When Margaret Fingerhut commissioned this piece, we both felt that we'd like to celebrate our Jewish roots. We decided to look into Iraqi Jewish music to conjure up a vanished world. Jews had lived in the region for more than 2,000 years until they had to flee the country only a generation ago.

Dangoor Education then kindly offered to sponsor the commission, and we soon came across the beautiful 'D'ror Yikra' – often sung during Shabbat meals, to a haunting Iraqi folk melody.

My piece follows the words of the song, which were written by Morrocan poet, linguist and musician, Dunash ben Labrat, in 960 CE. There are biblical references and the first verse draws from Leviticus, declaring liberty to everyone. The music opens with hints of the theme to come, played inside the piano evoking the haunting Iraqi Santur. Returning to the keyboard, the theme becomes established and embellished over a rocking accompaniment as the words implore rest, on this Sabbath day.

The remaining five verses of the song alternate between Longing and Anger:

A. Longing, for a sign that better times are to come takes the descending notes of the theme and leans into them, yearning for deliverance.

B. Anger, let our enemies be defeated takes us to the very depths of the keyboard as the theme becomes sporadic and unpredictable and thoughts of crushed foes abound.

We glide to the heights of the keyboard for **C. Longing, for places of beauty and serenity**. Again the theme is yearning and wistful over a heartbeat rhythm of chord clusters created from the Hidjaz mode, in which this ancient melody was composed. I also use the Phrygian scale which is also commonly used in Iraqi Jewish music.

A sense of danger and unpredictability ensues in **D. Anger, again at foes but praying for unity**. An old Iraqi metre of 10/16 (3+2+2+3) raises the music adrenalin as thoughts of foes return. However, returning to the very bottom note of the keyboard we hear the reiteration of an octave-based motif as the words implore unity - even with their foes.

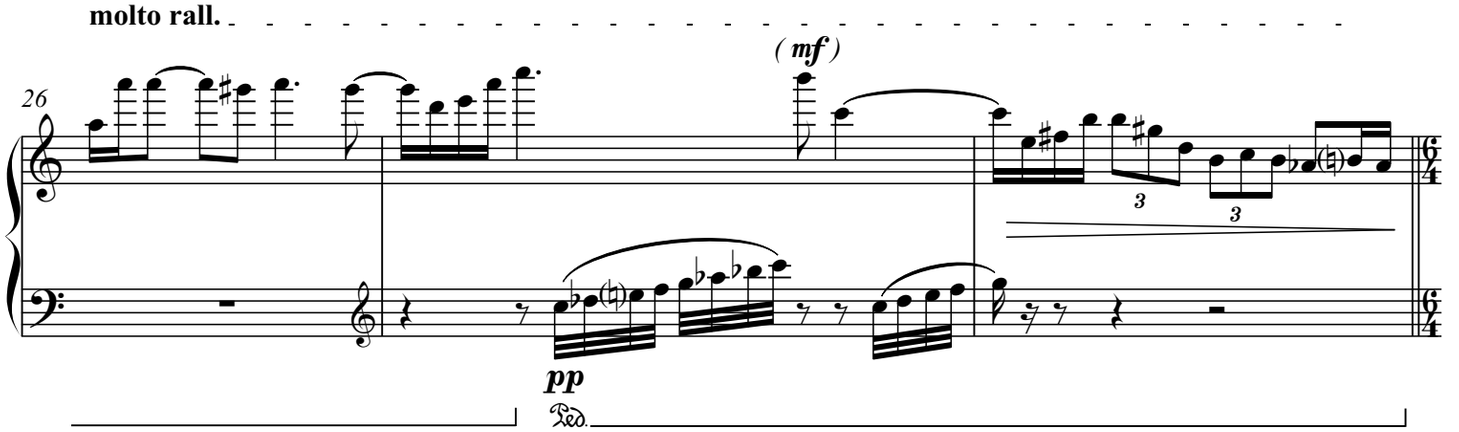
The final verse, **E. Longing, for a glorious future – regal in its wisdom and beauty**, has a majestic and stately feel to it. It sounds like it is heading for hope and a happy ending but we end in quiet, bittersweet contemplation – in memory of the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Jews who had to leave the country, never to return. And it is to them, that I dedicate this piece.

I am hugely grateful to Margaret Fingerhut for commissioning the piece and to Dangoor Education for supporting it. Also, to Sara Manasseh, who aided my extensive research into this field, inspiring me with her beautiful singing. Thank you to Rabbi Michael Hilton for talking me through the words of the song and the sentiment between the lines.

