Song Acts

Twelve Songs to Texts from Ezra Pound

For Voice and Piano

Book I: Angels of Wind and Fire

2008, 2018

Lawrence Kramer

Song Acts originated as a hybrid work, half a choreographed song cycle for mezzo soprano and baritone, and half a musical drama enacted in twelve songs. The version here is for a single voice, male or female. The choreography is lost as a result, and there are other changes necessitated by the shift to solo song, but the essential dramatic arc remains intact.

Writing in the early twentieth century, Pound took up the traditional topics of love and war to articulate but also to counter the feeling, widespread at the time, that modernity had caused experience to lose its depth and become merely a series of shocks and impressions. As Walter Benjamin put it, life felt as if human beings had fallen off the calendar. The result on the one hand was a loss of the sense of the numinous that had once touched everyday life and, on the other, the collective folly that allowed the catastrophe of the First World War. These issues are with us still, in new and perhaps even more dangerous forms, so these old modernist poems remain all too timely.

"Songs Act" resists synopsis because of its prismatic approach to narrative. The basic action involves the vicissitudes of meeting and parting, separation and reunion, intimacy and distance, between romantic partners. The fate of the couple, however, becomes significant less in its own right than as an embodiment of the possibility of authentic human bonds in an era that is at best indifferent to them and at worst brutally hostile.

Song Acts consists of two books, which may be performed either as independent cycles or in sequence to form the full cycle. Book I, *Angels of Wind and Fire* (six songs, eighteen minutes) turns on the vicissitudes of desire, separation, and reunion. Book II, *Erat Hora* (six songs, twenty minutes) dwells on the question of how, in the words of W. H. Auden, to "show an affirming flame" amid dark memories and darker events.

All the texts are in the public domain. Some have been freely modified. The pronouns "he" and "she" may be switched freely throughout.

1. “The dew is upon the leaf. The night about us is restless.”

2. Alba

As cool as the pale wet leaves of lily-of-the-valley
She / He lay beside me in the dawn.

3. Song of Separation

Blue mountains to the north of the walls,
White river winding about them;
Here we must make separation
And go out through a thousand miles of dead grass.

Mind like a floating wide cloud,
Sunset like the parting of old acquaintances
Who bow over their clasped hands at a distance.
Our horses neigh to each other as we are departing.

4. “The night about us is restless. The dew is upon the leaf.”

5. Separation on the River Kiang.

Ko-jin goes west from Ko-kaku-ro,
The smoke-flowers are blurred over the river.
The lone sail blots the far sky.
And now I see only the river,
The long Kiang, reaching heaven.

6. Angels of Wind and Fire.
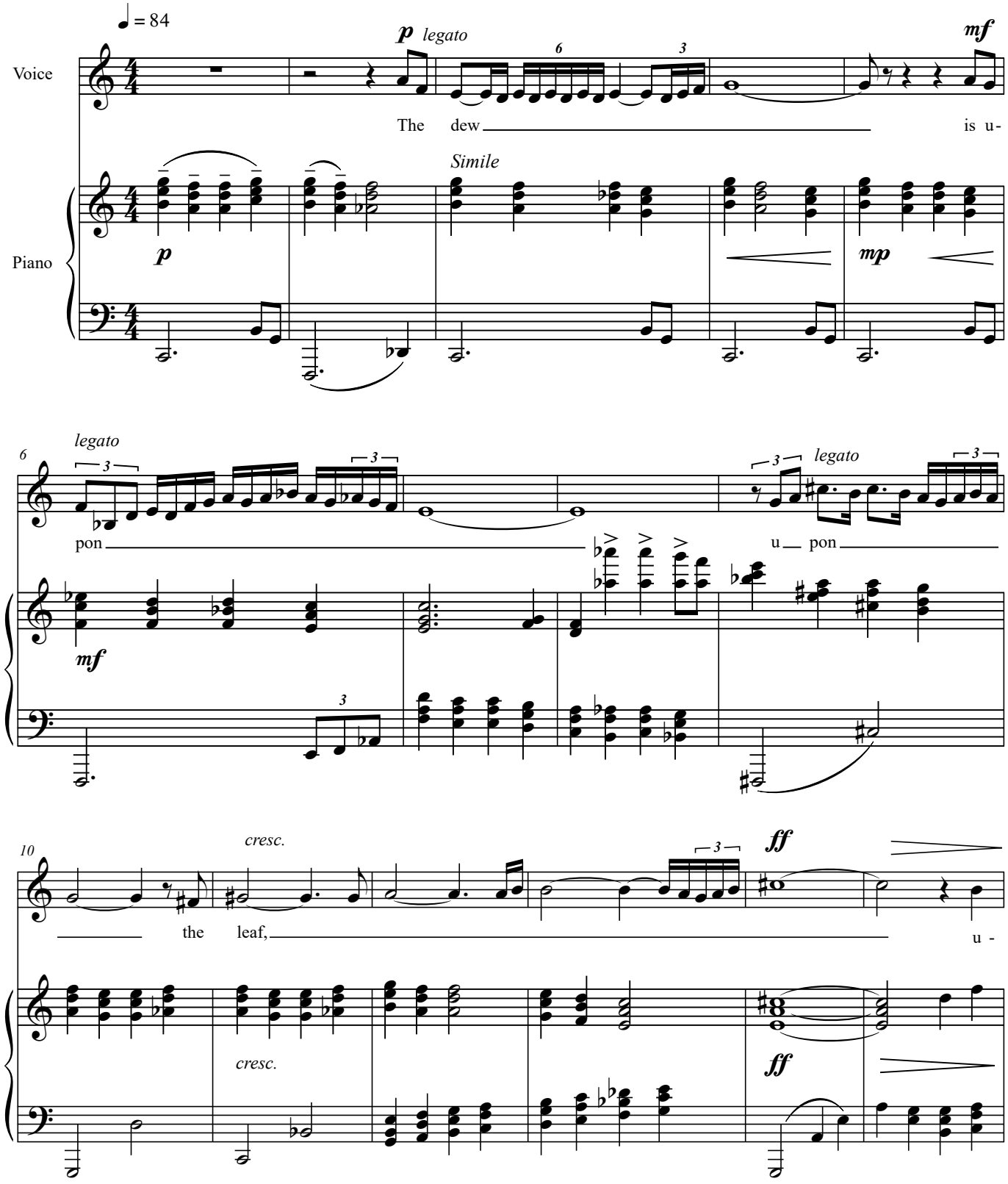
The angel of prayer according to the Talmud stands unmoved among the angels of wind and fire, who die as their one song is finished, also as he gathers the prayers they turn to flowers in his hands.
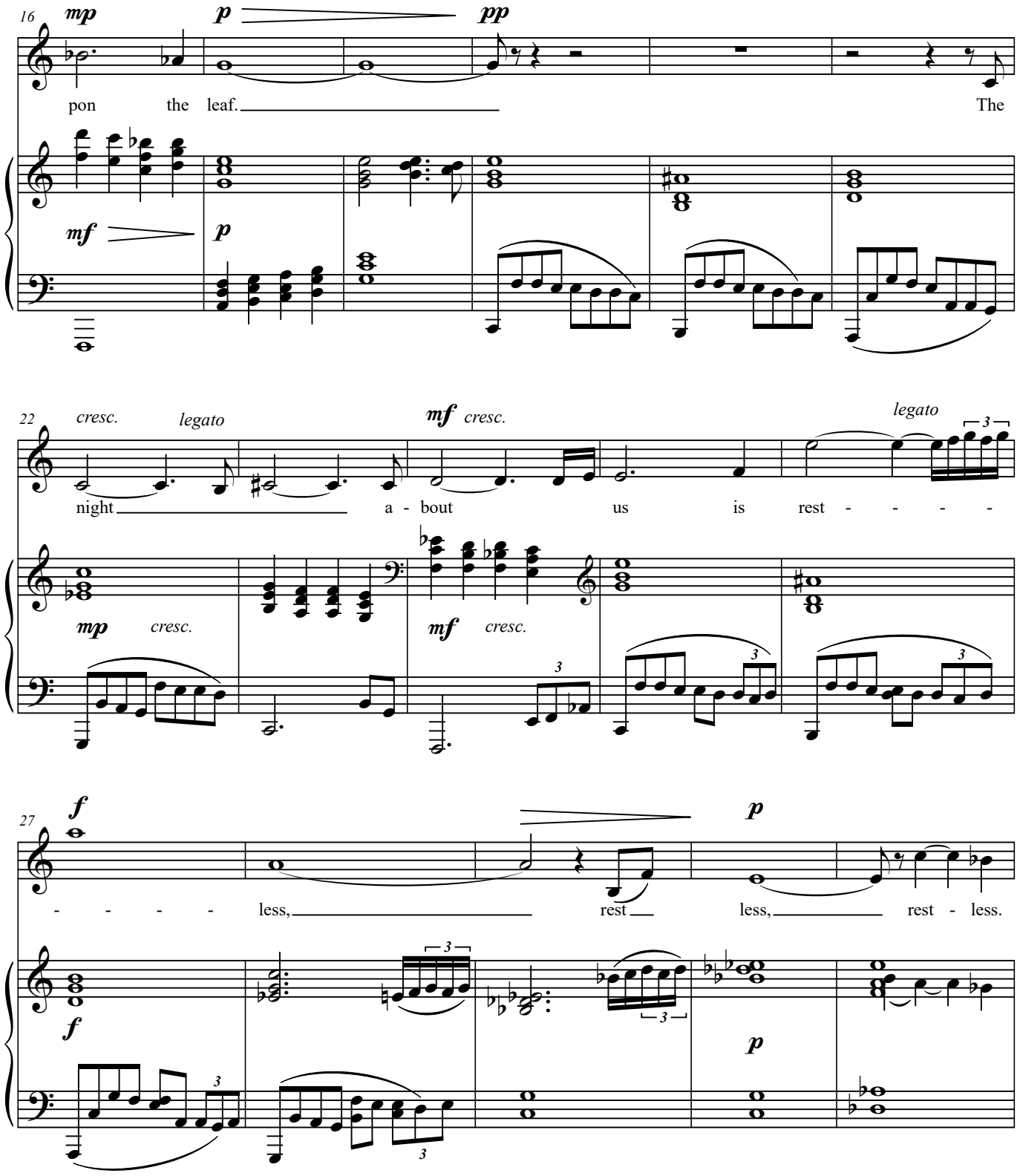
And if I, watching,
Make of these prayers of earth ever new flowers
From the pain of infinite singing,
Marvel and wonder!
Here, in this ash grove,
Comes first their thought of life
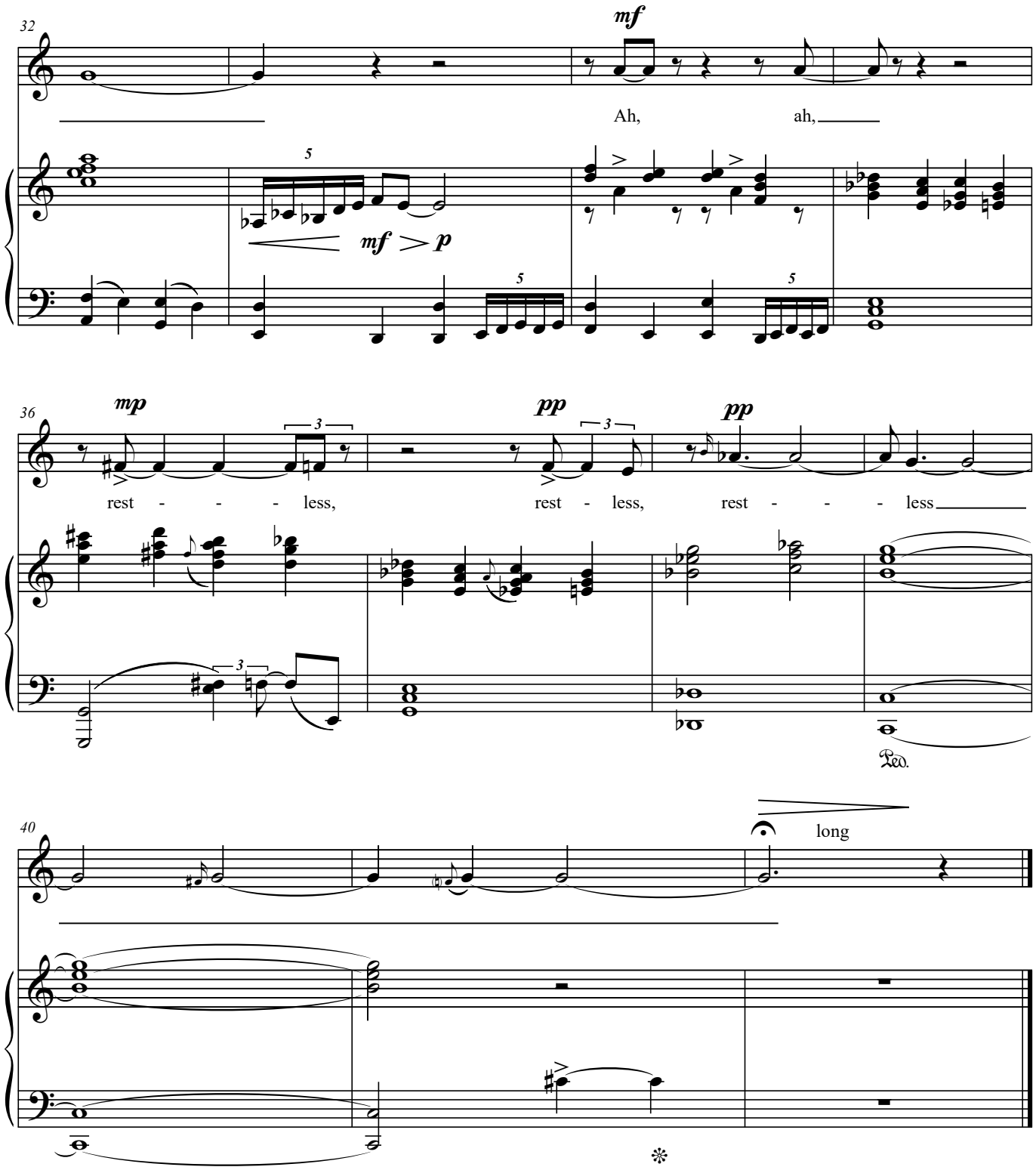
(Marvel and wonder!) even as I,
Giving to prayer new language
And causing the works to speak
Of the earth-horde's age-lasting longing--
Even as I marvel and wonder, and know not,
Yet keep my watch in the ash wood
Among angels of wind and fire.

