The Sacred Choral Works of Seth Daniels Bingham: A Stylistic Overview

James E. Wilson

Seth Daniels Bingham (1882-1972) stands as one of only two French-educated American composers of his generation to write and publish a large number of sacred choral works.[1] Remembered today as a highly respected composer of organ music, his numerous choral compositions have almost completely fallen away from the American choral repertoire. With the exception of his last piece, *Perfect Through Suffering*, none of Bingham's sacred choral works remain in print. We may find cause for revisiting many of these works, for not only did Seth Bingham possess a tremendous gift for composition and performance, his background as a French-educated organist connects him directly to an esteemed musical tradition. Today's choral artists may want to examine for themselves and decide whether or not Bingham's sacred choral works fill an important niche in the development of American choral music.

Influences and Background

From 1906 until 1907, Seth Bingham studied in France with Charles Marie Widor, Alexandre Guilmant, and Vincent d'Indy. It was during these years that his compositional voice began to take shape. Characterized by an emphasis on counterpoint, chant-like melodies, mixtures of modality and an "imaginative yet disciplined" use of registral color, Bingham's style represents the musical philosophies propagated by his teachers and that of their institution, the Schola Cantorum.[2]

The Schola Cantorum's initial mission, to promote reforms to the music of the Catholic liturgy, particularly Gregorian chant and Palestrinian polyphony, came to embody the French sacred musical aesthetic of the time.[3] As a student and disciple of César Franck, d'Indy's compositional and educational philosophy embraced the "fundamental importance of tonal architecture and the clear deployment of themes, as exemplified in the works of Bach and

[1] The other being Clarence Dickinson.

[2] Andrew Thomson. "Guilmant, Alexandre." In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.library.unl.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/11996 (accessed April 4, 2010).

[3] Andrew Thomson and Robert Orledge. "Indy, Vincent d'." In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.library.unl.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/13787 (accessed April 4, 2010).

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Beethoven."[4] D'Indy's motivations also emanated from Franz Liszt, who taught him "an historically based pedagogy, by following which students could discover for themselves the evolution of their art through its successive stages."[5] As a student of this school, Bingham undoubtedly absorbed notions of a historically-informed model of composition, with emphasis on counterpoint and other traditional techniques such as chant, modality, polyphony, and fugue.

Bingham received a similar style of training from the famed organist Charles-Marie Widor, whose "solid expertise in counterpoint, fugue and orchestration, together with his profound knowledge of the Austro-German tradition, proved valuable [to his students]."[6] Though several of his organ symphonies show "uncompromising demands on both the player and listener," Widor's last two organ symphonies shift to embrace "cyclically treated Gregorian themes, reflecting the Catholic ethos of the Schola Cantorum."[7] Bingham applied this technique, of using chant-based melodies within a twentieth-century idiom, to several of his pieces including the *Magnificat*, *The Canticle of the Sun*, and *Missa Salvatoris*.

In speaking of Bingham's choral works in general, Walter Blodgett observes a "Handelian spirit of false simplicity which overlies impeccable, sophisticated technique… The unconventional phrase-lengths or shifting rhythmical patterns, derived from the thought span or rhythms of the texts, often trouble singers unacquainted with the magnificent freedoms of early choral composers."[8]

Blodgett's notion of "Handelian simplicity" refers to the many instances of Renaissance and Baroque compositional techniques found in Bingham's music. Following his studies in France, Bingham found inspiration from his teachers to pursue a secondary career as a music scholar and professor at both Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary. Like his French teachers, many of Bingham's published writings and editions focus on the works of great (and sometimes forgotten) composers throughout history. In the words of Brian Doherty, "He was particularly interested in French music of his time, but he wrote on German, Dutch, Italian, English, and American works helping to indoctrinate Americans into repertoire from the great composers of the past and present."[9] As an advocate and performer of the great masterworks, Bingham maintained a first-hand understanding of traditional forms and techniques, and his sacred choral works demonstrate frequent use of imitative polyphony, fugue, and chant-like melodies.

As a counterbalance to his mastery of historical techniques, Bingham applied a creative yet refined use of modern tonality, incorporating both impressionistic and modal idioms. The extent to which Bingham's choral music melds history with modernity has led some critics to relate his music to neo-classicism. In the words of Searle Wright:

> Bingham's musical inclinations tended toward neo-classicism with an emphasis on a linear, contrapuntal style of writing, and he was given to weeding out any unnecessary elements in his textures. As time went on,

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Félix Raugel and Andrew Thomson. "Widor, Charles-Marie." In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.library.unl.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/30261 (accessed April 4, 2010).

[7] Ibid.

[8] Walter Blodgett, "Bingham Organ and Choral Music Wins Notable Distinction" *The Diapason* 42, no. 3 (February 1951): 10.

[9] Brian J. Doherty, *The French Training of American Composers, 1890-1914* (University of Kansas, 2004): 354.

> his works became less chromatic and more strongly modal in flavor. His avoidance of lush harmony for its own sake suggested a sort of puritanical streak which seemed to belie his truly warm nature; however, this eschewal of "over-ripeness" was undoubtedly a reaction to the banal harmonic clichés so prevalent in church and organ music during the preceding fifty years or so."[10]

Wright observed nothing ordinary in Bingham's sacred choral works, and he viewed them as deserving of higher esteem. Though Bingham's music demonstrates influences of Widor's sense of registration, orchestration, and thematic unity, his overall focus on necessity and meaning goes against the effects of grandeur and "over-ripeness"—effects often practiced by many of his American teachers and colleagues. Though his music contains the aforementioned "Handelian simplicity," a closer examination often reveals a hidden layer of depth, detail, and thematic cohesion.

Walter Blodgett holds a similar view. He observes, "a conspicuous lack of opportunity in Bingham's music for virtuosic fuss or effect-making simply for the sake of effects. The music has a first-hearing attraction, but under the surface there is a rewarding amount of substance which, upon study, stimulates increasing appreciation. Craftsmanship is logical and economical, particularly in the choral music. His facility in both harmonic and contrapuntal writing is full of invention and fancy."[11]

From 1913 until 1951 Bingham served as Organist and Music Director at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. Bingham's choir at MAPC maintained approximately forty to fifty singers during his tenure. Several singers held paid positions (including his wife, Blanche), but the majority consisted of skilled volunteer singers. In his memoirs Bingham writes, "I began at Madison Ave. still cherishing the idea of a paid professional choir, and with disdain for amateurs. Experience eventually taught me that there are very real rewards, even advantages for a choirmaster willing to develop the talents of a volunteer organization."[12] From the *a cappella* works of the 1930s to the organ-accompanied choral works of the 1940s, Bingham shifts away from impressionistic and organ-based part-writing in the vocal parts to a more accessible choral language. In considering the skill-set and make-up of Bingham's own church choir at Madison Avenue Presbyterian, one might relate this shift in approach to matters of experience and practicality.

The Sacred Choral Works

Today, Seth Bingham's musical legacy lies with the organ, his primary instrument for both performance and composition. The organ also seems to have served as his laboratory for writing choral music, as evidenced in three of his earliest *a cappella* compositions: *The Strife Is O'er* (1932), *Come Thou Almighty King* (1932), and *O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go* (1936). Small sections of these pieces look and sound as though they were first conceived by the hands and feet (ex. 1), while certain melodies would present relative ease for the fingers and difficulty for the voice (ex. 2). The resulting texture, though difficult to sing, presents an exciting flurry of

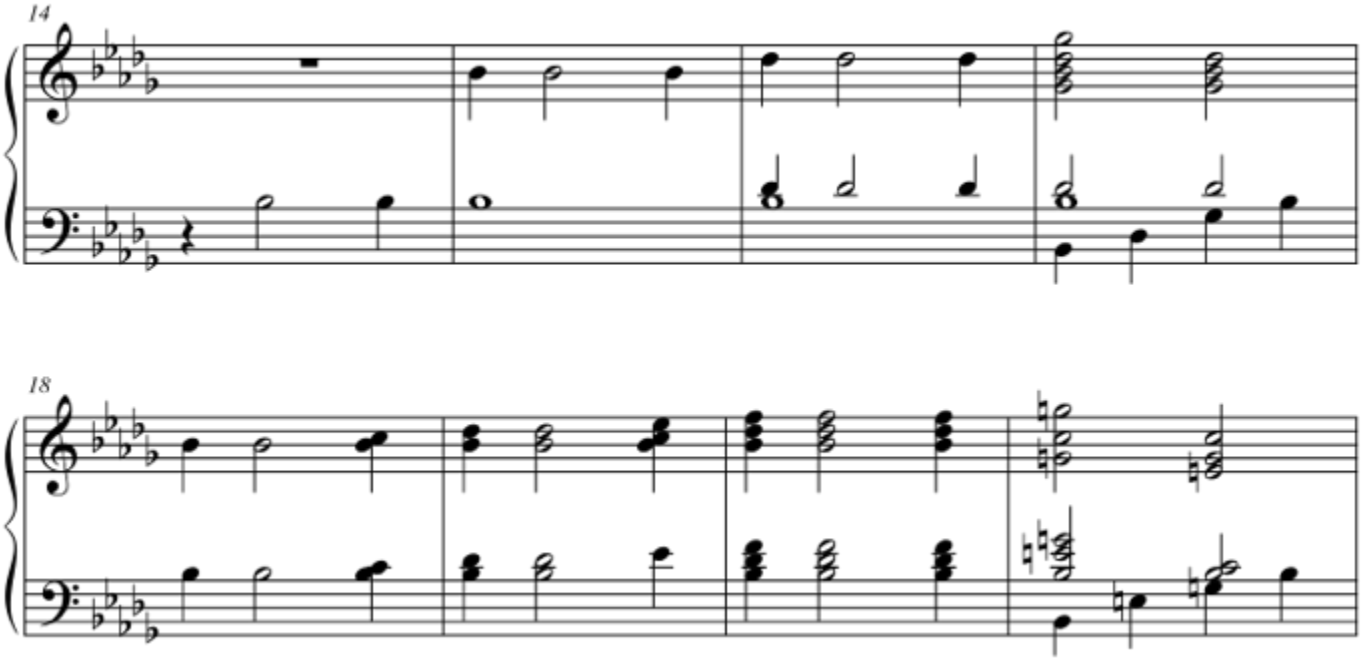
[10] Searle Wright, "Seth Daniels Bingham: 100th Anniversary," *The American Organist* 16, no. 6 (June 1982): 41.

