Five Songs: The Acrobats

For Mezzo Soprano, Baritone, and Piano

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Five Songs: The Acrobats

1. Out of the Night (Ezra Pound)

You came in out of the night
And there were flowers in your hands. . . .

I who have seen you amid the primal things
Was angry when they spoke your name
In ordinary places.
I would that the cool waves might flow over my mind,
And that the world should dry as a dead leaf,
Or as a dandelion seed-pod and be swept away,
So that I might find you again,
Alone.

2. The Panther (In the Jardin des Plantes, Paris) (Rainer Maria Rilke; translated by the composer)

His gaze is from the pacing past the bars
So tired now that it holds nothing more,
As if for him there were a thousand bars
And past the thousand bars no world to see.

The quiet tread of strong and agile steps
Which turn in circles growing ever smaller
Is like a dance of force around a center
In which a great will stands there paralyzed.

Only at times the curtain of his pupils
Silently parts—and then in glides an image,
Glides through the high-strung stillness of his limbs--
And in his heart gives up its being.

3. The Soldier's Tale (Carl Sandburg)

I am an ancient reluctant conscript.

On the soup wagons of Xerxes I was a cleaner of pans.
On the march of Miltiades' phalanx I had a haft and head;
I had a bristling gleaming spear-handle.

Red-headed Cæsar picked me for a teamster.
He said, "Go to work, you Tuscan bastard,

Rome calls for a man who can drive horses."

The units of conquest led by Charles the Twelfth,
The whirling whimsical Napoleonic columns:
They saw me one of the horseshoers.

I trimmed the feet of a white horse Bonaparte swept the night stars with.

Lincoln said, "Get into the game; your nation takes you."
And I drove a wagon and team and I had my arm shot off
At Spottsylvania Court House.

I am an ancient reluctant conscript.

4. Acrobats (Guillaume Apollinaire; translated by the composer)

Across the plain the wandering troupe
Recedes along the sides of the gardens
Before the doors of gray auberges
Through villages with no churches

And the children go out in front of them
The others following in a dream
Every fruit tree yields itself up
When they give the sign from very far away

They have weights round or square
And tambourines and hoops of gold
The bear and the ape, wise animals,
Beg for pennies as they wend their way.

5. Epilogue (Ezra Pound)

This man knew out the secret ways of love,
No man could paint such things who did not know.
And now she's gone, who was his Cyprian,
And you are here, who are ‘The Isles’ to me.

And the days are not full enough
And the nights are not full enough
And life slips by like a field mouse
    Not shaking the grass.

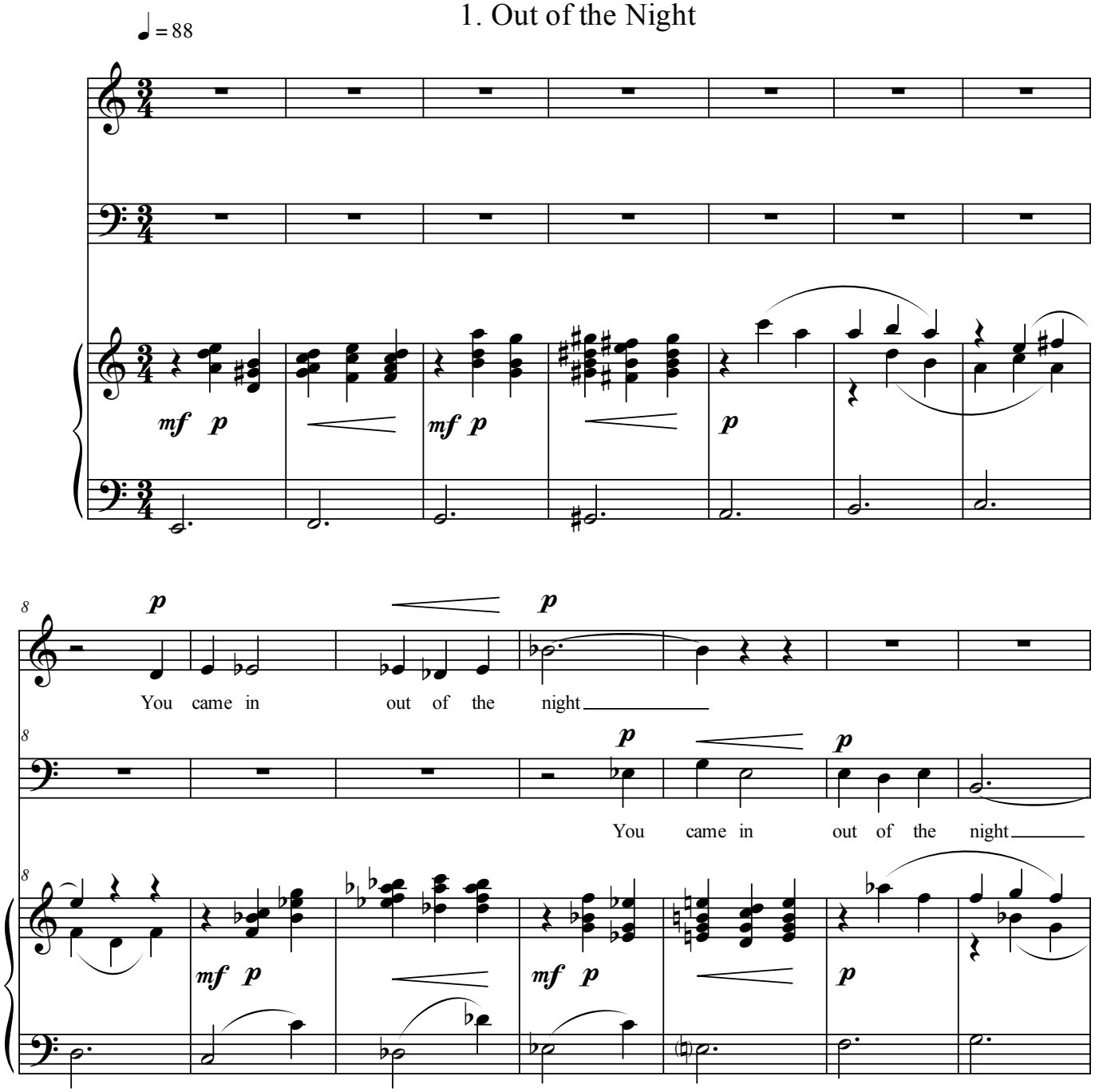
And now she's gone, who was his Cyprian,
And you are here, who are ‘The Isles’ to me.
And here's the thing that lasts the whole thing out:
The eyes of this dead lady speak to me.

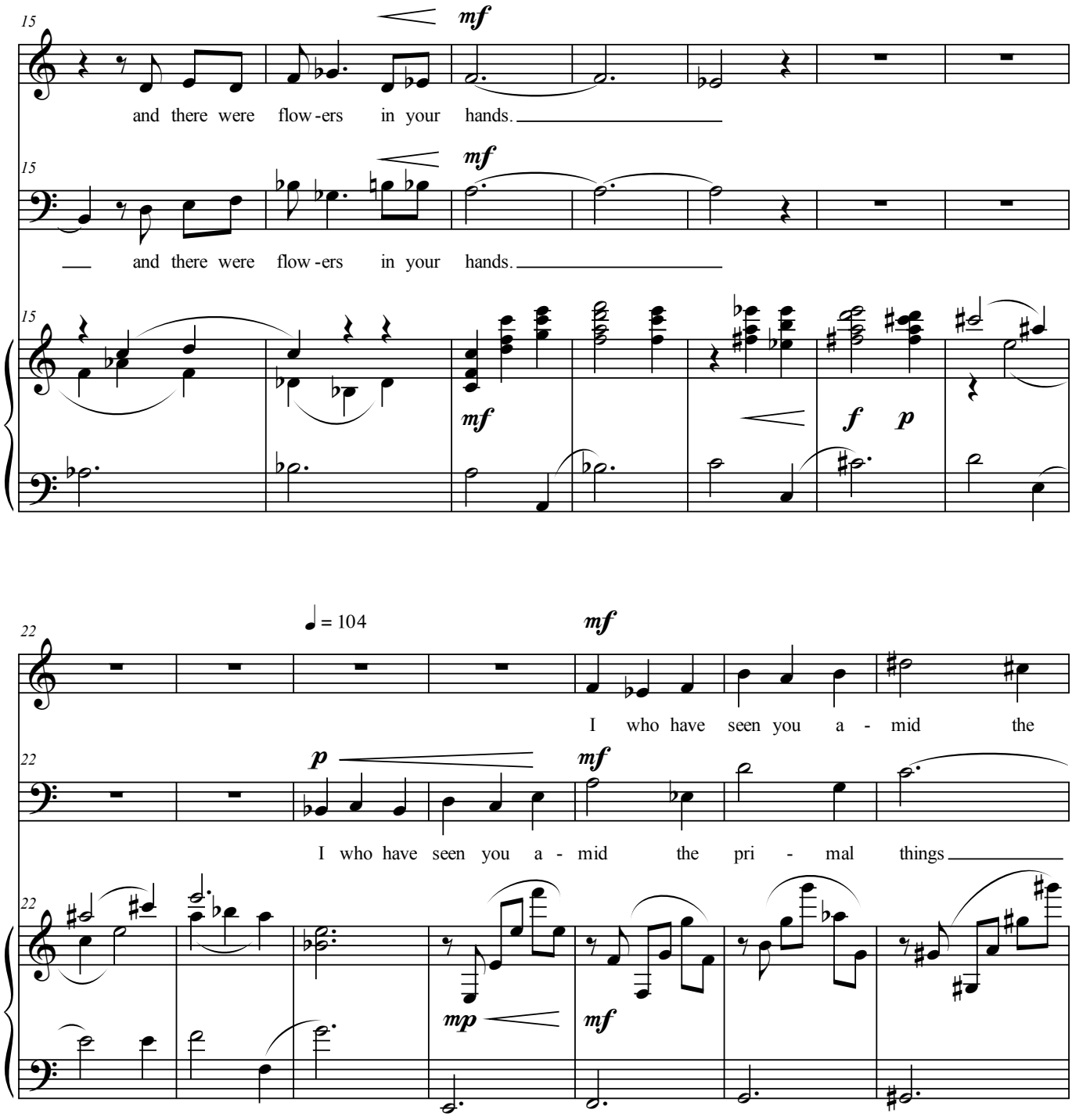
Lines 1-4, 9-12, "Of Jacopo Del Sellaio"
Lines 5-8, Epigraph to Lustra

