Timothy Corlis

NOTES TOWARDS A POEM THAT CAN NEVER BE WRITTEN

for three SATB Choirs (divisi.), Solo Cello, Percussion, and Narrator

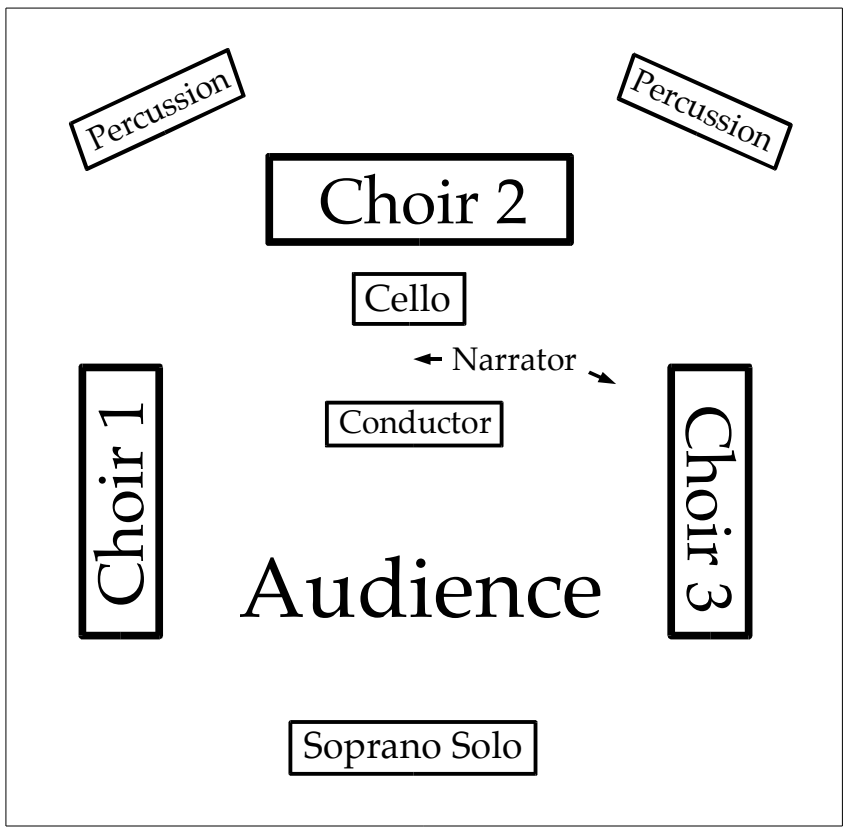
Based on the poem by Margaret Atwood
Used with permission from the author

Duration ca. 25 minutes

About the Work

One line from Margaret Atwood's poem illustrates a central inspiration for the composition: "the facts of this world seen clearly are seen through tears." When I read this poem as a composer, I hear it speaking about the numbing effect of privilege in an age where we are bombarded with information. As artists we have the freedom to speak about the injustices that surround us but are in many ways silenced by the white noise of information. We become overwhelmed by "facts" and often make the mistake of granting such "facts" an objectivity or distance from our senses. Atwood raises the question of whether this distance (emotional or otherwise) from information provides clarity. Perhaps a mode of perception that is subjective, emotional, or entangled offers a deeper kind of clarity.

My goal in writing this composition is to provide a reading of Atwood's poem that immerses the senses in sound, so that we might become entangled in her words. Rather than dwelling on words and concepts as "facts" to be scrutinized, this music aims to focus the audiences attention on the immediate sensual experience. Here, we come close to suspending the distance that our privilege grants us. Instead of being overwhelmed by information or merely interested in statistics, we become involved and vulnerable.



Performance Notes

The piece uses the concert space as an essential element of the artistic canvas. This offers the audience an experience that is distinct from most recorded music and paints the spatial metaphors that are present in the spoken text. The diagram shown above gives a rough guideline as to how the performers should be arranged in the concert space. If the choirs are not equal in size, choir 2 should be the largest, while choirs 3&4 should be very close in size. Choir 2 may wish to surround the solo cellist in a semi-circular fashion. The piece is scored for 2 percussionist; both should be set back from the audience (if possible for sight lines, behind choir 2) so that their sound remains ambient rather than focused. The solo soprano should sing from the foot of the concert space (the rear of a central isle or the front of a balcony) and the Narrator should feel free to treat the entire concert space as a stage. In general, the sounds notated in this score will work best in a wet acoustic; in particular, the effects created in Movement VI will have the strongest impact where the spatial resonance approaches cathedrallike proportions.

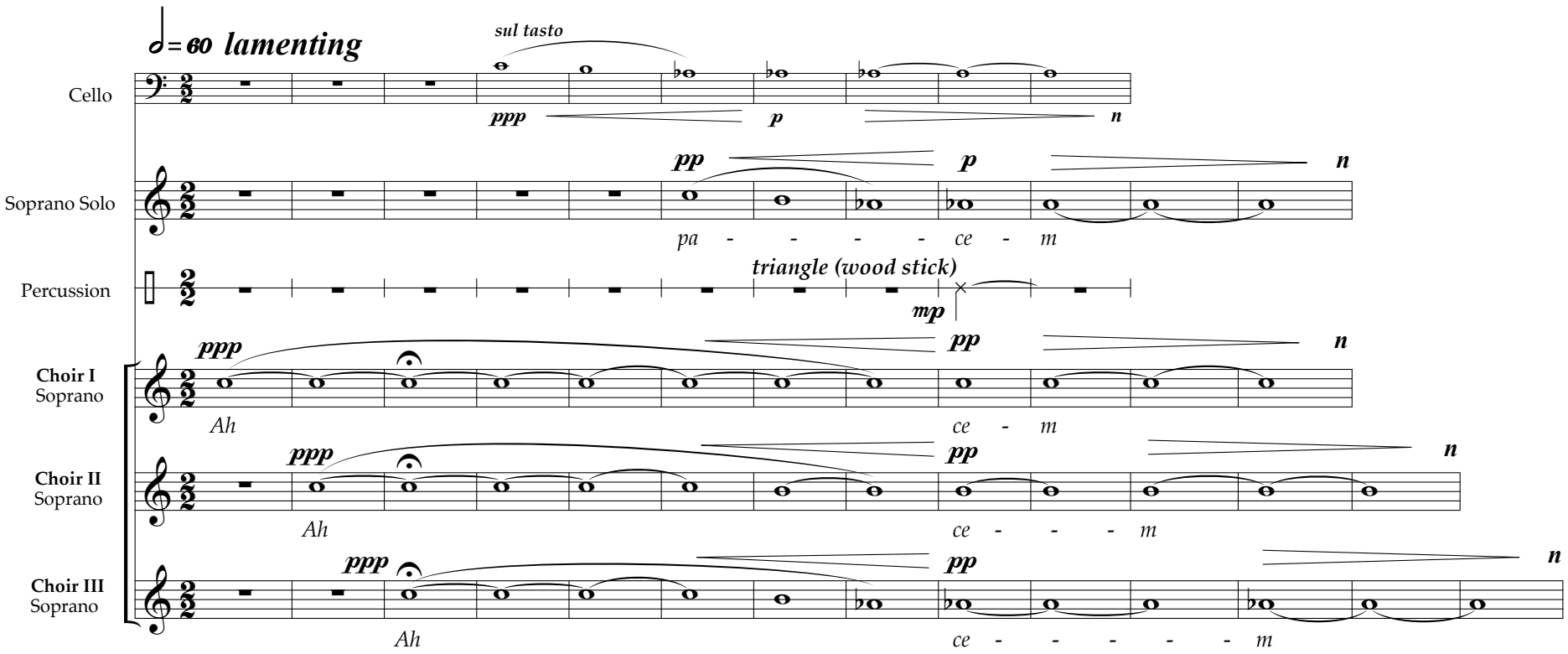
Commissioned by the DaCapo Chamber Choir of Waterloo, Ontario
with assistance from the Ontario Arts Council

