

ON THE NATURAL  
HISTORY OF DESTRUCTION



ERIC SHANFIELD



## ON THE NATURAL HISTORY OF DESTRUCTION

Eric Shanfield | ENS.2008.7 | 13'

text by W. G. Sebald and Walter Benjamin

I. Today it is hard to form an even partly adequate idea of the extent of the devastation suffered by the cities of Germany in the last years of the Second World War... (W. G. Sebald)

II. There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. (Walter Benjamin)

III. Speer describes Hitler at a dinner... (W. G. Sebald)

Baritone

2 Violas

*On the Natural History of Destruction* has its origins in an emotional night following a devastating fight with someone I was very close to. Desolate, in the early hours of the morning I pulled from a shelf W.G. Sebald's essays on air war and literature, whose disquieting bleakness and quotidian brutality seemed to match my own feelings at the time, and somehow began to set them to music. The entire piece was written in the hours between midnight and sunrise by hand on manuscript paper, though I barely remember doing it.

In this work an emotionless male voice declaims upon a limited range of pitches made unstable by quarter-tones while two violas numbly repeat phrases broken by the rhythms of the voice. The first movement sets the opening passage by Sebald ruminating on the ways in which people choose to forget pain and destruction, the second dramatizes the famous essay by Walter Benjamin on the angel of history, *Angelus Novus* (as quoted by Sebald), and the last movement sees Speer recalling Hitler's terrible vision of the obliteration of London by his bombers.

This work should be performed in darkness, performers spotlit, violists either flanking the singer at the beginning and at the start of each movement gradually moving away, abandoning him, or starting at the edges of the stage and gradually crowding him until they form a claustrophobic group at the center of the stage.

## ON THE NATURAL HISTORY OF DESTRUCTION

W. G. Sebald (I, III) & Walter Benjamin (II)

### I

Today it is hard to form an even partly adequate idea of the extent of the devastation suffered by the cities of Germany in the last years of the Second World War, still harder to think about the horrors involved in that devastation. It is true that the strategic bombing surveys published by the Allies, together with the records of the Federal German Statistics Office and other official sources, show that the Royal Air Force alone dropped a million tons of bombs on enemy territory; it is true that of the 131 towns and cities attacked, some only once and some repeatedly, many were almost entirely flattened, that about 600,000 German civilians fell victim to the air raids, and that three and a half million homes were destroyed, while at the end of the war seven and a half million people were left homeless, and there were 31.1 cubic meters of rubble for every person in Cologne and 42.8 meters for every inhabitant of Dresden—but we do not grasp what it actually all meant. The destruction, on a scale without historical precedent, entered the annals of the nation, as it set about rebuilding itself, only in the form of vague generalizations. It seems to have left scarcely a trace of pain behind in the collective consciousness, it has been largely obliterated from the retrospective understanding of those affected, and it never played any appreciable part in the discussion of the internal constitution of our country.

### II

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

### III

Speer describes Hitler at a dinner in the Reich Chancellery in 1940 imagining the total destruction of the capital of the British Empire: “Have you ever seen a map of London? It is so densely built that one fire alone would be enough to destroy the whole city, just as it did over two hundred years ago. Göring will start fires all over London, fires everywhere, with countless incendiary bombs of an entirely new type. Thousands of fires. They will unite in one huge blaze over the whole area. Göring has the right idea: high explosives don’t work, but we can do it with incendiaries; we can destroy London completely. What will their firemen be able to do once it’s really burning?” This intoxicating vision of destruction coincides with the fact that the real pioneering achievements in bomb warfare—Guernica, Warsaw, Belgrade, Rotterdam—were the work of the Germans. And when we think of the nights when the fires raged in Cologne and Hamburg and Dresden, we ought also to remember that as early as August 1942, when the vanguard of the Sixth Army had reached the Volga and not a few were dreaming of settling down after the war on an estate in the cherry orchards beside the quiet Don, the city of Stalingrad, then swollen (like Dresden later) by an influx of refugees, was under assault from twelve hundred bombers, and that during this raid alone, which caused elation among the German troops stationed on the opposite bank, forty thousand people lost their lives.

# ON THE NATURAL HISTORY OF DESTRUCTION

I. Today it is hard to form an even partly adequate idea of the extent of the devastation suffered by the cities of Germany in the last years of the Second World War...

