University of Alberta

Vic Nees: “Godfather” of Belgian Choral Music

by

Marvin Henry Dueck

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Music

Department of Music

Spring 2013
Edmonton, Alberta

Abstract

Vic Nees (b. 1936) is a prolific Belgian composer of primarily choral music who has had a profound influence on the culture of choral music in Belgium, Europe, and increasingly around the world. Through his long association with the Flemish Radio Choir, both as conductor and producer, he was instrumental in developing this chorus into one of the top-ranked professional choral ensembles in the world today. As adjudicator at many of the world's most prestigious choral competitions he has promoted excellence in choral performance on a global level. As a composition adjudicator and clinician at many international composition competitions, he has stimulated creativity and artistic integrity within the participants, nourishing the demand for new choral music of merit. Finally, as a composer he has been recognized world-wide with numerous awards for his compositions, and honours for his contributions to choral music. Most importantly he has gifted the world with his art.

This essay seeks to introduce Vic Nees and his body of work to the English-speaking world, specifically North America, where he is largely unknown. The main body of the essay includes an overview of Nees's place in the continuum of Belgian music history, an outline of his formative music training and experience, and his contributions as a conductor and choral composer, and a discussion of his stylistic characteristics found in his music. Appendices provide interview questions provided to Nees, verbatim transcripts of interviews conducted with Nees in 2008, and a listing of his compositions. The interviews provide true insights into his philosophy, his

musicianship, his artistry, and his towering intellect. Exposure to Vic Nees's music is a rewarding experience, and if the reading of this paper entices more musicians to seek out and perform his music, this paper will have served its purpose.

Table of Contents

List of Examples

List of Tables

Introduction

It was with some trepidation that I embarked on this project of writing a paper about the life and work of Belgian composer Vic Nees (b. 1936). North America has had very little exposure to the music of Nees, and despite extensive experience as a choral musician, I also had not heard of him. In 2006 I encountered single copies of his *Magnificat* (1981) and *Bonum est confiteri Domino* (1988) while leafing through a packet of sample music from the Fifth World Symposium on Choral Music in Rotterdam. I was immediately intrigued with the music, and thus were planted the seeds of this project. There was something pure about this discovery, untainted as it was by any knowledge of the composer and unsullied by any hearings/performances/(mis)-performances of his compositions. It was a discovery of black notes on white pages from which I had to extrapolate sound and idea. It was the combination of sound and idea, and particularly the quality of this combination that continued to draw me into a discovery of more works by Nees, and eventually convinced me to embark on a project that would help introduce this man and his music to a broader musical community.

Along with this paper, the project involved conducting two separate concerts of choral music in which significant portions of the programs were compositions by Nees. The first concert, given on October 29, 2008, featured the *Trumpet Te Deum* (2005); the second concert on March 15, 2009 included *Amsterdams Pater Noster* (2006) and *Singet dem Herrn* (2002). According to Nees, these concerts were the première performances of these compositions outside Europe.

Of course the most important and exciting aspect of the project was the opportunity of first, corresponding with the composer, and eventually, meeting and spending time with him. When I first contacted him in October 2007 to determine if he would be available for consultation and interviews he immediately responded in the affirmative, and invited me to come visit him at his home in Grimbergen. This resulted in a week-long visit to Grimbergen in May 2008, which included formal recorded interviews, informal discussions on music and philosophy, attending concerts and services, meeting significant members of the Belgian music community, and attending rehearsals of the Flemish Radio Choir. Vic Nees placed himself at my disposal for the entire week for interviews, discussions, etc., and very importantly, exposed me to the greater Belgian music society – specifically to places and institutions that were a part of his life.

Vic Nees is a man both brilliantly astute and remarkably humble. His knowledge of music is encyclopedic, and is coupled with a broad philosophical stance. He has the ability to set text to music in a profound manner. His music is technically and intellectually challenging, yet accessible. The time we spent together— poring over his scores, discussing music philosophy, discussing the human condition—resulted in thought-provoking interviews which I have decided to include as a significant appendix to this paper. Vic Nees is a musician and composer of superior rank, and his own words about his music and its import serve to enhance the narrative provided here of his life and work.

Proficient as he is in seven languages, and his self-effacing protestations of his ability with the English language notwithstanding, I found, both in his recorded interviews and off-the-record conversations, a very careful (and in most cases an absolutely correct) choice of words to convey his thoughts. Grammatical issues aside, he has the ability to state his line of thinking concisely and unambiguously, even in the unfamiliar language of English. The transcribed interviews (guided somewhat as they were by questions I had sent to him prior to my arrival), therefore, inform observations and statements made about his life and music in the main body of this essay, and serve to illuminate the character and intellect of Vic Nees.

As a broad outline, the main body of the paper will be divided into three sections which will deal respectively with placing Vic Nees in historical perspective socially and musically, outlining his musical background/education and experience, and discussing the most salient aspects of his musical style. This is followed by appendices presenting the interview questions and transcripts, as well as a listing of Nees's compositions.

As a final word of introduction, I count it as one of the great privileges of my life to have become acquainted with Vic Nees. He has befriended me, educated me, stimulated me, and rewarded me with his gift of music. I only hope that my efforts have, in some way, convinced him of my humble gratitude.

1. Historical Setting

Open to the English Channel on the west, bordered by the Netherlands on the north and France to the south, and flanked by Germany and Luxemburg on the east, the tiny country of Belgium and surrounding area has figured significantly in the history of all the arts. Perhaps its central location in the European continent contributes to a cross-pollination of ideas from surrounding countries yielding a sort of hybrid vigour in the arts. Certainly throughout history the mere logistical fact of travel north, south, and east across Europe – even west across the Channel, would have resulted in a confluence of artistic theories and practices in this area. At the very least Belgium's location and size would have meant exposure to a host of concepts not necessarily available to countries on the periphery of Europe.

The list of painters that Belgium claims as its native sons appears like a veritable "Who's Who" of important figures in visual art history. Conspicuous among them are Jan van Eyck (1395–1441), Rogier van der Weyden (1400–1464), Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), and the famous Brueghel family of painters headed up by Pieter Brueghel the Elder and spanning the years 1525 to 1690. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century world was exposed to the renowned works of Belgian painters and sculptors James Ensor (1860–1949), Constant Permeke (1886–1952), Paul Delvaux (1897–1994), and René Magritte (1898–1967), while Jan Fabre (b.1958) and Luc Tuymans (b. 1958) figure prominently in the contemporary art scene.

In the world of literature Belgium boasts such figures as the poet Emile Verhaeren (1855–1916), novelists Hendrik Conscience (1812–1883), Georges Simenon (1903–1989), Suzanne Lilar (1901–1992), Amélie Nothomb (b. 1967), and 1911 Nobel Prize winner poet/playwright Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949).

As with the above-mentioned figures in their respective fields, in the world of music, Belgian composers also played a vital—some would say crucial—role in the development of Western art music.[1] Virtually as early as there are historically identifiable composers, notable among them are those of Flemish origins. Even a cursory review of Western music history identifies the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Burgundian school of composers as a significant starting point in its development – the Burgundian court covered an area which included Lille, Burges, Ghent, and Brussels. Guilluame Dufay (ca. 1400–1474) and Gilles Binchois (ca. 1400–1460) are often cited as the chief composers of this period and school, and it is no doubt due to the patronage of the court and the value it placed on the arts that we still have examples of their works, such as Dufay's *Missa L'homme armé*.

In the Renaissance period, most music history texts refer to this period as "the age of the Netherlanders." (Grout and Palisca, 1985) Again, composers from the area of

[1] For the purposes of this paper, henceforth when referring to music or music history I will be referring to the narrowly-defined scope of what is variously referred to as Western art music, Classical music, or more recently (with a nod to John Drummond and his article "Re-thinking Western Art Music: a perspective shift for music educators"), North-west Asian Court Music (Drummond 2010, 117-126).Generally speaking it is music composed for the concert hall or church, written in the tradition that originated with European music of the Middle Ages and passed through the Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, and Romantic styles.

modern-day Belgium and surrounding areas comprise this group: Johannes Ockeghem (ca. 1420–1497), Jacob Obrecht (ca.1452–1505), Pierre de la Rue (ca. 1460–1518), and perhaps the greatest of the early Renaissance composers, Josquin des Pres (1440–1521). This trend of Flemish prominence amongst composers continued into the middle of the sixteenth century with composers such as Nicolas Gombert (ca. 1500–ca. 1556), Jacobus Clemens, or Clemens non Papa (ca. 1510–ca. 1556), Adrian Willaert (ca. 1490–1562), and Cipriano de Rore (1516–1565).

Even as the geographic pendulum was shifting in the final half-century of the Renaissance era, Flemish composers remained amongst the most influential musicians of the time: Giaches de Wert (1535–1596), Philippe de Monte (1521–1603), and one of the towering figures of Western music, Orlando di Lasso (1532–1594), referred to as "… one of the greatest composers … the 'Belgian Orpheus.'" (Mann 2001) The influence of all these Flemish composers was felt throughout Europe during the Renaissance period and beyond, as composers of other nationalities emulated their musical style, or, as was the case with Andrea Gabrieli (ca. 1532–1585), studied with composers like Lassus.

This obviously unidimensional glimpse of pre-Baroque music history does not take into account many significant composers from other regions in Europe. However, it does provide a brief summary illustrating how many household musical names in early music history were from the area of Belgium. It is not within the scope of this paper to ferret out the causes of this phenomenon; merely to call attention to it. The

importance of the region of Belgium to the early development of Western art music, and the development of the arts as a whole is indisputable.

With the decline of church and court as important artistic music patrons, and with the rise of nation states towards the end of the Renaissance and into the Baroque era, the spectrum of recorded music history began to broaden, and Belgium composers no longer featured as prominently. If recognizable composers are a barometer of a country's importance in Western music history, a brief list of important Belgian composers born between 1600 and 1900 does not produce many familiar names. This list might include Jean-Baptiste Loeillet (1680–1730), André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry (1741–1813), César Auguste Franck (1822–1890), Peter Benoit (1835–1901), and Julius Van Nuffel (1883–1953). While recognizing the contribution of the composers listed above, and allowing for nationalistic tendencies, there can be no denying that beginning in the seventeenth century Belgium was reduced in its stature as a center for history-influencing composers.

Even in the twentieth century, there is not a plethora of well-recognized composers of Belgian origin. Yet there is evidence that Belgium continued to be important in the musical world, albeit not necessarily through its composers. The Royal Conservatory of Brussels was founded in 1832 and not only attracted musicians from Belgium and neighboring countries, but served as the musical centre for the city. It continues to exist today, but as two institutions—the Conservatoire Royal de Musique, and the Koninklijk Muziekconservatorium—offering instruction in the two national

languages of French and Flemish, respectively. (Wangermée and Vanhulst, 8 Feb. 2013)

Another example of Belgian influence in the international music community was the establishment in 1946 of *Jeunesses Musicales*, an organization, now international in scope, dedicated to the musical education of young people. It has promoted artistic exchanges amongst young musicians from many nations, and has promoted young performers through concert tours and competitions. In 1951 it held its first music camp in Orford, Quebec, Canada, and currently includes within its membership more than 40 countries, and 500,000 individual members. ("Jeunesses Musicales," February 8, 2013)

Despite the existence of such composers, institutions and activities, there is little extant literature to provide information regarding twentieth-century Belgian musical developments, particularly with respect to composers in general and choral composers specifically. What little exists is primarily in Flemish. As national and language barriers drop, and as cultures of other countries become more accessible, the time is ripe to explore this as yet unexplored aspect of choral music development.

Within Vic Nees's childhood city of Mechelen, as early as the1400's there was a strong musical tradition of the cathedral retaining paid choirmasters and choristers, among them Ludwig (Louis) van Beethoven (1717), grandfather of the great composer. Mechelen was also an important center for the development of many

musical instruments, including the organ, and later the carillon. The late fifteenth century saw the establishment of a cathedral choirboys residence and school at St. Rombout[2], and many of the choirmasters were also significant composers. By 1797, however, professional ecclesiastical musical activities had waned to the point of non-existence and remained so until the early twentieth century. Jules van Nuffel (1883–1953) is the musician credited with starting the revival of church music at the cathedral, with organist and composer Flor Peeters (1903–1986) being one of the most well-known twentieth-century musicians associated with St. Rombout. (Schreurs, June 14, 2010)

Beginning in 1897 professional music training took place at the Hoger Instituut voor Kerkmuziek (soon to be known as the Lemmens Institute) in Mechelen under the direction of the brilliant organist and composer Jaak Nikolaas Lemmens (1823–1881). Other directors included composers Edgar Tinel (1854–1912), Aloys Desmet (1867–1917), Jules van Nuffel, Jules Vyverman (1900–89) and Jozef Joris (b. 1923). One of the legacies of this institute was the publication of 65 volumes of *Musica Sacra* dedicated to the presentation of music appropriate for the Catholic liturgy, particularly Gregorian chants, organ accompaniments, and motets. Among its list of many fine instructors and composers, the Lemmens Institute retained Marinus de Jong (1891–1984), Flor Peeters, and the father of Vic Nees, Gustaaf (Staf) Frans Nees (1901–1965). (Vlaamse componisten, 2010)

[2] Mechelen-Brussels is the name of the Ecclesiastical Province and the Roman Catholic Primatial See, governed by the Archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels, which covers the whole of Belgium. The duality of the Belgian archbishopric is reflected in the rare fact that the archbishop has two active co-cathedrals: St. Rombout Cathedral in Mechelen and St. Michael and Gudula Cathedral in Brussels.

Jules Nuffel, Flor Peeters, Marinus de Jong, Jules Vijverman and Staf Nees came to be known as the “Mechelen School.” Their work focused heavily on the development of liturgical music for the Catholic Church in Belgium. The writing style of the members of the Mechelen School was largely unaffected by modern European trends. Their compositions were primarily designed to fit within the liturgical framework, and were distributed through *Musica Sacra.* Thus, a large proportion of the vocal compositions of Staf Nees is motets, and many of his organ compositions are intended for the church, rather than the concert hall. (Vlaamse Componisten, March 10, 2010.)

Today Staf Nees is remembered primarily for his carillon compositions, and for his development of carillon technique. Beginning in 1892 carillonneur Jef Denyn (1862–1941) began to give concerts on the St. Rombout carillon and in 1922, in Mechelen, founded the first and largest carillon school in the world—The Royal Carillon School (later named after him as The Royal Carillon School "Jef Denyn"). Staf Nees not only studied at this school, but in 1941 upon Denyn’s death, took over as its director. This school soon gained international renown and trained many of the foremost carillonneurs of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Together with Denyn, Staf Nees laid the foundations for carillon performance, and his compositions and technique still largely determine how the carillon sounds today. In 1922 Staf Nees was also appointed as Kapellmeister/organist for the Basilica of Our Lady of Hanswijk in Mechelen, and he retained these positions until his death in 1965.

Although a very accomplished organist and pianist, Staf wrote very little music for these two instruments, preferring to direct his compositional energy to the carillon. (Royal Carillon School, October 20, 2009)

This, in miniature, sets the historical and musical backdrop into which Vic Nees was born on March 8th, 1936. It is included not only to show Nees's place in the lineage of Belgian music history, but also to illustrate the long-standing, high quality cultural traditions that were a part of daily life in Belgium. This aesthetic exposure and heritage would inevitably have a bearing on the development of Nees's musical style and artistic sensibility.

---

2. Life

Born on March 8th, 1936, in the Belgian city of Mechelen, Vic Nees experienced a childhood that was anything but normal. He survived the German occupation during World War II, lost his mother at age 14, lived under the shadow of St. Rombout archiepiscopal cathedral, and, as mentioned in the previous chapter, had a father who was not only a member of the "Mechelen School" but who was also the director of the Royal Carillon School and a pivotal influence in the development of carillon playing.

Belgium was invaded by the German army on May 10, 1940, surrendered to the invading forces on May 28, 1940 and remained occupied until liberation by Allied forces in September, 1944. Although Nees was very young when he experienced this, he still recalls with horror the terrible bombardments.[3] Throughout the occupation, he was often required to remain indoors, and so Nees occupied himself by listening repeatedly to his father's 78 RPM recordings of Stravinsky, Honegger, Hindemith, Milhaud, Ravel, and was allowed to follow along in the score and to play piano. Thus, at the age of 5 or 6 when most children would be starting with Mozart and Beethoven, Nees, through external forces, was grounding himself musically in the works of some of the foremost twentieth-century composers.[4] Nees also immersed himself in the music of such masters as Bach, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Schubert, and

[3] When he took this author for a tour of Mechelen and showed him the home where he had grown up (literally in the shadow of the cathedral tower of St. Rombout), he recounted how as a child during the war he was aware that should the tower be hit by bombs, their house was just close enough to be included in the number of houses destroyed by the falling tower. For more anecdotal information by Nees see Appendix 6: Miscellaneous Notes from Belgium Visit, page 246 of this paper.
[4] See Appendix 2: Interview 1 with Vic Nees, Monday May 12, 2008, page 115 of this paper.

Schumann, since he indicated in an interview that at the age of 14, while playing organ for his father he wrote a set of variations on a Psalm tune. Nees stated, "It was not good, but it was correct—there were no failures in it. This I taught myself by studying, Schubert, Schumann and others. I learned what was correct by studying the masters."[5]

An additional impact of the pre-war and war years on the musical life of Nees, (although perhaps somewhat indirectly), was the formation in 1937 of the (now) world-famous Vlaams Radio Koor (Flemish Radio Choir), formerly known as the Belgium Radio Choir. Established as a professional chamber choir by the Belgian national broadcasting corporation, the INR/NIR, it was led during the war by German conductors, and was populated by German or German-sympathizing members. According to Nees, the choir of that time was very good.

Nees recounts that following the war in 1945, there was a large wave of anti-German sentiment that resulted in somewhat of a purge in the musical society of Belgium. The two German conductors went to America. Choir membership now comprised only "good" Belgians—those not sympathetic to the Germans. Similarly, Jan Van Bouwel, the conductor who took over the choir after the war, was not chosen solely on the merits of his musicianship, but substantively on his political sidings during the war. The prerequisite of political acceptability placed limitations on the number of qualified musicians available to be hired for positions in the choir, and according to Nees, the overall quality of this ensemble suffered considerably. As a child and young

[5] Appendix 6, Miscellaneous Notes from Belgian Visit page 251.

adult, Nees listened to radio performances of the choir. Given the political climate of the time, he was exposed to music of both German composers during the war, and that of non-Germanic composers after the war. Thus, the sound and the programming of this choir had a bearing on Nees's choral sensitivity and writing.

This was the choir that Nees inherited as conductor in December 1969, when the previous conductor, Jan Van Bouwel, died suddenly, and this was the choir that Nees directed for the next 26 years.[6] This anti-German sentiment haunted Nees for many of his early years as conductor, not only in the musicians available to him, but also in the repertoire deemed suitable for performance. French culture was dominant in Belgium and this, combined with the anti-German sentiment, resulted in very little music by German composers being performed in the first part of his tenure as director.

For Nees, the traumatic experiences of the war and occupation were followed, at the age of 14, by the death of his mother. Subsequently, his father remarried a widow with three children. His blood sister had already left the home, but Nees, still in high school or Gymnasium, continued to live at home, and had to deal with an entirely different family situation. This, along with all the other issues endemic to adolescence created a difficult time for him, and resulted in an estrangement from his father which was only reconciled shortly before his father's death, when the young Nees was 29. Significantly, it resulted in Nees's conscious decision to, initially, turn his back on his father's musical vocation (and, perhaps, his father's assumption that Nees would also

[6]See Appendix 3: Interview 2 with Vic Nees, Thursday May 15, 2008, page 209.

become a musician), and instead enroll in the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven as a student of philosophy and literature.

Nonetheless, as a child and adolescent, Nees benefitted from and was influenced by his father's work as a musician. He frequently played organ for his father in church. He constantly heard the sound of the carillon as his father's students practiced, performed, or received lessons in the carillon tower of St. Rombout cathedral, located next to the family home. The cosmopolitan side of young Nees's character was shaped by these carillon students since many of them came (and continue to come) from around the world to attend the Royal Carillon School, and many came to the Nees household socially or for lessons. He also received impromptu piano lessons from visiting instructors of the prestigious Lemmens Institute. As Vic Nees said in an interview: "Not to compare myself to Mozart, but like him I was always around music, my father was pushing me into music: music and church was all I ever knew growing up."[7]

Musical Training and Career

Vic Nees started his formal piano training at the age of four under the tutelage of his father, a person who, as has been mentioned, was a formidable musical presence, and who remained Nees's primary teacher. Occasionally during his elementary school years he was given additional lessons on the piano by an external teacher (unnamed by Nees) from a local college. During this time he was also a boy chorister in the St

[7] See Appendix 6, page 250.

Rombout Cathedral Choir under the direction of Jules Van Nuffel. Upon his entrance into secondary school, Nees ceased his formal piano instruction, outside the occasional impromptu lessons proffered by his father, or visiting professors. During this time, however, Nees continued to play, particularly compositions of French composers (Milhaud, Poulenc, etc.), as well as his own compositions. His first pieces were created as early as age nine, and his first serious music (according to Nees) occurred during these teenage years and very much followed the compositional styles of twentieth-century French composers.[8] Upon completion of high school, Nees enrolled in a year's study of philosophy and literature at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. The benefits of this year of study can be seen in Nees's music through his careful selection of texts, his treatment of words, and his philosophical treatment of these texts through musical expression, as will be discussed in the "Music" chapter of this essay.

After a year at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Nees realized that music was too much ingrained into the fibre of his being to turn his back on it, and he enrolled in the Artesis Hogeschool Antwerpen, or the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp. Here he studied with Marcel Andries and Flor Peeters earning first prizes in harmony, counterpoint, fugue, and composition, including the national Albert de Vleeshouwer composition prize. Marcel Andries had studied in Germany and introduced Nees to the choral compositional techniques of German composers, and specifically Hugo Distler (1908–1942). It was in the music of Distler that Nees found a union between his love of literature and his understanding of music: a union between the prosody of

[8] Appendix 2, page 115.

text and the rhythm of music. This discovery was to shape the rest of his compositional life as will be discussed in the "Music" chapter of this essay.

At the Antwerp conservatory Nees also began his study of conducting, but principally orchestral conducting as there was no choral conducting instruction being offered. He subsequently received a government scholarship to study choral conducting with the renowned Kurt Thomas in Hamburg, Germany, and in 1964 Nees became a laureate of the Meisterkurs für Chorleitung (Mastercourse for Choral Conducting) in Hamburg.

Nees continued to develop his choral conducting skills by directing two choirs from 1961 to 1969—the Vokaal Ensemble Philippus de Monte in Mechelen (named after one of Belgium's famous Renaissance composers), and the Ter Kamerenkoor in Brussels. It was with the de Monte choir in 1963 that Nees gave the Belgian première performance of *St. John's Passion* by Heinrich Schütz.

Nees continued to hone his skills as a composer during this period as well. Some of his most significant choral works from this period include *Mein Hirt ist Gott, der Herr* (1958), *Fünf Motetten* (1964), *European Stabat Mater* (1967), *Ave Maria* (1969), along with many smaller works[9]. It is also from this period that the majority of his admittedly small oeuvre of instrumental works was composed, including three works for piano, and an organ variation. By his own admission and through a review of his works, it is clear that Nees's love of literature naturally allowed him to express

[9] For a full listing of his works se Appendix 4: Works List, page 234.

himself musically most easily through vocal works, and predominantly choral works— a marriage of the two art forms of literature and music.

In 1961 Nees began his professional career with an appointment to the state-run Belgian Radio and Television (BRT), specifically with the Belgian Radio Chorus (BRC) and Orchestra (BRO), and he remained with this organization until his retirement in 1996. The mission of the Radio Chorus was to present new or unpublished/unperformed works to the Belgian public, and this entailed rehearsing a program of works for four days (Monday through Thursday, approximately five to six hours/day) and recording it on Friday for subsequent airing over the radio. Until 1969 Nees was producer for the Radio Chorus and this involved selecting music for programs, inviting guest conductors, and often rehearsing or directing the chorus himself. In December 1969, when the existing director of the chorus, Jan Van Bouwel, died suddenly, the director of the Radio department asked Nees to fill the position for a few weeks until they could find a new conductor. Thus, along with his work as producer, Nees also became the conductor. His work as conductor was so valued that he was asked to take the position permanently, and so, relinquishing his position as producer, from 1969 until his retirement in 1996 Nees held the position of conductor of the Belgian Radio Chorus.[10]

[10] His retirement in 1996 coincided with a change in the status of the Radio chorus. Now known as the Flemish Radio Chorus, it is no longer administered by, or affiliated with the BRT. It has become an autonomous organization, 50% funded by the Ministry of Arts and Culture, and 50% funded by public concerts. It is a professional performing and touring choir similar to many other European choirs, and is currently considered one of the première ensembles in Europe and the world. Recent conductors include Paul Hillier and Bo Holten.

Every week Nees was required to learn, prepare, and rehearse a 25-minute program of entirely new (or newly discovered) choral works with a fully professional ensemble. On Friday of every week he was required to record this program for public airing over national radio. This chorus was also required to record larger programs for special events (Christmas, Easter, significant national events), as well as perform these programs publicly and partake in occasional touring engagements. As opposed to public performance, where small performance mistakes could be hidden or at least quickly forgotten, recorded performances consigned any errors into perpetuity; every replay of the recording would reiterate the error. In order to prepare the chorus for these recording sessions, the conductor's thorough knowledge of the score, use of critical hearing, and clarity of gesture was paramount.

There were many benefits to the development of Nees's career and his skills as a conductor of holding this position for 26 years. Firstly, he became extremely proficient at quick study. The sheer volume of new music to be learned required a disciplined honing of sight-reading skills. Unlike travelling conductors, many of whom perform a series of works over and over again with different ensembles, Nees rarely performed works more than once. His position required that he be able to quickly "hear" the work as he saw it on the printed page, (as these were predominantly "new" works there would be no prior recordings to listen to), to be able to intimate the composer's intent, to perceive potential rehearsal difficulties, and to develop rehearsal preparations that would not only engage the singers, but also prepare the work with interpretive expressiveness for the recording.

Secondly, it required an economical use of rehearsal time. A high volume of music each week, plus a limited amount of rehearsal time each week, plus the demand for a high quality musical recording at the end of each week equated to very few minutes of rehearsal time per piece. It was essential to develop rehearsal skills that identified difficulties in the music, accelerated learning, preserved vocal abilities, prevented mental fatigue, and communicated through gesture rather than speech.

Also, as suggested above, it demanded an extraordinarily critical ear during performance. Since in most cases performance here meant recording, this required a certain distancing oneself from the actual emotional aspect of performance. Thus, Nees had to maintain a cool, detached and evaluative stance, while at the same time exhorting the chorus through gesture to become emotionally and intellectually involved in the performance.

Finally, holding this position for such an extended tenure has resulted in an extensive personal conducting repertoire for Vic Nees. Not only is he familiar with current music (and currently discovered “old” music), but he is also familiar with music composition trends. This has given him the ability to assimilate new musical expressions quickly and easily. Furthermore, intimate acquaintance with such a vast body of musical literature and composers has allowed him the ability to deduce immediately the quality and integrity of a work in terms of musical setting and suitability for the choral instrument.

It is small wonder, therefore, that Vic Nees has regularly been asked to serve as adjudicator at some of the world's most prestigious choral festivals. In reviewing some of the points above, it becomes immediately apparent that his skills and abilities are eminently suitable for adjudication: quick study, critical ear, familiarity with a vast repertoire, and recognition of musical trends. Among some of the international festivals he has adjudicated are International Choir Festival Arnhem, "Guido d'Arezzo" International Polyphonic Competition – Arezzo, Festival Internacional de Musica de Cantonigros – Barcelona, Cork International Choral Festival, Malta International Choir Festival, European Music Festival for Young People – Neerpelt, Florilège Vocal de Tours, International May Choir Competition "Prof. Georgi Dimitrov"– Varna, and the European Broadcast Union's, *Let The Peoples Sing.*

Along with his many appointments as adjudicator for choral festivals listed above, Nees has also served as a composition clinician and adjudicator throughout Europe, the United Kingdom, and South America. Furthermore, he has been guest conductor in the Netherlands, Ireland, Spain, Hungary, and Venezuela, often directing his own compositions.

Throughout his tenure as conductor of the Flemish Radio Choir, and in his retirement, Nees has continued to compose. His compositional production has been recognized through the receipt of several prizes, the earliest of which was the Albert de

Vleeshouwer Prize for Composition, awarded to him during his time at the conservatory, as already noted earlier. In 1973 he was awarded the Eugène Baie Prize by the Belgium government for his complete output of choral works. In 1990 he received the prestigious Golden Diapason award from the AGEC[11] for his work *Regina coeli – Blue be It.* SABAM, (Société d'Auteurs Belge – Belgische Auteurs Maatschappij), the Belgian association of authors, composers, and publishers awarded him the Fuga Trophy in 1993 for his contributions to art and culture. Other prizes include the 1995 ANV Visser Neerlandia Prize for the outstanding quality of his oeuvre, the 1995 Vondel Prize (from the Alfred Toepfer Stiftung in Hamburg) for services in the cause of European unification, and the 2000 Medal of Honour from Marnixring for the promotion and dissemination of Flemish culture.

Nees was elected corresponding member of the Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie (The Royal Flemish Academy) in 1994, and appointed as active member of Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten (The Royal Academy of Belgium for Sciences and Arts) in 1998. He is a consultant for the

[11] The Arbeitsgemeinschaft Europäischer Chorverbände (AGEC), a European umbrella organization for national choir federations, is the driving force behind an impressive series of international exchange projects in the field of vocal music. AGEC was founded in 1955 in Strasbourg aiming to improve and stimulate cultural activity and relations between singing Europeans. AGEC focuses in the first place on the co-operation between the member choir federations on a musical, pedagogical and organization level. This many-sided interaction contributes to the promotion of choir activities with national renown in the different countries. Each year, one of the member choir federations hosts the EuroChor, a choir training for young singers from all over Europe with choir music from the host country as leading theme. In addition, each year the famous composition prize the Golden Diapason is awarded to a new choir composition that can be considered as a qualitative contribution to modern choir literature. (Anonymous, 2010a)

Europa Cantat (European Federation of Young Choirs),[12] and has played an important role in many amateur choir organizations.

Nees's compositions have been rigorously tested and adjudicated internationally, and the continuing demand for his musical skill in both composition and conducting attests to the quality of his abilities, and the distinction of the awards he has received. Performances of his works by ensembles throughout the world are occurring in increasing numbers, even in North America where he is not yet well known.[13] "Through his courses in choral conducting, his contributions to periodicals and radio programmes, and his editions of both contemporary and historical choral music, he has achieved an important position in the movement for innovative choral music." (Coulembier, Heirman, and Vercammen 2005)

[12] Europa Cantat is a European youth choir organization founded in 1963. It is currently the biggest European youth organization with members in 42 European countries and 50 countries worldwide. It is a network of choir organizations, choirs and individual conductors, singers and choir managers all over Europe and it directly represents more than 1 million of them all over Europe and indirectly reaches 20 million. (Anonymous, 2010b)

[13] Nees has suggested that this may be linked to the fact that he is not a member of ASCAP (American Society of Composer, Authors and Publishers).

3. Music

Overall Output

Vic Nees's oeuvre comprises six instrumental works (four keyboard compositions, one string quartet, and one brass quintet), ten works for solo voice and keyboard, and approximately 125 choral works. Of his choral compositions most (95) are *a cappella* pieces and the remaining are usually accompanied by one or two instruments.[14] Given his religious background, and the fact that many of his works were commissioned for specific occasions, (often with religious significance), his choral compositions are primarily based on sacred texts. Approximately 20 of his works are distinctly Catholic, and specifically utilitarian to church functions or occasions. Close to 50 percent of his texts are in his native Flemish language. Nees readily acknowledges that some of his compositions do not lend themselves for use as concert pieces (i.e. they have been composed for church services) and have limited universal value because of language and function, but he contends that they still merit value as a method of compositional technique and an instructive influence for singers. There is, however, a large body of his work that is universal in appeal, demanding in technique, and rewarding in performance.[15]

Nees's compositional life can be divided into three periods:[16]

---

[14] For a full listing of his works see Appendix 4, page 234.
[15] For more information on how Nees views his body of work, and on Nees's philosophy, see Appendix 2, pp. 181–191.
[16] I am indebted to the organization MATRIX - Centrum voor nieuwe muziek (MATRIX – Center for New Music), and specifically to Veronique Verspeurt and Rebecca Diependaele for the chronological list of works by Nees, which were kindly forwarded to me. This information has been included in this paper as Appendix 4, page 234.

1. 1958–1969 (December) – a period of twelve years, which includes his final years at the conservatory and his tenure as producer at Belgian Radio and Television (BRT);
2. 1970–1996 – a period of twenty-six years during which he was full-time conductor of the Belgian Radio Chorus (BRC);
3. 1997–present (2009 at the end of interviews for this paper) – a period of twelve years,–(his retirement years).

The tables below provide a listing of works for each of these three periods, for both his Functional Music and his vocal and choral music intended for more universal use.

Table 1. Gebruiksmuziek (Functional Music)

Period	*Years*	*# Years (inclusive)*	*# Works*	*Yearly Avg,*
1	1958-1969	12	27	2.3
2	1970-1996	26	37	1.4
3	1997-2009	12	11	0.9

Table 2. Vokale Werken (Vocal i.e. Choral Works)

Period	*Years*	*# Years (inclusive)*	*# Works*	*Yearly Avg,*
1	1958-1969	12	17	1.4
2	1970-1996	26	67	2.6
3	1997-2009	12	30	2.5

The types of compositions included in Table 1 are referred to in Flemish as "Gebruiksmuziek"—literally "functional music," and comprise music for TV, film, theatre, jingles or music for specific occasions. During compositional period 1, Nees composed approximately 27 pieces for an average of 2.3 works per year. In period 2 he produced only 37 pieces for a significantly reduced average of 1.4 works per year. Period 3 saw a further reduction in yearly average with approximately 11 compositions averaging .9 per year.

There may be several possible explanations for Nees's decline in productivity of this particular type of music. The easiest is that he was simply too busy. That explanation, however, does not necessarily stand up to scrutiny when examining other factors. If the demands of his professional life explain the drop in yearly averages for period 2, why was there a continuing decline during his retirement years in period 3, presumably when he had more leisure time? Furthermore, a brief glance at the "Vokale Werke" shows that there is no corresponding drop-off in the number of vocal works composed over the same period. Perhaps a more plausible explanation is that there was increasing demand for Nees's more universally functional compositions. His ability as a choral composer of rank was becoming recognized and he was receiving commissions for larger-scale works. The greater creative license afforded to Nees for these more significant works could have been a natural attraction to spend more of his creative energies on them, as opposed to "Gebruiksmuziek". Finally, perhaps as Nees became more and more prominent as a composer, he became less dependent financially on the production of utility music. Whatever the reason or

reasons may be, there is a declining trend in his productivity of “Gebruiksmuziek” throughout his life.

The figures in Table 2, “Vokale Werken”, are conversely impressive for the productivity they reveal. This category includes works of a more substantial nature in terms of length, complexity, and artistic expression. Many were commissions for specific occasions or events, some were impulse creations— (Nees always wanted to compose a *Requiem*, so he composed a *Requiem*)—and some were artistic responses to life situations. During period 1, Nees composed approximately 17 works for a yearly average of 1.4 per year. In period 2, arguably the most hectic period of his life with regards to his full-time position at BRC, he nearly doubled his yearly output: approximately 69 compositions for a yearly average of 2.6. Nor did this compositional pace slacken substantially in period 3, particularly when one takes into account that many of these compositions are much lengthier, with 30 works composed for an average of 2.5 per year.

The above statistics clearly reveal that Nees was most prolific as a composer during the period of his life when he was also the most involved in a professional conducting career. There is a connecting musical thread here; a correlation, perhaps even a cause and effect. Nees was constantly exposed to, and engaged in the study and performance of new works in his position as conductor of the BRC (and also to a large extent in his capacity as adjudicator and clinician at international choral festivals). These works must indeed have been powerful stimuli for his personal

creativity and artistic expression. There may have been an ancillary benefit of this constant exposure to new compositional ideas in a somewhat converse way. The volume of music required of him to perform with the BRC would have required Nees to quickly discern which compositional techniques tended to be the most successful, artistic, and accessible for singers, and also, significantly, which were not. The less desirable elements he could then avoid in his own compositions, thereby improving the quality, and by extension, the universal appeal of his works.

Another potential cause and effect thread for this output in relationship to Nees's position as conductor of the BRC, is that given the professional status of the choir and the mission statement of its existence, the ensemble was a perfect venue for Nees to express his art. The choir rehearsed and performed a large volume of music, so there were many opportunities to include his works in programs. Furthermore, the choir was made up of professional singers, so the learning process was swift and the compositions proffered by Nees needed to be rigorously challenging, both intellectually and artistically. This body of experienced singers, through their daily interaction with Nees, also created a perfect sounding board for the merits of his compositions.

Thus through this combination of quality of art and instrument, Nees was able to hone his creative skills and disseminate his musical creations during his tenure with the BRC. The natural outcome of quality and exposure is increasing demand, and this, perhaps more than anything, explains the significant increase in compositional output

during his time with the BRC. The demand for Nees's music does not show any signs of waning since his retirement from the BRC, as the waves of exposure continue to ripple outward into the musical world.

General Music Characteristics

As mentioned in the Introduction to this essay, Vic Nees's own words, as transcribed from the interviews, provide valuable insights into his compositional methodology and intent. In an attempt to elicit interest in Nees's music from those readers unacquainted with it, it will be useful to examine some of the "attributes" or "elements" that tend to characterize his works, in the hope that the readers will move on to the fuller experience of hearing his music.

In general terms, Nees's music is characterized by a careful setting of the text both with regards to prosody and meaning. Although his compositions are often not written in specific keys, different sections will revolve around specific key areas, and his harmonic language is mostly tonal. His melodies are quite often lyrical and their contours frequently incorporate leaps of fourths or fifths, followed by stepwise return in the opposite direction, (or a combination of these intervals in various orders). His voicing is designed to create elements of interest in each part. He employs chord clusters (as illustrated in Example 6 and discussed on page 45 below), and elements of serialism for textual emphasis (see discussion and illustration in chapter on *Trumpet Te Deum* page 84).[17] Some works, such as his *Gloria Patri*, incorporate

[17] For a further example of how Nees uses serialism, see detailed discussion concerning *Gloria Patri* Appendix 2, page 106.

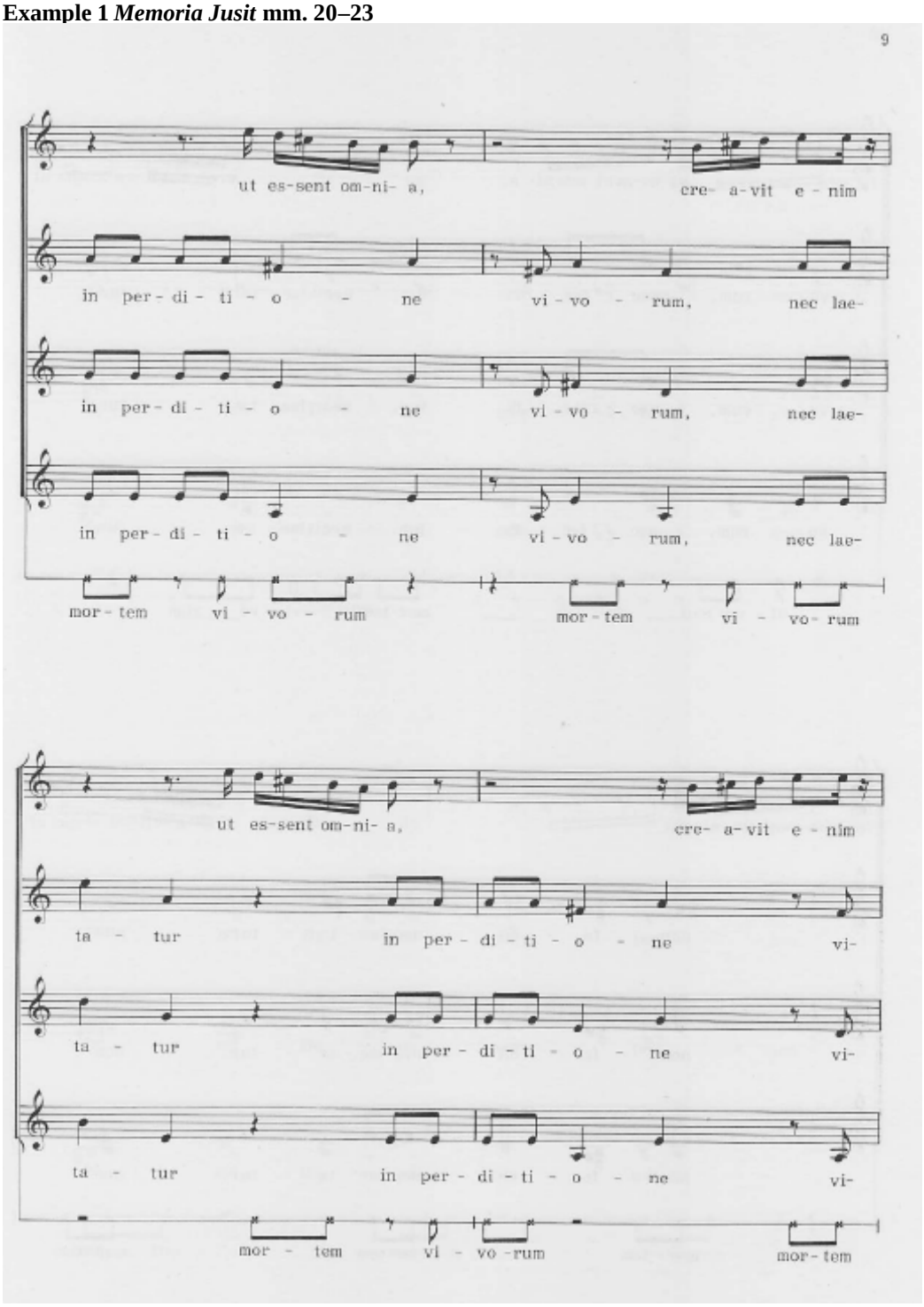
avant garde choral elements such as body sounds and pictorial writing within the larger framework of a predominantly tonal composition.

A conspicuous aspect of many of his pieces is the insertion of a segment of choral spoken text at some point in a work. “I started using it in my compositions … many works, because I think it is dramatic. When you combine it with sung parts, or played parts … it is still better.”[18] Some illustrations of this technique taken from various works are provided below.

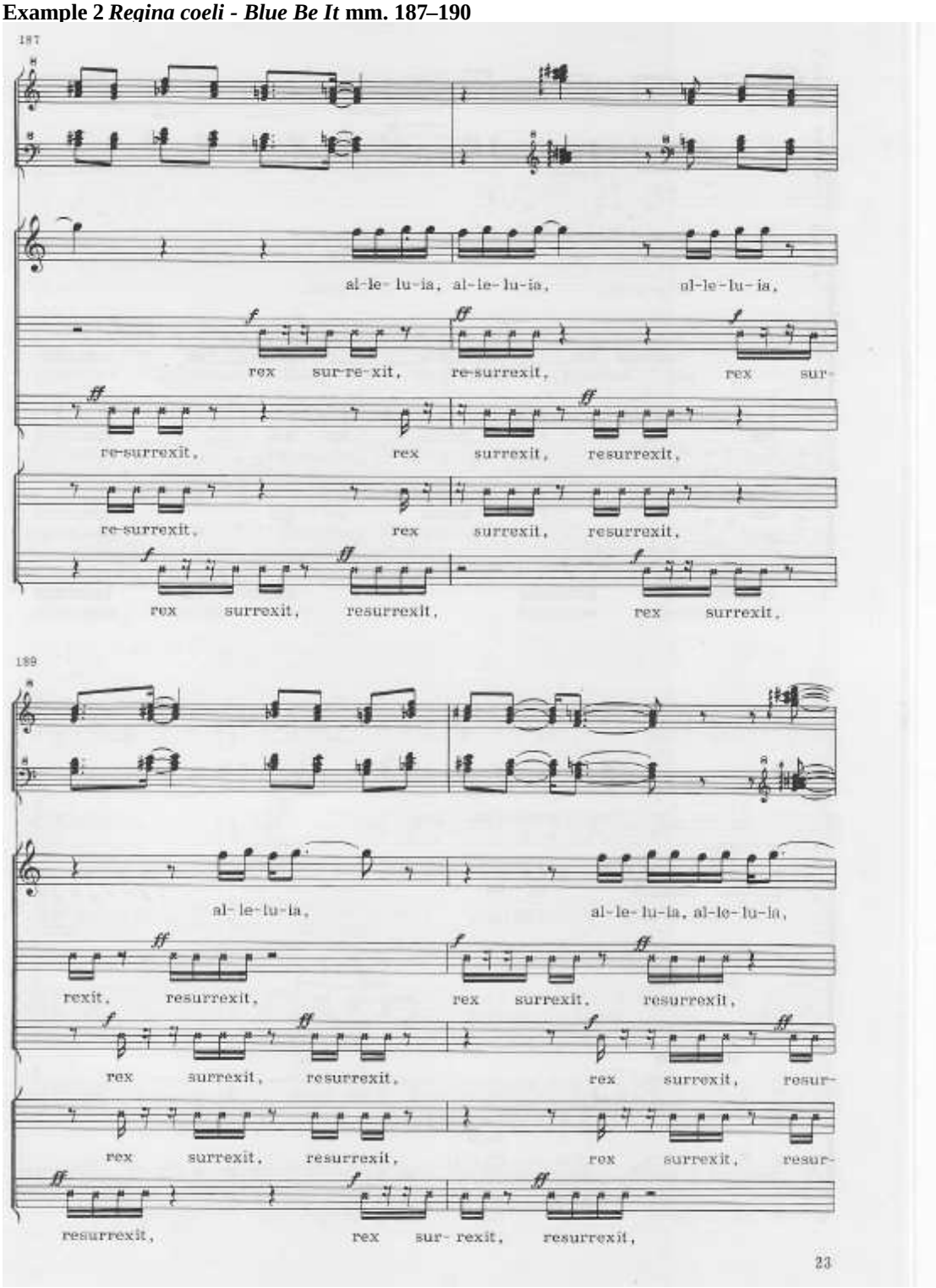
In Example 1 Nees has the speaking chorus interject the words “mortem” (“death”) and “vivorum” (“living”) to highlight the two themes presented in the musical text of the upper voices. In Example 2, Nees uses spoken text in four voices of the chorus to reiterate the words “rex resurrexit” (“the King has arisen”), while the soprano voice, set to the text “Alleluia”, and the celeste provide musical ornamentation. The final excerpt (Example 3) demonstrates how Nees combines spoken text with elements of graphic notation. Here on the words “fecit potentiam in brachio suo, dispersit superbos” (“He has shown strength with his arm, He has scattered the proud”), the altos intone the text on a single pitch, while the spoken chorus surrounds this chant with angular vocal and rhythmic repetitions of the same text. At the word “dispersit” (“scattered”), Nees uses graphic notation to instruct the individual voice of the spoken chorus to “scatter” their pitches.

[18] Appendix 2, page 153.

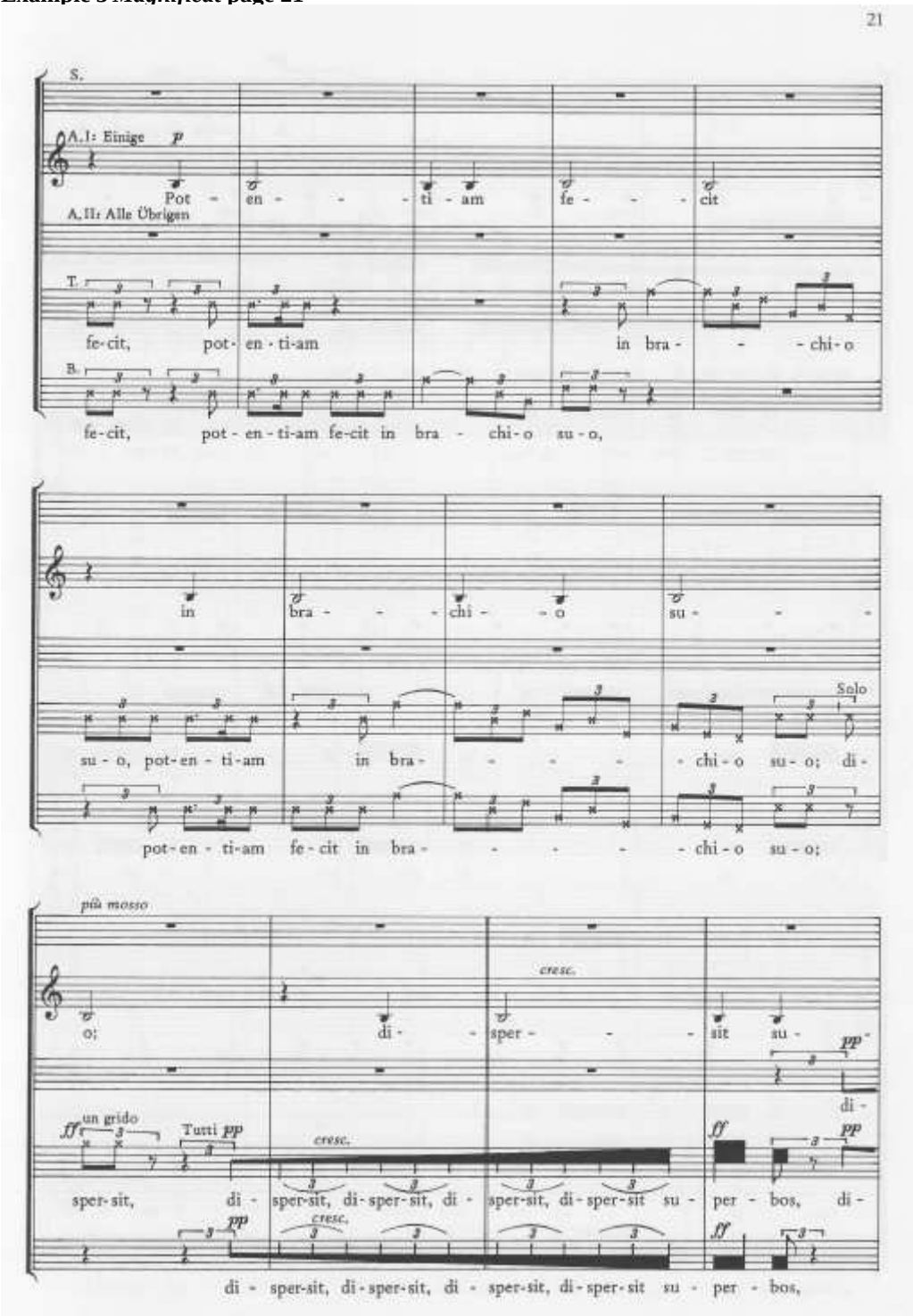
Example 1 ***Memoria Jusit*** **mm. 20–23**



Example 2 ***Regina coeli - Blue Be It*** **mm. 187–190**



Example 3 *Magnificat* page 21



When Nees includes instruments in his otherwise predominantly *a cappella* works, he chooses small and somewhat unusual or non-traditional instrumental combinations, such as two trumpets in C, soprano solo and *a cappella* mixed chorus (*Trumpet Te Deum* 2005), oboe and *a cappella* mixed chorus (*Concerto per la beata Vergine* 2000), and tenor, harp, percussion, and choir (*Bonum est confitere Domino* 1988).

Given the length of his compositional life, Nees's works often reflect his exposure to new compositional techniques at different periods of his life. His later works display the confidence of a mature composer, often employing multiple compositional techniques within a single work to suit his needs for artistic expression. An extreme example of this is his *Gloria Patri* (1987), where he uses nine different effects or techniques including hocket, phasing, minimalism, phasing, syllablization, tone clusters, citation, body sounds, serialism and pictorial writing.[19] Yet despite his use of varying techniques, certain of the general characteristics listed above continue to be heard throughout his music to help define it as that of Vic Nees. As Nees himself said, "Yes, when you write a lot of music certain idiomatic tendencies will reoccur."[20]

To better understand Nees's approach to text setting and his melodic style, it is beneficial to examine each of these elements in more detail. In the sections that immediately follow, examples have been drawn from his entire oeuvre of choral compositions to illustrate these elements. The final portion of this chapter is devoted

[19] A detailed discussion of this work, including its genesis and construction can be found in Appendix 2, page 102.
[20] Appendix 6, page 248.

to a discussion of these musical characteristics, and others, specifically found in his large-scale work, *Trumpet Te Deum* (2005).

Text Setting

Vic Nees has composed primarily on commission, often providing the compulsory work for a choral competition, and as such many of his works are in his native Flemish language. It could be argued that his choice of texts throughout his compositional life reflected his current social and cultural environment at the time of creation. Thus, perhaps, his early works reveal his recent emergence from the strong Catholic choral tradition of his youth, utilizing a greater abundance of abstract theological texts, particularly the psalms. The culture of social revolution in the late 1960's and early 1970's resulted in a compositional period of social engagement with texts chosen to suit this atmosphere. Thus, we have *Rachel* (1970), a Christmas cantata in which the Slaughter of the Innocents is placed in a modern context; *European Stabat mater* (1967), a work that comments on the suffering of the thousands of mothers who have lost children in the wars; *Mattheus en de rijkdom* (1971), which expresses a criticism of materialism; and *Mammon* (1972), a commentary on financial greed and high finance in the world. Nees eventually came to the realization that although temporarily popular, these socially-engaged works really did nothing to create change, and so he turned back to religious texts, which, he contends, can still be vehicles for change in the human condition: "So now my only engagement is religious. It's enough, I think."[21]

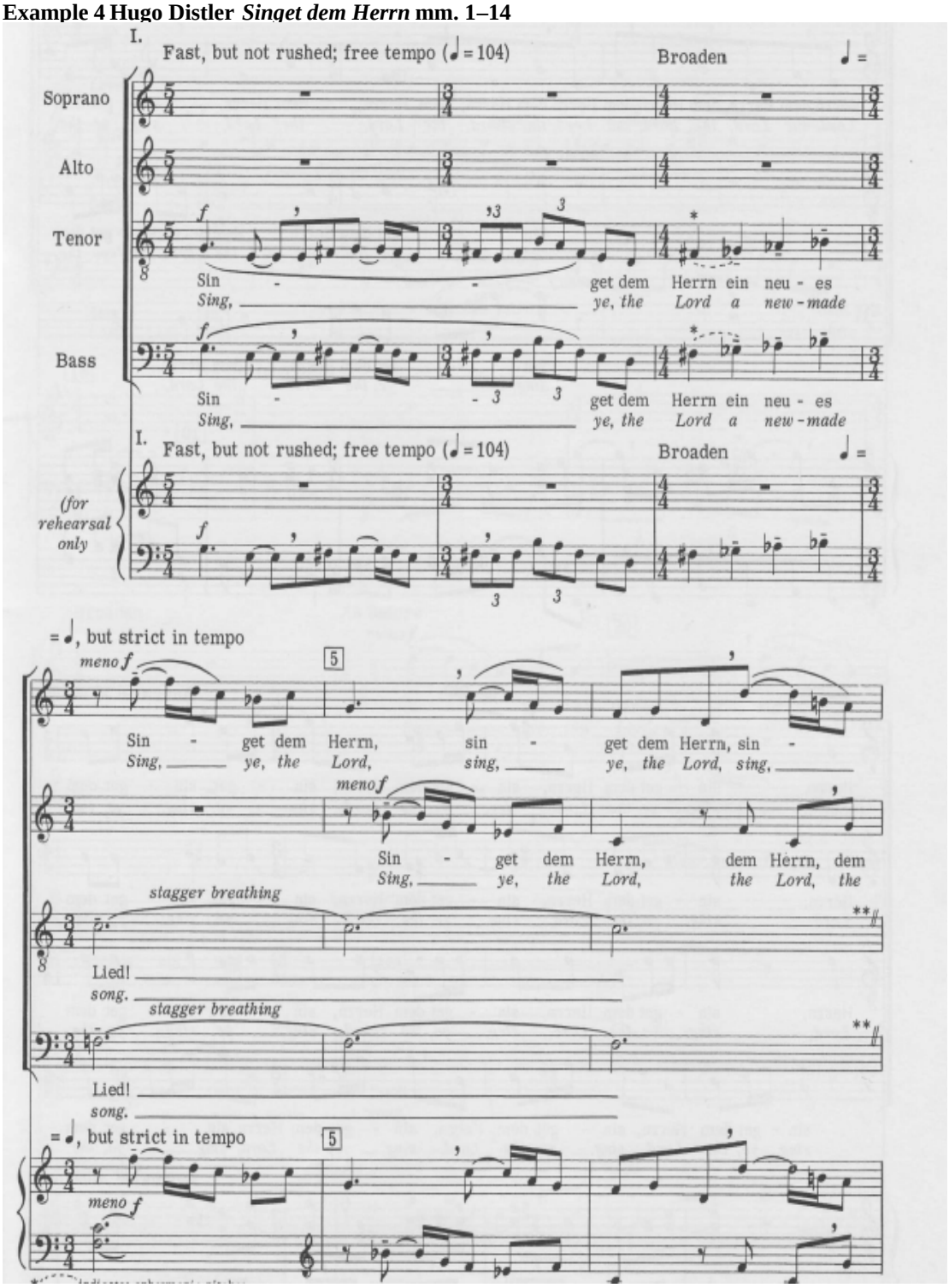
[21] Appendix 2, page 184.

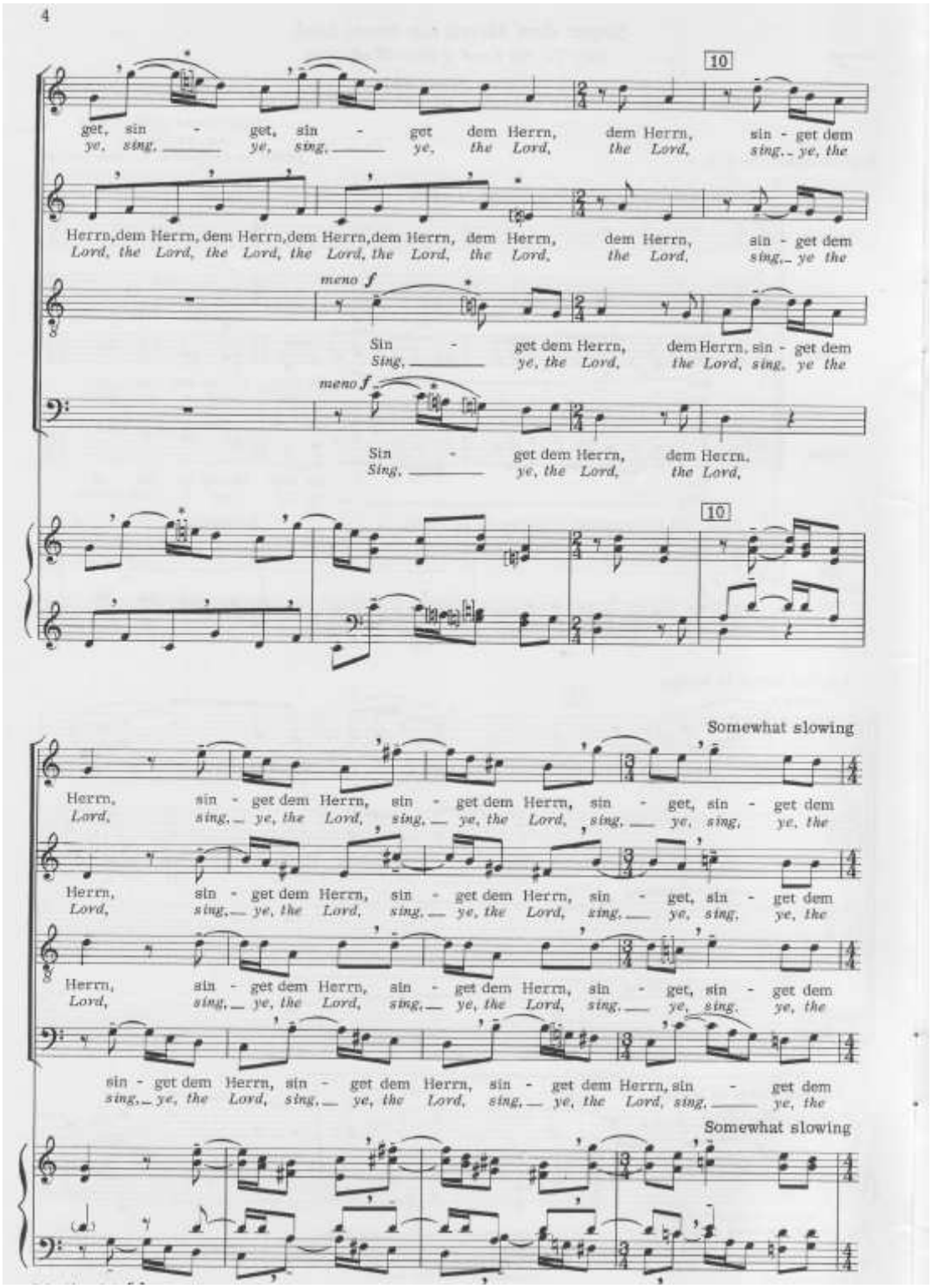
Despite composing music primarily for religious texts, Nees has also had opportunity to compose many secular works, particularly songs based on folk poetry, folksong arrangements, and folksong cycles. *Liermolen, suite van Europese molenaarsliederen* (1986) is an example of the latter; it is a 25-minute cycle of songs based on European miller songs. Instead of writing a simple medley of songs, Nees created a cantata-like work with movements that comprise various combinations of choir and harp, harp and solo, *a cappella* choir, and solo with choir and harp.

