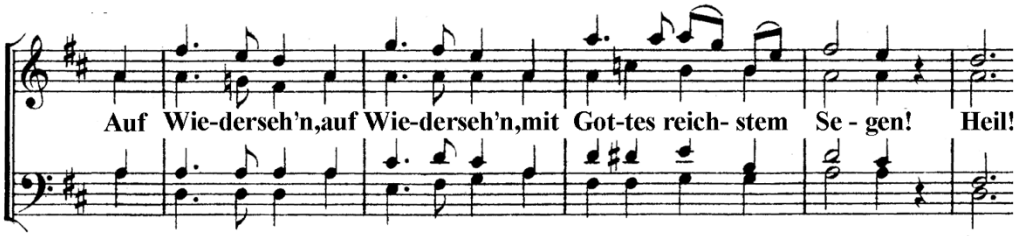
Opera, The Three Pintos - Program Notes

The Three Pintos is an opera left unfinished by Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826) and completed posthumously by a young Gustav Mahler (1860–1911). It premiered in 1888, more than 60 years after Weber's death. The known details of the completion process are as follows: Mahler had seven of Weber's sketches to work with, while the remaining 13 pieces were newly composed by Mahler, who sought out and used themes from Weber's other works and surviving manuscripts.

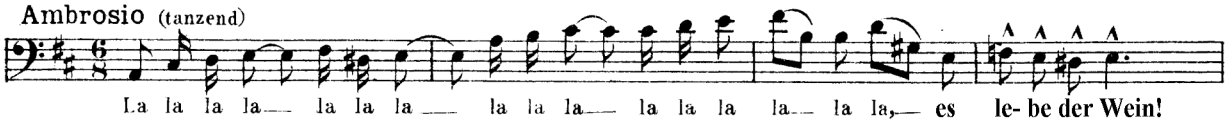
It is important to note that Weber almost exclusively composed only the melody. This means that many of the pieces can be described as Mahler's compositions based on Weber's themes. Musicologist Michael Kennedy has provided a detailed analysis of the work, and this article draws upon his research to offer a unique perspective on the degree of compositional involvement for both Weber and Mahler in each piece, expressed as a percentage (e.g., Weber 50% / Mahler 50%).

2025 Nihonbashi Opera Tokyo

Act I
No. 1 Ensemble Allegro vivace, 4/4
(Male Chorus, Gaston, Ambrosio) (W80% / M20%)
The curtain rises on a lively male chorus at a tavern in the Spanish village of Peñaranda. There is no overture; a brief Mahlerian introduction leads into the scene, which depicts a graduation party. This "drinking song" is based on Weber's 1812 work, A Feast for the Field-Day, Op. 68, which he wrote for a men's chorus in Berlin. The music shares a sensibility with the famous "Hunters' Chorus" from Der Freischütz.



The melody Ambrosio dances to while singing "la-la-la-la" becomes his leitmotif and is reprised in the No. 16 arietta in Act III.

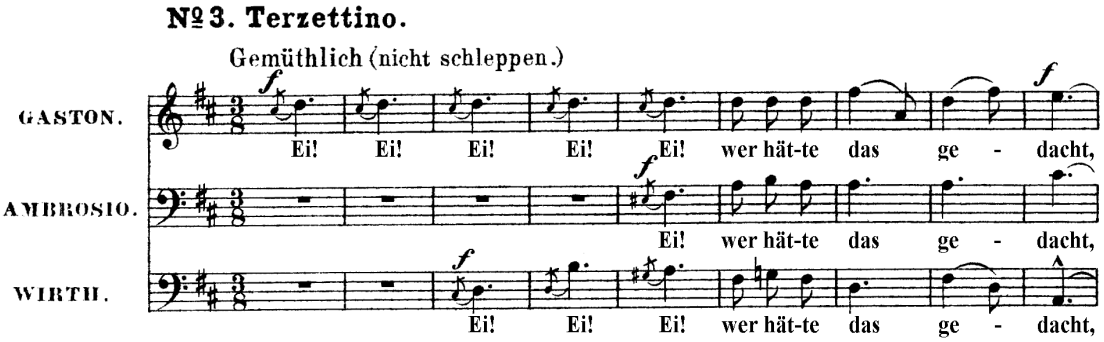


No. 2 Rondo à la Polacca: Commodo, 3/4 (Gaston) (W90% / M10%)

Gaston gaily sings a graceful Polish-style rondo in 3/4 time, expressing his lighthearted view on women. Weber composed this piece in 1809 for his brother, Fridolin, based on a Haydn pasticcio (a collection of themes). It has been noted for its similarity to Kilian's aria (in 4/4 time) at the beginning of Der Freischütz. The original key is C major, though it is sometimes performed in D major.

