Gabriel Jackson

A Vision of Aeroplanes

for unaccompanied choir (6S4A4T4B)

A VISION OF AEROPLANES was commissioned by Bernhard Starkmann and was first performed by the BBC Singers, directed by Simon Joly, at St. Paul's, Knightsbridge, on October 17th 1997

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Duration: 15 minutes

En! Similes sunt avibus magnis
sed hae machinae praeclarae pulchriores sunt quam avis ulla.
Alis sculptis de metallo nitido, se torquent, convertunt, demergent,
caelum illuminantes celeritate splendida et obscura venustate arcana.
Terrentes autem sublimes, habentes potestatem verendam et gratiam divinam,
opera priscissimorum somniorum nobis sunt -
laminae fulgentes et acutae quae viam suam discindunt in futurum;
hos currus flammeos aeriosque volare videre vere magicus est.

Machinae ingentes eorum nos in caelum sine opera trahunt.
Nubes perforamus quae nos ad tellus ligant
et ebrii in silentio et inanitate subvolamus.
In imaginatione immobilitatis nec ullo temporis sensu porro labamur.
Subauscultamus occulta angelorum. Conscii mysteriis stellarum.
Immortales facti sumus.

Tandem dominationem nutus vicimus.
Tandem latitudinem aetheris optato nobis est vagari.
Possumus iter ad fines orbis terrarum in horis facere;
possumus ad marginem aeris in puncto temporis attingere;
possumus lunam stellasque errantes tamquam nostras adrogare
et futurum ultra fines opiniorum nostrorum.

Salutemus miraculum maximum saeculi nostri: volatum!

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Behold! They are like great birds
but these glorious machines are more beautiful than any bird.
With sculpted wings of gleaming metal, they twist and turn and dive,
lighting up the sky with their dazzling speed and dark mysterious glamour.
Frightening yet sublime, possessed of awesome power and supernatural grace,
they are the products of our most primeval dreams -
shining sharp blades cleaving their way to the future;
it is truly magical to see these fiery aerial chariots in flight.

Their mighty engines pull us effortlessly into the heavens.
We pierce the clouds which tie us to the earth
and soar, intoxicated, in the silence and the space.
We glide along in a fantasy of immobility and timelessness.
We are eavesdropping on angels’ secrets. We are privy to the mysteries of the stars.
We have become immortal.

At last we have conquered the tyranny of gravity.
At last the breadth of the ether is ours to roam at will.
We can travel to the ends of the earth in hours;
we can reach the edge of the atmosphere in minutes;
we can claim the moon and planets as our own,
and a future beyond the range of our imaginations.

Let us salute the greatest miracle of our century: flight!

I am indebted to Martin Rupp for his invaluable help with the translation.
G.J.

COMPOSER’S NOTE

Although it takes its title from Vaughan Williams, the model for A Vision of Aeroplanes is the large-scale votive antiphon of the late 15th century (as exemplified by the pieces in the Eton Choirbook) with its sequence of richly scored tuttis alternating with reduced-voice sections (here scored for solo voices). The names of various aircraft are encrypted into the score: the structural proportions are derived from that of what is undoubtedly the most beautiful ever built - the AEROSPATIALE/BAC CONCORDE. The tutti sections (and the double gimell at Tandem dominationem) are each based on a different cantus firmus; these canti firmi are not of plainchant origin but are plainchant-substitutes derived, again, from the names of some of the most significant aircraft in the development of aviation. They appear in the piece in the chronological order of their construction: WRIGHT FLYER, SOPWITH CAMEL, SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE, DE HAVILLAND COMET, AVRO VULCAN, HAWKER HARRIER, LOCKHEED BLACKBIRD, DASSAULT BREGUET MIRAGE, BOEING 747 and NORTHROP B2.

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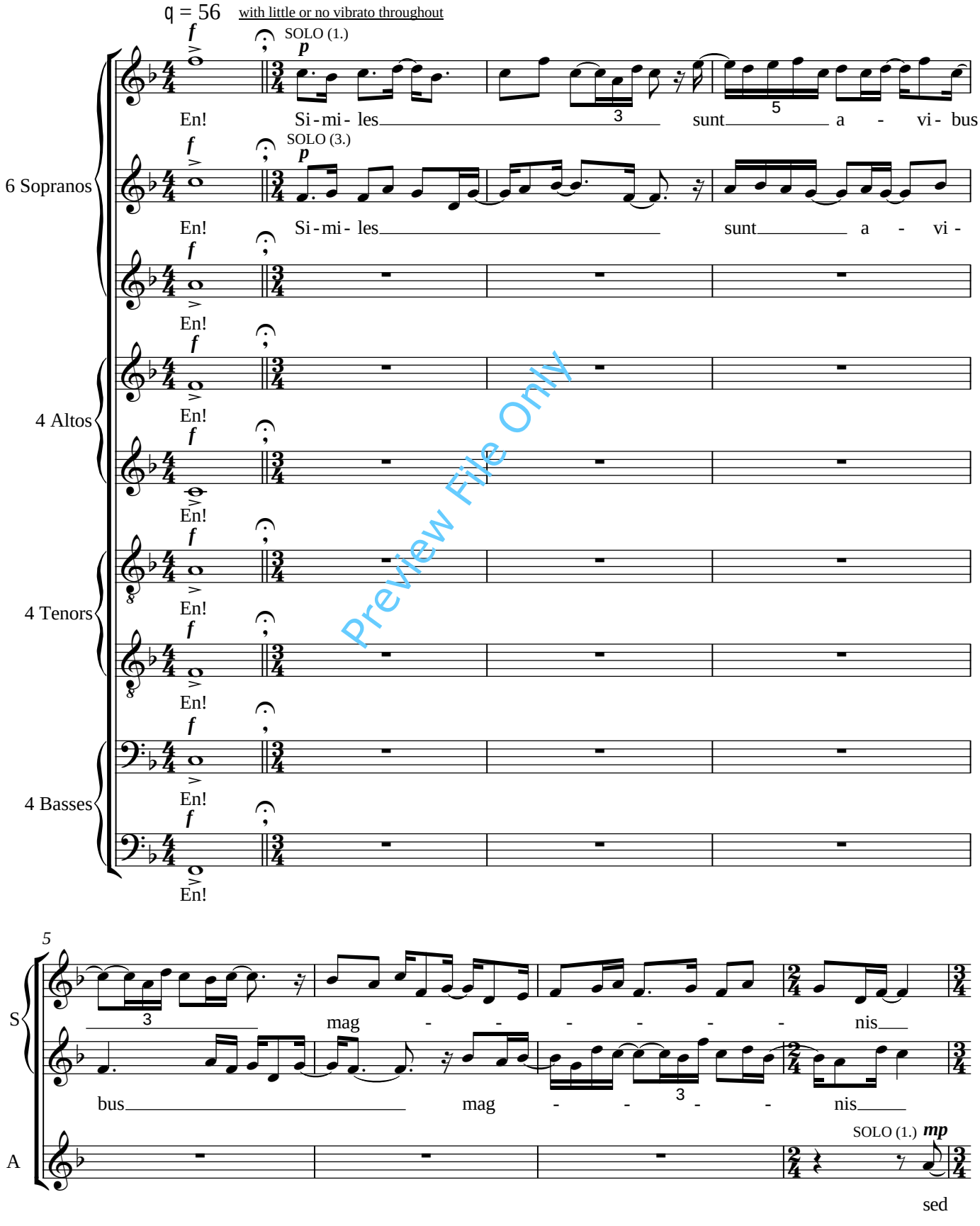
A Vision of Aeroplanes

Text: Anonymous

Music: Gabriel Jackson



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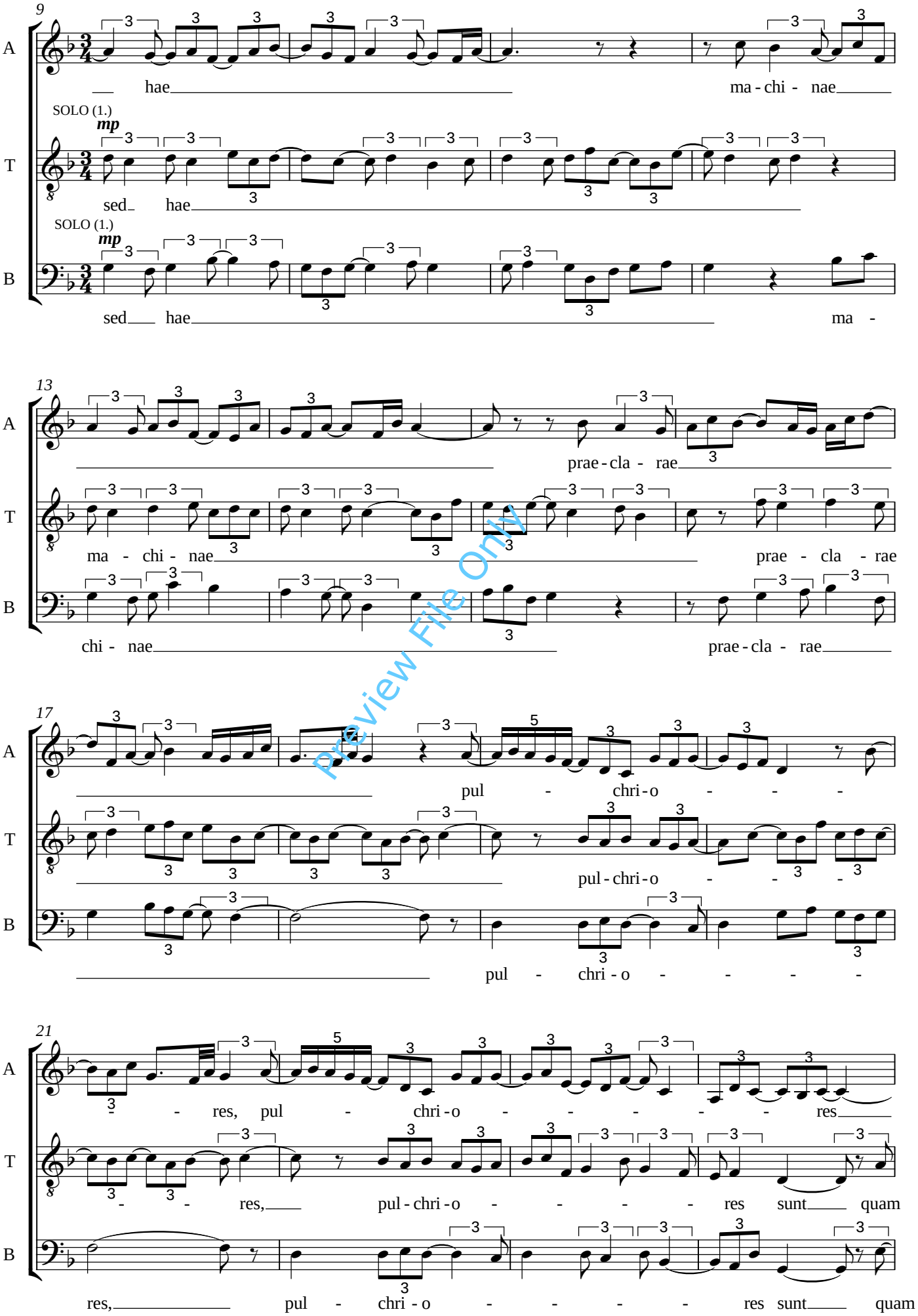

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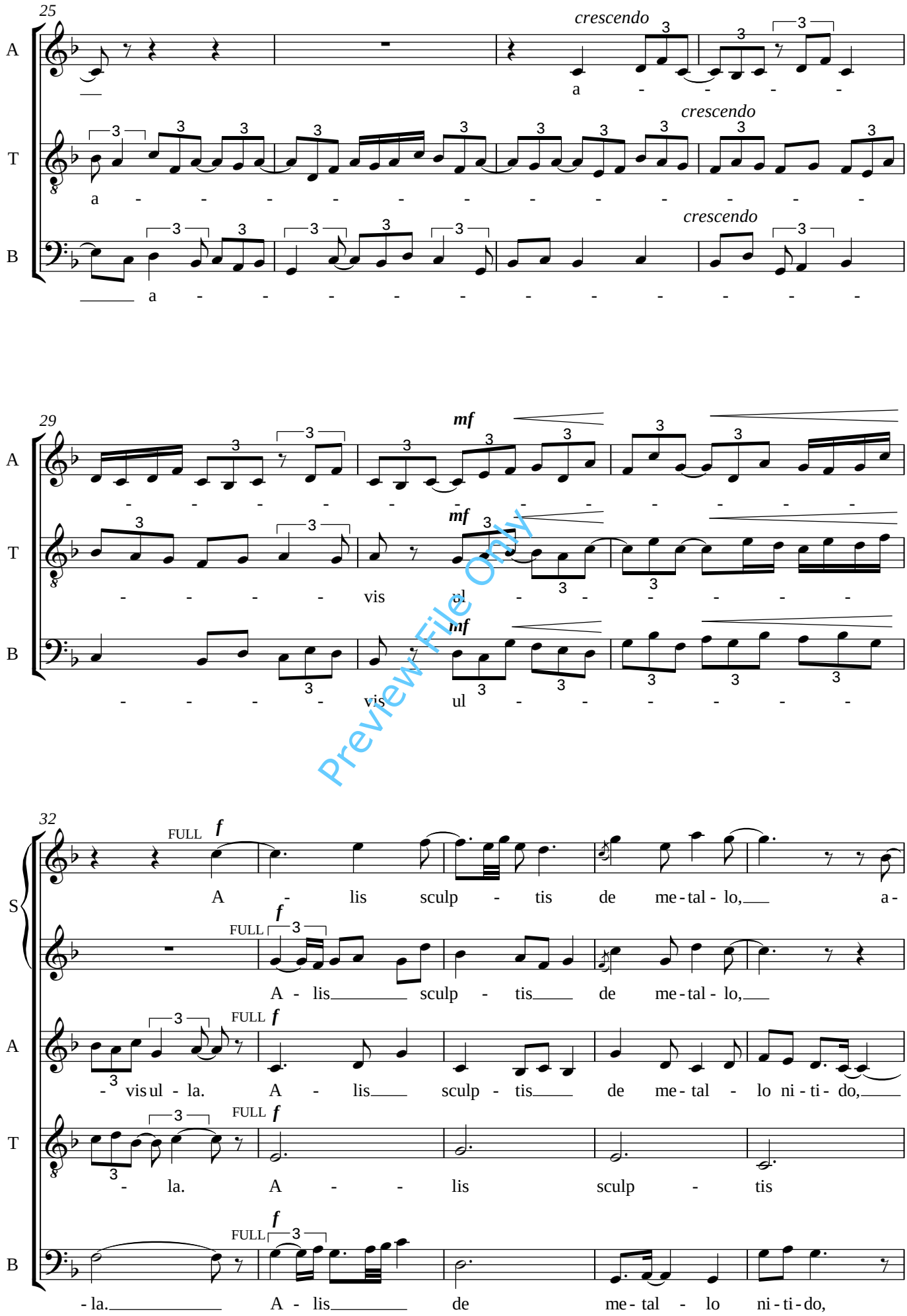
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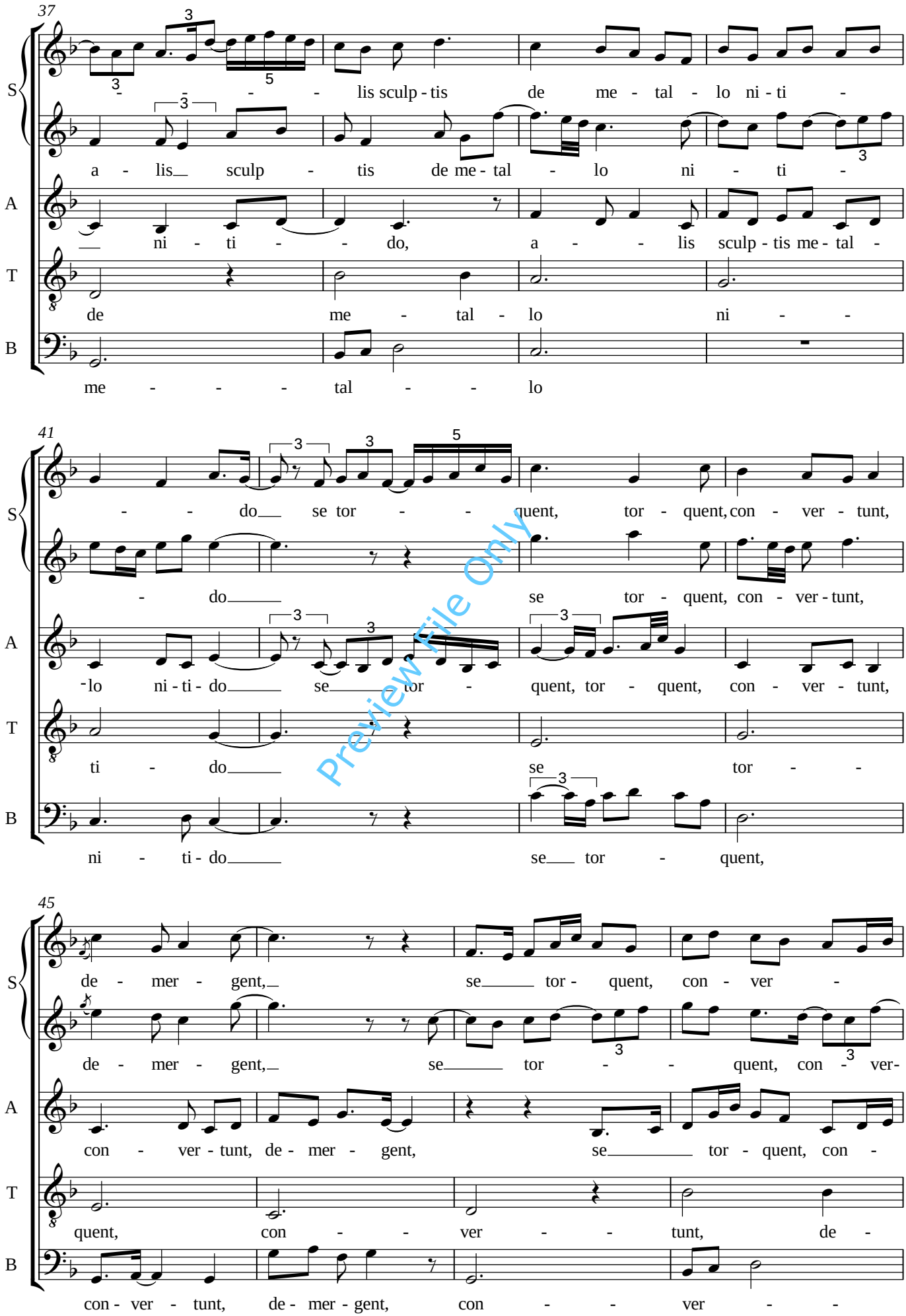