As indicated in the previous chapter, the music of German composer, Hugo Distler, had a profound bearing on the development of Vic Nees's compositional style. Hugo Distler is known primarily for his choral works, particularly sacred choral works (a notable exception is his collection of German secular *a cappella* choral music in *Mörike-Chorliederbuch*). Usually polyphonic and often melismatic, his music is classified as Neo-Baroque and relies heavily on old forms and genres, while embodying innovative harmonies and rhythms. Of great importance is "his highly effective word-painting evolved from the music of Schütz, but without imitating him…[T]he distinctive features of Distler's style are its pregnant rhythms and its harmonic boldness within a tonal setting." (Neuman, September 20, 2012)

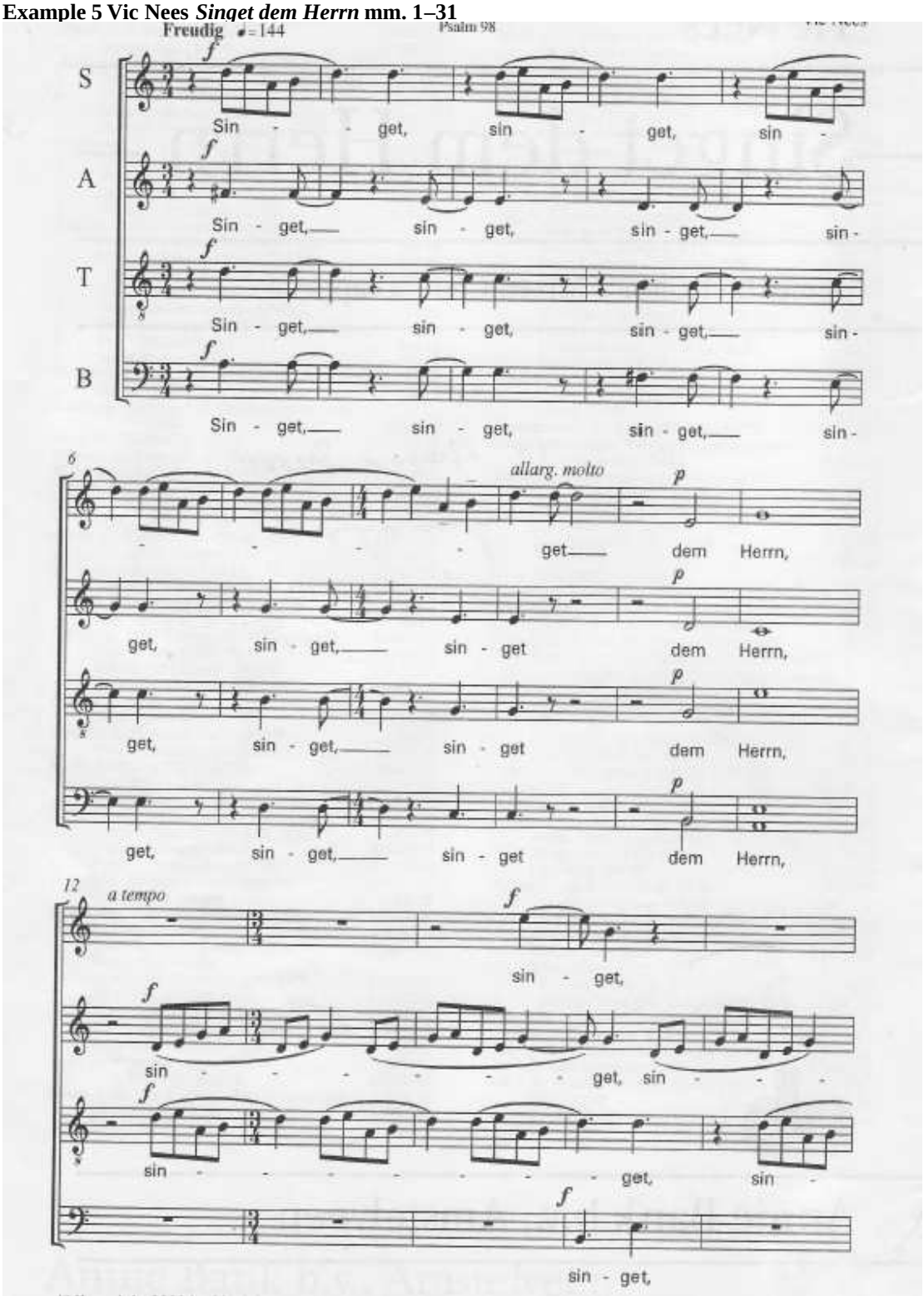
It is of interest to compare the settings of *Singet dem Herrn* by Distler (1934) and Nees (2002) to see traces of this influence. While a complete analytical comparison is not possible in this paper, a brief perusal of the first several pages of each work shows interesting similarities. (Example 4 and 5) Both begin with an innovative rhythmic

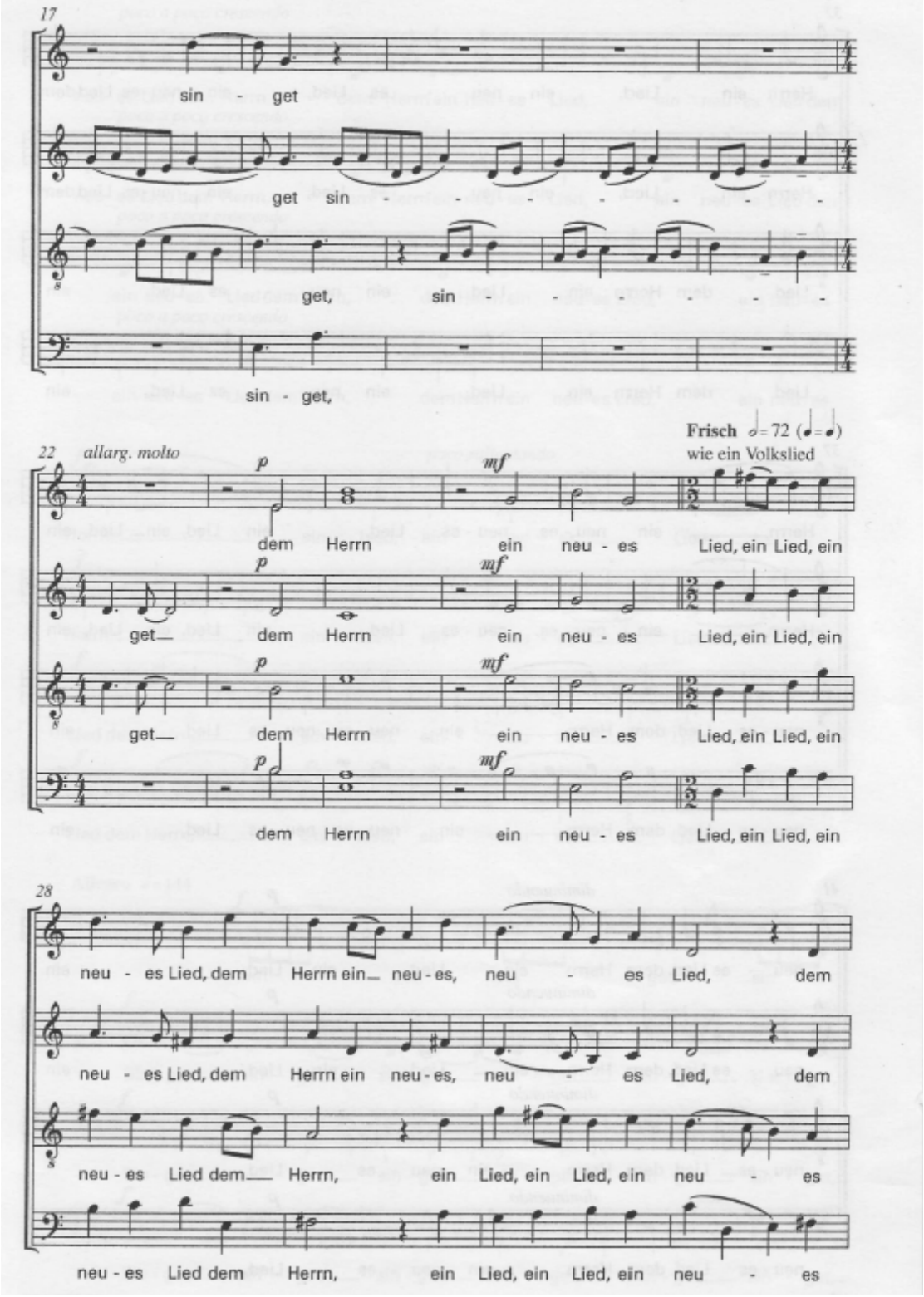
Example 4 Hugo Distler *Singet dem Herrn* mm. 1–14




4
10
get, sin - get, sin - get dem Herrn, dem Herrn, sin - get dem
ye, sing, ye, sing, ye, the Lord, the Lord, sing, ye, the
Herrn, dem Herrn, dem Herrn, dem Herrn, dem Herrn, dem Herrn, dem Herrn, sin - get dem
Lord, the Lord, the Lord, the Lord, the Lord, the Lord, the Lord, sing, ye the
meno f
Sin - get dem Herrn, dem Herrn, sin - get dem
Sing, ye, the Lord, the Lord, sing, ye the
meno f
Sin - get dem Herrn, dem Herrn,
Sing, ye, the Lord, the Lord,
10
Somewhat slowing
Herrn, sin - get dem Herrn, sin - get dem Herrn, sin - get, sin - get dem
Lord, sing, ye, the Lord, sing, ye, the Lord, sing, ye, sing, ye, the
Herrn, sin - get dem Herrn, sin - get dem Herrn, sin - get, sin - get dem
Lord, sing, ye, the Lord, sing, ye, the Lord, sing, ye, sing, ye, the
Herrn, sin - get dem Herrn, sin - get dem Herrn, sin - get, sin - get dem
Lord, sing, ye, the Lord, sing, ye, the Lord, sing, ye, sing, ye, the
sin - get dem Herrn, sin - get dem Herrn, sin - get dem Herrn, sin - get dem
sing, ye, the Lord, sing, ye, the Lord, sing, ye, the Lord, sing, ye, the
Somewhat slowing

Example 5 Vic Nees *Singet dem Herrn* mm. 1–31





structure, in particular the layering and juxtaposition of duple against triple note groupings; both feature melismatic vocal writing; both contain high voice versus low

voice polyphony; both have interesting word painting, e.g. both reach a new tonality on the first utterance of "(neues) Lied" ("[new] Song"). Additional similarities occur throughout the works, yet each is a unique, artistic composition. It is an example of two gifted composers embracing the same ideals while retaining their originality.[22]

Nees's approach to text setting, more than any other aspect of his music, has redirected the Flemish choral movement away from the Romantic sacred music tradition of the early 1900's, as exemplified in the works Staf Nees and others.[23] Perhaps it was in opposition to his father's style—Gregorian-influenced Romantic lyricism as stipulated by the church—that Vic Nees adopted the less lyrical north German style of Distler. Perhaps it was his interest in literature that compelled him to seek intelligibility of text in music. Perhaps it was a combination of various factors. Whatever the reasons, a single constant in Nees's music is the close relationship between the prosody of text and its rhythmic setting in the vocal lines. In many ways he sees a direct link between his music and the music of Ockegham and Obrecht[24], and particularly the early Baroque style of Schütz by combining the art of vocal polyphony with intelligibility of the text. For him the choice of text (in terms of meaning and quality) and the setting of the text to accurately highlight and emphasize it are of primary importance. According to Nees all facets of composition—tempo,

[22] See Nees's discussion of Distler in Appendix 2, page 117 and page 122.
[23] The information that follows has been assimilated from the interviews held with Nees and represents his understanding of his impact on the Belgian choral music tradition. For further clarification, refer to interview material in general as presented in Appendix 2 and 3, and specifically, beginning at page 117.
[24] Appendix 2, page 117 and page 144.

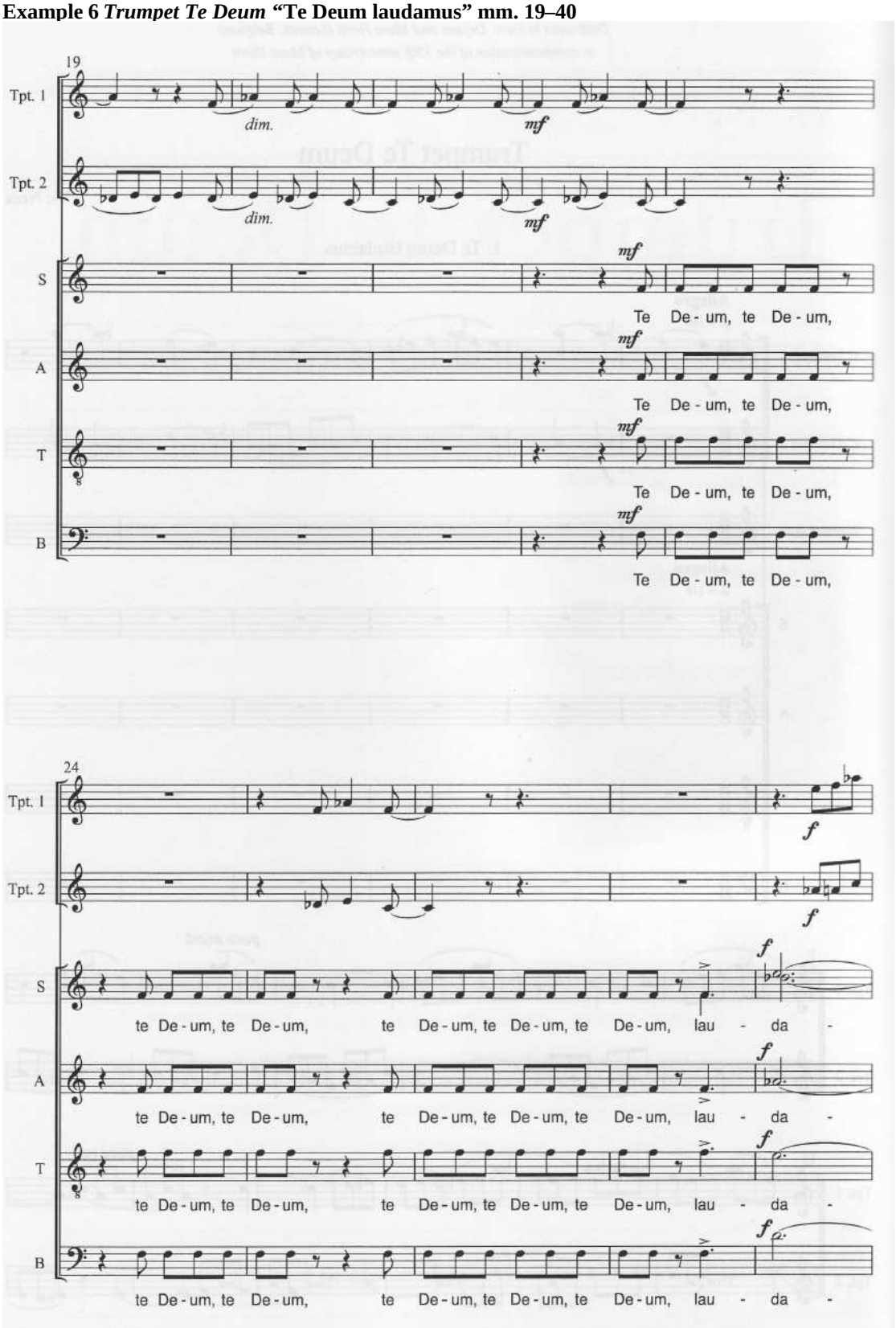
melody, rhythm, and harmony—are subservient to text, and are determined, influenced, derived from text.[25]

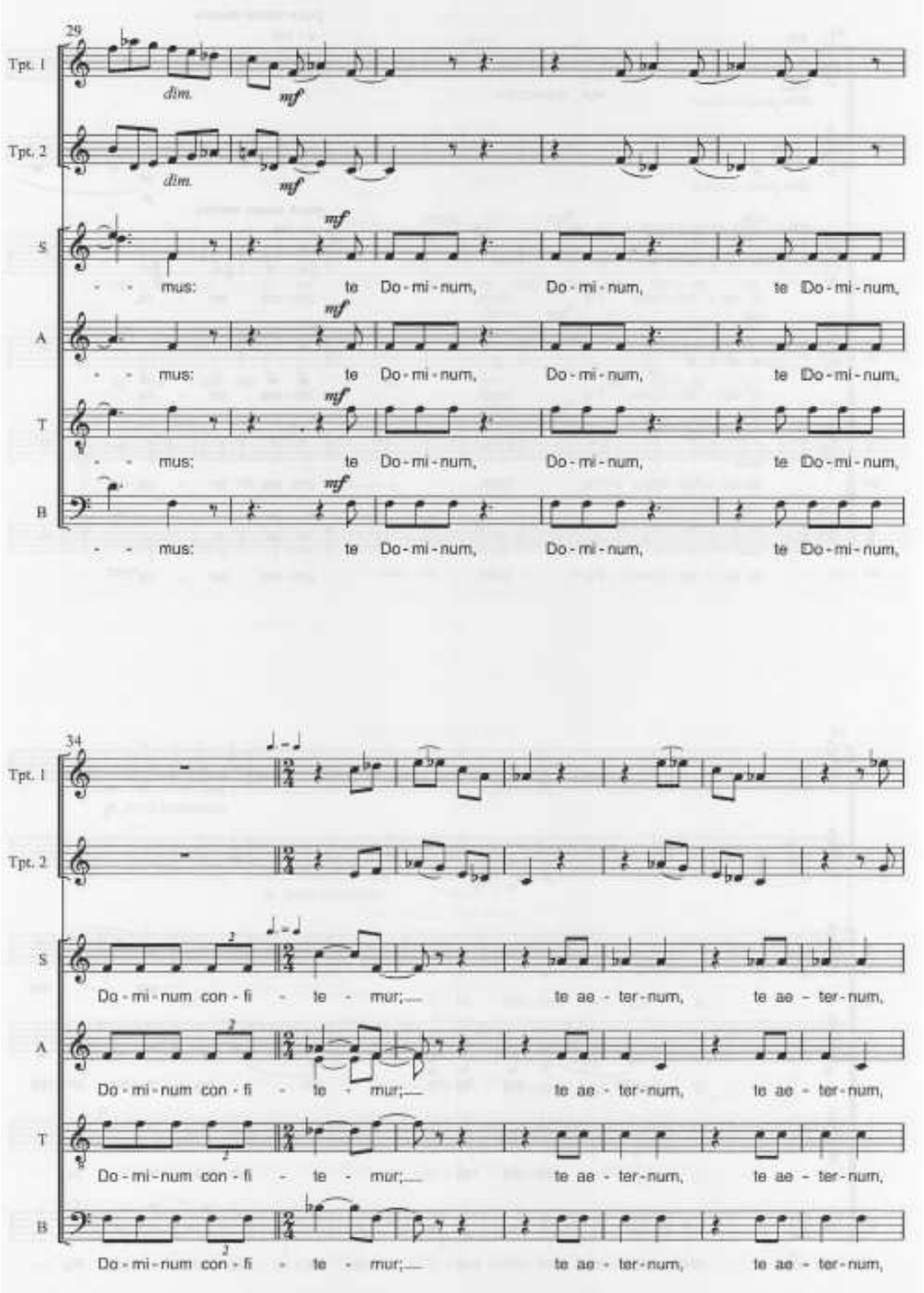
In the 1950's and 1960's this was a radical break from the Flemish Romantic Catholic choral tradition, and Nees was labeled "the most Protestant of the Catholic Flemish composers."[26] "My sound was really north German—it was new here, and anti-Romantic."[27] Not only were his compositions innovative by current Flemish standards, but his choice of music for performance also reflected a break from tradition. In the 1960's Nees's performance of the Schütz *St. John Passion* with the Philippe de Monte Choir was the première performance of this work in Belgium. This was novel not only in content (Protestant versus Catholic), but also in style (German versus Romantic Flemish).[28] Nees points out that in the reviews written about him in the 1950's and 1960's, a common refrain was that he had changed the choral style in Belgium from the Romantic period.[29] Nees became the "godfather" of Flemish choral music.[30]

A few examples demonstrating how Nees uses text to govern musical expression can be found in an excerpt from his *Trumpet Te Deum.* (Example 6) Without taking any tonal elements into consideration, an inspection of the rhythmic setting of the text reveals an exact correlation to the prosody of the text. Stressed syllables fall on strong

[25] Appendix 2, page 134, 143, and page 144.
[26] Appendix 2, page 118.
[27] Appendix 2, page 118.
[28] Appendix 3, page 214.
[29] Appendix 2, page 118.
[30] Appendix 3, page 212.

Example 6 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Te Deum laudamus" mm. 19–40





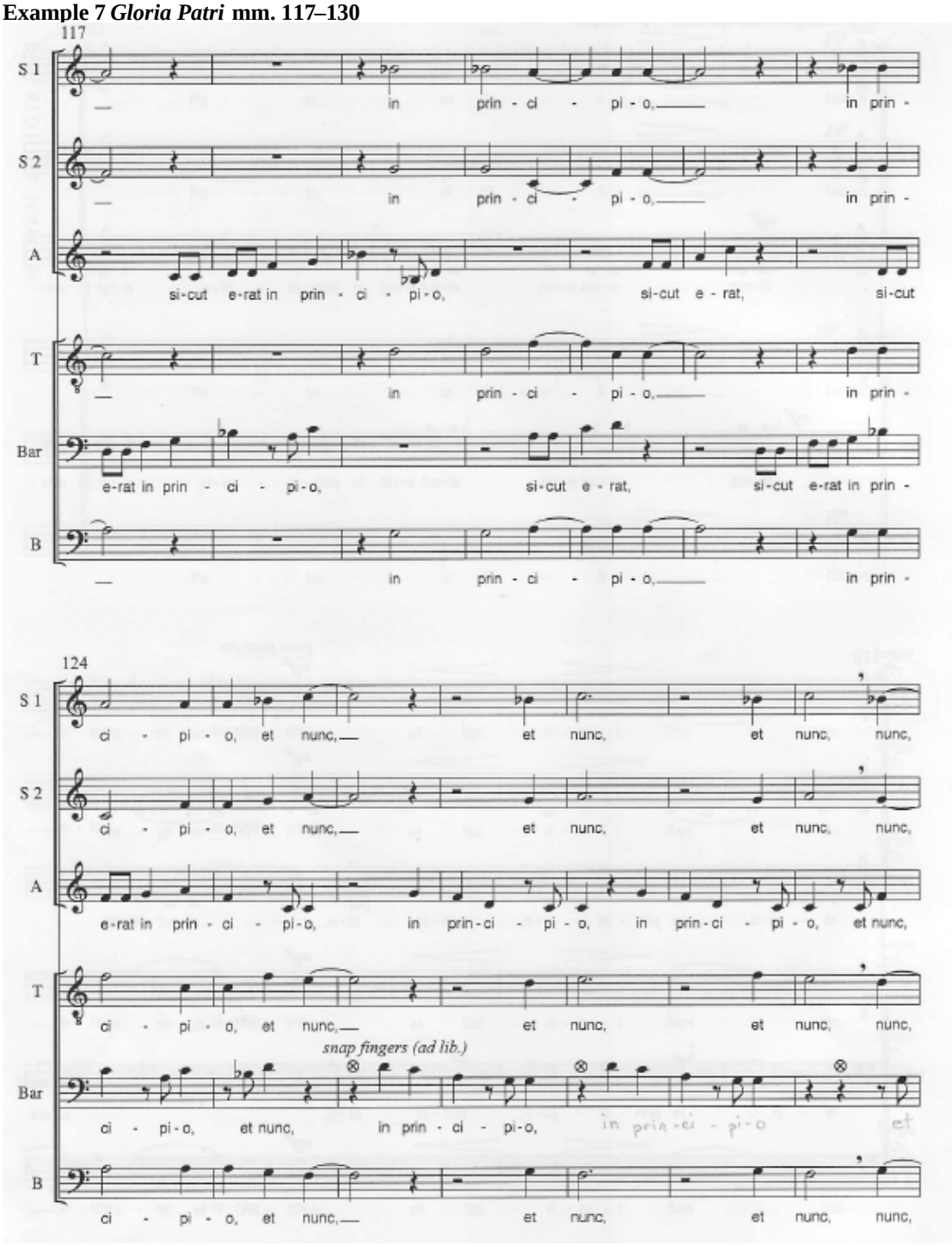
beats, longer syllables receive longer note values, and equally stressed syllables receive metrically shifted emphasis (“con – fi – TE – mur”). It is sung as it would be

spoken, resulting in Nees's principal musical goal of ensuring the intelligibility of text.

The transparent harmonic language of this excerpt also reveals the governing forces of text. "Te Deum" ("You [alone] God") is set in a chant-like style on a unison pitch F, invoking images of monastic reflection. "Lau – da – mus" incorporates a vocal leap in most voices to a potentially cacophonous-sounding chord cluster on the syllable "da", suggesting an exuberant outburst of adoration—hence, "we (all) PRAISE!!! Thee." "Te Dominum" ("You Lord") reverts back to the unadorned chant. This is a simple, even minimalistic composition technique, yet it is very effective in enhancing the text.

Below are two more representative examples illustrating the care that Nees takes in crafting his music around the prosody of the text. The first example is from a somewhat contrapuntal section in the *Gloria Patri* (1987) where the alto and baritone voices have soloistic but imitative lines, and the tenor, bass, and two soprano voices sing homophonically as a countersubject. A recitation of each of these voices individually in the notated rhythm shows a direct correlation to the textual rhythm, despite the fact that the text occurs at metrically different times in various voices. Furthermore, although between the three vocal textures (two imitative voices and homophonic countersubject) the text is occurring at different times, clarity of text is not lost. (Example 7)

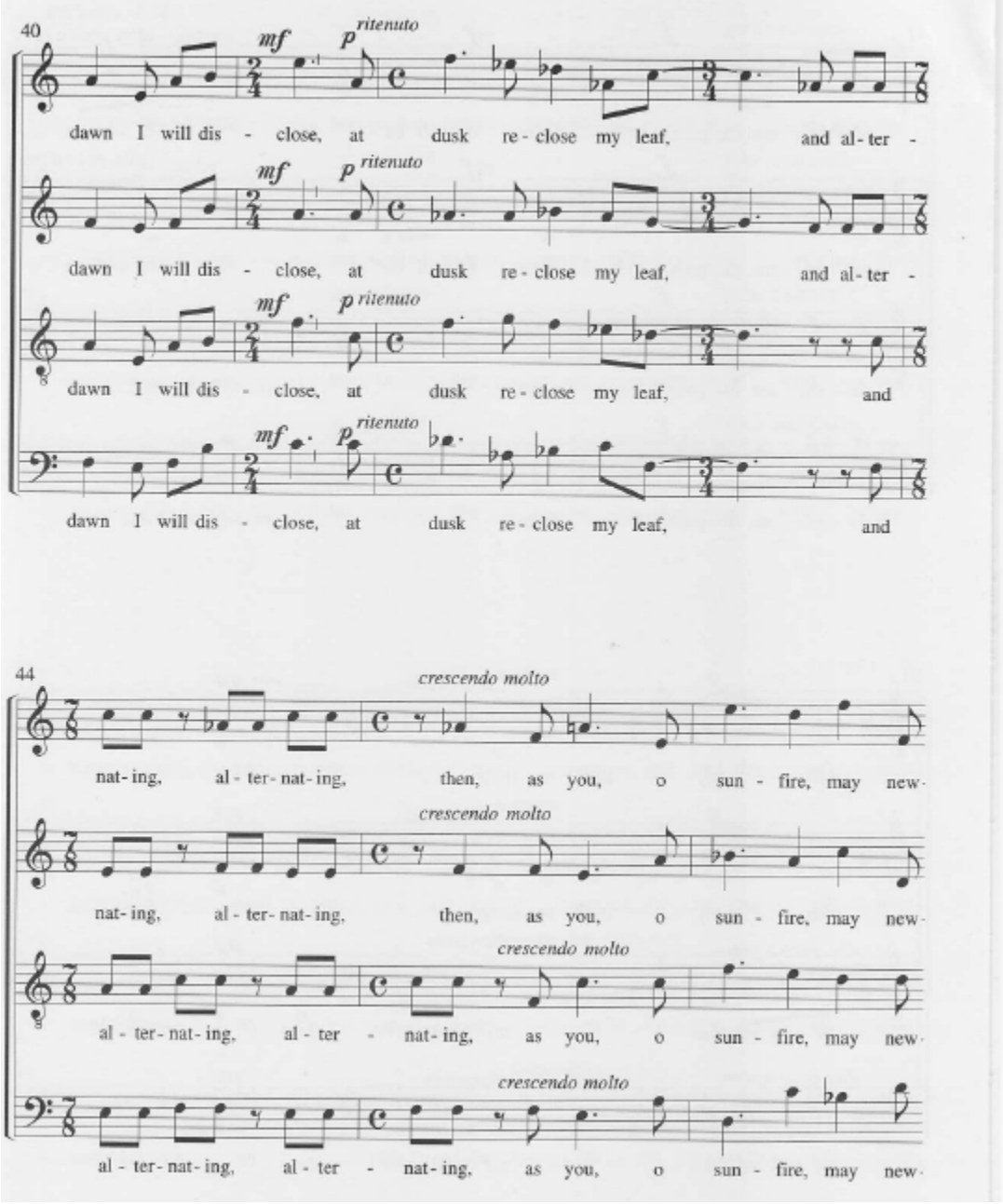
Example 7 *Gloria Patri* mm. 117–130



The second excerpt comes from his work *Ego Flos* (1997), and provides an example of how Nees makes meter subservient to textual rhythm. He not only uses multiple

meters to reflect the natural rhythm of speech, but at measure 43 he also introduces some word painting for the word “alternating” by creating a slight rhythmic shift between the voices. (Example 8)

Example 8 *Ego Flos* mm. 40–46



These are representative examples of pervasive elements in Nees’s music. The text is always clearly intelligible, and the music follows the rhythm of the text. These

characteristics are not unique to Nees's music alone, but in his works they are always apparent and a fundamental aspect of his choral writing. Here, again, it appears as though the many years that Nees spent as a conductor influenced his compositional style.

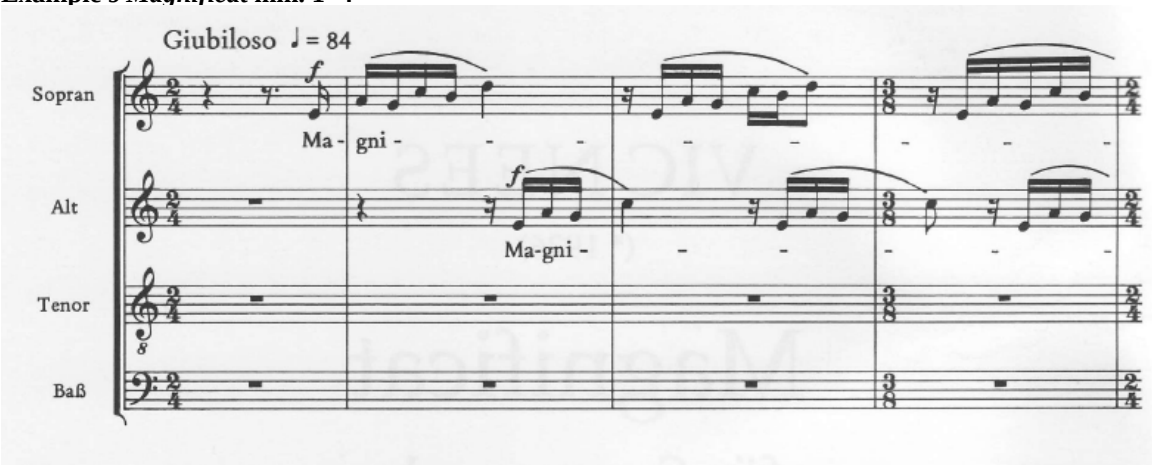
Melodic Characteristics

In the "General Characteristics" section earlier in this chapter it was pointed out that Nees often uses melodic phrases that incorporate leaps of fourths or fifths, followed by stepwise movement in the opposite direction, or a combination of these intervals in various orders. A few examples taken from his *Magnificat* (1981), *Singet dem Herrn* (2002), and his *Requiem* (2008), spanning a 27-year compositional period, display different methods of using this characteristic in context.

In the first example from the *Magnificat*, he uses a melodic pattern of an ascending fourth followed by a descending second as his opening motive for the entire piece. It is imitated by all the voices at some point in the work, and is reprised in the concluding section. (Example 9)

Likewise in the next example, Nees opens the piece with a similar melodic shape, this time an ascending second followed by a descending fourth. However, in this passage the melodic figure initially appears in the soprano voice only, while the lower three

Example 9 *Magnificat* mm. 1–4

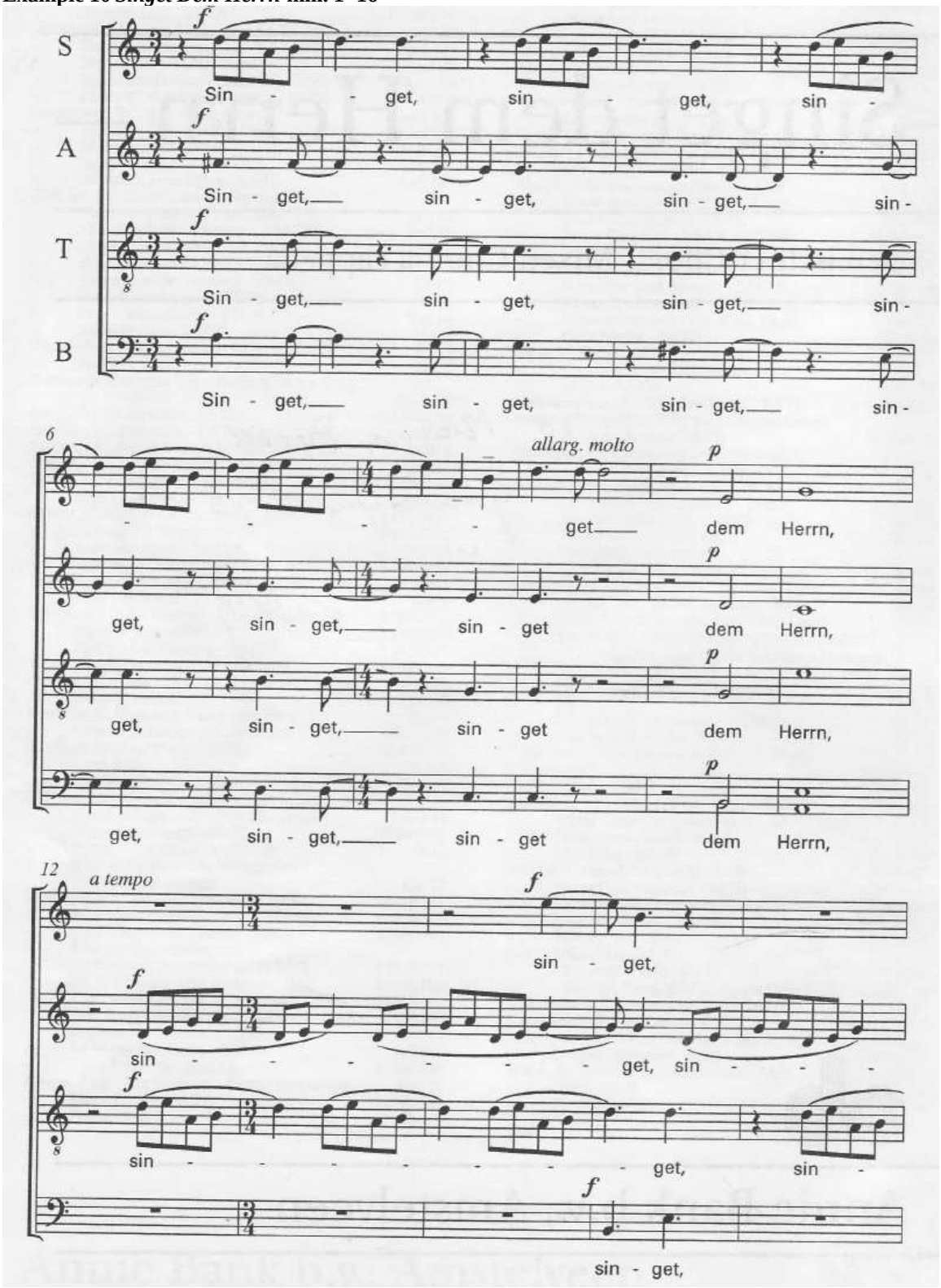


voices provide a supportive chordal harmony set in a rhythmically-contrasting texture (triple versus duple). Beginning in measure 12, some brief imitation occurs in the alto and tenor voices, but generally this motive is reserved for the soprano voice of the choir. (Example 10)

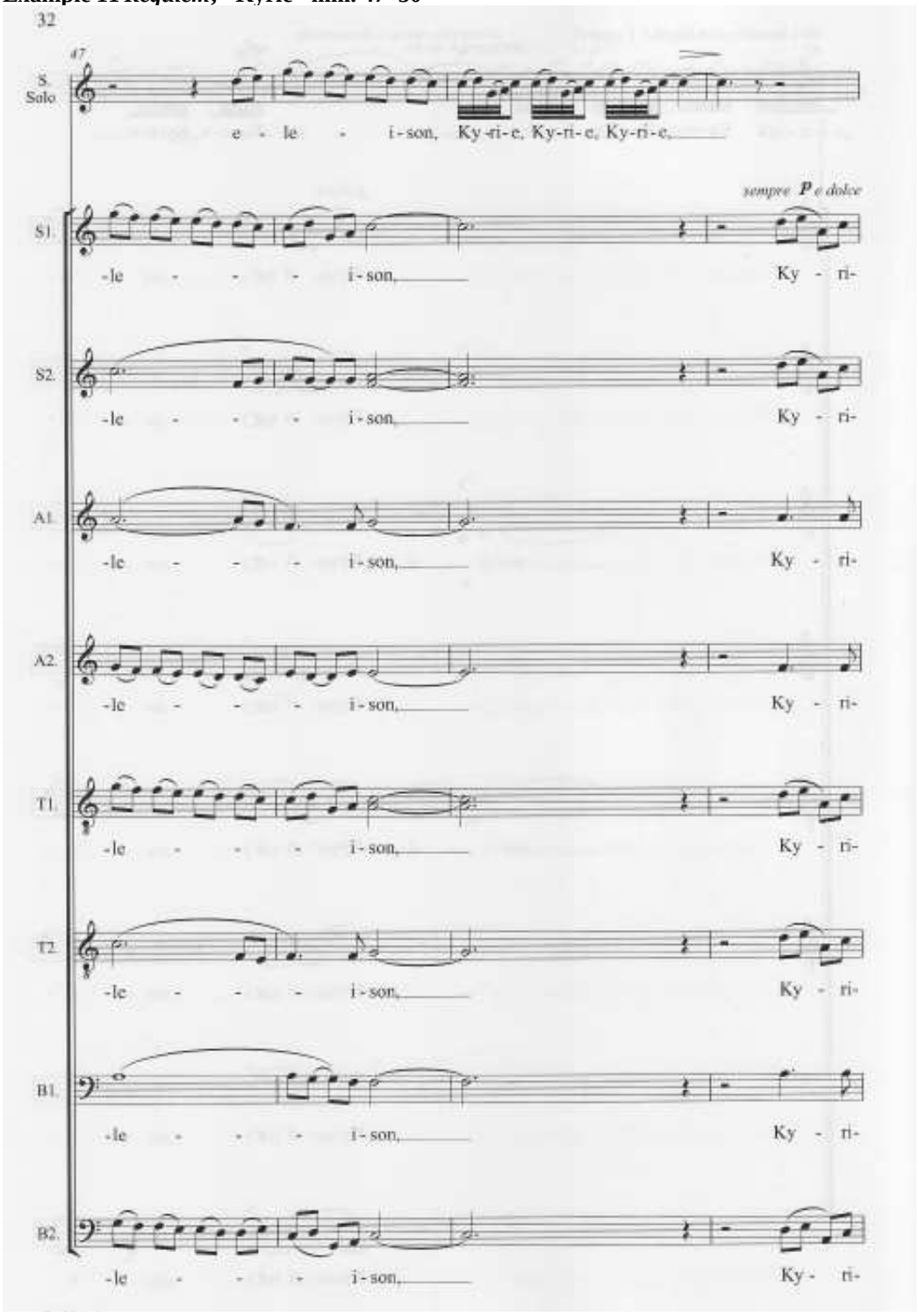
The final example is taken from the “Kyrie” section of Nees’s *Requiem* and illustrates his use of this melodic shape as ornamentation— in this case, in a solo voice singing above the chorus. (Example 11)

To this writer, at least, the frequent use of this melodic characteristic calls to mind the sound of church bells, or the carillon, and without treading too deeply into the murky waters of intent or subliminal childhood environmental influence, one cannot help but wonder if the years of exposure to the sound of the carillon did not imprint itself on the creative mind of Nees.

Example 10 *Singet Dem Herrn* mm. 1–16

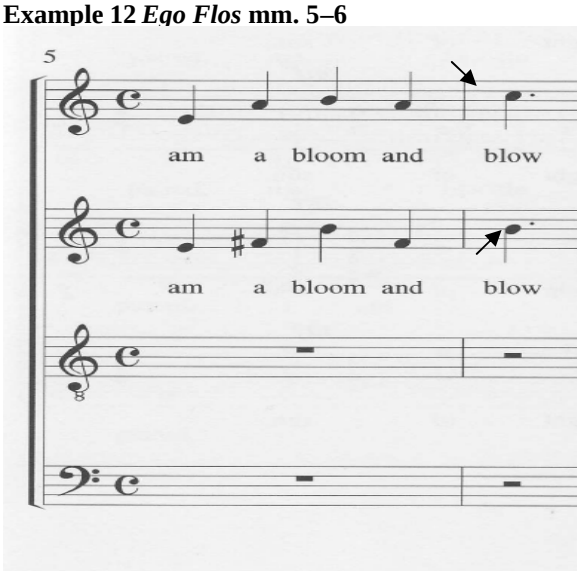


Example 11 *Requiem*, "Kyrie" mm. 47–50

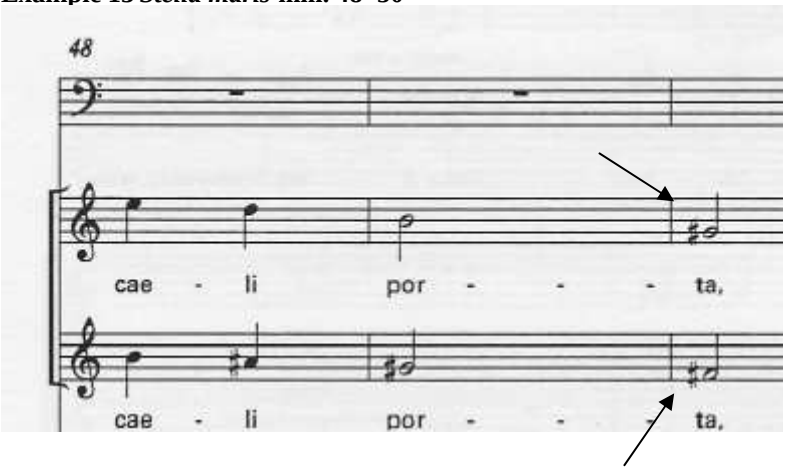


Another common melodic element is the leap of two separate voices to arrive at the vertical interval of a second. In each of the four examples that follow (Examples 12 to 15) these are identified through the use of arrows.

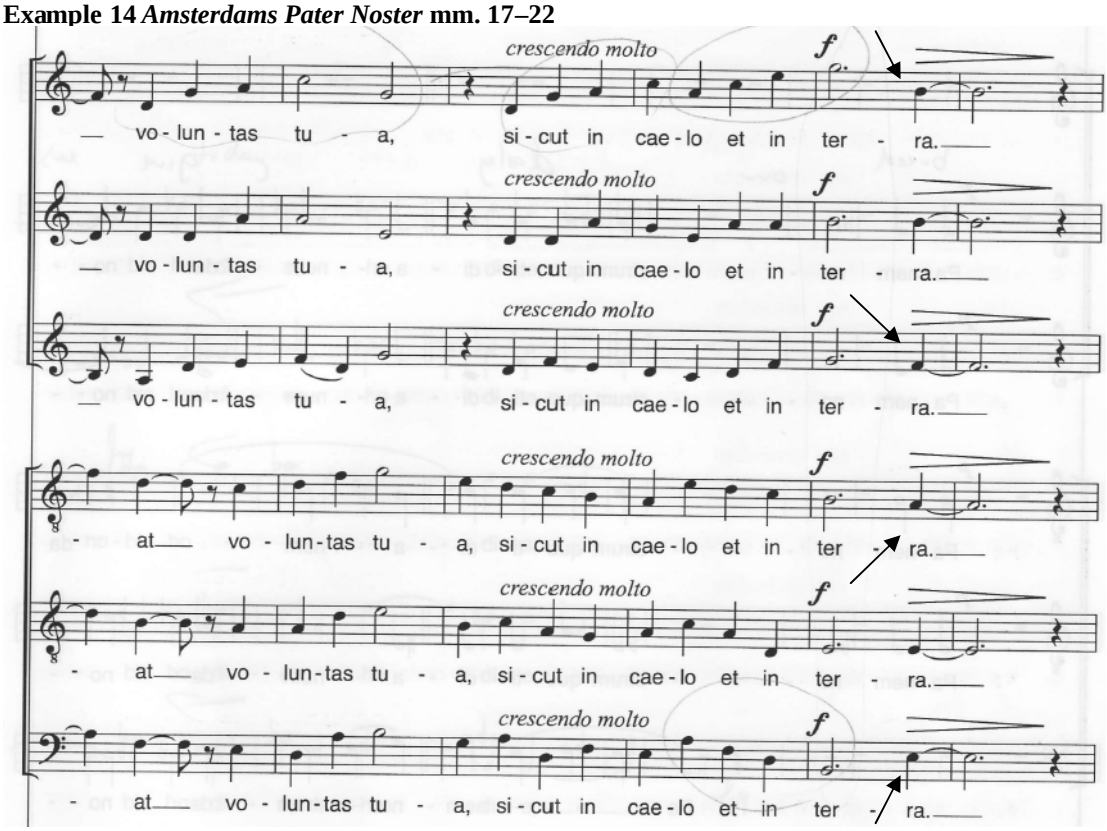
Example 12 ***Ego Flos*** **mm. 5–6**



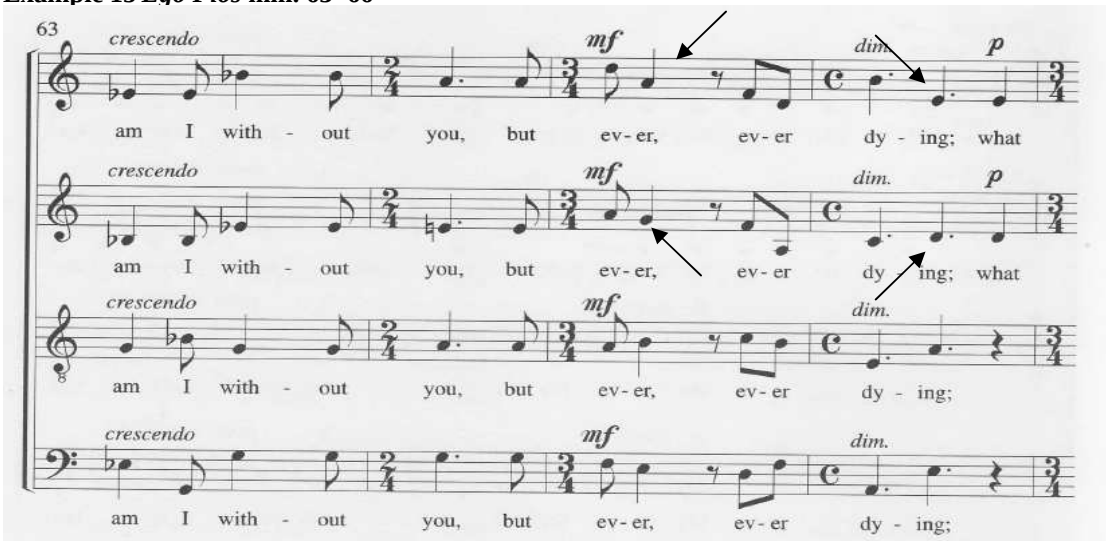
Example 13 ***Stella maris*** **mm. 48–50**



Example 14 ***Amsterdams Pater Noster*** **mm. 17–22**



Example 15 ***Ego Flos*** **mm. 63–66**



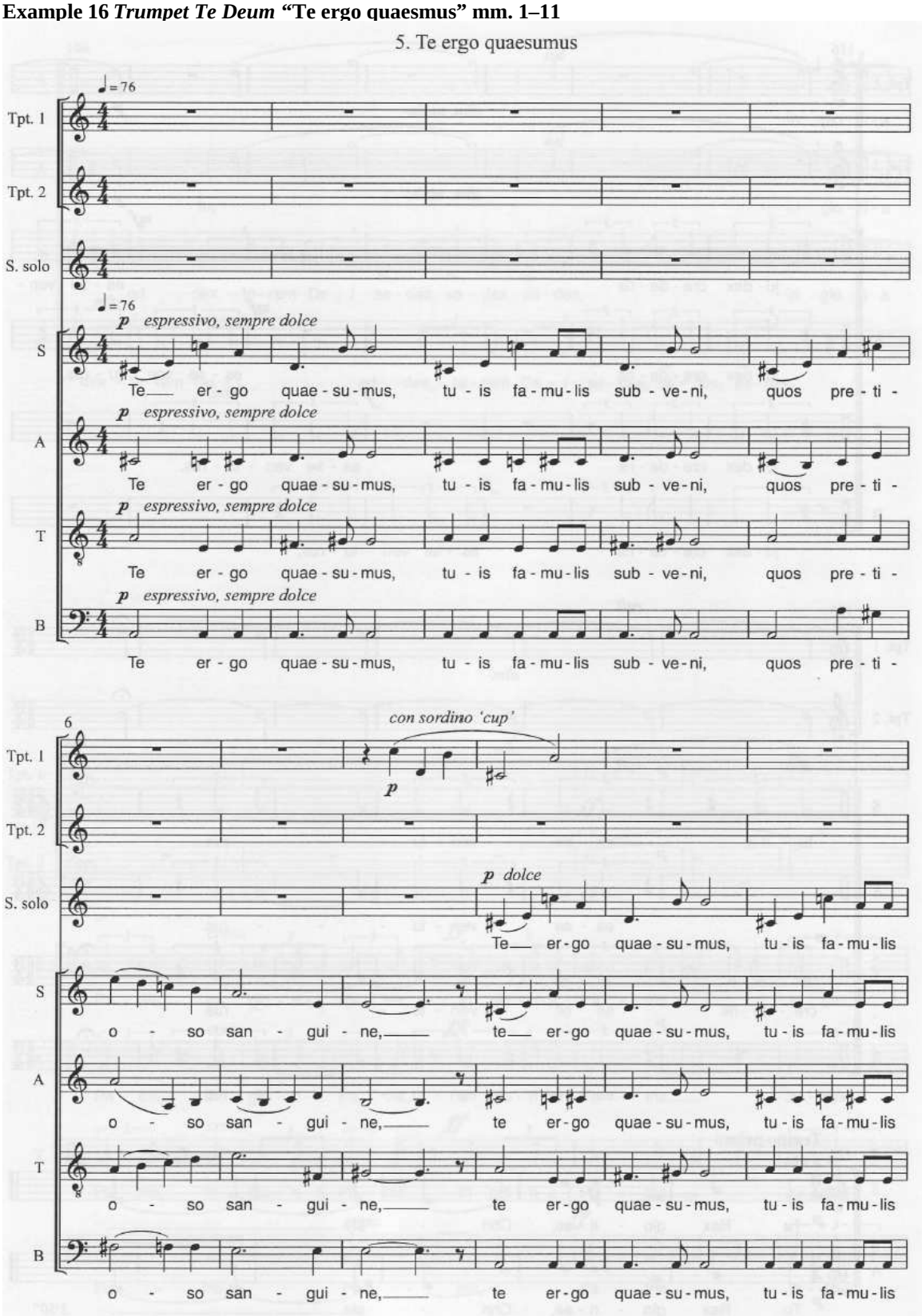
As previously described in the section on "Text Setting" Nees's melodies are always closely allied with the text, with little ornamentation. However, these melodies sometimes exhibit a lyrical beauty. When Nees first broke from the existing Flemish Romantic tradition he also eschewed lyricism, but found in his maturing years as a composer, that lyricism was not only a compelling motivation for singers, but also a useful tool for textual expression. In the following two excerpts from the *Trumpet Te Deum* (Examples 16 and 17) we see examples of how he has used beautiful lyricism to capture the essence of text.

"Te ergo quaesumus" is the one section (compared to other sections) of the *Te Deum* text that is less expostulative, less declamatory; it is more introspective, reflective; it is a Supplication. For this movement, Nees has embodied an almost Blues-style harmonic language in an attempt to create a more intimate sound for the raw human emotion expressed by the text— "We ask you, therefore, to help your servants whom you have bought back with your precious blood". Furthermore he has combined this harmonic language with a soaring lyrical melody in the soprano line to create a truly humanistic expression of the Supplication.[31] (Example 16)

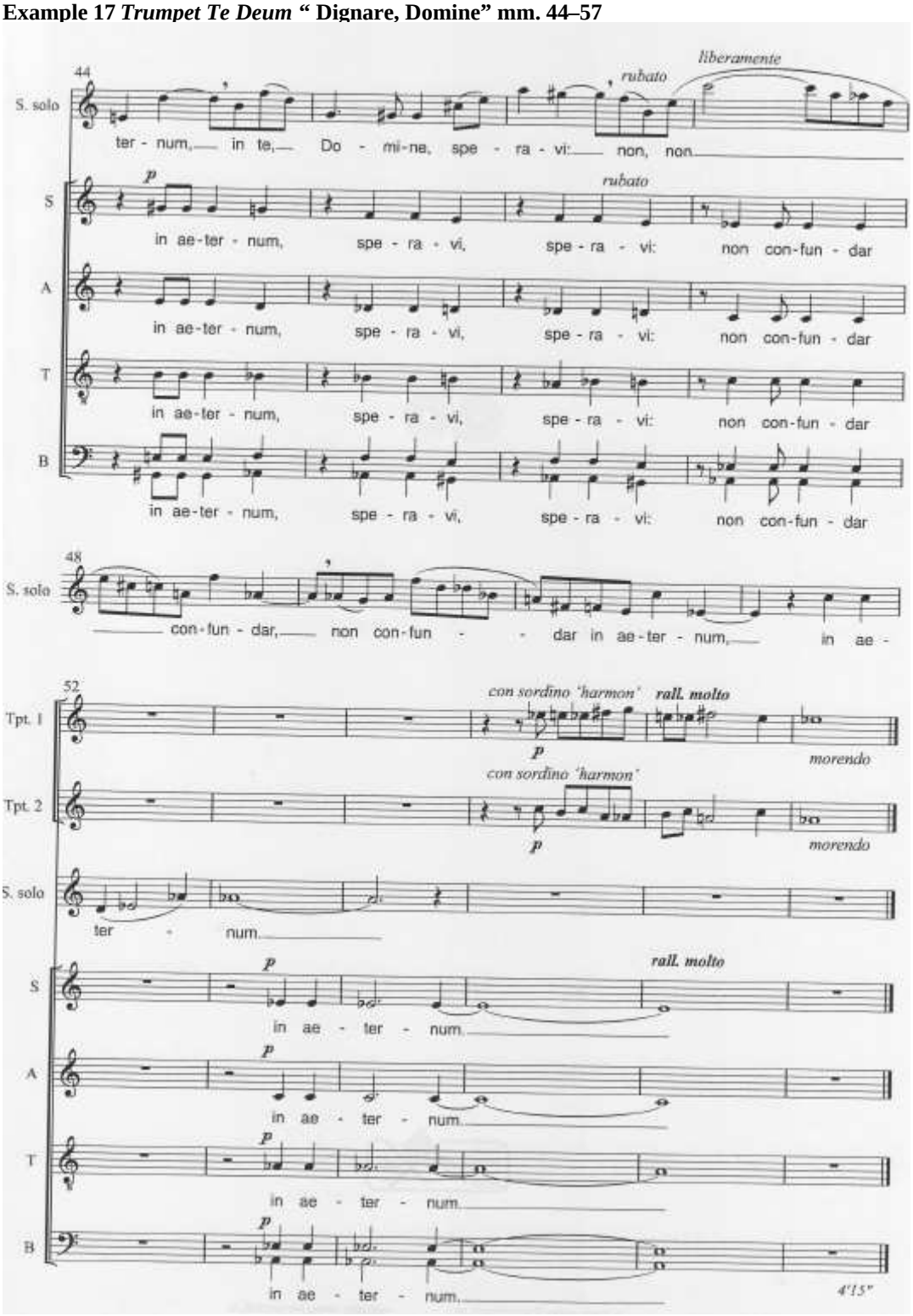
An even more vivid example of reflective lyricism (lyricism that illustrates or comments on the text), is found in the soprano solo at the conclusion of the work. (Example 17) Here with the text "non confundar in aeternam" ("Let me never be confounded through eternity") the soprano soloist sings a line of such exquisite

[31] More detailed discussion of this passage can be found in the portion of this chapter devoted to the *Trumpet Te Deum*

Example 16 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Te ergo quaesmus" mm. 1–11



Example 17 *Trumpet Te Deum* " Dignare, Domine" mm. 44–57



beauty and fragility that the listener must at some point begin to wonder whether, indeed, the lyrical line has become “confounded” (has lost its harmonic bearings), only to be gently and tenderly returned to a state of harmonic, theological, and intellectual rest on “aeternum” (eternity).

Trumpet Te Deum

To more fully illustrate Vic Nees’s compositional style, particularly as it applies to text setting, harmonic language, and melodic style it may be beneficial to examine in somewhat greater detail the *Trumpet Te Deum*, published in 2005. The reasons for the choice of this work as a representative example are three-fold. Firstly, it is a larger scale work in terms of length, and features multiple musical movements dealing with varying textual drama and emotion. Secondly, it is scored for *a cappella* chorus (which is Nees’s predominant choice for compositions), but also employs the use of solo instruments and solo voice, thus providing a glimpse into how Nees combines these forces for effect. Finally, it is a late work of a mature composer, and thus presents a confluence, or convergence, of a lifetime of exposure to and experimentation with a variety of compositional techniques into a personal style that is uniquely his.

Trumpet Te Deum was commissioned by and dedicated to the 30-voice ensemble Musa Horti (Leuven, Belgium) and its director, Peter Dejans, on the occasion of the choir’s fifteenth anniversary. It is a 26-minute piece comprising seven self-contained sections that correlate with the thematic sections of the text. Unlike many *Te Deum*

settings, the *Trumpet Te Deum* is set for very modest forces. Comparing this setting with those of Haydn, Walton, Bruckner and Berlioz, the texture of this work (*a cappella* SATB divisi chorus, two solo trumpets, and solo soprano) seems positively spartan. Conversely, it could be suggested that the limited forces used by Nees and the prominence of the human *a cappella* voice gives this setting of the *Te Deu*m text a distinctly more personal and intimate ambience. Philosophically this musical setting eschews (as Nees describes it) the 'triumphalism' of the Catholic Church (found in so many other settings), and proposes a more subjective humanistic approach to this ancient text; one that requires individual involvement.[32] There is less possibility for anonymity behind large forces of sound; greater exposure means greater personal accountability.

The following is not meant to be a comprehensive musical analysis of the piece, but rather a description of some of Nees's compositional techniques and textual manipulations.

Text Division

Nees's division of the text into sections is worth examination. Over the course of history the *Te Deum* text has been set to music in various ways. Franz Joseph Haydn set it in one complete movement with three subsections, Anton Bruckner set it in five movements, and Hector Berlioz reordered most of the text and set it in six movements. Here Nees follows the order of the Latin text and divides it into the following seven sections:

[32] Appendix 2, page 146

1.

Te Deum laudamus	You, God, we praise
te Dominum confitemur.	We acknowledge you Lord,
Te aeternum Patrem	You the eternal Father
omnis terra veneratur.	All the earth worships you
Tibi omnes Angeli;	To you all angels
tibi caeli et universae Potestates;	To you the skies and the powers of the universe
Tibi Cherubim et Seraphim	To you Cherubim and Seraphim
incessabili voce proclamant:	cry out with unceasing voice
Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus,	Holy, Holy, Holy :
Dominus Deus Sabaoth.	Lord God of Sabaoth;
Pleni sunt caeli et terra	Full are the skies and the earth
Majestatis gloriae tuae.	of the Majesty of your glory.

2.

Te gloriosus Apostolorum chorus,	You, the glorious choir of apostles;
Te Prophetarum laudabilis numerus,	You, the praiseworthy number of the Prophets;
Te Martyrum candidatus laudat exercitus.	You, the white-clad army of martyrs;
Te per orbem terrarum	You, throughout the globe of lands
sancta confitetur Ecclesia,	the Holy Church acknowledges

3.