W. G. Sebald

Eric Shanfield

$\text{♩} = 126$  Deadened  
*mf* parlando non vib. sempre

Baritone

To - day it is hard to form an e - ven

non vib. sempre

Viola (Left)

*mf*

non vib. sempre

Viola (Right)

*mf*

5

Bar.

part - ly ad - e - quate i - dea of the ex - tent of

Vla. L

Vla. R

9

Bar.

the de - va - sta - tion suf - fered by the ci - ties of Ger - ma - ny

Vla. L

Vla. R

13

Bar.

in the last years of the Se - cond World War, still

Vla. L

Vla. R


18

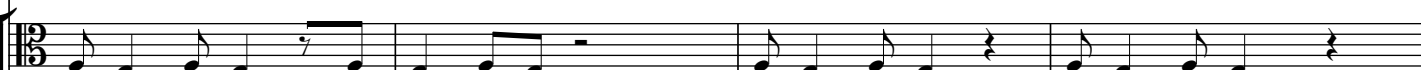
Bar.   
hard-er to think a-bout the hor-rors in-volved in that de-va-sta-tion.


Vla. L 

Vla. R 


22

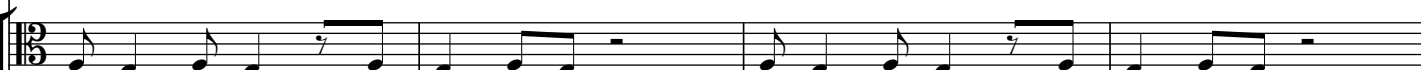
Bar.   
It is true that the stra-

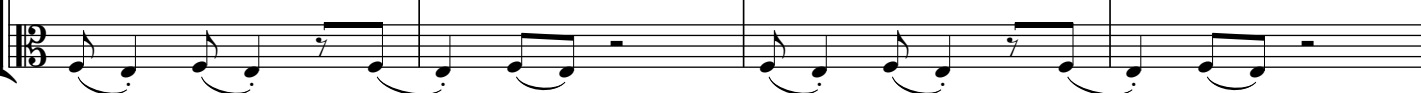
Vla. L 

Vla. R 

26

Bar.   
te-gic bomb-ing sur-veys

Vla. L 

Vla. R 

30

Bar.   
pub-lished by the Al-lies, to-ge-ther with the re-cords of the

Vla. L 

Vla. R 

34 *meccanico* **11:8**

Bar. Fe-der-al Ger-man Sta-tis-tics Of-fice and o-ther of - fi - cial sour-ces, show that the <sup>3</sup>

Vla. L

Vla. R

38

Bar. Roy - al Air - Force a - lone dropped a mil - lion tons - of bombs on e - ne-my ter - ri - to - ry; <sup>5</sup>

Vla. L

Vla. R

42

Bar. it is - true that of the

Vla. L

Vla. R

46 *clipped* **norm.**

Bar. one hun-dred thir - ty one towns and ci - ties at - tacked, <sup>3</sup>


pizz. arco



Vla. L

pizz. arco


Vla. R


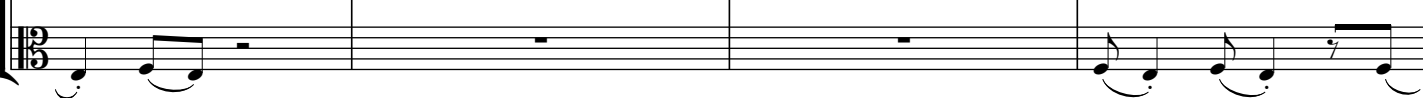
50

Bar.   
some on - ly once, and some re - peat - ed - ly,

Vla. L   
Vla. R 

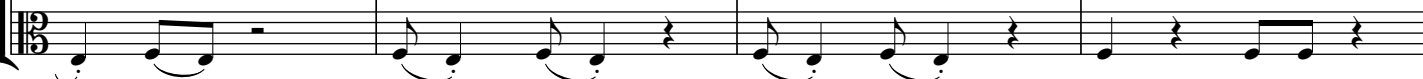
54

Bar.   
ma - ny were al - most en - ti - re - ly flat - tened,

Vla. L   
Vla. R 

58

Bar.   
that a - bout six hund - red  
pizz.

Vla. L   
Vla. R   
pizz.

