THE 13th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF

ISSEI
International Society for the Study of European Ideas

in cooperation with the University of Cyprus

The Sister Art of Music in Brecht's Plays

Linda Henderson
Assistant Professor
Ira Brind School of Theater Arts
University of the Arts
Philadelphia, PA 19102
lhenderson@uarts.edu

Contradiction. Headlines. Verfremdungseffekt. Provoking a response. These are some elements to consider when doing a play by Brecht. How does the sister art of music in a Brecht play contribute to and comment on the narrative? In these remarks, I'd like to share some observations and performance decisions about four of the plays: *Mother Courage* and *Good Person of Szechwan*, both with music by Paul Dessau, *The Life of Galileo,* music by Hanns Eisler, and *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui,* which has a small amount of music by Hans-Dieter Hosalla. All four were first performed in the 1940's.

Over the course of the past seventeen years, I have been the music director for these four plays. Dr. Heinz-Uwe Haus was the director, and our productions were based at two universities. The casts were drawn from undergraduates, graduate students, and professional actors in residence.

Let's look at the first impression an audience gets when a piece of music begins in a play. In most musical theater, the music will reinforce the action or mood, but that's hardly ever the case in a Brecht play. The composers who wrote with Brecht were making their own contributions to the narrative. Sometimes this means the sound of the music is in direct contrast to the lyrics. Sometimes it means I can instruct the actors to elaborate on a rhythm in the music that contradicts the essence of the lyrics. In our productions, the band was not only visible to the audience, it was usually onstage, frequently with members of the cast playing instruments. In addition, Brecht frames a song by means of an announcement, banner, or headline. In these plays, *Mother Courage* and *Galileo* are episodic narrative, with the scenes preceded by headlines. In *Good Person,* the scenes presenting the action are followed by musical interludes where the actors stand back and comment on what just happened. *Arturo Ui* uses both devices, before and after the scenes. In all cases, the headlines reinforce the fact that we're not involved in events which are happening in the present moment, but rather that we are seeing a comment on a past event.

So back to the first impression. I'll start with Dessau's music, comparing some of the music from *Mother Courage* and *Good Person.* Rhythm and harmony make an impression even before the lyrics begin. Notice the opening chords from Mother Courage's first song. She's selling supplies to the armies, so this song is an invitation to buy her wares. But what you hear is an odd march, repeated bi-tonal chords (Figure 1). The measures have mixed meters, uneven numbers of beats, sometimes two – left right left right – but sometimes three – left right right. The listener can't relax into a predictable rhythm. The bi-tonality, that is, two different chords stacked together, creates a mild dissonance. Dessau uses this compositional style many times in his music, and the decision to do makes the audience uncomfortable – even if you're not a musician, you can hear the difference between simple major and minor chords and the ones that are bi-tonal.

The audience hears the lyrics, "Hey captains! Make the drums stop drumming, and let your soldiers take a seat. Here's Mother Courage! With boots she's coming, to help along their aching feet." But Dessau sets the lyrics in an unnatural way. It forces the audience to listen carefully to understand the meaning of the words. It makes the familiar cadence of the words become strange: verfremdungseffekt.

Another example of Dessau's compositional style that uses both bi-tonality and mixed meter is during the wedding scene of *Good Person.* The time signature, or meter, is 3/4, 5/16, 2/4, 3/16, 2/4, 5/16, and 3/4. The harmony is made up of a Gb pentatonic melody set over a broken A minor chord. (Figure 2). You would expect wedding music to be a happy reflection of a happy event, Shen Te and Yang Sun's wedding. Instead, it's a chance for the music to comment on the situation. It's irritating. When we did the play in November of 2011, the music was played by the actors who were portraying the old prostitute and one of the gods. The audience knows the action and the music don't match, and I bring that out musically as often as I can. In fact, learning this piece was so difficult for my actors, that once they really had it, we used the melody later in the play, setting the scene when Shen Te reveals her pregnancy to Mrs. Shin. Our ensemble was moving set pieces as they sang the melody.

So, the music director is given a score, with the work of the composer already done. After that, the realities of the production determine how the music will be performed. A few paragraphs back, I mentioned Mother Courage's opening march. In our 1995 production at the University of Delaware, the actress in the title role was not a trained singer. The Professional Theater Training Program trains graduate students, mostly in non-musical productions. But I welcome the opportunity to use non-musicians in the roles, because beautiful singing is not a requirement in a play by Brecht. Dessau frequently has an instrument doubling the melodic line, and I like to follow Brecht's directive to "drop in" to the melody. Our Mother Courage mostly belted out her melody, and if the notes were out of her range, she spoke or shouted. We performed the play in a black box theater at the university, with the orchestration as written – piccolo, C trumpet, guitar, accordion, percussion, and piano. The musicians were students from the music department. It is always Uwe's strong feeling that we use no sound amplification, so the actors must project both their speaking and singing voices. A month after the University performances, we took the production to Kastellan, Germany. The venue was outdoors, an abandoned missile site, where we walked with Mother Courage's wagon to different missile silos for each scene. The audience had to travel to each scene too, sometimes in rainy, chilly weather. We brought only an electric piano to do the work of the band, and I rode on a truck to each scene, my electric piano powered by a generator. During the intermission, I played lively music from the 1940's, wearing my soldier costume and ghastly, ghostly gray makeup, while two actors, also in their soldier costumes, grimly stood guard. Contradiction.

Of course, Dessau didn't use only bi-tonality and mixed meter in his music. Yvette's "Song of Fraternization" and the seven-headed family's "Song of Smoke" put the audience off-balance in a different way. Both songs are strophic, making a point in three verses of repeated music, both are in A minor and are less dissonant than other music in the plays, and both are lyrical, in direct contrast to the words being sung. The tessitura of Yvette's song is high, and

should be sung sweetly. It should make the audience squirm as they hear her sing wistfully about fraternizing with the soldiers behind the hill. Likewise, the gentle introduction to "Song of Smoke," which spells out a C major seven chord. (Figure 3). I instructed our grandfather, man, and niece to use their loveliest voices, accompanied by piano, violin, and mandolin, to play against their song of disappointment and disillusion. The grandfather begins, "Once I believed, intelligence would aid…me. I was an optimist when I was youn…ger. Now that I'm old I see it hasn't paid… me. How can intelligence compete with hun…ger?" Yvette sings, (Figure 4) "When I was…only…seventeen…the foe came into…our land."