Patrem immensae majestatis:	The Father, of an immense majesty.
Venerandum tuum verum et unicum Filium;	Your true and only son, worthy to be worshipped
Sanctum quoque Paraclitum Spiritum.	and also the Holy Spirit, the comforter

4.

Tu Rex gloriae, Christe.	You are the King of Glory, O Christ.
Tu Patris sempiternus es Filius.	You art the everlasting Son of the Father.
Tu ad liberandum suscepturus hominem,	In undertaking to liberate men [from the burden of sin]

non horruisti Virginis uterum.	you did not shun the Virgin's womb
Tu, devicto mortis aculeo,	You, once the sting of death had been defeated
aperuisti credentibus regna caelorum.	opened the kingdom of the skies to believers
Tu ad dexteram Dei sedes, in gloria Patris.	You sit to the right of God, in the glory of the father
Judex crederis esse venturus.	We believe that you will come to be our Judge.

5.

Te ergo quaesumus, tuis famulis subveni:	We ask you, therefore, to help your servants
quos pretioso sanguine redemisti.	whom you have bought back [from the devil] with your precious blood
Aeterna fac cum sanctis tuis in gloria numerari.	Make them to be counted with your saints in eternal glory
Salvum fac populum tuum,	Make your people safe,
Domine, et benedic hereditati tuae.	O Lord, and bless your inheritance

6.

Et rege eos, et extolle illos usque in aeternum.	And rule them, and lift them up even for eternity
Per singulos dies benedicimus te;	Every day we bless you
Et laudamus Nomen tuum in saeculum, et in saeculum saeculi.	And we praise your Name forever, yea, forever and ever

7.

Dignare, Domine, die isto sine peccato nos custodire.	Deign, O Lord, to keep us this day without sin
Miserere nostri Domine, miserere nostri.	Have mercy upon us O Lord have mercy
Fiat misericordia tua,	Let Thy mercy,
Domine, super nos, quemadmodum speravimus in te.	O Lord, be upon us, as we have hoped in you
In te, Domine, speravi:	In you, O Lord, I have hoped,
Non confundar in aeternum.	May I not be confounded for ever

In broad terms this delineation of text results in the first four sections being used to extol the virtues and attributes of the Deity, while the last three sections are used to bring supplications to the attention of the Deity (i.e. Adoration section and Supplication section). Further scrutiny exposes additional subdivisions based on textual content. Within the first broad Adoration section, the first subsection (movement one) primarily contains language of adoration on a universal level, i.e. extra-human. Thus, we have concepts of angels, cherubim, universe, all the skies and earth, all creation giving praise. The second subsection (movement two) focuses the adoration to a human level, but still with an historical perspective. Here we have the apostles, prophets, and martyrs paying tribute and homage to the Deity. The third subsection (movement three) defines the triune nature of the Deity that is being adored. Finally, the fourth subsection of this broad Adoration section (the fourth movement) outlines the Christian doctrine of redemption and judgment while extolling the Christ figure of the Trinity that has accomplished this.

For the most part, the text of this first Adoration section is largely objective in nature. With the exception of the opening line it is a somewhat abstract, impersonal hymn cataloguing the nature of the Deity, and the elements that worship it.

Beginning in movement five (the beginning of the Supplication section) the *Te Deum* text becomes decidedly more personal and subjective in nature—characteristics that are required when making petitions. Therefore, the last three subsections (movements

five to seven) contain, respectively, requests for salvation, requests for redemption and mercy, and finally, requests for support/vindication for allegiance.

This, then, is the textual division that Nees has chosen for the setting of his *Te Deum*, and given his literary background and the importance of text settings in his compositions, it is an essential first step in the analysis of the work.

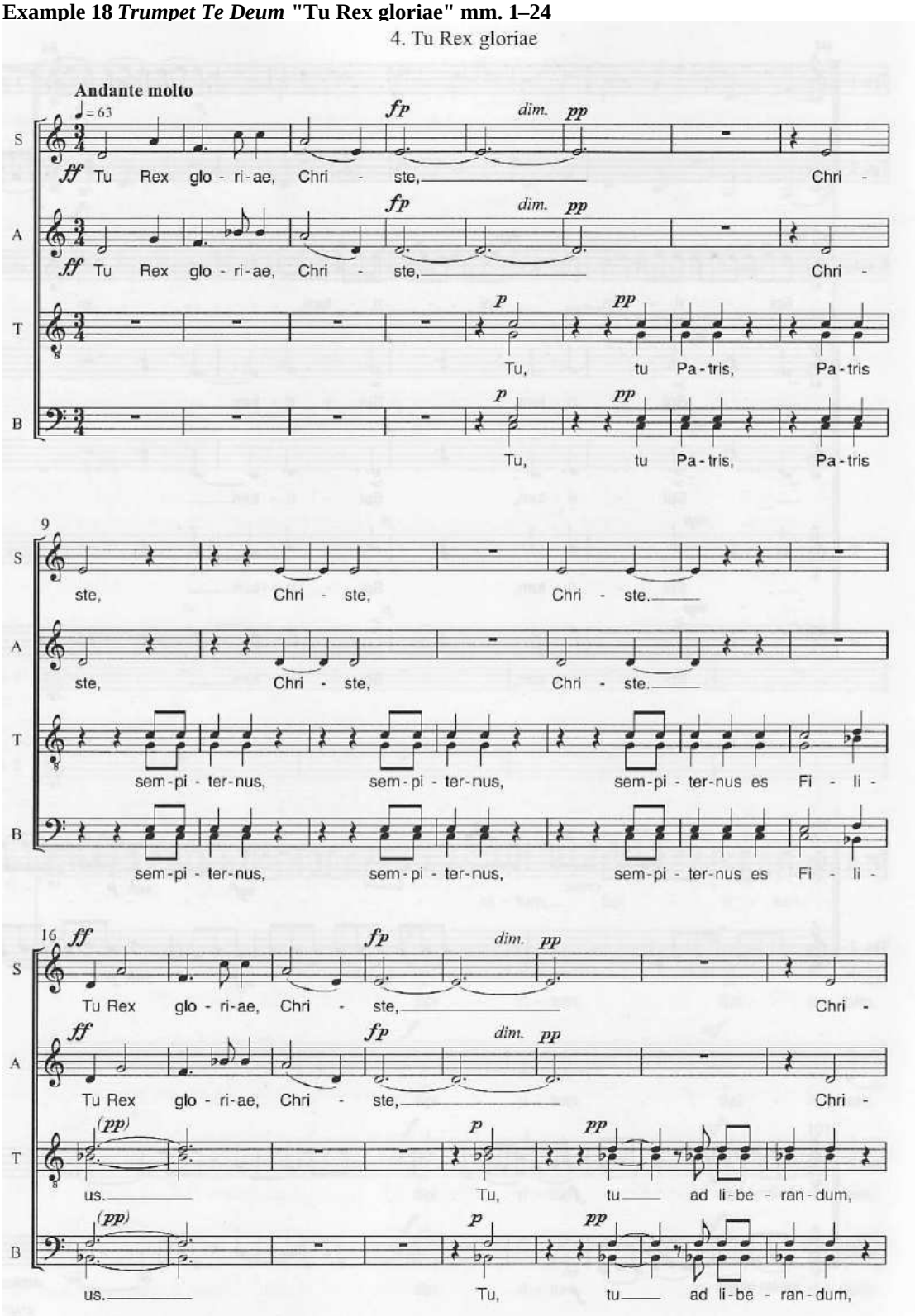
Dynamics

While Bruckner's and Berlioz's *Te Deum* settings are vocally athletic *tours de force* in terms of amplitude, Nees's work is surprisingly restrained. There are essentially only six uses of the *fortissimo* dynamic by Nees:

1. for the word, "Sanctus" ("Holy") (movement 1, mm. 95–110);
2. for the text, "Tu Rex gloriae, Christe" ("You, King of glory, O Christ") (movement 4, mm. 1–34);
3. for the text, "in gloria Patris" ("in the glory of the Father") (movement 4, mm. 112–117);
4. for the text, "Et rege eos" ("And rule them") (movement 6, mm. 1–11);
5. for the text, "benedicimus te" ("we bless You") (movement 6, mm. 49–52);
6. for the text, "et in saeculum saeculi" ("forever and ever") (movement 6, mm. 125–131).

Interestingly, Nees is even more sparing in his use of the *pianissimo* dynamic. (Example 18) It occurs only twice, in the following situations:

Example 18 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Tu Rex gloriae" mm. 1–24



1. in response to the *fortissimo* outburst, “Tu Rex gloriae, Christe” on the words “Tu Patris sempiternus es Filius” (“You are the everlasting Son of the Father”) (movement 4, mm. 6–15);
2. in response to the second *fortissimo* outburst, “Tu Rex gloriae, Christe” on the first two utterances of the words, “tu ad liberandum.” (“In undertaking to liberate men [from the burden of sin]”) (movement 4, mm. 21–25).

In both these cases, the *pianissimo* is an eminently suitable dynamic for the awe-filled textual response to “You are the King of Glory, O Christ.”

Generally speaking, however, the impression imparted by this *Te Deum* in terms of its dynamics is less that of an emotionally-charged outburst of euphoric ecstasy, and more that of a cool reasoned intellectual response to the philosophical subtleties of the text. This concept of restrained moderate dynamics combined with the minimal, predominantly vocal, performance forces sets this *Te Deum* apart from many other settings of this text. It embodies Nees’s personal assessment (as expressed throughout the interviews), of the role of religion for the individual, i.e. reasoned humanistic thought rather than ecclesiastical dictates, personal approbation rather than triumphal prescription.

Instrumentation

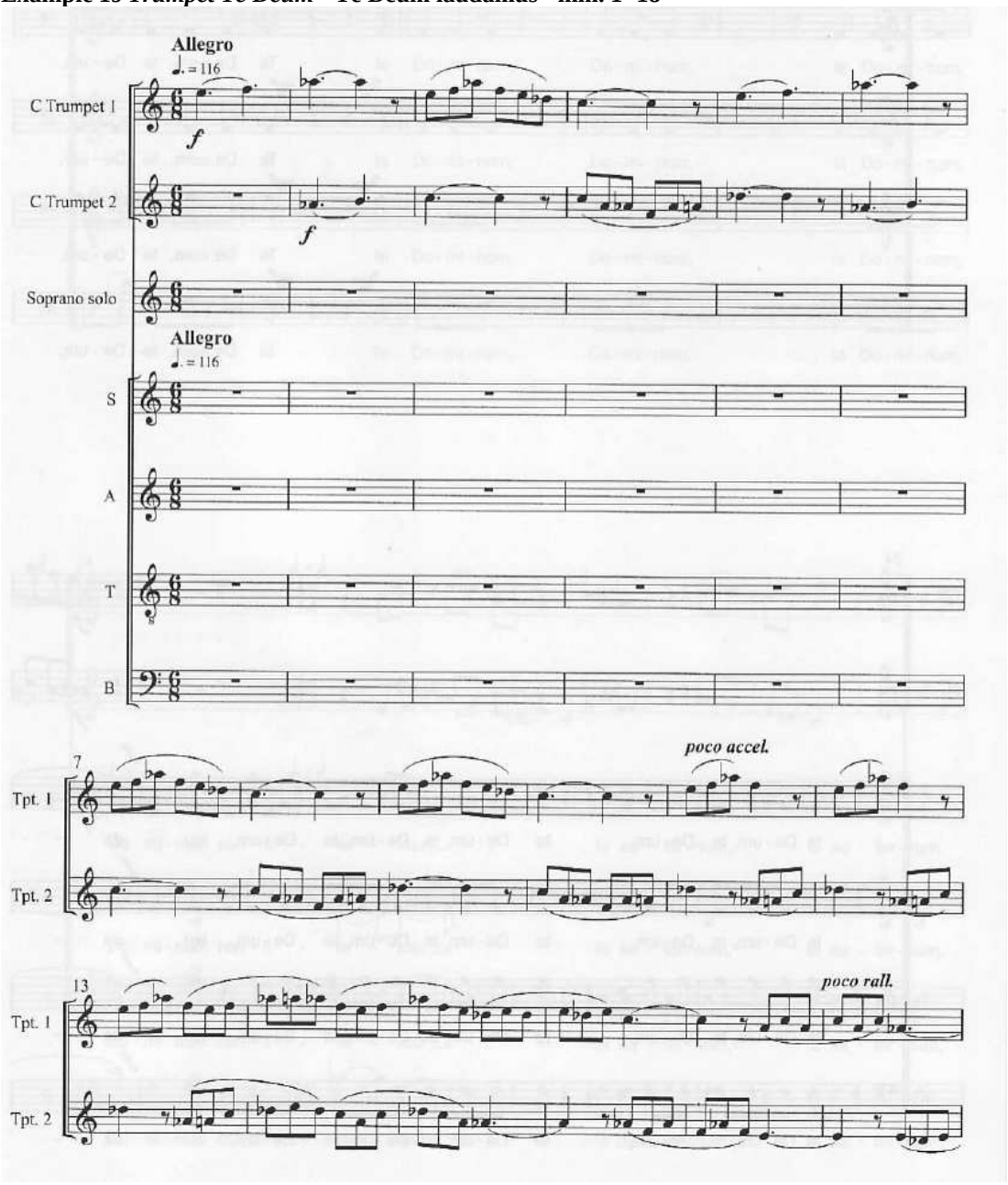
The role of the trumpets is another point of interest in this work and again suggests a different ideology of this text from that of Haydn, Bruckner, Walton and Berlioz. It is truly scored for two solo trumpets, not simply for first and second trumpet. Each

trumpet part has equally soloistic lines in terms of tessitura, melodic interest, and prominence, and both are often combined in intricate polyphony. Furthermore, rather than just accompanying the chorus, the trumpet parts are most often separate entities of the work which serve to elaborate, interpret, and sometimes foreshadow what the chorus is proclaiming through text.

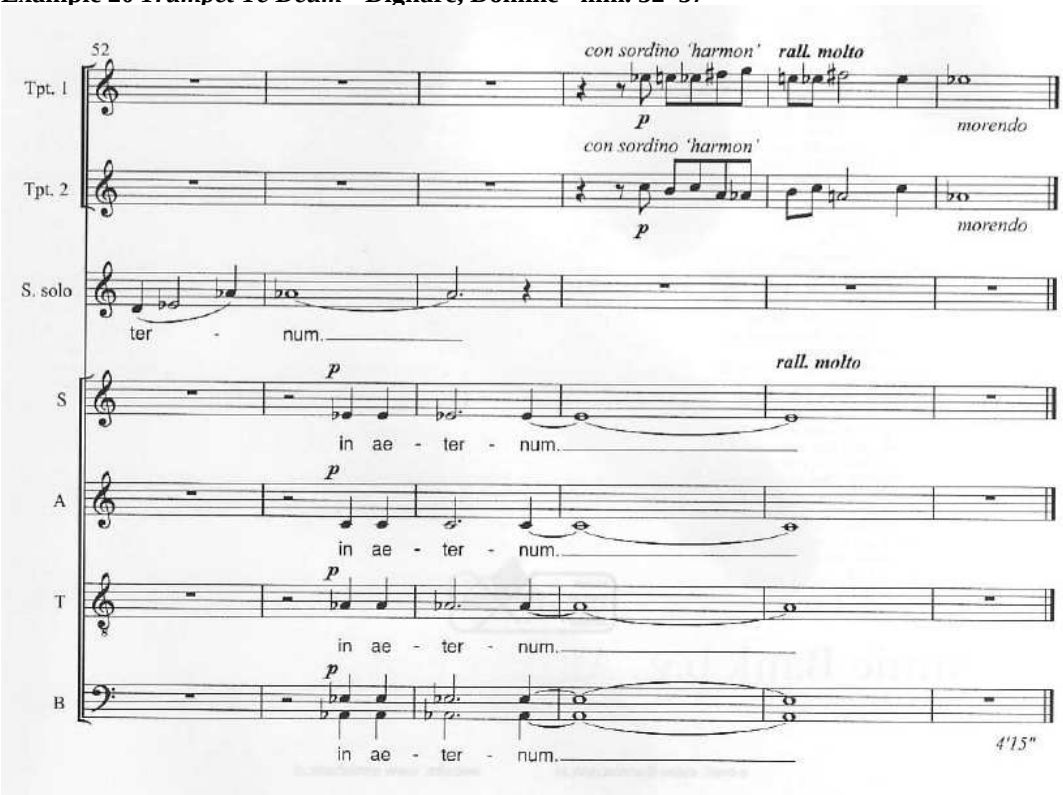
It is significant that the *Trumpet Te Deum* begins and ends with the solo trumpets; the trumpets have the first and last (word) sound. Within the work itself the movements titled "Te Deum laudamus" and "Patrem immensae majestatis" are also begun and concluded with solo trumpets, while "Te ergo quaesumus" and "Dignare, Domine" are concluded with solo trumpets. This prominent role seems to suggest an extra-human component to the work; it is as if mere human utterance is an inadequate or incomplete method of praise. On the one hand the martial flourishes of the opening movement immediately set the aural stage for the Adoration section. On the other hand the *con sordino* closing measures of the piece with the final *morendo* convey a haunting expectant concluding air to the Supplication section. (Examples 19 and 20)

In both cases, the atmosphere is suggested by the trumpets, but is not articulated by human voice and text, leaving the mental realization of the concept up to the individual. Once again it appears as if Nees (in this case, with his use of instrumentation), is actively promoting the concept of individual identity with this text for the listener; he is encouraging an introspective reception—a personal involvement, rather than corporate involvement.

Example 19 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Te Deum laudamus" mm. 1–18



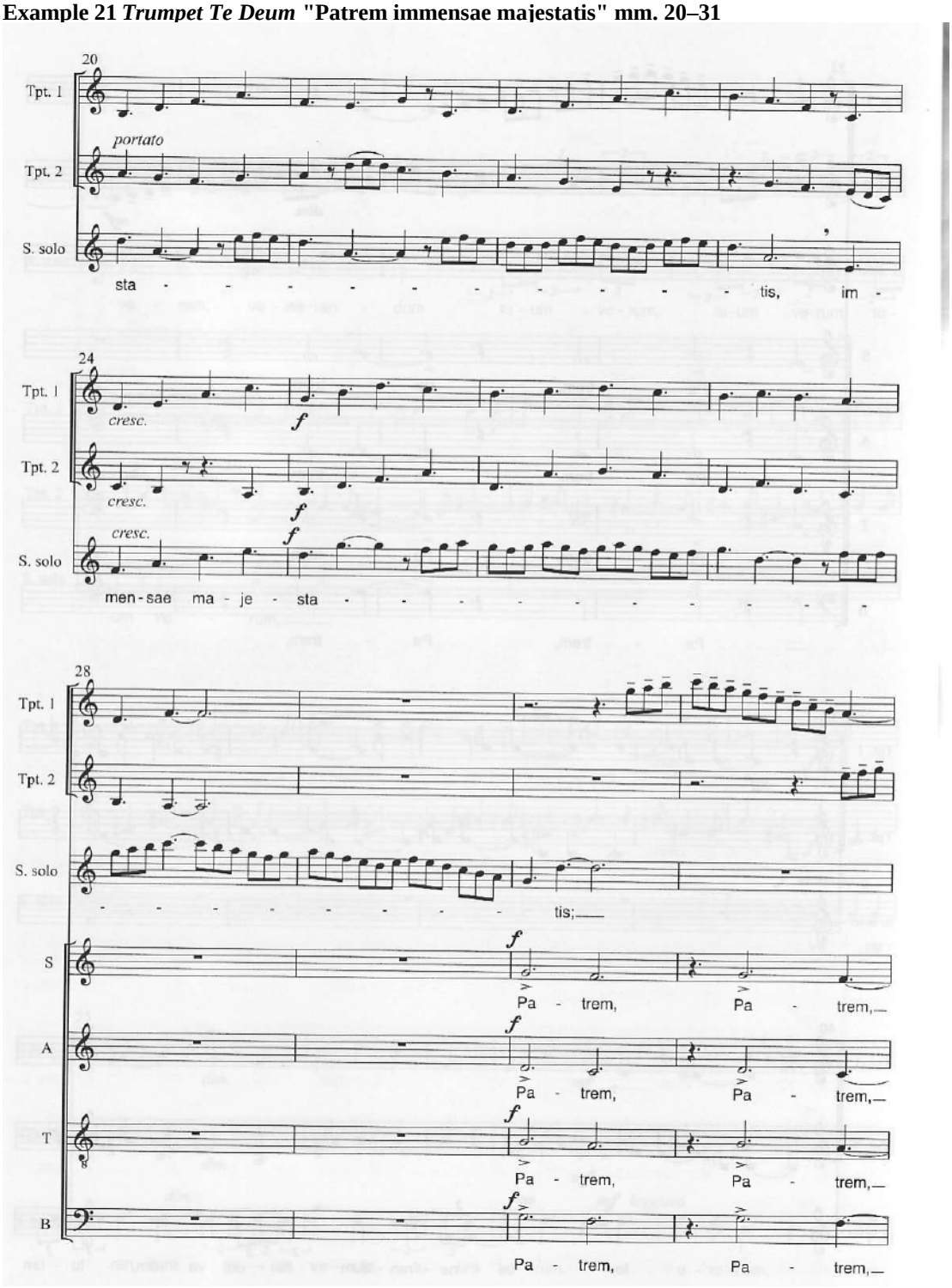
Example 20 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Dignare, Domine" mm. 52–57



Voicing: Solo versus Chorus

The soprano soloist participates in four of the seven sections: “Te gloriosus”, “Patrem immensae majestatis”, “Te ergo quaesumus”, and “Dignare, Domine”. The word “participates” is chosen with care, for in fact there is not one movement where she performs on her own—it is always in concert with the chorus. Her participation is often breathtakingly dexterous, as in the “Patrem”, or achingly beautiful, as in “Te ergo” and “Dignare”, and often serves to illustrate the text in a manner impossible for the chorus. (Examples 22 to 24) Just as the chorus parts in these movements would be lessened if the soprano soloist were not elaborating on them, conversely, so too would the solo line/text be weakened without the support of choral parts. Thus it appears as

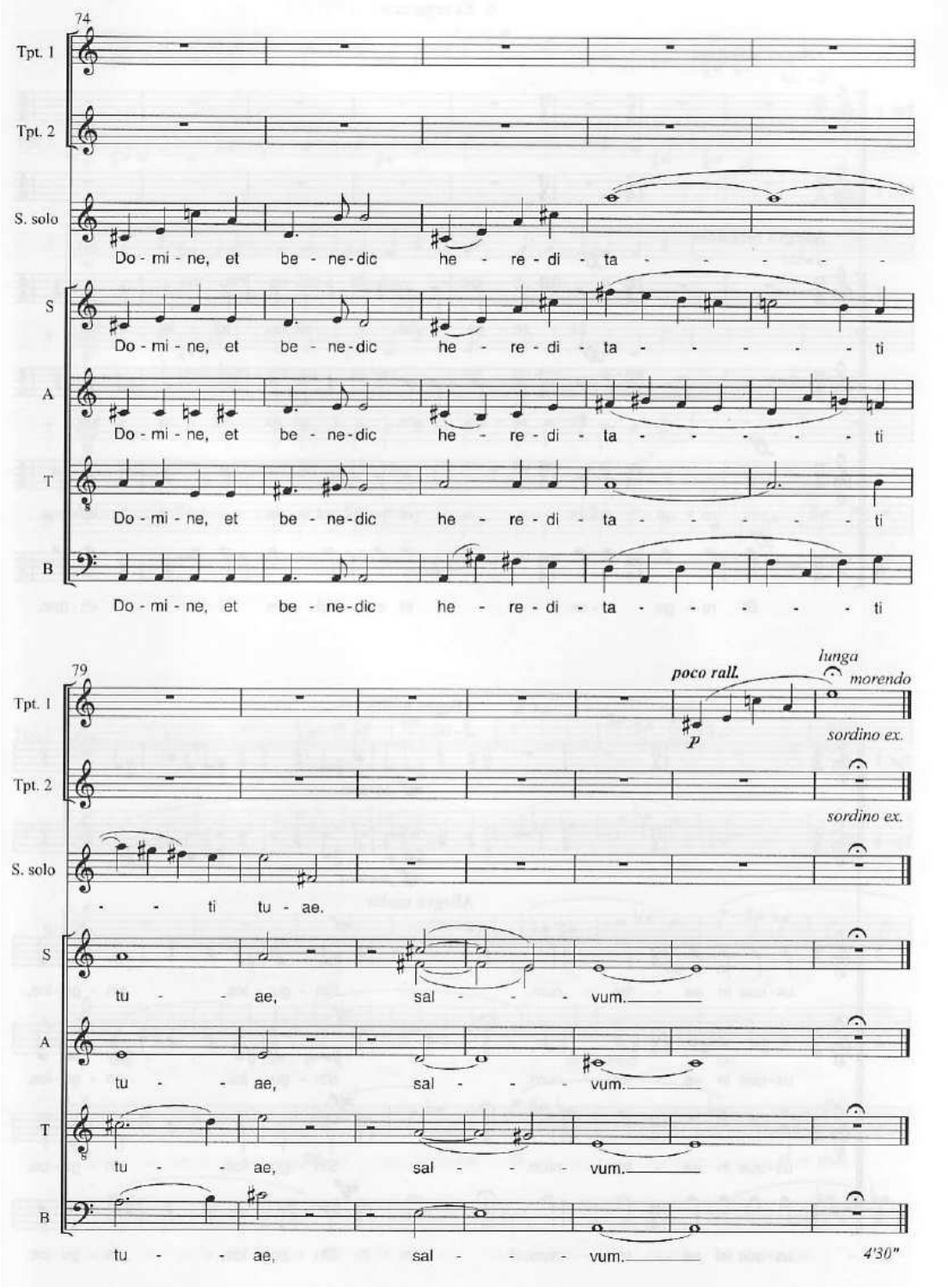
Example 21 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Patrem immensae majestatis" mm. 20–31



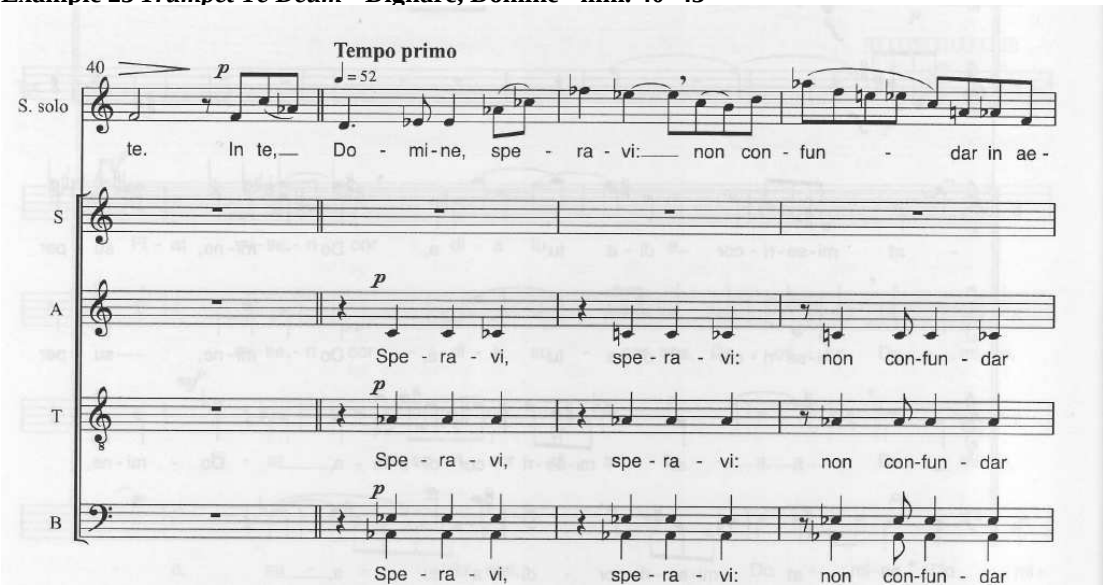
if Nees is reinforcing his ideology that religion/praise is a personal affair that will find unique (soloistic) expressions by the individual, but that it cannot be divorced from

the larger scope of shared humanity. Personal religious expression finds integrity and fulfillment in the context of human coexistence.

Example 22 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Te ergo quaesumus" mm. 74–85



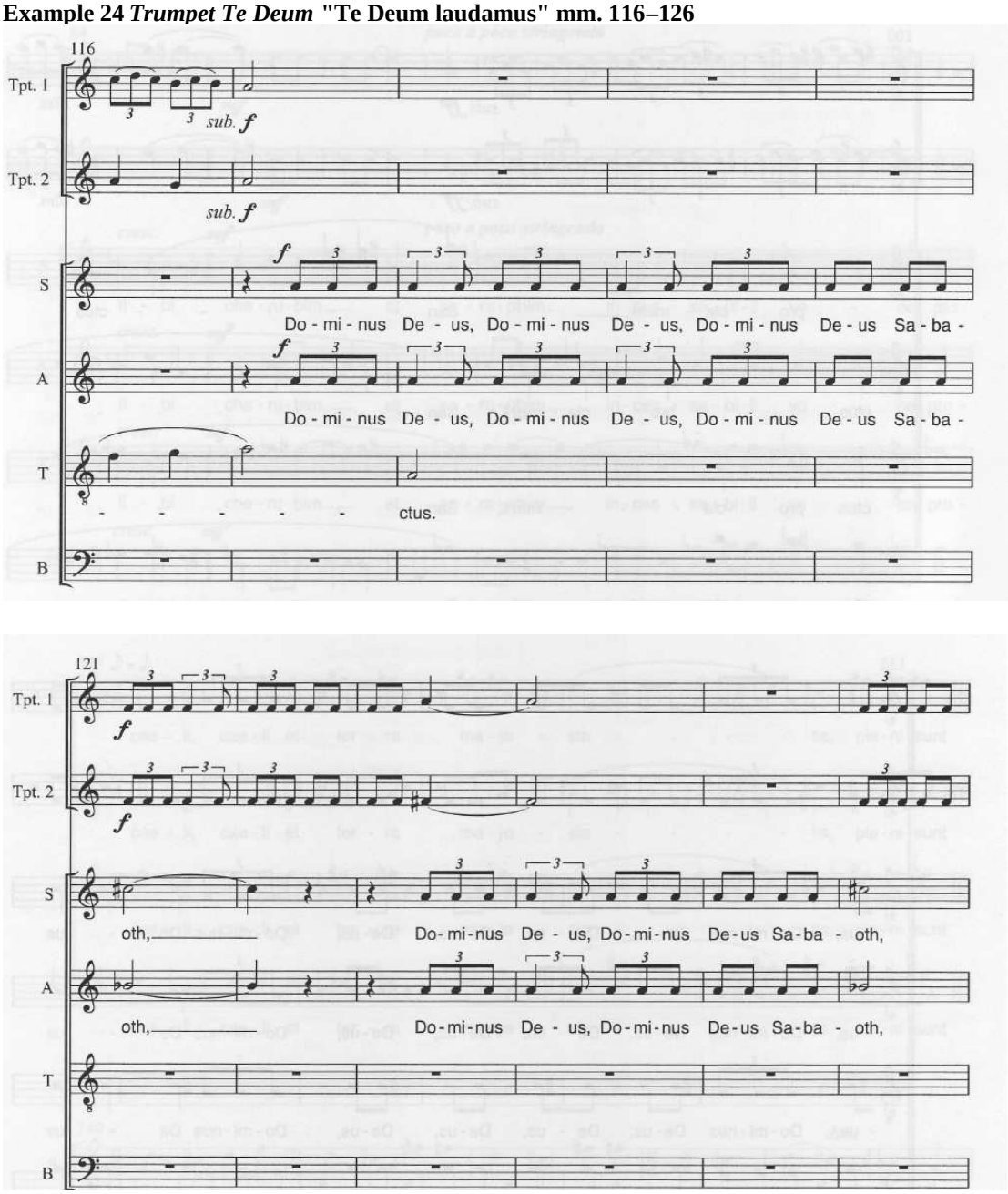
Example 23 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Dignare, Domine" mm. 40–43



Harmony

In terms of harmonic description, the *Trumpet Te Deum*, like many of Nees's other works, is not written in any specific key, yet it remains largely tonal, surrounding different harmonic centers. "Te Deum laudamus" can be heard to reside primarily in F minor. Certainly the trumpet fanfare opening and reprise reside in that key, as do the opening statements of the chorus, "Te Deum laudamus, te Dominum confitemur, Te aeternum Patrem" ("You, God, we praise, You, Lord, we acknowledge, You, the eternal Father"). D major features most prominently in the textual section starting with "Omnis terra" ("all the earth"), but at "Dominus Deus" ("Lord God") what appears to be a movement to A minor, ends up being a leading tone to the tonal center of B-flat minor. (Example 24)

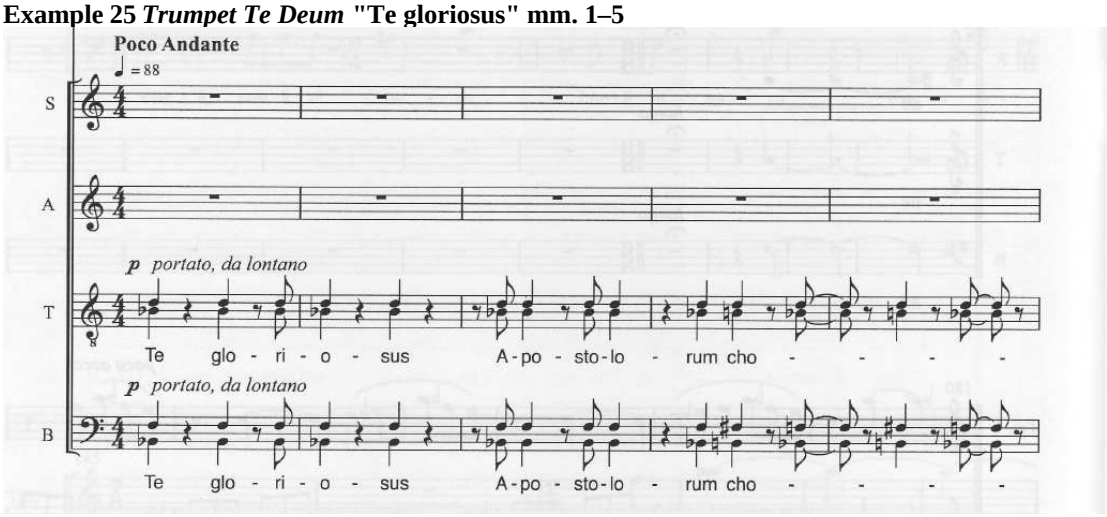
Example 24 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Te Deum laudamus" mm. 116–126



At “Pleni sunt coeli” (“Full are the skies”) there is a transition to the key area of D minor that is largely retained until the trumpet reprise in F minor.

The second movement “Te gloriosus” vacillates between B-flat major, B minor and B major, finally ending on a new tonality of E major on the new textual concept of “Ecclesia” (“called out ones”, commonly inadequately translated “church”). The homophonic harmonic shifts of the chorus combined with the displaced rhythmic notation serve to illustrate the sporadic and unique (i.e. variant in philosophy) appearances of the prophets, apostles and martyrs throughout history, culminating finally in a new body of thought—“Ecclesia”. (Examples 25 and 26)

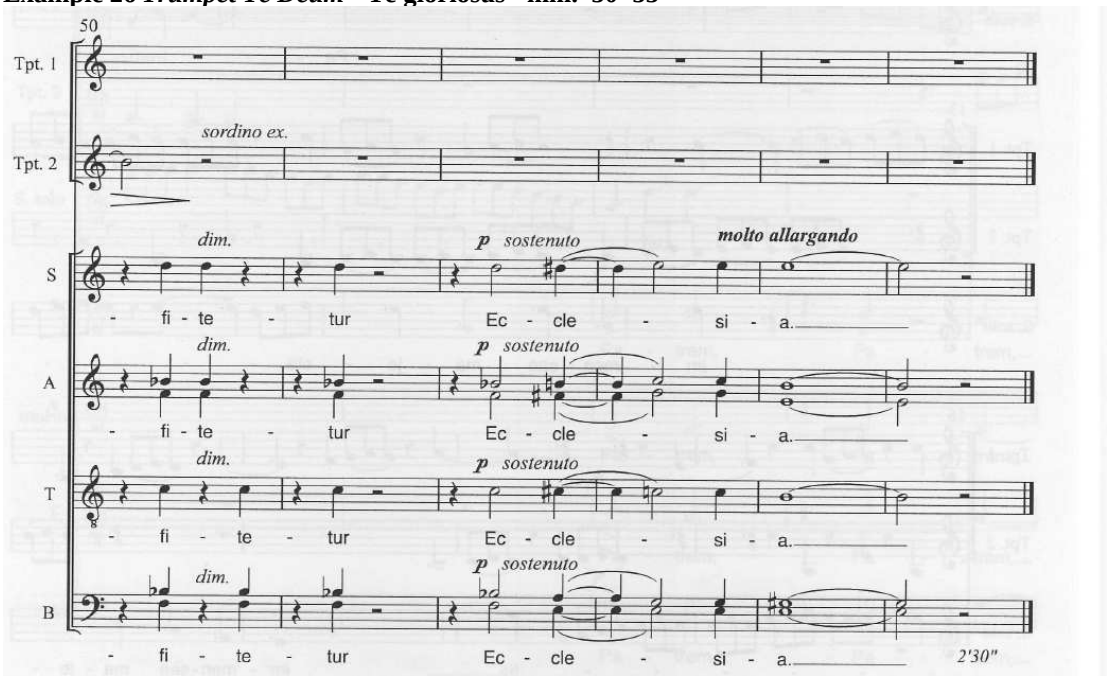
Example 25 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Te gloriosus" mm. 1–5



It is as if Nees is demonstrating, again, that all of humanity (harmonic shifts) has had their prophets, apostles, and martyrs who have pointed the way to the central tenets of human coexistence, that these have come from unexpected locations and human sources (displaced unpredictable rhythms), and that in combination, this collected body of thought has created and is creating a continually new, revelatory (E major) philosophy/belief system, which may or may not be part of institutionalized religion (traditional harmonic language and progression).[33]

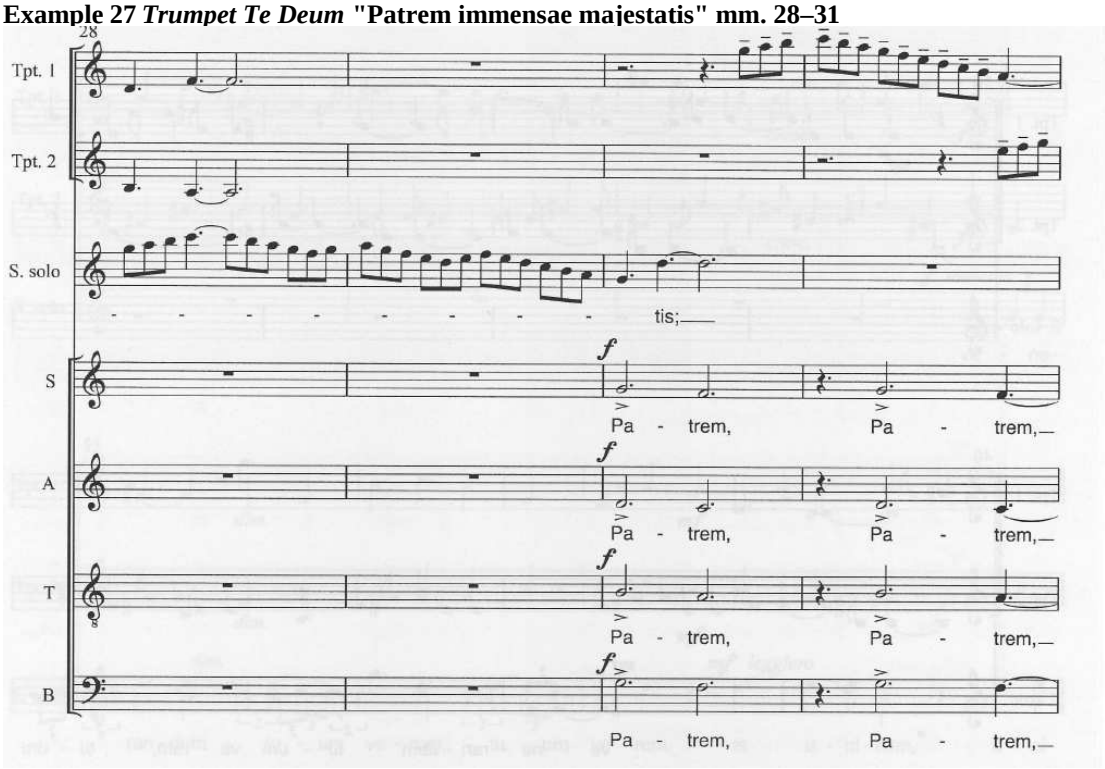
[33] Appendix 2, page 147

Example 26 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Te gloriosus" mm. 50–55

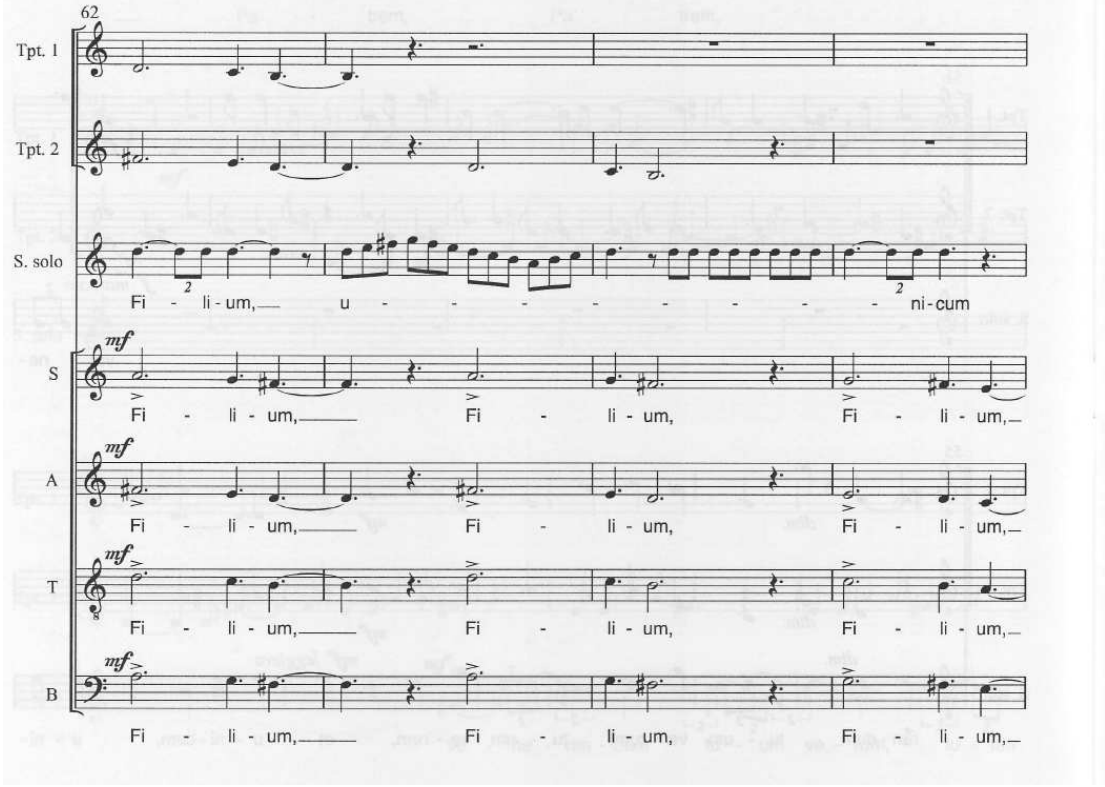


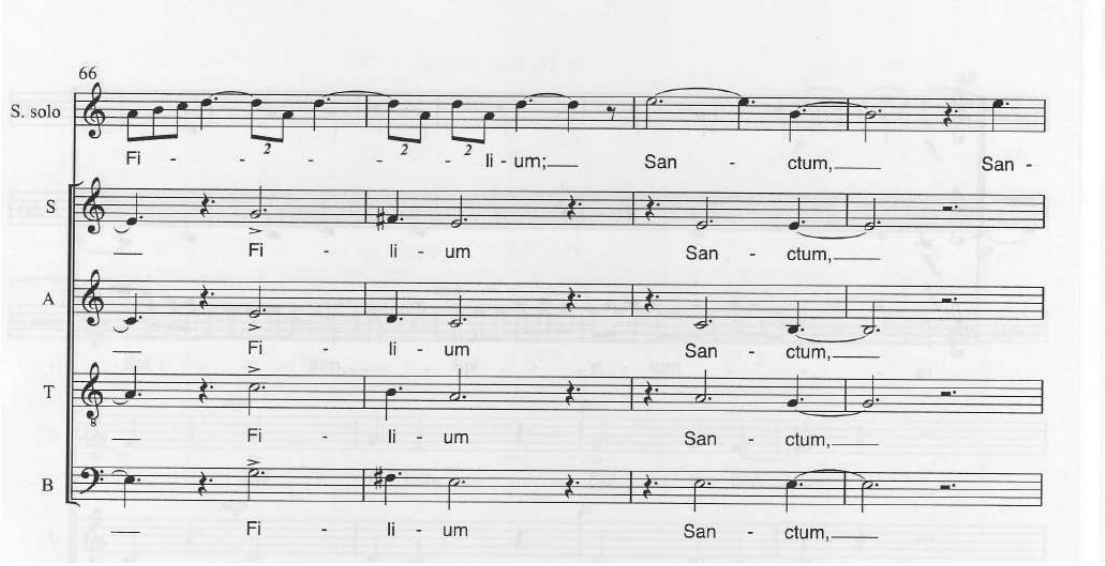
Harmonically speaking the third movement, entitled “Patrem immensae majestatis” is perhaps the most fluid movement, hinting at A minor, E minor, G major, F major, but never residing in a key area. The chorus has three interjections into what is largely an aural dance between the melodic lines of the soprano solo and trumpets and these interjections occur on the words “Patrem”, “Filium; Sanctum”, and “Spiritum” (“Father”, “Son; Holy”, and “Spirit” respectively). (Examples 27 to 29)

Example 27 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Patrem immensae majestatis" mm. 28–31

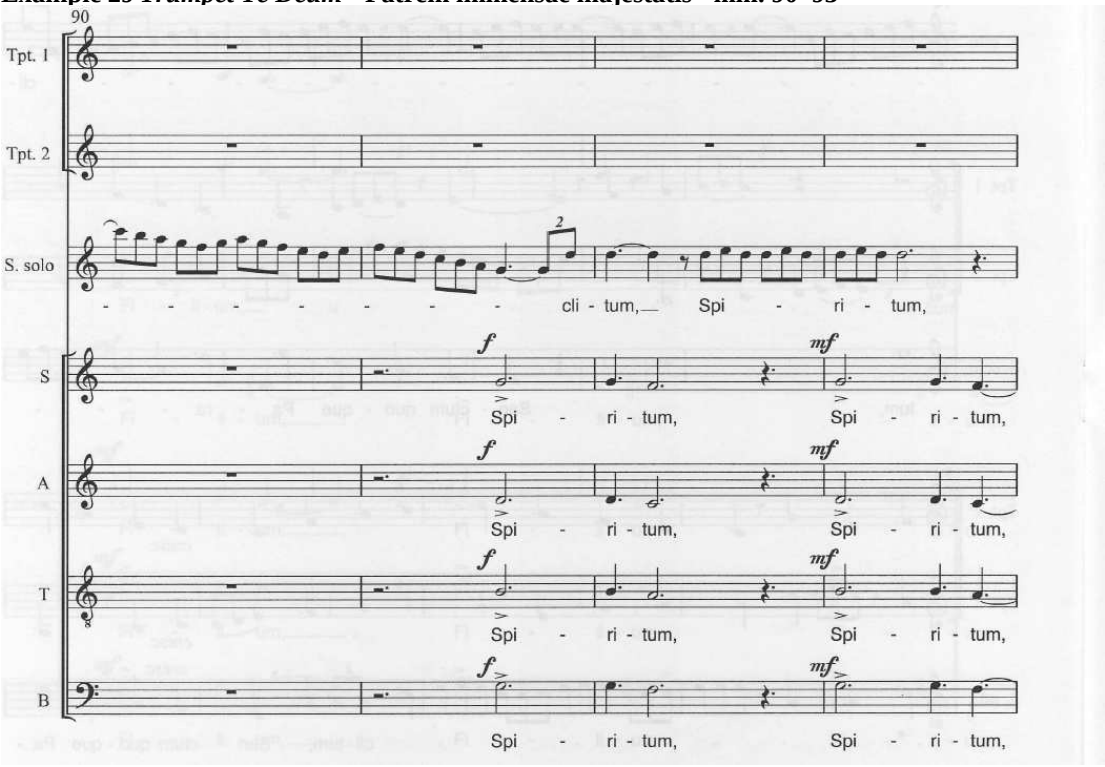


Example 28 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Patrem immensae majestatis" mm. 62–69





Example 29 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Patrem immensae majestatis" mm. 90–93



This division of text is in itself an interesting concept. By including the “Sanctum” with the “Filium” section, rather than with the “Spiritum” section, Nees has suggested alternate ways of thinking about this text: Holy being associated with the Son, and slightly separated from, but still introducing or connected to the Spirit. An

examination of the harmonic structure reaffirms this concept. The chorus chords used to portray “Patrem” and “Spiritum” are root position (the most stable chord position) G major and F major chords used on the first and second syllables respectively of “Patrem”, and first and third syllables respectively of “Spiritum”. The chorus chords used for “Filium” are D major, C major, and B minor used on the first, second, and third syllables respectively, but all in second inversion (a less stable chord position), i.e. 6/4 chords. Counter to either of the above patterns, on the word “Sanctum” Nees uses a second inversion A-minor chord for the first syllable, and a root position E-minor chord for the second syllable.

Table 3 Key distribution for selected text

Text	**Pa**	**trem**		**Fi**	**li**	**um;**	**Sanc**	**tum**		**Spi**	**ri**	**tum**
Chord	G+	F+		D+	C+	B-	A-	E-		G+	G+	F+
Inversion	Root	Root		2nd	2nd	2nd	2nd	Root		Root	Root	Root

Thus the “Sanctum” chords serve as a transition from second inversion chords of “Filium” to the root position chords of “Spiritum”.

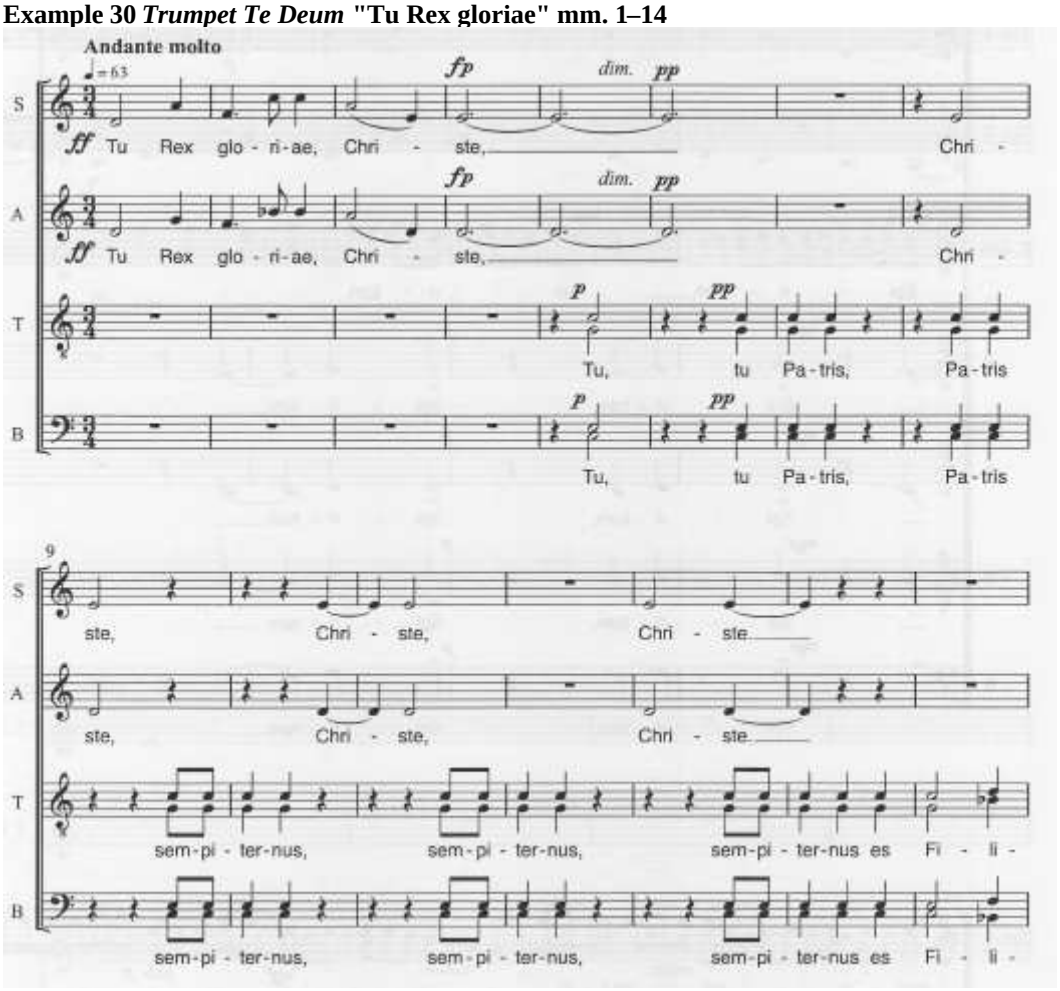
The interpretive significance of this harmonic structure should not be lost on anyone. While the three (trinity) soloists (two identical instruments and one dissimilar voice) are whirling about in a kind of “Perichoresis”, or Dance of Three,[34] the chorus, bell-like, intones the names of the Three. The Father and the Spirit are the stable, unchanging, entities (we hear stable root position chords), while the Son is the new (to history) and less stable (highly subjective) element (we hear less stable second inversion chords). The concept of Deity and Spirit are rooted in the psyche of

[34] Appendix 2, page 148.

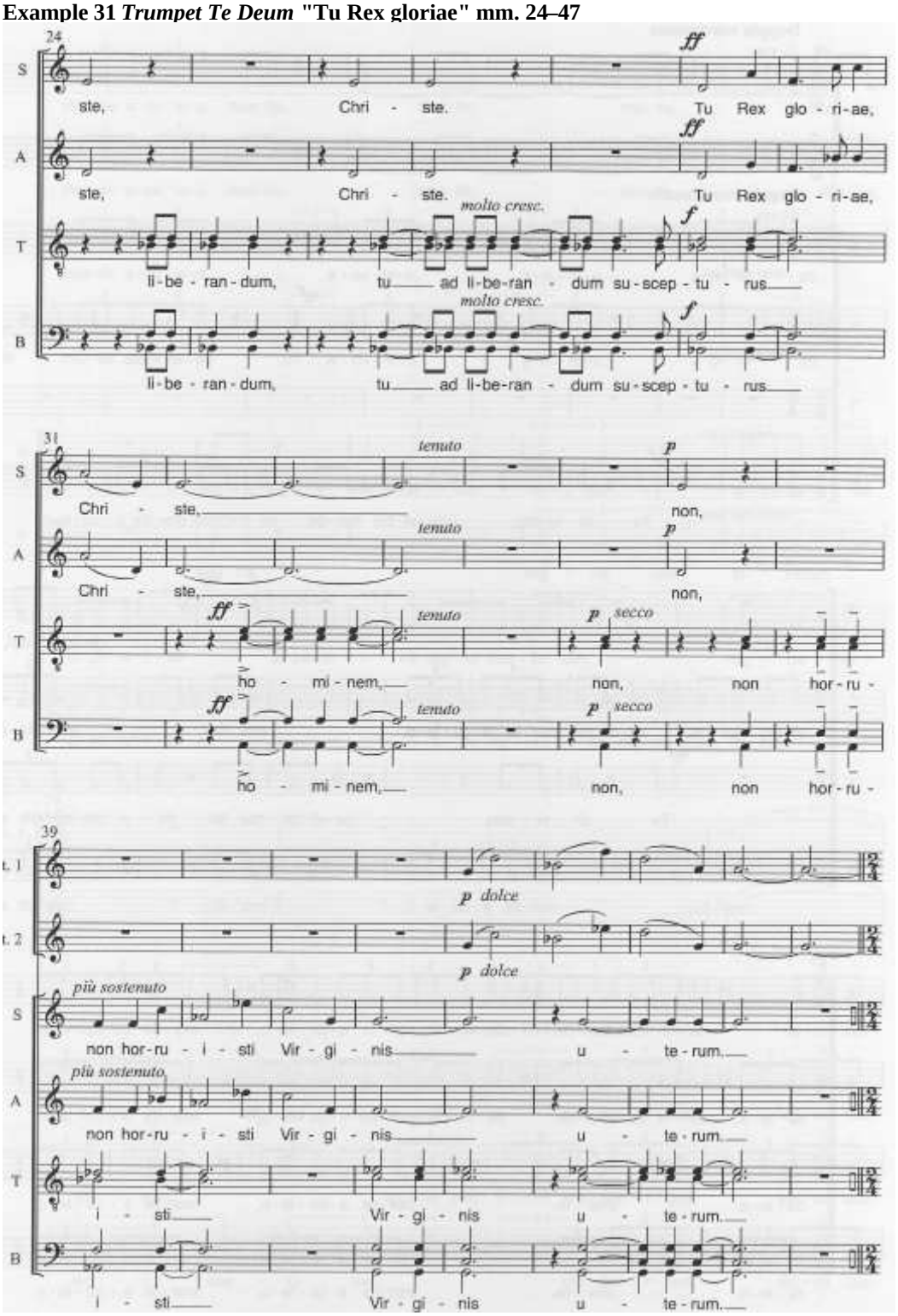
humanity; Son is an anomaly but connected. Lest the interpreter read too much into the speculative nature of the Son, Nees adds “Sanctum” (“Holy”) to the Son text, and associates the harmonically less stable Son element to the harmonically stable Spirit element by using a second inversion chord on the first syllable of “Sanctum” and a root position chord on the second.

