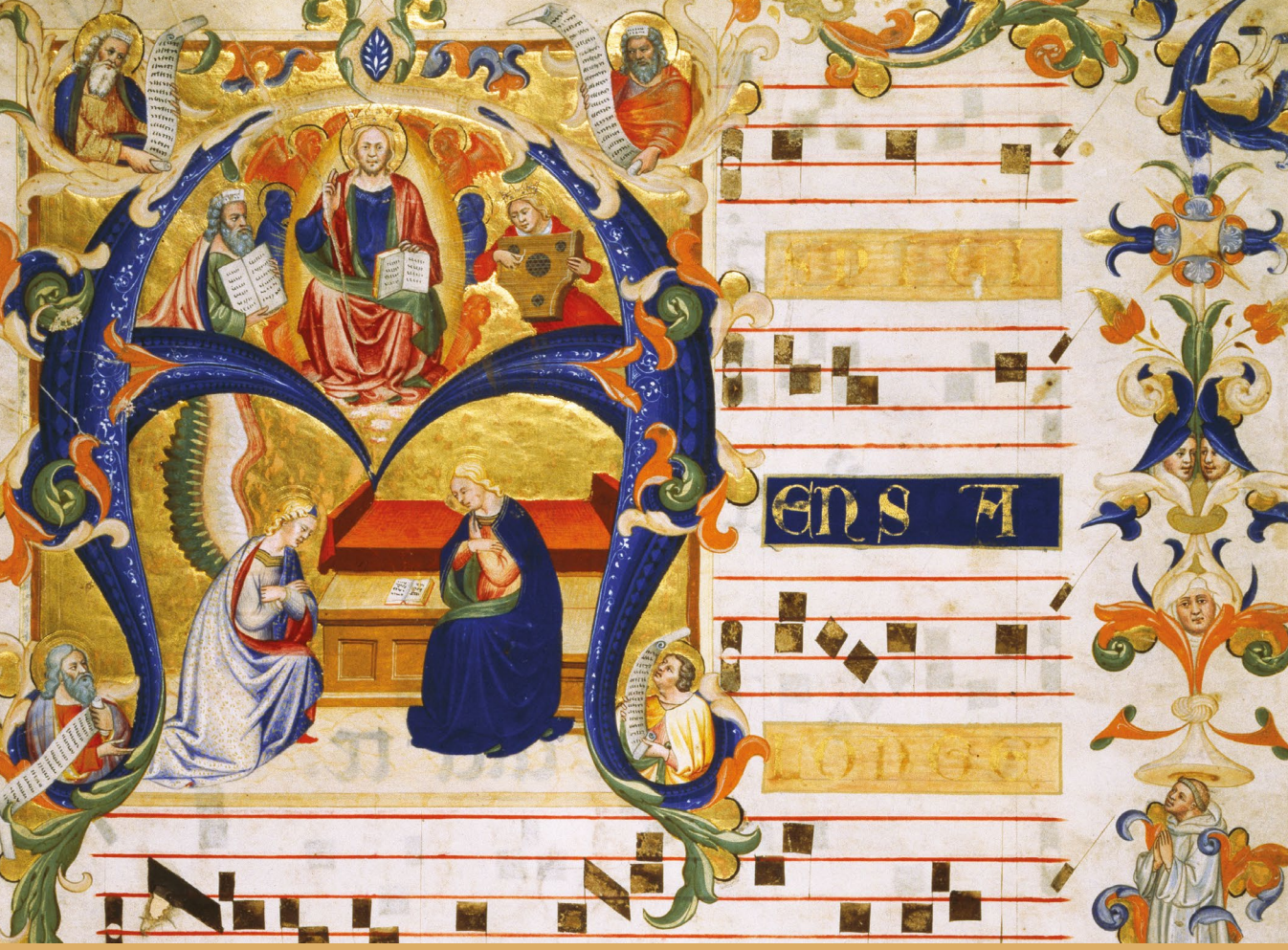

Annunciations

Sacred Music for the Twenty-First Century

Edited by George Corbett

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6. Composing for a Non-Professional Chapel Choir: Challenges and Opportunities

Tom Wilkinson

Writing sacred music for a non-professional chapel choir presents the composer with many challenges. One important theme of this discussion is that, in the most successful choral writing, challenges are treated as opportunities. Clichéd though it may appear, I hope to demonstrate that it is true. The most common circumstance is that the solution to a technical problem will present an opportunity for a mode of expression that would not otherwise have occurred. The first half of the chapter explores this principle, initially with reference to Benjamin Britten's 'Rejoice in the Lamb'. The majority of the musical examples, however, are taken from the CD, *Annunciations: Sacred Choral Music for the 21st Century*, and include several ingenious passages by the six TheoArtistry composers. The second half of the chapter focuses on harmony in some detail, citing James MacMillan's '*Ave Maria*'. Arguably, the challenges and opportunities afforded by harmony are especially significant for composers today.

While I take a broadly analytical approach, it will become evident that my perspective is that of a performer; specifically, that of a choral conductor with several years' experience of observing singers' responses to a wide range of sacred music. A discussion of what constitutes 'difficulty' from the performer's perspective leads to a breaking-down of this concept into two distinct parameters: practical difficulty and intelligibility of expression. A given passage of music might be practically challenging in some way, while its expressive purpose — emphatic textual declamation, say — might be obvious. In my experience, choral singers will readily engage with moderate technical challenges, provided that they can discern an underlying expressive purpose in the music. Such formulation comes close to being paradigmatic of a rewarding rehearsal process. Nonetheless, composers should not be afraid to

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produce music that is easy to learn: such repertoire is invaluable, not least because a choir's morale and confidence can be uplifted by the experience of rapidly learning and performing a new piece.

On the theme of expression, my experience is that singers admire pieces for what I would term 'expressive coherence': the ability to communicate emotive purpose. Britten's 'A Hymn to the Virgin' has enduring popularity with singers due to the unique sense of prayerful intensity it creates. This property of the work might alternatively be described as its 'expressive essence'.[1] Indeed, several terms and phrases in common musical parlance today seem related to this concept, such as 'sound-world' and 'the core of the piece'. From this perspective, today's composers are in a difficult position: the rich inheritance of sacred music is bound to seem intimidating. Moreover, the climate of purported artistic freedom is as much a curse as a blessing: with no universally accepted norms of musical language either to adopt or from which to deviate, achieving expressive coherence is a significant compositional challenge. One underlying theme of this chapter is the various possible responses to this problem.

It is useful to approach this theme systematically, by identifying some key parameters of choral music:

- voice-leading (the 'horizontal' aspect of music);
- harmony (for the purposes of this chapter, I take this to mean the 'vertical' aspect of music);
- individual rhythm;
- ensemble rhythm;
- metre;
- texture;
- text.

From a choral singer's perspective, rewarding pieces are often characterized by varied levels of difficulty across the parameters listed above. In other words, singers enjoy a challenge, but find it difficult to cope with being challenged from many angles simultaneously. Given the importance that Britten attached to writing music for amateurs, it is perhaps unsurprising that his music provides such an apposite starting-point from this perspective. His 'Rejoice in the Lamb' begins ominously, with a single held organ note (middle C); the choir subsequently enters on that same note

1 The notion that a musical work has a unique 'expressive essence' is, arguably, part and parcel of the modern 'work' concept, by which a piece of music is conceived essentially as a work of art. Lydia Goehr has argued — controversially — that this concept came of age *c.* 1800; it is worth remembering that much of the corpus of Western sacred music originated prior to this, thus providing a window onto earlier implied musical ideologies. See Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

(Fig. 6.1). The resultant lack of harmony (there is only one note) is rather unsettling for the listener, since it gives no clue as to the sound-world that might develop. From a practical perspective, though, one could hardly imagine a more approachable opening. In terms of the parameters listed above, there is nothing challenging.

Probably, the ever-practical Britten aims to give the choir a gentle start to a relatively long and challenging piece. The simplicity of the material leaves the singers free to focus on rewarding aspects of choral performance such as ensemble (i.e. 'togetherness'), vocal production, and blend. Britten's genius is to provide music that is intrinsically mysterious — as a result of the lack of harmony — and that enables the performers to enhance this property, by imbuing its delivery with expressive intensity.

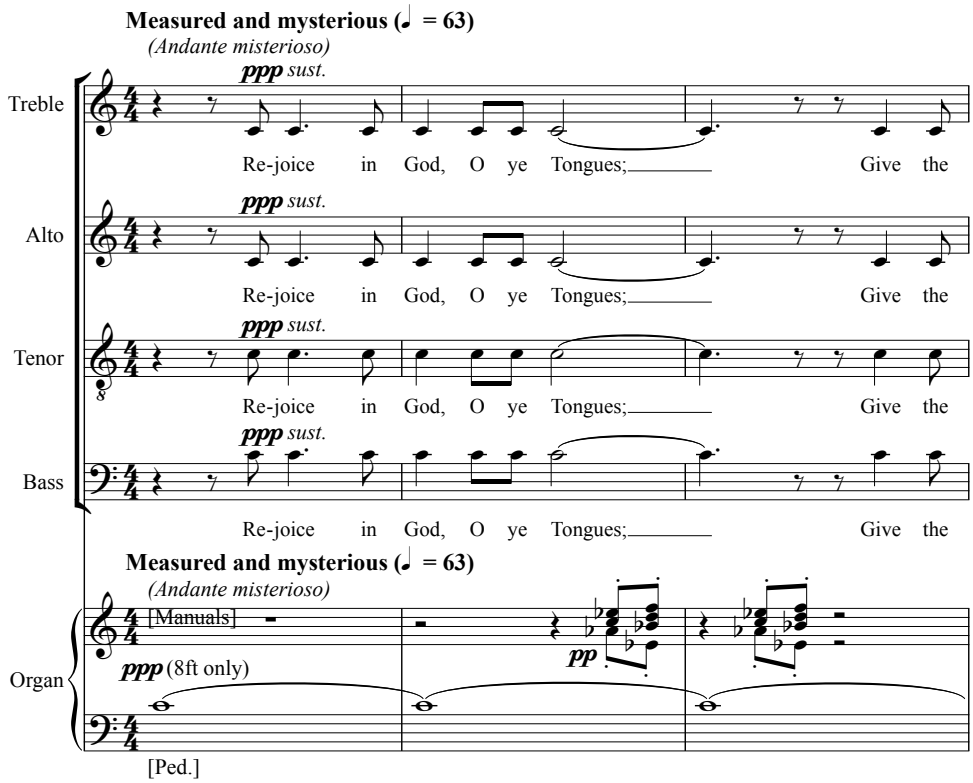

Fig. 6.1 Benjamin Britten, 'Rejoice in the Lamb '(1943), bars 1–3. © Boosey & Hawkes.