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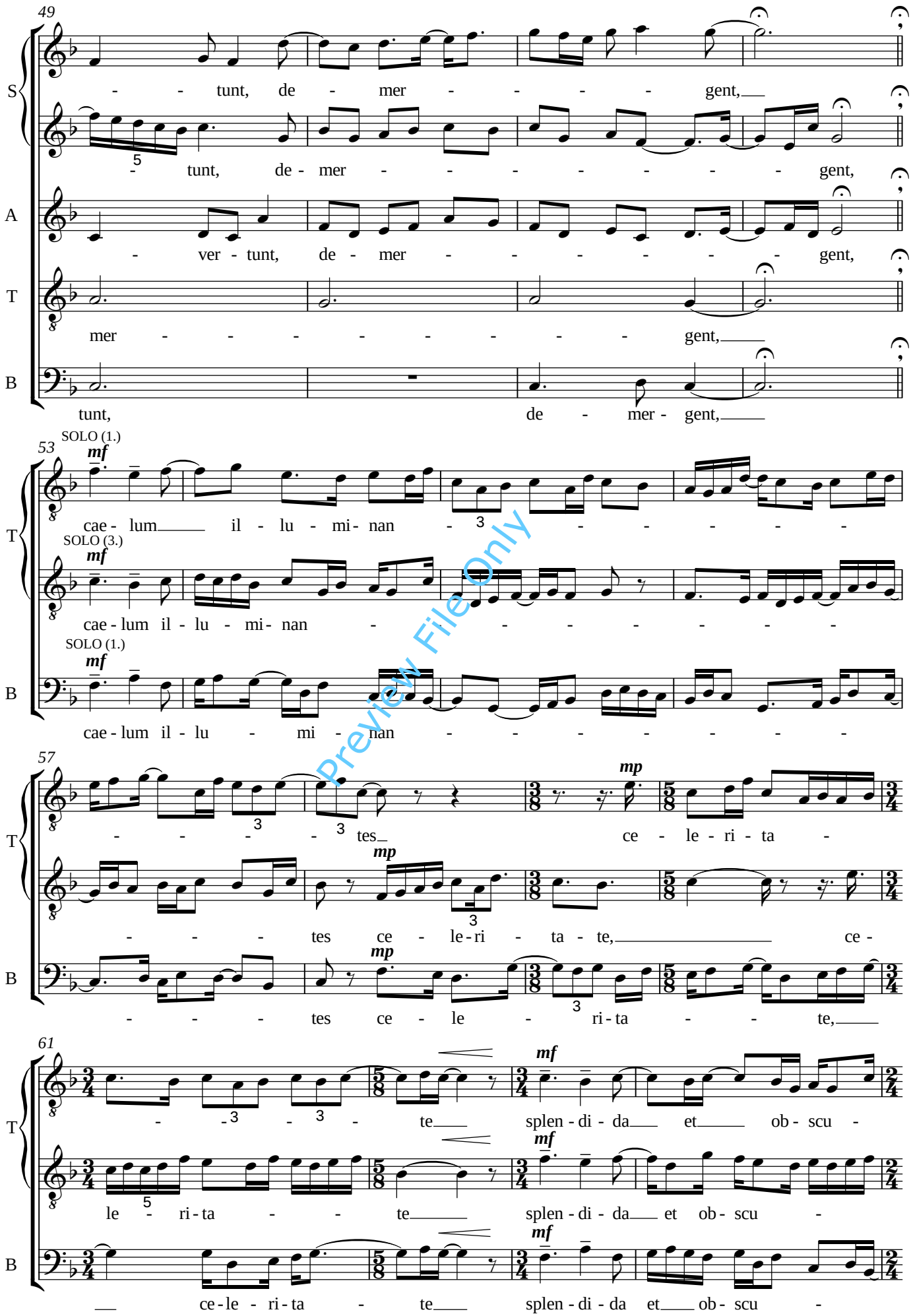

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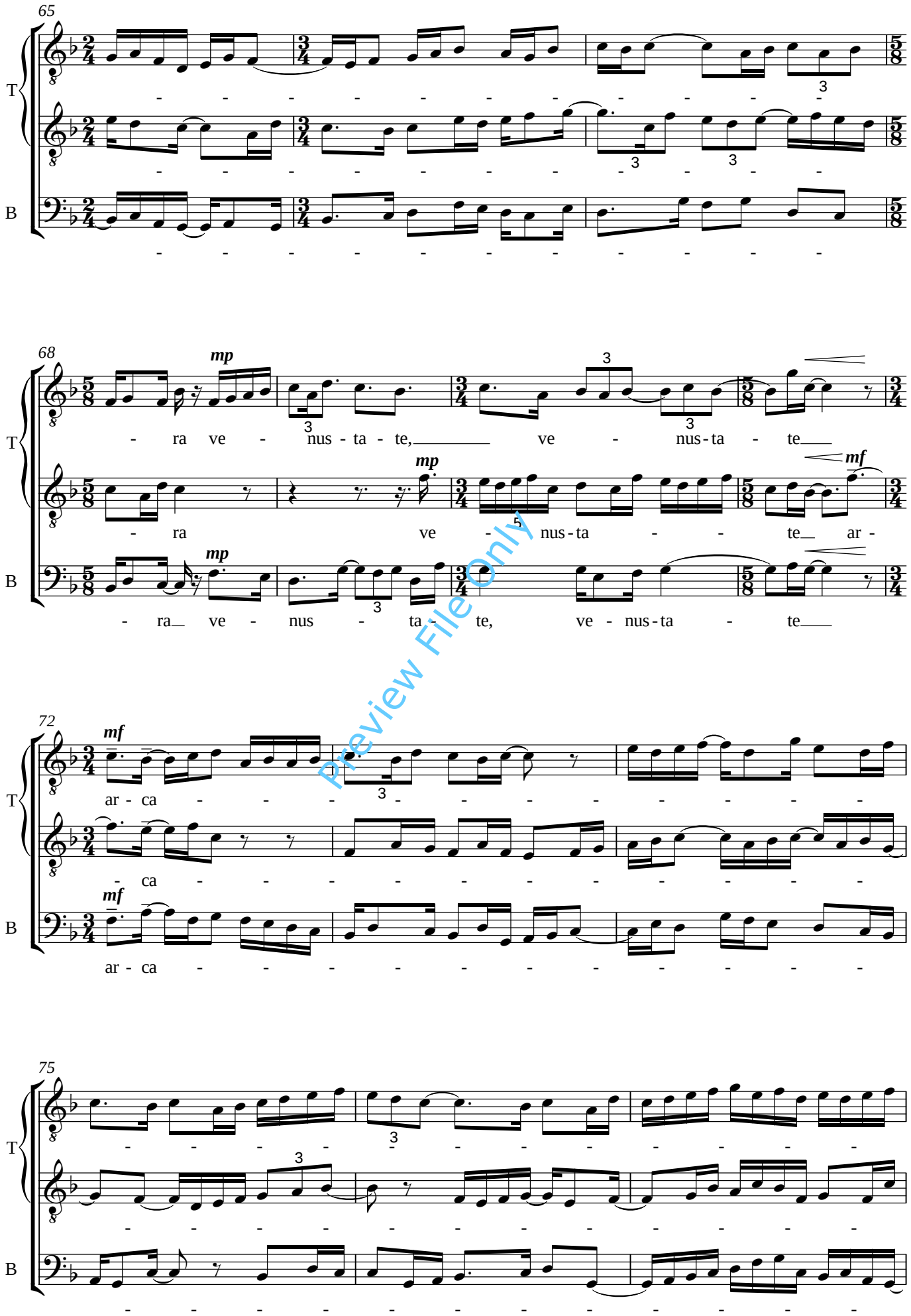

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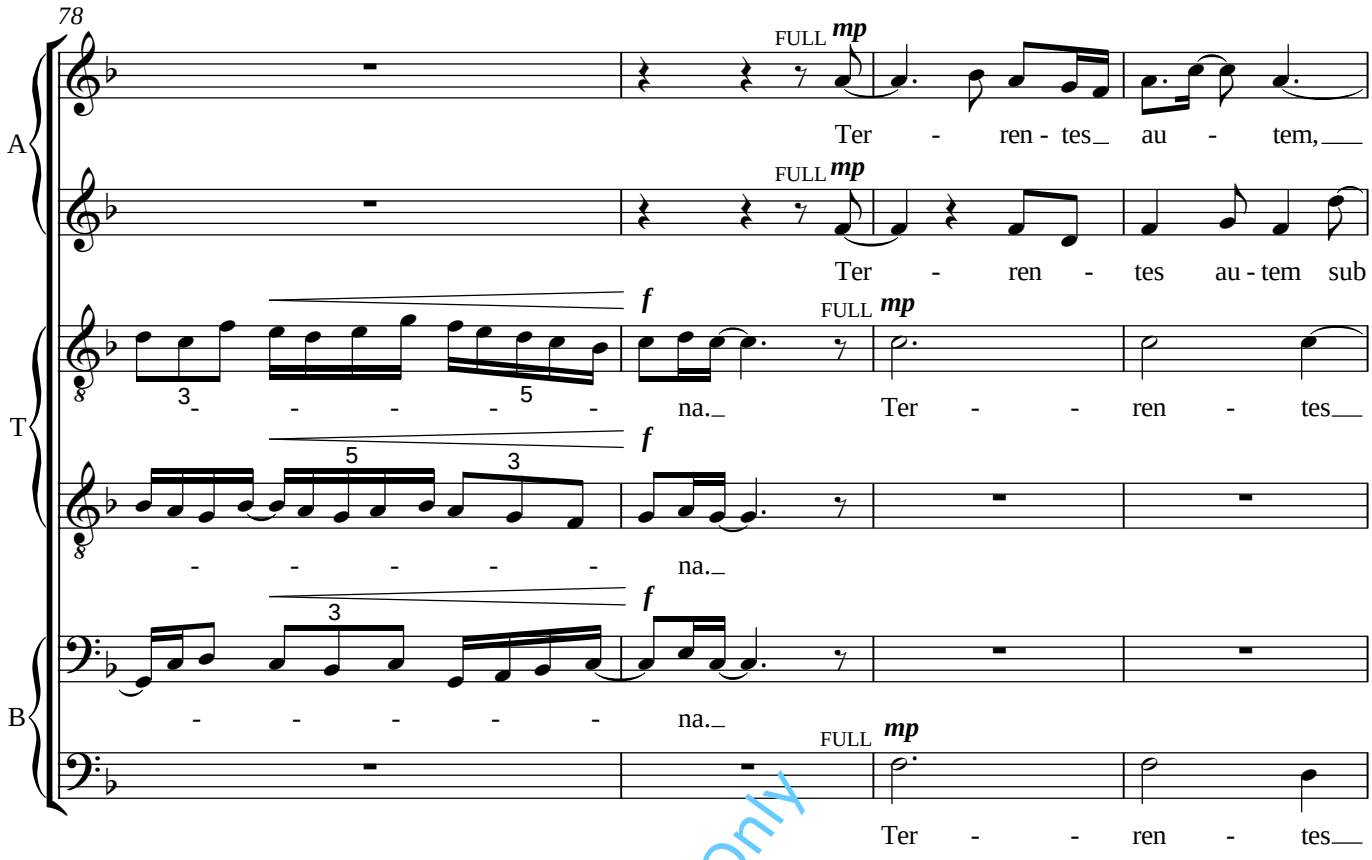

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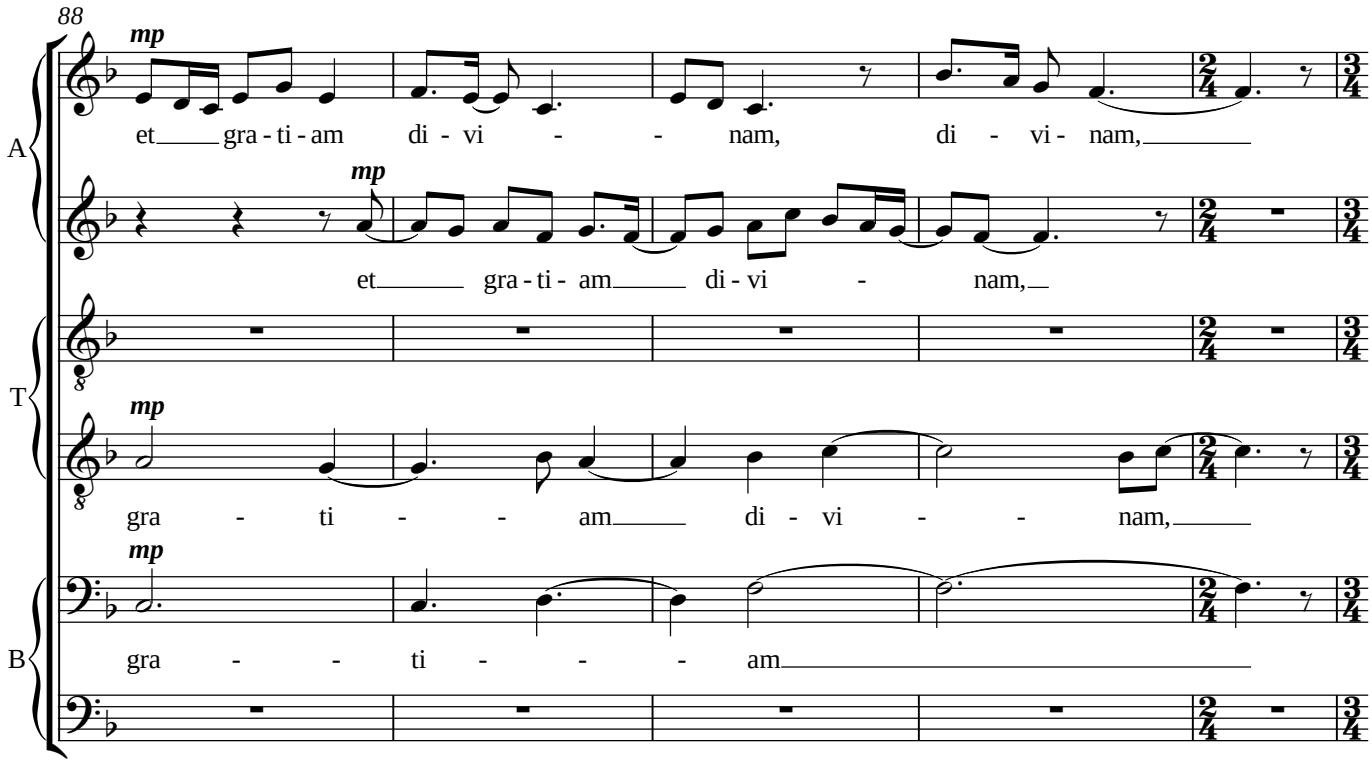

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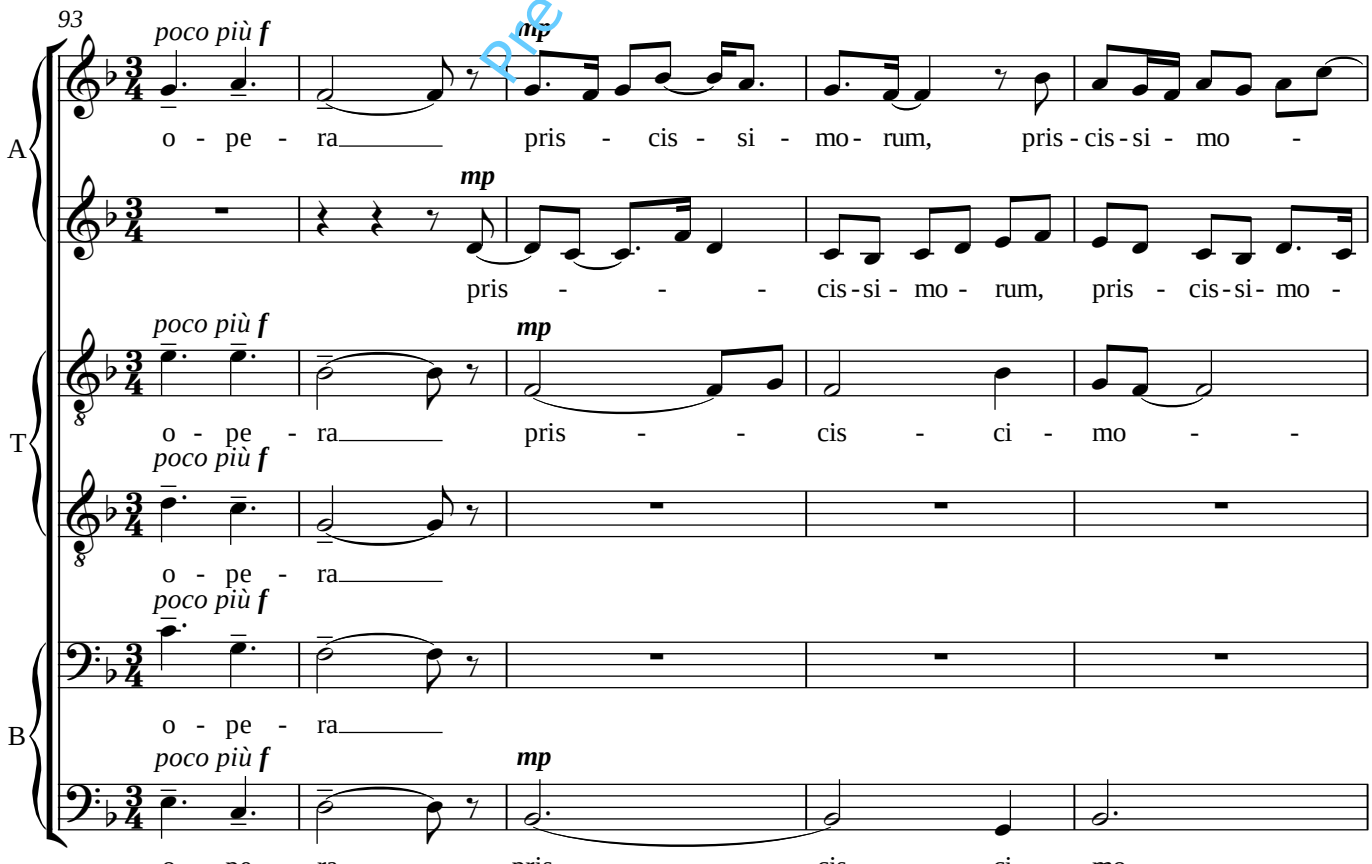

