Song Acts

Twelve Songs to Texts from Ezra Pound

For Mezzo Soprano, Baritone, and Piano

Book I: Angels of Wind and Fire

2008, 2018

Lawrence Kramer

Song Acts is a hybrid work, half a choreographed song cycle and half a musical drama enacted in twelve songs. The "libretto" is drawn from the early poetry of Ezra Pound; the work seeks to compress the impassioned action typical of opera into a series of simple movements and gestures without an explicit narrative, much as the poems seek to compress historical experience into a sequence of free-floating images.

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 Acts" 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, seventeen minutes) turns on the vicissitudes of desire, separation, and reunion. Book II, *Erat Hora* (six songs, twenty-one 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. The title songs may also be performed independently.

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.

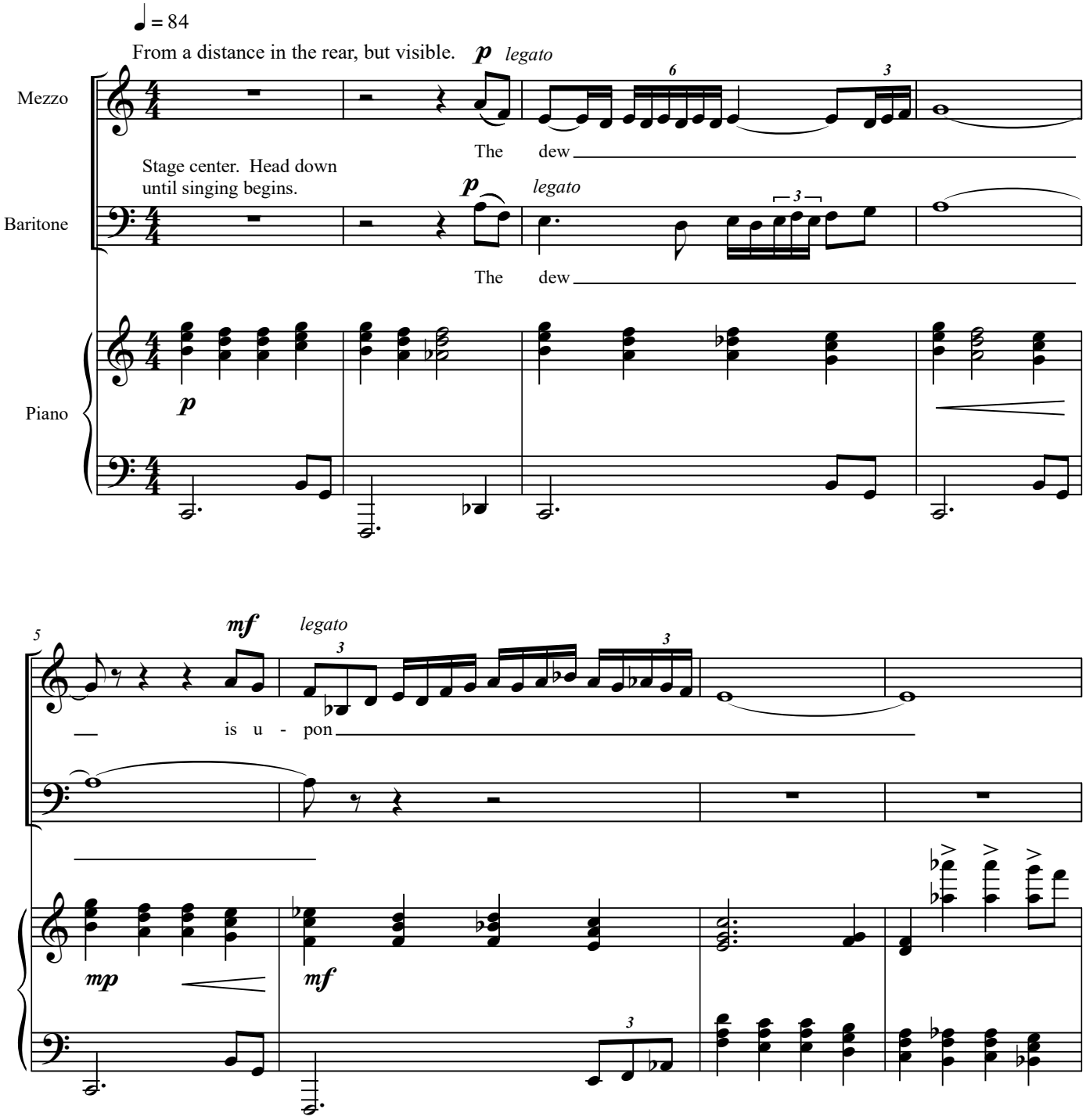
The angel of prayer according to the Talmud stands unmoved among the angels of wind and fire, who die as their one song is finished, also as he gathers the prayers they turn to flowers in his hands.

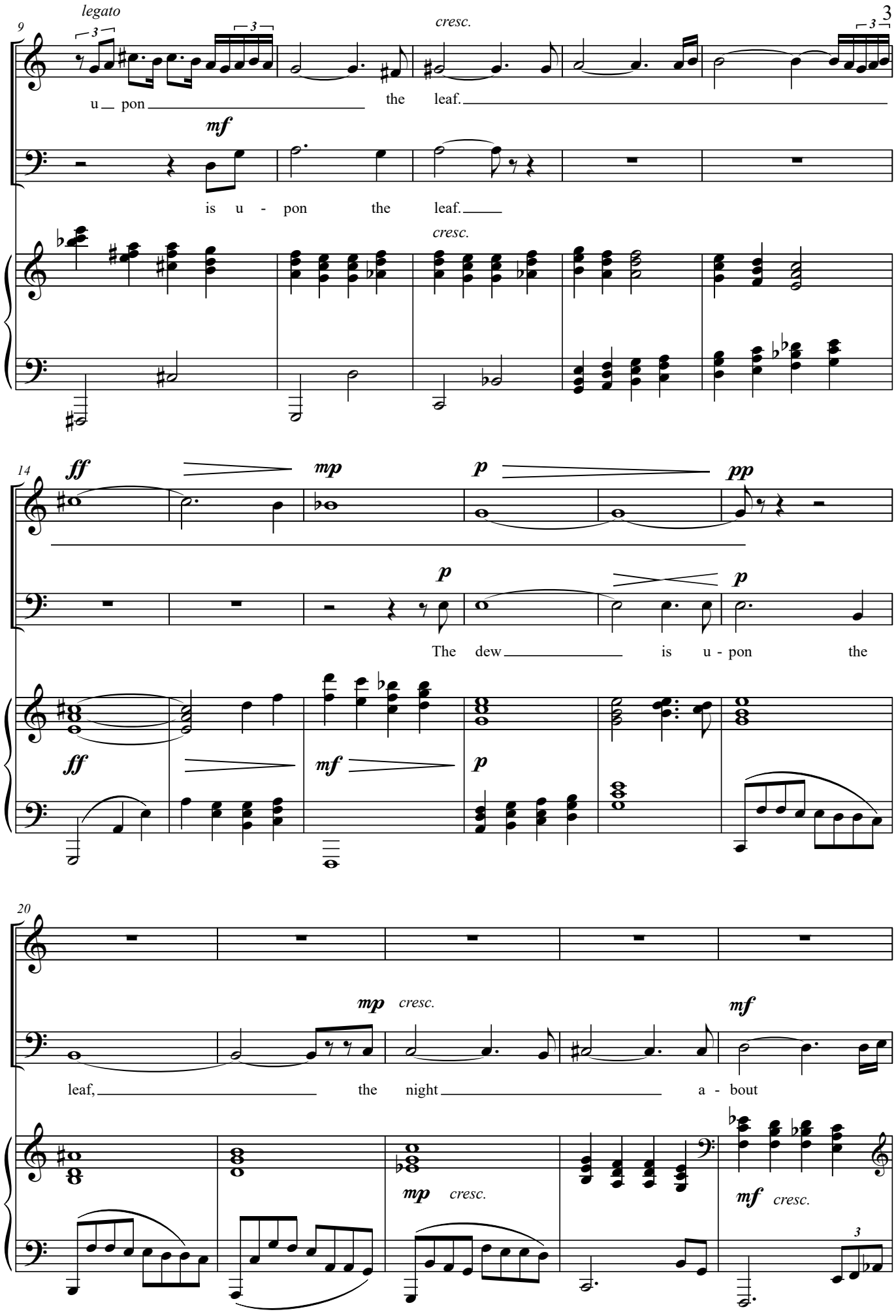
And if I, watching. . .
Make of these prayers of earth ever new flowers,
Marvel and wonder!
Marvel and wonder even as I,
Giving to prayer new language
And causing the works to speak

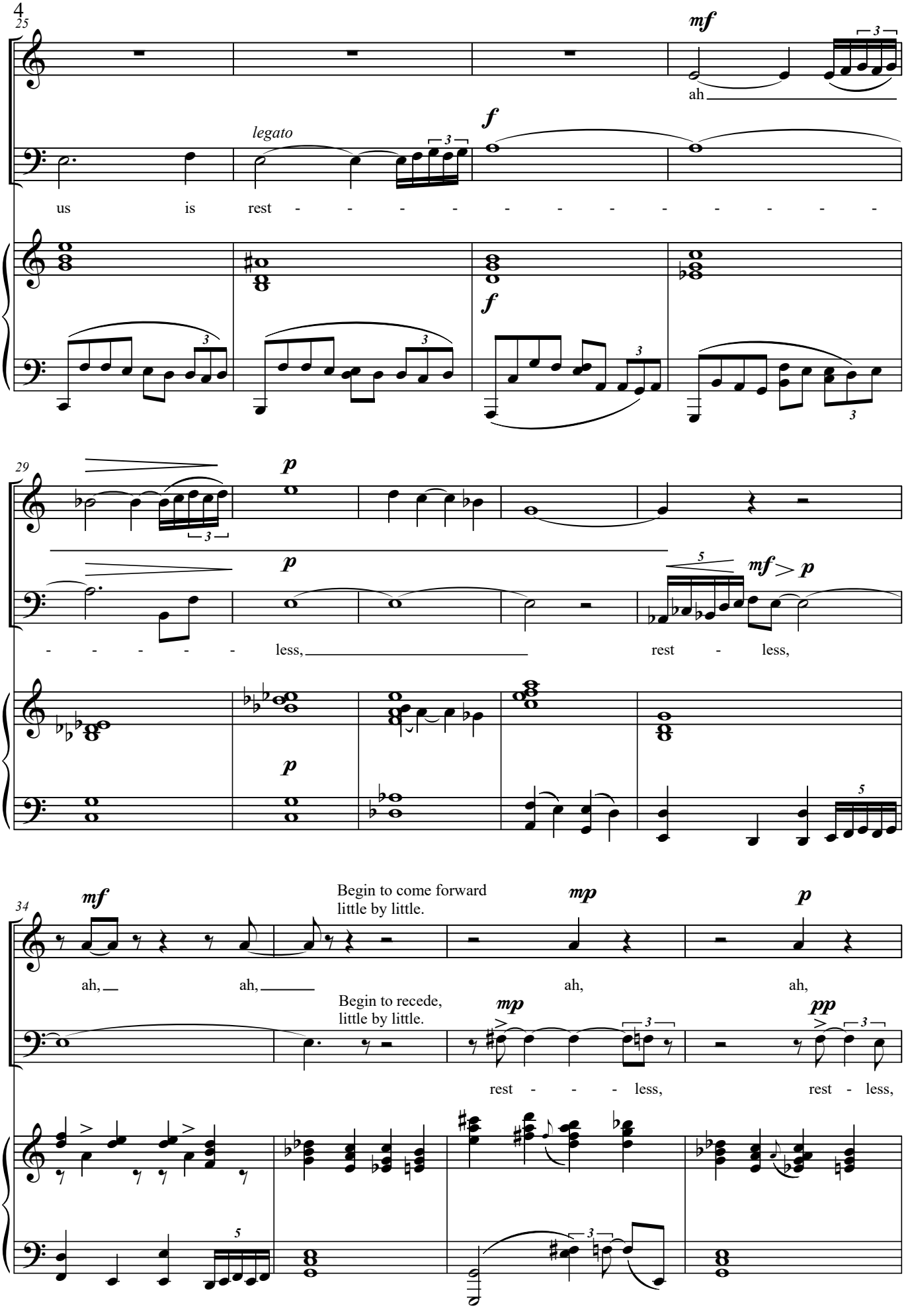
Of the earth-horde's age-lasting longing,
Even as I marvel and wonder, and know not,
Yet keep my watch in the ash wood
Among angels of wind and fire.

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).