In the second section, 'Let Nimrod, the mighty hunter', the vocal parts are characterized by metrical irregularity and fast-moving text (Fig. 6.2), making the music more challenging for the singers. Probably in recognition of this, Britten ensures that the music is straightforward in other ways: the 'horizontal' motion is diatonic and largely step-wise, and there is a unison texture. Thus, the singers' mental energies can be focused on the rhythmical and textual complexities.

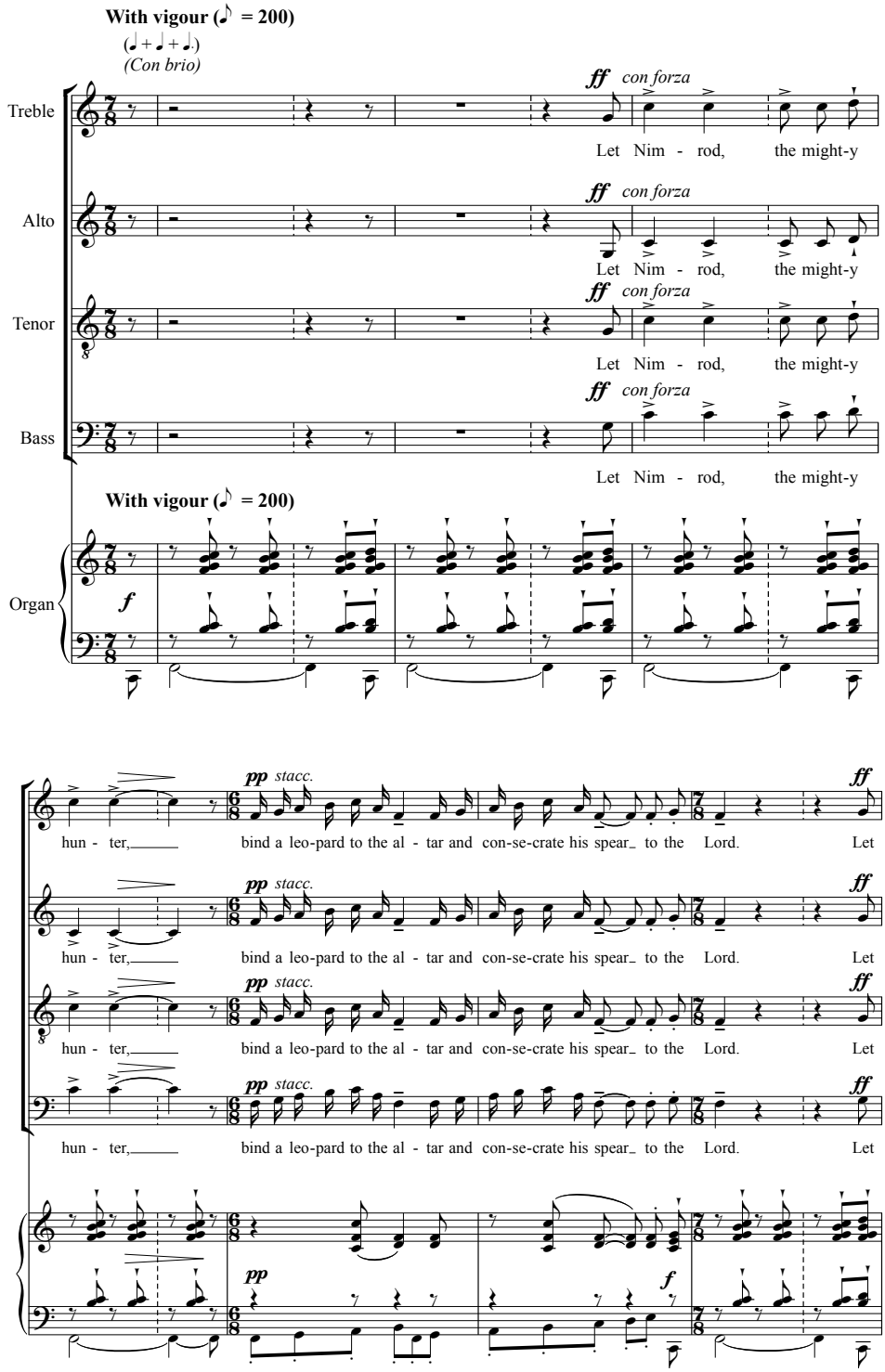

Fig. 6.2 Benjamin Britten, 'Rejoice in the Lamb' (1943), bars 19–25. © Boosey & Hawkes.

The tables turn for the third section, 'Hallelujah from the heart of God' (Fig. 6.3). Here, the relatively complex four-part texture is enabled, as it were, by the motivic economy: each voice-part sings music based on a simple scalic/triadic figure, creating an imitative effect. The simple diatonic chords heard in the right hand of the organ part provide a stable backdrop for the singers.

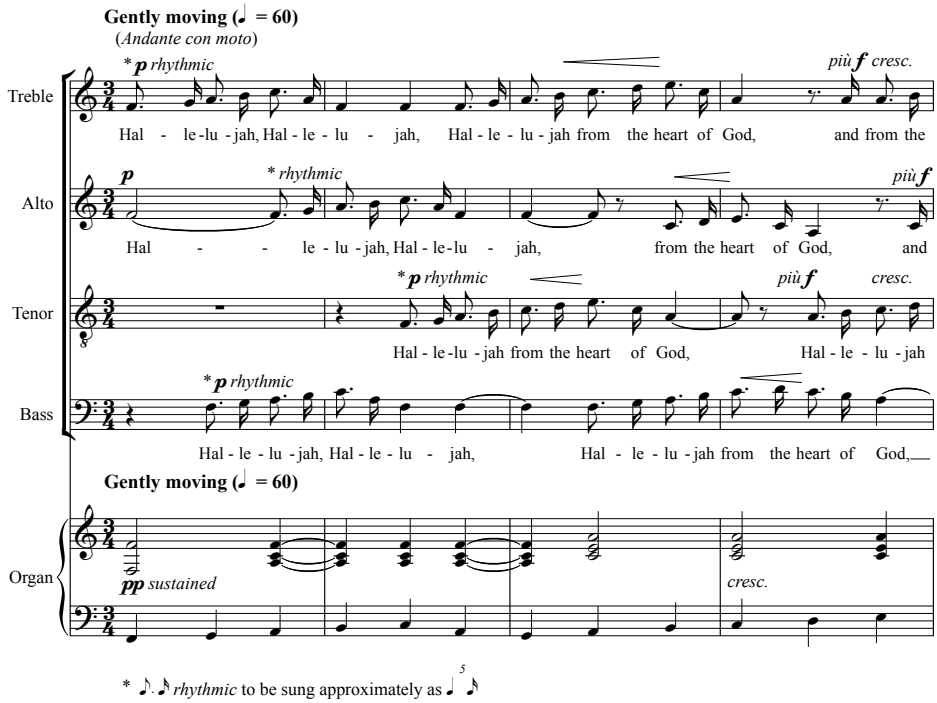

Fig. 6.3 Benjamin Britten, 'Rejoice in the Lamb '(1943), bars 60–63. © Boosey & Hawkes.

Britten's practical approach is also evident in the more challenging sections of the work ('For I am in twelve Hardships' and 'For the Shawm rhimes are lawn fawn and the like'), which are underpinned by pedal points (bass drones) on the organ, providing harmonic stability. In sum, from a singer's perspective, 'Rejoice in the Lamb' is characterized by achievable challenges.

While the human voice is a remarkably flexible instrument, there is certainly such a thing as idiomatic vocal writing; Figures 6.2 and 6.3 contain useful examples. The voice likes to move in small intervals; usually within an octave, and with a predominance of seconds and thirds. Passages containing successive leaps of more than an octave, or indeed remaining on the same pitch for an extended period, are physically challenging (and the former is also mentally challenging). This is not to say that such writing must be avoided at all costs, but rather that it should be treated with caution. The composer of vocal music has one significant advantage over the composer of instrumental music: they can easily test what they have written by singing it themselves. Of course,

