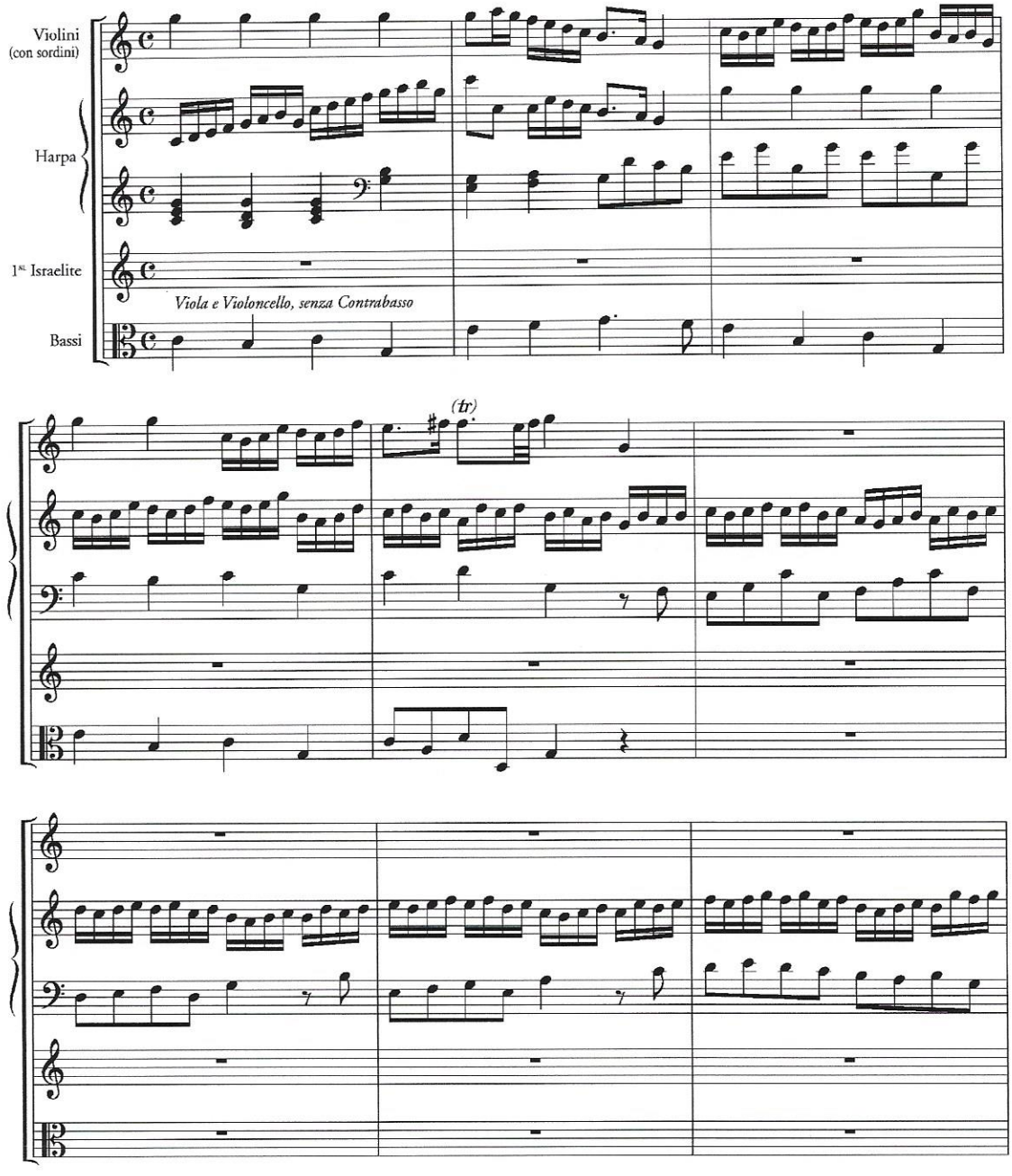
4. Georg Friedrich Händel: How was the harp used?

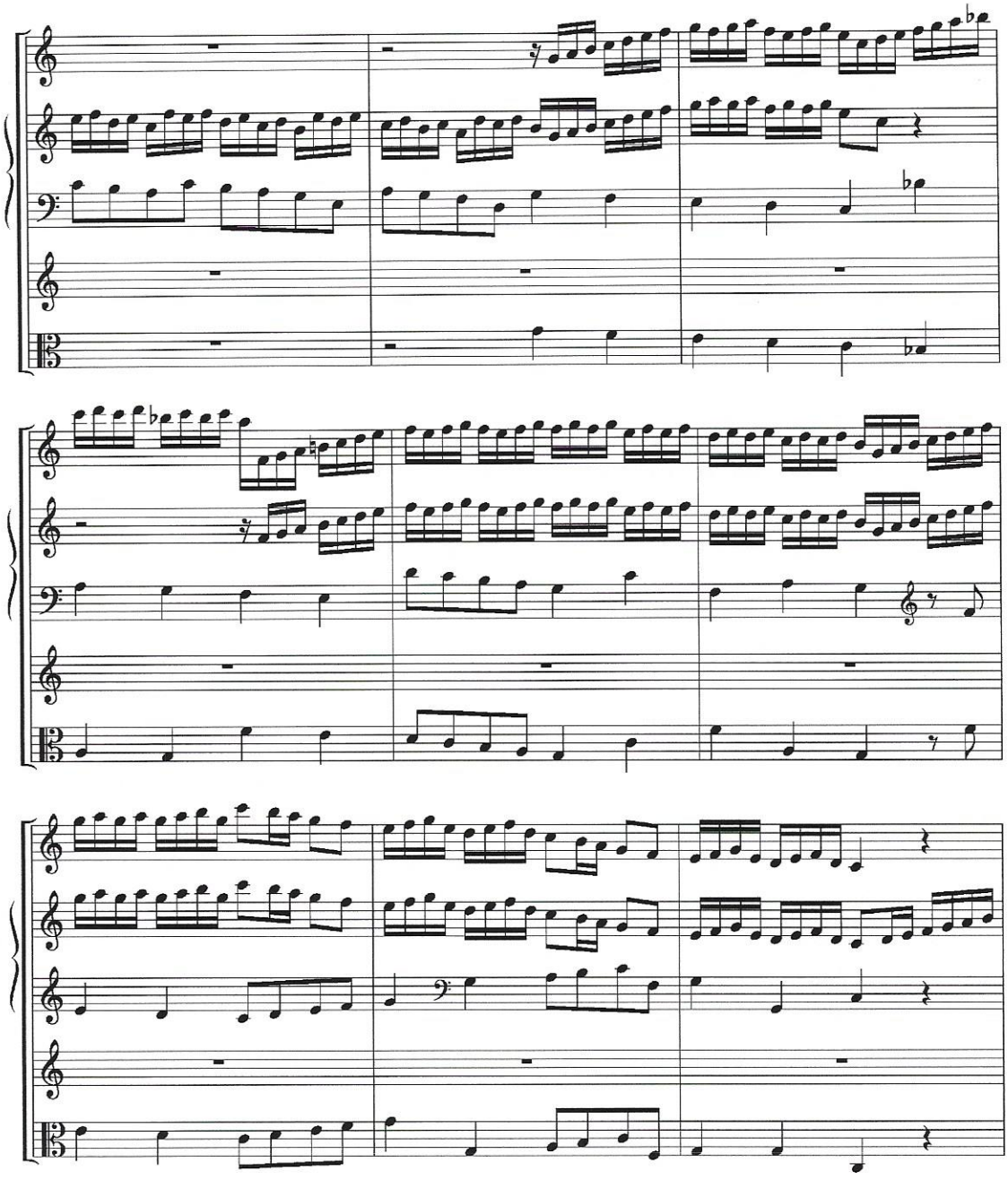
Georg Friedrich Händel (1685-1759) composed several major works that include harp: *Esther, Giulio Cesare, Alexander's Feast* (including the *Concerto in Bb*), *Saul* and *Alexander Balus*. A study of these harp parts provides insight into the role of the harp in Baroque continuo. Händel was an extraordinarily international composer who drew upon the best of various musical traditions: the rich orchestration and counterpoint of Germany, Italian melodies and aria style, French overtures, choral and ballet scenes, and the English **masque** tradition. Harpists are extremely fortunate to have received such attention from this fine composer.

Esther, which premiered in 1720, was Händel's first known attempt at composing for the harp. The oratorio features a beautiful, soloistic harp part. Händel collaborated with librettist Alexander Pope (1688-1744) to create the highly successful work, which was revised for a 1732 performance. This revised version also makes use of the harp, however the two versions of the oratorio employ the harp in strikingly different manners.

The 1720 version of *Esther* specifies the harp in Scene II, "Praise the Lord with cheerful noise," which is a da capo aria in C major. Händel combines muted violins, harp, viola and cello with the singer. The aria opens with an instrumental introduction that features a prominent harp part. Although Händel occasionally doubles the harp and violins, the musical lines are usually independent or complementary, not identical. Händel also occasionally eliminates the viola and cello continuo line, allowing the harp to accompany itself in solo passages. The harpist may have also improvised a solo continuo part above the independent bass line. Händel's instrumentation in "Praise the Lord with

cheerful noise" responds vividly to the text in certain passages. The text "wake my lyre" elicits sixteenth notes and a conspicuous passage in the harp. But the passage "tune your harps to songs of praise" elicits a more subdued response. Perhaps Händel is respecting the orchestration of the piece "Tune your harps to songs of praise," which is performed just prior to "Praise the Lord with cheerful noise" and does not specify harp in the orchestration. Händel's first effort for the harp is surprisingly idiomatic. He avoids extensive chromatics and five-finger keyboard patterns. The sixteenth-note patterns flow smoothly. Händel also balances the harp and strings well. The violins are muted, so as not to overpower the brilliance of the harp solo, and the viola and cello continuo tacet during the harp's solo passages.


Violini
(con sordini)
Harpa
1ste Israelite
Viola e Violoncello, senza Contrabasso
Bassi
(tr)



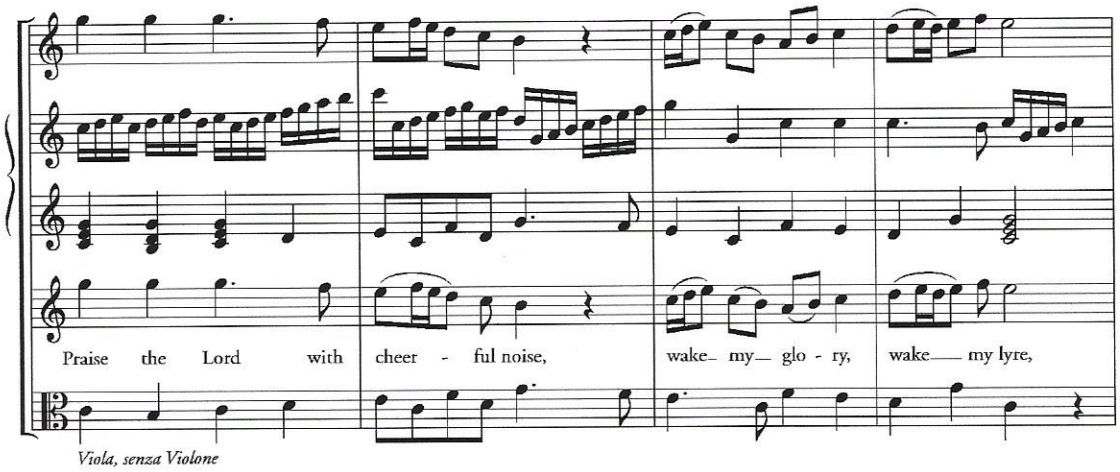


Figure 42. *Esther* (1720), "Praise the Lord with cheerful noise."[41] Reprinted, by permission, from Georg Friedrich Händel's *Esther*, in a publication of the Deutschen Händelgesellschaft, vol. 40 (Wiesbaden - Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1882), page 27-28.