Those two songs employ the same device that Dessau used in the Mother Courage march, putting unnatural pauses between words. It is another way to remind the audience that they are watching a play, these actors are not "impersonating" characters. We discover ways to provoke a response from the audience in all aspects of the productions, and it's fun for me to use an actor's "second talent" to surprise the audience.

Good Person and *Arturo Ui* were loaded with examples of second talents, when an actor can juggle, sing, dance, or play an instrument. *Good Person* was performed last fall at the University of the Arts, in Philadelphia, PA, in the Ira Brind School of Theater Arts, where I teach. Uwe was the guest director, and it was a tremendous learning situation for my musical theater students, most of whom had very little experience with Brecht. Luckily for me, I had students who can play other instruments. Dessau's score, written in 1947, is for piano, percussion, trumpet, flute, clarinet, and guitar. In an effort to honor the composer's intention, I substituted the instruments they could play – French horn instead of trumpet, recorder or mandolin for flute, violin rather than clarinet, and some more readily available percussion instruments, Chinese drum and metal pipe. The only "correct" instruments were piano, gong, and triangle.

We placed the piano, an old upright, downstage right, and that was the area where all the music was played. Because we never use sound amplification and the piano was close to the audience, we thinned out the instrumentation quite a bit, so the voices wouldn't be overpowered. Shen Te's first musical moment has no melody at all – she speaks lines which are separated by guitar chords. One of our gods played the guitar. She says, "They have no shelter, they have no friends." As it turned out, my three best musicians were the ones cast as the gods. Throughout the play, they were commenting on the narrative both as actors and as working musicians. The role of real musicians in a show is not generally considered glamorous, and to see the gods step over to the musicians' side of the stage during a song or interlude was especially alienating.

There are two completely consonant songs in *Good Person*, the "Song of the Gods," and the finale. In the first, on Do, Mi, and Sol, (Figure 5), the gods reprimand Wang in three-part harmony for his lack of faith in the goodness of man. Since these actors are singers, they used their vocal talent to display the only aural beauty of the evening, bringing it out, not to be repeated until the musical finale, when they leave Shen Te on her own. That second lovely song, with delicate triangle notes played by our Mrs. Mitzu, reveals the gods' shallowness (Figure 6). If I've done my job right, the audience should be disturbed by the beautiful sound. These gods had no power, just good voices.

Headlines, as I said, can be presented in different ways, and I'd like to compare the way we used them in *Galileo* and *Arturo Ui.*

The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui has only three songs, composed by Hans-Dieter Hosalla. They are "There was a Little Man," sung by the newspaper reporter, Ragg, "The Song of the Whitewash," sung by Givola, and "Our Home," sung by Jimmy Greenwool. In the 2010 production by the Repertory Ensemble Theater, a professional company at the University of Delaware, Uwe and I used these three songs as a base to create forty musical illustrations during the play, and second talents abounded. Some of the cast played instruments, one was a tap dancer, and one demonstrated martial arts. We also used American popular music of the early part of the 20th century, some contemporary pop music, traditional American folk music, a country western song, and Gregorian chant.

The headlines in this production of *Ui* were a collaborative effort between a group of students of the Professional Theater Training Program, which were included in the cast, Uwe, and myself. We opened in April of 2010, but the creation of these headlines began three months earlier. Uwe split the nine students into groups of three, and gave them an assignment: re-title the scenes of the play based on the essence of what was to come, but in a contemporary style. In addition, they had to incorporate a group rhythm, harmonize a melody, each one must have a solo, and they had to improvise over a text. After much exploration, we refined the pieces, adding percussion or piano accompaniment and choreographed movement. The pieces functioned the way headlines do in a Brecht play, but we changed them so they didn't relate directly to the action. Instead, they told a similar story, or a parallel situation, inviting the audience to make the connection.

Here's an example: the lead-in to Scene Three, the back room of Dogsborough's saloon. Dogsborough is about to deviate from his straight and narrow path of sixty years, and we made the point through the Patsy Cline song, "Triangle." The singer is cheating on her lover, as Dogsborough is about to cave in to Ui. (Figure 7).

We did use all of Hosalla's music in *Ui*, and it's different from the harmonic and melodic complexity of Dessau. We performed "The Song of the Whitewash" as a group number. We used variations on the piano introduction at other times too, when we wanted the audience to remember how people in the story keep trying to cover things up.(Figure 8). It's a bit threatening, in C minor, as the question is asked, "Is there something foul and oozing from the plaster? Does the dry rot drizzle through the wood?" The words don't have unnatural pauses between them like the Dessau songs do; they're set more the way traditional musical theater is set. Even more predictably, the chorus, "All we need is whitewash, fresh new coats of whitewash" is in C major, sounding like an easy, happy solution to an annoying problem (Figure 9).

The Life Of Galileo, written in 1943, has music by Hanns Eisler, whose compositional style is somewhere between Dessau and Hosalla. The songs all function as headlines, usually including the date of the scene to come. I was more conservative in my approach to this music, using the instrumentation as written, flute, clarinet, and harpsichord. Except I didn't have a harpsichord. Instead, I experimented with various kinds of thumbtacks, finally deciding on metal tacks stuck into the hammers of an upright piano. The result was a brilliant sound when I played forte, and a glittery delicacy when the notes were played lightly. I was lucky to have as cast members, three very talented women who sang beautifully as a trio. We also included an actor who played djembe, an African hand drum. He punctuated our songs with a roll or a single stroke, and then announced each scene.

Song number three (Eisler doesn't give them titles) describes Galileo's realization that "there is no heaven," a phrase sung in angelic vocal harmony by the trio. (Figure 10) Immediately following is a brief flute cadenza, (Figure 11), and ends with a crashing D minor chord from the piano. This D minor chord has a little dissonance in it – a Bb clashes with the DFA of the chord. It's not as dissonant as Dessau's harmonies, but that extra Bb makes a statement, perhaps foreshadowing the consequences of Galileo's realization.

What conclusions can be drawn from these examples? First, whenever music is introduced in a Brecht play, it should reinforce the artificial quality of the narrative, by means of using a second talent, vocal delivery that contrasts with the lyrics, or even who is providing the musical accompaniment. Second, the music shouldn't make the audience identify with the actors as characters, but instead, point up the contradictions of what's being said versus how it's being said.

Using actors as working musicians, deciding when to use lovely singing and when not to, wearing ugly makeup, riding on a truck playing an electric piano on a chilly German summer evening, sticking thumbtacks into the hammers of a piano, all have been part of my experience in exploring the sister art of music in these four plays.