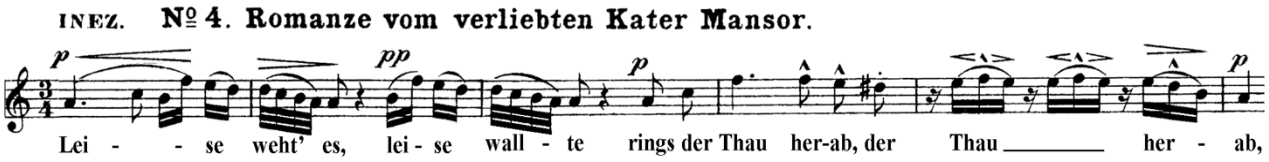
Incidentally, Gaston is one of the "false Pintos" mentioned in the opera's title and, throughout the work, is effectively the main protagonist.

No. 3 Terzettino Gemüthlich, 3/8
(Gaston, Ambrosio, Innkeeper) (W90% / M10%)



This male trio begins with a striking exclamation of "Ei! Ei! Ei!" Mahler set new lyrics for Pinto to Weber's 1818 piece, "How lovely and how bright the moon is shining," Op. 64/7, which was based on a German folk song. While "Ei" literally means "egg," here it is used as an interjection to express the comical bewilderment of losing money. The inclusion of this short piece symbolically introduces one of the opera's key features: the ensemble of three men. The tempo marking Gemüthlich means "cozy" or "comfortable," while the following note, nicht schleppen, means to "keep the tempo" and "not drag." In Italian, this would be Allegretto comodo, ma senza trascinare.

No. 4 Romance of the Tomcat Mansor Andante, 3/4
(Ines) (W80% / M20%)



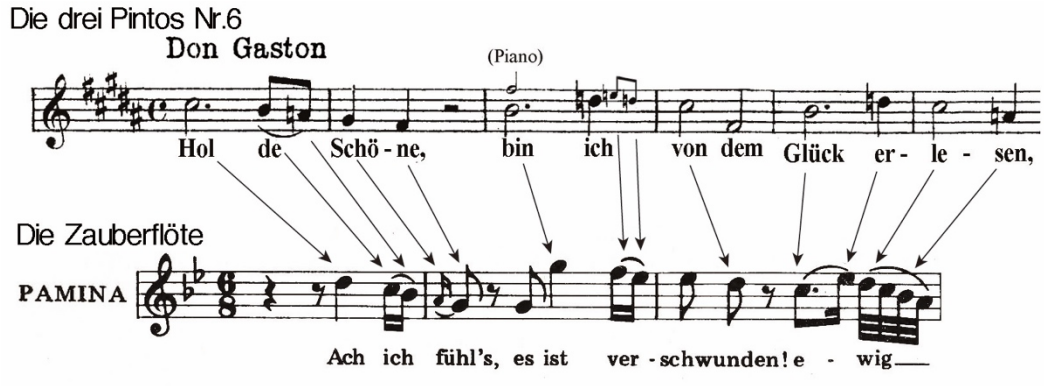
The innkeeper's daughter, Ines, sings this charming aria while impersonating a cat. Weber composed this song in 1818 for Friedrich Kind's play, The Night Camp of Granada; the original version was for voice and guitar. Mahler's distinctive style is evident in the expression markings, counter-melodies, and orchestration that imitate a cat's meows.

No. 5 Seguidilla a dos (The Two-Person) Keck, 3/4
(Gaston, Ines) (W80% / M20%)

This duet is based on a Weber sketch. It imitates the seguidilla, a dance from Southern Spain, and its style is similar to Ännchen's arietta in Der Freischütz, evoking the local color of this Spanish-set opera. The mournful middle section is particularly memorable. The lighthearted dynamic between Gaston, who is flirting, and Ines, who playfully fends him off, is a classic scene between a man and a woman, reminiscent of the openings of The Marriage of Figaro and Fidelio. The tempo marking Keck means "briskly," "brightly," or "with gusto," similar to Allegro brillante or Allegretto con brio.

No. 6 Terzett Anmuthig bewegt, 4/4
(Gaston, Ambrosio, Pinto) (W50% / M50%)

This is a pivotal scene in the opera where the protagonist, Pinto, finally appears, and Gaston teaches him "aristocratic manners." The opening melody and part of the trio are said to be from Weber's sketch, but Mahler's originality is more prominent in the development. The scene where Ambrosio disguises himself as a bride and sings in a falsetto is a comical technique that is also seen in Rossini's La Cenerentola and draws laughter from the audience. Additionally, bold harmonic progressions and dissonances are used, and the melody from Pamina's aria in Mozart's The Magic Flute is quoted almost in its original form.