No. 1 is a line from Pound's "Coitus"; no. 4 reverses its clauses. The original title of no. 3 is "Taking Leave of a Friend." No. 6 is a modified version of the epigraph and conclusion of "Sandalphon" (the title refers to the Talmudic angel of prayer).

Couplet I
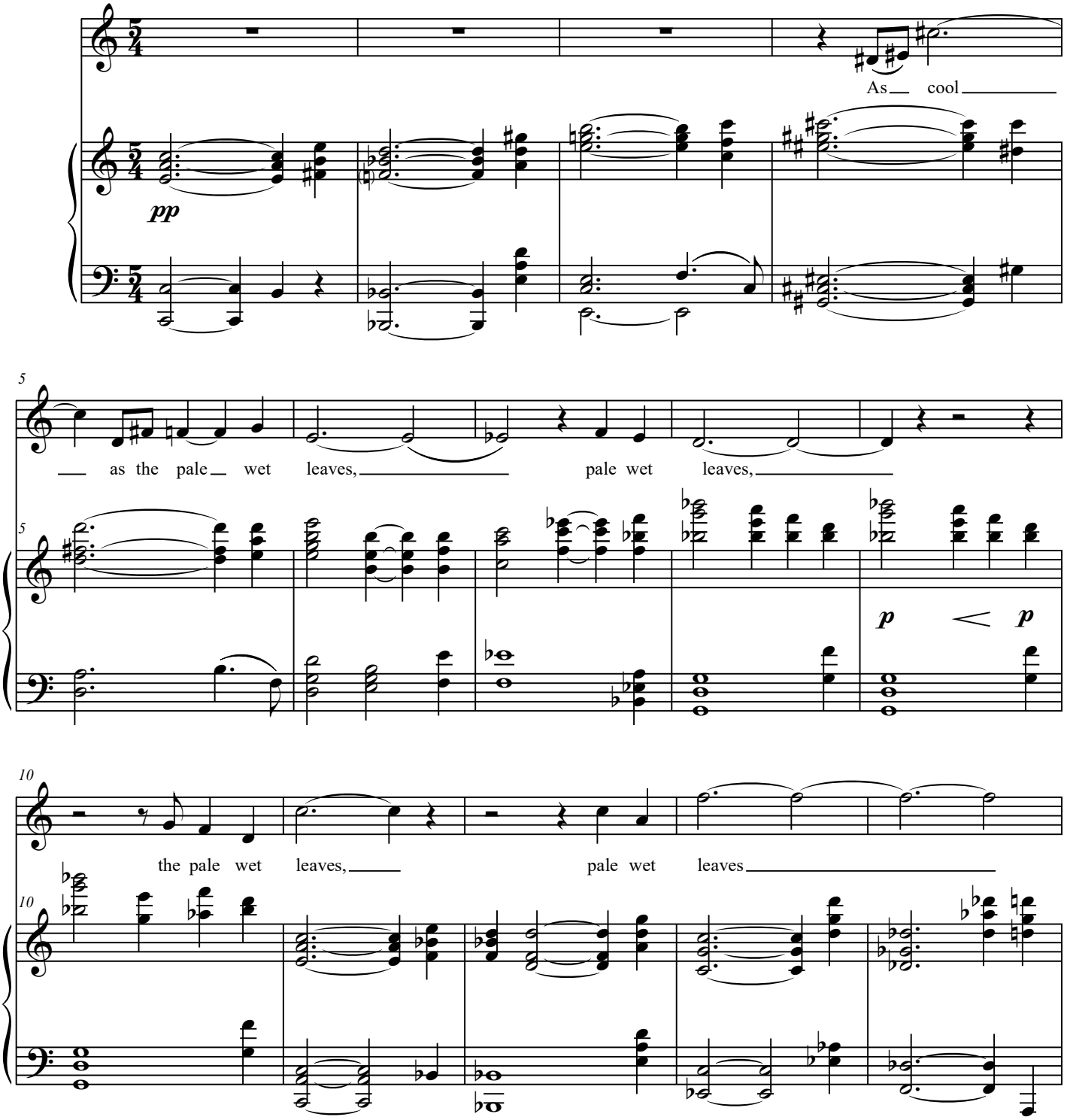

♩ = 84
Voice
Piano
p legato
mf
The dew is u-
Simile
p
mp
6
legato
pon
u pon
mf
10
cresc.
the leaf,
u -
ff
cresc.
ff
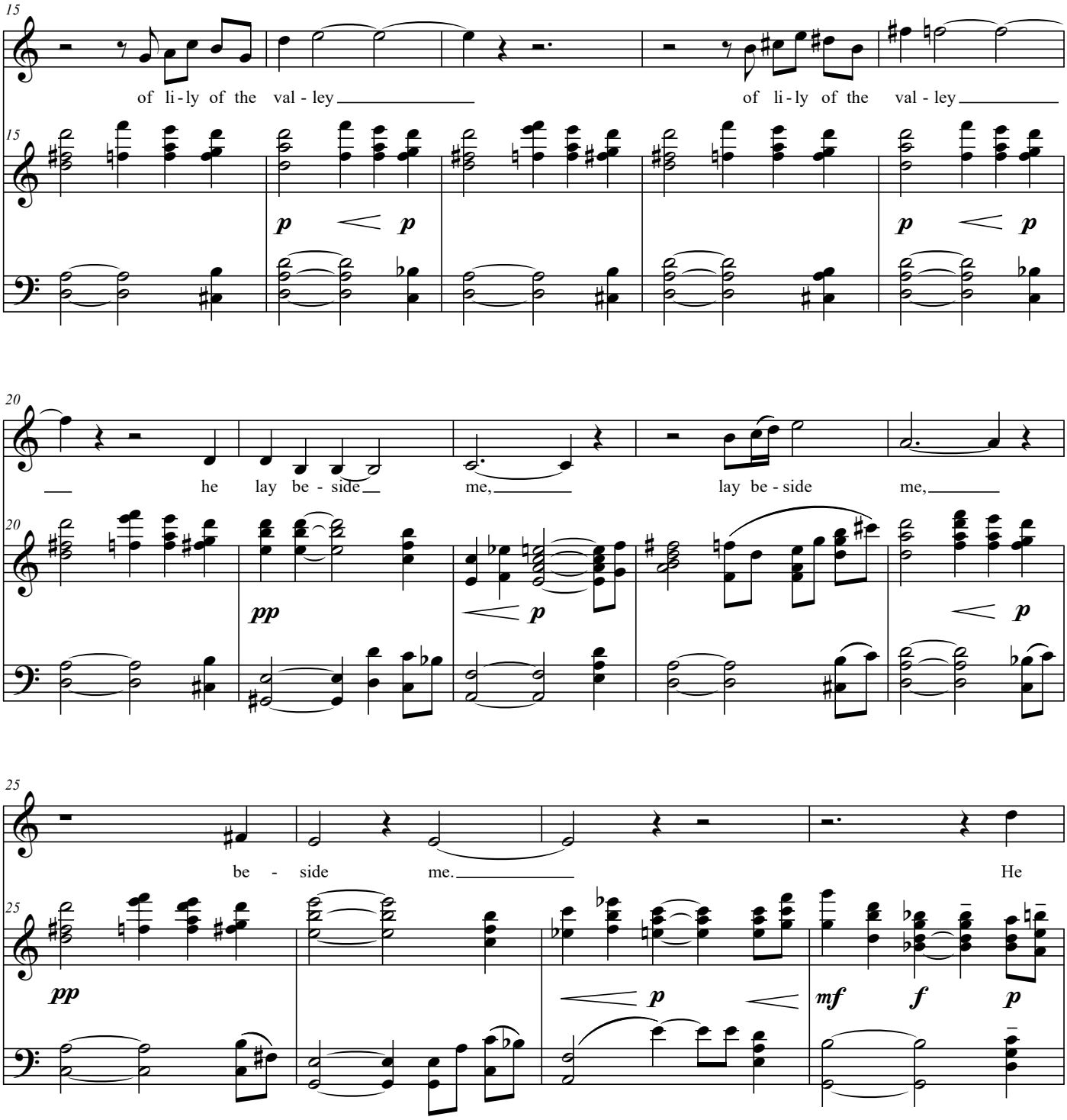

16
mp
p
pp
pon the leaf.
The
mf
p
22
cresc.
legato
mf
cresc.
legato
night
a - bout
us
is
rest - - - -
mp
cresc.
mf
cresc.
27
f
p
- - - - -
less,
rest
less,
rest - less.
f
p

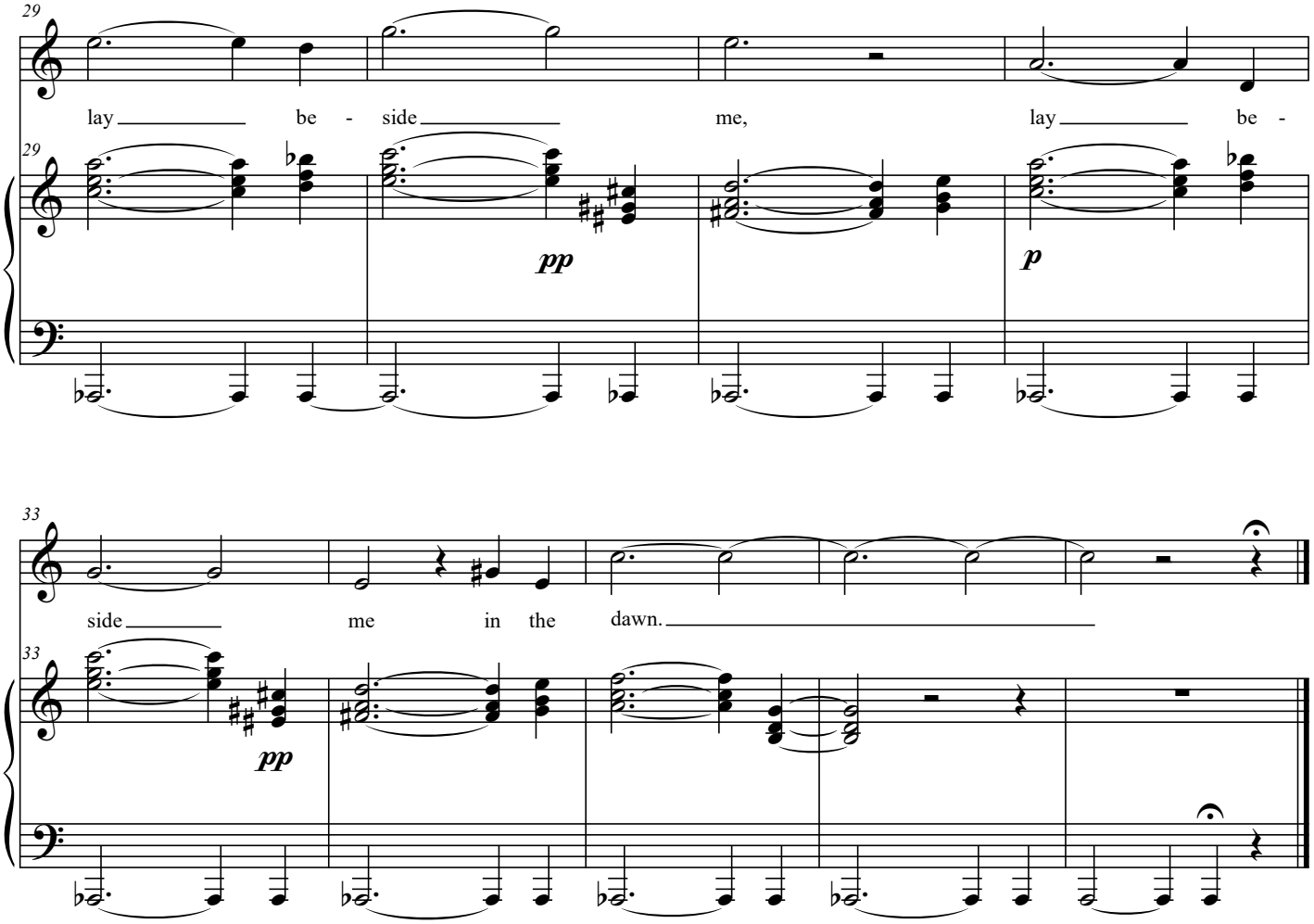

32
mf
Ah, ah,
mf > p
36
mp
pp
pp
rest - - - - less, rest - less, rest - - - - less
Ped.
40
long

