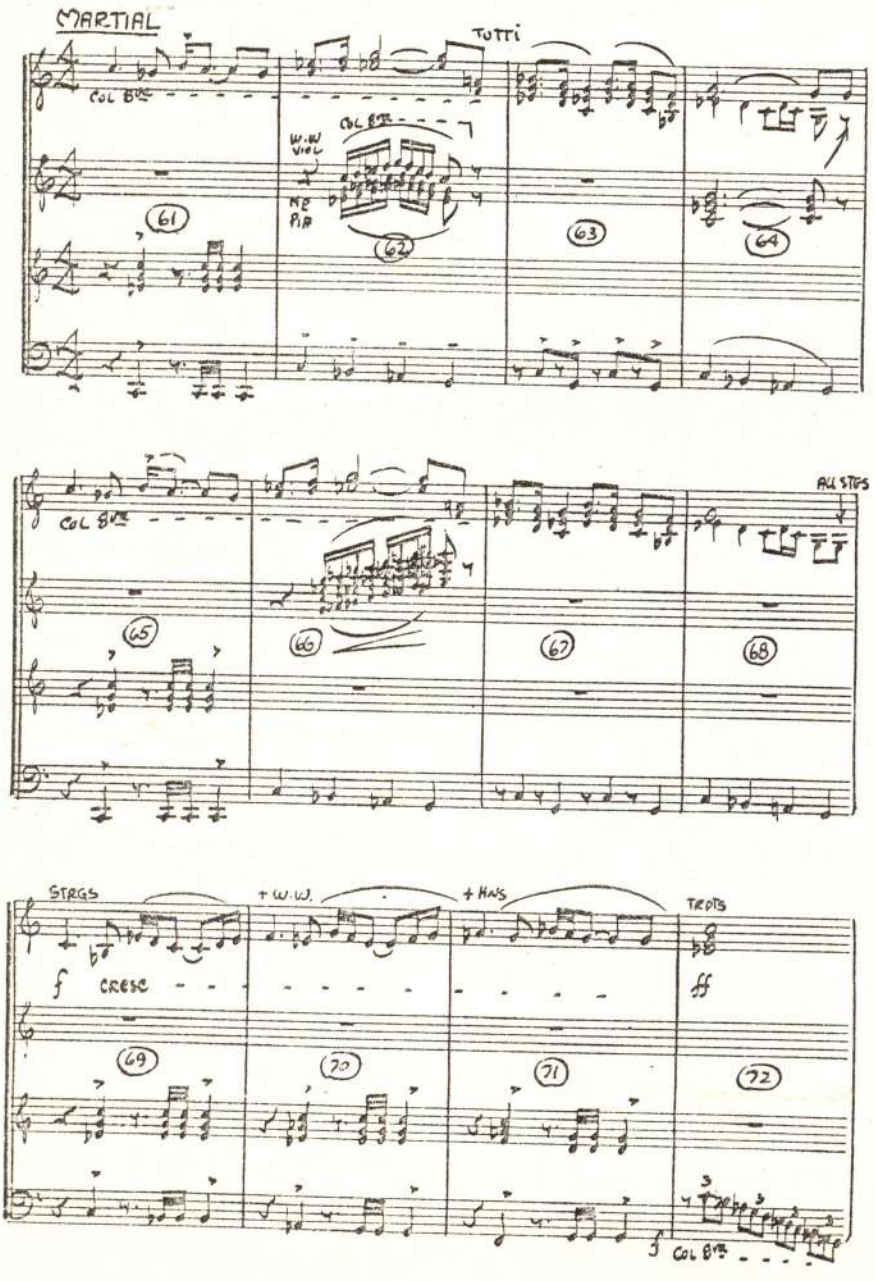
THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Elmer Bernstein

The composition of the score for THE TEN COMMANDMENTS represents a year and a half of the most exacting work I have ever done. There were so many obstacles to overcome. The first was my own apprehension of scoring what amounts to the birth of civilized ethical concepts, of scoring conversation between man and God, of scoring the birth of freedom and the dignity of man as a free soul under God. I don't think that any true artist should feel equal to that task. I was certainly beset by many fears and doubts. Perhaps it would have been easier if I were being called upon to present a purely personal approach to these great matters. In the composition of motion picture music, however, the composer most often finds himself bypassing his most personal expressions in favor of media and language *most certainly* communicative.

Ex. 1



This is one the primary concerns ond responsibilities of the screen composer -- the invention and adherence to musical language which communicates easily and spontaneously to the audience. In this case even this problem was not a simple one as I was working under the close supervision of the producer, Mr. Cecil B. DeMille.

It seems ridiculous to attempt to examine Mr. DeMille's great involvement with the scoring in one paragraph. First allow me a personal note to say that Cecil B. DeMille is one of the most extraordinary men it has been my pleasure to know. There is no detail of *any* aspect of picture making which escapes his very sharp scrutiny. From the costuming of the extra players to details of orchestration and sound recording Mr. DeMille was indeed the master of the fate of his picture. He has very definite concepts about music in his films and is indefatigable in his quest for what he believes to be correct for his films. His concepts are quite Wagnerian both dramatically and musically. He believes firmly in the use of the leit-motif and the interplays of these motifs in scenes which affect the destinies of more than one character. He is a great believer in line and most often would insist upon hearing the lines played on the piano in the belief that weakness of line could be masked by harmonic invention and other orchestral and compositional devices. A piano demonstration of composition played for him in a full, florid piano arrangement would invaribly bring a request for a "one finger" demonstration of the line. He is a "spontaneous reactor," becoming warmly enthusiastic about things which please him and equally disturbed about things which irritate him. I found it quite possible to disagree as long as I was completely candid and honest; to attempt to gain an end in devious ways is an extremely dangerous procedure with Mr. DeMille, as he is much too astute a gentleman to be taken in by politicking. To sum up, let's say that Mr. DeMille knew what he wanted and had the energy and drive to keep at it until he got it out of you.

Now some general musical problems. In some cases we were faced with creating Egyptian source music. Since no system of musical notation is extant, we studied the instruments of the period and found a rich assortment of woodwind and percussion instruments. They seem to indicate a richness of color and a very limited

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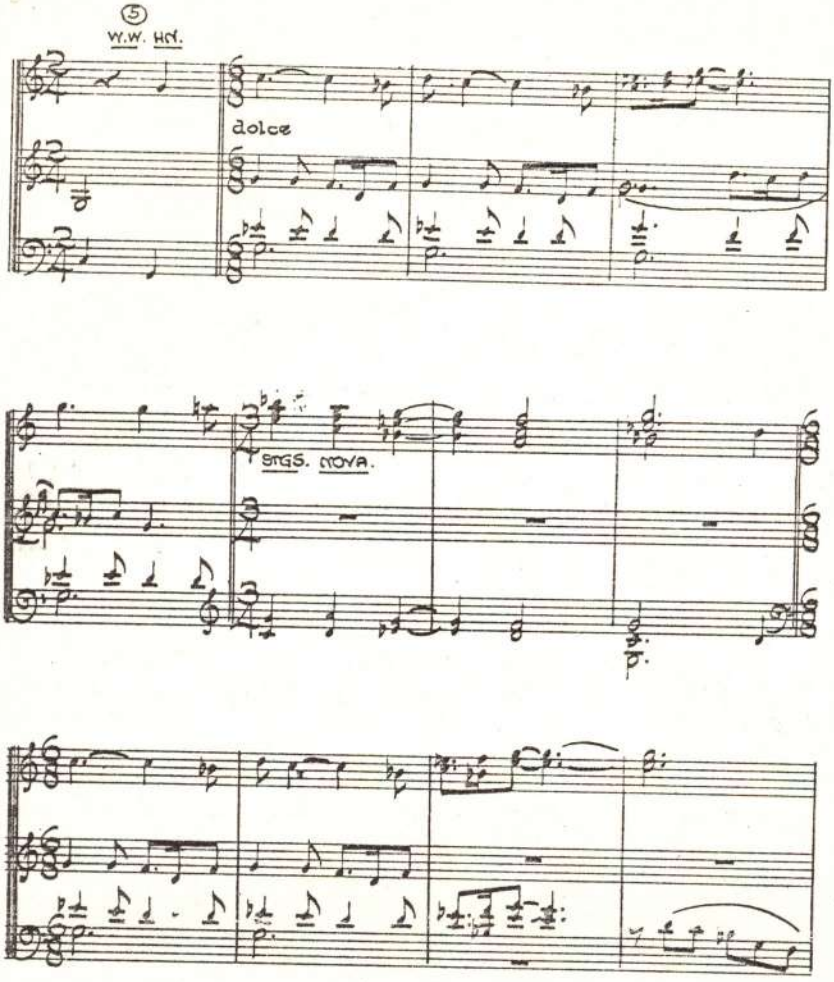
Ex. 2