In contrast to the virtuoso harp part in the 1720 version of *Esther*, the 1732 revision reverts the harpist to a continuo participant. Perhaps the harpist who premiered the 1720 version was not available for the 1732 performances. Or perhaps Händel was working with a harpist of exceptional continuo and improvisational skills in 1732, possibly William Powell, and he did not feel the need to restrict the part. The revised oratorio begins with "Breathe soft, ye gales," which is scored for the soloist Esther and full orchestra --a much fuller orchestra than the 1720 version. Händel specifies that the harpsichord, theorbo and harp improvise upon the same continuo part. Later in the piece, the cello, contrabass, harpsichord, theorbo, harp and bassoons all improvise continuo from the same line. Only the organ part remains independent. It is possible that this listing of continuo instruments at the opening of the oratorio indicates the continuo orchestration for the rest of the work.

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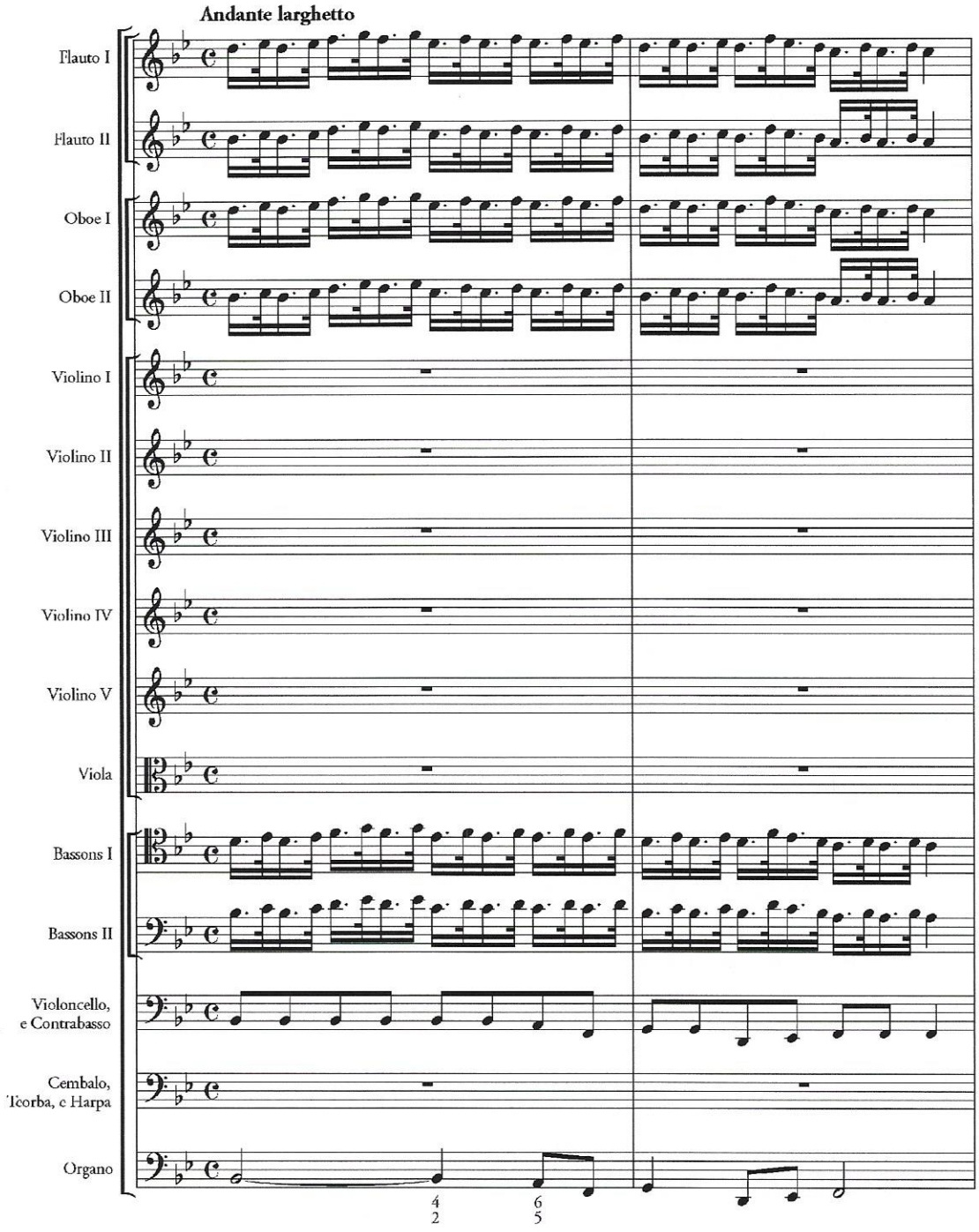
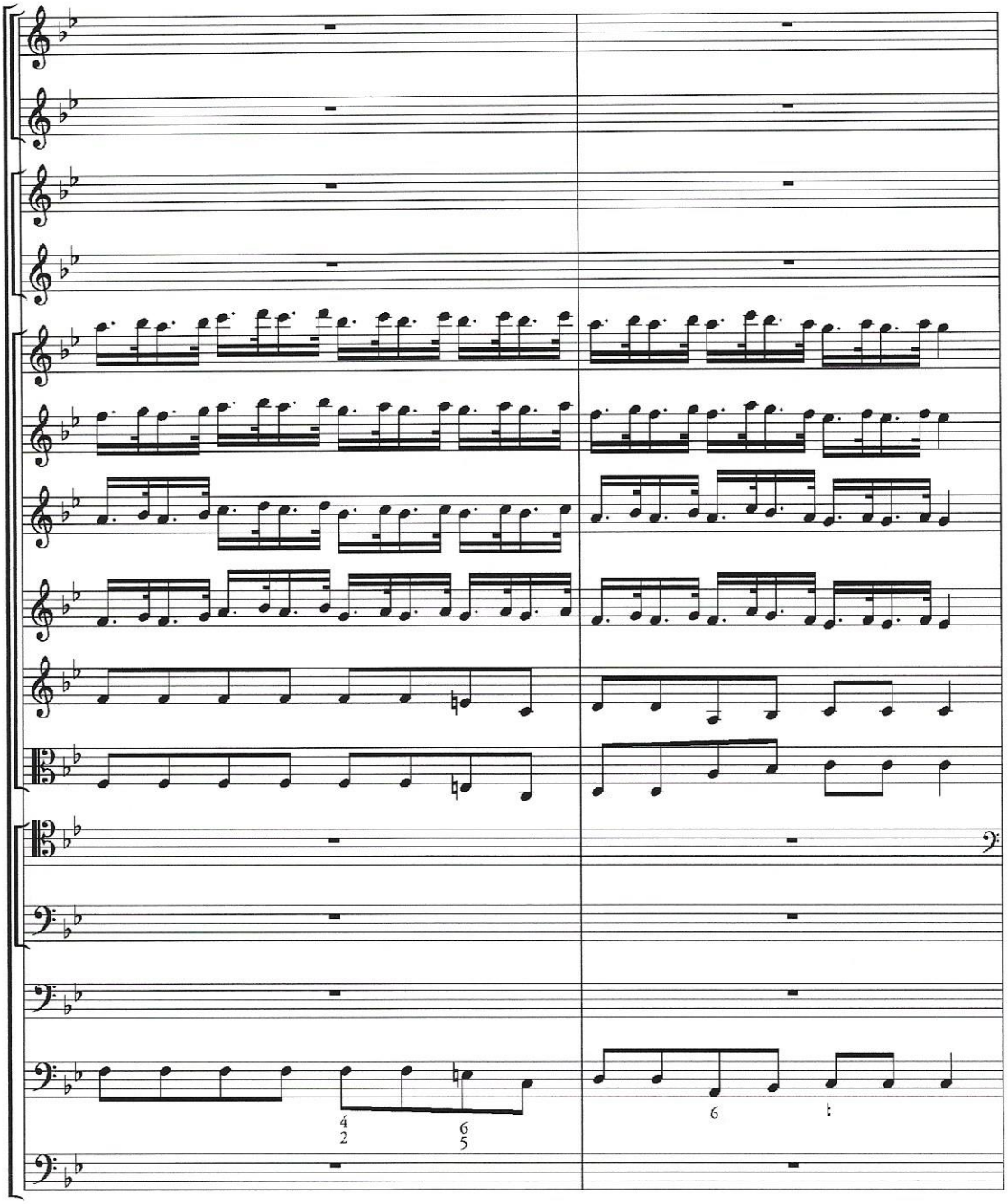
[41] Georg Friedrich Händel, *Esther*, Publication of the Deutschen Händelgesellschaft, ed. Friedrich Chrysander, vol. 40 (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1882), 27-28.

The plucked string, bowed string and reed groups could be compiled into one general continuo band or, at the discretion of the music director and performers, the continuo groups might have been variously employed for dramatic effect, thereby creating the improvisational character unique to continuo playing. The probability of the harp's role as a continuo participant throughout the 1732 version of *Esther*, rather than simply for "Breath soft, ye gales," is strengthened by the fact that the opening key of B-flat is a common key throughout the oratorio. (The triple harp player sets the tuning of the harp at the beginning of the oratorio, and it remains fixed in that key for the duration of the performance.) The 1720 version of "Praise the Lord with cheerful noise" suggests that the harp be tuned in C major, but the oratorio contains no other pieces in C major. Thus Händel restricts the harpist in the 1720 version of *Esther* to a solo role in the one aria.


Andante larghetto
Flauto I
Flauto II
Oboe I
Oboe II
Violino I
Violino II
Violino III
Violino IV
Violino V
Viola
Bassons I
Bassons II
Violoncello, e Contrabasso
Cembalo, Teorba, e Harpa
Organo
4 2
6 5



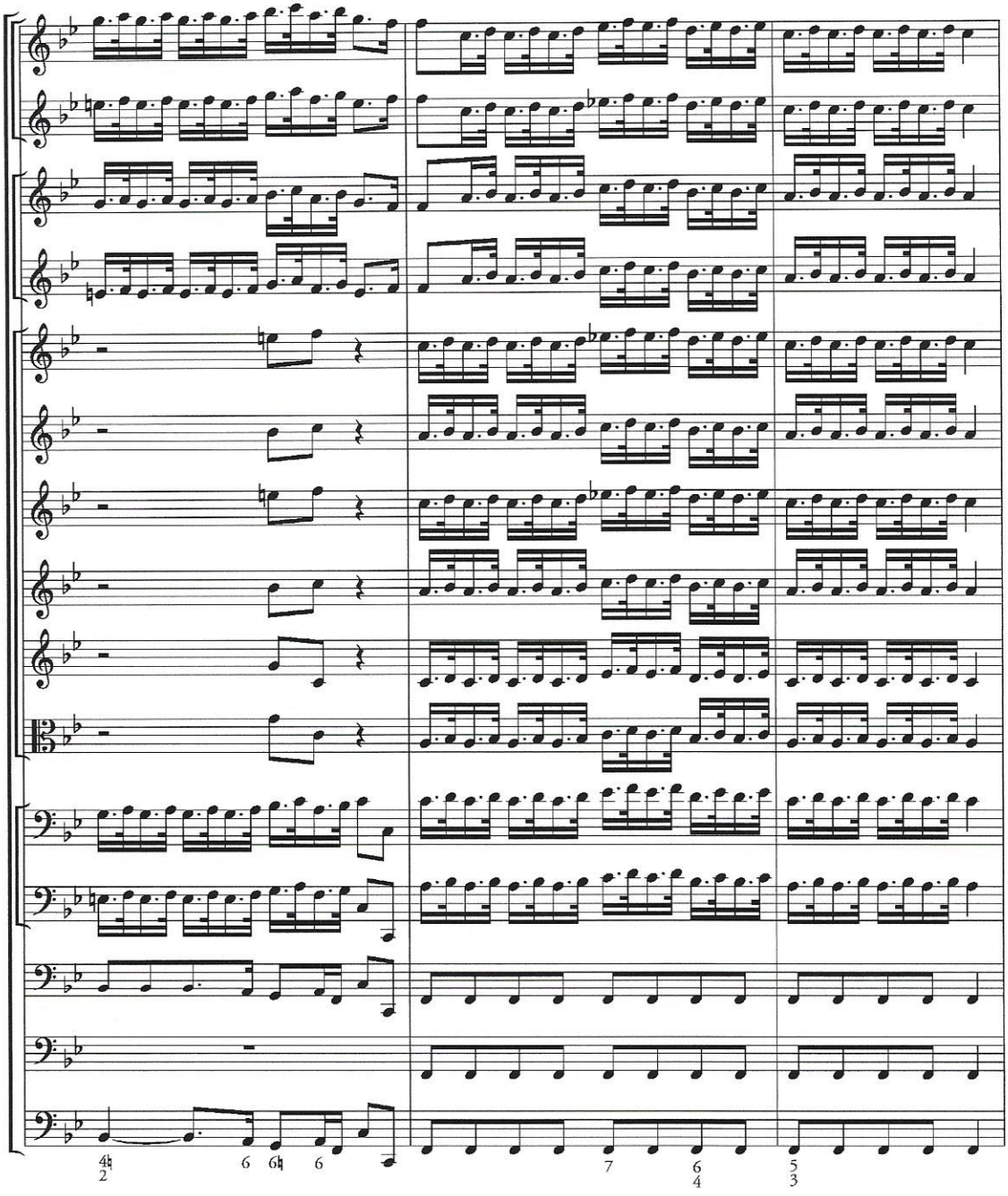


Figure 43. *Esther* (1732), "Breathe soft, ye gales."[42] Reprinted, by permission, from Georg Friedrich Händel's *Esther*, in a publication of the Deutschen Händelgesellschaft, vol. 41 (Wiesbaden - Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1882), pages 10-11.

