Song Acts

Twelve Songs to Texts from Ezra Pound

For Voice and Piano

Book II: Erat Hora [An Hour There Was]

2008, 2017

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. In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

2. April

Three spirits came to me
And drew me apart
To where the olive boughs
Lay stripped upon the ground:
Pale carnage beneath bright mist.

3. *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*, IV

These fought, in any case,
and some believing, pro domo, in any case ..

Some quick to arm,
some for adventure,
some from fear of weakness,
some from fear of censure,
some for love of slaughter, in imagination,
learning later ...

some in fear, learning love of slaughter;
Died some pro patria, non dulce non et décor...

walked eye-deep in hell
believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving
came home, home to a lie,
home to many deceits,
home to old lies and new infamy;

usury age-old and age-thick
and liars in public places.

Daring as never before, wastage as never before.
Young blood and high blood,
Fair cheeks, and fine bodies;

fortitude as never before

frankness as never before,
disillusions as never told in the old days,
hysterias, trench confessions,
laughter out of dead bellies.

4. Erat Hora [An Hour There Was]

"Thank you, whatever comes." And then she turned
And, as the ray of sun on hanging flowers
Fades when the wind hath lifted them aside,
Went swiftly from me. Nay, whatever comes,
One hour was sunlit and the most high gods
May not make boast of any better thing
Than to have watched that hour as it passed.
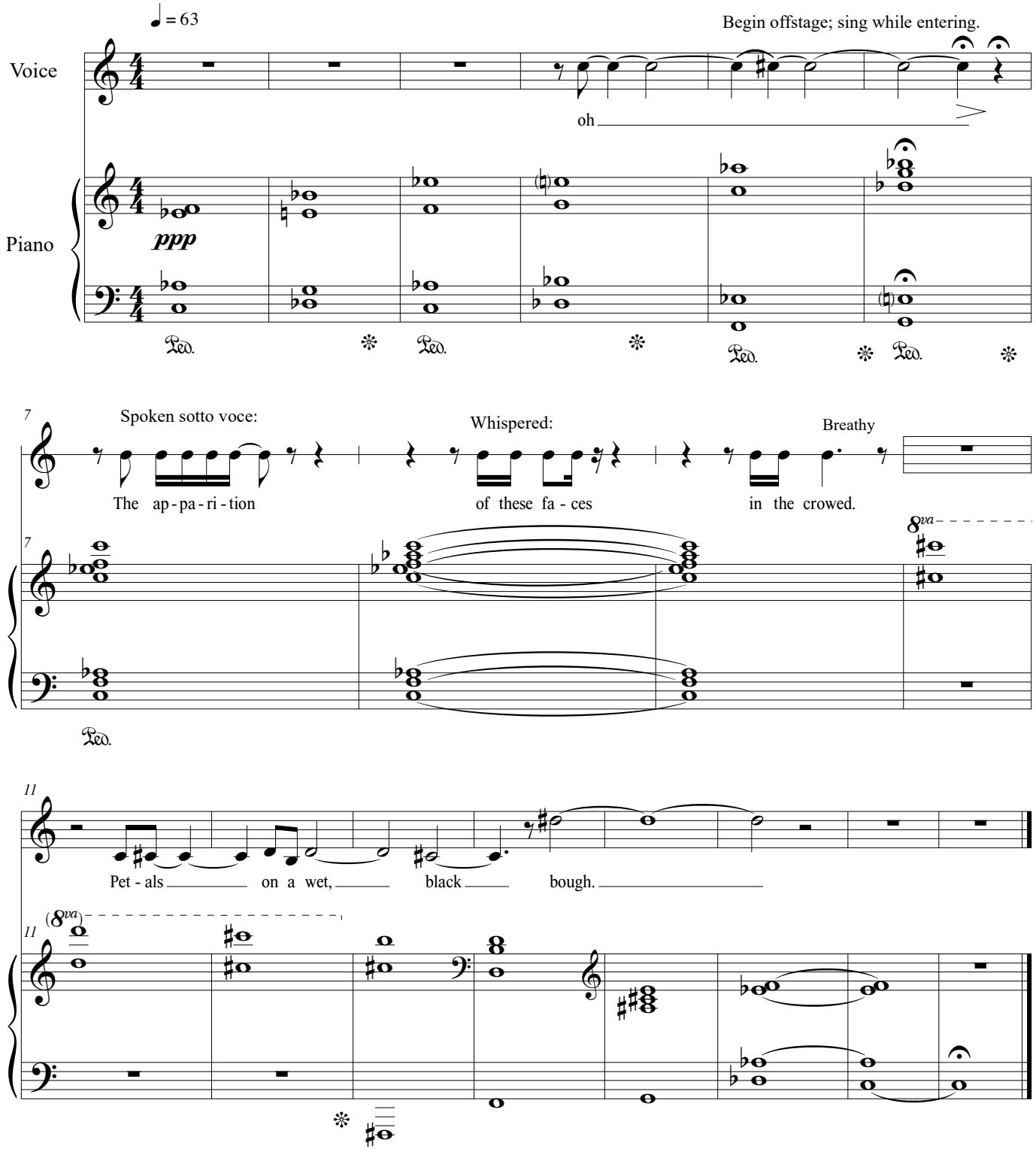
5. Doria

Be in me as the eternal moods
        of the bleak wind, and not
As transient things are—
        gaiety of flowers.
Have me in the strong loneliness
        of sunless cliffs
And of gray waters.
        Let the gods speak softly of us
In days hereafter,
        The shadowy flowers of Orcus
Remember thee.
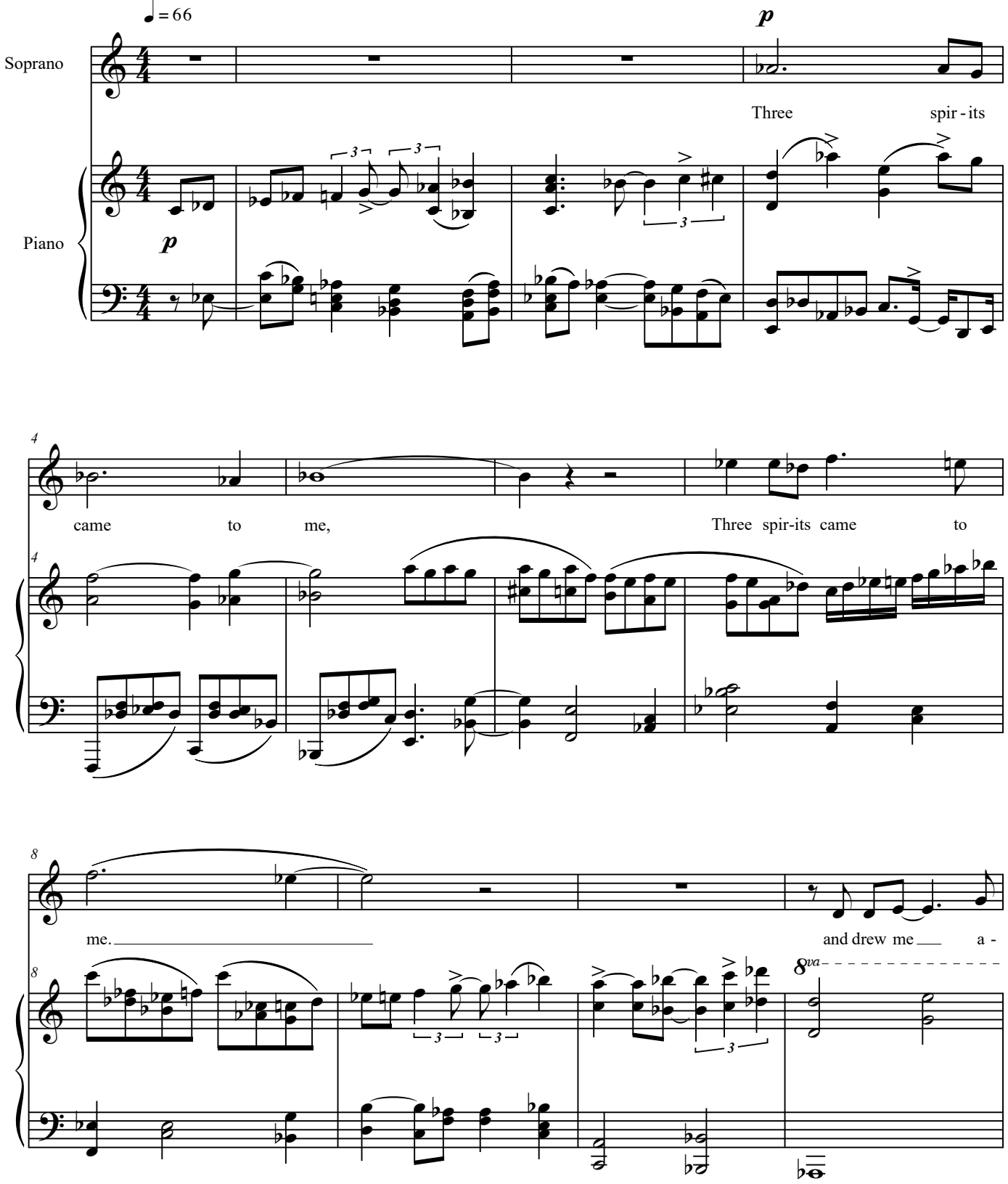
6. The Coming of War: Actaeon
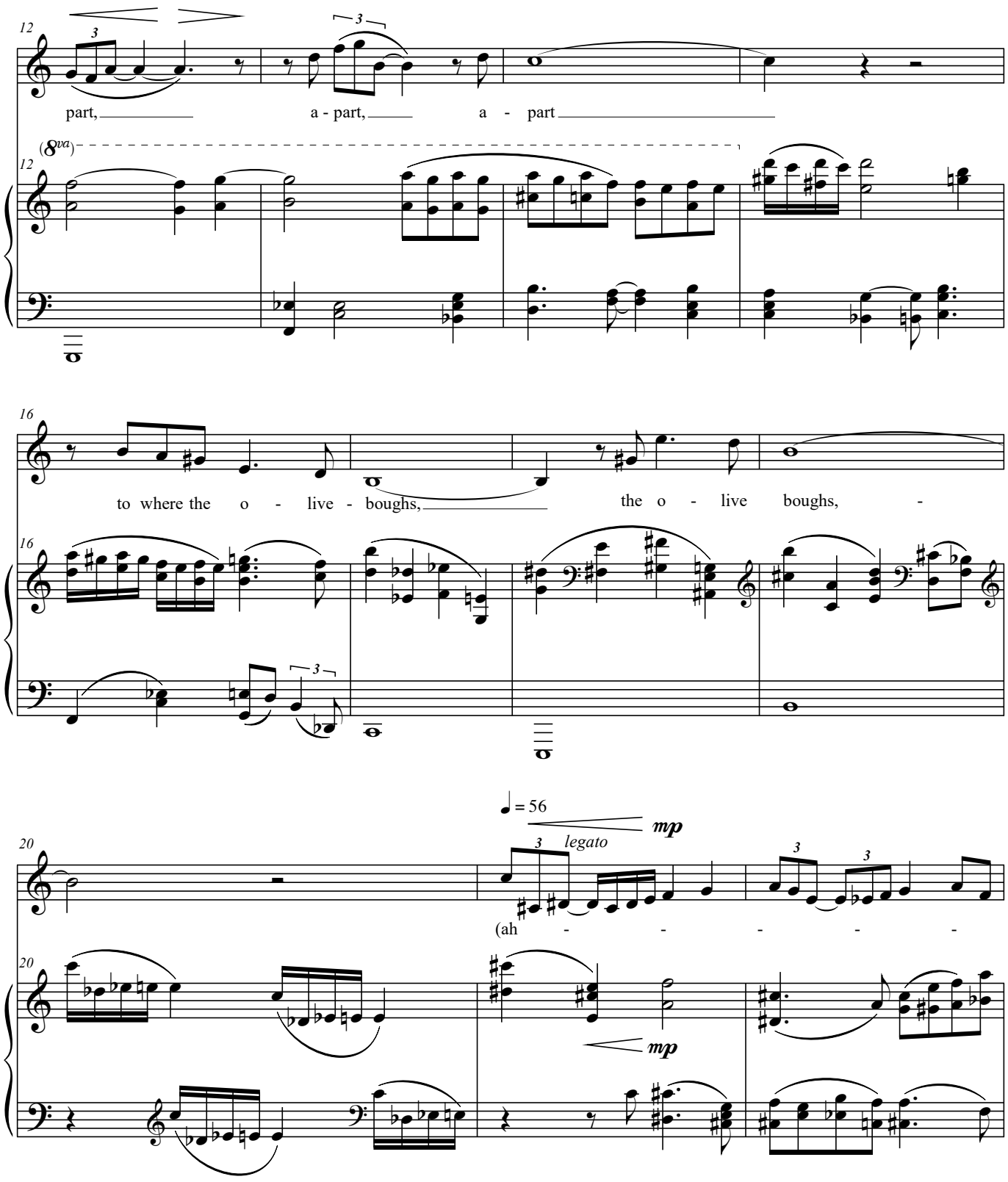
An image of Lethe,
    and the fields
Full of faint light
    but golden,
Gray cliffs,
    and beneath them
A sea
Harsher than granite,
    unstill, never ceasing;
High forms
    with the movement of gods,
Perilous aspect;
    And one said:
"This is Actaeon."
    Actaeon of [the] golden greaves!
Over fair meadows,
Over the cool face of that field,
Unstill, ever moving,
Hosts of an ancient people,
The silent cortège.
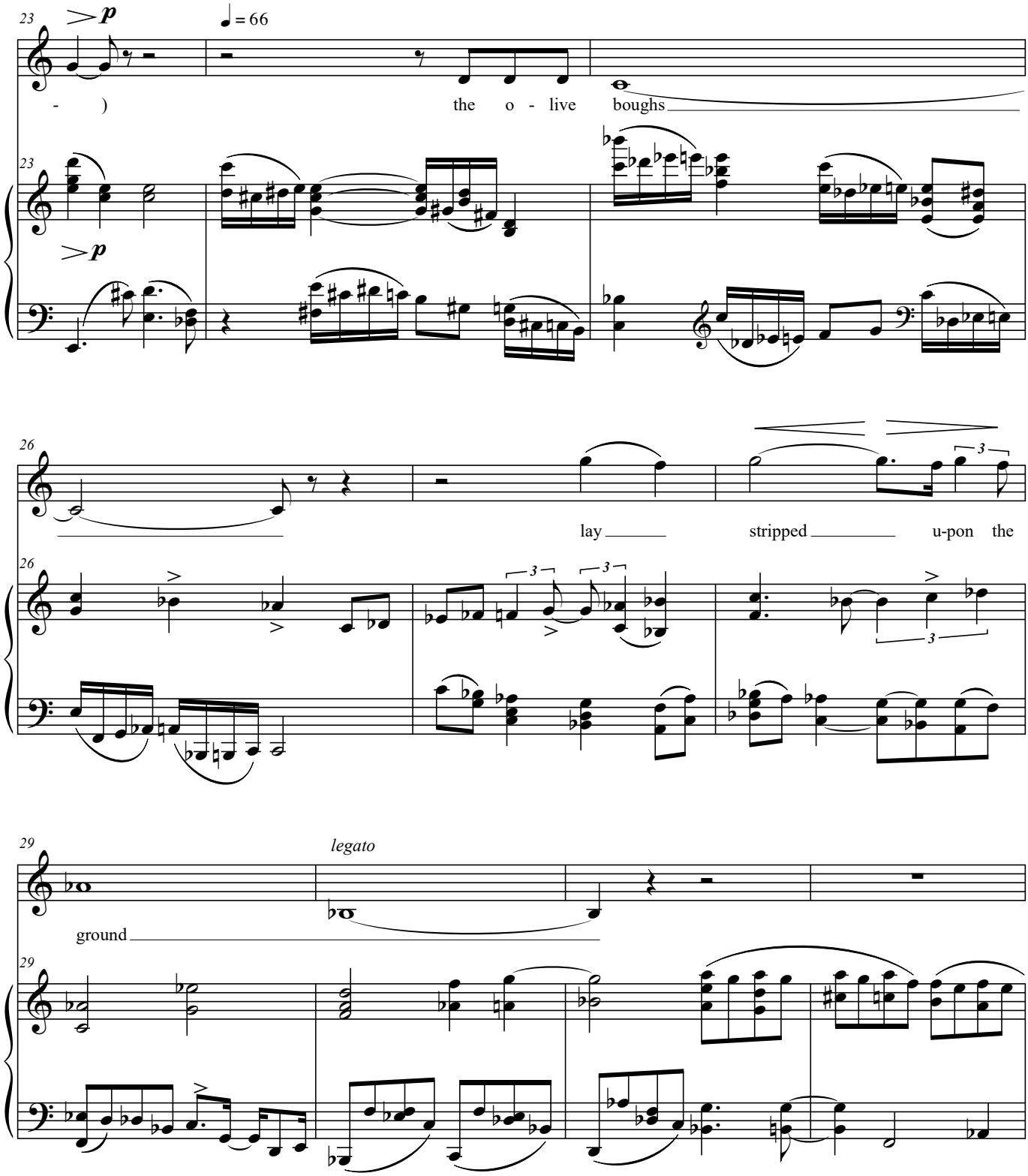
In a Station of the Metro
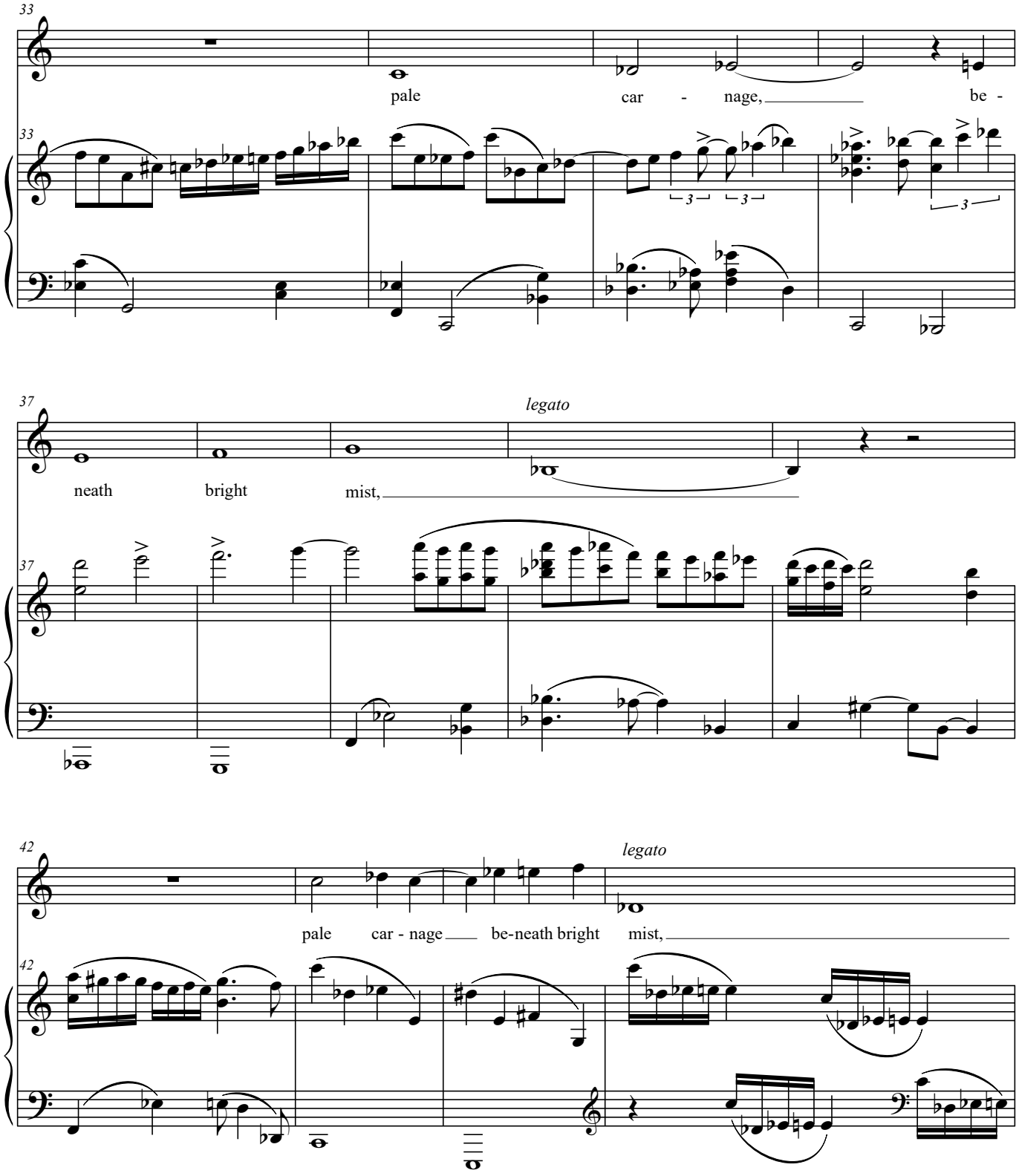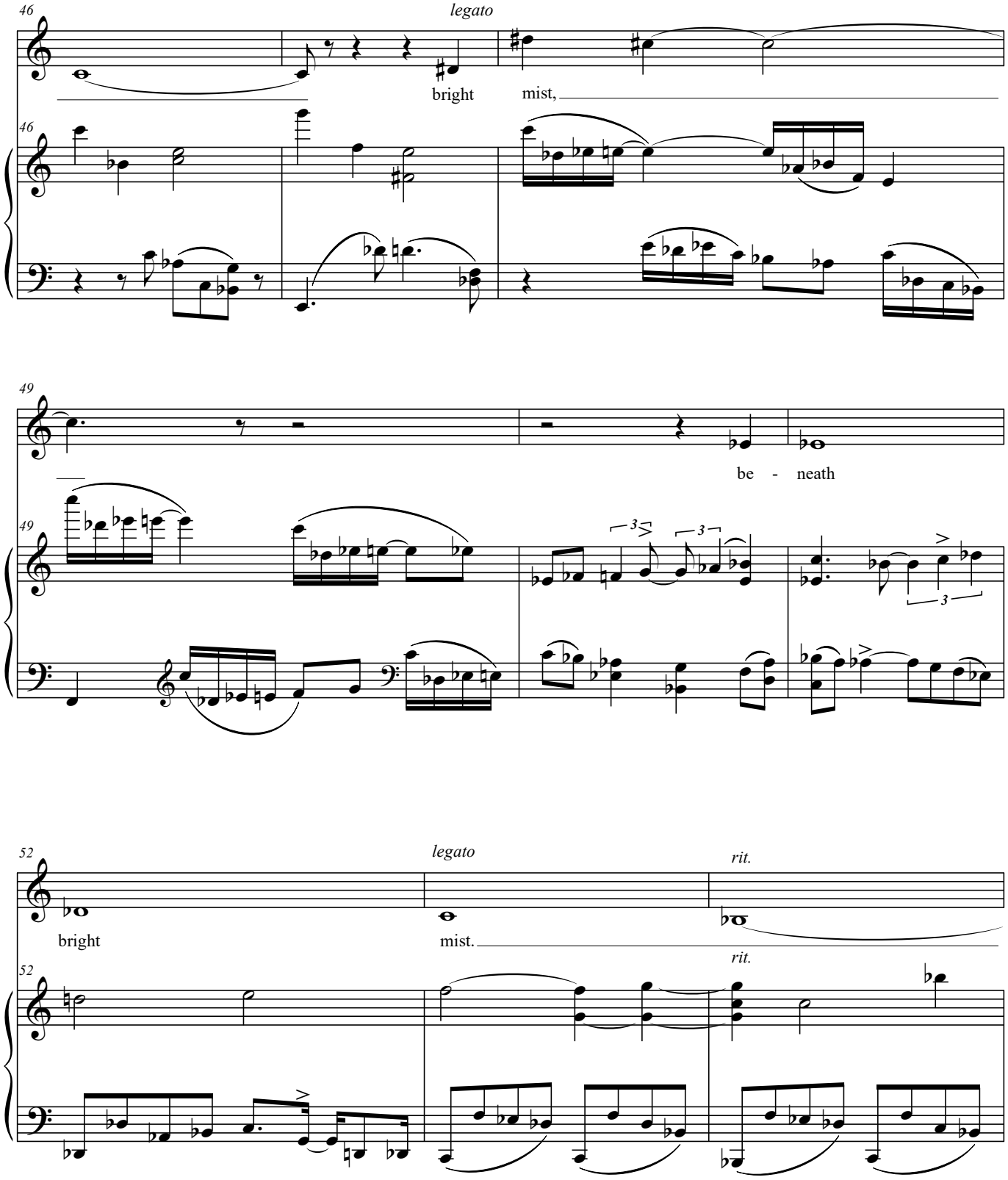