Alba
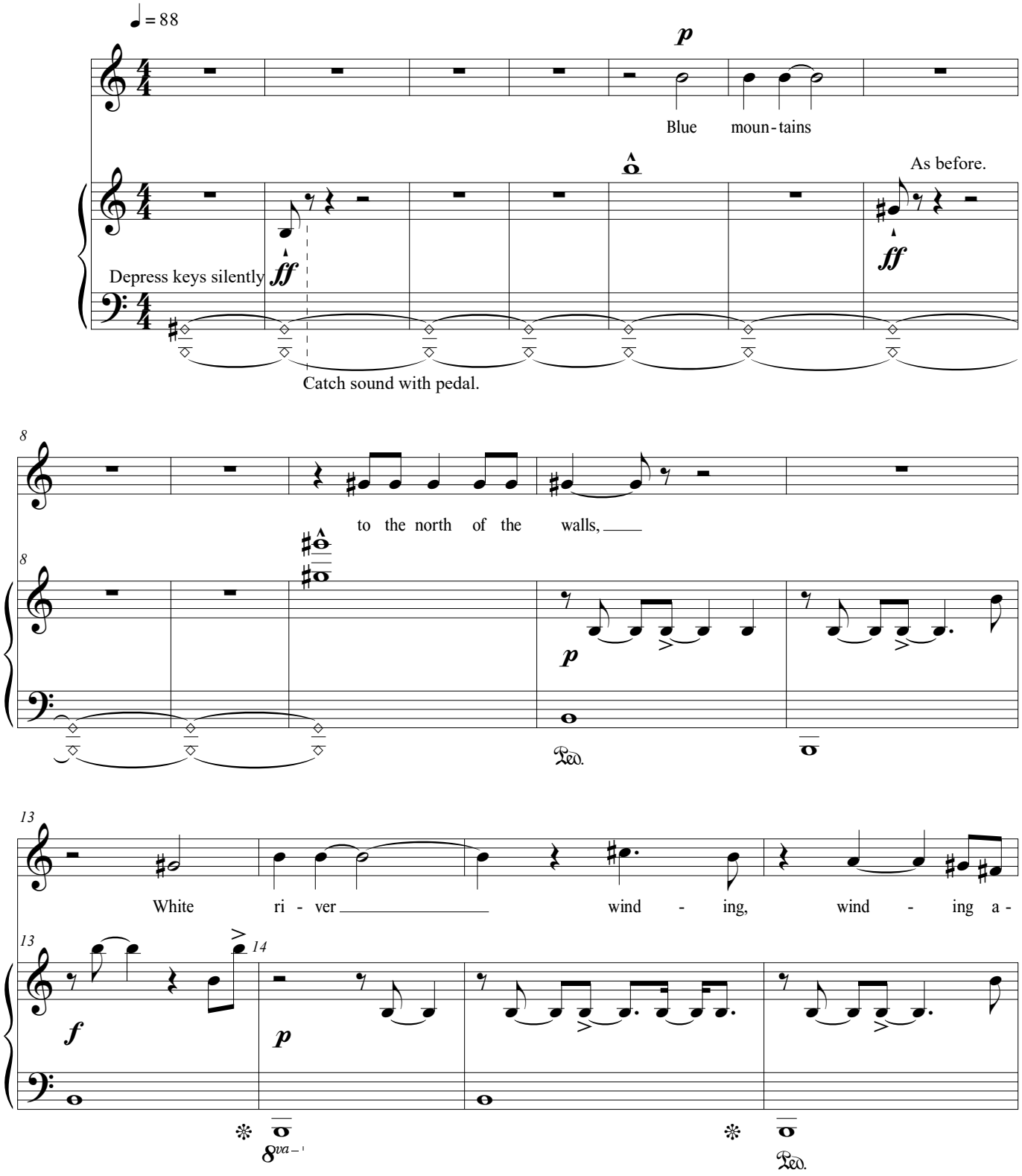
♩ = 80
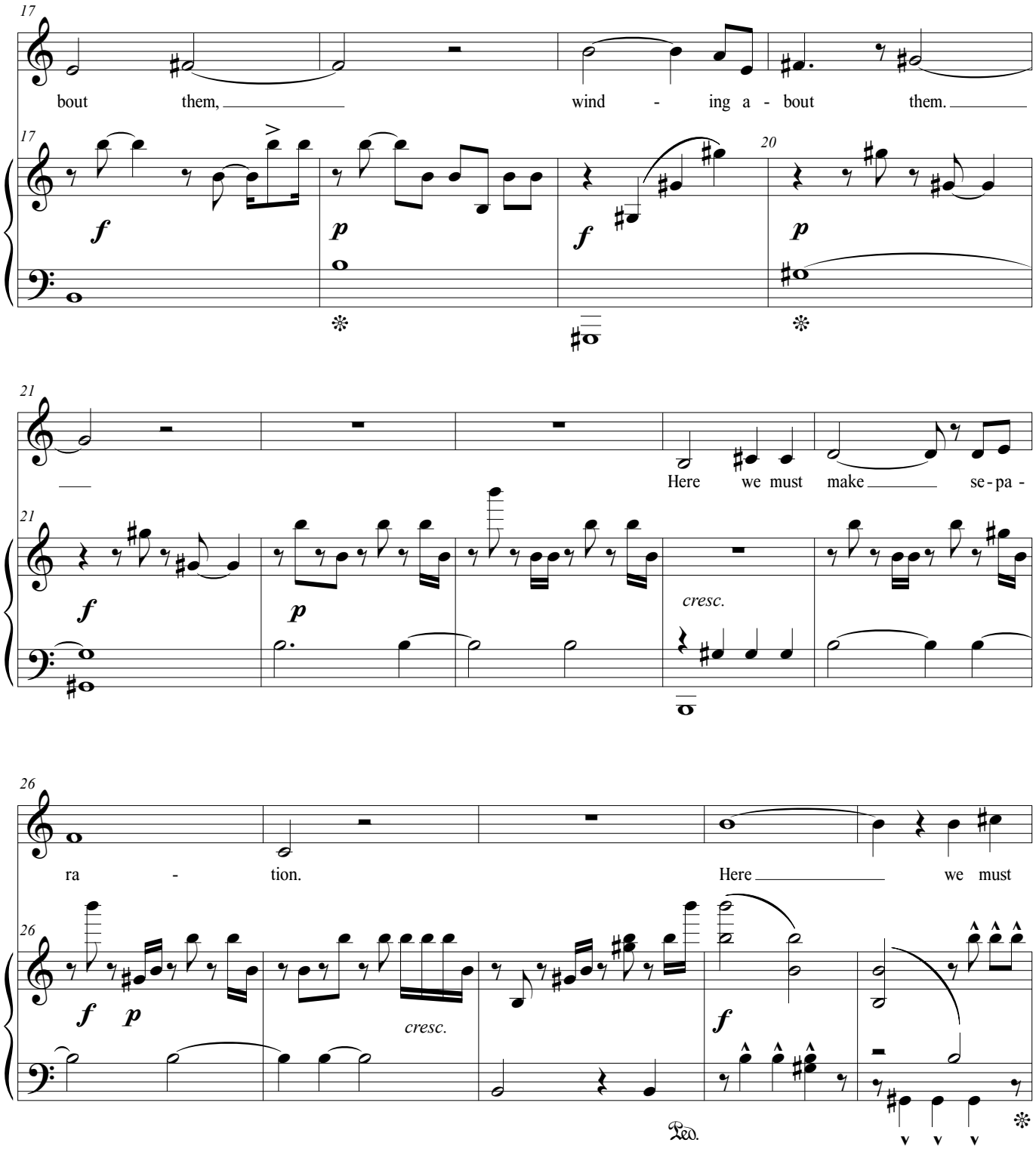

As cool
pp
as the pale wet leaves, pale wet leaves,
p < p
the pale wet leaves, pale wet leaves
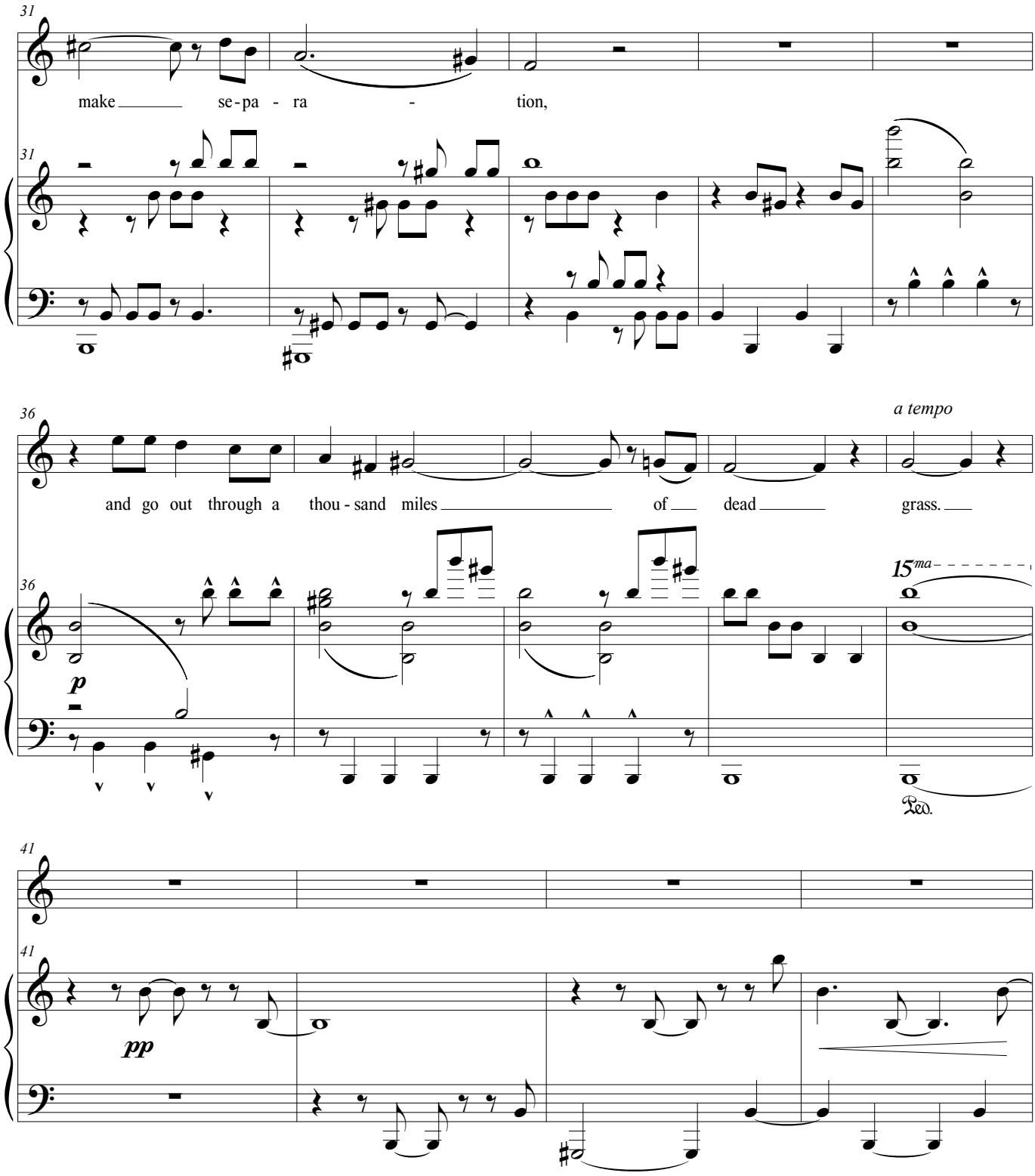

