Unmetered or Free Rhythms*

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Abstract

This module represents conducting and performance solutions to unmetered or free rhythmic passages. Two musical examples are provided, one unison and one with parts, for understanding and for practice.

1 UNMETERED OR FREE RHYTHMS

Chant or passages that do not have rhythmic or metric indications create special conducting problems. Two examples follow that illustrate both situations. Figure 1 illustrates a passage in which the meter is purposely omitted, preventing any misunderstanding of a metric pulse. The conductor should be reminded not to arbitrarily divide the passage into measures. At one level each note is important unto itself and by expanding each note slightly this importance is realized without interrupting the flow but also without forming an obvious metric pattern. This would undo the composer's intentions. In these instances the stress will be governed by the text. The most important words or syllables will receive slightly more weight (stress, not accent) than others. Avoid any metric pulse that will give the effect of a standardized meter.

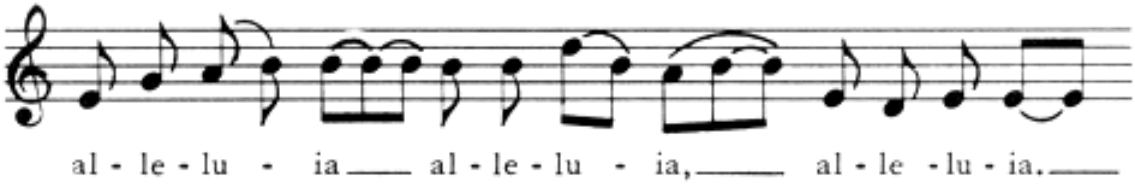

Figure 1

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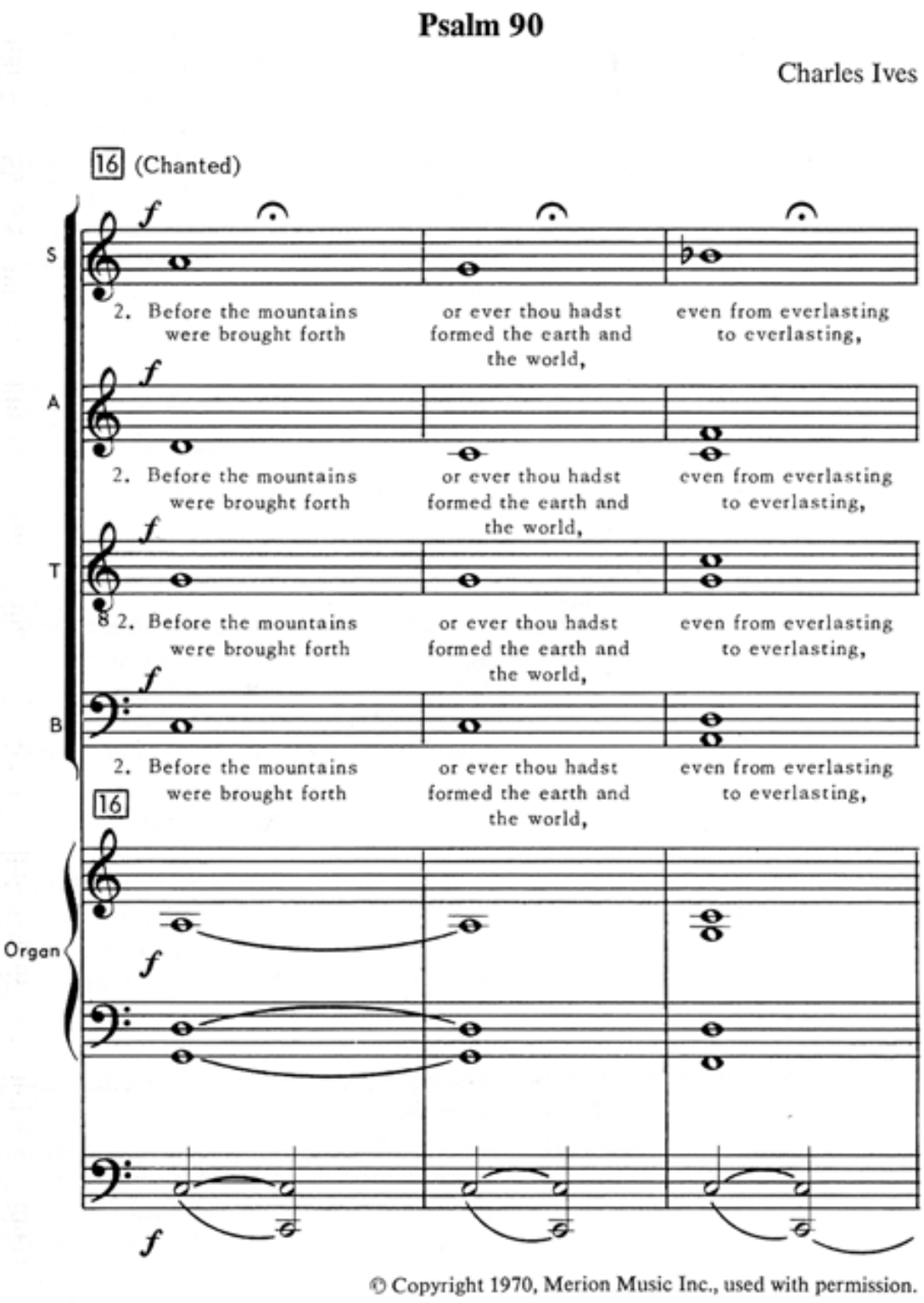
Psalm 90
Charles Ives
16 (Chanted)
S
A
T
B
Organ
2. Before the mountains were brought forth
or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world,
even from everlasting to everlasting,
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Figure 2

The example in figure 2, above, is a chant in which the composer has placed all of the text over a single whole note. This prevents the association of any rhythmic values to the text itself. In this instance the conductor will find the best solution by repeatedly singing the words himself until he finds the combination that he feels will be most comfortable, most musical, and indicative of the composer's desires.

Works that contain examples of free rhythm:

1. *Psalm 90,* Ives, Mercury Music Corporation
2. *Psalm 67,* Ives, Associated Music Publishers
3. *Hodie (Ceremony of Carols)* Britten, Boosey and Hawkes
4. *Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis,* Willan, H. W. Gray #2044