Song Acts

Twelve Songs to Texts from Ezra Pound

For Mezzo Soprano, Baritone, and Piano

Book II: Erat Hora [An Hour There Was]

2008, 2017

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 and 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 famously expressed it, life felt as if human beings had fallen off the calendar. The result on one hand was a loss of the sense of the numinous that 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 again, in new and perhaps more dangerous forms than in their first iteration, so it seemed more than timely to view the early years of the present century through the prism of their counterparts in the last.

The work resists synopsis because keeping narrative at a remove is one of its aims; the idea is to preserve the narrative dimension without telling a particular story. But 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 not only (or not primarily) in its own right but 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-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 texts are in the public domain.

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.

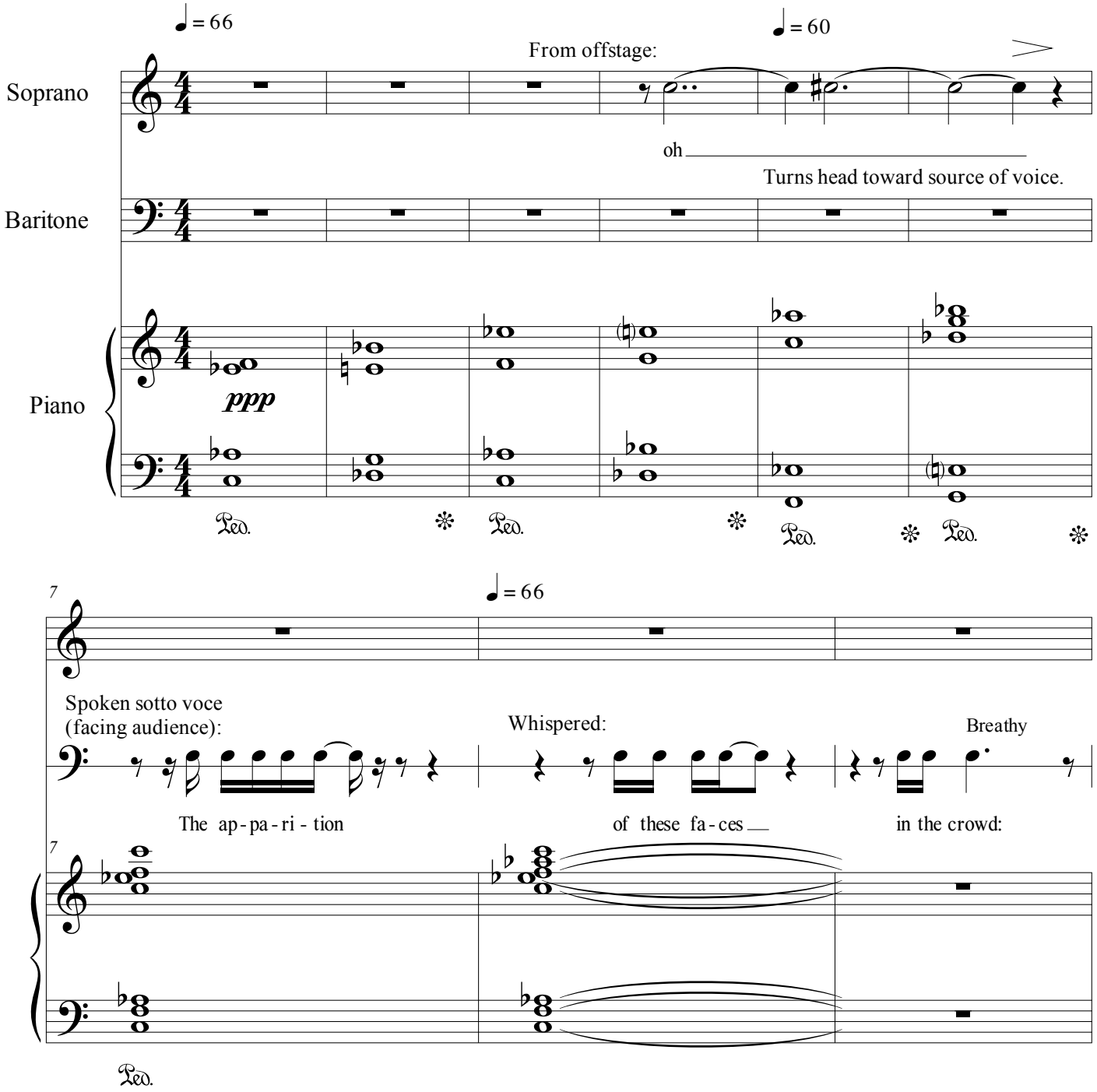
5. Doria

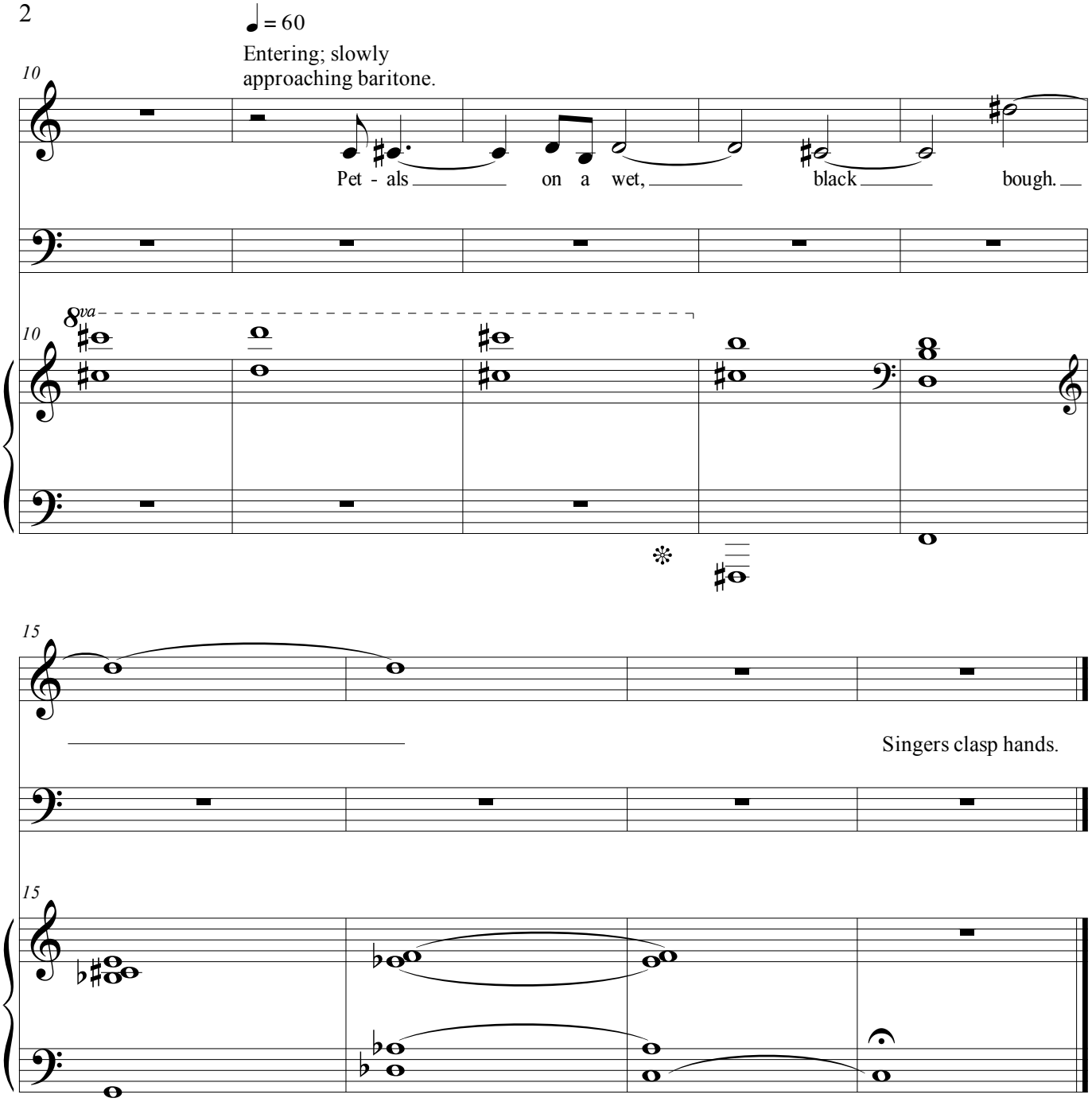
Be in me as the eternal moods
        of the bleak wind, and not
As transient things are—
        gaiety of flowers.
Have me in the strong loneliness
        of sunless cliffs
And of gray waters.
        Let the gods speak softly of us
In days hereafter,
        The shadowy flowers of Orcus
Remember thee.

6. The Coming of War: Actaeon

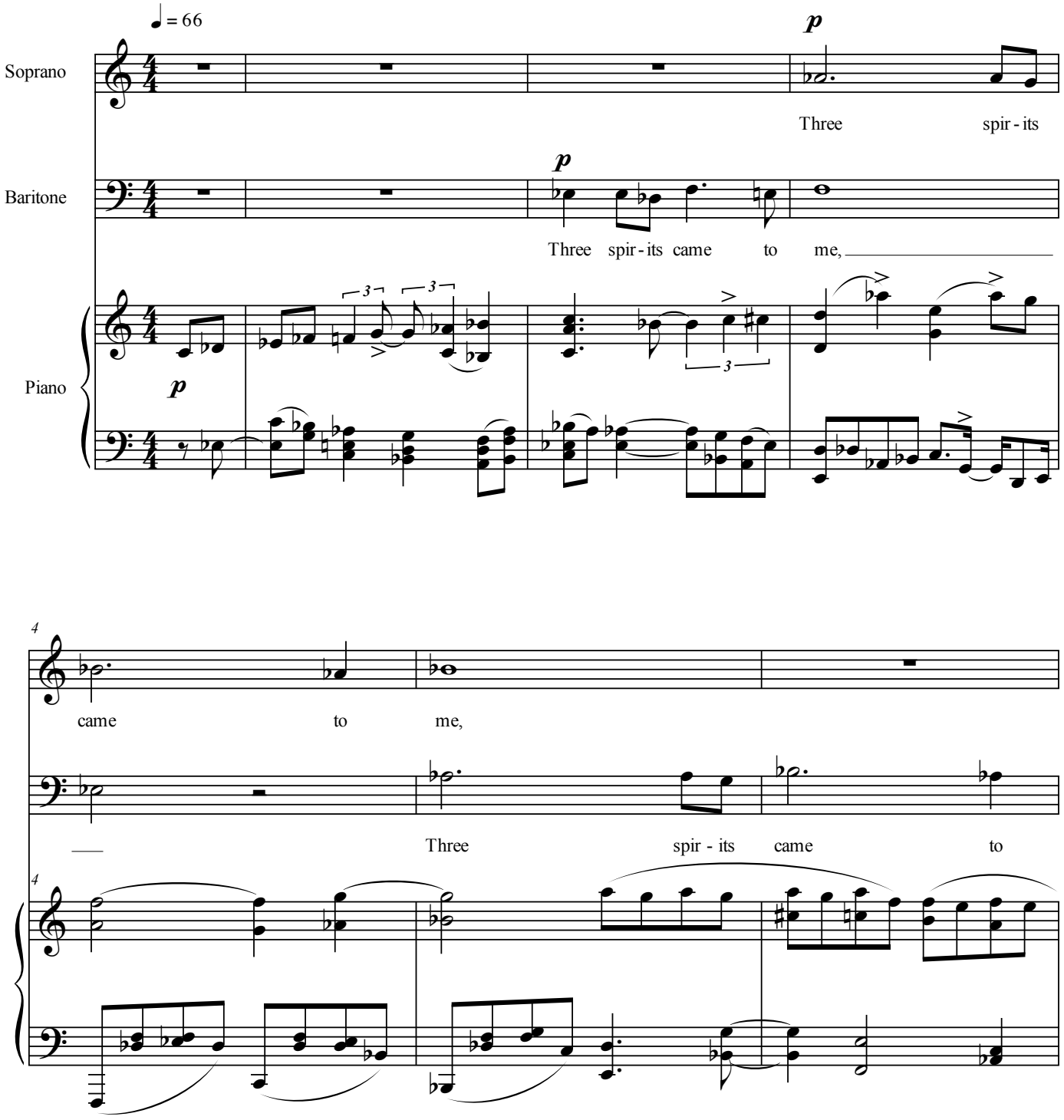
An image of Lethe,
    and the fields
Full of faint light
    but golden,
Gray cliffs,
    and beneath them
A sea
Harsher than granite,
    unstill, never ceasing;
High forms
    with the movement of gods,
Perilous aspect;
    And one said:
"This is Actaeon."
    Actaeon of [the] golden greaves!
Over fair meadows,
Over the cool face of that field,
Unstill, ever moving,
Hosts of an ancient people,
The silent cortège.

