

A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF “ALWAYS DEPARTING” AND “ALWAYS RETURNING”

FROM BRAD MEHLDAU’S *HIGHWAY RIDER*

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Abstract

Brad Mehldau's 2010 *Highway Rider* contains no lyrics yet tells a story. Through the use of repeated motives and motivic fragments, *Highway Rider* narrates a tale of one person's journey away from home and back again. He travels on paved roads across a vast American landscape, up a mountain, and back down again on a return journey. The complementary themes of departing and returning are apparent at both large and small scale in the music of *Highway Rider*. The album's narrative is told in the first thirteen tracks. The final two tracks, the fourteenth and fifteenth, therefore deserve special attention. Titled "Always Departing" and "Always Returning," these final tracks are best considered two parts of the same whole, which acts as an epilogue and recapitulates the themes of the two-disk album in a condensed, two-part summary.

Mehldau composed "Always Departing" and "Always Returning" with an intentionally limited melodic palette. The pieces develop through melodic repetition, fragmentation, and transformation. Mehldau has revealed his compositional intent through both the essay he published in conjunction with the album, and the storybook he released the following year. Using Mehldau's own writing as a guide, this essay will present a structural analysis of "Always Departing" and "Always Returning," emphasizing Mehldau's use of motives both in the two pieces and in the context of the entire album.

Background

Brad Mehldau

Born in 1970 and raised in West Hartford, Connecticut, Brad Mehldau received recognition for his musical aptitude at a young age. He attended the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in New York, where he studied with Fred Hersch, Junior Mance, and

Kenny Werner.¹ By the time he graduated in 1993, Mehldau was working regularly as both a sideman and a leader of his own trio. His breakthrough album *Introducing Brad Mehldau* was released in 1995 to critical praise. As one reviewer noted, the album “serves as a fine start to what should be a productive career.” And productive it has been. As of 2017, Mehldau has published thirty-three albums as leader or co-leader and, at only forty-seven years old, his career shows no signs of abating.

Like many pianists who have ascended into the canon of jazz piano masters, Mehldau received his early training in classical music.² This influence is audible throughout his musical output, which is frequently compared to that of 19th-century German Romantics like Schubert and Brahms.³ Mehldau himself has made no secret of this influence on his compositions. In Hal Leonard’s booklet of transcriptions *The Brad Mehldau Collection*, Mehldau states that his compositional process “came about as a result of studying a lot of the contrapuntal aspects of classical music.” He continues, “I tried to get away from a one-note melody and a chord under it and tried to explore the relationships between several notes moving independently.” Helpfully hinting at how to analyze *Highway Rider*, Mehldau continues, “The idea of generating a whole composition from a small amount of thematic material is very alluring to me, and resulted from studying the compositions of great classical composers like Beethoven and Brahms.”⁴

¹ Daniel J. Arthurs, *Reconstructing Tonal Principles in the Music of Brad Mehldau*, (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2011), ProQuest (UMI 3456438), 1.

² Here, and throughout this essay, the term “classical” is used in the vernacular sense, referring to the entire canon of Western art music. More descriptive terms such as Baroque, Impressionist, and Romantic refer to the specific periods of time those terms represent, each a subgenre of “classical” music.

³ For example, see: Adam Shatz, “A Jazz Pianist with a Brahmsian Bent,” *The New York Times*, July 25, 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/07/25/arts/music-a-jazz-pianist-with-a-brahmsian-bent.html>.

⁴ *The Brad Mehldau Collection* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, ca. 2002), quoted in Arthurs, *Reconstructing Tonal Principles*, 3.

Highway Rider

Highway Rider represents Mehdau's ultimate expression of motivic cohesion. Though he had used recurring motives on prior albums, it was on *Highway Rider* that he was able to connect motives both in individual pieces and across the whole album. In his essay published alongside *Highway Rider*, subtitled "Motive, Tonality, Chaos/Order, Narrative," Mehdau writes, "It's a method that I've used before to achieve thematic unity in two cyclical records of mine, *Elegiac Cycle* and *Places*." He continues:

What I hadn't achieved on those records was a way of connecting my motivic melody with the larger tonal architecture of the whole, giving the work more structure and a feeling of deeper tension and eventually deeper resolution. It might sound strange or even silly to mention Beethoven here, but his way of generating not just melodic material from a motif, but also larger tonal relationships that unfold and span the entire work, thereby connecting the small scale and large scale, is continually a strong model and source of inspiration for me.⁵

As this essay will demonstrate, on *Highway Rider*, Mehdau succeeded at making this connection. The album is like a musical fractal whose largest scale mirrors its smallest. Specifically, the music demonstrates a two-part structure that is apparent at every level – in individual motives, in single tracks, in the structure of the two-disk album, and even in the story the album narrates.

We know this in part because Mehdau has written as much. The opening lines of his essay read, "All the music on 'Highway Rider' is bound together by a two-part melody – a statement and a reply, you could say – that is heard most clearly at the beginning of 'Now You

⁵ Brad Mehdau, "Highway Rider: Motif, Tonality, Chaos/Order, Narrative," accessed April 20, 2017, <http://www.bradmehldau.com/essay-highway-rider/>.

Must Climb Alone’, played by the first violin.”⁶ Example 1 shows the “two-part melody” that Mehldau claims is the seed from which all the other music on the album sprouted.

EXAMPLE 1. Two-part melody, Vln. 1, mm. 1-7 of “Now You Must Climb Alone.”



