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Choral Spotlight

A Choral Commission: "Song for Our Transforming"

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Abstract

The commissioning of a new work is always an exciting prospect for a chorus. Choral commissions can be a celebratory affair, meant to commemorate a milestone, while at other times they may serve as a memorial. For Harrisburg Gay Men's Chorus (HGMC), our 2025 commission, "Song for Our Transforming," with Nebraska-based composer Donald Callen Freed, served as a stepping-stone. Since the pandemic, our chorus has gone through a handful of updates and changes, some in response to weathering the COVID-19 pandemic, and other changes in response to the changes we have seen in our region and the greater LGBTQIA+ community. This spotlight article highlights the new work Freed composed for HGMC's 2025 holiday show, "Radiance of the Rainbow: Holy, Queer, and Divine" titled "Song for Our Transforming." As Donald and I share, his commission, dedicated to the trans and gender-expansive community, is also representative of HGMC's ongoing transformation as we approach our 40th anniversary during the 2026-2027 concert season.

Keywords
choral commission, TGX, analysis, director perspective, community

Snowflakes gently tumble down as they lay a tranquil blanket over a small church in the Cumberland Valley of Central Pennsylvania. The stained-glass windows glow; a chorus of voices ring throughout the church. Strains of disco, chant, musical theatre, and poetry can be heard from within; there is a sacred quality as spoken and musical word comingle. This is Harrisburg Gay Men's Chorus's holiday show "Radiance of the Rainbow" where poetry and song are woven together to enfold and comfort the queer musicians and audience in attendance. Each color of the Progressive Pride Flag is accompanied by a poem or narrative, highlighting the strength, beauty, and perseverance of the LGBTQIA+ community. A singer from the chorus steps up to the podium and reads, "Pink, baby blue, and white represent our transgender family. They flutter like a promise written in the sky. They are the colors of the trans flag and reclaim what was once assigned without consent, transforming them into symbols of chosen truth." Then piano begins, the chorus breathes together and sings, "Is this the sunrise or the sunset? Either way the sky has the same colors…"

The commissioning of a new work can be an exciting prospect for a chorus. Choral commissions can be a celebratory affair, meant to commemorate a milestone, while at other times they may serve as a memorial. For Harrisburg Gay Men's Chorus (HGMC), our 2025 commission with Nebraska-based composer, Donald Callen Freed (DCF), served as a stepping-stone in the ensemble's growth and evolution. Since the pandemic, the chorus has gone through a handful of updates and changes, some in response to weathering the COVID-19 pandemic, and other changes in response to the changes we have seen in our region and the greater LGBTQIA+ community. This spotlight article highlights the new work Freed composed for HGMC's 2025 holiday show, "Radiance of the Rainbow: Holy, Queer, and Divine" titled "Song for Our Transforming." As we share, Freed's commission, dedicated to the trans and gender-expansive (TGX) community, is also representative of HGMC's ongoing transformation as we approach our 40th anniversary during the 2026-2027 concert season. As a co-authored

article, we (Donald and Dillon) offer our two perspectives of "Song for Our Transforming," first from the composer's viewpoint; sharing how the piece came to be created and its structure. Then we share the director's perspective and the song's impact on HGMC singers with insights from TGX chorus members.

Composer's Perspective

As a composer (DCF), I always begin with the text, perhaps being a bit more exacting and connected because the text is my own. The text guides my creation of rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic structures. I was approached after writing this poem by Dillon Beede, Artistic Director of the Harrisburg Gay Men's Chorus (HGMC) to set it to music for TBB chorus. The balance seemed correct for such an ensemble, and I looked forward to the challenge. I had originally written the poem in November 2024, where it was used in the program for the Omaha Transgender Day of Remembrance. At that time, I had not planned a musical setting.

I shared the poem with Dillon in December 2024, and he discussed the idea of a musical setting for a small (ca. 30 voices) TTBB choir. The poem is as follows:

Song for Our Transforming

Is this the sunrise or the sunset?
Either way, the sky has the same colors—
the pinks, the blues, purples, oranges, and crimsons—
all the variants, if only for an instant,
over the brown horizon.

We are longing for such a horizon,
the warmer, the other side,
where we are free to be of our own destiny,
not of a lifestyle but a life,
a life of all the colors should we choose them,
to the pinnacle of the sky,
the apex of our being,
and back again.
It should be our life and no one else's,
to have and to hold from this day, period.

Is our sun setting or rising?
The colors are all infinitely the same,
but the wondrous shapes they make through space
are over a trillion times more than powerful.

The poem is one of trans and gender expansion. Indeed, it could also be titled Song for Our Trans-forming because it indicates how being LGBTQIA+, especially trans and gender-expansive, is a transformative process that can take years. Some persons may have it easier, "like poof, this is who I am; get over it," but they seem fewer and farther between. "Song for Our Transforming" was chosen as the poem's title because transforming is a verb, indicating a continuing process, rather than "transformation," a noun which identifies a more finite, finished act.

The poem is rich in imagery, including references to colors found in the pride flag and relating them to nature, indicating that TGX identities are a normal part of existence and have been forever. The second stanza amplifies this imagery, especially in "all the colors should we choose them," "to the pinnacle of the sky, the apex of our being, and back again," expanding the horizons of trans and gender-expansiveness even further. The final stanza emphasizes that this swirling interplay of colors makes us "even more than powerful," stating that there is strength in our transforming and multitudinous gender diversity.

Admittedly, I am a cisgender gay man writing about the trans and gender-expansive experience. There are three items in my background that contribute to a sense of openness in general, and about gender in particular. The first is my mother, Mary Louise Callen Freed (1926-2005), who was among the first women to receive the M.A. in anthropology from the University of Nebraska and exposed me to Indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality, including traditions now associated with Two-Spirit identities, and a broader experience of sexuality in the late 1960s (Freed, 2011). I did exploration and reading in this area in high school and college, before and after coming out.

