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# Restoration: An Oratorio Based on Ezra and Nehemiah

Joshua Bland University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Restoration An Oratorio based on Ezra and Nehemiah

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music in Composition

by Joshua Bland Ouachita Baptist University Bachelor of Music in Church Music, 2009

> May 2017 University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

Robert Mueller, DMA Thesis Director

Benjamin Lorenzo, DMA Committee Member Nastassja Riley, MM Committee Member

#### Abstract

In beginning a project of this scope, I first spent months considering the genre in which I wanted to work. Once I committed to an Oratorio, more months were spent reading and finding the story I needed to tell and the orchestral medium through which to tell it. Thus began *Restoration*, an oratorio based on the story of Ezra and Nehemiah. I came to this story for several reasons: first, though comprising a unique moment in Old Testament history, it has not been told through music. More importantly, I believed that the themes of this story were ones that needed to be told today: people returning from exile to rebuild their homes and their lives. I sensed in their narrative some of the same cultural issues facing our world now: the question of isolationism on a social and political scale, the oppression of people because of belief, and the overarching issue of philosophical worldview put into action.

Because of this, I was not content to simply retell the story: something more needed to be said. Why should this story matter in twenty-first century America? Thus I created a third soloist, Sarah, who would represent the modern voice seeking to learn what lessons she could from the experience of Ezra and Nehemiah and apply those lessons in her own context.

Musically, this led me to personify each character. For Ezra, a scribe grounded in the Law, I chose to use a Baroque or early classical operatic style. Nehemiah, a public servant more willing to speak his mind, brought to my mind the nuanced musical character of the Romantic period. Sarah, the frustrated, realist voice of the twenty-first century, fit best into the genre of spoken poetry. I chose a smaller orchestra featuring strings, winds, and percussion. Between these various instruments the accompaniments could be created for any of the musical spirits of the characters. Finally came the choir. Functioning most as the traditional Greek chorus, the choir varies from representing the population as a whole in the story to providing an objective, third-party commentary on the narrative.

Fiat pax!

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Restoration An Oratorio based on Ezra and Nehemiah

# The Ensemble

Ezra (baritone) Nehemiah (tenor) Sarah (soprano)

SATB Chorus

Flute I & II Oboe I & II Bb Clarinet I & II Bassoon I & II Horn in F I & II Bb Trumpet I & II Trombone I & II Timpani Percussion Violin I & II Viola Cello Bass

# I. Urbe Fracta Est

Chorus

Urbe fracta	The city having been broken
Lacrimamus	Let us cry
Sine spe sumus	We are without hope
	1
Quomodo sedit sola civitas plena populo	Once the city sat filled with people
Facta est quasi vidua domina gentium	She, was was seen as queen of the nations, is
	broken
Princeps provinciarum fracta est	The first citizen of the provinces is broken
Et facta est serva <sup>1</sup>	and she is made a slave
Sine spe sumus, populi urbis magnae	We, the people of the great city, are without
Sine spe sunitis, populi alois magine	hope
Sino cho cumus, populi nunc cino potrio	1
Sine spe sumus, populi nunc sine patria	We, the people now without a homeland, are
The sector market and in the sector is the sector of the s	without hope
Urbs nostra, quae regina provinciarum erat,	Our city, which was the queen of the
nunc est in ruinis	provinces, is now in ruins
Plorans ploravit in nocte <sup>2</sup>	Wailing she lamented in the night
lacrimis in oculis eius.	with tears in her eyes.
Nemo eam curat.	No one cares for her.
Sine spe sumus, populi urbis magnae	We, the people of the great city, are without
	hope
Sine spe sumus, populi nunc sine patria	We, the people now without a homeland, are
	without hope
Urbs nostra, quae regina provinciarum erat,	Our city, which was the queen of the
nunc est in ruinis	provinces, is now in ruins
	1 '

Ezra and Nehemiah: The city is destroyed We the people cry- we are without hope

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Latin Vulgate, Lamentations 1.1 <sup>2</sup> Latin Vulgate, Lamentations 1.2