Mahler's philosophical spirit shines through in this brilliant move of using Pamina's mournful melody in a ridiculous disguise scene, with the 28-year-old composer embodying Nietzsche's idea of the "duality of tragedy and comedy." The tempo marking Anmuthig bewegt means "gracefully with movement," and the following note, (Belebt, doch, nicht zu schnell), means "lively, but not too fast." In Italian, this would be (Grazioso mosso, Animato)

No. 7 Finale Allegro energico, 4/4 (W 80% / M 20%)
This scene is a finale with the addition of Ines and the chorus of townspeople. As a drunken Pinto passes out, Gaston takes the letter of introduction from his chest. The opera's overall structure is symbolically highlighted as Pinto is left behind while all the other characters become a unified group. The music is largely by Weber, but a melody from Mahler's Symphony No. 1 appears, and the recitativo is also thought to be his work. The final 6/8 section is marked "Recht gemächlich" (quite leisurely, calm and relaxed) and features a bold modulation from D major (two sharps) to F-sharp major (six sharps), creating a dreamy atmosphere. The stage directions indicate that the sleeping Pinto is to be carried off, but for performance purposes, he is sometimes left on stage while the other characters exit.

Summary of Act I

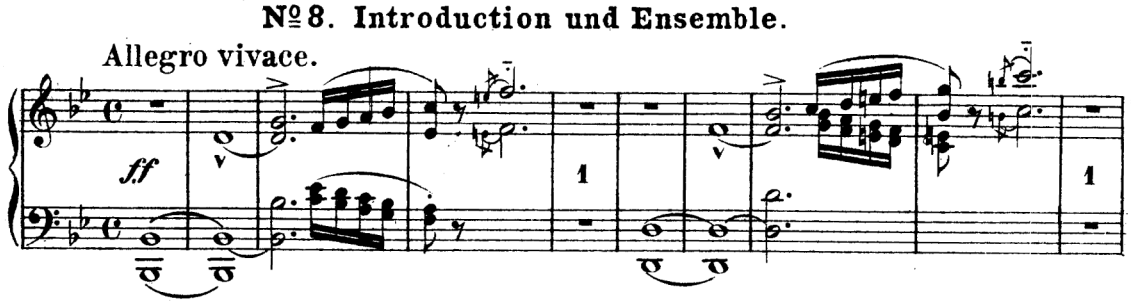
Throughout Act I, the conventional assessment that the opera is "composed by Weber and completed by Mahler" proves to be largely accurate. However, Mahler's "completion" was not a mere reconstruction; his philosophical intentions and symphonic sensibilities are evident throughout, which is why the work is often considered Mahler's only opera. Right from the opening chorus, audiences will be moved by Weber's music, which evokes the spirit of Der Freischütz.

Entr'acte (Interlude to Act II) Mässig (W20% / M80%)

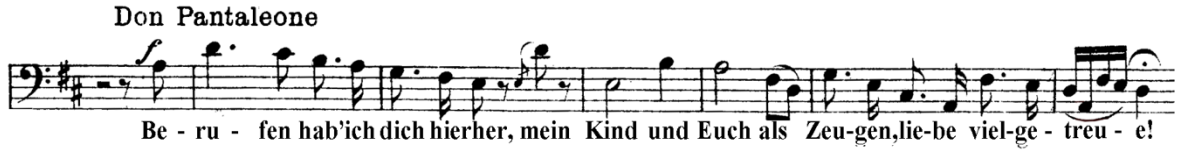
Mahler freely arranged themes from the finales of Act I (No. 7) and Act II (No. 12) to create this approximately six-minute interlude. It is sometimes performed as a standalone orchestral piece. The piece should officially be titled "Interlude on Themes by Weber," but it is occasionally mislabeled as the "Interlude to Act III." Its correct position is before Act II. True to its title, the "Interlude" is a brief, refreshing piece that connects the first and second acts. The tempo marking Mässig includes the note traumhaft, leise, meaning "at a moderate pace, dreamlike and quiet." In Italian, this would be Moderato, sognante e piano.

Act II
No. 8 Introduction and Ensemble – Allegro vivace *4/4*
(Pantaleone, Clarissa, Laura, Servants) (W60% / M40%)

The scene is set in Pantaleone's mansion in Madrid. The opening introduction is thought to have been composed by Mahler, inspired by the beginning of Weber's cantata, The First Sound, Op. 14 (1808).