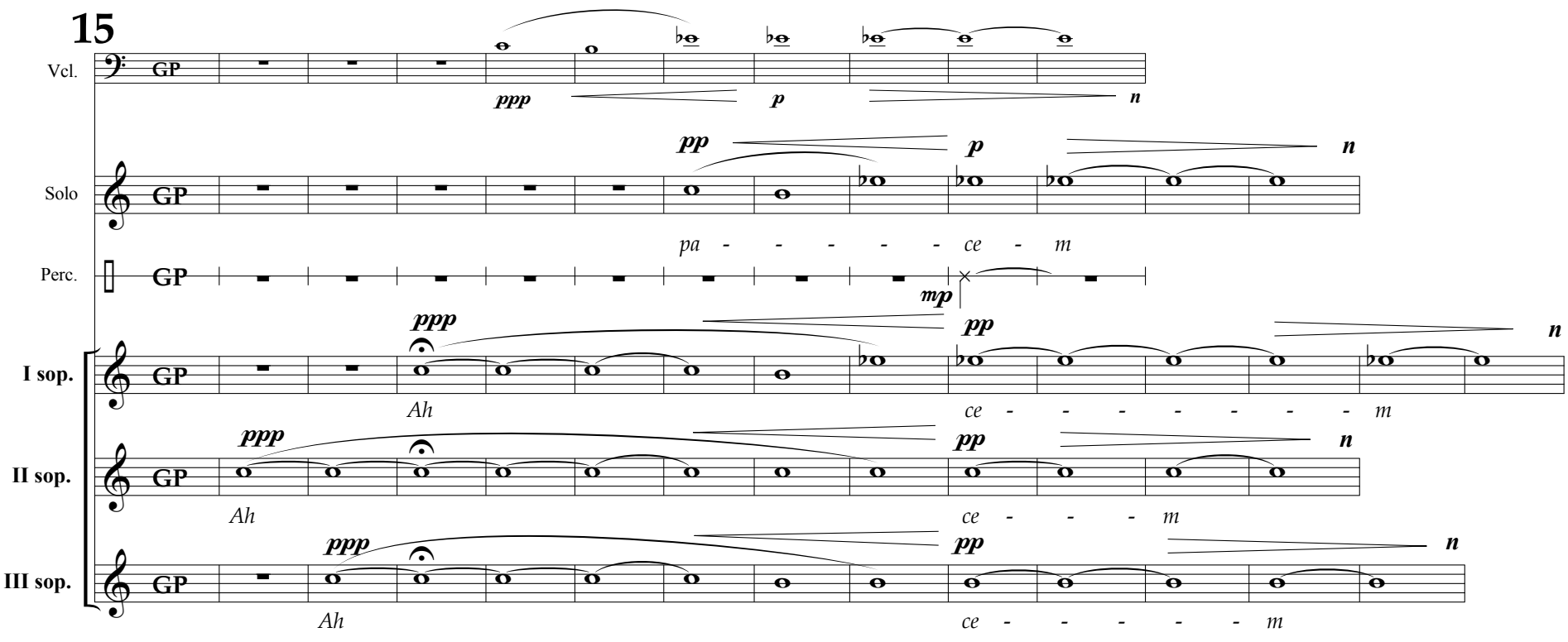
NOTES TOWARDS A POEM THAT CAN NEVER BE WRITTEN

for SATB Chorus (divisi), solo Cello, solo Soprano, and Narrator
with triangle, bass drum, and tam-tam

Text by **Margaret Atwood**

Music by **Timothy Corlis**





Music: Timothy Corlis © 2008: Lyrics are the Poem: "Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written", by Margaret Atwood, included in the poetry collection SELECTED POEMS II 1976 - 1986 currently publishes in th United States by Mariner Books, an imprint of Houghton Mifflin, © 1987 by Margaret Atwood, and in Canada included in the poetry collection SELECTED POEMS 1966 - 1984, publishes by Oxford University Press © 1990 by Margaret Atwood. All rights reserved.

30

Vcl. GP

Solo GP

Perc. GP

I GP

II GP

III GP

45

A

Vcl. GP

Solo GP

Perc. GP

I GP

II GP

III GP

61 ♩= 72

Vcl.

Perc.

I S A A T B B

II S A A T B B

III S A A T B B

Narrator:
This is the place you would rather not know about,

hold...

72

Vcl.

Perc.

pc. 2

bass drum (soft mallet)

I

pa - - - - cem pa - cem pa - cem pa - ce - m

Narrator:
this is the place that will inhabit you,

hold...

pa - - - - - - - - - cem pa - ce - m

hold...

pa - - - - - - - - - cem pa - cem pa - ce - m

hold...

83 *piu mosso* ♩ = 86

Vcl.

Perc.

pc. 2

II

pa - - - - cem pa-cem pa-cem pa - ce - m

Narrator:
this is the place you cannot imagine,

hold...

pa - - - - - - - - - cem pa - ce - m

hold...

94

Vcl.