Linda Henderson

July 4, 2012

Musical examples are on the pages that follow.

Figure 1

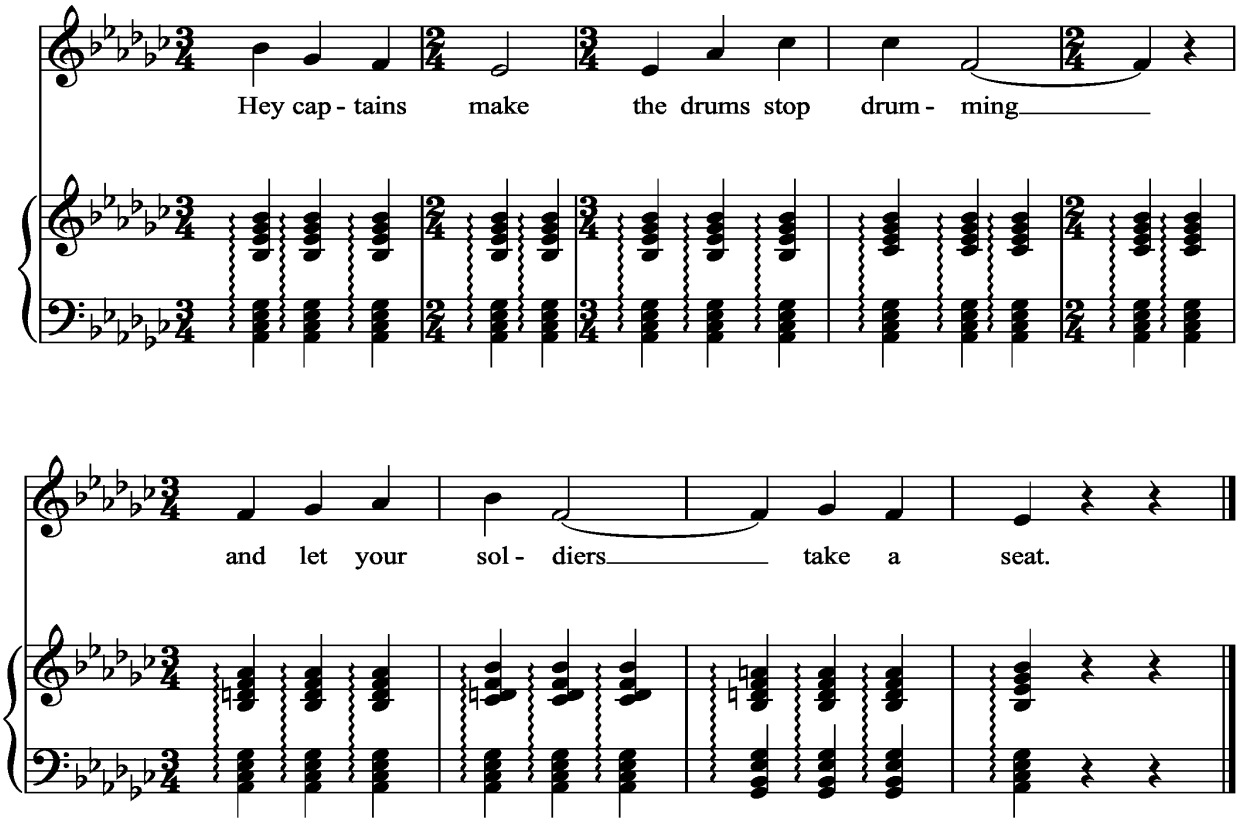


Figure 2

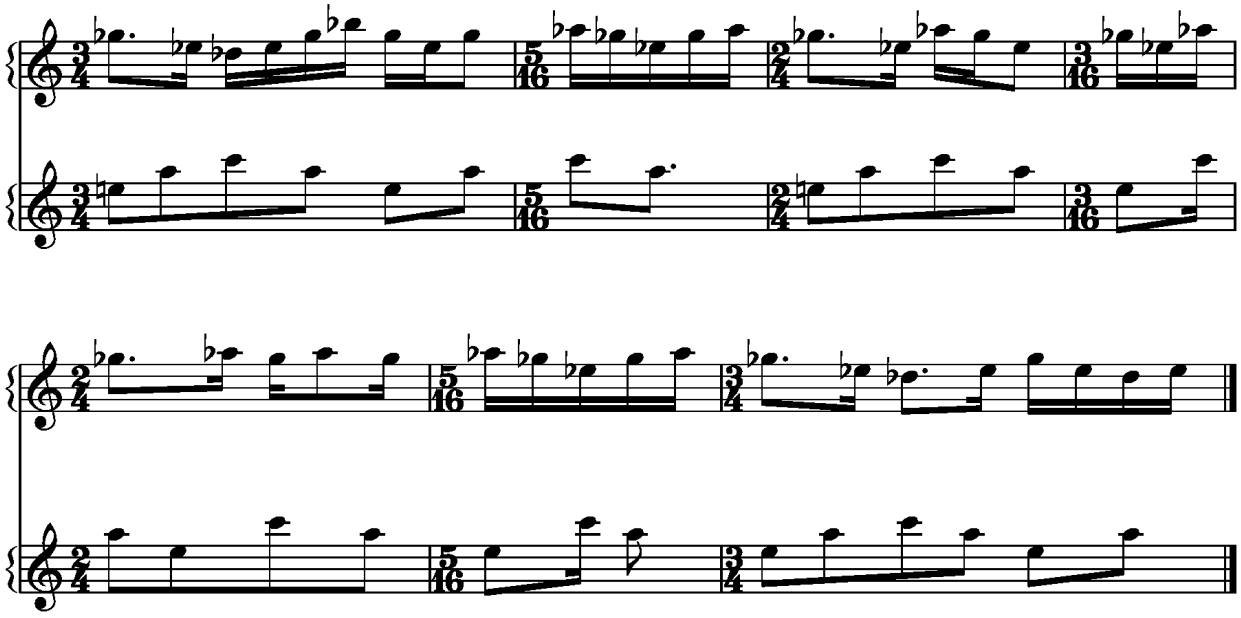
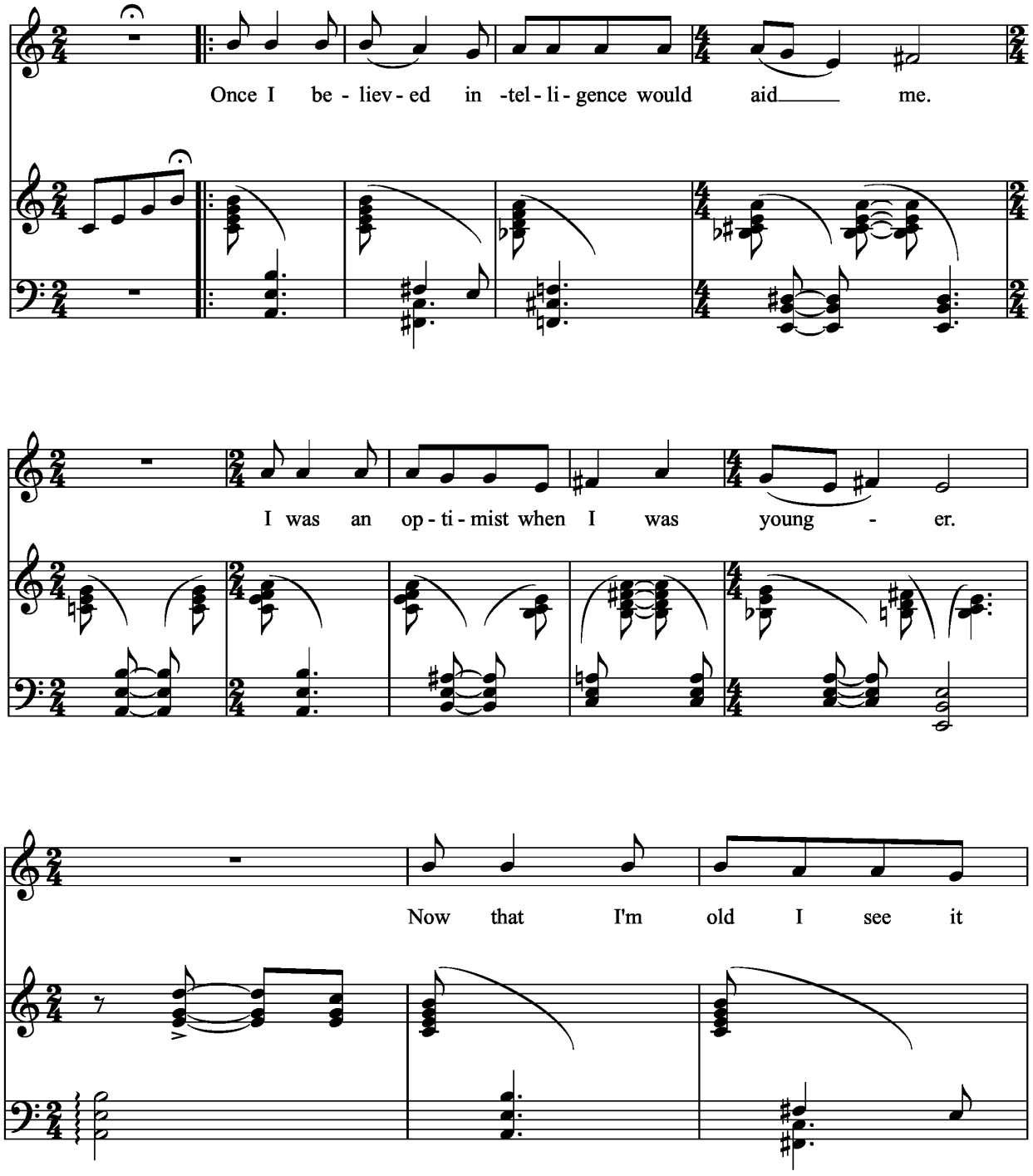


Figure 3


Once I be - liev - ed in -tel - li - gence would aid me.
I was an op - ti - mist when I was young - er.
Now that I'm old I see it