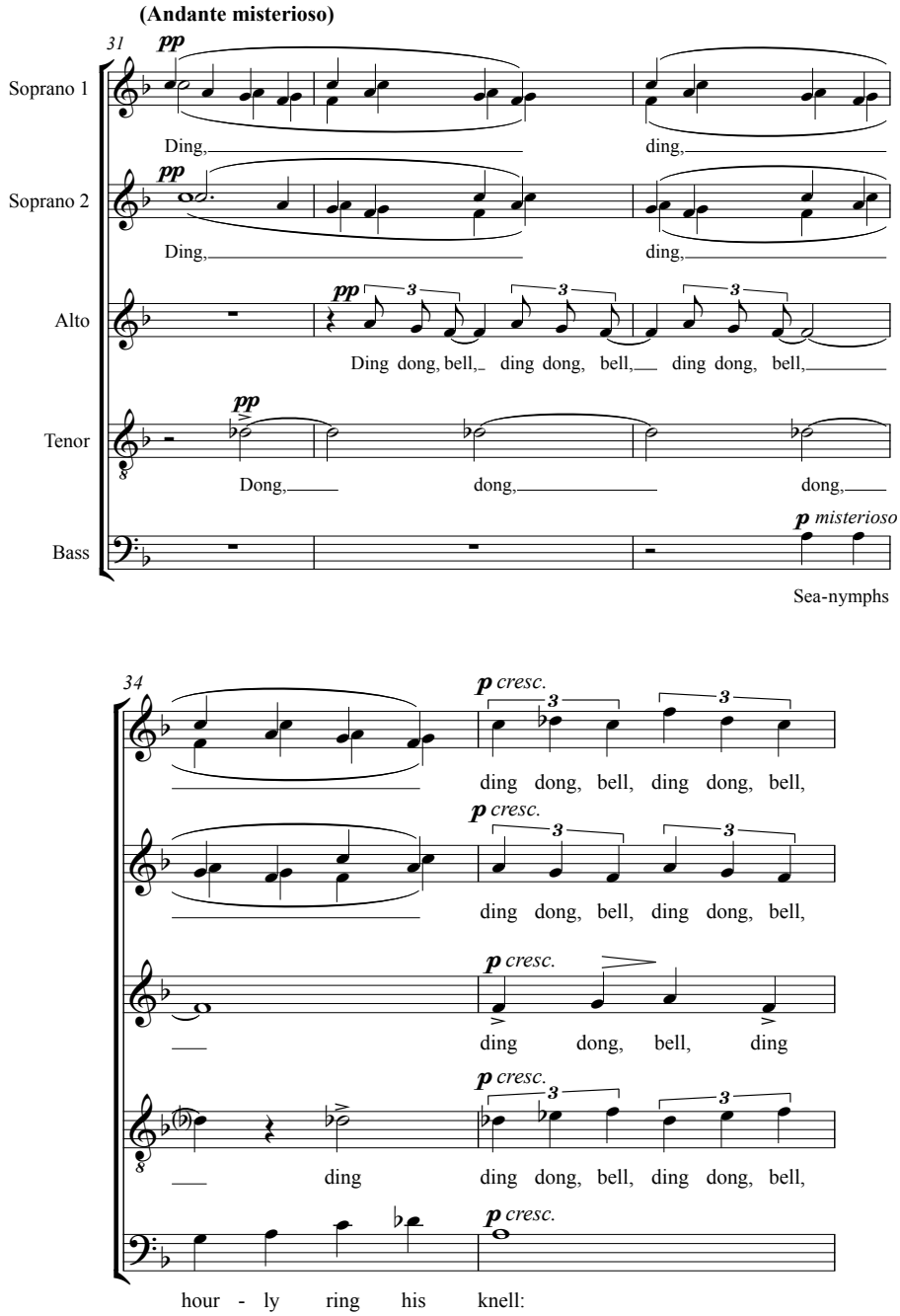

Fig. 6.4 Ralph Vaughan Williams, 'Three Shakespeare Songs', I. 'Full fathom five' (1951), bars 31–35.
© Oxford University Press.

a trained singer will have greater technical ability than a non-singer; nevertheless, self-testing is a broadly reliable route to idiomatic writing.

Another important consideration for the composer of vocal and choral music is pitching. While many instrumentalists locate pitches mechanically — by pressing the appropriate key on the piano, for example — the singer must always conceive the correct note mentally, in relation to what has gone before. (This does not apply to the tiny percentage of singers who possess 'perfect pitch'; these fortunate people can find any note 'out of thin air'). Therefore, the composer must consider harmonic context. Naturally, the more complex or dissonant the harmony, the greater the challenge that pitching presents. Britten seems to avoid anything more than mild dissonance in the choral writing of 'Rejoice in the Lamb'. Therefore, in order to consider how more pronounced dissonance might be approached accessibly, I shall turn to an example by Ralph Vaughan Williams': 'Full fathom five', from 'Three Shakespeare Songs'. The passage in Figure 6.4 begins on a unison C, in the soprano parts; the dissonance then increases steadily, achieving a particularly beautiful cluster chord on the third beat of bar 33. Had the composer begun the section with this chord, even professional singers would find the necessary pitching to be extremely challenging, or impossible. Aware of this issue, Vaughan Williams provides each voice-part with a clear reference-point: the tenors can pitch their D-flat from the sopranos' C, while the altos and basses can take their entry note directly from the soprano parts. Crucially, the melodic (i.e. 'horizontal') intervals within any given part are generally diatonic and straightforward. The soprano and alto parts are constructed as repeating units of four and three notes respectively; these simple cells are layered (i.e. presented out-of-phase with each other), thereby creating a complex texture. As a result, while the pitching required to sing any one vocal line is relatively simple, the resultant harmonies are complex. Vaughan Williams thus makes an artistic virtue out of a practical necessity: the shimmering, oscillating effect evokes the mystical eeriness of Ariel's song as experienced by Ferdinand (*The Tempest*, I, ii).

Adopting the same compositional principle as Vaughan Williams, TheoArtistry composer Anselm McDonnell achieves a quite different effect in his commissioned work, 'Hinneni' (Fig. 6.5). Bars 22–27 present God's question to Adam 'Have you eaten from the tree, of knowledge, of good and evil?' The anchor note E in the bass-line has both a practical and an expressive function: it provides a stable reference point for the other singers, while its immovability seems to communicate God's authority. The repeated motif heard initially in the first tenor part at bar 22 is layered, creating dissonance — and, as a result, tension — perhaps reflecting man's anticipation of God's impending judgement. Bars 28–29 employ the principle of conjunct melodic intervals: though each voice-part is straightforward to sing, the resultant harmony is very discordant. The climactic dissonant chord in bar 30 communicates God's anger with startling immediacy.

Listen to Anselm McDonnell, 'Hinneni', bars 22-30, in *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the 21st Century*, St Salvator's Chapel Choir and Sean Heath, cond. by Tom Wilkinson (Sanctiandree, SAND0006, 2018), © 2017 University of St Andrews. Track 07. Duration: 3.37 (1.10-1.35).

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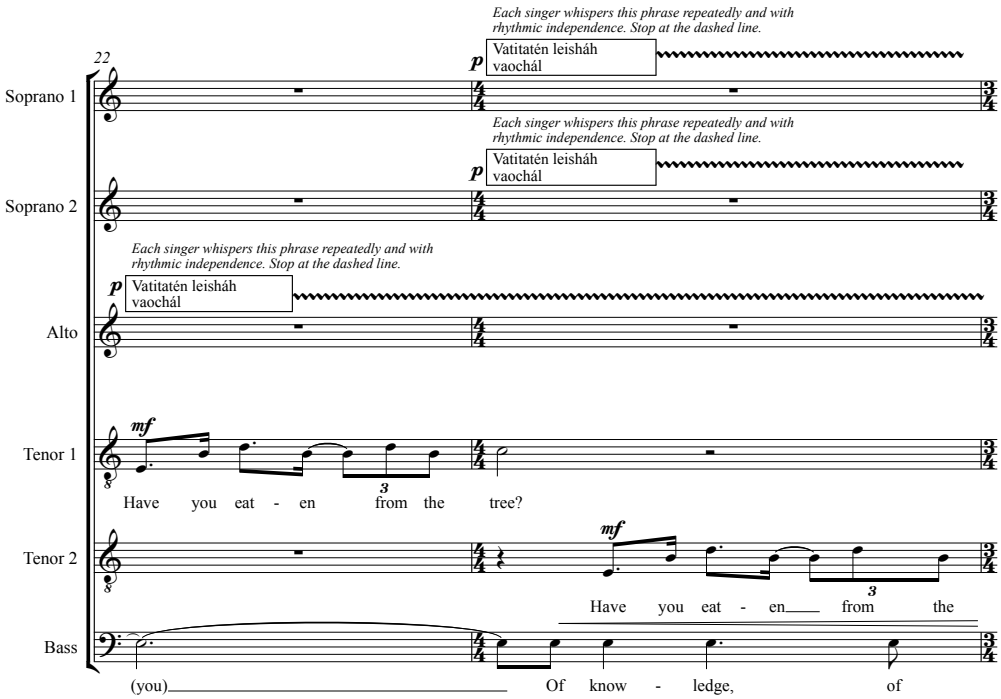