The second influence was my mother's aunt, Irmis Johnson (1900-1995), who grew up on a Nebraska farm next to mine and eventually became a journalist for the American Weekly from 1941-1962 in New York. In 1952 she wrote articles on the transformation of George to Christine Jorgensen (Alon Lischinsky (2026) Involuntary celebrity: the outing of Christine Jorgensen, *Celebrity Studies*, 17:2, 277-290). This is further chronicled in Joanne Meyerowitz's *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Harvard University Press, 2001, 64-65), and by Christine herself *(Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (New York: Paul S. Eriksson, 1967). My late partner and I discussed this extensively with Irmis in her New York apartment in 1988.

The third is the influence of more contemporary transgender persons since 2018, my close relationship with my cousin, who is a trans woman, coming out three years ago, and many singers in the River City Mixed Chorus (LGBTQ+ and GALA), Omaha, for which I am tenor section leader. While I am not transgender, trans people have been part of my life for nearly fifty years.

I have identified as a gay composer, particularly of choral and solo vocal works, for the last 35+ years, and have had works published by Moon of Hope, Tetra Continuo, and Yelton Rhodes (now Subito Music Press). Most works are featured on my own website. My catalogue features choral and vocal works, and works by gay poets, that have been performed by other GALA choruses, the College Music Society, universities, and high schools. "Song for Our Transforming" was premiered by the Harrisburg Gay Men's Chorus in December 2025.

Structure

The work comprises 102 measures and takes approximately 6:10 performance time. The structure may be analyzed as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Brief overall structure of "Song for Our Transforming" (6:10)
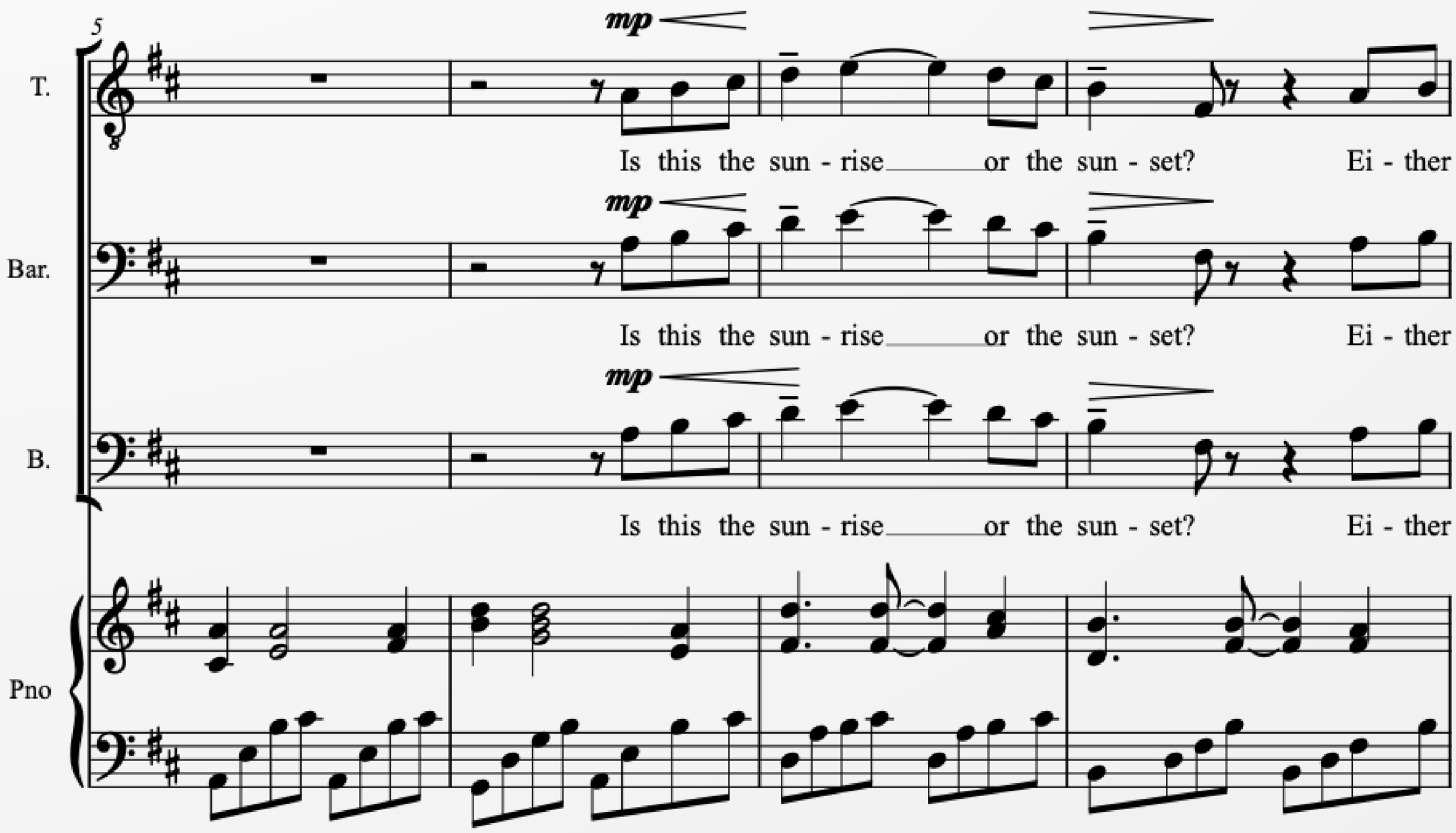
Section	Form	Measures	Characteristics
1	A	1–19	4/4; Moderato, 1st and 2nd themes
2	B	20–42	Ascending melody and two-pt. counterpoint introduced
3	B1	43–51	Continued 2-pt. counterpoint expanding to 3 pt.
4	Transition (piano)	52–56	From 4/4 to 9/8; faster tempo; based on original accompaniment figure in diminution
5	B2	57–71	Fugal w/slight alterations; a cappella
6	A1	72–94	Based on 1st theme but extended; return to 4/4, Tempo I
7	A2	95–102	1st theme + codetta

There are basically two main parts with a transition, followed by a codetta at the end.