The next major work in which Händel employed the harp was the opera *Giulio Cesare*, with librettist Nicola Francesco Haym (1678-1729). The opera premiered in 1724 and proved to be quite popular; Cluer and Creake published it in that same year. In *Giulio Cesare*, Händel experiments with the unique texture of the harp by utilizing it in a small onstage ensemble. This instrumental ensemble is featured in a Sinfonia (Act II, Scene II) and then accompanies Cleopatra in the following aria, "V'adoro pupille." Two different versions of the Sinfonia exist. The first is scored for oboe, viola da gamba, harp, theorbo and bassi. The gamba and theorbo are featured in this version, and the harp primarily doubles the oboe and bass line.

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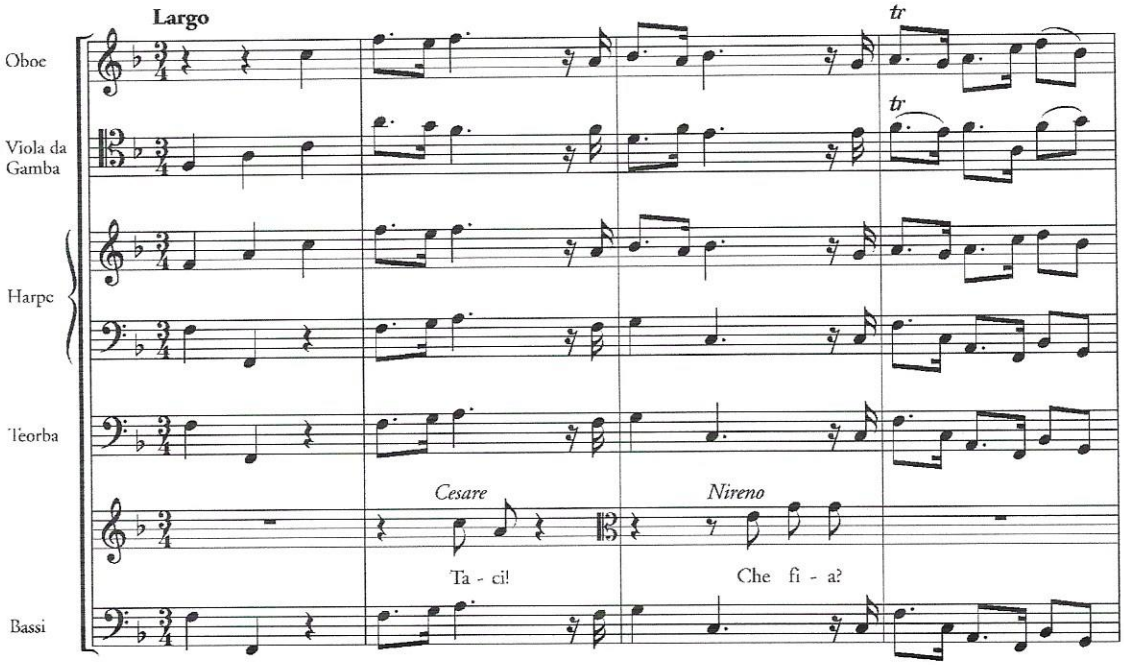
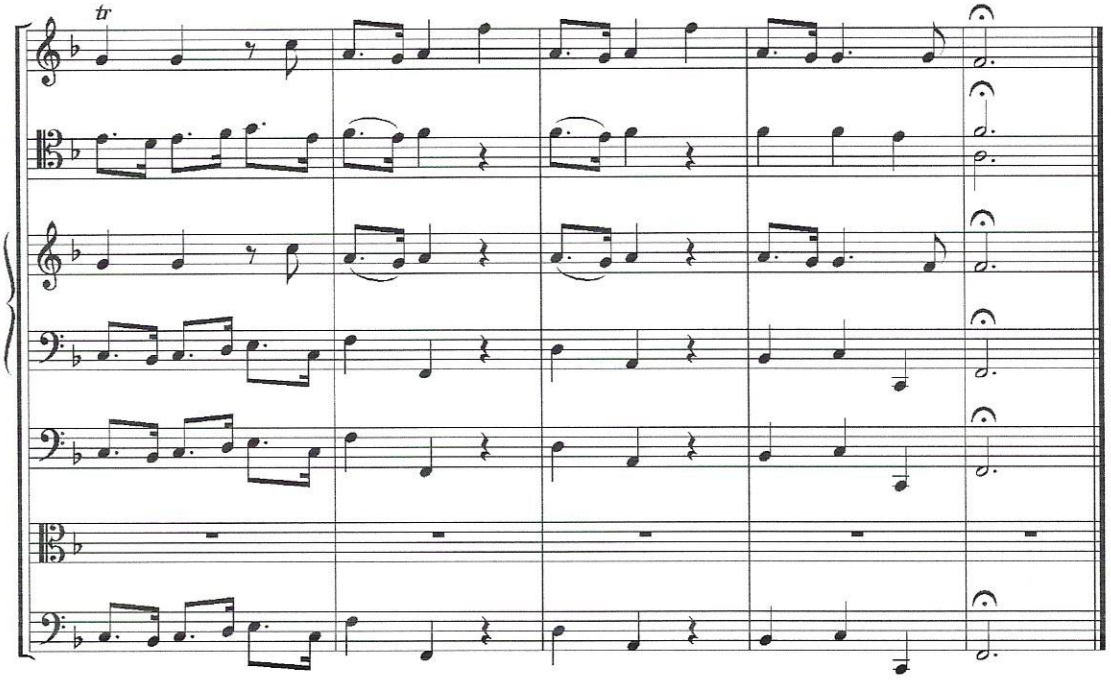
[42] Georg Friedrich Händel, *Esther*, Publication of the Deutschen Händelgesellschaft, ed. Friedrich Chrysander, vol. 41 (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1882), 10-11.


Largo
Oboe
Viola da Gamba
Harpe
Tëorba
Bassi
tr
tr
Cesare
Nireno
Ta - ci!
Che fi - a?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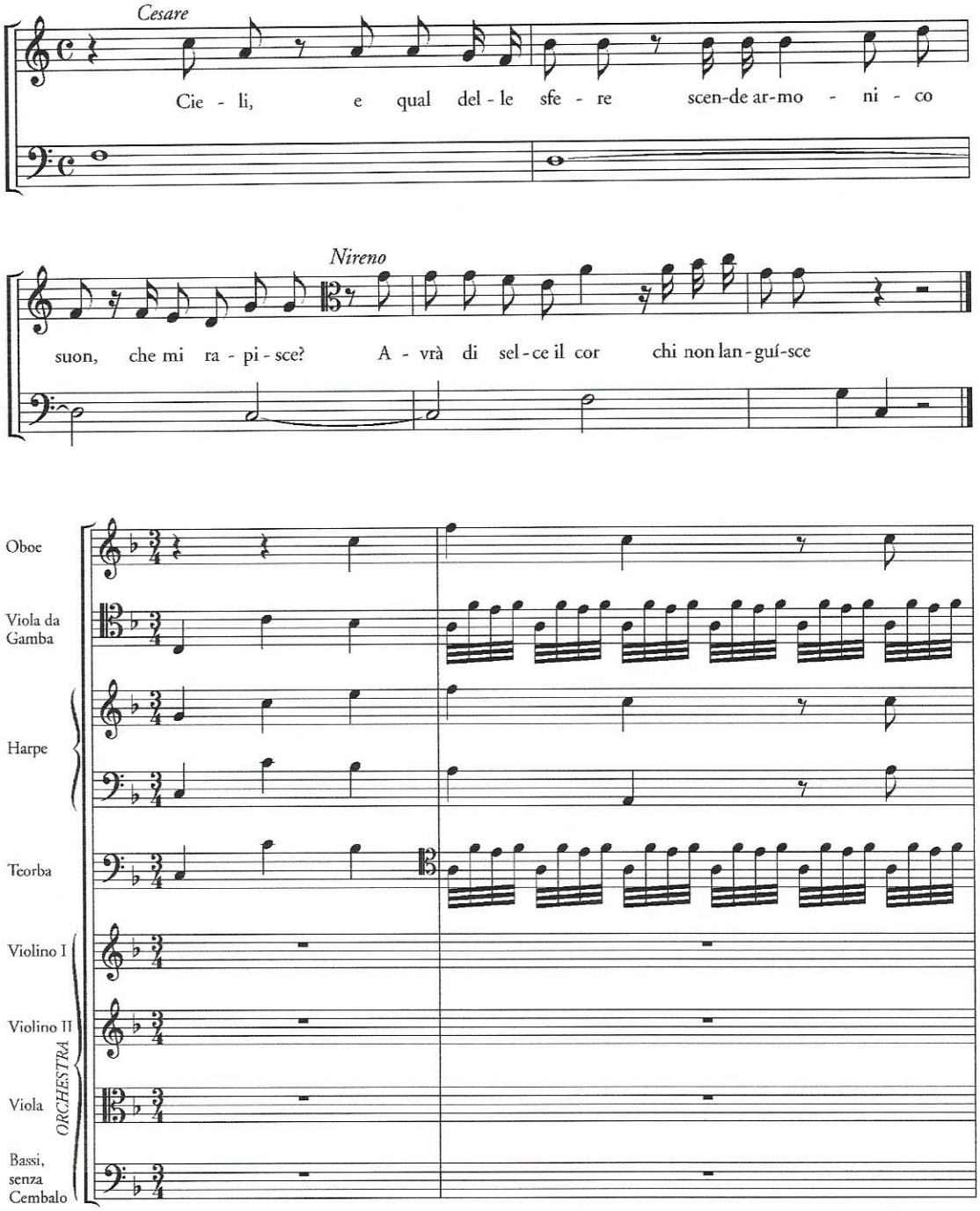
Cesare
Cie - li, e qual del - le sfe - re scen-de ar-mo - ni - co
Nireno
suon, che mi ra - pi - sce? A - vrà di sel - ce il cor chi non lan - guí-sce
Oboe
Viola da Gamba
Harpe
Teorba
Violino I
Violino II
Viola
Bassi, senza Cembalo
ORCHESTRA