Mehldau writes that the “motif is central to the work in the same way a theme is central to a novel.”⁷ Indeed, this two-part melody can be heard throughout *Highway Rider*, in whole or in fragments, transposed to different keys, with minor and major alterations, in augmentation and diminution, in the foreground as a melody, and in the background as one part of a larger orchestral texture.

The Narrative

In 2011, the year following *Highway Rider*’s release, Mehldau published a storybook on his website that purported to tell, in words, the narrative told by the music.⁸ Within the online storybook, short words and phrases that referred to song titles were hyperlinks to audio from their associated tracks. Because the tracks were referred to in sequence, the narrative significance of each in the context of the album was made rather explicit.

Highway Rider tells the story of a traveler, identified by the title of the first track as John Boy. John Boy leaves home on the “open road” and travels for some time before reaching a mountain. The final two tracks of disk one, “Now You Must Climb Alone” and “Walking the

⁶ Mehldau, “Highway Rider.”

⁷ Mehldau, “Highway Rider.”

⁸ All storybook segments quoted in this essay were retrieved from: Mats Arvidson, *An Imaginary Musical Road Movie: Transmedial Semiotic Structures in Brad Mehldau’s Concept Album “Highway Rider,”* Lund Studies in Arts and Cultural Sciences, Vol. 10, Lund Studies in Arts and Cultural Sciences. In footnote 296, Arvidson reports that “On 14 January 2014, Mehldau moved his website, keeping the article, but having the storybook removed. This not only affects the production of musical meaning but also the researcher’s perspective on how to study and understand the work.”

Peak,” depict John Boy arduously climbing a mountain and reaching the peak, where “he realizes that his journey is also a circle, and he is halfway around the circle... He stays there at the peak for a while, walking around ...looking all around him.”⁹ The first disk ends as John Boy turns back toward home; the second disk (except the final two tracks) signifies his journey home. In this way, *Highway Rider*’s narrative itself is structured in two-parts: departing and ascending, then descending and returning.

In 2016, Mats Arvidson, at Lund University in Sweden, published a book entitled *An Imaginary Musical Road Movie: Transmedial Semiotic Structures in Brad Mehldau’s Concept Album “Highway Rider,”* in which he describes and documents the many elements of *Highway Rider* that contribute to its narrative. Arvidson’s work elaborates upon the narrative of the storybook. He notes that the album artwork depicts an empty drive-in theater somewhere near Las Vegas, Nevada, connoting a desolate American landscape and inviting the viewer to treat the album as a movie. He concludes:

What comes to mind is the so-called road movie – a film genre which most often deals with adventures of an individual or groups who leave their hometown and travel from place to place, perhaps desperately trying to escape from their boring everyday life.¹⁰

Arvidson also avers that the narrative cycle is completed before the final two tracks. “Always Departing” and “Always Returning,” therefore stand as an epilogue of sorts. Arvidson writes:

Highway Rider has two distinct parts that are separated by their different ways to create a musical unity. They both belong to a fictional world, where the first is self-contained and based on the narrative script (the first 13 compositions), and the second is interconnected to the first by way of meta-reference.¹¹

⁹ Brad Mehldau, *Highway Rider* storybook.

¹⁰ Arvidson, *An Imaginary Musical Road Movie*, 94.

¹¹ Arvidson, *An Imaginary Musical Road Movie*, 171-72.

Arvidson notes that motivic repetition and development are the driving features of “Always Departing” and “Always Returning,” and he identifies many of the motives that appear in them. He even catalogues every fragment of two rhythmic patterns that occur throughout the pieces, noting the measure at which they occur, and whether the notes ascend or descend. But he stops short of drawing any particular conclusions about the narrative depicted by the two pieces, writing, “The content (signified) seems to be too abstract to be described”¹² and “There is no immediate way of showing iconic connections between musical and non-musical features.”¹³

In the following analysis, I seek to go just one step further. I argue that “Always Departing” and “Always Returning” do have an identifiable narrative arc, and that this arc mirrors that of the rest of the album. Taken together, the two pieces depict the traveler’s reflection upon his journey which took him away from home, up and back down a mountain, and on a long return trip. This is most clearly discernable through the identification and documentation of motives – where they appear, how they change over time, and how they each resemble the two-part melody.

Disk One Finale: “Now You Must Climb Alone” and “Walking the Peak”

A motive’s placement within the storyline is a strong clue about its narrative significance. The opening motives of both “Always Departing” and “Always Returning” appear first in the final two tracks of disk one, “Now You Must Climb Alone” and “Walking the Peak.” As Mehlau states, the two pieces are “a kind of turning point for the record.”¹⁴ Indeed, according to the storybook, the two pieces signify the traveler’s ascent and descent of a mountain, encompassing the moment he turns around and begins his journey home. The two pieces share

¹² Arvidson, *An Imaginary Musical Road Movie*, 171.

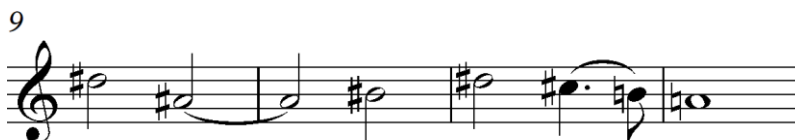
¹³ Arvidson, *An Imaginary Musical Road Movie*, 172.