Musical Analysis

"Song for Our Transforming" goes back and forth between accompanied and unaccompanied sections with discrete entry after unaccompanied passages to facilitate pitch adjustment if necessary, and to allow for emotional breathing space in the transition from one section to another. There is a contrast between the even rhythm of the voices at the beginning and at the end which indicate complexity of TGX issues (Figures 1, 6). The duration of the piece is circa 6:10.
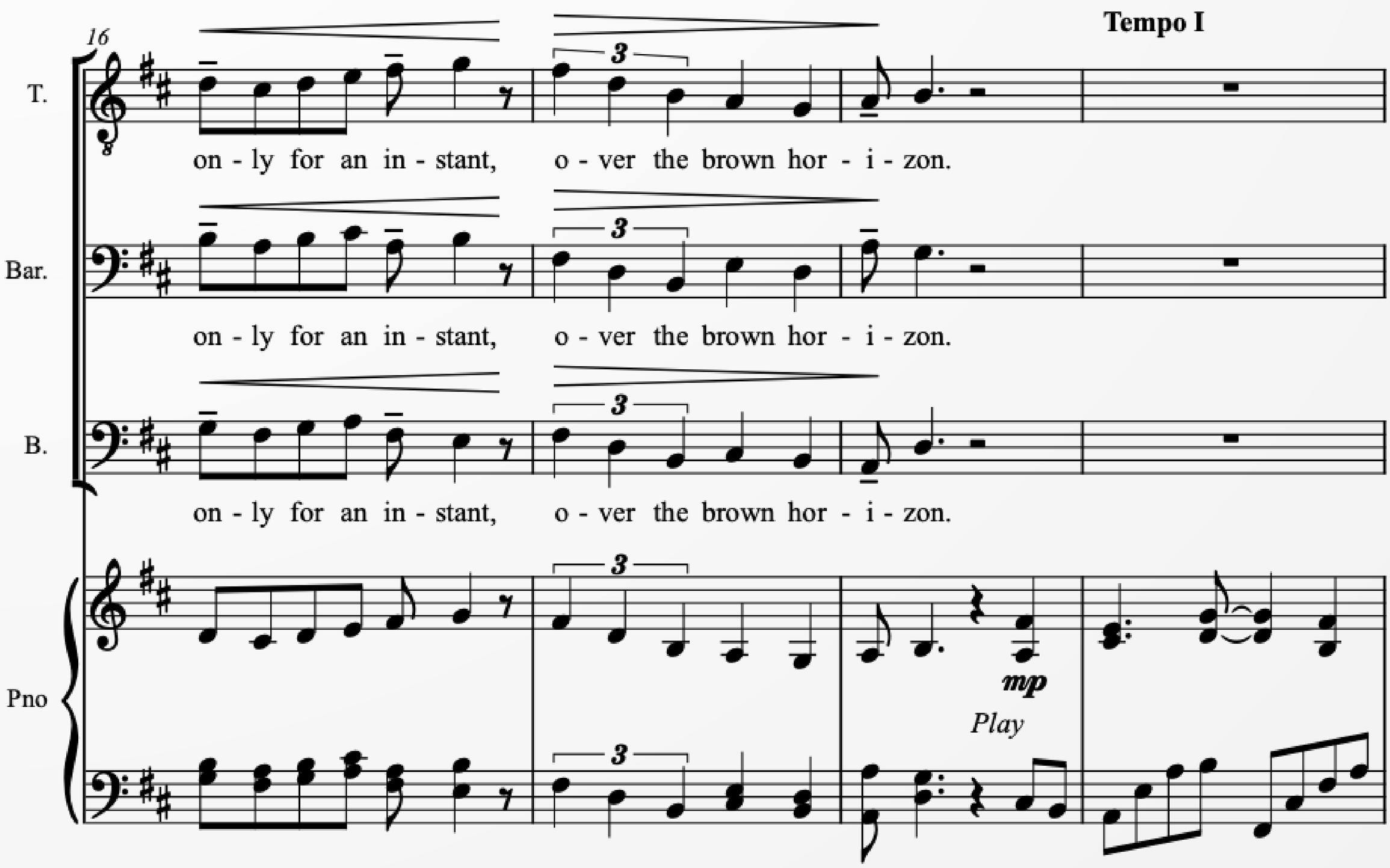
Figure 1. Contrast between even and syncopated rhythm, especially in accompaniment



Of course, some of these compositional techniques are inserted consciously, but often the compositional process is organic and intuitive, based on what sounds well and what is possible with the ensemble as defined by the artistic director. There is also a compositional instinct based on years of experience by the composer. These techniques are composed and written as felt first, and only then subjected some to analysis.

