PSALMS

The psalms constitute the oldest musical and literary heritage surviving in Doukhobor tradition, the foundation upon which the cult of Doukhoborism has been established. Although occasionally based upon Biblical materials, the psalms have virtually no connection with the Psalms of the Bible. They were composed by Doukhobors themselves or were inherited from proto-Doukhobor sects that broke away from the Orthodox Church, some as early as the fifteenth century.

There is, of course, the possibility that the musical origins of psalm-singing go back even further to early Christian sects, which are said to have roamed through southern Russia at an early period. Certainly the prolongation of one syllable throughout a long series of sustained tones is an ancient device. When queried about this style of singing in the psalms, Doukhobor elders invariably reply that it was used to 'confuse the authorities' who would not be able to understand what was being sung. There may be a grain of truth in this explanation, applicable particularly to the early Christian sects. In any event, the device is not a Doukhobor invention (as Doukhobor elders suppose) but an inheritance from the past, an inheritance also shared by both the Eastern and Western branches of the Christian Church.

This unison singing by men and women, an octave apart, is the basis of all Doukhobor choral singing. In the case of the psalms, the basic melodic line is embellished by a primitive sort of counterpoint, heavily weighted in favour of fourths and fifths, though the occasional major or minor triad is encountered. These embellishments doubtless arose under the influence of early Russian Orthodox Church music.

Psalms continue to permeate every aspect of Doukhobor life. They instruct young children in the basic tenets of the Doukhobor faith; they counsel adolescents on the responsible use of their newly awakened emotional powers; they accompany marriage ceremonies; they lay the dead to rest; but, more than anything else, the psalms provide Doukhobors with the only oral continuum that links their contemporary culture with the ancient past. Whatever later additions have accrued to the body of Doukhobor musical and literary tradition—and there have been many—the psalms remain at the core of the Doukhobor mystique.

The texts of most of the psalms still sung by the Doukhobors were collected by Vladimir Bonch-Bruevitch and published in Tsarist Russia in 1908 under the title *The Book of Life of the Doukhobors*. A photo-offset copy of the original was published in Winnipeg in 1954. About seventy-five psalms of the Bonch-Bruevitch collection survive in the current repertoires of Boukhobor choirs and congregations in Canada.

After many years of persecution in the latter part of the eighteenth century many Doukhobor groups throughout Russia were granted amnesty under the enlightened rule of Alexander I and were re-settled early in the nineteenth century at government expense in the Milky Waters region of Tavria province in southern Russia. Here, under the able leadership of Saveli Kapustin the colony flourished, and the art of psalm-singing was encouraged as never before. As the Doukhobor 'Moses,' Kapustin himself composed and amended many psalms and categorized existing psalms according to the occasions for which they were most suited—weddings, funerals, and so on. Also included were many psalms composed by Kapustin's predecessor, Ilarion Pobirohin, who had led a group of Doukhobors in Tambov province. Assisting Kapustin in the revival of psalm-singing was Bazilewski, a Church father who defected to the Doukhobors at the Tavria colony and helped them preserve the ancient forms of singing which they still practise. Bazilewski's knowledge of ancient church music doubtless had an influence on the type of music chosen for Doukhobor *sobranya* (meetings). However, it would be difficult at this point to establish the extent of his musical influence on the Doukhobor repertoire.

Both the texts and the music of Doukhobor psalms are asymmetrical, though certain musical patterns are repeated at irregular intervals throughout most psalms. This lends to each psalm a musical character which makes it distinguishable from other psalms. In fact, since most texts are unintelligible when sung, the music serves as the only point of mnemonic reference. Even here, though, the uninitiated find it difficult to imitate the 'sound' of a congregation of elders. Accustomed as they are to the strict metrical singing of the later hymns, the younger choirs have great difficulty producing an authentically 'free' musical interpretation of the psalms with all the spontaneous nuances of improvisation the elders find so natural. One difficulty lies in the so-called 'staggered breathing' used in singing psalms. Only after the most assiduous rehearsal can professional choirs use staggered breathing to produce a continuous flow of sound. Doukhobors have used staggered breathing quite unconsciously for centuries. Among younger Doukhobors there is a certain mystique connected with the singing of psalms. They are inimitable not only to outsiders but to the rising generation of Doukhobors. Psalm singing is felt to be so basic to the traditional Doukhobor way of life that its passing will have a traumatic effect on Doukhobor culture. When the art of singing psalms dies then Doukhoborism, in the old sense, will die with it.

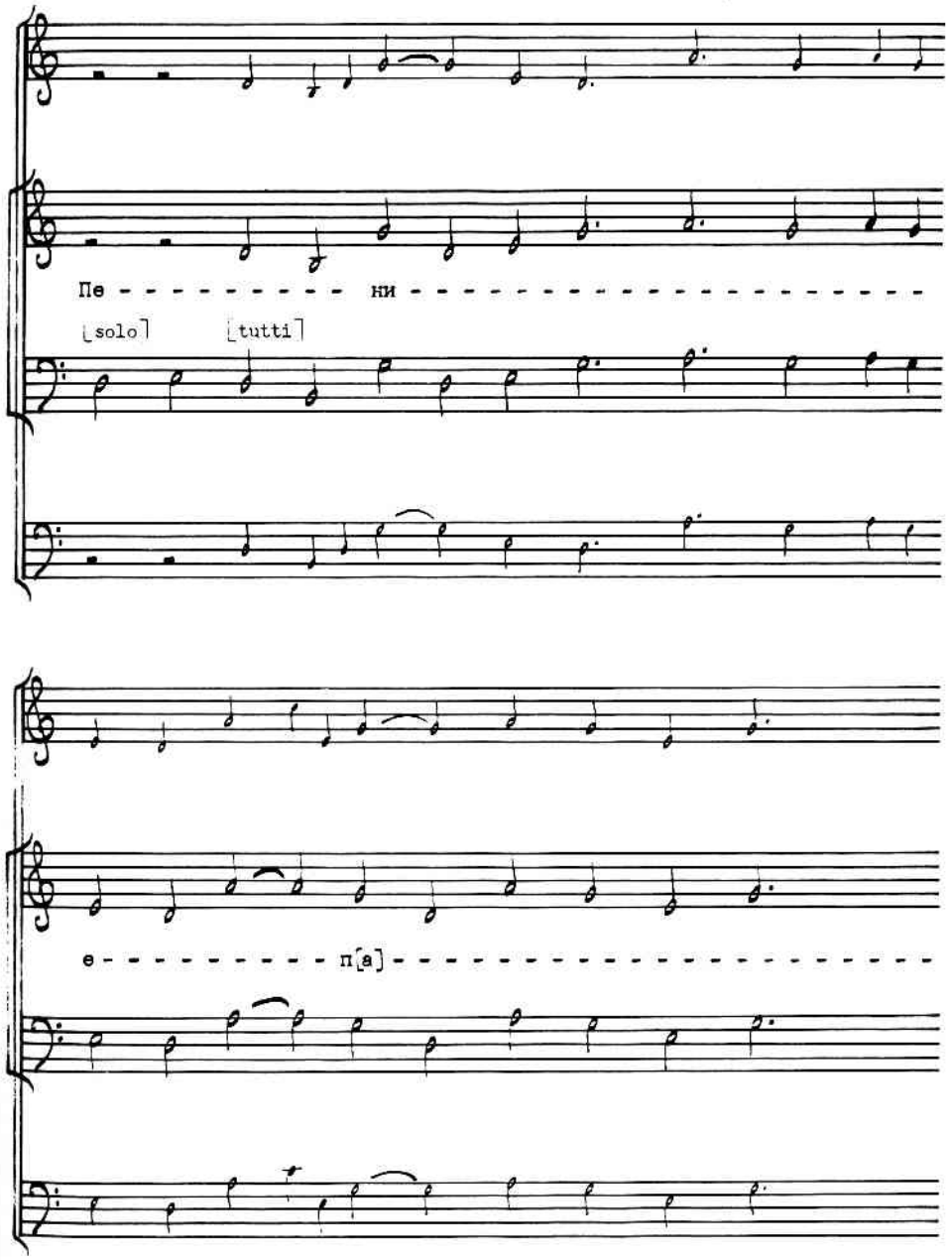
A group of elders from Grand Forks, British Columbia, singing the psalm *The Singing of Psalms Beautifies Our Souls*

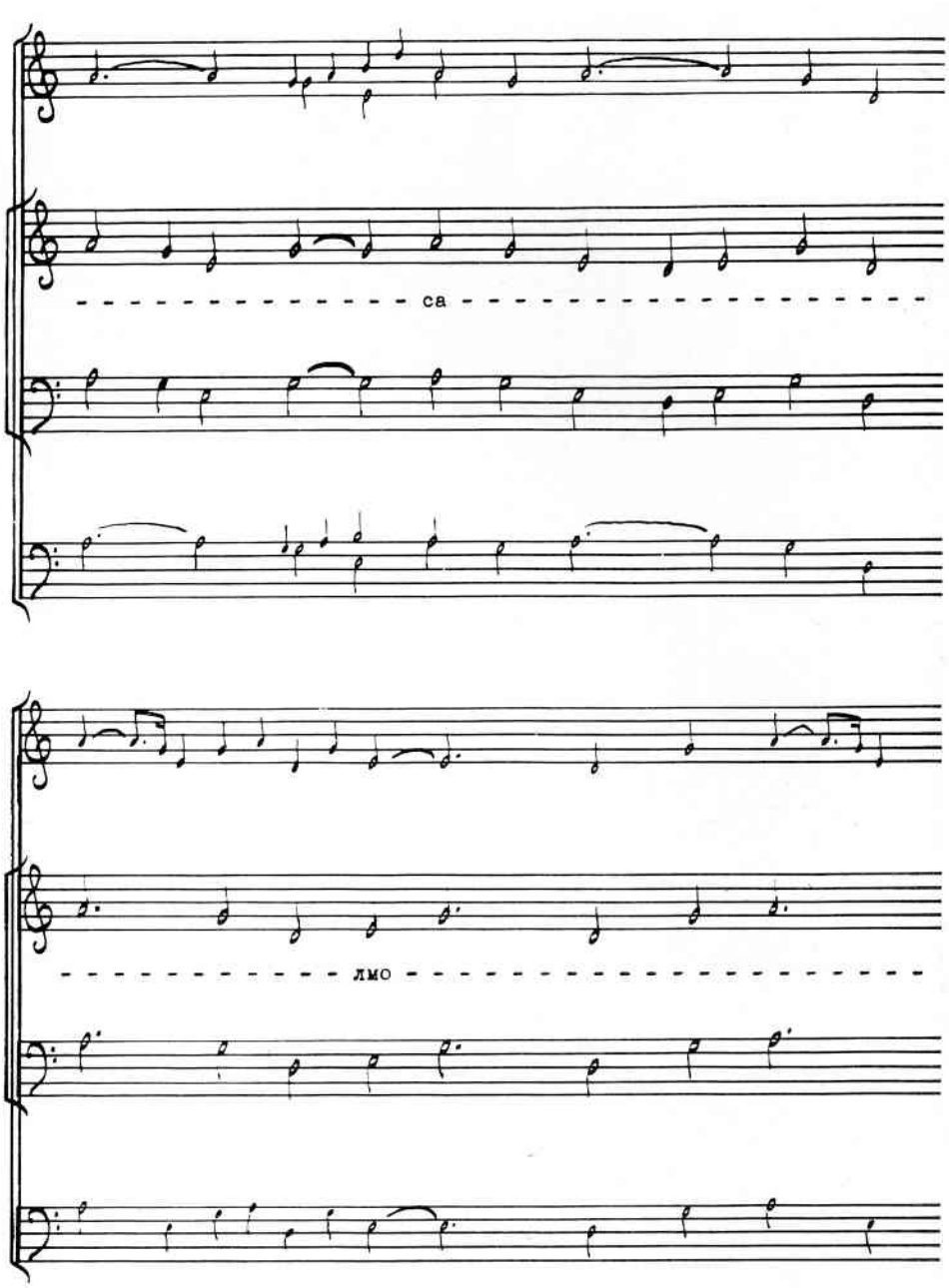
The Singing of Psalms Beautifies Our Souls

