Style, Tradition, and Innovation in the Choral Music of Rhona Clarke (b. 1958) and Eoghan Desmond (b. 1989)

Laura Sheils
BRelEd, Adv Dip, MA

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Dublin City University

School of Theology, Philosophy, and Music

Supervisor: Dr Róisín Blunnie

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DCU
Ollscoil Chathair
Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

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Abstract

Style, Tradition, and Innovation in the Choral Music of Rhona Clarke (b. 1958) and Eoghan Desmond (b. 1989)

Laura Sheils

Rhona Clarke (b. 1958) and Eoghan Desmond (b. 1989) are internationally recognised contemporary Irish composers whose choral works are widely performed at home and further afield. This thesis explores the principal compositional techniques that characterise their distinctive styles. Given the dearth of research relating to these two composers, and Irish choral music more broadly, this study represents the first comprehensive investigation into the compositional styles of Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond, elucidating the features of their respective choral outputs and capturing the striking blend of tradition and innovation evident in each case.

Chapter One presents biographical accounts of Clarke and Desmond, outlining their educational and other formative experiences, compositional influences, and career trajectories. Chapter Two addresses the available literature relating to Clarke and Desmond, referring also to the composers and musical eras that have impacted their respective compositional approaches. It also considers scholarship on style, text setting, allusion, and quotation, which are key components in the analysis of the music in this thesis.

The remaining five chapters present analyses of selected significant choral works by Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond, respectively, articulating core characteristics of their compositional styles and their versatile approaches to setting a variety of sacred and secular texts. The analytical approach encompasses an exploration of each composer's melodic idioms, use of quotation, textural structures, harmonic language, and timbral palettes, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of their creative voices. Across the analytical investigation, there is a particular focus on Clarke's and Desmond's synthesis of archaic and contemporary compositional techniques — a key feature of both of their styles — shedding light on their integration of past influences, and on how they forge striking individual compositional voices in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

Background

Rhona Clarke (b. 1958) and Eoghan Desmond (b. 1989) are internationally recognised Irish composers whose individual choral oeuvres continue to expand and to reach wide listenership (See Appendix A). Both exhibit eclectic compositional styles and versatile approaches to text setting. While they draw on compositional techniques of the past and present, they do so in a manner that articulates their distinctive contemporary voices, and that characterises the essence of the texts they set.[1] Their music has been performed by established choirs such as The Sixteen, the BBC Singers, State Choir LATVIJA, the Choir of King's College, Cambridge, and Chamber Choir Ireland — underlining their reputation and compositional skill — and commissions from a wide range of professional and amateur ensembles have provided opportunities for Clarke and Desmond to explore varied tonal palettes and levels of complexity.[2] For each composer, these opportunities, combined with influential formative and professional experiences, have resulted in a compelling body of choral music that is diverse in subject matter and character, and that merits scholarly investigation.

This thesis presents the first in-depth analysis of the respective choral outputs of Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond. Each has a particular compositional style built on notable elements — melodic structures, rhythmic devices, textural approaches, harmonic progressions, and extended techniques — recognisable to ardent listeners and performers of their work. The study investigates and articulates core characteristics of their compositional styles and their versatile approaches to setting a variety of sacred and secular texts. In doing so, this thesis aims to contribute to the growing discipline of Choral Studies, building upon the limited literature that exists on the analysis of contemporary choral music and ensuring that Irish composers are part of international scholarly discourse.

My decision to focus on Clarke and Desmond within this thesis arises for several reasons. As a choral singer, composer, and musicologist, my research is grounded in a deep

[1] My use of the term 'text' in this thesis denotes the words that composers set to music, ranging from poetic to sacred sources.

[2] As of 2026, Rhona Clarke's choral music has appeared on the albums *Sempiternam* (State Choir LATVIJA, 2022), *Ghost Songs* (Laetare Vocal Ensemble, 2021) *Vox Feminina* (St Mary's Pro-Cathedral Girls' Choir, 2019), *Make We Merry* (New Dublin Voices, 2017), *Under-Song* (Mornington Singers, 2017), and *Music from Ireland* (New Dublin Voices, 2014). Eoghan Desmond's choral music has featured on *James Joyce Chamber Music: Volume 1* (The Choral Scholars of University College Dublin, 2024), *A Meditation* (The Sixteen, 2022), *Be All Merry* (The Choral Scholars of University College Dublin, 2020), *Perpetual Twilight* (The Choral Scholars of University College Dublin, 2019), *Make We Merry*, and *Under-Song*.

interest in choral composition and analysis, and a desire to comprehend the musical techniques that characterise a composer's style and their approach to communicating a text. When performing Rhona Clarke's choral pieces, I have been repeatedly struck by the distinctiveness of her writing; the idiomatic vocal lines, harmonies, textural organisation, and resulting sonorities seemed to me to be unmistakeably Rhona Clarke. During my MA research, I noted the ambitious compositional language of Eoghan Desmond's early works, and this instigated a desire to investigate his stylistic development at his relatively early career stage.[3] Furthermore, both composers exhibit a deep understanding of writing for choral voices, as well as a compelling blend of historical and contemporary musical influences in their works. This synergistic relationship between the ancient and modern struck me as a notably effective characteristic of both composers' music and seemed to me to imply a desire to create new sonorities while also acknowledging the long tradition of choral music. In his thirties, Desmond's compositional palette continues to evolve, while Clarke, more advanced in her career, continues to innovate within her music. Both demonstrate their compositional versatility across their settings of sacred and secular texts but, in each composer's case, the stylistic similarities across diverse subject matter reveal a consistency throughout their oeuvres (See Appendix B).

While both composers are Irish, their music is international and eclectic in style, drawing on a wide range of historical and contemporary influences and stylistic traditions. Although Clarke and Desmond have set texts in the Irish language — such as *Suantraí Ghráinne* (1983) and *Amra Choluim Chille* (2019) — they do not use traditional Irish idioms extensively, nor create a folk-like sonority in their music. Desmond has developed his musical identity primarily in the Anglican choral tradition, and now resides in England; and, while Rhona Clarke has largely been based in Ireland throughout her career, she has stated, 'I don't think of myself as a woman composer, nor do I think of myself necessarily as an Irish composer, just a composer.'[4] Combined with the diverse educational and musical influences on these composers, outlined in Chapter One below, these observations demonstrate how Clarke and Desmond are not stymied by the question of 'Irishness', instead feeling free to draw from both historical and contemporary sonorities and techniques evident in international choral music. Regarding the question of Irish musical identity more broadly, Benjamin Dwyer notes

[3] Laura Sheils, 'A Comparative Analysis of Irish Contemporary Choral Composers' Innovative Approaches to Text Setting' (unpublished MA dissertation, Dublin City University, 2021).
[4] Rhona Clarke, 'An Interview with Rhona Clarke', interviewed by Ita Beausang, *The Contemporary Music Centre*, 1 April 2004 <https://www.cmc.ie/features/interview-rhona-clarke> [accessed 12 March 2025].

'the stylistic contrapuntality of Irish music and music in Ireland, its multiplicity of heterodox voices.'[5] Similarly, John Buckley has expressed how '[T]he disparate stylistic range of compositional approaches employed [in Ireland] is a source of strength and individuality of voice.'[6] This study does not focus on national identity in Clarke's and Desmond's choral music; instead it seeks to provide the first comprehensive analytical articulation and interpretation of these composers' musical styles as found in their choral outputs.[7]

This thesis explores stylistic traits across Clarke's and Desmond's respective sacred and secular compositions, examining the choice and effect of specific compositional processes in works of similar and diverse themes, and discerning how recurrences of certain techniques contribute to characterising their individual styles. Musical and extra-musical influences are considered, including the role of texts and contexts, as well as quotation and allusion to other early and contemporary composers, eras, and styles. Collectively, the various facets of the analysis intend to illuminate the distinctive and versatile voice of each composer, revealing the ways in which Clarke and Desmond blend tradition and innovation, and forge a sense of identity across their respective choral oeuvres.

Analytical Approach

This research engages extensively with selected choral works by Clarke and Desmond, respectively, in order to identify the core characteristics of each composer's style, and to capture the striking combination of old and new evident in each case. Different compositional styles and works necessitate different investigative lenses. As there is no established analytical method *per se* for choral music, I considered an extensive range of precedents when compiling my research approach.[8] I sought an analytical approach that would encompass a broad range

[5] Benjamin Dwyer, *Different Voices: Irish Music and Music in Ireland* (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2014), p. 78.
[6] John Buckley in Dwyer, *Different Voices*, p. 151.
[7] For further reading on national identity and influences in Irish music, see *The Invisible Art: A Century of Music in Ireland 1916–2016*, ed. by Michael Dervan (Dublin: New Island, 2016); John O'Flynn, *The Irishness of Irish Music* (London: Routledge, 2017); Harry White, *Music and the Irish Literary Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Harry White, *The Progress of Music in Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005).
[8] Schenkerian analysis, Neo-Riemannian analysis, and others were unsuitable given their omission of certain musical features, such as texture and timbre. For example, Schenker's approach emphasises the linear structure of tonal works, narrowing music to the same *Ursatz*, and thus, as Tarasti notes, 'leveling style differences between musical pieces and between individual composers' (Eero Tarasti, *Signs of Music: A Guide to Musical Semiotics* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002), p. 51). Analytical approaches focused on music-text relations — primarily in art song — such as those by David Lewin, Walter Bernhart, Peter Stacey, and Deborah Stein and Robert Spillman, place great emphasis on the role of the text within the compositional process, as opposed to focusing on the composer's overall style.

of compositional features within the music and that would leave room for interpretation. The approach I have used draws significantly from Jan LaRue's framework for style analysis[9] and from the methodological model used by Derek Myler in his examination of Charles Ives's choral music.[10] This research is not focusing on one musical element — melody/harmony/rhythm — within each composer's oeuvre, instead analysing the overall structures and recurring features across diverse pieces to discern how they relate to the set texts, reflect an array of musical influences, and contribute to characterising Clarke's and Desmond's broader choral styles.

Jan LaRue's style analysis focuses on the large, middle, and small dimensions of a musical work, determining how each layer within the music contributes to identifying a composer's style. According to the theorist, 'the first axiom […] is to begin by looking at the piece as a whole, not as parts, not even as a collection of parts.'[11] This approach helps with understanding the sense of movement, growth, and shape within the music and 'the relationships of its parts to each other.'[12] For example, where are the dynamic climaxes, harmonic shifts, and rhythmic contrasts? Are there particular areas of the work with more complex textural or rhythmic layers? Do certain elements recur across the piece? How do these help to formulate an overall understanding of the work and of the composer's intentions for its structure and progression? Middle-dimension functions 'control the formation of musical ideas into sentences, paragraphs, sections, and parts of a piece.'[13] Within a choral work, this would involve analysing the musical features, structure, and progression of a particular section, which could express a change in character relating to the text. Small dimensions work on the level of the motif and the smallest ideas within the music. For example, does the melody progress by step or leap? How does the rhythm generate a sense of flow? Are there dynamic contrasts within the subphrase?[14]

Where text is involved, LaRue proposes a study of its influence on the composer's musical decisions, asking questions regarding the use of striking harmonies on particular words, analogies between the text rhythm and musical rhythm, and the reflection of the poetic

[9] Jan LaRue, *Guidelines for Style Analysis*, 2nd edition (Warren, Michigan: Harmonie Park Press, 1992); Jan LaRue, 'Fundamental Considerations in Style Analysis', *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2001), 295–312 (p. 300) <https://doi.org/10.1525/jm.2001.18.2.295> [accessed 29 January 2024].
[10] Derek J. Myler, 'Charles Ives and Techniques of Choral Narrative: Exploring *Three Harvest Home Chorales*', *The Choral Journal*, Vol. 59, No. 8 (2019), 8–29 (p. 18) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26601976> [accessed 7 February 2023].
[11] LaRue, *Guidelines for Style Analysis*, p. 5.
[12] LaRue, 'Fundamental Considerations in Style Analysis', p. 300.
[13] Ibid., p. 301.
[14] Ibid., p. 302.

structure and character through musical articulation and thematic recurrence.[15] LaRue's analysis also involves interpreting the effect and meaning of particular musical features, their relation to the overall work, and in certain cases, their connection with other works in a composer's output. Although not all aspects of the three dimensions are applicable to this study, the analytical framework's consideration of the musical features and their functions on a small-scale and overarching level supports the investigation of the selected works, helping to formulate a comprehensive understanding of Clarke's and Desmond's styles. As LaRue notes, '[A] successful musical style employs a consistent choice of materials and control of functions to achieve affective Movement and Shape.'[16]

Derek Myler explores Charles Ives's narrative compositional techniques in *Three Harvest Home Chorales* (1912–15) through an examination of the music's 'surface literalisms', formal structures, and possible deeper meanings, which he interprets 'as an additional layer of storytelling'.[17] The initial surface layer involves features such as melodic idioms and word painting devices, while the formal structures extend to the textural and harmonic dimensions of specific areas of a piece, as well as multi-movement connections in larger works. An analysis of less conspicuous narrative techniques and an interpretation of the composer's choices encompasses the 'deeper meaning' section. Considering the potential influences on the composer's decisions, and discerning musical features' possible underlying meanings through an examination of extramusical sources — such as composer interviews and programme notes — are key facets of Myler's approach, making it an appropriate fit for this dissertation: 'first-person commentary often provides a vital resource in attempting to peer into the mind and intention of the composer'.[18] However, it is worth bearing in mind the importance of not being overly dependent on composers' remarks about their processes and pieces, as such opinions are subjective and may change over time.

Applying aspects of Myler's and LaRue's approaches, both small- and large-scale musical expressions within Clarke's and Desmond's works are examined within this thesis. The analysis identifies melodic idioms that recur across the composers' works, and examines how the music conveys a text's surface narrative,[19] primarily through word painting.[20] It also

[15] LaRue, 'Fundamental Considerations in Style Analysis', p. 311.
[16] Ibid., p. 307.
[17] Myler, 'Charles Ives and Techniques of Choral Narrative', p. 9.
[18] Ibid., p. 19.
[19] I adopt Myler's understanding of narrative: composers' approaches to 'musically describing programmatic events—whether as represented by explicit textual references or enigmatic subtextual clues—via specific compositional techniques' (Myler, 'Charles Ives and Techniques of Choral Narrative', p. 27).
[20] I adopt Tim Carter's definition of word painting: 'The use of musical gesture(s) in a work […] to reflect, often pictorially, the literal or figurative meaning of a word or phrase' (Tim Carter, 'Word-painting', *Grove Music*

discerns broader musical features such as quotation and allusion, textural structures, and harmonic and timbral language, and considers how these communicate certain phrases or sections within a text, and/or convey the text's overall essence. The investigation also assesses how particular musical eras and styles have influenced Clarke's and Desmond's approaches to text setting, both on the surface and within the broader structures of their works (Figure 1.1). The voices of the composers, as found in a range of media sources, and my interviews with the composers themselves support the analytical interpretation of certain pieces, helping to clarify particular observations in the music. The interviews that I conducted address both Clarke's and Desmond's compositional styles, their musical influences and experiences, approaches to text, and their creative techniques applied both on a general scale and in specific choral works.
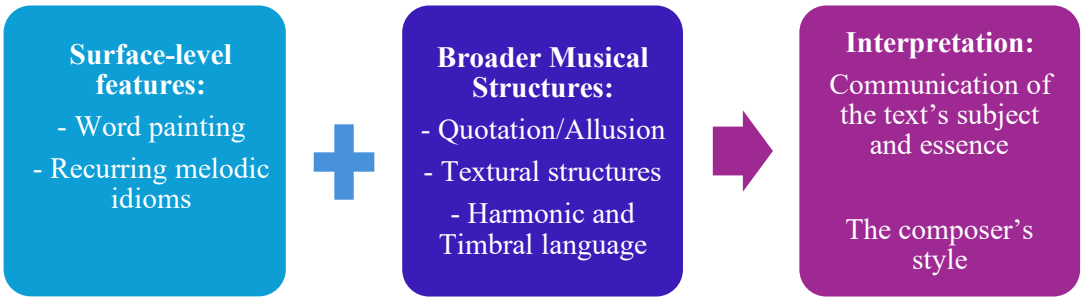


Figure 1.1. Analytical Approach.

Inevitably, not all compositions by the composers are discussed. The included compositions were chosen based on their significance and their expression of the composers' text-setting approaches, synthesis of various influences, and most importantly, their individual styles. Within the analysis, certain pieces receive more attention due to their particularly effective representation of each composer's style, and their versatile, yet consistent application of compositional techniques across diverse subjects. In the case of Clarke, the pieces focused on in this thesis were composed between 1991 and 2024. While earlier compositions exist, these are quite exploratory in style, and Clarke herself omits them from her own listed output.[21] For Desmond, *Mother Goose's Melodies* (2014) can be said to mark his arrival as a professional composer, winning the Seán Ó Riada Choral Composition Competition, and so the analysis of

Online (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.30568> [accessed 6 January 2023]).

[21] 'Works', *Rhona Clarke* <https://www.rhonaclarke.com/works/#choral> [accessed 17 April 2026].

his music begins with this work. While this thesis concentrates primarily on the music, Clarke's and Desmond's choral compositions naturally involve text, which strongly impacts the musical decisions in most cases. Therefore, important aspects of the set texts — themes, imagery, mood, and broader resonances, such as theological and literary meanings — are considered in light of the music, to determine the extent to which the words have driven compositional decisions.

The organisation of the analytical findings draws on Susan Stanford Friedman's 'juxtapositional model of comparison'.[22] The composers are examined side by side, 'not setting one up as the standard measure for the other'; rather, '[T]he distinctiveness of each [composer] is maintained, while the dialogue of voices that ensues brings commonalities into focus.'[23] This framework, drawn from literary studies and not previously applied to analytical musicology, aids this investigation by enabling a structure that places Clarke and Desmond side by side, without setting them in opposition or viewing one always in light of the other. Friedman's model accommodates the analysis of choral compositions spanning thirty-three years (Clarke) and ten years (Desmond), which may otherwise be perceived as asymmetric or imbalanced, and thus facilitates the study of two individuals at different stages of their careers. Ultimately, the juxtaposition of these composers highlights their distinctive musical identities while allowing commonalities in their creative approaches and influences to emerge.

Thesis Overview

While a complete biographical account of Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond is beyond the scope of this thesis, Chapter One provides an overview of the composers' respective educational and other formative experiences, musical influences, and career trajectories. These details form a basis for further discussion in the analysis chapters, shedding light on particular influences — conscious and subconscious — on both Clarke's and Desmond's creative approaches and application of compositional techniques. The biographical overview primarily draws on composer interviews — those conducted by me and those from various media sources — and their respective websites and scholarly output.[24] Chapter Two assesses the existing literature relating to Clarke and Desmond, revealing the lacuna in this area and thus underlining the importance of this study. The review extends to studies on choral music analysis and

[22] Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Why Not Compare?', in *Comparison, Theories, Approaches, Uses*, ed. by Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), pp. 34–45 (p. 40).
[23] Friedman, 'Why Not Compare?', p. 40.
[24] This output consists of Eoghan Desmond's PhD thesis commentary, and a book chapter by Rhona Clarke on collaborative processes in her non-choral music. See Chapter Two for discussion.

historical and contemporary composition more broadly, noting composers, musical techniques, and eras whose influence is evident in the work of Clarke and Desmond. This chapter also examines literature on the fundamental aspects within the investigation of each composer's music — style, text setting, and allusion and quotation — paving the way for the subsequent analysis of their choral works. While this literature engages with text setting in art song in particular, the aspects discussed are equally applicable to choral music.

Chapters Three and Four follow the analytical approach outlined above (Figure 1.1), focusing on principal musical elements within a selection of Clarke's and Desmond's works in order to comprehend their respective compositional styles. In the case of Clarke's music in Chapter Three, the analysis of particular aspects of twelve compositions (1991–2024) is expounded under the following headings: Melodic idioms and Text-painting Devices; Quotation and Allusion; Textural Approaches: Narrative and Structural Aspects; Harmonic Language; Timbral Exploration; and Conclusion. Various subheadings are contained within each section, under which specific techniques are examined that Clarke uses across various works and that contribute to defining her style. Chapter Four engages in an analysis of twelve of Desmond's choral works (2014–2024) under the following headings: Melodic idioms and Text-painting Devices; Quotation and Allusion; Textural Approaches: Narrative and Structural Aspects; Harmonic Language; and Conclusion. Similar to Chapter Three, separate subheadings are applied within the investigation, exploring salient musical features that characterise Desmond's style.

A more concentrated examination of one larger work by each composer — *Requiem* (2020) by Clarke and *Amra Choluim Chille* (2019) by Desmond — constitutes Chapters Five and Six, respectively. As these are diverse compositions with multiple movements, a varied analytical approach is taken to suit their individual structures. Where Clarke's four-movement *Requiem*, for unaccompanied voices, sets Latin liturgical texts from the Requiem Mass, Desmond's *Amra Choluim Chille* is a setting of an ancient Irish-language elegy for choir and instruments and takes a more musical-narrative approach across its seven movements. Given their distinct identities, each movement of Clarke's *Requiem* is examined in equal measure in Chapter Five; the formal structures and melodic, harmonic, and textural details are analysed, in order to comprehend the music's communication of the respective funereal texts, and to shed light on Clarke's integration of past influences while achieving a markedly individual compositional voice.

Chapter Six investigates the most significant motifs and structures within Desmond's cantata, considering his use of quotation, symbolism, orchestration, melodic and harmonic

language, and his manipulation of texture as a formal and narrative technique. Similar to previous chapters, the analysis elucidates Desmond's synthesis of various past influences and contemporary musical devices within *Amra Choluim Chille*, underlining his ability to use diverse techniques while establishing his own creative voice. Chapter Seven takes a juxtaposed analytical approach, examining a Christmas carol by each composer — *A Babe is Born* (2017) by Desmond and *Glad and Blithe* (2014) by Clarke. There is a particular focus on each composer's synthesis of past and contemporary compositional techniques within these pieces, discerning how they have recontextualised these medieval English texts for the twenty-first century. As this chapter includes only two works, each piece is analysed more extensively than those in Chapters Three and Four. Collectively, the analytical interpretations presented in this thesis represent the first extensive reading of the choral music of Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond, articulating their signature musical elements and creative approaches, and shedding light on their ability to blend old and new influences while forging striking individual compositional styles in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 1: Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond
A Biographical Overview

While comprehensive biographical accounts of Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond are beyond the scope and purpose of the present study, this chapter provides relevant background to aid our understanding of their musical and compositional development, outlining the composers' early introduction to music, their educational and career trajectories, and influences on their compositional identities, including their choral singing experiences and engagement with diverse musical genres. As will be seen in Chapter Two, limited secondary literature exists on these composers, and so the following biographical sketches draw primarily from interviews this author conducted with Clarke and Desmond, and various primary sources such as online interviews, the composers' respective websites, programme notes, and Desmond's own doctoral dissertation.

Rhona Clarke

Born in Dublin in 1958, Rhona Clarke's compositional career has spanned five decades, with an output of choral, chamber, orchestral, and electronic music. She has been commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra, the Cork International Choral Festival, New Music Dublin, Concorde, Music Network, the BBC Singers, Sydney Philharmonia Choir, and Chamber Choir Ireland, among others, demonstrating her national and international profile.[1] In addition to her individual work, Clarke has collaborated with visual artist Marie Hanlon since 2009, including on 'short experimental films with music, live music with visual projections and joint exhibitions'.[2] Her impact on Ireland's musical landscape is also evident in her membership of *Aosdána*, Ireland's affiliation of creative artists, to which she was elected in 2005.[3] Beyond her compositional work, Clarke was previously a secondary school teacher in Dublin, teaching music and directing school choirs, before becoming a lecturer at St Patrick's College, Dublin (Dublin City University) in 1994, retiring in 2019.[4]

[1] 'Rhona Clarke', *The Contemporary Music Centre* <https://www.cmc.ie/composers/rhona-clarke> [accessed 11 March 2025].
[2] 'About', *Rhona Clarke* <https://www.rhonaclarke.com/about/> [accessed 28 May 2025].
[3] 'Rhona Clarke', *Aosdána* <https://aosdana.artscouncil.ie/members/clarke/> [accessed 18 December 2025].
[4] Clarke taught music and directed the choir in St Dominic's College, Cabra, and later in St Paul's Secondary School in Greenhills, Dublin.

Clarke's immersion in music was apparent from a young age, having been born into a musical family — both parents played the violin and her mother also played the piano.[5] The composer began learning the piano at the age of six, and continued to play through her undergraduate studies at University College Dublin. David Wright notes how Clarke 'won the Viennese Solo Award with a silver medal and a scholarship for playing a Beethoven sonata' upon graduating from UCD in 1978, indicating her skill on this instrument.[6] Clarke recalls in an interview with Ita Beausang how she enjoyed making things, which 'didn't transfer on to music until I was in my twenties — about 22 — when I started composition.'[7] This path was instigated by her frustration at the lack of sufficient time to practise the piano when she was teaching full time in secondary school, thus seeking an alternative creative output.[8] In 1982, Clarke entered her first composition competition, the Feis Ceoil, with her *Six Short Piano Pieces for Children*, winning first prize and demonstrating her compositional adeptness.[9]

Clarke's engagement with choral music has remained a consistent factor throughout her career, from premieres of her early works at Cork International Choral Festival in the 1980s to State Choir LATVIJA's 2022 choral portrait album, *Sempiternam*.[10] She has noted how her interest in choral music 'was always there', and how the physicality of the human voice is irreplaceable in terms of sound.[11] Her works demonstrate a deep understanding of the voice and of choral writing, developed at least in part through her experience of singing in choirs. The composer has performed in choral ensembles since a young age and has been influenced by both historical and contemporary repertoire that she encountered while singing with the Lindsay Singers, a Dublin-based female ensemble conducted by Ethna Barror (1915–2011).[12] Clarke has referenced the key role of this choir in developing her interest in the madrigals of Renaissance composers such as Orlando Lassus and Thomas Weelkes,[13] as well as the

[5] David C. F. Wright, 'Rhona Clarke', *MusicWeb-International* (2005) <https://www.musicweb-international.com/rclarke/index.htm> [accessed 11 March 2025].
[6] Wright, 'Rhona Clarke'.
[7] Rhona Clarke, 'An Interview with Rhona Clarke', interviewed by Ita Beausang, *The Contemporary Music Centre*, 1 April 2004 <https://www.cmc.ie/features/interview-rhona-clarke> [accessed 12 March 2025].
[8] Clarke, 'An Interview with Rhona Clarke'.
[9] Wright.
[10] Rhona Clarke, *Sempiternam: Choral Music by Rhona Clarke*, State Choir LATVIJA, cond. by Māris Sirmais (Divine Art Recordings Group, MSV 28614, 2022).
[11] Rhona Clarke, interviewed by Jonathan Grimes and Evonne Ferguson, 'amplify #64 – Rhona Clarke on her new choral album 'Sempiternam'', The Contemporary Music Centre, podcast, 28 March 2022 (11:40–11:45) <https://www.cmc.ie/amplify/episode–64> [accessed 16 February 2023].
[12] Mark Fitzgerald, 'Rhona Clarke: The power and physicality of the voice', in Clarke, *Sempiternam: Choral Music by Rhona Clarke*, para 2.
[13] Barbara Lamont, 'The Choral Music of Rhona Clarke' (unpublished DMA dissertation, Texas Tech University, 2016), p. 8.

challenging musical language of twentieth-century composer Elizabeth Maconchy.[14] It was the Lindsay Singers who commissioned and premiered Clarke's first choral piece, the lullaby *Suantraí Ghráinne* (1983). They premiered it at the Cork International Choral Festival in 1984, where it won the Seán Ó Riada Choral Composition Competition. In addition to the formative influence of the Lindsay Singers, Clarke sang with Gaudete Chamber Choir during her undergraduate degree (1976–1980) — where she experienced repertoire ranging from Gregorian Chant and Renaissance works to Bruckner motets[15] — and with the choir at Queen's University Belfast during her postgraduate studies.[16]

While this research only focuses on Clarke's choral works over a thirty-four-year period (1991–2024), her compositional output extends to solo, chamber, orchestral, and electroacoustic music, as well as mixed media works.[17] The composer has stated that both 'the instrumental and the vocal are equally important' to her as 'it's all music'.[18] In 1985, Clarke first attended the Ennis Composition Summer School,[19] led by composers James Wilson (1922–2005) and John Buckley (b. 1951), and was introduced to music by Luciano Berio, Witold Lutosławski, and other European composers, which David Wright remarks, 'generated an enthusiastic response in her'.[20] Her meeting with composer Michael Alcorn (b. 1962) at the first course she attended later resulted in Clarke pursuing a Masters, followed by a PhD in electroacoustic composition at Queen's University Belfast under Alcorn's supervision (1990–1996). According to Clarke, she had a keen interest in studying this style of music and 'how to work in a studio', completing a portfolio of compositions for the degree in 1996.[21] Electroacoustic music is not as prominent in the composer's output, due to the lack of a 'desire to pursue it strongly enough' and the practicalities of finding appropriate studio facilities after her degree.[22] However, Clarke has expressed how her later collaborative work with visual artist Marie Hanlon reignited her interest in using electronic methods in her broader compositional

[14] Fitzgerald, 'Rhona Clarke: The power and physicality of the voice', para 2.
[15] Wright.
[16] Clarke, interviewed by Grimes and Ferguson, 'amplify #64' (11:32–11:42).
[17] Six of Clarke's chamber compositions were recorded by the Fidelio Trio for the album *A Different Game: Piano Trios by Rhona Clarke* (Divine Arts Recording Group, MSV 28561, 2017).
[18] Clarke, interview with the author, 10 January 2025.
[19] The Ennis Composition Summer School has since been renamed the Irish Composition Summer School and is now based in Dublin.
[20] Wright.
[21] Clarke, 'An Interview with Rhona Clarke'.
[22] Ibid.

output; for example, *Con Coro* (2011) for violin, cello, and tape; her orchestral work *SHIFT* (2013); and *smiling like that…* (2016) for mezzo soprano and tape.[23]

Clarke has remarked on how her interest in listening to a diverse range of music consciously and subconsciously influences her writing.[24] Beyond choral music, it is likely that her early participation in the Ennis Summer School, and her experience of both composing instrumental music and listening to a variety of instrumental compositions, had an impact on her choral writing. She has stated that when composing choral music, she examines 'not just choral works' but 'harmonic language in instrumental works, contemporary instrumental works, or rhythmic techniques' to see how these can be applied to voices.[25] Clarke has also noted the impact of a seminar on contemporary choral music at the Cork International Choral Festival in 1987 on her compositional approach.[26] The Via Nova Choir from Munich and their conductor Kurt Suttner demonstrated a range of modern techniques in works of the time, which Clarke vividly recalls:

> […] triadic formations, chords based on fourths and fifths, whole tone constructions, clusters, vocal formants, overtones, glissandi, speech as a textural element. He went through all of these different techniques in various works and gave samples [...] It was just really so mind-opening. I would have said that seminar had served as an amazing influence on what I did subsequently.[27]

Several of these musical features, such as *glissandi* and speech, subsequently emerged in Clarke's choral works — *Psalm 148* (1988) and *Gloria* (1989), for example — and continue to be present in more nuanced ways in her later works, revealing the considerable influence of this seminar on the composer's musical language.

Clarke's compositional language is underpinned by the aforementioned variety of formal and informal performance and creative experiences of choral and instrumental music. As she states, '[E]ssentially, we always make work out of who we are and out of our cumulative experiences'.[28] Her encounters with an array of choral repertoire, as well as a diverse range of instrumental and electroacoustic sonorities across her education and career, have contributed

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[23] Rhona Clarke, 'Transcending Conventional Habits: Music and the Collaborative Process in Joint Works', in *Women and Music in Ireland*, ed. by Laura Watson, Ita Beausang, and Jennifer O'Connor-Madsen, Irish Musical Studies, 13, series editors Lorraine Byrne Bodley and Harry White (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2022), pp. 182–190 (pp. 189–190).
[24] Rhona Clarke, interview with the author, 10 January 2025.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Rhona Clarke, interview with the author, 31 January 2025; See also Rhona Clarke, 'Rhona Clarke, Dublin, Composer Commissioned in 1994', in *Cork International Choral Festival 1954–2004: A Celebration*, ed. by Ruth Fleischmann (Herford, Germany: Glen House Press, 2004), pp. 313–14 (p. 314).
[27] Clarke, interview with the author, 31 January 2025.
[28] Clarke, 'Transcending Conventional Habits', pp. 184–85.

to the formation of her compositional voice and her ability to fuse a variety of musical influences — both ancient and contemporary — within her choral works, as the following chapters shall explore.

Eoghan Desmond

Eoghan Desmond (b. 1989) has been immersed in the cathedral choral tradition since his time as a boy treble in St Fin Barre's Cathedral in his native Cork, and this has had a significant impact on his career and his compositional style. He has acknowledged how his 'first real connection to music was choral.'[29] At the time of writing, Desmond is a professional bass-baritone based in London. He performs in cathedral choirs, as well as regularly singing with Chamber Choir Ireland. He is also a guest performer with the BBC Singers, ORA Singers, and I Fagiolini, among others. In his online biography, the composer outlines the influence of 'his long association with the cathedral choral tradition' on his writing, which is demonstrated by his extensive output of sacred music.[30] Desmond's vast experience as a singer also translates to his secular choral works, which exhibit similar idiomatic writing, as well as the influence of diverse musical genres, such as ambient music. Like Rhona Clarke, his reputation as a choral composer was established at the Cork International Choral Festival, succeeding in the Seán Ó Riada Choral Composition Competition in 2015 with his piece *Mother Goose's Melodies*. Since this award, Desmond's compositional career has gradually prospered internationally, with ensembles such as The Sixteen, the BBC Singers, Chamber Choir Ireland, the Choral Scholars of University College Dublin, and the Chapel Royal of HM Tower of London performing his music.

Although Desmond has produced solo instrumental pieces and chamber works — primarily between 2011 and 2018 — his output is dominated by choral music. He states, in a similar vein to Rhona Clarke, that the choral genre 'has always been the idiom that's spoken to me, that I've felt most at home in as a performer, and also as a writer.'[31] Reflecting on the emergence of his compositional voice, Desmond notes how

[29] Eoghan Desmond, interview with the author, 24 January 2025.
[30] 'Bio', *Eoghan Desmond* <https://www.eoghandesmond.com/about> [accessed 3 March 2025].
[31] Eoghan Desmond quoted in Michael Dervan, 'Eoghan Desmond: "I struggle to write in a vacuum – I draw inspiration from what I'm working on as a singer"', *The Irish Times*, 14 March 2023 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/music/2023/03/14/eoghan-desmond-i-struggle-to-write-in-a-vacuum-i-draw-inspiration-from-what-im-working-on-as-a-singer/> [accessed 14 March 2023].

> [T]he urge to compose was there as long as I knew what music was, so far as I can recall. I first sat down at a piano with the intent of writing a piece of music when I was about seven or eight years old.[32]

This time aligns with the composer's earliest choral performances in the cathedral at the age of nine, where he encountered repertoire by 'Noble, Walmisley, Stanford and Vaughan Williams, sitting alongside the Tudor and Stuart composers such as Byrd, Tomkins, Tallis and Weelkes'.[33] Desmond began learning the French horn concurrently, which led to formative encounters with twentieth and twenty-first century music while playing with the Cork School of Music's Symphony Orchestra and Symphonic Wind Ensemble. He credits works by Stravinsky and Poulenc, as well as Nigel Clarke's *The City in the Sea* (1994) and Michael Daugherty's *U.F.O* (1999) for introducing him to dissonance and rhythmic activity.[34] Desmond states that '[I]t was in reconciling the cathedral experiences with the orchestral experiences that my interest in anachronism as a musical device began', the composer regularly combining traditional and contemporary techniques within his music.[35]

This blended performance experience of the old and new progressed during Desmond's university education, particularly in relation to choral music, when he joined Christ Church Cathedral as a chorister while studying at Trinity College Dublin. In addition to singing early music, he also had the opportunity to perform contemporary choral works, such as James MacMillan's *Christus Vincit* (1994), and Francis Pott's *My Song is Love Unknown* (2002), which increased his interest in contemporary compositional techniques.[36] However, Desmond has viewed his BA and MPhil studies in composition in quite a negative light, stating that sacred choral music, and anything that did not align with Darmstadt ideals, 'was actively discouraged […]. I had little opportunity to forge anything resembling a compositional identity of my own.'[37] He has explained how he stopped writing choral music while at college, feeling 'too weighed down with hang-ups about what does or doesn't work' and afraid to experiment and fail.[38] Following the completion of his Masters at Trinity, the composer returned to writing choral music, beginning with *Mother Goose's Melodies* (2014).[39]

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[32] Eoghan Desmond, 'Alt Notes #11 | Eoghan Desmond', interviewed by Shell Dooley, *Headstuff*, 21 July 2016 <https://www.headstuff.org/entertainment/music/music-features/alt-notes-11-eoghan-desmond> [accessed 1 May 2023].
[33] Eoghan Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2: Commentary and Appendix' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 2020), p. 6.
[34] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 6.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., p. 7.
[38] Desmond, 'Alt Notes #11'.
[39] Ibid.

Desmond's subsequent PhD in Composition of Contemporary Sacred Choral Music at the University of Aberdeen (2016–2020) significantly shaped his compositional path and identity, allowing him to explore his musical interests and express his voice in his preferred choral genre. In tandem with his postgraduate studies, Desmond's performances with Chamber Choir Ireland, whom he joined after leaving Trinity, exposed him to diverse contemporary repertoire, which, he notes,

> opened my mind to new expressions of what choral music could be […] My continued association with Chamber Choir Ireland continues to introduce me to new pieces that have in some lesser or greater way influenced my style – or if not necessarily my style, at least my way of thinking about text and texture.[40]

In an interview from 2023, Desmond recalled how it was during the COVID-19 pandemic that he realised his struggle 'to write in a vacuum. I'm always drawing inspiration from what I'm working on as a singer.'[41] As well as choral music, the composer has acknowledged the influence of ambient electronic music on his writing, highlighting his interest in diverse musical styles.[42] He demonstrates a desire to combine traditional and contemporary techniques within his compositions, candidly stating that he is 'not afraid to borrow and steal liberally from those who've come before'.[43] Desmond's musical experiences from a young age through to his career as a singer have played a crucial role in the development of his compositional voice and style. The composer draws on diverse historical and modern musical influences and exhibits a thorough understanding of writing for voices throughout his growing output of choral music.

Following the review of literature presented in Chapter Two, the remainder of this thesis analyses a selection of choral works by Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond, examining notable elements — melodic idioms and quotations, harmonic progressions, textural structures, and extended techniques — that capture their approaches to text setting, their fusion of past and contemporary musical traits, and recurring characteristics, and determining how these components define their respective compositional voices. An interpretation of the functions and interrelationships of these musical elements within and across repertoire seeks to shed light on how each composer relates text and music, and endeavours to enhance our understanding of Clarke's and Desmond's individual styles.

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[40] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 7.
[41] Desmond quoted in Dervan, 'Eoghan Desmond: "I struggle to write in a vacuum"'.
[42] 'Bio', *Eoghan Desmond*; Eoghan Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025; Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 8.
[43] Desmond, 'Alt Notes #11'.

Chapter 2: Analysing Choral Music
Review of Literature

Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond

As Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond are both living composers, secondary literature about their music is still quite limited. Short biographies of both composers are available on the websites of The Contemporary Music Centre[1] and Cailíno Music Publishers,[2] as well as on Clarke's and Desmond's respective websites.[3] A brief account of Rhona Clarke's life and an overview of her compositional output is included in *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*; however, her oeuvre has expanded significantly since its publication in 2013.[4] David Wright provides a comprehensive outline of her early musical life and career online, following an interview with Clarke in 1996.[5] A written transcript of a conversation between Clarke and musicologist Ita Beausang in 2004 features on the Contemporary Music Centre's website, where the composer's work, influences, and interests are discussed.[6] Clarke has also provided insight into her compositional process and specific works for the Centre's podcast 'amplify',[7] in addition to interviews with RTÉ Lyric FM, *The Irish Times*, and choral and instrumental ensembles, all of which are available online.[8]

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[1] 'Rhona Clarke', *The Contemporary Music Centre* <https://www.cmc.ie/composers/rhona-clarke> [accessed 3 April 2025]; 'Eoghan Desmond', *The Contemporary Music Centre* <https://www.cmc.ie/composers/eoghan-desmond> [accessed 3 April 2025].

[2] 'Rhona Clarke', *Cailíno Music Publishers* <https://cailino.com/composers/rhona-clarke/> [accessed 3 April 2025]; 'Eoghan Desmond', *Cailíno Music Publishers* <https://cailino.com/composers/eoghan-desmond/> [accessed 3 April 2025].

[3] 'About', *Rhona Clarke* <https://www.rhonaclarke.com/about/> [Accessed 28 May 2025]; 'Bio', *Eoghan Desmond* <https://www.eoghandesmond.com/about> [accessed 3 March 2025].

[4] Eoin Conway, 'Rhona Clarke', in *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland, Volume 1*, ed. by Harry White and Barra Boydell (Dublin: UCD Press, 2013), pp. 204–5.

[5] David C. F. Wright, 'Rhona Clarke', *MusicWeb-International* (2005) <https://www.musicweb-international.com/rclarke/index.htm> [accessed 11 March 2025].

[6] Rhona Clarke, 'An Interview with Rhona Clarke', interviewed by Ita Beausang, *The Contemporary Music Centre*, 1 April 2004 < https://www.cmc.ie/features/interview-rhona-clarke> [accessed 12 March 2025].

[7] Jonathan Grimes and Evonne Ferguson, 'amplify #64 – Rhona Clarke on her new choral album 'Sempiternam'', The Contemporary Music Centre, podcast, 28 March 2022 <https://www.cmc.ie/amplify/episode–64> [accessed 16 February 2023].

[8] 'Rhona Clarke's *Sempiternam*', *Culture File*, RTÉ Lyric FM, 14 April 2022 <https://www.rte.ie/radio/podcasts/22087792> [accessed 26 November 2023]; Michael Dervan, '"When my life was more stable, my music was more active, more gritty. When my life has been chaotic my music has calmed down": New Music Dublin 2024: The composers Bekah Simms, Raymond Deane, Linda Buckley and Rhona Clarke on their creative processes', *The Irish Times*, 16 April 2024 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/music/2024/04/16/when-my-life-was-more-stable-my-music-was-more-active-more-gritty-when-my-life-has-been-chaotic-my-music-has-calmed-down/> [accessed 18 April 2024]; Mornington Singers, 'Thanks so much to @rhonapclarke', online video recording, Instagram, 20 March 2024 <https://www.instagram.com/p/C4wIrHwsh-2/?hl=en> [accessed 21 March 2024]; Hard Rain, 'Rhona Clarke Interview', online video recording, YouTube, 13 June 2023

In terms of academic research, Barbara Lamont's doctoral dissertation focuses on six of Rhona Clarke's choral works composed between 1998 and 2008.[9] However, this source is limited in analytical detail and length, with priority given to conducting considerations rather than a comprehensive musical analysis. Bernie Sherlock's doctoral dissertation, which investigates the development of choral music in Ireland since the pre-Christian era, includes an analysis of Clarke's *Regina Coeli* (2007), largely concentrating on the preparation and performance of the piece.[10] This composition is also included in *Choirland*, a collection of fifteen choral works by Irish composers, accompanied by performance notes to aid conductors and singers.[11] It is telling that *Regina Coeli* is the only composition in the collection by a female composer, a glaring statistic that is difficult to ignore. In his doctoral thesis on the Cork International Choral Festival, Fearghal Ó Conchubhair provides a pedagogical analysis of Clarke's upper-voice work *Géibheann* (1998), focusing on its suitability for younger voices, and also refers to her commissioned and performed pieces throughout the history of this festival.[12] In addition to the referenced literature, Clarke herself has published a chapter on her collaborative work with visual artist Marie Hanlon in *Women and Music in Ireland* (2022); however, she does not reference her choral work.[13] She has also offered a short contribution to the publication *Cork International Festival 1954–2004: A Celebration* (2004), outlining the impact of this festival on her compositional development.[14] Mark Fitzgerald's overview of Clarke's compositional career and the music featured on the choral portrait album

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4Db5VnStHw> [accessed 12 December 2023]; Chamber Choir Ireland, 'Celebrating International Women's Day with composers Áine Mallon and Rhona Clarke', online video recording, YouTube, 8 March 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAoelDu8-2s> [accessed 8 March 2023].

[9] Barbara Lamont, 'The Choral Music of Rhona Clarke' (unpublished DMA dissertation, Texas Tech University, 2016).

[10] Bernie Sherlock, 'Contemporary Irish Choral Music and an Outline of its Historical Origins, Volume I: Text' (unpublished DMusPerf dissertation, Dublin City University, Royal Irish Academy of Music, 2018), pp. 166–182.

[11] *Choirland: An Anthology of Irish Choral Music*, ed. by Anne Barry and Alan Leech (Dublin: Contemporary Music Centre, 2012).

[12] Fearghal Ó Conchubhair, 'The Influence of the Cork International Choral Festival on choral singing, choral conducting and choral composition in Ireland (1954–2021)' (unpublished DMusPerf dissertation, Royal Irish Academy of Music, 2022), pp. 100–102.

[13] Rhona Clarke, 'Transcending Conventional Habits: Music and the Collaborative Process in Joint Works', in *Women and Music in Ireland*, ed. by Laura Watson, Ita Beausang, and Jennifer O'Connor-Madsen, Irish Musical Studies, 13, series editors Lorraine Byrne Bodley and Harry White (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2022), pp. 182–190.

[14] Rhona Clarke, 'Rhona Clarke, Dublin, Composer Commissioned in 1994', in *Cork International Choral Festival 1954–2004: A Celebration*, ed. by Ruth Fleischmann (Herford, Germany: Glen House Press, 2004), pp. 313–14.

Sempiternam, recorded by State Choir LATVIJA, provides a further interesting insight into the composer's style.[15]

As Eoghan Desmond is still a relatively young composer, with his public choral output only growing since 2014, research into his career and music is scarce. Apart from this author's journal articles on his specific choral works, there is no academic literature published on Desmond.[16] In addition to her study of *Regina Coeli* and works by six other Irish choral composers, Sherlock's unpublished dissertation includes an examination of Desmond's *Mother Goose's Melodies* (2014), providing both an overview of the various sections of the piece, and considerations for preparing and performing the music.[17] Like Clarke, Desmond has engaged in several interviews about his music, which are available in recorded and written form, including a conversation with The Contemporary Music Centre,[18] and interviews for *The Irish Times* and RTÉ Lyric FM.[19] The composer's own PhD dissertation offers a significant insight into his compositional development and style, and specific works such as his cantata *Amra Choluim Chille* (2019), which is analysed in Chapter Six of this thesis.[20]

[15] Mark Fitzgerald, 'Rhona Clarke: The power and physicality of the voice', in Rhona Clarke, *Sempiternam: Choral Music by Rhona Clarke*, State Choir LATVIJA, cond. by Māris Sirmais (Divine Art Recordings Group, MSV 28614, 2022).

[16] Laura Sheils, 'A Choral Meditation: Fusing Past and Present in the Sacred Music of Eoghan Desmond', *Religions*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2024), 135 <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010135> [accessed 14 February 2024]; Laura Sheils, 'Eoghan Desmond's *Amra Choluim Chille*: A Contemporary Choral Setting of a Sixth-Century Poem', *Studia Hibernica*, Vol. 51 (2025), 141–168 <https://doi.org/10.3828/sh.2025.5> [accessed 15 September 2025].

[17] Sherlock, 'Contemporary Irish Choral Music and an Outline of its Historical Origins, Volume I: Text', pp. 108–124. In addition to Clarke and Desmond, Sherlock provides a study of works by Seán Doherty, Ben Hanlon, Michael McGlynn, Mark Armstrong, Gerald Barry, and Michael Holohan.

[18] Jonathan Grimes and Evonne Ferguson, 'amplify #50 – Interviews with Elaine Agnew and Eoghan Desmond for City of Derry International Choir Festival', The Contemporary Music Centre, podcast, 20 October 2021 <https://www.cmc.ie/amplify/episode-50> [accessed 25 June 2024].

[19] Michael Dervan, 'Eoghan Desmond: "I struggle to write in a vacuum – I draw inspiration from what I'm working on as a singer"', *The Irish Times*, 14 March 2023 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/music/2023/03/14/eoghan-desmond-i-struggle-to-write-in-a-vacuum-i-draw-inspiration-from-what-im-working-on-as-a-singer/> [accessed 14 March 2023]; Eoghan Desmond, 'Alt Notes #11 | Eoghan Desmond', interviewed by Shell Dooley, *Headstuff*, 21 July 2016 <https://www.headstuff.org/entertainment/music/music-features/alt-notes-11-eoghan-desmond> [accessed 1 May 2023]; 'Guthanna ar an gCnoc, Foteine Tryferopoulou, Nan Goldini', *Culture File*, RTÉ Lyric FM, 22 February 2025 <https://www.rte.ie/radio/lyricfm/clips/22490639/> [accessed 18 March 2025]; 'My Creative Life', *Aedín in the Afternoon*, RTÉ Lyric FM, 18 November 2022 <https://www.rte.ie/radio/lyricfm/clips/22173931/> [accessed 19 July 2023].

[20] Eoghan Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2: Commentary and Appendix' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 2020).

Literature on Choral Composition

In addition to sources concerning Desmond and Clarke, secondary literature on other choral composers, compositional eras, and styles have contributed to this research. Writings, including journal articles and dissertations, on Scottish composer James MacMillan (b. 1959) — a noted influence on Desmond's work — have informed my analysis and interpretation of the selected compositions and enriched my understanding of contemporary sacred choral music, and MacMillan's influence on the Irish composer.[21] Analyses and research on other composers, such as Arvo Pärt (b. 1935),[22] Jaakko Mäntyjärvi (b. 1963),[23] Elizabeth Maconchy (1907–1994),[24] and Charles Ives (1874–1954),[25] have also informed this study, providing insight into compositional techniques that characterise these composers' respective styles — quotation, minimalist features, and octatonicism, for example — and that are also apparent in the choral music of Clarke and Desmond.

Both Irish composers have been candid about the influence of historical eras and contemporary styles on their compositional practice. Therefore, broader literature on music of the Medieval and Renaissance eras, particularly that which focuses on carols and sacred

[21] Dominic Peter Wells, 'James MacMillan: Retrospective Modernist' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Durham University, 2012); *James MacMillan Studies*, ed. by George Parsons & Robert Sholl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); James MacMillan, 'God, Theology and Music', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 81, No. 947 (2000), 16–26 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43250342> [accessed 18 December 2023]; Phillip Cooke, *The Music of James MacMillan* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2019); Stephen A. Kingsbury, '*Divo Aloysio Sacrum*: James MacMillan's Early Motet as Exemplar of His Mature Style', *The Choral Journal*, Vol. 44, No. 5 (2003), 31–41 <https://www.acda-publications.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/choral_journals/Kingsbury-CJ-Dec-2003.pdf> [accessed 24 April 2023].

[22] Peter C. Bouteneff, 'The Sound—and Hearing—of Arvo Pärt', in *Arvo Pärt: Sounding the Sacred*, ed. by Jeffers Engelhardt, Robert C. Saler, Peter Bouteneff (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), pp. 8–22; Grace Kingsbury Muzzo, 'Systems, Symbols, & Silence: The Tintinnabuli Technique of Arvo Pärt into the Twenty-First Century', *The Choral Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 6 (2008), 22–35 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23557279> [accessed 8 February 2023].

[23] Timothy Allen Pahel, 'The Choral Works for Mixed Voices by Jaakko Mäntyjärvi' (unpublished DMA dissertation, University of Iowa, 2013).

[24] Catherine Roma, *The Choral Music of Twentieth-Century Women Composers: Elisabeth Lutyens, Elizabeth Maconchy, and Thea Musgrave* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2006).

[25] Christopher Ballantine, 'Charles Ives and the Meaning of Quotation in Music', *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (1979), 167–184 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/741701> [accessed 8 March 2023]; Ann Besser Scott, 'Medieval and Renaissance Techniques in the Music of Charles Ives: Horatio at the Bridge?', *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (1994), 448–478 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/742269> [accessed 29 August 2023]; Peter J. Burkholder, '"Quotation" and Emulation: Charles Ives's Uses of His Models', *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (1985), 1–26 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/948169> [accessed 29 August 2023].

music,[26] as well as contemporary styles such as ambient music,[27] twenty-first century sacred composition,[28] and contemporary compositional techniques and trends,[29] has also contributed to the formation of a comprehensive understanding of both Clarke's and Desmond's compositional styles and their place within the contemporary choral milieu. Particular concepts that have informed the approach used within this thesis — notably style, text setting, and allusion and quotation — are discussed below, drawing on existing literature relating to these subjects.

Style

The term 'style' has varied meanings and interpretations within musical scholarship, having been applied to eras, genres, and composers. It is necessary to consider a range of different perspectives on this concept in order to formulate a definition of style most suitable for the purposes of this thesis. Robert Pascall states that:

> [S]tyle manifests itself in characteristic usages of form, texture, harmony, melody, rhythm and ethos; and it is presented by creative personalities, conditioned by historical, social and geographical factors, performing resources and conventions.[30]

Similarly, Mario Baroni understands the concept of style to be 'conceived as a system of structural musical traits' — such as melody, harmony, and rhythm — that are present in musical

[26] Fabrice Fitch, *Renaissance Polyphony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Gustave Reese, *Music in the Renaissance* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1954); Howard Mayer Brown, *Music in the Renaissance* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1976); Helen Deeming and Frieda van der Heijden, *Medieval Polyphony and Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Manfred F. Bukofzer, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1950).
[27] *Music Beyond Airports: Appraising Ambient Music*, ed. by Monty Atkins and Simon Cummings (Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press, 2019).
[28] James MacMillan, 'Why Sacred Music Endures', *Image Journal*, No. 63 (2009) <https://www.imagejournal.org/article/sacred-music-endures/> [accessed 18 September 2023]; *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by George Corbett (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2019) <https://www.doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0172> [accessed 20 February 2023]; Jonathan Arnold, *Sacred Music in Secular Society* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).
[29] Alan Denney, 'Ours to See: Emerging Trends in Today's Choral Compositions', The Choral Journal, Vol. 60, No. 3 (2019), 8–21 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26870101> [accessed 2 February 2023]; Stefan Kostka and Matthew Santa, *Materials and Techniques of Post-Tonal Music*, 5th edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2018); Kira Zeeman Rugen, 'The Evolution of Choral Sound: In Professional Choirs from the 1970s to the Twenty-First Century' (unpublished DMA dissertation, Arizona State University, 2013); Joseph Auner, *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2013).
[30] Robert Pascall, 'Style', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.27041> [accessed 18 September 2023].

composition.[31] According to Gabrielsson and Lindström, these traits within the musical structure 'contribute to the perceived emotional expression' of a work, as intended by the composer.[32] The musical traits or parameters can be extrapolated from the work's structure, in order to discern their specific properties and the composer's characteristic use of certain traits within and across their works.[33]

Leonard Meyer defines style as 'a replication of patterning […] that results from a series of choices made within some set of constraints.'[34] This definition requires further clarification, particularly in relation to 'patterning'. In his deconstruction of Meyer's definition of style, Baroni notes that 'what is replicated cannot always be correctly defined as a "pattern".'[35] He refers to the regular occurrence of structural features within seventeenth-century arias, such as the sequence of cadences, particular melodic intervals, and harmonic hierarchies.[36] Rather than being perceived as patterns, he argues that 'what is repeated is the application of the same rules that produces […] an intuitive sense of similarity between compositions of the same repertory.'[37] These rules have 'an expressive intent',[38] and are understood as 'historically and culturally motivated procedures always incorporating forms of aesthetic experience.'[39] As the concept of rules within musical composition is less apparent now than in the Baroque and Classical eras, it is perhaps more useful to interpret Baroni's stance in the same light as Pascall's idea of style — the consistent application and manipulation of musical traits or structural aspects that produce a sense of similarity across a composer's oeuvre and contribute to stylistic coherence.

Beyond music, philosopher Nelson Goodman provides a more general definition of style, stating that '[S]tyle comprises certain characteristic features both of what is said and of how it is said […], both of content and of form.'[40] In a choral context, a composer's tendency

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[31] Mario Baroni, 'Hearing musical style: Cognitive and creative problems', in *Musical Creativity: Multidisciplinary Research in Theory and Practice*, ed. by Irène Deliège and Geraint A. Wiggins (Hove and New York: Psychology Press, 2006), pp. 78–94 (p. 78).
[32] Alf Gabrielsson and Erik Lindström, 'The Role of Structure in the Musical Expression of Emotions', in *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications*, ed. by Patrik N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 367–400 (p. 367).
[33] Mario Baroni, 'A Different Kind of Similarity: the Recognition of Style in Listening', *Musicae Scientiae*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2009), 119–138 (p. 124) <https://doi.org/10.1177/102986490901300106> [accessed 18 April 2024].
[34] Leonard B. Meyer, *Style and Music: Theory, history, and ideology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), p. 3.
[35] Baroni, 'Hearing musical style', p. 79.
[36] Ibid., pp. 79–80.
[37] Ibid., p. 80.
[38] Baroni, 'A Different Kind of Similarity', p. 124
[39] Baroni, 'Hearing musical style', p. 80.
[40] Nelson Goodman, 'The Status of Style', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (June 1975), 799–811 (p. 802) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1342849> [accessed 8 September 2023].

to set a particular type of text, such as a biblical extract or poetry on a specific theme, may contribute to their compositional identity and style, alongside the recurrence of certain musical features across their works. These features may be conscious or subconscious, and may have been influenced by details of context, commissioning where relevant, and the standard of ensemble for which a piece is intended. Goodman purports that the dictum '[S]ubject is what is said, style is how' is misleading as, more often than not, 'subject is involved in style.'[41] Within choral music, a composer may reuse specific features and structures across similarly themed texts. Conversely, he states that '[M]any works on many matters may be in the same style; and much discussion of styles is carried on without regard to subject.'[42] Taking all of the above into account, ultimately the idea of a composer's style within this research aligns with that of Pascall, while also considering the impact of subject — the text — on the composer's distinct application of musical traits. As Goodman asserts, 'what is said, how it is said, what is expressed, and how it is expressed are all intimately related and involved in style.'[43]

Style Analysis

Leonard Meyer defines style analysis as being 'concerned to identify the traits characteristic of some works or group of works, and to relate such traits to one another.'[44] How do persistent musical traits across a composer's oeuvre 'fit together, complementing one another'?[45] How do they contribute to creating a coherent musical shape in a piece and to characterising the essence of a composer's style? This stance is echoed by Jan LaRue, who underlines the importance of understanding 'the functions and interrelationships of these elements, so that we can make meaningful interpretations, identifying the significant aspects of each piece in relation to its composer, and the stylistic relation of each composer to his milieu.'[46] According to Meyer, style analysis begins with a description and classification of the features replicated in a work or selection of works.[47] It is improbable in most circumstances that a musical feature would be replicated in an identical manner across works, with alterations and variations expected. Therefore, it is more appropriate to interpret the term 'replicate' as something that is

[41] Goodman, 'The Status of Style', p. 799.
[42] Ibid., p. 800.
[43] Ibid., p. 803.
[44] Meyer, *Style and Music*, p. 65.
[45] Ibid., p. 43. See also Floyd Grave, 'Interpretation through Style Analysis', *College Music Symposium*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1978), 56–71 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40373918> [accessed 13 February 2024].
[46] Jan LaRue, 'Fundamental Considerations in Style Analysis', *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2001), 295–312 (p. 296) <https://doi.org/10.1525/jm.2001.18.2.295> [accessed 29 January 2024].
[47] Meyer, *Style and Music*, p. 10.

reused and modified, depending on the music's parameters. Meyer does not specify how many times a feature must be replicated to be considered a key trait of a composer's style, which leaves this decision with the analyst and may prove difficult to determine. As Goodman notes, 'some properties may be only usual rather than constant features of a given style'.[48] However, if certain techniques are apparent across several of the composer's works, it is reasonable to argue that they contribute to or form part of that composer's style.

Meyer is of the view that style analysis is 'not primarily concerned with why the traits observed were chosen by a composer', which, he argues, is the remit of history.[49] On the one hand, these recurring traits in a composer's output may not possess any meaning or relate to the set text and context, and may be a subconscious decision or simply techniques the composer enjoys using. On the other hand, Meyer asserts that all the traits that are identified in a work are 'symptoms of the presence of a set of interrelated constraints', which should be made explicit in order to explain and comprehend composers' choices within and across works.[50] He perceives these constraints as including the forces for which the composer writes, the acoustical environment, cultural attitudes, and music theories.[51] This interpretation is not far removed from Pascall's view of a composer's stylistic characteristics being 'conditioned by historical, social and geographical factors, performing resources and conventions.'[52] Within this study, constraints will be referred to as 'conditions', due to the negative tone of the former term, and due to the diverse, broad compositional context today. The conditions will naturally differ across a composer's works, resulting in different traits in certain circumstances. However, it is also possible that the same or similar features are present across diverse works, transcending the parameters of conditions such as those listed by Meyer.

Stylistic Fingerprints

Musicologist Susan Wollenberg applies the term 'fingerprints' in her analysis of eight compositional techniques across Franz Schubert's instrumental works that contribute to characterising his style.[53] She defines these fingerprints as Schubert's ''favourite devices',

[48] Goodman, p. 807.
[49] Meyer, *Style and Music*, p. 65.
[50] Ibid., pp. 12, 37.
[51] Leonard B. Meyer, 'Innovation, Choice and the History of Music', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (1983), 517–544 (p. 518) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343338> [accessed 31 January 2024].
[52] Pascall, 'Style'.
[53] Susan Wollenberg, *Schubert's Fingerprints: Studies in the Instrumental Works* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011).

marking his instrumental style with its special character or 'compositional personality'.'[54] Wollenberg investigates the similar melodic outlines, rhythmic characters, textures, and tonal plans across selected pieces, assessing whether the composer's choices are designed or arbitrary. Her understanding of 'fingerprints' could be compared to Meyer's definition of a composer's idiom — 'what is common to different works by the same composer'.[55] As the traits identified by Wollenberg are apparent across all the selected works by Schubert, it could be argued that 'fingerprints' implies that these features mark works with their composer's imprint, with an expectation that they appear in all or the majority of their music. Although this has proven to be suitable in Wollenberg's analysis of Schubert's compositions, the term may be contested if 'fingerprints' occur in several but not the majority of a composer's output.

Meyer states that 'styles do not remain constant over time as fingerprints do.'[56] As previously noted, this implies that fingerprints are indelible marks in a composer's work, consistently recurring throughout the evolution of a composer's craft and style. Contextually, a composer's style can change between genres (e.g. a symphony and musical), texts, or commissions, whilst chronologically, composers' styles change in various ways.[57] The latter point is underlined by Pascall, who acknowledges that a composer's style is 'hardly ever static; such a composer learns from himself and is constantly adding to his usable past.'[58] This stance is also echoed by Rhona Clarke's belief that '[Y]ou're never finished learning as a composer.'[59] For Meyer, despite stylistic developments in a composer's career, fingerprints or markers will remain unchanged. He argues that fingerprints are only significant 'when they are related to other features of the [composer's] style'.[60] Unless the analyst can explain how a feature such as a deceptive cadence is related to other elements of a composer's style, 'the trait will be no more than a marker.'[61]

Of course, it is important to understand how diverse compositional elements are repeated and synthesised in the creation of individual and multi-movement choral works, and, more broadly, throughout the development of a composer's style. However, acknowledging the existence of fingerprints or markers across a composer's output is of value, as they contribute to forming an overview of the composer's sound and identity. For musical devices

[54] Wollenberg, *Schubert's Fingerprints*, p. 2.
[55] Meyer, *Style and Music*, p. 24.
[56] Ibid., p. 61.
[57] Ibid., p. 62.
[58] Pascall.
[59] Hard Rain, 'Rhona Clarke Interview', online video recording, YouTube, 13 June 2023 (2:54–3:00) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4Db5VnStHw> [accessed 12 December 2023].
[60] Meyer, *Style and Music*, p. 62.
[61] Ibid., p. 62.

that occur across a particular set of works in a certain period, but do not appear in previous or subsequent scores, Meyer perceives these as contributing to characterising the composer's idiom: 'when the strategies chosen by a composer change over time, his or her idiom may be divided into periods such as early, middle, and late.'[62] This point is also suggested by Beard and Gloag, who propose that 'there may be an element of personality to style, and a sense of an evolving personality may be expressed through the detection of stages in a composer's career.'[63] For example, a composer may only apply a specific technique in their late works; alternatively, they may cease reusing an aspect of their idiom after a particular point in their career — as a possible result of context, changing influences and interests, and broader developments in composition — thus contributing to marking the end of that stage.

Contrary to Meyer's view that a composer's stylistic choices are more or less unconscious,[64] Claire Taylor-Jay argues that '[T]he musical techniques which a composer employs to maintain his style are *always* choices, which — usually — he decides not to change from work to work.'[65] When analysing a composer's output that demonstrates a common set of techniques, it is natural to question whether these features are active decisions made by the composer, or are a force of habit. Do composers consciously incorporate a specific motif, or rhythmic or harmonic pattern into a piece as a trademark of their style? Or is the recurring technique connected to similar texts or moods? Where certain features are deliberately applied in one composition, they may occur subconsciously in another. Taylor-Jay is hesitant about the rhetoric of 'fingerprints', asserting that it 'implies a belief in an inherent style, which a composer is almost obliged to manifest, unconsciously, and which he cannot escape.'[66] This perspective aligns with Meyer's understanding of fingerprints as unchanging markers across a composer's style, and reinforces an expectation that the composer must replicate them throughout their oeuvre.

Taylor-Jay also notes that certain compositional devices are found across various composers' works, making it difficult to define them as definitive stylistic fingerprints in one composer's output.[67] However, composition does not occur in a vacuum and it is unlikely that any musical technique is solely apparent in an individual's work. I would argue that it is a

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[62] Meyer, *Style and Music*, p. 24.
[63] David Beard and Kenneth Gloag, *Musicology: The Key Concepts*, 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 238.
[64] Meyer, *Style and Music*, p. 4.
[65] Claire Taylor-Jay, 'The Composer's Voice? Compositional Style and Criteria of Value in Weill, Krenek and Stravinsky', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, Vol. 134, No. 1 (2009), 85–111 (p. 89) <https://www.jstor.com/stable/40783131> [accessed 28 August 2023]. Italics added by this author.
[66] Taylor-Jay, 'The Composer's Voice?', p. 93.
[67] Ibid., p. 99.

composer's particular application and shaping of musical devices that determine their individual sound and style, not simply the inclusion of these in their compositions. This position is reinforced by Eric Blom in his analysis of Schubert's interchange of major and minor modes, stating that this was a well-established technique in music, yet it was the composer's 'unaccountably different' application of this technique that hallmarked his work.[68] Taylor-Jay's argument that 'the notion of the unity of the artist's oeuvre is […] questionable' is valid, as many factors can alter a composer's direction, style, and values.[69] A composer does not have to abide by an individual style throughout their career. However, where consistencies exist across their output, or within a particular compositional period, these should be examined to determine their purpose and connection with other musical and extra-musical features in the works.

Text setting

In choral music, text is a central extra-musical feature, with poetry, prayer, and other sources serving as inspiration for composers to set to music. A text's structure, sounds, tone, and meaning often play a significant role in a composer's creative approach. Jonathan King divides text setting into two broad areas: the syntactic and the semantic.[70] Syntactic questions concern the connection between musical and verbal structures, discerning the relationship between the overall musical form and that of the text, as well as between individual musical and textual phrases; semantic questions examine how the musical setting communicates the meaning of the text.[71] Lawrence Kramer's definition coincides with the above, proposing that 'text-setting unfolds along a continuum of interpretive responses.'[72] These responses range from musical devices illustrating overt textual features, to the broader compositional patterns conveying an understanding of the subject and character without any obvious correspondence to features in the text; Kramer notes that the two cannot always be easily distinguished.[73] It is worth considering whether the text set by a composer is specified to them as part of a commission or competition, or whether they have personally chosen the text. The text's structure and subject

[68] Eric Blom, 'His Favourite Device', *Music & Letters*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (1928), 372–380 (pp. 372–73) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/725999> [accessed 14 February 2024].
[69] Taylor-Jay, p. 110.
[70] Jonathan King, 'Text-Setting', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.51057> [accessed 28 October 2022].
[71] King, 'Text-Setting'.
[72] Lawrence Kramer, 'Text and Music: Some New Directions', *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1989), 143–153 (p. 147) <https://doi.org/10.1080/07494468900640601> [accessed 27 October 2022].
[73] Kramer, 'Text and Music', p. 147.

may be the initial impetus for a choral work. Alternatively, a composer may choose a text to suit their own preconceived musical ideas and sound world.

In his study of popular music, Richard Middleton asserts that the structural relationship between words and music 'varies along a continuum from complete homomorphism to a radically heteromorphic superposition.'[74] Where the structure and character of the text may be pivotal to one choral work or composer's practice, it is possible that the sound and rhythm of the words play a more significant role in certain cases, the text's meaning being subsidiary in the overall music. The latter point is noted by composer Libby Larson, who 'recognizes that the current choral trend is in homophonic settings that allow for a beautiful color from the choir, but she argues that the chords do not necessarily relate to the words'.[75] This stance is echoed by Chester Alwes, who asserts that our commercially popular culture has resulted in

> a disturbingly monochromatic array of music that, while filled with pretty sounds, is bereft of contrapuntal rigor, less attentive to the meaning of the text, and therefore more likely to result in quantity than variety of individual utterance.[76]

Although much contemporary choral music, particularly by composers from the United States and the Baltic States, favours slow homophony, these comments are subjective and do not consider the broader sphere of contemporary choral repertoire.

Words are naturally a fundamental element in the creation of most choral works, in terms of their meaning, rhythm, and/or their sound. Susanne Langer acknowledges the text's inherent meaning in the compositional process of vocal music, proposing the 'poetic core' as the motivating centre for musical ideas.[77] She states that a song sounds 'not as the poem sounds, but as the poem *feels*; in the process of composition, individual words, images, and actions merely present opportunities for the development of the composer's ideas.'[78] Langer's stance emphasises the importance of the composer's interpretation in transforming a text into music, choosing the textual elements they deem most suitable to express through their music. While literal word painting may be apparent, or the text's structure may be altered, the essence of the poem remains throughout the music. This outlook also implies an understanding of music with

[74] Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), p. 178.
[75] Libby Larson interviewed in Kira Zeeman Rugen, 'The Evolution of Choral Sound: In Professional Choirs from the 1970s to the Twenty-First Century', p. 88.
[76] Chester Alwes, *A History of Western Choral Music: Volume 2* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 384.
[77] Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), pp. 158–59.
[78] Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 159.

text as a new creation; not a mere musical parallel of the literary structure, but an interpretation of the original subject. It is Langer's view that 'composers have made as free as they liked with their texts', transforming 'the entire verbal material—sound, meaning, and all—into musical elements.'[79] Yet, the text's subject, character, and meaning can remain within the musical organism, 'grow[ing] from its own "commanding form".'[80]

In contrast to Langer's focus on the transformation of words and their sonorities, Peter Bouteneff, in his analysis of Arvo Pärt's work, argues that words can dictate the music, determining its shape and creating music that 'is sung much like it would be spoken'.[81] A text's phonemes (vowels and consonants) can be set percussively or lyrically, playing a significant role in the realisation of a sound world. Syllabic emphasis or the deconstruction of words into phonemes may be used as a form of word painting, thus contributing to the enhancement of the text's events and emotions, as well as underlining, or undermining, the language's natural stresses. Theorist Stephen Rodgers argues that 'the expressive power of musicalized phonemes is as responsible for our emotional response to song as the semantic content of the words and the musical expression of that content.'[82] The sound of words can be as important as their meaning, and can have a significant impact on listeners, which is demonstrated in composers' capacity to highlight, transform, and repeat words and their phonetic components in a particular way. Langer's observation regarding the 'poetic core' combined with Rodgers's consideration of a text's sounds and rhythm can inform the assessment of a composer's approach to text setting, their communication of a text's character, and their creation of individual sound worlds.

Allusion and Quotation

Allusion to and quotation of earlier music or certain musical styles are recognised by Jonathan Kramer as characteristics of postmodern music.[83] These customs are apparent in the work of both Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond, and as such, they form a significant aspect of this

[79] Langer, pp. 149–150.
[80] Ibid., p. 159.
[81] Peter C. Bouteneff, 'The Sound—and Hearing—of Arvo Pärt', p. 15.
[82] Stephen Rodgers, 'The Fourth Dimension of a Song', *Music Theory Spectrum*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2015), 144–153 (p. 145) <https://academic.oup.com/mts/article/37/1/144/1008552> [accessed 26 October 2022].
[83] Jonathan D. Kramer, 'The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism', in *Postmodern Music, Postmodern Thought*, ed. by Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 13–26 (p. 16). Kramer notes that 'postmodern music is not a neat category with rigid boundaries' (p. 17), but exhibits traits including: not respecting boundaries between sonorities and procedures of the past and of the present; challenging barriers between "high" and "low" styles; quotations or references to other music; encompassing pluralism and eclecticism (p. 16).

research. Peter Burkholder underlines the diversity of this practice, which can incorporate the quotation of an existing theme, or refer to a general musical style or historical era.[84] Arnold Whittall presents a broad understanding of allusion as 'a rich range of procedures from passing, elusive hints, to explicit, extended references and even quotations.'[85] If composers intentionally allude to an external influence in their music, such as a motif from their previous work or from another composer's oeuvre, it may appear to constitute part of his/her interpretation of the set text and its meaning.

Musicologist Karol Berger notes how, while an allusion or quotation may be outside the world of the composition, the composer 'inducts it [...] into the world of the work. If in interpreting this world we do not notice, or disregard, the quotation or allusion, we miss a feature of the world we interpret, not something external to it.'[86] However, failure to recognise the quotation arguably does not diminish its purpose in the work, and it is likely that the composer does not expect all listeners to recognise the use of pre-existing material in their music. As Dominic Wells argues, some allusions, particularly self-quotations, are not always audibly apparent, appearing 'in distorted or deformed guises where its rhetoric possesses greater personal significance for the composer rather than for the audience.'[87] These circumstances would require a comprehensive knowledge of the composer's output, and score analysis, to discover the manipulated quotations, which may not be initially perceptible to the ear or recognisable on the first reading of the music.

For Peter O'Hagen, in the contemporary music scene, 'self-allusion has become an increasingly important element in the music of composers to whom stylistic consistency is a major concern.'[88] Similarly, Wells maintains that 're-working early pieces into more recent compositions implies a sense of constant self-reflection.'[89] In the case of conscious allusion or self-quotation — which could recur across a composer's output, even in an altered guise — it is necessary to investigate the reasons for its repeated use, and how the motif or structure potentially relates to an image, subject, emotion, or the composer's overall style. Although it

[84] Peter Burkholder, 'The Use of Musical Borrowing as a Field', *Notes*, Second Series, Vol. 50, No. 3 (1994), 851–870 (p. 854) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/898531> [accessed 4 September 2023].
[85] Arnold Whittall, 'James Dillon, Thomas Adès, and the Pleasures of Allusion', in *Aspects of British Music of the 1990s*, ed. by Peter O'Hagen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 3–27 (p. 6).
[86] Karol Berger, 'Diegesis and Mimesis: The Poetic Modes and the Matter of Artistic Representation', *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1994), 407–433 (pp. 427–28) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/763970> [accessed 21 September 2022].
[87] Dominic Wells, 'Reincarnating *The Tryst*: The Endurance of a Simple Love Song', in *James MacMillan Studies*, ed. by George Parsons and Robert Sholl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 67–86 (p. 68).
[88] *Aspects of British Music of the 1990s*, ed. by Peter O'Hagen, p. xvii.
[89] Wells, 'James MacMillan: Retrospective Modernist', p. 117.

may carry meaning, or be intended to maintain stylistic consistency, it is also possible that the composer quoted from a particular piece simply due to its appealing sonority and their fondness for the work, with no desire for the quotation to be recognised by listeners. Alternatively, some self-allusion may be for the purpose of expediency, or may simply be subconscious.

Allusion to diverse styles and historical music highlights the eclectic nature of contemporary composition and composers' acknowledgment of past practices. In certain cases, the motivation to allude to a historical style may result from the text or context or a desire to continue musical traditions in today's musical culture. For example, twentieth-century composer Charles Ives regularly quoted American folk tunes and past forms in his works, which often reflected his musical upbringing. Similarly, contemporary composers such as James MacMillan and Jaakko Mäntyjärvi have integrated techniques of earlier eras and quotations of chants into their works, combining ancient and contemporary approaches, thereby illustrating the importance of compositional traditions in informing the present.[90]

In his investigation of quotation in twentieth-century music, David Metzer understands the practice as 'a two-part gesture: the original and its transformation.'[91] He refers to Karlheinz Stockhausen's view that

> [t]he gesture has us hear "what" music has been borrowed and "how" it has been changed. The more familiar and obvious the "what," the more we are drawn into the "how," and the more captivating the "how," the more we can appreciate the "what."[92]

The gesture also prompts us to ask "why" it has been used, particularly if it reappears in an altered form in other works by the composer. As Burkholder argues, 'proof of borrowing is incomplete until its *purpose* is clear.'[93] If its musical or extra-musical function is unknown, the quotation remains ambiguous and raises the possibility that the resemblance is coincidental.

While there may be a thematic connection between compositions in some cases, the composer may be unaware of their quotation of another work by them or another composer at other times. For example, in his analysis of James MacMillan's use of self-quotation, Wells observes how the recurring presence of the composer's *Tryst* theme in works around the same period were 'unconsciously manifested […]', with MacMillan stating his ignorance, thereby

[90] See Wells, 'James MacMillan: Retrospective Modernist'; Timothy Allen Pahel, 'The Choral Works for Mixed Voices by Jaakko Mäntyjärvi' (unpublished DMA dissertation, University of Iowa, 2013).
[91] David Metzer, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 11.
[92] Metzer, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music*, p. 6.
[93] Peter Burkholder, 'Musical Borrowing or Curious Coincidence?', *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2018), 223–266 (p. 247) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26501469> [accessed 4 September 2023].

deeming it 'foolhardy to argue any additional, subliminal extramusical connection.'[94] Although Burkholder argues that 'accounting for a composer's knowledge of the putative source is a crucial aspect of any claim that borrowing has occurred,' music is not created in a void, especially in today's society, where composers can access musical styles and historical repertoire with ease.[95] As such, a lot of contemporary choral music shares similar sonorities and structures, strengthening the argument for coincidental allusion or quotation in a composer's work. On the whole, allusion and quotation differ between composers, and depend on the context and intentions of the composition itself.

Conclusion

A composer's style, the recurring idioms or fingerprints in their work, their intentions in setting a text to music, their particular application of musical devices, and their allusion to past traditions and specific pieces within their respective oeuvres are fundamental to the following chapters. As previously stated, there is no prescribed approach or theory relating to the analysis of choral music. Rather, the range of literature and the terminology addressed in this chapter contributes to the formulation of an analytical language that can be applied to the interpretation of choral music and style in a broad sense. Specific to this study, the analysis of selected compositions from the choral oeuvres of Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of their respective compositional styles.

[94] Wells, 'Reincarnating *The Tryst*', p. 83.
[95] Burkholder, 'Musical Borrowing or Curious Coincidence?', p. 239.

Chapter 3: The Compositional Style of Rhona Clarke

Introduction

Rhona Clarke's choral oeuvre spans over forty years, with settings of a diverse range of sacred and secular texts demonstrating the development of her distinct choral voice and her creative approach to communicating various subjects and emotions. The composer has described her compositional style as 'a mix of the traditional with some innovative aspects, as in innovative of our time, of the twentieth, twenty-first century. There's always a nod to the tradition.'[1] Although her music exhibits influences from the past, the composer has stated that she sets herself 'the challenge to create what I've not heard or am not hearing yet [...] I want whatever is coming off my scores to be now'.[2] Clarke is vocal about her progressive compositional outlook, seeking to produce work that is innovative, yet 'never esoteric', ensuring her music is accessible and compelling for both singers and audiences.[3]

In several interviews, Clarke has outlined how her compositional process usually involves beginning with a musical idea and then seeking a text that will suit the sound and mood she wishes to create.[4] In setting a text, communicating a 'specific thing that is the key to the main emotion in that piece' is the priority.[5] On certain occasions, a text is stipulated by a commission, but in most cases, Clarke is at liberty to choose a text. While her English text settings are secular in nature, all her Latin works communicate sacred themes, excepting the war-themed *Ave Atque Vale* (2017). Regardless of the text's language, the composer emphasises how the meaning is most important — 'not so much specific words or phrases but the overall meaning.'[6] However, while the overall meaning is prioritised in her compositions, Clarke does not shy away from the opportunity to illustrate certain words and phrases in a madrigalian manner, particularly within her English text settings. Clarke also emphasises the significance of the sound of the words, which underlines her attraction to Latin and its compatibility with the singing voice. In addition to communicating an overall mood and sound

[1] Rhona Clarke, interview with the author, 10 January 2025.
[2] Rhona Clarke, interviewed by Jonathan Grimes and Evonne Ferguson, 'amplify #64 – Rhona Clarke on her new choral album 'Sempiternam', The Contemporary Music Centre, 28 March 2022 <https://www.cmc.ie/amplify/episode–64> (21:35–21:54) [accessed 16 February 2023].
[3] Carla Maria Verdino-Süllwold, 'Fanfare reviews Rhona Clarke *A Different Game*', *Métier Records* (n.d.) <https://metierrecords.com/review/fanfare-reviews-rhona-clarke-a-different-game/> [accessed 12 May 2026].
[4] See Clarke, interview with the author, 10 January 2025; Rhona Clarke in Chamber Choir Ireland, 'Celebrating International Women's Day with composers Áine Mallon and Rhona Clarke', online video recording, YouTube, 8 March 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAoelDu8-2s> [accessed 8 March 2023]; Barbara Lamont, 'The Choral Music of Rhona Clarke' (unpublished DMA dissertation, Texas Tech University, 2016), p. 7.
[5] Clarke, interview with the author, 10 January 2025.
[6] Ibid.

world, the composer endeavours to ensure that 'the words are as clear as possible […] that the meaning can be as clear to an audience as possible.'[7] With respect to the formal organisation of her works, Clarke's music aligns closely with the structure and expressive development of the texts she sets. The works examined are primarily through-composed, with some elements of motivic repetition representing the recurrence of a particular phrase or image in the text. The poetry and prayers set are largely based on a principal emotion or idea, which is a significant force in Clarke's generation of both the musical content and form. Her stylistic elements coalesce to create a compelling representation of each text, in terms of its overall structure and character.

This chapter examines twelve *a cappella* choral works from 1991 to 2024 — *A Song for St Cecilia's Day* (1991), *Rorate Caeli* (1994), *Regina Coeli* (2007), *Salve Regina* (2007), *The Kiss* (2008), *The Old Woman* (2016), *Ave Atque Vale* (2017), *O Vis Aeternitatis* (2020), *Requiem* (2020), *A Bit of Nonsense* (2020), *Navigatio* (2023), and *Epitaph* (2024) — that exemplify the development and core characteristics of Clarke's compositional style and notable sound, primarily in the areas of melodic idioms and text-painting devices, textural approaches, harmonic language, and timbral exploration. Certain pieces, such as *The Old Woman*, *Ave Atque Vale*, and *O Vis Aeternitatis*, are considered in greater detail within the chapter, as they epitomise most effectively the key musical traits that define Clarke's distinctive style. The analysis of these sacred and secular works illustrates the composer's consistency and deftness in communicating diverse subjects and moods through her characteristic creative techniques, both on the surface and within the broader layers of the music.

Melodic Idioms and Text-Painting Devices

Clarke's choral works demonstrate a sensitivity to the overall mood and meaning of their texts, combined with a deep understanding of writing for voices. Her melodic writing reflects the natural rhythm of the words being set, while the careful balance of conjunct motion with some leaps ensures accessibility and expressivity. In most pieces, particularly her Latin settings, the restrained use of or lack of word painting may reflect an intention to avoid over-emphasising surface features, instead concentrating on creating a musical structure that encompasses the overriding subject and character. However, as noted above, there are occasions, notably in

[7] Clarke, interview with the author, 10 January 2025.

Clarke's English settings, when certain words or phrases are clearly foregrounded, most often through melodic motifs.

Word Painting

Clarke's most striking use of word painting is evident in compositions that include vivid, often dramatic imagery, such as *The Old Woman*. This setting of a comedically gruesome children's rhyme tells of a woman discovering a corpse in a graveyard, before being informed of her own impending demise. Unlike much of her other work, Clarke's piece centres more on the literal events of the text, while also capturing its overall tone through various musical techniques. A notable example of word painting is the melismatic treatment of 'worms' in 5/8, alternating between the alto and tenor from bars 51 to 65 (Figure 3.1). While the movement of the worms through the cadaver's face is illustrated by the accented quaver movement, Clarke increases the intensity of the overall panicked tone through the ascending sequential motion of the motif in both voices. The original two-bar idiom comprises a semitone undulation (B–A#), followed by a descending third and semitone (B–G–F#), and concludes with a rising fourth (F#–B). The consistent expression of the inverted arching contour passing between the inner voices emulates the wriggling insects, propelling the music forward, and increasing the suspense of the section.
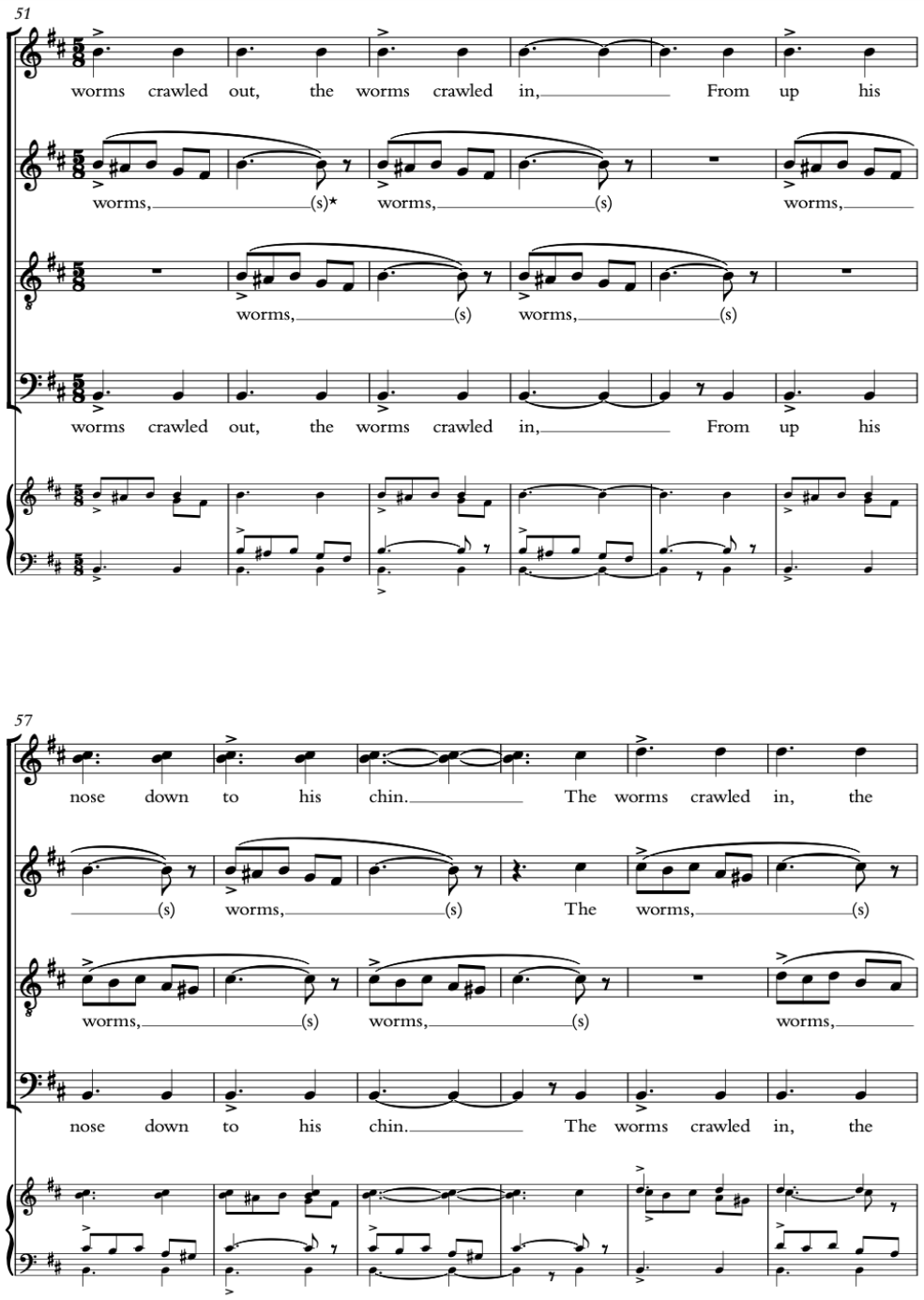


Figure 3.1. *The Old Woman* (Waterford: Cailíno Music Publishers, 2018), bb. 51–69.
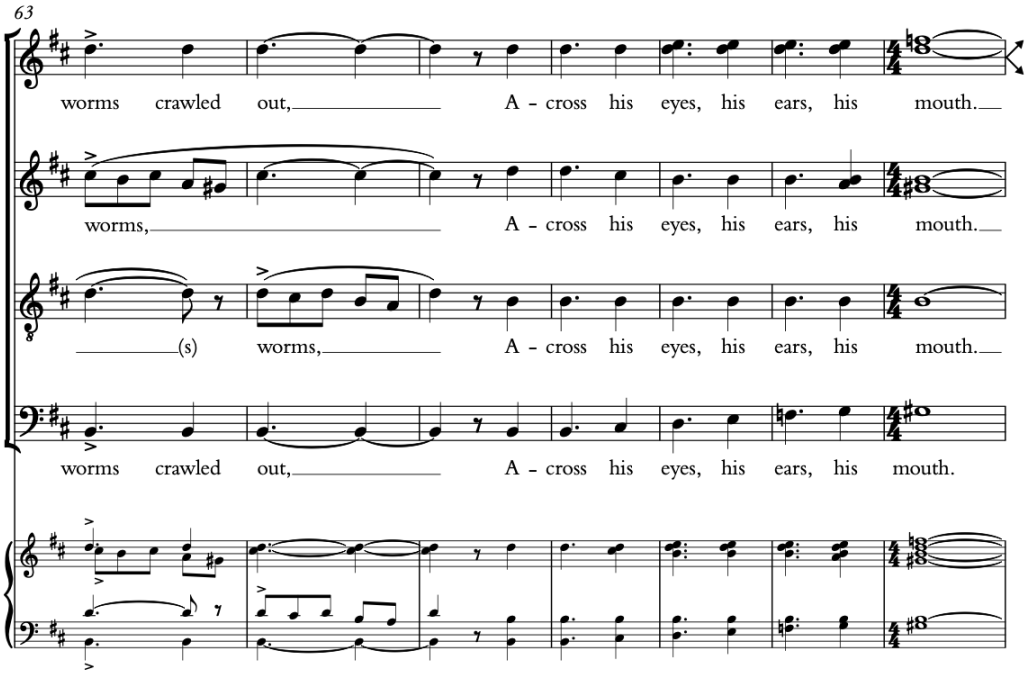


Figure 3.1. (continued).

The motif is repeated by the tenor on C# and D at five-bar intervals. The alto begins on B for the initial four presentations and ascends to C# for a further two repetitions of the motif, resulting in a major seventh with the tenor at the conclusion of the passage (D–C#; b. 65). The inner texture's quaver motion is effectively contrasted with the soprano and bass's repeated dotted crotchets and minimal melodic movement. The bass's B pedal tone maintains the B minor harmony throughout the fifteen bars. The sopranos ascend from B to D across the phrase, with the secundal interval (B–C#) resulting from oblique motion escalating the ominous sonority (bb. 57–60), before returning to a unison C# and subsequent D. While the irregular metre and contrasting vocal rhythms emphasise the worms' movement, the ascending pitches, underpinned by the pedal B, intensify the work's frightening character, creating a static dissonance that engenders a sense of entrapment.

A similar example of melismatic text setting is evident in the concluding four bars of 'Multitasking', the third of Clarke's four-movement suite *A Bit of Nonsense* (2020), which sets short, humorous texts that the composer sourced from the internet.[8] The soprano and alto decorate the titular word as melismatic quavers, oscillating in contrary motion between a perfect fifth (E–B) and major third (F–A). Although it may not be as conspicuous as the illustration of 'worms' in *The Old Woman*, the repetitive minor seconds of the alto and major

[8] Rhona Clarke, 'Composer's Note', *A Bit of Nonsense* (unpublished, 2020). The other three movements are 'Dear Santa', 'Busy', and 'A Life'.

seconds of the soprano convey an impression of busyness and moving back and forth between tasks, maintaining the overall impression of multitasking until the final bar (Figure 3.2). Like the contrasting vocal rhythms in *The Old Woman*, the two-part quaver oscillation is foregrounded by sustained tones in the lower voices, forming a ninth (A2–B3) beneath the incessant melisma. While the illustration of specific words or phrases could not be said to be common across Clarke's choral oeuvre, the two examples explored above demonstrate that melodic word painting does form part of the composer's language, particularly in her settings of English texts.[9] Given the increased probability of audiences being able to comprehend the texts' subjects and meaning, it is possible that Clarke considered it more effective to embellish certain words in these contexts. Furthermore, the humorous characters of both texts offer increased possibilities for exaggerating specific images through the music.
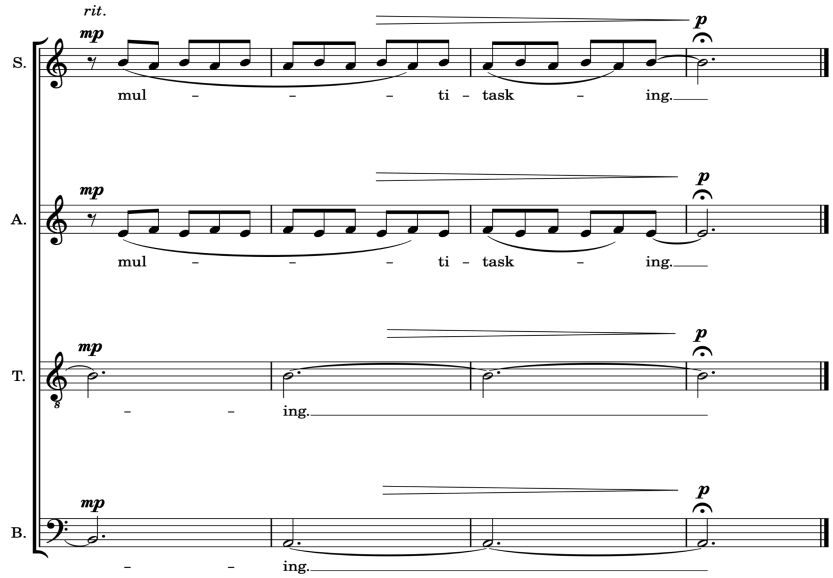


Figure 3.2. 'III. Multitasking', *A Bit of Nonsense* (2020), bb. 70–73.

In *The Old Woman*, following the first soprano and alto's descending *portamenti* on 'fainted', both parts perform the text 'fainted with the shock and hit her head upon a rock' as minor seconds oscillating in contrary motion (bb. 76–78). The repeated minor second–enharmonic unison intervallic pattern (A/B–B♭/A#) is underlined by the reduced texture, the jarring dissonance on each downbeat magnified by the lack of accompaniment (Figure 3.3). The staccato quaver on 'shock', with the performance instruction to '*Freeze*', evokes the woman's reaction upon seeing the decayed corpse. Clarke seldom includes actions in her work, with this

[9] See Appendix B for further examples of word painting in Clarke's choral music.

example suggesting her intention for a dramatic musical communication of the woman's fright. It could be assumed that the repeated secundal interval, a common feature of the composer's harmonic vocabulary, seeks to reflect the clash of bone against the rock. However, an almost identical repetition occurs between the same voices for the phrase 'But from the grave they heard her moan', concluding with a minor second (B–C♮) on 'moan', emphasised by the *forte* dynamic and semibreve (bb. 90–91). Although this may reduce the argument for word painting in the first appearance, the prominence of the dissonance on both phrases contributes to generating a harsh tone, expressing the distress of the old woman and the overall menacing character of the text.
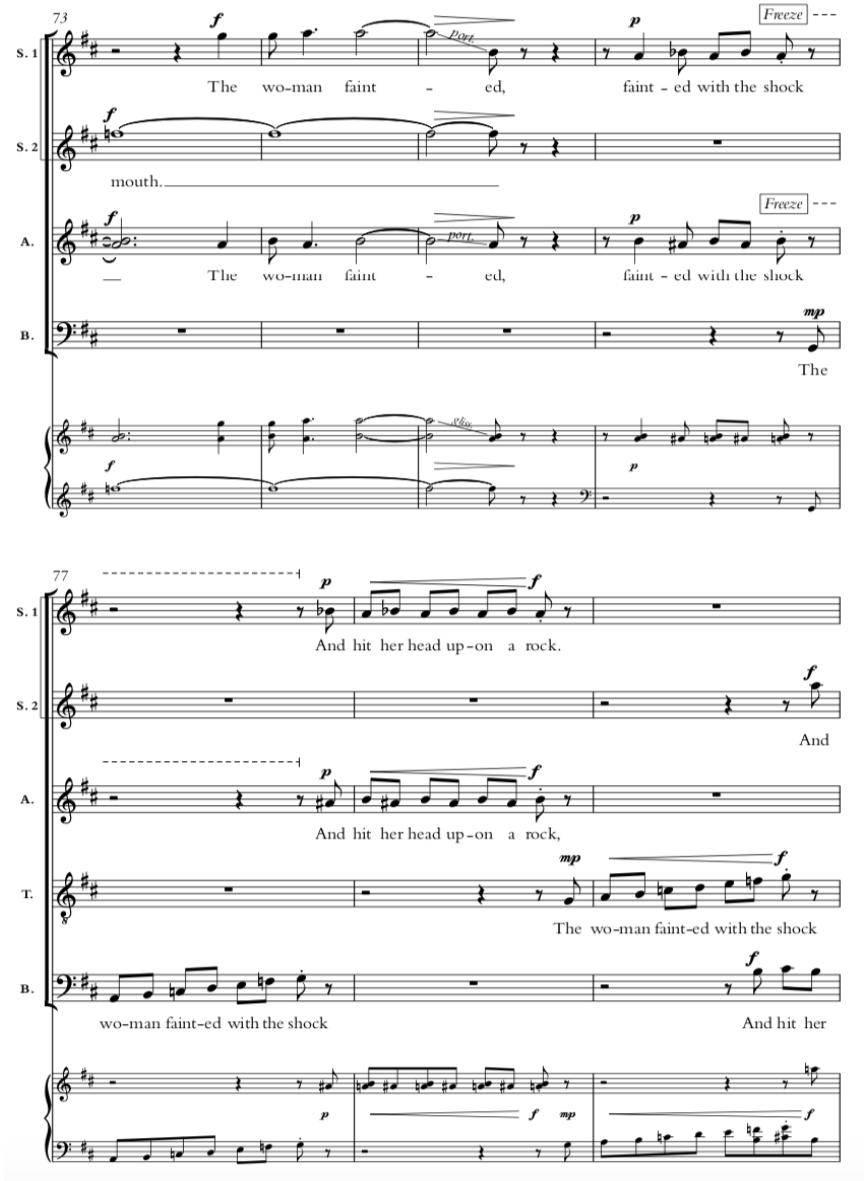


Figure 3.3. *The Old Woman,* bb. 73–79.

Melodic Oscillations

The oscillating major or minor second is a recurring feature in Clarke's choral output. In certain pieces, such as 'Multitasking' and *The Old Woman*, the melismatic movement illustrates a specific word within the texture. However, undulating vocals also serve as an accompanying figure within the broader texture, enhancing the overall atmosphere in pieces such as *Navigatio* and *O Vis Aeternitatis*. Clarke also expands her characteristic oscillating intervals in certain cases, such as in the setting of 'drowsy day' and 'kiss me' in her contemporary madrigal, *The Kiss* (2008). The alternating 6/8–7/8 pattern through 'bees on a drowsy day suck honey' helps to create a lethargic impression, the soprano's lilting minor third crotchet-quaver motif (A–F#) in the 7/8 bars enhancing this dreamy ambience (bb. 48–59). The accompanying tenor's oscillating major second (D–E) on the same text further evinces Clarke's fondness for this melodic idiom, and its suitability for this context. Following the soprano's 'drowsy' rhythm, the quaver rests dividing each note of the diminished triad descent (A–F#–D#) punctuate the percussive final consonant of 'suck' and interrupt the rocking minor thirds (Figure 3.4). The tenor imitates the oscillating minor third motif at a two-bar, tritone distance on E♭, spotlighting the polymodal texture of this section. A further secundal oscillation (D–E♭) in 6/8 occurs in the bass's repetition of 'bees on a drowsy day' (b. 54). The vocal interplay, lilting melodic figure, and shifting time signatures clearly illustrate the 'drowsy day' in the poem, with Clarke's compositional decisions befitting the madrigal style of the piece and recalling the prominent use of word painting in the sixteenth-century vocal genre.[10]

[10] Gustave Reese, *Music in the Renaissance* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1954), p. 315.
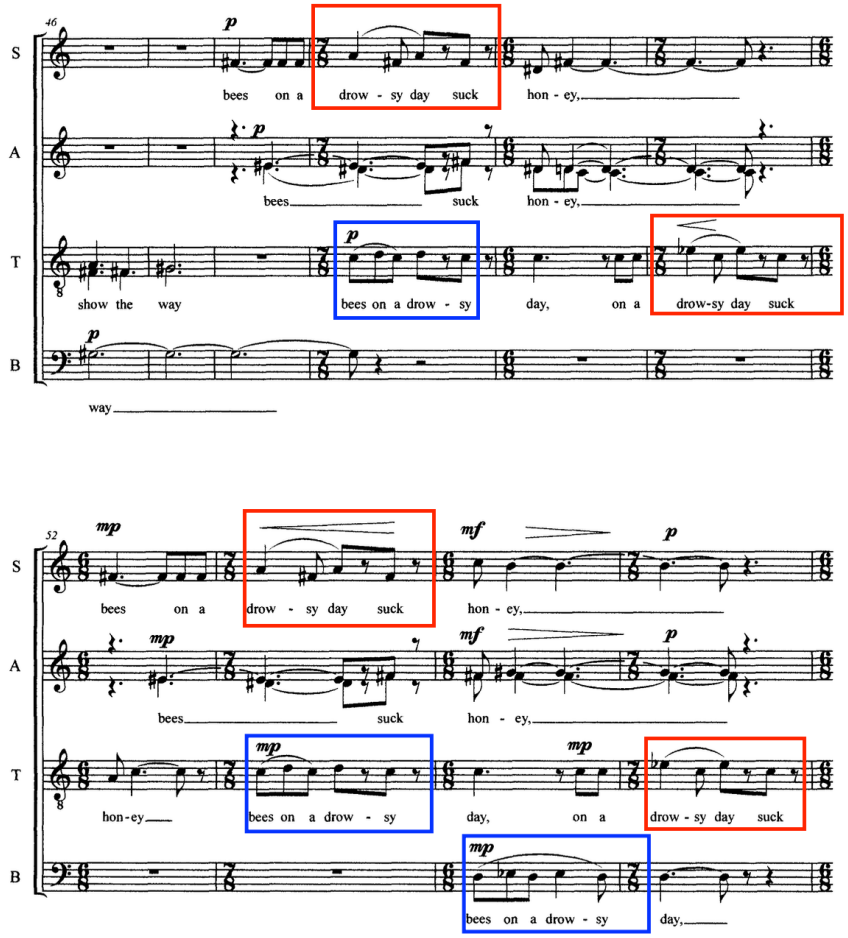


Figure 3.4 *The Kiss* (2008), bb. 46–55
(minor third motif in red; oscillating seconds in blue)

The sacred piece *Rorate Caeli* (1994) features varying melodic and rhythmic oscillations across the contrapuntal texture, most notably through the phrase '*et núbes plúant iústum*' ('and let the clouds rain justice', bb. 34–38; 44–53). The image of justice falling from the clouds is illustrated by the imitative descending phrases within the developing canonic framework. Beneath the sopranos' falling phrases in this G# Aeolian *meno mosso* section, the tenor presents a five-bar oscillating secundal idiom (G#–A#) in minims on an 'ooh' phoneme (bb. 34–38; Figure 3.5). The tenor's slow rhythmic motion, with sustained notes in the adjacent voices, provides a gentle carpet for the sopranos' presentation of the recurring '*et núbes*' motif in imitative dialogue. As the voices become more active, the alto oscillates a minor sixth between B and D# in crotchets and dotted rhythms through '*núbes plúant*', before extending to a minor seventh on '*iústum*' (bb. 44–46). The expanded interval and quicker rhythmic movement contribute to enhancing the intensity of this section and create interest amidst the repetitive canonic imitation. Maintaining consistent *legato* intonation through the repeated wide intervals

— particularly the minor seventh — presents a greater vocal challenge than the secundal oscillations. Given that this work was intended for a professional ensemble, Chamber Choir Ireland, Clarke perhaps wished to increase the complexity of the individual parts with the knowledge that they would be competently performed.[11]

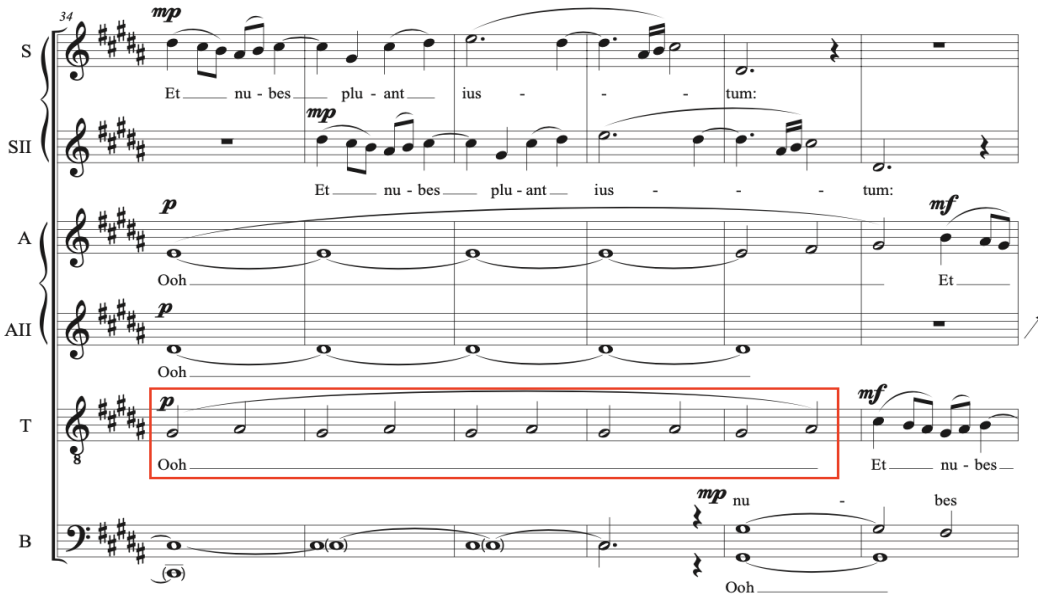


Figure 3.5. *Rorate Caeli* (1994), bb. 34–39 (oscillation in red).

The fluctuating minor seventh is passed to soprano 1 in bar 47, as the alto returns to a secundal idiom, alternating a semitone between D# and E in quavers for a further two and a half bars (bb. 47–49; Figure 3.6). This melismatic repeat of the same text in quicker rhythms is not unlike the secundal oscillation of the titular word at the end of Clarke's 'Multitasking' (See Figure 3.2). However, the presence of the undulating idioms across the voices has a more atmospheric purpose in *Rorate Caeli*, providing a subtle wavering backdrop to the more prominent imitative motifs. As the texture contracts with the omission of the bass in bar 50, soprano 2 emulates the wavering figuration of the preceding voices in a higher register, fluctuating a fourth between F# and C# (bb. 50–52). This idiom is spotlighted by the higher pitches, as well as the lighter texture and absence of the principal motif, allowing the sopranos to exhibit their vocal dexterity. In addition to reducing the texture, the composer signals the end of the section with diminishing dynamics (*pianissimo*), a *ritardando*, and slower rhythmic motion in the tenor. The final oscillating figure is performed by the first soprano on '*iústum*' (bb. 52–53),

[11] According to the programme note, *Rorate Caeli* was commissioned by the Cork International Choral Festival for the 34th Seminar on Contemporary Choral Music. It was first performed by the National Chamber Choir (Chamber Choir Ireland) at City Hall, Cork, 30 April 1994.

alternating between C# and D# initially as quavers, before slowing to crotchets and concluding on a D# with alto and tenor.
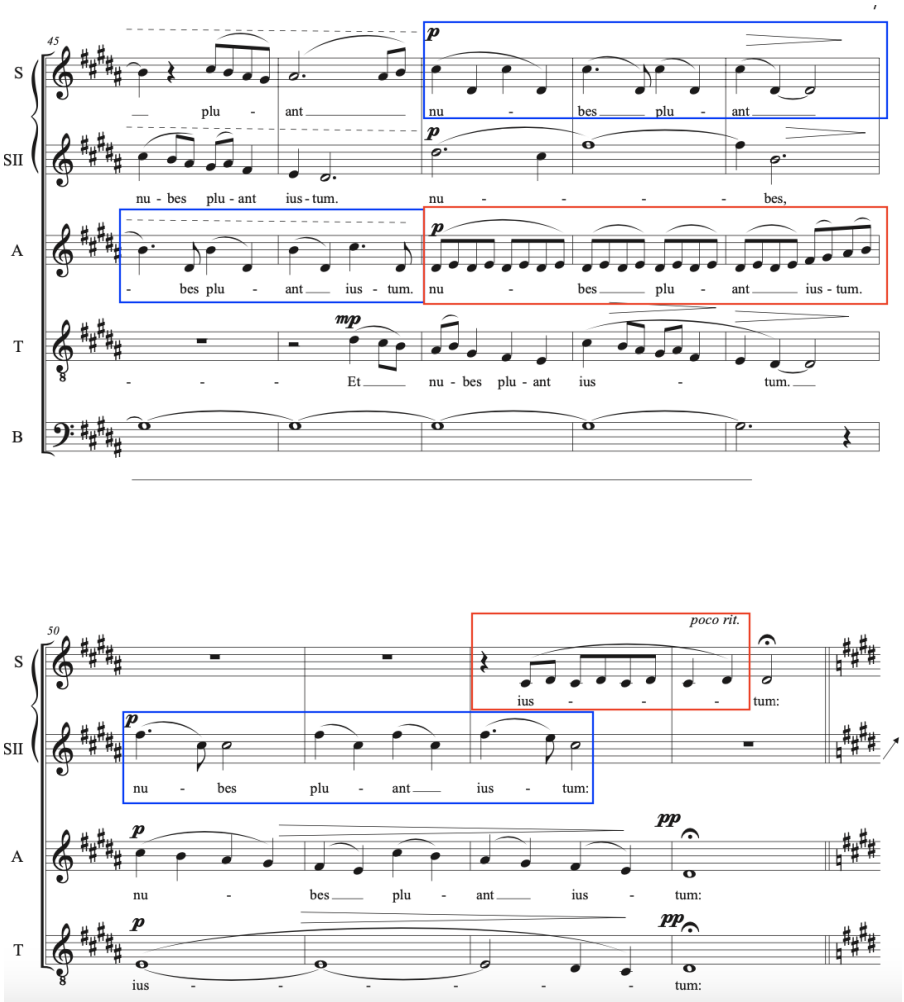


Figure 3.6. *Rorate Caeli*, bb. 45–53
(secundal oscillation in red; larger melodic oscillations in blue).

The above examples exhibit Clarke's attraction to wavering melodic figures, a salient feature that directly paints specific words and phrases, or assumes a more subtle role in the texture, contributing to the overall tone of the music. The prevalence of oscillating motifs built on the interval of a second suggests the composer's consideration of natural vocal inflections and the technical abilities of the choir for which she writes, with the close interspace comfortable to perform for most singers. The more challenging repetition of the interval of a seventh, as is apparent in *Rorate Caeli*, indicates its suitability for a more advanced choir. Sherlaw-Johnson notes that '[I]t is quite possible for a composer to become obsessed (unconsciously perhaps) with a particular idea, so that it leads to its exploitation in different works, particularly if they

are composed around the same time.'[12] It is uncertain whether Clarke is always conscious of her frequent use of this melodic and textural device, but the persistent presence of oscillating motifs across her oeuvre is a clear 'fingerprint' of the composer.

Scalic movement

Scalic movement is a further recurring feature in Clarke's output, with ascending and descending stepwise quaver passages notably present in works of a dramatic character. Within *Epitaph* (2024) — a setting of a humorous but tragic poem about a tired housewife 'citing the drudgery of her life as the reason' for her suicide — scales ranging from an octave to a twelfth rise across the texture, creating tension and anticipation.[13] Following the antiphonal soprano-alto repetition of 'Her last words on earth' and sustained rhythms on 'were', suspense is created by rising scales on the vocable 'doo', accentuated by the *crescendo* to *forte* in the B minor framework (bb. 28–30). The tenor begins the octave ascent on F#, before concluding with a falling fourth to C#. Altos imitate the scalic motion on C# after two dotted crotchets, extending the incline to a tenth (C# to E), while the bass echoes the tenor at a one-bar distance, repeating the octave ascent on G# (Figure 3.7). The rising quavers echoed across the lower texture create suspense around the woman's final words, and anticipate the return of the funeral march motif that dominates the work. The minor second beginning of each scale reflects a Phrygian quality. More broadly, musicologist William Kimmel notes how the minor second interval in music 'possesses greater energy and intensity and consequently internal momentum which in melodic progression accelerates in the direction of the second tone'.[14] Clarke's use of the interval in *Epitaph* enlivens the forward motion and upward trajectory of the music.

[12] Robert Sherlaw-Johnson, 'Analysis and the Composer', in *Companion to Contemporary Musical Thought, Volume 2*, ed. by John Paynter, Tim Howell, Richard Orton, and Peter Seymour (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 715–735 (p. 720).
[13] Rhona Clarke, *Epitaph* (unpublished, 2024).
[14] William Kimmel, 'The Phrygian Inflection and the Appearances of Death in Music', *College Music Symposium*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1980), 42–76 (p. 46) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40374079> [accessed 28 July 2023].
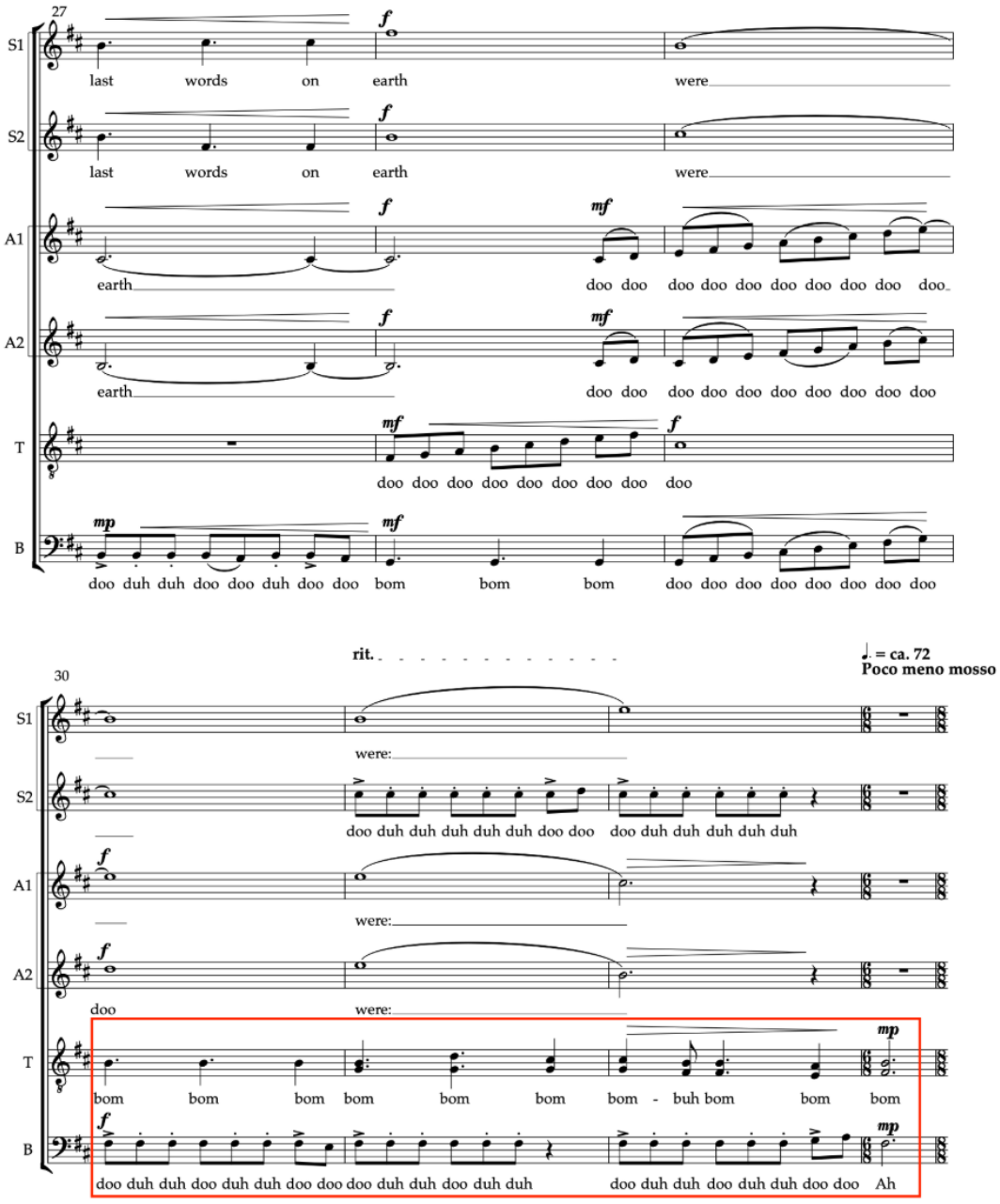


Figure 3.7. *Epitaph* (2024), bb. 27–33 (funeral march motif in red).

The rising scales evolve into a notable idiom in the second section of *Epitaph*, with the quaver motion repeated across the seven-part contrapuntal texture, which progresses through A minor, B Dorian, and C# Aeolian. Within this section, the scale is repeatedly associated with the depiction of a world where the woman is free from singing. In a reduced texture, the tenor oscillates a minor third (A–C♮) through the text ‘But having no voice I’ll be quit of the singing’, while the bass descends a fourth by step (A–E) before reverting to a scalic ascent to the higher octave (bb. 66–68; Figure 3.8). The stepwise motion in 6/8 is clearly audible in the two-voice

texture and offers a stark contrast to the preceding six-part static homophony in 8/8 (bb. 61–65). Like the previous example, the scale and oscillation propel the music forward, instigating the entry of further motives in the expanding texture.
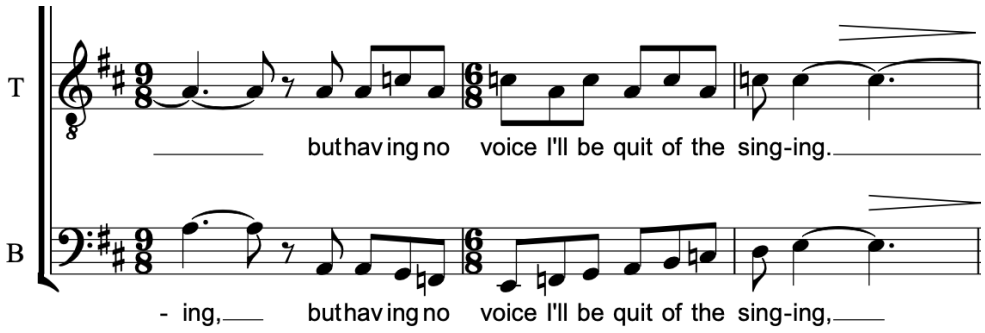


Figure 3.8. *Epitaph*, bb. 66–68 (tenor and bass only).

As the texture develops with overlapping motifs, the bass repeats the stepwise inverted arch (bb. 70–72), before the sopranos adopt the rising scale on a 'la' vocable, imitating the act of a vocal warm-up (bb. 75–77; 80–82). Soprano 2 replaces the word 'singing' with 'la', repeating the vocable through each note of a C# Phrygian scale, echoed by the first soprano a bar later as a D Lydian ascent, which leads to a sustained secundal dissonance (C#–D) between the upper voices before the motifs are repeated (Figure 3.9). The altos present the final extended variation of the scale on 'I'll be quit of the la la la …', rising through a twelve-note G# Phrygian sequence (G#3–D#5) amidst a contracting texture of sustained rhythms (bb. 89–91), anticipating the next section of the music. Scales play a twofold role within *Epitaph*, contributing to the suspenseful atmosphere and emulating the singing of scales. The predominantly Phrygian and minor sequences enhance the sinister tone of the work, particularly as the Phrygian mode is historically associated with death.[15] The stepwise sequences also balance with the disjointed 'quit of the singing' motif and sustained tones of other voices in the texture, maintaining the momentum throughout the work.