Movement 4, “Tu Rex Gloriae” exhibits simultaneously moving fourths and fifths in the upper voices and trumpets, while the male voices move through the key areas of C major, B-flat major, A minor, B-flat minor 7th, and C minor. (Examples 30 and 31)

Example 30 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Tu Rex gloriae" mm. 1–14

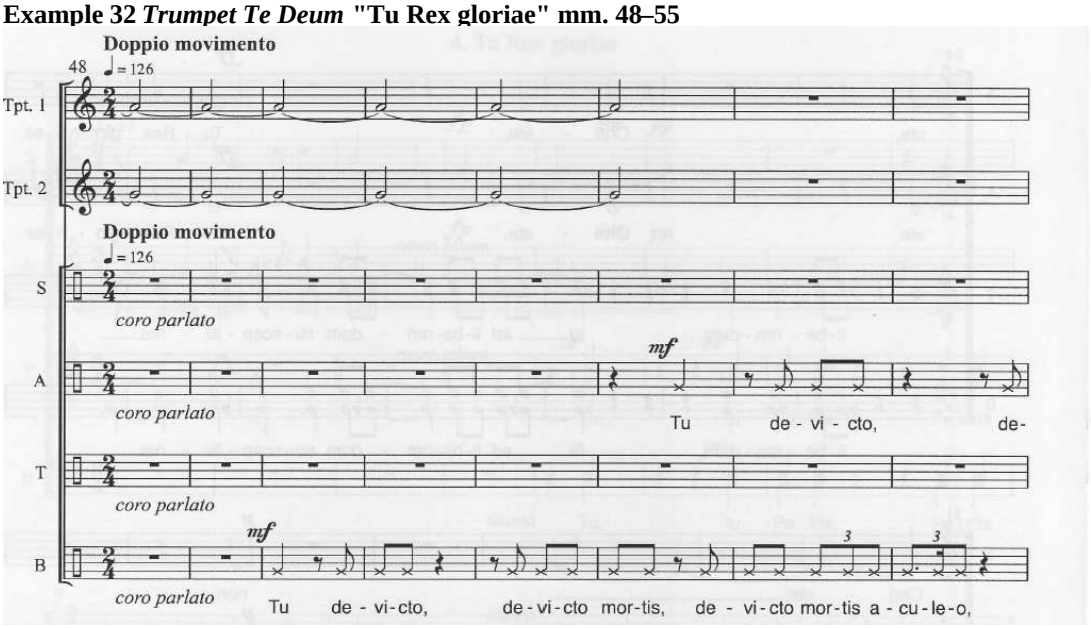


Example 31 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Tu Rex gloriae" mm. 24–47



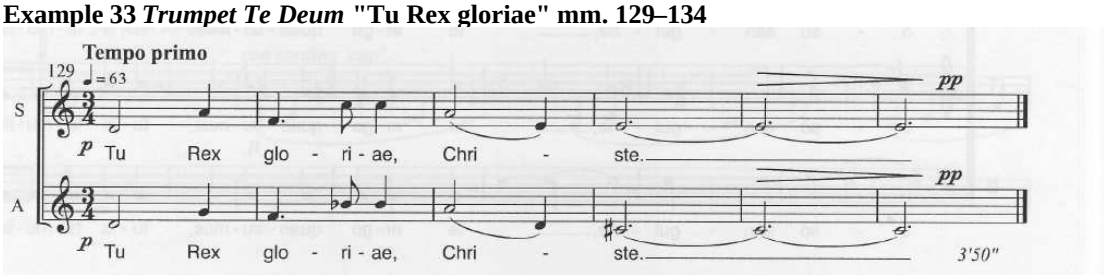
Harmonic sound ceases altogether with the advent of spoken text by the chorus on the words “Tu devicto mortis aculeo” (“You overcame the sting of death”), etc. (Example 32)

Example 32 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Tu Rex gloriae" mm. 48–55



The opening motive of fourths and fifths on the text “Tu Rex gloriae”(“You are the King of Glory”) is reprised at the very end but resolves to the key of A major to set up the tonality for the next movement. (Example 33)

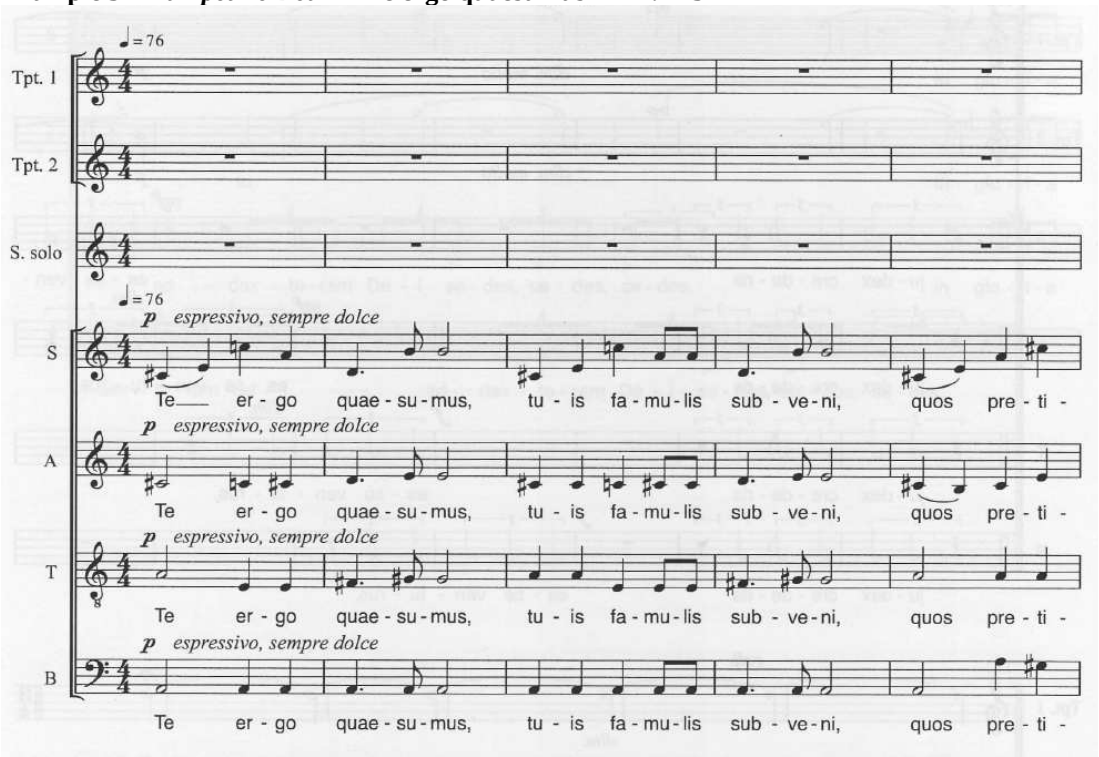
Example 33 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Tu Rex gloriae" mm. 129–134



It could be argued that the fifth movement, “Te ergo quaesumus” is the most harmonically-grounded movement of this entire work. Composed structurally as it is in ABA form, both A sections are clearly in A major, while the B section moves in a

largely homophonic manner through a number of key centers to arrive again at A major for the final A section. While both first and last sections are predominantly in the key of A major, it should be noted that Nees employs rapid fluctuations between minor and major tonality throughout in a decidedly “blues” manner, as noted previously. (Example 34)

Example 34 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Te ergo quaesumus" mm. 1–5

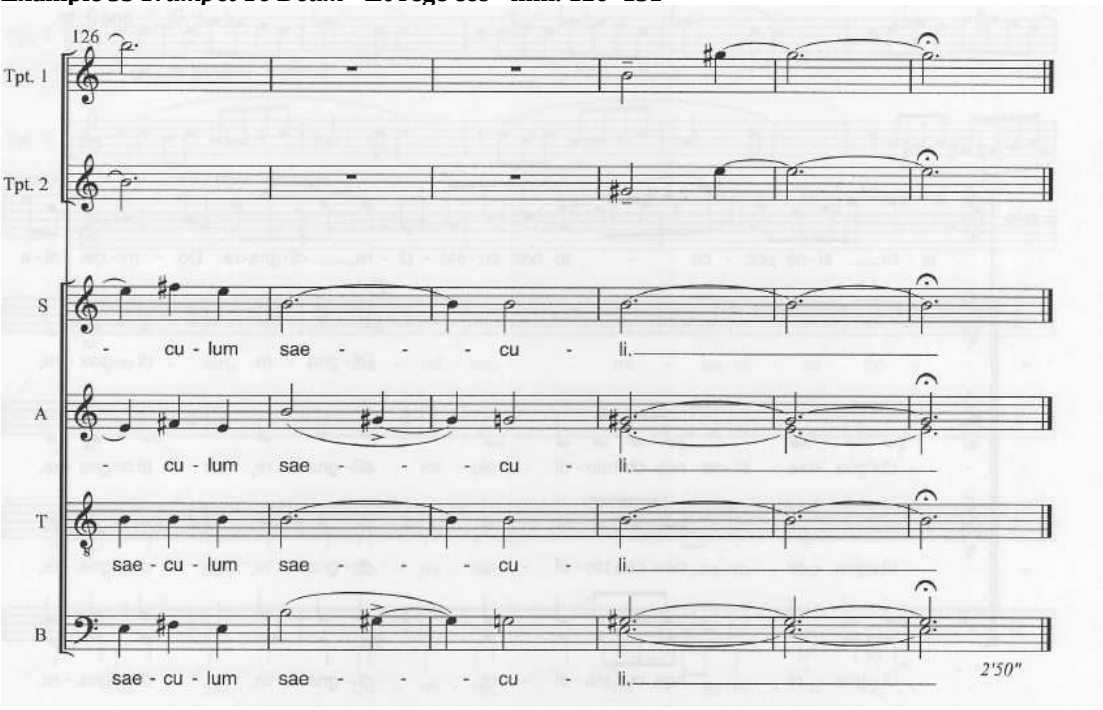


These sonorities impart an intimate, romantic quality to the movement, and the soprano and trumpet solos add to the sensation. The descriptors used above—“blues”, “romantic”, “intimate” (used also by Nees himself to describe this movement)—are uniquely human, and it is no accident that in this movement (which opens up the Supplication section of the *Te Deum,* and in which the supplicant “beseeches” the Deity for aid), an instantly recognizable “human” harmonic language is used—a

language that Nees believes humans can identify with, or at least understand.[35] Identifying with the harmonic language invites identification with the text; thus Nees uses harmonic expression to encourage personal individual association with the textual sentiments.

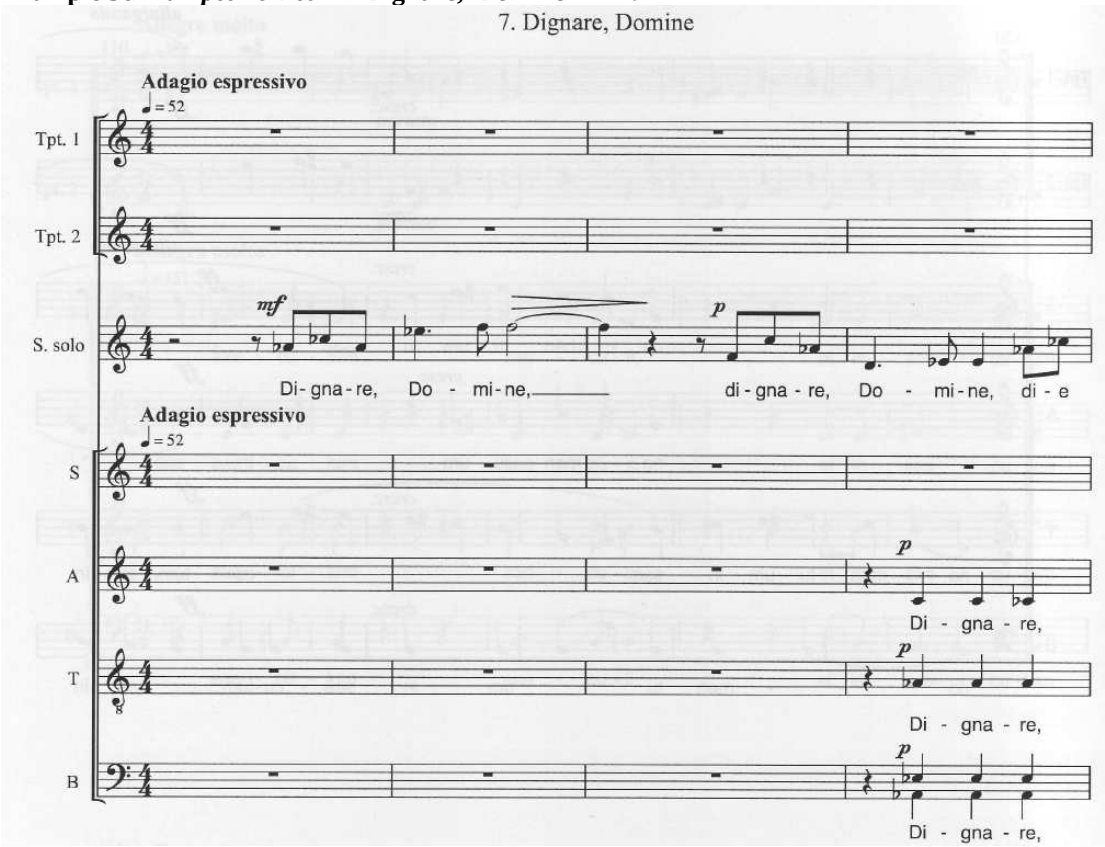
The sixth movement "Et rege eos" opens in the key area of B major, moves to C major for the "laudamus" ("praise") section of the text, and concludes in E major on the "saeculum saeculi" ("forever and ever") text. The G sharp in the key of E major, played and sung respectively by Trumpet 1, Alto 1, and Bass 1 on the last chord of this section, provides the enharmonic transition to the key area of A-flat major which characterizes the final movement of the *Trumpet Te Deum*, "Dignare, Domine". (Examples 35 and 36)

Example 35 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Et rege eos" mm. 126–131



[35] Appendix 2, page 155.

Example 36 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Dignare, Domine" mm. 1–4



Textually, the last movement “Dignare, Domine” falls readily into three sections:

1. “Dignare, Domine, die isto sine peccato nos custodire.” (“Deign, O Lord, to keep us this day without sin”);
2. “Miserere nostri, Domine, miserere nostri. Fiat misericordia tua, Domine, super nos, quemadmodum speravimus in te.” (“Have mercy upon us, O Lord have mercy. Let Thy mercy, O Lord, be upon us, as we have hoped/trusted in You”);
3. “In te, Domine, speravi: Non confundar in aeternum.” (“In you, O Lord, I have hoped/trusted: May I not be confounded for ever”).

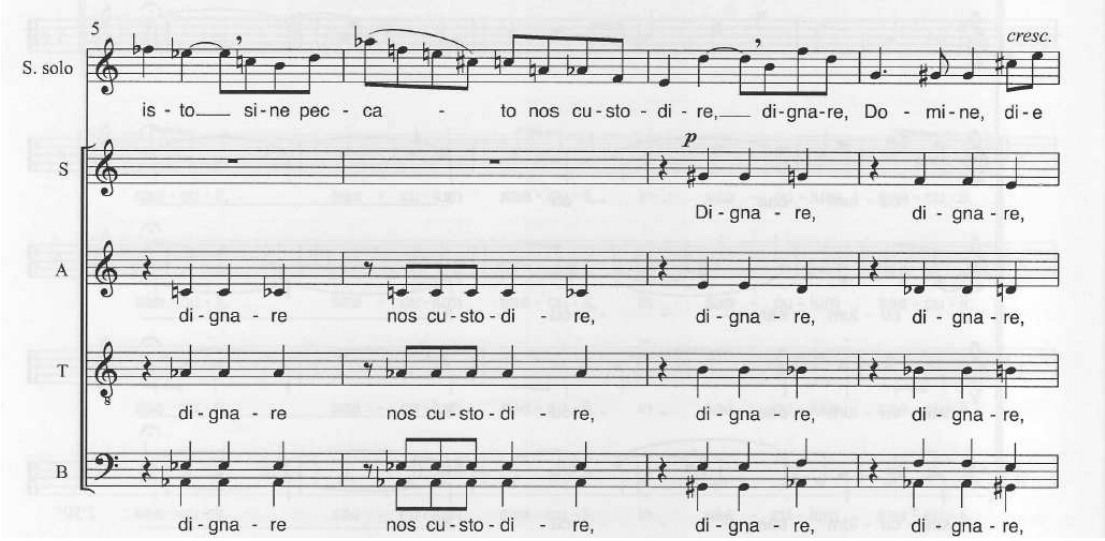
The first and third sections are requests for support from the Deity to assist the supplicants in their allegiance to the Deity. The middle section is a request for mercy for the supplicants as a confirmation of well-placed trust in the Deity. Taken together these three sections can be viewed as a request for contractual vindication—the supplicants have placed their loyalty and commitment in the Deity and in return they are requesting redemption and support for their adherence to this commitment.

In terms of music the "Dignare" corresponds to these textual divisions, and is in an ABA^1 form. Harmonically, the A and A^1 sections are largely in A-flat major, whereas the B section moves through a variety of tonal centers, virtually all of which (except for the opening "Miserere nostri, Domini, Miserere nostri" in F major) are in minor keys. What is more significant than the admittedly arbitrary A-flat tonality of the A and A^1 section is the pedal tone of A flat in the bass voices. Despite the change in harmonies above, there is a certain implacability about this tone throughout these two sections, even when it is enharmonically changed to G sharp to identify with the harmonic spelling of the upper tones. (Example 37) The A-flat tone is foundational, it is unrelenting, it is unwavering, and it is— in keeping with the text— "supportive".

By contrast, the B section is contrapuntal, sometimes fugal in sections, and roams freely through several tonal centers, reflecting the almost desperate cries for mercy/redemption in the text for this section. It is only on the text "quemadmodum speravimus in te" ("just as we have trusted in You") sung by the unaccompanied

soprano soloist, that the chorus is led back to the original, the familiar, the reassuring, the comforting, the confirming key of A flat, to begin the A^1 section.

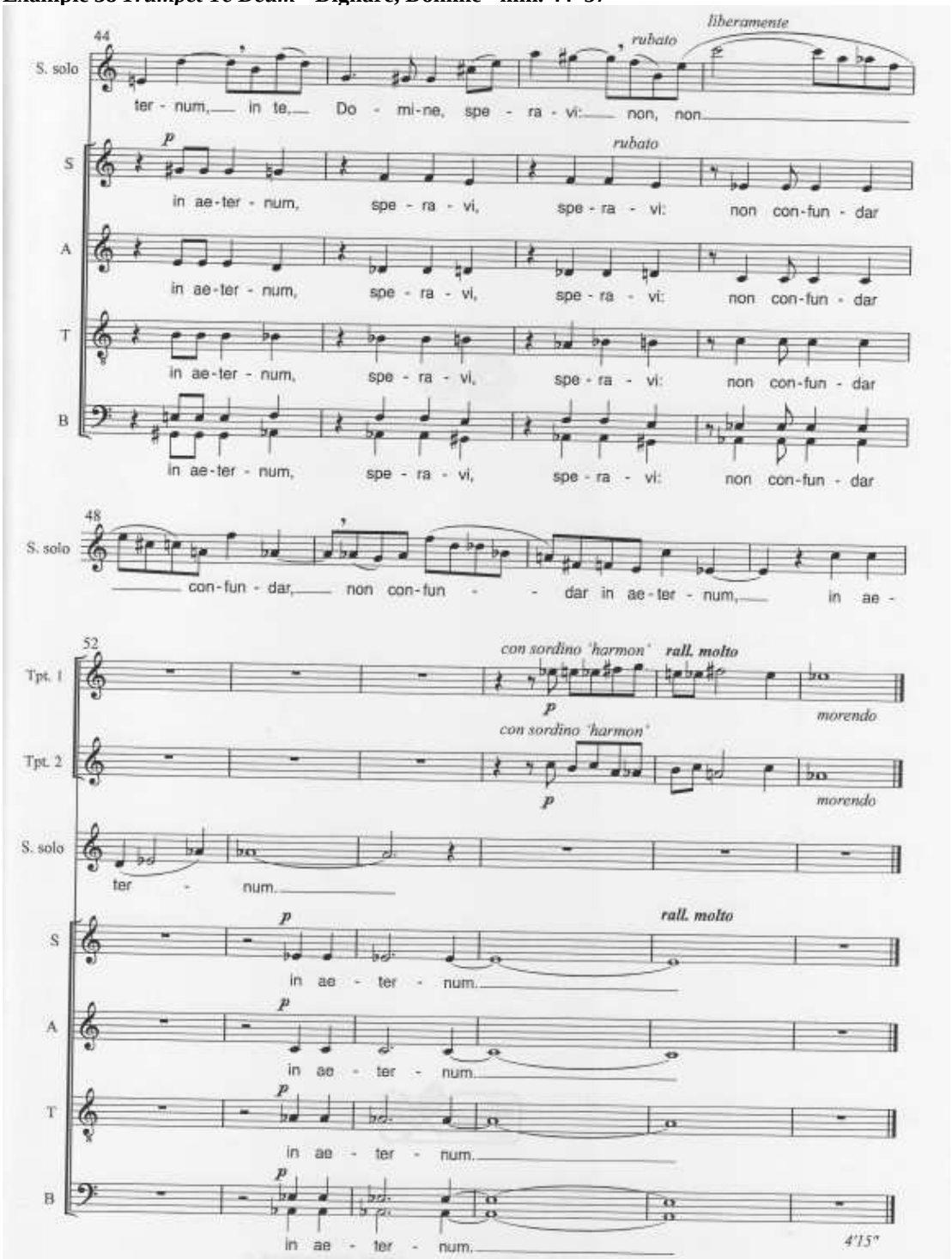
Example 37 ***Trumpet Te Deum*** **"Dignare, Domine" mm. 5–8**



Harmonically the soprano soloist plays an important dramatic role. It is essential to note that she sings only in the A and A^1 sections, where the A-flat pedal tone persists, and not in the B section, where harmonic vagaries abound (the exception to this, where the soloist leads the chorus back to A flat at the very end of the B section has been noted above). Yet the soprano solo line in the first and last sections cannot be labeled as being in the key of A flat; it is melismatic, extremely chromatic, and if anything, atonal in nature. In fact, in the A^1 section elements of serialism emerge, as on the last two utterances of the words “non confundar in aeternum” (“let me not be confounded/confused for ever”), she sings all twelve tones of the chromatic scale in a

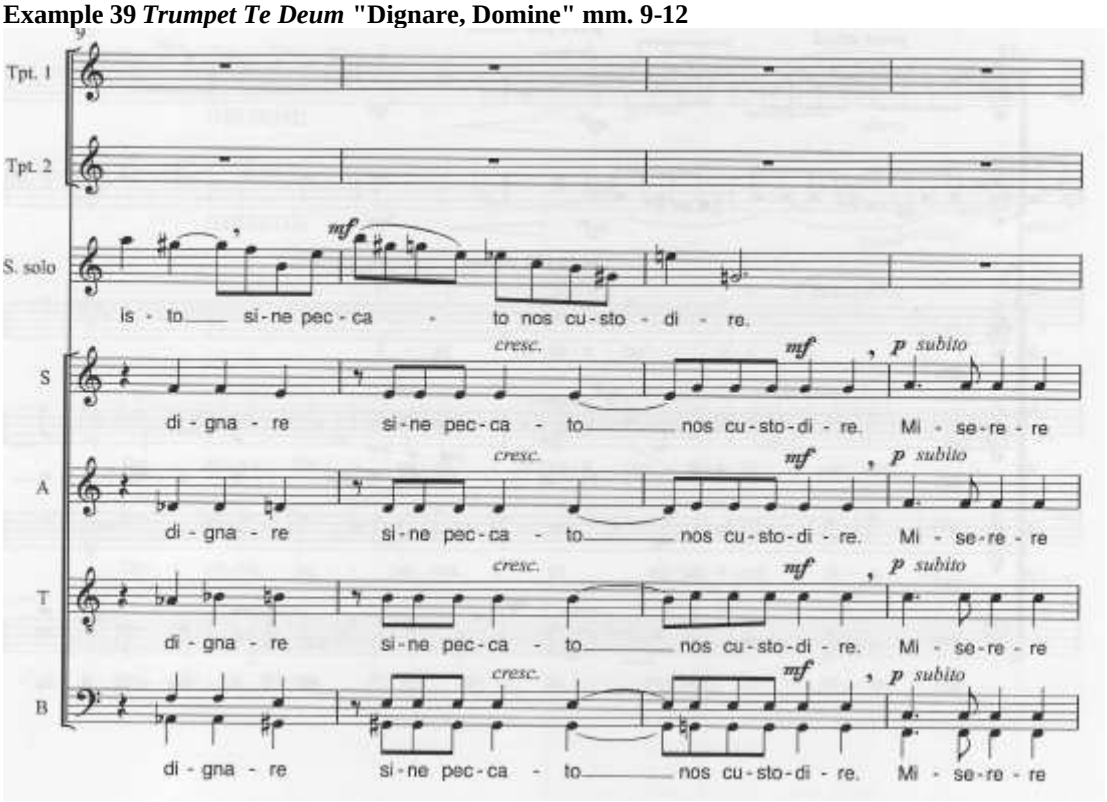
an intervallic pattern of thirds and seconds, before resolving gently back to A flat. (Example 38)

Example 38 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Dignare, Domine" mm. 44–57



The most obvious interpretive inference of this type of setting, is that no matter how wildly chromatic the solo line may be, the stability of A flat will not be confused/compromised—"non confundar". Then again, another way of looking at this might be to see that no matter how far the soprano line might stray from the tonal center of A flat, *she* will never be confused/confounded about finding her way back to that center—as, in fact, she does, without any help from the chorus. There is this sense of confidence and freedom in the solo line, the confidence to go anywhere tonally and yet find her way back—and the freedom to do it. As noted above, these same characteristics are exhibited in the A section, but in this case the freedom of the solo line is curtailed when the chorus "loses its way" from A-flat major to F major on the text "Miserere". (Example 39)

Example 39 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Dignare, Domine" mm. 9-12



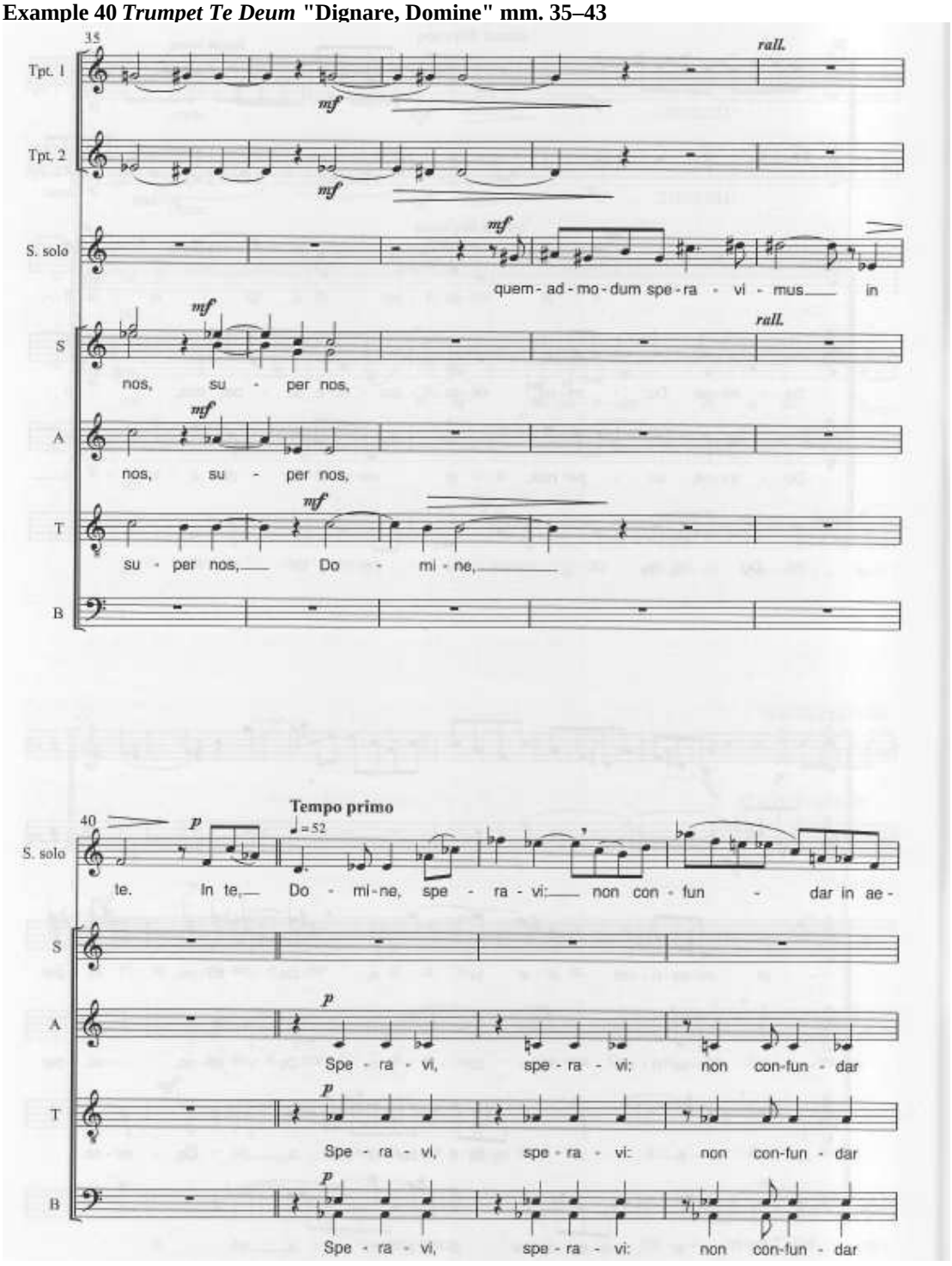
Viewed in this light, it appears as if the soprano solo represents the stable entity in this combination. It is free to express its allegiance to the Deity in any way; in an individualistic, non-conformist, non-traditional, seemingly non-harmonic way. The central tenet of faith in a Deity (A-flat major) persists, but expression of same can be as unique as the individual.

The chorus, with its traditional chords representing the traditions and trappings of organized religion, tends to be swayed relatively easily away from the tonal center of A-flat major, and at the end of the B section appears to lose its way entirely. At this point the soprano solo re-enters and gently leads the chorus back to A-flat major. (Example 40)

Perhaps this second interpretation reads too much into the score. It certainly appears to fall in line with Nees's personal appraisal of religion as a subjective/individualistic phenomenon rather than an objective/institutionalized one. Arguments can be made for both (or more) interpretive readings of this movement, and perhaps this enigmatic nature is precisely what Nees wanted for the final section of the *Trumpet Te Deum.* Just as adherence to religion is a personal, intimate, and subjective endeavour, so too, is the experience and interpretation of a religious work of art music like the *Trumpet Te Deum.*[36]

[36] For additional information on Nees's conceptualization of the *Trumpet Te Deum* see Appendix 2, pp. 146–161.

Example 40 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Dignare, Domine" mm. 35–43



4. Summary

The information presented in this essay has been provided with the goal of introducing the composer Vic Nees, and his music to those readers not acquainted with either. The paper has provided perspective by situating both the man, and his music within an historical framework. It has established Nees's musical authority through a discussion of his musical education, career, and significant achievements. Finally, it has examined some distinguishing characteristics of his musical style by using excerpts from various works to highlight these features, by using Nees's own assessments as found in the interviews to describe these aspects, and by concluding with a more in-depth description of a single large scale work.

Perhaps the single most important or distinctive feature of Vic Nees's music is his careful attention to text and the fact that the prosody and meaning of the text govern every musical parameter—rhythm, harmony, melody, voicing, dynamics, use of instruments, etc. Thus, although some of these parameters have been isolated to discuss individually, the pervasive influence of textual importance necessarily becomes a part of each discussion.

The interview transcripts that follow are invaluable to this topic, in that they are primary source material in English from the composer himself, and provide a wealth of information on his life, philosophy, and music.

On March 8, 2011 Vic Nees celebrated his 75th birthday, and the cultural society of Belgium hosted many commemorative events throughout the year to honour his legacy. As an example, the *11th International Choir Contest of Flanders-Maasmechelen* invited Nees as a special guest. His *Magnificat* was sung in the opening concert by the Flemish Radio Choir, under the direction of John Duijck (who was Nees' successor as conductor for this chorus). Nees was commissioned to write the compulsory test piece for this festival, and he was a participant at a workshop.

Other festivals and festivities featuring the music of Nees occurred during this year. A book detailing his life and contribution to the international world of music was prepared by the Conservatory of Antwerp for publication and was distributed at these occasions.[37]

What is the legacy of Vic Nees? Vic Nees has virtually single-handedly changed the direction of Flemish choral music in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He has raised the standard of choral music, both in Belgium and internationally, through his own performances as conductor and through adjudication of festivals. He has contributed to the continuing development of choral music through publications, radio programs, clinics and lectures. He has been a strong advocate for the promotion and development of amateur choirs in Belgium and abroad. Finally, by combining his experience as a choral conductor with his ability as composer, he has produced a substantial body of choral compositions that is intellectually rigorous and

[37] Cooremans, Kamiel; DeWilde, Jan; Leens, Roger; Theuwissen, Katelijne. 2011. *O Song, Vic Nees, portret van een koorcomponist*. Leuven, Belgium: Koor & Stem en Davidsfonds Uitgeverij

challenging, and of profound artistic integrity. His authority rests in his musicianship as a composer, a conductor, a musicologist, and ultimately as an intellect, and as such he has earned the title of “Godfather” of Belgian Choral Music.

Postscript

It was during the process of final submission of this essay, that I received word that Vic Nees had died on Thursday March 14th, 2013, at the age of 77. It is my hope that this paper, which includes his own words, will help preserve the legacy of Vic Nees and his art.

Selected Discography

Bikkembergs, Kurt, Jan Coeck, Vic Nees, Peter Pieters, Martin Valcke, and Jan van der Roost. *In Flanders' fields vol. 22: Music for children's* (sic) *and girls' choirs by Flemish composers,* Alouette, Die Ghespeelkens and Inamorati di Musica, conductors Dirk Biesemans, Johan Duijck, Johan Jourquin and Jo Remans. Compact Disc. Belgium: Phaedra DDD 92022.

Nees, Vic. c. 2007. *Magnificat*,. Olsztynski Chor Kameralyny "Collegium Musicum", conductor Janusz Wilinski. Vol. Compact Disc. Poland: Soliton.

———. c. 1990. *Anima christi*, Gents Madrigaalkoor, conductor Johan Duijck. Compact Disc. Belgium: Eufoda 1146.

———. c 2006. *In flanders' fields vol. 42 - Vic Nees (c1936) - Trumpet Te Deum & other choral works*, Vocaal Ensemble Musa Horti, conductor Peter Dejans. Compact Disc. Belgium: Phaedra 92042.

———. c 2005.
In Flnders' fields vol. 35 - A tribute to Vic Nees, Flemish Radio Choir, conductor Johan Duijck. Compact Disc. Belgium: Phaedra 92035.

———. 1996. *Sacred choral works*, Flemish Radio Choir, conductor Vic Nees. Compact Disc. Belgium: Rene Gailly International Productions VTP CD92 029.

Nees, Vic, and Staf Nees. 2006. *Nees & Nees*, Capella SS Michaelis & Gudulae, conductor Kurt Bikkembergs. Compact Disc. Belgium: Sabam CSSM&G 0601.

Bibliography

Arbeitsgemeinschaft Europäischer chorverbände (AGEC) in Deutscher Musikrat [database online]. Germany, 2010 [cited March 10 2010]. Available from http://www.music-connects.eu/en/info-point/institutions/arbeitsgemeinschaft-europaeischer-chorverbaende-agec.html.

Bikkembergs, Kurt. 2005. Het onmibare koor: (jeugd)koor in beweging, (the essential choir: (youth)choir in motion). *Adem* 41 (1): 10-2.

Central Intelligence Agency. *The world factbook 2009*. in Central Intelligence Agency [database online]. Washington, DC, 2009 [cited February 20 2009]. Available from https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html.

Choralmusic.nl: Vic Nees. [cited December 9 2006]. Available from http://www.anniebank.nl/kmn/Eng/Frame.htm.

Classical composers database [database online]. Netherlands, 2010 [cited January 15, 2010]. Available from http://www.classical-composers.org/group/13.

Cooremans, Kamiel; DeWilde, Jan; Leens, Roger; Theuwissen, Katelijne. 2011. *O Song, Vic Nees, portret van een koorcomponist*. Leuven, Belgium: Koor & Stem en Davidsfonds Uitgeverij

Cosaert, Koen. Beiaardcomponisten - Staf Nees. in Vlaamse Beiaard Vereniging [database online]. Antwerp, 2010 [cited March 10, 2010 2010]. Available from http://www.beiaard.org/comp_nees.html (accessed March 10).

Coulembier, Klaas, Heirman, Kristien and Vercammen, Els. Nees, Vic (1936). 2005 [cited January 20 2010]. Available from http://www.matrix-nieuwe-muziek.be/en/composer/nees-vic-1936 (accessed January 20, 2010).

Croymans, Dominiek. Van Eyck ensemble vew maasik: Backgrounds/Vic Nees. Belgium, 2010 [cited September 20 2009]. Available from http://www.vaneyckensemble.be/achtergr06neese.html.

Dewilde, Jan, ed. 2011. *Choral Music from Flanders*, an anthology compiled by Vic Nees & Michael Scheck. Munich, Germany: MPH Publishing.

Drummond, John. 2010. Re-thinking western art music: A perspective shift for music educators. *International Journal of Music Education* 28 (2) (May 1): 117-26.

Europa cantat: Uniting youth in song. in Europa Cantat Generalsekretariat [database online]. Bonn, 2010 [cited March 20 2010]. Available from http://www.europacantat.org/about-europa-cantat/ec-is/.

Grout, Donald Jay, and Claude V. Palisca. 1985. *A history of Western music*. 3rd ed. New York: W.W. Norton.

Hendrix, Geert. 1995. Musica explicit mysterium. De woord-toonverhouding in de religieuze werken van Vic Nees. Choral Music Thesis, Koninklijk Vlaams Muziekconservatorium, Antwerpen.

Heughebaert, H. 1974. Ontmoeting met koorkomponist Vic Nees. *Gamma* 26 (3): 8-12.

"Jeunesses Musicales." *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed February 8, 2013, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/14287.

Knockaert, Yves. Nees, Vic. *Grove Music Online Ed. L. Macy*, http://www.grovemusic.com.

Leens, R. 1981. Vic Nees: Een veelzijdig koorcomponist. *Adem* 17 : 126-9.

Lenders, Stefan. 1998. Vic Nees "Magnificat" Aspekte der Einstudierung unter Berücksichtigung der stilistischen Besonderheiten eines zeitgenössischen Komponisten. Thesis, St.-Gregorius-Hauses, Aachen.

Lockwood, Lewis, et al. "Palestrina, Giovanni Pierluigi da." In *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford MusicOnline*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/20749 (accessed July 2, 2012)

Mann, Alfred. 2001. Recollections III. *American Choral Review* 43 (2) (06/00; Summer-Fall 2001): 5.

Neumann, Klaus L. "Distler, Hugo." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online.* Oxford Unversity Press, accessed September 20, 2012, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/07854.

Nijs, K. 1996. De eerstelijnszorg van huisdirigent Vic Nees. *Muziek En Woord* 12 (3): 2-3.

Oron, Aryeh. Erich van Nevel (conductor). in Lacock Website; Goldberg Website [database online]. 2008 [cited September 20 2009]. Available from http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Bio/Nevel-Erik-Van.htm.

PhaedraCD: A tribute to Vic Nees. [cited December 10 2006]. Available from http://www.phaedracd.com/product_info.php?products_id=78.

Robert Wangermée and Henri Vanhulst. "Brussels." *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press. Web. 8 Feb. 2013. http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/04203.

Royal carillon school "Jef Denyn", Mechelen. in Royal Carillon School [database online]. Belgium, 2009 [cited October 20 2009]. Available from http://www.beiaardschool.be/en/ (accessed October 20, 2009.

Schmitt, Harald. 1998. Besprechungen: Bücher: Zwischen spätromantik und avantgarde. *Musik Und Kirche* 68 (4): 270.

Schreurs, Eugeen. Mechelen. *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/42619 (accessed June 14, 2010)

Thevelein, Ignace. Analyse van 'April', 'Vandaag', 'Begin'. Thesis Choral Conducting, Koninklijk Muziekconservatorium, Gent.

USO Webteam. Universitair symphonisch orkest van de K. U. Leuven. in Katholiek Universiteit Leuven [database online]. Belgium, 2010 [cited September 20 2009]. Available from http://www.usoleuven.be/index.php?option=com_content&task=section&id=9&Itemid=389&lang=en.

van Moergastel, P. 1993. Vic Nees: Compositeur belge'. *International Choral Bulletin* 12 (3): 47-8.

Vervliet, Els. 1990. Taal en muziek: vergelijkende studie aan de hand van Requiem voor een kind (H. Hensen/V. Nees). Licentiate Thesis Germanic Philology, Universiteit Antwerpen.

Vlaamse componisten: Staff Nees. in InfoNu [database online]. Netherlands, 2010 [cited March 10 2010]. Available from http://kunst-en-cultuur.infonu.nl/biografie/21764-vlaamse-componisten-staf-nees.html (accessed March 10, 2010).

Wiggins, Mark. Bo Holten and his Bach motets. in Glossa Music/MusiContact [database online]. Spain, 2007 [cited September 20 2009]. Available from http://www.glossamusic.com/glossa/context.aspx?Id=25.

———. Flemish Radio Choir: A portrait. in Glossa Music/MusiContact [database online]. Spain, 2006 [cited September 20 2009]. Available from http://www.glossamusic.com/glossa/context.aspx?Id=30.

Woolfe, Peter G. A tribute to Vic Nees. [cited December 12 2006]. Available from http://www.musicalpointers.co.uk/reviews/cddvd/Vic_Nees.htm.

Appendix 1: Interview Questions for Vic Nees

(These questions were sent to Vic Nees prior to my arrival and were meant to assist him in preparation for the interviews. While the resulting interviews were somewhat free-ranging in terms of subject matter and order, this list of questions was frequently consulted by Vic, to ensure that he had addressed all of the topics raised by the questions).

I. Background/History

A. How did (1) family, (2) society, and (3) culture of Belgium contribute to your background?

B. Who were the musicians that influenced you?

C. How has the church influenced your musical life? (As composer, conductor, teacher?)

D. How did your choral views develop? Through practical experience or through college courses, etc.?

E. Where was your collegiate training?

F. What kind of school did you attend? Conservatory? Liberal Arts? Education?

G. How were you attracted to conducting choral groups? Significant experiences?

H. What kind of choral groups have you conducted over the years?

I. How have the groups been meaningful to you?

J. How have these conducting experiences affected your composition process and style?

II. Creating a Work

A. How do you compose music? Particularly choral music?

B. How are your ideas for a work stimulated most effectively? (Time of day, political/social happenings, commissions?)

C. How do you evaluate your works?

D. What does one look for in evaluating any good choral work?

E. What is the role of the text in your choral music?

F. What kind of "insight" should a chorus gain from the music for effective understanding of the work?

G. What is your view of using unusual notation in choral music? Graphs, spoken parts, electronic sounds, etc.?

H. What was the impetus for the composition of *Trumpet Te Deum, Magnificat, Singet dem Herrn,* and most recently your *Requiem*?

I. Of your compositions, is there one that you feel is the most important? Why?

III. Choral Organization Concepts – Performance Practices

A. How do you choose your singers?

B. Is there an ideal choir size?

C. What do you look for in tone, color, balance, blend, personality, intonation?

D. How often do you rehearse?

E. What seating arrangements do you prefer?

F. Is the conductor the supreme authority or is the choir to be "democratic?"

G. What are the significant nonmusical factors that contribute to the organization and function of choirs? Your experiences?

H. What policies tend to maintain good morale and rehearsal attendance?

I. How often did your choirs perform?

J. Can a choir perform too much, too little?

K. Are there any particular demands on a choral organization in performing your literature? Is it predominantly intended for professional singers, collegiate singers, amateur singers?

IV. Rehearsal Techniques

A. What special problems need to be overcome in effectively performing your music; particularly with respect to the *Trumpet Te Deum, Magnificat, Singet dem Herrn*?

1. Problems for the conductor
2. Problems for the singer

   Include attacks, releases, dynamics, cadence points, clusters, pitches, rhythmic difficulties, etc.

B. How do you prepare for an effective choral rehearsal? How do you "prepare" the score?

C. Do you predetermine any special emphasis for your rehearsals?

D. Do you have an "order" for rehearsing? By key relationship? Tempo? Difficulty of piece?

E. How do you achieve good tone? Diction? Intonation? Vowel placement? Attention to consonants?

F. Are there/should there be differences between choral and instrumental conducting?

G. How do you as conductor help the chorus gain "insight" into the expressiveness of the music? Are there any methods that you find more effective than others? Comment with respect to your own works.

V. Choral Philosophy as Related to Music Education Today

A. What is the nature and purpose of music? In particular choral music?

B. Do you belong to a particular "school" of thought?

C. How does your philosophy generate ideas for compositions?

D. How does your philosophy aid in searching out effective choral literature to be performed?

E. What do you believe about an "aesthetic experience?" Choral performance and aesthetic education?

F. What should be stressed at the University level in teaching future conductors?

G. What should be the basis for a good general music education in schools — elementary to college?

H. What should be the emphasis on special music education in the schools?

I. What are specific strengths in choral singing today — all levels?

J. What weaknesses do you see?

K. How can music play a larger role in school and society?

L. How are our efforts as musicians of value to society?

VI. Choral Music of the Future

A. What kinds of techniques in composition will we see?

B. Do you foresee any directions of change in your writing?

C. What do you believe about electronic sounds? Computer generated sounds?

D. What will happen to stylistic trends? Performance practice?

E. What kinds of instructional methods will be used in the rehearsal/performance setting?

Appendix 2: Interview 1 Monday May 12, 2008

These transcripts of the interviews have been reproduced with permission by Vic Nees. As a form of road map for the transcripts, below is a list of protocols followed:

1. Anything enclosed in square brackets [ ] is my interjection for clarification and is not part of the audible recording
2. Anything enclosed in parentheses ( ) is truly a parenthetical clause spoken by Nees, as perceived from the audible recording
3. On occasion the reader will find this: "[indistinct]". This merely means that, given the background noise of the recording, I was unable to decipher the words spoken.
4. Sections of the transcript divided by a long line indicate different portions of a same day recording separated by a period of inactivity or casual conversation (e.g. meal times, rest periods, etc).
5. Obviously, any footnotes found in the transcripts are my own additions. To the extent and ability of my research, I have tried to provide footnotes for any obscure references in the recordings of the interviews.

Dueck: I have some other questions about one of the pieces you gave me - this one, the *Gloria Patri*. I was trying to read your writing here. You said it had nine types of structures. Now minimalism I understand. What is this next one again?

Nees: Ah, phasing. Let's see if I can find it. Ah yes, here with the clap. [demonstrates] Let's say a very easy example: abc, abc, aBc aBc, abC abC. It's phasing - it's placing the syllables on different moments with in the beat.

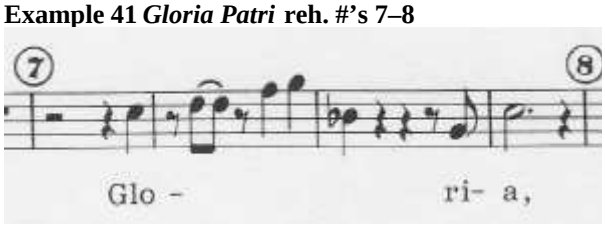
Dueck: Ah, yes. And the next one was ...

Nees: Hoquetus. It is a medieval technique.

Dueck: Where you stop the sound?

Nees: Yes. You can see there [demonstrates]. [Example 41]

Example 41 *Gloria Patri* reh. #'s 7–8



Dueck: And also in different voices then? Like Glo ----- ria?

Nees: Well, that is really syllablization - where the syllables are split up, often in different voices,

Dueck: Right. And what do we have next here?

Nees: Clusters, tone clusters.

Dueck: Yes. That's fine. And what is this next one?

Nees: Citation. To quote. I quote here the early Baroque music. Very simple, traditional style.

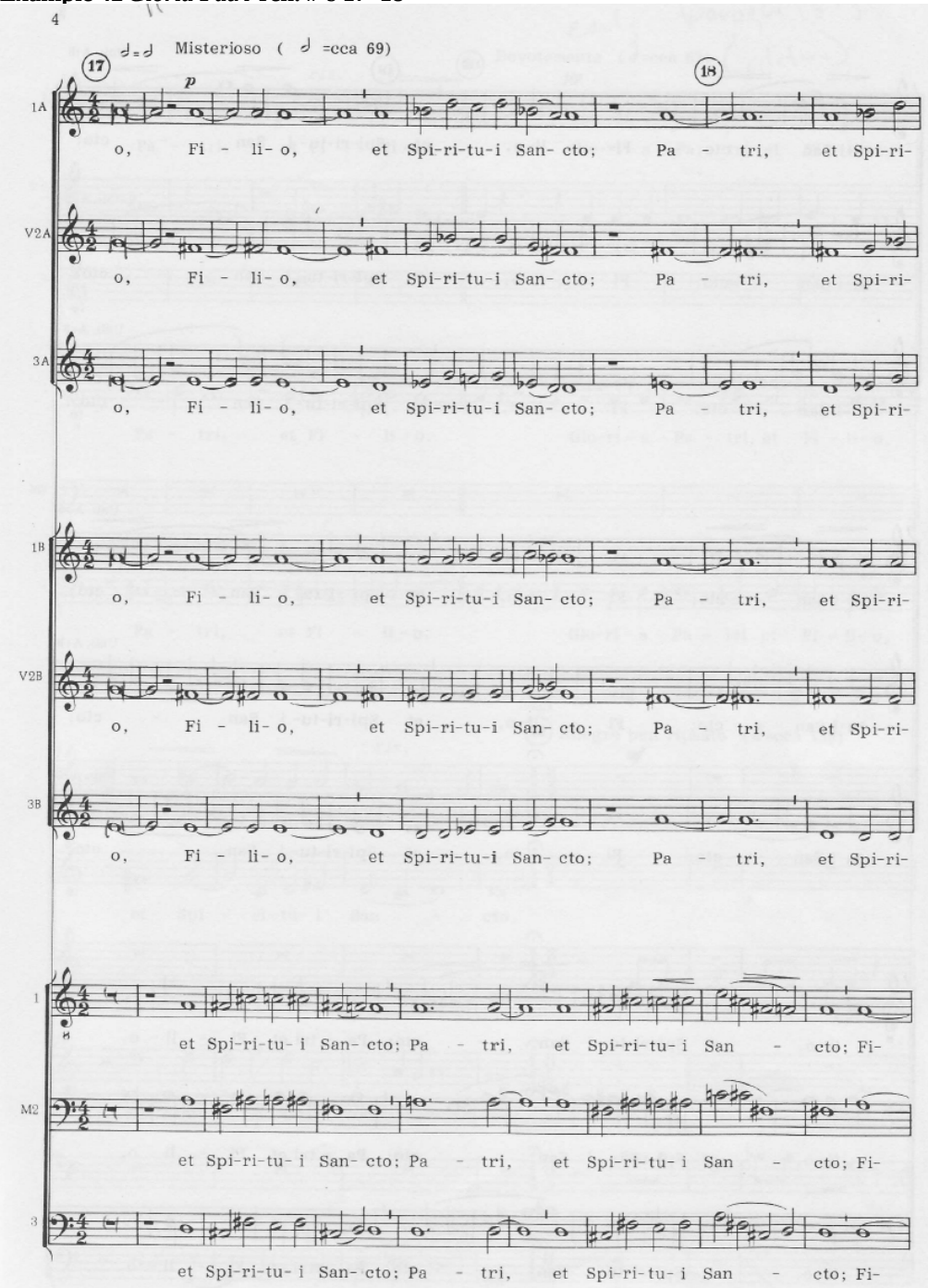
Dueck: Like cantus firmus?

Nees: No, no. Let's see. For example, when I write a modern piece, and use one Mozart quote.

Dueck: Ah!

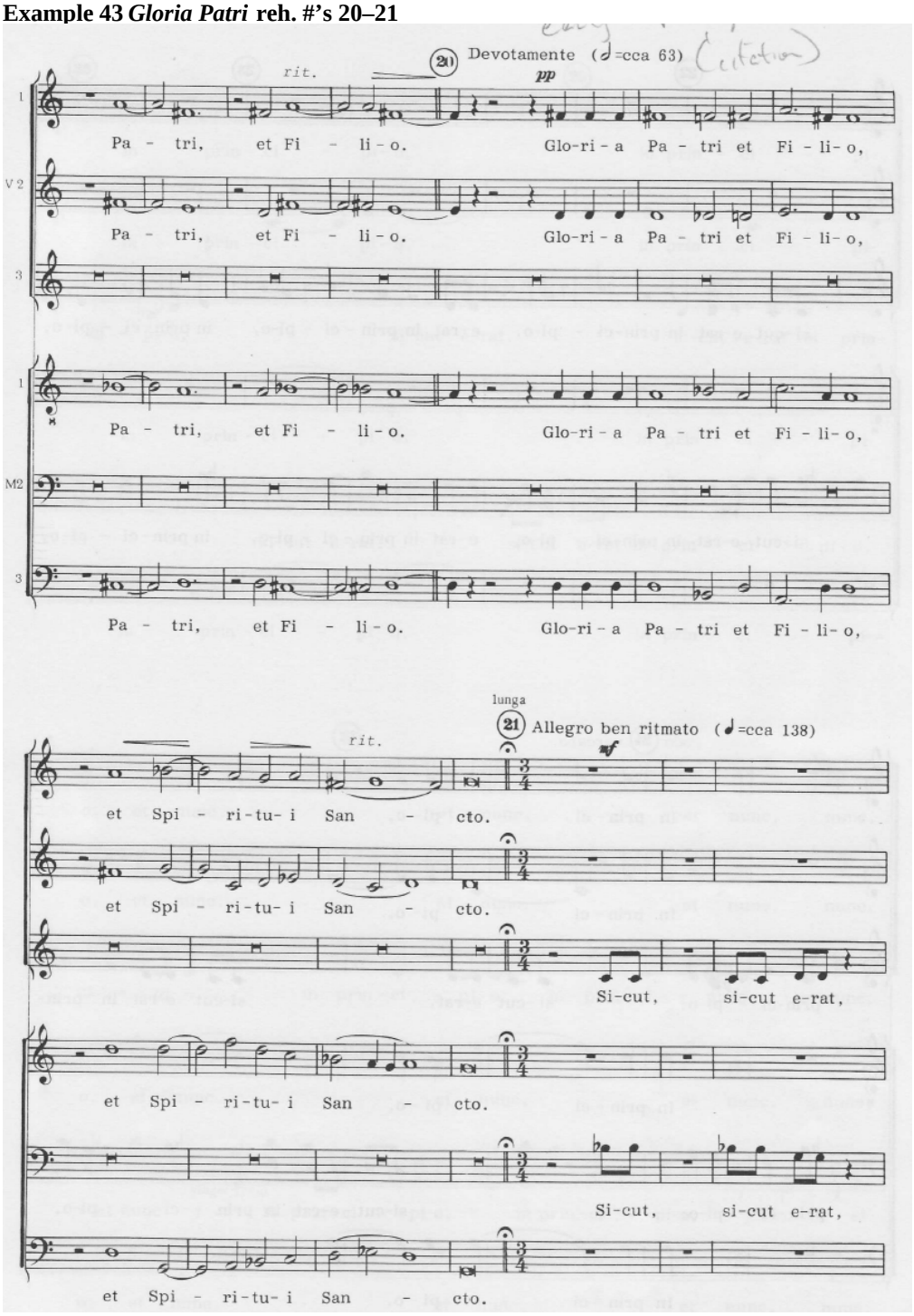
Nees: And you can have a literal quote from another work, but also just a stylistic quote. And here I am using stylistic quote. So here [circle 17-20] you find minimalism and so on. [Example 42]

Example 42 *Gloria Patri* reh. #'s 17–18



But here [circle 20] you find it could have been written in the Baroque period. So here [circle 17-20] I use many notes for few words, and here [circle 20-21] in 6 bars, all words - which is more like Schütz style. [Example 43]

Example 43 *Gloria Patri* reh. #'s 20–21



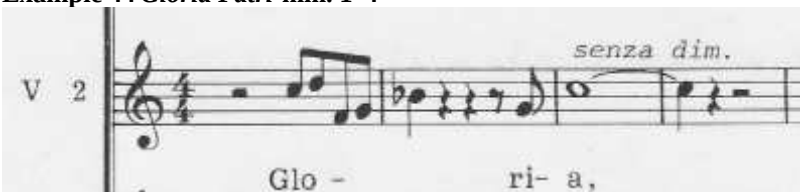
Dueck: I understand. And the next one?

Nees: Body sounds. Clapping, finger snapping.

Dueck: Right. And then?

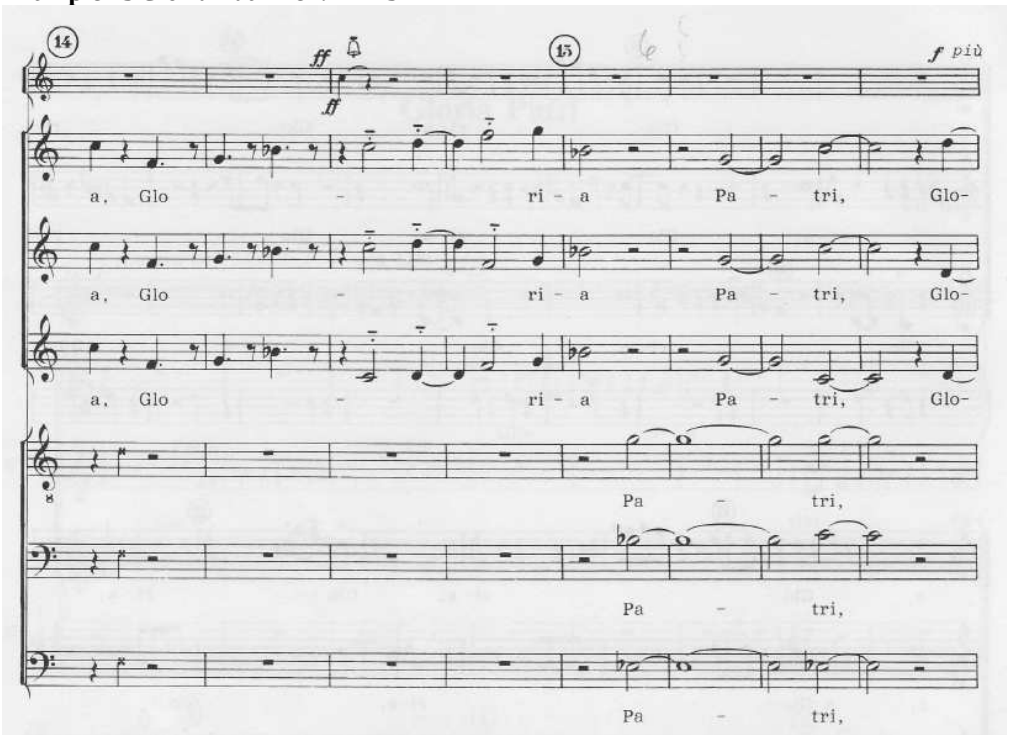
Nees: Serialism. Yes, but it is not completely serial. In that way, it is not dodecaphonic, but there is … you see, I use five notes. Gloria. [sings opening sequence, Example 44]

Example 44 *Gloria Patri* mm. 1–4



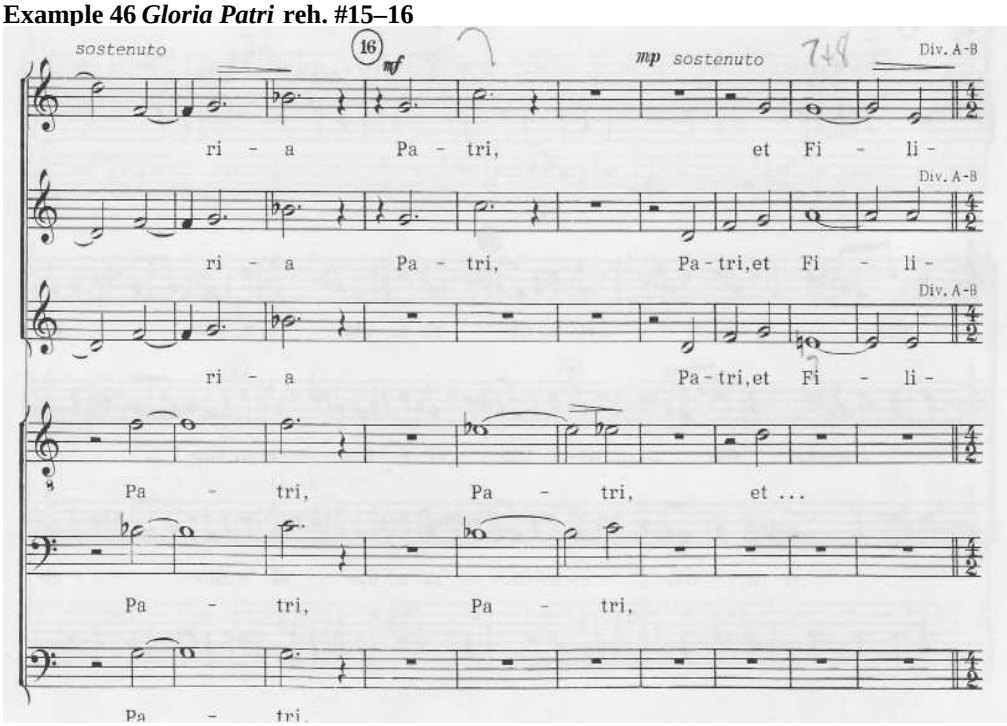
Then, next, six. [Example 45 at circle 15]

Example 45 *Gloria Patri* reh. 14–15



And then here [points to sixth measure of circle 16], seven. [Example 46]

Example 46 *Gloria Patri* reh. #15–16



But here [beginning at circle 17] all notes, except one. It's eleven tones.[38] [see Example 42]

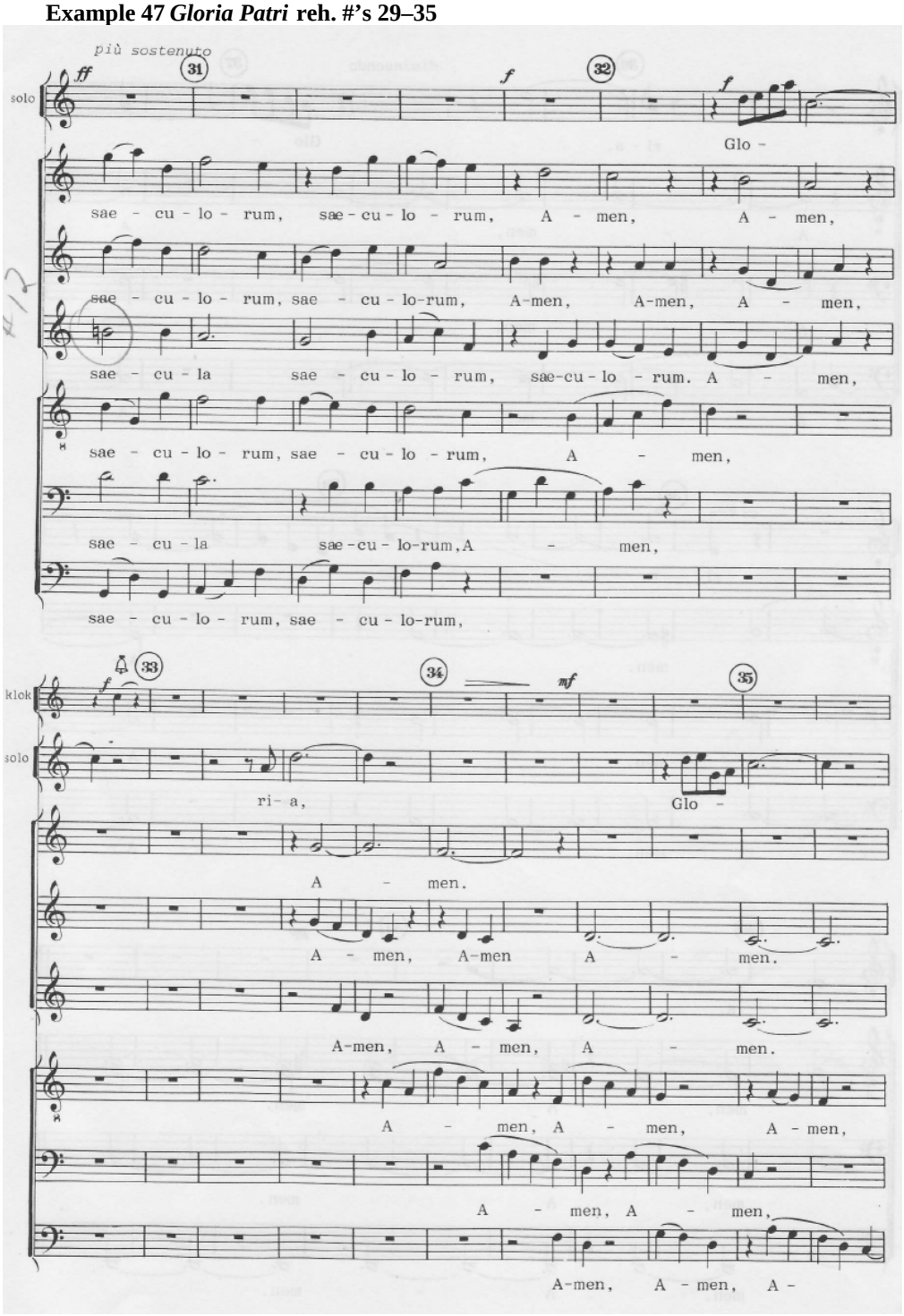
And the twelfth tone you find in … here. [B natural, 1st measure, Example 47]

Dueck: Okay. And this "Amen" section is visual music? [see Example 47, reh. # 32 and following]

Nees: Yes.

