Joshua Ballance

De profundis (2017)

for SATB Choir

Introduction

Attending the *Darmstadt Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik* last summer was fascinating for a wide variety of reasons - whilst I haven't returned from it inspired to pursue some of the more experimental approaches pursued by other members of the course, it certainly prompted me to think about the context in which my music is performed. Particularly relevant for my music is the difference between music being performed in the context of a concert, or as part of liturgy, the relevance of the physical space in which this takes place, and deriving from this, the expectations of those listening, and the function of the music for them. Whilst it is certainly dangerous to concentrate too heavily on these concerns, awareness of them, and the related traditions, can certainly be valuable, especially in writing music intended primarily for the Church, as this piece is. Whilst many see the Church as both socially and musically conservative, it seems to me that there is certainly space for new music, and indeed this can serve as a useful inspiration for the composer. Indeed, it is interesting that whilst this piece was commissioned for, and premiered in, a concert setting, I view it as primarily relevant for worship.

I have long been interested in the effects of the realities of performance on my music. Previously I have made use of extensive aleatoric procedures as a way of explicitly exploring this; whilst it is no longer the focus of my music, it continues to inform how I write music. In particular, I enjoy the freedom and the spontaneity of performers, able to adapt to the circumstances and space in which they perform.

From a more technical perspective, I have worked with pitch-class sets for several years now. They work as an effective way of ordering material and developing it in a structured manner. Whilst I would not claim that they produce a sense of coherence or integrity automatically, certain aspects of them can be useful in that way, in particular (in my work) by limiting the intervallic content that is available for the melodic and harmonic writing. Likewise, I have no particular compulsion to work exclusively with twelve-note sets, and/or sets that exhaust the total chromatic; thus, they often work as much as a pc collection, as an ordering. Whilst it would be intellectually fun to try and argue a dogmatically serial position, I don't find this to be a tenable position any more. Thus, in many respects, they function a bit like a 'theme', but only from the perspective of pc-interval content.[1] In terms of the manner in which I treat them, it is largely fairly traditional, with the usual retrograde/inversion/transposition transformations, as well as the production of chord aggregates, and further extensions of these, many of which will be detailed in the analysis below.

As regards the forms of my music, I am currently attracted to ideas of symmetry and arch-forms, with the links to Bartók and Reich obvious. In terms of the articulation of these forms, I am interested in the coordination, and/or deliberate un-coordination, of various intersecting parameters of music, influenced, of course, by my analytical study of eighteenth and nineteenth century sonata forms.

Adapted from a talk given at the Cambridge University Composers' Workshop on 7th February 2017.

[1] Cf. Schönberg on the set as theme.

De profundis - Analysis[2]

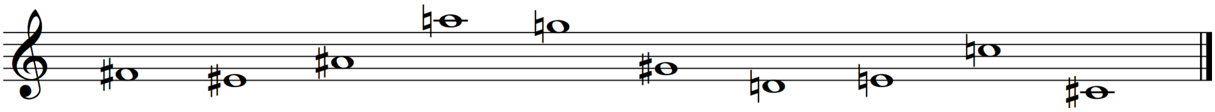
The following analysis is intended to be of interest primarily to other composers: rather than treating the piece is an independent entity, and assessing it from that viewpoint, it is instead largely considered from the perspective of the ways in which it was composed, to outline particular elements of my compositional technique. Nonetheless, I will include some broader comments about the finished piece, many of which were considered during the process of composition in any case.

On a global formal level, it is essentially one uneven arch, with the peak at b. 45; on a lower structural level, it can be understood as a pair of arches, where the first peak is at b. 19. Thus, it has the sort of back-end weighted form common to much music, where the climax of the music comes approximately $^2/_3$ of the way through the piece.

As regards the choice of language, I decided to use this to help articulate the form, with the change from Latin to English taking place after the first arch is completed. This also meant that the repetition of 'domine' or 'Lord' was explicitly avoided, whilst the meaning could be considered from two perspectives. Nonetheless, other features certainly contributed, not least my poetic preferences: whilst I preferred the simplicity of the Latin of the first verse, the more complex second line worked better, for me, in English.

In terms of my compositional process, early on in the composition of this piece, I drew up an 'activity plan' of the piece (Ex. 1). This was a technique I was first introduced to by my friend, Raymond Yiu, and functions as a way of mapping out the broad form, proportions, textures, and (in this case) disposition of text, in a tangible manner. Unsurprisingly, it is very much a sketch - much of it will be jettisoned or altered as the 'working out' of the piece goes along, but it certainly functions as a useful way of getting a sense of the whole piece early on.

With this established, I turned to producing the basic sets that would lay the foundations of the music. As I often do, I began be establishing a group of intervals that I wanted to use for the piece (largely chosen for their expressive qualities, in relation to the character of the text): minor second; major second; perfect fourth; tritone; minor sixth; major seventh. From here, I established the contour of the set as a double arch (thus mimicking the contour of the whole piece), and then drafted various different possibilities until alighting upon a set I liked (Ex. 2). From here, I cycled this through various permutations, using the technique of Boulez in *Dérive I:* working through the order of intervals but starting each time with the next interval in the row, always beginning on the same pitch (Ex. 3). As is fairly standard practice, the resulting sets were then considered from the perspective of the retrogrades and inversions too, and the resulting group of sets were then whittled down intuitively to produce a final group of 18 sets to be considered for use in the piece. It is perhaps worth pointing out that Boulez's technique simply produces a subset of the group of sets that would be produced were the composer to draw up a list of all transpositions of the set with all the different starting-points of the interval order. Whilst there was no aesthetic or principled reason to disregard all of the other possibilities, it was important for me at this stage to maintain the same starting pitch, as transpositions would be considered later down the line. From this group of 18 sets, 7 were then chosen to be used for particular lines of text, and thus sections of the piece; their aggregate pc content (10 pcs per set) was then considered to determine the transposition of each set (Ex. 4).