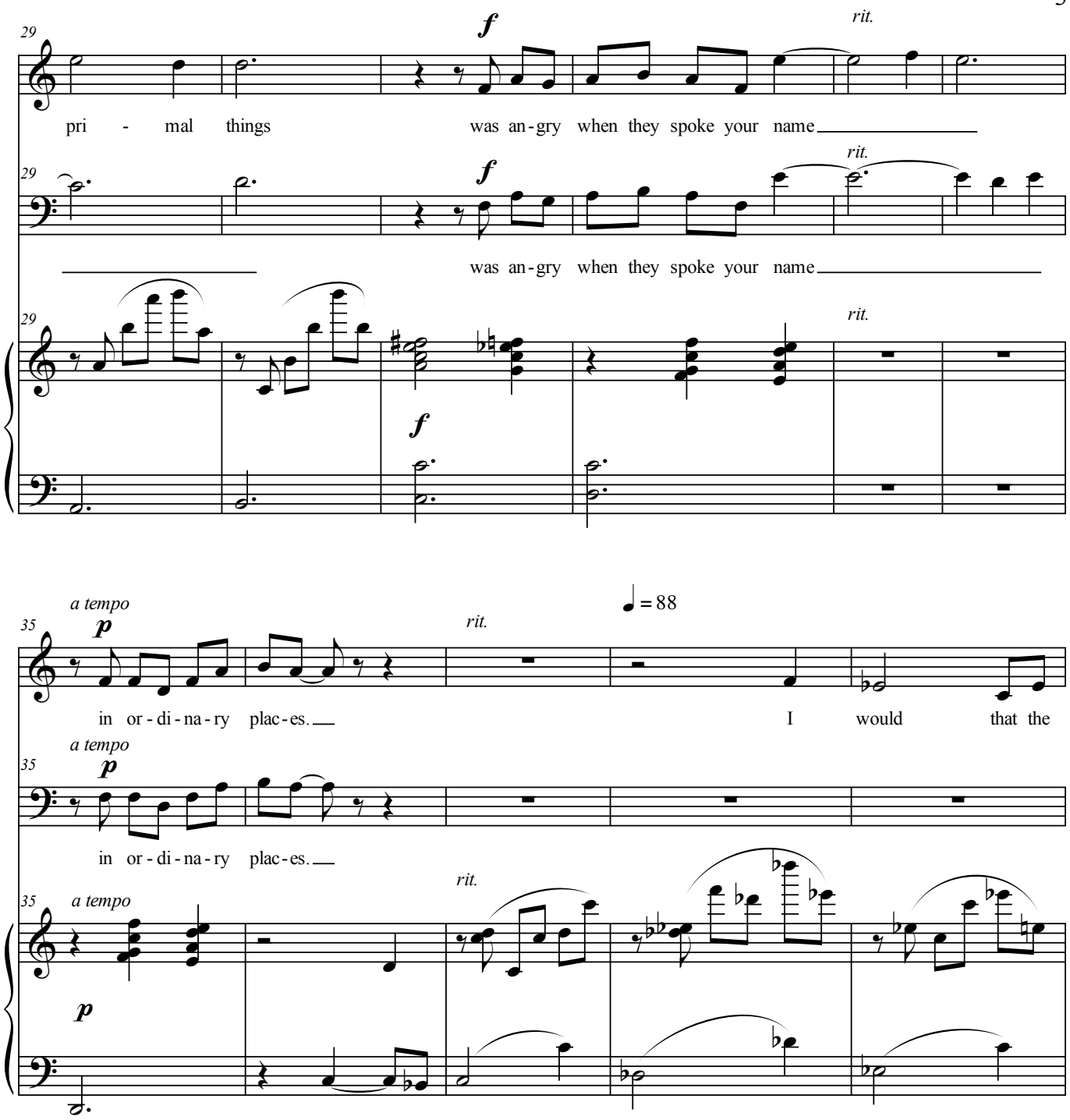
The five songs of *The Acrobats* form a meditation on questions of constraint and release: constraint by and perhaps, just perhaps, release from circumstance, history, custom, and above all the one constraint that nothing can break, the passage of time. The voices of the mezzo and baritone embody these questions by the way they divide after the first song and reunite in the last. The acrobats are all of us as we try to keep our balance amid the vicissitudes of life. The image applies directly to the wandering troupe of the fourth song, a setting of Apollinaire's "Acrobats" (Saltimbanques), but it also extends to cover the personae of the other songs as they, too, wend their way through the world. The image is of a piece with the "Saltimbanques" painted in 1904-05 by the poet's close friend Pablo Picasso. Apollinaire was involved with the process and is sometimes said to be the model for one of the acrobats in the painting, a heavy-set figure carrying a sack. Rilke drew on the painting for his Fifth Duino Elegy (1922), which, like his “The Panther,” set here, concentrates on the acrobatic motion that that Picasso leaves out: “A will, never satisfied . . . wrings them, / bends them, slings them and swings them, / flings them and snatches them back.”

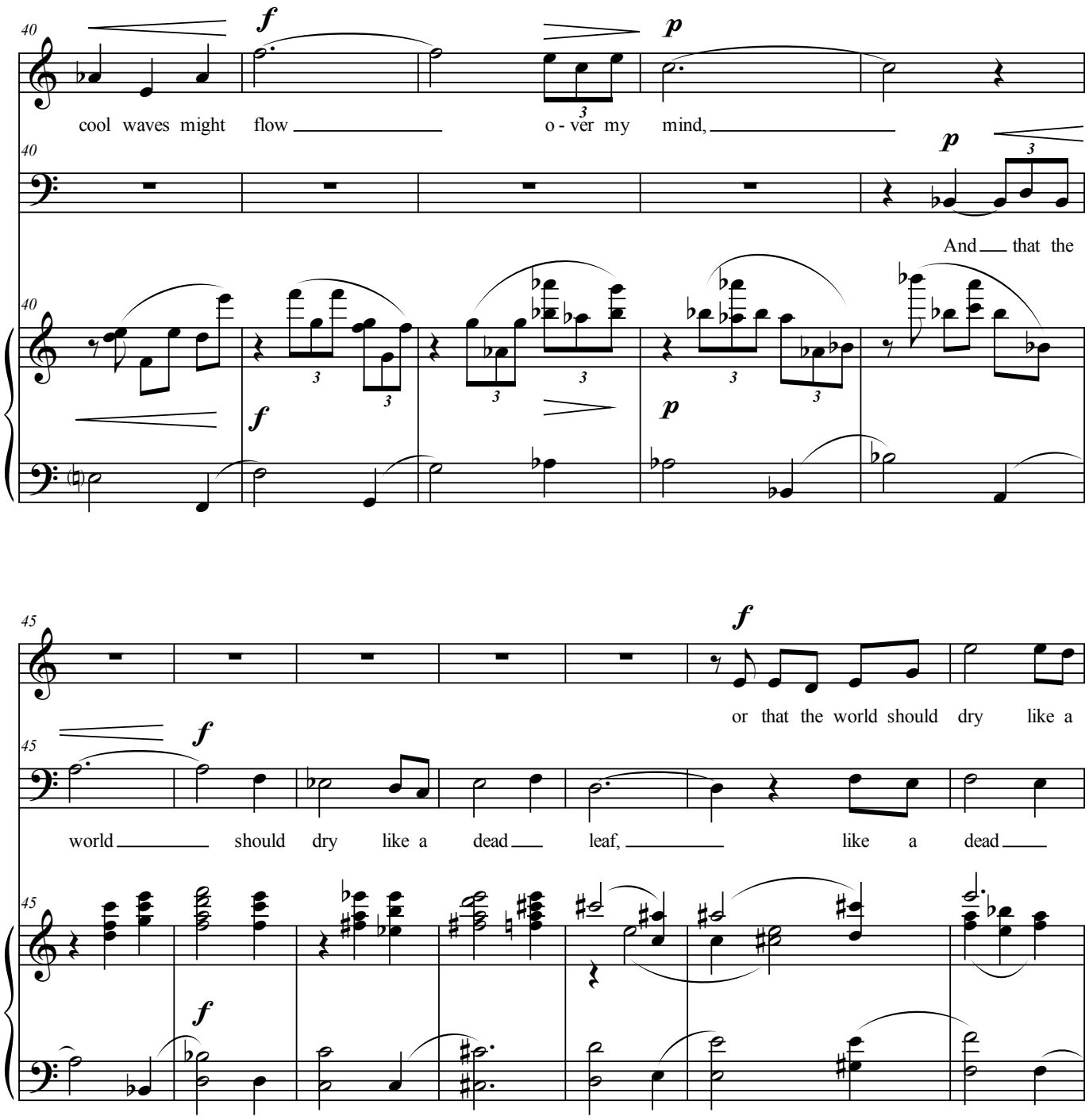
Voice ranges: G3-E4 / B3-F#5 with optional A3 and A5.
Duration 18 minutes.

