Repertory

A Chant-Based Polyphonic Setting of the *Improperia*

While reasons for replacing the masterful chant Improperia *are few, a work by Senfl is beautiful and fitting.*

by Charles Weaver

The Roman liturgy for Holy Week has many features that stand out against the predictability and regularity of the liturgical year. From the point of view of plainchant, the most special of these features is surely the music for the Adoration of the Cross on Good Friday. In the modern books, several chants are prescribed for this ceremony, beginning with a series of chants known as the *Improperia* or reproaches, which are formally unique within the plainchant repertoire. Although the reproaches are often sung together without a break, there are actually two distinct pieces of music within the series, and these two chants have a separate history. The first chant, a series of verses—"Populo meus," "Quia eduxi te," and "Quid ultra debui facere"— followed by a bilingual refrain "Hagios o Theos, Sanctus Deus," is older and is often found alone in early chant sources. In this article, I will focus only on this first chant.[1]

What is so unusual about this chant? First, it is sung in an elaborate antiphonal form, with two choirs, each of which has a pair of cantors; this level of complexity is unparalleled in the Roman Rite. The verses, paraphrasing various parts of the Old Testament, are sung in the voice of Christ on the Cross, contrasting the generosity of God with the ingratitude of the faithful. Singing the words of Christ, especially words not drawn directly from sacred scripture, is unusual within the Roman Rite. The refrain, also unusual in its alternation of Greek and Latin, presents a version of the Trisagion, representing an early borrowing from a Byzantine tradition. For more on the early history of these unique chants, examined from

[1] *Liber Usualis*, pp. 737–39. Graduale Romanum (1974), pp. 176–178.

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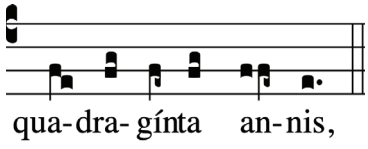
musical, liturgical, scriptural, and theological perspectives, interested readers should consult the recent dissertation by Armin Karim.[2]

The Chant in the Modern Books

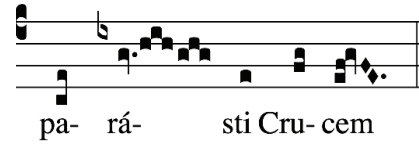
For all its elaborate formalism, "Populo meus" uses relatively simple musical means. It is worth analyzing this chant melodically, especially since no mode is assigned to it in the modern Graduale Romanum.[3] Consider the verse "Quia eduxi te," in which every phrase before the last gravitates toward E acting as a final, suggesting the fourth mode. The variations in the pitch of the reciting tone seem to resonate with the meaning of the text. The forty years' wandering in the desert (Figure 1) circles around F.[4]

Figure 1.



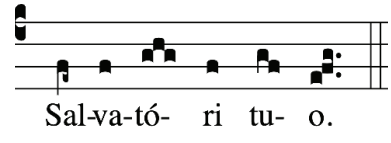
The more emotionally charged preparation of the Cross (Figure 2) is given a rising intonation and a decorated recitation on G.

Figure 2.



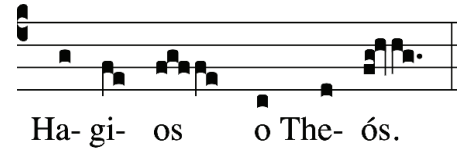
By contrast, the following verse, "Quid ultra debui," repeatedly cadences on C, and acts more like a transposed fifth-mode chant. Each verse ends with a cadence on the same words, "Of your Savior," set rising in the manner of a question (Figure 3). This unusual cadence shifts the orbit of the melody to G.

Figure 3.



The Trisagion refrain retains these central notes of E (as the target of the first word) and C (as the beginning of the ascent to the cadence), but G acts more firmly as the center of the mode. Figure 4 is a melody we hear four times in each statement of the refrain, creating an effect of circularity.

Figure 4.



In this passage, I hear G not as a final in the traditional sense but as one of two competing melodic poles (C and G), which seem

[2]Armin Karim, *"My People, What Have I Done to You?": The Good Friday Populo meus Verses in Chant and Exegesis, c. 380–880"* (Ph.D. diss., Case Western Reserve University, 2014) <http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=case1396645278>. Karim addresses the possible anti-Semitic implications of this chant, which might be considered problematic in light of the events of the twentieth century. He concludes that they were not conceived in an anti-Semitic way and did not carry that implication in the early centuries.

[3]This lack of modal assignment is a feature shared by Sanctus and Agnus Dei XVIII, and the various liturgical recitatives.

[4]Rather than the solfège syllables common in chant circles, I'm using the older system of letter names, in which the lower octave runs A–G and the higher octave runs a–g. Thus, a Fa clef represents F and a Do clef represents c.

to anchor this melody. From a modern tonal sensibility, we might hear these almost as a series of half cadences to G as the dominant of C. It is only in the last phrase, which ascends twice to c, that G asserts itself as the final of the mode, establishing the chant as belonging clearly to the eighth mode. To recap, in each verse-plus-refrain, we see a long arc of upward modulation, with C, E, and G all acting as candidates for a modal final within the various sections. This modulation almost mirrors the solemn procession of the faithful that this music accompanies and likely accounts for a lack of modal assignment in the modern books.

Simple Polyphonic Settings

When such a beautiful chant comes only once a year, it seems a pity to sing any other setting of this text. Still, a director or a choir may have good reasons to present a variety of musical textures over the course of the Mass. Several composers set the reproaches in the sixteenth century. A perennial favorite is the version by Tomás Luis de Victoria, from his *Officium Hebdomadæ Sanctæ* (1585). Victoria's setting is in homophonic style, and while it benefits from two choirs in performance, in order to assign the Greek and Latin alternation to different groups, it can be sung by a single choir in four parts. Victoria sets only the first part of the first verse, "Popule meus," and the Trisagion refrain, so the rest of the text must be sung to the chant melody. The arrangement of clefs strongly suggests a downward transposition, and if it is sung down a fourth, each section ends with a C-major chord, allowing for an easy transition to and from the chant interpolations. Many editions of Victoria's setting are available online. Some directors may prefer to find a higher key, since the chant sits comfortably with E-flat as Do.

In the same period, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina wrote a longer setting in *falsobordone*, in which alternating choirs sing all the music (including the verses) in a simple, homophonic style. To sing this setting complete, a full complement of eight parts is required. Palestrina's version remained popular enough in Rome to be included in Charles Burney's publication of the Vatican Holy Week music in the eighteenth century. Both these settings have a noble simplicity, although they lack the chant's subtle modal construction as discussed above.

The Setting by Ludwig Senfl

It was for this reason that I was pleased to come across the lesser-known setting by Ludwig Senfl, and I am presenting a new edition of this work here, since it is not readily available online. Senfl's version relies on the chant melody throughout. Especially at beginnings of sections, all the voices sing bits of the chant melody, but the chant is also sung throughout in *cantus firmus* style. In the refrains, a fifth voice is added, and the *cantus firmus* appears in canon between two voices.

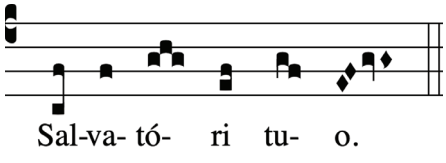
Senfl sets all the text of the first chant, but his version of the chant melody is closer to those in the *Graduale Pataviense* and the *Agenda Numburgensis*, both of which may be consulted online.[5] These sources do not include the second part of the reproaches (the "Ego" verses); instead, the first part of the reproaches is followed immediately by the "Ecce lignum Crucis." In addition

[5] *Graduale Pataviense* folios 70v–71v. *Agenda Numburgensis* folios 70v–73r.

to this liturgical rearrangement, there are a few other melodic and textual differences in the chant. First, there are the usual intervallic variants common to German chant sources (favoring c over b as an upper neighbor of a). Second, the order of the text is slightly different, as the Trisagion is sung all the way through in Greek and then in Latin, rather than in alternation by invocation as in the modern books. Senfl follows this arrangement of the text.

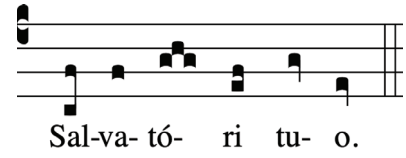
While he follows the chant melody closely, Senfl departs from the notes of the melody at the ends of the verses. While it is impossible to establish his motivations for such a departure, I will argue he did this to improve the modal design of the cycle as a whole. At the recurring cadence "Salvatori tuo," discussed above, the chant ends by rising to G, and this is true in both the contemporaneous chant sources. Example 5 gives the version of this cadence in the *Graduale Pataviense*, which varies slightly from that of the modern books (compare Figure 3).

Figure 5: Graduale Pataviense, f. 70v.



If we follow Senfl's tenor as our source for the chant melody, we arrive at the hypothetical version shown in Figure 6, which follows the *Graduale Pataviense* version exactly until the final cadence.

Figure 6: Hypothetical cadence.



This form, ending with a falling third, means that the tenor is prevented from participating in a contrapuntal cadence. To understand what I mean, I need to clarify what I mean by "cadence." In sixteenth-century theory, a cadence is an arrival at an octave (the interval of perfection and hence of repose) between two voices approached (in most cases) by a major sixth. This progression is often accompanied by a syncopated cadential gesture in the upper voice. Since Senfl's chant-based tenor moves down by third at its end, it cannot form part of a cadence in this sense. This gives Senfl a great deal of flexibility in composing the ending of each section, since the final note of the tenor may or may not coincide with a cadence, and if it does coincide, the important cadential functions will occur between two other voices. Since this ending is set three times (once at the end of each verse) and followed each time by the refrain, it will be instructive to look at the way Senfl varies the setting of this passage, to get a sense of his contrapuntal ingenuity.

In the examples that follow, I have starred the notes of the *cantus firmus* and marked the principal cadences with arrows. In the first verse (Figure 7), the chant is sung only in the tenor. The final note arrives in m. 72, at which point the discantus and contratenor form a cadence on c. This is a weak cadence, since it is somewhat undercut by the motion of the bass to A; in modern terms, we could analyze this as a deceptive cadence moving V–vi in C major,

and this is not an entirely anachronistic way of hearing this progression. What follows the tenor arrival is a typical oscillation between A and E harmonies (what Joachim Burmeister calls a supplement to the cadence), ending on E. In other words, this section clearly ends in the fourth mode. Some directors may prefer to add a G-sharp to the discantus in the last sonority, providing a major triad for the ending.[6]

In the second verse (Figure 8), the chant melody is anticipated exactly (but not with strictly the same rhythm) in the discantus, an octave above. The arrival of the last tenor note corresponds to a bass motion G–C. In modern terms, this is a more typical cadential progression, but in Zarlino this is merely an alternative cadence form, where a leap in the lower voice G–C substitutes for the more usual progression D–C. The music then settles on a final A-minor sonority. Interestingly, Senfl makes it essentially impossible to add a C-sharp to the last bar, which would provide a more typical and final-sounding major chord, as discussed in the first verse. Here, the leap from G to C in the contratenor (mm. 65–66) ensures a C-natural in the final bars.

In the third verse (Figure 9), the chant melody is set in canon at the lower fifth between the contratenor and tenor, at the time interval of one breve (one measure of the edition). The arrival of the last pitch in the tenor does not correspond with a cadence at all but is part of what modern ears would hear as a falling-thirds progression. The two non-canonic voices (discantus and bassus) are engaged in imitation at the lower twelfth from m. 68, although the time interval of the imitation fluctuates over the course of the passage. This corresponds with the last cadence in the section, the tenor and discantus approach to an octave G in m. 68. The finality of this cadence is undercut by the simultaneous bass motion D–E, in a fashion similar to the weak cadence of the first verse.

In this long setting, which amounts to a cycle of motets, we see that each verse approaches the ending differently, even with an identical *cantus firmus*, and each verse ends on a different sonority. If we consider the modal construction of the cycle, we see that this corresponds to the modal ambiguity of the chant. The verses (ending on E and A triads) can be clearly categorized as the *deuterus* mode (corresponding to modes 3 and 4 of plainchant), while the Trisagion refrain ends with G harmonies, meaning the *tetrardus* mode (corresponding to modes 7 and 8 of plainchant). It seems that Senfl even alters his *cantus firmus* in order to achieve this variety, as the tenor would end on g if he followed the chant melody exactly, limiting the possibility of modal variety.

[6]While there is some evidence for this practice in the sixteenth century, I have generally provided in the edition only the accidental inflections that would have been generally agreed upon by sixteenth-century writers. I have bracketed this final G-sharp to represent its optional nature.

Figure 7: Verse 1, ending.