Ex. 2: Basic Set

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[2] A full score is included at the end of this article in order to facilitate ease of understanding.

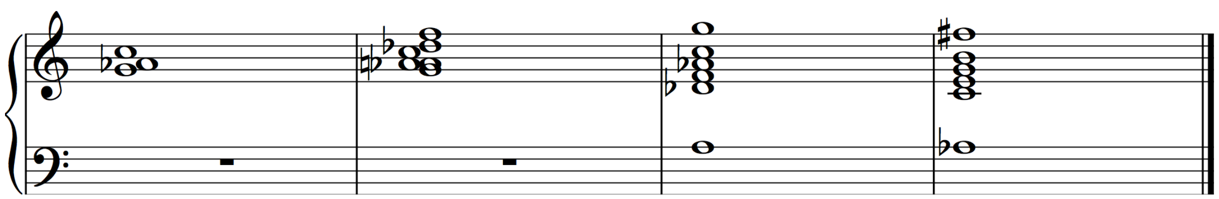
With the pitch structure laid out, the 'details' of the piece were then written fairly intuitively, as is typically my working process: we'll have a look at a few details.

The first four bars, for example, provide a good illustration of my use of sets. They deal only with pcs. 1-5 of Set 1, before b. 6 returns to pcs. 1-2. As mentioned earlier, I have no ambitions to be a dogmatic serialist, and as such I am perfectly happy to make use of only fragments of the set at one time: I have no interest in exhaustive exposition of it. Overlapping sets are likewise perfectly acceptable to me: in bb. 11-16, whilst the soloists expose pcs. 1-6 of Set 1 (though beginning on pc. 2), the SATB work through pcs. 1-6 of Set 2. It is worth noting, though, that despite the overlapping sets, the global pc content of Sets 1 & 2 is the same, so the overall transpositional structure established earlier is not sacrificed.

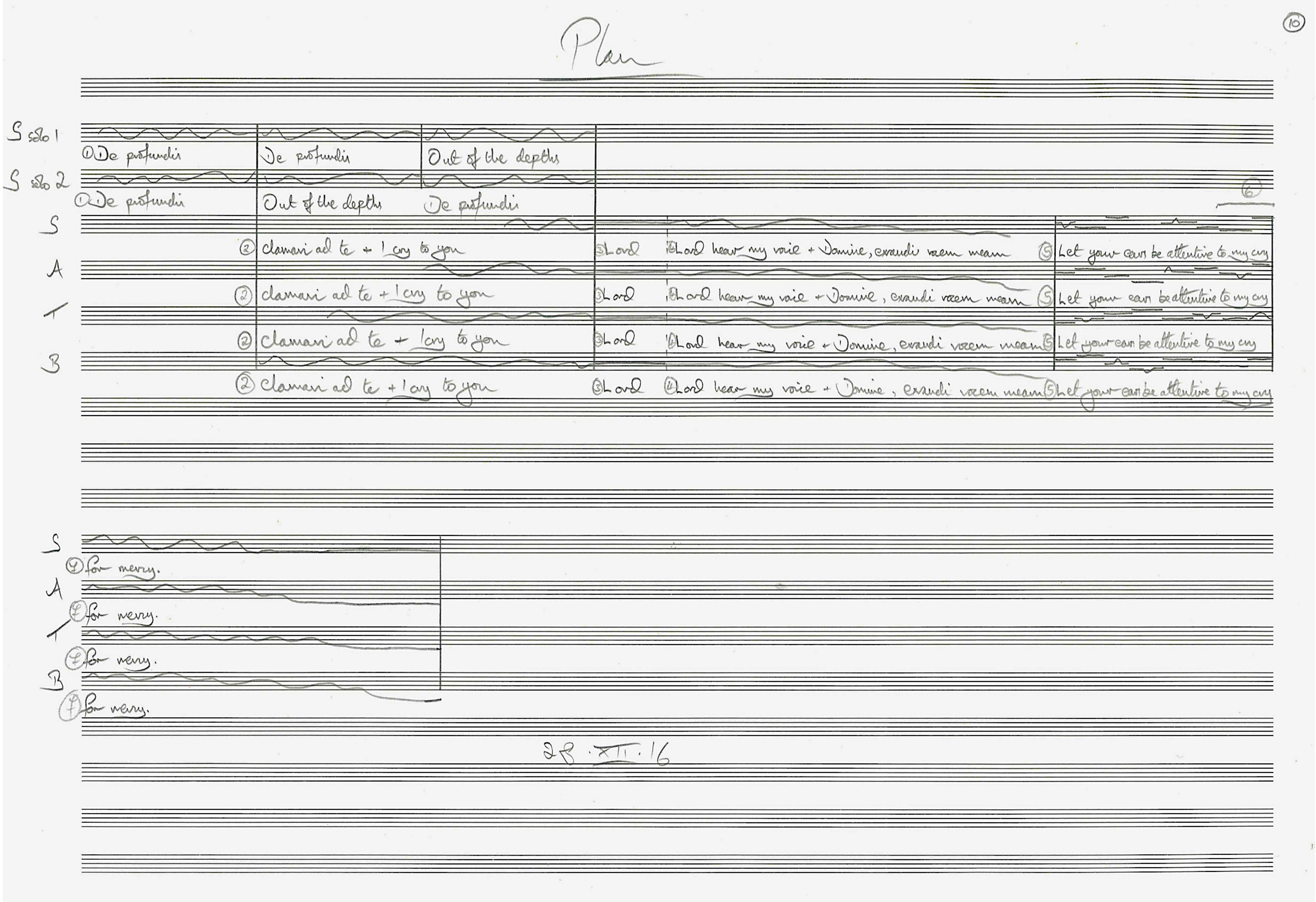
Other analytical points of interest might include the canonical writing (from a pc perspective) through bb. 20-36 which, coupled with long melismas, attempts to express the imploring sense of crying & begging in the text. This likewise returns in the final passage, from bb. 47 to the end: ignoring the first note of each vocal entry, each voice part traces the same interval progression, with S & T and A & B using the same pcs.