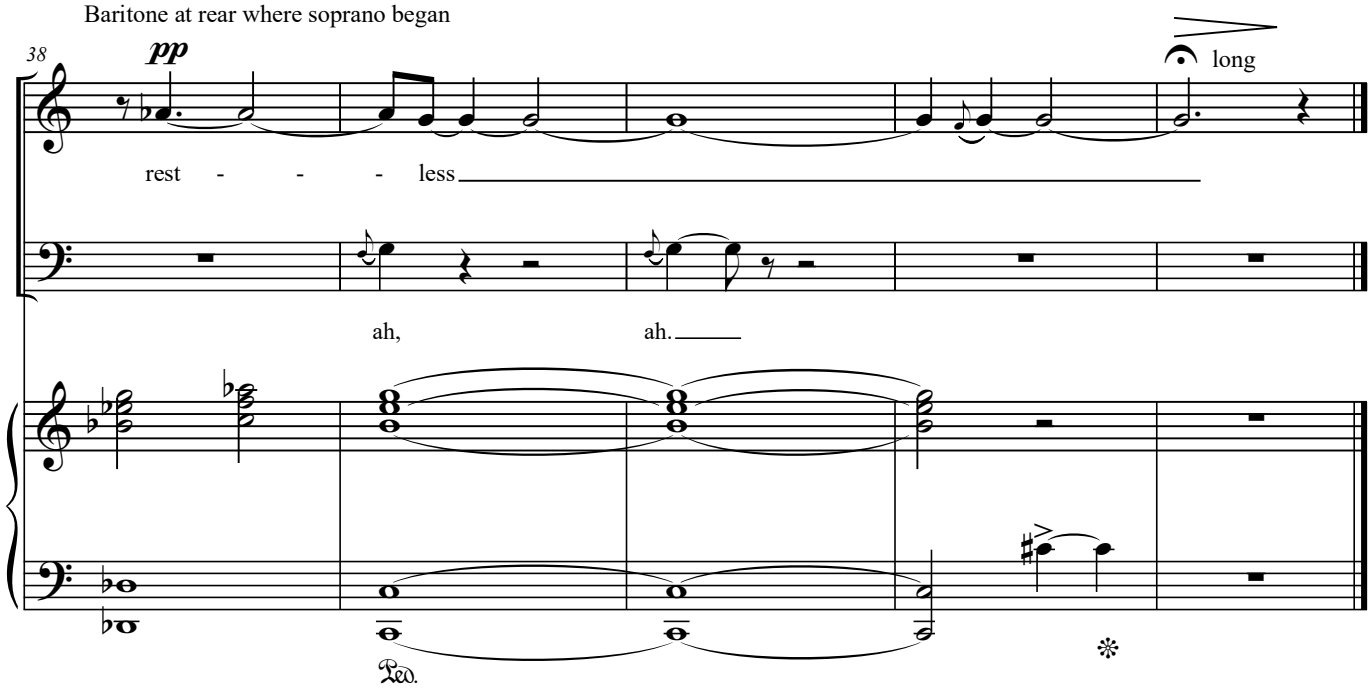
Couplet I


♩ = 84
From a distance in the rear, but visible.
p legato
Mezzo
The dew
Stage center. Head down
until singing begins.
p legato
Baritone
The dew
Piano
p
5
mf legato
is u - pon
mp
mf


9
legato
cresc.
u pon the leaf.
mf
is u - pon the leaf.
cresc.
14
ff
mp
p
pp
p
p
The dew is u - pon the
ff
mf
p
20
mp cresc.
mf
leaf, the night a - bout
mp cresc.
mf cresc.


25
mf
ah
legato
f
us is rest - - - - - - - - - - - -
f
29
p
p
- - - - - less,
rest - less,
mf > p
p
34
mf
Begin to come forward
little by little.
mp
p
ah, ah, ah, ah,
Begin to recede,
little by little.
mp
pp
rest - - - less, rest - less,

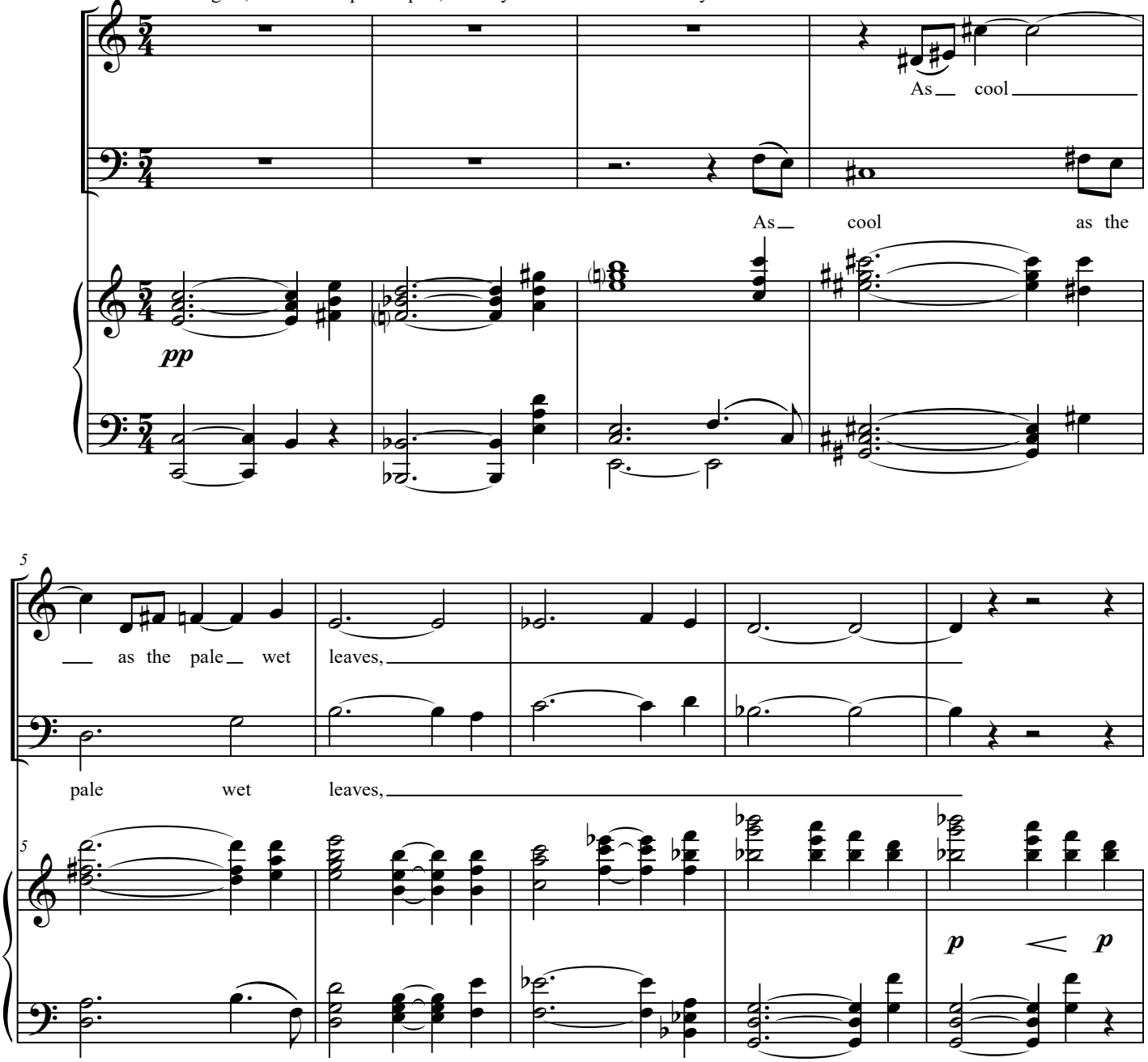
Soprano now at stage center.
Baritone at rear where soprano began

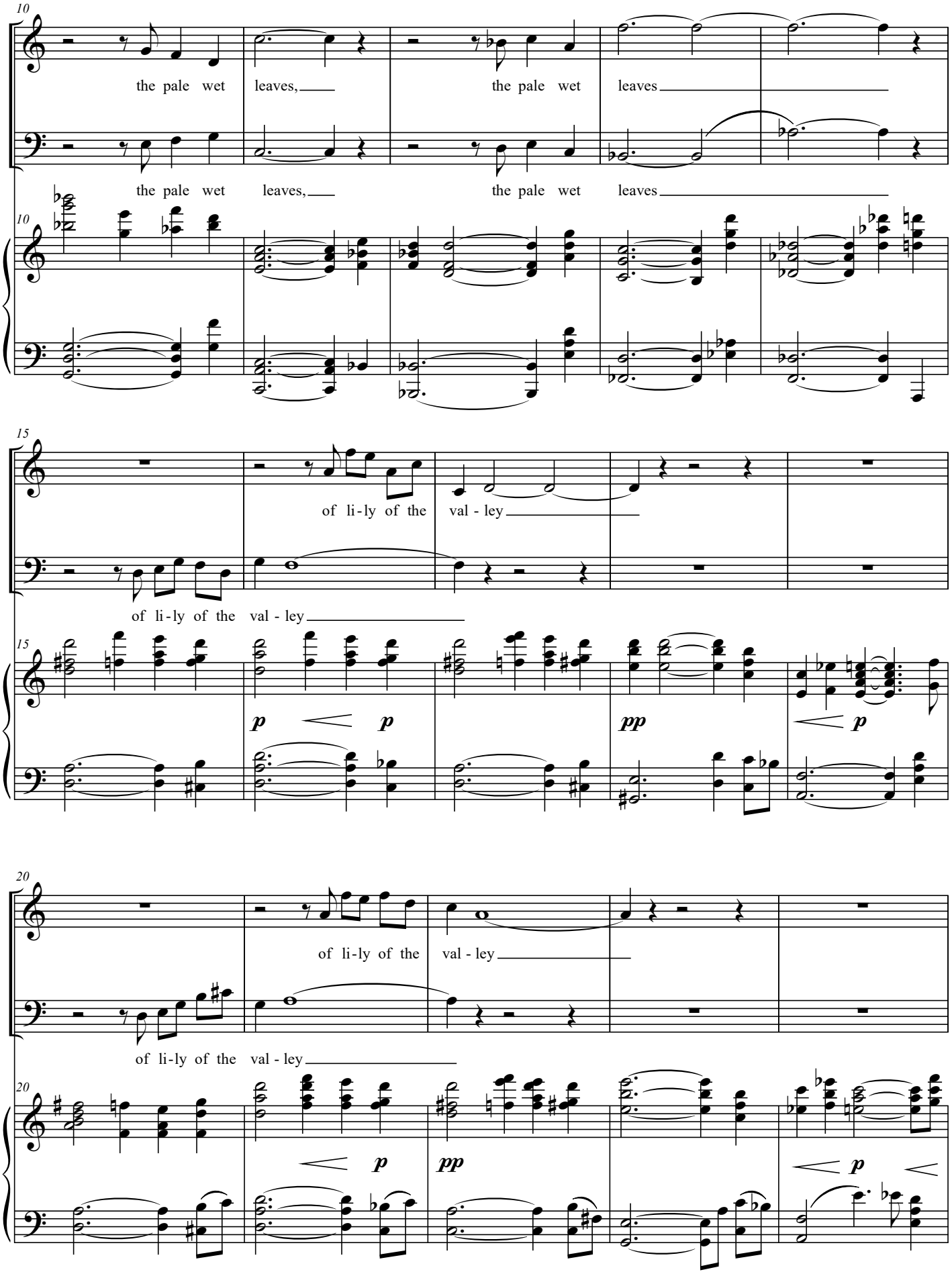


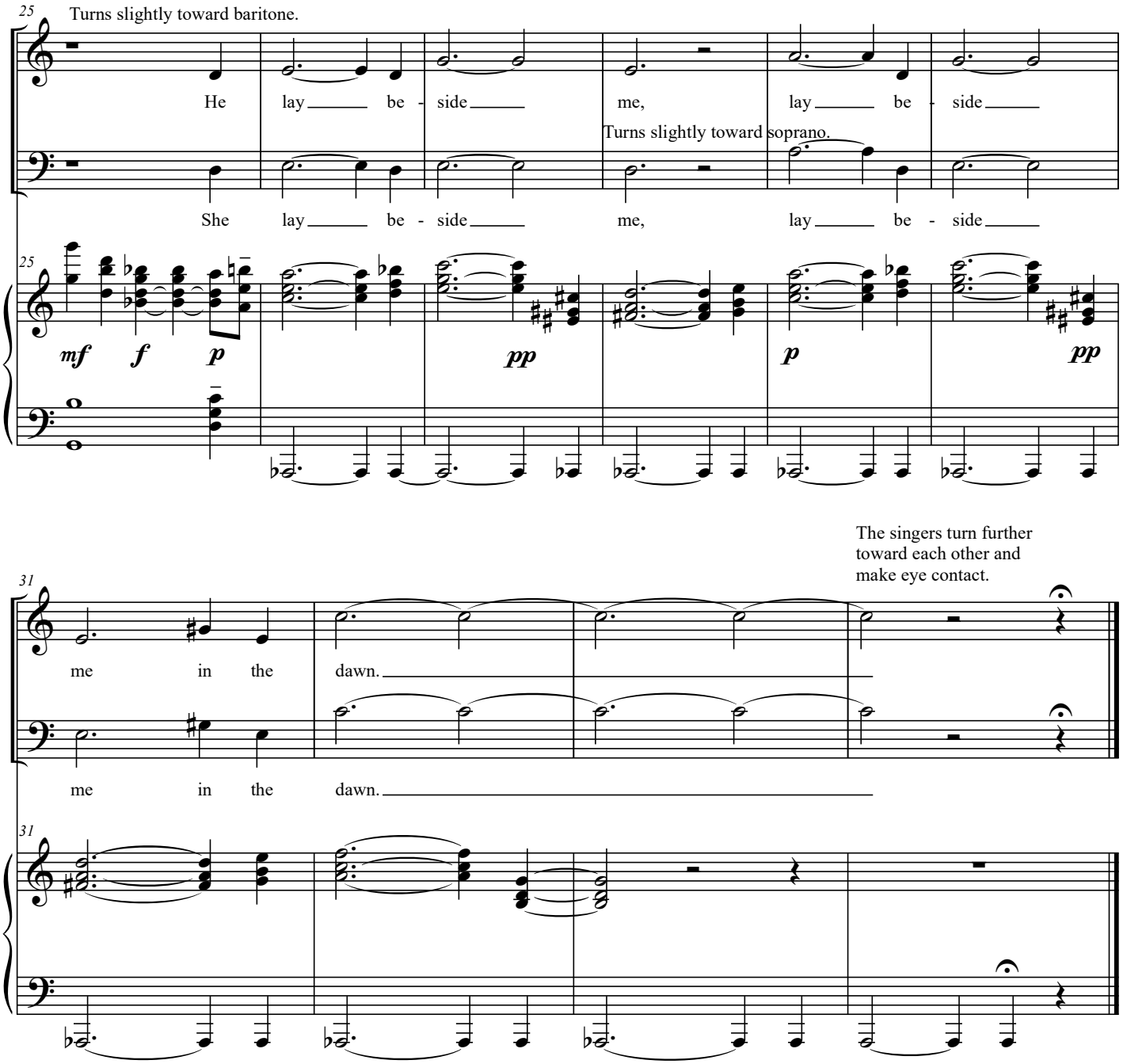
Alba

♩ = 80

The singers, four or five paces apart, steadily face the audience. They do not look at each other.




10
the pale wet leaves, the pale wet leaves
the pale wet leaves, the pale wet leaves
15
of li-ly of the val - ley
of li-ly of the val - ley
p p pp p
20
of li-ly of the val - ley
of li-ly of the val - ley
p pp p


25
Turns slightly toward baritone.
He lay be - side me, lay be - side
Turns slightly toward soprano.
She lay be - side me, lay be - side
mf f p pp p pp
31
The singers turn further toward each other and make eye contact.
me in the dawn.
me in the dawn.