15
of li - ly of the val - ley
of li - ly of the val - ley
p
p
p
p
20
he lay be - side
me,
lay be - side
me,
pp
p
p
25
be - side
me.
He
pp
p
mf
f
p
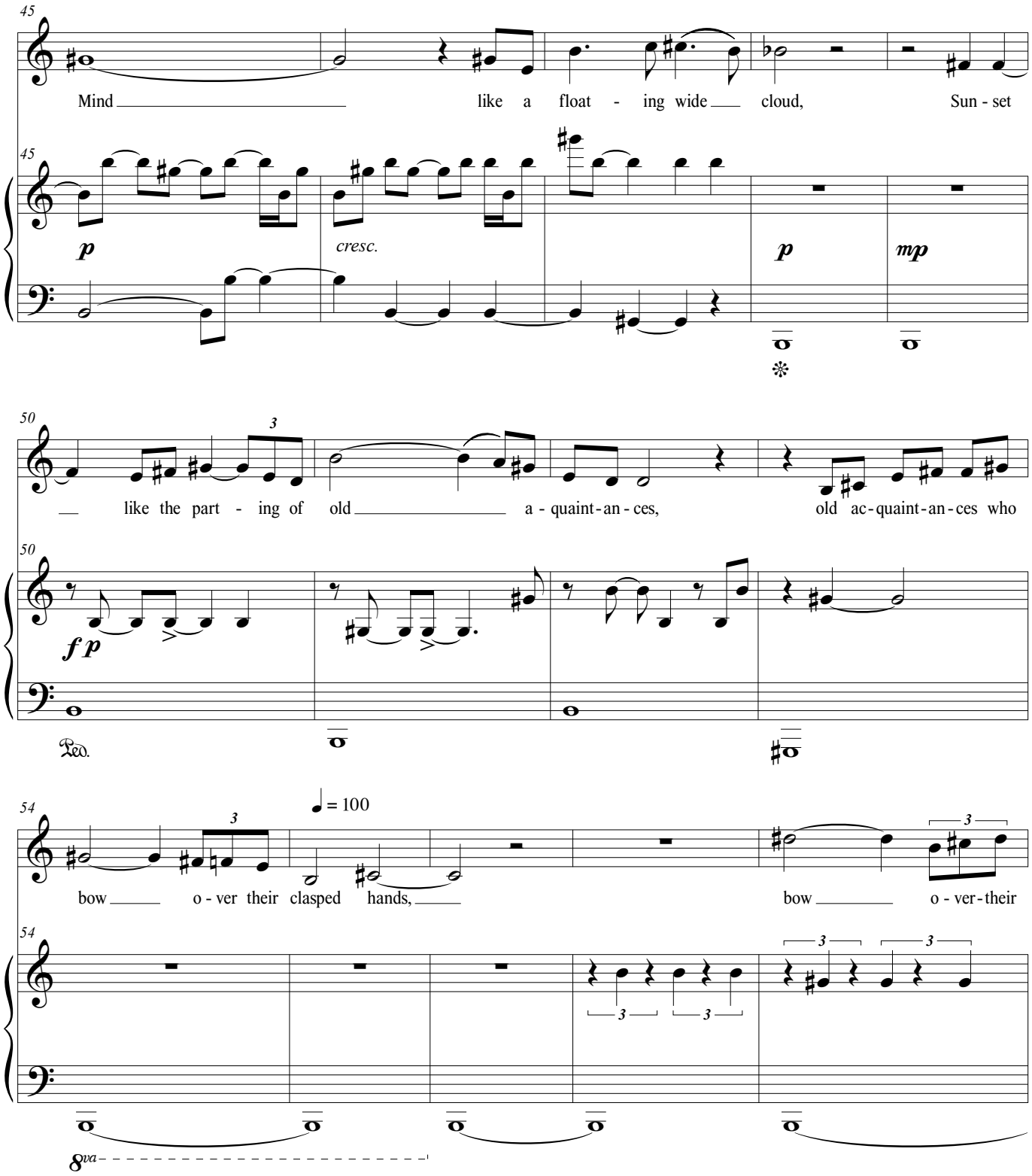

29
lay be - side me, lay be -
pp
p
33
side me in the dawn.
pp
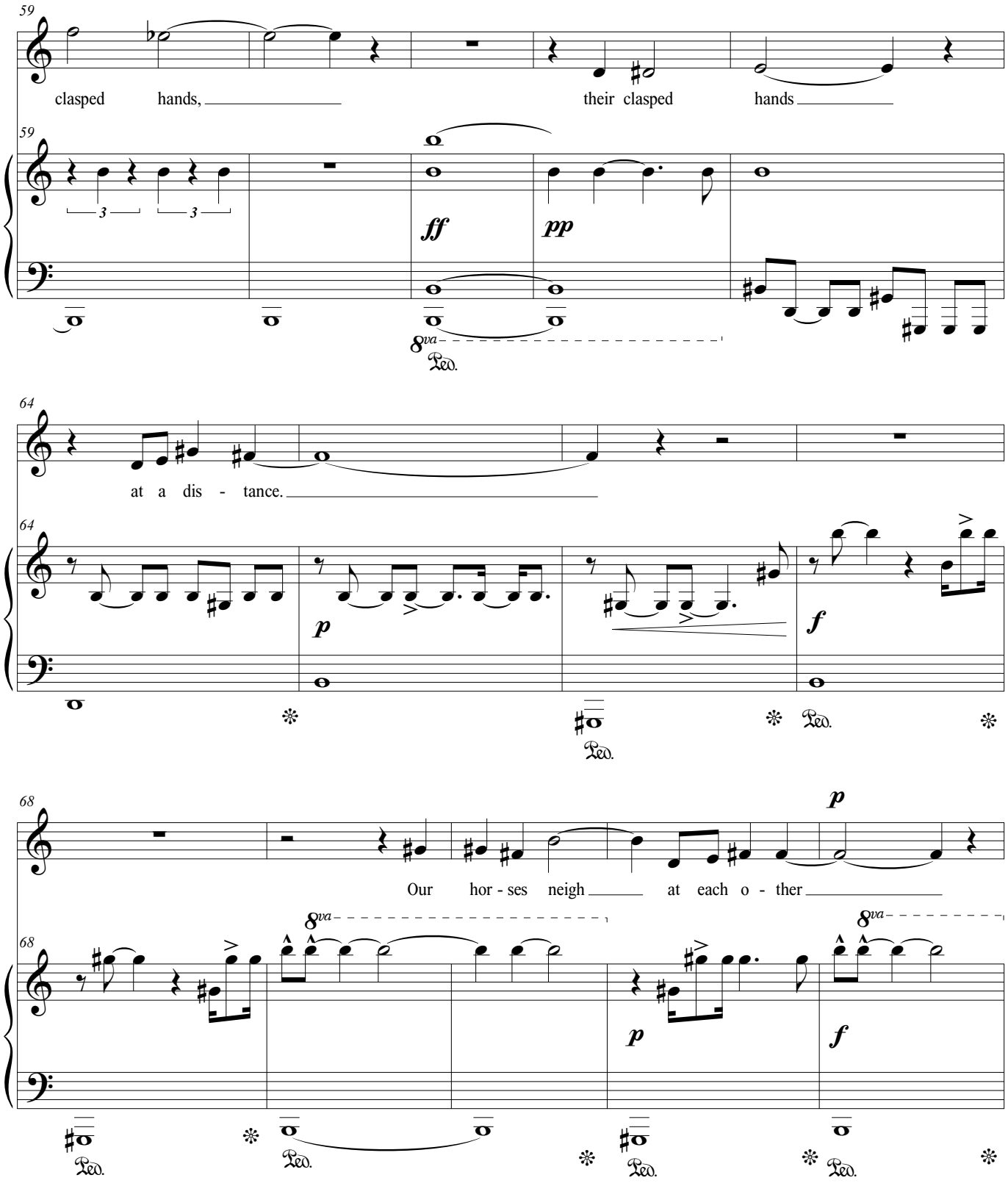
Song of Separation