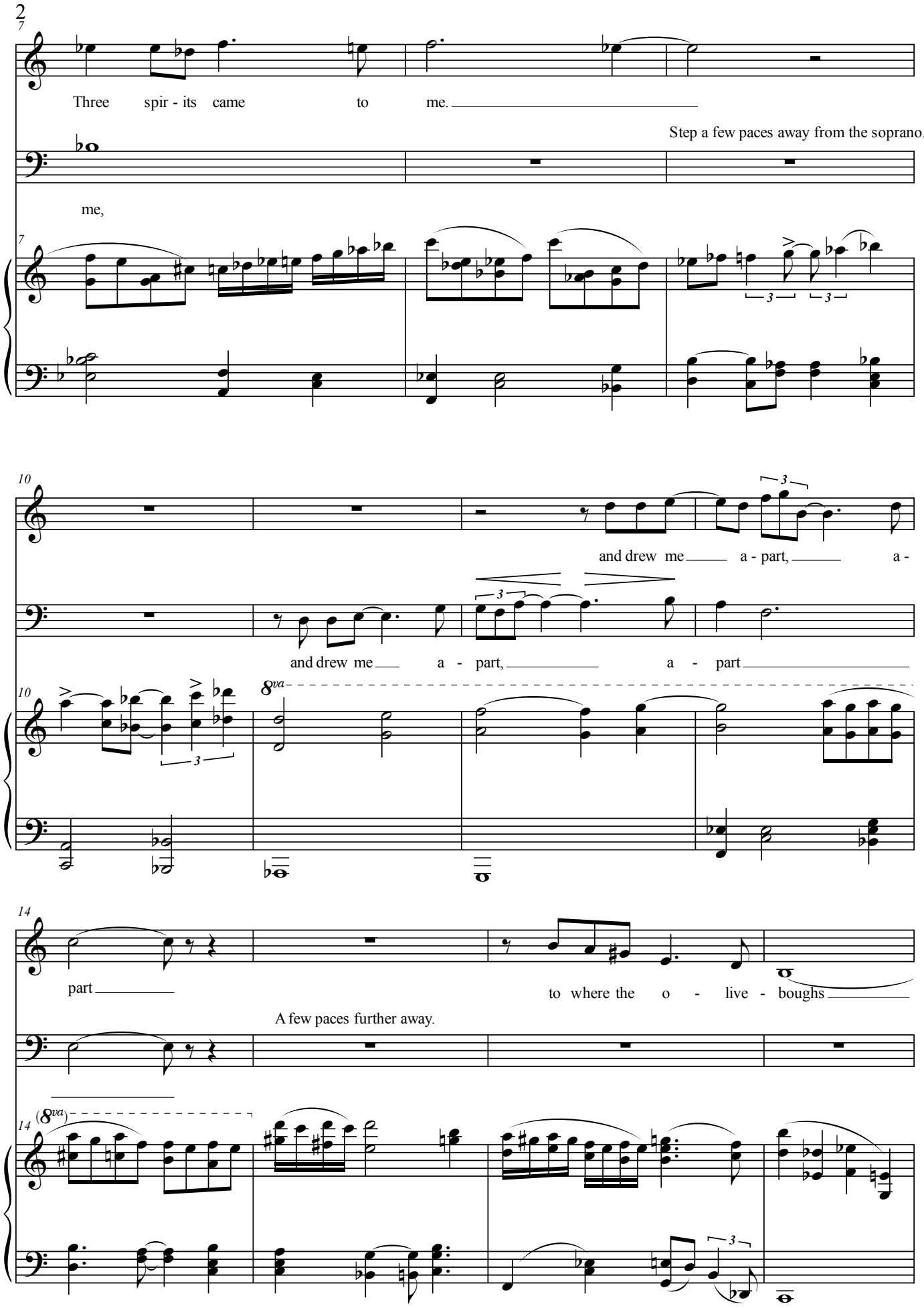
In a Station of the Metro

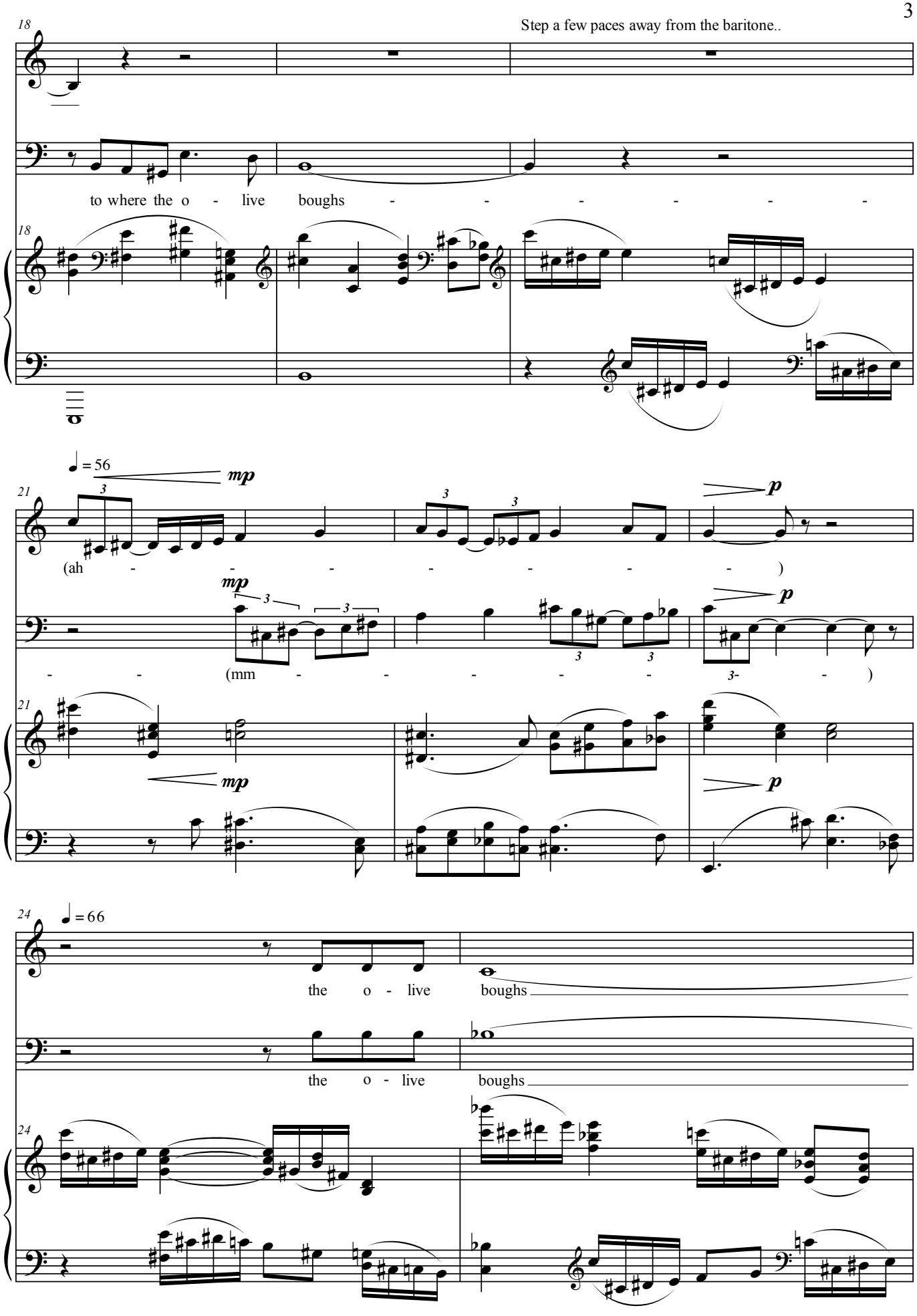


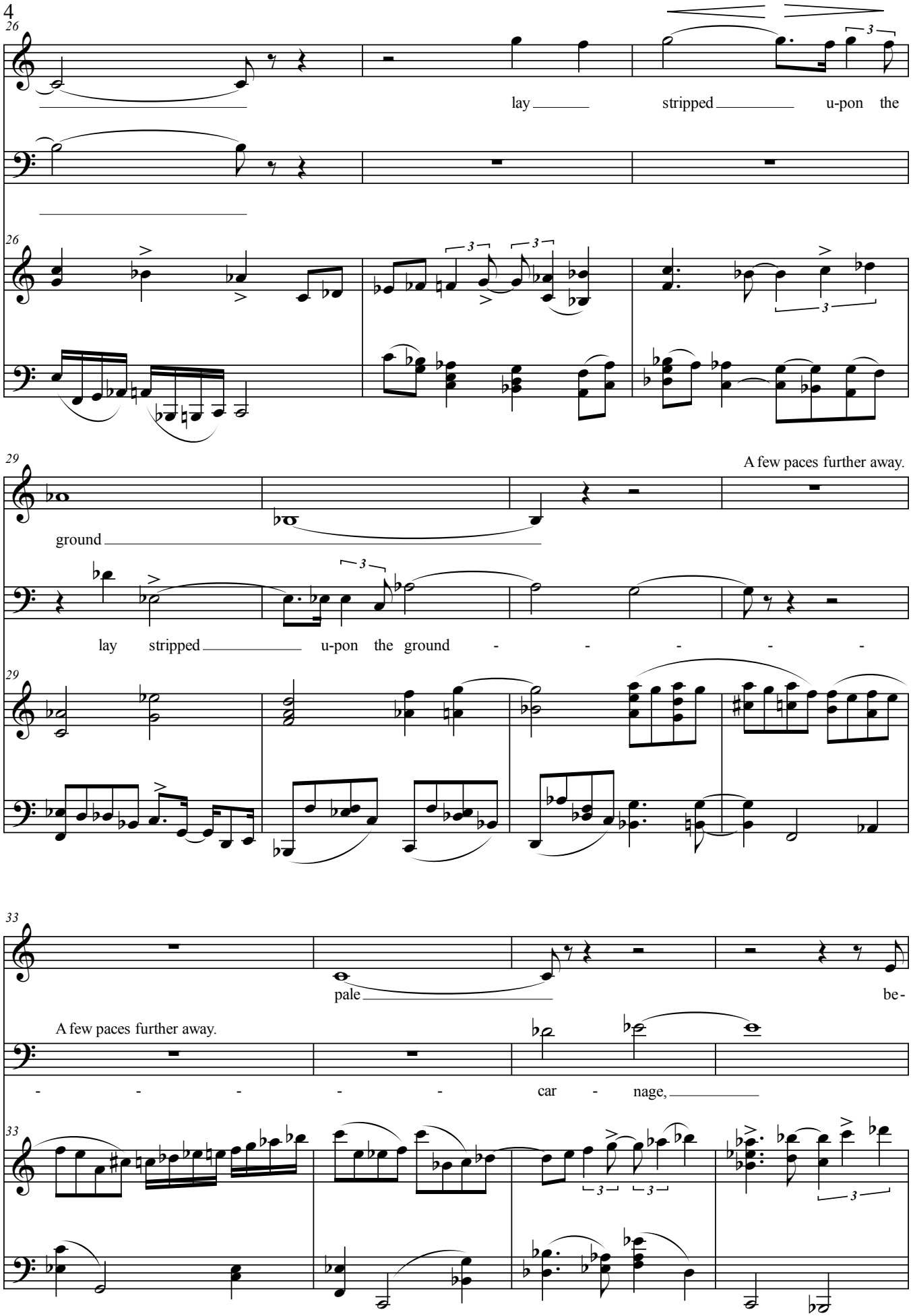

♩ = 60
Entering; slowly
approaching baritone.
10
Pet - als on a wet, black bough.
8va
10
15
Singers clasp hands.
15

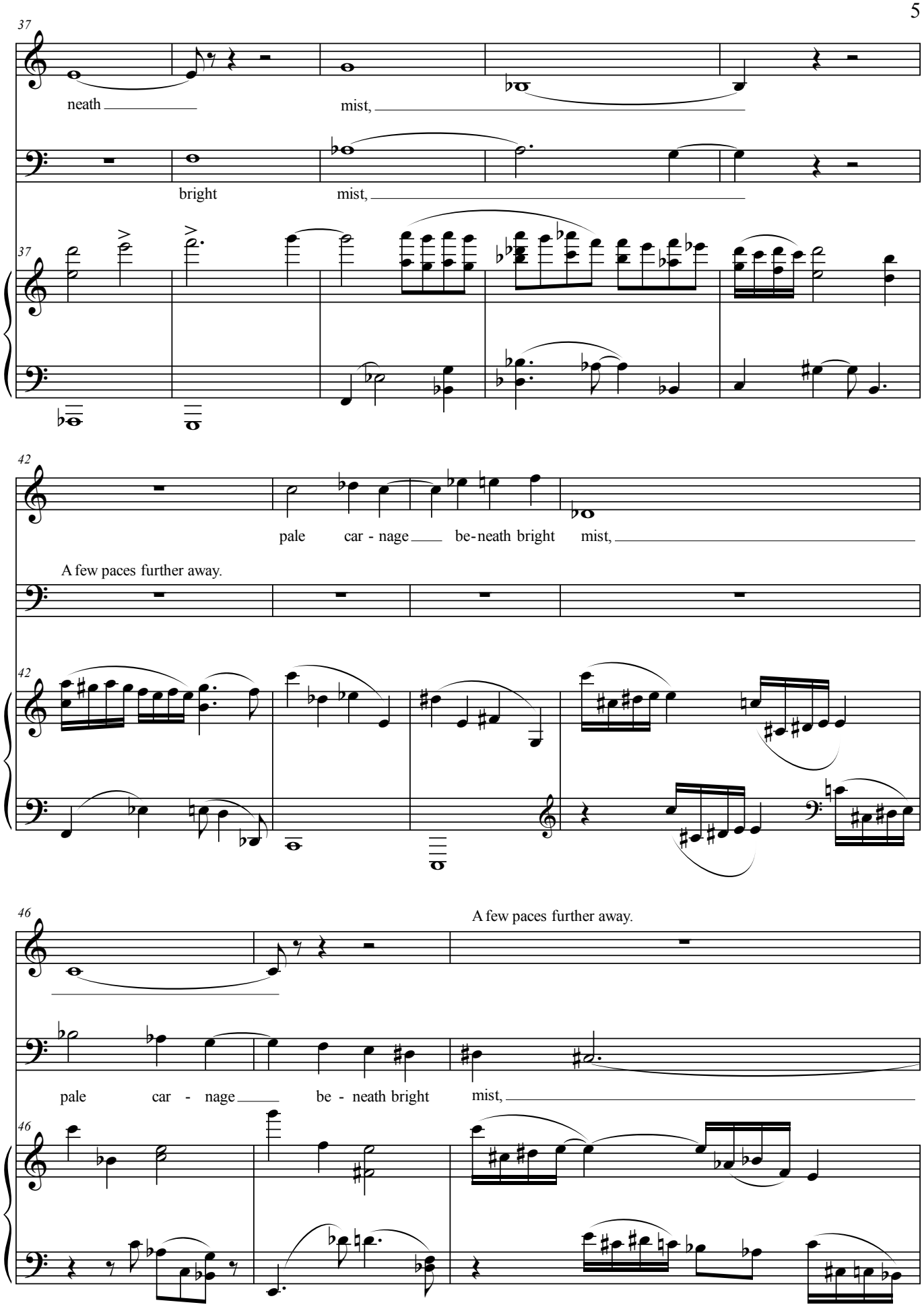
April

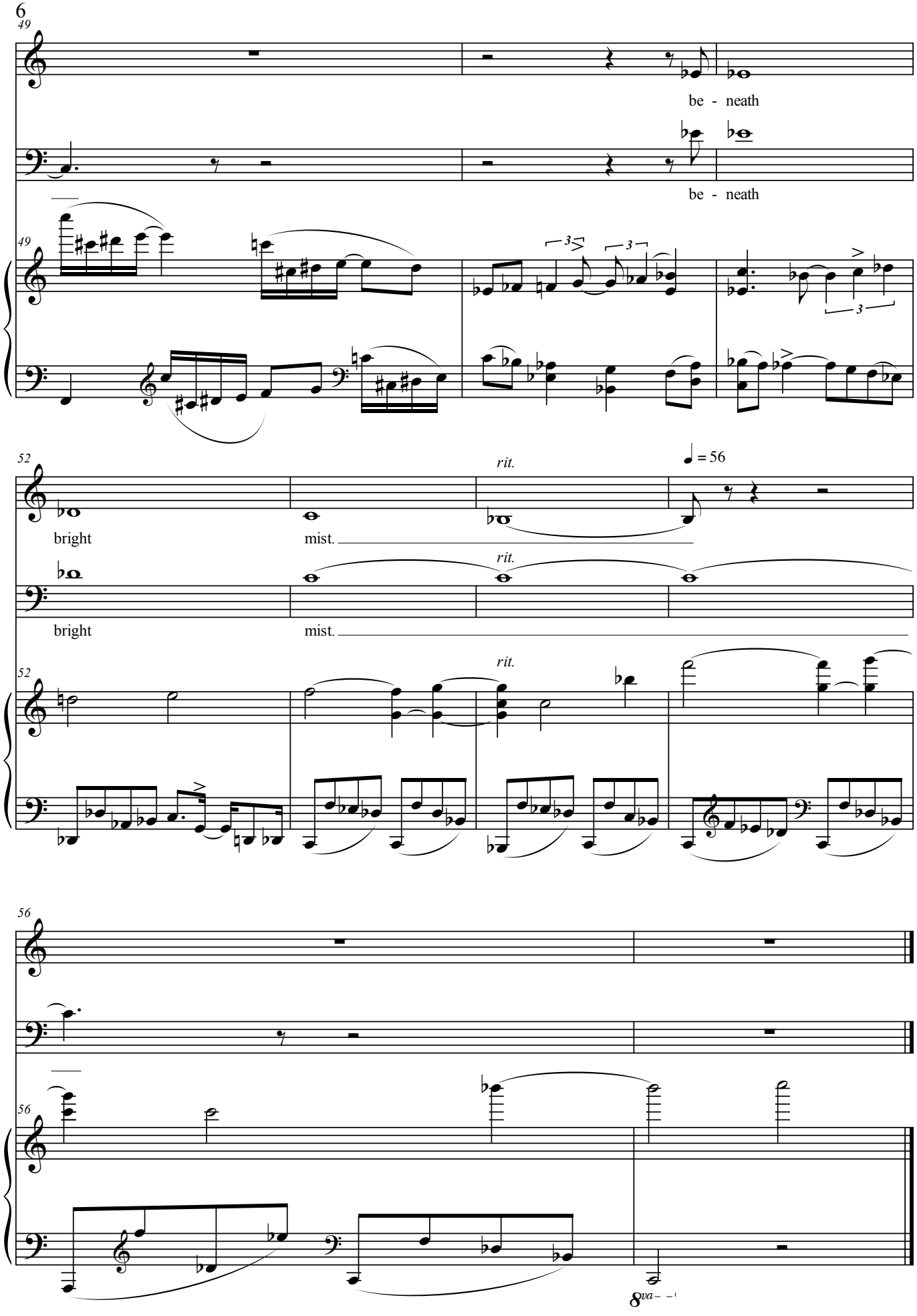

♩ = 66
Soprano
Baritone
Piano
p
Three spir - its
Three spir - its came to me,
came to me,
Three spir - its came to
4


7
Three spir - its came to me.
Step a few paces away from the soprano.
me,
7
10
and drew me a - part, a -
and drew me a - part, a - part
10
8va
14
part
to where the o - live - boughs
A few paces further away.
14
(8va)


Step a few paces away from the baritone..
to where the o - live boughs - - - - - -
♩ = 56
mp
(ah - - - - - - -)
mp
p
- - (mm - - - - - -)
mp
p
♩ = 66
the o - live boughs
the o - live boughs


26
lay stripped u-pon the
26
29
A few paces further away.
ground
lay stripped u-pon the ground - - - - -
29
33
pale be-
A few paces further away.
- - - - - car - nage,
33


37
neath
mist,
bright
mist,
37
42
pale car - nage be-neath bright mist,
A few paces further away.
42
46
A few paces further away.
pale car - nage be - neath bright mist,
46


49
be - neath
be - neath
49
52
rit.
♩ = 56
bright
mist.
rit.
bright
mist.
52
rit.
56
56
8va

These Fought, In Any Case . . .

♩= 120

Before beginning, return to the distance, stage rear.

Before beginning, return to center.