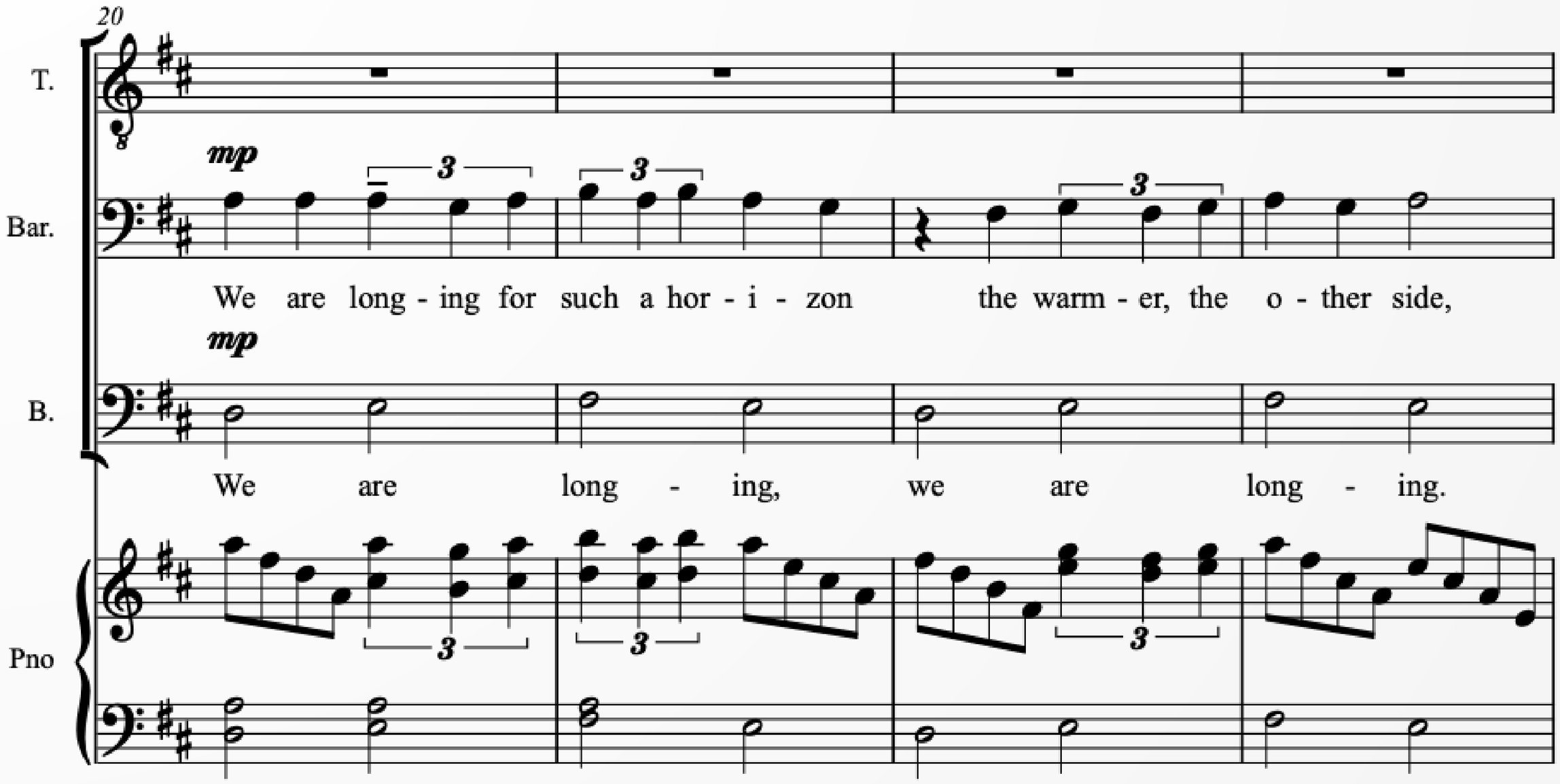
The fugal section is identical in rhythm, but a few pitches and harmonies have been altered. It comes to an end on a fortissimo iii chord in second inversion, suggesting the ongoing transformative and emphatic quality of TGX lives. This is followed by a *lunga* fermata, a moment of contemplation before the first piano theme returns us to the ending section (Figures 2, 4, 5, 7).

Figure 2. Text painting: rise and fall of musical and textual elements (occurs throughout) (See also Figures 4, 6, 7)



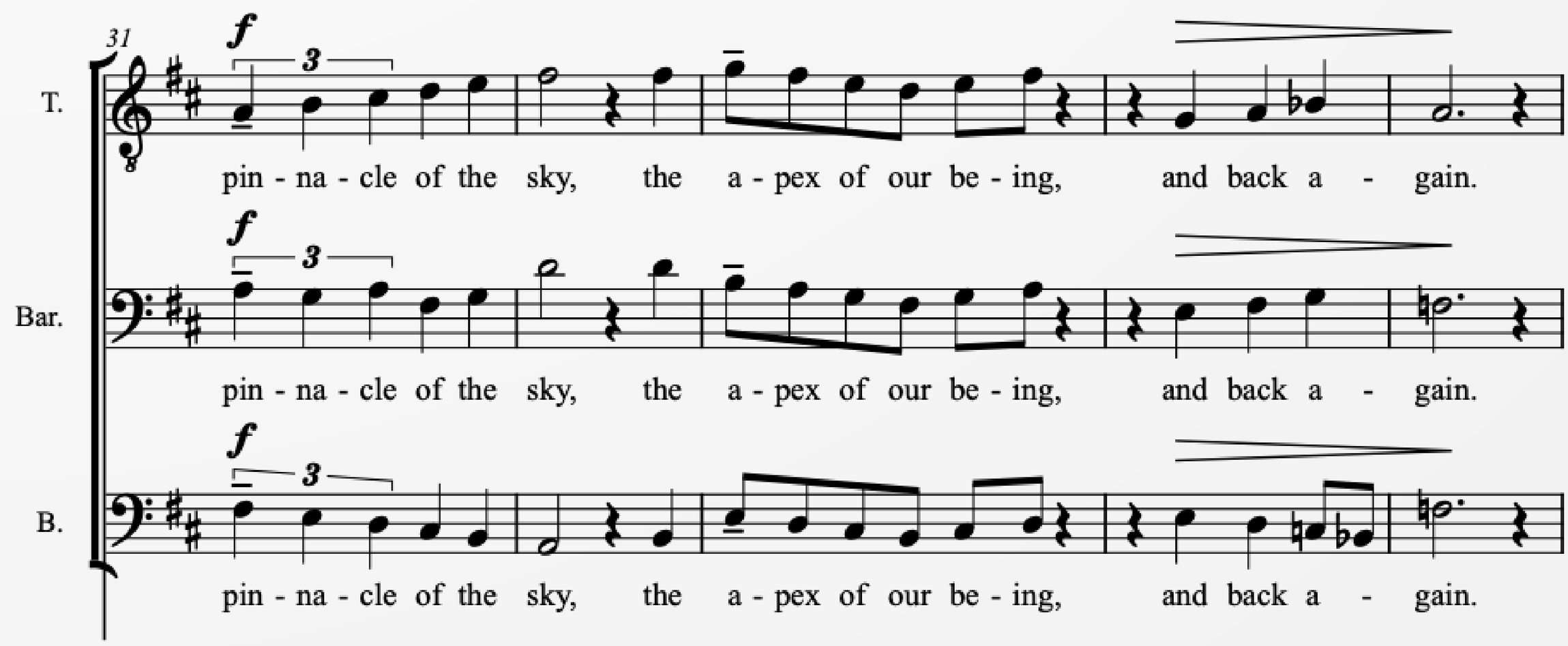
The resulting harmonies go in and out of dissonance and consonance, such as may be found in a TGX person's struggle (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Two-part counterpoint, often switched between voice parts