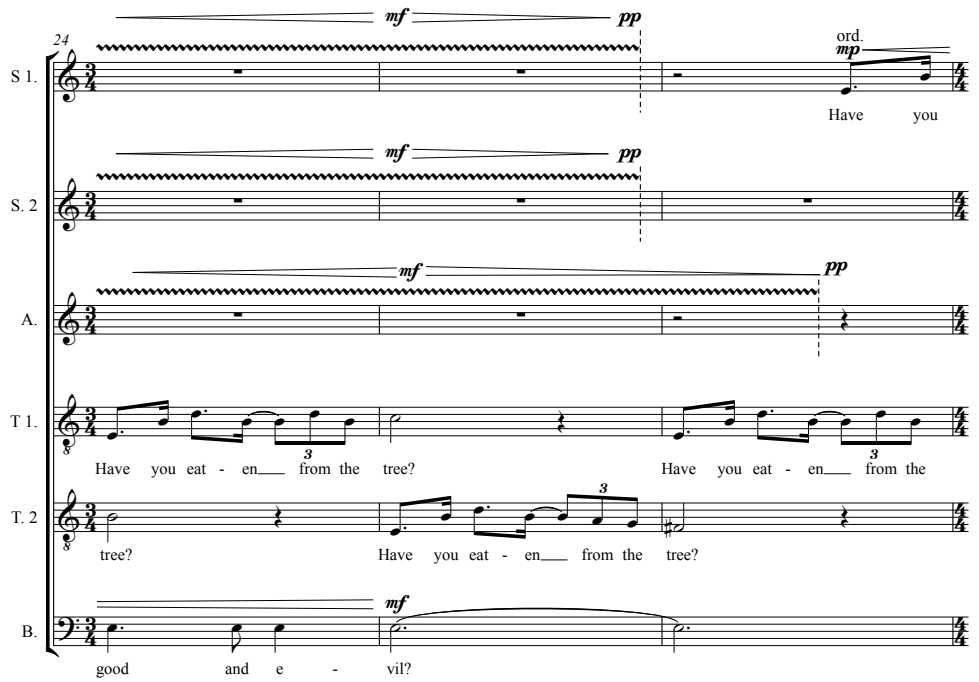

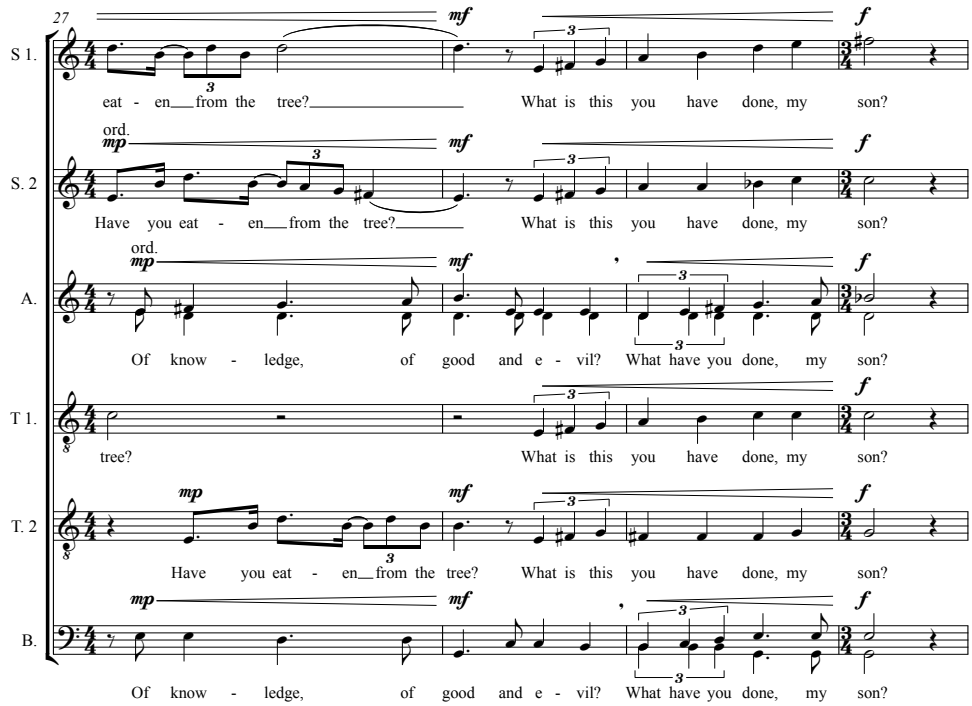

Fig. 6.5 Anselm McDonnell, 'Hinneni '(2016), bars 22–30.

Having begun by addressing the relative difficulties of the different parameters of choral music — in terms of practicality of performance — the discussion has broadened to include aspects of expressivity. That this has proved unavoidable is surely symptomatic of the sophistication of the music being analysed: the examples by Vaughan Williams and McDonnell present a synthesis of practicality and expressivity. I shall continue to discuss the manipulation of musical parameters in terms of expression as well as practicality. Contrast and juxtaposition are seen to be effective devices, especially concerning dramatic textual communication.

Lisa Robertson's 'The Silent Word Sounds' provides a striking example of dramatic textural contrast (Fig. 6.6). Its opening two bars depict God calling to Eliyahu (Elijah). The texture is complex: though essentially in only two parts, both of these are subjected to heterophony (the simultaneous variation of a single melodic line).[2] The following passage — God's command — is presented in emphatic unison. This is an effective use of a classic compositional technique: textural complexity abruptly gives way to textural simplicity, thus drawing the listener's attention to an especially significant line of text.

2 In a TheoArtistry composers' workshop, Sir James MacMillan remarked that the effect reminds him of Gaelic psalm singing (a tradition to which he himself alludes in, for example, 'A New Song'). MacMillan describes this tradition thus: 'a precentor leads the singing and the voices follow in an almost canonic fashion heterophonically masking and ghosting the line'. See Shirley Ratcliffe, 'MacMillan', *Choir and Organ*, 8 (1999), 39–42 (p. 40). Quoted in Stephen A. Kingsbury, 'The Influence of Scottish Nationalism on James MacMillan's "A New Song"', *The Choral Journal*, 47 (August 2006), 30–37 (p. 36).

Lisa Robertson, 'The Silent Word Sounds', bars 1-5, in *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the 21st Century*, St Salvator's Chapel Choir and Sean Heath, cond. by Tom Wilkinson (Sanctiandree, SAND0006, 2018), © 2017 University of St Andrews. Track 11. Duration: 3.41 (0-0.20).

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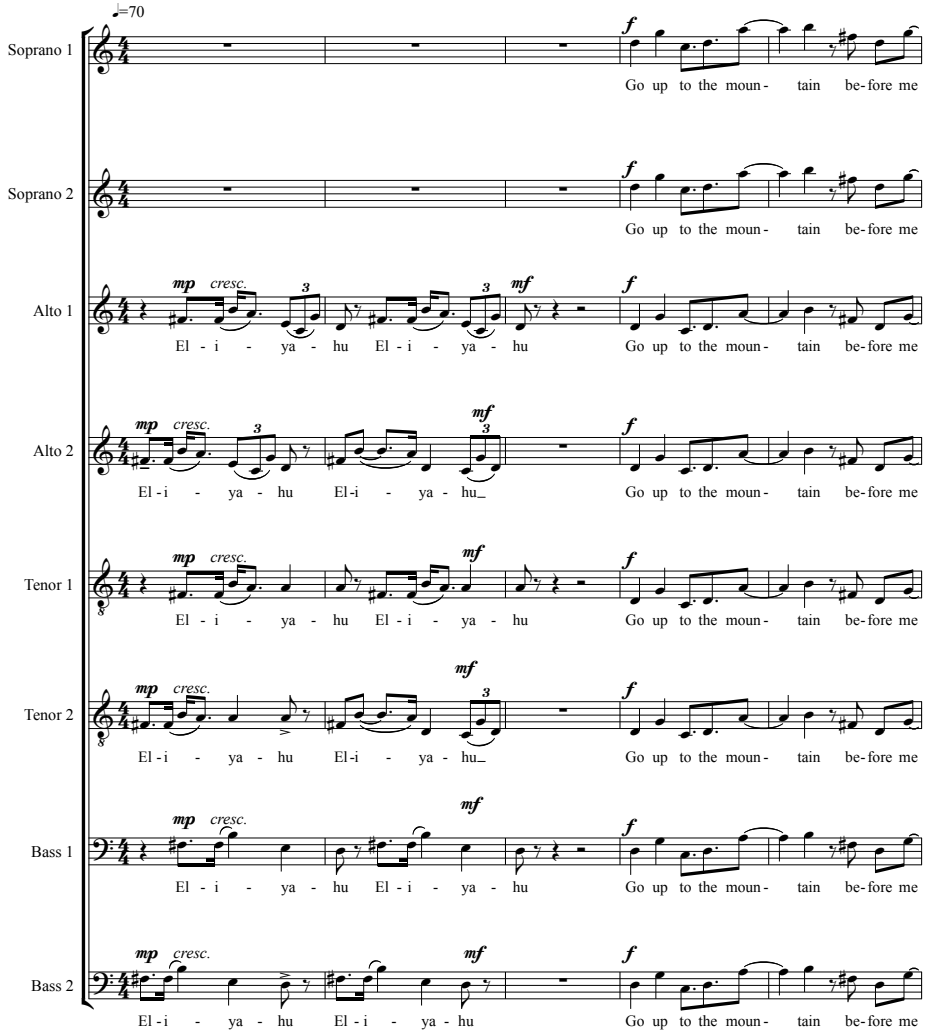

Fig. 6.6 Lisa Robertson, 'The Silent Word Sounds '(2016), bars 1–5.

MacMillan's Christmas motet, 'And lo, the Angel of the Lord Came upon Them', which depicts the angels' annunciation to the shepherds, employs this technique in an even more rhetorical fashion. At the point of annunciation, the narrative voice switches from polyphony to quasi-unison (Fig. 6.7). This vivid portrayal seems to emphasize that the angels' entrance was entirely unexpected. However, the use of this technique is not limited to such overt gestures. In the meditative Advent motet, 'A New Song', it helps to articulate a cyclical structure (ABABA), in a rather understated manner.

James MacMillan, 'And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them', bars 26-31, in *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the 21st Century*, St Salvator's Chapel Choir and Sean Heath, cond. by Tom Wilkinson (Sanctiandree, SAND0006, 2018), © 2017 University of St Andrews. Track 13. Duration: 4.42 (2.00-2.24).

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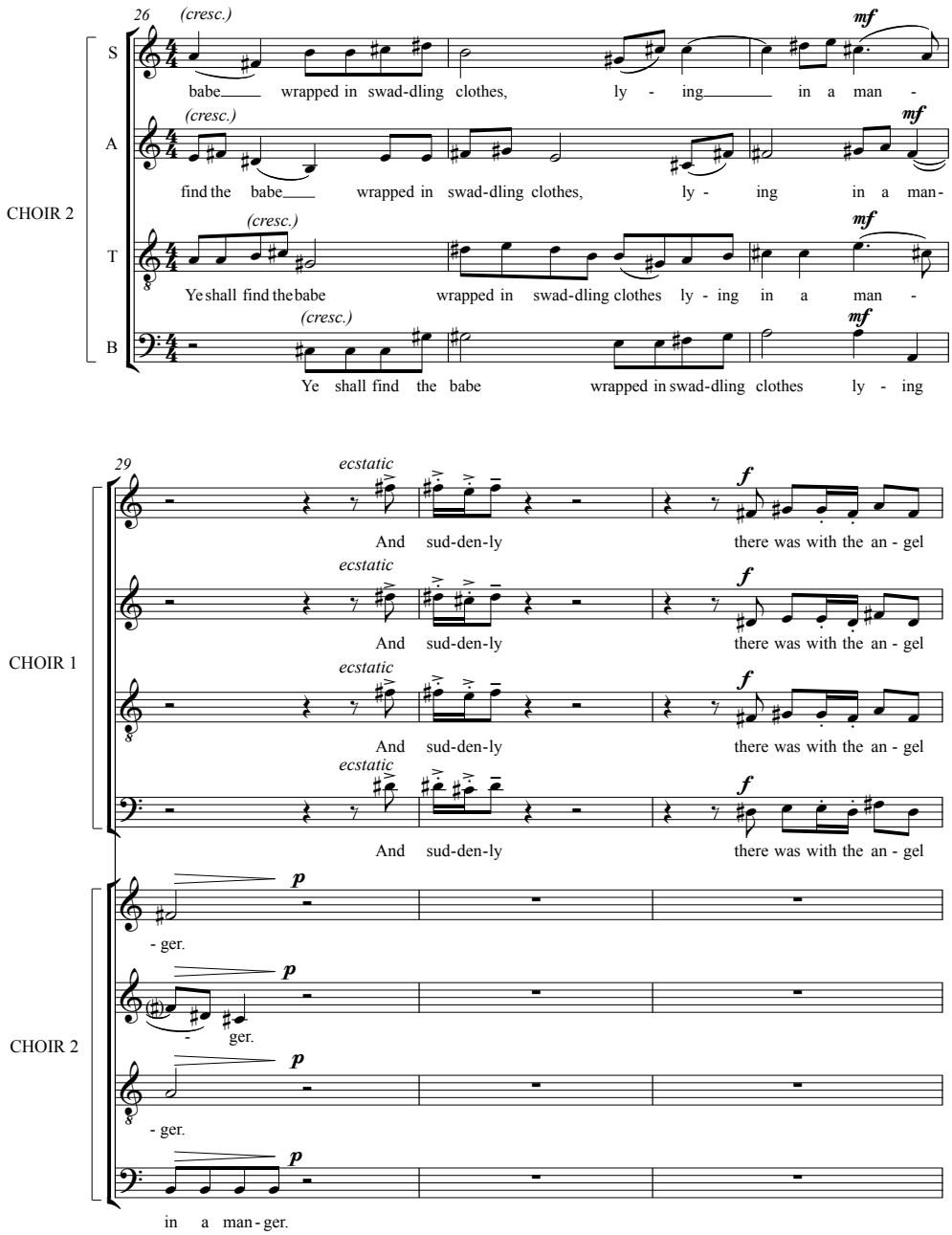