Perc.

pc. 2

II

Narrator:
this is the place that will finally defeat you

where the word why shrivels and empties itself. This is famine.

hold...

pa - - - - - - - - cem pa - ce - m

hold...

pa - - - - - - - - cem pa-cem pa-cem pa - ce - m

hold...

pa - - - - - - - - cem pa-cem pa - ce - m

B *piu mosso* ♩ = 92

pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem

pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem

pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem

pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem pa-cem

119 *molto rit.* *tempo* C

Vcl. *fff* *mf*

Solo *ff* *mp* *Ah*

Perc. *tr* *ff*

pc. 2 *tr* *f*

I *ff* *mf*
pa - cem Do - na no - bis pa - - - - - - - - - - - - cem
ff *mf* *pa*
Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis pa - - - - - - - - cem pa - cem pa - cem pa - cem

II *ff* *mf*
pa - cem Do - na no - bis pa - - - - - - - - cem pa - cem pa - cem pa - cem
ff *mf* *pa*
Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis pa - - - - - - - - cem pa - cem pa - cem pa - cem

III *ff* *mf*
pa - cem Do - na no - bis pa - - - - - - - - - cem pa - cem pa - cem
ff *mf* *pa*
Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis pa - - - - - - - - cem pa - cem pa - cem pa - cem

129

Vcl. *normale* *mp*

I *p*
pa - cem pa - cem pa - cem
SAABB continue ostinato...
p *ce* - *m*
pa - cem pa - cem pa - cem

II *p*
pa - cem pa - cem
ce - *p* *m*
pa - cem pa - cem
p
pa - cem pa - cem pa - cem pa - cem

III *p*
- - - - - - ce
pa - cem pa - cem pa - cem pa - cem

Tenor: each voice sing "pacem" as notated below, use random entries but keep constant time
pppp
pa - - - - - - - - ce - m
SAABB continue ostinato...
SAABB continue ostinato...

143

Vcl.

continue ostinato...

mf

156

Vcl.

continue ostinato...

p

168

Vcl.

accel.

ff *mf* *mp* *p*

♩ = 120

pa - cem *ce - m*

II

All Tenor: now sing ostinato as written

179 *accel.*

Vcl.

♩ = 132

f *mf*

I

II

III

191 *ritard poco a poco* ♩ = 120 ♩ = 100

Vcl.

mp

I

II

III

p

pa - cem *pa-cem*

203 ♩ = 92

Vcl.

pp *n* *pp* *hold...*

Perc.

triangle (wood stick) *ppp*

I

II

III

pp *ppp*

pa - cem *pa-cem* *pa - - - ce - - - m* *hold...*

ii

Vcl.

pp

p

Solo

pa - - - - - - - ce - m

Narrator:
There is no poem you can write
about it, the sandpits
where so many were buried
& unearthed, the unendurable
pain still traced on their skins.

ppp

Sop (all)

pa - - - - - - - ce - m

Sopranos: *randomly timed entries, constant individul tempo should create the effect of an echo.*

pp

T
B

mm

11

Vcl.

p

Solo

pa - - - - - - - - ce - m

Narrator:
This did not happen last year
or forty years ago but last week.
This has been happening,
this happens.

ppp

Sop (all)

pa - - - - - - - - ce - - - m

T
B

20

Vcl.

p

Solo

pa - - - - - - - ce - m

Narrator:
We make wreaths of adjectives for them,
we count them like beads,
we turn them into statistics & litanies
and into poems like this one.

ppp

Sop (all)

pa - - - - - - - ce - - - m

T
B

29

Vcl.

Continue drone...

T
B

Continue drone...

Narrator:
Nothing works.
They remain what they are.

iii, iv

Cello
Soprano Solo
Percussion
tam-tam (large)
All Choirs
S
A
T
B
Vcl.
perc
t-t

18

32

46

Vcl.

ppp mp mf mp cres.

S

mp mf mp mf

Ah Ah

A

mp mf mp mf

Ah Ah

T

mp

Ah Ah

B

64

A

Vcl.

f fp non vib. ff

perc

bass drum (soft mallets)

mf p

t-t

tam-tam

pppp f (stop sound) pppp

p ff

Ah

p f pp

Ah

f pp

Ah Ah

77

Vcl.

non vib. non vib.

ppp ff ppp ff

perc

mf p mf f

t-t

f pppp ff pppp

A

f pp f pp

T

f pp f pp

Narrator:

The woman lies on the wet cement floor
under the unending light,
needle marks on her arms put there
to kill the brain
and wonders why she is dying.

90

Vcl.

Solo

Ah

Narrator:
She is dying because she said.

Narrator:
She is dying for the sake of the world.

perc

triangle (metal stick)

bass drum (soft mallets)