As shown in the musical example, the low B-flat and subsequent D whole notes ring out in fortissimo. The opening has an ambiguous tonality, but with the next G, G minor dramatically resounds. Immediately following this, the elegant grace notes E and F appear, as if mocking the somber key, and strongly hint at The Three Pintos as a comedy. The chorus has a bright and cheerful Weber-like sound. The master of the house, Pantaleone, then appears.

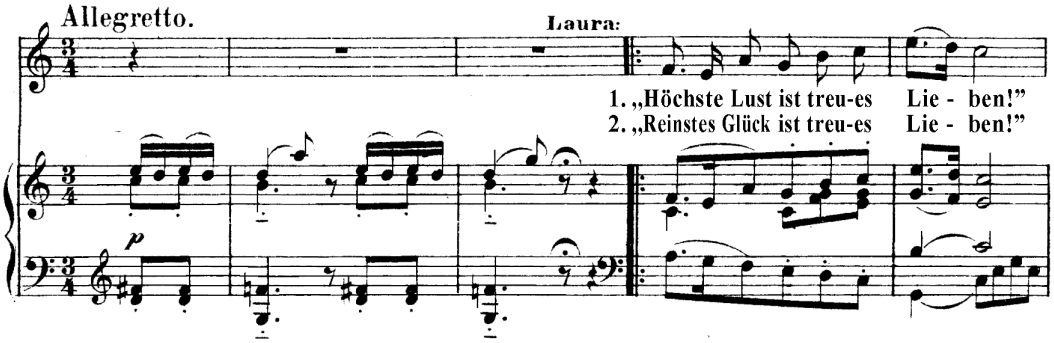


His theme is characterized by a descending scale progression with a stressed rhythm and a seventh-interval leap; the composition emphasizes effect over

melody. These motifs can also be found in Der Freischütz and Weber's Clarinet Concerto, and serve to highlight Pantaleone's dignity. The chorus in the second half also has a characteristically light and lively Weber style, and its similarity to the introductory chorus of Act I of Der Freischütz has been noted. From this point on, Act II has the character of a chamber opera with three soloists (Clarissa, Laura, and Gomez).

No. 9 Ariette Allegretto 2/4 (Laura) (W80% / M20%)

Laura, Clarissa's maid, is a significant role that requires a highly skilled performance. Although the part is designated for mezzo-soprano, it reaches a high C and requires coloratura technique.



This short arietta is a simple two-part A-B form; the first half is an adaptation of Weber's song, Keine Lust, Op. 71/1 (1819), and the second half is from Lucinda's Arietta, J194 (1816). Notably, while the original lyrics of Op. 71/1 are "Keine Lust ohn' treues Lieben" ("There is no joy without true love"), Laura's arietta sings, "Höchste Lust ist treues Lieben" ("The highest joy is true love") in the first verse and "Reinstes Glück ist treues Lieben" ("The purest happiness is true love") in the second.
The beginning is particularly noteworthy. Although the arietta is in C major, the melody starts on an F, and the two-bar prelude immediately preceding it begins in D major (V/V, or secondary dominant), with a high A sounding out of place. This passage is a clear display of Mahler’s playful spirit.

No. 10 Arie Andante. Tempo giusto 4/4 (Clarissa) (W 80% / M 20%)

Clarissa is the love interest of all three Pintos (the real one and the two "false" ones), making her the de facto female protagonist of this opera. She is the counterpart to Agathe in Der Freischütz. For this reason, a great aria comparable to Agathe's was expected for Clarissa, and Mahler, in turn, composed one carefully so as not to disrupt the mood. The theme itself is by Weber. The relaxed melody, which follows the accompanied recitative, and

the graceful development in the latter half are very Weber-like and successfully evoke "Agathe." The long phrases at a soft dynamic in the first half and the lengthy decorative figures in the second half demand a high level of musicality, technique, and stamina from the singer.

No. 11 Duett Mäßig, mit wechselndem Ausdruck 4/4
(Clarissa, Gomez) (W 50% / M 50%)

This is a love duet with the addition of Don Gomez, Clarissa's lover and one of the other "false Pintos." The first half of this piece is believed to be largely by Mahler. The music was composed to pre-existing lyrics, using techniques not seen in Weber's time, such as complex rhythms and frequent accidentals. In the second half, Clarissa and Gomez express their love for each other, and this part maintains a romantic sound typical of Weber. Overall, this piece, where the styles of Weber and Mahler interweave, can be said to symbolize the very essence of this opera as a "collaboration between the two composers." The opening tempo marking, "moderate tempo, with changing expression," calls for highly nuanced phrasing. This instruction is consistent with the late Romantic practice of "performing music as if telling a story."