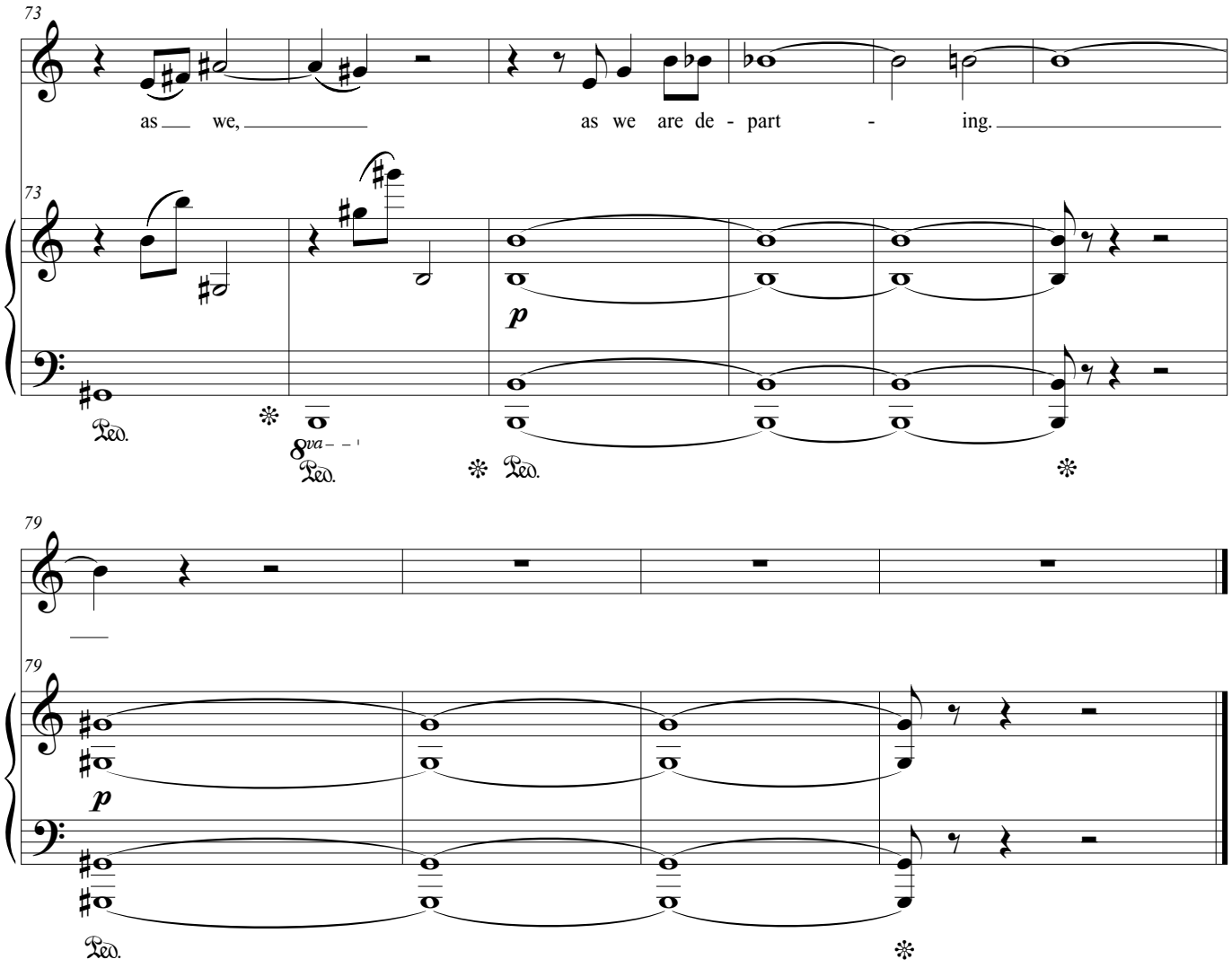



17
bout them, wind - ing a - bout them.
17
20
f
p
f
p
21
Here we must make se - pa -
21
f
p
cresc.
26
ra - tion. Here we must
26
f
p
cresc.
f
Ped.
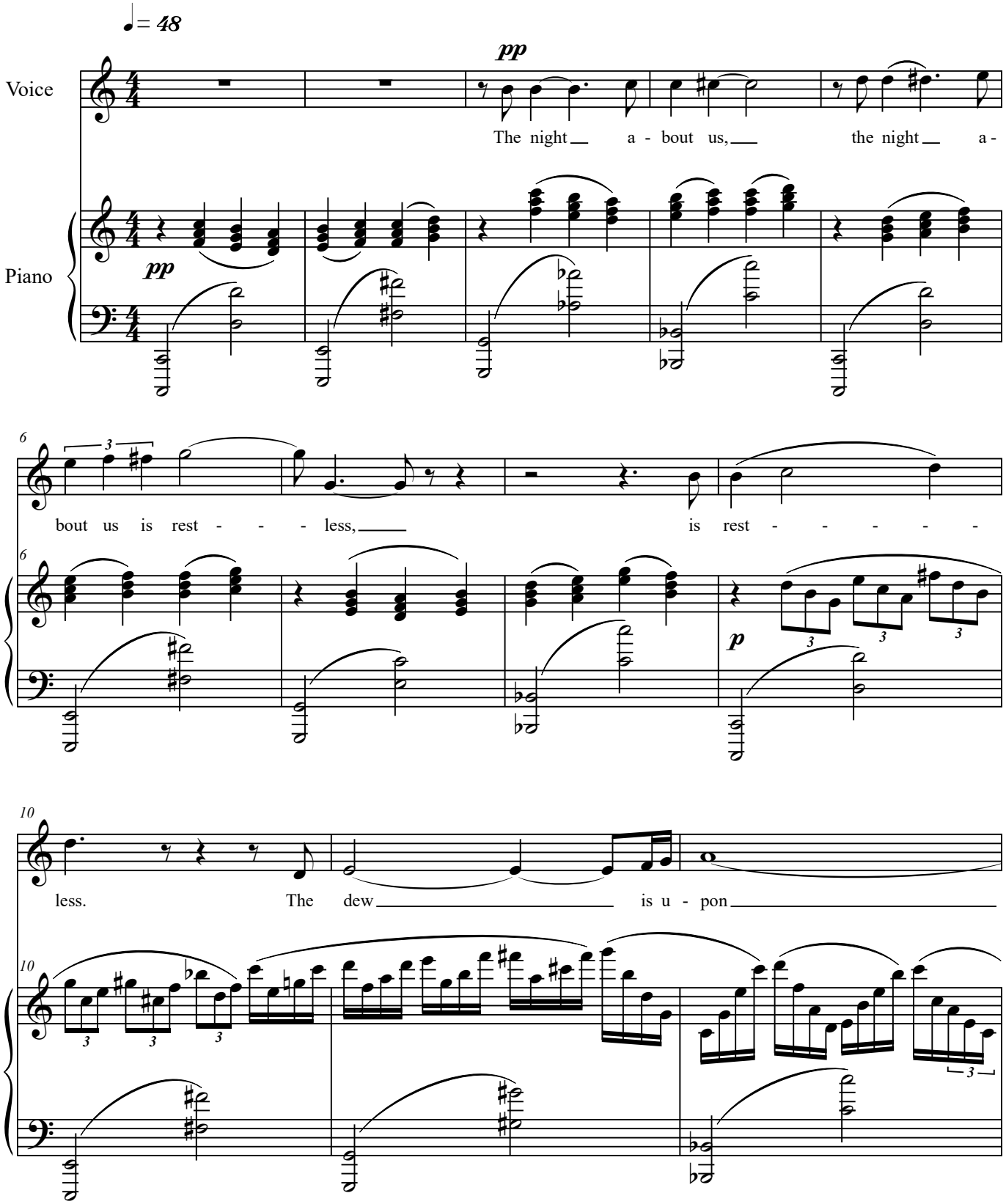

31
make se-pa - ra - tion,
31
36
a tempo
and go out through a thou - sand miles of dead grass.
36
p
15ma
Ped.
41
41
pp
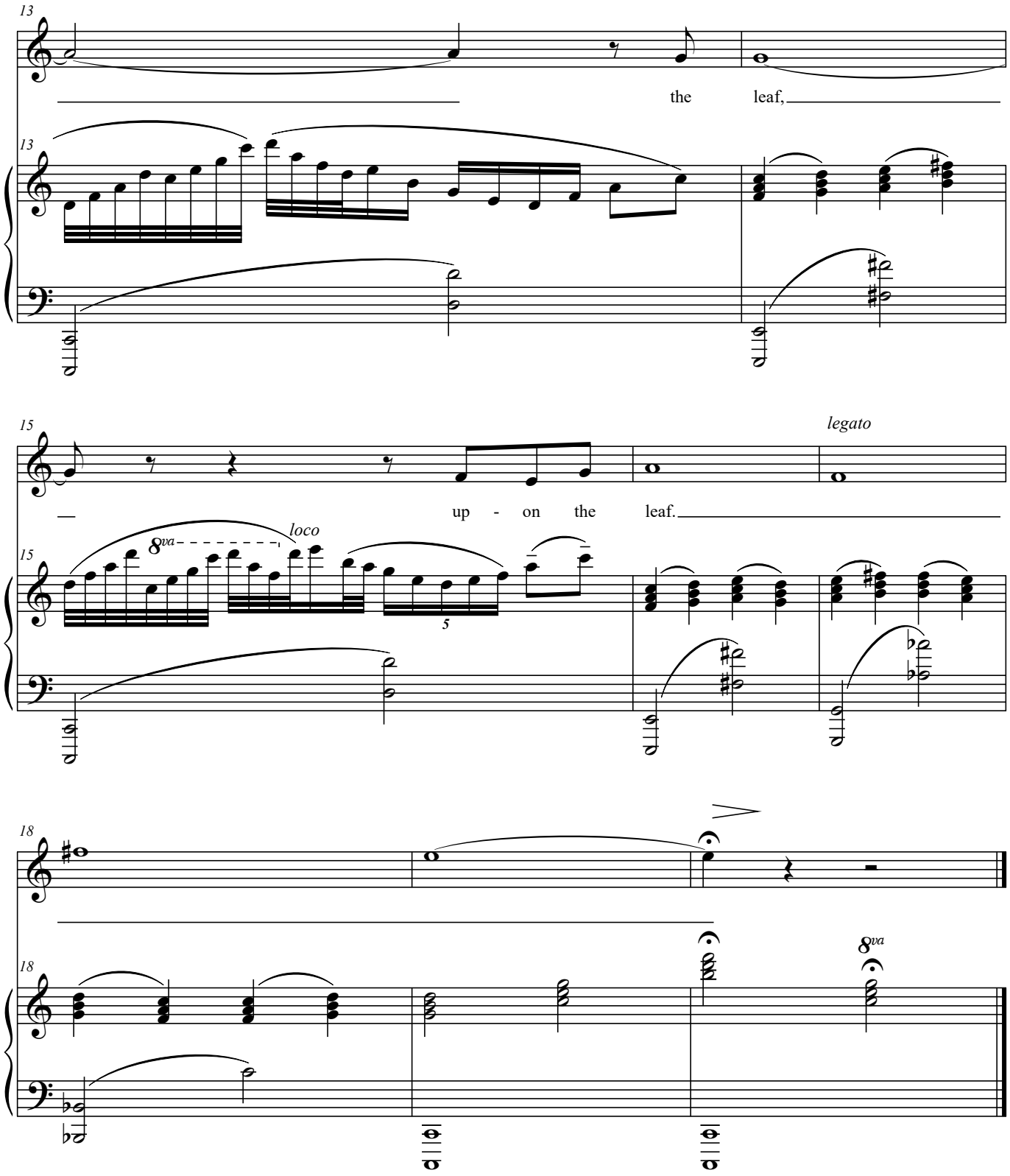

45
Mind like a float - ing wide cloud, Sun - set
p
cresc.
p
mp
50
like the part - ing of old a - quaint-an - ces, old ac-quaint-an-ces who
f p
Ped.
54
♩ = 100
bow o - ver their clasped hands, bow o - ver-their
8va


59
clasped hands, their clasped hands
59
ff
pp
8va
Ped.
64
at a dis - tance.
64
p
f
Ped.
Ped.
68
p
Our hor - ses neigh at each o - ther
68
8va
8va
p
f
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
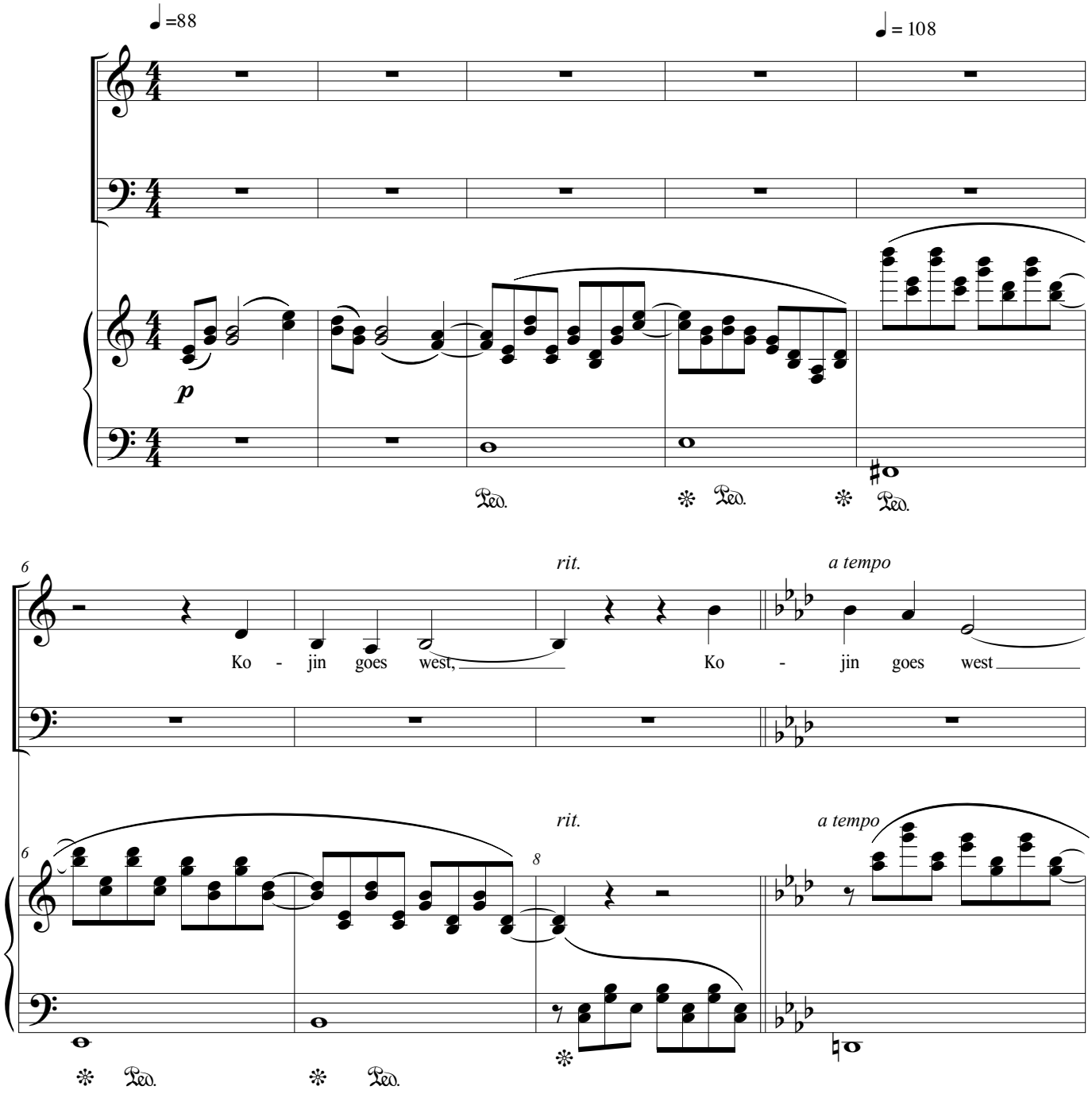

73
as we, as we are de - part - ing.
73
p
Ped.
8va
Ped.
Ped.
79
79
p
Ped.