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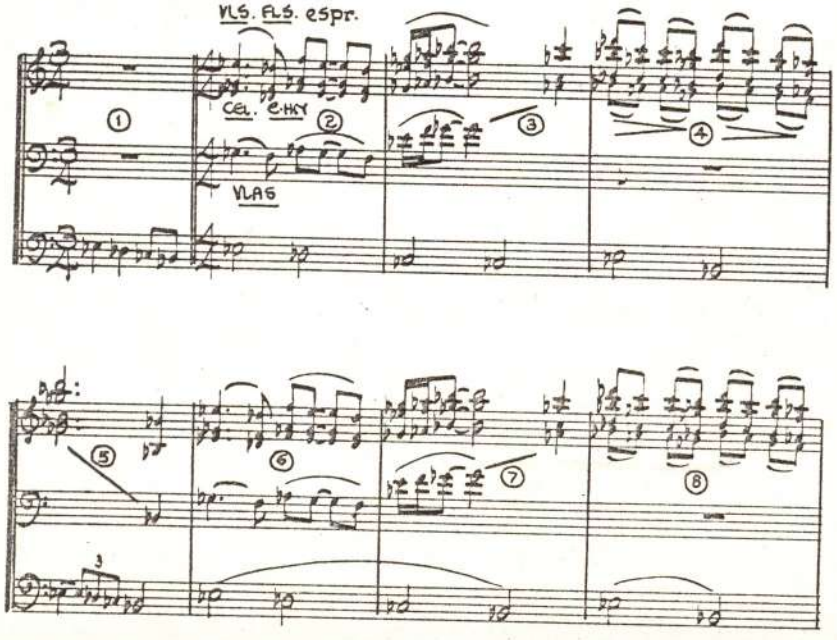

scale. Several compositions in this vein were created, some of which remain in the release print of the picture. A few were cut as it was felt that the sounds, while authentic, might be unpleasant to the modern ear. There are numerous fanfares for which I employed natural horns which impart a wild, barbaric quality to their sound. The only "tricky" effects employed were in the burning bush sequence in which the string choir was reinforced by a novachord, and in the sequence of the pestilence in which several electronic devices were used to help impart a feeling of terror. The orchestra at its greatest strength consisted of seventy-one musicians. The only unorthodox feature was the presence of eight horns. The music was recorded in a conventional single channel setup on full coat magnetic film and transferred to optical film upon the completion of dubbing.

As I indicated previously, this score was approached on the basis of creating themes for all the major characters and forces. I will attempt to demonstrate some of the usages in different situations. Ex. 1 is a forthright statement of the theme of Moses as it appears in the Main Title or Prelude. Moses emerges as complex figure in THE TEN COMMANDMENTS. Found in the basket on the Nile by the daughter of Pharaoh he is reared in the palace as a prince. He is temporal power, a warrior, a suitor of the throne princess, in all, a glamorous, human figure. Later he is fallen from favor, outcast from Egypt. He is a skeptic concerning his God until, transformed by his experience at the burning bush, he returns to Egypt as God's messenger to lead his people from bondage. The treatment of the theme in Ex. 1 relates to Moses as a prince of Egypt; its martial stride and "fleshy" orchestration tell of temporal power.

Ex. 2 is a treatment of the Moses theme for his discovery as an infant. Here both rhythmically and in its transparent woodwind setting it is imbued with the feeling of lullaby.

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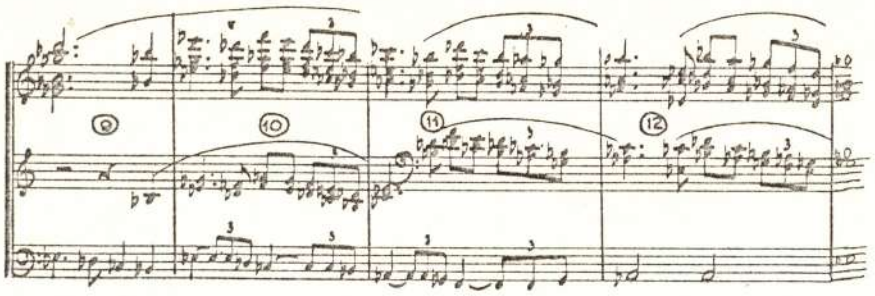
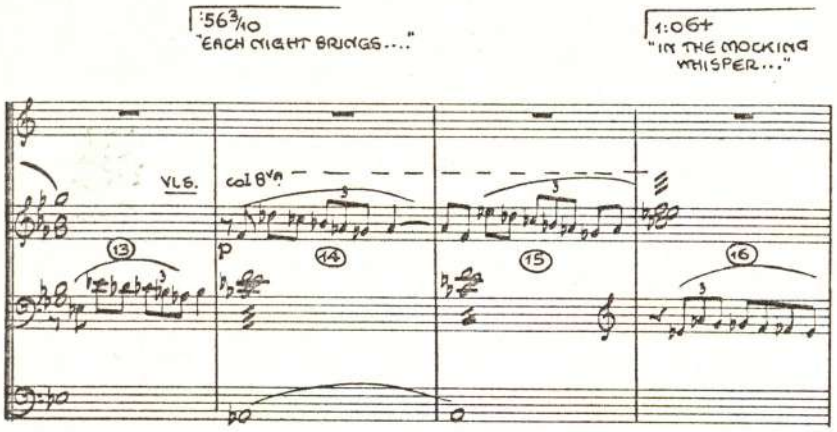
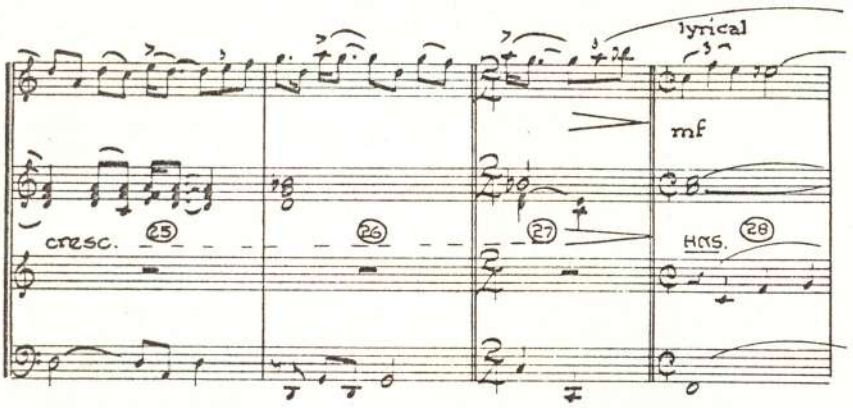
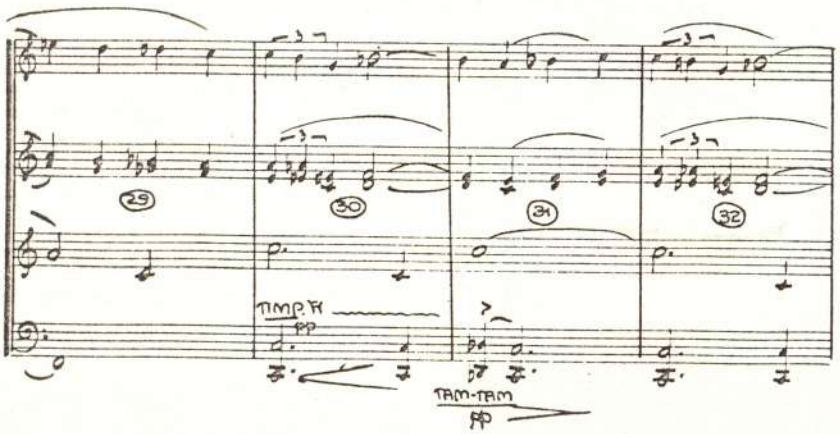




Ex. 4





Ex. 3 is yet another treatment of the same material. Here Moses, fallen from favor, is driven out into the desert "where men are purged and cleansed for God's great purpose". Here the arrogance is gone. In tempo, treatment and orchestration we have a wanderer in a desperate search for his God and the meaning of his life. This might be a good place to tackle the problems of thematic style. From Mr. DeMille's point of view the problem to tackle was story telling. From my point of view the problem at some point had to reduce itself to questions of through what musical idiom. Even if we could have resurrected the music of the ancients it is doubtful that the idiom would have been communicative to our ears. I was most anxious to avoid the time-worn augmented seconds that seem to represent the easy way to say Hebrew in music. I turned rather to more modern modes of more recent Hebrew music and so we find the Moses theme loosely based on the dorian mode, whose major sixth in midst of the minor feeling appears to be somewhat characteristic of a more vigorous side of Hebrew music. Do not assume anything clinical or scholarly in this approach, however, as our main goal was the immediate communication of story and emotion rather than a scholarly recreation of Hebrew music.

Ex. 4 is the theme of the seductive, langorous throne princess. Here we have a pure fabrication. This is not in any sense ethnic music, but its chromatic meanderings impart a suggestion of the exotic, the presence of incense.