April
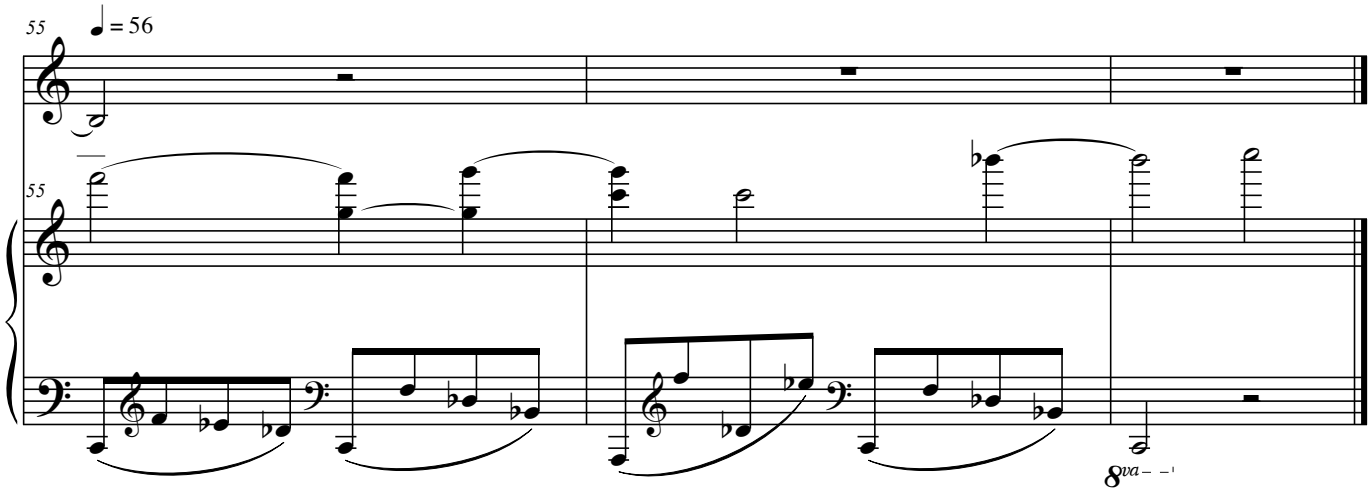

♩ = 66
Soprano
Piano
p
Three spir - its
4
came to me,
Three spir-its came to
8
me.
and drew me a -
8va


12
part, a - part, a - part
(8va)
12
16
to where the o - live - boughs, the o - live boughs, -
16
20
♩ = 56
mp
legato
(ah - - - - -
20
mp
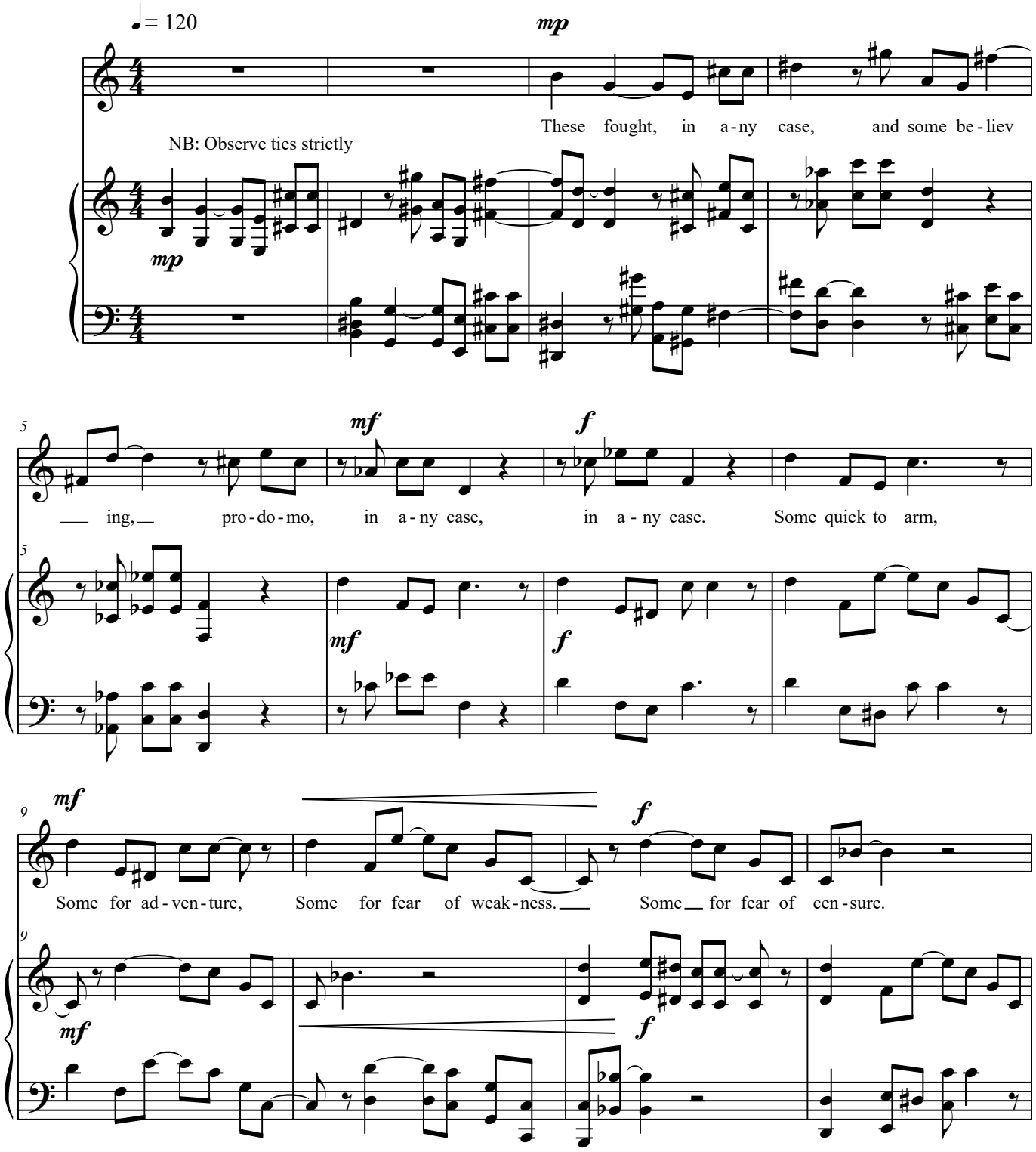

