Gwyneth Walker

The Circus of Creation

a musical drama for
Narrator, Brass Quintet and Percussion
based on the poems
Circus of the Sun
by Robert Lax

THE CIRCUS OF CREATION *is a staged presentation of selected poems from* ***Circus of the Sun*** *(1950) by Robert Lax (1915-2000). This new work combines readings of the poems with instrumental music (brass quintet and percussion) and optional actors/dancers.*

In the simplest performance format, only one reader is required. The Narrator plays the role of ***Ringmaster****, introducing the circus performers and describing their acts. He brings to life in our imagination a troop of* ***Jugglers*** *and* ***Acrobats****, and then the very special* ***Mogador****, who performs somersaults while riding on horseback.* ***La Louisa*** *on her trapeze sways overhead. The elephants and circus crew labor to erect the tents. And of course,* ***Penelope*** *the tightrope walker is there to applaud Mogador's feats of bravery!*

These characters come forth within one day to create their moments of adventure (worship), and then they steal away, "leaving the field of wonders darkened." "Have you known such a thing?"

The Robert Lax poems in ***Circus of the Sun*** *present the circus as entertainment and reverence. The topics range from lighthearted and action-filled to contemplative and spiritually profound. And thus the* ***CIRCUS OF CREATION*** *intends to explore and celebrate this unusual blending of diverse elements. Scenes may be excerpted as desired.*

Performance Notes

The optimum performance situation would include actors and dancers to portray the circus characters, while the music and readings are taking place. However, in lieu of these additional performers, some clever stage sets and props can provide abundant circus atmosphere. It is suggested that drawings of circus entertainers be displayed on panels. Various props (hoops, juggling pins, a small trapeze) may be placed on the stage. Thus, the ***Ringmaster*** *can gesture towards the drawings and props when referring to specific characters and their acts. And the circus can come alive in our imaginations!*

about Robert Lax and his poetry

Robert Lax was born in Olean, NY in 1915. He has been described by Jack Kerouac as "One of the great original voices of our time...a Pilgrim in search of beautiful innocence, writing lovingly, finding it, simply, in his own way." Though many hold him to be one of the greatest American poets of this century, Lax maintained a low profile, living and writing in seclusion on the Greek island of Patmos.

In 1943, Robert Lax first met the family of circus performers who were to become the subject of ***Circus of the Sun*** *and* ***Mogador's Book****. Lax accompanied New Yorker writer Leonard Robinson who was interviewing the Cristiani family for a piece he was doing for the "New Yorker." Lax's fascination with the circus had taken root, and in 1950 he traveled through western Canada with the Cristiani family, observing and absorbing their world.*

The poems in ***Circus of the Sun*** *express a reverence for the acts of daring, beauty and grace that make the circus the singular event that it is. What also emerges is the drawing of a link between this world of the circus – wherein a tent is erected, acts are performed, and then the tent is disassembled only to be re-erected the next day – and Lax's faith. As Denise Levertov has said "the radiant security of Lax's faith appears in his work as a serenity of tone."* ***Circus Days and Nights*** *presents a powerful spiritual vision for the present day.*

Narrator

The Circus of Creation

for Narrator, Brass Quintet and Percussion

Robert Lax (1915-2000) Gwyneth Walker

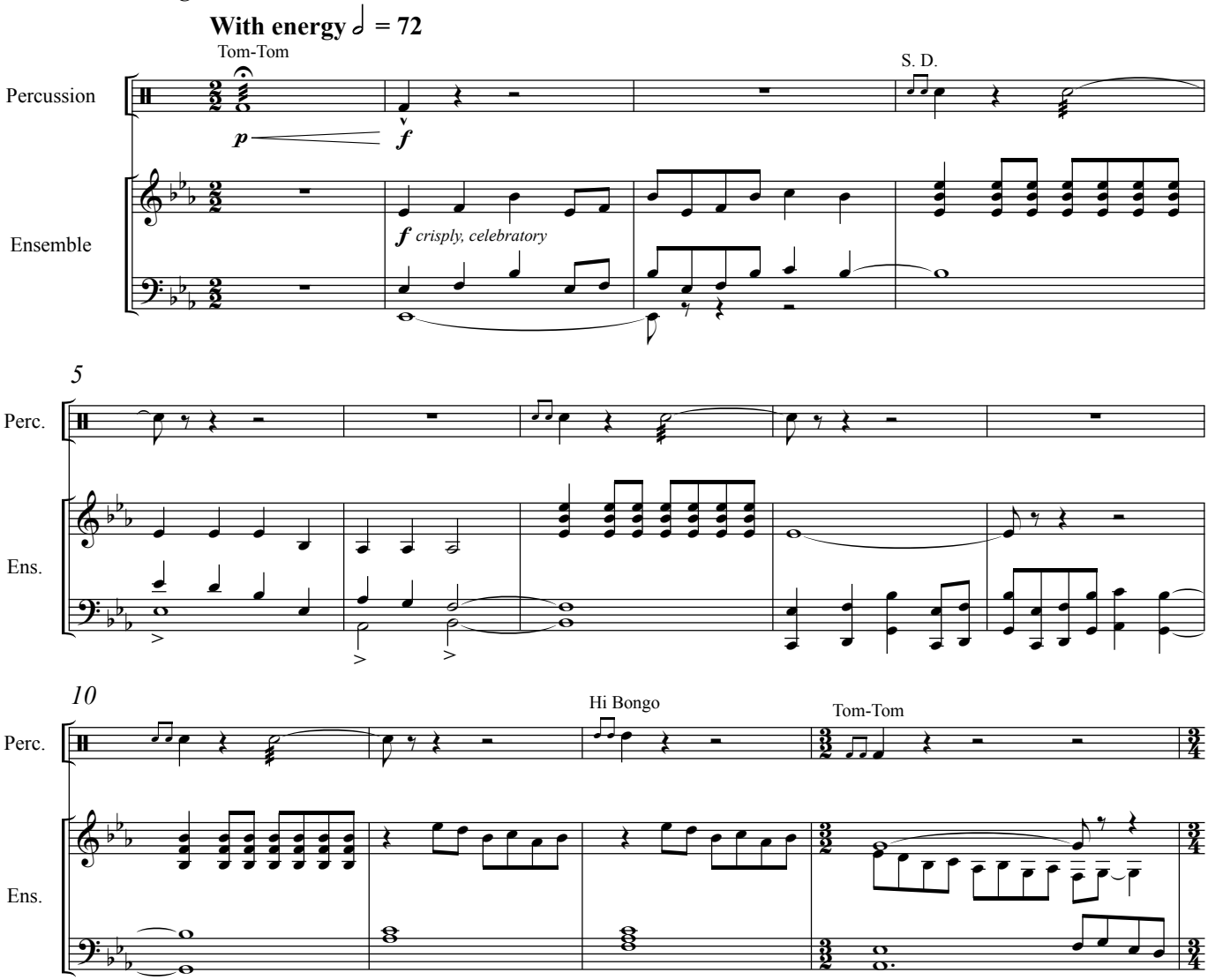
Prologue

The RINGMASTER comes to the front/center of the stage to address the audience. His introductory words are intended to express the excitement of the circus.

Ringmaster *(spoken)*

Fields were set for the the circus,
stars for the shows
before ever elephant lumbered
or tent rose.

begin music



Poetry from *Circus Days and Nights* by Robert Lax (Overlook Press, 2000) based on his travels with the Cristiani Bros. family circus.
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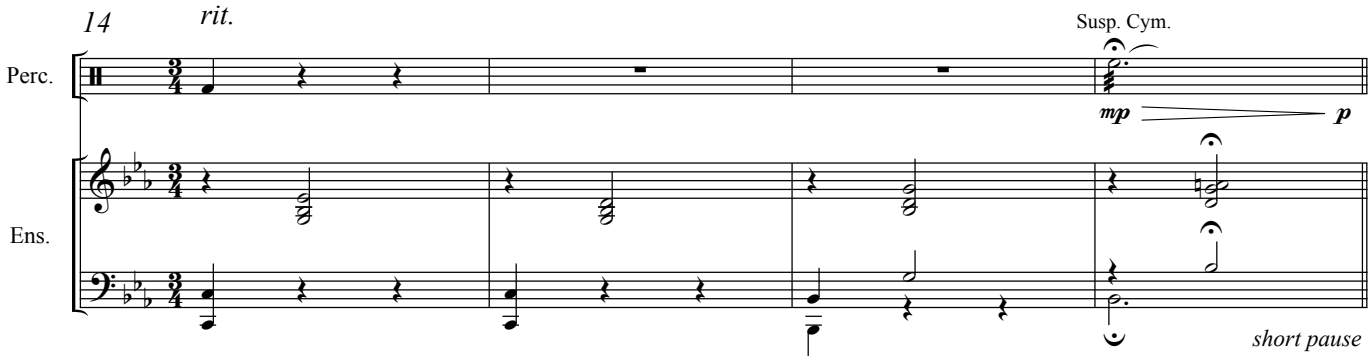
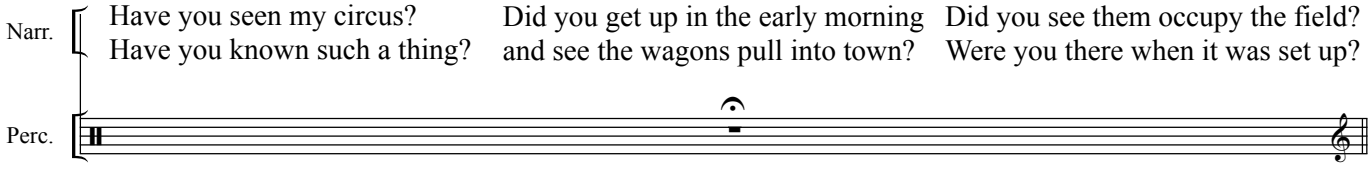
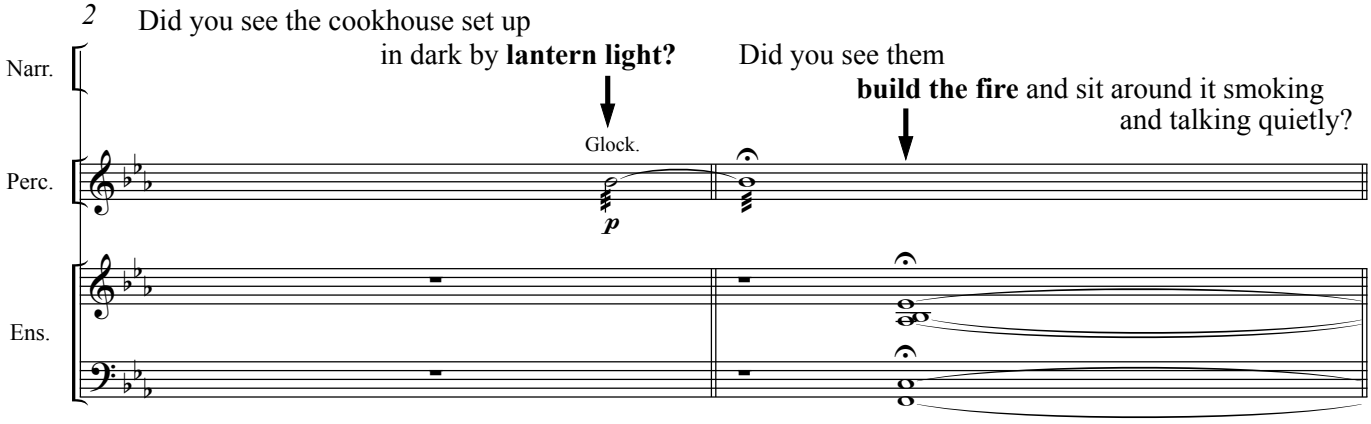


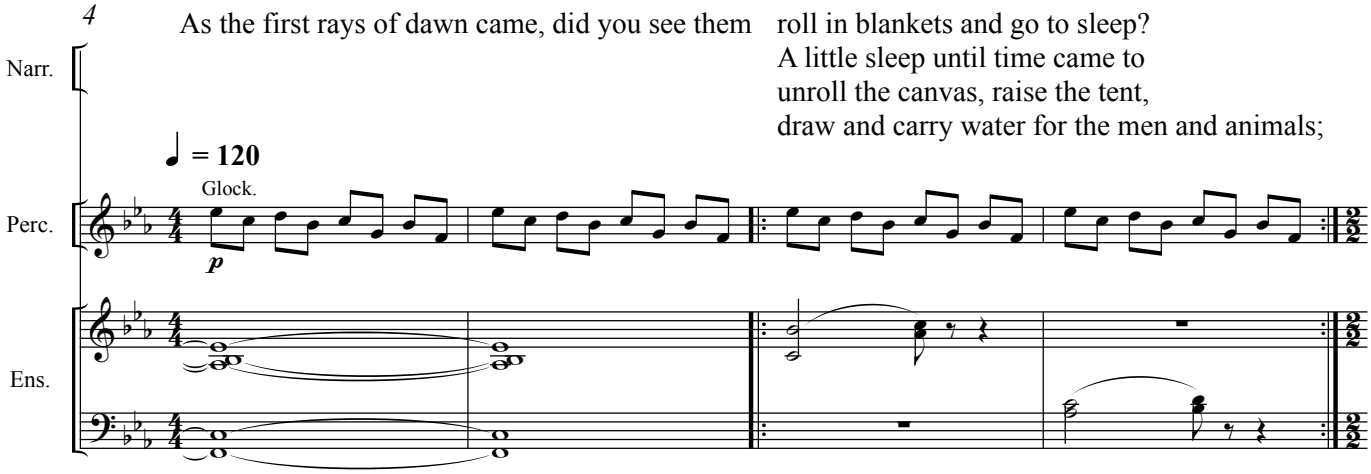
Have You Seen My Circus?