(Record 1, Side 1)

PEA 275-1677

Sung by the William F. Makortoff choir of mixed elders
Grand Forks, B.C., July 21, 1963

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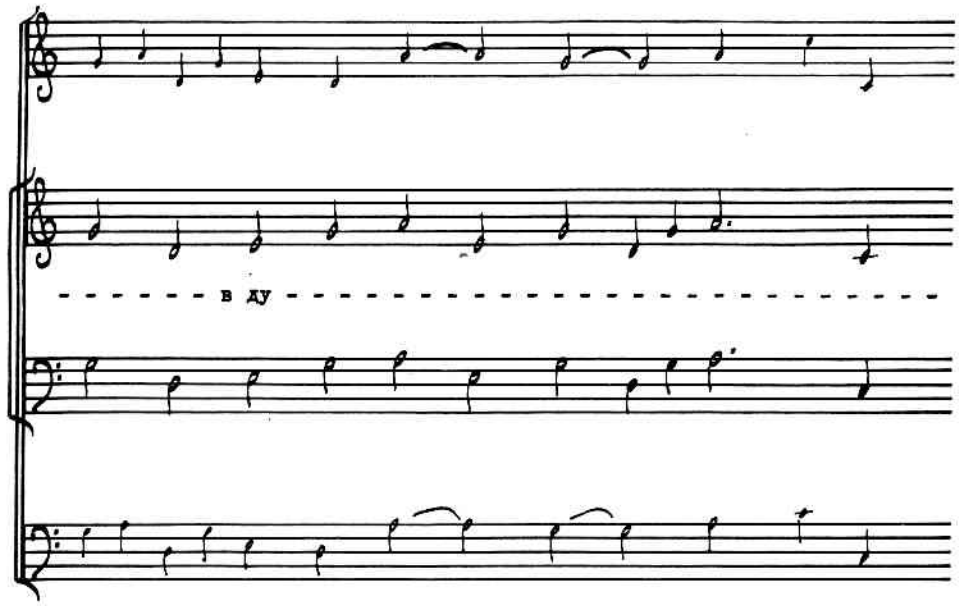
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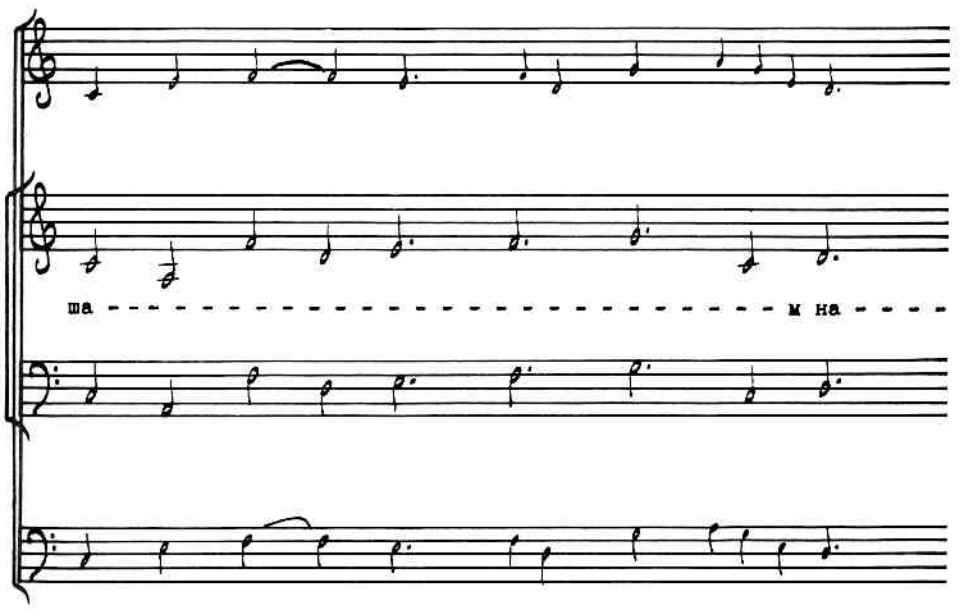
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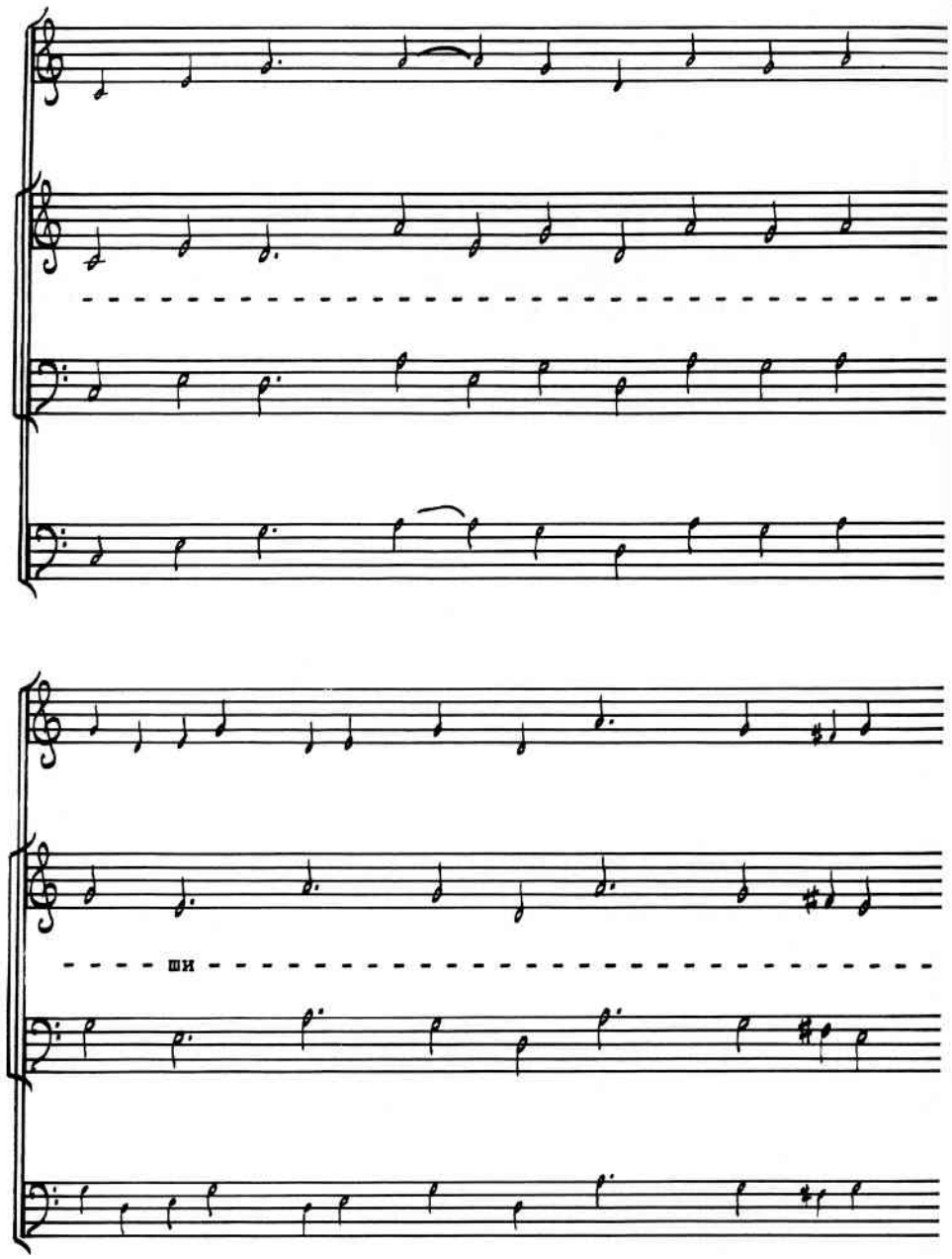
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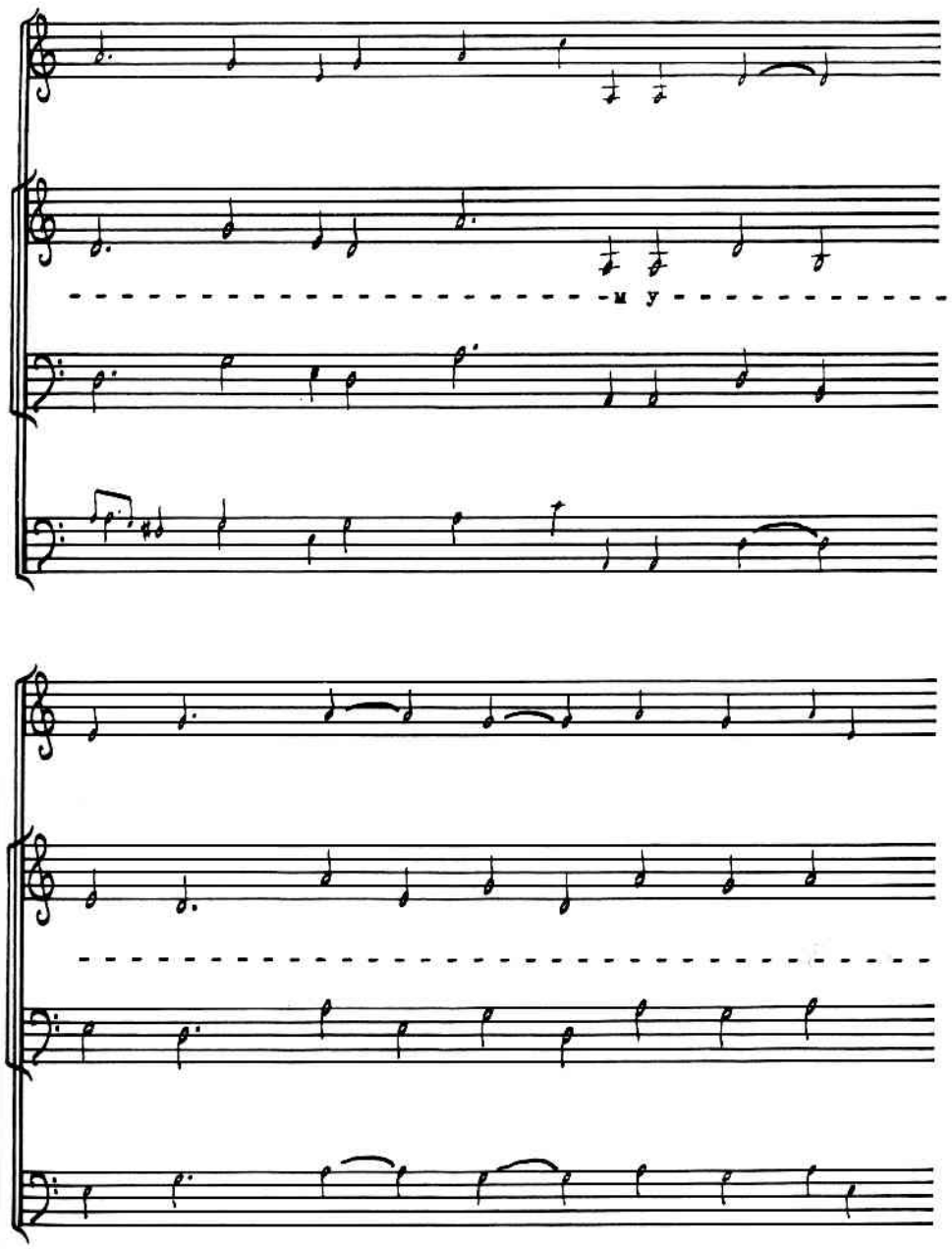