NB: Observe ties strictly

mp

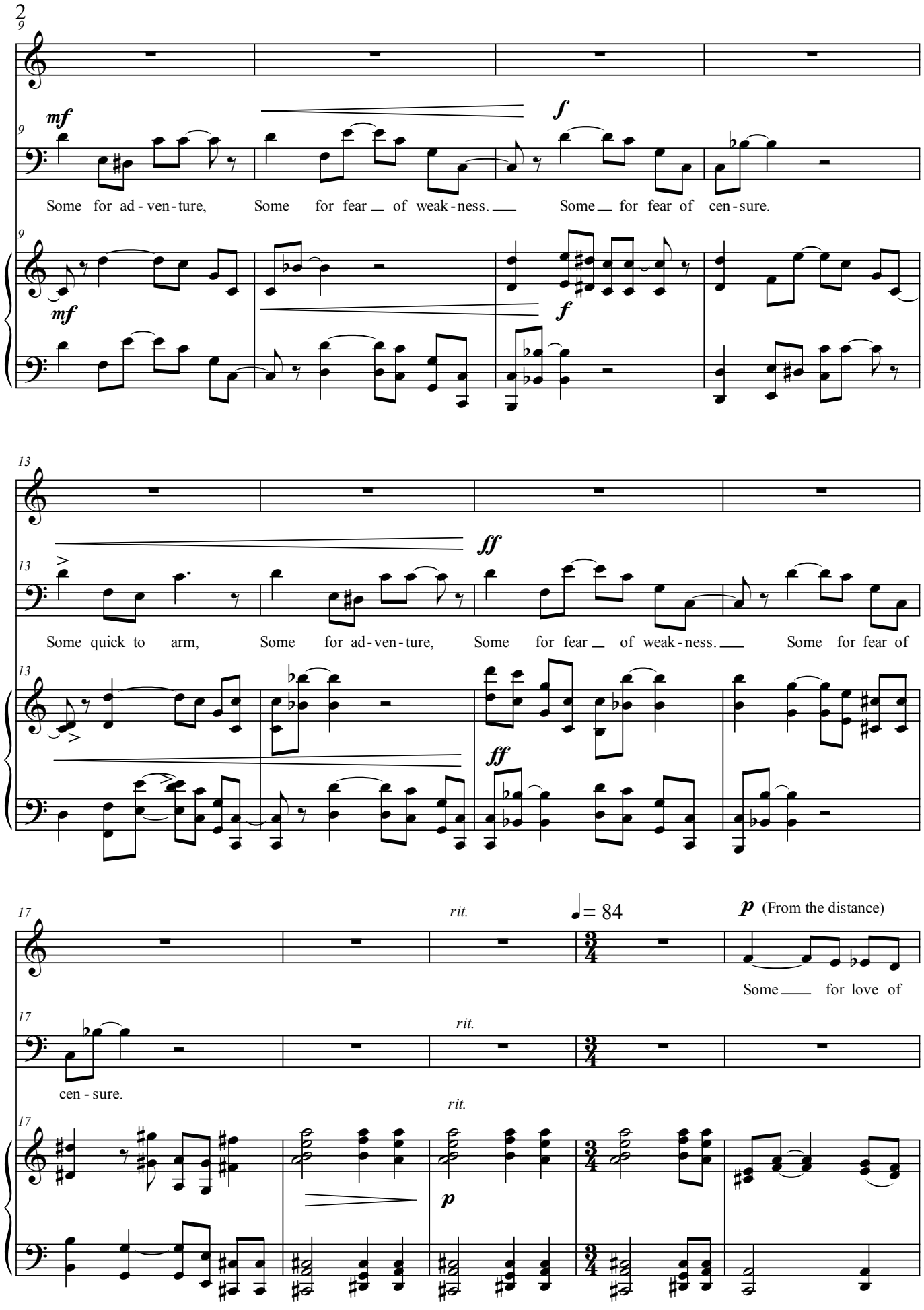
These fought, in a-ny case, and some be-liev

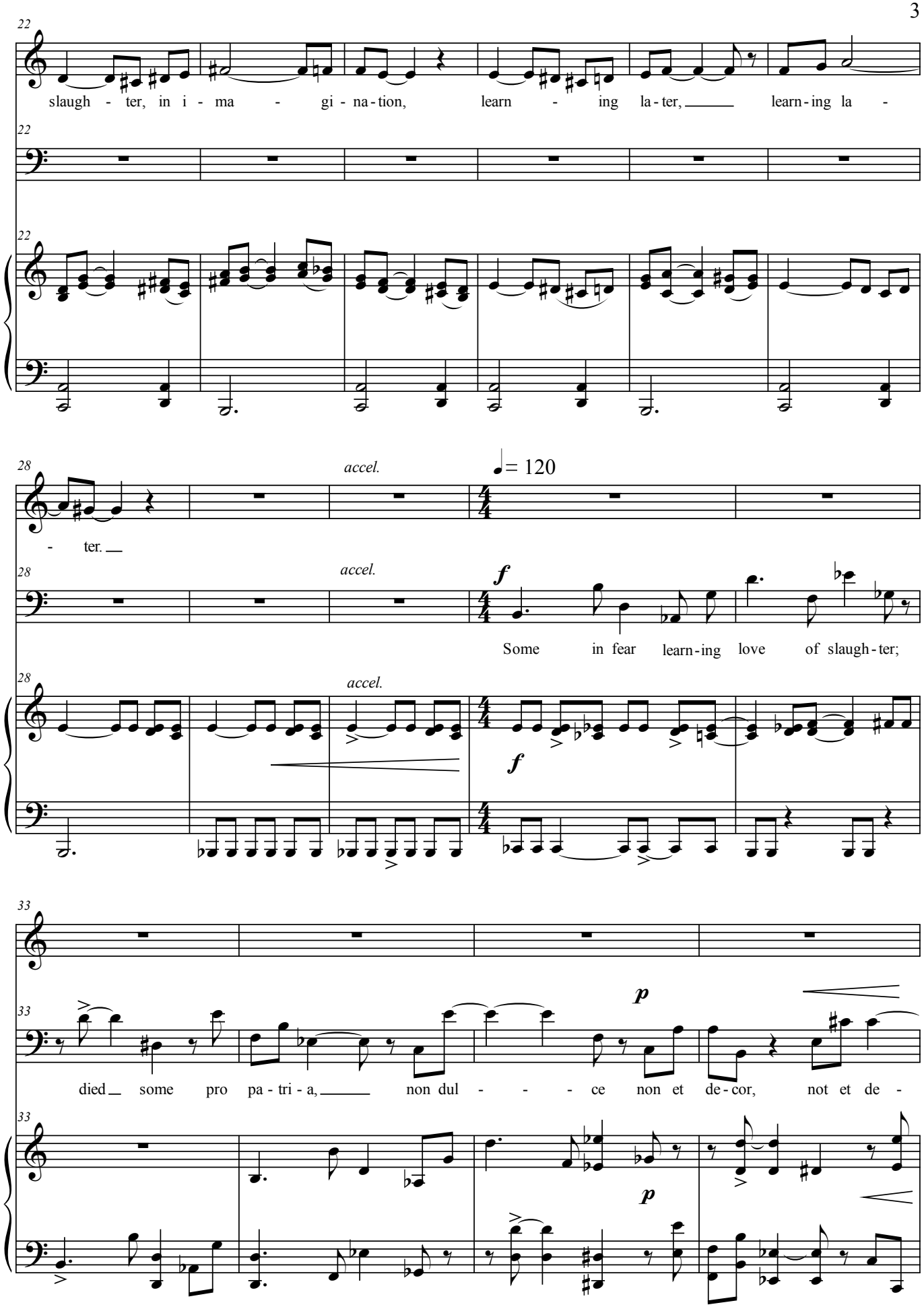
5

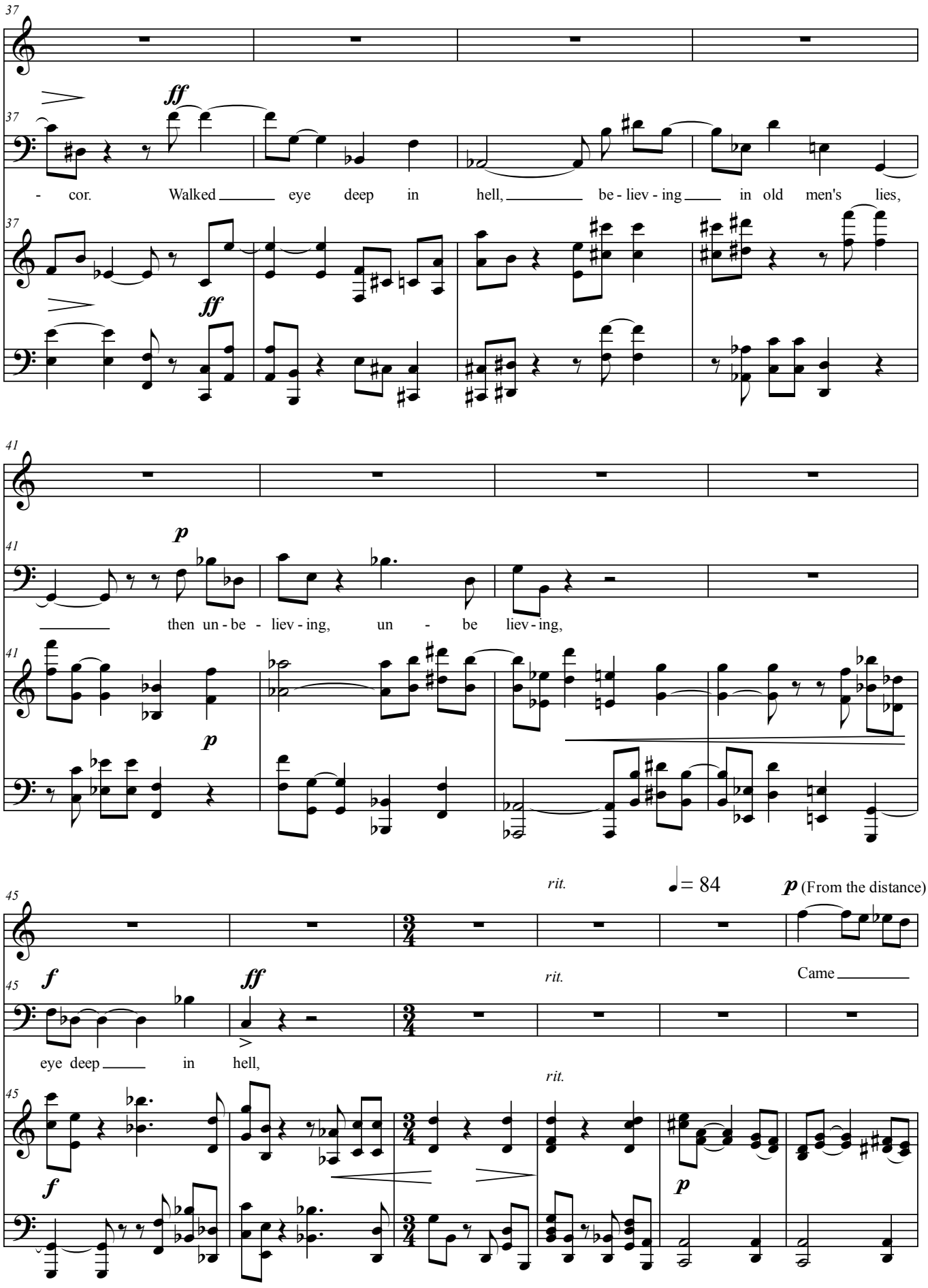
mf *f*

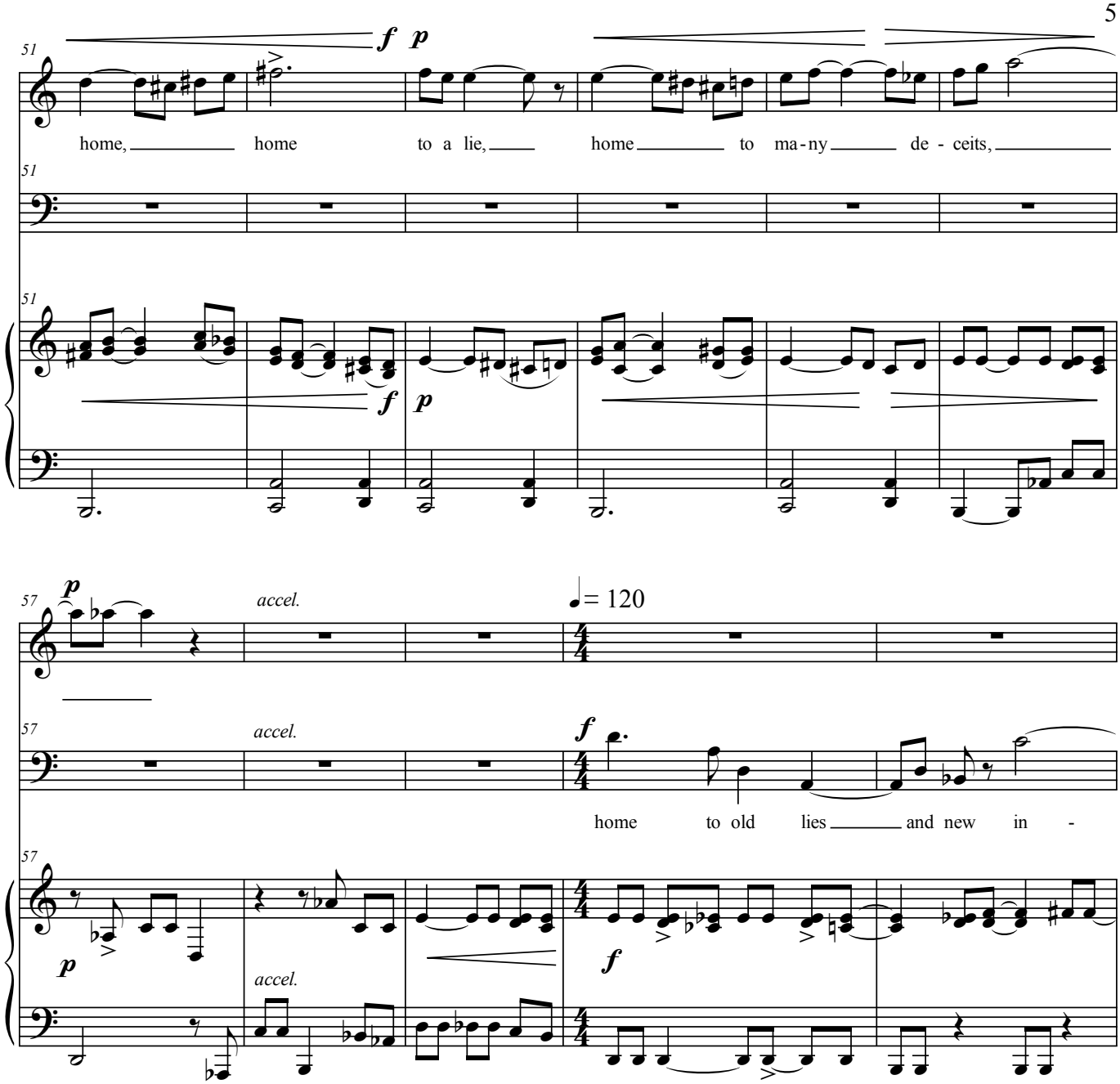
— ing, — pro-do-mo, in a-ny case, in a-ny case. Some quick to arm,