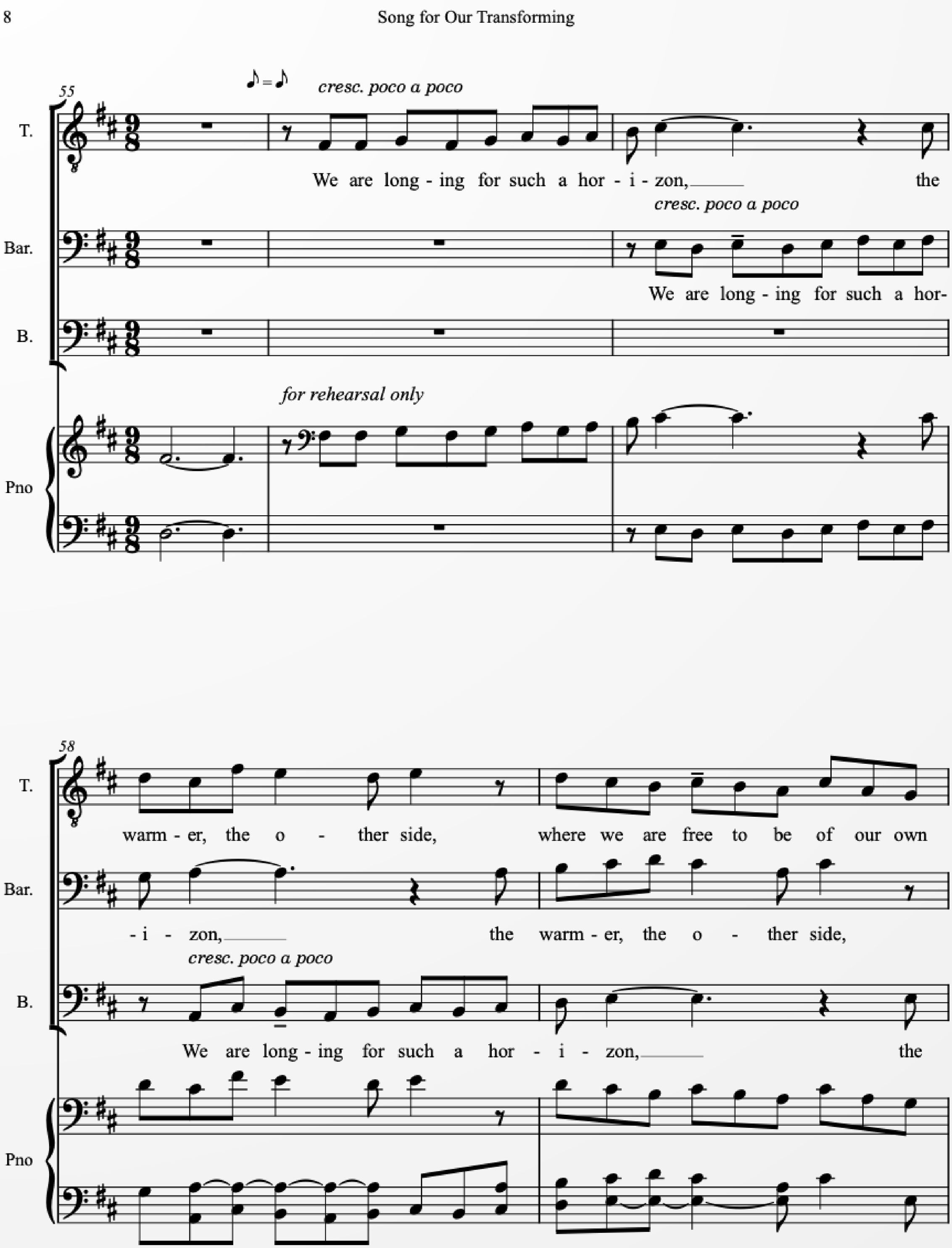
Text painting, especially the rise and fall of lines according to the text, is ever present (Figures 4, 6, 7).