23
p
♩ = 66
-)
the o - live boughs
23
p
26
lay
stripped
u-pon the
26
3
3
3
29
legato
ground
29
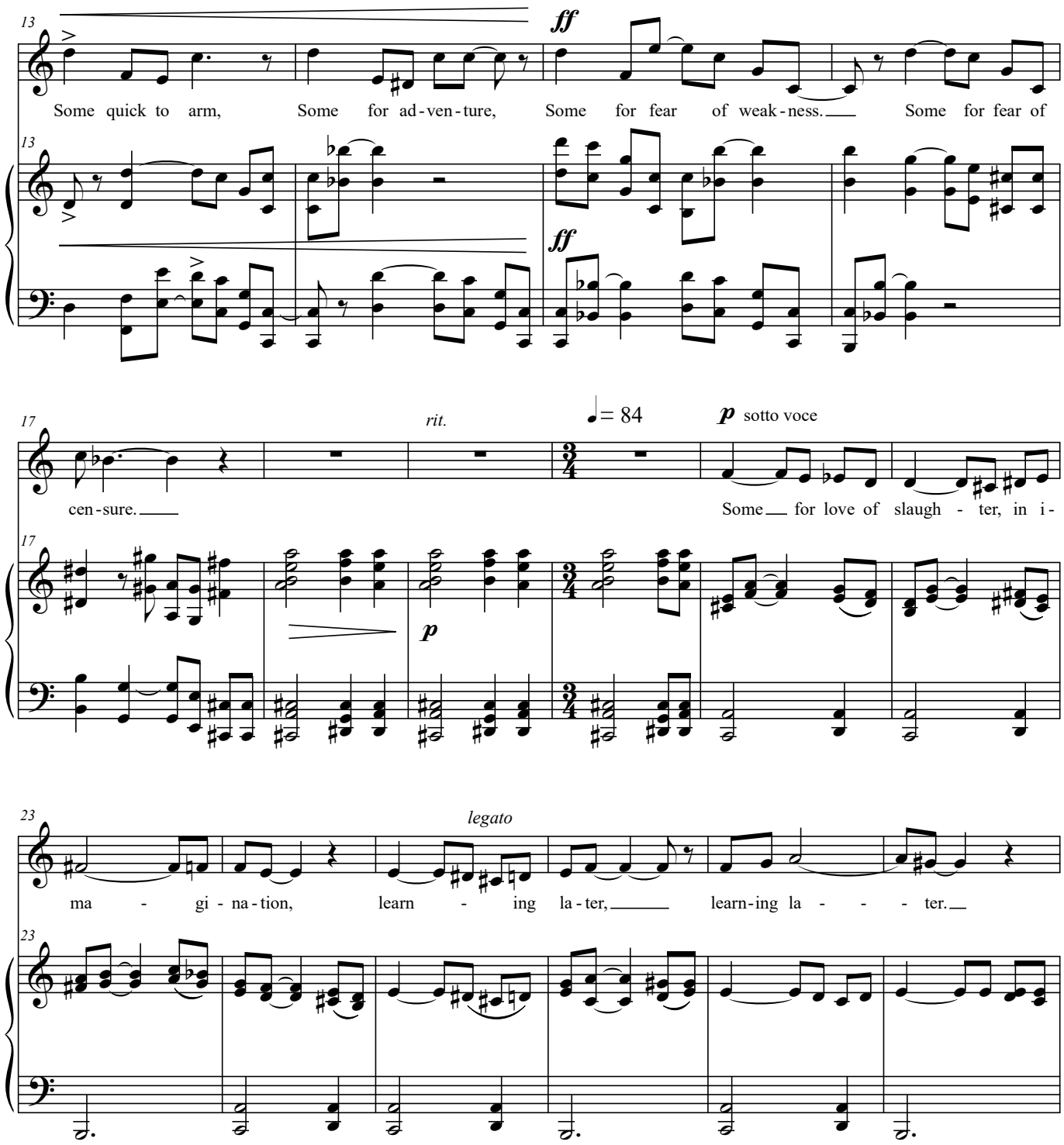

33
pale car - nage, be -
37
legato
neath bright mist,
42
legato
pale car - nage be-neath bright mist,
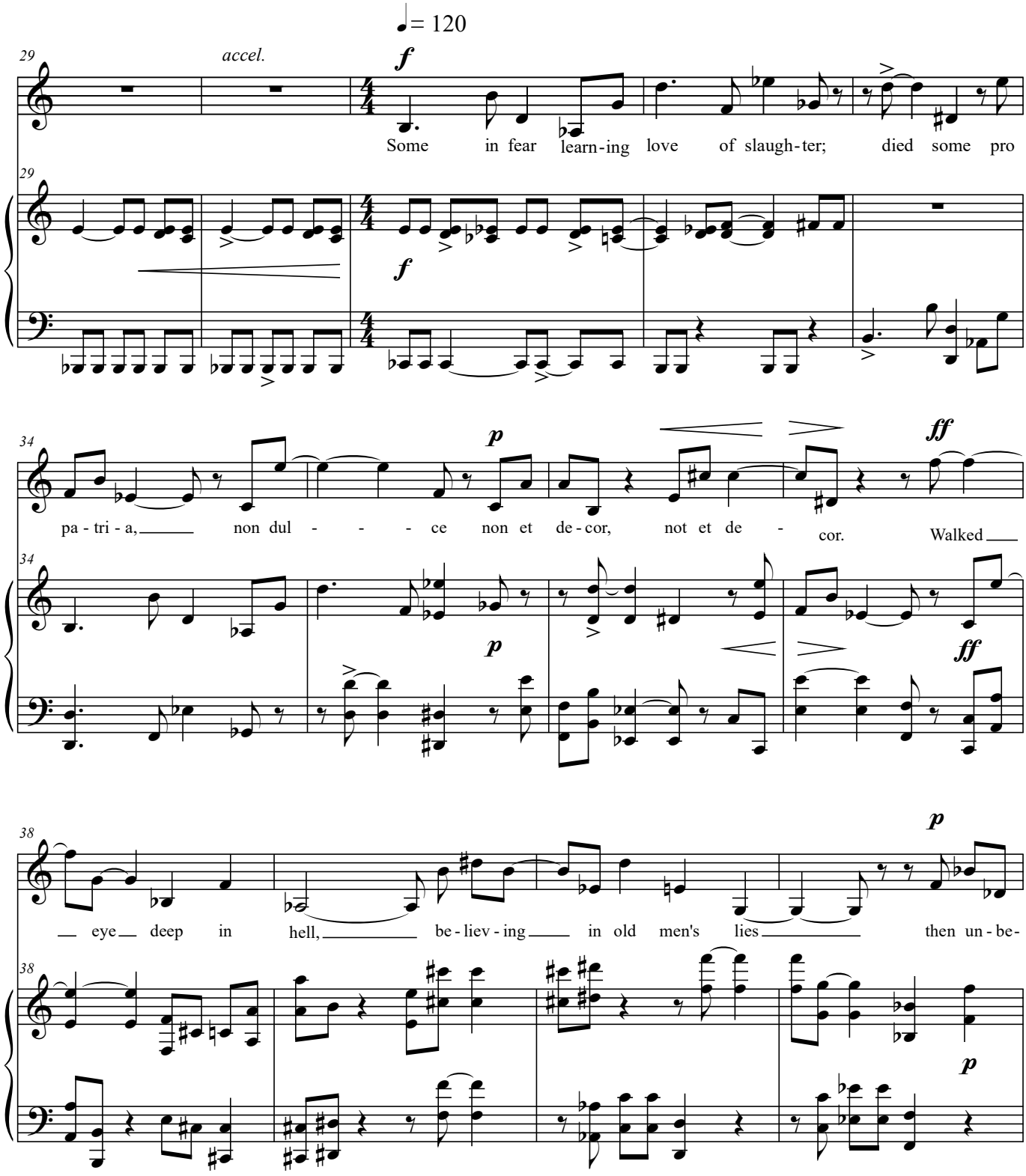

46
legato
bright
mist,
46
49
be - neath
49
52
legato
rit.
bright
mist.
rit.
52
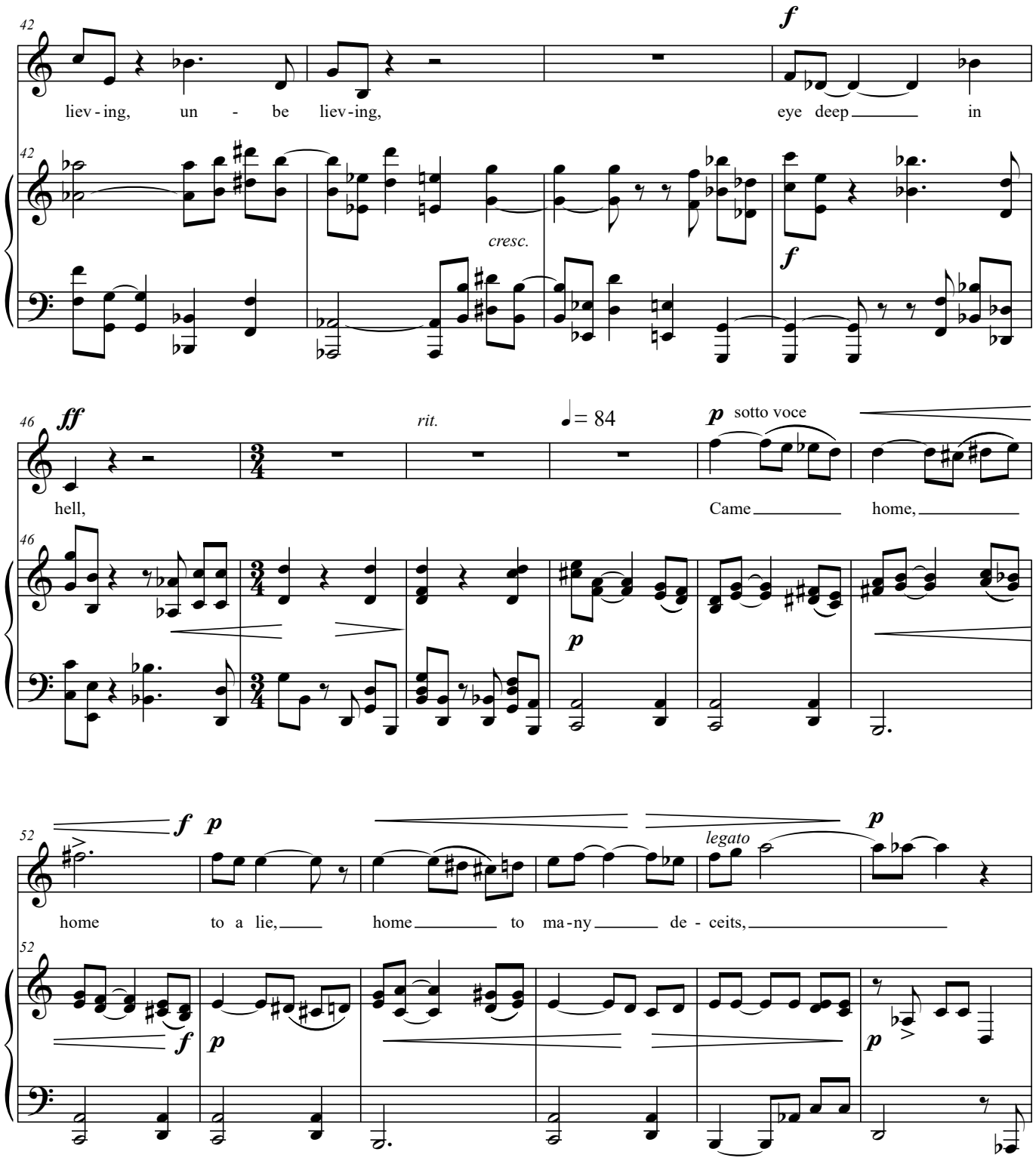