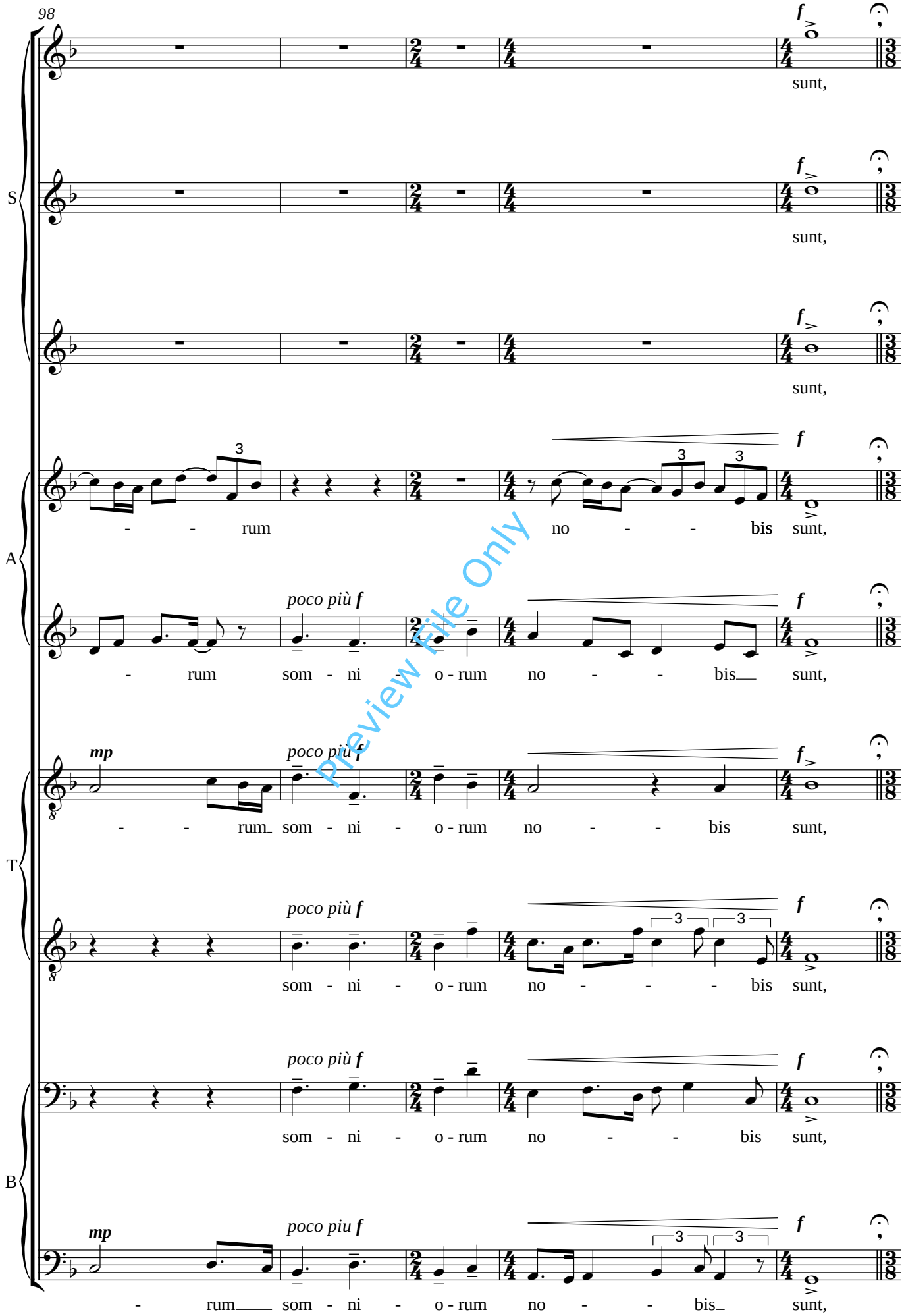

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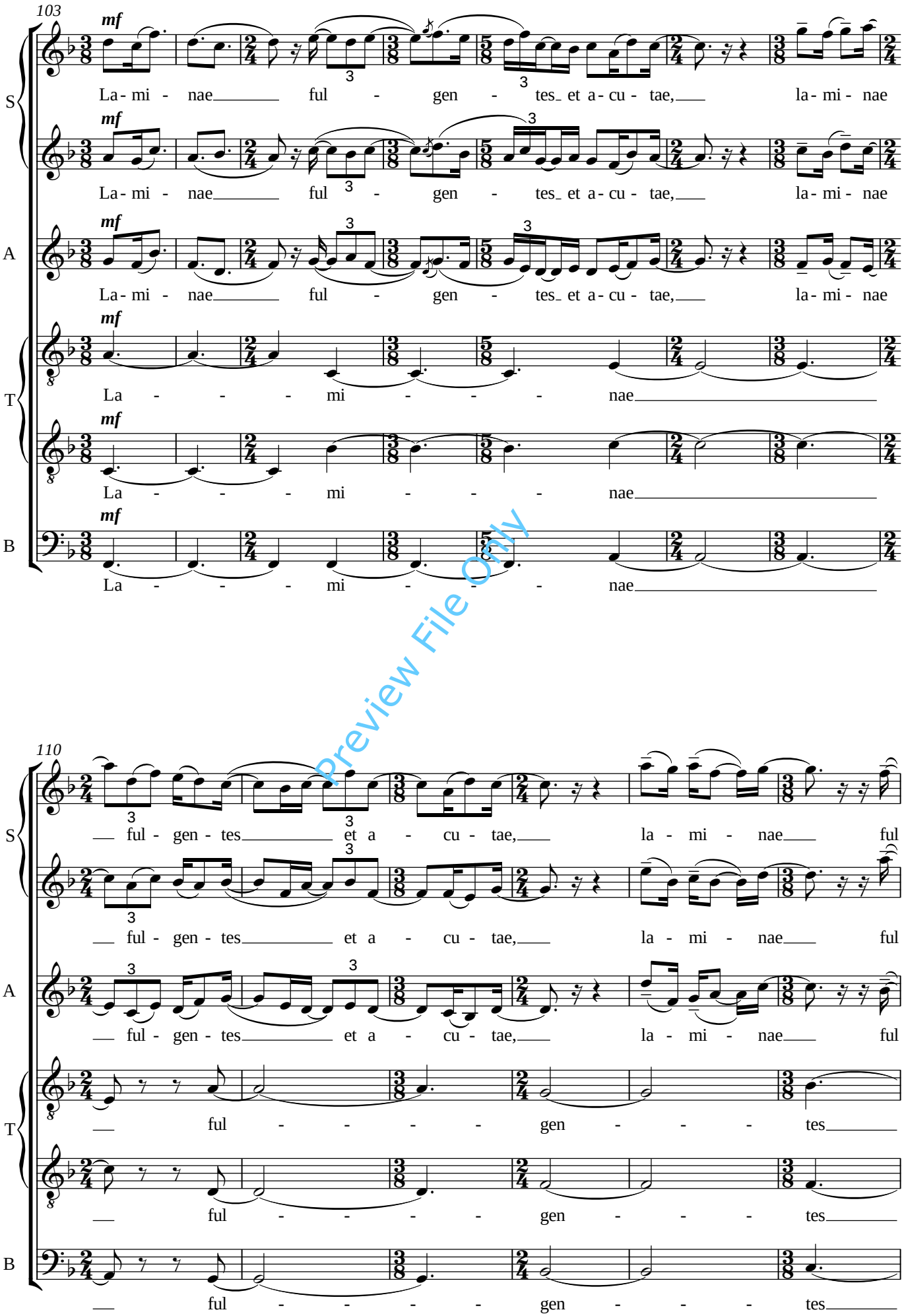

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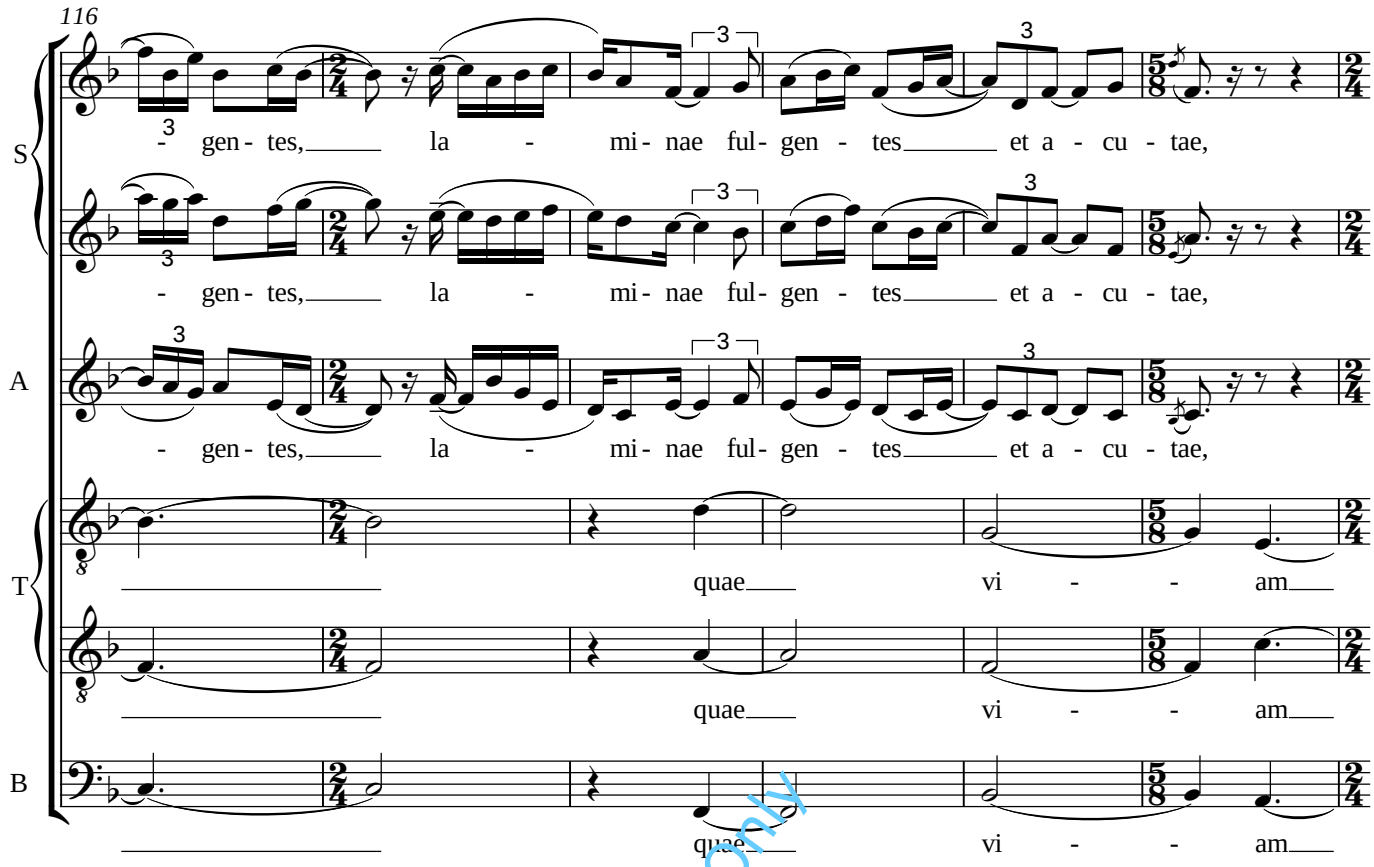

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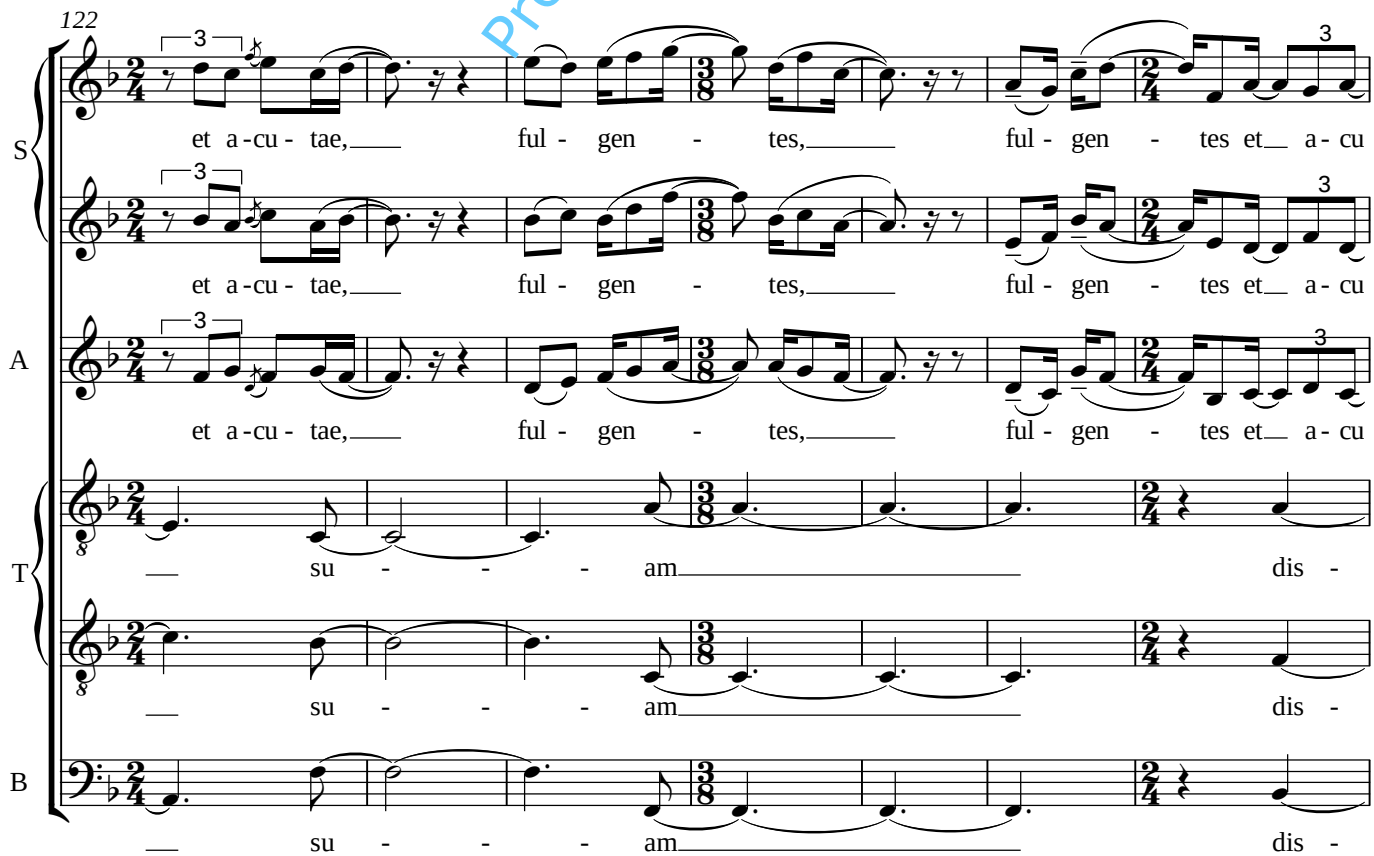

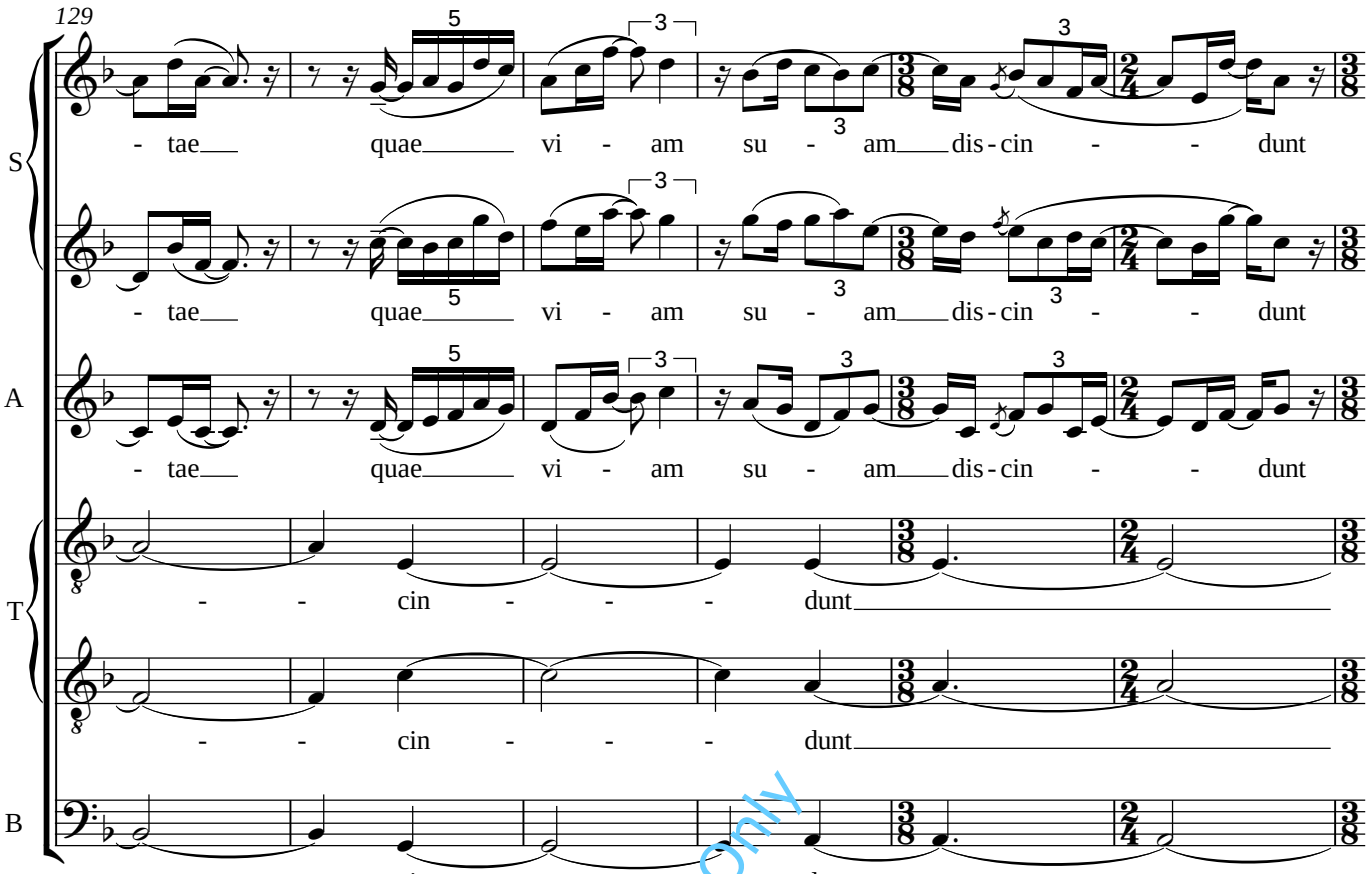

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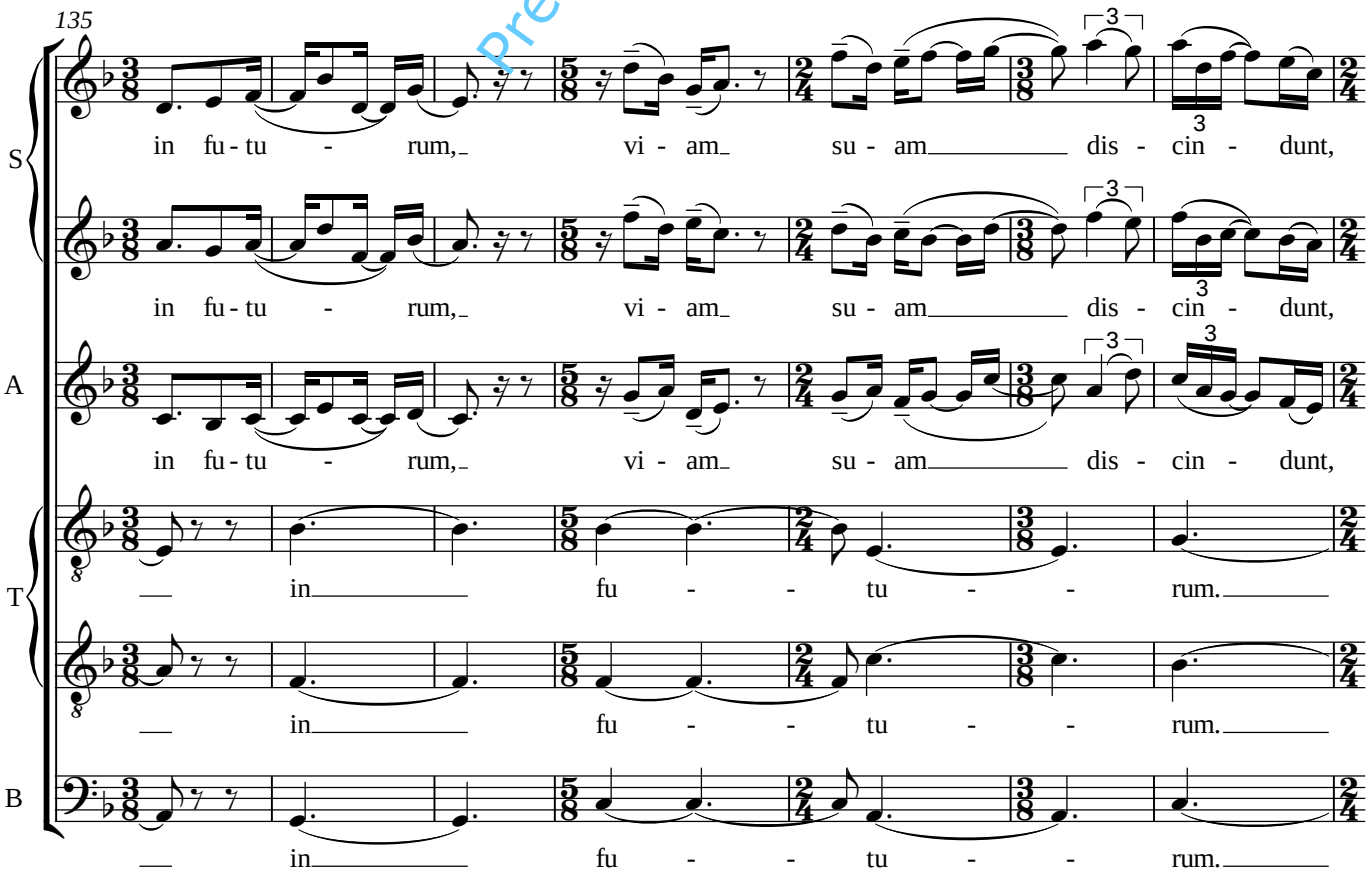