t-t

S1

S2

S3

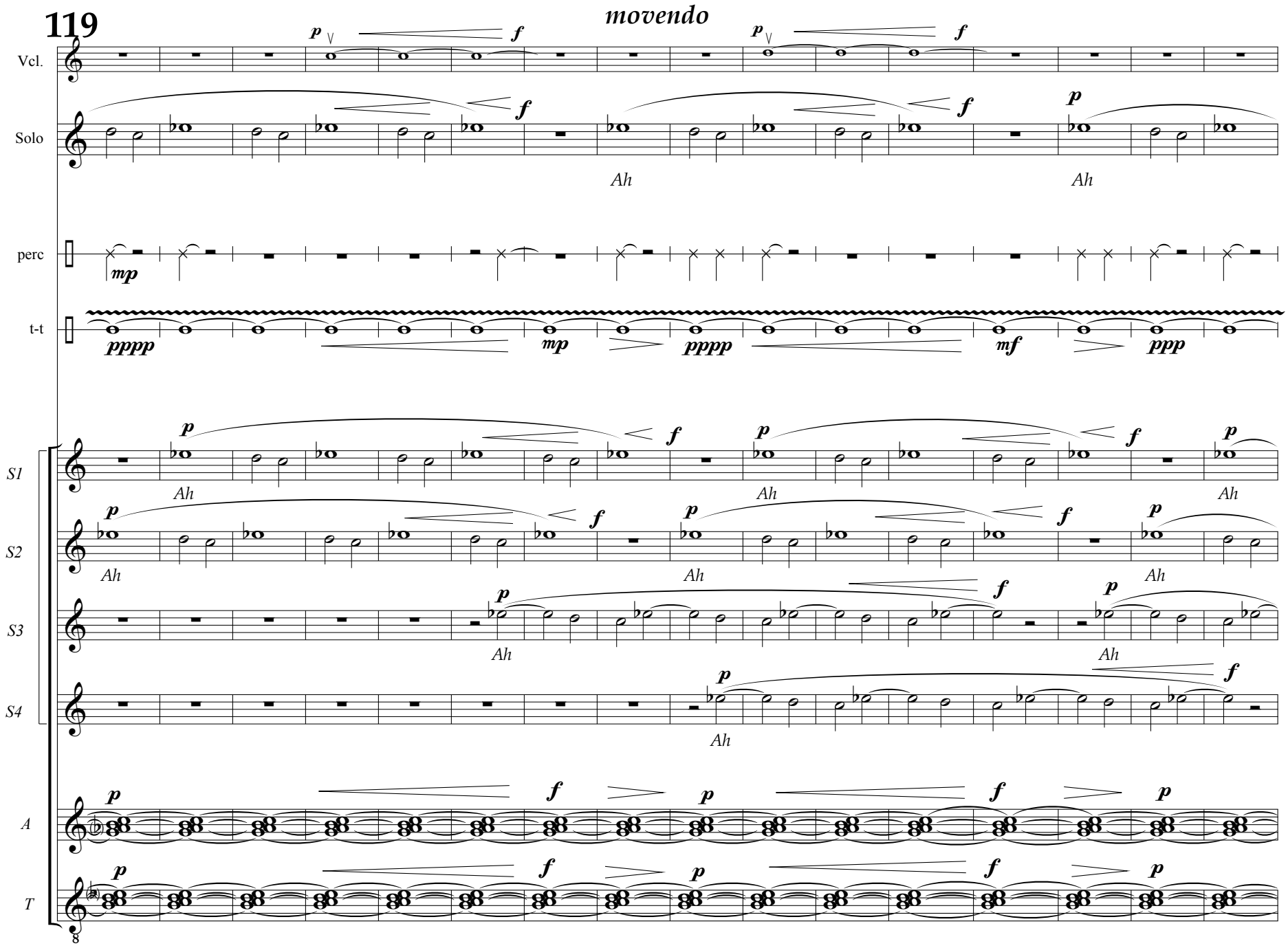
S4

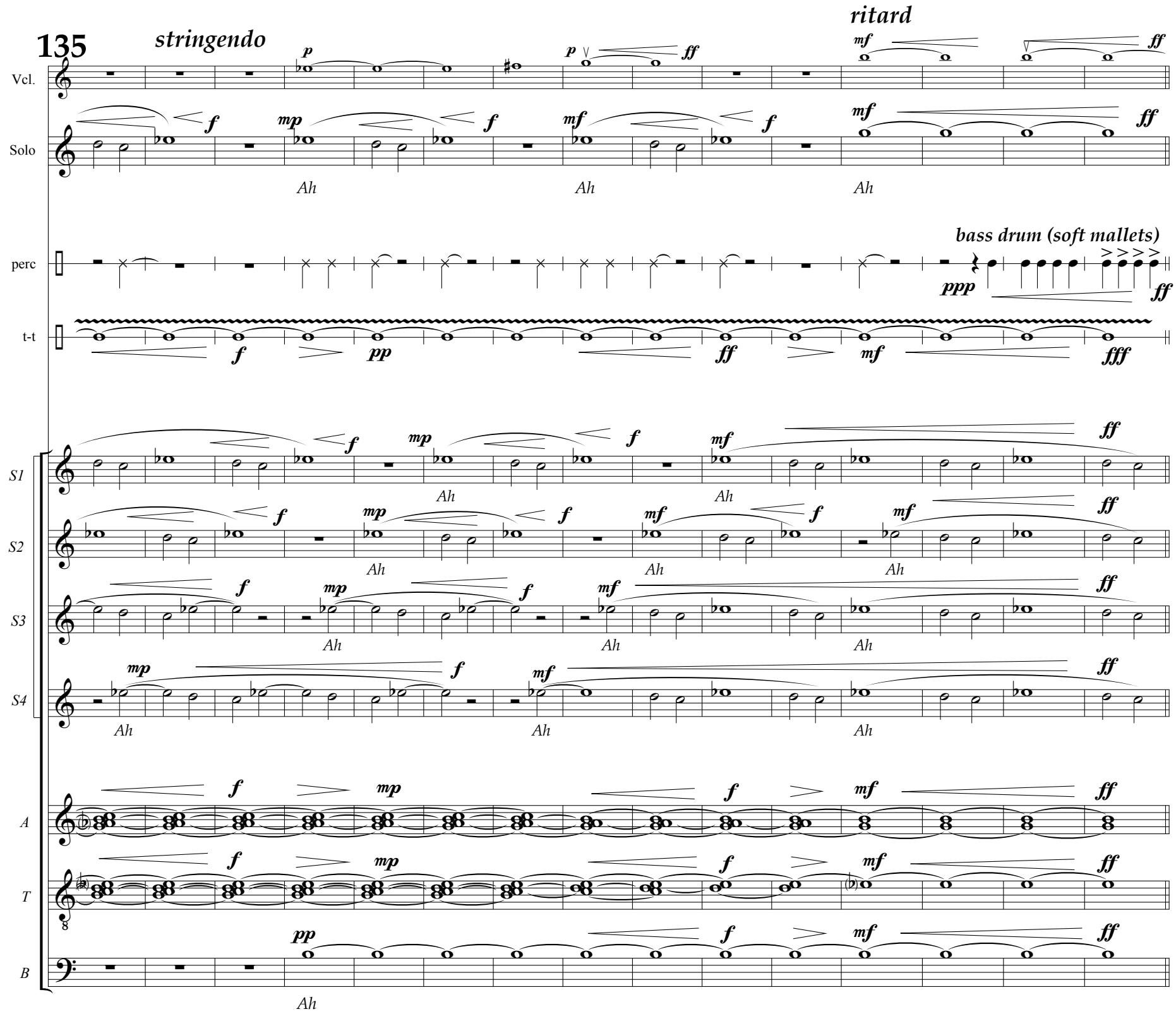
A

T

103

Narrator:
It is her body, silent and fingerless, writing this poem.


119
movendo
Vcl.
Solo
Ah
Ah
perc
t-t
S1
S2
S3
S4
A
T


135
stringendo
ritard
Vcl.
Solo
Ah
perc
bass drum (soft mallets)
t-t
S1
S2
S3
S4
A
T
B

150 **B** *largamente* ♩ = 60

Vcl.

Solo

Ah *Ah* *Ah* *Ah*

t-t

perc

S

Do - - - - - - - na *No - - - - - - - bis*

A

Do - - - - - - - na *No - - - - - - - bis*

T

Do - - - - - - - na *No - - - - - - - bis*

B

Do *na* *No* *bis*

166 *piu mosso* ♩ = 72

normale *poco rit.*

Vcl.

Solo

Ah *Ah* *Ah*

Do - na no - bis pa - cem Do - na no - bis pa - cem Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis

Do - na no - bis pa - cem Do - na no - bis pa - cem Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis

Do - na no - bis pa - cem Do - na no - bis pa - cem Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis

Do - na no - bis pa - cem Do - na no - bis pa - cem Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis

meno mosso
dolce

178

Vcl.

Solo

Ah *Ah* *Ah*

Do - na no - bis pa - cem *Do - na no - bis pa - cem* *Do - na no - bis pa - cem*

Do - na no - bis pa - cem *Do - na no - bis pa - cem* *Do - na no - bis pa - cem*

Do - na no - bis pa - cem *Do - na no - bis pa - cem* *Do - na no - bis pa - cem*

Do - na no - bis pa - cem *Do - na no - bis pa - cem* *Do - na no - bis pa - cem*

190

Vcl.

Solo

Ah *Ah* *Ah* *Ah* *Ah*

Do - na no - is pa - - - - cem *pa - - - - cem* *pa - - - - cem*

Do - na no - bis pa - - - - cem *pa - - - - cem* *pa - - - cem*

Do - na no - bis pa - - - - cem *pa - - - - cem* *pa - - - cem*

Do - na no - bis pa - - - - cem *pa - - - - cem* *pa - - - cem*

203

ritard

ppp

♩ = 60

Vcl.