¹⁴ Mehlau, “Highway Rider.”

much in common with “Always Departing” and “Always Returning.” There is no audible pause between each pair of tracks, they are the final two tracks on their respective disks, they feature identical instrumentation, and each pair is sold as a single score.¹⁵ They also share similar motives, and these motives evolve across each pair in a way that suggests similar narrative content.

Although the two-part melody is implied throughout *Highway Rider*,¹⁶ it is first heard fully in violin 1 in the opening measures of “Now You Must Climb Alone” as shown in Example 1. Immediately thereafter, violins 1-3 play a phrase that is rhythmically identical to the first part – the statement – of the two-part melody. Though it differs in pitch content, it shares a similar intervallic structure: it begins with a leap of a perfect fourth, ascends stepwise up in half notes, then stepwise down. This motive, shown in Example 2, is defined both by its rhythm and its contour, appears again in the opening measures of “Always Departing.” For this reason, I refer to it as the *departing motive*.¹⁷

EXAMPLE 2. Departing motive, Vln. 1-3, mm. 9-13 of “Now You Must Climb Alone.”



Until the final four measures of the piece, the final rhythmic fragment of the departing motive, shown in Example 3, echoes throughout the ensemble. The pitch content of each fragment varies as it is taken up by the different instruments, but the rhythm remains the same.

¹⁵ Scores for this album were purchased from Modern Works Publishing at <https://modernworksmusicpublishing.com/store/brad-mehldau>. All musical examples that appear in this essay were copied manually into Sibelius, then exported as graphics. Any errors in transcription are mine.

¹⁶ Arvidson notes the similarities between the two-part melody and the themes of nearly every other piece on the album in *An Imaginary Musical Road Movie*, 153-56.

¹⁷ Though it could just as descriptively have been named the climbing motive.

This grants a strong sense of cohesion to “Now You Must Climb Alone,” which can be interpreted as an extended meditation upon the departing theme. In the final four measures, the French horns play, almost inaudibly, the second part of the two-part melody, transposed to a new key. In context, the phrase played by the horns concludes the departing motive, just as the second part of the two-part melody concludes the first.

EXAMPLE 3. Departing motive fragment rhythm.



This two-part structure is also apparent in the relationship between “Now You Must Climb Alone” and its companion piece. “Walking the Peak” begins similarly: the first audible melody is a complete statement of the two-part melody, with slight alterations, this time heard in the top note of a series of chords played by the piano, shown in Example 4.

EXAMPLE 4. Two-part melody, piano right hand, mm. 63-70 of “Walking the Peak.”



In the following measure, shown in Example 5, the piano plays a motive that recurs throughout “Walking the Peak.” This motive closely resembles the second part – the reply – of the two-part melody. Quarter notes on beats two, three, and four ascend stepwise, then the phrase ends with the now-familiar dotted-quarter, eighth, half-note rhythm. This motive, augmented and

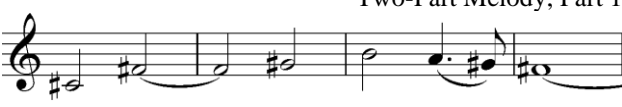
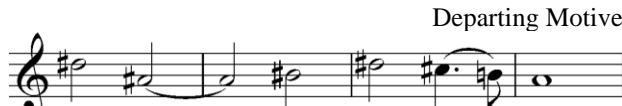
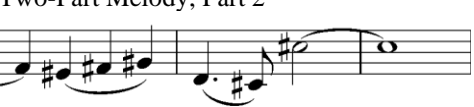

with one rhythmic difference, constitutes the first melodic material heard in “Always Returning.” I therefore call it the *returning motive*.¹⁸

EXAMPLE 5. Returning motive, piano right hand, mm. 71-73 of “Walking the Peak.”



The returning motive occurs seven more times throughout the remainder of the “Walking the Peak” and constitutes the bulk of the piece’s melodic content. Thus, just as “Now You Must Climb Alone” can be considered a meditation on the departing theme, “Walking the Peak” is a meditation on the returning theme. As we’ve seen, the departing theme and returning theme are derived from the first and second parts of the two-part melody. If we connect these observations with the narrative supplied by the storybook, what emerges is a two-part structure present throughout *Highway Rider* and depicted in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Two-part structures found in *Highway Rider*.

Two-Part Melody, Part 1		Two-Part Melody, Part 2	
			
Departing Motive		Returning Motive	
Climbing Statement		Descending Reply	
“Now You Must Climb Alone”		“Walking The Peak”	
“Always Departing”		“Always Returning”	
Disk One		Disk Two	

Two other motives that feature prominently in “Now You Must Climb Alone” and “Walking the Peak” also occur in “Always Departing” and “Always Returning.” The first

¹⁸ Though it could just as descriptively have been named the descending motive.

consists of a repeating rhythmic pattern - quarter-note, half-note, quarter-note – usually in two measure phrases. It is first played by rhythm section bass and third double bass in measure 47 (of 58) of “Now You Must Climb Alone.” The motive is quickly taken up by the rest of the strings and, by the opening measures of “Walking the Peak,” every instrument not obeying a rest is playing it.¹⁹ This march-like motive comes to define the rhythmic structure of “Walking the Peak,” so I refer to it as the *walking motive*.

EXAMPLE 6. Walking motive, strings reduction, mm. 59-60 of “Walking the Peak.”

