Songs and Silences to Poems by Wallace Stevens

For mezzo soprano and piano

2013

Lawrence Kramer

lkramer@fordham.edu

Songs and Silences to Poems by Wallace Stevens

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.
--"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"

Six Significant Landscapes no. 1

An old man sits
In the shadow of a pine tree
In China.
He sees larkspur,
Blue and white,
At the edge of the shadow,
Move in the wind.
His beard moves in the wind.
The pine tree moves in the wind.
Thus water flows
Over weeds.

Tattoo

The light is like a spider.
It crawls over the water.
It crawls over the edges of the snow.
It crawls under your eyelids
And spreads its webs there--
Its two webs.

The webs of your eyes
Are fastened
To the flesh and bones of you
As to rafters of grass.

There are filaments of your eyes
On the surface of the water
And in the edges of the snow.

The Place of the Solitaires

Let the place of the solitaires
Be a place of perpetual undulation.

Whether it be in mid-sea
On the dark, green water-wheel,
Or on the beaches,
There must be no cessation
Of motion, or of the noise of motion,
The renewal of noise
And manifold continuation;

And, most, of the motion of thought
And its restless iteration,

In the place of the solitaires,
Which is to be a place of perpetual undulation.

The Valley Candle

My candle burned alone in an immense valley.
Beams of the huge night converged upon it,
Until the wind blew.
The beams of the huge night
Converged upon its image,
Until the wind blew.

Fabliau of Florida

Barque of phosphor
On the palmy beach,

Move outward into heaven,
Into the alabasters
And night blues.

Foam and cloud are one.
Sultry moon-monsters
Are dissolving.

Fill your black hull
With white moonlight.

There will never be an end
To this droning of the surf.

Gubbinal

That strange flower, the sun,
Is just what you say.
Have it your way.

The world is ugly,
And the people are sad.

That tuft of jungle feathers,
That animal eye,
Is just what you say.

That savage of fire,
That seed,
Have it your way.

The world is ugly,
And the people are sad.

Primordia no. 5

The birch trees draw up whiteness from the ground.
In the swamps, bushes draw up dark red,
Or yellow.
O boatman,
What are you drawing up from the rain-pointed water?
O boatman,
What are you drawing up from the rain-pointed water?
Are you two boatmen
Different from each other?

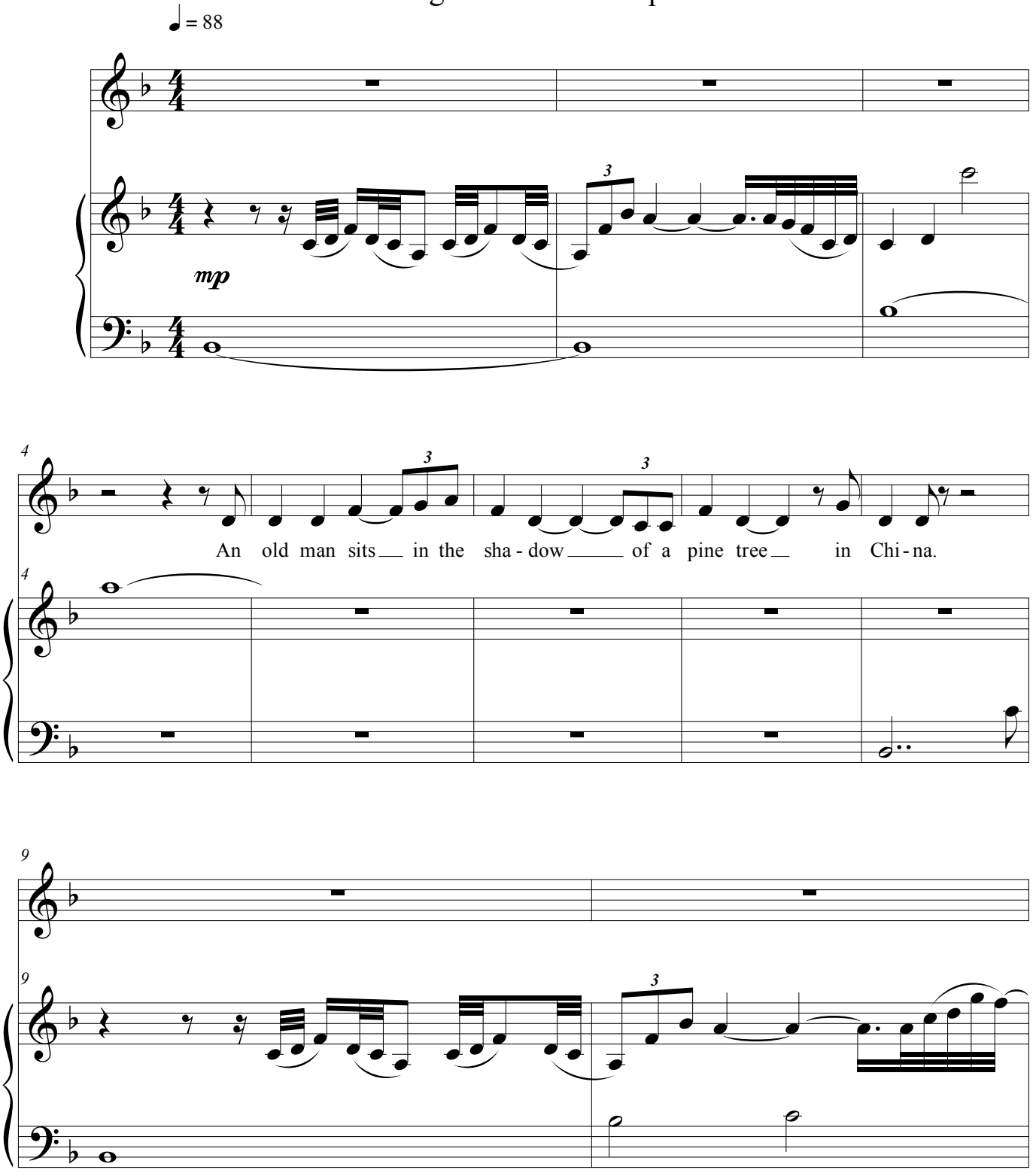
The Disillusionment of Ten O' Clock

The houses are haunted
By white night-gowns.
None are green,
Or purple with green rings,
Or green with yellow rings,
Or yellow with blue rings.
None of them are strange,
With socks of lace
And beaded ceintures.
People are not going
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.
Only, here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches tigers
In red weather.

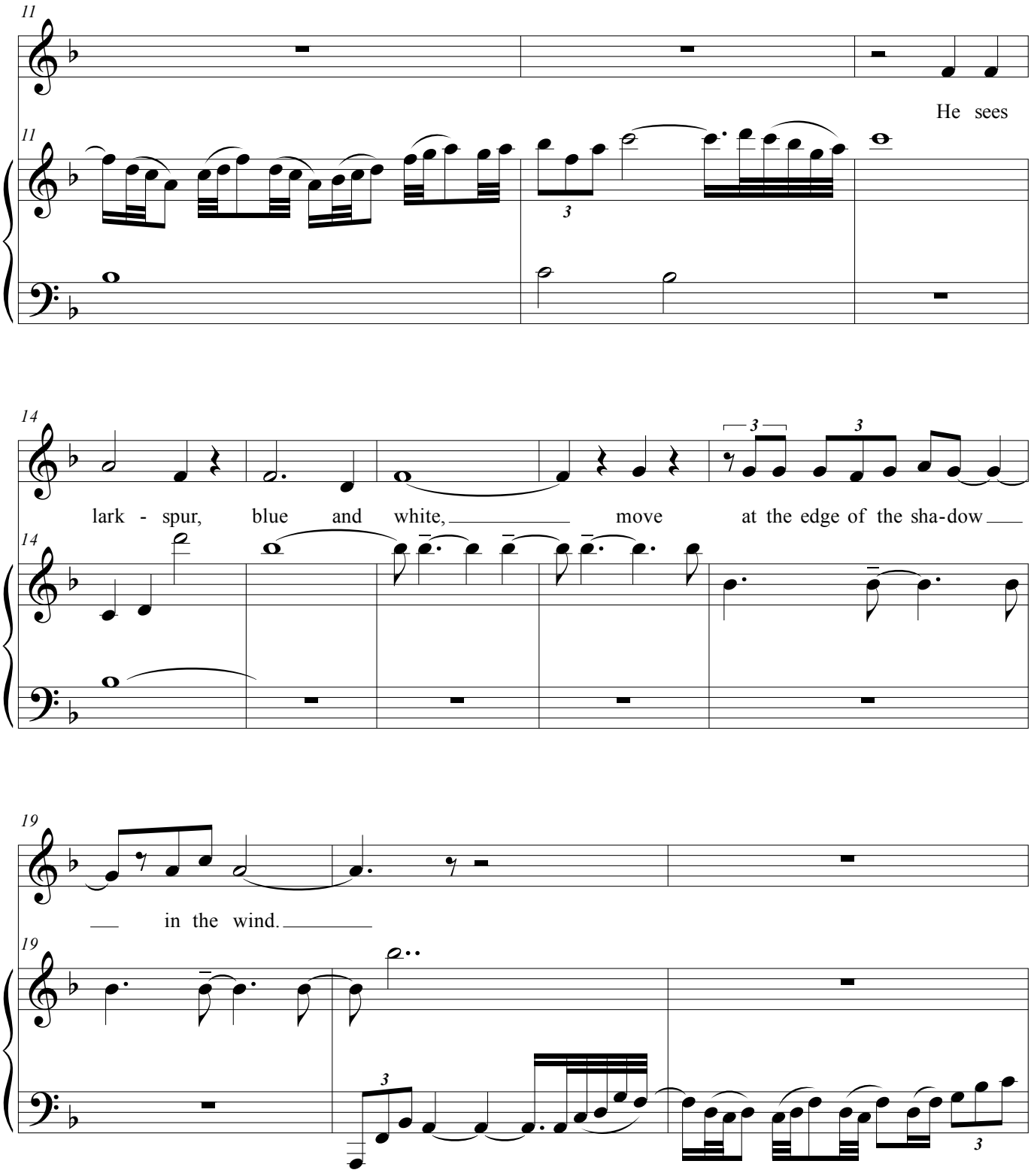
Songs and Silences to Poems by Wallace Stevens was composed in connection with a conference, "Absence, Silence, and Ellipsis in Words and Music," held by the International Association of Word and Music Studies (WMA) in London in 2013. Why Stevens? The poems (chosen partly, I confess, because they are out of copyright) belong to the early phase of the poet's career. The works from this phase typically set up a stark opposition between a banal, mundane reality and a sensuous, exotic, and fanciful imagination. What makes this opposition powerful rather than merely glaring is the constant intimation that the world without imagination is not banal for social or accidental reasons, but banal in essence. The unimagined world is in and of itself a void. Stevens's regular word for its condition is "poverty." Modernity, whose only wealth for Stevens was an abundance of lost illusions, made the knowledge of this poverty inescapable, however much we may wish to hide it from ourselves. And it is this surplus absence that compels the products of imagination to attain the force of surplus presence. The music of *Songs and Silences* seeks to unveil the haunting traces of this underlying emptiness--absence, silence, and ellipsis all in one--in ways that allow the paradoxical fullness of imagined things to find a voice.

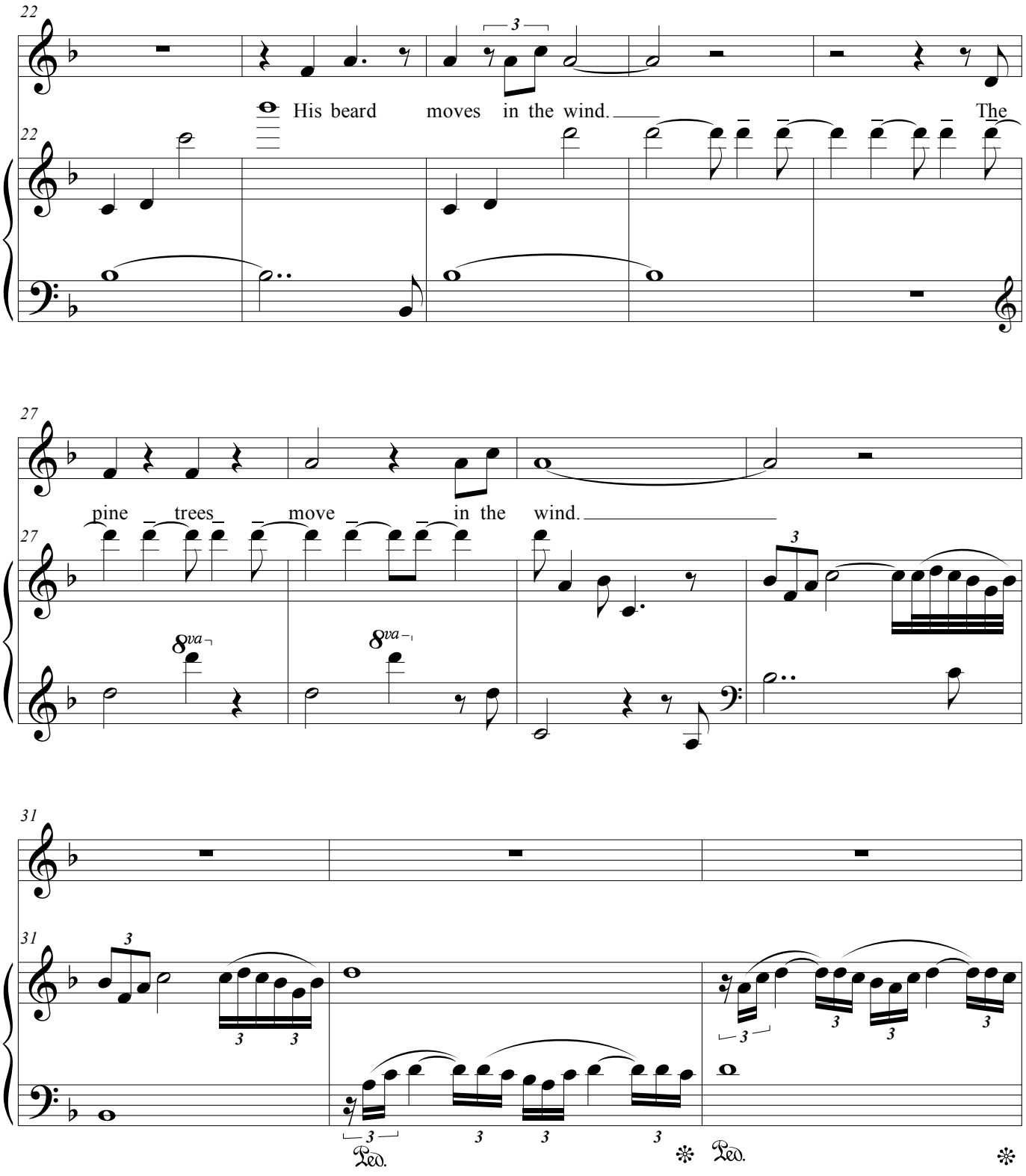
Duration: about 18 minutes.