Figure 4. Text painting, second example
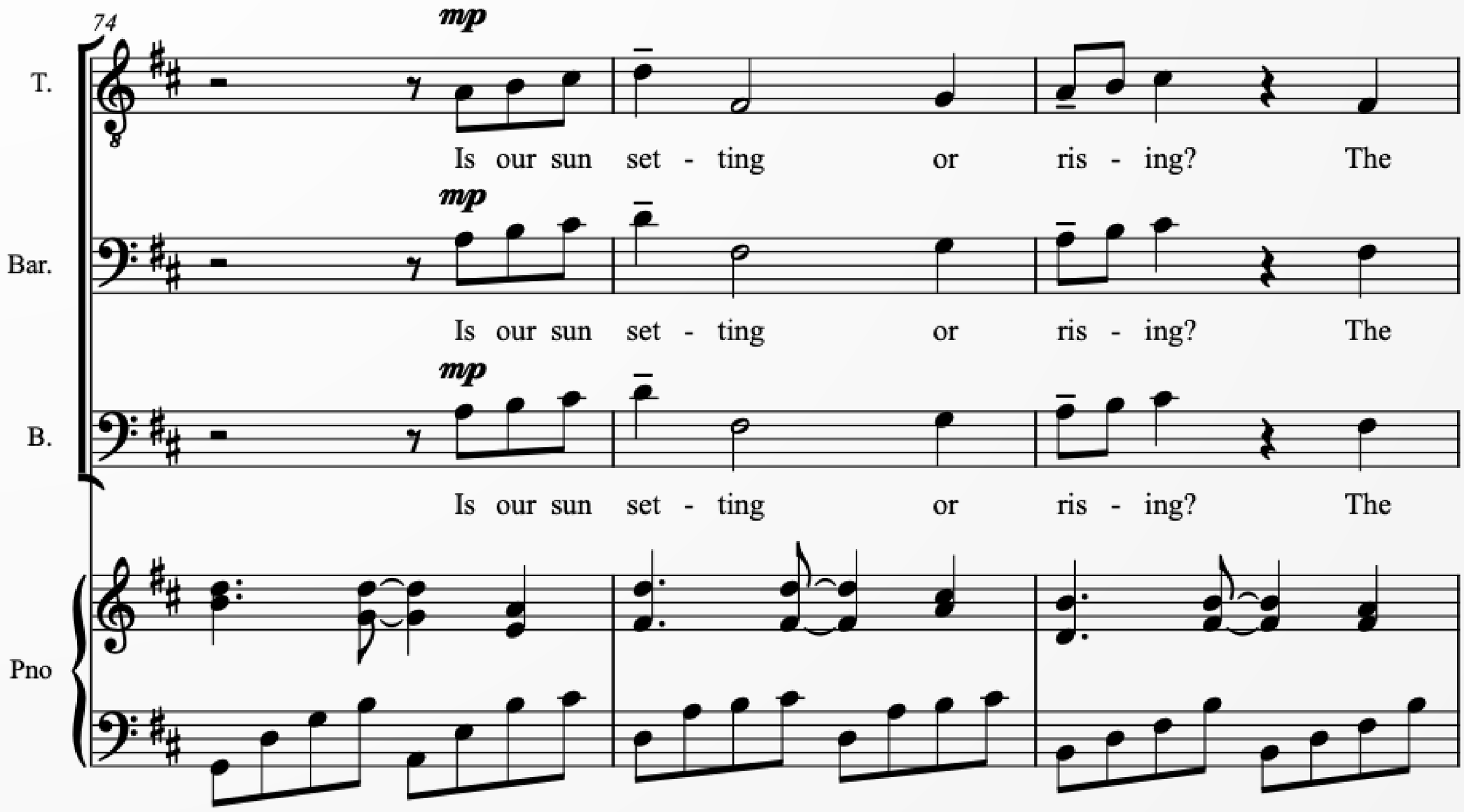


Counterpoint in two parts appears initially at bar 20, expanding and contracting to bar 51. There is a transition from 4/4 to 9/8 beginning with the accompaniment figure introduced at bar one. Then an unaccompanied fugal section occurs, indicating both unity and variety of each individual transforming (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Fugal/contrapuntal section, triple rather than duple meter, slightly faster; piano for rehearsal only



Theme 1 returns, measure 74, with variant (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Return of Theme I and more text painting



This final section, based on the introductory theme, takes that thematic and text material and extends it. The piece ends on a *M7* chord, indicating a triumph in transformation, but also of lingering or unresolved challenges (Figures 7, 8).