Ringmaster *(spoken with excitement and reverence)*

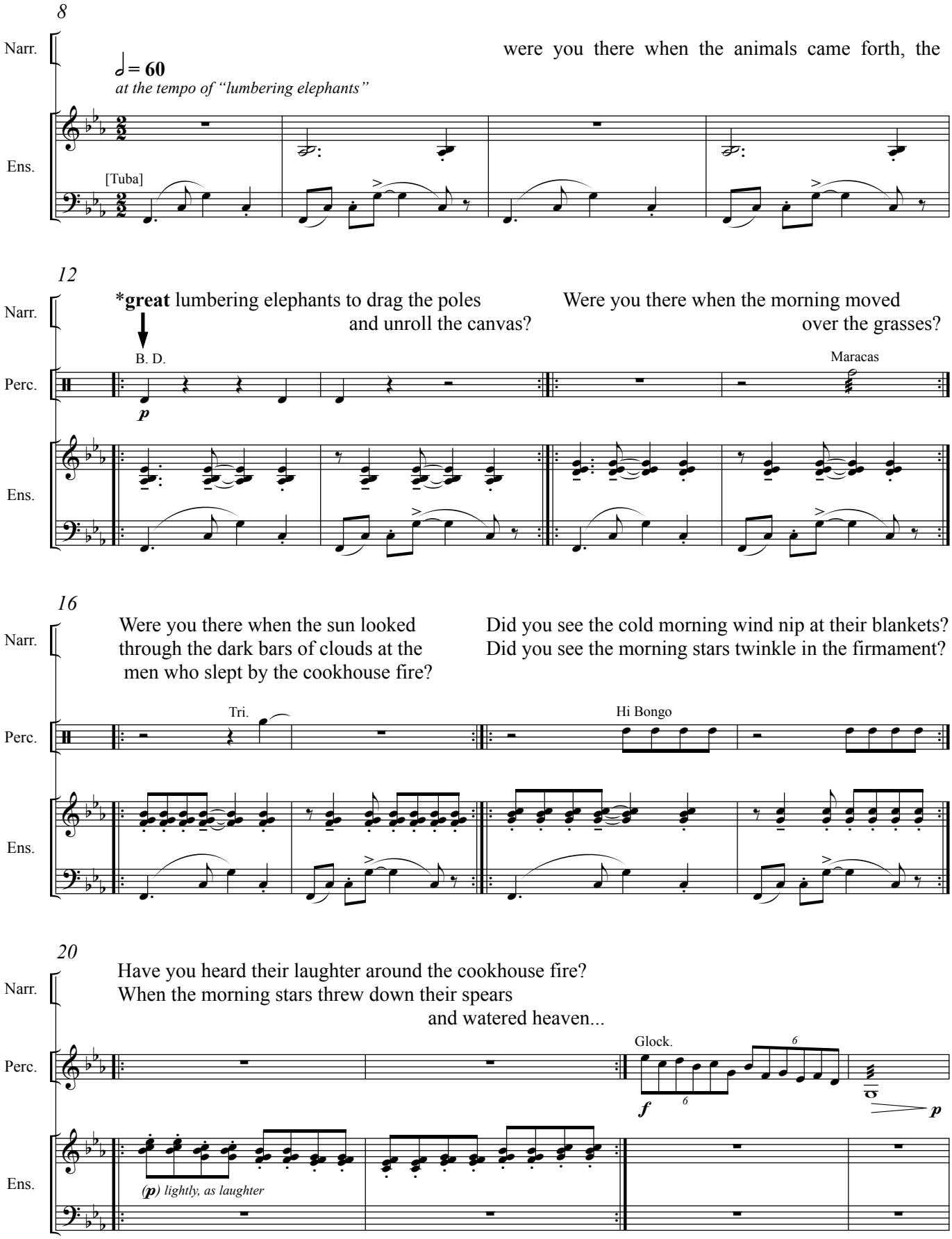


(approximately synchronize the reading with the music)

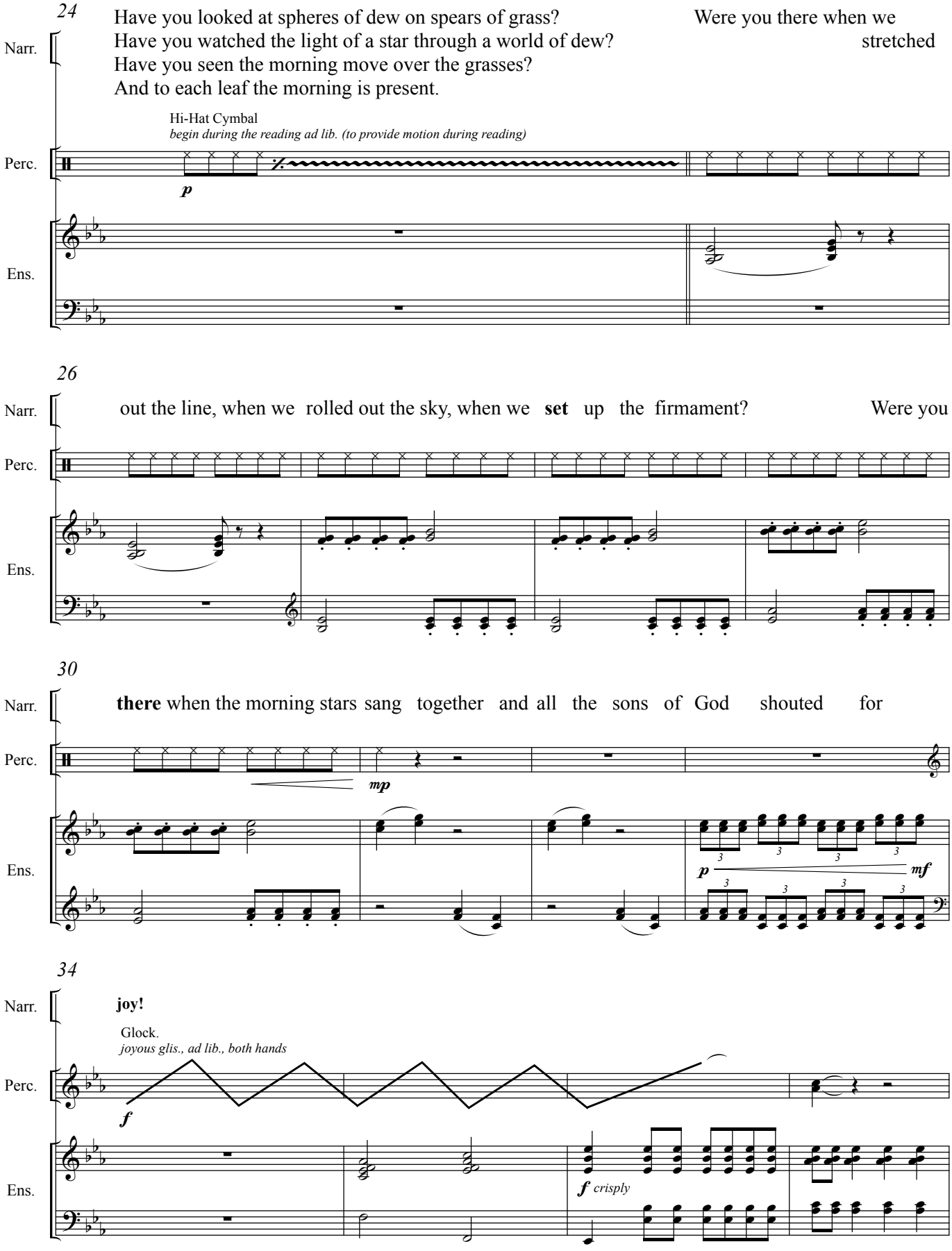


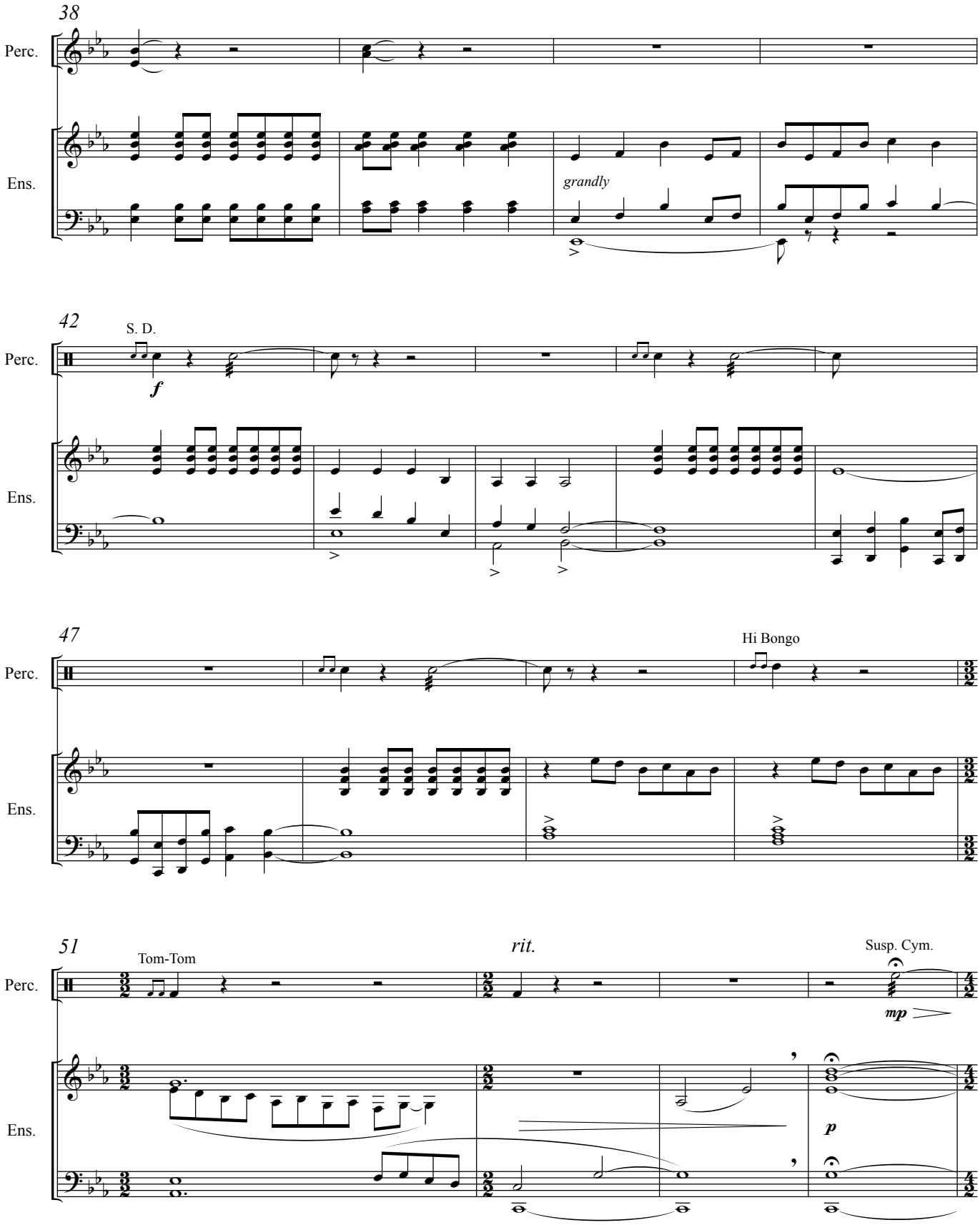


*Allow a short pause before continuing.



*Words in bold print are intended to coincide with the downbeat of the measure in which they appear, or to the indicated musical entrance or effect.


24
Have you looked at spheres of dew on spears of grass?
Have you watched the light of a star through a world of dew?
Have you seen the morning move over the grasses?
And to each leaf the morning is present.
Were you there when we stretched
Narr.
Hi-Hat Cymbal
begin during the reading ad lib. (to provide motion during reading)
Perc.
p
Ens.
26
out the line, when we rolled out the sky, when we set up the firmament?
Were you
Narr.
Perc.
Ens.
30
there when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for
Narr.
Perc.
mp
Ens.
p
mf
34
joy!
Narr.
Glock.
joyous glis., ad lib., both hands
Perc.
f
Ens.
f crisply


38
Perc.
Ens.
grandly
42
S. D.
Perc.
f
Ens.
47
Hi Bongo
Perc.
Ens.
51
Tom-Tom
rit.
Susp. Cym.
Perc.
mp
Ens.
p

Ringmaster *(read without music)*

55

A song rises up from the ground, herbs from the field.
Who will watch the green grass growing; who will hear
the song of earth?

Children who come to see the tent set up in the morning.

Three masts stand on a sea of canvas. Rope line loops
from one to another, drops into a gentle arc to the ground.
Bagonghi swings his hand toward the gesture in midair.

"Look! The big top!" [gestures across the stage]

Narr.

Perc.

Slowly

Susp. Cym.

p

ff very triumphantly

Ens.

f very triumphantly

Connect to next scene with minimal pause

Mogador Arrives

Ringmaster

Narr.

Mogador comes down the field.
"There he is!"

He walks the earth like a turning ball: knowing
and rejoicing in his sense of balance:
he delights in the fulcrums
and levers, teeterboards, trampolines, high wires,
swings, the nets, ropes, and ring curbs of the natural universe.

♩ = **132** *(Mogador and his energy)*

Hi & Low Bongos

Perc.

p (background rhythm)

Narr.

Beneath his feet the world is buoyant,
thin and alive as a bounding rope.
He stands on it poised,
a gyroscope on the rim of a glass,
sustained by the whirling of an inner wheel. **[stop tapping]**

He steps through the drum of light and air,
his hand held forth.

Perc.

Susp. Cym.

Narr.

The moment is a sphere moving with Mogador.