[11] Walter Blodgett, "Bingham Organ and Choral Music Wins Notable Distinction" *The Diapason* 42, no. 3 (1951):

[12] Seth Bingham, *Memoirs* (1957-1965): 61.

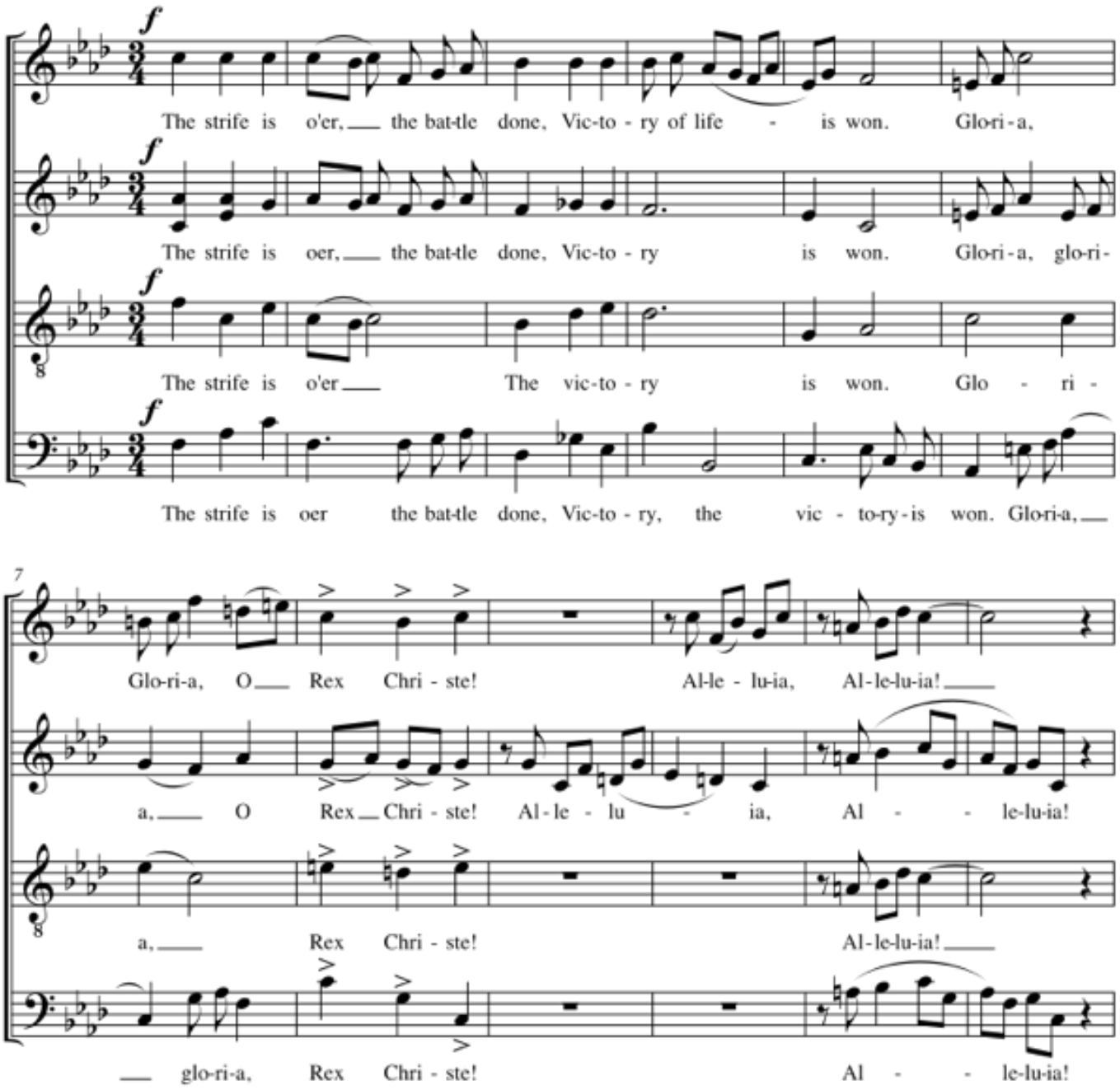
sound, full of layers and complexity. Bingham's later choral works show a turn away from harmonic and melodic difficulty. Through greater use of homophony, duet pairings, parallelism, and choral unisons, he succeeded in making his choral music more accessible to accomplished church choirs, his own included. The textural and harmonic influence of Bingham's registral aesthetic remains present throughout these later works, however the impressionistic colors and flourishes used to paint this aesthetic are generally handled by the organ rather than the voices.

Example 1. *Come Thou Almighty King*, mm. 14–21, keyboard reduction of the vocal parts



(Example 2 on next page.)

Example 2. *The Strife Is O'er*, mm. 1–12



The Strife Is O'er

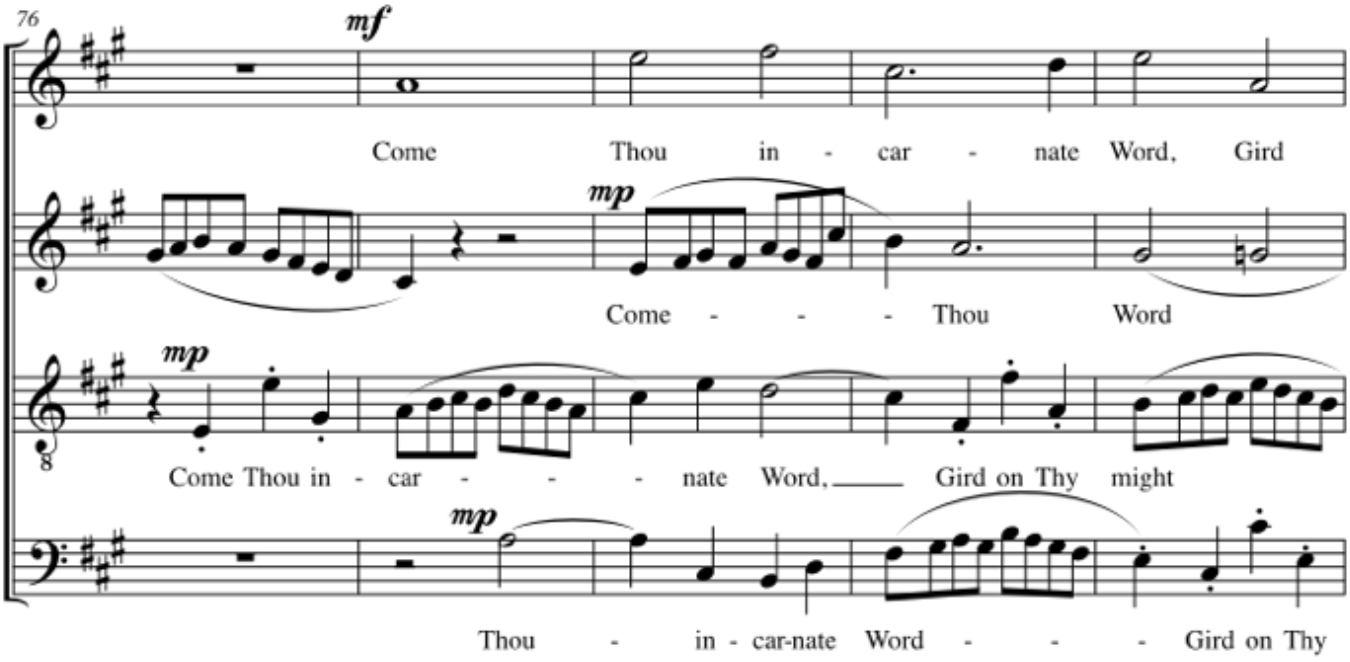
The published score of *The Strife Is O'er* lists a dedication to the "Westminster Choir," and one might assume this refers to the Westminster Choir at Rider University and not a church choir of the same name. The level of difficulty, readily apparent within the first twelve measures of this three-movement work, calls for a well-trained and highly skilled group of singers such as John Finley Williamson's choir at Westminster. A few

important stylistic features reveal themselves within the first several measures. The opening chordal declamation spins off into a series of points of imitation (ex. 2). This Renaissance-based technique of setting passages of chordal declamation between periods of imitative counterpoint remains a prominent feature of Bingham's choral output in subsequent decades. Oftentimes, an eighth-note motive emerges either from the voices or the accompaniment, gains momentum as it spins through layers of the texture, and leads headlong into a climactic choral unison. The first twelve measures of *The Strife Is O'er* presents a clear example of this feature. The eighth-note figuration in m. 2 introduces a rhythmic pattern upon which the point of imitation develops, building toward a choral unison at measure 11 (ex. 2).