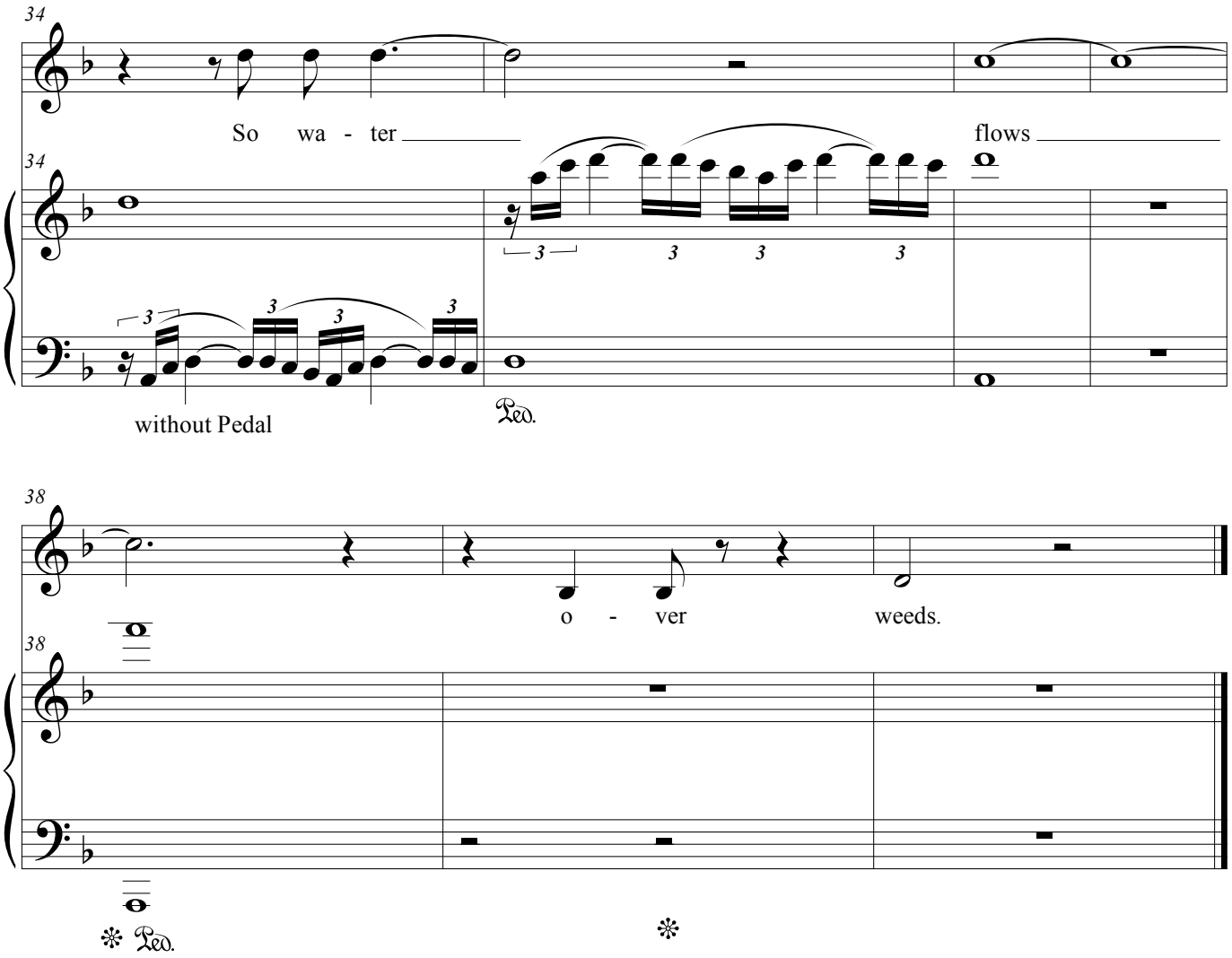
Significant Landscape I



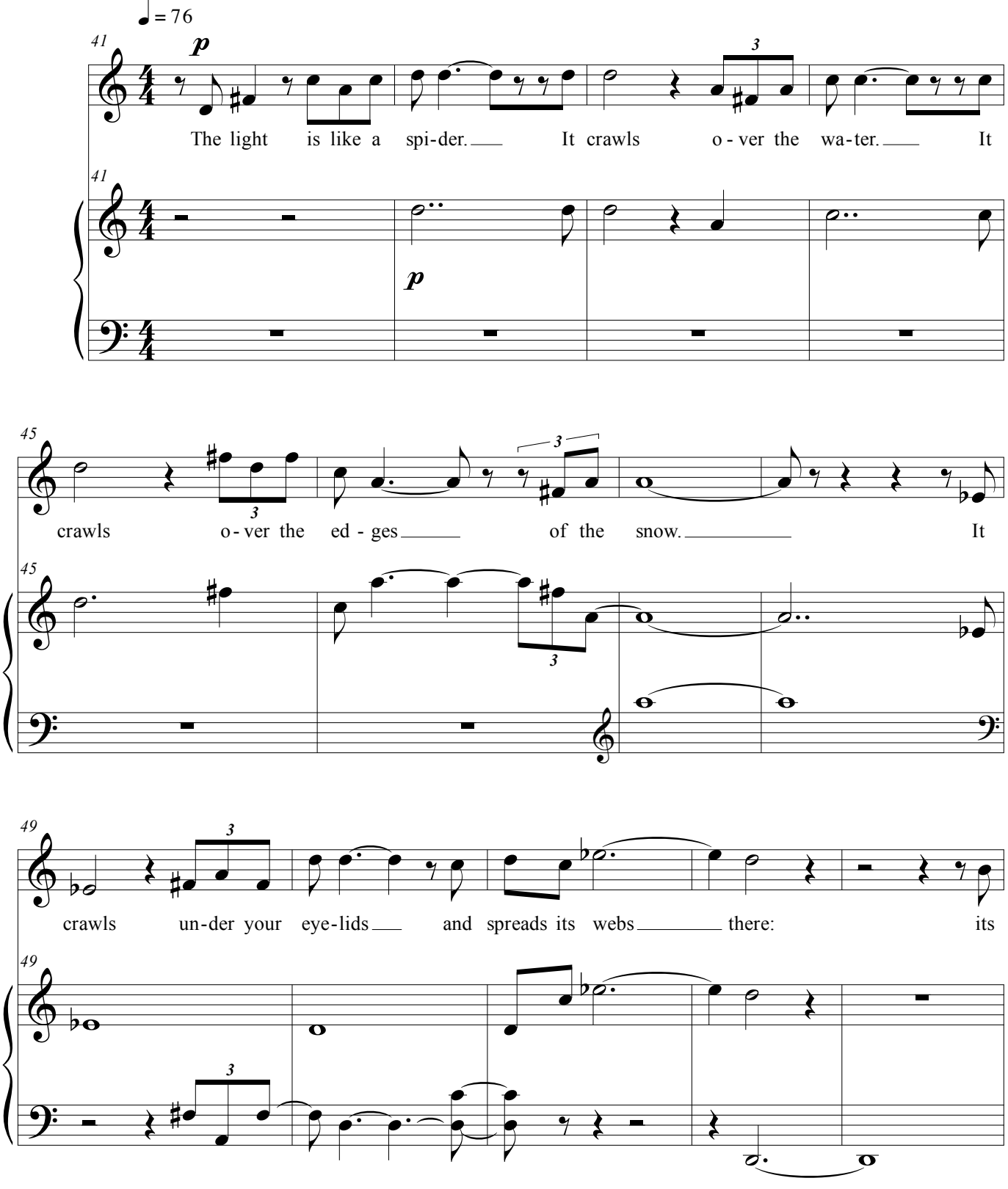
©2012

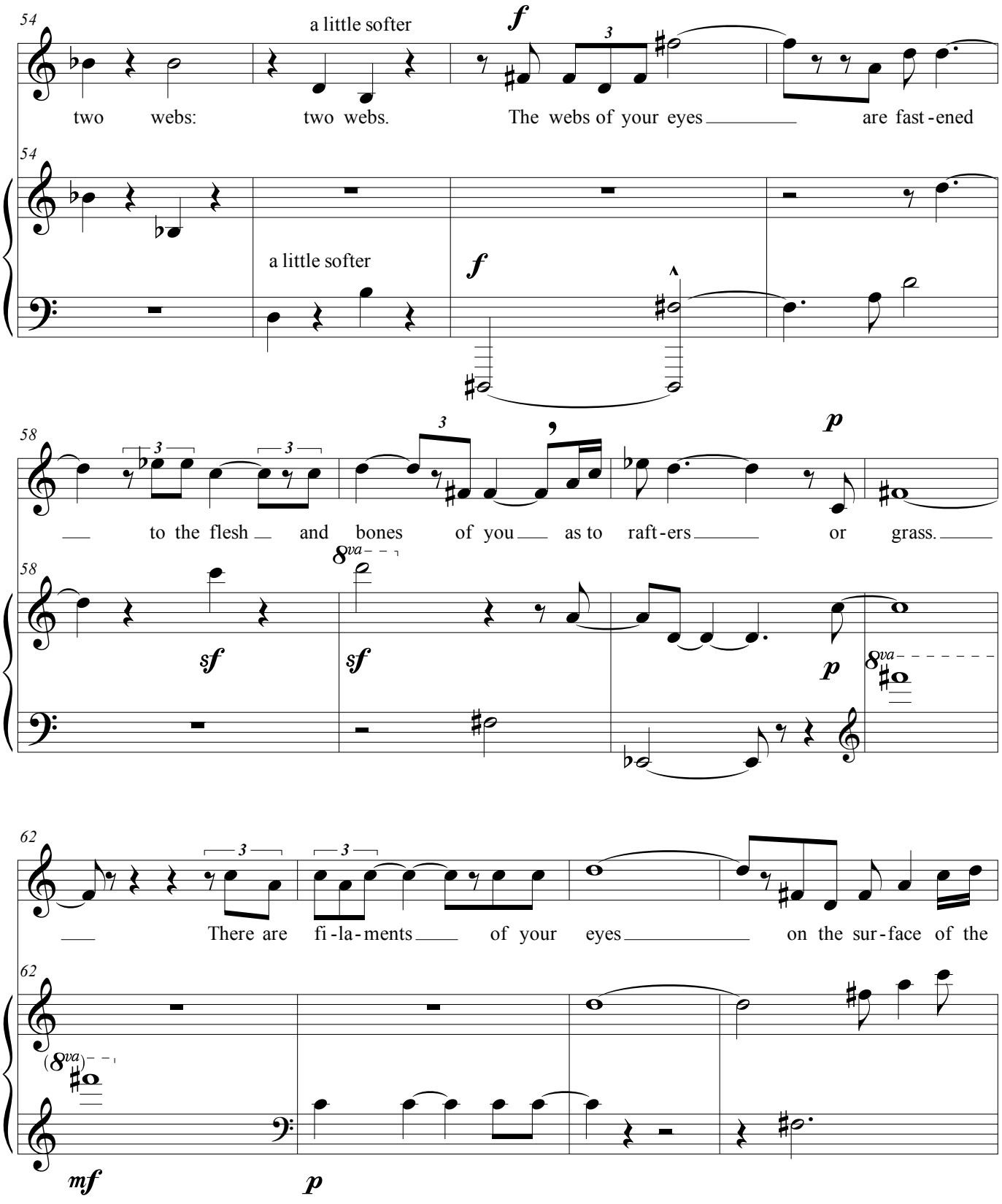

11
He sees
11
14
lark - spur, blue and white, move at the edge of the sha-dow
14
19
in the wind.
19

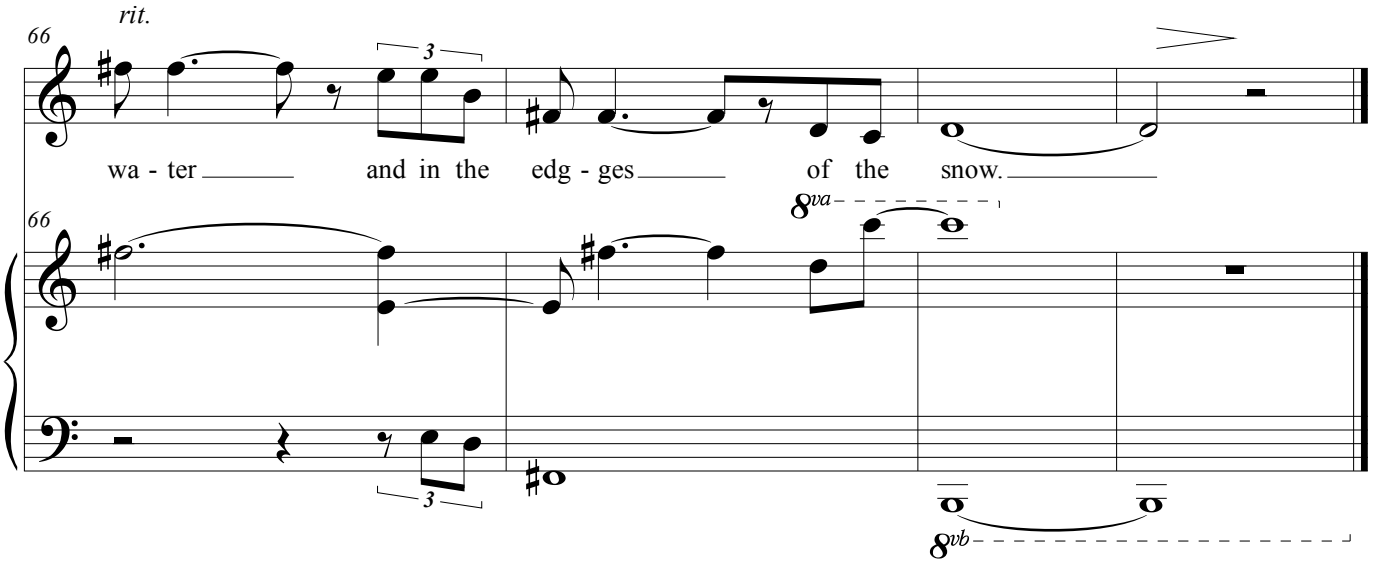

22
His beard moves in the wind. The
27
pine trees move in the wind.
8va
8va
31
Ped.
Ped.


34
So wa - ter
flows
34
without Pedal
Ped.
38
o - ver
weeds.
38
Ped.

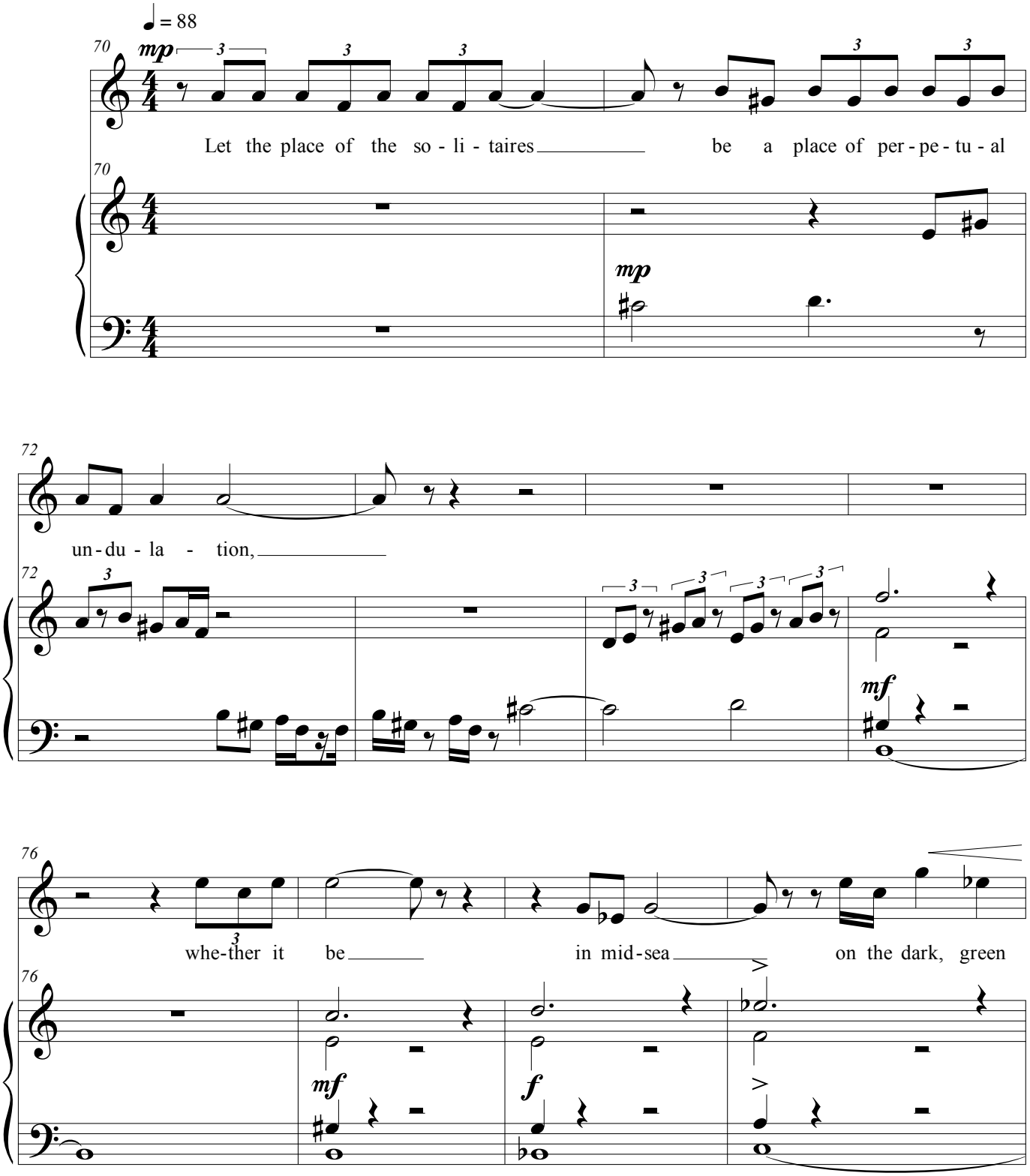
Tattoo