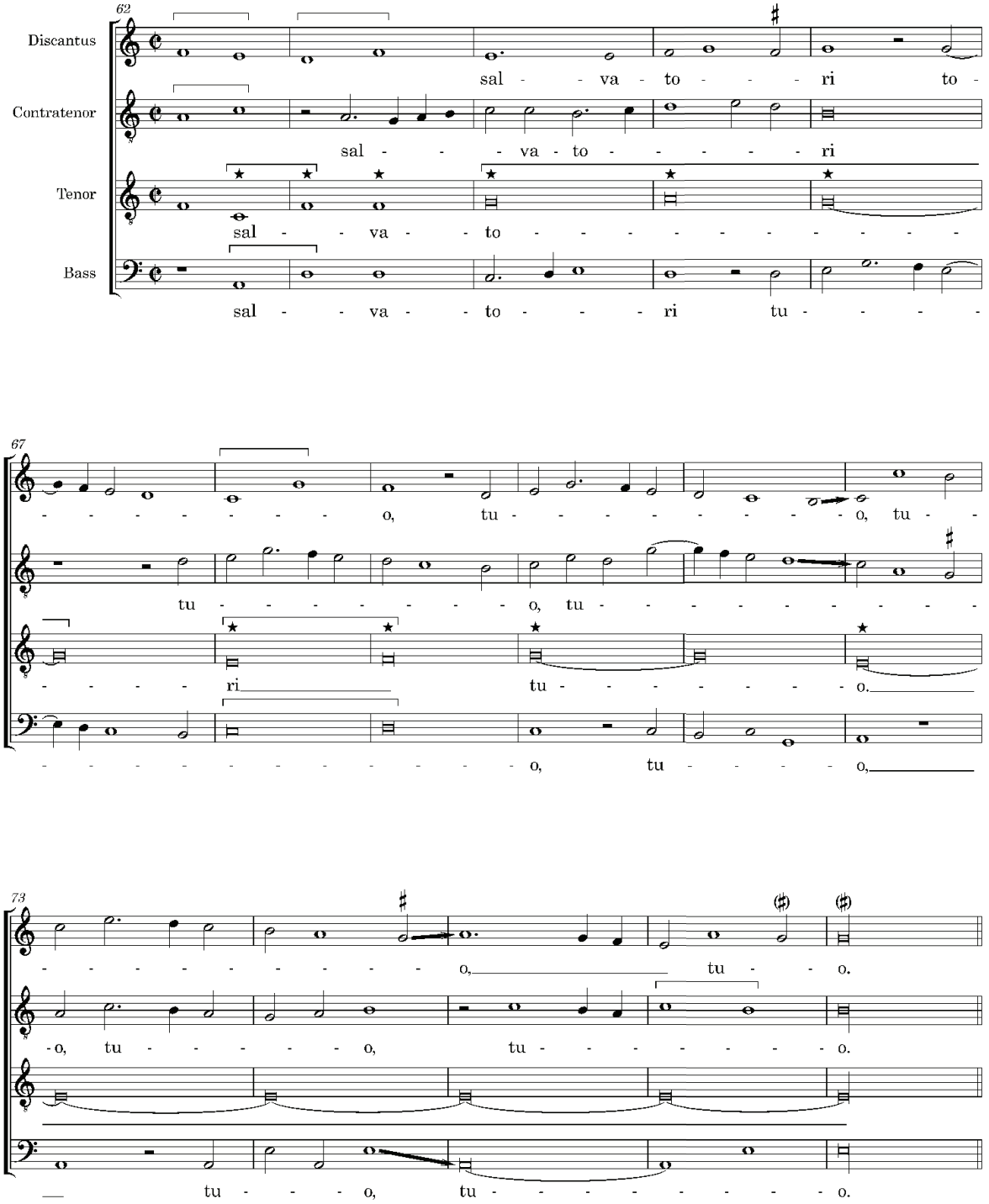


Figure 8: Verse 2, ending.

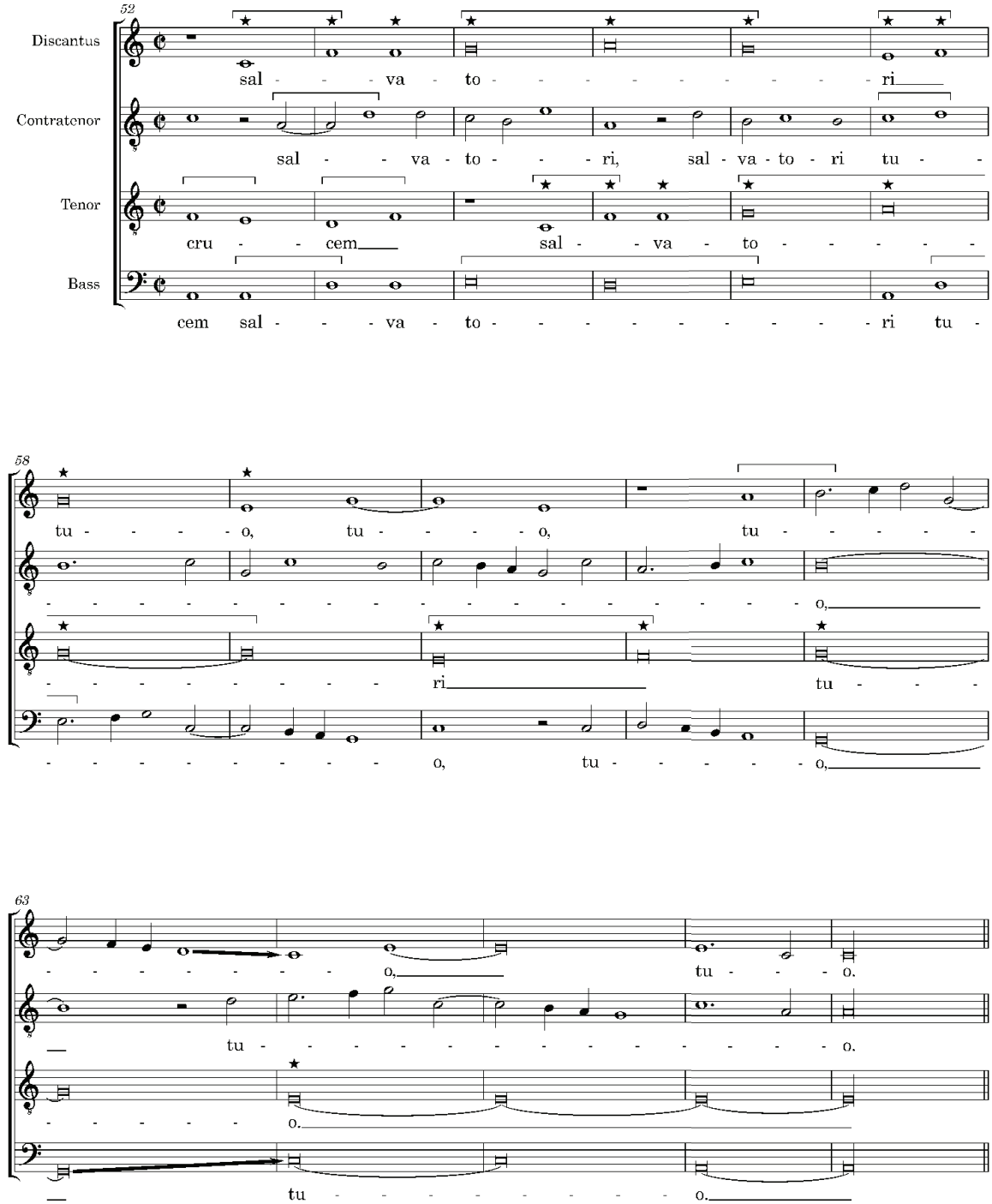
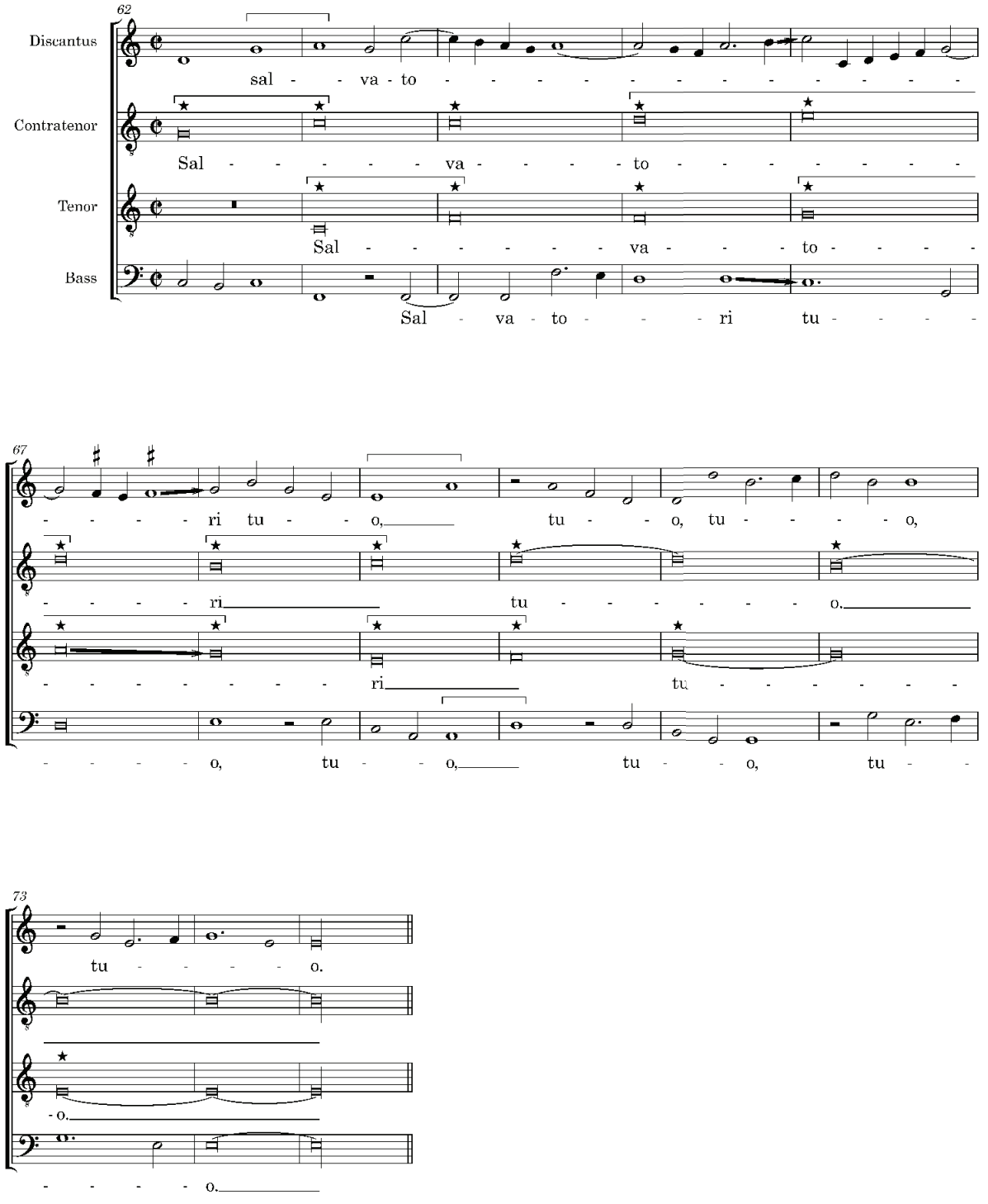


Figure 9: Verse 2, ending.



Editorial Method and Practical Considerations

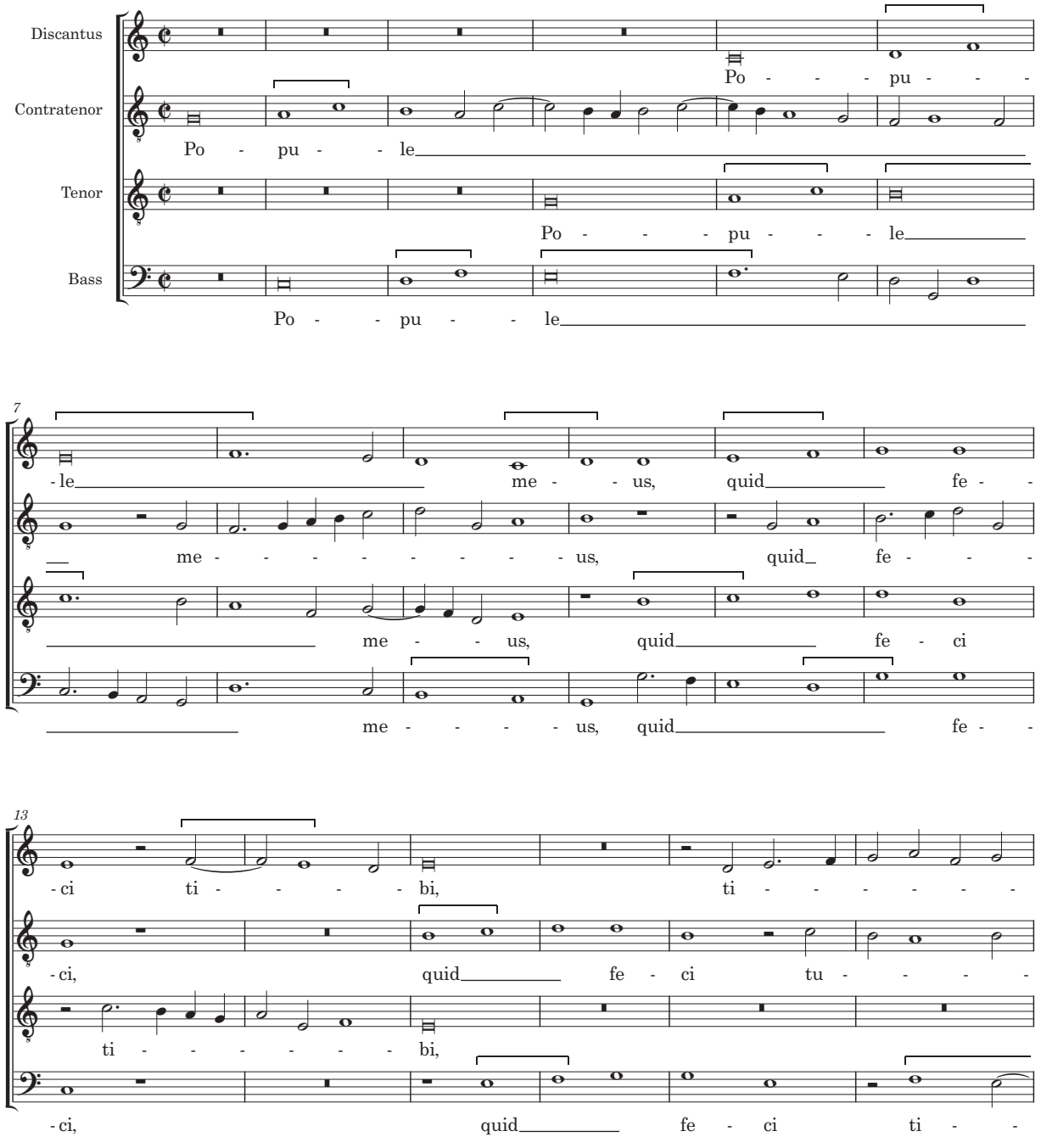
The music assumes the usual sixteenth-century ensemble of four parts: soprano (here called discantus), alto (here called contratenor), tenor, and bass. The contratenor divides in the Trisagion sections, so at least five singers are required to sing all the music. These ranges should not be confused with their modern cognates, since the alto is best sung by a high, non-falsetto, male voice. While music in this style may be transposed upward for a modern mixed ensemble, the results are often poor, since the other three lines tend to become uncomfortably high in order to accommodate the singing of the alto by female singers. I have reproduced the original note values, so the pulse should be felt either on the semibreve (whole note), or even on the breve (double whole note) in a faster tempo. This requires the conductor and the singers to consider the whole note as a single beat, which is unusual in modern music, but is an easy adjustment as long as the tempo is sufficiently fast. While I hesitate to give specific tempo directions, which must depend on the size and ability of the choir, the space in which they sing, and the mood of the occasion, a whole note of 64–68 beats per minute seems like a good starting point.

