Dear Matafele Peinam

for mezzo-soprano and orchestra

Clifton Callender

Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, text

2020

Dear Matafele Peinam

- 1. You are
- 2. I want to tell you
- 3. Don't cry
- 4. You'll see

for William and Ethan we will all fight

Written for Alexander Jiménez, Phyllis Pancella, and the Florida State University Symphony Orchestra

INSTRUMENTATION

- 3 Flutes (3rd doubling Piccolo)
- 2 Oboes
- 1 English Horn
- 2 Clarinets in Bb
- Clarinet in A (doubling Bass Clarinet)
- 3 Bassoons (3rd doubling Contrabassoon)
- 4 Horns in F
- 3 Trumpets in C
- 3 Trombones

Tuba

- 3 Percussion
 - player 1: vibraphone, 2 bongos, 3 toms (high, medium-high, medium), woodblock
 - player 2: crotales (2 octaves), xylophone, marimba, flex atone, ocean drum, 2 bongos, 4 toms (high, medium-high, medium, low)
 - player 3: glockenspiel, slide whistle, music box (optional part on glockenspiel), 2 bongos, 3 toms (high, medium-high, medium)

Harp

Keyboard: celeste, toy piano (option part on celeste)

mezzo soprano

Strings

Duration: ca. 18 minutes

PROGRAM NOTES

[N]ow that I feel personally and intimately anchored in the future in a different way, I feel a different kind of fear. — Jedediah Britton-Purdy

[M]y work has [...] always been about processing the emotional weight of climate change through $art.^1$ — Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner

Several years ago, I fell into despair after hearing a report about millennials questioning the wisdom, even morality, of having children given the climate crisis and projections of the type of world their children would inherit. Setting aside the merits of such arguments², the discussion struck at the heart of my own anxieties raising two children who are aware that their entire lives will be affected unpredictably by climate change. Succumbing to these fears, I was plagued with insomnia, joyless, and felt physically ill at my own daily contributions to greenhouse gas emissions.

Looking beyond scientific articles and the news, I turned to artistic responses to the crisis and discovered the work of the Marshall Islander poet, spoken-word artist, and climate activist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner. "Dear Matafele Peinam" was written for and first performed at the Opening Ceremony of the 2014 UN Secretary-General's Climate Summit. Written to her then seven-month-old daughter, the poem addresses climate change in general and the specific and urgent threat to the Marshall Islands and similar island countries through the lens of the most intimate of relationships—a parent seeking to protect their child.

we are artists painting, dancing, writing

In setting the poem, I've done my best to capture its meaning and provide a musical context for the text without losing the overall directness, succinct articulation of the threat and subsequent focus on the collective fight, and especially the touching depiction of the poet's daughter. The poem is presented in four sections, realized as four separate movements. "You are" captures the simple delights of a young child (bananas, hugs, walks by the lagoon) and concludes with a slightly exhausted mother and a still bouncing baby. "I want to tell you" hints at the threats facing the Marshall Islands, with peaceful lagoons devouring shorelines, sea walls, and roots of breadfruit trees, rendering the islands uninhabitable, their inhabitants left to wander without a home. The third and by far largest section of the poem ("Don't cry") channels anger at "blindfolded bureaucracies" and companies "with broken morals" into personal and collective action. "You'll see" is (mostly) a lullaby, reassuring a drowsy child and recalling the melody from the first movement most associated with her.

i apologize to you

The most challenging portion of the text to set was a passage in the third movement in which Jetñil-Kijiner changes voice, directly apologizing to other Pacific Islanders who have already become climate-change refugees. At this point, the music is suddenly torn off and the text is framed by a strident chord. This same chord recurs in three separate passages: the first recurrence accompanies lines about those who pretend that the Marshall Islands and similar island nations, as well as the many disasters attributed to climate change, don't exist. The chord next accompanies text about people marching in the streets "chanting for change NOW." Finally, this chord associated with apology slightly colors the closing repeated chords recalling the bouncing baby from the opening movement.

Since the poem was completed in 2014, there have been many other climate-change disasters and refugees—devastating cyclones striking southern Africa and Puerto Rico, wildfires in Australia and California, massive floods in south Asia, severe droughts in east Africa and central America, European heatwaves. Indeed, Marshall Islanders are having to contemplate raising their islands or the construction of artificial islands in case it becomes impossible to remain on their homeland in its natural state. Will we have to apologize to this daughter? To our own children?

we won't let you down, you'll see

We can't promise our children that everything will be okay, but we can assure them that we are going to fight, which begins with those most vulnerable to climate change. The best chance we have to protect our own homeland is to do everything we can to preserve theirs.

¹ Jetñil-Kijiner, K. (2019, February 19). Bulldozed reefs and blasted sands: rituals for artificial islands [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://kathyjetnilkijiner.com/blog/.

² Gibson, C. (2020, February 14). How climate experts think about raising children who will inherit a planet in crisis. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from http://washingtonpost.com.

TEXT

"Dear Matafele Peinam" by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner from lep Jāltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter

dear matafele peinam,

you are a seven month old sunrise of gummy smiles you are bald as an egg and bald as the buddha you are thighs that are thunder and shrieks that are lightning so excited for bananas, hugs and our morning walks past the lagoon

dear matafele peinam,

i want to tell you about that lagoon that lucid, sleepy lagoon lounging against the sunrise

men say that one day that lagoon will devour you

they say it will gnaw at the shoreline chew at the roots of your breadfruit trees gulp down rows of your seawalls and crunch your island's shattered bones

they say you, your daughter and your granddaughter, too will wander rootless with only a passport to call home

dear matafele peinam,

don't cry

mommy promises you

no one will come and devour you

no greedy whale of a company sharking through political seas no backwater bullying of businesses with broken morals no blindfolded bureaucracies gonna push this mother ocean over the edge

no one's drowning, baby no one's moving no one's losing their homeland no one's gonna become a climate change refugee

or should i say no one else

to the carteret islanders of papua new guinea and to the taro islanders of the solomon islands i take this moment to apologize to you we are drawing the line here

because baby we are going to fight your mommy daddy

bubu jimma your country and president too we will all fight

and even though there are those
hidden behind platinum titles
who like to pretend
that we don't exist
that the marshall islands
tuvalu
kiribati
maldives
and typhoon haiyan in the philippines
and floods of pakistan, algeria, colombia
and all the hurricanes, earthquakes, and tidalwaves
didn't exist

still there are those who see us

hands reaching out fists raising up banners unfurling megaphones booming and we are canoes blocking coal ships we are the radiance of solar villages we are the rich clean soil of the farmer's past we are petitions blooming from teenage fingertips we are families biking, recycling, reusing, engineers dreaming, designing, building, artists painting, dancing, writing and we are spreading the word

and there are thousands out on the street marching with signs hand in hand chanting for change NOW

and they're marching for you, baby they're marching for us

because we deserve to do more than just survive we deserve to thrive

dear matafele peinam,

you are eyes heavy with drowsy weight so just close those eyes, baby and sleep in peace

because we won't let you down you'll see

Dear Matafele Peinam

Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner Clifton Callender

1. You are



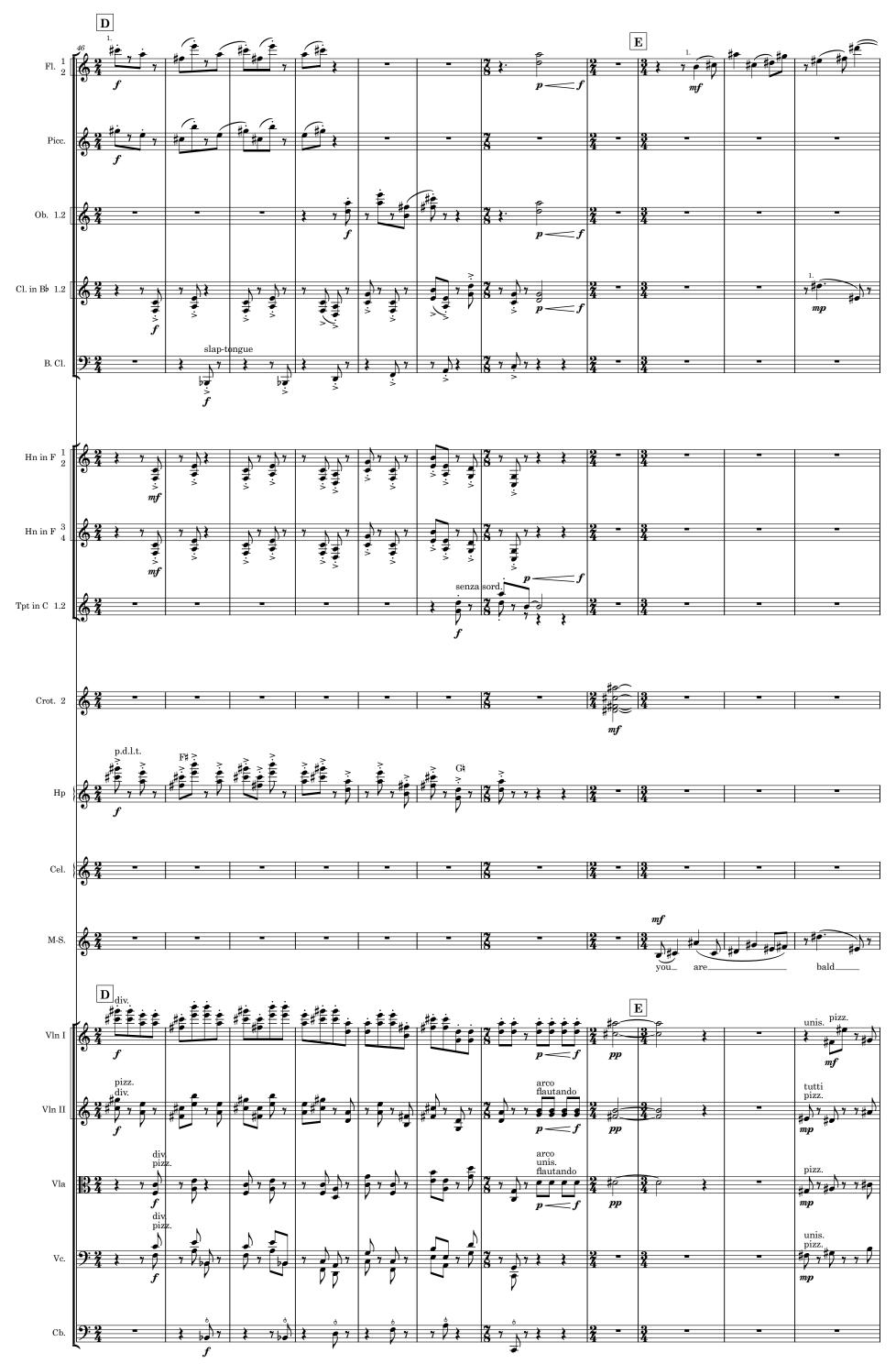




























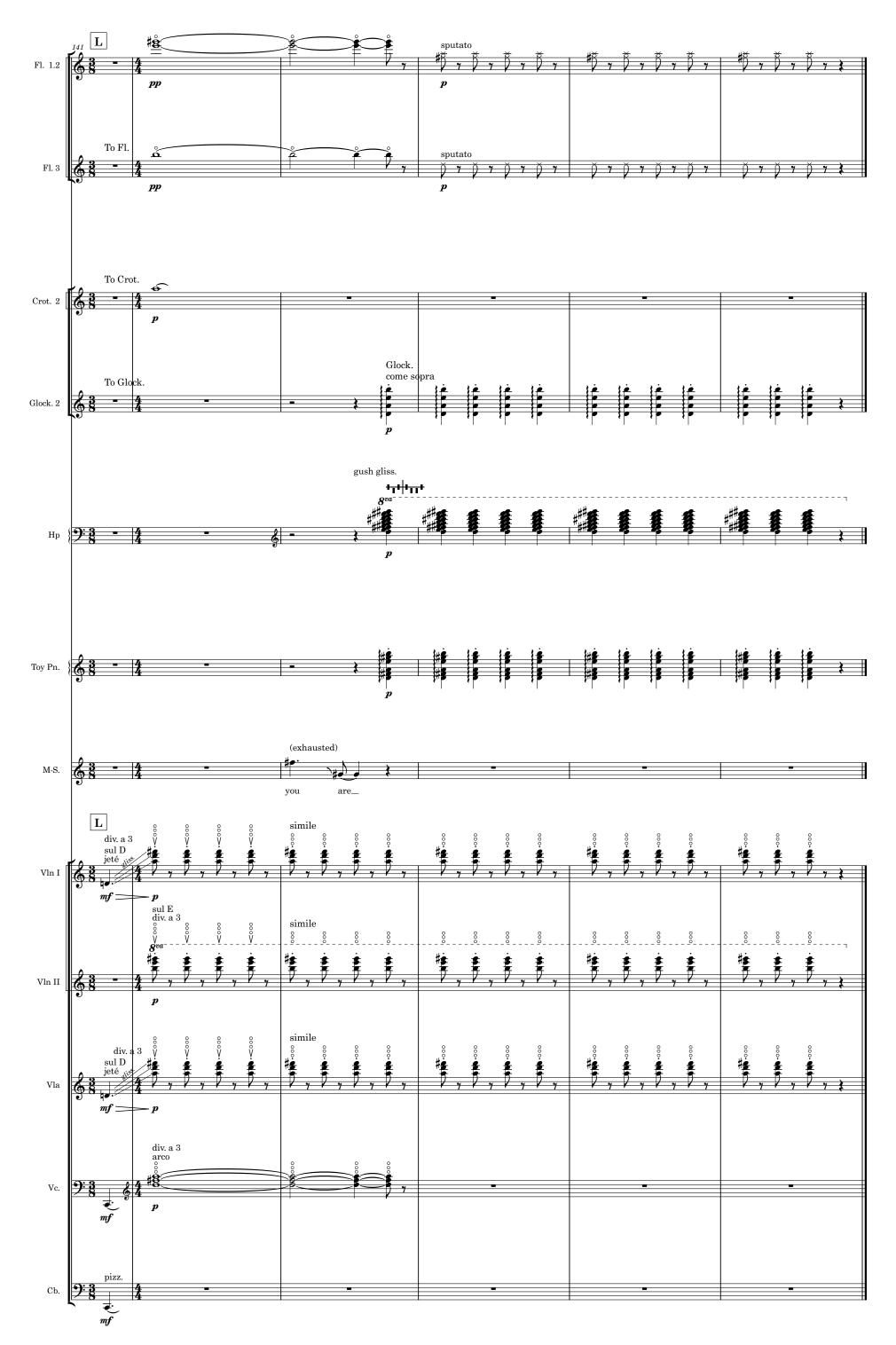


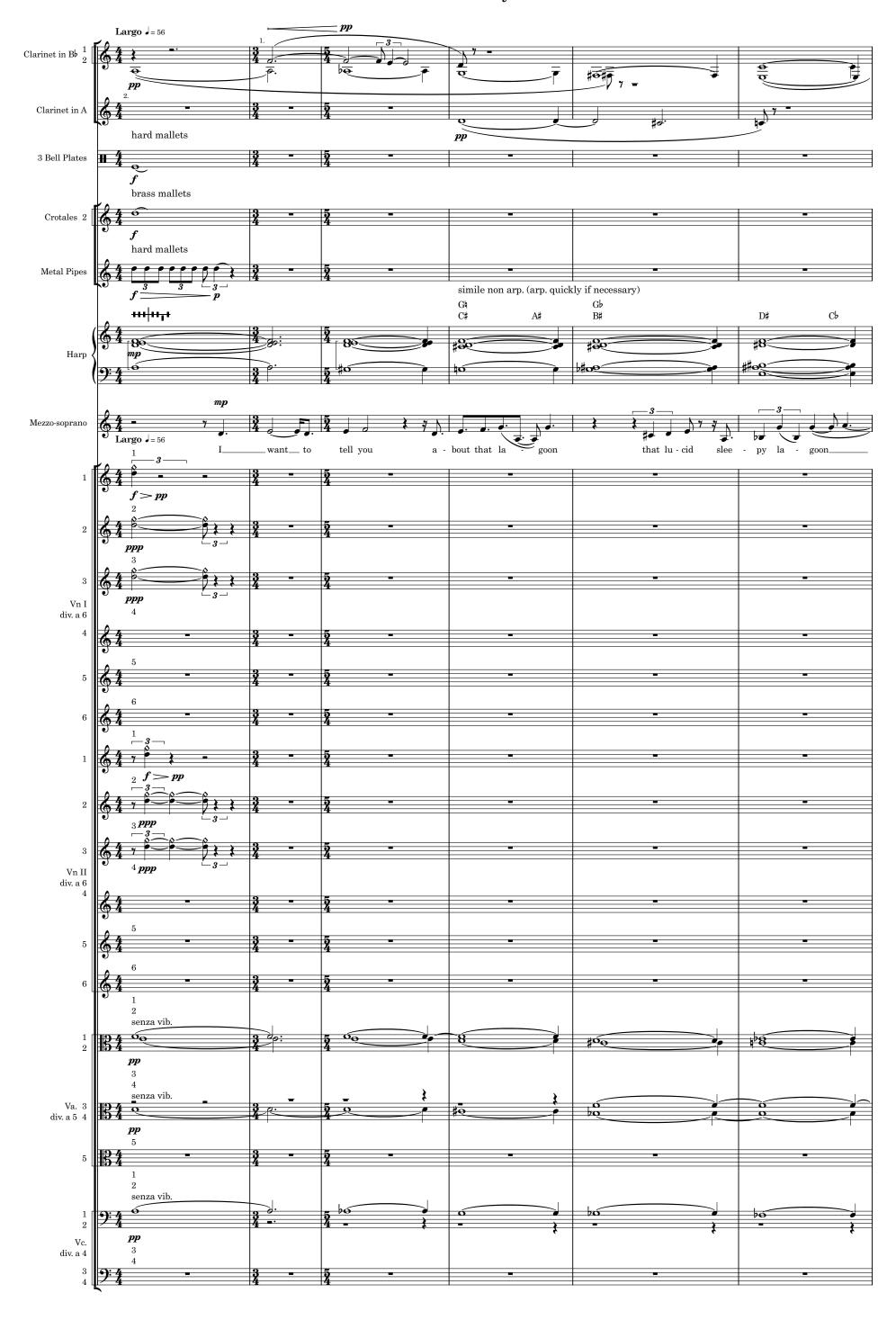














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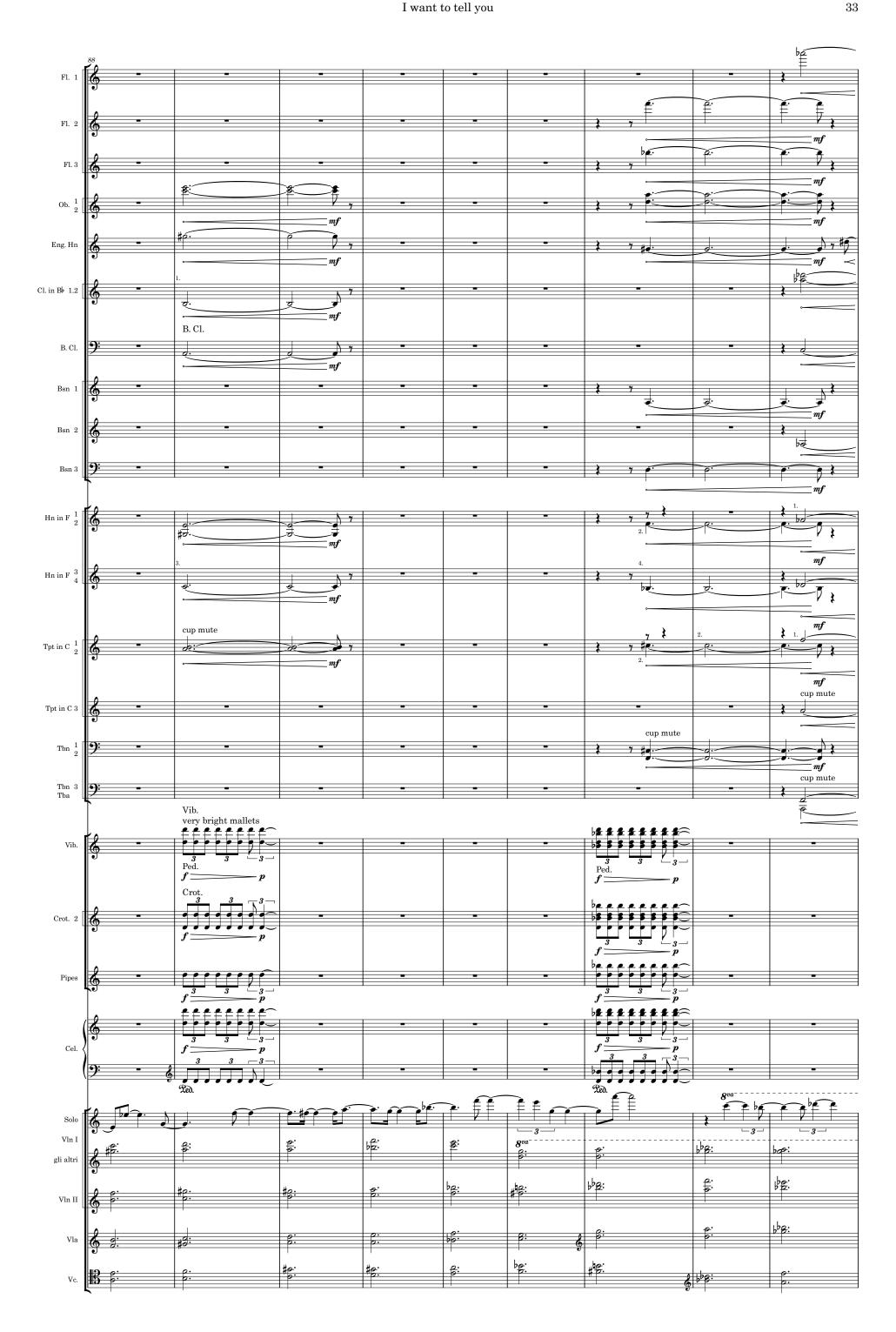






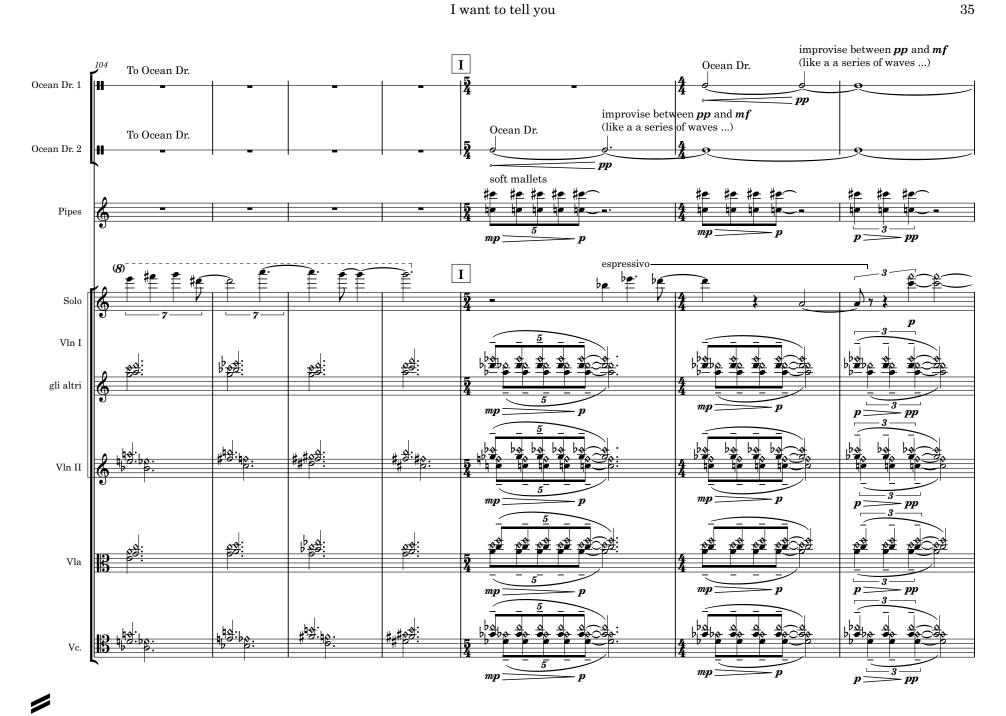


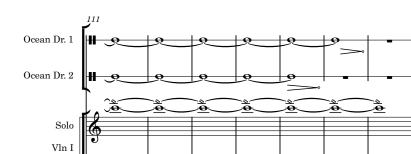




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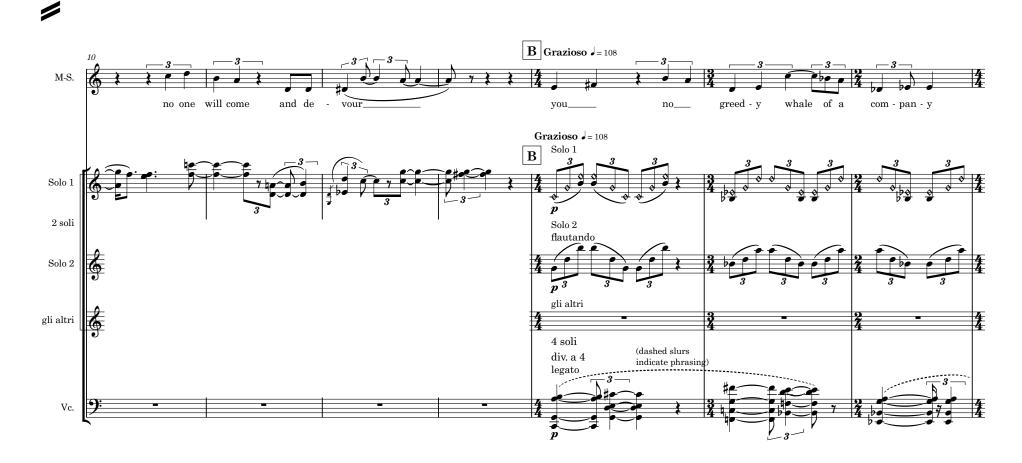




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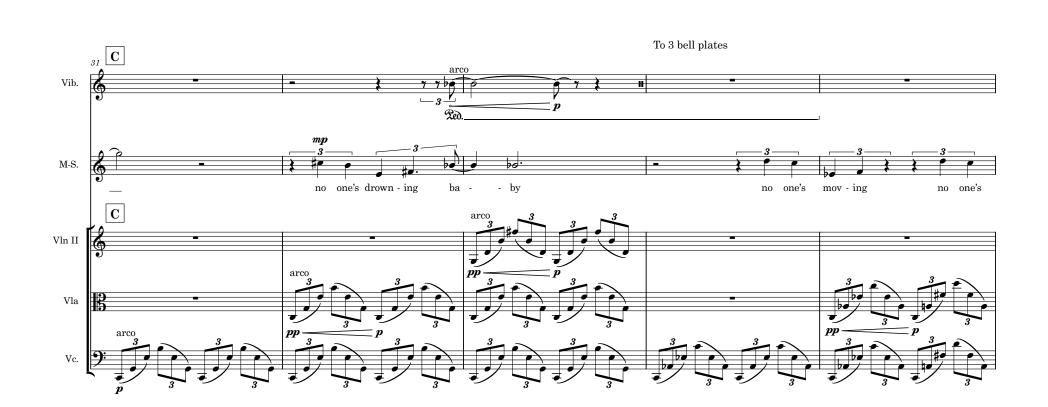
3. Don't cry

















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