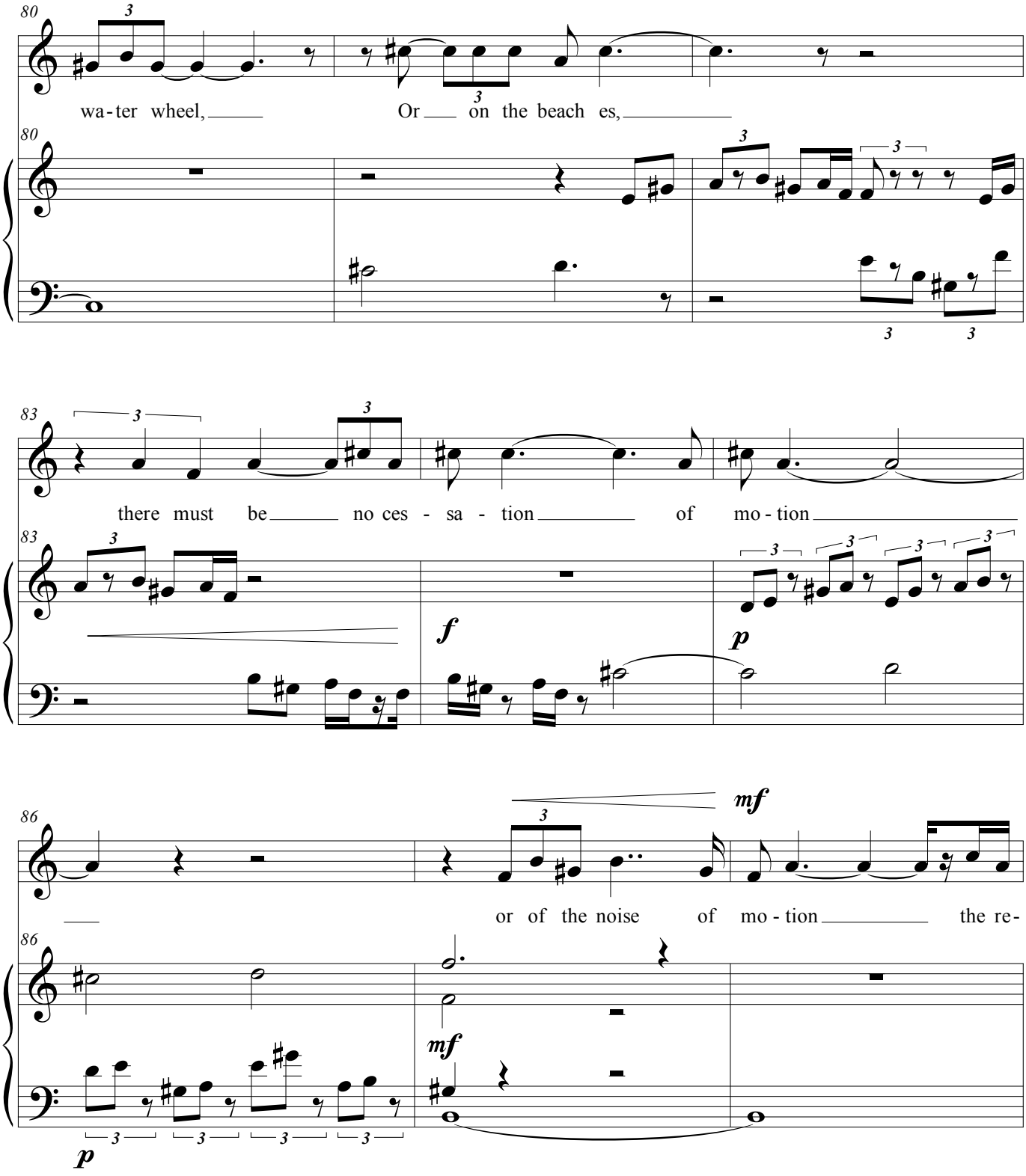

♩ = 76
41
p
The light is like a spi-der. It crawls o-ver the wa-ter. It
41
p
45
crawls o-ver the ed-ges of the snow. It
45
49
crawls un-der your eye-lids and spreads its webs there: its
49

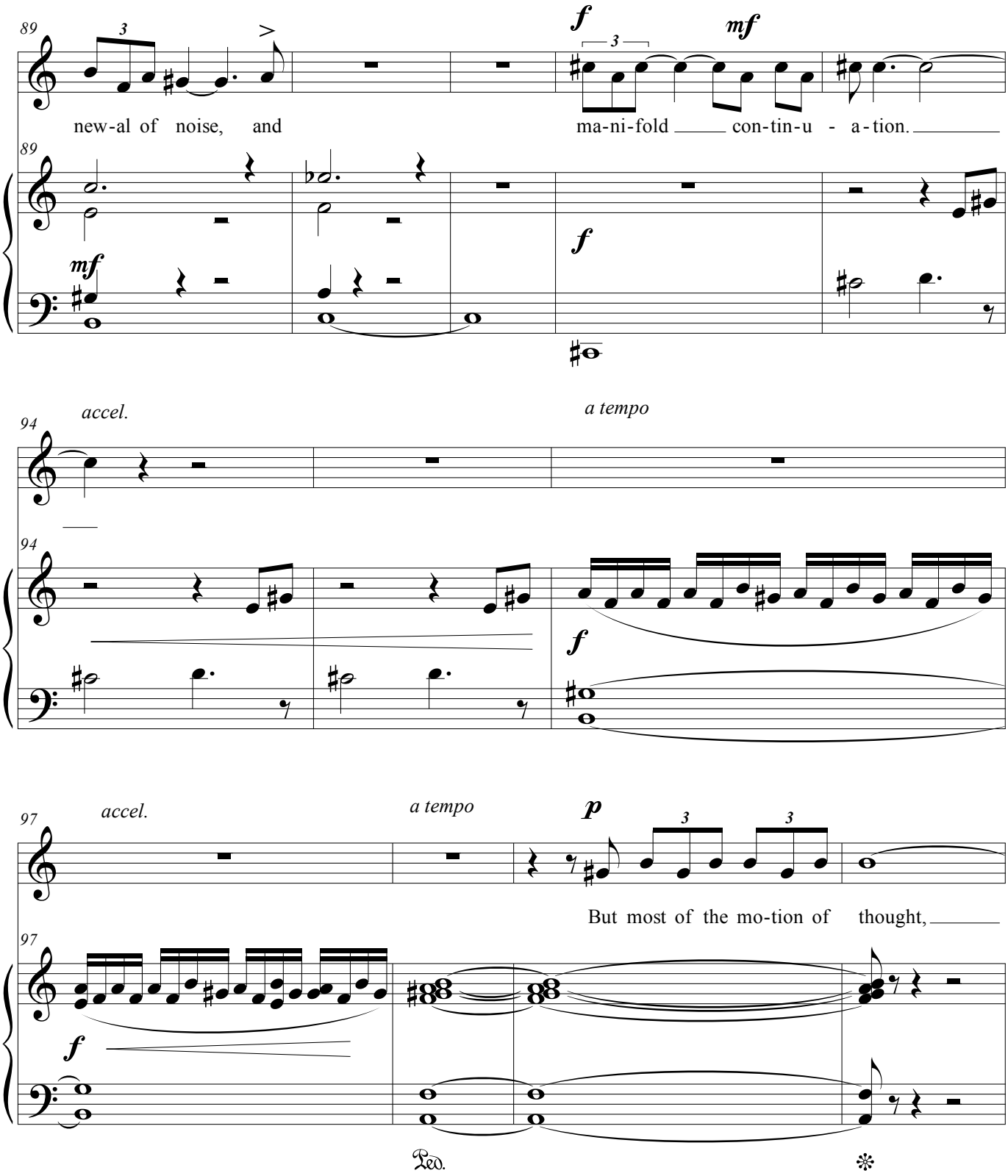

54
a little softer
f
two webs: two webs. The webs of your eyes are fast-ened
54
a little softer
f
58
to the flesh and bones of you as to raft-ers or grass.
p
58
8va
sf
sf
p
8va
62
There are fi-la-ments of your eyes on the sur-face of the
62
(8va)
mf
p