No. 12 Terzett Finale Drängend 3/4
(Clarissa, Laura, Gomez) (W 50% / M 50%)

This is a tense scene where Laura rushes in to warn the two, "My father (Pantaleone) is coming! You must flee!" While Laura quickly explains the situation, Clarissa and Gomez continue to confirm their love, echoing the mood of the previous piece (No. 11). Laura's part is highly virtuosic and is thought to be Mahler's idea, as it does not align with Weber's compositional style. A lively dance is inserted in the middle section. This uses a typical Weber-esque three-beat accompaniment that is also common in No. 2 (Polacca), No. 5 (Seguidilla), and Ännchen's aria in Der Freischütz. At approximately four minutes, this piece is an unusually short finale for Act II. Drängend means "pressing" or "urgent."

Summary of Act II

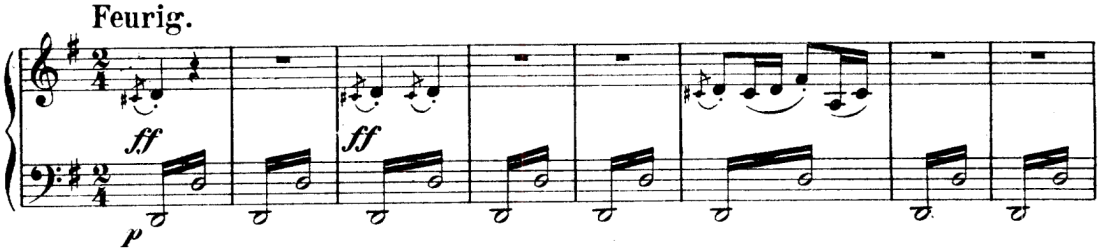
The evaluation of Act II of this opera has been divided. Indeed, with the exception of No. 8 (Pantaleone and the chorus) and No. 10 (Clarissa’s grand aria), each piece is short, lasting only about three to four minutes, and the act consists of a series of lighthearted pieces that serve more to introduce the

characters than to advance the drama. However, Mahler accomplished a highly sophisticated task: he respected the original intent of the commission to create a "Weber opera" and the audience's expectation of hearing "Weber's music," while also integrating cutting-edge late 19th-century musical language to create a cohesive whole. As a result, audiences can enjoy the music naturally without feeling any sense of incongruity.

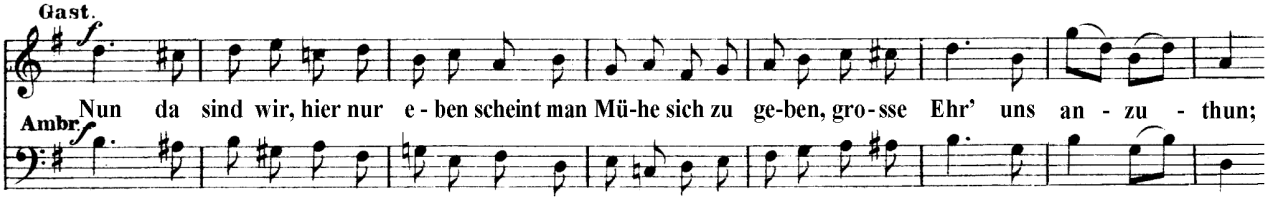
Act III — Pantaleone's Mansion, Grand Hall
No. 13 Lied and Chorus — Grazioso 2/4
(Laura, Female Ensemble) (W 90% / M 10%)
Laura and the waitresses are busy decorating for a wedding. This piece is an almost direct adaptation of No. 7 from Weber's Festive Cantata, Op. 58 (1818). Laura's solo part was originally sung by the female choir's Soli (one singer per part). Its bright rhythm is reminiscent of the "Hunters' Chorus" from Der Freischütz, which is especially famous.

No. 14. Duet Feurig — 2/4 (Gaston, Ambrosio) (W80%/M20%)

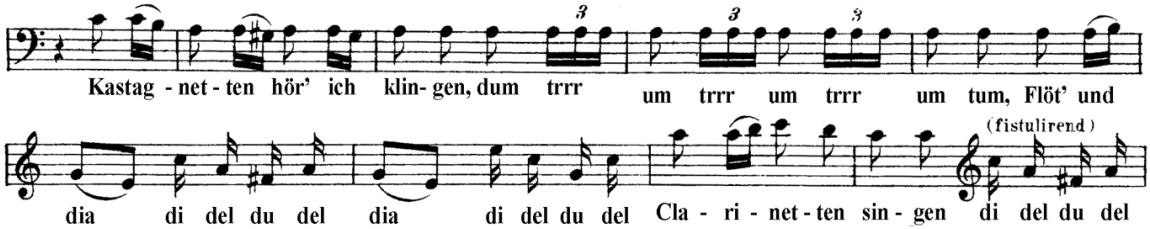
Gaston and Ambrosio, who did not appear in Act 2, finally arrive at Pantaleone's mansion. Mahler chose to introduce this scene in a completely unexpected way.