[38] In the published score there are in fact only ten tones. The G#/A*b* is missing and, in fact, is nowhere to be found in the entire piece. When I questioned Nees about this, he was quite surprised to find this note omitted. He maintained that it was always his intention to structure the piece in such a way as to include all eleven tones, saving the twelfth (B natural).to appear on the word "saeculorum." He suggested that sometime (25 years ago), during the revision and editing process, this G#/A*b* must have been inadvertently taken out of the score. However, this in no way diminishes the startling aural effect of the appearance of the B natural on the measure before circle 31. Similarly, the inclusion of only ten tones versus eleven in the previous section does not detract from the harmonically undefined vagueness of the "Spirit."

Example 47 ***Gloria Patri*** **reh. #'s 29–35**



Dueck: Okay. I found that. And I think the other ones I understood. The last one is visual - "augenmusik?"

Nees: Yes, yes, augenmusik.

Dueck: So, serialism, followed by "augenmusik." So we have … nine different structural forms in this piece.

Nees: Yes. It's more or less an introduction for amateur choir in modern composition.

Dueck: And was that why you wrote it? To show all these things?

Nees: Yes. And no. Every work of mine is a comment, vocally. I wrote the "Magnificat." It's only the Bible [text], not [including] the Gloria Patri, -not uh …

Dueck: The doxology?

Nees: Right, right the doxology. And then this Michael Scheck, conductor of this [Antwerp] Bach choir asked to write the doxology. And that is where it came from.

Dueck: Okay. But when you incorporated these specifically, was this as an educational tool?

Nees: Yes, because his choir is a Bach choir, and they are, more or less, doing Bach, and next to Bach … and not many modern music. Not Romantic, also. So it was for them to have a "bath" in other forms.

Dueck: Ah, yes. And would he then have instructed them saying, "This section here shows, etc. etc."

Nees: I don't know how he did it. I don't know. But I did it [conducted it] myself, many times because they [organizations where he conducted] asked for it. I did it in the states, also for Russia. Why? I think it is a nice piece.

Dueck: Oh, I think it is very effective, and I was just wondering about the impetus. Was it because the director asked for an instructional piece, or was it because you wanted to instruct them?

Nees: No, I wanted to instruct them. Because I know that they are more or less traditional in their way of working, I will give them something extra.

Dueck: It's fascinating. It's very good. Okay, when I was looking through some of this music last night, and I saw this note about the nine structural methods, I just wanted to review this with you to make sure that I was clear.

Nees: Yes, yes. So you see, the seriality is not completely there; it is starting only with five tones, then seven, then eleven and finally twelve.

Dueck: Yes and the twelfth is there just to conclude the loop, at that moment in the text?

Nees: Yes. And also something; a criticism of our time. In the beginning, only the female voices will sing the glory of God. Male voices are getting, at the maximum, only applause - yes? Ritual. But then, at "God the Father", very loud male voices - all in. And then, "Christ". You see, [gesturing to the opening two pages] the computer exactly takes after this. It has to be done computer [like], otherwise it doesn't work. The beat. [tapping]. The beat, yes? But here [at "Patri" circle 15] it's going more to freedom. The harmony is softer, and the beat is disappearing. And then you come to this part - 11 tone - "Spirit" [circle 17] - going where it wants. It's a theological piece, yes? And then - [referring to circle 20-21, citation style] - ah, yes, that's God. [ancient structural form]. And then [at circle 21] it's the beginning idea.

Dueck: "As it was in the beginning?

Nees: Yes. There is a little bit of the rhythm of the first, but with the melodic parts. And here [measure before circle 31 with entry of the twelfth tone on "saeculorum"] it is the maximum. And then, you see, female voices more or less disappear here, [beginning at circle 33] and continuing are only male voices, with one soprano. [Example 48]

The last word is for men. So it is representative of the time, the spirit of the time, and also theological text. Something more than music!

Dueck: When was this composed?

Nees: 1987

Dueck: Are the female voices the angels?

Nees: Ah - no, I see it more or less as our computer time, which is ... [demonstrates the precise rhythmic pattern and minimalistic melodic pattern of the opening section], very exact. There is brains in it but no heart in it, that part. It is only liturgy. They are forced to go to church and say words.

Dueck: And then this is "heart?" [circle 15, male voice entry on "Patri."]

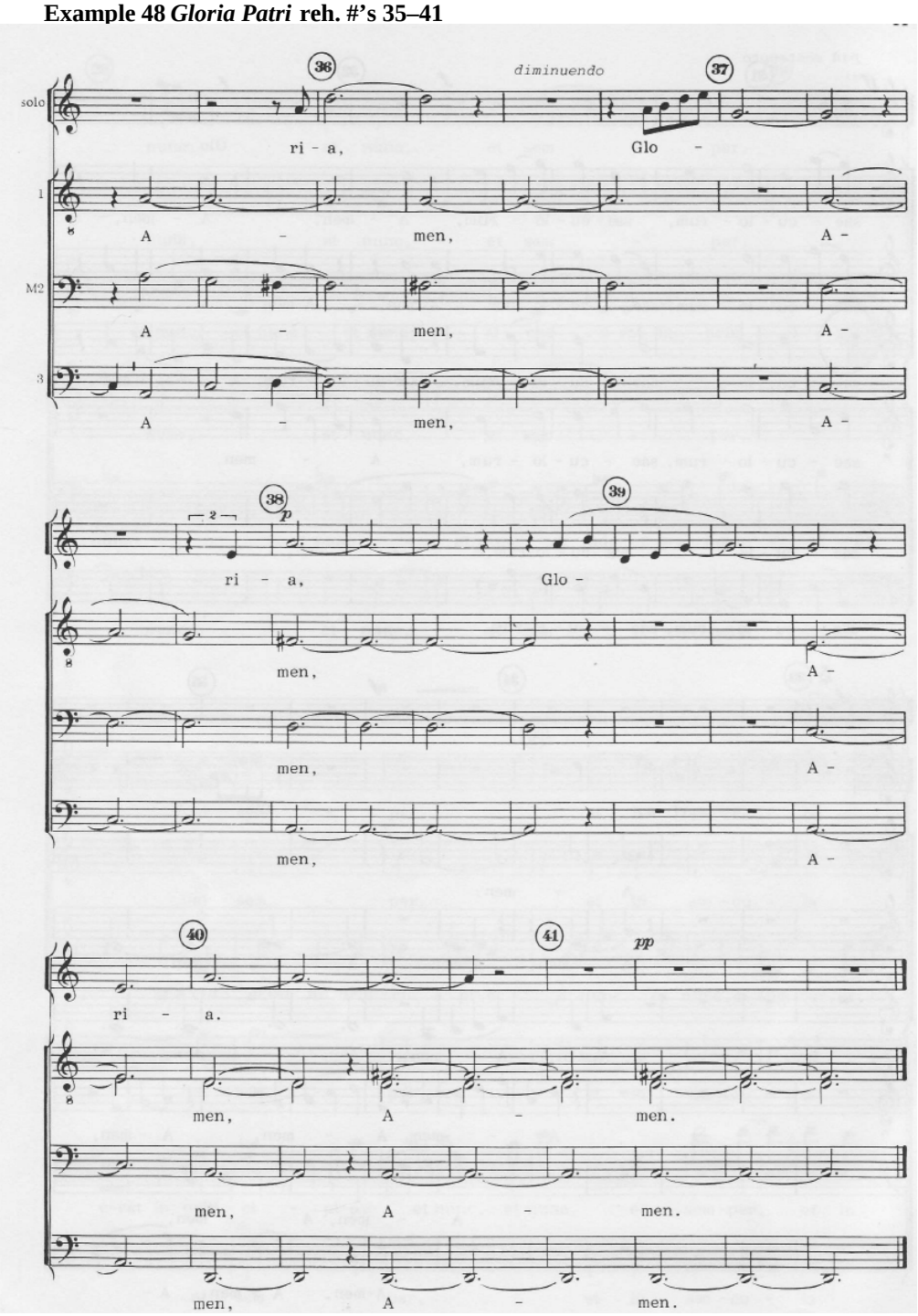
Nees: Well, "heart" is really coming here, [at "Filio] when Christ *Is*. Man, yes? Back here is still "Patri" - granite, monolithic.

Dueck: Very interesting. Okay, let's move on to this next work, *Neusser Messe.* Again, liturgical, with the "Gemeinde" singing along, as well, and specific to a church, almost.

Nees: Yes, yes. This is liturgical.

Dueck: Would this piece be done in other churches, say, in Belgium?

Example 48 ***Gloria Patri*** **reh. #'s 35–41**



Nees: It has been done in Belgium four or five times, but originally it is for Neuss which is in the neighborhood of Dusseldorf, where there is a Roman basilica, very nice, big. It was 800 years, I think, for it that it existed - the building.

And the town asked me to write the *Neusser Messe.*

Dueck: But, it is not specific for that town, is it? It would work for any Catholic church, because it has liturgical elements, but also non-liturgical in it. Is that correct?

Nees: Well, not exactly. It is liturgy. You have the "Kyrie" litany (in Germany they have this). First the "Kyrie eleison," and then you have other words, "The Lord who was given to us, etc.," i.e. comments. It is a type of "Kyrie" which was also used in the medieval times—more prose. You know, the *Sequentia* [sequences], coming from there. And this one is a text by Hildegard von Bingen.[39]

Dueck: Are these texts specific to a certain time of the year?

Nees: Well the basilica is named after St. Quirinus of Neuss; he is the patron saint. And so there is the "Alleluia" and "Communion" of that Saint's day, which is April 30. Is it for a specific time of the year? Well not really. Yes it was for the festival of St. Quirinus day which was held on May 13, 2000, but you can use the "Kyrie," "Gloria," "Credo," "Sanctus," "Benedictus" any time. There is no "Agnus Dei" because the text of the Mass was made by the liturgist of Köln, the bishop.[40] He said that the "Agnus Dei" will eventually disappear from the Latin mass.

Dueck: Oh, really? Do you believe that?

---

[39] Hildegard von Bingen, (1098–1179), Christian mystic, German Benedictine abbess, author, counselor, linguist, naturalist, scientist, philosopher, physician, herbalist, poet, channeller, visionary, composer, and polymath

[40] Joachim Meisner (1933–).is a Cardinal priest and Archbishop of Cologne in the Roman Catholic Church.

Nees: I don't know.

Dueck: Yesterday's newly composed mass [in Brussels] used the "Agnus Dei."

Nees: Yes, yes. It does still exist in the official version of the mass, but it may fall into disuse. This bishop was saying that it is something that comes between Consecration and Communion which — well, you have "The Lord's Prayer," then a Peace moment, and then should come "Communio," not "Agnus Dei." So here in this Mass there is no "Agnus Dei," but rather the "Communio" and the "Alleluia," which are not normally in a Mass. And also, as this was sung in the church, and partly by the people [congregants], it is in the style of a Gregorian Mass. I also used the Gregorian incipits for the "Gloria" and the "Credo." Further, the "Gloria" and the "Sanctus" are for the people [for the community]. The "Credo" had to be not longer than four minutes. It is what the Germans call *Schnell-Credo*—very fast, the words go very fast. There is an incipit for liturgical use, but I started the sung "Credo" with the words, "Credo in unam, etc." as well, instead of starting with "Patrem omnipotentum." The reason? If this Mass is used elsewhere, there are some churches where there is no priest who can sing the incipits. And also for concerts; it is possible to program this work into concert settings rather than liturgical. The "Credo" from this Mass is also printed or published as a separate work, as it is the most popular part of the liturgy.

Dueck: And in Belgium, is the incipit still most often sung by the priest?

Nees: Yes, certainly here in Grimbergen, in Brussels, in the big churches in other cities, but there are churches where the priest cannot sing.

Dueck: Okay. Now I wanted to get back to this work *Singet dem Herrn.* Can you explain to me the reason, or rationale behind the rhythmic structure in this work, i.e. triple versus duple, etc.? Is it to give a sense of spontaneity—spontaneous outbursts of singing, almost non-metrical, everyone "praising" in their own time?

Nees: In this case I have to speak about Hugo Distler. My father, being a musician, he had early records—78 rpm—of Stravinsky's *Les Noces*, Stravinsky's [indistinct], Honegger, *Le roi David*, Hindemith, *Mathis der Maler*, and some Ravel, *L'enfant et les sortilege*, and I educated myself as a musician by listening to these choruses. So I was playing piano by age 5 or 6. My first composition was when I was 9, I think, 9, 10, 11, and my first works were, of course influenced by what I heard and played. But then I moved to serious music and wrote songs and piano pieces in the style of Poulenc and French composers. Normally students start with Mozart, Beethoven. I started with Stravinsky, and came later on, to Mozart and Beethoven. It was during the war, which was rather terrible with many, many bombardments. We did not go out, and I had permission from my father to follow in the score, and to play. So, *Les Noces*, *The Wedding*, is for four pianos, percussion, soloist, and chorus. Let's say, for choral conductor, it is the *Le sacre du printemps* for chorus conductors—the same difficulty. And I listened, maybe, 200 times - I don't know how many, but many, many times. It takes 20 minutes, the piece, and with 78 rpm records, you would have to turn the record over after four or five minutes. I listened to it so much that I knew it by heart, and visually also

the score. Since then I have had to recollect this music three times. The first time when I was forty-five or something for the radio [with the Flemish Radio Choir], and I did not have to study! The piece was in my blood, in my heart completely, and every change in meter, dynamics, etc was there. Of course, I still had to determine how to do it with the people [choristers], - how to teach it—that's another thing. But musically, it was there! It was amazing for me to realize this! Yes, of course, I start from the beginning [with score study] but then I saw that, "I know it!" I have now done this work three times, and the last time was with students of the Conservatory in Brussels. That is the only piece that you can ask me, "They are performing this tomorrow in Brussels. The conductor is ill. Can you come and conduct?" I can take it every time!! [laughing]

But, seriously, you see, this was my "foot," my foundation—Stravinsky, Honegger, Darius Milhaud was also there, and my first compositions when I was 16, (songs and such) were very influenced by the French school. I wrote in the style of Poulenc, etc. But then after I was a year at university … but I have to explain why.

My father was a musician, so it would seem normal for me to be a musician. However, my mother died when I was fourteen, and my father married a widow with three children. My own sister left the home, and I had to stay there because I was still in high school. As a father's son during puberty, it is a difficult period, and that situation was complicated. And so I decided after my Gymnasium, to go to university for literature. I did this for one year—it

was called Philosophy and Literature—it was history, philosophy, and so on. These courses were preparing students also as historians, for language, and for law,—the same courses. You see, first I wanted to do other things than my own father did. And then, well yes, I realized I had too much musical talent not to use it, and so finally I went into the Antwerp Conservatoire. In the Conservatoire, I met Marcel Andries, who was the first professor of music pedagogy. He had studied in Germany and had brought from there, choral music. I thought Hugo Distler was for me really a source of ideas. It was rather traditional, harmonically, but rhythmically—the relation between prosody of text; meter and prosody and rhythmic music is so complex, you could compare it to Ockegham and Obrecht, (now, of course, we put bars in their music]. It is the same in Distler. So there I found the opportunity to join my early literary interest with music. Distler, this year would be one hundred, he was born in 1908. Yes, here [in the study of Distler] I felt a new world for me. Coming from a very Romantic tradition, we had a French influence which had Italian influence with some more operatic ways. Also the Flemish polyphony with dynamics and so on. I sang in the Boys Choir in the Cathedral in Mechelen with Monsignor [Jules] Van Nuffel[41] who was a really great musician, a very excellent choral composer, but he was doing this Philippe de Monte in a Verdian style! Yes, that was the tradition, the style at that time. Coming from there, I felt a new way of singing, which was northern German. And so, people of the church music tradition—I never stood in the line of

[41] Jules Van Nuffel (1883–1953), musicologist, composer, and renowned expert on religious music.

church musicians. I was in the Conservatoire of Antwerp, because my *father* was in the *Church* music, a teacher. And the people said of me, "You are the most Protestant of the Catholic composers!" Because my sound was really north German—it was new here, and anti-Romantic. So it was in the late 50's, early 60's, there you will find when you read about me, "He changed the choral style in Belgium from the Romantic period." It happened there and was influenced by Distler. Of course I left Distler after a few years—it's not definitive, but it was interesting for me.

Dueck: Were you accepted?

Nees: Yes, yes. There were young people. Yes I was accepted by the younger choirs, not the elderly. The Gregorian choir of yesterday [in Brussels], they would not have accepted me. [laughing]

Then the next influence for me—well in 1961 I began to work in the radio[42] as producer of choral and vocal music, and it was the moment when all the English choruses were on CD—not CD, but LP recordings. And it was new—Cambridge King's College, and so on—and I found new inspiration in Michael Tippett and others, Benjamin Britten, of course. Knowing already, since age ten or eleven, the French harmony system of Poulenc and Ravel, I had many influences, yes? I think that if there is something typically Flemish, or Belgian rather, (not now Flemish), it's that there is now our *own* culture; (our folksongs, for instance, are the same as in north, or as in Denmark, there is no difference musically). But we are on the frontier of two main cultural

[42] Belgian Radio and Television

entities; and we know both. The German knows his own tradition; the French his own. The French—well their lineality, for instance. In Poulenc it's two bars, yes? Nice harmony, people like to sing it, but two bars, every two bars. And harmony, yes, but how to sing this harmony? Many times it is not so interesting for the single voice. And the Germans have Pepping;[43] it's interesting, vocally gymnastic, but the sound overall poor. So we have a little bit of both; the lineality of the Germans, and the colours of the French, and *that* could be Flemish. [laughing]

Of course, Stravinsky and Bartok; I knew that music very well and had influences from them. But since I was writing mostly vocal music, these influences are not so strong in the vocal music. However, an influence that I had was the Polish music of the generation of Penderecki.[44] My *Magnificat*, for instance, was made in 1980, I think, and it was a period when I had this new music from Polish composers; Górecki,[45] Penderecki, Twardowski[46] (an interesting choral composer). So I found new ideas, and more or less, a new feeling for tonality. And then, approximately 5 years later, so, in the middle of the 80's, came the minimalism of the Americans—La Monte Young [1935], Philip Glass [1937], that generation, who are of my age, most of them. Actually it was earlier, because I was conductor [of the Belgian Radio Chorus] in 1970, and it was in the 60's that the first recordings arrived of

---

[43] Ernst Pepping (1901-1981), German composer.
[44] Krzysztof Penderecki (1933–), Polish composer and conductor.
[45] Henryk Górecki (1933–), Polish composer.
[46] Romuald Twardowski (June 1930), Polish composer.
[47] André Laporte (1931–), Belgian composer.
[48] Iannis Xenakis (1922–2001), Greek composer, music theorist and architect.

Young's. I was in the same local bureau [Belgian Radio and Television] as Andre Laporte,[47] a very good composer, when this first recording came. And we listened to it, and we loved it—everything. It was for us … we didn't understand; and he [Laporte] does not … he was Viennese [school] … he was thrilled. But after a few years I understood what they were doing. It's not so simple, not so easy what they are writing. It seems very simple, but it's not, rhythmically. You need a strong technique.

The complexity of music, (you were talking previously about Xenakis,[48] etc), had become so great, that there was between composers and the larger society, or even their audience, no more connection, not at all. So I think there is something wrong with that way of composing; it's for specialists, it's for insiders, they compose for a club of composers. They make scores as long, and complex, and signs and so on … we have to study the legend to the score before you can understand it. And then as adjudicators the jurors have sometimes difficulty to imagine how it sounds! You see a lot of signs, but, yes… if it sounds good it depends on the conductor, when he has handled it.

Dueck: Some pieces do work that way (with out a score in front of you), but they usually need program notes. For example, Murray Schafer[49] and his work on Hiroshima, *Threnody*—if you have the program notes you can start to visualize. Xenakis' *Nuits*; if you understand a little bit of the background of what he went through there, then you can start to image that in the music. But if it was just played for you and you had no notes …. I have difficulty with

[49] Raymond Murray Schafer, (1933), Canadian composer, writer, music educator and environmentalist.

some of that. It is for an elite audience, for an academic audience.

Nees: Yes, it is for an elite audience. And you need that kind of composers. They are working at the future; above it. But you need also … ah ... Britten is still an interesting composer. Those people said, "Oh, Britten, that's old stuff." That is not true; Britten is an interesting composer.

But the influence of the minimal music was … it was a medicine for that [complexity]. How to be simple and comprehensive for everybody. And you see, they had a lot of influence in the live music, and pop music, in the film industry. They had much more influence than the Viennese school in the general [society].

Dueck: Is it commercially driven?

Nees: No, I think, because it is easy to understand.

Dueck: So, being slightly cynical, do they want to sell their music? Is that the motivation?

Nees: I'm sure they did it, but I think that others… you have the adapt[ation] of them. As in England, Michael Nyman,[50] for instance. He was the copyist of Philip Glass, and then … it's second-hand Glass. He was popular because of the films of Peter Greenaway,[51] and every film of Greenaway had success, and the score was Nyman. So you can come to … you have some methods of a man, now in his sixties who plays very simple tunes, and he stayed popular in Japan and Spain. But it's, ah … you know, every style has it's …

Dueck: Commercial aspect?

---

[50] Michael Nyman (1941–), English composer of minimalist music, pianist, librettist and musicologist.
[51] Peter Greenaway (1942–), Welsh film director.

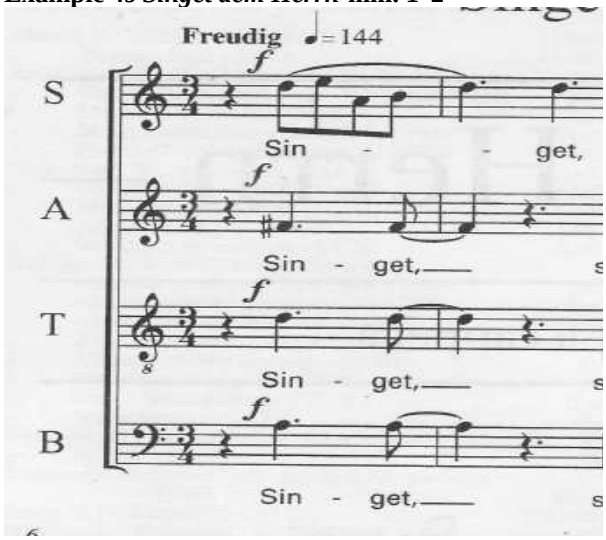
Nees: Yes, yes.

Dueck: Yes, I understand.

Nees: But for me, for instance, a piece like *Gloria Patri* would not exist without the minimal idea.

And here, [opening *Singet dem Herrn*] it's coming back to Distler. It's a greeting to Distler. The prosody of the word "Singet," it's not just [demonstrates two note "Singet" of lower 3 voices], but [demonstrates the melismatic "Singet" of sopranos]. It's not all one way or other, but somewhere in between. And combined together it gives … ah … phasing. [Example 49]

Example 49 *Singet dem Herrn* mm. 1–2

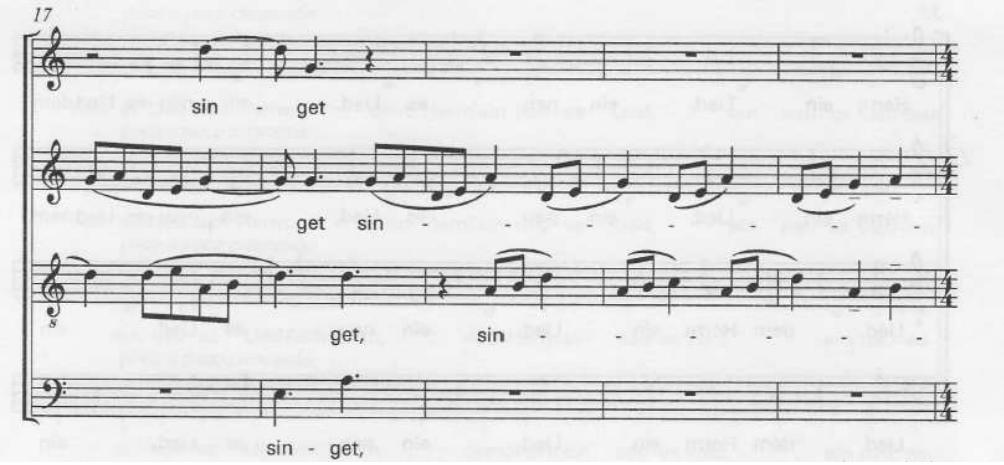


Dueck: Yes, I understand.

Nees: *Singet*; this was written for a chorus of Hamburg/Munich, *I Vocalisti*, Hans-Joachim Lustig [conductor], (it is written in the comment), because he would make a CD with this motet, *Singet dem Herrn*, by modern composers, Mishkinis … I don't know … maybe five composers who were asked to write [Thomas Hofmann, Vic Nees, Vytautas Miskinis,[52] Aleksandar S. Vujic[53]]. And it was therefore, only in the CD, it never came out. But there exist four or five compositions on this text.

And this is also phasing. [Example 50]

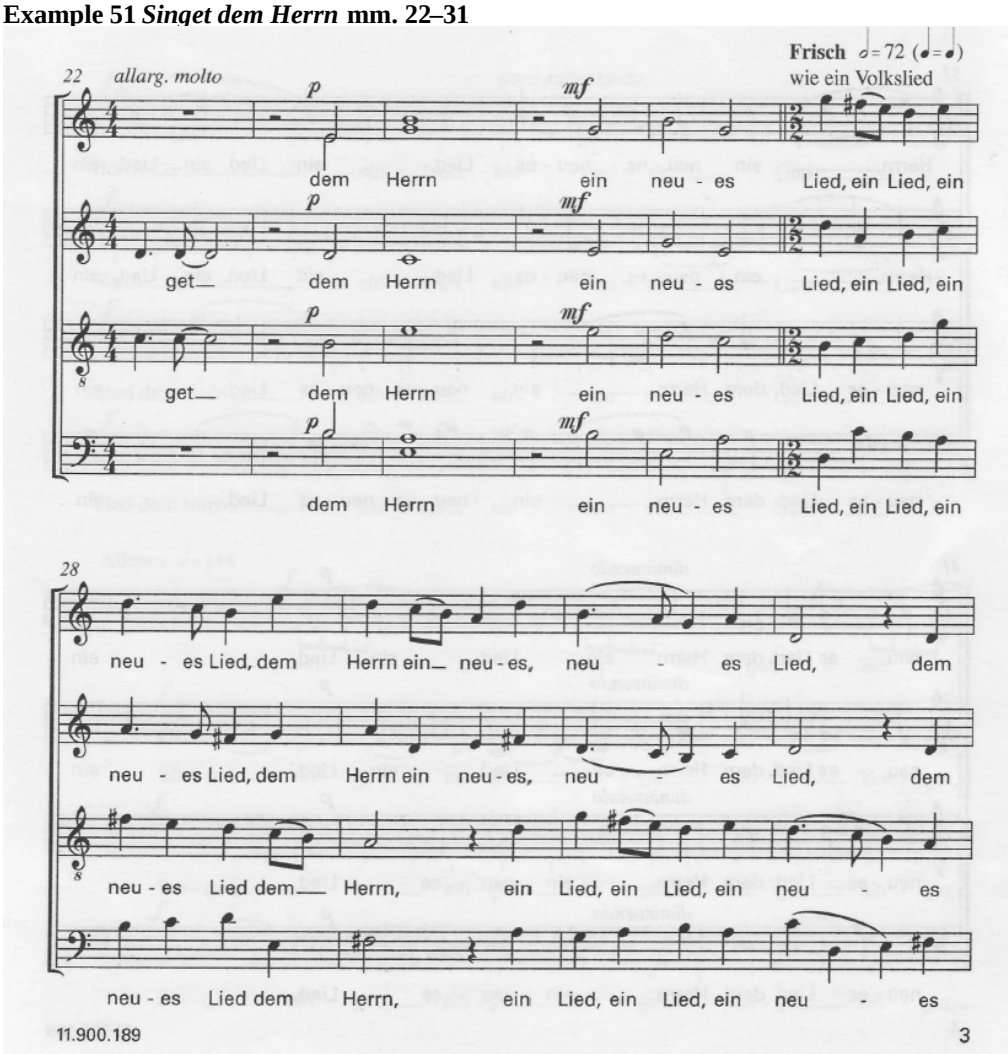
Example 50 *Singet dem Herrn* mm. 17–21



And then … this [mm. 27 on] is folk … "wie ein Volkslied." [Example 51] Now I write like that; twenty years ago I wouldn't risk it, no. It was too simple.

[52] Vytautas Miskinis (1954–), Lithuanian composer and music professor.
[53] Aleksandar S Vujic (1945–), Serbian composer.

Example 51 ***Singet dem Herrn*** **mm. 22–31**



Dueck: You would have been criticized then?

Nees: Yes, yes. But no more, now.

Dueck: And why? Have they accepted this, or have they accepted you?

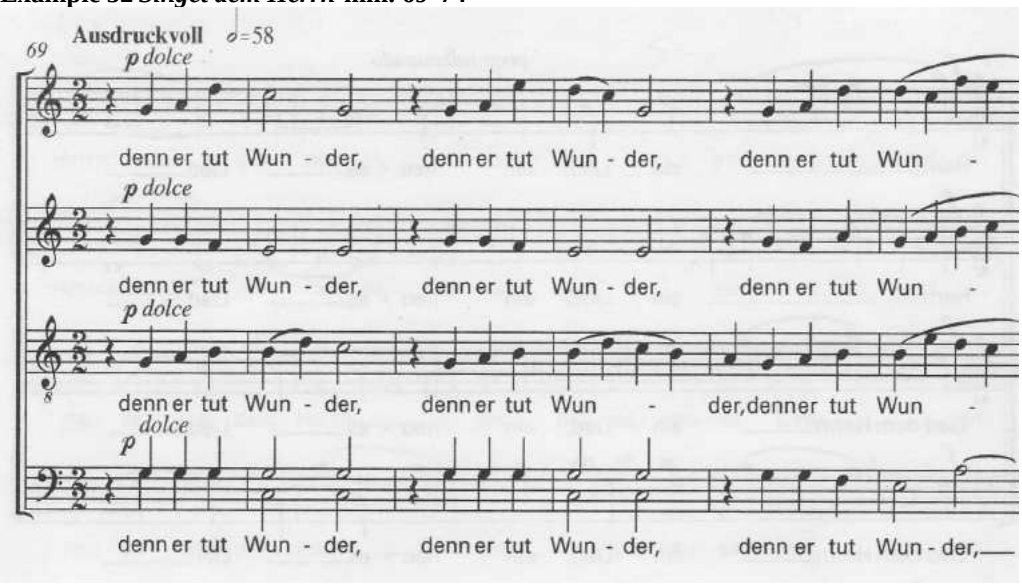
Nees: No. The Post-modernism, you know. Everything is possible now. They accept now, even composers who write in the 16th century style. We have one who writes motets, for instance, even that. Everything is now possible; extreme modernity, and simplicity—everything, and that is the philosophical way of

life. You see it also in society.

Dueck: Accept everything?

Nees: Yes … which is dangerous … nothing that can't be done. But here it is a simple folksong, and rather Romantic. And here [m. 57] is like the beginning. And there [mm. 69 on] I come very close to the light music sound. [Example 52]

Example 52 ***Singet dem Herrn*** **mm. 69–74**



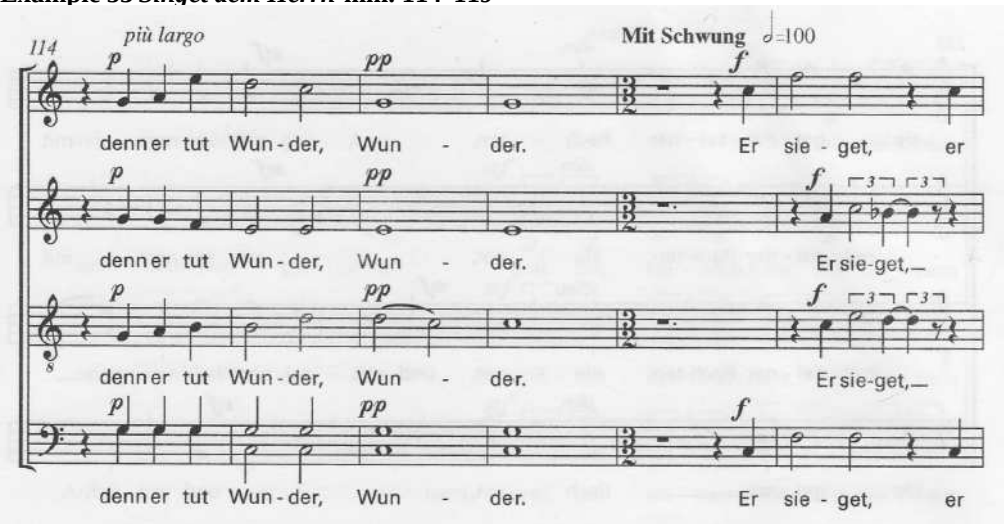
You know, there is tendency also in the church to use "pop" music, and, yes, people like it, and the priests also, because it brings people in. So here … "wunder" … clouds … "wunder."

Dueck: So coming back to the use of pop music. This seems to be an example of how you can use modern stylistic elements, but still create a work of art.

Nees: Yes, yes. It is not pop music, just the sound is.

Dueck: It's an art form that is appealing. "Mit Schwung?" [pointing to tempo marking m. 118]. Swing? [Example 53]

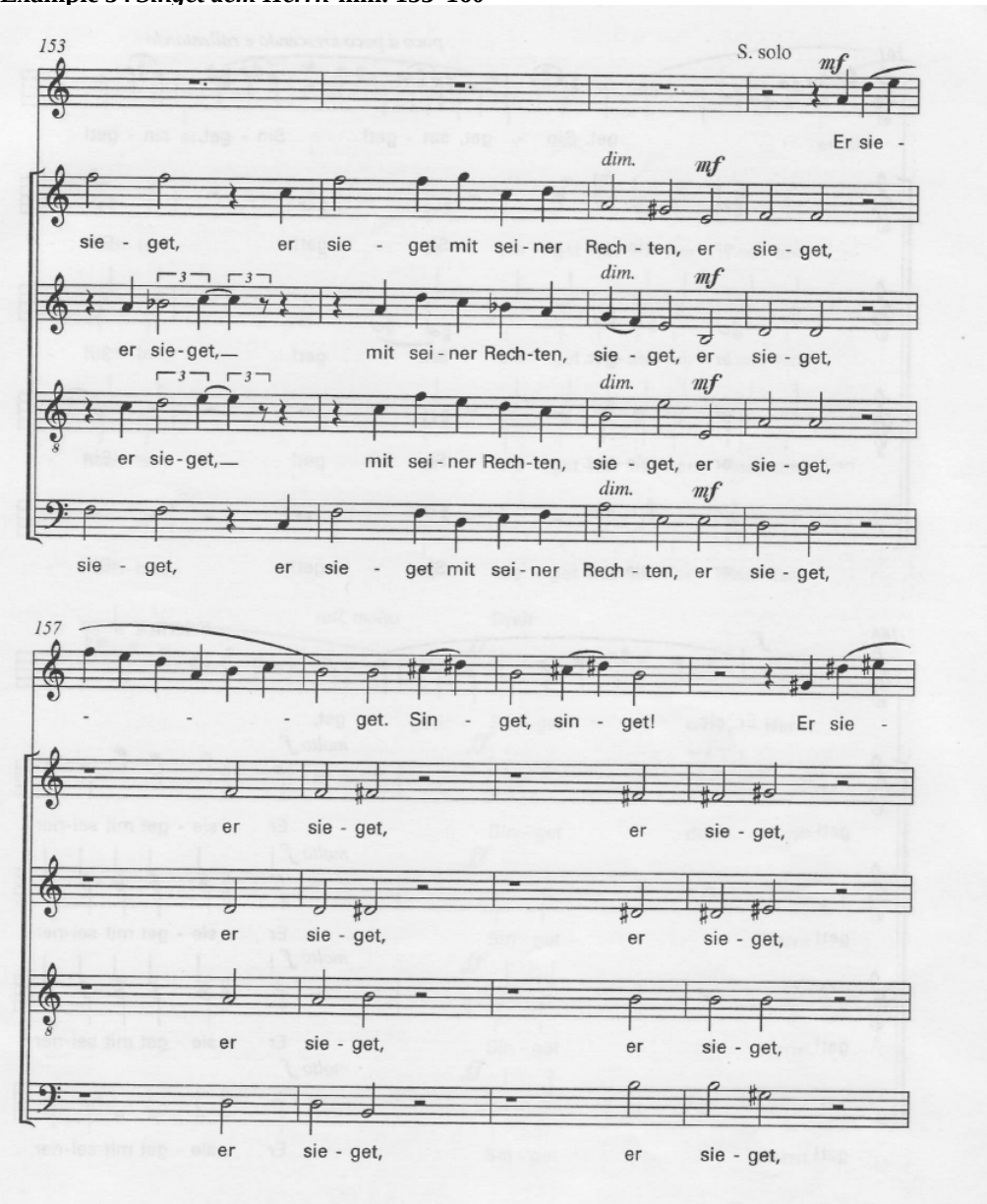
Example 53 ***Singet dem Herrn*** **mm. 114–119**



Nees: Yes, yes. See, I have always the feeling, coming from a Romantic father, (in his musical style … and he was not the only one. His generation wrote Romantic music), that his music was most of the time, slow. Some solemnity. And why should religious music be slow? I don't understand. I think when David danced before the Ark, it was a "dance." It was very simple in the Baroque and Classical. Mozart … "Gloria" … tempo, yes? Bach has *allegro Singet*, yes? And now in the Romantic period is all "Panis angelicum" … is very soft and sweet. So I try always in a work to have at least one quick movement where they can [gestures a dance]. And I think it is also religious. Why shouldn't it be? It can! And so in this work, that is the slow [gestures to mm. 69–117 "denn er tut Wunder" section), and <u>that</u> [pointing to mm. 118 on "er sieget" section] is the … foxtrot! [laughing]

Here [mm. 136–147] a little bit of my German tradition. [Example 54] It refers also, a little bit to Distler. And then at the end [mm. 156 on] I think I will show … [Example 54]

Example 54 ***Singet dem Herrn*** **mm. 153–160**



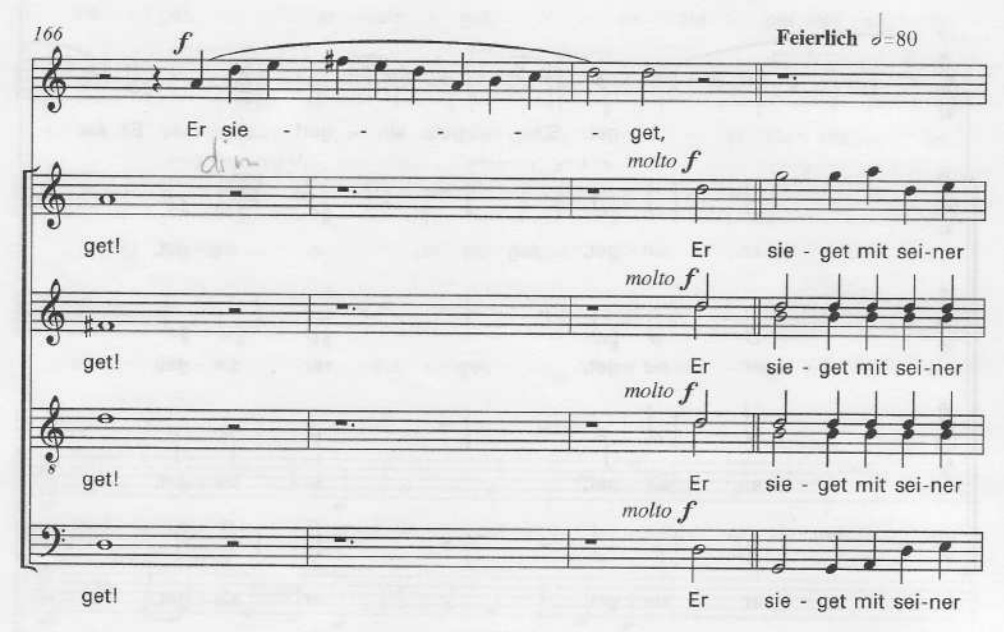
I was always afraid of lyricism because of my father still, and his generation, but I have this quality in me. I can do it. I could do it, also, twenty years ago, but now I am old enough to do it. Ah, yes, seventies, hm? [laughing]

Dueck: It has to do with your stature as a composer? You are now confident?

Nees: Yes [laughing]. So it [this section] could be Puccini. Also with the octave

[demonstrates mm. 168 on] between bass and soprano. [Example 55] You find it in … Puccini used it many times.

Example 55 *Singet dem Herrn* mm. 166–169



Dueck: And your choice of soprano solo? Is that your favourite voice?

Nees: Ah … no, no. I don't think so.

Dueck: You also use it in *Trumpet Te Deum*?

Nees: Yes, *Te Deum* also. [The soprano voice is] more of a spectacle of course. The *Requiem* is now for soprano and tenor solo, but the piece we heard yesterday [*Anima Christe*] was for tenor and baritone. No it depends on the situation. In *Singet* it gives you possibilities to be … as you use the flute, or a first violin. It's practical. And I think for most of the men, [laughing] it's interesting when the soloist before the chorus be the female, better than the male, visually. It depends. But it's nice when she steps out of the first row of the chorus—for a man he has to come from the back.

Dueck: Logistically, the soloist should step out of the chorus?

Nees: Yes, it is to be sung by a soprano of the chorus.

Dueck: And many similar lyrical lines to the *Te Deum*, I noticed. Soaring lines. Now, your reason for "sieget" and "singet" at the end together?

Nees: Yes, I put it there together. Also, "singet" and "sieget"—there is a little bit of assonance. But there is a big distance between the two words [in meaning].

Dueck: Yes. They also both start with "s". Is there significance to that? For example in Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, in "Siehe, der Hüter Israels" there are the two words "schläft" and "schlummert", both starting with the "sh" sound. And throughout the movement the interjections of these two words at different times by different voices presents a "shh, shh, shh, shh" effect … like lulling to sleep.

Nees: Ah, yes! Hmm, very interesting, I had never thought of that …

Dueck: And I thought in this piece, "sieget," "singet"… But, you are the composer. You know what you write.

Nees: Well, in this case, it is in the last "sieget" section, and then I refer to the first word "singet." The first and last word together.

Dueck: For form?

Nees: Yes, and it is a nice coincidence that it is similar, but in that case, coincidence, you have to find them.

Dueck: And is it alright for conductors to find those coincidences?

Nees: Of course!

Dueck: This was a topic of discussion in one of my classes. For me as a conductor,

one of the greatest joys is to go into the music in search of those discoveries; to say, "Ah! I know what happened here. Here is something!" For example, "schläft" and "schlummert." Was it intentional by Mendelssohn to have that lulling effect? I'm not sure, but the "sch's" happen all the way through that movement, and combined with a generally falling tessitura …

Nees: Um, some things are so natural that you have not to find it; it's there, it's written. But if you take that as a rule, then you make every great conductor into a simple technician. Because when somebody conducts Mahler; it's Mr. X, or it's, let's say, George Szell. There is a difference. Why? The difference is coming from the maestro's intelligence, and he understands what is behind the notes of Mahler. It is not simply notes. And I think that when you are a simple executor of what is written, technically it can be OK, but I think the quality of great conductors is to find things in the score. If you find them, they are there!

Dueck: Yes. Referring to great choral conductors like Robert Shaw, Helmuth Rilling, Eric Ericson, for me one of the fascinating aspects of singing with them is not necessarily the performance; it is the rehearsal where they say, "Don't you understand? This is what is happening in the music. For example, here is the cello [in Mendelssohn's *Elijah*] leading Elijah out to the desert." And then one realizes; of course this is correct, this is how it must be played/sung. And to a large extent that is how I work with choirs; to give them insight into the music/text interrelationship as a way of informing performance.

Nees: Yes. So that's when the conductor has a culture, also a literary culture. But

you need that! And the best performances …. When I was a young composer I wrote five motets in Latin, and still today, one of these is the most performed pieces of mine. It was done by Felix de Nobel[54]. Felix de Nobel was the "Dieux" choral conductor of Holland, with the Nederlands Kamerkoor, [Netherlands Chamber Choir], but this was in the '70's. And he sung my first choral piece, *Psalm 23*, in Dutch. And it was written in the North German style, (at that time I was thinking like that), and I know Felix de Nobel was against Pepping, or at least didn't like Pepping. He was for the French composers. And he sung this *Psalm 23*. I didn't know what I heard! It was completely Romantic. But, it was very nice. When he did it, it was there. It was somewhere in the music, this possibility to make Romantic phrasing. It was not what I should have done, but is the composer always the best conductor of his work? I don't think so. Igor Stravinsky, for instance. There are many conductors who did much better than he did.

Of course this is the question [facing conductors]. But you need a general culture to do that. And you have to be also a little bit artist to find [this], because every *good* choral conductor has used fantasy. I mean, *Verbildung* ...

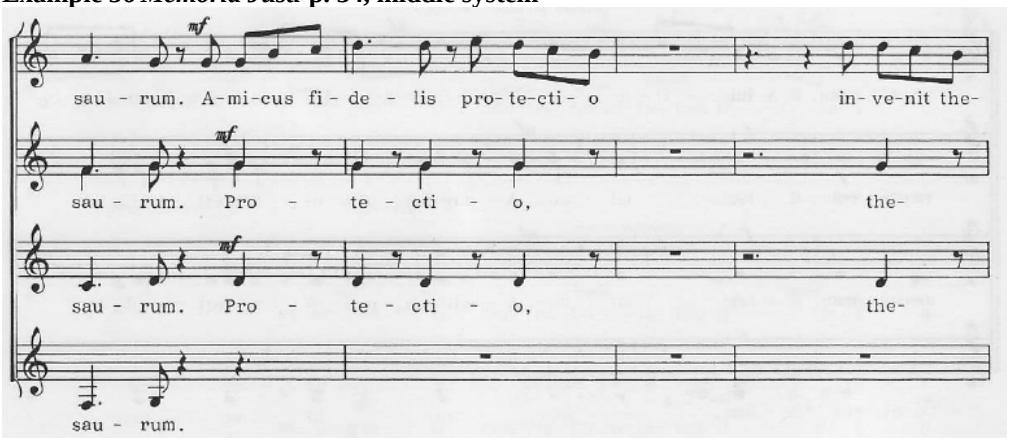
Dueck: Visualization?

Nees: Yes. Do you have [the score for] *Memoria Justi?* Yes, there it is. [Reads text from last movement] "Amicus fidelis protection fortis"—this is from the Bible … Ecclesiastes. "A true friend is a strong protection." Now here [demonstrates p. 34, middle system, soprano 1] … what is happening here?

[54] Felix de Nobel (1907– 1981), Dutch conductor and pianist

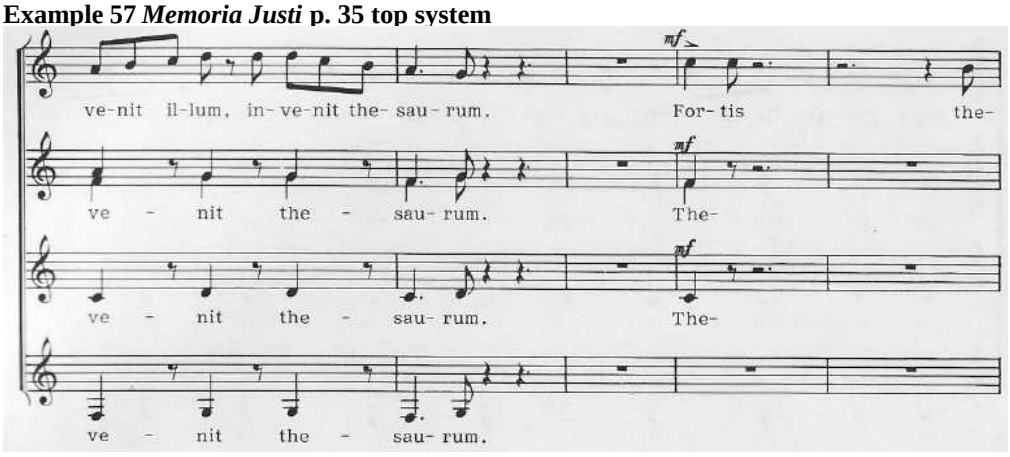
[Example 56]

Example 56 *Memoria Justi* p. 34, middle system



This was done in Lyon by an excellent French chorus, female chorus, and it was during the rehearsal, and the conductor, she asked me, "What is this?" It is a train, always going on, and then it is going in a tunnel, continuing at the same speed, and then it comes out and you hear it again. And <u>that</u> was the solution [for this conductor]. Disappearing here also [p. 35, top system] … "Fortis," with tunnel before, then some moment of light on "Fortis", followed by tunnel. In other words, two segments of tunnel. [Example 57]

Example 57 *Memoria Justi* p. 35 top system



Dueck: That was <u>you</u>? Or did she come up with this?

Nees: No, no, that was me. I did it because she did not find the solution. She didn't understand why it was there. [In these sections] you must go straight on, not wait. Things are going on, only you can't hear them for a moment. So, that kind of fantasy, or visual imagination, you need it. And also for professionals; that they are simple singers, as amateur singers. They are … When you work with them, they need that kind of visual, or emotional impulses to find the way. Otherwise, they don't know what it means, they don't know the culture of the Bible, and they need … For me it's very important to … the words, the meaning of the words, and the imagination about … Here [in these musical passages] it means, "In every situation, even if you don't see them" [pointing to the measures of rest].

Dueck: Of course. Although it is not there, the rhythm is underlying; it is the "protection" … the framework of "protection" is the rhythm, which keeps going on.

Nees: Yes! Yes! And this kind of thing; when you [are] forbidden to explain some things which you could find with your imagination … For example, [demonstrates this section again without the underlying rhythmic pulse], now nothing happens. But everything has to continue here [pointing to the measures of rest], and then (up in the mountain) returns the sound. Now you can't write all of this in the score [laughing], therefore, you need the fantasy of the choral conductor. And you can have different fantasies, with the same results. So in that case, I don't agree with the system that you can only do what the composer writes in.

Dueck: I had trouble with [this system] because it seems to make [music] sterile. After awhile it becomes just a technological exercise.

Nees: Yes, yes.

Dueck: So perhaps we can't say, "This is what the composer intended," but we can use our imagination to suggest intentions; at least to perform the music to get the desired effect. Especially choral music is text driven, and for any good composer the text is the driving force.

Nees: For me, yes. Not every composer. I know composers who use text only as a departing point to make music, but it is never good music. For me it is very important. You see sometimes programs of Schubert and Mendelssohn, but never Goethe, or other librettists—"oh, it's not important who wrote the text." I say it's 50 percent of importance.

Dueck: Another feature of many of your works is that they contain a portion where there is "spoken text."

Nees: Spoken chorus, yes. I have a lot of works with spoken chorus. I wrote also an article on spoken chorus a long time ago.

Oh, I just had another thought about conductor bringing something to the score. Think about the performances of Medieval, or Renaissance, or Baroque music 50 years ago, and now. What a change has been made! It's not the composers who changed; it's the conductors who changed. You couldn't explain it without the imagination and the historical knowledge of the conductors. Otherwise we would still have the performance of Ockeghem as it was in his time. But we <u>don't</u> have it. So it was done in many different ways

during so many centuries. And now we do it totally different from my teachers.

Dueck: Here's another example. For a while, beginning in the late 19th century, many conductors felt that they had the liberty to actually change scores. They would take out sections or actually rewrite scores: this was standard practice.

Nees: Yes, yes, of course. Or to make arrangements for piano; Wagner, for instance. Oh for me, when I was young, it was forbidden. It was the time of Donaueschingen and Darmstadt.[55] It was … well yes, composers like Stockhausen, etc. Now we are at a different time.

During the period of Darmstadt everything was forbidden. To write in the style of Stravinsky, for instance, was not done. It had to be serialism, and it was so strong by the young composers—they had to make their pilgrimage to Darmstadt and Donaueschingen. Which I did not! But in that time, it was also forbidden to play Tchaikovsky, and even Beethoven was suspect. And arrangements? Impossible! So when you see that Busoni[56] wrote so many arrangements of Bach, you were not allowed to play them. You could play Bach only on a cembalo, not on a piano. Everything was forbidden! And now, when you see that every week there is a new CD with arrangements; arrangements or paraphrases of Liszt or Wagner or Puccini—so many, many arrangements. It's popular again. So you see it's changing every year; from

[55] Darmstadt and Donaueschingen were considered the geographical centers of an aesthetic avant-garde and were the platforms for much contemporary music from 1945 until well into the '60s.

[56] Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924), Italian composer, pianist, editor, writer, piano and composition teacher, and conductor, noted for his editions and transcriptions of early composers, particularly Bach.

left to right, right to left. So when you speak about conductors [who took liberties], [Willem] Mengelberg,[57] when he did the St. Matthew Passion [recorded in 1939], the chorales were done so [demonstrates an extremely slow tempo]. That's something, isn't it?

Now we are in a period of historical precision. And we need that. But when this period is finished, we will once again take Bach as Mengelberg did it, and then after so many years later Bach as Rilling did it. Because the industry has to have new things to sell. So you have a first collection, and all the Bach pieces are sold. And then you have Rilling, and after that you have a new generation. There is a limit on the possibilities of playing Bach. So then we will take Bach as it was done in the 19th century, Bach as it was done in the 20th century, and so on.

Dueck: Oh, I see. As a form. To sell various interpretations, as a form of Bach. That's interesting.

Nees: Yes, [laughs] it is only my imagination, but there are not so many possibilities.

Dueck: So has "historical performance" almost come to an end, at this point? For example, we now have recordings of St. Matthew Passion with 12 singers, because historically it is assumed that Bach could only hire so many singers for his performance. Has this practice [of trying to recreate history] reached its peak, then?

Nees: I think so. There is already a tendency … younger conductors do it more free.

---

[57] Joseph Willem Mengelberg (1871–1951), Dutch conductor, famous for his performances of Mahler and Strauss with the Concertgebouw Orchestra.

I have the impression it's natural because ... historical is not authenticity. It is not the same thing. Authenticity is when you make music in an authentic way with your own insight and feeling.

Dueck: How about in terms of intonation? Bach at A440, or Bach A415?

Nees: Ah, yes. That will always be a problem. When you sing it lower, it is okay, because the parts are always rather high in modern pitch. But still, there are remarkable recordings in the modern pitch.

Dueck: Yes, there are, but there is a different tone color.

Nees: There is a different tone color, yes.

Dueck: And then once again we get to the question of intent. If Bach was writing at a time when A was 415, that was the tone color he was hearing. So if we perform it at 440, is that correct? Are we presenting the correct tone color?

Nees: Yes, I understand the question. But is it very important? The pitch may be important because the passages can be handled better lower … or worse, it depends!

Yes, we don't know what the future will bring. But still, I see that this generation, which was for historical correctness, is disappearing here.

Dueck: Well, I have noticed that as well. Particularly in some organ concerts I have attended recently, where the playing used to be very rigid, and now it is much freer, allowing for more interpretation, etc.

Nees: Yes. Well you know the organ tradition—it was legato playing in the 19th century. Flor Peeters,[58] who was my teacher of composition at Antwerp, - was

[58] Flor Peeters (1903–1986), Belgian composer and organist

a famous organist—always legato in the pedals. Now … no more legato; short chords. This is okay; it was okay in the past also for their time. Maybe it will come back, because the legato playing is something you can use for … *changement* … "in addition to." When you only play [demonstrates detached rhythm], or only play [demonstrates legato rhythm]; why not both?

Dueck: I see. So, four hour St. Matthew Passions may be coming back? Just because this is how somebody did it back then?

Nees: How they <u>think</u> they did it back then.

Dueck: Ah, yes that's right. And then of course the question is also … so maybe Bach did only have eight singers for his performance of the St. Matthew Passion. But is that what he wanted? Did he conceive it for a larger chorus?

Nees: Well, yes, when he had 80 singers he was maybe happier! So Mozart did Handel with 150 singers. Yes, who knows?

Dueck: When I was studying in Winnipeg in the early 1980's, we had Handel's *Messiah* with thousands, sung in a sports arena.

Nees: Yes, yes, yes. And Handel himself did it in London with many, many, many singers. I don't think it's … What is the quality of … For instance, Bach as Bach wrote it—as Bach himself did it. But Bach went to his church by foot, or with horse and coach, not by car. And he did not telephone. People are looking to avoid their own time, looking for a place in the past where they are sure, where they can say, "I am sure now." Most of the people are not happy in the time they live, and they look for protection in the past. Is this a desirable quality? I don't know. It is maybe only flight from reality; escape.

When you see our Gothic cathedrals, and you see the Baroque altars and Baroque paintings, and 19th century glass windows, you don't feel uneasy. That is the way it is. The Gothic building is thirteenth to fourteenth century, and then the Baroque altar is sixteenth to seventeenth century: for those people it was normal to put a Baroque altar on a Gothic building. And when you consider the glass paintings, they are nineteenth century—many cathedrals in Brussels, for instance. It's not Gothic. And that type of misalignment or juxtaposition of architecture was normal. *And yet we want to be pure only in our art form, not in all things!* We need our cars for our banking, and we fly in airplanes, but there [in our music] we have to be pure. And you see, together with that purity in music, there is that impurity in theatre. You see now historical Baroque violins and so on with Monteverdi productions and on the theatre you see [indistinct] and soldiers in Nazi uniforms! It's crazy. Why so pure for music, and yet for the drama, 20th and 21st century costuming: and this in the same production! Something is crazy!

Dueck: That's a great point. Perhaps the rationale from a musical perspective is that it is only through a very narrow historical focus are we able to understand what the composer heard, or what he "intended" to be heard. However, is that essential? Everything else in art can be mixed up; like you said, the cathedrals can have 16th and 19th century architecture. And so perhaps in music we can also have a very historical presentation aligned, or together with a modern interpretation.

Nees: But you see that the "historical" interpretation has changed already three

times! [laughs]

Dueck: Right! So what is “historical”?! Perhaps it is impossible. As you say, we drive our cars, we don’t have horses, we don’t walk, we have our telephone. Our environment will impact our historicity, or how we view history. It is important to understand where the composers came from, but perhaps it is impossible to recreate that atmosphere.

Nees: Yes, and I think it is also an escape, and that is not good for society; in art or other things. No I believe in tradition which is changing itself while it is going on. And what is happening now is tradition in opposition. “I don’t want to do it the same as my teachers.” It’s opposition.

Dueck: There is no line?

Nees: No. It was a line until 50 years ago, because even Schoenberg came from the Romantic. He was too far; he had to do something new, but it was a natural progression. And yes, even now in composition there is still a little dependence on your teacher: you reflect what you have been taught. The teacher is still important. But in performance it is different. I know Rilling, for instance, in Europe; [his popularity] it’s passed away. In America, he is still an important figure in performance, but here not so much anymore.

Dueck: There are the new conductors now. By some people he is seen to be old school.

Nees: Yes, but he ***was*** new. And [John Eliot] Gardiner, right?

Dueck Gardiner, yes. And now Paul McCreesh.

Nees: McCreesh, yes. But that is coming more from the television, I have a feeling.

And therefore I like it more. I'm not for … I'm looking for the name of the very well known conductor who was the first in Vienna to do all the Mozart and Bach. He's now doing the Carl Maria von Weber repertoire: this music is coming to the modern time. Also we have [indistinct] who is playing French music on the [indistinct], because French music *has* to be played on the [indistinct]. So now he's playing Ravel as Ravel would have heard it.

Dueck: Good? Bad?

Nees: [laughs] Not sure.

Dueck: Very interesting. On a slightly different topic. We were talking about tradition and how it is sometimes in opposition in different periods. Is this why the church has been so successful in the musical tradition; i.e. because the liturgy has been basically unchanging? I realize there is always new music surrounding the liturgy, but at least in the High churches, the liturgical tradition has remained fairly constant. Does the liturgy create a line through time, which makes this tradition successful, or successive?