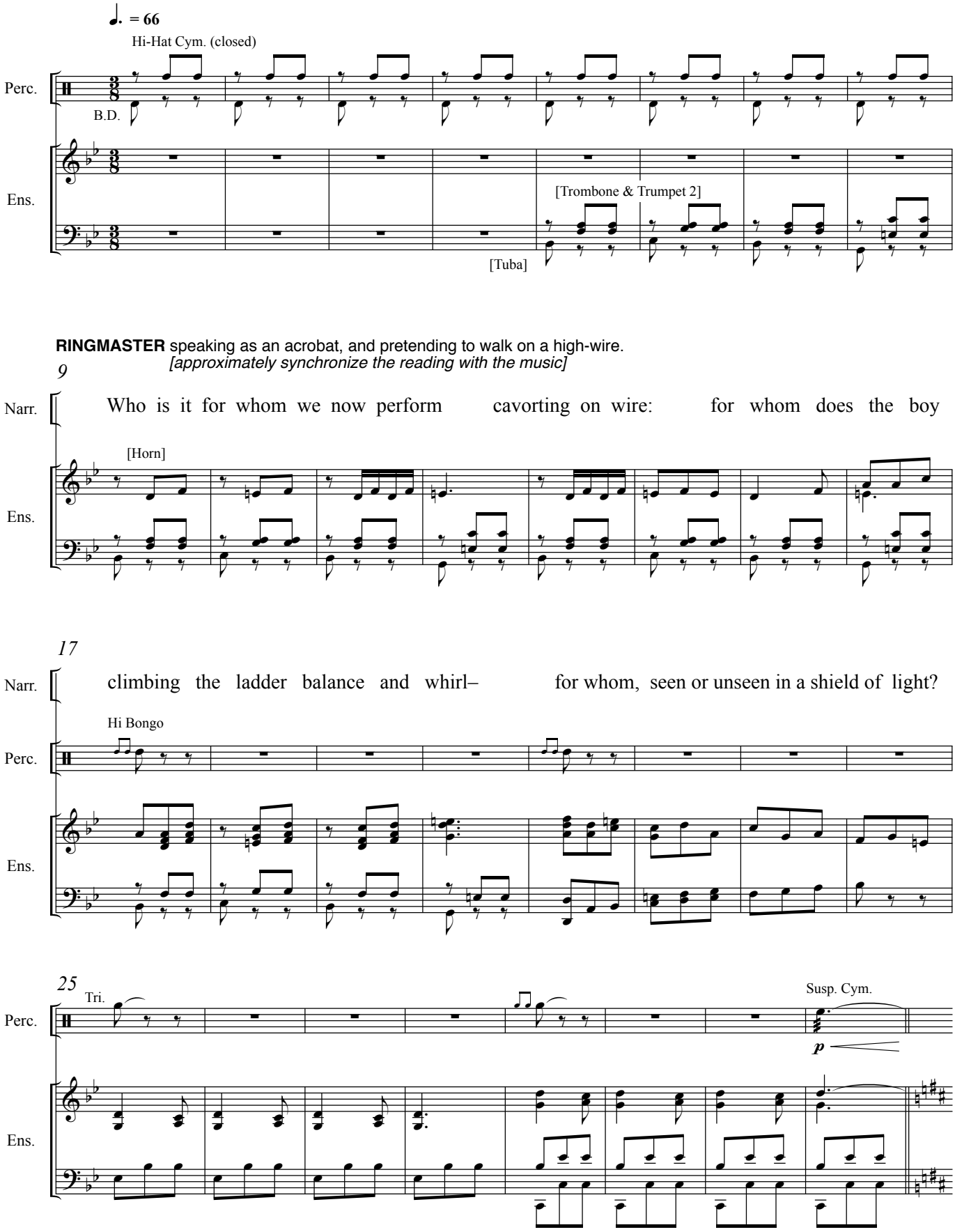
Perc.

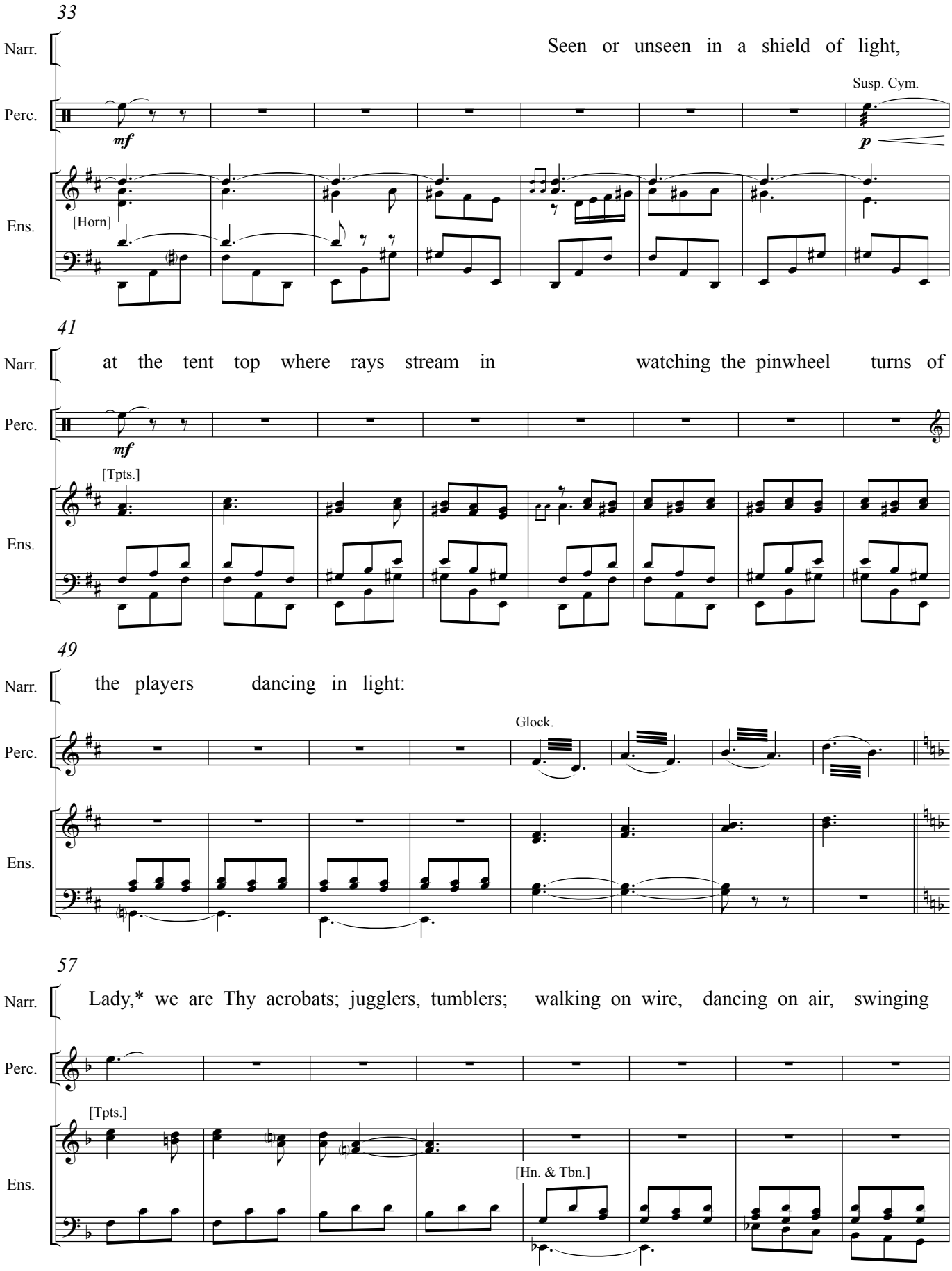
Susp. Cym.

l.v.

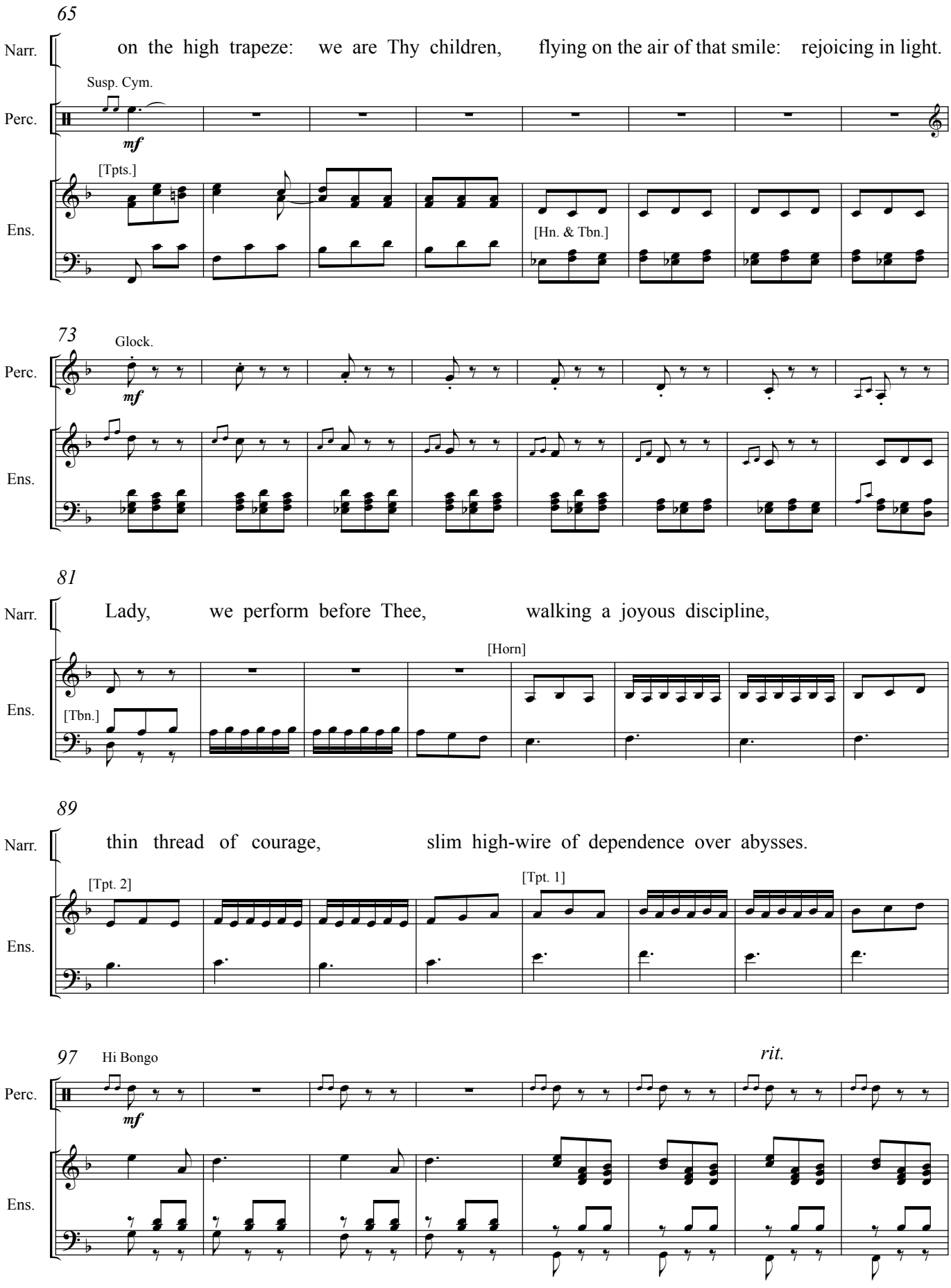
p *f*

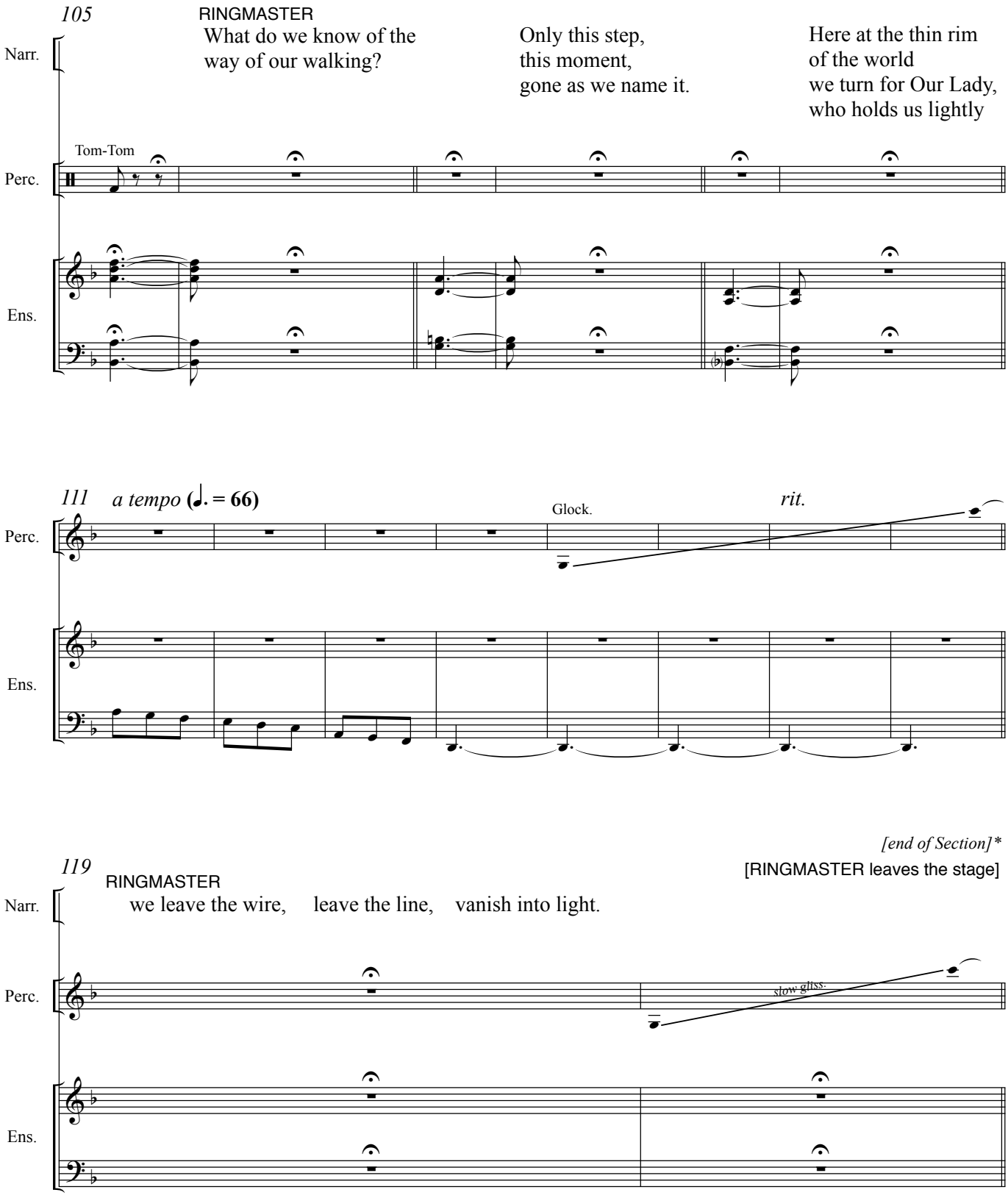
Acrobat's Song





*referring to the Virgin Mary


65
Narr.
on the high trapeze: we are Thy children, flying on the air of that smile: rejoicing in light.
Susp. Cym.
Perc.
mf
[Tpts.]
Ens.
[Hn. & Tbn.]
73
Glock.
Perc.
mf
Ens.
81
Narr.
Lady, we perform before Thee, walking a joyous discipline,
[Horn]
Ens.
[Tbn.]
89
Narr.
thin thread of courage, slim high-wire of dependence over abysses.
[Tpt. 2]
[Tpt. 1]
Ens.
97
Hi Bongo
rit.
Perc.
mf
Ens.