[15] Kimmel, 'The Phrygian Inflection and the Appearances of Death in Music'.
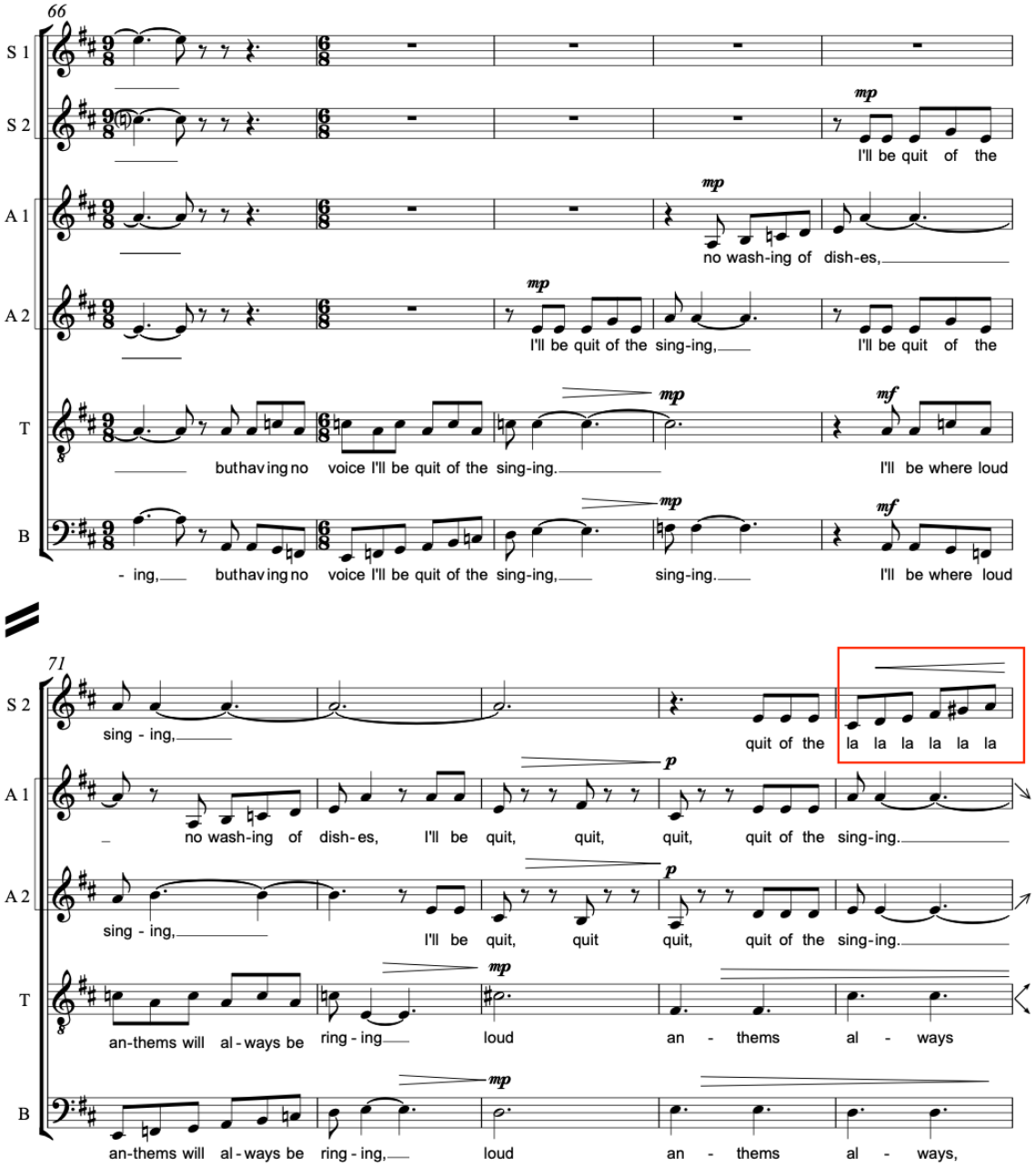


Figure 3.9. *Epitaph*, bb. 66–85 (scales in red).
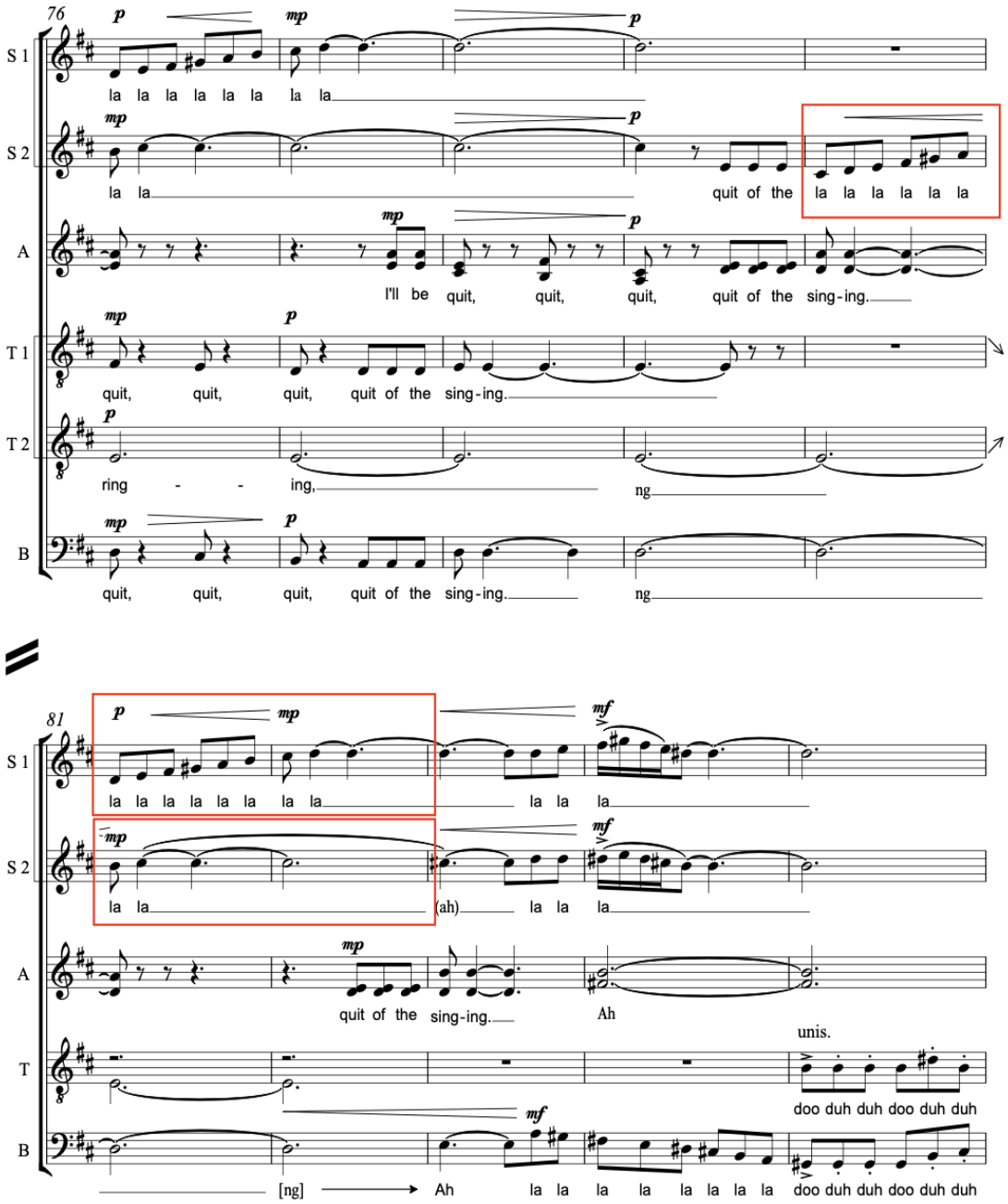


Figure 3.9. (continued).

Scalic motion that enhances the energy of the polyphonic framework is also a feature of *The Old Woman*, which betrays a similar menacing but humorous tone to *Epitaph*. It is worth noting that both works are based on a woman who meets her demise, albeit in different contexts, which may have influenced Clarke's similar use of techniques and B minor tonality. Like *Epitaph*, the setting of the children's rhyme features rising scales in imitative sequences, with the repeated text of the echoing voices underlining the dramatic events and increasing the suspense. Following the static 5/8 homophonic declamation of 'Across his eyes, his ears, his mouth',

culminating in a sustained *forte* G# diminished seventh chord and return to 4/4, there is a release of harmonic tension with the rapid succession of ascending scales at a *piano* dynamic, gradually rising in volume with the pitch (bb. 70–73; Figure 3.10). The bass intones an E Phrygian scale, repeating the choir's text, and is echoed by the tenor in F Lydian. The second soprano adopts the rising motion as a Lydian augmented scale (raised fourth and fifth), concluding on a sustained *forte* F5. Like the rising 'doo doo' scalic figures anticipating the return of the funeral motif in *Epitaph*, the imitative scales in this section of *The Old Woman* serve as a bridge to the next turn of events, increasing the urgency of the music, as well as vividly conjuring the sense of the worms crawling over the corpse's face.

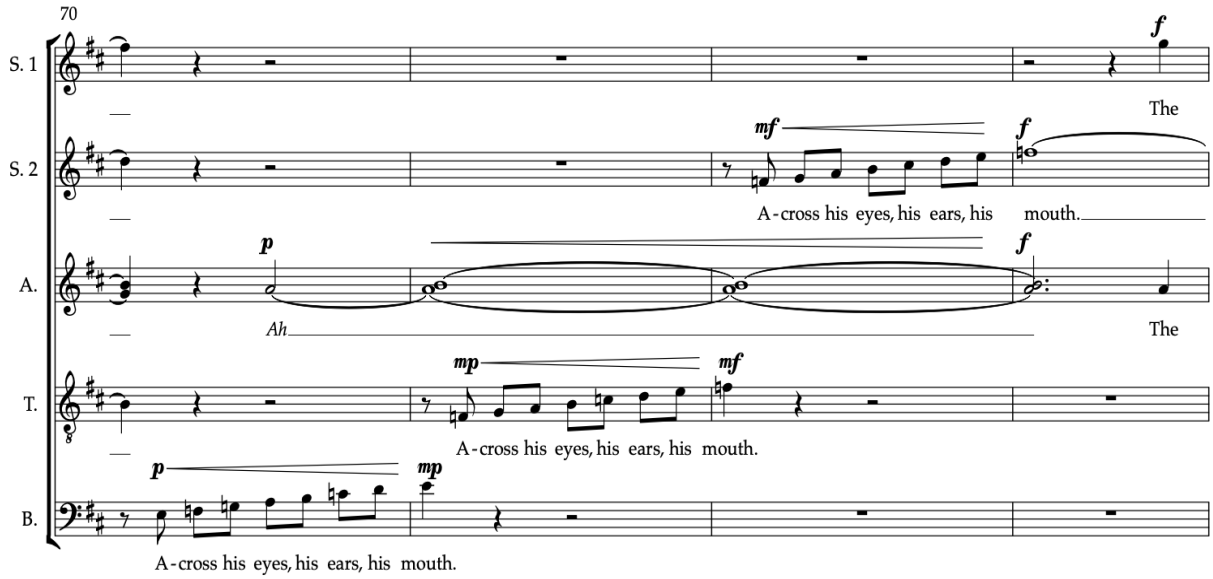


Figure 3.10. *The Old Woman*, bb. 70–73.

In the similarly fast-paced framework of 'Multitasking', scalic figures in various tone sets occur, generally progressing as quavers. Like the rising 'la' vocables in *Epitaph*, Clarke applies an 'ah' vowel to the soprano and alto's ascending conjunct passages in 'Multitasking', making the successive quavers more manageable to sing without the addition of words. Clarke has professed her fondness for open vowels in singing, particularly in Latin texts, due to their suitability to the voice.[16] While the sopranos and bass move in contrary motion through the text 'listen, ignore and forget', the first alto ascends as a C melodic minor gapped scale, featuring

[16] Rhona Clarke in Music for Galway, 'ABENDMUSIK 2 "Resounding Landscape" Zoom interview with Rhona Clarke', online video recording, YouTube, 9 November 2020 (4:55–5:08) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-R13qH3MPI&t=263s> [accessed 16 February 2024]; Mark Fitzgerald, 'Rhona Clarke: The power and physicality of the voice', in *Sempiternam: Choral Music by Rhona Clarke*, State Choir LATVIJA, cond. by Māris Sirmais (Divine Art Recordings Group, MSV 28614, 2022), para 5.

a major third leap between F and A, the gap likely included to fit the scale into the six-quaver rhythm with a sustained terminus (bb. 37–38; Figure 3.11). A similar gapped scale is performed by the sopranos three and a half bars after that of the alto (bb. 41–42), rising a minor third from G# to B, and progressing as a 1:2 octatonic ascent to G♭. The apex of the phrase initiates a repeat of the alto's C minor scale, which concludes with an extended minor third ascent to a sustained E♭.
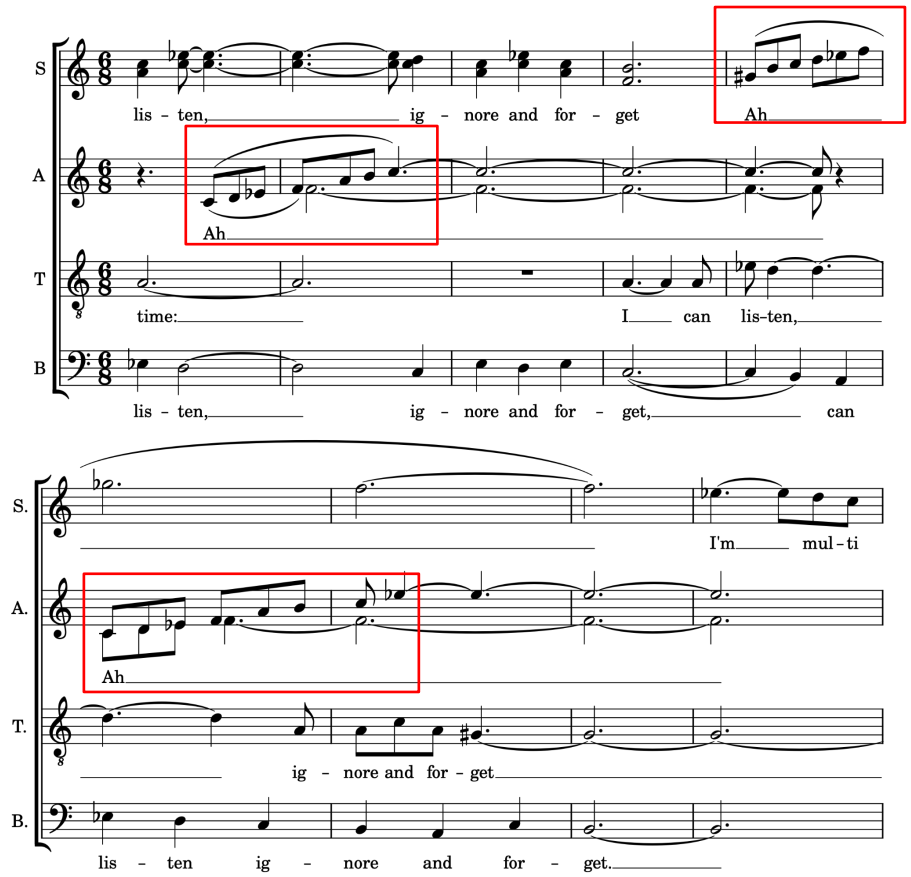


Figure 3.11. 'Multitasking', bb. 37–45 (scales in red).

The prominent octatonic passages within 'Multitasking' represents Clarke's recurring use of this tone set in her music, with octatonicism also evident in *The Kiss*, briefly in the bass of *The Old Woman*, and in segments of *Magnificat* (2024). Twentieth-century composers Béla Bartók (1881–1945) and Elizabeth Maconchy (1907–1994) both integrated octatonic material and gapped scales into their music, which may have influenced Clarke's exploration of these melodic techniques, given her open admiration for both composers.[17] The simultaneous

[17] Fitzgerald, 'Rhona Clarke: The power and physicality of the voice', para 2; Clarke, interviewed by Grimes and Ferguson, 'amplify #64' (18:42–18:53).

presence of the upper voices' scales and the phrase 'listen, ignore and forget' perhaps represents a person's attempt to perform these tasks at the same time, with the rising syllables reflecting the ignoring and forgetting, while the lower voices' expression of the text struggles to be heard. The rhythmic setting of 'Multitasking' could also be interpreted as having a narrative purpose, with metric dissonance between the bass and other voices in bars 37 to 45. The bass moves in crotchets throughout the phrase 'listen, ignore and forget', which conflicts with the notated 6/8 and compound rhythms of the other voices. A similar juxtaposition of common and compound rhythms occurs in the tenor's expression of 'I'm multitasking' (bb. 49–50; 68–69), creating a hemiola effect and enhancing the frantic texture. As well as the polymodal fabric of octatonic scales, the metrically conflicting voices represent the art of multitasking.

The above examples, all based on somewhat humorous texts, illustrate scalic motion as a key narrative and emotive compositional trait of Clarke's style, with the quaver movement of each idiom highlighting the rhythmic vitality of her music. The ascending, descending, and arching contours of the scales serve both as illustrative devices — such as the rising 'la la' figures representing the word 'singing' in *Epitaph* — and melodic progressions that build suspense and create a bridge between adjacent sections of the music, as demonstrated by the scalic motion in *The Old Woman*. The quaver motion propels the music forward, often amidst sustained tones, providing rhythmic contrast and embodying the fast tempo of each piece. Furthermore, the tonal and modal nature of the scales reflect Clarke's preference for melodic lines that are accessible to sing for a range of choirs. As 'Multitasking' was composed for Chamber Choir Ireland, Clarke was able to broaden her compositional palette, which may have influenced her decision to use octatonicism. Given the respective characters of these three compositions, the incremental quaver figures drive the busy textures, enhancing the overall dynamic atmosphere of each work.

While she uses some madrigalisms to illustrate words literally, and repeats particular melodic techniques within and across her works, Clarke more often transcends the surface of the text, manipulating the texture and harmonic palette to portray the work's overall subject more broadly. The composer has emphasised the significance of evoking the character and mood of a piece rather than making specific words the focal point in the music. The following sections will analyse the compositional features beyond the melody, investigating the means through which Clarke expresses a text's subject and mood — primarily her references to music from past eras in her work; her textural structures; and her harmonic and timbral language — and discerning how these features form part of her stylistic identity.

Quotation and Allusion

In certain cases, Clarke echoes historical musical traditions or composers, suggesting her possible desire to highlight connections between her work and those who have set the same or similar texts. These compositional allusions are not always immediately apparent to the listener, requiring an investigation into Clarke's musical intentions and their purpose in relation to the text, as well as knowledge of the music to which she refers. As she has regularly formed musical ideas before choosing a suitable text, the composer's decisions are often determined by her attraction to particular sonorities and textures, or by her desire to create a certain mood, rather than being governed by the words.[18] Conversely, it may also be possible that Clarke is unaware of links between her work and others, with potential musical influences residing in her subconscious. She has previously stated that 'it's hard even to say whether or not what I look at and what I listen to directly has an influence on any of the works'.[19] However, it is worth investigating the allusions to discern how this technique contributes to her compositional style, and to consider how the music to which she alludes relates to the text she is setting.

Although her music conveys a contemporary style, Clarke has stated that she is 'not afraid to go back to pure melodic lines'.[20] While some of her works, such as *Ave Atque Vale* (2017) and *Requiem* (2020), are dominated by textural contrasts and timbral interplay, with less focus on the melodic components, the composer's deep understanding of the choral sound is highlighted through her melodic idioms in works such as '*Pie Jesu*' (*Requiem*), her Christmas carols set to medieval texts (2014), and *Regina Coeli* (2007). Several of her Latin pieces, such as *Salve Regina* (2007) and *O Vis Aeternitatis* (2020), are influenced by liturgical chant, with the melodic contour and rhythmic structure following the natural inflection of the words. Clarke attributes her allusion to chant to her 'childhood memories of Latin rituals, learning plainchant and studying Latin at school.'[21] It could also be posited that her settings of ancient texts have been informed by her experiences of performing Renaissance music with the Lindsay Singers, her own score study, and, as Barbara Lamont observes, her exploration of plainchant and sixteenth-century polyphony with Dr Hans Waldemar Rosen and Fr Sean

[18] Rhona Clarke in Chamber Choir Ireland, 'Celebrating International Women's Day with composers Áine Mallon and Rhona Clarke', online video recording, YouTube, 8 March 2023 (2:48–3:26) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAoelDu8-2s> [accessed 8 March 2023].
[19] Rhona Clarke, interview with the author, 10 January 2025.
[20] Rhona Clarke in 'Rhona Clarke's *Sempiternam*', *Culture File*, RTÉ Lyric FM, 14 April 2022 (3:56–4:00) <https://www.rte.ie/radio/podcasts/22087792> [accessed 26 November 2023].
[21] Rhona Clarke, 'The Music – notes by the composer', *Sempiternam: Choral Music by Rhona Clarke*.

Lavery during her undergraduate degree.[22] These encounters may also be a contributing factor in her prevalent use of modes. While her melodies are often influenced by ancient traditions, Clarke does not intend her music to sound traditional, instead manipulating and embedding themes in harmonically complex textures, highlighting the synthesis of early and modern musical styles.[23]

Several instances in the composer's choral oeuvre exhibit homage to historical compositions, indicating Clarke's admiration for music of earlier eras and her adept integration of past idioms into her contemporary work. A salient example of allusion is evident in *O Vis Aeternitatis*,[24] a setting of a text by Hildegard of Bingen, which the medieval composer also set to music. Clarke draws closely on Hildegard's melody, opening the piece with a four-bar melisma that begins and ends on a unison E, reflecting the original chant (Figure 3.12). The composer has overtly acknowledged how Hildegard's melody, with the 'beautiful melisma on 'O' […] very definitely influenced the opening of this particular setting.'[25] She explains how the opening 'O' is a form 'of expressing wonder […] This power that's beyond our comprehension. A reverence in it for something that is far greater than human beings'.[26] The soprano and tenor present the Phrygian phrase in unison, accompanied by the alto and bass's E drone, a further evocation of early music and establishment of E as the tonal centre (Figure 3.13). The 'O' vowel enables a fluid melismatic line, reflecting Clarke's attraction to the sound of Latin words and 'how well their open vowels suit the voice'.[27]

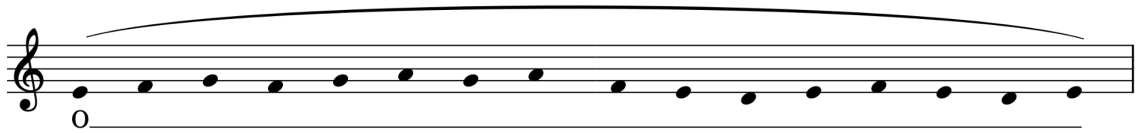


Figure 3.12. Opening of Hildegard of Bingen's *O Vis Aeternitatis*.[28]

[22] Lamont, 'The Choral Music of Rhona Clarke', p. 8.
[23] Clarke, interviewed by Grimes and Ferguson, 'amplify #64' (21:30–21:59).
[24] The analysis of this work is published in Laura Sheils and Róisín Blunnie, 'Style, Tradition, and Innovation in the Sacred Choral Music of Rhona Clarke', *Religions*, Vol. 16, No. 8 (2025), 984 <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16080984> [accessed 15 September 2025].
[25] Clarke in Music for Galway, 'ABENDMUSIK 2' (2:11–2:23).
[26] Clarke, interview with the author, 10 January 2025.
[27] Fitzgerald, para 5.
[28] Transcribed by the author from Sequentia, 'O vis eternitatis', online video recording, YouTube, 25 January 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Vcv2HdApcs> (0:10–0:20) [accessed 22 January 2024].

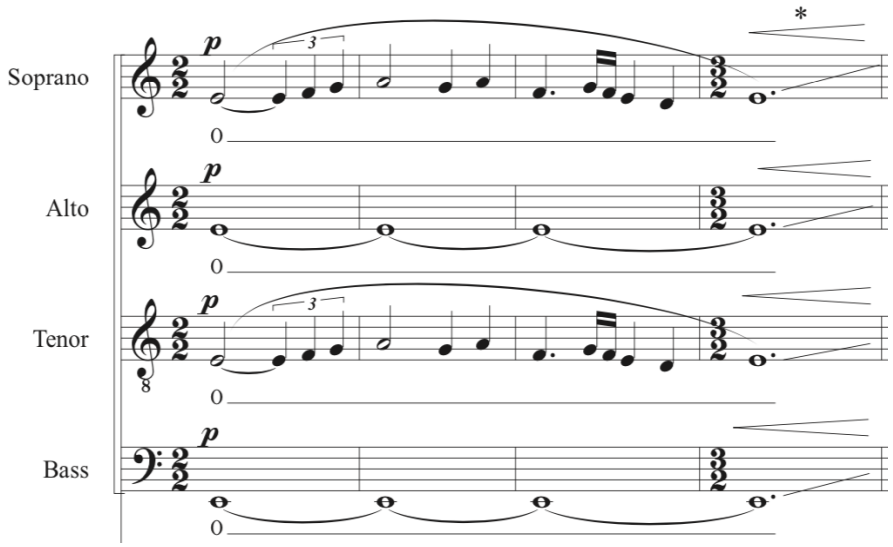


Figure 3.13. *O Vis Aeternitatis* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 2022), bb. 1–4.

The introductory *piano* melisma is restated at the beginning of the second verse (bb. 56–59), on a similar statement of veneration (*O quam magna est benignitas Salvatoris* — 'O how great is the goodness of the Saviour'). According to religious historian Barbara Newman, a key feature of Hildegard's style 'is her fondness for the grand gesture', with the majority of her songs beginning with the 'solemn apostrophe' — '*O virga ac diadema*' ('O rod and diadem') or '*O victoriosissimi triumphatores*' ('O most victorious triumphators'), for example.[29] Clarke's repetition of the opening musical material highlights her manipulation of the form and texture to indicate a new musical section and text that directly exalts the Divine, creating a sense of coherence and underlining Hildegard's continued influence on her setting.

Literature scholar Michael Leddy remarks on how a quotation can invoke 'verbal materials (titles or lyrics) [...] or serve as an act of homage.'[30] This form of quotation is evident in Clarke's *The Old Woman*, with the composer openly acknowledging her manipulation of the melodic line 'I am not yet born' from Elizabeth Maconchy's *Prayer Before Birth* (1972; SSAA) in her setting of the phrase 'I am not yet dead' from the rhyme. Clarke has noted the influence of Maconchy on her compositional development and how this particular quotation is 'a pun on birth/death as well as a small homage to this great composer.'[31] The intended pun reflects musicologist Christopher Reynolds's assertion that 'an allusion can accept the meaning of the

[29] Barbara Newman, *Saint Hildegard of Bingen: Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the* Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum *[Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations]* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 40.
[30] Michael Leddy, 'Limits of Allusion', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1992), 110–122 (p. 116) <https://academic.oup.com/bjaesthetics/article/32/3/110/20376> [accessed 22 August 2024].
[31] Clarke, 'The Music – notes by the composer'.

earlier text or use it to create another meaning, even a contrary meaning.'[32] Like the reference to Hildegard's chant, it is not a direct imitation of the music, but the melodic contours and call and response structure of both phrases are similar. Maconchy's work begins with the second soprano ascending a semitone from C to C# on 'I am not', followed by a descent to B and G, respectively, on 'yet born' (Figure 3.14). Altos respond with 'not yet born' in descending parallel diminished fifths on the third beat of bar 2, creating a dissonant tone. This passage recurs in different voices at various pitches at the beginning of each new verse of Maconchy's setting of Louis MacNeice's poem.

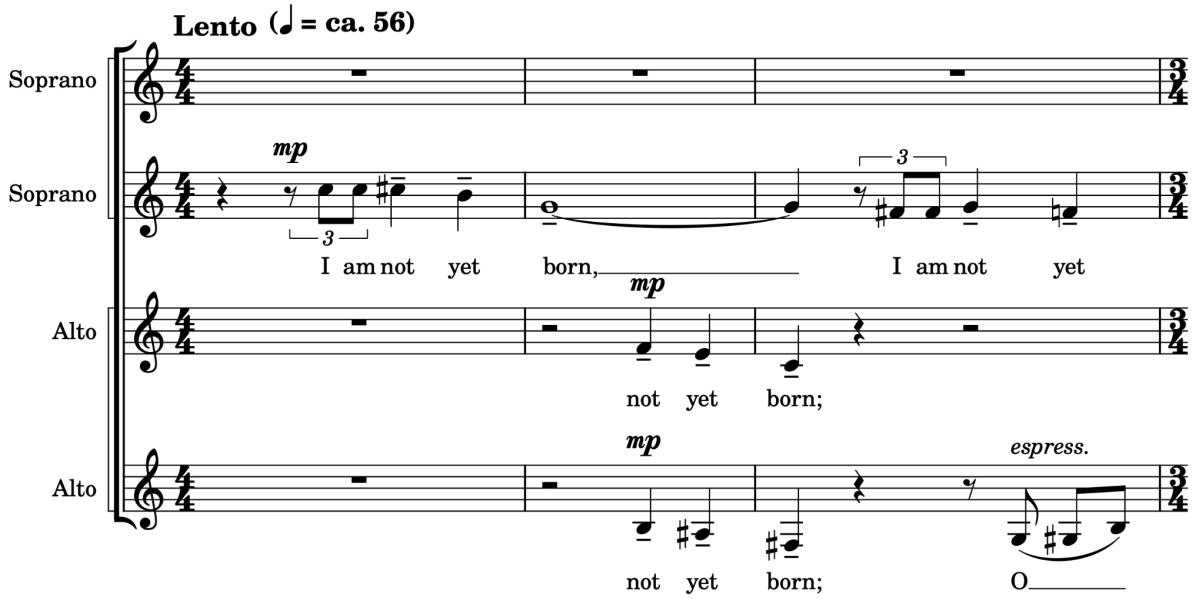


Figure 3.14. Elizabeth Maconchy, *Prayer Before Birth* (1972), bb. 1–3.[33]

Clarke refers to Maconchy's melody during the soprano solo in *The Old Woman* (bb. 98–101), ascending a fifth on 'I am not' (C#–G#), followed by a descending semitone and augmented fourth (G#–F^{x}–C#) on 'yet dead' (Figure 3.15). The ominous intervals, a clear distortion of Maconchy's major second and third, possibly illustrate the sinister reality of being buried alive. The alto and tenor respond in a similar manner to the altos in *Prayer Before Birth*, descending in fourths (perfect–diminished–perfect) through the phrase 'not yet dead', accompanied by the soprano and bass's sustained E. Rather than have a two-beat distance between the soloist's final note and the response, Clarke introduces the alto and tenor at the soprano's arrival on the word 'dead' (b. 100), avoiding a pause in the music, which befits the tense character of the

[32] Christopher Alan Reynolds, *Motives for Allusion: Context and Content in Nineteenth-Century Music* (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 16.
[33] Typeset by the author from Elizabeth Maconchy, *Prayer Before Birth* (Sussex: Chester Music, 2002).

work. Maconchy's influence is clear, yet Clarke's alteration of the original melody's contour and rhythm suggests an attempt to highlight the thematic differences between both texts ('born/dead'), and to portray her own independent voice whilst paying homage to the twentieth-century composer.
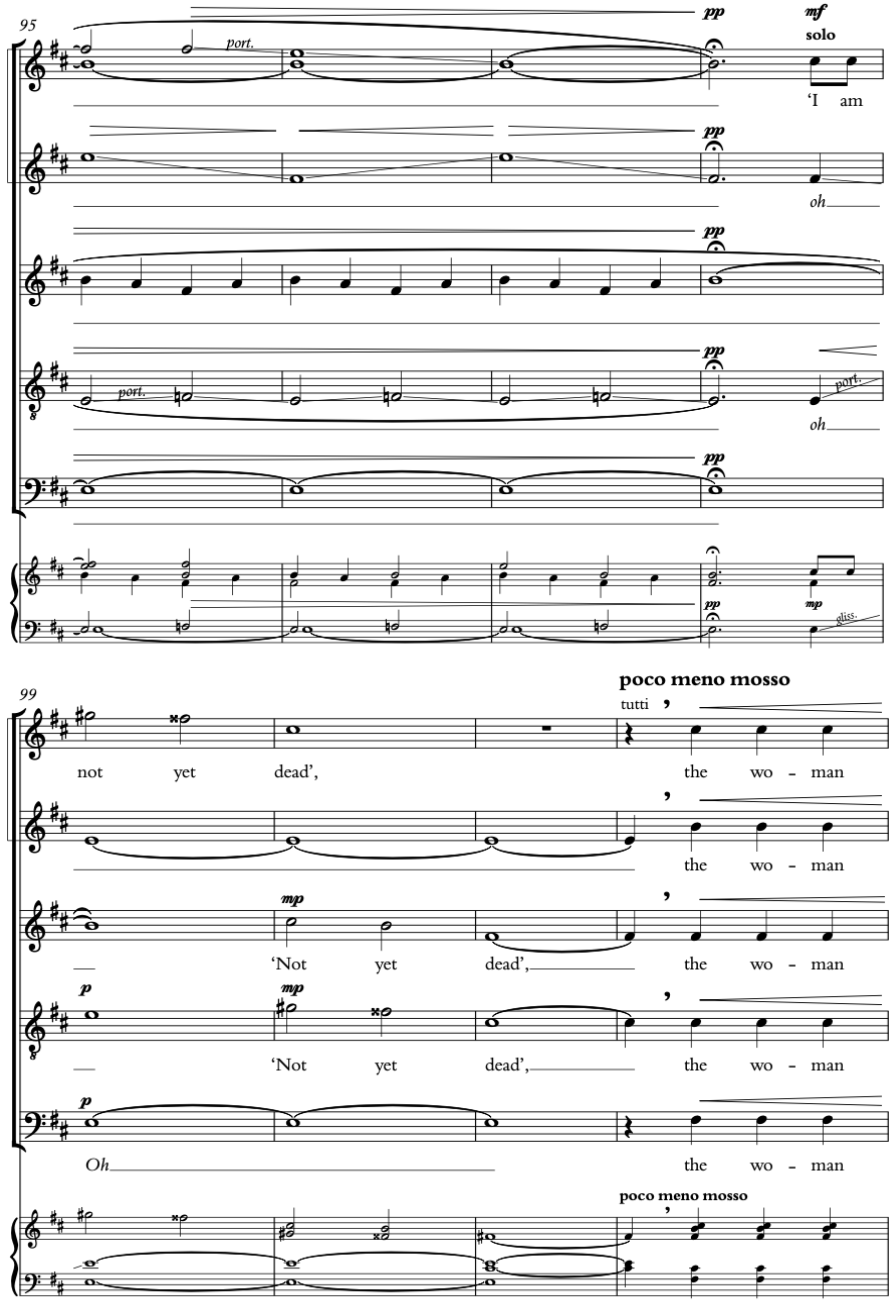


Figure 3.15. *The Old Woman*, bb. 95–102.

Clarke has addressed how the third movement of Béla Bartók's String Quartet No. 4 (1928) served as the stimulus for the opening of her *Salve Regina* (2007; Figures 3.16–3.17). The

Hungarian composer's central movement begins with a gradually scaffolded homophonic texture, descending from the first violin to the viola at minim intervals, before the cello's chromatic melody is introduced in bar 6. The *pianissimo* upper strings form an ambiguous harmony, implying a C# minor seventh in third inversion with added fourth (b. 3). Violin 1 extends this chord with the addition of A in bar 4, denoting a stacked harmony of F# minor and E major. The opening of Clarke's *Salve Regina*, at the same *Lento* tempo (crotchet equals sixty beats), quotes Bartók's movement a semitone lower, the *pianissimo* upper voices imitating the falling strings to form a C minor chord with added fourth, the first bass's B♭ entry in bar 4 completing the minor seventh harmony in third inversion. There is no hidden meaning in the composer's use of this work, with Clarke simply professing her attraction to its night music style and how the descending cluster 'would be very effective on voices',[34] thus 'stealing it' for her choral setting of the Latin text.[35] The mysterious ambience of Bartók's 'night music', which is characterised by dissonant tone clusters, usually at a slow tempo, complements the reverent nature of the Christian text, making this an effective quotation in Clarke's work.[36]
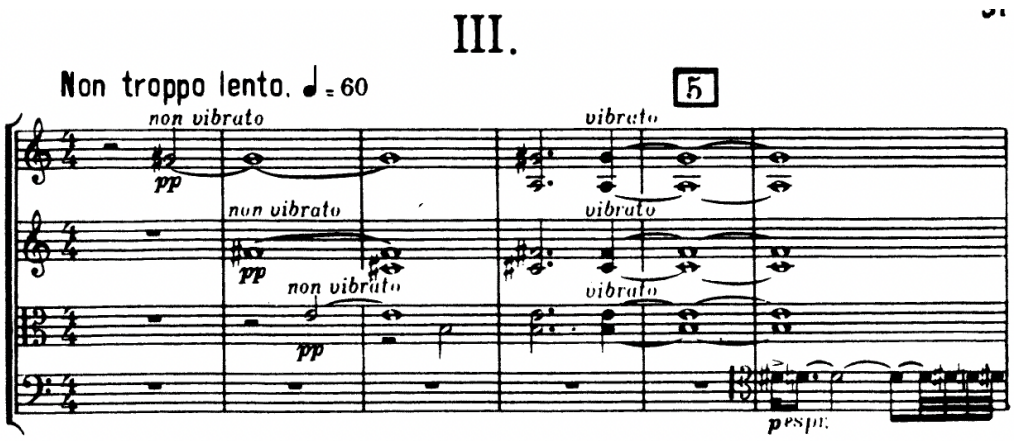


Figure 3.16. Béla Bartók, *String Quartet No. 4* Movement III (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1929), bb. 1–6.

[34] Clarke, interview with the author, 10 January 2025.
[35] Clarke, interviewed by Grimes and Ferguson, 'amplify #64' (18:42–18:53).
[36] David E. Schneider, *Bartók, Hungary, and the Renewal of Tradition: Case Studies in the Intersection of Modernity and Nationality* (California: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 84–85.
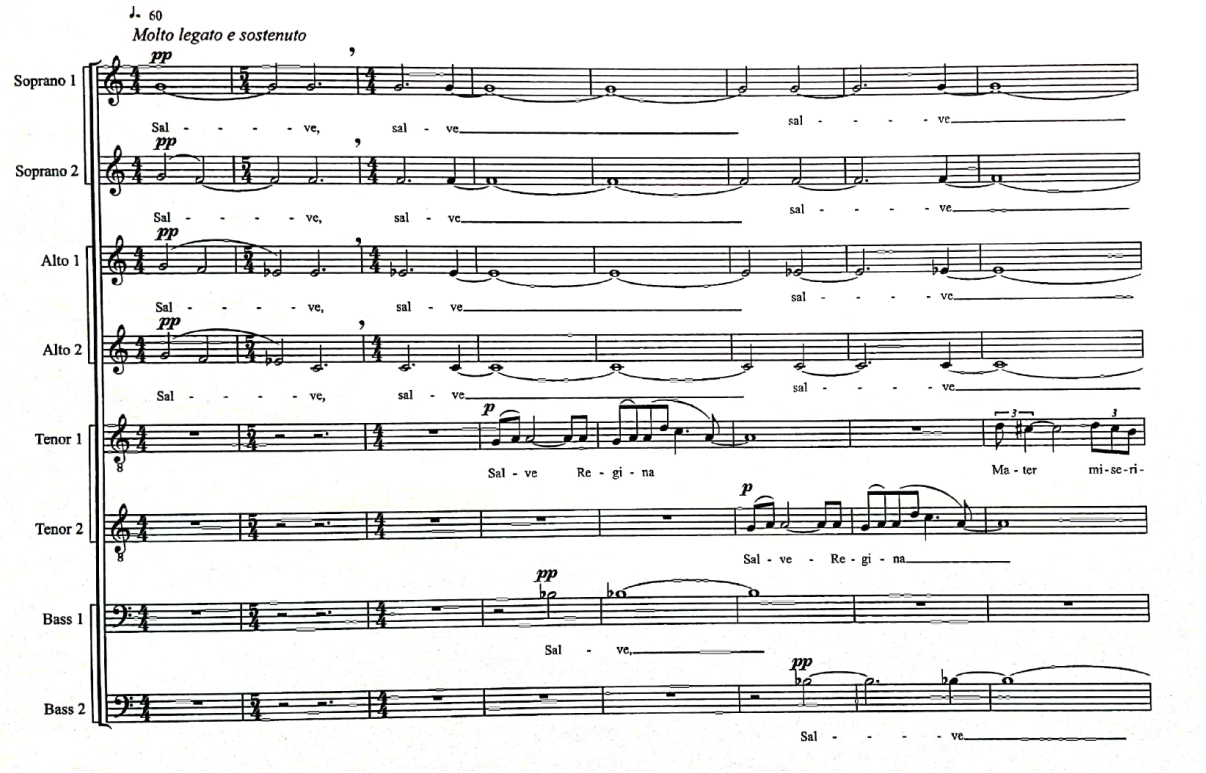


Figure 3.17. *Salve Regina* (2007), bb. 1–8.

Quotation for narrative purposes is evident in Clarke's *Epitaph*, which uses the opening phrase of Frédéric Chopin's funeral march (Sonata No. 2, Movement 3) throughout the piece (Figure 3.18). The quotation occurs at three significant moments — the introduction, the bridge to the slower second section in 6/8, and before the conclusion. The composer transforms the B-flat minor *Lento* march into a B minor motif 'with a rather upbeat rhythmic slant' in 8/8 in the alto and tenors, supported by the bass's staccato quaver ostinato (Figure 3.19).[37] The *Allegro* motif replaces Chopin's crotchets and dotted quavers with dotted crotchets, while the semiquavers are altered to crotchets or quavers. Tenor 2 follows a similar trajectory to the oscillating second voice of the piano piece (F– G♭), beginning on a unison B before repeating G and F# beneath the first tenor. Harmonic tension arises between the tenor's G and the bass's F#, as well as from the penultimate major second of the tenors (G–A), which is resolved to a fourth at the phrase's conclusion (F#–B). Secundal dissonances are a recurring trait in Clarke's harmonic vocabulary, here generating a dark tone, particularly in the lower register, while also contributing to the composer's distinctive sound.

[37] Clarke, *Epitaph*.
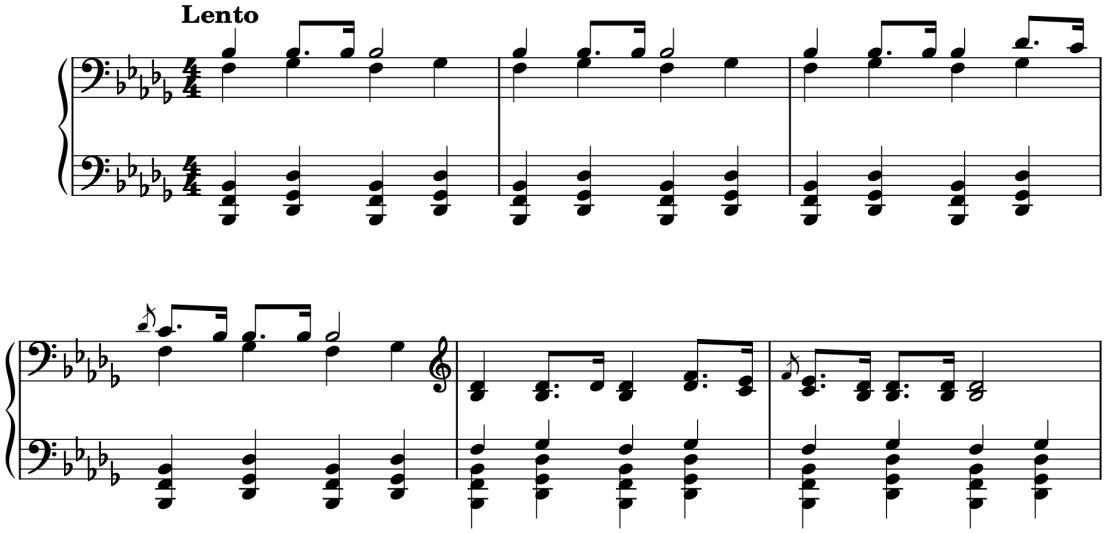


Figure 3.18. Frédéric Chopin, *Piano Sonata No. 2*, Movement III (1839), bb. 1–6.[38]
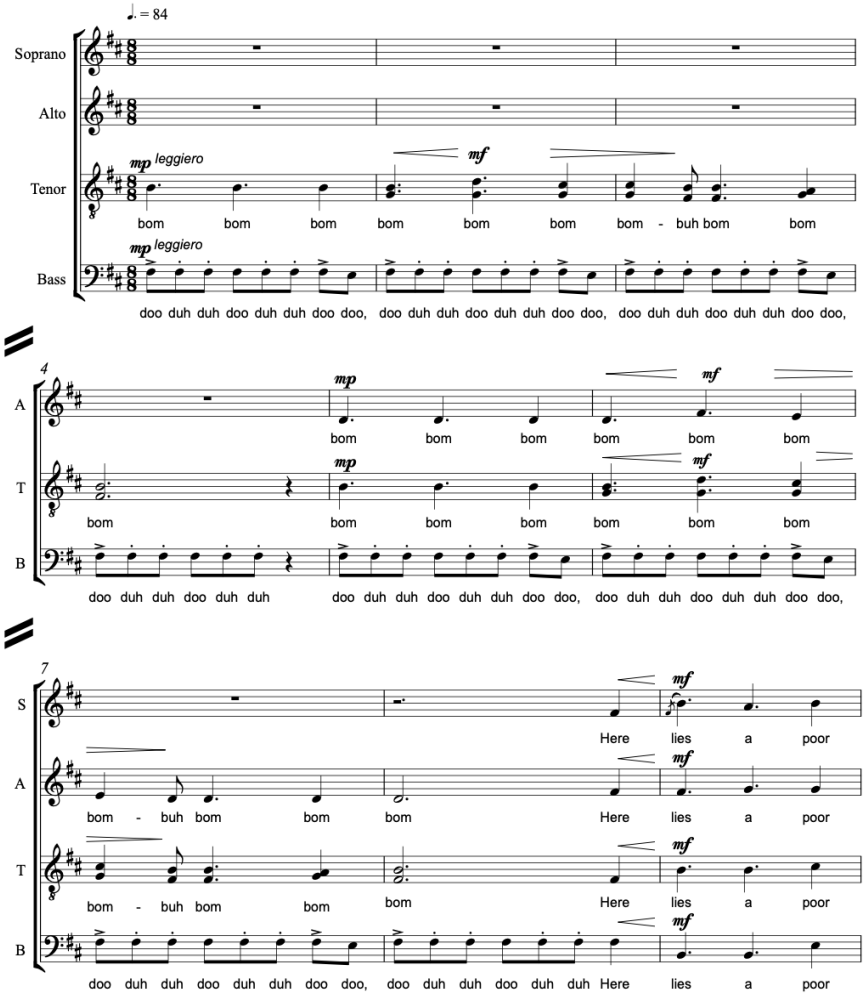


Figure 3.19. *Epitaph*, bb. 1–9.

[38] Typeset by the author from Frédéric Chopin, *Piano Sonata No. 2* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1840).

In a similar vein to her previous allusions, the composer does not emulate the music directly, instead altering its rhythm, key, and tempo to suit the context. She describes the text as 'a seemingly humorous poem', which may explain her decision to modify Chopin's funeral march for the fast, rhythmic setting. Although the tired housewife appears to celebrate going to a place where she will 'do nothing forever', Clarke reminds us of the ultimate tragedy of the poem — the woman's death — through her quotation of the mournful melody. She does not set the poetic text with the tune, instead using the syllable 'bom', which conveys the march-like quality of the original composition.

Just as Clarke has paraphrased the music of other composers, there are also instances in which she has imitated her own writing. An overview of the textural and harmonic structure of *O Vis Aeternitatis* exhibits distinct similarities to the composer's *Ave Atque Vale*, most notably the sparse tonal and textural framework, as well as the inclusion of *Sprechstimme*. Whether this self-allusion is deliberate or mere coincidence is unclear, but an analysis of her compositional approaches and the text in both works can help to elucidate this matter. In bars 29 to 36 of *O Vis Aeternitatis*, the soprano repeats A, rising and falling through B♭ and C, before culminating in a stepwise ascent to a secundal interval (C–D). This ascent is accompanied by a fragmented pattern of G–D fifths in the tenor and alto, supported by the bass's E♭ moving to D. The apex of this section features a tone cluster of B♭, C, and D in the alto and sopranos with F in the bass, descending via *glissandi* to a unison D with *Sprechstimme* in the bass (Figure 3.20). This section relates to the Incarnation of Jesus, culminating in the upper tone cluster and descending *glissandi* through the first syllable of '*Adam*', which is followed by undulating seconds (E4–D4) in the alto on '*educta est*' ('drawn from'), echoed by the bass in wider intervals (C3–A3–D3–A3–E3). The gradual stepwise ascent to a tone cluster and subsequent *glissando* descent are highly dramatic and could be interpreted as a depiction of Adam's Fall.[39]

[39] Hildegard's 'pairing of Adam—the first human, whose Fall broke […] creation—and Christ—the God-human, whose Incarnation restored it—is commonplace in Christian thought, rooted in the writings of St. Paul (e.g. Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–50)' (Nathaniel M. Campbell and Beverly Lomer, '*O vis eternitatis*', *International Society of Hildegard von Bingen Studies*, 26 June 2014 <https://www.hildegard-society.org/2014/06/o-vis-eternitatis.html> [accessed 23 June 2025]).
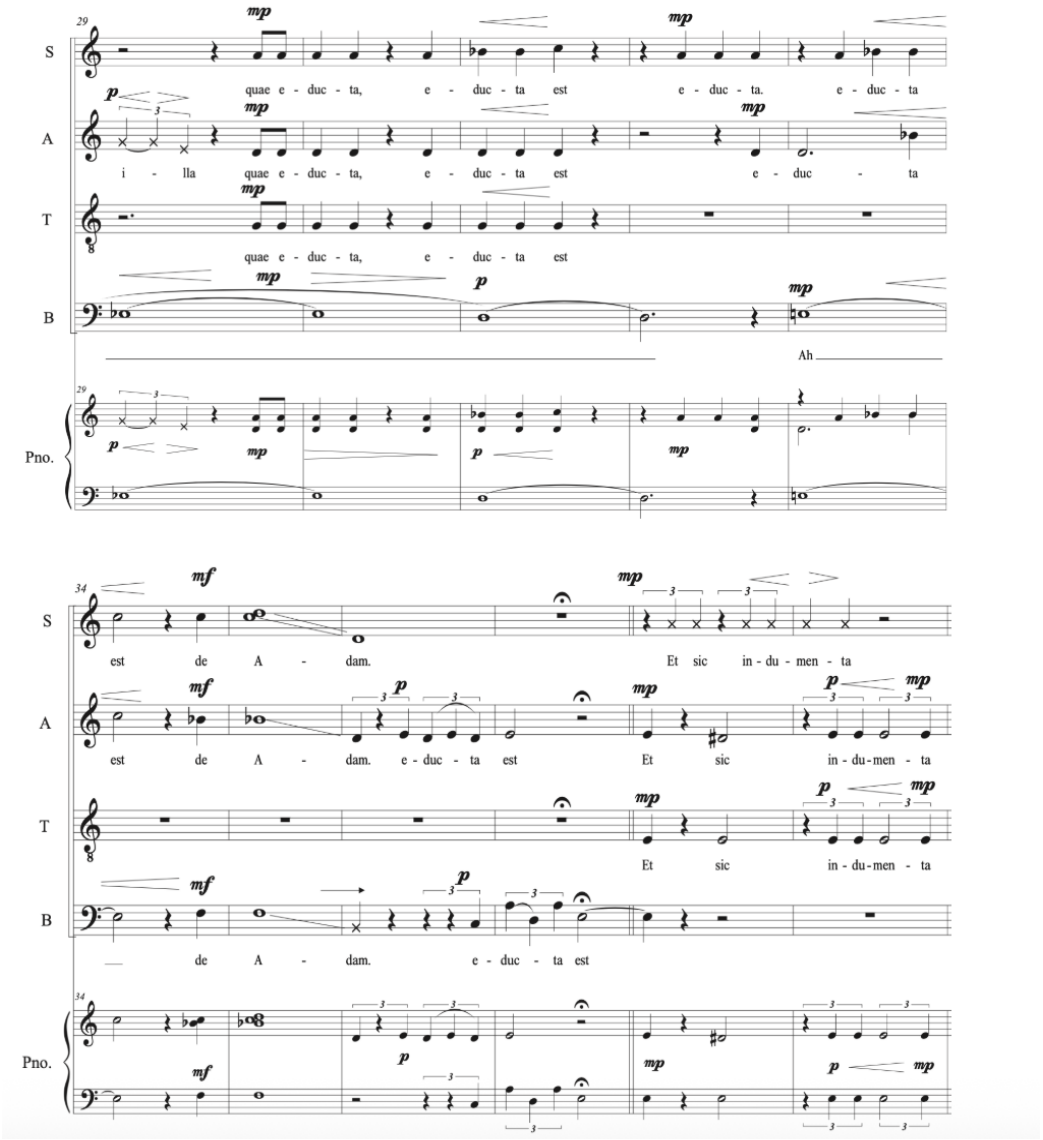


Figure 3.20. *O Vis Aeternitatis*, bb. 29–39.

The elegy *Ave Atque Vale* by the Roman poet Catullus (c. 84–54 BCE) is addressed to his brother, who was killed in war.[40] Clarke pursues a minimalist approach to developing intensity while capturing the despondent mood of the text. Textural density and dynamics gradually expand in tandem with the increasingly dissonant language, conveying the growing despair of Catullus as he bids farewell to his brother. The music thus reflects Peter Sacks's interpretation of an elegy as having 'a measured pace and direction', like a funeral procession.[41] At bar 29,

[40] The work was commissioned by the Choir of the Chapels Royal, HM Tower of London, in association with the Contemporary Music Centre, Ireland. Five Irish composers — Rhona Clarke, Eoghan Desmond, David Coonan, Séamus de Barra, and Anne-Marie O'Farrell — were each commissioned to compose a choral piece in response to Hubert Parry's *Songs of Farewell* (1916–1918). Parry's six songs were interlaced with the commissioned compositions.

[41] Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spencer to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 19.

the soprano follows an almost identical trajectory to *O Vis Aeternitatis*, gradually ascending from A to D, supported by the fragmented open G–D fifths in the tenor and alto, and the E♭ pedal point in the bass. The climax of this subsection is signalled by the shift to a sustained F in the bass, while the sopranos ascend to a secundal *divisi* (C–D), forming a tone cluster with the alto's B♭ on '*ipsum*' at a *forte* dynamic (b. 39). This tense sonority of close intervals in the upper texture, forming a B♭ ninth in second inversion, dissipates in a descending *glissando* in the soprano and bass, with all voices then resolving to D (Figure 3.21). As the text at this point describes fate unjustly taking his brother from him ('*Quandoquidem fortuna mihi tete abstulit ipsum*' – 'Inasmuch as fate takes you, even you, from me'), this extended vocal technique could be illustrating Catullus's outpouring of grief.
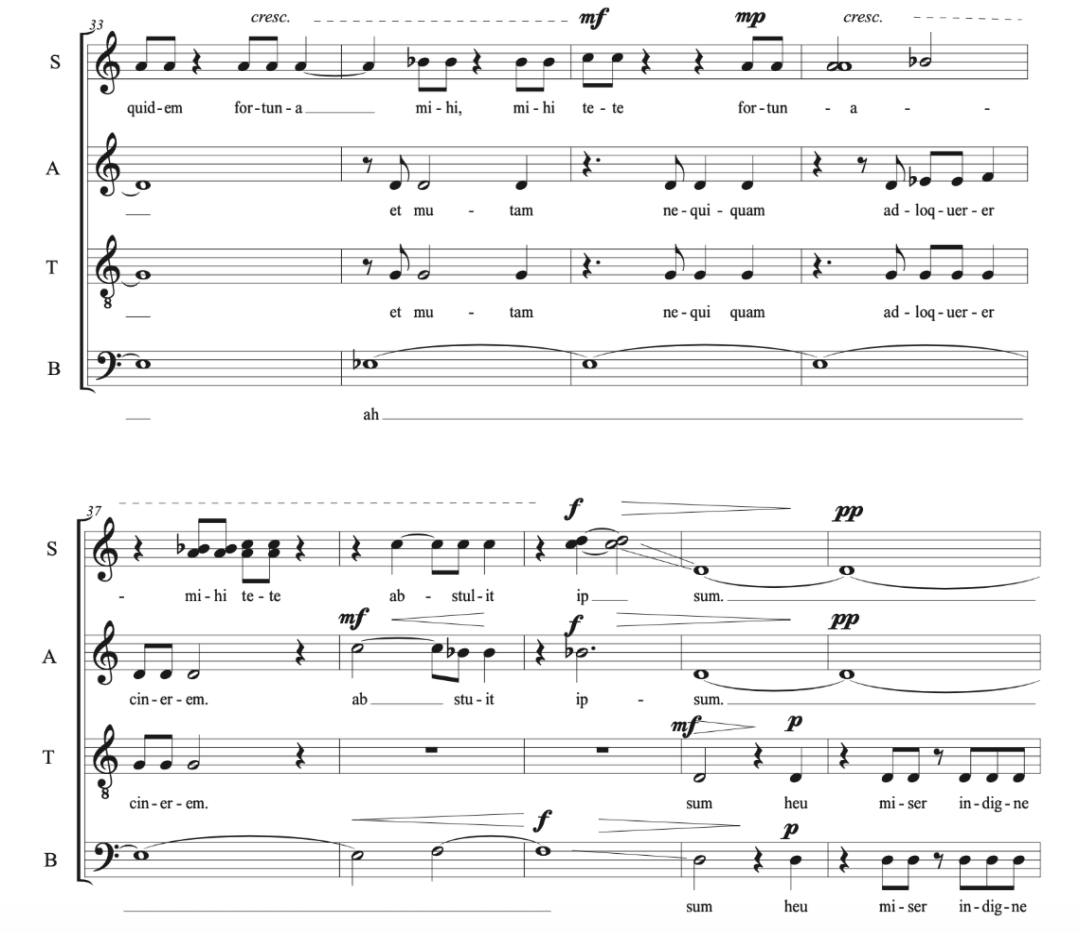


Figure 3.21. *Ave Atque Vale* (2017), bb. 33–41.

The texture and harmonic language are practically indistinguishable in the above excerpts, and both gradually build in intensity through rising dynamics and pitch. While the respective

moments in question differ greatly in text and narrative content, both convey a notably dramatic character, which likely prompted Clarke to use almost identical musical elements. These moments of heightened drama demonstrate how Clarke's compositional palette is applied to diverse texts and in different contexts to create an emotive, impassioned sound. Considering the timeframe within which these works were composed, *Ave Atque Vale* was one of Clarke's first choral works to feature extended vocal techniques, which, she says, followed from similar approaches in her instrumental work *SHIFT* (2013), and *O Vis Aeternitatis* was one of the first choral pieces she wrote after *Ave Atque Vale*.[42] While she has not referred specifically to the excerpts highlighted above, Clarke has stated that her setting of Hildegard's text 'came out of the experience with *Ave Atque Vale*'.[43] Her utilisation of strikingly similar harmonic and textural elements across these diverse sacred and secular works reveals a coherence of compositional voice, as she employs similar intensifying sonorities at emotionally powerful points in each piece.

Textural Approaches: Narrative and Structural Aspects

The importance of texture in composition has been highlighted by composers and scholars alike, with Tom Wilkinson contending that 'it can shape the narrative of a work in myriad ways, the most apparent being its ability to draw the listener's attention to a significant passage of text'.[44] Clarke's music conveys a diverse textural palette, with a frequent emphasis on emotional intensity and variety through contrasting textures in individual works. Her structured development and alteration of choral density and activity exhibit her understanding of the expressive power of texture to communicate a particular phrase, as well as the overall tone of the texts she sets. Where homophony is often reserved for textual clarity and spotlighting an important phrase, Clarke's more complex contrapuntal frameworks demonstrate her attraction to 'very rich textures, some counterpoint', and her adeptness at developing motivic, and often conflicting, material in a compelling web of individual voices.[45] The composer's organisation of texture also highlights her careful consideration of voice leading and the horizontal trajectory of each voice, which are tailored to the capabilities of the given choir.

[42] Clarke, interviewed by Grimes and Ferguson, 'amplify #64' (22:40–22:52).
[43] Clarke, interview with the author, 31 January 2025.
[44] Tom Wilkinson, 'Composing for a Non-professional Chapel Choir: Challenges and Opportunities' in *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by George Corbett (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2019), pp. 69–94 (p. 91).
[45] Clarke in 'Rhona Clarke's *Sempiternam*' (0:45–0:52).

Textural Diversity

The barren, discordant tapestry of repeated and sustained notes in *Ave Atque Vale* expresses the grief of Catullus and the overriding theme of death. However, the most literal communication of text materialises on the phrase '*Accipe fraterno multum manantia fletu*' ('accept a brother's drowning tears'), with Clarke expanding the texture into a canon based on a rising five-note stepwise motif in G minor, painting the image of flowing tears (bb. 63–75; Figure 3.22). Musicologist Mark Fitzgerald observes how this textural augmentation has 'a devastating effect' that triggers 'an abandonment of the atmosphere of detached reserve in favour of a more visceral expression of grief.'[46] Following the dissonant palette of recitative-like tones and *Sprechstimme*, the ascending melancholic motif introduced by the tenor in bar 63 constitutes the first definitive lyricism and polyphony within the work, effectively illustrating Catullus's tears. The contrapuntal texture gradually develops with increasing dynamics as the basses and sopranos adopt the melismatic 'tears' motif. The altos and bass proceed to descend in compound thirds below the sopranos' undulating quaver '*fraterno*' echoes, as the dynamics diminish to *mezzo-piano* and the music contracts to a sustained minor seventh between the tenor and first soprano (D–C), signalling a return to the desolate texture. Clarke's expansion of the melodic material and textural density in this section of the piece distinctly contrasts with the adjacent textures, spotlighting the powerful phrase and painting the overwhelming emotion of grief in a compelling manner.

[46] Fitzgerald, 'Rhona Clarke: The power and physicality of the voice', para 6.
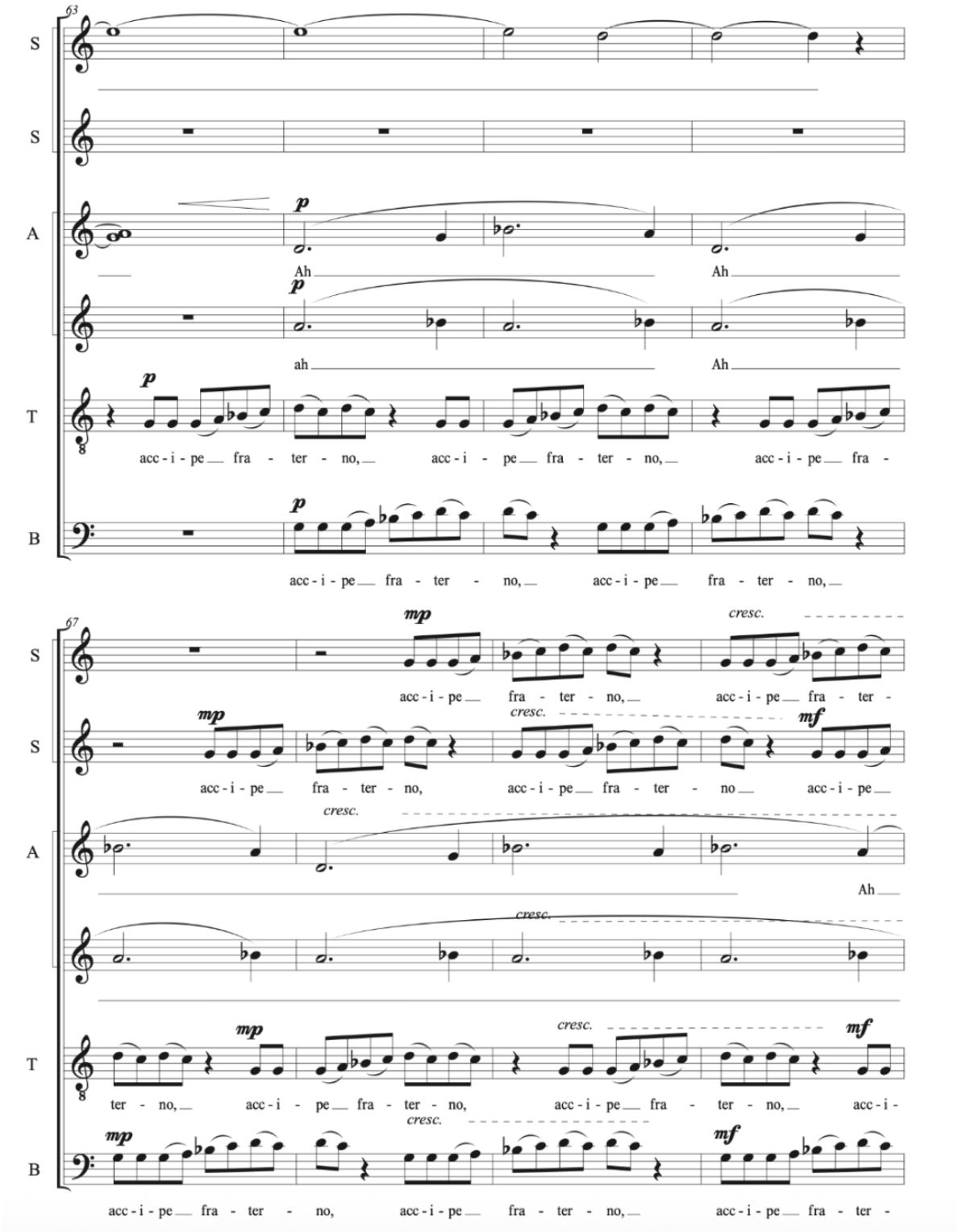


Figure 3.22. *Ave Atque Vale*, bb. 63–75.
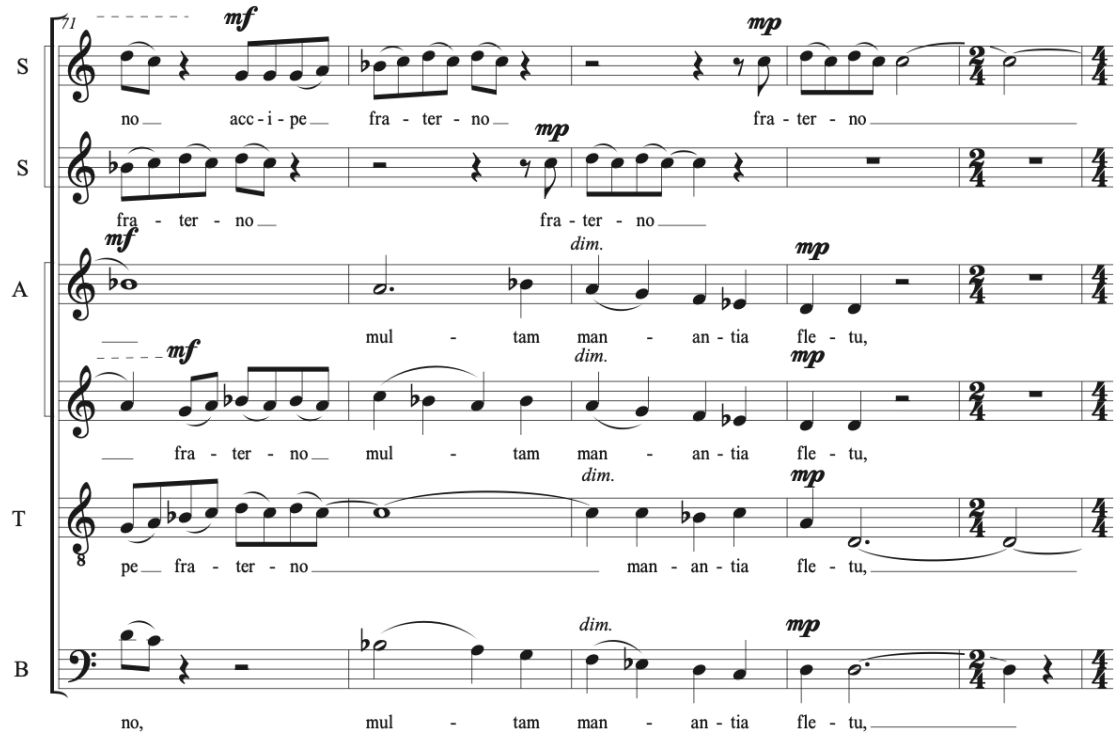


Figure 3.22. (continued).

Fitzgerald states that '[S]inging out a word or phrase within the larger text for expressive expansion is a common compositional strategy' in Clarke's choral work, as is evident in *Ave Atque Vale*.[47] The composer herself explains that '[W]hen you are setting a text, you cannot bring out every single thing […], so you must focus on very particular aspects'.[48] Within *O Vis Aeternitatis*, Clarke reveals how she chose to spotlight the power of the opening line and the aspect of suffering in the response.[49] The most literal communication of text materialises on the phrase '*a maximo dolore, abstersa sunt*' ('through greatest suffering, were cleansed'), outlining Adam's suffering from sin, and the human suffering of Jesus (bb. 40–55; bb. 87–101; Figure 3.23). Following the dissonant, exposed texture of repeated and sustained tones and *Sprechstimme*, the *legato* alto and tenor ascend melismatically in sixths on '*maximo*', gradually broadening the melodic range, in preparation for the impassioned, five-part discordant outburst on '*dolore*'. *Forte* octave leaps (A–A') in the first soprano and bass (bb. 43–44) instigate similar leaps across the texture,[50] with each voice's subsequent stepwise descent at independent rhythmic intervals creating harsh suspensions that evoke suffering. Major and minor seconds

[47] Fitzgerald, para 6.
[48] Clarke in Music for Galway, 'ABENDMUSIK 2' (4:03–4:16).
[49] Ibid (4:16–4:22).
[50] Soprano 2 ascends a minor seventh (A4–G5), alto ascends a fourth (A4–D5), tenor ascends a minor sixth (A3–F4) (bb. 43–45).

between the sopranos, and soprano 2 and alto, create a jarring tone, before resolving to thirds. According to Clarke, her setting of the refrain is 'very definitely an expression of pain […] The whole impetus there is on […] the idea of pain as a very visceral thing'.[51]
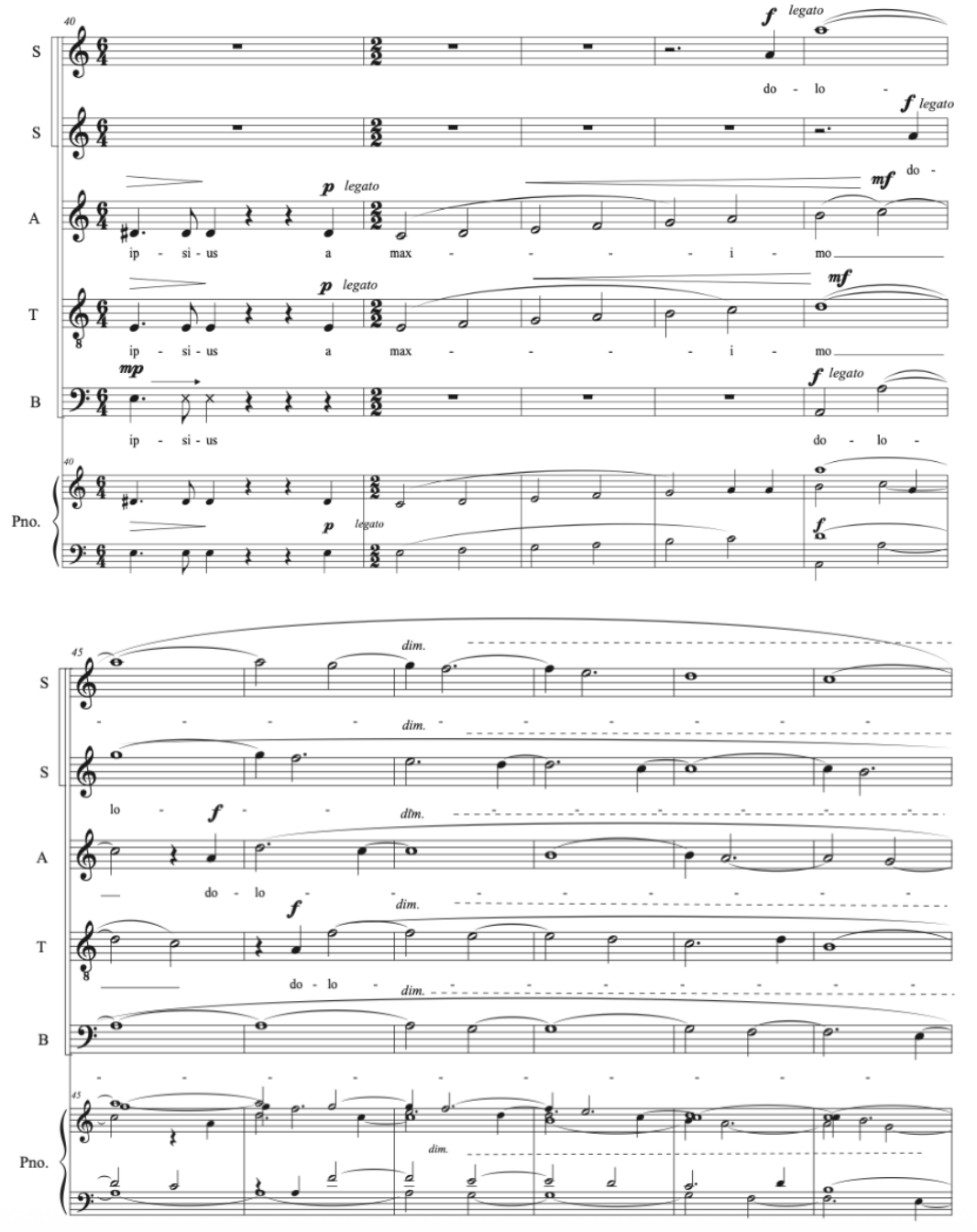


Figure 3.23. *O Vis Aeternitatis*, bb. 40–55.[52]

[51] Clarke in Music for Galway, 'ABENDMUSIK 2' (3:40–3:56).
[52] This music is repeated in bars 87–101, indicating the response within the sacred text.
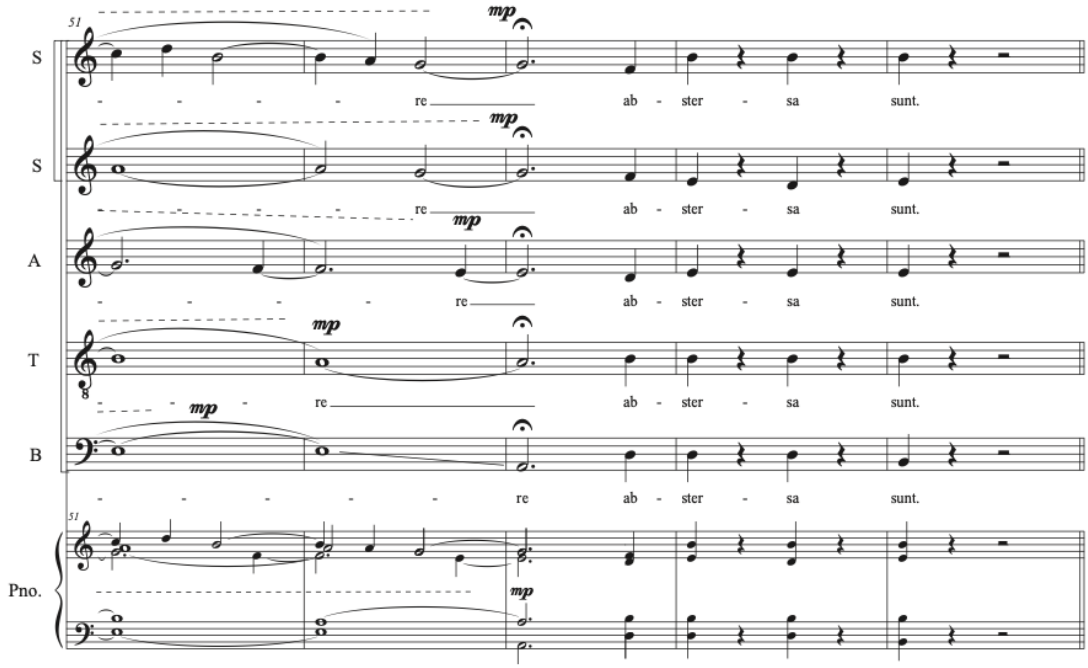


Figure 3.23. (continued).

This dissonant descent, which gradually diminishes in dynamics to *mezzo-piano*, concludes with the bass's falling *glissando* (E3–A2) forming an open A seventh chord at the end of the phrase (bb. 52–53). The lack of the third is an indication of Clarke's evasion of traditional tonality, preferring a modal sound. A striking textural contrast ensues, with the homophonic utterance of '*abstersasunt*' ('cleansed'), disjointed by crotchet rests between the chords. The voices' B diminished chord in first inversion moves to an open E seventh in third inversion, before concluding with an open B–E–B harmony. The tenor and first soprano's repeated B, and alto's repeated E, with minimal movement in the other voices, creates a sense of melodic stasis, the stark harmonies patently contrasting with the previous dense dissonance. The wider intervals between voices, and the crotchet rests, may be interpreted as illustrating the cleansing of Adam and Jesus's 'garments', or bodies, purifying the tonal palette following the suspensions. The subsequent three-beat rest intensifies the conclusion of this section and the emotive weight of the text. Theorist Robert Hines contends that '[t]he importance of silence should not be underestimated; it is a strong, malleable ally when developing musical ideas.'[53] Clarke's application of extended rests prolongs the tension of the preceding discordant outburst, while also allowing respite before the beginning of a new section.

[53] Robert Stephan Hines, *Choral Composition: A Handbook for Composers, Arrangers, Conductors, and Singers* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), p. 69.

An effective illustration of a phrase through an isolated change in texture is spotlighted in *Rorate Caeli*. There is a moment of dramatic monophony, with the alto, tenor, and basses' unison expression of '*aperiatur*' ('open') in bars 54 and 55. Clarke's shift to unison singing after the previous busy counterpoint engenders what Janet Levy calls an 'aura of authoritative control [...]. Unisons are often used to announce or to mark other structural moments or to rouse us from a kind of musical action to which we may have grown accustomed'.[54] The *forte* exclamation is accentuated by the previous polyphonic section, which concluded on a *pianissimo* D#. All voices ascend in consecutive fourths (G#–C#–F#), followed by a triplet oscillation on the melismatic penultimate syllable (E–B–E), before returning through a descending minor sixth to G# (Figure 3.24). The rising intervals 'open' the melodic space, expanding the range of the phrase, while the melismatic crotchet triplet on the open 'a' vowel extends the vocalisation of the word, thus illustrating its meaning. The text is repeated by the unison alto and first bass, supported by the second bass's G# pedal tone, extending the initial leap to a minor ninth (G#–A) and reducing the first note's minim to a crotchet, accelerating the overall rhythmic motion.
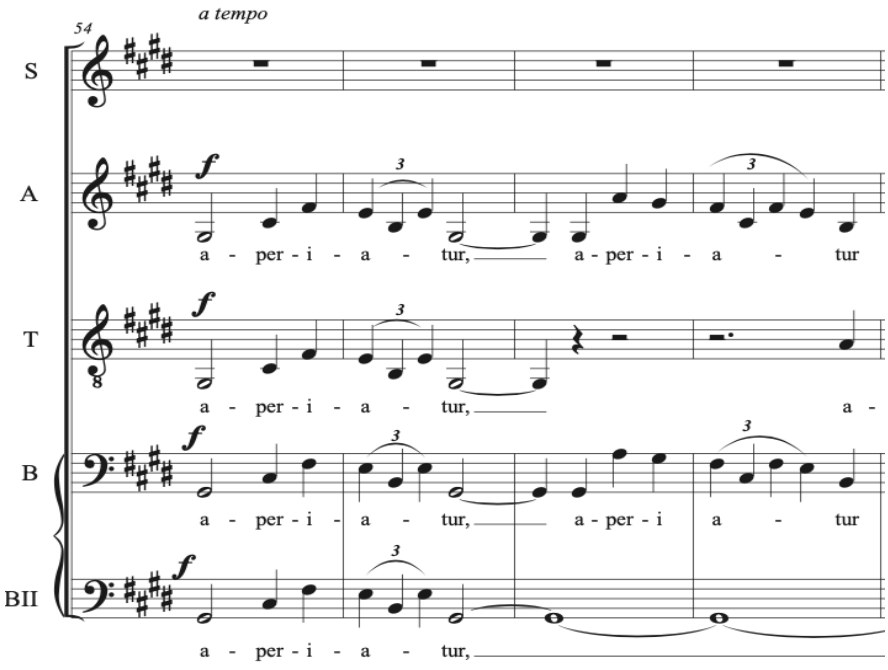


Figure 3.24. *Rorate Caeli*, bb. 54–57.

[54] Janet Levy, 'Texture as a Sign in Classic and Early Romantic Music', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (1982), 482–531 (pp. 507, 509) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/830985> [accessed 30 January 2025].

Clarke's alteration of texture in *Rorate Caeli*, from the preceding contrapuntal framework to stark monophony, calls to mind Wallace Berry's observation on the significance of such textural shifts: 'Within structural segments both large and small, the rate at which texture changes in the course of progression and recession is a vital aspect of expressive effect.'[55] Through the unexpected reduction of choral density to a *forte* monophonic texture with a rising unison melody, Clarke reflects the textual idea of 'opening'. The abrupt textural shift has a narrative and structural function: the lack of harmony through this ascending phrase draws our attention to its importance, illustrating the text's announcement of the earth opening, and signalling the beginning of a new section of music after the slow, melancholic polyphony of the previous segment.

In a work characterised by contrapuntal interplay, Clarke illustrates the reality of trying to 'listen, ignore and forget at the same time' in 'Multitasking' through conflicting motifs and modalities. As the texture increases in complexity and the voices become more melodically independent, the words become more difficult to comprehend. This may be Clarke's intention to reflect the act of multitasking, challenging the listener to perceive the various motifs within the polyphonic texture. However, a notable moment of homophonic word painting occurs at the upbeat to bar 33 with chordal motion in the sopranos, alto, and tenor on 'at the same time', above the bass's pedal D. The upper voices repeat the tone cluster of F–C–D–E♭ on 'same time', disjointed by a crotchet rest between the words and a further three-beat rest before the text is repeated (Figure 3.25). Sopranos unite on E♭ for the repeated text, with all voices in the chord descending a step in parallel (bb. 34–35), maintaining secundal intervals between the soprano and alto. The final dissonance on 'time' includes a diminished fifth between tenor and alto (E♭–B), with the outer voices on D, illustrating Clarke's avoidance of conventional harmonies, particularly at the close of phrases.

[55] Wallace Berry, *Structural Functions in Music* (New York: Dover Publications, 1987), p. 201.

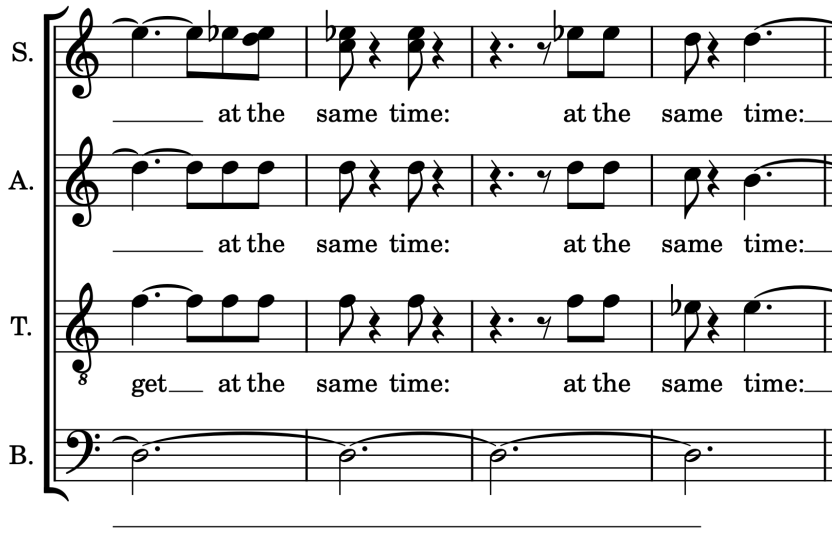


Figure 3.25. 'Multitasking', bb. 32–35.

Similar to the preceding example in *Rorate Caeli*, the unexpected change to homophony in 'Multitasking' spotlights the meaning of the words, representing the only time in the movement where the voices sing the same text 'at the same time'. As the work is characterised by a contrapuntal texture of conflicting harmonies, Clarke draws us to this phrase through the abrupt textural change, which effectively communicates the text, and allows a respite from the incessant polyphony. Wilkinson describes this type of textural shift as

> an effective use of a classic compositional technique: textural complexity abruptly gives way to textural simplicity, thus drawing the listener's attention to an especially significant line of text.[56]

In a choral era where, as composer Andrea Ramsey notes, 'perhaps too great a percentage of our works comprise slow homophony', Clarke exhibits a continuous manipulation of texture, at times reserving complete homophonic and monophonic passages for significant moments in the text and music.[57]

Like *O Vis Aeternitatis* and *Rorate Caeli*, Clarke manipulates the texture of *Navigatio* in various ways to convey the text's character and narrative. The focal figure of this setting is the Christian saint Brendan, who is at sea with his religious brothers. In order to underline Brendan's importance in the overall narrative, as well as the aquatic context of the work, Clarke repeats the word '*Brendanus*' across the lower texture through a progressive layering of rising

[56] Wilkinson, 'Composing for a Non-professional Chapel Choir', p. 77.
[57] Andrea Ramsey quoted in Alan Denney, 'Ours to See: Emerging Trends in Today's Choral Compositions', *The Choral Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (2019), 8–21 (pp. 13–14) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26870101> [accessed 2 February 2023].

melismatic figures (Figure 3.26).[58] This expanding ostinato, gradually increasing in dynamics from *piano* to *mezzo-forte*, continues until bar 22 as a gentle backdrop to the more pronounced homophonic presentation of text in the soprano and alto lines. The ascending 'wave-like' *legato* figures in the tenor and bass lines, built on intervals of a second and third, reflect the image of Brendan sailing at sea. The melismatic figures return in the sopranos and altos from bars 70 to 79 above the lower voices' recitative-like homophony, demonstrating Clarke's adept balance of texture and timbre to achieve textual clarity while maintaining the maritime image within the piece.
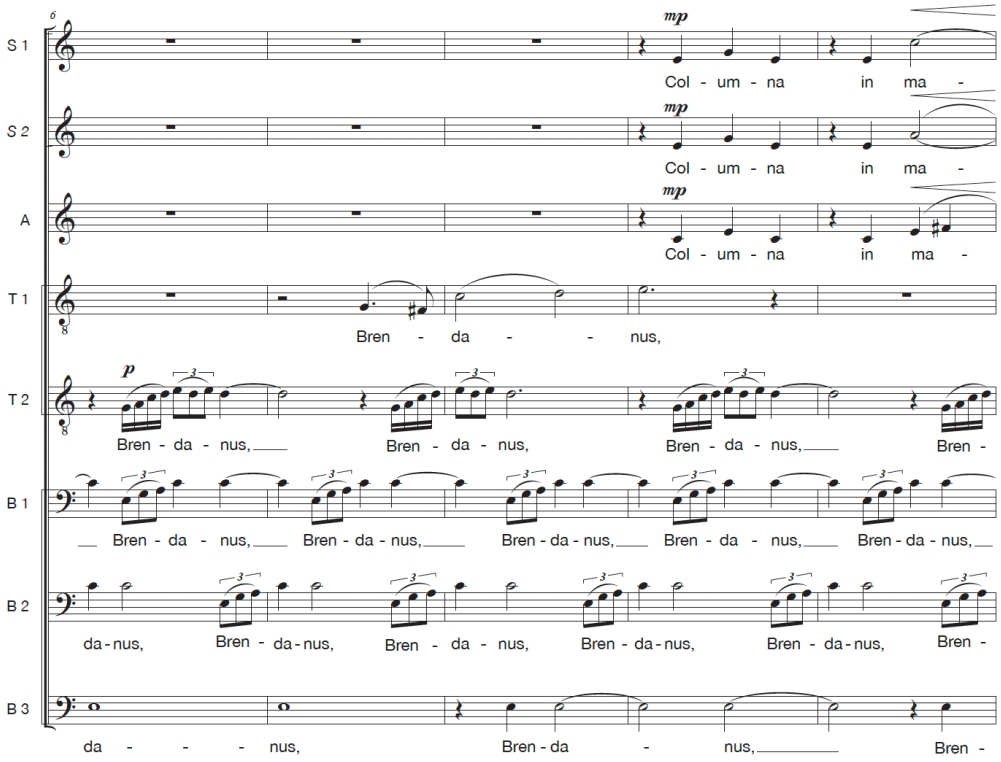


Figure 3.26. *Navigatio* (2023), bb. 6–10.

As previously outlined, textural contrasts occur at notable textual points in many of Clarke's choral works, underlining a change of tone or the importance of a specific phrase. While wave-like polyphony and the simultaneous presentation of different text dominate *Navigatio*, reflecting St Brendan's journey at sea, homophonic, chorale-like passages are more pronounced at points when the navigator speaks directly to his companions — the first sung by lower voices only and the second by the full ensemble (Figure 3.27). Where the sopranos and

[58] *Navigatio* was commissioned by the choir Cois Cladaigh as a gift to their founder conductor Brendan O'Connor. Clarke's repetition of '*Brendanus*' could also serve to pay homage to O'Connor.

altos provide a brief decorative pentatonic figure on '*Sanctus Brendanus*' above the first tenor-bass statement, in which Brendan directs his brothers to send the boat forward (bb. 42–55), the five-part *forte* chorale texture for Brendan's final statement is emphatic, underlining his proclamation that '... Jesus Christ has shown us this wonder so that it be manifested to many in order that they may believe' (bb. 81–90). These direct homophonic phrases help to notify the listener of when the saint speaks to his brothers, emphasising the gravity of his directions and the clarity with which they hear his words. Each communication of an important moment in a text is carefully executed by Clarke, primarily through the astute use of texture and contrasting vocal timbres.
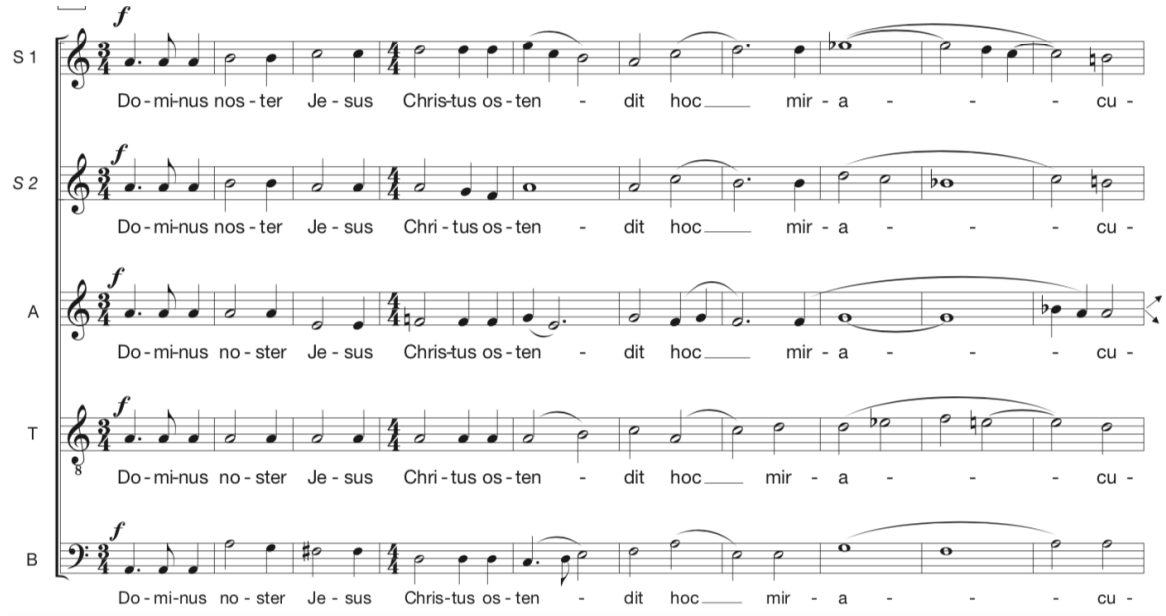


Figure 3.27. *Navigatio*, bb. 81–90.

Prayer through Texture

The shaping of texture for the expression of reverent, contemplative passages like those in *Navigatio* is exhibited on several occasions in Clarke's sacred Latin settings. Chant-style recitation characterises the final five bars of *O Vis Aeternitatis* (bb. 133–37) on the words '*et Spiritui sancto*' ('and the Holy Spirit'). Following the vigorous fugal exaltation of the Trinity, the bass sings a B2 drone, establishing a more meditative atmosphere. The sustained quintal harmony of B–F#–C in bar 132 leads to the static SSAAT homophonic recitation of the prayer. The choir repeats '*et Spiritui sancto*' three times syllabically as the bass continues to sustain an '*o*' vowel, each statement diminishing in dynamics from *mezzo-piano* to *pianissimo* (Figure

3.28). The bass's drone, forming an open fifth with the tenor's F#, creates tonal stability and is redolent of medieval harmony; yet the stacked intervals of fifths and fourths (B–F#–B–E–B) are characteristic of contemporary choral writing, with the lack of resolution, particularly the conspicuous avoidance of a conventional triad, preserving a sense of mystery in the work's conclusion.

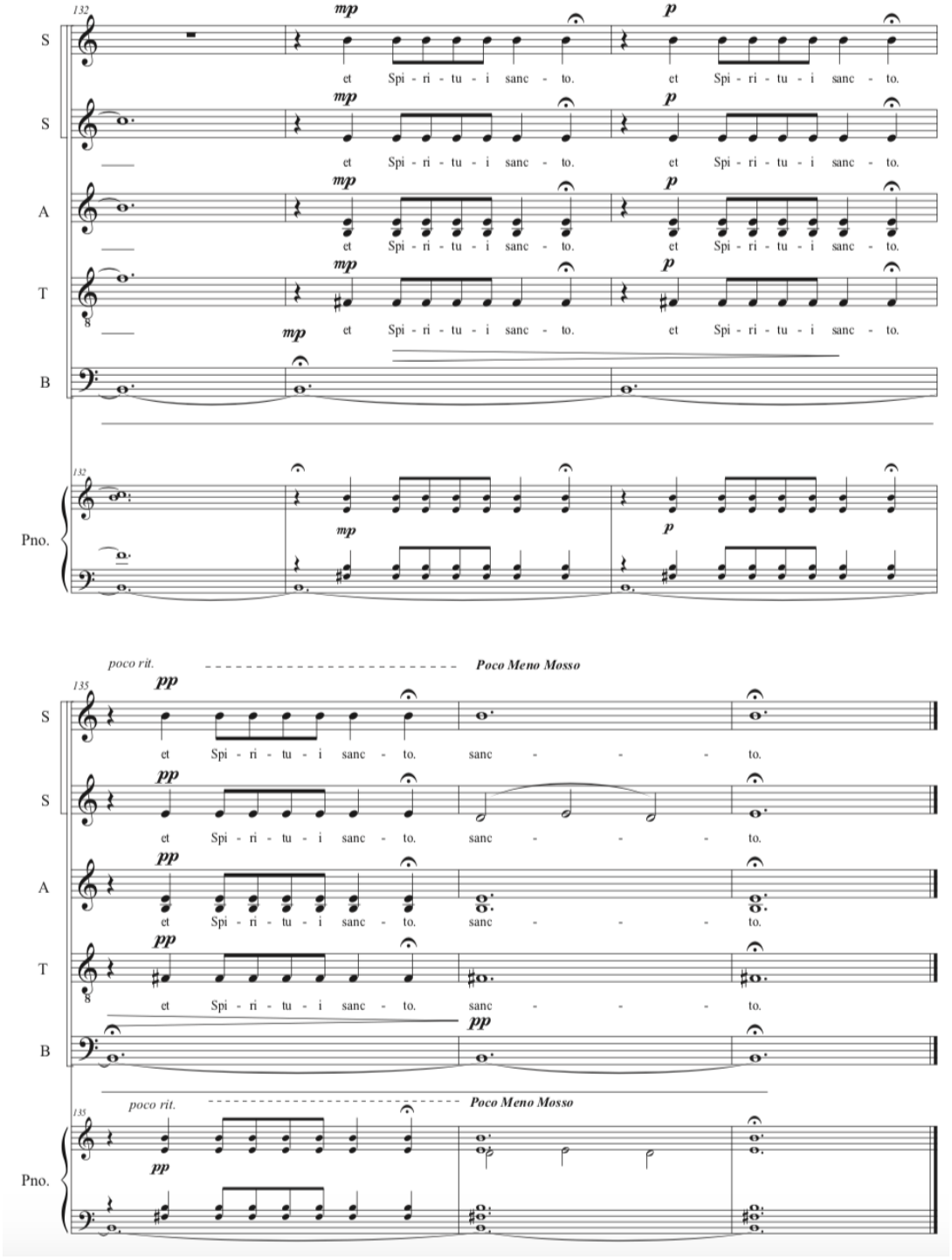


Figure 3.28. *O Vis Aeternitatis*, bb. 132–137.

The notes of the final chord could be deemed a synthesis of the tonic (E) and dominant (B) in E Aeolian, the harmonic basis of the preceding fugue. This ambiguous harmony could be interpreted as expressing the synthesis of the divine and human aspects within the Christian Trinity and the Incarnation, the focal point of Hildegard's text. The syllabic chanting on an unchanged chord recalls the stripped sound of previous sections of the work's verses, unifying its overall thematic and modal outline. The inconclusive final harmony, combined with the homorhythmic litany of text, offers a significant distinction from the exuberance of the previous polyphony, demonstrating Clarke's effective alteration of texture and melody to manifest a change of character, a lingering sense of mystery, and perhaps a bold divergence from traditional, less ambiguous representations of the Holy Trinity.

A similar recitation of text can be observed in the tenor-bass chant in the '*Introit*' of Clarke's *Requiem* (2020), with the same notes rearranged (E–B–F#) and applied in the static homophonic expression of '*exaudi orationem*' ('hear our prayer'; Figure 3.29).[59] Whether this is intentional is uncertain, but it is clear that Clarke has a thorough understanding of the texts that she sets, and seeks to communicate their tone through the musical ideas she conceives. The devout chorale-like expressions of '*et Spiritui sancto*' in *O Vis Aeternitatis*, and '*exaudi orationem*' in '*Introit*', recall the homophonic presentation of '*ora pro nobis*' ('pray for us') in the composer's *Regina Coeli* (2007). The *legato sostenuto* minims, the sopranos' ascending five-note idioms (B–F#; E–B), and the stable harmonic motion in the lower voices evoke a similar tone of reverence in this Marian antiphon, the slow tempo and soft dynamics offering a sharp divergence from the rhythmic vitality of the surrounding sections (bb. 66–70; Figure 3.30).

[59] See Chapter Five for further analysis of Clarke's *Requiem*.
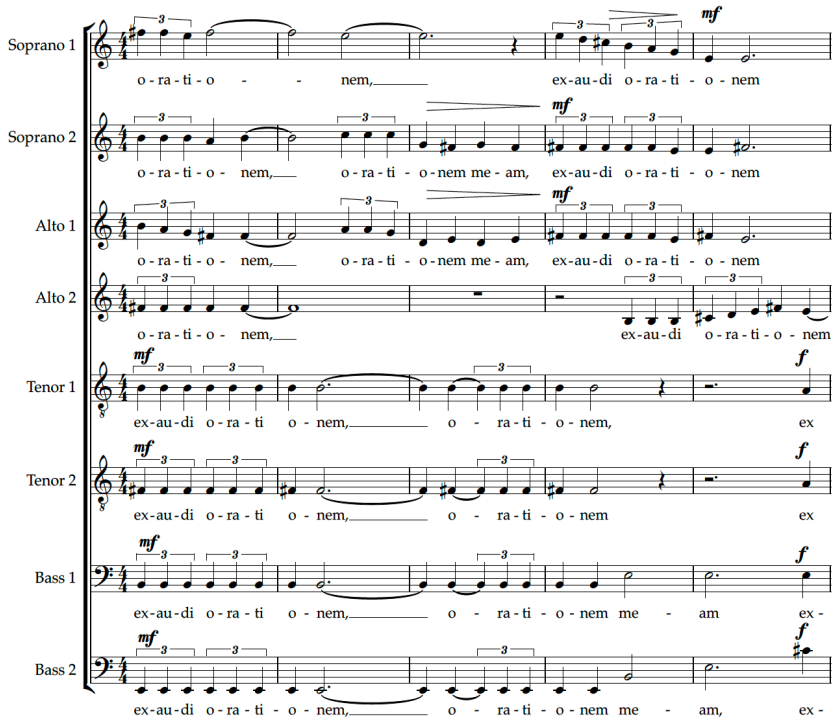


Figure 3.29. '*Introit*', *Requiem* (2020), bb. 44–48.

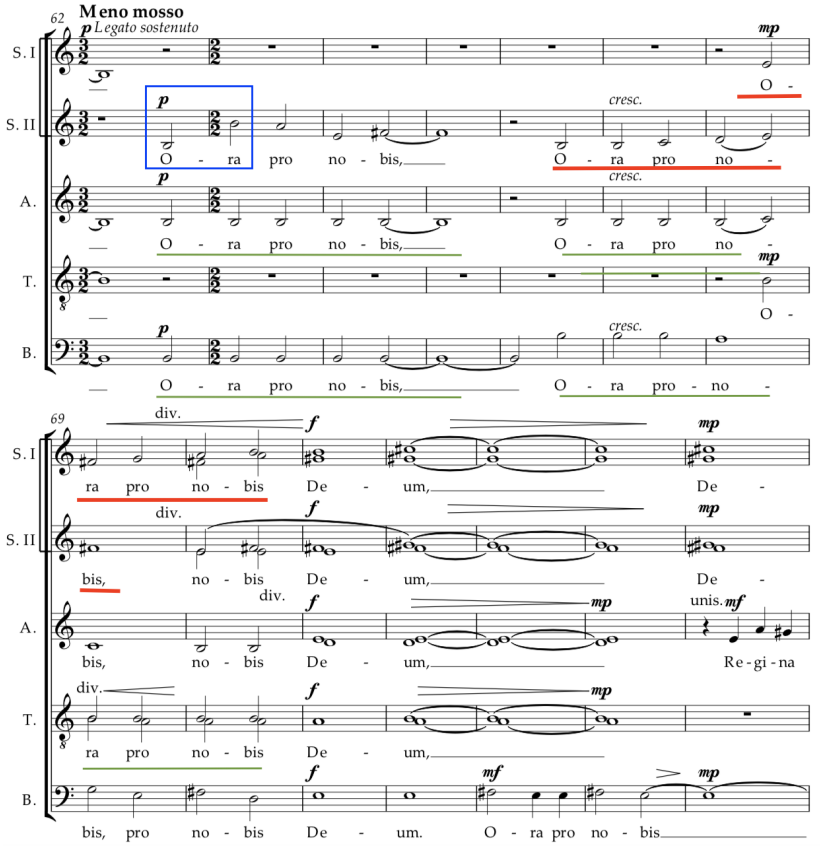


Figure 3.30. *Regina Coeli* (2007), *Choirland*, ed. by Anne Barry and Alan Leech (Dublin: The Contemporary Music Centre, 2012), bb. 62–75.

The rising stepwise trajectory of the sopranos' prayer is not unlike the ascending '*orationem*' motif of the sopranos in '*Introit*' (Figure 3.31), which causes one to question whether Clarke has consciously set these phrases in a homogenous manner due to their similar theme and tone. Although the *piano* '*ora*' in *Regina Coeli* differs from the *fortissimo* exclamation of '*exaudi*' in the first movement of Clarke's *Requiem*, both phrases begin with an octave leap in the soprano parts. The second soprano's octave ascent (B3–B4) on '*ora*' in *Regina Coeli* could be compared to the leap in the first soprano of '*Introit*' (A4–A5), perhaps illustrating praying to a higher power. Although Clarke's compositional language has evolved since the former work, the approach to conveying prayer within sacred texts has remained relatively consistent, as has her skill at underlining significant sections of text through altering musical parameters such as texture, melody, tempo, rhythm, and dynamics.
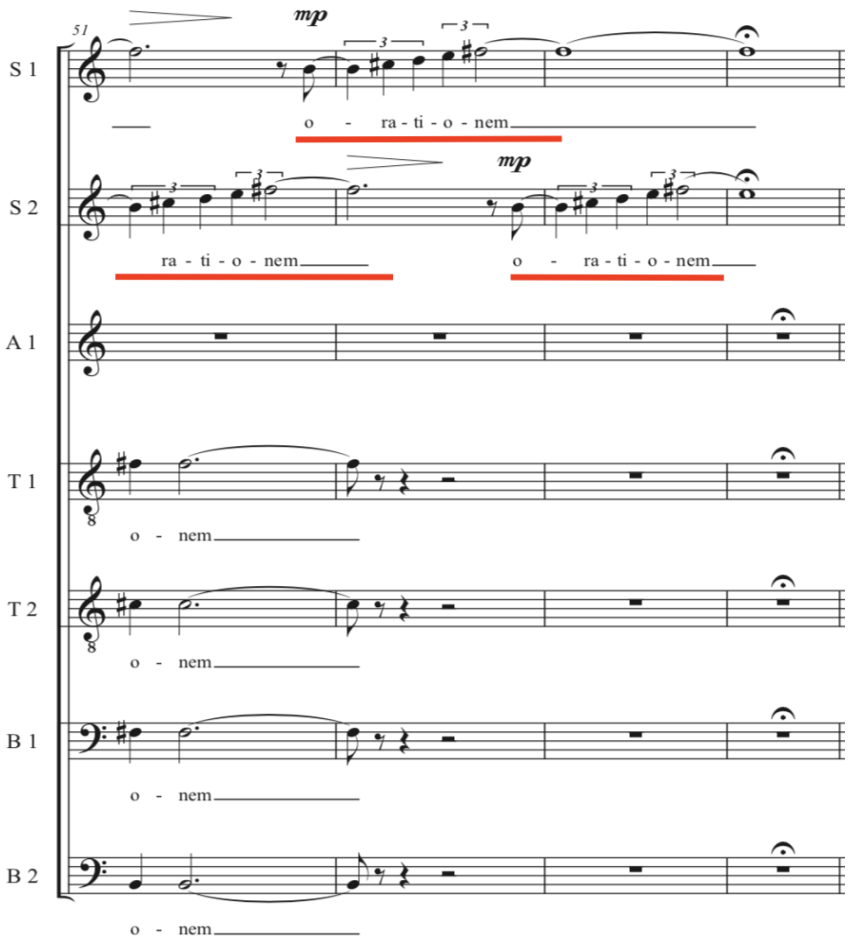


Figure 3.31. '*Introit*', bb. 51–54.

The above analysis highlights the consistent textural and timbral contrasts in Clarke's choral writing, demonstrating both sparse and dense passages throughout a single work. The preceding examples highlight the composer's use of texture to reflect the essence of a text, focusing on either illustrating a phrase's significance, in the case of *Rorate Caeli* and *Navigatio*, or on the emotional weight of the text, as in *Ave Atque Vale* and *O Vis Aeternitatis*. Clarke has noted her desire for audiences 'to have an emotional reaction to a piece of music', thus creating immersive sound worlds that can generate that response.[60] The composer consistently evokes the overriding mood of each text, as well as individual words and phrases, through an effective combination of texture, harmony, timbre, and dynamics. Clarke's diverse approaches to texture highlight her sensitivity to the texts she sets and provide a refreshing insight into the power of choral voices to communicate both the specific events and overriding tone of a text.

Harmonic Language

Clarke's harmonic language does not abide by conventional tonality and the expectation of traditional resolutions. Instead, her music is dominated by modes, striking dissonances, pedal tones, and frequent open and mixed-interval chords, emphasising the avoidance of harmonic conventions and traditional major or minor tonality, and implying the composer's preference for contemporary, often tense, sonorities. In many of her compositions, the complex vertical harmonies often arise from idiomatic, mainly stepwise or repeated horizontal vocal lines, which are frequently layered in expanding contrapuntal textures. Clarke composes a significant amount of choral music for non-professional ensembles, which is reflected in the accessible structure of each part, and the gradual progression to more complex harmonies and textures. The composer remarks how 'when writing for singers, you always have to keep in mind where the pitch will come from [...]. You must write to the capabilities of that particular choir.'[61] This stance is also emphasised by Irish composer Anselm McDonnell (b. 1994), who notes that '[I]n choral music, appropriate voice-leading and the employment of familiar intervals can become steppingstones to lead non-specialist singers to more complex combinations of intervals.'[62]

[60] Clarke in Chamber Choir Ireland, 'Celebrating International Women's Day with composers Áine Mallon and Rhona Clarke' (3:22–3:32).
[61] Clarke, interviewed by Grimes and Ferguson, 'amplify #64' (24:07–24:38).
[62] Anselm McDonnell, 'A Portfolio of Original Compositions' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Queen's University, Belfast, 2020), p. 47.

Clarke's *The Kiss* (2008) exhibits an intricate harmonic fabric imbued with diminished chords built from the octatonic tone set of the voices. This piece was commissioned by Chamber Choir Ireland, allowing for a more complex harmonic language; however, Clarke intended to compose a piece 'which would be challenging but also within the capabilities of a good amateur choir.'[63] Therefore, pitching aids would be a significant factor for voices in a dissonant, polyphonic texture. For example, the phrase 'And with her lips on mine' is echoed across the choral fabric at various intervals, resulting in discordance. Harmonic tension occurs between the sopranos' descending phrase and the bass's rising D diminished broken triad in bar 30, particularly on the second beat, as the first soprano's A conflicts with the basses' A♭ octave. The synthesis of voices in the second half of this bar generates an A♭ major chord with F# and A, implying a polymodal framework (Figure 3.32).
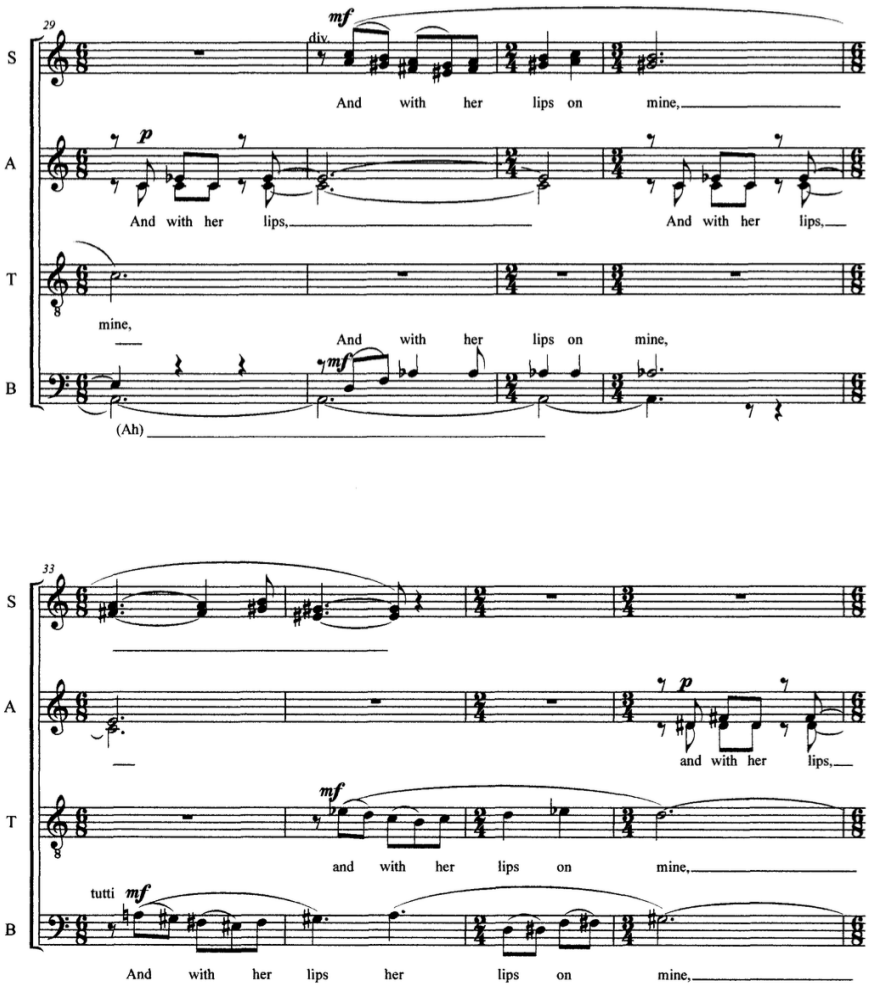


Figure 3.32. *The Kiss*, bb. 29–36.

[63] Clarke, 'The Music – notes by the composer'.

Despite the vertical friction, the incremental movement of the individual voices allows the discordance to be achieved more smoothly. Similarly, the tenor's entry in bar 34 on E♭ conflicts with the first soprano's and bass's G# and second soprano's E#, yet the pitch can be obtained from the first alto's preceding E♭. The second alto's echoing fragment on D# in bar 36 strikes a discord with the tenor's sustained D, maintaining the complex harmonic language throughout this section. However, the repeated tone and minor third undulations of the altos are accessible to most singers, with Clarke demonstrating a consistent awareness of the need to ensure each voice can obtain their pitch from a preceding note in the texture. Her compositional decisions exhibit 'a synthesis of practicality and expressivity', the idiomatic melodic lines enabling the choir to express the mystical character of the poem.[64]

Drones/Pedal Points

The second bass's sustained A♭ in the above section of *The Kiss* (bb. 29–32) demonstrates the effective use of a pedal point, creating a static harmonic backdrop to the active melodic lines. Drones or pedal points are a common feature in Clarke's music, particularly in Latin sacred settings such as *O Vis Aeternitatis* (See Figures 3.13; 3.28), possibly due to the historic association of drones with church music, and their prevalence in medieval organum.[65] The presence of a sustained tone, primarily in the bass line, provides a stable substructure for changing harmonies and textural development. Pedal points also create a reverent atmosphere befitting the text, as is apparent in the '*Ora pro nobis*' section of *Regina Coeli* and a similar segment in *Rorate Caeli* (bb. 30–49). In the latter work, following the lively mixed-metre opening, there is a change to a *meno mosso* tempo, 4/4 time signature, and slower rhythms for the phrase '*et núbes plúant jústum*' ('and let the clouds rain justice'), generating a more subdued tone (Figure 3.33). This aligns with Wallace Berry's statement that rhythm 'undergoes changes with functional consequences for music's intensity scale, playing an essential and telling role in the delineation of processes of growth and decline, climax and subsidence, stability and flux.'[66] The basses adopt an octave C# drone on an open 'ooh' vowel, which is sustained through the modulation from C# minor to G# minor in bar 34, enabling a smooth transition to the new key. The altos' secundal interval (D#–E) in bar 33 is similarly carried

[64] Wilkinson, p. 77.
[65] John Caldwell, *Medieval Music* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1978), p. 114.
[66] Berry, *Structural Functions in Music*, p. 302.

through the modulation, the sustained tones providing stability as the surrounding voices progress through their new melodic phrases.
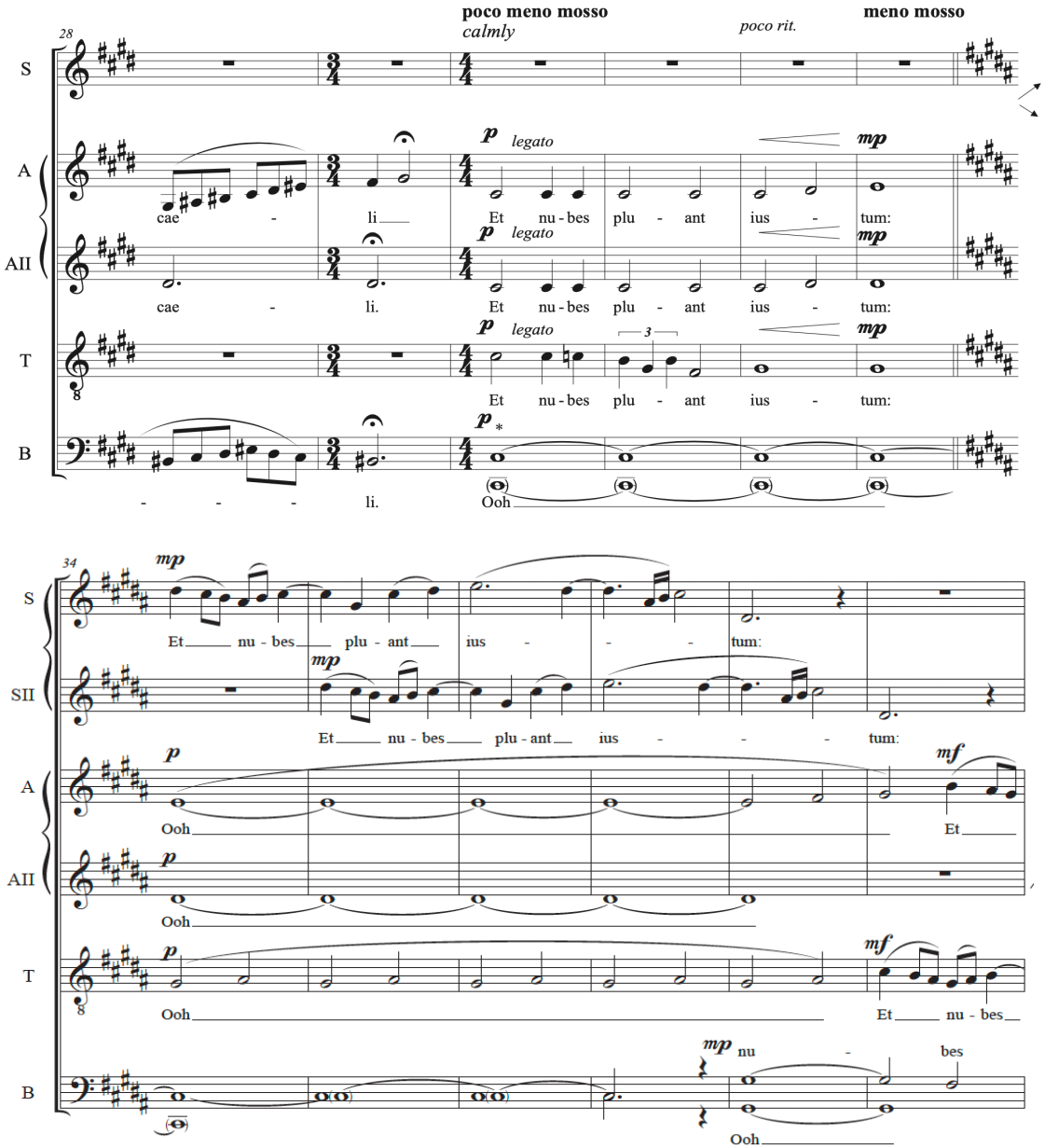


Figure 3.33. *Rorate Caeli*, bb. 28–39.

Clarke's *Salve Regina* is another sacred setting permeated with pedal points in the upper and lower register, achieving stability amidst the interchanging dissonant melodic motifs, and contributing to evoking a gentle, ethereal atmosphere. As well as the upper voices' sustained tone cluster emulating Bartók's String Quartet No. 4 in the opening of the work (See Figure 3.17), a further example of the pedal tone's effect is evident in the tenors' and basses' continuous *pianissimo* chord on the text '*Salve*', anchoring the imitative upper voices' melodic

fragments through the phrase '*Ad te clamamus filii Haevae*' ('To thee do we cry, children of Eve'; bb. 26–33). The secundal intervals between the two bass voices (B♭–C) and three tenors (E♭–F–G) imply a C minor seventh in third inversion with added fourth, and create a dark tone due to the close proximity of notes in the lower register (Figure 3.34). As well as echoing the C minor seventh harmony of the introduction, the tone cluster could be interpreted as Clarke's means of conveying the sorrowful phrase, which focuses on crying to Mary.
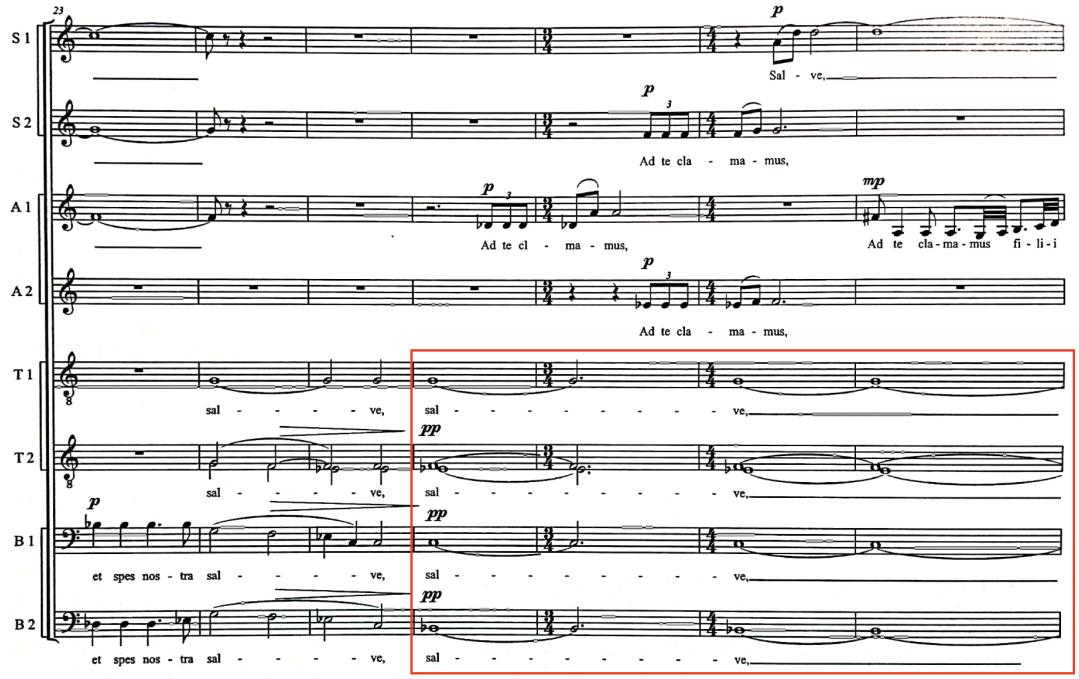


Figure 3.34. *Salve Regina*, bb. 23–29 (pedal points in red).