62

Bar.   
thou - sand Ger - man ci - vil - ians fell

Vla. L   
arco

Vla. R   
arco



66

Bar.   
 vic - tim to the air raids, and that three and a half mil - lion

Vla. L   
 pizz.

Vla. R   
 pizz.

70

Bar.   
 homes were des - troyed, while at the end of the war\_\_

Vla. L   
 arco

Vla. R   
 arco

74

Bar.   
 se - ven and a half mil - lion peo - ple were left home - less,

Vla. L   
 pizz. arco

Vla. R   
 pizz. arco

78

Bar.   
 and there were thir - ty one point one cu - bic me - ters of

Vla. L   
 pizz. arco

Vla. R   
 pizz. arco



98 *mf* parlando non vib. sempre *p* espress.

Bar. *mf* *p*  
grasp what it

Vla. L *mf* *p*

Vla. R *mf* *p*

102 *mf* parlando non vib. sempre

Bar. *mf*  
ac - tu - al - ly all meant.

Vla. L *mf*

Vla. R *mf*

106

Bar.

Vla. L

Vla. R

110


Bar. *mf*  
The de - struc - tion, on a scale with - out his - to - ri - cal pre - ce - dent,


Vla. L


Vla. R



130

Bar.    
 It seems to have left scarce - ly a trace of pain

Vla. L 

Vla. R 


134

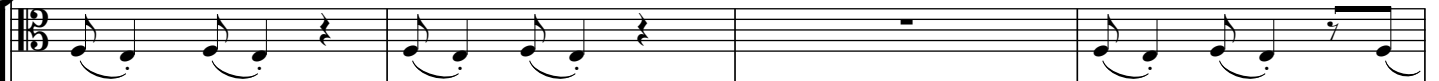
Bar.    
 be - hind in

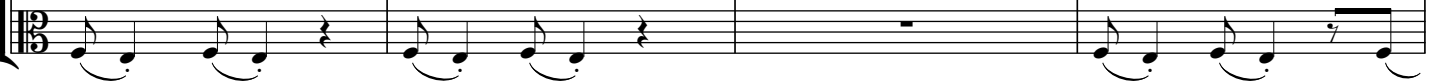
Vla. L 

Vla. R 


138

Bar.    
 the col - lec - tive con - scious - ness,

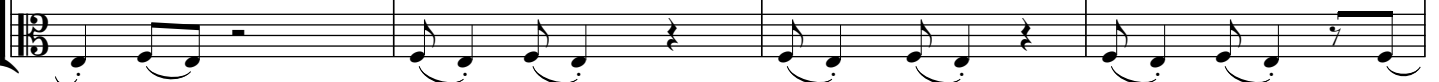
Vla. L 

Vla. R 

142

Bar.    
 it has been large - ly o - blit - er - a - ted

Vla. L 

Vla. R 

146

Bar. from the re - tro - spec - tive un - der - stand - ing of those

Vla. L

Vla. R

150

Bar. af - fect - ed, and it ne - ver

Vla. L

Vla. R

154

Bar. played a - ny ap - pre - cia - ble part in the dis - cus - sion of the in -

Vla. L

Vla. R

158

Bar. ter - nal con - sti - tu - tion of our coun - try.

Vla. L

Vla. R

# ON THE NATURAL HISTORY OF DESTRUCTION

## II. There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*.

Walter Benjamin

Eric Shanfield

$\text{♩} = 144$  Desolate *mf parlando non vib. sempre*

Baritone

There is a pic - ture by Klee

III

Viola (Left) *mf*

III

Viola (Right) *mf*

5

Bar.

called An - ge - lus No - vus

Vla. L

Vla. R

10

Bar.

It shows an an - gel who seems a - bout to move a - way.

Vla. L

Vla. R

14

Bar.

from some-thing he stares at.

Vla. L

Vla. R

19

Bar. 
  
 His eyes are wide, his mouth is o - pen, his

Vla. L

Vla. R

23

Bar. 
  
 wings are spread.

Vla. L

Vla. R 
  
*p*

28

Bar. 
  
 This is how the an - gel of his - to - ry must look.

Vla. L 
  
*mf*

Vla. R 
  
*mf*

33

Bar. 
  
 His face is turned toward the — past.

Vla. L

Vla. R



38

Bar. 