Come Thou Almighty King

Also published in 1932, *Come Thou Almighty King* reveals Bingham's intrinsic familiarity and understanding of the contrapuntal language of J.S. Bach. Structured on three connected yet distinct sections, we find again a series of points of imitation that propel the music into the following section, in this case a well-developed and masterful fugue. A melismatic countersubject, first introduced at m. 68, gives additional density and momentum to the fugue as it churns onward. A particularly impressive moment occurs in mm. 77-82 where the fugue subject is presented in rhythmic augmentation in the soprano voice against subject inversion in the bass, accompanied by two statements of the counter-subject in the interior voices (ex. 3). Walter Blodgett's aforementioned use of the term "Handelian simplicity" does not apply to this instance where Bingham shows himself equally at home in the dense complexity of J.S. Bach's contrapuntal language. In later choral works such as the *Canticle* and *Missa Salvatoris*, Bingham reverts to a more sparing and targeted use of fugato.

Example 3. *Come Thou Almighty King*, mm. 76–80



Magnificat

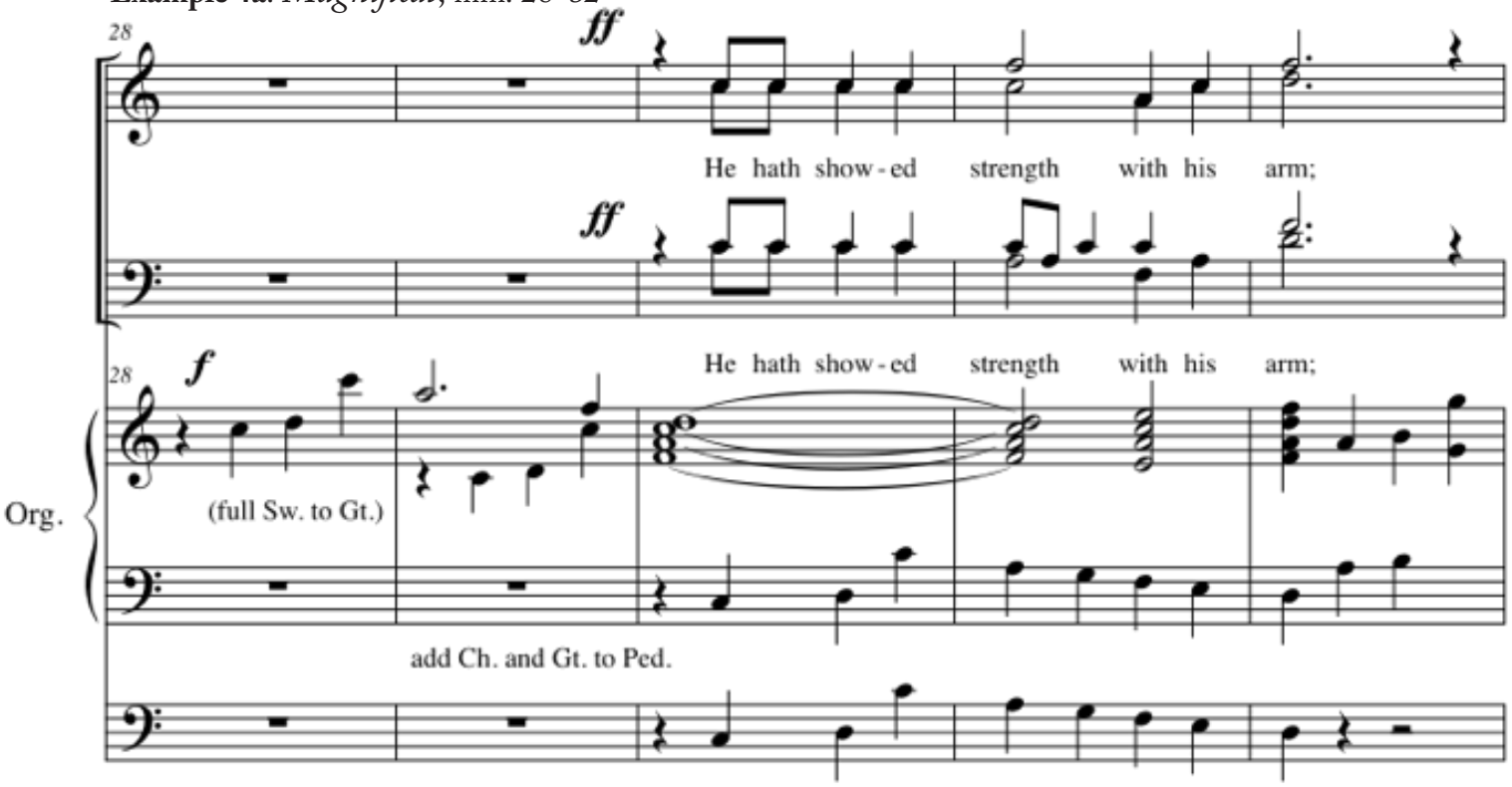
The *Magnificat* and *Jubilate Deo*, both from the 1940s, introduce Bingham's handling of chorus with organ accompaniment. The historically-based approach to composition persists, now demonstrating more influence from the concerted style of Giovanni Gabrieli and Heinrich Schütz. The *Magnificat* opens with antiphonal passages between the organ and chorus. Later, in mm. 28–37, several significant compositional traits make their first appearance. We again find a continuous stream of imitation, now taken from the vocal parts and assigned to the organ. The imitated motive, first presented in quarter notes (ex. 4a.), accelerates into eighth notes as it continues to develop in mm. 35–39 (ex. 4b.). In the earlier *a cappella* works, Bingham assigned acrobatic passages such as these to the voices, but here in the organ-accompanied works, the same contrapuntal construction and harmonic language is supplied by the organ, allowing for the chorus to sing simpler, more melodic phrases. This leads to an improvement in the overall clarity of the music, with improved intelligibility of the text, lessened difficulty on part of the singers, and no loss of color or harmonic complexity. On this topic, Walter Blodgett observes the following:

> There is a happy melding of his talents in choral works accompanied by organ. The organ part usually is independent, and the two forces complete each other. Although organ parts support voices by subtle means, they do not obscure, and actually project them by a canny openness, rhythmical vigor and forward movement.[13]

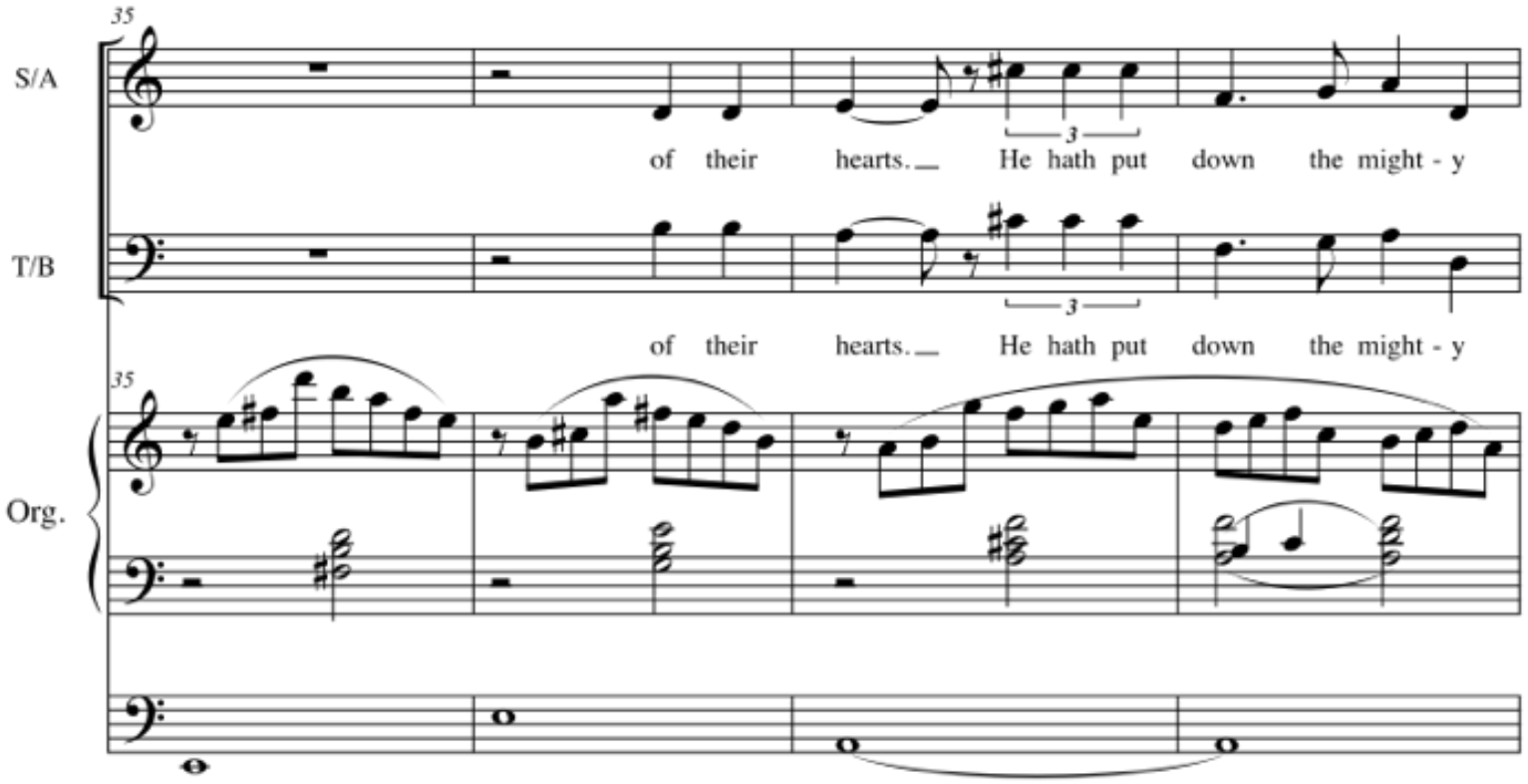
From the texture of organ-accompanied works Bingham finds a choral sound well-suited to his unique harmonic language, and to the human voice.