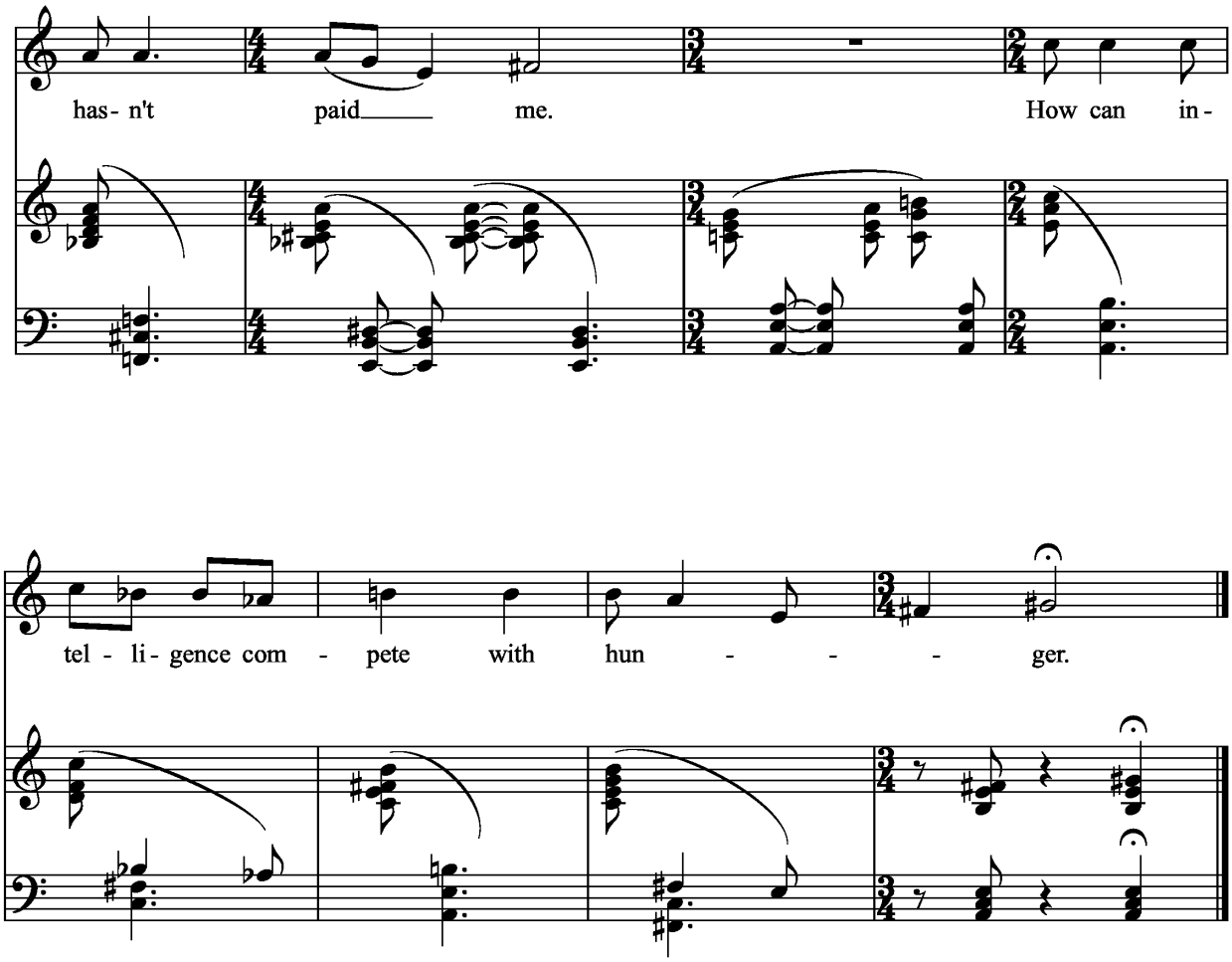

has- n't paid me. How can in-
tel - li- gence com - pete with hun - - - ger.