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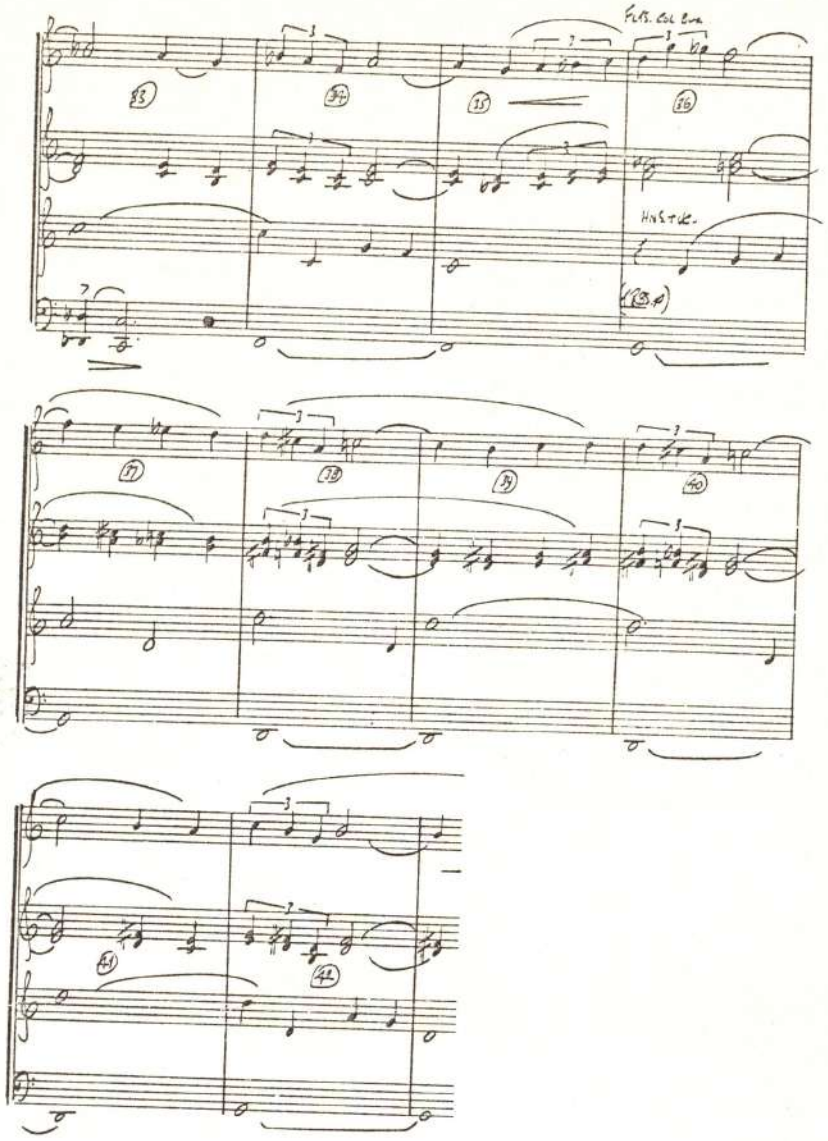
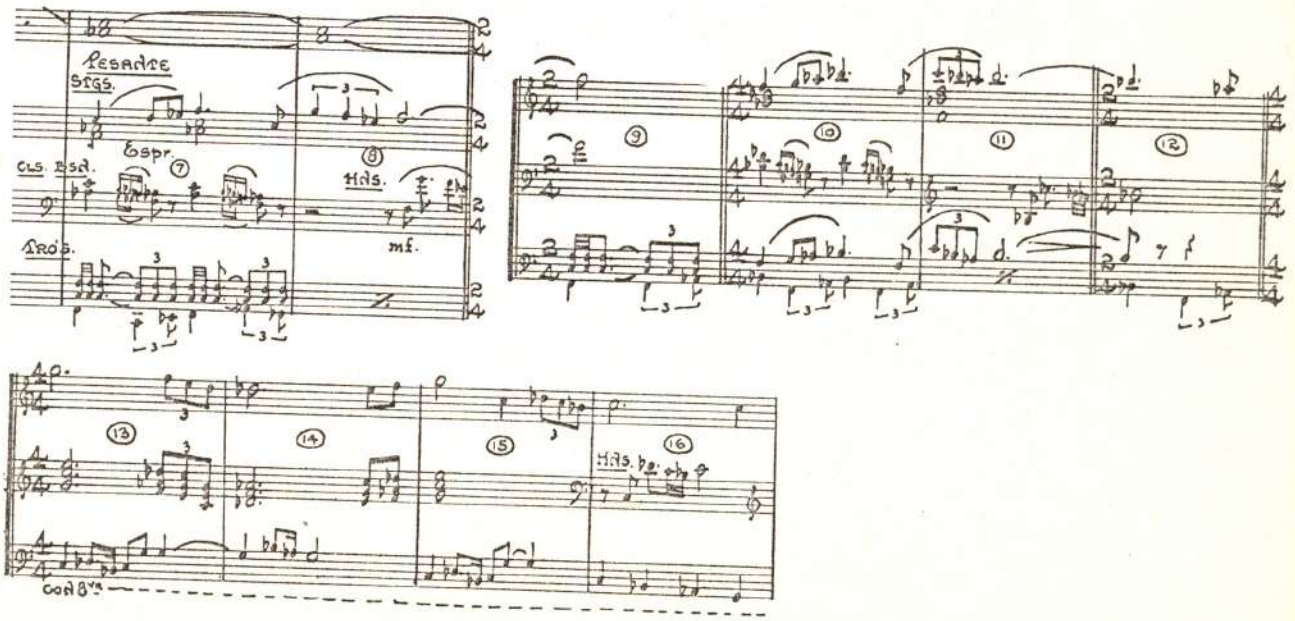


In the theme of the Hebrew people (Ex. 5) we have a marriage of the dorian feeling of the Moses theme with the suggestion of our old friend, the augmented second. This theme was primarily projected against a background of suffering and slavery and was abandoned in favor of fresh material in the scenes of the exodus.

Ex. 5



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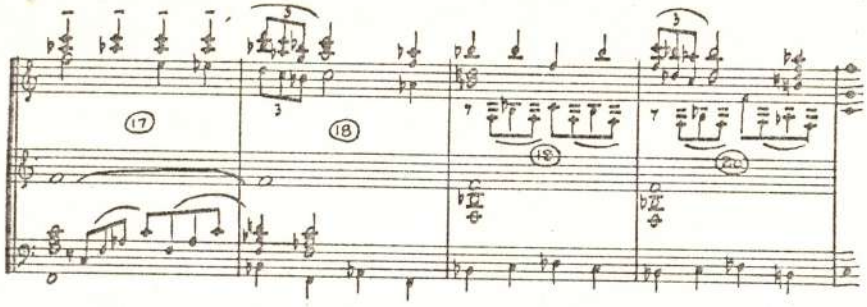
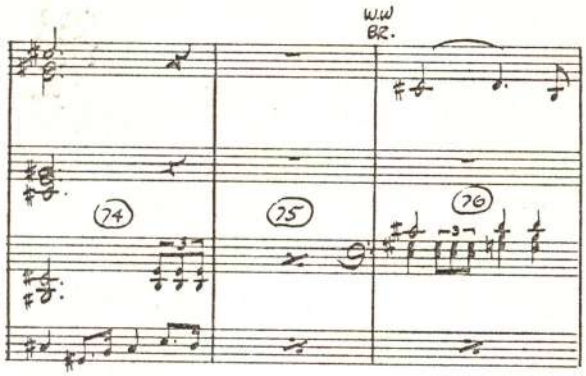
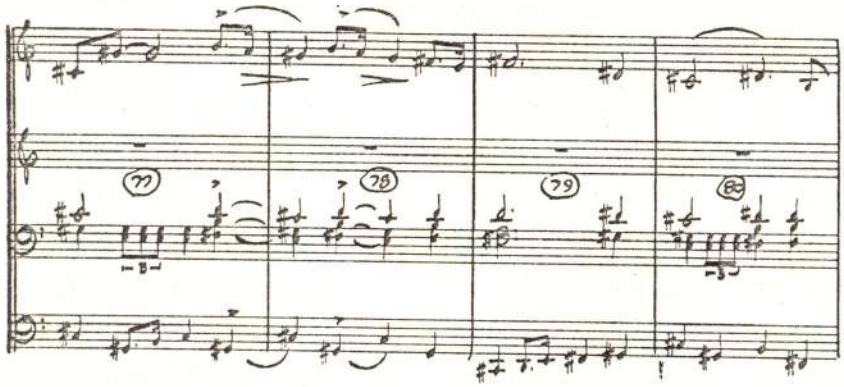
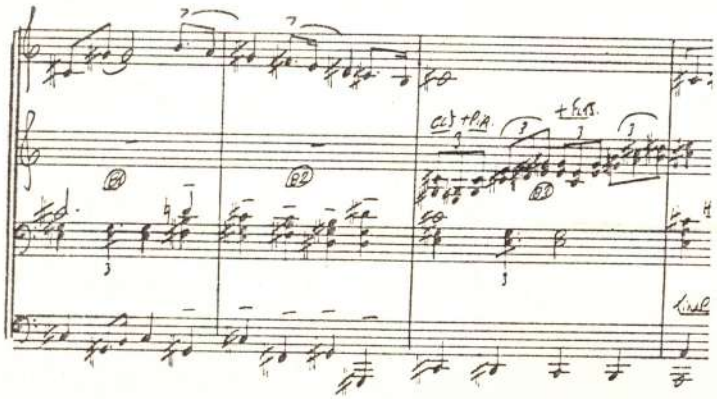


Ex. 6







Rameses is the ruthless natural son of the Pharaoh who brings about Moses' downfall in the palace and goes on to become the tyrannical ruler of Egypt, finally brought to his knees by his indifference to the laws of man and God. Ex. 6 is his theme, faintly modal, always pompous and relentless.