Where we per - ceive a chain of e - vents,

Vla. L 

Vla. R 

43


Bar. 

he sees\_ one sin - gle ca - tas - tro - phe

Vla. L 


Vla. R 

47

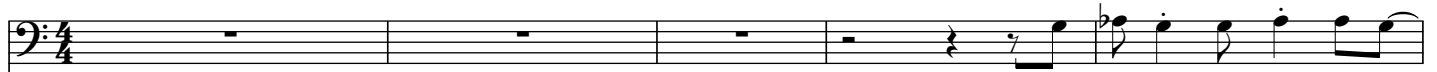
Bar. 

which keeps pi - l - ing wreck - age u - pon wreck - age and hurls it in front of his feet...

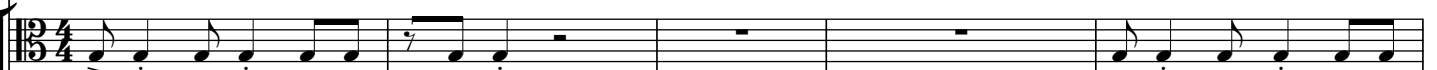
Vla. L 


Vla. R 

50


Bar. 


The an - gel would like to stay,


Vla. L 

Vla. R 

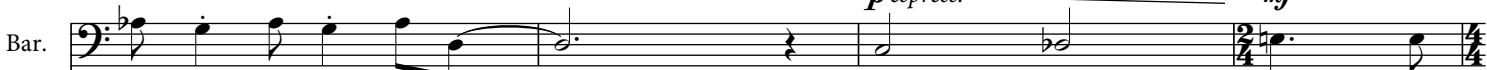
55

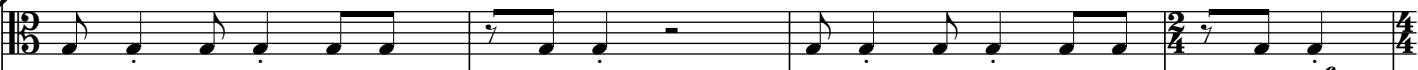
Bar. 

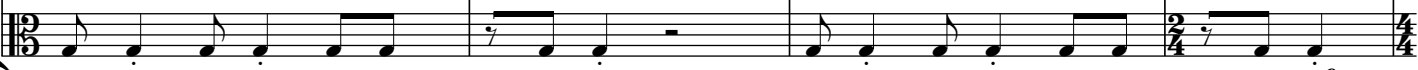
Vla. L 

Vla. R 

59

Bar. 

Vla. L 

Vla. R 

63

Bar. 

Vla. L 

Vla. R 

68 *mf parlando non vib. sempre*

Bar. 

Vla. L 

Vla. R 

72 *mf* *mf espress.* *f*

Bar. that the an - gel can no long - er close them.

Vla. L *mf*

Vla. R *mf*

76 *mp espress.*

Bar. This

Vla. L *f* *mp*

Vla. R *f* *mp*

81

Bar. storm ir - - - re

Vla. L

Vla. R

86 *f* *mp*

Bar. sis - ti - bly pro - pels him in - - -

Vla. L *f* *mp*

Vla. R *f* *mp*

90 *mf parlando non vib. sempre*

Bar. *mf*

Vla. L

Vla. R

94 *mf espress.*

Bar. *mf*

Vla. L

Vla. R

98 *mf parlando non vib. sempre*

Bar. *mf*

Vla. L

Vla. R

102 **non rit.**

Bar. *mf*

Vla. L

Vla. R

# ON THE NATURAL HISTORY OF DESTRUCTION

## III. Speer describes Hitler at a dinner...

W. G. Sebald

Eric Shanfield

$\text{♩} = 132$  Affectless *mf* poco vib. sempre

Baritone

Viola (Left)

Viola (Right)

4

Bar.

Vla. L

Vla. R

7

Bar.

Vla. L

Vla. R

10

Bar.

Vla. L

Vla. R

Speer...

des-cribes Hit-ler at a

din-ner in the Reich chan-cel-lery in nine-teen

for-ty i-ma-gi-ning the to-tal des-truc-tion of the ca-pi-tal of the Bri-tish

13 *mf parlando malato*

Bar. 