55
♩ = 56
55
8va
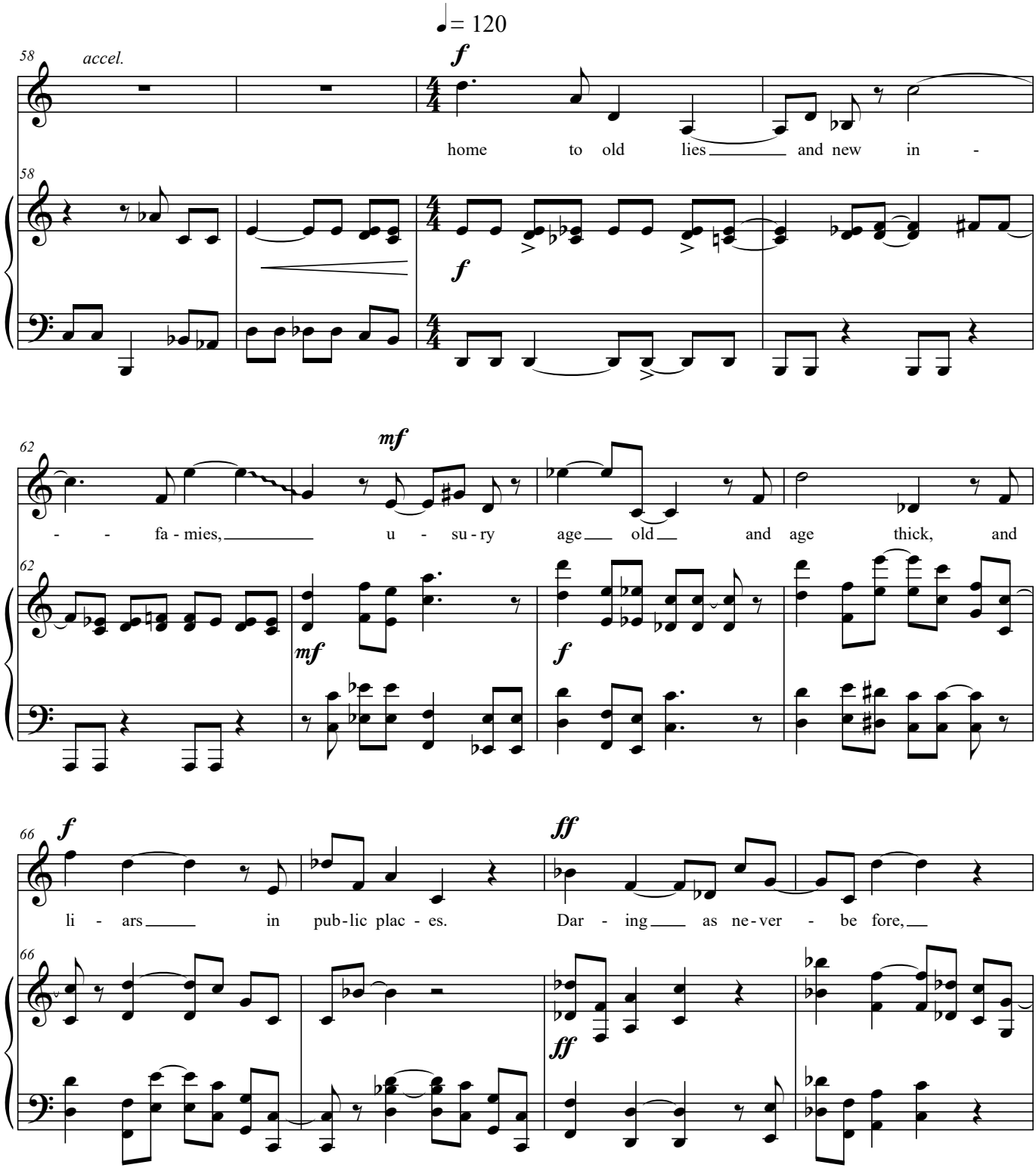
These Fought, In Any Case . . .
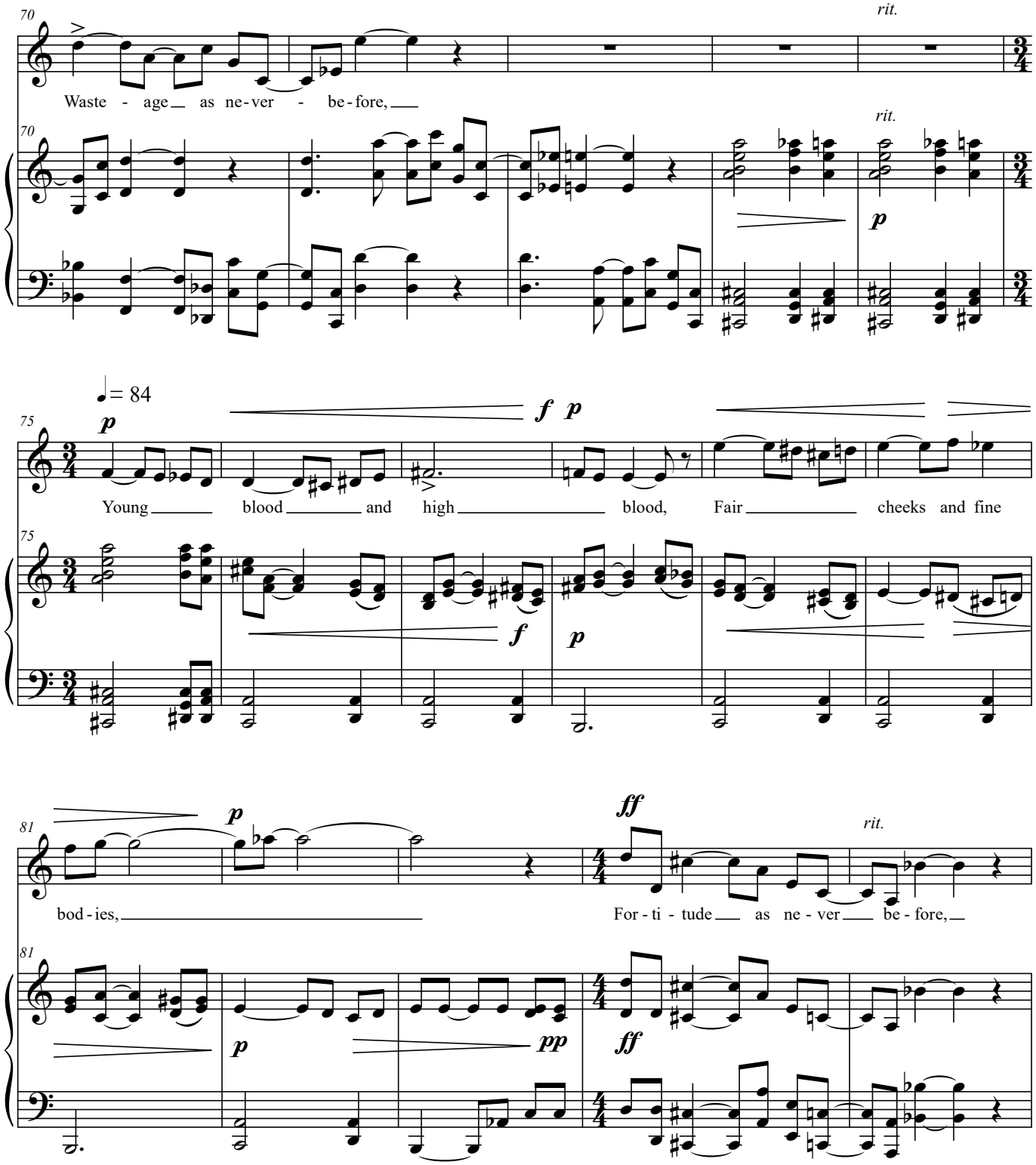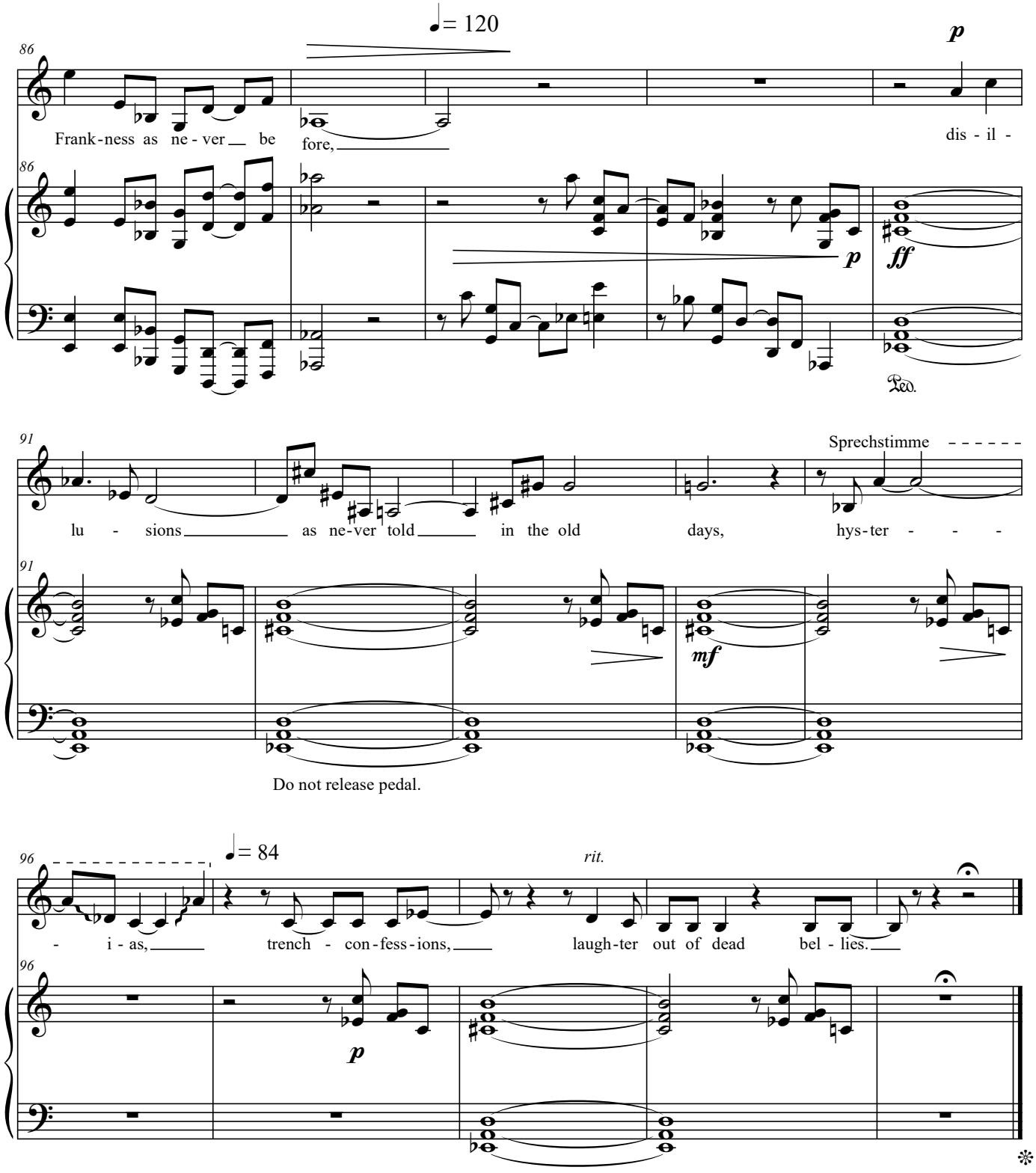



13
ff
Some quick to arm, Some for ad-ven-ture, Some for fear of weak-ness. Some for fear of
13
ff
17
rit.
♩= 84
p sotto voce
cen-sure. Some for love of slaugh - ter, in i-
17
p
23
legato
ma - gi - na-tion, learn - ing la-ter, learn-ing la - - - ter.
23


♩= 120
29
accel.
f
Some in fear learn-ing love of slaugh-ter; died some pro
34
p
ff
pa-tri-a, non dul - - - ce non et de-cor, not et de - cor. Walked
38
p
eye deep in hell, be-liev-ing in old men's lies then un-be-
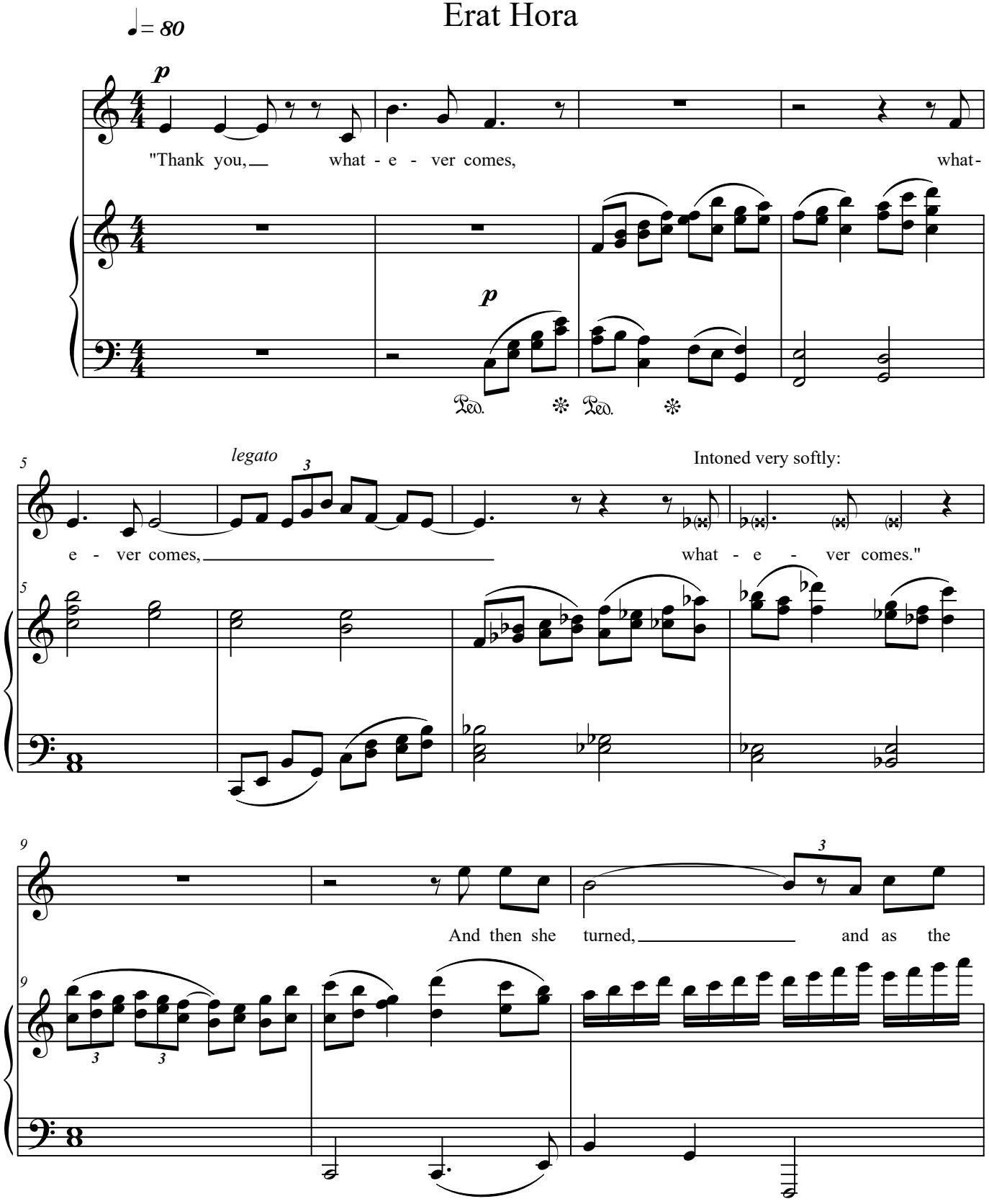

42
liev - ing, un - be liev - ing,
f
eye deep in
cresc.
f
46
ff
hell,
rit.
♩= 84
p sotto voce
Came home,
p
52
f p
home to a lie, home to ma - ny de - ceits,
legato
p
f
p
p
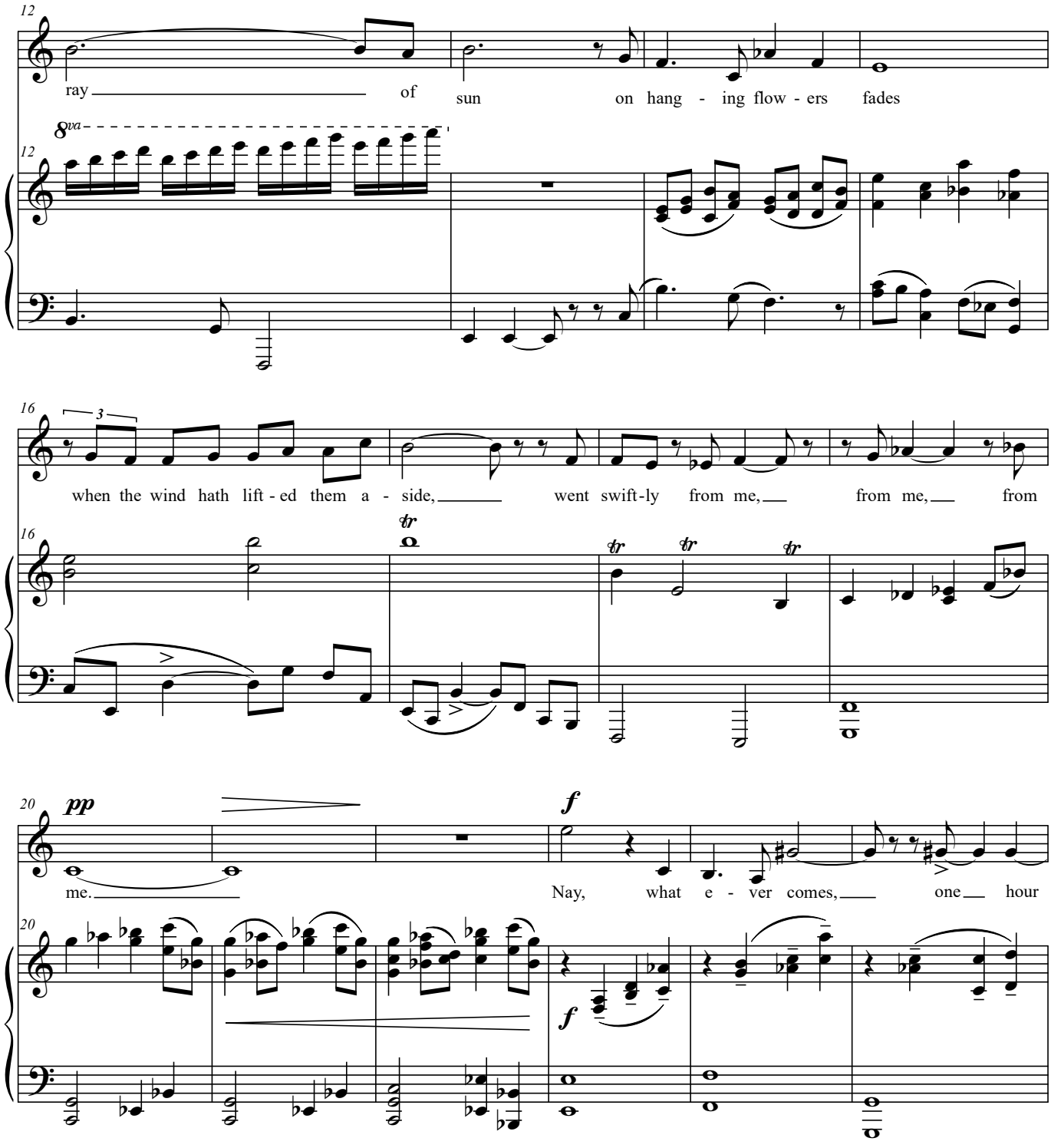