Figure 4

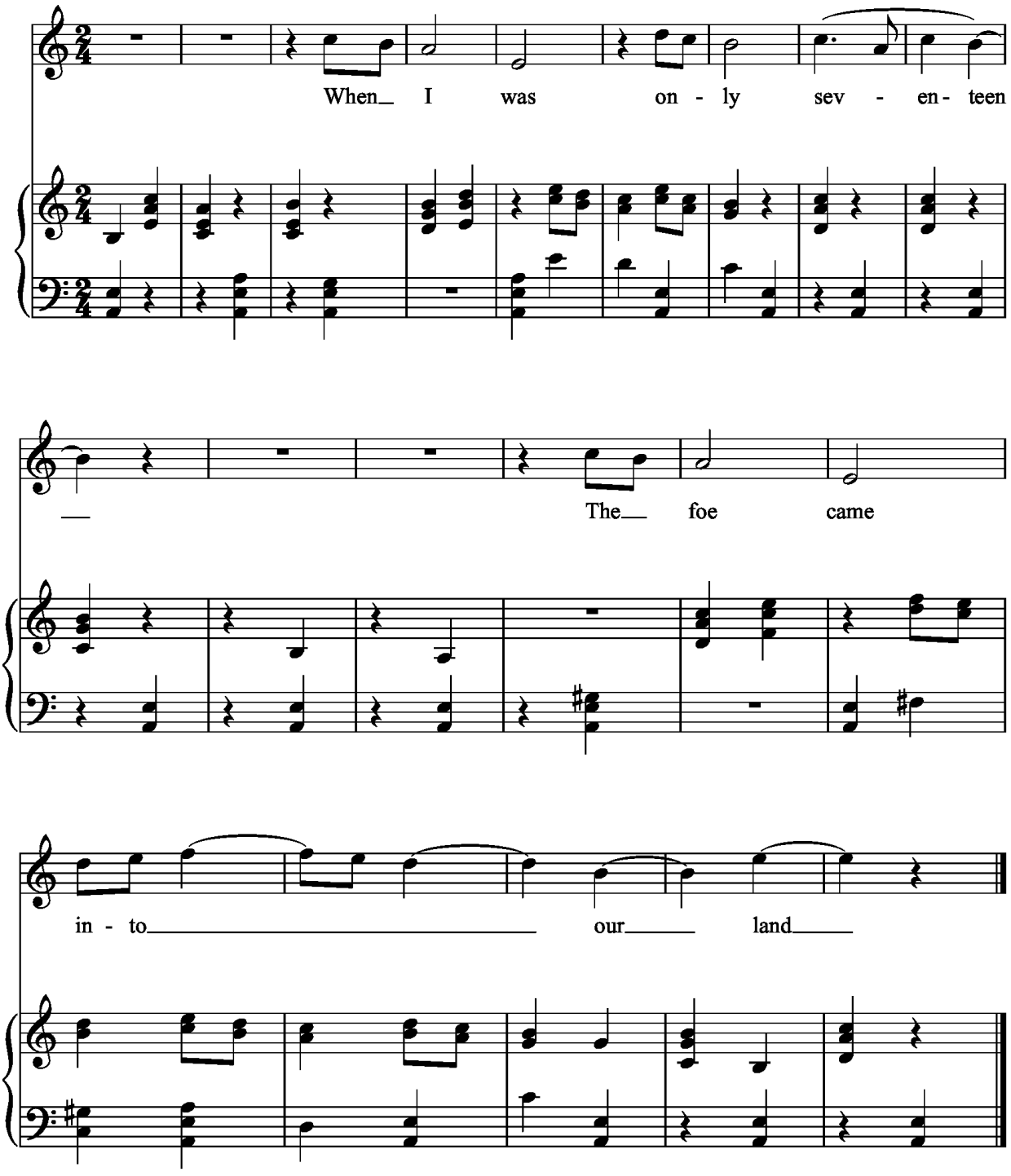


Figure 5

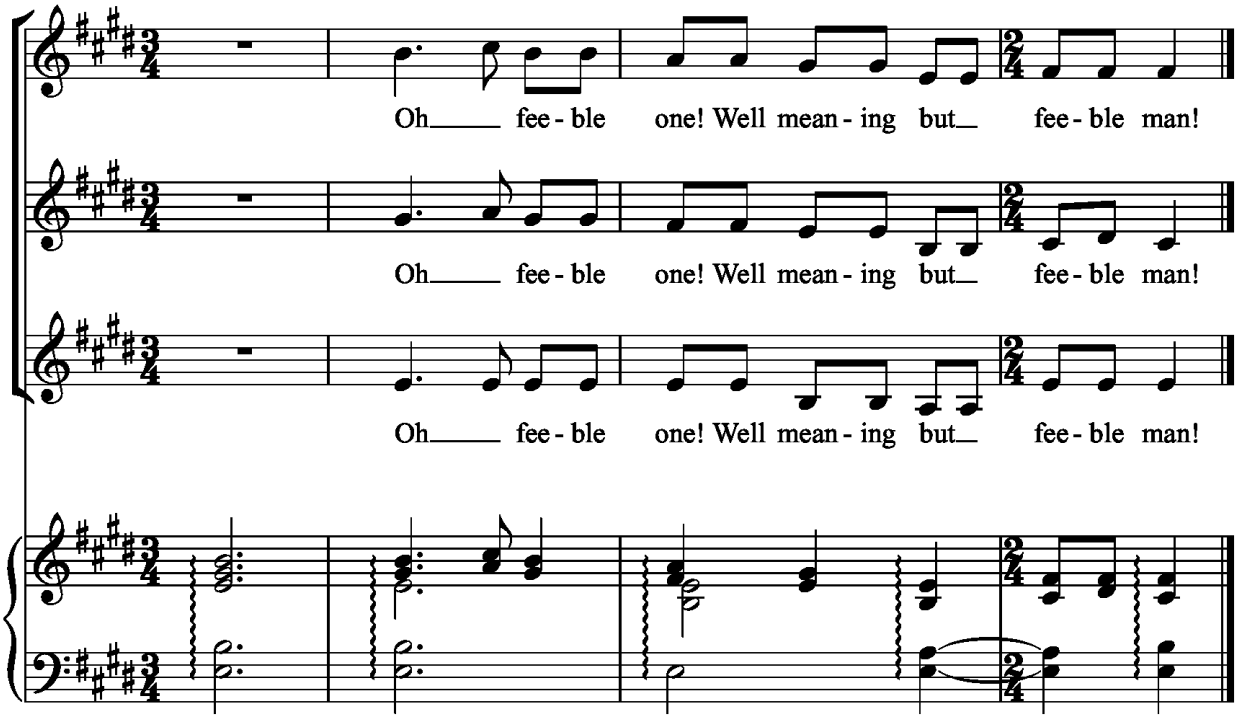

Oh fee - ble one! Well mean - ing but fee - ble man!
Oh fee - ble one! Well mean - ing but fee - ble man!
Oh fee - ble one! Well mean - ing but fee - ble man!