Couplet II
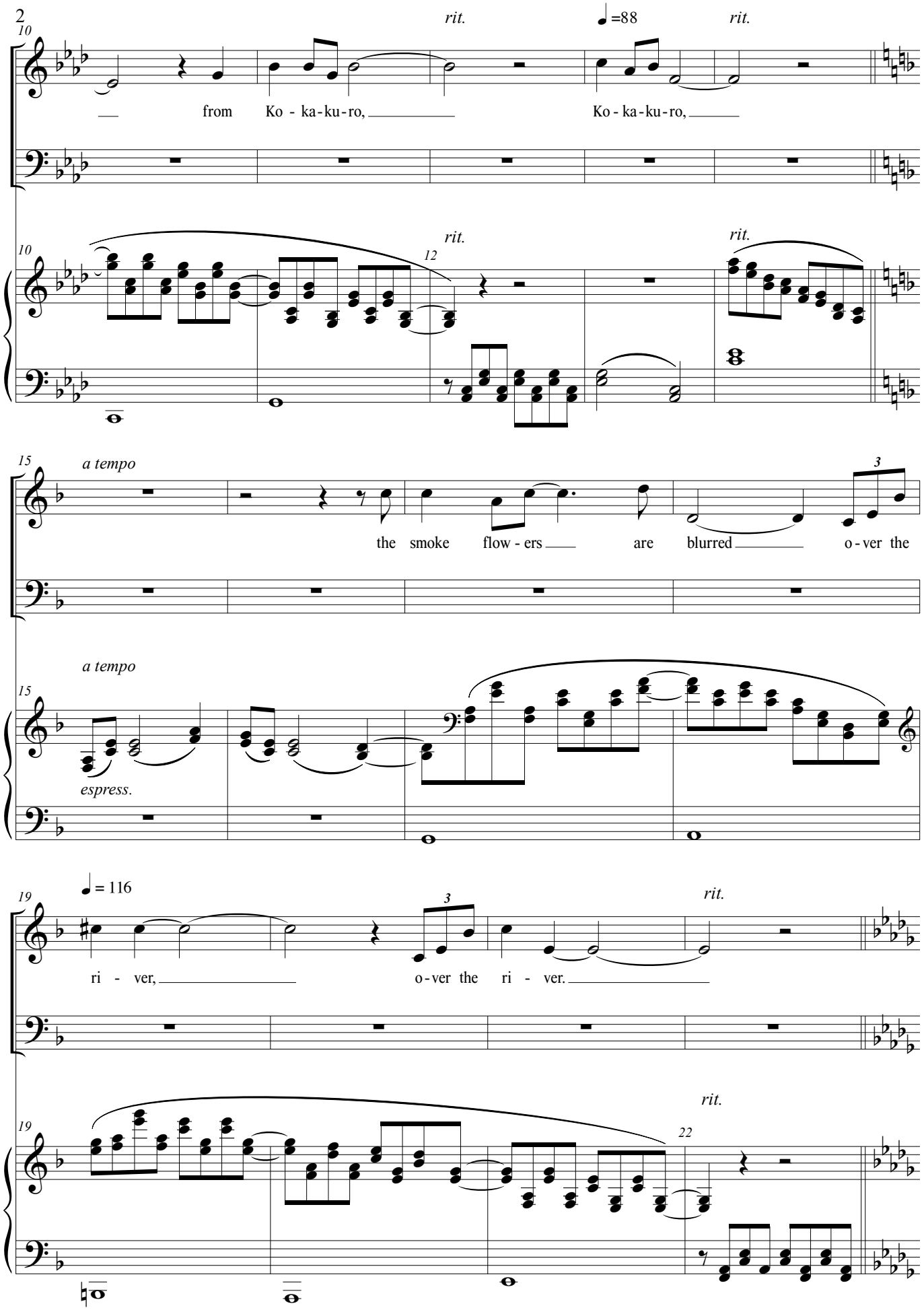

♩= 48
pp
Voice
The night a - bout us, the night a -
Piano
pp
6
bout us is rest - - - less, is rest - - - - -
p
10
less. The dew is u - pon
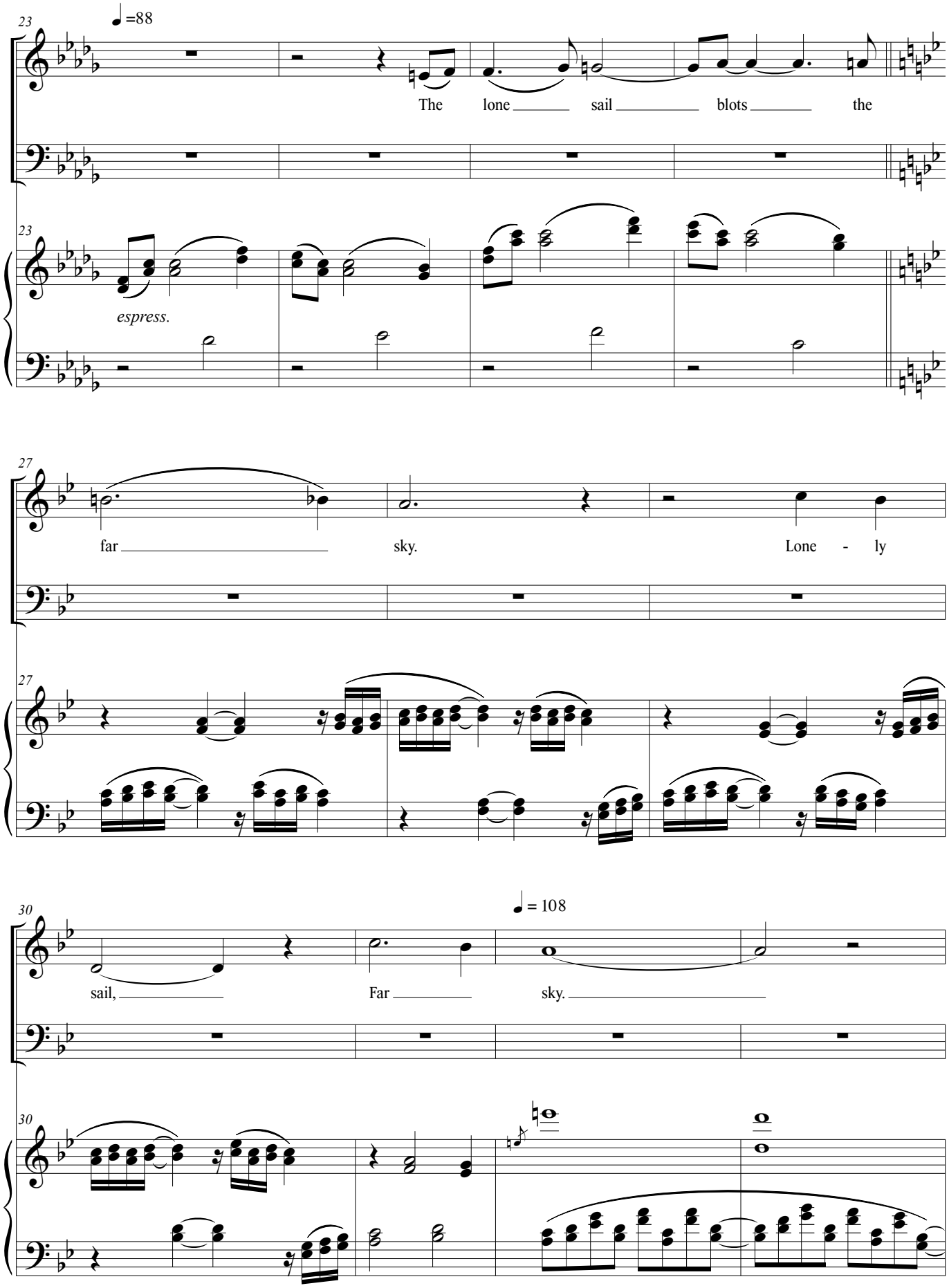

13
the leaf,
13
15
legato
up - on the leaf.
8va
loco
15
5
18
18
8va
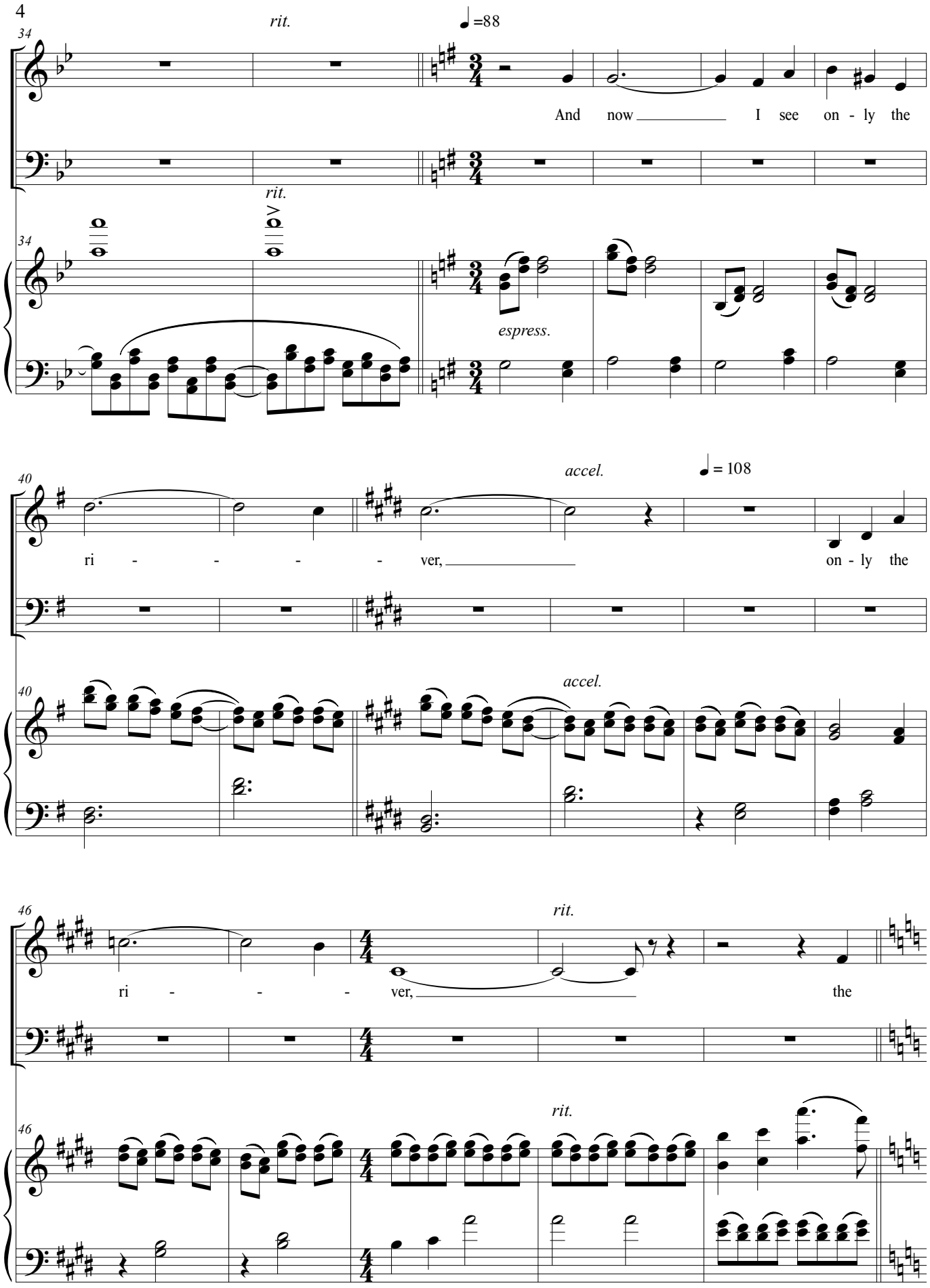
Separation on the River Kiang
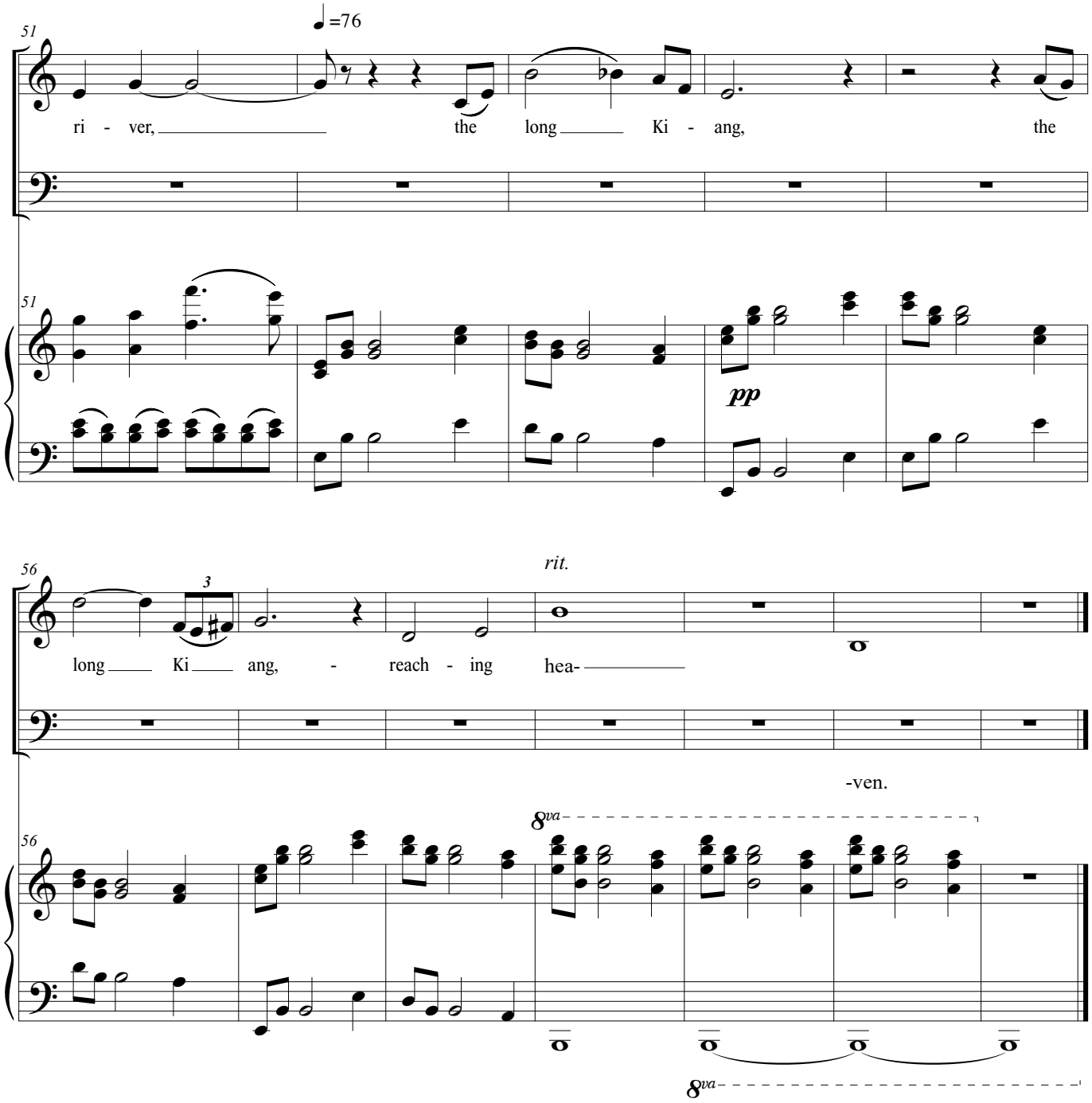