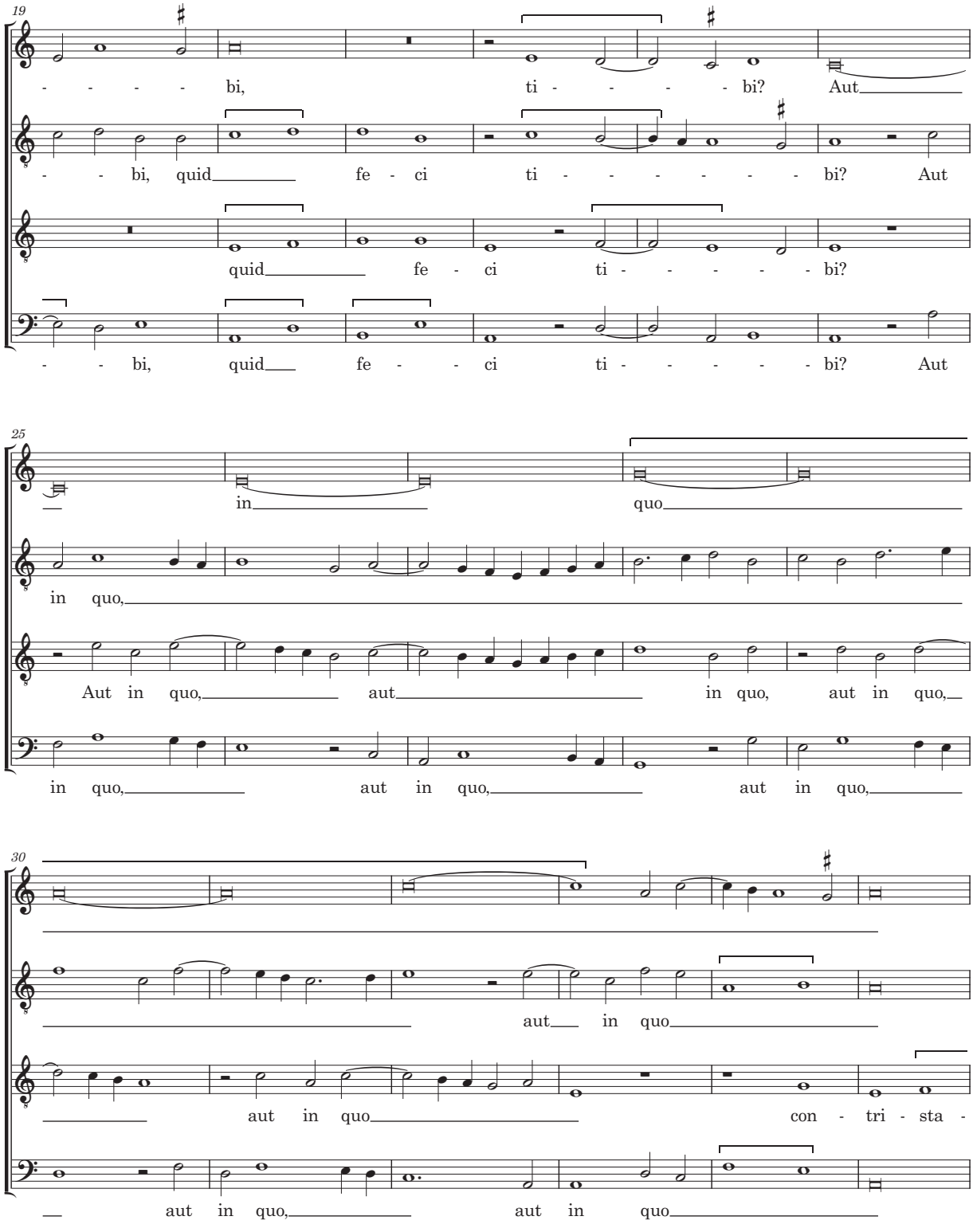
In this piece, Senfl marks no accidental or non-diatonic pitches. I have added (above the staff) all the accidentals (sharp notes) required by the rules of sixteenth-century style and counterpoint. On the one occasion mentioned above, I have added bracketed accidentals that sound good but are not mandated by sixteenth-century theorists. The brackets above the staff mark the original ligatures. These serve the purpose of guiding the underlay of the text, since it is traditional not to change syllables within a ligature, but they do not necessarily have any other meaning in terms of phrasing or grouping.

One advantage of the sectional nature of this piece is that the various parts can be excerpted or sung in alternation with the chant setting. For instance, a performance of the entire cycle where the Trisagion refrain is sung to plainchant can be executed by only four singers. Certainly any of the verses may be sung alone as part of another plan. I hope that choir directors will find this edition of this beautiful and deeply chant-based music to be helpful. ❖

De Passione Christi

LUDWIG SENFL (ca. 1490–1543)