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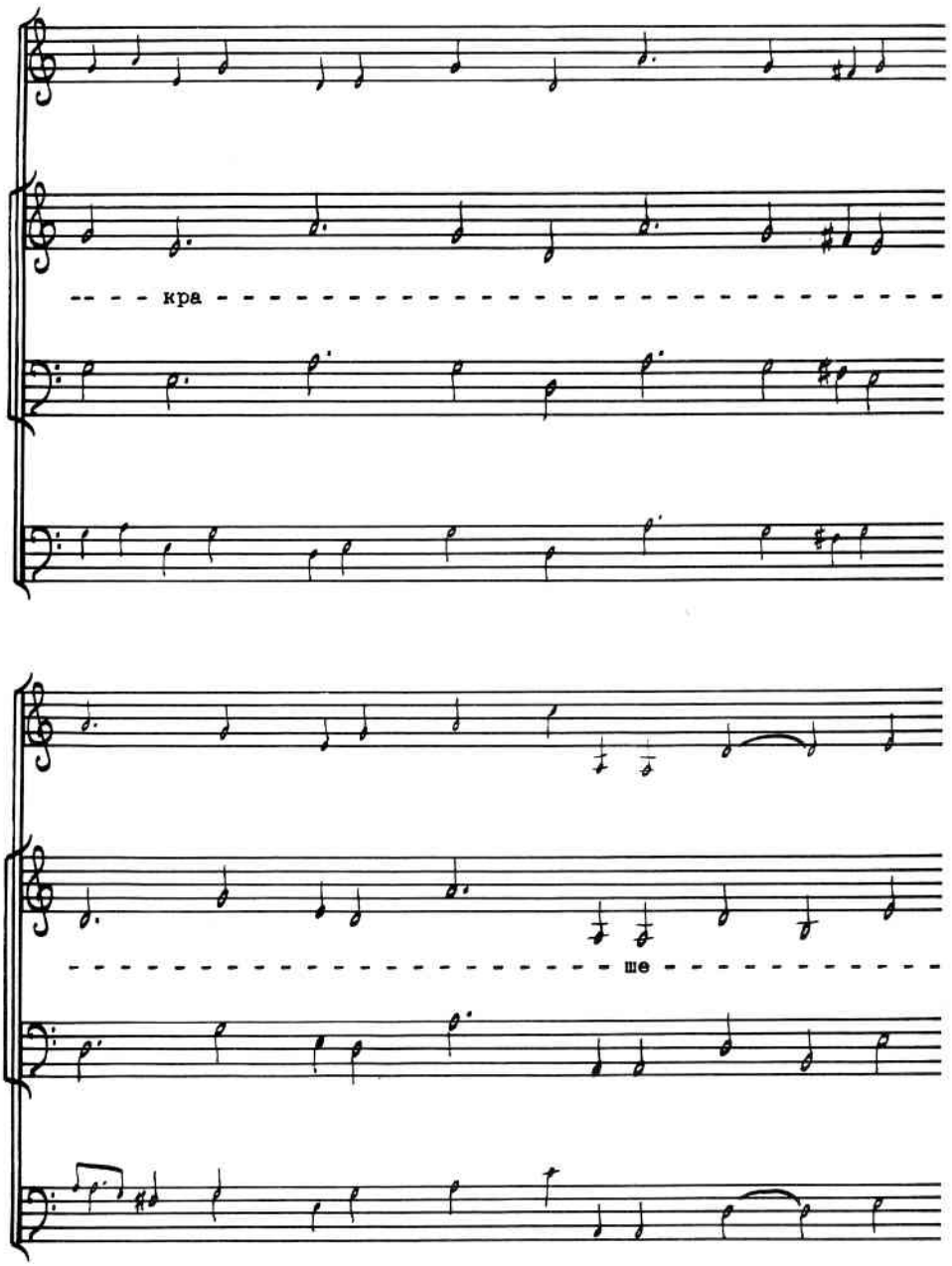
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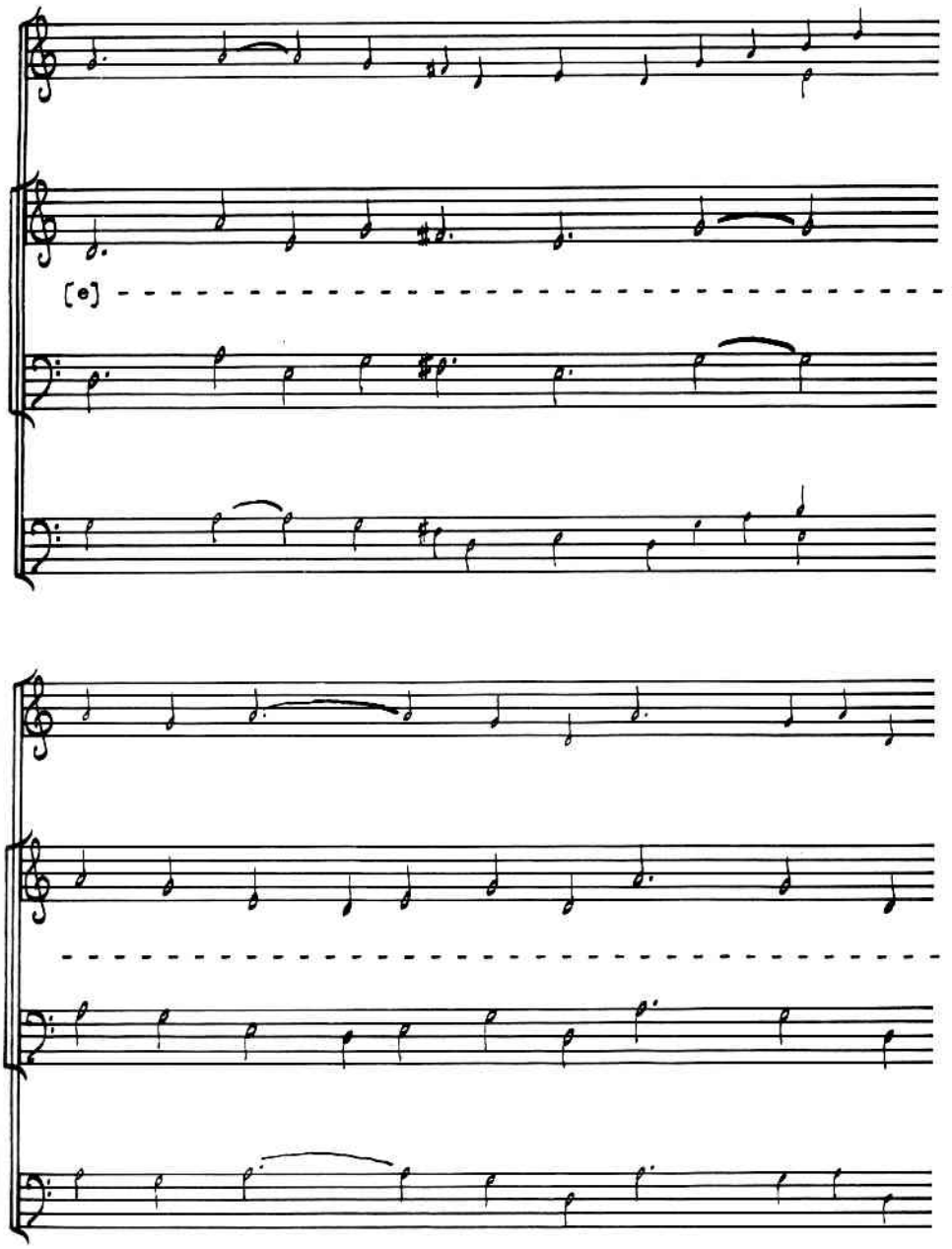
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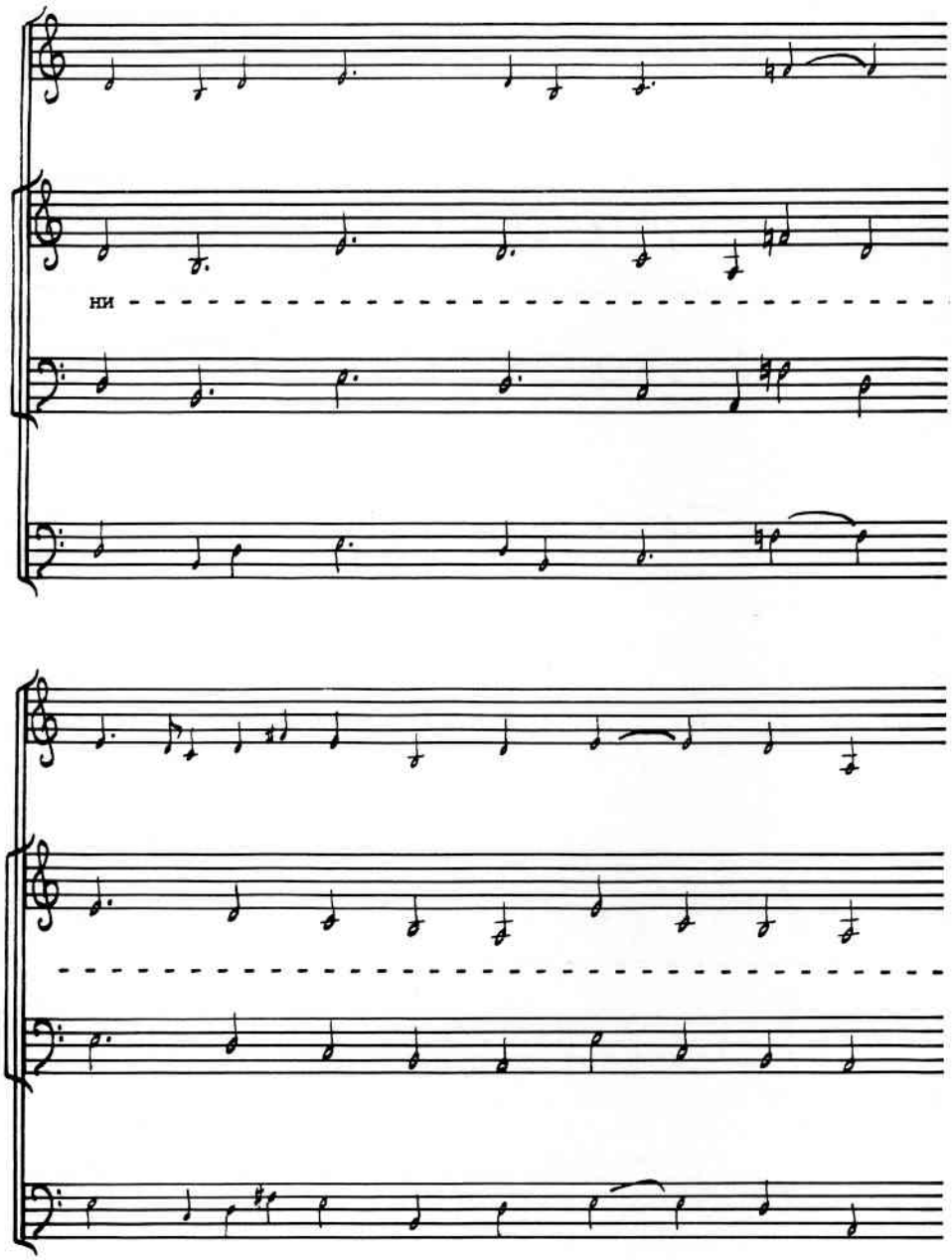
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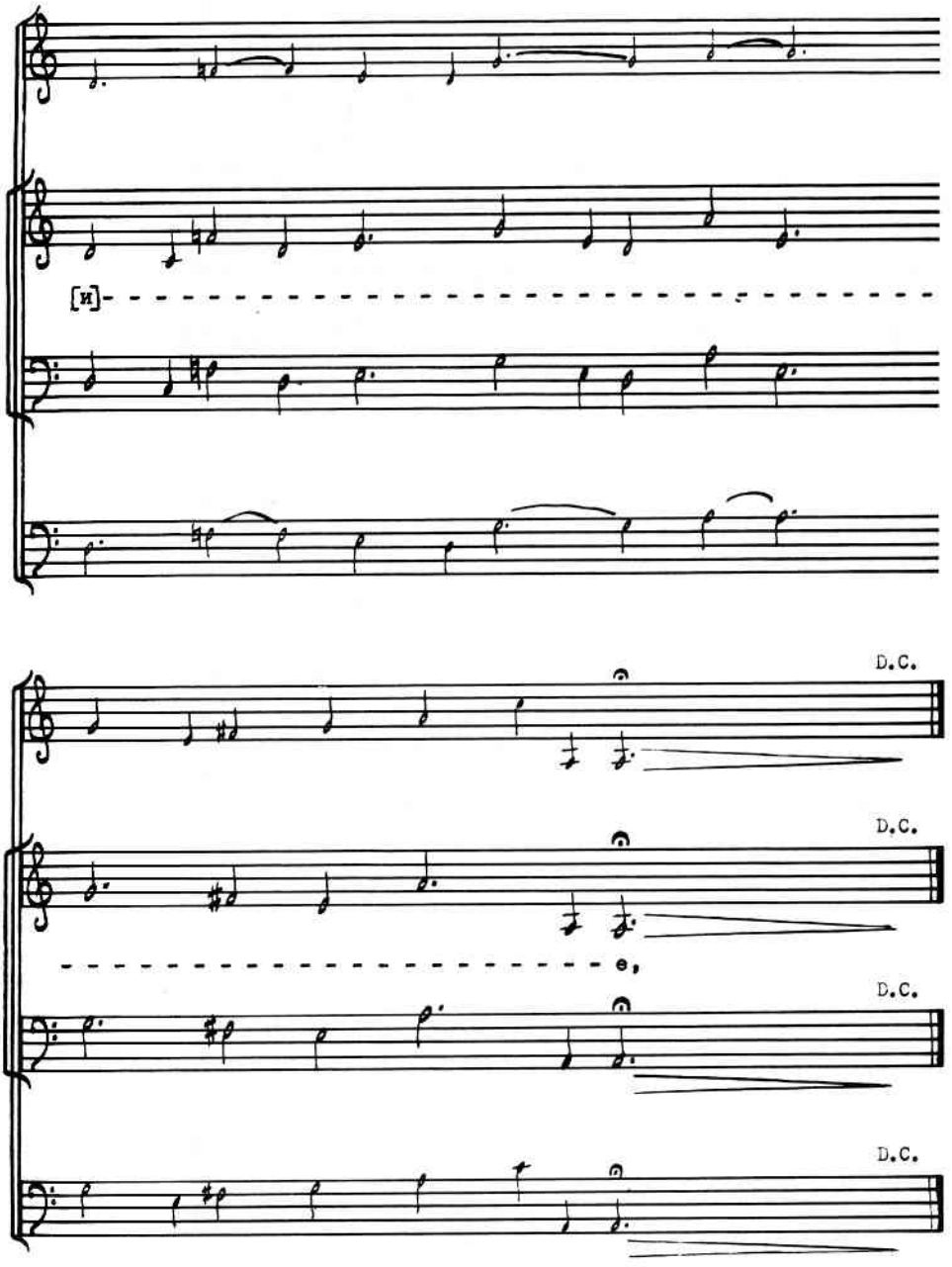
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Господи благослови:

Пение псалмов душам нашим украшение, ангелов на помощь призывает, отгоняет тьму, содеивает святыню, человеку на укрепление ума есть, изглаживает грехи. Подобно есть милостыне святых: прибавляет веры, надежды, любви. Яко солнцем освещает, так водой очищает, яко огонь опаляет, так елеем умащает. Дьявола постыдивает, Бога показует, телесную похоть угашает. Елей милосердия есть, жребий веселия, честь ангелов избранных, свирепство изгоняет, всякую ярость утишает и гнев сокрушает, хвала Богу непрестанно есть. Подобно есть меду — пение псалмов. Песни избранных есть пред Богом. Всяк грех отгоняет, союз в любви содружает, все приходит, все исполнит, все научает, все показует, душу величит, уста очищает и сердце веселит, столп высок созидает, человека просвещает, чувства отверзает, всякое зло убивает, совершенство показует. Аще кто имеет память и любовь, также боязнь и хвалу Богу в сердце своем, тот не отпадет никогда и не погибнет, а напоследок возрадуется, моление его завсегда пред Богом. Тишина ума — есть возвестник мира. Псалмы молят о грядущем, воздают хвалу в настоящем, каются в минувшем, о благих делах радуются, в радости Царство Небесное вспомянуют. Чередуясь в псалмопении — великий щит правды взыскуется против дьявольских сил. Светлость истины показует старцам утешение, а юношам украшение, ума совершение, Самого Христа-Бога дело, помогающее, дарующее в уста пророческие уставы. Они же сии псалмы, устами пророческими установлены, тщательно завсегда молиться научают. Богу же есть хвала и честь, величие, благоволение, светлость, премудрость и благодарение, сила и крепость с Господом вкупе.

Богу Нашему Слава.

Translation:

Bless us O Lord [spoken]:

The singing of psalms beautifies our souls, brings the angels to our help, drives away the darkness, creates holiness, strengthens the mind of man, effaces sin. It is like the grace of saints: it augments faith, hope, and love. As with sunlight it illuminates, so with water it cleanses; as with fire it scorches, so with holy oil it anoints. It shames the devil; it reveals God; it suppresses carnal desires. It is the holy oil of charity; it is the prize of Joy, an honour destined for the chosen angels; it drives away ferocity; it subdues all rage, and it shatters wrath; praise be to God forever! The singing of psalms is like honey. The singing of the chosen is always

in the presence of God. It drives away all sin; it strengthens union in love. All things come of it; in it are all things fulfilled; all things are taught thereby; all things are revealed thereby; it magnifies the soul; it purifies the lips and gladdens the heart; it builds the high pillar; it enlightens man; it turns the senses into the way of the Lord; it destroys all evil; it reveals perfection. Whosoever retains within his heart the memory and love, the fear and praise of God will never stray or perish, but in the end will rejoice; his prayer is always in God's presence. Serenity of the mind is the herald of peace. Psalms pray for the future, give praise for the present, repent of the past; they rejoice in good deeds, recalling with joy the Kingdom of Heaven. Alternate singing of the psalms raises the great shield of Truth against satanic powers. The light of Truth brings comfort to the old, beauty to the young, perfection for the mind; it is the work of Christ the Lord Himself; it brings help and gives the tongue the gift of prophecy. These very psalms, which came from the lips of the prophets of old, carefully teach us always to pray. In the singing of psalms there is praise and honour to God; there is good-will, radiance, wisdom and thankfulness, power and strength in communion with God.

Glory to our God!

DATA:

This is one of a large group of fundamental psalms that can be used for all occasions. The basic ideals of Doukhoborism have never been more beautifully expressed, and the psalm was chosen for this reason. The text is actually a poetic delineation of the psychological well-being and the spiritual benefits that are supposed to result from the act of singing psalms. Originally the text was sung in its entirety, a process which must have taken at least two or three hours.

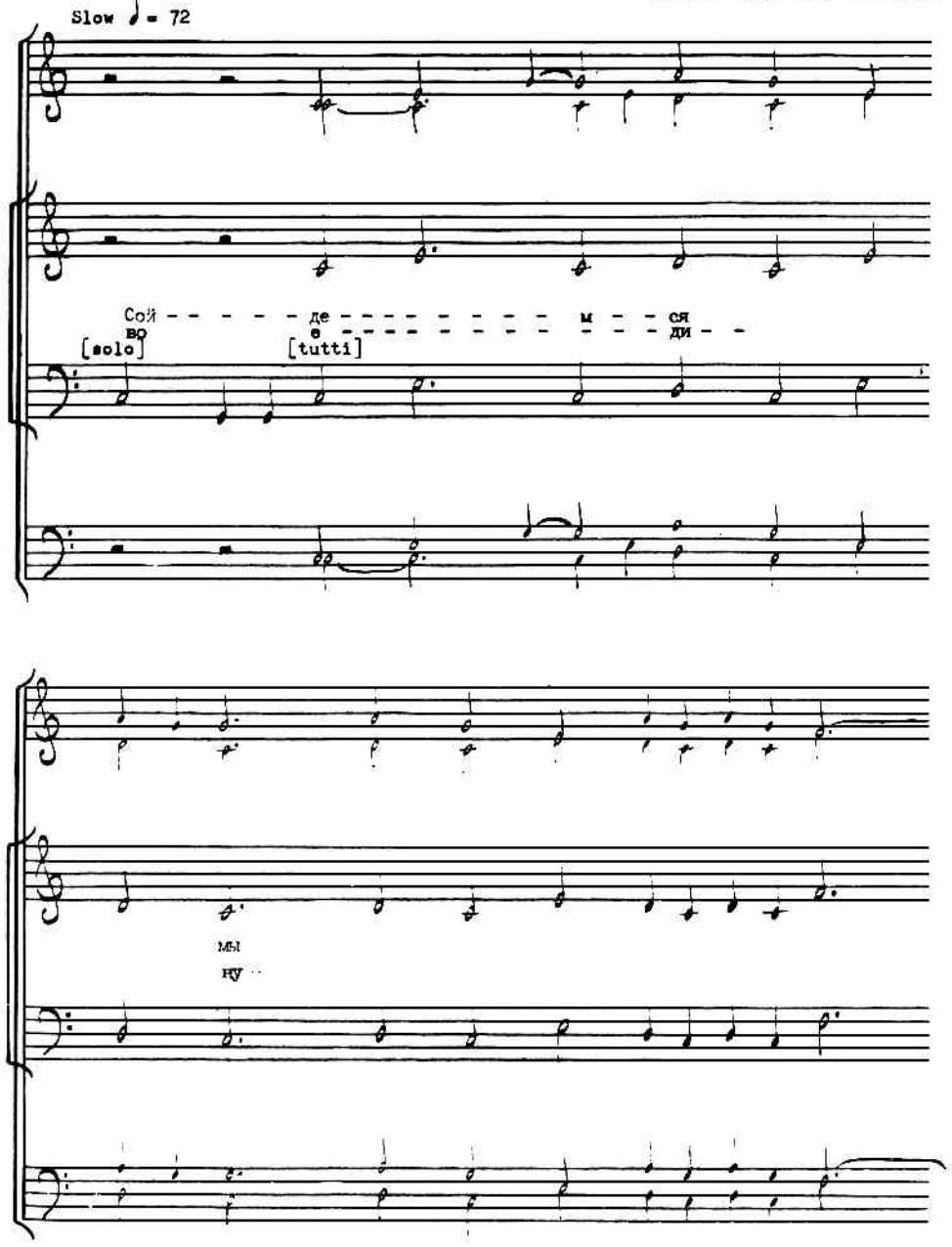
Nowadays the singing is limited to two 'verses,' the remainder being recited. Even at that, it takes over five minutes to sing just the first five words.