Song of Separation

Lawrence Kramer

♩ = 88

Side by side with baritone.

p

Blue moun - tains

Depress keys silently

ff

Catch sound with pedal.

7

Drifts away from baritone.

Pauses.

Blue moun - tains

to the north of the walls,

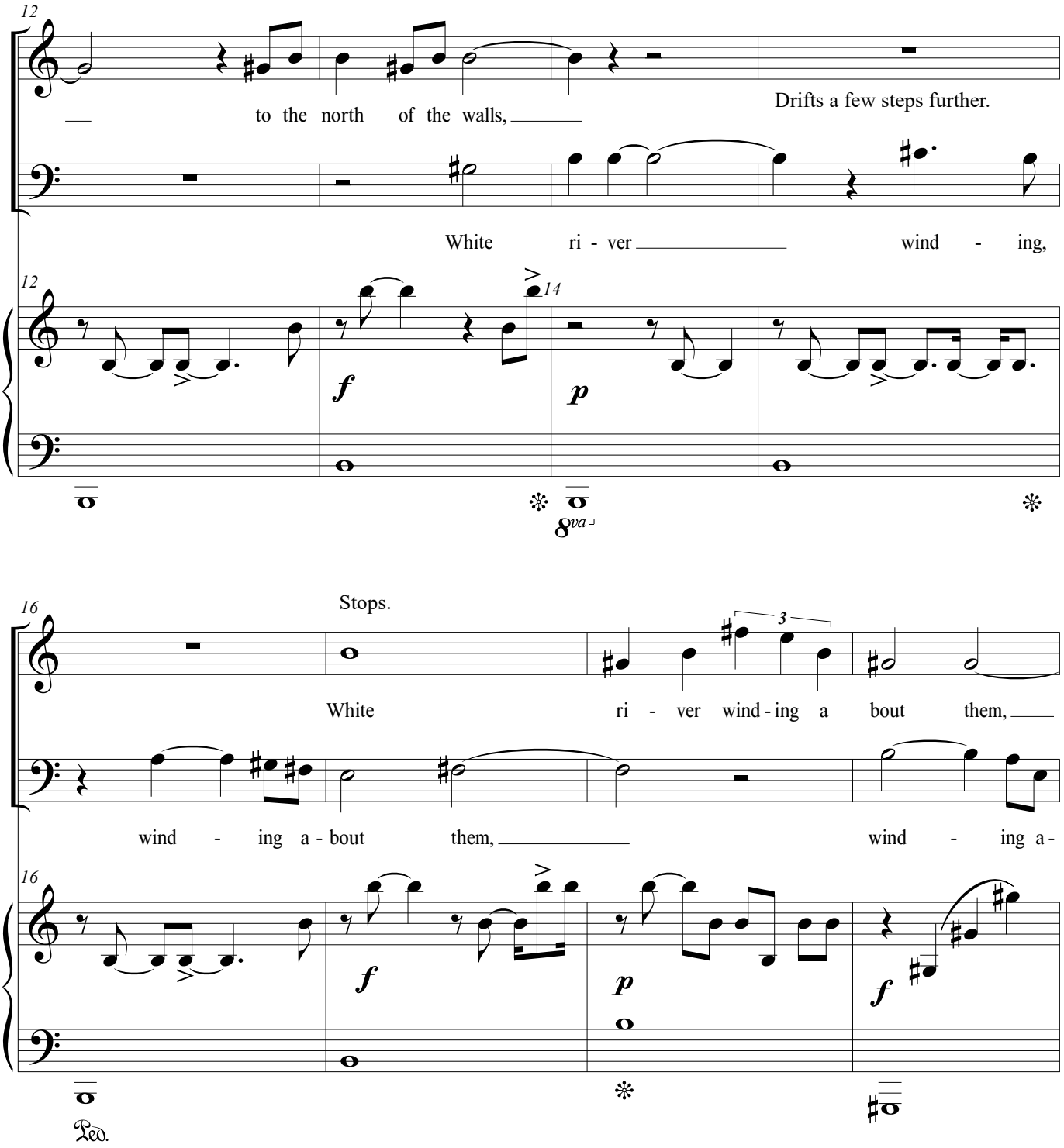
7

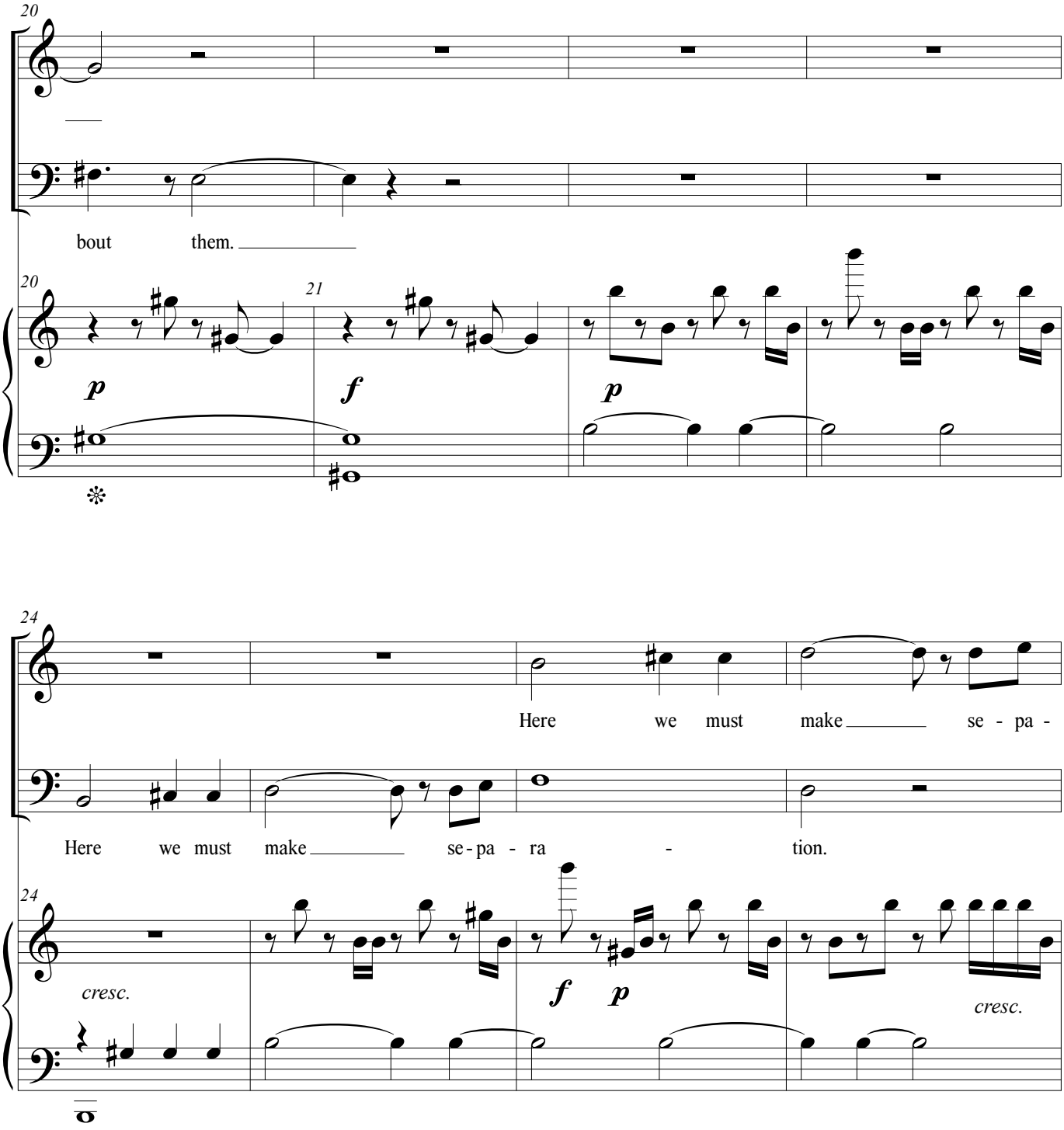
As before.