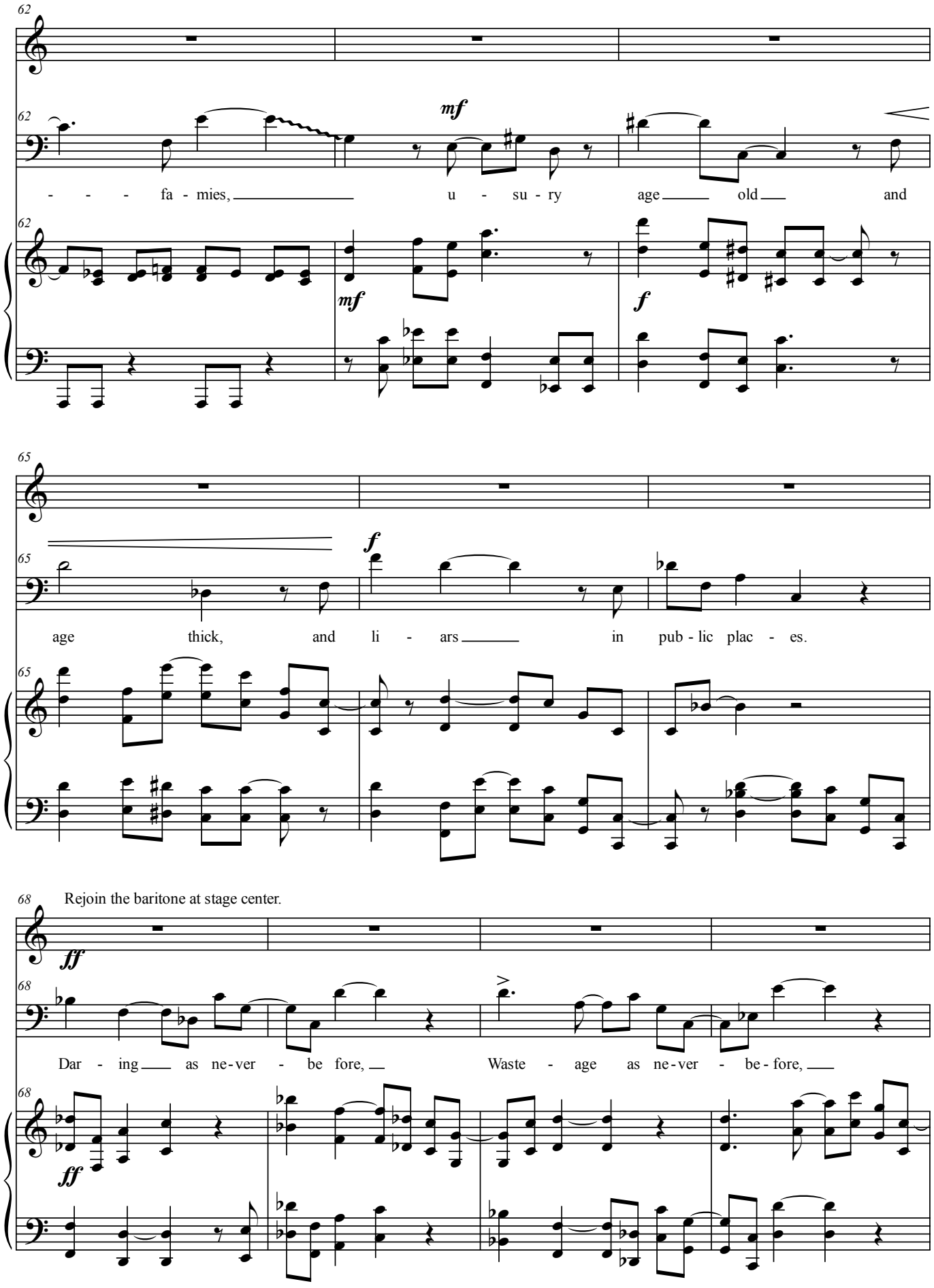
mf *f*

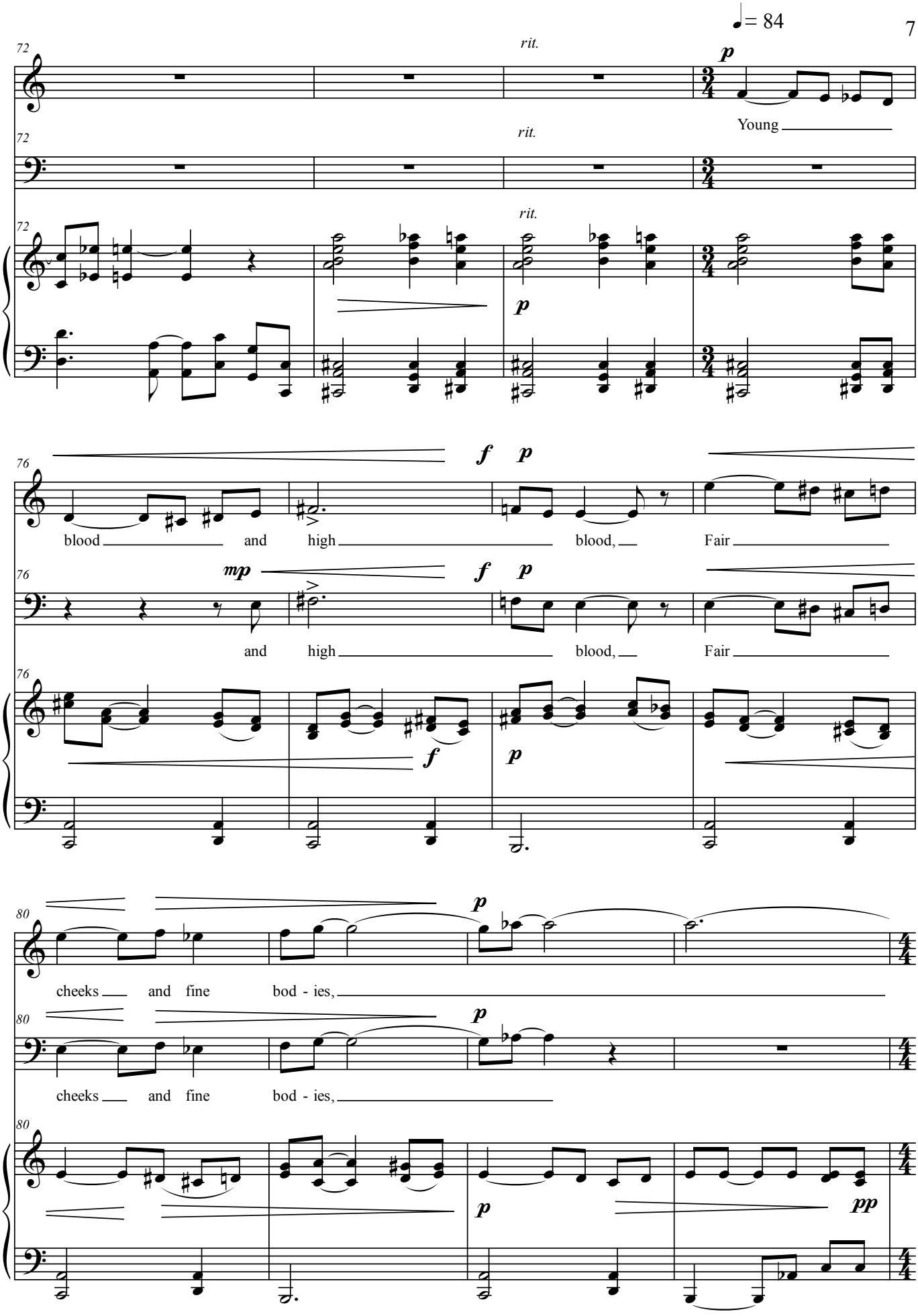

9
mf
f
Some for ad - ven - ture, Some for fear of weak - ness. Some for fear of cen - sure.
13
ff
Some quick to arm, Some for ad - ven - ture, Some for fear of weak - ness. Some for fear of
17
rit.
♩= 84
p (From the distance)
Some for love of
cen - sure.

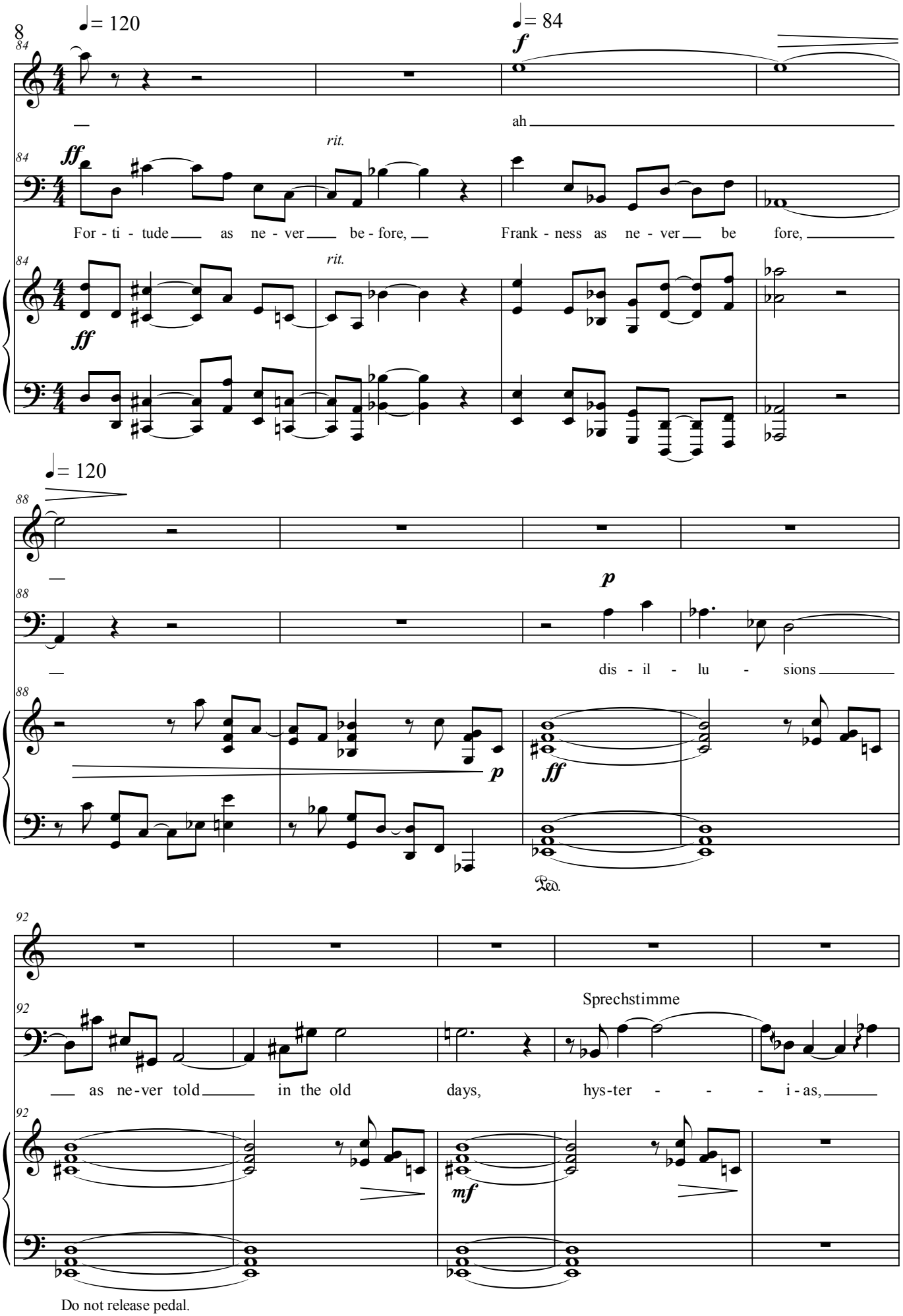

22
slaugh - ter, in i - ma - gi - na - tion, learn - ing la - ter, learn - ing la -
22
22
28
accel.
♩= 120
- ter.
28
accel.
f
Some in fear learn - ing love of slaugh - ter;
28
accel.
f
33
p
died some pro pa - tri - a, non dul - - - ce non et de - cor, not et de -
33
p
33

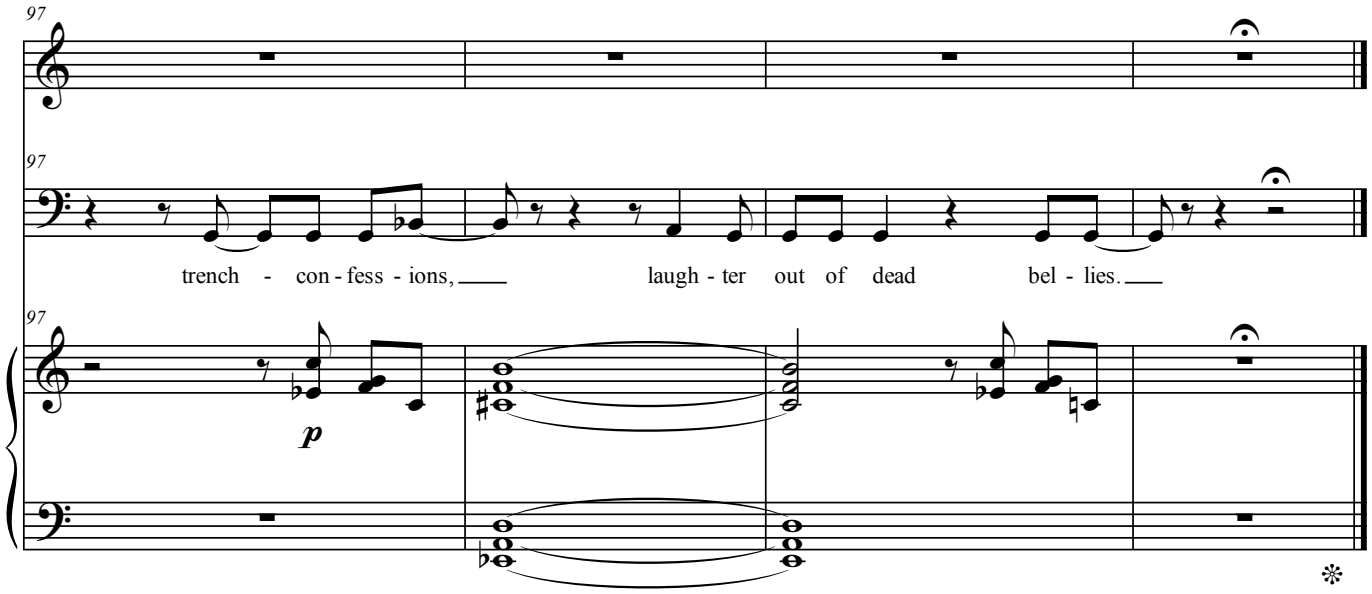

37
ff
- cor. Walked eye deep in hell, be - liev - ing in old men's lies,
41
p
then un - be - liev - ing, un - be liev - ing,
45
f
ff
eye deep in hell,
rit.
♩= 84
p (From the distance)
Came


51
f p
home, home to a lie, home to ma - ny de - ceits,
51
51
f p
57
p
accel.
♩= 120
57
accel.
f
home to old lies and new in -
57
p
accel.
f


62
mf
- - - fa - mies, u - su - ry age old and
mf
f
65
f
age thick, and li - ars in pub - lic plac - es.
68
Rejoin the baritone at stage center.
ff
Dar - ing as ne - ver - be fore, Waste - age as ne - ver - be - fore,
ff


♩= 84
72
rit.
p
Young
72
rit.
72
rit.
p
76
f p
blood and high blood, Fair
76
mp
f p
and high blood, Fair
76
f
p
80
p
cheeks and fine bod - ies,
80
p
cheeks and fine bod - ies,
80
p
pp

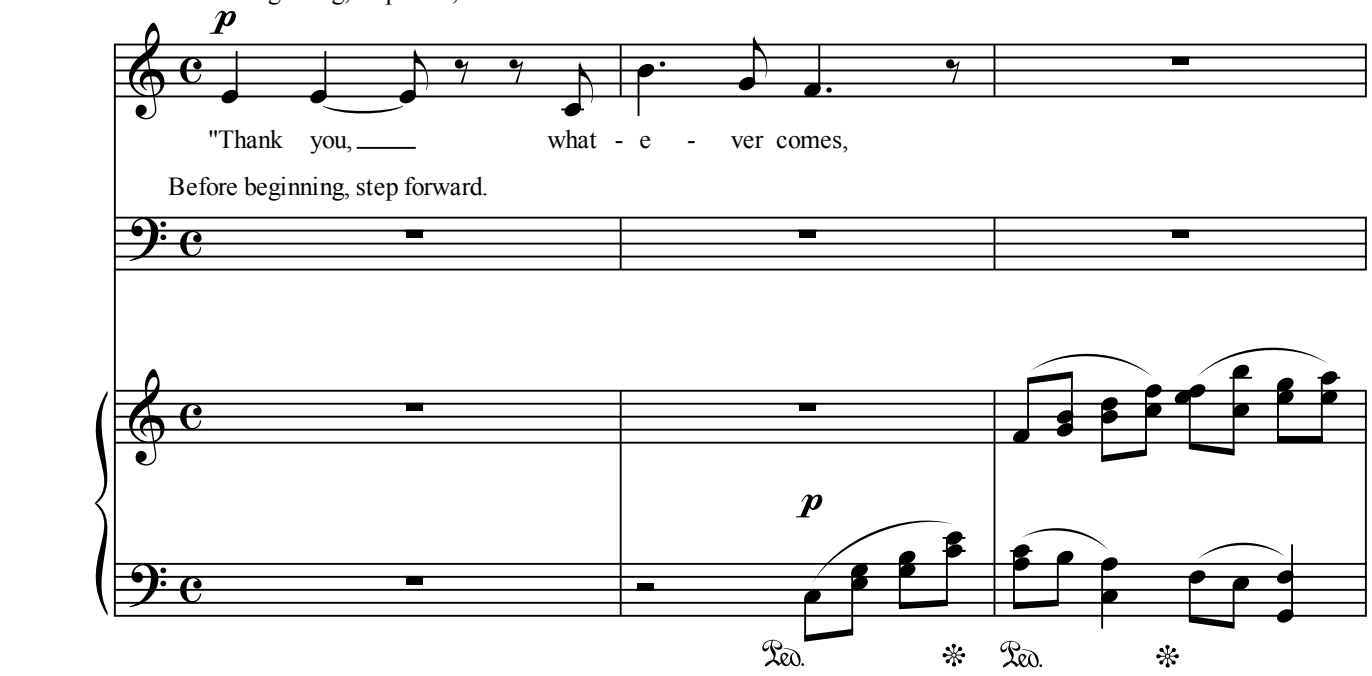

♩= 120
84
ff
rit.
For - ti - tude as ne - ver be - fore,
♩= 84
f
ah
Frank - ness as ne - ver be fore,
♩= 120
88
p
dis - il - lu - sions
ff
Ped.
92
Sprechstimme
as ne-ver told in the old days, hys-ter - - - i-as,
mf
Do not release pedal.

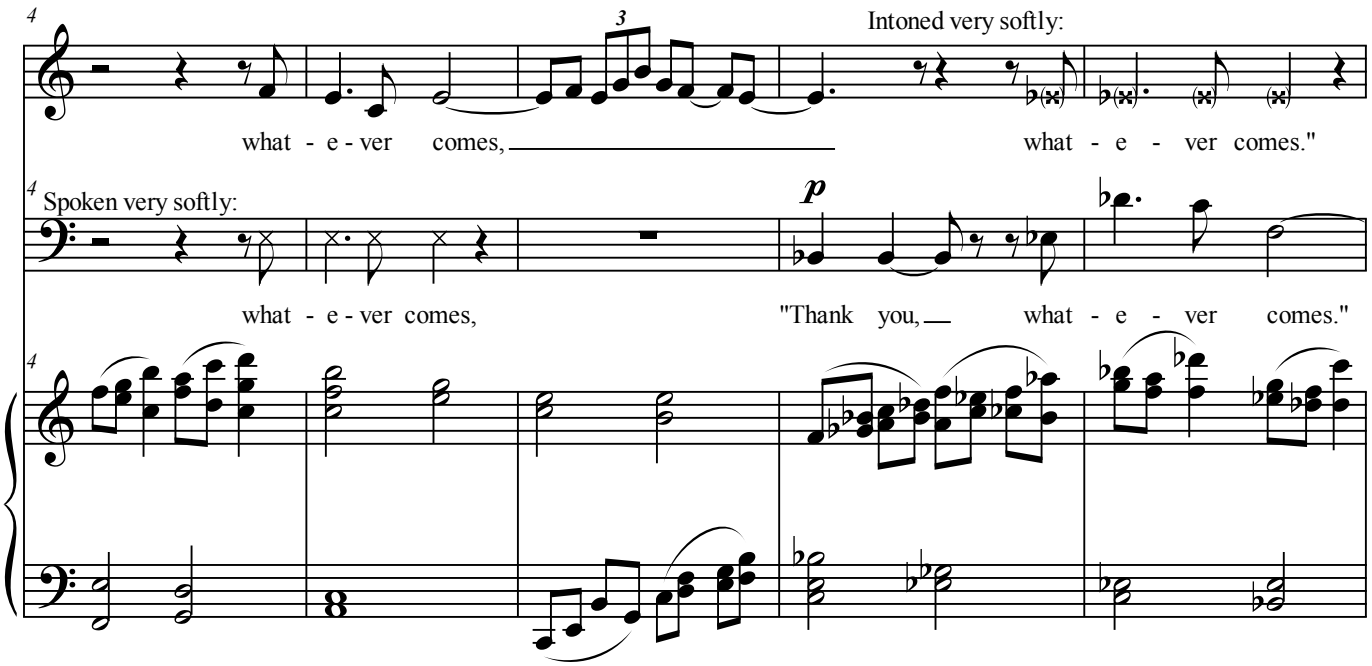

97
97
trench - con - fess - ions, laugh - ter out of dead bel - lies.
97
p

Erat Hora

♩= 80

Before beginning, step back, stand behind baritone.





9

And then she turned, and as the

12

The ray of sun...