#### Chorus:

Sine spe sumus, populi urbis magnae	We, the people of the great city, are without
	hope
Sine spe sumus, populi nunc sine patria	We, the people now without a homeland, are
	without hope
Urbs nostra, quae regina provinciarum erat,	Our city, which was the queen of the
nunc est in ruinis	provinces, is now in ruins

# Ezra and Nehemiah:

We the people of the great city are without hope We the people are now without a country, without a home

#### Chorus:

Nunc est in ruinis	Now it is in ruins
--------------------	--------------------

#### Sarah:

I look around, see a world in devastation.

All across the board it's nation against nation.

People are scared, they're oppressed and abused:

the rules are changed every day, no wonder they're confused.

We're a people without a home to call our own:

no place to run and hide, no tranquility inside

of our minds. We need something to give real soon

before the world as we know it is ashes and ruins.

#### Chorus:

Sine spe sumus, populi urbis magnae	We, the people of the great city, are without
Sine spe sumus, populi nunc sine patria	hope We, the people now without a homeland, are without hope
Urbs nostra, quae regina provinciarum erat, nunc est in ruinis	Our city, which was the queen of the provinces, is now in ruins

# Sarah:

Before the world as we know it...

*Ezra and Nehemiah:* We the people of the great city are without hope We the people are now without a country, without a home

#### Chorus:

Nunc est in ruinis	Now it is in ruins	

#### II. Decree

#### Ezra:

Our people were removed, taken from our homes to a new land while our city burned.

Our treasures: carried by our oppressors as a tribute to their king.

Seventy years we wept as captives in Babylon,

until she too fell into the hands of Cyrus, the Persian king.

The king decreed:

#### Chorus (tenor soli):

God has given me the kingdoms of the world. His anointing and provision inspire me to rebuild. We'll start with His Temple in Jerusalem. Let His people return with supplies for the work. May God be with you!

*Chorus (tutti):* The Lord be with us!

*Ezra:* Thus the chiefs of the people, the priests and the Levites, returned home!

*Chorus*: To fulfill our duty to the king and to our God!

# **III. Opposition**

#### Ezra:

Thus the people returned and our work began. Assembled as one, a plan we devised to restore the Temple and our way of life. We rebuilt the foundations! *Chorus:* We rebuilt our foundations Our call to celebration!

#### Ezra:

Our joy was expressed through both exclamations and tears: the sounds mingled as one song of praise to God, the Hope of our people.

#### Nehemiah:

Then men of the province came forth to help.

They who were our enemies now claimed to seek our God though their heart was pledged to another.

They sought to subvert us: they sent a letter to the king, accusing us as rebels with the intent to wage war once we had rebuilt our home and restored our customs.

Ezra:

An edict was made that construction should cease.

We were forced so to do as soldiers stilled our hands and idle hands stilled our hearts

#### Nehemiah:

They stopped us cold for fifteen years

#### Chorus:

Nunc est in ruinis	Now it is in ruins
--------------------	--------------------

Nehemiah:

until the second year of Darius, who declared:

#### Chorus (alto and bass):

As Cyrus decreed the Temple built, this work has been unjustly delayed too long. Let it be completed now without delay or further disruption. Leave the people to their work.

#### Chorus:

To fulfill our duty to the king and to our God!

# IV. Prayer<sup>3</sup>

Chorus:

Hierusalem quae aedificatur ut civitas	Jerusalem which is made so that the citizens
(civitates ascendent)	(that the citizens may ascend)
cuius participatio eius in id ipsum	united together may share in it
Illic enim ascenderunt tribus, tribus Domini,	Indeed in that place the tribes ascend, the
testimonium Israhel ad confitendum nomini	tribes of the Lord, the testimony of Israel in
Domini	confession of the Lord's name
Rogate quae ad pacem sunt Hierusalem et	Ask for the peace of Jerusalem and the
abundantia diligentibus te	prosperity of those who love her:
Fiat pax in virtute tua et abundantia in turribus	May peace be in your strength and abundance
tuis	in your walls
Propter fratres meos et proximos meos	On behalf of my brothers and my neighbors I
loquebar pacem de te	will speak peace concerning you
Propter domum Domini Dei nostri quaesivi	On behalf of the house of the Lord our God I
bona tibi	sought good things for you