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- - - - - bi, ti - - - - - bi? Aut
- - - bi, quid fe - ci ti - - - - - - - bi? Aut
quid fe - ci ti - - - - - bi?
- - bi, quid fe - - ci ti - - - - - bi? Aut
25
in quo
in quo,
Aut in quo, aut in quo, aut in quo,
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30
aut in quo
aut in quo con - tri - sta -
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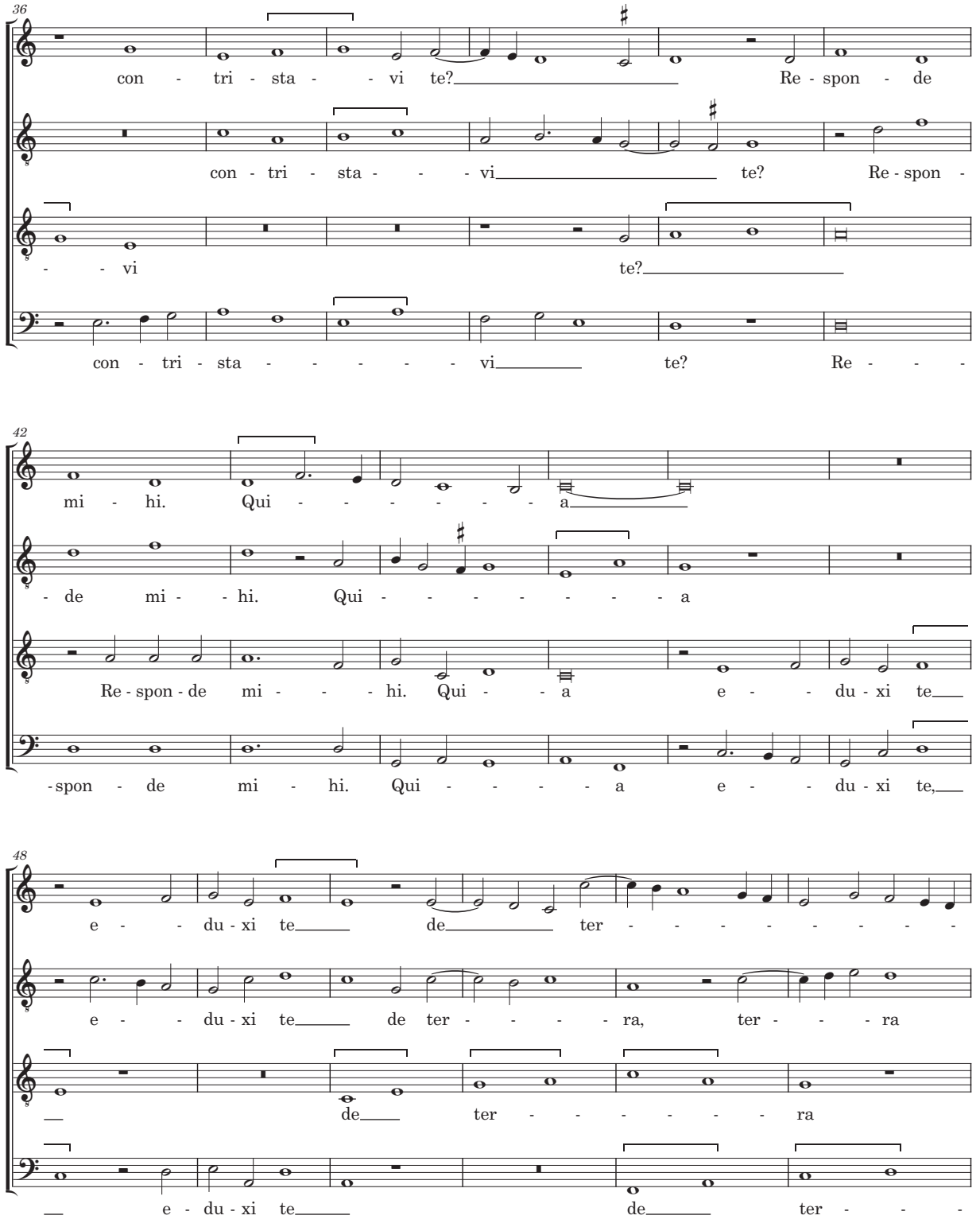
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con - tri - sta - - vi te? Re - spon - de
con - tri - sta - - vi te? Re - spon -
- - vi te?
con - tri - sta - - - - - vi te? Re - - - -
42
mi - hi. Qui - - - - - - a
- de mi - - hi. Qui - - - - - - - - a
Re - spon - de mi - - - hi. Qui - - a e - - du - xi te
- spon - de mi - hi. Qui - - - - a e - - du - xi te,
48
e - - du - xi te de ter - - - - - - - - -
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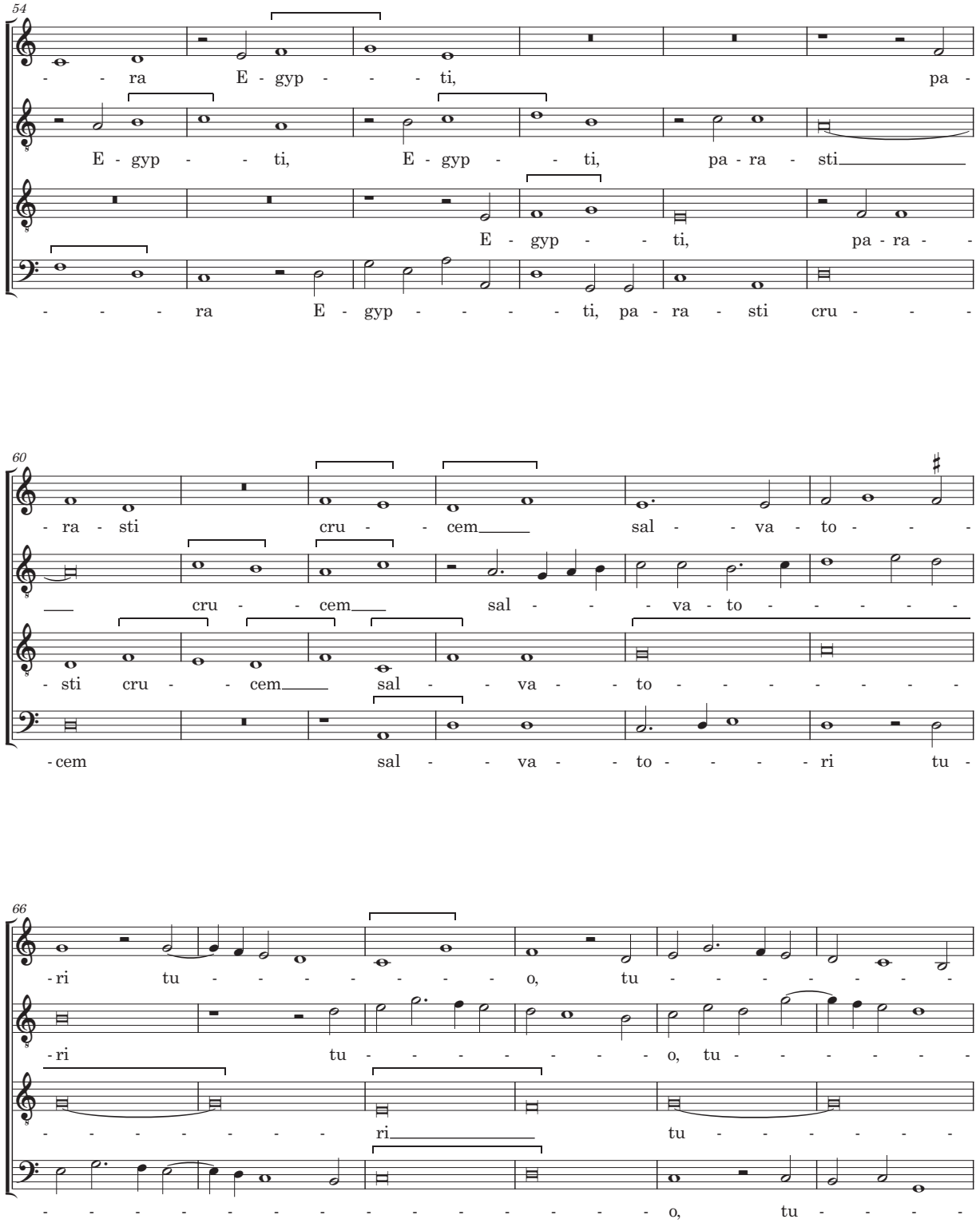
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- - ra E - gyp - - - ti, pa -
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60
- ra - sti cru - - cem sal - - va - to - - -
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66
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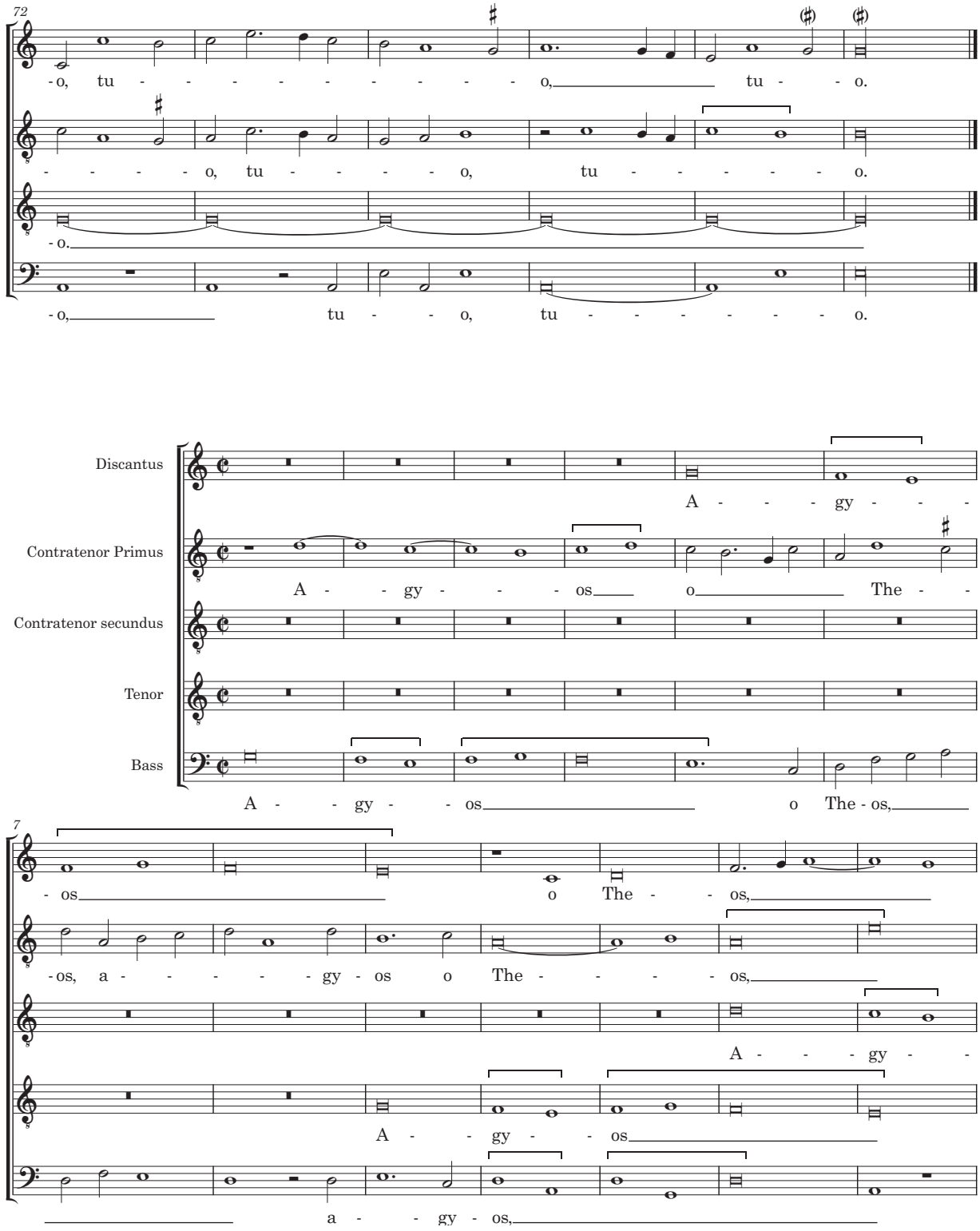
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-o, tu - - - - - - - - - o, tu - o.
- - - - - o, tu - - - - o, tu - - - - - o.
-o.
-o, tu - - o, tu - - - - - - o.
Discantus
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Contratenor Primus
A - - gy - - - os o The - -
Contratenor secundus
Tenor
Bass
A - - gy - - os o The - os,
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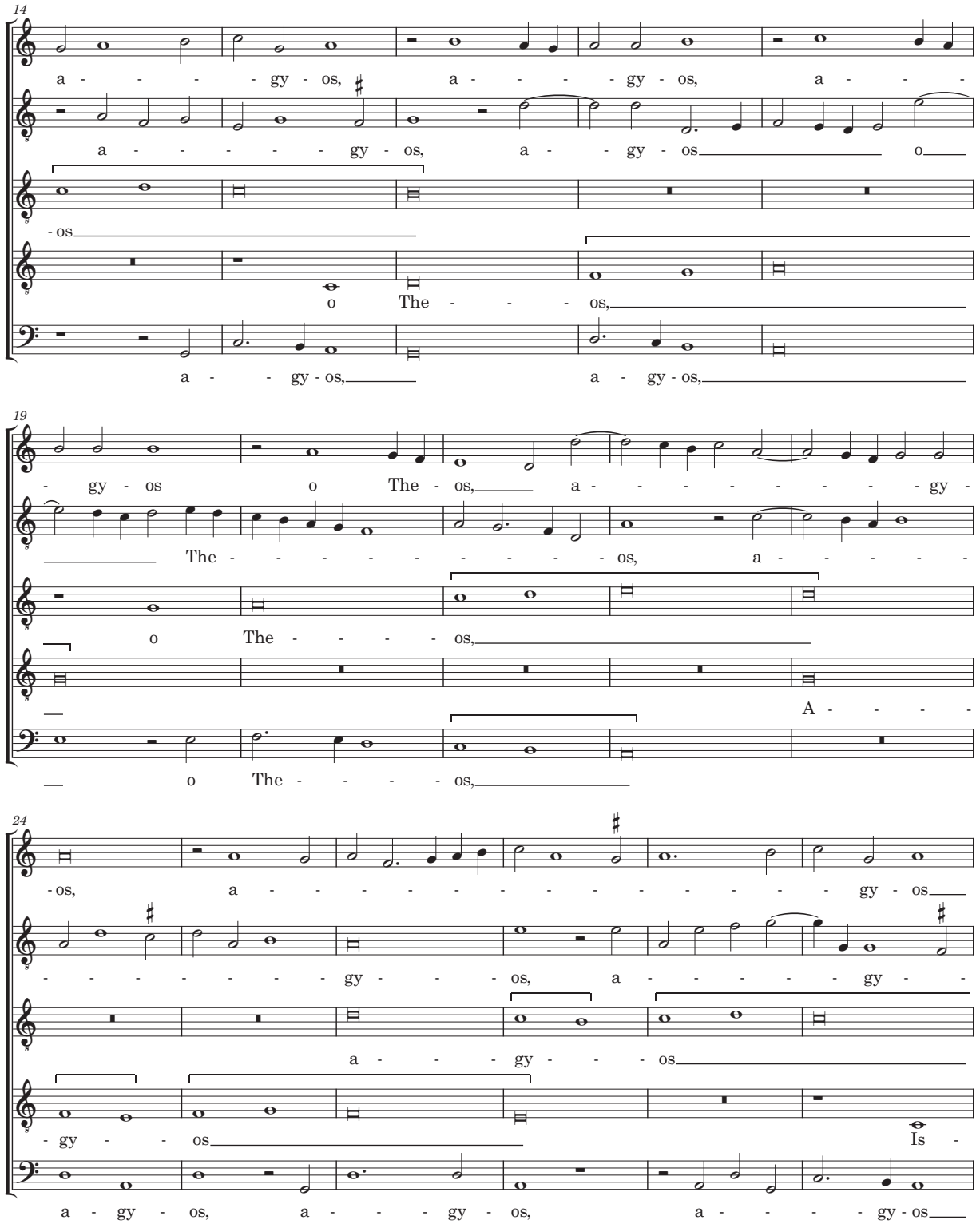
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19
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24
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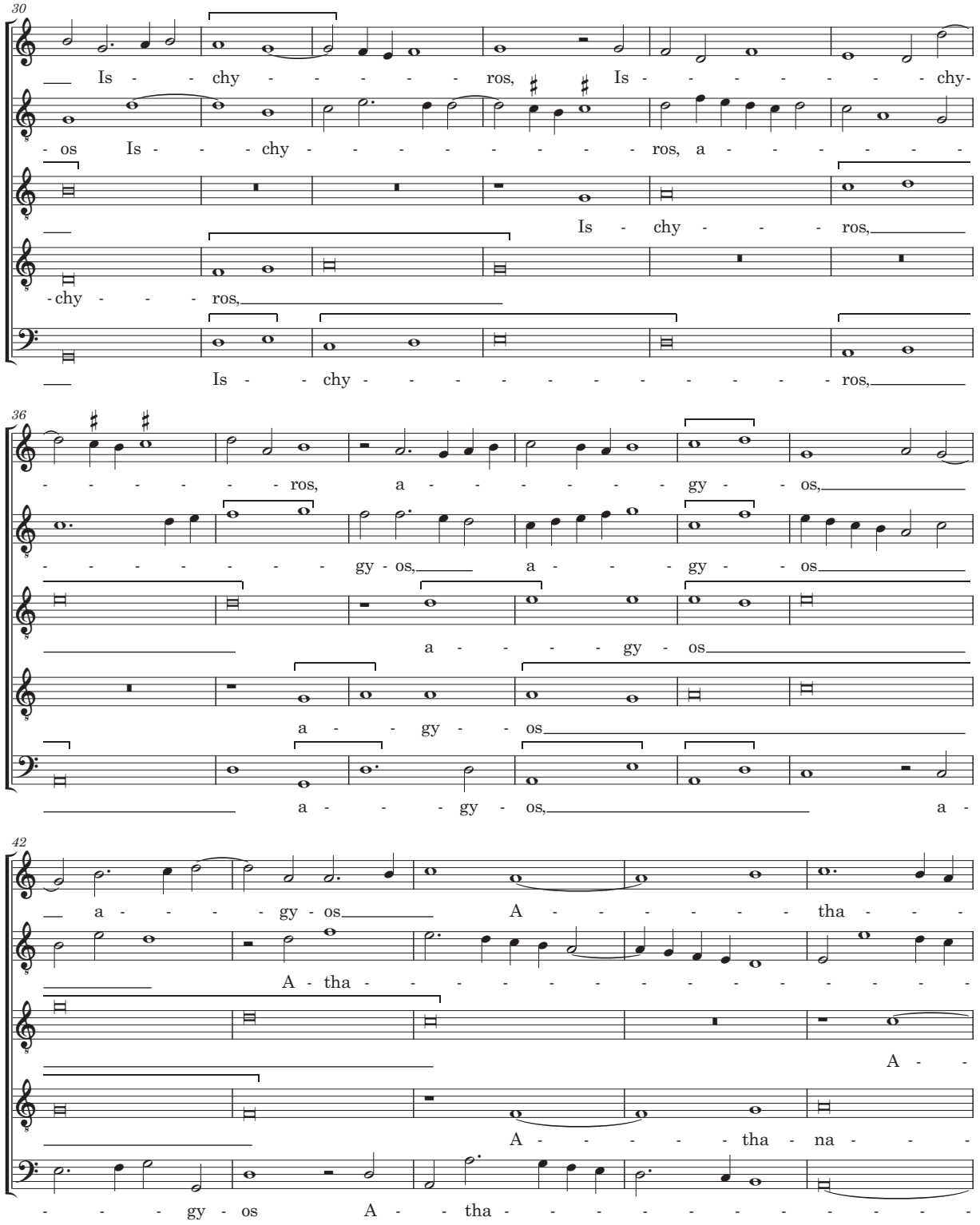
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Is - chy - - - - ros,
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36
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42
a - - - - gy - os A - - - - - - tha - - -
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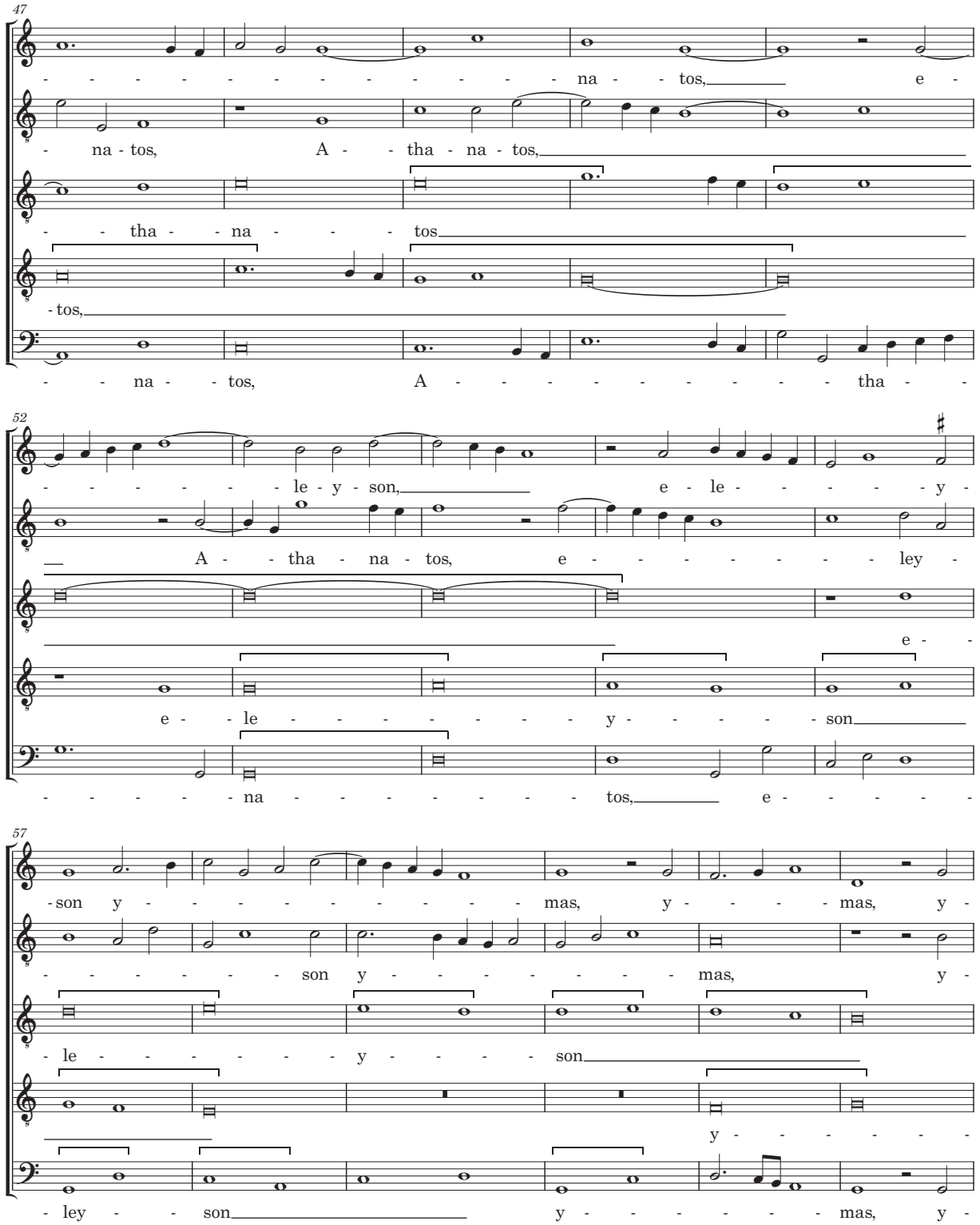
47
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- tha - na - tos
- tos,
- na - tos, A - tha -
52
- le - y - son, e - le - y -
A - tha - na - tos, e - ley -
e -
e - le - y - son
- na - tos, e -
57
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- son y - mas, y -
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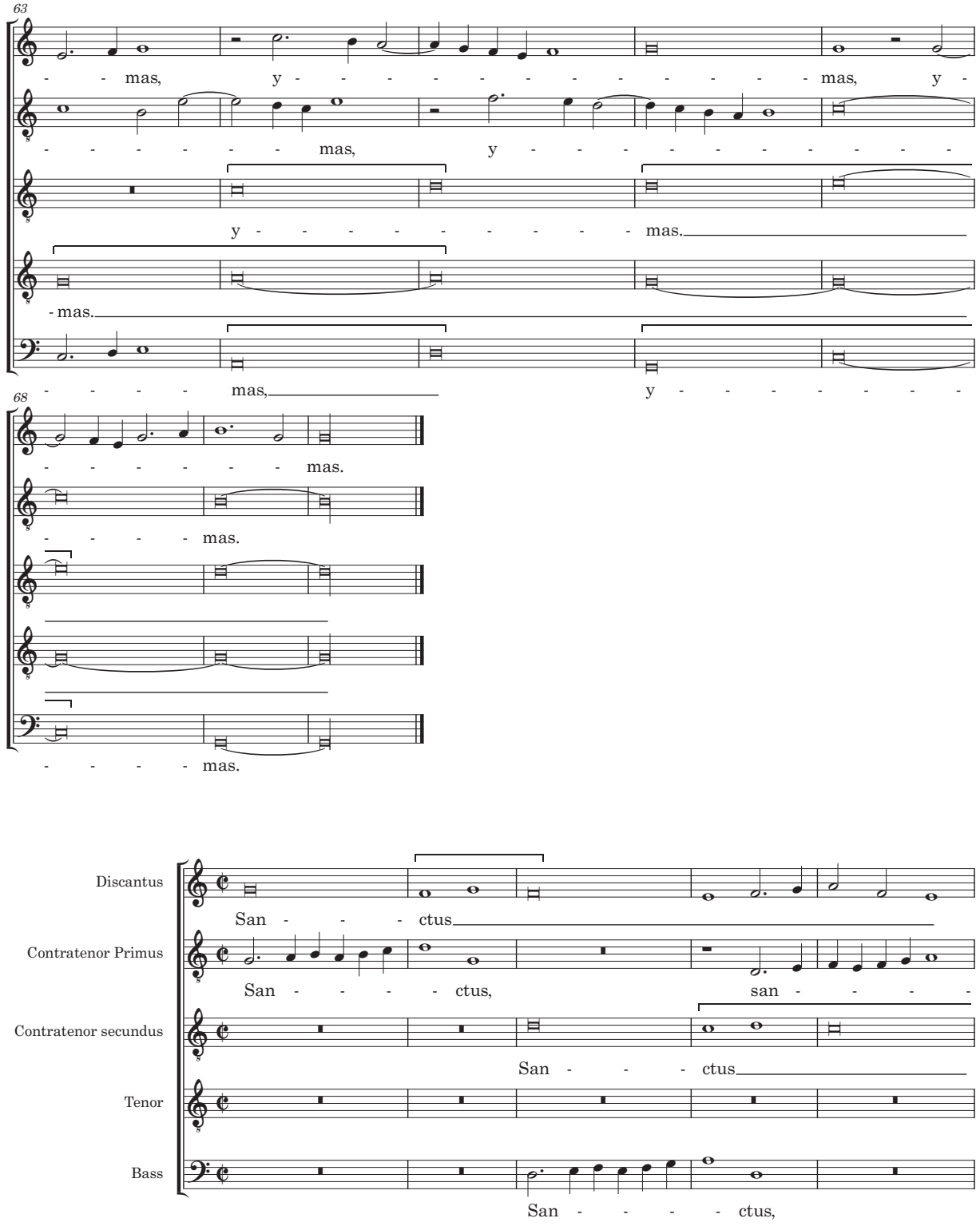
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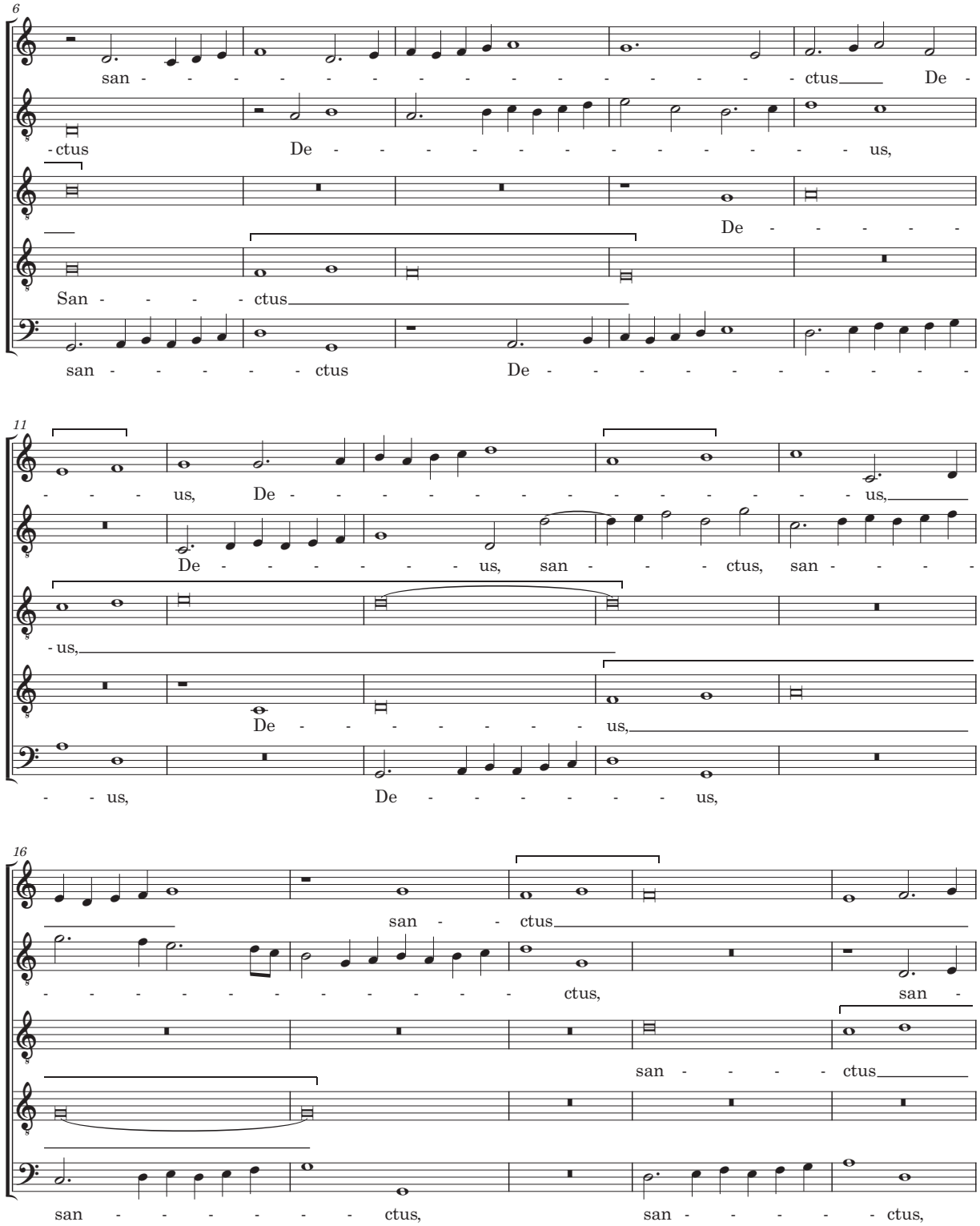
- - - - - mas, y - - - - - - - -
68
- - - - - - - mas.
- - - - - mas.
- - - - - mas.
Discantus
San - - - - ctus
Contratenor Primus
San - - - - - ctus, san - - - - -
Contratenor secundus
San - - - - ctus
Tenor
Bass
San - - - - - ctus,