Fig. 6.7 James MacMillan, 'And lo, the Angel of the Lord Came upon Them' (2009), bars 26–31. Choir 3 parts are omitted. © Boosey & Hawkes.

This technique is also a key feature of Kenneth Leighton's 'Second Service' ('*Magnificat*' and '*Nunc dimittis*'), which tends to contrast passages of rhythmic (and often melodic) unison with imitative writing (Fig. 6.8). Furthermore, textures are not only alternated, but also super-imposed: in Figure 6.8, the *staccato*, dissonant, rhythmically unpredictable organ writing contrasts sharply with the longer, *legato* choral phrases. This creates a complex, yet intelligible, texture.

Other examples include passages from 'A Hymn to the Virgin' (Britten) (Fig. 6.9) and, again, MacMillan's 'And lo, the Angel of the Lord Came upon Them' (Fig. 6.10). In both cases, the syllabic writing serves to bring the text into sharp focus against a more expressive, melismatic, backdrop. The joyful text of the MacMillan — 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards all men' — is dazzlingly portrayed by this juxtaposition of decorative polyphony and emphatic homophony, in a passage equally thrilling for performer and listener.

Kenneth Leighton, 'Magnificat' from 'The Second Service', bars 20-32, in *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the 21st Century*, St Salvator's Chapel Choir and Sean Heath, cond. by Tom Wilkinson (Sanctiandree, SAND0006, 2018), © 2017 University of St Andrews. Track 04. Duration: 7.12 (1.31-1.51).
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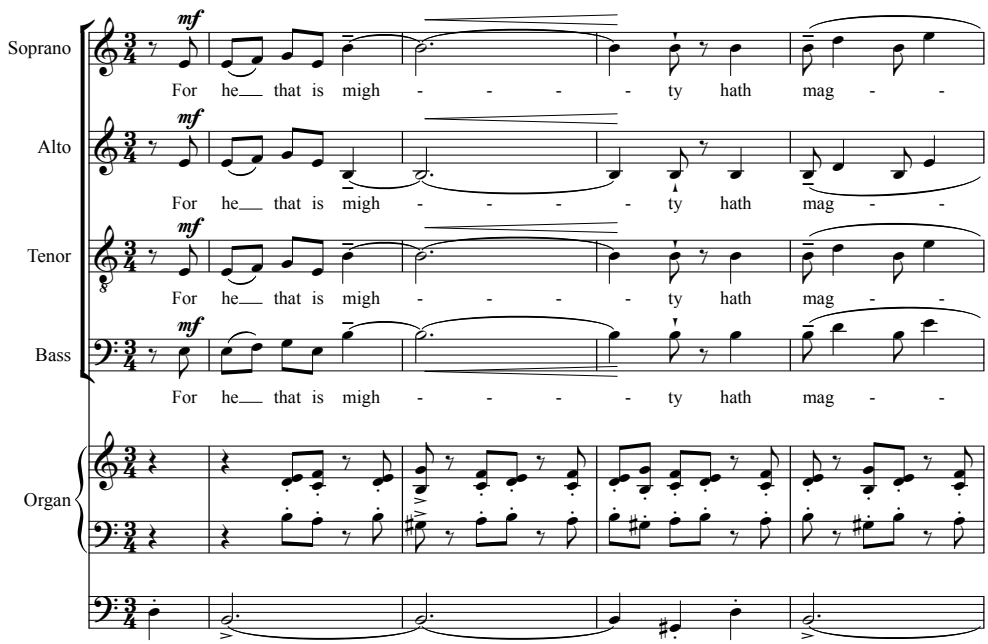

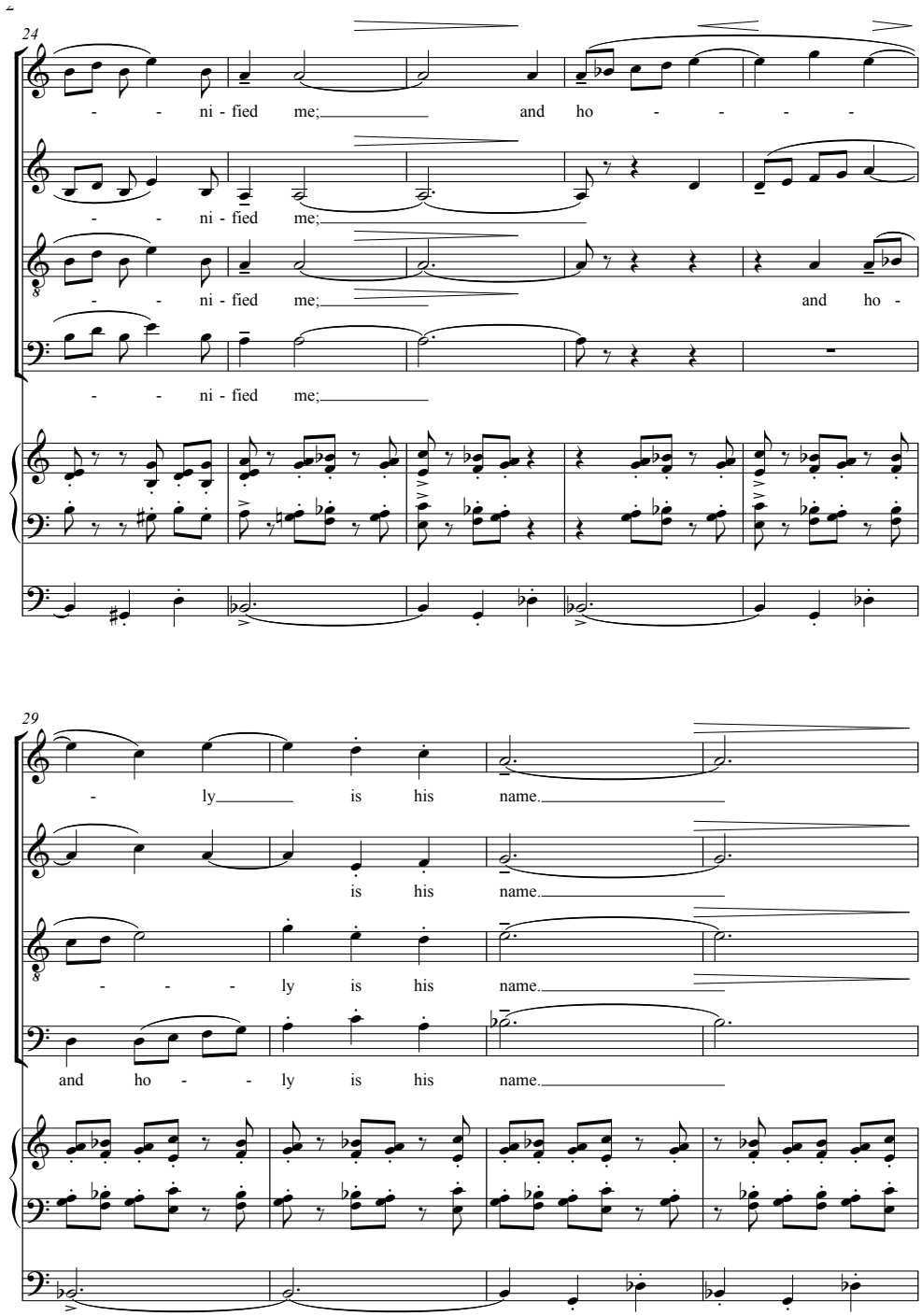

Fig. 6.8 Kenneth Leighton, 'The Second Service' (1972), 'Magnificat', bars 20–32. © Oxford University Press.

Benjamin Britten, 'Hymn to the Virgin', verse 3, in *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the 21st Century*, St Salvator's Chapel Choir and Sean Heath, cond. by Tom Wilkinson (Sanctiandree, SAND0006, 2018), © 2017 University of St Andrews. Track 14. Duration: 3.27 (2.12-2.33).