# V. Lifeless

#### Sarah:

In every generation there has been organization spending untold fortunes to build fortifications and even more in adorning ornamentation, which makes us wonder: What the hell?!? A building is just that: a building. And often they fall into disuse and ruin. The system exploits, taking more than it needs for its own damn benefit, not that of those it leads. Why exist if you don't have a purpose? Why waste the time, the effort, the fortune? A body without a spirit is lifeless.

#### Nehemiah:

How true!

The Temple was meant to be the dwelling of God, the heart of our people. Though the House stood complete, incomplete was our community.

#### Ezra:

In the seventh year of Artaxerxes I, a scribe well-versed in Law, returned home, tasked by the King to appoint judges according to the wisdom of God given to me.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Latin Vulgate, Psalm 122.3-4, 6-9

#### Chorus:

Virga peccatorum super sortem iustorum non	The rod of sinners will not be left behind above
relinquetur	the destiny of just men
Virga peccatorum super sortem iustorum non	The rod of sinners will not rule over the
reget	destiny of just men
ut non extendant iusti ad iniquitatem manus	that the just may not extend their own hands
suas	towards iniquity

# Ezra and Nehemiah:

The scepter of evil will not rule over us!

Oh that we, the just, may not extend our hands unjustly.

Let us not extend our hands

# Sarah:

All our best intentions.

# Chorus:

Qui confidunt in Domino sicut mons Sion non commovebitur in aeternum	Those who confide in the Lord are like mount Zion which will not be moved throughout
et Dominus in circuitu populi sui	eternity And God will surround his people

# *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Sarah:* All our best intentions

# Chorus:

Pax super Israhel	Peace over Israel
-------------------	-------------------

# VI. Remedy

Sarah:

We claimed to be people of God, a great nation, but we chose to lie, cheat, steal, deceive; then to lead us we chose better liars and thieves.

They built up the system to benefit themselves, damning the rest of us, leaving us without help. Crime and corruption don't exist because of the tools that we have.

We entrusted those tools to liars and fools to make us safer than we were at the start,

but this shit continues on and on because crime and corruption are conditions of the heart

#### Chorus:

Crime and corruption are conditions of the heart.

#### Nehemiah:

As our people once more found their strength, we began to fix the wall, thinking it with our resolve would prevent another fall.

#### Sarah:

But a wall won't protect you when the issue lies within: none of our tools are able to stop our sin as a people to spread hate and division. The only real remedy is unity of purpose and vision.

#### Ezra:

We turned our hearts toward the Lord, renewing our commitment to His Word: obeying His statutes, fulfilling our vows.

As one we proclaim:

# Ezra and Nehemiah:

Dies sanctifactus est Domino Deo nostro.	The day is sanctified to the Lord our God.	
Nolite lugere. Nolite flere.	Do not mourn. Do not weep.	

Nehemiah:

An ancient feast we observed according to the Lord's command. Hearts awaking, our song of praise was heard:

Chorus:

Tu ipse Dominus solus	You alone are Lord
-----------------------	--------------------

Ezra and Nehemiah: As one we cried.

# Sarah:

As one we cry, we must understand: our fight is not against our fellow man

but against the darkness that stains our heart, making crime and corruption our skillful works of art.

We as a nation must return, if we are to stand, to faith and love for God and for our fellow man. Now we stand in the fire, on the brink of ashes and ruin: with renewed conviction we must act soon.