Pedaling of mm, 3-8 applies to all similar passages.
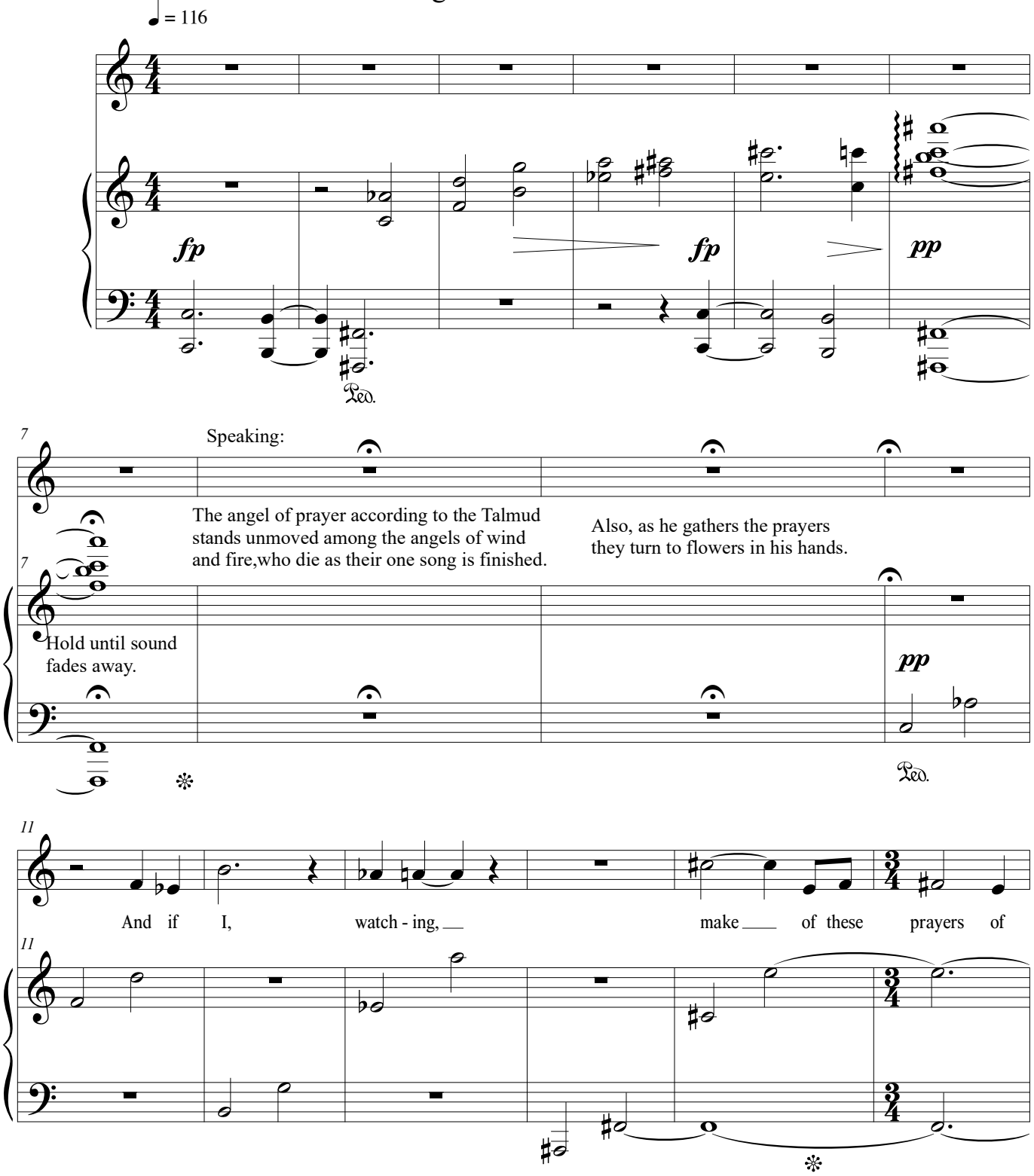

10
rit.
♩=88
rit.
from Ko - ka-ku-ro,
Ko - ka-ku-ro,
10
rit.
12
rit.
15
a tempo
the smoke flow - ers
are blurred
o - ver the
a tempo
15
espress.
19
♩= 116
ri - ver,
o - ver the ri - ver.
rit.
19
rit.
22
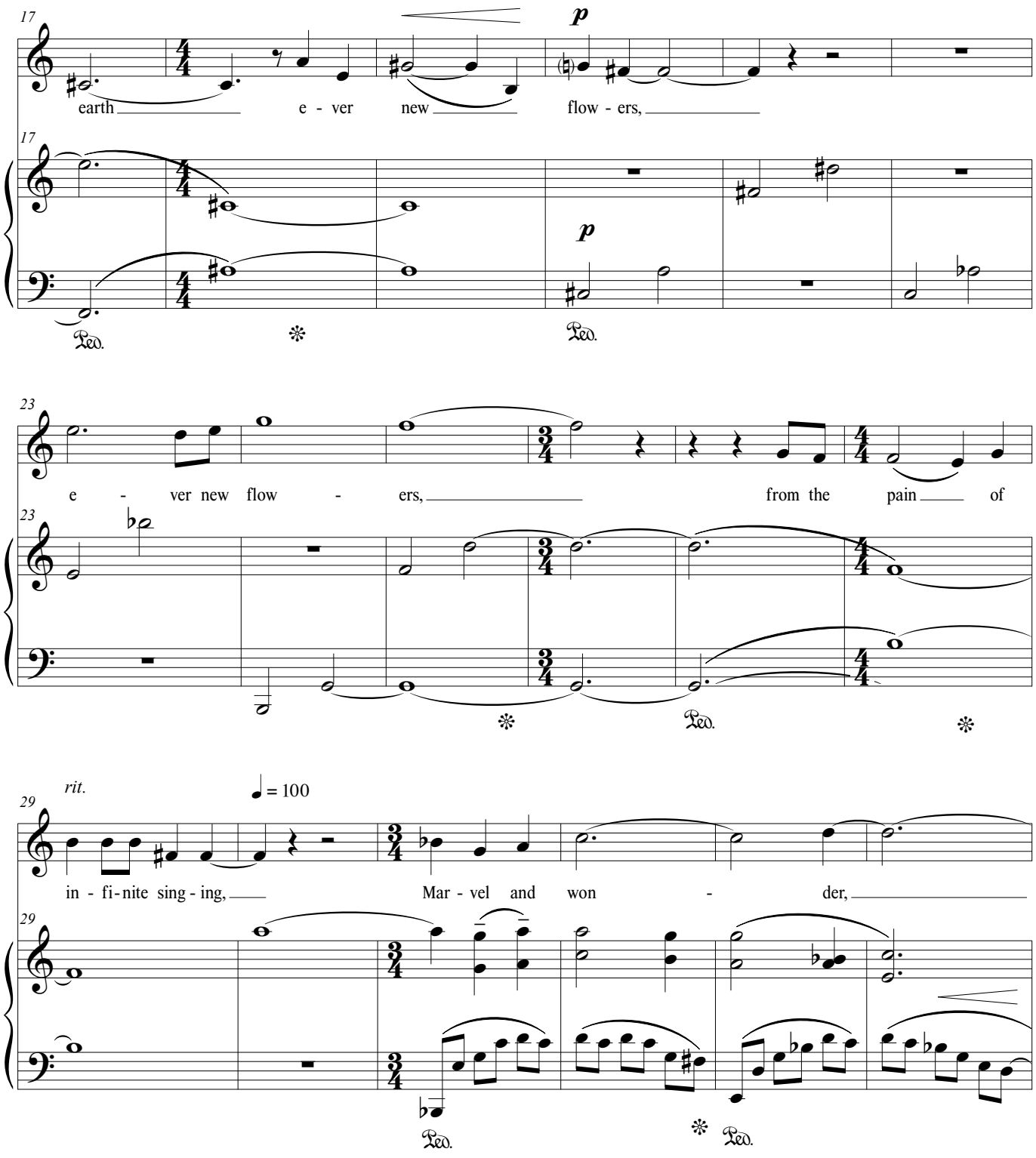

23
♩=88
The lone sail blots the
23
espress.
27
far sky. Lone - ly
27
30
♩= 108
sail, Far sky.
30
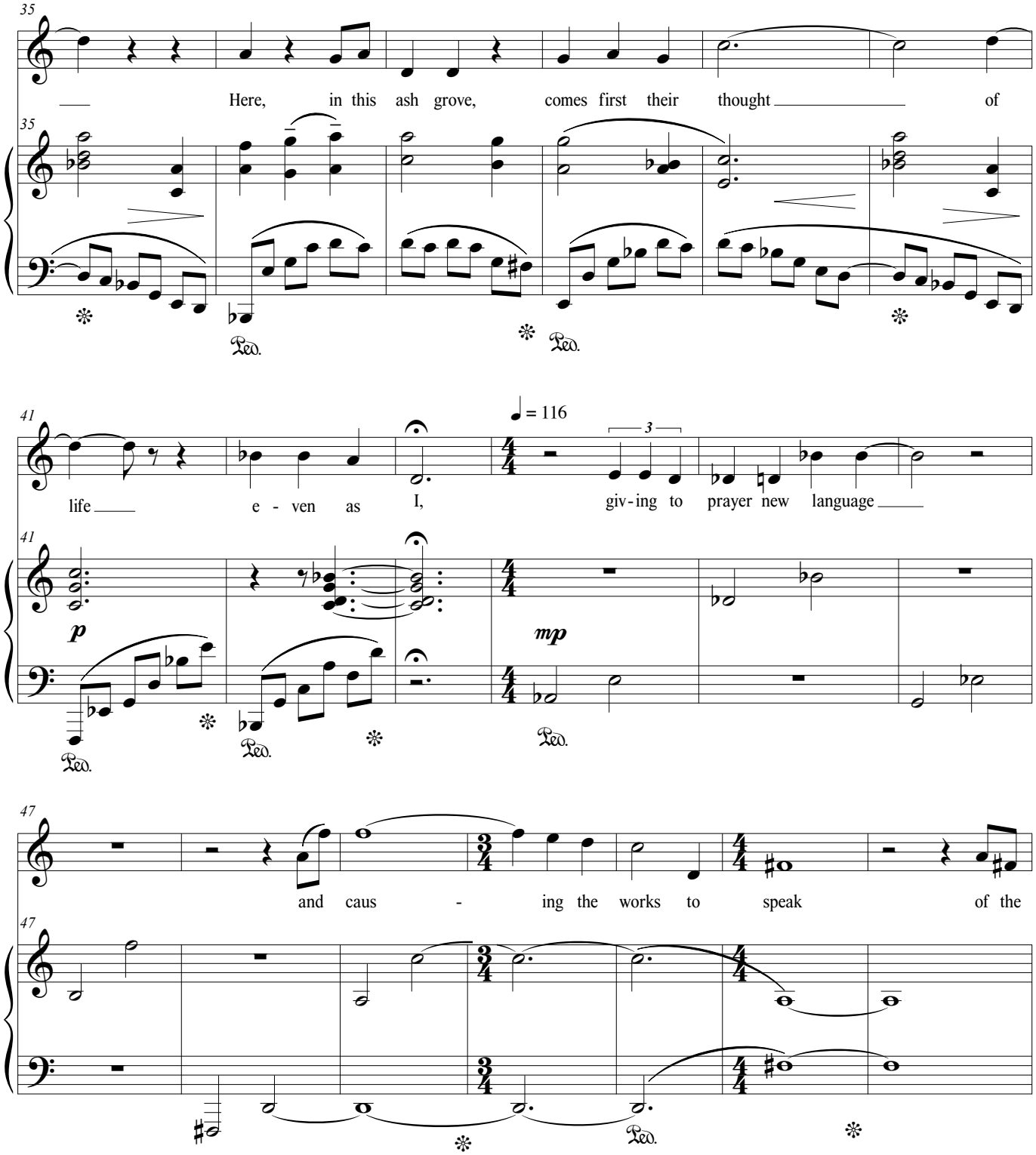