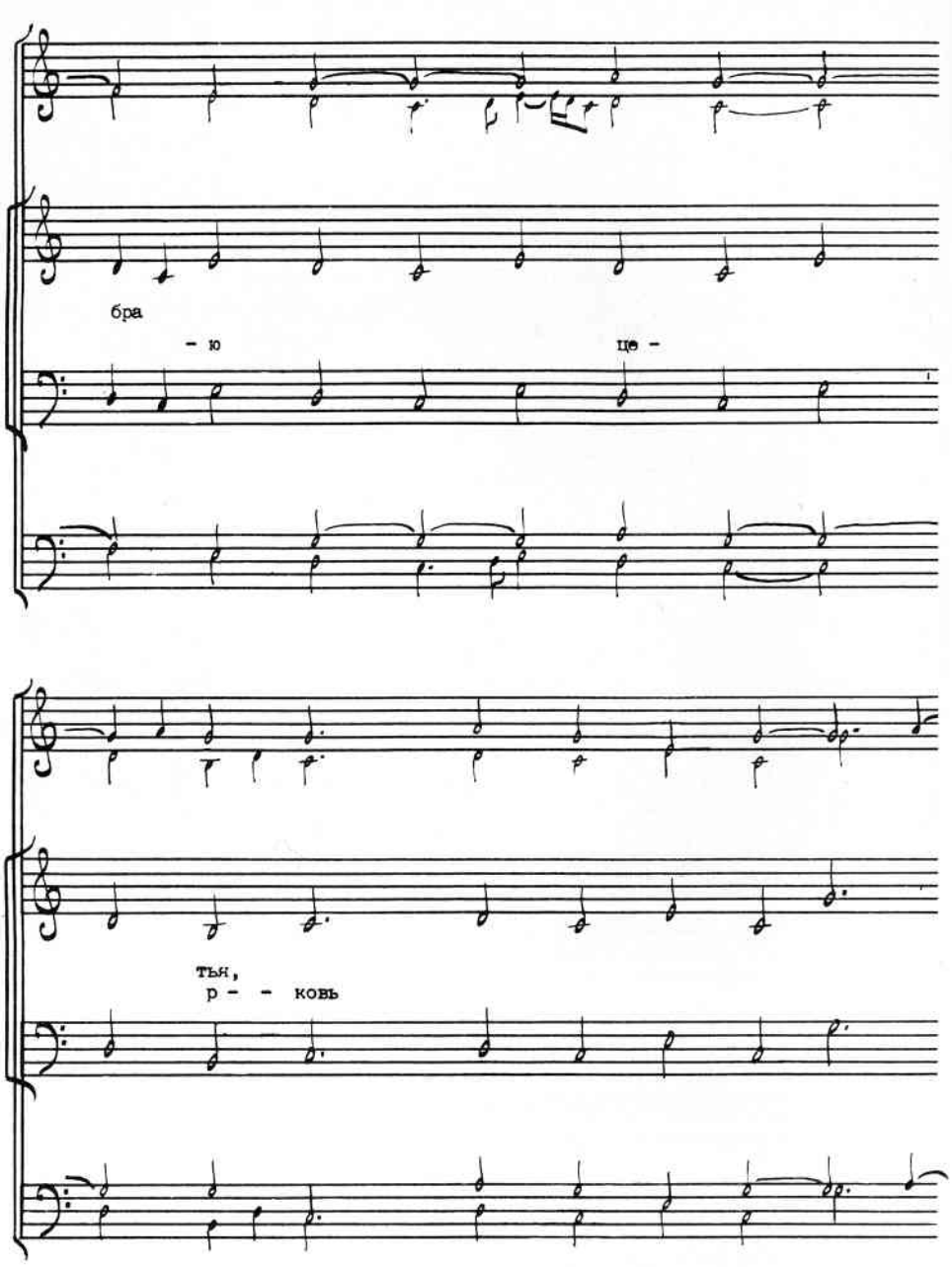
A section of the George A. Popoff choir singing *Let Us Gather, Brothers*

Let Us Gather, Brothers

PEA 280-1708

Sung by the George A. Popoff choir of mixed elders
Brilliant, B.C., July 25, 1963

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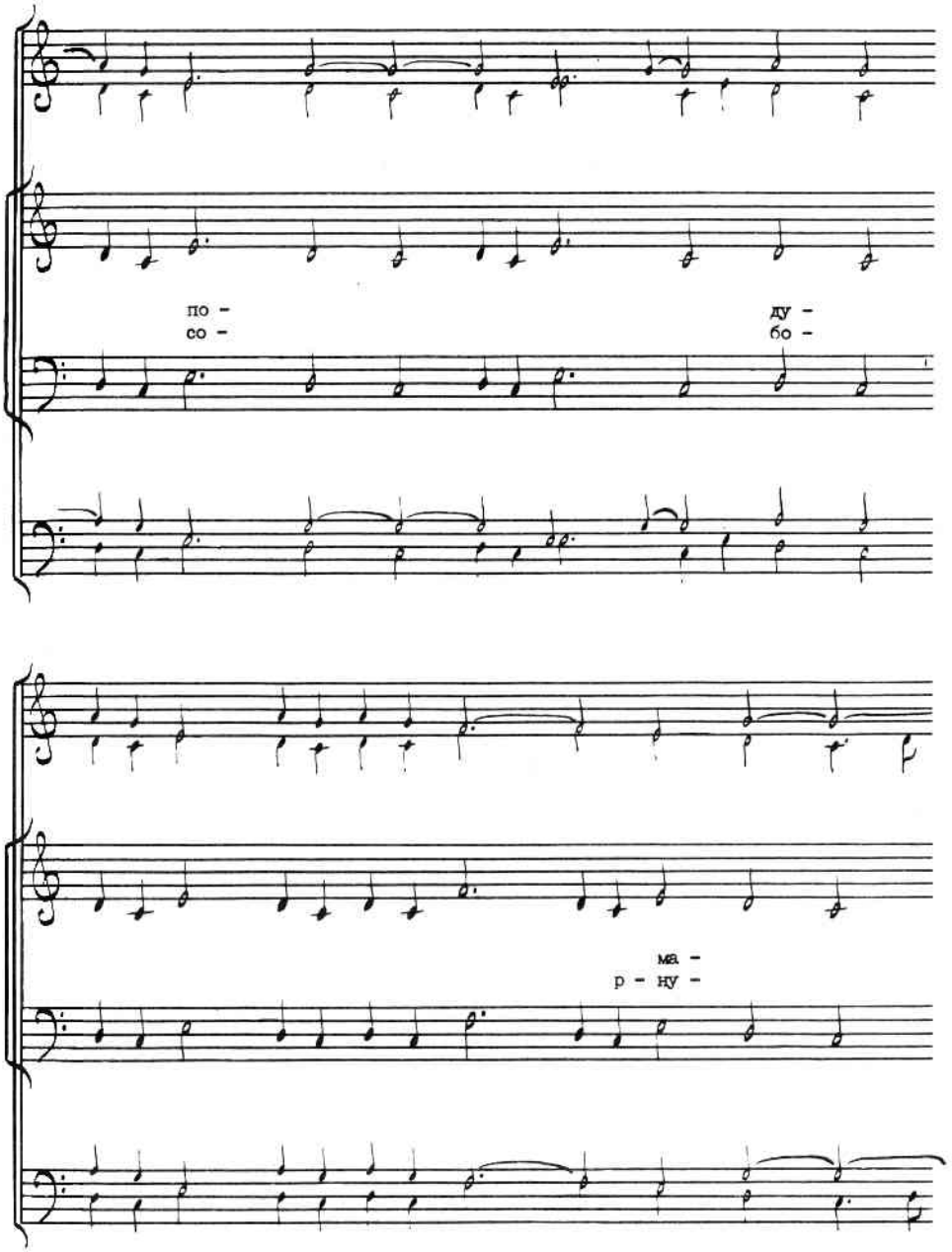
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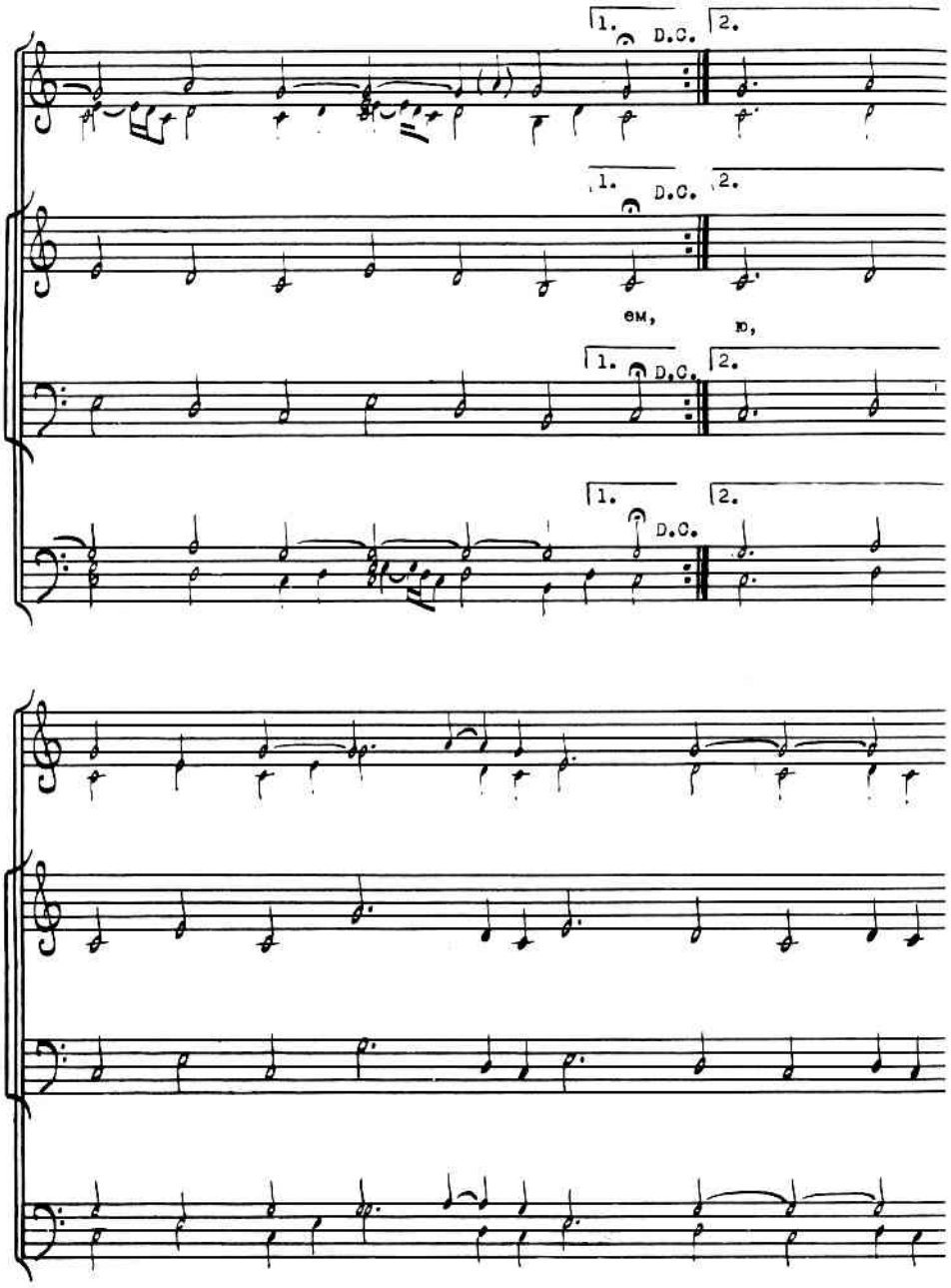
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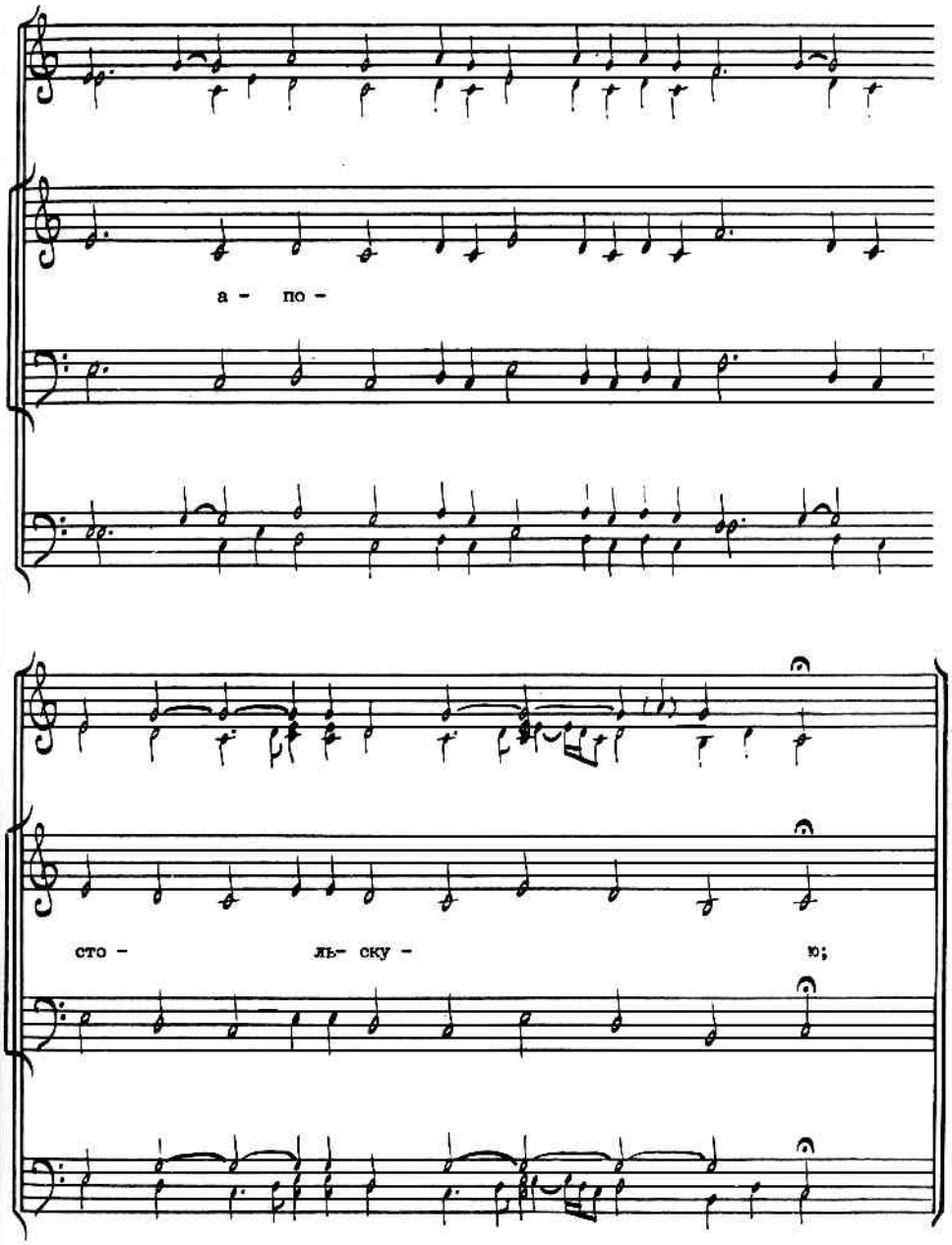
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Господи благослови:

Сойдемся мы, братья, подумаем, во единую церковь соборную, апостольскую; сотворим мы, братья, радость ангельскую, архангельскую. С вечера церковь ограждалася, к полуночи церковь освещалася, к белу свету церковь на суд к Богу пошла. Прилетели ангелы Божьи за той душой Израильской, поняли ту душу с пением, понесли ту душу к Самому Христу, к Богу нашему. Встречает ту душу Сам Господь Бог: ты поди Моя душа Израильская — нелживый пророк, ученик Христов, во Мой рай пресветлый. Есть у Меня человек на земле, такой же как Я, как столб до небес.

Богу нашему слава.

Translation:

Lord give us Thy Blessing [spoken]:

Let us gather, brothers, and ponder in the one and only assembled, apostolic church; we will create, brothers, a rejoicing as of angels and archangels. In the evening the church was on the defensive, towards midnight it was enlightened, and at dawn the church went before God for judgment. Angels of God came for this Israelite soul; they lifted the soul with singing, carried the soul to Christ Himself, our God. The Lord God Himself met the soul. Go, My Israelite soul, a true prophet, disciple of Christ, to My serene paradise. A person I have on earth, the same as Myself, as a pillar reaching to heaven.

Glory to our God!

DATA:

This belongs to a small group of special psalms which are sung only at funerals. In keeping with the simplicity of the Doukhobor way of life, there are no elaborate preparations or rituals for funerals. No attempt is made to hide the fact of death by embalming or 'prettying-up' the corpse to make it appear alive. Death is accepted for what it is—the inevitable climax to life. A typical burial 'service' consists of the Lord's Prayer, sung by the group assembled, and one or two funeral psalms such as the one reproduced, and perhaps a closing hymn like *We Have Concluded Our Assembly* (see *Contemporary Hymns*).

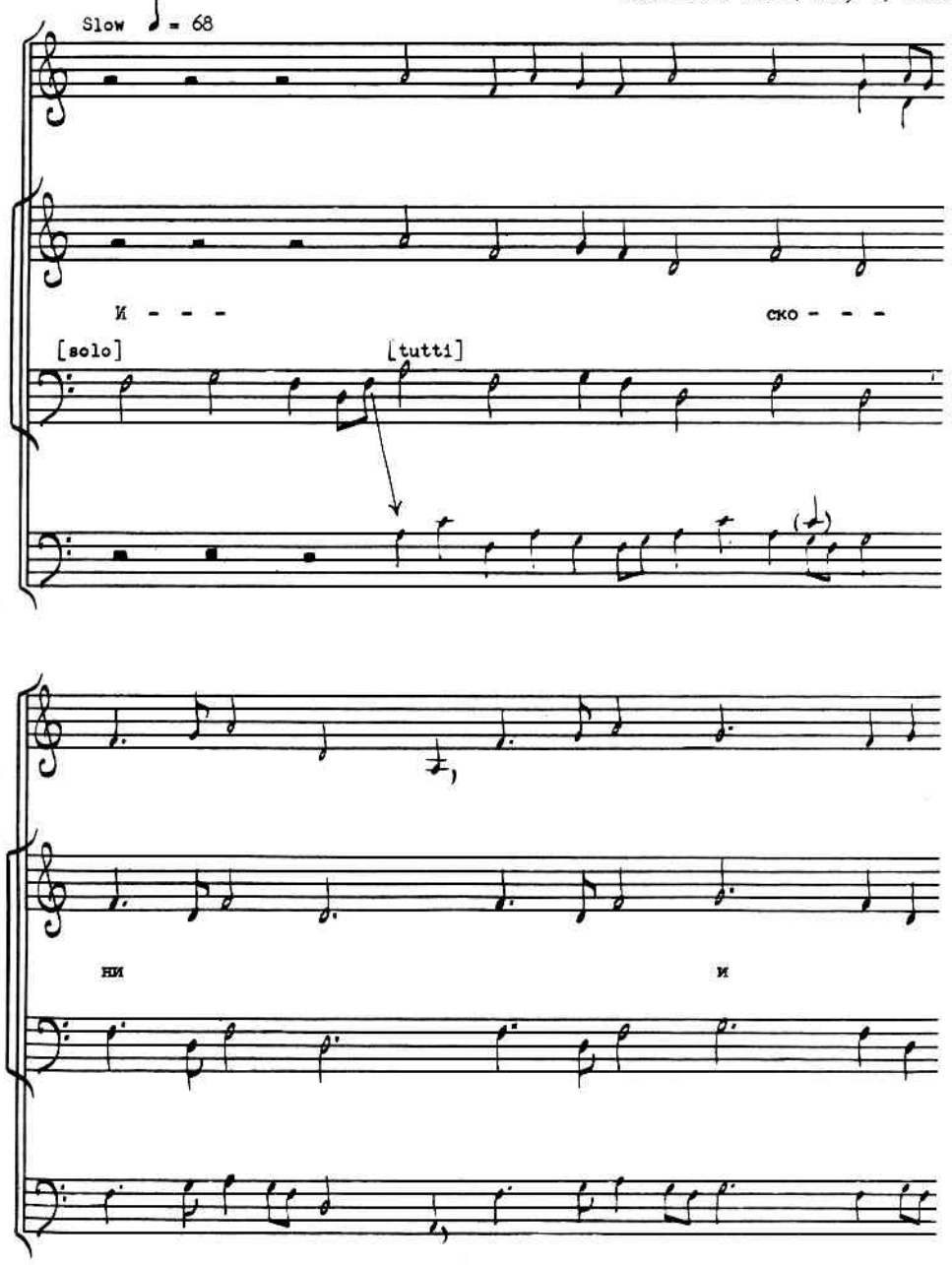
The wording of the text of *Let Us Gather, Brothers* suggests that the psalm might have originated in the seventeenth century among the 'Children of Israel' sect, which had a profound influence on Doukoborism, but its musical style suggests a much earlier origin. Whatever its origin, *Let Us Gather, Brothers* illustrates perfectly the nature of the human soul as it is conceived by the Doukhobors. In his *Sociological Study of the Doukhobors* (manuscript, National