Let us be stewards and neighbors and sons striving together for restoration

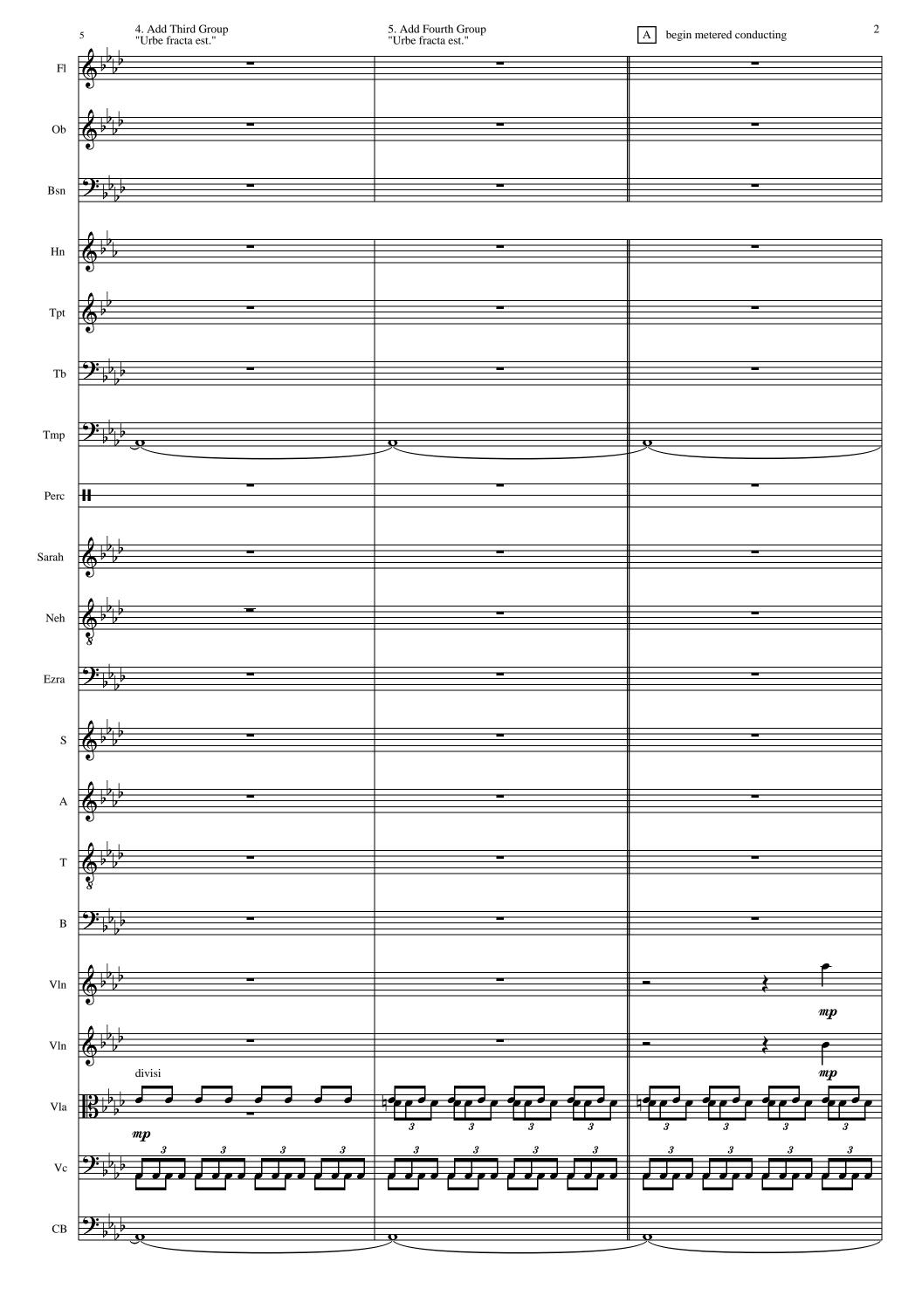
Chorus:

Fiat pax!	Let there be peace!
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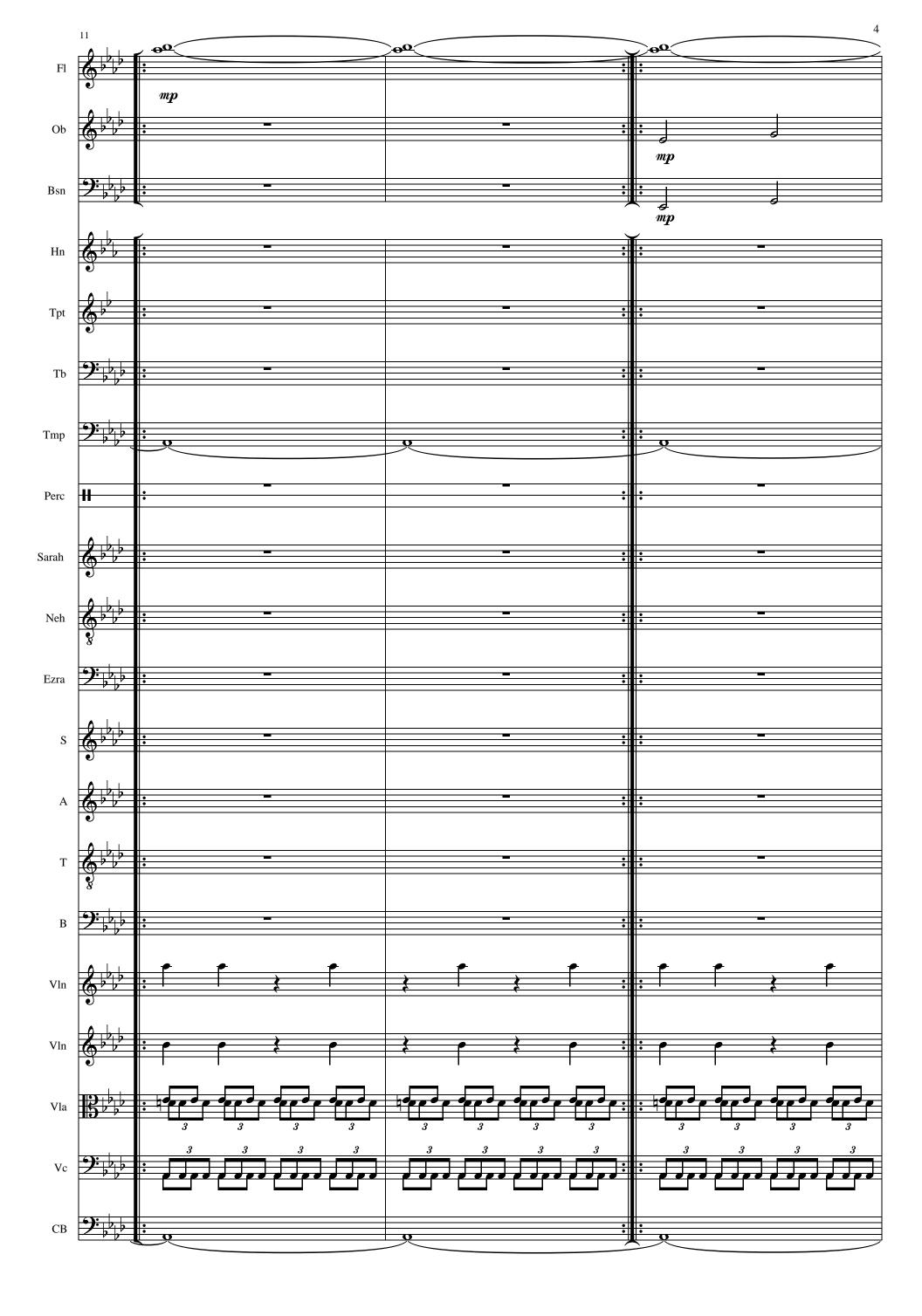
*Libretto and translation by Joshua Bland with reference to Lamentations 1 and Psalm 122 of the Latin Vulgate* 