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Finally, one last motive from “Walking the Peak” will be important for my analysis of “Always Departing” and “Always Returning.” I call it the *cadential motive* because it is always heard at the end of long musical phrases and it accompanies changes in instrumentation and dynamics. For example, its first occurrence - played by piano and tubular bells in measure seventy-five of “Walking the Peak” – heralds the entrance of the soprano saxophone and the beginning of the saxophone solo. The cadential motive is therefore helpful to identify, as it consistently signals the ends of musical sections.²⁰ It is shown below, in Example 7.

¹⁹ The motive is not notated on the drum set staff, which is filled with slash marks. Instead, Mehlldau instructs the drummer to play a “swamp groove/anthem/march/rock/backbeat!”

²⁰ The cadential motive, like a cadence itself, more strongly signals ends of phrases than beginnings. Nevertheless, where one section ends another is sure to begin, so the cadential motive can help flag beginnings of sections as well.

EXAMPLE 7. Cadential motive, Tub. B., mm. 75-78 of “Walking the Peak.”



Disk Two Finale: “Always Departing” and “Always Returning”

For this analysis, I created a graphical representation of both “Always Departing” and “Always Returning” (attached as Appendices A and B). The graph depicts four properties of each piece at a resolution of one value per measure. It charts the contour of the piece by tracking the highest and lowest notes, shows the key signature, and identifies what motives and motivic fragments are sounding in every measure. Each of these properties helps identify the formal structure of the two pieces. Changes in instrumentation have also been useful to note. The piano (played by Brad Mehldau) and soprano saxophone (played by Joshua Redman) are the two featured solo instruments of the album, and their entrances and exits often accompany section changes. Though Mehldau helpfully provides chord symbols throughout “Always Returning,” this essay will not provide a detailed analysis of chordal harmony. Text, in the form of the storybook, is critical to this analysis.

At the largest scale, “Always Departing” and “Always Returning” form a single piece with a simple binary structure. The first half, “Always Departing,” explores the first part of the two-part melody in the form of the departing motive. It signifies the traveler’s departure from home and up a mountain. The second half, “Always Returning,” explores the second part of the two-part melody in the form of the returning motive. This time, however, the returning motive itself takes two forms: a statement and a reply. This final piece is also peppered with statements and fragments of the departing motive and the walking motive. Each piece is composed of three sections (A, B, and C), and the cadential motive appears at the end of all but the very first.

“Always Departing”

Section A of “Always Departing” begins at the opening measure, with a statement of the departing theme played in violin 1 (Example 8). This theme, in the form of a rhythmic fragment, is then taken up by nearly every other instrument. It echoes throughout the orchestra, sounding in nearly every measure as the strings play ever higher pitches. Together, the strings climb to an all-time high of C7 in measure 36 before plunging down to a low F1 in measure thirty-seven.²¹ My contour graph for section A resembles one side of a mountain, and I think this is appropriate. The rising slowly rising pitch of the strings signifies the traveler’s steep ascent.

EXAMPLE 8. Departing motive, Vln. 1, mm. 1-4 of “Always Departing.”



In measure 41, a sort of invisible key change occurs. The piece has so far not established a clear tonal center, instead shifting quickly between implied keys. It is likely that Mehltau sometimes uses a key signature of no sharps or flats to indicate a section where no specific key is implied. We know this because of the way he later notates the key signature of the soprano saxophone in “Always Returning.” The soprano saxophone is a B \flat transposing instrument. As we would expect, therefore, when the non-transposing instruments are written in C \sharp , the soprano saxophone is written one whole-step higher - in E \flat . Chord symbols written on the saxophone staff are also transposed from those that appear on the bass and piano staves. However, when the non-transposing instruments are written with no sharps or flats, the saxophone is too. The chord

²¹ This is the most dramatic-looking moment in my chart, and provides a clear example of how the contour graph represents the score.

symbols above the saxophone staff remain transposed. It is safe to assume, therefore, that no key signature frequently means no key – not C major or A minor.²²

After the non-tonal introduction of “Always Departing,” both the melody and harmony sound firmly within the key of C major. It is this invisible key change between no-key and C major that signals the end of section A. Section B begins with piano unaccompanied. At measure 49, Mehlidau plays a new motive in a clear, single-note melody in his right hand. This new motive is an augmented²³ version of the departing motive with a minor rhythmic alteration: the second and last notes are anticipated by half a beat. For reasons that will become clear, I call this the first of three *reversing motives*.

EXAMPLE 9. First reversing motive, piano right hand, mm. 49-56 of “Always Departing.”



Two more new motivic statements are played by the piano during section B, each a variant of the last. The first of these begins at measure 65 and is shown in Example 10. Though not indicated by the key signature, this motive establishes the key of C minor; every note in it and in the left-hand accompaniment is diatonic to C minor. The rhythm of the first and final measures of this second reversing motive are identical to those of the first, but the middle measures have been abridged and half-notes have replaced some whole-notes.

²² This reflects the default behavior of music notation software Sibelius, which distinguishes between the key signatures for C major, A minor, and atonal/no key.

²³ “Augmented” here means the note lengths have been doubled – half-notes have become whole-notes, quarter-notes have become half-notes, etc.

EXAMPLE 10. Second reversing motive, piano right hand, mm. 65-69 of “Always Departing.”



The third and final reversing motive (Example 11) begins in measure 82 and accompanies a notated key change to C# minor. The half-notes of the second reversing motive remain, but one measure has been added to the middle.

EXAMPLE 11. Third reversing motive, piano right hand, mm. 82 of “Always Departing.”