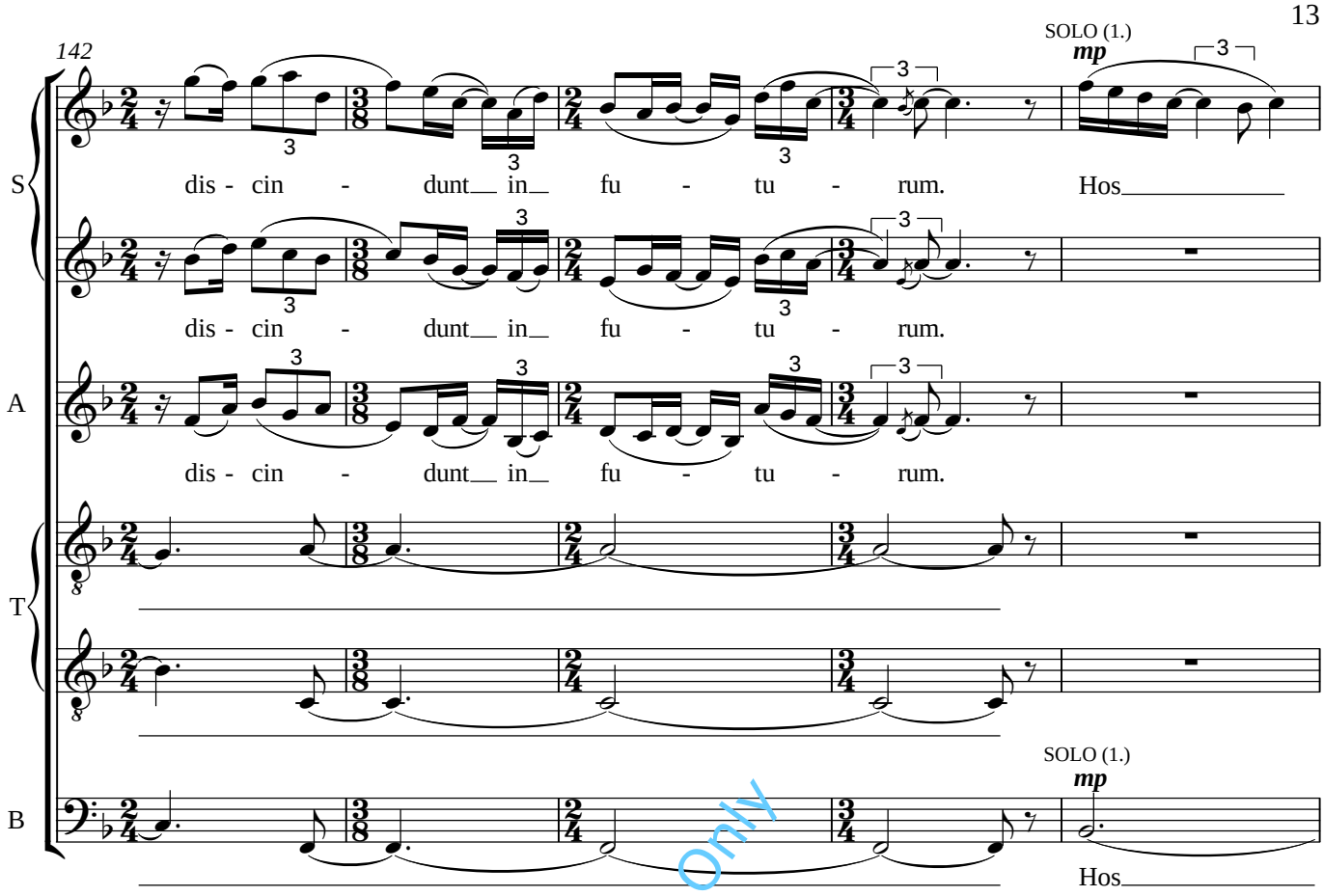

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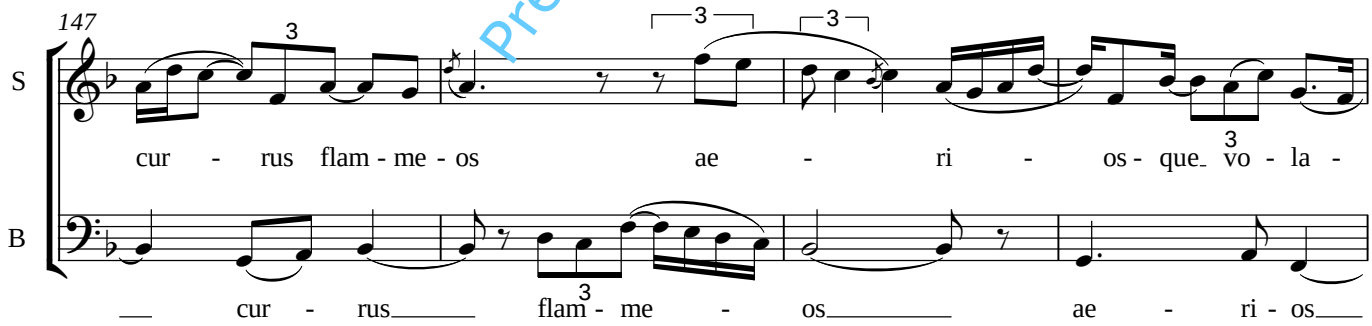

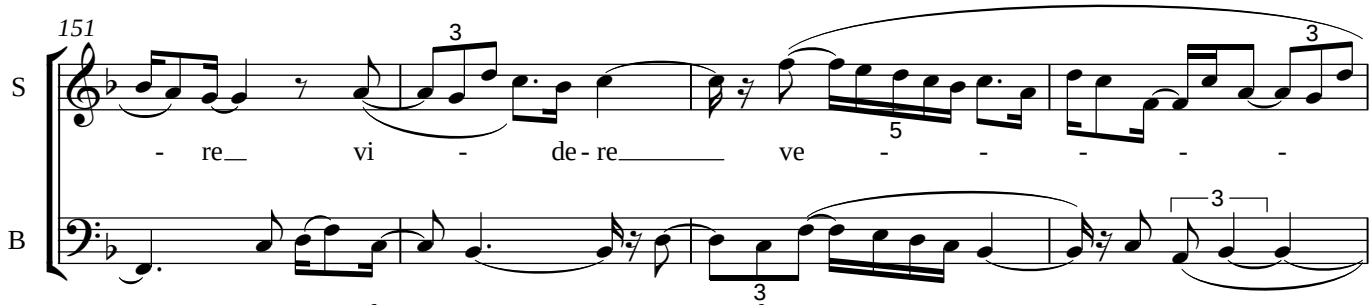

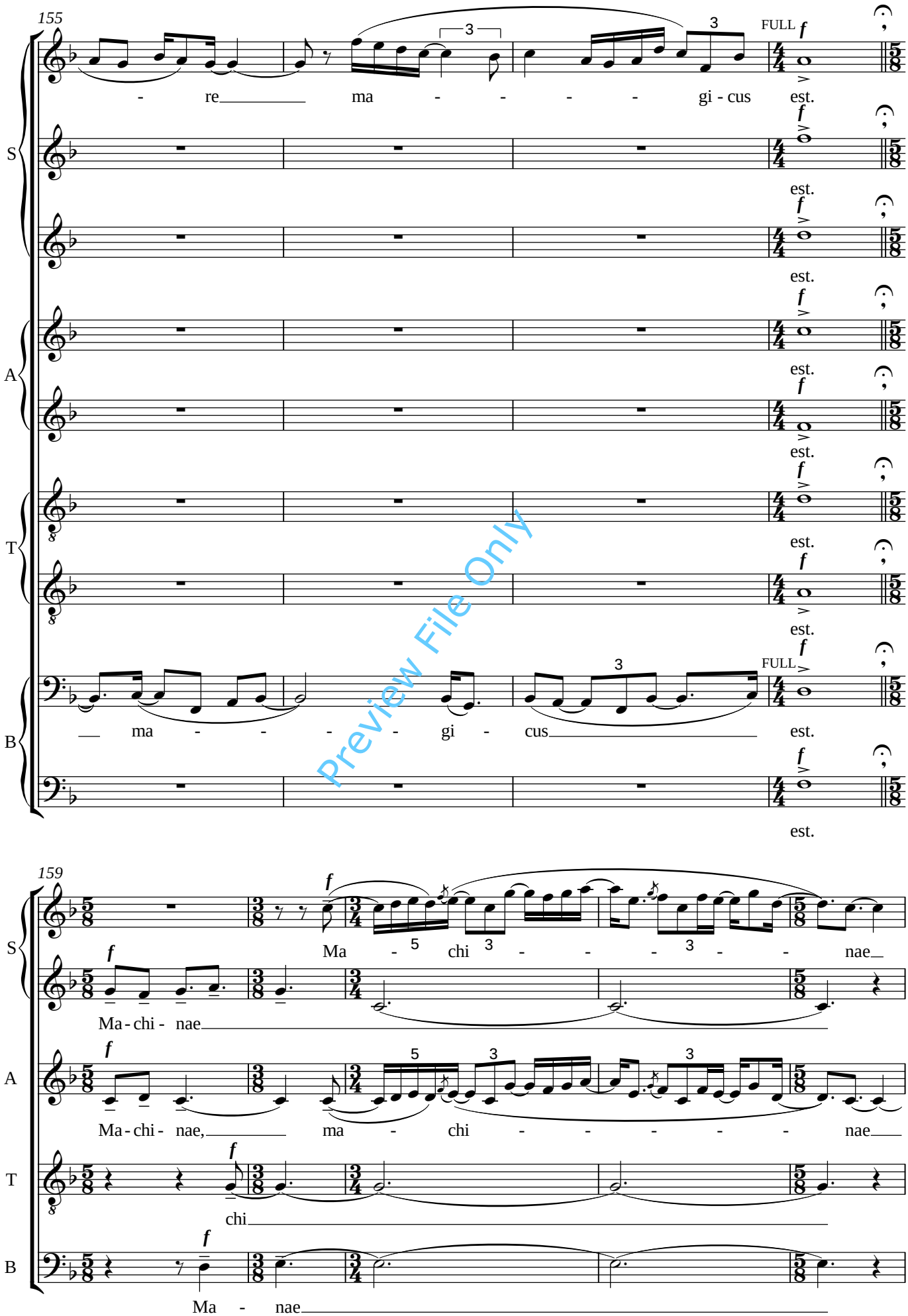

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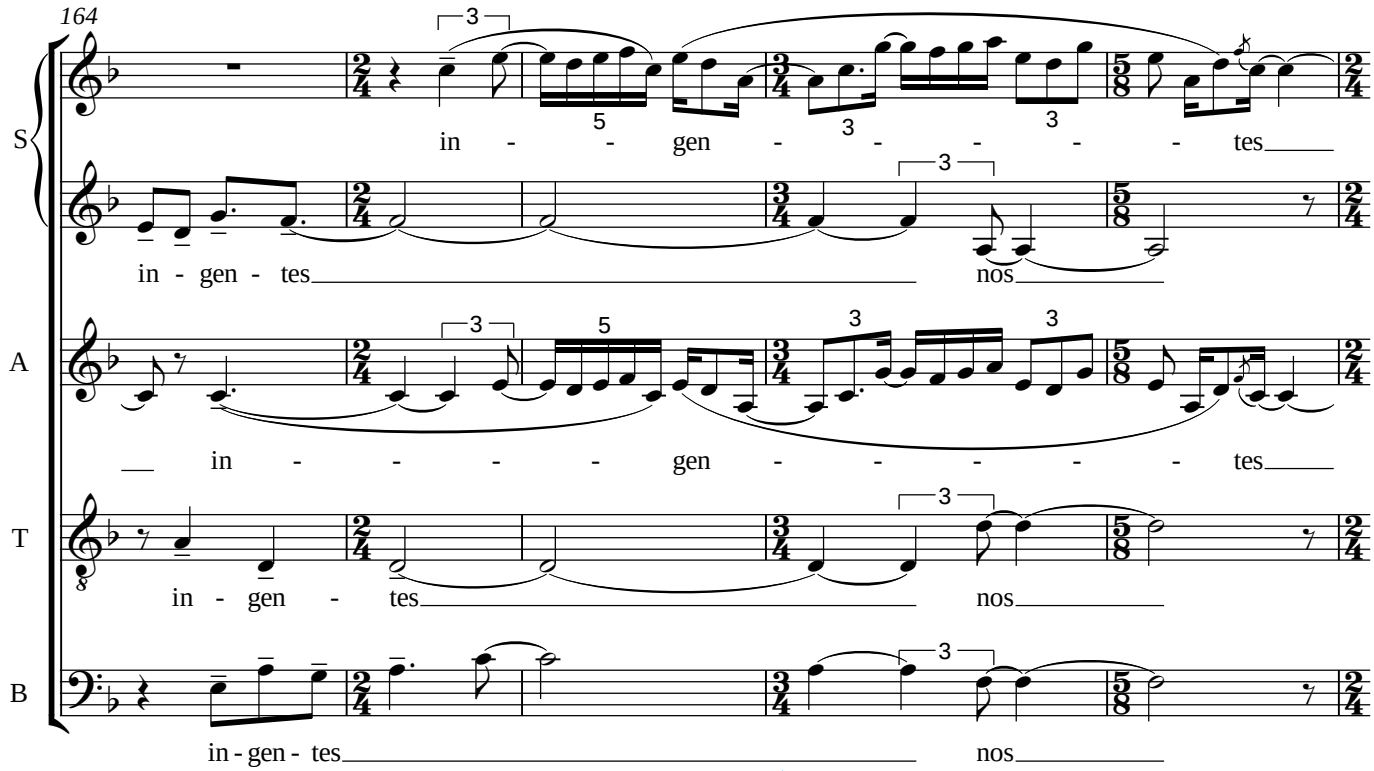

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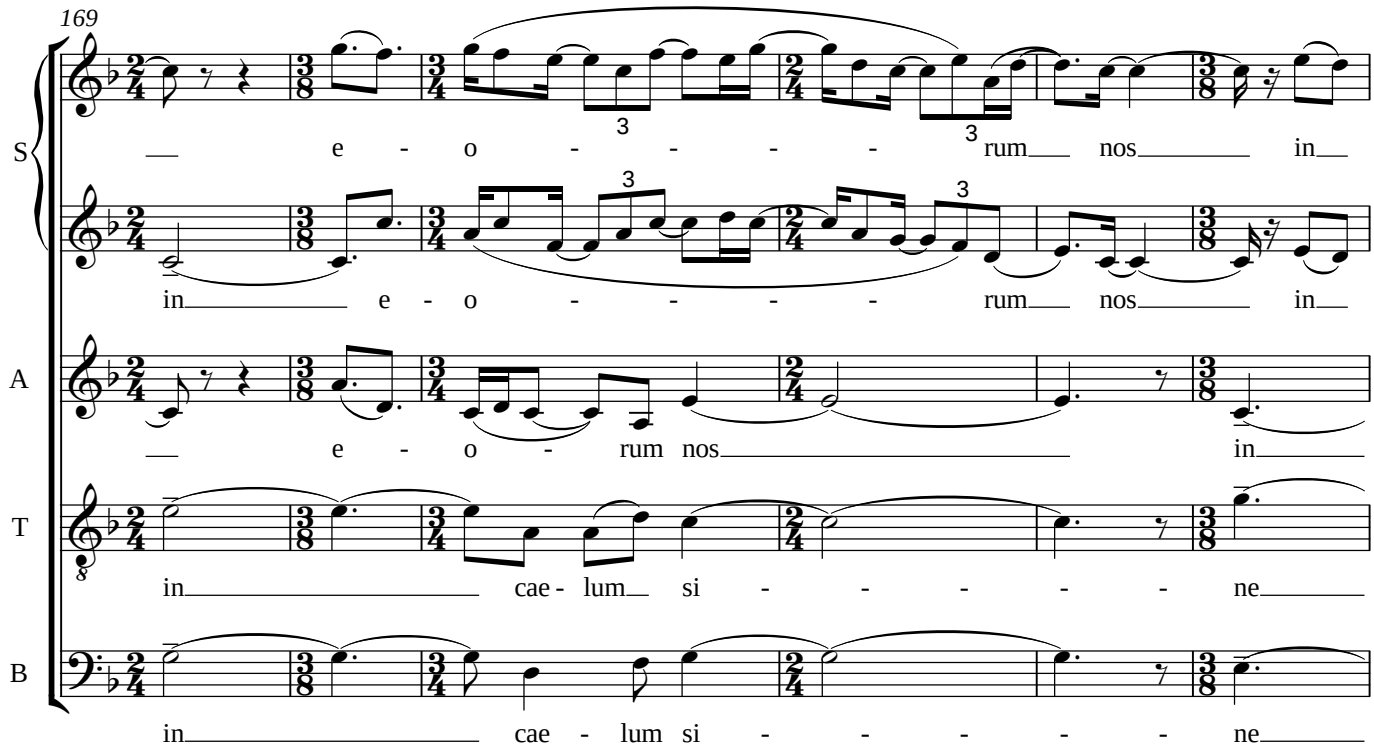