Figure 6

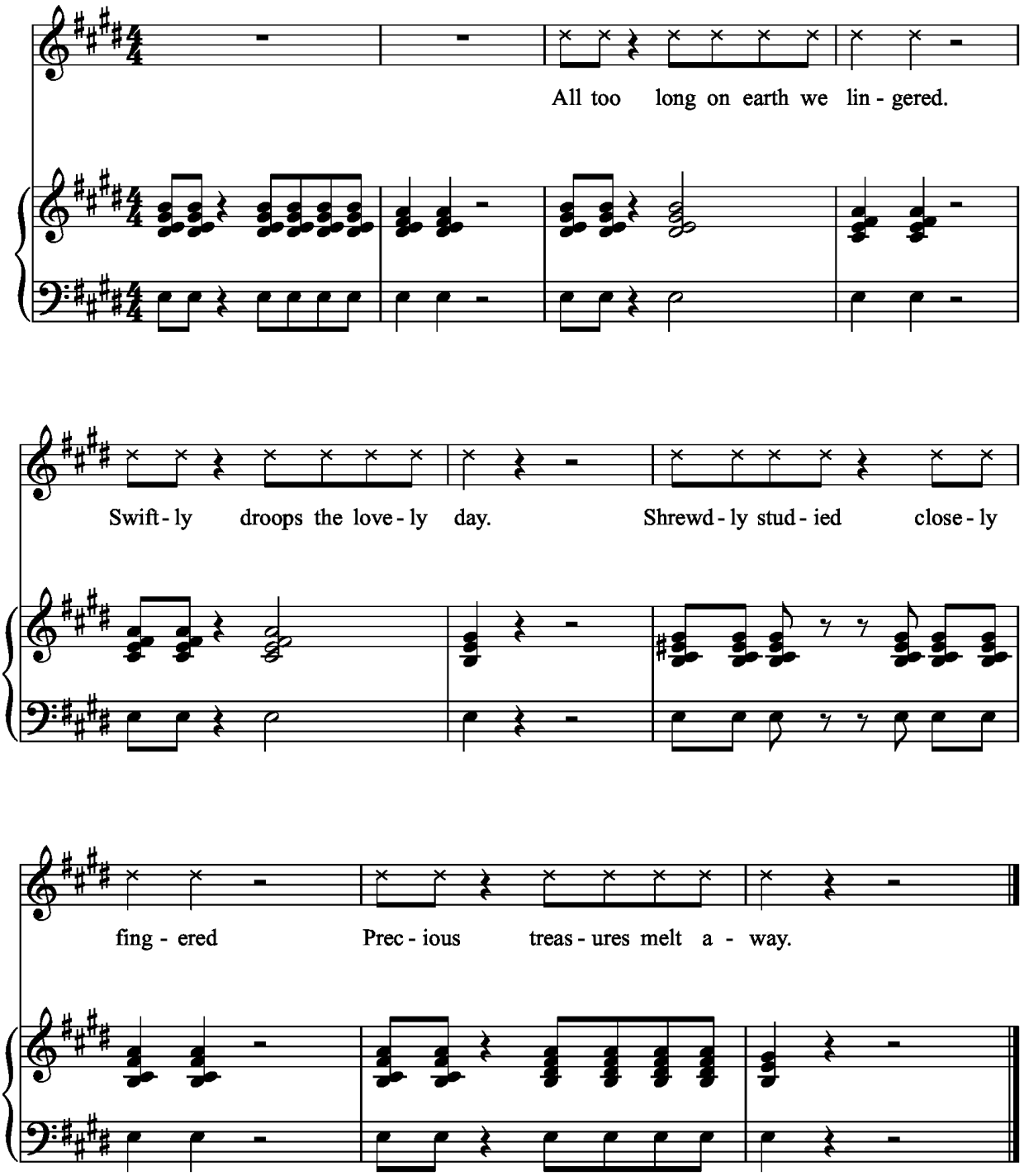

All too long on earth we lin - gered.
Swift - ly droops the love - ly day.
Shrewd - ly stud - ied close - ly
fing - ered
Prec - ious treas - ures melt a - way.