[13] Walter Blodgett, "Bingham Organ and Choral Music Wins Notable Distinction," *The Diapason* 42, no. 3 (February 1951): 10.

Example 4a. *Magnificat*, mm. 28–32



Example 4b. *Magnificat*, mm. 35–38



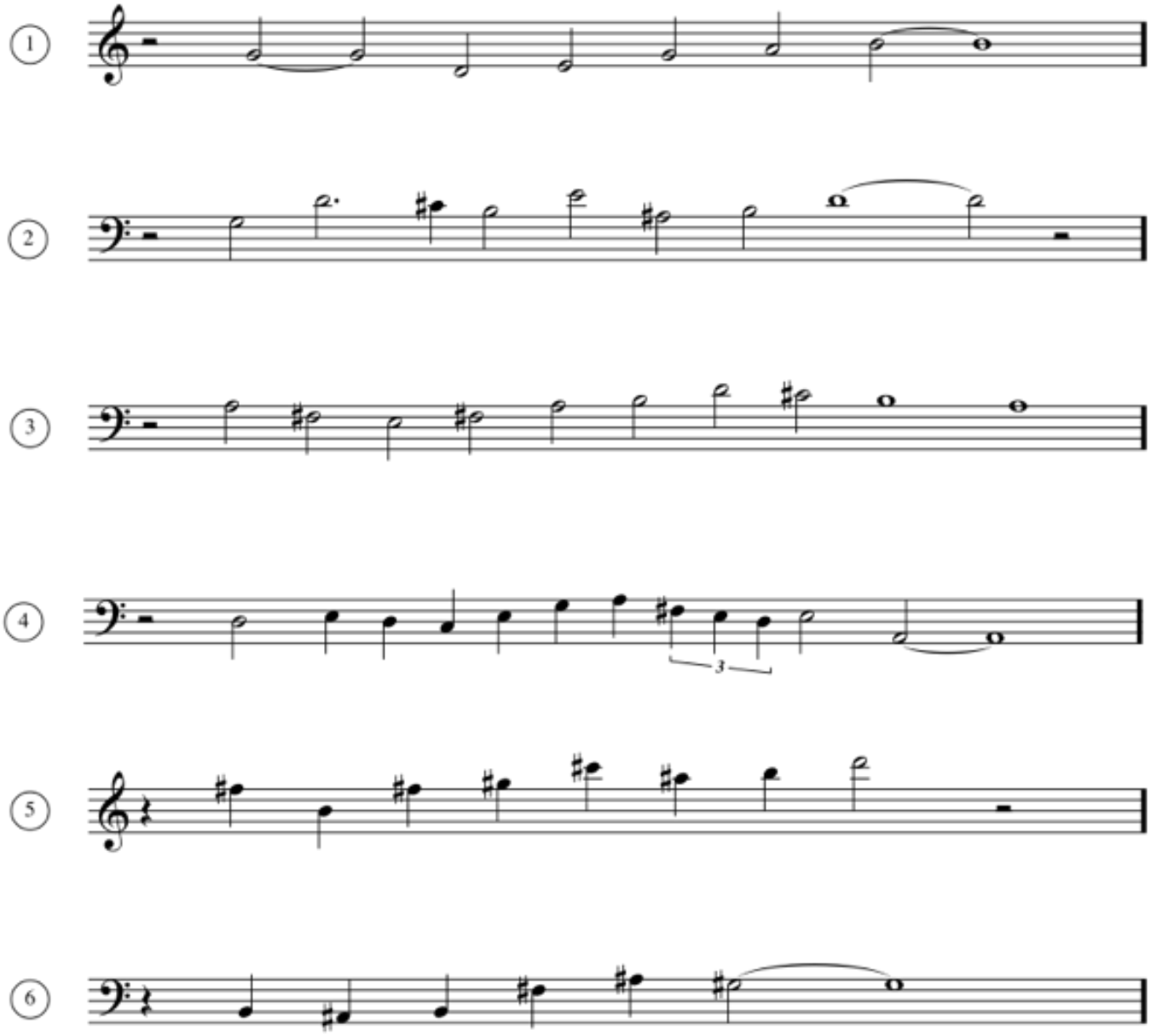
The Canticle of the Sun

Published in 1949, *The Canticle of the Sun* marks Bingham's greatest achievement in the realm of sacred choral music. By this time, Bingham had clearly established his compositional language, freeing him to adjust the focus of his choral writing onto word painting. St. Francis of Assisi's imaginative and colorful canticle offered the perfect tapestry. The ten verses of the canticle, each set to a separate movement, displays thematic unity through the recurrence of six motives (ex. 5). Bingham introduces each of the motives in the first movement, visits them periodically and through different guises within the interior movements, and reprises the full company in the eleventh and final movement.[14]

(Example 5 on next page.)

[14] For a more detailed discussion on the *Canticle* and its thematic construction, please see my dissertation, "The Sacred Choral Music of Seth Daniels Bingham (1882-1972), with Special Focus on *The Canticle of the Sun*," available online through ProQuest.

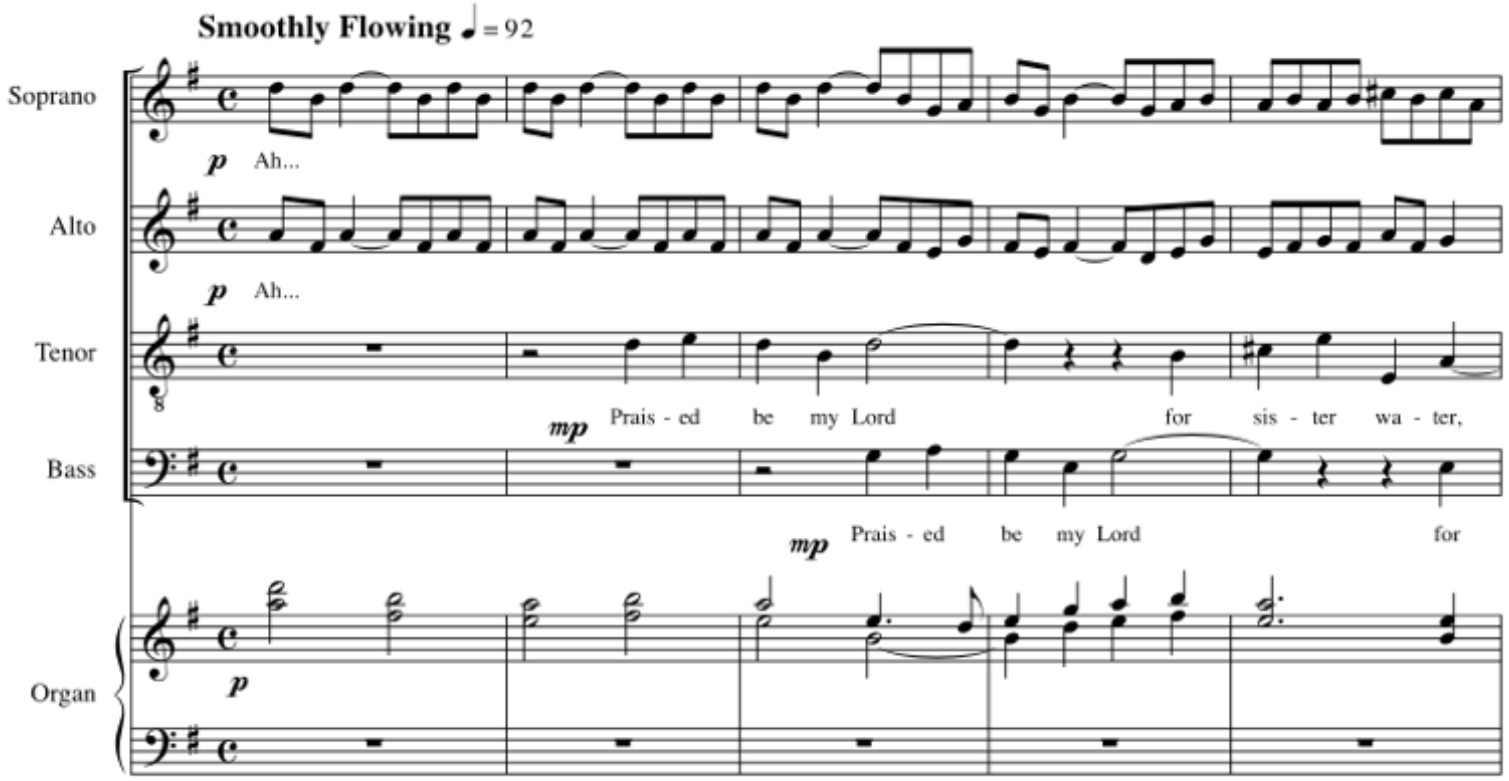
Example 5. *The Canticle of the Sun*, Motives 1–6