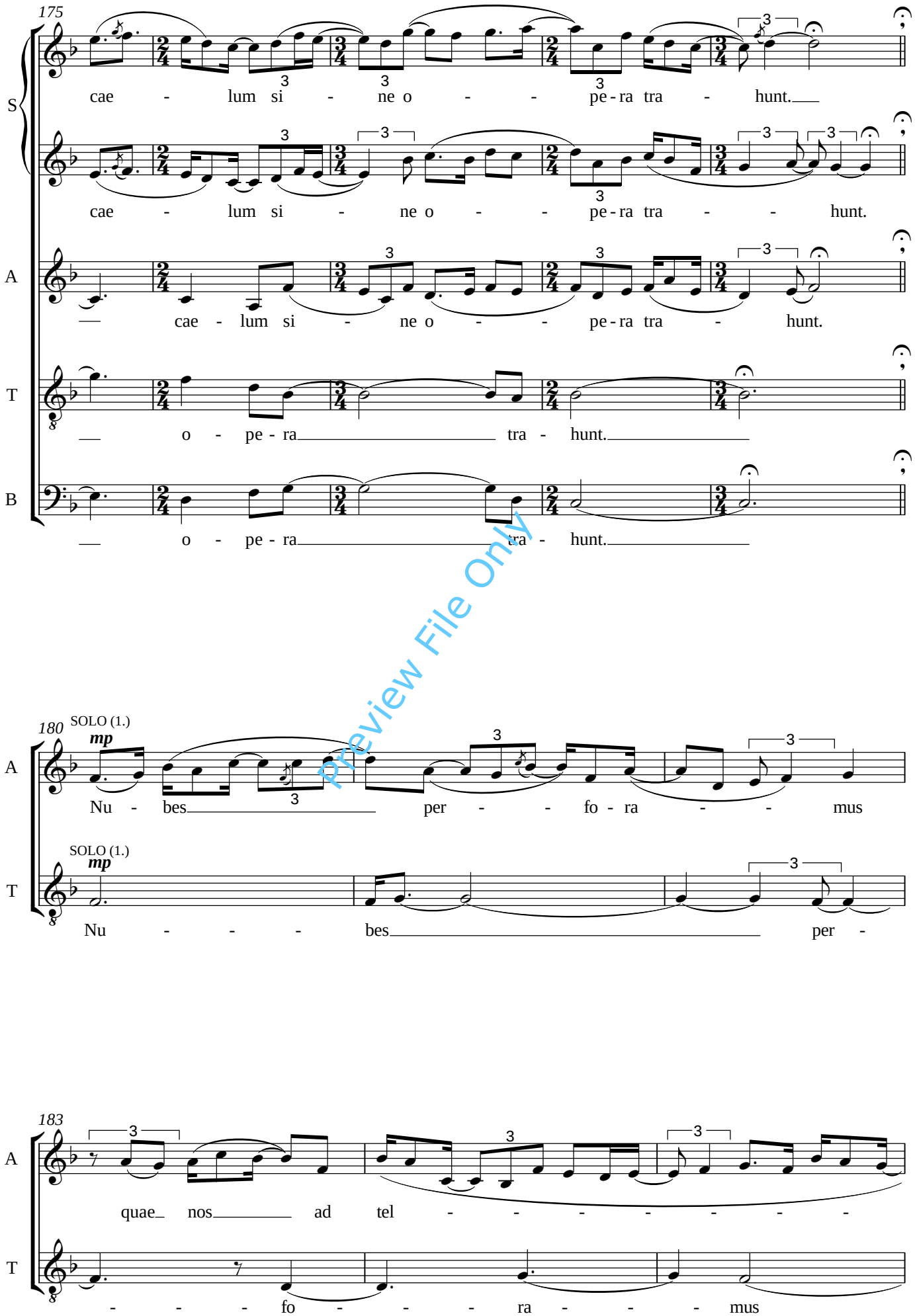

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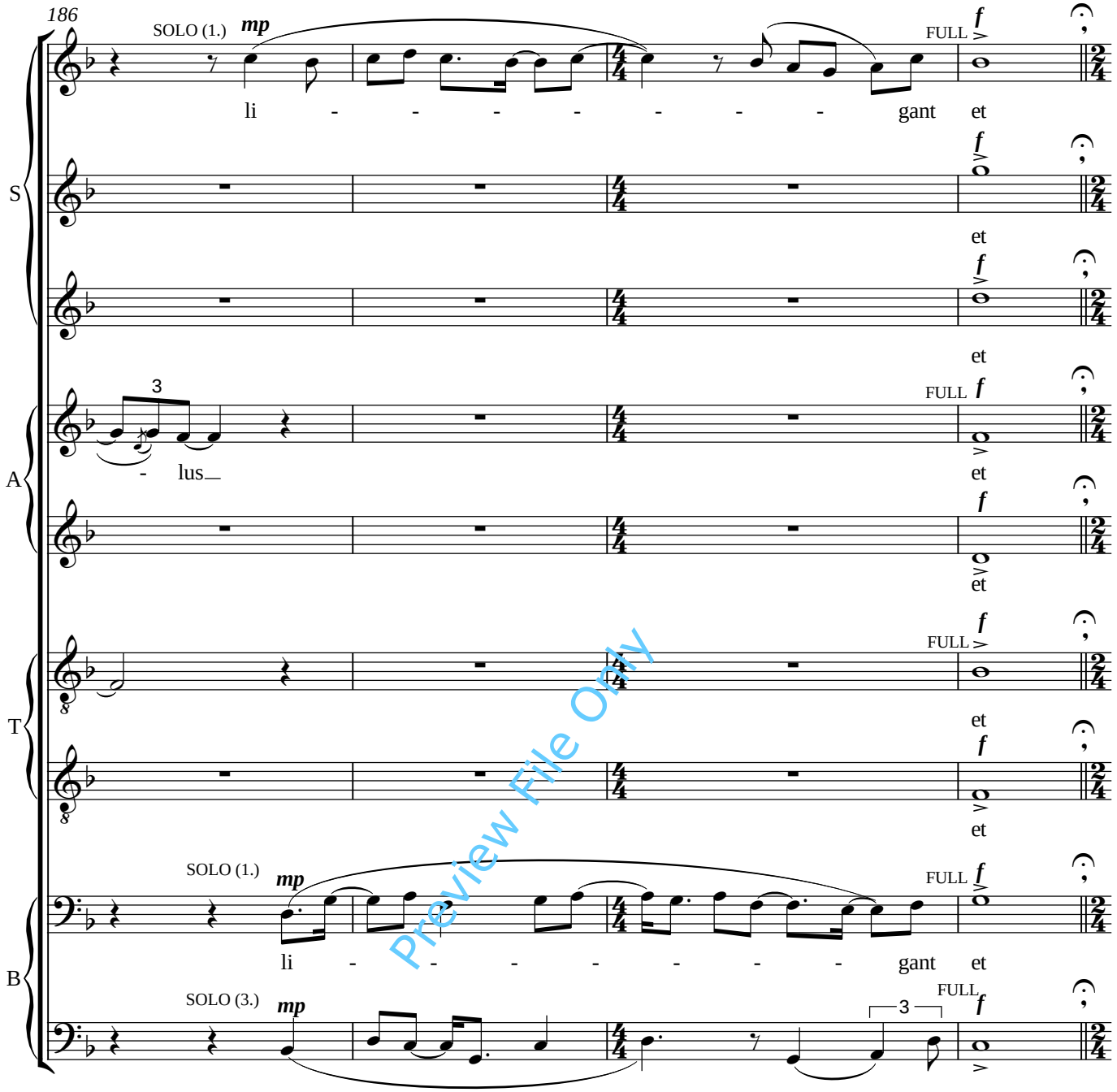

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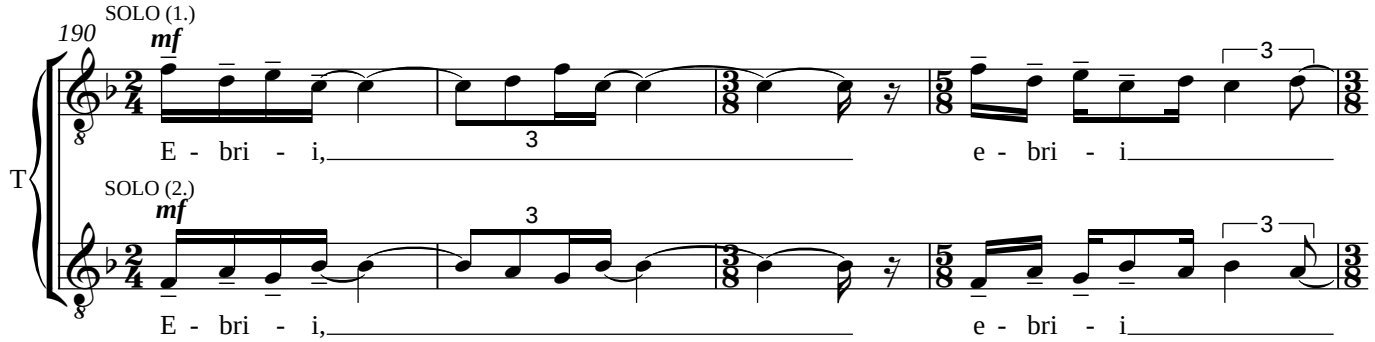

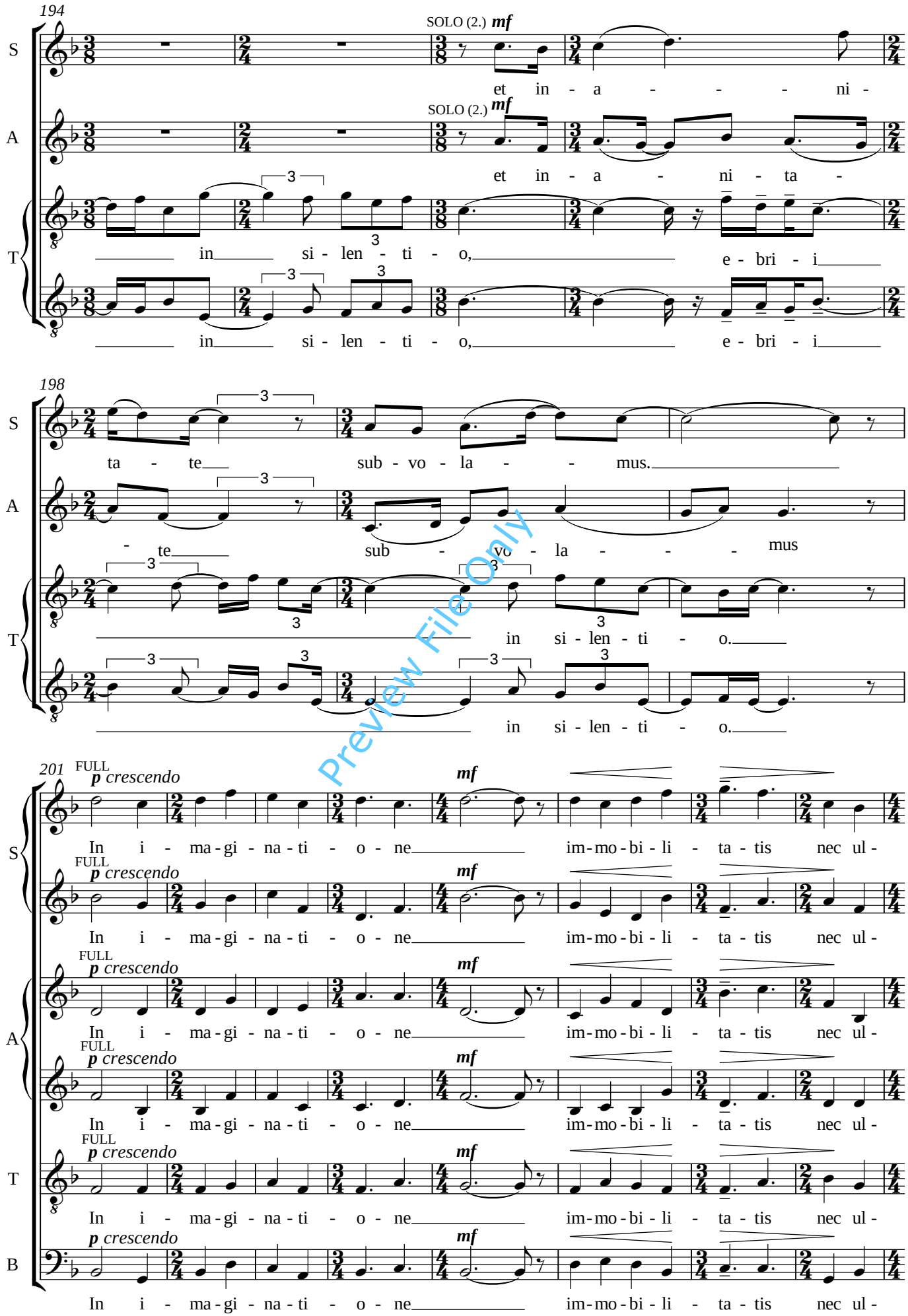

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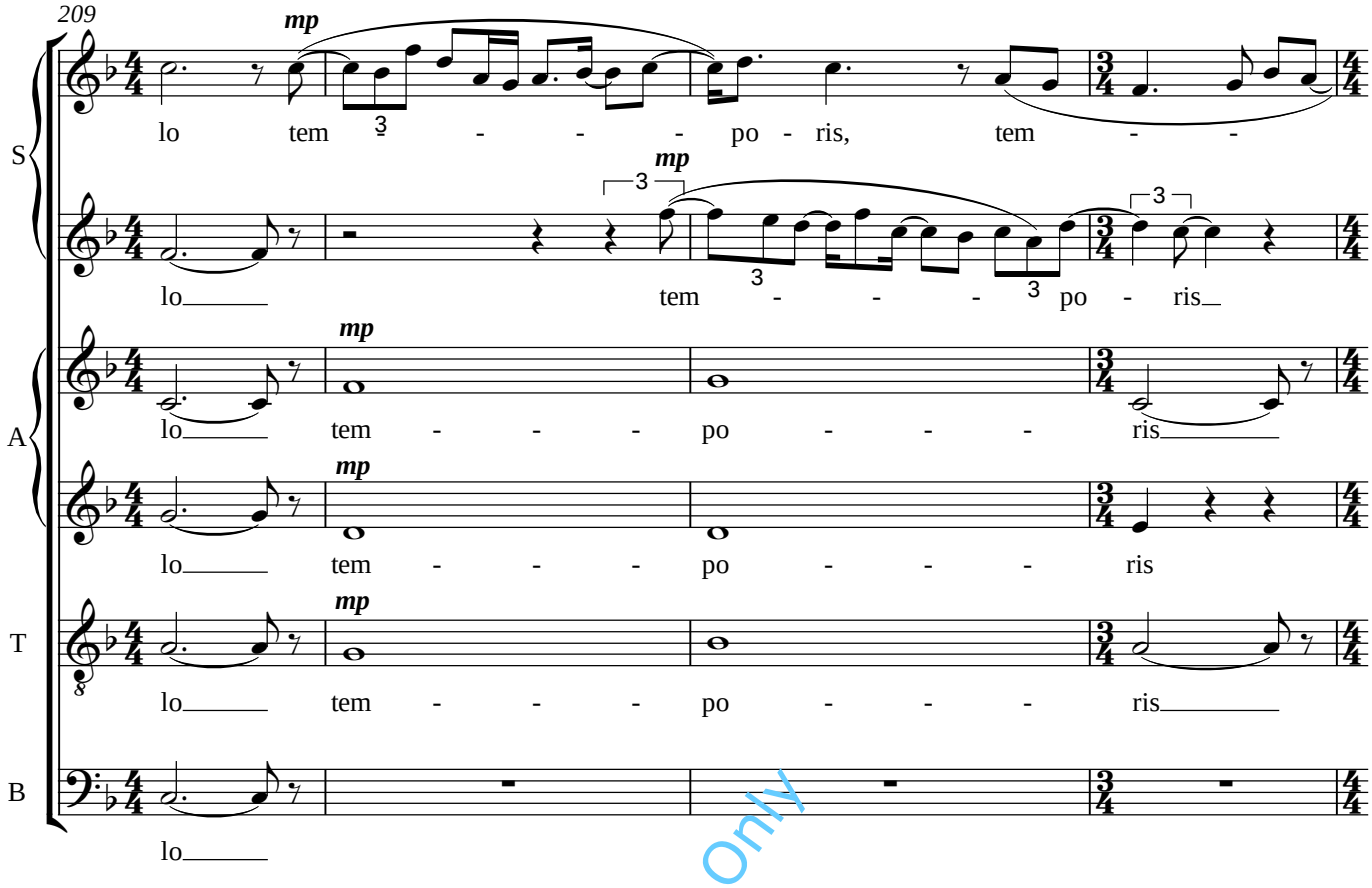

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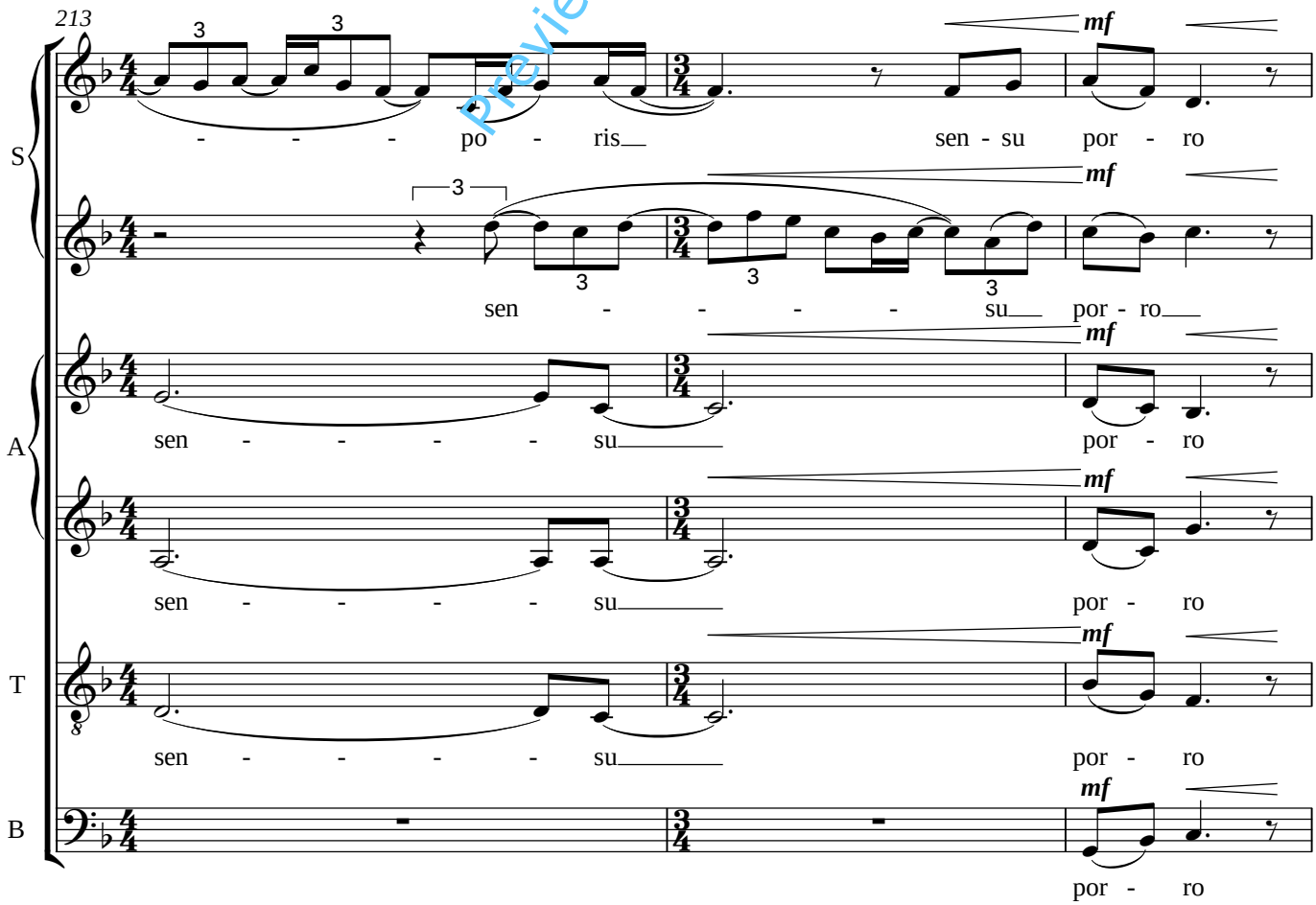