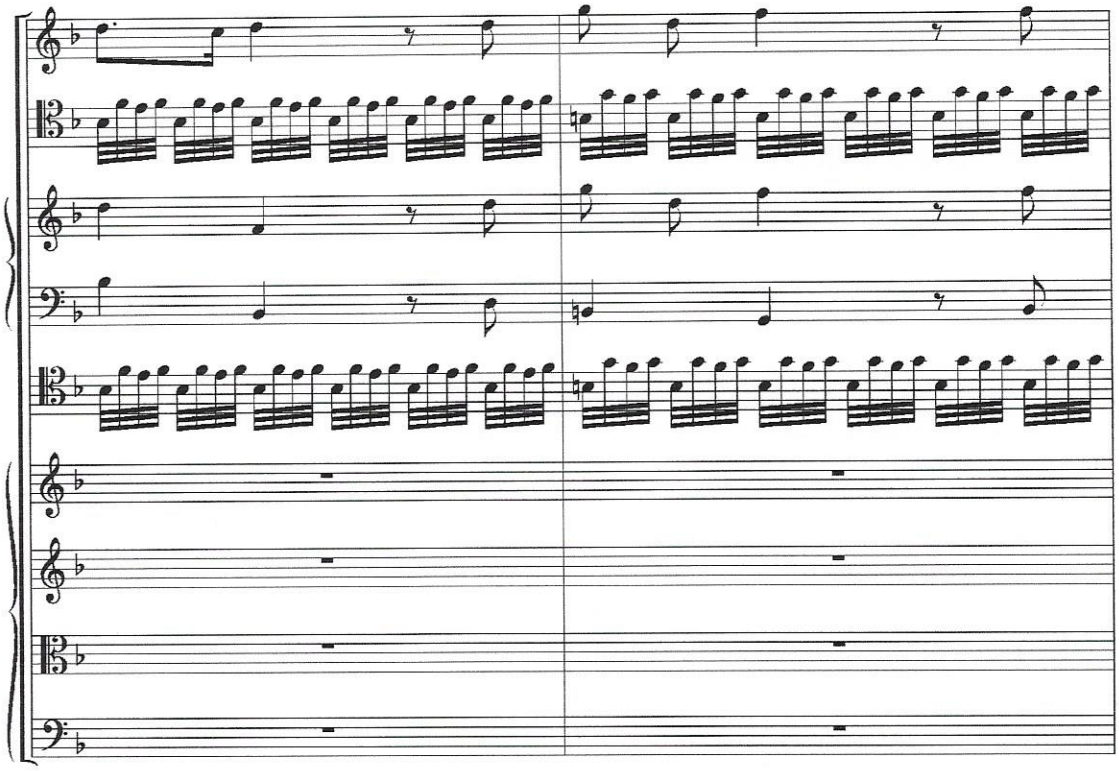

Figure 44. *Giulio Cesare*, Sinfonia A.[43] Reprinted, by permission, from Georg Friedrich Händel's *Giulio Cesare,* in a publication of the Deutschen Händelgesellschaft, vol. 68 (Wiesbaden - Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1882), pages 52-53.

The second version of the Sinfonia is scored for oboe and violin I, violin II, viola, harp, viola da gamba, theorbo, bassoons and cello. The harp part in this Sinfonia is somewhat more prominent, adding a few flourishes to accompany the melodic instruments.

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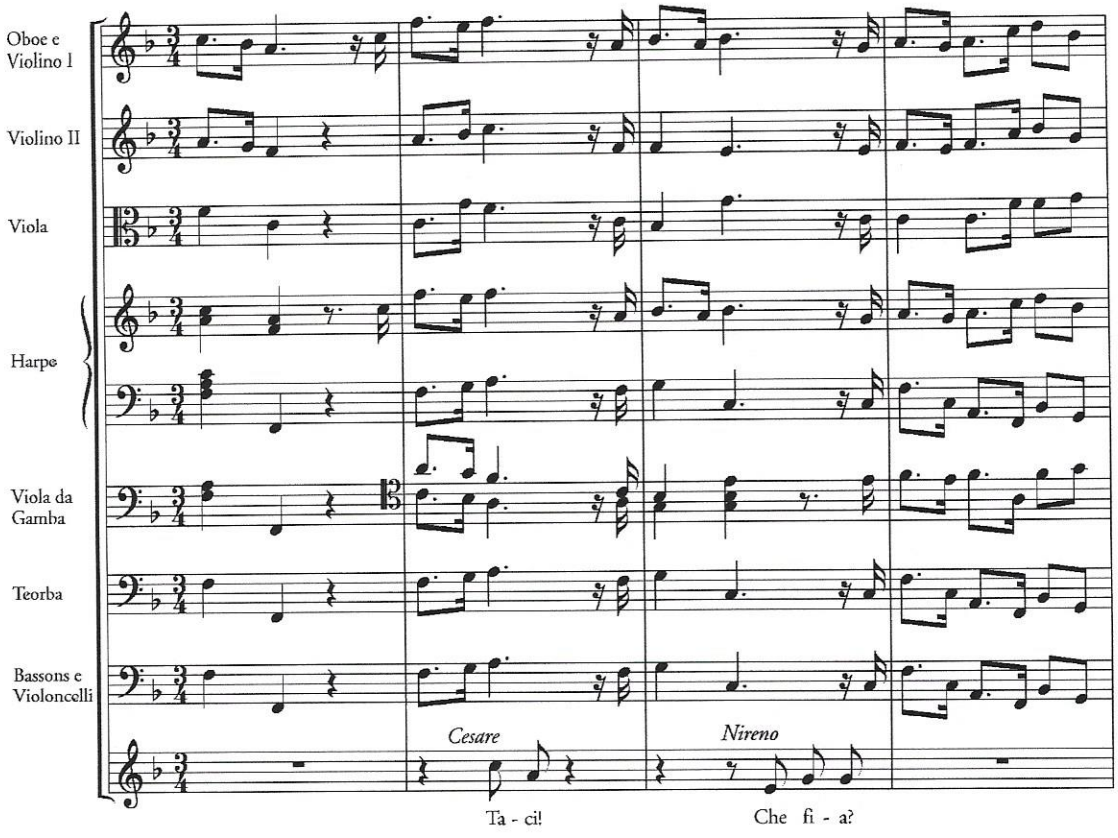
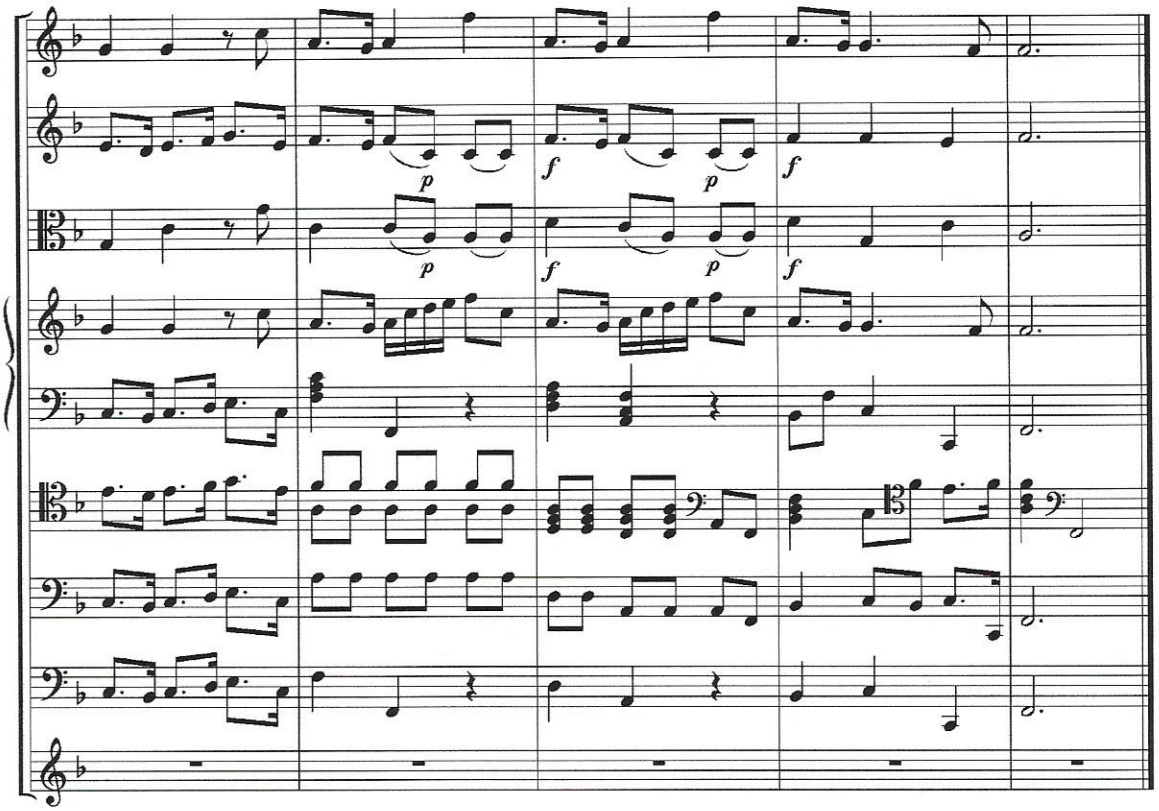
[43] Georg Friedrich Händel, *Giulio Cesare,* Publication of the Deutschen Händelgesellschaft, ed. Friedrich Chrysander, vol. 68. (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1875), 52-53.


Oboe e Violino I
Violino II
Viola
Harpe
Viola da Gamba
Teorba
Bassons e Violoncelli
Cesare
Nireno
Ta - ci!
Che fi - a?


p
f
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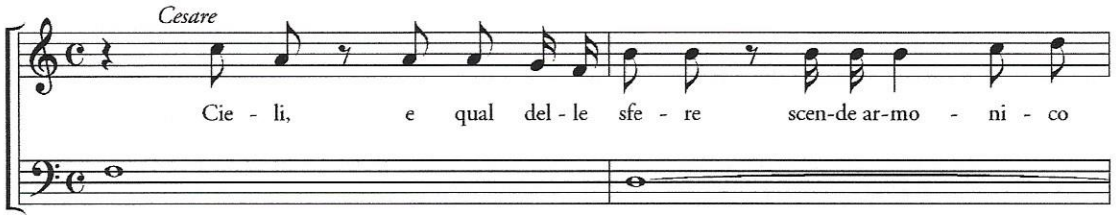
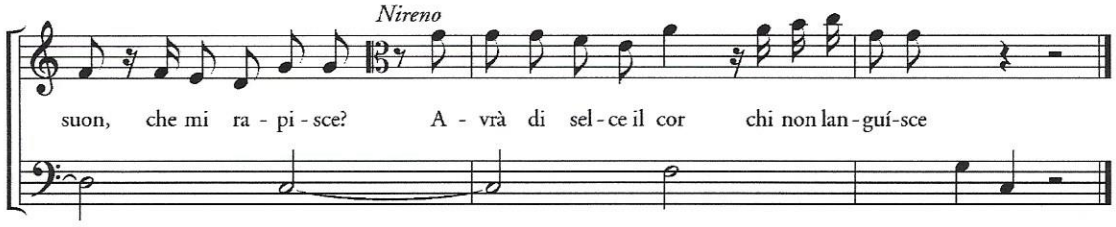
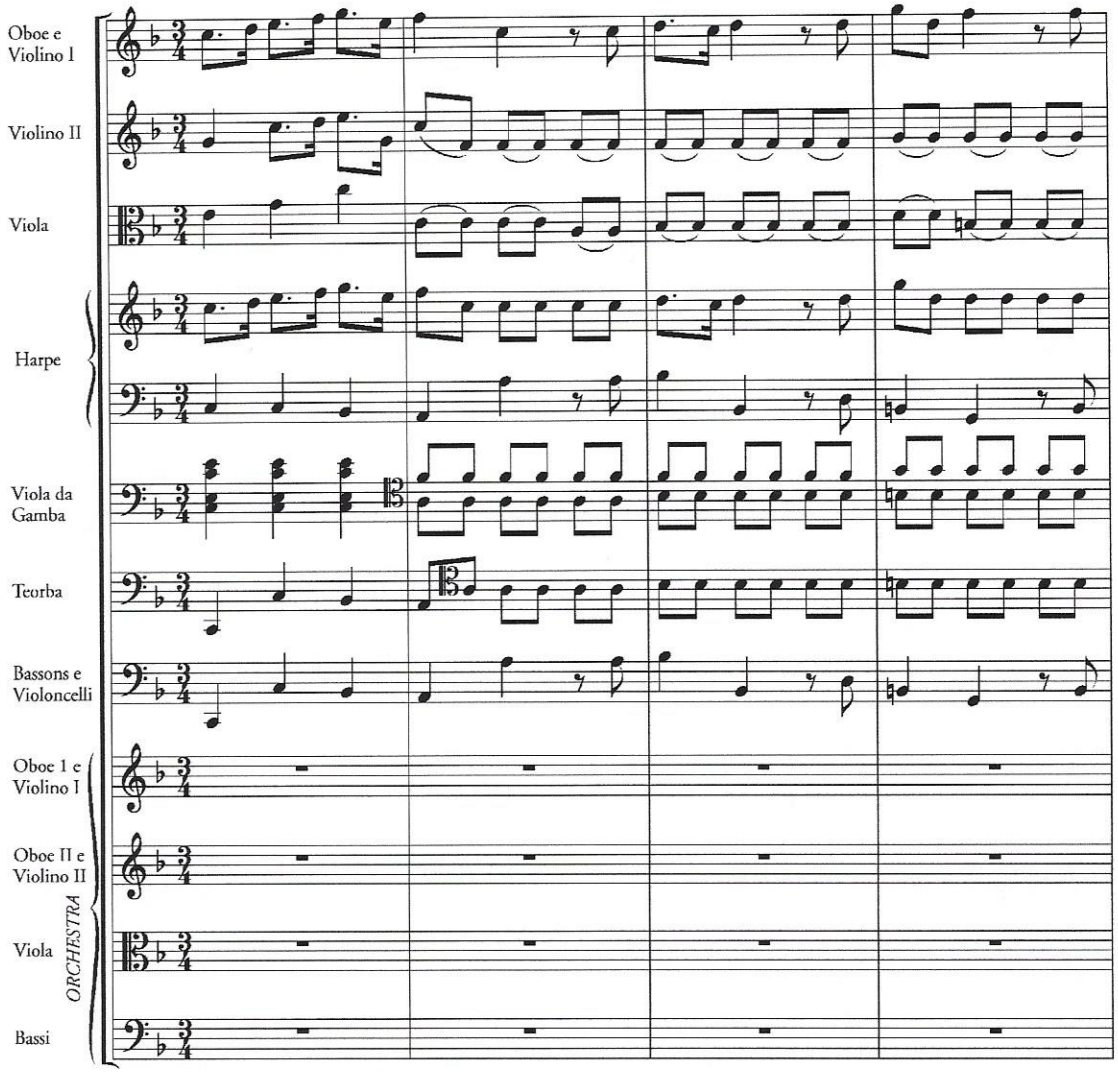
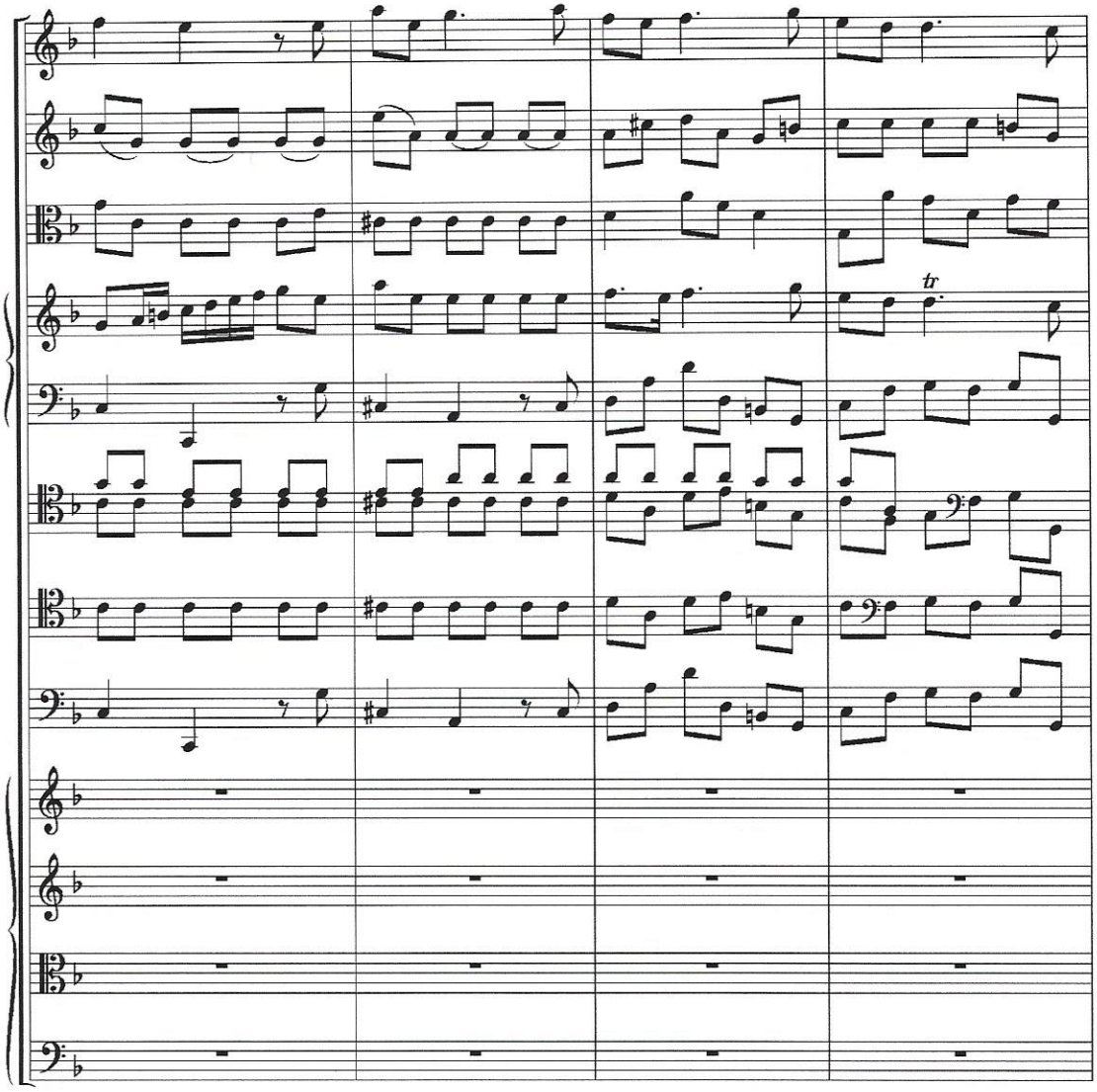

Cesare
Cie - li, e qual del - le sfe - re scen-de ar-mo - ni - co


Nireno
suon, che mi ra - pi - sce? A - vrà di sel - ce il cor chi non lan - guí-sce


Oboe e Violino I
Violino II
Viola
Harpe
Viola da Gamba
Teorba
Bassons e Violoncelli
Oboe I e Violino I
Oboe II e Violino II
Viola
Bassi
ORCHESTRA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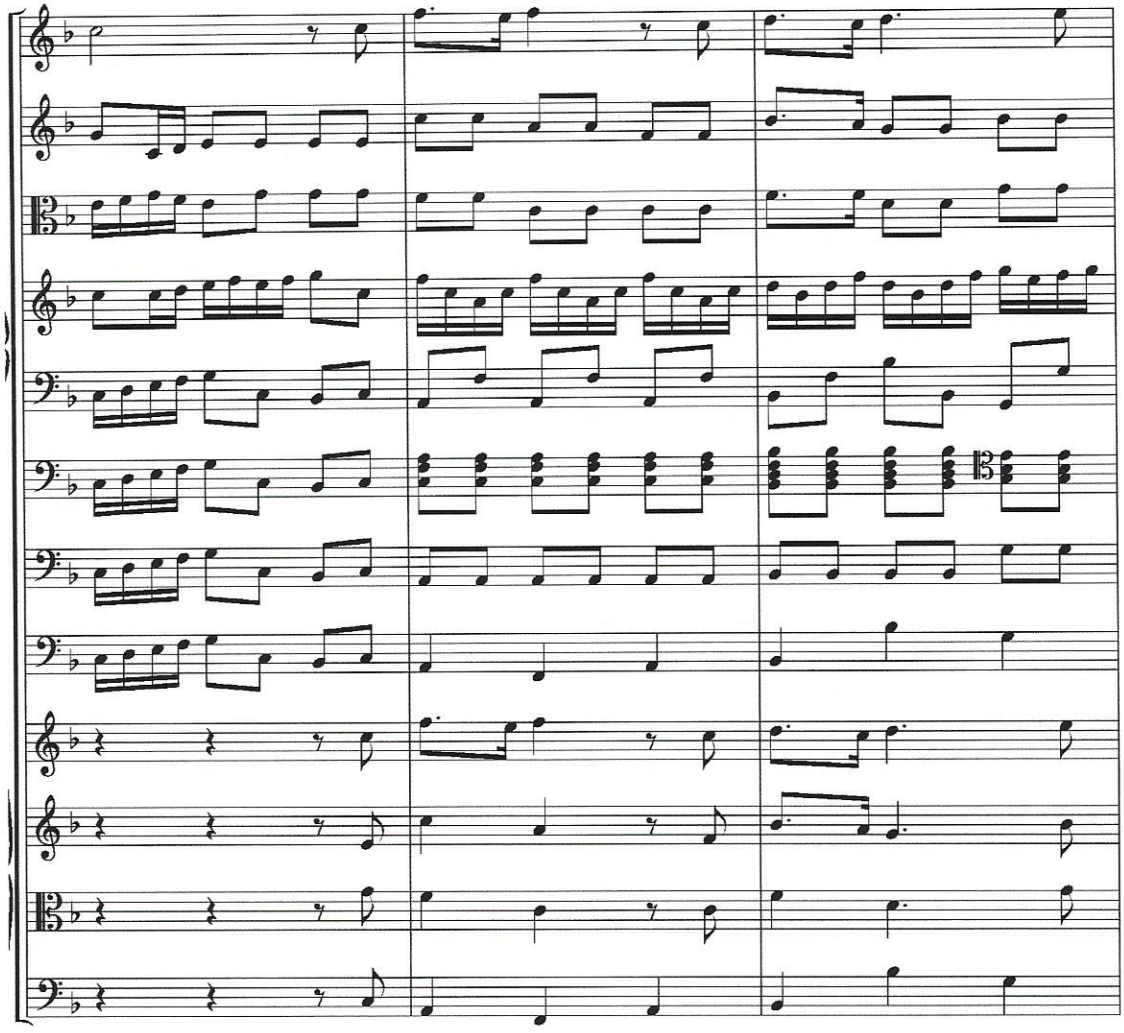

Figure 45. *Giulio Cesare*, Sinfonia B.[44] Reprinted, by permission, from Georg Friedrich Händel's *Giulio Cesare*, in a publication of the Deutschen Händelgesellschaft, vol. 68 (Wiesbaden - Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1882), pages 54-55.

In both versions of the Sinfonia, the pit orchestra joins the onstage ensemble toward the end of the short piece, and both groups provide accompaniment for "V'adoro pupille."

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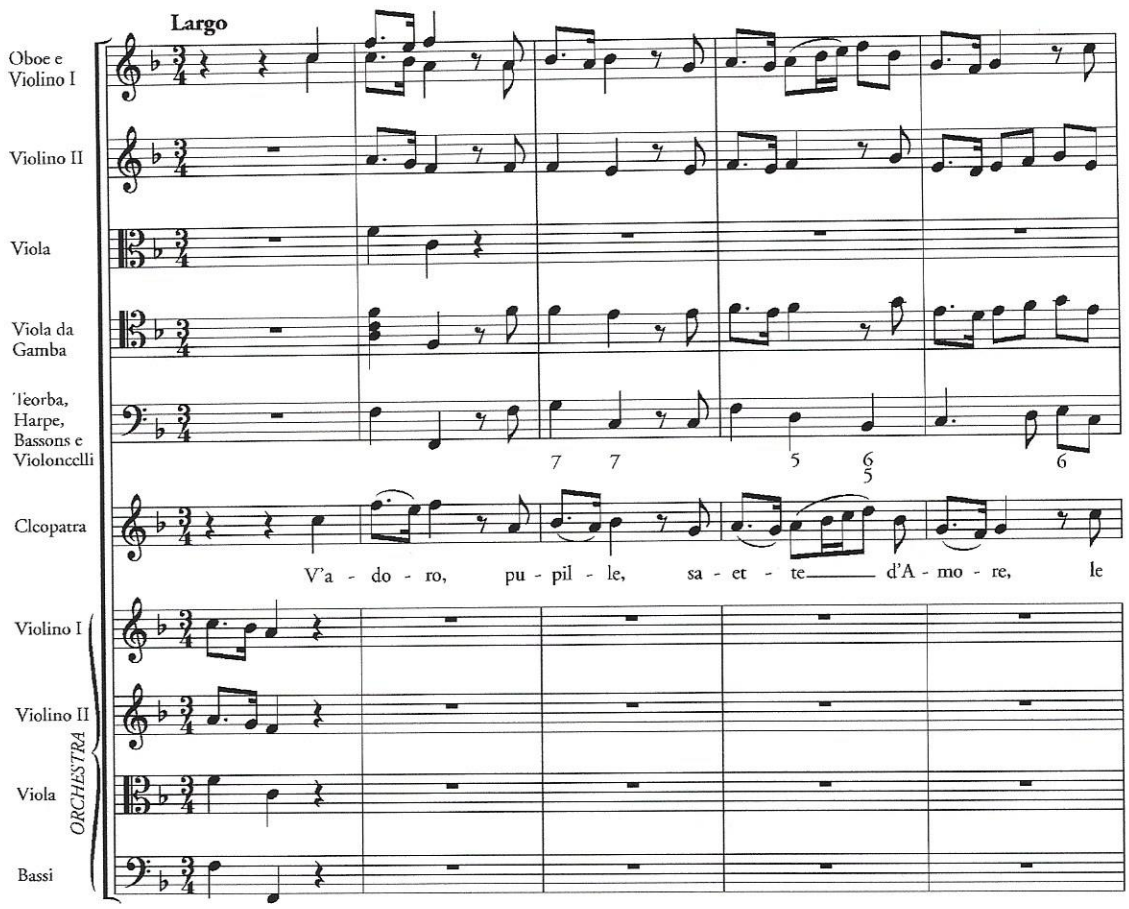
[44] Ibid., 54-55.

Cleopatra's saraband aria, "V'adoro pupille," accentuates the physical separation of the onstage and pit orchestras. Although the onstage ensemble is more conspicuous, the two groups playfully complement one another in their accompaniment of Cleopatra. The instrumentation for the da capo aria is the same as the second Sinfonia version, with muted strings. The pit orchestra, violin I con sordini, violin II con sordini, viola and bass, is interspersed in the accompaniment. The harp serves a continuo function throughout the aria.

The placement of the harp onstage restricts the harp to participating only in the second act, and only for the specified Sinfonia and aria. However, it is feasible that the harpist participated in *Giulio Cesare* from the pit in acts one and three, moving and even retuning the harp at the intermissions. This would allow unlimited dramatic interpretations for the harp continuo because the harpist could tune in a closely related key, depending on which recitatives and arias he wanted to accompany.


Largo
Oboe e Violino I
Violino II
Viola
Viola da Gamba
Teorba, Harpe, Bassons e Violoncelli
7 7 5 6 6
5
Cleopatra
V'a - do - ro, pu - pil - le, sa - et - te d'A - mo - re, le
Violino I
Violino II
Viola
Bassi
ORCHESTRA

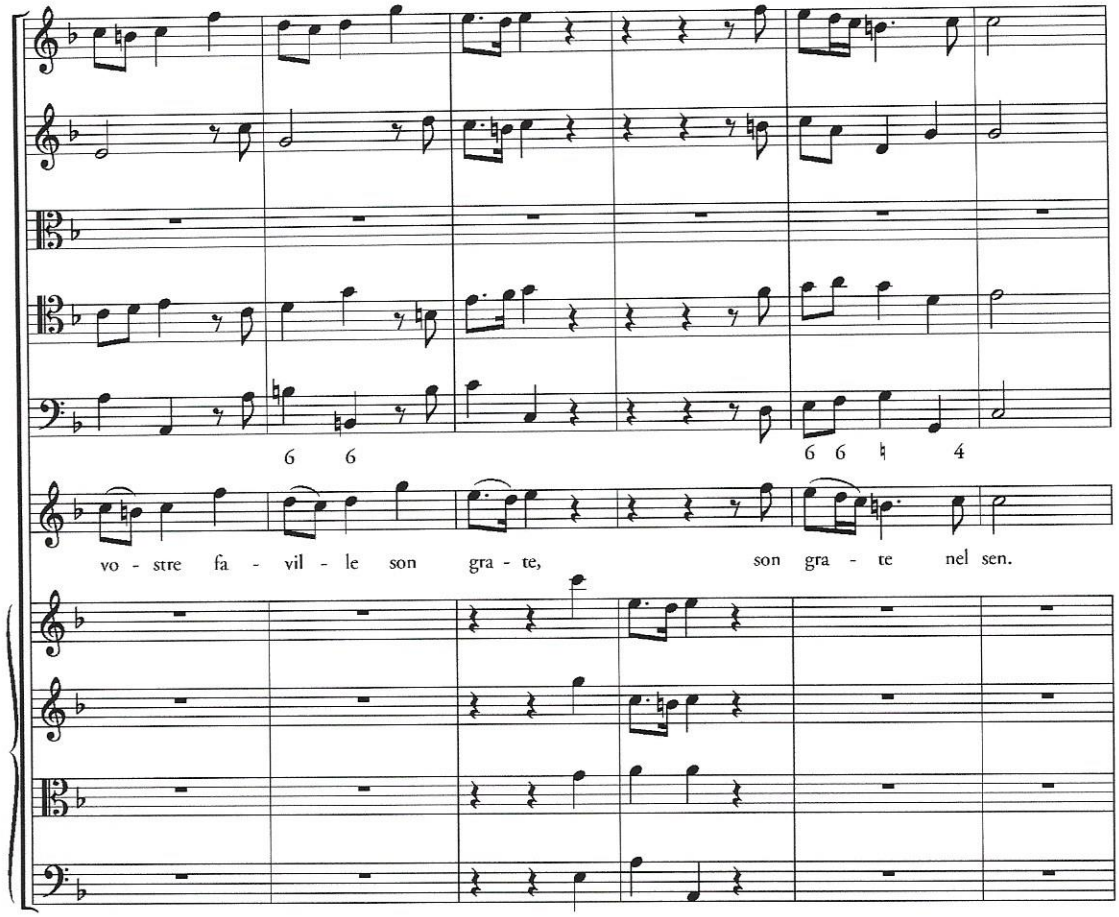


Figure 46. *Giulio Cesare*, "V'adoro pupille."[45] Reprinted, by permission, from Georg Friedrich Händel's *Giulio Cesare,* in a publication of the Deutschen Händelgesellschaft, vol. 68 (Wiesbaden - Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1882), pages 56-57.

In 1736, Händel wrote the choral ode *Alexander's Feast,* a work that has taken a prominent position in harp repertoire. John Dryden (1631-1700) wrote the text of the original *St. Cecilia Day Ode*, or *The Power of Musick*, in 1697. Händel's libretto for *Alexander's Feast* included some changes to the ode, which were provided by Newburgh Hamilton (flourished 1712-1759). The ode tells of a competition between St. Cecilia and the mortal

[45] Ibid., 56-57.

musician Timotheus at a Persian feast. The two players compete to stir Alexander's emotions. Händel's music provides solos for the competitors-- an organ concerto for St. Cecilia and a harp concerto for Timotheus--as well as lush orchestration befitting the Power of Musick, which centers on a Concerto Grosso in C major. London's John Walsh Jr. (1709-1766) published the ode in full score in 1738, but the edition did not include the three concerti. Instead, the concerti were published separately. Notably, Timotheus' harp concerto was published as organ concerto Op. 4, No. 6.

The Harp Concerto in B-flat was performed in the first part of *Alexander's Feast,* following the tenor recitative:

> Timotheus plac'd on high
> Amid the tuneful quire,
> With flying fingers touch'd the lyre;
> The trembling notes ascend the sky,
> And heav'nly joys inspire.[46]

Representing the lyre, the harp emerges from the final F major chord of the recitative into this famous solo concerto. The orchestration of the Harp Concerto consists of recorder and violin I con sordini, recorder and violin II con sordini, cello, viola, and contrabass (pizzicato), organ continuo and solo harp. Again, Händel demonstrates the most sensitive orchestration. The upper strings are muted, and the lower strings are pizzicato. Both effects subdue the volume and timbre of the accompaniment so as not to overpower the harp.

The three-movement work is written in the contemporary style galant. This free and embellished style of composition supports the extemporaneous dramatic character of

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[46] Georg Friedrich Händel, *Alexander's Fest*, Publication of the Deutschen Händelgesellschaft, ed. Friedrich Chrysander, vol. 12 (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1861), 1.

the ode. The first and third movements, Andante allegro and Allegro moderato respectively, are in binary form. Händel uses limited chromatics, moving conventionally from the tonic to the dominant and back to the tonic in both movements. The second movement is a triple meter Larghetto in g minor. This movement is noticeably more chromatic than the outer movements. William D. Gudger, an expert on Händel's organ concerti, suggests that the second movement of the Concerto in B-flat was improvised in performance, and that the published Larghetto was actually composed for the organ, not for the harp.[47] The dramatic effect of an improvised second movement would have contributed to the ode's competition, and it is feasible that William Powell was such a skilled improviser that Händel allowed him the liberty of improvising. When Händel pursued publishing the concerto, he may have composed the second movement for the organ in order to complete the collection of six concerti. Not only is the second movement thought to have been improvised, but also Händel's initial concept of the work as a solo concerto was casually altered to include any other virtuosi who might be available. For example, the 1736 libretto introduces the concerto as "A Concerto here, for Harp, Lute, Lyrichord, and other Instruments." In later versions of the ode, the harp concerto was replaced by an organ concerto. Händel "probably included the Harp Concerto whenever a soloist was available."[48] He seemed less concerned with the specifics of the concerto than with the overall effect of the performance

Following the performance of the Concerto in B-flat in *Alexander's Feast*, Händel avoids the key of B-flat until the end of the ode, thereby making it difficult for the harpist

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[47] William D. Gudger, "Händel's Harp Concerto," in *American Harp Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer 1978), 16.

[48] Ibid.

to participate in continuo accompaniment. The opening setting of Part II in D major seems especially deliberate: "Now strike the golden Lyre again!" But the key of D is so far removed from B-flat that, even if the harpist retuned at intermission, the harp would not hold pitch for such a drastic change. However, the key of B-flat strategically returns for Timotheus' revenge. The pieces "Behold, a ghastly band," "Give the vengeance due," and "Thaïs led the way" all utilize two flats. This allows the harpist one last opportunity to demonstrate Timotheus' musical mastery before yielding the prize to St. Cecilia.

Händel's next work to include the harp was completed soon after *Alexander's Feast;* the oratorio *Saul* premiered in 1738. The oratorio's librettist was Charles Jennens (1700-1773). The piece involving harp, "Fly, fly, malicious spirit, fly," was cut from *Saul* prior to the oratorio's premiere. However, Händel restored the piece in the 1741 revival. "Fly, fly" is orchestrated for harp, theorbo and violin on the same treble line; the singer, David; and pizzicato viola and bass. Because the line that specifies harp is limited to the treble range, it is possible that the harpist also doubled the viola and bass continuo line.

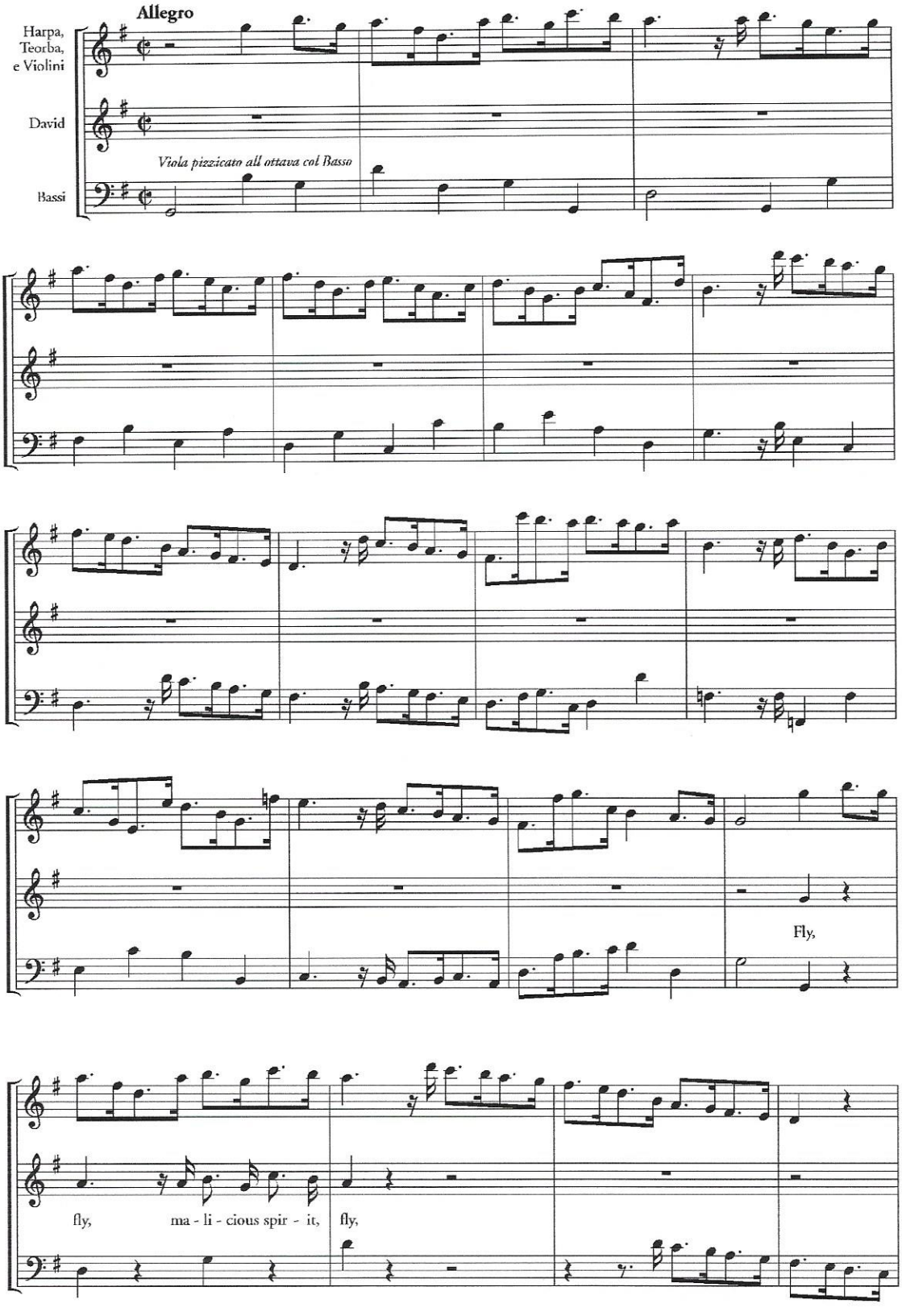
Allegro
Harpa, Teorba, e Violini
David
Viola pizzicato all ottava col Basso
Bassi
Fly,
fly, ma - li - cious spir - it, fly,

Figure 47. *Saul,* "Fly, fly, malicious spirit, fly."[49] Reprinted, by permission, from Georg Friedrich Händel's *Saul,* in a publication of the Deutschen Händelgesellschaft, vol. 13 (Wiesbaden - Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1882), page 91.

The harpist may have also participated in the continuo accompaniment throughout the oratorio. An especially suitable recitative for harp is Act I, Scene 4: ""Tis but his old disease... Oh take thy harp...."

Händel's final work involving harp harkens back to the role of the harp in the first *Esther.* The oratorio *Alexander Balus*, with text by Reverend Thomas Morell (1703-1784), premiered in 1747. The work opens with Cleopatra's recitative: "But how shall Cleopatra entertain the royal ear, unless Apollo's self deigns to attune to his own harp my song (Act I, Scene I)?"[50] She continues singing "Hark! hark! hark! he strikes the golden lyre," accompanied by a rich, full orchestra that includes transverse flutes, harp and mandolin. The combination of harp and mandolin, which double the same part, creates an evocative texture that could resemble the immortal music of Apollo, the music of exotic lands, well-suited to the drama of *Alexander Balus*, or the timbre of the Irish wire-strung harp, a sound adored by the British when British-Irish relations were good. Whatever the desired sonority, the sound produced by combining the mandolin and harp is a dry, metallic, and slightly percussive pluck. This unique timbre is enhanced by Händel's orchestration, which places the harp and mandolin with pizzicato cello and bass, and bassoon. This plucked

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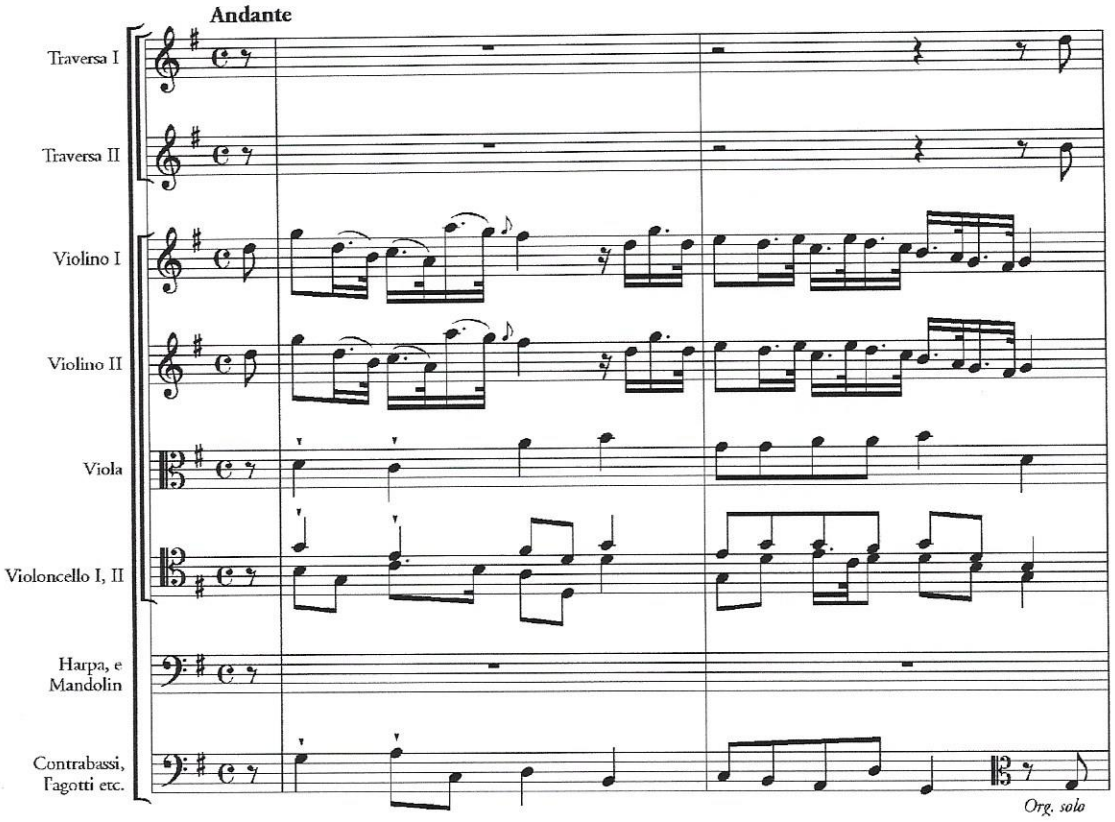
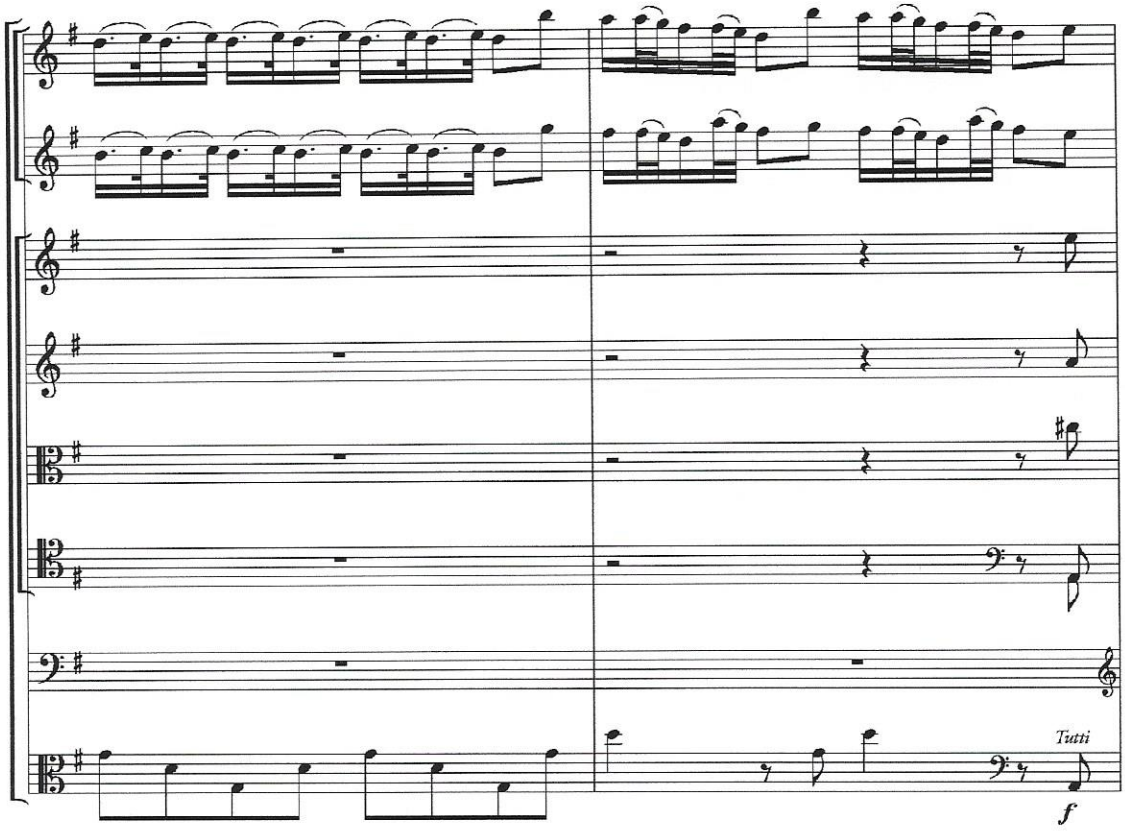
[49] Georg Friedrich Händel, *Saul,* Publication of the Deutschen Händelgesellschaft, ed. Friedrich Chrysander, vol. 13 (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1862), 91.

[50] Georg Friedrich Händel, *Alexander Balus*, Publication of the Deutschen Händelgesellschaft, ed. Friedrich Chrysander, vol. 33 (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1870), 27.

ensemble is contrasted with the bowed upper strings and legato transverse flutes. The prominent part played by the mandolin and harp is challenging and notable.




Tutti
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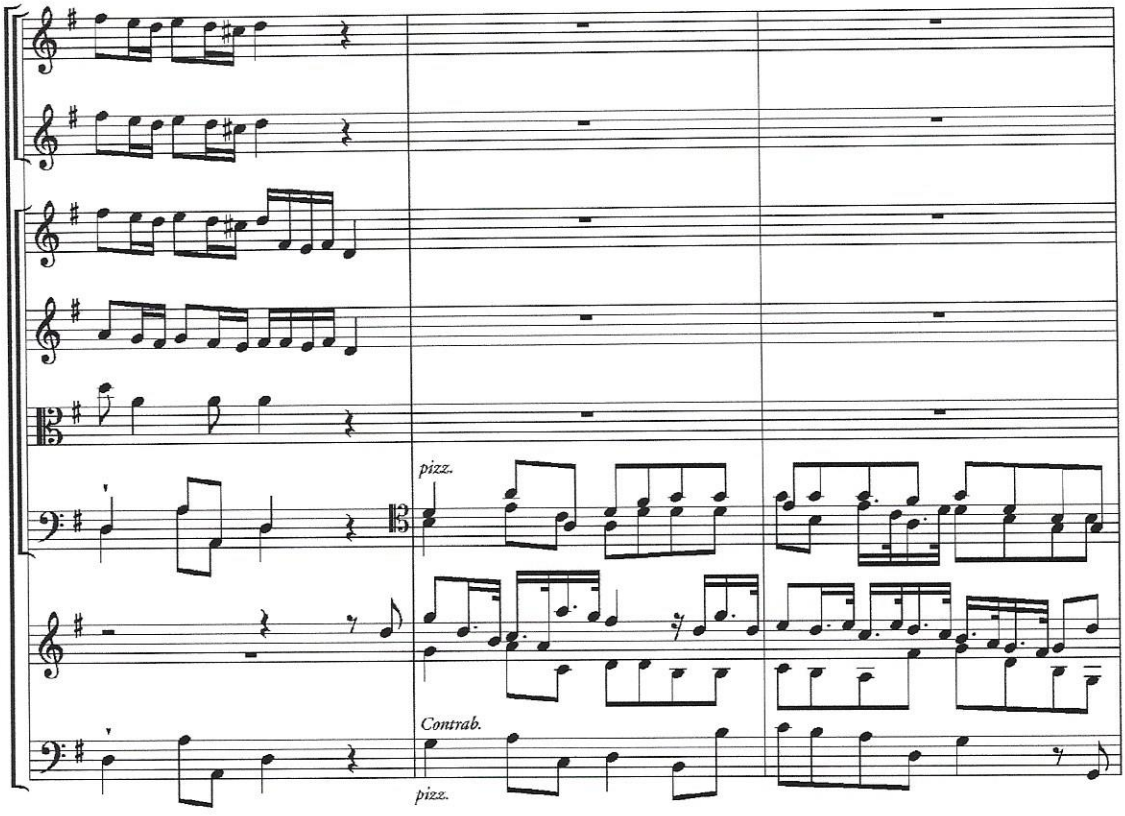
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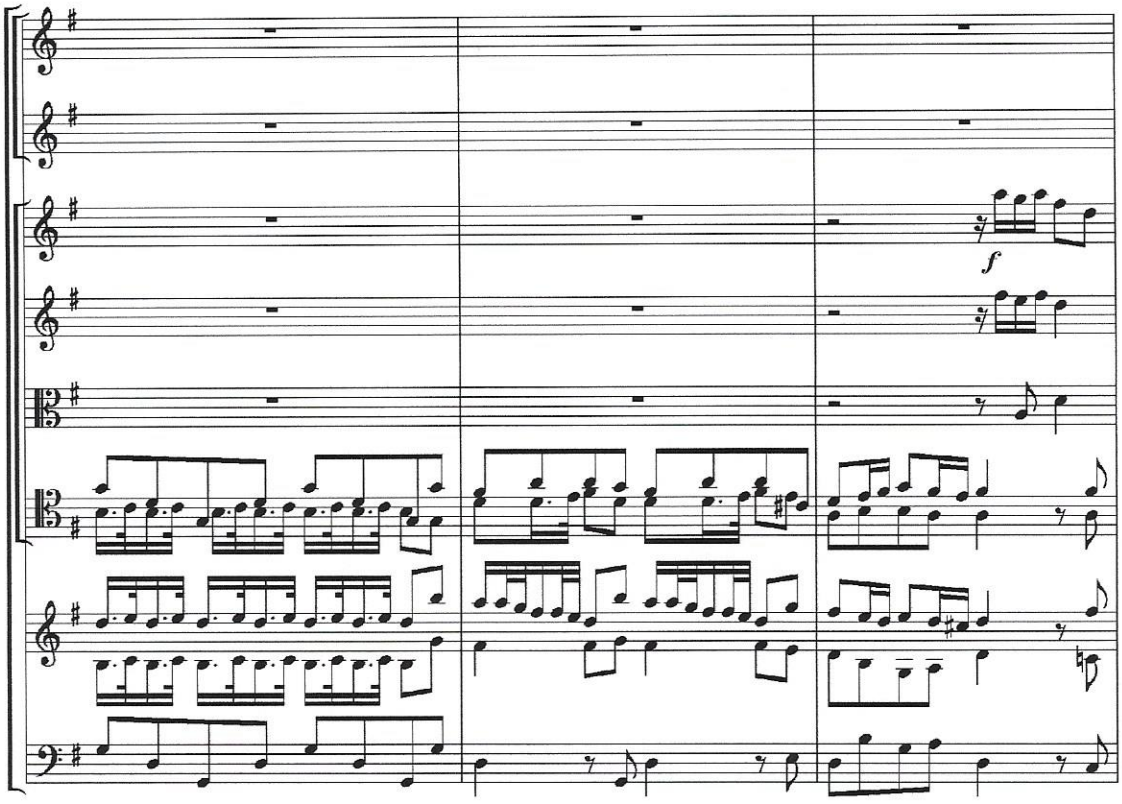
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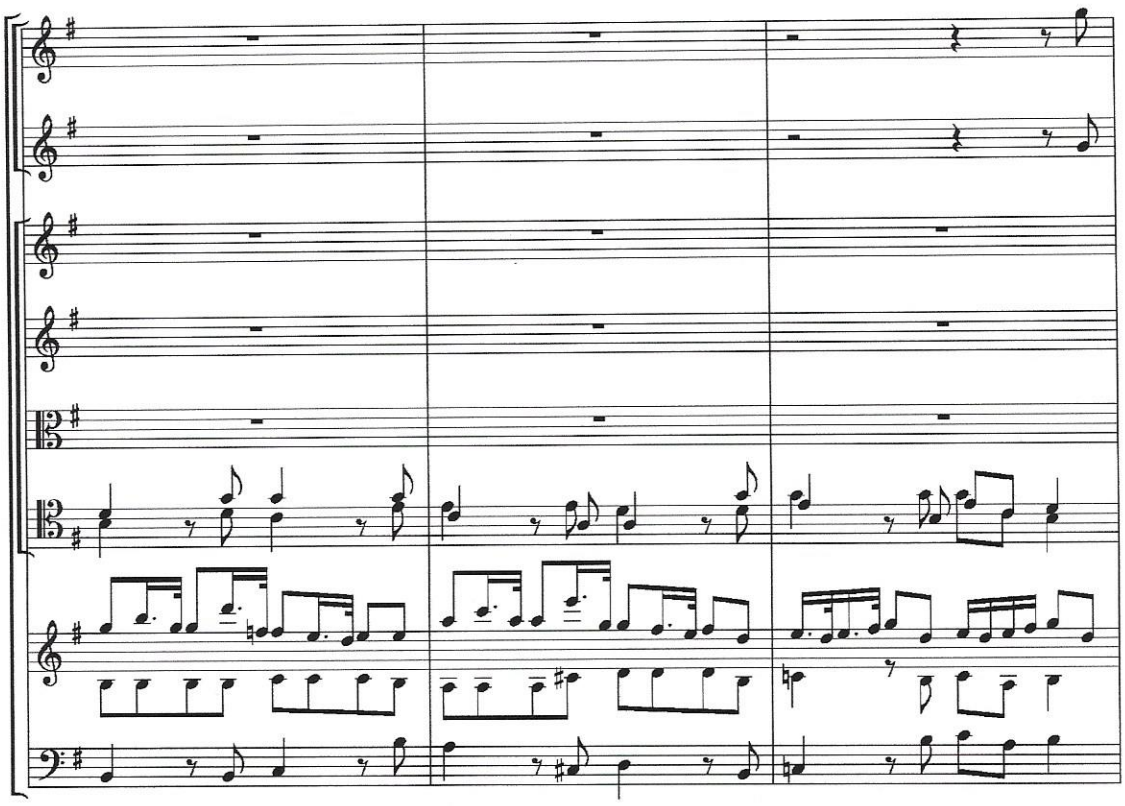

Figure 48. *Alexander Balus*, "Hark! hark! hark! he strikes the golden lyre."[51] Reprinted, by permission, from Georg Friedrich Händel's *Alexander Balus,* in a publication of the Deutschen Händelgesellschaft, vol. 33 (Wiesbaden - Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1882), pages 27-29.

Like the harp part in *Esther's* "Praise the Lord with cheerful noise," *Alexander Balus'* "Hark! hark! hark! he strikes the golden lyre" provides a substantial part for the harpist. However, unlike the 1720 version of *Esther,* the harpist for *Alexander Balus* probably played continuo throughout the oratorio. The specified harp part is in the common key of G major.

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[51] Ibid., 27-29.

Händel's compositions for the harp were extraordinarily idiomatic from the outset. Händel was fortunate to have such talented harpists as young William Powell and his father, and John Parry (c. 1710-1782) at his disposal, and to have been surrounded by a thriving tradition of Welsh classical harpists. Although single row harps were in use at this time,[52] the free use of chromatics in Händel's compositions eliminates the possibility of performing his works on single row instruments without the aid of pedals. In addition, the range of his treble and bass lines makes performance extremely awkward on a double-strung harp. Händel almost certainly composed for the triple harp.

Händel was probably familiar with both Welsh and Italian triple harps, although his access to the Italian triple would have been limited. His more complicated harp parts definitely utilize the advantages of the Welsh instrument. The harp parts for *Esther*, *Alexander's Feast* and *Alexander Balus* are brilliant in the clear, upper register of the Welsh triple harp, whereas an Italian triple would have produced a lackluster performance. In other works, Händel specifies that the harp be used as a continuo instrument. But, whereas the Italian triple harp was well suited for continuo playing because of its powerful bass register, a Welsh triple harp could not support the musical line because of its light bass sound. Händel is clearly aware of the Welsh harp's limitations and avoids relying solely on the harp for a continuo line. He uses the harp to provide an exotic texture to the traditional continuo group of keyboard, lower strings and low winds. In sections where the harp needs to be more prominent, Händel either mutes the strings, so as not to overpower the delicate sound of the instrument, or he reinforces the pluck of the harp with string

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[52] Osian Ellis, *The Story of the Harp in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), 52.

pizzicato and theorbo. Händel was consistently aware of orchestral balance in terms of both volume and timbre, and was careful not to expose the limitations of the Welsh harp. Instead he deftly enhanced the beauty of the instrument.

The material that Händel composed involving the harp provides interesting insight into the instrument's function in Baroque ensembles and the technical proficiency of contemporary harpists. Händel's initial prominent harp part in *Esther* was quickly subdued into straightforward continuo roles for the harp. The Concerto in B-flat performed in *Alexander's Feast* indicates that Händel was advancing toward combining the harp's solo brilliance with the functional role of continuo playing. Händel concludes his efforts for harp with *Alexander Balus'* prominent harp part in a functional key, conveniently paired with the appropriate arias and recitatives for harp continuo. *Alexander Balus* ultimately demonstrates Händel's concept of the harp in a clear, simple, finely crafted part.

Suggested Readings:

Gudger, William D. "Händel's Harp Concerto." *American Harp Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer 1978): 14-22.

Music, David W. "Händel and the Harp." *American Harp Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Summer 1982): 6-15.