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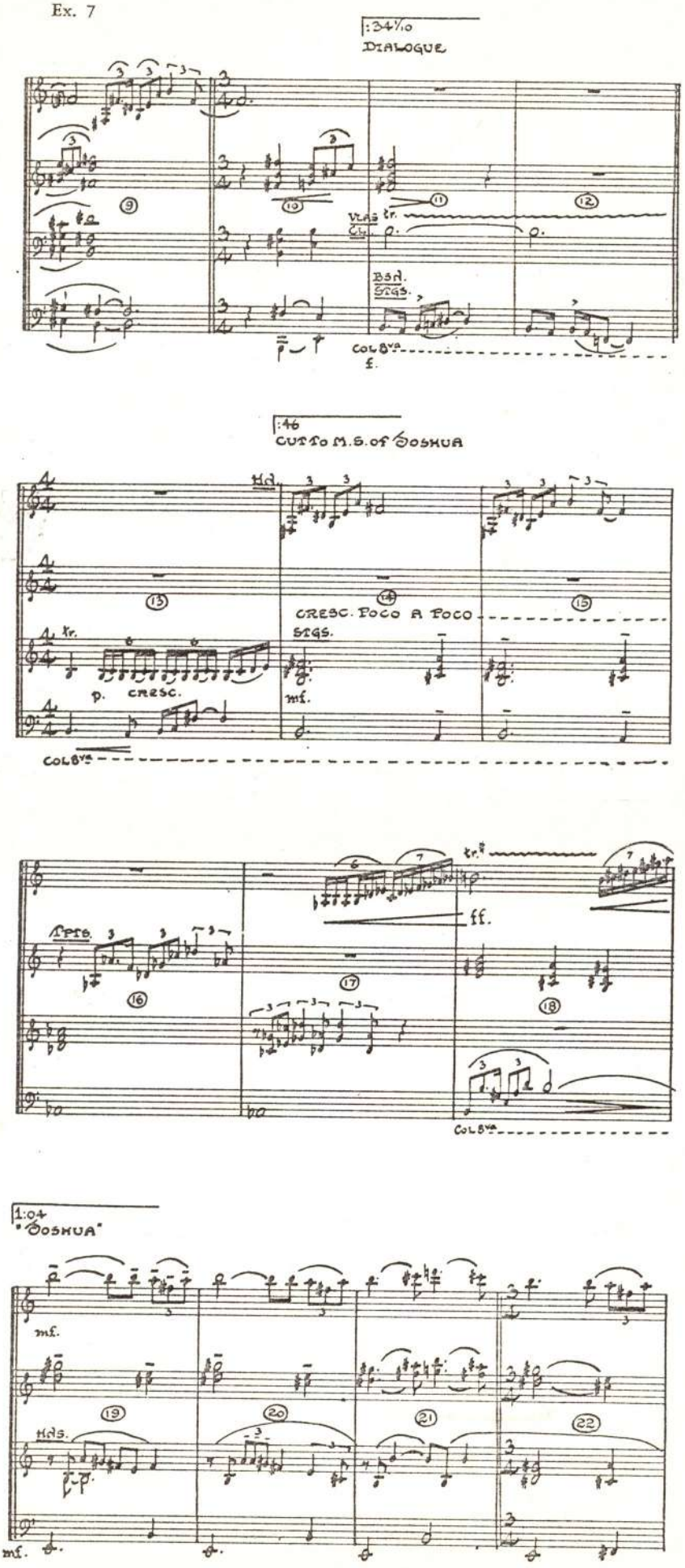
Ex. 7



Joshua, the fervent military organizer of the exodus, is represented primarily by a characteristic horn call. Ex. 7 shows a development of the call leading to a gentle theme that represents his love for the water girl, Lilia.

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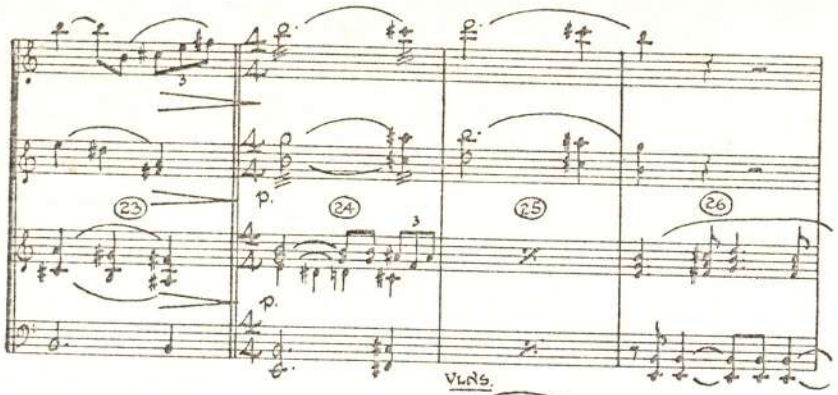
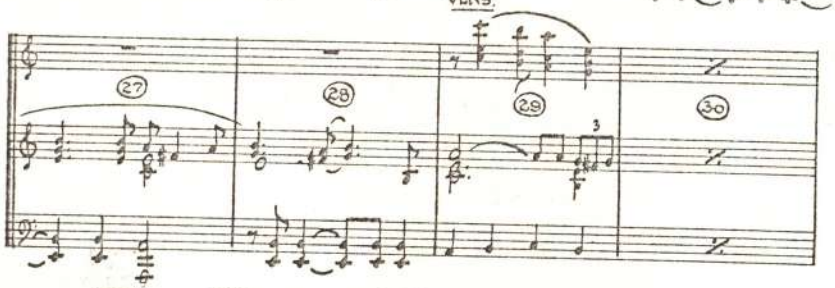
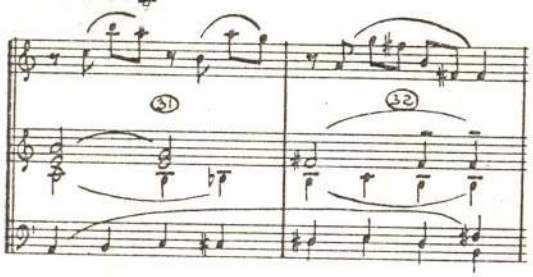
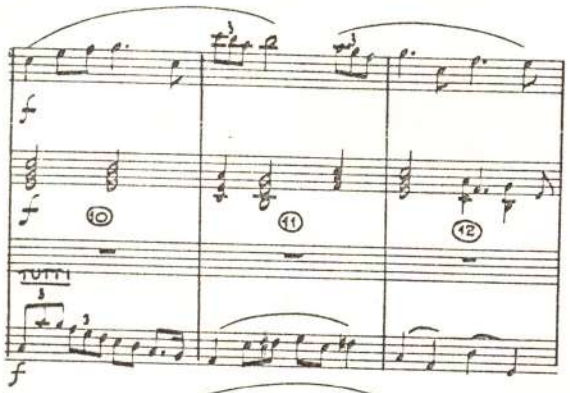
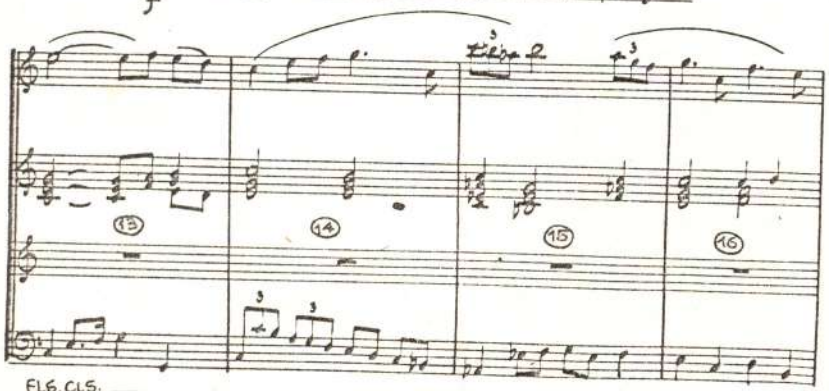


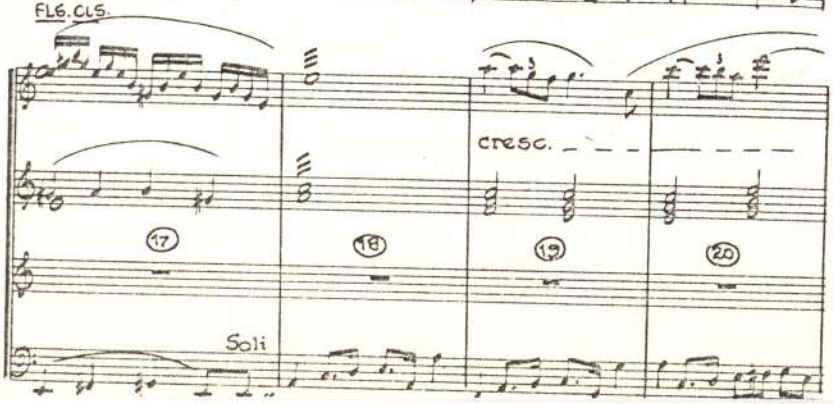




Ex. 8







We now come to the most difficult problem of all. From the very outset all of us concerned with this project had been giving much thought to the projection of the concept of God, which is a vital factor in the unfolding of this picture.