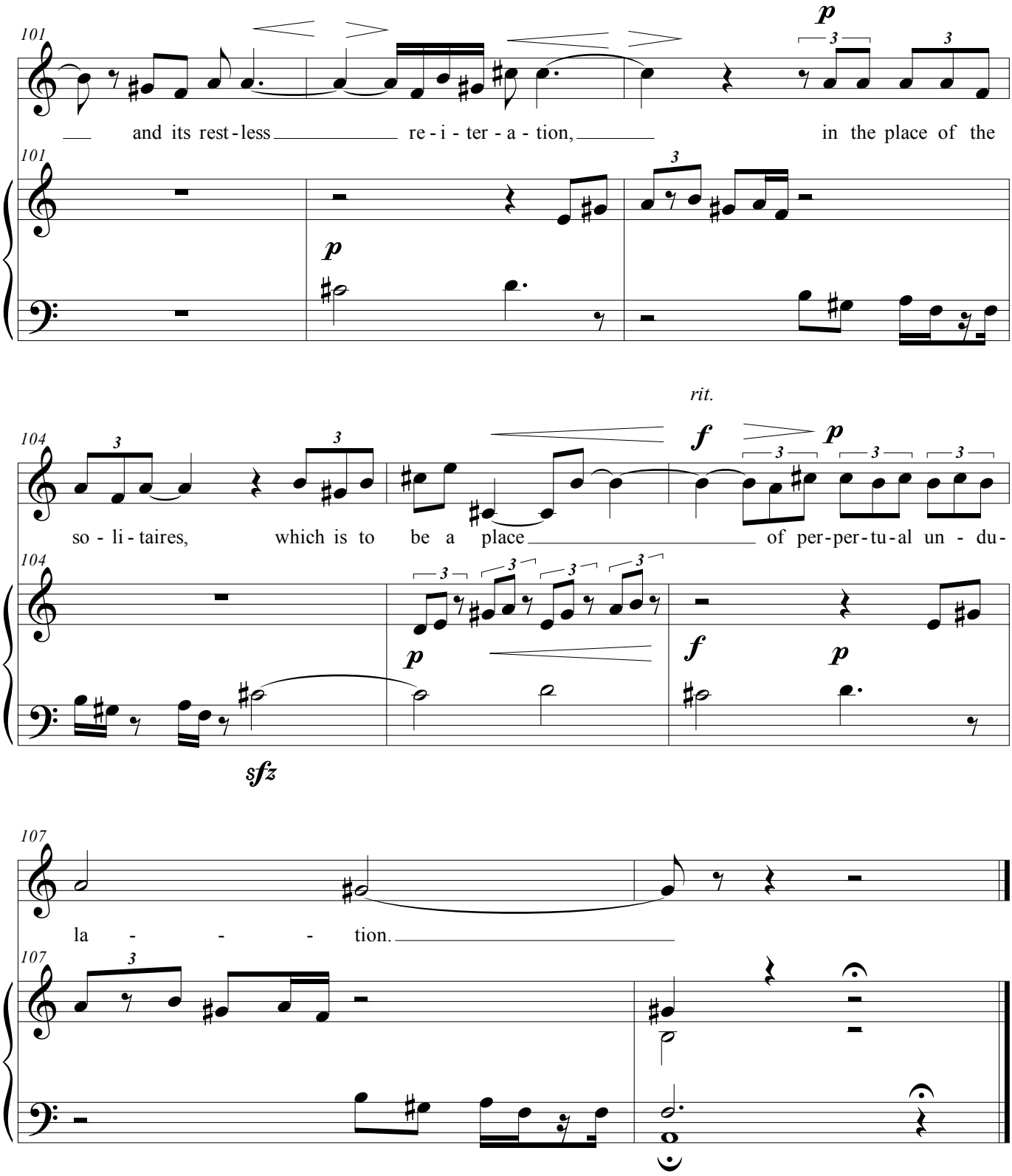

rit.
66
wa - ter and in the edg - ges of the snow.
8va
8vb

The Place of the Solitaires

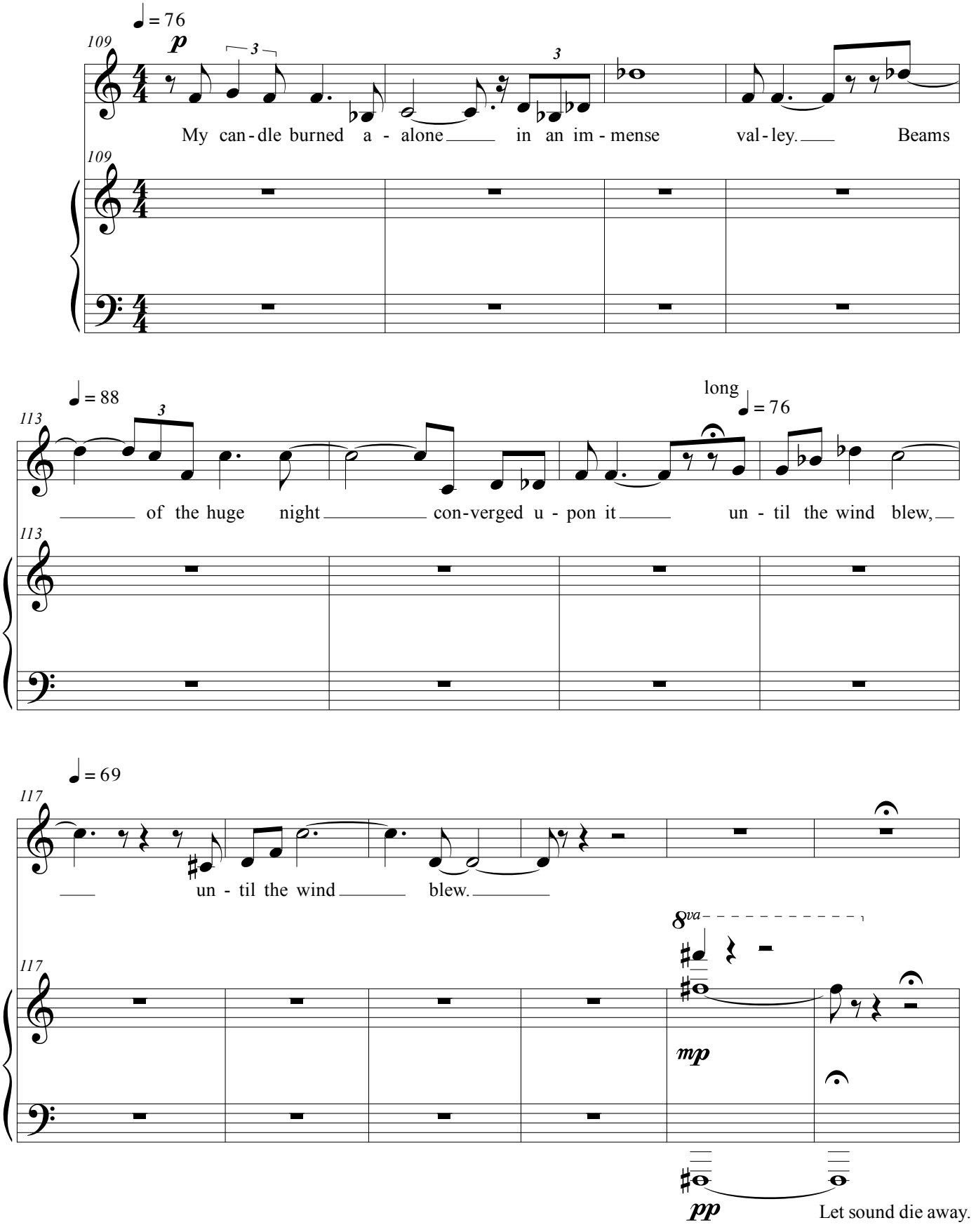


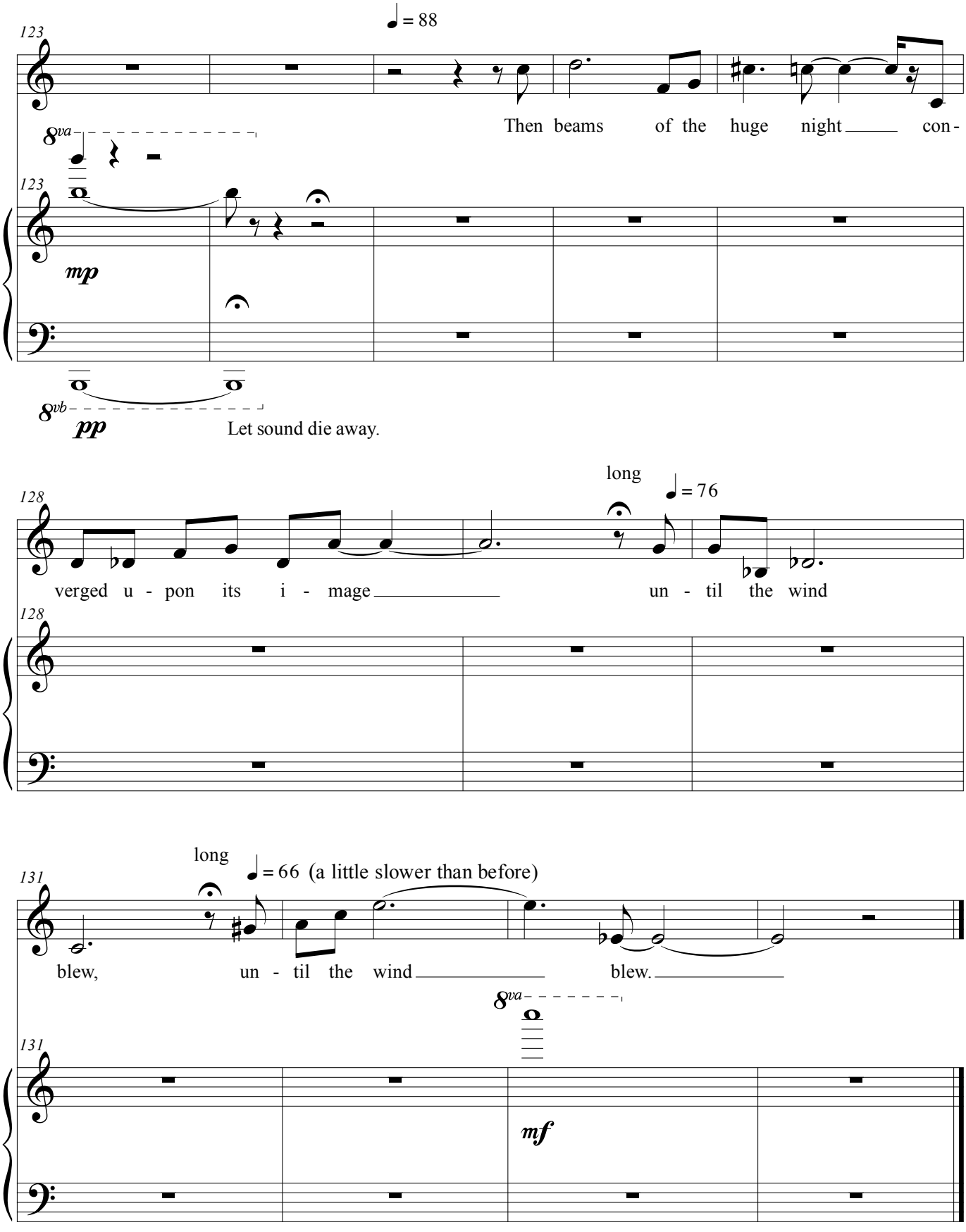

80
wa - ter wheel,
Or on the beach es,
83
there must be no ces - sa - tion of mo - tion
f
p
86
or of the noise of mo - tion the re -
mf
mf
p


89
f
mf
new-al of noise, and
ma-ni-fold con-tin-u - a-tion.
mf
f
94
accel.
a tempo
f
97
accel.
a tempo
p
But most of the mo-tion of thought,
f
Ped.
*

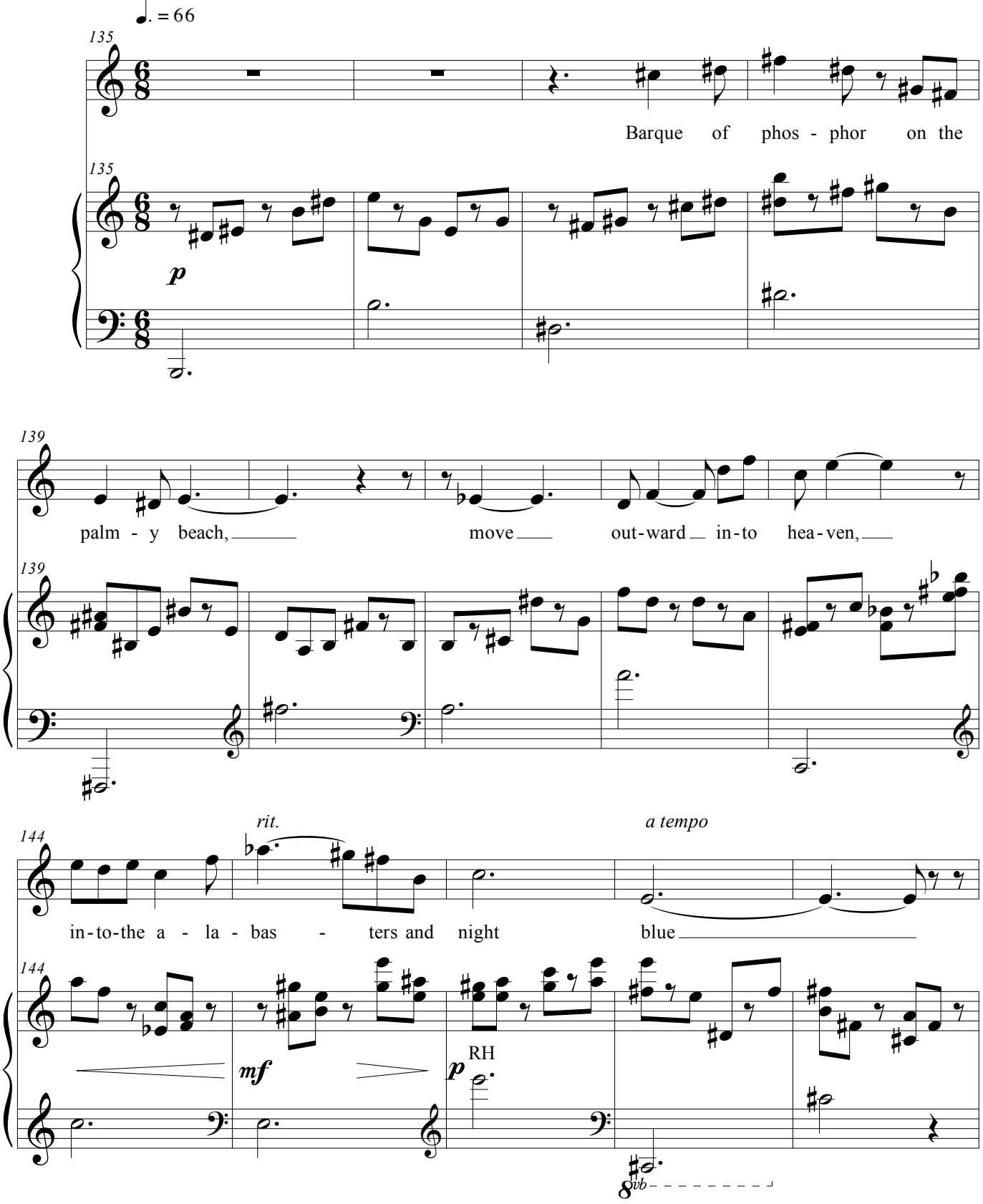

101
and its rest-less re-i-ter-a-tion, in the place of the
101
104
so-li-taires, which is to be a place of per-per-tu-al un-du-
104
sfz
107
la - - - tion.
107

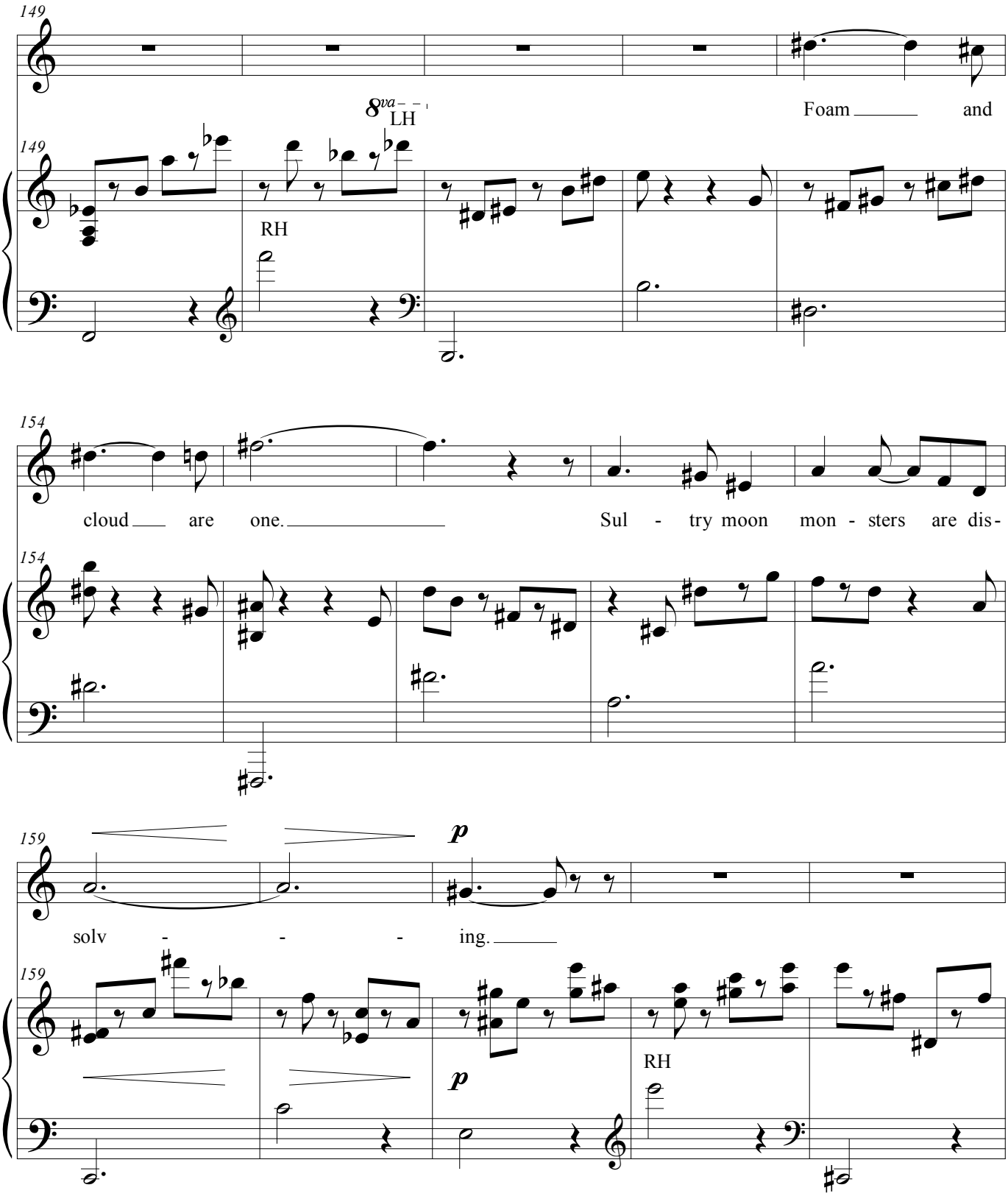
The Valley Candle

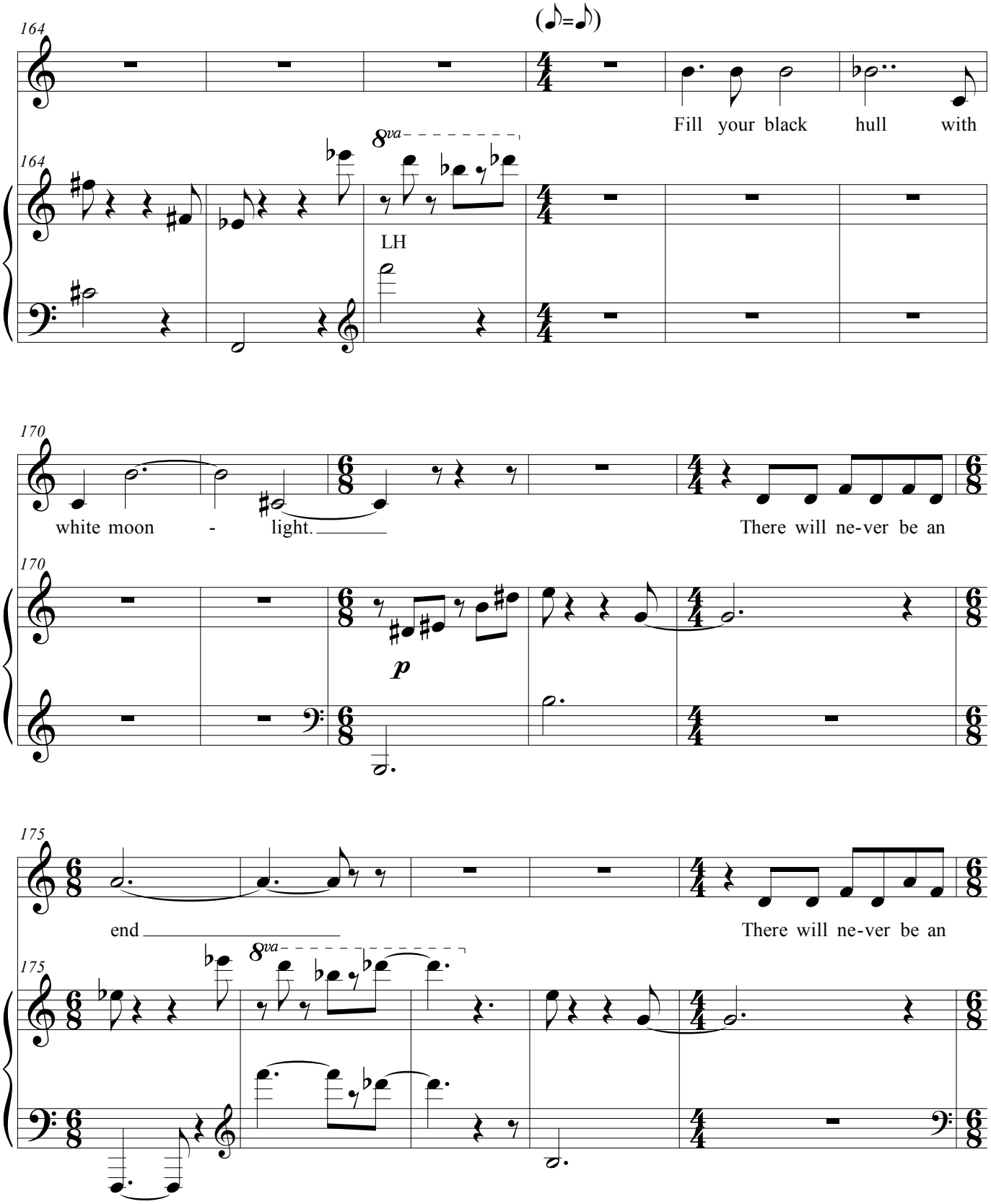


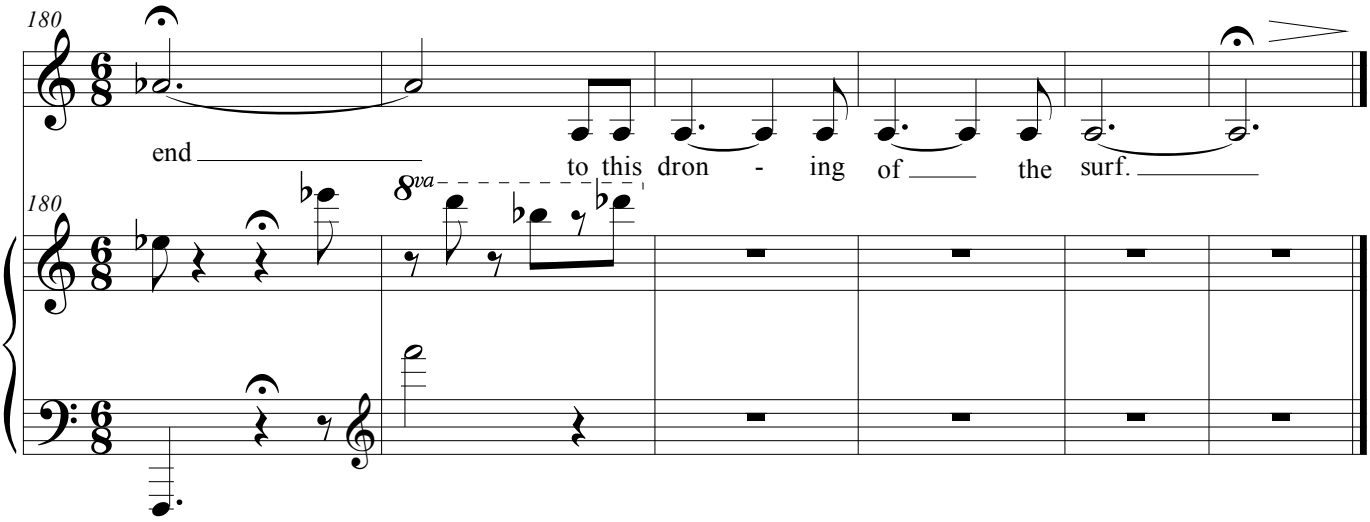

123
♩ = 88
Then beams of the huge night con-
8va
mp
123
8vb
pp
Let sound die away.
128
long
♩ = 76
verged u - pon its i - mage un - til the wind
128
131
long
♩ = 66 (a little slower than before)
blew, un - til the wind blew.
8va
131
mf