Figure 7. Extended motives in Section 7; text painting continues
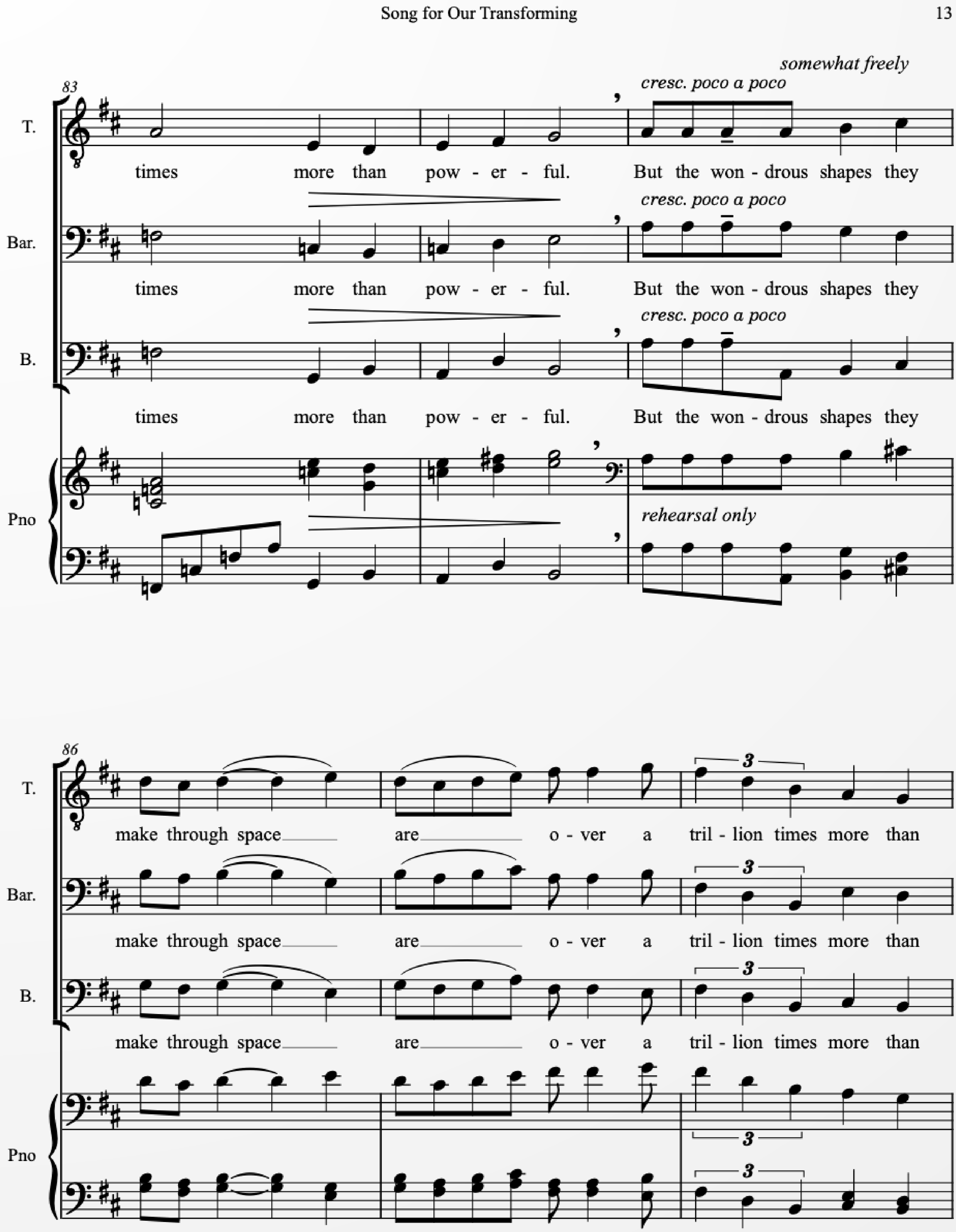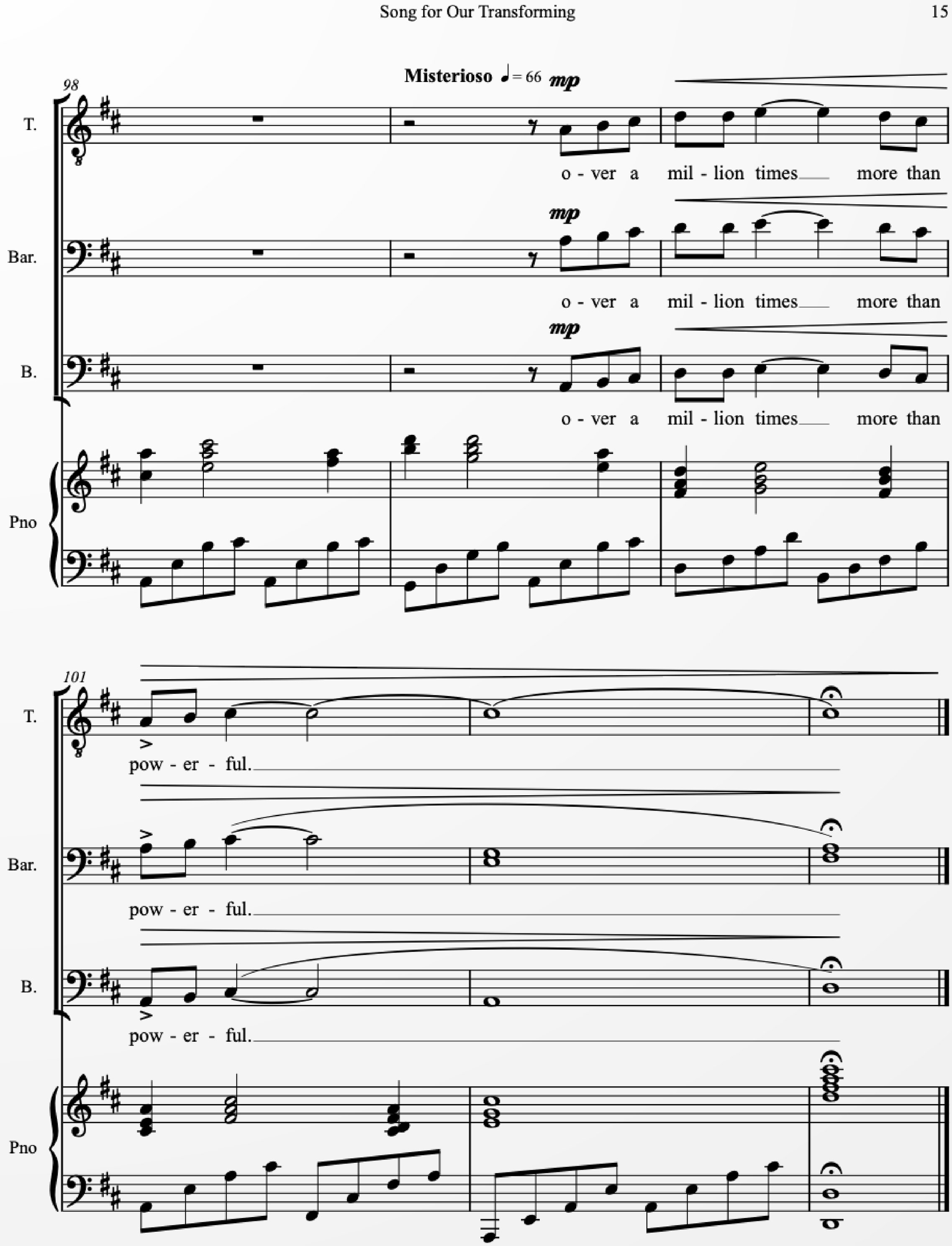


Figure 8. Codetta; ending on major seventh chord; transgender life can be bright yet dissonant



Discussion

The more difficult middle section of the piece, faster, contrapuntal and interweaving, is a metaphor for the variety of trans lives that are complex and develop at different times. These lives finally arrive in a consonance, albeit an unexpected one, that we can begin to comprehend, or so I hope. The same is true of the final section, this time on a major seventh chord with the 7th in the tenor, again indicating that something dissonant is also consonant at the same time—incomplete completeness, or complete incompleteness, if you will. The upward passages that occur in the a cappella sections are related to the senses of anticipation and hope in our transforming, or trans-forming.