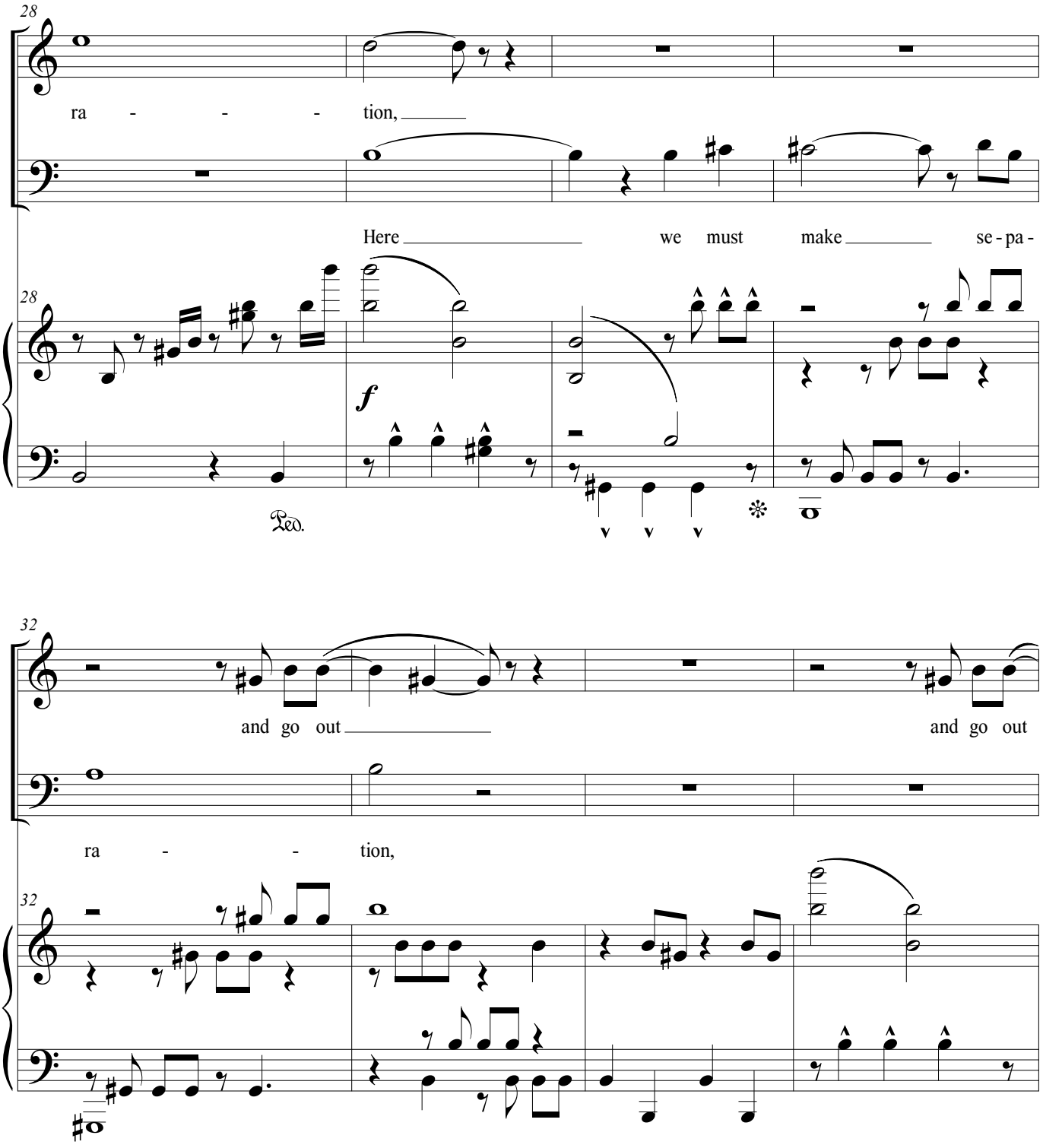
ff

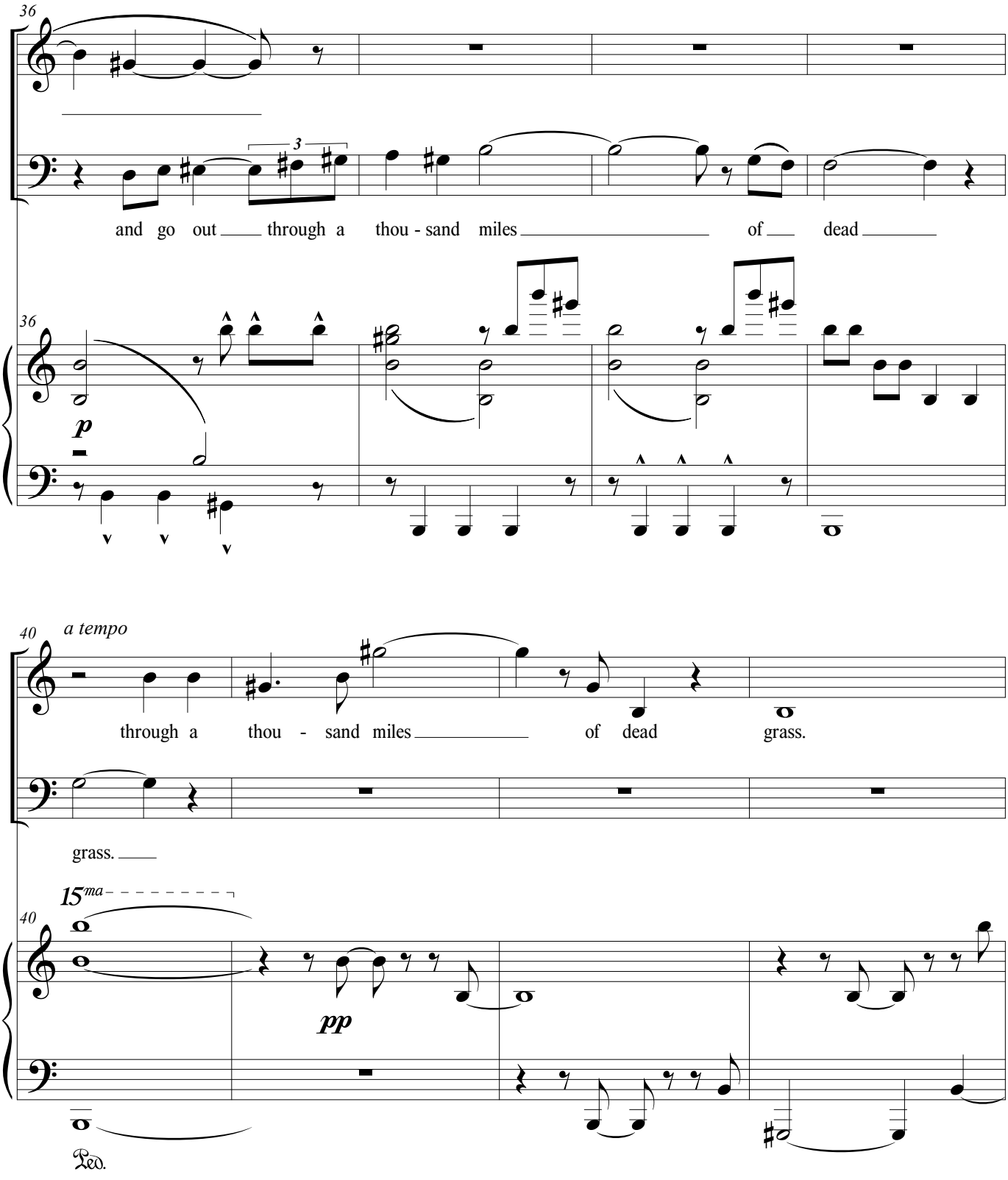
p

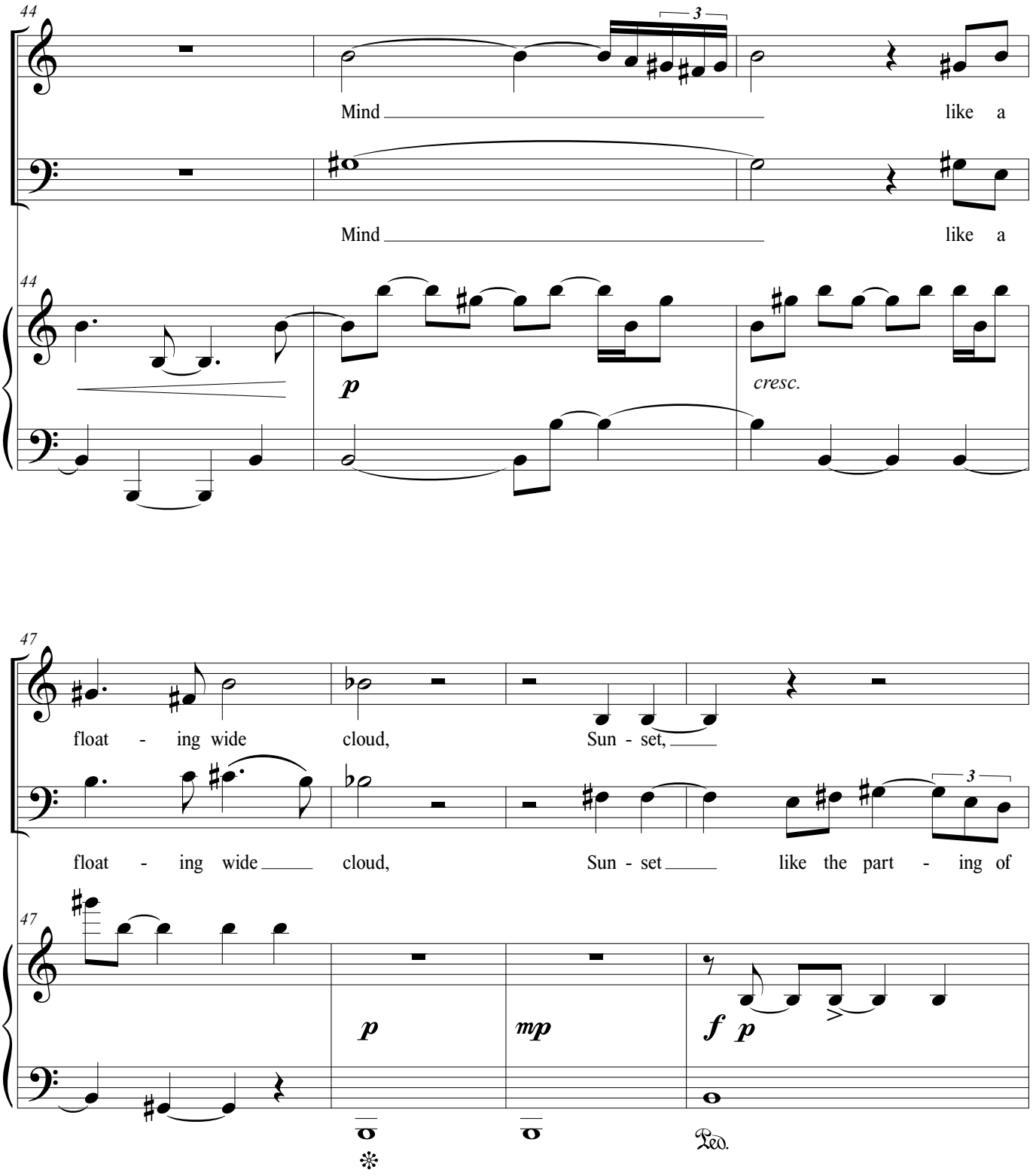
Ped.

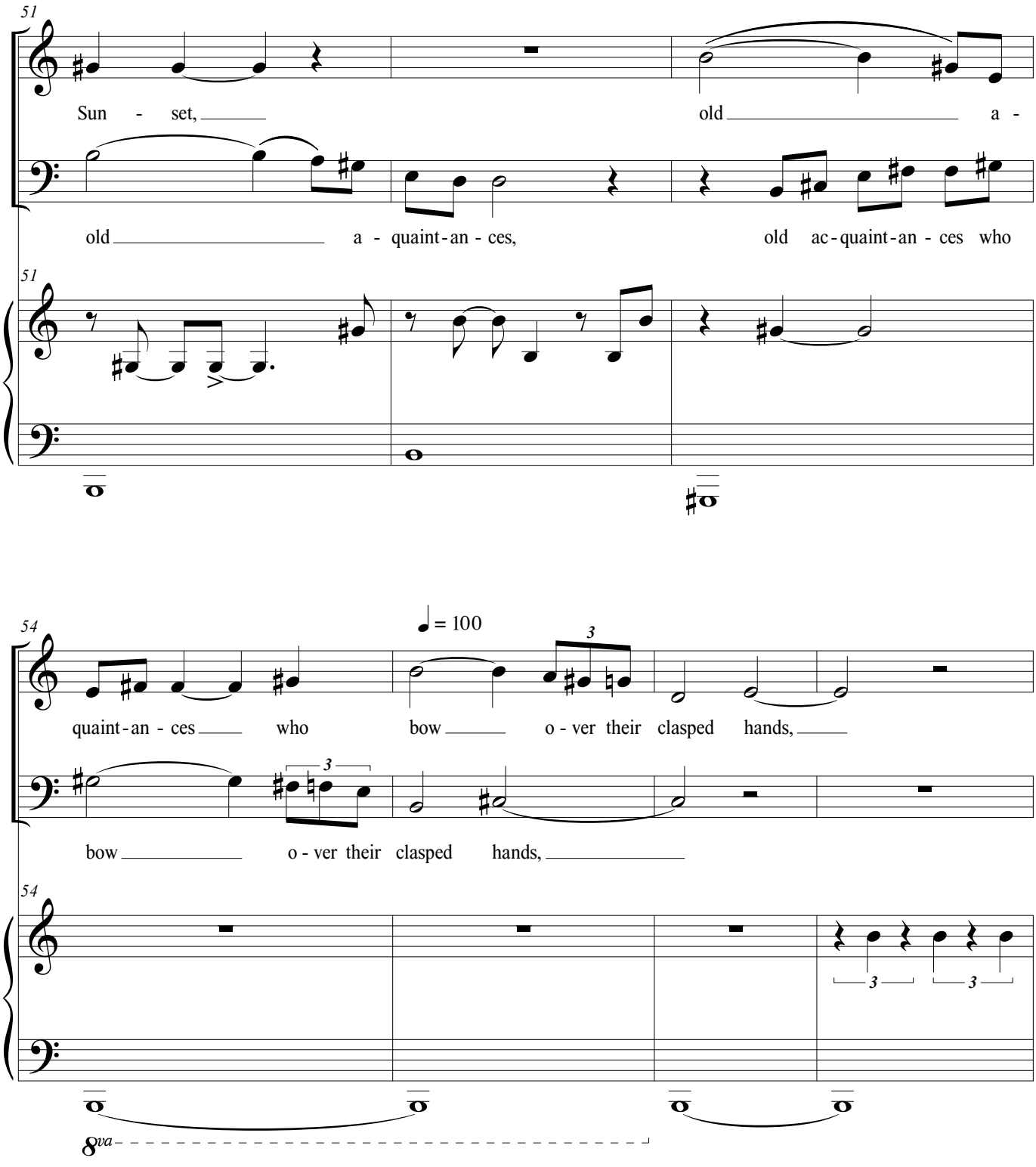

12
to the north of the walls,
Drifts a few steps further.
White ri - ver wind - ing,
12
14
f
p
8va
16
Stops.
3
White ri - ver wind - ing a bout them,
wind - ing a - bout them,
wind - ing a -
16
f
p
f
Ped.

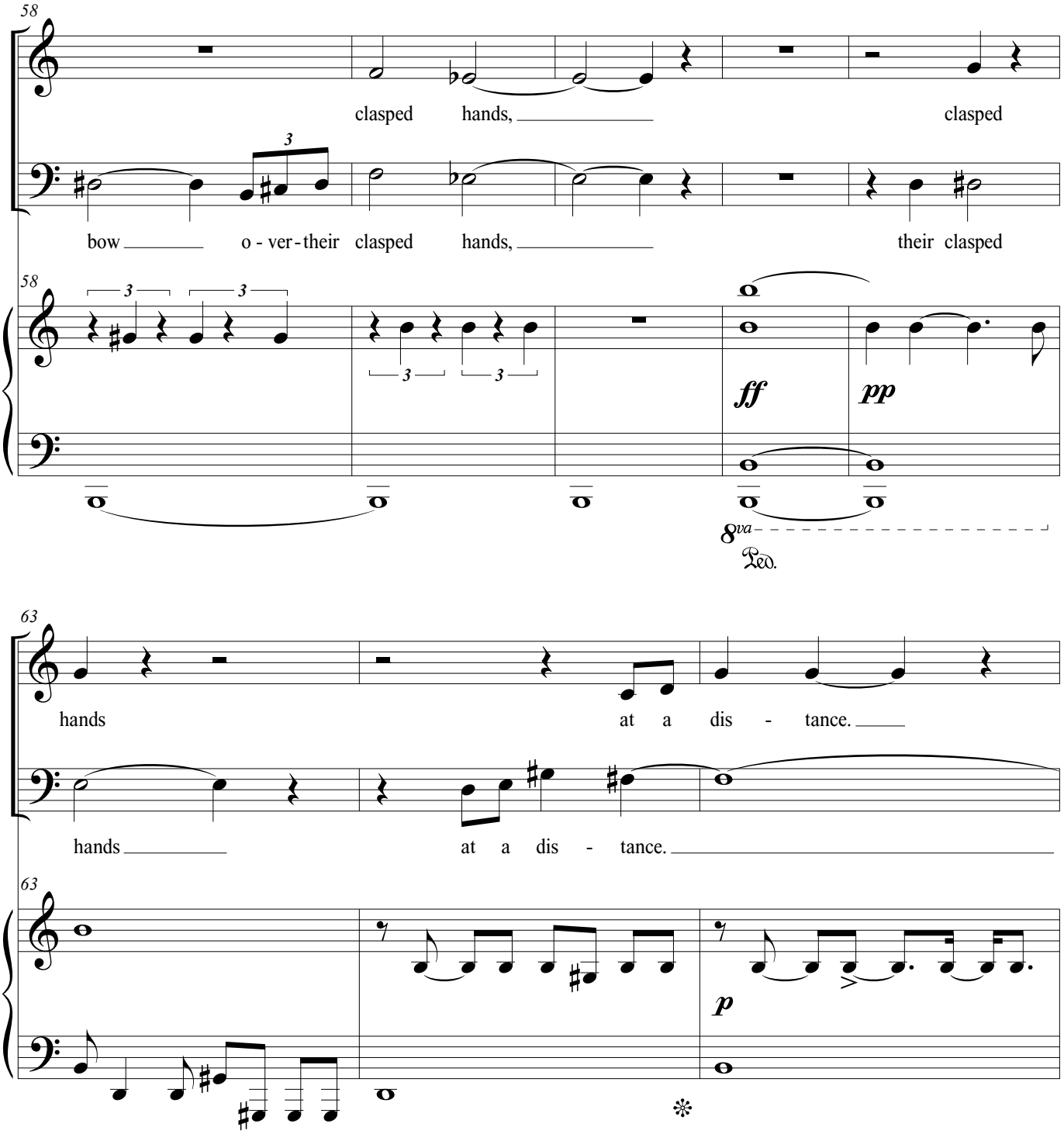

20
bout them.
20
21
p
f
p
24
Here we must make se - pa -
Here we must make se - pa - ra - tion.
24
cresc.
f p
cresc.