*Allow a short pause before continuing.

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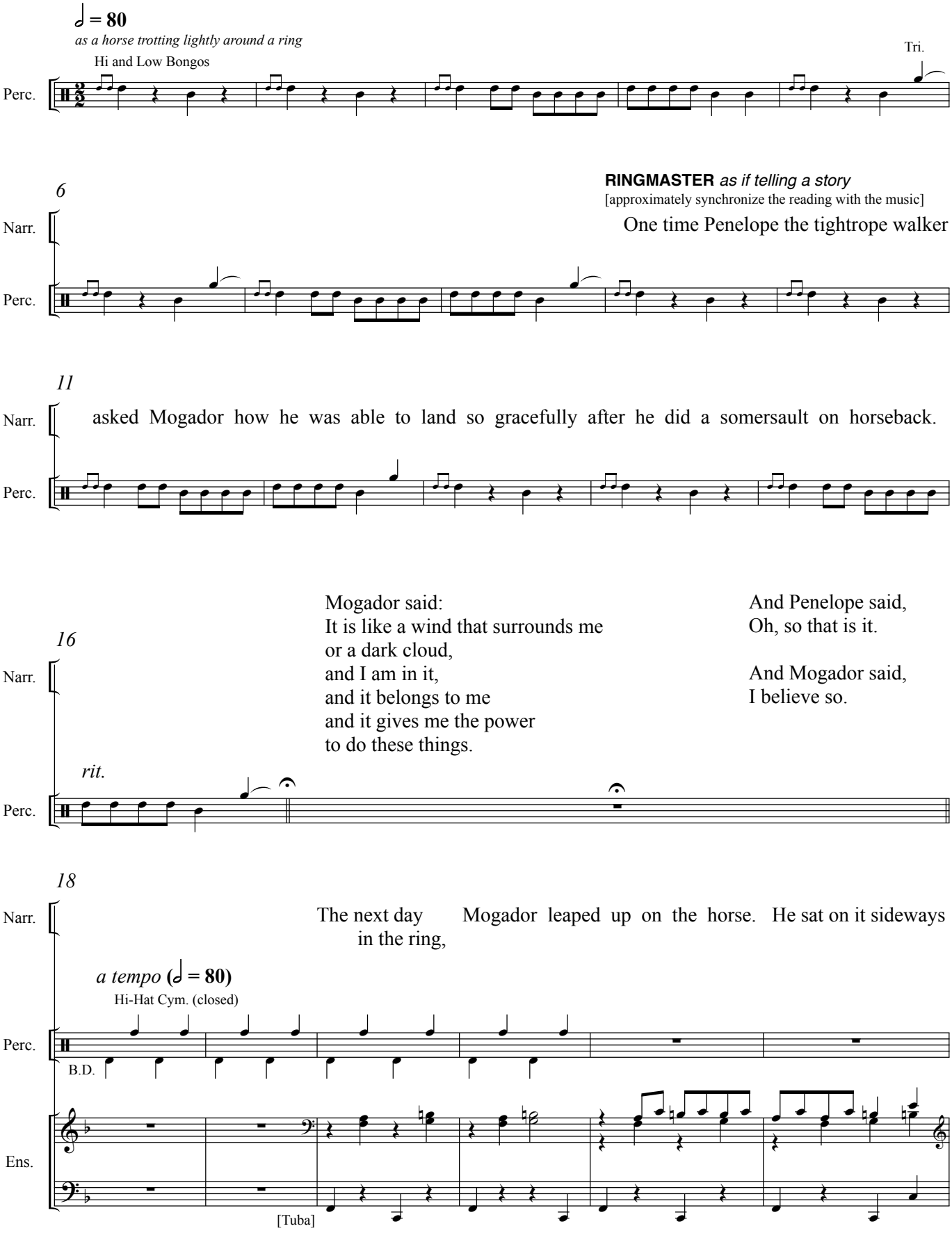
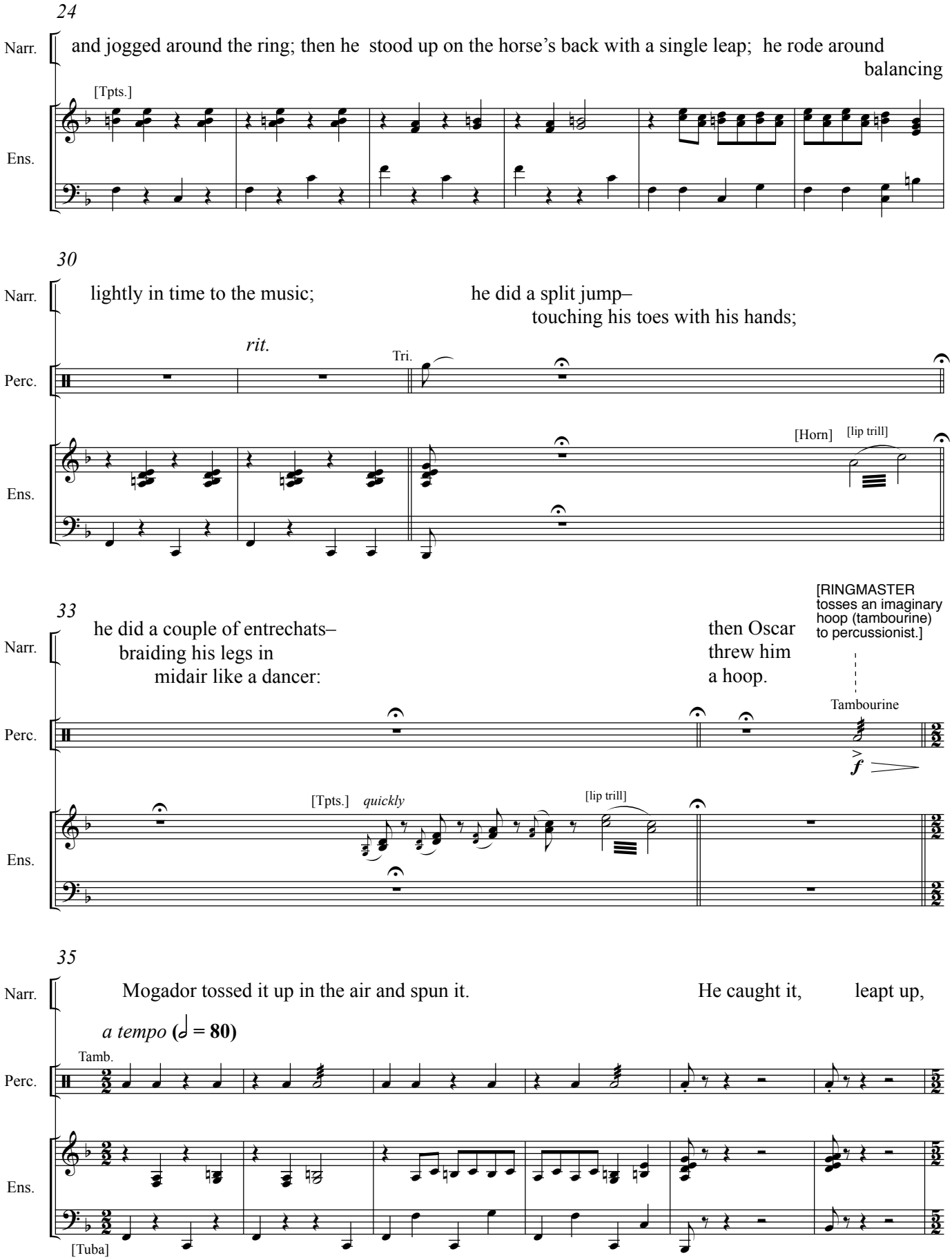
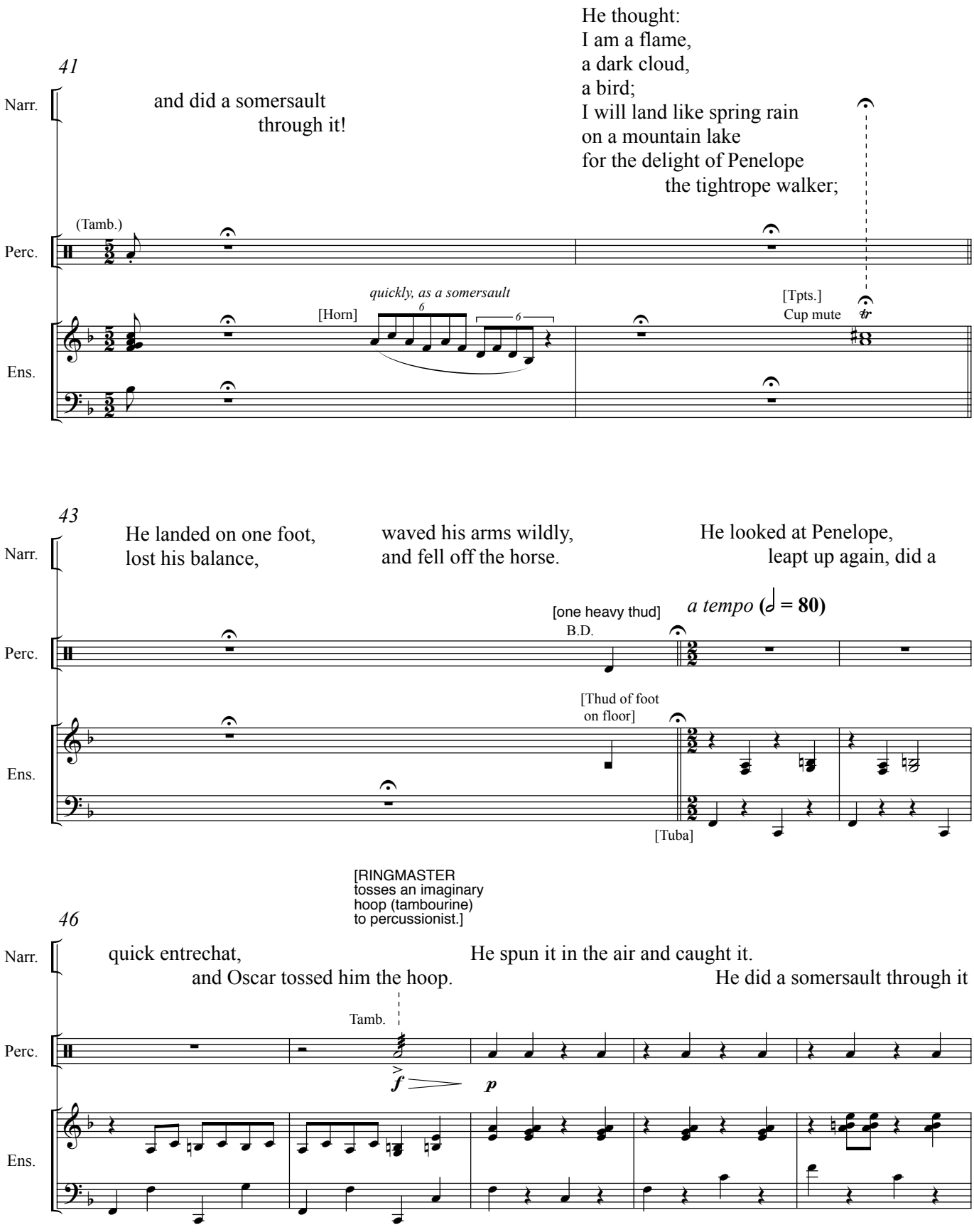
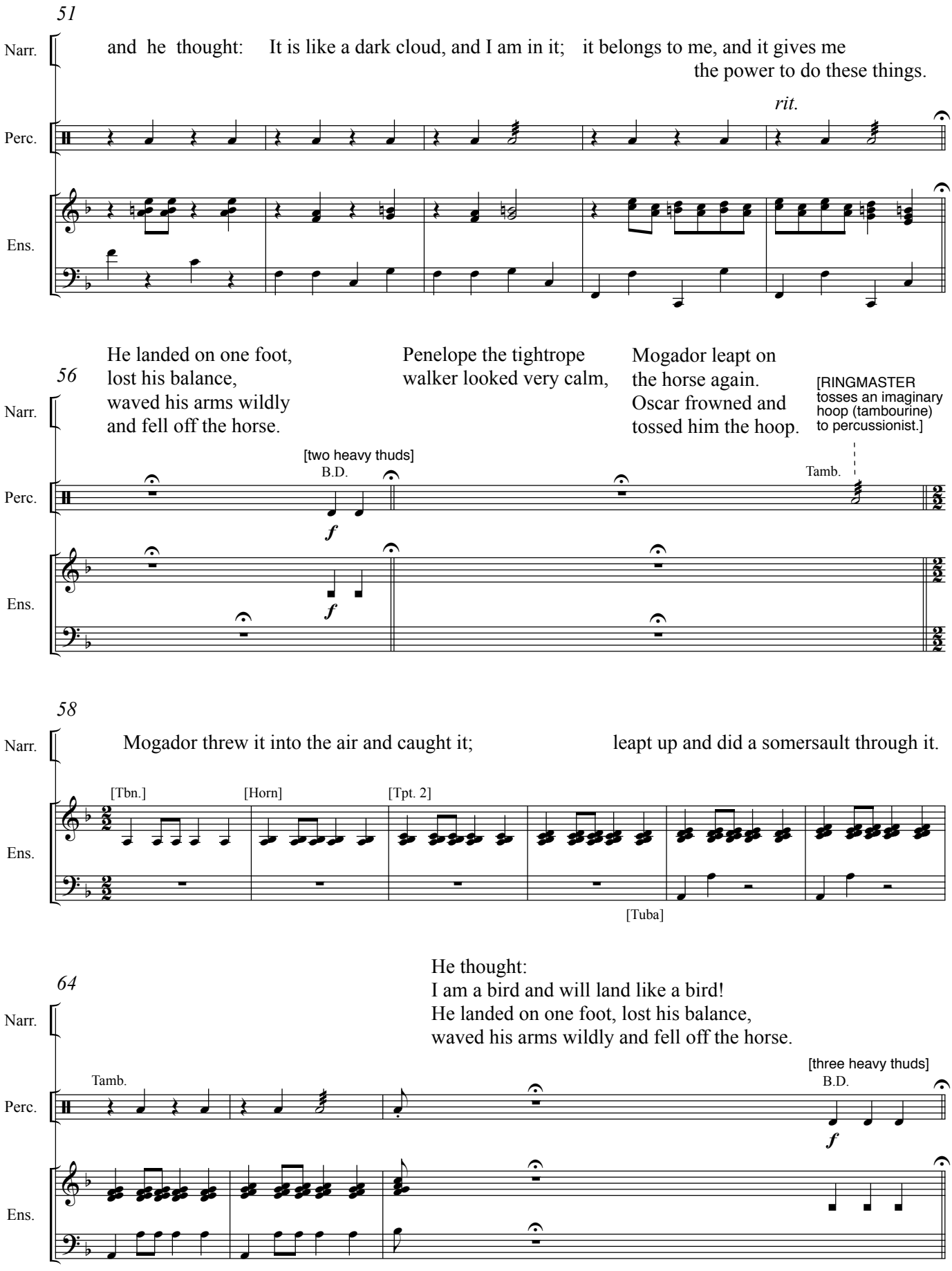
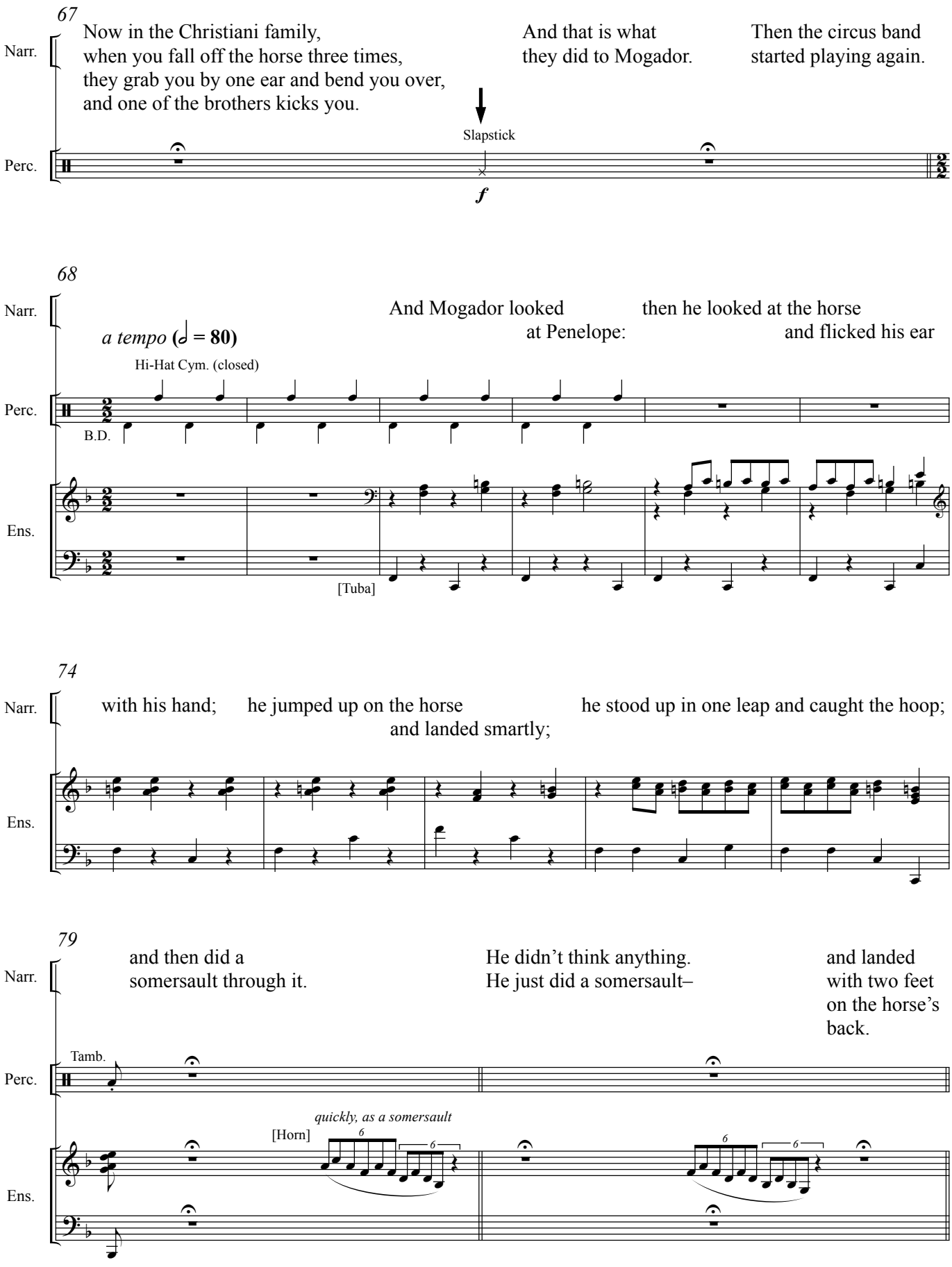
Penelope and Mogador