# Urbe Fracta Est

















































## Decree





mf











тp











p























## Opposition





















mp





































## Prayer





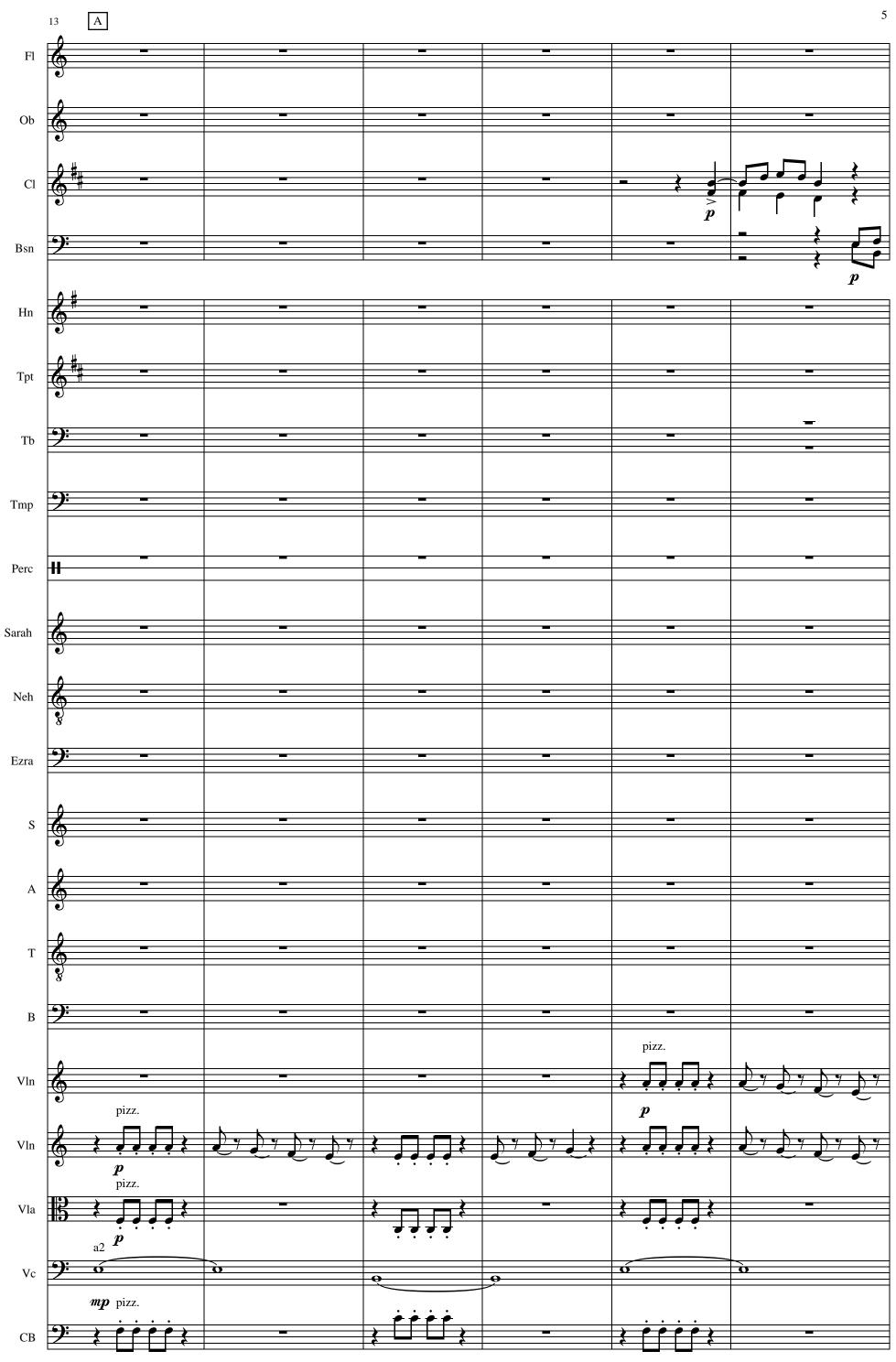
## Lifeless











p













mf 













## Remedy



