The third reversing motive is nearly rhythmically identical to the returning motive that will soon be introduced in section A of “Always Returning.” They differ only in that the second note in the reversing motive is anticipated by half a beat. Each is also an augmented version of the returning motive heard previously in “Walking the Peak.” This provides an important hint about the narrative. In section B of “Always Departing,” the departing theme is incrementally transformed into the returning theme. It signifies the traveler changing direction – reversing.

The measures between the three reversing motives contain fragments of those motives, identifiable by the rhythms shown in Example 12. The only other melodic statement in the piece is the cadential motive, which is first heard in the top note of the piano in the final measures of section B. Here (and in all future sections), the cadential motive marks the end of section B. The orchestra, which had been building to a minor crescendo, again falls silent, and the piano continues unaccompanied.

EXAMPLE 12. Reversing motive fragment rhythm.



Through most of section C, the piano plays fragments of the reversing motive in minor ninths. The dissonance these minor ninths provide make the music sound tense and restless.²⁴ The contour graph for section C, like that for section A, shows the highest note in each measure rising to a peak before a precipitous fall. This time, however, the lowest note instead descends as the highest note climbs, causing the texture to become increasingly rich as it approaches a crescendo. The end of section C is marked by a fragment of the cadential motive (Example 13).

EXAMPLE 13. Cadential motive fragment, mm. 138-40 of “Always Departing.”



Perhaps in section C, the traveler not only climbs a mountain but also struggles with inner turmoil. Noting that road movies usually depict a character’s mental struggle, Arvidson suggests that “Now You Must Climb Alone” at times signifies “a psychological test.”²⁵ He writes:

The increase in dissonance and the strength and intensity that characterises the composition represents a change in the musical structure that metaphorically deals with a personal struggle, and which corresponds with the psychological test previously mentioned. ...The music thus... provides an opportunity to explore tension and crisis typical for the road movie.²⁶

²⁴ Mehl dau discusses his use of minor ninths in his essay, but in a different context. While describing the significance of the two-part melody, Mehl dau writes, “Another important aspect of the motif is the role that the D-natural leading to the C# has – the third to last and second to last notes of that melody. Those two notes, and the interval of the flatted second that they comprise (and, that same interval separated by an octave’s length, the flatted ninth), provide much of the harmonic tension on the record that yearns for resolution.”

²⁵ Arvidson, *An Imaginary Musical Road Movie*, 127.

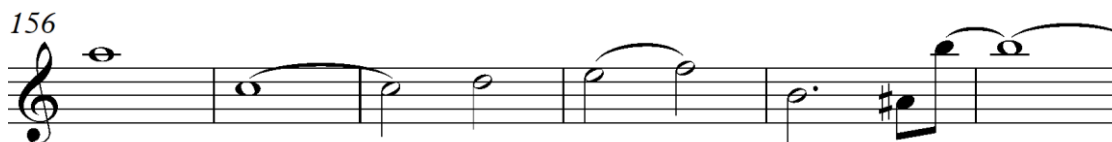
²⁶ Arvidson, *An Imaginary Musical Road Movie*, 128.

“Always Departing,” builds tensions by using minor ninths, wandering harmony, climbing pitches, and fragmented motives. These might represent the difficulty he faces both on the road and within his own mind. Or perhaps they signify a level of abstraction from the source material, and “Always Departing” and “Always Returning” are best considered an epilogue to or a retelling of events that have already occurred.

“Always Returning”

The final measures of “Always Departing” are essentially identical to the opening measures of “Always Returning,” creating an entirely smooth transition between the two pieces. The unaccompanied piano sets up a groove using thick chords played in eighth notes. This four-measure pattern follows the contour of the walking motive, which it is later accompanied by. Section A begins with a full statement of the returning motive played in violins 1-5 (Example 14). It is immediately followed by a new motive (Example 15) that closely resembles and acts as a kind of *response* to the returning motive.²⁷

EXAMPLE 14. Returning motive, Vln. 1-5, mm. 156-63 of “Always Returning.”



²⁷ It is possible that this response is best thought of as a modified fragment of the returning motive. Elsewhere in the piece, what I have identified as fragments of the returning motive seem to serve the same melodic function as what I am calling the returning response. The response motive and the second part of the returning motive differ in only one way: where the former uses a quarter-note followed by two eighth-notes, the latter uses a dotted half-note followed by two eighth-notes.

EXAMPLE 15. Returning motive response, Vln. 1-5, mm. 164-67 of “Always Returning.”



One final motive (Example 14) is introduced in the following measures. It closely resembles the departing motive, except two half notes have been replaced by two whole notes. This variant of the departing motive is only fully stated twice in “Always Returning.” As it is heard frequently in fragments, which exclude this dissimilarity, I find it most appropriate to label this motive a *reprise* of the departing motive.

EXAMPLE 14. Departing motive reprise, mm. 172-79 of “Always Returning.”



The returning motive, the returning response motive, and the departing motive reprise, together with the walking motive, the two-part melody, and the cadential motive, constitute nearly all the melodic material heard in “Always Returning.” In this way, the piece is a motley tapestry of thematic material established previously – a fitting conclusion for the album.