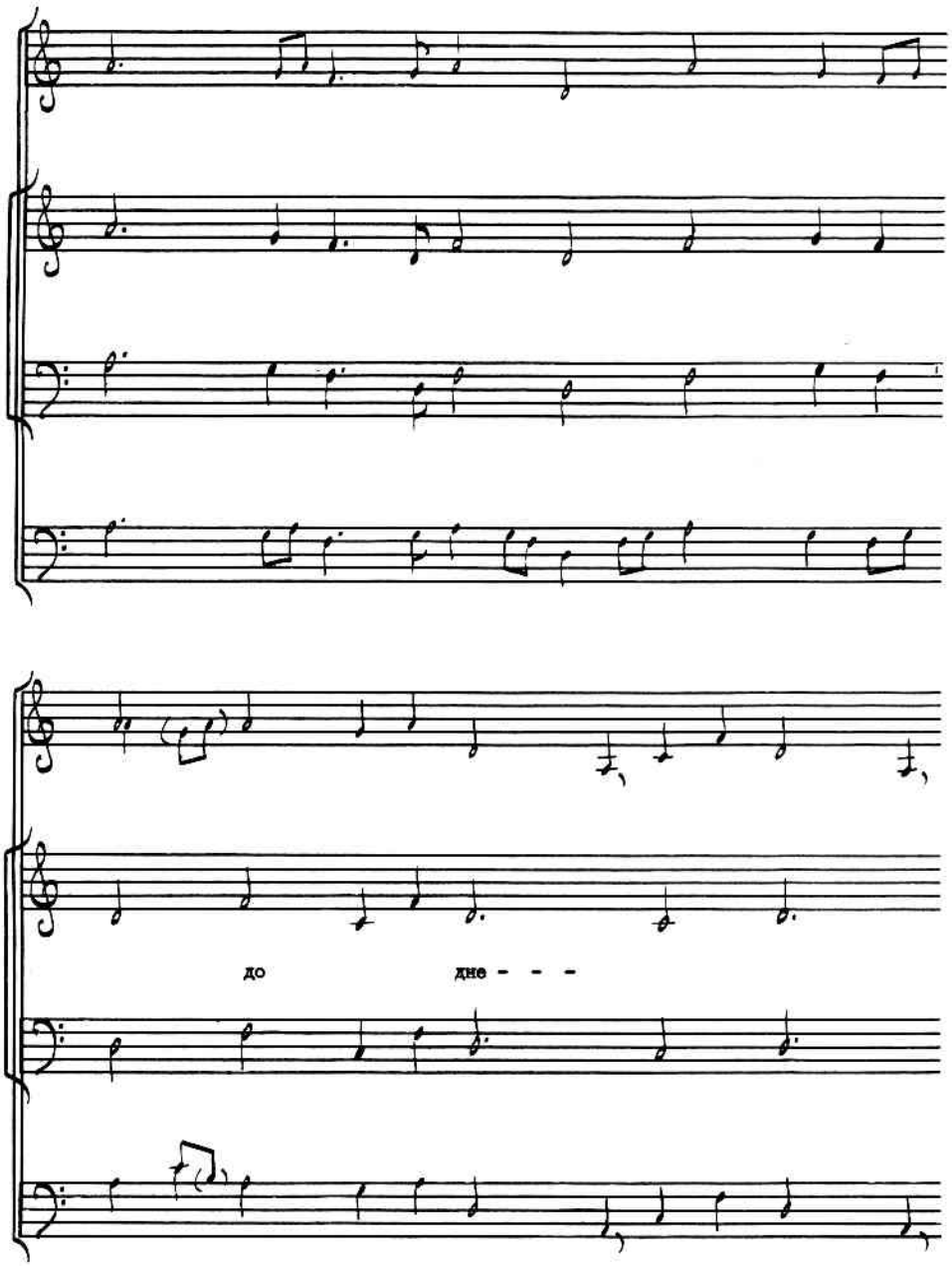
Museum of Man) Koozma J. Tarasoff writes: "The older generation Doukhobors believe that a soul exists in the living human being. Its nature, however, is not clear: it is 'the substance of God,' 'intelligence,' 'reason,' 'image of God' and 'God himself.' And because every man possesses this element of God in him, he is divine, he is then man-God. This is the source for the belief that divine revelation comes directly to every individual without the necessity of priestly intermediaries. Upon their death, the elders believe that man's flesh decays, while his soul departs from the body." The soul need not ascend to 'heaven,' however. The Doukhobor elders believe that the soul can be inherited, that it passes from one being to another to be preserved and continued in 'righteous ones' by a process of transmigration. Mr. Tarasoff continues: "A six week mourning period (corresponding to the Russian Orthodox custom) is traditionally postulated as the period during which the soul is in flight or in a state of disturbance; after that, it settles down in the 'righteous one.' Not all Doukhobors, though, believe in the immortality of some portion of the individual; some postulate that when they die, they die completely in the physical sense but live on in the form of memories in the history of mankind. If a person has done good deeds, he will be remembered longer." While one cannot term this a 'secular drift,' it does reveal an attempt, especially among younger Doukhobors, to examine the mysteries of 'soul' and 'personality' on a more rational level.