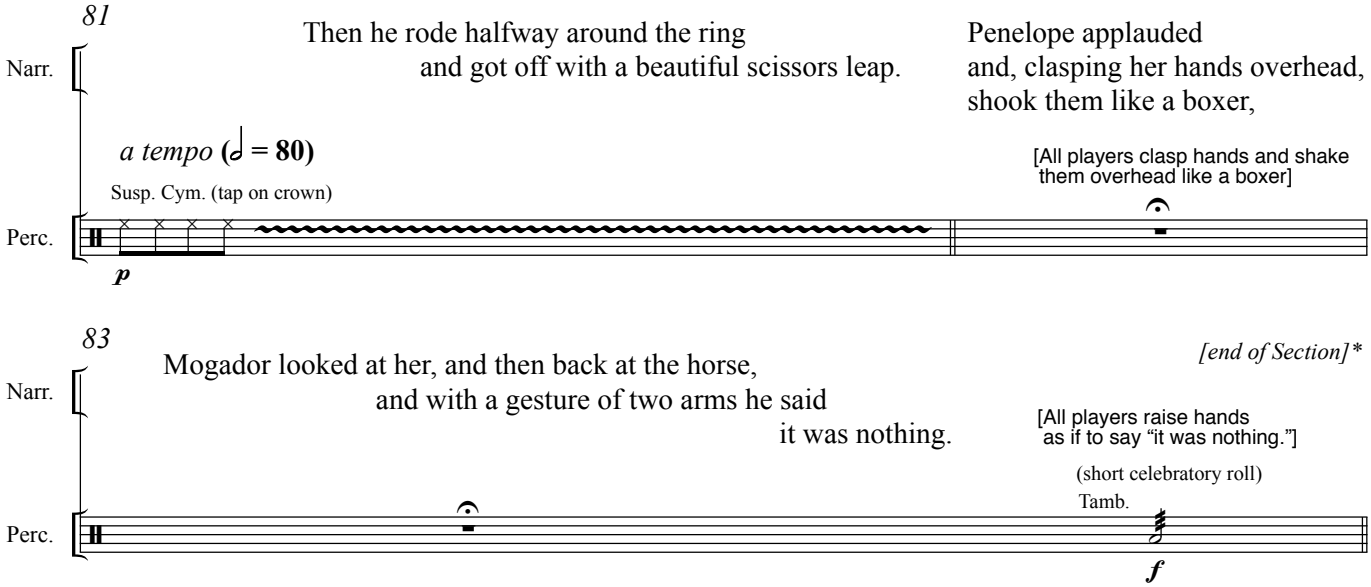



24
Narr.
and jogged around the ring; then he stood up on the horse's back with a single leap; he rode around
balancing
[Tpts.]
Ens.
30
Narr.
lightly in time to the music;
he did a split jump–
touching his toes with his hands;
rit.
Tri.
Perc.
[Horn]
[lip trill]
Ens.
33
Narr.
he did a couple of entrechats–
braiding his legs in
midair like a dancer:
then Oscar
threw him
a hoop.
[RINGMASTER
tosses an imaginary
hoop (tambourine)
to percussionist.]
Tambourine
Perc.
f
[Tpts.]
quickly
[lip trill]
Ens.
35
Narr.
Mogador tossed it up in the air and spun it.
He caught it,
leapt up,
a tempo (♩ = 80)
Tamb.
Perc.
Ens.
[Tuba]


41
Narr.
and did a somersault through it!
He thought:
I am a flame,
a dark cloud,
a bird;
I will land like spring rain
on a mountain lake
for the delight of Penelope
the tightrope walker;
(Tamb.)
Perc.
[Horn]
quickly, as a somersault
[Tpts.]
Cup mute
Ens.
43
Narr.
He landed on one foot,
lost his balance,
waved his arms wildly,
and fell off the horse.
He looked at Penelope,
leapt up again, did a
[one heavy thud]
B.D.
a tempo (♩ = 80)
Perc.
[Thud of foot
on floor]
Ens.
[Tuba]
[RINGMASTER
tosses an imaginary
hoop (tambourine)
to percussionist.]
46
Narr.
quick entrechat,
and Oscar tossed him the hoop.
He spun it in the air and caught it.
He did a somersault through it
Tamb.
Perc.
f
p
Ens.

