The Grand “Amen” from Handel’s *Messiah*

Englishman Edward Schulz, who met Beethoven in 1823, recalled: “I sat close to him and heard him say quite clearly in German:

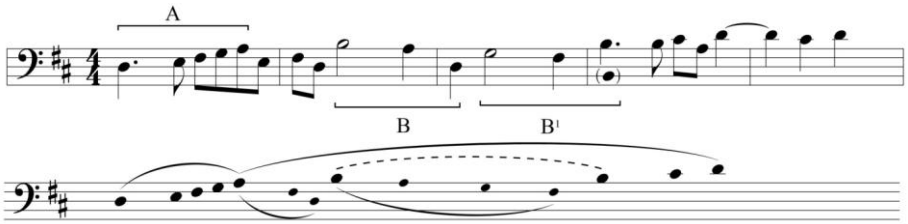
> 'Handel is the greatest composer who has ever lived.' I cannot describe with what pathos, and I may say with what sublime words he spoke of that immortal genius's *Messiah*. All of us were moved when he said: 'I would bare my head and kneel at his grave.'”

Less than four months before his death, Beethoven received a gift of the complete works of Handel in 40 volumes. In his reply he said Handel was “the greatest, most excellent composer” from whom he could “still learn”.

Closing the great oratorio *Messiah*, the Amen fugue is undoubtedly a masterful work of counterpoint and the technique displayed is of the highest calibre. But it is not only an impressive work of the logical, rational mind; it has an emotional power that moves the deepest parts of our beings. After singing this choral fugue numberless times, I decided to look under the hood and analyse it’s construction with the view of a greater appreciation.

There is a language in music, a semantics of motives, harmonies and scales. Baroque counterpoint in general and fugues in particular, compress a maximum amount of that meaning into a densely packed space. The genius of Handel is that he was able to use that cerebral form to illicit a visceral, highly emotional response. Part of his secret is that he treats the form with some freedom, using stark contrasts and distinct phrases in a clearly vocally-based music. If one listens to, say, the Agnus Dei fugue of Bach’s B-minor Mass, we find a much more seamless work, woven of a piece from end to end. Handel gives us more defined points of resolution and new beginnings to hold on to, a characteristic we find emulated and enlarged in the closing minutes of Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis and later Romantic works.

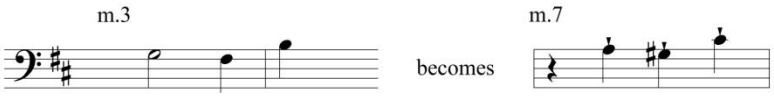
The Amen fugue opens with a statement of the Subject in the bass (the full score with numbered measures is appended at the end of the essay). Our Subject is basically scalar, rising through an octave from D to D.



Ex. 1 Fugue Subject with linear reduction

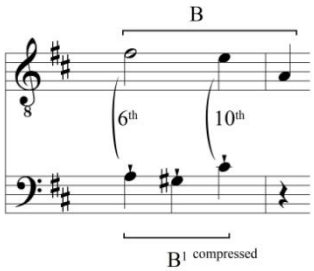
The Subject opens with what I label motive A, a five-note scale: this will be a fundamental motive throughout the fugue. The next element, motive B is three notes: two downward steps, a 2nd followed by a 5th which is immediately varied by inverting the falling 5th to a rising 4th (in the bass – the Tenor and

Alto entries do not invert the second B motive). This variation will become a main element of the Counter Subject in m.7:



Ex. 2 Derivation of Counter Subject motive

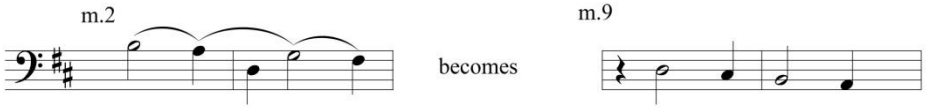
Not surprisingly, the use in the Counter Subject of a motive from the Subject gives the opportunity to set that motive in consonant intervals with itself (i.e., 3rds or 6ths). However, Handel sees another possibility: he alters the rhythm so that the first notes are a 6th apart, but then he compresses the Counter Subject so that the second and third notes align, making a 3rd and filling in a resultant quarter note rhythm, making the interplay more interesting:



Ex. 3 Counter Subject setting against original Subject motive

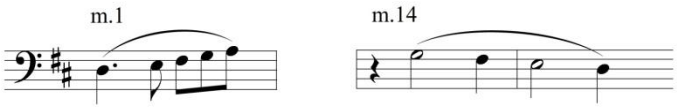
Further, using B and it's partial inversion B^1 together gives a pleasing contrary motion between the voices, the bass rising and the tenor falling.

One last interesting correlation between the Subject and Counter Subject is the descending scale at the end of the CS which relates directly to the implied scale at the centre of the Subject:



Ex. 4 Derivation of Counter Subject ending

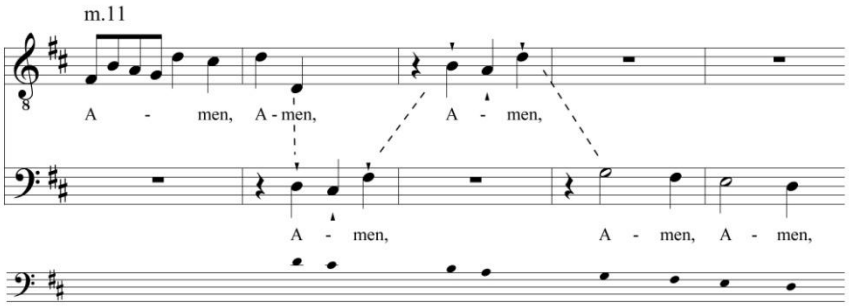
This slower descending scale is an inversion of the opening eighth-note scale of the Subject, although in the Dominant key. The bass Counter Subject that occurs later at m.14 is in the Tonic key and directly answers the opening five note rise D-E-F#-G-A, by descending G-F#-E-D.



Ex. 5 Subject opening answered by Counter Subject ending

We will see waves of five note scales become an integral feature of the fugue as it progresses through the developmental episodes to come.