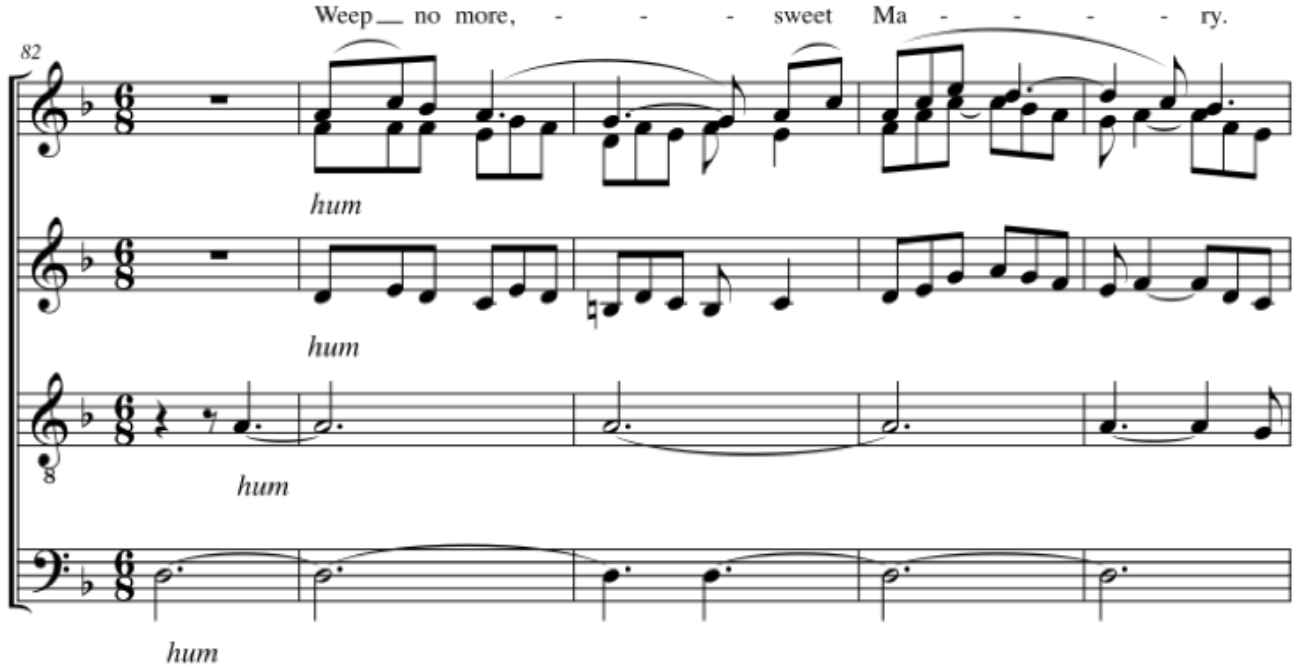
As noted earlier, Bingham's choral works of the 1940s exhibit a shift toward improved singability. The resulting texture employs a greater use of parallelism, duet pairings, and choral unisons. Moreover, Bingham's choices regarding where he utilizes specific devices in the *Canticle* shows greater relation to the text than in previous works.

In the sixth movement, titled *Sister Water*, a steady stream of eighth-notes in parallel motion depicts flowing water (ex. 6). This same device appears in the second section of *The Strife Is O'er* as a means to accompany the text, "Weep no more, sweet Mary." (ex. 7).

Example 6. *The Canticle of the Sun*, Sister Water, mm. 1–5

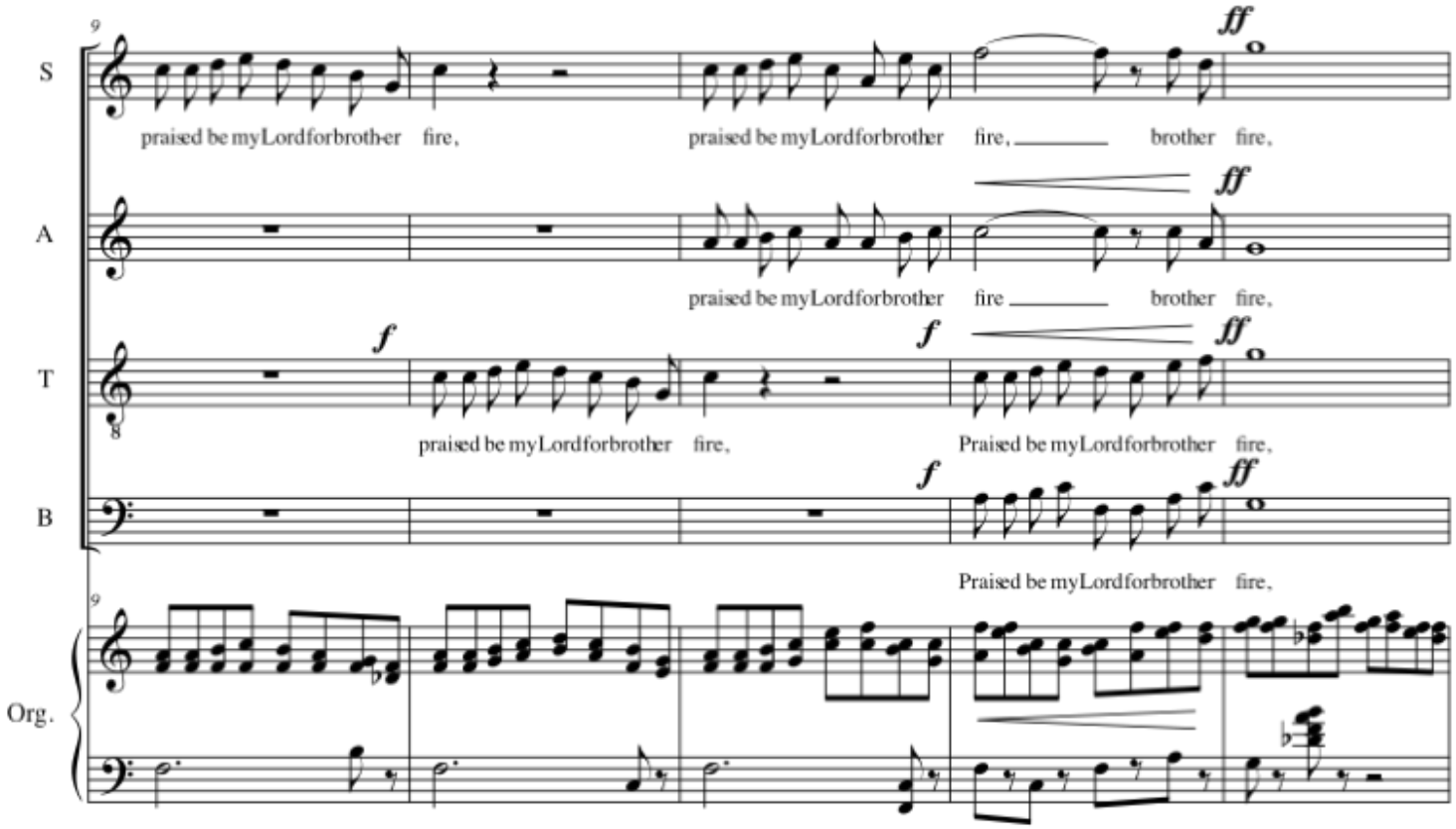


Example 7. *The Strife Is O'er*, mm. 82–86



Bingham makes frequent use of choral unisons and duet pairings throughout the *Canticle*, and he often uses these devices as a means to build intensity (ex. 8). The second movement, titled *Brother Sun*, begins with a rapid and impressionistically-colored lead-in to a fortissimo chordal declamation. This technique, too, appears in earlier works. In this instance however, Bingham uses motivic lead-in material, thus relating to other verses and movements of the work (ex. 9). Textual interplay, now connected motivically, brings a new layer of depth to Bingham's adaptation of the words of St. Francis. The resulting texture leaves no room for arbitrary pitches, and here we find Bingham at the height of his craftsmanship.