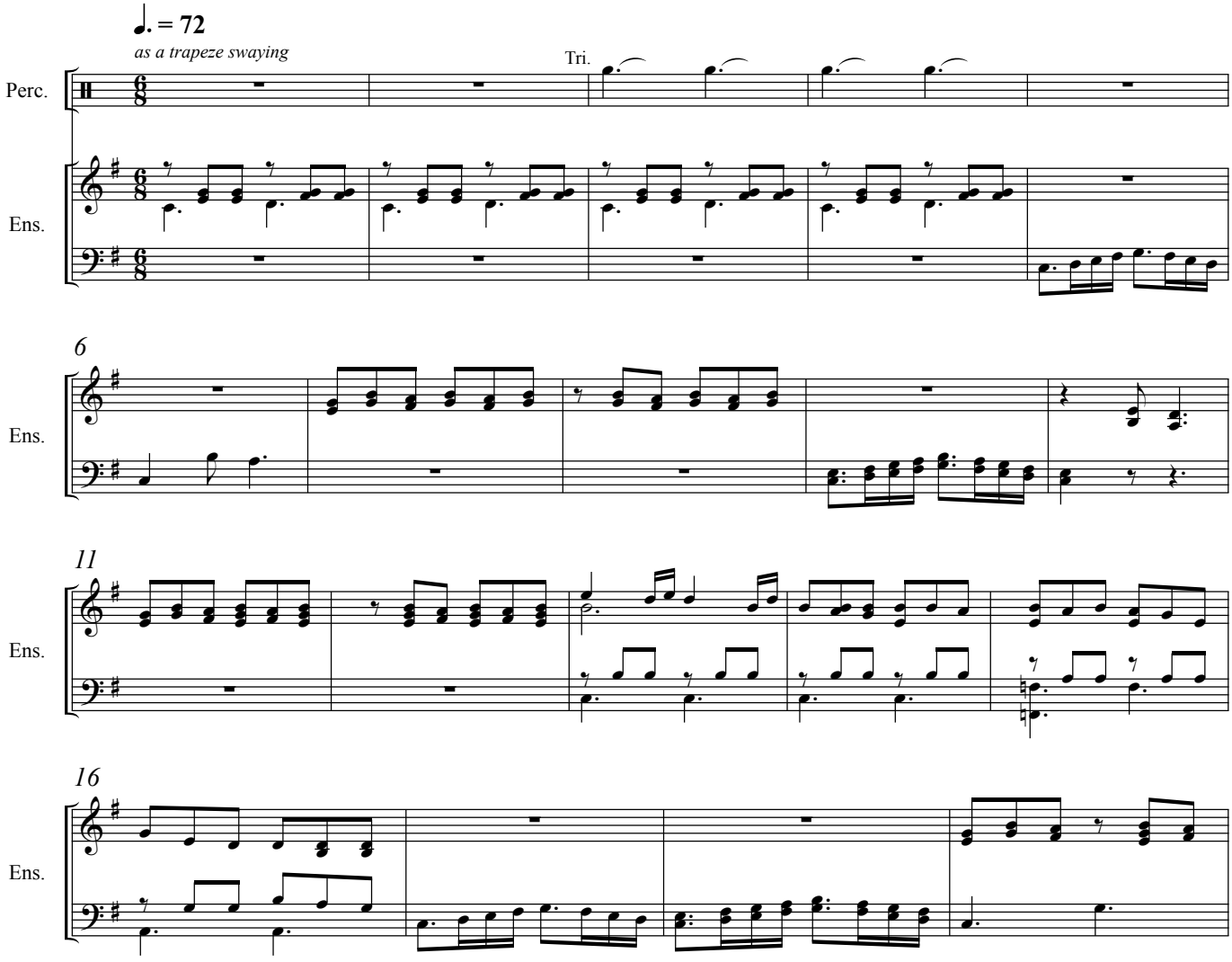

51
Narr.
and he thought: It is like a dark cloud, and I am in it; it belongs to me, and it gives me the power to do these things.
rit.
Perc.
Ens.
56
He landed on one foot, lost his balance, waved his arms wildly and fell off the horse.
Penelope the tightrope walker looked very calm,
Mogador leapt on the horse again. Oscar frowned and tossed him the hoop.
[RINGMASTER tosses an imaginary hoop (tambourine) to percussionist.]
[two heavy thuds]
B.D.
Tamb.
f
58
Mogador threw it into the air and caught it;
leapt up and did a somersault through it.
[Tbn.]
[Horn]
[Tpt. 2]
[Tuba]
64
He thought:
I am a bird and will land like a bird!
He landed on one foot, lost his balance, waved his arms wildly and fell off the horse.
Tamb.
[three heavy thuds]
B.D.


67
Narr.
Now in the Christiani family,
when you fall off the horse three times,
they grab you by one ear and bend you over,
and one of the brothers kicks you.
And that is what
they did to Mogador.
Then the circus band
started playing again.
Slapstick
Perc.
f
68
Narr.
And Mogador looked
at Penelope:
then he looked at the horse
and flicked his ear
a tempo (𝅗𝅥 = 80)
Hi-Hat Cym. (closed)
Perc.
B.D.
Ens.
[Tuba]
74
Narr.
with his hand;
he jumped up on the horse
and landed smartly;
he stood up in one leap and caught the hoop;
Ens.
79
Narr.
and then did a
somersault through it.
He didn't think anything.
He just did a somersault–
and landed
with two feet
on the horse's
back.
Tamb.
Perc.
quickly, as a somersault
[Horn]
Ens.

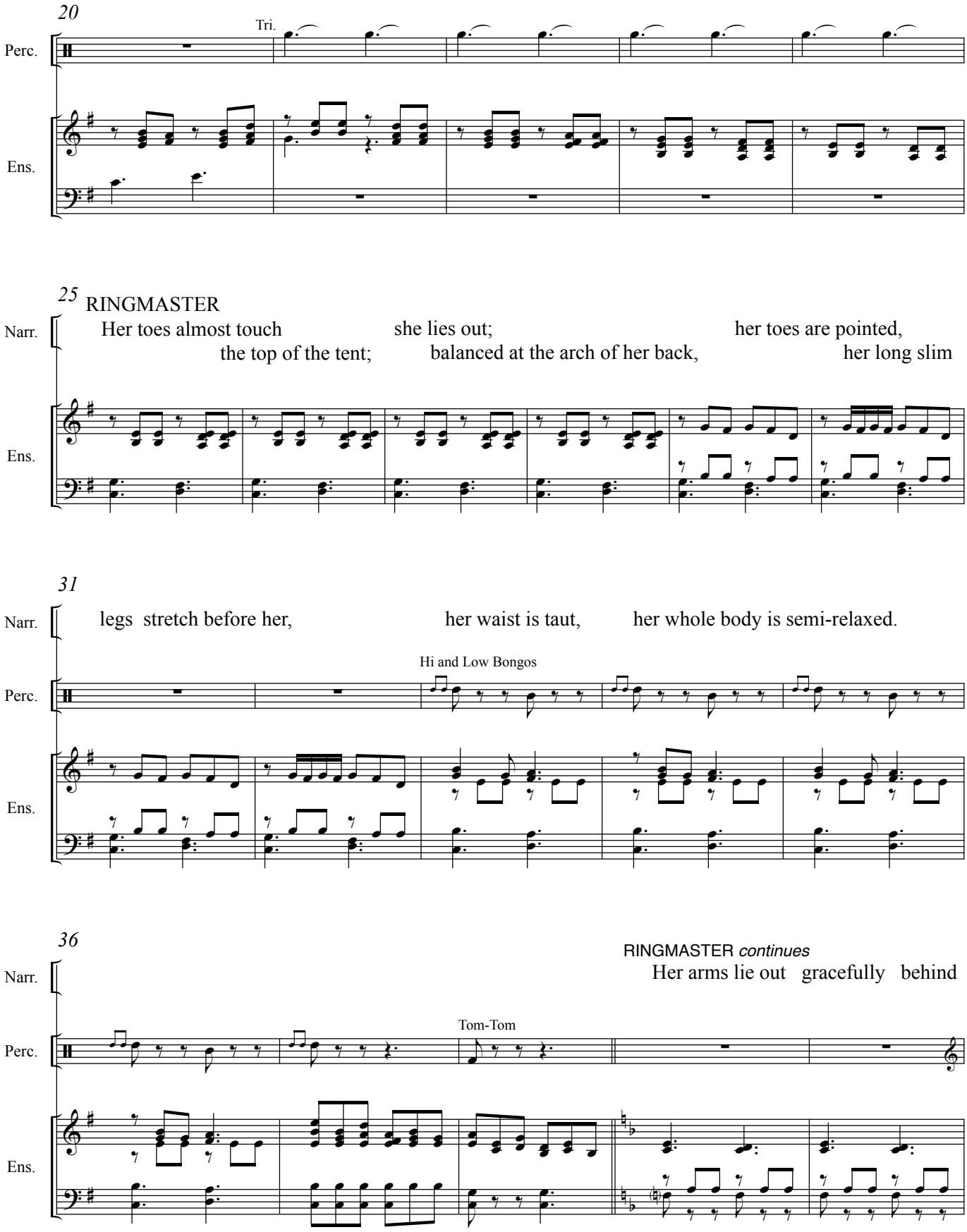


La Louisa

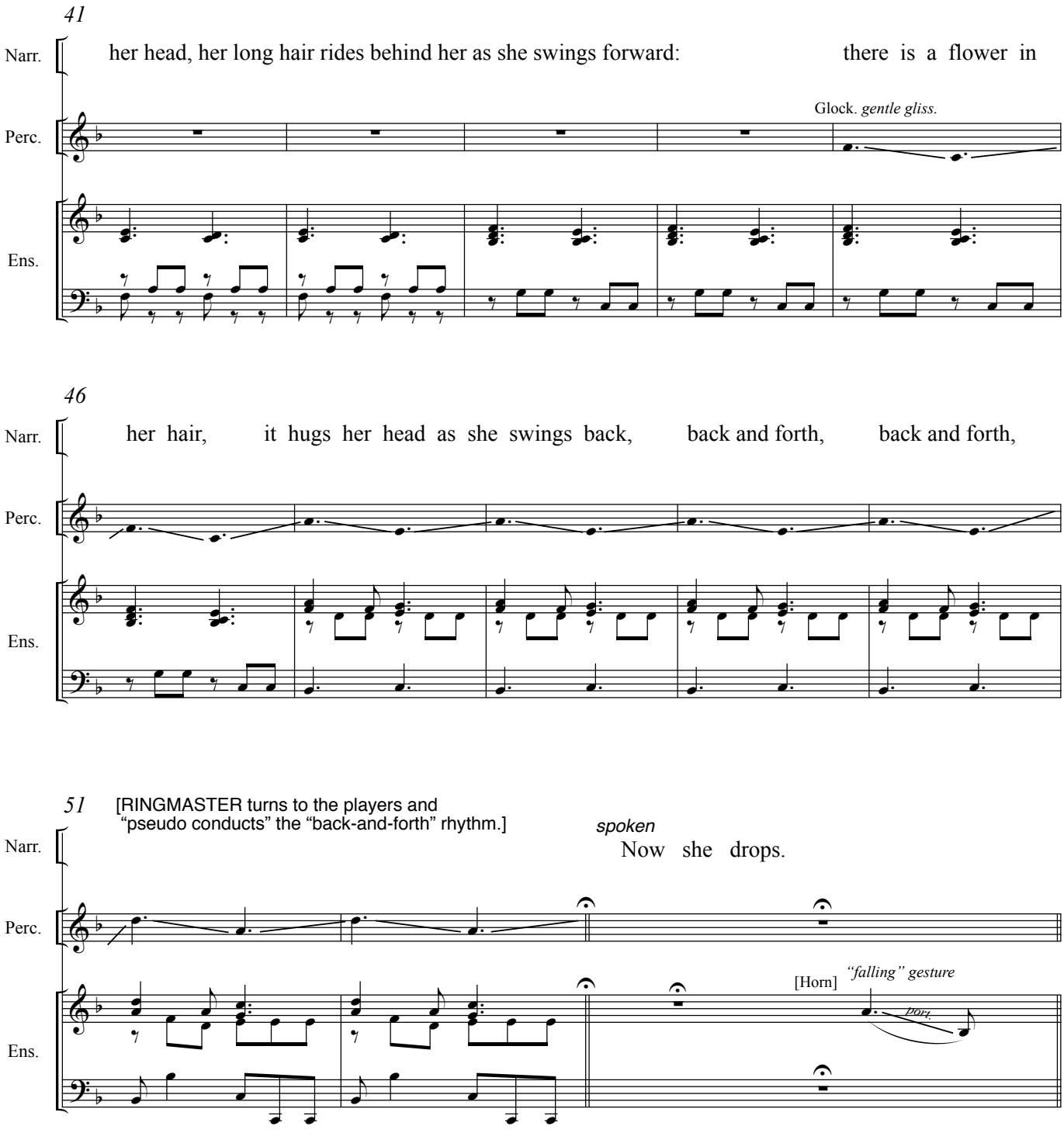
RINGMASTER looks upward at *La Louisa,* swaying on her trapeze, back and forth.



*Allow a short pause before continuing.



* "Wedding" refers to the union/merging of the circus performers.