The tenor-bass chord is sustained for eight bars, which shift between 3/4 and 4/4 to align with the natural expression of Latin text in the upper texture. Similar to the interchanging voices above the bass's drone in *Rorate Caeli*, the sopranos and altos echo each other across the phrase, accelerating to a climax in bar 33 and a subsequent homophonic expression. Several motivic fragments conflict with the lower texture, such as the first alto's F# and second tenor's F (bb. 29–30), and the sopranos' respective E and B against the pedal chord's B♭ and E♭ (bb. 31–33; Figure 3.35), undermining a clear tonality and implying a polymodal framework. The ascending contour of the sopranos and altos' motifs increases the tension of this section and a yearning for resolution. However, the wide distance between the sopranos, tenor, and bass avoids an overt discordant sonority. The unresolved dissonant climax, consisting of chromatically conflicting notes between the higher and lower voices, is abruptly followed by a

crotchet rest, before continuing to the texturally reduced *Piu mosso* section. The application of the respective pedal points provides a sense of stasis beneath the changing harmonies, allowing for the flexible use of chromatic pitches and the fluid exchange of motivic fragments in an evolving texture.
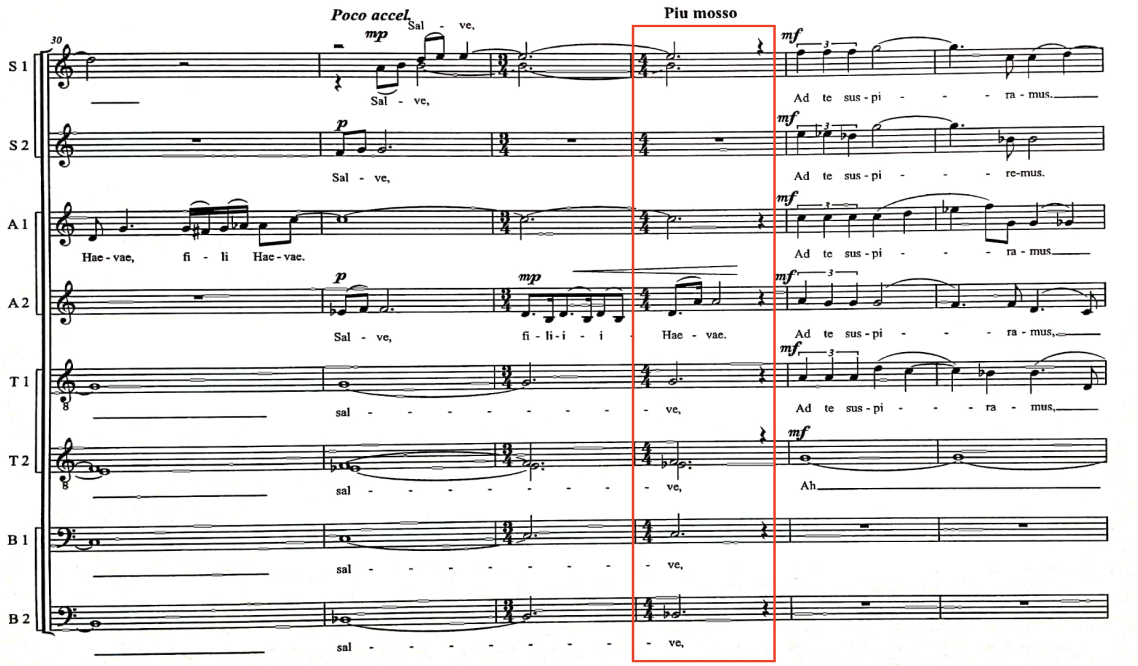


Figure 3.35. *Salve Regina*, bb. 30–35 (climax in red).

It is evident from *Salve Regina* and the other analysed Latin settings that pedal points are characteristic of Clarke's choral writing, contributing significantly to the atmosphere of each work. The use of this harmonic device provides a stable foundation upon which polyphony can develop, with the melodic motifs interweaving fluently above the static tone or sustained homophonic chord, often resulting in dissonance. Furthermore, the pedal points, which predominantly reside in the lower texture, provide timbral balance, creating a clear distinction between the vocal registers' respective ideas. In terms of their tonal function, pedal points allow for a secure transition between modes or keys, as is evident in *Rorate Caeli*. The anchored notes dispel the expectation to resolve dissonance, allowing for a liberal alternation between and synthesis of diatonic tones and their chromatic inflections without being bound by traditional harmonic motion. The discordance that emerges from pedal points is a key aspect of Clarke's compositional voice, with the prevalence of this device crystallising her acknowledgement of its effect in the Medieval and Renaissance eras, and her proclivity for contemporary dissonance.

Secundal Intervals

Certain harmonic intervals can be observed across Clarke's oeuvre, suggesting her preference for particular sonorities — both open and dissonant — and her consideration of the contour of individual lines amidst the vertical harmonic structure. As well as the prevalence of melodic seconds in the composer's writing, harmonic seconds are an important aspect of Clarke's oeuvre, the composer acknowledging her fondness for the tense, clashing sound of the adjacent notes.[67] Secundal dissonance is a key feature of *Epitaph*, dominating the soprano and alto lines. The dissonant adjacent seconds create harmonic tension, their placement in the upper voices reflecting the overtone series, which features close intervals in the higher register. A climactic moment in the piece exhibits all six parts engaging in an accented homorhythmic statement of 'I'll be where loud anthems will always be ringing' in A Aeolian, returning to 8/8 and the original tempo (dotted crotchet = 84; bb. 61–65), following an accelerated section in 6/8. Soprano 2 and tenor present the melodic material while the other voices repeat A or E. Sopranos intone a major second (D–E), the lower voice repeating D, the anomaly in the undefined A chord lacking a third. The dissonance is resolved through the second soprano's stepwise descent to A, before returning to C♮ to complete the A minor chord (Figure 3.36).

[67] Clarke, interview with the author, 10 January 2025.

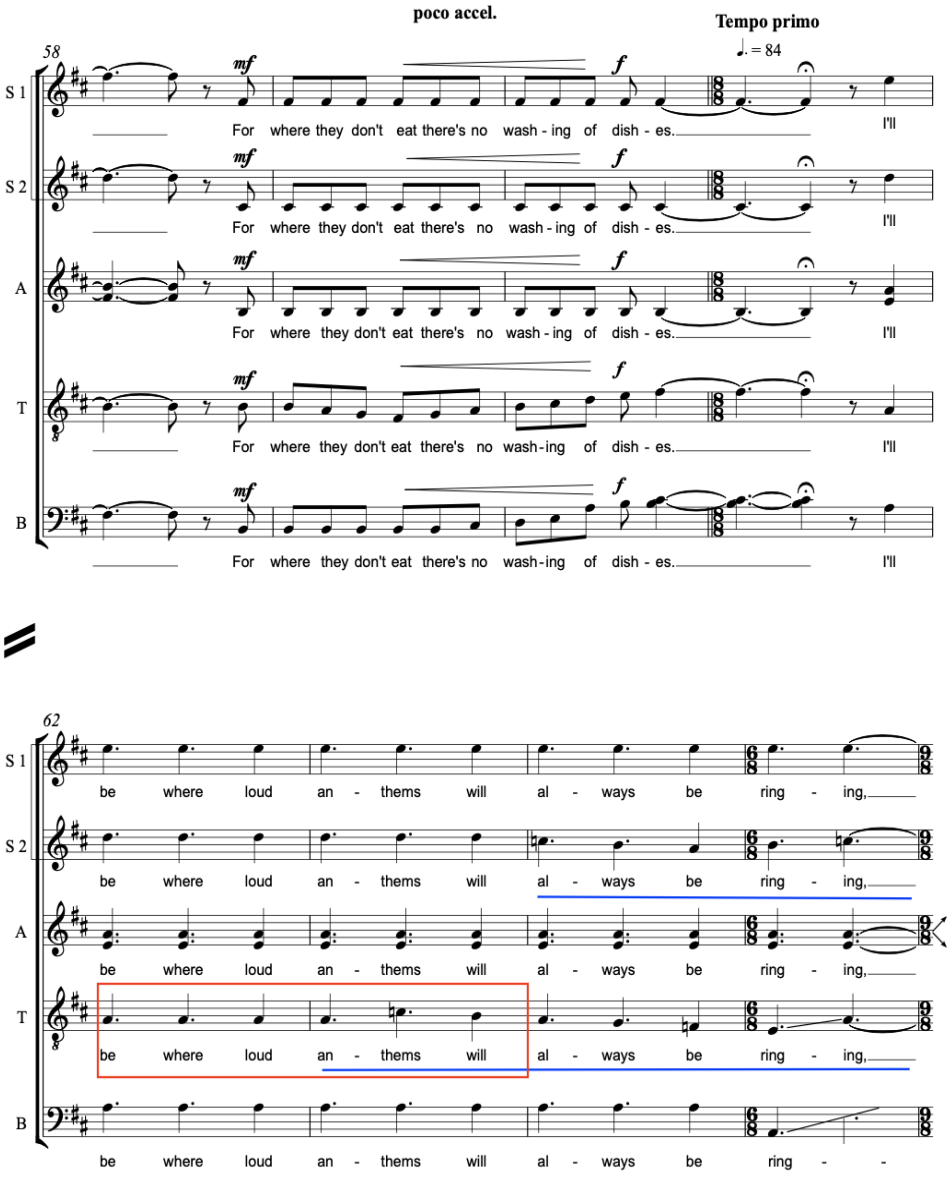


Figure 3.36. *Epitaph*, bb. 58–65 (funeral motif in red; melodic activity in blue).

The tenor, beginning on A, presents a brief fragment of the funeral march motif, ascending a minor third to C, followed by a stepwise descent to E and rising *portamento* return to the tonic. The return to 8/8 strengthens the possibility of the funeral motif's fleeting presence, given the dotted rhythmic pattern's previous association with the quotation. Furthermore, the static adjacent voices allow the motif to be heard, which suggests Clarke's deliberate quotation in this instance, reminding the listener of the woman's death amidst the idealistic notion of a work-free paradise. Ultimately, the dense texture with secundal dissonance has a jarring effect, capturing the thunderous ringing of the anthems in the poem.

The bare texture of the introduction to *Ave Atque Vale* consists primarily of repeated unison notes and secundal dissonances in short phrases, with interest maintained through the contrasting vocal timbres and *Sprechstimme*. G is established as the tonal centre, repeated by the tenor and bass through the '*Ave atque vale*' phrase, interrupted by two-beat rests. According to Clarke, the prevalent punctuation intends to communicate grief and the idea that 'when we are upset, we are short of breath. We can't speak or sing in long phrases'.[68] A minimal but effective change occurs in bar 7 with the tenor's semitone shift to A♭ on '*vale*' ('farewell') creating a two-beat discord before returning to a unison G (Figure 3.37). The A♭ indicates a Phrygian modality and the dissonances to follow, as well as Clarke's practice of writing in modes. Although this may be a coincidence or unconscious decision, it is worth noting that the Phrygian mode was associated with mourning, and 'feelings of anger, indignation and lamentation' in the Renaissance era.[69] This fragmented antiphonal phrase occurs four times between the lower and upper voices, the final presentation in the upper texture concluding with an unresolved minor second, underlining the grief of Catullus (b. 15). As the poem describes the funeral rites, the monotone incantations of text evoke the impression of a ceremony, with the secundal dissonance establishing the 'mournful, desolate' tone that pervades Catullus's elegy.

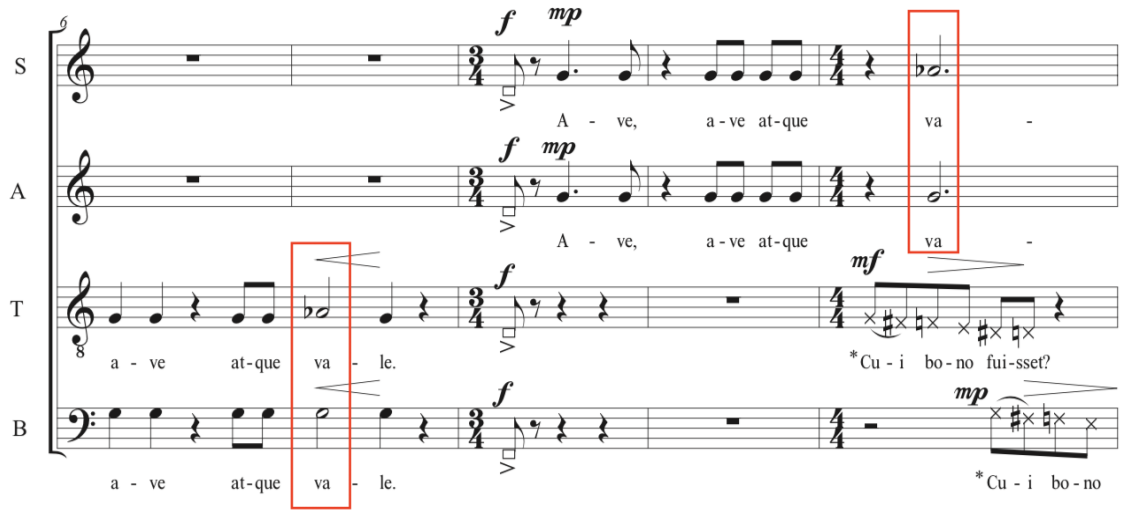


Figure 3.37. *Ave Atque Vale*, bb. 6–10 (secundal dissonance in red).

[68] Rhona Clarke in Mornington Singers, 'Thanks so much to @rhonapclarke', online video recording, Instagram, 20 March 2024 <https://www.instagram.com/p/C4wIrHwsh-2/?hl=en> [accessed 21 March 2024].
[69] Willem Elders, *Symbolic Scores: Studies in the Music of the Renaissance* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), p. 139; Fabrice Fitch, *Renaissance Polyphony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 106.

The above harmonic analysis spotlights significant examples from Clarke's choral oeuvre that demonstrate her compositional style. While the harmonic structure of each work befits the character of the set text — such as the polymodal dissonance of *The Kiss* conveying the poem's mysterious atmosphere, and the harsh dissonance of *Ave Atque Vale* reflecting the grief of Catullus — an overview of each piece exhibits a consistent application of certain harmonies. Her work conveys the influences of past traditions — such as Medieval and Renaissance traits — but does not necessarily sound traditional, instead amalgamating with modern harmonies in carefully expanding textural frameworks that progress with the drama of the text. Clarke's contemporary voice emerges from her consistent use of dissonance, with secundal intervals regularly occurring above the more open harmonies of the lower voices, creating a harsh tone, which is not always resolved. As *Epitaph* demonstrates, climactic moments are approached through increased harmonic density, with tone clusters or *fortissimo* wide-ranging discords reserved for particularly dramatic moments in a text. While the application of mixed-interval chords and unconventional harmonic progressions illustrates Clarke's contemporary characteristics, her regular use of modes, drones, and open harmonies convey her fondness for the techniques of past musical eras. Ultimately, Clarke's diverse harmonic palette of archaic and modern techniques results in communicative sound worlds that seek to engage audiences and have contributed to her established reputation as 'an original and integer composer'.[70]

Timbral exploration

Clarke's synthesis of singing, spoken text, and *glissandi* in her choral output post-2014 has contributed to a distinctive sound that creates an unsettling atmosphere in works such as *Ave Atque Vale* and *O Vis Aeternitatis*, and a sense of mystery in *Requiem* and *Navigatio*. The contrasting choral sounds reflect her desire to 'create something that I have not heard before, either as a listener or as a composer.'[71] Irish contemporaries such as Siobhán Cleary, Ben Hanlon, and Seán Doherty, as well as international composers such as Jaako Mäntyjärvi, Jake Runestad, and Caroline Shaw regularly incorporate extended vocal techniques into their choral works, continuing to diversify choral ensembles' performances. These contemporary devices are used in a variety of ways, expanding composers' creative and expressive toolkits while

[70] Axel Klein, 'Rhona Clarke: Stepping out of the Shadow', in *A Different Game*, The Fidelio Trio (Divine Arts Recording Group, MSV 28561, 2017), para 2.
[71] Clarke in Chamber Choir Ireland, 'Celebrating International Women's Day with composers Áine Mallon and Rhona Clarke' (3:33–3:40).

evoking the atmosphere of the texts that they set. Following brief forays into the use of extended techniques in *Gloria* (1989) and *A Song for St Cecilia's Day* (1991), Clarke began to integrate these devices consistently into her choral language after her instrumental work *SHIFT* (2013), which experimented with extending the parameters of instruments' sounds, and contrasting orchestral colours as 'blocks of sound'.[72] As Clarke regularly composes for choirs of a high technical and expressive standard, such as Resurgam, and State Choir LATVIJA, opportunities to augment the timbral palette and textural complexity within her music are extensive. However, Clarke's judicious compositional decisions, particularly in integrating extended techniques, render her works accessible across a range of technical levels.

In a 2014 interview, Clarke observed how '[A] 'shift' in language and style has emerged gradually in my own work resulting from, amongst other things, a return to electro-acoustic processes.'[73] Since 2009, she has collaborated with visual artist Marie Hanlon on 'short experimental films with music, live music with visual projections and joint exhibitions', highlighting her versatility as a composer and her interest in diverse sonorities.[74] Reflecting on the effect of the collaborative process on her approach to writing music for a concert audience, Clarke states that 'there is something bolder and more visceral about works such as *A Different Game* [2016] and *Smiling like that…* [2014]', and contemplates whether this stylistic development could be 'a matter of becoming older, more experienced and more free'.[75] The visceral sonorities of these identified works extend to Clarke's choral repertoire from around 2016, as evidenced in pieces such as *Ave Atque Vale and O Vis Aeternitatis*.

Clarke also acknowledges her attraction to 'visual and musical works, which are bold and have confident strokes', seeking to achieve this in her own musical language.[76] Having previously been reluctant to explore extended techniques in her choral settings, with minimal use of *Sprechstimme* only evident in *A Song for St Cecilia's Day*, Clarke began to combine 'more speech patterns [...], almost half-sung patterns' with conventional vocals to enhance the overall timbre in pieces such as *Ave Atque Vale* and *It Matters* (2021).[77] As well as noting how

[72] Rhona Clarke, 'Catching Fire', *RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra Horizons Contemporary Music Series 2014* <https://www.rte.ie/documents/orchestras/14-01-14-rhona-clarke.pdf> [accessed 15 January 2024].
[73] Clarke, 'Catching Fire'.
[74] 'About', *Rhona Clarke* <https://www.rhonaclarke.com/about/> [accessed 28 May 2025]. These works include *Dic Tat* (2014), *Everything We See* (2014), and *Water Table* (2018, revised 2021).
[75] Rhona Clarke, 'Transcending Conventional Habits: Music and the Collaborative Process in Joint Works', in *Women and Music in Ireland*, ed. by Laura Watson, Ita Beausang, and Jennifer O'Connor-Madsen, Irish Musical Studies, 13, series editors Lorraine Byrne Bodley and Harry White (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2022), pp. 182–190 (p. 190). Dates of works added by this author.
[76] Clarke, 'Catching Fire'.
[77] Clarke, interviewed by Grimes and Ferguson, 'amplify #64' (22:40–22:52).

her combination of different sounds has coincided with a greater confidence in her work as she has become older,[78] Clarke further explains: 'my thoughts on making something very definitely sound 'of now' might have triggered the use of extended techniques from [...] 2016'.[79] Her synthesis of diverse timbres and techniques has resulted in innovative sound worlds that effectively capture the tone of the set texts and demonstrate her distinct compositional voice.

Sprechstimme

A Song for St Cecilia's Day (1991) was one of the first choral works by Clarke to utilise extended vocal techniques, taking the form of *Sprechstimme* for the phrase 'Then cold and hot and moist and dry'. Unlike her later works, the composer does not provide instructions on how to perform the text with cross-shaped notation; however, the placement of the notes on different lines of the stave indicate the half-sung/half-spoken interpretation that is common in her later music. The alto and soprano engage in a quasi-imitative *Sprechstimme* dialogue, returning to a sung B tone on the word 'dry' at the end of their respective phrases (bb. 70–75; Figure 3.38). The tenor and bass's unison B expands to a major second, creating dissonance beneath the half-sung dialogue for two bars, before the bass continues alone on A until bar 74. Following the soprano's phrase and alto's return to conventional singing, there is a moment of spoken text in the bass's expression of 'moist and dry' (bb. 76–77), before regular homophonic singing resumes.

[78] Clarke in 'Rhona Clarke's *Sempiternam*' (3:37–4:34).
[79] Clarke, interview with the author, 10 January 2025.
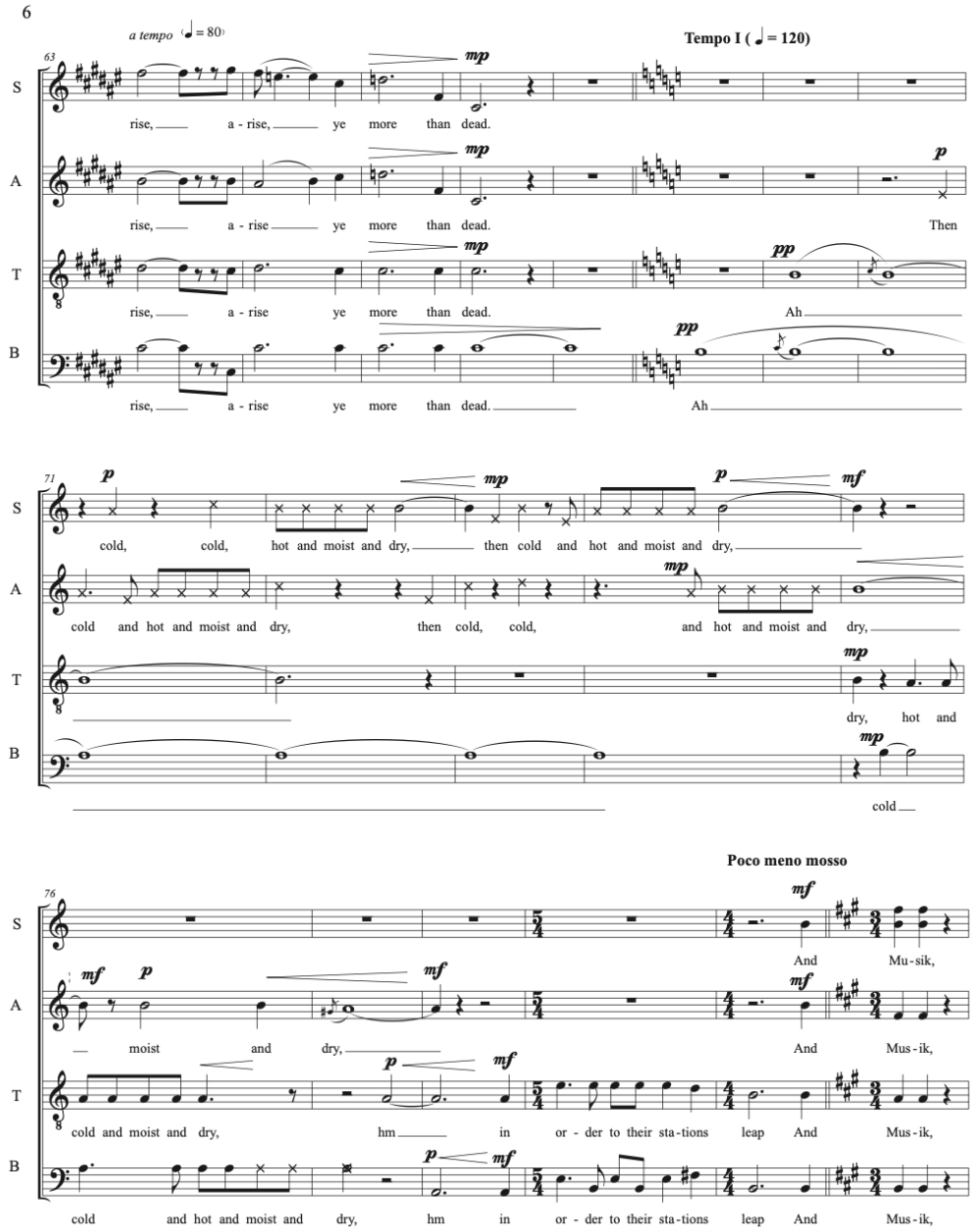


Figure 3.38. *A Song for St Cecilia's Day* (1991), bb. 63–81.

It is unclear why Clarke chose to integrate these contemporary sounds into this work, but it could be posited that the poem's focus on choosing from 'all the compass of the notes', and the phrase's description of nature rising from beneath the atoms warranted a mysterious sound. The gradual transition from *Sprechstimme* to a sung tone at the end of the upper voices' phrases possibly seeks to reflect the evolution of music, from primitive sounds to the diapason. *A Song for St Cecilia's Day* was included in Clarke's PhD portfolio of electroacoustic music; she notes how she became 'more aware of the importance of timbre and texture in acoustic composition, and of the dominance and recessiveness of a sound in relation to others' during this period

(1990–1996).[80] It is likely that this timbral and textural awareness transferred to her choral music at that time, with the composer wishing to explore alternative sounds and their effect through the voice. Clarke would not use *Sprechstimme* again until *Ave Atque Vale* (2017), with *glissandi* and body percussion also explored in *The Old Woman* (2016). She explains that she 'tended to shy away from these so-called extended techniques', possibly due to a lack of confidence in her compositional voice in her early career.[81] An overview of her output since 2016 demonstrates how the composer has embraced these contemporary sounds, which have arguably become a significant 'fingerprint' in her music. As Robert Pascall remarks, 'the personal styles of great composers are hardly ever static; such a composer learns from himself and is constantly adding to his usable past.'[82]

The cross-headed notation within Clarke's later choral work alternates between repeated tones and descending chromatic fragments, which should be 'varied [...] as per natural speech inflections'.[83] *Sprechstimme*, *glissandi*, and foot stamps play a pivotal role in *Ave Atque Vale*, enhancing the harrowing atmosphere and communication of Catullus's grief. The rhetorical question '*Qui bono fuisset?*' ('For whose benefit?') — included by Clarke herself — is set as descending chromatic *Sprechstimme* throughout this piece, which, according to the composer, 'serve[s] to question the reason for the untimely death of a soldier of ancient Rome and indeed, all acts of war.'[84] Peter Sacks remarks how the use of questioning in an elegy, often marked by anger and repetition, served as 'a voicing of protest', impugning others and deflecting feelings of guilt experienced by the mourner.[85] The question's three appearances (bb. 10–11; 24–25; 47) — chromatically descending from G to D — coincide with specific connotations of death, evoking a feeling of indignation towards dying on a battlefield (Figure 3.39). Clarke also sets fragments of the elegiac text as half-sung/half-spoken tones, which predominantly echo their sung counterparts or recite the text alongside pedal tones, varying the timbral framework.

[80] Rhona Clarke, 'A Portfolio of Compositions' (unpublished PhD dissertation, The Queen's University of Belfast, 1996), p. x.
[81] Clarke in 'Rhona Clarke's *Sempiternam*' (3:19–3:35).
[82] Robert Pascall, 'Style', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.27041> [accessed 18 September 2023].
[83] Clarke, 'Performance notes', *Ave Atque Vale* (2017); Clarke, 'Performance notes', *O Vis Aeternitatis*, p. iii. Similar instructions are outlined in the performance notes of *Requiem* and *Navigatio*.
[84] Clarke, 'The Music – notes by the composer'.
[85] Sacks, *The English Elegy*, pp. 22–23.

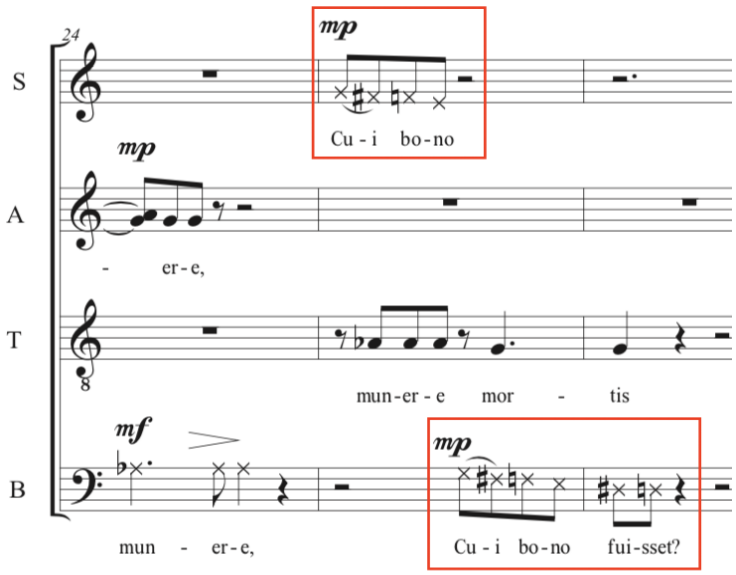


Figure 3.39. *Ave Atque Vale*, bb. 24–26 (*Spechstimme* in red).

While *Sprechstimme* enhances the elegy's funereal atmosphere, the similar use of this technique in *O Vis Aeternitatis* betrays a different character, revealing Clarke's versatile approach to text setting. *Sprechstimme* echoes of recitative-like phrases dominate the barren textural moments of the work, although not to the same extent as in *Ave Atque Vale*. It is more difficult to discern why Clarke has used these extended techniques in relation to the text, and it is quite possible that they are used solely to vary the overall timbre of the work. As *O Vis Aeternitatis* was one of the first choral works Clarke composed after *Ave Atque Vale*, the inclusion of *Sprechstimme* appears to be a further exploration of vocal timbre and a possible attempt to establish the half-sung/half-spoken palette as an integral fingerprint in her compositional language. This impression is reinforced by the inclusion of extended techniques in *Requiem* and *It Matters*, both of which were composed in the same period as *O Vis Aeternitatis*.

An effective use of aleatoric *Sprechstimme* in *O Vis Aeternitatis* occurs in the basses' expression of '*sine vinculo peccati*' ('without the chains of sin', bb. 81–83). The exposed tenor-bass texture occurs after a homophonic SATB expression of the same text, offering a distinct contrast in timbre and textural density. As is the case with Clarke's orchestral work *SHIFT*, '[T]he concentration is on blocks of sound' and opposites, which is apparent across the choral piece.[86] While the tenor undulates between E and D in crotchet triplets, the basses speak the words at 'individual entries and durations', the pitch direction and intensity indicated by a

[86] Clarke, 'Catching Fire'.

dense triangular graphic (Figure 3.40). As is common with sectional conclusions in the work, Clarke has reduced the texture and dynamics, closing with a fermata. This ending allows the spoken text to resound before the return of the refrain's more structured, yet initially bare, texture of a unison E and *Sprechstimme*. The contrasting timbres and independent expression of text at the end of this verse effectively convey one uninhibited by the bondage of sin, the tenor and bass voicing likely representing the figure of Jesus. The prolonged rest that follows the spoken text also allows the voices to echo before proceeding to the new phrase, creating a distinction between the verse and response. The use of surging collective speech at individual *tempi* for '*sine vinculo peccati*' could be interpreted as the sound of chains, and then those chains falling away (*mf* reducing rapidly to *pp*), thus freeing all from sin ('*omnia liberavit*'). Clarke reserves this swelling aleatoric spoken text, solely in the lowest voices, for this literal and significant moment of expression.

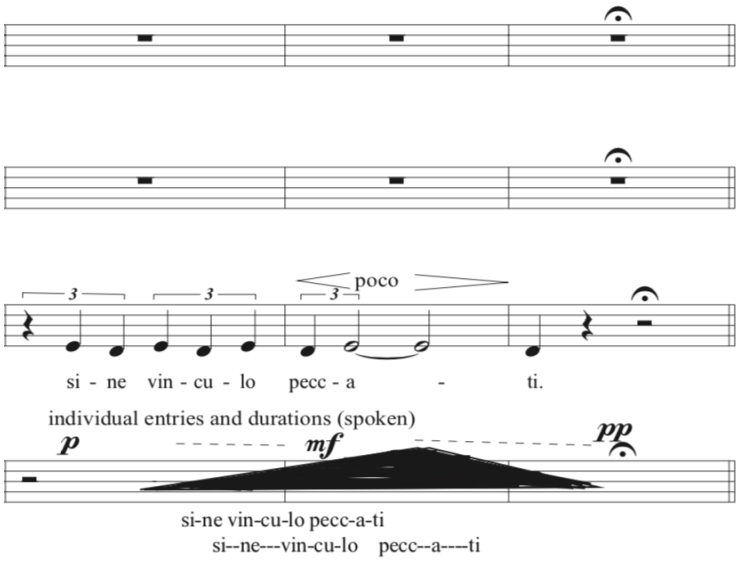


Figure 3.40. *O Vis Aeternitatis*, bb. 81–83.

Foot stamps and Glissandi

While used less frequently, body percussion, particularly foot stamps, also entered Clarke's choral writing around 2016, further indicating a shift in her compositional language. As well as integrating *Sprechstimme* within *Ave Atque Vale*, foot stamps play a key role in the expression of Catullus's grief. An accented *forte* foot stamp opens the work, shocking the listener and establishing a desolate tone. Clarke explains how the stamp is 'an expression of

violence […] the violence of the emotion rather than a physical violence.'[87] The final foot stamp occurs at the music's climax (b. 80), after the *fortissimo* homophonic declamation of '*in perpetuam*' ('for eternity'), which is followed by a bar of silence, allowing the percussive sound to reverberate (Figure 3.41). The inclusion of body percussion has a dramatic effect and, in Clarke's words, is 'like a punch'.[88] It is notable that foot stamps also occur, albeit more actively, as rhythmic accompaniment to the open fifth (B–F#) ostinato on 'skin and bone' in *The Old Woman*, which also dwells on the theme of death, but in a more comical manner (Figure 3.42). According to Clarke, 'In *The Old Woman*, it's [body percussion] a fun aspect and in *Ave Atque Vale* it's a shock aspect.'[89] Although their precise function differs according to the expressive context of the respective pieces, foot stamps elicit a direct and ominous effect in both *Ave Atque Vale* and *The Old Woman*, immediately capturing the listener's attention.
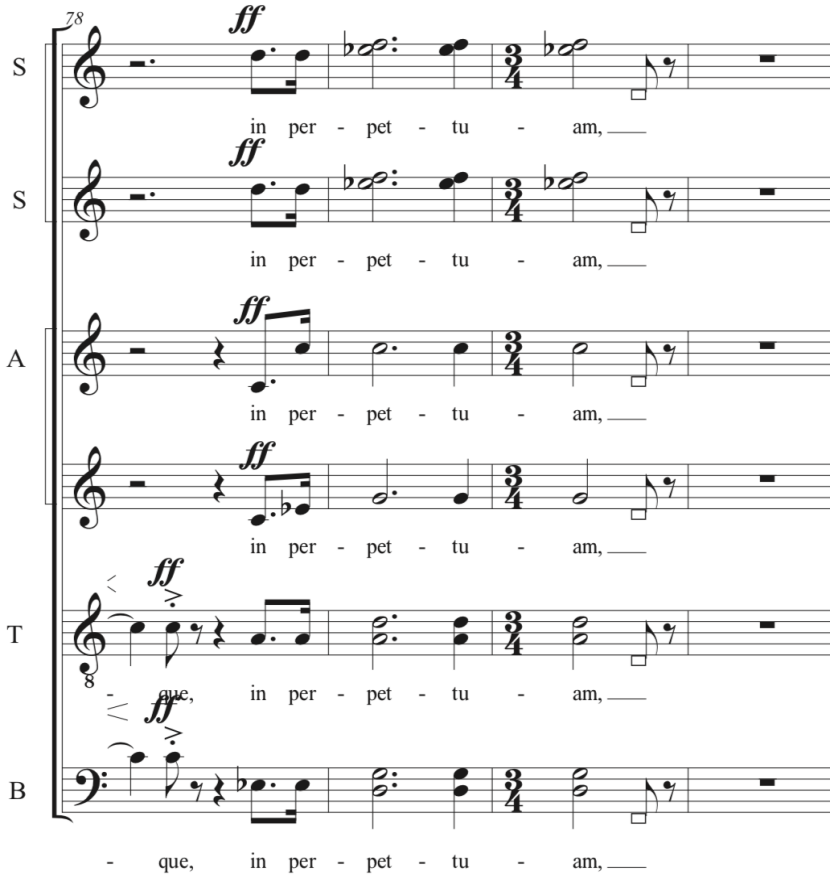


Figure 3.41. *Ave Atque Vale*, bb. 78–81 (foot stamp as square-headed notation).

[87] Clarke, interview with the author, 10 January 2025.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.

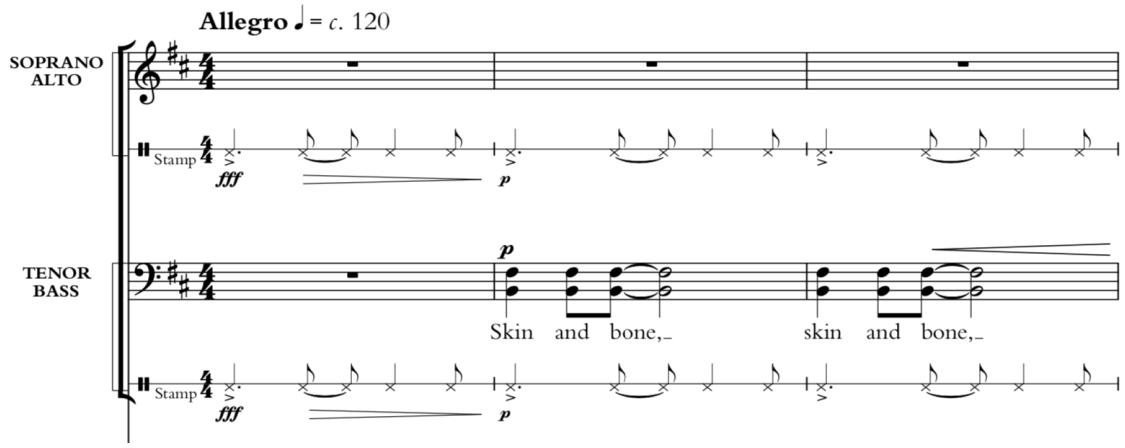


Figure 3.42. *The Old Woman*, bb. 1–3.

Extended techniques are also a significant feature in the climax of *Ave Atque Vale*, the *fortississimo* discord on the first syllable of '*frater*' ('brother') descending via *glissandi* across the upper texture (bb. 83–89; Figure 3.43). The composer explains that this chord, 'the most dissonant' in the piece, represents 'something that is like a stab to the heart', the final outpouring of grief.[90] The sopranos' and altos' falling *glissandi* embody Catullus's anguish, descending *poco ritardando* while diminishing in volume at a controlled rate, reaching a unified conclusion on G, the tonal centre. Beneath the descending cloud of *glissandi*, basses sing fragmented G octaves on '*ave atque*', while tenors alternate between G and the minor second G–A♭ on '*frater*', recalling the introduction. The tenor concludes the *glissando* motion to D, forming a *pianissimo* open fifth with the bass's G on '*vale*' in the final bar. This stark *finale* conveys the emptiness felt by Catullus, yet its inconclusive quality suggests the eternal nature of his 'Hail and farewell'.

[90] Clarke in Mornington Singers, 'Thanks so much to @rhonapclarke', online video recording, Instagram.
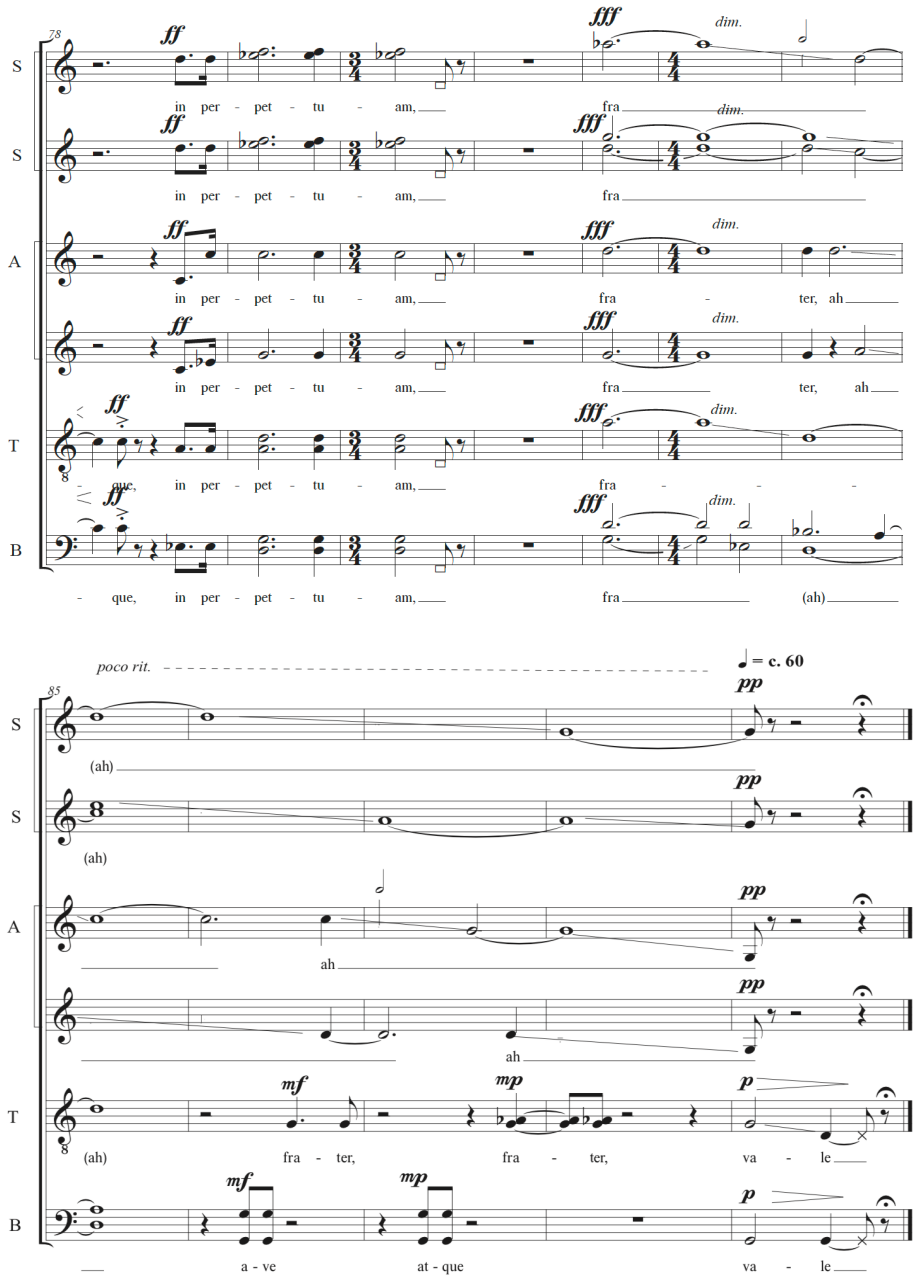


Figure 3.43. *Ave Atque Vale*, bb. 78–89.

The Old Woman presents a similar conclusion of *glissandi* across the texture as the woman, who has exclaimed that she is 'not yet dead', is warned by the priest that she 'will be soon'. However, unlike the more reserved, conclusive destination of *Ave Atque Vale*, all voices advance to the highest or lowest notes possible at an accelerated tempo, ending indeterminately (bb. 109–114; Figure 3.44). Following Clarke's characteristic open B chord with added fourth (B–E–F#) — the secundal dissonance in the upper voices supported by the octave intervals of the lower voices — all parts move via *glissandi* at a controlled rate, maintaining some element of harmonic order around B minor as the tempo accelerates. As the foot stamps return across

the parts and the dynamics surge to *fortissimo*, the upper voices ascend more liberally to their highest possible notes, while the tenor and bass fall to the depths of their register, creating a thrilling conclusion and encapsulating the priest's warning of the woman's impending demise. Given the more shocking premonition of death in *The Old Woman*, as opposed to the grieving tone of *Ave Atque Vale*, this chaotic finale is suitable for the dramatic portrayal of the narrative.

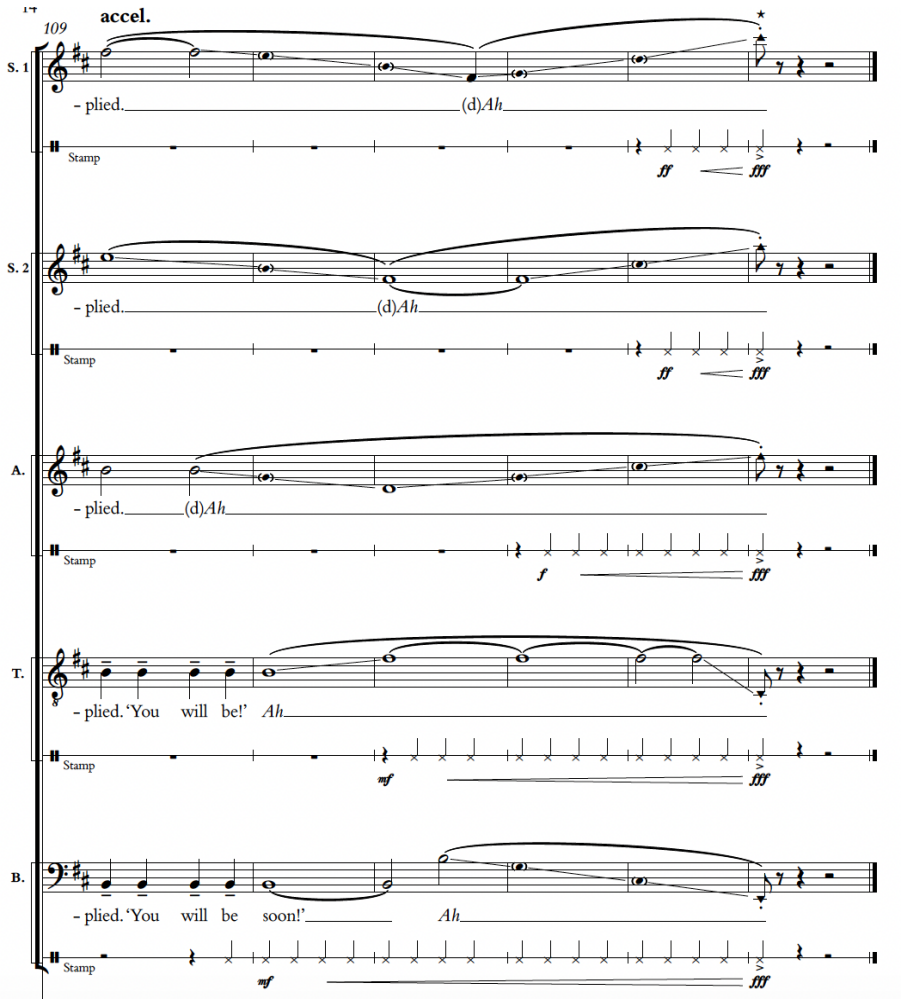


Figure 3.44. *The Old Woman*, bb. 109–114.

It can be posited that Clarke's extended techniques are effective in conveying specific phrases and contributing to the atmosphere of the works, as well as diversifying the overall sound and timbral framework of each piece. The examples explored here also reveal *glissandi* and *Sprechstimme* as fingerprints within her work since 2016, which leads to an expectation that they will appear in her future choral compositions. Clarke's more consistent use of these techniques since 2016 demonstrates a mature and confident compositional voice, and a desire to create bolder sounds in her music. The diverse themes of the pieces in which the techniques

occur could reflect the composer's attempt to re-use particular timbres and devices in different settings, to demonstrate their effect in conveying various moods and inducing different emotional reactions from the listener. The sound that emerges from the harmonic, textural, and timbral parameters in the aforementioned works is striking, strongly communicating the distinctiveness of Clarke's choral style. The presence of these extended techniques contributes to identifying the voice of the composer and her specific compositional sound, which could be Clarke's intention, as well as communicating the mood of the texts she sets. As Henry Fogel notes in his review of Clarke's *Sempiternam* album, her works 'are all different yet all clearly from the pen of the same composer.'[91]

Conclusion

Rhona Clarke's music exhibits a distinctive voice that has continued to develop over forty years, demonstrating her openness to new compositional ideas and utilising contemporary techniques in an individual manner, while also paying homage to past traditions within her text settings. The stylistic elements across the melodic, textural, harmonic, and timbral frameworks combine in a synergistic manner to create a coherent representation of the textual form and character of each of the works, the majority of which are through-composed. On the surface, Clarke's melodic motifs, rhythmic vitality, and manipulation of existing music contribute to painting individual phrases and encapsulating the overall themes of works such as *The Old Woman* and *Epitaph*, while also demonstrating her idiomatic vocal writing. Beyond their particular sonic or expressive effect, techniques such as rising scales and melodic oscillations play a significant role in the broader harmonic palette and textural fabric of pieces, allowing Clarke to unify distinct sections within the overall musical form, as seen, for example, in *Rorate Caeli* and 'Multitasking'.

The composer's organisation of texture in through-composed works like *Ave Atque Vale* and *Navigatio* indicates her careful consideration of the poems' formal structures and of the key ideas within each text, as well as significant narrative and expressive moments. While *Ave Atque Vale* primarily presents a barren texture of dissonant sonorities — conveying the overriding theme of mourning — the music consistently develops in tension through the ascending melodic trajectory, blending of distinct timbres, and increasing dynamics,

[91] Henry Fogel, 'Fanfare Review of *Sempiternam*', *Métier Records* (n.d.) <https://metierrecords.com/review/sempiternam-msv-28614-fanfare-review-1/> [accessed 13 May 2026].

culminating in the dramatic outpouring of grief and anger in the final section. Similarly, the rising melismatic motifs through the texture of *Navigatio* engender a tranquil illustration of the main image of St Brendan at sea. However, Clarke employs a complete shift to homophony in tandem with judicious voice leading to enhance the clarity of Brendan's words and the sense of reverence when the saint speaks directly to his followers. The comparable homophonic sections built on stepwise voice leading and chant-like melodies in the prayerful sections of *O Vis Aeternitatis* and *Regina Coeli* underline how her stylistic traits are used to similar effect across works, cohesively communicating the overall form and character of the texts.

Clarke's distinctive harmonic palette of subtle dissonances and open and mixed-interval chords within diverse textural structures immerses listeners in her striking sound worlds, communicating the essence of the texts she sets. The astute horizontal approach to discordant harmonies illuminates her idiomatic vocal writing and consideration of the melodic-harmonic relations within the broader texture and structure. The composer's proclivity for combining contemporary secundal dissonances with the more ancient technique of drones points to her desire to create new sonorities while acknowledging tradition. Within specific works, such as *Salve Regina* and *Rorate Caeli*, these distinct harmonic devices coalesce to engender tension, lead to a change in tonality, or indicate a new section within the overall form. In such cases, the sustained drones enable a fluid use of dissonance and chromatic alterations, supporting a smooth transition to new material.

In terms of Clarke's timbral palette, the regular integration of extended vocal techniques such as *Sprechstimme* and *glissandi* into her choral works post-2016 exhibits a shift in her style, and portrays her penchant for exploring distinct timbres and conveying the visceral quality of texts such as *Ave Atque Vale* and *O Vis Aeternitatis*, while also demonstrating her versatile use of techniques from her instrumental and electroacoustic output. As Barbara Lamont asserts, '[D]uring a time when so much choral music sounds alike, it is rare to find a composer whose work offers something novel and innovative'.[92] Clarke consistently captures the form and character of texts and responds to the needs of each choir through her favoured melodic, harmonic, textural, and timbral techniques, their combined effect communicating her deep understanding of choral writing and of compositional tradition, while always expressing her own unique style.

[92] Lamont, p. 41.

Chapter 4: The Compositional Style of Eoghan Desmond

Introduction

Eoghan Desmond's choral output demonstrates a sensitivity to writing idiomatically for the voice, as well as a desire to convey the character and meaning of each text through the formal structure of his music and the application of particular compositional devices, both conservative and innovative. Desmond's experience as a professional bass-baritone within the cathedral choral tradition, as well as with Chamber Choir Ireland, has significantly influenced his compositions, exposing him to a wealth of historical and contemporary repertoire across sacred and secular themes, and nurturing his approach to vocal writing and text setting.[1] His settings of predominantly English religious texts exhibit a strong connection to choral music of the past: their modal palettes, intricate polyphony, and symbolism demonstrate a desire to continue the rich tradition of sacred composition into the present day. This practice reflects Scottish composer James MacMillan's (b. 1959) vision of rooting oneself 'in something very deep culturally and spiritually'.[2] Although his sacred output for liturgical and concert purposes is more extensive, Desmond has also produced a substantial amount of secular music, setting nursery rhymes, and texts of love and nature. His attentive consideration of each text's essence is illustrated in his synthesis of past and contemporary musical devices at both the melodic, and overarching textural and harmonic levels, evoking the character of each piece and revealing the composer's narrative instinct. His expanding choral output demonstrates an evolving compositional voice, moving through exploratory phases to an idiom that exhibits greater subtlety in the communication of the set texts.

Desmond has characterised his style as being 'quite varied' and responsive to the diverse circumstances of the text, context, and commission.[3] According to the composer, 'there is a huge difference between writing a piece for a church service and writing a piece for a concert. That goes both to structure and […] to the musical language' used.[4] Where certain sacred works are perhaps more conservative in nature, and follow the verse-response form of prayer, Desmond's *Mother Goose's Melodies* (2014) and *More Mother Goose's Melodies* (2016) — which were influenced by his performance of modern repertoire with Chamber Choir

[1] 'Bio', *Eoghan Desmond* <https://www.eoghandesmond.com/about> [accessed 3 March 2025].
[2] James MacMillan, 'God, Theology and Music', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 81, No. 948 (2000), 16–26 (p. 17) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43250342> [accessed 18 December 2023].
[3] Eoghan Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[4] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.

Ireland — are broadly through-composed and illustrate an exploration of extended vocal techniques, complex harmonies, and playing with the audience's expectations, moving beyond the orthodox.[5] It could be argued that Desmond has greater liberty when setting secular texts, his compositional palette uninhibited by factors such as the practicalities of performance in a Christian service, the reverent nature of sacred texts, and perhaps the sense of tradition in setting well-known religious words. There is a greater focus on quotation, stark dissonance, syncopation, and performance instructions in his secular works, embodying the characters of the texts, and often illustrating specific textual passages in more overt ways than in his sacred settings. Furthermore, many of the composer's secular pieces have been commissioned or performed by the professional ensemble Chamber Choir Ireland, allowing Desmond to augment his compositional toolkit to suit the advanced technical abilities of the choir. He has expressed that 'if I got a chance to write for Chamber Choir I could basically do whatever I liked and know that if it was on the page, it is what the audience heard.'[6]

In this chapter, an analysis of the compositional techniques and approaches applied in a selection of Desmond's choral pieces from 2014 to 2024 seeks to highlight the composer's stylistic traits or 'fingerprints', concentrating on his melodic idioms and text-painting devices, use of quotation, textural approaches, and harmonic language, all of which contribute significantly to his creative approach and identity. The investigation draws on twelve works — *Mother Goose's Melodies* (2014), *More Mother Goose's Melodies* (2016), *Childish Things* (2017), *O Sacrum Convivium* (2018), *Comrades* (2019), *Amra Choluim Chille* (2019), *Nothing in Vain* (2021), *An Gleann Mór* (2022), *In Monte Oliveti* (2022), *Aestimatus Sum* (2022), *Beloved* (2023), and *I Am* (2024) — presenting a comprehensive exploration of the composer's stylistic development and traits over a ten-year period. Certain pieces, such as *Nothing in Vain*, feature more prominently in the analysis, as they encapsulate particularly effectively the key musical elements that characterise Desmond's evolving style. Despite differences arising from their themes and contexts, particular musical features can be observed across sacred and secular works, applied in a manner that befits the piece's tone and form. As well as the similar elements revealing a growing stylistic unity, they point to the time in which the works were composed, and to influences on Desmond's compositional approach, including his performance of past and contemporary repertoire as a choral singer. The examination of these particular pieces

[5] Eoghan Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2: Commentary and Appendix' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 2020), p. 7.
[6] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.

exhibits Desmond's versatility in evoking distinct moods and communicating diverse subjects through both overt melodic techniques and his broader textural and harmonic frameworks.

Melodic Idioms and Text-Painting Devices

Similar to Rhona Clarke's compositional approach, Desmond tends to focus on the overall character of a work as opposed to primarily illustrating individual words through the music. Where the composer's earlier pieces, such as *Mother Goose's Melodies*, *More Mother Goose's Melodies*, and *Childish Things*, contain more bravura gestures and exaggerated examples of word painting, his later works tend to concentrate predominantly on evoking the mood of the text, with fewer examples of obvious word painting. In response to a question on word painting in 2025, Desmond explained how:

> [O]verall, a piece should convey a general mood [...]; within that mood, without necessarily compromising that mood, you can then colour rather than paint words. I went through a phase of being quite madrigalian [...] and now I am kind of trying to fuse the two.[7]

In contrast to the 'narrative' *Childish Things* and the *Mother Goose* compositions, the composer's sacred settings and later works on the natural world are more 'suggestive' in nature, evoking rather than explicitly illustrating the details of the texts. On balance, Desmond has stated 'I am as likely to use text to generate musical material as I am to use music as a vehicle for the delivery of text'.[8] This section traces the evolution of Desmond's use of text illustration on a surface level, examining his overt use of word painting in his early pieces and more conservative examples of illustrating words within the overall musical texture of later works.

Madrigalian Elements and Extended Techniques

Desmond's early 'phase of being quite madrigalian' can be observed in his light-hearted secular works — both *Mother Goose* suites from 2014 and 2016 and *Childish Things* (2017).[9] The frivolous, childish character of each of these pieces presents multiple opportunities for the composer to paint the words through his melodic palette. He grasps the comical mood of each work primarily through his performance instructions, exaggerated diction, and madrigalian

[7] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[8] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 14.
[9] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.

elements. A clear example of this satirical communication of words is evident in *Mother Goose's Melodies*, Desmond's award-winning three-movement composition premiered at Cork Choral Festival in 2015, which announced his name to a wide audience of choral enthusiasts.

In '*Cock-a-doodle-doo!*', the opening section of the first movement 'A Comic Triptych', the composer over-articulates the text in a facetious manner, immediately setting a humorous scene. 'Cock' is set as '*[koh]-[k]*', and 'stick' as '*sti[k]*' and '*sti-[kuh]*', while the monosyllable 'dame' is also divided as '*[day]-[muh]*' (Figure 4.1). Furthermore, the 'cocky' performance instruction for the opening solo alto's expression of the titular text brings an additional layer of silliness to the performance. The soloist's percussive '*[koh]-[k]*' is followed by a jagged idiom on 'doodle-doo!', rising a major sixth (D–B), falling a major third (B–G), and concluding with a rising tritone (G–C#), giving the impression of a discordant cockcrow. This exaggerated diction and tritone idiom continues throughout the rhyme setting, enhanced by the staccato articulation. According to Desmond, he was experiencing an '*enfant terrible*' phase when writing this work. Having completed his Masters degree, he wanted to 'poke fun at academic composition for its own sake' through setting these rhymes 'in a really banal, surface-level, facile way', rebelling against what he saw as constraints on his compositional expression whilst studying.[10] He previously expressed how '[P]articularly in academia, composition can be too focused on a response to all the terrible things happening in the world. […] I wanted something totally frivolous.'[11]

[10] Eoghan Desmond, interview with the author, 24 January 2025.
[11] Eoghan Desmond, interview with the author as part of MA dissertation, 29 October 2020.
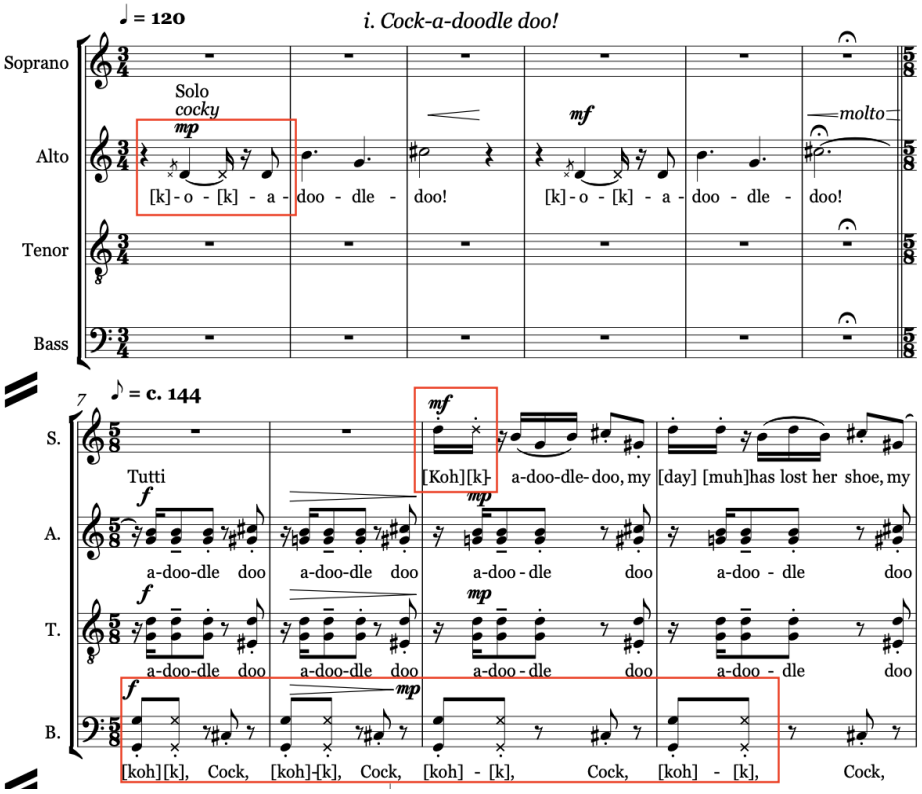


Figure 4.1. '*i. Cock-a-doodle doo!*', *Mother Goose's Melodies* (Helsinki: Sulasol, 2016), bb. 1–10 (percussive vocals in red).

Similar detachment of percussive consonants is evident in *More Mother Goose's Melodies*, the five-movement sequel to Desmond's settings of well-known nursery rhymes, in a more dominant manner in this case. '*Hickety-pickety*' — the second section of the first movement, 'A Trio of Bourgeois Waltzes' — features dislocated text, percussive vocalisations, and similar staccato accents to those in '*Cock-a-doodle-doo!*', all of which contribute to manifesting the hen clucking. While the tenor presents the full text, the accompanying voices repeat the word 'clu-ck' as staccato quavers on the respective first, second, and third beats (bass–alto–soprano) (Figure 4.2). Desmond divides the monosyllable into two quaver beats, a pitched 'clu-' and the plosive 'ck' detached as a separate unpitched quaver, imitating the sound of the hen. This vocal percussion across the texture enhances the imagery and sounds within the rhyme. The detached setting of 'Hickety Pickety' in the tenor line, and the staggered arrangement of rests across the texture, creates a hocket effect, further underlining the work's light-hearted character, as well as the composer's incorporation of past techniques in his music.[12] The frivolous character and content of both suites of *Mother Goose's Melodies* allows Desmond to extend choral diction

[12] Hockets were a common rhythmic feature in Medieval music.

for the purpose of emphasising the words and conveying a silly tone. Furthermore, given that both compositions were intended for Chamber Choir Ireland, Desmond had the liberty to use more exaggerated vocal techniques within a complex harmonic and rhythmic framework.
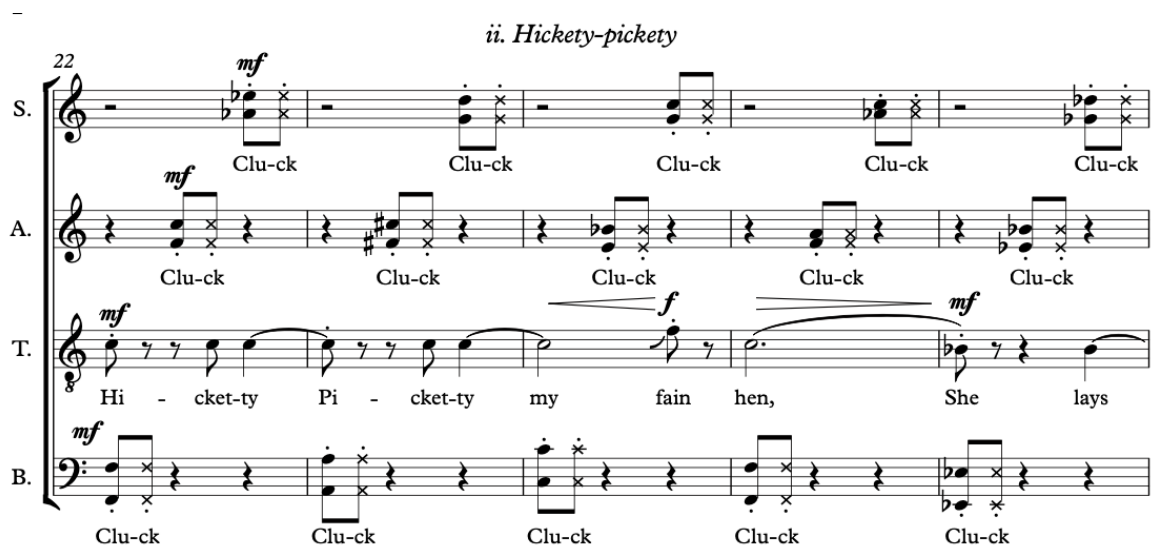


Figure 4.2. '*ii. Hickety-pickety*', *More Mother Goose's Melodies* (Helsinki: Sulasol, 2016), bb. 22–26.

Continuing his settings of cheerful texts and his exploration of exaggerated choral diction and word painting, *Childish Things* (2017) for upper voices is imbued with these techniques, particularly in the light-hearted first section. The composition sets two contrasting texts — one secular, one sacred — that reminisce on childhood. The first text, written by Desmond himself, describes the innocent longing for objects and activities that are deemed unacceptable as an adult, like bicycles, splashing in the rain, and building sandcastles. The second is an excerpt from a letter from St Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor 13:11), which reflects on childhood and accepts the reality of adulthood in a stoic manner. A clear example of text illustration in the playful first section is Desmond's use of rhythmic articulation and extended vocal techniques to capture the sound of beads clacking on the spokes of a child's bicycle (bb. 11–13).

A madrigalian portato on the word 'clacking', performed by soprano 1 and alto, literally depicts the text, concluding on a *sforzando* open chord with soprano 2 (C–G–C) on 'spokes' (Figure 4.3).[13] The displacement of text by a quaver's length results in alternating accents between the outer voices, with 'clack' beginning on the alto's downbeat (b. 11), echoed by

[13] Desmond uses the same word-painting technique on 'shakes' in his cantata *The Falling Tear* (2017–2018).

soprano 1 a quaver later. This technique seems to illustrate the individual beads hitting the bicycle spokes at specific rhythmic intervals. There is a brief dissonance on the second quaver of the second beat in bar 11, the first soprano's E♭ conflicting with the alto's E♮. False relations are common throughout Desmond's harmonic language; this particular example is a plausible harmonic evocation of the 'beads clacking on the spokes'. The *forte energetically* expression accentuates the image of the care-free beads rattling on the bicycle spokes and contributes to the child-like tone of the work.

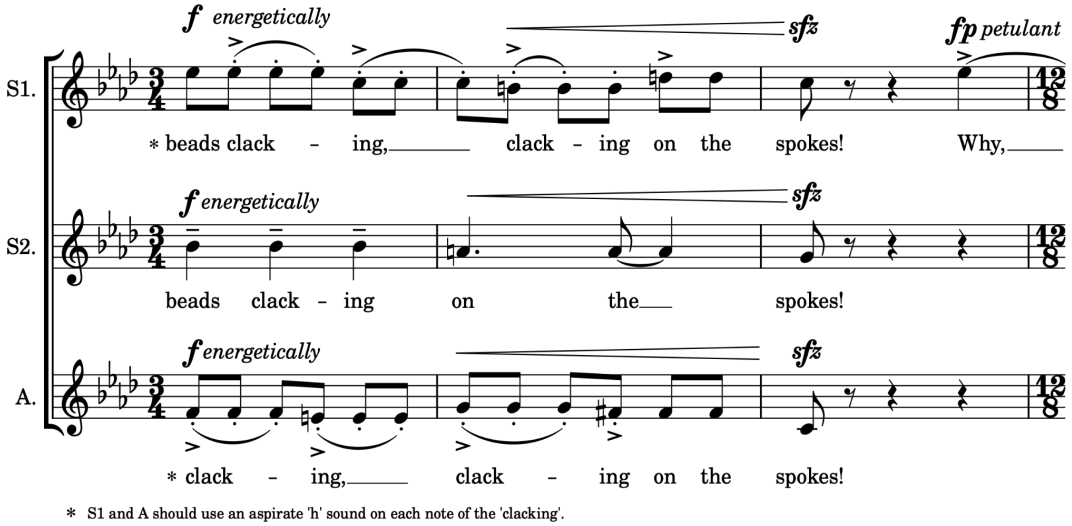


Figure 4.3 *Childish Things* (Waterford: Cailíno Music Publishers, 2018), bb. 11–13.

The three aforementioned compositions from the early stage of Desmond's career, connected by their light-hearted characters, highlight the composer's exploration of extended vocal techniques for humorous, superficial purposes. It is interesting that his later compositions do not focus on similar themes or include extended techniques and word painting in the same emphatic manner, his attention turning to more sacred works and serious secular poetry. Desmond's reservation of such techniques for these humorous pieces accentuates their effectiveness within his overall output, and provides an insight into his nascent compositional voice and early exploration of contemporary musical devices. It is clear from the subjects of these works that the composer carefully chose the musical devices based on the texts' light-hearted moods, stating that the percussive sounds are 'serving a direct purpose — it's facetious jokes but I would only ever use a technique like that in order to serve the text'.[14]

[14] Desmond, interview with the author, 29 October 2020.

Stylistic Development: Subtle Word Painting

Desmond's approach to word painting evolved during his doctoral studies in Aberdeen (2016–2020) and continues to develop in his most recent works, revealing a desire to fuse 'pictorial methods of using text to generate musical material' with a broader evocation of the overall mood of a piece.[15] More conservative examples of word painting can be observed as the composer's creative process progressed, such as his application of descending scale-like passages in several of his later works (*circa* 2022). In *An Gleann Mór* (2022), a setting of a poem by Grace Wilentz, inspired by the landscape of the Devil's Glen in County Wicklow, he illustrates the waterfall through the sopranos and altos' descending five-note (A–G#–F#–E–D) stepwise phrases.[16] The idyllic scene of a couple sitting by the waterfall as the sun sets is captured through the composer's cascading melodies and textural scaffolding. Each note is repeated on the descent, engendering a lilting motion that enhances the tranquil atmosphere. The soprano imitates the alto at a two-beat distance, expanding the vocal waterfall and creating a gentle ostinato that continues throughout the verses (Figure 4.4).

[15] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 13.
[16] Eoghan Desmond in 'My Creative Life', *Aedín in the Afternoon*, RTÉ Lyric FM, 18 November 2022 (4:46–4:51) <https://www.rte.ie/radio/lyricfm/clips/22173931/> [accessed 19 July 2023].
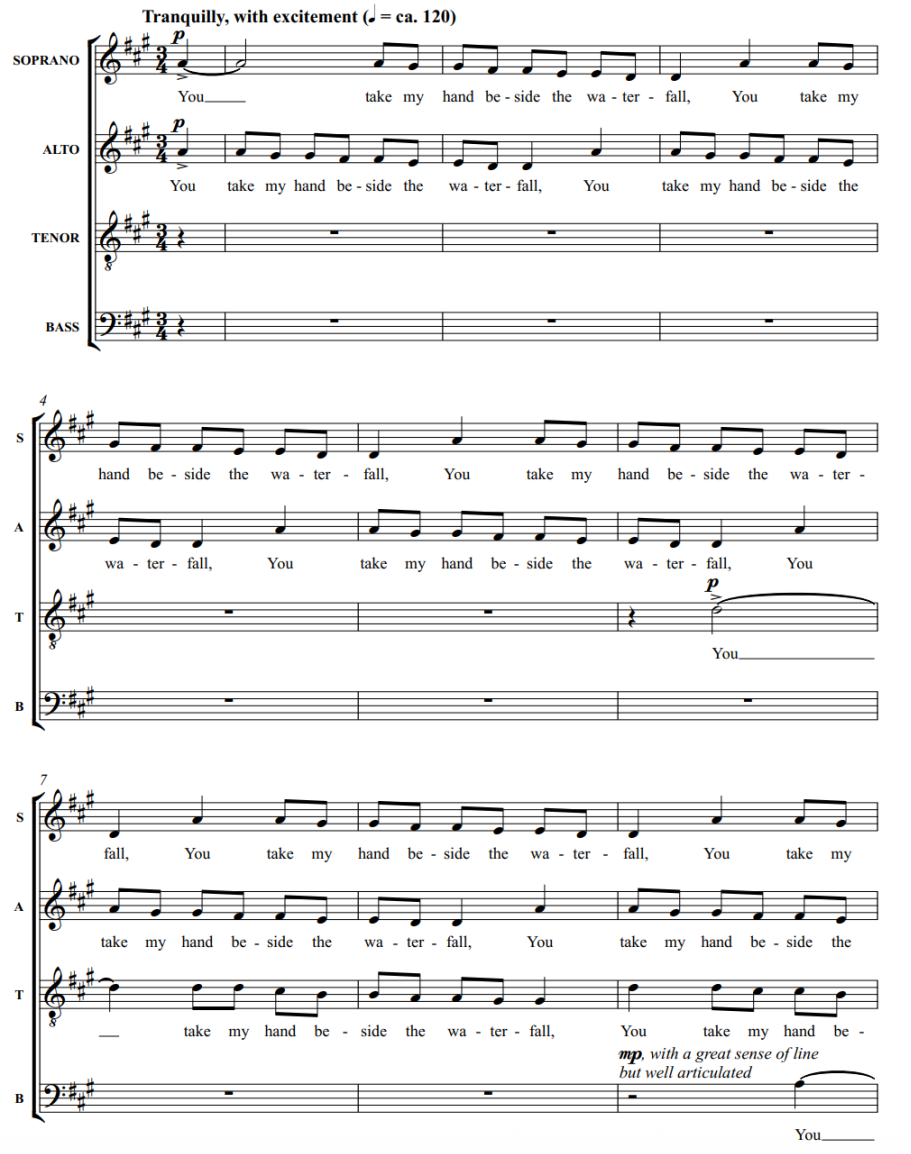


Figure 4.4. *An Gleann Mór* (2022), bb. 1–9.

Tenors join the upper voices a fifth lower on D (b. 6), augmenting the contrapuntal texture from which the bass's melody emerges in bar 9. 'You take my hand beside the waterfall' is repeated across the polyphonic voices until bar 32, with Desmond varying the falling motif on two occasions. As the *piano* dynamics *crescendo* to *mezzo-piano* (b. 13), the soprano repeats the stepwise phrase a fourth higher on D, while the tenor extends the range of the descent to seven notes (E4–F#3). Both voices return to their original *piano* phrases in bar 21, before a modulation to D major is signalled through G♮ (bb. 27–28; Figure 4.5). The falling pattern could be understood as both an illustration of the waterfall, and as a broader expression of text, forming the foundation of the polyphonic texture, which creates the overall spirit of tranquillity. The repeated nature of the canonic voices also demonstrates Desmond's interest in ambient

music, a genre characterised by simple, repeating textures. He states that 'if you hear something enough times it becomes background', which is the case in *An Gleann Mór*, the falling scales becoming the backdrop to the bass's melody.[17]
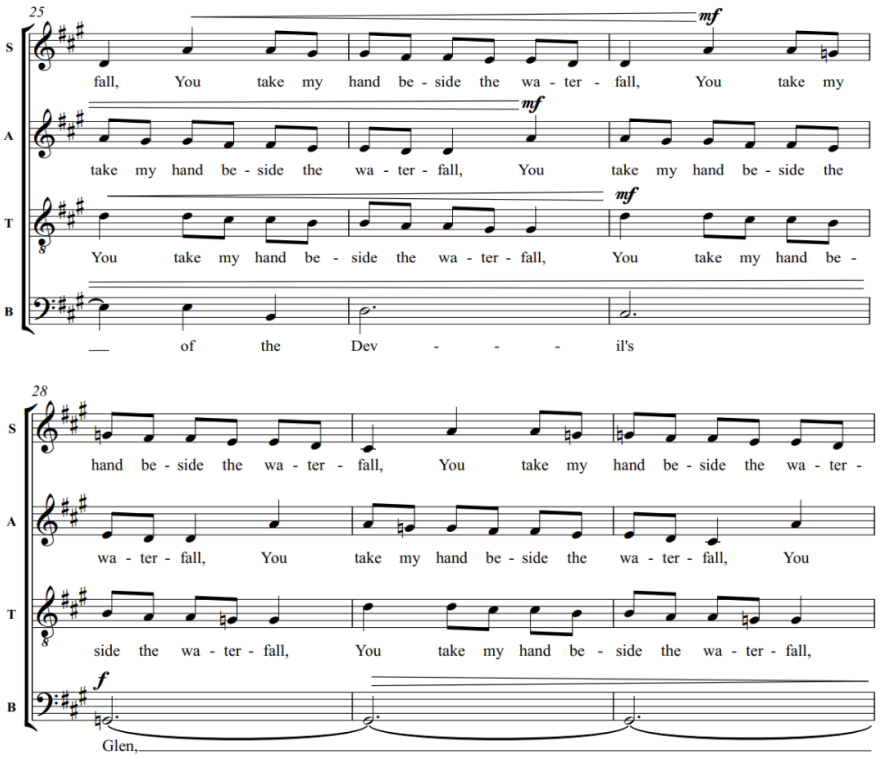


Figure 4.5. *An Gleann Mór*, bb. 25–30.

A very similar melodic figure is present in *I Am* (2024), a synthesis of reflections on 'the Holy Spirit as it relates to the natural world' by the medieval composer and saint Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), and Desmond's own reflections.[18] Desmond assigns a falling motif — which varies in length across the double-choir texture — to text associated with water, suggesting a narrative intention. Tenor 1 introduces the figure as a seven-note drooping descent (F4–G3) in F major through the phrase 'I am the dew on the grass' (bb. 55–57). Like *An Gleann Mór*, each note is repeated on the descent, contributing to the relaxed tone of this section. The 'water' motif is echoed across the sopranos and tenors at different pitches as three-note variations, including the first tenor's 'I am the rain', which undulates between B♭ and A before falling to G (bb. 59–60). Following a mixed-interval ascent through 'I am the shine' (G–C–D–F–G),

[17] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[18] Eoghan Desmond, 'Composer's Note', *I Am* (unpublished, 2024).

soprano 2 falls by step to E through the melismatic text, before singing the motif as a five-note descent to A, completing the phrase ‘I am the shine on the river’ (bb. 61–63, Figure 4.6).
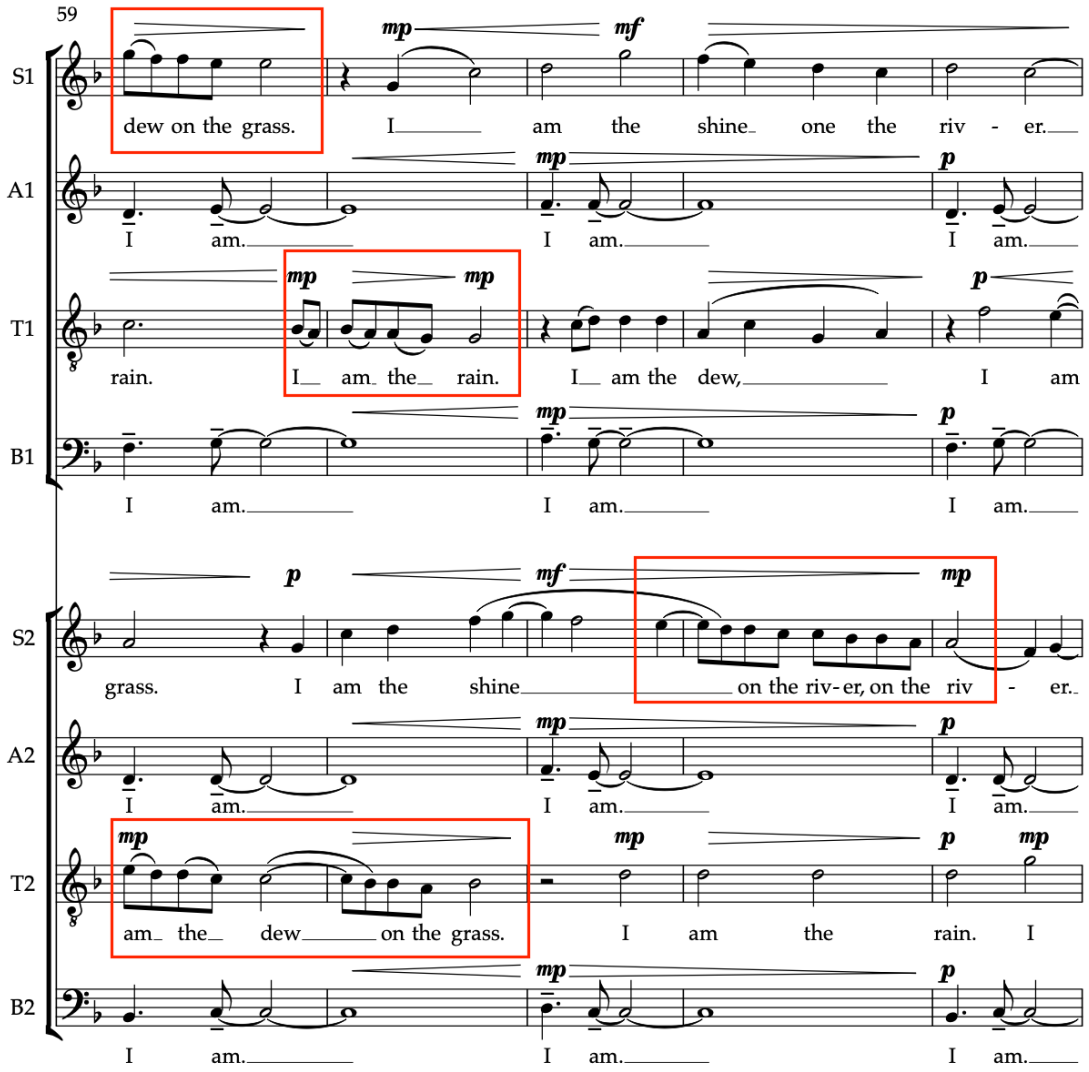


Figure 4.6. *I Am* (2024), bb. 59–63 (‘water’ motif in red).

The descending motif interweaving through the polyphonic tapestry effectively illustrates the ‘river’, ‘dew’, and ‘rain’ in the text. In the same vein as the texture in *An Gleann Mór*, the melody directly paints the forms of water, while also forming a significant role in the contrapuntal framework, evoking the overriding presence of the Holy Spirit throughout the natural world. A notable aspect of both these pieces and Desmond’s secular output after 2021 — such as *Beloved* (2023), and *Guthanna ar an gCnoc* (2025) — is the focus on themes of environmentalism, influenced by his concern over the ongoing environmental crisis. Rather than taking an activist or sententious approach, he has stated, ‘I am writing music about it in

the hope that people hear it and sing it' and recognise that 'the world is actually quite beautiful'.[19] Whether Desmond is conscious of the close similarities between the lilting motifs in *An Gleann Mór* and *I Am* is uncertain, but the narrative parallels are clear, with both melodic ideas representing water in its various forms in compositions based on the natural world. Beyond the surface of the music, these motifs enhance the overall textural structures and their role in communicating the subjects and emotions of the texts, indicating Desmond's evolution from an exaggerated madrigalian approach to more subtle text illustration that also forms a significant part of the textural fabric. The repetitive, looping nature of the melodies interlaced through the voices also points to the strong influence of ambient music, 'a music that often aims at immersing the listener in sound', on Desmond's compositional approach. [20]

The Influence of Chant

Many of Desmond's melodies reflect the contour of plainchant, while others, such as the Latin phrases in his carol *A Babe is Born* (2017) and his antiphon *O Sacrum Convivium* (2018), quote existing chants.[21] Given his experience as a choral singer in church settings since the age of nine, the composer states that he 'can't escape it' and that 'everything comes from chant somehow'.[22] This reflects the position of contemporary composer James MacMillan, who regularly integrates Gregorian chant into his music: 'I quote chant, I elude to it, I fragment it, I dissect it, I use it as the building blocks, the DNA, of larger structures.'[23] A significant example of Desmond's integration of chant in his work is evident in his antiphon *O Sacrum Convivium*, which utilises the original Gregorian chant throughout the piece (Figure 4.7). The opening of the chant is initially presented by a solo tenor, before appearing in canonic dialogue and fragmented form across the voices, maintaining textural interest throughout the work. A notable moment of polyrhythmic contrapuntalism occurs in the *Grazioso* section of the piece, the upper voices crafting an imitative web of humming above the tenor's and bass's presentation of the chant in canon (bb. 30–36; See Figure 4.8). Desmond reflects the natural motion of plainchant through the shifting time signatures (3/2–3/4–4/4–3/2–5/4–4/4) and triplet

[19] Desmond, interview with the author, 24 January 2025.
[20] *Music Beyond Airports: Appraising Ambient Music*, ed. by Monty Atkins and Simon Cummings (Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press, 2019), p. vi.
[21] See Chapter Seven for further discussion. His cantatas *Amra Choluim Chille* and *The Falling Tear* also feature chant inflections and quotations.
[22] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[23] James MacMillan, 'God, Theology and Music', p. 17.

figuration in the tenor and bass, while the sopranos and alto proceed predominantly in melismatic quavers.
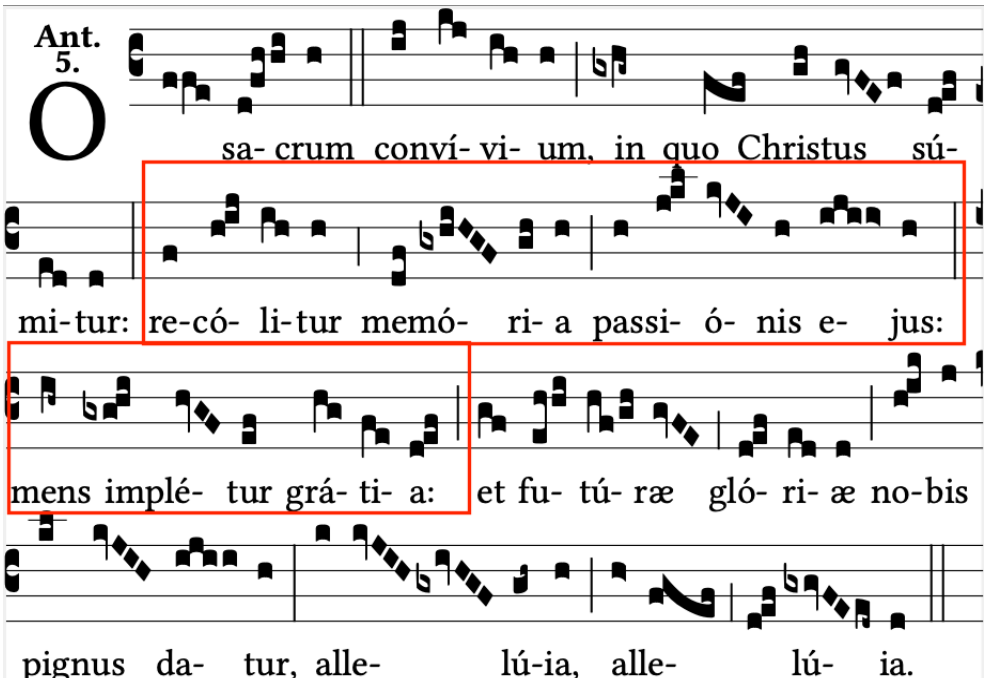


Figure 4.7. *O Sacrum Convivium* Gregorian Chant (fragment in red discussed below).[24]

Beginning on a *pianissimo* G at the upbeat to bar 28, soprano 2 hums the melody of the preceding phrase '*recolitur memoria passionis eius*' ('the memory of his passion is renewed'), the instruction '*like plainchant*' enhancing the traditional ambience of the work. Soprano 1 enters at the unison (G) on the second beat of bar 28 (4/4), followed by the alto a fifth below (C) at a crotchet-beat distance. The tenor begins the new phrase '*mens impletur gratia*' ('the mind is filled with grace') on the final C of bar 29 (3/2), proceeding with a quotation of the original chant (Figure 4.8). The bass enters on A♭ in the following bar, falling a fourth to E♭ to imitate the tenor (bb. 30–31). As the upper voices repeat their canonic dialogue, the tenor continues with the original chant inflection of '*gratia*', the bass echoing with an altered version, resulting in descending parallel thirds and contrary motion between the lower voices. Both parts conclude their respective phrases, forming an open fifth (C–G) as the upper voices close the section at a reduced tempo, fading to *pianississimo* (bb. 34–36).

[24] '*O Sacrum Convivium*', *GregoBase* <https://gregobase.selapa.net/chant.php?id=7187> [accessed 18 June 2026].
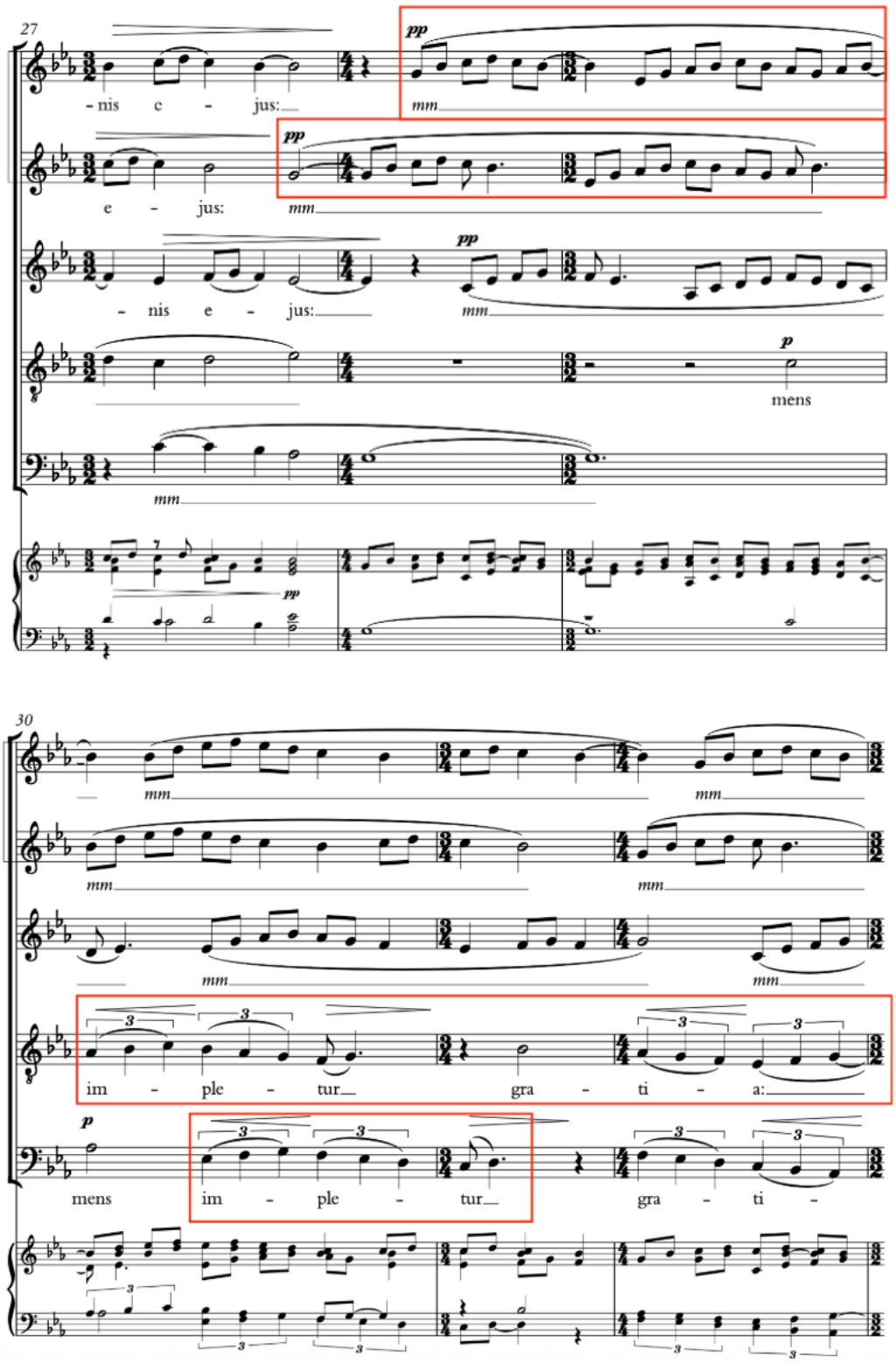


Figure 4.8. *O Sacrum Convivium* (Waterford: Cailíno Music Publishers, 2019), bb. 27–36 (quotation of chant in red).
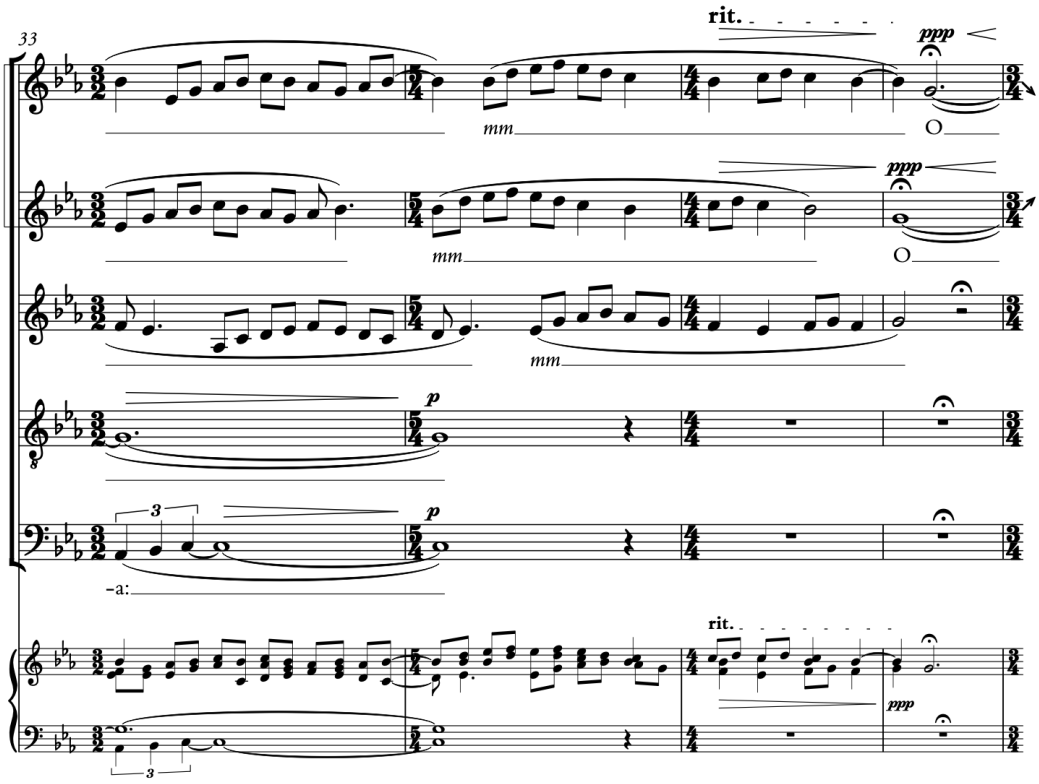


Figure 4.8. (continued).

The humming upper texture provides a tranquil contrapuntal carpet beneath which the new musical idea can be presented by the lower voices. Rhythmic dissonance results from the upper voices' quaver and crotchet motion conflicting with the tenor and bass's crotchet triplets, increasing the independence of the respective parts and allowing the new chant phrase to emerge more clearly. This polyrhythmic technique reflects the contemporary trend of returning to the 'free rhythms of medieval motet and Renaissance madrigal', as well as 'the aesthetic ideals of the age of Bach [...] when the horizontal-linear point of view had prevailed'.[25] The three against two polyrhythmic texture also results in momentary tonal discordance, demonstrating Desmond's admiration for the Medieval and Renaissance planes of dissonance. The composer exhibits his synthesis of past and present techniques in this section, the traditional devices of canonic imitation and chant blending in a contemporary fabric of extended harmonies and conflicting rhythms.

A later work that utilises chant to build material in a more subtle manner is *Nothing in Vain* (2021), Desmond's setting of Catholic theologian John Henry Newman's (1801–1890) meditation. The composer has consciously alluded to *Tu es Petrus* from the *Graduale*

[25] Joseph Machlis, *Introduction to Contemporary Music*, 2nd edition (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1980), pp. 33 and 39.

Romanum (Figure 4.9) within the piece, such as in the opening soprano line. The Latin chant centres on Peter as the rock upon which Jesus built his church. Just as Peter was entrusted to carry out God's work, Newman's text meditates on a vocation 'to do some work, some definite service' entrusted by God. Desmond's integration of *Tu es Petrus* — a chant not directly linked to Newman's words — within his setting reveals his consideration of the text's deeper meaning.

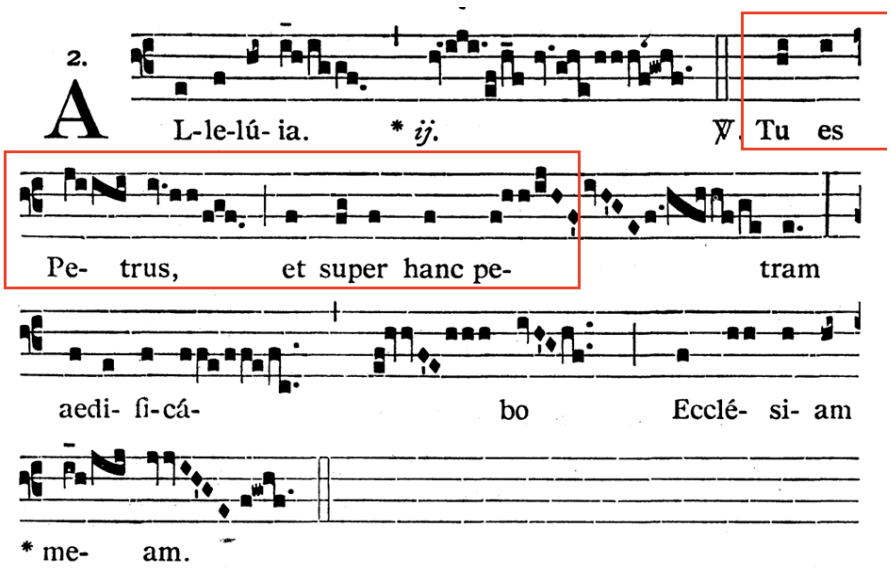


Figure 4.9. *Tu es Petrus*, *Graduale Romanum* (quoted material in red).[26]

Although it is not immediately discernible due to the elongated rhythms in Desmond's contemporary setting, the soprano's contour reflects that of the original chant in bars 19 to 33 (Figure 4.10). Supported by the alto-tenor-bass homophonic ostinato 'God has created me to do some definite service' (A♭–Fm–B♭–Gm), the soprano gradually ascends by step from F to A♮ across seven bars, repeating 'God' three consecutive times for eight, ten, and three beats, respectively (bb. 19–35). Following a secundal oscillation between G and F through 'has created', the subphrase concludes with a descending third to D ('me'). The soprano continues the phrase 'to do some work, some definite service', rising to a tenuto-accented E♮, which suggests an impending modulation to D minor (bb. 30–31). Following a return to D, the melody rises a minor third followed by a stepwise ascent to A♮, before descending triadically to D.

[26] *Graduale Romanum* (1961), p. 534 <https://media.musicasacra.com/pdf/proprium_de_tempore1961.pdf> [accessed 13 January 2025].
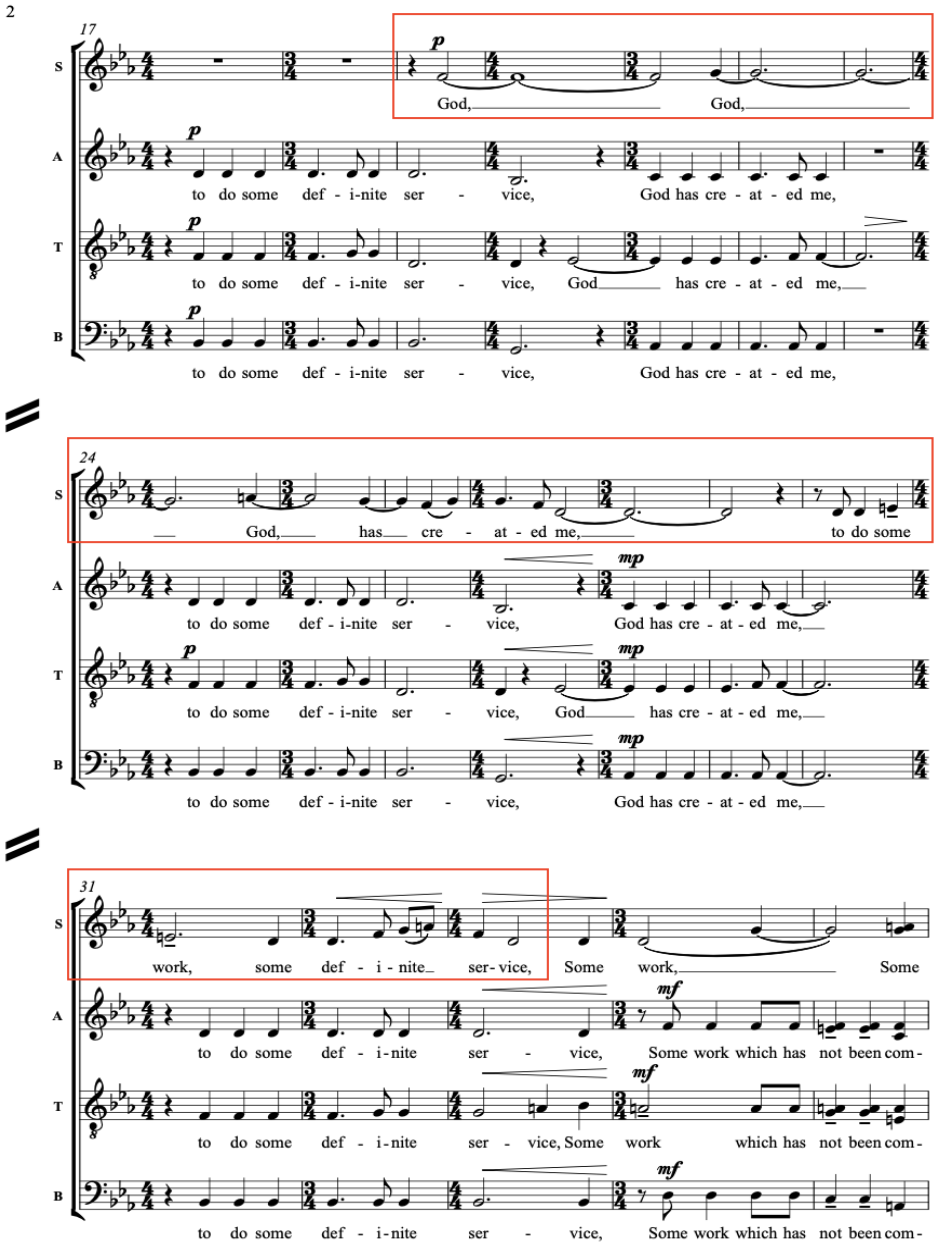


Figure 4.10. *Nothing in Vain* (2021), bb. 17–35 (chant allusion in red).

While the rhythm is augmented and some intervals are repeated, the overall shape of Desmond's melody clearly reflects the opening of *Tu es Petrus*. According to the composer, he used this chant above the ostinato 'to create this sense that while the speaker in the piece is kind of confirming to themselves that they're created [...], there is also an external voice agreeing and reassuring'.[27] The *piano mormorando* homophonic pattern that accompanies the melody establishes an absorbing meditative atmosphere, requiring attentive listening to

[27] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.

Newman's reverent words. The unchanging, steady pattern also indicates the impact of ambient music on Desmond, with its focus on the repetition of musical patterns, and its ability to articulate 'a 'narrative' with which we can emotionally (and spiritually) engage'.[28] The choir slowly builds in dynamics towards the modulation to D minor in bar 34. This gradual harmonic shift serves not only to introduce new material but to guide the listener in the meditation, illustrating the increasing devotion of Newman. The composer is candid about the presence of *Tu es Petrus* in this work, explaining how it was 'a starting point to generate material and generate structure', reappearing in varied guises throughout his setting.[29] Although it is possible to associate chant with many melodies built on stepwise motion, it is clear that the tradition has influenced Desmond's creative approach in *Nothing in Vain*, as well as other compositions in his oeuvre.

The above examples of text painting and melodic idioms in Desmond's choral work demonstrate the composer's careful consideration of a text's natural rhythm, subject, and character. While certain surface devices, such as descending figures and vocal percussion, exhibit his narrative intuition, chant-like idioms highlight his connection to the sacred music tradition and his inclination to draw from past traditions if the text is suitable. The preceding analytical findings demonstrate, as the composer himself has observed, a shift 'away from these kinds of programmatic, pictorial methods of using text to generate musical material, towards a more abstract one', exhibiting a maturing compositional voice.[30] Where Desmond's text painting explicitly brings specific images to life, particularly in his earlier settings of secular, child-like texts, his formal structuring of melodic idioms in the broader texture suggests a desire to 'go past the surface' of the words in his music, serving as a significant aspect in the communication of a text's form.[31] It is clear that, as his style continues to evolve, communicating the general mood and meaning of a text through the overall structure of the music — his textural organisation, rhythmic interplay, and harmonies, as well as his quotation of musical elements from historical works — is Desmond's primary intention in his compositional approach.

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[28] Simon Cummings, 'The Steady State Theory: Recalibrating the Quiddity of Ambient Music', in *Music Beyond Airports: Appraising Ambient Music*, pp. 83–118 (pp. 115–16).
[29] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025. Fragments of *Tu es Petrus* are also present in the soprano line in the C Aeolian section, which is characterised by shifting time signatures and another choral ostinato (bb. 68–79).
[30] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 13.
[31] Eoghan Desmond, interviewed by Jonathan Grimes and Evonne Ferguson, 'amplify #50 – Interviews with Elaine Agnew and Eoghan Desmond', The Contemporary Music Centre, podcast, 20 October 2021 <https://www.cmc.ie/amplify/episode-50> (13:21–13:26) [accessed 25 June 2024].

Quotation and Allusion

As demonstrated in the aforementioned examples of chant, an additional layer of narrative that recurs throughout Desmond's oeuvre is the quotation of historical music, both in the melodic and broader textural fabric of his works. While the composer's allusions to previous musical styles and pre-existing melodic material on occasion simply reflect his own interests, there are several examples in Desmond's music that suggest connections between his work and compositions that set similar texts or themes.[32] References to specific historical compositions indicate his admiration for music of earlier eras, particularly Medieval and Renaissance, and the significant influence of the diverse repertoire that he performs as a professional singer on his compositional practice. Desmond has been forthright about his quotations of other composers' music in his works, stating 'I actually mimic consciously, deliberately, a lot, particularly in my non-sacred music. I just steal outright.'[33]

As some of his secular pieces sets texts with frivolous themes, such as his two suites of *Mother Goose's Melodies*, there is an opportunity to quote from music that would enhance their sarcastic, silly character, or suggest an alternative interpretation of the children's rhymes. Within 'Bobby Shafto/A Sailor Went to Sea', the second movement of *Mother Goose's Melodies*, Desmond juxtaposes the two rhymes, suggesting that Bobby Shafto is the sailor at sea. In an ominous twist, Desmond composes a third verse for the 'Bobby Shafto' rhyme, in which the sailor's lover, who carries his only son, announces his death (Figure 4.11). The falling scales that comprise 'A sailor went to sea' convey a dark character, dividing the first two verses of 'Bobby Shafto' — where his lover looks forward to their marriage — and forewarning the listener of the death of Bobby.

[32] Quotation is also explored in Chapters Six and Seven.
[33] Desmond, interviewed by Grimes and Ferguson, 'amplify #50' (14:55–15:03).

2. **Bobby Shafto/A Sailor Went to Sea**

Bobby Shafto went to sea,
Silver buckles on his knee.
He'll come back to marry me.
Bonny Bobby Shafto.

Bobby Shafto's bright and fair,
Combing out his yellow hair.
He will love me evermair.
Bonny Bobby Shafto.

(A sailor went to sea
To see what he could see
But all that he did see was
The bottom of the deep blue sea)

Bobby Shafto's dead and gone.
I remain and must go on,
Carrying his only son.
Poor old Bobby Shafto.

Desmond's verse

Figure 4.11. 'Bobby Shafto/A Sailor Went to Sea' text.

The text of 'Bobby Shafto' is set to Orlando Gibbons's *Song 13* (1623), a Renaissance sacred hymn (Figure 4.12).[34] This peculiar quotation, which is rhythmically altered from the original in parts, does not appear to have any connection with the rhyme — certainly not the original — but Desmond's inclusion of a self-composed third verse ('Bobby Shafto's dead and gone') appears to offer a subtle reason for the use of Gibbons's melody. The composer has noted Edward Bairstow's (1874–1946) arrangement of Gibbons's tune in *Jesu, Grant Me this I Pray* (1929; Figure 4.13) as one of his favourite choral works, which suggests why he might have recontextualised this tune in his secular piece.[35] On the surface, the melody's metre fits that of the rhyme, allowing the composer to easily combine the two, albeit with his own harmonisations and rhythmic alterations. On a deeper level, Desmond has explained how Bairstow's hymn

> is about death and crucifixion and living on so I think there was an element of that in trying to connect that message [...] I'm sure a lot of people wouldn't necessarily hear that without being told but it was just this weird abstract association in my mind.[36]

[34] Desmond also quotes Gibbons's *Song 46* in his 'Drop, Drop, Slow Tears', the fifth movement of *The Falling Tear* (2017–2018), due to both compositions' use of the same text.
[35] 'Eoghan Desmond: Mother Goose's Melodies', *Chamber Choir Ireland*, 29 April 2015 <https://www.chamberchoirireland.com/eoghan-desmond-mother-gooses-melodies/> [accessed 7 January 2025].
[36] Desmond, interview with the author, 29 October 2020.
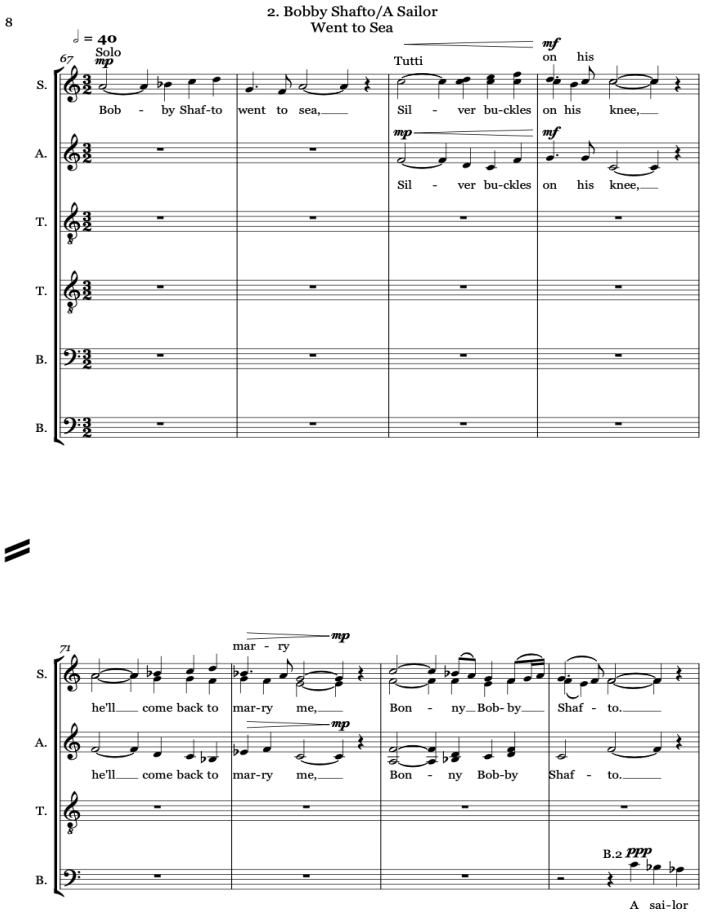


Figure 4.12. 'Bobby Shafto/A Sailor Went to Sea', bb. 67–74.
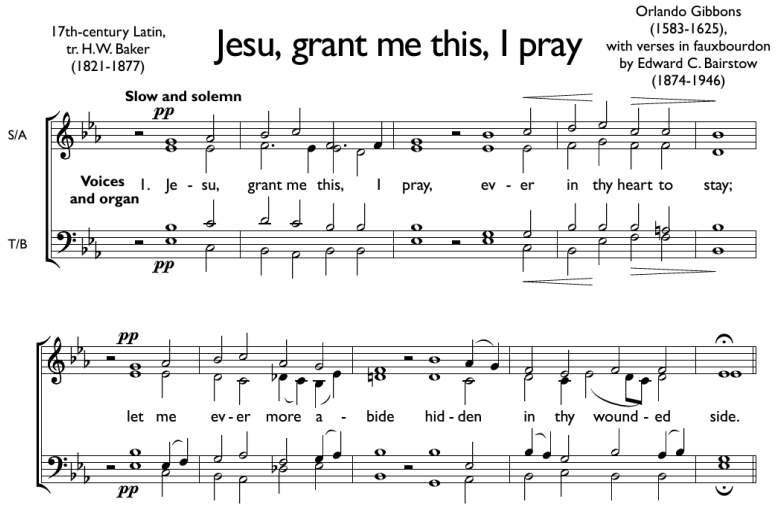


Figure 4.13. Orlando Gibbons, arr. by Edward Bairstow, *Jesu, Grant Me This, I Pray*, bb. 1–10.[37]

[37] Orlando Gibbons, arr. by Edward Bairstow, 'Jesu, Grant Me This, I Pray', *Choral Public Domain Library* <https://www.cpdl.org/wiki/index.php/Jesu,_grant_me_this,_I_pray_(Edward_Bairstow)> [accessed 8 January 2025].

This connection between Shafto's death at sea and death in the Christian hymn is very abstract, and likely would not be observed by most listeners. However, Desmond's quotation and additional verse highlights his distinctive interpretation of the rhyme, as well as his deft integration of historical musical elements into his contemporary setting. This particular quotation calls to mind Robert Morgan's assertion that '[T]hough the musical past is evoked [in modern composition], it is also placed in unfamiliar surroundings, where it can be transformed into something new and strange, reinterpreted and revitalized through confrontation with the present.'[38] The chorale-like *Song 13* in the upper texture initially evokes an angelic atmosphere, the upper voices representing Bobby's lover. The innocent love expressed in these 'Bobby Shafto' verses is interrupted by the haunting lower voices' descending scales, describing the sailor — Bobby — journeying to the bottom of the sea, and unfortunately, his death. The melody's harmonisation becomes increasingly dissonant and chromatic in the final verse, reflecting the girl's heartbreak over her lover's death at sea. Rather than the expected unison F conclusion, the upper voices end on a D♭ major third. On the first beat of the final bar, the alto's D♭ creates an augmented fourth with the melody's G, as well as a brief false relation with the second soprano's D, underlining the sinister situation (Figure 4.14). The penultimate dissonance (D♭–E–F) resolves to the major third, which may intentionally reflect the triadic conclusion of Bairstow's harmonisation, as well as the lover's resolve to carry on without Bobby.
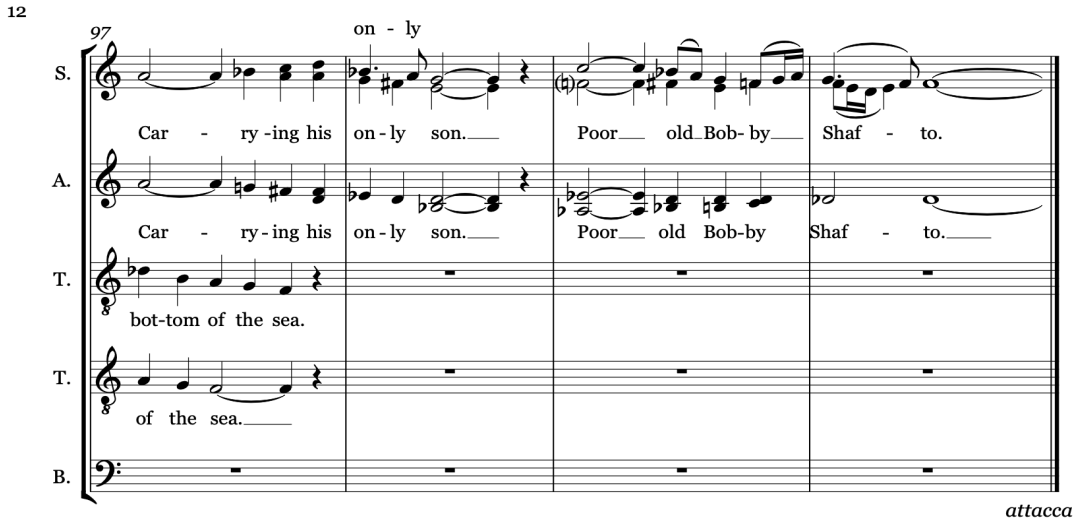


Figure 4.14. 'Bobby Shafto/A Sailor Went to Sea', bb. 97–100.

[38] Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music: A History of Musical Style in Modern Europe and America* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), p. 411.

More Mother Goose's Melodies also features several well-known musical quotations, including the prelude of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, the *Dies Irae* medieval chant, and *God Save the King*, all for humorous reasons.[39] '*Pussycat, Pussycat*', the third of the 'Trio of Bourgeois Waltzes', is based on a distorted version of the British national anthem (Figure 4.15), with Desmond integrating fragments of the melody across the voices in a polymodal framework. In his analysis of Charles Ives's use of quotation, Christopher Ballantine posits that a composer quotes for 'thematic or formal reasons', which is evident in this movement.[40] On the surface, Desmond's use of the British anthem suits the text's account of the cat's travels 'to London to visit the queen'. The alto opens the piece with the first two bars of the anthem in F major, asking 'Pussycat, pussycat, where have you been?', the text fitting the original tune's 3/4 metre.
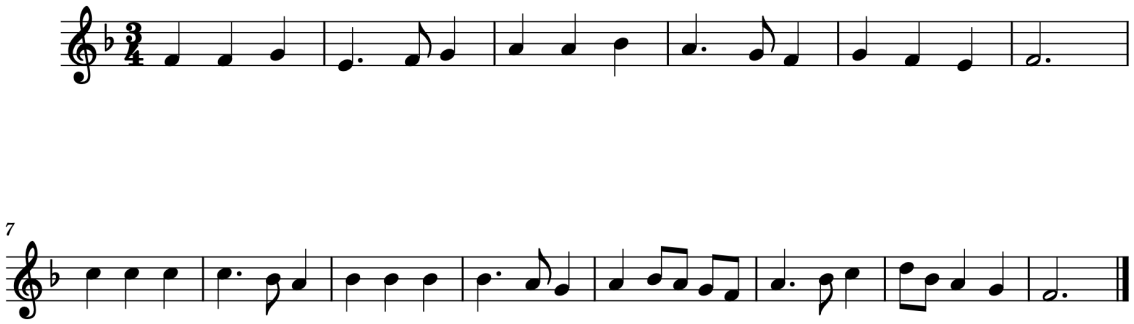


Figure 4.15. National anthem of the United Kingdom.