♩= 120
58
accel.
f
home to old lies and new in -
58
f
62
mf
- - fa - mies, u - su - ry age old and age thick, and
62
mf
f
66
f
li - ars in pub - lic plac - es.
ff
Dar - ing as ne - ver - be fore,
66
ff
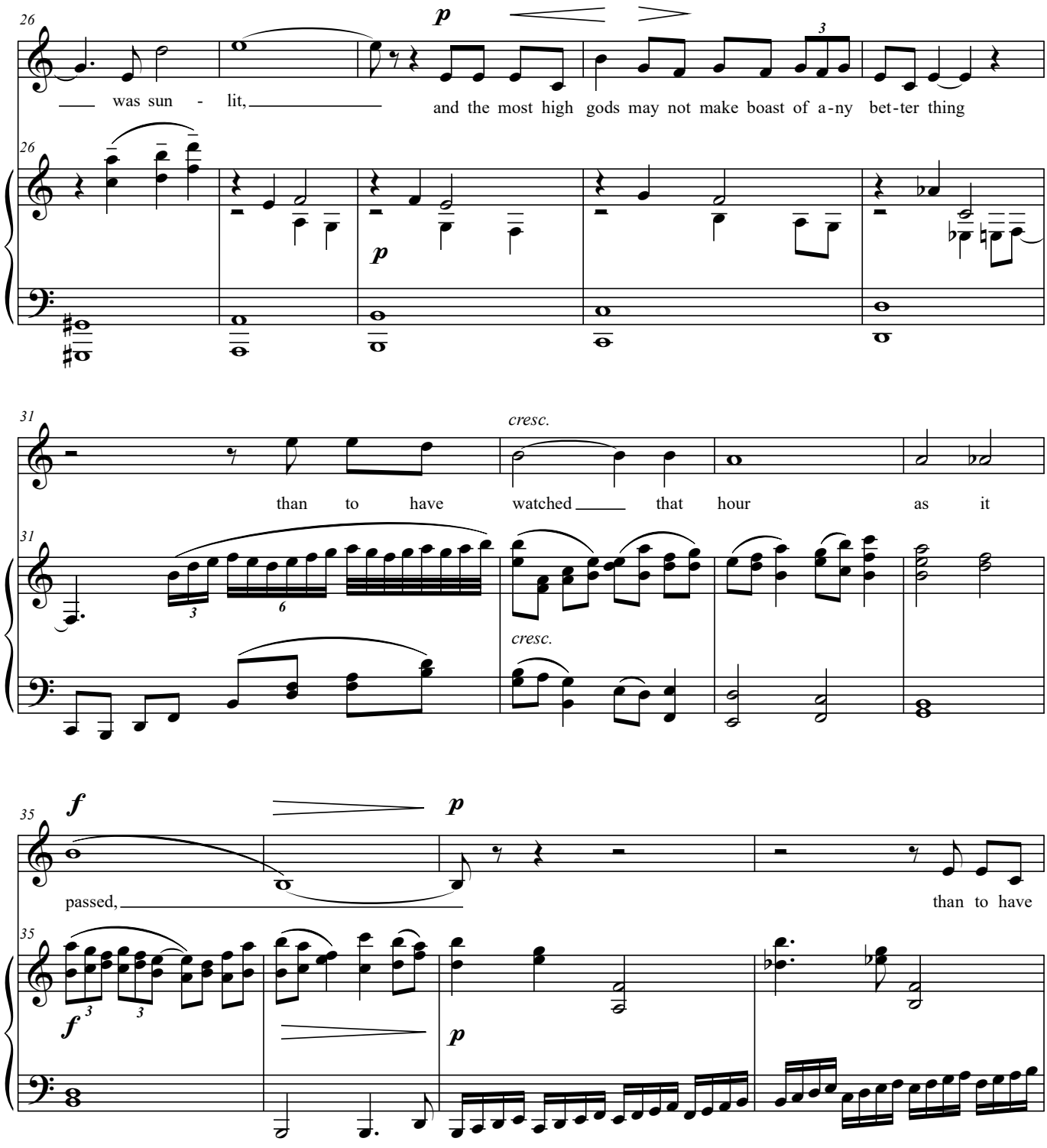

70
rit.
Waste - age as ne-ver - be-fore,
70
rit.
p
♩= 84
75
p
f p
Young blood and high blood, Fair cheeks and fine
75
f
p
81
p
ff
rit.
bod-ies,
For-ti-tude as ne-ver be-fore,
81
p
pp
ff
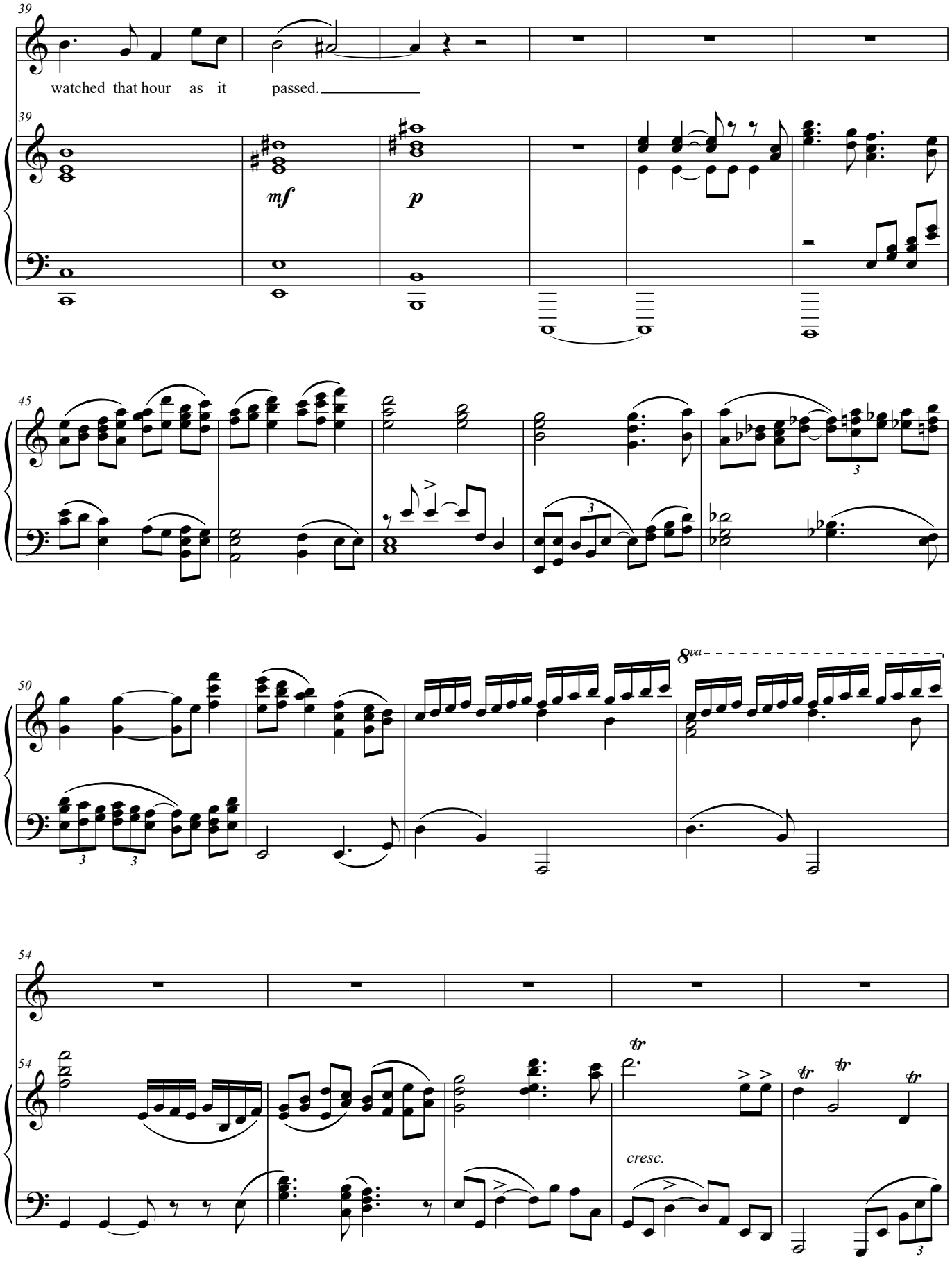

♩= 120
86
Frank-ness as ne-ver be fore,
dis - il -
p
ff
Ped.
91
lu - sions as ne-ver told in the old days, hys-ter - - -
Sprechstimme
mf
Do not release pedal.
96
♩= 84
rit.
- i - as, trench - con-fess-ions, laugh-ter out of dead bel - lies.
p
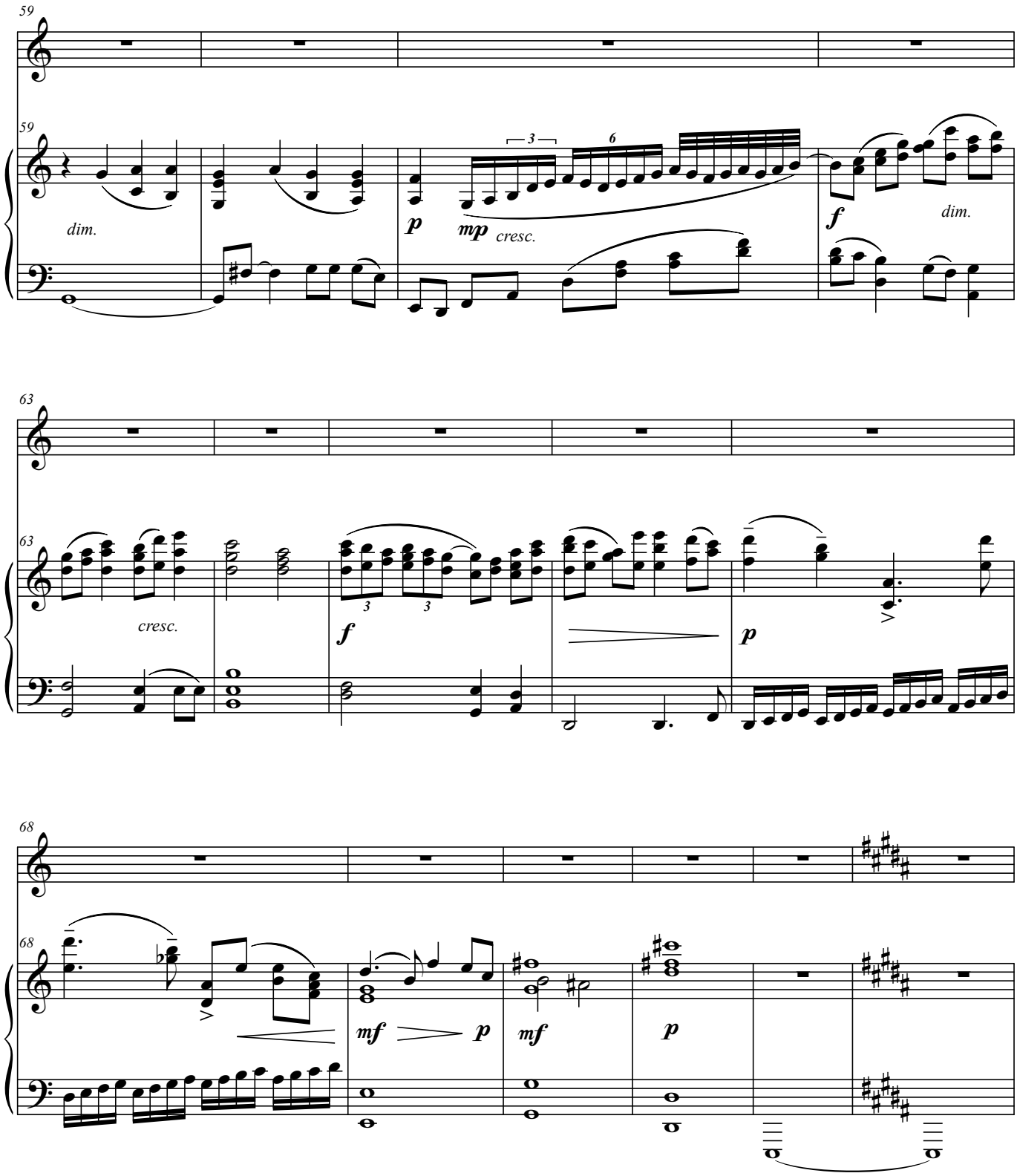
Erat Hora
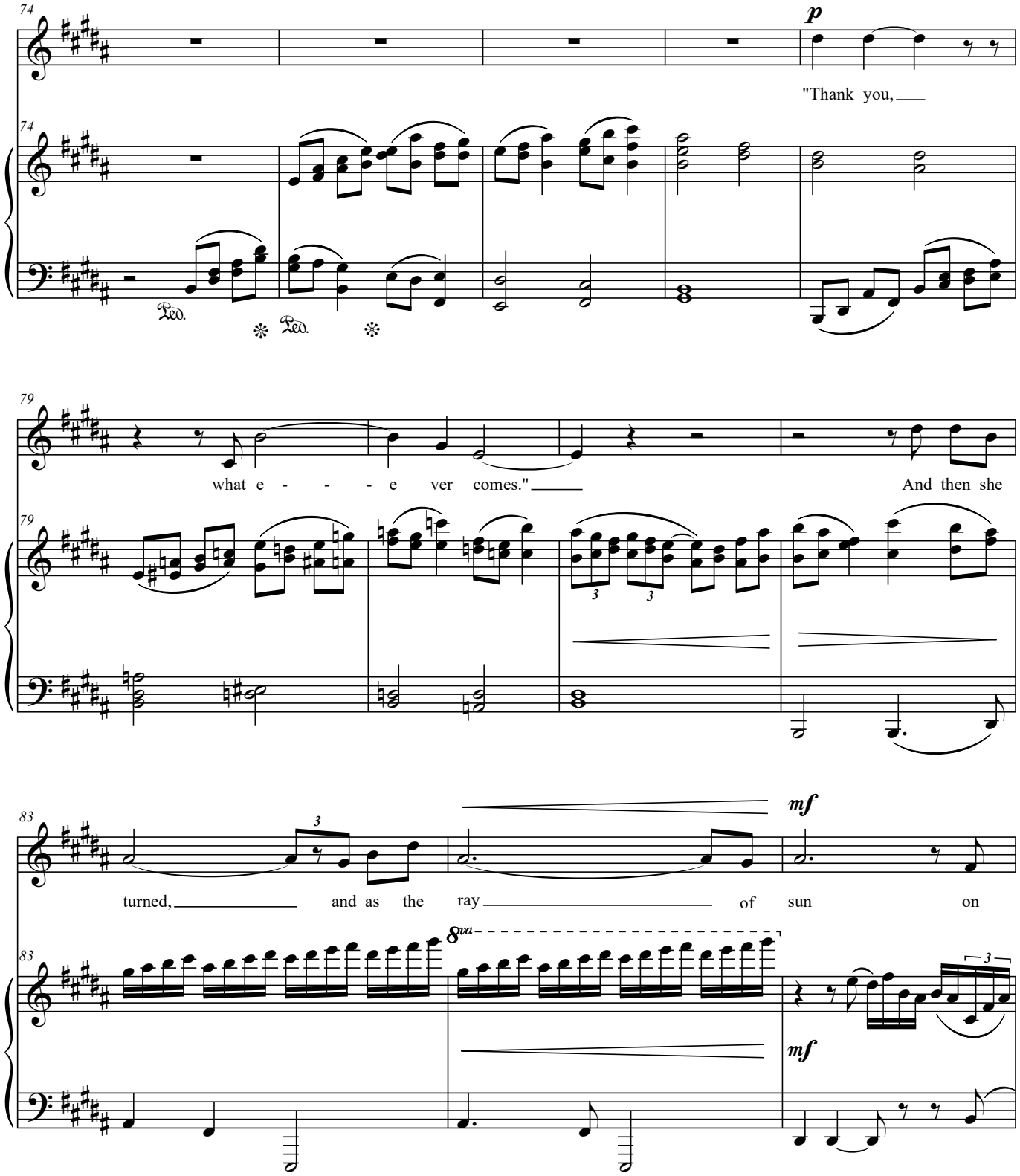