Solo

pp

Do - - - - na no - bis pa - - - - - ce - - - - m

Do - - - - na no - bis no - bis

Do - - - - na no - bis no - bis

Do - - - - na no - bis no - bis

214

Narrator:
It resembles an operation but it is not one

Narrator:
nor despite the spread legs, grunts & blood, is it a birth.

Narrator:
Partly it's a job. [no pause] partly it's a display of skill like a concerto.

no - bis

226

Narrator:
It can be done badly or well, they tell themselves.

Narrator:
Partly it's an art.

no - bis

233

Vcl.

ppp

Solo

p

pa - - - - - - ce - m

f

perc

bass drum (soft mallets)

ppp

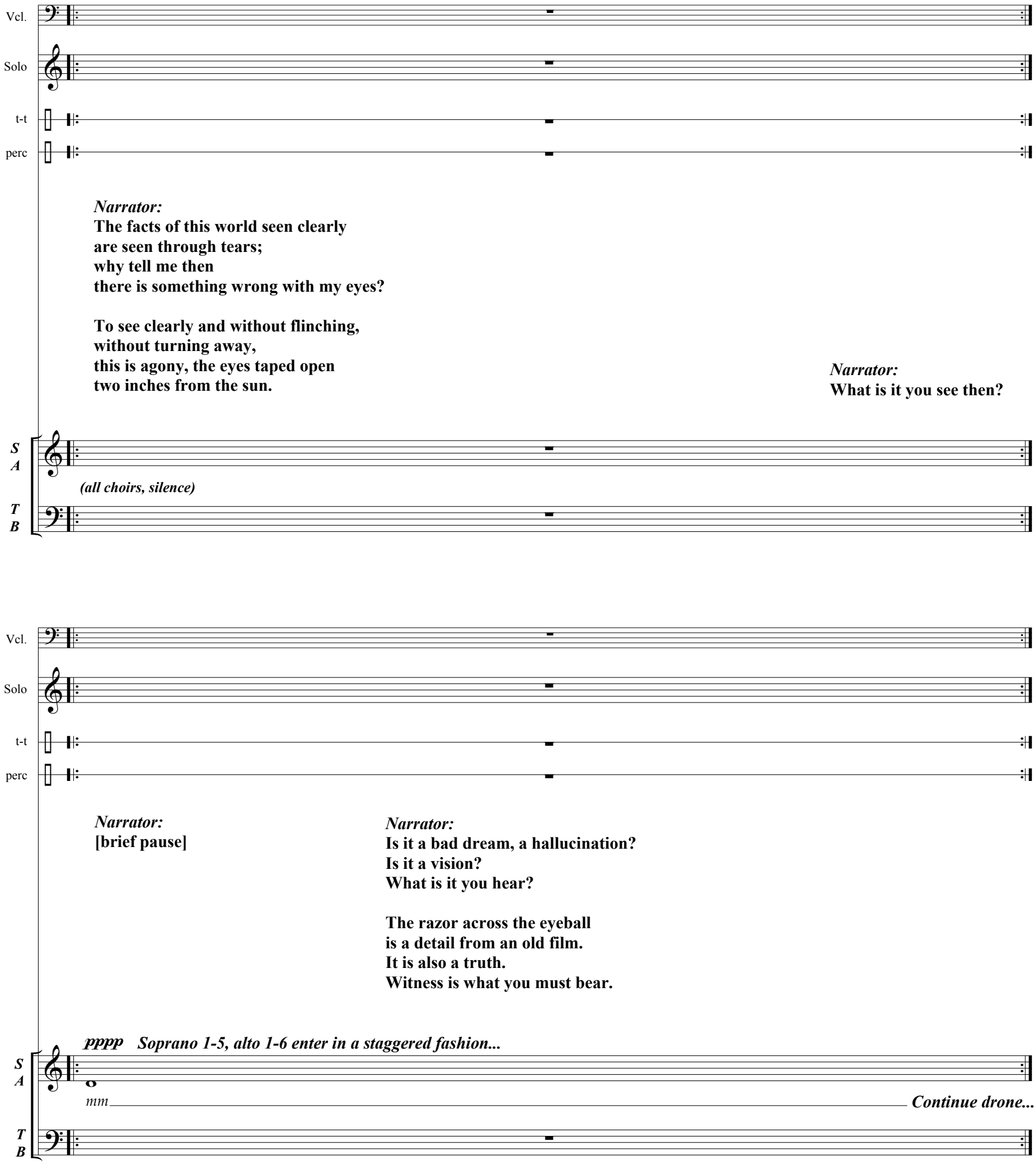
triangle (metal stick)