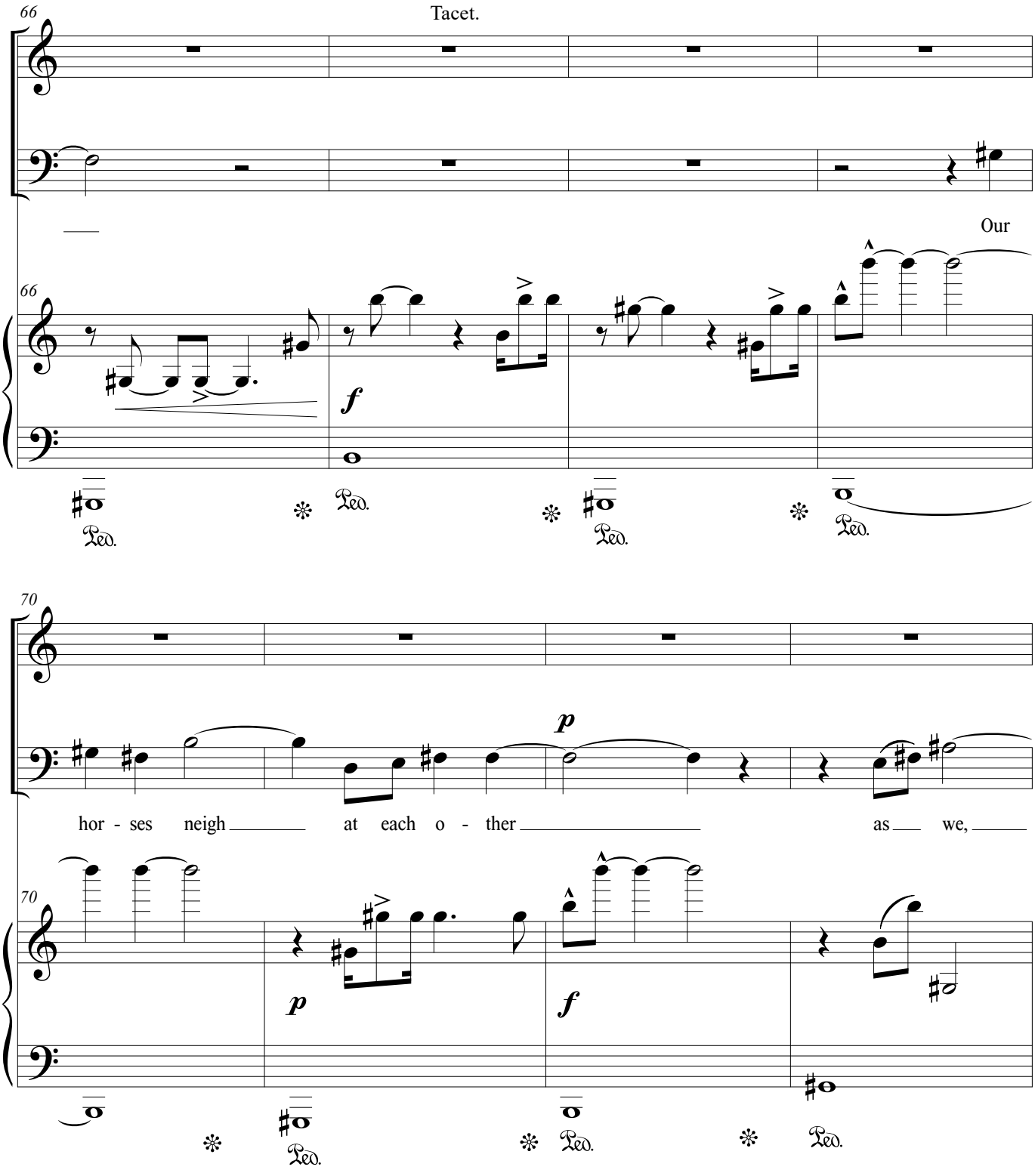

28
ra - - - tion,
Here we must make se - pa -
28
f
Ped.
32
and go out
and go out
ra - - tion,
32

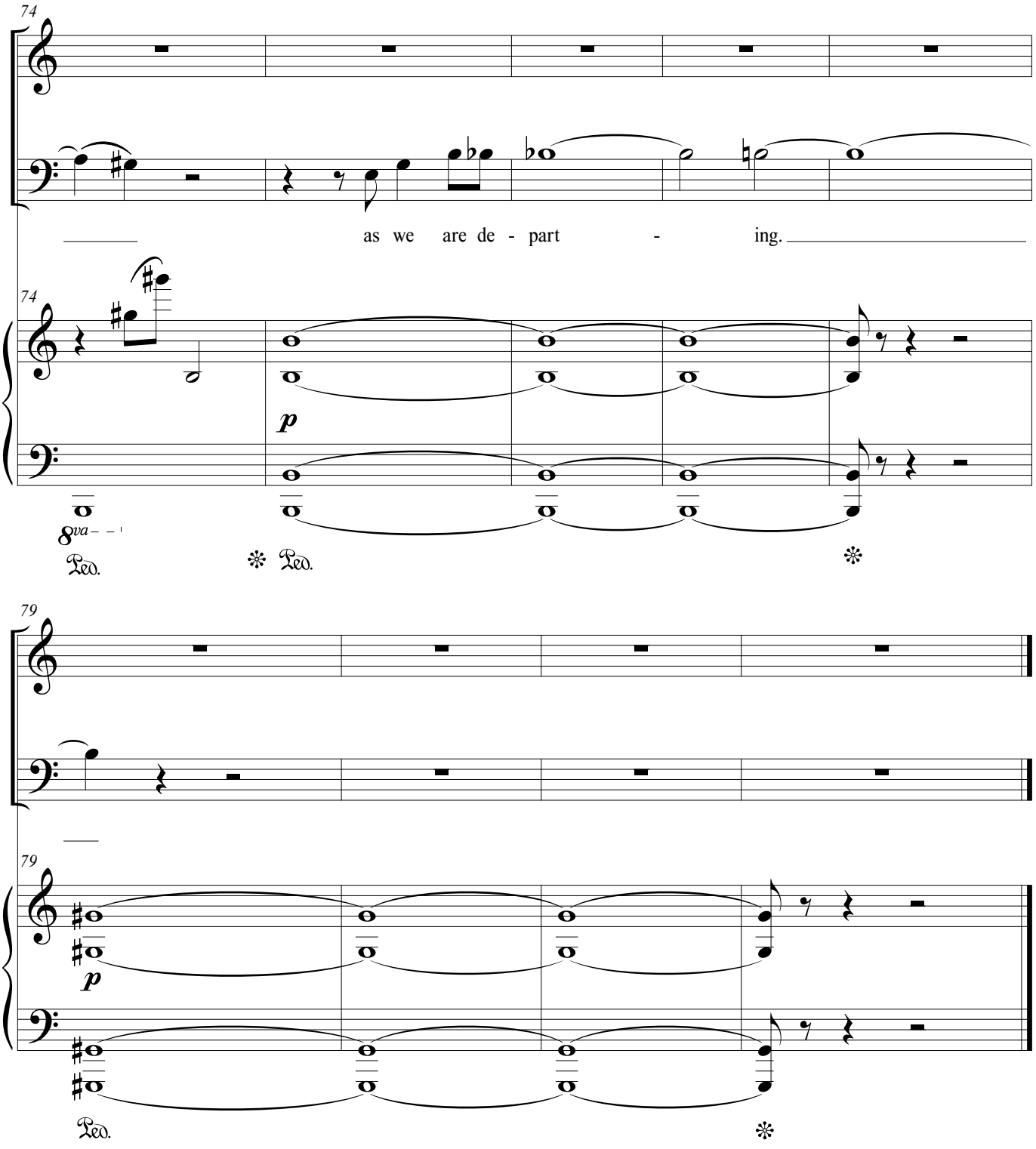

36
3
and go out through a thou - sand miles of dead
36
p
40
a tempo
through a thou - sand miles of dead grass.
grass.
15ma
40
pp
Ped.


44
3
Mind like a
Mind like a
44
p
cresc.
47
float - ing wide cloud, Sun - set,
float - ing wide cloud, Sun - set like the part - ing of
47
3
p
mp
f p
Ped.

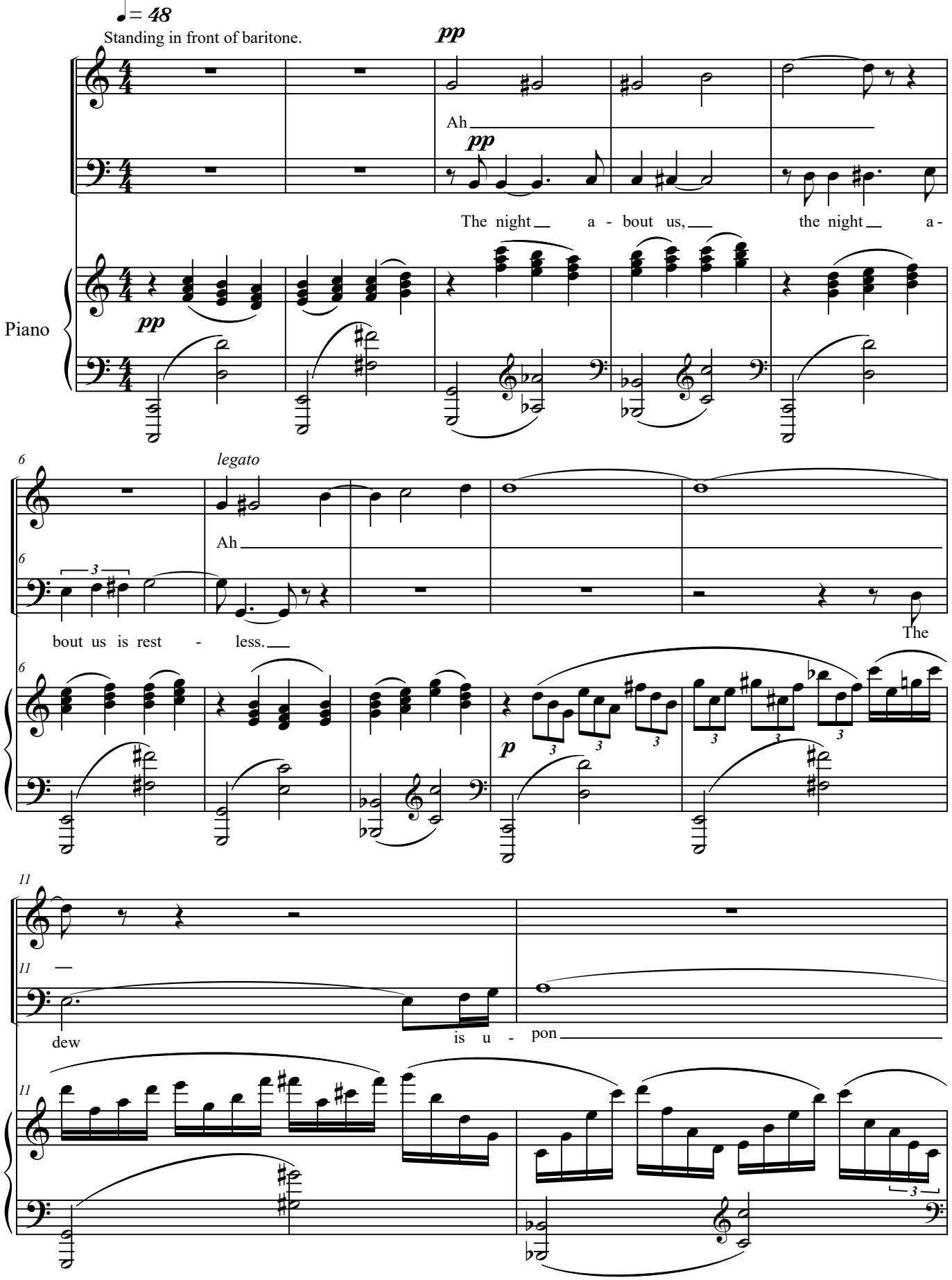

51
Sun - set,
old a -
old a - quaint-an - ces,
old ac-quaint-an - ces who
51
54
♩ = 100
3
quaint-an - ces who
bow o - ver their clasped hands,
3
bow o - ver their clasped hands,
54
3
3
8va

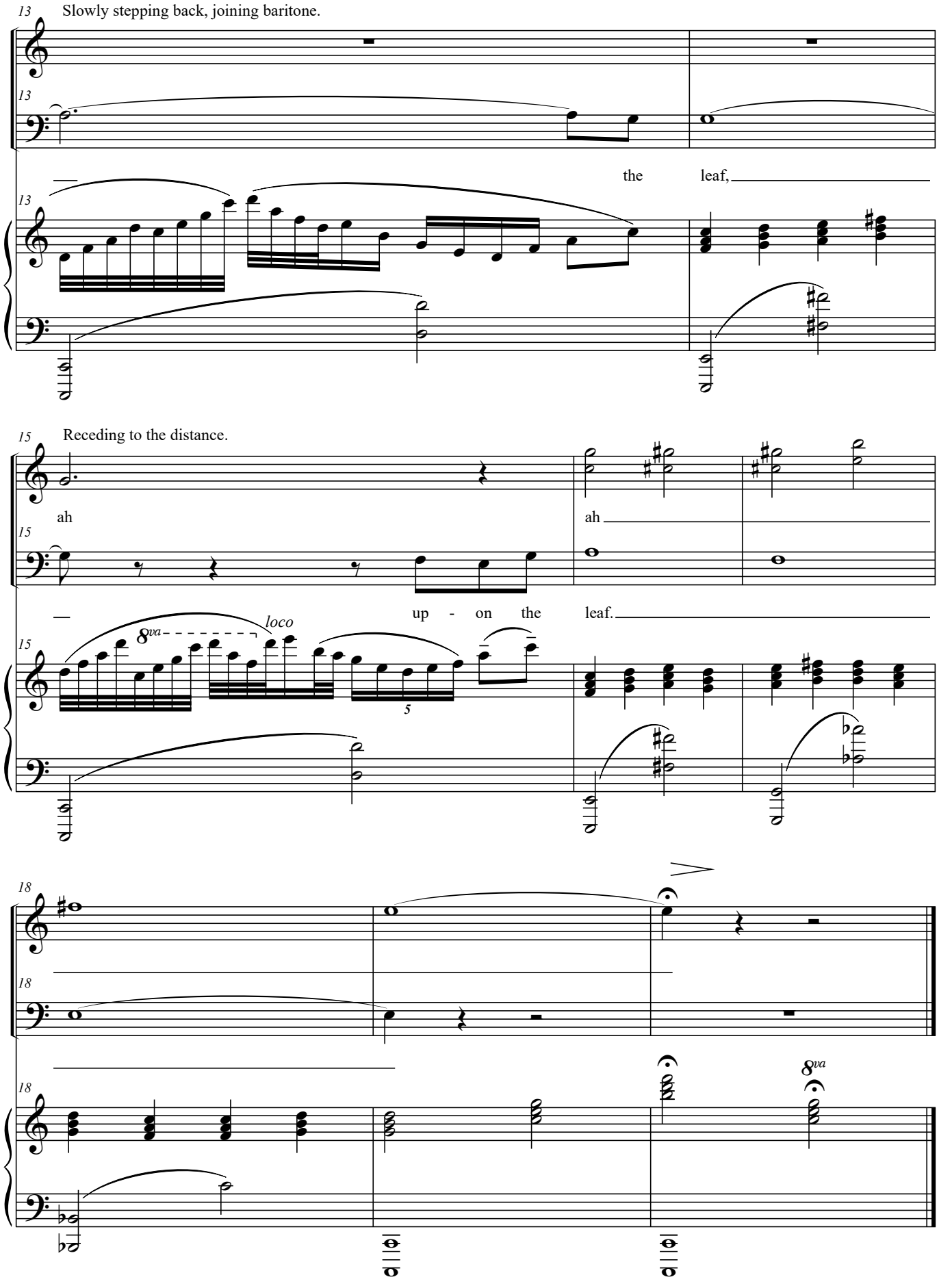

58
clasped hands, clasped
bow o - ver - their clasped hands, their clasped
58
3
3
3
3
ff
pp
8va
Ped.
63
hands at a dis - tance.
hands at a dis - tance.
63
p


66
Tacet.
Our
66
f
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
70
p
hor - ses neigh at each o - ther as we,
70
p
f
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.