Fabliau of Florida

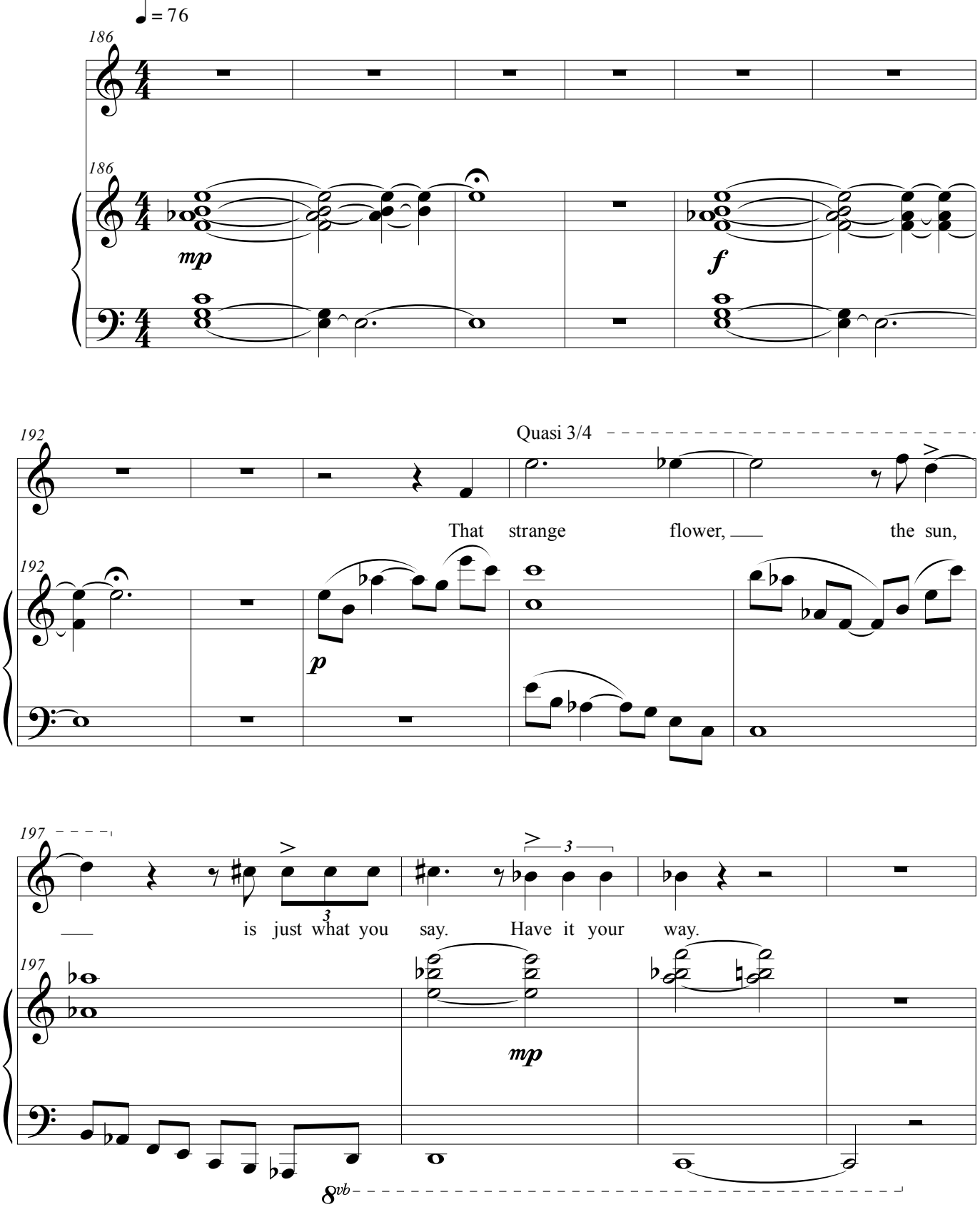


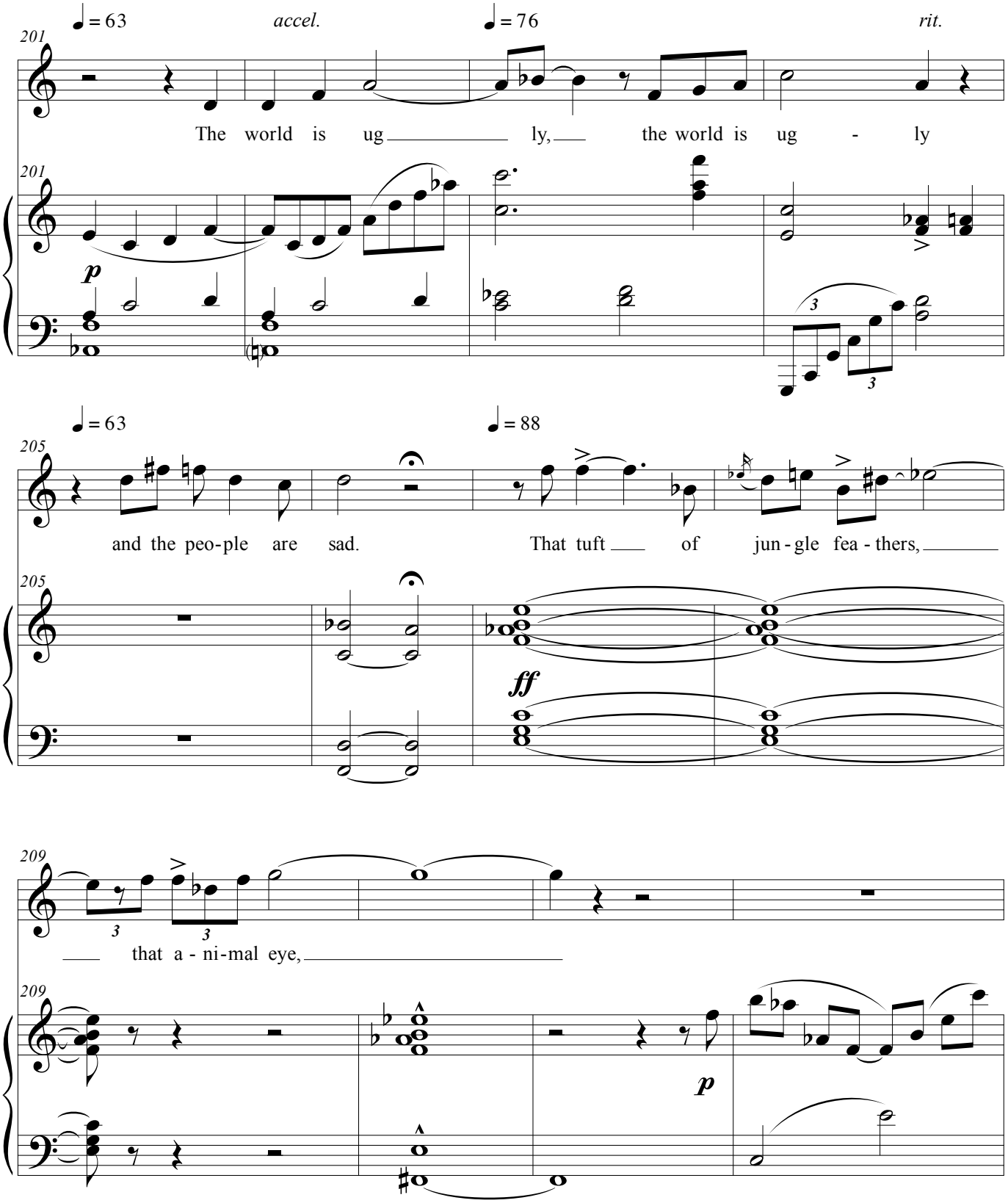

149
8va
LH
Foam and
149
RH
154
cloud are one.
Sul - try moon mon - sters are dis-
154
159
p
solv - - - ing.
159
p
RH

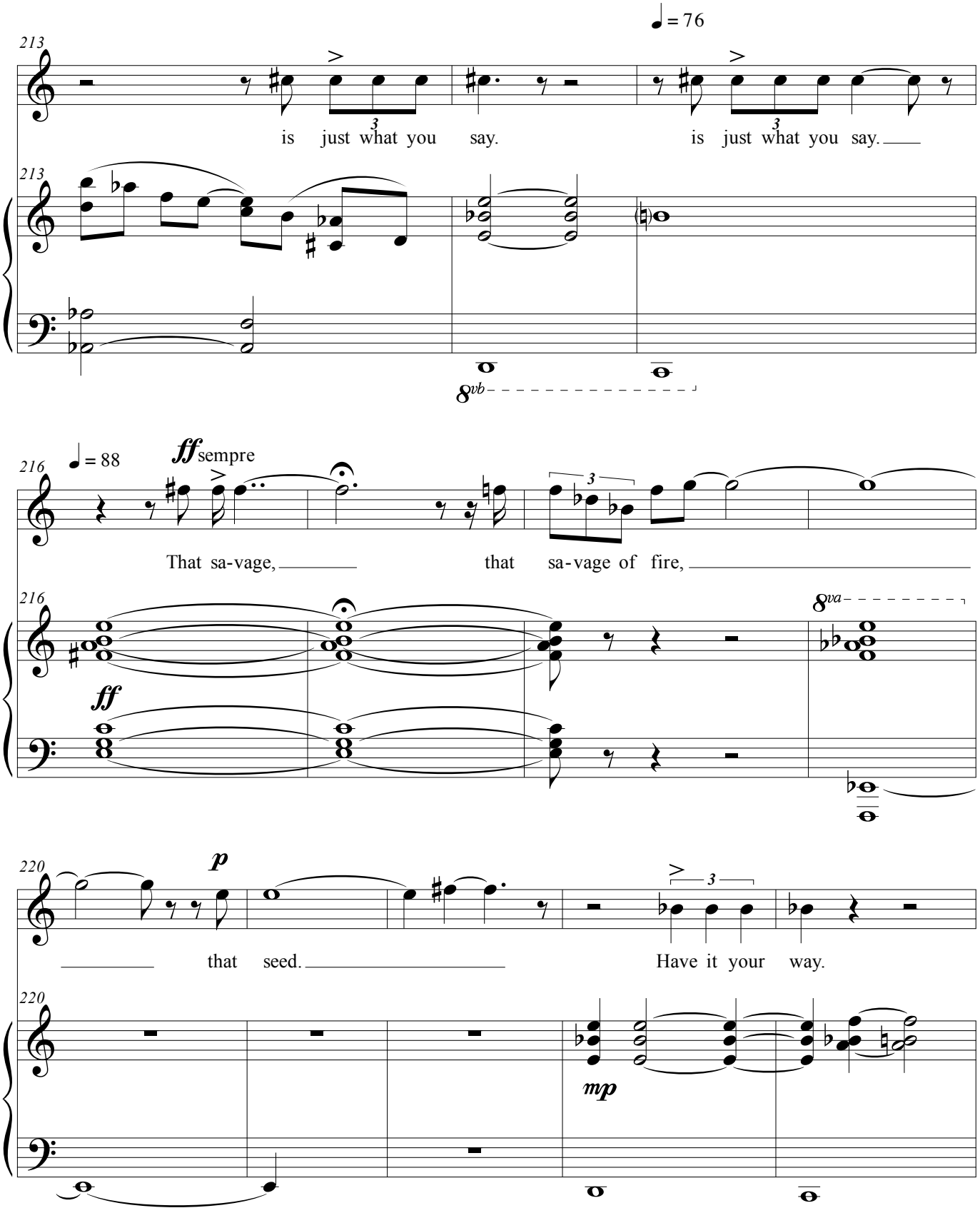

(♪=♪)
164
Fill your black hull with
8va
LH
170
white moon - light.
There will ne-ver be an
p
175
end
There will ne-ver be an
8va