Our Exposition follows the standard tonal pattern for Subject entries: I–V–I–V, moving from the Bass upward in order through Tenor, Alto and Soprano. The Exposition actually maintains a mostly two-voiced texture with voices passing off the Counter Subject to another voice. Only at the cadences does Handel use a thicker texture.



Ex. 6 Counter Subject sharing and descending scale

Note as well that while the Subject rises through an octave scale, the Counter Subject inverts that motion, descending through the octave from D to D.

At m.21 we come to a feature of this fugue that is particularly Handelian, the instrumental break. Here the texture is reduced to 1st and 2nd violins in a high register. The contrast with the full choir and orchestra is quite dramatic and illustrates Handel's emphasis on choral story-telling of a theatrical, operatic persuasion. He is more interested in the dramatic effect of his music than the working out of a form. This is also reflected in the clear divisions of blocks of music which we shall see in the Development section, in effect a series of relatively short phrases and not a seamless spinning out of the fugue's form. It is first and foremost vocal music.

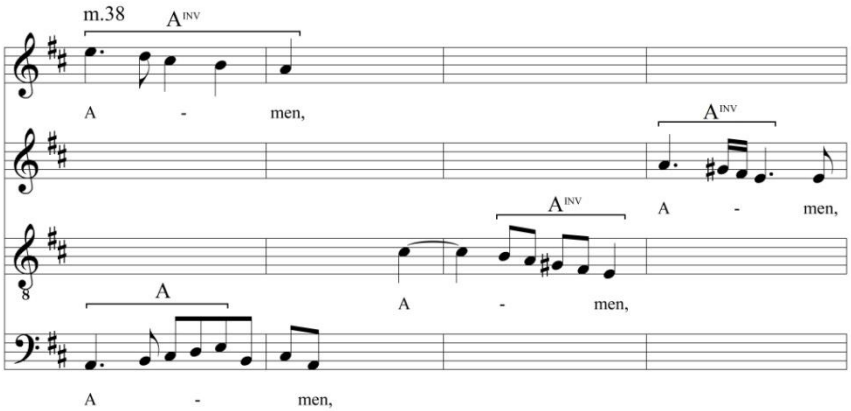
The first instrumental break presents the Subject in the Tonic, then the Dominant. The Subject is varied, repeating the ending motive as the initial Exposition did not. At m.36 this variation becomes the basis of a short fugato, the second instrumental break.

Ex. 7 Counter Subject variation in Violin breaks

We note retrospectively that the motive identified here, present in the original Subject, also contains an incipient version of the three-note motive B that was a main feature of the Counter Subject (see. Ex.2) except that the first interval is a falling 3rd followed by the rising 4th.

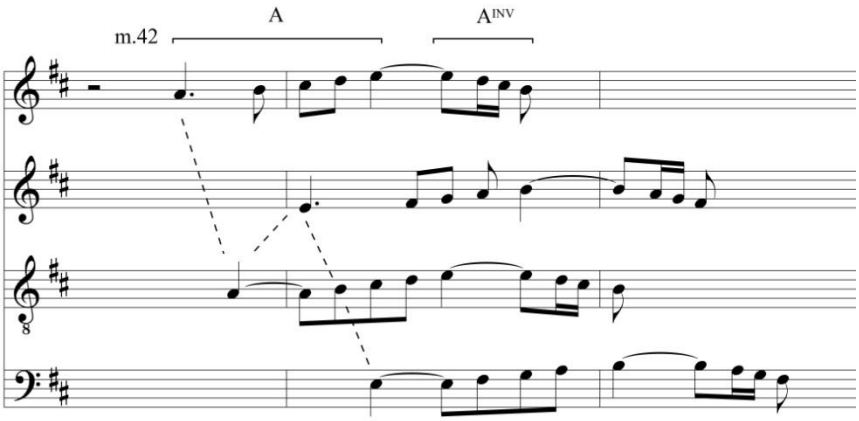
Ex. 8 Counter Subject motive incipient in Subject

These brief instrumental fugatos are each followed by grand choral statements of the Subject in the bass with the other three parts amplifying the Counter Subject. The first choral outburst (m.31) harmonizes the beginning of the Subject homophonically in the Tonic, the second one (m.38) similarly treats the Subject in the Dominant key. In this second outburst the use of the inverted 5-note scale motive (labelled A in Ex.1) is prominent. This motive will be a major element of the ensuing sections.



Ex. 9 Subject motive A inverted

At m.42 we begin a series of seven sections or phrases which develop the thematic material. The first one features a stretto of the opening scale of the Subject (motive A) in all four voices:

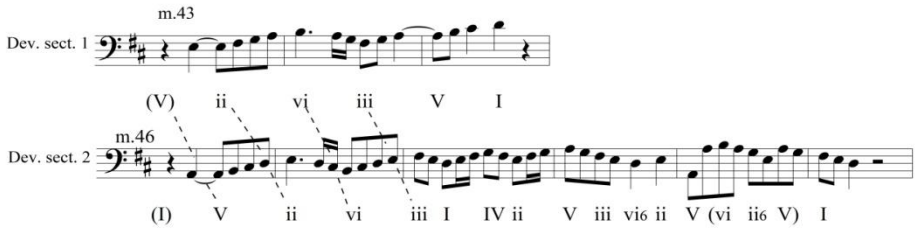


Ex. 10 Motive A stretto

Motive A is here presented with it's inversion A^{INV} in a close stretto in the Tonic key (although beginning on $\hat{5}$ instead of $\hat{1}$). Such tight interweaving of thematic material is truly impressive, and the mark of a contrapuntal master of considerable skill and experience. Harmonically, this three-measure passage moves V-ii-vi-V-I.

A^{INV} is altered rhythmically by following the initial tone with a pair of 16th notes. This quickened version of A which appeared in the alto at the end of the previous section (m.41) will become more and more prominent as the piece progresses. At m.48 it is inverted to its rising form with a shortened initial note; at m.64 that shortened, rising form forms the basis of a stretto in the alto, tenor and soprano and features prominently in the next sections, mm.68-75 as well, rising and falling.