The creative artist who tackles this problem may not find the solution difficult if he is primarily concerned with a subjective expression of his own feeling in relation to God. In a medium like motion pictures the artist cannot afford the luxury of subjectivity. In a medium which reaches more people in one month than a so-called "serious composer" reaches in an entire lifetime it is necessary that the screen composer have some recognition of the "language barrier" which exists between his own highly sophisticated (we hope) language and the more primitive musical language of his vast and varied audience. The screen composer must also have an *honest* desire to communicate with his audience. The snob is lost in this medium. His future is an obscure end with a small coterie. The composer who either by choice or necessity invents tortured musical devices to mask a weakness of line or lack of spontaneity of emotion is similarly doomed. Lest there be any misunderstanding let me restate that I am referring to the motion picture as it is constituted today. I am simply saying that when an artist works in a medium in which he has a captive audience, he then has the responsibility to communicate with it in a language it understands. It was an acute awareness of this problem which led me to procrastinate for some time in the creation of music for the scenes which concerned themselves with the presence of God. In music God could be many things; Gregorian chants, Palestrina, Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, or perhaps the Verdi of the Requiem, or perhaps I Believe. I am not building up to confessing that I took all these elements and fused them in some mechanical way. I mention the foregoing to try to give the reader an understanding of the thoughts that were conditioning my efforts as I approached the problem. The result appears below as Ex. 8. This is the most forthright statement of the theme as it appears in the prelude. After all this introduction I dare not make any comments of my own about this theme. It is, of course, too early to try to judge whether I have succeeded in what I set out to accomplish with this theme. That is something the millions of people who see this film will have to judge for themselves.

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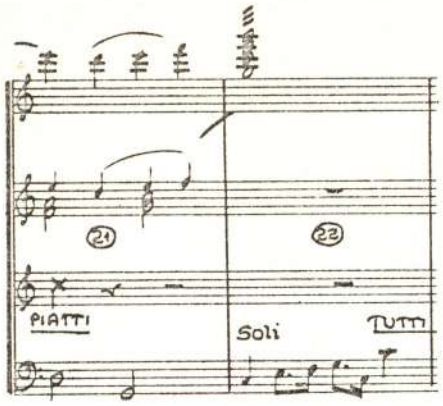
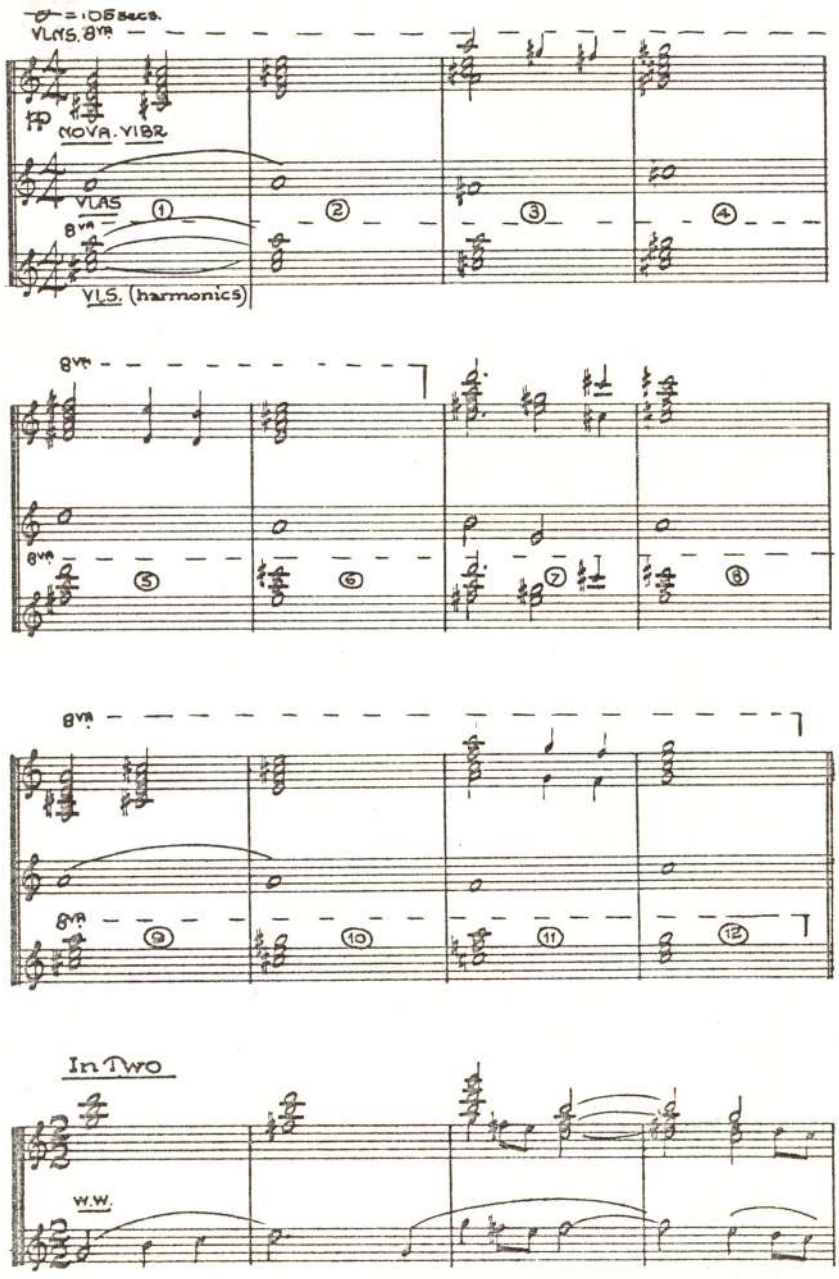


Ex. 9



Ex. 9 is a treatment of the theme which occurs as Moses returns from the burning bush and realizes for the first time that he is God's messenger and will liberate his people in bondage.