'*Pussycat, Pussycat*' becomes increasingly bitonal from bar 43, soprano 1 answering the alto with a repeat of the anthem's opening in A major, while tenor 1 sings the same phrase in C major (Figure 4.16). The bass accompanies with a separate commentary in rising and falling quavers, presenting Desmond's own version of the rhyme — 'Did you ask her to tea? Did you go to the sea? Or did you just see her chair?'. The clashing false relations (F#–F♮, C#–C, G#–G) and tritones between the voices create a harsh sonority throughout the waltz, impairing a clear recognition of the anthem, and engendering a slight tone of mockery. Desmond acknowledges how he admired Charles Ives's quotation of well-known melodies in a dissonant

[39] Desmond directly quotes the prelude of *Tristan und Isolde* throughout 'IV. I Love Little Pussy' due to the theme of desire in both works. *Dies Irae* is quoted by the tenor and bass in 'III. Ladybird, Ladybird', given the rhyme's focus on fire and presumed death.
[40] Christopher Ballantine, 'Charles Ives and the Meaning of Quotation in Music', *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (1979), 167–184 (p. 184) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/741701> [accessed 8 March 2023].

manner, and wanted to emulate this practice, creating 'facile, childish fun'.[41] Desmond has a proclivity for polymodal dissonance, evidenced in his application of this harmonic technique in *A Babe is Born* (2017) and *Amra Choluim Chille* (2019) for the purpose of expressing the texts.[42] His synthesis of conflicting modes/tonalities also stems from his interest in medieval harmony:

> We talk about how amazing bitonality was in the twentieth century and […] if you go back to the 1500s and before, you get this independence of voicing, and I think that's kind of been a huge thing for me.[43]
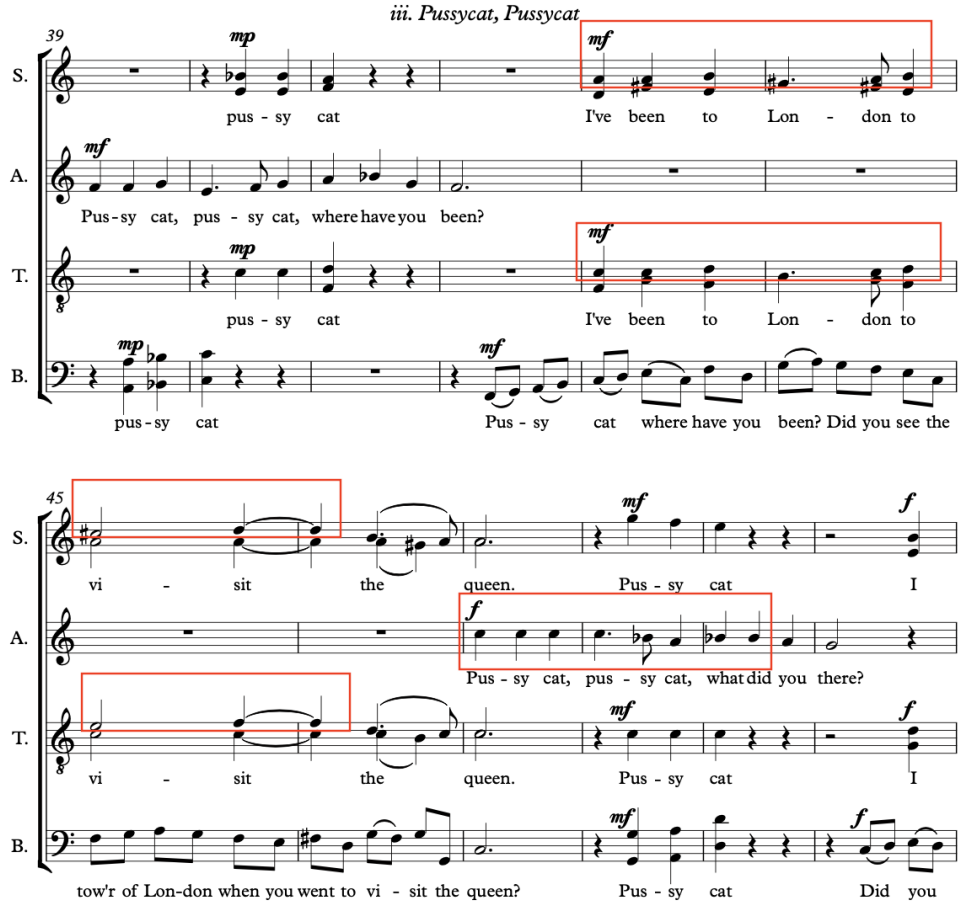


Figure 4.16. '*iii. Pussycat, Pussycat*', bb. 39–50 (anthem in red).

The movement ends with a distorted version of a plagal cadence on 'Her chair', moving from an eight-part F minor cluster harmony with raised fourth (F–A♭–B–D–G–C) to a C Lydian cluster chord (C–G–E–A–B–F#). The dense dissonance is accentuated by a fermata on each

[41] Desmond, interview with the author, 24 January 2025.
[42] See Chapters Six and Seven for further discussion.
[43] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.

chord, while the first soprano's concluding F#, a tritone away from the lower voice, yearns for resolution (Figure 4.17). Structurally, the alternating F major and simultaneous A and C major phrases help to distinguish between the question and response form of the text. The juxtaposition of polytonal fragments of the anthem appears to be the composer's means of making the music and rhyme more comical, which is also suggested by the superimposition of his own text with the original. Desmond notes how he was 'making fun of everyone: the listener, the performer, myself, institutions' in his dissonant manipulation of the anthem, demonstrating the light-hearted aspects of his compositional style.[44]
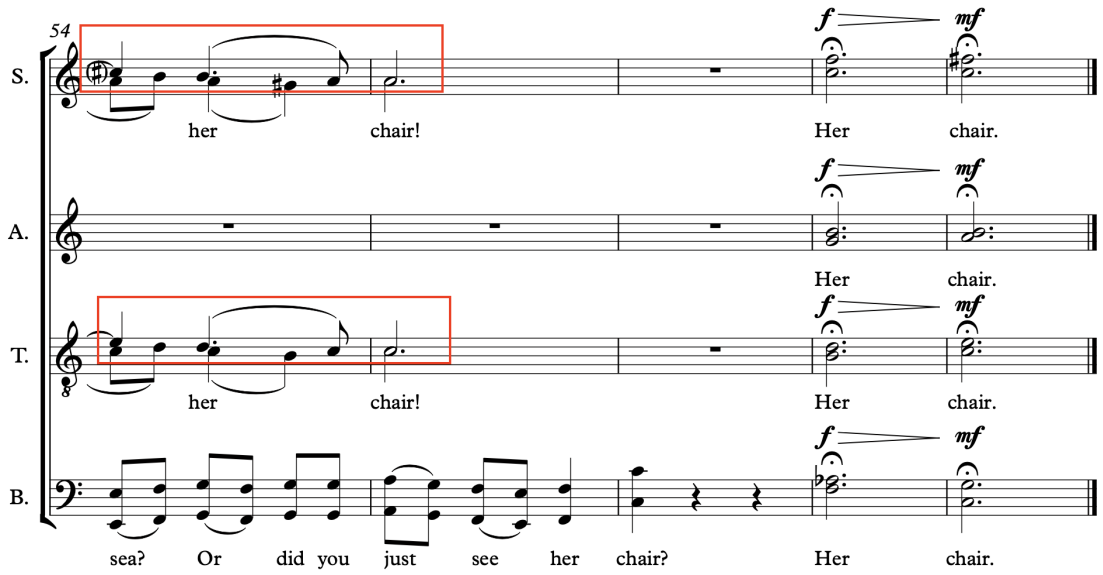


Figure 4.17. '*iii. Pussycat, Pussycat*', bb. 54–58 (anthem in red).

It is clear from these examples that Desmond liberally quotes or alludes to certain pieces of music if the subject matter or character of the text he is setting is suitable. He has been direct about his use of past melodies and techniques, remarking 'I beg, borrow, and cadge.'[45] The borrowed material, whether chant, or a piece from the repertoire of historical music, is carefully manipulated by the composer to suit his setting, both musically and textually. As David Metzer notes, 'quotation is a two-part gesture: the original and its transformation'.[46] Where the chant *Tu es Petrus* is used as 'a clothesline from which to hang' *Nothing in Vain*, contributing to the musical ideas and structure, the quotation of *Song 13* in 'Bobby Shafto/A Sailor Went to Sea'

[44] Desmond, interview with the author, 24 January 2025.
[45] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[46] David Metzer, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 11.

has a more abstract resonance, the juxtaposed rhymes' underlying idea of death influencing Desmond's use of Gibbons's melody.[47] In a more obvious manner, the composer's paraphrasing of the British national anthem in '*Pussycat, Pussycat*' clearly links to the rhyme's narrative — a cat's visit to London. As he 'struggle(s) to write in a vacuum', drawing inspiration from his work as a singer, it is natural that the music of others has influenced and infiltrated his own compositions.[48]

Just as Desmond has alluded to the music of other composers, there are also instances in which he has paraphrased his own writing. A review of the textural and harmonic structure of the second section of *Comrades* (2019) illustrates distinct similarities to the sixth movement of the composer's *Amra Choluim Chille*, composed in the same year. Desmond applies the looping of melodies in the upper voices of *Comrades*, a setting of Eva Gore-Booth's letter 'to her sister, Constance Markievicz, while she was imprisoned [...] for her role in the 1916 Easter Rising.'[49] The texture gradually increases in contrapuntal density with the layered melodies, creating a tense atmosphere. Throughout the phrase 'Free through the world your spirit goes', the altos engage in canonic dialogue at a one-beat distance, rising through an octatonic scale in two-bar patterns (bb. 26–47). Tenors enter the texture with rising open fifths (D–A; A–E), followed by the sopranos' ascending loops, with the basses' sustained open fifths — falling through a G minor ninth (D–A; B♭–F; G–D) — completing the eight-part polyphonic texture. The altos and sopranos' melodies, likely representing the sisters Gore-Booth and Markiewicz, are built on three-note octatonic cells rising incrementally on each repetition. Alto 1, echoed by alto 2 a crotchet-beat later, begins the ascent in two-bar phrases, moving from a repeated E to a semitone-tone or tone-semitone undulation (E–D#–E–F#; F#–E–F#–G; G–F#–G–A). A change occurs on the fifth statement from bar 33, the altos alternating between a G major and G minor three-note stepwise motif (G–A–B–G–A–B♭) on 'through the world your spirit goes', which repeats until bar 40 (Figure 4.18). The final four statements reiterate the ascending minor motion on A (A–C–E), concluding in bar 47.

[47] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[48] Eoghan Desmond quoted in Michael Dervan, 'Eoghan Desmond: "I struggle to write in a vacuum – I draw inspiration from what I'm working on as a singer"', *The Irish Times*, 14 March 2023 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/music/2023/03/14/eoghan-desmond-i-struggle-to-write-in-a-vacuum-i-draw-inspiration-from-what-im-working-on-as-a-singer/> [accessed 14 March 2023].
[49] Eoghan Desmond, 'Composer's Note', *Comrades* (unpublished, 2019).

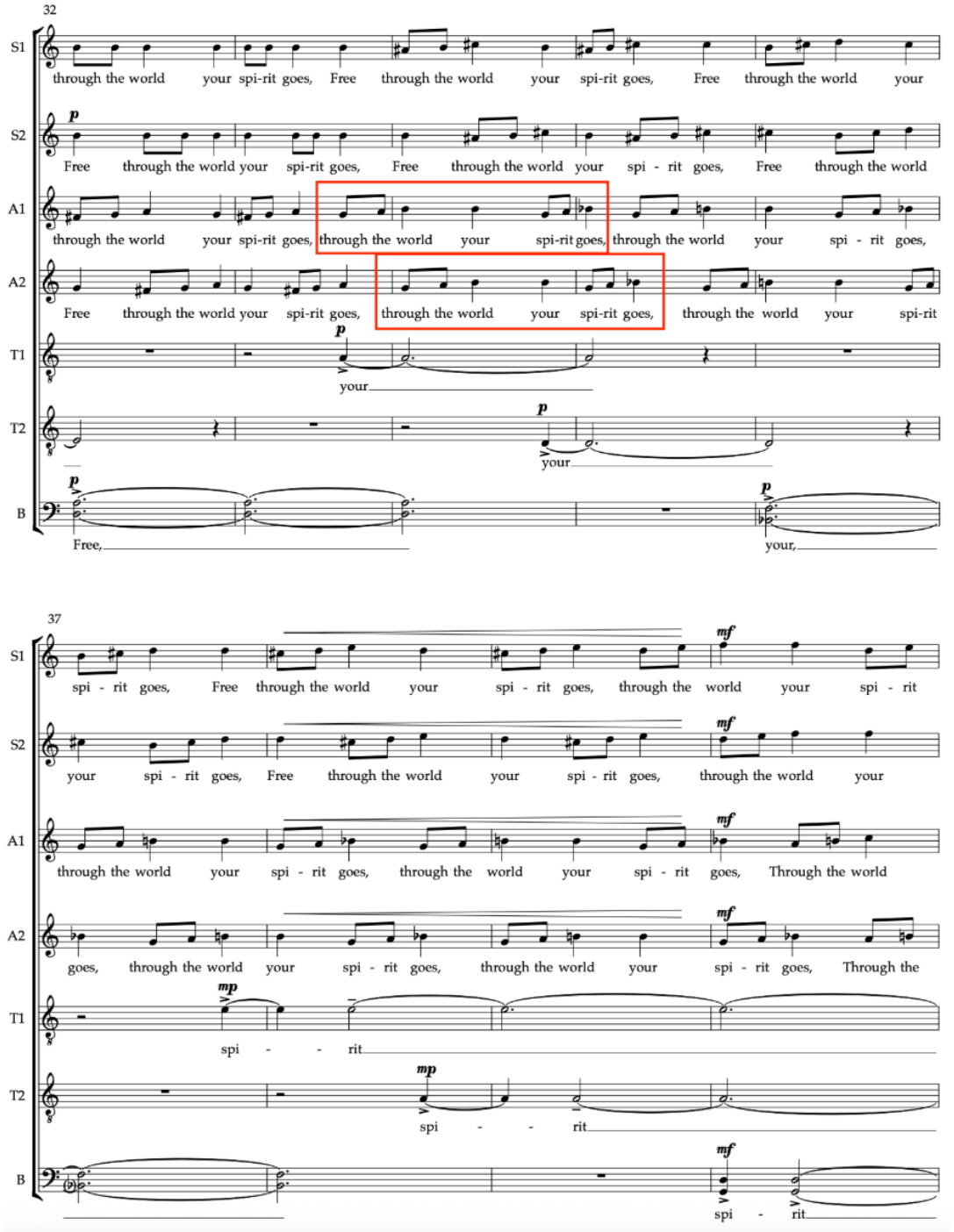


Figure 4.18. *Comrades* (2019), bb. 32–40 (major-minor motif in red).

The sopranos, entering the texture on B (b. 31), a fifth higher than the altos' initial E, imitate the same ascending trajectory, with a similar alternating D major/D minor three-note motif (bb. 41–46). The incessant layering of voices, combined with the rising pitch and dynamics, induces a sense of urgency, which is apparent in the poetic text. This aligns with Wallace Berry's statement that 'the progressive complication and diversification of musical texture are assumed

to be evocative of the impression of rising intensity, an intensity which increases the more the progression is prolonged.'[50] According to Desmond, the looping technique, which was influenced by his growing interest in ambient music during his doctoral studies, sought to reflect 'the sound of fluttering wings [...] so the spirit is literally exiting on wings and leaving'.[51] The same imitative polyphony with ascending melodic patterns in the upper voices is repeated on 'We meet beyond earth's barred gate, where all the world's wild rebels are' (bb. 73–89), producing the same effect of spirits taking flight and leaving the confines of the prison in which the poet's sister sits.

Desmond applies a similar approach, based on a rising octatonic scale and alternating three-note idioms, in '*Bás Choluim*', the sixth movement of his sacred cantata *Amra Choluim Chille*. The soprano and altos repeat the text '*Féach an spéir!*' ('Look at the sky!') in aleatoric counterpoint from bars 36 to 64, accompanying the solo soprano's account of Columba's journey to heaven. Desmond's choice to set this movement for only upper voices was determined by the text, which 'relates to the grief of the Uí Néill clan upon hearing of the death of St Columba.'[52] The composer sought to reflect the ancient Irish keening tradition, where the women would lament over the deceased's body.[53] Each accompanying voice sings a rising three-note octatonic cell at independent *tempi*, creating a texture suggestive of floating, which implies Columba's ascent to the afterlife. The voices rise by step in four-bar patterns, repeating the same cell a tone or semitone higher, accompanied by ascending and descending *glissandi* strings.

At bar 49, soprano and alto 1 engage in an alternating A major/A minor rising three-note motif in a rhythmically independent manner (Figure 4.19), comparable to that in *Comrades*. This controlled aleatoric pattern continues until bar 57, when both voices ascend to B and repeat the three-note octatonic motif (B–C#–D), while alto 2 adopts the major-minor pattern on E (E–F#–G#–E–F#–G♮). Composer Anselm McDonnell observes how 'aleatoric textures have a tendency to create a static effect', which is also apparent in the repeated loops of ambient music.[54] The aleatoric rhythmic notation allows for a more liberal performance of this rising musical idea, which is appropriate for illustrating the ethereal tone of the words and

[50] Wallace Berry, *Structural Functions in Music* (New York: Dover Publications, 1987), p. 190.
[51] Desmond, interview with the author, 29 October 2020.
[52] Eoghan Desmond, '100 Days – Day 1', 'Blog', *Eoghan Desmond* <https://www.eoghandesmond.com/blog?offset=1558207500622> [accessed 18 January 2024].
[53] Desmond, '100 Days – Day 1'. See also Chapter Six.
[54] Anselm McDonnell, 'A Portfolio of Original Compositions' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Queen's University, Belfast, 2020), p. 84.

the image of Columba reaching heaven, as opposed to the strict rhythms of *Comrades* and Gore-Booth's desire for her sister to escape the confines of prison.

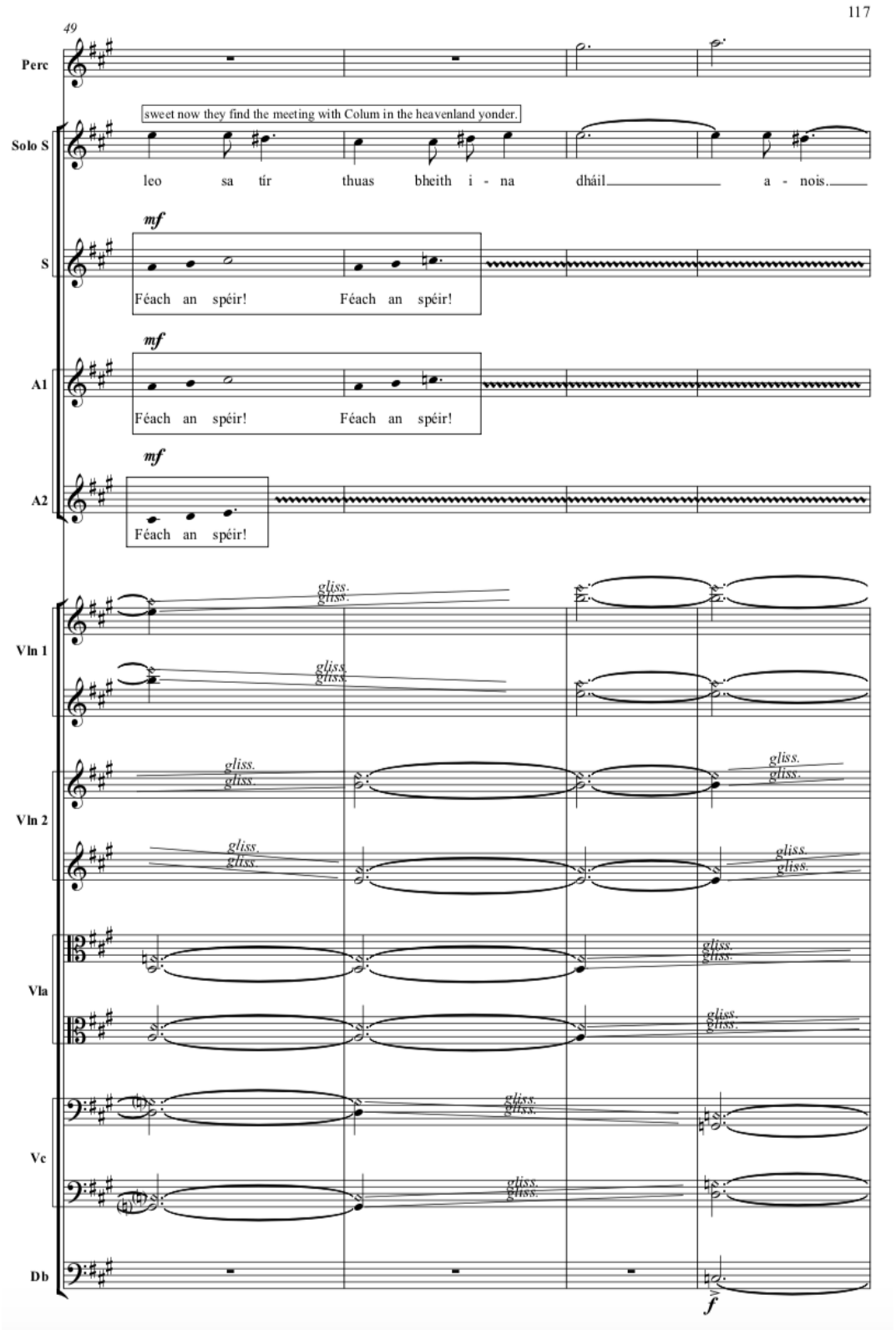


Figure 4.19. '6. *Bás Choluim*', *Amra Choluim Chille* (2019), bb. 49–52.

These examples from *Comrades* and '*Bás Choluim*' demonstrate Desmond's use of self-allusion, applying the same technique — the rising three-note octatonic phrase and major-minor pattern — to significant effect in two very different works. The rapid, *ritmico* ascent of the upper voices in *Comrades* reflects the urgency of the spirit seeking freedom, as opposed to the upper texture's slower, primarily aleatoric ascent in *Amra Choluim Chille*, illustrating Columba's journey to heaven. The similar idea of spirits in both texts, whether they float 'free through the world' or ascend to heaven, suggests the reason for Desmond's use of the same compositional device in both pieces. As well as both texts having similar thematic ideas at their respective points in the music, their completion in the same year, 2019, may be a further reason for Desmond using virtually interchangeable musical material. He alludes to this in his composition blog, when discussing the sixth movement of the cantata: 'I have planned more or less the whole structure, based on an octatonic ascending texture that I developed for [...] *Comrades*.'[55] The effective portrayal of the images in both works highlights Desmond's ability to illustrate diverse texts using similar compositional techniques.

Textural Approaches: Narrative and Structural Aspects

Desmond's systematic development of texture is a notable narrative and structural technique evident in his choral compositions. Regarding the role of texture in a composer's communication of text, Abbie Betinis asserts that it serves "as a primary storytelling device" in choral music.[56] Desmond astutely organises the voices throughout his respective compositions, often gradually expanding from homophonic to contrapuntal interplay at notable moments of emotional escalation and spiritual significance, or moving more directly between the distinct textures to indicate a verse-response or binary structure. While homophony allows for textual intelligibility and the expression of an important phrase, the composer's denser polyphonic frameworks demonstrate his 'obsession with polyphonic technique' and Renaissance counterpoint, as well as his deftness at crafting textures that contribute to generating a particular mood or atmosphere.[57] As he states, '[W]hile my output can be

[55] Desmond, '100 Days – Day 1'.
[56] Abbie Betinis quoted in Alan Denney, 'Ours to See: Emerging Trends in Today's Choral Compositions', *The Choral Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (2019): 8–21 (p. 15) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26870101> [accessed 2 February 2023].
[57] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 9.

stylistically eclectic, a focussed approach to text setting and polyphonic technique binds it all together.'[58]

Textural Diversity

In his discussion of the manipulation of musical parameters for expressive and practical purposes, Tom Wilkinson observes how '[C]ontrast and juxtaposition are seen to be effective devices, especially concerning dramatic textual communication.'[59] In Desmond's compositions, textural contrast between sections of a work, transitioning from homophony to polyphony or vice versa, serves to convey specific words, a change in character or situation within the text, or a binary form. One such example is evident in *An Gleann Mór*, whereby the contrapuntal carpet of falling phrases that reflects the Devil's Glen subsides to sparser homophony each time the lovers speak directly to each other, the composer interpreting the poem's interplay between the scenery and couple through a binary structure.

The first instance of this textural shift occurs in bar 34, the modulation from D major to A minor introducing the phrase '*Let's sit here a little longer*' and engendering an intimate tone.[60] Bass and alto sustain F and E, respectively, creating a major seventh pedal as the soprano and tenor sing an arching phrase '*very expressively*' in unison. Beginning and ending on A, they move predominantly by step, the dynamics rising and falling according to the natural inflection of the melody (Figure 4.20). The attenuated texture and slower tempo (crotchet = ca. 69 from ca. 120), marked 'Intimately', generate a sense of time suspended, with the focus on the couple, as opposed to their surroundings. The poet's response, '*We should go*', is represented by four-part triadic movement from a C major seventh to D major, resolving on a *subito piano* A minor seventh chord as the second verse begins and the polyphonic ostinato of falling quavers returns at the original tempo (Figure 4.21). This chord progression returns in bars 61 to 64 with added *tenuto* accents for a further exchange between the lovers on the text '*Here, eat this*'.

[58] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 84.
[59] Tom Wilkinson, 'Composing for a Non-Professional Chapel Choir: Challenges and Opportunities', in *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by George Corbett (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2019), pp. 69–94 (p. 77) <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0172> [accessed 7 February 2025].
[60] The poet indicates the direct speech in the poem with italics.

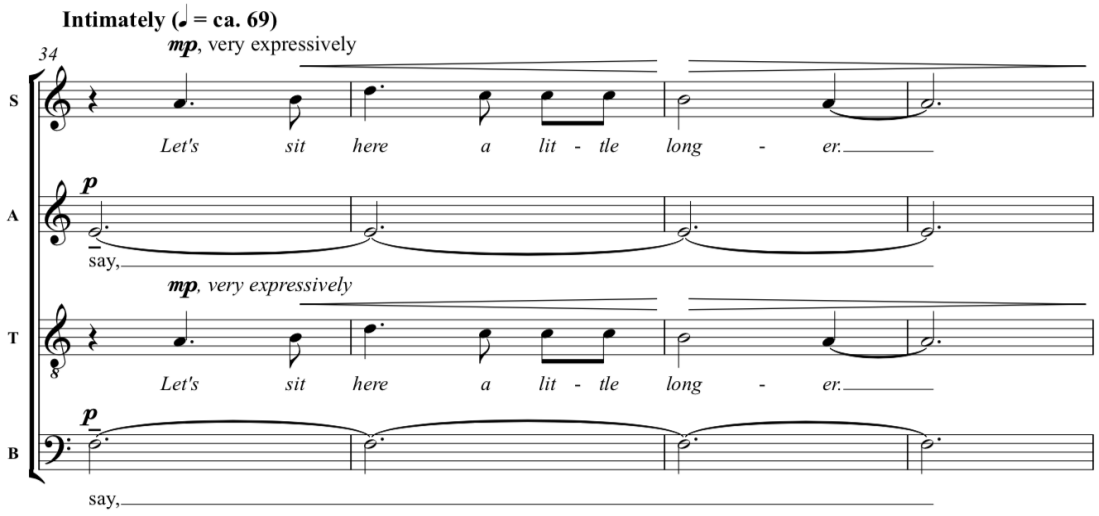


Figure 4.20. *An Gleann Mór*, bb. 34–37.

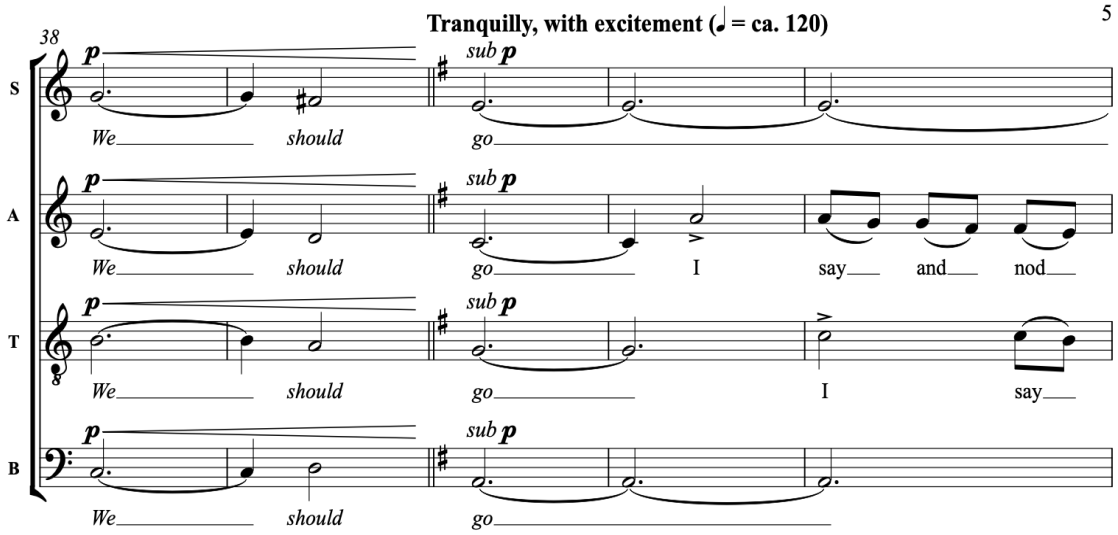


Figure 4.21. *An Gleann Mór*, bb. 38–42.

A similar harmonic progression can be observed on three separate occasions in '*Remfocul*' ('Preface'), the first movement of *Amra Choluim Chille* (bb. 51–54; 95–97 [altered]; 178–180), each aligning with a transition to homophony after more rhythmically and texturally active sections. The first appearance of the progression on the text '*Trí charbaid ghleo*' ('through the chariots of fire') in the cantata moves from B♭ minor seventh in first inversion to C minor seventh in first inversion with suspensions, concluding on an open B♭ fifth (Figure 4.22). The basses' parallel fifths ascend by step, followed by a descending fourth, while tenors fall by step from D♭ to B♭, emulating their movement in *An Gleann Mór*. Soprano 1's repeated B♭ serves as the connection between each chord, while the second soprano descends by step from A♭ to

F, like the voice's descent in the secular work. The similar control of texture in both *Amra Choluim Chille* and *An Gleann Mór* demonstrates the manner in which Desmond utilises textural variation for structural and expressive purposes.[61] In each piece, the reduction in textural activity, as well as the slower tempo and augmented rhythms, contribute to informing the listener of the conclusion of specific sections and to indicating a change in tone. As Janet Levy notes, 'texture can make the functional and sign relationships created by the other variables more evident and fully effective.'[62]

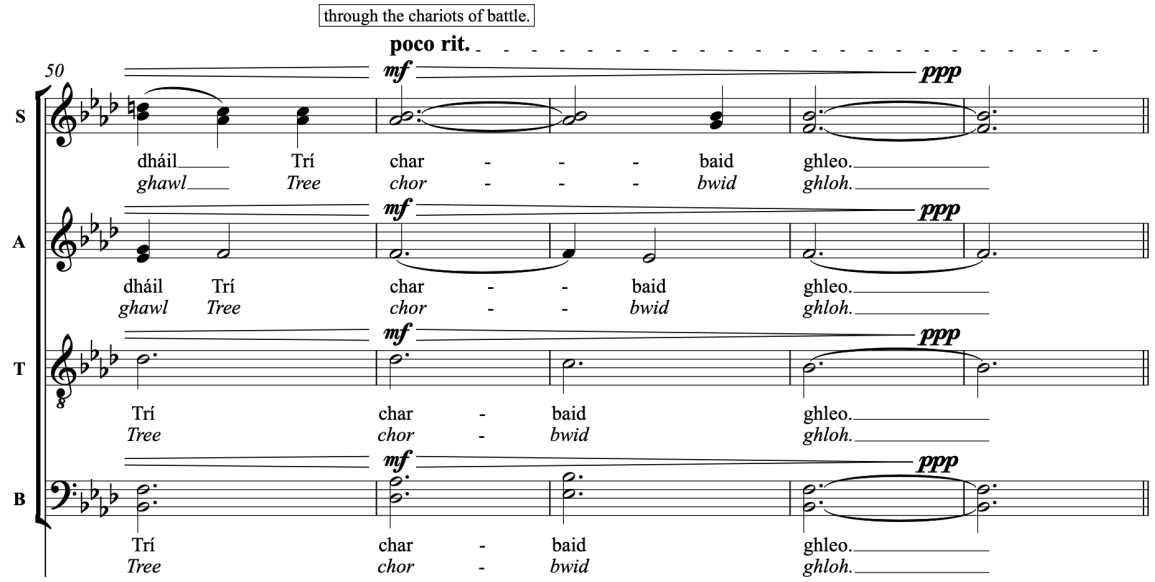


Figure 4.22. '*1. Remfocul*', *Amra Choluim Chille*, bb. 50–54.

Joseph Machlis notes how 'In the highest art there exists the utmost unity between form and content [...]: *what* is said cannot be conceived as existing apart from *how* it is said.'[63] Desmond's organisation of texture for the purpose of communicating a text's structure and emotions is effectively demonstrated in *Beloved* (2023). Inspired by the extinction of the Kauai 'ō'ō bird, this piece adapts 'a selection of lines from The Song of Songs to create a dialogue between the living and the dead', resulting in a fluid two-part musical structure.[64] The first musical idea, 'depicting a person searching in vain for their lover', comprises a solo flute

[61] The bass's rising second-falling fourth is also evident at the end of phrases in '*1. Loch Cruite*', the first movement of Desmond's choral cycle, *Guthanna ar an gCnoc* (2025).
[62] Janet Levy, 'Texture as a Sign in Classic and Early Romantic Music', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (1982), 482–531 (p. 483) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/830985> [accessed 30 January 2025].
[63] Machlis, *Introduction to Contemporary Music*, p. 48.
[64] Eoghan Desmond, 'Composer's note', *Beloved* (unpublished, 2023).

accompanied by slow choral homophony.[65] The flute line notably features a simplified transcription of the recording of the bird's final song – a further example of Desmond's use of pre-existing music for generating material for his work. The choir repeats 'return' four times, twice progressing through C minor, E♭ major seventh in second inversion, and A♭ major seventh in slow-moving rhythms (bb. 5–9, Figure 4.22). The soprano and tenor's respective E♭ and G pedal tones, with incremental movement in the other voices, demonstrate controlled voice leading and underline the 'Lost, and alone' tone of the section. The repetition of the harmonic pattern and text also suggests the longing of the bird searching for its lover.
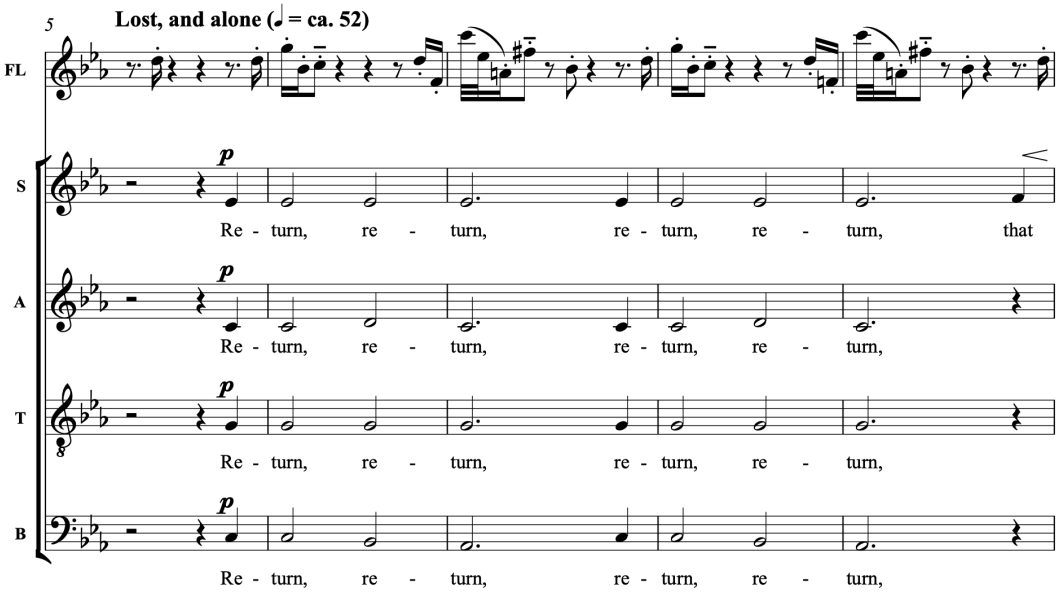


Figure 4.23. *Beloved* (2023), bb. 5–9.

The section concludes with further stepwise harmonic motion, progressing through G minor, A♭ major seventh, C minor seventh, and a B♭[4-3] suspension. Desmond's decision to use homophonic, consonant harmonic progressions that move predominantly by step demonstrates his versatility in writing for a choir's capabilities, as *Beloved* was commissioned by the Irish Youth Choir, a national, annually auditioned choir of 18 to 28 year olds who meet primarily for a short summer course. Given the choir's limited rehearsal time and early-stage choral development, the composer tailored his melodic motion, harmonic progressions, and textural structure to suit the young singers.

[65] Desmond, 'Composer's note', *Beloved*.

Desmond initiates a shift in tone with his second idea in *Beloved*, characterised by a significant change in texture, tempo, and metre. The slow 4/4 homophony (crotchet = ca. 52) and flute are replaced by 'A phantom voice, calling from beyond' in 7/8, with a tempo more than doubled (crotchet = ca. 114; b. 14). The alto repeats a *pianissimo* D throughout much of the phrase 'Come, come my beloved' in a 2+2+3 rhythmic pattern, echoed by the soprano at a one-bar interval, creating a tense atmosphere (Figure 4.24). In his analysis of contemporary choral composition, David Bednall asserts how '[T]he rapid chanting of a single note very quietly can create a strong sense of unease', which is apparent in Desmond's piece.[66] The dramatic modification of musical parameters, including the reduction in texture, effectively evokes the 'ghostly response' of the bird calling to her mate from beyond.[67] The composer includes melodic interest at the close of each phrase, the voices rising a fourth to G, and falling a step and minor third (F–D, bb. 20–21). The melodic idea is expanded to five notes (D–G–A–F–D) in the second phrase (bb. 25–26), before both voices repeat 'Come, come my beloved' on D, closing the section with a prolonged beat of silence. As part of Desmond's textural variation, this example explicitly demonstrates his skill at increasing the complexity of one musical parameter — rhythm — while maintaining simplicity in another — melody.

[66] David Bednall, 'Composing for Choir', in *The Cambridge Companion to Composition*, ed. by Toby Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), pp. 139–152 (p. 141). Desmond also uses this technique in *Oxen of the Sun* (2018) and *The Morningstar* (2019).
[67] Desmond, 'Composer's note', *Beloved*.
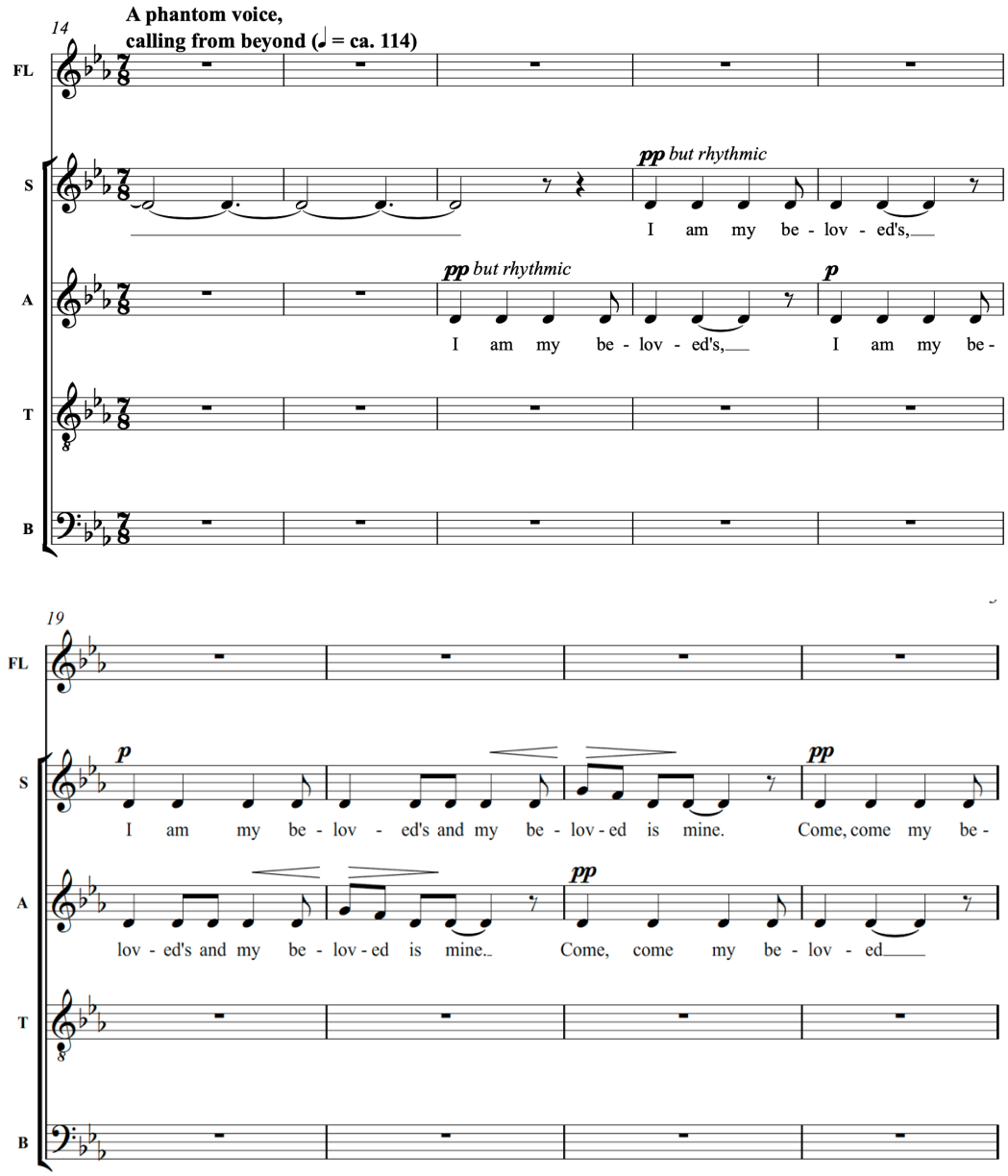


Figure 4.24. *Beloved*, bb. 14–22.

Desmond alternates between these two contrasting musical ideas throughout the work, representing the dialogue between life and death; the emotional call of 'a person searching in vain for their lover', and the desperate response of the deceased willing their beloved to join them. Musically, the lighter soprano-alto texture and quicker tempo gives the listener a period of relief from the slow four/five-part homophony. The occasional moments of thematic juxtaposition (bb. 47–67, 96–104) could imply the birds' attempts to reach each other. The distinct ideas coalesce on the text 'There, my beloved, I will give thee my love', implying their vision of reuniting in the vineyard (Figure 4.25). The superimposition of the contrasting ideas

also further exhibits the influence of ambient music on Desmond's work. The composer notes how 'The use of two planes of activity – one of which is rhythmically charged, underpinned by another, which is tranquil – helps to create this sense of tension and relief, excitement and restfulness', which is evident in this musical style.[68] The soprano and alto's searching 7/8 *pianissimo* call 'Make haste, my beloved' concludes the work, confirming the birds' separation and the mate's unrelenting call from the beyond.

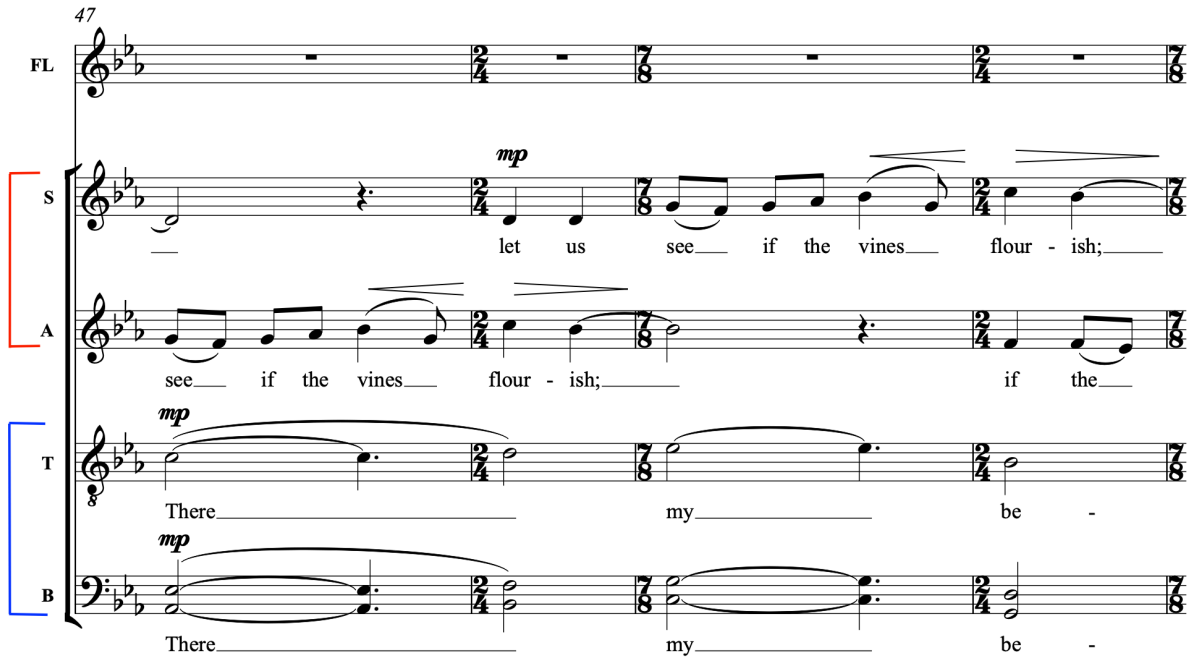


Figure 4.25. *Beloved*, bb. 47–50 (idea 1 in blue; idea 2 in red).

Desmond uses texture for similar structural purposes within the liturgical responsories *In Monte Oliveti* (2022) and *Aestimatus Sum* (2022), distinguishing between the verse and response by reducing textural density and increasing harmonic complexity in the verses. This approach reflects the Renaissance practice of having the verse sung by a small group of voices — in this case three parts — and the response by the full choir, an intentional decision made by the composer.[69] Wallace Berry remarks how '[T]he evolution and craft in the art of many a composer is most comprehensively and revealingly traced in the evaluation of his textures at various points.'[70] In an interview in 2025, Desmond stressed how he is increasingly conscious

[68] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 24. This quote relates to Desmond's use of this textural synthesis in *The Falling Tear*.
[69] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[70] Berry, *Structural Functions in Music*, p. 200.

of simplifying his textures, which is evident in the responsories, as well as in the soprano-alto sections of *Beloved*, admitting to being 'a victim' of wanting dense textures too often.[71]

The verse of *Aestimatus Sum* (bb. 31–45) is scored for upper voices only (SSA). In the composer's note, Desmond instructs that this section 'should be sung by a solo trio, potentially away from the rest of the singers, even out of sight.'[72] This direction appears to relate to the text '*Posuerunt me in lacu inferiori, in tenebrosis et in umbra mortis*' ('Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in the depths and shadow of death'). The performance of this verse out of sight indicates an intention to portray Jesus in the tomb, separated from humanity at death. In contrast to the SSATB homophonic, harmonically consonant response, the verse's lighter contrapuntal texture also provides an opportunity to underline the more intricate musical details of this section, including harmonic suspensions, chromaticism, and sequential movement.

In terms of the verse's overall structure, the middle voice of the texture (Soprano 2) begins unaccompanied, joined by the outer voices echoing the text after two beats (Figure 4.26; '*Posuerent me*', b. 31). This technique recurs throughout Desmond's output, including in *Nothing in Vain* and *In Monte Oliveti*, and further implies the Renaissance influence on his sacred writing, with new musical material often beginning with an unaccompanied voice before further entries.[73] Having heard Claudio Monteverdi's *Ecco Mormorar L'Onde* (1590), which begins with the tenor and expands in texture with the entries of the adjacent voices (Figure 4.27), Desmond recalls the impact of the 'beautiful texture' on his own compositional approach and how he was inspired to use this technique moving forward:

> [A]ll composers find ingredients they use again and again. One of the ones that I have found myself using is a low voice starting on a note, and then [...] this sparse texture filling up, and usually rising up in my music.[74]

The composer's manipulation of this archaic procedure reflects Wilkinson's observation that '[T]he techniques and conventions developed over centuries continue to be adopted and adapted today'.[75]

[71] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[72] Eoghan Desmond, 'Composer's Note', *Aestimatus Sum* (unpublished, 2022).
[73] Paul Frederick Cutter, et al, 'Responsory', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.23247> [accessed 27 July 2023].
[74] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[75] Wilkinson, 'Composing for a Non-Professional Chapel Choir', p. 91.

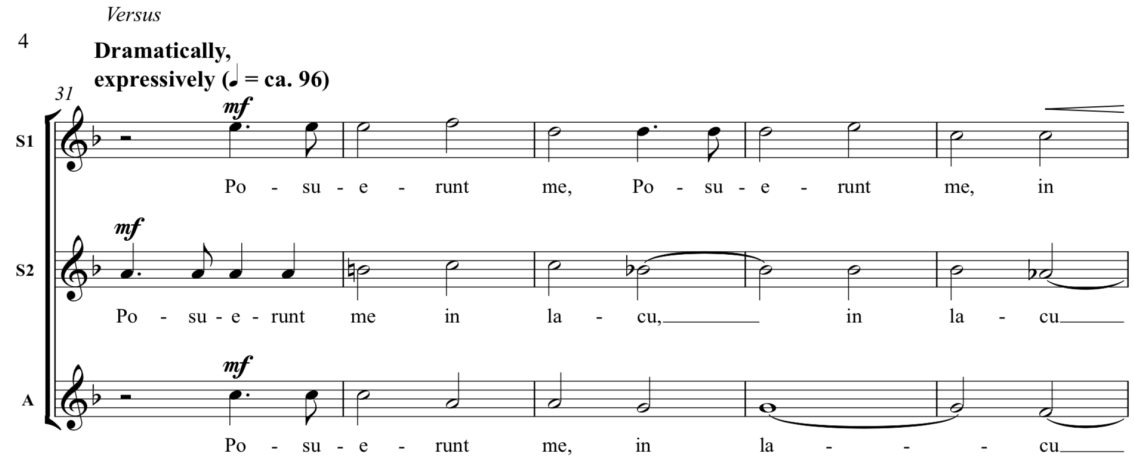


Figure 4.26. *Aestimatus Sum* (2022), bb. 31–35.

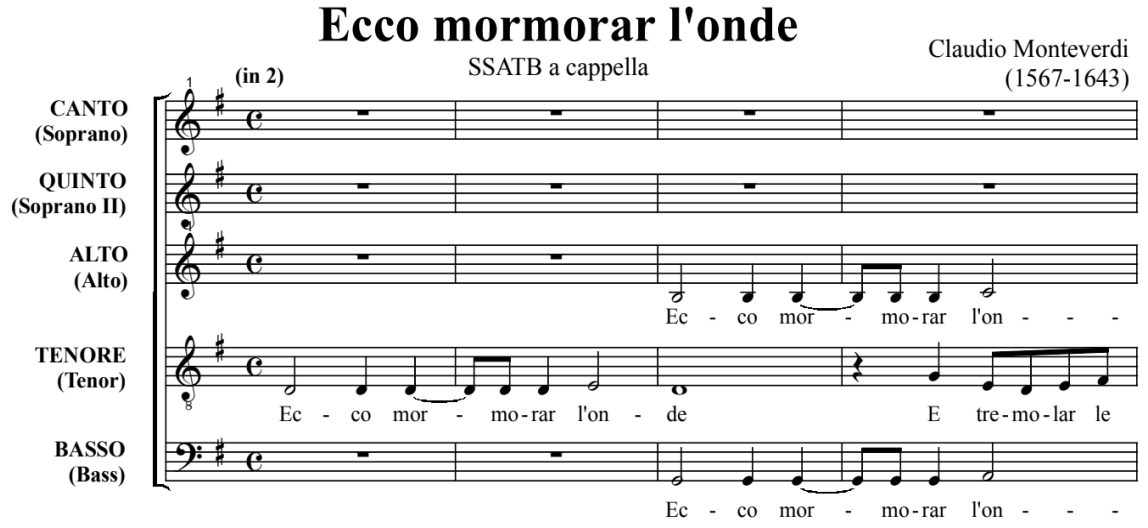


Figure 4.27. Claudio Monteverdi, *Ecco mormorar l'onde* (1590), bb. 1–4.[76]

Desmond applies the same lighter texture in the verse of *In Monte Oliveti*, for alto, tenor, and bass (bb. 41–49). The distinction between the responsory's sections is further augmented by the change in tempo and expression ('Moderately fast, Conflicted'), quicker rhythmic movement, and textual differences between the voices. As in *Aestimatus Sum*, the isolated middle voice (tenor) introduces the verse (b. 41; Figure 4.28). In both responsories, the distinction between the contrapuntal verses and the syllabic, homophonic responses demonstrates Desmond's conscientious understanding of the Renaissance form of psalm-settings and his adaptation of this textural structure for a contemporary context (Figure 4.29).

[76] Claudio Monteverdi, *Ecco mormorar l'onde* (1590), *Choral Public Domain Library* <https://www.cpdl.org/wiki/images/6/63/Ws-mont-ecc.pdf> [accessed 15 January 2025].

Jonathan Arnold asserts that 'composers of sacred music today stand at the end of an unbroken tradition through the centuries that leads back to the great contrapuntalists of the Renaissance.'[77] While embracing this historical structure of Renaissance psalms, Desmond's musical language remains contemporary, displaying his ability to draw from the past while foregrounding his individual voice.

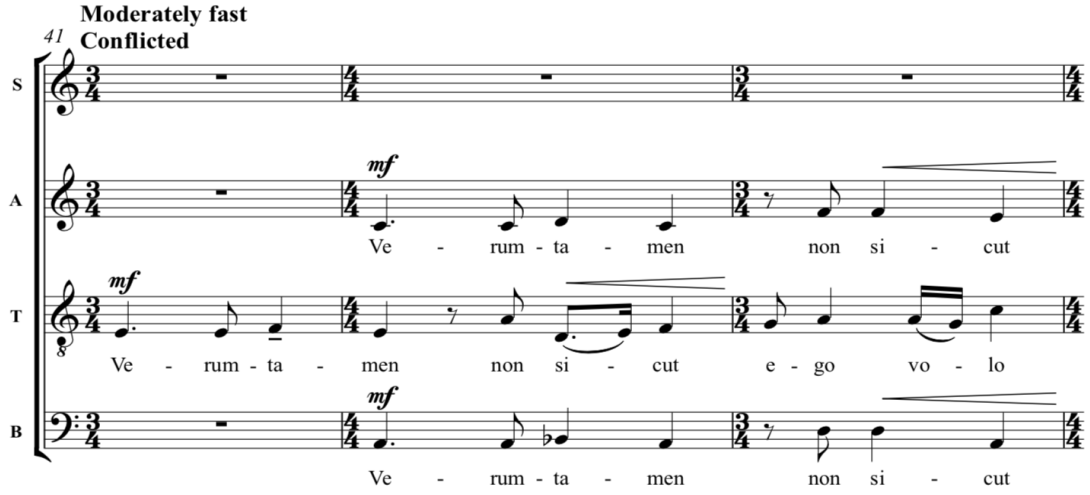


Figure 4.28. *In Monte Oliveti* (2022), bb. 41–43.
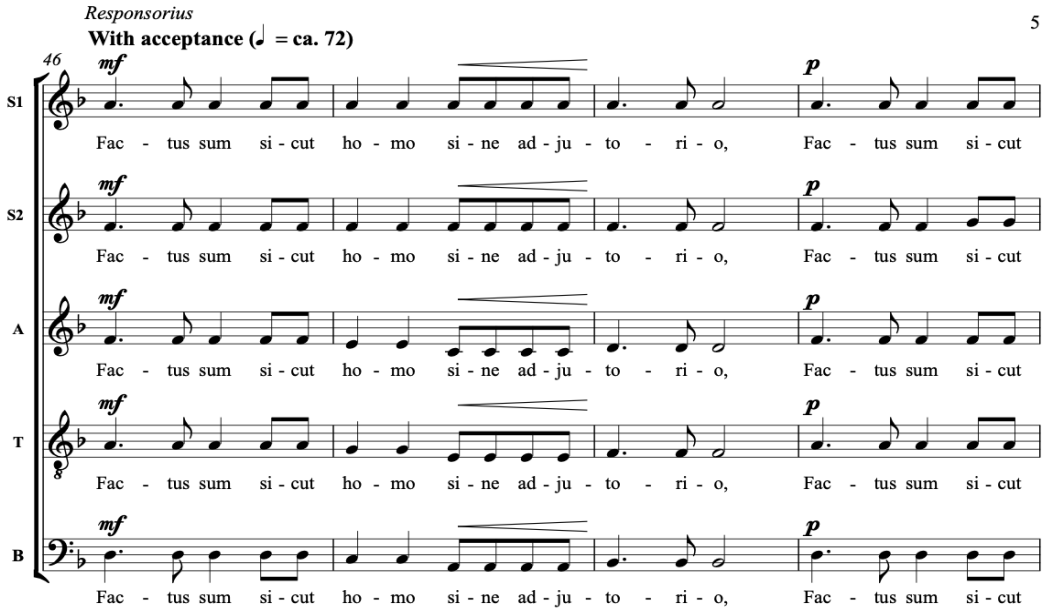


Figure 4.29. *Aestimatus Sum* response, bb. 46–49.

[77] Jonathan Arnold, *Sacred Music in Secular Society* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 145.

Musicologist Willem Elders observes how '[M]usical symbolism seldom discloses itself to the ear; it is rather to be detected by a close reading of the score.'[78] The use of texture as a symbolic device is skilfully executed in a pictorial form in some of Desmond's sacred settings. In both his choral and instrumental structures, the composer has organised the voices in a manner depicting a cross, demonstrating the influence of the Renaissance device *Augenmusik* ('Eye Music') on his writing. As previously noted, the introduction of one voice, followed by the surrounding voices, is a common technique in Desmond's oeuvre, the composer citing the influence of Renaissance textures on his use of this structure. He perceives this vocal organisation as 'a textural trick, a little interplay of voices that I found that I like […], and that can be quite versatile.'[79]

From the score of *Nothing in Vain*, we can observe that the isolated entry and sustained conclusion of the tenor's E♭, leaving it briefly alone in bar 4, creates the image of a cross with the other voices (Figure 4.30; 'God has created me'). Within Renaissance music, the cross was a popular form of *Augenmusik* to reflect Christian themes.[80] This appears to be a deliberate structural device used by Desmond, given its four consecutive occurrences and his similar textural presentation in his cantata *Amra Choluim Chille*.[81] Desmond appears to be embedding a level of narrative that is not immediately apparent to the listener but is discovered upon score analysis. The overarching subject — Newman's trust in God's plan — within the texture is pivotal in the composer's work, aligning with his professed dedication to 'go past the surface' of the music to convey the text's essence.[82] Beyond the prayerful ambience established by the simple homophonic harmonies of the introduction, the very symbol of Christianity resides in, or indeed constitutes, the texture, further accentuating Newman's faith.

[78] Willem Elders, *Symbolic Scores: Studies in the Music of the Renaissance* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), p. 15.
[79] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[80] Fabrice Fitch, *Renaissance Polyphony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 216.
[81] See Chapter Six.
[82] Desmond, interviewed by Grimes and Ferguson, 'amplify #50' (13:21–13:26).

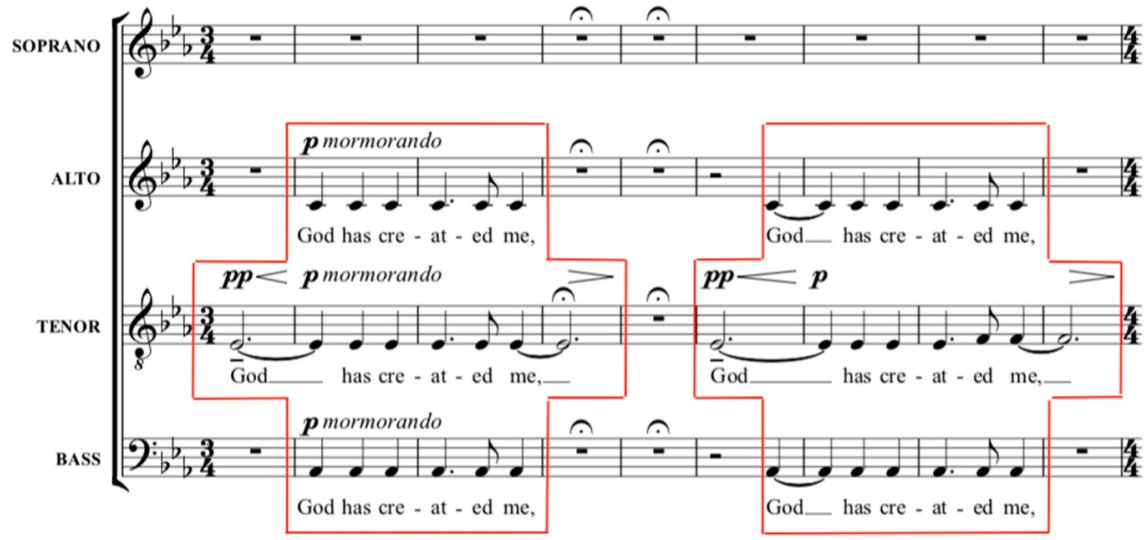


Figure 4.30. *Nothing in Vain*, bb. 1–9.

Ambient Ostinati and Textural Layering

Like the chordal motion of the above idea in *Nothing in Vain*, and the responses of the liturgical *In Monte Oliveti* and *Aestimatus Sum*, many of Desmond's sacred compositions include homophonic structures that contribute to establishing the prayerful tone of the respective texts. As previously stated, despite the composer's fascination with polyphony, the chordal movement stems from his desire in recent years to simplify his textures, in order to make his music more accessible to learn in a short period of time, particularly for non-professional ensembles.[83] The repetitive nature of the harmonic progressions is also influenced by his 'obsession with ambient music', a genre characterised by repetition, minimal harmonic motion, and superimposed motifs.[84] While there is a sense of simplicity and restraint in his homophonic structures, Desmond regularly uses harmonic ostinati upon which to expand his textures, the underlay remaining unchanged as new melodic ideas and further voices are added to an augmenting polyphonic framework, maintaining melodic interest.

Ostinati play a significant role in the communication of Newman's devotional words in *Nothing in Vain*. The underlying harmonic patterns engender a sense of concentration in prayer — which often involves continuous repetition of religious supplications — and help to unite the overall musical structure, with Desmond beginning each of the four sections with a homophonic motif in the lower voices and gradually layering chant-like melodies above the

[83] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[84] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 8.

repeated harmonic idea. One such ostinato in the accompanying voices (alto-tenor-bass) is marked by frequently shifting time signatures in C Aeolian (bb. 68–87). Despite the varying metre, homogeneity is maintained with the rhythmic pattern occurring five times consecutively, diminishing from 10/8 to 7/8 across every four-bar grouping (Figure 4.31). The rhythmic diminution by a quaver beat through each bar aligns with the stressed syllables of the prayer fragments — 'God has created me, I am a link in a chain, If I do but keep God's commandments, who does nothing in vain'. Desmond's homorhythmic, syllabic framework could be deemed to reflect prayerful recitation, the textual repetition accentuating Newman's obedience in following God's plan for him.
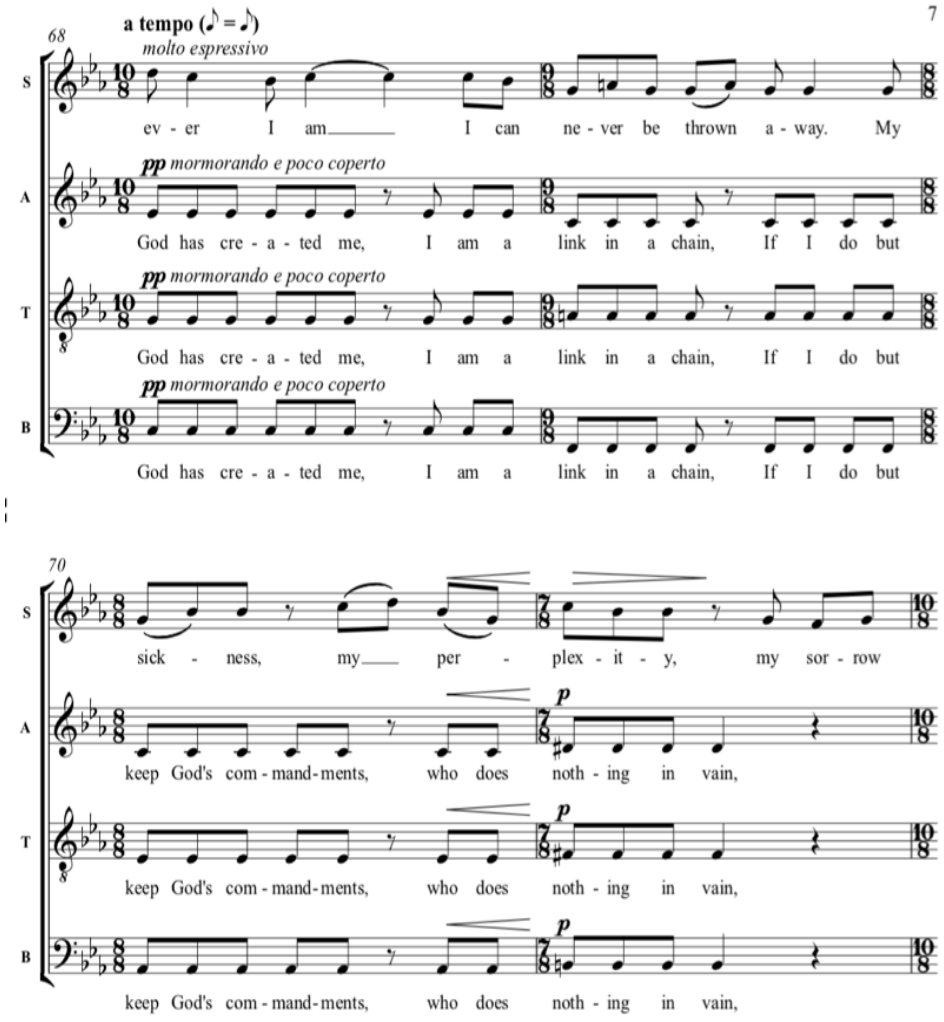


Figure 4.31. *Nothing in Vain*, bb. 68–71.

James MacMillan follows a similar approach to creating ostinati, such as in *Divo Aloysio Sacrum* (1991), *7 Last Words from the Cross* (1995), and *A Child's Prayer* (1996).[85] MacMillan has noted how the repetition of a simple idea that forms patterns within a work, such as a set of chords, 'can focus attention and create atmosphere giving a bedrock of sounds from which other things emerge'.[86] This stance may have influenced Desmond's text-setting process, given his experience of performing MacMillan's choral works, and his acknowledgment of the Scottish composer's impact on his broader compositional approach.[87] This direction could also have emerged from Desmond's doctoral studies with Professor Phillip Cooke, a sacred music composer and James MacMillan scholar, alongside his own interest in ambient music.[88]

The repeated harmonic patterns in *Nothing in Vain* effectively draw the listener into the worshipper's litanies, articulating their spiritual meaning and engendering a meditative atmosphere. Leonard Meyer observes how musical elements become particularly meaningful 'if they point to, indicate, or imply something beyond themselves'.[89] Although *Nothing in Vain* is not ostensibly related to the Rosary — a Christian ritual which involves the worshipper reciting a set of prayers at prescribed intervals — the five consecutive statements of the mantra 'God has created me…' in Desmond's setting indicate a possible association with its five decades, which are repeated in accordance with a worshipper's prayer beads. As the sopranos sing of 'sickness', 'perplexity', and 'sorrow', the rhythmically diminishing ostinato could relate to the five Sorrowful Mysteries within the Rosary, which articulate Jesus's suffering. The retreat from 10/8 to 7/8 on each repetition also points to each decade, the rhythmic diminution through each bar possibly reflecting the counting down of prayers on the Rosary beads. This ritual intimation is further strengthened by the *pianissimo mormorando e poco coperto* (very soft, slightly covered murmuring) instruction, which builds in dynamics with each recurrence and culminates in a *forte* conclusion, suggesting the growing intensity of prayer. The unexpected change to 4/4, as opposed to 7/8, in the final bar of the motif's fifth presentation (b. 87) serves as a structural device, indicating the conclusion of this section and the beginning of new musical material in 3/4.

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[85] Movement I of MacMillan's *7 Last Words from the Cross* features a repeated cadential figure in the strings. More significantly, Movement VI involves an ATB ostinato on 'It is finished' below the soprano melody, like Desmond's ATB ostinato in *Nothing in Vain* (as well as in *Aestimatus Sum* and *In Monte Oliveti*).
[86] Shirley Ratcliffe, 'MacMillan', *Choir & Organ*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (1999), p. 38.
[87] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[88] Phillip Cooke is a Professor of Composition at Aberdeen University, Scotland, and has published extensively on James MacMillan, including the monograph *The Music of James MacMillan* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2019).
[89] Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 34.

The succession of chords in this section (C minor, F major, A♭ major, and B major) exhibits a non-functional harmonic nature, with no traditional connection between each adjacent chord.[90] The B major harmony is the most anomalous within the ostinato, deviating from an expectation of B♭, the leading-tone chord in C Aeolian. However, the enharmonic connection between the thirds (D#/E♭) of the chords of B major and C minor highlights their proximity, allowing the alto to maintain their note while the tenor and bass resolve by semitone to C minor, renewing the ostinato. The unexpected parallel augmented second ascent from A♭ major to B major is further emphasised by the minor second/false relation between the B♮ in the bass and the soprano's B♭, creating an uncomfortable dissonance on each appearance of 'nothing in vain'. Although the B♭ could be conceived as A#, constituting a B major seventh, the simultaneous notation of the natural and flat B increases the harmonic tension and a yearning for resolution. False relations were frequently applied in Renaissance madrigals and motets for the purpose of expressive text painting and conveying conflict.[91] They abound in Desmond's output, particularly at specific moments of tension or unrest, indicating the influence of historical harmonic nuances on the composer, as well as his interest in 'planes of dissonance'.[92] It is possible that these specific dissonances serve to communicate the sopranos' expressions of suffering. Despite 'sickness', 'perplexity', and 'sorrow', Newman will continue to serve God, 'who does nothing in vain'.

A similar ostinato with non-functional harmonies and false relations is evident in *In Monte Oliveti*, depicting Jesus's suffering as he contends with his imminent crucifixion. The eight-bar ostinato moves in parallel between the chords F–A minor–E♭–G minor, repeating six consecutive times beneath the soprano's melody (Figure 4.32). Parallel harmonic motion is also apparent in the response of *Aestimatus Sum* (Dm–C–Am–B♭), the tenor and bass moving in parallel fifths, while the alto and bass form parallel compound thirds (bb. 22–27; 46–51; Figure 4.33). Desmond regularly uses open fifths in the lower voices, which establish planes

[90] The first three chords are connected through a common note (e.g. C connects C minor and F major) and two pairs of corresponding tones separated by a tone or semitone. If considering this chordal pattern within C minor/Aeolian, F major is the borrowed subdominant from the parallel C major tonality. A♭ major is the submediant within C minor. B major is external to the key, despite the B♮ serving as the leading tone in C minor.

[91] George Dyson, 'False relation', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.09269> [accessed 25 April 2023].

[92] Desmond, interview with the author, 24 January 2025.

of tonal centre, without necessarily being major or minor, thus undermining the strength of tonal progressions.

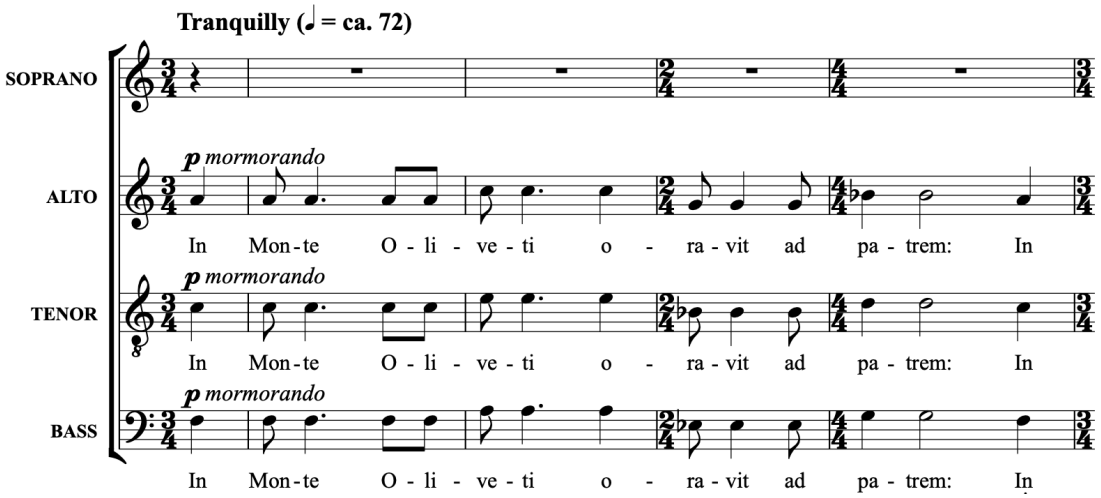


Figure 4.32. *In Monte Oliveti*, bb. 1–4.
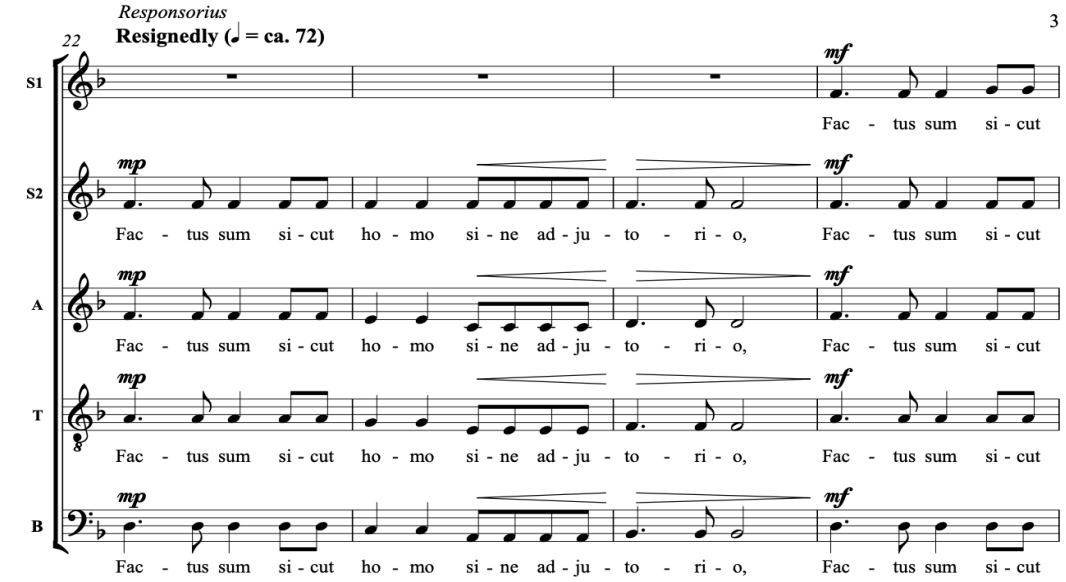


Figure 4.33. *Aestimatus Sum*, bb. 22–25.

Within *In Monte Oliveti*, the soprano embodies the voice of Jesus above the ostinato, descending an octave by step (G5–G4), the B♭ indicating G Dorian mode. Word painting is suggested in the final bar of the phrase, the soprano's descent from A to G crossing beneath the alto's B♭, creating a brief secundal dissonance before resolving to G (Figure 4.34). Although it could simply be a result of the descending scale's natural ending, it also reflects

the text '*transeat a me*' ('let it pass from me'). The melody falling beneath the accompaniment possibly intends to depict the 'cup' ('*calix*') passing from Jesus.

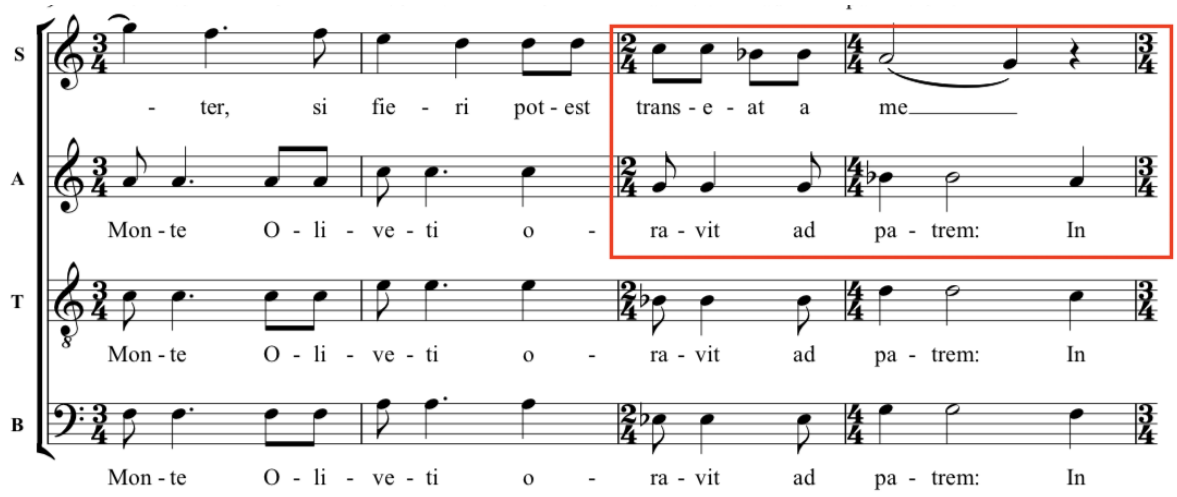


Figure 4.34. *In Monte Oliveti*, bb. 9–12 (possible word painting in red).

The ostinati within the aforementioned sacred works convey Desmond's sensitivity to the prayerful contexts, the repeated patterns generating a contemplative atmosphere and sense of ritual, communicating the essence of the words. The homophonic textures also provide a stable foundation above which the melodic material can develop, conveying the prayer's text. As noted above, Desmond has acknowledged the influence of ambient music on his textural frameworks; according to composer Simon Cummings, the ambient genre 'has always found itself attributed with extra-musical connotations pertaining to that which we might loosely called 'beyond'', making it an apt influence in these sacred settings.[93]

As well as the meditative effects created by homophonic ostinati in Desmond's sacred works, his secular output demonstrates the versatility of this textural device in evoking diverse moods. A particularly effective ostinato forms a central role in *Comrades*, instilling a sense of agitation and unease from the piece's beginning. Desmond starts each of the two verses with the repeated pattern, the texture gradually increasing in contrapuntal density and emotional intensity with the stratified looping melodies, creating a tense atmosphere. Following the altos' pensive undulating introduction (bb. 1–4), basses begin the *ritmico* section in bar 5 with the lower voice repeating *tenuto* crotchet beats on C3, serving as a pedal through the phrase 'The peaceful night that round me flows, breaks through your iron prison doors'. Bass 1 continually

[93] Cummings, 'The Steady State Theory', pp. 114–115.

rises from C to F# through an octatonic 1:2 scale, creating dissonances with the repeated C, which underscores the tension in Gore-Booth's words (Figure 4.35). This pattern is repeated five times in the opening section (bb. 5–25), embodying 'a heart pounding', an 'insomniac mantra', according to the composer.[94]
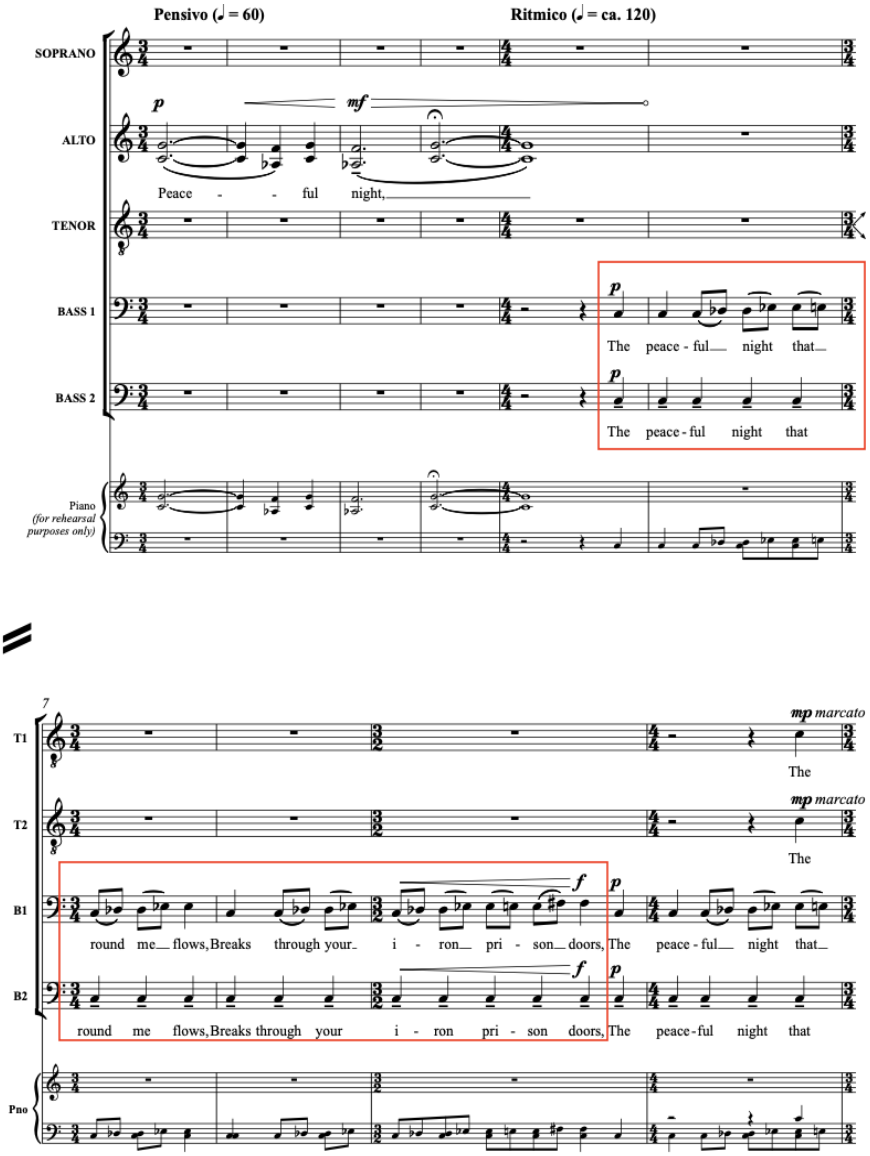


Figure 4.35. *Comrades*, bb. 1–10 (bass ostinato in red).

The bass ostinato is restored following the *fortissimo* homophonic culmination of the first verse, returning to a *subito piano* dynamic in bar 53, and renewing the gradual scaffolding of vocals until a similar climax occurs in bars 70 to 73. The layering of higher voices with

[94] Desmond, interview with the author, 29 October 2020.

independent melodic idioms above the repetitive musical backdrop reflects the influence of ambient electronic music on Desmond, particularly at this time, which coincided with his PhD. The composer acknowledges the repetitions in this piece, as well as in *Amra Choluim Chille* and *The Morningstar* (2019), as 'the beginnings of an ongoing interest in re-creating electronic and sampling effects, using only acoustic instruments and voices.'[95] Similar to the contemporary genre, the ostinato forms the substructure from which the other voices emerge and engage polyphonically, generating the rising agitation within the music, comparable to a pounding heart.

The seeds of this practice of textural layering are evident in Desmond's earlier piece 'Ladybird, Ladybird', the third movement of *More Mother Goose's Melodies* (2016). Here, the tenor and bass sing a rhythmically augmented version of the *Dies Irae* chant (Figure 4.36) in parallel octaves beneath the sopranos' and altos' *piano* polyphonic flurry of looping phrases, which evoke the impression of fluttering wings and create a constant sense of motion throughout the piece. Following the altos' two-bar introduction in 9/8 at a *presto* tempo, the second alto begins their first complete seven-bar 'Ladybird, fly away home' phrase, centred on F (bb. 81–87, Figure 4.37). There is a minimal range of a fourth, the voice moving chromatically between A♭ and A♮, and G♭ and G♮ throughout, suggesting an F Phrygian-Aeolian modality. Alto 2 concludes the phrase with four repetitions of 'away', rising a second (F–G), extending to a third and fourth (F–A♭; F–B♭), before falling by step to G. Alto 1 and soprano 2 begin their phrases on G♭ and C, respectively, a dotted-crotchet beat after the second alto's initial phrase (b. 81), with soprano 1 joining the texture in bar 84. The altos' minor second dissonance (F–G♭) and the augmented fourth between alto 1 and soprano 2 (G♭–C) create an ominous tone reflective of the ladybird's panicked flight. Altos unite rhythmically in major seconds (F–G; G♭–A♭) at the beginning of bar 85, maintaining harmonic tension throughout. Although there are slight melodic variations on the repeats of the upper voices' respective motifs, the text and overriding image of flurrying wings remain unchanged, allowing the focus to turn to the lower texture's new musical idea. Desmond coins this polyphonic looping as pseudo-polyphony, describing how

> a polyphonic motif is briefly established in the upper voices, before succumbing to a minimalist repetitiousness, subordinate to the need to get through all of the (also repetitive) text, and make way for the purely homophonic entry of the lower voices.[96]

[95] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 8.
[96] Ibid., p. 10.
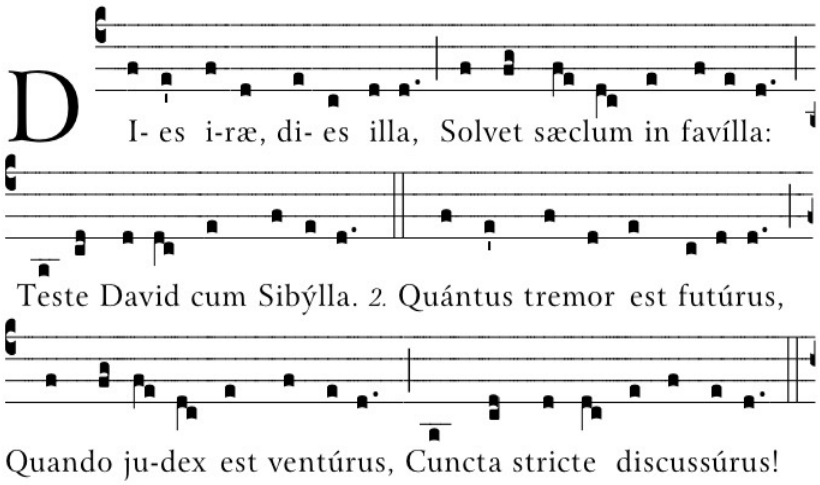


Figure 4.36. *Dies Irae* chant (c. 13th Century).[97]
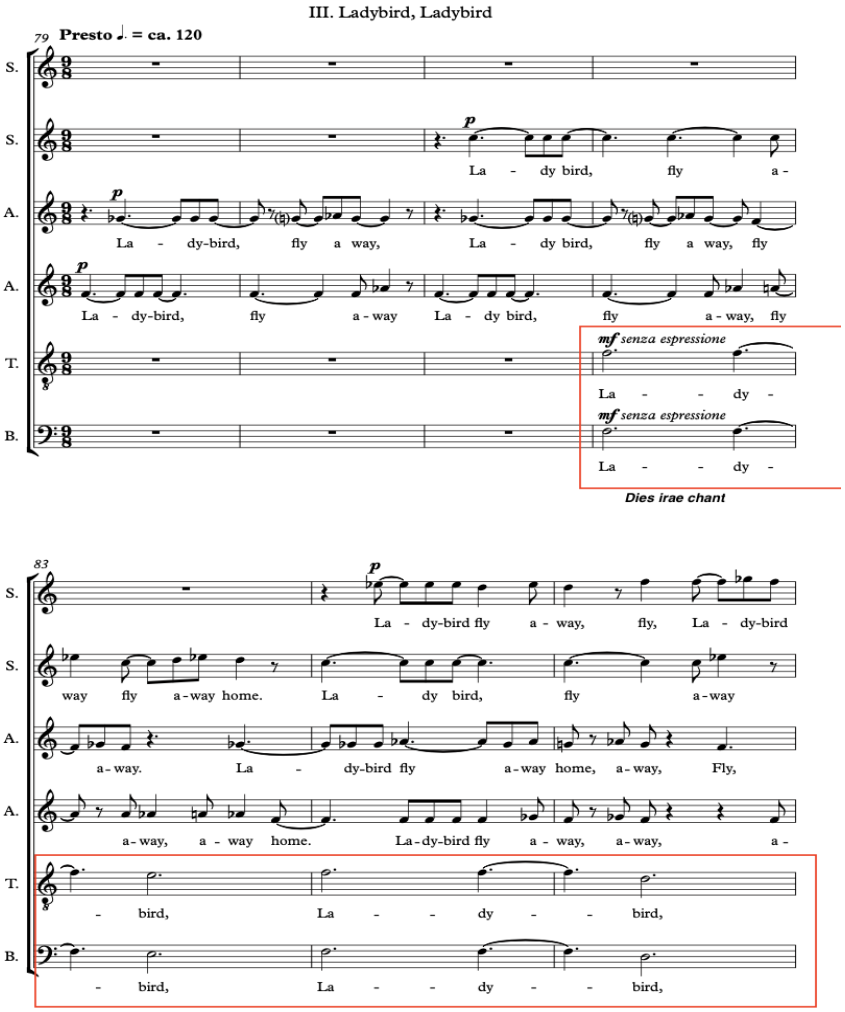


Figure 4.37. 'III. Ladybird, Ladybird', bb. 79–85 (*Dies Irae* in red).

[97] '*Dies irae*', *Gregorian Chant Hymns* <https://gregorian-chant-hymns.com/hymns-2/dies-ire.html> [accessed 20 January 2025].

The independent rhythms — primarily quavers and dotted crotchets — of each voice create a polyrhythmic texture, enhancing the agitated atmosphere while also demonstrating the influence of ambient music's gradually expanding frameworks of 'overlapping, non-synchronised loops'.[98] The overriding harmonic structure could be described as unstable, given the moving bass line and the chromatic melodies of the upper texture. The resulting discordance indicates Desmond's fondness for dense textures, 'tension in time and tension in sound', the close distance and intervallic structure of the upper voices desiring resolution.[99] However, Desmond constructs melodies that are practical to sing within the complex harmonic and textural framework. While the dissonant intervals between adjacent voices create unease above the *Dies irae* chant, the four upper parts display minimal melodic activity and range, their respective phrases built on repeated notes, stepwise undulations, and sequential movement.

Beneath the polytonal tension, the tenor and bass persist *senza espressione* with the chant quotation in D Dorian, an appropriate use of this melody given its focus on the Day of Wrath and the rhyme's focus on fire and potential death. The augmented dotted minims and tied dotted crotchets, as well as the *mezzo-forte* dynamic and distinct timbre of the lower voices, enable a clearer perception of the melody and text. The rhyme's message is communicated by the overall dissonant, contrapuntal framework — the ladybird's home is in flames, and she must save her remaining child. In his polyphonic textures, it is not altogether important to Desmond that the words are intelligible:

> the point of setting a text to music is to add a layer of intangibility to the communication of the text. The aim is to produce a whole that is greater than the text on its own would be, at the expense of the direct intelligibility of the text if necessary.[100]

The layered soprano and alto melodies repeating the same text in a contrapuntal web may be intangible, but the rapid tempo, quick rhythms, dense texture, and dissonance convey the ladybird's panic over her burning home.

In the final section of *Nothing in Vain*, Desmond uses textural juxtaposition at a climactic point in the music, steadily expanding from chorale-like movement to polyphonic interplay (bb. 88–167), communicating the outpouring of Newman's conviction amidst adversity. An eight-bar SATB homophonic ostinato in dotted minims chants the text 'God does nothing in vain' (Figure 4.38), forming the bedrock of this section. A solo vocal quartet

[98] Cummings, 'The Steady State Theory', p. 95.
[99] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[100] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', pp. 12–13.

gradually enters the texture at individual phases with independent melodic ideas, portraying an impassioned expression of faith and sacrifice, before receding to slow homophony from bar 152, and repeating the assured mantra with the larger ensemble. This controlled increase in textural density reflects Desmond's sensitivity to the text, his meticulous attention to each voice, and the impact of early music on his text setting, with independent melodies interweaving within a fluid contrapuntal texture.
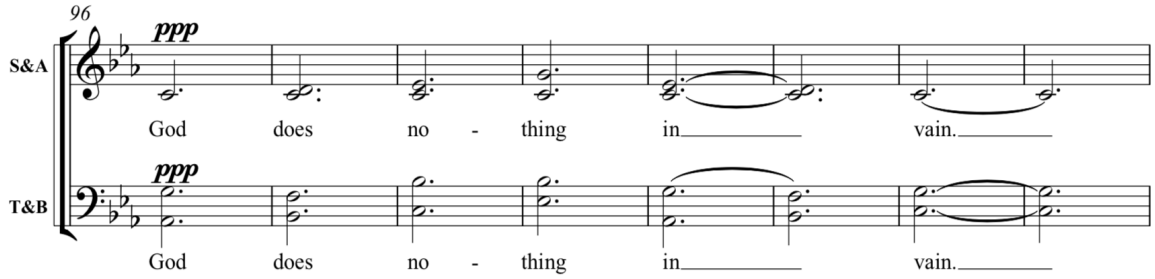


Figure 4.38. *Nothing in Vain*, bb. 96–103.

The superimposition of the soloists' melodic gestures further underlines the presence of ambient music in Desmond's compositional methods. It is notable that Cummings has observed the influence of the past on ambient music, comparing its process of overlapping loops

> to the mediaeval practice of isorhythm, in which rhythmic and melodic components (the *talea* and *color* respectively) […] are continually repeated, their asynchronous nature leading to musical patterns that are continually new, yet which arise from a fixed and limited range of possibilities.[101]

Whilst the intertwining melodic idioms in Medieval and Renaissance choral music contribute to communicating the essence of a sacred text and immersing the listener in its spiritual meaning, the similar looping practice in today's instrumental ambient music can carry extra-musical connotations, creating 'a sonic environment within which contemplation' can occur.[102] This fusion of past and present styles in Desmond's choral sound conveys the effectiveness of both in articulating the spirituality of Newman's meditative words.

According to Cummings, 'steady states depend upon longer durations in order to be appreciated and effective'.[103] The choral ostinato in the final section of *Nothing in Vain* occurs

[101] Cummings, 'The Steady State Theory', p. 97.
[102] Ibid., p. 115.
[103] Ibid., p. 100.

eight times in succession, forming the harmonic pattern A♭7–B♭9–Cm7–Cm6/5–A♭7–B♭9–open C (sustained for two bars). There is a palindromic contour in the soprano's phrase from C to G to C, the alto intoning a pedal C throughout the progression. The rising-falling melodic contour, coupled with the augmented phrasing of 'in vain' in the second half of the pattern, evokes the impression of meditative inhalation and exhalation, and subsequent resolution. Desmond's repetition of this final line could intend to reassure the soloists and listeners of their unique purpose, that 'God does nothing in vain', despite their tribulations. Through this repeated harmonic backdrop that transmits the fundamental message of the meditation, the composer illustrates his understanding of Newman's conversion to Catholicism and an awareness that, throughout this difficult process, his devotion to God remained constant. The tempo indication 'Relaxed. Assured' supports this evaluation, forming a steady bedrock below the soloists' expressions of their adversities, and symbolising Newman's unwavering faith.

At bar 104, the bass soloist introduces a lament-like melody adapted from the chant *Tu es Petrus* ('When I am among strangers'). The texture organically transitions to polyphony at bar 114 with the tenor's entry, followed by the alto in the succeeding bar, forming arching melodies on the text 'When my spirits sink, and my future is hidden'. The soprano enters the contrapuntal tapestry at bar 125 with the same text. The melodic fragments are defined by descending melismas on 'spirits sink' and 'hidden', illustrating these words. Similar to the '*transeat a me*' ('pass from me') example in *In Monte Oliveti* (Figure 4.34), the voice-crossing on the first presentation of 'hidden' in the alto and tenor (bb. 118–19), and tenor and bass (b. 122), could be interpreted as word painting, the lower voice obscuring the word as it ascends within the texture (Figure 4.39).
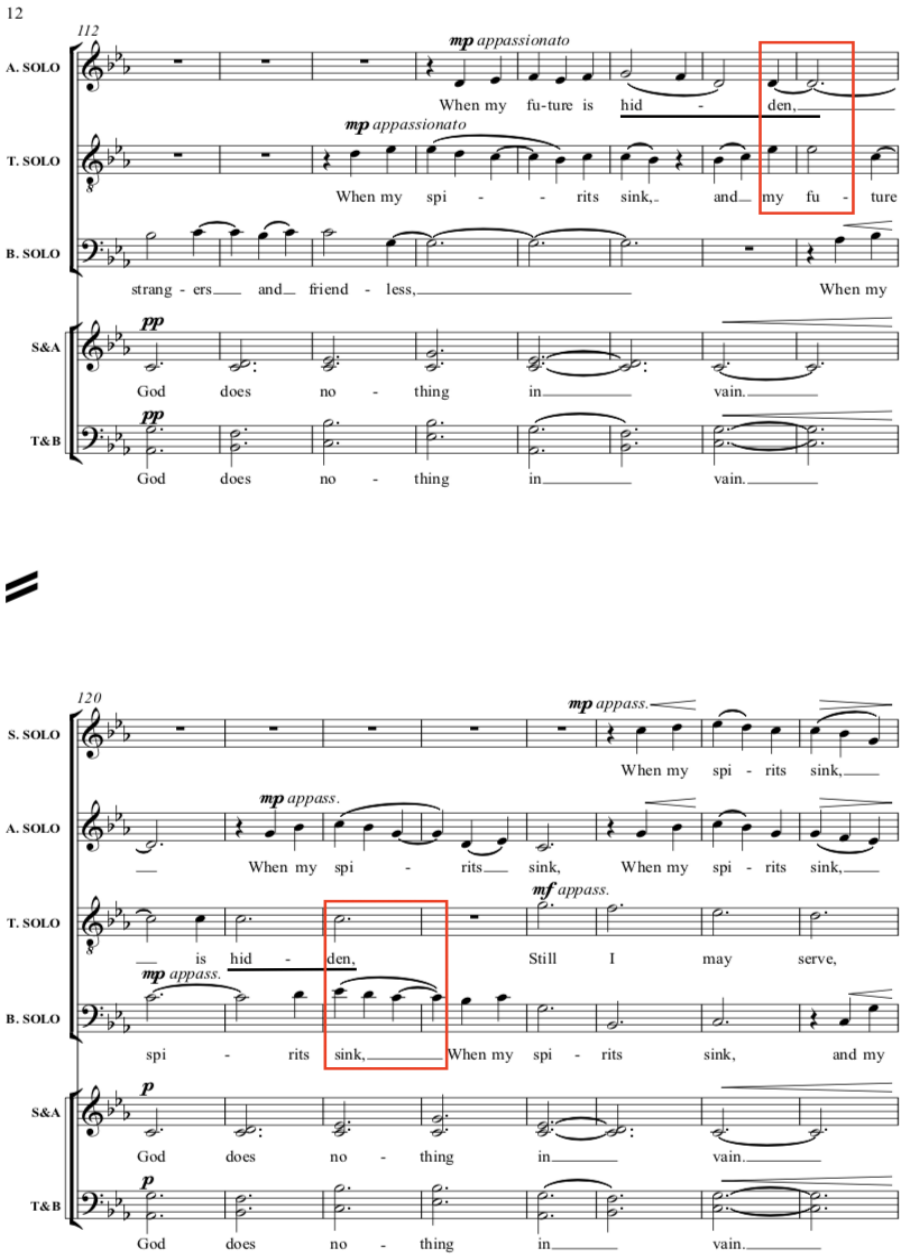


Figure 4.39. *Nothing in Vain*, bb. 112–127.

'[M]y future is hidden' continues to weave throughout the parts as the devotional statement 'Still I may serve' unfolds as a descending four-bar phrase in dotted minims in the tenor (b. 124), echoed by the alto in bar 128. The vocal interplay in this climactic section reinforces Desmond's intention to achieve a contrapuntal fluency in his work, with equal significance given to each voice: 'the big key with choral music is […] this chance to have this polyphonic texture, which is somehow both homogeneous down through the parts and also different', due

to the diverse dimensions of each voice part.[104] Similar to the increasing tension within the expanding polyphonic textures of *Comrades* and 'Ladybird, Ladybird', the impassioned, layered melodies intertwine and increase in dynamics within *Nothing in Vain*, foregrounding the sacrifices Newman was willing to make to show his devotion to God.

The melodic independence of each soloist in this section manifests the struggles outlined within the text, yet the ensemble's persistent homophonic backdrop ensures a focus on what is fundamental in Newman's life: God. As Desmond asserts, 'the most important aspect of the text is the conviction'.[105] Furthermore, the superimposition of the voices' conflicting compound and simple rhythms coincides with the simultaneous intensification of dynamics, texture, and textual repetition (Figure 4.40). The high tessitura of each voice, particularly the soprano and alto, at a *forte* dynamic, contributes to the climax of the work, the impassioned height of Newman's prayer. Desmond's textural juxtaposition and escalation of musical parameters pertain to the meaning of the text; despite the difficulties Newman endures, he commits to serving God, who 'does nothing in vain'.
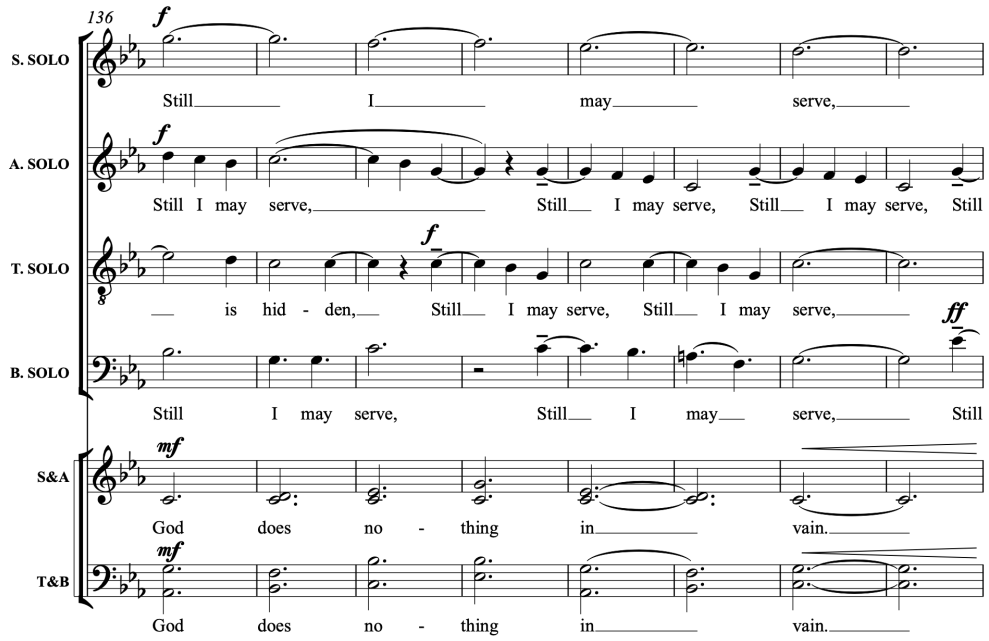


Figure 4.40. *Nothing in Vain*, bb. 136–143.[106]

[104] Desmond, interviewed by Grimes and Ferguson, 'amplify #50' (6:55–7:05).
[105] Desmond, interview with the author, 24 January 2025.
[106] The bass soloist's descending phrase through 'Still I may serve' (bb. 139–143), which is also repeated in bars 147 to 151, is intervalically identical to the tenor's concluding idiom in Peter Warlock's Christmas carol *Bethlehem Down* (1927). Although there is no connection between the two works' subject matter, it is likely that Desmond has performed *Bethlehem Down* as a chorister. The quotation could be subconscious or Desmond may have liked the motif and desired to use it in his own music.

It is clear from the aforementioned examples of Desmond's music that ostinati and textural layering are central facets of his compositional style, serving a narrative, expressive, and structural function. The composer's fascination and abiding engagement with early polyphony is merged with his interest in ambient music and its characteristic looping techniques, resulting in a compelling communication of specific phrases, and a text's broader subject and mood. His gradual development of texture, including the synthesis of polyphonic and homophonic structures, is effectively conveyed in both sacred and secular works. Where the homophonic ostinati create a contemplative ambience beneath the soprano's melody in *In Monte Oliveti* and a reassuring accompaniment to the polyphonic soloists' emotional outpouring in *Nothing in Vain*, the basses' pulsating ostinato in *Comrades* and the emergence of melodic material beneath the flurrying repeated motifs in 'Ladybird, Ladybird' maintain a sense of tension throughout the music, painting the overriding impression of the texts' events. Desmond's multifaceted approach to texture conveys his developed integration of diverse musical influences and his sensitivity to the words' literal and deeper meanings, creating engaging atmospheres befitting each set text.

Harmonic Language

Desmond's works reflect the non-functional harmonic language of contemporary music, using chords that do not abide by functional tonality and often prioritising the progression of individual melodic lines, as exhibited in the ostinati of *Nothing in Vain* and *In Monte Oliveti*, the octatonicism of *Comrades*, and polymodality of '*Pussycat, Pussycat*'. Similar to Clarke, his inclusion of notes outside the key signature, as well as his frequent use of false relations, also indicate a modal quality, underlining the influence of early music on his compositional approach. Desmond's absorption of modality into his harmonic idioms, particularly in his sacred works, draws from the music of the Medieval and Renaissance eras, while being contemporary in sound. The composer has also integrated modern scales into his works, with octatonicism apparent in *Comrades* and *Amra Choluim Chille*, and whole tone scales in *Mother Goose's Melodies* and *Childish Things*. A common thread throughout much of his work is the avoidance of tertian chords and strong tonal progressions, which he states stems from his interest in ambient music.[107] Desmond's consistent use of open fifths and fourths, particularly in the lower texture, undermines the tonality of works and generates a more modal palette,

[107] Desmond, interview with the author, 29 October 2020.

establishing the effect of both the past and present on his compositional approach. He has expressed a desire 'to explore extending and suspending harmony, and playing with the expectations that an audience may have not only in relation to other music, but within pieces of music themselves', avoiding the obvious harmonic choice.[108]

Tonal Evasion

A conspicuous evasion of conventional tonality is evident throughout '*i. Elsie Marley'*, the first of 'A Trio of Bourgeois Waltzes' in *More Mother Goose's Melodies*. While the soprano sings the rhythmically disjointed melody in F Lydian, the altos, tenors, and basses repeat the title 'Elsie Marley' as a harmonic ostinato, moving between F major and B major chords (Figure 4.41). Basses undulate between an octave (F–F) and fifth (B–F#), while tenors move incrementally between a fifth (F–C) and fourth (F#–B), and altos repeat a third (F–A) and sixth (D#–B). The oscillating harmonies of F and B have no functional connection, lying at polar ends of the circle of fifths at the distance of a diminished fifth. The tritone interval between the chords — emphasised by the augmented fourth leap in the second bass, and the false relation between the soprano's F and accompaniment's F# — generates an ambiguous harmonic framework. The unconventional chord pattern beneath the disjointed melody could be interpreted as Desmond illustrating Elsie Marley's disregard for conventions and work.[109] Like the facetious use of bimodality in '*Pussycat, Pussycat*', the composer sought to 'poke fun' at people's avoidance of the *diabolus in musica*.[110] The final chord in the movement, a synthesis of C dominant seventh and C minor, with the E♭–E♮ false relation, also creates a harsh tone far removed from the notion of 'Bourgeois', indicating Desmond's comical interpretation of the rhyme and his clever use of dissonance.

[108] Eoghan Desmond, 'Alt Notes #11 | Eoghan Desmond', interviewed by Shell Dooley, *HeadStuff*, 21 July 2016 <https://www.headstuff.org/entertainment/music/music-features/alt-notes-11-eoghan-desmond> [accessed 1 May 2023].
[109] The rhyme outlines Elsie lying in bed instead of working, and refusing to leave her room to dine.
[110] Desmond, interview with the author, 24 January 2025.

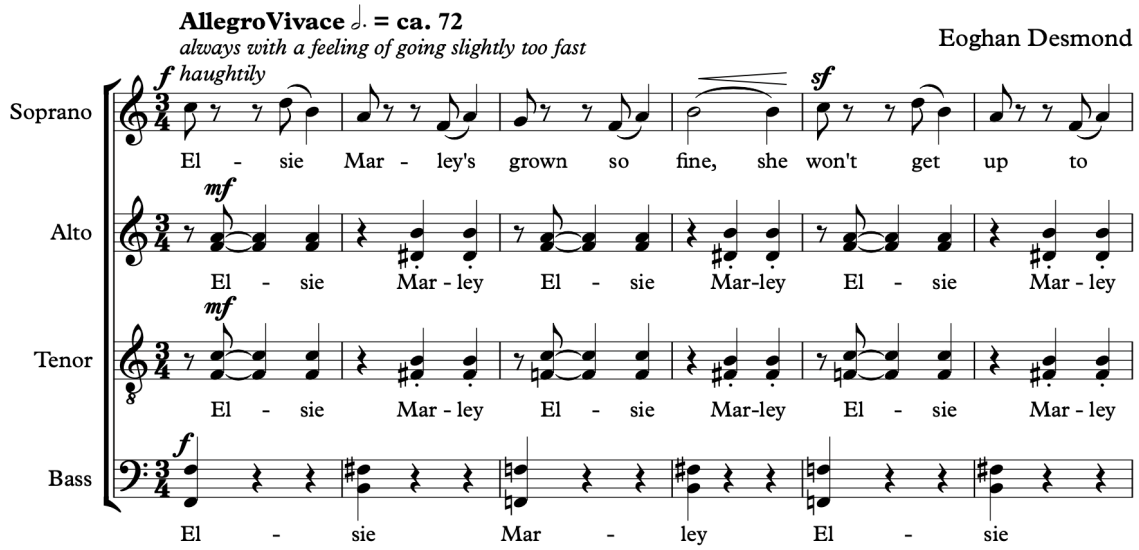


Figure 4.41. '*i. Elsie Marley*', bb. 1–6.

Desmond's contemporary harmonic tendencies also play a significant narrative role in 'One Misty Moisty Morning', the second movement in *More Mother Goose's Melodies*. The dense whole tone texture, extending to twelve parts, engenders a hazy ambience, evoking the 'misty morning'. More broadly, the tonally unstable scale, which 'lacks the fundamental harmonic and melodic relationships of major-minor tonality, namely those of the dominant (perfect 5th) and the leading note (minor 2nd)',[111] reflects the composer's focus on suspending tonality in his broader output: 'I'm trying to avoid anything where people go 'Oh, there's a chord change'; it's all about fluid transitions from one set of pitches to another or one set of tonalities to another.'[112] The initial unison E of the sopranos and altos broadens to a dense whole-tone cluster (E–F#–G#–A#), with all voices moving incrementally at a *pianississimo* dynamic (bb. 59–61, Figure 4.42). Tenors and basses respond in mirror form, falling from E to a tone cluster of B♭–C–D–E ('When cloudy was the weather', bb. 61–63).[113]

[111] H.K. Andrews, 'Whole-tone scale', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.30242> [accessed 21 January 2025].
[112] Desmond, interview with the author, 29 October 2020.
[113] The expansion of texture from unison to whole tone clusters is reminiscent of Charles Ives's *Psalm 90* (1894–1921) for choir, organ, and bells (bb. 60–65). Given the noted impact of Ives on Desmond's compositional approach in *More Mother Goose's Melodies* (e.g. the use of polymodality in 'Pussycat, Pussycat'), *Psalm 90* may have influenced 'One Misty Moisty Morning'.
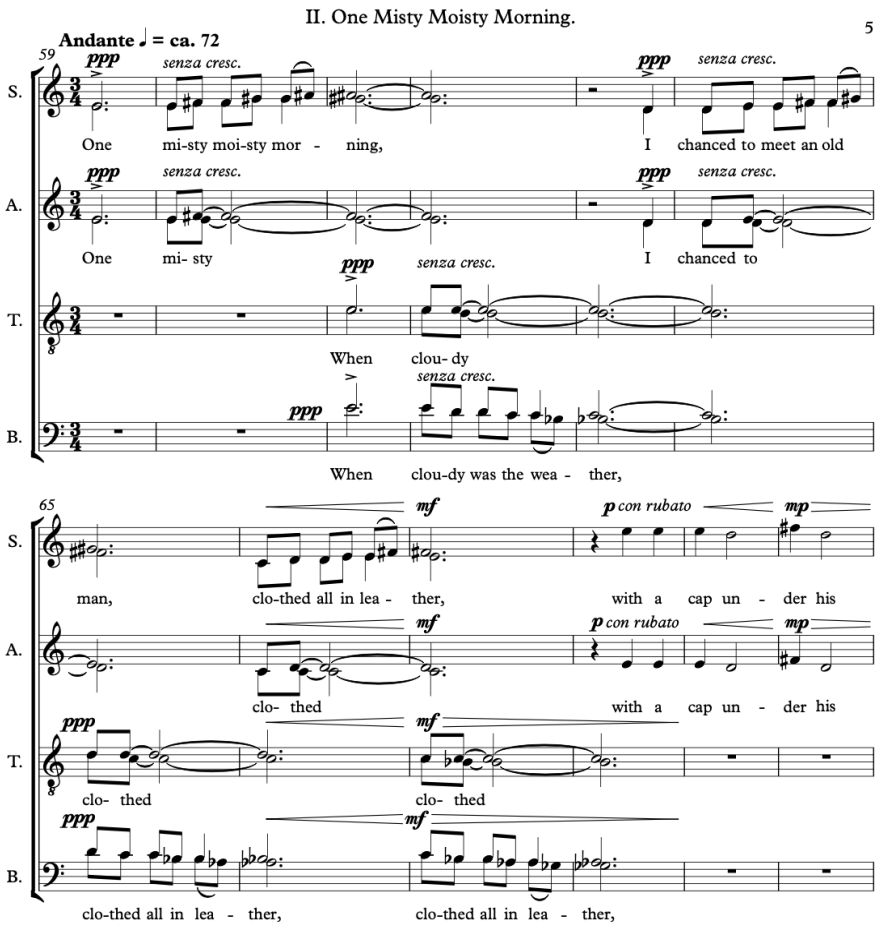


Figure 4.42. 'II. One Misty Moisty Morning', bb. 59–70.

The melodic dialogue between the upper and lower texture is repeated on D and C, respectively, demonstrating the fluidity of the whole tone scale.[114] The absence of a progression towards a tonal centre is further underlined in the movement's conclusion, with the texture augmenting to twelve parts. The final sustained chord comprises all notes of a whole tone scale, anchored by bass 3's G♭. Despite the choral density, prolonged rhythm, and melodic climax of each voice, the harmony lacks a definite resolution, encapsulating the piece's mysterious atmosphere. The opaque texture, soft dynamics, and tone clusters all contribute to illustrating the misty morning, and demonstrate Desmond's manipulation of harmony and texture for narrative purposes. The evasion of tonal stability in the aforementioned pieces exhibits Desmond's early, and arguably ostentatious, exploration of contemporary harmonic sound worlds in his writing. Furthermore, these examples illustrate the composer's tendency 'to push the musical language a little bit further' and 'be a bit more adventurous when it comes to

[114] Desmond also uses whole tone scales in 'Bobby Shafto/A Sailor Went to Sea', a similar tonally unstable work.

dissonance' when writing concert pieces, particularly for professional or high-quality amateur ensembles who have sufficient time to rehearse and refine the harmonies.[115]

Tonal Alteration

Several of Desmond's works demonstrate a correlation between increased accidentals and escalating emotions, with chromaticism and tonal instability, combined with syncopated rhythmic movement, unsettling the overall choral framework. The verses of *In Monte Oliveti* and *Aestimatus Sum* present a more active rhythmic and melodic character than their respective responses, with greater emphasis on linear counterpoint. Tonal alteration and melodic sequences are evident within the three-part texture of the verse of *Aestimatus Sum* (bb. 31–45), underlining the independence of each voice. The alto descends from C5 to A3 in primarily stepwise motion, the B♭ resolving to A in the verse's penultimate bar giving the lament a Phrygian colour. According to Willem Elders, Renaissance laments and texts of mourning were characteristically set in the Phrygian mode.[116] Given Desmond's experience of singing and studying historical music, it is probable that Renaissance harmony had an influence on his setting.

Soprano 1's descending melody features sequential movement based on a rising second-falling third in the initial six bars of the verse, restated in the second phrase and concluding on E, an octave below where the melody began. The descending sequential inflection, with suspensions caused by soprano 2, evokes the text '*Posuerunt me, in lacu inferiori, in tenebrosis, et in umbra mortis*' ('Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in the depths and shadow of death'), painting Jesus's descent to the grave (Figure 4.43). Soprano 1's semitone ascent at the beginning of each phrase (E–F [bb. 31–32]; B–C [bb. 39–40]), initially suggests an E Phrygian modality. The return of B♭ in bar 41 maintains the semitone ascent within the sequence, while also indicating the transition to A Phrygian.

[115] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[116] Elders, *Symbolic Scores*, p. 138. See also Fitch, *Renaissance Polyphony*, p. 106; William Kimmel, 'The Phrygian Inflection and the Appearances of Death in Music', *College Music Symposium*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1980), 42–76 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40374079> [accessed 28 July 2023].
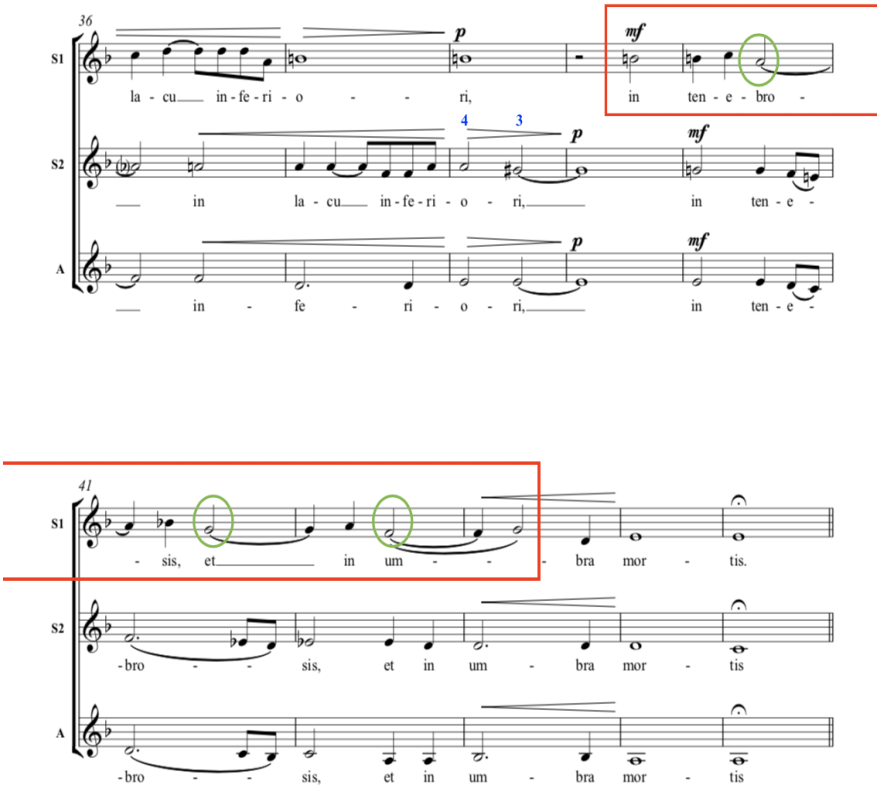


Figure 4.43. *Aestimatus Sum*, bb. 36–45 (sequence in red).

Soprano 2 is the most chromatic in nature, descending an octave (C–C) with additional accidentals and sequential movement. The first five bars present a quasi-palindromic motif, ascending a minor third by step (A–B♮–C), followed by a major third descent (C–B♭–A♭) through '*Posuerunt me in lacu, in lacu*' (Figure 4.44). This minor-major inflection undermines the tonality of this section, reflecting the expressive nature of the text. Considering Jesus's sombre circumstances, Desmond may have altered the notes of Soprano 2's descent to result in minor harmonies with the surrounding voices, communicating the text's sorrowful character. Similar chromatic alterations (E–E♭) are evident in the descending sequence in bars 40 to 42, maintaining the tone-semitone intervallic pattern, as well as the minor third relationship with the alto ('*in tenebrosis*' — 'in the depths'). While Desmond creates harmonic instability through chromatic alterations and dissonance, the individual vocal lines are carefully crafted to move primarily by step or leaps of a third, allowing the singers to move fluently through the discordant section. It is evident that the composer has considered the limited rehearsal time likely given to these liturgical pieces, enabling church choirs to sight read and achieve the dissonant sonorities with greater security.

