
We can start by adding our new structural tones to the existing melody created in paragraph 3. This assures structural unity with the accompaniment.



When choosing melody notes we turn to the augmented triads we have become familiar with yet again. Bar 4 of the melody is embellished with an upper neighbourtone of F and passes one tone of the F augmented triad before reaching the last bar.

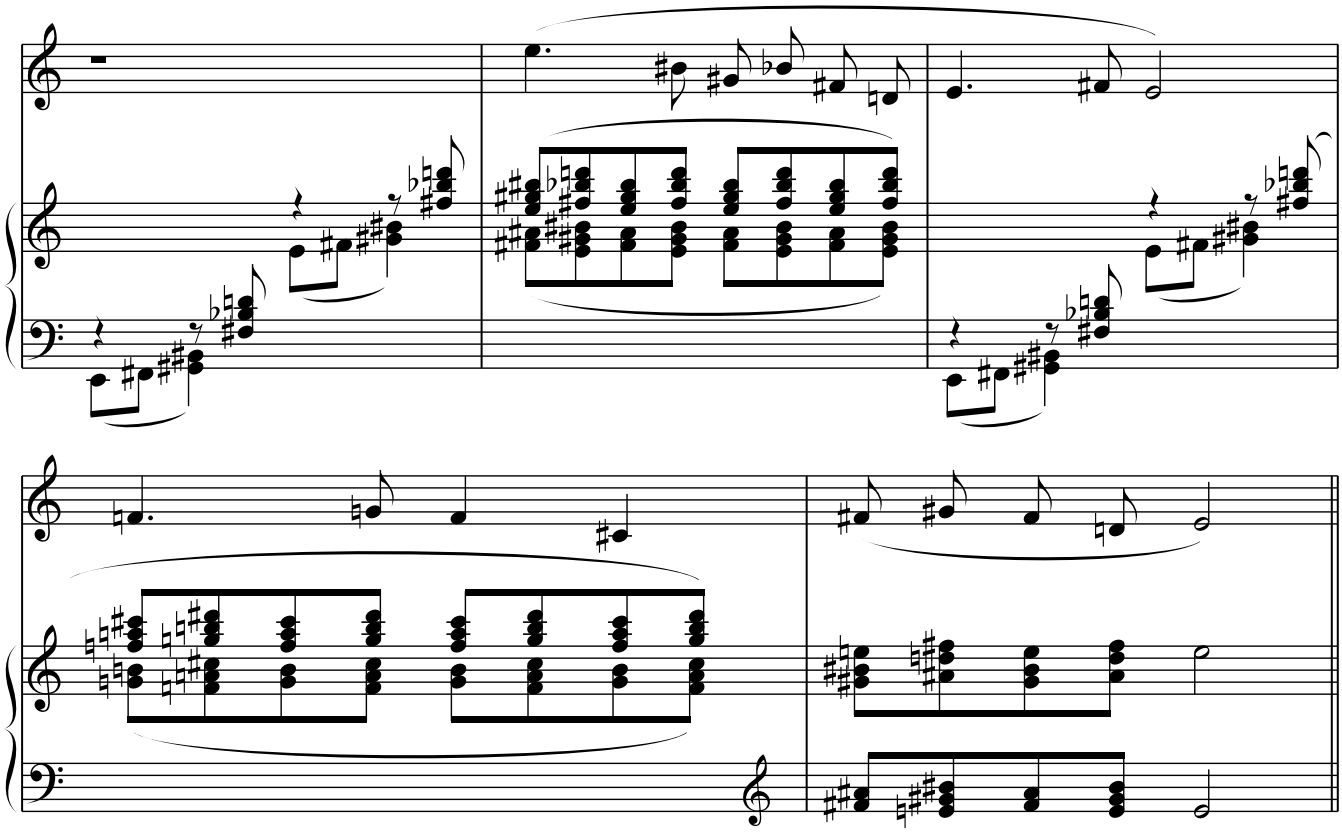
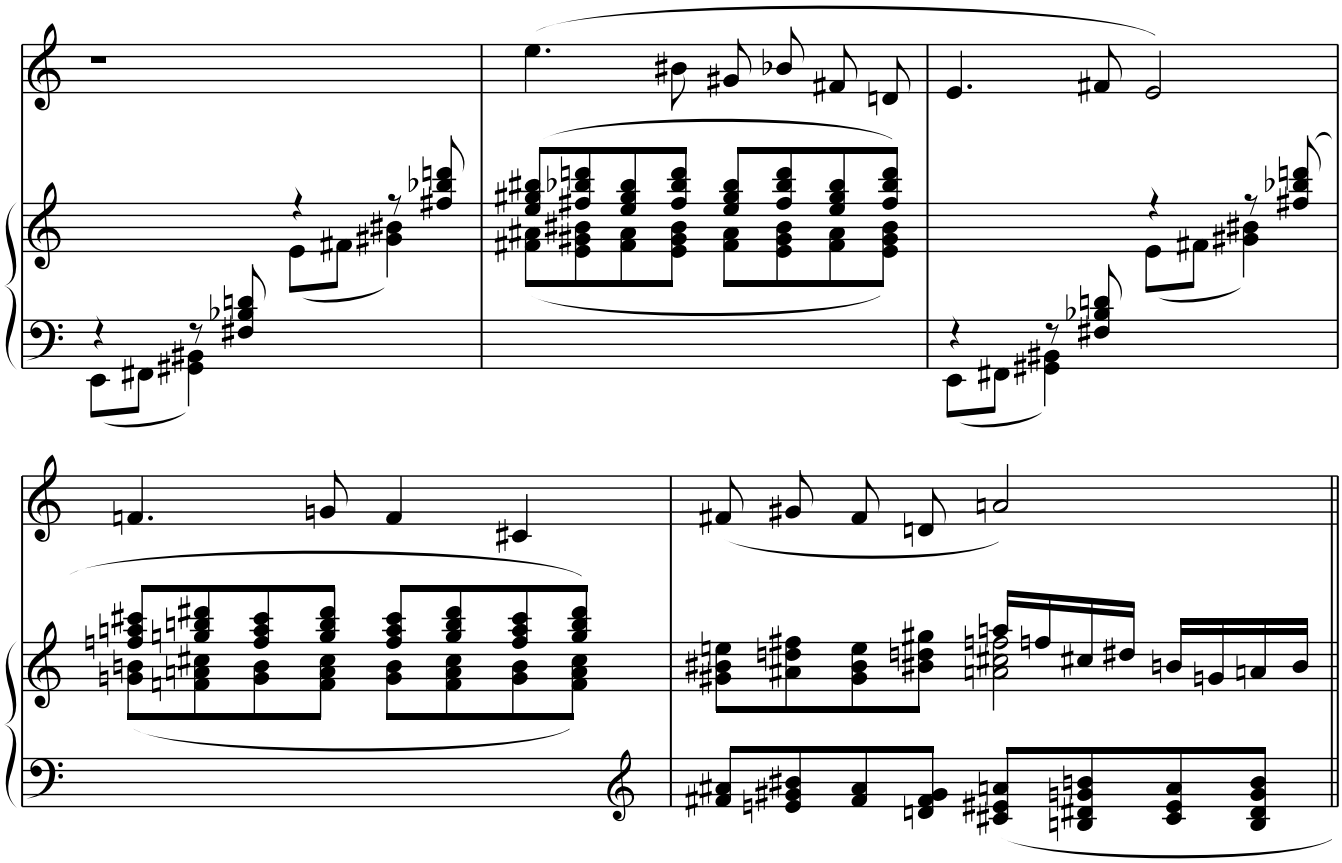


Berg then embellishes the E at the end by a form of suspension, placing the F# at the start of the bar and resolving to E in the second half.



Since we have a melodic model of embellishment used on the third bar, it would be a waste if we didn't use it on the fourth bar as well. We can simply use a neightourtone and a tone from the F# augmented triad. In effect this creates a sequens, though note values aren't the same.

7) The combined result and a new opening



This creates an effective end to the first phrase. Of course, Berg is not finished with this piece yet so he decides to change the very last note in the example above. This gives the music an impuls to continue moving and opens up a new pitch area for exploration.