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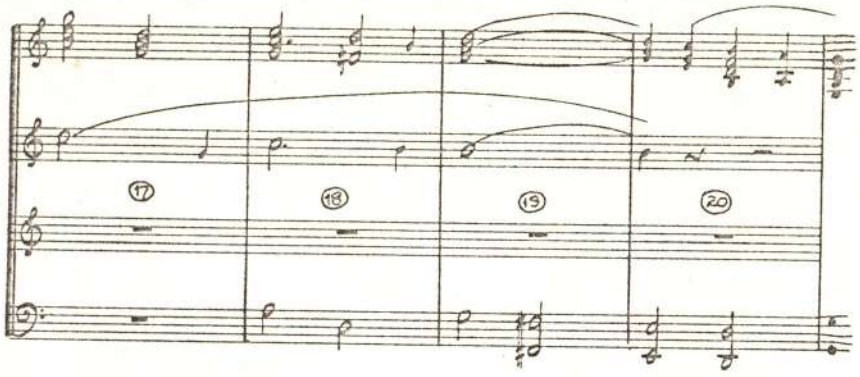
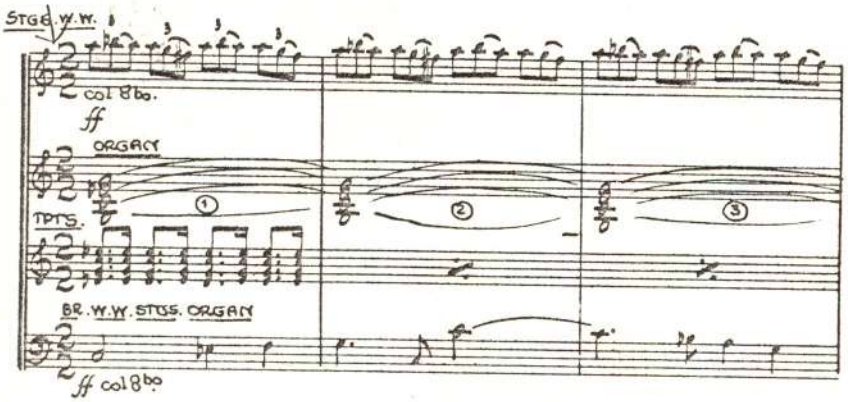
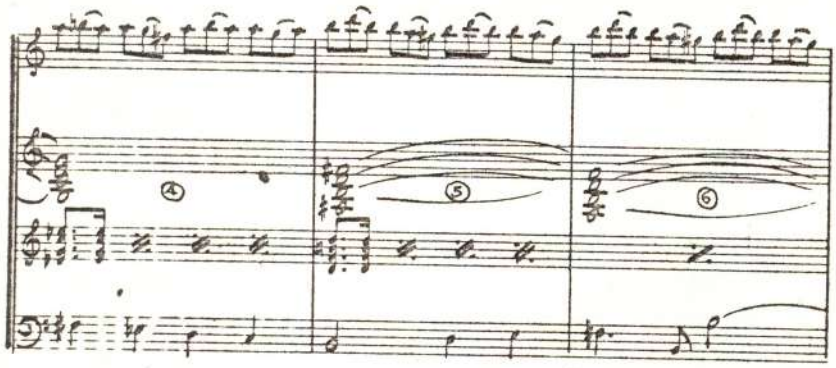
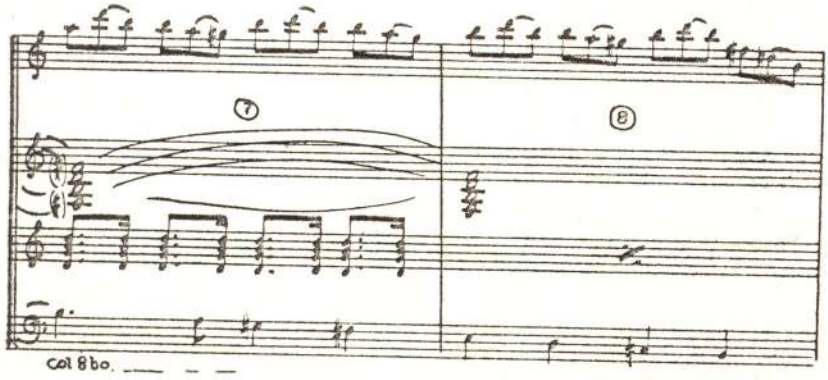


Ex. 10







Ex. 10 is a more wrathful God punishing the wicked after the debauch of the golden calf sequence.

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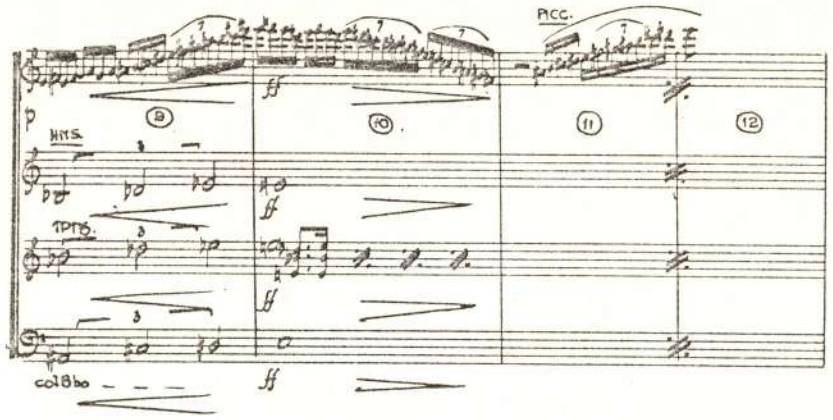
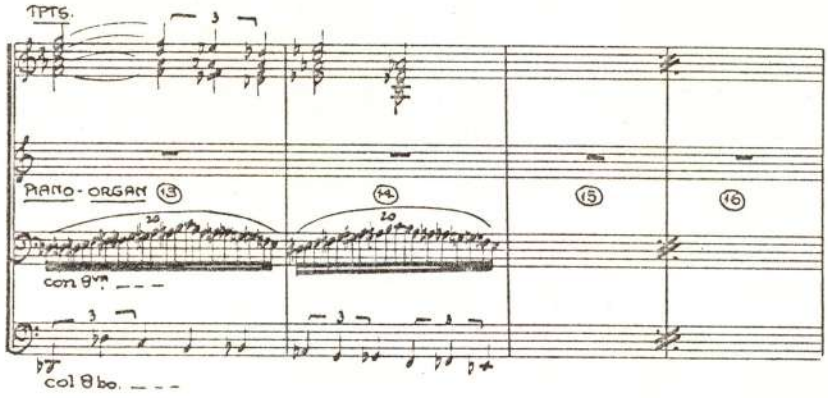
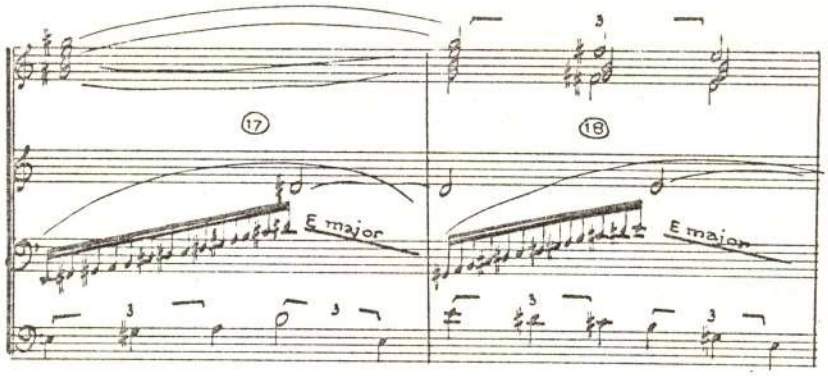
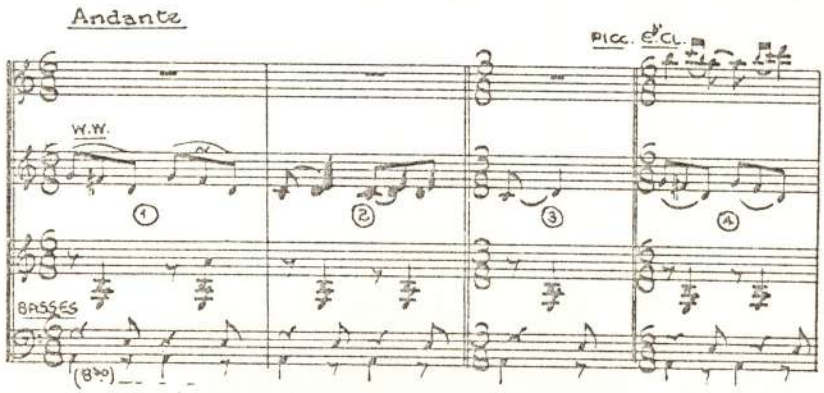






Ex. 11



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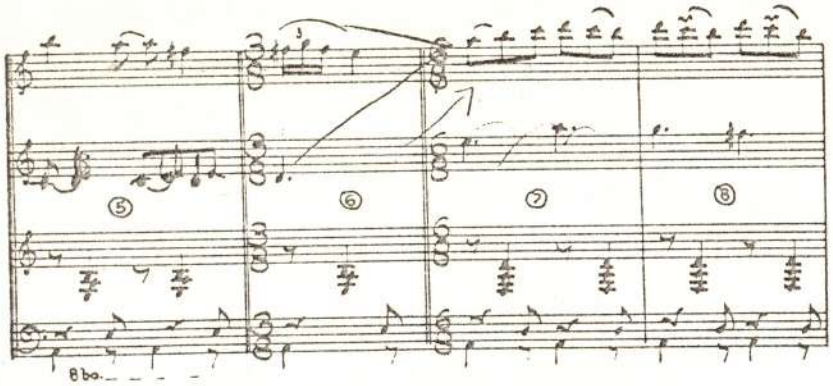