6
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San - - - - - ctus
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11
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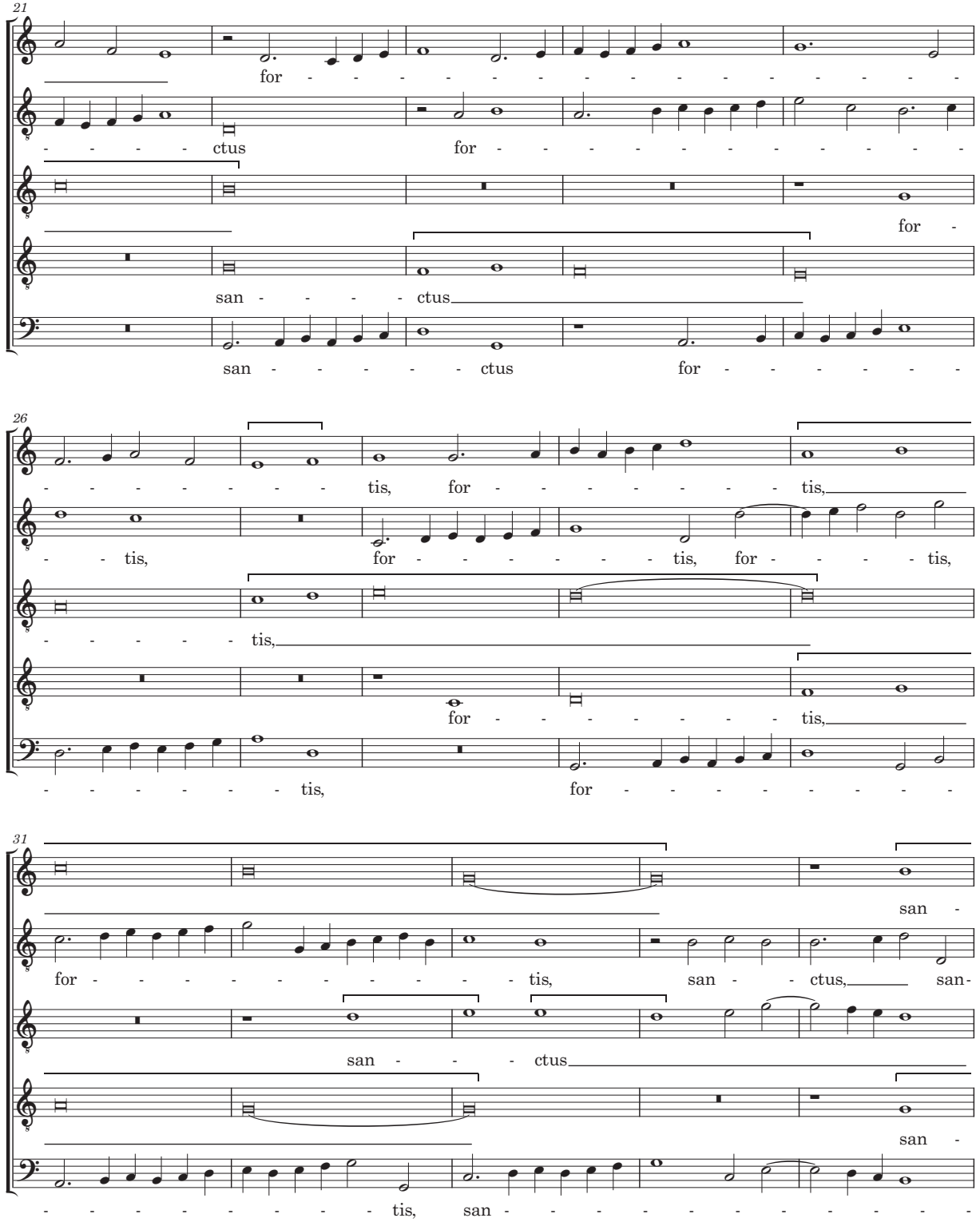
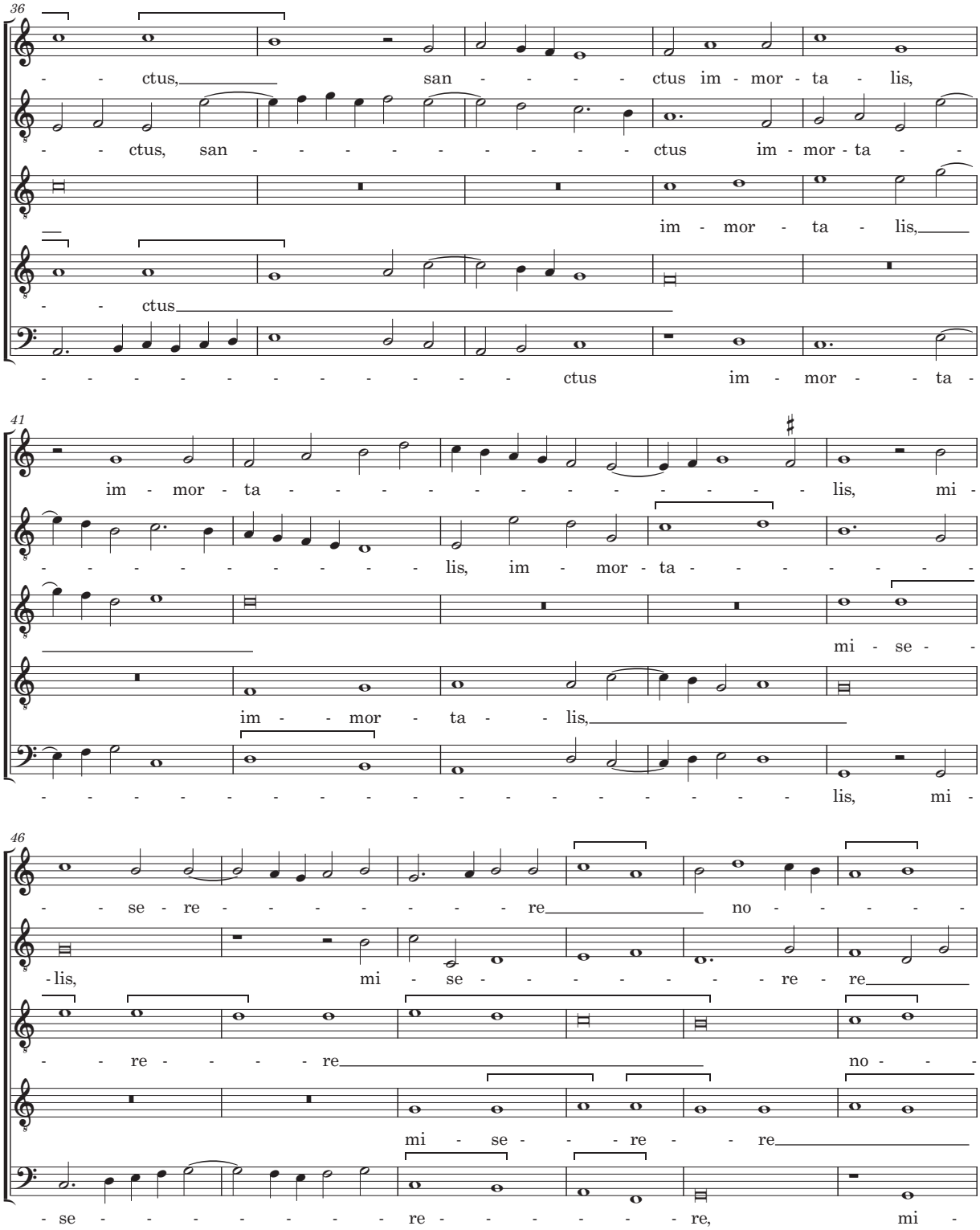
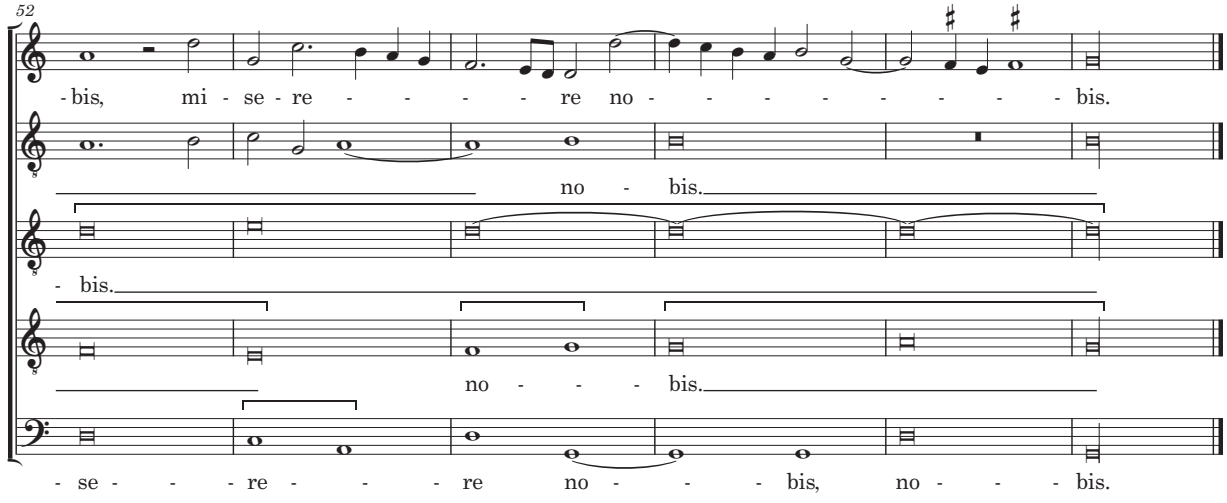
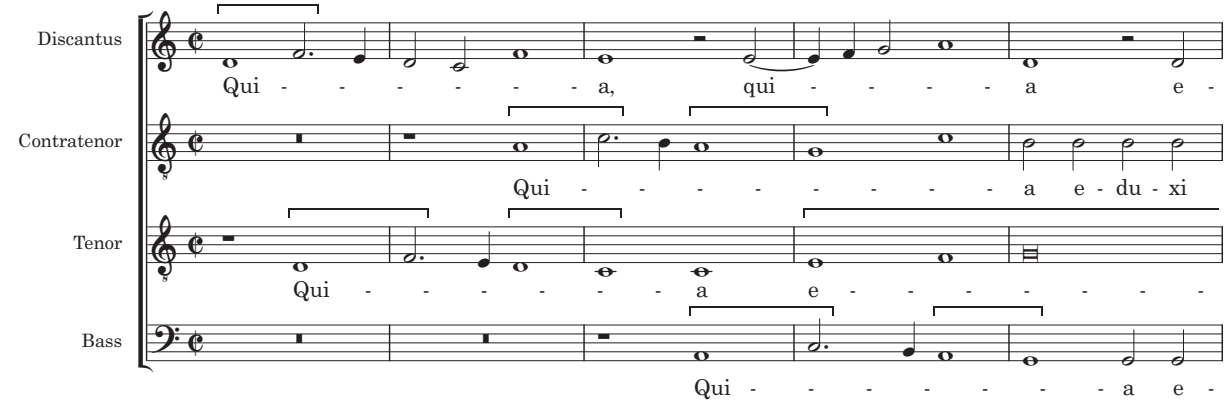
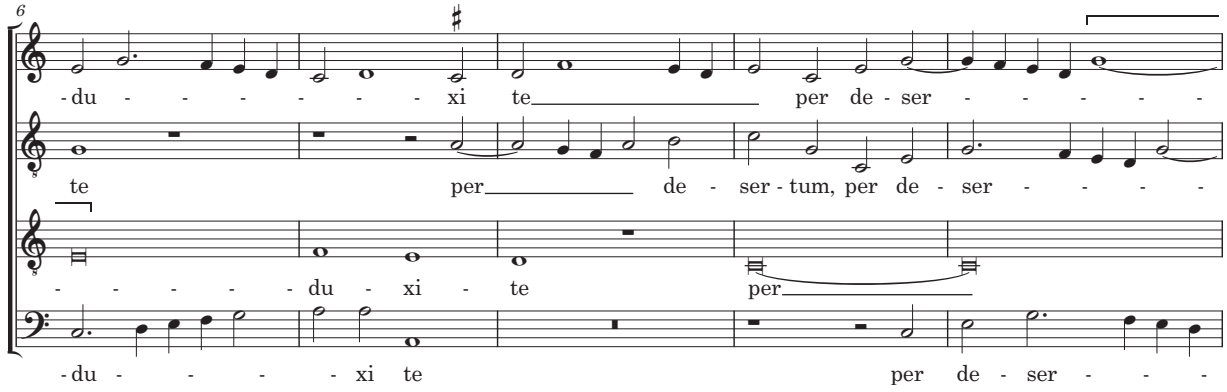
De - - - - - - - us, san - - - ctus, san - - - -
- us,
De - - - - - - - - us,
- - us, De - - - - - - - us,
16
san - - ctus
- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - ctus, san -
san - - - - ctus
san - - - - - - ctus, san - - - - - ctus,