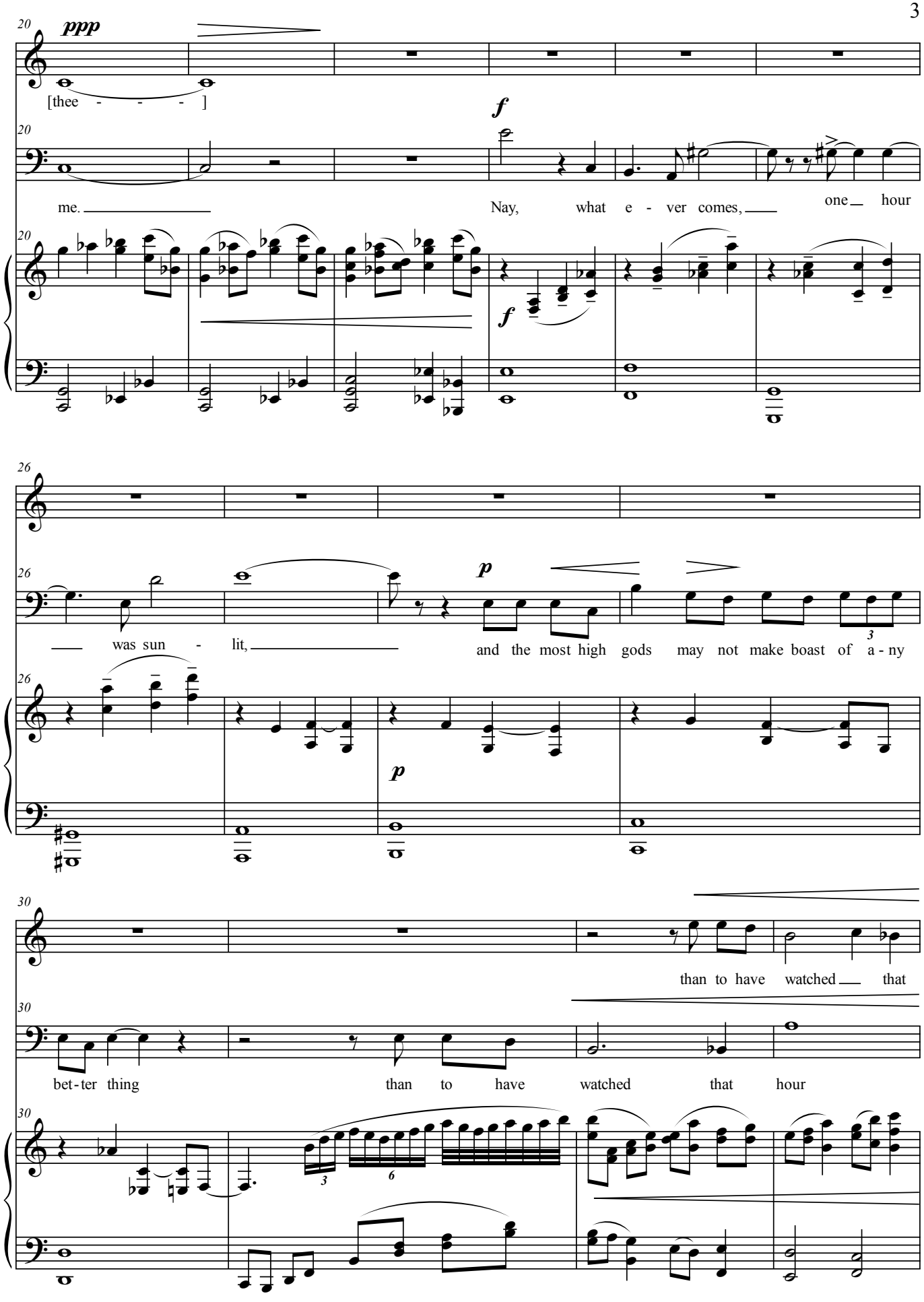
ray of sun on hang - ing flow - ers fades

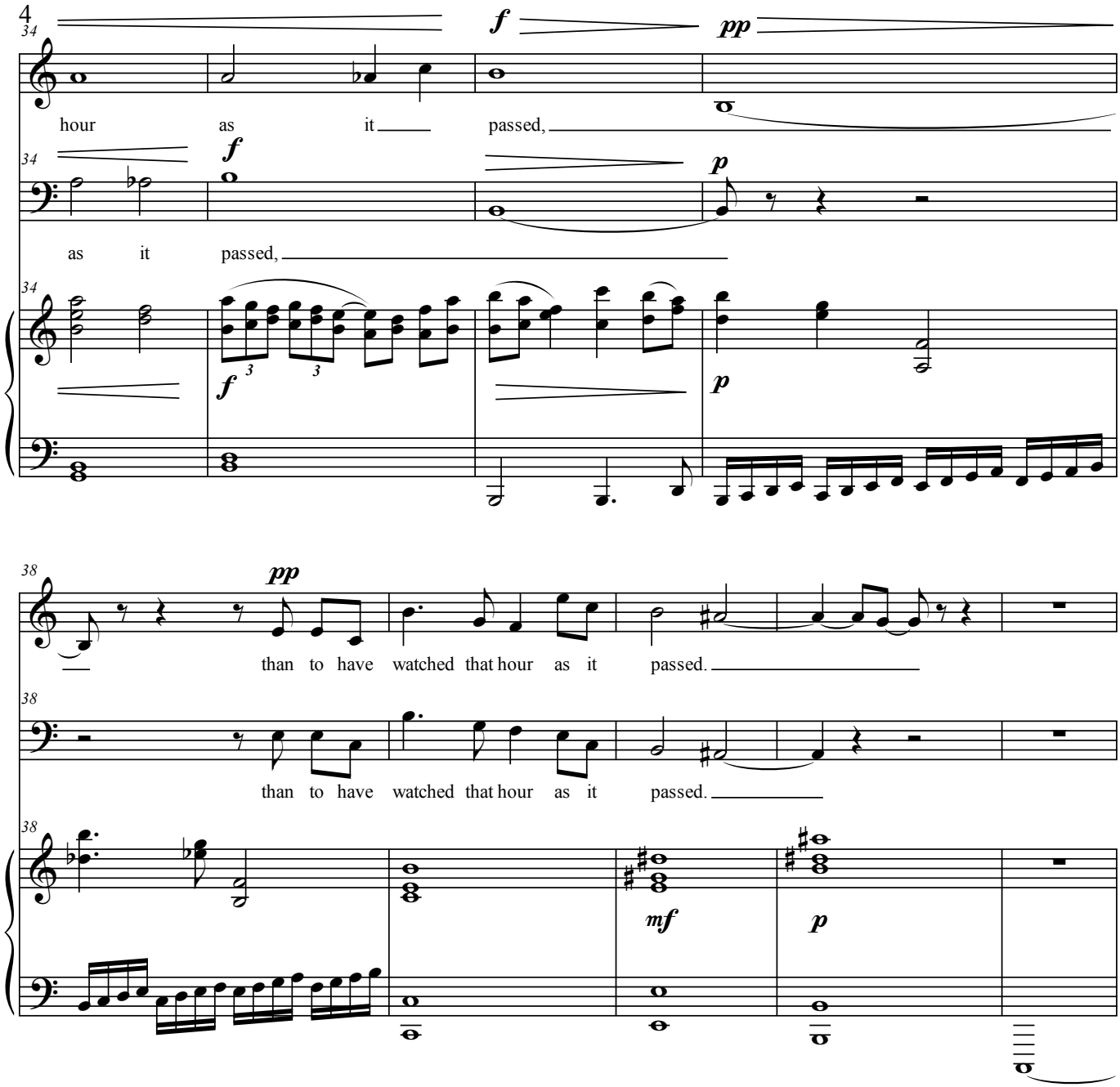
8va

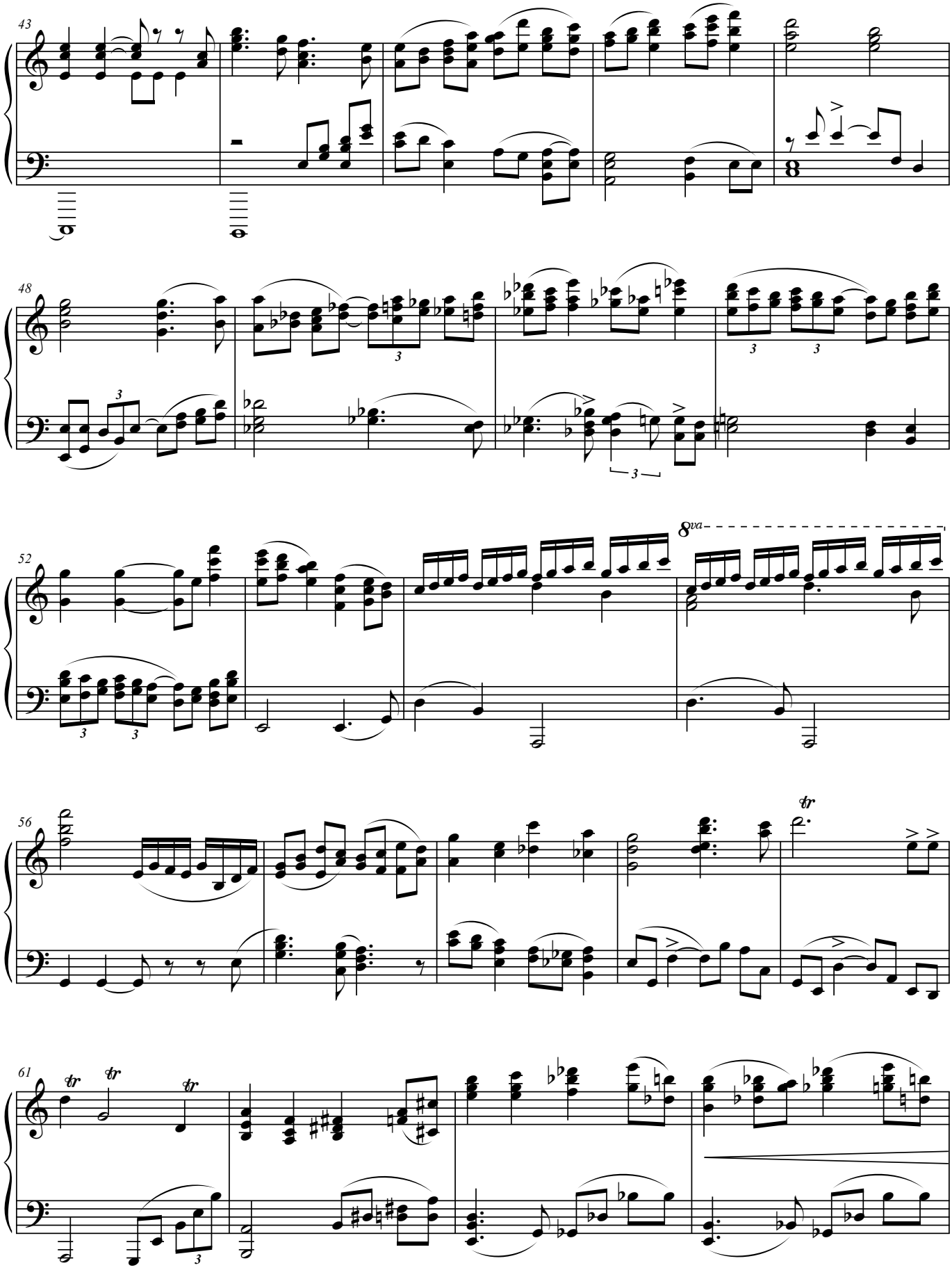
16

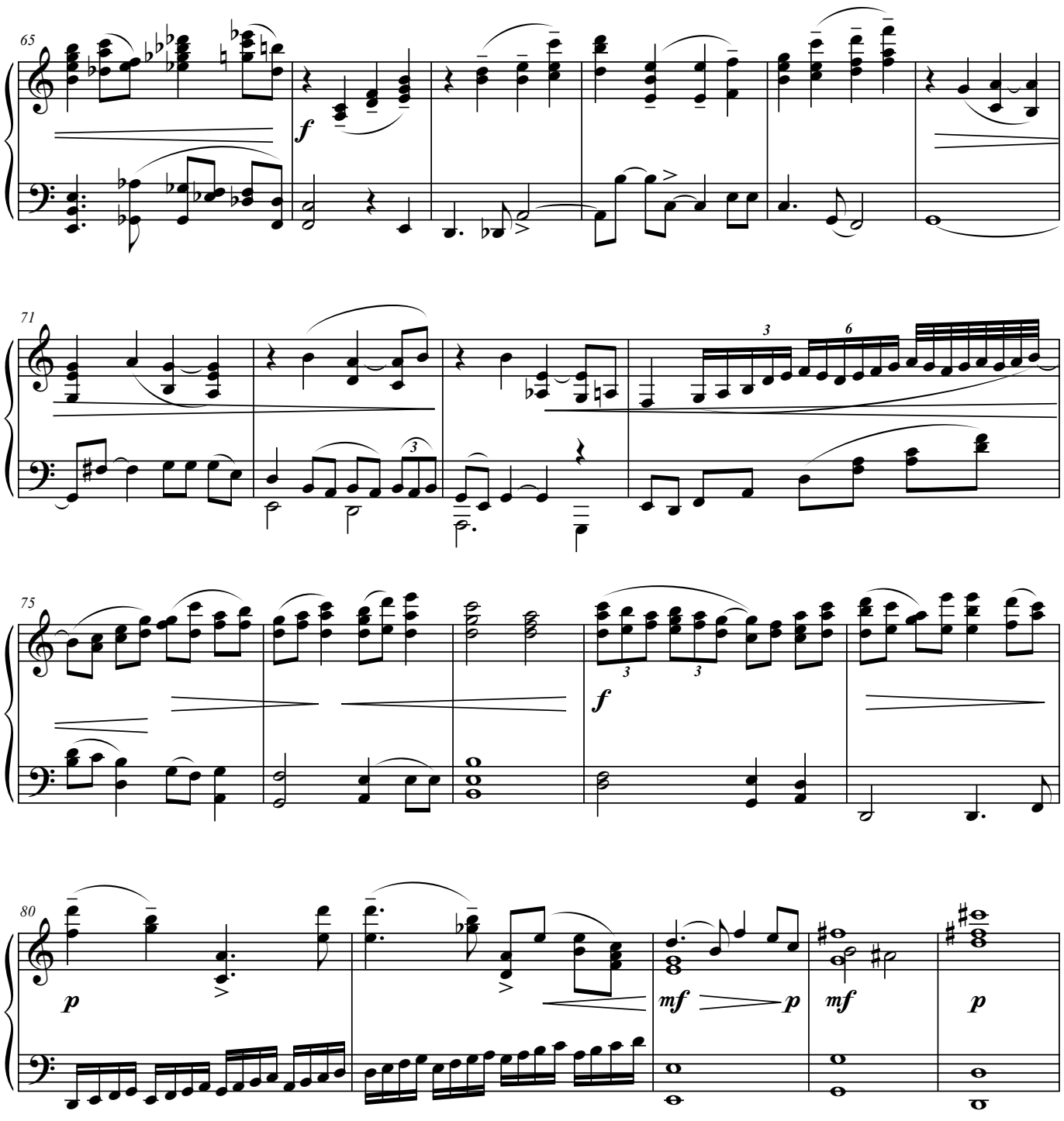
ah!

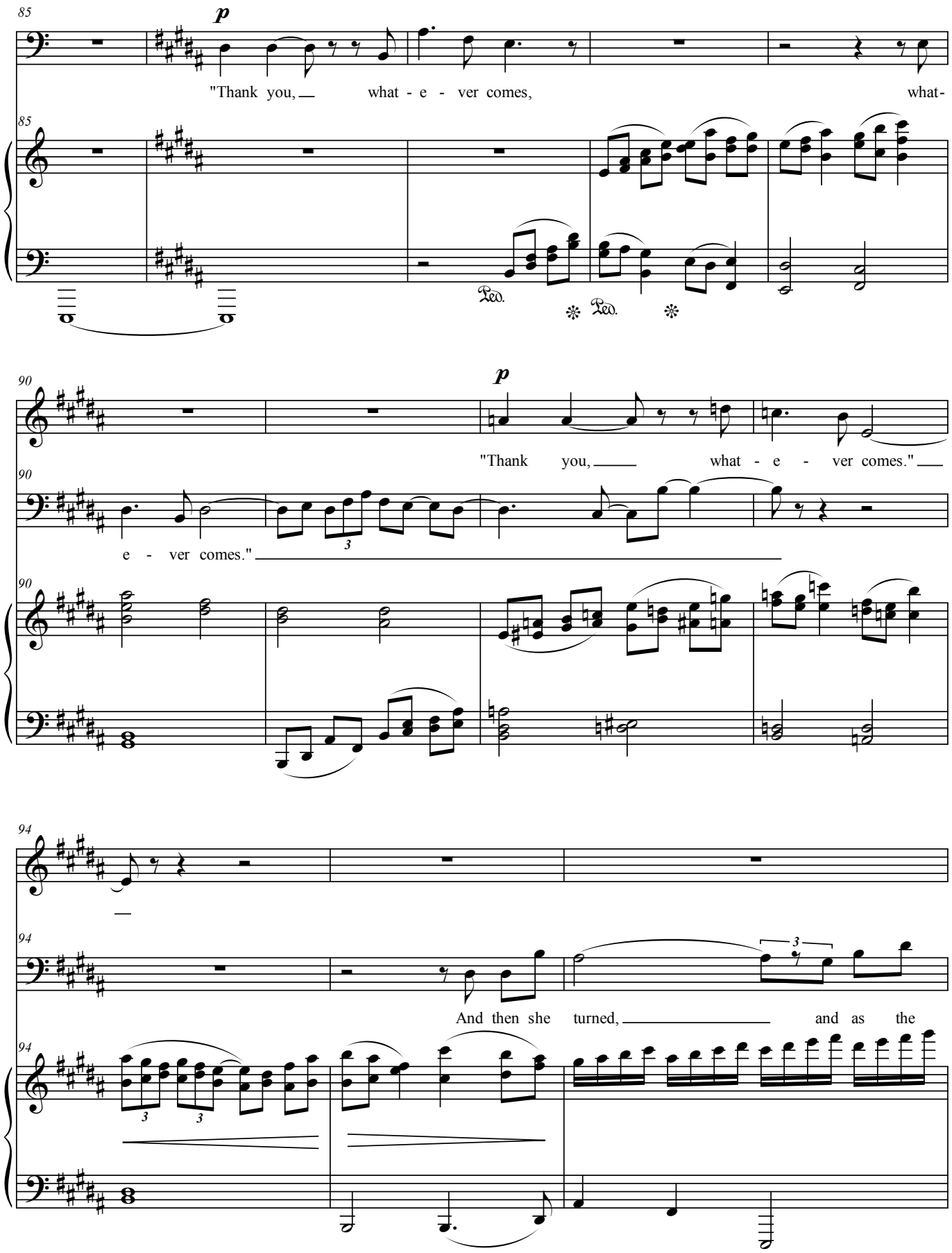
when the wind hath lift - ed them a - side, went swift-ly from me, from me, from