While music typically uses regular periodicities, like four-bar phrases, Mahler deliberately employs irregular and unpredictable phrasing to create tension and unease. This technique is also found in the final section of the first movement of his Symphony No. 1, which he was composing around the same time.



TThe bright theme sung by the two in thirds is taken from a Weber sketch. It reappears throughout Act 3, highlighting the comedic nature of Die drei Pintos.



The middle section features vocal improvisations and percussive expressions like "di del du del dem," which imitate a castanet and clarinet. This is a very unique historical example that could be considered a precursor to the "doo-wop" style of jazz scat singing first used by Louis Armstrong in the 1920s. This single piece powerfully demonstrates how the 28-year-old Mahler was ahead of his time. "Feurig" means "fiery, lively," or Con fuoco, Animato.

No. 15 Terzettino — *Gemächlich* 2/2

(Laura, Gaston, Ambrosio) (W 80% / M 20%)

This trio reuses Weber's Canon, J35 (1802). Ambrosio tries to seduce Laura, singing, "I am burning with passionate love for you, my lady," while Gaston warns her, "Watch out for sweet-talking men." Laura nonchalantly dismisses them, saying, "Nobody falls for those pick-up lines." During this period, Mahler was also using a canon that starts with a double bass in the third movement of his Symphony No. 1, suggesting that he was simultaneously conceiving multiple canons, including this one.

The canon, a classical technique used by Bach and Beethoven, was already considered outdated in Mahler's time. Nevertheless, the young Mahler found new value in this old form, actively incorporating it into his later Symphonies No. 3 and 5. The "new value" here is the restrained emotion and black humor used just before a comedic wedding. Although only Pinto is alienated from his peers in this opera, it can be interpreted as a satire and critique of the social systems and values of the time, mirroring Mahler's own experience of social discrimination as a Bohemian-born Jew. "Gemählich" means "comfortable" or Comodo.

No. 16 Ariette — *Tempo giusto* (Ambrosio) (W 80% / M 20%)

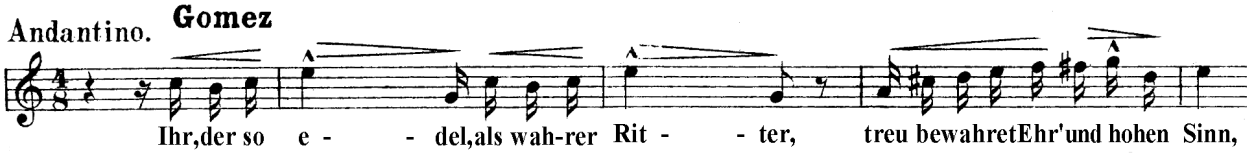
Ambrosio is Gaston's servant and has followed him from the very beginning. It's a surprising development that he gets to sing a full-fledged aria at this late stage of Act 3, especially since the protagonist Pinto, his rival Gomez who ends up with Clarissa, and even Pantaleone himself are not given a solo aria.

Ambrosio repeats his views on women—that it’s fine to have many lovers—three times in a simple Lied form. The "la-la-la-la" melody that appears at the end of each verse is a reappearance of the theme he sang in the No. 1 ensemble, bringing a sense of unity to the entire work. This piece is adapted from the song The Wife is a Caporese, J183 (1815), which Weber composed for Anton Fischer's musical play, The Satirical Aeneas. The vocal score indicates "giarto" for the tempo, which is likely a misspelling of "giusto" (meaning "in strict time").

No. 17 Rondo Terzett — *Andantino* 4/8

(Gaston, Gomez, Ambrosio) (W 80% / M 20%)

This piece is structured in a simple ABAB binary form. The opera's libretto has been criticized for structural problems from its early stages, and this trio is a prime example. Despite traveling to Madrid to marry Clarissa, Gaston's actions are somewhat unconvincing: in the first section, he is ready for a duel against his rival Gomez, but in the second section, he gives in to Gomez's pleas without a fight.