Roxanna Panufnik, 16 May 2022

Commissioned by Margaret Fingerhut with support from Dangoor Education

First performed on 20 July 2022 by Margaret Fingerhut at Birdsall House, Birdsall Malton as part of the Ryedale Festival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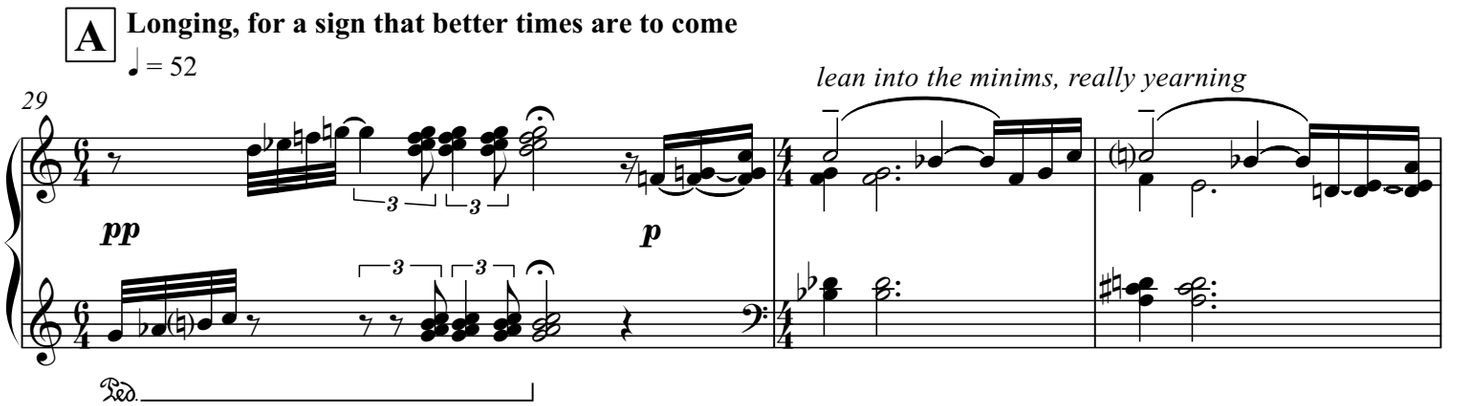
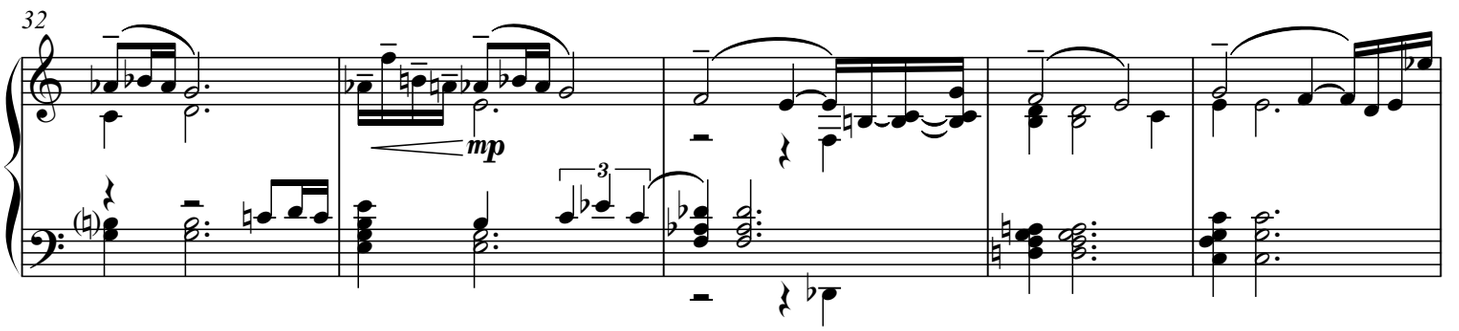
(mf)
26
pp
Ped.