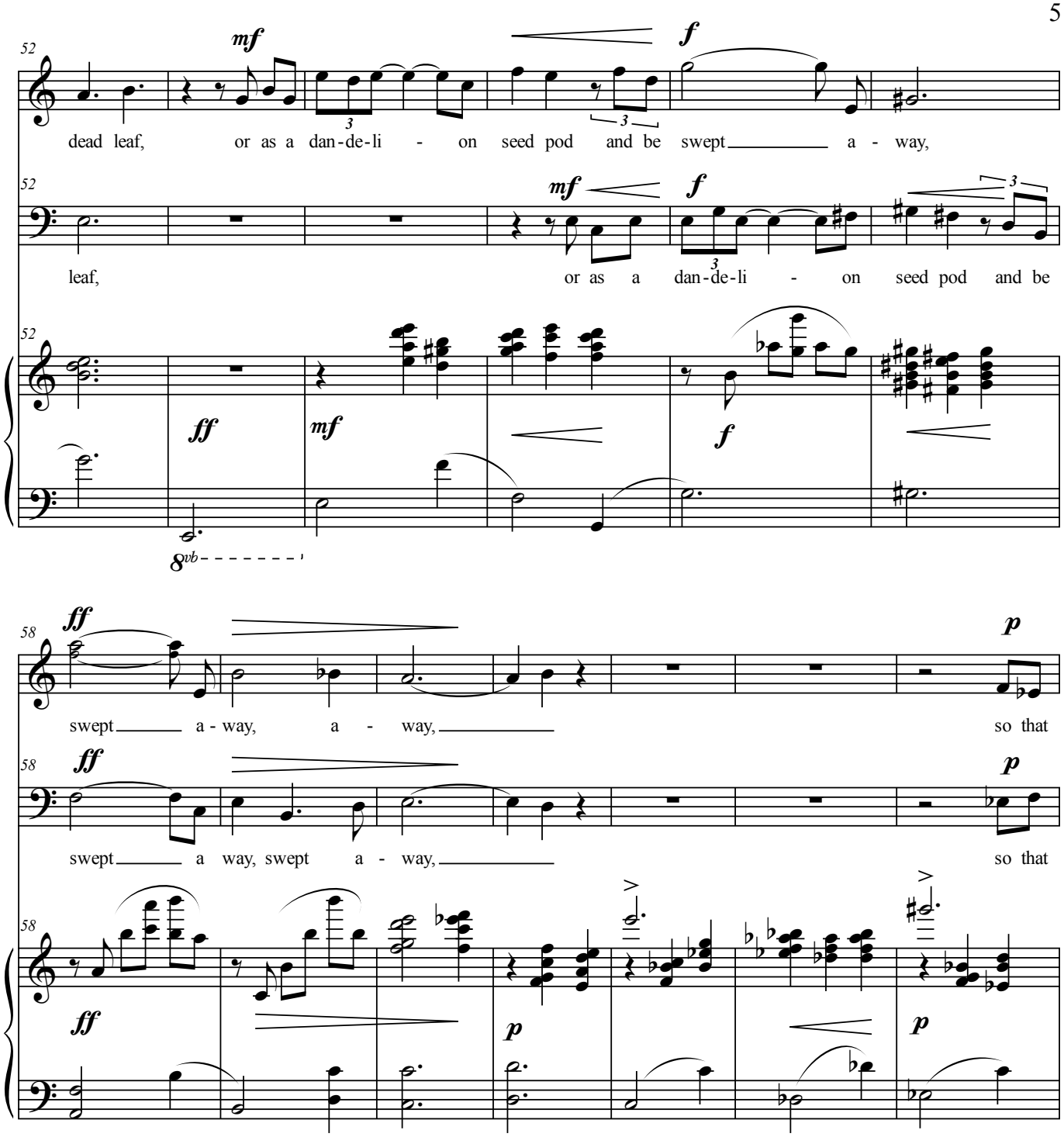
1. Out of the Night

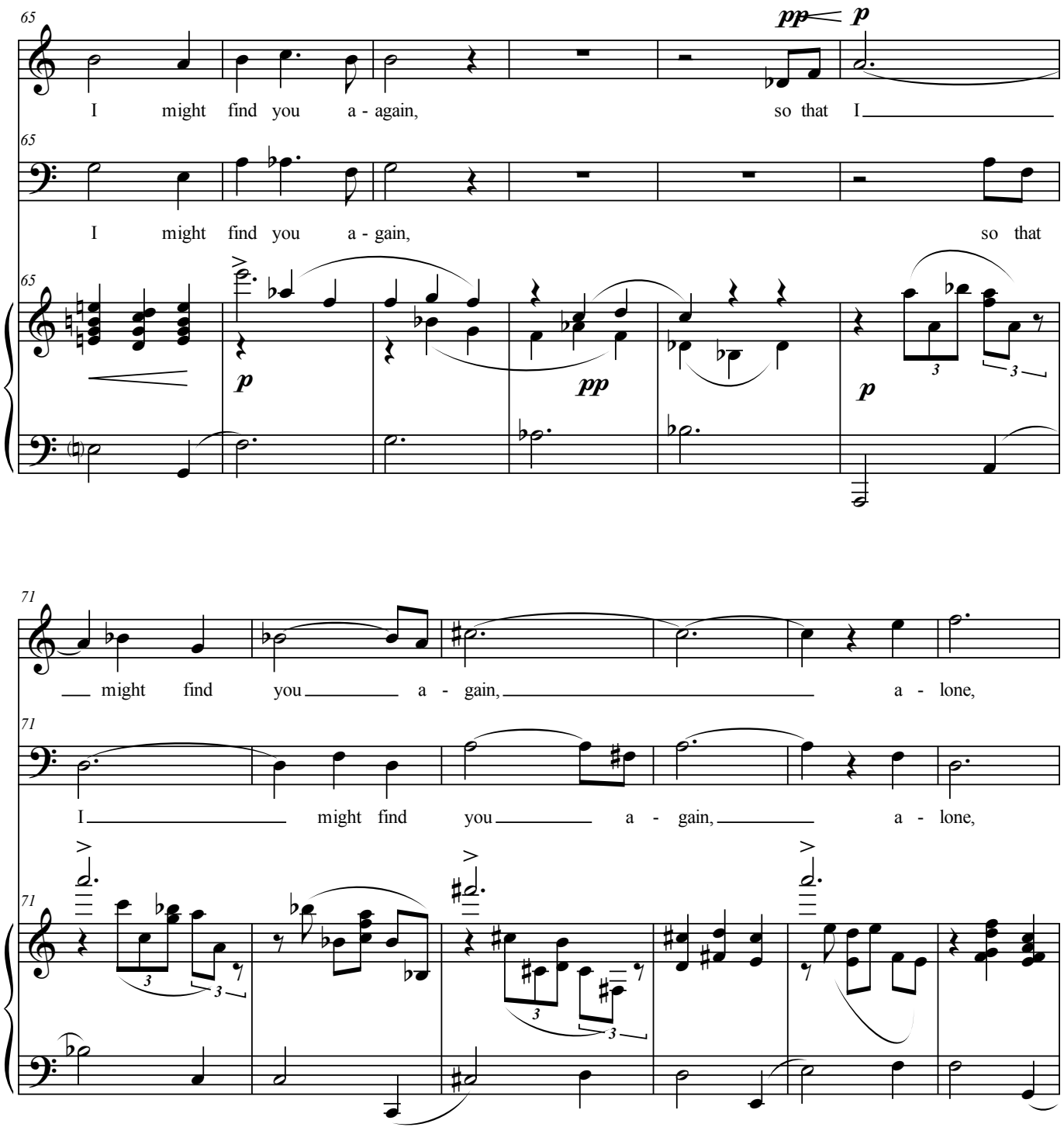


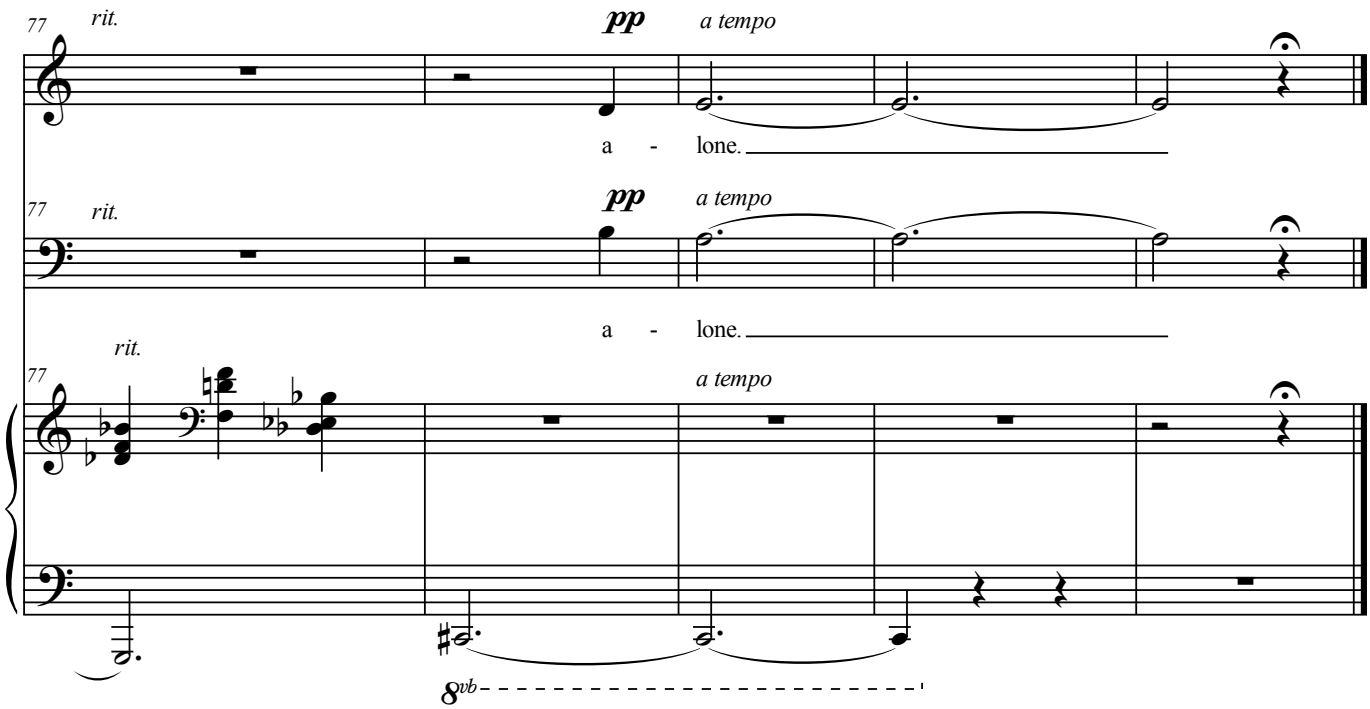

15
mf
and there were flow-ers in your hands.
15
mf
and there were flow-ers in your hands.
15
mf
f p
22
♩ = 104
mf
I who have seen you a - mid the
22
p
mf
I who have seen you a - mid the pri - mal things
22
mp
mf


29
f
rit.
pri - mal things was an-gry when they spoke your name
29
f
rit.
was an-gry when they spoke your name
29
f
rit.
35
a tempo
p
rit.
♩ = 88
in or-di-na-ry plac-es. I would that the
35
a tempo
p
in or-di-na-ry plac-es.
35
a tempo
rit.
p