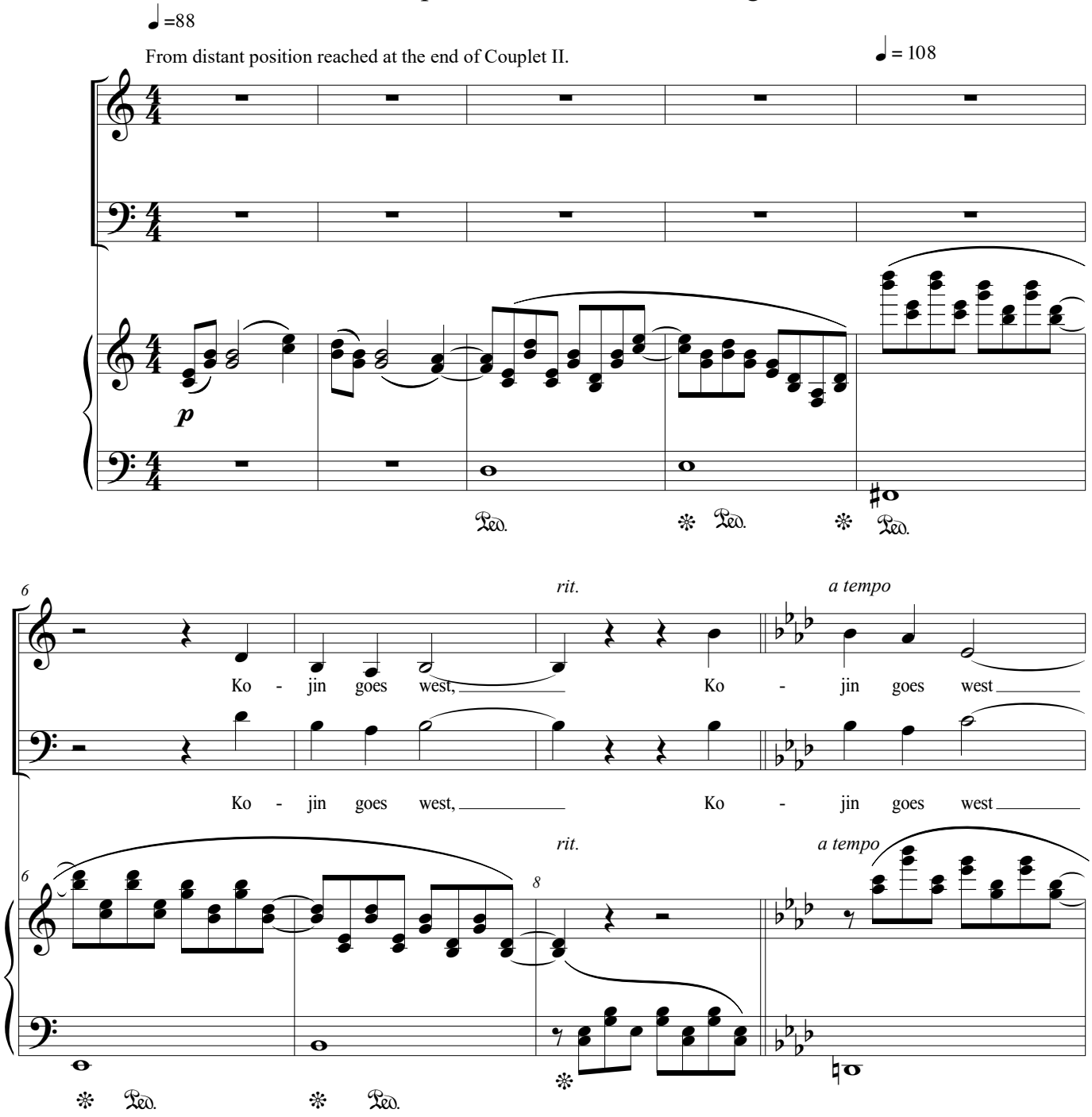

74
as we are de - part - ing.
74
p
8va
Ped.
Ped.
79
79
p
Ped.

Couplet II

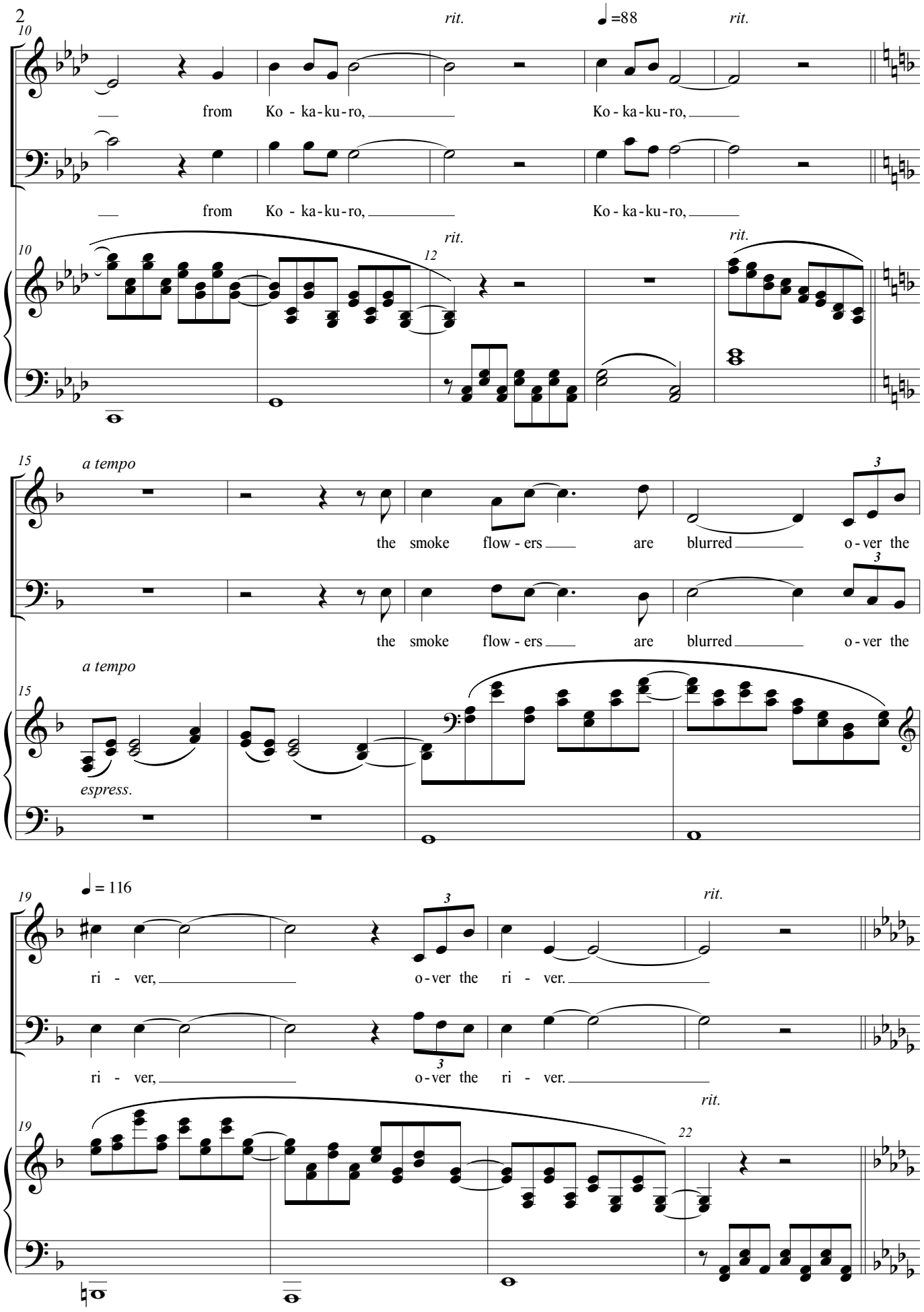

♩= 48
Standing in front of baritone.
pp
Ah
pp
The night a - bout us, the night a -
Piano
pp
6
legato
Ah
6
3
bout us is rest - less.
The
6
p
11
11
dew
is u - pon
11
3

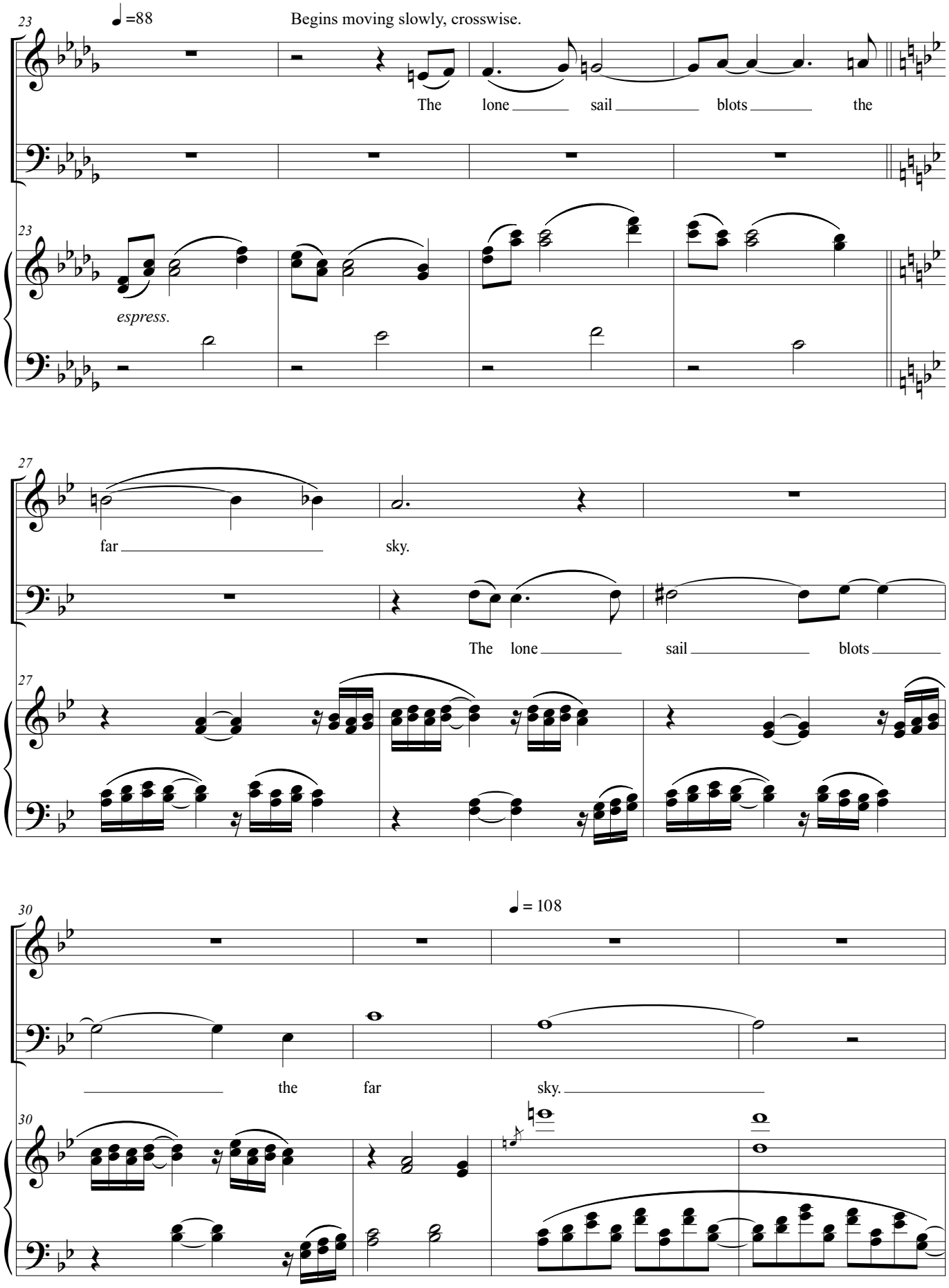

13
Slowly stepping back, joining baritone.
the leaf,
15
Receding to the distance.
ah
ah
up - on the leaf.
8va
loco
18
8va

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,
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
the smoke flow - ers are blurred o - ver the
a tempo
15
espress.
19
♩= 116
ri - ver, o - ver the ri - ver.
ri - ver, o - ver the ri - ver.
rit.
19
rit.
22


23
♩=88
Begins moving slowly, crosswise.
The lone sail blots the
23
espress.
27
far sky.
The lone sail blots
27
30
♩= 108
the far sky.
30

34

rit.

♩=88

Stops. From furthest visible distance:

And now I see on - ly the

rit.

And now I see on - ly the

espress.

40

accel.

♩= 108

ri - - - - ver, on - ly the

ri - - - - ver, on - ly the

accel.