Example 8. *The Canticle of the Sun*, Brother Fire, mm. 9–13



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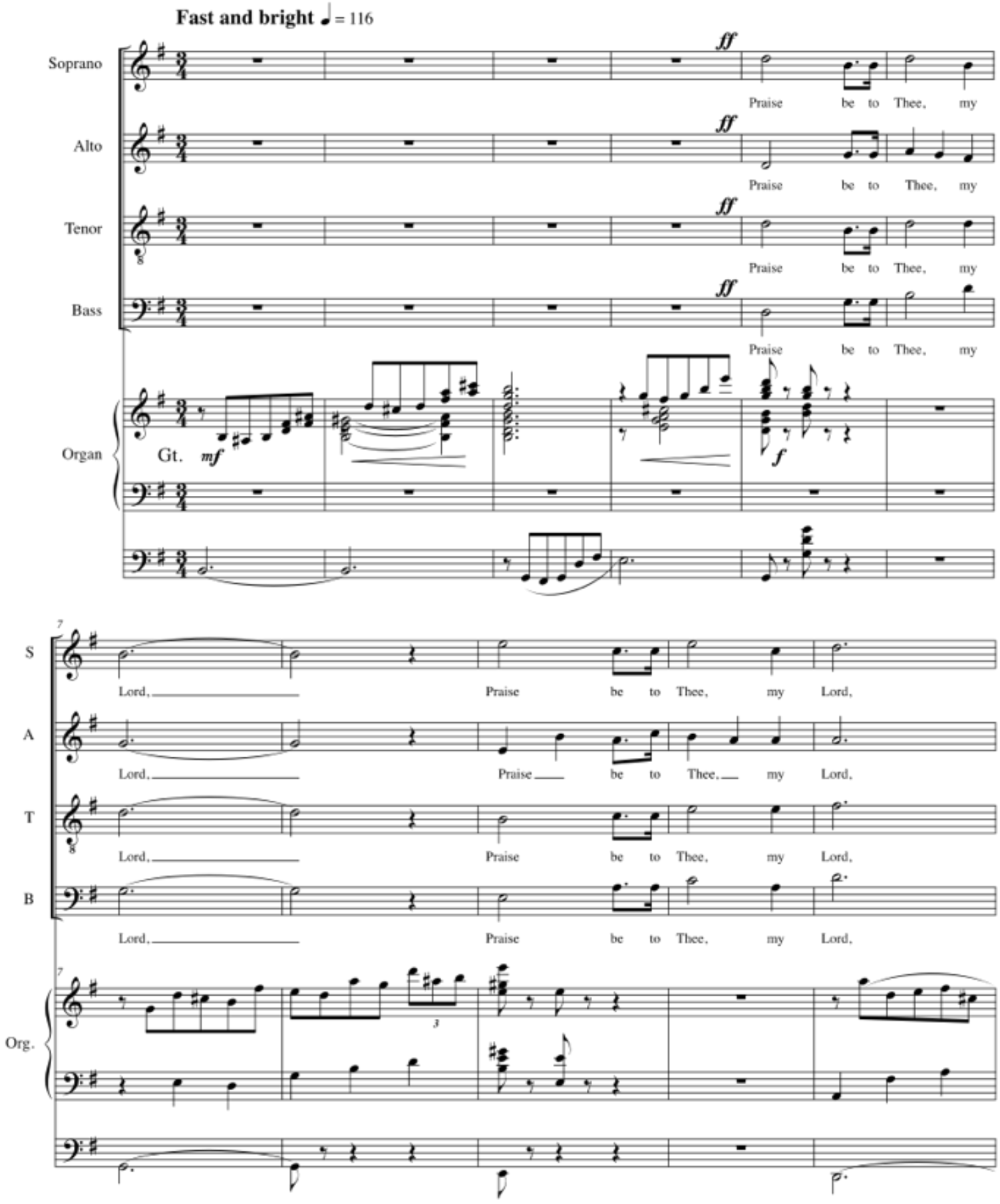
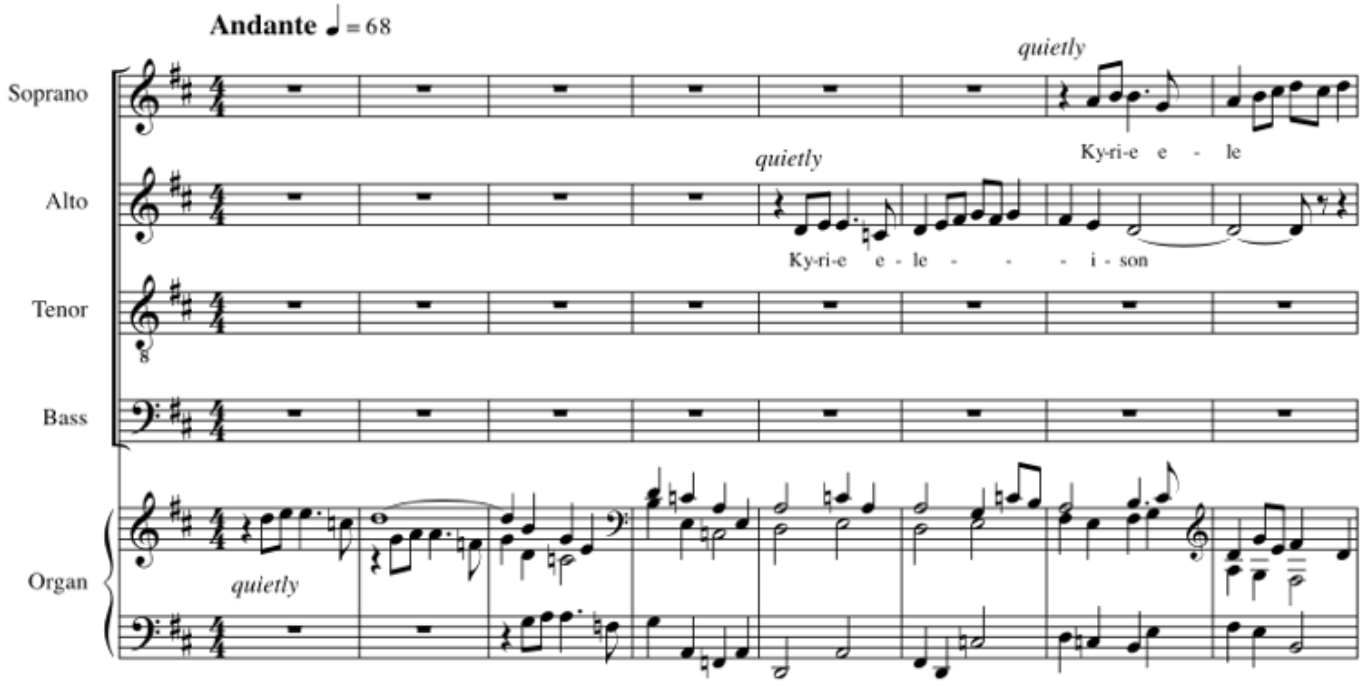
Example 9. *The Canticle of the Sun*, Brother Sun, mm. 1–11



Missa Salvatoris

The *Missa Salvatoris*, published in 1955, turns again to a historically-based approach to composition, with instances of points of imitation and incantations of chant-based melodies. Nothing in the *Missa Salvatoris* is new to Bingham's style of composition, however the application of his French influences reaches a higher level of refinement in the Mass. The opening section of the *Kyrie* reflects the calm melodic beauty and harmonic coloration of Gabriel Fauré's sacred choral writing (ex. 10). Bingham adds his personal harmonic flavor to the *Christe* while maintaining a strict imitative texture in the choral parts. At the return of the *Kyrie*, Bingham employs several of his characteristic part-writing techniques: two-part choral textures, simple part-writing with additional harmonic complexity supplied by the accompaniment, and a motivic lead-in to a climactic phrase in octave unison (ex. 11).