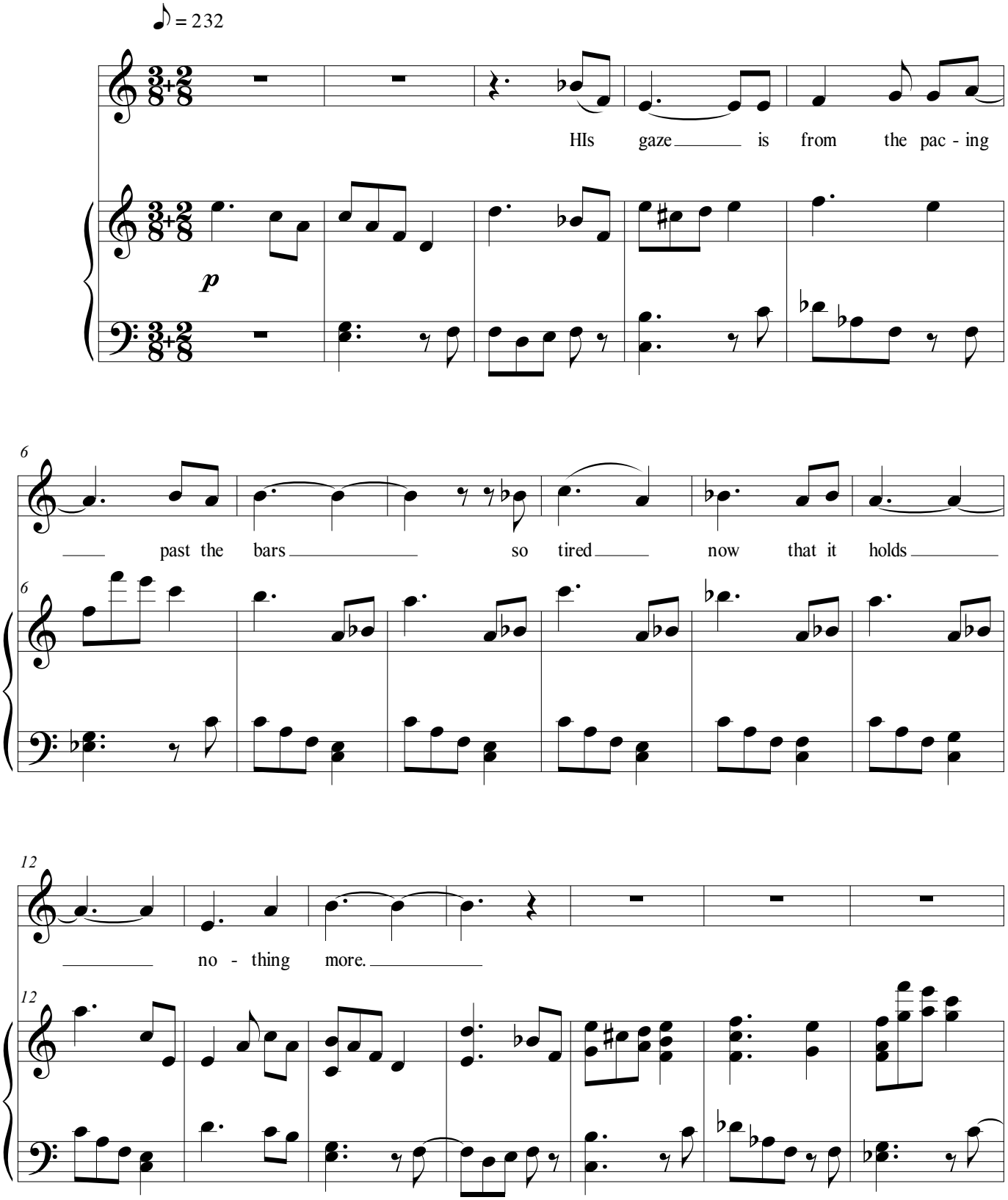

40
f
p
cool waves might flow o - ver my mind,
And that the
45
f
or that the world should dry like a
world should dry like a dead leaf, like a dead

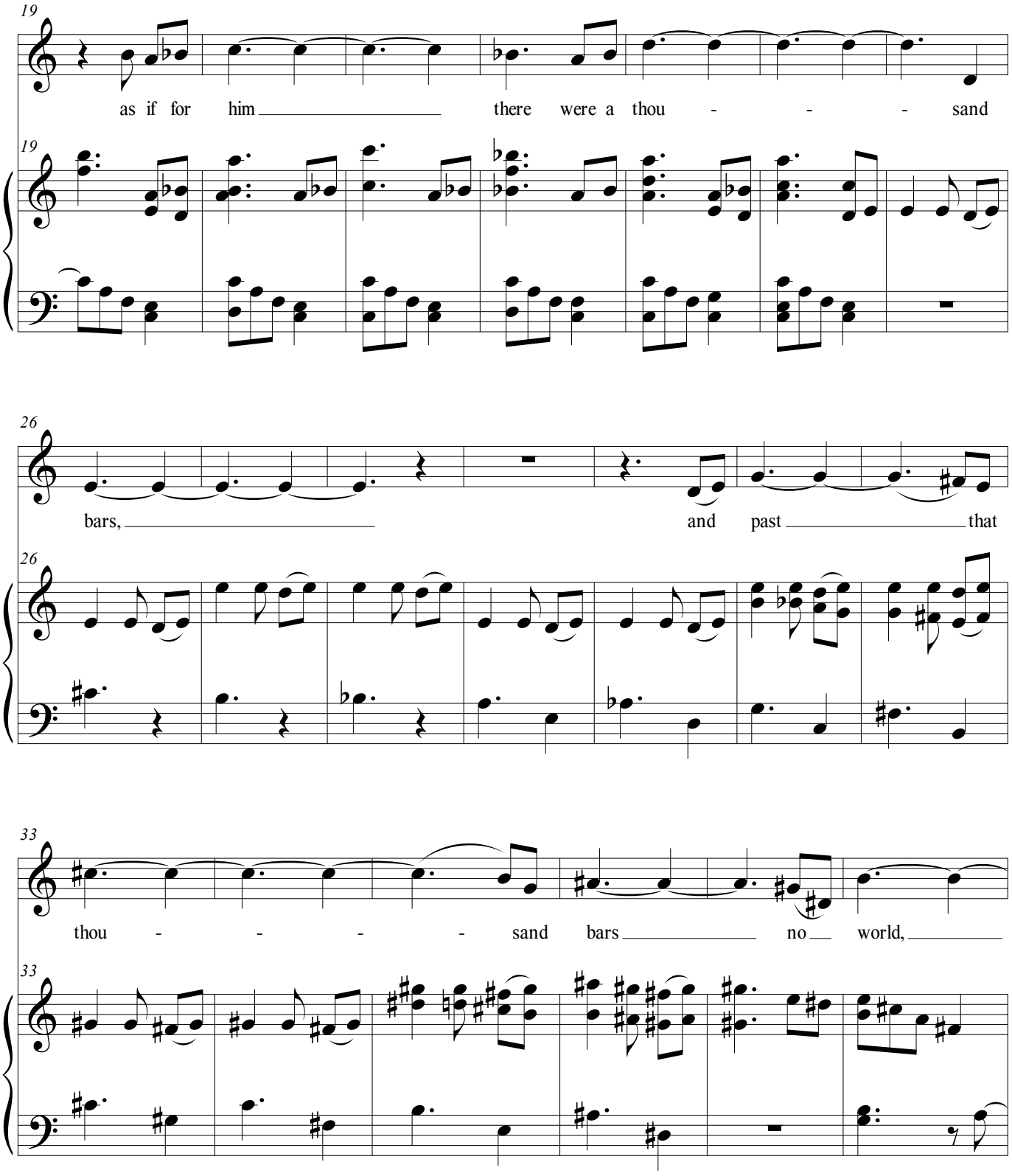

52
mf
f
dead leaf, or as a dan-de-li - on seed pod and be swept a - way,
52
mf
f
leaf, or as a dan-de-li - on seed pod and be
52
ff
mf
f
8vb
58
ff
p
swept a - way, a - way, so that
58
ff
p
swept a way, swept a - way, so that
58
ff
p
p

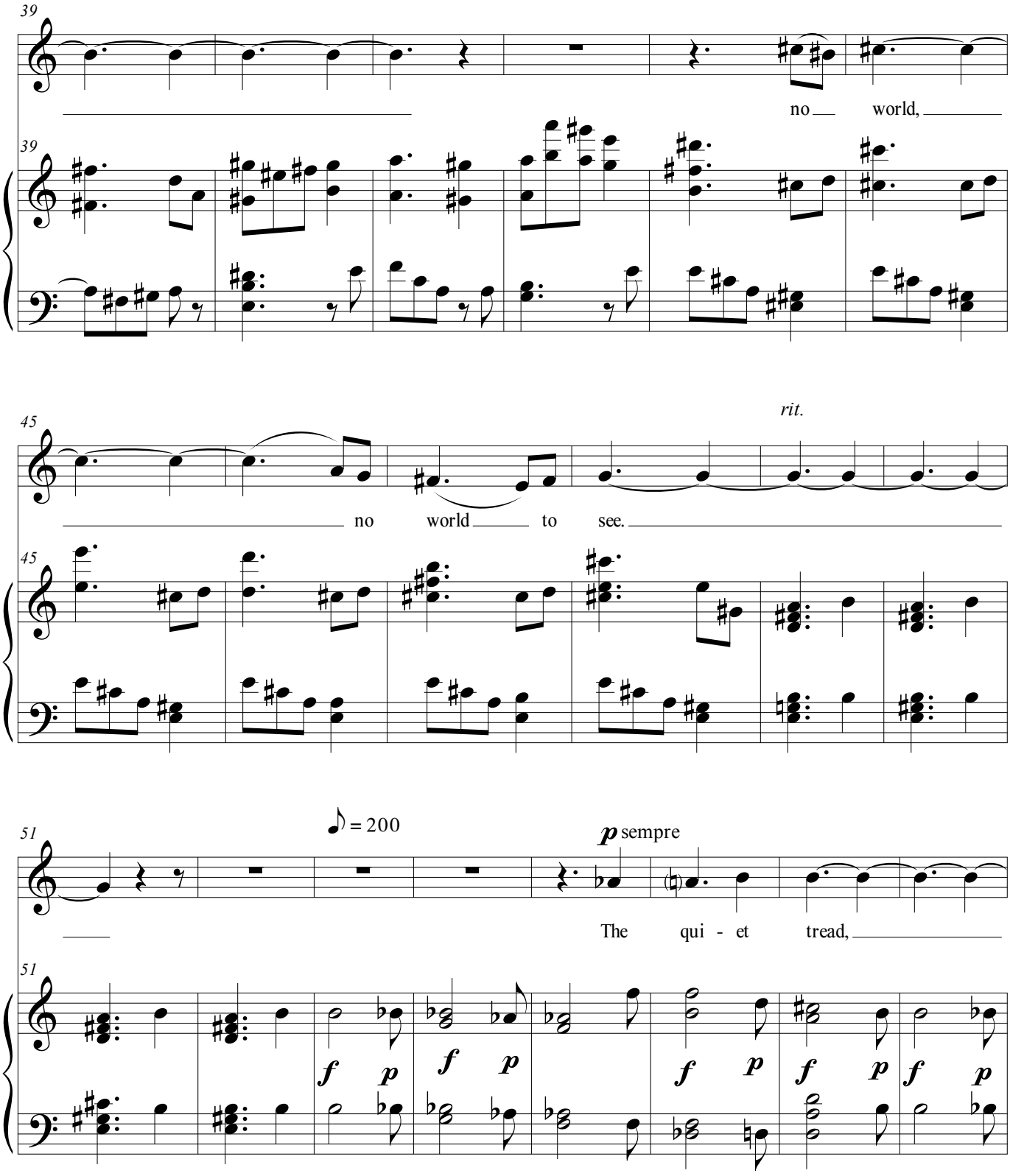

65
I might find you a - again, so that I
65
I might find you a - gain, so that
65
pp p
p pp p
71
might find you a - gain, a - lone,
71
I might find you a - gain, a - lone,
71