Em- pire: "Have you e - ver seen a

Vla. L 

Vla. R 

16

Bar. 

map of Lon - don? It is so dense - ly built\_ that

Vla. L 

Vla. R 

19

Bar. 

one fi - re a - lone

Vla. L 

Vla. R 

22

Bar. 

would be e - nough to des - troy the whole ci - ty, just as it did\_ o - ver two hun - dred

Vla. L 

Vla. R 



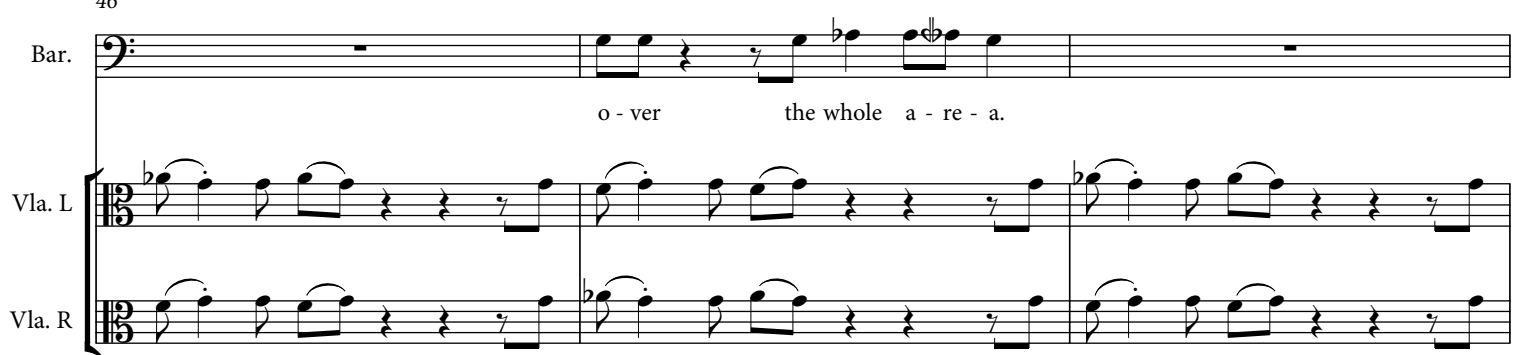
40

Bar. 

43

Bar. 
  
*mf*  
 They will ig - nite... in one huge blaze

46

Bar. 
  
 o - ver the whole a - re - a.

49

Bar. 
  
 Gö - ring has the right i - dea:...



52

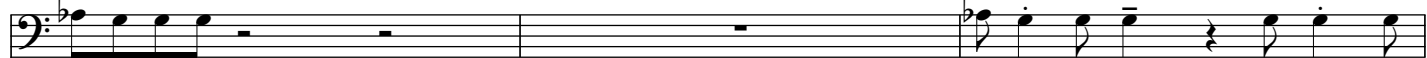
Bar. 

high ex-plo-sives don't work but we can do\_\_\_ it with in -


Vla. L 


Vla. R 

55

Bar. 

cen-di - ar - ies; we can des-troy Lon-don com

Vla. L 

Vla. R 

*mp* *mf* *mp* *mf*

58

Bar. 

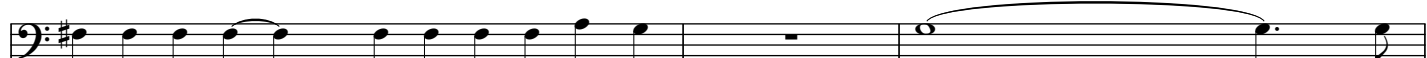
plete - ly. What will their fi - re-men be

Vla. L 

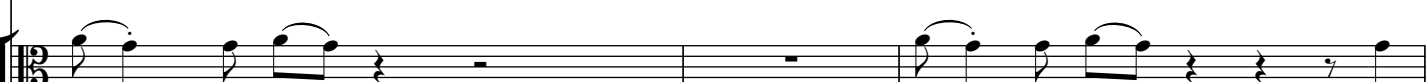
Vla. R 

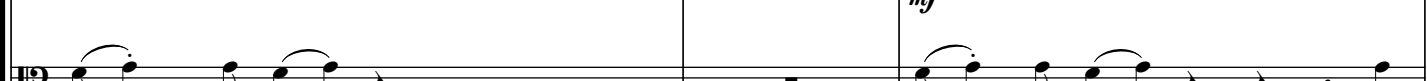
*mp* *mp*

61

Bar. 