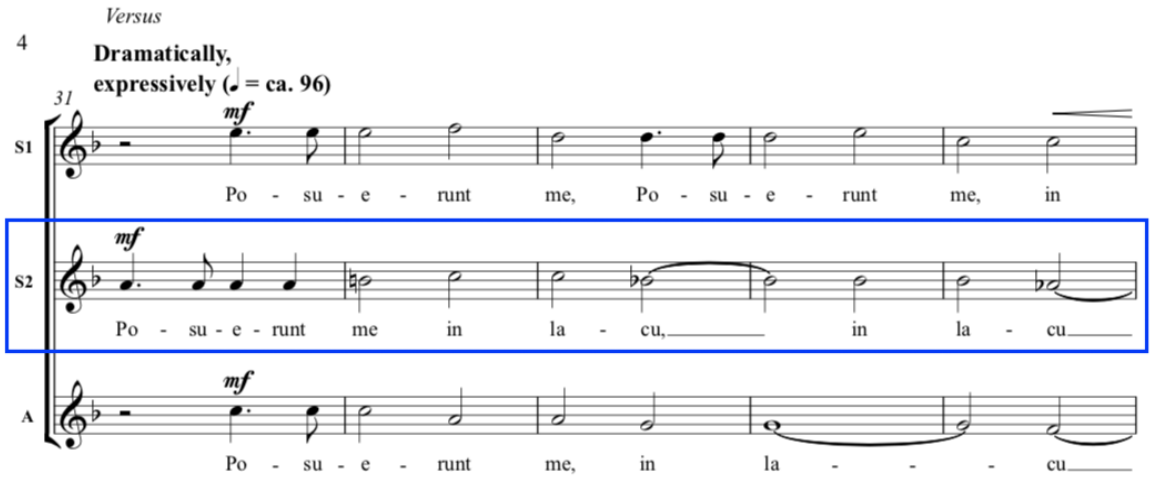


Figure 4.44. *Aestimatus Sum*, bb. 31–35 (palindrome in blue).

The final three bars of the verse confirm a Phrygian modality with the B-flat major chord resolving to A minor, including a 4–3 suspension in the internal voice (bb. 43–45; Figure 4.45). Given the verse's expanded harmonic palette, it is impractical to define its conclusion in conventional terms. The final progression reflects the Phrygian cadence of the Renaissance era, the alto's B♭ descending to A, while the highest voice ascends by a tone to E.[117] Although this type of cadence usually involves the interval of a sixth resolving to an octave, it is possible that Desmond intended to reflect this practice with considerable flexibility in a contemporary context.

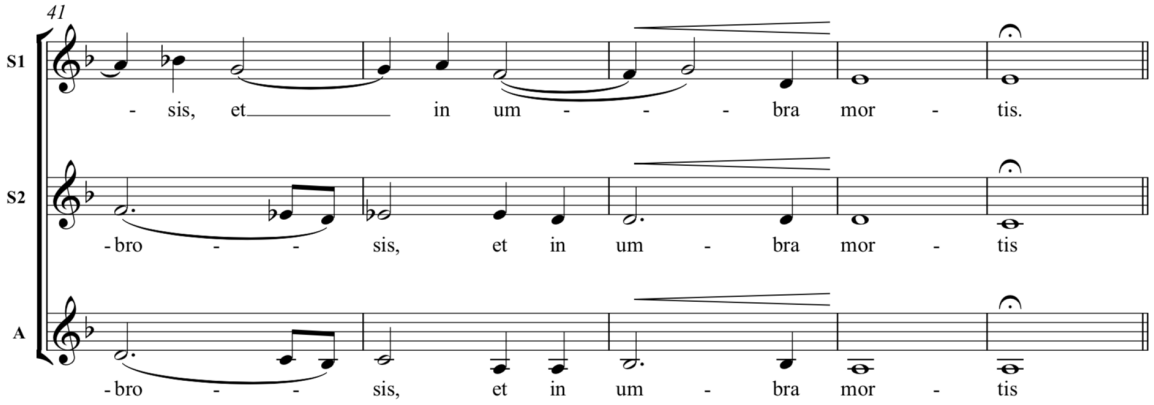


Figure 4.45. *Aestimatus Sum*, bb. 41–45.

[117] 'Phrygian cadence', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.21601> [accessed 26 July 2023].

A similar Phrygian cadence on D unfolds in *In Monte Oliveti* (bb. 36–37), the bass's E♭ descending to D and the soprano's G ascending to A, with an accented 4–3 suspension in the alto of the D minor chord (Figure 4.46). As he is deliberately following 'the Renaissance approach of having the verse sung by a group of soloists', reducing his textural forces, it is probable that Desmond used this cadence to further indicate the music of this period.[118] The particularly feeble homophonic resolution in *In Monte Oliveti*, emphasised by the *diminuendo* and *poco ritardando* features, could be a means of expressing the text '*infirma*' ('weak'). It is evident from these liturgical works that Desmond's vocal lines achieve a polyphonic fluency comparable to their Renaissance counterparts, resulting in momentary dissonance and evoking the emotions expressed in the text.

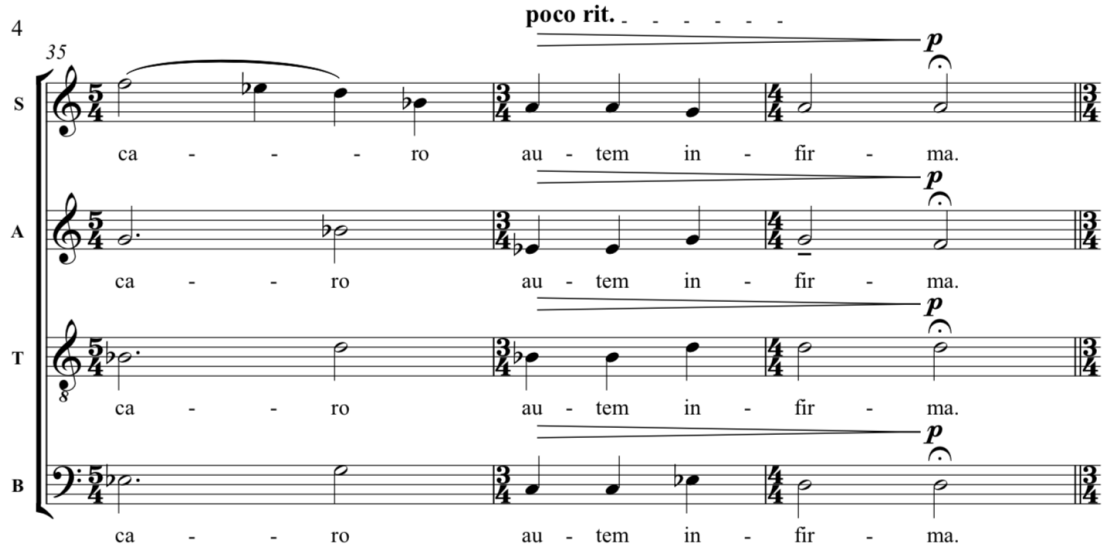


Figure 4.46. *In Monte Oliveti*, bb. 35–37.

Ambiguous Endings

Another facet of Desmond's harmonic language is his tendency to conclude works on mixed-interval or unsettled chords, avoiding a definitive major or minor tonality, which is often determined by the text, as exhibited in 'One Misty, Moisty Morning' and '*Elsie Marley*'. *Nothing in Vain* concludes on an unresolved C–G fifth with added ninth, the accompanying voices sustaining a pedal open harmony below the soprano's chant-like expression of 'God does nothing in vain' (Figure 4.47). This final melodic statement is characterised by syncopated

[118] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.

tenuto rhythms, concluding on the ninth of the tonic chord (D). The off-set rhythm and lack of a third in the concluding harmony creates ambiguity and could be interpreted as a symbol of doubt over one's purpose. Alternatively, it could serve as a reminder that life is not always straightforward, and that complexities will arise that are not always rectified as expected. Despite the unresolved melody, the sustained open fifth beneath the soprano maintains C as the tonal centre and suggests the stability of Newman's faith, abiding beneath the challenges faced in life.

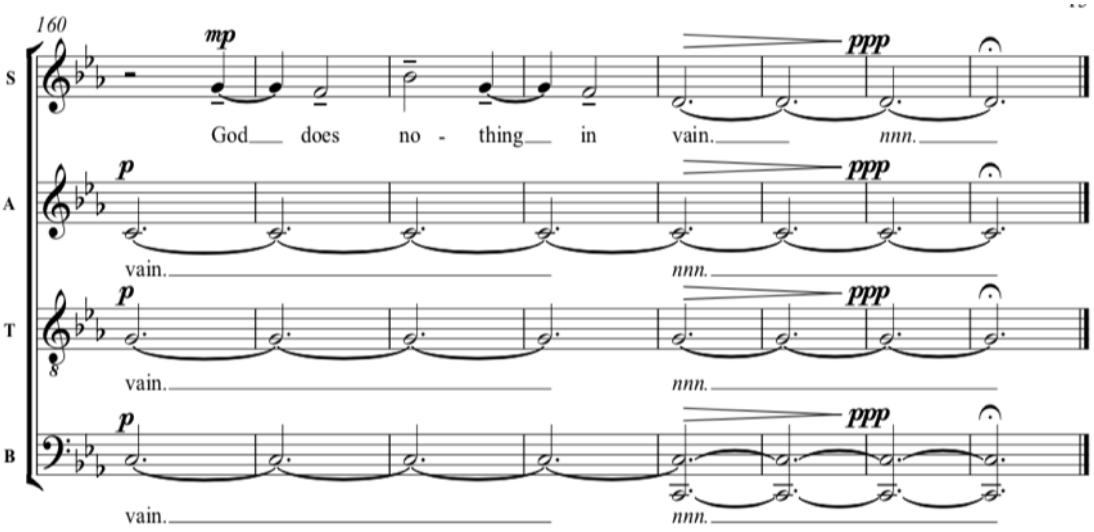


Figure 4.47. *Nothing in Vain*, bb. 160–167.

A similar unsettled conclusion transpires in *Comrades*, with a cluster chord containing C, D♭, E♮, F#, G, and B♭. The final seven bars (bb. 93–99), marked *Meno Mosso*, feature a *pianissimo* tenor-bass pedal fifth (C–G), and diminished fourth between the sopranos (F#–B♭), preserving the tense tone of the overall work. Altos repeat the final line 'Where all the world's wild rebels are' as an altered version of the basses' original pulsating ostinato. Alto 2 undulates between C and D♭ in *tenuto* crotchets, while alto 1 repeatedly rises by step from C to E♭ as a 1:2 octatonic figure, concluding on E♮, which results in an augmented second with the lower alto's D♭ (b. 99, Figure 4.48). While the *ritardando* and *decrescendo al niente* reinforce the image of spirits fading into the 'peaceful night', the final dissonance creates an unsettling atmosphere. This conclusion reflects Desmond's interpretation of the poem as having no resolution, as Gore-Booth's fantasy is unattainable. The composer states that he sought 'to convey this sense that it is unfinished and that what they are talking about is something that they want to happen

but is currently impossible.'[119] In this sense, it would be inappropriate to resolve the work with a conventional harmony and contradict the reality of the situation, as Markievicz remains behind bars.

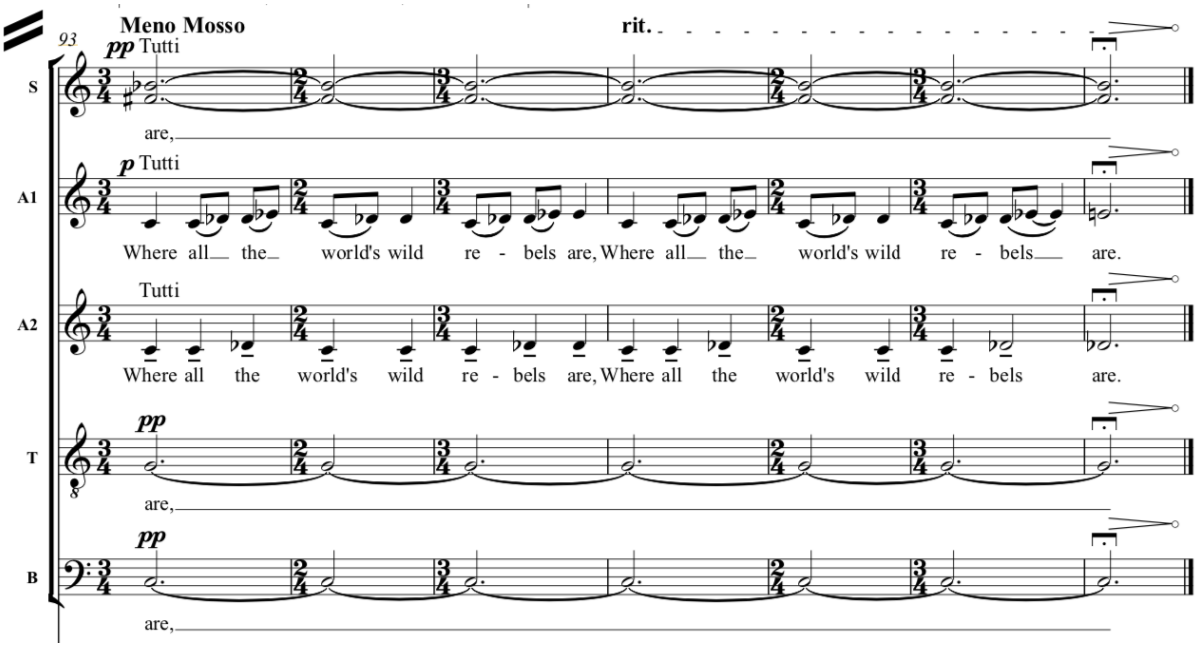


Figure 4.48. *Comrades*, bb. 93–99.

The above analysis of Desmond's harmonic tendencies illuminates the narrative and emotive role of harmony in his music, showing how it contributes to his innovative communication of each text, and shedding further light on his compositional style. While open chords and false relations exhibit the influence of historical music, the composer's frequent use of mixed-interval chords, unsettled phrase conclusions, and repeated chord progressions underline the contemporary aspect of his harmonic language. According to Desmond, '[Y]ou create a mood with dissonance and consonance', without being overt.[120] His conscious understanding of the effect of harmony in eliciting an atmosphere is a significant aspect of his compositions. As evidenced, where the increased dissonance and independent melodies of his responsories and *Nothing in Vain* align with the escalating tension within the texts, the unconventional harmonic progressions in his rhyme settings demonstrate a frivolous tone consistent with the subjects. As he has written largely for professional and high-level choirs, Desmond has the liberty of expanding his harmonic range. However, like Rhona Clarke, the complex, often dense, vertical harmonies are approached through his idiomatic melodic lines, providing the singers with an

[119] Desmond, interview with the author, 29 October 2020.
[120] Desmond, interview with the author, 24 January 2025.

accessible route to dissonant chords. Ultimately, Desmond's diverse harmonic palette of past and contemporary features results in communicative sound worlds that strive to convey a text's progression, while also illustrating his own compositional voice.

Conclusion

Desmond's eclectic style demonstrates an effective synthesis of diverse techniques and influences, as well as an expressive, versatile communication of each text he sets. Like Rhona Clarke's oeuvre, the fusion of old and new compositional techniques, evident in his melodic, textural, and harmonic frameworks, is a salient characteristic of Desmond's stylistic identity and is discernible throughout his choral oeuvre. While there is variety across his compositions, illuminating the character and form of each text, as well as his compositional development, the composer also conveys consistencies in his melodic lines, harmonic progressions, and textural structures, all of which illustrate his deep understanding of writing for voices. His sacred output — particularly pieces for liturgical use — could be deemed to be more conservative in terms of the techniques and structures applied, determined by the textual structure, the context, and the forces for which he is writing, and indicating his declared preference to compose 'music more dependent on form, harmony and contrapuntal textures.'[121] Conversely, Desmond's concert repertoire, largely composed for professional ensembles, demonstrates greater flexibility and boldness in the application of compositional techniques, all of which contribute to a cogent evocation of each text's form and character, and reveal the composer's own personality more directly.

Desmond's idiomatic yet innovative works highlight choral music's capacity to evoke the essence of a text and draw listeners and performers into pondering its words and meaning, both on and beneath the surface. The compositions analysed demonstrate how there has been a gradual shift from maximalist, overt text illustration in his early secular works, to a more refined choral palette with parsimonious voice leading and repeated motifs that encapsulate the core of a text in his later compositions. It could be argued that this compositional development has also coincided with and been influenced by the composer's move from frivolous texts like nursery rhymes to more sacred repertoire and environmental-themed texts, which warrant a more rounded, contemplative approach to text setting. For example, while his early exaggeration of percussive consonants and disjointed text serve to paint the cockcrow and

[121] Desmond, 'Alt Notes #11'.

clucking hen in his *Mother Goose* suites, his more conventional descending melodies in *An Gleann Mór* and *I Am* simultaneously illustrate water, and form an important part of the broader textural and repetitive harmonic structures, maintaining a sense of motion and contributing to the formal organisation of the music.

Desmond's profession as a cathedral and concert chorister, as well as the completion of his PhD in 2020, have clearly shaped his compositional craft. These influences are particularly evident in his use of chant in sacred works such as *O Sacrum Convivium* and *Nothing in Vain*. The quotations of the ancient melodies have multifaceted functions within the broader musical form and communication of the text's meaning. The former work pays homage to the original chant, establishes a prayerful atmosphere, and uses the melody to develop an imitative polyphonic structure and connect the various sections of the work. The quotation of chant in *Nothing in Vain* is more ambiguous, both pointing to the deeper meaning of Newman's words, and serving as an impetus for creating new material over the harmonic ostinati in each section, all of which grow in textural density and emotional fervour. With regard to the role of quotation in the secular 'Bobby Shafto/A Sailor Went to Sea' and '*Pussycat, Pussycat*', the use of pre-existing melodies carries an abstract or light-hearted tone relating to Desmond's interpretation of each rhyme's character and narrative. However, the quotations also provide the composer with a structure in which to set the short rhymes and with which his own musical and textual material can develop and combine, the resulting unity of distinct texts, polymodality, and textural interplay and juxtapositions crafting unique renderings of each text's events and tone.

The composer deftly uses texture as both a narrative and formal technique throughout his works, reducing and developing the choral density to convey both the formal and expressive aspects of each text. The binary structures of *An Gleann Mór* and *Beloved*, primarily executed through the regular interchange between homophony and polyphony, in tandem with changes in the other musical parameters, effectively convey the dialogue between the landscape and lovers in the former, and the living and the dead in the latter. These textural shifts are equally evident in his sacred works *In Monte Oliveti* and *Aestimatus Sum*, the contrapuntal interweaving of three voices in the verses standing in contrast to the more reserved homophonic responses, and demonstrating the composer's understanding of the prayers' liturgical forms. Where the Renaissance-like polyphony in each work illustrates greater melodic independence and expressivity in each voice, resulting in more dissonant sonorities and tonal evasions, the chorale-like responses illuminate Desmond's more conservative approach to harmonic progressions built on astute voice leading. The expressive power of textural layering is particularly exemplified in *Nothing in Vain*, *Comrades*, and 'Ladybird, Ladybird', with the

gradual stratification of idiomatic voices above ostinati resulting in harmonic and rhythmic dissonance, and the composer's stylistic tendencies uniting in a vivid expression of the overall character and form of each piece.

Like Clarke, Desmond's careful crafting and synthesis of stylistic elements across his sacred and secular works result in cogent representations of each text's form, narrative, and tone, while also considering the capabilities of the voices for which he is writing. The fusion of melodic, harmonic, and textural devices reveals an effective synthesis of old and new musical influences, and a thorough immersion in the choral tradition. As he is still at a relatively early stage in his career, Desmond's compositional language will naturally continue to evolve. However, the characteristics and consistencies evident in his output to date suggest the development of an assured stylistic voice, and indicate that the creative techniques explored here may recur in various guises in his future work.

Chapter 5: Rhona Clarke's *Requiem* (2020)

Introduction

Rhona Clarke's *Requiem* (2020) is a noteworthy contemporary addition to the few Irish composers' settings of this traditional text.[1] The piece was written for The State Choir LATVIJA, intended to form the centrepiece of the choir's album of Clarke's choral music.[2] Unlike some well-known examples of Requiems with organ or orchestral accompaniment, the composer explains that her *Requiem* was always going to be unaccompanied, in order to fit the programme of music on the album.[3] Despite being composed during the Covid-19 pandemic, Clarke has stated that this difficult period had no impact on her choice of text.[4] Rather, she reflects on how 'it was just something I wanted to do', and how she was attracted to 'the idea of something that spans generations.'[5] The focus on redemption is evident in the composer's choice of texts from the Requiem Mass, with Clarke excluding the ominous '*Dies Irae*', as well as the more liturgical movements, in favour of those that evoke eternal rest and light — '*Introit*', '*Lux Aeterna*', '*Pie Jesu*', and '*In Paradisum*'.[6] It is notable that the themes of death and eternity evident within this work are present across her choral oeuvre, including *Epitaph* (2024), *Ave Atque Vale* (2017), *The Old Woman* (2016), and *Do Not Stand at my Grave and Weep* (2006). According to the composer, these themes 'drew out the music. Grief, and the idea that this is something that we all must face, and the idea of eternity' are the elements she wished to capture in her *Requiem*.[7]

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[1] Charles Villiers Stanford composed a *Requiem* in 1896 for SATB soli, choir, and orchestra. *Requiem* compositions identified in the Contemporary Music Centre include settings by Colin Mawby (1989), Ann Hoban (1995), Patrick Zuk (unknown date), Gerard Victory (*Ultima Rerum* (1975–1981)), and Seán Ó Riada (1969). Twenty-first century settings include Ódhrán Ó Casaide's *Requiem 1916 – Marbhna* (2016) for solo sean nós and classical voice, chamber choir and orchestra, and traditional and early musical instruments; and Philip Hammond's *Requiem for the Lost Souls of the Titanic* (2012) for mezzo-soprano, large choral forces, brass, piano trio, and narrator.

[2] Rhona Clarke, interview with the author, 31 January 2025.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Rhona Clarke, interviewed by Jonathan Grimes and Evonne Ferguson, 'amplify #64 – Rhona Clarke on her new choral album 'Sempiternam'', The Contemporary Music Centre, podcast, 28 March 2022 (7:00–7:08) <https://www.cmc.ie/amplify/episode–64> [accessed 16 February 2023].

[5] Clarke, interview with the author, 31 January 2025.

[6] Clarke set the '*Dies Irae*' subsequently as musical fragments to accompany the exhibition LAST ACT in 2024, a collaboration between her and visual artist Marie Hanlon. The fragments were recorded by The State Choir LATVIJA and accompanied the on-screen visuals of damage caused to the planet by global warming.

[7] Rhona Clarke in 'Rhona Clarke's *Sempiternam*', *Culture File*, RTÉ Lyric FM, 14 April 2022 (6:10–6:32) <https://www.rte.ie/radio/podcasts/22087792> [accessed 26 November 2023].

Macro-Structure

In contrast to many well-known settings of the sacred text, Clarke's *Requiem* is relatively short, with four diverse movements, all of which focus on themes of peace and eternal rest (Table 5.1). The opening movement, '*Introit*', follows the traditional Requiem framework, setting the processional antiphon '*Requiem aeternam*'. '*Lux Aeterna*' asks for 'eternal light' to shine upon the deceased with the recurrence of the text '*Requiem aeternam*', albeit with different musical material. Clarke sets this prayer as the second movement, which contrasts with its usual placing as the Communion chant towards the conclusion of the traditional Requiem Mass.[8] As this composition is not intended for a liturgical context, it may have been her preference for '*Lux Aeterna*' to follow the first movement because of their similar thematic material.

I Introit	I Introit
Requiem æternam dona eis, Domine: et lux perpetua luceat eis. Te decet hymnus, Deus, in Sion, et tibi reddetur votum in Ierusalem: exaudi orationem meam, ad te omnis caro veniet. Requiem æternam dona eis, Domine: et lux perpetua luceat eis.	Eternal rest give them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. It is fitting to sing a hynm to you, O God, in Zion, and to you a vow will be given in Jerusalem: hear my prayer; all flesh will come to you. Eternal rest give to them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them.
II Lux æterna	II Lux æterna
Lux æterna luceat eis, Domine: Cum Sanctis tuis in æternum: quia pius es. Requiem æternam dona eis, Domine: et lux perpetua luceat eis. Cum Sanctis tuis in æternum: quia pius es.	May eternal light shine upon them, O Lord: With your Saints for eternity: you who are gracious. Eternal rest give to them, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon them: With your Saints for eternity: you who are gracious.
III Pie Jesu	III Pie Jesu
Pie Iesu Domine, dona eis requiem. Dona eis requiem sempiternam.	Merciful Lord Jesus, grant them rest. Grant them eternal rest.
IV In paradisum	IV In paradisum
In paradisum deducant te Angeli: in tuo adventu suscipiant te Martyres, et perducant te in civitatem sanctam Ierusalem. Chorus Angelorum te suscipiat, et cum Lazaro quondam paupere æternam habeas requiem.	May the Angels lead you into paradise: may the Martyrs receive you at your coming, and lead you into the holy city of Jerusalem. May the choir of Angels receive you, and with Lazarus, who once was poor, may you have eternal rest.

Table 5.1. Rhona Clarke, *Requiem* (2020) text.[9]

[8] Alec Robertson, *Requiem: Music of Mourning and Consolation* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976), p. 23.
[9] Rhona Clarke, *Requiem* (unpublished, 2020), p. ii.

'*Pie Jesu*', the shortest piece with only thirty-six bars, also appeals for eternal rest to be granted upon the departed, this time in the form of a passacaglia with solo soprano. The fourth movement, '*In Paradisum*', conveys the journey to paradise with the angels and concludes with a final petition for perpetual rest ('*aeternam habeas requiem*'), the three statements of '*Requiem*' providing, in the words of Clarke, 'a peaceful, reflective ending' to the work.[10] The chant is traditionally sung '[A]s the coffin is borne out of the church to the cemetery',[11] with the composer acknowledging its origins through her quotation of the original antiphon in her setting. Clarke's decision to set only these more tranquil texts recalls the Requiem compositions of French composers Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924) and Maurice Duruflé (1902–1986), both of whom focused on the more serene Latin passages in the mass for the dead. This chapter will focus on significant sections of each movement of *Requiem*, analysing how Clarke's distinct melodic and harmonic language, textural organisation, and synthesis of past and contemporary compositional techniques coalesce into an evocative work that encapsulates her distinctive and innovative voice in the context of a long-established genre.

Compositional Influences

Clarke's *Requiem* indicates several potential influences on the melodic, harmonic, and textural structure of each movement. The impact of the dense textures and timbres of Hungarian composer György Ligeti's (1923–2006) *Introitus* (1964) and *Lux Aeterna* (1966) can be discerned within Clarke's settings of the same texts, which convey a similar treatment of the lower and upper registers in the introduction of both movements. Similarly, it could be argued that elements of James MacMillan's musical language are perceptible in '*Introit*', particularly in the harmonic progression of the higher voices, and in the ostinato of the lower texture, with its repeated text and harmonies evoking a sense of ritual. Clarke has not acknowledged the influence of these two composers' music on *Requiem*, instead stating '[I]f I was influenced by any other work, I'm not completely conscious of it.'[12] Equally apparent is the influence of past traditions on Clarke's melodic and harmonic writing, in her quotation of the original '*In Paradisum*' melody, use of modes, open harmonies, and consistent use of triplet figuration reflecting the natural rhythms of plainchant.

[10] Clarke, 'Composer's note', *Requiem*, p. iii.
[11] Robertson, *Requiem*, p. 24.
[12] Clarke, interview with the author, 31 January 2025.

A further evocation of the past is demonstrated in Clarke's formal structures, with the seventeenth-century passacaglia defining the form of '*Pie Jesu*', contributing to the movement's meditative character. While acknowledging tradition, the composer conveys her individual, contemporary style through her application of particular traits or 'fingerprints', such as secundal dissonances, undefined chords, oblique harmonic motion, extended vocal techniques, and melodic oscillations. The composition's dedication to professional ensemble State Choir LATVIJA also enabled Clarke to expand her creative palette. The composer's synthesis of ancient and modern musical styles demonstrates her appreciation of earlier Requiem settings, while simultaneously communicating her distinctive interpretation of this sacred text. As Clarke states, she is unafraid to return to past practices, such as 'pure melodic lines', as these idioms 'have not been done before by me in this way'.[13]

'*Introit*'

Formal Structure

Clarke's opening movement, '*Introit*', follows the traditional Requiem framework, with '*Requiem aeternam*' bookending the verse, '*Te decet hymnus*'. The work has three distinct sections, determined by the text's structure; Clarke distinguishes between the antiphon and verse through modality and timbre (Table 5.2). The rich, deep sonorities of the six-part (TTBBBB) '*Requiem aeternam*' ostinato in A melodic minor establishes the sombre atmosphere. Clarke also begins *Ave Atque Vale* (2017) and *Epitaph* (2024) — which also focus on death — with repeating melodic patterns for tenor and bass voices. While the former repeats the phrase '*Ave Atque Vale*' ('Hail and Farewell'), and the latter quotes Chopin's 'Funeral March', the repeated '*Requiem aeternam*' chant evokes a similar funereal atmosphere. The return of the dense ostinato in the final section of '*Introit*', joined by the upper voices' predominantly repeated chords, creates an ABA1 symmetrical structure.

[13] Clarke in 'Rhona Clarke's *Sempiternam*' (3:56–4:34).

Section	Bars	Tonality	Text
A	1–32	A melodic minor	*Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine:* *et lux perpetua luceat eis.*
B	33–63	B Aeolian	*Te decet hymnus, Deus, in Sion,* *et tibi reddetur votum in Ierusalem:* *exaudi orationem meam,* *ad te omnis caro veniet.*
A1	64–87	A melodic minor	Repeat of A.

Table 5.2. '*Introit*' Structure.

Harmonic and Textural Analysis

The most notable harmonic feature in this movement is the lower voices' ostinato, consisting of four-part basses' rhythmically augmented expression of '*Requiem*', answered by the tenors' disjointed utterances of '*Requiem aeternam*' in quaver triplets and semiquavers (Figure 5.1). There is incremental movement in each bass part, the secundal harmonic intervals in the low register creating an ominous tone. Though perhaps a coincidental parallel, György Ligeti's *Requiem* (1965) also begins with an extended rhythmic setting of the titular word in four-part basses, with bass 4 oscillating between F#2 and E#2 (Figure 5.2). Clarke's ostinato could be deemed similar, the E2 pedal tone serving as the harmonic root in the lowest voice. The initial two statements of '*Requiem*' across the first six bars consist of the divided second basses moving from an open fifth (E–B) to minor sixth (E–C) and returning to the fifth, while the upper basses' minor third (A–C) expands to a fourth (A–D), before retracting to a major second (A–B).

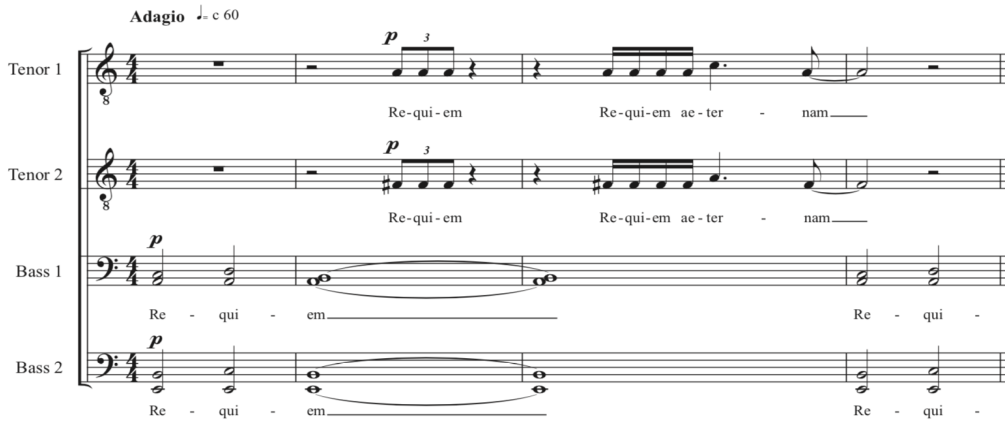


Figure 5.1. '*Introit*', *Requiem* (2020), bb. 1–4.

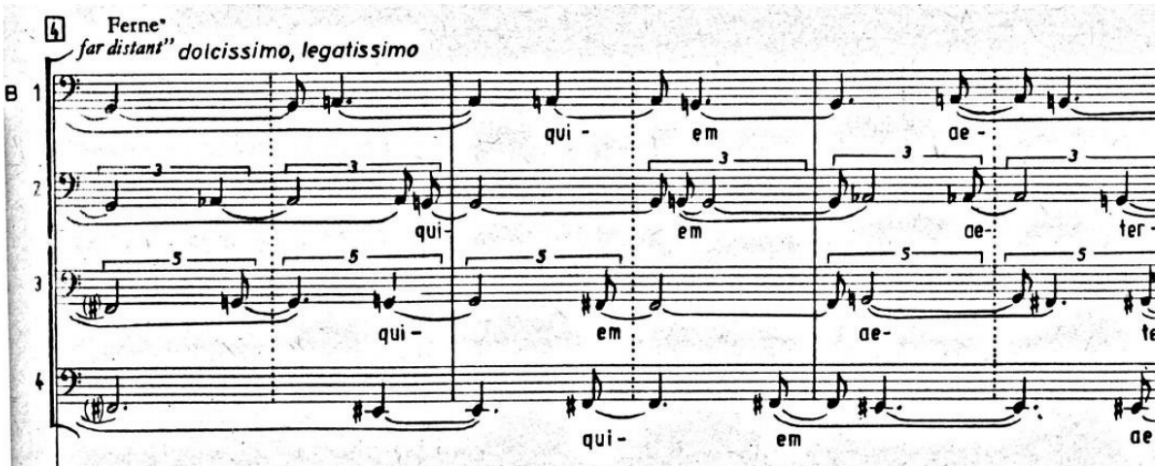


Figure 5.2. György Ligeti, '*Introitus*', *Requiem*
(Leipzig: Henry Litolff's Verlag/ C. F. Peters, 1963–66), bb. 4–9.

Bass 2 and bass 4's repeated A and E throughout Clarke's opening chord progression suggests an A minor tonality, with the recurrence of F# and G# in the tenors and subsequent upper voices implying A melodic minor or a synthesis of A Dorian and A harmonic minor. Clarke may have included the F# to ensure minor third intervals between the tenors, as a natural F would not evoke the same funereal effect, instead contradicting the basses' minor harmonies. As outlined in Chapter Three, drones and pedal points in the lower texture are common in Clarke's output and particularly effective in this setting, achieving a sense of stasis while conveying a sombre tone. The tenors' syllabic, repeated tones and parallel minor third movement (F#–A; A–C) also engender an organum-like quality and could be deemed to reflect prayer recitation.[14] The third statement of the ostinato is extended to six bars due to the inclusion of '*aeternam*' in the basses (bb. 7–12), with the sopranos entering the framework at the end of this progression (b. 11). This augmented idiom occurs three times in the opening thirty-three bars, alternating with the original ostinato. The low register, minimal melodic movement, and pedal tone of the ostinato generates a mournful atmosphere, yet its gentle repetition as the texture develops serves as a reminder of the text's message of peace and 'eternal rest'.

Following an open A fifth in the conclusion of the eighth, and final, presentation of the ostinato in the first section, Clarke indicates the verse through a change in timbre and tonality, shifting from the dark A minor of the lower voices to a homophonic SSAA texture in B Aeolian

[14] The ostinato occurs twelve times in two different versions across '*Introit*'. The first version appears seven times (bb. 1–3; 4–6; 13–15 [additional early '*Requiem*' in tenors at the beginning of the phrase]; 16–18; 25–27; 64–66; 67–69); the second, which is doubled in length, repeats five times (bb. 7–12; 19–24; 28–33 [no tenors in bar 29 above the final syllable of basses' '*Requiem*'; different resolution to an open A–E dyad]; 70–75; 76–81 and extended with E pedal and repeated '*Requiem*' triplets on A).

(bb. 33–34). The timbral contrast creates a lighter, ethereal tone, with the upper voices possibly representing the angels singing to God ('*Te decet hymnus, Deus, in Sion*'), while also highlighting the polarity between light and darkness. The difference between the dark ostinato and the lighter texture could be deemed to reflect the Renaissance artistic technique of '*chiaroscuro*' ('light-dark'), which uses striking delineations between light and shade. Artistic influence is not surprising in both Clarke's choral and instrumental works, as she has expressed the impact of visual art, and the bold strokes of artists such as Picasso, on her compositional approach in recent years.[15] She has also commented on such 'transformations in colour and texture' in her orchestral work *SHIFT* (2013), which achieves contrast using 'blocks of sound and polar opposites between arrhythmic and rhythmic material.'[16] The contrasting timbres and colours of the lower and upper voices in '*Introit*', which constitute distinct sonorities and textual ideas, demonstrate Clarke's application of similar techniques across her instrumental and choral works.

The syllabic homophonic soprano-alto texture offers a significant break in the overall sound, introducing the angelic hymn as a chorale — '*Te decet hymnus, Deus, in Sion*' ('It is fitting to sing a hymn to you, O God, in Zion'). The minimal melodic activity and repeated notes through each chord — resulting in tone clusters — reflect Clarke's penchant for oblique motion in her wider output (Figure 5.3). As evidenced across her output, the composer enables the choir to achieve dissonant vertical sonorities through smooth voice leading, the vocal lines primarily featuring stepwise melodic motion and pedal tones. The close harmonies and incremental movement, remaining largely around the chord of B minor, achieve 'a sense of stasis and luminosity', a common trend in contemporary choral composition and an appropriate representation of the prayer.[17]

[15] Axel Klein, 'Rhona Clarke: Stepping out of the Shadow', in *A Different Game*, The Fidelio Trio (Divine Arts Recording Group, MSV 28561, 2017), para 6. Clarke's piano suite *Cocteau* (2022), commissioned and premiered by the Franco-Irish pianist Isabelle O'Connell, was inspired by the work of French artist Jean Cocteau (1908–63). According to the programme note, 'Certain drawings by Cocteau influenced initial ideas for the pieces […]. Two of the pieces are loosely based on his self-portrait (1962)' (Rhona Clarke, *Cocteau* (unpublished, 2022)).

[16] Rhona Clarke, 'Catching Fire', *RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra Horizons Contemporary Music Series 2014* <https://www.rte.ie/documents/orchestras/14-01-14-rhona-clarke.pdf> [accessed 15 January 2024].

[17] David Bednall, 'Composing for Choir', in *The Cambridge Companion to Composition*, ed. by Toby Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), pp. 139–152 (p. 141).
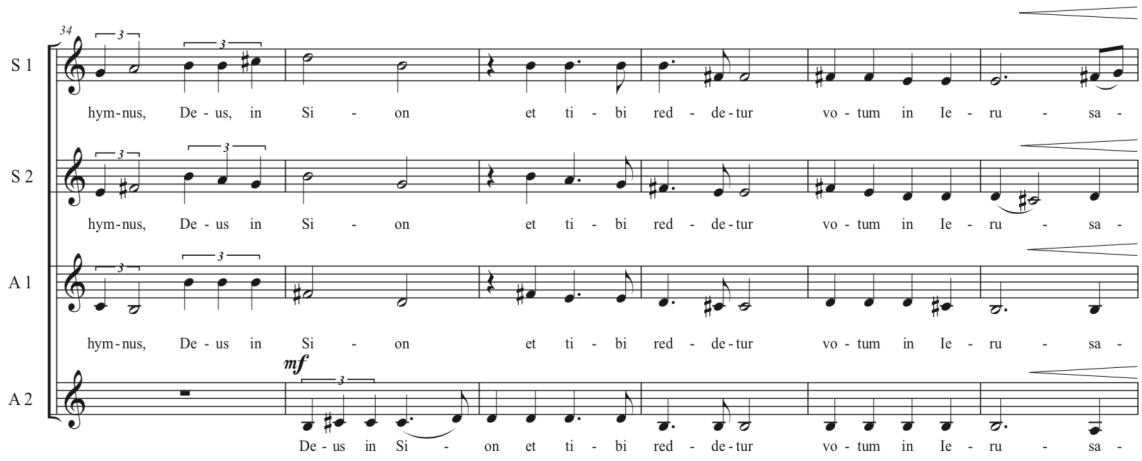


Figure 5.3. '*Introit*', bb. 34–39.

Oblique motion can be observed through bars 36 to 38, with repetition dominating the outer voices (Soprano 1 and Alto 2). Following the sopranos' unison B at the beginning of the subphrase '*et tibi reddetur votum*' ('and to you a vow will be given'), the lower soprano continues to descend by step to F#, above the repeated B. Similarly, alto 2 reiterates D while the first alto descends from F# to E, forming a major second with the lower voice (b. 36). The secundal interval is more pronounced in the subsequent bar with the sopranos' major second (E–F#) on the final two syllables of '*reddetur*', above the altos' second (B–C#), resulting in an ambiguous chord. Close harmonies continue with a B minor triad contracting to tone clusters grounded on the second alto's repeated B, the pedal tone maintaining harmonic stability and a sense of calm assuredness amidst the soft dissonance. The harmonic tension is resolved in bar 40 (Figure 5.4) with the first soprano's augmented fourth ascent to C# forming an A major triad on the final syllable of '*Ierusalem*', before the *fortissimo* eight-part climax of the movement.

In stark contrast to the gentle B minor homophony, Clarke announces the apex of '*Introit*' with the SSAATTBB *fortissimo* declamation of '*exaudi*' ('hear', bb. 40–42). This emotional outburst of voices pleading for their prayer to be heard is characterised by wide leaps in the upper voices (octave in soprano 1 (A–A); sixth in soprano 2 (A–F#); fifth in alto 1 (E–B); alto 2 repeats C#), a marked difference from their previous stepwise motion. The A dominant seventh chord in third inversion moves to an undefined harmony that combines F# minor and E minor chords on the second syllable of '*exaudi*', leading to a G major seventh on the final syllable (Figure 5.4). The A5 of the mixed-interval chord is the highest note of the movement and a culminating point in the work. Wide leaps and harmonic density at dramatic

points are common traits in Clarke's music, particularly in her later works, with similar leaps to dissonant outbursts evident in *Ave Atque Vale* (bb. 78–82) and *O Vis Aeternitatis* (bb. 43–52; 89–97). The homophonic lower voices' subsequent '*exaudi*' echo (TTBB, bb. 42–43) features similar wide leaps, emphasising the significance of the word 'hear'.
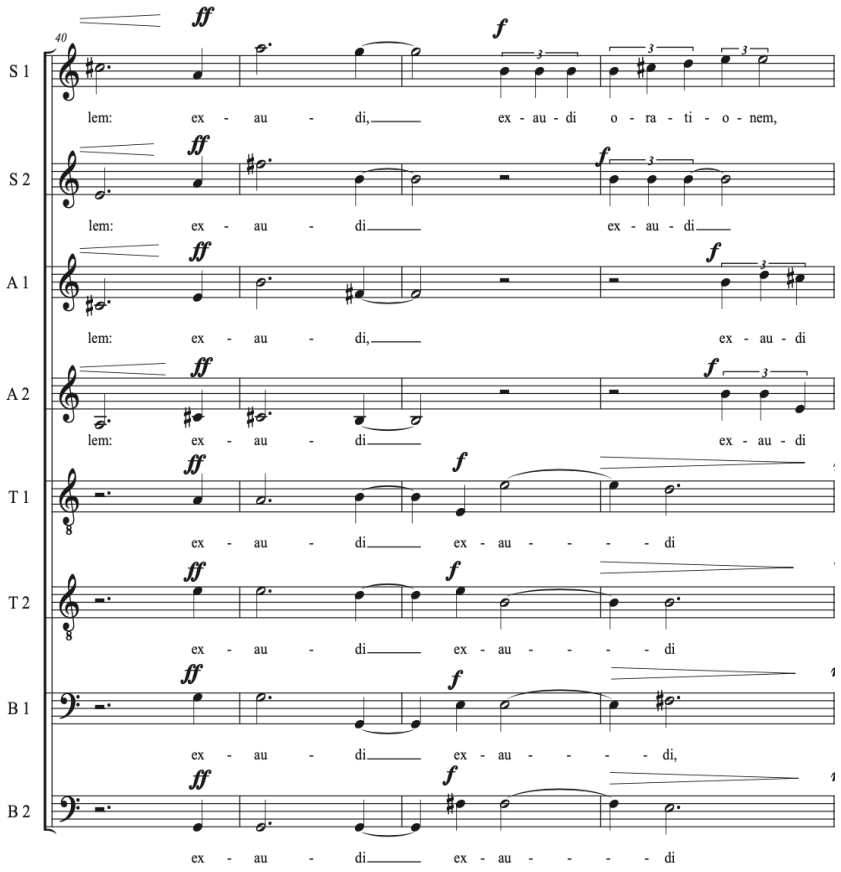


Figure 5.4. '*Introit*', b. 40–43.

Clarke sets the final line of '*Introit*' as a single note chant on an octave B in the sopranos and altos, with '*lux*' repeated as an unpitched whisper in the first and third presentation (bb. 75, 79), while the lower voices continue the '*Requiem aeternam*' ostinato. The basses' *portamento* descent through the last '*aeternam*' (B2–A2; B2–E2; bb. 80–81) creates a tone of mystery and illustrates Clarke's consistent use of this technique in her choral works since 2016. In the higher texture's closing phrase, '*luceat eis*' ('shine upon them'), Alto 1's semitone descent from F to E on '*eis*', bookended by the sopranos and second alto's repeated B, resolves the upper voices' tritone to an open chord (b. 82), providing a sense of peace. Tenor 1 and bass 2's octave E drone surrounds the inner voices' triplet quaver recitation of '*Requiem*' on an octave A, with the fifth and final expression rhythmically augmented, fading to *pianississimo*. While

conveying an archaic sound, the sustained tones and final open chord could be interpreted as having no definite conclusion, symbolising 'perpetual light' and eternity.

Melodic analysis

Although the static harmonic tapestry and timbral contrasts are at the forefront of '*Introit*', the melodic progressions, primarily in the upper voices, suggest the influence of plainchant and contribute to the peaceful communication of the prayer. Soprano 1's opening stepwise ascent (E4 –B4) through '*dona eis, Domine*', moving in thirds and fifths with soprano 2 (bb. 11–14), effectively contrasts with the lower voices' sombre ostinato, perhaps to convey the idea of light shining in the darkness of death, with the rising inflection on '*et lux perpetua*' evoking brightness in the forthcoming bars. This five-note ascent is not unlike the sopranos' stepwise idiom on '*ora pro nobis*' ('pray for us') in Clarke's *Regina Coeli* (2007; bb. 66–70), and serves as a precursor to the five-note rising figures on '*orationem*' ('prayer') later in '*Introit*' (bb. 49–53); the motif's recurrence on similar texts suggests its association with prayer. The syllabic setting and sustained rhythms through '*et lux perpetua luceat eis*', particularly on '*perpetua*' ('perpetual'), enhances the prayerful atmosphere and could be deemed a form of word painting (Figure 5.5). The sopranos continue to ascend through the repeat of '*luceat eis*' (bb. 23–24), soprano 1 peaking on a sustained *forte* G5, a fifth above the second soprano. Both voices descend in consonant suspensions through the melismatic '*eis*', closing on a major second (D5–E5; b. 27), a common intervallic conclusion in Clarke's choral work.[18]

[18] See Chapter Three and Appendix B.
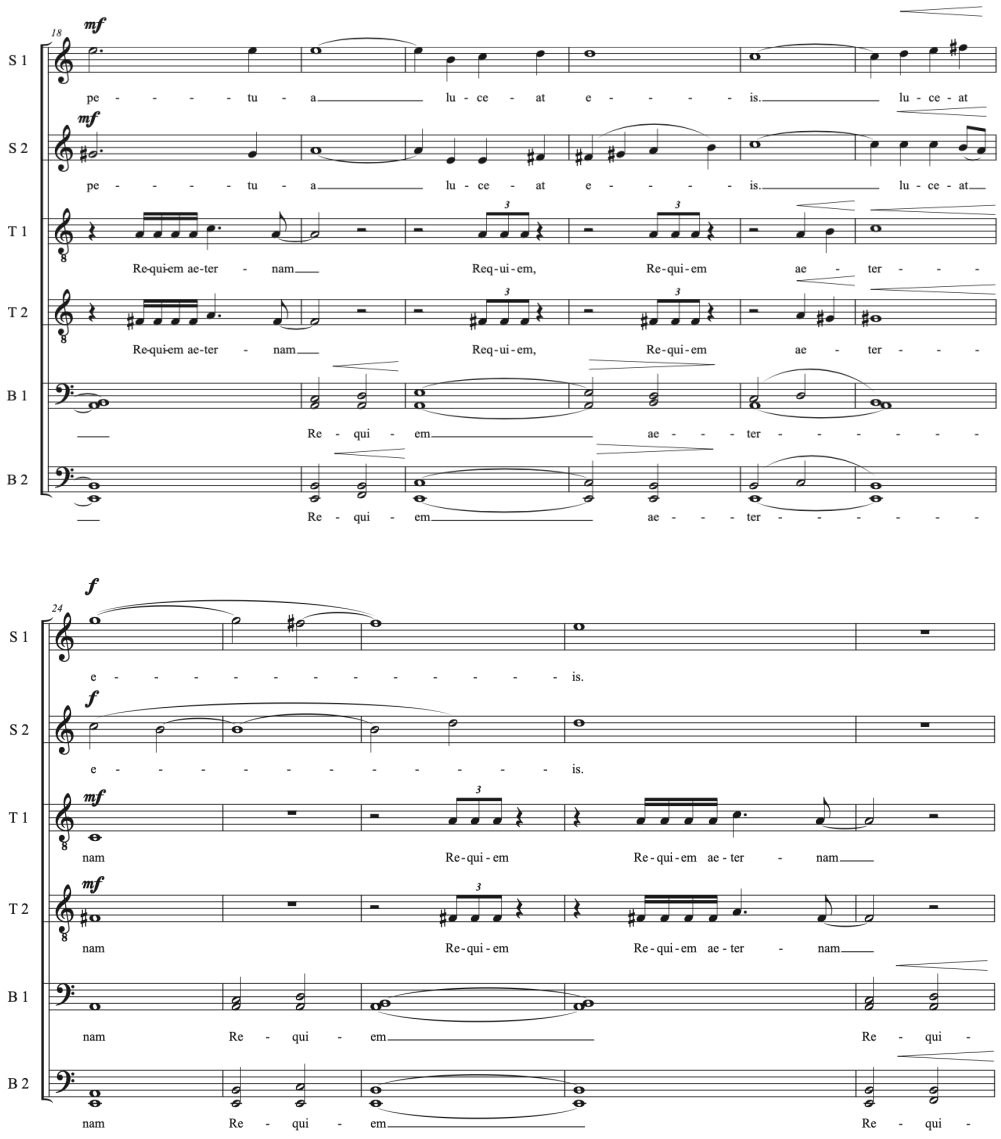


Figure 5.5. '*Introit*', bb. 18–28.

The sopranos' rising expressions and harmonies convey striking similarities to the treble soloists in the contemporary Scottish composer James MacMillan's *A Child's Prayer* (1996), a work also dedicated to the dead. Similar to the sopranos' entry on E on the third beat of bar 11 in Clarke's movement, MacMillan introduces the trebles on F# on the third beat of bar 7, accompanied by a harmonic choral ostinato on 'Welcome'. The soloists repeat '*Jesu*' three times in an ascending manner (bb. 7–19), before proceeding to the text 'deep in my soul forever' (bb. 19–27). Apart from the F# at the beginning of each '*Jesu*' iteration, MacMillan's trebles in bars 8 to 17 (Figure 5.6) are harmonically and melodically identical to Clarke's sopranos in bars 12 to 14 (Figure 5.7). Furthermore, the rising sixths and fifths (bb. 19–22, Figure 5.8) are apparent in Clarke's soprano lines on '*lux perpetua*' (bb. 16–20, Figure 5.9).

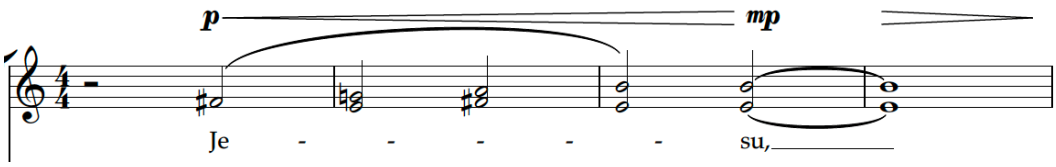


Figure 5.6. Treble soloists, James MacMillan, *A Child's Prayer* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1997), bb. 7–10; 11–14.
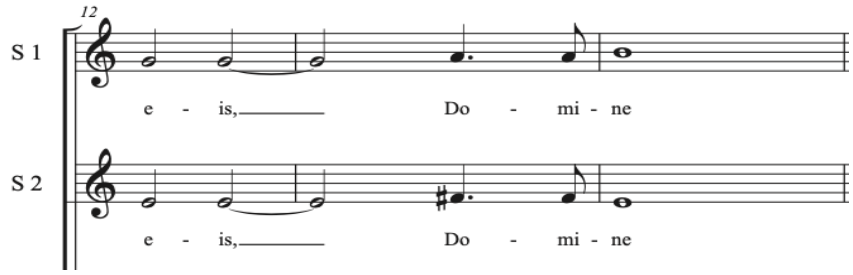


Figure 5.7. Sopranos, '*Introit*', bb. 12–14.
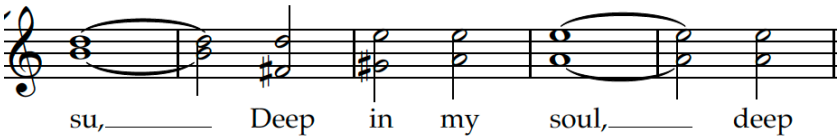


Figure 5.8. Soloists, *A Child's Prayer*, bb. 18–22.

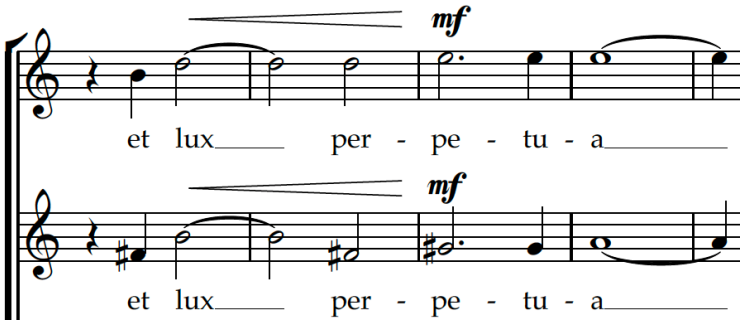


Figure 5.9. Sopranos, '*Introit*', bb. 16–20.

As the trebles ascend through the next phrase in *A Child's Prayer* (bb. 23–27), their intervals contract from a fourth to thirds, concluding on a second (D–E) on the final syllable of 'forever' (Figure 5.10). Analysing the sopranos' trajectory in '*Introit*' (bb. 20–22), Clarke's voice leading results in an inversion of MacMillan's intervals on '*luceat eis*', the second soprano's rising melismatic crotchets beneath soprano 1's semibreve D leading to a unison C (Figure 5.11). Additionally, Clarke's movement from tertian to secundal intervals (D–F#; D–E) at the

end of '*eis*' (bb. 26–27; Figure 5.12) are identical to the soloists in MacMillan's work (bb. 25–27).

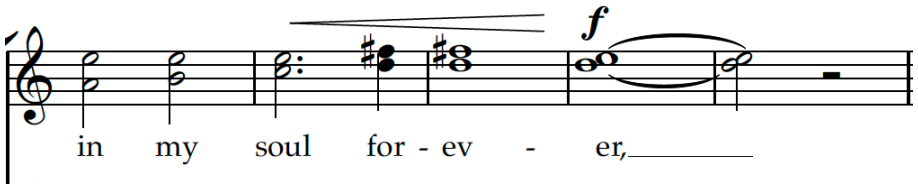


Figure 5.10. Soloists, *A Child's Prayer*, bb. 23–27.

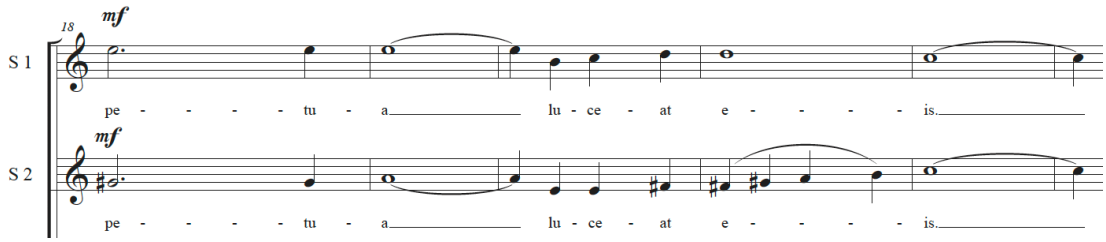


Figure 5.11. Sopranos, '*Introit*', bb. 18–23.



Figure 5.12. Sopranos, '*Introit*', bb. 24–27.

The similar rich textures and harmonies of both compositions may be a curious coincidence, with Clarke possibly unaware of how her approach reflects that of MacMillan. However, it is plausible that she has heard *A Child's Prayer* and perhaps sought a similar sound, especially given the connection between the meaning of both texts. Whilst the *Requiem* is traditionally a Christian ritual for the dead, MacMillan's work is a setting of a Christian prayer dedicated to the victims of the 1996 Dunblane tragedy, when sixteen children and their teacher were tragically shot in a primary school.[19] Composition does not occur in a vacuum and it is likely that both composers are drawing from the same well of sonorities — the high-voiced duets

[19] Paul Spicer, *James MacMillan: Choral Music: A Practical Commentary and Survey* (Boosey & Hawkes, 2021), p. 6 <https://www.boosey.com/downloads/MacMillanChoralPDF21WEB.pdf> [accessed 10 January 2024].

melodically ascending above gentle repetitive harmonies — to express a similar image of the souls of the deceased ascending to heaven. The theme of death and the search for peace in both compositions strengthen the argument for the conscious or subconscious influence of *A Child's Prayer* on Clarke's setting of the opening movement of *Requiem*. Both composers' spotlighting of the upper voices, supported by ambient ostinati, inspire a sense of tranquillity befitting the respective prayers and dedication to the dead.

The primarily ascending melodic phrases throughout '*Introit*' offer a light contrast to the subdued, dense harmonies of the lower voices, evoking an impression of 'perpetual light' amidst darkness and death. The rising stepwise figures and undulating movement demonstrate Clarke's idiomatic melodic writing, with repetition and triplets throughout the texture conveying a chant-like tone suitable for the funereal text. The tenor-bass ostinato serves as the principal component of the movement, contributing to its coherent structure, and establishing the solemn atmosphere of *Requiem*, with the composer arguably placing a greater focus on static harmonic motion and recitative-like phrases than a consistent, dominant melody. While Clarke's distinctive compositional voice is at the forefront of '*Introit*', most notably through her harmonic progressions and timbral contrasts, likenesses to MacMillan and Ligeti's works suggest possible influences on her setting of the same/similar-themed text.

'*Lux Aeterna*'

Formal Structure

As is evident across the composer's oeuvre, Clarke's music generally tends to encapsulate the overall mood of a text and endeavours to create a particular sound world, rather than fixate on painting specific words. The Latin *Requiem* text does not naturally present many opportunities for literal text illustration, instead focusing on the more general themes of light and eternal rest. The depiction of light ('*lux*') in '*Lux Aeterna*' stands somewhat in contrast to this broad focus, with Clarke's melodic, harmonic, and timbral framework capturing the image in a *pianissimo* diaphanous texture and causing this word to stand out. Oscillating seconds in semiquaver and triplet fragments flicker repetitively across the upper voices throughout the movement, illustrating perpetual light. While these soft, wavering idioms paint flickering light in an overt manner, Clarke's organisation of these fragments across the broader, imitative texture generates an otherworldly atmosphere, evoking an overall impression of radiance and tranquillity.

Like the opening text of *Requiem*, the second movement contains a repeated phrase — '*Cum Sanctis tuis in aeternum: quia pius es*' ('With your Saints for eternity: you who are gracious') — which Clarke sets with similar material, creating further musical and structural cohesiveness. More broadly, melodic undulations, close harmonies, sustained tones, triplet figuration, and extended vocal techniques within '*Lux Aeterna*' demonstrate consistency of techniques across *Requiem*, exhibiting Clarke's compositional voice. It is difficult to define the overall tonality of this movement, given the high level of chromaticism, tone clusters, and non-functional harmonic progressions. '*Lux Aeterna*' is also not as sectionally distinct as '*Introit*', with the recurring chromatic undulations, triplet rhythms, and dense upper harmonies permeating the overall structure, obscuring a definite form. The music could be interpreted as having three sections (Table 5.3), underlined by changes in texture and tempo. An analysis of the movement's melodic, harmonic, and textural components reveals the continuous focus on 'light'.

Section	Bars	Tonal centre	Text
A	1–34	E♭ (Highly chromatic)	'*Lux aeterna luceat eis, Domine*'
B	35–60	B–G (Highly chromatic)	'*Cum Sanctis tuis in aeternum: quia pius es. Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine: et lux perpetua luceat eis.*'
B1	61–70	B–G (Highly chromatic)	'*Cum Sanctis tuis in aeternum: quia pius es.*'

Table 5.3: '*Lux Aeterna*' Structure.

Harmonic and Textural Analysis

In a dramatic textural contrast to the opening and closing of '*Introit*', the repetition of fleeting undulating seconds across the eight upper voices (SSSSAAAA) in the introduction of '*Lux Aeterna*' creates a 'shimmering texture' that seeks to evoke flickering light.[20] A semiquaver triplet-quaver figure descends through the upper texture from soprano 2 to alto 4, supported by the other sopranos and altos' sustained E♭ and C tones, respectively (Figure 5.13). The imitative vocal entries initially occur at a crotchet-beat distance, the echoes reduced by a quaver beat from bar 6, resulting in a syncopated, denser sound. The undulating E♭–D and C–B semitones

[20] Clarke, 'Composer's note', *Requiem*.

create a diminished tone cluster (B–C–D–E♭) at the end of each appearance of '*lux*', continuing until bar 16, with the subsequent arrival of the tenor oscillating between F and G♭ (b. 8), and the bass between D♭ and C (b. 10), expanding the texture. The high register of the tenor and bass contrasts with the previous movement's ostinato in the depths of their vocal ranges, further illustrating the emphasis on 'light'. The opening thirty-four bars of polyphony and chromatic figures in each part's high register — growing from *pianissimo* to *mezzo-piano* before fading in dynamics through the final prolonged notes — underlines the text's ethereal character, while depicting eternal light glimmering gently. The dense harmonies, gradually expanding from sopranos and altos to twelve parts, recedes to a single tenor tone (B; bb. 34–35), effectively communicating the first phrase of the prayer. The introduction also expounds the key compositional techniques in the movement, with melismatic undulations, triplet rhythms, close harmonies, and imitation — all significant features of Clarke's style — remaining at the forefront of the music.
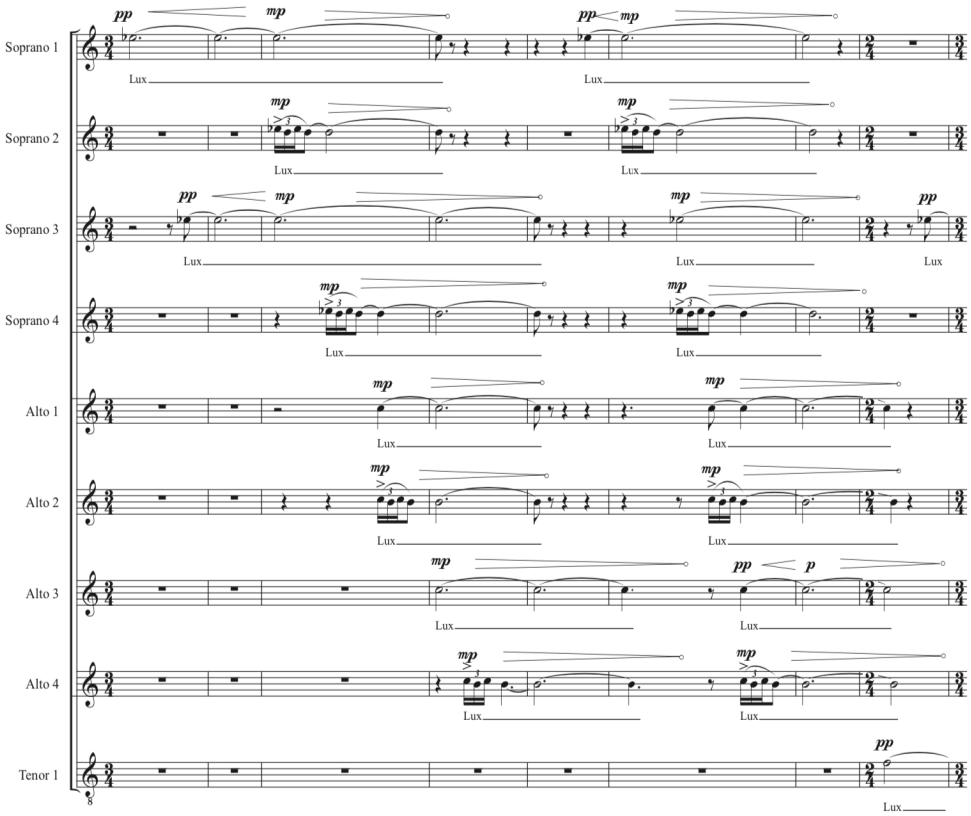


Figure 5.13. '*Lux Aeterna*', *Requiem*, bb. 1–8.

It could be argued that Clarke's depiction of light is to some extent inspired by György Ligeti's setting of the same text (1966), particularly the opening textural structure and phrase

fragmentation. Ligeti opens his work with a similar framework of four sopranos and four altos; the fractured entries of each voice at a *sempre pianissimo* dynamic gradually change pitch to create a similar ethereal tapestry of sound (Figure 5.14). Although the entries of certain voices occur on an off-beat, Clarke's setting is more rhythmically stable compared to the syncopated voices of Ligeti's composition, which instructs that 'barlines have no rhythmic significance and should not be emphasised', resulting in the obscurity of time and disjointed note changes.[21] The Hungarian composer's work has likely influenced Clarke's compositional approach, given the similar opening timbral and textural fabrics of both composers' '*Introit*' and '*Lux Aeterna*'. In an interview with Ita Beausang in 2004, Clarke states her admiration for Ligeti's style, and his 'textured layering', which is evident in his *Lux Aeterna*, and in her setting of the Latin text.[22]
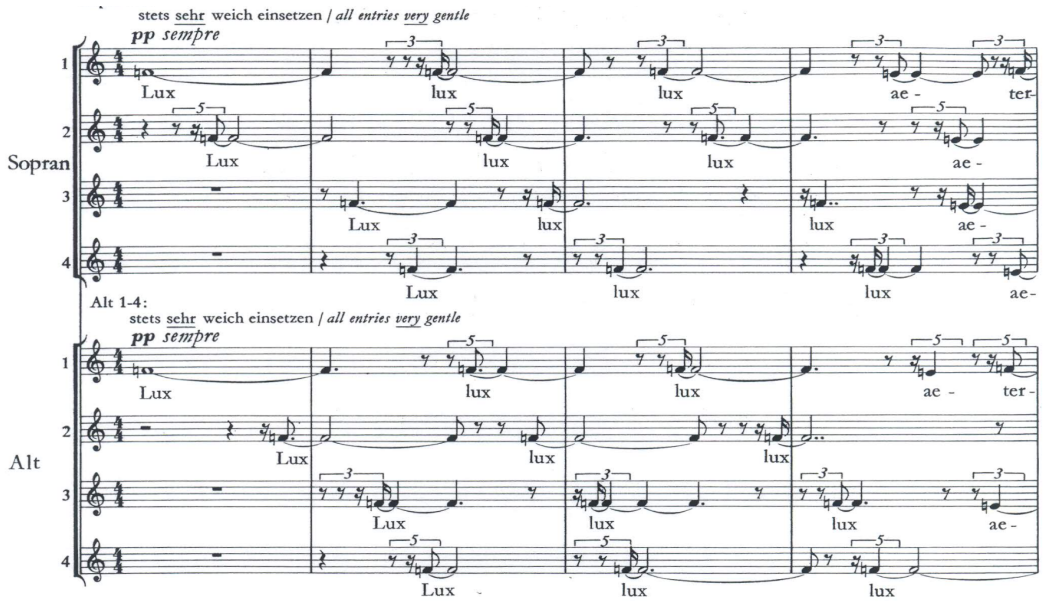


Figure 5.14. György Ligeti, *Lux Aeterna*
(Leipzig: Henry Litolff's Verlag/ C. F. Peters, 1966), bb. 1–4.

In his examination of texture, Wallace Berry observes how '[O]ne of the evidences of the significance of textural structure is its immediacy of effect.'[23] An important textural change in Clarke's '*Lux Aeterna*' occurs with the homorhythmic, syllabic phrase '*Cum Sanctis tuis in aeternum*' ('With your Saints for eternity'; bb. 35–39). The shift from a polyphonic tapestry of

[21] György Ligeti, *Lux Aeterna* (Leipzig: Henry Litolff's Verlag/C. F. Peters, 1966).
[22] Rhona Clarke, 'An Interview with Rhona Clarke', interviewed by Ita Beausang, *The Contemporary Music Centre* (2004) <https://www.cmc.ie/features/interview-rhona-clarke> [accessed 12 March 2025].
[23] Wallace Berry, *Structural Functions in Music* (New York: Dover Publications, 1987), p. 293.

imitative idioms to strict homophony at an *allargando* tempo creates a reverent tone, drawing the listener's attention to the text and change in mood. Clarke may have intended to underline the solemnity of eternal life through this stately chorale-like motion, the elongation of the second and third syllable of '*aeternum*' as minims and semibreves painting the word's meaning. Furthermore, the homophonic texture could represent 'togetherness' with the saints, as if in harmony. The composer demonstrates similar accentuated textural changes in *Navigatio* and *Regina Coeli* to underline significant phrases or signal a change in tone.[24] Despite the textural modification in '*Lux Aeterna*', the harmonic language remains unchanged, with chromatic movement and secundal intervals eschewing functional harmony (Figure 5.15).

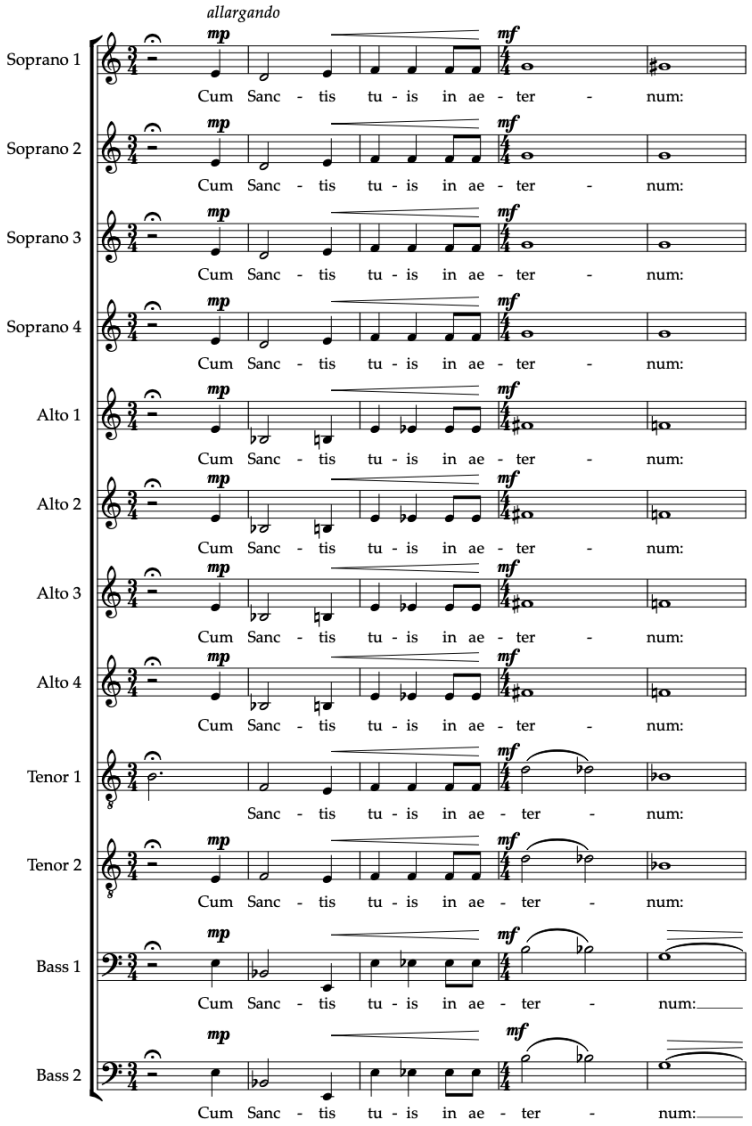


Figure 5.15. Clarke, '*Lux Aeterna*', bb. 35–39.

[24] See Chapter Three for further analysis.

All voices proceed from a unison E to a B♭ major chord, featuring descending tritones in the altos and basses (E–B♭). Clarke avoids conventional chords as the voices progress through an open E fifth, dissonant minor second (E–F), and a major second through chromatic alteration (E♭–F), before expanding to denser harmonies at the change to 4/4 time. The concluding extended rhythms of '*-ternum*' move from G major seventh in first inversion, G half-diminished in first inversion with a raised seventh (F#), to a final discord of G–B♭–F–G#, heightened by the false relation between the first soprano's G# and the accompanying sopranos and basses' G. Spotlighted by the homorhythmic texture, the dissonant harmonies almost overshadow the first soprano's stepwise ascent from D to G#, the latter recalling the rising melodic idioms in '*Introit*'.

Apart from the return of this homophonic declamation in the closing section of '*Lux Aeterna*' (bb. 61–65) — which is moderately altered with a repeated B in tenor 1 chanting the text independently of the other voices, and a varied melodic and harmonic progression from '*in aeternum*' (G major seventh in first inversion–B minor–B♭ minor with the tenor's B–G dominant seventh; bb. 63–65) — translucent polyphony defines the texture of the second movement, consistently evoking an ethereal radiance. Following the concentrated homorhythmic passage, the upper-voice quaver triplets return, echoing across the eight parts, anchored by the basses' G pedal point (bb. 40–42). Like the previous '*Lux aeterna*' undulations, oscillating melodic motion occurs through the repeating '*quia pius es*' ('you who are gracious') setting. Soprano 1 ascends a minor third from B to D, falling to C#, before returning to B through a *portamento*. This brief triplet motif is echoed across the four sopranos at a crotchet-beat distance, with the canonic pattern repeated in the following bar (Figure 5.16). Similarly, the four altos engage in imitative dialogue with chromatic motifs. While alto 2 and alto 4 descend a semitone from B to A#, their counterparts fall in the same manner (B–A#), but return to B through a *portamento* on '*es*'.
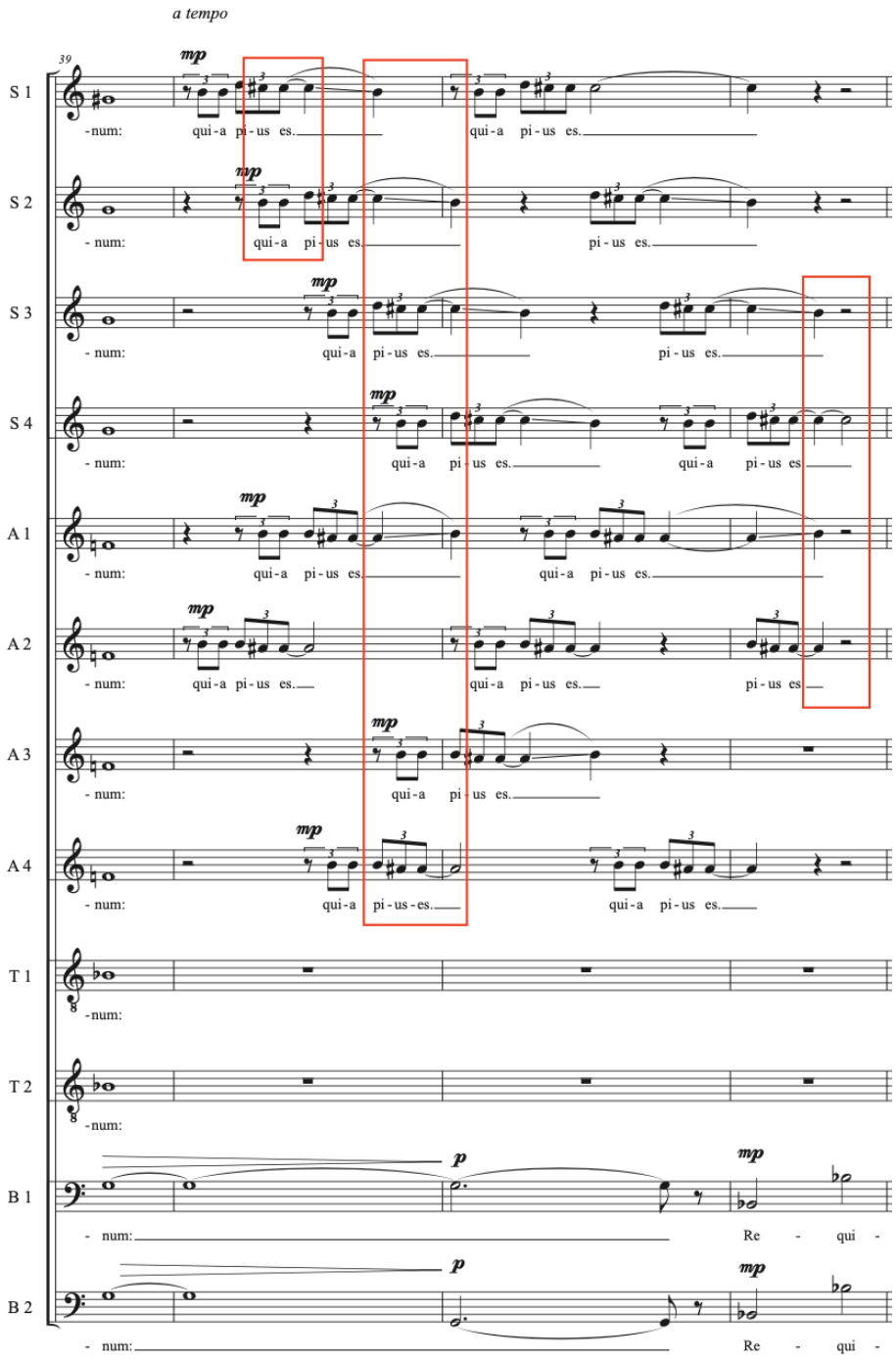


Figure 5.16. '*Lux Aeterna*', bb. 39–42 (tone clusters in red).

The upper-voice interplay results in continuous major and minor seconds, reflecting the opening '*Lux*' polyphony. Secundal intervals characterise the harmonic palette of the entire movement, and convey Clarke's proclivity for this dissonance, which remains unresolved, maintaining a sense of tonal ambiguity. Mirroring the conclusion of previous sections, Clarke gradually reduces the texture, dynamics, and tempo to signal the end of the movement. As the bass sustains G, soprano 4 and alto 2 sing the final chromatic '*pius es*' in minor thirds (B–D;

A#–C#), sustaining the final interval for eleven beats, gradually fading *al niente* (bb. 68–70). The concluding chord of G–A#–C# maintains the sense of mystery. The enigmatic harmony could be interpreted as G diminished, which does not naturally align with the prayer's message of 'eternal rest'. The first tenor's whispered '*quia pius es*' enhances the ghostly, transient tone, with Clarke desiring the effect of 'vanishing into the ether' (Figure 5.17).[25] The spoken text also reflects the composer's prevalent use of this vocal technique in her recent choral works on similar themes of death and the sacred.
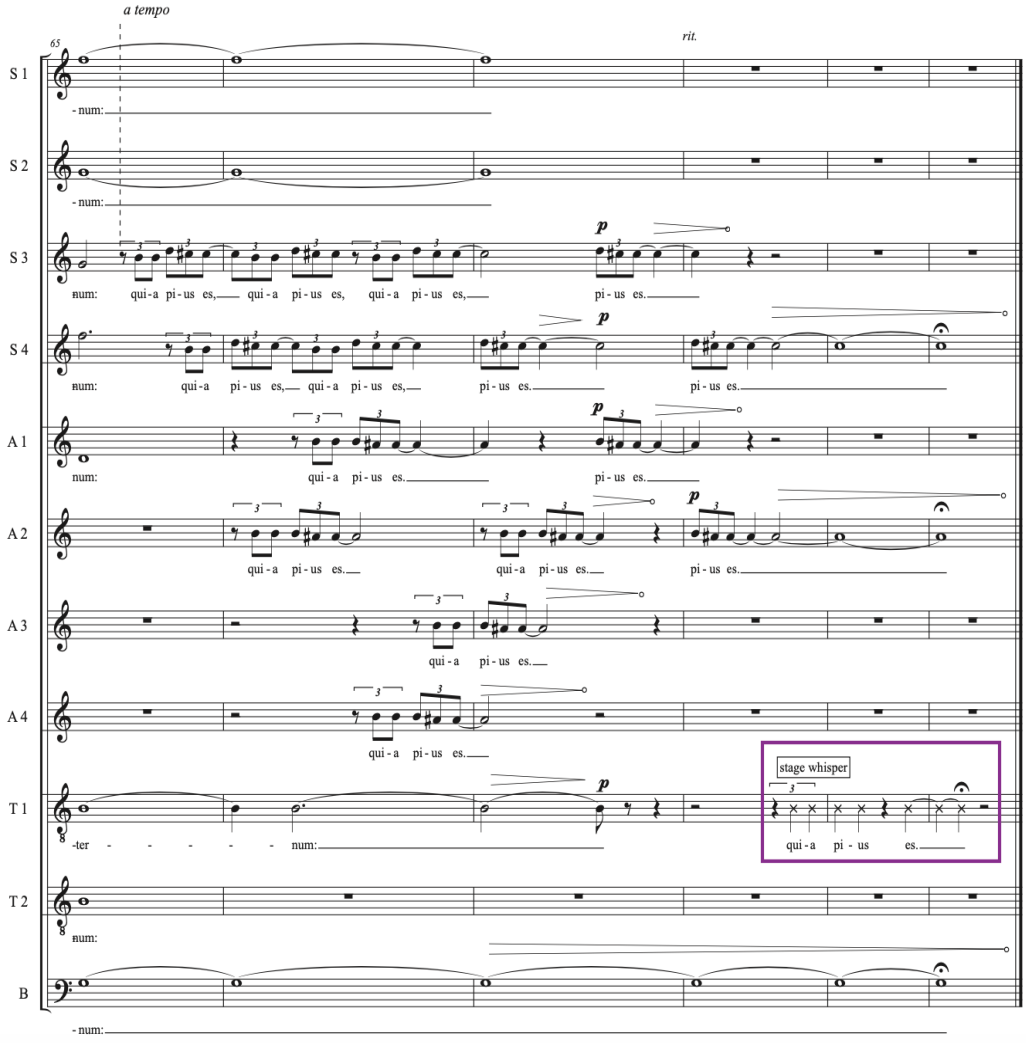


Figure 5.17. '*Lux Aeterna*', bb. 65–70 (whispered text in purple).

Unlike the modal framework and distinct sections of '*Introit*', '*Lux Aeterna*' is characterised by chromaticism, undulating motifs interweaving through the polyphonic texture, and secundal

[25] Clarke, interview with the author, 31 January 2025.

intervals, resulting in a cohesive musical structure. The possible influence of Ligeti's setting of the Latin text on Clarke's compositional approach is suggested by the dominant role of the eight-part soprano and alto polyphonic texture, tone clusters, and phrase fragmentation. The gradual layering of voices to create a dense texture of close harmonies represents a significant example of Clarke's distinct textural organisation, with a similar approach evident across several of her choral works.[26] Chords built on seconds, and the unresolved status of these harmonies, also characterise the composer's fondness for dissonance, which creates a haunting, enigmatic tone, possibly intending to communicate the idea of eternity, with no desire for resolution. The overall contemporary framework exhibits an innovative interpretation of this ancient text, reflecting Clarke's intention for her music to not 'sound in any way traditional', but rather to present a modern, individual choral setting.[27]

Melodic analysis

As an overview of the textural and harmonic structure demonstrates, Clarke's melodic setting of '*Lux Aeterna*' can be defined by oscillating chromatic motifs that reverberate through the upper voices (SSSSAAAA). Like the harmonic fabric, the melodic fragments are primarily built on the secundal interval, painting the flickering light within the prayer. Clarke's fondness for setting Latin texts in triplet rhythms is exemplified in this movement, with the key melodic idioms all featuring triplets ('*Lux*' [bb. 1–16]; '*Domine*' [bb. 31–33]; '*quia pius es*' [bb. 40–42; 65–68]; '*Requiem dona eis*' [bb. 44–49]; '*luceat*' [b. 55]) or semiquaver-dotted quaver syncopation ('*Lux aeternam*'; bb. 20–28). In his analysis of the Renaissance composer Pierre de la Rue's (1452–1518) *Requiem*, Willem Elders proposes that the triplet rhythms within his '*Lux Aeterna*' 'suggest illumination', which is equally applicable to Clarke's contemporary work.[28] She describes how the 'hovering' triplet oscillations and their 'various iterations throughout the movement [...] create a shimmering texture', encapsulating the eternal light shining upon the deceased.[29] The triplet rhythms also enable a more fluid expression of text akin to plainchant, which was likely Clarke's intention, given the text's origins in Gregorian chant.

[26] See, for example, *Salve Regina*, *Ave Atque Vale*, *Navigatio*.
[27] Clarke, interviewed by Grimes and Ferguson, 'amplify #64' (21:30–21:59).
[28] Willem Elders, *Symbolic Scores: Studies in the Music of the Renaissance* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), p. 122.
[29] Clarke, 'Composer's note', *Requiem*.

As well as the motifs previously analysed in the textural structure, Clarke sets the text '*Requiem aeternam, dona eis*' in three different rhythmic formats (bb. 43–49). Like the opening '*Lux*' idioms, the altos present an oscillating semitone figure (G#–A) as semiquaver triplets on the first melismatic syllable of '*Requiem*', followed by a repeated G# on the remaining syllables. The interval of the undulation expands to a minor third (G#–B) on '*aeternam*' with a *portamento* descent to the final syllable. This motif is first introduced by the upper two altos at the upbeat to bar 44 and is echoed on the downbeat of bar 45 by the third and fourth altos. The imitative altos' second iteration of the motif concludes with an extended *portamento* octave descent across three bars in the upper parts (B–B), and a reduced descent of a minor sixth across two bars in the lower altos (B–D#), forming a major third (b. 49). The tenors present similar rhythmically augmented oscillations within the expanding polyphonic texture, while the bass intones a pedal F. Tenor 2 engages in the echoing dialogue from bar 44, undulating a major third (B–D#) through a crotchet triplet statement of '*Requiem dona eis*'. Tenor 1 enters in canon at a one-bar distance, resulting in a static major third interval between both voices (Figure 5.18). The imitative dialogue is rhythmically reduced on the first tenor's repeated motif, avoiding the prolonged final syllables to join the lower voice on the homophonic expression of '*Domine*' (b. 50).
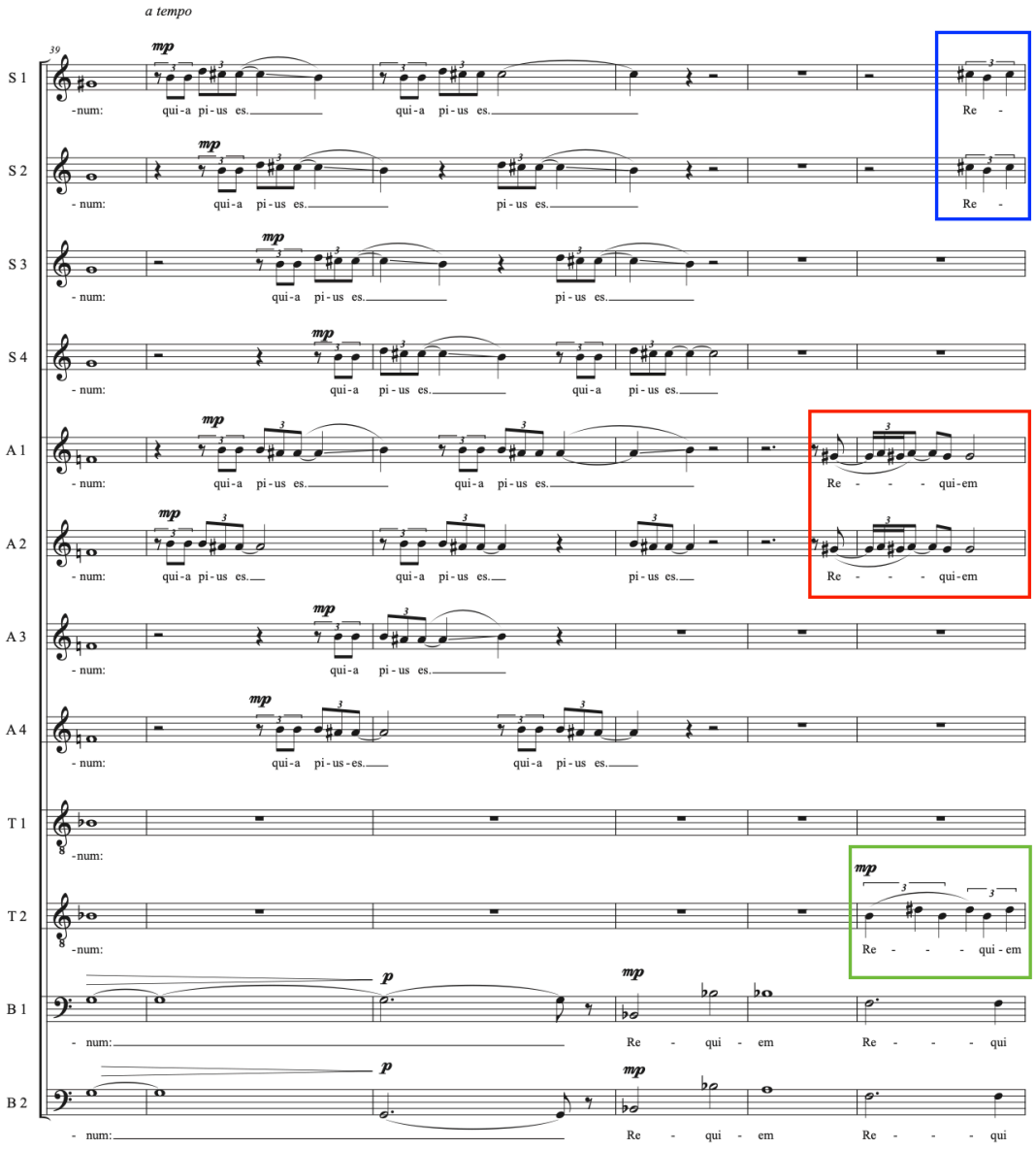


Figure 5.18. '*Lux Aeterna*', bb. 39–49 (distinct motifs in coloured boxes).
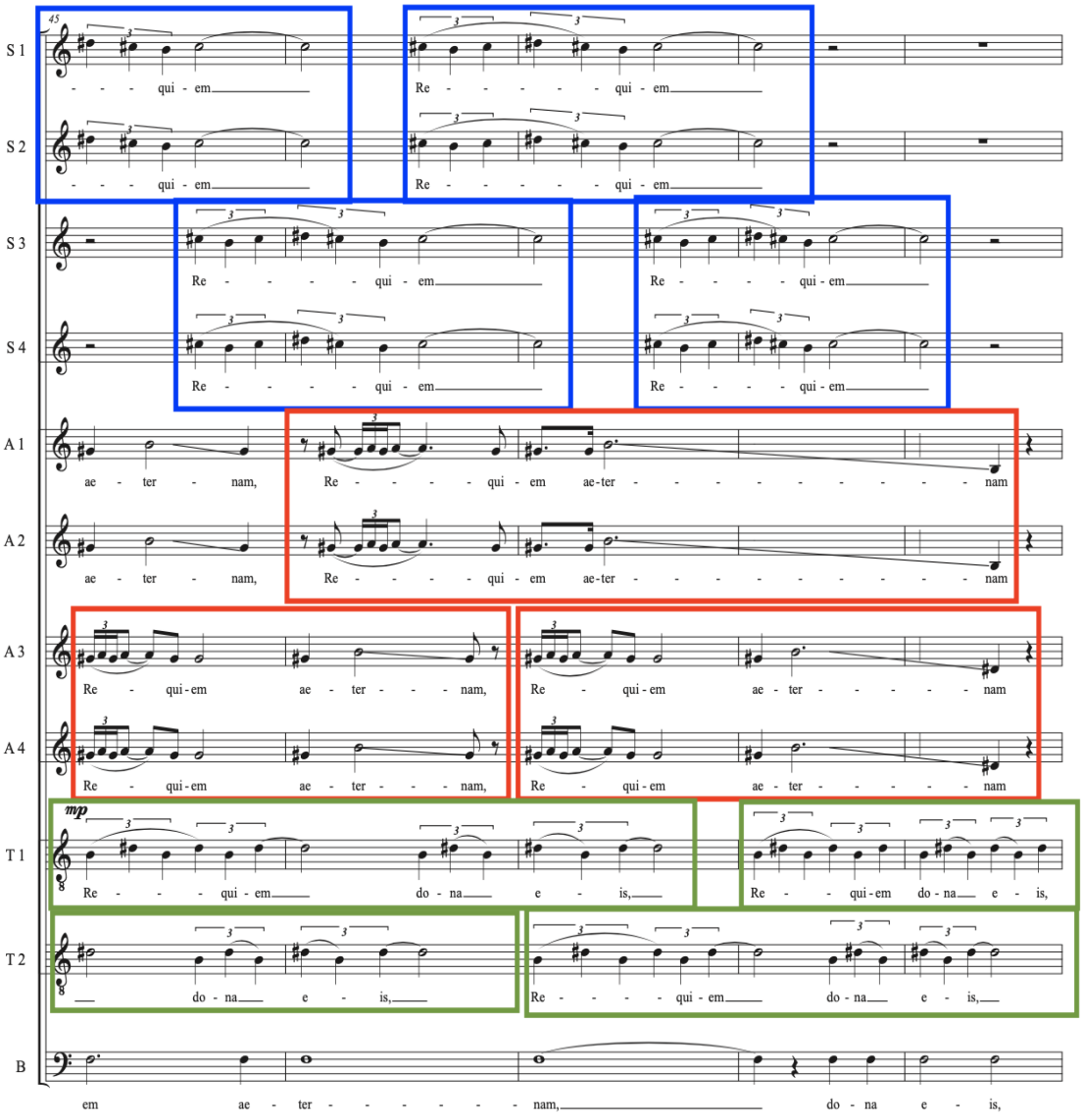


Figure 5.18. (continued).

The upper two sopranos present a similar triplet oscillation between C# and B, followed by a stepwise descent from D# to B and return to a prolonged C# (bb. 44–48). Unlike the altos and tenors, the sopranos do not sing the full phrase, instead repeating '*Requiem*' twice in succession. The third and fourth sopranos enter the imitative texture at a one-bar distance, repeating the motif verbatim (bb. 45–49). Clarke's imitative dialogue and her juxtaposition of simple idioms above the bass's F pedal point result in harmonic stasis, reflecting the previous polyphony in the movement. The unchanging character of each motif, layered within a larger, nebulous framework effectively communicates the idea of eternity ('*aeternam*'). Clarke's melismatic triplet setting of this phrase diverges significantly from the same text in '*Introit*',

offering a lighter tone than the previous movement's syllabic, minor ostinato in the lower texture.

The minimalist melodic motifs all contribute to the overarching theme of 'eternal light' within this movement, the intervals of seconds and thirds in a stratified polyphonic texture kindling an evocative atmosphere. The triplet rhythms and oscillating patterns also highlight Clarke's prominent use of these features in her broader output, particularly her Latin works. Like '*Introit*', a single, pronounced melodic voice does not dominate '*Lux Aeterna*'. Rather, the imitative short motifs take precedence, weaving a contrapuntal illustration of light and tranquillity. The similar shape of each wavering idiom, as well as the extensive repetition, gives the music a coherent structure, consistently communicating the key themes of the text.

'*Pie Jesu*'

Formal Structure

Clarke's '*Pie Jesu*' is the shortest movement in her *Requiem*, consisting of thirty-six bars of choral homophony with soprano solo. Veronica Franke observes in her analysis of historical *Pie Jesu* settings how this movement generally 'serves a musical [,] textural and structural function, drawing attention to itself through the arrest of more active rhythms, dynamics, counterpoint, and dissonances that prevail in adjacent movements.'[30] This observation is equally applicable to Clarke's setting of the prayer. However, while this movement may initially appear straightforward, the composer's meticulous crafting of each voice within the texture betrays subtle complexities. The form of her '*Pie Jesu*' is a passacaglia, with the bass's quasi-chromatic tetrachord descent (E♭–B♭), and the soprano's two-bar ostinato, uniting the overall movement. This seventeenth-century form has been applied by composers throughout history to reflect themes of a serious character — as in Benjamin Britten's use of the passacaglia in his vocal works based on death — which likely influenced Clarke's decision to use this musical structure.[31] As Darrell Handel notes, the passacaglia's 'tension-building

[30] Veronica Franke, 'Form, Function and Compositional Methods in five *Pie Jesu Domine* Settings: Luigi Cherubini, Gabriel Fauré, Anton Dvořák, Maurice Duruflé and Hendrik Hofmeyr', *Vir die Musiekleier*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2023), 157–177 (p. 159) <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-vdm_v43_n1_a7> [accessed 23 September 2024].

[31] Alexander Silbiger, 'Passacaglia', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.21024> [accessed 19 September 2024]; Darrell Handel, 'Britten's Use of the Passacaglia', *Tempo*, No. 94 (1970), 2–6 (p. 2) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298200046167> [accessed 19 September 2024].

qualities [are] a good means for expressing and intensifying certain moods'.[32] Similarly, Wallace Berry emphasises that this ostinato form is, 'while a primitive and obvious means of extending music in time, capable of a high degree of intensity and expressiveness when endowed with subtle control and imaginative means of variety.'[33] In the case of '*Pie Jesu*', the repeated bass line allows for the heightening of the sorrowful character of the prayer and its petition for eternal rest. Furthermore, given the prayer only consists of two lines, the passacaglia offers an opportunity to reiterate the full text with increasing intensity and emotional expression, largely through controlled intensification of the texture, dynamics, and subtle harmonic changes. Although traditionally confined to the low register in triple time, Clarke slightly alters the passacaglia conventions through a shifting 4/4–6/4 metric framework, and by assigning an ostinato figure to the soprano as well as the ground bass.

'*Pie Jesu*' also includes a more understated dynamic range than the rest of Clarke's *Requiem*, extending from *pianissimo* to *mezzo-piano*, preserving the serenity of the movement. Although the key signature suggests B♭ major, E♭ dominates the melodic ostinato and choral underlay. The presence of A♭ strengthens an E♭ major tonality, even amidst the chromatic alterations throughout the texture, a common characteristic of Clarke's harmonic language. The *molto legato* syllabic setting, uncomplicated rhythms, and extended harmonies generate an intimate, peaceful atmosphere befitting the text, which asks Jesus to grant the deceased eternal rest. Furthermore, the repetition of text and melodic material reflects that of a mantra or ritual, capturing the essence of the prayer, and conveying the dominant use of repetition across Clarke's *Requiem*. The solo soprano presents a further shift from the previous movements, with a greater focus on the melodic line in the communication of text and in giving the music forward momentum. It is likely that Clarke was inspired by the inclusion of a soloist in previous settings of this text, such as those by Fauré (1890), Duruflé (1947), Rutter (1985), and Lloyd Webber (1985), although Fauré and Duruflé omit the choir, instead focusing on the solo voice with instrumental accompaniment. Overall, the homophonic structure, slow rhythmic motion, and soft dynamics encapsulate the prayer's tranquillity, inspiring a sense of spiritual contemplation.

[32] Handel, 'Britten's Use of the Passacaglia', p. 2.
[33] Wallace Berry, *Form in Music: An Examination of Traditional Techniques of Musical Structure and their Application in Historical and Contemporary Styles* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 270.

Melodic Analysis

Unlike the short, layered motifs of the previous movements, there is a more pronounced melodic trajectory in '*Pie Jesu*', led by the soprano's repeated two-bar idiom, and the solo soprano. Therefore, it is more fitting to begin with a melodic analysis of this movement, followed by an investigation of the broader harmonic and textural structures. The two-bar ostinato on '*Pie Jesu Domine*' features undulating figures of three notes — E♭, B♭, F — the open fifth and fourth intervals eschewing a major or minor tonality (Figure 5.19). The rising-falling oscillations further underline the prominence of this technique in Clarke's *Requiem* and broader choral oeuvre, although the intervals are expanded beyond the seconds and thirds of the previous movements. As the tenor and bass chant repeated tones beneath each statement of the motif, the alto engages in contrary motion with the soprano, expanding from a fourth (E♭4–B♭3), to a fifth (E♭–A♭), and minor sixth (E♭–G) interval by the fifth presentation of the ostinato (b. 9). The repetition of the rocking, triadic-like melody above the controlled substructure inspires an impression of stasis and prayerful concentration within the music, somewhat reminiscent of the tintinnabuli style of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt (b. 1935), evident in pieces such as *Berliner Messe* and *Spiegel im Spiegel*.
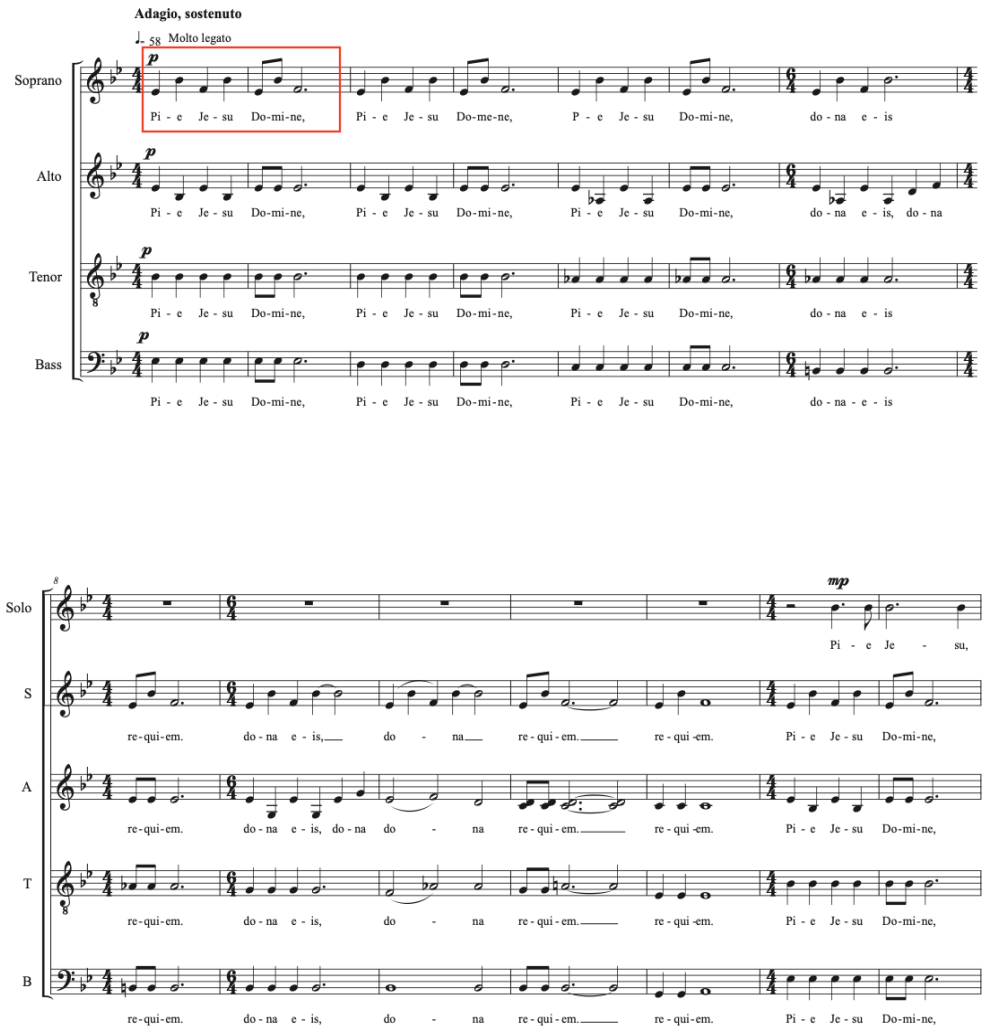


Figure 5.19. '*Pie Jesu*', bb. 1–14 (ostinato in red).

The fourth and fifth appearance of the soprano's motif is rhythmically augmented, due to the transition to 6/4 and addition of '*dona eis*' ('grant them'). The extended 6/4 fifth iteration features text repetition and a melismatic '*dona*' on the same wavering intervals (E♭–B♭–F–B♭), briefly breaking from the syllabic motion. The repeated '*requiem*' text, slowing from quavers to crotchets, provides closure to the introduction and anticipates the arrival of the soloist (b. 13). This broadened four-bar phrase is repeated at the movement's climax (bb. 21–25), with a modified time signature (4/4) at '*requiem*', followed by a change in the choir's melodic direction and the soloist's delivery of the final word – '*sempiternam*' ('eternal').

The introduction of the soprano solo in bar 13 enhances the intimate aspect of the prayer, creating the impression of an individual directly communicating with a higher power ('*Pie Jesu Domine*'). The soloist's *mezzo-piano* entry on a repeated B♭ through the titular text

(bb. 13–14) continues the chant-like tone of the piece, with the D♭ and A♭ in the subsequent stepwise descent suggesting a B♭ Dorian modality. Clarke highlights the transcendent associations of '*Domine*' through an ascending fourth to E♭ on the first five-beat syllable, followed by a return to a repeated B♭. As the tranquil passacaglia continues, the soloist ascends incrementally to a *mezzo-forte* climax on G, with '*requiem*' sustained across two bars, falling to F (bb. 21–22; Figure 5.20). The melody peaks on A♭, beginning the predominantly stepwise descent to B♭ through the melismatic setting of '*dona eis*', diminishing to *mezzo-piano*. The soloist's soaring contour above the homophonic chorale embodies the sense of innocence and beauty found in other '*Pie Jesu*' settings, and aptly expresses the humble petition to grant the deceased eternal rest. The minor third descent to a dotted crotchet-quaver G on the first two syllables of '*requiem*', followed by an ascending fourth (G–C) to the sustained final syllable — a common interval within the movement — conveys a melancholic quality, enhanced by the choir's C minor chord in second inversion (b. 24). The further rising step to D provides a sense of momentum for the final word of the prayer, '*sempiternam*', which falls by step from E♭ to B♭, the focal pitch of the melody.
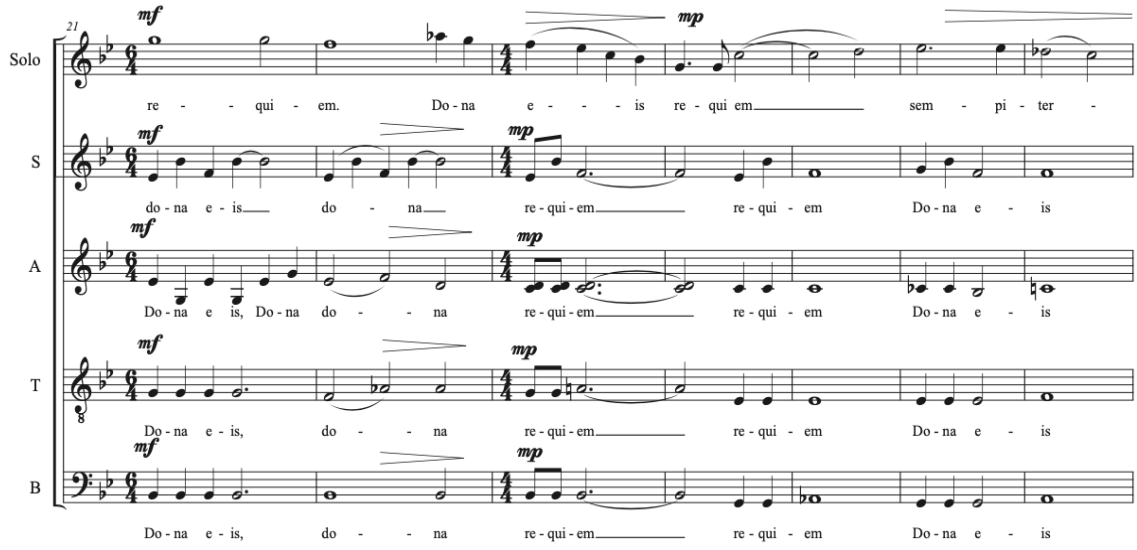


Figure 5.20. '*Pie Jesu*', bb. 21–27.

As the passacaglia concludes in the choral accompaniment, the soloist adopts the '*Pie Jesu*' ostinato in the final phrase (E♭–B♭–F–B♭), repeating it twice before a major third ascent (C♭–E♭) on '*sempiternam*' concludes the work, the semibreve rhythms providing closure above the

choir's sustained mixed-interval harmony (B♭–E♭–A–F–B♭; bb. 29–36). '*Sempiternam*' is the most rhythmically augmented word in the setting, reflecting eternity and signalling the conclusion of this movement (Figure 5.21). The high E♭ above the final unresolved E♭ Lydian chord in second inversion engenders a celestial quality suitable for the prayer, given the Lydian mode's 'calm and peaceful disposition' and association with hymns.[34] Overall the melodic structure of '*Pie Jesu*' inspires a more pronounced feeling of eternal repose than the previous movements' dissonance, rhythmically active motifs, and imitative counterpoint. The solo soprano's melody above the chorale distinguishes this movement from its counterparts, enhancing the intimate, tender nature of the prayer, and continues the tradition of including a soloist in the setting of this text.
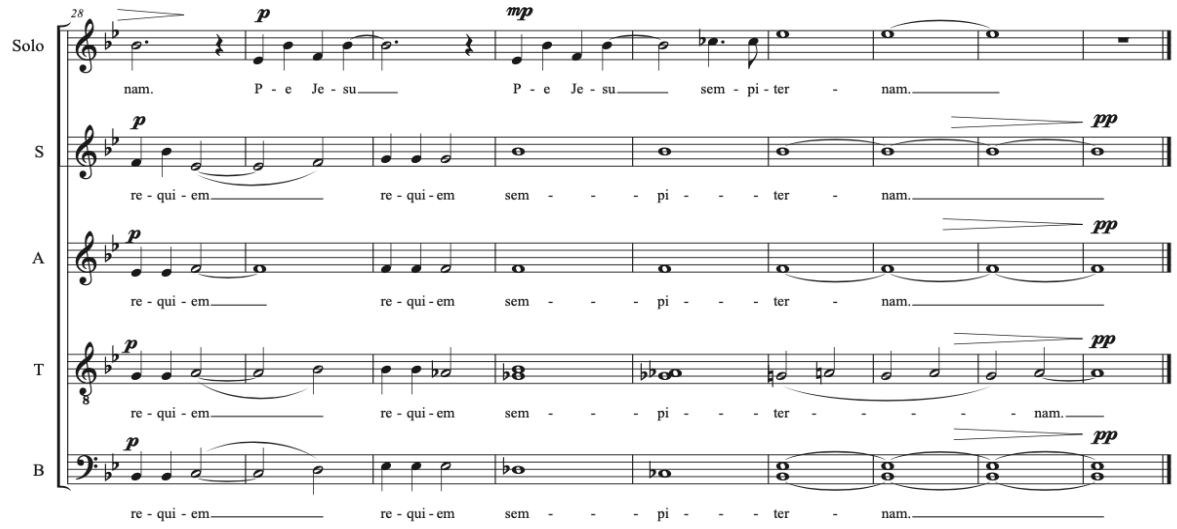


Figure 5.21. '*Pie Jesu*', bb. 28–36.

Harmonic and Textural Analysis

In contrast to the low-register ostinato of '*Introit*', and dissonant, dense upper texture of '*Lux Aeterna*', the unadorned four-part homophonic structure with a soprano soloist in '*Pie Jesu*'

[34] Claude Victor Palisca, 'The ethos of modes during the Renaissance', in *The Emotional Power of Music: Multidisciplinary perspectives on musical arousal, expression, and social control*, ed. by Tom Cochrane, Bernardino Fantini, and Klaus R. Scherer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 102–114 (p. 104); Harold S. Powers, 'Lydian', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.17245> [accessed 7 August 2024]; Frank Lehman, 'Reading Tonality through Film: Transformational Hermeneutics and the Music of Hollywood' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2012), p. 31.

engenders a more intimate, modest tone, conveying the prayer's simple piety. The slow chorale framework also stands out in Clarke's oeuvre, given her general avoidance of prolonged homophonic textures. This movement comes closest, of all the works in her output, to the contemporary tendency for sustained homophony in choral music, particularly in settings of sacred texts.[35] However, Clarke's textural approach here is clearly influenced by the delicate settings of this text within the *Requiem* tradition, and by the movement's humble petition for eternal rest. In comparison to the rest of her *Requiem*, she also places a greater focus on triadic movement and stable rhythmic activity in '*Pie Jesu*' — reminiscent of Pärt's minimalist tintinnabuli technique — with less pronounced dissonance throughout the harmonic structure. Nonetheless, secundal intervals in the upper voices prevail, notably at the end of each subphrase, maintaining harmonic consistency throughout *Requiem*, and subtly revealing Clarke's compositional voice. Harmonic changes occur predominantly at two-bar intervals, resulting from incremental movement in the three lower voices, as the soprano continues to repeat the ostinato in a ritualistic manner. Collectively, the reduced textural density, rhythmic activity, and dynamics, as well as the undulating ostinato and steady harmonic changes, evoke a contemplative ambience. The repetitive structure is not unlike Eoghan Desmond's application of ostinati in the choral underlay of his sacred works, such as *Nothing in Vain* (2021) and *In Monte Oliveti* (2022), which also elicit a meditative character.[36] In Clarke's case, the modest musical framework is unique in her overall choral output, underlining its effectiveness in this setting.

Following the dissonant '*Lux Aeterna*', which concluded with whispered text and a sustained discord (G–A♯–C♯), the open E♭ fifth that begins '*Pie Jesu*' sets a more serene tone. The initial two bars oscillate between this open interval and an open ninth, the bass and tenor repeating their fifth (E♭–B♭) in a chant-like manner, while the soprano's F on the third beat of both bars forms a major second with the alto's E♭, subsequently resolving to a unison E♭. This close interval between the upper voices persists through the movement, with the open ninth reflecting the common application of added intervals in contemporary choral music,

[35] Kira Zeeman Rugen, 'The Evolution of Choral Sound: In Professional Choirs from the 1970s to the Twenty-First Century' (unpublished DMA dissertation, Arizona State University, 2013), p. 88, 109; Alan Denning, 'Ours to See: Emerging Trends in Today's Choral Compositions', *The Choral Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (2019), 8–21 (p. 13) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26870101> [accessed 2 February 2023].
[36] See Chapter Four; See also Laura Sheils, 'A Choral Meditation: Fusing Past and Present in the Sacred Choral Music of Eoghan Desmond', *Religions*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2024), 135 <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010135> [accessed 14 February 2024].

particularly in the higher texture.[37] The parsimonious voice leading and chant-like motion in the lower voices is not unlike the '*Requiem*' ostinato of '*Introit*', with minimal movement between chords a common technique in homophonic sections of Clarke's choral output.[38]

Through the opening eleven bars, the bass descends by step from E♭ to B♭ at two-bar intervals, before G resolves to A, forming the first inversion of F dominant seventh (bb. 11–12; Figure 5.22). The quasi-chromatic trajectory of the bass's tetrachord recalls the falling ground bass of seventeenth-century laments, most notably Claudio Monteverdi's *Lamento della Ninfa* (1638), and 'Dido's Lament' from Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (1689). The passacaglia's role in mournful text settings of earlier eras likely prompted Clarke to apply this compositional technique in her '*Pie Jesu*'. As musicologist Ellen Rosand states, the falling tetrachord was exploited by Baroque composers as 'a source of harmonic, melodic and rhythmic dissonance created by suspensions, syncopation and overlapping phrases between the voice and the bass', with similar dissonance evident in Clarke's setting.[39]

[37] Stefan Kostka and Matthew Santa, *Materials and Techniques of Post-Tonal Music*, 5th edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 55, 57; Rugen, 'The Evolution of Choral Sound', p. 86.
[38] See, for example, *Epitaph*, *Navigatio*, 'II. Busy' from *A Bit of Nonsense*, *O Vis Aeternitatis*, *Ave Atque Vale*, *Salve Regina*, *Do Not Stand at my Grave and Weep*.
[39] Ellen Rosand, 'Lamento', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.15904> [accessed 24 September 2024].
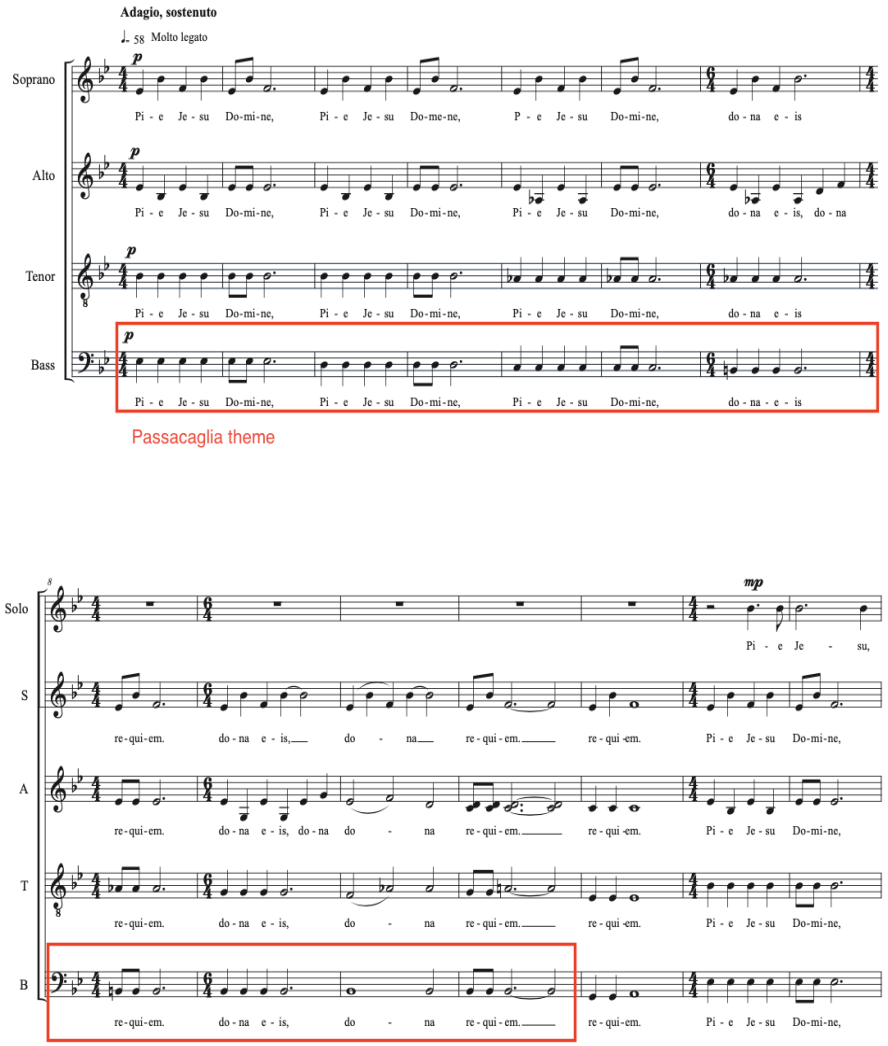


Figure 5.22. '*Pie Jesu*', bb. 1–14 (passacaglia in red).

The soprano's ostinato and the ground bass result in harmonic tension and false relations in the texture, underlining the mournful context. The bass's repeated B♮ creates subtle discordance with the upper voices (bb. 7–8), conflicting with the soprano's B♭, and causing a diminished fourth and fifth on the E♭ and F downbeats. The bass and tenor's diminished seventh (B♮–A♭), and the diminished fourth and seventh between bass and alto, result in further dissonance and highlight the mixed-interval nature of the chords. Rather than the mellow E♭ open ninth or F minor seventh of the previous subphrase endings, the first '*dona eis requiem*' concludes with an unsettled open B diminished seventh with added fourth (E♭; b. 8). While the inner voices maintain the static open fifth (A♭–E♭) of the previous three bars, the unchanging patterns of the soprano and bass, which result in the diminished fifth (B–F), create momentary discordance

that conflicts with the idea of rest. However, this tension is resolved through the incremental shift to an E♭ major chord in second inversion on the repeat of '*dona*', the bass's repeated B♭ supporting smoother harmonies through the subphrase, befitting the petition for rest (b. 9–11). Although the slow homophony, soprano oscillations, and chant-like motion of the lower voices instil a sense of contemplation, the prescribed trajectory of the bass and soprano results in unavoidable dissonance, conveying brief moments of musical tension amidst the calm.