Figure 7

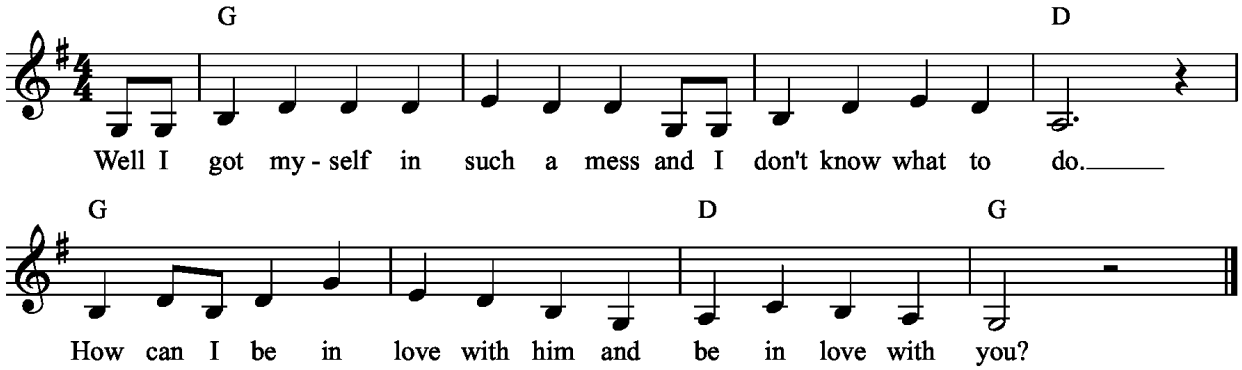


Figure 8

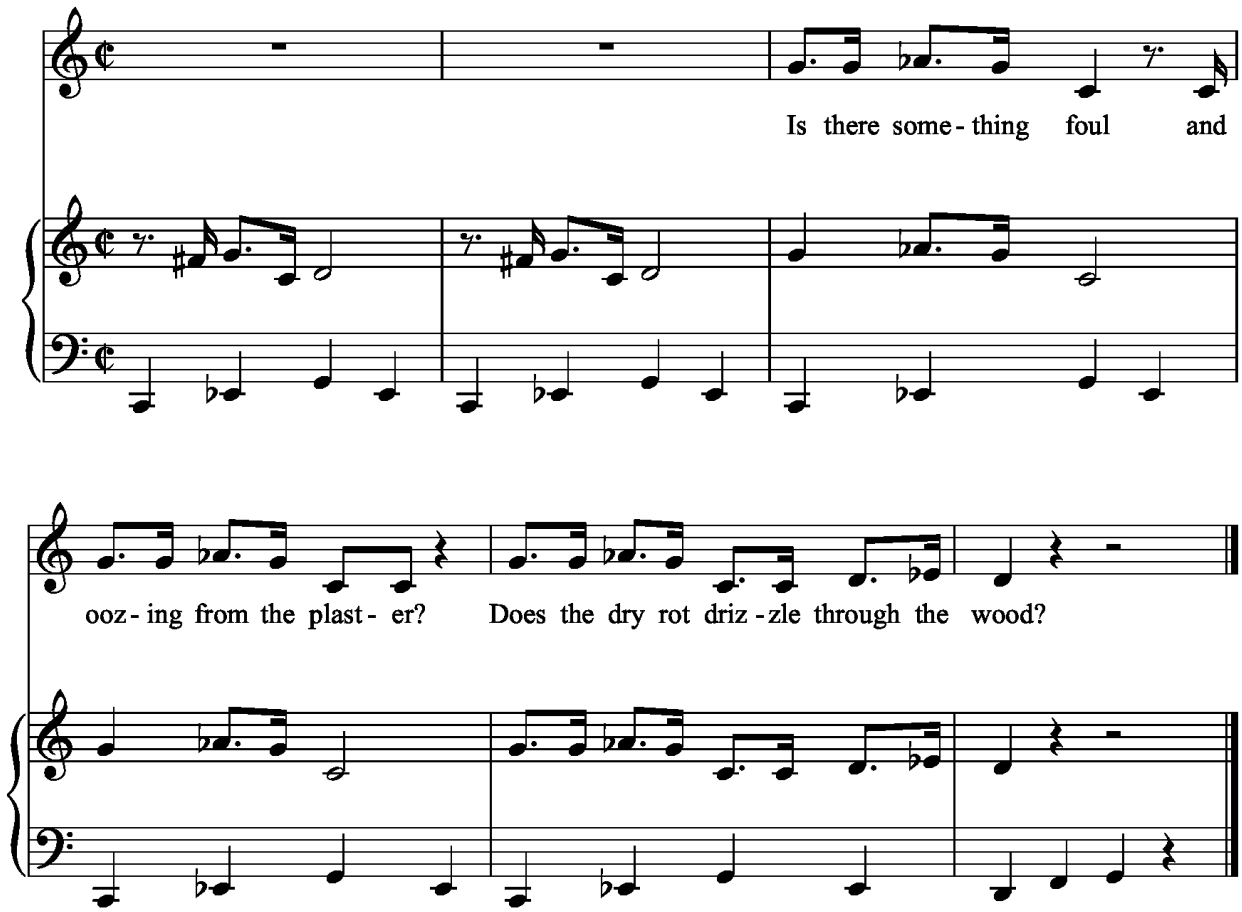


Figure 9

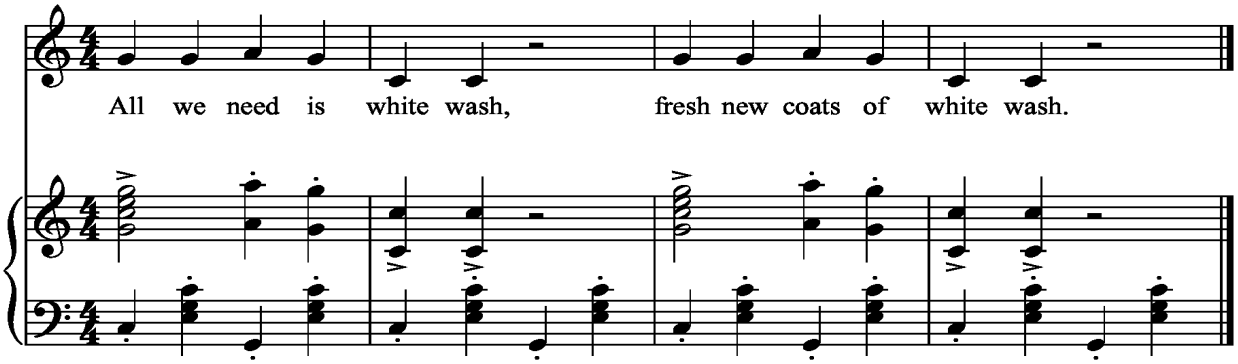
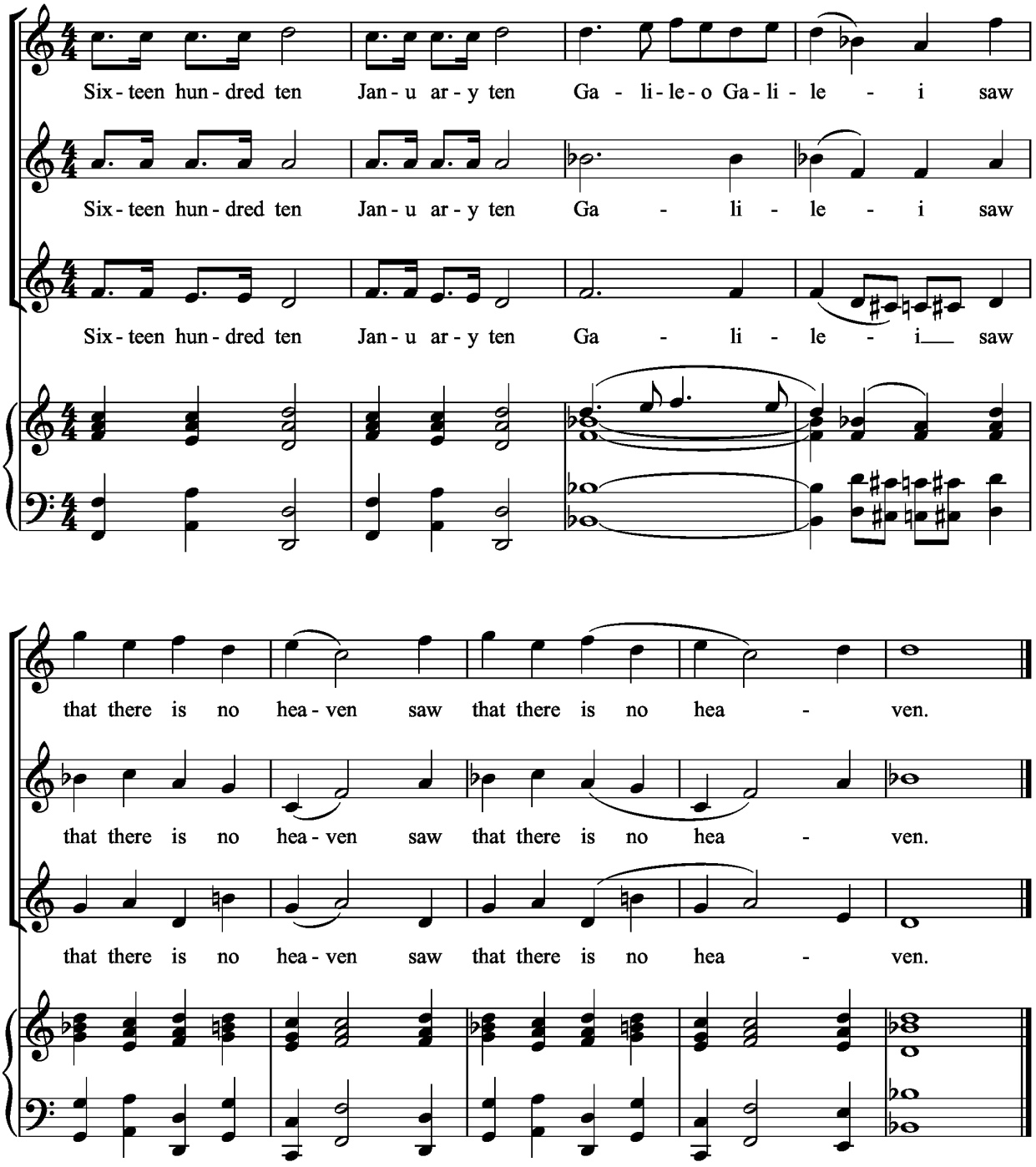


Figure 10


Six - teen hun - dred ten Jan - u ar - y ten Ga - li - le - o Ga - li - le - i saw
Six - teen hun - dred ten Jan - u ar - y ten Ga - li - le - i saw