Nees: I suppose it could be. But you said "successful"—I'm not sure. It could be. There is always a faction in the Catholic tradition that want to return to the old liturgy, - Latin. Since the second Vatican Council of 1962 very much has changed. Our church language; Flemish, and German, and French and so on. The new compositions, poems had to come quickly, whereas with Luther for example, there was a century to make new songs. And now in 1962, suddenly we have to have what the Protestants did during one, or even more than one century. And now in five years we were to have new songs,—it was crazy. A

lot of unimportant composers were used. It was not very good. But still now, 50 years later there are interesting things.

Dueck: But Latin is still maintained in the Ordinary portion of the Mass? At least in the High churches, correct?

Nees: Ah, yes, in the songs. But the other readings and so on are all in the vernacular.

Dueck: In North America, in many churches even the Ordinary of the Mass is in the vernacular. Is that as common here?

Nees: It can be here as well in some churches.

Dueck: Is it just in the High churches, the larger churches where Latin is predominant?

Nees: No, I don't think it is so much a case of the High churches, but more the situation. For special occasions, like Easter, it would always be Latin, but on a normal Sunday it would be in the vernacular. But here in the [Grimbergen] Abbey, every Sunday at 10:00 o'clock it is Latin—the songs. Gregorian chant. In the evening Mass, it is common language.

Dueck: Is there a movement to return to Latin?

Nees: You know, the Pope recently did a Mass in Latin with his back to the people, as it was before. I write a column in the bulletin of the choral federation, and the one that is to come out now is about the Pope who put his back to the people. And the conductors, what are they doing now? They have to turn also, because now they are before the priests which will be at the altar. And will they eventually go back to the organ?

Dueck: At the back of the church. Well, this is essentially my question. Is the move toward Latin similar to the move toward historicity in music?

Nees: No, no. The people who want historicism in music are people who think in the future; that may be upsetting. Those that think Latin in churches are the conservatives. They want to be sure and stay in the tradition as it was before. The council of 1962 was not good for everybody; there were bishops who were opposed to it. No, musically it is very difficult; it was better before. The music was better because in all of those new songs in the vernacular, many of them are not really good music, and not good words, too. We need time to come to new standard. No, I am against those conservative people who want Latin, and back to the system (in my youth), where the priest was there somewhere, and was speaking something, but you couldn't understand it. He was always there and you would see his back and that's all. So it is more natural; a priest facing the people: a community.

Dueck: You have already discussed many of the musical influences in your early years. I read an article about you that suggested that your music was influenced by [Heinrich] Schütz. The writer pulled *this* composer from "the list" as one of your significant influences.

Nees: Ah yes. Well previously I mentioned only the modern composers because I am a modern composer. I found Schütz through Distler. What Schütz was

doing … when you leave the melody in Schütz, and put the words on it, you have spoken chorus, which works polyphonic. And when there was something important, it was homophonic. So that is literally what I do. When you need to understand the words, homophonic; but then let the voices go. I saw a lot of Schütz, and conducted a lot of Schütz in my youth. Later on, no more, because the generation was historical, and now Schütz is … well, the way I did it was probably not good.[laughs]

Dueck: So it was his manner of setting the text that influenced you?

Nees: Yes, yes. And also the consequence of his work: he has some madrigals but everything is more or less religious. I think he was a genius; a great genius!

Dueck: A great genius! I love his music.

Nees: Yes. You could say that I found prosody in Distler, but he had it already from Schütz, and Schütz had it from Gabrieli, and Gabrieli had it from Lassus and [indistinct] then you come to Flanders, so I made the full circle. It was here already in Ockeghem and Obrecht and Josquin.

Dueck: Your beginning was your end. And for Lassus, it was also about transparency of text.

Nees: Well, you see a great composer of vocal music is always about text. Schubert is about text; Fauré is about text; Debussy is about text. It is so natural. Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* is about text. Berlioz is NOT about text. It is orchestral, and he doesn't know what to do with words. When you do the *Te Deum* by Berlioz; of course it is good music, but still … also Bruckner *Te Deum.*

Dueck: Oh?

Nees: Play it on the piano. There is nothing. They [the pieces] are living from orchestration, not from chorus, and the orchestration is strong. But what they do with text is not that good.

Dueck: What about Bruckner's motets?

Nees: That's better. Yes, that is good music. But still I prefer the north German Protestant motets.

Dueck: What about Bruckner's masses? Mass in E minor, for example. Textual, or orchestral?

Nees: I cannot decide without the score. Messiaen is not about text; *L'Ascension*, *La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ*; it's more in the Bruckner tradition. Blocks of music, and then [demonstrates by singing] birds and so on where there are no words there but the music in full orchestration is with the words, and the prosody is not especially interesting. Only one piece *Cinq rechants* for 12 solo voices; but he wrote the words himself!

Dueck: Ah!

Nees: So here he made interesting music and syllables. It is not an existing language, just syllables.

Dueck: I think I understand what you mean about the Bruckner *Te Deum.* It's more about color.

Nees: Color; and triumphalism of the church. I don't like that. It's a part of the Catholic church that I know, but it is not the most interesting part, and Bruckner modeled it. He was probably a very good person, but his music is

not mine.

Dueck: Well, while we are on this topic, at the university we just performed the William Walton *Te Deum*. It was part of our 100th year anniversary celebration for the university, and we had a large choir and big orchestra. Is that about text?

Nees: I don't know that *Te Deum* very well.

Dueck: Well, it is in English, so I suppose that is somewhat different.

Nees: I suppose it is probably good with the text. The parts that I know appear to be very good.

Dueck: Very interesting, this whole discussion about text.

Nees: Berlioz is really the one …. He wrote also some choral pieces: uninteresting. His *Te Deum* … I had to help in a performance in Holland. It's music for … I don't know for what kind of persons … athletes, maybe, but not for normal people.

Dueck: Athletes! (laughing) Which brings us to your *Te Deum.*

Nees: Yes, well it is NOT for athletes.

Dueck: It is not. In the light of some of these other *Te Deum*'s that we have been discussing I find yours very reflective, introspective, intimate.

Nees: When you think of the *Te Deum*, when you think of Bruckner, and the triumphalism of the Catholic church, I am against it. So my *Te Deum* will be … [gestures to himself]

Dueck: Personal?

Nees: Yes. When I see [sings the opening theme of Bruckner's *Te Deum*] … well,

that's not a king. Sure it's a King, but not a normal king, with military and force. No, you are full of that *Te Deum*, and then you sing, "Te Deum, Te Deum, Te Deum." It's not solemn; no, it's "Te Deum, Te Deum, Laudamus," and therefore I start with repetition. We should look at the score. [reviews first section of his *Trumpet Te Deum*]. You see, there is nothing military here. There is rhythmical play. And here - "Te Gloriosus."

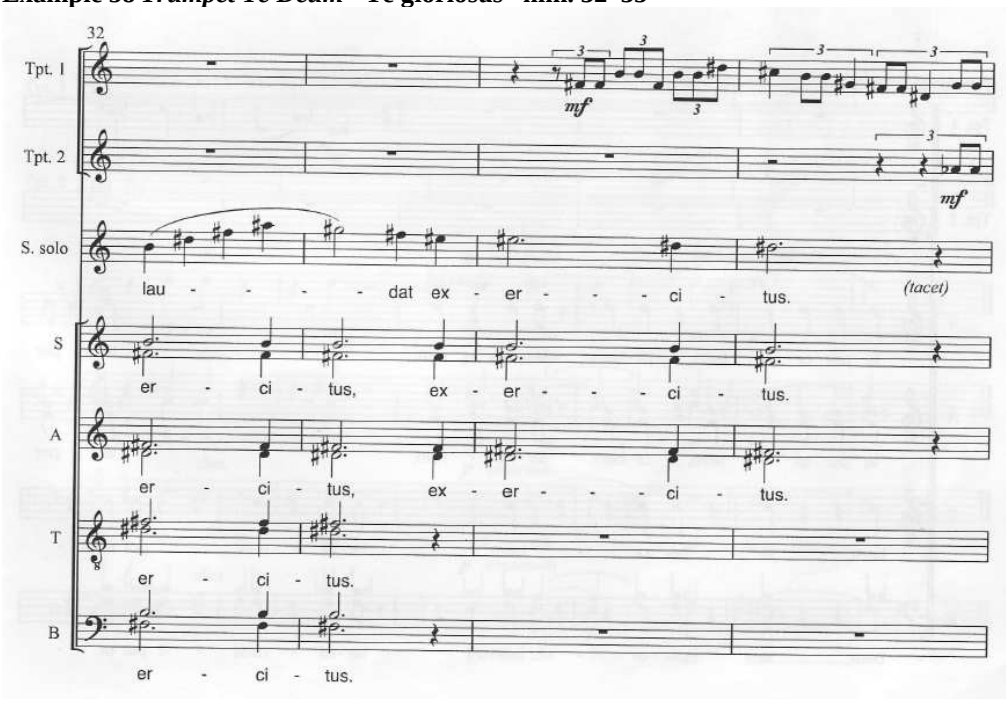
Dueck: The march of the saints?

Nees: Yes, but I see it … *da lontano.* Because the *Te Deum* is a theological piece and I don't see why the church uses it for Solemn Days. It is not especially for Solemn Days; it is for every day, "Te Deum laudamus," [we give thanks to you Lord]. And you see, first it is everybody from the ancient Testament and the New Testament, all the prophets and apostles are there. And you could say a march, or procession with, let's say an angel in the soprano solo above all. But here next—"martyrum." I think of these as the martyrs of the wars. You see monuments for so many thousands of people who perished in the wars. And on the churchyards they play [sings "Reveille] every year at the eleventh of November. And the trumpet part here [mm. 34 following] is meant to more or less reflect that. [Example 58]

Dueck: As an interjection, in front of the [Grimbergen] Abbey I noticed a statue of a mother with her child, and I could not understand the transcription.

Nees: Ah, that is to depict the general sufferings of the mothers for their children. My *European Stabat Mater* is like that; it is about the suffering of all those thousands and thousands of mothers.

Example 58 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Te gloriosus" mm. 32–35

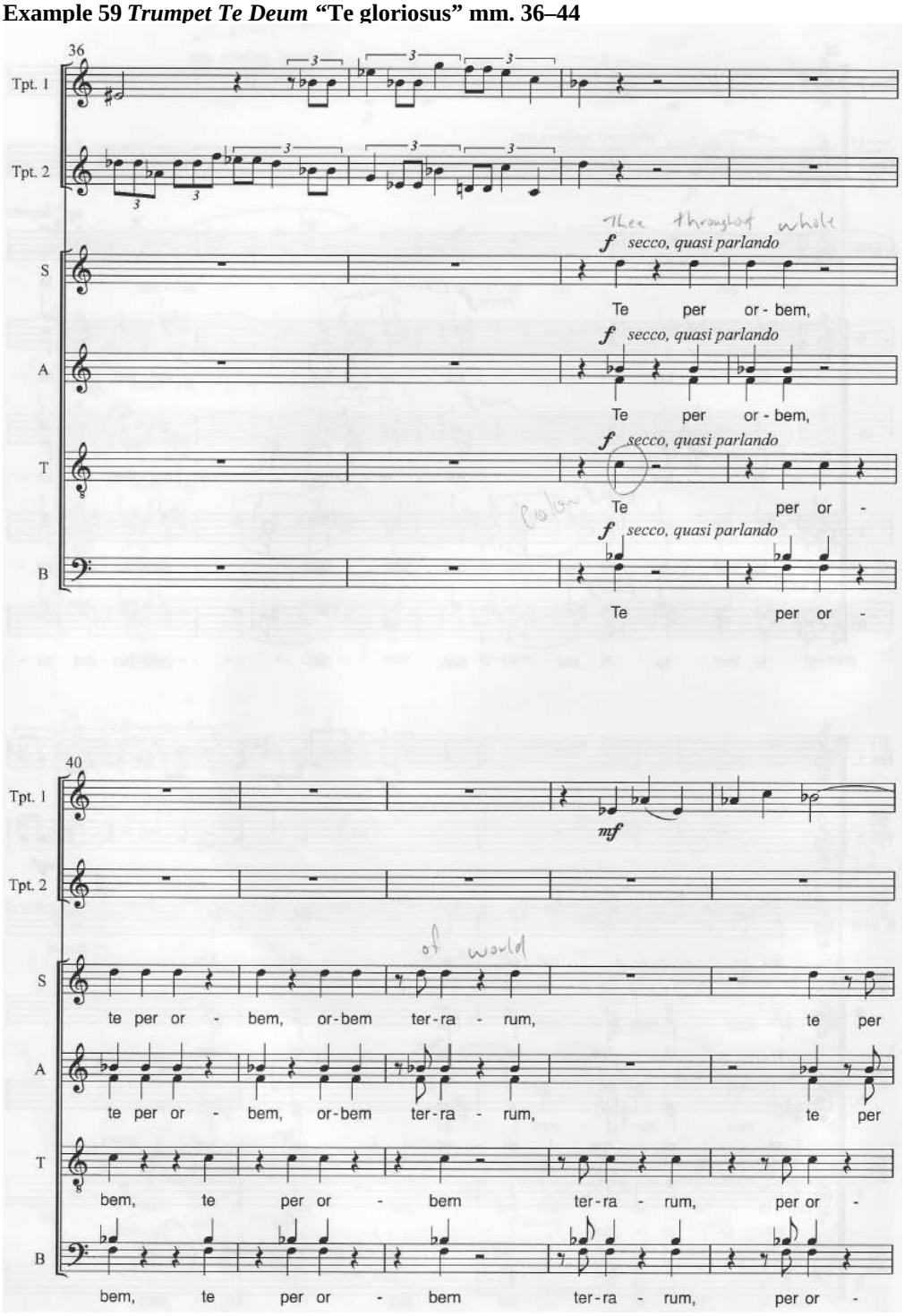


Now here [at "Te per orbem"] it is different. The procession is done and here you have cosmos—the "procession" of comets, planets, everything which is going on very quick in the cosmos, but so organized that there is never … it is precision. Everybody has their own speed, but it fits. That's the idea behind this section: kind of a cosmic vision. [Example 59]

And that [pointing to #3 "Patrem immensae majestatis"] is the vision! It is of the ancient Greek fathers, the "Perichoresis." It's more or less an Atomium[59] theory. You see, the Trinity, the three elements are moving so fast that you

[59] The Atomium was the main pavilion and icon of the World Fair of Brussels (1958).At 102 metres high, with its nine interconnected spheres, it symbolizes a crystallized molecule of iron by the scale of its atoms.

Example 59 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Te gloriosus" mm. 36–44



don't see what it is. "Perichoresis"[60]—Dance of the Trinity. I found this

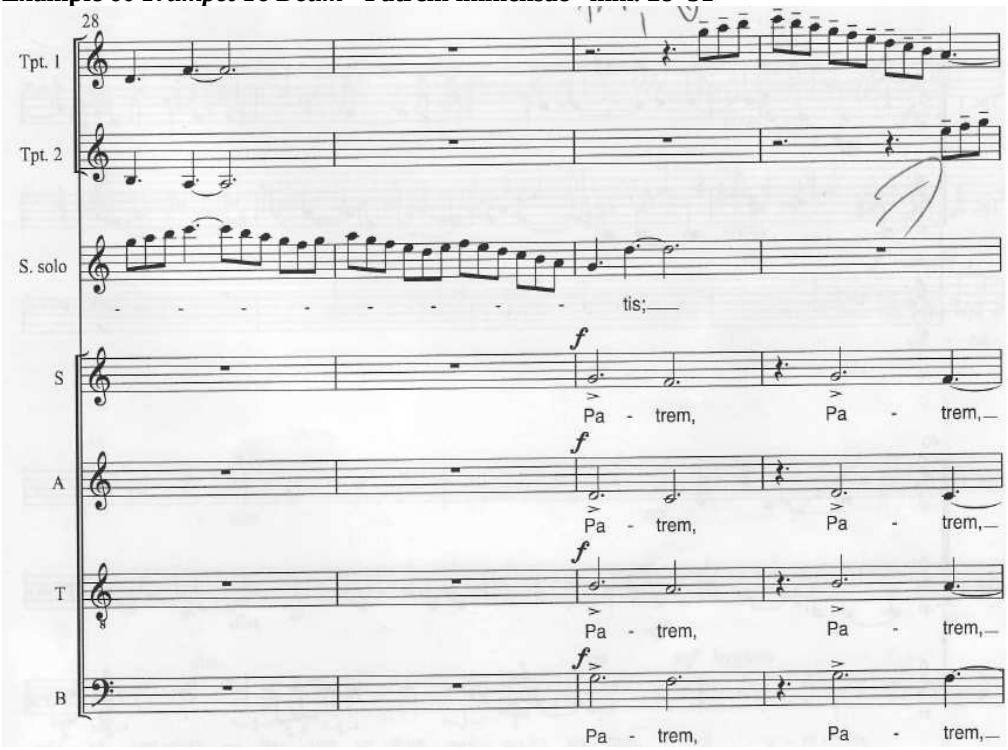
[60] Perichoresis is a Greek term used to describe the triune relationship between each person of the Godhead which allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two.

concept in a lecture by the Greek fathers. And so we have the three sections—Patrem, Filium, Paraclete (Spirit)—these three elements. I tried to make the chorus sing only the names. Also, using the phasing technique.

Dueck: Moving over metrically?

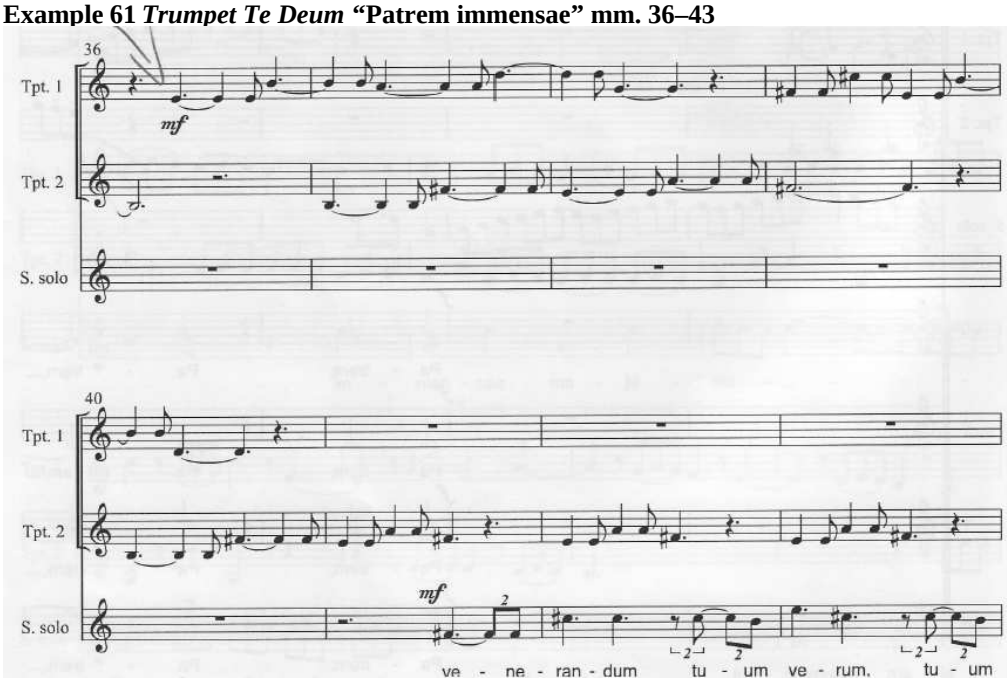
Nees: Yes, yes. So when you hear it, you can see which element it is. So trumpets make the movement—dance, soprano is singing the history, and the chorus coming as church bells. [demonstrates accented first syllable, followed by second unaccented syllable of "of "Patrem" in a bell-like sound Example 60].

Example 60 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Patrem immensae" mm. 28–31



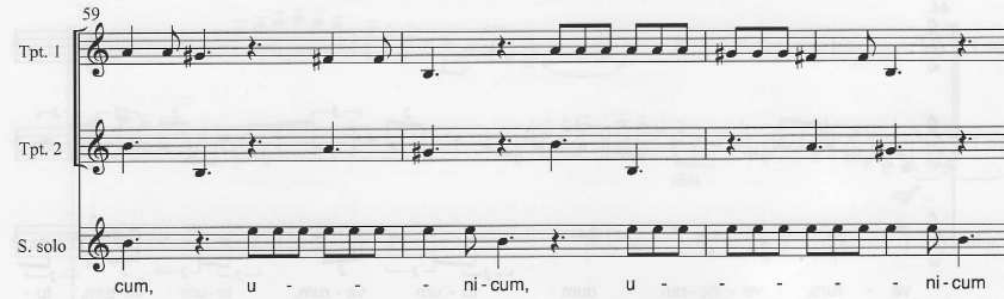
Continue with a little bit rhythmical [Example 61].

Example 61 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Patrem immensae" mm. 36–43



Yes and here [mm. 59 following] vocal play for the soprano—why not? Monteverdi has done it—all this vocalize and repetition. It's a Baroque tradition—what is the word - "Bebung." It was used in the Baroque period and so, why not I? It is in the music; certain joy. [Example 62]

Example 62 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Patrem immensae" mm. 59–61



So in this one piece we have the Trinity, this idea of very fast movement …

Dueck: So fast that it seems as one?

Nees: Yes, as one. And you can find it in the Greek church fathers writing: it is not mine. I suppose if you would look up "Perichoresis" on the internet that you

would find it.

In “Tu Rex gloriae” the female voices are going different than the male voices; the male voices are a little bit chant-like. “Gloriae” has a little bit of [intervallic] allusion to “Tu Rex.” And then you have the spoken chorus. The first to do it (I think) is Darius Milhaud. It comes from the Greek drama. Milhaud wrote in the early ‘20s *Les euménides*,[61] and *Les Choéphores*,[62] and these are two French translations by Paul Claudel from Greek dramas of Aeschylus. Every time there is in the original Greek drama the antagonist, Milhaud made spoken chorus—but monodic. And it is always with some percussion. Then the first (in the early ‘30’s, ’33, ’34, ’35) to write polyphonic spoken choruses was Wladimir Vogel.[63] I was to conduct *Wagadus Untergang durch die Eitelkeit*.[64] It’s a piece for six [sic, see footnote] saxophones, chorus and soloists, and a spoken chorus. And the spoken chorus in that time—we used the spoken chorus of Zürich[65] —the conservatory out of Zürich. There is; there was at the time (it was in the ‘80’s), and they came to Brussels to do it because we had not the tradition of spoken chorus. You know, we have tradition when we have spoken chorus [demonstrates “tu, de victo” with pitch trailing down at the ends of words and phrases]. It’s always down. But it should be [demonstrates same phrase with

---

[61] *Les euménides* , Op.41 (1917–1923); L'Orestie d'Eschyle (Orestiean Trilogy No.3); 3 acts; libretto by Paul Claudel after Aeschylus

[62] *Les Choéphores*, Op.24 (1915); *L'Orestie d'Eschyle* (Orestiean Trilogy No.2); Paul Claudel translation of the drama by Aeschylus; premiere 1919

[63] Wladimir Vogel (1896– 1984). Swiss composer of German and Russian descent.

[64] *Wagadus Untergang durch die Eitelkeit* (L. Frobenius), S, A, B-Bar, chorus, speaking chorus, 5 sax, 1930

[65] Kammersprechchor Zürich

pitch ascending at ends of words and phrases] … it should be more upwards than downwards. Because otherwise you have stopping of motion. And to have continuity you have to make sure that at the ends it is not down, it is going on, as the train in the tunnel, you see. [laughs] Continuing. And when every voice is going on like that, it is very nice. But when you sing [demonstrates descending pitches again], it is not interesting to listen to. Then your chorus is tired. I learned this with the Züriches Sprechchor, and Vogel lived in that time (he has died already some 20 years ago), and he was at the rehearsal. Out of curiosity I asked some voices of the chorus to do some other phrases, and they couldn't do it, because they were not of the class of the clinicians. They didn't know music. They had learned to say it in the proper rhythm, but without knowing music notation. And therefore it was so good; they did it naturally. And there I learned the effectivity of spoken choruses. And then Rautavaara[66] did it once, and some others, I suppose. But I started using it in my compositions—I don't know which was the first one, but many works, because I think it is dramatic. When you combine it with sung parts, or played parts like in this piece it is still better.

Dueck: And the rhythmic complexity of this section?

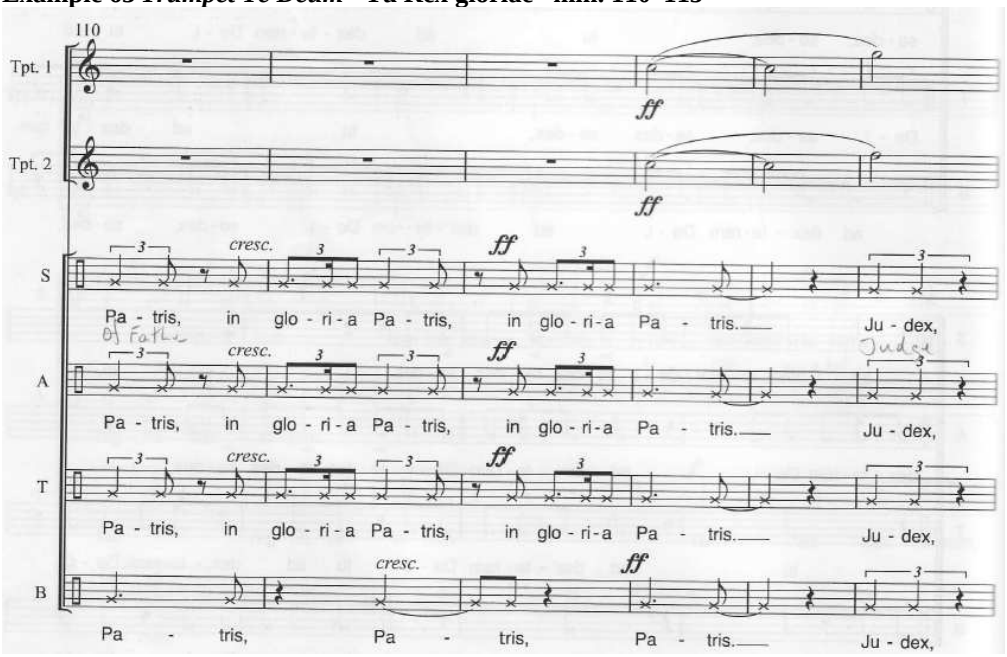
Nees: In Latin you can put the adjective before or after the words. So you see in the phrase "devicto mortis aculeo" you can have "mortis aculeo" or "aculeo mortis." And you will find them both somewhere in here.

And then you have the possibility to make some parts shouted. [Example 63]

---

[66] Einojuhani Rautavaara (b. 1928), Finnish composer

Example 63 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Tu Rex gloriae" mm. 110–115



Dueck: Higher pitches, or same pitches?

Nees: Here it is all notated on the same pitches but you could write it on three levels—I did it once. It doesn't work so well because then the choristers … [demonstrates three distinct pitches, high, medium, and low]. *Piano* and *forte* are different; *piano* will naturally be lower, and *forte* will be higher to have the force.

Dueck: We did a work by Werle,[67] *Canzona 126 di Petrarca* and what he did in his score was change the height of the note stems indicating the pitch should be higher or lower.

Nees: Yes, yes I did the work also. I actually gave the first performance.

Dueck: Did you really?!

[67] Lars Johan Werle (1926–2001), Swedish composer, teacher, radio producer, singer and jazz musician

Nees: Yes, because it was the winning piece in a competition and we gave the concert for them. It was not only this piece; also some other pieces, but yes, that was the first performance for Werle.

Dueck: And so he did indicate relative pitch height.

Nees: Yes, yes, but here I use crosses and dynamics, so it can go higher or lower. But not singing. As a conductor you can use your imagination. But always rhetoric.

And then we come to "Te Ergo Quaesumus"… the piece where all the people go, "ahhhhhh."

Dueck: Beautiful! And do you like it?

Nees: … Yes … were it not so I would not have written it.

Dueck: Right, but I meant do you like it in the context?

Nees: … Yes … it is blues, eh?

Dueck: Right, major/minor.

Nees: Yes, and that's maybe the only relation to the actual music that use something of the jazz. Otherwise it is very romantic.

Dueck: And why this style for this text?

Nees: I think everything up to this moment is, "You Lord," and here it is, "We." The human element is more present.

Dueck: So it is more human, thus blues, romantic.

Nees: Yes, and it is also a prayer. Medieval prayers are made from the rhetoric principles of Cicero[68]. Cell division, mathematical. You go to the king, and

[68] Marcus Tullius Cicero**,** 106–43 BC, Roman philosopher, statesman, lawyer, political theorist, and Roman constitutionalist.

you ask him. You start with saying, “Oh great king, you are family and you are our father, etc., etc. And could you eventually for me …” And that is the principle in prayers also.

Dueck: Extol the Deity first, and then request.

Nees: Yes. And this [“Te ergo quaesumus”] is the moment of request.

Dueck: Very interesting. And then with soprano solo.

Nees: Yes. You need a good soprano.

Dueck: A very good soprano, indeed. Clear straight tones, especially here at measure 77 where the long held high A has to start softly and come, almost out of the overtones created by the choir … trumpet-like. Very hard to do; can’t have a lot of vibrato; must be very clear.

Nees: Yes. Therefore I write, in the “Te Deum” and also other works, always a B or something very high for soprano solo to be sure that they do not ask a soprano from the opera. That music cannot survive by a Puccini[69] soprano, and when you write a *piano* high B, then you need a soprano which is light soprano. Therefore I do it. [laughs]

Dueck: The role of the trumpets, even in this movement. The whole work is for chorus, soprano solo and two trumpets. Trumpets perhaps to bring a bit of regal air to the work, but even here in this piece which is very introspective you still have ...

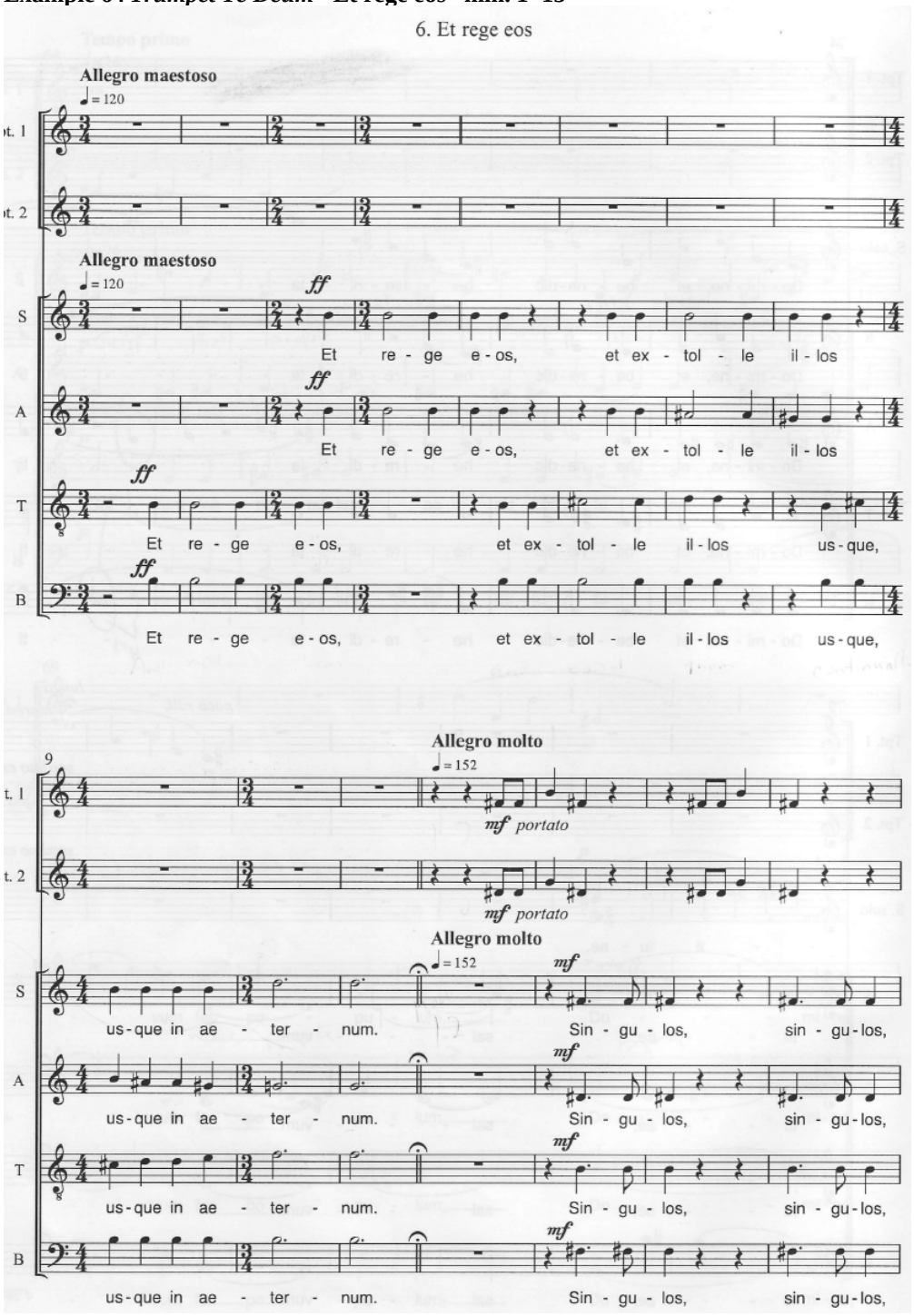
Nees: An important role, yes. Also to go outside of the normal tonality; to have a feeling that we are not always in this A major. We are going beyond, and I

[69] Giacomo Puccini, 1858 – 1924, Italian composer of operas

give the trumpets rather strange bi-tonal combinations.

And then “Et rege eos.” [Example 64]

Example 64 *Trumpet Te Deum* “Et rege eos” mm. 1–15



Here [at the *Allegro molto* m. 12] don’t take it too slow; you have to stay at

152 [quarter note = 152. Demonstrates the rhythmic pattern on word "singulos"] If you do it at, say, 140 [demonstrates] it is too slow. You must keep up the tempo. And here are questions about choral practice also. I would say as an example when this rhythm [dotted quarter note followed by 1/8 note as on the word "sin – gu – los"] comes in choral music, most of the time the chorus sings the first note [dotted quarter] too long. They like to sing on the vowels, of course, but here you have the *n* before the *g*. You have a choice; either prolong the vowel in which case you have no *n*, or move immediately to the *n* so that it sounds before the *g*. I think you must move to the *n*.

Dueck: Similarly if you drop the dot of the dotted quarter and have a space, you would lose the sound of the *n*. So essentially the *n* is the sounded dot of the dotted quarter. The *n* is a rhythmic element to push the sound onward toward the *g*.

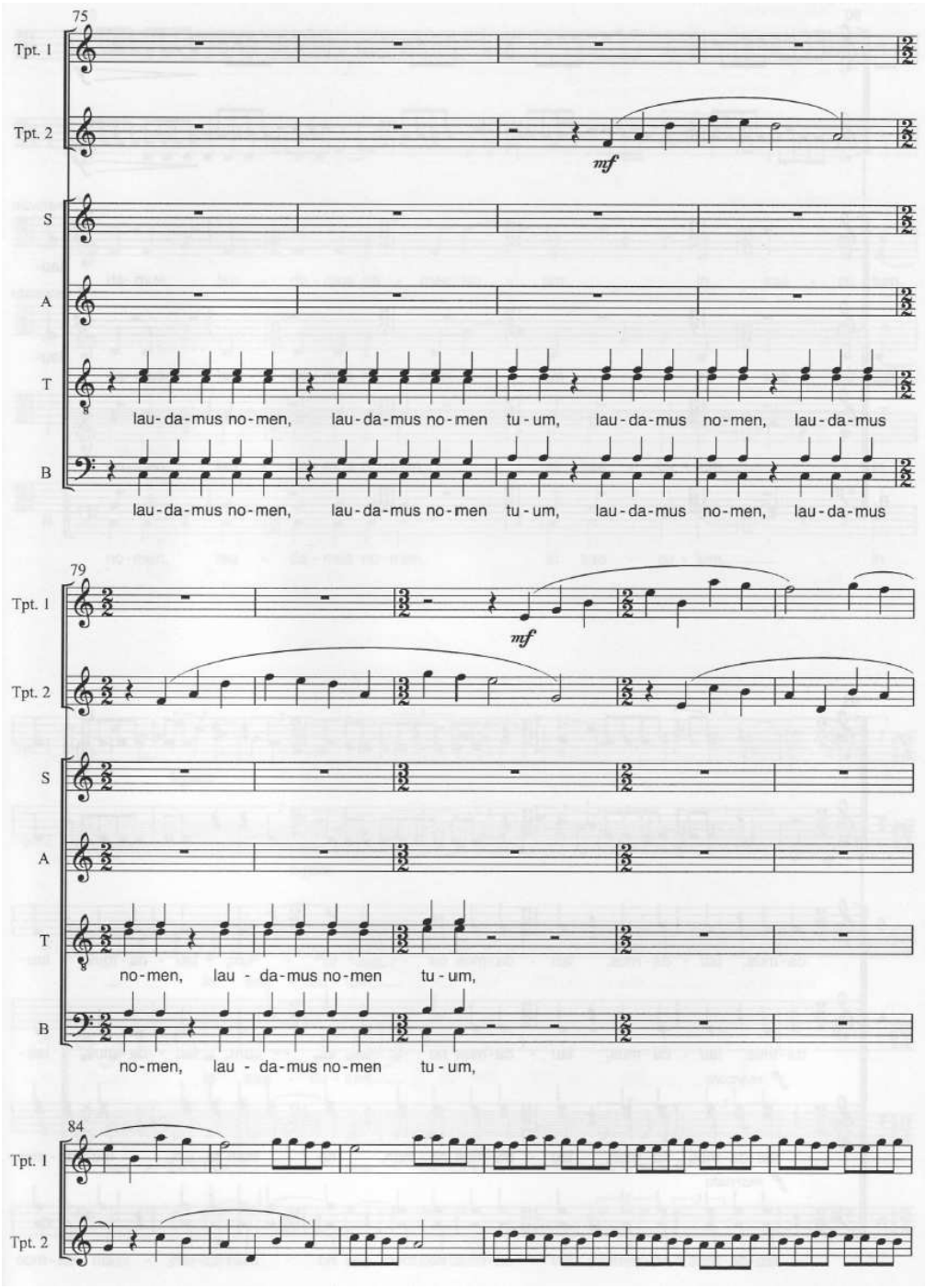
Nees: Yes. Yes.

And then here a moment of joy; laudamus, laudamus, laudamus. [Example 65] Rather popular in C major and very simple. But not for trumpets.

Dueck: Never simple for trumpets. That is the other issue in this work; you must have good trumpet players.

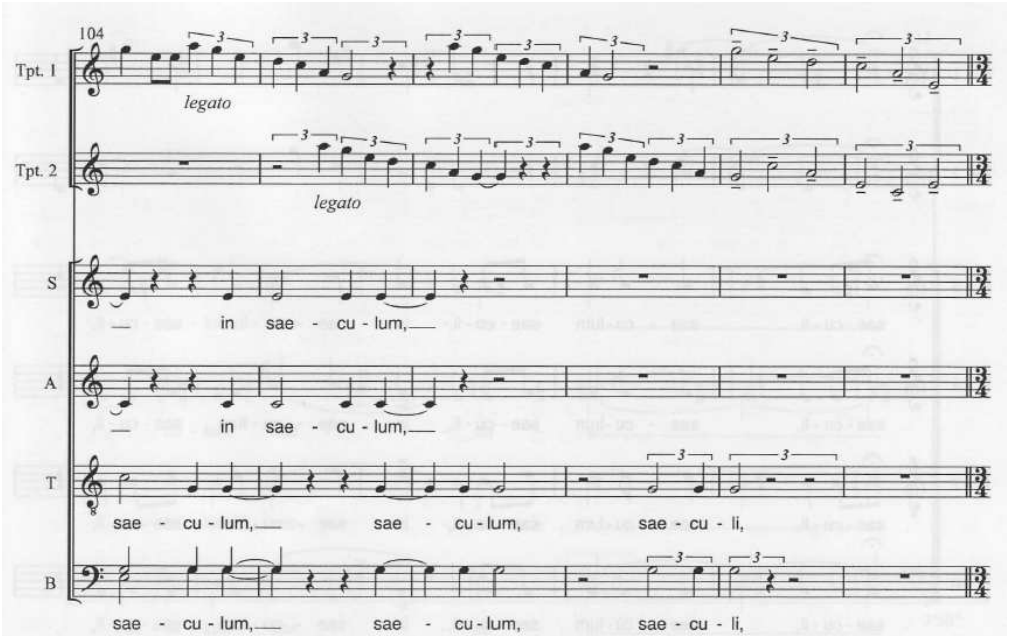
Nees: Yes, but then that's what I always do. For the chorus, not too difficult because they are not sung if it is too difficult—only by professionals. But for the instruments and the soloists, they are professionals. They are paid for, let them work.

Example 65 ***Trumpet Te Deum*** **"Et rege eos" mm. 75–83**

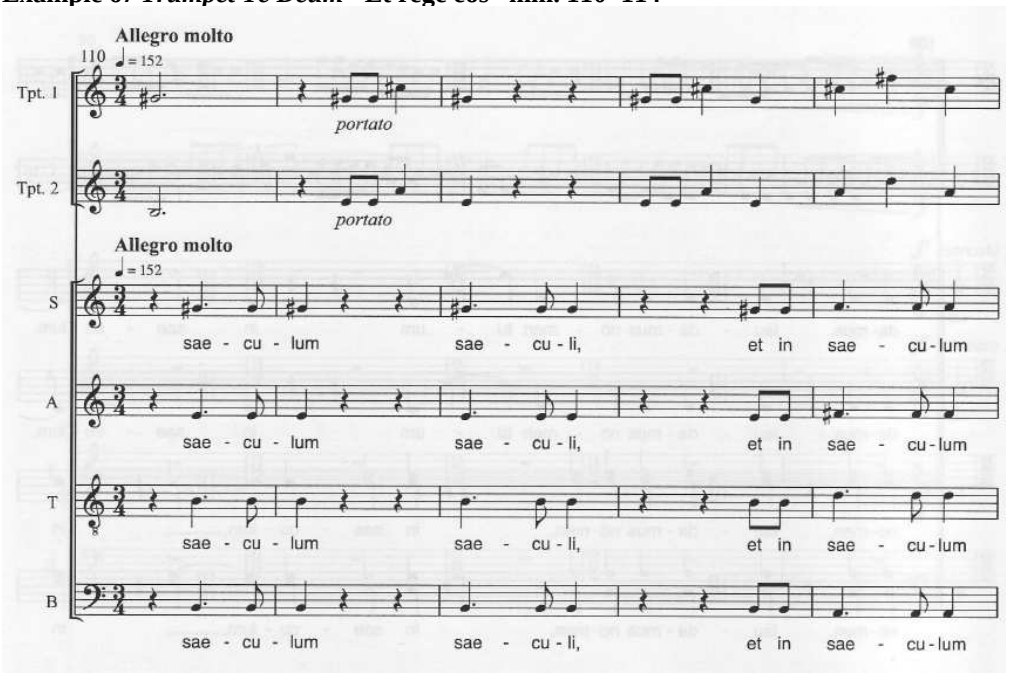


Here [mm. 104 following] when you do it exactly, it will match to the new tempo at measure 110. [Example 66 and 67]

Example 66 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Et rege eos" mm. 104–109



Example 67 *Trumpet Te Deum* "Et rege eos" mm. 110–114



I know there can be a problem here because the conductor had troubles. The half notes [mm. 108–109 trumpets] must equal the quarter notes of the new

tempo at measure 110. It will be exact.

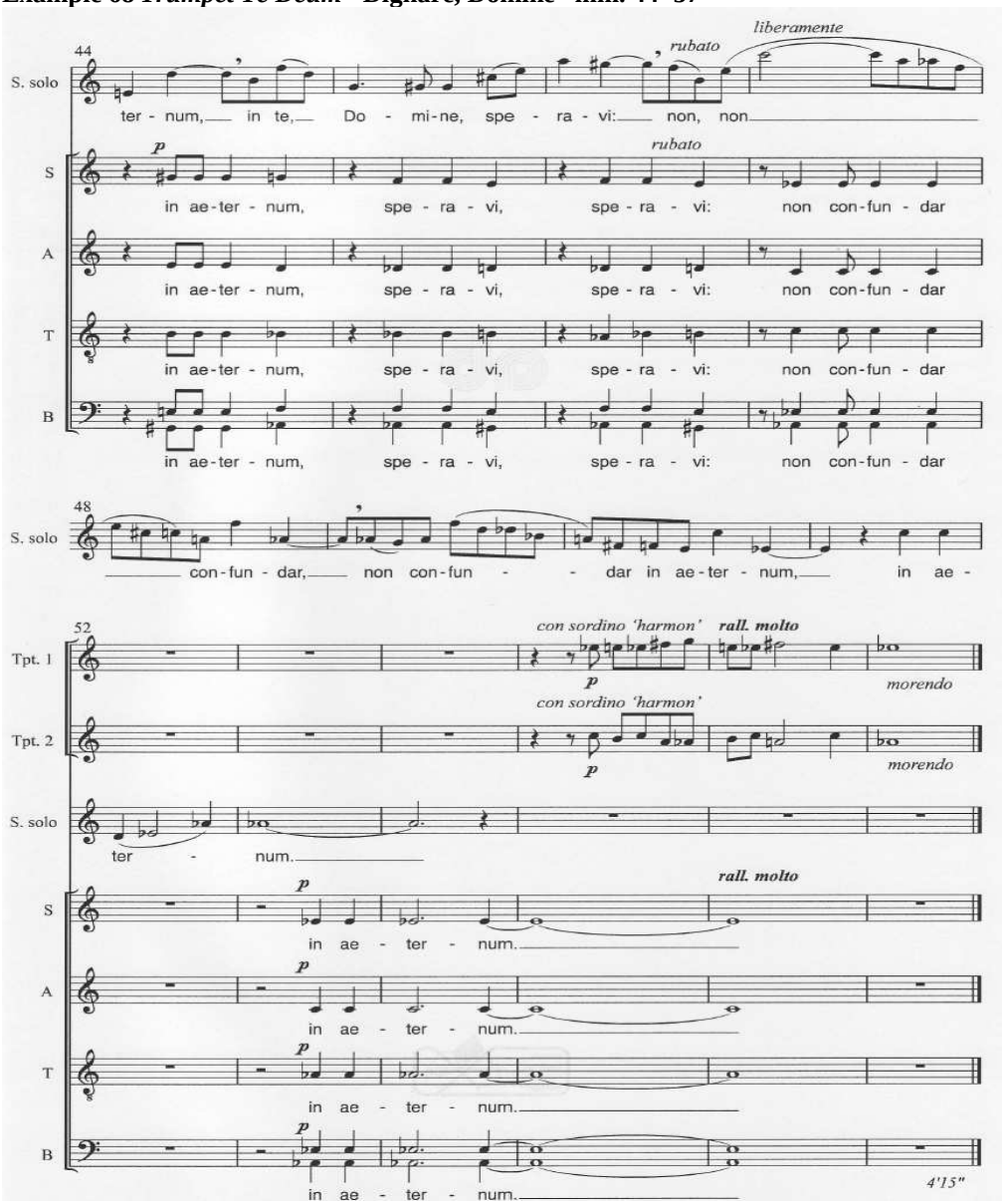
Yes, and this [“Dignare, Domine” soprano solo]; rather difficult intonation.

Dueck: Very difficult. Especially on the last page where she has this long melisma starting from the high C. And then to end up back on the A flat. [Example 68]

Nees: Yes, and of course, it has to be sung temperate. Otherwise it doesn’t work.

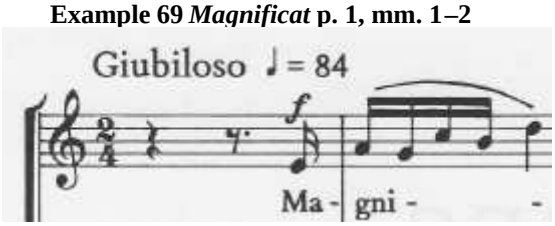
Dueck: It is a beautiful work.

Example 68 *Trumpet Te Deum* “Dignare, Domine” mm. 44–57

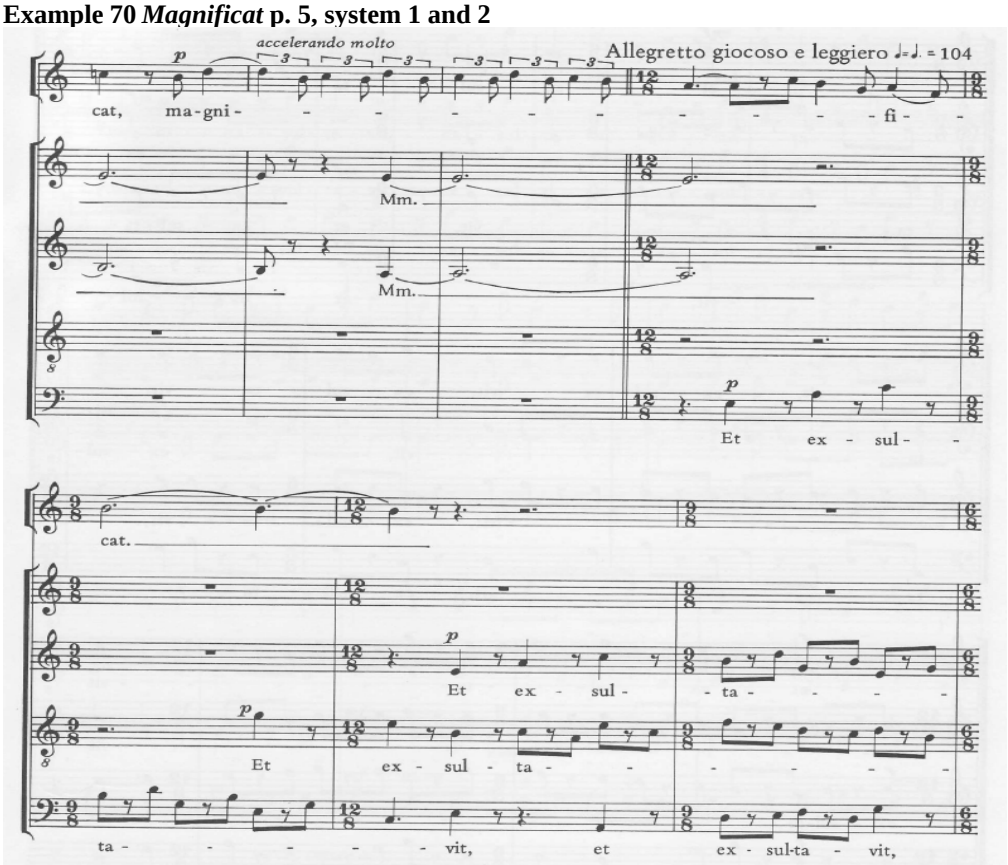


Nees: So the "Magnificat." Maybe I could give also some explanations about it. Written in 1980. I used as material [whistles the opening 4 note sequence] those tones, and I think (but it's a long time ago) that here [p. 5 at the *Allegretto giocosa e leggioero*] …yes, starting with the bass, followed by the tenor in inversion, and so on, there is always an allusion to these tones. [Examples 69 and 70]

Example 69 *Magnificat* p. 1, mm. 1–2

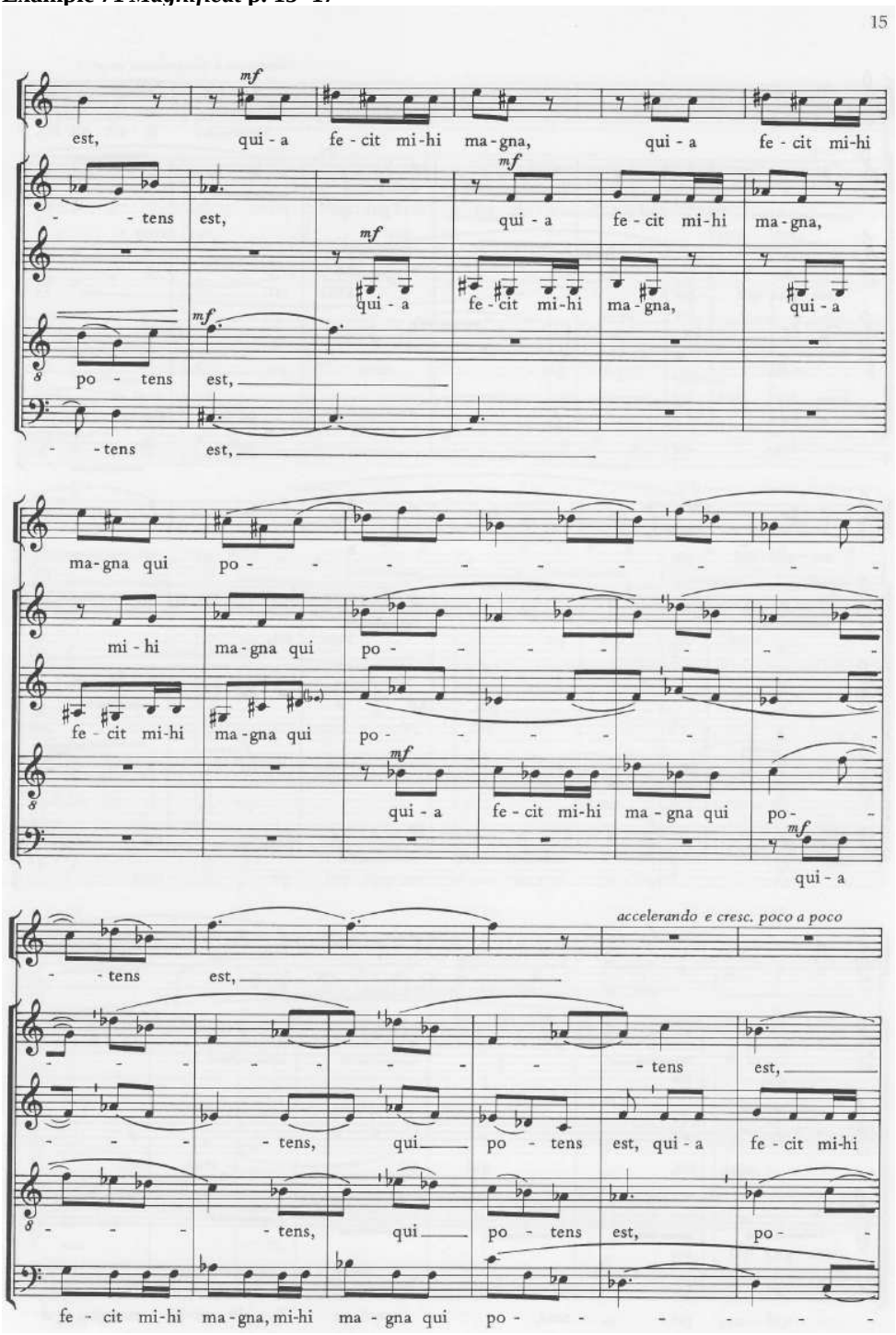


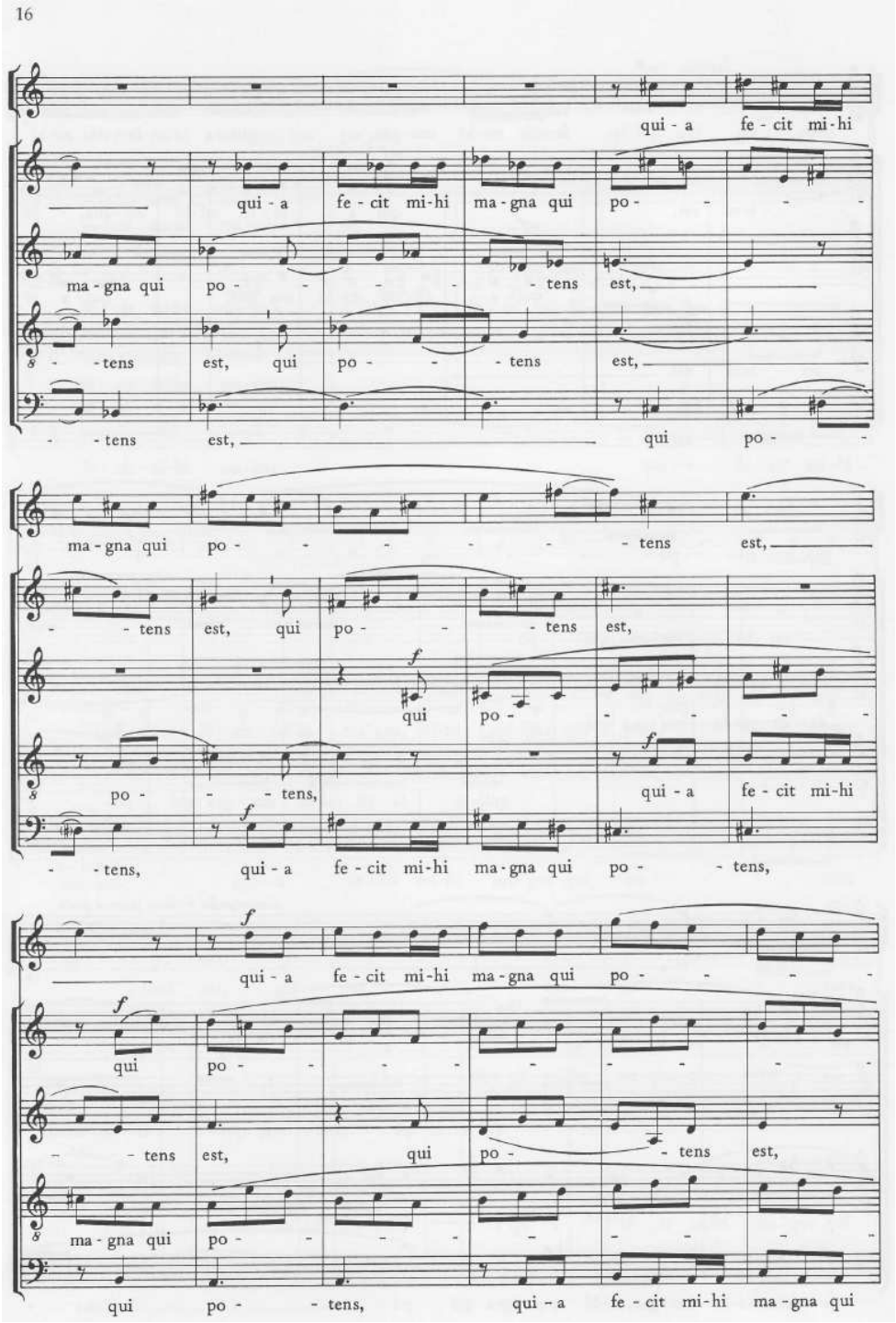
Example 70 *Magnificat* p. 5, system 1 and 2

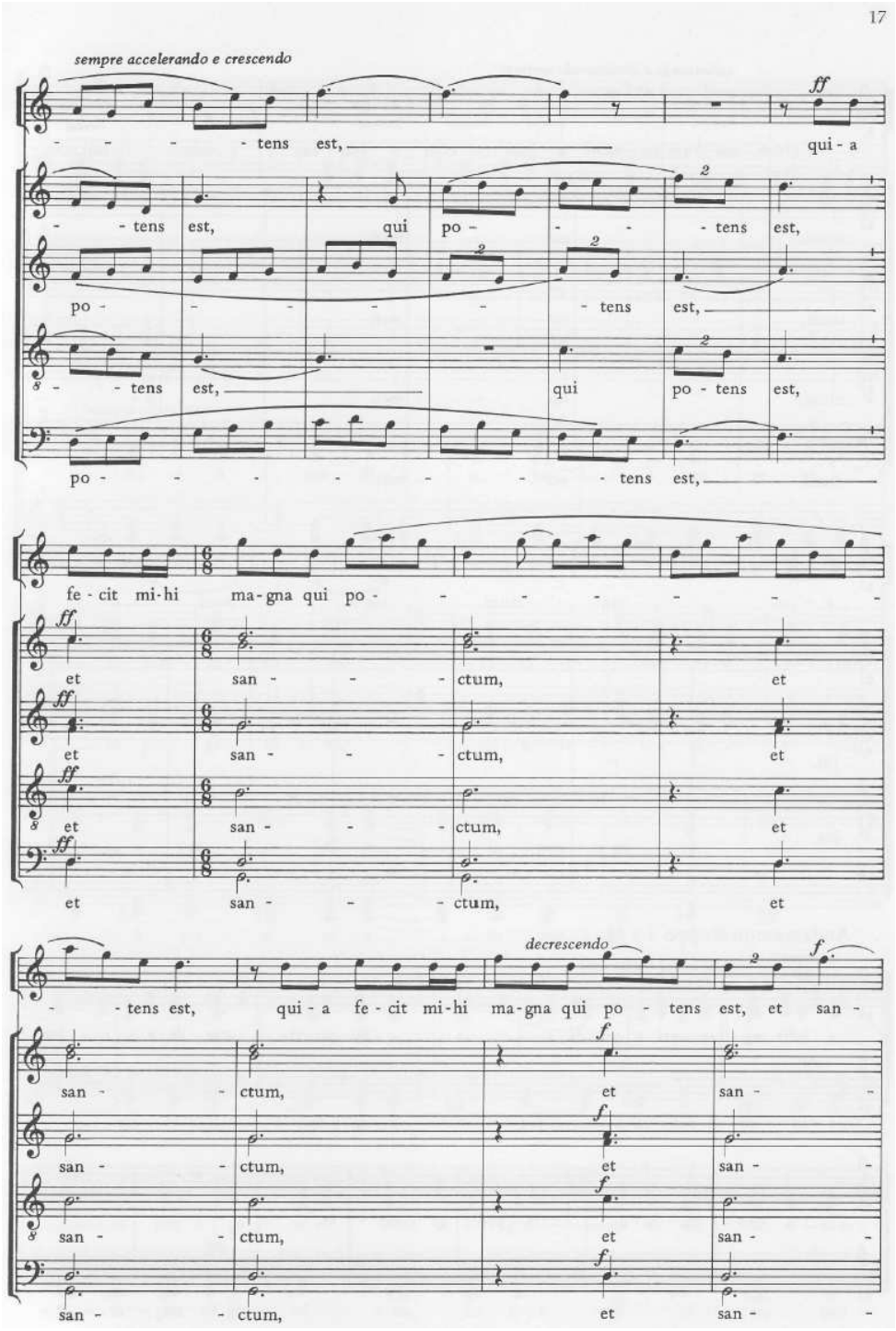


When you conduct this it is difficult to make *accelerando* [p. 15 bottom system]. [Example 72]

Example 71 *Magnificat* p. 15–17




16
qui - a fe - cit mi - hi
qui - a fe - cit mi - hi ma - gna qui po - - - -
ma - gna qui po - - - - - tens est,
- - tens est, qui po - - - tens est,
- - tens est, qui po -
ma - gna qui po - - - - - - tens est,
- - tens est, qui po - - tens est,
qui po -
po - - - tens, qui - a fe - cit mi - hi
- - tens, qui - a fe - cit mi - hi ma - gna qui po - - tens,
qui - a fe - cit mi - hi ma - gna qui po - - - -
qui po - - - - - - - - -
- - tens est, qui po - - tens est,
ma - gna qui po - - - - - - -
qui po - - tens, qui - a fe - cit mi - hi ma - gna qui

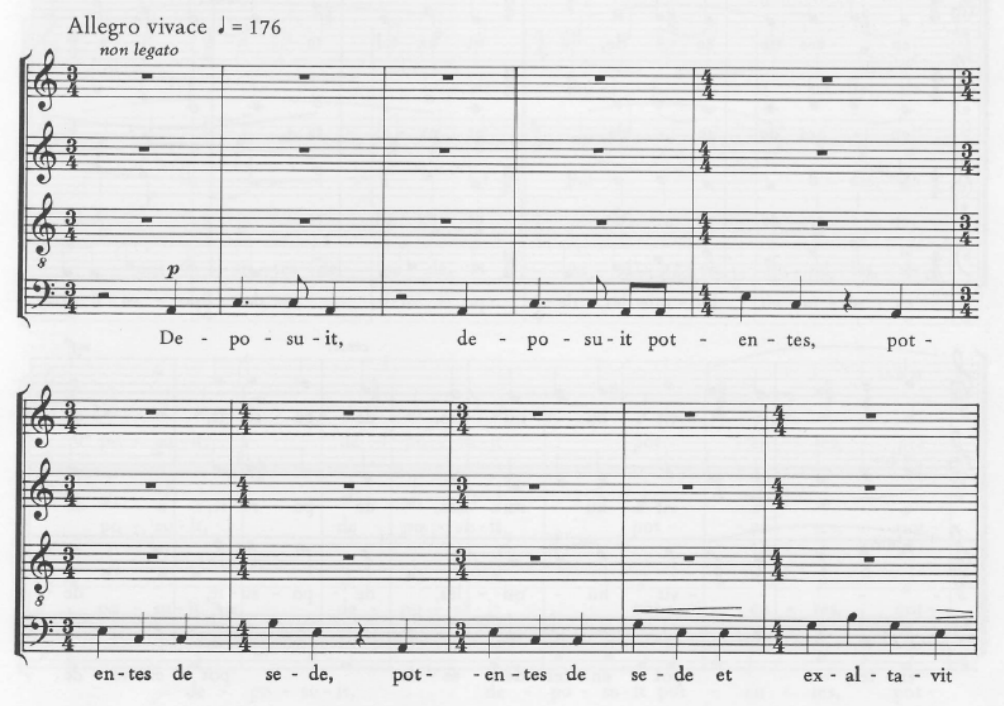


Somewhere you have to go to one and many conductors have trouble there. When they are going *accelerando,* they are going *subito.* It has to start here and then always faster so that when you get here [p. 17 middle system 6/8

measure] you arrive at this tempo [demonstrates this measure at approximately dotted quarter = 60]. And somewhere you have to find the place to change into one [to the measure]. And that is difficult; it is not easy, I know. There are conductors who do it one already from the start [p. 14 top] but it is not okay. You need precision; when you do it only like that it will be not for the chorus and solo. Those rhythmic things are not easy to coordinate with only one beat to the measure, so I do it rather instrumental.