The twelve-bar chorale is repeated beneath the soprano soloist, with one notable change in the bass. Rather than the initial semitone descent from E♭ to D, the bass falls to D♭ (b. 15), before progressing through C, B♮, and B♭ (Figure 5.23). Clarke possibly made this alteration to avoid conflicting with the soloist's D♭ dotted minim. This interpretation is slightly undermined by the subsequent false relation between the bass's B♮ and soloist's B♭ (b. 19), however this discord was previously highlighted in the introduction with the choral soprano's B♭ (bb. 7–8). The tension between the soprano's B♭ and soloist's B♮ in bar 19 is more obvious due to the close proximity of the voices, but the intoning of B♭ one beat before the soloist's note avoids a direct dissonance. There is a further alteration to the passacaglia in bar 25, following the conclusion of the bass's descending tetrachord. Rather than the imperfect cadence on a first inversion F dominant seventh (b. 12), the bass ascends a semitone to A♭, altering the chord to F minor seventh, inducing a more melancholic tone. The slight changes made by Clarke on the repeat of the chorale perhaps demonstrate a desire to avoid direct repetition and to develop musical and expressive ideas within the piece.
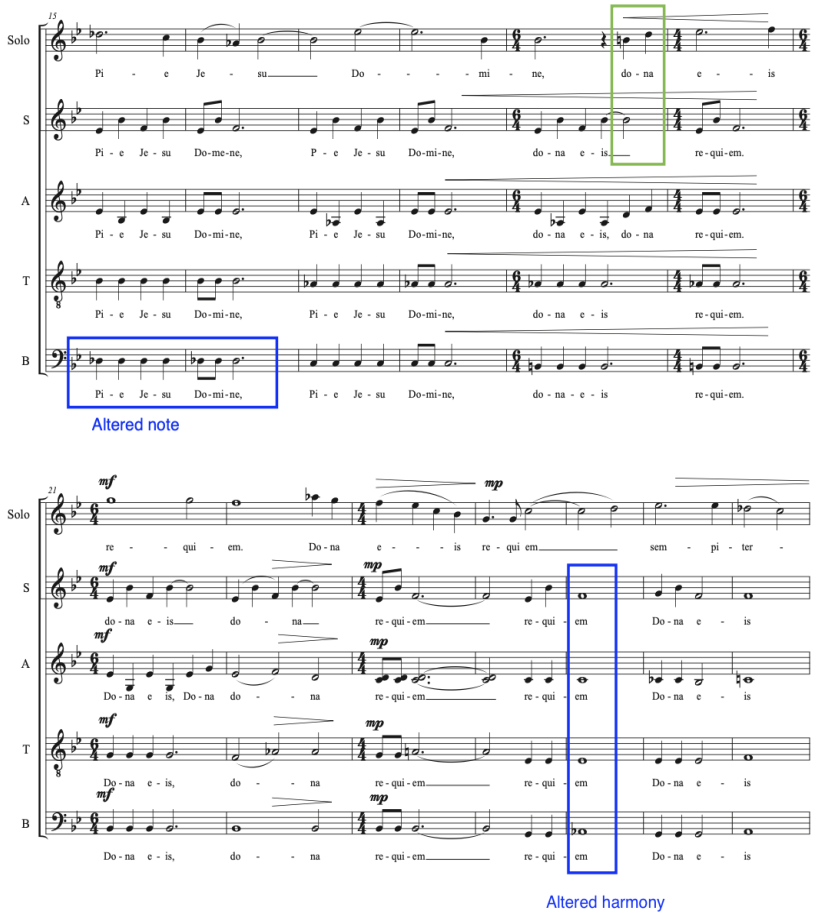


Figure 5.23. '*Pie Jesu*', bb. 15–27 (harmonic changes in blue; dissonance in green).

Within the choral accompaniment, Clarke reserves the final word, '*sempiternam*', for the closing six bars, with the last syllable prolonged for twelve beats, emphasising the notion of 'eternity' (bb. 31–36). Following the bass's return to E♭ on '*requiem*' (b. 30), a condensed, altered version of the falling tetrachord is presented, the underlay falling in semibreves through D♭, C♭, and B♭. The bass's modified tones, as well as the presence of G♭ and A♭ in the divided tenors, indicate a harmonic shift to the parallel E♭ minor in bars 31 and 32 (Figure 5.24). As the soloist presents the final undulating '*Pie Jesu*' idiom (E♭–B♭–F–B♭), ascending to a sustained E♭, the homophonic substructure intones a G♭ major seventh chord in second inversion, creating an uplifting tone and providing further harmonic shading within the overall ambient sound world (b. 31).[40] While the alto and soprano sustain their fourth (F–B♭), serving

[40] Although Clarke has modulated to the parallel E♭ minor, this chord III could also be interpreted as a chromatic mediant in E♭ major, the composer borrowing the harmony from the parallel minor key to generate an uplifting, otherworldly quality in the music. Composers in the nineteenth century, as well as throughout film music, often applied chromatic mediants to 'depict sublime, supernatural, or exotic phenomena' (Richard Cohn,

as an unresolved suspension, the lower voices progress incrementally to A♭ minor seventh in first inversion. The minor subdominant anticipates a plagal cadence in E♭ minor, the tension enhanced by the tenors' secundal interval (G♭–A♭). However, the shift to G♮ in the tenor line, flanked by the basses' and upper voices' fourths (B♭–E♭; F–B♭), forms an E♭ major ninth in second inversion, indicating a return to the parallel major key (b. 33). This modal shift engenders a sense of light and hope, demonstrating Clarke's skilful voice leading and use of modal mixture for powerful expressive effects.[41]
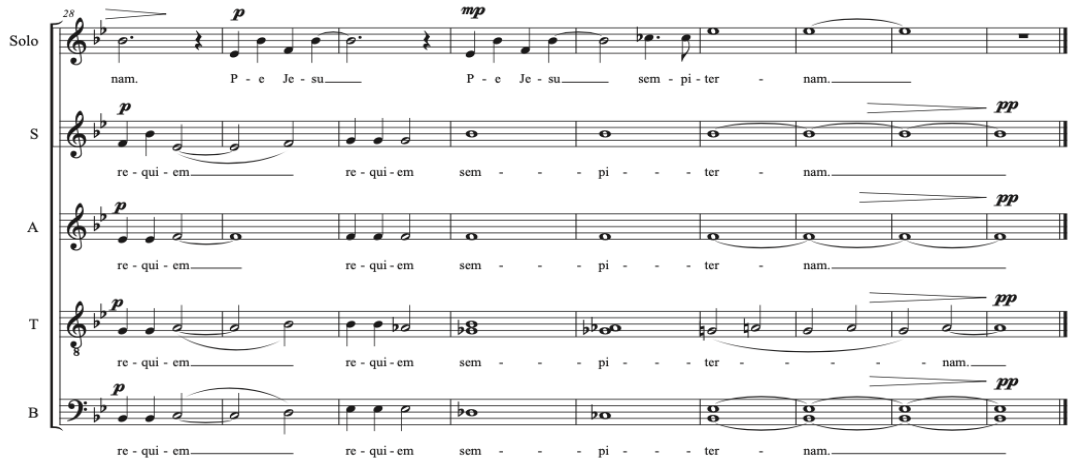


Figure 5.24. '*Pie Jesu*', bb. 28–36.

This sense of harmonic resolution is brief, with the tenor's oscillation between G♮ and A♮ for the remaining bars creating a sense of ambiguity amidst the sustained outer fourths. The raised fourth degree implies a shift to E♭ Lydian, the mode's peaceful, otherworldly character befitting the pious nature of the text.[42] Rather than resolving to the third of E♭ major, Clarke concludes her characteristic oscillation on A, forming an inconclusive *pianissimo* chord built predominantly from fourths (B♭–E♭–A–F–B♭; b. 36). The evasion of a conventional final triad aptly conveys eternity, as well as demonstrating Clarke's tendency to avoid traditional

Audacious Euphony: Chromaticism and the Triad's Second Nature (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 21).

[41] It is worth noting that modal mixture in the Romantic era, particularly in the works of Brahms and Schubert, was used to depict enlightenment and transcendence, which is also evident in Clarke's '*Pie Jesu*' (Loretta Terrigno, 'Emergent Modality: Minor-to-Major Progressions as "Tragic-to-Transcendent" Narratives in Brahms's Solo Songs', *Music Theory Online*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2025), 1.4–1.5 <https://doi.org/10.30535/mto.27.3.3> [Accessed 6 May 2026]).

[42] Palisca, 'The ethos of modes during the Renaissance', p. 104; Lehman, 'Reading Tonality through Film', p. 31.

harmonies, often preferring mixed-interval chords in the conclusion of her works. Disregarding the added fourth in the open E♭ ninth harmony, it is interesting that *Epitaph* (2024) also ends with an open ninth (B–F#–C#) on 'forever', the lack of a complete cadential closure illustrating the word.

The slow passacaglia of '*Pie Jesu*' effectively represents the simplicity of the short prayer, while contrasting with the textural, harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic elements of the other movements. The work represents one of few examples of Clarke's music that does not apply imitative counterpoint, extended vocal techniques, and complex rhythms, instead focusing on an unadorned expression of the mournful text. The soprano's ostinato and the lament bass create a coherent movement, their unembellished repetition evoking a gentle, meditative atmosphere befitting the prayer. Clarke also juxtaposes traditional elements with her contemporary style, particularly through her harmonic language and the overall form. The inclusion of a soloist continues the tradition of '*Pie Jesu*' settings that utilise a solo voice, while the passacaglia, open harmonies, and chant-like motion reflect the ground bass of the Baroque era, and the influence of plainchant. However, the prevalence of open ninth chords, incremental voice leading, chromatic inflections, and dissonance demonstrates Clarke's consistent preference for these contemporary compositional traits. The soprano's undulating ostinato, the tenor's secundal oscillation (G–A) in the closing bars, and the ambiguous concluding chord are further trademarks of Clarke's style, ensuring her compositional voice prevails throughout this less complex, but suitably emotive movement. As Tom Wilkinson notes, a composer's ability to achieve a consistent harmonic language, as is evident in Clarke's work, 'can make a powerful contribution to the [...] sense of 'expressive coherence'' throughout their oeuvre.[43] Even in a piece that on the surface seems uncharacteristic of the composer, Clarke's style is present in the subtle integration of her favourite musical devices.

'*In Paradisum*'

Formal analysis

Clarke's most pronounced fusing of the past and present in her *Requiem* is evident in the final movement, '*In Paradisum*'. Soprano soloists adopt the original plainchant, their heterophonic,

[43] Tom Wilkinson, 'Composing for a Non-Professional Chapel Choir: Challenges and Opportunities', in *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the Twenty-First Century*', ed. by George Corbett (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2019), pp. 69–94 (p. 86).

fragmented quotations of the ancient melody soaring above the choir's contemporary harmonies and homophonic texture, creating a dialogue between the old and new. In the broader Requiem archive, this quotation reflects Maurice Duruflé's similar approach to using the ancient chant in his setting of the same text. As James MacMillan asserts in relation to plainchant and historical music, composers 'have always taken fragments of material […] from elsewhere and breathed new life into them, creating new forms, new avenues and structures of expression.'[44] In contrast to the simple, repeated homophony of '*Pie Jesu*', the final movement returns to more overtly innovative practices, including extended vocal techniques and aleatoricism. However, a similar harmonic palette to the preceding movements is evident, maintaining a consistent tone representative of Clarke's compositional language throughout *Requiem*.

The *Moderato* movement is structured in two distinct sections — which include subsections — indicating the two three-line segments of the prayer (Table 5.4). The soloists' chant permeates the work, intertwining in an imitative manner above the choir's sustained phrase endings. While the solo voices are predominantly in B♭ major, reflecting the movement's key signature, the numerous accidentals and undefined chords within the choral texture, and the soloists' later passages, make it difficult to discern a specific tonality or mode. Rather, Clarke moves liberally across various modes through borrowed chords and chromaticism, frequently returning to a specific note or pedal point. However, there is harmonic symmetry within the chromatic structure, with G serving as the tonal centre at the beginning and conclusion of the movement.

[44] James MacMillan, 'God, Theology and Music', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 81, No. 947 (2000), 16–26 (p. 22) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43250342> [accessed 18 December 2023].

Section	Bars	Mode	Text
A	1–23	G Aeolian/Locrian (bb. 1–6) D Aeolian/Phrygian	*In paradisum deducant te Angeli: in tuo adventu suscipiant te Martyres, et perducant te in civitatem sanctam Ierusalem.*
A1	23–29	G Phrygian [chromatic sixth alterations] (bb. 23–29) A♭ Mixolydian (bb. 30–35) F Aeolian (bb. 36–39)	
B	40–72	E♭ Mixolydian (bb. 40–43) F Aeolian (bb. 44–51) C♭ Lydian Dominant (bb. 52–54) B♭ Aeolian (bb. 55–60) A♭ major (bb. 61–69) C Aeolian (bb. 70–72)	*Chorus Angelorum te suscipiat, et cum Lazaro quondam paupere aeternam habeas requiem.*
Conclusion	72–79	G Aeolian	

Table 5.4: '*In Paradisum*' Structure.

Melodic Analysis

Similar to '*Pie Jesu*', solo voices are spotlighted within '*In Paradisum*', engaging in heterophony in a high register, and likely representing the angels in the prayer. Clarke fragments the original chant into short responses to the primarily homophonic choral phrases (Figure 5.25). The soloists emulate the ancient antiphon until the penultimate line of the prayer, before returning in four parts on the final word, '*requiem*', where all four soloists ascend to form a mixed-interval chord (G–A–C–D) on the final syllable, the nebulous harmony avoiding an explicit minor triad and maintaining the ethereal atmosphere of the overall work. The melody moves in triplets throughout the piece, a common rhythmic figuration in Clarke's Latin settings, with the dashed bar lines in the score reflecting the untethered rhythmic flow of plainchant (Figure 5.26).
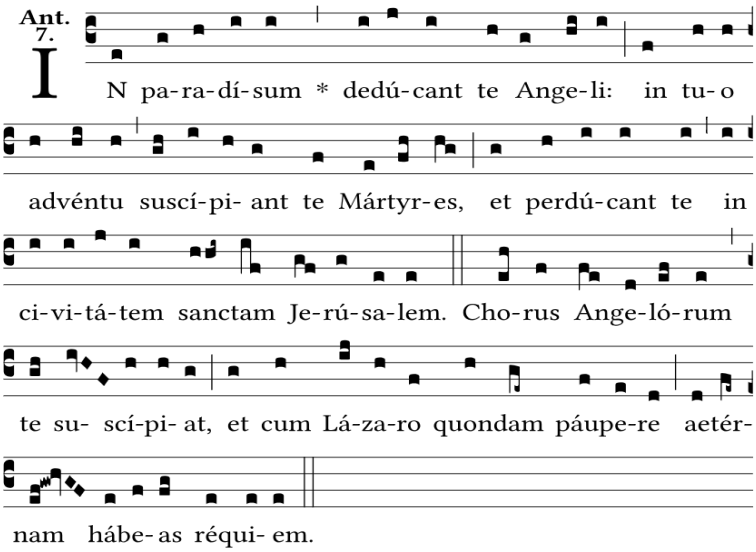


Figure 5.25. Original *In Paradisum* chant.[45]
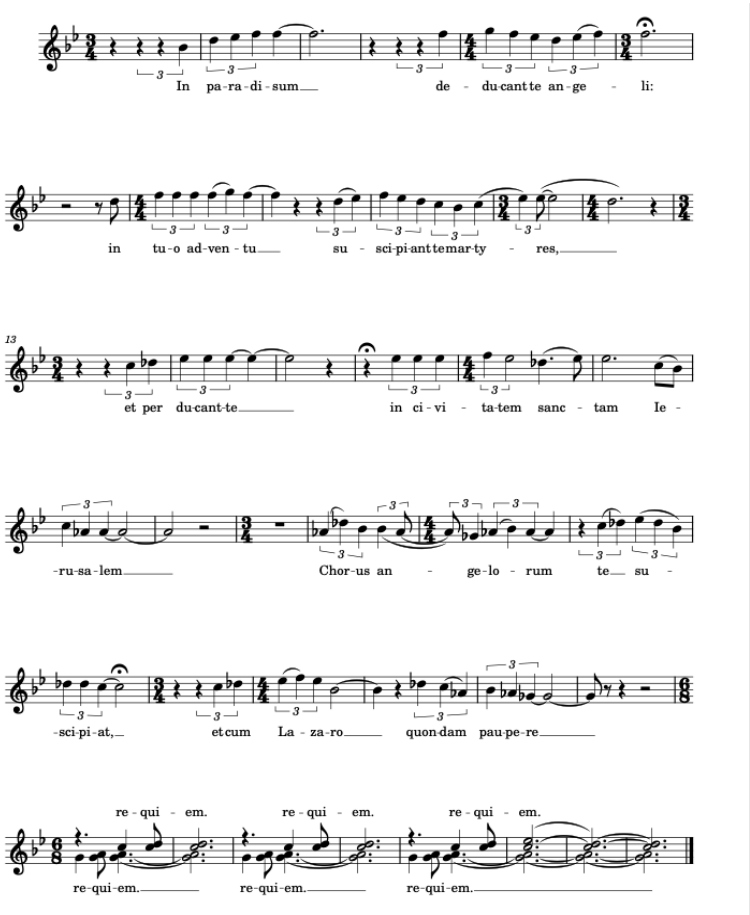


Figure 5.26. Clarke's manipulation of the original '*In Paradisum*' chant.[46]

[45] '*In Paradisum*', *GregoBase: A database of Gregorian scores* <https://gregobase.selapa.net/chant.php?id=3541> [accessed 11 December 2024].
[46] Figure typeset by this author.

Clarke modifies the initial note of each melodic fragment on several occasions to align with the harmonies of the choral underlay. Chromatic alterations occur in both solo lines to mirror the contour of the ancient chant, with similar accidentals arising in the choir. For example, the soloists' primarily stepwise descent through the phrase '*quondam paupere*' ('who once was poor') — with A♭, D♭, and G♭ — conveys a G♭ Lydian inflection (bb. 57–59; Figure 5.27). The only modification to the original melody occurs in the setting of '*Lazaro*' in bars 56 and 57. Rather than descend a major third (F–D♭) from the first to second syllable, the sopranos fall by step to E♭ before a further descent to B♭, extending the original conclusion's minor third by a tone. This alteration may simply have been an unconscious error, holding no particular significance; on the other hand, Clarke may have intended to create a major second between the soloists (D♭–E♭) on the last crotchet of the first triplet, rather than a unison D♭, maintaining the pronounced use of this interval across her *Requiem*.
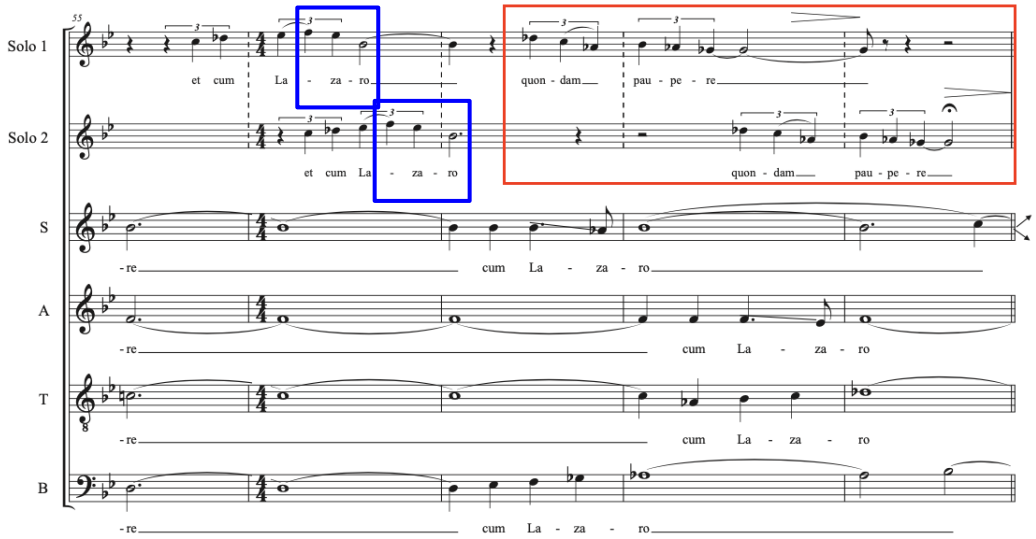


Figure 5.27. '*In Paradisum*', bb. 55–59 (melodic alteration in blue; Lydian inflection in red).

Clarke's quotation of the '*In Paradisum*' chant in imitative solo voices acknowledges the ancient origins of the Requiem mass, while creating an ethereal ambience above the subdued homophonic choir. The setting of the archaic melody with quasi-free triplet movement and modal inflections, soaring above the harmonically ambiguous, often dissonant choral texture, highlights Clarke's ability to combine past and present musical techniques in a distinctive manner. The composer draws from musical precedents, but is not tied to tradition, instead fusing archaic features with her own harmonic, textural, and melodic traits. The interweaving

motion of the soloists also creates consistency across movements, with similar upper-voice imitation dominating '*Lux Aeterna*'. Where the upper texture of the second movement illustrates the light within the text, the imitative soloists in the final movement most likely represent the angels guiding the deceased to eternal rest.

The melodic contour of the choir contrasts significantly with the soloists' stepwise motion, as Clarke's contemporary voice engages with the ancient antiphon. The choral soprano's opening phrase is quite angular, the fourths and fifths forging a melodic connection with the intervallic patterns of the preceding '*Pie Jesu*' ostinato and indicating the shape of the subsequent phrases. An ascending fourth (B♭–E♭) is followed by a descending fifth (E♭–A♭), before resolving by step to a sustained B♭ in the introductory '*In paradisum*' (bb. 1–3; Figure 5.28). The phrase proceeds in a similar manner through '*deducant te angeli*', with a descending fourth and oscillating fifth (B♭4–F4–C5–F4) resolving by step to a sustained G (bb. 6–9), contrasting with the soloists' stepwise trajectory. The melodic and harmonic fourth is a recurring interval throughout the movement, the open sound evading a definitive tonality and implying a modal palette. Despite the D♭ and A♭ in the harmonic substructure, which suggests G Locrian or B♭ Dorian, the soprano's opening melody indicates the B♭ Mixolydian mode, aligning with the soloists' B♭ centre.
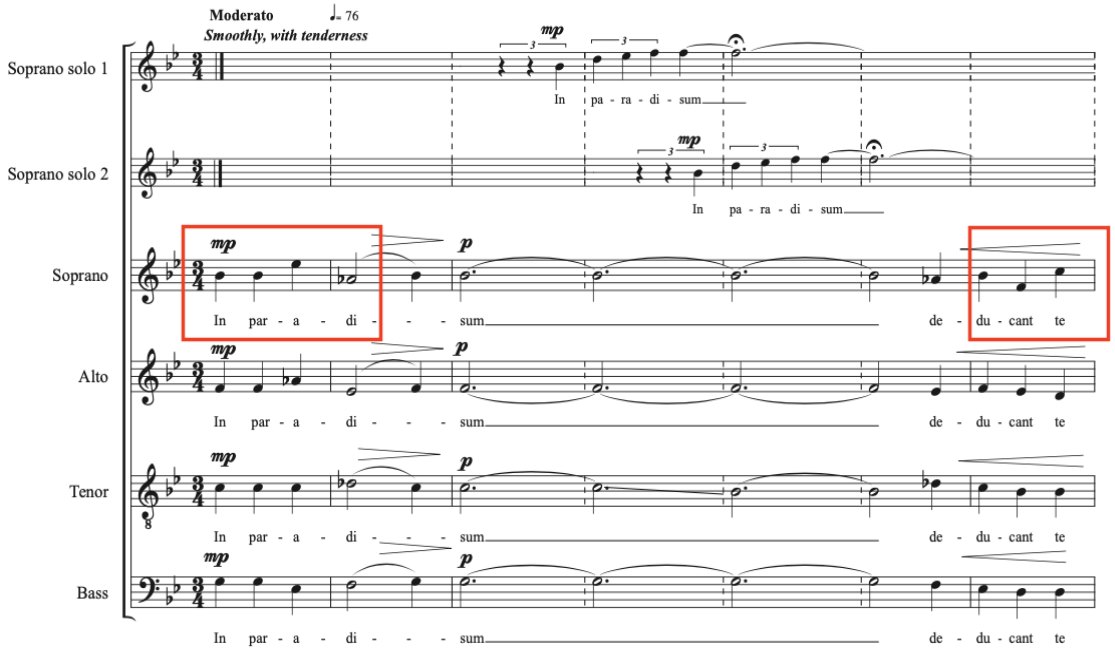


Figure 5.28. '*In Paradisum*', bb. 1–7 (open intervals in red).

The leaping fourths and fifths, balanced by incremental movement at the beginnings and ends of phrases, permeates the choir's melodic structure, with chromatic and repeated notes occurring in the supporting voices. The rising fourth-falling fifth is repeated at the beginning of the second section of the work (bb. 40–41), the soprano singing the same four notes through the first four syllables ('*Chorus ange*[*lorum*]'). Although the harmonic underlay differs from the opening, particularly the bass's E♭ drone, the restatement of this four-note motif serves a formal and thematic function, indicating the beginning of a new section and the return of the angels within the prayer. Clarke also melodically connects the term 'lead you' ('*deducant*'; '*perducant*') through the open intervals, repeating the pointed melodic idiom of bars 7 and 8 (B♭4–F4–C5–F4) on the text '*perducant te in civitatem*' ('lead you into the city'; bb. 26–27), underlining the melody's structural and motivic function.

Throughout '*In Paradisum*', the distinction between the soloists and the choral soprano's phrases is highlighted through the angular structure of the latter, the consecutive leaping intervals contrasting with the stepwise motion of the solo voices. Furthermore, the primarily syllabic text setting and standard rhythms of the choir vary from the chant-like triplets of the soloists, who proceed more liberally through their phrases. The diverse structures of the choir and soloists' respective melodies enhance their dialogue, achieving a greater balance between the homophonic and heterophonic textures throughout the movement. Both parts could also be interpreted as a juxtaposition of the past and present, with Clarke's more contemporary setting of the soprano's phrases contrasting with the soloists' plainchant.

Harmonic and Textural Analysis

Clarke moves freely between choral homophony and the heterophonic soprano duet throughout '*In Paradisum*', establishing textural balance and distinct musical identities. The antiphonal interchange between the chorale-like expressions of the choir and the soloists' chant could be interpreted as a dialogue between the worshipper praying for the deceased to be led to paradise, and the angels. Like '*Pie Jesu*', the choral structure remains consistent throughout the movement, with less textural layering than '*Introit*' and '*Lux Aeterna*'. In terms of the harmonic palette, Clarke applies her characteristic techniques of oblique motion, mixed-interval chords, and dissonance, with chromatic alterations, *Sprechstimme*, and *portamento* also evident. It is difficult to discern a strict mode given the prominence of undefined chords and chromatic modifications, which result in regular discordance throughout the movement.

Quartal harmonies and secundal intervals permeate the homophonic choral texture, the juxtaposed fourths demonstrating Clarke's avoidance of conventional harmonies. Fourths also allow for smooth transitions between tonal centres, given their non-triadic identity. While major and minor seconds between the soprano and alto are a common occurrence in Clarke's harmonic language, frequently achieved through oblique motion, these intervals are usually resolved to open fourths and fifths. The opening subphrase begins with a quartal chord (G–C–F–B♭), suggesting a G minor tonality, while the A♭ and D♭ accidentals in the subsequent chords highlight the composer's liberal use of harmonies from alternative modes, adding greater colour to the overall sonority.

For example, the second inversion A♭ major chord leading to a first inversion D♭ major ninth (bb. 1–2) evades the conventional diminished supertonic and minor dominant in G minor, instead engendering a benign tone reflective of the text. These major chords borrowed from the G Locrian mode highlight Clarke's careful use of altered tones within her smooth voice leading for particular expressive purposes — in this case, to evoke the vision of paradise. Alternatively, the composer may have preferred the sound of these chords, regardless of the text.[47] The opening quartal harmony returns on the prolonged final syllable of '*paradisum*' as the soloists enter the framework, with the tenor's *portamento* descent to B♭ amidst the sustained tones creating a G minor seventh, asserting its tonic identity (Figure 5.29).



Figure 5.29. '*In Paradisum*', bb. 1–7 (borrowed chords in blue).

[47] Clarke has explained the importance of harmony in her compositions, and how she 'will work on some harmonic language in advance' of setting a text to music, 'some sort of chord sequence' that will suit the piece, and proceed from there (Rhona Clarke, interview with the author, 10 January 2025).

Increased chromaticism, secundal intervals, and oblique motion are evident through the phrase '*in tuo adventu suscipiant te martyres*' ('may the Martyrs receive you at your coming'), with incremental movement in the accompanying voices, culminating in *Sprechstimme* and descending *portamenti* at the end of the phrase (bb. 13–23). Clarke introduces E♮ in the alto and soprano's stepwise movement on '*tuo*' (b. 13), the voices' secundal dissonance (E♮–F) resolving to a unison E. The alto's return to E♭ on the final beat of the bar forms a major second with the higher voice's F, leading to soft dissonance (F–G) through '*adventu*', the alto's F serving as an added fourth in the C minor first inversion chord. The consistent seconds in the upper voices create tension and forward motion through the phrase, yearning to be resolved (Figure 5.30). As musicologist Joseph Machlis notes in relation to contemporary harmony, 'dissonance energizes the movement and propels the texture forward'.[48] Although this harmonic motion is common in Clarke's compositions, the unresolved intervals in this context could reflect a desire for the deceased to reach paradise. Alternatively, the dissonance, followed by the haunting *Sprechstimme*, could seek to convey the martyrs' suffering.
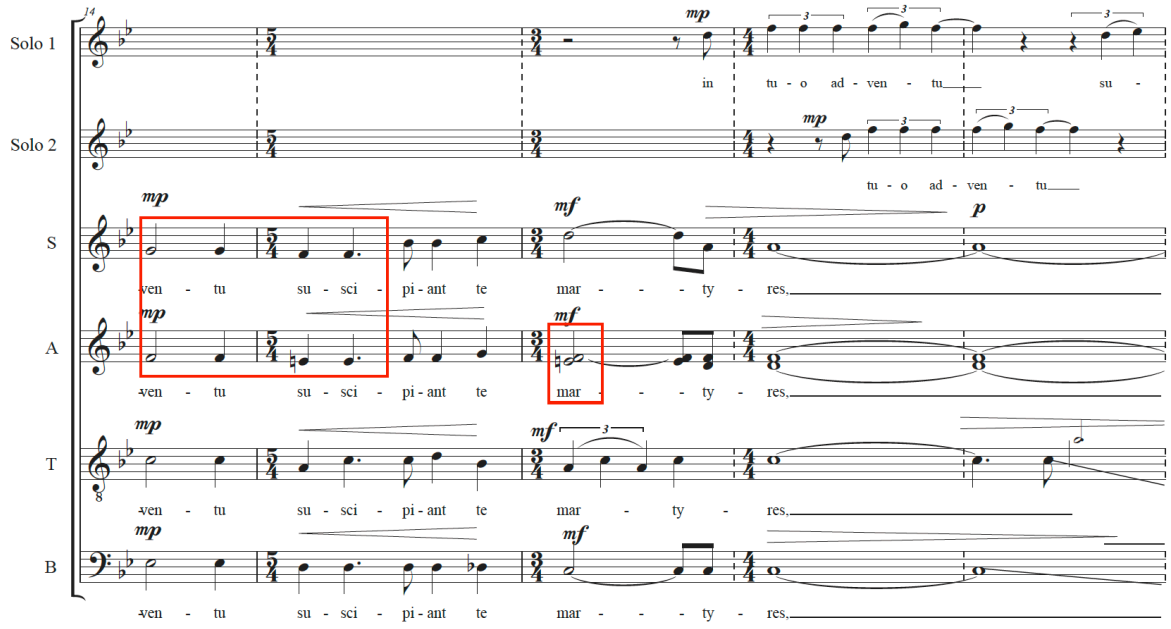


Figure 5.30. '*In Paradisum*', bb. 14–18 (secundal dissonance in red).

The bass falls to softly spoken text on '*martyres*', echoed by the alto at a two-beat distance (bb. 18–20). The gradual timbral shift evokes a haunting tone and serves as a further example of

[48] Joseph Machlis, *Introduction to Contemporary Music*, 2nd edition (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1980), p.39.

Clarke's penchant for using this vocal technique in texts associated with the dead, suffering, and the beyond.[49] Imitation between the soloists and choir, which, thus far, have been distinct components, occurs on the word '*martyres*' (bb. 19–22). As the soloists ascend in imitation (B♭–C–E♭), before descending a step to D through the final syllable, the tenor and alto answer the motif at two-beat intervals. Rather than directly imitate the soloists' conclusion, the tenor falls a ninth via *portamento* to the lower D, while the alto ascends a sixth to the final syllable (E♭–C), followed by a gliding minor seventh descent to D (Figure 5.31). The falling *portamenti* are common in Clarke's work, with similar descents evident in *Ave Atque Vale* (2017) and *O Vis Aeternitatis* (2020). In this context, the rapid echoing descents to low pitches have an earthly quality, which could symbolise the martyrs falling to their deaths, their ghostly cries of suffering resonating through the texture. The choral echo, *Sprechstimme*, descending *portamenti*, and gradually reduced texture effectively close the phrase and signal the next subsection, which begins with a layered choral entry on the same quartal harmony as the introduction (bb. 23–25).
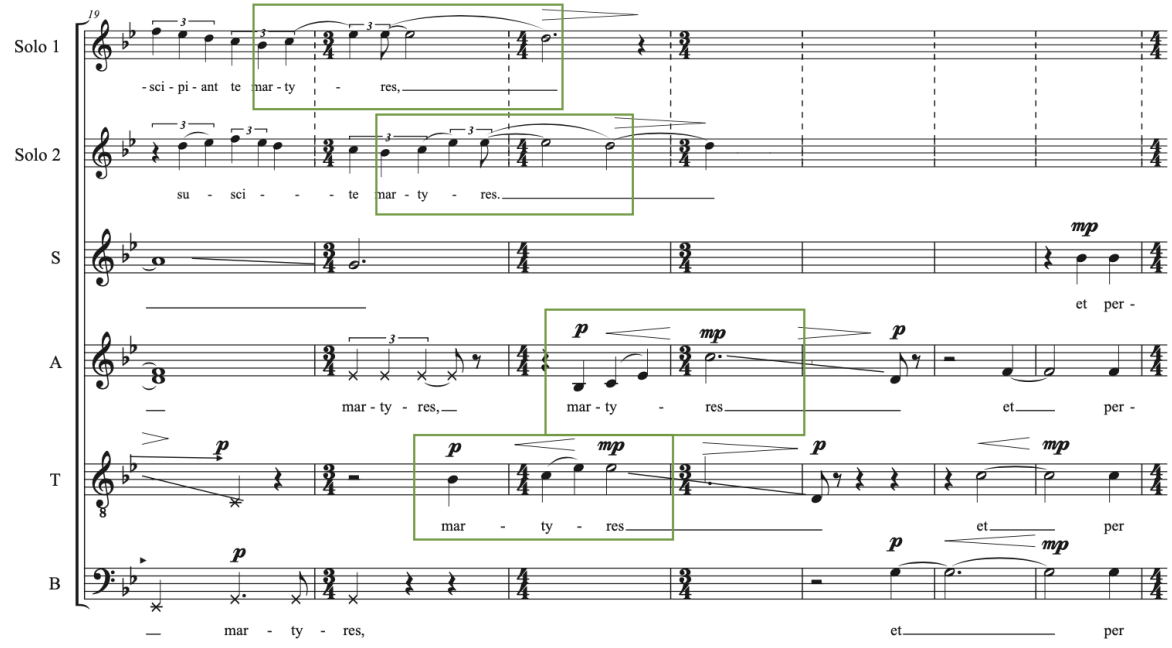


Figure 5.31. '*In Paradisum*', bb. 19–25 (echoing motif in green).

Apart from the stratified upper-voice structure of the '*Lux*' motifs in '*Lux Aeterna*', the most explicit manipulation of texture for narrative and expressive purposes occurs in the aleatoric

[49] See Chapter Three for further discussion.

setting of '*aeternam*' in '*In Paradisum*' (bb. 61–68; Figure 5.32). Clarke highlights the meaning of 'eternal' rest with an indeterminate treatment of the word across the five-part texture. While the 6/8 time signature, *mezzo-piano* dynamic, duration (c. 10–15 seconds), and melodic idioms are prescribed, the tempo and number of motivic repetitions are at the discretion of each individual voice. This aleatoric passage creates a nebulous quality and suspends the music harmonically, the layering of each voice's motif resulting in a cloud of fleeting A♭, B♭, D♭, E♭, and F tones. The harmonic stasis, constructed from the melodic undulations and the tenor's B♭ pedal point, effectively illustrates 'eternity'. The unresolved chord (A♭–F–B♭) at the end of the section enhances its everlasting nature. As David Bednall notes, 'the creation of a sense of endless movement by voices moving between different notes of the same chord' strongly evokes 'mystery and the eternal'.[50]

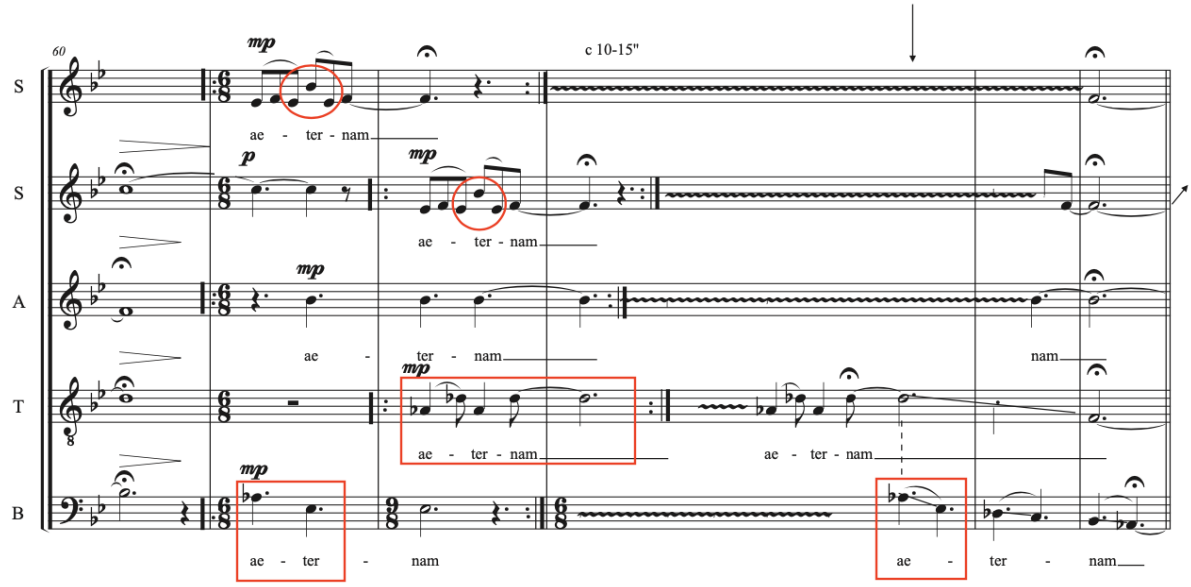


Figure 5.32. '*In Paradisum*', bb. 60–68 (recurring intervals in red).

The indeterminate setting of '*aeternam*' distinctly evokes infinity, a theme Clarke intended to convey across her composition.[51] The arrhythmic, opaque texture created by the aleatoric voices also provides a stark divergence from the previous chorus-soloist interchange. It is notable that the composer applies a similar textural approach in the original version of her later work, *Epitaph* (2024), setting the closing words 'forever and ever' in an aleatoric manner

[50] Bednall, 'Composing for Choir', p. 141.
[51] Clarke in 'Rhona Clarke's *Sempiternam*' (6:10–6:32).

across the eight-part texture (Figure 5.33).[52] Like '*In Paradisum*', the time signature in *Epitaph* shifts to 6/8, with each voice staggering their motif at individual intervals, gradually fading to nothing. The primarily arpeggiated quaver movement, anchored by the second bass's repeated B, creates similar harmonic stasis around an open B eleventh, evading a fixed tonality and reinforcing the unsettled elucidation of 'forever'. The similar structure and text of both works suggests that Clarke consciously sought to manifest the related words through the same compositional technique, with aleatoricism preserved for narrative, expressive purposes.
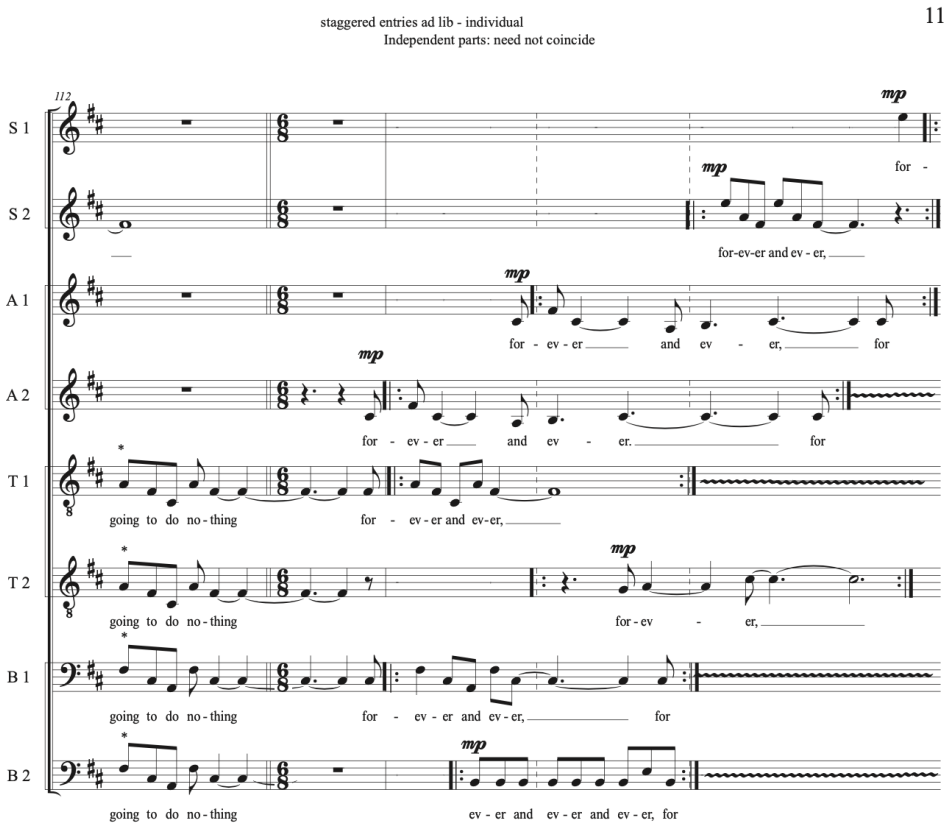


Figure 5.33. *Epitaph* (2024), bb. 112–116.

Clarke's tendency to close sections and compositions with non-traditional harmonies, creating an impression of uncertainty or infinity, is apparent in the conclusion of '*In Paradisum*'. The return of the soloists, with *divisi*, in antiphonal form in the final bars (bb. 72–79) provides a sensitive end to *Requiem*, evoking a celestial atmosphere befitting the text. The metric shift from 3/4 to 6/8 initiates the *mezzo-piano* stratified ascent of the four sopranos' three repetitions of '*requiem*', above the choir's stacked fourths (G–C–D–G). The choir repeat their respective

[52] Clarke revised *Epitaph* in 2025, making several changes to the music, including setting the conclusion in a fixed, rather than aleatoric, manner.

notes as dotted minims through each syllable, the final note prolonged for five bars (Figure 5.34). The four soloists' close-interval chord of G–A–C–D, resulting from their rising idioms, could be compared to the final harmonies of '*Lux Aeterna*' (G#–A#–C#) and '*Pie Jesu*' (B♭–E♭–A–F), which also lack a third, creating harmonic and structural consistency across *Requiem*. Although there is possibly no underlying meaning to Clarke's decision to conclude with this harmony, its unresolved identity could be interpreted as signalling the unknown nature of life after death, and eternity. The juxtaposition of secundal intervals and fourths underlines their prominence across the movement, creating coherent intervallic patterns and a congruous sound throughout the texture. There is also a sense of symmetry with the return of G in the bass, the initial tonic of '*In Paradisum*', creating an impression of conclusion, albeit without a conventional major or minor chord.

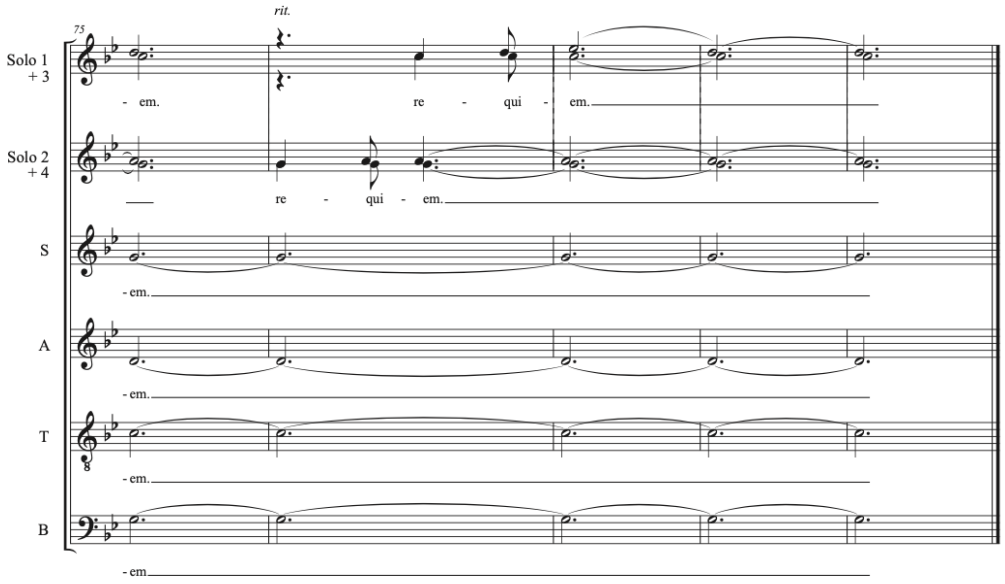


Figure 5.34. '*In Paradisum*', bb. 75–79.

Conclusion

Clarke's decision to set the more peaceful texts of the Requiem Mass highlights her intention to communicate the tranquil nature of eternal rest, and 'coming to grips with death itself'.[53] The composer's focus on the recurring text '*Requiem aeternam*' is evident in her structural, harmonic, and textural organisation. The distinct timbres of '*Introit*', with the dense chords of

[53] Clarke in 'Rhona Clarke's *Sempiternam*' (5:32–6:00).

the tenor-bass ostinato and the lighter tone clusters and static harmonies of the upper voices, reflect the artistic technique of *chiaroscuro* (light-dark), underlining the contrast between perpetual light and the initial darkness of death within the texture. The image of light continues in '*Lux Aeterna*', the undulating triplet fragments in the eight-part soprano-alto texture evoking immutable light, further emphasised by the chromatic inflections and tone clusters throughout the movement.

The passacaglia, slow homophony, motivic repetition, and soprano soloist in '*Pie Jesu*' effectively communicate the peaceful prayer. Of the four movements, this short setting is more removed from Clarke's broader compositional style, with less dissonance and rhythmic complexity, fewer textural and timbral contrasts, and no extended techniques. Her reduction of musical activity in this movement reflects the tradition of setting the '*Pie Jesu*' with repeated, unadorned motivic material in a serene texture, expressing the petition for rest.[54] '*In Paradisum*' also draws from the past, with the original antiphon presented by soprano soloists, answering the choir's homophonic phrases. Clarke juxtaposes the plainchant with her contemporary harmonic and textural palette, demonstrating her distinctive style and skilful blend of the old and new. The modal framework is imbued with non-diatonic notes, undefined chords — particularly quartal harmonies — and extended vocal techniques, creating a subtle tension beneath the angelic soloists. More so than in the previous movements, the word '*aeternam*' is vividly painted through a five-part aleatoric section of independent, wavering voices. Contrasting with the opening movement's dark ostinato, Clarke provides 'a peaceful, reflective ending' to the overall work with three statements of '*requiem*' rising through the soloists, joining the choir's unresolved chord.[55] The lack of resolution, a common trait in the composer's music, creates a mysterious ambience, and allows the listener to interpret 'eternal rest' in their personal way.

Rhona Clarke's *Requiem* encapsulates the essence of her individual contemporary voice, displaying a consistency of melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, textural, and timbral techniques across the work. Characteristics of the composer's style, particularly since 2016, such as open intervals, unresolved seconds, non-diatonic notes, mixed-interval harmonies, melodic oscillations, and extended vocal techniques, are applied throughout the diverse movements of the funereal composition. Each movement has a distinct identity and could potentially be performed separately, but despite their diversity, Clarke's compositional traits

[54] Franke, 'Form, Function and Compositional Methods in Five *Pie Jesu Domine* Settings'.
[55] Clarke, 'Composer's note', *Requiem*.

are ever-present. The multi-movement composition epitomises her compositional style, particularly in relation to the harmonic language, rhythmic setting, and use of *Sprechstimme* and *portamento*, demonstrating a consistent development from her previous pieces while also anticipating the appearance of these traits in her future compositions. As Ligeti asserted in relation to his own *Requiem*, 'I regard the Requiem as a kind of dividing line between the previous and the future pieces'.[56] While compositions preceding Clarke's *Requiem* utilise the same stylistic idioms, this particular large-scale work arguably represents a crystallisation of Clarke's compositional voice and her confidence in creating music that distinctly expresses both a text's character, and her contemporary artistic identity. The pieces following *Requiem*, such as *Navigatio* (2023) and *Epitaph* (2024), reveal an increasing assertiveness in her use of the aforementioned compositional features, as well as a consistency across her choral output. Clarke's *Requiem* is a significant addition to the long-standing history of Requiem settings, the composer deftly acknowledging the tradition and capturing the prayers for eternal rest through her characteristic, contemporary voice.

[56] György Ligeti quoted in Nina Rohlfs (trans. Elizabeth Pilon), 'Iridescent to unbridled: The Requiem', *György Ligeti* (2023) <https://en.gyorgy-ligeti.com/article/a-test> [accessed 7 October 2024].

Chapter 6: Eoghan Desmond's *Amra Choluim Chille* (2019)[1]

Introduction

Amra Choluim Chille is Eoghan Desmond's largest work to date, comprising seven movements for choir, strings, harp, and percussion. The Irish-language cantata was completed as part of his PhD in Composition of Contemporary Sacred Choral Music at the University of Aberdeen, under the supervision of Dr Phillip Cooke, and was professionally performed by Chamber Choir Ireland and the Irish Chamber Orchestra in 2023.[2] Desmond sets the blind poet Dallán Forgaill's sixth-century eulogy in praise of St Columba, which is thought to have been written after the death of the saint in 597CE, making it one of the oldest literary works in the Irish language.[3] Although there are several examples of music dedicated to the Irish saint, including Seóirse Bodley's *Amra Choluim Chille* (2007)[4] and Benjamin Britten's *A Hymn of St Columba* (1962) — both for choir and organ — it would seem that Desmond's cantata is the only large-scale setting of Dallán's poem.[5] Of the preface and ten verses, Desmond omits verses V to VIII from his composition, explaining that this was 'to preserve a narrative tautness, wherein the text could be faithfully and effectively set while also allowing for a satisfying musical form to play out'.[6]

The inspiration for this themed work stemmed from a commission from Christ Church Cathedral, in association with Cumann Gaelach na hEaglaise, for an Irish-language anthem for choir and organ to be performed at evensong on the feast of St Columba (June 9th).[7] Desmond

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[1] A significant portion of this chapter features in a journal article: Laura Sheils, 'Eoghan Desmond's *Amra Choluim Chille*: A Contemporary Choral Setting of a Sixth-Century Poem', *Studia Hibernica*, Vol. 51 (2025), 141–168 <https://doi.org/10.3828/sh.2025.5> [accessed 15 September 2025].

[2] Eoghan Desmond, 'Composer's note', *Amra Choluim Chille* (unpublished, 2019). *Amra Choluim Chille* was premiered by Chamber Choir Ireland and the Irish Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Cormac McCarthy, on 15 March 2023 in All Hallows' Chapel, Dublin City University, Dublin. His other substantial passion cantata, *The Falling Tear* (2018), also formed part of his PhD in Composition of Contemporary Sacred Choral Music.

[3] Jacopo Bisagni, *Amrae Coluimb Chille: A Critical Edition* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2019), p. 77.

[4] Seóirse Bodley's *Amra Choluim Cille* was commissioned by Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin, in association with Cumann Gaelach na hEaglaise, as part of the same Irish-language church music project that included Desmond's commission *De Ascensione Eius in Caelum* (2017), which is also based on St Columba. Like Desmond, Bodley also consulted P.L. Henry's translation of the poem for his work, setting verses VI, III, and II (*Amra Cholum Chille: Dallán's Elegy for Columba*, ed. by P.L. Henry (Belfast: Colmcille and Iontaobhas ULTACH, 2006)).

[5] Eoghan Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2: Commentary and Appendix' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 2020), p. 40.

[6] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 40.

[7] Christ Church Cathedral, in association with Cumann Gaelach na hEaglaise, commissioned several new Irish-language anthems celebrating Celtic saints throughout the liturgical year. New repertoire produced from this initiative included *Caintící Mhuire & Shimeon* (Garrett Farrell), *Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis* (Simon MacHale), and '*SBeannaithe Thú* (Anne–Marie O'Farrell), ('Christ Church Cathedral Continues Celtic Celebration with New Anthem for St Brigid', *Church of Ireland*, 2 February 2017

had recently commenced his doctoral studies and was seeking an Irish text for his commission. Having initially considered the Latin *Vita Columbae*, Nicholas Williams[8] directed the composer to a modern Irish translation of *Amra Choluim Chille* by P.L. Henry.[9] Desmond set the third stanza of the poem for the cathedral's commission, *De Ascensione Eius in Caelum* (2017). This composition became the third movement of the larger cantata, and also influenced Desmond's creation of 'material for the rest of the piece'.[10]

Macro-Structure

Desmond's seven-movement work sets extracts from the ten-verse poem *Amra Choluim Chille*, praising the life of St Columba (c. 521–597)[11] — the Irish abbot and Christian missionary who founded Iona Abbey — and expressing the grief of the O'Neill clan, of which Columba was a descendent. The preface of Dallán's poem, which Desmond sets as the cantata's first movement, is an invocation and plea for God to protect the poet. It is believed that the preface was composed 'at the Synod of Druim Cetta, when Colum Cille was still alive'.[12] The mournful second movement sets the first verse of the poem, emphasising Dallán's insistence that Columba's life is not a trifle of a story ('*Ní díscéal*' — 'Not without tidings') but one that must be told for the posterity of the House of Niall. Following the grief upon hearing of Columba's death, the more vibrant third movement outlines the saint's ascent to heaven with the angels, and the impact of the clerical community's missionary work across Ireland. The fourth and shortest movement continues through the poetic narrative, announcing Columba's arrival in heaven.

The eulogy proceeds in a retrospective form, with Columba's struggles forming the focal point of the fifth movement, depicting his battle with the Devil before his ultimate triumph. A sense of symmetry can be observed in the sixth movement, which sets the

<https://www.ireland.anglican.org/news/6934/christ-church-cathedral-continues-celtic> [accessed 2 August 2024]).

[8] Nicholas Williams was a scholar of Celtic languages in University College Dublin.

[9] Eoghan Desmond, interviewed by Jonathan Grimes and Evonne Ferguson, 'amplify #50 – Interviews with Elaine Agnew and Eoghan Desmond for City of Derry International Choir Festival', The Contemporary Music Centre, podcast, 20 October 2021 (17:58–18:15) <https://www.cmc.ie/amplify/episode-50> [accessed 25 June 2024].

[10] Eoghan Desmond quoted in Michael Dervan, 'Eoghan Desmond: "I struggle to write in a vacuum – I draw inspiration from what I'm working on as a singer"', *The Irish Times*, 14 March 2023 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/music/2023/03/14/eoghan-desmond-i-struggle-to-write-in-a-vacuum-i-draw-inspiration-from-what-im-working-on-as-a-singer/> [accessed 14 March 2023].

[11] Saint Columba is also known as Colmcille.

[12] Bisagni, *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, p. 21.

penultimate verse of the poem. Like the second movement, the theme of grief at Columba's death returns, yet the sixth focuses more on praising his faith and his illumination of heaven. Dallán's verse emphasises the significance of the saint's story and his impact upon not only one household, but many ('*Is deimhin ní och aontí […] Is trom an tuath anois*'). Desmond's final movement sets the postscript of the eulogy, which returns to the poet, assured in his belief that Columba will guide him past torments to heavenly peace ('*A thabharfaidh chun Sióin sinn, A sheolfaidh thar pheannaid mé!*'). The cantata concludes with a repetition of the text '*Ní díscéail*', reminding listeners of the importance of sharing Columba's story. Desmond effectively conveys the character, emotions, and events of each verse through his motivic organisation, orchestration, modality, textural structures, and interconnected movements, threading the narrative of Columba's faith and mission across the large-scale musical work.

Compositional Influences

Amra Choluim Chille highlights various influences on Desmond's text setting, ranging from Irish traditional music to textures used by contemporary composers such as James MacMillan (b. 1959), Tarik O'Regan (b. 1978), and Max Richter (b. 1966).[13] Despite its Irish language, the composer emphasises that the work is 'not beholden' to the Irish traditional style.[14] Nevertheless, it includes traditional elements in the fifth movement, and less directly in the third movement, due to the parameters of the commission from Christ Church Cathedral, which requested that the piece 'would draw on Irish folk and traditional idioms.'[15] In his commentary on the cantata, the composer underlines his desire

> to separate Irish language composition from Irish traditional musical influences in order to demonstrate that the language can stand on its own, and needn't be bound by the gimmick of folk influences – that serious art music can be composed through the medium of the Irish language.[16]

As is discernible in his other sacred works, the strong presence of modal writing, polyphony — most notably fugal and canonic textures — and *Augenmusik* throughout *Amra Choluim Chille* underlines Desmond's conscious use of historical musical devices and the significant impact of the Renaissance and Baroque eras on his compositional practice. Equally

[13] Dervan, 'Eoghan Desmond: "I struggle to write in a vacuum"'.
[14] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 37.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

apparent is the influence of contemporary music — particularly the ambient works of Max Richter and Jóhann Jóhannsson (1969–2018), and Arvo Pärt's (b. 1935) austere textures and tintinnabuli style — on Desmond's minimalist techniques throughout the cantata, which evoke a meditative, solemn atmosphere reflective of Columba's religious existence and the act of mourning his death.[17] The composer's attentive synthesis of archaic and contemporary musical styles demonstrates a thorough consideration of Dallán's words, thus presenting an imaginative modern-day artistic rendering of the ancient eulogy.

Orchestration

The impact of contemporary music is evident in Desmond's choice of instruments for the cantata. O'Regan's *A Letter of Rights* (2015) and MacMillan's *Stabat Mater* (2015) were particular influences on his orchestration and harmonic structures, due to his performance of these pieces with Chamber Choir Ireland at the time he was finding a text for his cantata.[18] The dominant role of strings in both works influenced Desmond's use of these forces in *Amra Choluim Chille*, while O'Regan's use of crotales and tubular bells evidently inspired their inclusion in the Irish cantata. Desmond also notes André Caplet's *Le Miroir de Jésus* (1923) — for choir, strings, and harp — and MacMillan's *Seven Last Words from the Cross* (1995) as influences on the cantata's instrumental forces.[19] However, in the case of Caplet, it is clear that the connection goes considerably beyond instrumentation. The similarities between the harp's figuration in *Amra Choluim Chille* and *Le Miroir de Jésus* underline the strong influence of Caplet's motivic writing on Desmond's cantata. Desmond has repeatedly stated his fondness for quoting from other composers' works if the context is suitable, justifying his almost direct imitation of Caplet's harp figuration.[20] The most obvious example of this emulation can be observed in the sixth movement, '*Bás Choluim*', the introduction (bb. 1–10) paraphrasing the opening (bb. 1–7) of the '*Prélude*' of the second section of Caplet's sacred work, '*Miroir de Peine*' ('Mirror of Pain'), which focuses on the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary. Where Caplet's *San lenteur* music is in 3/8 (Figure 6.1), Desmond's *Andante Lugubre* movement is

[17] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 42.
[18] Dervan, 'Eoghan Desmond: "I struggle to write in a vacuum"'.
[19] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 40.
[20] Eoghan Desmond, '100 Days – Day 29: On Quotation', 'Blog', *Eoghan Desmond*, 5 June 2019 <https://www.eoghandesmond.com/blog?offset=1559994407190> [accessed 28 March 2024]; Desmond, interviewed by Grimes and Ferguson, 'amplify #50' (14:50–15:30); Eoghan Desmond, 'Alt Notes #11 | Eoghan Desmond', interviewed by Shell Dooley, *HeadStuff*, 21 July 2016 <https://www.headstuff.org/entertainment/music/music-features/alt-notes-11-eoghan-desmond> [accessed 1 May 2023].

set in 3/4. Both sections begin with a unison F# on the strings, although Desmond alters the dynamics from *pianissimo* to *sforzando*, with *tremolo* and *pizzicato* articulation (Figure 6.2). '*Bás Choluim*' introduces the unison upper voices with tubular bells before the harp's arpeggiation, evading an exact imitation of Caplet's work, which introduces the harp in bar 2, and does not include bells. Despite these differences, the cantata's allusion to the French work cannot be denied.

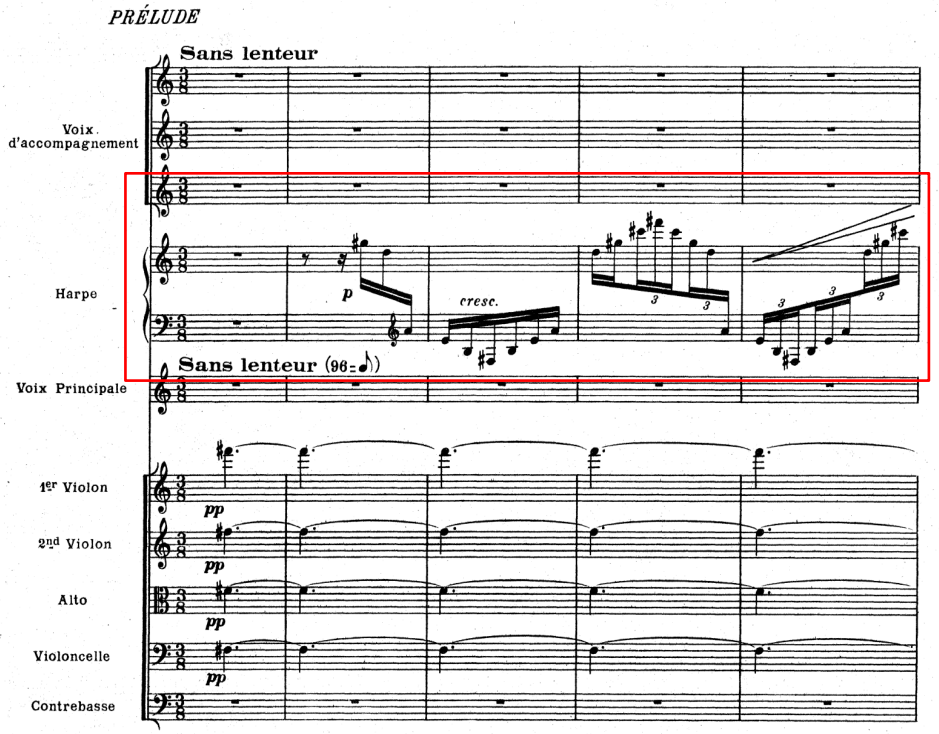


Figure 6.1. André Caplet, '*Prélude*', '*II. Miroir de Peine*', *Le Miroir de Jésus* (Paris: Durand & Cie., 1942), bb. 1–5 (quartal figuration in red).
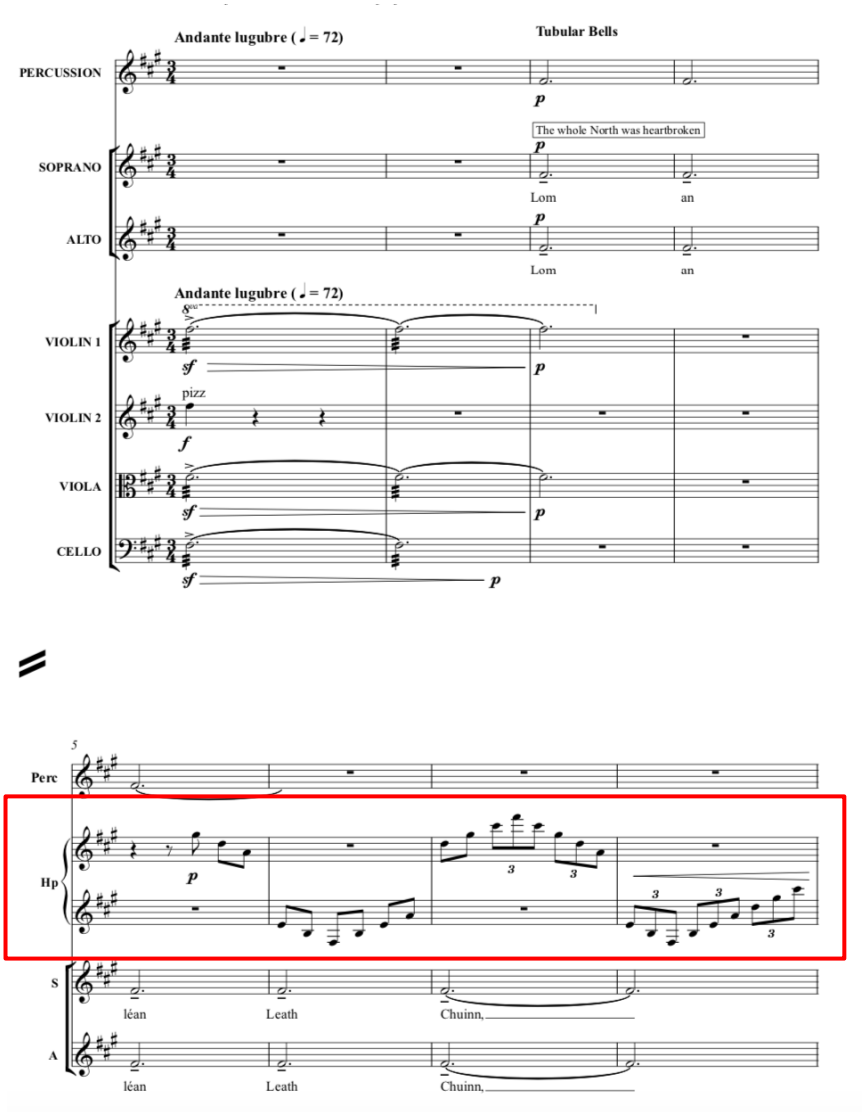


Figure 6.2. '*6. Bás Choluim*', *Amra Choluim Chille* (2019), bb. 1–8 (quartal figuration in red).

The harp's quartal intervals are notable in both works, with the rapid progression to triplets, and Desmond's continuation to quintuplets, clearly inspired by Caplet's writing. The quotation may have a structural purpose, serving as a prelude to a new section in the cantata and establishing a change of tone following Columba's turmoil in the preceding movement. The harp's *glissandi* notation throughout *Amra Choluim Chille* also appears to have originated from *Le Miroir de Jésus*, enhancing the ethereal atmosphere of the music and the spiritual aura of Columba. The conspicuous similarities between both compositions' harp writing suggests that Desmond consciously emulated Caplet's piece, conceivably for reasons relating to both texts' focus on the death of sacred figures. Allusion to earlier music is a recurring feature of

Desmond's work, with his career as a professional singer and the repertoire he encounters clearly impacting his compositional approach.

Large-scale Musical Expression

Desmond communicates the essence of Dallán's poem through the various layers of his composition, manipulating the texture, timbre, and melodic and harmonic structures to convey the venerated Columba, his mission and death, and his impact on the Irish Christian community. Narrative communication is evident at the local level of phrase structure, in larger sections within each movement, and through interrelated musical themes across the cantata. As noted in Chapter Four, Desmond's more abstract expression of text has developed over his career, impacted by his interest in the complexity of Renaissance polyphony, as well as the contemporary genre of ambient music, with its meditative, looping textures. Motivic repetition is a significant narrative technique used to unify the seven movements of *Amra Choluim Chille*. The most salient motif connecting the multi-movement musical narrative is the *St Columba* hymn tune, which appears in various guises throughout the cantata. As the composer notes, the entire work is 'bound by this one hymn tune, which is never explicitly stated – only played around with.'[21]

Significant Motifs

St Columba's Hymn

As discussed in Chapter Four, quotation is a common trait in Desmond's compositions, with the composer liberally including existing melodies in his choral output, particularly those that deal with a similar text to one he is setting.[22] Within *Amra Choluim Chille*, Desmond takes the traditional Irish melody *St Columba* and sets it predominantly in the Lydian mode. The tune of unknown date was collected by the Irish violinist and antiquarian, George Petrie (1790–1866), and later included in composer Charles Villiers Stanford's (1852–1924) *The Complete Collection of Irish Music as Noted by George Petrie* (1902–1905; Part II, No. 1043), under the

[21] Desmond, '100 Days – Day 29: On Quotation'.
[22] Ibid. See Chapters Four and Seven for further discussion of Desmond's use of quotation.

title ‘Irish hymn sung on the dedication of a chapel—Co. of Londonderry’ (Figure 6.3).[23] However, the first recognised publication of the melody is found in the 1864 edition of the *Church Hymnal*, described as a ‘Hymn of the Ancient Irish Church’ and set to the Anglican cleric John Newton’s text ‘Great Shepherd of thy people here [hear]’ (Figure 6.4).[24]

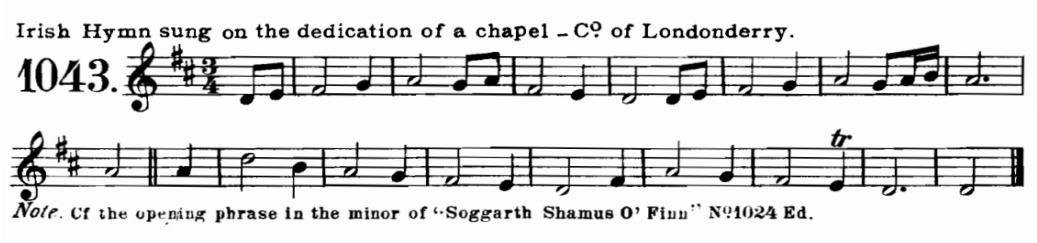


Figure 6.3. *St Columba* hymn tune.

Charles Villiers Stanford, ed. *The Complete Collection of Irish Music as Noted by George Petrie*, Part II, No. 1043 (London: Boosey & Co., 1902), p. 265.

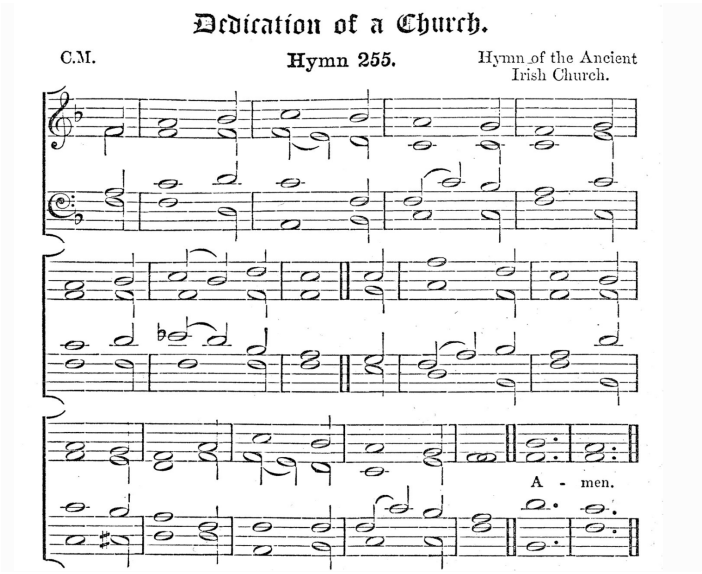


Figure 6.4. *Church Hymnal with Appropriate Tunes*

(Dublin: Association for Discountenancing Vice and Promoting the Knowledge and Practice of the Christian Religion, 1864).

[23] David Cooper, ‘Petrie, George’, *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.51127> [accessed 25 June 2024]; George William Rutler, *Brightest and Best: Stories of Hymns* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), pp. 174–175.

[24] Chris Fenner, ‘Psalm 23: ‘The King of Love my Shepherd Is’, *Hymnology Archive*, 29 April 2021 <https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/the-king-of-love-my-shepherd-is> [accessed 25 June 2024]; Nicole Robinson, ‘Hymnals as Historical Documents: A Contextualisation of the Church Hymnal and its Representation of the Church of Ireland and its People 1864–1919’ (unpublished PhD dissertation, Technological University Dublin, 2021), pp. 257, 260 <https://doi.org/10.21427/k982-9a40> [accessed 25 June 2024].

A more recent, widely familiar arrangement of the tune is that by Irish composer Thomas C. Kelly (1917–1985), set to the text 'When We Eat This Bread' as part of his *A Mass for Peace* (1976).[25] Desmond has noted that it was Stanford's well-known harmonisation of the tune in 'The King of Love my Shepherd Is', in *The English Hymnal* (1906), that inspired his quotation of the melody in *Amra Choluim Chille* (Figure 6.5).[26] As the composer has explained, he does not present the complete tune, instead focusing predominantly on the first two phrases, which appear in the vocal and instrumental lines, primarily in the Lydian mode.

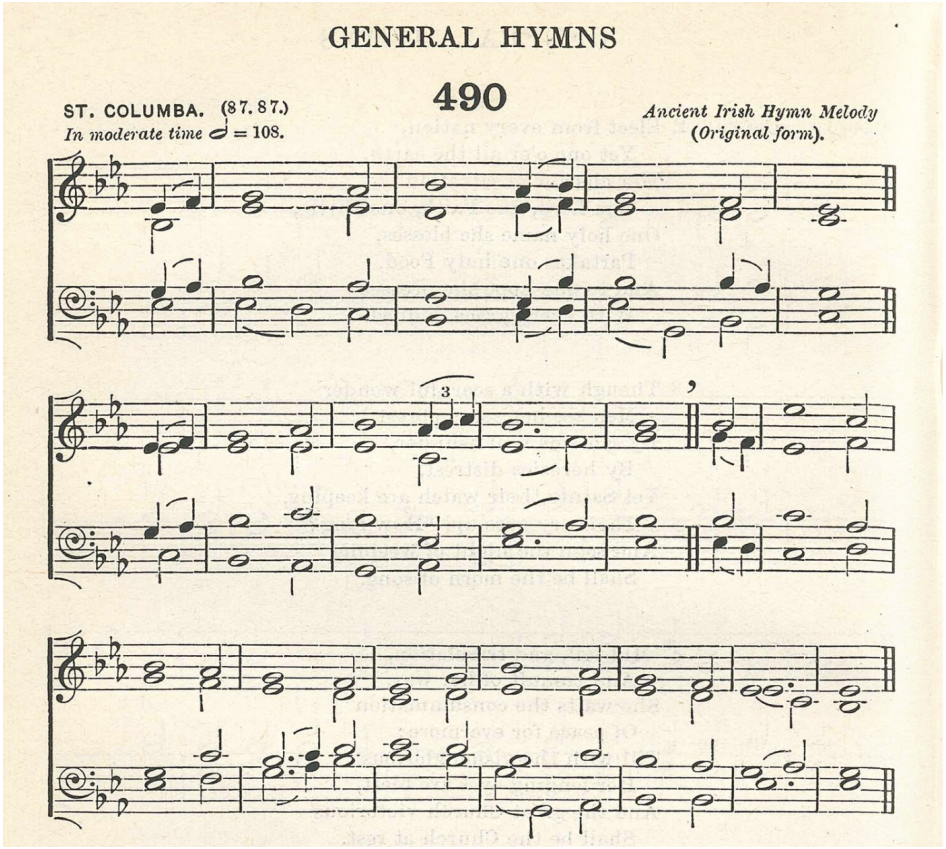


Figure 6.5. Charles Villiers Stanford, 'The King of Love my Shepherd Is', *The English Hymnal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906).

It is unclear why Desmond transformed the original major melody into a modal format. His decision may simply intend to generate an archaic tone, serving as an enduring reference to the use of church modes in Medieval and Renaissance sacred music. However, the Lydian modality may carry an underlying meaning within the cantata, expressing the persona of Columba.

[25] Thomas C. Kelly, arr., 'When We Eat This Bread', *A Mass for Peace* (1976, 2011) in *Sing the Mass: Anthology of music for the Irish Church*, National Centre for Liturgy (Dublin: Veritas, 2011), p. 233.
[26] Desmond, interviewed by Grimes and Ferguson, 'amplify #50' (19:13–19:18).

Claude Palisca notes how the Lydian mode 'inspires a calm and peaceful disposition' and was used for hymns, paeans, and eulogies in the Renaissance era, making it a suitable choice for Desmond's setting.[27] In the domain of film music, Frank Lehman observes how the Lydian mode has

> victorious […] optimistic connotations. At the same time, its divergence from the diatonic norm, and the presence of a prominent tritone between tonic and subdominant scale-degrees, enables suggestion of the extraordinary and otherworldly.[28]

Dallán's hagiographic portrait of Columba aligns with Palisca and Lehman's interpretations, suggesting that Desmond's choice of mode may have a narrative implication, seeking to convey the saint's spiritual character and ascent to heaven. The well-known tune is manipulated in diverse textures and timbres, often occurring in fragmented form, most notably played by the tubular bells. The quotation of this ancient melody throughout the composition highlights Desmond's understanding of the Irish-Christian nature of Dallán's poem and demonstrates an intention to integrate historical precedents — this sacred Irish tune in a distinctive mode — into his contemporary setting.

The tune of *St Columba* opens *Amra Choluim Chille* in F Lydian, played by tubular bells and accompanied by *pianississimo tremolo* strings (b. 7). The first five notes, ascending by step from F to C, are followed by seven bars of melodic rest, as the violins restate their shimmering D minor seventh chord in second inversion, which expands to a cluster harmony in the full string texture (Figure 6.6). The bells reappear in bar 17 with the second half of the tune's first phrase, followed by a bar of silence. The resting bar after each of the three statements of the bells' melodic fragments enhances the introduction's *Misterioso* atmosphere and may intend to evoke a sense of prayer, building on the melody's use in Christian hymns, and underlining the reverent tone and sacred nature of the narrative. The antiphonal structure of the opening, moving between the strings' harmonies, with brief harp *glissandi*, and the bells' melody, possibly seeks to emulate the verse-response format of Christian antiphons, and therefore, a religious ritual or prayer. This perhaps reflects Desmond's own experience of performing antiphons as a chorister at religious services.

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[27] Claude Victor Palisca, 'The ethos of modes during the Renaissance', in *The Emotional Power of Music: Multidisciplinary perspectives on musical arousal, expression, and social control*, ed. by Tom Cochrane, Bernardino Fantini, and Klaus R. Scherer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 102–114 (p. 104).
[28] Frank Lehman, 'Reading Tonality through Film: Transformational Hermeneutics and the Music of Hollywood' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2012), p. 31.
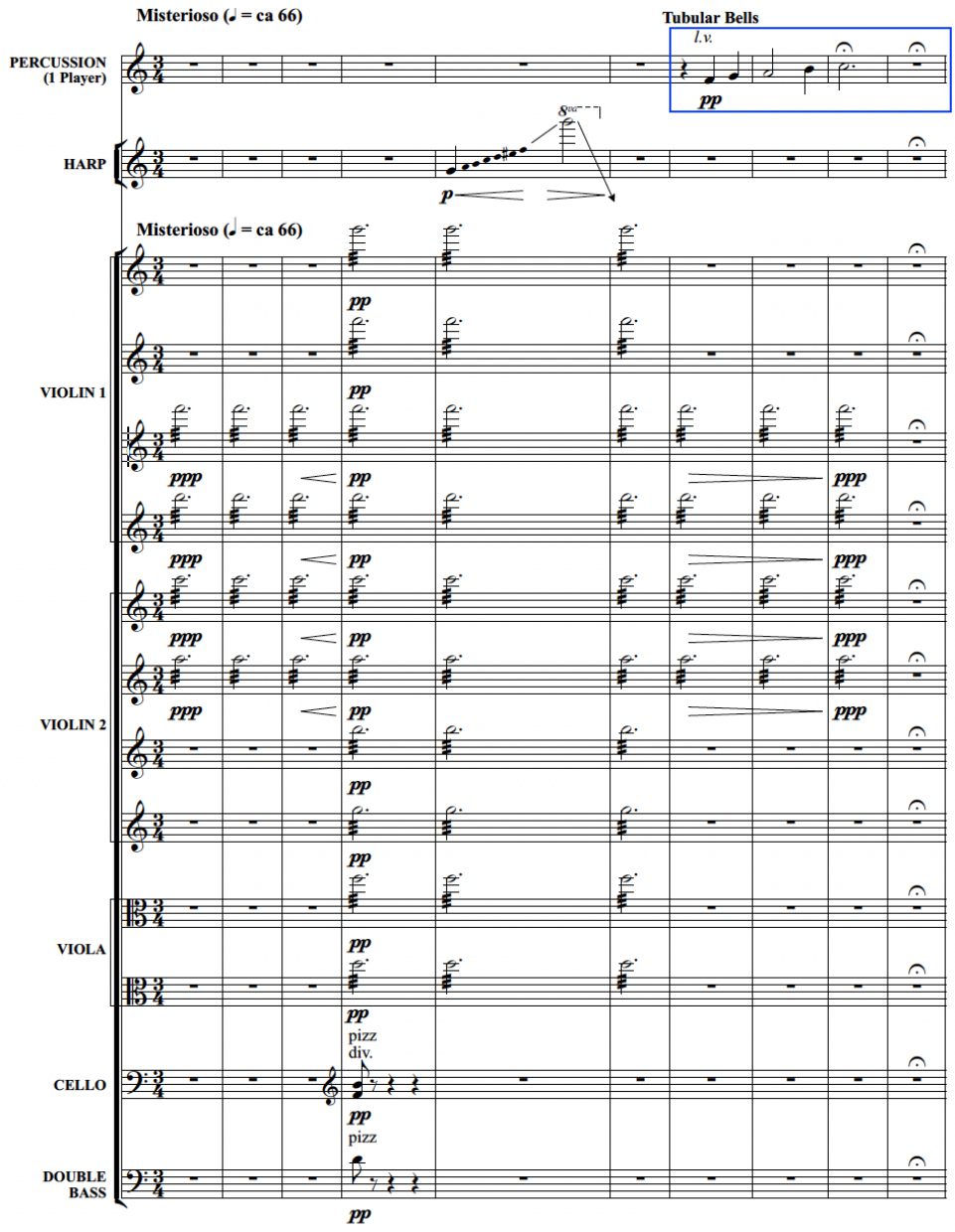


Figure 6.6. '*1. Remfocul*', bb. 1–10 (*St Columba* tune in blue).

After the third statement of the strings' sustained harmony (bb. 21–29), the second phrase of the tune ascends in the bells but does not resolve to the expected dominant, C, instead remaining on an unaccompanied D, the penultimate note of the phrase. This incomplete idiom, which leads to a prolonged bar of silence, amplifies the mysterious ambience of the setting, as well as preparing for the soprano and alto's entry on D (b. 32). Bells permeate the cantata, appearing at the beginning of movements and at 'structurally significant moments'.[29] Desmond perceives bells as being 'played for times of celebration, and times of mourning. They simultaneously

[29] Eoghan Desmond, '100 Days – Day 11: The Importance of Bells' [accessed 28 March 2024].

evoke transience and impermanence, and eternity.'[30] In the context of the first movement, the bells play a significant role in establishing the Christian theme of the work, helping to evoke the solemn tone, and introducing the protagonist, Columba, through the fragmented statement of the melody attributed to the saint.

The traditional melody is most prevalent in the first movement, denoting its importance, whilst acquainting listeners with the motif that will return throughout the cantata. The first appearance of the tune in the vocal parts occurs within a fugal texture, as the poet Dallán prays to God to not be left 'on the tracks of the anguished in great desolation' ('*Nár lige Dia neimhe i mbuíonta an éimh mé, ar mhéad a ndobróin*'; bb. 58–90). Altos present the first two phrases of the *mezzo-forte espressivo* theme in D♭ Lydian, accompanied by a B♭ minor ninth *tremolo* pedal chord on violas and cellos, with intermittent B♭ tones on the bells and double bass. According to Desmond, the bells' alternating muffled beats 'simulate the "half-muffled" effect in bell-ringing, […] creating a mournful echo effect.'[31] Sopranos answer the subject in A♭ Lydian (b. 66), joined by violin 1's pedal point F, as altos proceed with a lilting countersubject, reflecting the poet's anguish on the path of the tormented (Figure 6.7). As well as exhibiting a mournful tone, the falling second (G–F; b. 67) foreshadows the 'mourning' motif that dominates the second movement, illustrating Desmond's narrative and thematic organisation of the large-scale work.

[30] Desmond, '100 Days – Day 11: The Importance of Bells'.
[31] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 47.
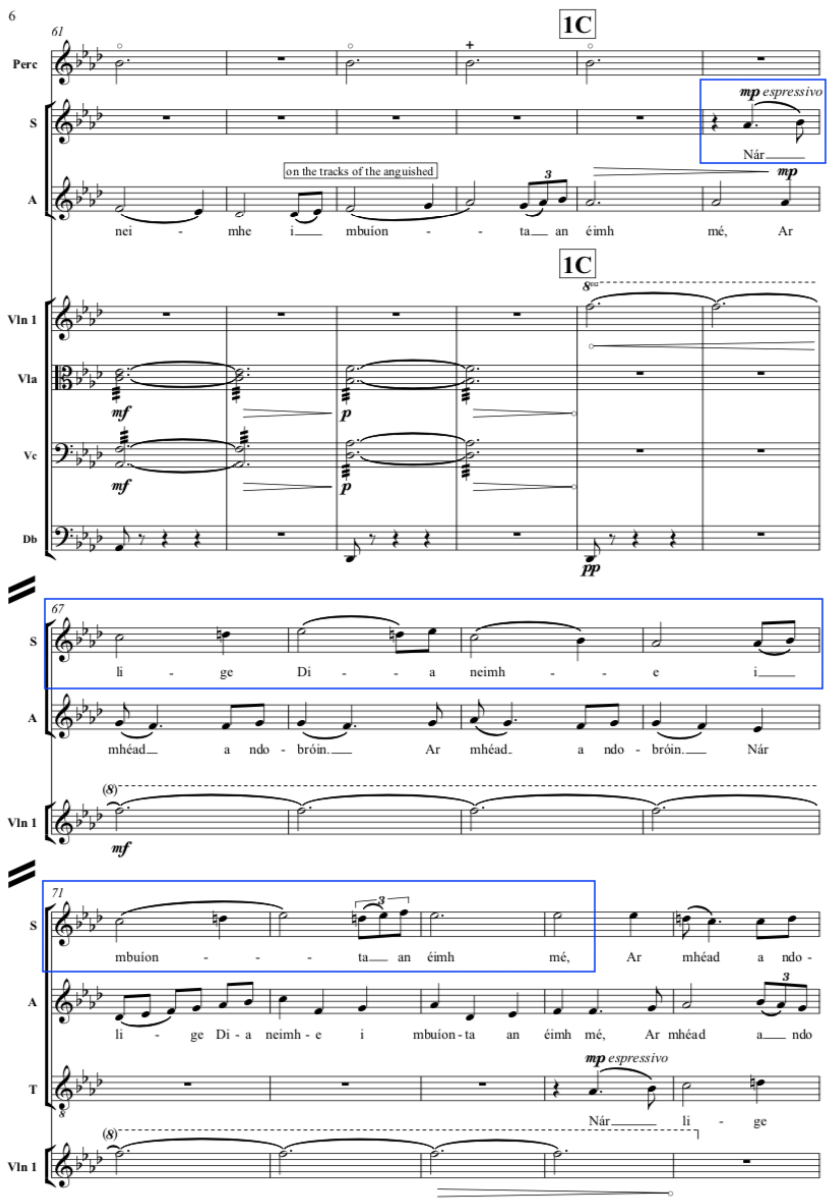


Figure 6.7. '*1. Remfocul*', bb. 61–75 (subject in blue).

The entry of the tenor's subject on A♭ (b. 74), followed by the bass's D♭ Lydian phrase (b. 81), completes the four-part fugue, the *a cappella* voices interweaving in an increasingly mournful tone. The phrase concludes on an open fifth (F–C), with the return of the first violin's sustained F (b. 90). Desmond's interest in achieving contrapuntal fluency is evident in this section, while the open harmony at the end of the phrase further underlines the impact of early music on his harmonic and textural language. The stratified, melancholic melodies built on the modal motif not only establish Columba as the focus of the music but foreground the difficult spiritual

journey intimated by Dallán, with the layered voices within a complex fugue representing 'the tracks of the anguished'.[32]

A similar imitative presentation of the first five notes of the *St Columba* motif in G♭ Lydian is evident in the strings' expanding canon, which accompanies the choir's dissonant homophonic repetition of the text '*Go saoraidh Dia ar an múr tine mé*' ('the great God is my protection from the fiery wall'; bb. 109–133). The cello initially presents the theme after the eight-part accented *fortissimo* declamation of text (Figure 6.8). It is notable that Desmond introduces the melody in each instrument while the voices are silent, perhaps to ensure the clear audibility of Columba's tune within the dilating texture.[33] As the choir repeats the *risoluto* phrase, reinforcing the image of God protecting Dallán from 'the fiery wall', the strings' polyphony develops into nine parts, manifesting the fire that threatens the poet. The strings' contrapuntal texture contrasts effectively with the voices' steadfast discordant homophony, allowing two separate themes to be clearly presented, increasing in intensity with the *crescendo* to *fortissimo* (bb. 126–130).
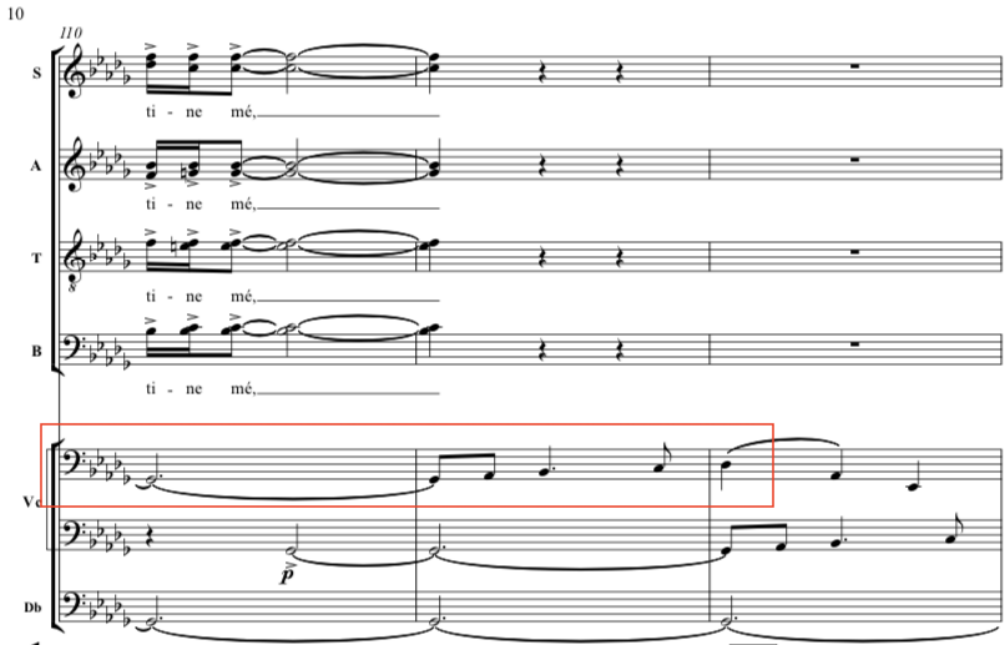


Figure 6.8. '*1. Remfocul*', bb. 110–112 (*St Columba* in red).

[32] Desmond utilises a similar textural approach in the final layered polyphonic section of *Nothing in Vain* (2021), with four soloists interweaving above a choral SATB harmonic ostinato, detailing the unwavering faith of John Henry Newman amidst struggles and adversity (bb. 104–151).

[33] The order in which the theme is presented: cello 1 (b. 109), cello 2 (b. 110), viola 1 (b. 115), viola 2 (b. 116), violin 2 (b. 120), violin 2 (b. 121), violin 1 (b. 129), violin 1 (b. 130). Double bass accompanies with a rhythmically diminishing ostinato (G♭–A♮–E♮–E♭–B♭).

A symmetrical structure is conveyed at the conclusion of the first movement with the return of the fragmented display of the first two phrases of *St Columba* in B♭ Lydian on the crotales (bb. 161–173).[34] Similar to the beginning of the work, the presence of *St Columba* alongside the voices' exaltation of the 'just God' may have narrative intentions, restating the devout tone of the overall movement, while also indicating the conclusion of Dallán's prayer, reinforced by the crotales' resolution on the dominant of the mode (F). Desmond uses this instrument, as well as the tubular bells, throughout the cantata due to 'the frequent mentions of bells in the *Amra*, and to evoke the ancient *Dowris Crotales*.'[35] The crotales were a prominent instrument in pre-Christian Ireland, uncovered in the Dowris hoard near Birr, county Offaly in the mid-nineteenth century.[36] Both the crotales and bells, and their appearance at significant points within movements — primarily to present a fragment of *St Columba* — contribute to the ancient, mystical atmosphere of the work, and underline the Irish and sacred nature of the text.

The *St Columba* melody plays a pivotal role in the fifth movement, serving as the subject of the choral fugue, which illustrates the saint's struggle with the Devil. As the viola adopts the D Dorian slip jig melody, first presented at the beginning of the movement, the soprano enters with the hymn tune in F Lydian, doubled by the first violin (b. 20; Figure 6.9). The fugal subject consists of the first two phrases of *St Columba*, regularly shifting between 9/8 and 6/8, as the singers communicate the saint's affliction by the Devil, who could plausibly be represented by the slip jig. The unusual metric format of the five-bar subject (9/8–9/8–6/8–9/8–6/8) 'creates structural conflict with the slip-jig', heightening Columba's struggle with Satan, and by extension, the contrast between heaven and hell.[37] As the soprano concludes the subject on C (b. 25), the alto answers in the dominant C Lydian, doubled by violin 2. The theme is subsequently presented by the tenor and viola in F Lydian (b. 32), and the bass and cello in C Lydian (b. 37), as the frantic polyphonic texture expands with independent, polymodal counterpoint and a rhythmically conflicting countersubject ('*Is é i sáinn, ag an Aifreann*' — 'he was fettered by the Mass').

[34] The crotales are a percussion instrument consisting of twelve small cymbals tuned to the chromatic scale.
[35] Desmond, '100 Days – Day 63' [accessed 3 April 2024].
[36] Alison Rosse, 'The Dowris hoard', *Irish Arts Review (1984–1987)*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1985), 25–28 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20491717> [accessed 14 May 2024].
[37] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 63.
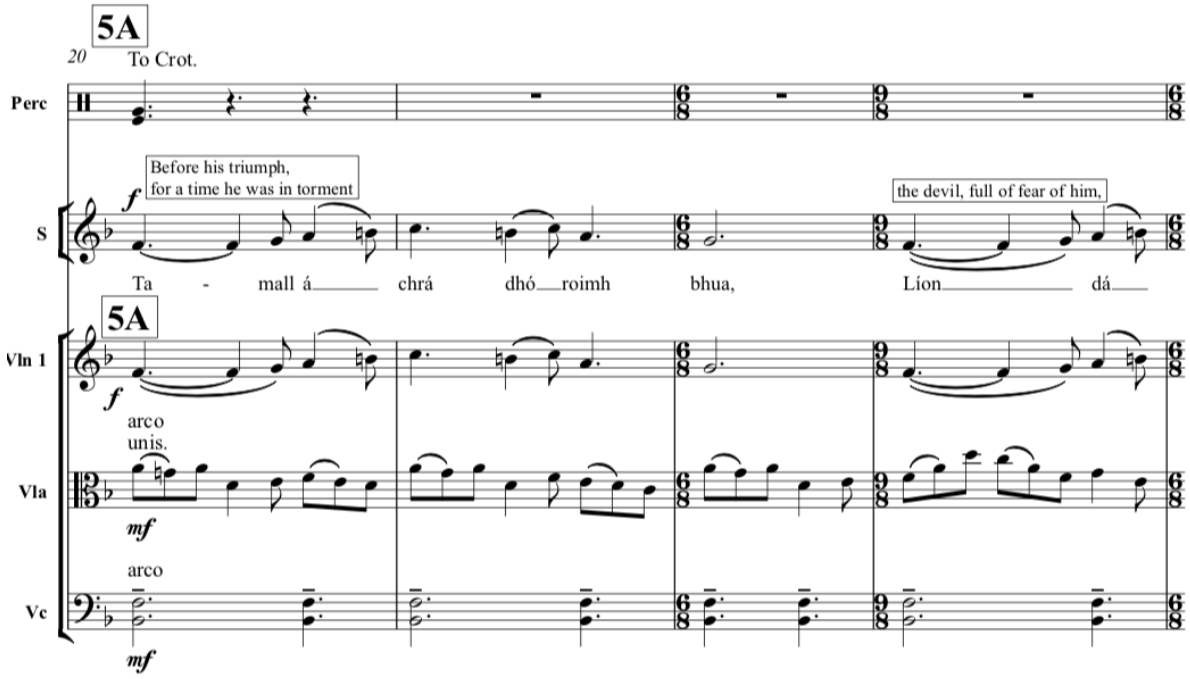


Figure 6.9. '*5. Anró agus Suáilcí Choluim*', bb. 20–23.

The *fortississimo* bells signal the end of the contrapuntal chaos and Columba's triumph with their syncopated presentation of the first phrase of the hymn tune (b. 104), concluding with the ascending first three notes of the second phrase (F, G, A; bb. 111–112). The bells' statement, accompanied by homophonic strings, is followed by an almost complete bar of rest, allowing a moment of reprieve before the *Lamentoso e Misterioso* section in 3/4. The imitative polyphonic modal lament played by the solo string quartet, accompanied by the intermittent bells' repeated A minims and the double bass's sustained A, serves as the bridge between both halves of the movement, and is built on an alteration of the third phrase of *St Columba* (bb. 114–146, Figure 6.10). According to Desmond, this mournful instrumental interlude represents 'the sheer exhaustion of the saint at the culmination of his battle', which is accentuated by the dramatic change in tempo from dotted crotchet as 120 (*Con Fuoco*) to crotchet equals 60 (*Lamentoso e Misterioso*), and the metric shift from compound (9/8) to simple time (3/4).[38] The presence of all bar the final phrase of *St Columba* in both the vocal and instrumental texture of '*Anró agus Suáilcí Choluim*' serves as the bedrock of the musical narration and emotional communication of Dallán's verse, embodying the saint's conflict with evil, his ultimate triumph, and exhaustion after battle.

[38] Desmond, '100 Days – Day 43' [accessed 8 April 2024].
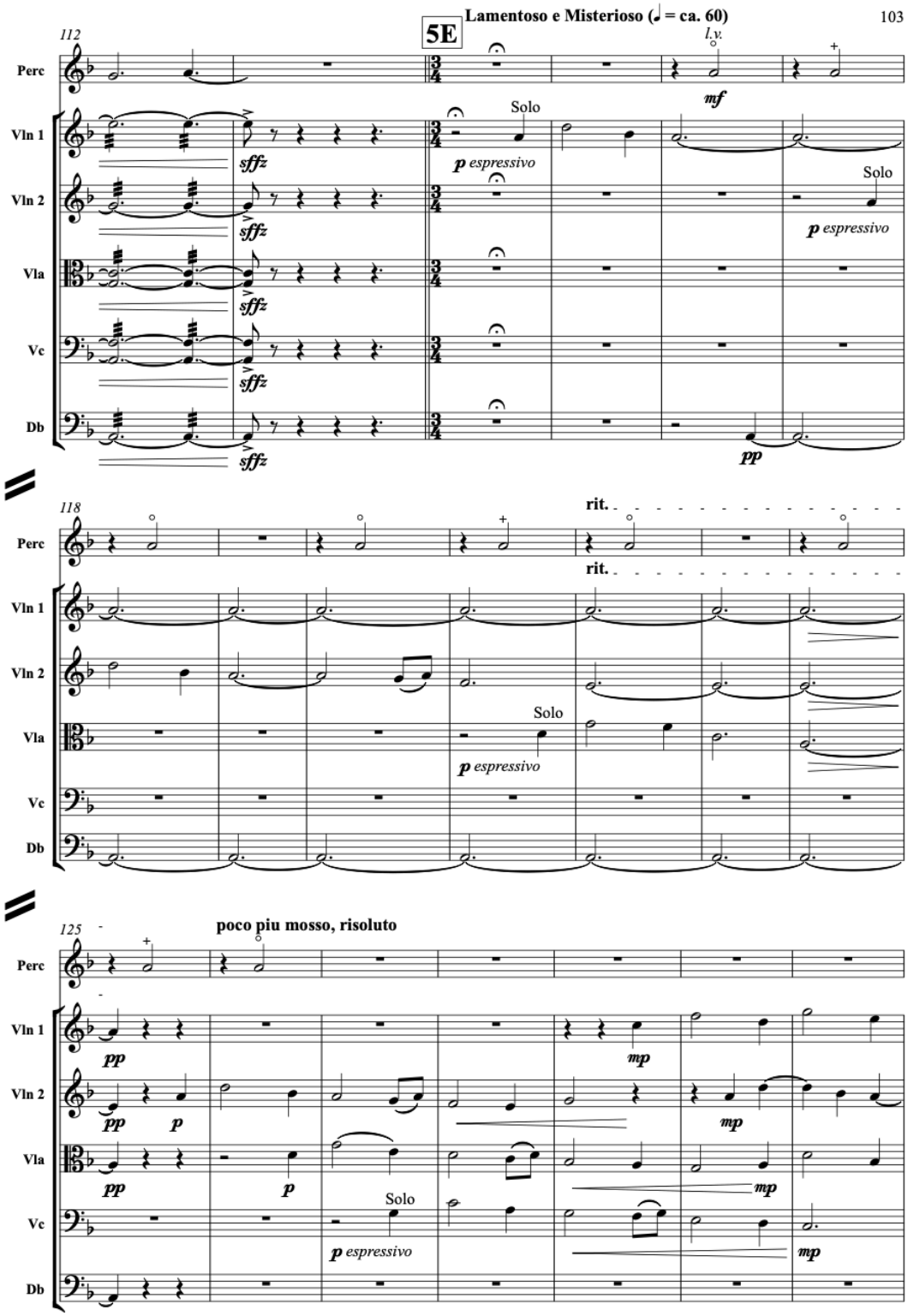


Figure 6.10. '*5. Anró agus Suáilcí Choluim*', bb. 112–149.
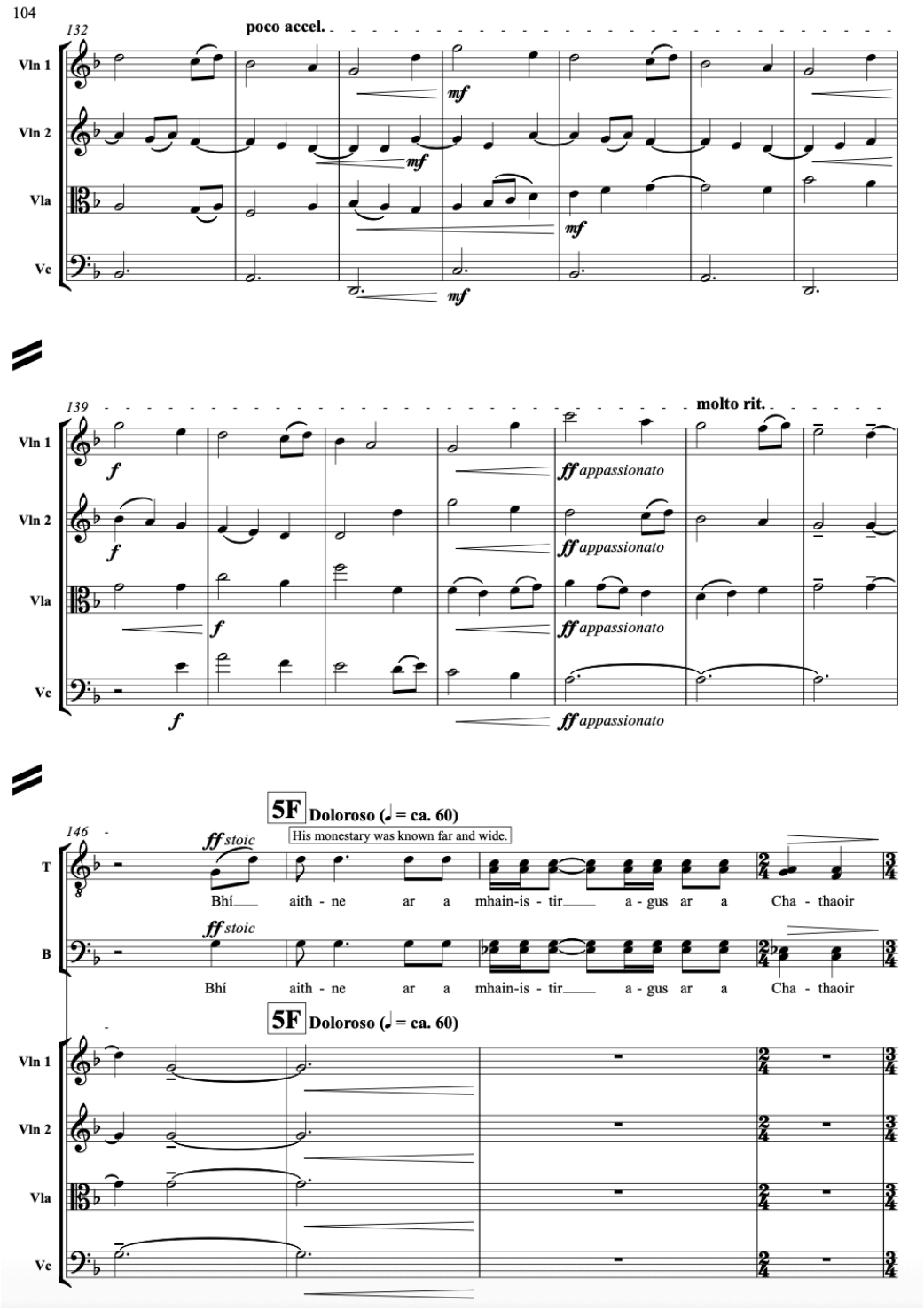


Figure 6.10. (continued).

The appearance of the melody in the final movement, '*Críoch*', is not unlike its treatment in the preface. This forges a connection between the first and last movements, concluding the work as it began. The rising fourth (F–B♭) of the strings' passacaglia at the beginning of the seventh movement indicates the beginning of the third phrase of Columba's tune, which

appeared in the quartet's lament in the fifth movement, tying the narrative together through this melody, and more specifically, the similar grave tone of both sections. Rather than proceed with a modal variation of the melody's third phrase, Desmond's passacaglia theme is based on a piccolo warm-up exercise that he encountered backstage at a performance in Amsterdam of Irish composer Donnacha Dennehy's (b. 1970) opera *The Second Violinist* (2017), demonstrating his proclivity for allusion to other music in his work, which, in this case, does not carry an underlying meaning.[39]

The first clear evidence of *St Columba* in '*Críoch*' occurs with the solo alto's E♭ Lydian phrase presenting the first half of the Irish melody (b. 75). Accompanied by the harp and crotales, the vocal texture gradually expands to imitative counterpoint, each voice echoing the sacred tune in a modal pattern reflecting the circle of fifths. The tenor joins the alto a fourth lower in B♭ Lydian, followed by the bass's F Lydian statement and soprano's C Lydian phrase, creating a Renaissance-style polymodal tapestry on the text '*Tiocfaidh Colum ua Choirb uí Chathaír uasail gan mhoill chugam*' ('Without delay he will come to me, with dignity, the descendant of Cathaír's offspring, Coirpre'), which concludes in bar 88 (Figure 6.11). This gradual development of texture through the layering of solo voices could be compared to the stratified polyphony in bars 58 to 91 of the first movement ('*Nár lige Dia neimhe i mbuíonta an éimh mé*' — 'May God of Heaven not leave me on the tracks of the anguished'), with both sections' texts expressing faith in the Divine to deliver Dallán from torment. Desmond alludes to the thematic connection between the two movements in his composition blog, noting how the material in the final movement would be used in the first, tying 'the whole work together'.[40]

[39] Desmond, '100 days – Day 9' [accessed 8 April 2024].
[40] Desmond, '100 Days – Day 86' [accessed 8 April 2024].
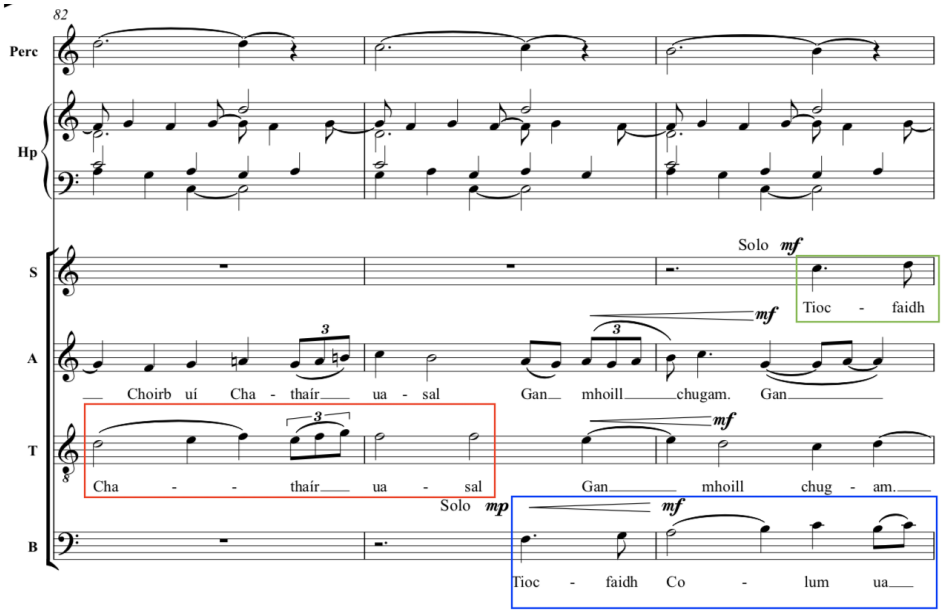


Figure 6.11. '*7. Críoch*', bb. 82–84 (*St Columba* in coloured boxes).

The vocal quartet is followed by the *risoluto* section (bb. 90–125), the third and final fugue of the cantata. *Tutti* sopranos begin with an A Lydian subject based on the first phrase of *St Columba* to the text '*Eachtach ollchasadh mo dháin*', followed by the altos' modified E major version (b. 92). According to Desmond, 'the cyclical nature of a fugue – with subject and countersubject constantly returning and revolving around one another – fit well with the words 'Wondrous the great turning of my poem.''[41] The tenor and bass imitate the upper voices, respectively (bb. 94–96), continuing in imitative counterpoint until the alto's C# minor with flat fifth (G♮) *espressivo* statement of the opening of *St Columba* in bar 103. Tenors respond with a melodic variation of the theme in E major with flat sixth (C♮), extending the range of the subject (b. 105). Sopranos echo the altos' theme in F# minor with lowered fifth, as the tempo accelerates, and the dynamics increase. The bass's A Lydian statement (b. 113; Figure 6.12) signals the *fortissimo appassionato ecstatico* climax, the thematic fragments progressing in stretto counterpoint until the *fortississimo* open A harmony in bar 125, which instigates the final section of the cantata.

[41] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 78.

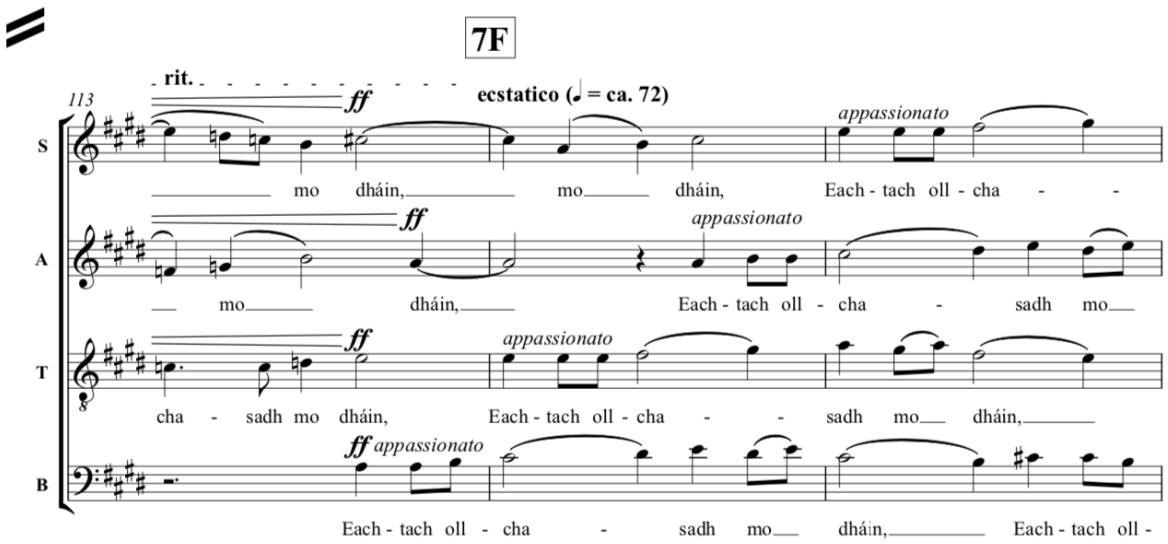


Figure 6.12. '*7. Críoch*', bb. 113–115.

As well as linking movements on a structural level, the similarities between the first and seventh movements' four sections could have narrative connotations. Where Dallán pleads with God not to leave him on the tracks of the anguished in '*Remfocul*', there is a sense of acceptance of death, followed by a passionate expression of faith in '*Críoch*', with Columba remaining present throughout the poet's trials. This interpretation is supported by Jacopo Bisagni, who identifies the thematic connection between the preface (*IP*) and final verse (X) of the *Amra* text:

> If read together, stanza X and the *IP* ('God, God may I beseech/ before I go into His presence') may be understood as a thematic unit: before death comes (*IP*, 2) – which will be soon (X, 8) – I must pray God (*IP*, 1), so that, under Columba's leadership (X, 1), I will be delivered from sin (X, 4) and I will avoid the torments of Hell (X, 3, but also *IP* 4–9).[42]

Desmond has indicated his intention for the final movement to 'mirror' the structure of the first, particularly in relation to the fugal format of the respective third sections, with the latter's musical material conveying a more decisive, heroic tone than the distressed opening music.[43] The uplifting character of the final fugue, built on the *St Columba* melody, not only represents the 'wondrous' completion of the eulogy, but encapsulates the entire work, serving 'as a reminder that all of life (indeed, all of Columba's life) consists of simple beginnings, followed by hard work and hard times, and finally, triumph.'[44]

[42] Bisagni, *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, p. 405.
[43] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', pp. 75, 78.
[44] Ibid., pp. 82–83.

The return of the disjointed utterances of the first half of *St Columba* on the bells and harp, heard between the sopranos' lamenting fragments of the final phrase '*Níl sé d'uain agam. Ní díscéail*' ('My time has run out. Not without tidings'; bb. 128–170), recalls the opening of the cantata, reinforcing the work's solemn atmosphere. The bells fall an augmented fourth from D# to A following their stepwise ascent, continuing to repeat A while the harp ascends by step from A to E, leaving a sense of openness and mystery as the *tremolo* strings' accompaniment fades into silence (bb. 178–79; Figure 6.13). It is significant that the bells are the first and last instrument to play *St Columba*, given their ceremonial character, representation of death, and religious associations. The offstage bell's A is the final unaccompanied note in the work, continuing to resound after the movement's conclusion. This final toll may represent Dallán's death knell. Furthermore, the prevailing note may symbolise Columba's lasting impact throughout Christian Ireland, especially given the composer's statement 'Who knows when a bell that is allowed to ring truly stops making vibrations in the world.'[45]

[45] Desmond, '100 Days – Day 11: The Importance of Bells'.
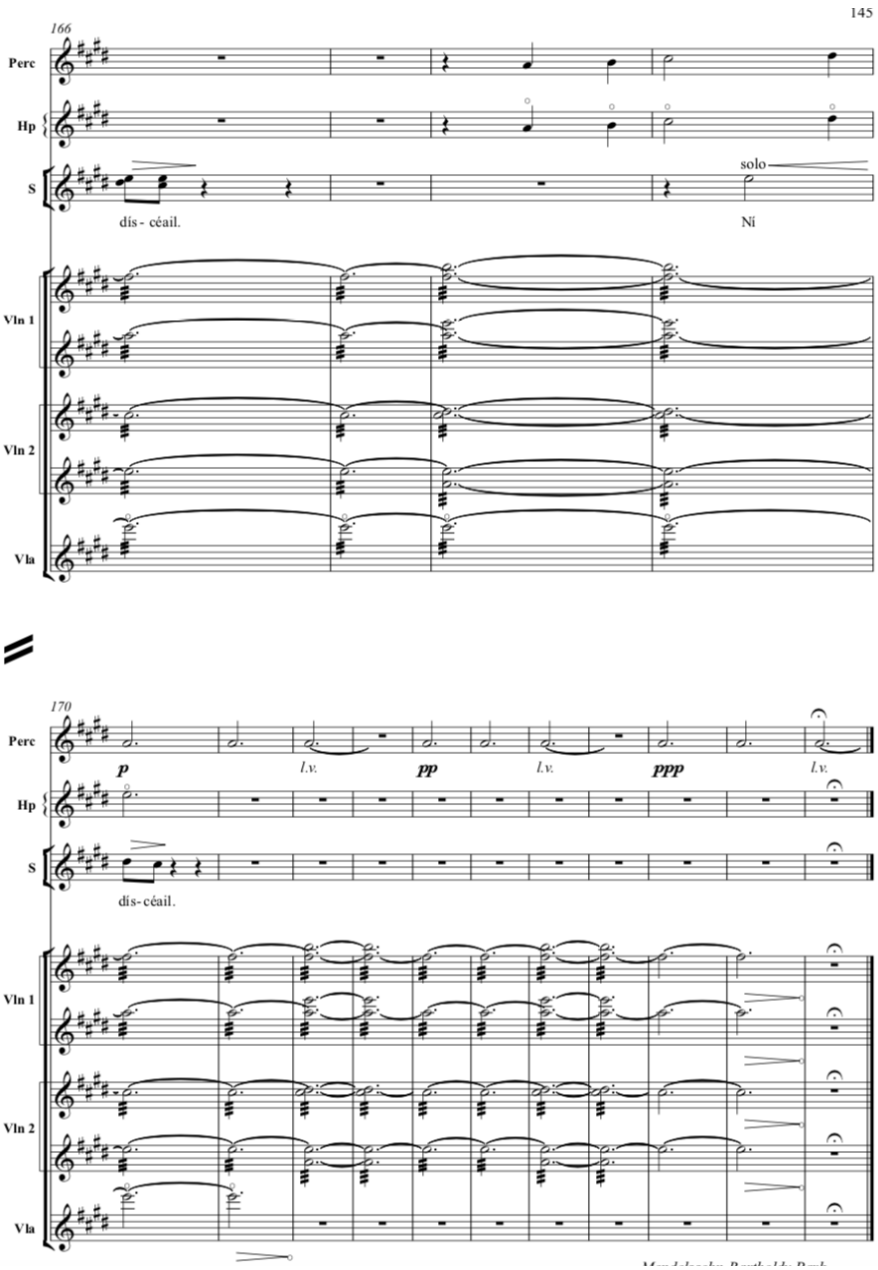


Figure 6.13. '*7. Críoch*', bb. 166–180.

Desmond's ability to embed fragments or hints of the tune in a more subtle manner across the cantata is particularly evident in the second movement, '*Colum: Scéala agus Méala a Bháis*' ('Colum: The Announcement and Mourning of his Death'). It is difficult initially to ascertain whether the melody is present in the minor, tintinnabular sound world as there is no clear evidence of the modal phrase. However, the solo cello's octatonic melody in the second section, playing against the solo tenor's similarly octatonic subject announcing the death of Columba, potentially represents a melodically and rhythmically distorted version of the first two phrases of the tune (bb. 47–63; Figure 6.14). Rather than the expected five-note Lydian ascent, the

cello's *espressivo* phrase rises by step as a minor scale from F to B♭, returning to the initial note in the same stepwise manner, reflecting a palindromic contour. The ascent is immediately repeated, rising to C♭, followed by D♭ and D♮ (b. 52), establishing a 2:1 octatonic scale.
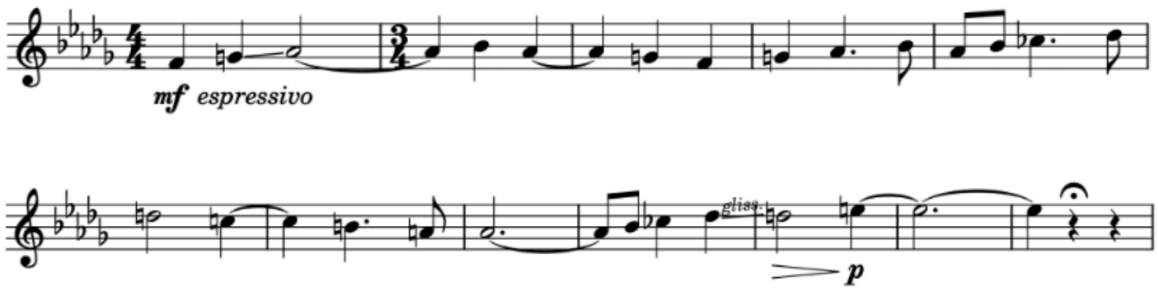


Figure 6.14. '*2. Colum Scéala agus Méala a Bháis*', bb. 47–58 (cello solo).