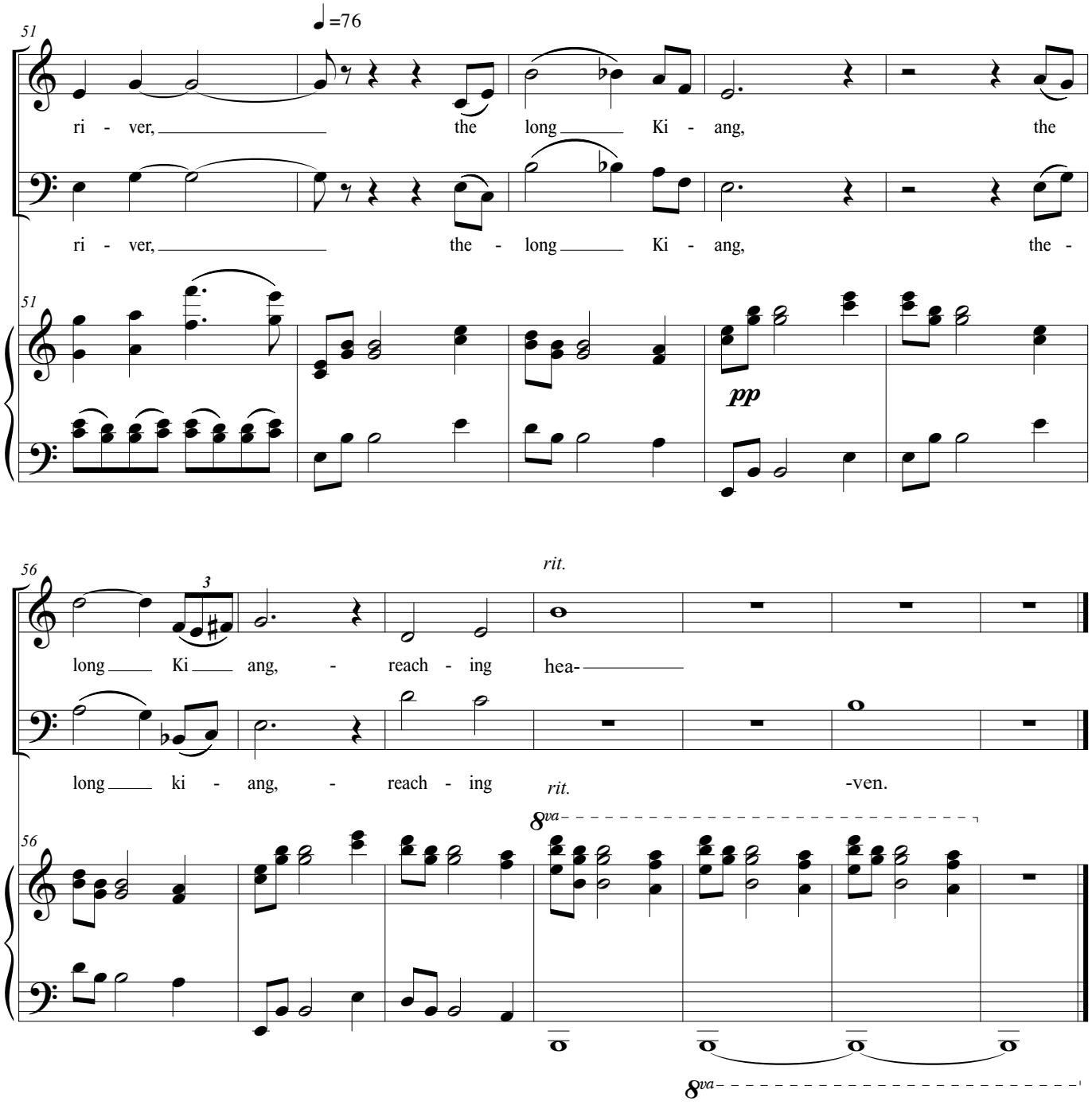
46

rit.

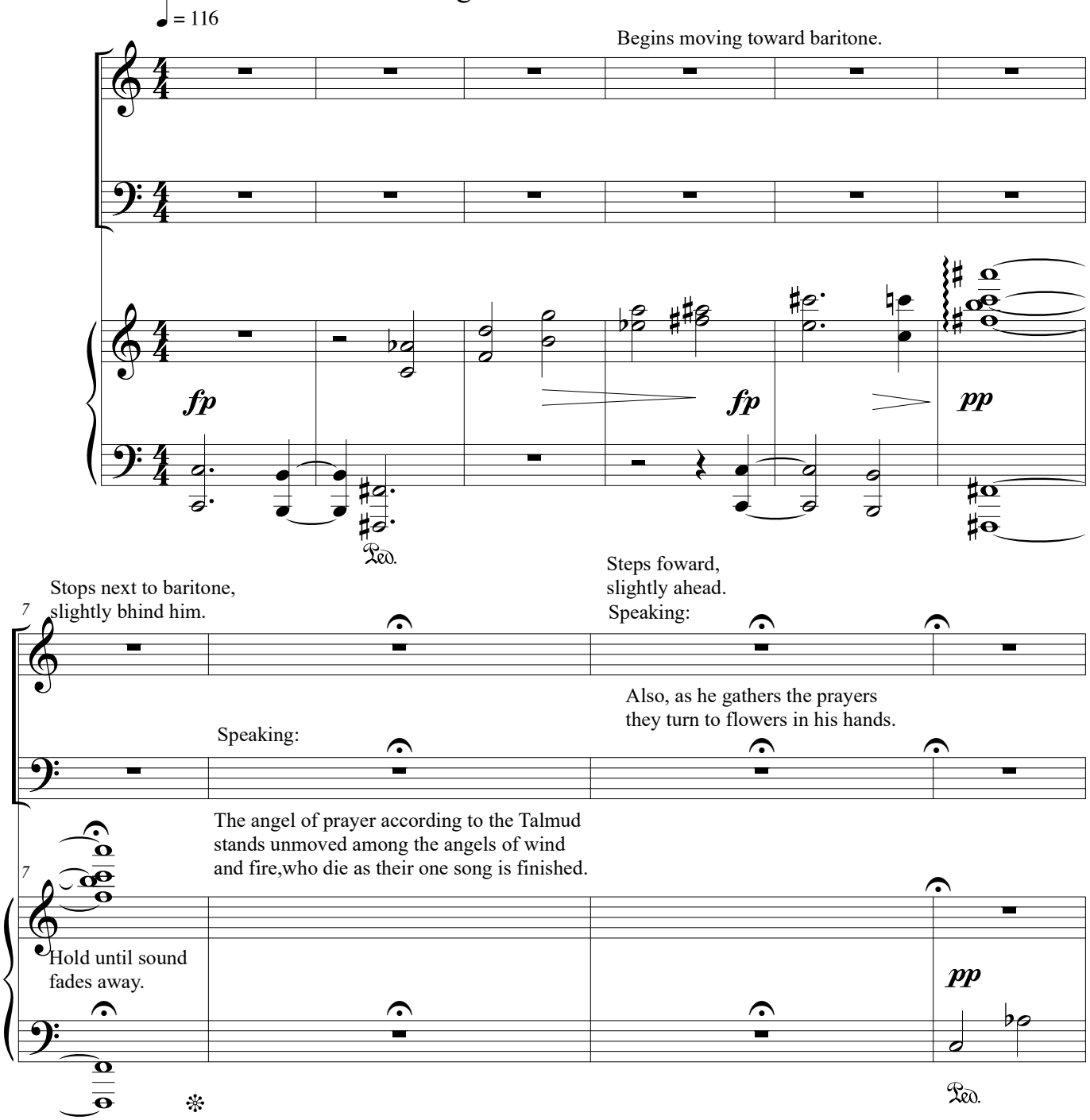
ri - - - - ver, the

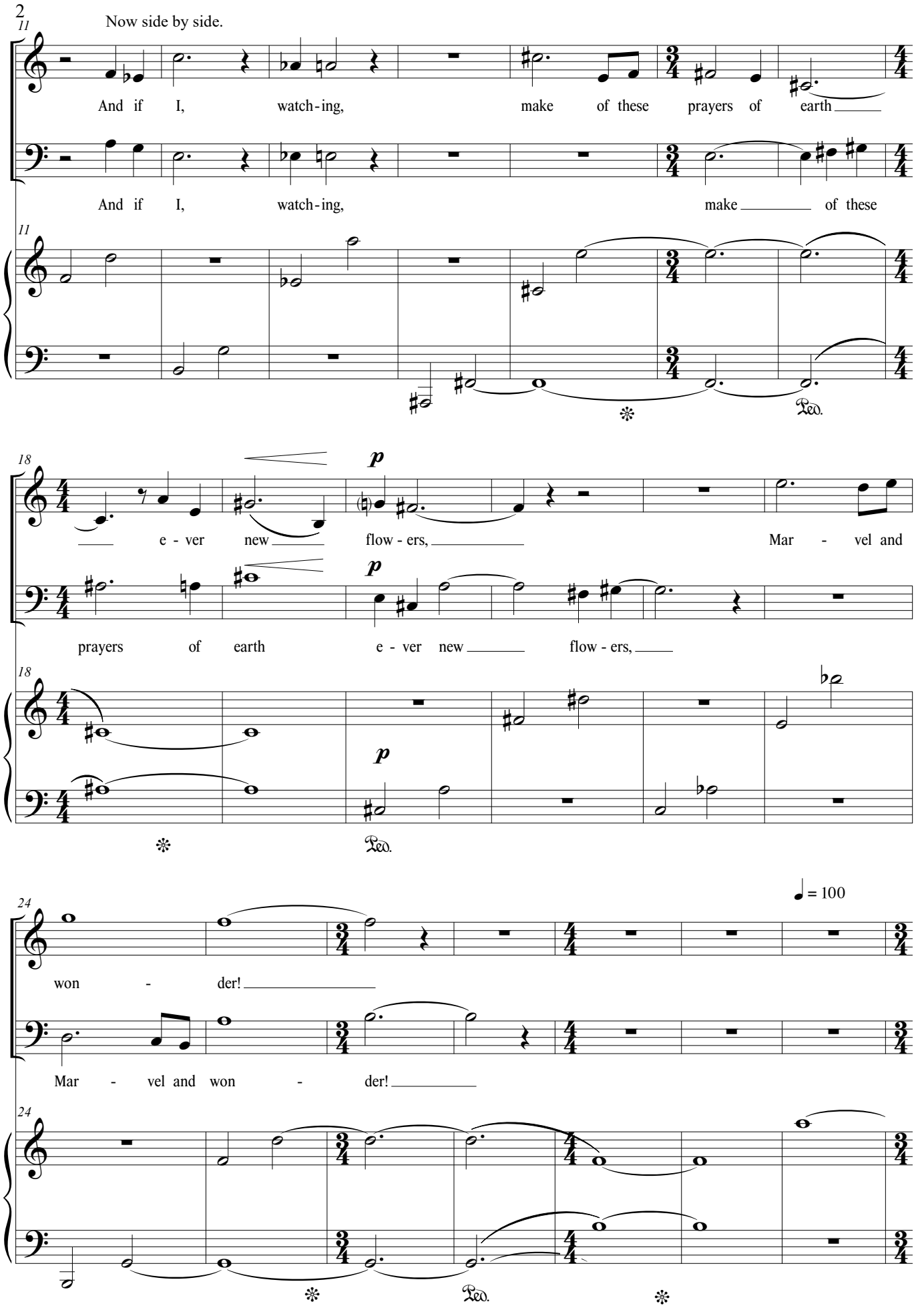
ri - - - - ver, the

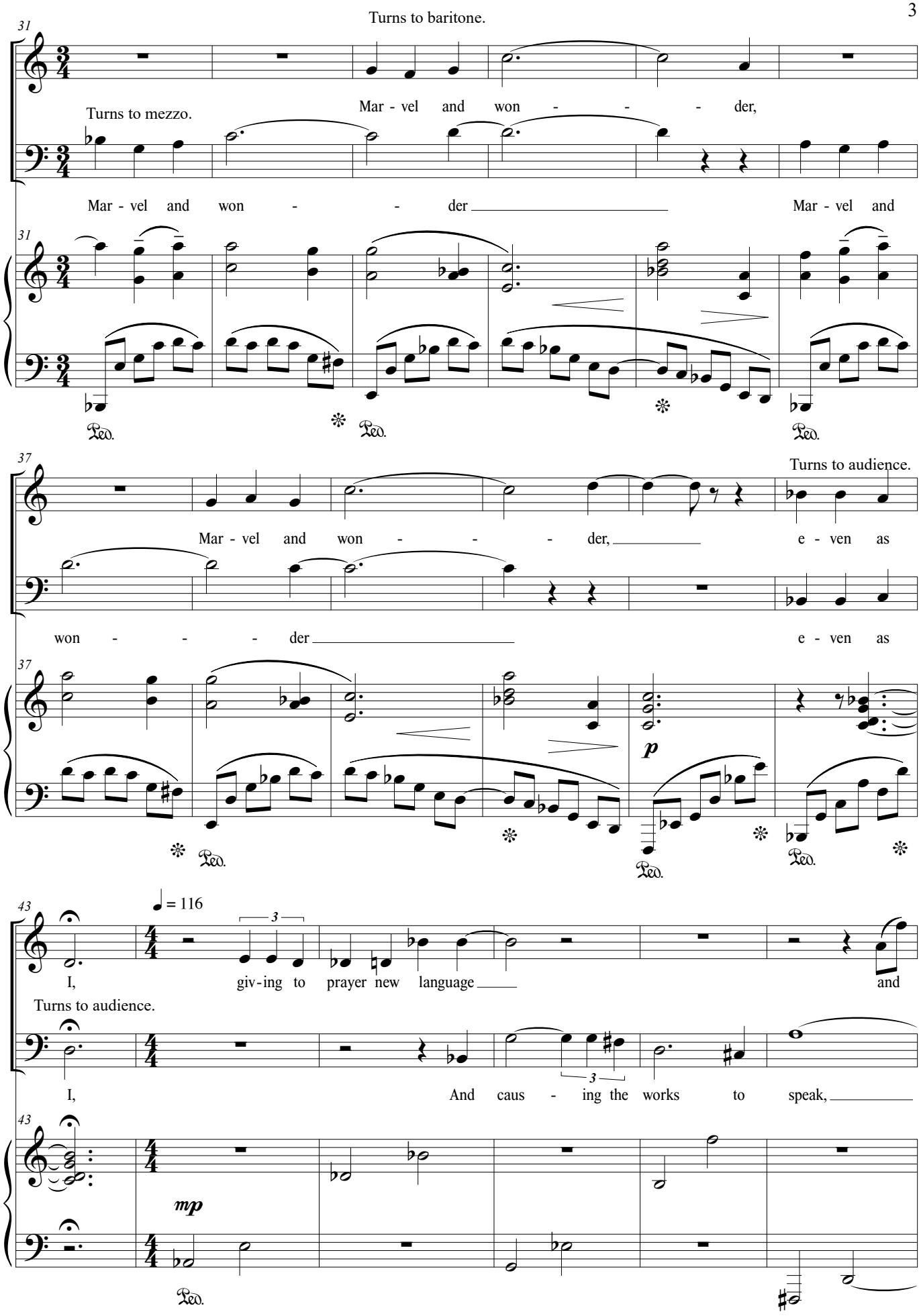
rit.