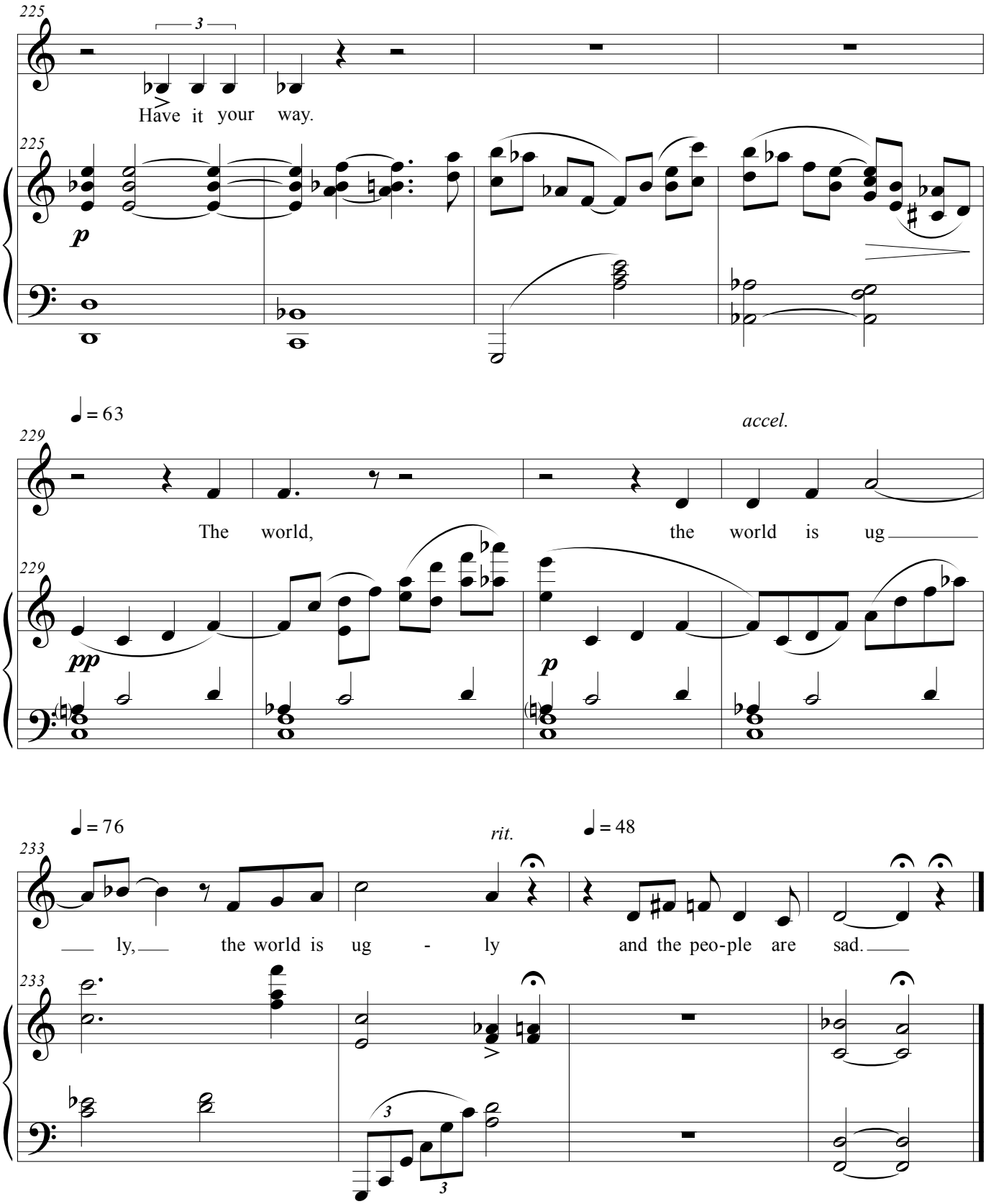

180
end
to this dron - ing of the surf.
180
8va

Gubbinal

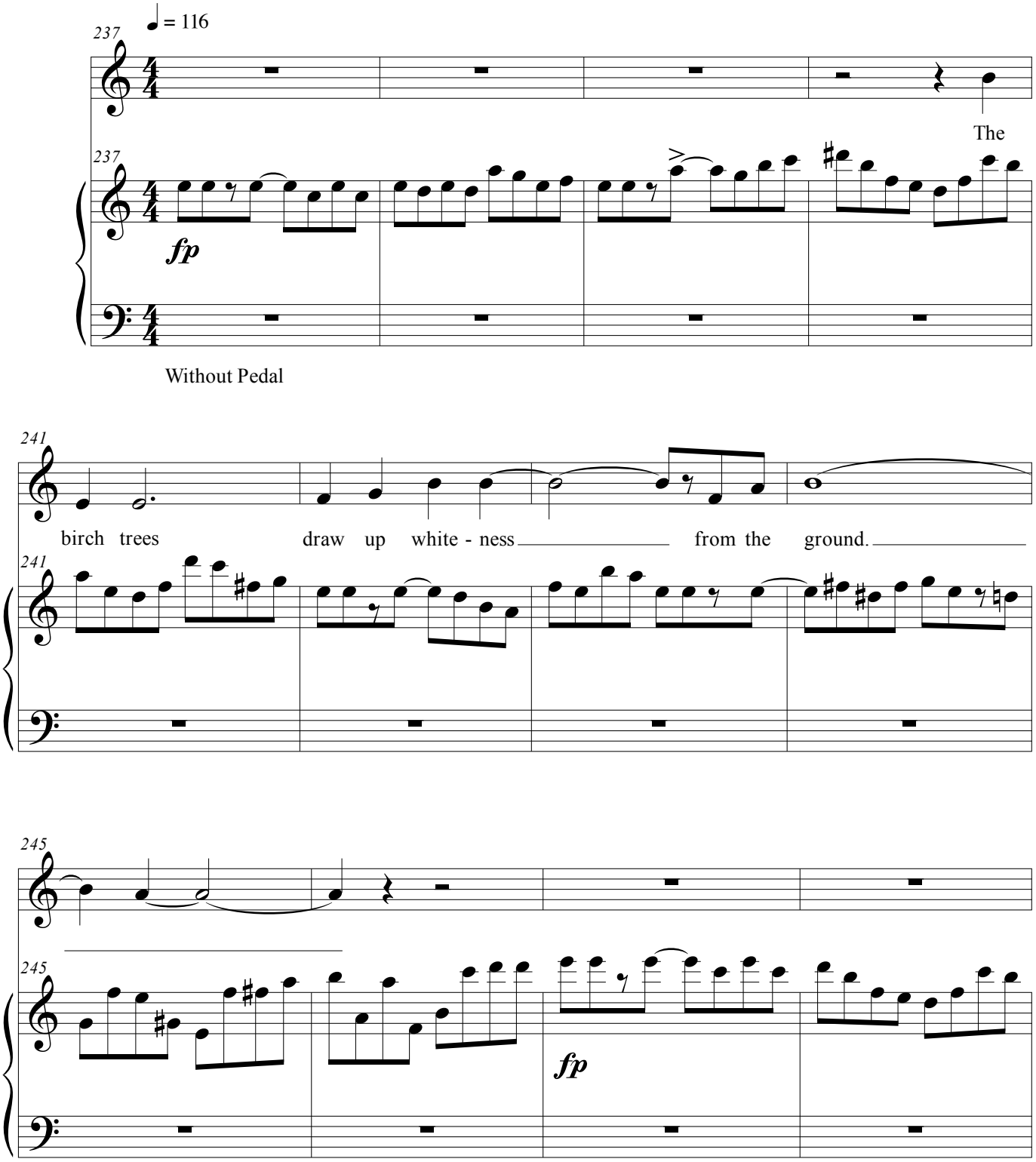

♩ = 76
186
186
mp
f
192
192
Quasi 3/4
That strange flower, the sun,
p
197
197
is just what you say. Have it your way.
mp
8vb

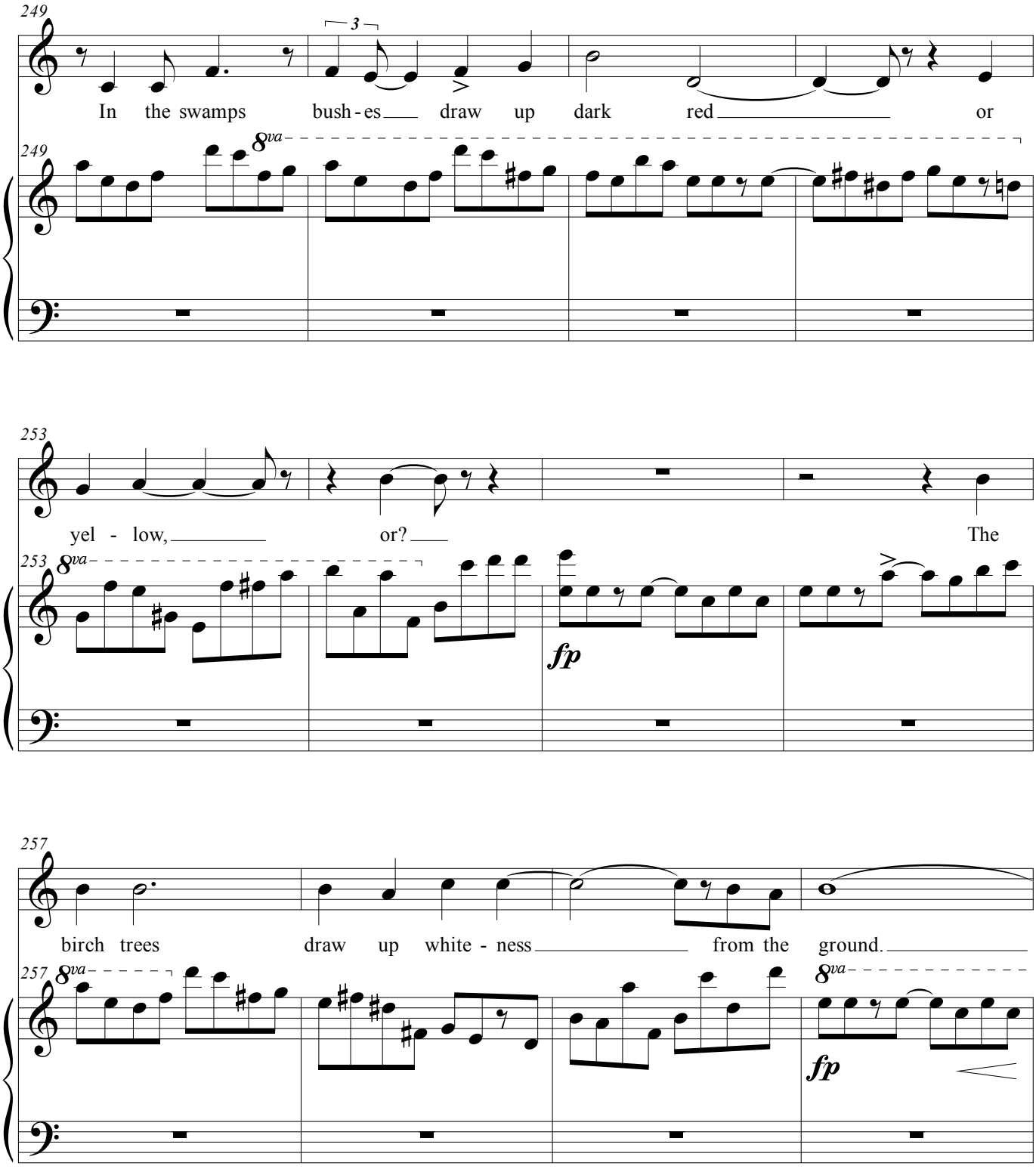

♩ = 63
accel.
♩ = 76
rit.
201
The world is ug ly, the world is ug - ly
p
♩ = 63
♩ = 88
205
and the peo-ple are sad.
That tuft of jun-gle fea-thers,
ff
209
that a-ni-mal eye,
p

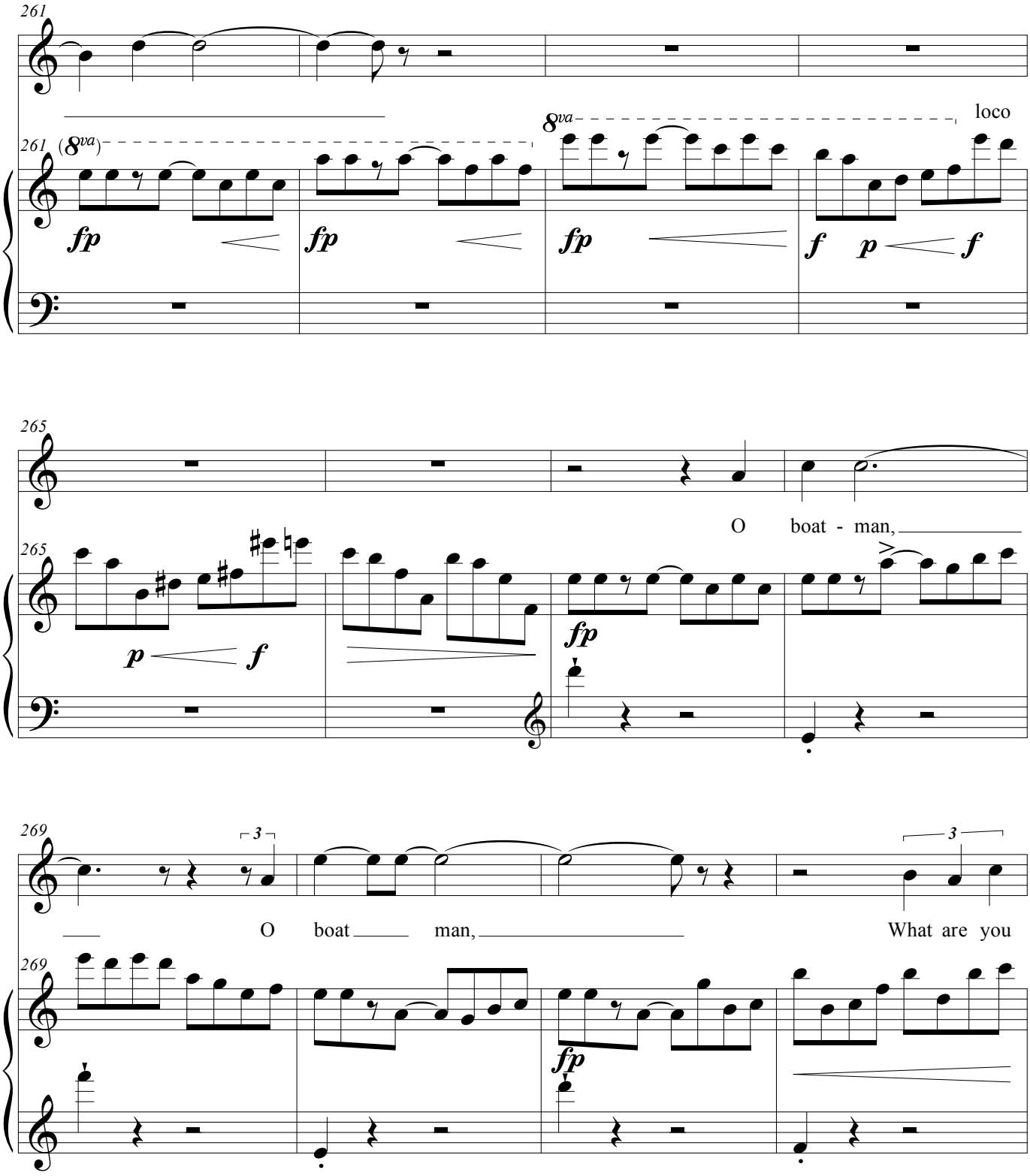

213
♩ = 76
is just what you say.
is just what you say.
213
8vb
216
♩ = 88
ff sempre
That sa-vage,
that sa-vage of fire,
216
8va
ff
220
p
that seed.
Have it your way.
220
mp

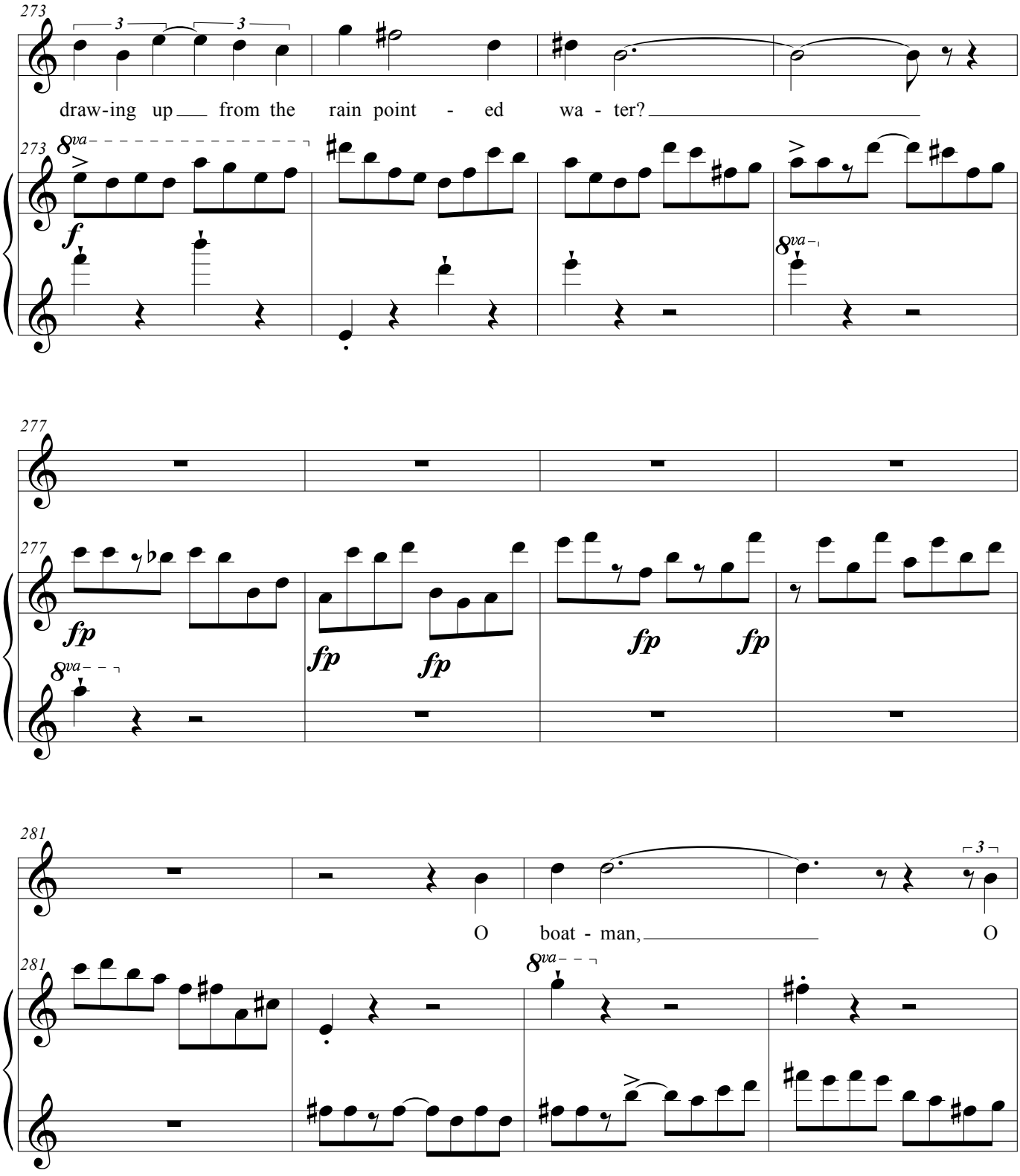

225
3
Have it your way.
225
p
♩ = 63
accel.
229
The world, the world is ug
229
pp
p
♩ = 76
rit.
♩ = 48
233
ly, the world is ug - ly and the peo-ple are sad.
233
3
3