Meanwhile, the intervening climaxes of the piece are articulated both times by a move from a more contrapuntal texture into an explicitly homophonic texture, with the dynamics and the fuller scoring further emphasising this. At the second climax, the peak of the whole piece, the register is also expanded to its fullest extent, with the bass of the harmony extending to its lowest point in the entire piece, and the gap between the top and bottom pitches greater than at any other time. This chord is also a demonstration of a type of chord 'multiplication' I often use to expand my harmony: a basic chord, in this case containing three pitches, is transposed onto each pc member, and the three resultant chords are then superimposed, before, in this case, being 'unwrapped', and then transposed (Ex. 5).

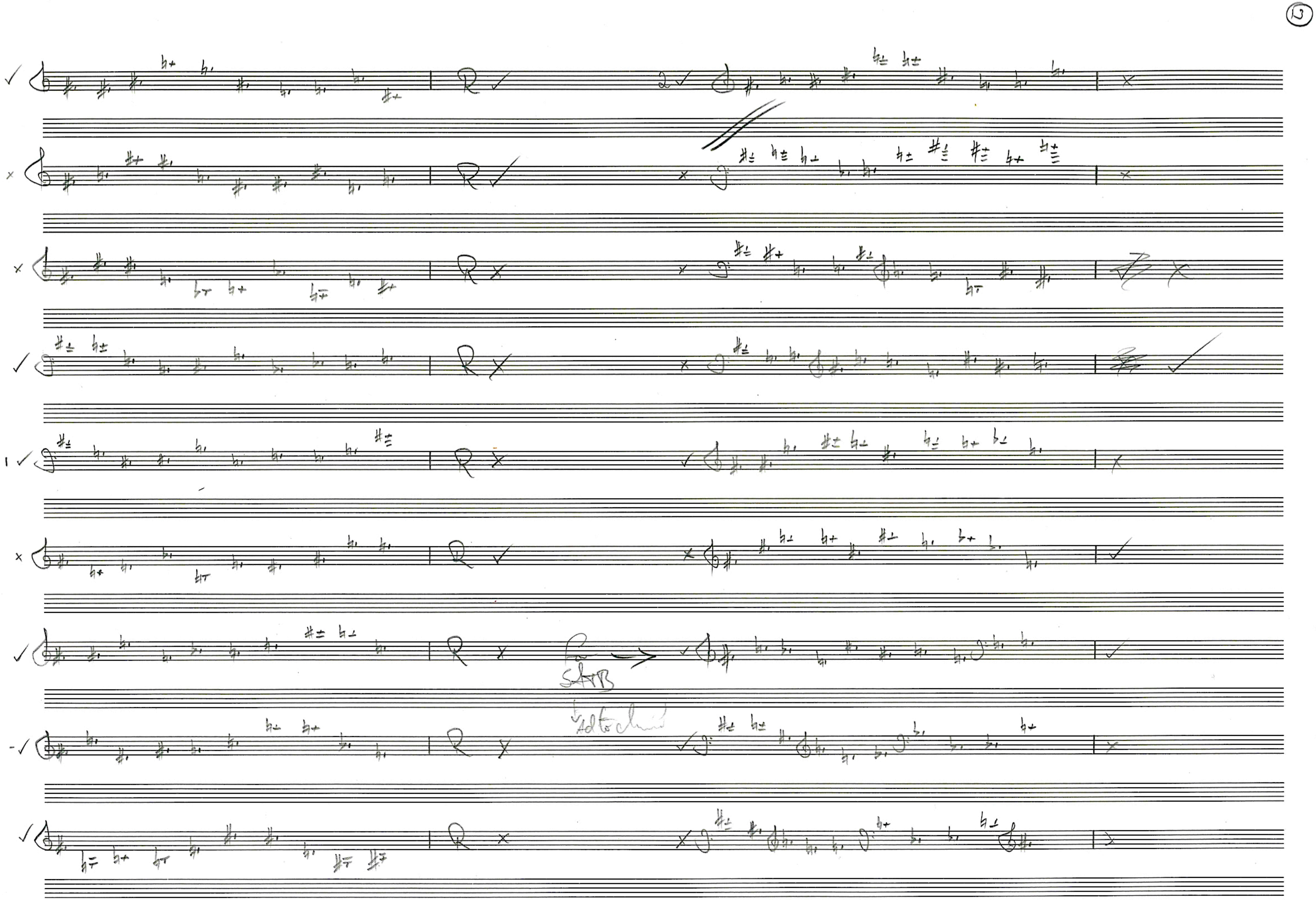
Register also has a part to play in shaping the overall form: on the whole, despite the arch, there is a gradual descent in register, most obviously illustrated by the descending melodic lines of the final section. Not only does this global descent appear to subvert the opening line of the psalm, "Out of the depths", but in fact it suggests that without God we are doomed to remain in these very depths: it is for the rest of the psalm to suggest a way out.