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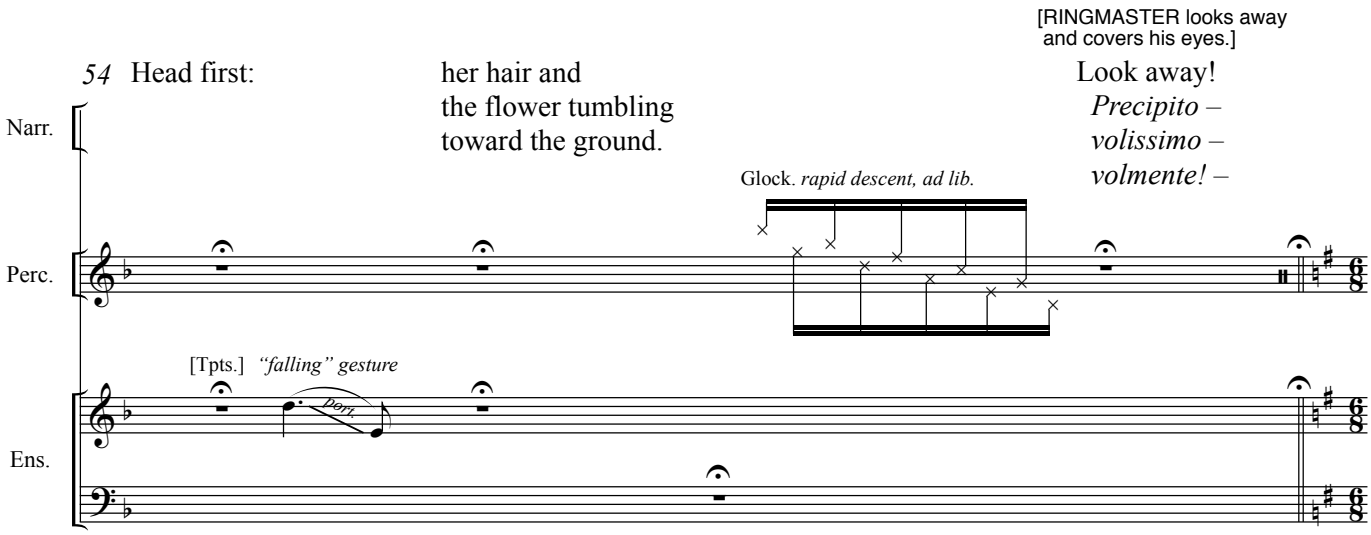
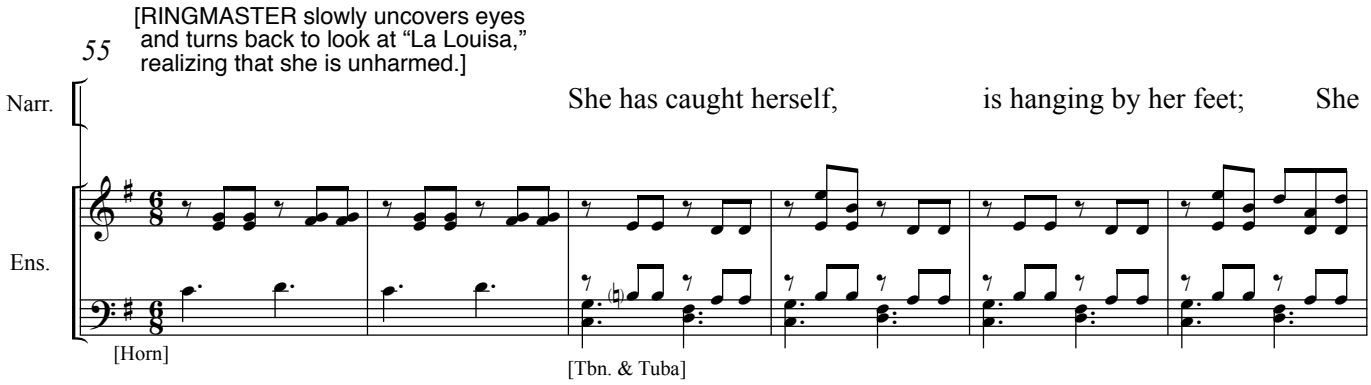
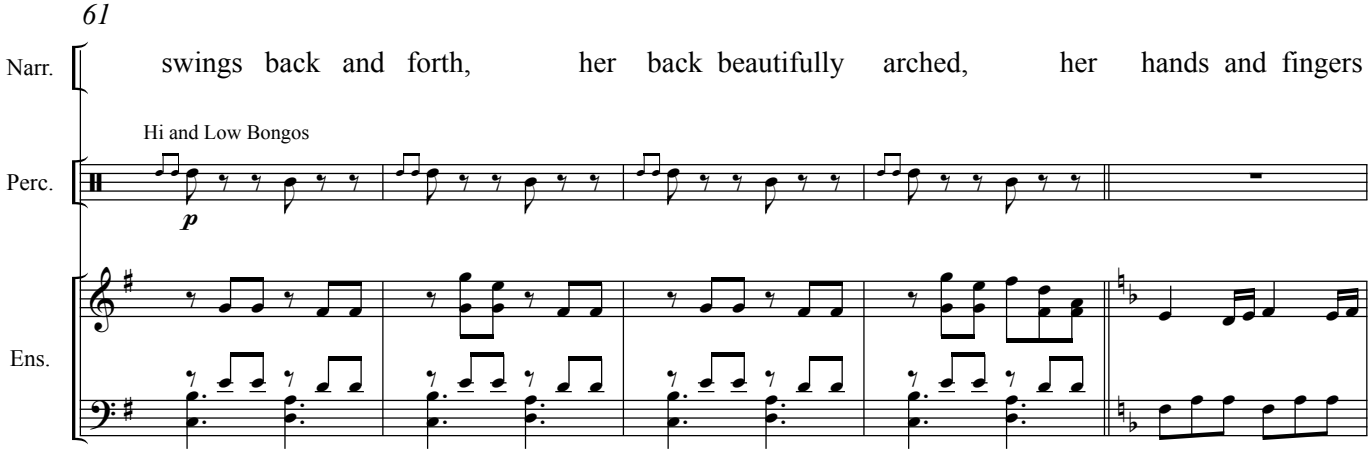
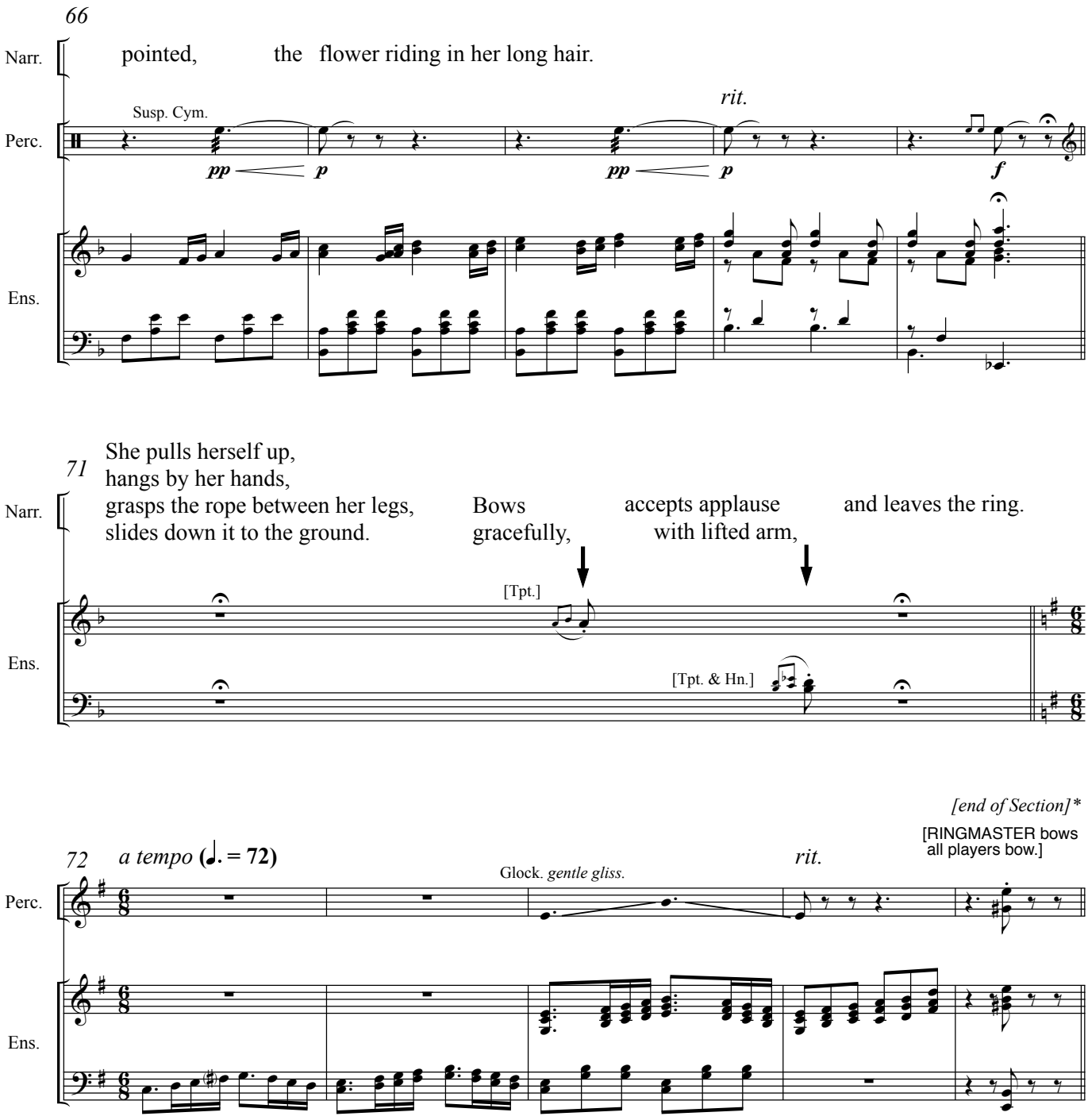

[RINGMASTER looks away and covers his eyes.]
54 Head first: her hair and the flower tumbling toward the ground. Look away! Precipito – volissimo – volmente! –
Narr.
Glock. rapid descent, ad lib.
Perc.
[Tpts.] "falling" gesture
port.
Ens.


[RINGMASTER slowly uncovers eyes and turns back to look at "La Louisa," realizing that she is unharmed.]
55
Narr.
She has caught herself, is hanging by her feet; She
Ens.
[Horn]
[Tbn. & Tuba]


61
Narr.
swings back and forth, her back beautifully arched, her hands and fingers
Hi and Low Bongos
Perc.
p
Ens.

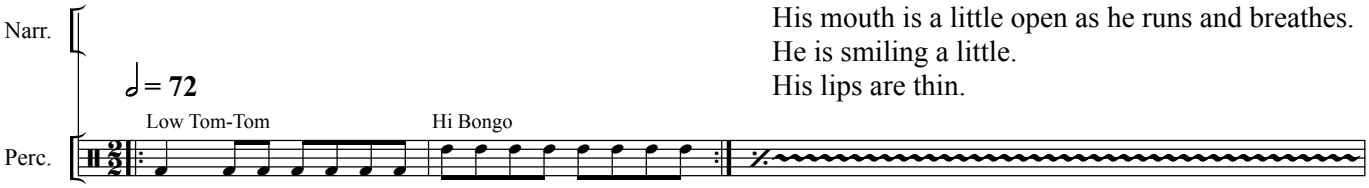

66
Narr.
pointed, the flower riding in her long hair.
Susp. Cym.
rit.
Perc.
pp
p
pp
p
f
Ens.
71
She pulls herself up,
hangs by her hands,
grasps the rope between her legs,
slides down it to the ground.
Bows
gracefully,
accepts applause
with lifted arm,
and leaves the ring.
Narr.
[Tpt.]
Ens.
[Tpt. & Hn.]
[end of Section]*
[RINGMASTER bows
all players bow.]
72
a tempo (♩. = 72)
rit.
Glock. gentle gliss.
Perc.
Ens.

Mogador Running with Horse

In this scene, the RINGMASTER reads accompanied only by percussion and various tapping sounds produced by the brass players

Ringmaster

Mogador is running along with the horse.
His eyes are serious, full of thought.
His mouth is a little open as he runs and breathes.
He is smiling a little.
His lips are thin.



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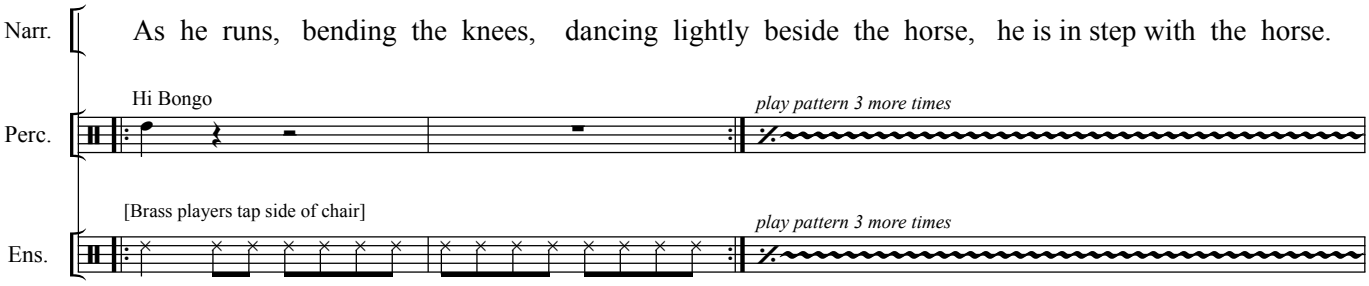

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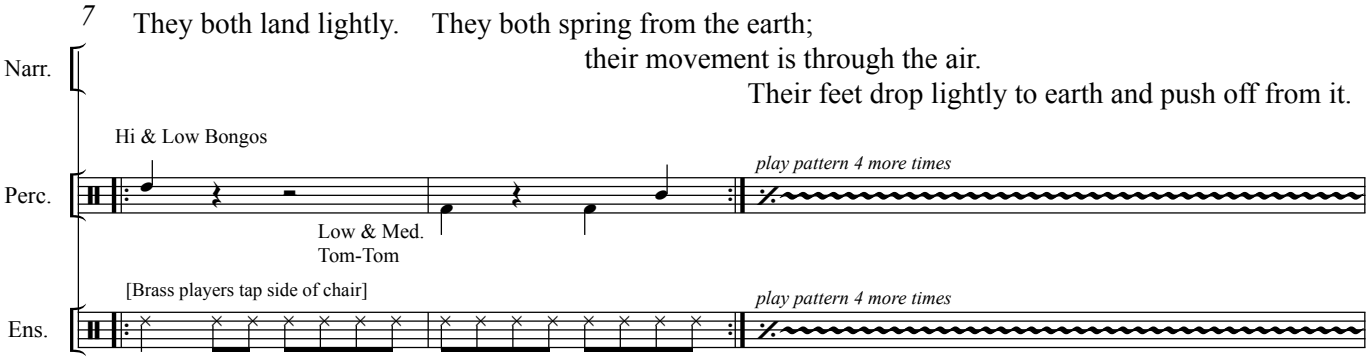

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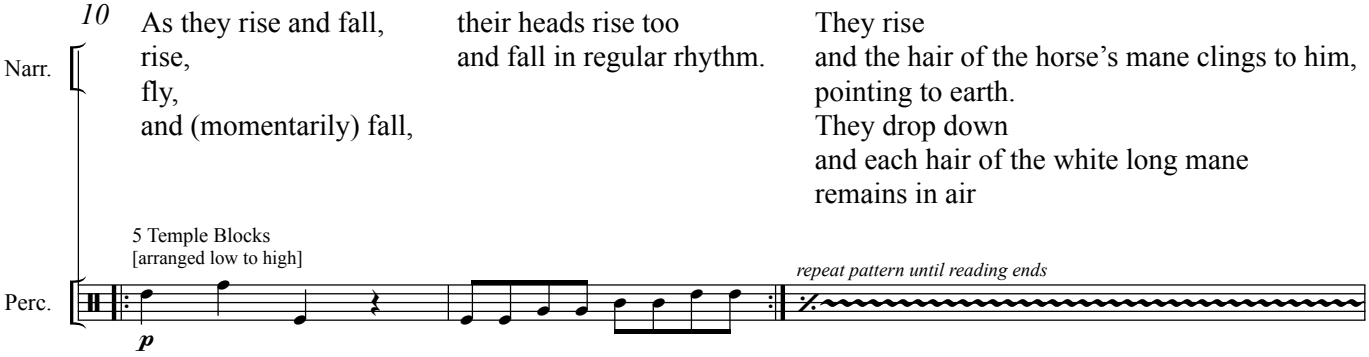


13

Narr. The boy's hair too,
dark silk
rides close as he rises;
then rises in the air
falling lightly over his forehead
as he drops to earth.