The poem and the music are designed to be not only transforming but also trans-forming: forming a new reality not only through the word, but also through the musical elements of melody, harmony, rhythm, counterpoint, and ascending scale passages and motives.

Director's Perspective

When Donald shared his poem with me in 2024, I was struck by its scale; bringing together the deeply personal queer experience with the cosmos. The music also has an intimate but celestial quality—what I imagine an astronaut might feel in a quiet moment alone looking at our planet from outer space. The first and last stanzas best capture this ethereal quality while the longer middle stanza pulls performer and audience into the more intimate and yearning perspective. The piece was embraced by the chorus as the poetry and music connected with members across the LGBTQIA+ spectrum.

While the majority of HGMC is composed of primarily queer cisgender men (approximately 75%), they were able to connect to the piece personally as it reflected aspects of their own lived experience. It also served as an opportunity for these individuals to better understand and sympathize with the experiences of some TGX individuals. More importantly, trans singers in the chorus especially connected with the piece. One trans singer shared:

> …it was a realization that even though the trans experience is very lonely and isolating, even if you surround yourself with other trans people because everybody has such an individual journey, just to know that somebody is able to [DBd1] [FD2] understand that and capture it in musical form was significant. And then also finding out that it's not even a trans person that wrote the song…it's nice to know that even though the trans journey can be very isolating and that even though somebody doesn't fully understand it, they can see what's happening and it closes that gap. It doesn't feel as lonely because of that. (Blake, TGX singer in HGMC)

This piece provided an opportunity for shared narratives and perspectives between the cisgender and TGX singers in HGMC. The universal themes of being seen and belonging were essential for these conversations in our chorus and invited singers to be seen, belong, and find their place in our chorus and in a chaotic world. Another trans singer shared:

> I just really felt that through the lyrics of the poem and also through the music, you can feel the expressiveness and the love that we as trans people deserve to feel included…and so I think that the song is meaningful and it feels really good to be part of a chorus where we can sing music that's composed just for us. (Rowan, TGX singer in HGMC)

This visibility and centering of TGX identities has been especially important for HGMC as it continues to grow and embrace a new identity in its forthcoming 40th anniversary in 2027. This commitment to a more expansive TTBB choral experience is reflected in our new vision statement, "We dream a world that embraces and celebrates LGBTQIA+ voices." TGX identities have become more visible both nationally as well as within our

chorus. This visibility has also been accompanied by more contestation of TGX identities within our U.S. political sphere. During this period, GALA choruses should be using our artistic and musical gifts to uplift TGX and BIPOC voices in defiance of individuals who would like to see them silenced. Our mission, "We create musical experiences that embolden our community toward social progress. Like notes in a well-tuned chord, our voices unite to amplify our role as a leader in celebrating the LGBTQIA+ community of Central PA" speaks to this as well. Works like Donald's, which embrace and uplift the TGX experience are essential in strengthening the community bonds of our chorus as well as to share with our audiences.

"Song for Our Transforming" was more than a new addition to HGMC's repertoire; it became a musical expression of the chorus's own becoming, of the community we are continuing to build. In rehearsing and premiering the work, we musically embraced our TGX siblings, recognizing their struggles as central to the work of the LGBTQIA+ community, standing in solidarity, and developing deeper bonds of care. This commission marks both a reflection of where the chorus has been and a gesture toward who we are becoming: a chorus committed to amplifying LGBTQIA+ voices in Central Pennsylvania through music that honors complexity, celebrates transformation, and makes space for lives still unfolding.

Conclusion

As we have shared, choral commissions can be a significant opportunity to celebrate and look toward the future for a chorus. "Song for Our Transforming" is a moving work that should be considered for inclusion in other choruses programming, especially to uplift the voices of TGX singers. While this work was composed for a small GALA chorus, the intimacy and delicate quality of the fugue-like sections are well suited to ensembles of this size. However, because of the message of the text, a chorus that is much larger should also consider the work if they are able to negotiate its contrapuntal quality. Freed's composition has captured a pivotal moment for the Harrisburg Gay Men's Chorus. As the chorus looks to the future and continues to grow and expand, we acknowledge and celebrate the ways in which our TGX siblings are so essential to the queer community. Songs like Freed's, among other songs by TGX composers like Mari Esabel Valverde and Michael Bussewitz-Quarm, are essential repertoire for choruses that proclaim to be open and affirming for TGX singers. The music we commission, rehearse, and perform creates opportunities for singers to encounter each other's experiences, to reflect on who has been marginalized within our communities, and for singers to see themselves clearly recognized and celebrated in what we sing.

Video performance of "Song for Our Transforming" as performed by HGMC, December 2025:
https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/6arws25sqikk5dkkqzp0d/Song-For-Our-Transforming-HGMC-2025.mp4?rlkey=mt0ju8wbj8lrseslra0r424ke&dl=0

Full copy of music available at donaldcallenfreed.com

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Dr. Donald Callen Freed is a published and self-published choral composer and vocal musician. His works are published by Subito Music Press (formerly Yelton Rhodes, Tetra Continuo, Moon of Hope, and on his website, donaldcallenfreed.com. He teaches at Iowa Western Community College and was previously head and professor at Sul Ross State University (TX). He has also taught at Hastings College (NE), the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and Peru State College (NE). He holds the following degrees: BM, Nebraska Wesleyan University; MM and PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He is also Tenor Section Leader of the 160-voice River City Mixed Chorus, Omaha.

Dr. Dillon E. Beede is a 2026 doctoral graduate of Teachers College, Columbia University, head of Music at Wilson College (PA), and Artistic Director of the Harrisburg Gay Men's Chorus (PA). He taught previously at Hastings College (NE).

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