Example 10. *Missa Salvatoris*, *Kyrie*, mm. 1–8



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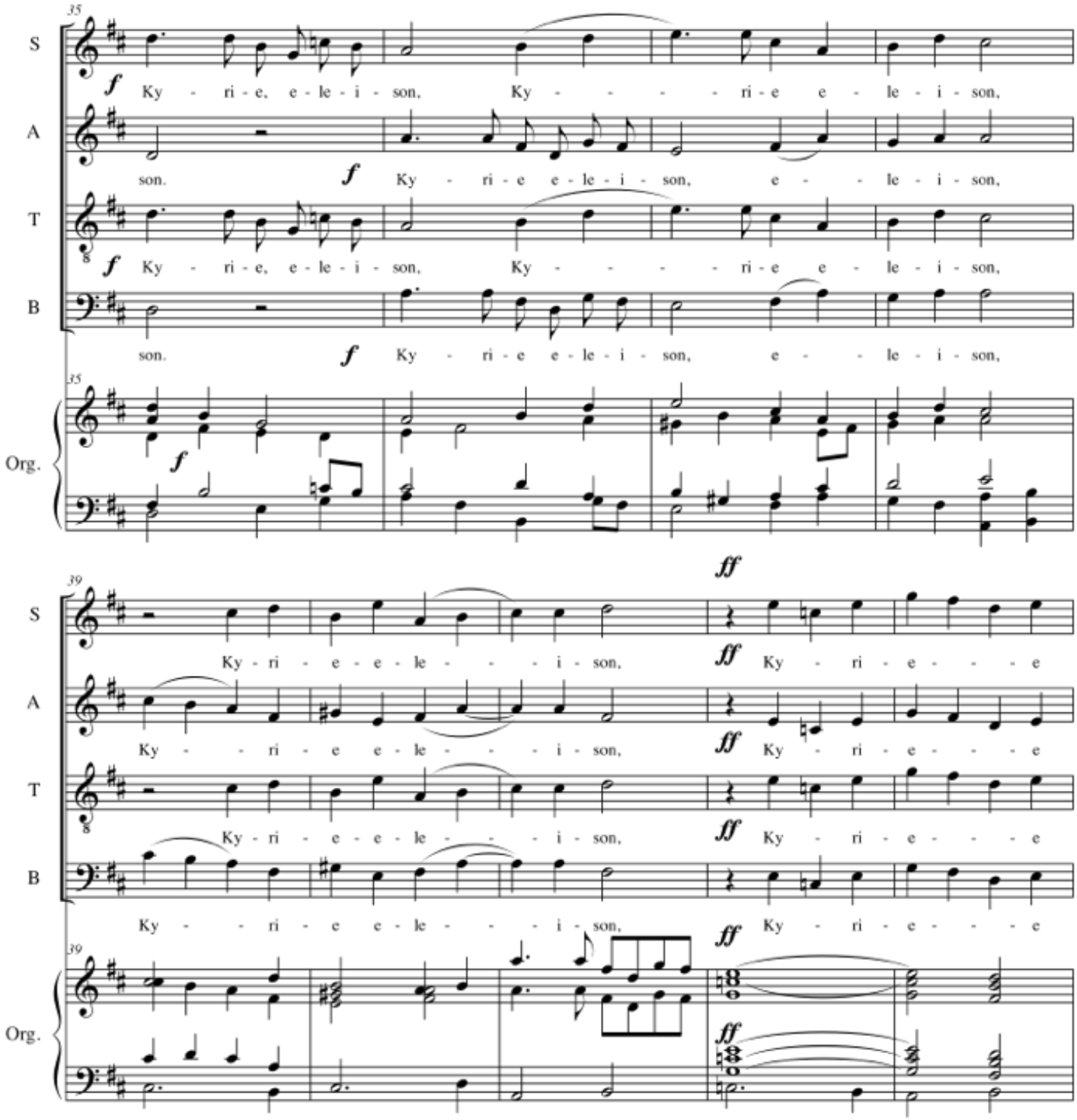
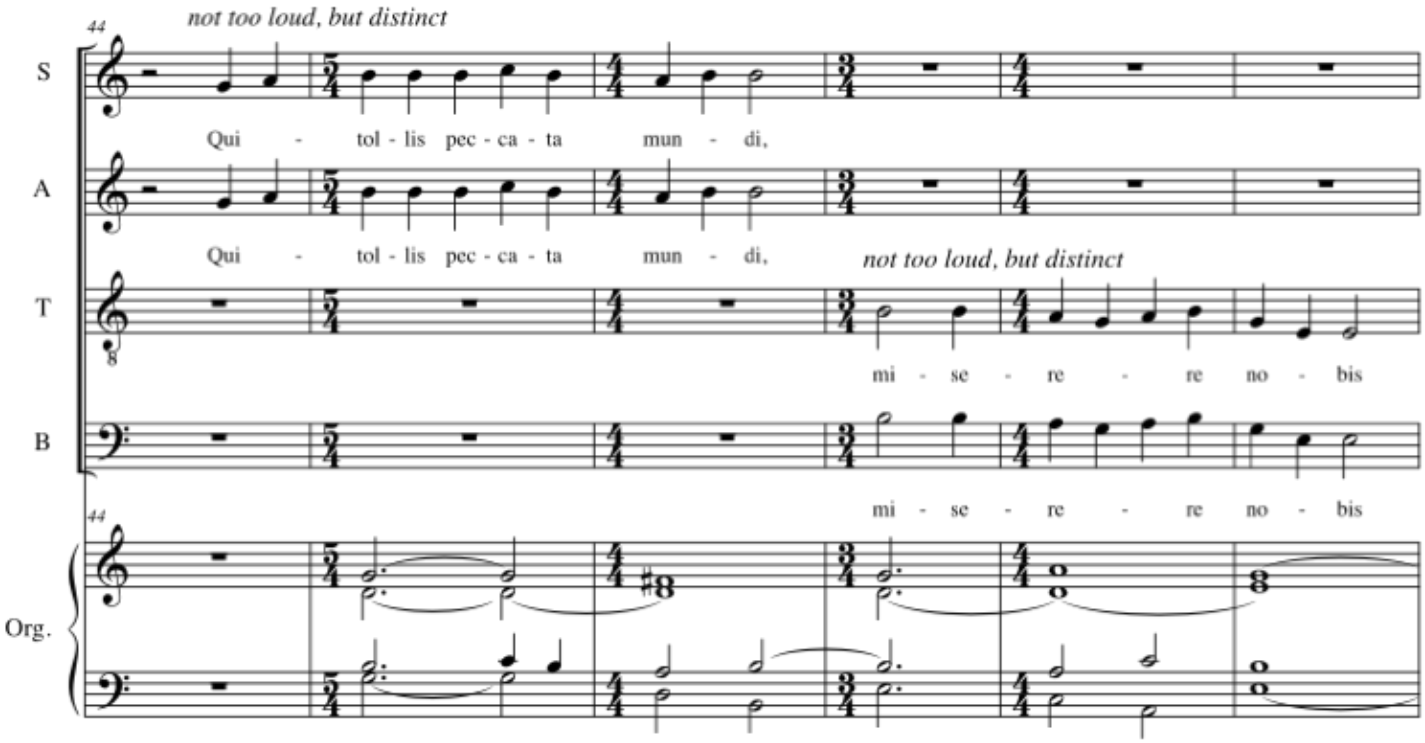
Example 11. *Missa Salvatoris*, *Kyrie*, mm. 35–43



The *Gloria* revisits the chorus versus organ antiphonal technique seen earlier in several pieces. The *Qui Tollis*, handled with strict Gregorian-like chant, joins with the organ's soft and beautifully simple accompanying harmonies (ex. 12). This section represents one of the most literal applications of chant-based melodic writing in all of Bingham's choral repertoire. As we might expect, Bingham aligns with tradition in setting the *Cum sancto* to a short fugue and the Doxology to a series of triplet figures, as if to imply a shift in prolation.

The three remaining movements of the *Missa Salvatoris* (Bingham omits the *Credo*) display a continued stream of expressive simplicity. Bingham makes continued use of duet pairings and choral unisons with minimal chromaticism. In summation, we may view the *Missa Salvatoris* as the most accessible sacred choral work in Bingham's repertoire. Due to its relatively simple part-writing and fifteen minute overall length, this Mass could serve as a beautiful supplement to any concert program.

Example 12. *Missa Salvatoris*, *Gloria*, mm. 44–49

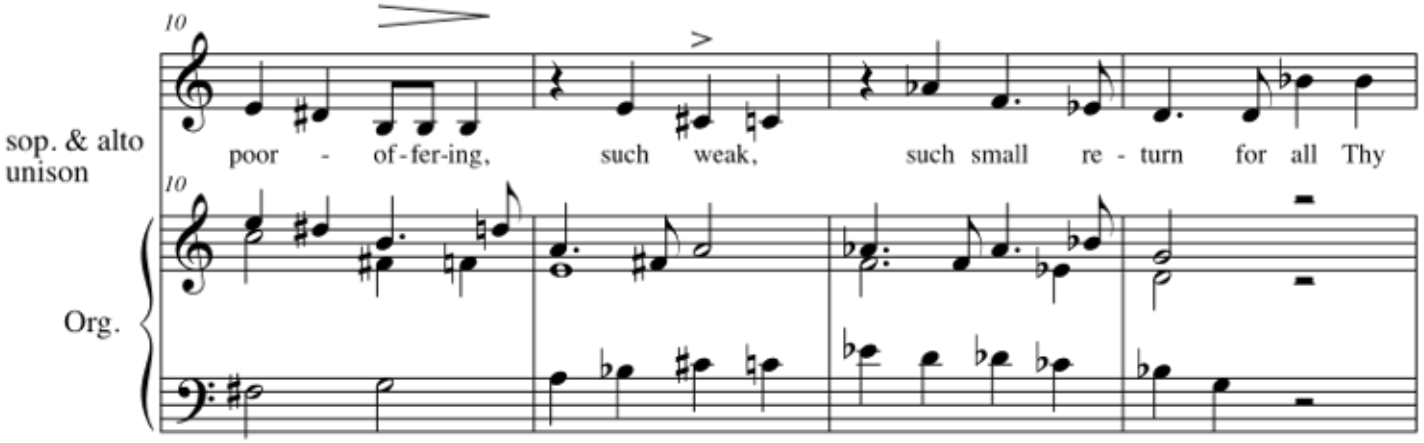


Perfect Through Suffering

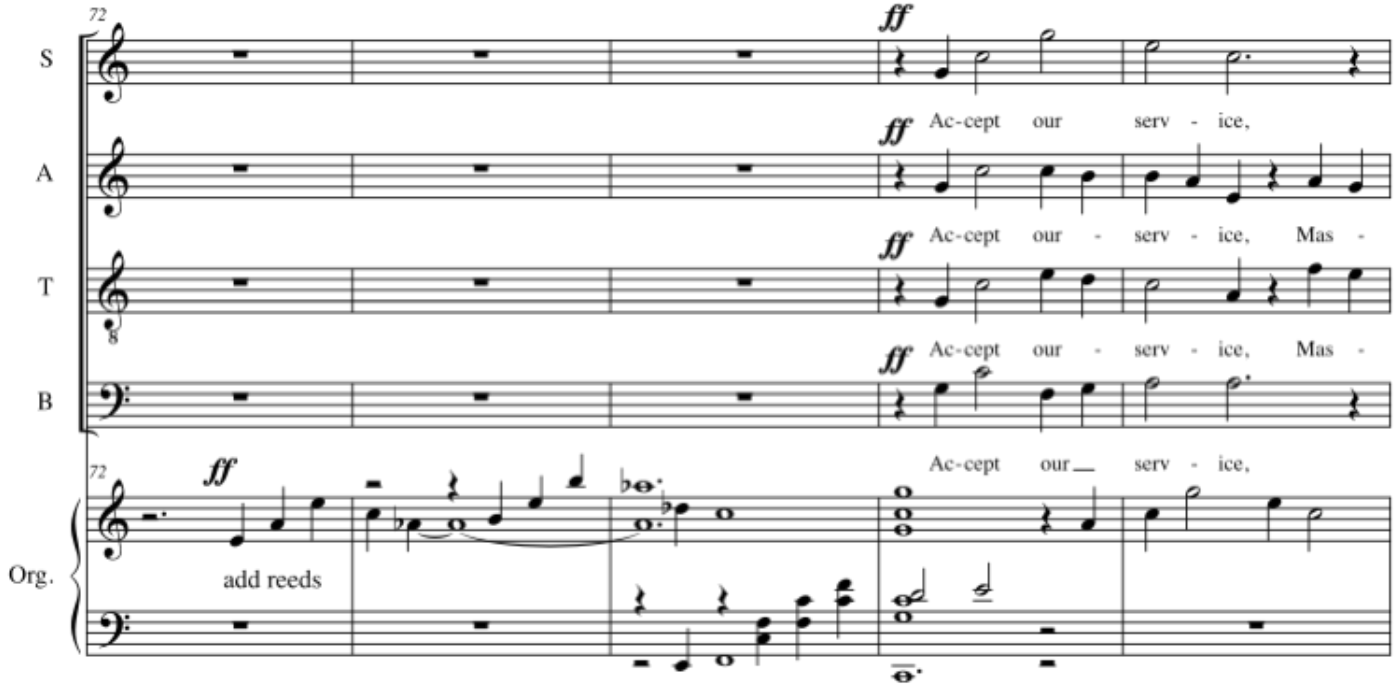
Bingham's last sacred choral work, *Perfect Through Suffering* represents the culmination of Bingham's choral style. The tonal language used here stretches the bounds of tonal harmony. The chromaticism employed in the opening and closing sections would lead any listener to believe the work is wholly a-tonal (ex. 13), however much of the piece's interior gains a sense of tonality. Most of the previously identified compositional traits reappear: duet pairings, parallelism in thirds, octave unisons for textual emphasis,