34
rit.
♩=88
And now I see on - ly the
rit.
34
espress.
40
accel.
♩= 108
ri - - - - ver, on - ly the
40
accel.
46
rit.
ri - - - ver, the
46
rit.
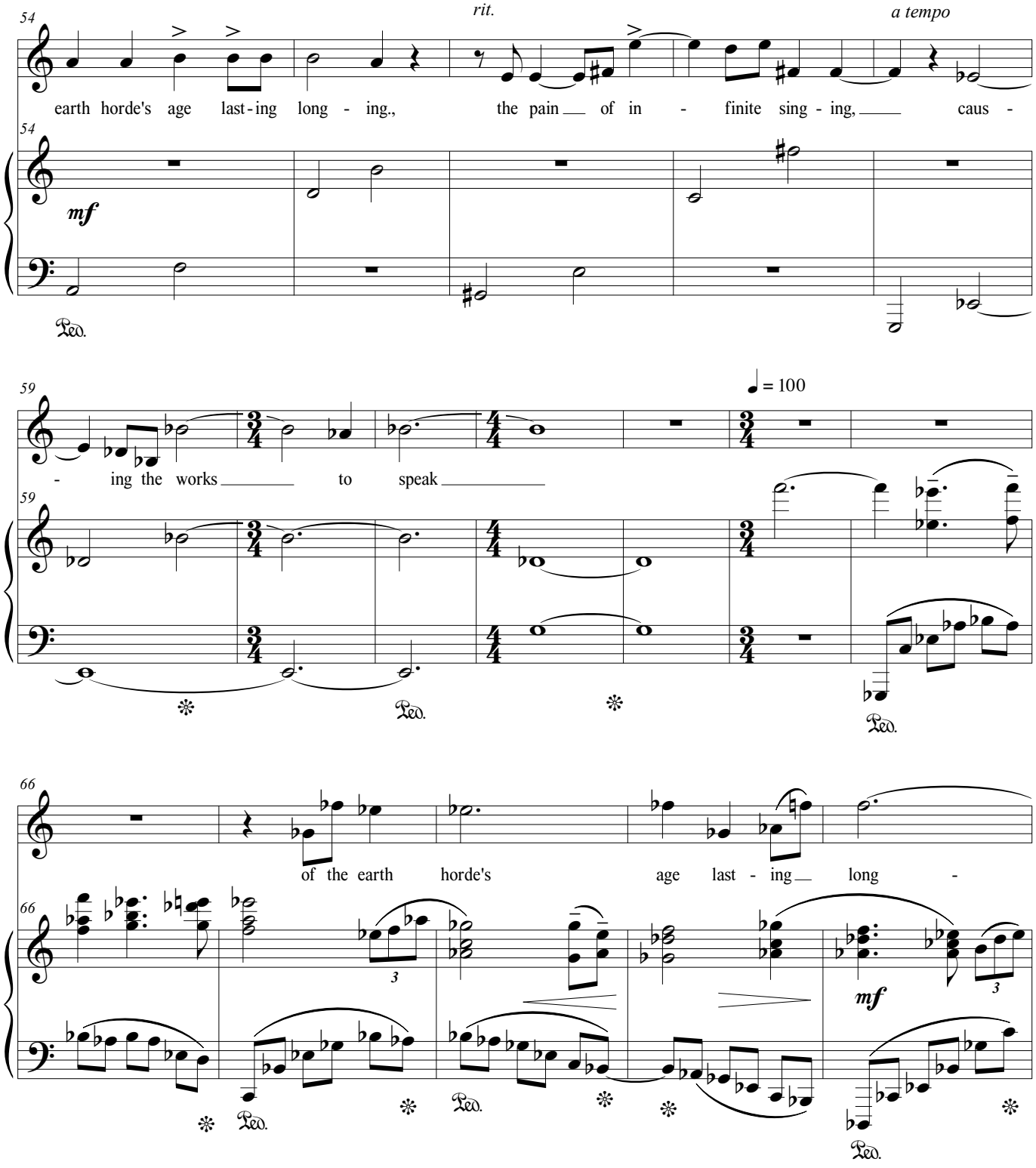

51
♩=76
ri - ver, the long Ki - ang, the
51
pp
56
rit.
3
long Ki ang, - reach - ing hea-
-ven.
56
8va
8va
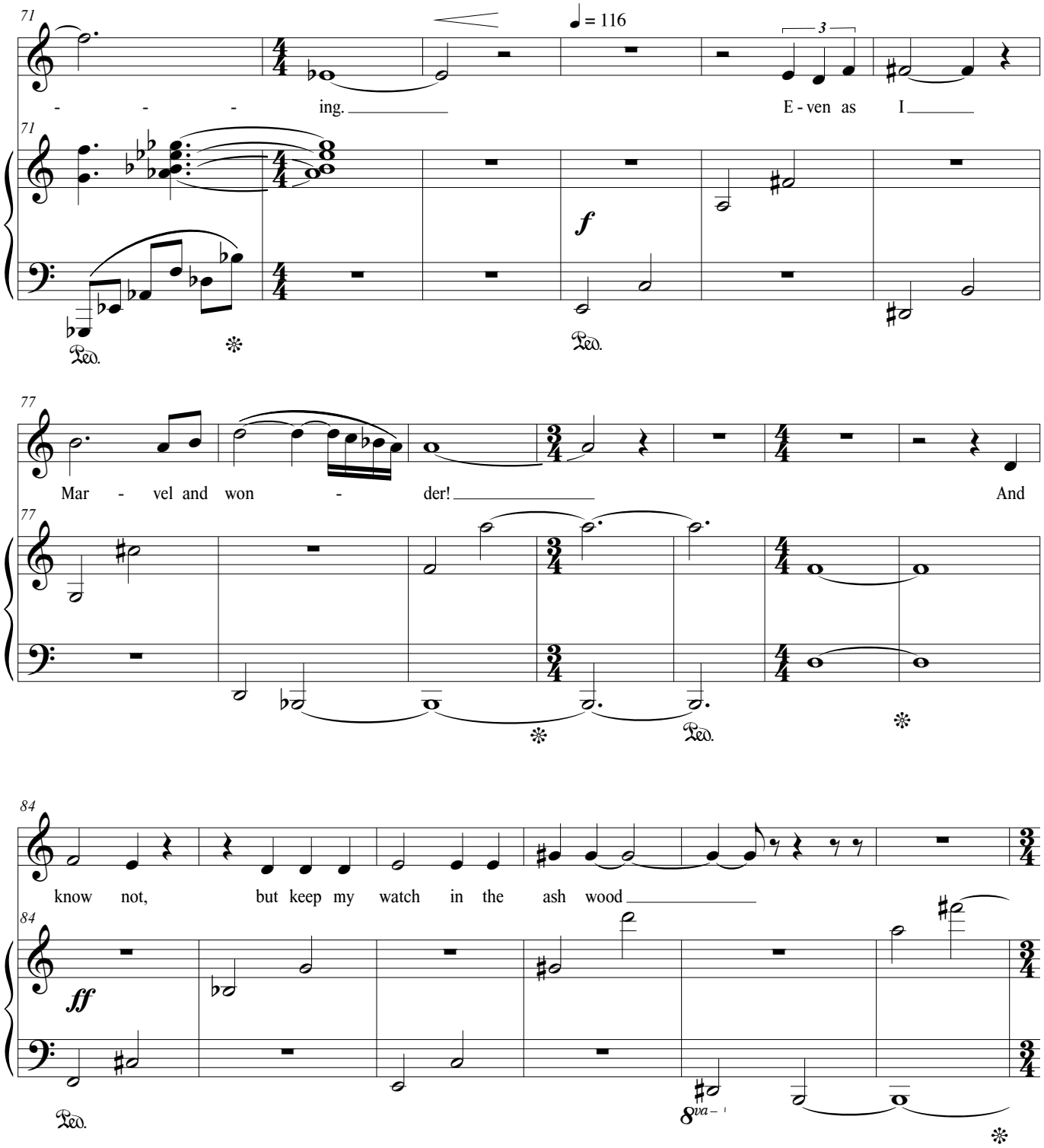
Angels of Wind and Fire
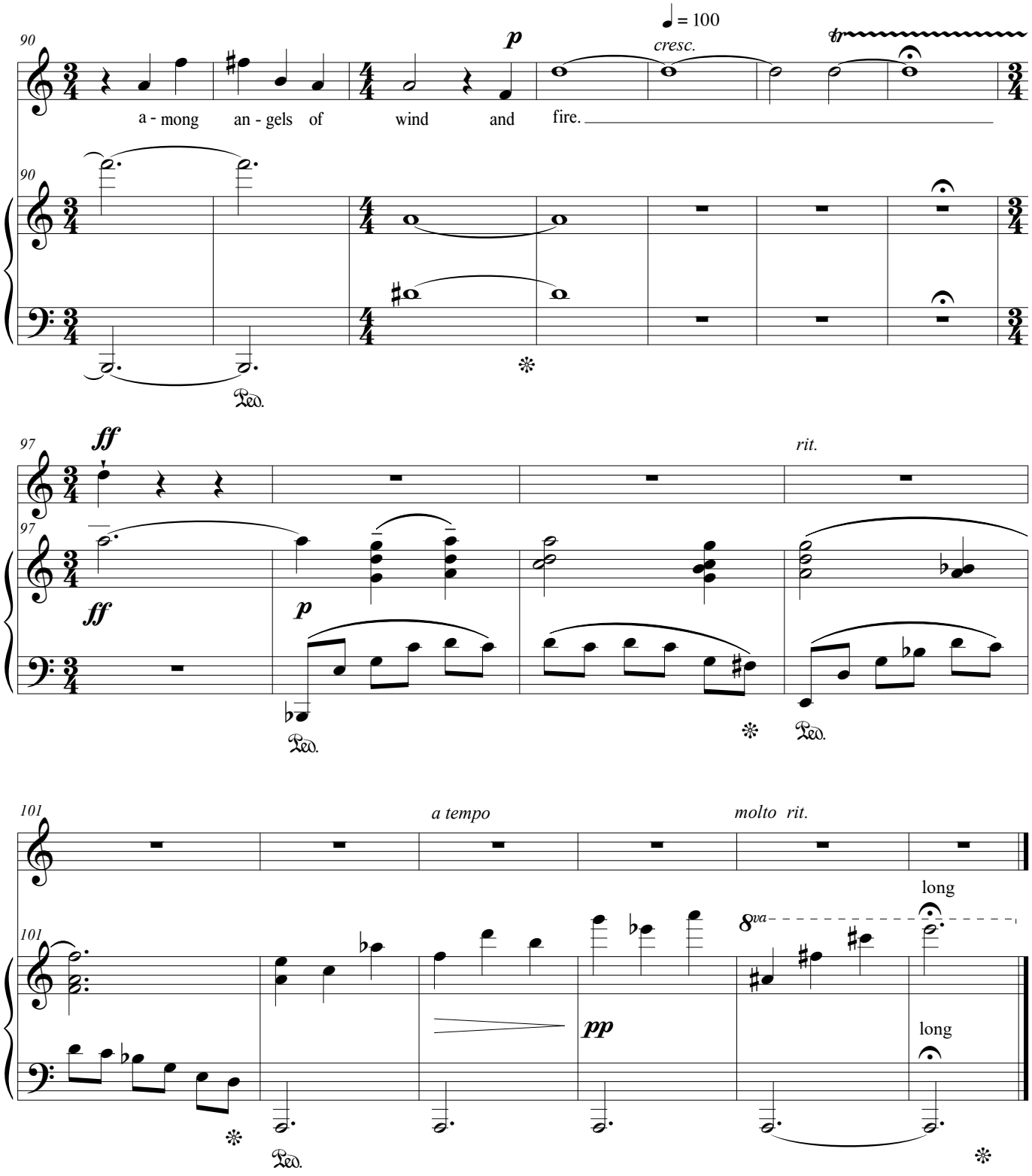



17
p
earth e - ver new flow - ers,
Ped.
23
e - ver new flow - ers, from the pain of
Ped.
rit.
♩ = 100
29
in - fi - nite sing - ing, Mar - vel and won - der,
Ped.
Ped.


35
Here, in this ash grove, comes first their thought of
35
Ped.
Ped.
41
♩ = 116
life even as I, giv-ing to prayer new language
41
p
mp
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
47
and caus - ing the works to speak of the
47
Ped.


54
rit.
a tempo
earth horde's age last-ing long - ing., the pain of in - finite sing - ing, caus -
mf
Ped.
59
♩ = 100
- ing the works to speak
Ped.
Ped.
66
of the earth horde's age last - ing long -
mf
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.


71
= 116
3
- - - ing.
E - ven as I
f
Ped.
77
Mar - vel and won - der!
And
84
know not, but keep my watch in the ash wood
ff
8va


90
p
♩ = 100
cresc.
tr
a - mong an - gels of wind and fire.
Ped.
97
ff
rit.
p
Ped.
101
a tempo
molto rit.
long
8va
pp
long
Ped.