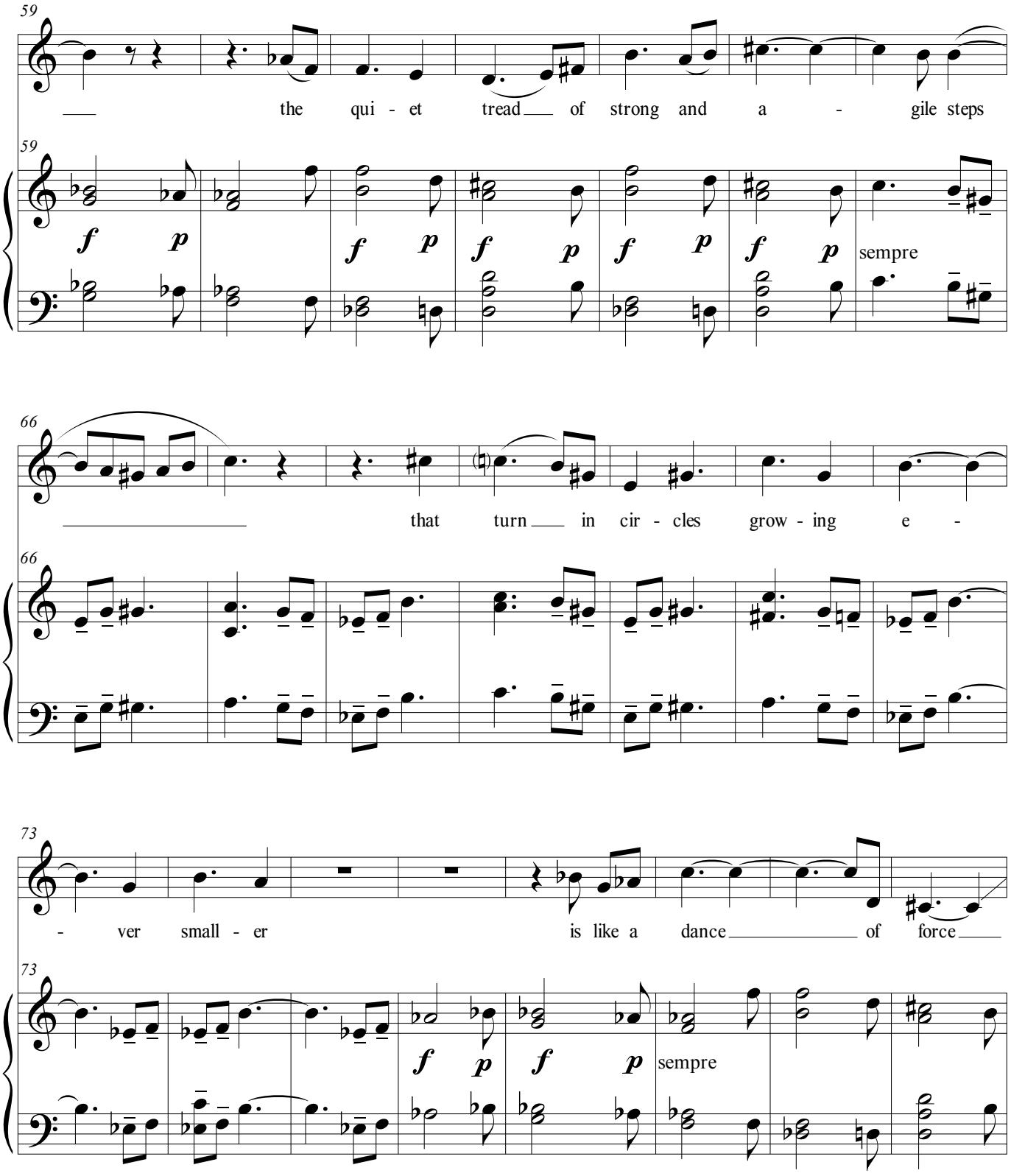

77
rit.
pp
a tempo
a - lone.
77
rit.
pp
a tempo
a - lone.
rit.
77
a tempo
8vb

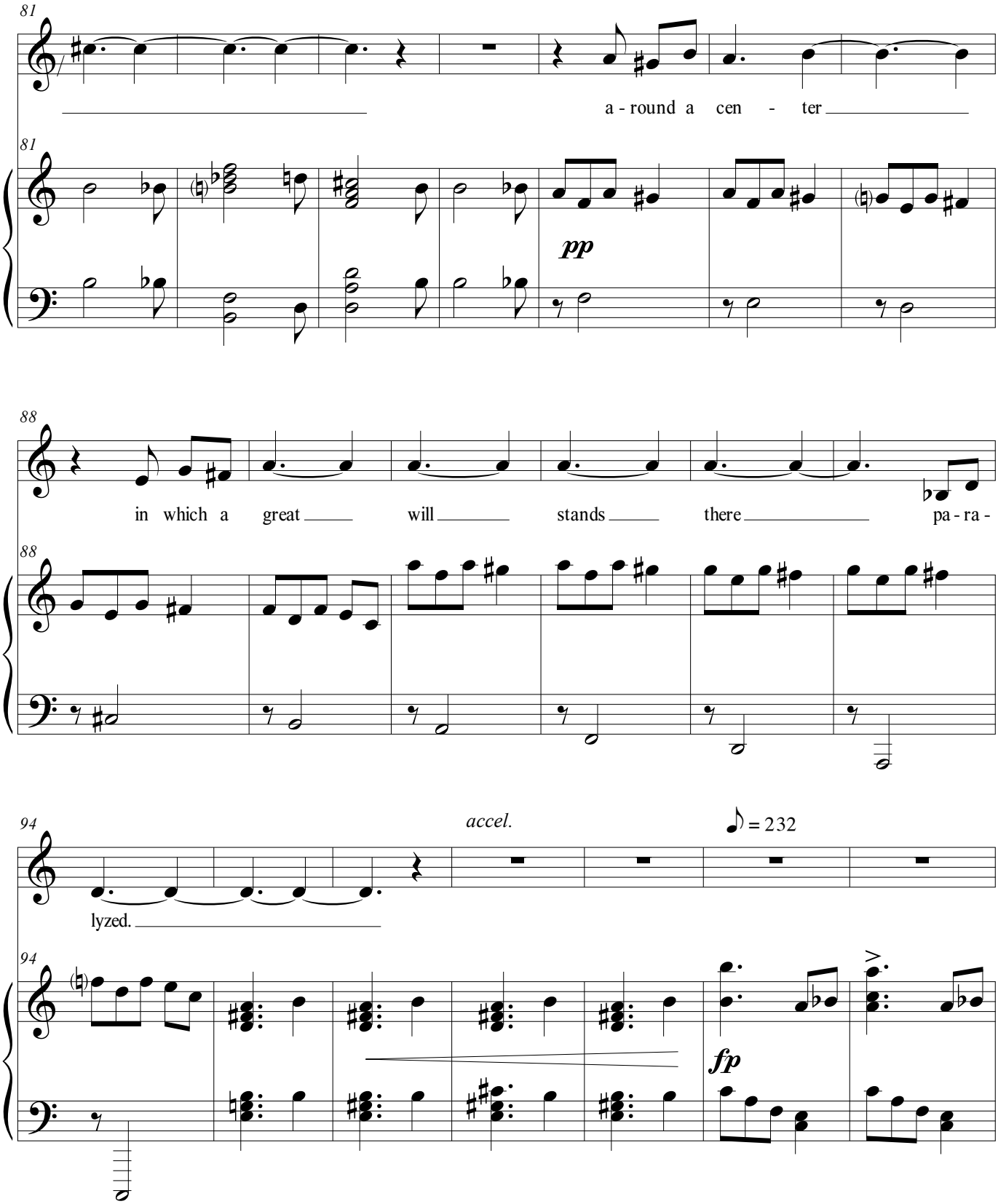
2. The Panther

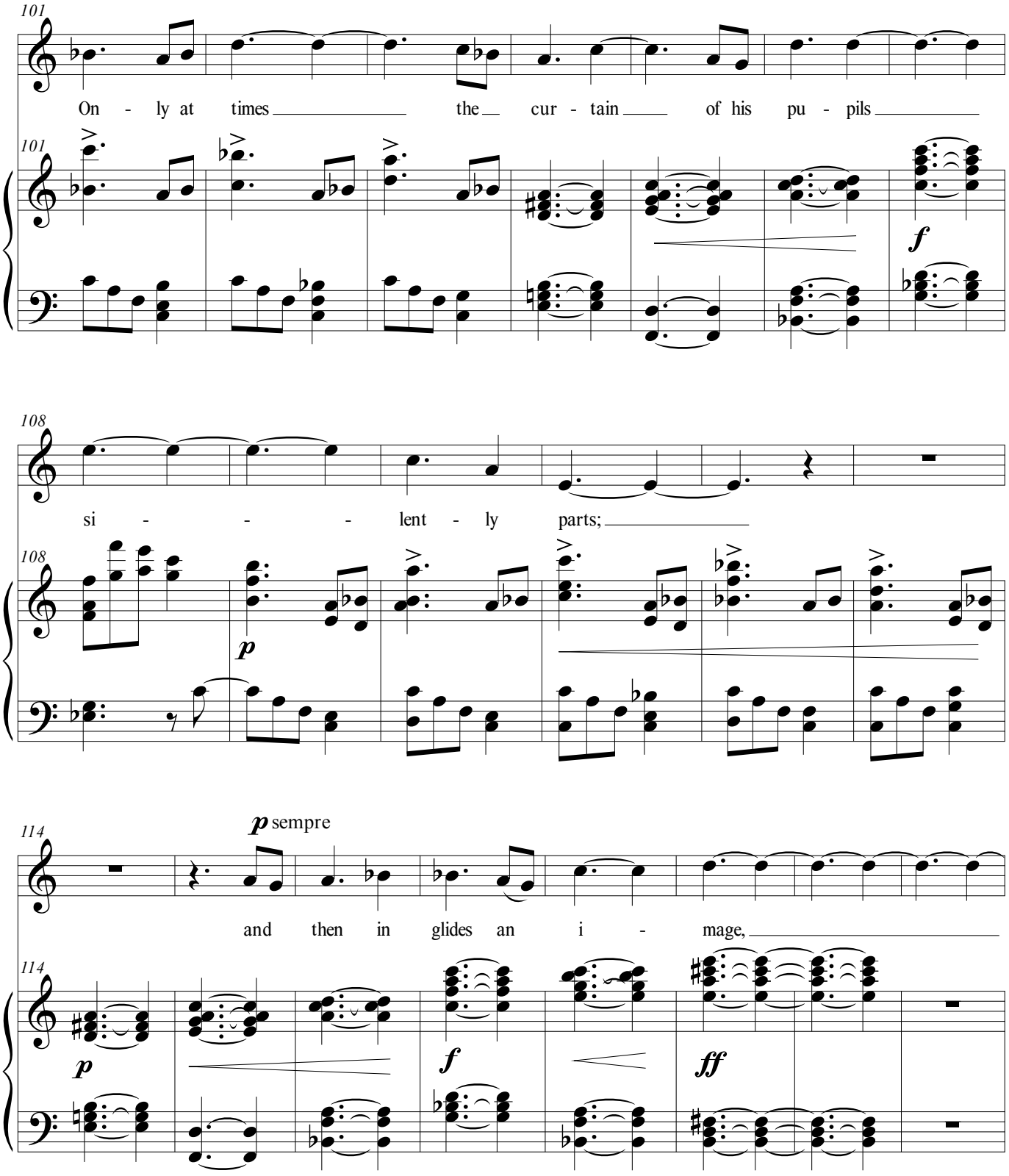


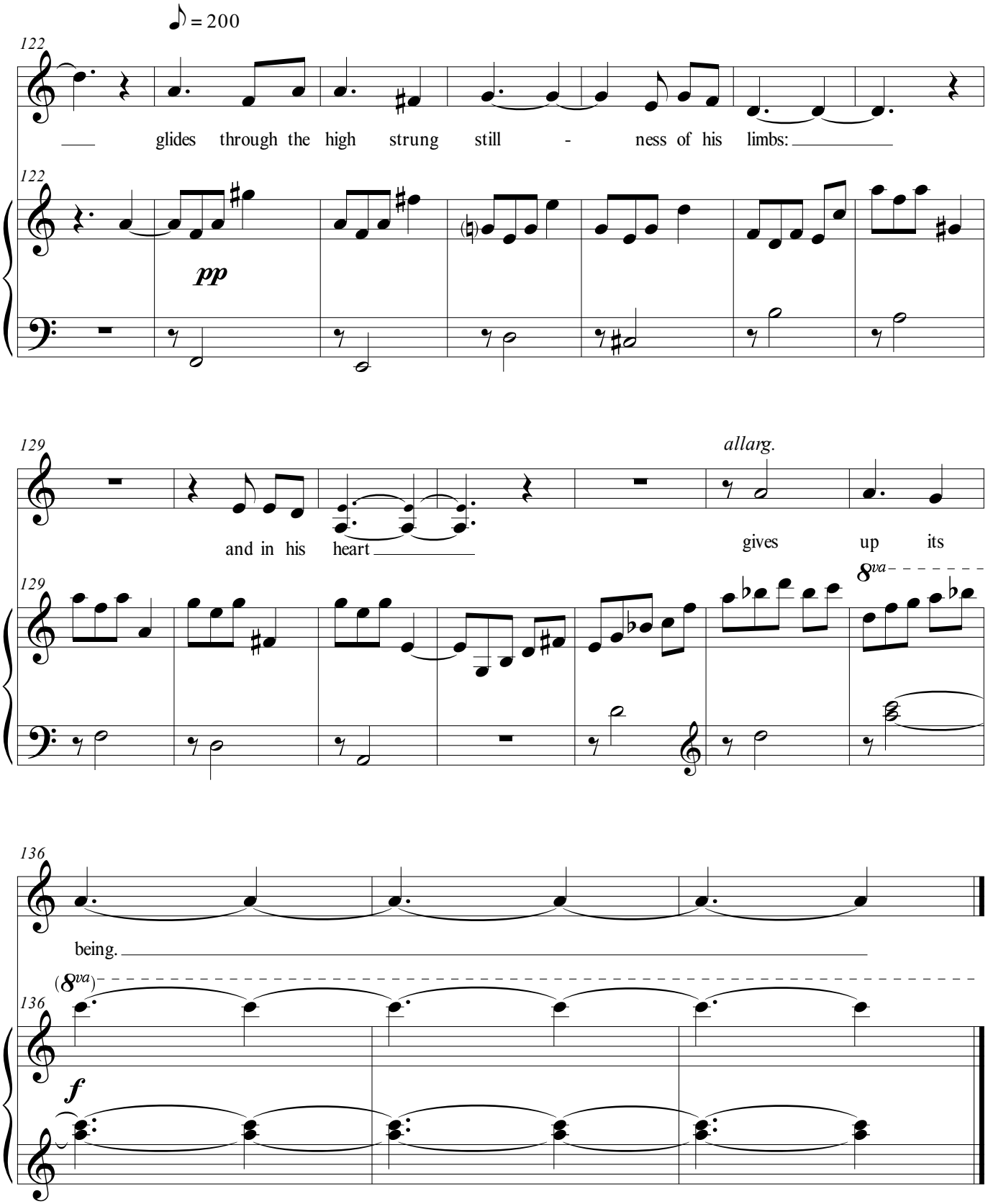

19
as if for him there were a thou - - - sand
19
26
bars, and past that
26
33
thou - - - - sand bars no world,