a - ble to do\_\_\_ once it's real - ly burn- ing?" This\_\_\_\_\_ in -

Vla. L 

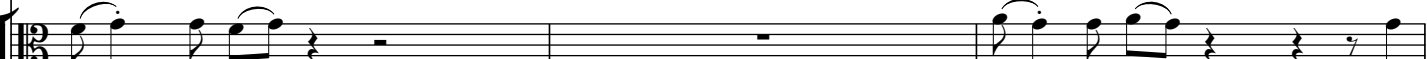
Vla. R 

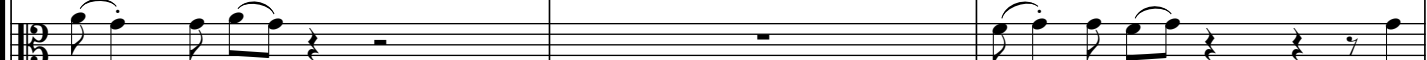
*mf poco vib. sempre* *mf* *mf*

64

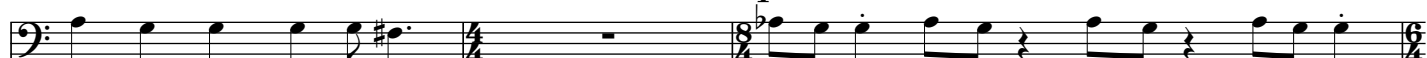
Bar. 

tox - i - ca - ting vi - sion\_ of des - truc - tion co - in - cides with the fact that the real pi - o - neer - ing a -


Vla. L 

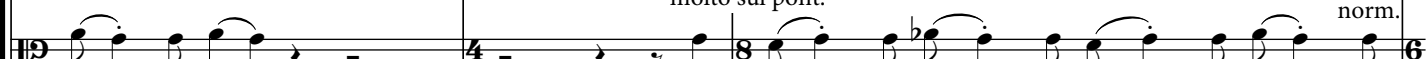
Vla. R 

67

Bar. 

chiev - ments in bomb war - fare Guer - ni - ca, War - saw, Bel - grade, Rot - ter - dam

Vla. L 

Vla. R 

*p* *molto sul pont.* *mf* *norm.*

70

Bar. 

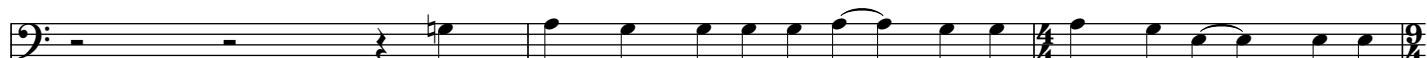
were the work of the Ger - mans.

Vla. L 


Vla. R 


*mf*

73


Bar. 

And when we think of the nights when the fi - res raged in Co -

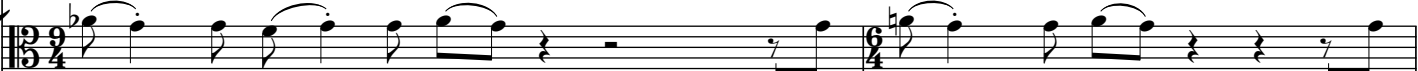
Vla. L 

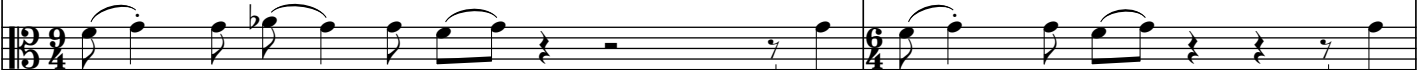
Vla. R 

76


Bar. 

logne and Ham-burg and Dres-den, we ought al-so to re-mem-ber


Vla. L 


Vla. R 

78

Bar. 

that as ear-ly as Au-gust nine-teen for-ty two,

Vla. L 

Vla. R 

81

Bar. 

when the van-guard of the Sixth

Vla. L 

Vla. R 

84

Bar. 

Ar-my had reached the Vol-ga,

Vla. L 

Vla. R 



101 *p* *mf*

Bar. was un - der as - sault by twelve hun - dred

Vla. L

Vla. R

104 *p cresc.*

Bar. bomb-ers, and that dur-ing this raid a - lone, which caused e - la - tion

Vla. L

Vla. R

108 *f*

Bar. a - mong the Ger - man troops sta-tioned on the op - po - site bank,

Vla. L

Vla. R *pp*

112 *pp sotto voce parlando non vib.*

Bar. for - ty thou-sand peo-ple lost their lives.

Vla. L *pizz.* *pp*

Vla. R