This melody reuses themes from Weber’s romance Elle était simple et douce, J292 (1824), and the song "Nurmahal's Song" from Lalla Rookh, J308 (1826). Gomez's opening melody (A) is very romantic and has a charm reminiscent of the later musical, The Student Prince. Gaston's responding melody (B) cites the rhythm of the "Hunters' Chorus" and develops motive (A). It's also worth noting the striking similarity between the ending of this piece and the ending of the third movement (Scherzo) of Mahler’s Symphony No. 5.

No. 18 Chorus — Vivace 4/4 (W80% / M20%)

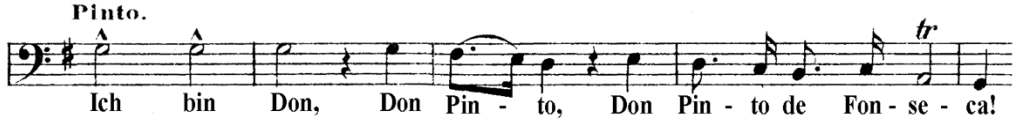
Following an original introduction by Mahler, the same melody from No. 8 at the beginning of Act 2 reappears. The servants compare Gaston and Gomez, trying to figure out which one is Clarissa’s fiancé. In the second half, Pantaleone and Clarissa appear, and the wedding is about to begin. Note that the score indicates a faster tempo than in No. 8.

No. 19 Women's Chorus — Pastorale 6/8 (W100% / M0%)

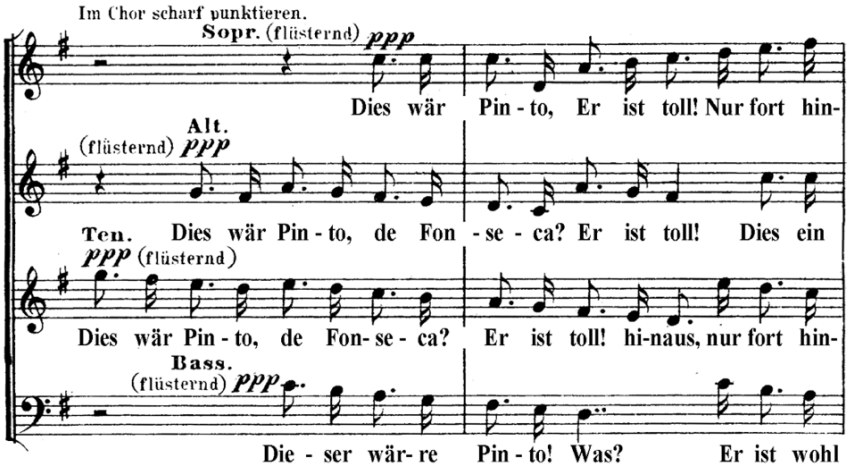
This piece is adapted from Weber’s incidental music for Today a Son of Saxony Shall Be Wed, J.289 (1822). Although the melody itself is different, the scene

is similar to the bridal chorus in Weber's Der Freischütz. The inclusion of this short female chorus serves to remind the audience that this work originally began as a Weber opera, which enhances the overall sense of unity.

No. 20 Finale A — Allegro 4/4 (W20% / M80%)
This finale is a section composed almost entirely by Mahler. The climax of the wedding is interrupted by Pinto's arrival, causing a chaotic scene that ends with him being chased out. It's notable that this is where Pinto's theme finally appears.