The contour graph for “Always Returning” is somewhat less descriptive than that of “Always Departing.” The former does not rise and fall quite as dramatically as the latter, so the range between the highest and lowest notes is more consistent. “Always Returning” also introduces a degree of improvisation to the score. In a manner typical of jazz pieces, many measures in the piano, saxophone, and bass staves are filled with slashes and chord symbols that instruct the musician to interpret their part freely within the indicated harmony. The drum staff, too, when not showing rests, is filled with slashes. This makes the highest notes (often played on the saxophone) and the lowest notes (often played on rhythm section bass), difficult to

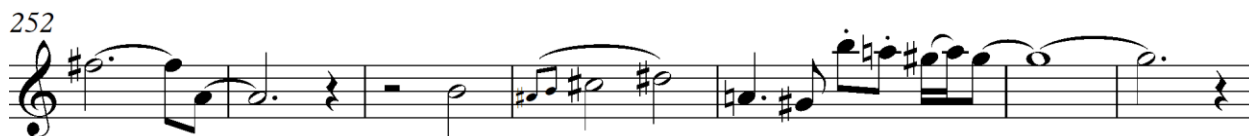
objectively determine just by looking at the score. Where necessary, I used my best judgment to fill in the lowest note using the chord symbol indicated on the rhythm section bass staff.

The relatively flat contour of “Always Returning” ultimately assists the narrative. While “Always Departing” signifies the traveler confronting mental and physical challenges, “Always Returning” depicts him moving with purpose. He is propelled forward by both gravity, as he descends the mountain, and a newfound confidence.

Section A of “Always Returning” ends with a full statement of the cadential motive, played in the violas, and overlapping an occurrence of the returning response motive. The piano, momentarily unaccompanied, again plays the groove that began the piece. It is quickly joined by the three French horns, which play the walking motive and cement the relationship between this motive and the piano groove.

Section B begins in measure 220 with a restatement of the returning theme in violins 1-5. The beginning of the section is also demarcated by the entrance of the soprano saxophone, which is instructed to “double melody with strings, *ad lib.*”²⁸ Throughout section B, the orchestra plays restatements of thematic material that are doubled in the saxophone, albeit freely. Even the notated melodies are modified slightly (Example 15). The effect is to create ever-increasing levels of abstraction of the established motivic material.

EXAMPLE 15. Returning motive modified, Vln. 1-5, mm. 252-56 of “Always Returning.”



²⁸ The rhythm section bass is soon instructed similarly. In measure 228, the score instructs: “When notes are written, bass is doubling with other basses/contrabassoon. Play them, but *ad lib.*”

In measure 267, the saxophone is instructed to “begin playing soloistically,” while the strings continue to play motivic material. In measure 276, the saxophone’s instructions read, “Now really soloing no holds barred.” The orchestra, except for the cellos, falls silent.²⁹ It slowly builds again throughout the saxophone solo, during which the French horns play the walking motive. The saxophone solo ends by morphing smoothly again into motivic material. This time it is joined by the bassoon for a full statement of the two-part melody, then the returning theme once more. Section B ends with the cadential motive and a dramatic ritard. In short, section B explores the same themes as section A, but it does so more freely and with a higher level of abstraction by using improvisation and motivic alterations.

Section C of “Always Returning” again deals with familiar motives with an increasing degree of abstraction. Piano once more takes the lead. The orchestra falls silent as the piano plays short fragments of the departing theme, first in single notes and then in minor ninths. The tension slowly builds as the piano approaches a cadenza (marked in measure 377). Unaccompanied piano closes section C with a full statement of the cadential theme played in three octaves, slowly and deliberately (Example 16). The final measure of section C is filled with slash marks and the note “Open: Rolling cadenza on theme.” Mehlau must be referring here to the walking motive, as this is the theme he plays on the recording during this open cadenza.

²⁹ The discrepancy between what appears on the contour graph and what is heard in the recording is most notable here, where only one instrument of the orchestra accompanies the rhythm section. The graph looks thin, but the sound is anything but, as the soprano saxophone freely solos in a high register, and the rhythm section bass supplies a low foundation. Accompaniment in the piano and a driving groove supplied by the drums make this one of the most energetic sections of the piece.

EXAMPLE 16. Cadential motive, piano, mm. 390-95.

The musical score for Example 16 consists of two staves, treble and bass clef, in a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and common time. The piece is marked 'Ad lib:'. The music begins with a series of chords and melodic lines in both staves, with a final cadence in measure 395. The score is presented in a standard musical notation format.

One final musical phrase closes “Always Returning,” but it is best thought of as a coda rather than a new musical section. Two motives are briefly heard. In measures 404 and 405, French horn 1 and cello 1 play a fragment of the departing motive, and in measures 408 through 411, French horn 1 and bassoon play the walking motive. The piece ends with a tonic C# major chord played by the entire orchestra.

Considered together, the three sections suggest a narrative. “Always Returning” is the retelling, or remembrance, of the returning half of a long journey. The confident pulse of section A signifies the traveler’s triumphant descent from the mountain. With newfound momentum, he travels back home. In section B, the motives are slowly altered, and the notated orchestral parts give way to improvisation. In his essay on *Highway Rider*, Mehdau discusses the use of improvisation within composed material, writing:

The arbitrary aspect of an improvised jazz solo is, of course, also its winning strength. A micro-narrative of a different sort will emerge from a worthy jazz solo. In comparison to written music, an improvised solo will express the intense, heightened subjectivity of the individual musician.³⁰

The traveler is reflecting on his journey, connecting and synthesizing all he has learned. The abstraction of his musings reaches a peak in section C, and a final cadence indicates the end of a story.

³⁰ Mehdau, “Highway Rider.”