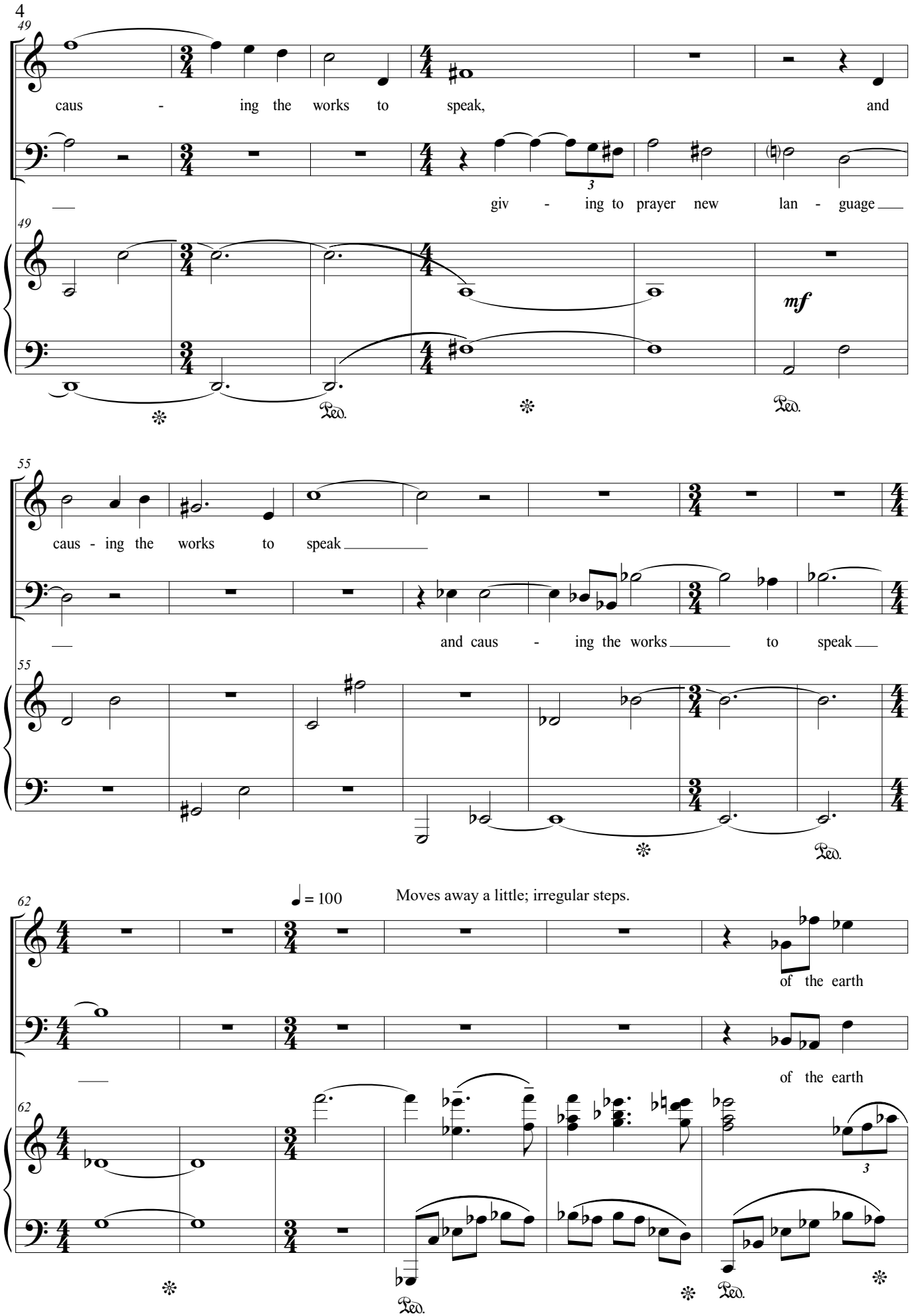

51
♩=76
ri - ver, the long Ki - ang, the
ri - ver, the - long Ki - ang, the -
51
pp
56
rit.
3
long Ki ang, - reach - ing hea-
long ki - ang, - reach - ing
rit.
-ven.
56
8va
8va

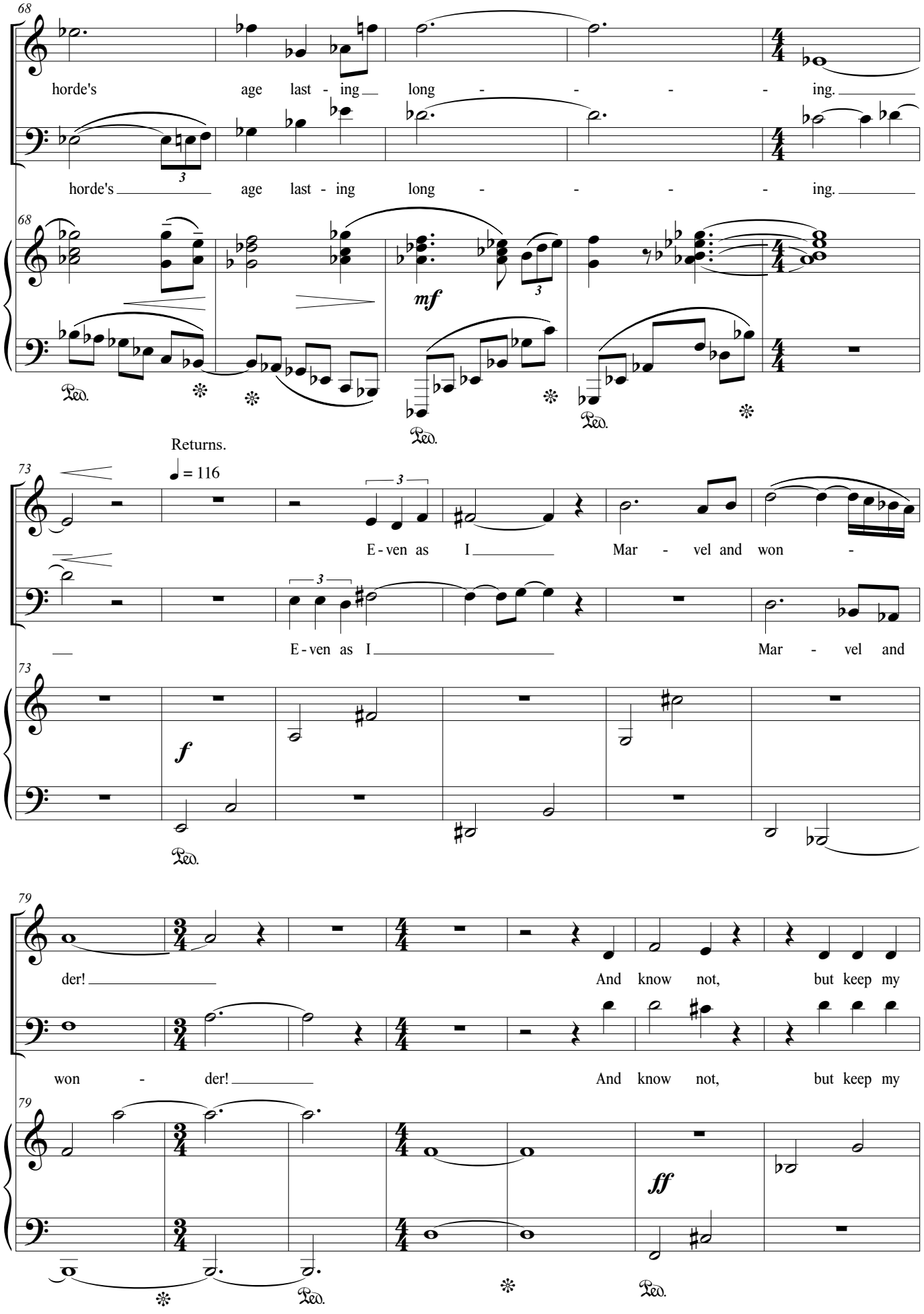
Angels of Wind and Fire

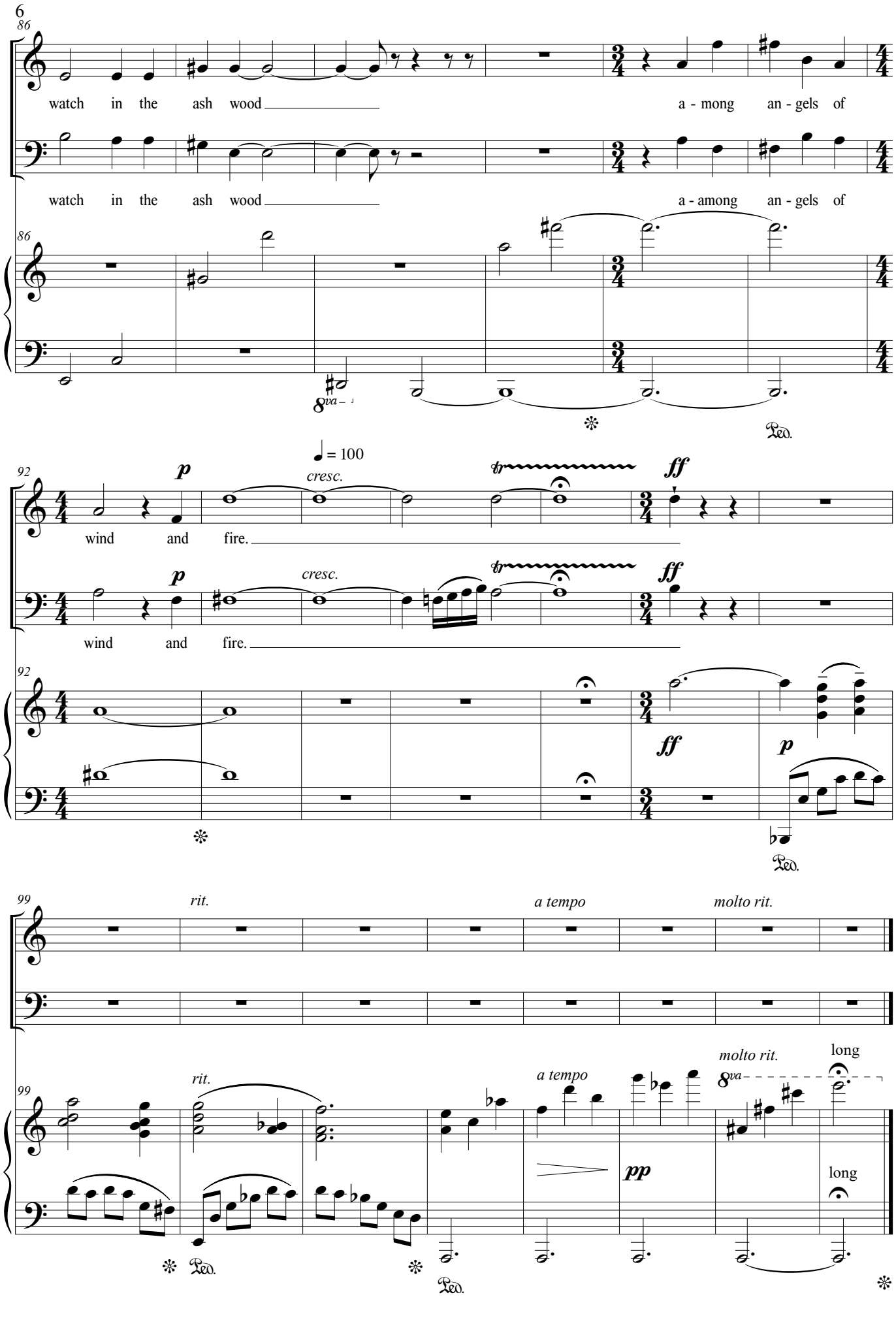



11
Now side by side.
And if I, watch-ing, make of these prayers of earth
And if I, watch-ing, make of these
18
p
e - ver new flow - ers, Mar - vel and
prayers of earth e - ver new flow - ers,
p
Ped.
24
♩ = 100
won - der!
Mar - vel and won - der!
Ped.


Turns to baritone.
31
Turns to mezzo.
Mar - vel and won - - - der,
Mar - vel and won - - der
Mar - vel and
Ped.
37
Turns to audience.
Mar - vel and won - - - der,
e - ven as
won - - - der
e - ven as
p
43
♩ = 116
3
I,
giv-ing to prayer new language
and
Turns to audience.
I,
And caus - ing the works to speak,
mp


49
caus - ing the works to speak, and
giv - ing to prayer new lan - guage
mf
Ped.
55
caus - ing the works to speak
and caus - ing the works to speak
62
♩ = 100
Moves away a little; irregular steps.
of the earth
of the earth
Ped.


68
horde's age last - ing long - - - - ing.
horde's age last - ing long - - - - ing.
68
mf
Ped.
Returns.
73
♩ = 116
E - ven as I Mar - vel and won -
E - ven as I Mar - vel and
73
f
Ped.
79
der! And know not, but keep my
won - der! And know not, but keep my
79
ff
Ped.
Ped.


86
watch in the ash wood
a - mong an - gels of
watch in the ash wood
a - among an - gels of
8va
Ped.
92
♩ = 100
p
cresc.
tr
ff
wind and fire.
wind and fire.
99
rit.
a tempo
molto rit.
pp
long
long