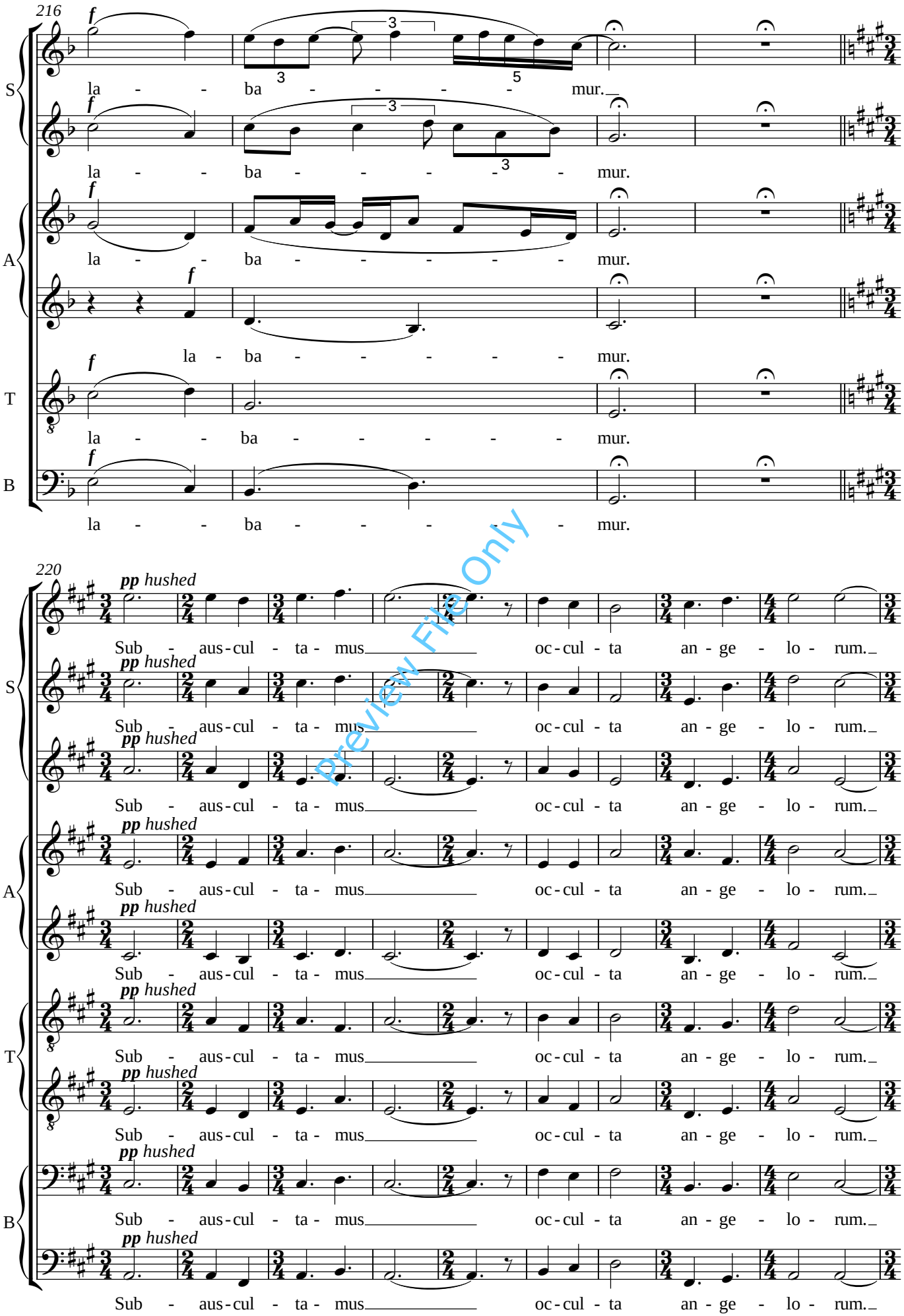

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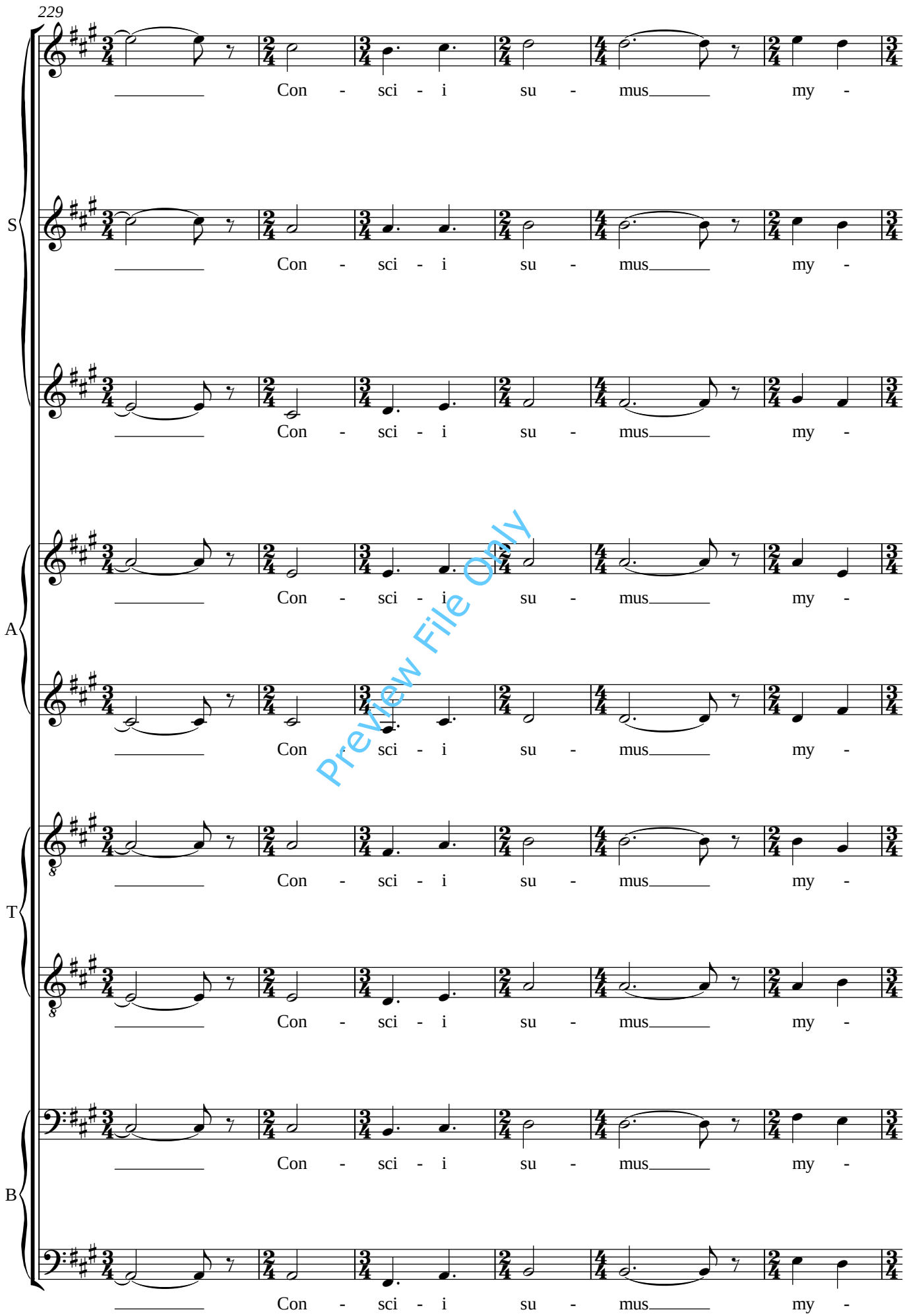

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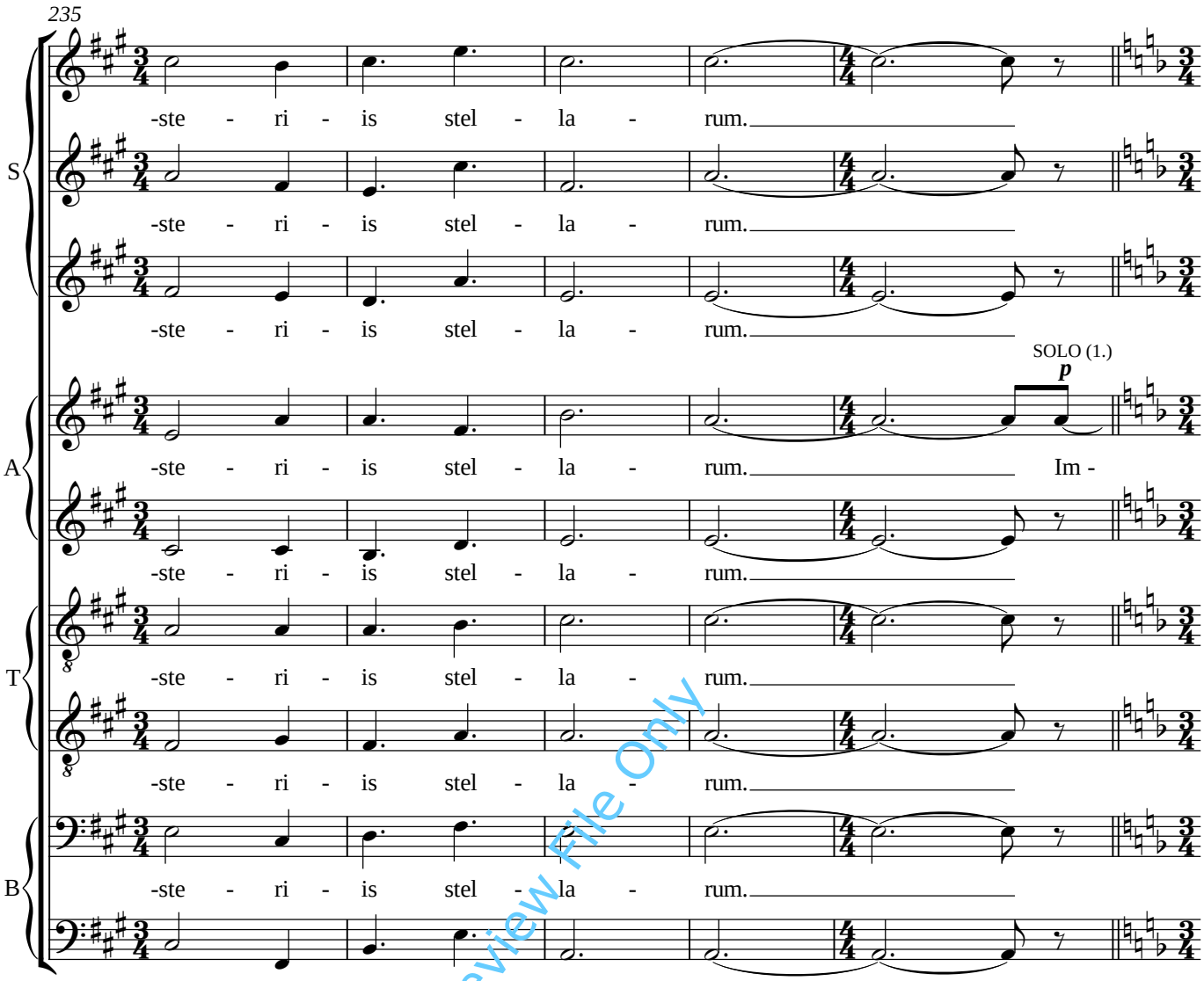

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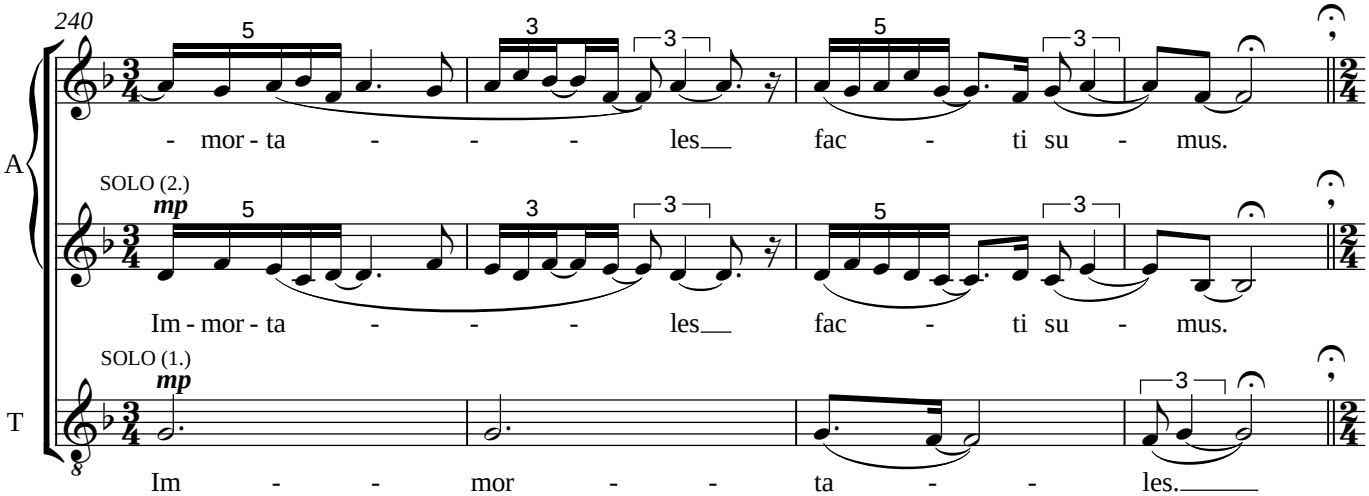

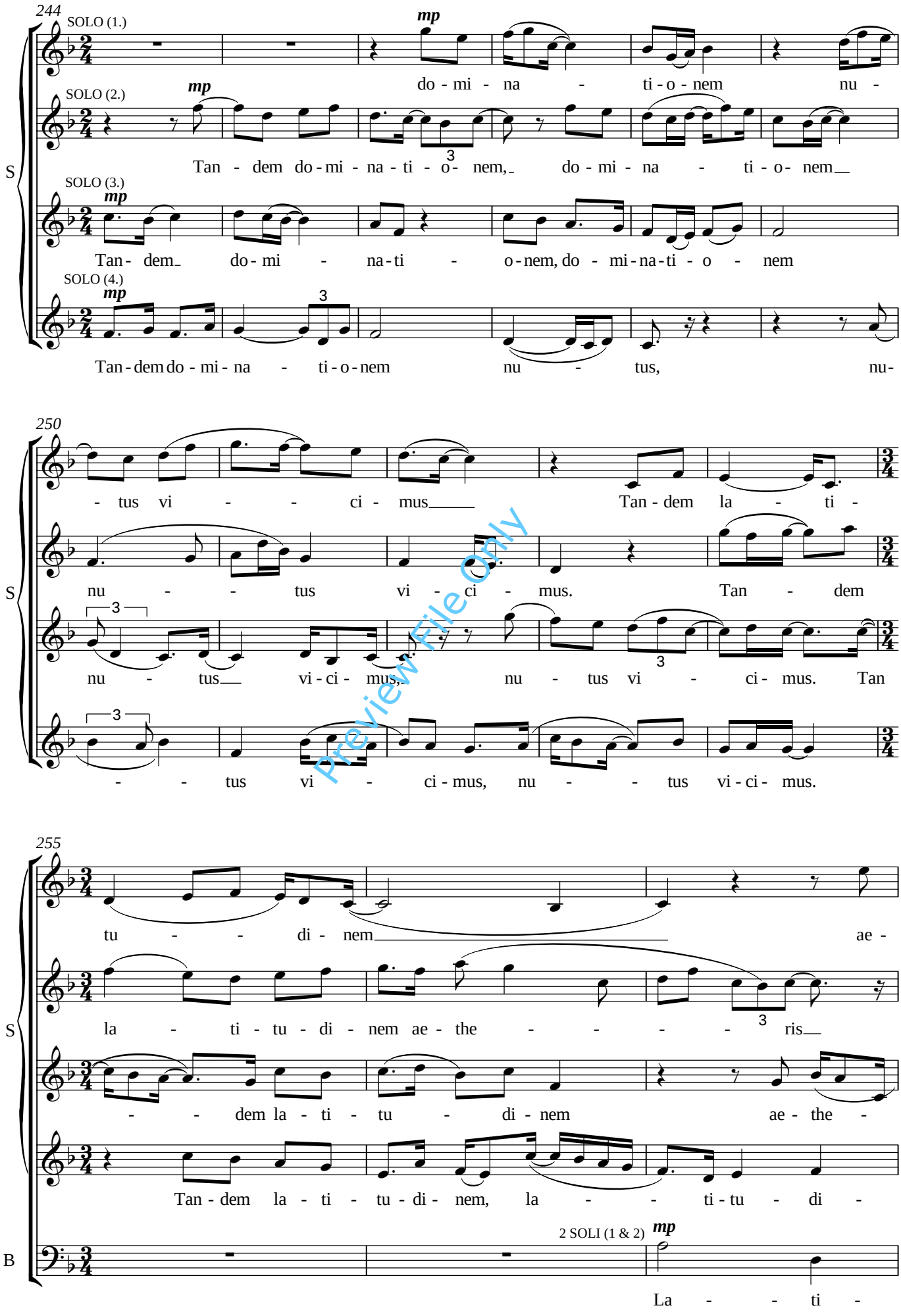

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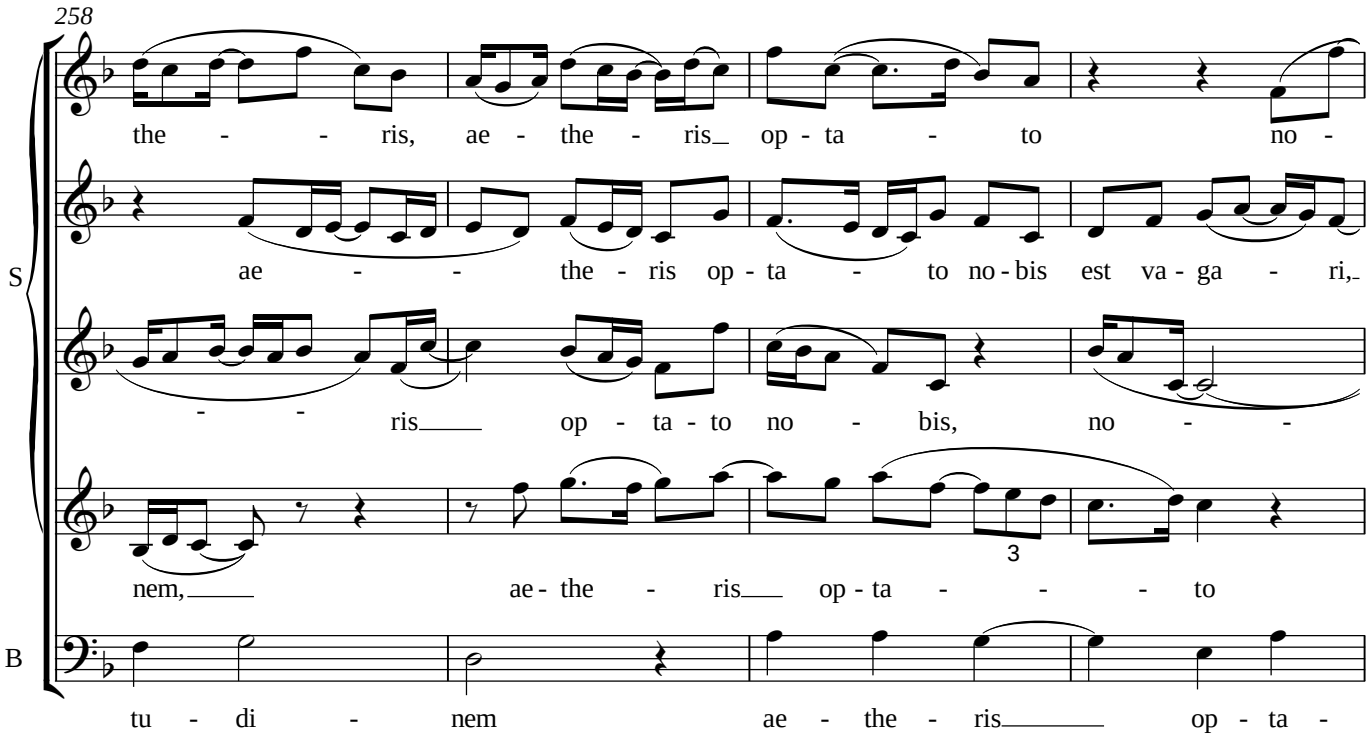