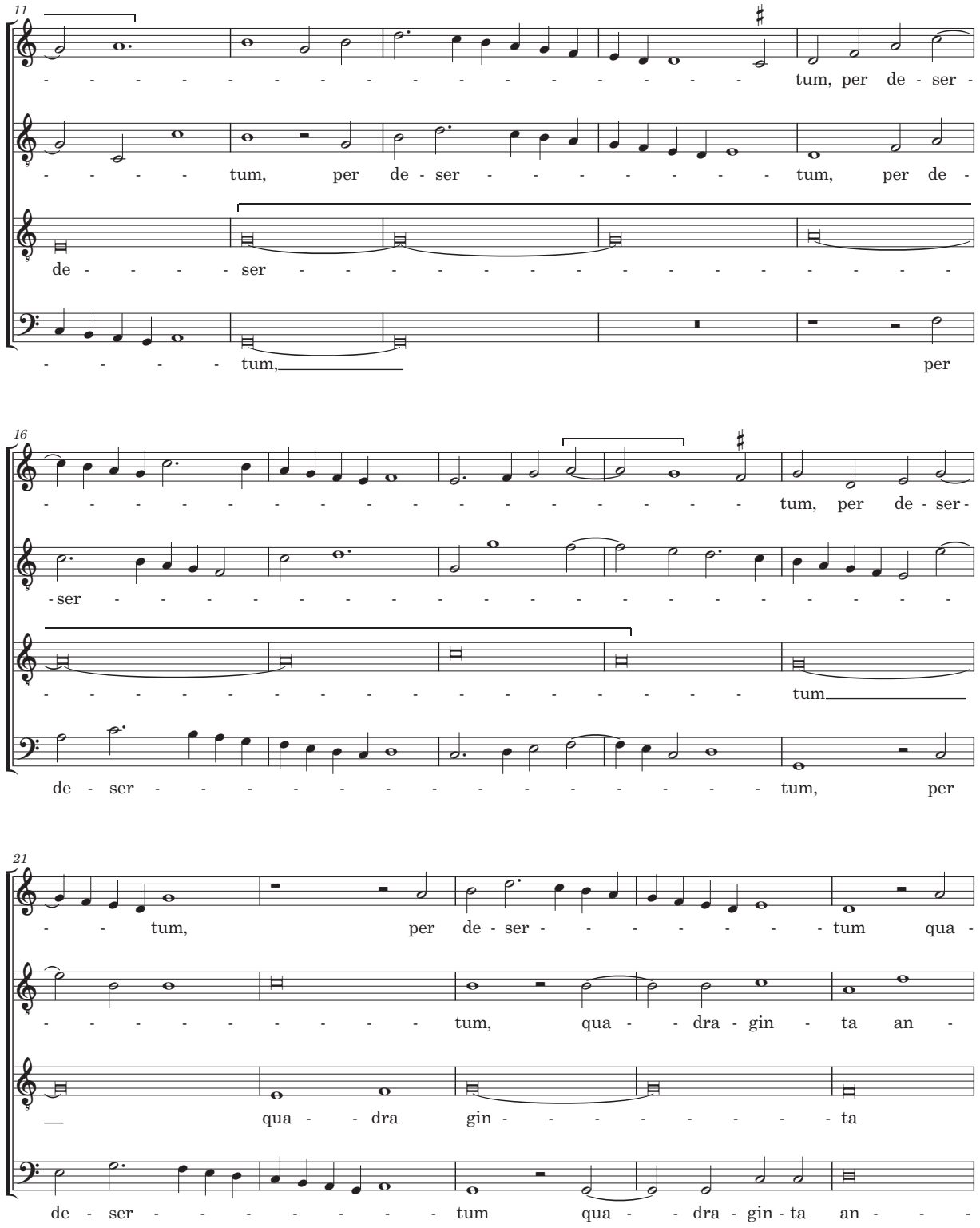

21
for - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
- - - - - ctus for - - - - - - - - - - - -
for -
san - - - - - ctus
san - - - - - - ctus for - - - - - - -
26
- - - - - - - - - tis, for - - - - - - - - tis,
- - tis, for - - - - - - - tis, for - - - - tis,
- - - - - - tis,
for - - - - - - - - tis,
- - - - - - - - tis, for - - - - - - - - - -
31
san -
for - - - - - - - - - - - - tis, san - - ctus, san-
san - - - - ctus
san -
- - - - - - - - - - tis, san - - - - - - - - - - - - -

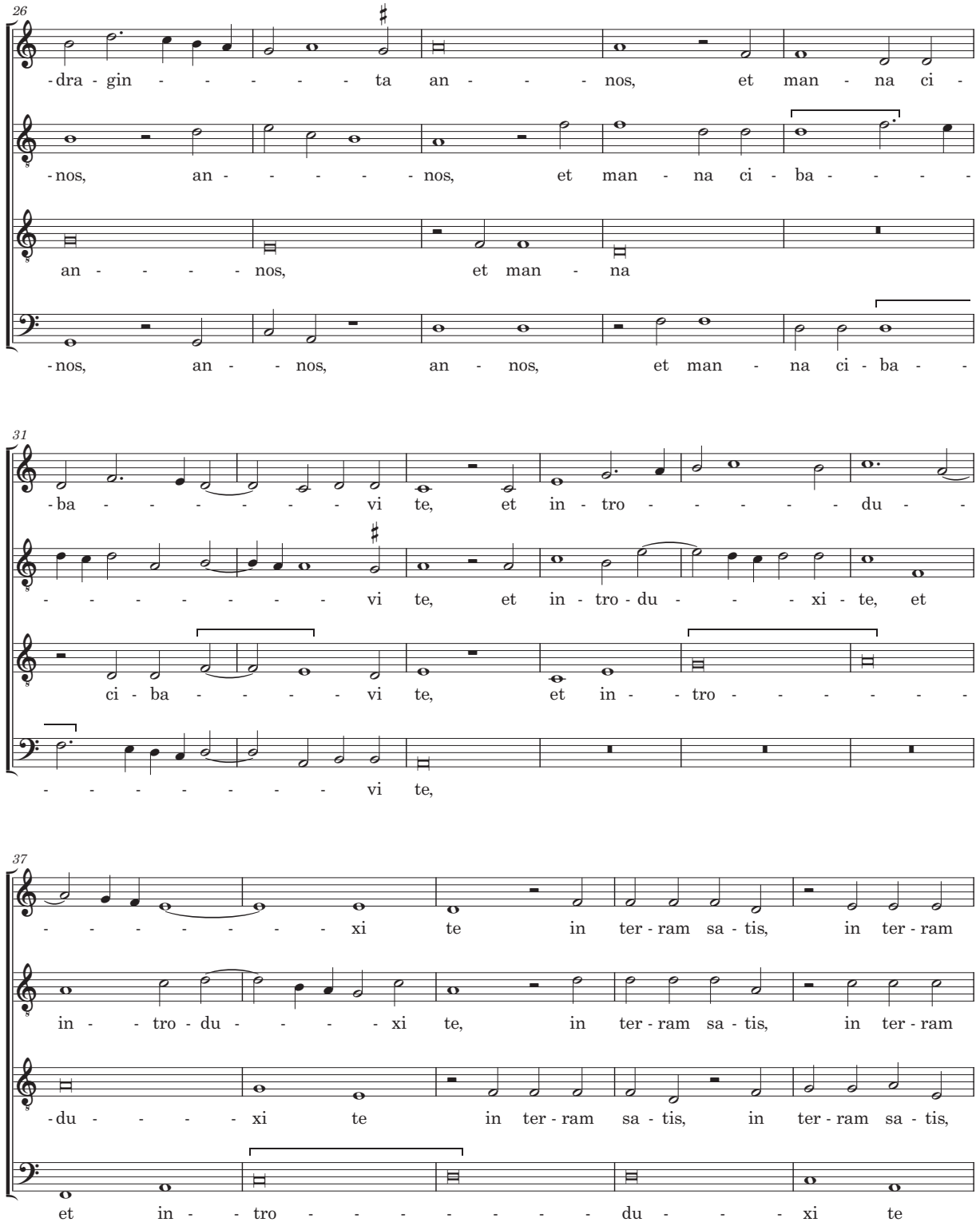

36
ctus, san ctus im - mor - ta - lis,
ctus, san ctus im - mor - ta -
im - mor - ta - lis,
ctus
ctus im - mor - ta -
41
im - mor - ta lis, mi -
lis, im - mor - ta -
mi - se -
im - mor - ta - lis,
lis, mi -
46
se - re re no -
lis, mi - se - re - re
re re no -
mi - se - re - re
se re, mi -