♩= 80
p
"Thank you, what - e - ver comes, what-
p
Ped. Ped.
5
legato
3
Intoned very softly:
e - ver comes, what - e - ver comes."
5
9
3
And then she turned, and as the
9
3
3
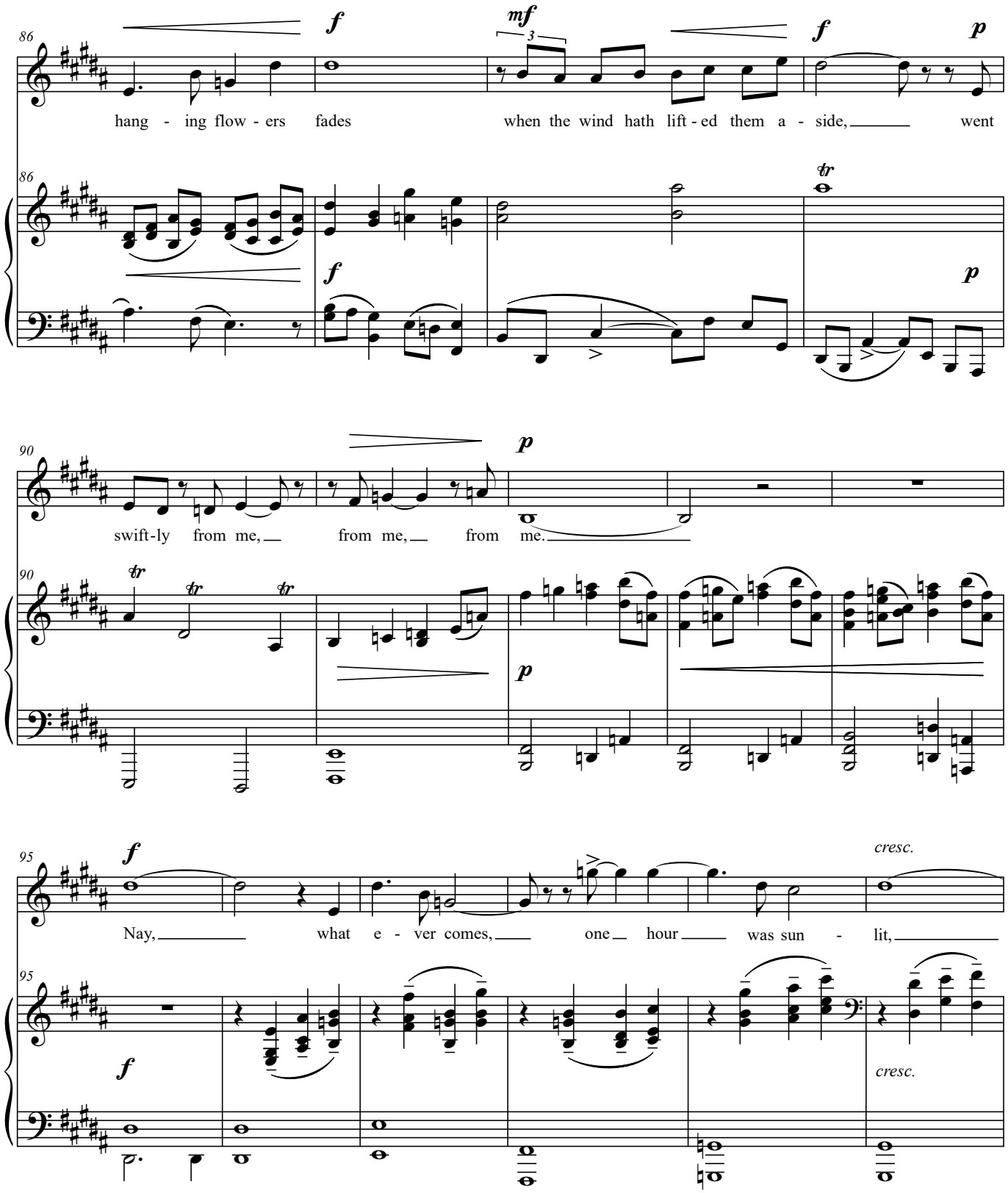

12
ray of sun on hang - ing flow - ers fades
8va
16
when the wind hath lift - ed them a - side, went swift-ly from me, from me, from
tr
20
pp
me.
f
Nay, what e - ver comes, one hour
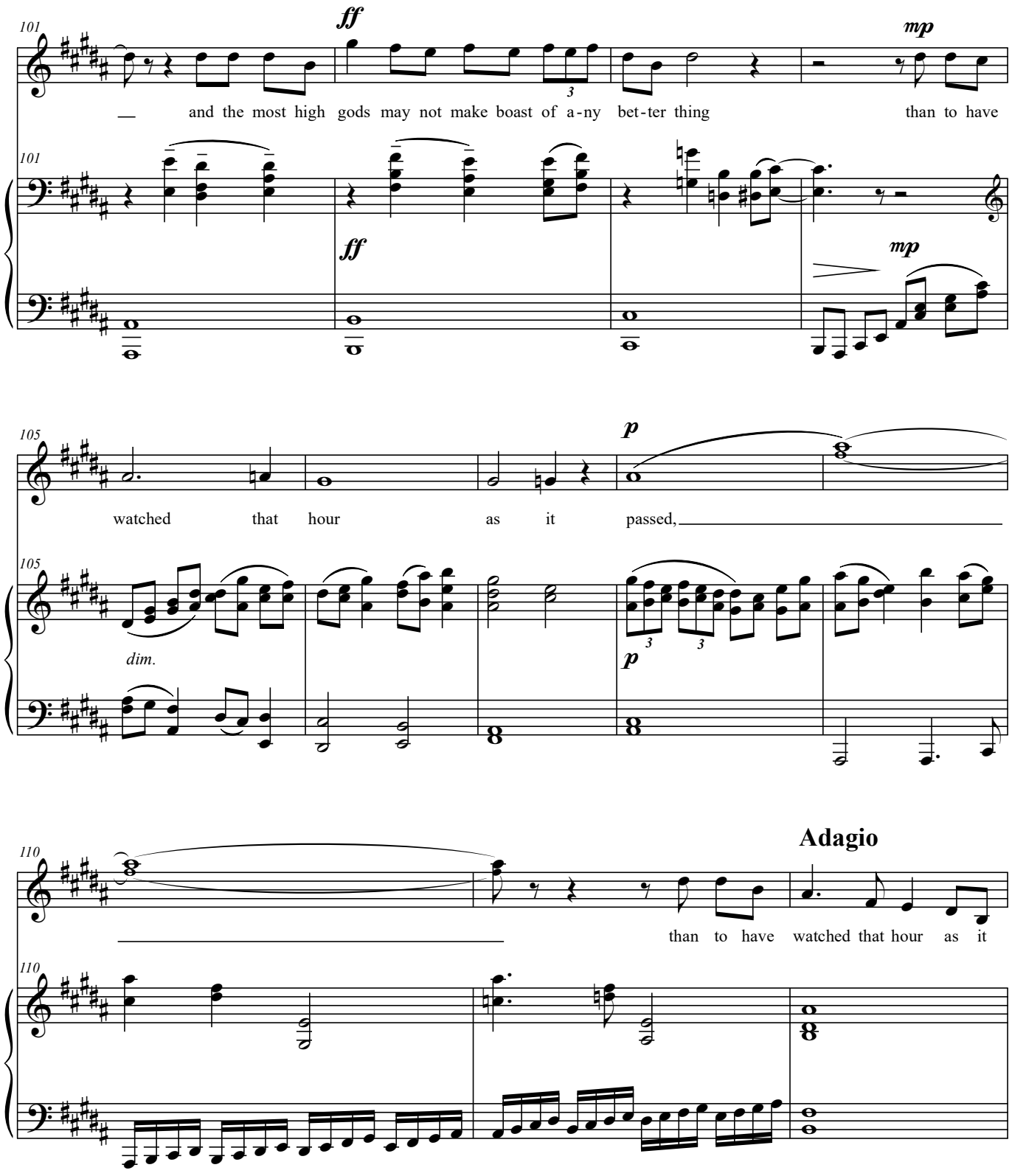

26
p
was sun - lit,
and the most high gods may not make boast of a-ny bet-ter thing
31
cresc.
than to have watched that hour as it
35
f
p
passed,
than to have

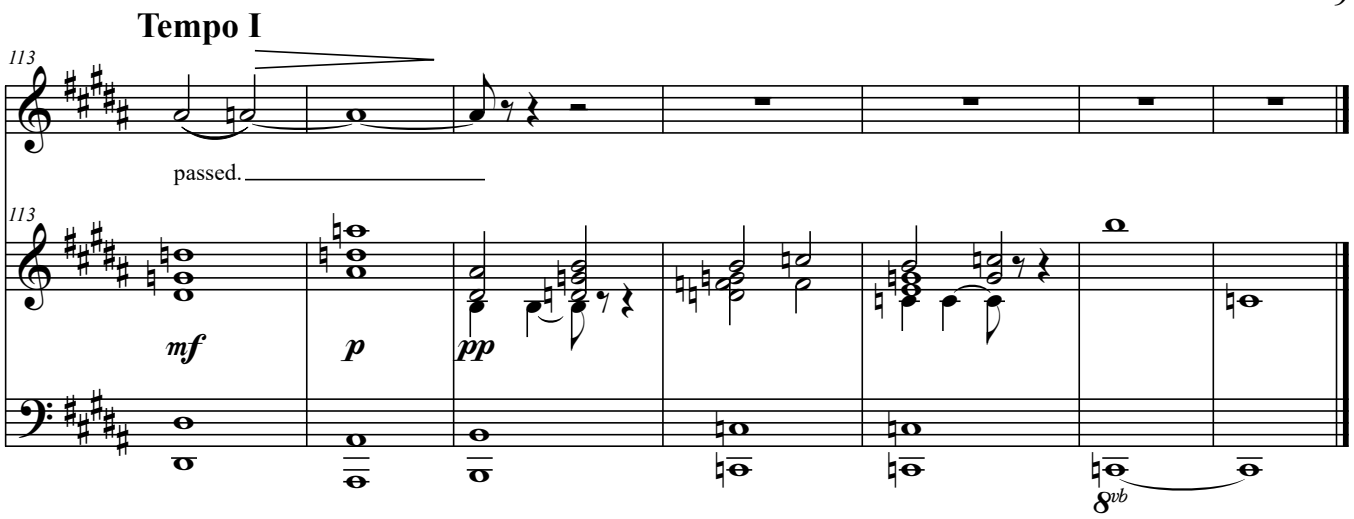

39
watched that hour as it passed.
39
mf
p
45
3
3
50
8va
3
3
54
54
tr
tr
tr
cresc.
3


59
dim.
p
mp
cresc.
3
6
f
dim.
63
cresc.
f
3
3
p
68
mf
p
mf
p
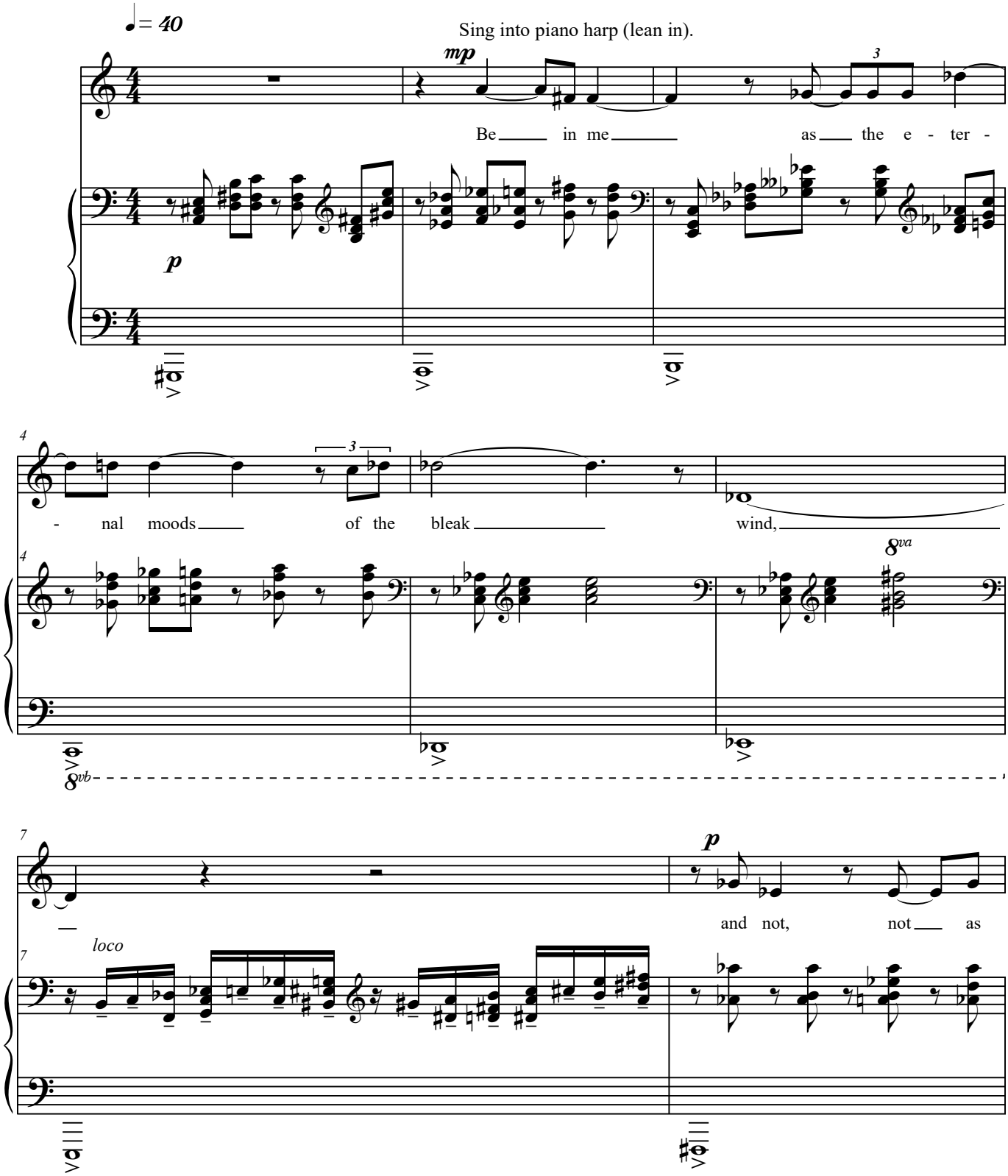