counterpoint based on points of imitation, and motivic cohesion. Mm. 72–76 revisits a familiar technique used in several earlier works, where a motivically-based organ lead-in culminates in chordal declamation (ex. 14a). The motive returns at the piece's climax in mm. 96–101, using again the model of motivic organ lead-in and motivic chordal declamation in octaves (ex. 14b). The piece's ending reflects the meaning of the text, "find rest," as the parts come to settle on low-voiced C major triad. As the voices approach rest, the organ accompaniment writhes in chromatic unresolve, spinning aimlessly downward until it comes to rest on a C major triad. The chromaticism, used in many of Bingham's previous works, seems in this instance to have symbolic meaning related to the text. The words, dedicated in the score to F.A.B., are by Seth's mother.

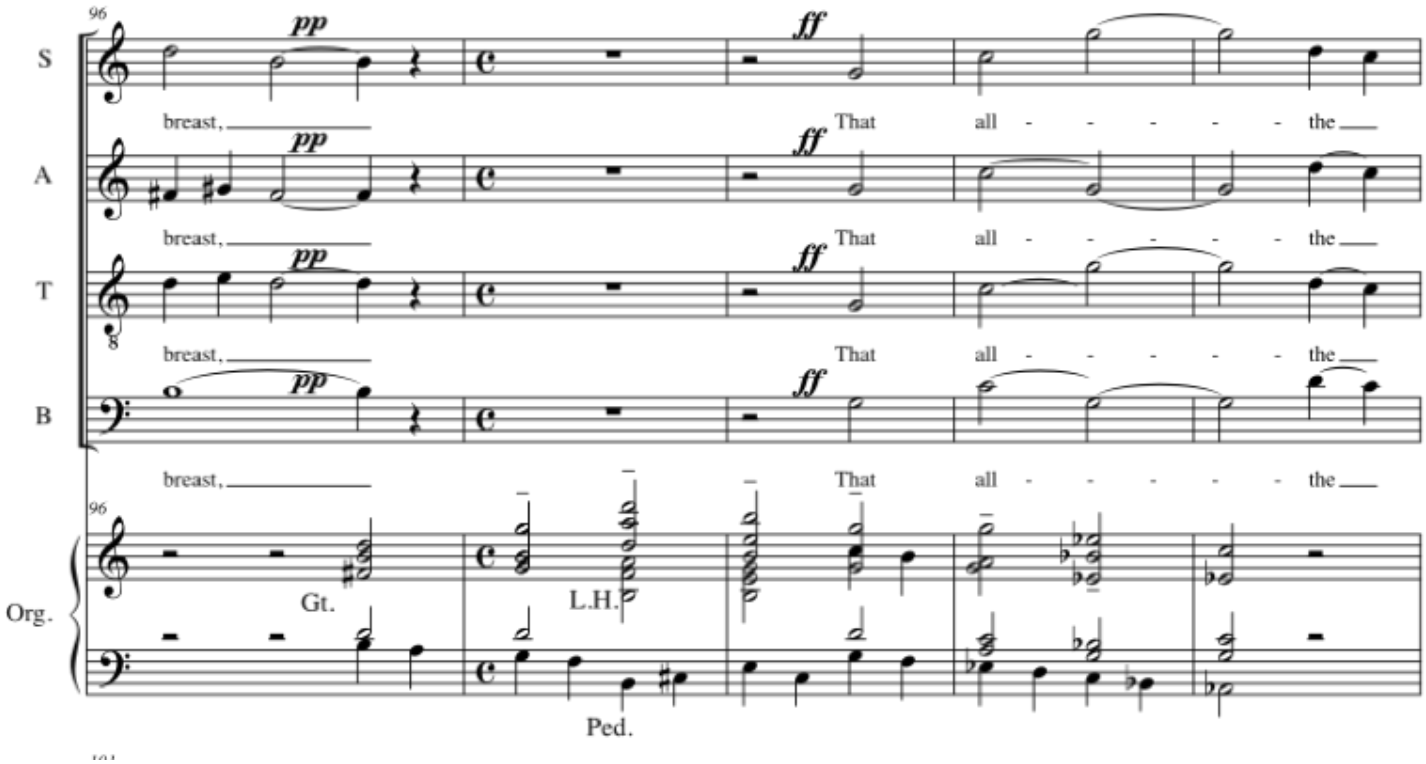
Example 13. *Perfect Through Suffering*, mm. 10–13



Example 14a. *Perfect Through Suffering*, mm. 72–76



Example 14b. *Perfect Through Suffering*, mm. 96–100



Many of the sacred choral works of Seth Bingham hold a hidden layer of substance and craftsmanship. The juxtaposition of his individual aesthetic and European influences plays into a style that may serve an important niche in the development of American choral music. His colorful and expressive style, which never strays far from a classical idiom, provides his music with a quality that deserves a second look.

Availability

Those wishing to further study any of the pieces discussed in this article may contact this author for mp3 files and/or Finale notation files. Anyone wishing to undertake a performance of one or more of Bingham's sacred choral works should contact the current copyright holder to request permission to photocopy. For locating original copies from which to photocopy, conductors should contact either this author, Dr. Andrew Henderson at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, or the New York City Public Library at Lincoln Center.

Complete Listing of Seth Bingham's Sacred Choral Works

N.B.: Name of publisher is provided when known. Some of the voicing cannot be verified, in which cases it may read "Chorus," or nothing at all. All of the information listed is taken from one of two sources, 1.) Octavos sent to me from Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, NYC, and 2.) Listings of published sacred works found in the Seth Bingham Collection housed at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. The following list is in chronological order:

1916 *Let God Arise* (SATB and TTBB)
Pub. Arthur P. Schmidt Co.

1932 *The Strife is O'er* (Easter Anthem, SATB *a cappella*)
Pub. J. Fischer and Bro.

1932 *Come Thou Almighty King* (SATB and 8-part *divisi*, *a cappella*)
Pub. Carl Fischer

1936 *O Love that wilt not let me go* (SATB *a cappella*)
Pub. H.W. Gray Co.

1938 *Benedictus es* in F minor
Pub. H.W. Gray Co.

1940 *Te Deum* in B flat
Pub. H.W. Gray Co.

1941 *The Lord's Prayer* (SATB and Organ)
Pub. Carl Fischer

1942 *Thou Father of us all* (Congregational Hymn)
Pub. The Hymn Society of America

1943 *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* (SATB Alt, Sop and Bass Solo and Organ)
Pub. H.W. Gray Co.

Immortal Love (*a cappella*)
Pub. J. Fischer & Bro

Personent Hodie (Christmas Anthem, SATB and Organ)
Pub. H.W. Gray Co.

1944 *Puer Natus in Bethlehem* (Christmas Anthem, SATB *a cappella*)
Pub. Hall & McCreary

1945 *O Come and Mourn* (Anthem for Lent Holy Week, SATB *a cappella*)
Pub. Galaxy Music Co.

Gabriel from the Heaven (Carol for SATB and Descant, piano/organ)
Pub. Hall & McCreary

The Christmas Child (Carol for SSA or SAT, *a cappella*)
Pub. Galaxy

1946 *Jubilate Deo*, B-flat (SATB and Organ)
Pub. Boston Music Co.

Puer nobis nascitur (Carol for SATB and Organ)
Pub. G. Schirmer, Inc.

1948 *O Man Rejoice* (Christmas Anthem for SATB *a cappella*)
Pub. Edwin H. Morris & Co.

Away in a Manger (Carol for SATB and Youth Choir *ad lib*)
Pub. H.W. Gray

1949 *The Christmas Man* (Carol for Soprano Solo and SATB *a cappella*)
Pub. J. Fischer & Bros.

The Canticle of the Sun Op. 52 (SATB, optional solo quartet and Orchestra or Organ)
Pub. H.W. Gray Co.

1950 *Christ of the upward way* (SAB)

1952 Twelve Choral Prayers (only 2 published)
Pub. H.W. Gray

1955 *Four Marian Litanies* Op. 58 (SATB *a cappella*)
Pub. St. Mary's Press

1955 *Missa Salvatoris* (SATB and Organ)
Pub. Gregorian Institute of America

1956 *Missa St. Michelis* (*a cappella*)
Credo (Chorus, Organ and optional Brass)

1958 *Communion Service*

1959 *Sing to the Lord* Op. 59 #1 (Chorus, Baritone Solo, and Organ —Brass and Timpani optional)

1960 *Love came down at Christmas* (SATB and Organ)
Pub. H.W. Gray

1960 *Worship the Lord* Op. 59 #2 (SATB, Brass, Strings and Organ)

1962 *As Men of Old* (Thanksgiving Anthem, SATB and Organ)
Pub. H.W. Gray Co.

1963 *The Presentation*
Pub. World Library of Sacred Music

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