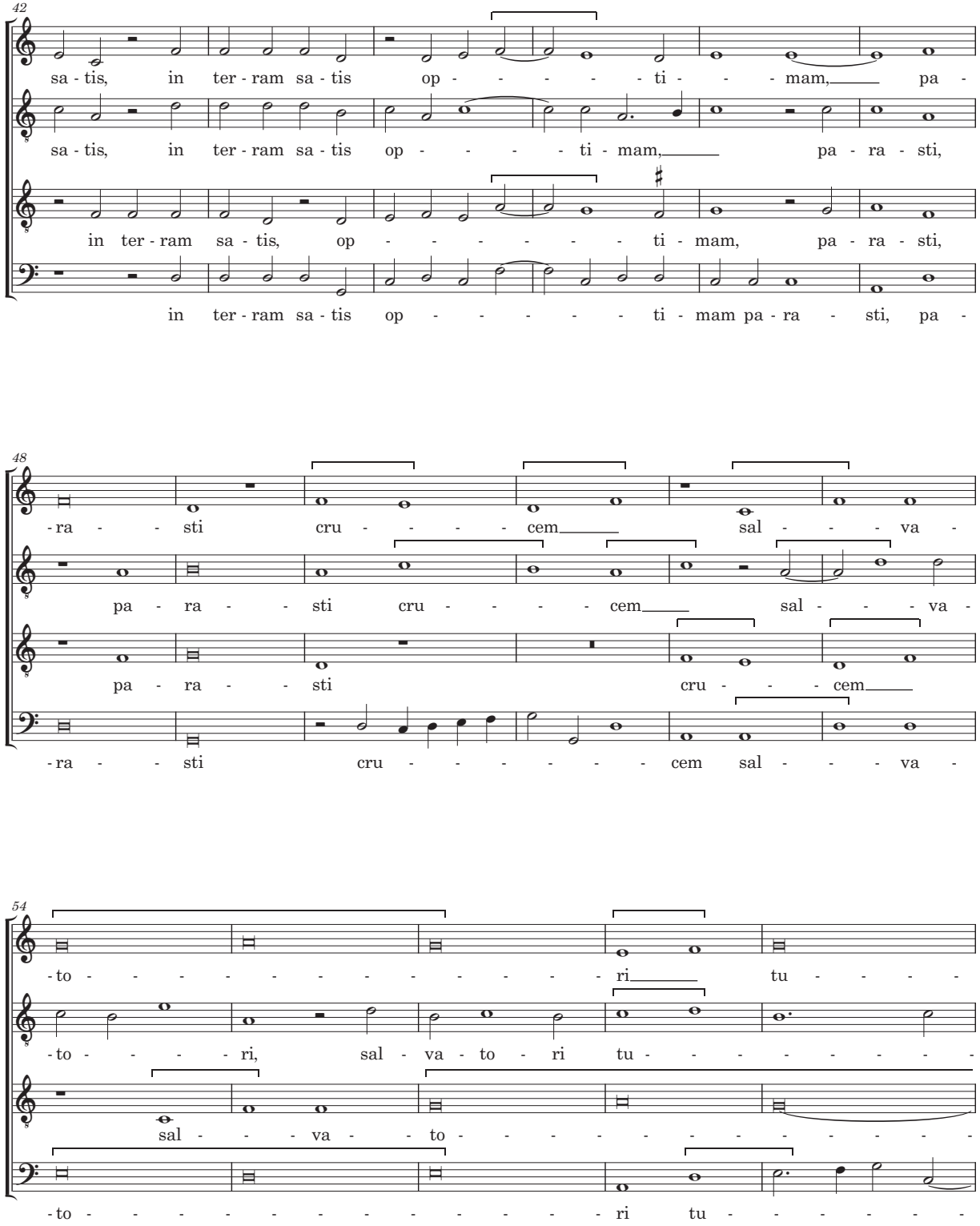

52
-bis, mi - se - re - - - - re no - - - - - - - - bis.
no - bis.
- bis.
no - - - - bis.
- se - - - - re - - - - re no - - - - bis, no - - - - bis.

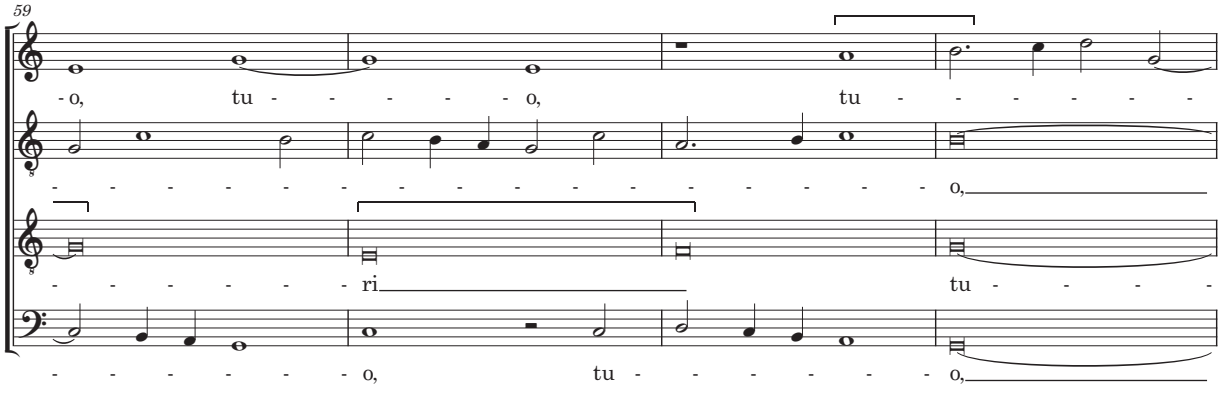

Discantus
Qui - - - - - - - a, qui - - - - - a e -
Contratenor
Qui - - - - - - - - - - a e - du - xi
Tenor
Qui - - - - - - - a e - - - - - - - -
Bass
Qui - - - - - - - - - a e -

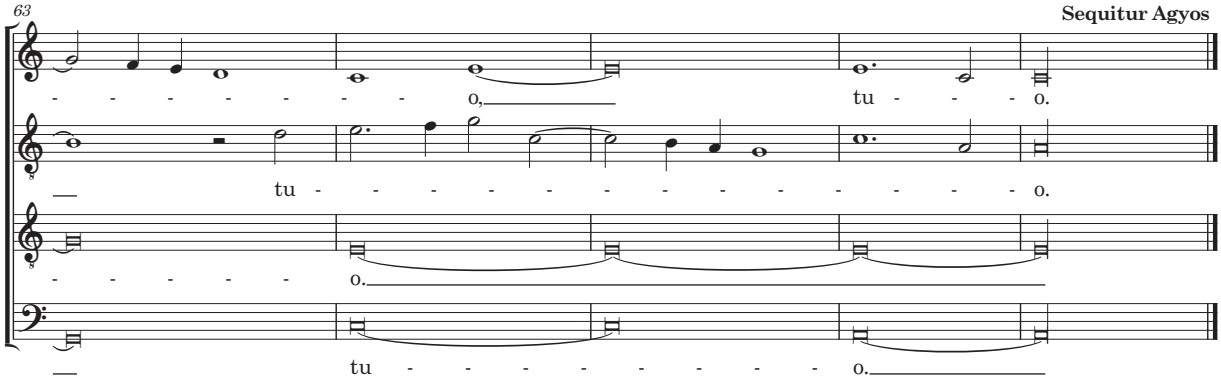

6
-du - - - - - - - xi te per de - ser - - - - - -
te per de - ser - tum, per de - ser - - - - -
- - - - - - du - xi - te per
-du - - - - xi te per de - ser - - - -

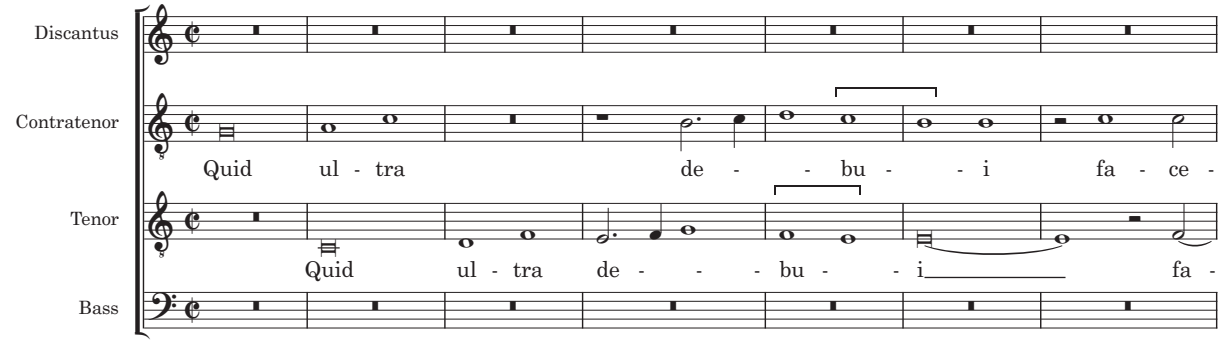

11
tum, per de - ser -
tum, per de - ser - tum, per de -
de - ser
tum, per
16
tum, per de - ser -
ser
tum
de - ser - tum, per
21
tum, per de - ser - tum qua -
tum, qua - dra - gin - ta an -
qua - dra gin - ta
de - ser - tum qua - dra - gin - ta an -

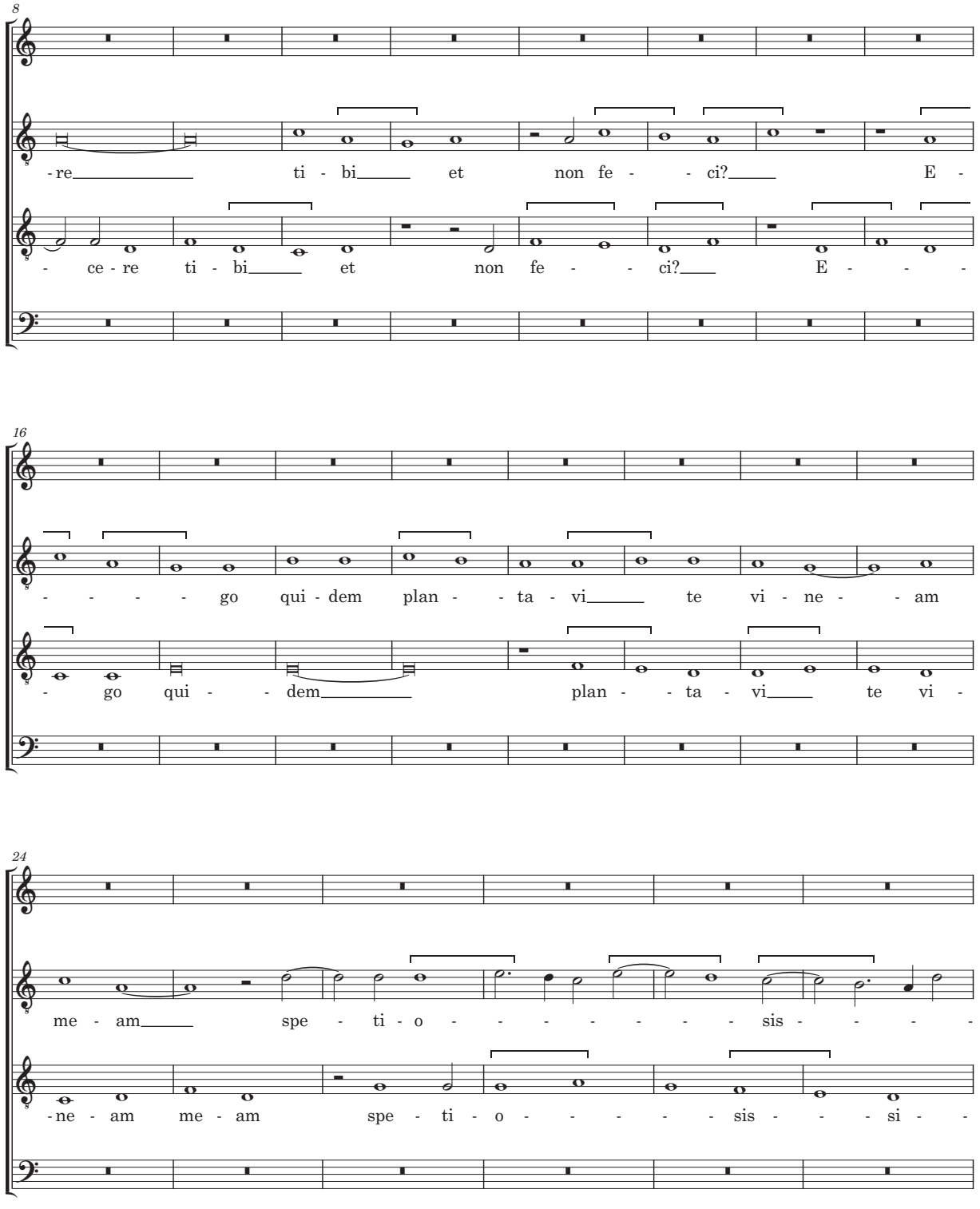

26
-dra - gin - - - - - - ta an - - - - nos, et man - na ci -
-nos, an - - - - - - nos, et man - na ci - ba - - - - -
an - - - - - nos, et man - na
-nos, an - - nos, an - nos, et man - na ci - ba - -
31
-ba - - - - - - - - vi te, et in - tro - - - - - - du - -
- - - - - - - - - vi te, et in - tro - du - - - xi - te, et
ci - ba - - - - - vi te, et in - - tro - - - - - - -
- - - - - - - - - vi te,
37
- - - - - - - - - xi te in ter - ram sa - tis, in ter - ram
in - - tro - du - - - - - xi te, in ter - ram sa - tis, in ter - ram
- du - - - - - xi te in ter - ram sa - tis, in ter - ram sa - tis,
et in - - tro - - - - - - - - du - - - xi te