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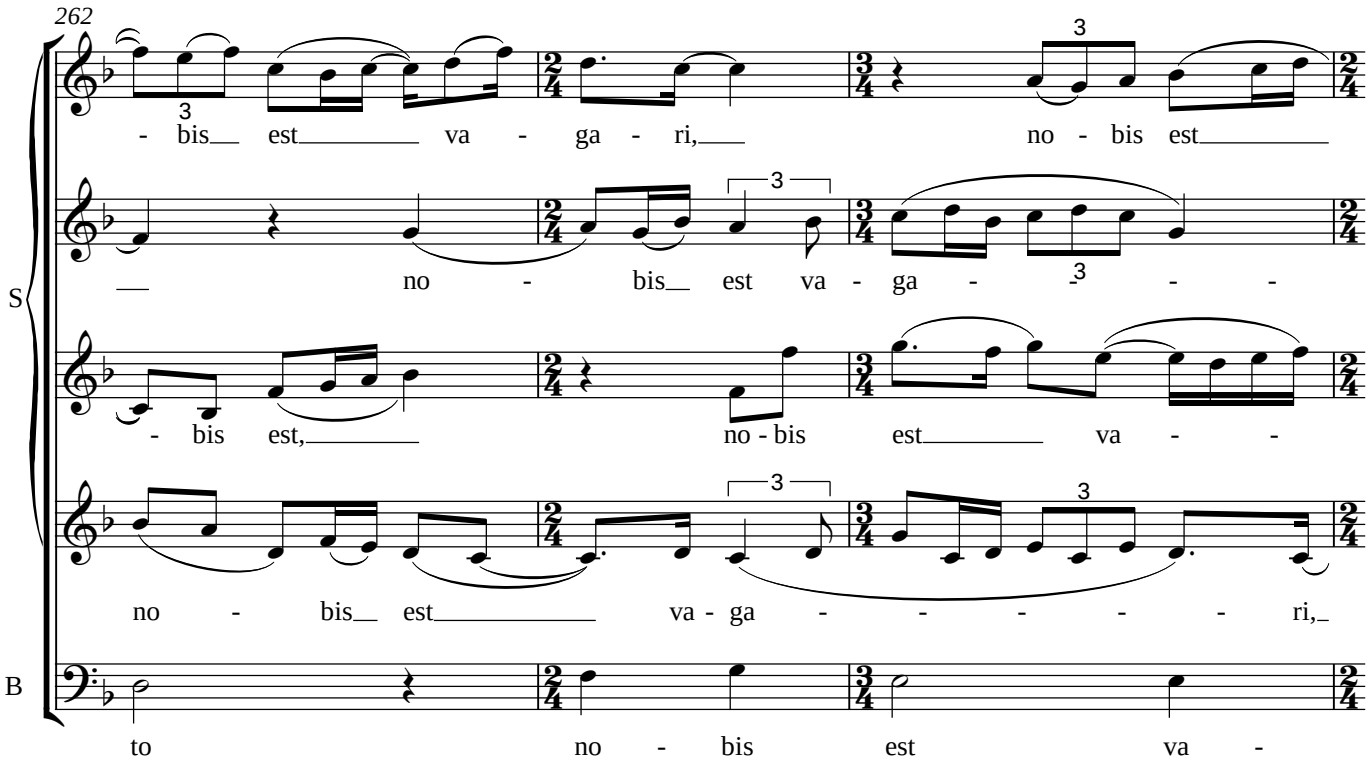

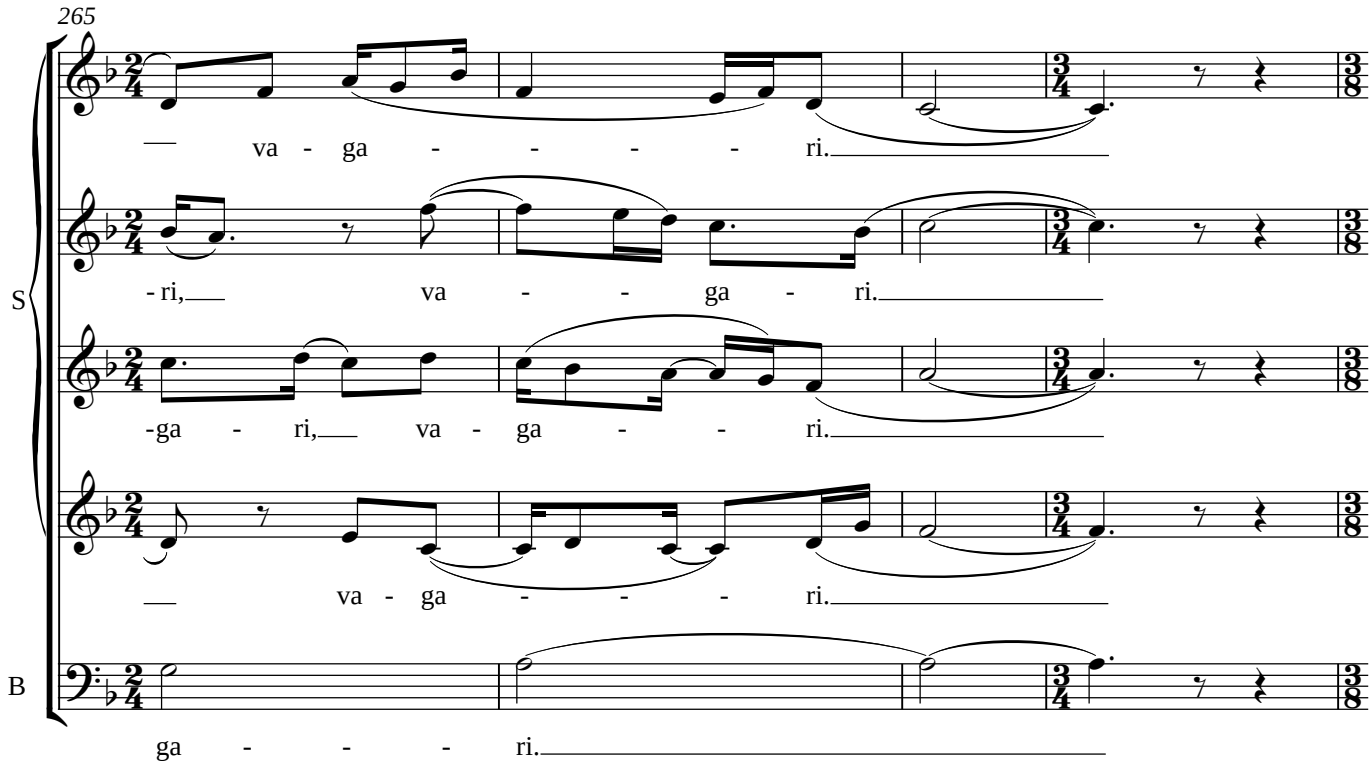

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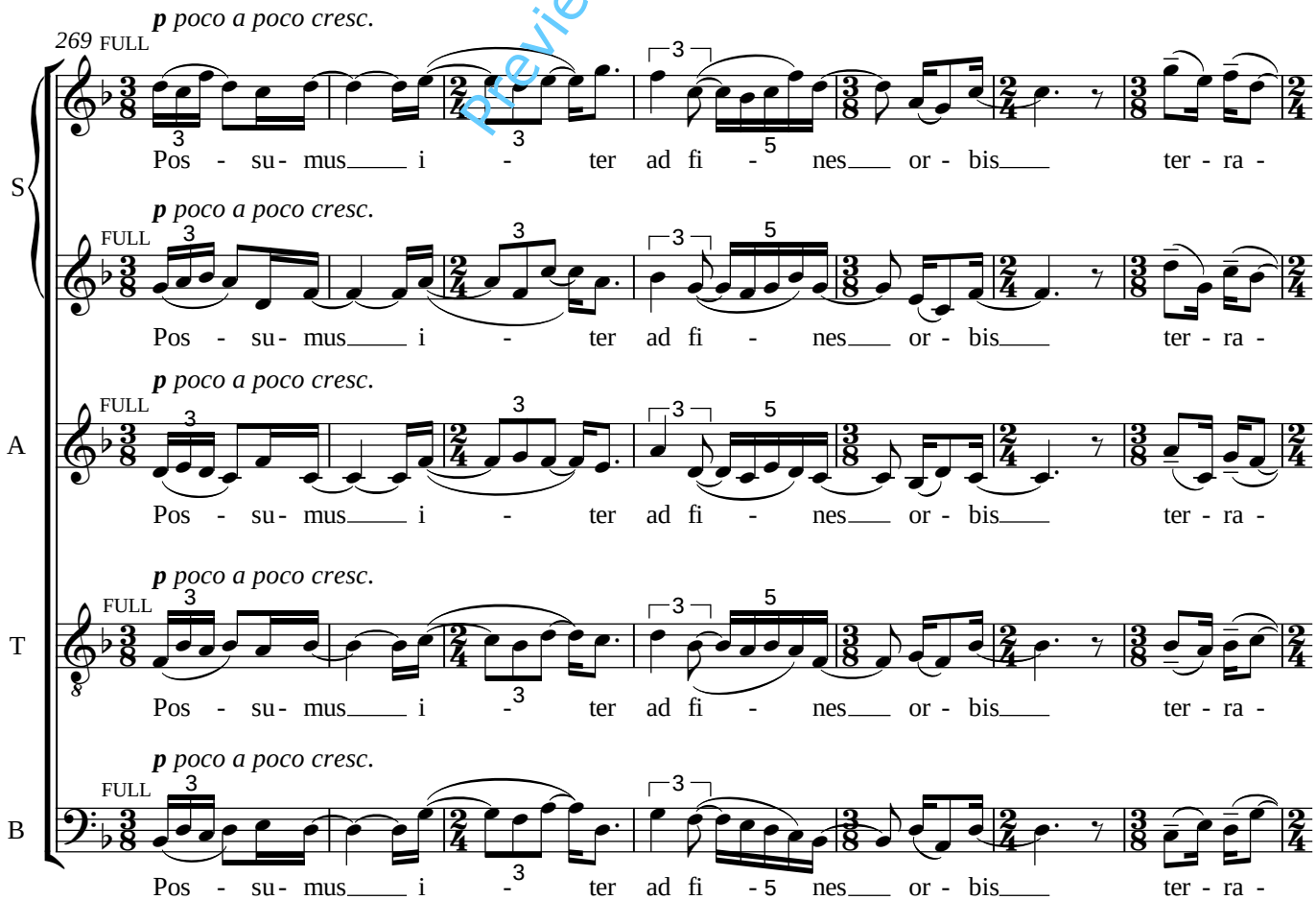

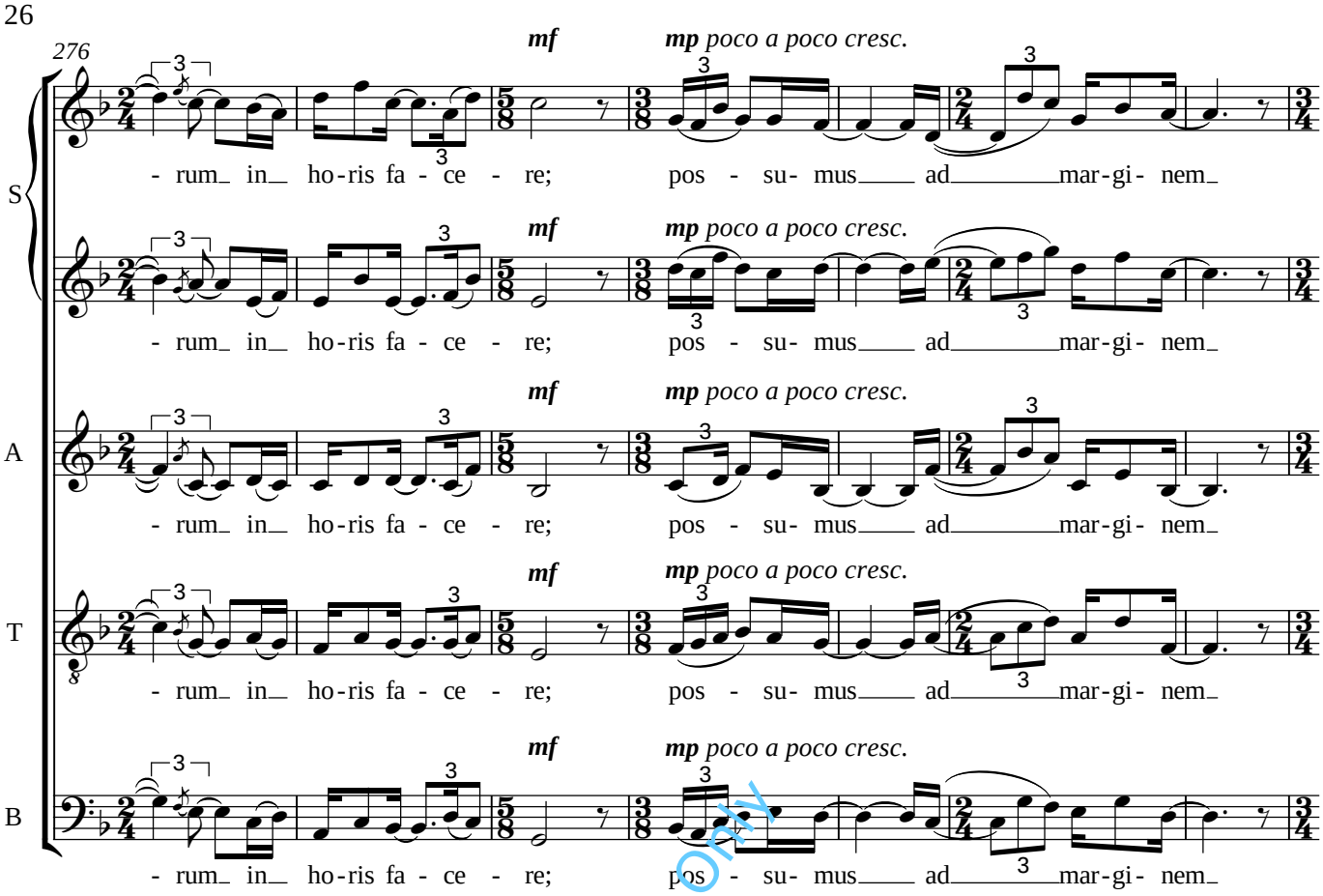

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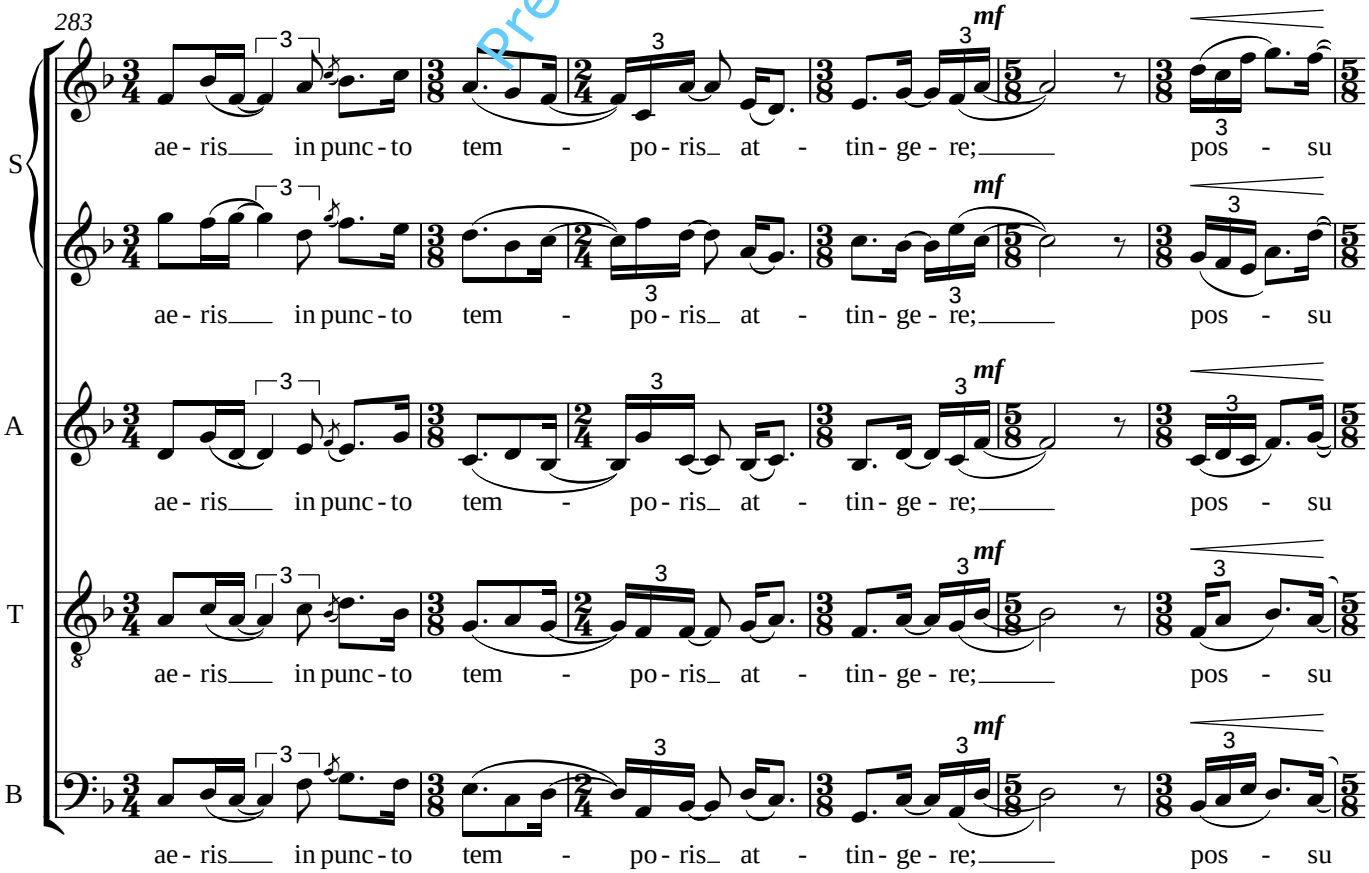