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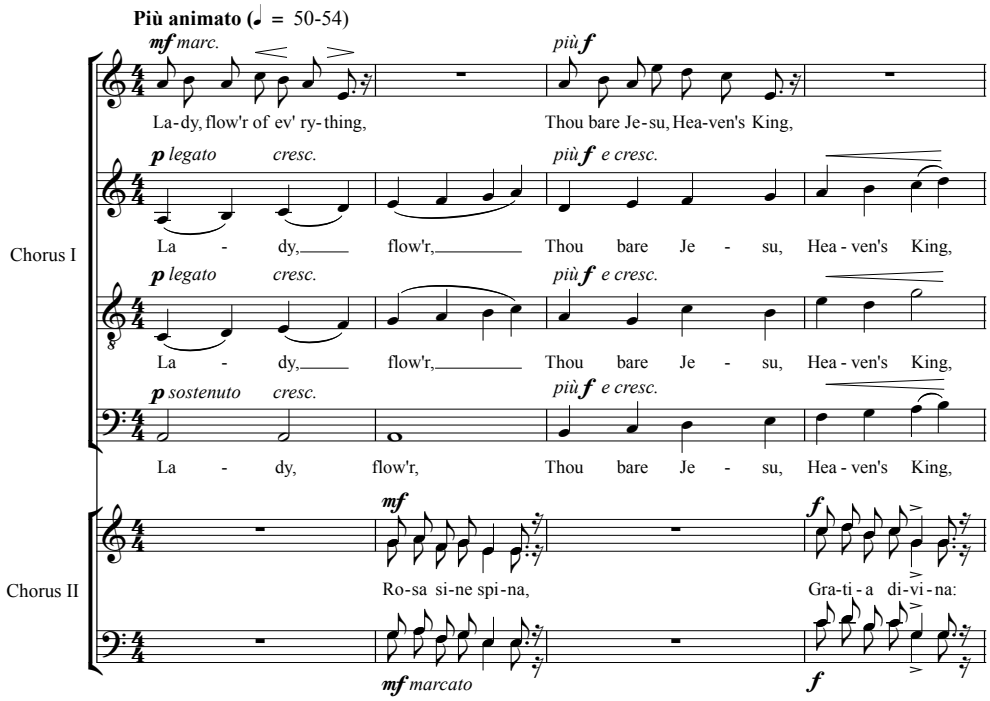

Fig. 6.9 Benjamin Britten, 'A Hymn to the Virgin' (1930, rev. 1934), verse 3. © Boosey & Hawkes.

James MacMillan, 'And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them', bars 43-44, in *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the 21st Century*, St Salvator's Chapel Choir and Sean Heath, cond. by Tom Wilkinson (Sanctiandree, SAND0006, 2018), © 2017 University of St Andrews. Track 13. Duration: 4.42 (3.17-3.30).

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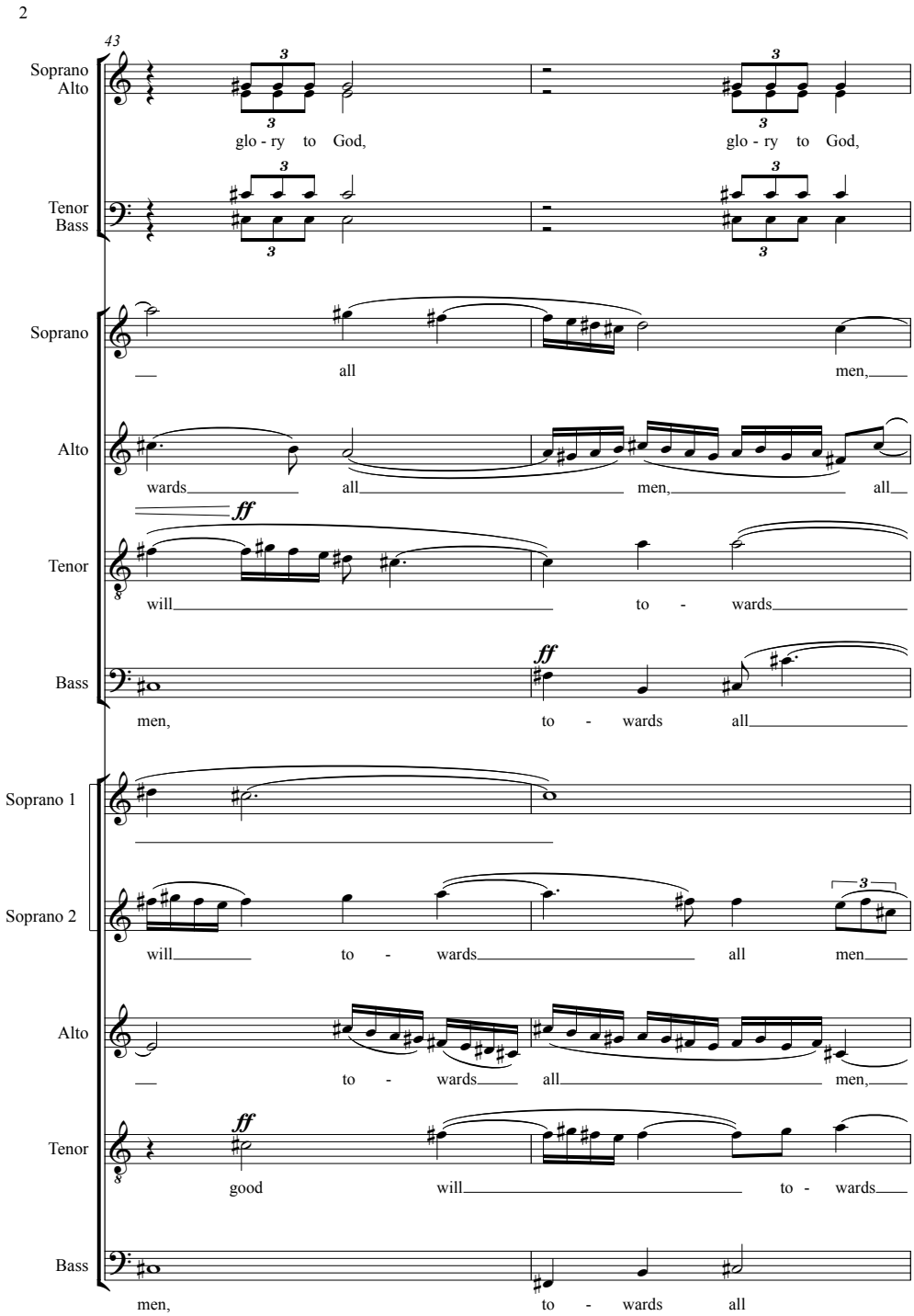

Fig. 6.10 James MacMillan, 'And lo, the Angel of the Lord Came upon Them' (2009), bars 43–44. © Boosey & Hawkes.

A fundamentally different approach to creating textural complexity is explored by Séan Doherty in 'God calls Samuel'. The effect of complex imitation is achieved by syllabic repetition *within* individual voice parts (Fig. 6.11). This technique has to be used with care: the risk is that the vocal lines lose their individual integrity, and consequently become counter-intuitive for the singers. Doherty successfully avoids this danger through the use of static harmony and pitch. This is a clear example of complexity in one musical parameter being compensated by simplicity in another.

Seán Doherty, 'God Calls Samuel', bars 22-24, , in *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the 21st Century*, St Salvator's Chapel Choir and Sean Heath, cond. by Tom Wilkinson (Sanctiandree, SAND0006, 2018), © 2017 University of St Andrews. Track 10. Duration: 4.11 (1.30-1.43).
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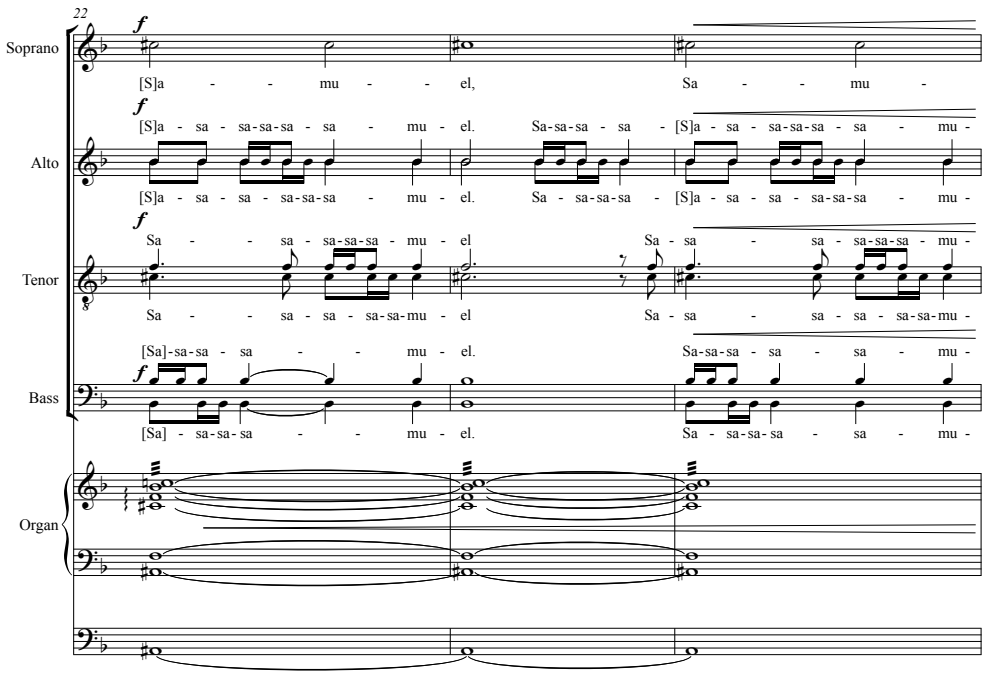

Fig. 6.11 Seán Doherty, 'God Calls Samuel' (2016), bars 22–24.

In 'God calls Samuel', then, Doherty's writing is technically challenging yet 'intelligible' for the performers, since its expressive purpose is clear: the music communicates the power of God's voice as it echoes around the temple, and Samuel's intense fear in hearing it. As discussed in the introduction, choral singers tend to enjoy rehearsing and performing music in which they can discern a clear expressive purpose, whether this is overt and dramatic (as in 'God calls Samuel'), meditative (as in the music of John Tavener, for example), or otherwise.