Six - teen hun - dred ten Jan - u ar - y ten Ga - li - le - i saw
that there is no hea - ven saw that there is no hea - ven.
that there is no hea - ven saw that there is no hea - ven.
that there is no hea - ven saw that there is no hea - ven.

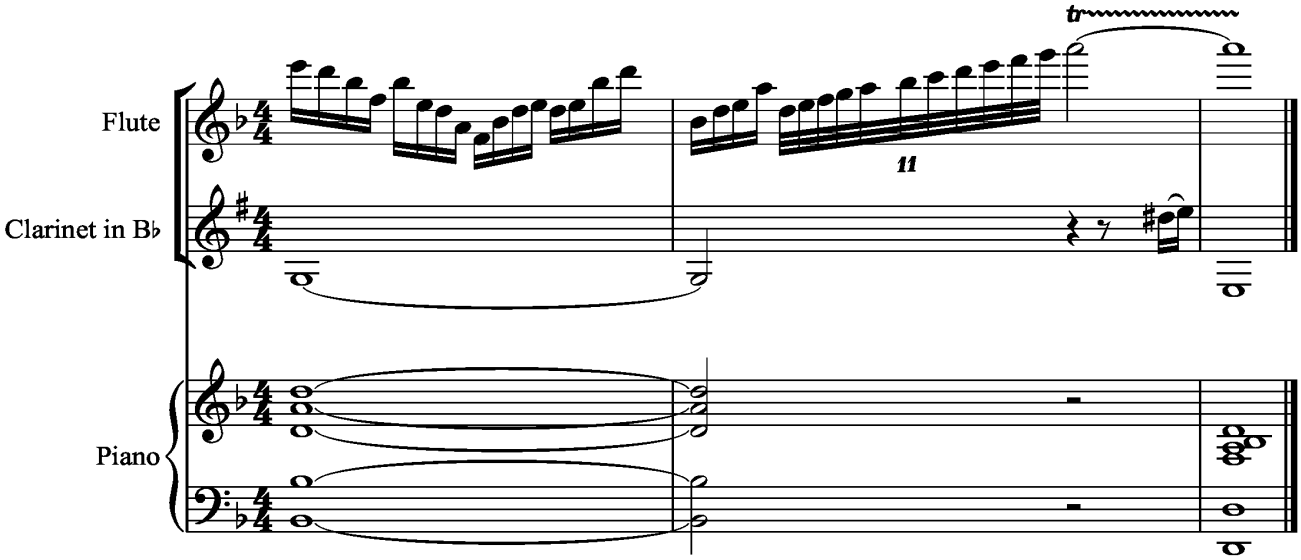



Figure 11