Woman elder from Grand Forks, British Columbia

PEA 334-2145

Sung by a group of mixed elders
Saskatoon, Sask., July 8, 1964

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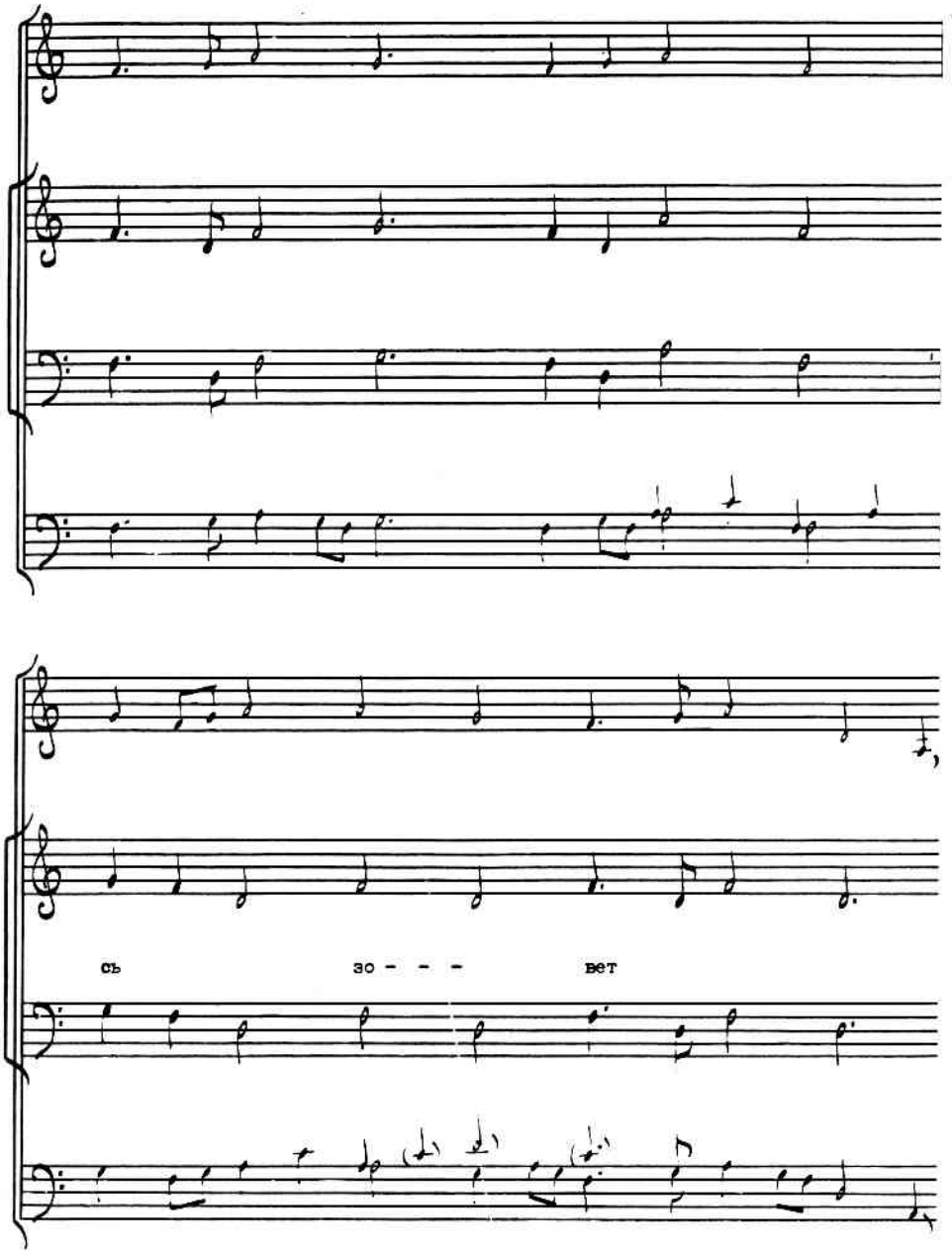
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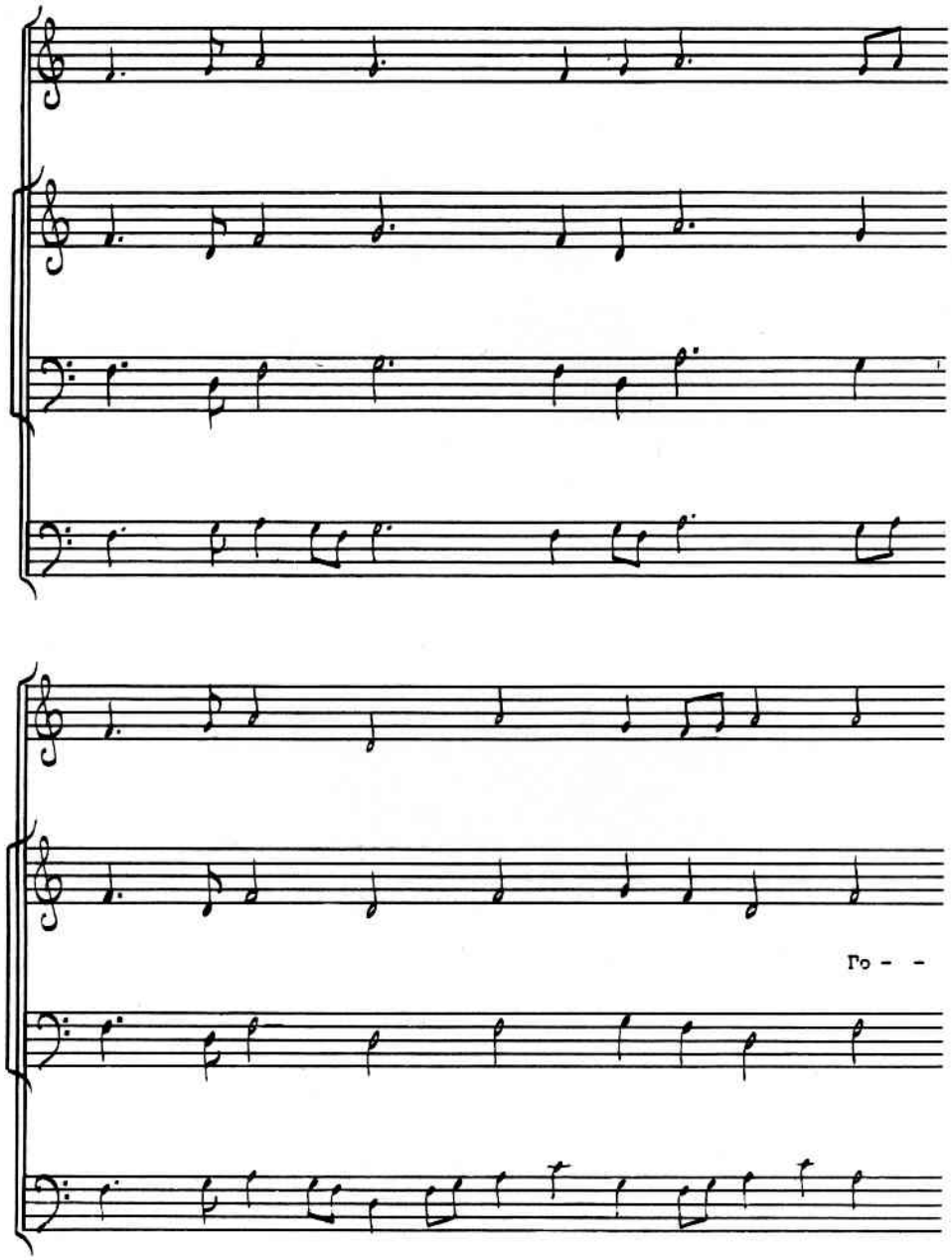
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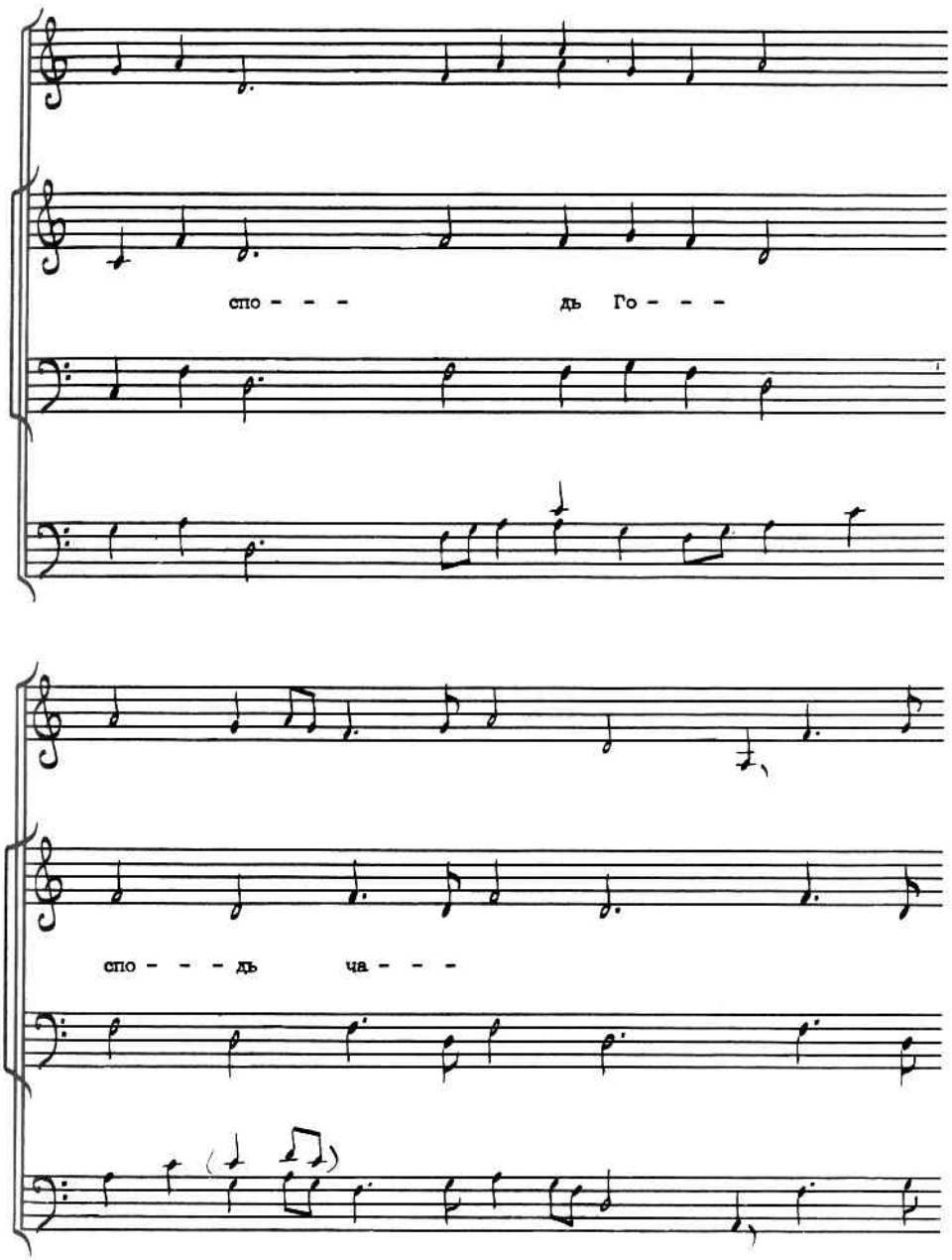
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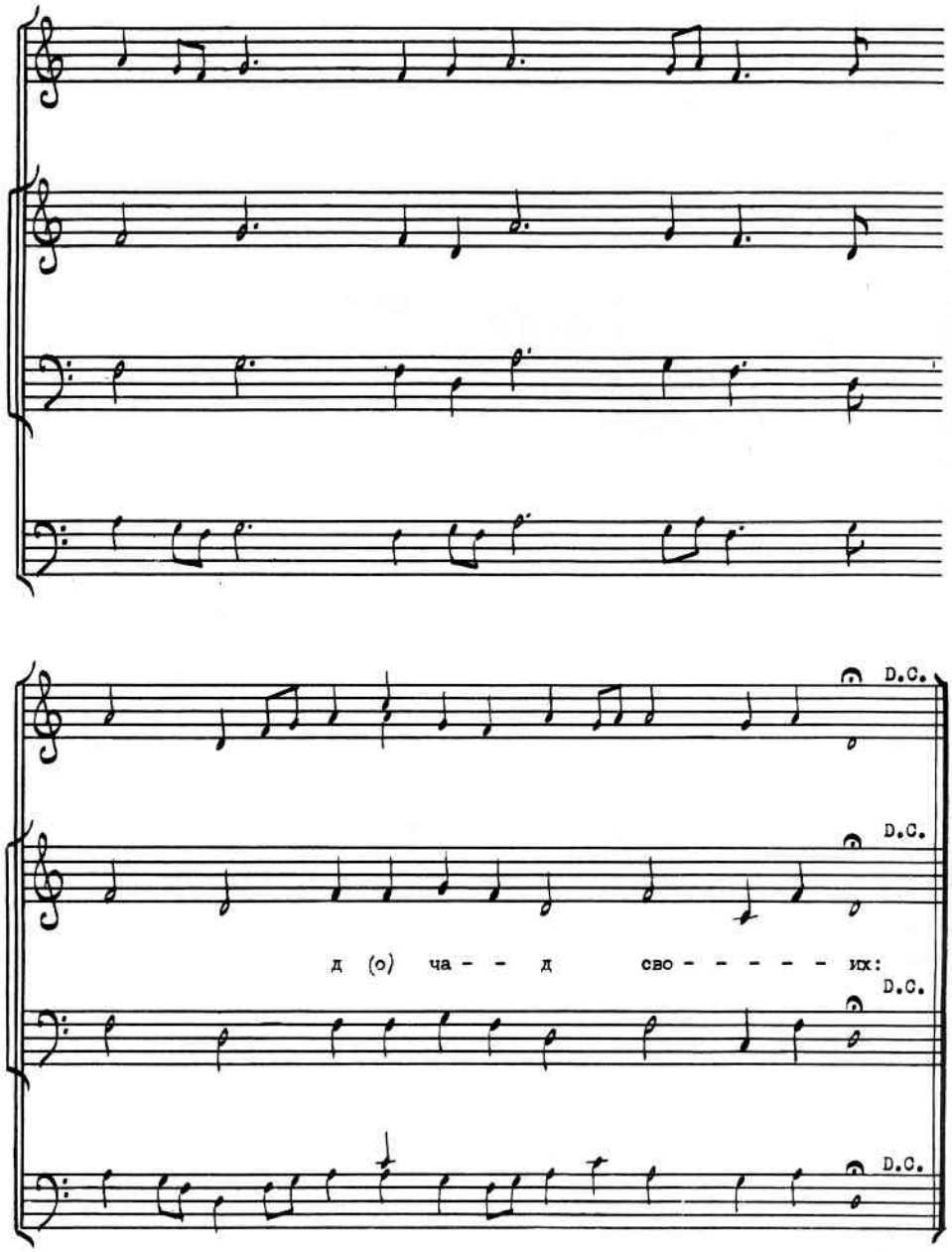
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Искони и до днесь зовет Господь чад Своих: вы придите ко Мне, Мои чадушки, вы придите ко Мне, Мои милые, — уготовлено вам Мною Царство Небесное. Не пожалейте вы своего отца и мать по плоти, весь свой род-племя, все свое тленное имение, а пожалейте Меня Батюшку, Царя Небесного по духу. Возмолились к Нему чадушки, Возмолились к Нему милые: Господи, Господи, тяжело нам в Твое царствие войти, все пути Твои заграждены. На путях стоят двери железные и врата медные, у ворот стоит стража страшная. Возглаголил к ним Господь: Не убойтесь, Мои чадушки, не убойтесь, мои милые, аз Я Борец крепкий, впереди вас гряду. Сломлю их двери железные, сокрушу их врата медные и разгоню их стражу страшную, а вас введу в Свое Царство Небесное и буду с вами царствовать в раю Бога Иаковлева.

Богу нашему слава.

Translation:

From the beginning to the present time the Lord has been calling to His children: "Come to Me, my children, come to Me, my dear ones; I have prepared the Kingdom of Heaven for you. Feel no sorrow for [leaving] your father and mother or your kith and kin or all your worldly wealth; but feel sorrow for Me, your Spiritual Father and Heavenly Tsar." And His children, all His dear ones, prayed to Him fervently: "Lord, Lord, it is difficult for us to enter Your Kingdom; all Your paths are blocked. On these paths are doors of iron and gates of brass; at the gates fearsome guards are stationed." And the Lord exclaimed to them: "Do not fear, my children, do not fear, my dear ones; for I, the mighty Wrestler,* am leading you forth. I shall break through their doors of iron and shall smash their gates of brass. And I shall disperse their fearsome guards and lead you into my Heavenly Kingdom; and I shall reign with you in the Paradise of the God of Jacob."

Glory to Our God!

DATA:

This old psalm, based upon Biblical texts, is Number 150 in the Bonch-Bruevitch collection *The Book of Life of the Doukhobors*. Although Doukhobors in general agree that the choirs and congregations in British Columbia give the most polished renditions of psalms and hymns, I found that several Doukhobor groups on the prairies had preserved the archaic quality of psalm-singing to a remarkable degree. The traditional singing of this group of Doukhobor elders from Saskatoon is especially noteworthy.

*As Spirit-Wrestlers themselves, the Doukhobors interpret the word 'warrior' as the supreme 'Wrestler'.