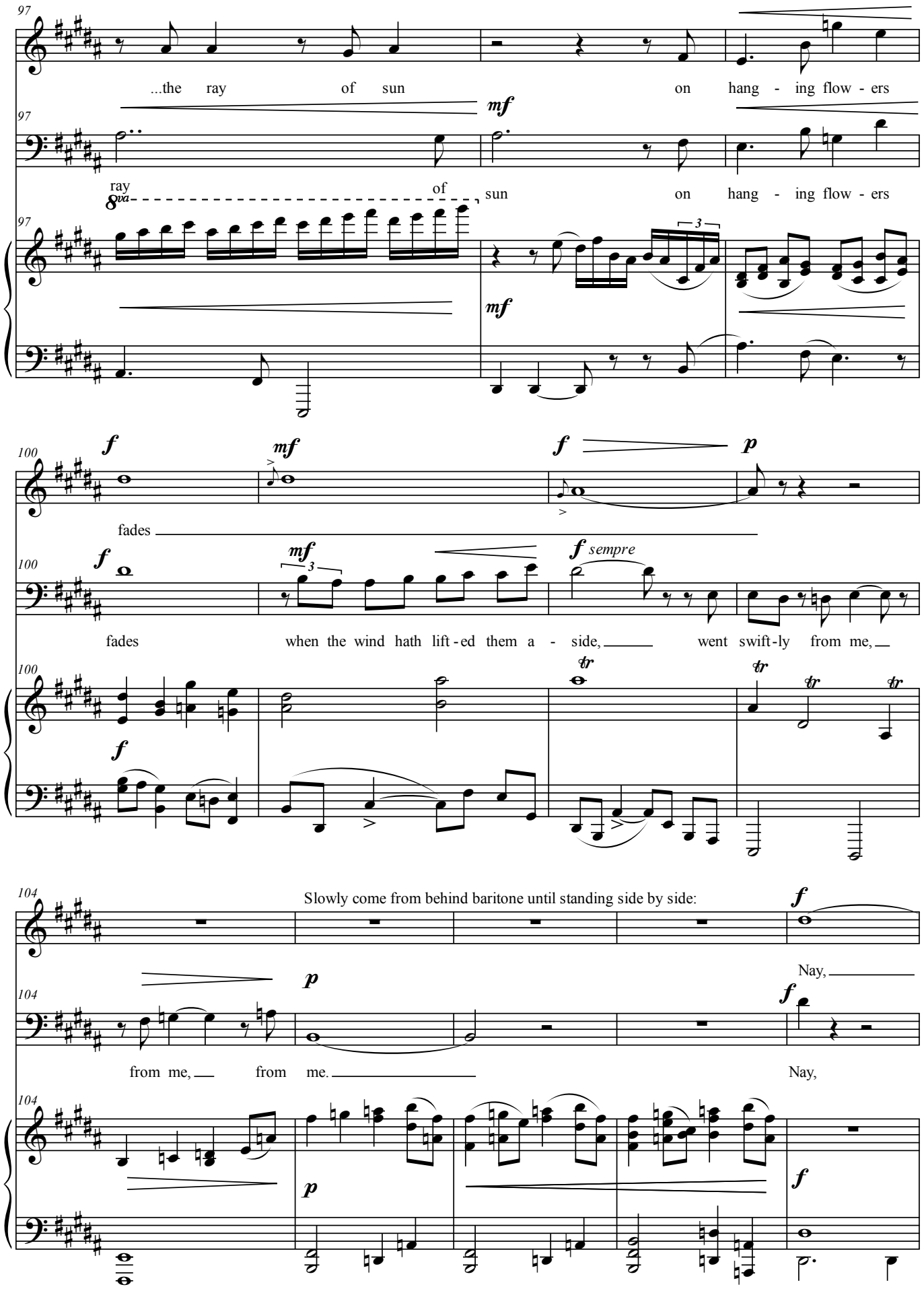

20
ppp
[thee - - -]
f
me.
Nay, what e - ver comes,
one hour
26
p
was sun - lit,
and the most high gods may not make boast of a - ny
30
than to have watched that
bet - ter thing than to have watched that hour

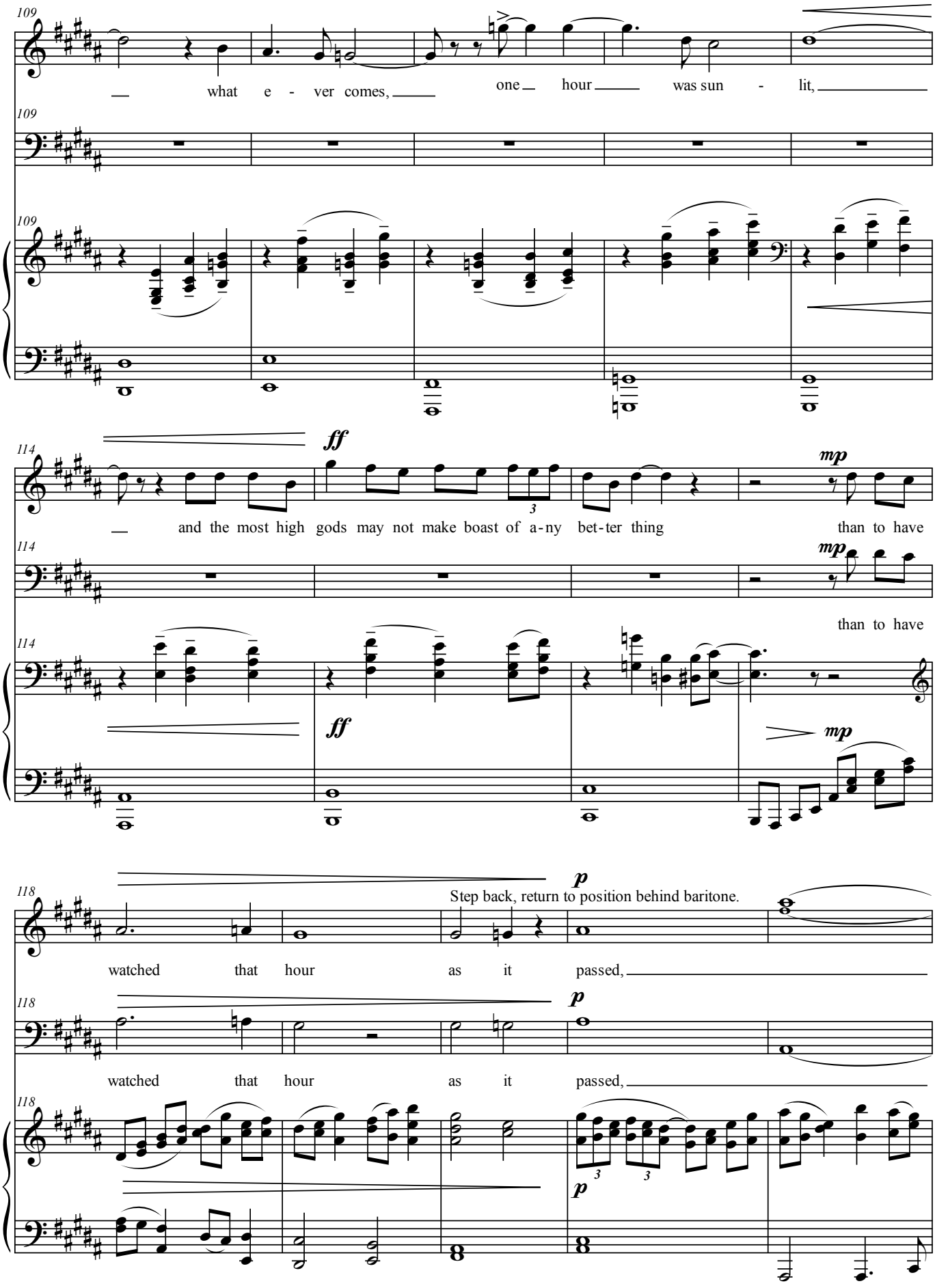

34
f
pp
hour as it passed,
34
f
p
as it passed,
34
f
3
3
p
38
pp
than to have watched that hour as it passed.
38
than to have watched that hour as it passed.
38
mf
p

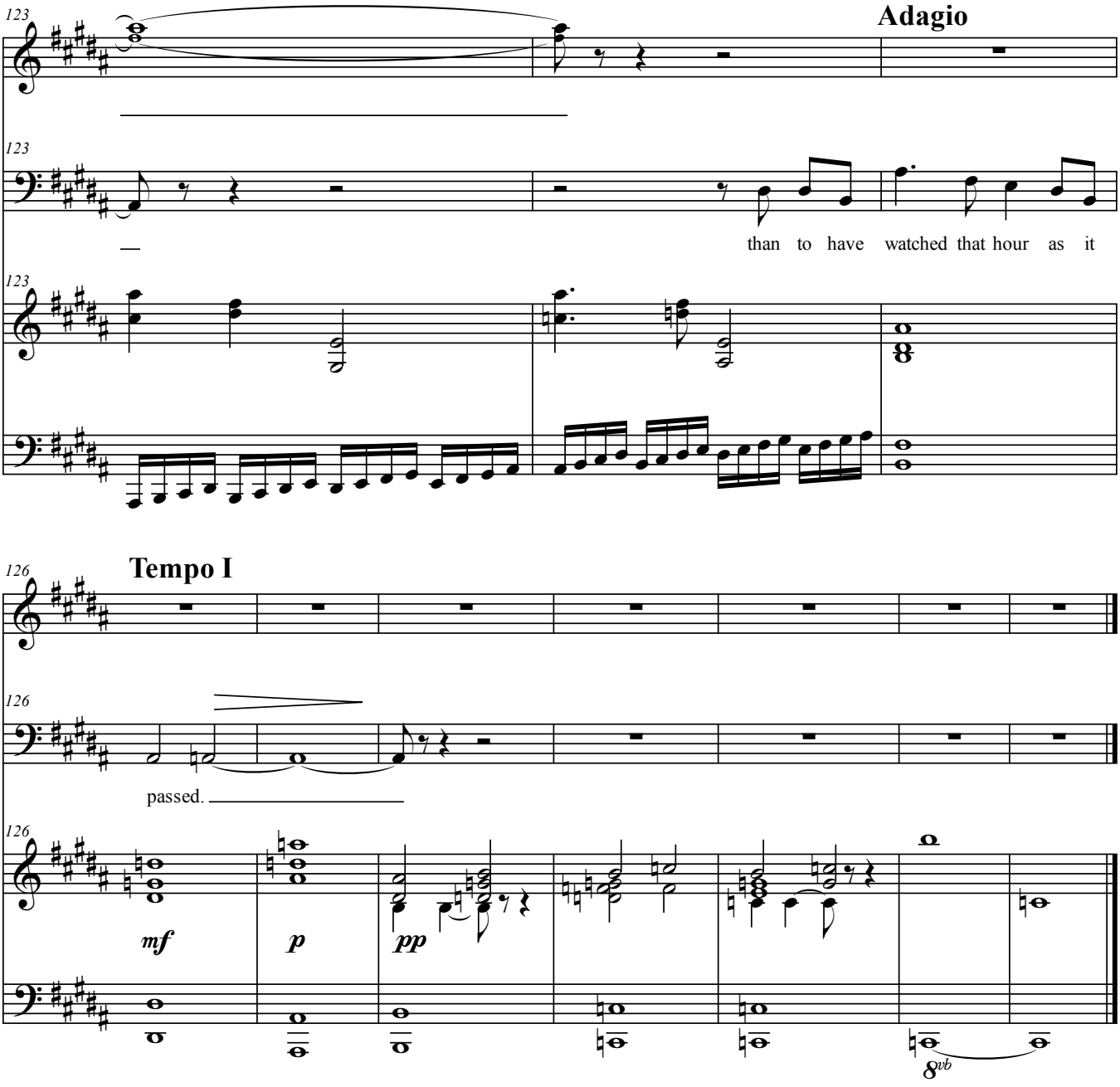

43
48
52
8va
56
tr
61
tr
tr
tr


65
f
71
3
6
3
75
3
3
f
80
p
mf
p
mf
p

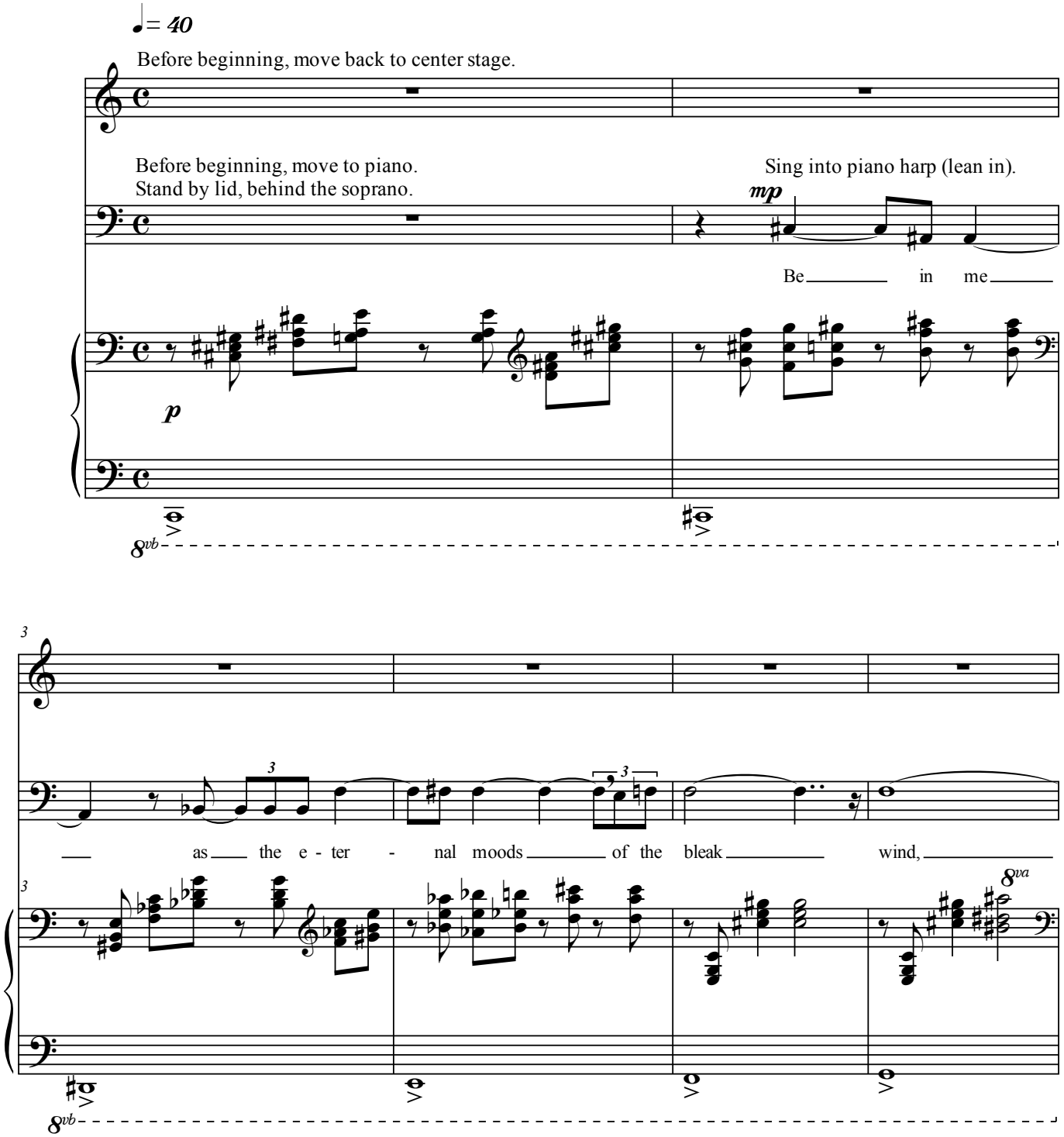

85
p
"Thank you, what - e - ver comes, what-
Ped.
Ped.
90
p
"Thank you, what - e - ver comes."
e - ver comes."
94
And then she turned, and as the