p

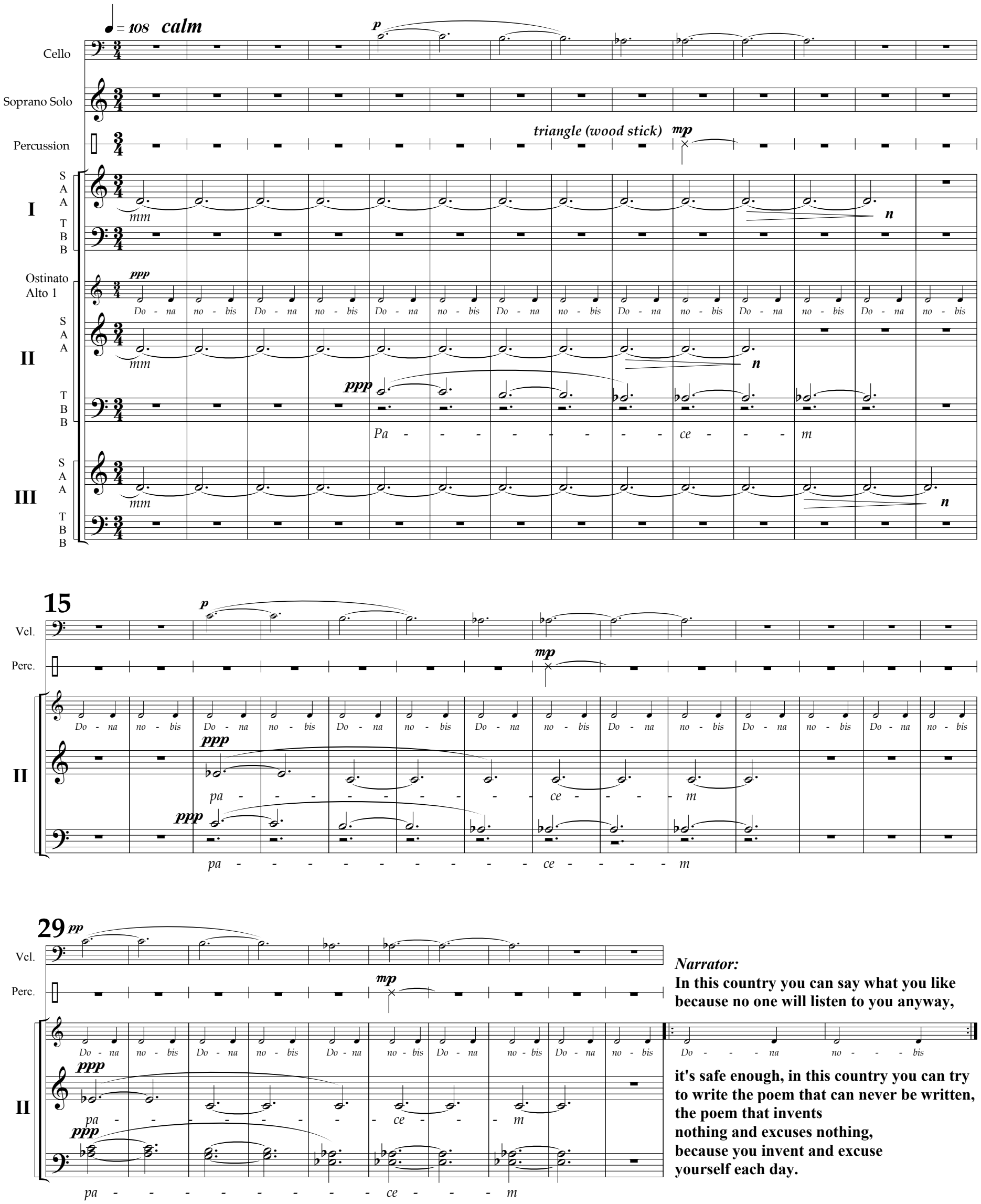
n

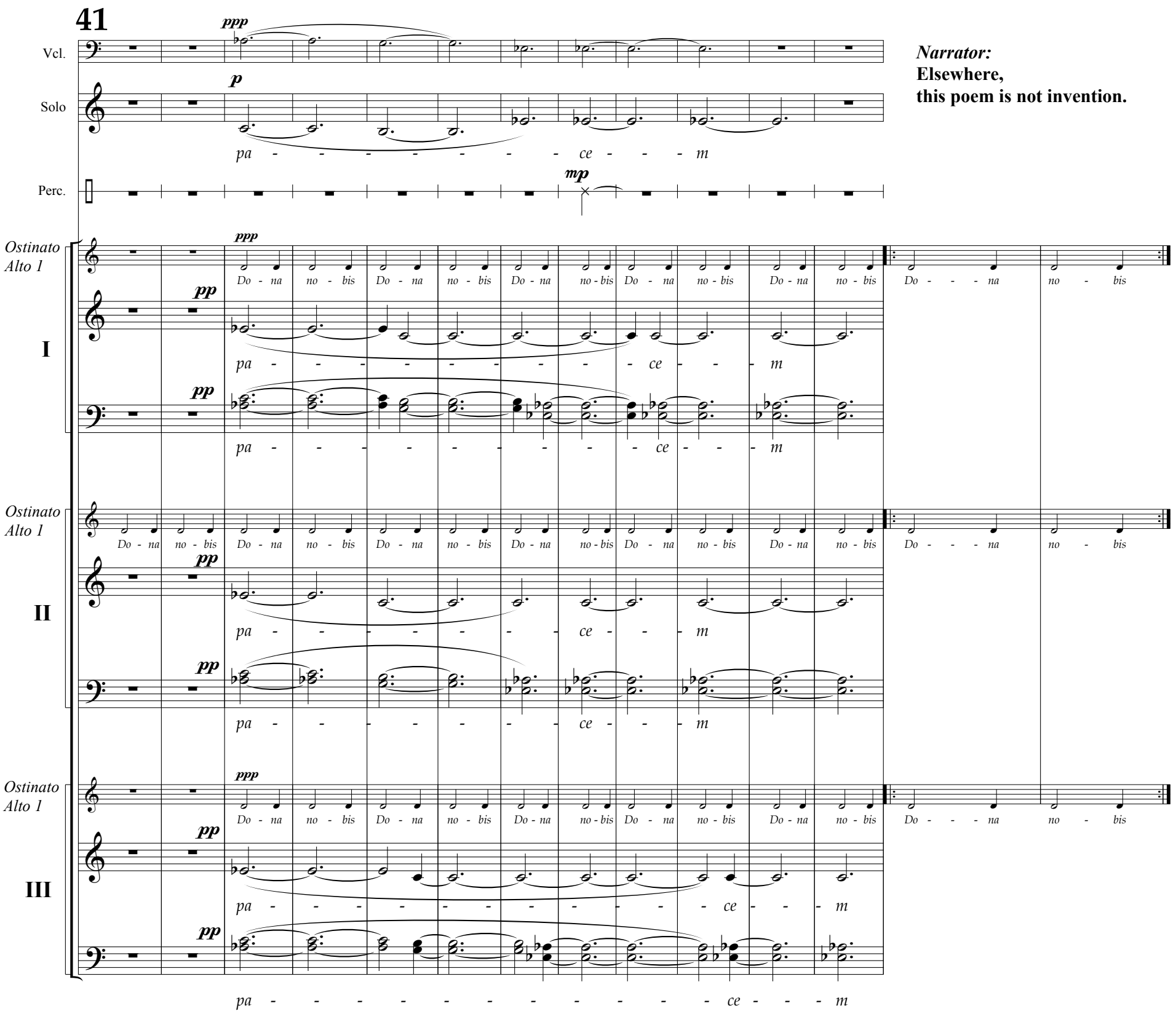
S

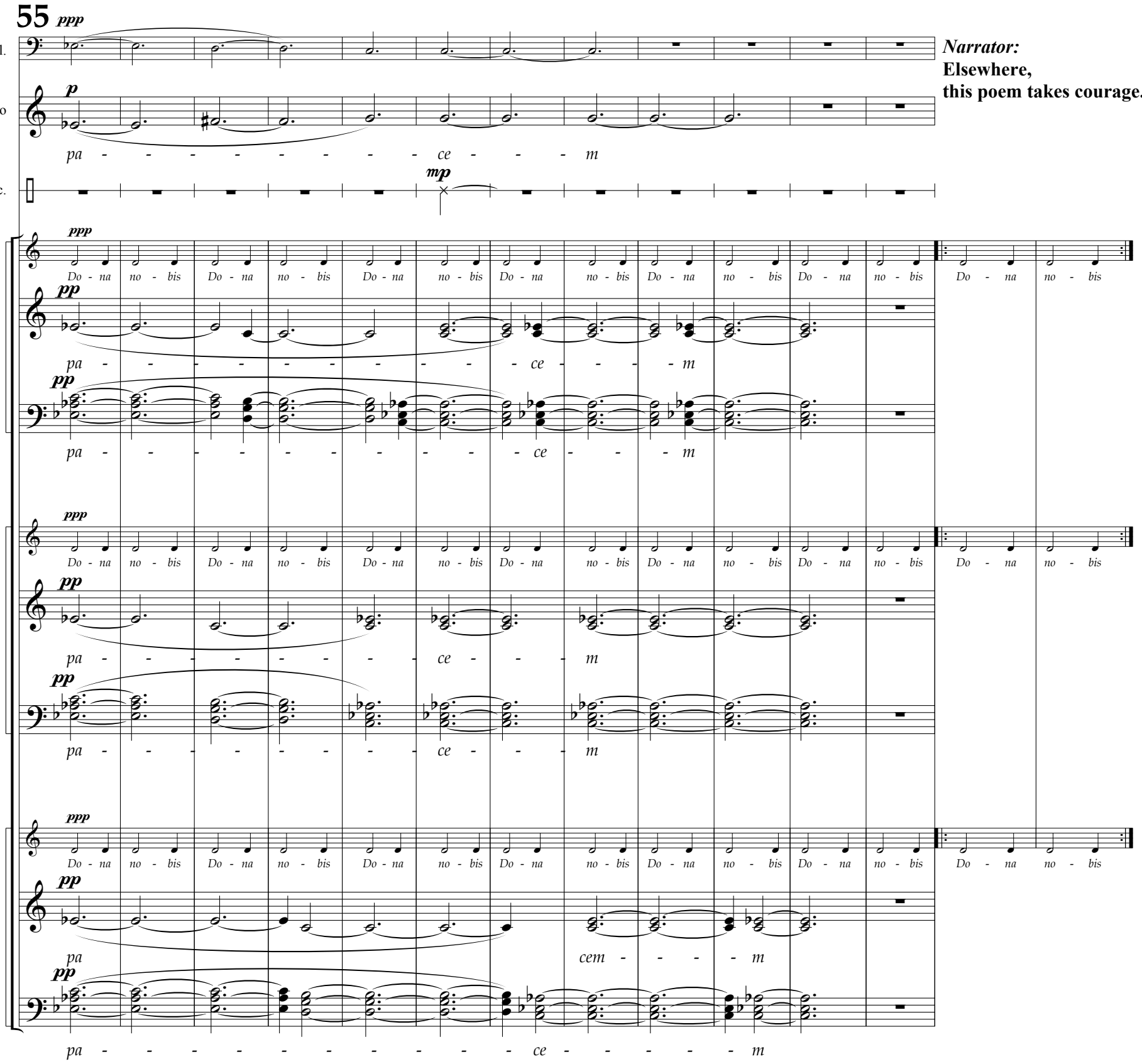
V

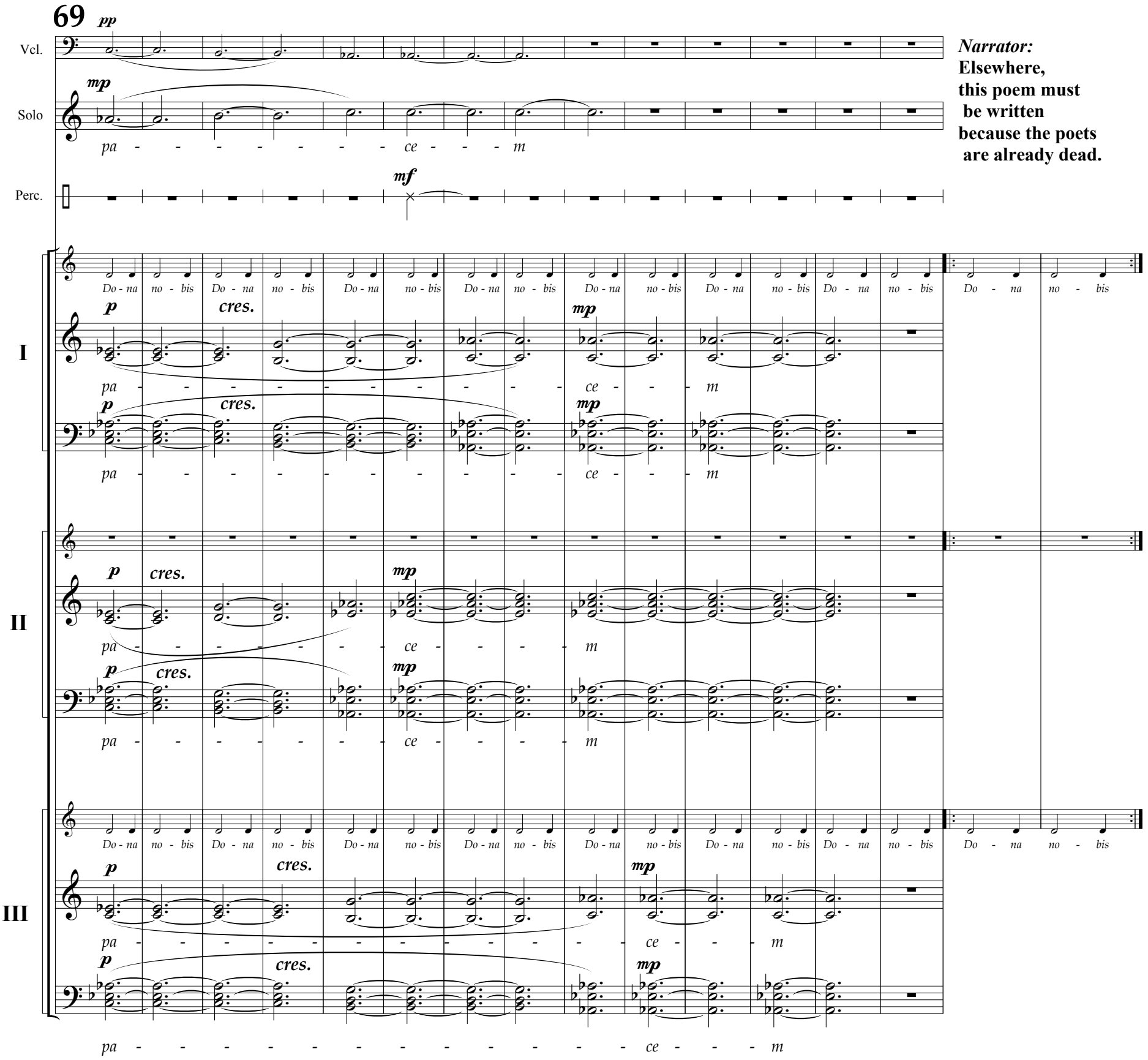

Vcl.
Solo
t-t
perc
Narrator:
The facts of this world seen clearly
are seen through tears;
why tell me then
there is something wrong with my eyes?
To see clearly and without flinching,
without turning away,
this is agony, the eyes taped open
two inches from the sun.
Narrator:
What is it you see then?
S
A
T
B
(all choirs, silence)
Vcl.
Solo
t-t
perc
Narrator:
[brief pause]
Narrator:
Is it a bad dream, a hallucination?
Is it a vision?
What is it you hear?
The razor across the eyeball
is a detail from an old film.
It is also a truth.
Witness is what you must bear.
pppp Soprano 1-5, alto 1-6 enter in a staggered fashion...
S
A
T
B
mm
Continue drone...