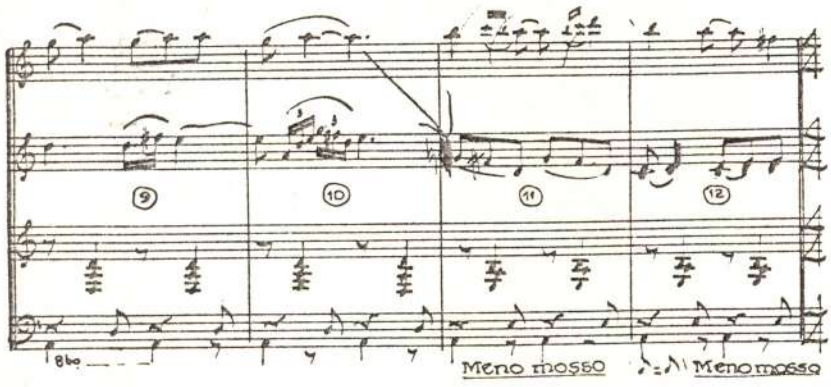

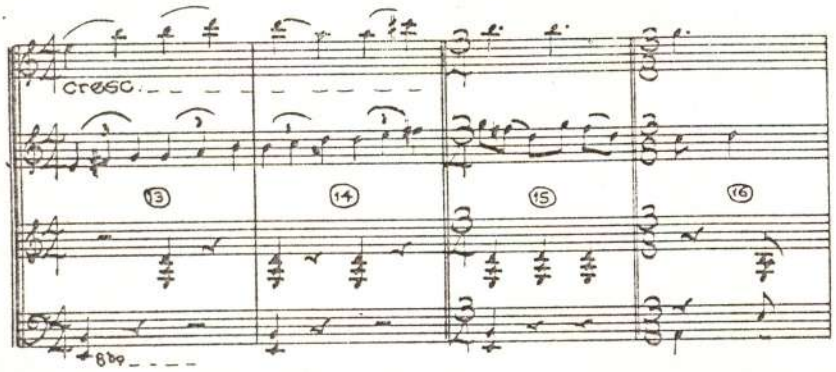

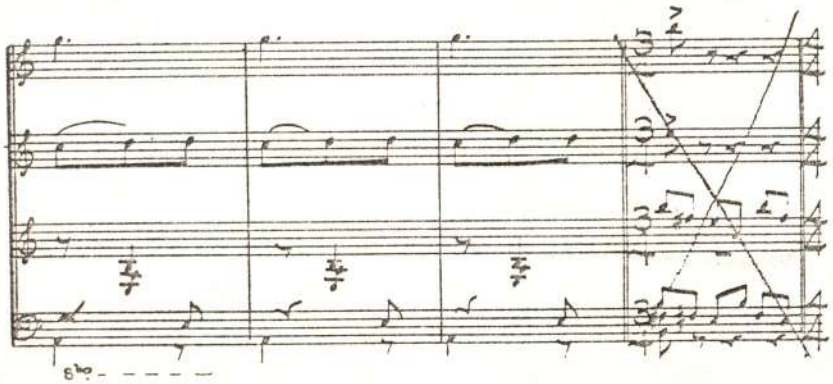

The question of authenticity was one which returned to plague us periodically. It had been clearly established that the first function of the music would be to aid character delineation and thereby function in a somewhat "narrative fashion". However there were always the scenes with Egyptian musicians. Ex. 11 is one of the more successful solutions of this problem. The scale is a limited one, as were the ancient scales. The orchestration was designed to come as close to authenticity as possible. Since the sounds of the ancient instruments are known to us, if not the musical materials, it was possible to recreate a fine approximation of what an Egyptian orchestra might have sounded like, if not what they actually played. I can only guess that I made a pretty good stab at what the sound was like, because it caused some discomfort to the modern ear. Unfortunately little of the sound remains in the picture and that which is there is played at a rather low level, but if you are interested in this phase of things, listen to the music that is played as the royal dancers perform in the palace of Pharaoh.

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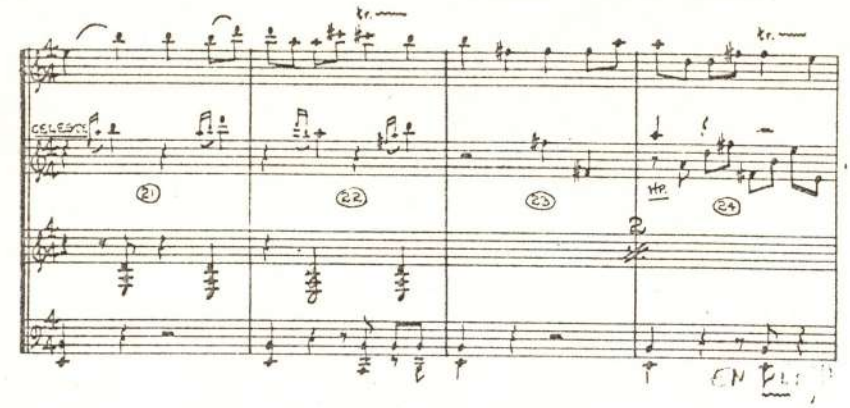

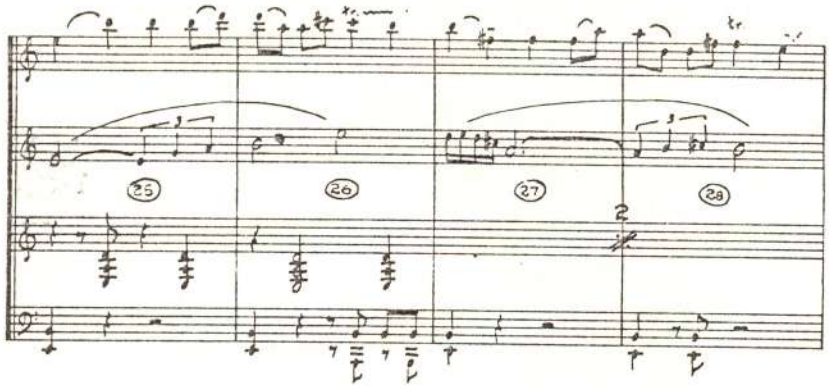

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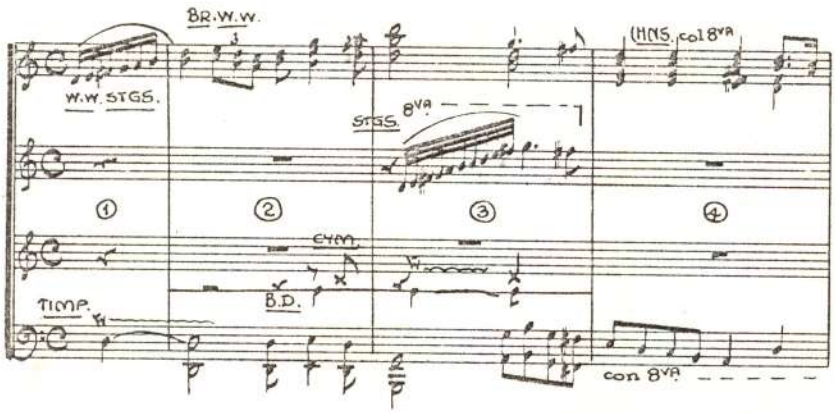

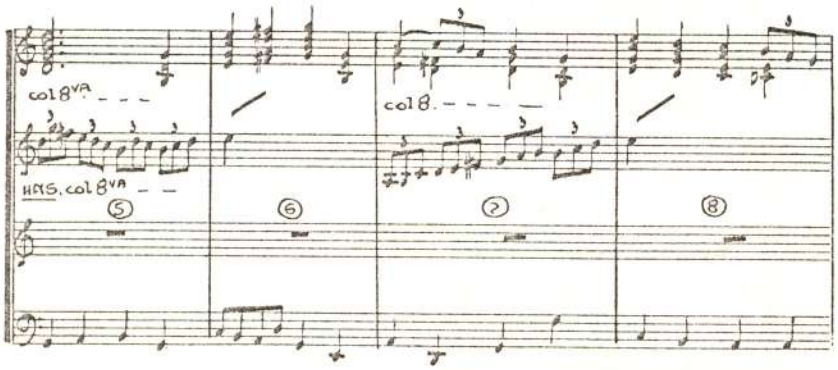

The exodus, Ex. 12, was a point of contention for a while. The question here was whether we should attempt a "Hebraic anthem" or not. In the long run the no's won, but not before I had tried several approaches of my own. The general consensus was that the first duty of the music was to give a feeling of elation. It was argued that any presentation of Hebrew music of that period would be of academic interest at best, and would be of no value at all if its elements were too foreign to communicate the excitement we were attempting to generate. This was once again a projection of the general problem. In conclusion I can only say that I have attempted to "flavor" what is essentially a familiar idiom with certain modal elements which at times impact a feeling of antiquity. The foremost concern of all was the greatest possible communication to the greatest number of people throughout the world. It is thought that this picture will probably reach more people than any other picture in the history of the art form. If, in sacrificing some of my more subjective expression, I have in some way made this picture a more exciting experience for some people I don't know, in some corner of the world I shall probably never see, I would consider this a sacrifice well made.