Having discussed the interplay between various musical parameters in both practical and expressive terms, it is worth considering what is perhaps a more contentious issue: harmony. I have already cited harmonic language as one of the most important issues faced by composers today. Notwithstanding the alleged 'breakdown of tonality' of the early-twentieth century,[3] it could be argued that most listeners familiar with Western music still perceive common-practice tonality as their musical mother tongue. Since the mid-twentieth century, the normative status of atonality has, arguably, lessened. Assessing the state of choral music in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, Nick Strimple writes the following:

> After the explosion of new ideas in the early decades of the twentieth century, and the resistance to them exemplified by traditionalists and later by minimalists, the last third of the century gradually relaxed into an era where virtually nothing new was brought to the compositional table. Rather, choral composers experimented with various combinations of twentieth-century devices, eventually abandoning atonality and dodecaphony in favor of an essentially — but not exclusively — diatonic language (often derived from folk music or chant) which could be manipulated to function in association with any known compositional technique. Arvo Pärt (b.1935), James MacMillan, Tan Dun, and a few others were able to turn this situation to their advantage and create choral works of genuine originality. Some, such as Morten Lauridsen, chose to ignore trends altogether and developed exceptionally distinctive and inviting styles.[4]

It is worth noting the distinction between tonality and what Strimple describes as 'an essentially — but not exclusively — diatonic language'. 'Tonality' implies a system of functional harmony that, fundamentally, is governed by the need for a dominant chord to resolve to a tonic chord. Strimple's phrase implies no such temporal energy: music can be diatonic without being tonally functional. However, for most amateur singers of classical music — in the UK, at least — diatonicism carries with it the baggage of tonality. Consequently, amateur singers respond positively to diatonic music that obeys the conventions of tonality to some extent. Certainly, my experience is that choirs enjoy getting to grips with a harmonic language that acknowledges dissonances as in need of resolution (however 'consonance' and 'dissonance' might be defined). This acknowledgement can even take the form of non-resolution. From this perspective, one challenge for the composer of choral music today is that of finding a

3 See Carl Dahlhaus '3.iv: Early 20th Century', in Richard Cohn, Brian Hyer, Carl Dahlhaus, Julian Anderson and Charles Wilson, 'Harmony', *New Grove Online*, http://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.50818. See also Christopher Butler, 'Innovation and the avant-garde, 1900–20', in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music*, ed. by Nicholas Cook and Anthony Pople (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 69–80 (esp. pp. 77–79); and Jim Samson, *Music in Transition*: *A Study of Tonal Expansion and Atonality, 1900–1920* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

4 Nick Strimple, 'Choral Music in the Twentieth and Early Twenty-first Centuries', in *The Cambridge Companion to Choral Music*, ed. by André de Quadros (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 43–60 (p. 60).

consistent harmonic language. When achieved, it can make a powerful contribution to the aforementioned sense of 'expressive coherence'.

MacMillan's choral music is neither tonal nor exclusively diatonic: as Strimple recognizes, it is imbued with modality, betraying the influence of Celtic music and, arguably, Gregorian chant.[5] However, voice-leading patterns and harmonic progressions familiar from tonal music are employed frequently — sometimes at moments of structural demarcation — creating memorable effects. His '*Ave Maria*'

James MacMillan, 'Ave Maria', bars 51-58, in *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the 21st Century*, St Salvator's Chapel Choir and Sean Heath, cond. by Tom Wilkinson (Sanctiandree, SAND0006, 2018), © 2017 University of St Andrews. Track 1. Duration: 4.30 (1.48-2.15).

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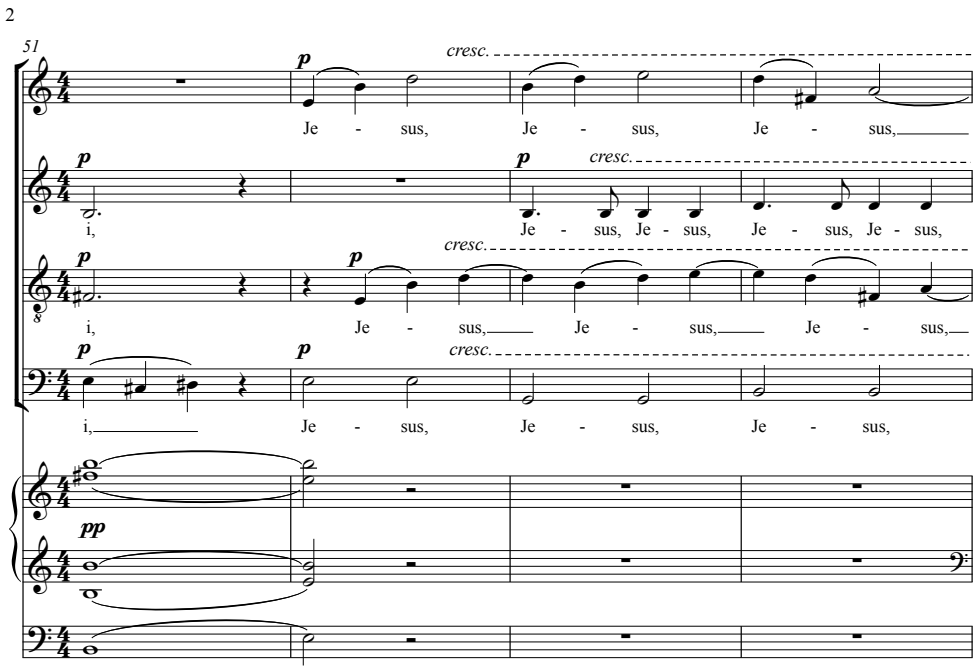

5 See, for example, Richard McGregor, '"A Metaphor for the Deeper Wintriness": Exploring James MacMillan's Musical Identity', *Tempo*, 65 (July 2011), 22–39.

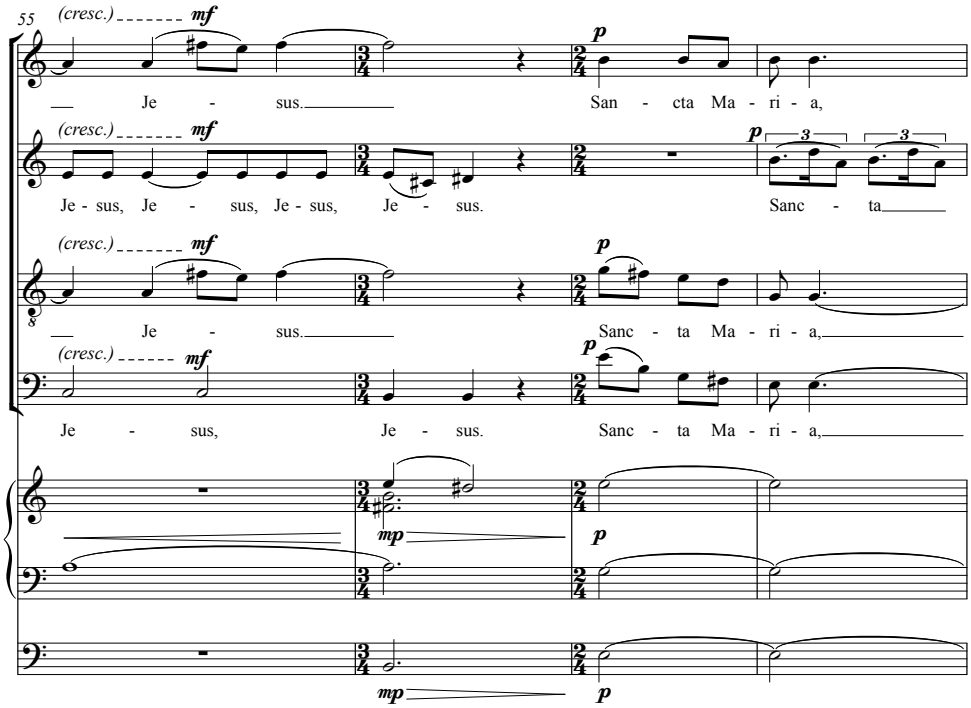

Fig. 6.12 James MacMillan, 'Ave Maria' (2010), bars 51–58. © Boosey & Hawkes.

Bars 52–56 (Fig. 6.12) are, it seems to me, the core of the work: five bars of intimate yet emotionally-charged music, containing only one word, 'Jesus'. Bar 55 is something of a climax: canonic writing between soprano and tenor voices abruptly gives way to a unison rising sixth, which seems to embody a sense of longing. Modally, the passage could be considered as in E Dorian or E Aeolian (notwithstanding the 'tonal' raised leading note, D sharp, in bar 56). Listening to the work from beginning to end, one has the sense that everything is focused on this atmospheric passage. How is this effect achieved?

Examining the work as a whole, one discovers a three-part harmonic structure: G 'major' (beginning) — E 'minor' (bar 43) — G 'major' (bar 85). Listeners familiar with tonal music will discern the major/minor contrast between these sections. Tonally speaking, this structure is markedly traditional: E minor, as the 'relative minor' of G major, is the standard secondary key. Another tonal feature is the use of pedal points (bass drones), found primarily in the organ part: G (bars 1–6), B (bars 23–35), E (bars 43–48), and finally G again (bars 85–89 and 110–17). An obvious next step, analytically speaking, would be to consider the B pedal point as having a dominant role in the overall tonal scheme. On this view, its role would be to prepare for the section in E 'minor' beginning at bar 43. The listening experience, however, reveals that the B pedal point is heard as a tonic; moreover, the music has a modal flavour at this point, owing

to the unconcealed non-functionality of the surrounding harmonies, and especially the non-sharpened leading notes.

However, the pedal point does move subsequently to an E, in bar 36, retrospectively hinting at a dominant role for the B. Richard McGregor discusses a similar case in MacMillan's percussion concerto, *Veni Veni Emmanuel*, in which a C♯ drone eventually becomes the fifth degree of an F♯ triad.[6] McGregor argues further that '[t]here are places in MacMillan's music where individual pitches assume a hierarchical importance, not simply in the sense of defining some tonality but expressing an aspect of a work's developing narrative'.[7] It seems that the note B falls into this category in '*Ave Maria*': in addition to its prominent role as a pedal point, a recurrent dotted motif — first heard in the alto line in bar 26 — emphasizes the note B in a more overt manner by 'circling around it' (Fig. 6.13). By the time that the E pedal point of bars 43–48 is reached, then, the note B has been imbued with an ambiguous significance.

James MacMillan, 'Ave Maria', bars 25-28, in *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the 21st Century*, St Salvator's Chapel Choir and Sean Heath, cond. by Tom Wilkinson (Sanctiandree, SAND0006, 2018), © 2017 University of St Andrews. Track 1. Duration: 4.30 (0.50-0.59).