The next section (mm.45-51) repeats very similar music, waves of A and A^{INV}, with similar harmonic motion except offset by one measure so that it begins on tonic. Here is the harmonic analysis under the bass line for these two sections (mm.42-45 and 45-51)

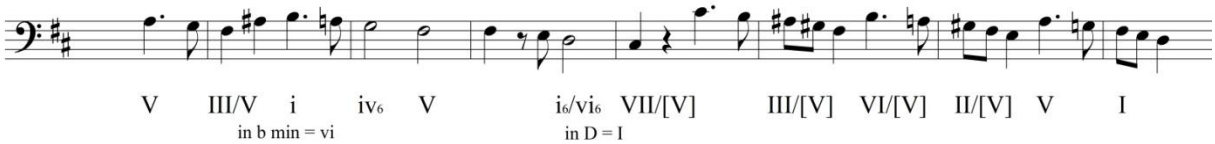


Ex. 11 Harmonic analysis mm.42-51

Note how the harmonic rhythm quickens during the second section. While the first section begins with an emphasis on V and the second on I, both cadence in the Tonic and are wholly diatonic.

Dovetailed with section 2, the third section begins with a stretto of the A motive between the soprano and alto; the alto continues with the B motive but truncates the ending. The tenor joins in at m.52 with a Subject entry that skips the B motive straight to the ending while the bass presents the Counter Subject B motive for the last time and ends in m.56 with A^{INV}. This section tonicizes V.

The fourth section of the Development is the longest at 7 measures, and the most chromatic and harmonically distant.

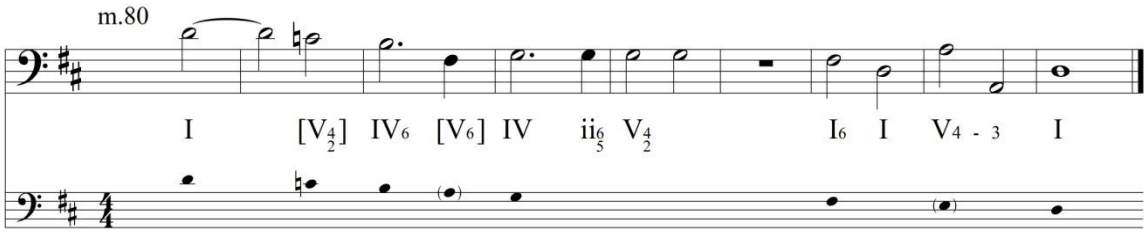


Ex. 12 Harmonic analysis mm.56-63

After a segment in b minor (the only departure of any length from the Tonic or Dominant keys) the tenor and bass participate in a stretto of A^{INV} which quickly moves through a series of applied Dominants in a cycle of fifths from VII–III–VI–II–V–I. The next chord (which would complete the whole cycle of seven major chords rooted on the notes of D major) would be IV; it is delayed, but the next section *does* centre on IV, in m.67 the Tonic chord receiving the lowered 7th making it [V] of IV. The motive A^{INV}, a descending 5-note scale, lends itself to articulating this cycle of fifths, since it descends a 5th and then can be repeated a tone lower, creating roots moving down a 5th, up a 4th and so on.

As mentioned, phrase 5 of the Development tonicizes IV (G). Its contrapuntal foundation is a four-part stretto of a rhythmically accurate A^{INV} which jumps up a 4th to repeat or uses the sixteenth note variation from m.43 to rise through the 4th. The close imitation using these rising and falling A / A^{INV} continues through the final two sections. Section 6 moves to the key of V and section 7 returns us to the Tonic using standard harmonic progressions (i.e., vi–ii–V–I). It is really the contrapuntal spinning out of the rising and falling scale motives that holds our interest here.

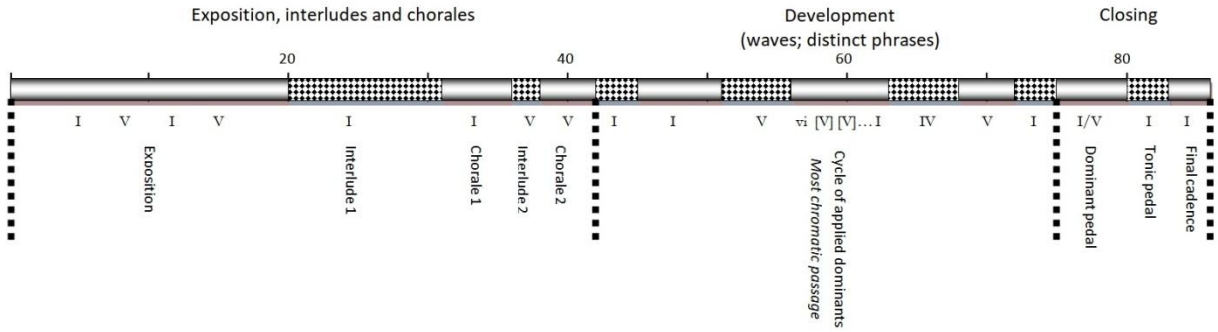
Now we come to the closing sections. In the first section the basses echo the soprano's opening fragment of the Subject in the Tonic key (m.75) with a variant of the Subject which comes to rest on an A, forming a Dominant pedal for 3 and a half measures. Motive $\mathrm{A}^{\mathrm{INV}}$ in the tenor sails over the pedal harmonies and continues in the closing section in the soprano, alto and tenor while the bass descends through a D mixolydian scale whose lowered $\hat{7}$ emphasizes IV (hinting at a plagal "Amen" cadence). Instead the root of IV is becomes the 3rd of a ii^{6}_{5} chord to the 7th of a V^{4}_{2} chord and brings us to a grand authentic cadence.



Ex. 13 Harmonic analysis and descending scale of closing

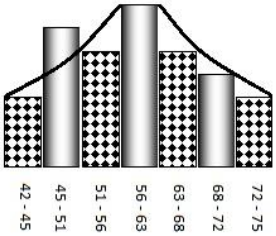
This descending bass scale powerfully answers and gives closure to the ascending scale of the Subject we heard in the same voice at the opening of the fugue.