This [p 23, third system *Allegro vivace*], I did it in 3. [Example 72]

Example 72 *Magnificat* p. 23 systems 3 & 4



When I learned it, I worked sometimes with a jazz orchestra, when their conductor was ill. I am not a jazz specialist. I like it, but I was only playing as a conductor to make it work for the orchestra. And every time when there was a quick tempo, [demonstrates three to the measure] okay, but [demonstrates

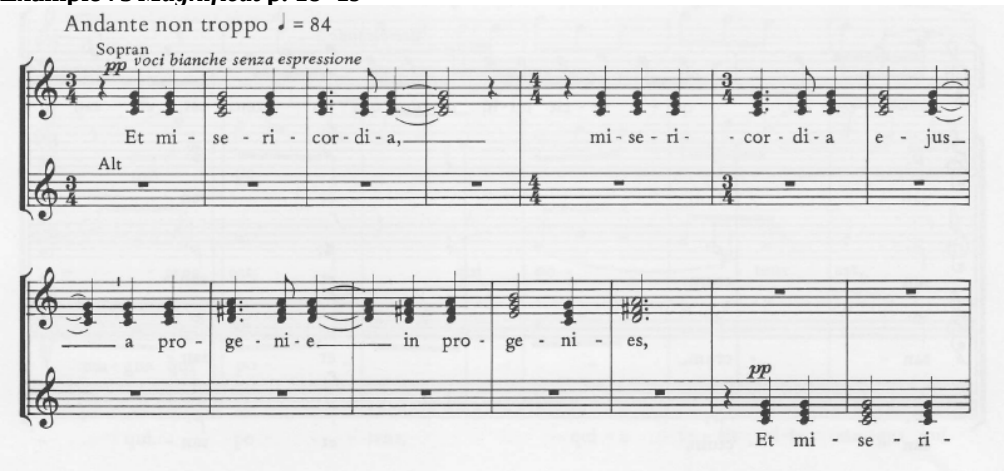
one to the measure], not that. They cannot play with it; they need …

Dueck: Clarity, small.

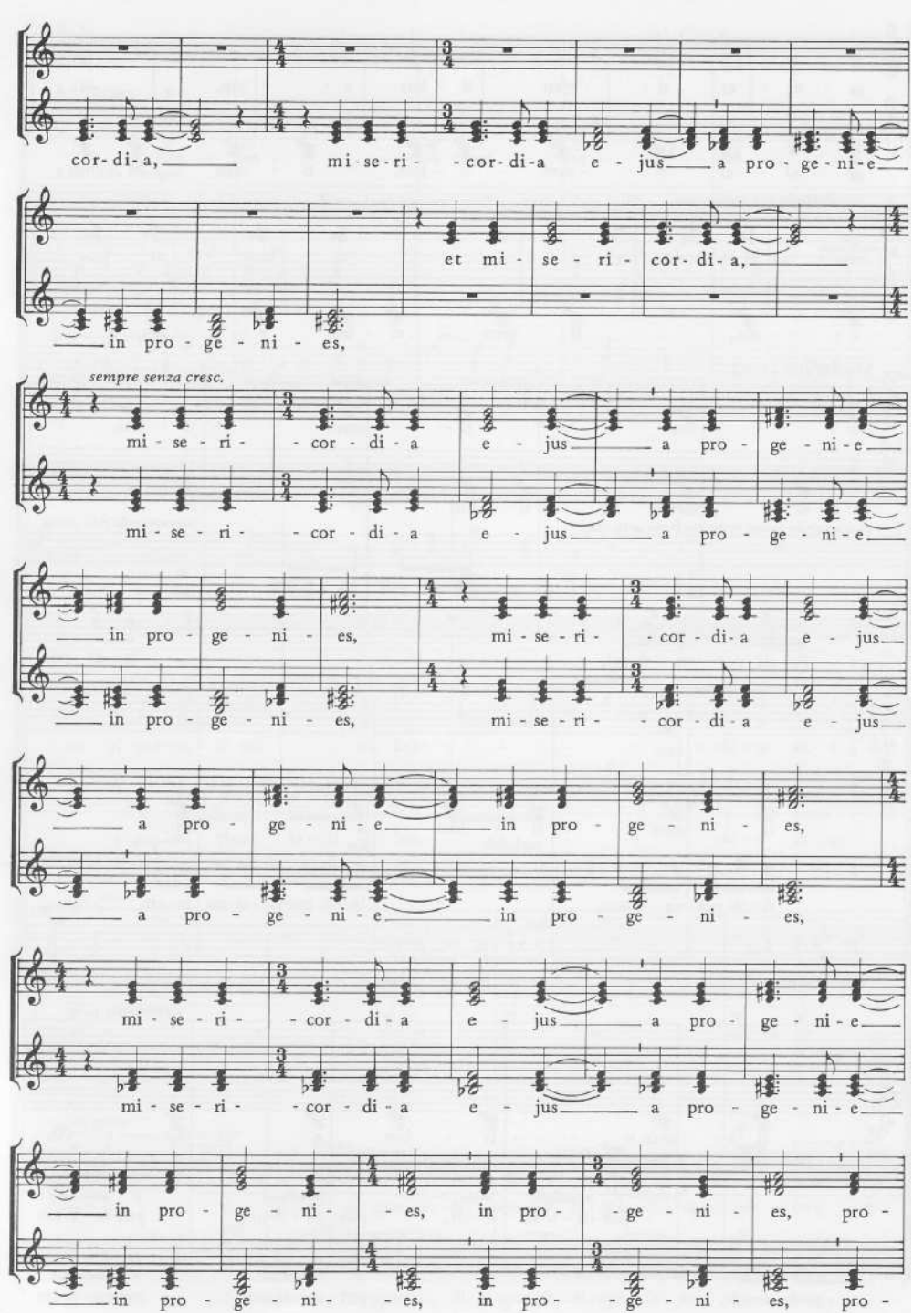
Nees: Yes. And you will see at the end of Stravinsky's *Wedding*[70] it ends with a few chords, four pianos together; chords followed by silence, and then another chord. And you must continue conducting through the silence, very small but there, otherwise these chords will not be together. And that's what I do here. For precision. I have learned this method from Boulez,[71] this instrumental way, and when you have that type of music, they need a good guide.

That [p 18. fourth system, *Andante non troppo* and following] is very simple writing, but not easy to find (dance of sopranos [laughs]), because many times it has not been the correct chord which I wrote. [Example 73]

Example 73 *Magnificat* p. 18–19



[70] ***Les Noces*** , Igor Stravinsky, is a dance cantata, or ballet with vocalists, premiered 1923..
[71] **Pierre Boulez** (born March 26, 1925).is a French composer of contemporary classical music and a conductor



It should be easy, but it is not. But that is the way of writing clusters in a simple way: starting from chords and going away, stretching. You have clusters, and nice coloured clusters, otherwise you have something that is free

of clusters. It is easy, very easy when you start from the same three notes—chords, simple chords.

Dueck: Then the singers have a place to come back to, a foundation.

Nees: Yes, yes.

This music … this is built … it is my living. You see, going off of this piece, we take those [sections] from the beginning, but in a different, opposite way at the end, which was a complication to compose so that it could be at the beginning and at the end. But I wanted that mirror type. And you have the structure more or less like a Gothic cathedral. The first part goes to [12/8 measure top of p. 5], the second starts here and goes to [double bar line, middle system p.9], and after that comes the third section [ending last measure p. 12]. Then you have this part [p. 13 to p.18 double bar line, third system], which is a longer part with elements from the beginning and new elements. It ends with "sanctus" [sic]. Next comes "misericordia" [p. 18 fourth system to p.23 double bar line, second system], and then "deposuit" [p. 23 fourth system to p. 28 double bar line last system]. And then we come here [p. 29 first measure]. If the first three sections of the work are A, B, C, this is now C, followed by B, followed by A. And here at the end of the last A there is something: "in saecula" three times, one, two, three [in the soprano voice]. And you see here in the "sanctus" at the end [of the opening three sections, end of C] there are three chorus "sanctum" [p. 17–18]. Three times "sanctum." So you have three times "sanctum" and three times "saecula." So there is a kind of coda at the end of the first three sections, A, B, C, and at the

end of the last three sections, C, B, A. You have a building: three smaller pieces and repeating them at the end. Here in the middle, three larger pieces. The soprano solo is used in the first four pieces, then not in the fifth and sixth, and then again in the last three pieces. So it is completely as the architecture of the late Gothic style: the same left and the right (symmetrical), the middle is the largest, the highest part. But it is never completely symmetrical; always some towers a little higher, or there is always something that is not complete. Sure, it is a superficial drawing now, but when you see the measures of it, it is similar to a Gothic cathedral. And using the soprano here, and not here [fourth section and fifth section] makes a difference also.[72]

Dueck: I have not done an in depth study of it yet, but are the numbers of measures essentially the same in the symmetrical sections?

Nees: I think so. Only here [end of last section] is the addition of the coda. It is a long time ago when I wrote it, but I know it was the idea of having two parts as mirror, and each of these parts having three sections. And the three is significant; always three; Trinity.

Dueck: And by extension, nine; three sections of three?

Nees: Yes, yes [laughing]. So you see, figures play a role in my music.

Dueck: Yes, indeed. As they did in Bach. What do you think of that whole issue; symbolism in the music of Bach?

Nees: Ah, yes. There are many books written on it. I don't know; I think a composer makes some things sometimes, in which you can find afterwards some

[72] For reasons of length and of copyright infringement, I have not provided visual examples of this structural architecture. When studying a full score it is readily apparent.

symbolism, but was it what he was working, or was it already there? Or is it in his work because he is a genius?

Dueck: Right. Was it structural, or was it because he was surrounded by those influences?

Nees: Yes, was it in that period? Of course there are things; he did it specially, therefore it is clear … many times! But it can also happen that there is a symbolism there without knowing that it is there. And then the conductor who is fantastic will discover it! [laughs]

Dueck: It is an interesting subject. For example, the *B Minor Mass* with its divisions of sections and the numbers of measures in each section, etc. And here you have measured sections as well. Perhaps it is just the overall symmetry, and perhaps it was not entirely intentional?

Nees: Yes. Well here I wanted … my end is my beginning, yes? I wanted the mirror. And that the middle section was so much larger; was it with purpose, I don't know. But to count bars and so on, I don't do that. However, many times it is logic when you set it out. Is it part of our nature? I guess you could write an article about that.

Dueck: Well, humans are a logical species. They try to sort things out.

Nees: Yes, yes.

Dueck: I think, most of the time we try to create order out of chaos. It's a human condition.

Nees: Yes. And now chaos out of order! [laughs]

Dueck: In music?

Nees: Yes. What they now do with children, for instance. It is not necessary to read notes. They put them in a forest, for instance, and there on the trees are some wind chimes, and there they are to discover sounds. It is okay, it can be done, but that is not an introduction to music. The sounds … when you listen, there is sound there. It is interesting to know that sound exists and that they are there without you having produced them, but you cannot make an art without any technicity [sic]. And to give the children the impression that music is so easy goes too far.

Dueck: As a conductor I have programmed works by composition students in which this "technicity," this discipline is missing. And many times I have felt that it is just random noise. There are currently some very popular American choral composers, [Morten] Lauridsen and [Eric] Whitacre, and quite frankly I am tired of their music.

Nees: Yes, I know their music. It is … simpler than mine.

Dueck: In some ways they appear to be the flavour of the day. Perhaps it is because we hear so much of it over in North America. But I think that perhaps there has not been enough discipline put into this music. As if to say, "It sounds good, so it must be good."

Nees: It sounds like it has been made at the piano. I work also with the piano, but my work is not made at the piano. You can see it in the lines; it is not made as a pianist. I use the piano as a control, or maybe a little bit for amusing myself. I will take a break and play for a few minutes, and then continue on with composing. That [other] kind of music is made at the piano; that is my

impression.

Nees: I gave once a concert with the Radio Chorus in Amsterdam of a Martinu[73] cantata for chorus, soloist, six or seven instruments, and accordion.[74] For this concert there was a young accordion player (whom I didn't know), and we went by bus to Amsterdam to give the concert, and came back, and he asked me, "Could you write something for accordion and chorus, because it doesn't exist." At that time it was in the '80's, I think. So okay, I can try, but there has to be the situation where I can produce it; it's a somewhat strange combination. Then some 10 years ago I had request from a Dutch chorus, a female chorus, to write a summer piece, three pieces, and I thought, "Maybe that's a good idea to use now, accordion," because it was a female chorus and accordion is better with a female chorus. Male chorus is in the same level of the register. I looked for words, and I took the *Stella maris*, the *Ave Maris Stella*, Star of the Sea, because the Dutch people are sea people, and *Schifferklavier*—the accordion is called *Schifferklavier*—the piano of the sailors. So that is a nice connection. Then I took three poems by a Belgian poet from Antwerp, 19th century,[75] (but who wrote in French, of course), about the Holy Virgin. And I give them to a baritone solo. So it is baritone solo, female chorus and accordion; three pieces maybe ten or twelve minutes

[73] Bohuslav Martinu 1890–1959 - Czech composer
[74] *Legenda z dýmu bramborové* (Legend of the Smoke from Potato Tops), 1956
[75] Max Elskamp, 1862–1931

long together. It's already on a CD of "Dutch" composers [laughs]. It is a Romantic piece.

Dueck: When I was in Ireland last week I heard a wonderful concert by the vocal group *Amarcord* from Leipzig.

Nees: The conducting professor, Kurt Thomas [1904–1973] was *Thomaskantor* in Leipzig. Do you know *Lehrbuch der Chorleitung*?[76] He wrote a famous book; even translated in Japan. He was the leading man in the Bach production in the '50's. He came from Leipzig to Western Germany, because he couldn't adapt himself to the Communists. He was *Thomaskantor,* I don't know, two or three years and he was at that time the Bach specialist, and then came Karl Richter,[77] and then came Rilling, and so on. It was the traditional Bach following.

Dueck: You mentioned that you educated yourself by listening to Stravinsky over and over again. Do you advocate learning music by listening to it, or by score study?

Nees: Both. Before they sing, read the score, and then listen. Not for Vittoria,[78] [sic] or something like that, but for music that is difficult to imagine, as for

---

[76] Lehrbuch der Chorleitung (3 volumes, Leipzig, 1935-1948)
[77] Karl Richter, 1926–1981 German conductor, organist, and harpsichordist
[78] Tomás Luis de Victoria, sometimes Italianised da Vittoria (c. 1548–1611), Spanish composer

example, Stravinsky. When you are young, it is impossible, and it is so quick that even if you can follow, it is already good. No, I think that when you are a professional musician you have to do it with score alone. Most of the times when I was on the radio, I did so many first performances that it was not possible to listen to recordings. However, many times people read the score—okay, interesting, but then they hear it—oh, that's the way it is. Judging or adjudicating something … You know the famous Marcel Proust;[79] French; difficult writer. He sent his first book *À la recherche du temps perdu* to *Gallimard*[80] and the redactor there was Andre Gide,[81] also a famous writer. And Gide rejected it. And afterwards, twenty or thirty years later; "The greatest mistake in my life was to reject that work." You have to be in a good condition, yes; not in a hurry, not with problems, but quietly, to see what is there. And then you also have to have the ability to read [music]. Not everybody can hear what he is reading. It is necessary to hear what you read, more or less.

Dueck: When you were given new works, did you sit by the piano and figure them out?

Nees: No, most of the time just in my head. You can't play modern scores; it's too difficult to play, even with legends that tell you this means this, and that means that. No, after so many years, normal music I can do it fast without preparation.

---

[79] Marcel Proust 1871–1922, French novelist, critic and essayist
[80] *Éditions Gallimard* is one of the leading French publishers of books
[81] André Gide 1869–1951 French author and winner of the Nobel Prize in literature in 1947

Dueck: So for example, when you were adjudicating at all of these festivals, and they sent you the music prior, you would learn the music yourself without piano. Envisioning or imagining it.

Nees: Yes, imagination.

Dueck: And then you would listen to see if it meets your imagination?

Nees: Ah, you mean for composition?

Dueck: No, choral competitions?

Nees: Oh, most of the time, you would only get the scores the moment before the choir sings. But you can see that when they are experienced people on the jury, at least half of the repertoire they would know. It is only the test piece which is to learn. And when they come with a piece from their own culture, for example Ukraine, words that you can't read, or hand written music, you can't study this. Then you have to listen. And the notes you can follow along. And most of the time you are not alone as juror. No it is not so much a problem, I think. The position to adjudicate compositions is much more difficult.

Dueck: Because then you have to *know* the piece?

Nees: Yes, you have to read them and study them. My scores I can see and read, and most others as well, but some composers send you a score that you have to figure out; that means that, and this means this. And then there is the graphic score, as well. That is difficult to adjudicate.

Dueck: And that is what you will be doing in Italy this July? Or teaching?

Nees: No, I will be teaching now, but I was adjudicator in Arezzo[82] last year, and in Belgium too, I did a lot of competitions. Yes, but after so many years, you can almost smell it.

Dueck: Originality and authenticity?

Nees: Yes. Adjudicators have to be experienced people. When you have young judges, maybe they are excellent, but many times I have already seen people that can't even *hear* the test piece. They come in juries because they are members of the commission in, say, Tours[83]and then they go to Cork.[84]It's not always the best; sometimes it is political—I ask you, and you ask them. But there are still very good jurors, and it depends many times on the percent of the jury. And then the adjudication is good. No, I trust that more or less from my experiences that most of the time the adjudications are correct.

Dueck: In all cases, my feeling is that in these competitions whatever the adjudication may be, they generally promote excellence. Even in the preparation for the competition.

Nees: Yes, yes. It is like the world championships, the Olympics of singing; it is what choirs work for.

Dueck: Another question, again in reference to the speech Peter Erdei[85] made to the choirs at the closing concert of the Cork Festival. He was talking about movement on stage. I was previously in Cork in 1999 and now again in 2008,

---

[82] International *Guido d'Arezzo* Composition Competition of Arezzo, Italy
[83] *Florilège vocal de Tours*, Tours, France
[84] *Cork International Choral Festival,* Cork, Ireland
[85] Past Director of the Zoltán Kodály Pedagogical Institute of Music, Kecskemét, and frequent adjudicator at the Cork International Choral Festival

and I noticed much more movement on stage during singing. He suggested that we live now in an age where everything has to be visual: we have television, we have computer screens, we have music videos. Everything is visual; it's part of our lifestyle and we have to come to terms with that. But for him when he is hearing music, there cannot be anything happening that detracts from the listening experience. This is very much the position I hold as well. Is the *music* not arresting enough, that we have to add motion, or *visual* effects to it? Is this not similar to music videos?

Nees: Yes, yes. But unfortunately some music is not important without movement. However, you will never make movement on Bach, I suppose, or Vittoria. It's clear. The movement comes there where it is possible, and it is mostly in twentieth century music when you have jazzy influences, or a story which is told, or a musical.

Dueck: Interestingly one of the gala concerts at this years Cork competition featured *Musica Intima*, a 12 voice professional ensemble from Canada. In this concert all of their music incorporated movement. It didn't matter whether it was Renaissance or 21st century music, there was always movement onstage. I kept wondering, "Why?" The music was wonderful, the group is excellent. Movement added nothing to the music, do you understand?

Nees: Yes. Of course, is it only the changing of place on stage for a better acoustic or something? Then it would be functional. But if it is only to make movement, then it is crazy to do it. For religious music of the Renaissance, for instance? Not good. But I think when you do it with Poulenc piece written for

children, for instance, then it could be helpful. However it is *la mode*; it's in vogue, so it will disappear also. Since movement started, choruses are singing more by heart. Juries requested that if there was to be movement that the music must be sung by heart, not with the score. And so choirs sing by heart. That is already good; they are looking at the conductor who can ask for more expressibility, than when they are studying the score. And then, it is a question of good taste. Most choirs ask a choreographer and if they do a little bit here or there, it can be good, but when they do from A to Z, not so good. It happens less now than in the beginning when they first discovered movement.

Dueck: So from your perspective, this too shall pass?

Nees: It will pass, I'm sure, because it has come once, and will disappear at a different moment in time. Maybe essential things …. When we sing now, let's say, Spanish polyphony we will do it a different way than my grandson will, because the historical period, the authenticity movement was there, and even if it is exaggerating, something is there. So maybe you can find no new possibilities and maybe say, "It was not so bad in the past. Let's take that again." But something will be kept there. And I think also when there is more freedom in singers, when they are a little bit more at ease, it can help to sing better. Even when they let go the extreme movements, only keeping certain movements, even in their expression to the audience, it can be better. It's like the violinist who always plays with closed eyes; when he's a genius, maybe. When you are before an audience, people listen but see also and there has to be a good balance between both.

Dueck: That's part of our 20th/21st century malaise. We are now expecting a spectacle. We are not going to concerts to hear; we are going to concerts to see. It wasn't always so. The choirs used to be in the back of the church. You could not see them; you listened to them. You brought up an interesting point about memorization. Do you prefer memorized concerts?

Nees: Not complete concerts. It is not necessary. I recently was at a concert featuring a female chorus. Total repertoire by heart, and then they sung two modern pieces (one by me), and then they used scores. I think it was too adventurous to do it without scores. For memory it is not so easy as Schubert. So you can do both, with score and without.

Dueck: We were one of only two choirs in the competition to use scores. Our program of music was made up of fairly difficult music in terms of expressivity—the composers had put in a lot of expressive markings, articulative markings. We memorized it all, but decided to perform it with music. We found in rehearsal that much of the expressive nuances were lost trying to sing from memory, because our minds were focused on the memory aspect. Whereas, if the score was in front of us, we still sang basically from memory, but could use it occasionally for a quick reference. And as conductors, we felt that the overall performance was not only better, but more relaxed. What's your opinion on that?

Nees: Oh, no meaning. When the singing is good, both are possible. Often when it is done by memory it is not good, but it can also be poor when they are only looking into the score. You have to educate the singers that they do not use

the score [demonstrates hiding behind score, laughing]

Dueck: [laughing] As a screen!

Nees: I think that is not an important question; by memory or not. Accept both. When you sing a soprano in opera, she is by heart; when she sings oratorio most of the time it is with score. Both are good. And for songs I see the most different things. Most of the time when it's Schubert in the repertoire they sing by heart, but when they sing some less know songs then they use the score.

Nees: About philosophy. I see always music, art in general, as a consolation for the human situation. Human beings … we are more or less suffering. In general everyone has to suffer in his life. So music, painting, etc is given as a way of consolation. Religion too, I think. I wrote an article on music and the Bible and I started with Jubal. Jubal was descended from Cain, and he founded music, flute and harp, in Genesis.[86] It's coming from Cain, not from the line of Methuselah, and the forefathers of the Hebrew. Cain had a sign, a mark, and you can say, we are signed as people. *Gezeichneten durch Leiden.* [Marked by suffering] People that feel more than others, artists I think, are more signed, *gezeichnet*, than the normal worker who can live and drink and eat. And in that case, it is significant that it is coming from Cain; that we are signed somewhere and have found consolation. It is not of the great

[86] Genesis 4:21

descendents of Adam; Abel and so on. It is of the Cain line.

Dueck: The shady side.

Nees: Yes, yes. And thus artists have this human side which is from rebel and evil and everything, and still there, we are marked—privileged, with talent to compensate. And I think that this is very important in music. You can say that music is the most spiritual of the arts. Of course that's not true, in that music is frequencies. Moving frequencies. It is also not pure; it's not spiritual. It is something existing which we can't see but it is something in nature—it is going on. And so I come to the question: What is music for me? You know the Bach quote: "*Musik ist zu Gottes Ehre und die Recreation des Gemütes.*"[87] When he composed music it was only for "*Ehre Gottes*" and "recreation" of the soul/emotions, etc. It is very clear: glory of God or the recreation of the soul, and not for money and so on.

Dueck: Stimulation for the intellect and the emotion, but together.

Nees: In my case, you have seen titles of my work. It is religious music most of the time; about 75 percent, I think. I have also the other [secular]. Less instrumental, but when it is instrumental it is always rather light. I cannot be too serious on things that are not serious.

Dueck: And if the text is light?

Nees: Yes. Of course I have written on serious profound poetry also and then the music is serious. Still I have some works which are only play. For instance, when the world championship for football was in Rome ('84 or '86, I think),[88]

[87]Music is for God's honour/glory and the recreation of the soul
[88] 1990 FIFA World Cup

and we had the television, every day two hours of program, certain people asked me, "Could you write something for that? We need some classical music also in the background." Then I wrote a football gavotte.[89] It is interesting to note that my male singers, most of the basses, were amateurs of football. I was not especially interested: I like sport, but every Monday I knew who had won. So I would start my rehearsal with composition for the male voices, and then they were very happy. And so I asked them to write me many names of good footballers, and I would compose on it. And I wrote a gavotte which is 18th century music, rather aristocratic, with the football idea together. I made a verse on the names of these footballers. That kind of play. Not so long ago, for a university chorus of Leuven students, I wrote a piece, *Filosofenfontein.*[90] It's on the names of Greek philosophers, French philosophers, and on two or three sportsmen from Belgium. So it's totally different from most of my music. But it's a part of me that I like to be humourous also in music. And why not. And another thing: engagement, social engagement. 1968 was for Europe very important.[91] I was too old to be a student already, but still I was young enough to … Che Guavaro,[92] and so on. And in that period I wrote some engaged music pieces. For instance, *Rachel*.[93] It was a, let's say, alternative Christmas cantata on the murders of

---

[89] *Voetbalgavotte*, 1989, mixed chorus
[90] *Filosofenfontein*, 2003, mixed chorus and piano
[91] The year of student protests in Europe and around the world.
[92] Ernesto "Che" Guevara, 1928–1967), Argentine Marxist revolutionary, physician, author, intellectual, guerrilla leader, diplomat, military theorist, and major figure of the Cuban Revolution
[93] *Rachel*, 1970, cantata for choirs, solos and instruments.
[94] *Mattheus en de rijkdom*, 1971, mixed chorus
[95] *Mammon, een radiofonische satire*, 1972, 2 speakers, soprano solo, mixed chorus, instrumental ensemble

the children. I wrote about St. Matthew and the riches,[94] and *Mammon*,[95] on money in the world. But I did this only for a few years, because it is very easy to make that title, then, "Oh that is very interesting," applause, but nothing is done. So it is not every engaged piece that has consequences. It does not make the world better. So now my only engagement is religious. It's enough, I think. But I did it, and I believed it in that time, but it is in vain. It has no impact on the world. You have big success. Everybody likes it that you wrote it. "Oh, *Mammon*, Oh!" But to be a social worker you need to work on a different way and not with music.

Dueck: Yes. Someone once said to me, "The poor need food and clothing, not music."

Nees. Not music, yes. It's hard to argue with that, because my wife is working with refugees, very poor. I know what it is.

Dueck: So by becoming engaged with the church, or staying with the church, is the church a force of social change?

Nees: I think so, yes. But I'm not working with the church. I'm a believer, yes, but I give the music, that's all. I'm not engaged in some parish. Only to help the choirs, that's the only thing. I will give you my *Requiem*.[96] You can have it but it is illegal [not published yet, working score only], not making concert, or no *bibliothek*, no library. It's only until next year when the Annie Bank version comes out, which will be the same, I suppose. This is only for your own interpretation. So that, I give you.

---

[96] *Requiem*, 2008, soprano, tenor solo, mixed chorus. First performances on March 8, 2009, the birthday of Vic Nees, in Antwerp and Tielen, by the Ghent Madrigal Choir conducted by Johan Duijck

Dueck: Thank you.

Nees: At the time when I wrote this … there is a lot of lyricism there.

Dueck: There is no "Dies irae?"

Nees: No, no, no. That is no more. It is not forbidden [to write it], but no. That is the spirit from the Catholic mass, because it's tremendous, yes. But it is not corresponding to the actual vision of [hereafter]. However, everything except the "Dies irae" is there.

Dueck: [after perusing many of Nees's scores with him, including some from the 1970's which contain graphic notation] Do you do any graphic notation any more?

Nees: No, no.

Dueck: Why is that? Not interested, not effective?

Nees: Too easy. Too easy to write. Not enough thinking about it.

Dueck: [looking through the score for *Mammon*] And where is this text from?

Nees: Ah! I made it myself from newspapers and magazines.

Dueck: Oh. How often have you done that, create your own text?

Nees: No, not very often. Never for serious music.

Dueck: Most of your music is related to the church, i.e. church music. It may be hard for you to answer this question. Are you writing church music because that is your tradition, or are you writing church music because that is the type of music you feel most comfortable with?

Nees: Yes, most comfortable with and …

Dueck: Because you obviously come from a long tradition of being immersed in the

Catholic church.

Nees: Yes, but I was against, first of all, my father, and that implicated his world which was the church. And I was going a little bit outside, looking for something else, but eventually came back which is wise, I think. But why always [sacred music]? First of all there is a practical reason. When you sing Bible language, it's always … it can be sung by a group. When you have poetry, for example *Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedeuten* [I do not know what it means], Heine,[97] you have "ich", "I." It's possible to sing together, "I," but it's better to sing together "we." And in the Bible, even when it says "I," for example, in Psalm 122, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go unto the house of the Lord." So it was I, but in the Bible language I is usually …

Dueck: Collective?

Nees: Yes, yes, collective and never egocentric. Heine is individualistic. Therefore, my preference for Bible texts: it's always "we," even when it's "I."

Dueck: How interesting. It's actually humanism, collective humanism.

Nees: And you can believe it, everybody can. Even if you are not a "believer" you can believe what you sing. And it is not so with most poetry; it is always individualistic. And when I write songs for piano and solo voices I use that poetry. But for chorus music it is that type of poetry [collective], or religious. And as for religious texts, I am persuaded by the religion. I am no more seeking; I am rather sure. So yes, that is the natural way to express myself. I prefer to sing in the church with chorus also for acoustic reasons. And so it is

[97] First line from *Die Lorelei* (1822), written by German poet Heinrich Heine (1799-1856)

always more interesting than to write on profane poetry for a concert. In Berlioz' case it is not true [laughs] because he was not a serious believer; and others also. For instance, Ramond[98] yesterday. Raymond is a Free Mason now; in his youth he was a Catholic believer. So he is writing a mass. He is not a believer any more. It is good music, but I think when you … Let's say a Bach Passion. You need a very good soprano, a good alto if you don't use a male alto, and so on. You can have a soprano who is going everyday to church and can sing, but not extremely good and you have her as soloist, or you can have a soprano who is an excellent singer but not at all religious and even a life that is not … serious, let's say. [laughs] Which of those do you prefer for a concert? I prefer the good singer. I prefer the good singer. I think that when you don't know those persons personally, and you are hearing that music in the audience you need the best singer. And she can be such a good singer, and interpret the music so that she can bring that religious feeling as if it was true, but without believing herself. And the first singer cannot. Let's say, vocally or artistically it is not enough, but she believes it. Well you know in churches [laughs] we can hear bad singing too. Even when they think it is good. They do all that they can but … The maximum is when both elements are there: when you have a person who has total integrity, human and artistically. That's still the best solution.

Dueck: Choruses too, then.

---

[98] Raymond Schroyens, (1933).Belgian composer. His "Missa Spes et Dubatatio" was heard by us at Mass at the St. Michael's Cathedral in Brussels, May 11, 2008, sung by Cathedral Choir, conductor Kurt Bikkembergs.

Nees: But you don't find many. Thomas Aquino[99] wrote about the arts in churches. They had to be churched with aesthetic laws, not with ethic laws. And the comportment of people with ethic laws, of course. But both are different qualities. Aesthetic has its rules. If you write bad music and you set the "Kyrie eleison" but with many mistakes, it is not good. It is still bad, even if it is religious and written by "holy" [laughs] men or women. It has its laws which have to be followed.

Dueck: So you can have religious music written by "un-holy" men and it can be good, because it follows aesthetic laws.

Nees: Yes. It exists. A lot of it.

Dueck: And by extension you can have "holy" performances by "unholy" people.

Nees: Yes. Ethics, aesthetics; it's a different way, but they come together. Manuel de Falla[100] was a very, let's say, holy man. He wrote, never religious music because he didn't feel himself good enough as a man to do it. Because in his youth he wrote the *Los Amores de la Inés*[101], and all those sensual works. But he was … When you read his biography, he was a serious Christian, and a holy man. It's a pity, but no church music or religious music at all. Only one small motet.

Dueck: Too high a calling?

Nees: Yes. I think there <u>are</u> composers and painters and writers who are good

---

[99] Thomas Aquino (ca. 1225–1274).an Italian priest of the Roman Catholic Church in the Dominican Order, influential philosopher and theologian in the tradition of scholasticism

[100] Manuel de Falla (1876–1946), one of the foremost Spanish composers of the 20th century. Know for his intense Catholicism, daily practice of spiritual exercises, and ascetic lifestyle.

[101] *Los Amores de la Inés* ("The loves of Ines), an operetta of one act, two scenes.

religious men and are also artists. But most of the time it is not so. Alas.

Dueck: And there will always be a place for religious music, given the decline of the church?

Nees: Yes, religious music outside of the church is possible. My music is religious but most of the time not liturgical. Only a mass, and some others, but they can also be performed. The [*Trumpet*] *Te Deum* has been done in a religious service but you can sing it anywhere. Same with the *Magnificat*: religious music but not liturgical. No in the church music school in Leuven, where my father taught, I was never there, and so they don't like … well, they ask me from time to time in the juries, but I am my own institute for religious music. And there is no … we have good relations but they never ask me for some compositions. They have their own composers.

Dueck: That have come through the school?

Nees: Yes. Many of them are priests. Or actually not at the moment: it was previously always priest. There is one, the successor of Monsignor Van Nuffel, who said to me, "You are the most Protestant of the Catholic composers. You perform Distler, and you know he was Protestant, and he committed suicide." There are so many reasons not to practice Distler [laughs] for Monsignor.

Dueck: And why do they say you are the most Protestant of Catholic composers? Is it because you are outside the liturgy?

Nees: No, no. It is because in the beginning I was in the idea of this North German Protestant music as my model.

Dueck: Yes, but technically?

Nees: Technically, there was no difference. But they were used to that type of harmony, sweet music, and so on, compared to my [demonstrates opening motive of *Singet dem Herrn*]. It was not in the Catholic tradition.

Dueck: It is now though?

Nees: Yes, yes, it is now.

Dueck: And the positions of Kapelmeister? For example, as we saw yesterday, Kurt Bikkkembergs is the Kapelmeister of St. Michael's Cathedral in Brussels. This is still a tradition that is carrying on.

Nees: No, no. It is a tradition in Antwerp and in Brussels. In Mechelen it was a tradition, but for a long time there was no chorus. Now one of my colleagues has started again the cathedral choir there. Antwerp has a good young conductor. They have a choir school. They go to normal schools, but they also have a school where they can go to make music after the normal school. And in Brussels it is not from the cathedral. It is students and friends, and students of the church music school where Bikkembergs is teaching.

Dueck: And he selects?

Nees: Yes

Dueck: And pays?

Nees: The church pays them but it is not … it is only a trifle of what an [professional] artist costs. For him I suppose there is a fee, but it will not be a normal salary.

Dueck: In other words, that could not be his sole position?

Nees: Not at all.

Dueck: Are there any situations here where the position of Kapelmeister and organist are combined, and where that would be enough to be a full time position?

Nees: No, here [in Belgium] there are no more organists who are also conductors.

Dueck: I noticed in your list of works that there are many unpublished works. In those cases, you either gave manuscript copies to the choir, or they made copies of your manuscript for performances, is that right?

Nees: Yes, or made copies with the computer.

Dueck: Do you use a computer for writing music?

Nees: No. It is all hand written.

Dueck: It's very beautiful.

Nees: Now I sometimes have a little bit of tremor in the hand, not much but sometimes enough to disturb. But I have a copyist who writes it out for me, and I can ask for a computer also.

Dueck: Thank you very much for today.

Appendix 3: Interview 2 Thursday May 15, 2008

Dueck: Perhaps today we should just review the interview questions that I sent to you, to make sure that we have them all covered, and use that as a point of departure. As a starting point, my questions on rehearsals. You were talking about posture yesterday when we went to watch the Radio Chorus rehearsal. You said to me, "Look how they are sitting." You were implying that it doesn't matter as long as the correct sound is produced - with professionals.

Nees: With professionals, of course. When you have an amateur chorus which is rehearsing once a week, you can ask them not to sit too comfortably. But you can't ask those singers who are singing three to five hours a day that. You can ask that they sit so that they can breathe comfortably, and they are professionals; when it comes time to sing they will produce the sound.

Now about preparing a rehearsal. I don't know if in Canada it is the same, but here in Europe they have a tendency to sing 10–15 minutes maximum, exercises. In the amateur choruses the conductors like to take a canon for that, because then you have unison and then polyphony. But most of the interesting canons are made high and low, because they are sometimes in bass, 3 or 4 voices, sometimes in upper voices, and it's a very great distance between the parts. So to sing the first note of the day, you don't need an octave, plus. So it's not good. So when I assist at rehearsals, then they sing this as a duty. 'You have to prepare the voices.' And then they sing these exercises or songs,

and then, okay, after 10 or 15 minutes, now we start rehearsal. And nothing is there from what they did! They lose, because it was not alive; nothing to do with what was coming. It was a duty. They start with this because the professor said to start with 10 minutes of exercises, then on to the music. But it's crazy. So the maximum what I did was to prepare the medium [mid range]. I start in the high/medium, not too high so that everyone can easily sing it, and then come down by half tones. The problem is never the profound sounds, not the high or low sounds; it is the medium sounds—that's the problem. Because when a chorus is going downwards [sinking intonation] it is always happening when it is comfortable to sing. It's not at the high G's or the low G's; it's always between C and C when it is comfortable for everyone to sing. And there they go flat. So why? There is one reason, I think. No there are more: general reasons, the weather, for instance, or bad moments, it can happen. But *normally*, it is at the vowels. They don't go downwards on [sings ee, ay], no problem. But [demonstrates falling pitches with *denk – <u>en</u>*, *stel – <u>la</u>*]. Here in Flanders it depends on the regional dialects. Everyone, without knowing, brings their own sounds. Even in Latin or in other languages, they bring their vowels from their dialects. Even if they have studied diction, even then. And I think to sing correctly, you have to have unified vowels.

Dueck: So with open vowels, in the middle range, you will always tend to lose pitch?

Nees: Yes. And therefore, I use some exercises like this. In Flemish *deze den is slecht*: den is fir tree. So translated, *this tree is bad*. Now in Flemish you have the same vowel four times in this phrase and four different sounds on this

same vowel. [demonstrates] And then that's the problem. They sing them too much alike, and they need to be clearly different.

Dueck: So in your "warm-ups" with the choir, you use this type of exercise to focus attention on different vowel sounds and projection?

Nees: Yes. Sometimes just on vowels, no consonants, sometimes on this vowel, sometimes other vowels. And only in the medium range. And sometimes in chords also. And not too much major; more minor, or church modes. Because major is used so often.

Dueck: So you use minor or church modes to focus the concentration; the singers have to think about pitch placement?

Nees: Yes, yes. And always in downwards motion because they most often go flat going down. And the difference between chromatic and diatonic half tones. They are different. With the piano it is all the same, but when you sing *a cappella* there are times when you make the thirds too large. Descending, most of the time. I work a little bit of this technique (5 or 6 minutes, not more), and then we sing a piece that we are rehearsing, and then stop at the first time there is a vowel issue. After the exercise they were aware of it, but then they forgot, so this reminds them. So I work on the piece itself, and separate this voice and that voice. I think that generally, preparation for a rehearsal in which the duty is going upwards to high A, or even higher, without any control of vowels is of no use.

Dueck: In other words, the preparation (or what we call "warm-up") always has to be connected to what you are working on in the rest of the rehearsal. There has to

be something brought back from the pieces into the warm-up, otherwise it is just an exercise.

Nees: Yes, yes.

Dueck: In your professional choirs, were there ever occasions where you did not have warm-up periods?

Nees: I always did it.

Dueck: The reason I ask is that I have been in choruses where the director expected the singers to be ready to sing.

Nees: Yes, I know. It's nice, very nice. But [in a professional choir] you come to work on a Monday morning, after the Sunday drinks after football, and the females are working Monday morning for their children and so on, and they take the train, and it's too late, and so on. They come there, and whew!! So…

Dueck: Five minutes?

Nees: At least, certainly do not start with a difficult piece. A very easy piece and homophonic. Because when you have different vowels in a polyphonic piece with many voices you have no control. Homophonic, like an *Ave verum*; everybody has the same vowels. So I think good singing has to start with logopedy.[102]

Dueck: Diction?

Nees: Logopedy? Yes, but more than diction, also vowels, pronunciation. Many people have structural defaults … mistakes in their mouths. Could be personal injuries, but also just the region where they come from. To cure that first so

[102] The study and treatment of speech defects; speech therapy, dealing with problems concerning speaking and listening.

that it is natural. If you have said something twenty-five years one way, but now to say it a different way, sometimes you forget and you say it the old way. Take enough time to make the roles natural; that the singers don't fall in their old sickness but that it is normal; they don't have to think about it. You have to be prepared so that you can sing the music and the words without all those technical things. So use those five or six minutes of preparation to make them clear for the whole chorus, male and female. And make it so that they [the vowels] are always there, between every consonant, because, for example, they could be good before "m" or "n," but bad after "k." Something different, but close. *A cappella* singing, *a cappella* contour is more or less floating because the singers have the meter, and you can sing … When you pronounce words it is not mathematically precise. When I say, "Singet dem Herrn" it is not the same as when I have written [in the score] "Singet dem Herrn." But you can do it in *a cappella* [demonstrates lengthening first syllable of "sing – et"]. But when you do it with a tactus, then it has to be precise. Otherwise you come too late. [writes dotted quarter followed by an 1/8th note with "sing" on dotted quarter, and "et" on 1/8 note] You see the "ng" has to come on the dot, otherwise the vowel is too long and the "et" will be too late. I will take a crazy example. In German you have "angst schrei."[103] [writes these two words under two consecutive quarter notes] You see, in the word "angst" you have one vowel and four consonants. And you have four consonants in "angst" followed by four consonants in "schrei." When you sing

[103] (in)fear, cry out

it *a cappella* you can lengthen the consonants, stretch the time, but when you sing it with the orchestra all of the consonants have take place within the quarter note and not after. [demonstrates two versions] That's a crazy example because there are so many consonants.

Dueck: Actually I think it's a good example. So in *a cappella* singing you are allowed more liberties; you can stretch things out a little bit more depending on which consonants you want to stress the most; for example if you wanted to lengthen either the first four consonants, or the second four consonants depending on which word you felt was more important.

Nees: Yes. But when you put that together with an orchestra, no. Even piano. Or take something like "sepulchrum" over three quarter notes. "Se" is no problem; "pul" you have to make sure there is time for the ending "l" in the quarter note; and "chrum"—that takes time.

Dueck: So the "kr" of "chrum has to come before the beat.

Nees: No the "r" is shorter. The roll will be shorter. The "k" sound, that's a point, but the "rrrr" needs time, and the "m" needs more time. So it will be a very short "u." So then in this word on three quarter notes you will have a long vowel on "se," a shorter vowel on "pul," and a very, very short vowel on "chrum." And that's the reason why when you work in an instrumental way that you have to take care of the tempo, and everything has to be on the note where it is written. When I speak the word there is a natural lengthening of the second syllable, because of the stress. That is the prosody of the word. But you can't put it in music like that if you have three equal length notes. With

instruments it has to have even lengths; it can be legato but still exact.

Dueck: Robert Shaw used to rehearse his choirs by having them sing on numbers, (for example, 1 and 2 and tee and 4 and, etc.), and would allow them to use texts only after the music was learned. It was his method of internalizing the rhythms for the chorus, and forcing the text to match the rhythms.

Nees: Yes, but even there "four" is longer than "two", or "six." My system can work as well. And when you work with an adult chorus, you can say, "Look at the size of the syllables. Some are longer than others. So you will need more time to get through all the letters for those." It's logic.

And then you can at the same time … for instance "sepulchrum" means the grave, so it is a different sound. When you think what you sing, even when it is rather instrumental, it is still about "sepulchrum" and not about the sun or stars. And if you are working only with numbers, it can become somewhat objective.

Dueck: Yes it can. I had another question about the Radio choir. When you were conducting was it always only new works, or normally only new works?

Nees: New, or what did not exist on CD.

Dueck: Ah. So was that the mission of the Flemish Radio Choir? To promote Belgian choral music?

Nees: Not only Belgian. There were three channels. On the first and third of these we might perform not so difficult music, songs and so on, musical arrangements. But what exists on CD's or records, you don't have to do it again, it's already there for your listeners. So what was not recorded we had to

do. But it was, most of the time new music, and most of the time Belgian composers, which is natural. Also ancient music which was found during the year, which had not been performed. And it could be music from Romania or something like that; composers you found. Everything that didn't exist in recordings.

Dueck: And you would rehearse for how long? How many programs per week?

Nees: Every week a program. Now it is week preparation, and a week concerts—five concerts. In my time it was a week of preparation and the last day, Friday, recording.

Dueck: And this was aired the following week?

Nees: No, usually much later.

Dueck: So you would prepare four days and record one day. This was the routine for those thirty-five years when you were conductor?

Nees: Most of the time. But now because they are preparing a concert, it is longer than what I did. Our programs were usually 20–25 minutes, depending on the difficulty and the scores. But everything has to be recorded, so recording is dangerous, more dangerous than concerts. At a concert you hear it once; there may be a mistake but you forget it. On a recording if you make a mistake, you will hear it every week once again. [laughs]

Dueck: So Friday was probably the most difficult day. Recording day.

Nees: Yes, but you know, after so many years you are used to recording. It's always a little bit stressing, but it can be also a pleasure. Depends on the music you sing.

Dueck: You were a conductor for many years. Did that change the way you wrote choral music, or do you think it had any effect?

Nees: Yes, it had an effect. First of all you find a lot of new music which you didn't know to make programs, and even if you had your own style, you are affected by what you learn. So I think some elements came. For instance, repetitive elements. This came from … I did some recordings of Philip Glass, and [Michael] Nyman and others. So you start with, "Oh why did he write it," but after a few rehearsals you say, "There is something in there." I did also the *Requiem* by Ligeti[104] for instance. It is a masterpiece, I agree, but not interesting to sing. It has spaghetti lines, up and down, and all together. The notes have to be there, but if you sing different notes, not important, nobody will hear them. [laughs]

Let's say also Romantic music, because lyricism also came late; I accepted it late. It was there earlier, but I accepted it only in my late 50's. And it came maybe also from Romantic French composers. For instance the music of my father. So this lyrical music that I write now, I wouldn't have written it thirty years ago, and now with post-modern music where everything can, I can say, "Why not? It's there; show it." And this is coming from doing [performing] other compositions [composers] too.

The main influence is that most of the choral conductors are used to amateur singers. They have their own way of working; once a week and you have to give every spoon in the mouth [laughs]. But professionals, they read and after

[104] György Sándor Ligeti, (1923–2006), Hungarian composer

many times you see that they are the same people as the amateurs. If it is difficult, or too high, or always around the passaggio, then they don't like to sing. It's completely normal. Yet you say, "But you are professional, you have to do it." Okay, they do it but still they would have preferred to do some Dvorak![105] The voice is important. The *music* you sing with the voice, but also the *voice* is important. It has to be well written for the voices and when it sounds good then it is easy to sing. The singers are more happy than when it's some Ligeti, difficult, etc. There is joy in singing. And you can have joy in Bach singing, in Mozart singing, Ravel singing. But there are composers where there is no joy, only labour, duty. And then, yes, they feel it. They are not happy with it. They react as every normal person.

Dueck: More so than an instrumentalist?

Nees: Yes, of course. With instrumentalists it's always something between them—"*I* can do it!" You have composers who will write for sopranos always F and G. Okay, it's possible, but it is not amusing. It's boring, eventually musically, but also straining. So in my compositions you will see that the singers are happy.

Dueck: More so in later compositions?

Nees: More the later, and that's from the experience of working with choirs. I have performed some works by composers where I would ask, "May I change that note?" "NO. What is written is written." No change. And you have composers like that: "What I wrote is holy." For some composers when I wrote a certain note to make it easier to sing and better to sound, they were happy. Some

[105] Antonín Leopold Dvorak, (1841–1904)., Czech composer

didn't want it. So *I* was in the beginning more or less … I wrote my compositions and they had to sing it. They are musicians and players; sing my music. But afterwards I saw that music has to be interesting to listen to, to sing, and not labour. Somebody whose body is in the mines or something, that's labour. But singing has *not* to be labour. Music, art; it can be difficult but still you need a good economic balance between the input and the output. When something is very difficult, it has to be very good also. When it is only very difficult it is not in balance. It needs so much work but the result is not interesting, because the composition is not good. And that the singers can feel.

Dueck: Ah. So you can sing the *Missa Solemnis* by Beethoven; very difficult to sing but the result is good, so as a singer you are willing to put in the work.

Nees: Yes. So you will see that in the last ten, fifteen years every single note in my works, tenors, altos, there is always something interesting to do. With many composers the upper voice is interesting, and then follow, less interestingly, the other voices. I'm always aware of writing polyphonic; or harmonic polyphony, which is not the same. It can be linear but still harmonic; not really polyphonic but good lines. It is always with respect for the singers. It's because I spent so much time with choirs. Also it is better for you as a conductor when they like to sing it and are interested. As yesterday at the rehearsal, they said to me, "It's beautiful." Yes, *I* think it is beautiful, but they have to sing it. And if they like it, that is also a pleasure for me, and it will for the audience be also a pleasure. When choruses like it, they will sing well.

Dueck: In choral music what is the main point of interest? Is it how the text is

displayed through music?

Nees: That's for us as conductors. For the singers it is to see their line. What is well written for the voice, and what they can sing with pleasure. Especially for professional choruses who sing so much music. With instrumental players it can be good, or not good for the instrument, but that can be very different from the bassoon, for instance, who has other difficulties. But in a chorus, everybody has the same difficulties.

Dueck: When do you like to compose? Mornings, afternoons?

Nees: Different times. I was always composing in the mornings. I sometimes had guest conductors, so then I had a week free, and then I worked every morning from half past nine to twelve. I was always a morning person. Since I was retired I am working in the afternoon from two to five regularly. It can be writing articles too, but creative work, or transcription. But two to five, that's the rule. Why now in the afternoon? Because in the morning after breakfast I like to go by foot for my journal [newspaper] which takes 35–40 minutes. And when I get back I read my journal with a coffee. By then it is eleven o'clock. Then I do correspondence and mail, telephone. This takes usually an hour, maybe a little bit more. Then I eat at twelve, twelve fifteen, and after the noon news (news on the radio at one o'clock), then I prepare to start exactly at two, and I continue until five. And then it is over. I don't work in the evening. It sometimes happens in the evening when something has to be ready but normally it is two until five. Three hours a day of working intensively is enough. At my age, every faculty of the body is working less well than thirty

or forty years ago.

Dueck: Are there occasions where you are so involved in writing a piece of music that you carry on past the three hours?

Nees: No. I try to be arrived at the place where I can start the next day with possibilities. So stop when you still have something to say. If you finish, then the next day you have to bring new ideas, and to start is always difficult. A new part of the piece, a white paper, writer's block [laughs]. So I try to finish at a moment when I can write the next two bars. And then the next day you start with those two bars, and you are involved and it is easy for me.

Dueck: Do you evaluate your works, and how do you evaluate them?

Nees: Evaluation is most of the time made by others. When a chorus sings your work [laughs] then you know what they think and what the audience thinks. And when they say it is good, then it is good. But there are works that don't have success. It can be because the first performance is not good. People hear only; they don't read what is written. The work can still be good. I know that. It is not my fault. But I have works of which I know they are not so … it depends on the period. When you are looking for new things, then it is most of the time interesting for the first while. As my *Magnificat* was, for instance. I can't say what the good works are, but what the bad works are I can say. The bigger works are good. Some songs are not as well made as others

Dueck: I guess part of this question is whether there is one particular work where you really felt good about it? Or do you feel that you incorporate the same intellectual activity into every work?

Nees: Of course you try to do that, but it doesn't happen every day. A few choruses that I wrote in the seventies, or the eighties maybe—single works, not a cycle. Maybe it's not good; it's not sung and there is no interest in it, so I suppose it's not very good, but it is well made. There are other pieces. For instance, *Regina Coeli, Blue Be It*. It's not often performed because of the repetitive style. Rather strange lyricism and repetitive style together. You need a very good soprano and a celesta. And someone who can play celesta, because it is not like a piano. You have to play rather hard to have good sound. But I am sure that is a good work. Even if it is not recorded. Well, I recorded it myself, and it is performed a few times. I received a prize for it, but still there are not so many performances of it. There was an English chorus who did it recently in Stratford. I am sure that is a good work, performed or not.

Pieces from most of the records; *Concerto per la beata Vergine*, *Trumpet Te Deum*, *Magnificat*, those are good. I am sure that's good music. And the evaluation is made by choruses.

Dueck: Perhaps it doesn't matter how they evaluate it. Ultimately you have to decide whether it is good or not.

Nees: My evaluation takes place during the composing … because I am composing rather slowly. I have colleagues who are much quicker in their work. For me it is more or less slowly, every day three hours. For instance, the *Requiem*. I started it last March and it took me ten months. So that's a long time for a thirty-five, forty minute maximum piece. It's a long time. But when you

know that the complete works of Webern[106] are only three hours and so many minutes; the complete works. That's not the length of one opera of Wagner.[107]

Dueck: [laughs] Is that an assessment of value?

Nees: No, no, but it shows that Webern worked longer than Wagner. In my *Stella maris*, for instance you see a lot of details are made. The heart has intuition, but there are also intellectual things. To combine both, yes? And in the case of Webern it is more intellectual; pure. In the case of Wagner it is more emotion. I like both. The music seems to be spontaneous when you hear it, but it is not always. I strive to make it spontaneous sounding, but it *is* made. So during the process of working I am evaluating; will I write that, or that? For instance, for the *Requiem*, I wrote a "Benedictus," which I eventually put aside because I was not satisfied. It is not even in the score. And therefore it is good that you take a long time. When you are composing every day ten minutes then you don't have the time to evaluate it. I write for periods twenty, thirty seconds and then you have the time to control everything. And what I do when I think that it is difficult for intonation, I sing it myself. If it is difficult for me it is also difficult for the singers. And then I try to avoid that complexity and write in a more normal way.

Nees: A few more questions on things we had not touched on concerning choirs. For the Flemish Radio Choir, how did you choose your singers? By audition, I am assuming, but every year new auditions?

---

[106] Anton Webern, (1883–1945), Austrian composer and conductor

[107] Wilhelm Richard Wagner, (1813-1883), German composer, conductor, theatre director and essayist, primarily known for his operas (or "music dramas", as they were later called). Unlike most other opera composers, Wagner wrote both the music and libretto for every one of his works.

Nees: No, no, no. With the Radio Chorus we had the system of civil servants—State radio. Once the examination was done, after a period of six months probation, I think, if there were problems, then another six months probation, maximum three times, and then dismissal. But most of the time they stayed because they were in the unions, and there was interaction between the unions and the radio direction. So I had people who sung until they were sixty years old. That was the drama when I started, because I was producer. But the previous director,[108] who at that moment was sixty-three, or sixty-four, died suddenly on the street. And the chorus needed somebody to conduct it [laughs]. The director of the Radio music department (he was a conductor himself), asked me if I could do it for a few weeks until they could find a new conductor. Okay, so next to my producer work, I conducted the choir. But they were so satisfied with my work that they said, "Please can you change your work." And I changed it.

Dueck: So you were not producer after that?

Nees: No.

Dueck: So you started as producer. What did that entail? Did you select the music?

Nees: Make programs. And invite conductors.

Dueck: So if these singers were unionized, and it was a state service, and after their probation they were in the choir, how would you expel them if, for example, their voices were no longer suitable?

Nees: That was the problem, and it happened. And in that case I could ask, "Please, this man can no more sing seriously. Could you put him in another service?"

---

[108] Jan Van Bouwel

So perhaps they would put him in the music library to prepare scores for the singers; partitur, scores for the individual voice parts. This was a possibility. In other cases it was not. I had to make them sick!

Dueck: What, poison? [laughs]

Nees: No, not poison, not with a gun. [laughs] It was not allowed to make them sing alone. (This was in the past; everything has changed now). So I would ask, "Could you two sing together that phrase?" (Two you could ask.). But of course, I would know directly who had the problems. And doing that, they would [become self-conscious]. So they would go to the doctor asking always for a note to be excused. And the doctor would give them the note. And so for some, the last three or four years of their career was at home. I replaced them with other singers.