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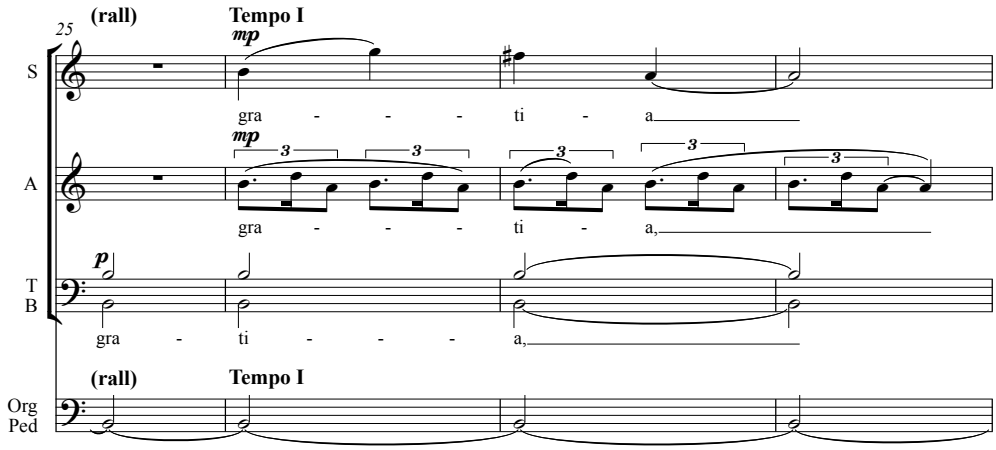

Fig. 6.13 James MacMillan, 'Ave Maria' (2010), bars 25–28. © Boosey and Hawkes.

Bars 51–52 present, for the first time, an unambiguous perfect cadence in the key of E minor (Fig. 6.12). The quiet dynamic belies the significance of this gesture from a tonal perspective: finally, the note B has been accorded a definitive role — that of the dominant of E. Since the listener has been primed to hear the note B as significant yet tonally undefined, this cadence draws the listener in by laying this indistinctness to rest. An additional possibility is that the listener experiences the cadence as a kind of

6 Richard McGregor, 'A Metaphor for the Deeper Wintriness', p. 30.
7 *Ibid.*

telescoped memory of the earlier B and E pedal points. The harmony of '*Ave Maria*' is largely non-functional: it is not driven by dominant/tonic polarity. Yet MacMillan is unafraid to employ the perfect cadence — an overtly tonal technique — in order to highlight a particularly significant moment of structural demarcation. This subliminally exploits the listener's memory, and familiarity with tonality, in order to create narrative cohesion. Overall, the work seems to embody principles of musical structure that are eloquently captured by Roger Scruton:

> We should see [musical form] not as the unfolding or 'composing-out' of some underlying 'deep structure', but in the way that we see the composition of a painting — as forms and figures in a unified surface, each answering to, completing, or complementing the others. The pleasure that we take in musical forms depends … upon their abstract quality — on their emancipation from the figurative aims which tie painting to the world of objects. Music shows us movement without the thing that moves; it can therefore present us with a reality that we know otherwise only through the workings of consciousness — movements outside physical space, which do not merely coincide but which coalesce as a unity. And these movements find in music a completion which ordinary consciousness denies.[8]

The compositional techniques found in '*Ave Maria*', discussed above, achieve the 'completion' and 'unity' which Scruton considers. The same could be said of Tavener's 'Annunciation', though the compositional means are quite different from MacMillan's. Characteristically, this work does not aggressively subvert the listener's experience of linear time, as can sometimes seem to be the case in the Minimalism of Terry Riley and Steve Reich. Rather, the music of the so-called 'Holy Minimalists' (Tavener, Arvo Pärt, etc.) seems to offer a space in which the listener is invited to meditate. This is achieved partly through repetition of a ritualistic kind. Whereas musical interrelation is exploited by MacMillan to create a sense of heightened focus in a specific passage, Tavener seems to invite the listener to move 'beyond' linear time altogether.

In markedly different ways, then, MacMillan and Tavener exploit music's capacity to evoke reflection on a verbal text, and on itself. The composers on the TheoArtistry scheme also exploit this potential. Stuart Beatch, for example, provides a reflective ending to his work 'The Annunciation of Solomon'. The text, 'Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon in the day of the gladness of his heart', seemingly a forthright command, is presented simply in syllabic and homophonic music (Fig. 6.14). This provides effective contrast with the preceding impassioned music, and, more importantly, invites the listener to reflect on the musical work as a whole.

Stuart Beatch, 'The Annunciation of Solomon', bars 57-59, in *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the 21st Century*, St Salvator's Chapel Choir and Sean Heath, cond. by Tom Wilkinson (Sanctiandree, SAND0006, 2018), © 2017 University of St Andrews. Track 12. Duration: 4.11 (3.25-4.06).

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8 Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 340–41.

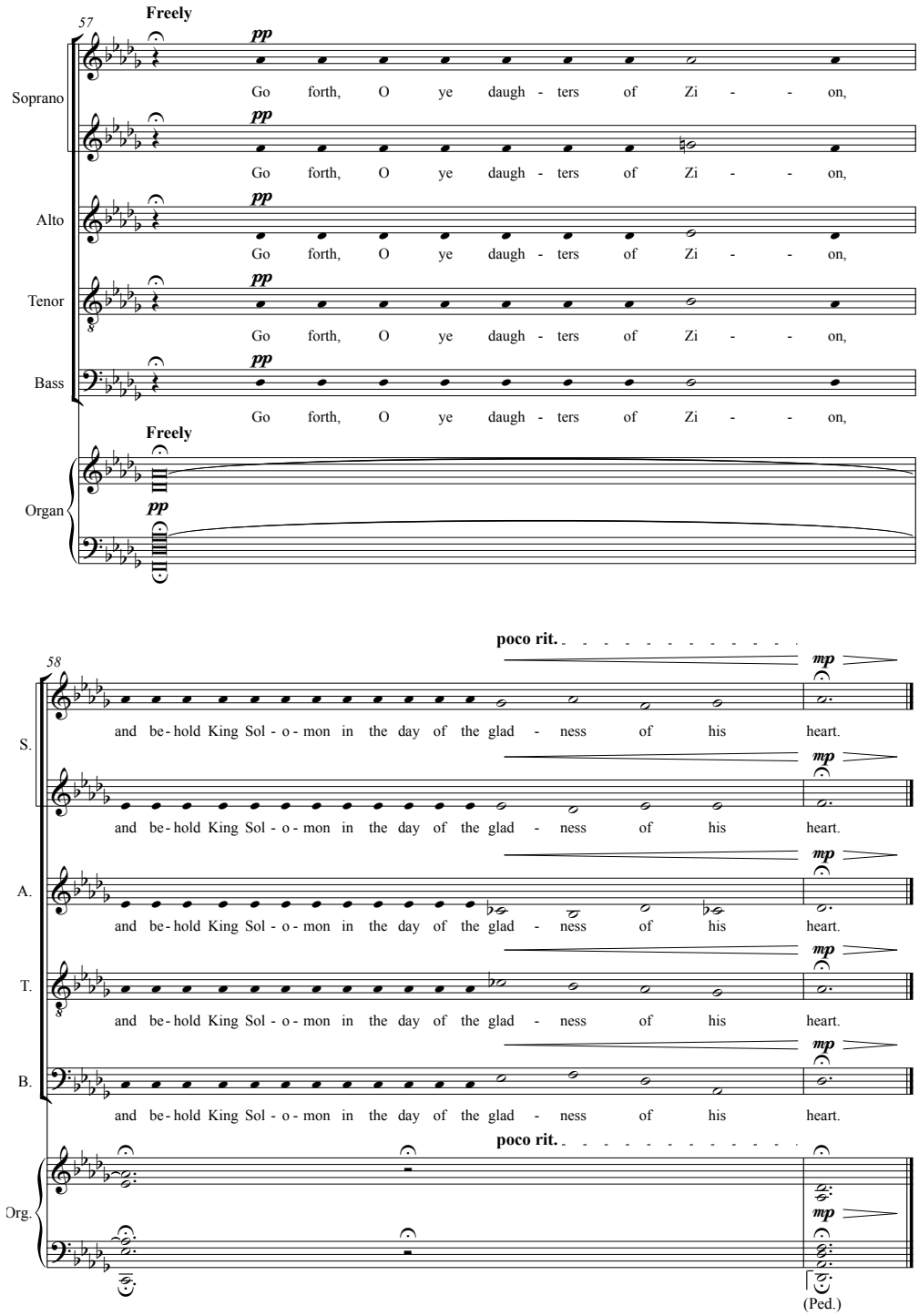

Fig. 6.14 Stuart Beatch, 'The Annunciation of Solomon' (2016), bars 57-end.

My primary purpose in exploring these aspects of sacred choral music has been to examine what makes a work rewarding to rehearse and perform. As many of the musical examples above demonstrate, rewarding music is often challenging in one area while being straightforward in others. Command of texture has emerged as a crucial aspect of the composer's art: it can shape the narrative of a work in myriad ways, the most apparent being its ability to draw the listener's attention to a significant passage of text. This technique is but one example of expressive intelligibility — a concept that has emerged as significant not only for listeners, but also for performers. With regard to harmony, composers of sacred choral music today operate in a post-tonal — and, arguably, post-atonal — world. MacMillan's *Ave Maria* has been analysed from this historically-defined perspective: tonal and non-tonal techniques coalesce in a unique sound-world, which reveals its secrets only gradually to performers and listeners. In particular, it exploits music's capacity for internal-reference, to great expressive effect.

Composers today possess a rich inheritance of sacred music. This chapter has explored ways in which this legacy is materially-reflected in twentieth- and twenty-first-century sacred choral music, including in the six TheoArtistry commissions. The discussion has edged towards a conception of the contemporary composer's situation as, potentially, postmodern. The techniques and conventions developed over centuries continue to be adopted and adapted today, yet this occurs in an environment that is acutely aware of its own historical contingency. As W. H. Auden identified in 1948, our situation is one in which we are 'no longer supported by tradition without being aware of it'.[9] Thus, the 'meaning' of any musical gesture cannot be 'purely expressive' or 'purely functional'. Rather, every compositional decision seems to carry with it an uncertainty as to whether its validity should or could be defined in relation to the vast legacy of sacred music. I would argue that our inheritance of sacred music remains relevant to us today in ways that we cannot fully rationalize or understand. Perhaps part of its attraction — to composers, performers and listeners alike — may lie precisely therein.

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