33


39
no world,
39
45
rit.
no world to see.
45
51
♪ = 200
p sempre
The qui - et tread,
51
f p f p f p f p f p

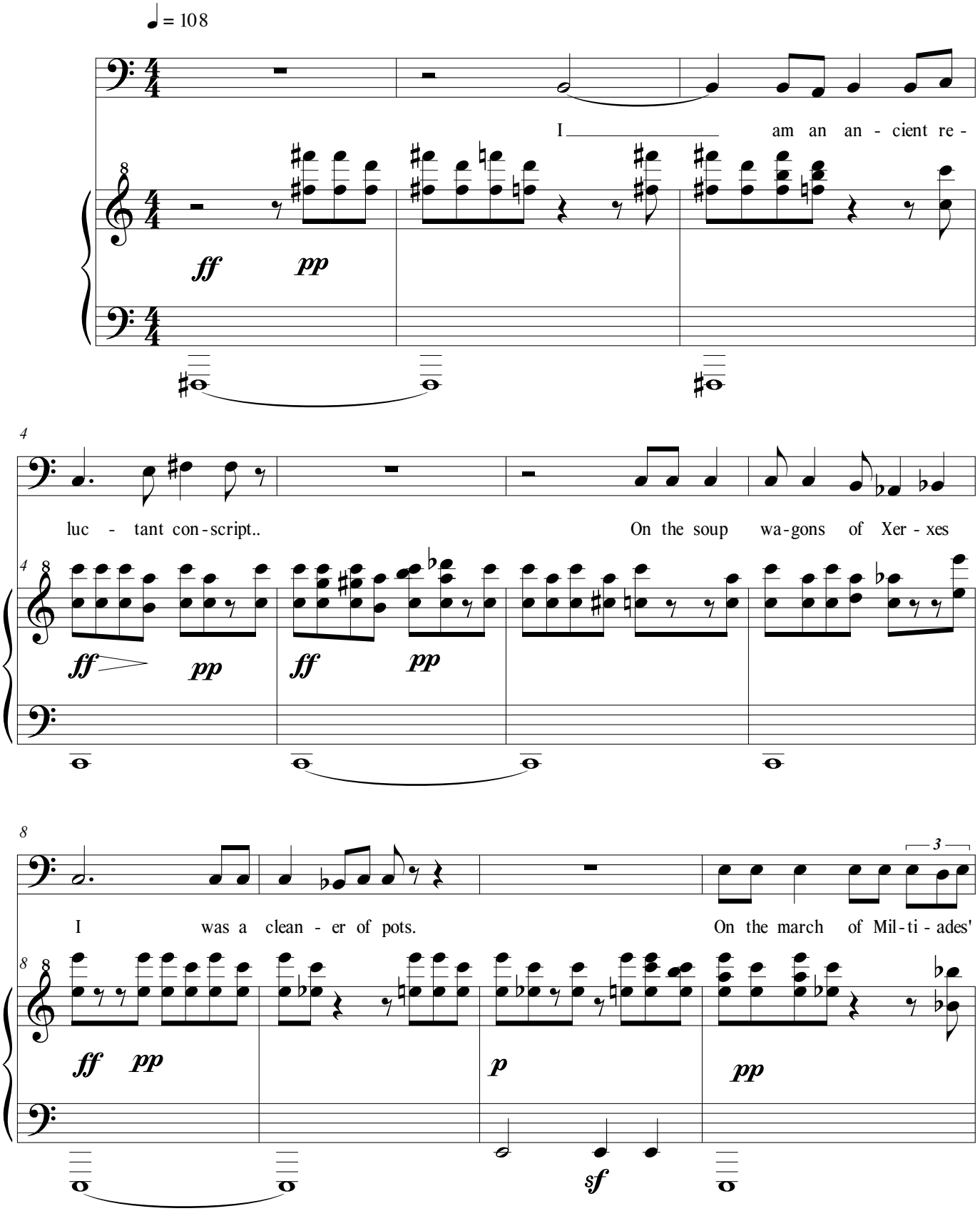

59
the qui - et tread of strong and a - gile steps
59
f p f p f p f p f p sempre
66
that turn in cir - cles grow - ing e -
66
73
- ver small - er is like a dance of force
73
f p f p sempre