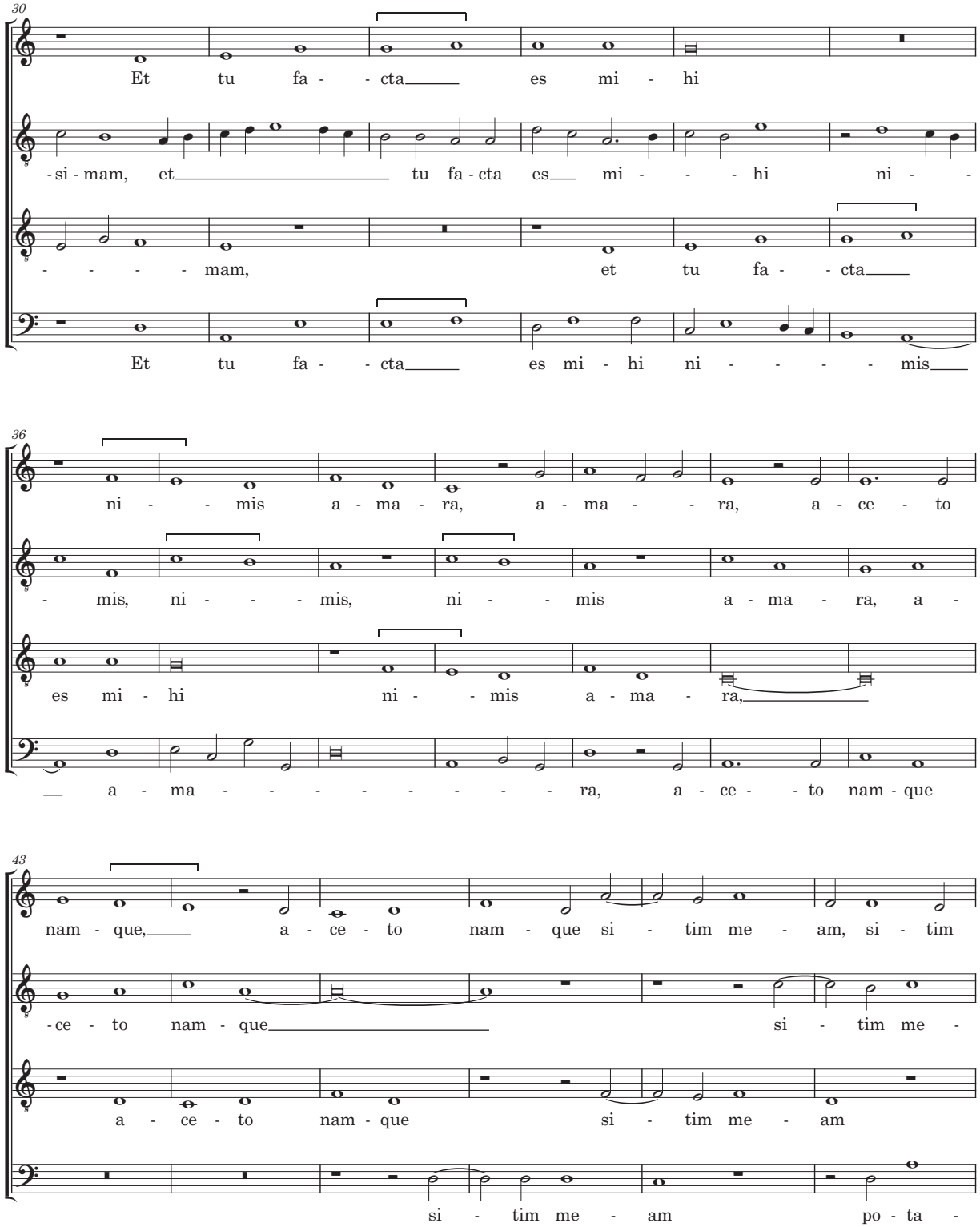

42
sa - tis, in ter - ram sa - tis op - - - - - ti - - - mam, pa -
sa - tis, in ter - ram sa - tis op - - - - - ti - mam, pa - ra - sti,
in ter - ram sa - tis, op - - - - - - - ti - mam, pa - ra - sti,
in ter - ram sa - tis op - - - - - - ti - mam pa - ra - sti, pa -
48
- ra - - sti cru - - - - - cem sal - - - - va -
pa - ra - - sti cru - - - - - cem sal - - - - va -
pa - ra - - sti cru - - - - cem
- ra - - sti cru - - - - - - - cem sal - - - - va -
54
- to - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - ri tu - - - - -
- to - - - - ri, sal - va - to - ri tu - - - - - - - - -
sal - - - va - to - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
- to - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - ri tu - - - - - -

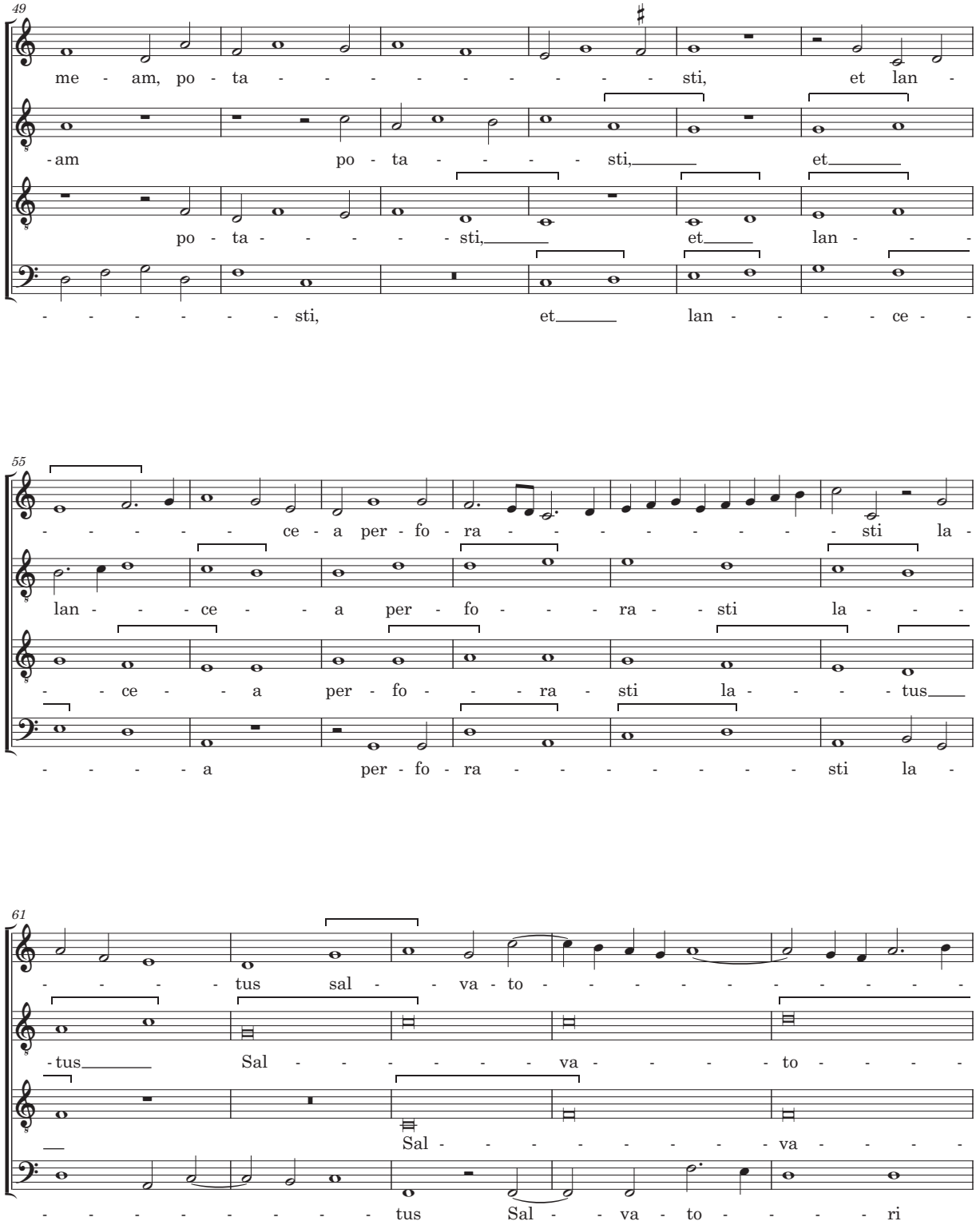

59
o, tu o, tu
o,
ri
tu
o, tu o,

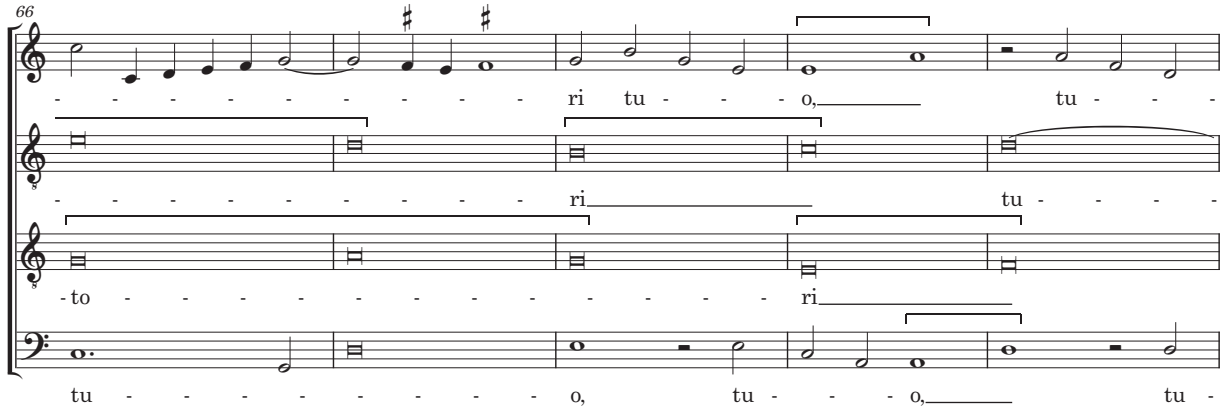

63
Sequitur Agyos
o, tu o.
tu o.
o.
tu o.

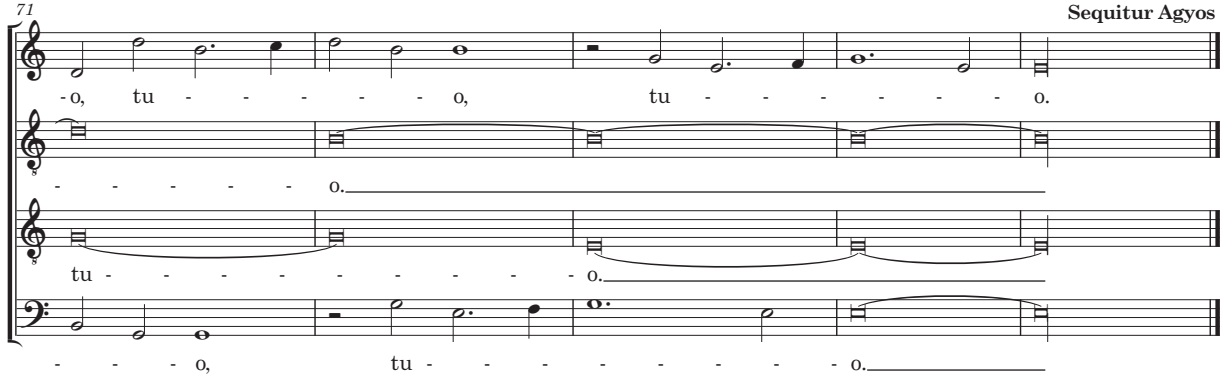

Discantus
Contratenor
Tenor
Bass
Quid ul tra de bu i fa ce
Quid ul tra de bu i fa


8
-re ti - bi et non fe - ci? E -
- ce - re ti - bi et non fe - ci? E - - -
16
- - - - go qui - dem plan - - ta - vi te vi - ne - - am
- go qui - - dem plan - - ta - vi te vi -
24
me - am spe - ti - o - - - - - - - sis - - - -
-ne - am me - am spe - ti - o - - - - - sis - - - si -


30
Et tu fa - - cta es mi - hi
-si - mam, et tu fa - cta es mi - - - hi ni - -
- - - - - mam, et tu fa - - cta
Et tu fa - - cta es mi - hi ni - - - - - mis
36
ni - - mis a - ma - ra, a - ma - - ra, a - ce - to
- mis, ni - - - mis, ni - - mis a - ma - ra, a -
es mi - hi ni - - mis a - ma - ra,
a - ma - - - - - - - - - ra, a - ce - - to nam - que
43
nam - que, a - ce - to nam - que si - tim me - am, si - tim
- ce - to nam - que si - tim me -
a - ce - to nam - que si - tim me - am
si - tim me - am po - ta -


49
me - am, po - ta - - - - - - - - - sti, et lan -
- am po - ta - - - - sti, et
po - ta - - - - - sti, et lan - - -
- - - - - - - - sti, et lan - - - - - ce -
55
- - - - - - ce - a per - fo - ra - - - - - - - - sti la -
lan - - - - ce - - - a per - fo - - - - ra - - sti la - - -
- - ce - - a per - fo - - - ra - sti la - - - - tus
- - - - - a per - fo - ra - - - - - - - - sti la -
61
- - - - - tus sal - - va - to - - - - - - - - - - -
- tus Sal - - - - - - - - va - - - - - to - - - - -
Sal - - - - - - - - - va - - - - -
- - - - - - - - - - tus Sal - - va - to - - - - - ri


66
ri tu - - - o, tu - - -
ri tu - - - - -
to - - - - - - - - - - - ri
tu - - - - - - - - - o, tu - - - o, tu -


71
Sequitur Agyos
- o, tu - - - - - o, tu - - - - - - o.
- - - - - - o.
tu - - - - - - - - - o.
- - - - o, tu - - - - - - - - o.