Here is a timeline summary of the entire Amen fugue showing the main divisions and harmonic centres of each section.



Ex. 14 Timeline

The fugue divides into two main sections, the Exposition and the Development, followed by a closing section. Interestingly, the Development section divides into seven phrases which have some symmetrical aspects to their arrangement. The centre section (mm.56-63) begins in vi (b minor – this is the only extended passage not in the Tonic or Dominant) and while it ends on the Tonic, is the most chromatic, passing quickly through four keys. It is preceded by a section in the Dominant and followed by a section in the Sub-Dominant. The first and last sections are both in the Tonic, so there is a symmetry to the key structure. Additionally, the centre phrase is the longest, the first and last phrase the shortest and the others ordered generally symmetrically according to length:



Ex. 15 Development phrase lengths

While the phrases usually are dovetailed, the one ending as another begins, they all have a disctinct closing gesture. At the end of each, one has the impression of the whole choir breathing to attack the next phrase. As noted above, most of the Development is based on motives A and A^{INV}, rising and falling 4 and 5 note scales, which creates waves of sound, rolling toward the gates of heaven, as it were.

I personally find the closing section (mm.75-88) among the most moving of musical experiences. It strikes me that the Dominant pedal at m.76 has the effect of an extended cadential 6/4 with the Dominant in the bass and Tonic/Dominant harmonies flowing above. Then the descending bass line extends the Tonic (with special emphasis on the plagal Sub-Dominant) toward a final authentic cadence. It's like a $\mathrm{I}–\mathrm{I}^{6}_{4}–\mathrm{V}–\mathrm{I}–\mathrm{IV}–\mathrm{I}$ progession extended over 13 measures.

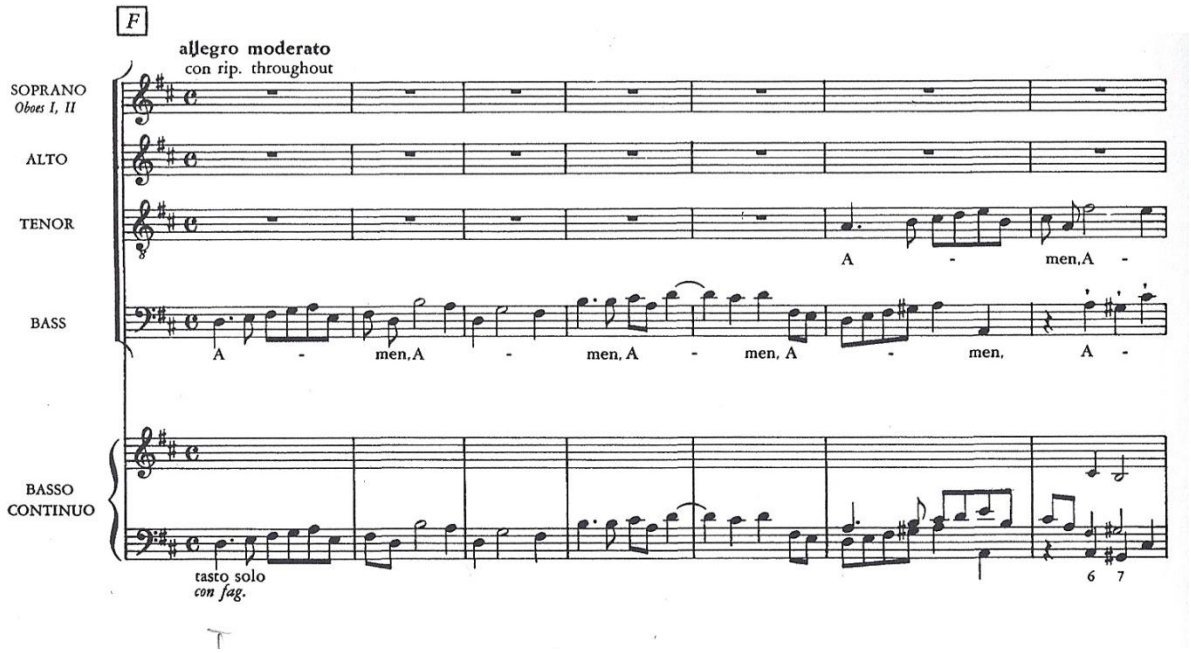
I have sung Messiah many times and in most of those rehearsals and performances of the Amen I have had a persistent problem: when the bass rises to that mighty Dominant pedal I become choked with emotion, unable to sing. I imagine the scene from Revelation:

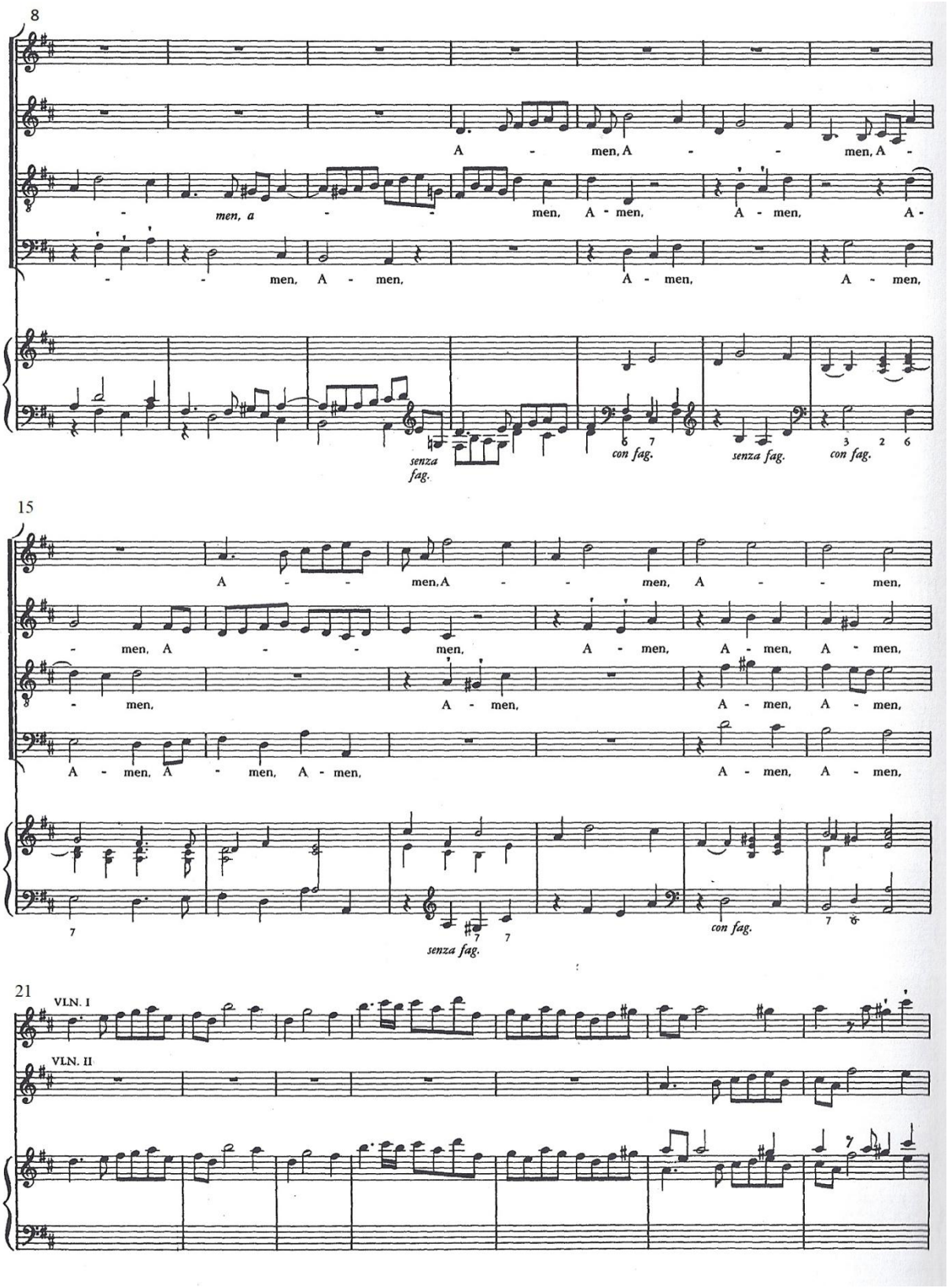
> "And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain". [Rev.5:11-12]

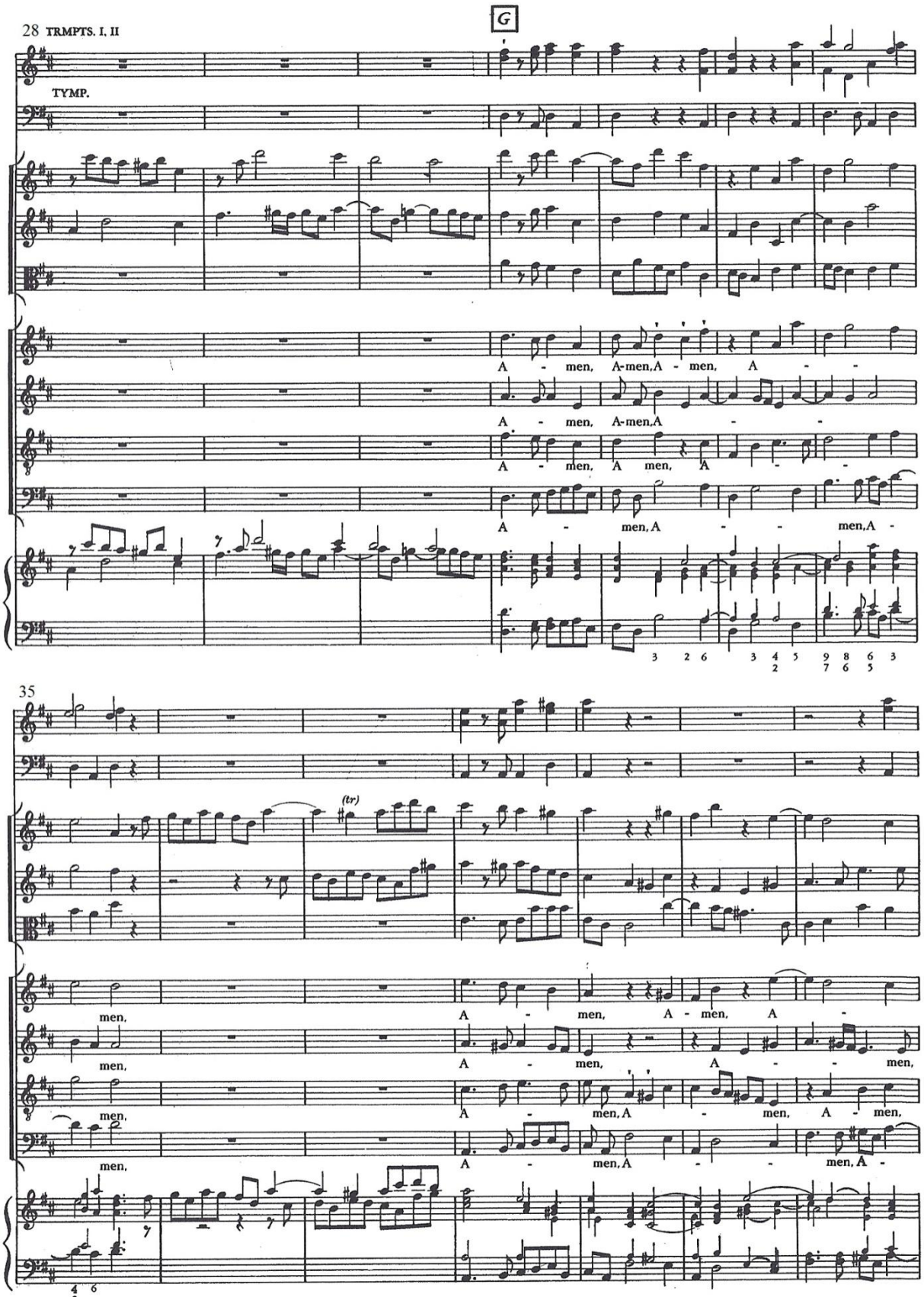
After all, Handel himself is reported to have said, "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself seated on His throne, with His company of Angels". I see it too.