A
Longing, for a sign that better times are to come
♩ = 52
lean into the minims, really yearning
29
pp
p
Ped.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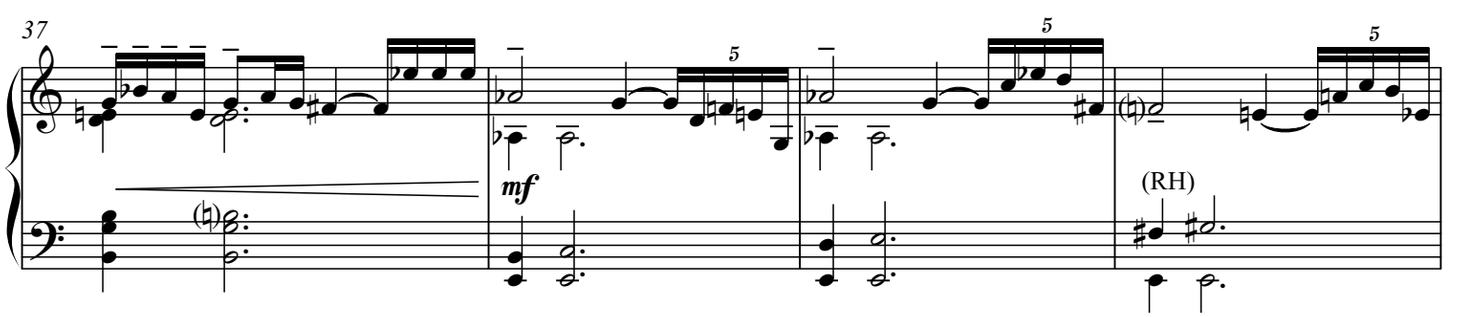
37
mf
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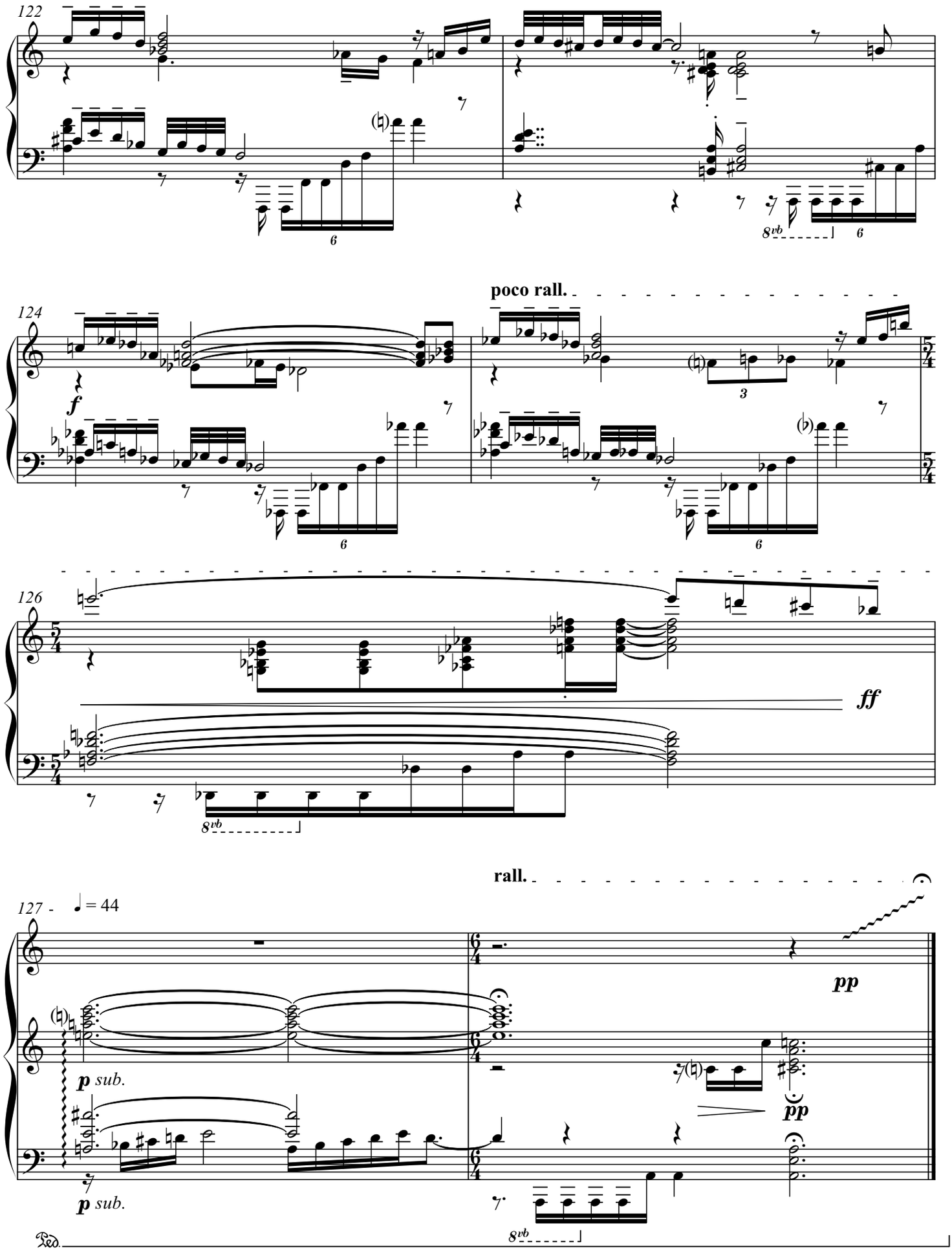
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