Dueck: Really?

Nees: Yes.

Dueck: Is it still that way?

Nees: No, no, no. I left in 1996. I left it when I was sixty, because it was possible, but also because at that moment the chorus and orchestra were outside the Radio. It was no more paid by the Radio. So they could exist still. Fifty percent paid by the government, Ministry of Arts and Culture, and fifty percent paid by concerts. And now the singers have no tenure, not for life. It is for one year, two years, or three years, maximum. And contract.

Dueck: I find that former situation as you described it so strange. It must have been very difficult.

Nees: It was difficult, but it was also this way in France, and in Germany also. In Germany, still now. I know the chorus of München Radio. They have sixty or seventy singers. Not thirty or forty of them are the real singers. They are replacements! We changed [conductors] at a good moment. But in that case, should I have left the Radio at sixty, and lose my pension, and start at sixty-one with a new career, free lance? No, I didn't. And at that moment I had still those [older] singers. After a year they disappeared. It was now possible to replace them. You saw now most of them are young. Even the ones who kissed me yesterday at the rehearsal, they are still from the old group, but they were at that time the youngest and best ones.

It was not so bad. The record I made in 1969 was not so bad. But still the sound is now fresher.

Dueck: You see, we don't have anything like a state sponsored chorus in Canada. We have professional choruses that can apply to the government for some funding assistance. But the government has no authority over these choirs; it is always a local board.

Nees: Yes, but you see, the influence of Europe is an old lady. We had the same system in the radio. It was State radio and the other people in the organization were nominated or appointed, and the union said, "Why not the same for players and singers. We are civil servants." It started in the thirties. I will tell you during the war it seemed to be very good. They had two conductors; I knew these people; they died both; they were good musicians. But both studied in Germany and were with the enemy. So in the chorus and orchestra

also many people were with the new idea: with Germany together. Germany lost the war, of course. So then in 1945 there was a commission—the unions, the Communist party, others—and they said, "You and you and you, you and you and you." And these [selected] people were out of the orchestra and chorus, and disappeared, even perished sometimes. And the two conductors went to America. One was an organist, and one was a flute player—Karajan's[109] player and church musician. And one of them died in Belgium.

Dueck: And after this commission it was just Belgian people in the choir and orchestra?

Nees: Yes. In 1945 they took all the good people, the good Belgians, but they were not the best musicians. During the war the best musicians had been sent to Germany. So in 1945 there came to the choir all those French conservatoire-educated people with their big vibratos; the conductor also [Jan Van Bouwel]. He was not a bad musician, but nothing special (we had many of that kind), but he was, during the war, on the good or right side. He was conductor from 1945 until he died suddenly in December of 1969, and then I started. And I had a few of that generation that started in 1945.

Dueck: I suppose you had to change the style quite a bit when you took over?

Nees: Oh, yes. It was a revolution for the choir.

Dueck: Because of the vibrato and the big sound?

Nees: Yes.

Dueck: That must have caused a certain amount of tension between conductor and

[109] Herbert von Karajan, (1908–1989).Austrian orchestra and opera conductor

chorus.

Nees: Of course, yes. But some of them were very happy with me.

Dueck: Well they must have been. They asked you to stay.

Nees: Yes. I will never forget one incident. There was an elderly bass with a very big vibrato, and I asked him if he could fix that, [i.e.] straighter tone. During the rehearsal break, all the basses came to me and said, "Mr. Nees, before you were born, we were singing already. You don't have to teach us, we know already." [laughs]

Dueck: Wow! What was your response? "I'm sorry but I am here now. Do as I ask."

Nees: [laughs] No, I put it in nice words.

Dueck: Well that brings me to my next question. What is the role of the conductor? Commander, leader, encourager?

Nees: I was, for that generation when I took the chorus until 1996, counselor for open marriages and everything, father for some, a teacher. I was a little bit of everything. Why, I don't know.

Dueck: But therefore, an effective leader because they confided in you.

Nees: You see, authority … I don't have the kind of authority that can be forced on people. That is not my personality. I have to find authority in what I *know*. And they had to feel that I had something to say. And they had to see the results; the difference in what was before and what was now and the success that they had. And so they knew that I was good.

Dueck: So the authority is in the music that you can create, in your musicianship. And that brings respect.

Nees: Yes. And at this moment I am the godfather of the Flemish choral music. And therefore in that booklet there[110] every three months since five years or so, I write my column.[111] I can say what I want. And sometimes I can have effect.

Dueck: And I suppose you can be critical as well. You have the authority and respect.

Nees: Yes, I am the godfather so who will reject his godfather? [laughs]

Dueck: Can a choir perform too often?

Nees: I am trying to think how many concerts the radio chorus does now, but let's say five concerts every two weeks. Then also extra concerts for special holidays, and so on. It could be more than 100. Yes it's different, I think, if you have to sing 100 times the [Handel's] *Messiah*, or Mozart's *Requiem*, or even the masterpieces, but still always the same. I am for changing the repertoire and finding new sounds and new things. That's amusing for me. Twice, maybe three times for a piece, but once you have found the secrets of the music, you have found them. When I was a young boy I read Poulenc's *Les Biches*[112] and there were some marvelous colours, sounds. So I was at the piano and I played and figured it out. I found the secret and that was enough for me. No need to hear twenty time *Les Biches*. It was that specific series of chords which were interesting to me because I didn't know what it was. Another time when I was fourteen or fifteen years old I had to buy a score because I couldn't find the harmonies. It was *Le Tombeau de Couperin* by

---

[110] *StemBand* is the national magazine for Koor & Stem, a Belgian national organization for choral music.
[111] "Kopstem" (translated "Headvoice")
[112] *Les biches*, ballet with chorus, orch, 1923, rev. 1939–40, 1947, eventually reduced to an orchestral suite in five movements.

Ravel,[113] the "Forlane." I don't know if you know it; the "Forlane" is number three, I think, of the suite. And it has very curious harmony, very curious. I was not able to find it on the piano. So I bought the score to know how it was made. In most of the other cases, I could find it by listening to it but not here. I will show you. [demonstrates by playing several excerpts of "Forlane" on the piano] So I found those chords before I learned to compose. And I knew that long before I read Beethoven. [laughs]

Dueck: Yesterday you said that before you became their conductor, the choir had never sung [Heinrich] Schütz.

Nees: That's right.

Dueck: This is the Radio Choir.

Nees: No, no. The Philippe de Monte Choir. Those were very young people; I asked them to sing in this choir. I was not with the Radio chorus yet, only producing at that time. Yes, the *St. John's Passion* by Schütz was the first performance in Belgium.

Dueck: And how long did you conduct this choir?

Nees: Nine years.

Dueck: And then you went to the Flemish Radio Choir after that?

Nees: Yes.

Dueck: And what happened to the Phillipe de Monte choir?

Nees: The male voices from there made a male chorus.

---

[113] *Le tombeau de Couperin*, Maurice Ravel (1875–1937), a suite for solo piano composed between 1914 and 1917, in six movements. Each movement is dedicated to the memory of friends of the composer who had died fighting in World War I.

Dueck: And are doing Renaissance works?

Nees: They don't exist anymore. I wrote a male choir suite for them. They did mainly modern male choir music, even barbershop. It was more amusement than serious. But it was a good chorus.

Dueck: To me it's very interesting that Schütz had never been done here. Then you went to the Radio Choir …

Nees: And I did one Schütz and one Schein.[114]

Dueck: And after that only new compositions?

Nees: Yes. And I did the Schütz and Schein when I was still only producer. I was as a guest conductor, and didn't know exactly what was there, so I came there with the wrong repertoire.

Dueck: I'm assuming that the reason for Schütz not being performed here primarily has to do with him being a Protestant composer versus Catholic composer, Belgium being predominantly Catholic.

Nees: Yes, Protestant, but also German. Because of the war maybe, but also we had more connection with the French culture. Certainly at that time we had the French music, and via France, also Italy. The Roman culture. And it stopped at the frontier of Belgium and Holland. You know, the first performance of the *St. John's Passion* by Bach in Belgium was in 1902, in Antwerp.

Dueck: Really. That's very late.

Nees: Of course! Because it was not in the Catholic tradition. And it came via Mengelberg and others, and now we are one of the champions of Baroque

[114] Johann Hermann Schein, (1586–1630).German composer of the early Baroque era

music. But the first performance was 1902, and my first performance of the Schütz passion was in 1963 or 1964.

Dueck: And were people excited about it?

Nees: It was the first concert I gave with that ensemble. Yes they were very happy. Not only the chorus. You see, you have *a cappella* soloist in the passions, without accompaniment. They were not used to that; they were used to Mozart recitative. It was very strange for us. So that was new and it came, together with Distler and north German Protestant music.

Dueck: Just now when you were playing piano, I remembered that I hadn't really asked you about your formal piano instruction.

Nees: I started with my father when I was four or so.

Dueck: Until when?

Nees: Until I started in the lower grades—before high school;[115] elementary school. During elementary school I had a piano teacher from the college. And after that I stopped, more or less. I was amusing myself; I was playing Darius Milhaud, other repertoire, my own, and then I had a few lessons from a teacher and composer in the church music school in Mechelen, but who lived in Antwerp. He came first to eat with us at home, and then he went to catch his train. So when he was there he gave me some instruction. When I went into the conservatoire I followed the pedagogical course, in which I had to play piano, and also theory, harmony, counterpoint, fugue, and so on, and

[115] High school refers to Secondary school beginning for students around age 12, where along with core subjects, students are allowed to follow different streams, technical, professional, or artistic. Elementary school refers to Primary school which begins on September of the year in which a child reaches the age of six. It lasts for six years and a whole range of academic subjects are studied.

directing. I took just a little teaching in conducting—just orchestra conducting, because choral conducting—well I was the first to give it here in Belgium. [laughs] When I went to Germany I studied it with Kurt Thomas.

Dueck: One of my instructors also studied with Kurt Thomas.

Nees: Oh yes? He was famous. Traditional, but good. Only he was not interested in modern music. I was [interested], in that time; Berio,[116] and others. And I asked him, "Professor, what do you make of Berio." And he replied, "I don't know him." And I invited him with the Radio Chorus to do *Die Schöpfung*[117] and a Bach concerto. It was in a church in Kortrijk, and before the concert he stood outside of the church at the sacristy, totally still and alone. So I went to him and asked, "Sind Sie eigentlich auch nervös?" [Are you actually also nervous?] He replied, "Wahnsinnig." [insane, mad] "Wahnsinng" meaning stupid or mad, and you couldn't understand him. Was he saying that he was completely nervous—stupidly nervous, or not at all nervous? He stood there; he did yoga. He was a man of imagination; some Germans are very connected to sun and water. He stood there as a Buddha. "Wahnsinnig." You could say enormously nervous or not at all!

He died when he was 64. He suffered from a muscle illness. He lost the possibility to use his arms, and at the end he had to be fed by somebody. But he wrote me then that he needed money. He was leaving then to come again, and the [Radio] orchestra said to me, "No more with him," because already

---

[116] Luciano Berio, (1925–2003), Italian composer, noted for his experimental work

[117] *The Creation* (German: *Die Schöpfung*), an oratorio written between 1796 and 1798 by Franz Joseph Haydn

then he could only make very small gestures—couldn't make big movements. It was clear but still too small. So that was a difficult moment to answer him and say no. I didn't tell him what the orchestra said; I only said that it was not possible at this moment for him to come again. And he died a few months later. But he was famous in his days.

But back to your question. At the Conservatoire I started piano again and I played Beethoven sonatas, Mozart and Bach partitas, and so on. Then I stopped piano and I was in conducting class, where there were only two of us. The other one couldn't play piano, I could. And he was doing *Till Eulenspiegel*[118] without orchestra, so somebody had to play. I was asked to play, so I played. And the other student followed me. I never got to conduct; always had to play. [laughs] So I was a good "prima vista" player, because my interest was not to play as a performer. My interest was to play to see what was there; how does it sound. I accompanied singers, that's all. Never gave solo performances on piano.

Dueck: You did play organ in church when you were twelve.

Nees: [laughs] Yes, yes.

Dueck: This next question may be difficult for you to answer because you have always worked with professional choirs. How do you maintain the interest of the choristers in a non-professional choir so that you don't have attendance issues, e.g. I'm feeling a little bit sick today, or ...

Nees: Or there is football.

---

[118] *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche*, (1894-95), Op. 28, a tone poem by German composer Richard Strauss (1864–1949)

Dueck: [laughs]Yes, football, or hockey. I'm sure this wasn't a problem in the union choir, but it is an issue in non-professional choirs.

Nees: I had a program with the choir where I would conduct for one, two, three weeks and then I would get in a guest conductor. In my case this worked. In that time we were together with a French chorus, twenty-five singers in each chorus, so a chorus of fifty, together. So the French conductor was using it and I was using it. But the French chorus quality was so low, that at one point I said, "I don't work anymore with the French chorus." And very soon after that the French chorus did not exist anymore. But then I had to do it myself alone, every week work. I tried to find an assistant, and had for three years an assistant. His name was Erich Van Nevel; he was a very good conductor but it was too much for the Radio to pay. So I lost my assistant, and instead I got in a guest conductor every month for one week. So let's say that I was always there, even when there was a guest conductor. I was also administrative boss of the chorus, artistic director. In the States they have the sabbatical year. After seven years you feel that you are empty. Not empty, but no more inspired. So then you take a sabbatical year. Only I couldn't; it didn't exist. So I had another solution. I renewed myself. Sometimes I paid attention to pitch, vowels, and then perhaps only text, or something else, yes? You look always for new points which you can work, while keeping the others. So you have to change yourself, your points of interest. And the most interesting thing as very simple people, not only professionals but everybody, is listening to stories. You can say something about the composition, the composer, and for all, the

words. Because the sensibility for poetry and stories is always for each age, young and old; everybody is interested. And you know, when you analyze church music texts they are beautifully made. Also from literary texts. And when you can tell something about "Gloria," for instance: It's about the Almighty but here it's about the Son, and the Almighty is very short but the Son is very long. And then the Holy Ghost is only that, [laughs] "cum sancto Spiritu." That's it. So when you see these proportions, Almighty, Jesus, Spirit, it says something about that period when it was made, and maybe also about belief. When you see everything that is behind the words also, then the chorus members can listen to it, and that is interesting to them. And when they sing afterwards you hear it a difference. And don't tell them too much about the serialism, "Oh, that is the twelfth tone," etc. It is more important to ask, "What do you sing now? What was the word; what did you sing? Sabaoth. What is it?" Maybe they don't know, and then you explain where it comes from. Then they say, "Oh, yes, now I understand the music." And that I think is the best way to interest people. Tell about the composer, his situation, why he did it, does he believe it, (Berlioz, not at all, but he wrote the *Te Deum*); always the human element.

And then also in my case, on Monday mornings talking about football. For a chorus that starts at 9:30 on Monday morning, eyes still half closed from drinks after football, female voices still worried about how their hair looks, etc. [laughs] You know, you can be cynical against people. It's very easy, and I was cynical when I was younger. So that they would shut up. But I don't do

it anymore. You can have the same result in a gentle way, but still be firm. Show that you understand what they think. Sometimes you see through that person, and you can, many times, feel what they are telling about. Is it eventually about you, or a word that they interpret as some sexual thing? It is very easy to be misunderstood. And when you can put the finger on the heart of the issue, it is good. However, life is so great you have to experiment with what works. I am not the same as you. I have my techniques. But to go inside the text is always interesting for everybody.

Another thing I do. Sometimes the vocal line is no longer melodically interesting. Only when you put the scores together, there is some interesting sound, but each line is not so interesting in every composer. So they will sing their notes, and you realize that they are singing without understanding; they are making no *singing* melody. I am very good in practical harmony, so I play the same notes with totally different chords; Romantic chords. And then they feel the attraction of each note, by association with the chords. And then its, "Ah, it sounds like *that*!"

Dueck: I see. Did you have an accompanist?

Nees: I had an accompanist in the beginning but he died, and from then on I did it myself. Or if we had a piece with piano, we would hire one.

Dueck: I also do not like to use an accompanist. I have found that there is better intonation if you stay away from a tempered instrument.

Nees: This morning, Gregorian chant of the "Introitus" was okay. The "Kyrie" was with the organ and at the end of the phrase the "eleison" was always going

downwards in pitch. When it's *a cappella* it might only be very small, but with the organ you can hear—well we hear, maybe not the singers [laughs]. So it's good to control; not to play everything with them, but control from time to time at the end of a phrase. Or when it's happening and you hear it, play a few notes - I play the piano always with my left hand.

Dueck: I have been in choruses where the piano was always used as a crutch and then taken away for the dress rehearsal and performance.

Nees: Even for *a cappella* music? No, no, no. Terrible. That is very awkward. When it is music with accompaniment you have to do it, but not always. You can do it *a cappella* and where it is necessary you can play the intermezzi, and so on. But never for *a cappella* music. Well, yes let's say for Schoenberg, so that you can have a control for them. It may be a very difficult line and if you play just in advance of the note to help them that sometimes work. Not every voice, but one or two. But you need to listen to where it is difficult; when it is going good you don't play, but when it gets difficult you may have to help.

Dueck: Did you consciously have to change the way the choir sang when you sang with tempered instruments; in other words did you have to ask them to adjust their tuning of thirds, etc? Or did this just occur naturally?

Nees: In my youth the intonation was always tempered. And it was tradition, and even when we sung Vittoria it was tempered. But then came the '70's and 80's, and the different ways to make the thirds smaller. It was not easy. Because it is sometime in difference between intonation and vowels, therefore start with good vowels and then you can correct intonation. It depends on one

or two commas;[119] sometimes a simple change in vowels and you are already there.

At some point I did no more ancient music. It was always 19th and 20th century, because there was such a culture of the ancient music, Renaissance and Baroque, on records that I had no more need of it. And so it was okay for me, because there were so many young people who were only interested in that stuff that I was more or less an amateur in that movement.

Dueck: Did you have any comments about choral music and education? What do you think about the future of choral music? Are there any new trends?

Nees: I have the impression that everything is now done; graphics, body movements, so on. Chorus will be not only chorus, but be combined with theatre. There is now a movement of total spectacle, as in Wagner's time. *Gesamtkunst*.[120] And now the theatre group hires a chorus and a ballet choreographer, and it is a total spectacle. That is new for choruses.

Dueck: And this, too, shall pass?

Nees: I'm sure. Everything will pass. But you cannot know what will come. The movement of ancient music is now also diminishing. But here in Belgium I couldn't say. You can hear, even in amateur choirs, music of Hildegard von Bingen up to the most modern; everything is now done. I could show you some program notes from modern competitions where many choruses come

[119] In music theory, the syntonic comma is a small interval between two musical notes, equal to the frequency ratio 81:80, or around 21.51 cents. Two notes that differ by this interval would sound different from each other even to untrained ears, but would be close enough that they would be more likely interpreted as out-of-tune versions of the same note than as different notes

[120] Universal artwork, synthesis of the arts, comprehensive artwork, all-embracing art form, total work of art, or total artwork. A work of art that makes use of all or many art forms or strives to do so.

from all over, and when you see the composers it is going from very well known to totally unknown, from all periods, from all countries of Europe.

Dueck: Did you have your programs set up for the Radio Choir a year in advance? By when did you have to submit a program, or how did that work?

Nees: Even weekly. We were depending on the Radio and the Television. With the Radio it was sometimes, "Can you do next week that and that?" It could sometimes be a year before you could get soloists and so on, but normal *a cappella* works, or works with piano, it could be at every moment. With Television it was prepared a long time before. But we were in business; with your own chorus you can make plans for concerts. We were in the service of Radio One, Radio Three, and Television.

Dueck: So you had televised performances as well?

Nees: Yes.

Dueck: How did that work?

Nees: Ha! [laughs] In the beginning, we sung it in the classical way, and they made their camera going around the choir. Then they said, "Sing it once again," and they would make a different light, or direction, and then "Once again," and so on. After five or six times, they would say, "It's okay now," and I would say, "Not for me, because now the music is not good when you sing it five or six times." And so I decided to make only playback. That means I would record it in studio—a good sound recording, and then we let that play while we were filmed lipping—or singing. Singing is better because it is not heard, but it is and looks more natural. The difficulty for me … For instance, I did *Les Noces*

by Stravinsky with four pianos and percussion, but it was easy. It doesn't change; the pulse is always the same. But when you do, say, Dvorak, with rubato, and accelerando, and retard, and then to find your same way during filming as when you recorded it in the studio or church; to do it under the lights and camera the same way … So I had to study. I took my tape, played it here at home, and studied my rubato. And my failings most of the time were when to stop the chords. To do things twice, exactly the same thing is not easy. The most simple things to sing were the most difficult to do in playback.

Dueck: I read an article about Toscanini[121] in which they compared the tempos of two of his recordings made twenty years apart and they were virtually identical.

Nees: Yes. He was renowned for that. It was a time when the conductor was the dictator. I think Toscanini was the perfection of togetherness, clear. But I think Stowkowski[122] was much more … singing. The precision of Toscanini was dry, and he was not beloved by the men who played for him. Now that is not my type of performance. But [laughs] if he could do it [repeat identical tempos], okay.

Dueck: I can only imagine how difficult playback must have been. Especially the expressive pieces, where to place your cutoffs.

Nees: I developed a system in the beginning. Our cutoffs were always in tempo and I would make a sign of one or two beats. Otherwise, where to stop? Not possible. You have to make a sign in the tempo, and decide where you will

[121] Arturo Toscanini, (1867–1957), Italian conductor renowned for his intensity, perfectionism, phenomenal ear for orchestral detail, and his photographic memory.
[122] Leopold Stowkowski, (1882–1977). British-born American orchestral conductor known for his free-hand conducting style, and the warm sounds he achieved with orchestras.

stop.

Dueck: The chorus probably did not like that at all, recording for television.

Nees: Oh yes, they did. They had special clothes for television, makeup and so on. It was a show.

Dueck: Very interesting.

Did you want to say anything about choral music as education, the philosophy of music as education?

Nees: Yes. I told you my philosophy is theology.

Dueck: Yes, but specifically music as an educating tool in general public education? The reason I ask is because in Canada there are many school districts where there is no formal music instruction in the schools. And if you want to put your child into some form of music program, it is after school and it must be paid for privately.

Nees: Here also. In the elementary schools they sing, but not serious—television tunes, and so on. And then in the first two years of the high school there is music. It can be recorder playing or singing, but I heard my grandchildren and they don't sing in the class. And in the last four years there is no music. In the last year there is an optional course, Introduction to the Arts, which is general. It can be about music, but most of the time it is about visual. No the emphasis is on mathematical, and information—Informatika [computer training], and modern language, practical and speaking. So I know four or five languages but I speak only good Dutch, and perhaps French.

Dueck: And English.

Nees: No, no. I always have to look for words, and so on. No, it's good enough to give a rehearsal. I can say more or less what I want to the chorus and they help me. Therefore for recordings I am not able to say clearly what I think as good as in Flemish. And sometimes it is not a simple thought, but rather complicated and therefore difficult to say clearly if you don't have the vocabulary.

Dueck: I see this problem of music education coming full circle. In the Middle Ages the only children trained in the arts were those that went into the seminaries, or church schools, or the very wealthy. Now in Canada the children that are trained in the arts are the ones whose parents can afford to pay for them to be in an organization, or in a private school. So it is still the same. One would think that as humankind we would progress; that we would understand the value of arts/music, given 1500 years of examples of what it has done for society. Yet somehow we still do not recognize this value, at least from a political standpoint.

Nees: That's our problem as well. I'm not happy that it is the same in Canada, but it is a consolation that you have the same problem. There are countries who don't have this problem; Sweden is excellent, Hungary is still good, Czechoslovakia also. But Germany it is already worse, France it was never good. Here in Belgium we have the state schools and the free schools. The free schools are, most of them, Catholic, some Steiner schools[123] (that is anthroposophy), and then there are two other methods of elementary

[123] Embracing **Waldorf education**, a pedagogy based upon the educational philosophy of the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy.

schooling. That is also a free initiative and the parents pay for it. But the Catholic schools have the support of the state, and are about the same price as the state schools. So it is a free choice between these two schools. And many people who are not Catholic or not religious at all send their children to the Catholic schools because of the better training, better curriculum. Some of the Catholic schools still have a chorus, or an atelier for painting.

Dueck: It makes one wonder about the future.

Nees: Oh, I don't know what will happen. But we had periods in Europe after the first World War when in Germany one loaf of bread was 300,000 marks. The devaluation of everything. And then twenty years later, they won the war—well, not won the war, but ruled Europe. So in twenty years so many things can happen. It is not easy to say what will happen.

Dueck: No it is not. It is just difficult when our children go to certain schools and there is really no opportunity for them to do anything in the arts.

Nees: Yes, but I think that old Europe is tired. We had all, and in 1968 it was really a new period, but the people from 1968 are now my age. And they are tired, and most of them are working; in banks and so on, and I know their ideals of 1968 are far away. Then came the generation, the generation of my children, who are in their forties now, who have no more religion because it was rather free when they were young. What they do is imitate rich people, what they see on television; horses, drugs, alcohol, even when they are very old—forty years. And then our culture is really disturbed by the influence of North Africa, Morocco, Algeria. Also many thousands of people from Turkey are

living here and they have their own ghettos which they do not want to leave, in the midst of Flemish people. When we drove into Mechelen you could see some houses there, most of them not well painted, and there live some North African people who don't even speak Flemish. So it is difficult for schools. That is their first problem now; how to let these children follow [the curriculum], because these people don't know enough Flemish to follow the normal education.

Dueck: In other words, music is of secondary importance. Let's just get these people into the schools, and let them follow in the school.

Nees: Yes, yes. Music is a luxury.

Dueck: Well, perhaps it's encouraging in a negative sense to realize that it is not only in Canada that there are these problems. Maybe it's a sign of the times.

Nees: Yes. For instance, the Catholic belief was very strong in Belgium and France. Now it is stronger in South America in some regions, and in Africa. There are many more priests in Africa than here. Every year there are in Belgium, maybe one or two new priests. When I was ten years old there were every year at least 250. And now it is the same thing Africa; every year many more priests. So religion is, no more, strong here, but is becoming strong in Africa, or Asia, or in South America.

Dueck: You were in South America. Is there also a corresponding rise in music?

Nees: Yes, yes. I was in Caracas, and I was giving a course of folk song arrangements, and how to write a good melody for a folk song. I had about seventy or eighty students a week.

Dueck: Wow.

Nees: The results were only four or five interesting pieces, but still there were seventy or eighty students per week. And at the end of the week there was a concert of my music that had been prepared by choruses of those students. And I have to say that they knew how to sing; it was a very good concert.

Dueck: Very interesting. Religion and art.

Nees: Yes. The Egyptian culture was great in the time of the pharaohs. Now those Muslim men that are living there in the region of Cheops pyramid, who take money from the visitors, when you ask them, "What century is this from?" "Oh, I don't know!" Not interested. The Egyptian culture is now … Yes the fundamentalism is there, and the situation is what we had in the '20's, or so—intellectually. And Greece. It is, of course, now a modern country, but the great history of the poets and philosophers—done. If you have seen the picture *Zorba the Greek,* [124] that's Greece now. And that is typical of southern Europe. Just to live. As for art, well living, that is the art! But you see when art dies here it will have its renaissance in, say, Tunisia, or somewhere. It will always be somewhere. But the history is … China is a very old culture. China, India, Egypt, Greece, Western Europe, the States, then Africa is not there but South East Asia and India is now very strong.

Dueck: Ah, full circle.

---

[124] *Zorba the Greek* (originally titled Alexis Zorbas), a 1964 film based on the novel *Zorba the Greek* by Nikos Kazantzakis, directed by Cypriot Michael Cacoyannis with the title character played by Anthony Quinn.

Nees: Yes, circle, and Africa will come later. For China rice was the food. Now here in the west it is bread, and the potato. In Africa it is manioc. You will see that after the rice and the bread will come the manioc, but it may take one hundred years. But there will be a moment when the Africans who are very strong people, and musically very rich (also physically)—it is impossible that they stay on the level that they now are! They will see what happens and once they have, let's say, the frames of culture they will be as interesting as we, or maybe more interesting. And maybe we will be here in Northern Europe, a very old culture which you could visit and read about, but just living here.

Dueck: That is a very interesting concept, and certainly plausible.

Here are some really simple questions. What do you think is the ideal choir size?

Nees: Twenty or twenty-five. Twenty-five because I had seven sopranos, and there was always somebody ill in the soprano part. So practically I had six. [laughs] And of course sometimes there were soprano solos, so one voice would be used out of the chorus. So it was twenty-five. But with the first people in the Radio Chorus, it was not necessarily soprano, alto, tenor, bass equally; it was twenty-five persons. Twenty-five persons for the weekly pay. And now when I lost the pianist, I didn't ask for another because I had more money for extra singers from time to time. Now they have twenty-four; six/six/six/six. When you have professional singers, with thirty-five you can sing practically all music before 1830. You can do Mozart mass, Beethoven mass, Mendelssohn, Schubert; it's possible with thirty-five professionals. It can be done with

twenty-five; well, yes they are doing it now with twelve, and even eight singers, anything is possible. But to do it comfortably … For instance, Stravinsky's *Les Noces*: it has four pianos and percussion and I did with thirty-five. That is minimum, really minimum.

Dueck: Next, what about seating arrangements for choirs?

Nees: Most of the time I did the most classical format. I put sopranos and altos in front, with tenors behind sopranos and bass behind altos. Sometimes I put the male voices in front, [laughs] to punish them. It makes a difference. And sometimes I would rotate them in different positions. Now my successor, Duijck[125] has sopranos and altos in the front, with bass behind the sopranos, and tenors behind the altos. Then you have the outside voices together. But I think whatever sounds good. Singing in quartets can also be good, not only for the uniformity, but also you have a stronger sound. Everybody has to sing more. Everybody has to give the maximum of his or her personality. Otherwise they are in a group together; sheep. [laughs]

Dueck: And what about the notion that some music was conceived spatially? For example, a Bach motet, where the soprano sound comes from one area, the alto from another and so on.

Nees: Yes. If you have a small group you can sing in one line in a half circle. You can even have the voices far from each other. The danger is that the best of

[125] Johan Duijck is the conductor of the Flemish Radio Choir, the Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chorus in London and the Ghent Madrigal Choir. He regularly appears as guest conductor with renowned ensembles such as the European Youth Choir, the Danish Radio Choir, the Irish National Chamber Choir, the Choir of Spanish Radio and Television, the Reykjavik Cathedral Choir (Iceland), the Coro de la Universidad de la República (Montevideo, Uruguay), the Capilla Santa Cecilia (Puebla, Mexico).

them sing most loudly. The uniformity of sound has to be controlled.

Dueck: But normally you used the classic formation?

Nees: Yes. If you do something different you always have to do it suddenly and for a reason. If you have a normal way of singing, keep it like that, but after, say, three months, "Let's sit so and so." Then they will say, "Oh, this is interesting," and it will change the rehearsal because there is another source of interest. But if you do it every day, then they will learn to predict what will happen and they will lose interest. Keep the changes for yourself, do not tell them the future, do it suddenly. I once had the experience with one of the bass singers, who was a good singer and wrote everything that I said, for example, more colour, more diction, etc. So I did something and I asked them, "Keep breathing there," for instance. And he put up his hand and said, "Ten years ago, you asked us to do it differently." Because it was still in his score. So I said, "I am happy that I changed now, because otherwise I would be stupid, and be still the same without any evolution." [laughs]

Dueck: [Laughing] Yes, there is the saying; if one is not changing one is not alive. Change is a human condition; we learn, we change, we do things differently.

Nees: Yes, yes. There is a title by Jean Paul Richter, an early 19th century German novelist, and he wrote, "Wenn ein Buch und ein Kopf zusammenstoßen und es klingt hohl, ist das allemal im Buche?[126] And I think it was Voltaire[127] that

[126] "If a book and a head collide and it sounds hollow, is it always in the book?" Jean Paul Richter, (1763–1825).was a German Romantic writer, best known for his humorous novels and stories. However, this quote is originally attributed to Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, (1742–1799), a German scientist and satirist.

[127] François-Marie Arouet, (1694 – 30 May 1778), better known by the pen name Voltaire. A French Enlightenment writer and philosopher famous for his wit and for his advocacy of civil liberties.

said, “There are only the stupid people who never change their opinion.” And Voltaire also said, “Si qu'on peut pas dire on chante; What you cannot say, you sing it.”

Appendix 4: Works List

(as provided by MATRIX - Centrum voor nieuwe muziek – last updated January 2011)

Vokale werken (Vocal works) – Chronological order

1958 **Mein Hirt ist Gott, der Herr** (psalm 23,vert. Roman Zybal; mixed chorus; Concertino Musikverlag, 1995;)
Zie ook: **Mijn herder is de Heer** (Nederlands origineel)

1959 **Aloeëtte voghel clein** (middeleeuwse tekst; mixed chorus; Musicerende Jeugd, 1968)

1960 **Kleine geestelijke triptiek** (spreuken uit het Johannesevangelie; mixed voices; Halewijnstichting)

1961 **Glanzend zal ik u bewonen** (Jos Vandeloo; soprano and piano; unpublished)

1964 **Fünf Motetten** (Genesisand psalmen; mixed chorus; Möseler Verlag, 1966)

1966 **Ik kwam er lestmaal** (10 volksliederen; mixed chorus; De Notenboom)

1967 **European Stabat mater** (Albert Boone; mixed chorus, A and T solo; Möseler Verlag)

Tusschen de twee (Guido Gezelle; mixed chorus; EMJ, 1977)

Winterstilte (Guido Gezelle; three voice chorus; De Notenboom (DMK 9))

1968 **Drie Gezelle-koorliederen**: 1. O eerbiedwaardig hoofd, 2. Hoort, 3. Aleer het licht ten avond raakt (Guido Gezelle; equal voices; De Notenboom (DMK 20))

Mietje (Guido Gezelle; two part chorus; De Notenboom (DMK 8))

Wech op, wech op (10 volksliederen; equal voices; De Notenboom)

1969 **Ave Maria** (liturgische tekst; equal voices; De Notenboom (DMK 32))

Gekwetst ben ik van binnen (volkslied; mixed chorus; De Notenboom (DMK 71))

O Domine Deus (Maria Stuart; mixed chorus; EMJ, 1977/De Notenboom)

Repleatur os meum (psalm 71; two part chorus; De Notenboom (DMK 31))

Sur le pont d'Avignon (rev. 1985) (volkslied; mixed chorus; De Notenboom, 1986)

1970 **Rachel** (Albert Boone; cantata for choir, solo voices, some instruments; De Notenboom)

1971 **Mattheus en de rijkdom** (Mattheus; mixed chorus; unpublished)

1972 **Mammon, een radiofonische satire** (Vic Nees; 2 speaking voices, S solo, mixed chorus, instrumental ensemble; unpublished)

Salve regina (liturgische tekst; SSAA; Musica (Montserrat))

Vigília de pentecosta (liturgische Catalaanse tekst (Nederlandse versie beschikbaar); horns, organ, mixed chorus; Musica (Montserrat)

1973 **Birds and flowers** (Vic Nees; 1 flute (picc, flute, alto flute) and chorus; unpublished)

Ik ben van nergens en overal (10 volksliederen; mixed chorus; De Notenboom, 1983)

1974 **Als een duif op een dak** (psalmen; mixed chorus; Musicerende Jeugd)

1975 **Ave Regina caelorum** (liturgische tekst; equal voices; EMJ, 1976)

Haec est praeclarum vas (liturgische tekst; mixed chorus; EMJ, 1977/DMK 52)

Laudate pueri (psalm 113; mixed chorus; Harmonia, 1976)

Tota pulchra es (liturgische tekst; three voice chorus; EMJ, 1975)

Vocalise (; voice and piano Andel editions, 1975)

1976 **Requiem voor een kind, vier liederen** (Herwig Hensen; low voice and piano; unpublished)

Seven madrigals (Guido Gezelle/Christine D'haen; mixed chorus; Musicerende Jeugd, 1978)

1977 **Bijbelse vrouwen** (Willem Kersters; mixed chorus; unpublished)

Ons derde land, 6 liederen (Mark Insingel; middle voice and piano; unpublished)

Twee mannenkoren: Stilten, Krokuswit (Jo Gisekin; (Krokuswit uitg. Edition Egtved, Denemarken); male chorus; unpublished)

Verborgen roos (Albe (Renaat Antoon Joosten; high voice and piano); unpublished)

1978 **Beatus vir** (psalm 1; mixed chorus; Harmonia, 1979)

Lesbia (Catulli Veronensis liber; mixed chorus; unpublished)

1979 **Aurora lucis, cantate** (Mieke Martens; similar voice youth choir, children choir, T solo, string orchestra; De Notenboom, 1996)

Liedjes voor de slapelozen (Mieke Martens; mixed chorus, male voice, female voice, child voice, piano; De Notenboom, 1986)

Sine musica nulla disciplina (Rhabanus Maurus; chorus equal voices; EMJ, 1980)

1980 **Magnificat** (liturgische tekst; S solo, mixed chorus; Möseler Verlag, 1981)

1981 **Licht in mijn handen** (Mieke Martens; children's chorus; EMJ, 1982/De Notenboom, 1984)

Tweeklank van aarde en water (Mieke Martens; youth chorus, guitar; Musicerende Jeugd, 1982)

1982 **Gisekin-triptiek** (Jo Gisekin; mixed chorus; unpublished)

Two songs: Lips of the rose, Oh you fat …(Guido Gezelle/Christine D'haen; high voice and guitar; unpublished)

Veni sancte spiritus (liturgische; mixed chorus, brass quintet tekst; De Notenboom, 1986)

1983 **Japanese folksongs** (8 Japanse volksliederen; mixed chorus and Bar solo; De Notenboom, 1984)

Fortissimi (C. Julius Caesar; children's chorus; EMJ, 1984)

Op de keerkring (Mieke Martens; high voice and guitar; unpublished)

Stille nacht (Franz Grüber; mixed chorus; unpublished)

Van as en ander schuim (Mieke Martens; male chorus; De Notenboom, 1987)

Zoete merronton (10 volksliederen; mixed chorus; De Notenboom)

1984 **Musica, solamen et gaudium** (Vic Nees; youth chorus; EMJ, 1985)

Rijke armoede van de trekharmonica (Paul Van Ostaijen; female chorus; De Notenboom, 1985)

Teergeliefde in tien talen (10 Europese volksliederen; mixed chorus; De Notenboom, 1985)

1985 **L'Escaut** (Emile Verhaeren; female chorus of youth chorus; EMJ, 1986)

Nausikaä, cantate (Mieke Martens; youth chorus, S and Bar solo, transverse flute, piano; De Notenboom, 1986)

1986 **Alma redemptoris mater** (liturgische tekst; mixed chorus; De Notenboom (DMK 55))

Liermolen, suite van Europese molenaarsliederen (volksliederen; equal voice chorus, T solo, harp; De Notenboom, 1988)

1987 **Die stille Stadt** (Richard Dehmel; S and cello; unpublished)

Gloria Patri (liturgische tekst; mixed chorus, S solo and chime; De Notenboom, 1987)

Regina coeli, blue be it (Gerard Manley Hopkins; S solo, mixed chorus, celeste; De Notenboom, 1988)

Ricordi di Sicilia (Vic Nees; children's chorus; EMJ, 1988)

1988 **Bonum est confiteri Domino** (psalm 91; T solo, mixed chorus, harp and percussion; Möseler Verlag, 1995)

1989 **A bunch of cherries, child** (Filip van de Wouwer (Albert Boone; mixed voices); De Notenboom, 1997)

Memoria justi (Latijnse Bijbelteksten; equal voice chorus; De Notenboom, 1990)

1989 **Anima Christi, cantata** (Albert Boone; T and Bar solo, rec, mixed chorus, audience singing, instrumental ensemble; unpublished)
Herein: Jezus, uw naam is honig (edition Notenboom, DMK 73)

Herein: Onze vader (edition: Notenboom, 1991)
Herein: Wees gegroet (edition: Notenboom, 1991)

Voetbalgavotte (Vic Nees; mixed chorus; De Notenboom (DMK 70))

1990 **Nuestra Senora de la soledad** (Mieke Martens; A solo, violas, mixed chorus; De Notenboom, 1990)

Upon G (Albert Boone; mixed chorus; De Notenboom, 1991)

1991 **Cantemus** (Guido Gezelle/Latijnse vert. Luc Neuville; equal voice chorus; De Notenboom, 1991)

Piping down the valleys (William Blake; children's chorus; EMJ, 1992)

Trois chansons de Hollande (Max Elskamp; male chorus; De Notenboom, 1994)

1992 **Emmanuel** (Bijbel; female chorus; De Notenboom, 1992)

Rana et bos (De kikker en de koe) (Phaedrus; male chorus; De Notenboom, 1994)

Picchiarello (Anna Eva Gosso; children's chorus, body sounds; Suvini Zerboni (Italië))

Twee liedjes over duiven (Jo Gisekin; mixed chorus; De Notenboom, 1992)

1994 **E cantico canticorum fragmenta** (Hooglied; male chorus; Koneza (Hoensbroek))

Quatre chansons de Flandre (Max Elskamp; mixed voices; De Notenboom, 1995)

1995 **Ego flos** (Guido Gezelle/Christine D'haen; mixed voices; De Notenboom, 1997)

Gedichtje voor St. Niklaas (Paul Van Ostaijen; male chorus; unpublished)

Three partsongs (Guido Gezelle – Paul Claes/Christine D'haen; equal voices, A and S solo; De Notenboom, 1996)

1996 **Windharp** (Prosper Van Osmael; female chorus; CVM, 1998)

1997 **Babel** (from Genesis; female chorus; Annie Bank, 1999)

Ecce quam bonum (psalm 133; male chorus; unpublished)

1998 **Neusser Messe** (Latijnse mistekst; trumpet, mixed chorus, organ; Annie Bank, 2003)

1999 **Au bout de l'amour** (Liliane Wouters; children's chorus; EMJ, 2000)

Les pies (Emile Verhaeren; S solo, female chorus; unpublished)

2000 **Concerto per la beata Vergine** (Latijnse tekst; oboe, mixed chorus; Annie Bank, 2000)

De zee is een orkest (Armand Van Assche; children's chorus, piano four hands; Carus 2008)

O caro lactea (Christine D'haen; T solo and female chorus; unpublished)

2001 **In memoriam** (Psalm 42, 141, Jes. 38; mixed chorus and string orchestra; unpublished)

Singet dem Herrn (liturgische tekst; mixed chorus; Annie Bank, 2002)

Sion (Psalm 87; 3 S, mixed chorus, tambourine; unpublished)

2002 **Nu is die roe van Jesse** (17de eeuws Kerstlied; mixed chorus; O.U.P., 2005)

Stella maris (Max Elskamp; Bar solo, female chorus, accordian; Annie Bank, 2004)

Zwei Chorlieder: Hälfte des Lebens, Fußreise (Hölderin/Mörike; S solo, mixed chorus; Carus Verlag, 2003)

2003 **Filosofenfontein** (Vic Nees; mixed chorus and piano; unpublished)

Trumpet Te Deum (Te Deum; S, mixed chorus, 2 trumpets; Annie Bank, 2005)

2004 **Drie pelgrimsliederen van David** (Psalmen; mixed chorus; unpublished)

In diebus festivis cantica: 1. Viderunt omnes, 2. Factus est repente, 3. Haec dies
4. Beati mundo corde (liturgische tekst; mixed chorus; Euprint)

2005 **Zingen** (Karel Van de Woestijne; mixed chorus; CVM, 2005)

Een lied van Willem (Willem Kersters; female chorus; CVM, 2005)

Aachener Ave Maria (liturgische tekst; mixed chorus; Annie Bank, 2006)

Trois complaintes: 1. A furnes, 2. Jardin des olives, 3. Les vierges sages (Liliane Wouters; mixed chorus, Bar solo; unpublished)

2006 **Amsterdams Pater noster** (Pater noster; mixed chorus, soprano solo; Annie Bank, 2006)

Drie miniaturen: 1. De wind draagt, 2. Tapijtjes mos, 3. Snerpend (Nele Warson; female chorus, soprano solo; unpublished)

Gestroomlijnde stad: 1. In de wolken, 2. Stad in alle staten, 3. De dag der kleine Dingen (Mieke Martens; mixed chorus; Annie Bank, 2006)

Mijn geest op haar (Jesaja 42, 1-4; solo, chorus, inst. ensemble; unpublished)

Trois sonnets de Louise Labé: 1. O longs desires, 2. Pour le retour du soleil, 3. Quand j'aperçoy ton blond chef (Louise Labé; female chorus; unpublished)

2007 **Koordiptiek** (Francis De Preter; SATB; unpublished)
1Koorzang 2 In concert

Pater Hemoon (Onze Vader; mixed chorus; unpublished)

Requiem: (liturgisch; soprano and tenor solo, SSAATTBB chorus; Annie Bank, 2009)
1 Requiem aeternam 2 Kyrie 3 Domine Jesu Christe 4 Sanctus, Benedictus 5 Agnus Dei 6 Lux aeterna 7 Recitativo: Ego sum resurrectio et vita 8 In paradisum

2008 **Als minnaars** (Jo Gisekin, high voice solo, organ, unpublished)

Signum magnum (liturgisch**,** SABar, Euprint 2008)

O kerstnacht (Joost Van den Vondel, winds, unison chorus, Beriato 2009)

An die Musik (Rainer Maria Rilke, SATB chorus, Annie Bank 2009)

Die beste Zeit im Jahr ist mein (Martin Luther**,** volksliedzetting, SSAA chorus, Carus Verlag 2009)
Grüβ Gott, du schöner Maien (volksliedzetting, SSAA chorus, Carus Verlag 2009)

2010 **Nachtlied - De Avond** (Jos Stroobants, SSATBB chorus, Euprint 2010)

Fundamenta ejus (psalmtekst, SSATBB chorus, Annie Bank 2011)

Verba mea (psalmtekst, SSAA chorus, Annie Bank 2011)

Domine, ne in furore (psalmtekst, TTBB chorus, Annie Bank 2011)

Herfst (Jo Gisekin, mezzo solo, SSAA chorus, piano, unpublished)

Zwei-Stoecklin-Chöre (Francisca Stoecklin, SSAA chorus, Annie Bank)
1 Der spiegel 2 Der Tänzer

Passio super Galli cantu (Matteüs, SSATBarB chorus, Annie Bank 2011)
1 Prologus 2 Pars I 3 Pars II 4 Pars III 5 Epilogus

2011 **Panta rhei** (Mieke Martens, SA, piano, unpublished)

Ad monicam (2 voices, chorus, piano, unpublished)

2012 **Al jorn del judici** (SATB chorus, unpublished)

Grimbergs Gloria (SSATBB chrous, Annie Bank 2012)

Zwei Hölderlin Lieder (tenor, string quartet, unpublished)

Leise rieselt der Schnee (arrangement, SATB, Carus Verlag 2012)

Abbreviations: EMJ = Europees muziekfestival voor de jeugd (Neerpelt),
DMK = De Monte Koorreeks,
CVM = Centrum voor vocale muziek

Note: Publications of De Notenboom can be ordered from CVM (Koor & Stem)

Instrumentale muziek (Instrumental music)

1956 **Capriccio** (piano) (unpublished)

1957 **Toccata** (piano) (unpublished)

1962 **Sonatine** (piano) (unpublished)

1970 **Variaties in trio over psalm 133** (organ) (De Crans, 1962)

1975 **Serenade voor strijkers** (strings) (unpublished)

1989 **2x Baie** (brass quintet): 1. Le miroir de l'Escaut, 2. Le rameau en fleurs (unpublished)

Gebruiksmuziek: alfabetisch overzicht (Functional Music: alphabetical list)

Ach, vergeet uw verdriet (1983)
Al onder de weg van Maldegem
Al op een meiemorgen vroeg (1978)
Als de herfst de zomer verjaagt (1976)
Berceuse (1983)
Christus is verrezen (1966)
Daar boven uit het vensterken (s.d.)
De fiere Pinksterblom (1984)
De kleremakers op hun feest (s.d.)
De moerbeitoppen ruischten (1974)
De vastenavond die komt aan (1968)
De wind waait door de bomen (1976)
De wolken (1983)
Die door de wereld zal gheraken (1983)
Dodendans (1984)
Drie kerkliederen (1997)
Drie Zaïrese volksliedjes (1994)
Eén wil ik zingen (1991)
Fransche Ratten (1974)
Gekwetst ben ik van binnen (2004)
Gij moet het al betalen (1983)
Gildebroeders, maakt plezieren (2004) equal voices
Gildebroeders, maakt plezieren (2004) mixed chorus
God treedt ons tegemoet: Kerstpsalm (1965)
Grosser Gott wir loben dich (1984)
Herders Hij is geboren (1984)
Herdertjes van buiten (1991)
Het carillon van Ekelsbeke (1968)
Het komt een schip geladen (ca. 1960)
Het regende zeer (1972)
Het waren twee koningskinderen (1969)
Het zou een jager (1974)
Hoe leit dit kindeken (2006)
Hoe lustich is den somer (1973)
Ik stond op hoge bergen (1972)
In een satelliet (2005)
Je t'aurai, ma brunette (2005)
Joshua fit de battle of Jerico (1985)
Karel (1969)
Kollegelied (1959)
Kristus de aanvang (1968)
Looft de Heer in zijn heiligdom (psalm 150) (1963)

Mis van Grimbergen (1969)
Musica, alderzoetste konst (1978)
Nachtlied (1981)
Nederlandse misgezangen
Niets dan de sterren, de wouden (1958)
Nu is het woord gezegd (1970)
O Denneboom (1968)
Onder der linden (1962)
Quand l'âme prête l'oreille (1994)
Quodlibet (1999)
Schenk de wijn uit hoge kruiken (1983)
Schoon lief, wilt gij met mij rijden (1972)
Schoon lieveke waar waarde gij (1978)
Simeon zingt (Laat nu je dienaar gaan) (s.d.)
Zie: Drie kerkliederen
Syt vrolic groot en klein (1962)
Ronde Wallonne (1994)
T'zo (1985)
Taritata (1969)
Uit angst en nood, psalm 129 (s.d.)
Viva Maria (1958)
Vreugde (1965)
Waar staat jouw vaders huis en hof (1978)
Wandellied (1976)
Whiskey in the jar (1996)
Wie kan de blaren tellen (1972)
Wij boeren en boerinnen (1969)
Z: rondo voor children's chorus (2000)
Zangalewa (1999)
Zoals de vader mij gezonden heeft (1962)
Zoet, zoete, wiege, wiege (1984)
Zonnelied-Franciscus (1977) (muziek voor BRT, Karel Aerts)
Zwanezang (1999)

Appendix 5: Literature List

(as provided by Matrix – Centrum voor nieuwe muziek – last updated March 2007)

Pieter Andriessen, *Vic Nees* (unpublished, celebration of Vic Nees in 1996).

Eva-Maria Atzerodt, *Mit Pfefferminzakkorden groß geworden. Der Belgische Komponist Vic Nees in Ingolstadt,* in *Lied & Chor. Zeitschrift für das Chorwesen*, nr. 4, 2000, p. 30.

Jan Christiaens, *Eigentijdse liturgische muziek: religieus koorwerk van Vic Nees,* in *Tertio,* 23 November 2005, p. 10.

Simonne Claeys, *Vic Nees*: *Mammon: satire radiophonique*, text prepared for the Prix Italia 1974.

Kamiel Cooremans, *De retoriek van Vic Nees*, in *Muziek & Woord*, nr. 320, 2001, p. 18.

Mark De Smet, *Is er leven na Vic Nees?*, in *ANZ*, 19/6, 1991, p. 136-137.

Hugo Heughebaert, *Ontmoeting met koorkomponist Vic Nees*, in *Gamma*, nr. 3, 1974, p. 8-12.

Hugo Heughebaert, *Vic Nees: retrospectieve van een kwarteeuw koormuziek*, in *Ons erfdeel*, 26/2, 1983, p. 291-293.

Jean Lambrechts, *Vic Nees: een verlate polyphonist*, in *Het Nederlands Zangersblad*, p. 5.

Margaret H. Marquis, *Magnificat by Vic Nees: an appreciation*, 1986. (unpublished)

Vic Nees, *Spreekkoor*, in *Gamma*, nr. 3, 1974, p. 13-15.

Joz Swinnen, *Koortypen allerhande. Het beroepskoor: het omroepkoor van de BRT*, in *Vlaanderen. Vlaamse vokale muziek en koorleven*, 29, nr. 176, 1980, p. 145-148.

Katelijne Theuwissen, *Vic Nees: de cirkelgang van een inwendig lied*, in *Ons erfdeel*, 35/2, 1992, p. 255-260.

Hendrik Vanden Abeele, *Een leven voor stem en koor*, in *Muziek & Woord*, nr. 363, 2004, p. 4-5.

Jacques Van Deun, *La reconnaissance internationale pour Vic Nees*, in *Septentrion*, 1996, p. 86-87.

Pieter van Moergastel, *Vic Nees, compositeur belge*, in *International Choral Bulletin*, April 1993, p. 47-48.

Theses and Dissertation on Vic Nees

Geert Hendrix, *Musica explicit mysterium. De woord-toonverhouding in de religieuze werken van Vic Nees*, eindwerk tot het verkrijgen van een eerste prijs koordirectie, Koninklijk Vlaams Muziekconservatorium Antwerpen, 1995.

Stefan Lenders, *Vic Nees "Magnificat" Aspekte der Einstudierung unter Berücksichtigung der stilistischen Besonderheiten eines zeitgenössischen Komponisten*, eindwerk voor St.-Gregorius-Hauses te Aken?, 1998.

Ignace Thevelein, *Analyse van 'April', 'Vandaag', 'Begin'*, eindwerk cursus Koordirectie, Koninklijk Muziekconservatorium Gent, s.d.

Els Vervliet, *Taal en muziek: vergelijkende studie aan de hand van Requiem voor een kind (H. Hensen/V. Nees*), eindverhandeling licentiaat Germaanse filologie, Universiteit Antwerpen, 1990.

Appendix 6: Miscellaneous Notes from Belgium Visit

(not recorded electronically)

Sunday May 11/08

St. Michaels Cathedral, Brussels

- I joined Vic as guest of honour at Pentecost mass.
- He was requested to be there for the première performance of a new Mass by Raymond Schrayers, a fellow Belgium composer.
- The morning service also included a new composition by Kapellmeister Kurt Bikkembergs, and also a work by Staf Nees, Vic's father
- I was brought "backstage" after the service by Vic to meet the Kapellmeister and discuss the new work.
- On our walk back to train station Vic stated his opinion of the new Mass – too many chord clusters, and not lyrical enough for a church mass.
- We returned back to his house for lunch (we dropped off his granddaughter first, whom we had met on the train).

Waiting for Dinner – comments made by Vic

- Serialism is the ultimate atonalism, but unless carefully crafted it is not suitable for voice.
- There have been some successes, e.g. Anton Webern created a 5 minute work that took him 5 years to create. Many composers can create serial works but these will only work with professional choirs who have perfect pitch, and even then, the tuning may be slightly out. There must be a certain amount of

lyricism. Vic has come to believe that choruses (human voices) need some form of modality and lyricism, to anchor themselves. His expression: "We will sing/perform something like Xenakis *Nuits* because it is by Xenakis, and we know that he is a great thinker. Composers put in high C's in the soprano parts, and the sopranos say,' We don't like to sing that – it's not easy' and the composers [Belgian] say, 'Well, Ligeti put them in his piece,' and we say, 'We do it for Ligeti, because he is Ligeti. When you are Ligeti, we will do it for you.'"

- His own *Gloria Patri* – incorporates 9 elements of 20th century writing; minimalism, faseversh ungen (phasing), hoquetus (hiccup), syllabization, clusters, citation, body sounds, serialism, visual aids.

Post- dinner: On instructing choirs on new work

- He always rehearsed and performed new works with the Flemish Radio Choir.
- He always tried to find something special in the piece. He once had a piece that he could not find anything special, so he said to the choir, "I'm sorry but I just don't see anything special." The choir then made a point of singing it in a special way just to prove him wrong.
- On another occasion a soprano was having a routine operation on the day of rehearsing a new piece, when someone came in with the news that she had died in the operation. The new work became very special to the choir because of this association and their performances reflected this. "Sometimes it is external things that can most profoundly affect the success of a new work."

Anima Christe – Oratorio composed May 1988 – March 1989

- We listened with score in Vic's house. It was performed in three different churches. It is liturgical with participation by congregation, and it is specific to certain segments of the Catholic Church. There is the litany of the saints (Vic is not so excited about this, but was commissioned to write this piece), and uses Flemish text. Vic realizes that it is not a concert piece and it has limited universal value because of language and use, but used it to display compositional technique.
- When I mentioned certain sections reminding me of the Trumpet Te Deum, he said, "Yes, when you write a lot of music certain idiomatic tendencies will reoccur."

Vic learned Latin, Greek, Flemish, French, German, English, Italian, and Spanish. He has written music in most of those languages.

May 14/08

In the morning we went into Brussels to watch Peter Dejans rehearse Vic's work, *Stella maris* (2004) for accordion, baritone solo, and female voices with the Flemish Radio Choir. This choir rehearses for one week, and then performs for one week at various locations throughout Belgium and Europe.

General Comments.

- After final C major Chord of one section, Vic said, “How many composers will write a C major chord at the end? Not many, but why not – it is nice!”
- “15 or 20 years ago I would not write with such lyricism or tonality [in the 70’s/ 80’s]. It was not because my work would not be accepted; it was because I could not accept lyricism and tonality as legitimate – a product of my education. Now I can write it. It is good and I have accepted it.”

Choir

- Vic was producer from 1961 until 1970, then conductor until 1996 (35 year association). From 1961 to 1969 he was also conductor of theVokaal Ensemble Philippus de Monte in Mechelen and the Ter Kamerenkoor in Brussels.
- When he started with the FRC, it did not have voices trained in choral singing, just vocal singers. This created some difficulties. Later on, and continuing today the conservatories teach two types of singing, (vocal and choral). Now all the members of this choir (although very good vocal singers) are also trained choral singers.
- The baritone singer at this rehearsal (a member of the choir) was an excellent soloist!
- Vic’s comment, “You cannot make good choral music with ‘Puccinni’ voices – they must not have vibrato – only what is natural vibrato.”

Conductor

- When Peter requested a specifically expressive phrase Vic said to me, “Is that in the score? No it is not, but this is where the conductor can imagine what the composer wanted – and he is right. You must tell your lady teacher she is incorrect; it is possible to determine the intent of the composer if you really understand the music.”
- Vic never conducted major works like the St. John Passion until after he left the Flemish Radio Choir. He was always preparing new works, and sometimes regreted the fact that he did not have the time/opportunity to perform standard repertoire. Now looking back he thinks that he would not always like to be preparing the same standard works all the time. As a composer he wants to see what is original, new and different – yes conduct the old works but also the new.

May 15/08 – Trip to Mechelen (random notes)

- Vic’s father Staf was Kapellmeister/organist of the Basilica of Our Lady of Hanswijk in Mechelen. Father died when Vic was 29. He had become reconciled, but he still did not understand what his father stood for.
- Vic was immersed in the church and music. When his father broke his arm, Vic (at 10-12 years old) would play organ for the services. “Not to compare myself to Mozart, but like him I was always around music, my father was pushing me into music. Music and church was all I ever knew growing up.”

- While playing organ for his father much of it was improvised, as in the tradition of Bach, Mozart, and Mendelssohn. At age 14 he wrote a set of variations on a Psalm tune. “It was not good, but it was correct – there were no failures in it. This I taught myself by studying Schubert, Schumann and others. I learned what was correct by studying the masters. And then, of course, came the music studying which made me better – also practise at composing.”
- His childhood house was so close to the Cathedral that if the bell tower would fall, their house would be the last one hit by the tower.
- His father became quite heavy, and after the war arranged to have a telephone line between his house and the bell tower. This way he could sit in his garden, listen to his carillon students, and call them to correct/teach them. He could hear better in his garden, but more importently, he did not have to climb all those steps to the carillon room!
- The Royal Carillon School was founded in 1922 by renowned carillonneur Jef Denyn, in whose honor it was later named, with the support of Americans Herbert H. Hoover, John D. Rockefeller, and William Gorham Rice. The first institution of its kind in the world, the school soon gained international acclaim and has trained carillonneurs from nations across the globe, including China, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Ghana, Japan, New Zealand, Portugal, Russia, Switzerland, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The institution has developed under the successive direction of Jef Denyn (1862-1941), Staf Nees (1901-1965), Piet Van den Broek, and Jo

Haazen, its present director. Throughout its history, it has established an eminent reputation and made a significant impact on carillon performance throughout the world (Royal carillon school, October 20, 2009)

- During Vic's childhood the Carillon school was the greatest school in the world, and continues to play a prominent role in the education of carillon playing. It was the only one with the new mechanism that allowed for easier playing (Vic's father was instrumental in incorporating this mechanism). Students came from all over (and still do) to learn, and new schools were created in Holland and elsewhere by students fo Staf Nees. Even a Canadian studied here with Staf – Emile Allaire.
- While at the Cathedral we viewed some Rubens paintings, particularly *John at Patmos*. Vic mentioned to me that no one really knows if the Apostle John was at Patmos, or if he wrote the book of Revelation. "That is true, but I think that traditions is usually pretty close to the truth."
- When he returned from music studies in Germany, he programmed some Schütz – it was the first time Schütz had ever been performed- (Schütz was Protestant).