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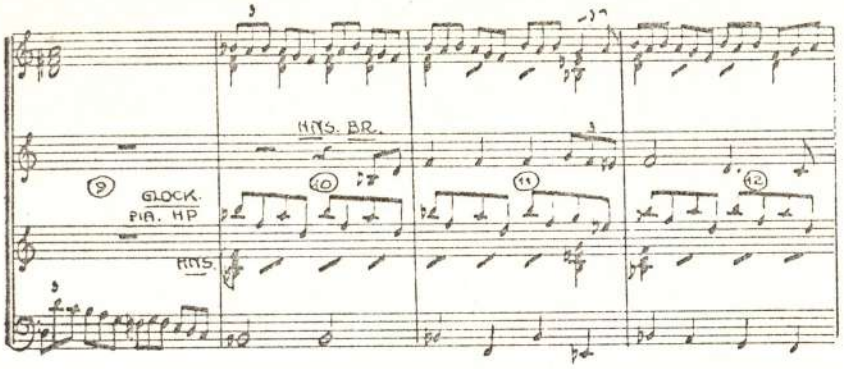

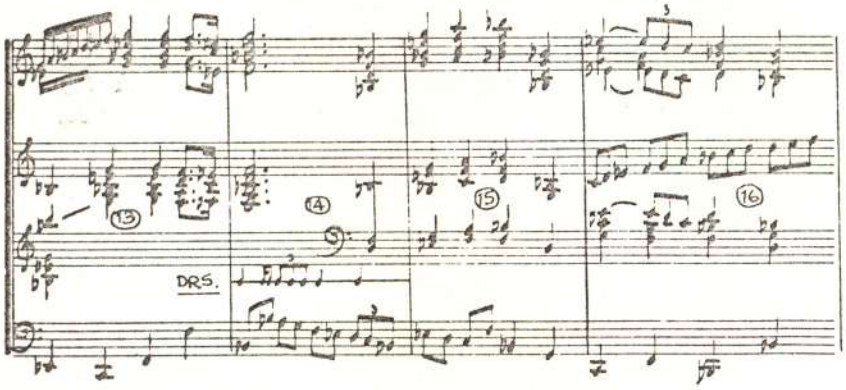

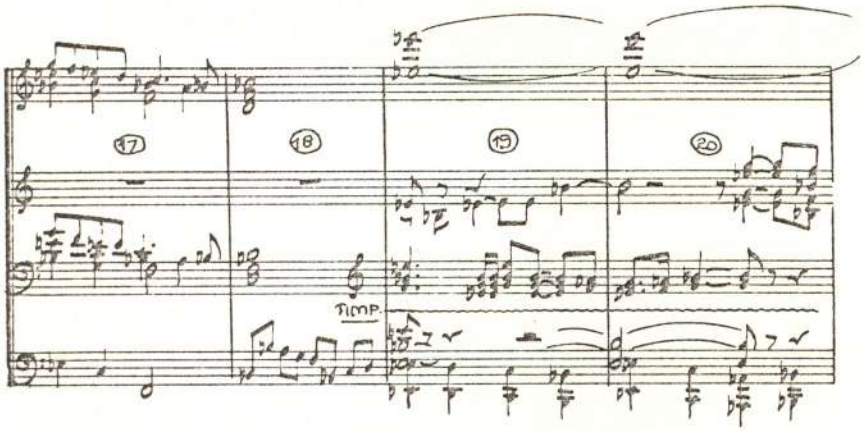

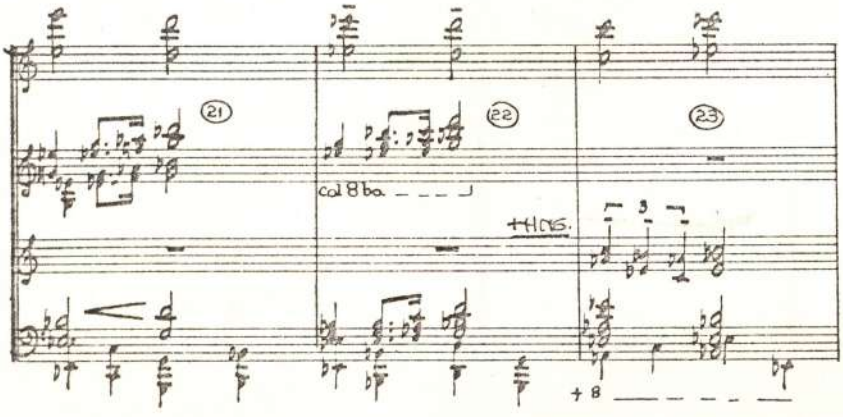

I cannot conclude without acknowledging the aid of Mr. Henry Noerdlinger in research, Mr. Henry Wilcoxon, whose knowledge of Mr. DeMille's artistic thinking was an invaluable aid and a calming factor at some difficult moments, and finally Mr. Roy Fjastad, a veritable bulwark of strength at even the most trying moments, who reposed his absolute confidence in me and had faith in the outcome at all times. I don't think I could have got through the job at that particular stage of my career without Mr. Fjastad's steadfast loyalty and encouragement.

Mr. DeMille afforded me the great opportunity, but what can be added to the many words written about him? Suffice to say that I am very grateful for all that I learned under his tutelage. He is like all extraordinary men, unique, a great man of his chosen profession and his times.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS . . . Paramount. Charlton Heston, Anne Baxter. Produced and directed by Cecil B. DeMille. Music, Elmer Bernstein. Orchestrations, Lucien Cailliet, Van Cleave, Leo Shuken.

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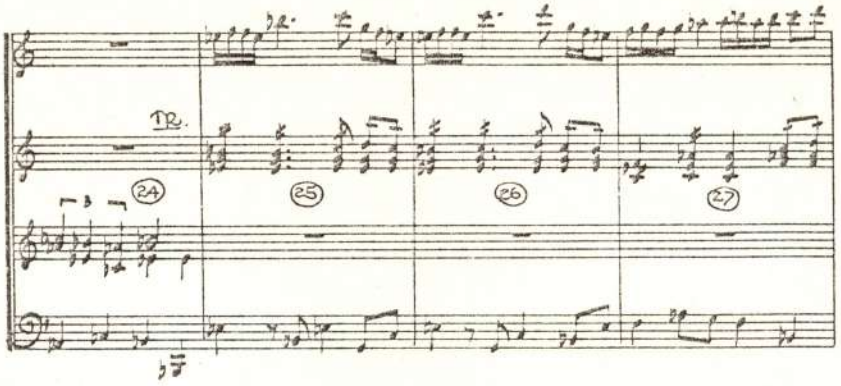

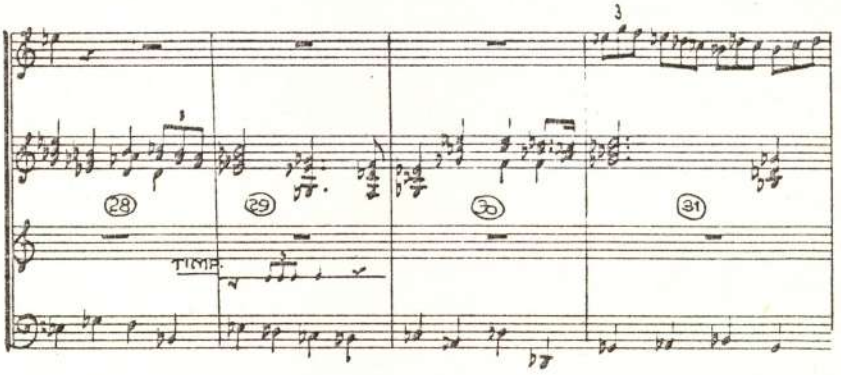

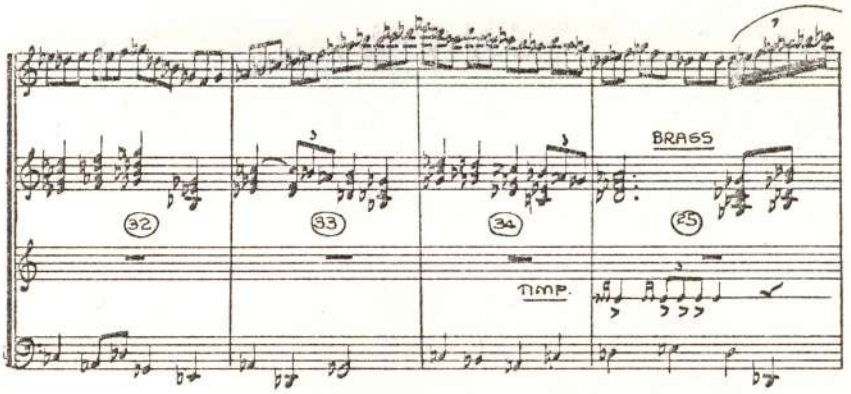

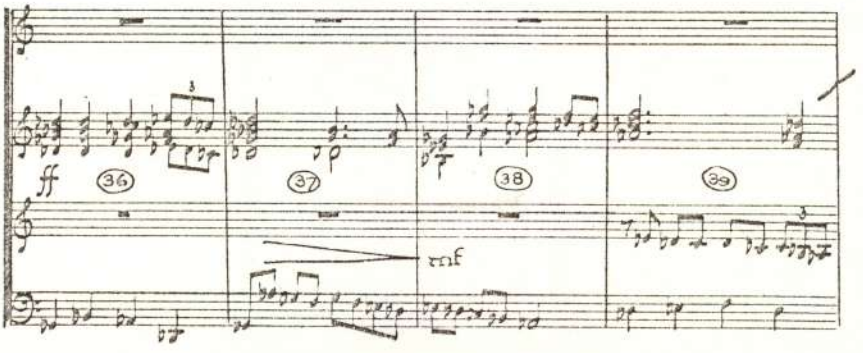

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