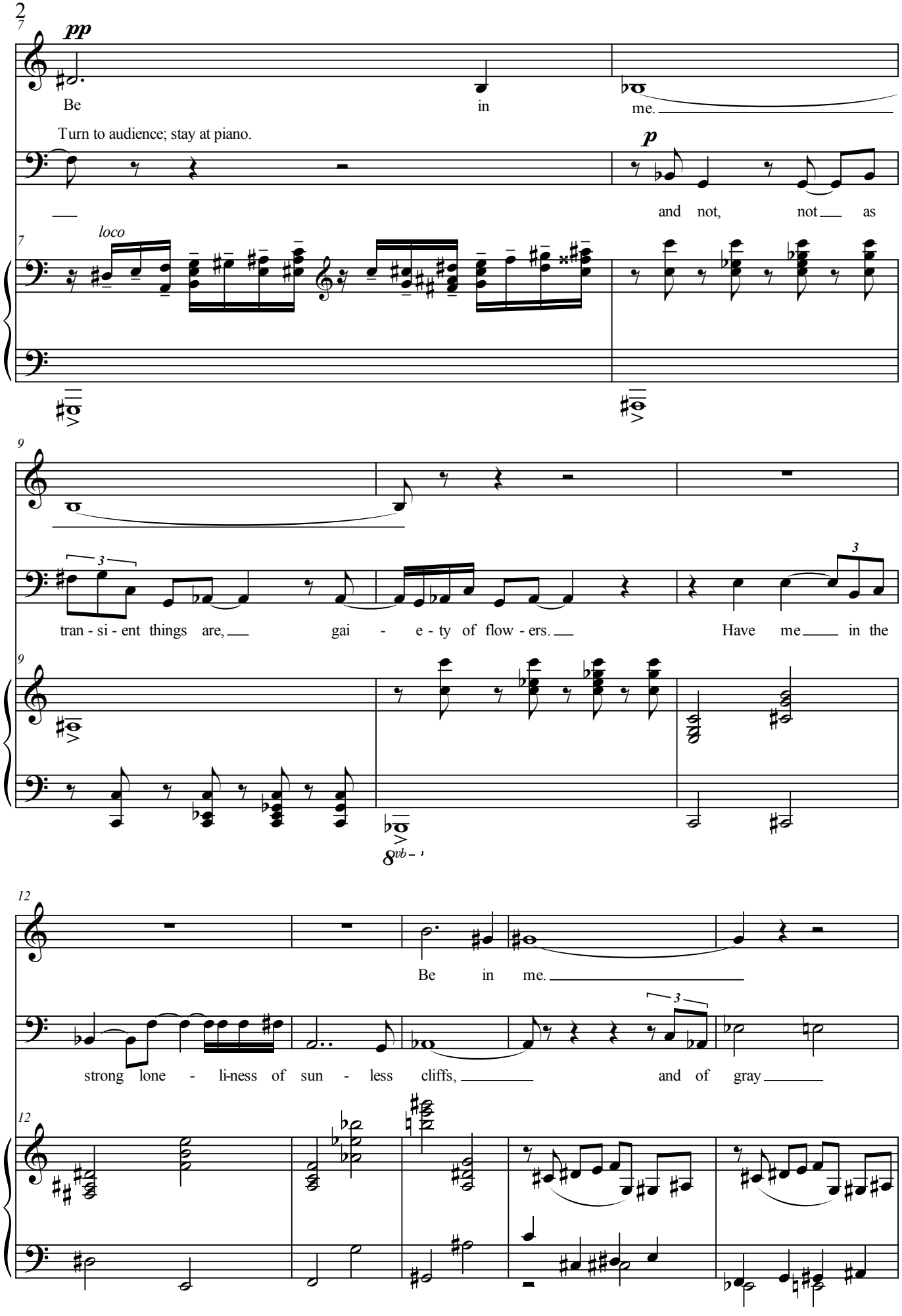

97
...the ray of sun on hang - ing flow - ers
mf
97
ray of sun on hang - ing flow - ers
8va
97
mf
100
f
mf
f
p
fades
100
f
mf
3
f sempre
fades when the wind hath lift - ed them a - side, went swift - ly from me,
100
f
tr
tr
tr
104
Slowly come from behind baritone until standing side by side:
f
p
Nay,
104
f
from me, from me.
Nay,
104
p
f

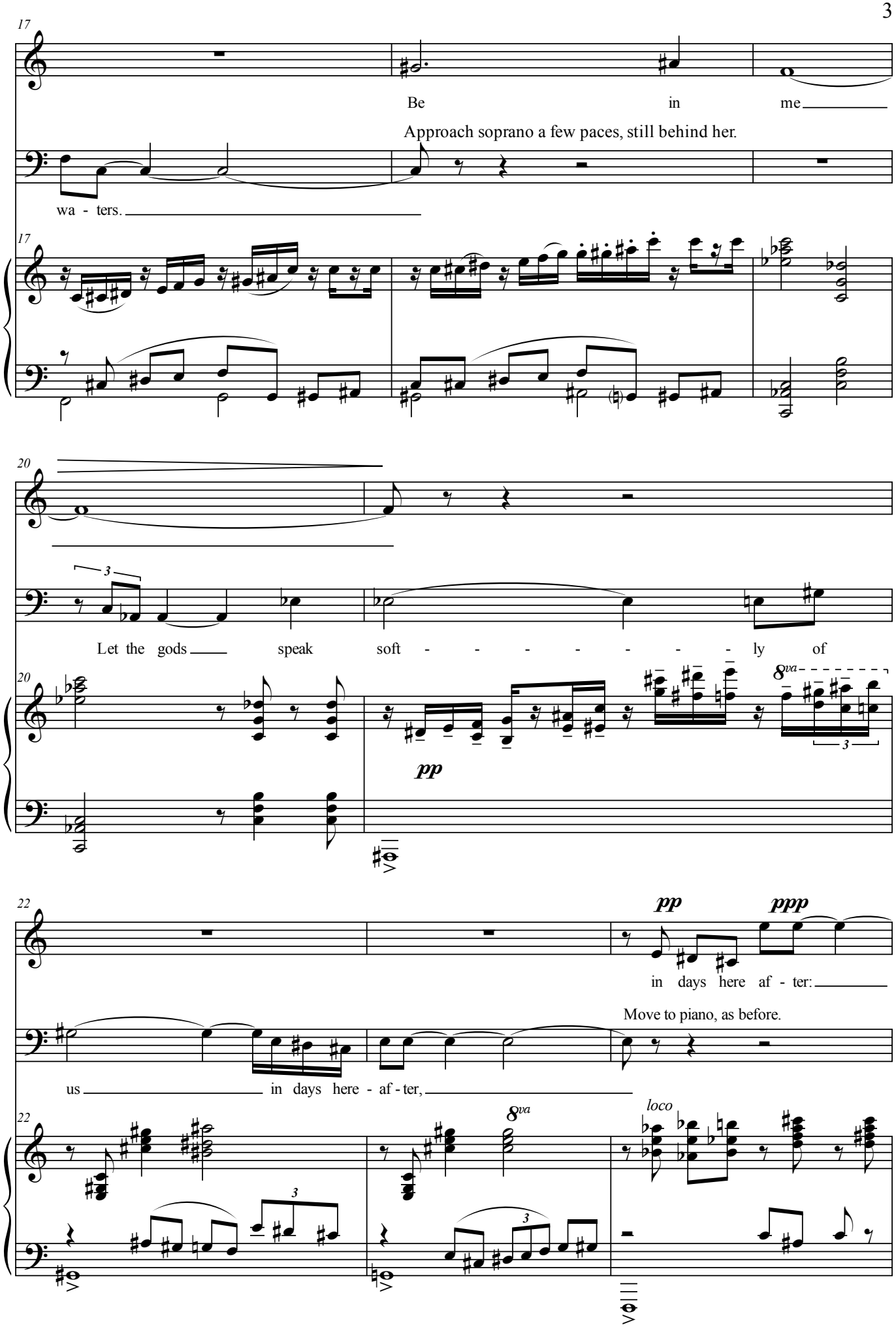

109
what e - ver comes,
one hour was sun - lit,
114
ff
and the most high gods may not make boast of a-ny bet-ter thing
than to have
mp
than to have
ff
mp
118
p
Step back, return to position behind baritone.
watched that hour as it passed,
p
watched that hour as it passed,
p

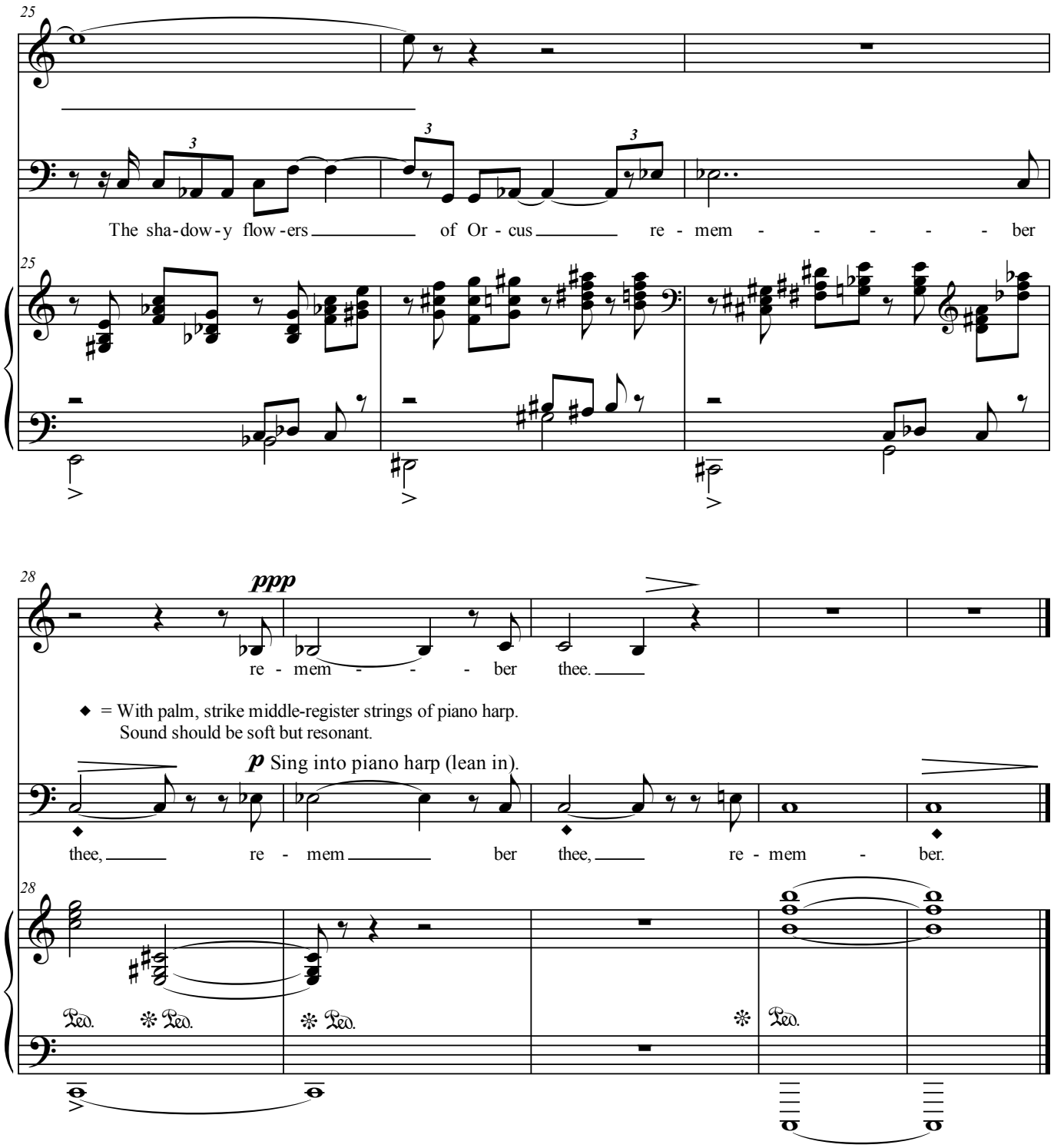

123
Adagio
123
than to have watched that hour as it
123
126
Tempo I
126
passed.
126
mf
p
pp
8vb

Doria


♩= 40
Before beginning, move back to center stage.
Before beginning, move to piano.
Stand by lid, behind the soprano.
Sing into piano harp (lean in).
mp
Be in me
p
8vb
as the e - ter - nal moods of the bleak wind,
8va
8vb


pp
Be
in
me.
Turn to audience; stay at piano.
p
and not, not as
loco
tran - si - ent things are, gai - e - ty of flow - ers. Have me in the
8vb
Be in me.
strong lone - li-ness of sun - less cliffs, and of gray

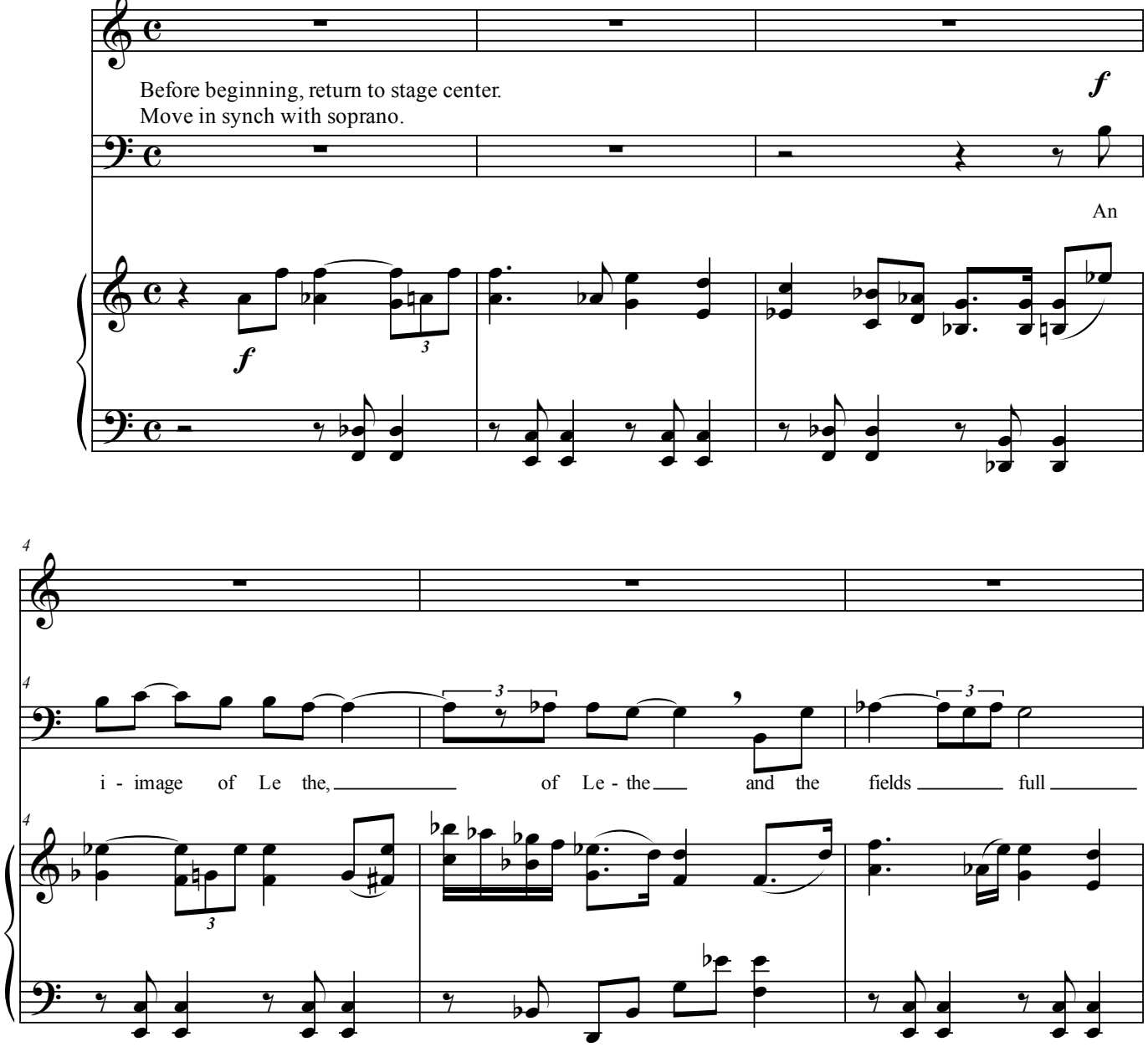

17
Be in me
Approach soprano a few paces, still behind her.
wa - ters.
17
20
Let the gods speak soft - - - - - - - - ly of
8va
20
pp
22
pp
ppp
in days here af - ter:
Move to piano, as before.
us in days here - af - ter,
22
8va
loco

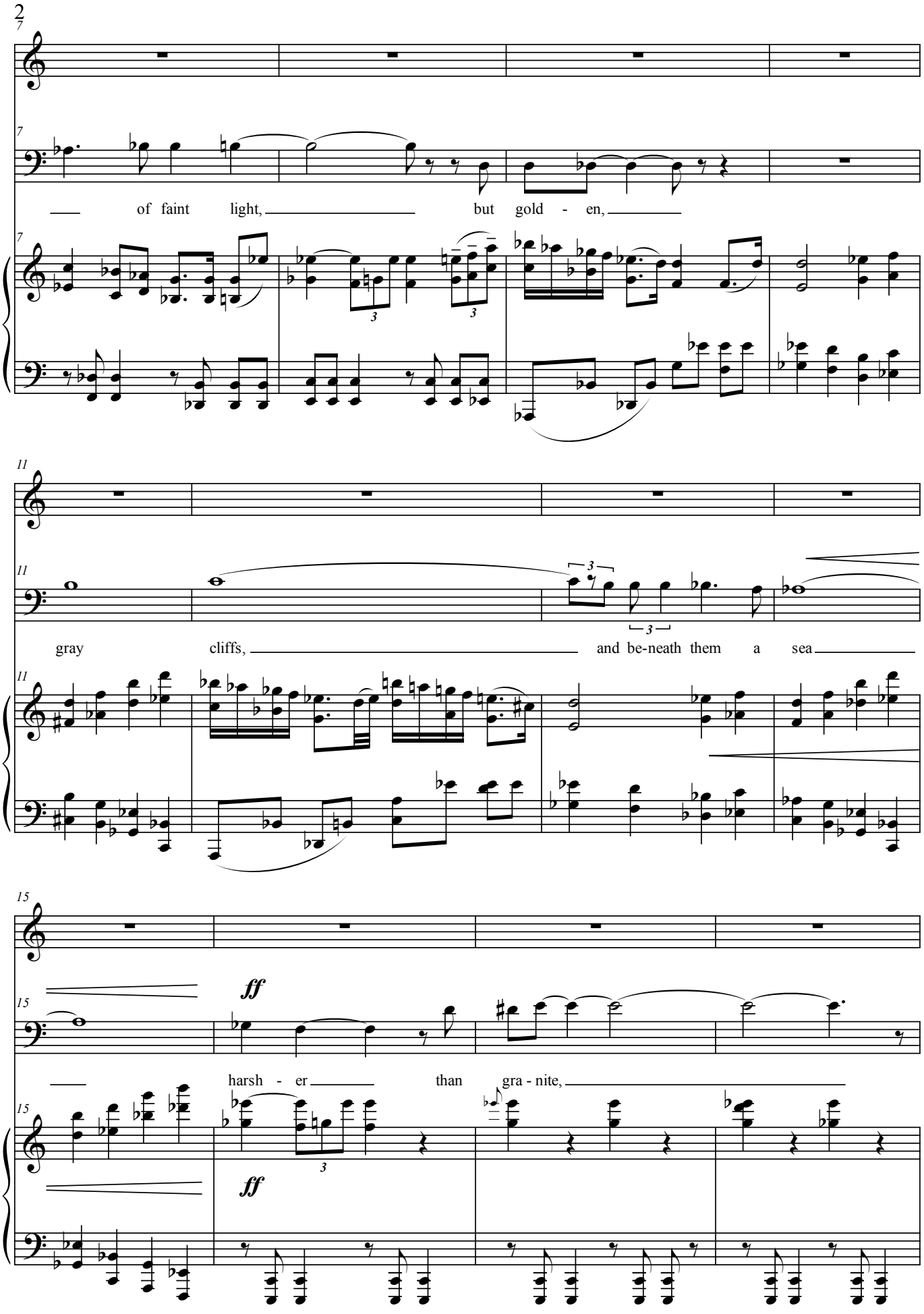

25
The sha-dow-y flow-ers of Or-cus re-mem-ber
25
28
ppp
re-mem-ber thee.
◆ = With palm, strike middle-register strings of piano harp.
Sound should be soft but resonant.
p Sing into piano harp (lean in).
thee, re-mem-ber thee, re-mem-ber.
28
Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.