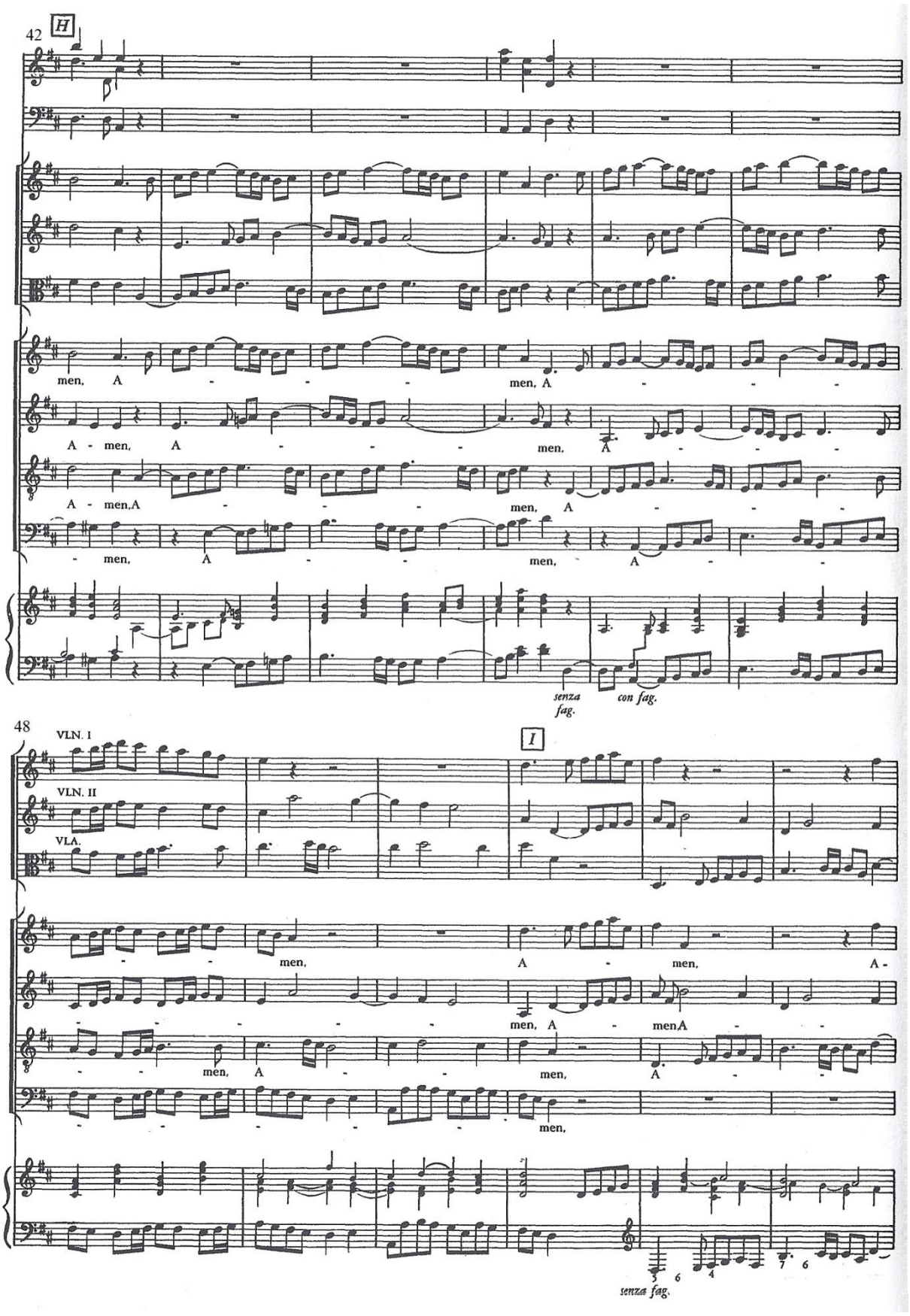
Appendix

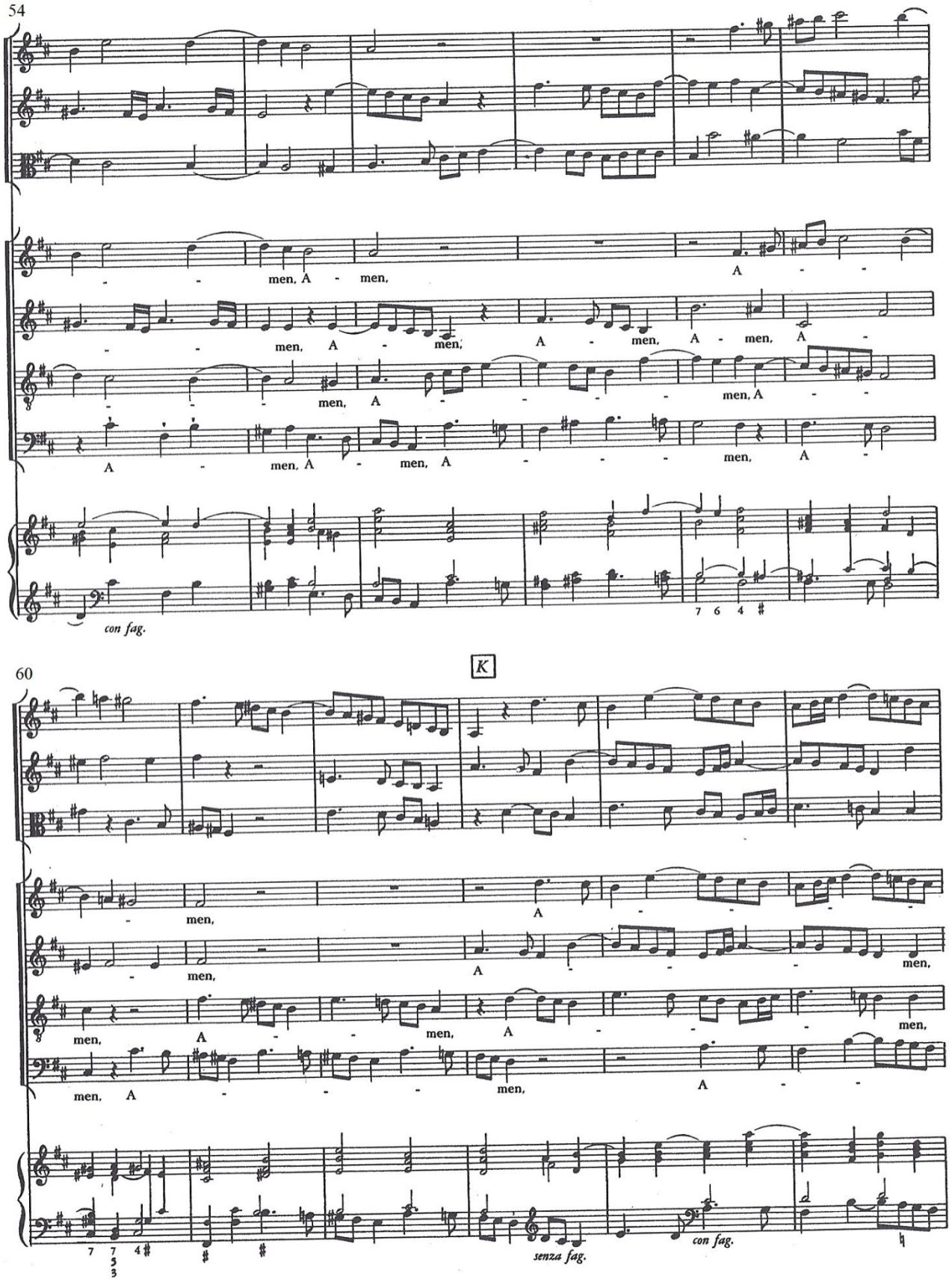
Amen from *Messiah* - score

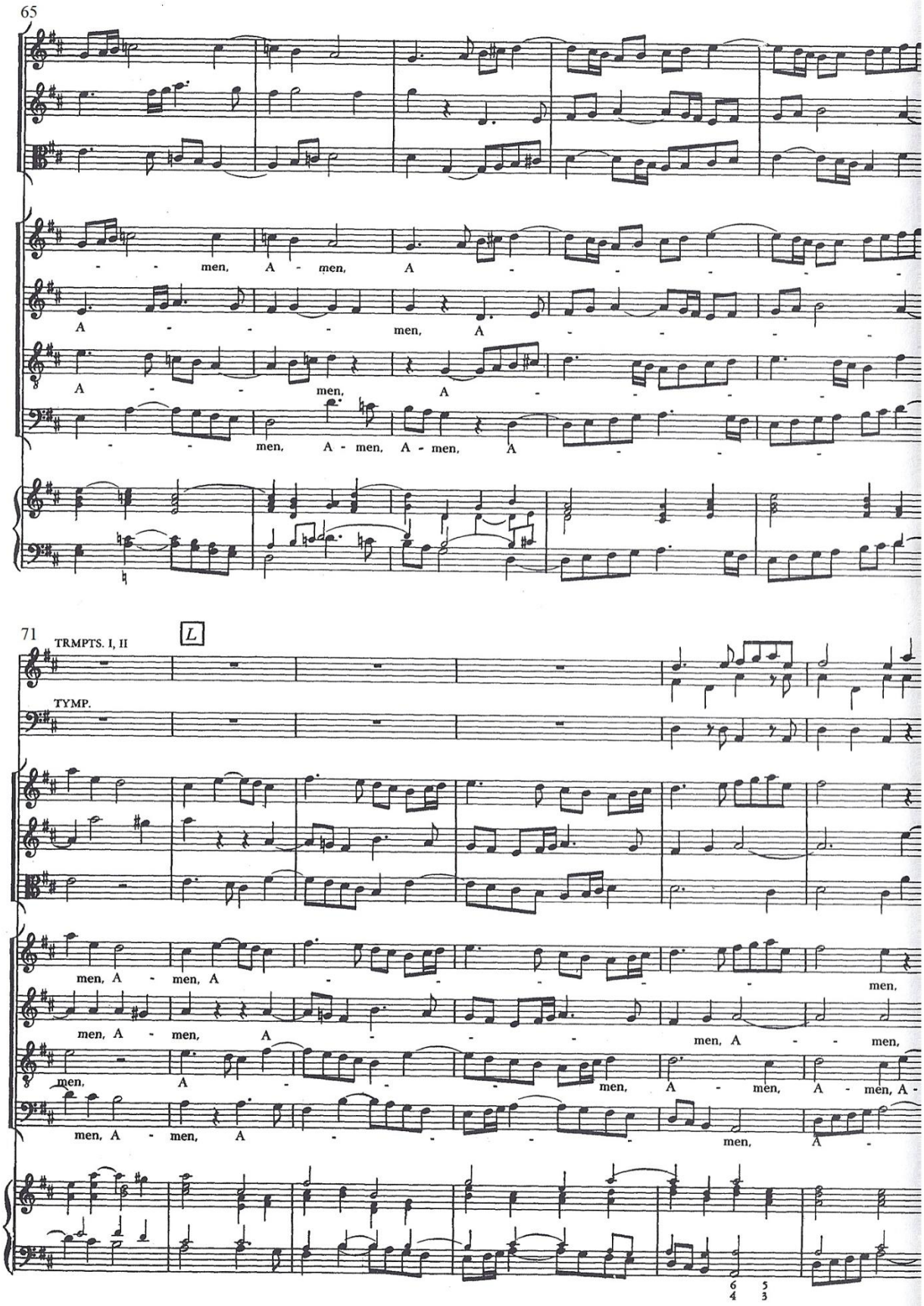


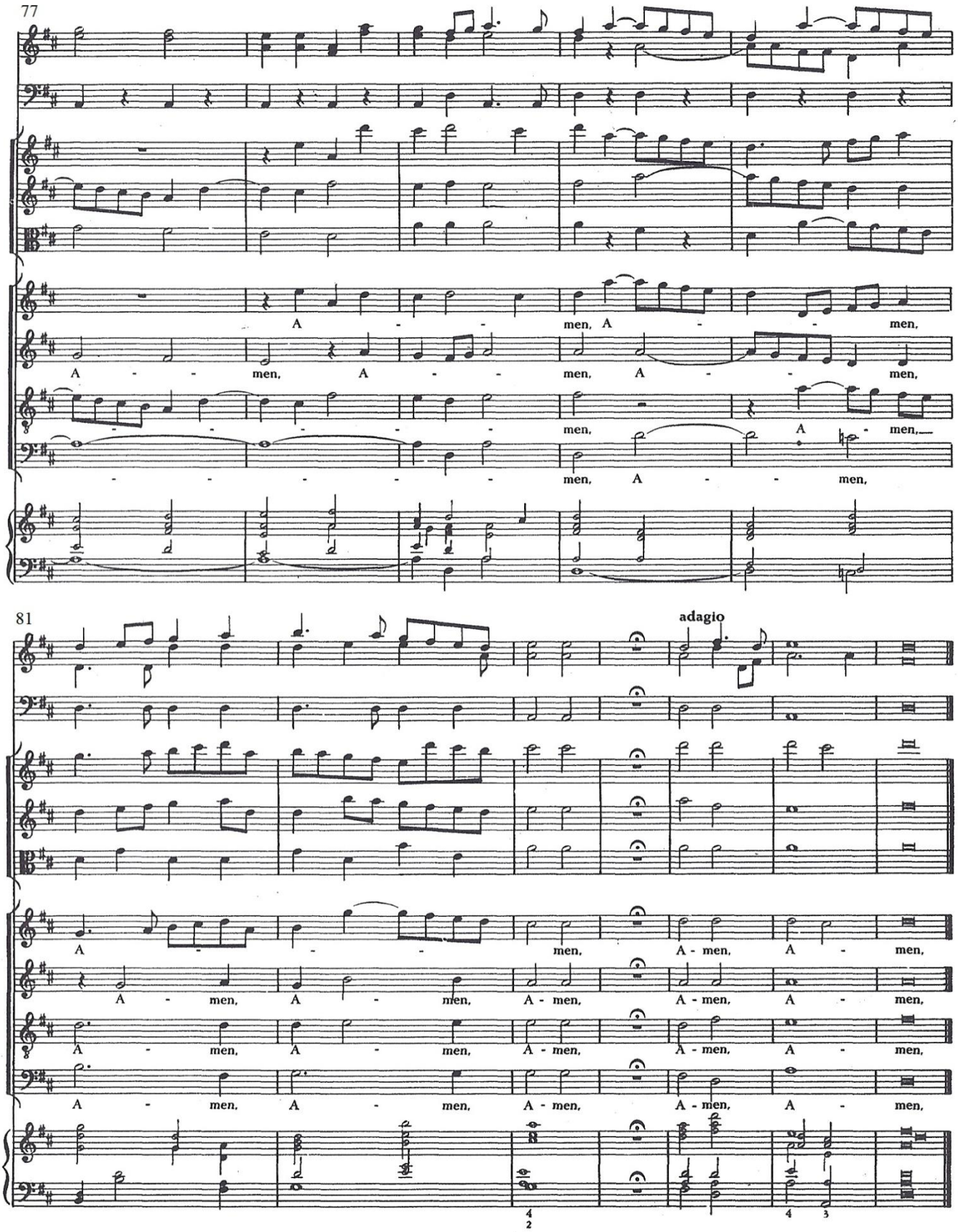

8
A - men, A - - men, A -
men, a - - men, A - men, A - men, A -
- - men, A - men, A - men, A - men,
senza fag.
con fag.
senza fag.
con fag.
15
A - - men, A - - men, A - - men,
- men, A - - men, A - men, A - men, A - men,
- men, A - men, A - men, A - men,
A - men, A - men, A - men, A - men, A - men,
senza fag.
con fag.
21
VLN. I
VLN. II


28 TRMPTS. I, II
G
TYMP.