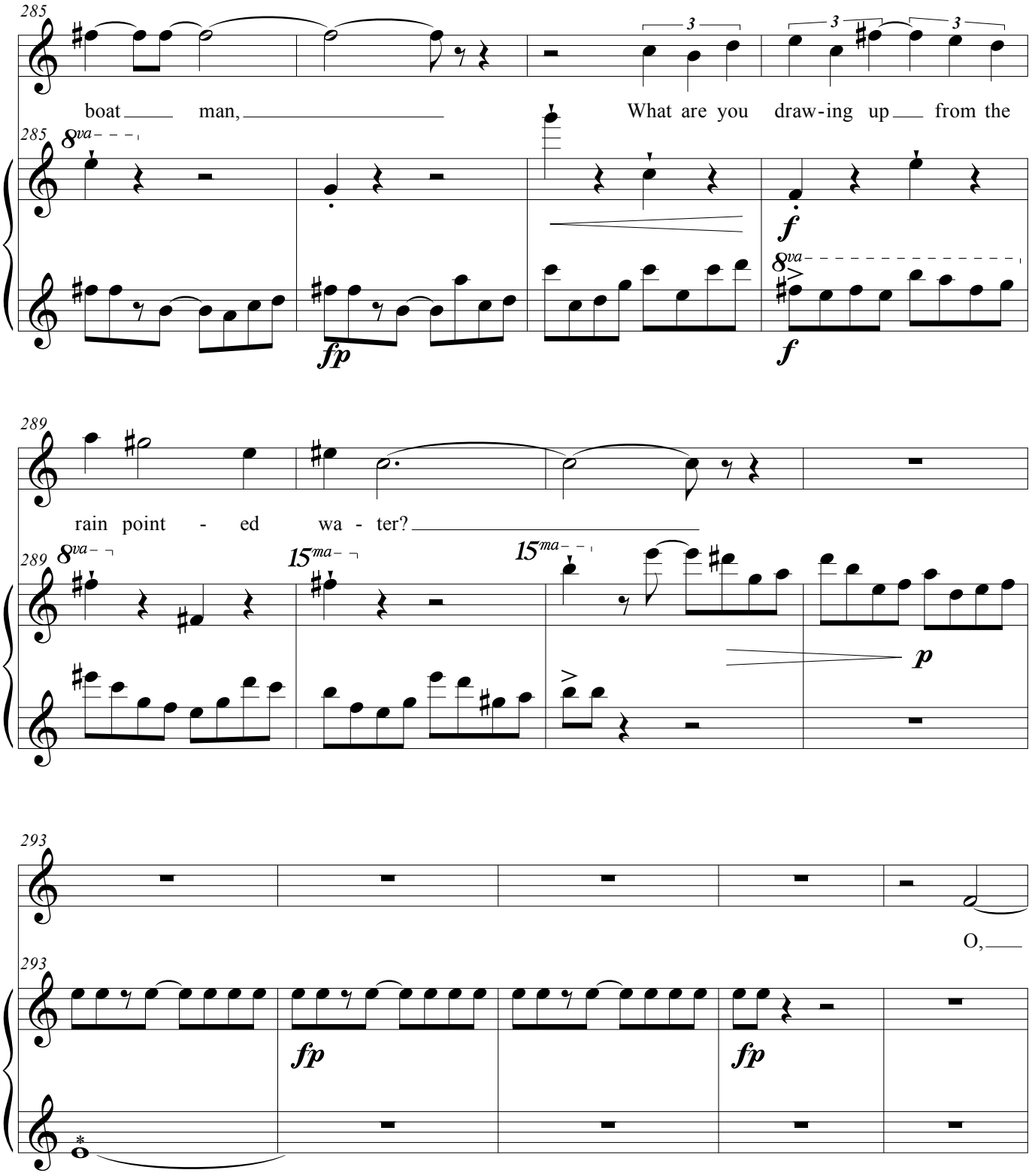
From "Primordia"

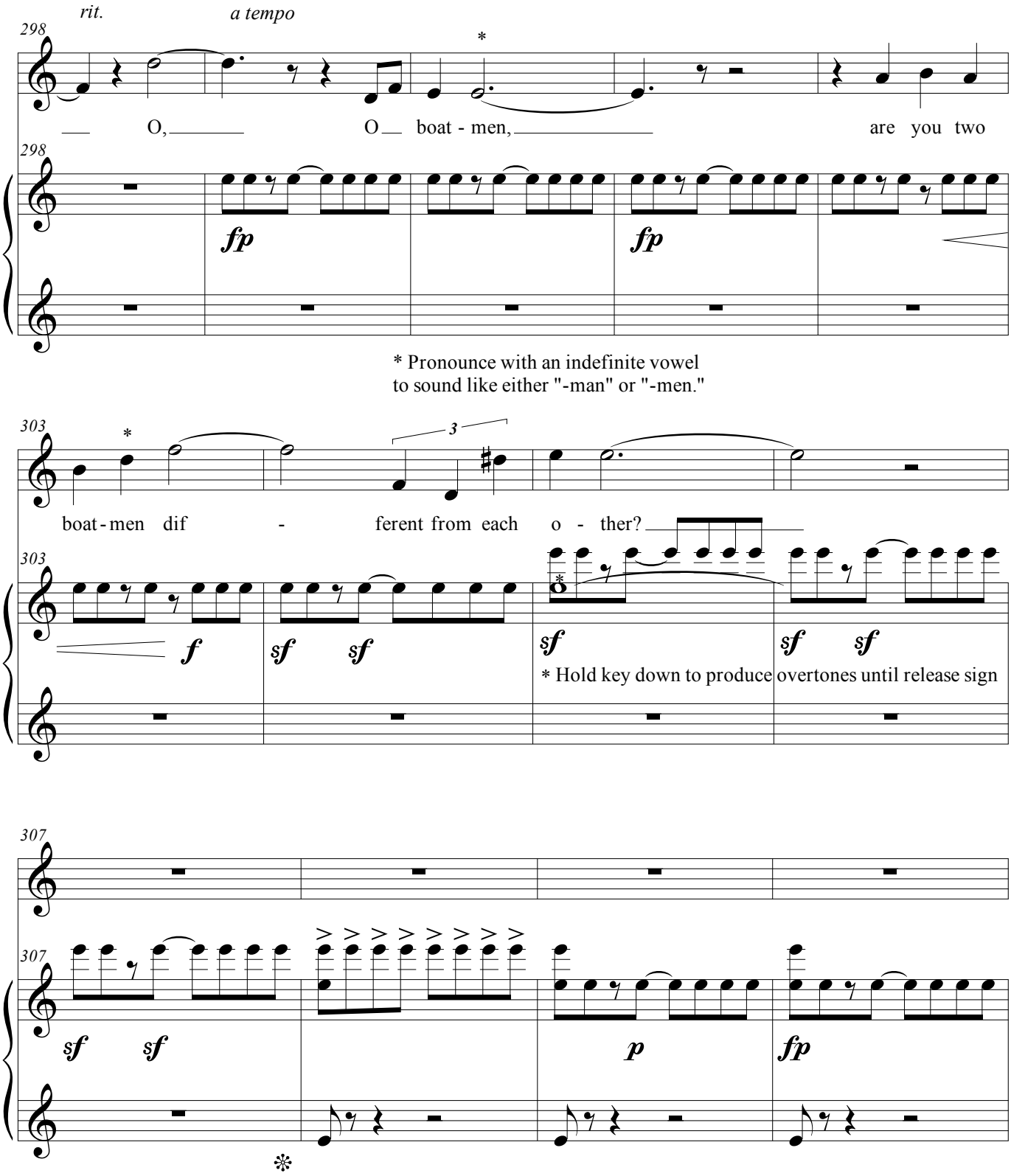


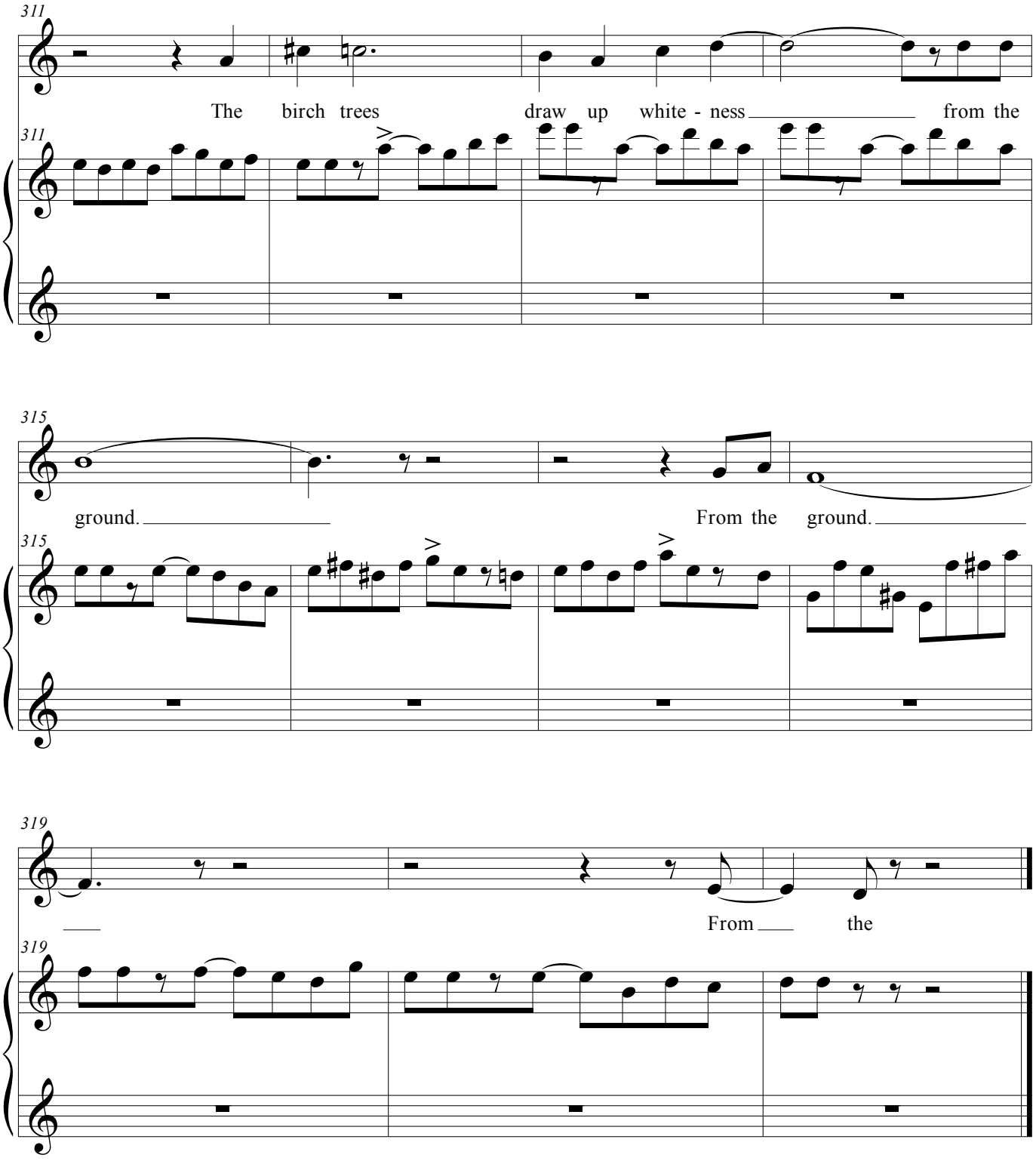

249
3
In the swamps bush - es draw up dark red or
249
8va
253
yel - low, or? The
253
8va
fp
257
birch trees draw up white - ness from the ground.
257
8va
8va
fp


261
(8va)
8va
loco
fp
fp
fp
f p f
265
O boat - man,
p f
fp
269
3
3
O boat man,
What are you
fp

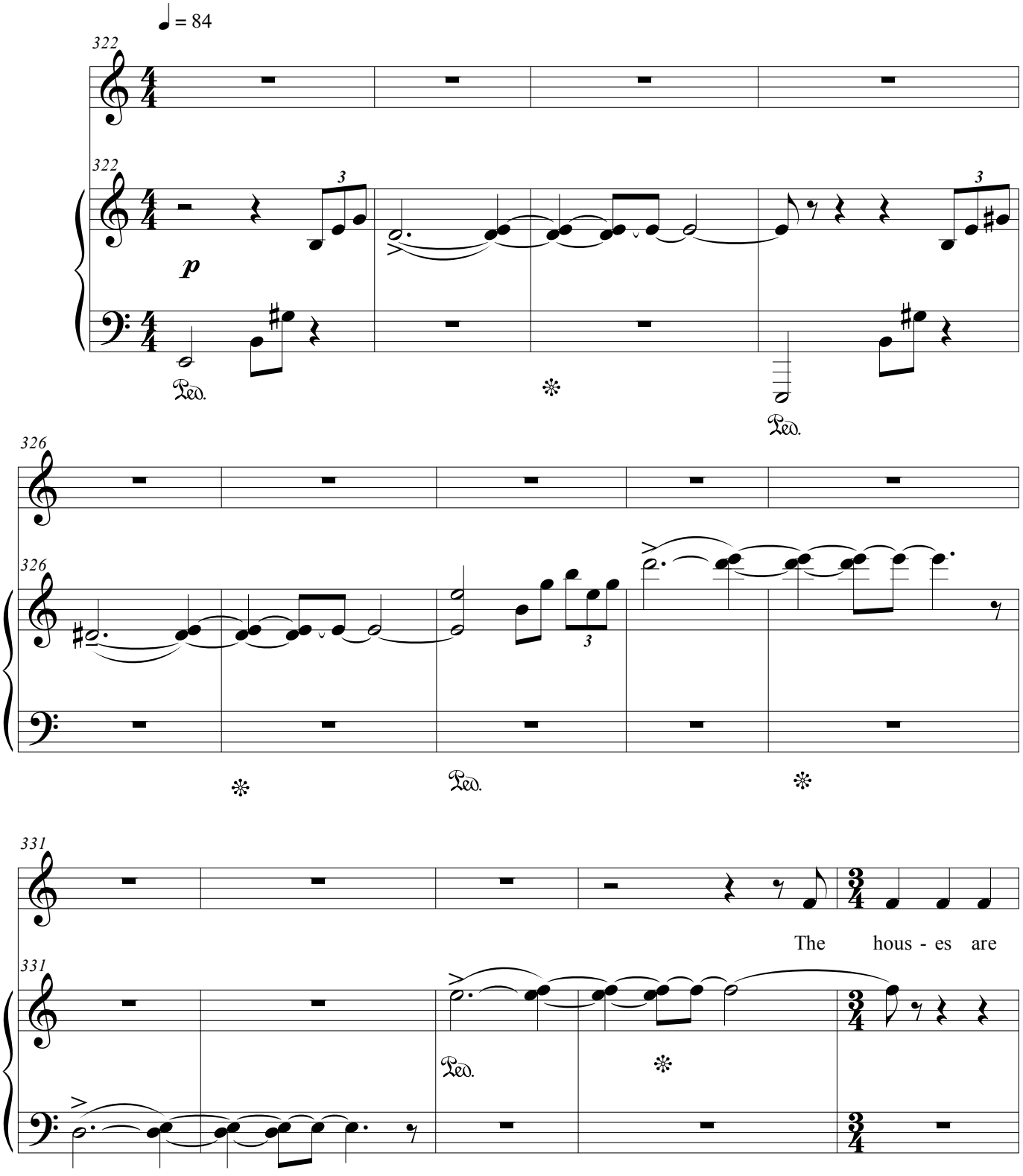

273
draw-ing up from the rain point - ed wa - ter?
8va
f
277
fp
fp
fp
fp
fp
281
O boat - man, O
8va