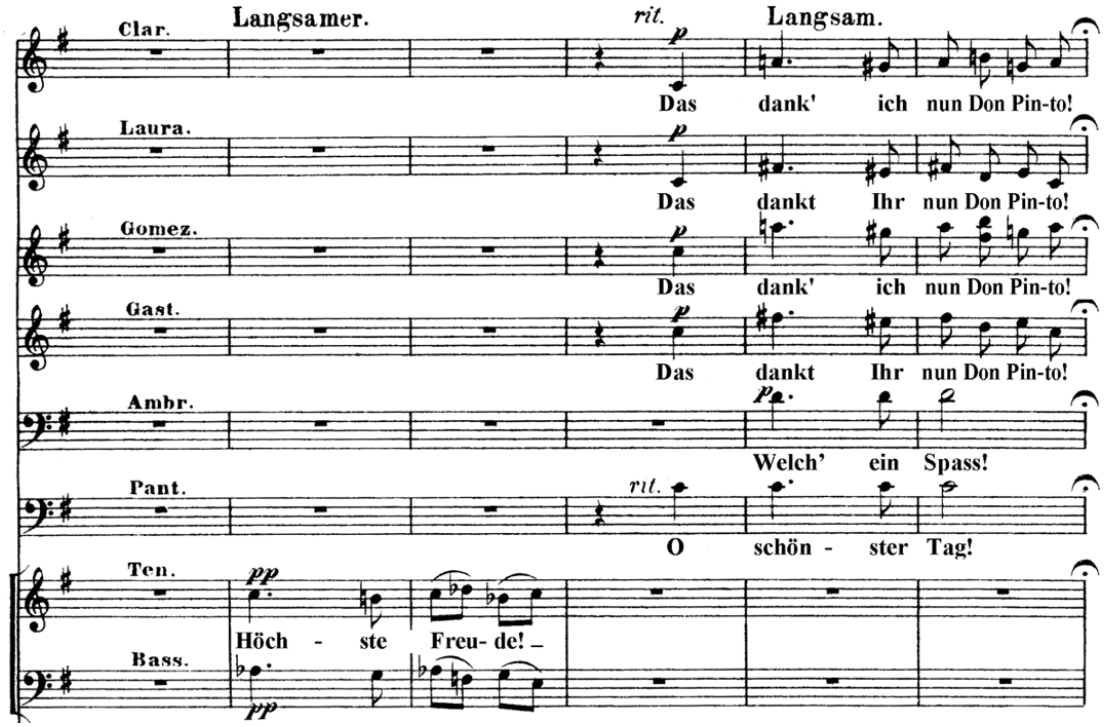
Though the audience would have expected to hear this theme when he first appeared in Act 1, its awkwardness perfectly captures Pinto's character. The music from the "lesson scene" in Act 1 (No. 6) also reappears, adding to the comedic effect. Pinto finds Gaston and becomes enraged, but when Gaston draws his sword, Pinto quickly loses his will to fight and retreats. While this is a comedy, this development does raise questions about the consistency of the libretto.



From a compositional standpoint, a canon is used with each voice entering at a different time, creating a humorous, "whispering" effect. This is an innovative use of the chorus as a sound effect, demonstrating Mahler's sonic experimentalism. Furthermore, as Pinto is being chased out, the meter shifts to 6/8 and the tempo doubles, increasing the tension. The call-and-response between the soloists and chorus, and the dramatic build-up using bold dissonance, are reminiscent of the finale of Beethoven's Fidelio.

No. 21 Finale B —*Feurig* 2/4 (W20% / M80%)
After Pinto's exit, Gaston and Gomez reveal their plan, and Pantaleone officially grants his permission for Gomez and Clarissa to marry. The story reaches its happy conclusion here. The characters once again sing and dance

to the cheerful theme from No. 14, and the stage is brought to a climax with the aforementioned scat.



Just before the conclusion, the stage pauses for a moment with a strange-sounding chord, accompanied by the line, "I thank Don Pinto for that!" The sound is like a car engine stalling and can be interpreted as an intentional jolt that reveals Mahler's sense of humor. The surprisingly abrupt ending that follows even leaves the listener with a feeling of anticlimax, showcasing Mahler's exceptional structural skill.

Summary

A detailed analysis of each number in the opera Die drei Pintos reveals the unique positions of Weber and Mahler. At the core of this work is the relationship between Weber, the father of German Romanticism who composed the immensely popular Der Freischütz, and Mahler, a young conductor and composer who was just starting his career in opera.

For the audience of the time and for Weber's grandson who commissioned the completion, Die drei Pintos was expected to be a new Weber opera. Mahler initially proceeded cautiously, almost like a "stand-in" for Weber, to meet these expectations. However, his unstoppable talent soon began to emerge, and his own unique personality became deeply embedded in the music.

A problem arose from this: Mahler couldn't deeply relate to the content of the opera. As a Jewish man from Bohemia, he was subjected to discrimination

and prejudice throughout his life and was often isolated from society. He may have seen a reflection of himself in the protagonist, Pinto. For Mahler, at that time and later in his career, the opera houses where he worked were extremely stressful environments, filled with daily conflicts. It is believed that he sought refuge from this reality by immersing himself in his own inner musical world, finding salvation through composition. In fact, it is well known that during his time as music director of the Vienna Court Opera, he would retreat to his composing hut on a lake in Salzkammergut during his summer vacations to dedicate himself to composing symphonies.

Despite being considered the greatest opera conductor of his time, Mahler never composed another opera of his own. One reason for this is likely that he was unwilling to compromise his own musical identity, which is often required in the operatic form. Given this background, it's understandable why Die drei Pintos, even though it is a collaboration with Weber, is considered Mahler's only opera. There's no doubt that his first experience with "opera composition" profoundly influenced his subsequent creative work.