A - men, A-men, A - men, A - -
A - men, A-men, A - -
A - men, A men, A - -
A - men, A - - men, A -
35
(tr)
men, A - men, A - men, A -
men, A - men, A - - men,
men, A - men, A - men, A - men,
men, A - men, A - - men, A -


42
H
men, A - - - men, A - - -
A - men, A - - - men, A - - -
A - men, A - - - men, A - - -
- men, A - - men, A - -
senza fag.
con fag.
48
VLN. I
VLN. II
VLA.
I
men, A - men, A -
men, A - men, A - -
men, A - - men, A - -
men,
5 6 4 7 6
senza fag.


54
men, A - men,
A - men, A - men, A - men, A -
men, A - men, A - men, A -
A - men, A - men, A - men, A -
con fag.
7 6 4 #
60
K
men,
A
men,
A
men,
A - men, A - men, A - men,
men, A - men, A
7 7 4 #
5
3
senza fag.
con fag.


65
men, A - men, A
A men, A
A men, A
men, A - men, A - men, A
71
TRMPTS. I, II
L
TYMP.
men, A - men, A men,
men, A - men, A men, A - men,
men, A men, A - men, A - men, A -
men, A - men, A men, A -
6 5
4 3


77
A - men, A - men,
A - men, A - men, A - men,
men, A - men,
men, A - men,
81
adagio
A - men, A - men,
A - men, A - men, A - men, A - men, A - men,
A - men, A - men, A - men, A - men, A - men,
A - men, A - men, A - men, A - men, A - men,