74
p
"Thank you,
Ped.
Ped.
79
what e - - - - e ver comes."
And then she
83
mf
turned, and as the ray of sun on
8va
mf
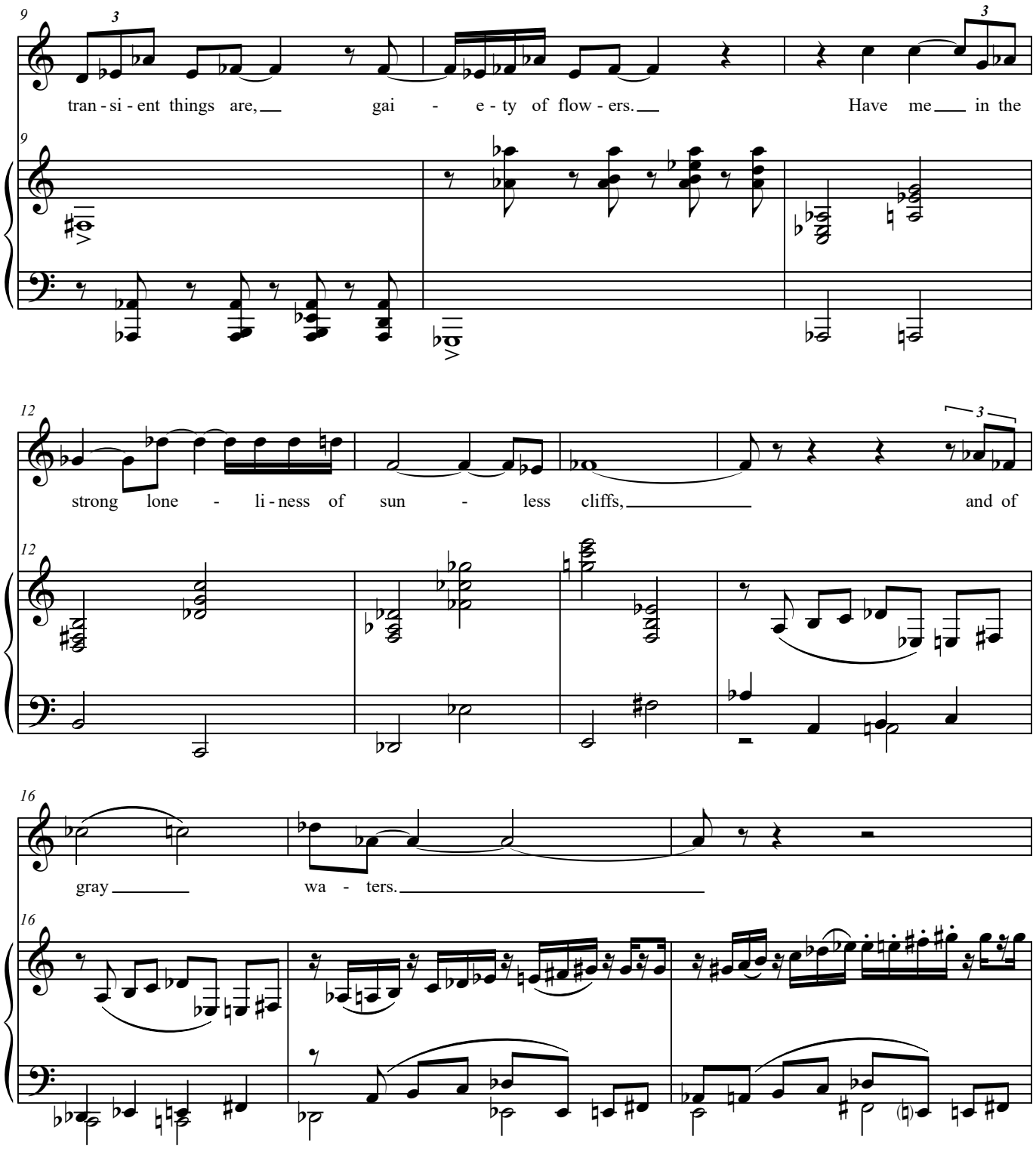

86
f
mf
3
f
p
hang - ing flow - ers fades when the wind hath lift - ed them a - side, went
86
f
tr
p
90
p
swift-ly from me, from me, from me.
90
tr
tr
tr
p
95
f
cresc.
Nay, what e - ver comes, one hour was sun - lit,
95
f
cresc.
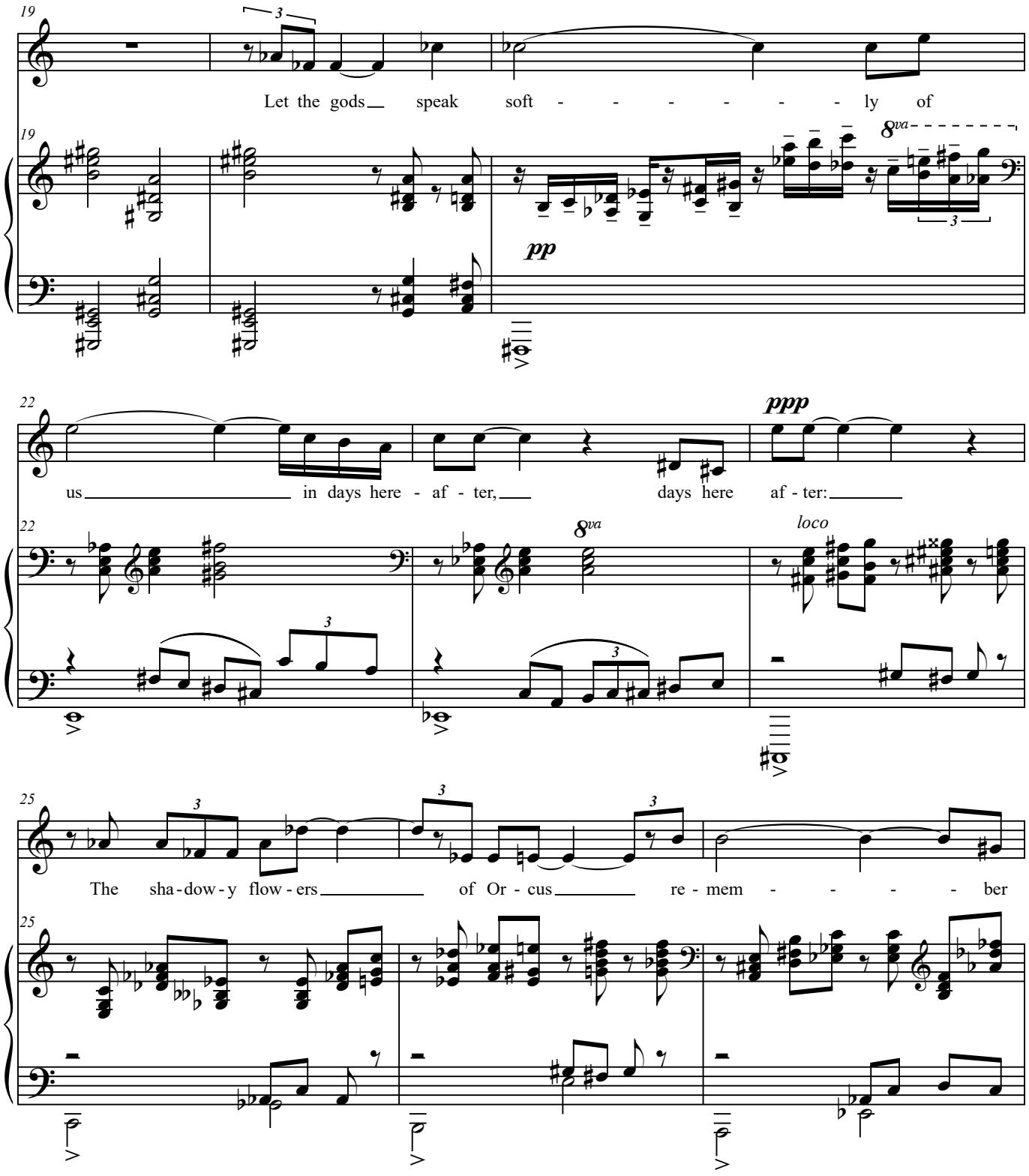

101
ff
mp
and the most high gods may not make boast of a-ny bet-ter thing than to have
101
ff
mp
105
p
watched that hour as it passed,
105
dim.
p
110
Adagio
than to have watched that hour as it
110


Tempo I
113
passed.
113
mf
p
pp
8vb

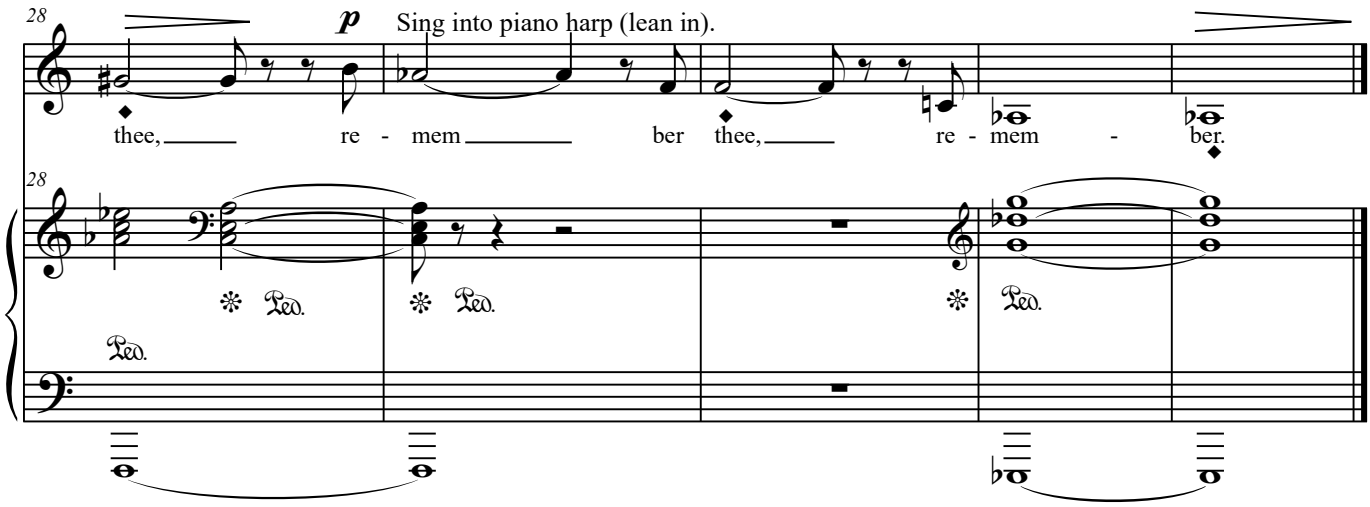
Doria


♩= 40
Sing into piano harp (lean in).
mp
Be in me as the e - ter -
p
- nal moods of the bleak wind,
8va
8vb
p
and not, not as
loco
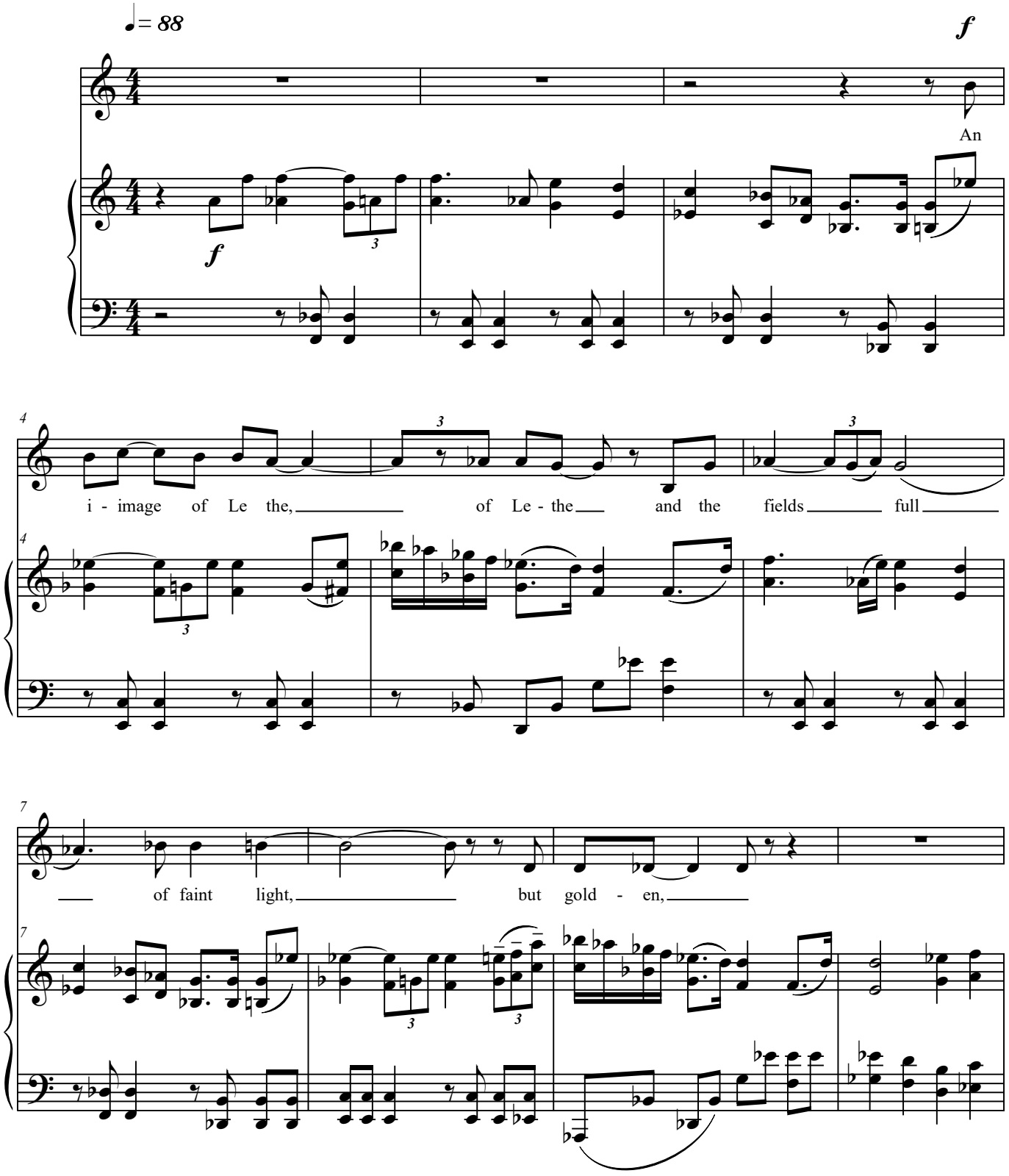