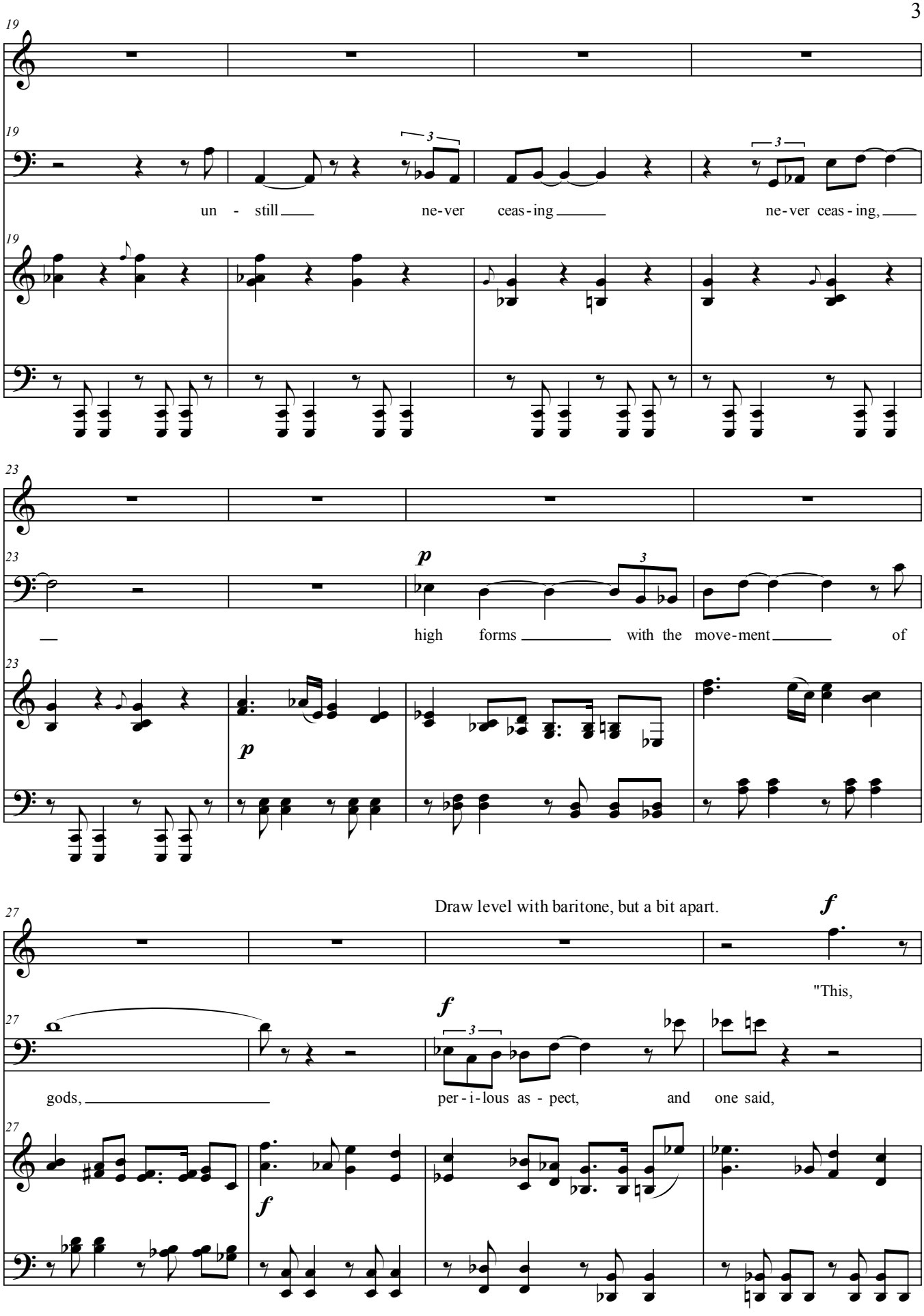
The Coming of War

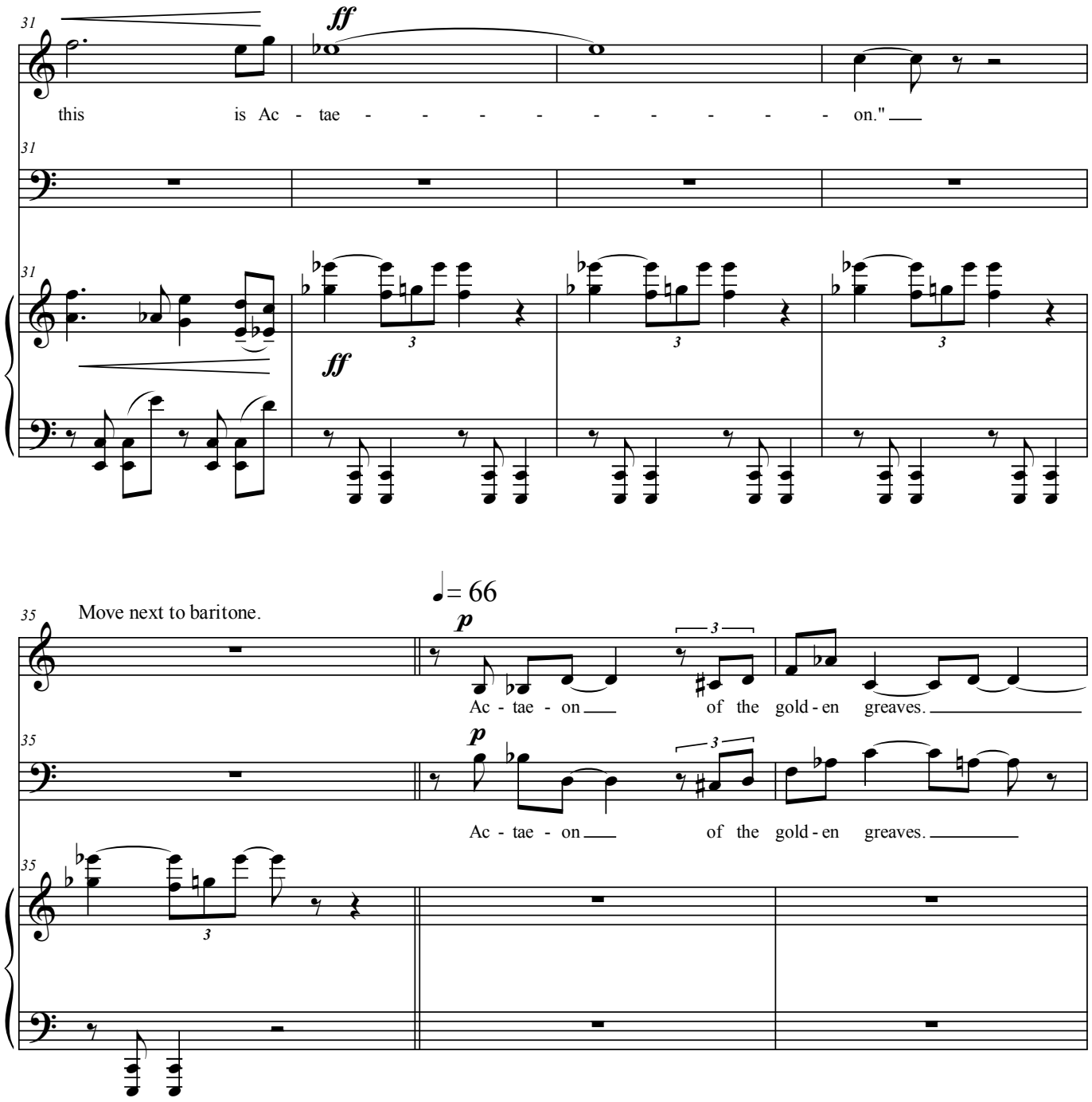
♩= 88

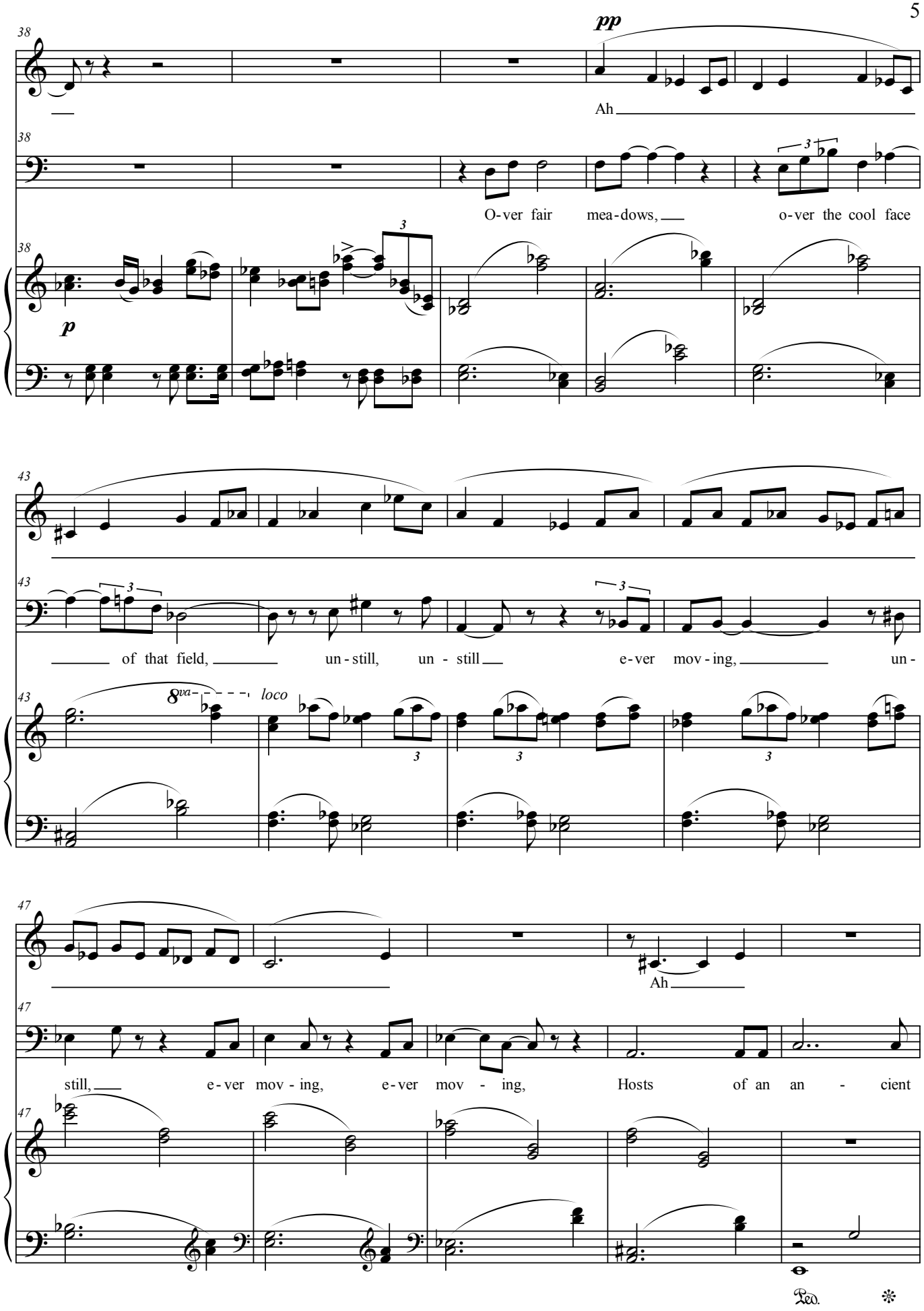
Before beginning, go to piano behind baritone, reversing positions at the start of "Doria." Profile to audience.
Tacet until m. 30

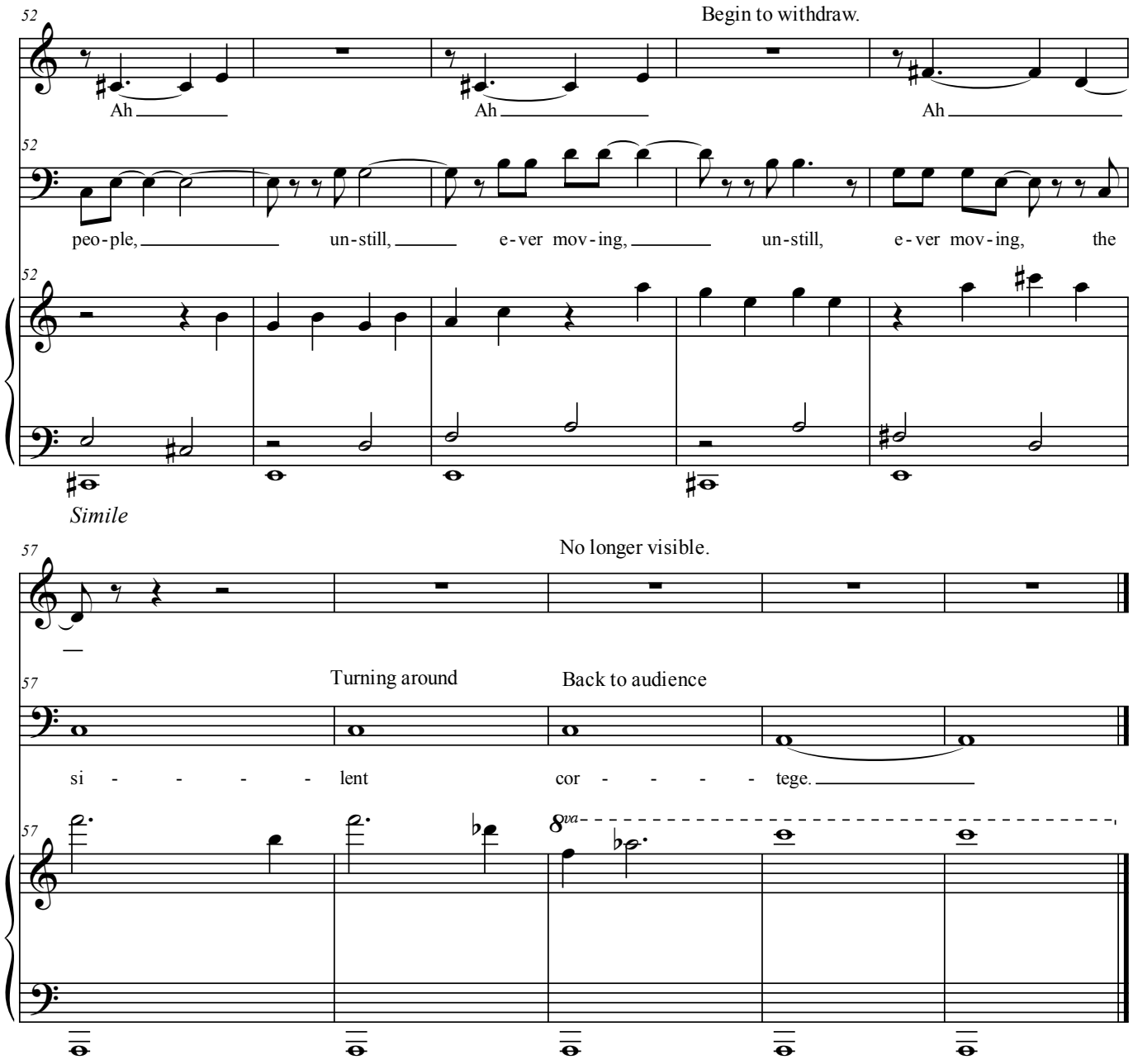



7
of faint light, but gold - en,
11
gray cliffs, and be-neath them a sea
15
ff
harsh - er than gra - nite,
ff


19
un - still ne-ver ceas-ing ne-ver ceas-ing,
23
p
high forms with the move-ment of
27
Draw level with baritone, but a bit apart.
f
"This,
gods, per-i-lous as-pect, and one said,


31
ff
this is Ac - tae - - - - - - - - - on."
31
31
ff
3
3
3
♩= 66
35
Move next to baritone.
p
Ac - tae - on of the gold - en greaves.
35
p
Ac - tae - on of the gold - en greaves.
35
3


38
pp
Ah
38
O-ver fair mea-dows, o-ver the cool face
38
p
43
of that field, un-still, un-still e-ver mov-ing, un-
43
8va
loco
43
47
Ah
still, e-ver mov-ing, e-ver mov-ing, Hosts of an an-cient
47
47
Ped.


52
Begin to withdraw.
Ah
Ah
Ah
52
peo-ple,
un-still,
e-ver mov-ing,
un-still,
e-ver mov-ing,
the
52
Simile
57
No longer visible.
57
Turning around
Back to audience
si - - - - - lent
cor - - - - - tege.
57
8va