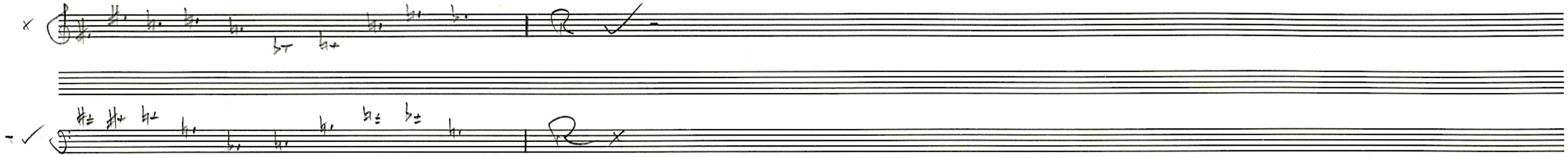
Ex. 5: Derivation of chord at b. 45


⑩
Plan
S solo 1
① De profundis
De profundis
Out of the depths
S solo 2
① De profundis
Out of the depths
① De profundis
⑥
S
② clamavi ad te + I cry to you
③ Lord
④ Lord hear my voice + Domine, exaudi vocem meam
⑤ Let your ears be attentive to my cry
A
② clamavi ad te + I cry to you
③ Lord
④ Lord hear my voice + Domine, exaudi vocem meam
⑤ Let your ears be attentive to my cry
T
② clamavi ad te + I cry to you
③ Lord
④ Lord hear my voice + Domine, exaudi vocem meam
⑤ Let your ears be attentive to my cry
B
② clamavi ad te + I cry to you
③ Lord
④ Lord hear my voice + Domine, exaudi vocem meam
⑤ Let your ears be attentive to my cry
S
⑦ For mercy.
A
⑦ For mercy.
T
⑦ For mercy.
B
⑦ For mercy.
28 · XII · 16

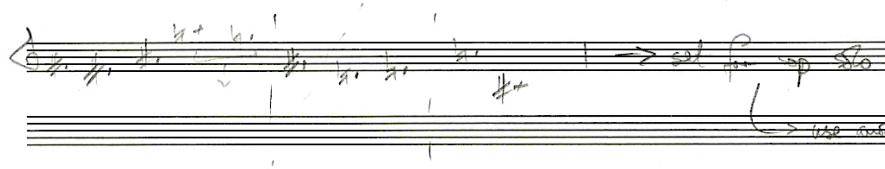
Ex. 1: Activity Plan


13
R
2
For SATB
Ad to choir

Ex. 3: Set Collection

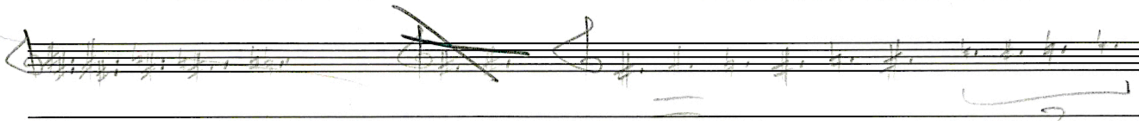


4. I. 17

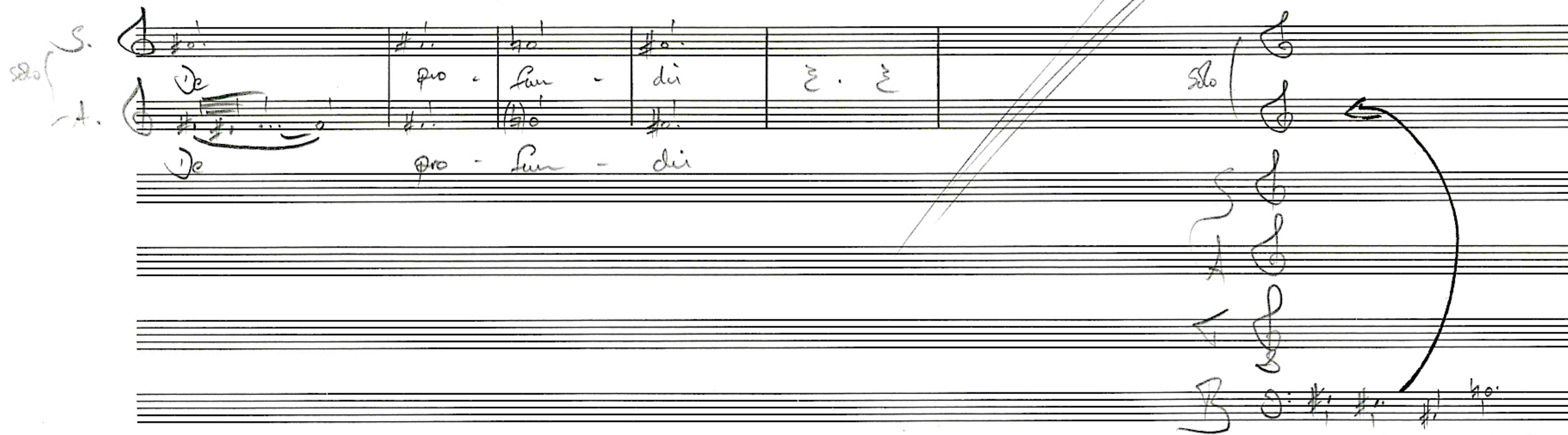


→ sol for sop solo

→ use another for choir : something with rising major [illegible]