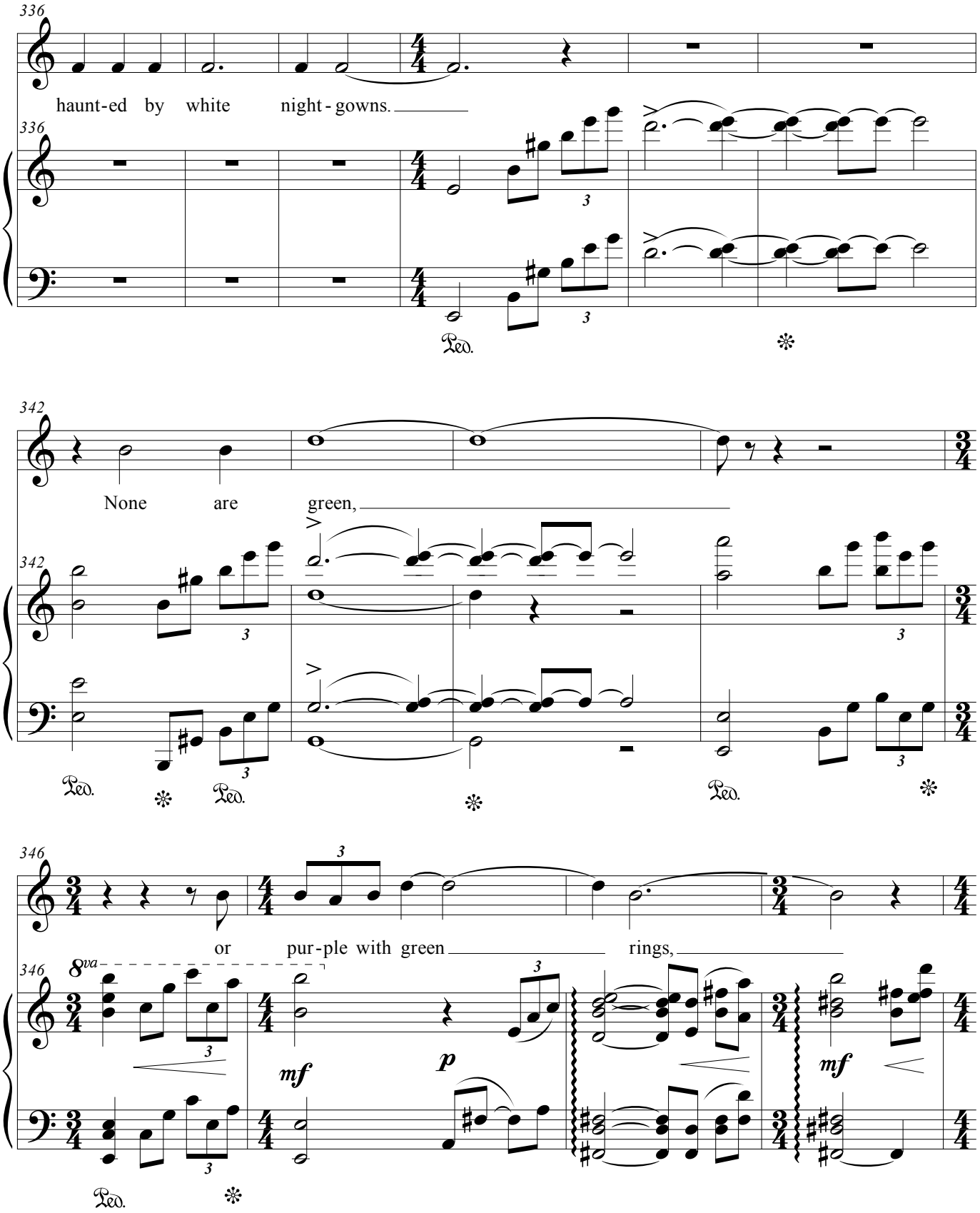

285
boat man, What are you draw-ing up from the
fp
f
289
rain point - ed wa - ter?
8va
15ma
p
293
O,
fp
fp
*Hold key down to produce overtones until release sign

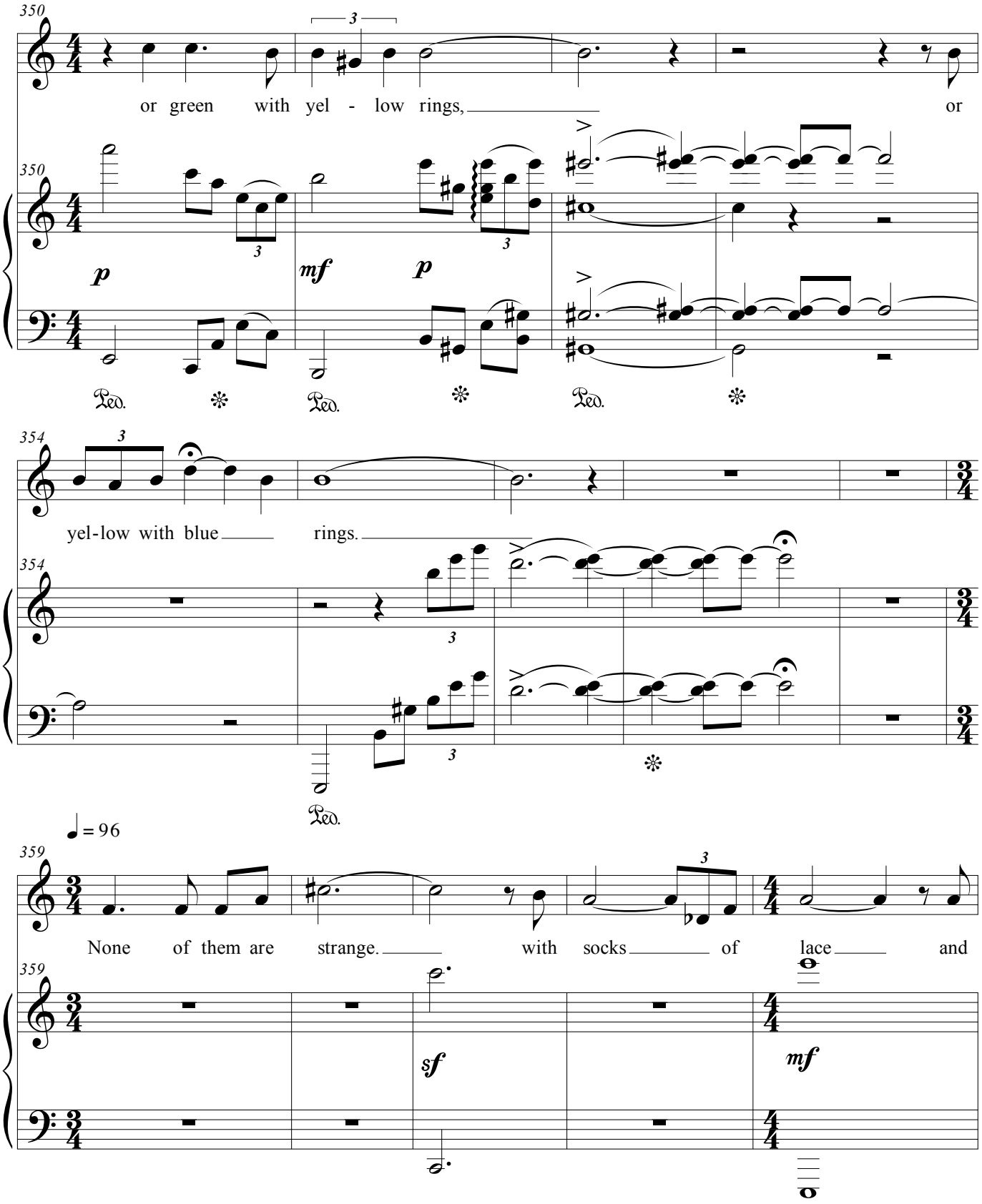

rit.
a tempo
298
O, O boat - men, are you two
fp
fp
* Pronounce with an indefinite vowel
to sound like either "-man" or "-men."
303
boat - men dif - ferent from each o - ther?
f
sf sf
sf
sf sf
* Hold key down to produce overtones until release sign
307
sf sf
p
fp

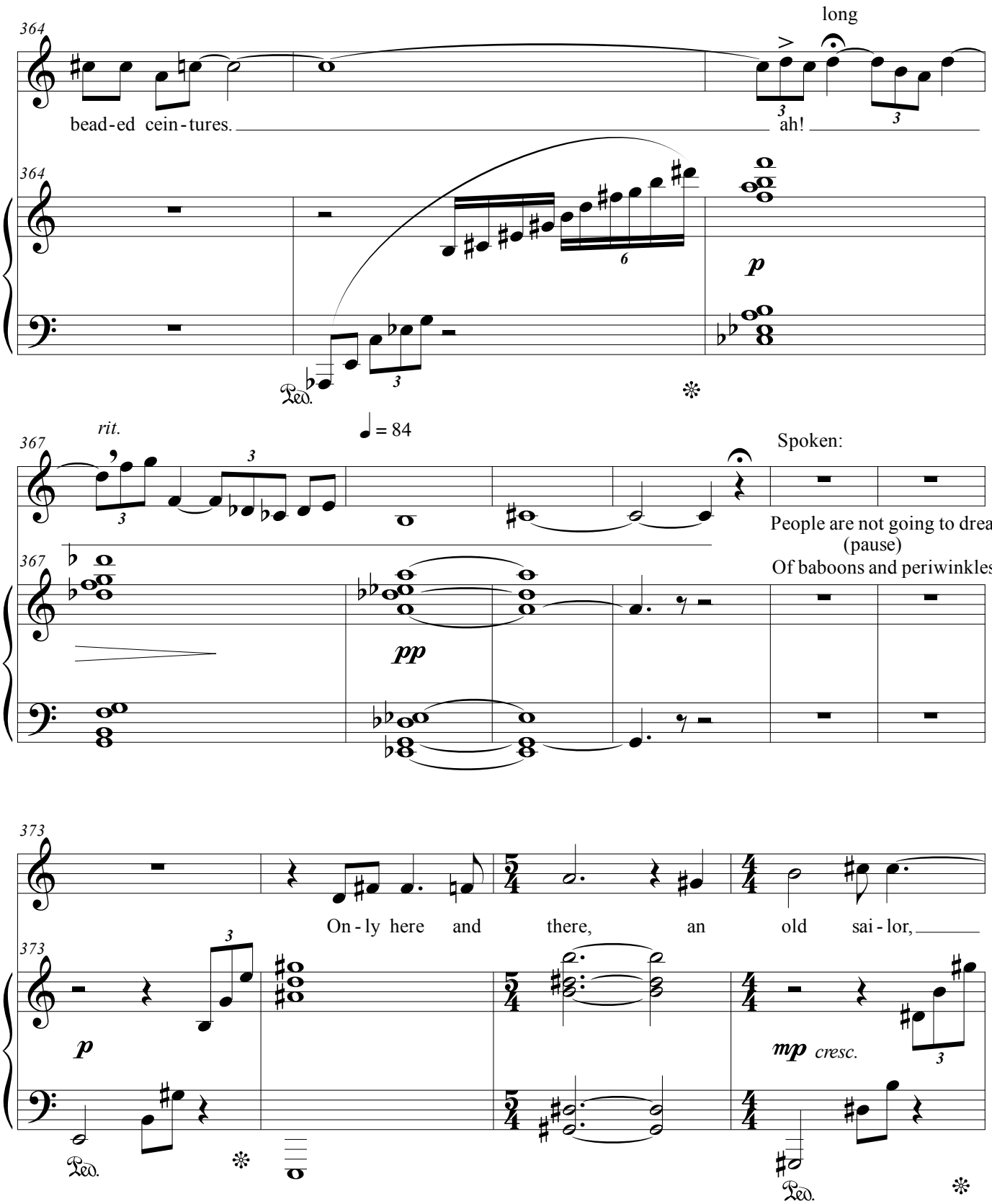

311
The birch trees draw up white - ness from the
311
315
ground. From the ground.
315
319
From the
319

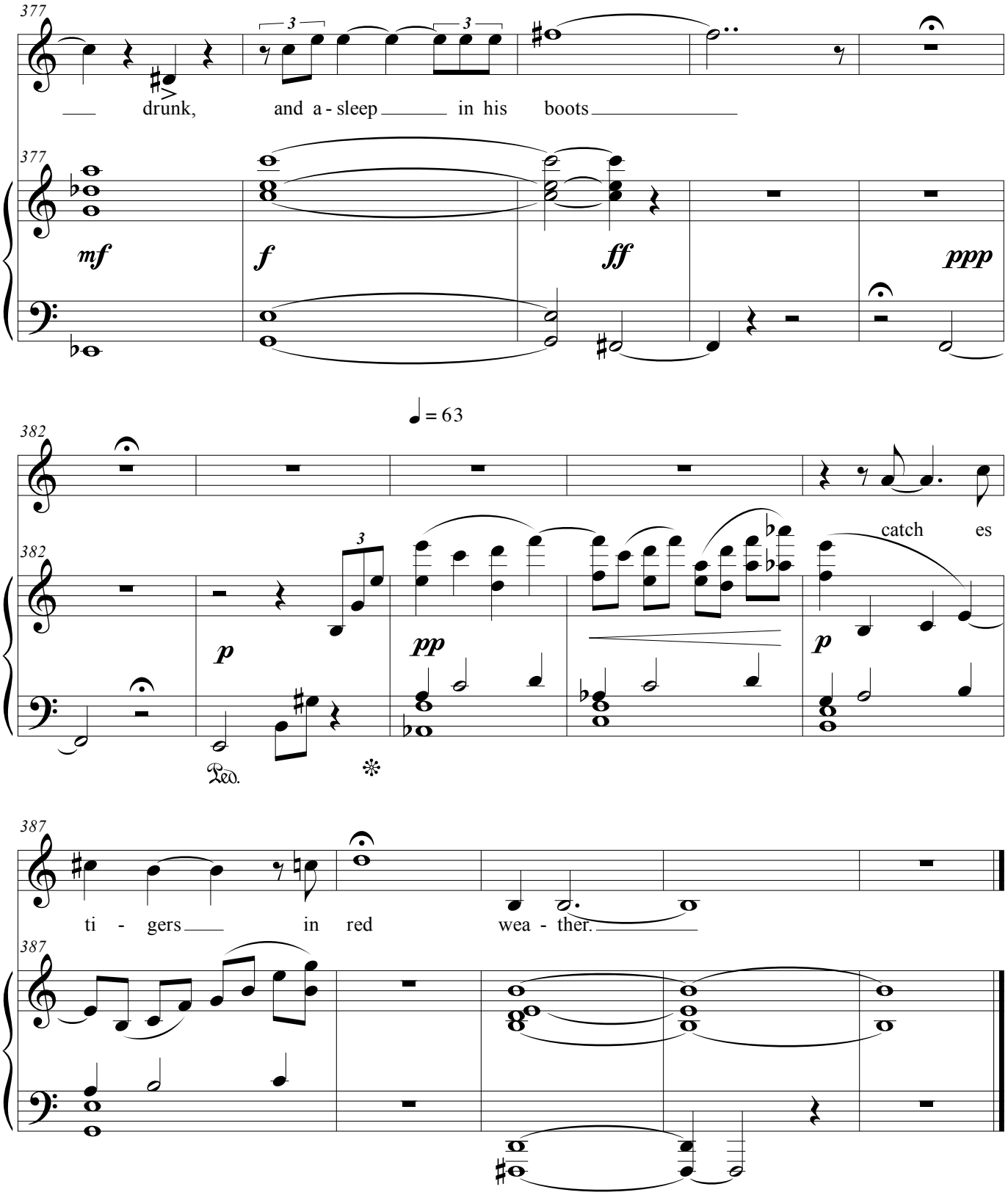
The Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock




336
haunt-ed by white night-gowns.
342
None are green,
346
or pur-ple with green rings,
8va
mf
p
mf
Ped.


350
or green with yel - low rings, or
p
mf
p
Ped.
354
yel-low with blue rings.
Ped.
♩ = 96
359
None of them are strange. with socks of lace and
sf
mf


364
long
bead-ed cein-tures.
ah!
364
p
Ped.
rit.
367
♩ = 84
Spoken:
People are not going to dream
(pause)
Of baboons and periwinkles.
367
pp
373
On-ly here and there, an old sai-lor,
373
p
mp cresc.
Ped.
Ped.


377
drunk, and a - sleep in his boots
377
mf
f
ff
ppp
♩ = 63
382
382
p
pp
p
catch es
Ped.
387
ti - gers in red wea - ther.
387