Conclusion

Highway Rider is united by a two-part structure that is evident at nearly every scale. It is clear how Mehlau arrived at such thematic unity: he tells us as much. In his essay, he identifies the two-part melody that he claims inspired every other aspect of the album, and the evidence supports his claim. The two part-melody clearly inspires the theme of every track on the album. It is mostly clearly heard, however, in the two pairs of tracks that end each disk. Both “Now You Must Climb Alone” and “Always Departing” derive thematic material almost exclusively from the first part of the two-part melody. “Walking the Peak” and “Always Returning” each features both the returning theme and the walking theme.

The storybook tells us how to interpret the narrative. In the final two tracks, the traveler, having arrived home, “realizes that he is always departing from somewhere and someone and always returning to someplace and someone else.”³¹ Arvidson fills in some details. He writes, “In the specific case of *Highway Rider*, I argue that the story consists of events that, according to the fiction, occurred earlier than the narration.”³² This separation in time between event and narration is especially evident in “Always Departing” and “Always Returning.” Their placement as the last two tracks on the album, their level of motivic abstraction, and their similarity to the final tracks of disk one contribute to the interpretation that they are a retelling of the original story. “Always Departing” and “Always Returning” are an epilogue to *Highway Rider*. They represent the reflections of the traveler upon his journey, and the concluding sentence to his tale.

³¹ Mehlau, *Highway Rider* storybook.

³² Arvidson, *An Imaginary Musical Road Movie*, 188.