They come around the ring,
The boy runs on the inside.
The horse trots along close
to the curb.

The boy with his horse as they turn
in the ring are boy and horse running in
blue and green field: his hand is on the
horse's back the horse is to him
as close as hand.

Perc. Hi Bongo — *repeat pattern until reading ends*

Ens. [Brass players tap side of chair] — *repeat pattern until reading ends*

15

Narr. They round the turn, the boy is out of sight. But now, behold!

He flies above the horse,
holding a strap at his shoulders.
His feet fly out behind.
His toes are together and
pointed like closed scissors.

Perc. Temple Blocks; Hi & Low Bongos; Tri.

(17)

Narr. Now he splits, sits riding bareback
pointing his toes to the ground
spinning beneath them.
His arms are held in air relaxed.

He rides lightly, barely touching, his arms in air.
Then he leaps up and with a pirouette begins his dance.

Ens. [Brass players roll fingers very gently on side of chair]

19

Narr. What was begun as a run through the field

Perc. Hi Bongo

Ens. [Brass players tap side of chair]

23

Narr. is turned to ritual. *[end of Section]**

rit.

Perc. Tri.

Ens. [Brass players tap side of chair]

*Allow a short pause before continuing.

Mogador's Poem

The following reading is performed without accompaniment

Ringmaster *(portraying the Circus Acrobat)*

By day I have circled
like the sun,
have leapt like fire.

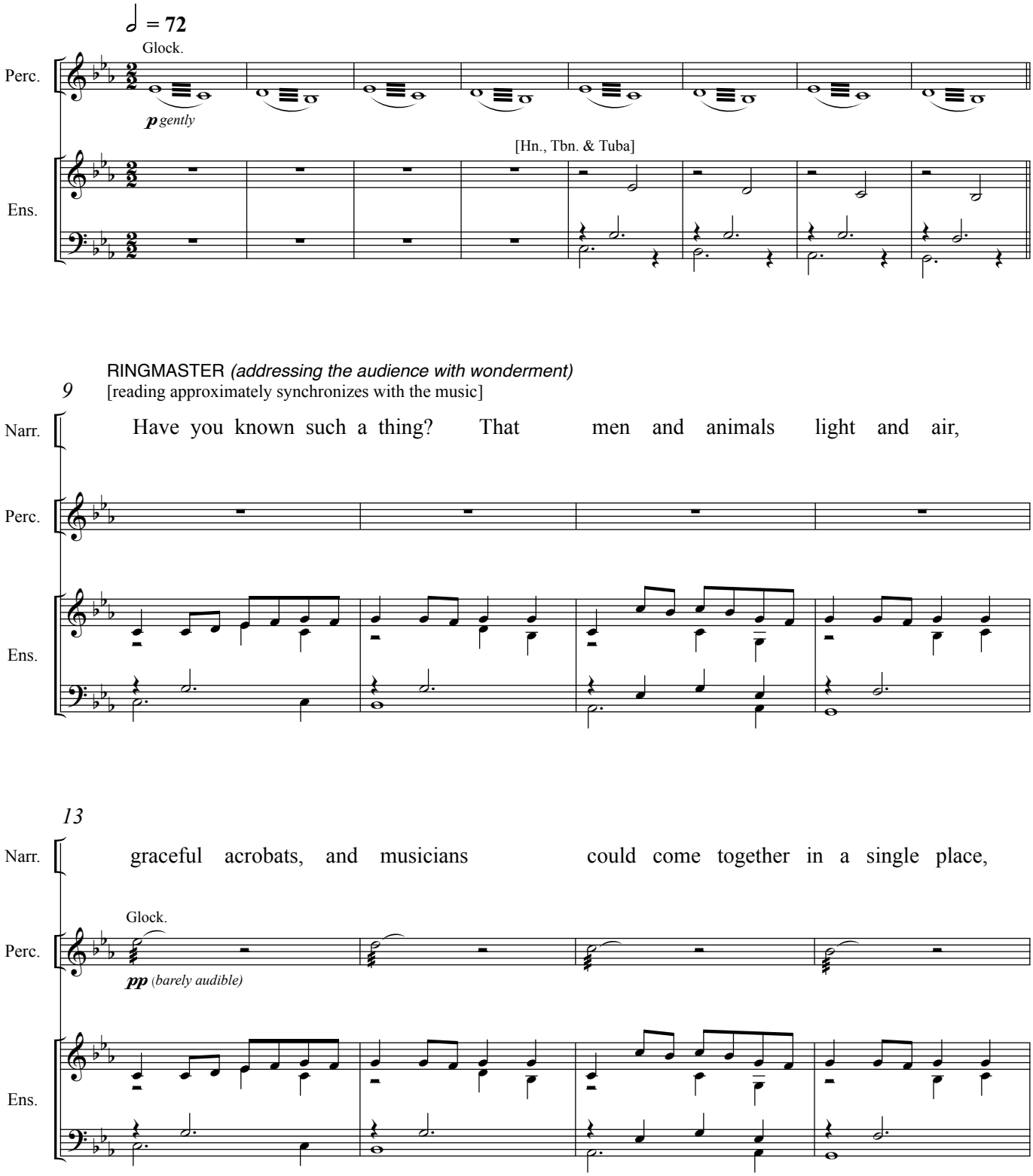
At night I am a wise man
on his palanquin.

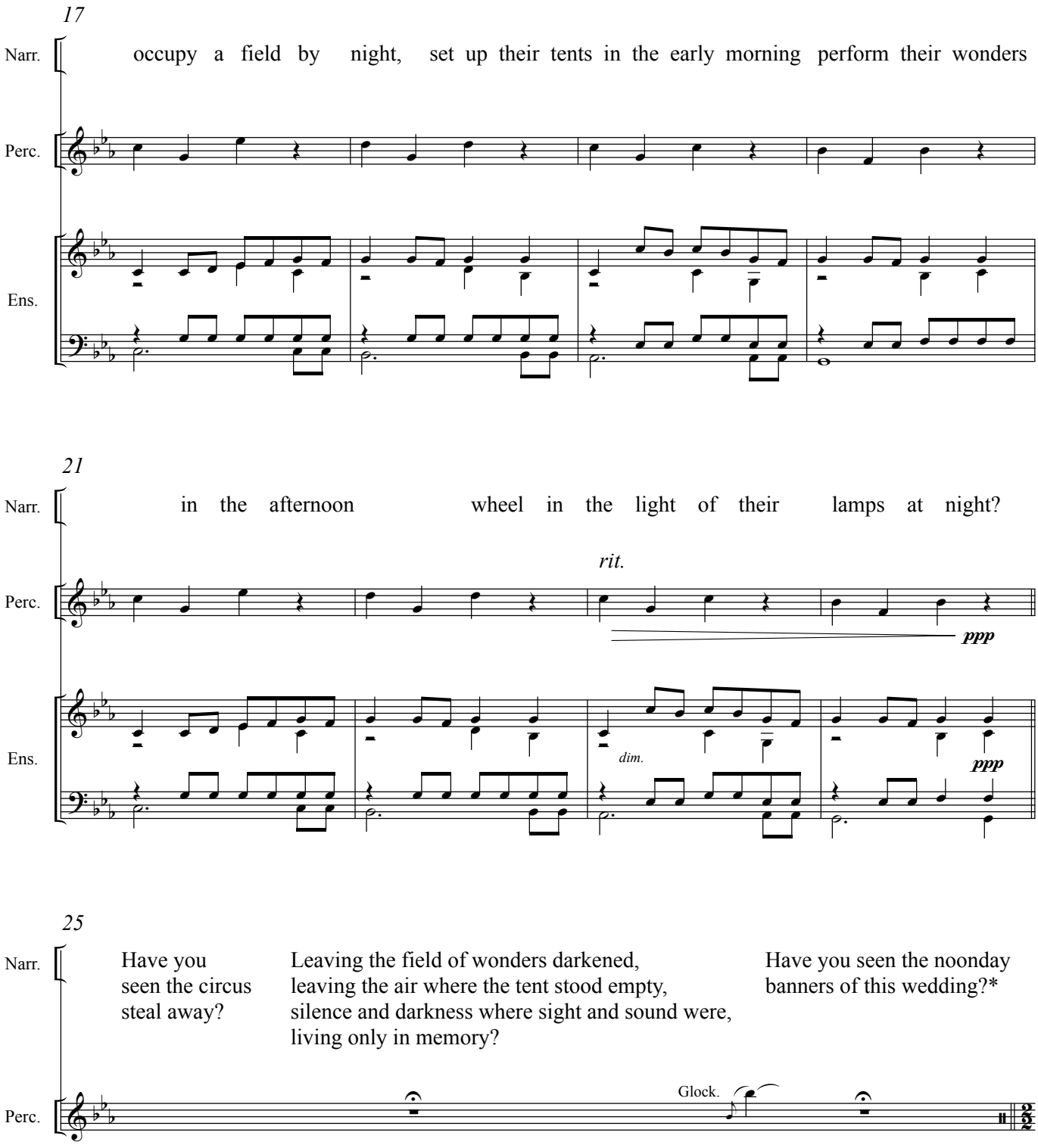
By day I am an acrobat,
spinning brightly,
a juggler's torch.

Nights I am contemplative,
drinking deep of silence.

Road, prairie, night
go through me:
Songs of praise
like mist rise up:
Blessings
tumble down
like dew.

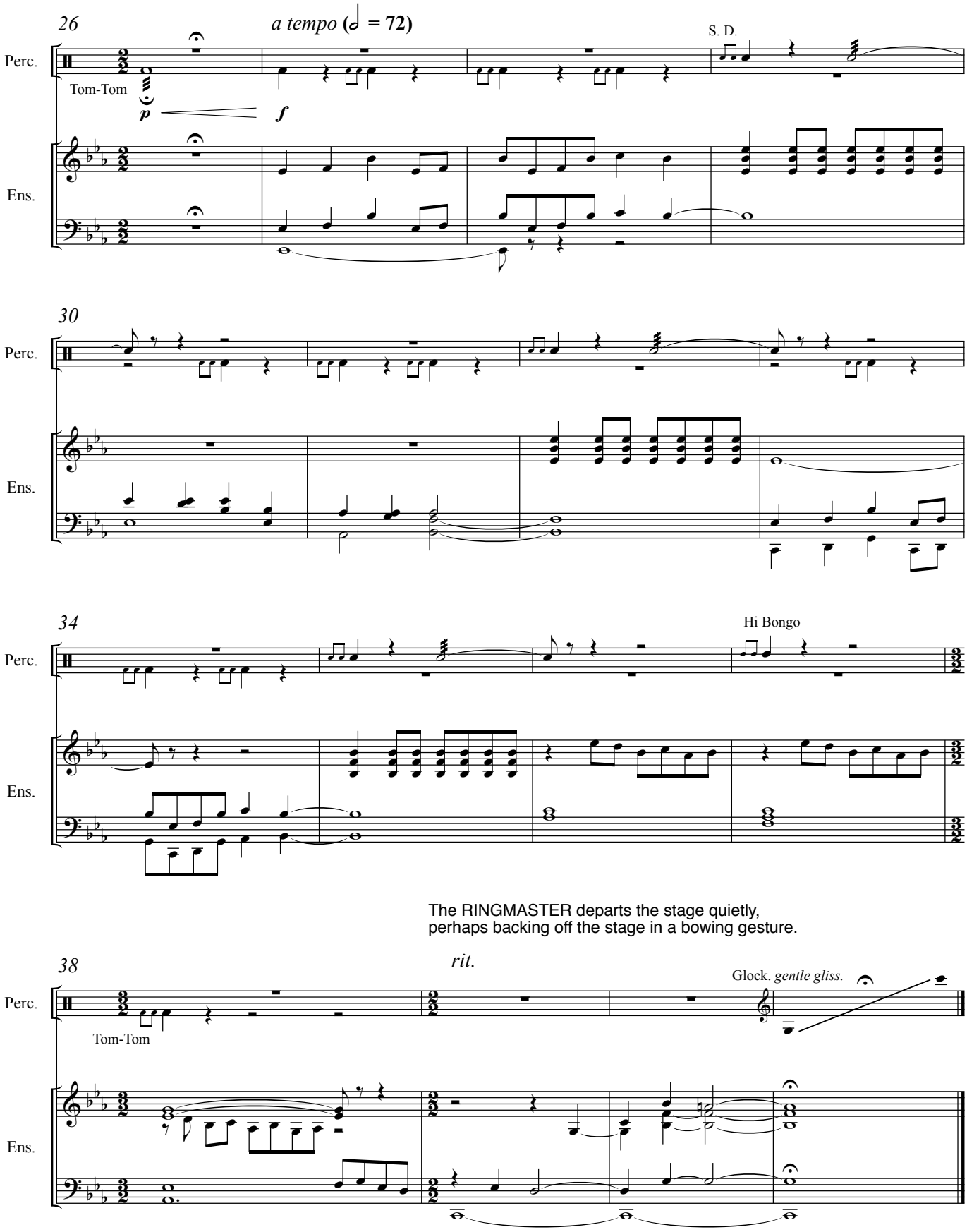
Epilogue


♩ = 72
Glock.
Perc.
p gently
[Hn., Tbn. & Tuba]
Ens.
RINGMASTER (addressing the audience with wonderment)
9
[reading approximately synchronizes with the music]
Narr.
Have you known such a thing? That men and animals light and air,
Perc.
Ens.
13
Narr.
graceful acrobats, and musicians could come together in a single place,
Glock.
Perc.
pp (barely audible)
Ens.



* "Wedding" refers to the union/merging of the circus performers.

The RINGMASTER grabs a colorful banner and walks proudly
across the stage, giving a final acknowledgement of the circus performers.



The RINGMASTER departs the stage quietly,
perhaps backing off the stage in a bowing gesture.