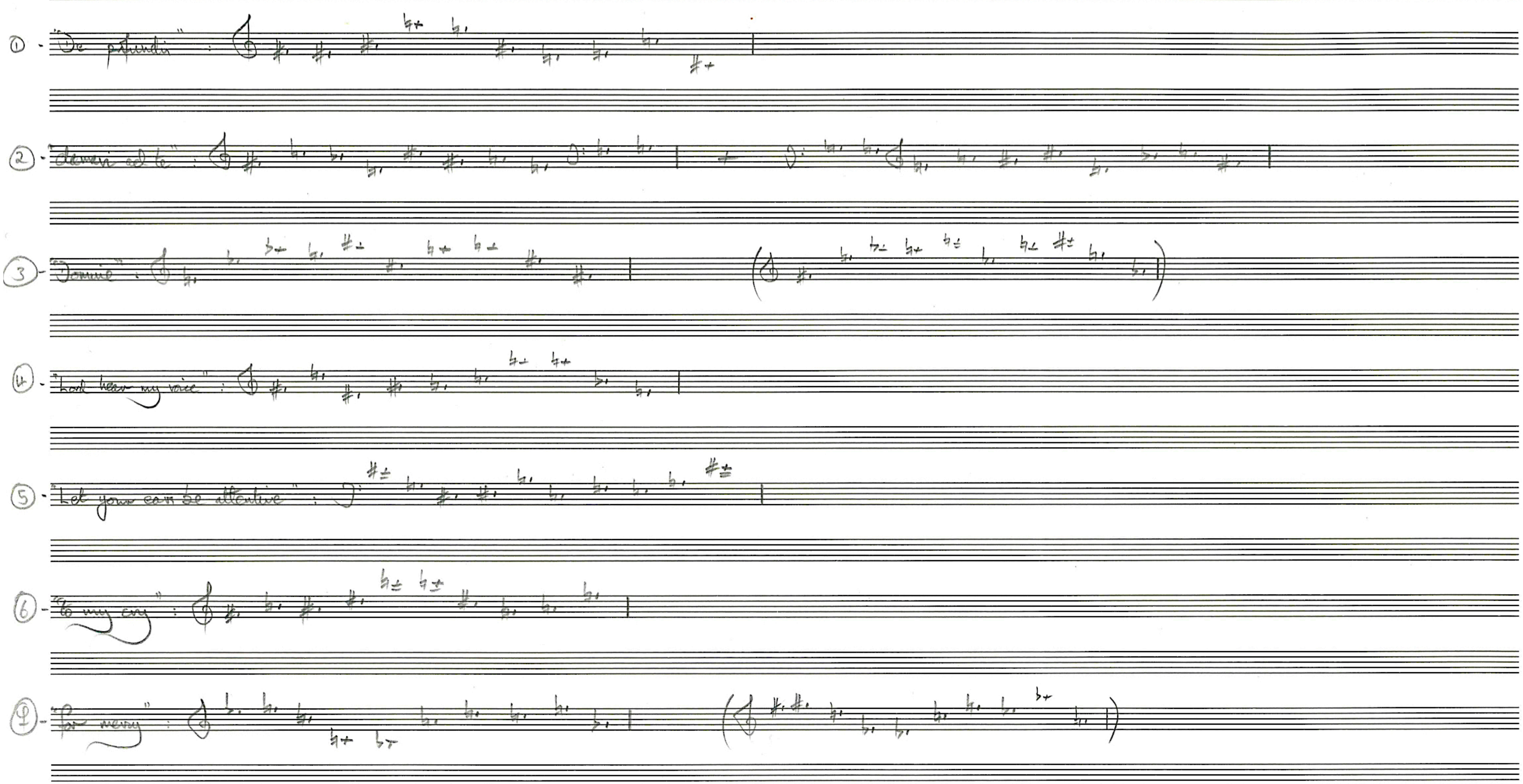


10. I. 17


S.
Solo
A.
De
pro - fun - di
De
pro - fun - di
Solo
S
A
T
B

Out of the depths

Sets in Use


① - "De profundis" :
② - "clamavi ad te" :
③ - "Domine" :
④ - "Lord hear my voice" :
⑤ - "Let your ears be attentive" :
⑥ - "to my cry" :
⑦ - "for mercy" :

→ rather than just intervallic identity

now I need to establish the pitch-class identity of each: general ascent using intervals of set; bear in mind total pitch collection ~~[illegible]~~ of each set and changes to this

Ex. 4: Transposed Set Collection

De profundis

for SATB Choir

Joshua Ballance

2017

De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine;
Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.

Singers (excluding soloists) should feel able to stagger breaths whenever necessary:
the priority is for a sustained and legato corporate body of sound,
rather than the maintenance of individual lines.

Where fermatas are used, the length is left up to the performer.
However, their relative length is:
⌃ short;
𝄐 medium;
⊓ long.