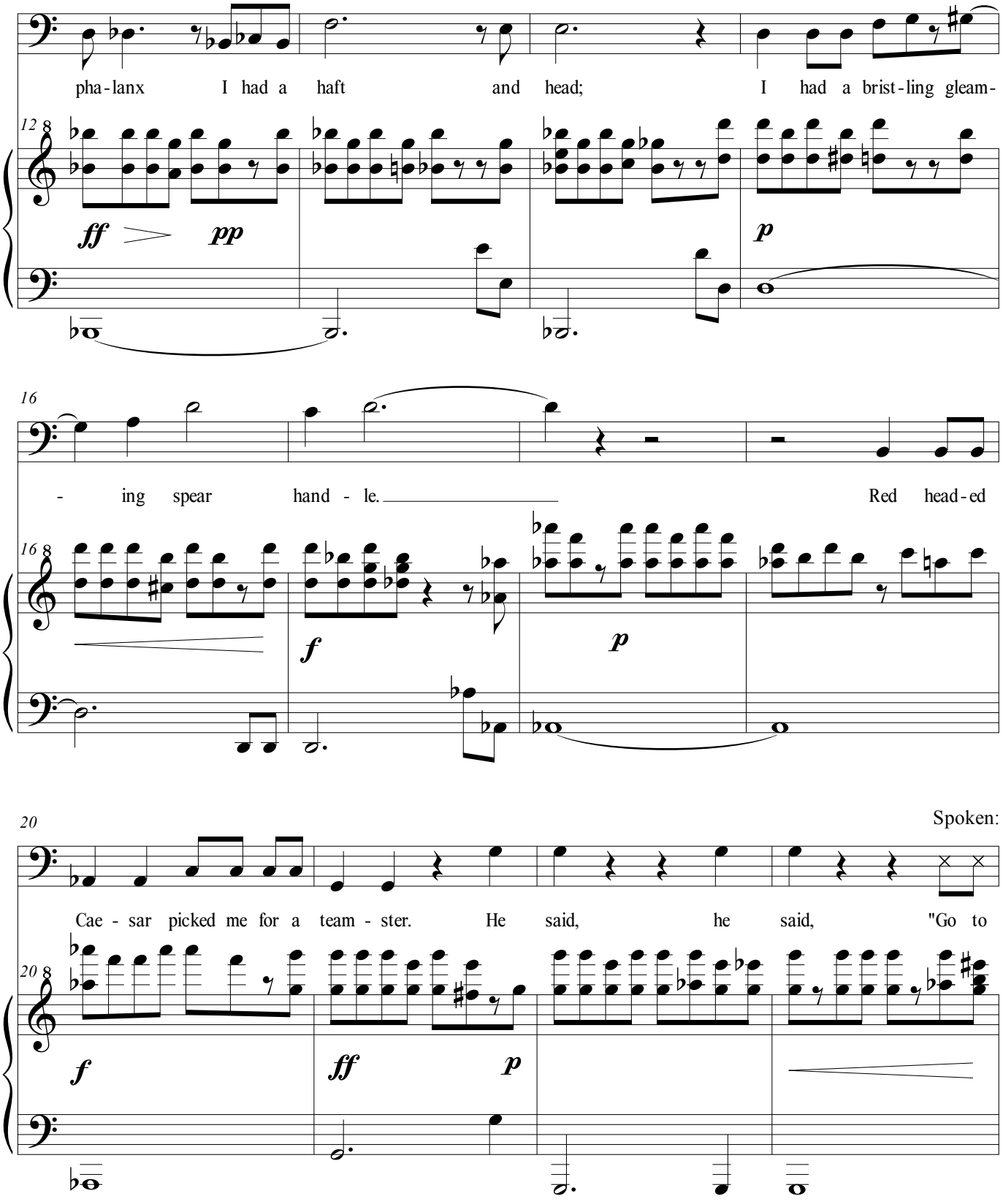

81
a - round a cen - ter
81
pp
88
in which a great will stands there pa - ra -
88
94
accel.
♪ = 232
lyzed.
94
fp

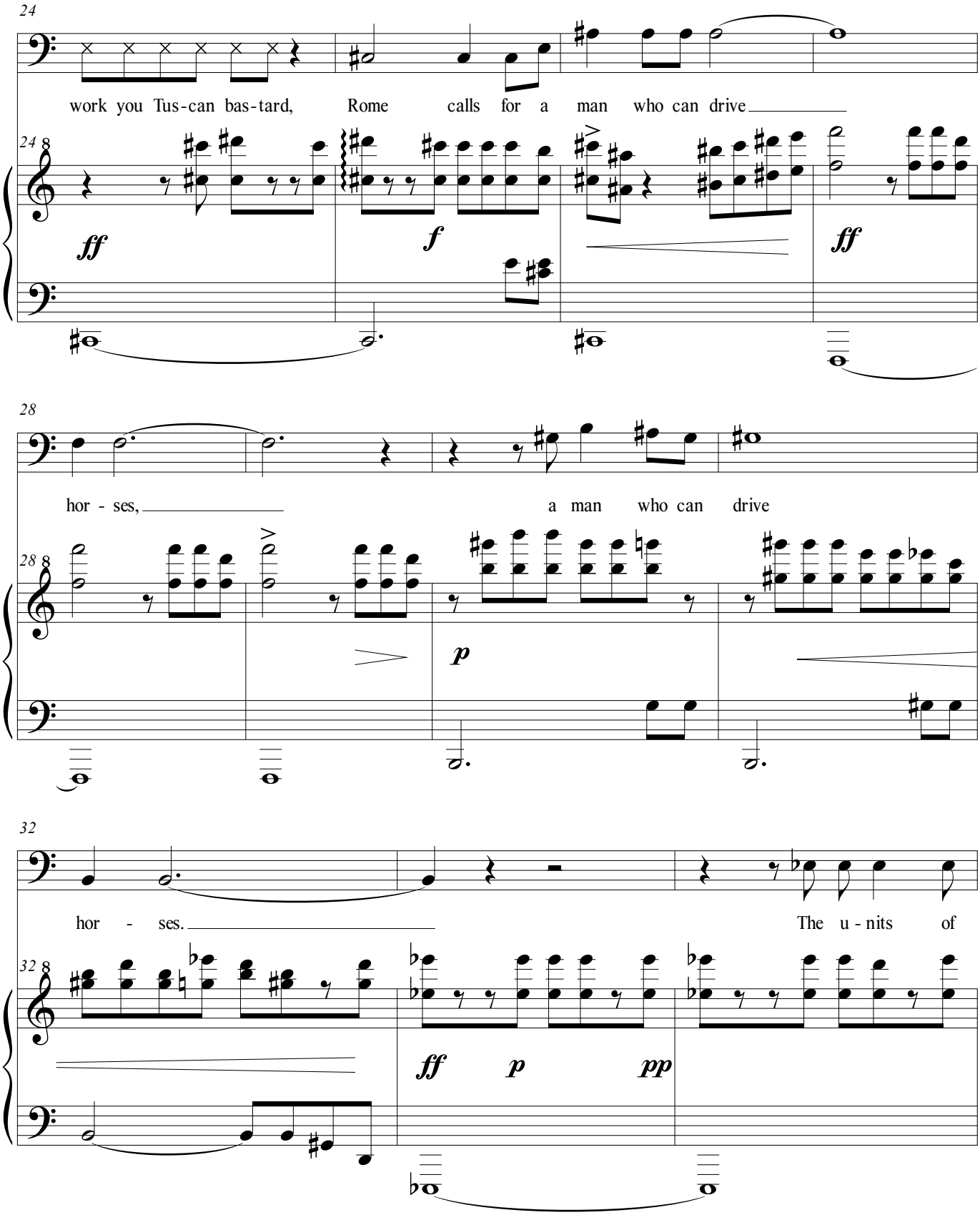

101
On - ly at times the cur - tain of his pu - pils
101
f
108
si - - - lent - ly parts;
108
p
114
p sempre
and then in glides an i - mage,
114
p
f
ff

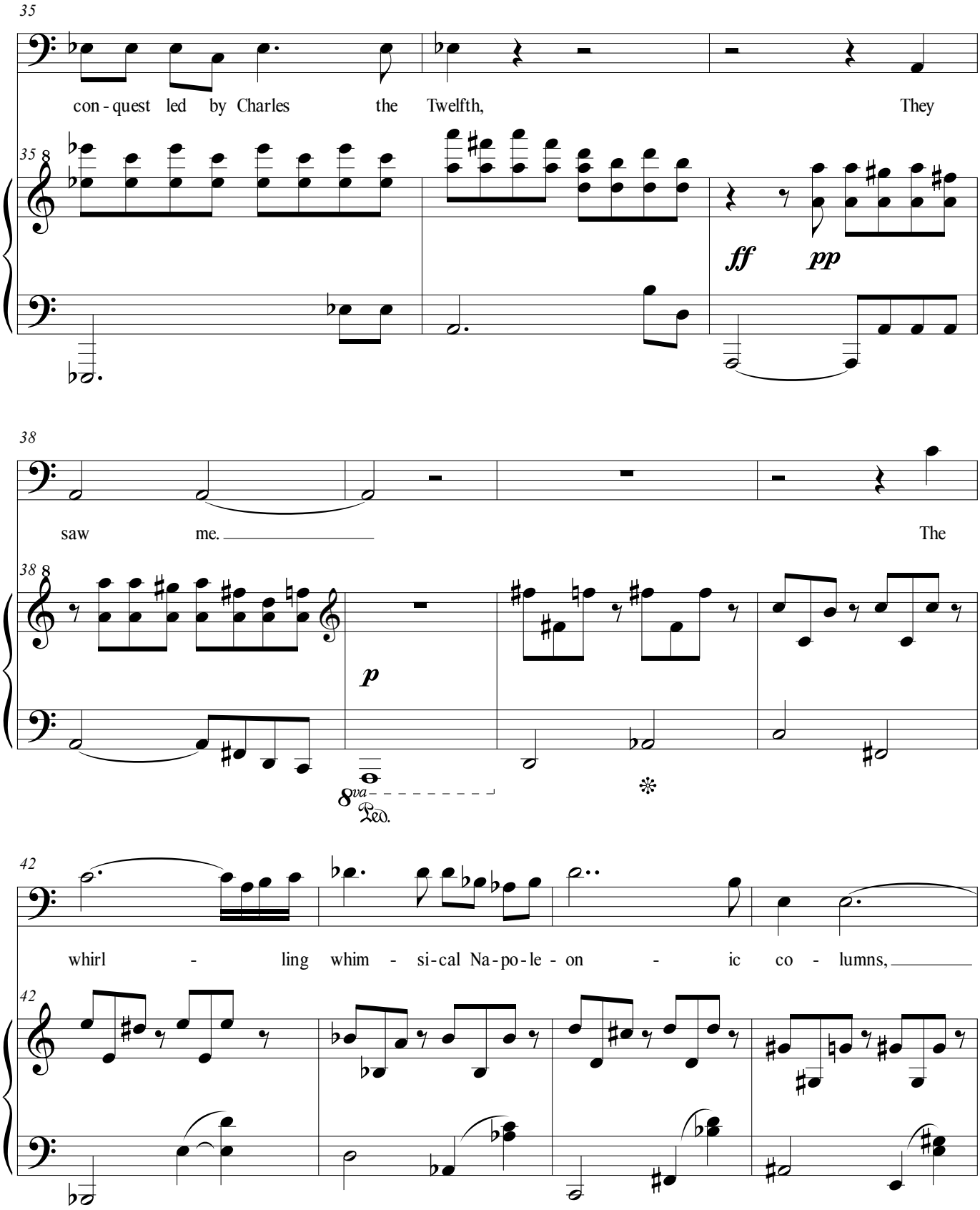

♪ = 200
122
glides through the high strung still - ness of his limbs:
pp
129
allarg.
and in his heart
gives up its
8va
136
being.
(8va)
f