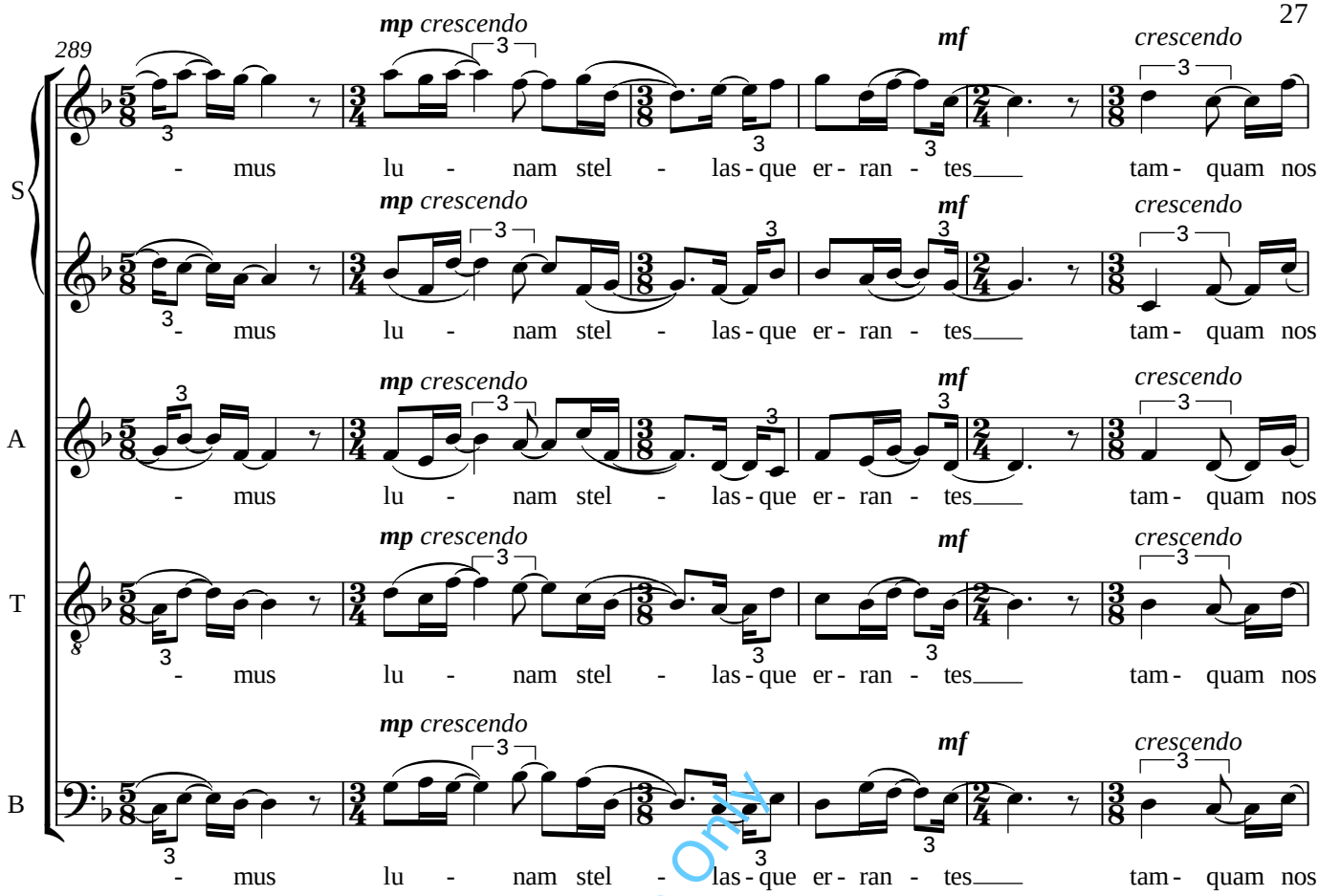

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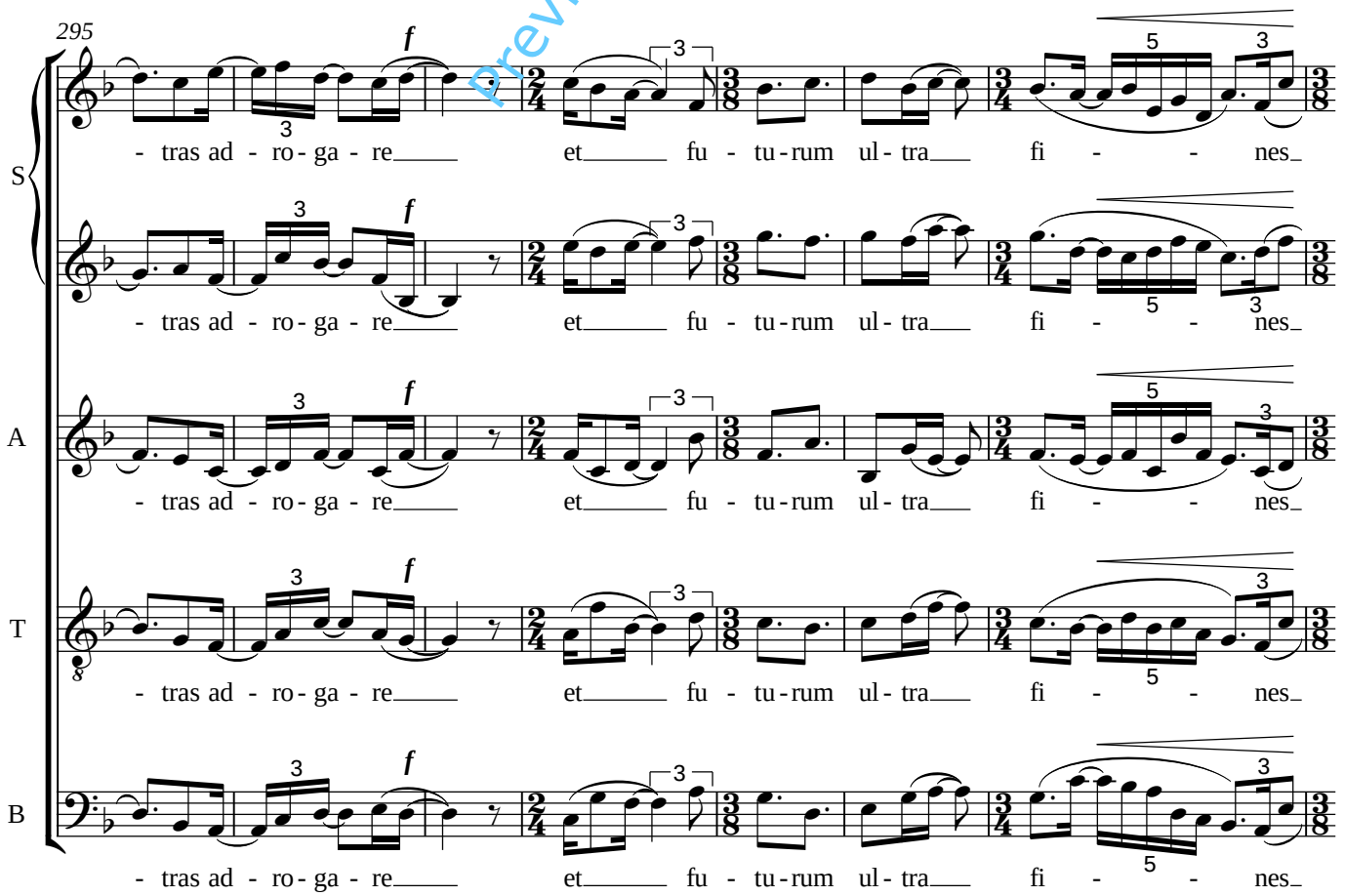

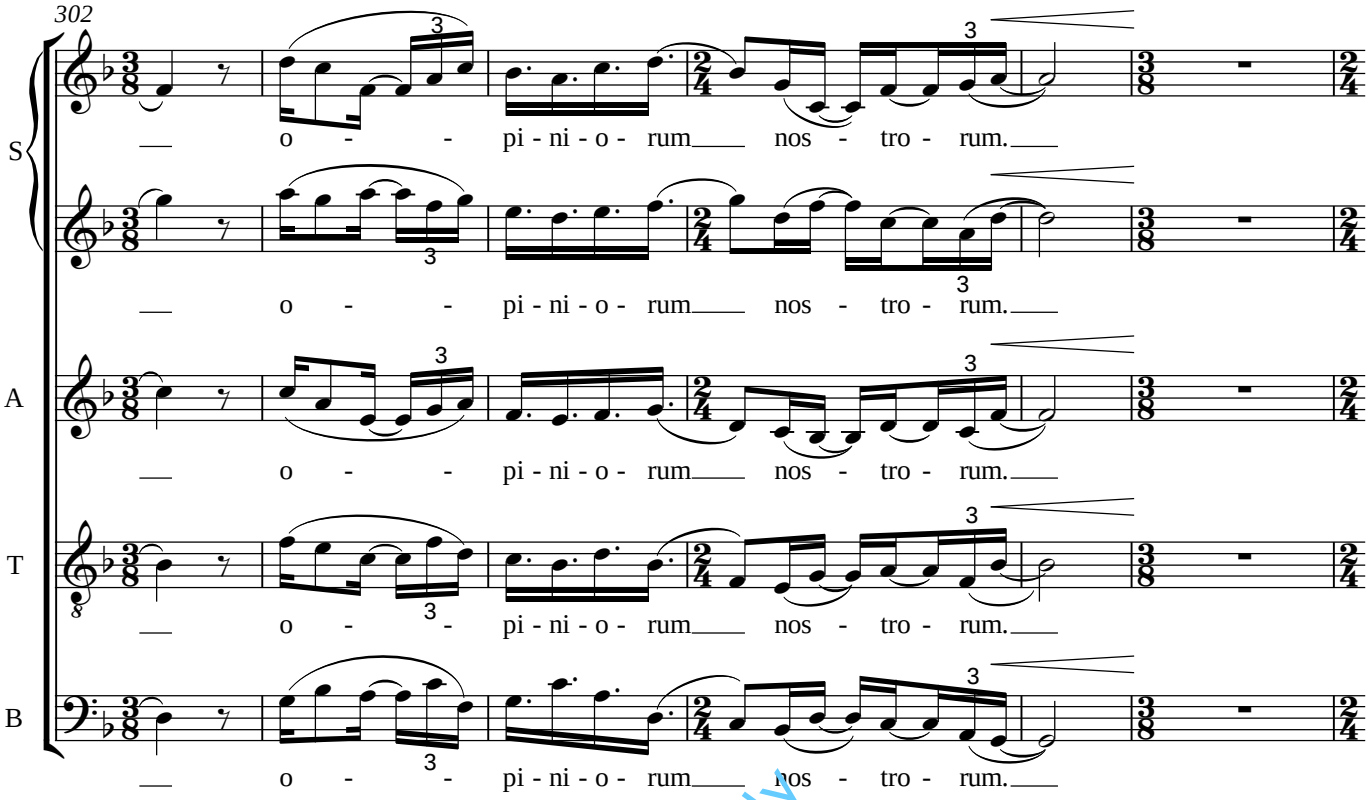

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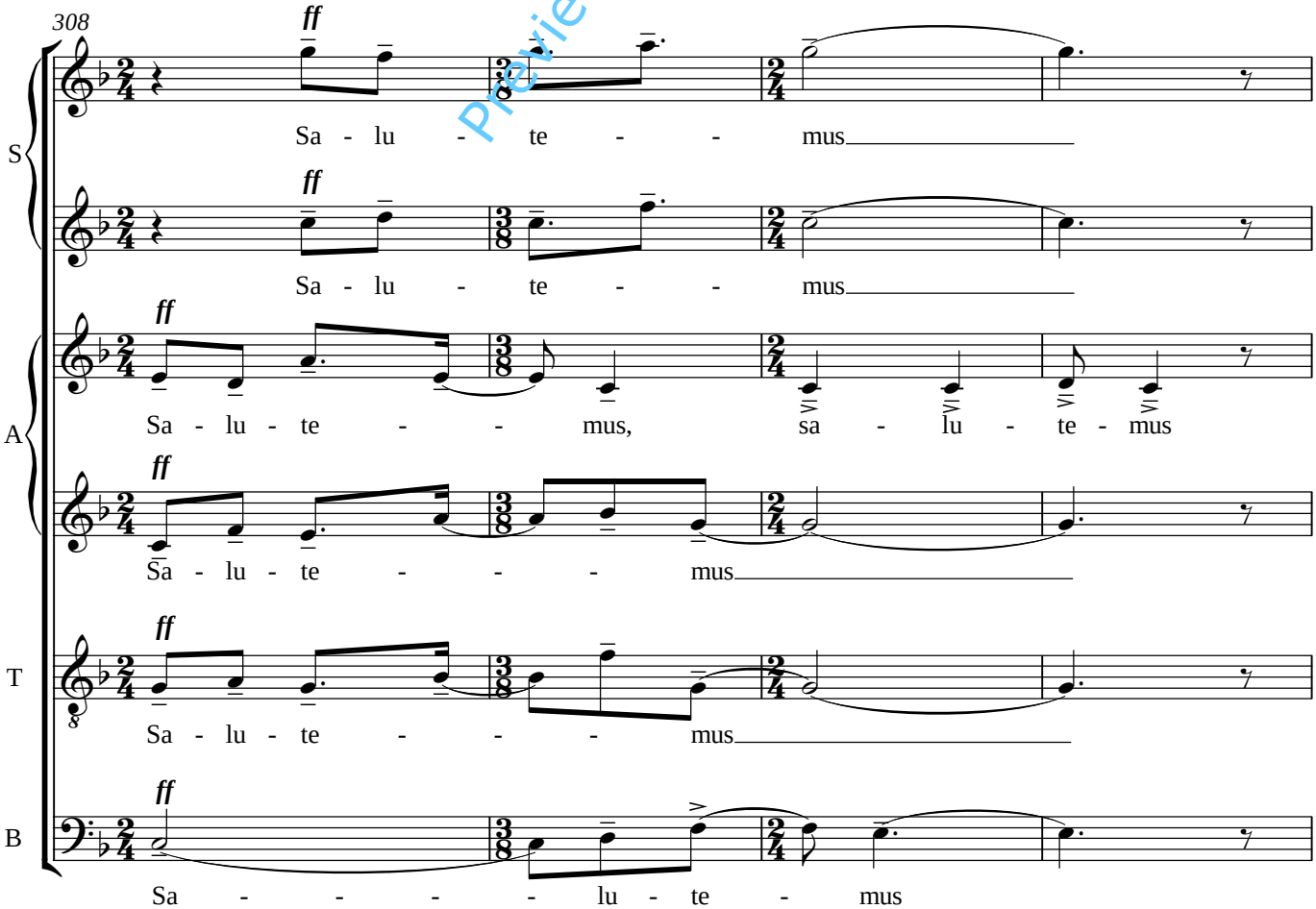

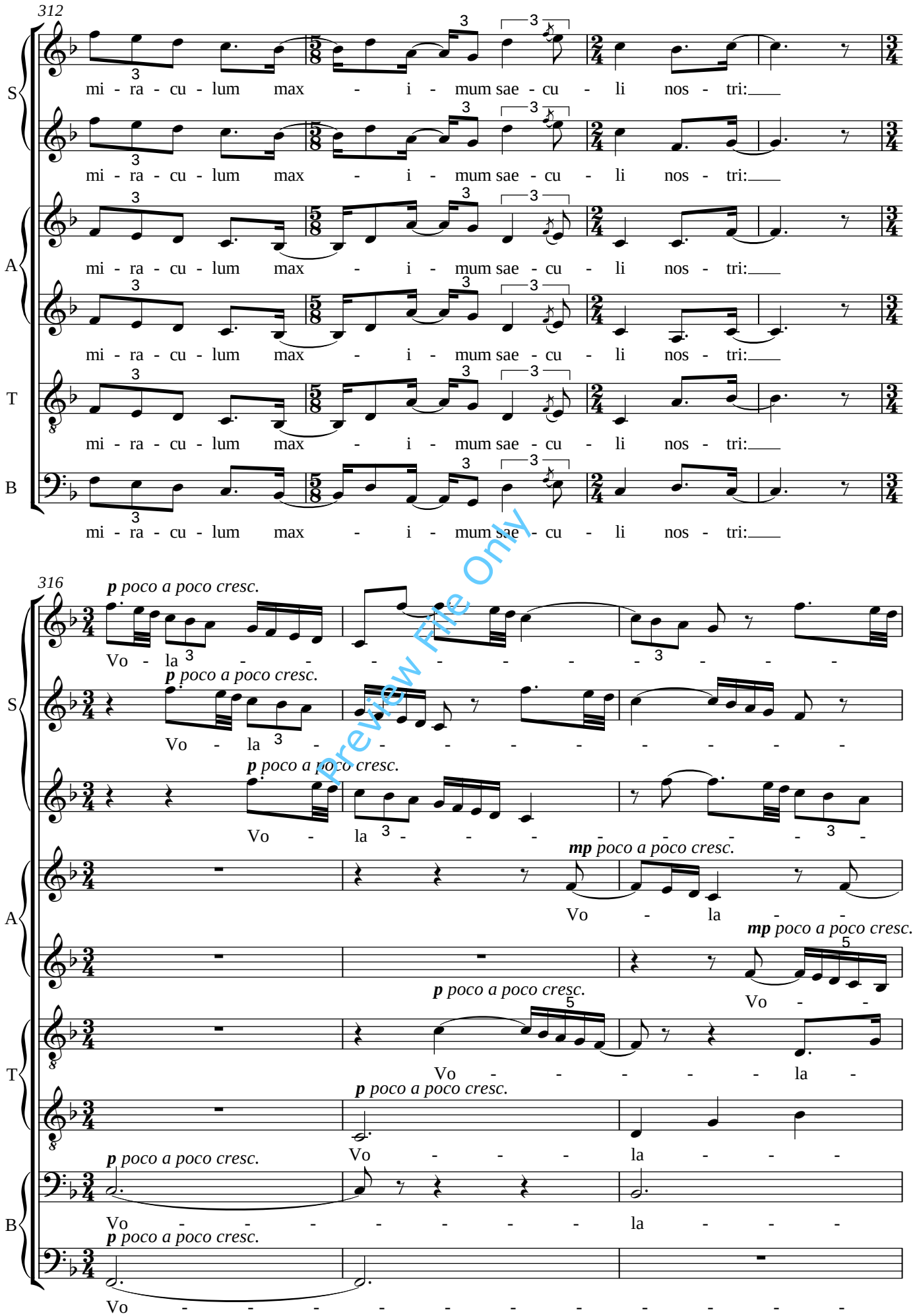

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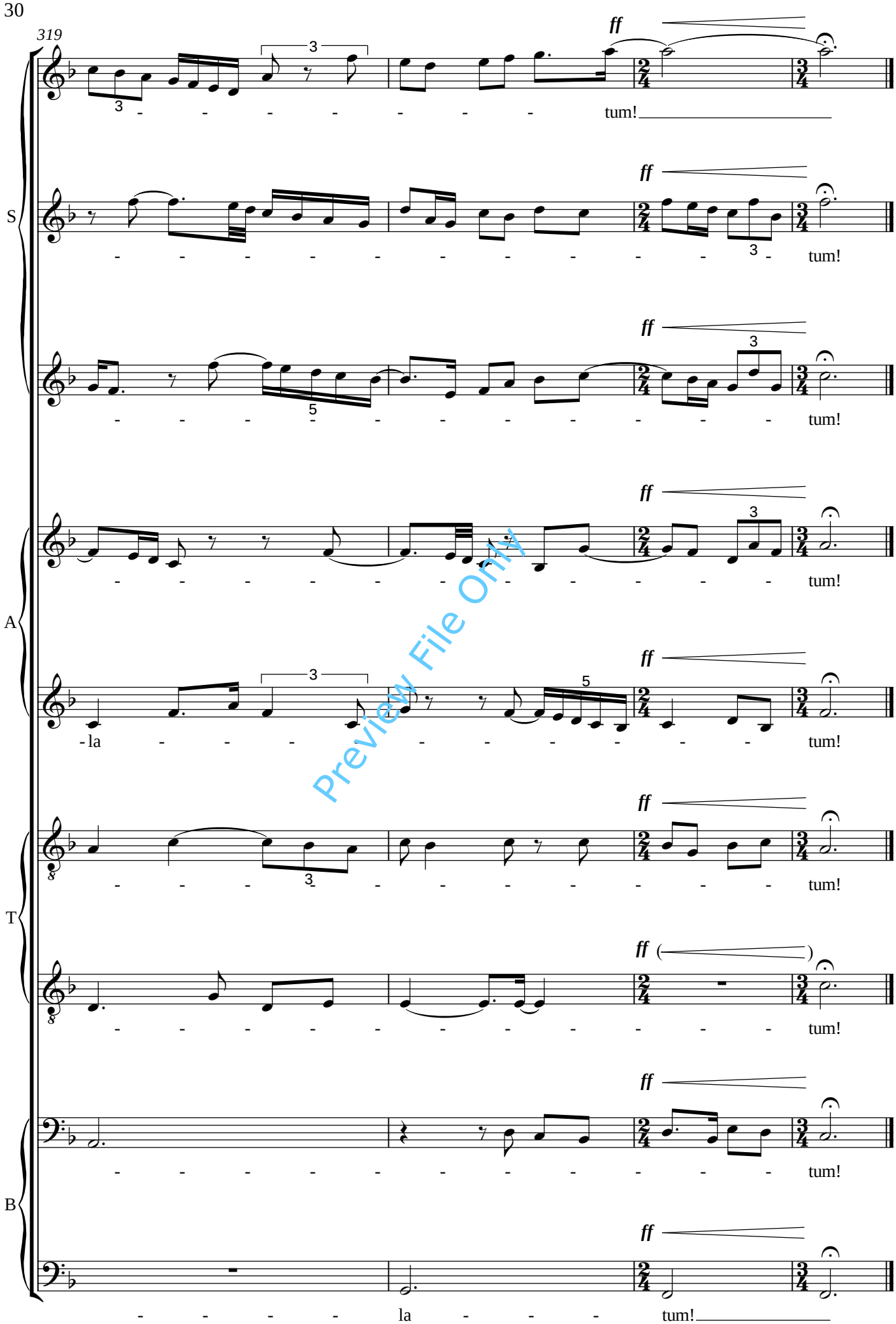
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