The cello resumes its countermelody a beat after the tenor's new phrase at the reduced *poco piu adagio* tempo in bar 59, restating the rising thee-note minor idiom (F–A♭) that continues in an octatonic format to C♭, before resolving to B♭, forming a B♭ minor chord with the accompanying strings (b. 62). This concluding phrase is a clearer indication of the first six notes of *St Columba*, albeit in an octatonic form. Desmond's manipulation of the motif using the contemporary scale sustains the movement's minor quality and offers an effective means of relaying the news of Columba's death. According to the composer, the octatonic scale is an intentional reflection of the harp having 'no key' ('*Is cruit gan chéis anois*'), eschewing an established tonality.[46] Altering the traditional tune through octatonicism also demonstrates the composer's innovative approach to combining past and present compositional elements.

The recurrence of the *St Columba* motif throughout the cantata demonstrates Desmond's understanding of the significance of Columba to Dallán and the early Christian community in Ireland, and his likely intention to spotlight the saint consistently. He carefully manipulates the traditional tune to adopt various narrative functions throughout the elegy, while ensuring it is the first and final significant melody to be heard. Where the first half of the tune's presence across the first movement foregrounds Columba as the central figure in the cantata, its octatonic variation in the second movement embodies a mournful tone, accompanying the soloist's announcement of the abbot's death. The melody adopts the central narrative role in the fifth movement, representing Columba as he battles with the Devil, who is manifested by

[46] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 53.

the strings' slip jig. Desmond's allusion to the tune on the bells and harp in the closing section of '*Críoch*' reflects the narrative technique of bookending, with the conclusion exhibiting similar structural attributes to the introduction of the cantata, framing the entire work around Columba and his religious mission. Given that both ends of the elegy focus on Dallán, Desmond's thematic mirroring at either ends of the cantata is fitting in this context, reflecting the structure of the original poem.

Éiríonn Colum

In addition to the *St Columba* hymn, the slip jig of the fifth movement, and the instrumentation (harp, bells, crotales), several traditional Irish (or related Scottish) music idioms are evident throughout *Amra Choluim Chille*, ensuring the ancient and national context of the elegy is portrayed. Within the third movement, '*A Dheascabháil agus a Shaol*' ('Of his Ascent into Heaven and his Life'), the principal motif, '*Éiríonn Colum*' ('Colum rises'), features melodic and rhythmic embellishments reflective of traditional music. The solo soprano's F Lydian phrase ascends by step (F–G), followed by a scotch snap rising third (G–B) on '*Colum*', conveying the influence of traditional rhythms on Desmond's setting, whilst generating a sense of accelerated momentum (bb. 2–7). This motif could also be considered a Lydian variation of the original *St Columba* tune, with the third note omitted from the rising scale. The same four-note ascent is immediately repeated through '*in ard neimhe*' ('to high heaven') and the subsequent recurrence of '*Éiríonn Colum*', followed by a demisemiquaver flourish (b. 8) and stepwise descending return to F on '*ar theacht chuige aingil Dé*' ('when the angels of God come to him'). The ornamented setting of '*chuige*' underlines the traditional influence on Desmond's vocal writing, while the descending conclusion portrays 'the descent of the angels' (Figure 6.15).[47] This phrase is restated by all sopranos, with the altos echoing a bar later (bb. 11–20). The setting of the rising melody in the imitative upper voices most likely serves to evoke the angels and a celestial atmosphere.

[47] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 58.

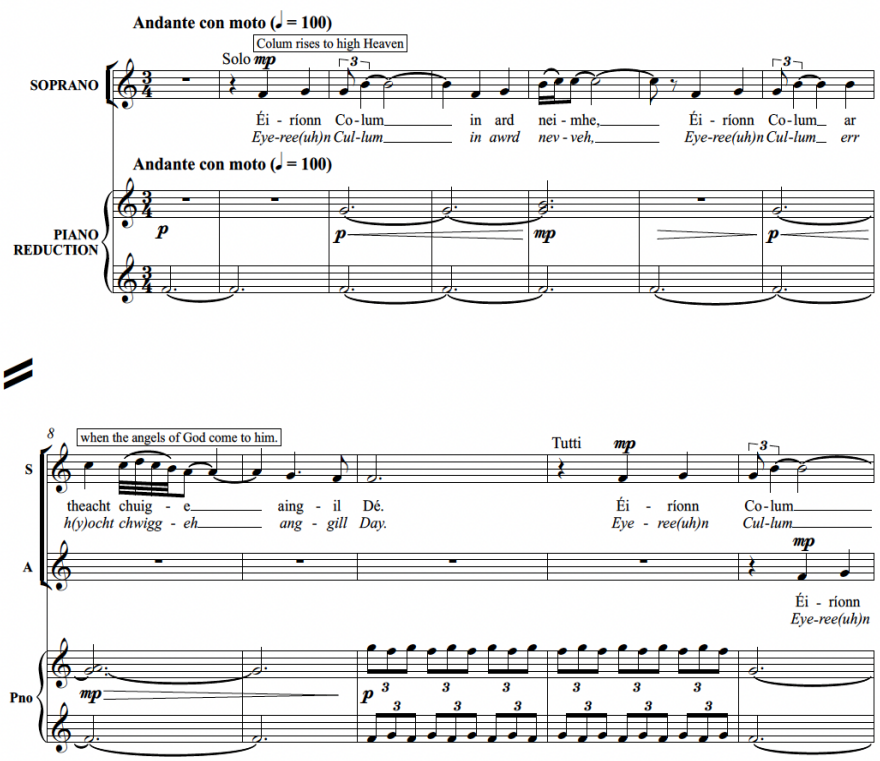


Figure 6.15. '*3. A Dheascabháil agus a Shaol*', bb. 1–12 (Choir and Piano Reduction).

The vocal ornamentation within the '*Éiríonn Colum*' motif is a definitive marker of the influence of traditional Irish music on the melodic framework of *Amra Choluim Chille*. The rising motif recurs throughout the movement, consolidating each distinct section and spotlighting the image of Columba's ascent to heaven.[48] The melody also returns in E♭ Lydian towards the end of the fifth movement in the solo soprano and alto's expression of '*ba mhaith é a bhás*' ('his death was indeed holy'; bb. 155–158), as well as briefly in the seventh movement in the alto-tenor polyphonic interplay ('*Éachtach ollchasadh mo dháin*' — 'Wondrous the great final turning of my poem'; bb. 88–89). The restatement of the motif across movements consistently illustrates Columba's heavenly ascent and connects the various events of the saint's life within a larger, cohesive musical framework.

The Mourning Motif

In addition to the *St Columba* motif conveying the overall subject of the cantata, Desmond also repeats musical structures associated with particular emotions within Dallán's poem. The

[48] The melody appears in bars 2–7, 11–17, 25–33, 34–43, 60–63, 87–92, 95–100.

'mourning motif' is first presented in the second movement by the solo alto, accompanied by the solo soprano's triadic motion, sustained *tremolo* strings and harp, and 'half-muffled' B♭ bell-tolls (bb. 8–16). The B♭ minor lament falls by step from D♭5 to C4, with two-beat rests disjointing the first five notes of the phrase, evoking a sobbing character that creates suspensions with the upper voice's descending G♭ broken triad — the T-voice in this tintinnabular section inspired by Estonian composer Arvo Pärt (Figure 6.16). In contrast to Pärt's tintinnabuli technique, which uses a single mode at one time, Desmond combines 'B♭ minor and G♭ major simultaneously in order to create a repeated pattern of dissonance and resolution', further emphasising the funereal character of the 'mourning motif'.[49] The melancholic tone of the descending melody is strengthened by the minor tonality, dissonance, and primarily *pianissimo* dynamics, communicating the O'Neill clan's mourning of Columba's death ('*Ní díscéal teach Néill; Ní mionosna aonmhá*' — 'Not without tidings is the House of Niall; Not the sighing of a single plain').
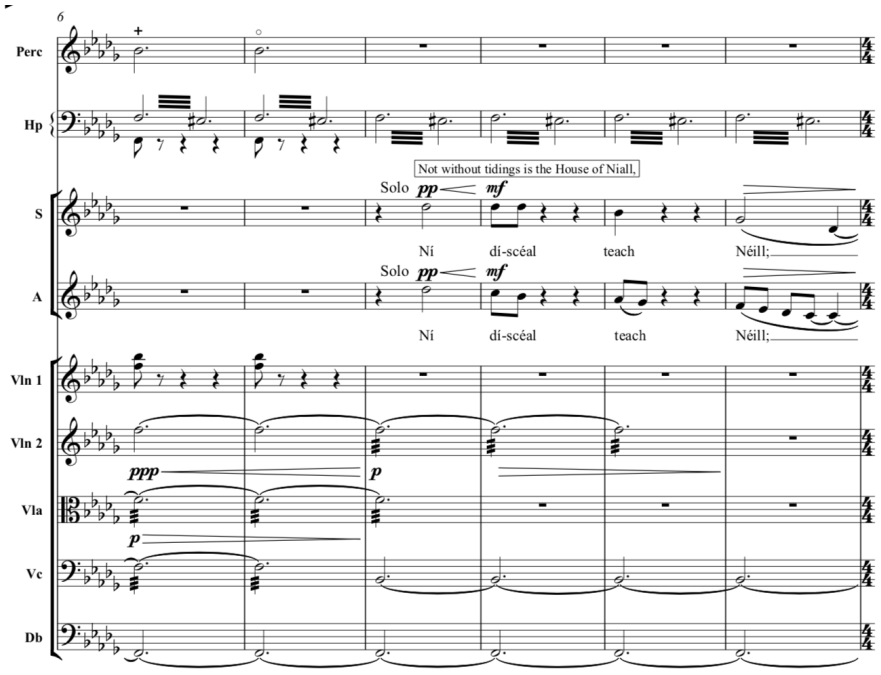


Figure 6.16. '*2. Colum: Scéala agus Méala a Bháis*', bb. 6–11.

According to Desmond, the lament is intended to represent the ancient Irish keening ritual, which traditionally involved the *bean chaointe* ('keening woman') singing or crying at a

[49] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 51.

wake.[50] Although the phrase is more melodic than that of a keening woman, which is believed to have been a form of cacophonous wailing, the sobbing descent in the upper voices has its origins in this mourning tradition.[51] This interpretation is supported by O'Beirne Crowe's translation and explanation of Dallán's verse, which notes how 'There is a woman in the land […] her ringing bursts out of her like a stone from a sling.'[52] In his blog, Desmond also refers to the women's role at mourning rituals in ancient Ireland, which informed his upper-voice setting of the penultimate movement, '*Bás Choluim*': 'traditionally in Ireland, only the women were involved in keening over the dead body – often in chorus, lead [*sic*] by a professional *bean chaointe*.'[53]

The 'mourning motif' occurs nineteen times throughout the second movement, predominantly sung by alto, with echoes in the strings at a one-beat distance. The presentation of the ancient keening ritual in a contemporary framework is effectively demonstrated with the soprano and alto's undulating '*is marbh*' ('is dead') aleatoric passage (bb. 105–110). The *pianississimo mormorando* (very soft murmuring) upper voices' semitone oscillation (G♭–F) in independent rhythms, accompanying the solo alto's repetition of the same phrase in strict rhythms, mimics 'the effect of a *bean chaointe* and a chorus of keening women' (Figure 6.17).[54] The violins' imitative B♭ minor broken triads, maintaining the tintinnabular sound of the previous sections, accompany the oscillating voices, underpinned by the double bass and cellos' open B♭ drone. The aleatoric counterpoint built on a minor second creates an unsettling atmosphere, which contributes to conveying the announcement of Columba's death. As well as emulating the murmurs of the keening women, the wavering upper voices could be interpreted more generally as manifesting a feeling of disorientation and devastation upon hearing of the saint's passing.

[50] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', pp. 51–52.
[51] Breandán Ó Madagáin, *Caointe agus Seancheolta Eile: Keening and Other Old Irish Musics* (Conamara: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2005).
[52] J. O'Beirne Crowe, *The Amra Choluim Chilli of Dallan Forgaill* (Dublin: McGlashan and Gill, 1871), p. 25.
[53] Desmond, '100 Days – Day 1' [accessed 11 April 2024].
[54] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 54.

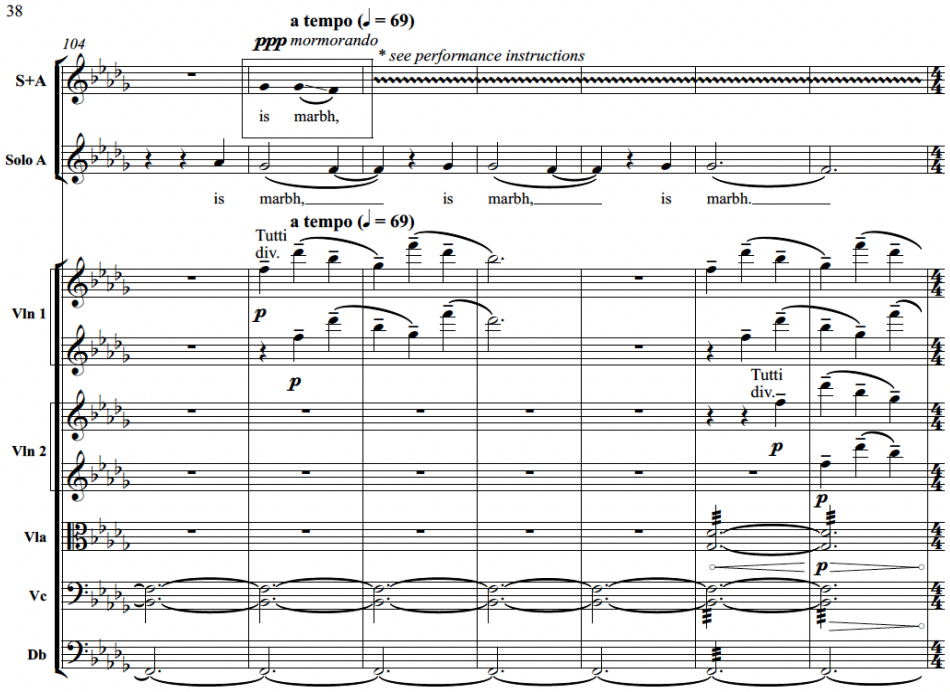


Figure 6.17. '*2. Colum: Scéala agus Méala a Bháis*', bb. 104–110.

Desmond underlines the 'mourning motif's' significance as a representation of death with its repetition in the sixth movement, '*Bás Choluim*'. The solo alto recapitulates the descending lament, accompanied by the cello and double bass's F# pedal point, and F# bell-tolls in three-bar patterns. The *lamentoso* section is introduced by the bells and *sforzando* strings (b. 84), further highlighting the bells' role in announcing significant moments and new sections in the cantata. The alto descends from D5 to F#4 by step in an *appassionata* tone, the G♮ suggesting an F# Phrygian modality (bb. 85–95; Figure 6.18). The phrase '*Is deimhin ní och aontí, ní och aontéite!*' ('Truly: not the grieving of one household, nor the sighing of one harp string!') is repeated twice, with quaver rests disjointing the first half of the phrase, as was evident in the second movement. The reference to grieving and sighing in both the second and sixth movements' texts further illustrates their connection, with Desmond aptly using the same melodic material to indicate the keening ritual and the community's grief.[55]

[55] A shortened version of the 'mourning' motif also occurs in the conclusion of '*Críoch*' (bb. 125–170).
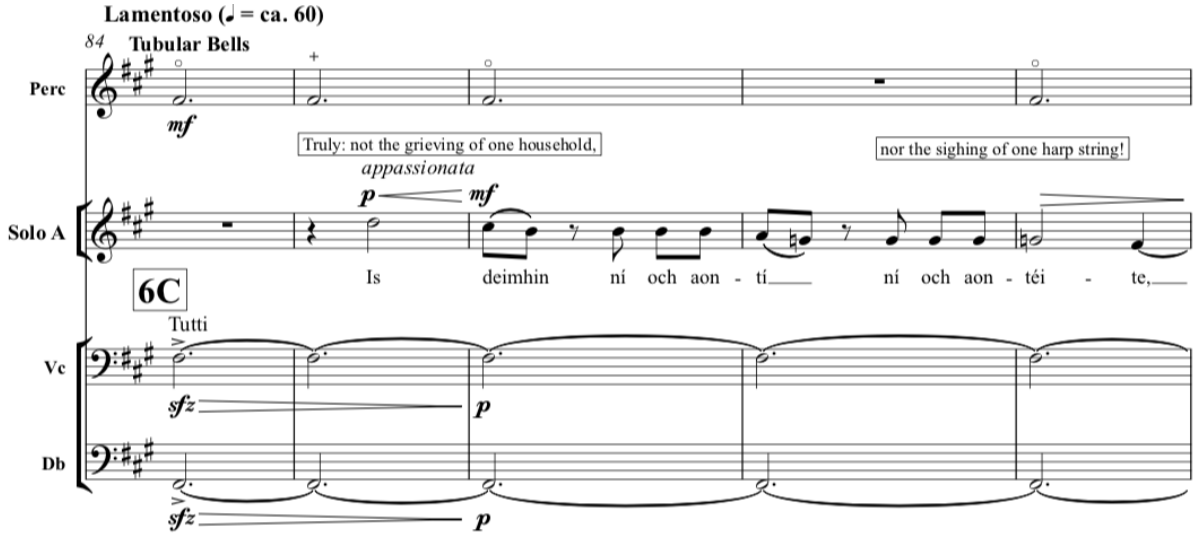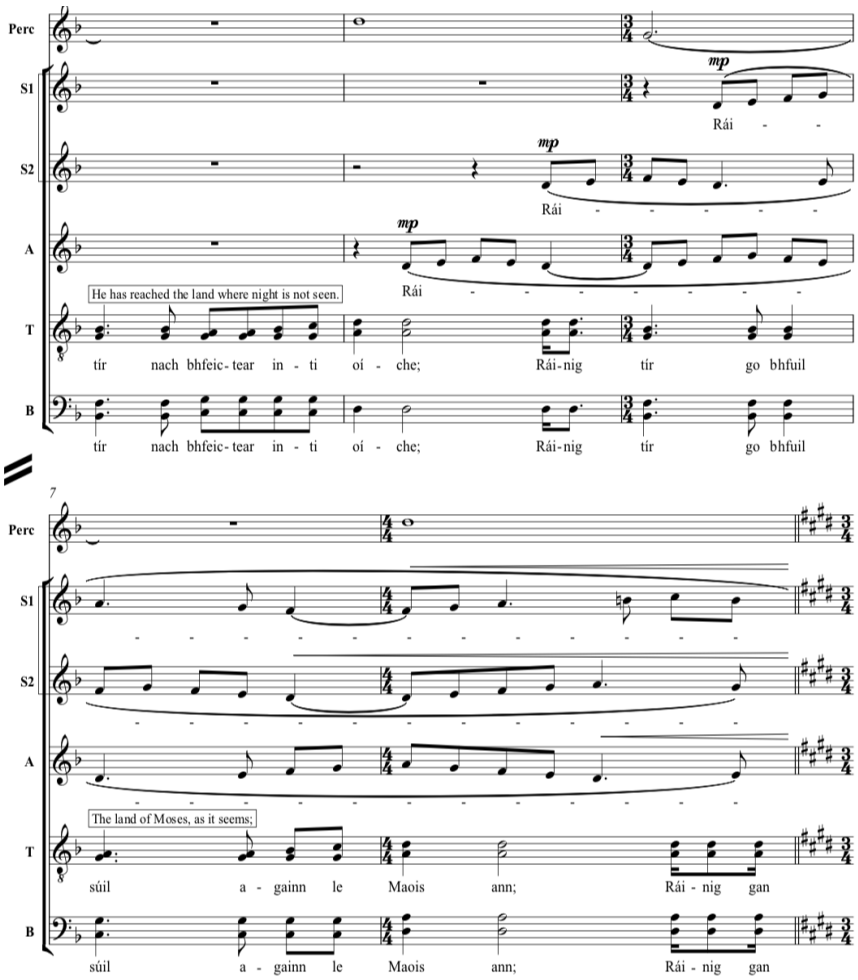


Figure 6.18. '*6. Bás Choluim*', bb. 84–88.

The Misterioso Motif

Desmond connects the fourth and fifth movements of *Amra Choluim Chille* through the *Misterioso* motif, a rising-falling stepwise minor melismatic phrase, predominantly in the upper voices. The motif is first presented by the sopranos and alto in the introduction of '*4. Na Flaithis agus a Muintir*' ('Of the region to which Columba came'). Desmond notes how the six lines of text 'are quite similar', which led him to set each phrase to the same melodic theme.[56] The alto introduces the D Dorian phrase on the text '*Ráinig*' ('reached'), echoed by soprano 2 at a two-beat distance, followed by soprano 1 (bb. 5–6). The alto rises and falls by step from D4 to F4, adding the next note on the subsequent repetitions, ascending to G and A, respectively, before returning to D (b. 8) and resolving to F# by step on the second syllable of the word (Figure 6.19). Soprano 2 follows an identical pattern but descends to F# by step after reaching A (bb. 8–9). Soprano 1 immediately ascends by step from D to A, returning to F before continuing the Dorian ascent to C (b. 8) and proceeding through the modulation to F# Dorian in bar 9. The gentle, overlapping polyphony of the upper voices' ascending phrases suggests Columba's destination in heaven, while contrasting with the lower voices' stoic homophonic announcement of the saint reaching 'the land of Moses' ('*Ráinig tír go bhfuil súil againn le Maois ann*').

[56] Desmond, '100 Days – Day 9' [accessed 8 April 2024].


Perc
S1
S2
A
T
B
mp
Rái - - -

mhainistir agus ar a Chathaoir'; Figure 6.20). The range of the melody is reduced to four notes, the sopranos and alto each rising from D to F, and repeating the stepwise ascent to G, before resolving to D (b. 153). Violins 1 and 2 echo the motif in D Phrygian in canon (bb. 155–58), as the soprano and alto soloists reintroduce the '*Éiríonn Colum*' motif in E♭ Lydian, imitating each other at a three-beat distance ('*ba mhaith é a bhás*' — 'Holy indeed was his death'). The simultaneous combination of musical ideas from different movements creates a sense of continuity through the cantata and reinforces the image of Columba's journey to heaven.
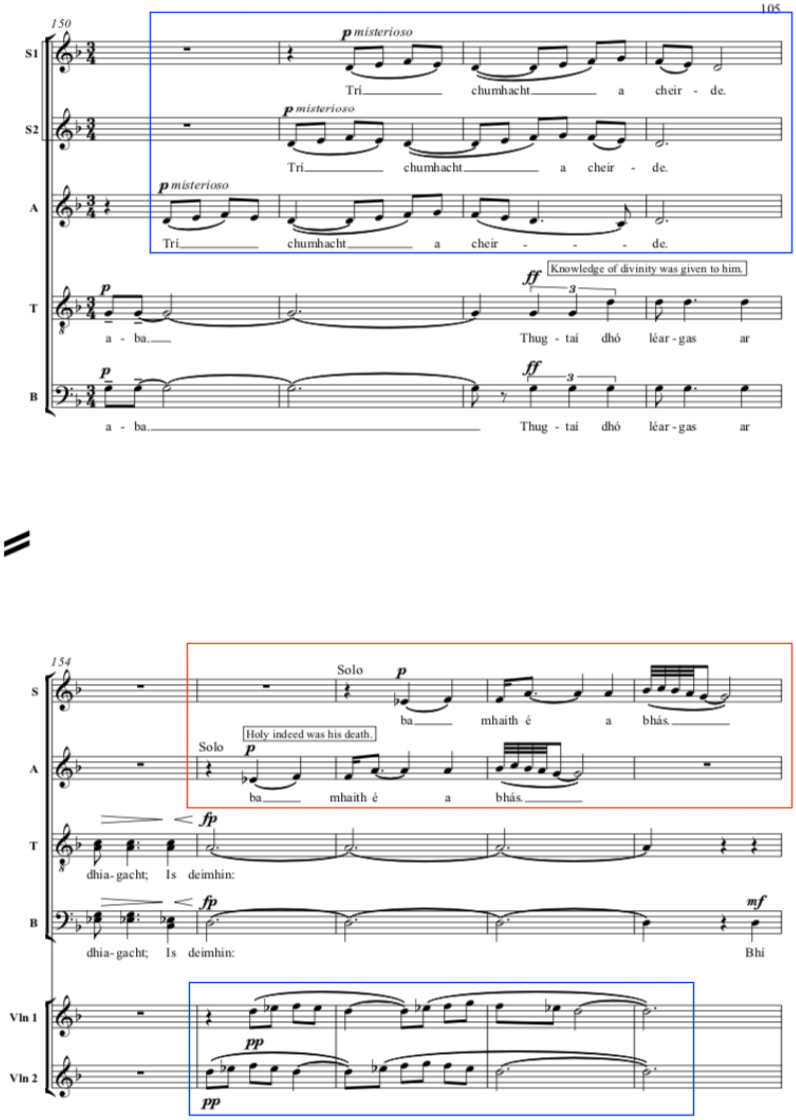


Figure 6.20. '*5. Anró agus Suáilcí Choluim*', bb. 150–158 ('*Éiríonn Colum*' motif in red; *Misterioso* motif in blue).

Symbolism: The 'Cross Motif'

Beyond the restatement of the aforementioned melodic motifs, Desmond provides an additional layer of meaning in *Amra Choluim Chille* through the 'cross motif', the most significant example of the composer's cryptic use of texture in this work.[57] This structure is first observed in the introduction of the cantata in the strings' shimmering texture. The violins begin on a sustained *tremolo* D minor seventh in second inversion, joined in bar 4 by the remaining strings (upper violin 1s, lower violin 2s, violas, and a *pizzicato* quaver in the cello and double bass), before returning to the original forces in bar 7. The tentative introduction arose from Desmond's interpretation of the poem's opening line, representing Dallán invoking God and 'trembling at the thought of disturbing' Colm Cille in his prayerful seclusion.[58] The score's opening bars exhibit the shape of the cross, immediately establishing the Christian context of the work and evoking 'the splendour of Colm Cille's death' (Figure 6.21).[59]

[57] The 'cross motif' is also apparent in *Nothing in Vain* (2021). See Chapter Four.
[58] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 45.
[59] Ibid., p. 45.

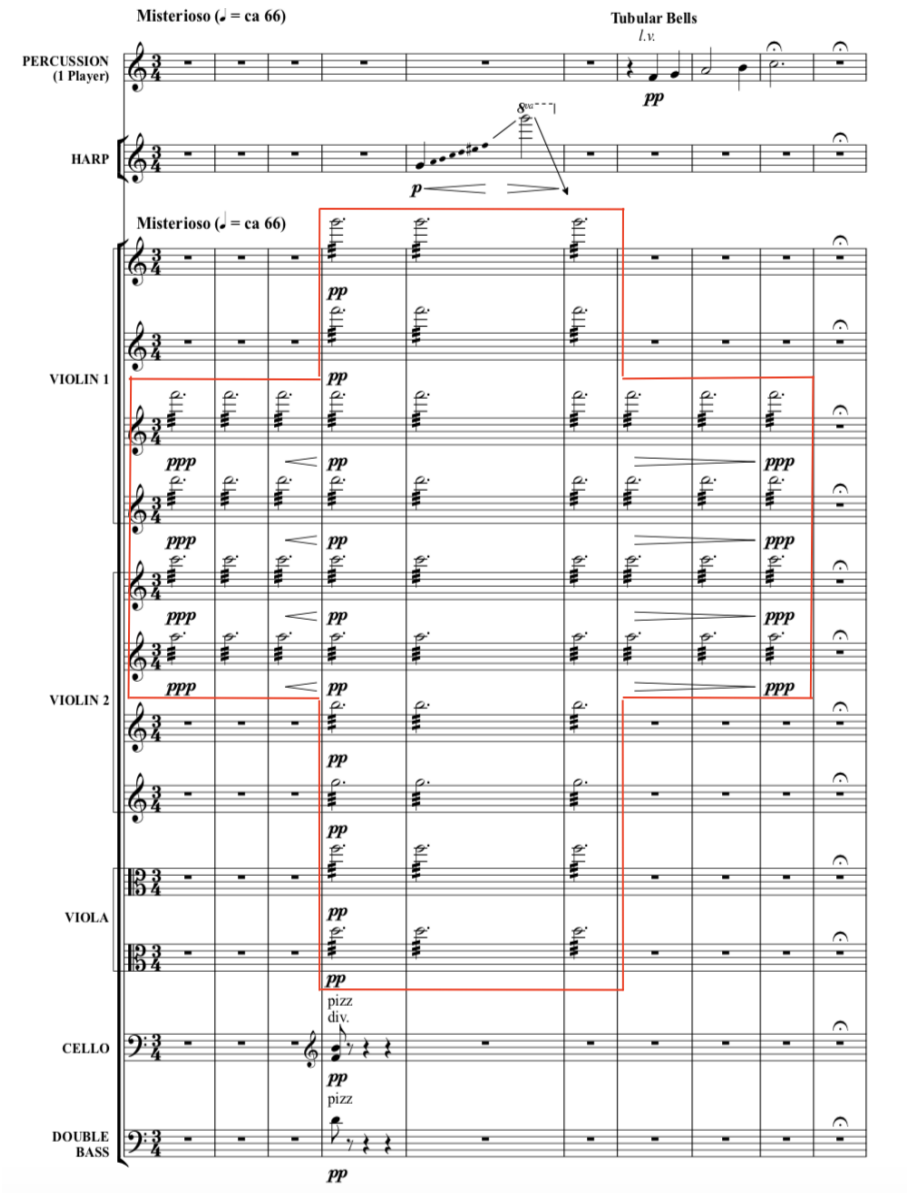


Figure 6.21. '*1. Remfocul*', bb. 1–10.

The 'cross motif' is repeated twice more in the first thirty bars of '*Remfocul*', each repetition separated by a bar of rest, enhancing the *Misterioso* ambience of the music (bb. 11–19; 21–29). Desmond's decision to repeat the cross texture three consecutive times could have been informed by a prayer ritual or Christian symbolism and the association of the number three with the Holy Trinity. Equally, its presence suggests the influence of Renaissance music, as the cross was a popular form of *Augenmusik* to communicate Christian concepts in this period.[60]

[60] Fabrice Fitch, *Renaissance Polyphony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 216.

The ‘cross motif’ is also central to the SSAA texture of the sixth movement, ‘*Bás Choluim*’. Soprano 2s and alto 1s begin the phrase ‘*Mac na Croiche a ainm*’ (‘Son of the Cross’) in bar 21 with a B minor seventh chord in second inversion. They are joined in the subsequent bar by upper sopranos and lower altos’ fourths on a semibreve ‘*Ah*’ phoneme, accompanied by the harp’s rising-falling *glissandi*, before the texture recedes to the initial voicing, creating the cross shape (Figure 6.22). According to Desmond, he used this motif at this point due to visualising ‘the dying St Columba looking at the sky and seeing a shining cross formed out of light and clouds and rain’.[61] In the same manner as the first movement, the motif is repeated after brief silence and concludes with two further beats of rest (bb. 25–28). The recurrence of this motif throughout the movement creates a coherent structure, serving as a reminder of Columba’s vision of the cross at his death, while underlining the cantata’s religious theme.

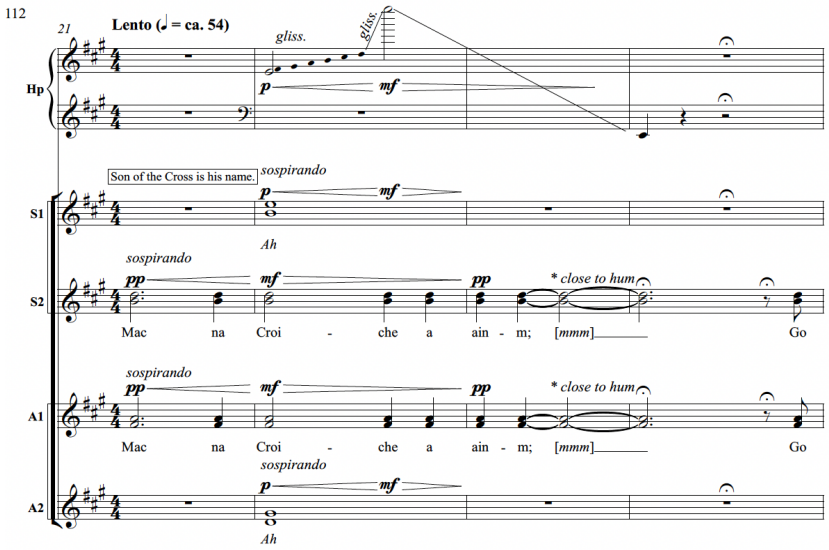


Figure 6.22. ‘*6. Bás Choluim*’, bb. 21–24.

Although less visible in the score, it could be argued that the ‘cross’ motif has its final appearance in the conclusion of the seventh movement, which would support the symmetrical structure of the work, given the symbol’s first appearance in the opening of *Amra Choluim Chille*. From bar 158, the violins and viola intone a *tremolo* second inversion F# minor seventh chord for two bars, broadening to a cluster chord (A–C#–D#–E–F#–B) with divisions in the four violins for a further two bars, before returning to the original F# minor seventh (Figure

[61] Desmond, ‘100 Days – Day 1’ [accessed 11 April 2024].

6.23). This harmonic pattern continues until the penultimate bar of the work (b. 179), the strings concluding on F# minor seventh in second inversion, with a *decrescendo al niente*. The expansion and contraction of the strings' texture beneath the fragmented *St Columba* quotation on the bells and harp and the 'mourning motif' of the sopranos reflects the image of the cross, recalling the first movement's framework. It is likely that the *Augenmusik* technique is deliberate here, the composer intending to close the work as it started, binding together the entire cantata, thematically and structurally.

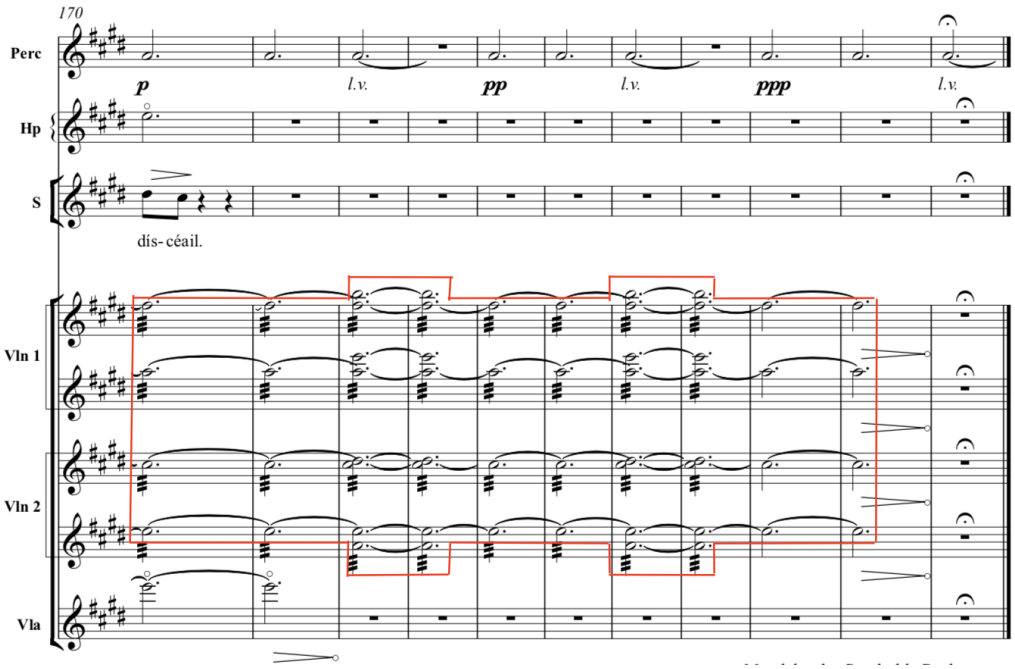


Figure 6.23. '*7. Críoch*', bb. 170–180.

In total, there are eighteen appearances of the cross-shaped texture throughout the seven movements (Table 6.1), each one an integral part of the overall composition. Desmond has clearly been influenced by *Augenmusik*, the visual representation of text in the Renaissance era. As Katelijne Schiltz notes in her analysis of musical images in this historical era, '[T]he addition of iconographic material and the intimate linking of music, text, and image certainly heighten the symbolic potential of the work as a whole and draw us into the composer's mindscape.'[62] *Amra Choluim Chille*, as well as Desmond's previously analysed choral works, highlights the composer's interest in past musical techniques and his innovative approach to moving beyond sound, embedding the essence of the text in the score's visual structure.

[62] Katelijne Schiltz, 'Visual Pictorialism in Renaissance Musical Riddles', *Journal of the Alamire Foundation*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2012), 204–221 (p. 221) <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.JAF.1.102970> [accessed 31 May 2024].

Movement	Bars	Instrumentation
1	1–9; 11–19; 21–30	Strings
3	20–24; 43–46	TTBB
4	15–17; 28–30	TTBB
6	21–24; 25–28; 69–73; 76–81; 114–117; 119–121	SSAA
7	159–162; 163–166; 167–170; 171–174; 175–179	Violins, viola

Table 6.1. 'Cross motif' appearances in *Amra Choluim Chille*.

These musical examples demonstrate the structural and narrative purpose of the cantata's motifs, indicating thematic connections between movements and threading the overall elegy into a cohesive musical account. Whilst the *St Columba* motif serves as a constant reminder of the cantata's protagonist, Desmond ensures it returns in varied guises, altering the modality, instrumentation, rhythm, and structure of the motif's phrases throughout each movement. The fragmented character of the 'mourning motif' in a minor tonal framework evokes a lamenting tone, underlining its association with sadness and grief, while the Lydian ascent of '*Éiríonn Colum*' conjures a majestic, uplifting character associated with Columba's ascent to heaven. The *Misterioso* motif also elicits a specific atmosphere, the polyphonic upper voices' minor melody conveying a sense of mystery and transcendence as Columba reaches his celestial destination. Beyond the melodic structure and sound, the 'cross motif' represents Desmond's subtle communication of the Christian context of the poem through textural organisation. The recurrences of the diverse motifs contribute to forming a comprehensive musical narrative that communicates the sacred nature of Columba's life, the emotions arising from his death, and the medieval Irish context of the poem.

A Palindromic Structure

An analysis of the principal motifs across the cantata reveals a symmetrical structure, knitting the overall work into a unified musical account. Although certain themes return in varied guises, their restatement creates a mirror effect in the music's structure and enhances the narrative progress of Dallán's elegy (Figure 6.24). Taking the fourth movement as the axis of the work, the three movements on either side feature key motifs in mirror form. Desmond's

decision to structure *Amra Choluim Chille* as a thematic/motivic palindrome reflects the symmetrical structure of Dallán's elegy (Figure 6.25). Beginning with the prelude in Dallán's voice (movement 1), the poem and music progress through the mourning of Columba's death (movement 2), his ascent with the angels following his missionary work (movement 3), to his arrival in heaven (movement 4), which constitutes the central movement of the cantata. Dallán then reverts to earth in his writing, relaying Columba's battle with Satan, and his preservation of religious laws (movement 5). Grief is reinstated as the community mourns its abbot's death but anticipates his arrival in heaven with a tone of optimism (movement 6). Dallán concludes the elegy with a return to his own perspective, reassured that Columba will protect him from torment as he approaches his own death (movement 7).

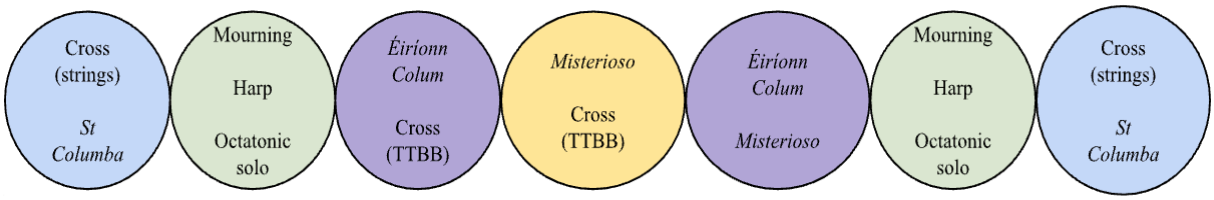


Figure 6.24. Palindromic structure of Desmond's *Amra Choluim Chille*.

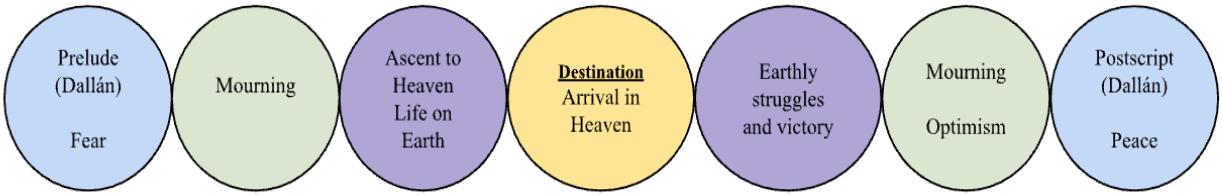


Figure 6.25. Palindromic structure of Dallán's elegy.

Examining the music that borders the fourth movement, the '*Éiríonn Colum*' motif permeates '*3. A Dheascabháil agus a Shaol*', particularly in the soprano and alto. The theme reappears briefly in the fifth movement in the same canonic voices in E♭ Lydian (bb. 155–158), a tone lower than the original statement. Imitative violins accompany the voices' rising melody with the *Misterioso* motif, highlighting Desmond's juxtaposition of two themes associated with Columba's ascent to heaven, a principal image in Dallán's elegy. As well as sharing the '*Eiríonn Colum*' motif, the third and fifth movements exhibit similar lively tempi, polyrhythmic movement, and traditional elements, such as the 9/8 metre. The energetic momentum of both movements provides a stark contrast to the stoic and mourning atmosphere of their flanking movements.

Continuing in a symmetrical manner, the second and sixth movements share similar musical material, particularly the 'mourning motif', octatonic solo passages, aleatoric upper voices, and harp accompaniment. The shared motifs are clearly determined by the poetic verses' lamenting characters and their focus on the community's grief. The solo alto's lilting passages in both movements emulate the *bean chaointe* leading the ancient Irish keening ritual, yet the sixth's rising contour, accompanied by the aleatoric voices and nebulous *glissandi* strings, engenders a more uplifting tone, suggesting an acceptance of Columba's death. Where octatonicism is applied in the solo tenor and cello in the second movement (bb. 47–63; 166–182), this contemporary scale is used in the solo alto and accompanying voices in the sixth, communicating the saint's journey to heaven (bb. 36–64). Similar minimalist approaches to texture and harmony, use of sustained *tremolo* strings, and broken triads on the harp further connect the movements, conveying the ethereal nature of Columba's destination. Furthermore, the ascending trajectory and lighter texture of '*Bás Choluim*' indicate the Christian community coming to terms with their grief and focusing on the saint residing in heaven.

As previously noted, *Amra Choluim Chille* begins and ends in a similar manner, with the return of the *tremolo* strings' sustained minor seventh harmony above tolling bells and fragments of *St Columba* (A Lydian). It is also interesting, although possibly unintentional, that the opening and closing movements both have 180 bars of music and four distinct sections. In the poem, Dallán conveys a symmetrical structure by returning in the closing verse to the first person's perspective and underlining his faith in Columba, and by extension, God, to guide him to salvation ('*Tiocfaidh Colum ua Choirb uí Chathaír uasail*'). Where the cantata's first movement sets the prelude, in which Dallán seeks God's strength, the seventh movement is 'a post-script, a thanksgiving to Colm Cille for affording the poet the opportunity to write his elegy.'[63] Although the closing section is not a verbatim recollection of the introduction, Desmond conveys his recognition of the poem's symmetrical structure through reintroducing similar sustained harmonies on the strings, the 'cross motif', and the bells and harp's modified *St Columba* melody. The palindromic structure of the cantata denotes the composer's consideration of the overall subject and structure in his text setting, ensuring that all aspects of the music communicate the narrative, from the level of individual phrases and sections to the overall form.

[63] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 75.

Texture as a Formal and Narrative Technique

Desmond's organisation and development of texture is a significant structural and narrative factor in his overall output, serving to distinguish between contrasting sections of his works and contributing to the portrayal of images and emotions within the texts he sets. As outlined in Chapter Four, a notable feature of his music is his gradual expansion from homophonic to contrapuntal interplay at moments of emotional escalation and spiritual significance, a technique that is also apparent in *Amra Choluim Chille*. The composer's juxtaposition of contrasting textures in the vocal and instrumental ensembles not only creates a complex sound world, but often carries a narrative function, demonstrating conflicting ideas, emotions, or figures within Dallán's elegy.

As was mentioned in the analysis of the *St Columba* motif, Desmond's innovative synthesis of contrasting textures is evident in the polymodal section of '*Remfocul*' (bb. 113–146). The dissonant homorhythmic choral declamations of '*Go saoraidh Dia ar an múr tine mé*' ('That great God is my protection from the fiery wall') are juxtaposed with the strings' expanding canon based on the opening notes of *St Columba*. Desmond has stated that the texture of this section was influenced by the third movement of James MacMillan's *Stabat Mater* (2015), in which the choir's homophonic fanfare is accompanied by a polyphonic mass of strings that begins canonically.[64] Beneath the conflicting textures representing God's protection of Dallán from the flames, the double bass repeats an accented five-note melodic idiom: G♭–A♮–E♮–E♭–B♭. The pitches remain unchanged throughout the seven complete statements of the pattern; however, Desmond manipulates each repetition through rhythmic diminution (Figure 6.26). Beginning with sustained rhythms encompassing almost twenty-three bars, including a G♭ pedal, the rhythmic structure gradually diminishes in duration, resulting in the final statement comprising a quaver triplet and a partial semiquaver sextuplet (b. 146).

[64] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 50.
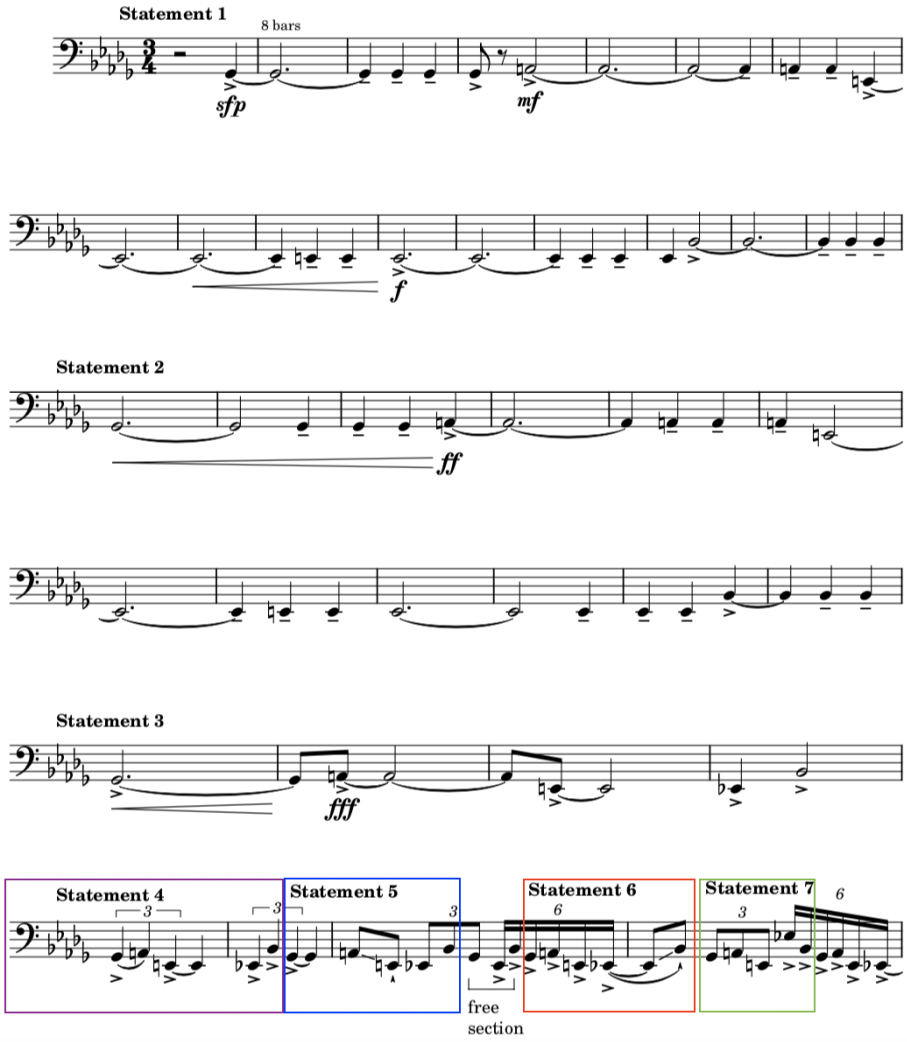


Figure 6.26. Double bass rhythmic diminution, '*1. Remfocul*', bb. 113–146.

The increasingly unsettled rhythm of the double bass's dissonant pattern aligns with the upper strings' rapid transition to semiquavers and quavers as the pitch begins to rise. According to the composer, the rhythmic diminution of this sequence of notes is for expressive purposes, changing the motif's character 'from that of a menacing drone to something of a psychopathic basso continuo.'[65] As the polyphonic texture is depicting 'the long-lasting pit of tears' and 'fiery wall', it is likely that Desmond chose to gradually destabilise the initial steady rhythms of the substructure in order to contribute to the intense atmosphere of this section and to convey Dallán's anxiety about hell.

The fifth movement represents the most conspicuous example of Desmond's organisation of texture to convey the narrative and character of the text, with the frantic fugue

[65] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 49.

depicting Columba's battle with the Devil. The composer applies a 'sound collage' technique,[66] superimposing three distinct musical ideas — a slip jig, fugue, and shifting five-chord pattern — in differing combinations 'in order to create and represent conflict itself.'[67] The dissonant polymodality and syncopation in a tireless polyphonic texture manifests the antagonism between heaven and hell in the poem. The first element to be introduced is the D Dorian slip jig on the violin, a melody Desmond composed as a second-level student at Coláiste Choilm in Cork. According to the composer, it was 'too much of a coincidence not to use the slip-jig I composed while at a school named for Columba in an elegy for Columba.'[68] The string accompaniment, with harp *glissandi* and tom-tom rhythmic interjections, develops in dissonance, creating false relations with the melody. A notable feature of the accompaniment is the return of the double bass's five-note motif from the first movement's nine-part string polyphony (G♭–A–E–E♭–B♭; bb. 114–146), serving as a further example of cross-movement connections. Within the fifth movement, the pattern initially appears as *pizzicato* chords, with a slight change in its permutation, beginning on B♭ and concluding on E♭ (bb. 8–19; 74–107). Three consecutive statements of the motif accompany the slip jig, following the solo violin's first phrase.

The strings' chord progression does not abide by functional harmony, nor does it accord with the slip jig's Dorian mode. The pattern progresses through G♭ major ninth in first inversion, G♭ eleventh with no third, F major ninth in first inversion (no seventh), E minor eleventh, and E♭ minor eleventh, with the violins' A conflicting with the simultaneous A♭ in the chords (Figure 6.27). Desmond manipulates the accompaniment through shifting the pattern by a particular number of quaver beats on each repetition, creating an increasing sense of friction and asymmetry within the 9/8 tapestry (Table 6.2). It is unclear why he chose to use a similar note-pattern and technique of rhythmic manipulation to that of the first movement; however, considering the narrative of both verses, Desmond may have intended to form a thematic thread. The first occurrence of the double bass's motif accompanies the homophonic declamation of God's 'protection from the fiery wall' (movement 1, bb. 114–146), a common

[66] 'Musical collage is the juxtaposition of multiple quotations, styles or textures so that each element maintains its individuality and the elements are perceived as excerpted from many sources and arranged together, rather than sharing common origins' (J. Peter Burkholder, 'Collage', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.53083> [accessed 3 July 2024]).
[67] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 64. Well-known examples of the 'sound collage' technique appear in Baroque composer Biber's *Battalia* (1673), Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1789), and Charles Ives's works, including *Central Park in the Dark* (1906) and *Putnam's Camp* (1931).
[68] Desmond, '100 Days – Day 43' [accessed 8 April 2024].

representation of hell in Christianity. Similarly, the strings' ostinato in the fifth movement introduces Columba's battle with the Devil, a further tribulation within Dallán's poem. The polymodality and rhythmic displacement of the chords causes the melody and accompaniment to dislocate, which appears to evoke the saint's struggle with Satan.
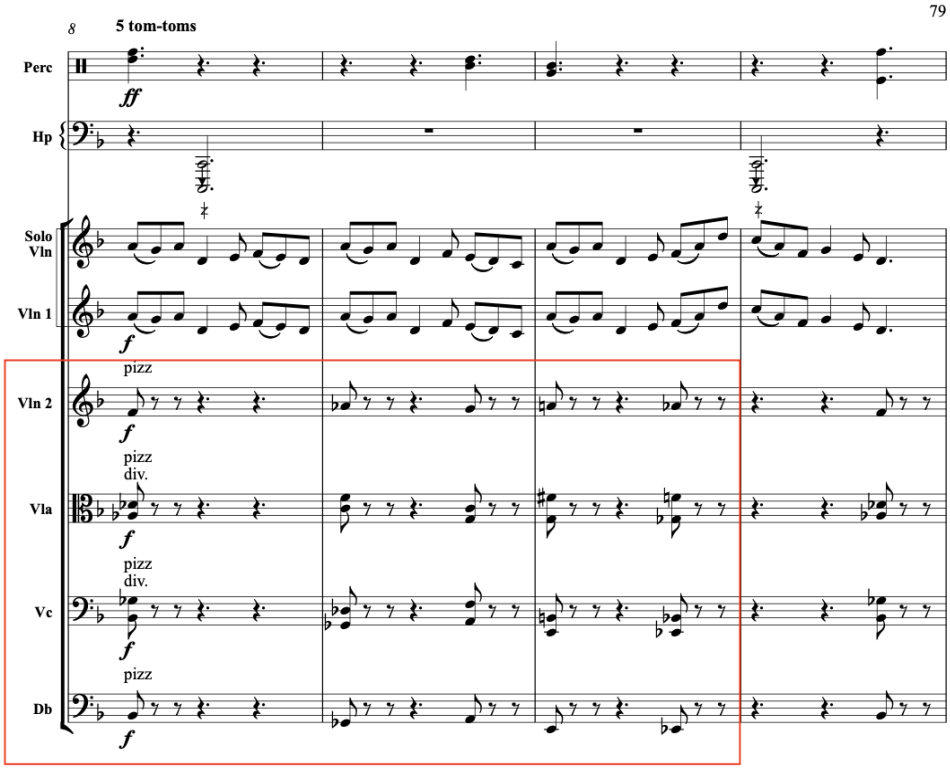


Figure 6.27. '*5. Anró agus Suáilcí Choluim*', bb. 8–11 (harmonic pattern in red).

Occurrence	**No. of quaver beats between each chord**				
1	8	5	2	5	8
2	11	8	5	2	5
3	8	11	8	5	2

Table 6.2. Phasing of strings' rhythmic pattern in '*5. Anró agus Suáilcí Choluim*', bb. 8–19.

Following the complete sixteen-bar statement of the dance (AABB form), the voices begin a four-part fugue, with the soprano introducing the subject based on the *St Columba* tune in F Lydian, doubled by violin 1 (bb. 20–25; Figure 6.28). The viola continues to play the slip jig in D Dorian, but gradually grows out of sync with the fugue's shifting time signature pattern (9/8; 9/8; 6/8; 9/8; 6/8), eventually concluding in bar 29. The alto answers the subject in the dominant (C Lydian), doubled by violin 2, as the soprano progresses with the countersubject

(b. 25). Strings double the vocal parts in an increasingly complex texture of cross-rhythms, false relations, and accents, reflecting Columba's struggle with the Devil. The countersubject occurs on the text '*is é i sáinn ag an Aifreann*' ('was fettered by the Mass'), based around F# minor (bb. 27–30). The duple dotted quaver rhythm on '*Aifreann*' conflicts with the alto's compound rhythm of a dotted crotchet and three quavers (2:3, b. 29), increasing the fugue's tension and highlighting Desmond's tendency to create polyrhythms at moments of intense emotion.[69]
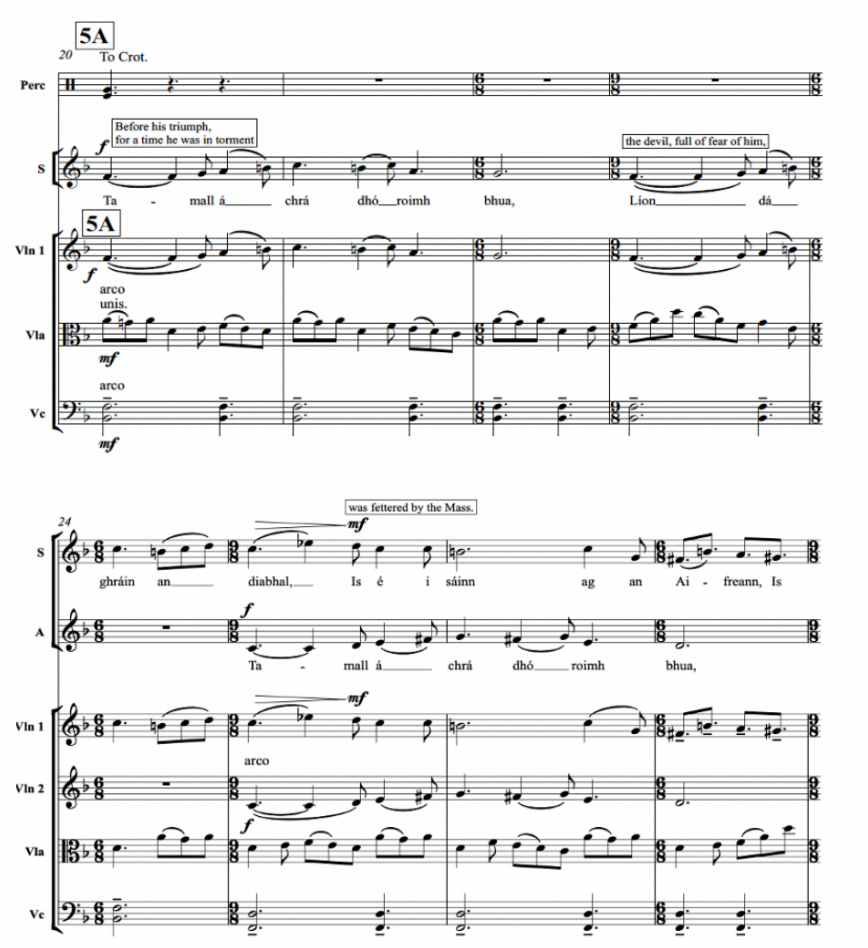


Figure 6.28. '*5. Anró agus Suáilcí Choluim*', bb. 20–27.

The '*Aifreann*' motif, first presented in bar 27, consists of a rising fourth, descending tone, and descending semitone (F#–B♮–A–G#), and is repeated a fourth higher against the alto's regular rhythm later in the phrase (b. 29; Figure 6.29). The contour is a quotation of the first four notes of the twelfth-century '*Gloria*' chant from the *Missa Orbis Factor*, which possibly seeks to

[69] See Chapter Four for further analysis of this technique in *Nothing in Vain* (2021), *Comrades* (2019), and 'Ladybird, Ladybird' (2016).

celebrate Satan being hindered by the celebration of the Mass, and Columba eventually triumphing (Figure 6.30).[70] The polyrhythmic ideas are repeated across the expanding texture, consistently growing in vigour and reflecting the ongoing conflict. The four-note idiom reaches a climax with a rising *crescendo* tonal sequence, repeated four consecutive times, with slight variations in the descending intervals, in the soprano, alto, and violins' imitative counterpoint (bb. 42–45, Figure 6.31). The cross-rhythmic polyphony effectively communicates the impassioned text, while increasing the complexity of the overall movement.



Figure 6.29. '*5. Anró agus Suáilcí Choluim*', bb. 28–30 (rhythmic conflict in blue).

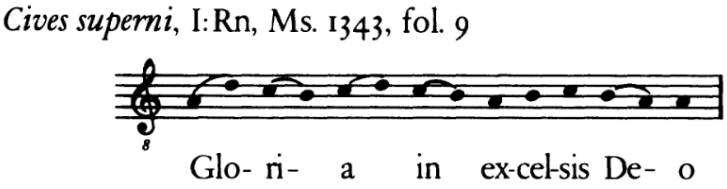


Figure 6.30. 12-century '*Gloria*' chant, *Missa Orbis Factor*.[71]

[70] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 65.
[71] Thomas Forest Kelly, 'Introducing the "Gloria in Excelsis"', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 479–506 (p. 492) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/831336> [accessed 30 April 2024].
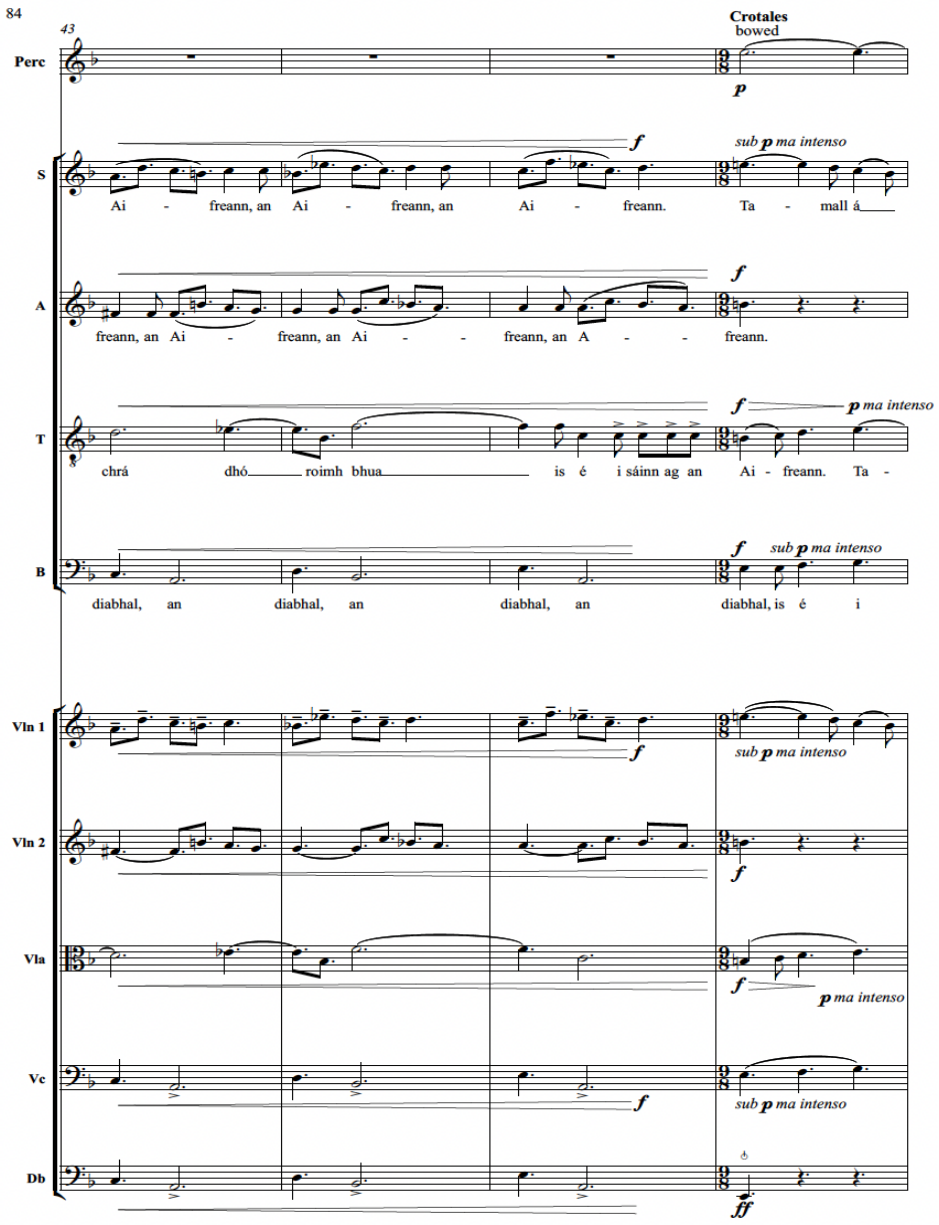


Figure 6.31. '*5. Anró agus Suáilcí Choluim*', bb. 43–46.

The fifth movement's most intense section exhibits Desmond's maximalist approach to illustrating Columba grappling with Satan, the juxtaposition of independent musical ideas creating complex harmonic and rhythmic effects. The entry of the snare drum's vigorous rhythm in bar 73 reintroduces the slip jig and signals the fugue's conclusion. Contrasting with the choir's chant-like expression, the strings' slip jig attempts to reassert its presence in the texture, detaching from the accented harmonic underlay through rhythmic displacement. The returning five-chord motif from the opening section repeats eight times beneath two statements of the slip jig, the viola joining the cello and double bass's chords following the dance's first two phrases (b. 82), and violin 2 also adopting a harmonic role at the beginning of the melody's

repetition (b. 90). The chordal ostinato is displaced by one dotted crotchet with each repetition, while the accents on the weaker beats of each bar result in syncopation. The cycle returns to the original pattern on the seventh statement, following the conclusion of the choral homophony and snare drum ostinato (b. 99). The composer's penchant for symmetry is displayed in the rhythmic configuration of the five-chord pattern, diminishing incrementally from four dotted crotchet beats to one, before returning to the initial note-value in the opposite manner (Figure 6.32; Table 6.3). The palindromic pattern (4–3–2–1–2–3–4) conveys order amidst the textural and harmonic chaos and could be perceived as a subtle communication of the text, which expresses Columba's strength in preserving the law 'through the power of priesthood'.

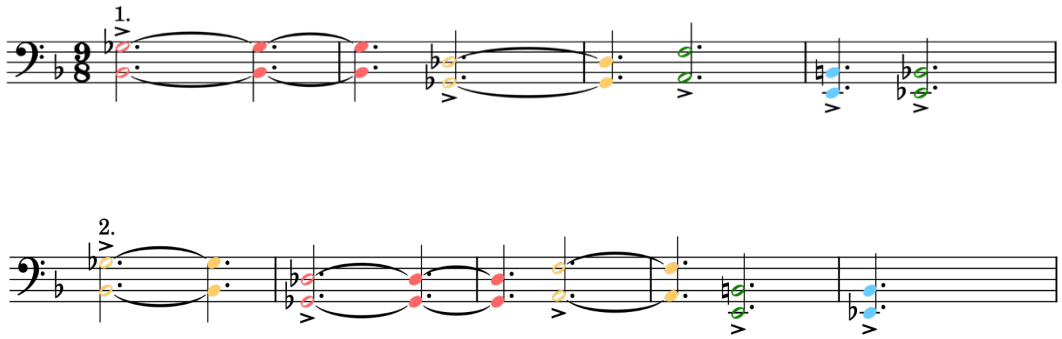


Figure 6.32. First two statements of the harmonic pattern, bb. 74–82 (cello and double bass only; colours assigned to rhythmic value).

Occurrence	**No. of dotted crotchet beats between each chord**				
1	4	3	2	1	2
2	3	4	3	2	1
3	2	3	4	3	2
4	1	2	3	4	3
5	2	1	2	3	4
6	3	2	1	2	3
7	4	3	2	1	2
8	3	4	3	2	1

Table 6.3. Palindromic and phasing structure of the rhythmic pattern, '*5. Anró agus Suáilcí Choluim*', bb. 74–107.

Desmond's synthesis of contrasting themes (slip jig and *St Columba*), dissonant harmonies, and rhythmic displacement within the polymodal texture of the fifth movement demonstrates his desire to evoke the chaos of the text's events, with each new melodic or rhythmic layer adding to the musical narrative. The multiple musical ideas, superimposed over the carefully displaced rhythms of the accompaniment, are subversive in nature, vying for a central role within the frenetic texture, reflecting Columba's conflict with the Devil. Yet, beneath the surface, there is a systematically organised structure, with the harmonic ostinato's shifting rhythmic position conveying Desmond's controlled creation of urgency and conflict. Within the climactic section, in which the slip jig returns in the upper strings, the phased chord pattern causes a gradual separation of the melody and accompaniment. Despite this disconnect, the palindromic rhythmic structure of the chords retains a sense of symmetry, illustrating the composer's attention to order and his technical innovation. Furthermore, the chord pattern could have a narrative purpose, possibly indicating Columba's adherence to religious laws amidst his torment. Desmond's development of a frenzied polyphonic texture using ancient and traditional sources (Columba's hymn, the '*Gloria*' chant, and the slip jig) within a contemporary harmonic and rhythmic framework highlights his imaginative compositional language and ability to merge the past and present in a compelling manner. As he states, sacred music can be 'contemporary in its expression, while also maintaining its connection to the choral music of the past.'[72]

Conclusion

Desmond's *Amra Choluim Chille* makes a significant contribution to contemporary Irish choral repertoire, serving as one of the few large-scale compositions in the Irish language not 'wholly dependent on Irish traditional music material for their main focus.'[73] The work demonstrates the influence of traditional music with the inclusion of scotch snap and slip jig rhythms, vocal ornamentation, and modal writing, yet it does not sound overtly traditional. Desmond embeds these features into a more classically influenced musical framework with contemporary harmonies, Renaissance-style polyphony and symbolism, extended techniques, rhythmic displacement, and instrumental features such as *tremolo* and *glissando*. The composer has stated that he hopes *Amra Choluim Chille*

[72] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 6.
[73] Desmond, '100 Days – Day 57' [accessed 16 May 2024].

> will set a precedent for a new style of contemporary choral music in Irish, that can pay homage to the rich language of traditional Irish music, while not being bound by it, and also draw on more influences.[74]

It is worth noting that composers such as Seóirse Bodley (1933–2023) and John Buckley (b. 1951) were setting 'the Irish language to a musically European modernist aesthetic' in the preceding century.[75] For example, Bodley notes how his songs for voice and piano, such as *Cré* (1953), were 'quite definitely modernist in terms of the music rather than elaborations of folk tunes.'[76] Furthermore, there are many short choral works, such as Bodley's choral cycle, *An Bás is an Bheatha* (1960), Rhona Clarke's *Suantraí Ghráinne* (1983) and *Géibheann* (1998), Ben Hanlon's *Molaimis* (2008), and Eoin Mulvany's *Is Úar Geimred* (2013), that set Irish-language texts in a contemporary manner, without being tied to traditional Irish sonorities. While there are earlier precedents, Desmond's *Amra Choluim Chille* incorporates traditional elements within a modern musical style on a much broader scale, demonstrating his eclectic international voice, the formal, thematic, and narrative purposes of his stylistic tendencies, and his attempt to convey a historic Irish narrative in today's context.

Desmond's instinct for communicating a text's events and character is demonstrated across each movement of *Amra Choluim Chille*, through word-painting devices and the larger choral-instrumental fabric, with recurring motifs and textural structures carrying narrative and symbolic implications and providing thematic and formal organisation. His sensitivity to the reverent tone and palindromic structure of Dallán's poem is evident in the quotations of the *St Columba* melody, the restatement and synthesis of the '*Éiríonn Colum*', 'mourning', and *Misterioso* motifs across the vocal and instrumental parts of movements, as well as the symbolic gestures, which take the form of the cross in the textural framework. Ultimately, Desmond's compositional choices within the cantata merge into a large, interactive musical rendering of the ancient poem, outlining the missionary vocation of St Columba in Ireland and the impact of his work and death on the early Christian community. The composer's synthesis of diverse musical techniques, woven into an engaging musical narrative, provides an opportunity to enrich audiences' understanding of the historical story, while also having the potential to influence future compositional settings of Dallán's poem and other literary texts in the Irish language more broadly.

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[74] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2', p. 85.
[75] Benjamin Dwyer, *Different Voices: Irish Music and Music in Ireland* (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2014), p. 63.
[76] Seóirse Bodley in Dwyer, *Different Voices*, p. 63.

Chapter 7: Christmas Carols: Blending the Old and New

The Historical and Contemporary Context of Carols

Since the Middle Ages, Christmas carols have played a significant role in the choral calendar, appealing to both liturgical and secular contexts. Deriving from the medieval French '*carole*', referring to a 'ring-dance', the carol was a form that was initially danced.[1] However, Gustave Reese notes that at the turn of the fifteenth century, the carol evolved into 'a simple polyphonic form', solely for singing.[2] Originally a song on any subject, with a stanza-burden structure, it was not until after c. 1550 that 'the carol became the form par excellence for Christmas songs'.[3] The fifteenth-century English carol repertory, mostly comprising macaronic texts of English and Latin, includes Christmas themes celebrating the birth of Jesus, praising saints linked to the festive season — such as St Stephen and St Nicholas — as well as venerating the Virgin Mary.[4] These medieval carols have been a significant source of inspiration for composers, particularly since the birth of the Nine Lessons and Carols services in King's College, Cambridge in 1918. In the twentieth century, English composers such as Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958), Gustav Holst (1874–1934), and Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) contributed to the vast collection of Christmas carols with original and arranged settings of medieval texts, which form a substantial part of collections such as the *Oxford Book of Carols*.[5]

Contemporary composers such as John Rutter (b. 1945), Cecilia McDowall (b. 1951), and Bob Chilcott (b. 1955) have continued this trend of composing new Christmas works based on medieval texts, many of which demonstrate the combination of old and new techniques. As musicologist Jacob Sagrans notes, the Middle English and/or liturgical languages of the texts set by composers create 'an archaic feeling', even if the music has been composed in the modern era.[6] Ireland's contemporary composers have been equally attracted to creating new

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[1] Douglas Gray, *Make We Merry More and Less: An Anthology of Medieval English Popular Literature* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2019), p. 302. See also John Stevens, 'Carol, Origins and Social Setting', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/omo/9781561592630.013.90000382035> [accessed 31 July 2024].
[2] Gustave Reese, *Music in the Renaissance* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1954), p. 766.
[3] Reese, *Music in the Renaissance*, p. 765 (fn 12).
[4] Helen Deeming and Frieda van der Heijden, *Medieval Polyphony and Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 157.
[5] See *The Oxford Book of Carols*, ed. by Percy Deamer, Martin Shaw and Ralph Vaughan Williams (Oxford: Oxford University of Press, 1928) and *The New Oxford Book of Carols*, ed. by Hugh Keyte and Andrew Parrott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
[6] Jacob Sagrans, '"What England has done for a thousand years": Medievalism in Christmas Lessons and Carols Services', in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Medievalism*, ed. by Stephen C. Meyer and Kirsten Yri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 205–233 (p. 214).

compositions and arrangements of Christmas choral music, with many setting medieval English and/or Latin texts.[7] Like aspects of their other choral compositions, Eoghan Desmond and Rhona Clarke have captured the jubilant season through their synthesis of old and new traditions in their settings of medieval carols. Although their works are not direct imitations of their Middle Age precedents, both composers' innovative approaches incorporate medieval musical idioms into a broader contemporary framework, exemplifying the rich connections between musical eras.

To date, Desmond has composed seventeen Christmas carols, many with texts of medieval origin, which amalgamate the ancient and contemporary sonorities of the festive season.[8] According to the composer, his carol compositions allow him to 'express both the more serious side of my composition and the zany, *Moother Goose* [sic] side [...] in the one breath.'[9] Although Rhona Clarke's output of Christmas material is not as expansive, consisting (to date) of *Three Carols on Medieval Texts* (2014), *Sweet the Song: Three Carols on the Nativity* (2022), and *A Welsh Carol* (2025), her settings also demonstrate past influences with her use of modality, rhythmic modes, open harmonies, drones, and parallel voicing. While carols usually follow a strophic form, both composers offer variety amidst recurring material through melodic variations, timbral changes, metrical shifts, and textural development. The lively characters of Desmond's *A Babe is Born* (2017) from his *4 Medieval Carols* (2014–17) and Clarke's *Glad and Blithe* from her *Three Carols on Medieval Texts* (2014) reflect the origin of the carol, which 'evolved as a popular dance form' (Table 7.1).[10] Applying a juxtapositional model of comparison, this investigation of Desmond and Clarke's approaches to setting these medieval carol texts will illuminate their similar use of archaic techniques as well as their distinct compositional styles. Similar to the previous chapters, the analysis will focus on each composer's approach to form, melody, modality, harmony, texture as a structural device, and, in certain cases, quotation, within their respective carols.

[7] Cailíno Music Publishers list thirty-one Christmas works in their catalogue — some of which are arranged for various ensemble types — while the Contemporary Music Centre houses close to seventy carols (figures correct as of 8 July 2026).
[8] Of the seventeen carols, four are arrangements of traditional melodies <https://www.eoghandesmond.com/listofworks> [accessed 8 July 2026]. Desmond's carols written after 2021 are not listed on his website.
[9] Eoghan Desmond, 'Day 38 – State of the PhD Address', 'Blog', *Eoghan Desmond*, 14 June 2019 <https://www.eoghandesmond.com/blog?offset=1561326440891> [accessed 18 December 2023].
[10] William Emmett Studwell, *The Christmas Carol Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 2–3.

Composer	Title	Year	Period and Language of Text	Past musical characteristics
Eoghan Desmond	*A Babe is Born*	2017	15th-century English and Latin	Modality Open harmonies Plainchant quotation Parallel writing (fourths, fifths) Drones Pastorale
Rhona Clarke	*Glad and Blithe*	2014	15th-century English and Latin	Rhythmic modes Modality (Aeolian) Drones Open harmonies

Table 7.1. Medieval traits in Clarke's and Desmond's Christmas Carols

A Babe is Born (2017) – Eoghan Desmond

Eoghan Desmond's *A Babe is Born* (2017) captures the exuberant character of the medieval macaronic text with a synthesis of ancient and contemporary musical techniques across the work. The fifteenth-century carol, found in the Sloane Manuscripts, contains five English verses presenting 'a rapid-fire summation of the whole story of the Nativity,' each verse ending with a Latin exclamation of praise.[11] Well-known settings of the text include those by English composer Gustav Holst (1874–1934) and Welsh composer William Mathias (1934–1992), the latter's influence notably evident in Desmond's contemporary setting. Unlike the conventional carol form, this text does not include a burden, with Desmond manipulating the structure to include a variation of one — '*Noel, noel, all was well that ever was woe!*'. However, the phrase does not appear in the same manner throughout, conflicting with the 'self-contained formal and metrical unit' of a burden.[12] Therefore, it is more appropriate to determine this recurring phrase as a musical repetend, making irregular and varied appearances throughout the carol.

[11] Eoghan Desmond, 'Programme note', *4 Medieval Carols* (Helsinki: Sulasol, 2017).
[12] Reese, pp. 765–66.

Structural Overview

Rather than the common strophic (verse-burden) structure of the traditional carol, the form of *A Babe is Born*'s text reflects the four-line stanzas of the medieval hymn, which carol writers adapted to include three lines of English followed by a Latin tag or *cauda*, taken from a well-known hymn.[13] According to Bukofzer, it was not customary to match the liturgical phrase 'with musical quotations from the proper plainsongs' in carols of this format.[14] However, Desmond disregards this custom by quoting well-known chant melodies associated with the Latin texts. The composer breaks further from tradition by avoiding the exact repetition of musical material across each verse, instead providing new musical idioms and altering recurring material throughout, suggesting his intention to illustrate the various events of the Nativity like a through-composed narrative.

An overview of the five-verse structure exhibits contrasts in timbre — alternating phrases between the upper and lower voices — key changes, variations in texture, and one sudden change in tempo to convey the solemnity of Jesus's birth (verse four) (Table 7.2). The recurring phrase is never repeated in an identical manner, instead being manipulated through fragmentation between the upper and lower voices, and shortened presentations between verses, ensuring a constant sense of motion and the 'rapid-fire summation' of the Christmas story. Desmond combines the contemporary musical elements of irregular time signatures, dissonance, and chromaticism with medieval idioms, using modal writing, open harmonies, drones, hockets, and chant quotations for the Latin passages throughout the work, repeatedly acknowledging the fifteenth-century origins of the text. The shifting compound and simple metres throughout the piece imbues the music with an incessant forward motion, the predominant *Con brio capriccioso* tempo and accented, syncopated rhythms uniting the overall musical narrative and further enhancing the music's medieval, dance-like quality.

[13] Richard L. Greene, *The Early English Carol* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), pp. lxxii–lxxiii.
[14] Manfred F. Bukofzer, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1950), p. 151.

Verse	Texture
1	SSAA homophonic text with antiphonal refrain in TTBB (*Noel, noel, all is well!*). Latin: TB parallel octaves (chant).
Recurring phrase/Repetend (‘*Noel, noel, all is well that ever was woe!*’)	SSAA full text with TTB ‘*Noel*’ interjections.
2	TTBB homophony (organum-style) with ‘*Noel, Noel*’ interjections in SSAA. Latin: Soprano. Repeated by SSAA with sustained ‘*Noel*’ TTBB accompaniment (chant).
Repetend	TTBB full text with SSAA countermelody interjections.
3	SSAA homophonic text (music from verse 1) with ‘*Noel*’ TTBB imitative interjections (tenors followed by basses at dotted crotchet distance). Full choir for second phrase (‘gold and myrrh and frankincense’). Latin: Begins in bass with tenor response. Texture increases in canon for SATB (possible quotation of Mathias’s setting)..
Repetend	Short homophonic ‘*All is well!*’
4	Pastoral – Tenors with melody and harmony, basses’ octave drone. SSAA ‘*All is well!*’ interjection. Solo soprano and alto *meno mosso* melody/harmony (‘Why are ye so sore aghast?’ and Latin phrase) with TTBB drone (F–C).
Repetend	Short antiphonal ‘*Noel!*’ SA echoed by TTBB.
5	TTBB organum-style homophony (like verse 2 but semitone higher) with ‘*Noel, Noel*’ interjections in SSAA. Latin: SSAA homophony with ‘*Nowel!*’ interjections. Homorhythmic full choir repeat to *fff* climax.
Repetend	SSAA–TTBB antiphony of divided repetend (‘*Nowel!*’ – ‘*Nowel! All is well!*’). Homorhythmic unpitched SATB ‘*Nowel!*’ conclusion.

Table 7.2. Eoghan Desmond, *A Babe is Born* structure (Colours indicate recurring features).[15]

Echoes of the Past: Melodic and Rhythmic Structures

Desmond opens *A Babe is Born* with antiphonal dialogue between the upper and lower voices, with the lively 7/8 time signature immediately establishing the bright, dance-like character of

[15] Desmond uses varied spellings of ‘*Noel*’ in the score.

the work. Beginning in the A Lydian Dominant mode, the sopranos and alto announce the opening line in the manner of a fanfare, undulating between A major and second inversion B major triads. The tenors and bass answer with similar undulating harmonies through a rhythmically detached staccato '*Noel-el*', concluding with a descending progression of G augmented, F# minor, and A major on '*all is well!*' (Figure 7.1). The movement of the principal melodic fanfare theme reflects Bukofzer's description of 'the rhythmic vigour' and paradoxical 'smooth and angular' design of medieval carol melodies, which often feature 'repeated notes or patterns of the same note by turns to the lower and upper second and third.'[16] Although Desmond's wider carol output does not feature this specific melodic undulation, it is possible that he intended to reflect the melodic structure of the ancient carol in this setting, which is one of his earlier Christmas works.
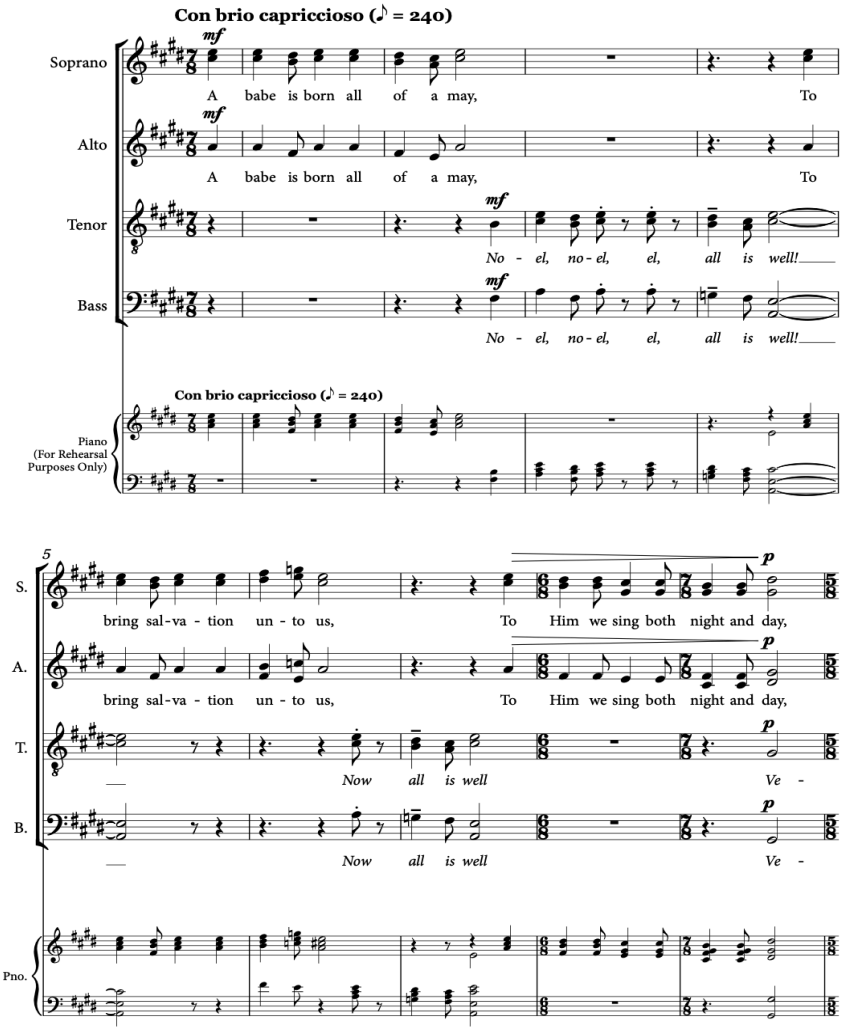


Figure 7.1. Eoghan Desmond, *A Babe is Born* (Helsinki: Sulasol, 2017), bb. 1–9.

[16] Bukofzer, pp. 168–169.

Following a similar call and response, the upper voices briefly transition to 6/8 with a descent through B minor second inversion, C# minor first inversion, and an undefined harmony (C#–F#–G#–B), resolving to an open harmony (D#–G#–D#) with the entry of the lower voices' Latin text (bb. 8–9). The non-functional harmonic progressions and ambiguous chords illuminate the contemporary nature of Desmond's carol, the composer regularly applying these harmonic techniques across his wider choral oeuvre. The compound metre, minor harmonies, and *decrescendo* to *piano* create a momentary reverent tone, expressing the text 'To Him we sing both night and day'. The concluding fifth, and parallel fourths in the altos, reflect the medieval character of the work, while the G# signals a modulation to G# minor.

The buoyant opening of Desmond's work is similar to William Mathias's 1971 setting of the same text for choir and organ. Following a syncopated organ introduction in 6/8 in the Welsh composer's carol, the SATB voices proceed in similar crotchet-quaver rhythms, with the extension of the final quaver on 'all' into the next bar reflecting Desmond's 7/8 setting of the text (bb. 7–8; 11–12; Figure 7.2). The antiphonal dialogue between the choir and organ could have influenced the Irish composer's similar interchange between the upper and lower voices in his *a cappella* setting. Furthermore, Mathias's introductory undulating major second idiom in the upper three voices is not unlike the sopranos and alto's melodic undulations (E–D#–E; C#–B–C#; A–F#–A) on 'A babe is born' in Desmond's work. Given the Irish composer's profession as a cathedral singer and his probable knowledge of this work, it is possible that he has consciously alluded to Mathias's carol in his composition.
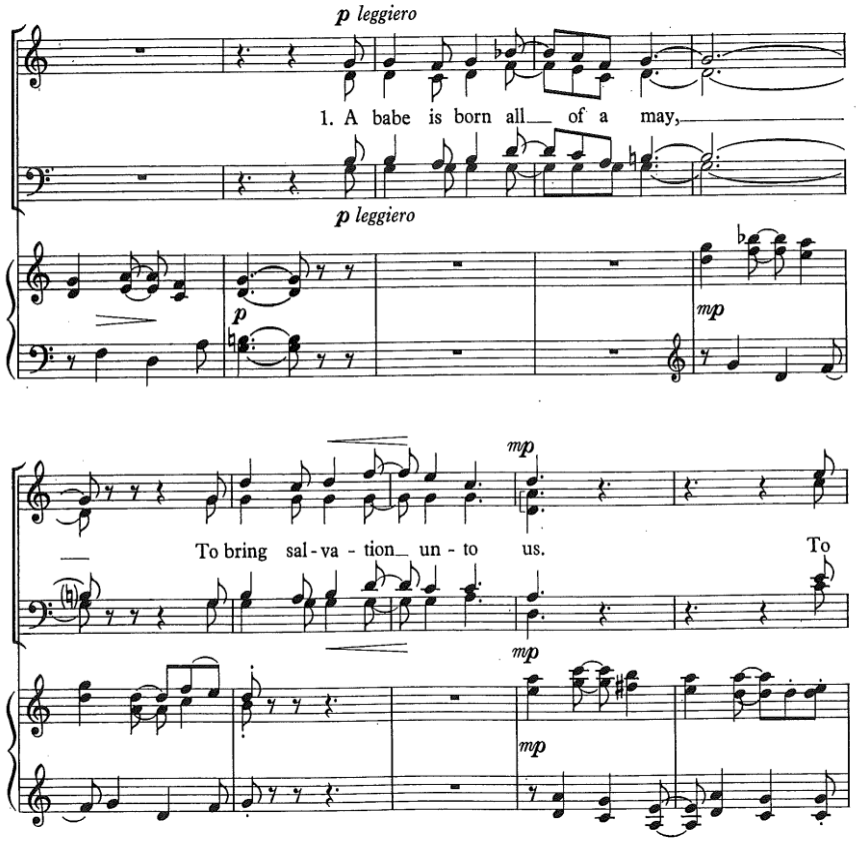


Figure 7.2. William Mathias, *A Babe is Born* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), bb. 5–14.

Quotation

As mentioned previously, Desmond has noted his interest in quoting historical works in his own music where a suitable opportunity may arise relating to the text he is setting.[17] Quotation is apparent in several sections of *A Babe is Born*, most notably in the Latin endings of each verse. The tenor-bass expression of '*Veni Creator Spiritus*' in parallel octaves (bb. 9–12) is a rhythmically distorted setting of the original chant (Figure 7.3), with a four-bar pattern of 7/8–5/8–3/4–7/8 (Figure 7.4). The uneven structure, beginning on a G# minim upbeat, results in unnatural text stresses, the second syllable of '*Veni*' falling on the downbeat of the 5/8 bar, as opposed to the expected first syllable. Rather than quote the medieval chant verbatim, Desmond

[17] Eoghan Desmond, '100 Days – Day 29: On Quotation' [accessed 28 March 2024]; Eoghan Desmond, interviewed by Jonathan Grimes and Evonne Ferguson, 'amplify #50 – Interviews with Elaine Agnew and Eoghan Desmond for City of Derry International Choir Festival', The Contemporary Music Centre, podcast, 20 October 2021 (14:50–15:30) <https://www.cmc.ie/amplify/episode-50> [accessed 25 June 2024]; Eoghan Desmond, 'Alt Notes #11 | Eoghan Desmond', interviewed by Shell Dooley, *HeadStuff*, 21 July 2016 <https://www.headstuff.org/entertainment/music/music-features/alt-notes-11-eoghan-desmond> [accessed 1 May 2023].

transforms its natural rhythmic flow through the shifting asymmetrical time signatures, giving the ancient melody a lively, contemporary character suitable for the dance-like carol.
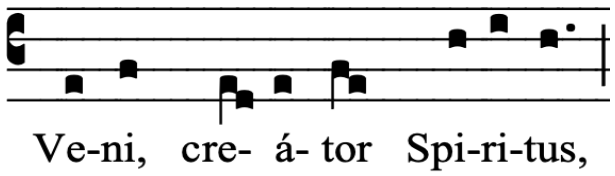


Figure 7.3. *Veni Creator Spiritus* original chant, b. 1.[18]

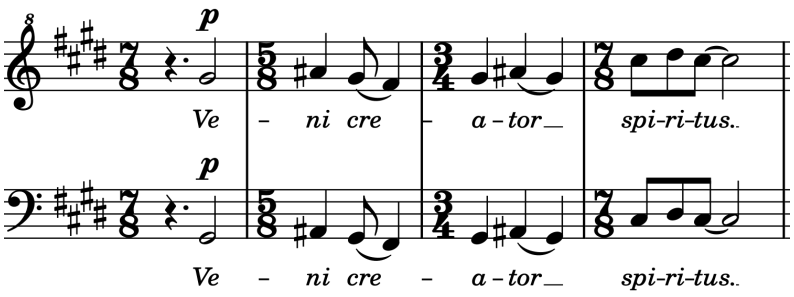


Figure 7.4. Desmond, *A Babe is Born*, bb. 9–12.

In a similar vein, the composer uses the original '*O lux beata*' chant at the end of the second verse, with the soprano's four-bar F major statement moving between 7/8 and 4/4 (bb. 22–26). Altos harmonise with the soprano on the repeat of the phrase, accompanied by the lower voices' stacked open fifth drones (B♭–F; G–D), maintaining a quasi-archaic sound. The asymmetric–symmetric time signature motion allows for a flowing expression of the text that emphasises its natural syllabic stresses, while exhibiting a modern rhythmic character. As well as the alto's harmonisation of the medieval chant, the basses' consecutive tritones (D♭–G; C♭–F) in bars 24 and 25 create a contemporary harmonic substructure, the second inversion dominant seventh with flat fifth (C♭–F–A–E♭) in the lower voices — resolving to G minor seventh in first inversion — suggesting a jazz influence, given the common use of this chord within this genre (Figure 7.5).[19] Alternatively, if interpreting the C♭ enharmonically as B♮, it could be implied that the music is continuing the Lydian Dominant modality of the previous section, with a raised fourth and flat seventh within the key of F. As the text is describing 'the blessed light,

[18] '*Veni Creator Spiritus*', *IMSLP Petrucci Music Library* <https://ks15.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/6/6f/IMSLP227313-WIMA.0db6-Veni_Creator.pdf> [accessed 7 August 2024].
[19] Joe Mulholland and Tom Hojnacki, *The Berklee Book of Jazz Harmony* (Boston: Berklee Press, 2013), p. 35.

the Trinity' within Christianity, the use of the Lydian mode, which is regarded as having 'mysterious […] religious associations', is fitting for the communication of the text's sacred subject.[20]

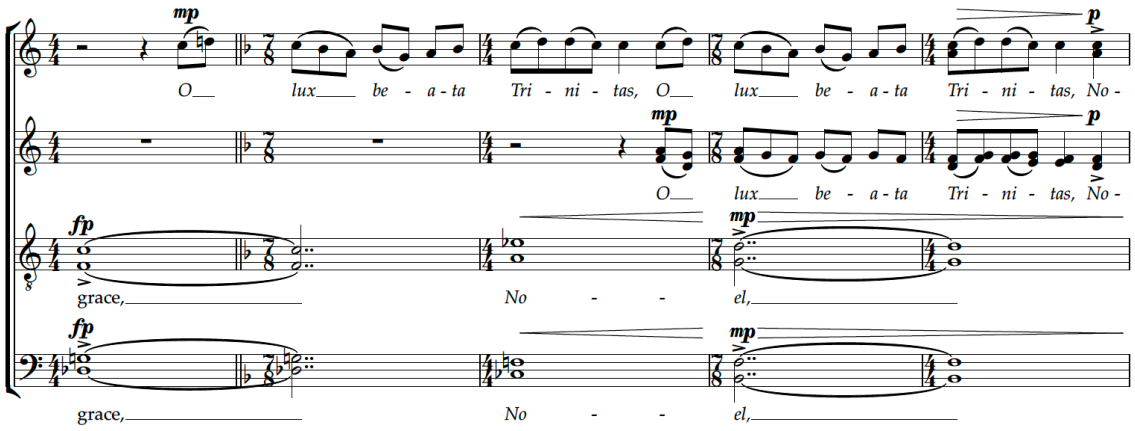


Figure 7.5. Desmond, *A Babe is Born*, bb. 22–26.

While continuing to acknowledge musical precedents in the Latin phrases of the work, Desmond moves from quoting Gregorian chant to paraphrasing Mathias's *A Babe is Born* in his setting of the words '*A solis ortus cardine*' ('From the rising sun'), further underlining the possible influence of the twentieth-century carol on his text-setting approach. He does not mimic Mathias's recurring melody directly, instead altering several intervals within the phrase, while maintaining the overall contour of the original fragments. Mathias's 6/8 music begins with three repeated notes and a rising minor third, followed by a stepwise descent to the opening note, a further falling second, and return to the central note (bb. 69–71; Figure 7.6). All but one of his Latin sections are set in E♭ Dorian, with '*A solis ortus cardine*' raised to E Dorian. Desmond sets the text in an E♭ Phrygian framework in 7/8 and begins with an ascending fifth (E♭–B♭) or fourth (B♭–E♭), as each voice gradually enters the texture upon the repetition of the text (bb. 41–45; Figure 7.7). The initial leap could be intended to reflect the 'rising sun', hence explaining Desmond's decision not to imitate Mathias's repeated tones. The bass mimics the rising third of the 1971 carol (B♭–D♭), but continues with a falling fifth,

[20] Harold S. Powers, 'Lydian', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.17245> [accessed 7 August 2024]; See also Claude Victor Palisca, 'The ethos of modes during the Renaissance', in *The Emotional Power of Music: Multidisciplinary perspectives on musical arousal, expression, and social control*, ed. by Tom Cochrane, Bernardino Fantini, and Klaus R. Scherer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 102–114 (p. 104).

concluding with another ascending third to a repeated B♭ on '*cardine*', avoiding a direct repetition of Mathias's closing notes, which feature a major second undulation (E–D–E; B–A–B). Although Desmond's first expression of the Latin phrase differs somewhat from Mathias's idiom, the overall arching contour and similar use of intervals cannot be denied.

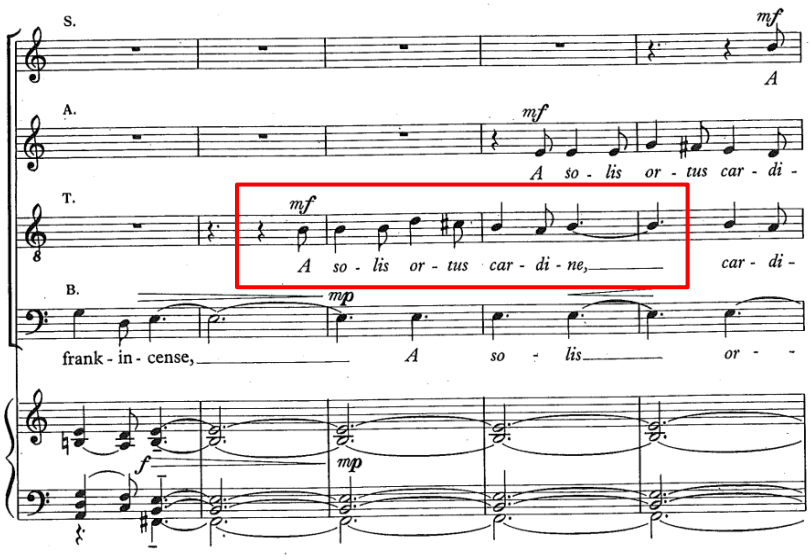


Figure 7.6. Mathias, *A Babe is Born*, bb. 68–72.

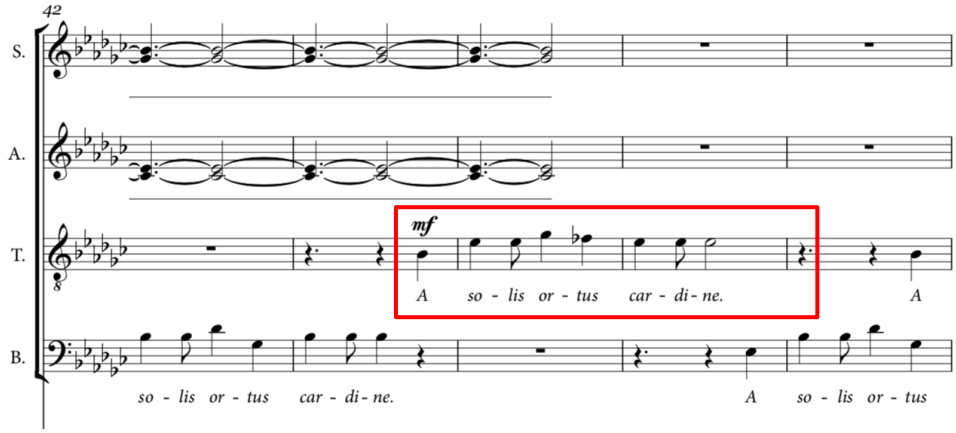


Figure 7.7. Desmond, *A Babe is Born*, bb. 42–46.

The argument for Desmond's paraphrasing of Mathias's melody is strengthened by the tenor's answering phrase (bb. 43–45), which begins with an ascending fourth (B♭–E♭), followed by an almost direct imitation of the twentieth-century carol's contour, the rising third between '*solis*' and the first syllable of '*ortus*' (E♭–G♭) leading to a stepwise descent to E♭. The only difference between both composers' descending trajectory is the intervallic pattern, Desmond altering

Mathias's minor descent (semitone–tone) to a Phrygian disposition (tone–semitone), and concluding with a monotonic '*cardine*', as opposed to the undulating second. As well as the melodic allusion, it could be argued that Desmond's textural structure echoes that of his predecessor, the repetition of the phrase rising through the voices in both works. In the Welsh composer's setting, the tenor initially presents the Latin phrase on B, above the bass's repeated E and organ's pedal point (F#–B–E; bb. 69–71). The alto answers on E (b. 71), with the soprano completing the texture on B at the upbeat to bar 73, before the conclusion of the alto's sentence. The section closes with homophonic parallel motion undulating between open E and D fifths, repeating '*cardine*' four consecutive times (bb. 74–77).

Similarly, Desmond presents the Latin phrase in the bass on E♭, the tenor answering a fifth above after two bars (bb. 41–44). This tenor–bass antiphony is repeated in a stretto manner, with the imitation reduced to a one-bar interval. Both voices continue to repeat their respective phrases as the alto enters on E♭, echoed by the soprano on B♭ after one bar (bb. 48–50). The overlapping polyphonic texture abruptly ends with a homophonic exclamation of '*cardine*' on a repeated B♭ major chord in bar 53, underlined by the *crescendo* and modulation to B♭ Lydian (Figure 7.8). This tonal transition could be interpreted as a form of word-painting, as the Latin '*cardine*' translates to 'pivot'. Desmond may have intended to highlight the text's meaning with a dramatic shift from a second inversion C diminished seventh with added F♭ to a B♭ major triad, signalling a modulation to the Lydian mode for the following bright expression '*All is well!*'. The similarities between the melodic outline and scaffolded texture of the '*A solis ortus cardine*' phrase in Mathias's *A Babe is Born* and the contemporary carol serve as evidence to suggest that Desmond consciously reflects the 1971 setting. The composer's use of allusion in the previous sections of the carol and in his wider output further strengthens the argument for the application of this technique within this section, with Desmond possibly wishing to acknowledge the British cathedral tradition in his contemporary setting of the medieval text.

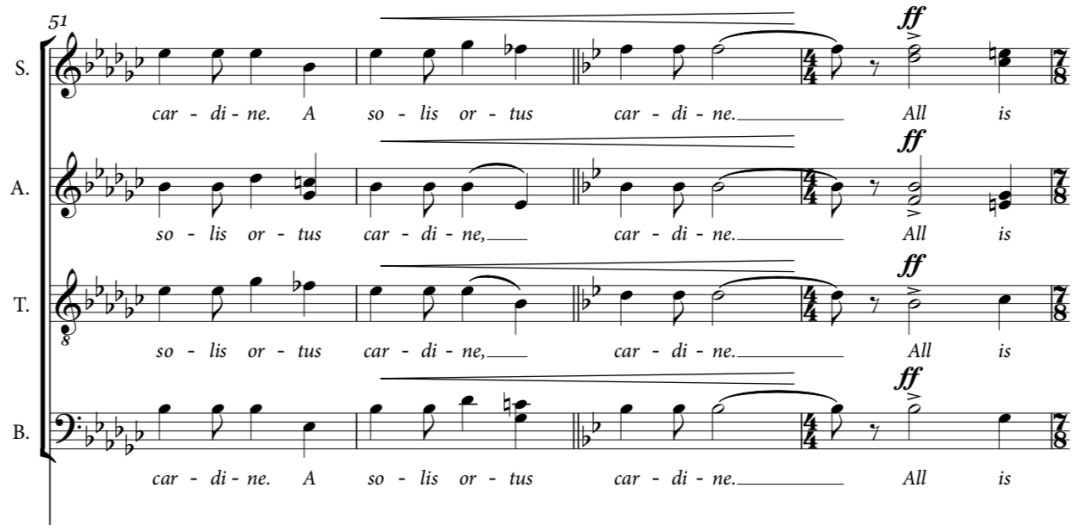


Figure 7.8. Desmond, *A Babe is Born*, bb. 51–54.

Harmonic Language: Blending the Old and New

Evoking the past is evident beyond quotation in *A Babe is Born*, with medieval idioms blending with the contemporary harmonic and rhythmic palettes throughout Desmond's carol. Open harmonies at the ends of phrases, and organum-like parallel fourths and fifths recur throughout the music, particularly in the lower voices. This medieval-style harmonic writing in the texture's underlay is a common trait in Desmond's choral writing, particularly his sacred works and carol settings, highlighting his deep understanding of the choral tradition and his desire to reimagine archaic musical styles and techniques in a contemporary framework.[21] Tenors and basses move primarily in open fifths and fourths at the beginning of the second verse of the carol (bb. 17–22), the prevalent accidentals creating dissonance between the voices, which results in ambiguity regarding the music's modality. For example, the tenors' descending G♭–D♭ fifth moves contrary to the basses' B♭–F in bar 17, the secundal dissonance between the inner voices causing momentary conflict before the return to the open A♭–E♭ chord (Figure 7.9). Despite the parallel open dyads, the non-functional harmonic progression and accidentals of the lower voices display the music's contemporary character.

[21] See, for example, *4 Medieval Carols* (2014–2017), *Oxen of the Sun* (2018), *Amra Choluim Chille* (2019), *Verbum Caro Factum Est* (2019), *Sir Christëmas* (2019), *Comrades* (2019), *Nothing in Vain* (2021).

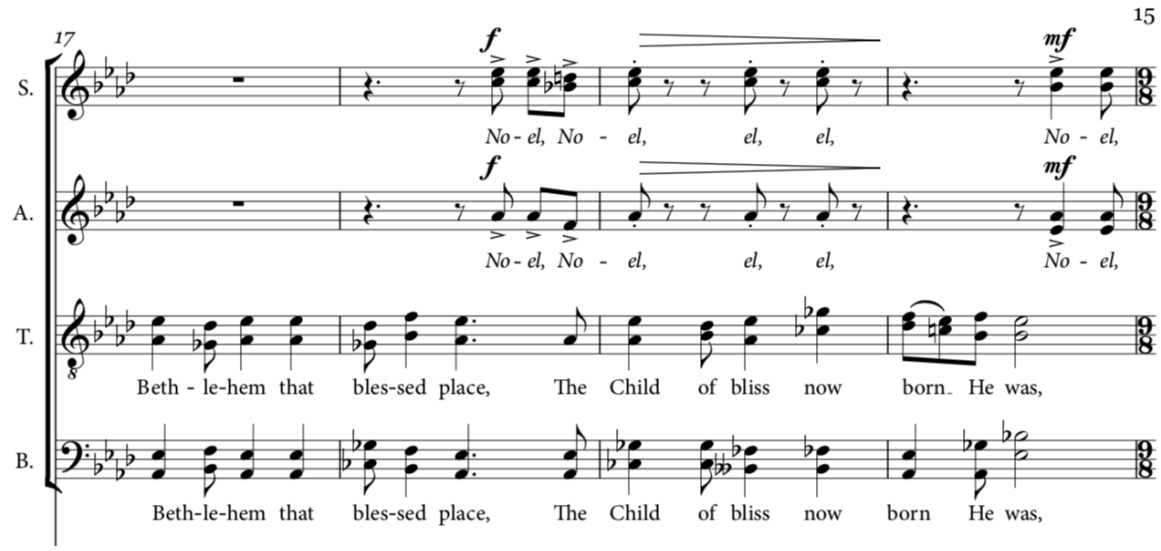


Figure 7.9. Desmond, *A Babe is Born*, bb. 17–20.

While the key signature of the second verse implies A♭ major/F minor, underlined by the prevalent open A♭ fifths in bars 17 and 18, the multiple accidentals undermine any sense of a definite tonality/modality. The presence of G♭ and C♭ in the first two-bar phrase, with the parallel B♭ fifth–A♭ fifth resolution (b. 18), suggests A♭ Dorian, which is immediately contradicted by the D♮ in soprano 1's '*Noel*' interjection on the final quaver beat of the bar. While the upper voices repeat an A♭ major triad in the next phrase (b. 19), the C♭, G♭, F♭, and B♭♭ of the tenors and basses implies an A♭ Phrygian progression, creating a polymodal texture (Figure 7.9). Emulation of past musical techniques is evident with the false relations between soprano 2's hocket-style C quavers and bass 2 and tenor 2's C♭ on the first and final crotchet beats of bar 19, reflecting Renaissance practices. However, despite the chromatic contradictions between the lower and upper textures, the primarily conjunct motion of the individual voices enables a smooth transition between chords, demonstrating Desmond's judicious voice leading and careful control of dissonance.

The discordance between the upper and lower textures' conflicting accidentals contradicts the meaning of the text 'The Child of bliss', particularly on the latter word, which falls on a discord of B♭♭–F♭–A♭–E♭–C, which could also be interpreted enharmonically as stacked A and A♭ major triads. The three-chord progression of A♭ major (with suspensions in the tenors), a mixed-interval harmony (A♭–G♭–B♭–F), and an open E♭ in bar 20 resolves the previous harmonic tension, the E♭ harmony suggesting an imperfect cadence. The final phrase

of the three-line English passage conveys a more conventional A♭ major palette, with organum-style parallel fourths in the descending tenor-bass progression concluding with an ambiguous *fortepiano* chord on 'grace' (D♭–F–G♮–C) in bar 22, highlighting this word through a shift from the previous end-of-phrase open fifths to a more contemporary harmony (Figure 7.10). This lower-voice organum passage is repeated a tone higher for the final *Con brio* verse (bb. 73–81), featuring an extended conclusion of conflicting harmonies as the section reaches a *fortissimo* climax for the '*Gloria*' expression.

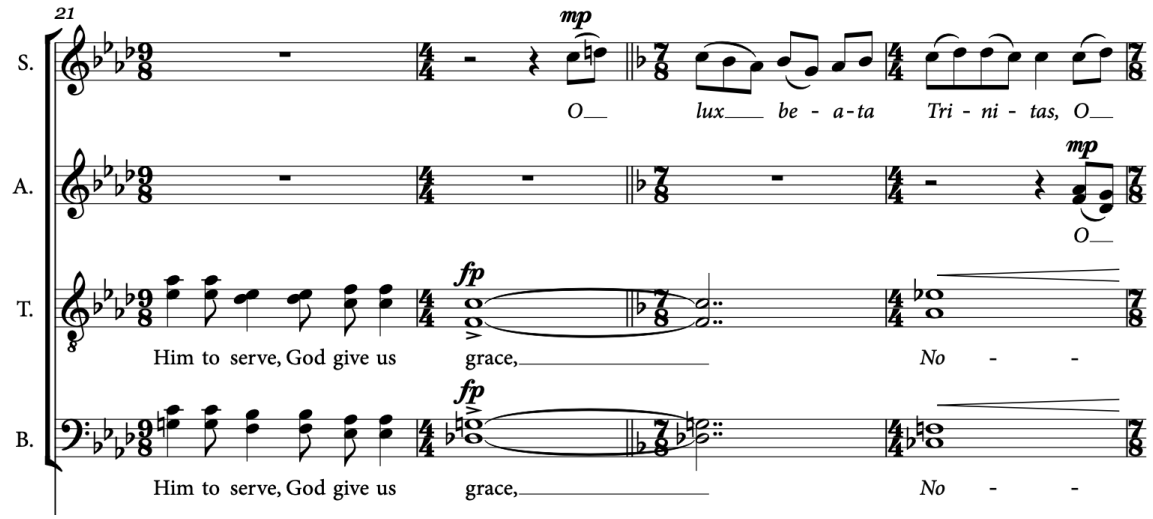


Figure 7.10. Desmond, *A Babe is Born*, bb. 21–24.

Desmond's implementation of archaic styles continues in the fourth verse, which depicts the shepherds hearing an angel cry and singing a 'merry song'. The composer treats the tenor-bass phrase with seventeenth-century pastoral techniques, underlined by the performance direction '*pastorale*' (bb. 55–61). The tenors communicate the text in parallel thirds, accompanied by the basses' B♭ octave drone (tonic), recalling the Christmas music of the Italian shepherds' shawm and bagpipes.[22] The lilting melody with symmetrical two-bar phrases emulates the typical structure of a traditional pastoral, while intermittent *leggiero* parallel upper voices intone the familiar undulating '*All is well!*' fanfare motif (B♭/F–C/E–B♭/F), possibly representing the angel in the text (Figure 7.11). The Italian pastoral conventions were used by Baroque composers such as Bach, Corelli, and Handel in their Christmas settings that referred

[22] Geoffrey Chew, 'Christmas and instrumental pastorals in Italy', in 'Pastoral', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40091> [accessed 13 June 2023].

to shepherds, with Desmond continuing this trend in his contemporary carol.[23] Rather than imitate the conventional triple metre of the form, Desmond continues with 7/8, maintaining the jaunty rhythmic motion and highlighting his synthesis of past and present musical techniques. The *pastorale* concludes in an archaic manner with an open F fifth in the lower voices, which proceeds as a drone for the remainder of the verse (F–C, b. 60).
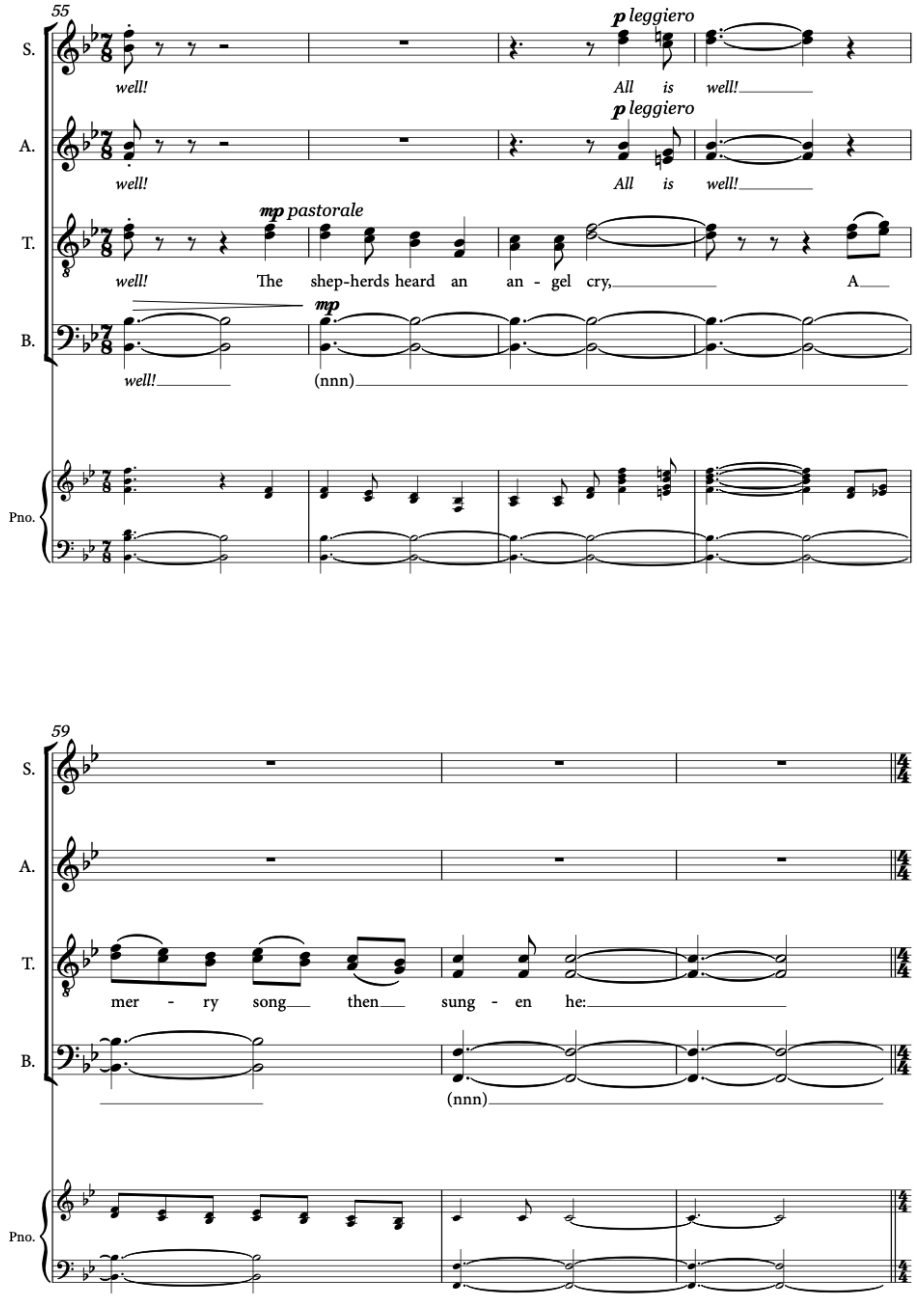


Figure 7.11. Desmond, *A Babe is Born*, bb. 55–61.

[23] Chew, '17th- and 18th-century Christmas and instrumental pastorals outside Italy', in 'Pastoral'.

Desmond's ability to contrast the timbre, texture, and character of the verses — evading the traditional strophic carol framework — is particularly evident in the second half of the fourth verse (bb. 62–70). The *pastorale* is followed by a solo soprano and alto, accompanied by the lower voices' continued open fifth drone (F–C), maintaining the medieval sound. The solemn mood is underlined by the *meno mosso* tempo change and shift to the more stable 4/4 time signature, effectively communicating the phrase 'Why are ye so sore aghast?' and the adoration of the Son of God in the Nativity. The soloists move in parallel thirds and fourths, with vocal ornaments denoting a folk-like character, enhanced by the drone. The melody and drone also convey the influence of chant, as well as the possible impact of ambient music on Desmond's approach, as the minimalist accompaniment is a key feature of the contemporary style.[24] While the tenor-bass pedal fifth underpins F as the tonal centre, its neutral sonority also spotlights the false relations and dissonance between the soloists, enhancing the bimodality of the section. The soprano's melody is set in F Mixolydian, with the alto harmonising in F Dorian, resulting in dissonance between the modes' thirds — A and A♭ — which are frequently heard in close succession (Figure 7.12). Desmond's intention in synthesising these modes was to create 'a sense of otherworldliness'.[25] In an interview in 2025, the composer noted that, although he composed this carol early in his career, this bimodal minimalist section represents 'kind of a beginning of what I have been doing more recently' — exploring polymodality and ambient textures.[26] Desmond indicates the end of the verse through the omission of the drone on the repeat of the Latin '*Jam ortus solis cardine!*' ('Now the rising of the sun!'; b. 69), followed by syncopated antiphonal interplay between the upper and lower voices' F Lydian '*Noel*' motif, signalling the return of the *Con brio* 7/8 fanfare (bb. 73–74).

[24] The melody is very similar to the chant '*Sanctus Sacerdos Dum Divina*' (ID: 204534), found in a sixteenth-century Augsburg manuscript. However, given that this chant is not well known and not associated with Christmas, the similarities between the early music and Desmond's melody are likely coincidental (*Cantus Database* <https://cantusdatabase.org/chant/313429> [accessed 9 August 2024]).
[25] Eoghan Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[26] Ibid.
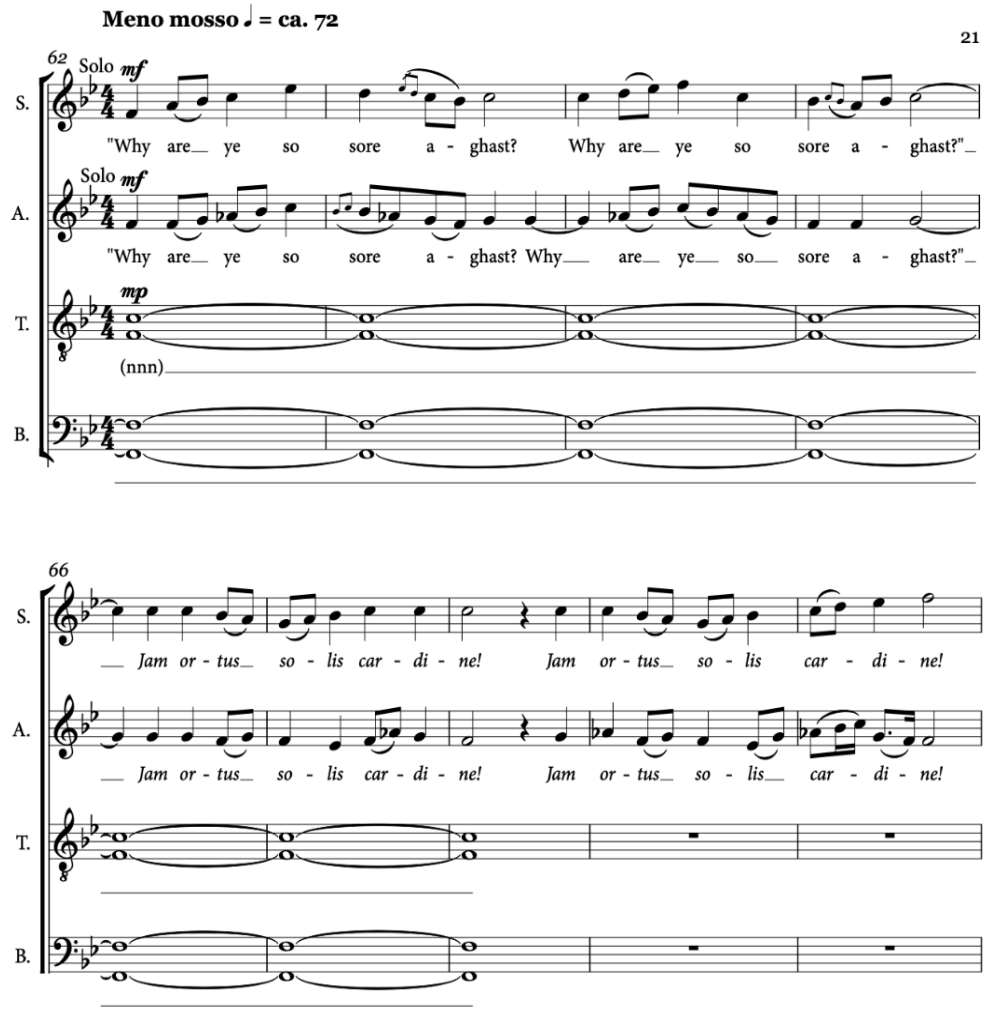


Figure 7.12. Desmond, *A Babe is Born*, bb. 62–70.

