

## Web Feature 2.4

### Contextual Dissonance in Richard Strauss's Introduction from *Also Sprach Zarathustra*

Examples 2.11 and 2.12 in the text, illustrating the perfect fourth as a dissonance and as a consonance, respectively, show how dissonance in general is to some extent contextual. For another example, consider the opening of Richard Strauss's 1896 composition *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Thus Spoke Zarathustra), inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical work of the same. (Strauss commented that he "meant to convey in music an idea of the evolution of the human race from its origin"; the director Stanley Kubrick used this music to convey a similar concept—the dawning of human intelligence—at the beginning of his 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.)

Notice that in this musical portrayal of "origins," Strauss essentially opens with an orchestrated version of the first four overtones of the harmonic series. However, the dramatic appearance of the E $\flat$  in the melody—abruptly changing the C major chord to C minor—presents what may be considered the work's first "dissonance." Even though the interval of C in the bass to E $\flat$  in the melody—a minor third—would not normally be considered dissonant, in the *context* of the music heard to that point the E $\flat$  is dissonant because in the harmonic series that pitch class above a C fundamental would not appear until the nineteenth harmonic! The tension introduced by the E $\flat$ , then, is resolved by the second phrase, when the C minor chord abruptly reverts back to C major. See Web Example 2.6.

The image displays a piano reduction of the opening of Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. The score is written in 2/4 time and consists of two systems. The right hand (treble clef) begins with a series of chords, including a dissonant one. An arrow labeled "Dissonance!" points to a specific chord in the first system. The second system shows the resolution of this dissonance. The left hand (bass clef) features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, with triplets indicated by the number "3" above the notes. The score is annotated with "Dissonance!" and "Resolution!" to highlight these musical concepts.

**Web Example 2.6.** Richard Strauss, Introduction from *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, opening (piano reduction).