9
tran - si - ent things are, gai - e - ty of flow - ers. Have me in the
12
strong lone - li - ness of sun - less cliffs, and of
16
gray wa - ters.
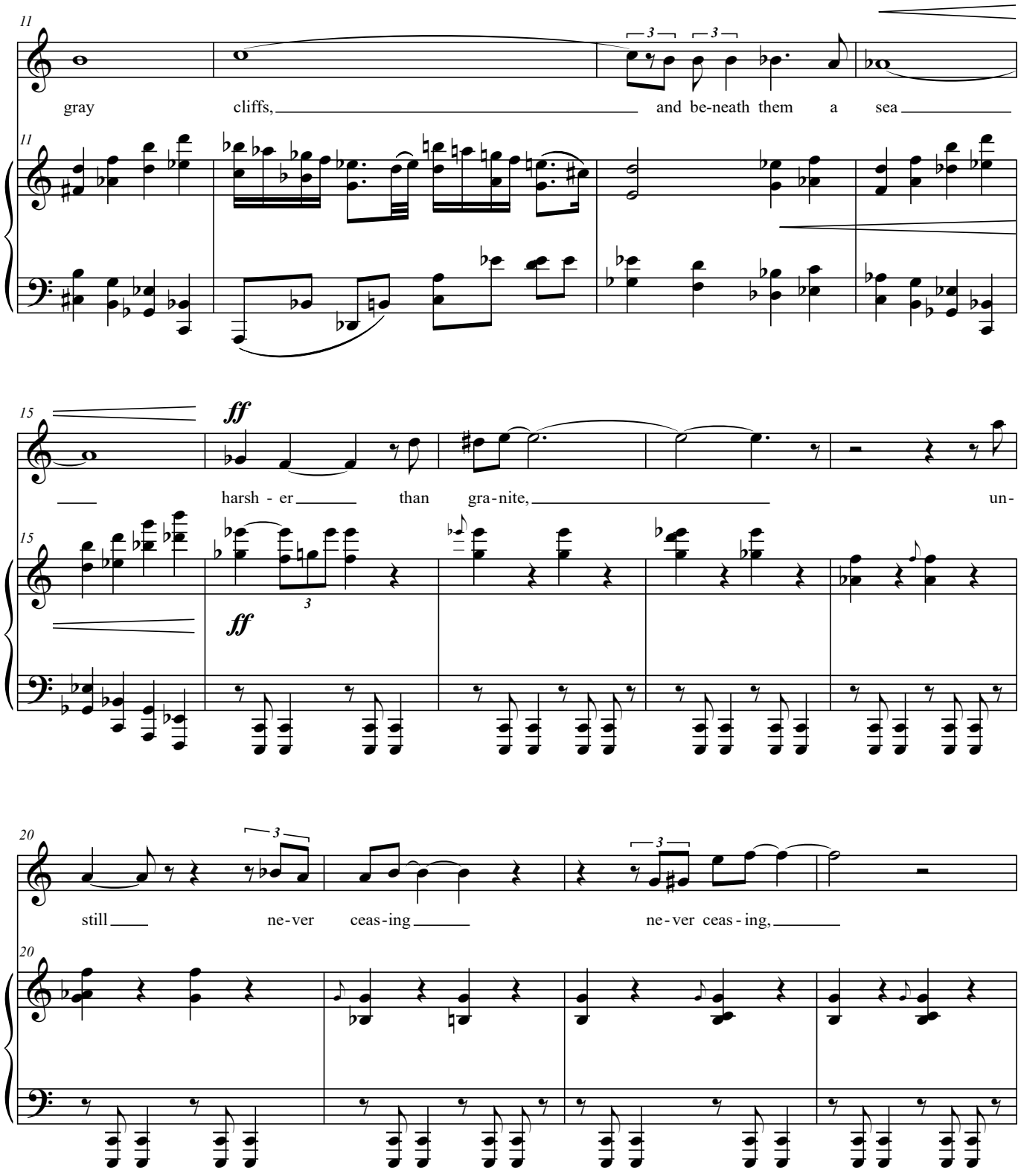

19
Let the gods speak soft - - - - - - - ly of
8va
pp
22
us in days here - af - ter, days here af - ter:
ppp
8va
loco
25
The sha - dow - y flow - ers of Or - cus re - mem - - - - ber
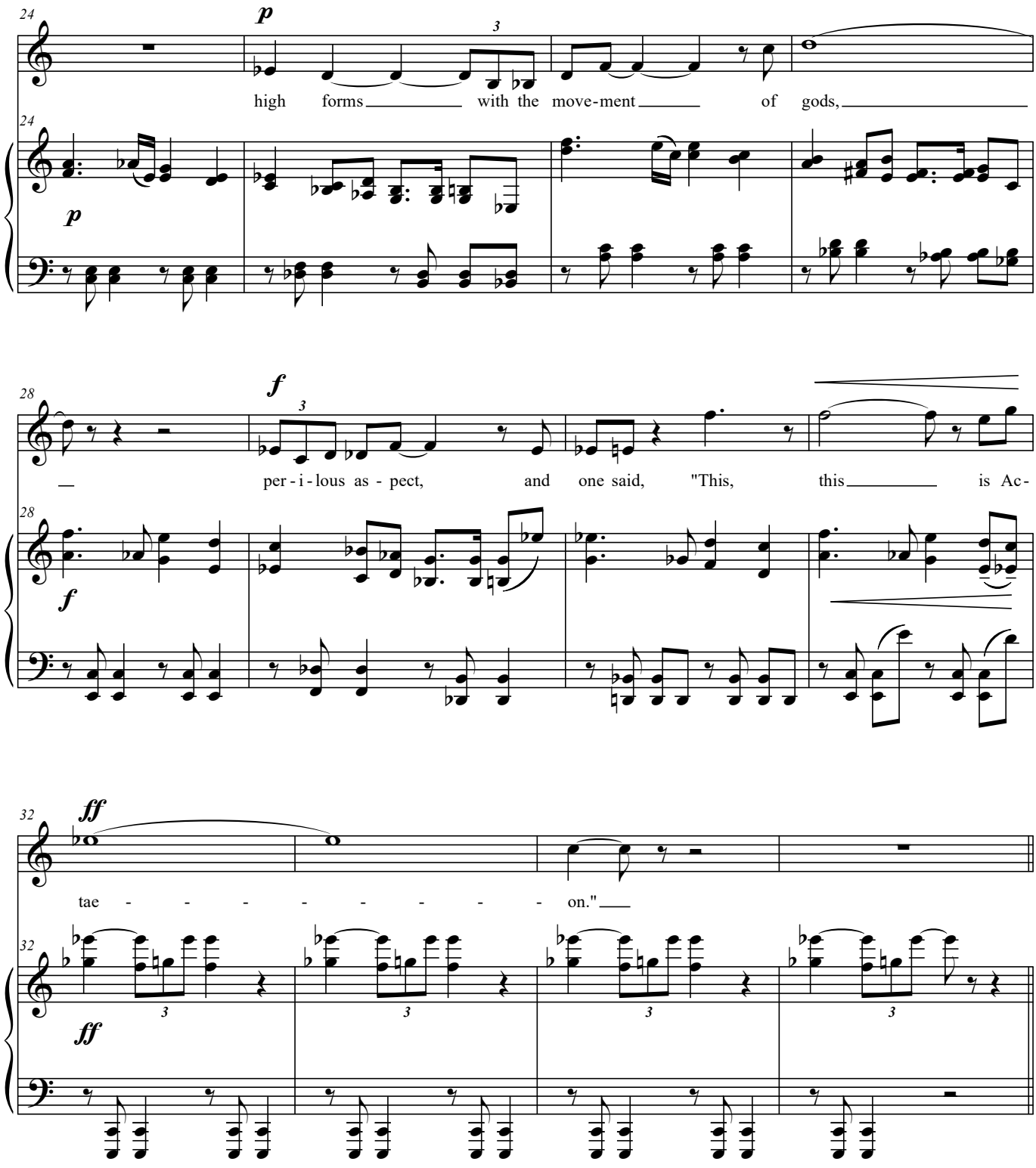
◆ = With palm, strike middle-register strings of piano harp.
Sound should be soft but resonant.
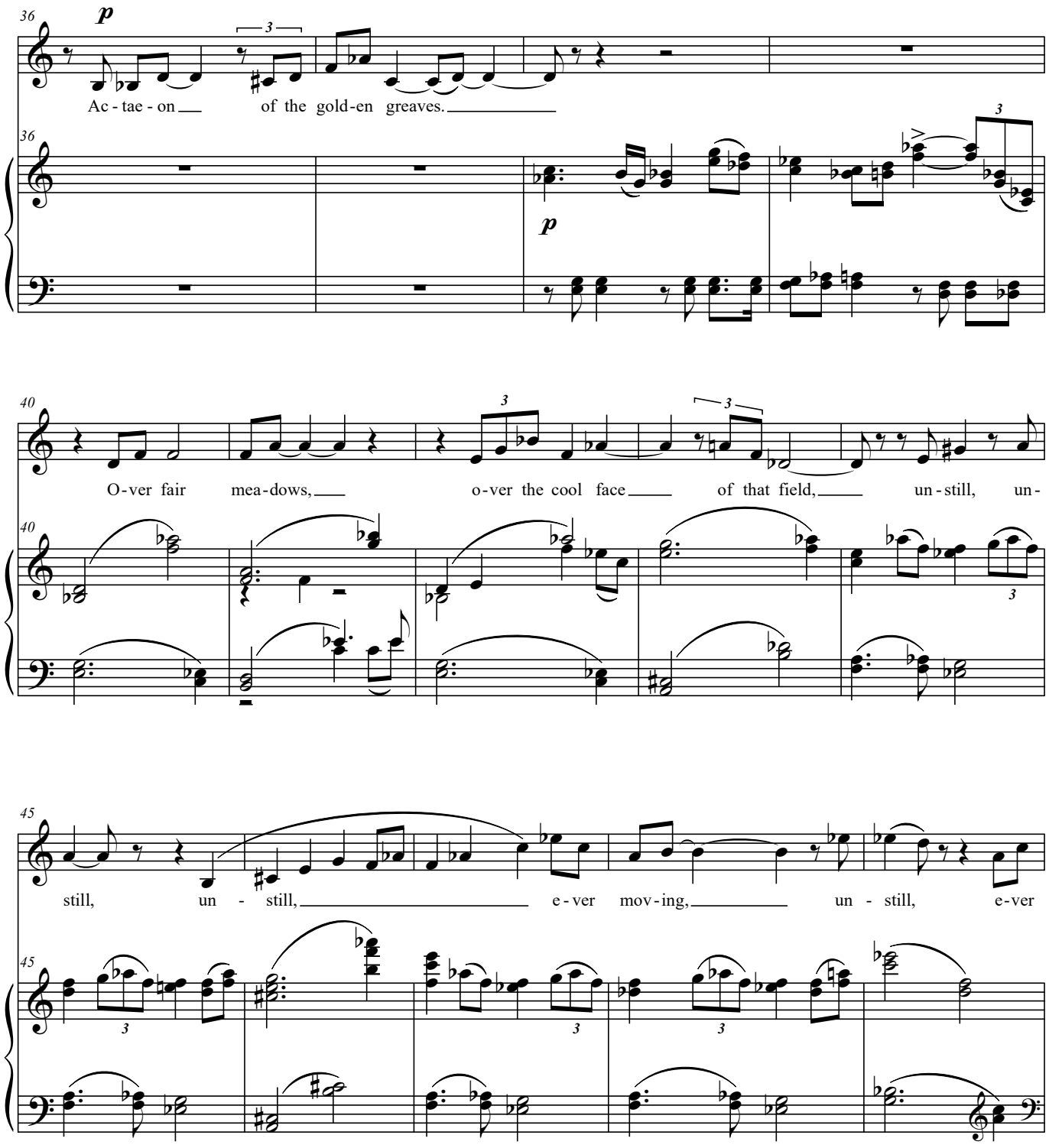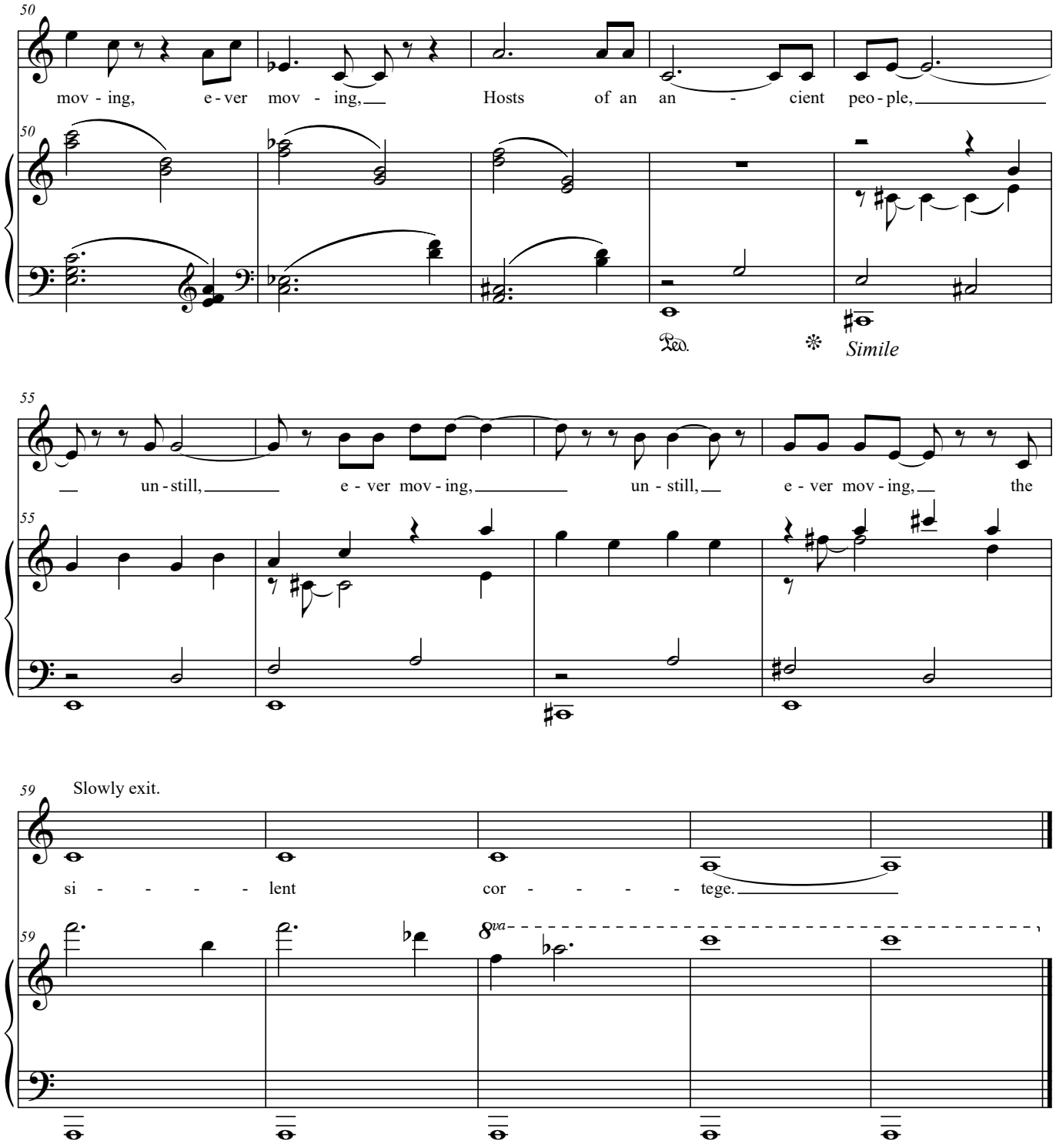


The Coming of War




11
gray cliffs, and be-neath them a sea
11
15
ff
harsh - er than gra-nite, un-
15
ff
20
still ne-ver ceas-ing ne-ver ceas - ing,
20


24
p
high forms with the move-ment of gods,
28
f
per-i-lous as-pect, and one said, "This, this is Ac-
32
ff
tae - - - - - - - - on."


36
p
Ac - tae - on of the gold-en greaves.
36
p
40
O-ver fair mea-dows, o-ver the cool face of that field, un-still, un-
40
45
still, un - still, e-ver mov-ing, un - still, e-ver
45


50
mov - ing, e - ver mov - ing, Hosts of an an - cient peo - ple,
Ped. * Simile
55
un - still, e - ver mov - ing, un - still, e - ver mov - ing, the
59
Slowly exit.
si - - - - - lent cor - - - - - tege.
8va