While many of Desmond's works feature overt text illustration, particularly those in his early career (c. 2014–2019), the use of explicit word painting in *A Babe is Born* is minimal, the composer instead focusing on conveying the character and medieval origin of the carol through the broader harmonic and textural structures of the music. It is worth noting musicologist John Stevens's observation that 'word-painting is unknown in the 15th-century carol', which may have impacted Desmond's compositional approach in this context.[27] Within this piece, the narrative device is reserved for the distinct pastoral section, and 'for the warmth of "Gold" and the bitterness of "myrrh"'.[28] The third verse centres on the three kings' visitation, bringing gifts of gold, myrrh, and frankincense to the baby Jesus (bb. 31–41). Desmond highlights the three gifts with a modulation from A Lydian Dominant to G♭ major, underlined by *fortissimo*

[27] John Stevens, 'Carol, Pre-Reformation', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/omo/9781561592630.013.90000382036> [accessed 6 September 2024].
[28] Desmond, 'Programme note', *4 Medieval Carols*.

dynamics and subsequent discords. The 'gold' is illustrated by the upper voices' transition from a three-part A major triad to a four-part *fortissimo* G♭ major chord, the rising minor third in the first soprano (E5–G♭5) highlighting the gift's luminosity (bb. 37–38). The lower voices echo the higher texture with an accented D♭ major chord at a distance of a dotted crotchet, continuing the antiphonal technique that permeates the work (Figure 7.13).

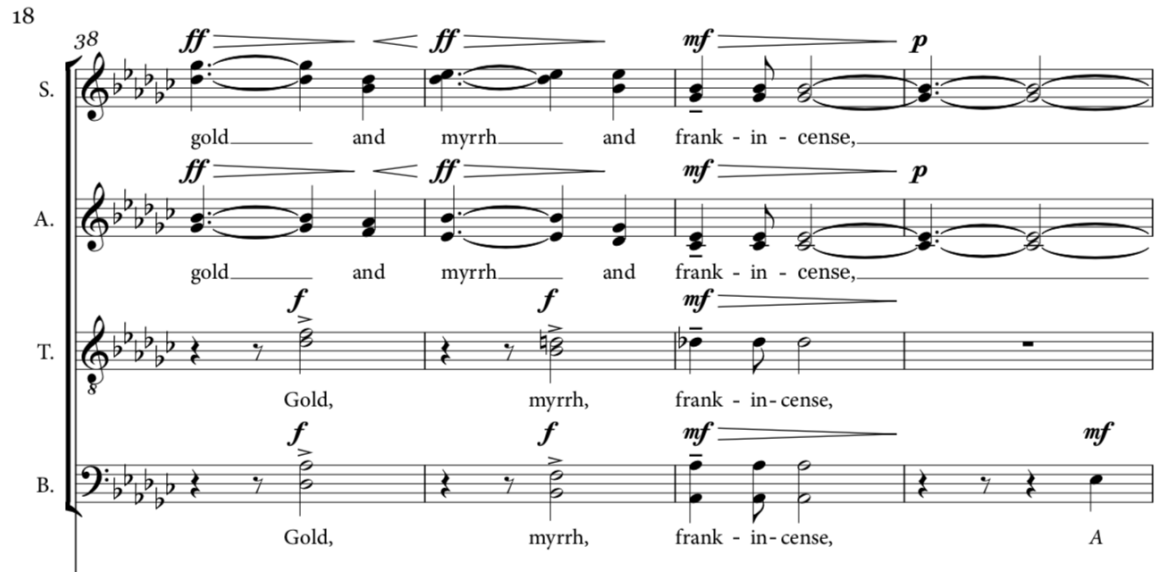


Figure 7.13. Desmond, *A Babe is Born*, bb. 38–41.

Following a *decrescendo* through the sustained 'gold' chord, the sopranos and altos move through a B♭ seventh to a *fortissimo* open E♭ seventh on 'myrrh'. The lower voices' B♭ major echo creates a false relation between the second soprano's D♭ and first tenor's D♮, the dissonance emphasising the bitterness of the myrrh (b. 39). All voices unite homophonically for a *mezzo-forte tenuto* expression of 'frankincense' on a complete A♭ eleventh. The harmonic density and return of D♭ in the tenors for the final gift generates an ethereal sonority, conveying the spiritual incense bestowed upon the infant. The dynamics fade to *piano*, with the texture similarly reduced to the upper voices' C♭ minor seventh, which is sustained through the bass's rising '*A solis ortus cardine*' phrase (bb. 41–44). Desmond's manipulation of dynamics, textural and harmonic density, and accents in his evocation of the three gifts contributes to illustrating their sacred qualities and significance within the Nativity. It could be argued that the first soprano's initial rising-falling melodic trajectory, particularly the descending fourths, is a further imitation of Mathias's setting, which exhibits a similar rising second-falling fourth contour throughout the bass's phrase on the same text (bb. 66–68; Figure 7.14). Although the

contemporary subject proceeds in a more independent manner, the similarity of intervallic structure in both composers' melodies is clear.

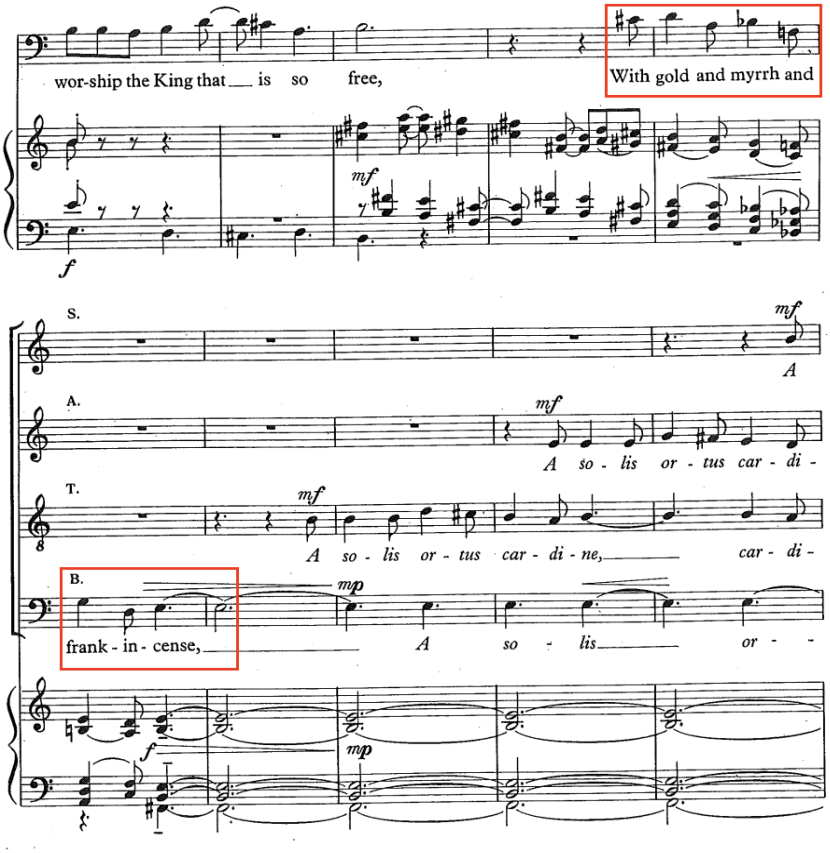


Figure 7.14. Mathias, *A Babe is Born*, bb. 63–72 (melody in red).

A Cacophonous Conclusion

Rather than referring to a historical precedent for his setting of the final extended Latin expression '*Gloria tibi Domine!*', Desmond reverts to the original 7/8 undulating A Lydian Dominant theme of previous verses. The text is initially presented by *fortissimo* upper voices following the tenor-bass organum-style verse, the lower voices proceeding to syncopated descending '*Nowel!*' chords (bb. 81–85). As evidenced in Desmond's wider output, the climaxes of his compositions are often underlined by conflicting rhythms and polymodality, which is equally apparent in *A Babe is Born*. While the sopranos and altos move in A Lydian Dominant, the tenors and basses' harmonic trajectory contradicts this mode, with widespread accidentals across the chord progression resulting in false relations. Beginning on an open fifth (A–E) at the upbeat to bar 83, the lower voices move through E minor in second inversion, F

major seventh with added fourth (B), and an ambiguous chord of E♭–A♭–B♭–D♮, resolving to a unison A for a homophonic repetition of the Latin text in bar 86. The presence of flats contradicts the natural and sharp identities of the sopranos and altos, creating a polymodal, dissonant tapestry (Figure 7.15). The syncopated, non-functional '*Nowel!*' chord progression conflicts with the upper voices' undulating theme, conveying an almost chaotic excitement and celebration at the birth of Jesus Christ.
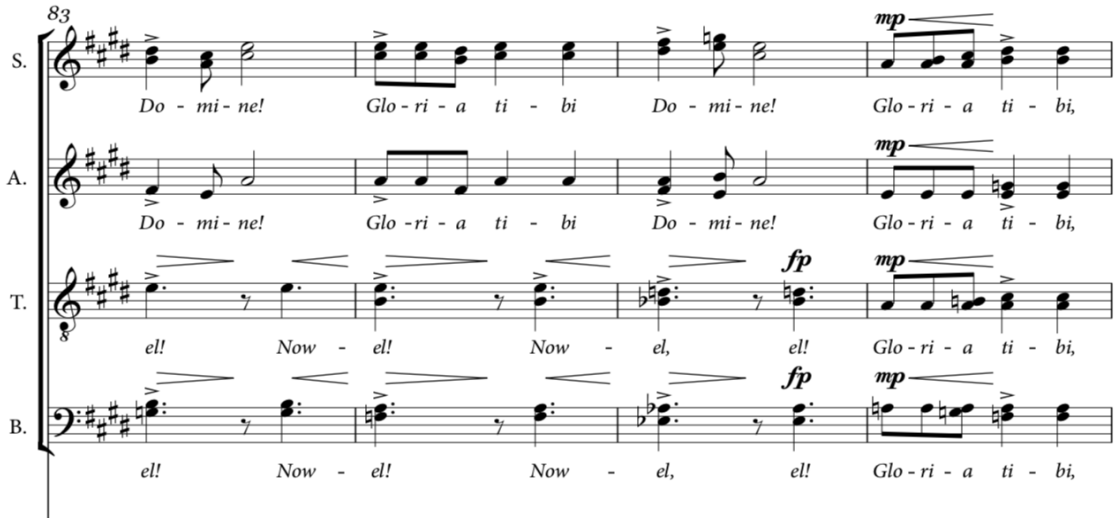


Figure 7.15. Desmond, *A Babe is Born*, bb. 83–86.

All voices proceed homophonically in A Lydian Dominant with a flat sixth (F♮), gradually rising in dynamics from *mezzo-piano* to *fortississimo* across the final three repetitions of '*Gloria tibi*'. The first two exclamations are identical, proceeding from an open A fifth to an accented form of F augmented thirteenth on '*tibi*' (F♮–A–C#–E–G♮–B–D#), with contrary motion in the outer voices. Desmond extends the rhythmic setting and the melodic and dynamic range of the final complete presentation of the Latin text, encapsulating the joyful expression of praise. The three quavers of '*Gloria*' broaden to a crotchet triplet with the change to 4/4, while the melody's range in soprano 1 extends from a stepwise augmented fourth (A4–D#5) to a ninth (A4–B5), with similar movement in bass 2 in the opposite direction (A3–G♮2). The eight-part homorhythmic declamation concludes with a dense climactic progression through a *tenuto* G major ninth in first inversion and D# diminished eleventh in second inversion, to an accented staccato *fortississimo* discord on the quaver downbeat of bar 90, with stacked fourths in the tenors, altos, and sopranos (A#–D#–G#–C#–F#–B; Figure 7.16). The basses' G♮ and F♮

conflict with the alto and soprano's G# and F#, while the second tenor's A# creates further harmonic conflict. The raucous effect of this short chord epitomises the cacophony of the final section and conveys an overwhelming elation at the culmination of the Nativity, rejoicing in Christ's birth.
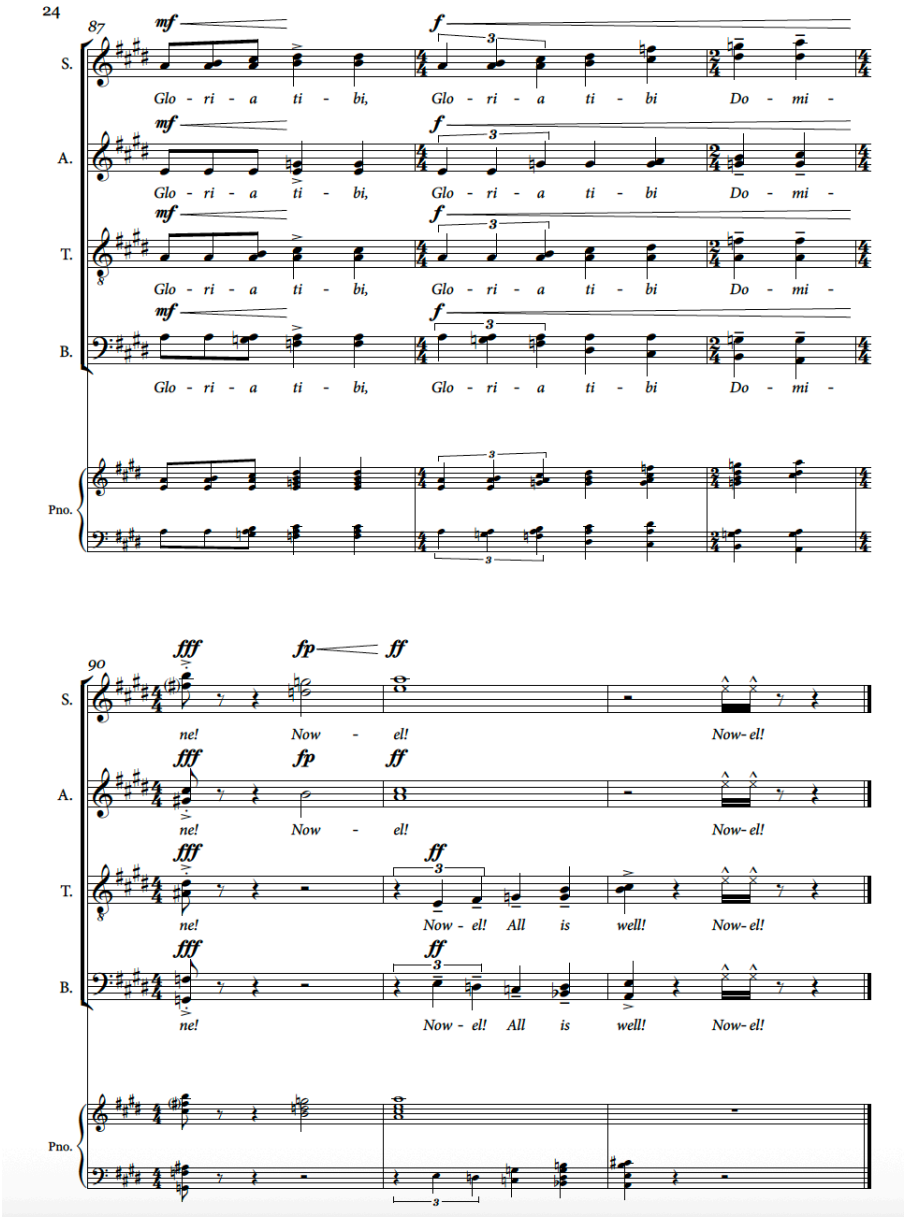


Figure 7.16. Desmond, *A Babe is Born*, bb. 87–92.

Polymodality continues in the final two bars with the upper voices' concluding A major triad answered by the lower voices' bimodal exclamation of '*Nowel! All is well!*' in contrary motion (bb. 91–92). While the tenors ascend in A Mixolydian from E to a secundal interval (B–C#), the basses descend in A Phrygian from E to an open fifth (A–E), forming an A major ninth

chord in the final bar, a prevalent harmony in contemporary choral music. The penultimate discord, with conflicting B♭ and B♮, yearns for resolution, with the minor second descent and major second ascent in the outer voices resulting in a stable, uplifting concluding chord, ensuring that '*All is well!*'. The unpitched, accented semiquaver cry of '*Nowel!*' ends the work and the effervescent narration of the Nativity.

Desmond's *A Babe is Born* is a challenging contemporary carol that utilises various medieval techniques in an ultimately modern framework. The chant quotations, parallel open harmonies in the manner of organum singing, modal writing, drones, and manipulation of the pastoral form contribute to indicating the text's ancient origins throughout the work. Yet, the composer reimagines the macaronic carol for a contemporary context, embedding the medieval references in a predominantly *Con brio* 7/8 rhythmic setting that enhances the vivacious narration of Jesus's birth. Polymodality — resulting in dissonance and false relations — pervades the work, with the music's non-functional harmonic nature and, at times, dense discordance, increasing its complexity and highlighting the influence of contemporary music. Unlike the majority of traditional carols, Desmond's avoidance of a traditional strophic form, characterised by musical repetition, indicates his intention to convey the various moods and events of the Nativity in an innovative manner, while exhibiting historical resonances. His control of timbre, texture, modality, tempo, and dynamics, and the presentation of new material amidst the recurring melodic themes, conveys his diverse narrative approach to text setting, ensuring the words, as well the overall mood, are communicated in a compelling manner.

Glad and Blithe (2014) – Rhona Clarke

Rhona Clarke's *Glad and Blithe* forms part of her *Three Medieval Carols* (2014), all of which apply an array of medieval compositional techniques, bridging the gap between the early and the contemporary. According to the composer, this quasi-medieval work, in addition to its two counterparts within the *Three Carols*, was inspired not only by the ancient origins of the texts, but by the sixth-century monastic ruins on the Skellig Islands, Co. Kerry, as she composed these pieces while staying in Ballinskelligs.[29] Her macaronic carol is a setting of a fifteenth-century text from the Selden Carol Book. The text is a translation of the Latin prose '*Laetabundus*', attributed to St Bernard of Clairvaux.[30] Unlike the majority of ancient carols,

[29] Rhona Clarke, 'The Music – notes by the composer', in *Sempiternam: Choral Music by Rhona Clarke*, State Choir LATVIJA, cond. by Māris Sirmais (Divine Art Recordings Group, MSV 28614, 2022).
[30] Greene, *The Early English Carol*, pp. lxxviii–lxxix.

yet similar to *A Babe is Born*, the text contains no burden, with each verse consisting of two lines of English followed by a liturgical Latin phrase. Contrary to Desmond, and, consequently, abiding by the more conventional format, the liturgical idioms do not allude to the musical phrases of plainchant. Instead, Clarke sets the different Latin expressions of praise with the same musical material, reflecting a burden or refrain.[31]

Structural Overview

Although, as Richard Greene states, the text of *Glad and Blithe* 'lack(s) the burden necessary for a true carol', Clarke achieves a traditional strophic structure by treating the English verses and Latin expressions of praise with distinct musical material, thus reflecting a verse-refrain format.[32] She uses compositional techniques such as drones, open fifths, and rhythmic modal writing throughout the setting, acknowledging medieval characteristics in an increasingly rich textural and harmonic framework more reflective of contemporary music. The eight-verse musical depiction of the Nativity culminates with a *fortissimo* homophonic declamation of '*Alleluia*', encapsulating the joy of the Christmas season (Table 7.3).

Verse	**Structural Features**
English 1	Monophonic – Solo soprano ad lib (C Ionian).
Latin 1	*Alleluia* Homophonic SATB - Cadential progression of first inversion VII^{9} to i^{7} (A Aeolian). - Open A seventh conclusion.
English 2	Monophonic – All sopranos
Latin 2	*Resmiranda* Homophonic SATB - Bass pedal A. - Cadential progression of second inversion iv^{4-3} to i (open). - Open A fifth conclusion. - Shift to 9/8 for final bar.
English 3	Tenor and bass parallel octaves - Less quaver-crotchet syncopation due to text syllables.
Latin 3	*Semper clara* Homophonic SATB - Bass drone on G2, resolving to A2 at cadence.

[31] Reese, p. 766.
[32] Greene, pp. lxxix–lxxx.

	- Cadential progression of second inversion $iv^{4–3}$ to i (open fifth).
English 4	Alto and tenor parallel octaves. - Accompanied by bass's A drone (medieval), which is continued from the burden. Denser texture than previous verses. - Second phrase in canon, with tenor echoing alto a bar later (bb. 27–30). Bass ascends to higher octave (A3). Soprano joins a bar after the tenor with a countermelody a third higher on E5, concluding with an inversion of the alto-tenor counterparts – a descending fifth (B4–E4). - Open A fifth conclusion.
Latin 4	*Pari forma* Homophonic SATB - Concluding cadence: vi– i^7 (open).
English 5	SSAATB. Expanded homophonic texture. - Melody: Soprano 2, alto 1, and tenor move in parallel. - Bass drone (A2). Alto 2 drone (E4). Harmonic stasis. - Soprano 1 accompanying 'ah', centred on E5, with concluding stepwise descent to B4, forming a major second with soprano 2 (A–B). - Less syncopation (only one quaver-crotchet on second syllable of 'barnè'). - Open i^9 conclusion (A–E–B: Dominant of D Aeolian) with *crescendo*.
Latin 5	*Fit corrupta* Homophonic SATB. - Modulation up a fourth to D Aeolian. - Closing cadence: $ii^{ø7}$–i (first time the complete minor triad is used at the end of the burden).
English 6	Homophonic SATB. - Voice crossing in upper voices. - More melodic activity in each voice. - Final bar of tenor's phrase features undulation between C# and B♮, signalling return to A Aeolian. - v–$VI^{6/3\#}$ (Em–F/A augmented) conclusion in A Mixolydian with flat sixth. Interrupted cadence with *decrescendo*.
Latin 6	*Valle nostra* Homophonic SSATB. - A Aeolian mode with original melody. - Soprano 1 with inverted E5 pedal tone. - Imperfect cadence on E minor (v).
English 7	Polyphonic SATB. - C major/Ionian. - Alto begins melody on C, imitated a fifth higher in G major by soprano at the distance of one dotted crotchet (bb. 52–53). - Bass G3 drone, joined by tenor's C4 drone two bars later (*mezzo-forte*). - Bass repeats first half of melody on C3 (*forte*, b. 55).

	- Hemiola in bar 59 with three crotchets moving homophonically. - G7 first inversion on final beat (VII$^{6/5}$ in A Aeolian).
Latin 7	*Carne sumpta* Homophonic SATB. - A Aeolian. - Plagal cadence (iv–i) with open A fifth and *crescendo*. - Shift to 9/8 in final bar.
Latin 8	*Alleluia* SSAATTB. - Return to 6/8. - Direct continuation from previous Latin phrase. *Fortissimo*. - Soprano 2 and alto 1 melody. - Final melismatic '*alleluia*' extended with a change to 4/4 in bar 67, followed by a return to 6/8 for sustained final syllable. - Harmonic congestion in final system (bb. 66–67). - Cadence of III^{11} to i (open fifth). Could be interpreted as E minor ninth with added C, indicating a perfect cadence in A Aeolian. - Sustained two-bar open fifth (A–E).

Table 7.3. Rhona Clarke, *Glad and Blithe* structure.

Echoes of the Past: Melodic and Rhythmic Structures

Although the principal melody remains relatively unchanged across each verse, Clarke alters the texture, timbre, and harmonic palette to provide musical contrast, while ensuring a sense of musical flow and coherence throughout. In relation to the defining features of a carol, Bukofzer observes that '[T]he most prominent unifying factor of the musical style is the reliance on a forthright and lilting rhythm', with settings characteristically in compound or triple time.[33] An archaic atmosphere is immediately established with the monophonic solo soprano's introduction of the four-bar phrase 'Glad and Blithe', the dotted and syncopated 6/8 rhythms reflecting the medieval rhythmic modes and enhancing the vigorous, dance-like tempo (bb. 1–4; Figure 7.17). In particular, the syncopated quaver-crotchet movement on the downbeat of the second and fourth bars — constituting the fourth rhythmic mode — recurs throughout the work, connecting the rhyming words and creating a sense of symmetry within the phrase.[34]

[33] Bukofzer, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Music*, p. 164.
[34] Edward H. Roesner, 'Rhythmic modes', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.23337> [accessed 28 August 2024].

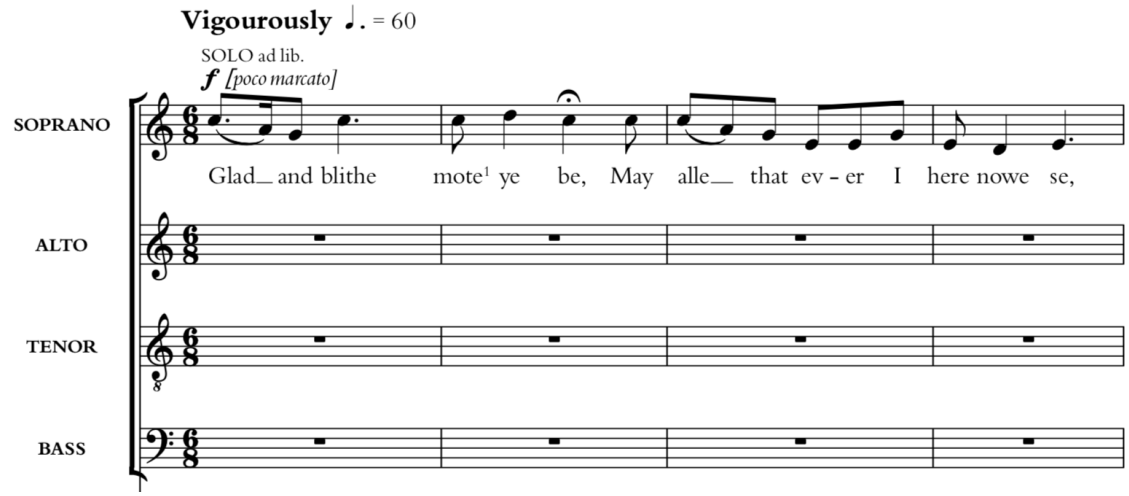


Figure 7.17. Rhona Clarke, *Glad and Blithe* (Waterford: Cailíno Music Publishers, 2019), bb. 1–4.

It is notable that Clarke also uses this rhythmic pattern extensively in *Make We Merry*, another of the *Three Medieval Carols*, particularly within the burden, highlighting her penchant for syncopated rhythms and the consistent use of medieval techniques in her carol settings (Figure 7.18). The C major/Ionian modality of the opening pentatonic verse of *Glad and Blithe* generates a joyous mood that reflects the meaning of the text, and harks back to the popular use of this mode for carols in the Middle Ages.[35] Another significant feature presented in the first bar, and recurring throughout *Glad and Blithe*, is the rising perfect fourth (G4–C5) to the second dotted crotchet beat, a melodic interval that is also prevalent in *Make We Merry*. Although it is likely coincidental, this ascending interval is also common in popular Christmas carols such as *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, *Away in a Manger*, and *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*, demonstrating its uplifting character and suitability for carol settings.

[35] Stevens, 'Carol, Pre-Reformation'.

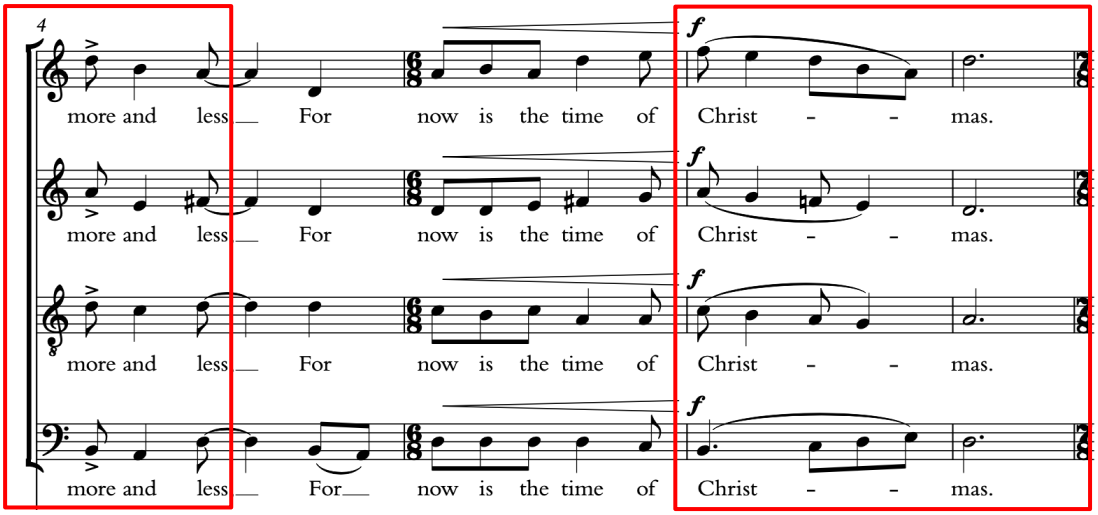


Figure 7.18. Rhona Clarke, *Make We Merry* (Waterford: Cailíno Music Publishers, 2019), bb. 4–7 (syncopation in red).

The entry of the full choir in bar 5 of *Glad and Blithe* introduces the first four-bar homophonic refrain — although each repeat has different Latin text — characterised by the soprano's repeated rising pattern of a second inversion broken A minor seventh chord (E–G–A–C) on '*Alleluia*', concluding with a stepwise descending melisma on the third syllable of the third repetition of text (C–G; Figure 7.19). The melodic structure reflects the tendency in medieval carols 'to begin syllabically and to place melismas toward the end of the phrase'.[36] Harmonically, the open fifth (E–B) on the downbeat of the first three bars of the refrain (bb. 5–7), as well as the momentary parallel fifths of the alto and soprano (bb. 5–6; D–A; F–C), and fourths of the tenor and alto (b. 7; B–E; C–F), underline the influence of medieval harmonic writing on Clarke's compositional approach. Furthermore, the quaver-crotchet rhythm continues to abound in all voices for much of the refrain, engendering a lively, swaying motion through the syllabic setting of '*Alleluia*', before shifting to independent rhythmic movement in each part in the final bar of the phrase (b. 8). The refrain's harmonic language is relatively simple, moving through an open E fifth, D minor seventh, and F major in first inversion for the initial three bars, before concluding with a G major ninth in first inversion resolving to an open A seventh (VII9–i7), constituting an Aeolian cadence and confirming the Aeolian mode of the phrase. While a medieval atmosphere is effectively created throughout the refrain, the added notes within the cadential progression — the added ninth (A) of the penultimate harmony, and the soprano's added seventh (G) above the concluding open fifth — provide a contemporary flavour to the music, extending beyond traditional harmony.

[36] Bukofzer, p. 168; See also Stevens, 'Carol, Pre-Reformation'.
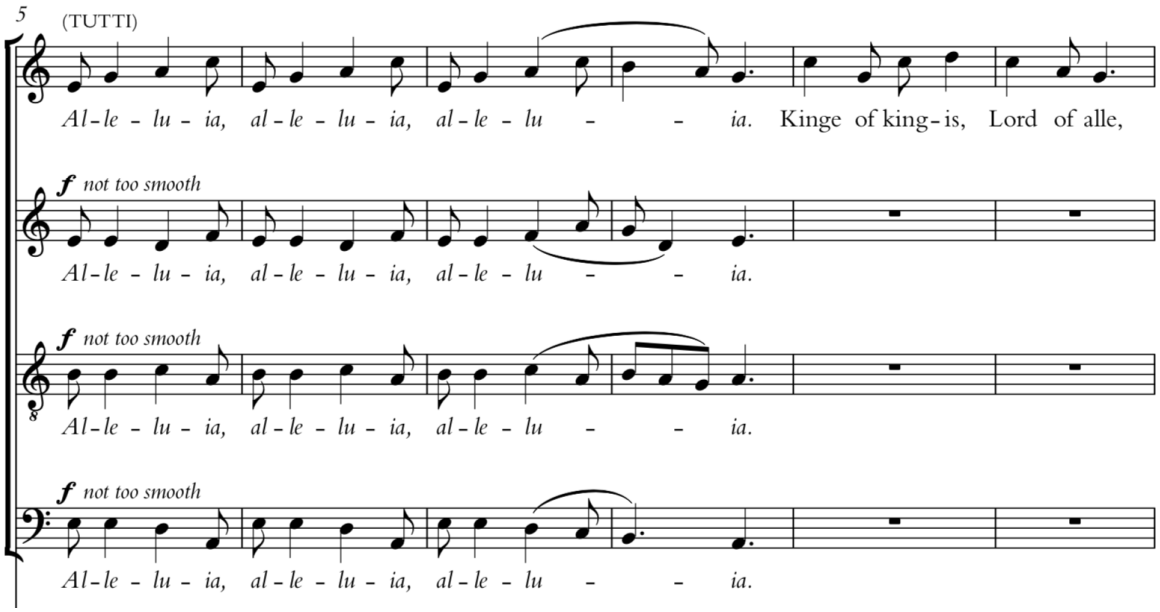


Figure 7.19. *Glad and Blithe*, bb. 5–10.

Drones

As the previous chapters have illustrated, drones have been employed in both Clarke's and Desmond's works, particularly in their sacred compositions.[37] This compositional technique not only engenders a sense of harmonic stasis but also creates an anachronistic atmosphere, given the common use of drones in medieval music.[38] In the Middle Ages, this accompaniment either took the form of vocal improvisation — where a drone or sustained chant line accompanied a soloist's melody[39] — or was played on an instrument, such as the organ, bagpipe, or hurdy gurdy, providing support to chant and secular melodies.[40] The *piano* second Latin expression '*Res miranda*' ('Wonderful thing') in Clarke's piece is accompanied by the bass's two-bar sustained A, followed by a fluctuating octave on the same note for the third repetition of text (bb. 13–16). The unchanged bassline results in less harmonic activity than the previous refrain, instead remaining on the tonic for the majority of the phrase. While the colour

[37] See Appendix B.
[38] Ultan Lloyd, *Music Theory: Problems and Practices in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 52; Peter Williams, 'The Meaning of Organum: Some Case Studies', *Plainsong & Medieval Music*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2001), 103–120 (p. 112) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0961137101000080> [accessed 29 August 2024].
[39] Timothy McGee, 'Medieval Performance Practice', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Music: Volume I*, ed. by Mark Everist and Thomas Forrest Kelly (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 582–608 (pp. 596–598).
[40] Nigel Wilkins, 'Instruments and the Music', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Music: Volume I*, pp. 451–474 (p. 464); John Caldwell, *Medieval Music* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1978), p. 114.

of the chords may change, based on the upper voices' motion, the overall harmony does not progress, remaining anchored in A minor. Desmond applies drones in a similar manner in *A Babe is Born*, as is evident in the *pastorale* and *meno mosso* sections, imbuing the music with an ancient sound while underlining the tonal centre of the section through harmonic stasis. In the case of the second Latin refrain of *Glad and Blithe*, the pedal A continues to the plagal cadence, which features a 4–3 suspension on a second inversion D minor chord moving to an open A fifth, further imbuing the music with a sense of the old (Figure 7.20).
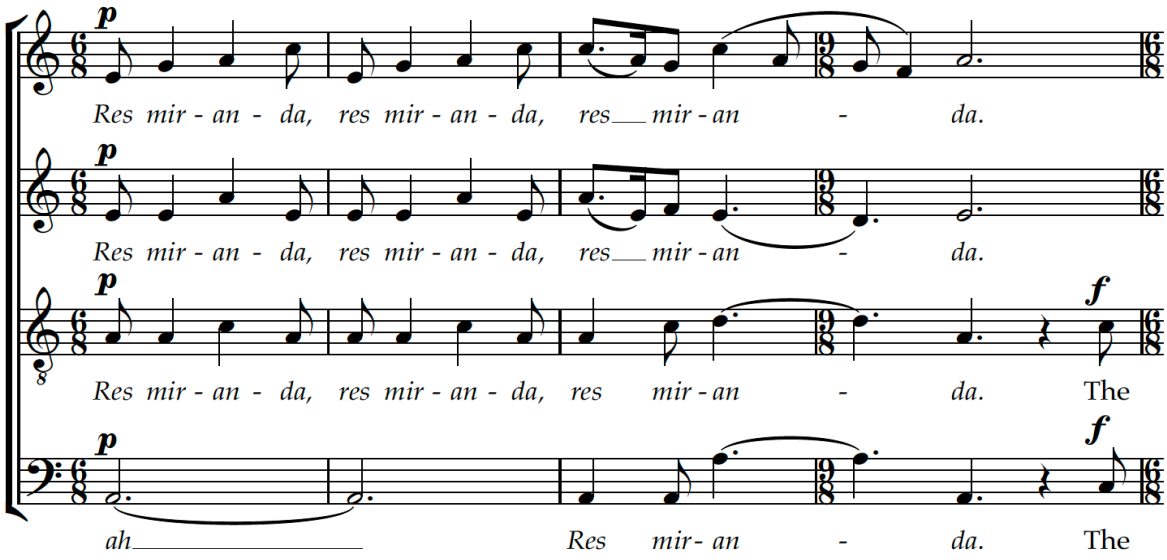


Figure 7.20. *Glad and Blithe*, bb. 13–16.

Drones accompany the third Latin refrain, as well as the fourth, fifth, and seventh English verses, continuing the practice of 'primitive polyphony' throughout the carol.[41] A broadened use of this ancient device is evident in the fifth verse ('Nother the star for his beme'), in tandem with the medieval technique of parallel voicing (bb. 35–39). Clarke also expands the texture to six parts, but the overall harmonic activity is reduced. The bass's A drone forms an open fifth with the sustained E of the second alto, while the second soprano, first alto, and tenor present the melody in unison. The open fifth between the bass and alto 2, continued from the open A seventh cadence of the previous burden, reflects the drone fifth common in plainchant accompaniment of the Middle Ages.[42] Soprano 1 adopts a melismatic countermelody on an '*ah*' vowel, harmonising with the principal melody in consonant intervals, and likely representing the 'star' within the text (Figure 7.21). The highest voice's concluding B offers a

[41] Caldwell, *Medieval Music*, p. 114.
[42] Williams, 'The Meaning of Organum', p. 112.

moment of contemporary nuance in the archaic fabric, representing the ninth of the final open A chord, with the major second between sopranos (A–B) reflecting the composer's consistent application of this harmonic interval in the upper voices of her works. The common use of oblique motion in Clarke's compositions is also effective on the approach to the cadence, creating tension in need of resolution. While soprano 1 and alto 2 sustain B and E, respectively, soprano 2 and alto 1 descend by step from B to F, creating secundal dissonance with the stationary voices on the second (A–B) and fourth notes (E–F) (b. 38). Clarke effectively increases the harmonic density as the verse progresses, the concluding open A ninth chord anticipating the Latin motif '*Fit corrupta*' ('Become corrupt') and transposition to D Aeolian.
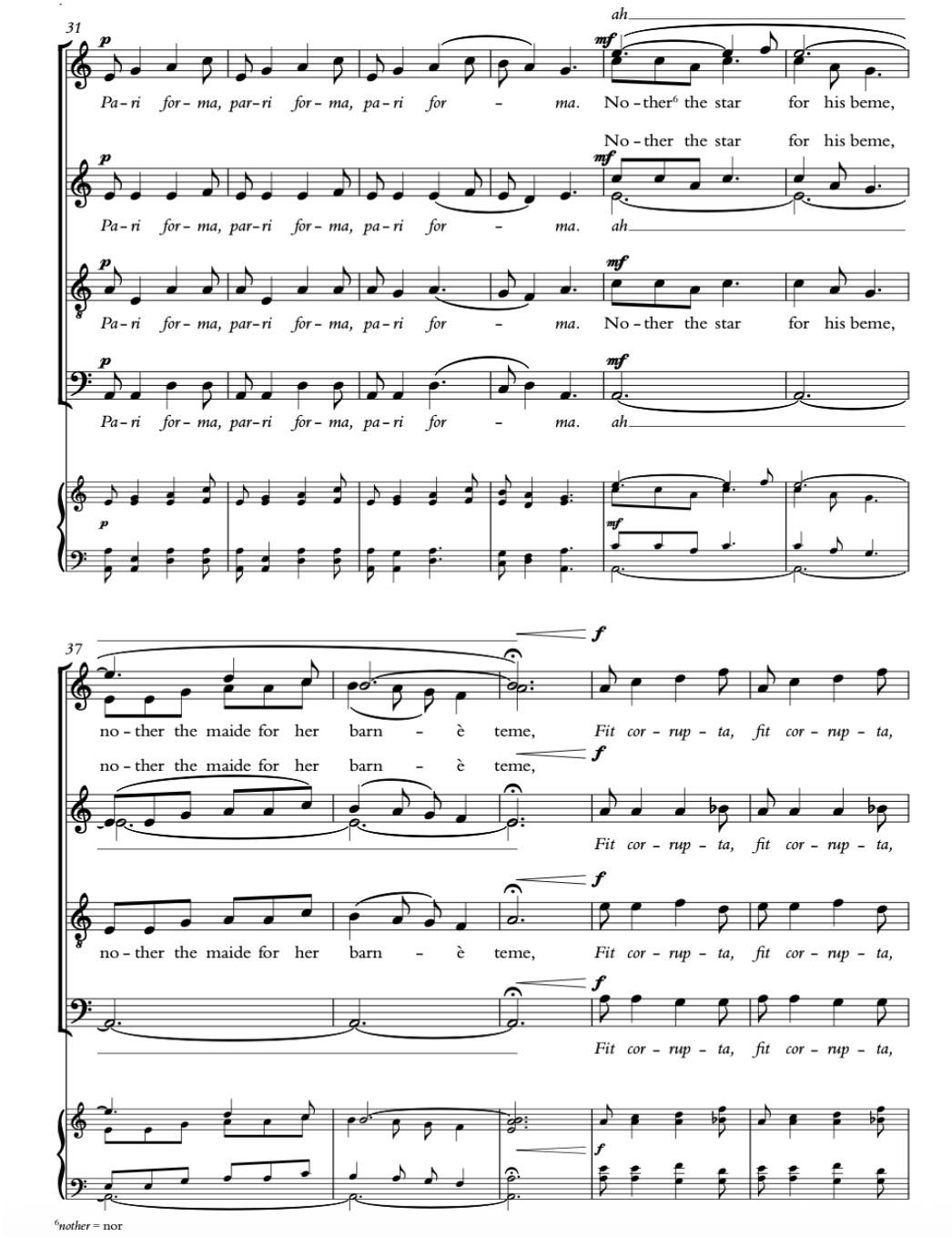


Figure 7.21. *Glad and Blithe*, bb. 31–41.

Texture as a Structural Device

Like Desmond in *A Babe is Born*, as well as in Clarke's other Christmas carols and broader oeuvre, the composer consistently alters the texture of each verse, presenting the melodic content in diverse ways. Reese remarks that there was greater variety in the musical texture of

the carol after 1480, with imitative counterpoint becoming a common feature by 1515.[43] Unlike much of her sacred and secular work, which emphasises the text's character or events through textural changes, contrasting textures within Clarke's carols appear to be used for structural purposes, diversifying and enlivening the overall strophic form. While the first three English verses consist of monophonic singing or parallel organum, the choral density is gradually increased from a solo soprano (verse 1), to all sopranos (verse 2), followed by tenor and bass parallel octaves (verse 3), which offers timbral contrast and reflects the organum singing of early music.

Verse 4 provides a release from this lack of harmony, as Clarke gradually enriches the textural fabric through drone accompaniment and imitative counterpoint (bb. 24–30; Figure 7.22). The first subphrase is not altered excessively, the alto and tenor continuing the parallel octave motion of the previous verse, but accompanied by the bass's A2 drone. As the drone ascends an octave, the overall textural activity is increased through imitative dialogue, reflecting the primitive polyphonic tapestry of medieval music. The alto continues the phrase, echoed by the tenor a bar later (b. 28), while the soprano subsequently enters the framework with a shortened variation of the melody a third higher on E5 (b. 29). All voices conclude on a second inversion of the open A fifth — due to the tenor's melody crossing beneath the bass's drone — anticipating the opening fifth (A–E) of the impending homophonic refrain.

[43] Reese, p. 767.
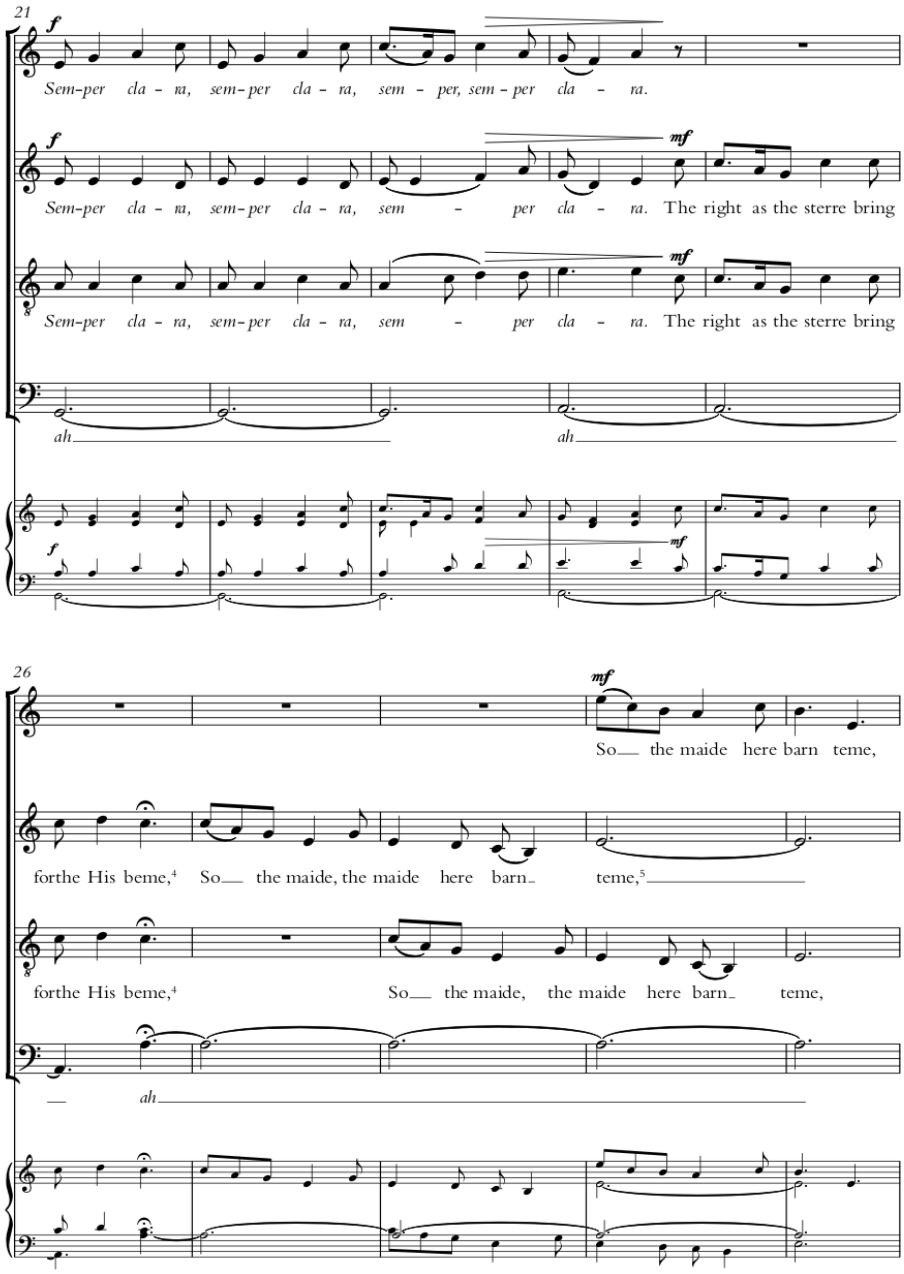


Figure 7.22. *Glad and Blithe*, bb. 21–30.

Drones and imitation dominate the final verse of Clarke's carol, while the C Ionian framework evokes a more uplifting tone than the previous Aeolian modality (bb. 52–59). The bass's G drone supports the alto's expression of 'God is sone of Heven bright' beginning on C5, echoed by the soprano at a dotted crotchet-beat interval a fifth higher (G5), reducing the one-bar distance of the previous canonic imitation in verse four. Clarke increases the complexity of the polyphonic motion for the second half of the phrase, expanding the interval between the soprano and alto to a sixth, varying their respective melodic material, and including the bass in the imitation. As the tenor adopts a C drone to support the soprano and alto (b. 54), the bass

repeats the opening melody on C3 (b. 55), conflicting with the upper texture's phrase continuation, thereby increasing the contrapuntal complexity of the verse (Figure 7.23).
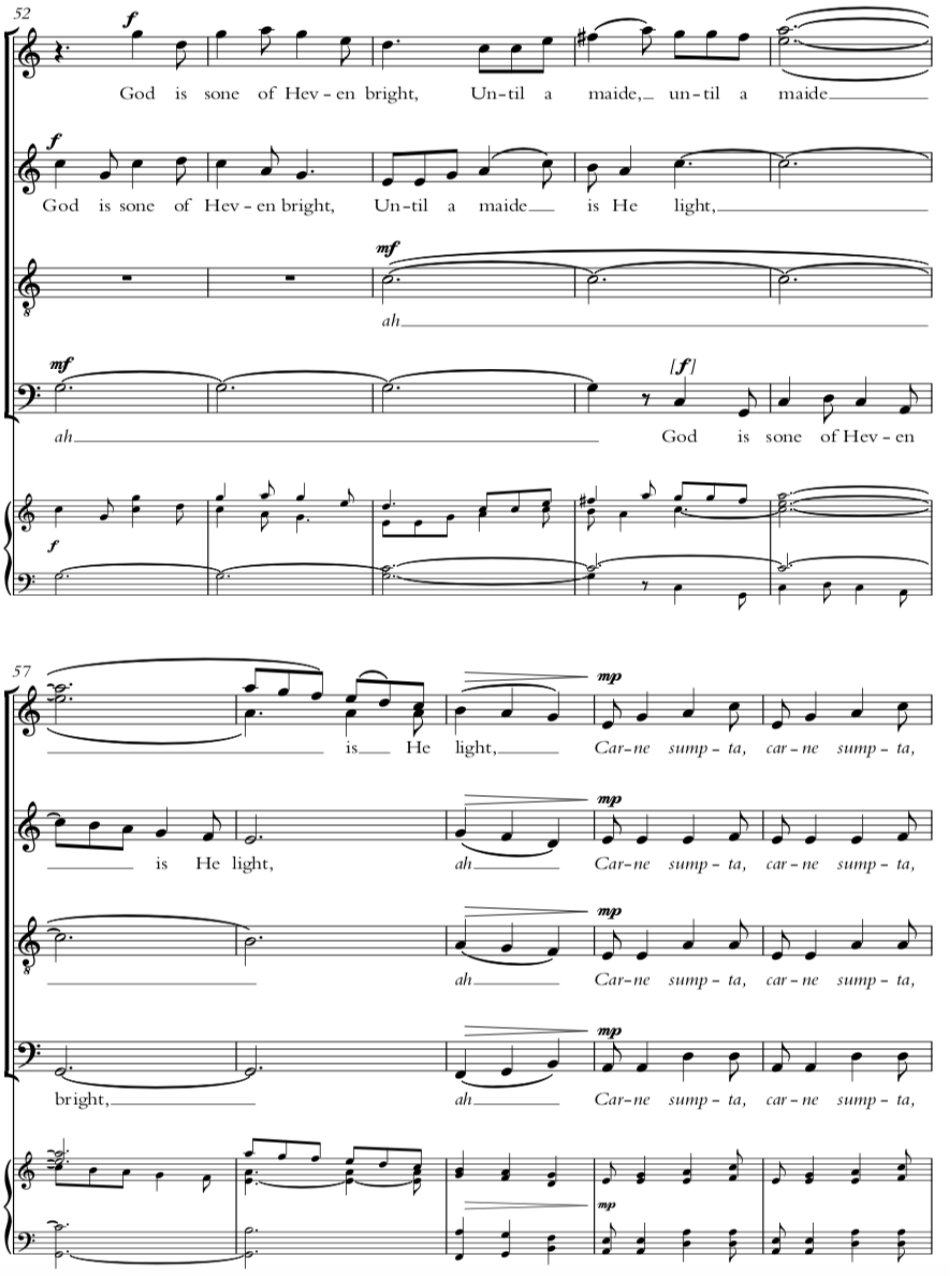


Figure 7.23. *Glad and Blithe*, bb. 52–61.

The contrasting texts and melodies within the polyphonic structure culminate in a homophonic hemiola that reintroduces the familiar A Aeolian Latin refrain (b. 59). The bass's three crotchets ascend in contrary motion with the upper texture's descent, the triple metre contradicting the 6/8 time signature. Following the contrapuntal interplay, the gradual transition to homophony, underlined by the hemiola and *decrescendo*, creates the impression

of extending the rhythmic motion, effectively signalling the penultimate *mezzo-piano* homophonic Latin refrain. Manfred Bukofzer and Julian Rushton note how hemiolas were 'particularly prevalent in the English carol repertory', which suggests that Clarke intended to reflect the traditional carol's rhythmic structure through this device.[44] Although hemiolas are not apparent in Desmond's *A Babe is Born*, his use of crotchet triplets in the work's climax has a similar effect of extending the rhythmic progression within the notated metre and preparing for the climactic conclusion.

While the hemiola, as well as the preceding imitative counterpoint and drone accompaniment, suggests the influence of medieval music, the harmonic progression leading to the refrain is centred on the dominant G major, but includes additional harmonic notes, highlighting Clarke's skill at simultaneously applying both contemporary and early musical techniques. The voices move through G major ninth in third inversion, G ninth without a third and fifth, and G dominant seventh in first inversion, anticipating a resolution to the tonic C major. However, the refrain ('*Carne sumpta*') begins with the characteristic open fifth on A, indicating the return to the Aeolian mode. Therefore, the harmonic progression could be perceived as an Aeolian cadence (VII6/5–i) — a recurring structural trait in *Glad and Blithe* — or an interrupted cadence (V6/5–vi) in C Ionian, resulting in the modulation to A Aeolian. As the music has progressed, Clarke has extended her palette of medieval techniques, gradually enriching the textural and harmonic framework, which builds to a final homophonic declamation of '*Alleluia*', rejoicing in the festive season.

A Climactic Conclusion

The *fortissimo* six-part homophonic climax reintroduces the '*Alleluia*' text of the first refrain, richer in harmonic and textural density (bb. 64–69; Figure 7.24). While soprano 2 and alto 1 sing the melody for the first three bars, supported by the undulating lower voices moving predominantly in open intervals, soprano 1 presents a fanfare-like countermelody that fluctuates a fifth between E5 and A4, increasing the triumphant character of the finale. The brief interjection of the dotted quaver-semiquaver-quaver stepwise descent from F5 to D5 before returning to the leaping fifth (b. 66) maintains the rhythmic consistency of the previous

[44] Julian Rushton, 'Hemiola', *Grove Music Online* (2001) <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.12768> [accessed 30 August 2024]; Bukofzer, p. 165.

refrains, the dotted motif recurring in the third bar of the Latin phrases throughout the work.[45] The harmonic framework of the first three bars reflects those of previous refrains, shifting from an open E fifth, to E minor, to an open D ninth.
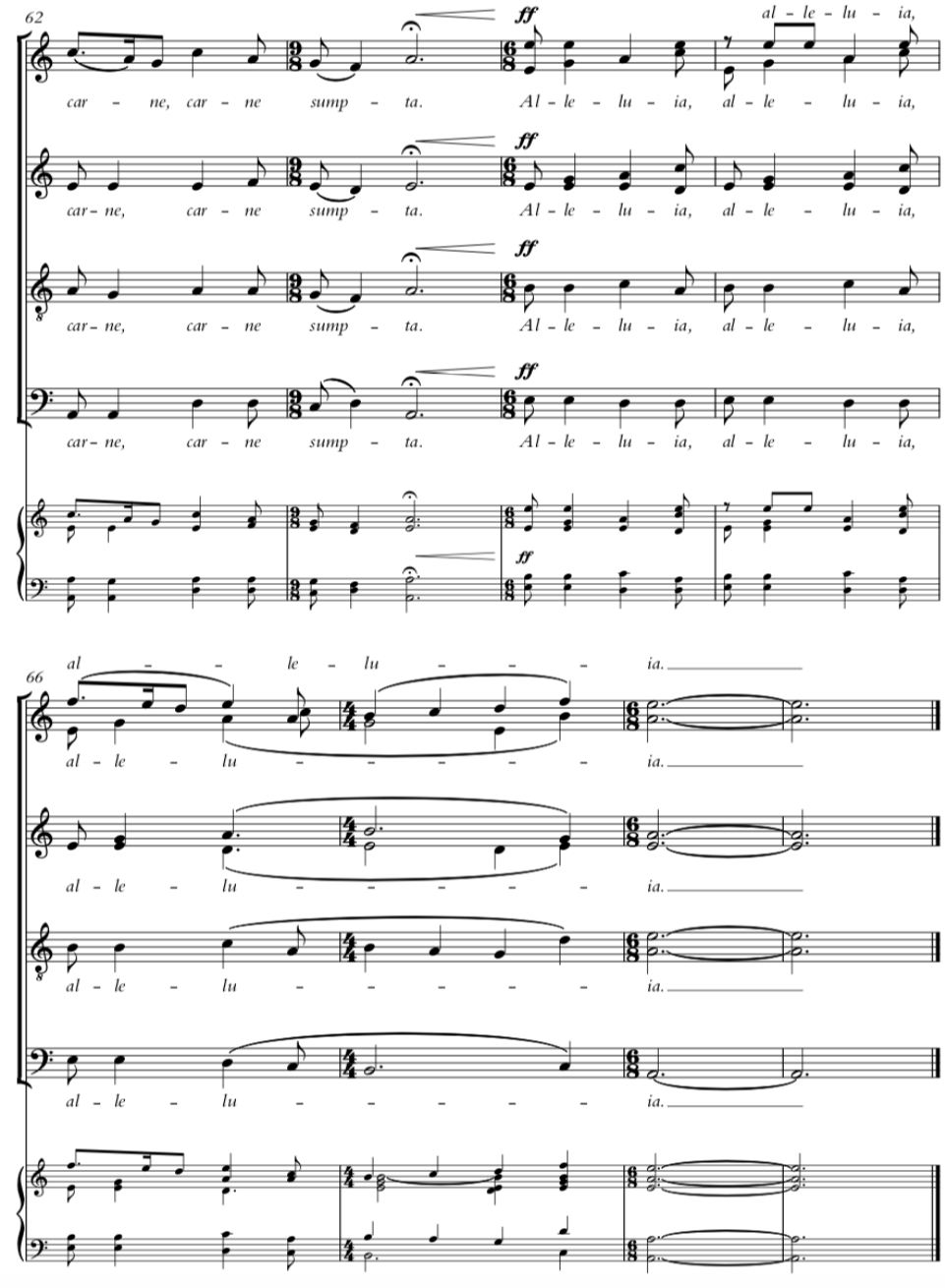


Figure 7.24. *Glad and Blithe*, bb. 62–69.

A change in metre, melodic role, and harmony in bar 67 signals the extended conclusion of the carol, culminating in an eight-part sustained open A fifth in the original 6/8 time (bb. 68–69).

[45] The dotted rhythmic motif occurs in refrains 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7.

Similar to Desmond's *A Babe is Born*, as well as her own carol *Make We Merry*, Clarke broadens the length of the final verse, with the third-last bar moving to 4/4, increasing the anticipation for the final harmony (b. 67). Soprano 1 assumes the main melodic function in the conclusion of *Glad and Blithe*, ascending in crotchets from B4 to D5, while the tenor descends from B3 to G3, before both voices leap in similar motion to F5 and D4, respectively, on the final beat of the bar (Figure 7.24). Like *A Babe is Born*, the surrounding voices intone more sustained rhythms, concluding on tied dotted minims on the final syllable of '*Alleluia*'.

In relation to the harmonic trajectory, following the undulating E minor–D ninth chords, the bass's C on the final quaver of bar 66 leads to the dominant in second inversion for three beats of the 4/4 bar. The voices progress through E minor in second inversion and E minor seventh in second inversion to C major eleventh, concluding on the open A fifth ranging from A2 to E5. This mediant–tonic progression is not a functional cadence and could alternatively be interpreted as an E minor ninth with C in the bass, which would indicate the more conventional perfect cadence in common practice harmony. The dense penultimate chord reflects the extended harmonies of contemporary music, while the resolution to the tonic open fifth anchors the work in the modal sound of medieval carols. Although Desmond's *A Babe is Born* features a ninth in the final open A chord, both settings conclude with the similar fifth, avoiding a definitive tonality through the lack of a third, and foregrounding the ancient origins of both texts.

Clarke's *Glad and Blithe* typifies a medieval carol, utilising many ancient rhythmic, harmonic, and textural techniques within the traditional strophic framework of the genre. While the compound metre and dotted and syncopated rhythms — drawn from the medieval rhythmic modes — embody the joyous, dance-like character of a carol, the prevalent use of drones, open fifths, and imitative counterpoint throughout the verses and refrains recalls the early polyphony and harmonies of the Middle Ages, from which the text derives. Despite remaining in strophic form, which somewhat constricts opportunities for development, Clarke gradually increases the complexity of the work, expanding the textural density from monophony to imitative polyphony, enriching the harmonic colour with additional notes, and increasing the melodic range in the latter verses, developing a sense of progression towards a climax. This expansion of harmony and texture, resulting in dissonance and more active melodic counterpoint, reflects the contemporary context in which the carol is composed, with Clarke embedding the medieval traits within a modern setting, and demonstrating her ability to consistently diversify the music in an effective manner.

Conclusion

Although both *Glad and Blithe* and *A Babe is Born* apply a broad range of historical compositional techniques, Clarke's and Desmond's respective manipulation of these musical features are not confined to these carols, as the previous chapters on their broader oeuvres have demonstrated. However, within the carol settings, both composers' innovative use of medieval devices creates a reimagined archaic sonority for the twenty-first century, while capturing the season of merriment. It could be argued that Clarke's more pronounced use of these past features — the structure, rhythmic setting, and most notably, the harmonies — generates a more authentic rendering of the medieval carol than Desmond's work, which presents a more contemporary harmonic palette and form. While both composers apply modes, open fifths, and parallel motion throughout their work, Desmond's harmonic progressions are ultimately denser, more dissonant — due to the extensive presence of false relations and chromatic alterations — and non-functional in nature, evading conventional cadences and tonalities. There are also more frequent modulations across *A Babe is Born*, contrasting with the more stable modal framework of *Glad and Blithe*, which remains in A Aeolian for the most part, with brief sections in C Ionian and D Aeolian.

Furthermore, Clarke abides by the more traditional strophic format, demonstrating greater consistency across each verse and refrain in terms of the melodic themes and harmonic patterns. There is also a clear, unaltered distinction between the verse and refrain throughout the carol, which differs dramatically from the overlapping idioms in *A Babe is Born* — most notably the '*Noel! Noel-el!*' interjections, which occur both in response to and in tandem with the English phrases. Although Desmond includes recurring musical material, such as the '*Noel! All is well!*' fragments and the undulating melodic fanfare theme in the verses, there are more pronounced modifications throughout the carol to reflect a narrative approach. For example, verse four's pastoral and polymodal chant-like duet provides a distinct contrast to the surrounding material, emphasising the shepherds' awe in the presence of the baby Jesus. Desmond also sets each Latin phrase to different music, representing a further distinction from Clarke's monothematic setting of the Latin stanza-closes.

Glad and Blithe perhaps remains truer to its medieval inspirations in terms of the metric structure, maintaining the dance-like 6/8 time for the majority of the work, with momentary shifts to 9/8 and 4/4. *A Babe is Born* exhibits more frequent metric shifts and irregular time signatures, such as 7/8 and 5/8, demonstrating the influence of contemporary asymmetrical

metres while capturing the buoyant, rapid narration of the Nativity.[46] Syncopated interjections of the '*Noel*' motif further underline the conflicting rhythms within Desmond's carol, as opposed to Clarke's more homorhythmic and standard imitative structures. In summary, while Desmond's *A Babe is Born* is certainly more complex harmonically, rhythmically, and texturally, Clarke's stratified textural and harmonic modifications within the stricter form of *Glad and Blithe* equally offer musical contrast but in a more reserved manner, reflective of a more authentic medieval carol. Both composers' contemporary carols effectively illustrate the synthesis of past and present musical techniques, and offer further insight into their individual compositional styles, demonstrating the recurrence of several of their characteristic musical traits.

[46] Clarke uses 7/8 extensively in *Make We Merry*, alternating between the irregular metre and 4/4 in each verse, combining past and present rhythmic techniques.

Conclusion

Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond have forged and continue to forge their own creative paths through their respective choral oeuvres, deftly integrating a variety of influences into their individual musical languages. The range and colour of their compositional palettes are evident across their outputs of sacred and secular works, with both conservative and innovative techniques, and old and new structures featuring across subjects of a similar and diverse nature. However, despite their eclectic arrays of influences, and their versatility in response to texts, each composer exhibits a consistency of compositional language, maintaining their own artistic voice.

The biographical accounts of Clarke and Desmond presented in Chapter One document their educational and other musical experiences, immersion in choral music since their youth, and the various influences on their compositional approaches. It is evident from their choral writing that both composers' early experiences in choirs proved formative, providing them with a valuable insight into the capabilities and sonorities of different voice types, timbral effects, and different historical styles and features, ranging from the medieval to contemporary. Singing with choirs such as the Lindsay Singers and Gaudete Chamber Choir developed Clarke's familiarity with a diverse range of music from the Renaissance to the twentieth century. Furthermore, her frequent attendance at the Cork International Choral Festival and the Ennis Composition Summer School introduced her to contemporary choral and instrumental techniques, which she would integrate into her own writing. Equally, Desmond's experience as a chorister since the age of nine, and subsequent profession singing with Chamber Choir Ireland and various cathedral and chamber choirs, has had a crucial impact on his compositional development and practice. His regular performance of sacred music and chant within the cathedral context, and of contemporary secular music with Chamber Choir Ireland, ignited a keen interest in merging the old and new in his own compositions. Additionally, Desmond's doctoral studies in sacred choral composition 'nurtured and encouraged' his love of historical music in particular, allowing his 'pre-occupation with contrapuntal technique' and his overall style to evolve.[1]

Clarke's and Desmond's fascination with early music is discernible in their quotation of chant and existing melodic material from historical composers, their preference for a modal

[1] Eoghan Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2: Commentary and Appendix' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 2020), p. 9.

palette in much of their work, and their manipulation of past formal structures, such as fugues and imitative counterpoint, particularly at important textual moments. As Beard and Gloag note, 'older styles may be adapted and integrated into a more contemporary musical language.'[2] Contemporary features are also prevalent in both composers' music, including ambient ostinati in the work of Desmond, *Sprechstimme* and body percussion in the work of Clarke, along with aleatoricism and non-functional, dissonant harmonic palettes, all of which directly serve to communicate the text being set, and have been crafted to suit the choirs performing the music.

Despite often drawing on similar historical and modern techniques, Clarke's and Desmond's styles are quite different, their respective oeuvres demonstrating their individual interpretations and approaches to text, and revealing their preferences for particular sonorities. However, neither composer's output could be deemed esoteric; there is a strong focus on the music being accessible and engaging. As Desmond states, 'I want to write music that singers will want to sing again, conductors will want to conduct again, and audiences will want to hear again'.[3] Clarke echoes this perspective, asking herself 'What do I want to hear? [...] What do I want to sing? [...] You must write to the capabilities of that particular choir'.[4] Professional and amateur choirs' frequent performances of both composers' music is testament to their craft and to the appeal of their compelling compositions.

Chapter Two noted the paucity of research on the work of Clarke and Desmond to date. Despite Clarke's established career spanning five decades, investigations into her compositional oeuvre — choral, instrumental, and electroacoustic — have been limited. Prior to the present project, there were no published analytical studies on Desmond's compositions; this research represents the first in-depth analysis of his choral style.[5] The chapter also outlined how literature on historical and current compositional trends, and on the compositional styles of others such as James MacMillan and Arvo Pärt, contributed to understanding Clarke's and Desmond's creative techniques, and to formulating the analytical structure of this study. The examination of literature on key facets of the analytical approach within this thesis — primarily style, text setting, and quotation and allusion — also revealed the various layers considered when interpreting the composers' decisions and their approaches to choral writing.

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[2] David Beard and Kenneth Gloag, *Musicology: The Key Concepts*, 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 238.
[3] Eoghan Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[4] Rhona Clarke, interviewed by Jonathan Grimes and Evonne Ferguson, 'amplify #64 – Rhona Clarke on her new choral album 'Sempiternam'', The Contemporary Music Centre, podcast, 28 March 2022 <https://www.cmc.ie/amplify/episode–64> (14:57–15:18; 24:32–24:38) [accessed 16 February 2023].
[5] This author has since published two articles on Desmond's pieces *Nothing in Vain* (2021) and *Amra Choluim Chille* (2019).

Chapter Three articulated the principal characteristics of Rhona Clarke's choral style, drawing on a selection of works from her extensive oeuvre. The analysis elucidates her experienced, consistent approach to writing for voices, and her ability to capture the essence of each piece through her textural organisation, harmonic language, and timbral palette. While she draws on past musical influences, primarily through her modal sonorities, pedal points, chant-like melodies, and allusion to musical fragments from medieval to twentieth-century pieces, her individual voice is illuminated through her idiomatic writing, melodic oscillations, proclivity for unresolved secundal dissonances and mixed-interval chords, and her use of extended techniques such as *glissandi*. The examined early-career works, *A Song for St Cecilia's Day* (1991) and *Rorate Caeli* (1994), demonstrate fingerprints that recur throughout Clarke's output, including melodic undulations, pedal tones, and secundal dissonance in the upper voices. The former work also exhibits the composer's early exploration of timbre — coinciding with her doctoral studies in electroacoustic composition — with *Sprechstimme* evident through the phrase 'Then cold and hot and moist and dry', combined with sung tones, revealing her pragmatism and desire to ensure singers find their pitch from a sounding note. Clarke's tendency to 'shy away' from extended techniques at this stage was likely due to a combination of lacking confidence in her compositional voice, and ensuring her work is accessible for choirs to sing.[6] While there are no instances of extended vocal techniques in pieces such as *Salve Regina* (2007), *Regina Coeli* (2007), and *The Kiss* (2008), Clarke applies her favoured devices, such as drones, secundal intervals, melodic oscillations, and antiphonal dialogue between the upper and lower textures, demonstrating a consistent style that is responsive to the set text and the choirs for which she writes.

Beard and Gloag affirm how 'it is style that generates evolution in music, as composers make choices that challenge and possibly overturn existing genres, or a composer's own earlier music.'[7] Chapter Three spotlighted the notable change in Clarke's use of timbre since 2016, the composer returning to extended vocal techniques such as *Sprechstimme* and *glissandi*, and including percussive effects in her works, with a sophisticated voice. She reflects on how her 'thoughts on making something very definitely sound of now might have triggered the use of extended techniques from that date, 2016'.[8] Additionally, Clarke's exploration of timbre in her instrumental works, particularly *SHIFT* (2013), and her collaborative work with visual artist

[6] Rhona Clarke in 'Rhona Clarke's *Sempiternam*', *Culture File*, RTÉ Lyric FM, 14 April 2022 <https://www.rte.ie/radio/podcasts/22087792> (3:19–3:35) [accessed 26 November 2023].
[7] Beard and Gloag, *Musicology: The Key Concepts*, p. 239.
[8] Rhona Clarke, interview with the author, 10 January 2025.

Marie Hanlon, likely influenced the inclusion of similar features in her choral work. The examined pieces from 2016 to 2024 exhibit bolder compositional choices and stylistic cohesiveness, with the recurrence of striking harmonic colours and timbral and textural contrasts, which are effectively adapted to suit each text's theme and character. Yet, the melismatic undulations, pedal tones, modal melodies, and close upper harmonies evident in her earlier compositions are still present, exemplifying Clarke's consistent style and individual voice. The composer has noted how her synthesis of historical and contemporary musical ideas is 'just who I am musically, that is where I go'.[9] However, in a choral era dominated by slow homophony and mellifluous tone clusters, Clarke seeks something she is yet to hear: 'That means it hasn't been written yet and I have to do it. That's a good thing.'[10] She consistently tailors her compositional toolkit to suit the choir and to communicate the text's subject and mood, deftly illustrating her ability to create compelling sound worlds that bring words to life. As Mark Fitzgerald affirms:

> [W]hether it is the summoning up of images of immutable light ('Lux Aeterna'), the evocation of visceral pain (*Ave Atque Vale*) or the sensual tracing in sound of the lines of a woman's lips (*The Kiss*), Clarke finds a directness and immediacy of expression enabling her to sing these feelings into being.[11]

Eoghan Desmond has produced a substantial body of choral music, exhibiting an eclectic style that draws on diverse influences, ranging from Renaissance polyphony to ambient electronic music. Like Clarke, his music is 'responsive to the circumstances' — the choir's abilities, the sacred or secular context, and the text.[12] The analysis in Chapter Four illustrates how Desmond's craft has been significantly influenced by his performance experience, his extensive knowledge of historical and contemporary repertoire serving as a well of inspiration throughout his career. This experience is evident in the regular quotation of existing melodic themes, his chant-like melodies, and subtle use of false relations, conveying the importance of idiomatic vocal writing and the independence of voicing in his more contrapuntal textures, and revealing his fondness for tradition. The composer has acknowledged his 'slightly luxurious twenties and early thirties', in which he had the opportunity to write extensively for Chamber Choir Ireland and, therefore, explore a broader palette of techniques, including over-articulated

[9] Clarke, interview with the author, 10 January 2025.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Mark Fitzgerald, 'Rhona Clarke: The power and physicality of the voice', *Sempiternam: Choral Music by Rhona Clarke*, State Choir LATVIJA, cond. by Māris Sirmais (Divine Art Recordings Group, MSV 28614, 2022), para 8.
[12] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.

text, elaborate word painting, harsh dissonance, rhythmic complexities, and humorous quotation in works such as *Mother Goose's Melodies* (2014) and *More Mother Goose's Melodies* (2016).[13] However, his later compositions, such as *Nothing in Vain* (2021) and *An Gleann Mór* (2022), exhibit a more refined approach to text setting, concentrating on evoking the overall mood and essence of the texts within the music, as opposed to overt word painting and flamboyant complexity.

While Desmond still composes regularly for professional chamber ensembles, his career as a singer with cathedral choirs — where rehearsal time tends to be limited — has contributed to a change in his focus towards writing music that is more accessible to a broader range of ensembles. He has expressed how he would like to, 'with all that experience, get back to something that is just a little bit more utilitarian'.[14] His increased use of ostinati, repeated harmonic progressions, and stratified polyphony, which aligns with the period of his PhD studies and subsequent move to England, reveals the development of Desmond's compositional craft. As he states, 'I have come to develop a unified approach to composition, that I hope enables me to bind together an occasionally eclectic output into a coherent body of work.'[15] This thesis has provided the first comprehensive insight into Desmond's formative years, tracing his evolving compositional style and varied oeuvre over a ten-year period. At the time of writing, the composer is still in his thirties, his compositional idiom likely to continue to develop and mature in future years, which will provide fertile ground for further scholarly research into Desmond's work and style.

Chapter Five examined *Requiem* (2020), a large-scale work by Rhona Clarke, analysing her multifaceted approach to setting the four prayers of peace: '*Introit*', '*Lux Aeterna*', '*Pie Jesu*', and '*In Paradisum*'. The composer's mature style is expressed throughout this work, the consistent techniques evident across her previous compositions blending with her more recent use of extended vocal techniques, timbral contrasts, and manipulation of pre-existing melodies. The four movements, which repeat the same textual passages — '*Requiem aeternam*' and '*Dona eis requiem*' — also reveal Clarke's versatility in generating new musical material for the repeated phrases across the larger work, befitting the tone of each movement. The composer acknowledged the challenge of setting the same text in diverse ways, yet professed that 'I like those kinds of problems'.[16] While the pervasive tenor-bass ostinato in the lower voices,

[13] Desmond, interview with the author, 8 January 2025.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Desmond, 'Amra Choluim Chille: Volume 2: Commentary and Appendix', p. 14.
[16] Rhona Clarke, interview with the author, 31 January 2025.

counterbalanced by the subsequent upper-voice chorale, generates a dark, mournful atmosphere in '*Introit*', the undulating melodic seconds and cluster harmonies of the eight-part upper texture in '*Lux Aeterna*' create a more otherworldly ambience, painting the image of perpetual light shining upon the deceased. '*Pie Jesu*' is arguably the most anomalous of Clarke's works, due to its minimalist repetitions and slow homophony. However, the idiomatic writing, undulating melody of the soprano's ostinato, unresolved harmonic seconds, and the concluding mixed-interval chord reveal the composer's familiar voice, albeit implicitly. '*In Paradisum*' epitomises Clarke's ability to draw on the past while ensuring her music sounds of now, the soloists' fragments of plainchant alternating with the contemporary harmonies and extended techniques of the choir. *Requiem* clearly exhibits Clarke's compositional style and distinctive voice, underlining her careful consideration of the liturgical texts within the work, and her skill at combining ancient and modern techniques and structures in a cogent manner.

Through an extensive analysis of Eoghan Desmond's cantata *Amra Choluim Chille* (2019), Chapter Six elucidated his narrative approach to text setting and his developing compositional style. While this work includes text painting, such as the ascending melody attached to the image of Columba's ascent to heaven, the composer focuses more on the broader musical material to convey the ancient Irish story. His use of diverse textures has multifaceted functions, being either symbolic in nature ('cross motif'), or playing a more expressive role, such as the polymodal fugal depiction of Columba's battle with Satan. Desmond's use of traditional (jig and scotch-snap rhythms; harp and crotales), historical (St. Columba's hymn; Renaissance-style polyphony, fugues, modality), and contemporary (non-functional harmonic progressions, dissonance, aleatoricism, polyrhythms) elements weave together an expressive, immersive musical narrative for voices, strings, and percussion that exemplifies the composer's maturing style. It could be argued that *Amra Choluim Chille* represents a turning point in Desmond's compositional approach, given the increased, yet refined use of similar techniques, such as repeated harmonic progressions, layered polyphony, polyrhythms, and false relations in subsequent works such as *Nothing in Vain*, *An Gleann Mór*, and *Beloved*. As Desmond's compositional career continues to progress, it will be interesting to observe how his style and application of his favoured devices continue to evolve.

In Chapter Seven, the juxtaposed analysis of two Christmas carols — Desmond's *A Babe is Born* (2017) and Clarke's *Glad and Blithe* (2014) — sheds light on the prominent medievalisms in both pieces, which the composers integrate into their respective contemporary choral tapestries. While the analysis did not seek to directly compare both composers' settings of medieval texts, the findings reveal common sources of inspiration in their use of drones,

modal melodies, and open and parallel harmonies, which they blend with modern techniques, such as irregular time signatures, polymodality, dissonant and extended harmonies, and diverse textures. Similar to the works analysed in the previous chapters, the carols illustrate Clarke's and Desmond's processes of reimagining past techniques in a contemporary context. Furthermore, both pieces encapsulate the versatility of the composers' styles, which are constantly adapted to the text and circumstances of the music.

This thesis can serve as a foundation for further research into the music of Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond, such as their works for other forces — solo, chamber, and electroacoustic — which would help us to contemplate the evolution of their respective compositional styles and their application of specific musical techniques across different genres. Additionally, the thesis may stimulate investigations into the work and styles of their contemporaries, providing an analytical lens through which to examine the principal characteristics of their compositional outputs. Moreover, it is hoped that the research can benefit performers and interpreters of Clarke's and Desmond's choral works, helping them to comprehend the composers' creative approaches, expressive intentions, and distinctive compositional voices.

Ultimately, the analysis of the choral music of Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond presented here has revealed two rich, compelling bodies of repertoire, and has articulated and examined the core features of the composers' choral outputs, capturing in particular the striking blend of tradition and innovation evident in each case. Both achieve a directness of expression in their music, deftly communicating the characters of the diverse sacred and secular texts they set, in ways that exhibit their individual styles. Clarke's and Desmond's respective choral experiences, their absorption of historical and contemporary influences, and their consummate skill in writing for voices have resulted in eclectic compositional styles, and in music that is deeply engaging, and rewarding to perform for both amateur and professional ensembles.

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Appendix A

Chronological List of Choral Works by Rhona Clarke (1983–2025)

Name	Date	Voicing
Suantraí Ghráinne	1983	SSA
Gloria Deo	1988	Soprano solo, SATB, and orchestra
Psalm 148	1988	SATB SATB and piano/organ
Gloria	1989	SSAATTBB
Cantate Domino	1990 (rev 2022)	SSAA
Triptych	1990	SATB (div.) and chamber ensemble
A Song for St Cecilia's Day	1991	SATB (div.)
Rorate Caeli	1994 (rev 2020)	SSATB (div.)
Géibheann	1998	SSA
There are also Musicians	1998	SSA (div.)
Missa	1999	SSA (div.), soli, and chamber orchestra SSA, piano
Jubilate Domino	2000	SSA (div.), soli, and organ
Thugamar Féin an Samhradh Linn	2000	SSA (div.)
Mo Pháistín Fionn	2002	SSA (div.)
Do Not Stand at my Grave	2006 (rev 2010)	SATB, soli
Two Marian Anthems - *Regina Coeli* - *Salve Regina*	2007	SSATB (div.) SSAATTBB
The Kiss	2008	SATB (div.)
Cnámh	2008	SSAA, soli
Síofra Sí	2008	SSA (div.)
Street Dancer	2010	Narrator, SATB, instruments
Veni Creator Spiritus	2010	SSAATTBB
Three Carols on Medieval Texts - *Make We Merry* - *Glad and Blithe* - *Lullay, My Liking*	2014	SATB (div.)
The Old Woman	2016	SATB (div.)
Ave Atque Vale	2017	SATB (div.)
O Vis Aeternitatis	2020	SATB (div.)
Requiem - *Introit* - *Lux Aeterna* - *Pie Jesu* - *In Paradisum*	2020	SATB (div.), soli
A Bit of Nonsense	2020	SATB

- ‘Dear Santa’ - ‘Busy’ - ‘Multitasking’ - ‘Long Time Ago’		
It Matters	2021	SAB
Sweet the Song: Three Carols on the Nativity - ‘Nowell: Dieu vous garde’ - ‘Sweet was the song’ - ‘That Noble Place’	2022	SSA (div.)
Navigatio	2023	SSAATTBB
Words on Rhythm	2023	TTBB
Epitaph	2024 (rev 2025)	SATB (div.)
Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis	2024	SSAA
A Welsh Carol (Sing Levy Dew)	2025	SATB
Points of Light	2025	Chorus and Symphony Orchestra
The Unconquerable Soul	2025	SATB chorus, solo violin, solo cello, piano, string ensemble

Chronological List of Choral Works by Eoghan Desmond (2006–2025)

Name	Date	Voicing
Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis – Fauxbourdons	2006	ATBarB
Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis – Short Service	2006	SATB
Mother Goose's Melodies	2014	SSAATTBB, soli
A Meditation for St Cecilia	2014	SATB (div.)
Crux Fidelis	2014	AATBB
Upon the Rose	2014	SSS (children's choir)
Aedh Wishes for the Clothes of Heaven	2015	SATB (div.)
The Language of Birds	2015	Trebles and organ
More Mother Goose's Melodies	2016	SSAATTBB
Oh, Most Merciful	2016	SATB (div.)
Ceiliúradh	2016	SATB
The Darkest Midnight	2016	Soprano solo, Baritone solo, SATB
4 Medieval Carols - *Adam Lay yBounden* - *There is no Rose* - *Coventry Carol* - *A Babe is Born*	2014–2017	SSAATTBB, SATB, soli.
Drop, Drop, Slow Tears	2017	AATTBB
De Ascensione Eius in Caelum	2017	SATB, organ
This is my Prayer to Thee	2017	Tenor solo, SATB
Oxen of the Sun	2017	SATB (div.), French horn
Childish Things	2017	SSA (div.)
The Falling Tear	2017–2018	AATTBB, organ
A Prayer Before Sleep	2018	SSATBB
The Flower of Youth	2018	Tenor solo, SATB, organ
Carol of the Field-Mice	2018	SATB, organ
Don Oíche Úd I mBeithil	2018	SSAA, soli
O Sacrum Convivium	2018	Tenor solo, SSATBB
Almighty and Everlasting God	2018	ATB
Dearest Old Darling	2018	Barbershop Quartet (ATBarB)
Be All Merry	2018	SATB, violin
Be All Merry	2019	SATB, violin solo, strings
Sir Christëmas	2019	SATB (div.)
I Sing of a Maiden	2019	SATB
The Morningstar	2019	SATB (div.)
All This Time/ Verbum Caro Factum Est	2019	SATB (div.)

Amra Choluim Chille	2019	SSAATTBB, soli, instruments
Une Prière pour Notre Dame de Paris	2019	SATB
Comrades	2019	SSAATTBB
Egredietur Jesus	2020	AATTBB
De Angelo Domini	2021	SATB, cello
Make Good Cheer!	2021	SATB, organ
Sans-Day Carol	2021	TBarB
Floreat Sodalitas Ruat Res	2021	SATB, piano
Nothing in Vain	2021	SATB (div.), soli
Awake, Ye Drowsy Mortals All! Hodie Christus Natus Est	2021 (rev 2022)	SSAATTBB
In Monte Oliveti	2022	SATB
Aestimatus Sum	2022	SSATB
An Gleann Mór	2022	SATB (div.)
Rain has Fallen	2022	SATB (div.), chamber ensemble
Beloved	2023	SATB (div.), flute
As Two Fair Trees	2024	Choir and Organ
I Am	2024	SSAATTBB
The Wayfaring Stranger	2024	SSATB
Guthanna ar an gCnoc	2025	SSAATTBB
Preces and Responses	2025	Cantor and SATB
Christmas Night	2025	SATB

Appendix B

Recurring Compositional Techniques in Rhona Clarke's Choral Works

Compositional Technique	Sacred Works	Secular Works
Word painting	**Melodic:** *Salve Regina* (2007) - Chromatic descent in SSAA texture through '*gementes et flentes in hac lacrimarum valle*' ('mourning and weeping in this valley of tears'). *Regina Coeli* (2007) - Descending-ascending minor seventh leap through '*Resurrexit*' (soprano 1 and alto), illustrating the resurrection. **Textural/Harmonic:** *Rorate Caeli* (1994) - Monophonic, ascending expression of '*aperiatur*' ('open'). *O Vis Aeternitatis* (2020) - Broad textural and harmonic expression of '*dolore*' ('suffering') through suspensions and dense texture. *Requiem* (2020) - '*Lux Aeterna*': Flickering undulating triplets through the upper texture on '*lux*' depicts 'light'. - 'In Paradisum': Aleatoric treatment of '*aeternam*' with repeated motifs at indeterminate tempi illustrating 'eternity'. *Nunc Dimittis* (SSAA, 2024) - Aleatoric treatment of 'of all peoples' with the indeterminate tempi and repetitions painting the image of all people.	**Melodic:** *Do Not Stand at my Grave and Weep* (2006, rev. 2010) - Descending melisma on 'cry' through SAT texture. *The Kiss* (2008) - Melodic minor third undulation in 7/8 on 'drowsy'. *The Old Woman* (2016) - 5/8 melismatic treatment of 'worms' in alto and tenor. - Melisma on 'turned' in basses and 'around' in altos. - Descending seventh with *glissandi* in soprano 1 and descending second in alto on 'fainted'. - Staccato quaver on 'shock' followed by instruction to 'Freeze'. - *Portamento* melisma on 'moan' in tenors. *A Bit of Nonsense* (2020) - 'Multitasking': Melismatic treatment of 'multitasking' in soprano and alto (conclusion). *Words on Rhythm* (TTBB, 2023) - Slower, sustained rhythms on 'slow'. **Textural/Harmonic:** *Street Dancer* (SATB, Narrator, Instruments, 2010) - Gradual expansion of texture and pitch from bass 2 to soprano 1 (SSAATTBB), with text repetition, on 'thousands and thousands and millions of stars'. *Ave Atque Vale* (2017) - Melismatic rising quaver motif echoed across the polyphonic texture to reflect Catullus's 'drowning tears' ('*Accipe fraterno multim manantia fletu*').

		A Bit of Nonsense - 'Multitasking': Dramatic change to homophonic SAT singing on 'at the same time'. *Epitaph* (2024) - Extended polyphonic treatment with melismas and repeated motifs on 'forever and ever'.
Undulations	*Psalm 148* (1988) - Brief undulating seconds on 'Praise' – recurring) *Gloria* (1989) *Rorate Caeli* *Cantate Domino* (SSAA, 1990, rev. 2022) *Salve Regina* *Veni Creator Spiritus* (2010) *O Vis Aeternitatis* *Requiem* *Sweet the Song* (2022, SSA) *Navigatio* (2023) *A Welsh Carol* (2025)	*Suantraí Ghráinne* (SSA, 1983) *A Song for St. Cecilia's Day* (1991) *Géibheann* (SSA, 1998) *Do Not Stand at my Grave and Weep* *Cnámh* (SSAA, soli, 2008) *Síofra Sí* (SSA, 2008) *The Kiss* *Street Dancer* *The Old Woman* *Ave Atque Vale* *A Bit of Nonsense* - 'Dear Santa' - 'Multitasking' - 'A Life' *It Matters* (2021) *Epitaph*
Scalic movement	*Rorate Caeli* *Regina Coeli* *O Vis Aeternitatis* *Requiem* - '*Introit*' *Sweet the Song* - 'Nowell: Dieu vous garde': Rising three-note scalic motifs on 'sing'.	*Street Dancer* *The Old Woman* *Ave Atque Vale* *A Bit of Nonsense* - 'Dear Santa' - 'Multitasking' *It Matters* *Words on Rhythm* *Epitaph*
Contemporary scales (Octatonic, whole tone)	*Magnificat* (SSAA, 2024) - Octatonic	*The Old Woman* - Octatonic

		The Kiss - Octatonic *A Bit of Nonsense* - 'Multitasking': Octatonic
Quotation and Self Quotation	*Salve Regina* – Intro inspired by the middle movement of Bartók's Fourth String Quartet. *O Vis Aeternitatis* (quotes from elements of *Ave Atque Vale*) - Alludes to Hildegard of Bingen's plainchant on the introductory 'O' *Requiem* - '*In Paradisum*' quotes original plainchant - 'Introit' soloists very similar to treble soloists in MacMillan's *A Child's Prayer*. Also the ostinato. - Possible allusion to Ligeti's *Introitus* and *Lux Aeterna* in Clarke's setting of the same texts. *A Welsh Carol* - Very brief reference to the carol 'The Holly and the Ivy' on said text in the tenor.	*The Old Woman* – 'I am not yet dead' alludes to 'I am not yet born' from Elizabeth Maconchy's *Prayer Before Birth* (1972) *O Vis Aeternitatis* alludes to *Ave Atque Vale* (self-allusion) *Epitaph* – Chopin's funeral march
Triplet figures	*Gloria* *Cantate Domino* *Rorate Caeli* *Missa* (1999, SSA, soli, chamber orchestra/piano) - '*Sanctus*' *Jubilate Domino* (2000, SSA, soli, organ) *Salve Regina* *Veni Creator Spiritus* *O Vis Aeternitatis* *Requiem* *Sweet the Song* - 'Sweet was the Song' - 'That Noble Place' *Navigatio*	*Suantraí Ghráinne* *A Song for St. Cecilia's Day* *Géibheann* *There are also Musicians* (SSA, 1998) *Do Not Stand at my Grave and Weep* *Cnámh* *The Kiss* *The Old Woman* *Ave Atque Vale* *A Bit of Nonsense* - 'Busy' - 'A Life' *Words on Rhythm*

	Magnificat *Nunc Dimittis*	
Irregular time signatures	*Psalm 148* - 5/8, 7/8, 10/8 *Gloria* - 5/8, 7/8 *Cantate Domino* - 7/8, 5/8 *Rorate Caeli* - 7/8 *Missa* - 'Gloria' (10/8) - 'Credo' (5/4) *Regina Coeli* - 7/8, 11/8, 5/4, 5/8 *Make We Merry* (2014) - 7/8 *Sweet the Song* - 'That Noble Place' (7/8)	*Thugamar Féin an Samhradh Linn* (SSA, 2000) - 7/8 (two examples) *Mo Pháistín Fionn* (SSA, 2002) - 10/8, 7/8 *Síofra Sí* - 10/8, 5/8 *The Kiss* - 7/8 *Street Dancer* - 5/8, 7/8, 10/8 *The Old Woman* - 5/8, 5/4 *Ave Atque Vale* - 5/4, 10/8 *Words on Rhythm* - 5/8 (one example)
Antiphony/Call and Response/Imitation	*Psalm 148* *Gloria* *Rorate Caeli* *Missa* - '*Kyrie*' - '*Gloria*' - '*Sanctus*' - '*Agnus Dei*' *Regina Coeli* *Salve Regina* *Make We Merry* *O Vis Aeternitatis* *Requiem* - '*Introit*' - '*Lux Aeterna*' - '*In Paradisum*' *Sweet the Song* - 'Sweet was the Song' - 'That Noble Place'	*A Song for St. Cecilia's Day* *Géibheann* *Thugamar Féin an Samhradh Linn* *Cnámh* *Síofra Sí* *The Kiss* *Street Dancer* *Ave Atque Vale* *A Bit of Nonsense* - 'Multitasking' - 'A Life' *It Matters* *Epitaph*

	Navigatio	
Open harmonies	*Psalm 148* *Cantate Domino* *Missa* - '*Kyrie*' - '*Gloria*' - '*Sanctus*' - '*Agnus Dei*' *Jubilate Domino* *Regina Coeli* *Glad and Blithe* (2014) *Make We Merry* *Requiem* *O Vis Aeternitatis* *Sweet the Song* *Navigatio*	*Suantraí Ghráinne* *A Song for St. Cecilia's Day* *Géibheann* *Thugamar Féin an Samhradh Linn* *Mo Pháistín Fionn* *The Kiss* *Síofra Sí* *The Old Woman* *Ave Atque Vale* *A Bit of Nonsense* - 'A Life' *Epitaph*
Ambiguous/open concluding chord	*Gloria* - Chord consisting of D, F, E, B, C#, F# *Cantate Domino* - Chord consisting of G#, C#, D#, F# *Missa* - '*Kyrie*': Open D, A, E conclusion (in voices and piano) - '*Gloria*': D, E, A concluding chord (in voices, with the addition of G to the chord in piano) - '*Sanctus*': Open E octave conclusion in voices and chord consisting of A, B, E in piano - '*Agnus Dei*': Open B♭–E♭ conclusion in voices and chord consisting of E♭, F, G, B♭, C in piano *Regina Coeli* - Chord consisting of A, E, B *Salve Regina* - Chord consisting of B, F#, G#, C#, E	*Suantraí Ghráinne* - Chord consisting of G, A, C, D *A Song for St Cecilia's Day* - Chord consisting of F#, G#, C# *Géibheann* - Open C# octave conclusion *Jubilate Domino* - Open D–A conclusion *Thugamar Féin an Samhradh Linn* - Open A–E conclusion *Mo Pháistín Fionn* - Chord consisting of C#–D#–G# *Street Dancer* - Open G–D conclusion *The Old Woman* - Concludes on the highest note possible for sopranos and alto, and the lowest note possible for tenor and bass *Ave Atque Vale* - Open G–D conclusion

	Veni Creator - Open F#–C# conclusion *Glad and Blithe* - Open A–E conclusion *O Vis Aeternitatis* - Chord consisting of B, F#, E *Requiem* - '*Introit*': Chord consisting of E, F#, A - '*Lux Aeterna*': Chord consisting of G, A#, C# - '*Pie Jesu*': Chord consisting of B, E, A, F# - '*In Paradisum*': Chord consisting of G, A, C, D *A Welsh Carol* - Chord consisting of G, A, B♭, C, D, E, F	*A Bit of Nonsense* - 'Multitasking': Chord consisting of A, B, E - 'A Life': Open A–E conclusion *It Matters* - Open B–F# concluding chord, followed by shouting and body percussion *Words on Rhythm* - Open E octave conclusion with *glissandi* *Epitaph* - Chord consisting of B, F#, C#
Oblique motion: Static vs active motion between adjacent voices (most often resulting in secundal dissonance between voices)	*Psalm 148* *Gloria* *Rorate Caeli* *Cantate Domino* *Missa* - '*Kyrie*' - '*Gloria*' - '*Credo*' - '*Sanctus*' *Jubilate Domino* *Salve Regina* *Veni Creator Spiritus* *O Vis Aeternitatis* *Requiem* *Sweet the Song* *Magnificat* *Nunc Dimittis* *A Welsh Carol*	*Suantraí Ghráinne* *A Song for St. Cecilia's Day* *Géibheann* *There are also Musicians* *Thugamar Féin an Samhradh Linn* *Mo Pháistín Fionn* *Do Not Stand at my Grave and Weep* *Cnámh* *Síofra Sí* *The Kiss* *Street Dancer* *Ave Atque Vale* *A Bit of Nonsense* - 'Busy' - 'Multitasking' *It Matters* *Words on Rhythm* *Epitaph*

Drones/Repeated pedal tone	*Gloria* *Cantate Domino* *Rorate Caeli* *Missa* - '*Gloria*' - '*Agnus Dei*' *Regina Coeli* *Salve Regina* *Veni Creator Spiritus* *Glad and Blithe* *Make We Merry* (repeated open fifth in third verse) *O Vis Aeternitatis* *Requiem* - '*Introit*' - '*Lux Aeterna*' - '*In Paradisum*' *Navigatio* *Magnificat* *A Welsh Carol*	*Suantraí Ghráinne* *A Song for St. Cecilia's Day* *Géibheann* *There are also Musicians* *Thugamar Féin an Samhradh Linn* *Mo Pháistín Fionn* *The Kiss* *Street Dancer* *The Old Woman* *Ave Atque Vale* *A Bit of Nonsense* - 'Dear Santa' - 'A Life' *It Matters*
Extended vocal techniques: *Glissandi*, Spoken text, *Sprechstimme*	*Gloria* - *Glissandi* *Veni Creator Spiritus* - *Glissandi* *O Vis Aeternitatis* - *Sprechstimme*, *glissandi* *Requiem* - '*Introit*': *Sprechstimme*, *glissandi* - '*Lux Aeterna*': *Sprechstimme*, *glissandi*, stage whisper - '*In Paradisum*': *Sprechstimme*, *glissandi* *Sweet the Song* - 'Nowell: Dieu vous garde': Spoken text *Navigatio* - *Sprechstimme*, *glissandi*	*Suantraí Ghráinne* - Brief bar of *glissandi* *A Song for St. Cecilia's Day* - *Sprechstimme* *Street Dancer* - Spoken text *The Old Woman* - *Portamento/glissandi* *Ave Atque Vale* - *Sprechstimme*, *glissandi* *It Matters* - *Sprechstimme*, stage whisper, *glissandi*, whistle, shout, spoken text *Words on Rhythm* - *Glissandi* *Epitaph* - *Glissandi*

Aleatoricism/ indeterminate passages	*Psalm 148* *Gloria* *O Vis Aeternitatis* *Requiem* - '*In Paradisum*' *Navigatio* *Nunc Dimittis*	*Street Dancer* (Intro) *The Old Woman* (conclusion; very controlled) *Ave Atque Vale* (concluding *glissandi* but quite controlled) *It Matters* (Intro)
Body percussion		*The Old Woman* - Footstamp, handclap *Ave Atque Vale* - Footstamp *It Matters* - Thighs, chest, footstamp *A Bit of Nonsense* - 'A Life' (finger clicking)

Recurring Compositional Techniques in Eoghan Desmond's Choral Works

Compositional Technique	Sacred Works	Secular Works

Word painting	*Crux Fidelis* (ATB, 2014)
	- Use of the B-A-C-H motif/cruciform motif to depict the 'Faithful cross'.
	
	This is my Prayer to Thee (Tenor solo, SATB, 2017)
	- Accented, detached repeated minor chords on 'strike'.
	
	The Falling Tear (AATTBB, organ, 2017–18)
	- '1. Introit': Descending motif represents Jesus weeping, 'the falling tear'.
	- '2. Christ in the Cradle': *Portato* on 'shakes for cold'. Similar technique with detached, staccato quavers on 'He's frozen'.
	- '3. Christ in His Garden': Descending two-note motif through the AATTBB texture on 'trickles'.
	- '5. Drop, Drop, Slow Tears': Falling 'drop' motif in altos and tenor.
	
	Amra Choluim Chille (2019, SATB, Strings, Harp, Percussion)
	- '*1. Remfocul*': Descending stepwise phrase on '*ar bhuanpholl na nedor!*' ('The long-lasting pit of tears').
	- '*3. A Dheascabháil agus a Shaol*':
	  - Rising motif on '*Éiríonn Colum in ard neimhe*' ('Colum rises to heaven').
	  - Brass sticks, accents, and *ff* dynamics on '*Is bhladhm an tOirthear*' ('And the East blazed').
	  - Ascending sixth leap (G–E) and stepwise rise to G in soprano solo on '*ar éirí dhó*' ('as he rose up').
	- '*5. Anró agus Suáilcí Choluim*': Rigid, repeated, tenuto-accented SATB harmony disjointed by rests with decreasing dynamics from *pp sotto voce* to a whisper
		Mother Goose's Melodies (2014)
		- 'Goosey, goosey gander': Rising and falling leaps paint 'upstairs, downstairs'.
		- 'Bobby Shafto/A Sailor went to sea': Descending whole tone scales in TTBB reflect the 'bottom of the deep blue sea'.
		
		Childish Things (SSA, 2017)
		- Madrigalian *portato* on 'clacking'.
		
		Rain has Fallen (SATB and chamber ensemble, 2017)
		- Descending SSA motif depicting 'rain has fallen'.
		
		Nothing in Vain (2021)
		- Descending motif on 'When my spirits sink'.
		
		An Gleann Mór (2022)
		- Descending stepwise scalic phrase and polyphonic development illustrates the waterfall.
		
		I Am (2024)
		- Descending five-note scalic motif (very similar to *An Gleann Mór*) reflects the water elements in the text ('dew on the grass'; 'rain'; 'river').
		
		Guthanna ar an gCnoc (2025)
		- '*1. Loch Cruite*': Rising motif through the texture on '*Ardaím mo cheann*' ('I raise my head').
		- '*4. Lig don nGiorria Suí*': Slow tempo and sustained notes illustrating '*Mall*' ('Slow').
		
		Christmas Night (2025)
		- Descending scalic crotchet movement on 'falling' (alto line); dropping downward sequence in soprano 2 and tenor.

	illustrating '*Choic léiriú na nduan do mhórdhronga*' ('Who forbids chanting at large meetings'). - '*6. Bás Choluim*': Cross-shaped SSAA texture for '*Mac na Croiche a ainm*' ('Son of the Cross is his name'). *Aestimatus Sum* (2022) - Descending scalic phrase in sopranos through '*descendentibus in lacum*' ('down into the pit').	
Extended vocal techniques	*Sir Christëmas* (2019) - Shouted '*Nowell!*' in final bar. *Amra Choluim Chille* - '*5. Anró agus Suáilcí Choluim*': Whispered text.	*Mother Goose's Melodies* - 'Cock-a-doodle doe!': Percussive, unpitched emphasis of '[k]o[k] and 'sti[k]'. Exaggerated diction. - 'Dr Foster's Fugue': Vocal *glissandi*; tenor *fff* shout (ARGH!); exaggerated diction. - 'Hey-diddle-diddle!': Unpitched 'Hey!'; crossed noteheads indicate approximate pitching on 'diddle-iddle' due to the speed of singing. *More Mother Goose's Melodies* (2015) - 'Hickety-pickety': Unpitched 'ck' in 'Clu[ck]', mimicking hens clucking; exaggerated diction. - 'I Love Little Pussy': Ecstatic descending unpitched sighs of pleasure in soprano and alto. Solo 'Meow!' sound. - 'Taffy's Canon': Exaggerated diction; unpitched endings of 'thie[fuh]' and 'bee[fuh]', etc., indicated by crossed noteheads. *Fortississimo* shouting in the conclusion. *Ceiliúradh* (2016) - Whispered and spoken expressions of '*ceathrú céad!*' *Guthanna ar an gCnoc* - '*1. Loch Cruite*': Stage whisper.
Quotation/Allusion	*Crux Fidelis* - Use of B-A-C-H motif in the introductory melody. *A Babe is Born* (2017) - *Veni Creator Spiritus* chant - *O Lux Beata Trinitas* chant	*A Meditation for St Cecilia* (2014) - Use of B-A-C-H motif in the melody. *Mother Goose's Melodies* (2014) - Use of B-A-C-H motif in fugal melody ('Doctor Foster's

	- Possible allusion to William Mathias's *A Babe is Born* (1971) *The Falling Tear* - 3. 'Christ in His Garden' is based on the Christian hymn *King Jesus hath a Garden*. - '4. Christ in His Passion' – Organ part quotes the Good Friday Office Hymn, *Pange Lingua Gloriosi*. - '5. Drop, Drop, Slow Tears' uses *Song 46* by Orlando Gibbons *O Sacrum Convivium* (2018) - Original chant *Amra Choluim Chille* - Original St Columba tune in Lydian mode - Piccolo Warm Up from *The Second Violinist* (2017) by Donnacha Dennehy - Refers to his own *Comrades* (2019) in '*6. Bás Choluim*' - Refers to *Oxen of the Sun* (2017) vocal intro in the vocal intro of '*1. Remfocul*'. *Verbum Caro Factum Est* (2019) - 'Joy to the World' *The Morningstar* (2019) - Arrangement of the German carol 'Der Morgenstern'. *Sir Christëmas* - 'Once in Royal David's City' - 'Silent Night' - 'The Holly and the Ivy' - 'Ding! Dong! Merrily on High' - 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' - 'Joy to the World' (slightly) - 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen' - Echo of *A Babe is Born* on 'Nowell!' - 'The First Nowell' *Egredietur Jesus* (AATTBB, 2020) - Uses a section from the chant *Egredietur Jesus portans spineam coronam*, a responsory for the feast of the commemoration of the crown of thorns. Specific melodic material used on the words '*spineam coronam*'.	Fugue'). Also uses the material of his own *Crux Fidelis* (2014). - Gibbons *Song 13* ('Bobby Shafto/A Sailor Went to Sea') *More Mother Goose's Melodies* - 'God Save the King' ('Pussycat, Pussycat') - '*Dies Irae*' ('Ladybird, Ladybird') - 'Desire' Motif from *Tristan und Isolde* ('I Love Little Pussy') *The Flower of Youth* (SATB, organ, 2018) - 'much of the melodic and contrapuntal material is based on the *In Pace* plainsong from the service of Compline' (Desmond, *The Flower of Youth* (unpublished, 2018). *Beloved* (SATB, flute, 2023) - Flute part is a transcription of a recording of the mating song of the last known male Kauai 'o'ō bird.

	Nothing in Vain (2021) - *Tu es Petrus* *De Angelo Domini* (SATB, cello, 2021) - Refers to music from '*4. Na Flaithis agus a Muintir*' of *Amra Choluim Chille*, and the St Columba tune in the Lydian mode.	
Contemporary scales (Octatonic, whole tone)	*The Falling Tear* - '3. Christ in His Garden' (Whole tone) - '4. Christ in His Passion' (Whole tone and Octatonic) - '5. Drop, Drop, Slow Tears' (Whole tone) *A Prayer Before Sleep* (2018) - Octatonic (very similar to 'Christ in His Passion' ascending octatonic scale through the texture). *Amra Choluim Chille* - '*2. Colum: Scéala agus Méala a Bháis*' (octatonic) - '*6. Bás Choluim*' (octatonic) *Make Good Cheer* (SATB, Organ, 2021) - Lydian Dominant	*Mother Goose's Melodies* - 'Bobby Shafto/A Sailor Went to Sea' (Whole tone) *More Mother Goose's Melodies* - 'One Misty Moisty Morning' (Whole tone) *Comrades* (2019) - Octatonic
Irregular time signatures	*Upon the Rose* (SSS, 2014) - 7/8 *A Babe is Born* - 7/8, 5/8 *The Falling Tear* - '6. Crucifixus Pro Nobis' - 7/4, 5/4 *O Sacrum Convivium* - 5/4 *Une Prière pour Notre Dame de Paris* (2019) - 10/8 (just one bar) *Verbum Caro Factum Est* - 7/8, 5/8, 7/16 *Sir Christëmas* - 7/8, 5/8 *Amra Choluim Chille* - '*7. Críoch*': 5/4	*A Meditation for St Cecilia* - 1/4, 5/4 *Mother Goose's Melodies* - 'Cock-a-doodle doo!' (5/8) - 'Goosey goosey gander' (5/8, 7/8) *Aedh Wishes for the Clothes of Heaven* (2015) - 5/4 *Ceiliúradh* - 10/8 *Childish Things* - 5/8 *Oxen of the Sun* (2017) - 7/8, 5/4 *Beloved* (2023) - 7/8 *I Am* - Brief 5/4

	Nothing in Vain - 7/8, 10/8 *In Monte Oliveti* - 5/4 (one bar)	*Guthanna ar an gCnoc* - '*3. Seas Siar*': 7/8, 5/8 - '*4. Lig don nGiorria Suí*': 5/4
Ostinato	*The Morningstar* (2022) *I Sing of a Maiden* (2019) *Amra Choluim Chille* - '*1. Remfocul*' ('Dia': ATB). - '*7. Críoch*': String passacaglia. *Sir Christëmas* *Nothing in Vain* *In Monte Oliveti*	*Mother Goose's Melodies* - 'Hey-diddle-diddle!' *More Mother Goose's Melodies* - 'Elsie Marley' - 'Ladybird, Ladybird' *Ceiliúradh* *Childish Things* - St Paul section *The Flower of Youth* - Brief accompaniment to tenor solo. *Comrades* *An Gleann Mór* *Rain has Fallen* - SSA ostinato on 'Rain has fallen' at start. *Guthanna ar an gCnoc* - '*5. Bantóst*' (brief) - '*6. An Bóthar Glas*'
Stratified texture/Augmenting polyphonic texture at climactic moment	*Upon the Rose* *This is my Prayer to Thee* *Coventry Carol* (arr. 2017) *The Falling Tear* *Be All Merry* (Solo violin and SATB, 2018) *Don Oíche Úd I mBeithil* (SSAA, arr. 2018) *O Sacrum Convivium* *I Sing of a Maiden* *The Morningstar* *Sir Christëmas* *Amra Choluim Chille* *Verbum Caro Factum Est*	*More Mother Goose's Melodies* - 'Ladybird, Ladybird' *Childish Things* *Oxen of the Sun* *Comrades* *An Gleann Mór* *Beloved* *I Am* *Guthanna ar an gCnoc* - '*1. Loch Cruite*' - '*6. An Bóthar Glas*'

	Egredietur Jesus *De Angelo Domini* *Nothing in Vain* *Awake, Ye Drowsy Mortals All! Hodie Christus Natus Est* (2021, rev. 2022)	
Polyrhythm	*Crux Fidelis* *This is my Prayer to Thee* *A Babe is Born* (one example of a triplet: 'worship that') *The Falling Tear* - '3. Christ in His Garden' - '5. Drop, Drop, Slow Tears' - '6. Crucifix Pro Nobis' (voice vs organ) *Be All Merry* *Don Oíche Úd I mBeithil* *O Sacrum Convivium* *I Sing of a Maiden* *Sir Christëmas* *Amra Choluim Chille* - '*1. Remfocul*': Strings. - '*2. Colum: Scéala agus Méala a Bháis*' - '*3. A Dheascabháil agus a Shaol*' - '*5. Anró agus Suáilcí Choluim*' - '*7. Críoch*' *Verbum Caro Factum Est* *Nothing in Vain*	*Mother Goose's Melodies* - 'Doctor Foster's Fugue' *More Mother Goose's Melodies* - 'Ladybird, Ladybird' *Ceiliúradh* *Comrades* *Beloved* (one example of a triplet: 'strong as') *Guthanna ar an gCnoc* - '*1. Loch Cruite*' - '*2. Neart*' - '*6. An Bóthar Glas*' *Christmas Night* (one bar of crotchet triplets in upper voices on 'blowing')
Augenmusik (Cross motif; Symbolism as Texture)	*Amra Choluim Chille* - '*1. Remfocul*': Strings. - '*3. A Dheascabháil agus a Shaol*': TTBB. - '*4. Na Flaithis agus a Muintir*': TTBB. - '*6. Bás Choluim*': SSAA. - '*7. Críoch*': Violins, viola. *Nothing in Vain*	
False relations	*Crux Fidelis*	*A Meditation for St Cecilia*

	4 Medieval Carols (2014–2017) - '*Adam Lay yBounden*' - '*Coventry Carol*' - '*A Babe is Born*' *The Falling Tear* - '3. Christ in His Garden' *Amra Choluim Chille* *Sir Christëmas* *Verbum Caro Factum Est* *Nothing in Vain* *Awake, Ye Drowsy Mortals All! Hodie Christus Natus Est* (SSAA + TTBB = different keys) *In Monte Oliveti* (verse: '*volo*')	*Mother Goose's Melodies* - 'Dr Foster's Fugue' - 'Bobby Shafto/A Sailor Went to Sea' - 'Hey-diddle-diddle!' *More Mother Goose's Melodies* - 'Elsie Marley' - 'Hickety-pickety' - 'Pussycat, Pussycat' - 'Ladybird, Ladybird' - 'I Love Little Pussy' - 'Taffy's Canon' *Childish Things* - Brief ('clacking') *Comrades* *Guthanna ar an gCnoc* - '*1. Loch Cruite*' - '*3. Seas Siar*' - '*4. Lig don nGiorria Suí*'
Open harmonies	*The Darkest Midnight* (2016) *4 Medieval Carols* - '*Adam Lay yBounden*' (parallel open fifths and fourths) - '*There is No Rose*' (parallel open fourths) - '*Coventry Carol*' (parallel fourths) - '*A Babe is Born*' (parallel fourths and fifths) *The Falling Tear* - '1. Introit' - '4. Christ in His Passion' - '5. Drop, Drop, Slow Tears' *A Prayer Before Sleep* *Be All Merry* *Amra Choluim Chille* *Don Oíche Úd I mBeithil* *Verbum Caro Factum Est* *De Angelo Domini* *Make Good Cheer*	*Ceiliúradh* *Comrades* *Beloved* (lower voices) *Guthanna ar an gCnoc* - '*1. Loch Cruite*' - '*2. Neart*' - '*3. Seas Siar*'
Ambiguous or open concluding chord	*4 Medieval Carols* - '*Adam Lay yBounden*': Chord consisting of F, C, G, B - '*There is No Rose*': E♭, B♭, D, F	*Mother Goose's Melodies* - 'Hey-diddle-diddle!' concludes with an alto solo performing what they like.

	- '*Coventry Carol*': Open G–D conclusion *The Darkest Midnight* - Open B♭–F conclusion *The Falling Tear* - '1. Introit': Open B♭–F conclusion *A Prayer before Sleep* - Open E–B conclusion *Amra Choluim Chille* - '*1. Remfocul*': Open B♭–F conclusion - '*5. Anró agus Suáilcí Choluim*': Whispered vocal conclusion with strings' chord consisting of D, A, B♭, E *Sir Christëmas* - Chord consisting of A, B, D#, E followed by a shout *The Morningstar* - Chord consisting of F, G, B, C *Verbum Caro Factum Est* - Open F–C conclusion *Nothing in Vain* - Chord consisting of C, G, D *Awake Ye Drowsy Mortals All* - Tone cluster consisting of A♭, B♭, C, D♭, E♭, F	*Aedh Wishes for the Clothes of Heaven* - Open A–E conclusion *Ceiliúradh* - Open G–D conclusion *More Mother Goose's Melodies* - 'Elsie Marley': Chord consisting of E♭, E♮, G, C - 'Pussycat, Pussycat': Chord consisting of C, E, F#, G, A, B (extended C Lydian chord) - 'One Misty Moisty Morning': Tone cluster consisting of G♭, A♭, B♭, C, D, E - 'Ladybird, Ladybird': Open F–C conclusion *Rain has Fallen* - Open C–G conclusion *Comrades* - Chord consisting of C, G, D♭, E, F#, B♭ *An Gleann Mór* - Chord consisting of G, C#, D, A *Guthanna ar an gCnoc* - '*1. Loch Cruite*': Chord consisting of B♭, G, D, F, C (B♭ major with added tones) - '*2. Neart*': Chord consisting of G, C#, A, E - '*3. Seas Siar*': Tone cluster consisting of A♭, B♭, C, D♭, E♭, F, G♭ - '*4. Lig don nGiorria Suí*': Tone cluster consisting of F, G, A, B *The Wayfaring Stranger* (2024) - Open F–C conclusion
Scotch-snap open harmony to cluster harmony	*The Morningstar* ('bright') *Amra Choluim Chille* - '*1. Remfocul*' on 'Dia' - '*3. A Dheascabháil agus a Shaol*' (repeated use of scotch-snap but not to cluster harmony) *Sir Christëmas* ('*Nowell!*') *Verbum Caro Factum Est* (TTBB 'Verbum Caro Factum Est')	*Oxen of the Sun* (No scotch-snap but open to cluster harmonies present on 'Deshil') *I Am* (repeated use of scotch-snap but not to cluster harmony) *Guthanna ar an gCnoc* - '*1. Loch Cruite*' (repeated use of scotch-snap but not to cluster harmony) - '*2. Neart*'

Pedal/drone	*4 Medieval Carols* - '*There is No Rose*' (repeated notes) - '*A Babe is Born*' (drone) *The Falling Tear* - '4. Christ in His Passion' *A Prayer before Sleep* *Amra Choluim Chille* - '*1. Remfocul*': Strings and voices. - '*2. Colum: Scéala agus Méala a Bháis*': Sustained notes in strings. - '*3. A Dheascabháil agus a Shaol*': Repeated notes and sustained notes in strings and harp. - '*4. Na Flaithis agus a Muintir*': Lower voices and strings. - '*5. Anró agus Suáilcí Choluim*': Repeated and sustained notes in strings. - '*6. Bás Choluim*': Voices and strings. - '*7. Críoch*': Strings. *The Morningstar* *I Sing of a Maiden* (brief) *Egredietur Jesus* *De Angelo Domini* *Nothing in Vain* (brief) *Aestimatus Sum*	*A Meditation for St Cecilia* *Ceiliúradh* (repeated G) *Oxen of the Sun* (repeated notes in each voice part) *Comrades* (repeated and sustained C) *An Gleann Mór* *Rain has Fallen* - Repeated notes in voices and sustained violin. *Nothing in Vain* *Beloved* *Guthanna ar an gCnoc* - '*1. Loch Cruite*' - '*4. Lig don nGiorria Suí*' - '*6. An Bóthar Glas*' (ending).
Aleatoricism/ indeterminate passages	*Don Oíche Úd i mBeithil* *Amra Choluim Chille* - '*2. Colum: Scéala agus Méala a Bháis*' - '*6: Bás Choluim*' *The Morningstar*	*A Meditation for St Cecilia* - Altos and tenors *Mother Goose's Melodies* - 'Hey-diddle-diddle!' conclusion. *Guthanna ar an gCnoc* - '*4. Lig don nGiorria Suí*'

Appendix C
Confirmation of Research Ethics Approval for Interviews

Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences
DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY
27th November 2024

CONFIRMATION OF RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL FOR A PROJECT

Application Reference: **DCU-FHSS-2025-011**

Project Title: **The Choral Music of Rhona Clarke and Eoghan Desmond**

Project contact(s): Laura Sheils, Róisín Blunnie

Let this letter certify that the proposed project identified above has been reviewed by the *Humanities & Social Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee* (F-REC) and has been approved as a low-risk project. The application was found to comply with university requirements and best practices for research ethics, and with GDPR guidelines and requirements where personal data is processed in the project.

A copy of the application, including appended documents related to participant consent, is archived under the reference above. Queries about this project's approval may be directed to the F-REC Chair.

Dr Alan J. Kearns

Chair, Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences
Dublin City University
Dámh na nDaonnachtaí agus na nEolaíochtaí Sóisialta
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath