MELODY WRITING: GENERAL CHARACTER/TEXT SETTING

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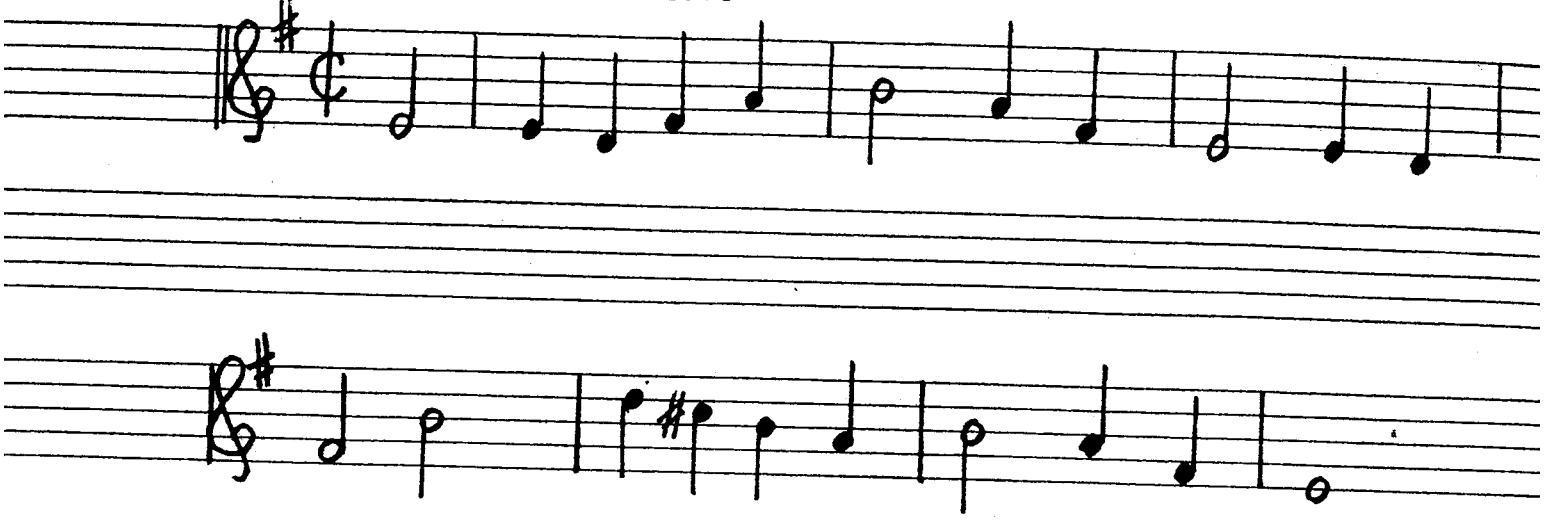
What provides a good melodic line?

1. Common rhythmic figures dictated by the text to be set.
2. An harmonic framework characterized by --
    - A. Relationship between beginning and ending notes in pitch, octave, timbre (i.e. same pitch, different octave
    - B. A high point/climax built up to and worked away from (though not necessarily any kind of arch form)
        - I. Nine times out of ten, the high point/climax occurs 2/3 to 3/4 the way through the work.
    - C. One or two different musical ideas expanded upon and related to one or the other of those ideas.

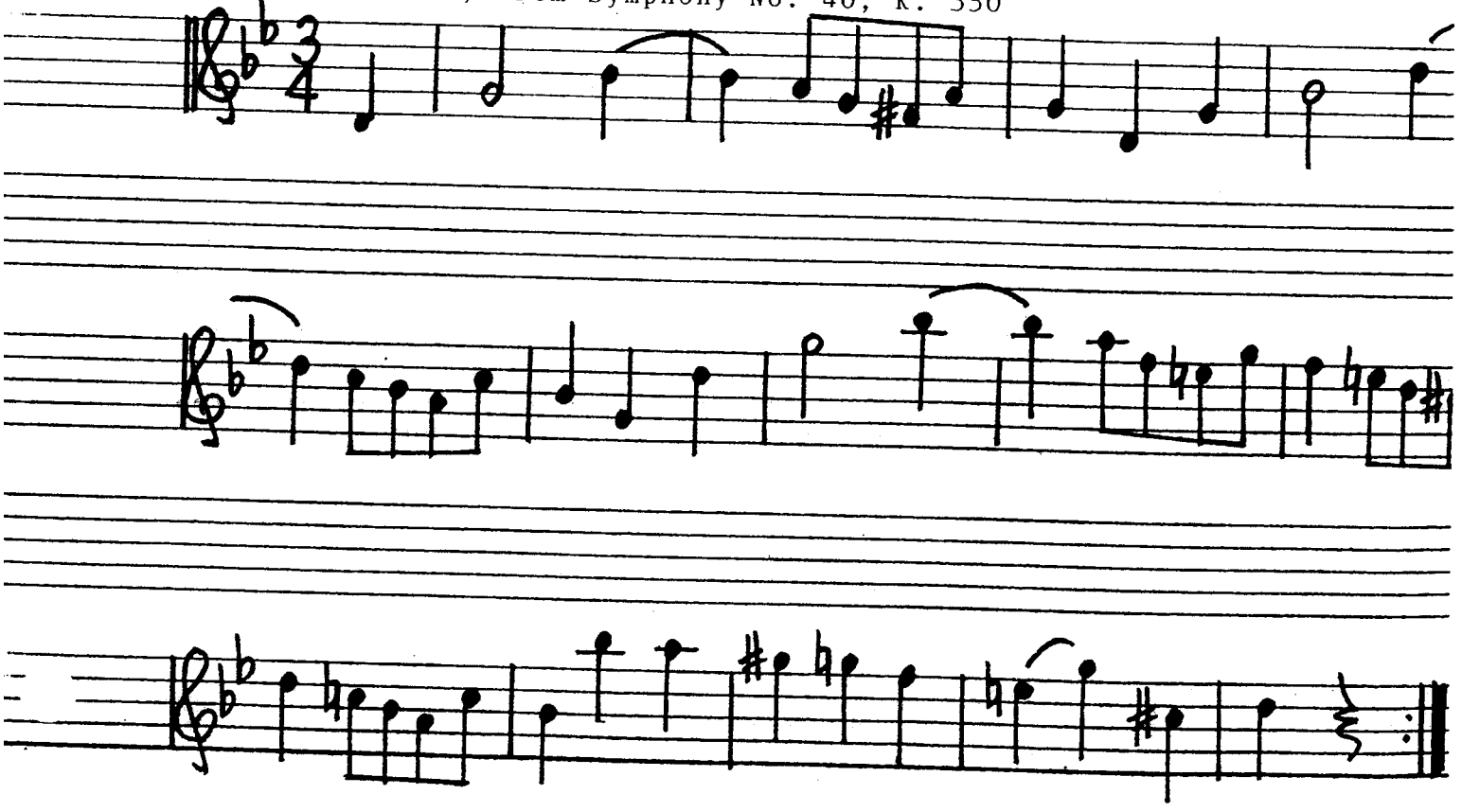
Text-Setting Summary

1. In writing vocal music, an understanding of the relation of words and music is essential.
2. Words influence the rhythmic patterns of melody.
    - A. The meter of the melody tends to agree with that of the words.
    - B. Accented words or syllables tend to receive musical accents.
3. Words also influence the pitch contour of a melody.
    - A. Patterns of verbal inflection suggest melodic inflections.
    - B. On the simplest level, melodic imagery can imitate natural sounds.
    - C. On another level, melodic imagery may enhance the effect of words expressing human emotions or portraying natural phenomena.

Spiritual: Wondrous Love



Mozart: Minuet, from Symphony No. 40, K. 550



EXAMPLES --

Following are excerpts from two songs from Shakespeare's "The Tempest."

Each song is set by three different composers.

The first song, "Full Fathom Five Thy Father Lies", is sung by Ariel and other invisible spirits to Ferdinand after his shipwreck on Prospero's enchanted island.

Notice, simply, how each song (here especially each opening phrase) is set entirely different from the rest:

Two are in $\frac{4}{4}$. One in $\frac{3}{4}$.
Two are in major keys. One in minor.

Notice what is in common. All arrive at the mid-point of the phrase on a downbeat in the second bar on the word "five" for emphasis of the rhyme with "lies".

Notice the difference in the setting of the word "father", but that all the settings drop, or move downward, for "lies".

"Where The Bee Sucks", sung by the spirit Ariel after Prospero has promised to make him free, provides an example of a relatively common time signature between the three settings, but a very different approach in harmonic implications of the melodies and in artistic license with the text.

The Johnson and Arne settings are in major keys, while the Humfrey passage is in g minor (here implying Bb major) but later contrasts with a section in G major.

Notice...

(1) The faster tempo implied by the $\frac{2}{2}$ of the Johnson.

(2) That Humfrey (a student of Lully) changed the line "the bat's back" to "the swallow's wings"

(a) Is his choice easier to set to music?

(b) Is it easier to understand being sung?

(c) Or a matter of social taste?

(3) The artistic license taken by Arne on the word "fly" (word painting).

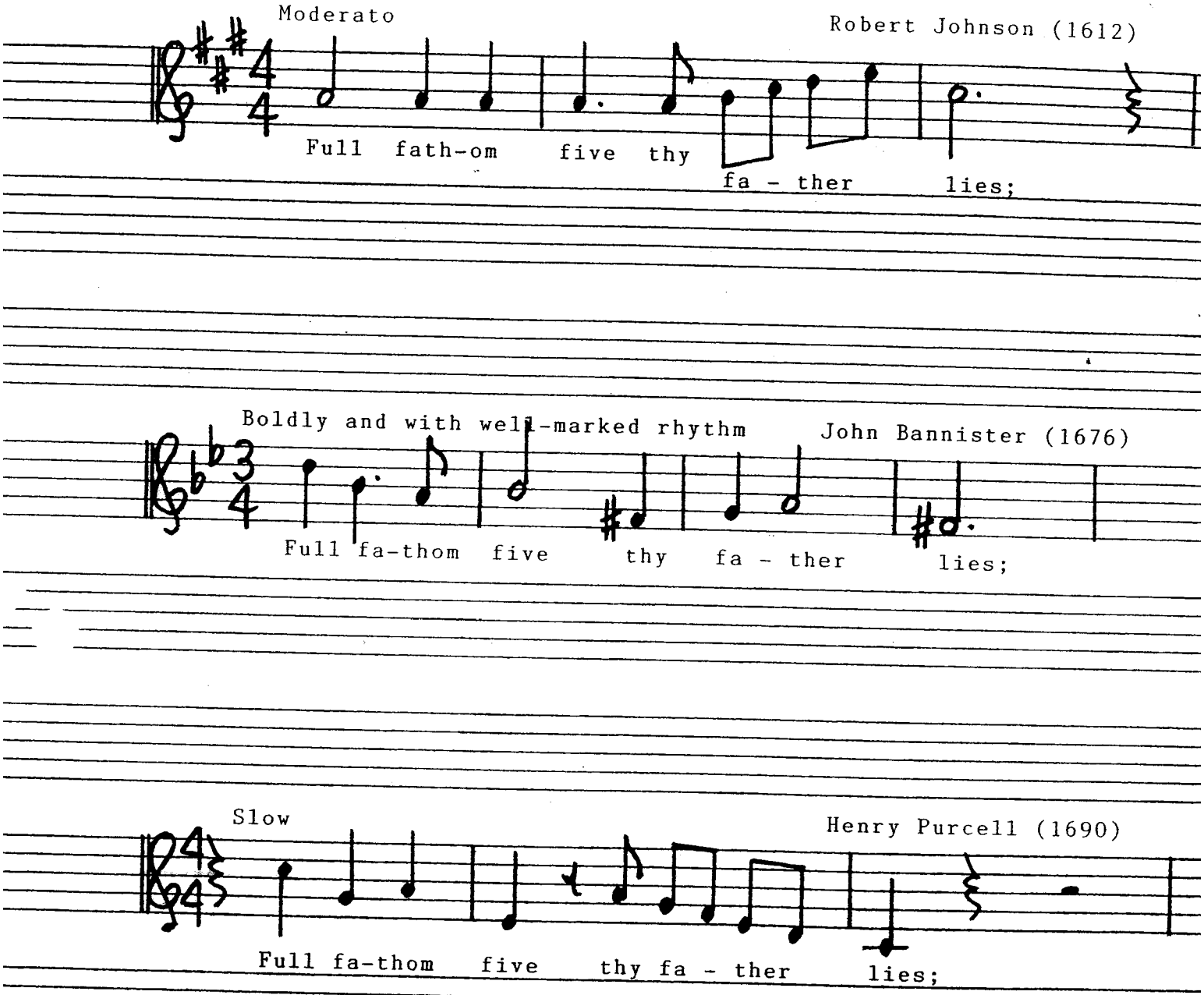
Juxtaposing two settings three hundred years apart, the opening phrase of "Rest, Sweet Nymphs" provides many differences in setting:

A simple meter vs. a compound meter.
f minor vs. F major.
moderate tempo vs. allegretto.

Where would you place the emphasis/accents in this line --

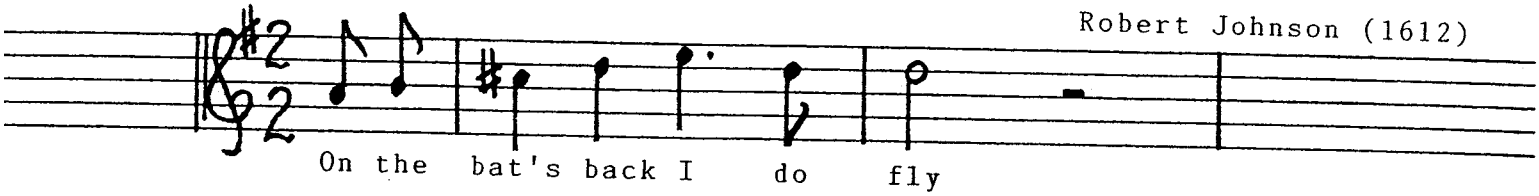
"Charm your star-brighter eyes" ?

FULL FATHOM FIVE THY FATHER LIES

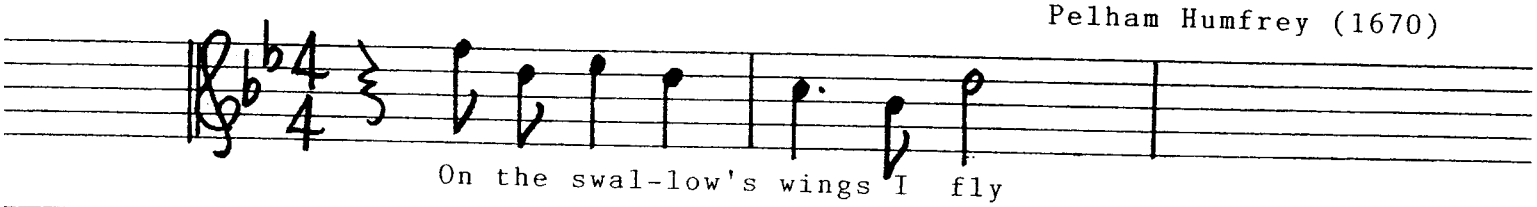


WHERE THE BEE SUCKS

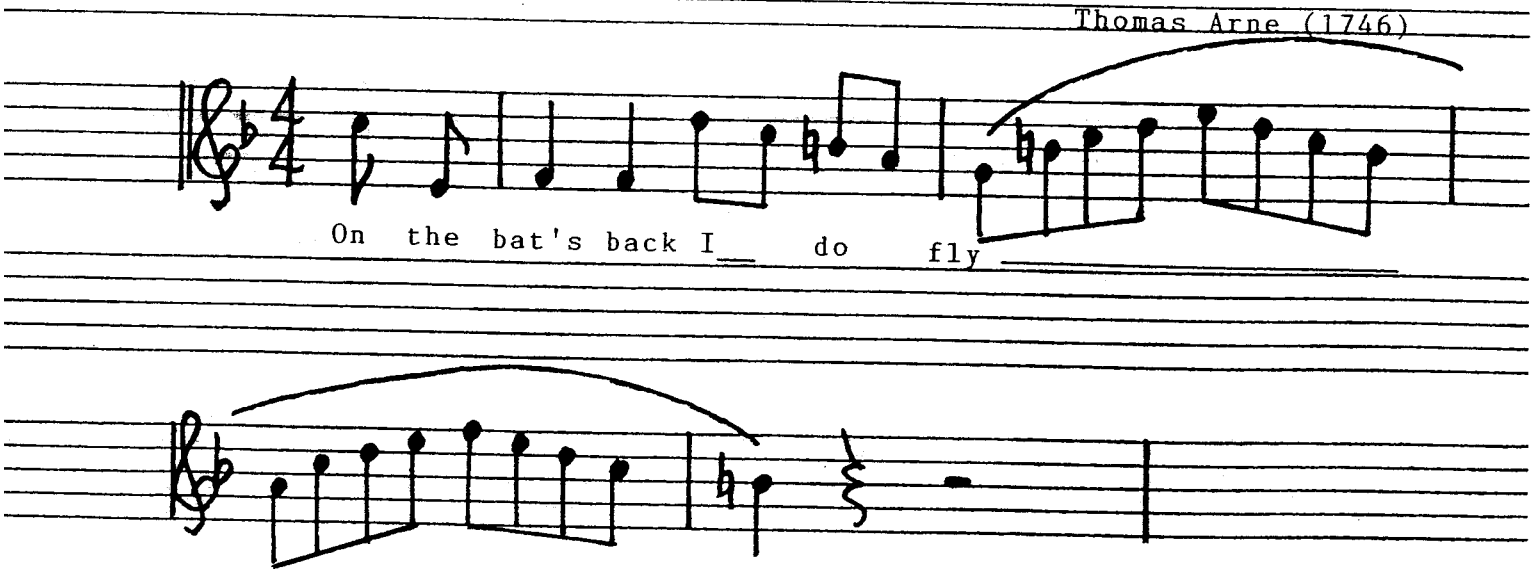
Robert Johnson (1612)



Pelham Humfrey (1670)

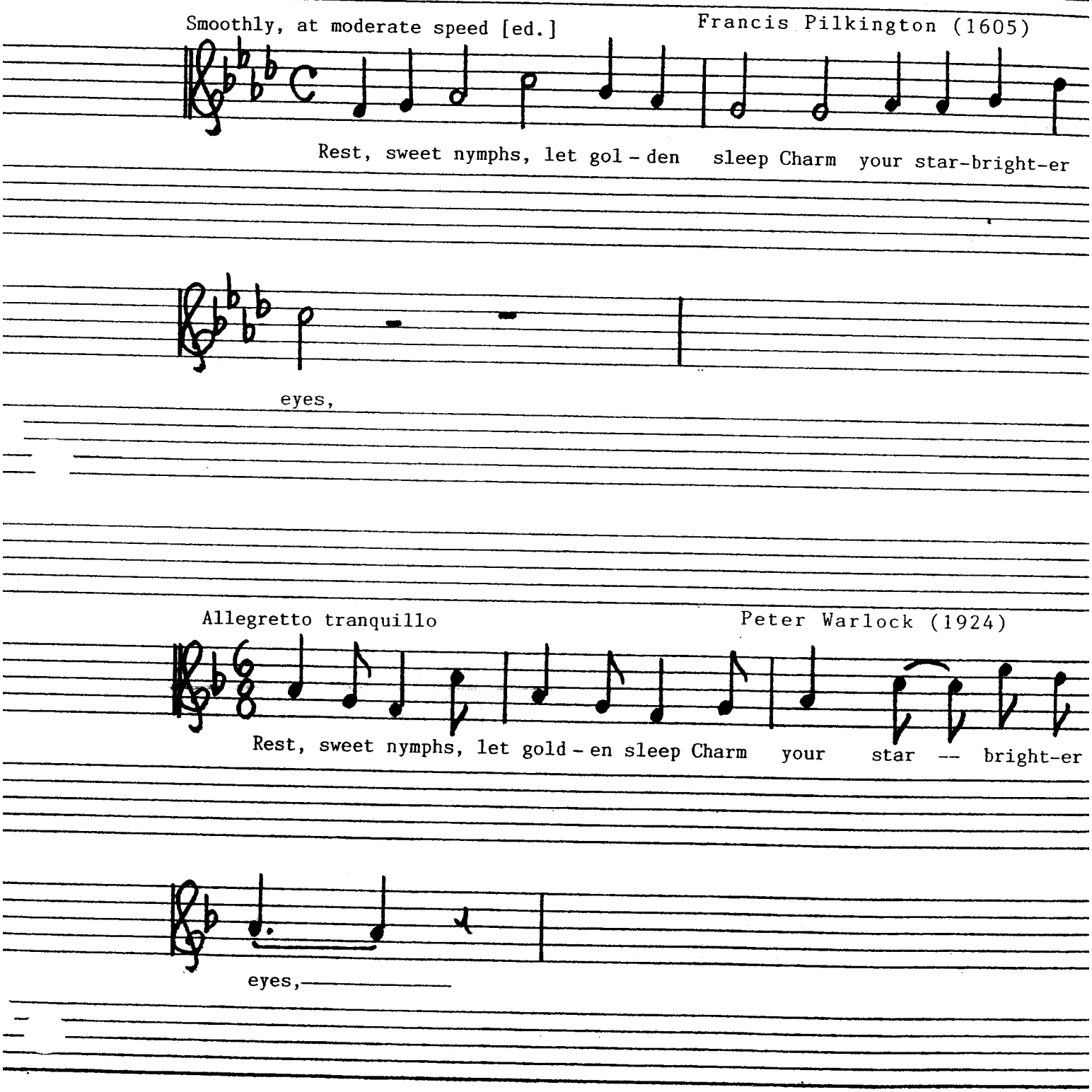


Thomas Arne (1746)



REST, SWEET NYMPHS

Rest, sweet nymphs, let golden sleep
Charm your star-brighter eyes,

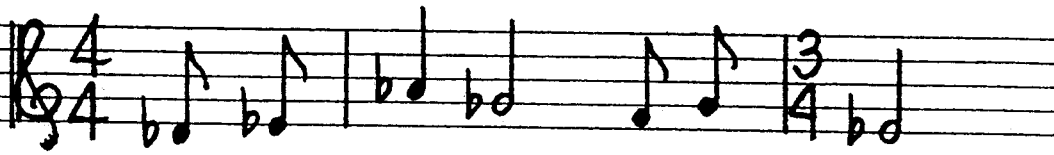


HOMEWORK EXAMPLES --

Below are three settings of the opening phrase of the poem you will set. Examine them closely. Look for what is good and not-so-good in the way they are set.

♩ = 40 sempre poco vibrato

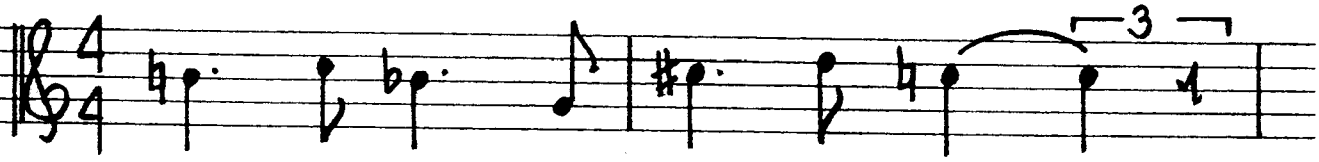
J. Mark Scearce (1983)



Why did this composer begin on an upbeat?
Why did he change meter?

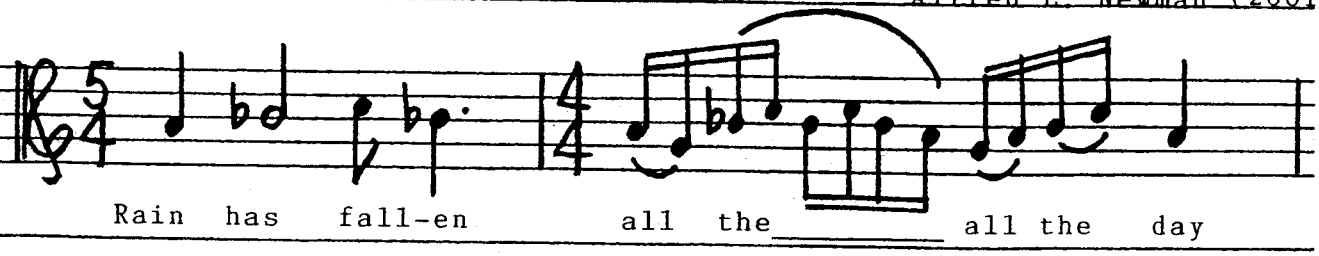
Moderato ♩ = 50

Samuel Barber (1939)



What does this composer want you to hear motivically?
Why did he do what he did pitch-wise?

Alfred E. Newman (2001)



What is basically wrong with this setting?

(8

GUIDELINES FOR THE COMPOSITION OF A MELODIC TEXT SETTING

1. Speak the rhythm of the text to be set and notate as precisely as possible what you have spoken.

2. Pay careful attention to this "natural" rhythm you have notated. If you decide to go against it --
   (a) know why you must
   (b) try to augment or diminish an entire phrase rather than one word
   (c) be careful to augment stressed syllables and diminish unaccented ones

3. Work for one musical idea and set whatever text you feel fits it best (beginning, middle, or end -- don't constrain yourself to the "left-to-right"/ "start-to-finish" mentality -- whatever works for you)

4. Closely examine your musical idea and explore its possibilities.
   (a) too many ideas, like cooks, make for an "overdone" composition
   (b) can you evoke a "musical memory" with your idea by using it throughout the text to such an effect?

5. Be melismatic to paint an emotion in a particular word.
   (a) understand what the text is saying and which words hold, for you, the greatest weight of meaning, emotion, personal depth, or understanding

6. Use large melodic skips for effect to off-set/springboard your melodic climax.

7. Use notes of longer duration (or rests) for cadences, ends of phrases, ideas set apart from the musical or textual body.
   (a) don't be afraid of rests, they hold the potential for great expression

8. Though the music must evoke the text in syntax and meaning, the music must also <u>breathe</u>. If the music demands a certain direction, explore, and bend your text if you must.