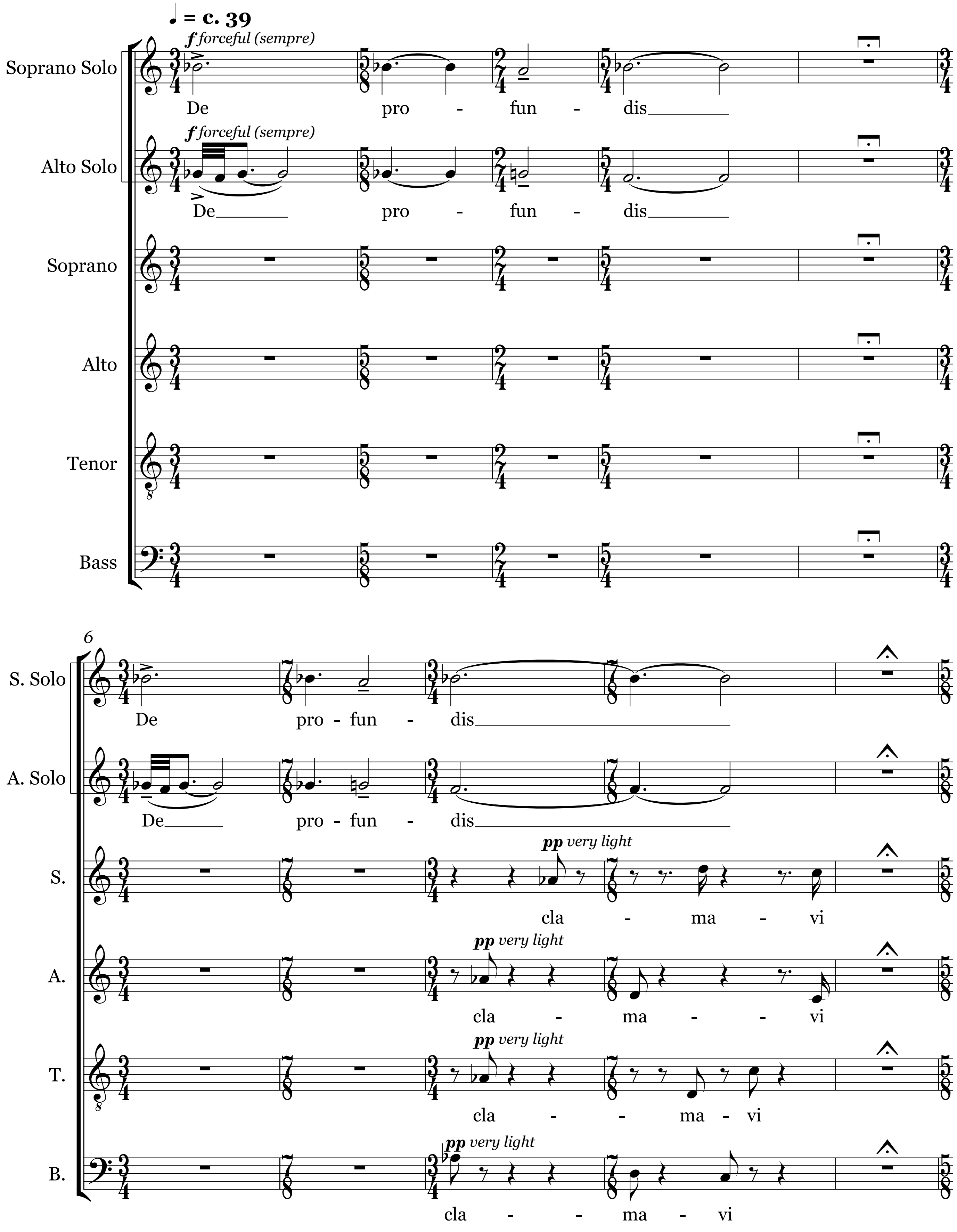
First performed by the Bruckner Singers, conducted by Kavi Pau,
in the Chapel of Trinity College, Cambridge, 10th February, 2016.

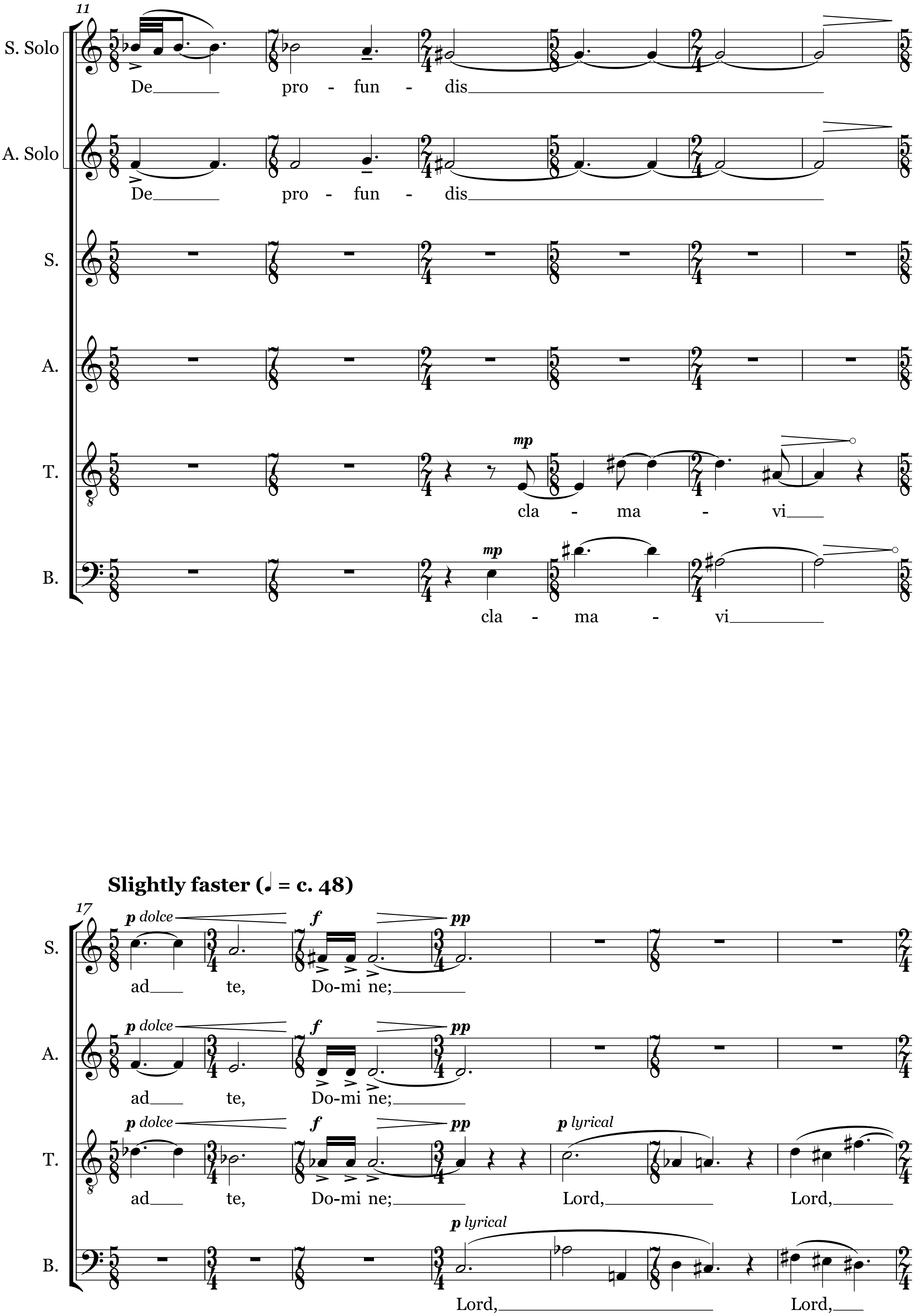
Duration c. 4’