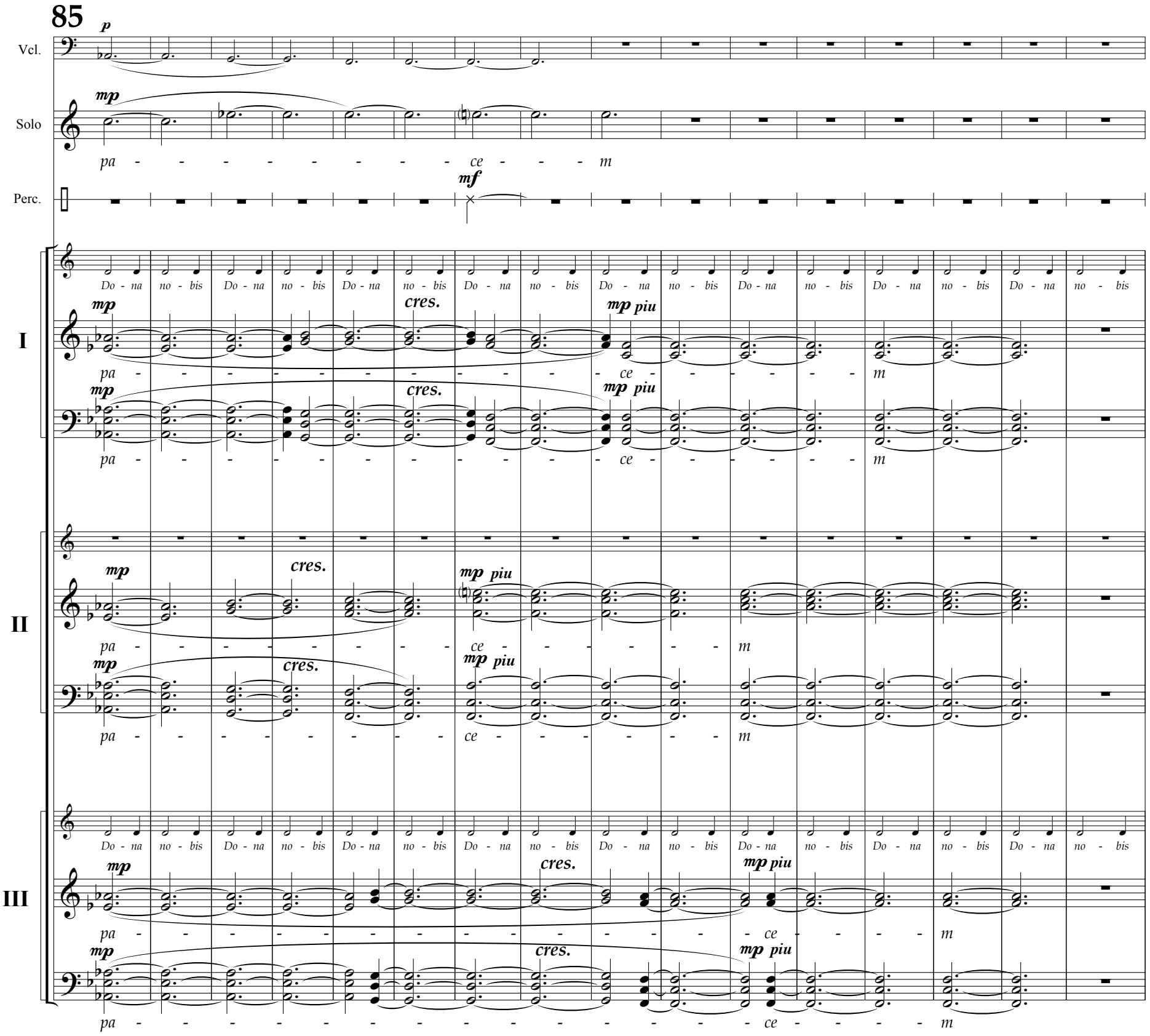
vi


= 108 calm
Cello
Soprano Solo
Percussion
triangle (wood stick)
mp
I
S
A
A
T
B
B
mm
n
Ostinato
Alto 1
ppp
Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis
II
Pa - - - - - - - ce - - - m
III
15
Vcl.
Perc.
pa - - - - - - - - ce - - - m
29
pp
Narrator:
In this country you can say what you like
because no one will listen to you anyway,
it's safe enough, in this country you can try
to write the poem that can never be written,
the poem that invents
nothing and excuses nothing,
because you invent and excuse
yourself each day.


41
Vcl.
Solo
Perc.
Ostinato
Alto 1
I
II
III
ppp
p
mp
pp
pa - - - - - - - - ce - - - m
Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - - - na no - bis
Narrator:
Elsewhere,
this poem is not invention.


55
ppp
Vcl.
Solo
p
pa - - - - - - - - ce - - - m
Perc.
mp
I
II
III
ppp
Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis
pp
pa - - - - - - - - ce - - - m
pa - - - - - - - - ce - - - m
pa - - - - - - - - ce - - - m
pa cem - - - - m
pa - - - - - - - - ce - - - - m
Narrator:
Elsewhere,
this poem takes courage.


69
Vcl.
Solo
Perc.
I
II
III
Narrator:
Elsewhere,
this poem must
be written
because the poets
are already dead.
pp
mp
mf
p
cres.
mp
Do - na no - bis
pa - - - - - - - - ce - - - m


85
Vcl.
Solo
Perc.
I
II
III
p
mp
mf
cres.
mp piu
Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis
pa - - - - - - - - - - ce - - - - - m

101

Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na

pppp

pa - - - - - - - - - - - - - - ce - - - -

pppp

pa - - - - - - - - - - - - - - ce - - - -

Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na

pppp

pa - - - - - - - - - - - - - - ce - - - -

pppp

pa - - - - - - - - - - - - - - ce - - - -

Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na

pppp

pa - - - - - - - - - - - - - - ce - - - -

pppp

pa - - - - - - - - - - - - - - ce - - - -

Narrator:
Elsewhere,
this poem must be written
as if you are already dead,
as if nothing more can be done
or said to save you.

114

no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis pa - - - - ce - - - - - - m

m

m

m

m

no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis pa - - - - ce - - - - - - m

m

m

m

m

no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis Do - na no - bis pa - - - - ce - - - - - - m

m

m

m

m

Narrator:
Elsewhere you must write this poem
because there is nothing more to do.