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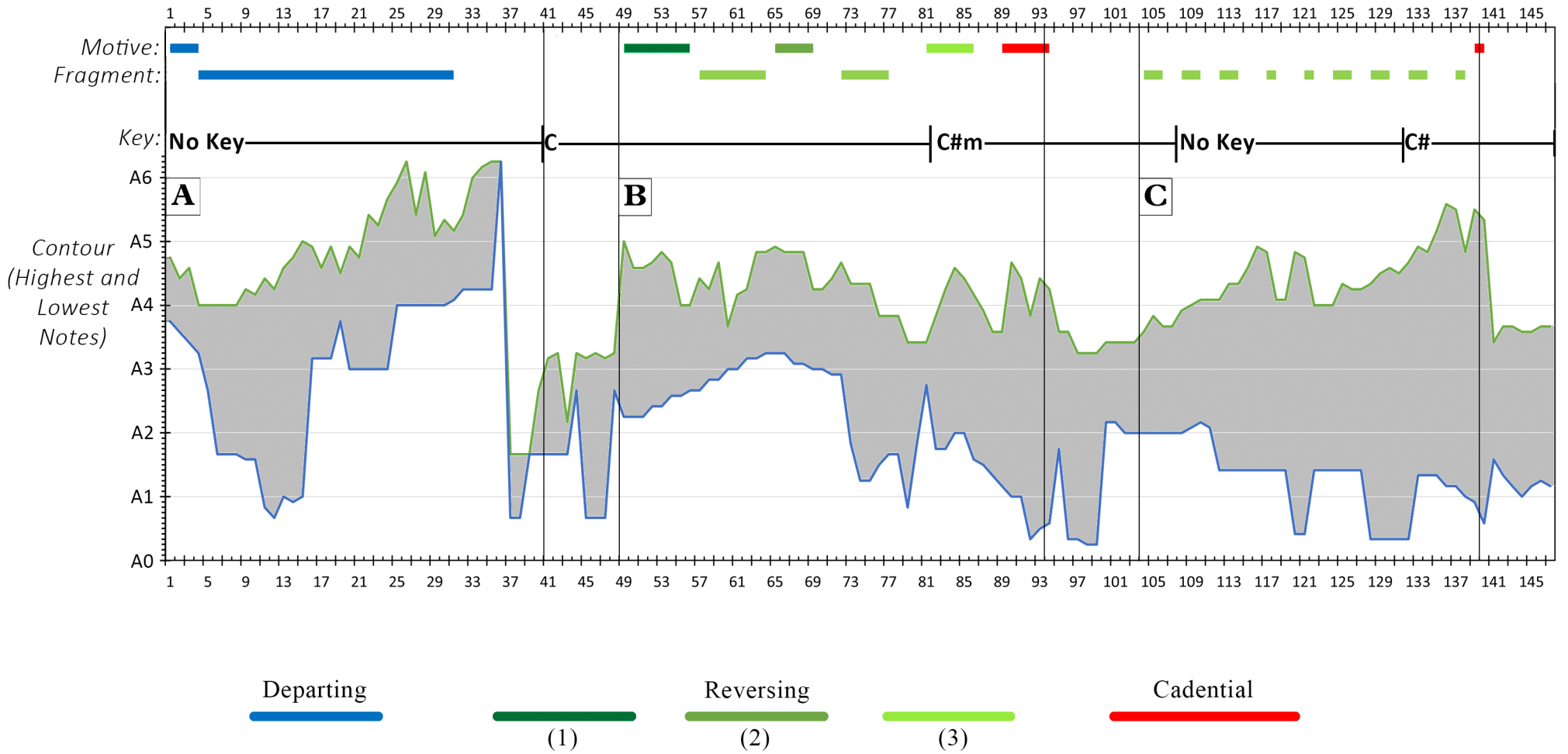
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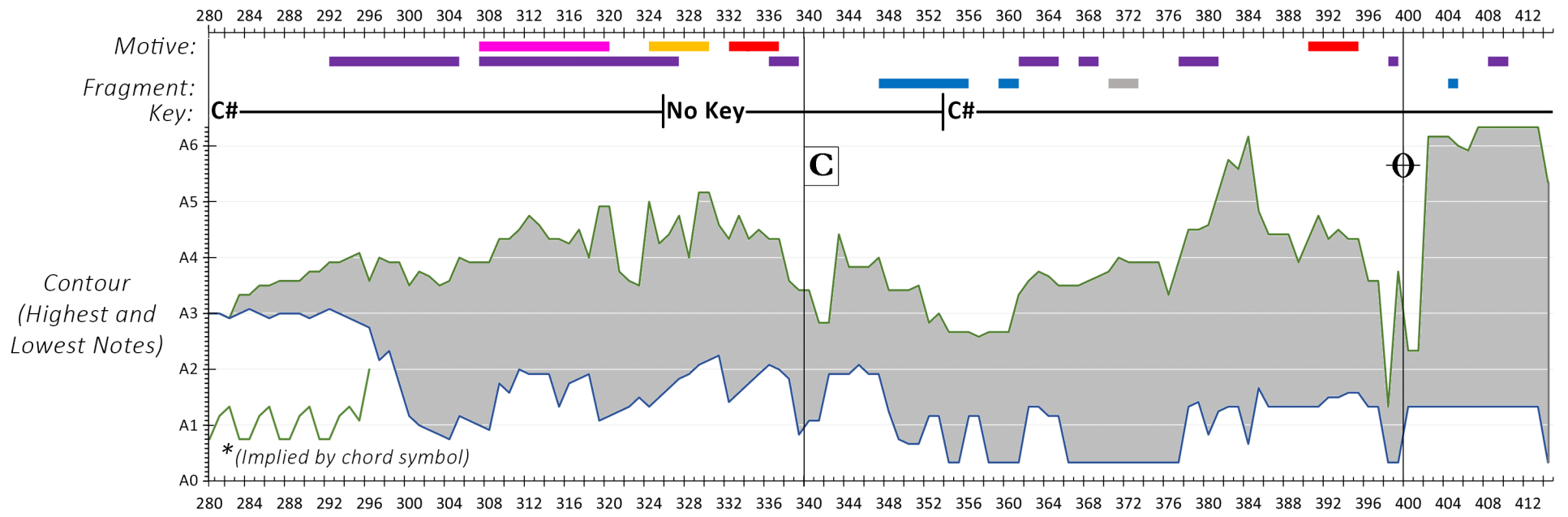
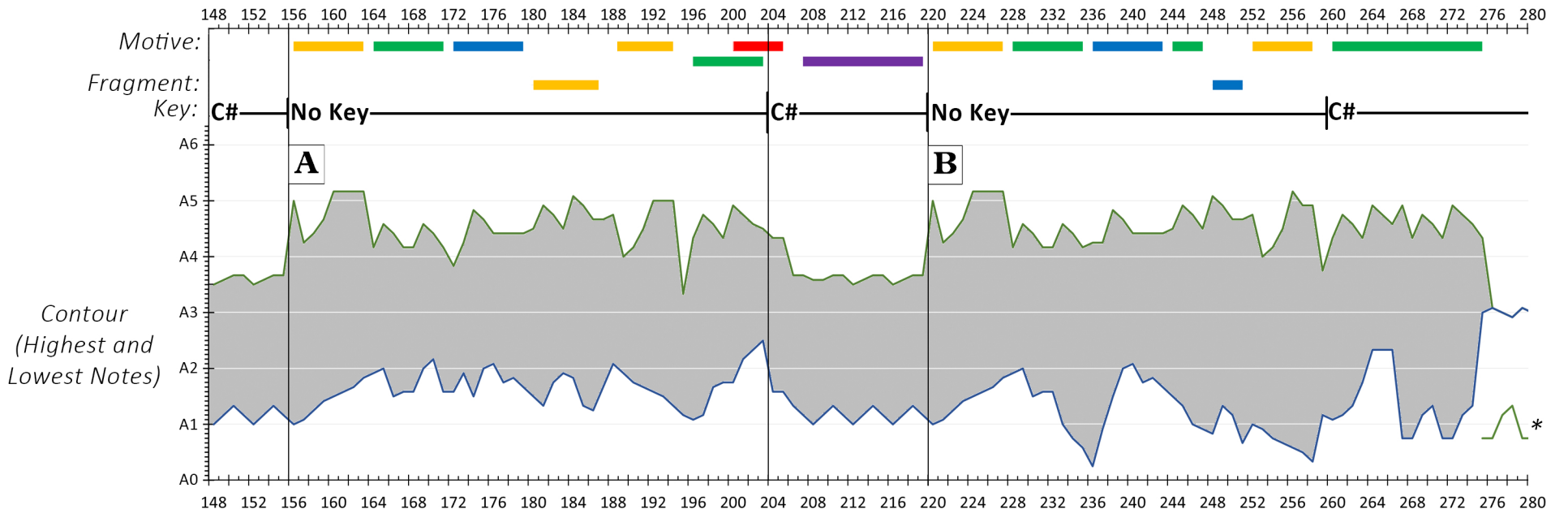
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Appendix A - "Always Departing" Chart



Appendix B - "Always Returning" Chart



- Returning
▬
- Returning Response
▬
- Departing Reprise
▬
- Walking
▬
- Two-Part Melody
▬
- Cadential
▬
- Reversing
▬