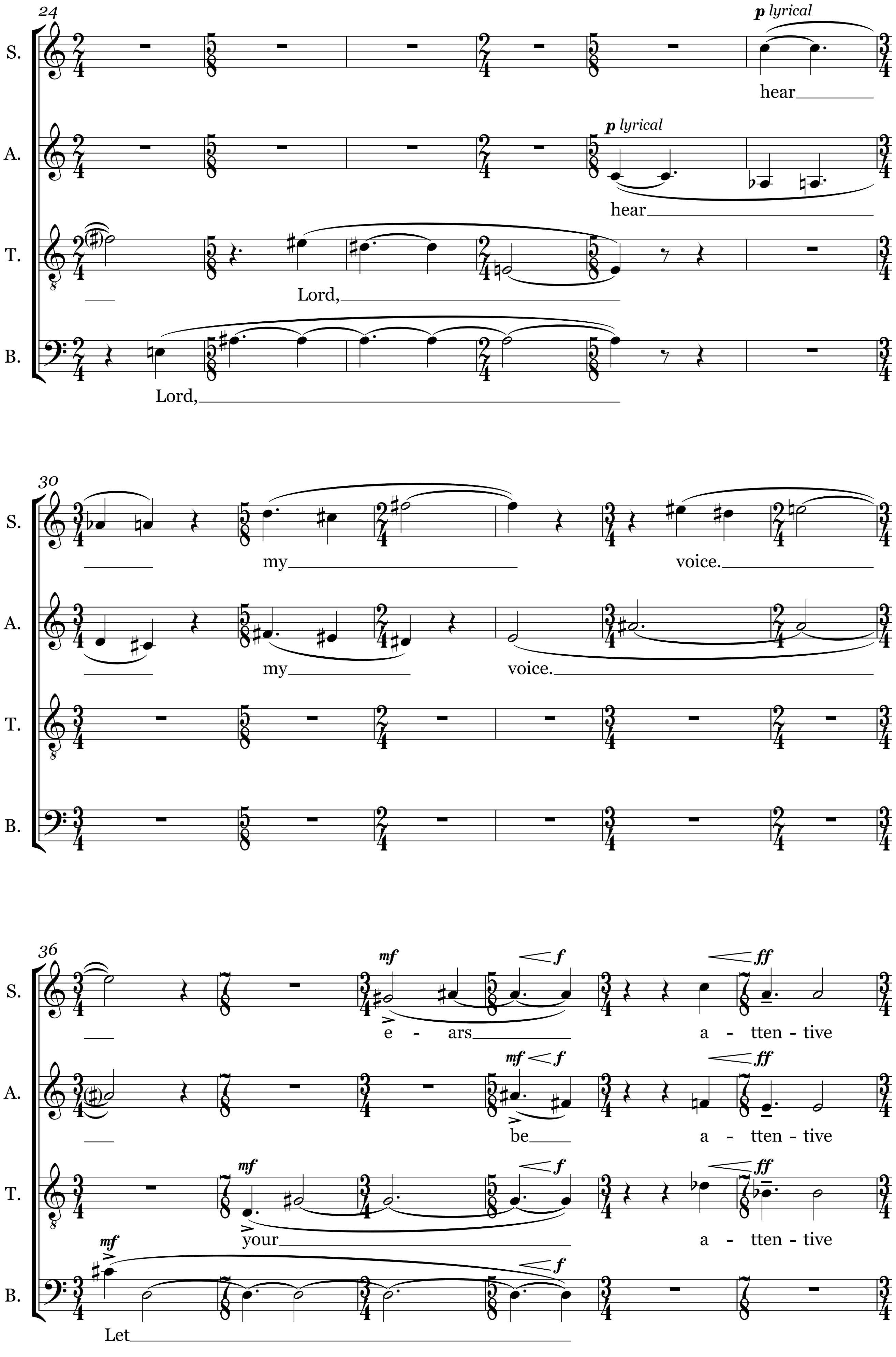
De profundis

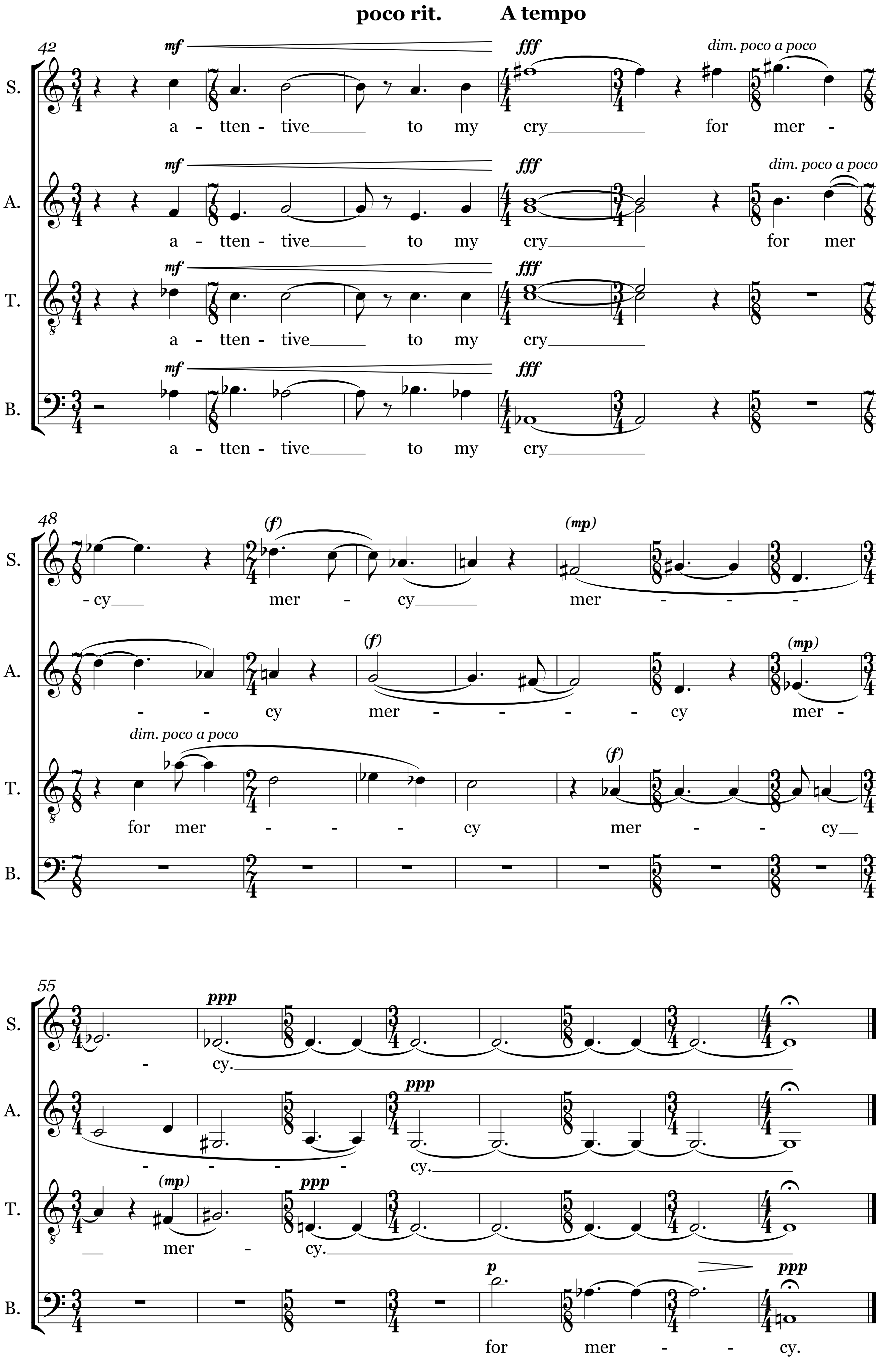
Psalm 130: 1-2

Joshua Ballance


♩ = c. 39
f forceful (sempre)
Soprano Solo
De pro - fun - dis
Alto Solo
De pro - fun - dis
Soprano
Alto
Tenor
Bass
6
S. Solo
De pro - fun - dis
A. Solo
De pro - fun - dis
S.
pp very light
cla - ma - vi
A.
pp very light
cla - ma - - vi
T.
pp very light
cla - - ma - vi
B.
pp very light
cla - - ma - vi


11
S. Solo
A. Solo
S.
A.
T.
B.
De pro - fun - dis
De pro - fun - dis
mp
cla - ma - vi
mp
cla - ma - vi
Slightly faster (♩. = c. 48)
17
p dolce
f
pp
ad te, Do-mi ne;
p dolce
f
pp
ad te, Do-mi ne;
p dolce
f
pp
ad te, Do-mi ne;
p lyrical
Lord, Lord,
p lyrical
Lord, Lord,


24
S.
A.
T.
B.
p lyrical
hear
p lyrical
hear
Lord,
Lord,
30
S.
A.
T.
B.
my
voice.
my
voice.
36
S.
A.
T.
B.
mf
f
ff
e - ars
a - tten - tive
mf
f
ff
be
a - tten - tive
mf
f
ff
your
a - tten - tive
mf
f
Let


poco rit.
A tempo
42
S.
A.
T.
B.
mf
fff
dim. poco a poco
a - tten - tive to my cry for mer -
a - tten - tive to my cry for mer
a - tten - tive to my cry
a - tten - tive to my cry
48
(f)
(mp)
- cy mer - cy mer - - - -
- - cy mer - - - - cy mer -
for mer - - - - cy mer - - cy
55
ppp
p
- cy.
- - - - - cy.
mer - cy.
for mer - - cy.

Cambridge, January 2017