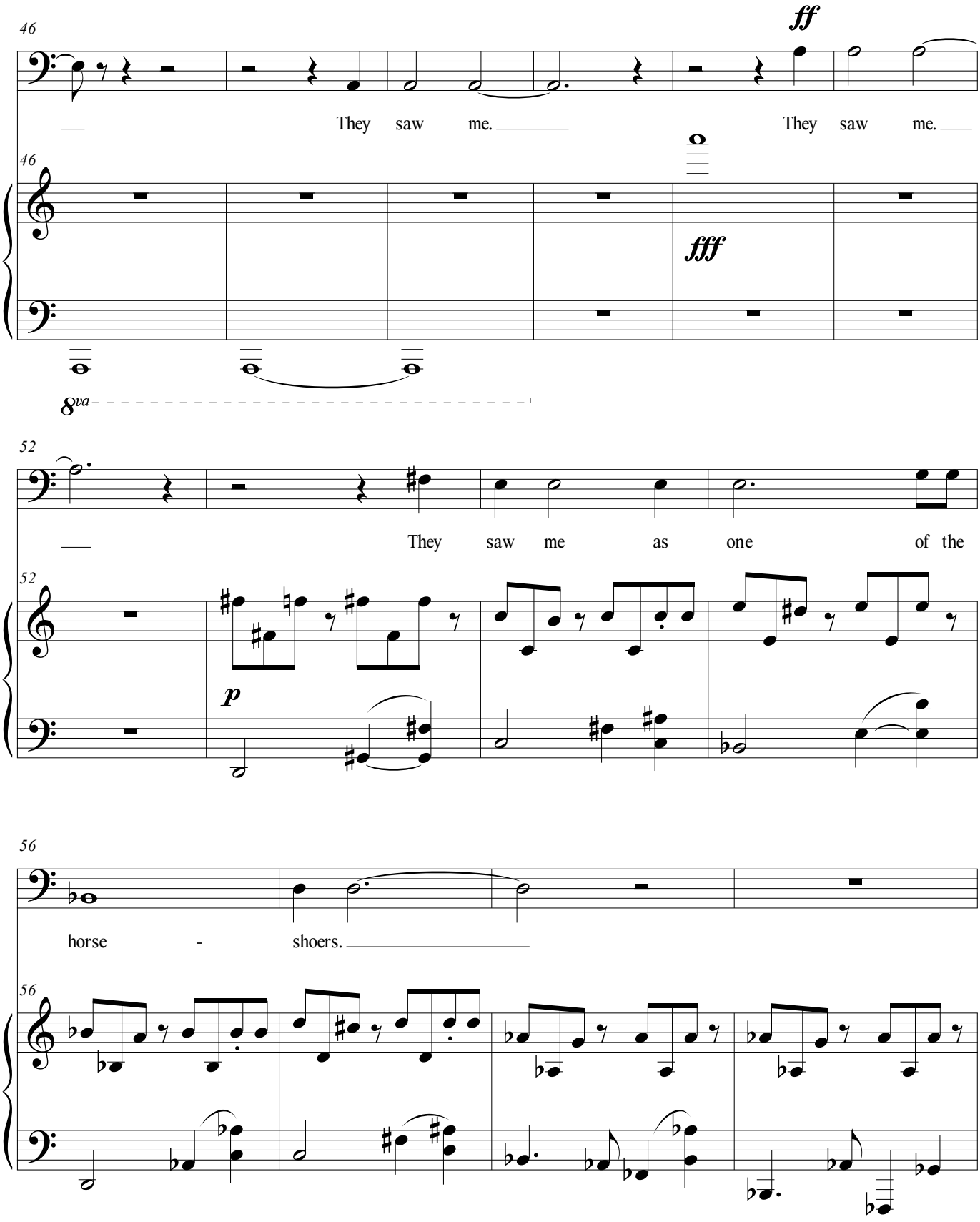
3. The Soldier's Tale

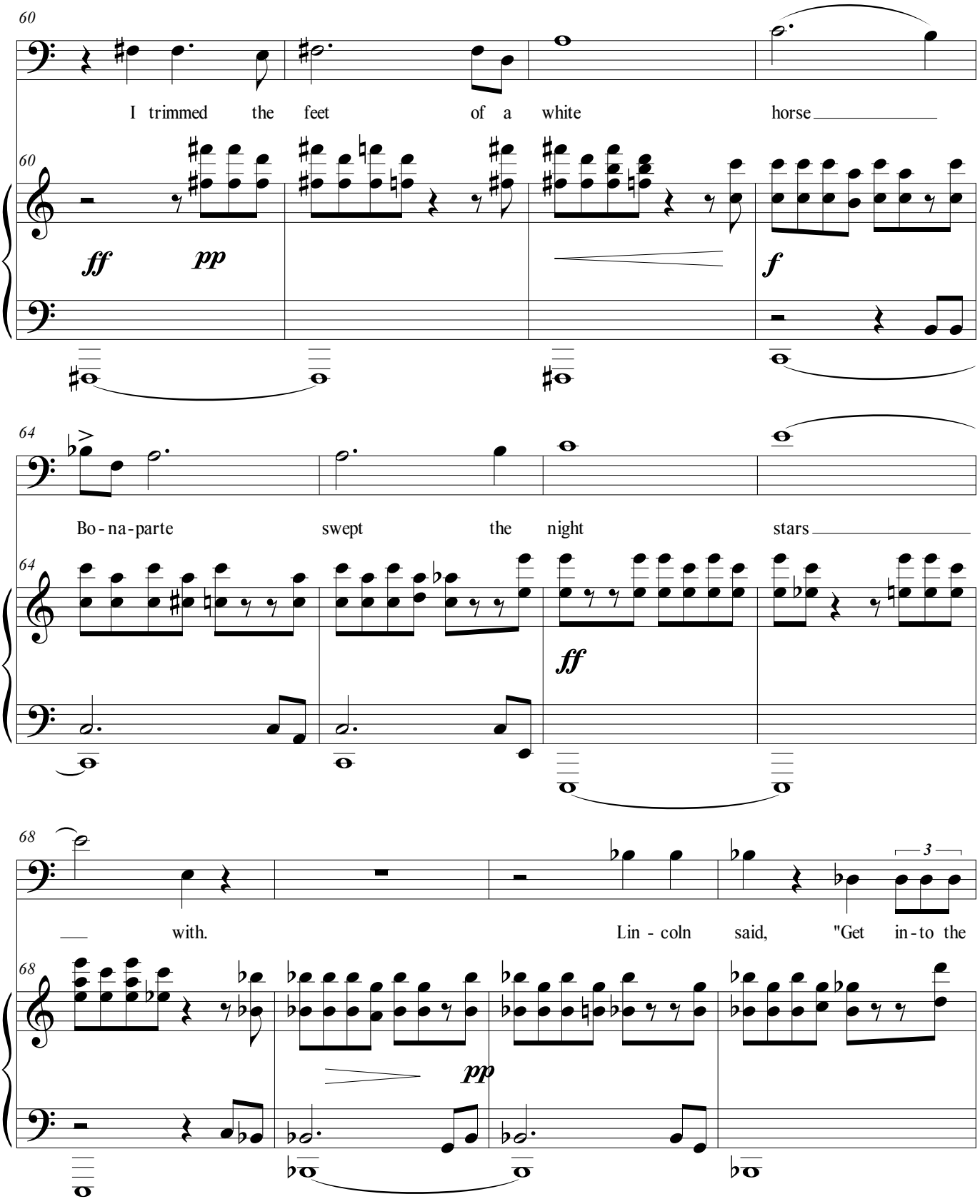


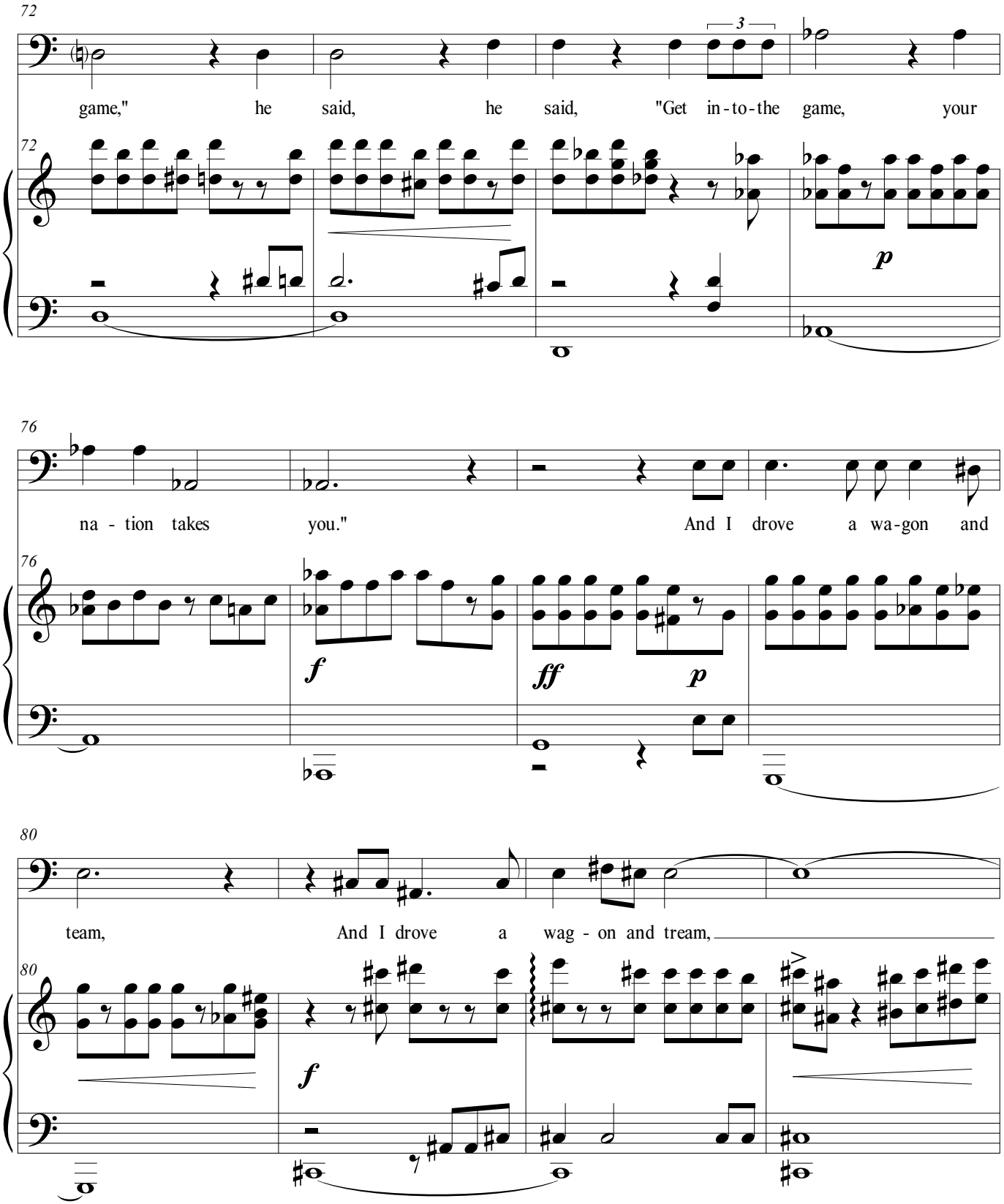

pha-lanx I had a haft and head; I had a brist-ling gleam-
12
ff pp
p
- ing spear hand - le. Red head-ed
16
f
p
20
Spoken:
Cae - sar picked me for a team - ster. He said, he said, "Go to
20
f
ff
p

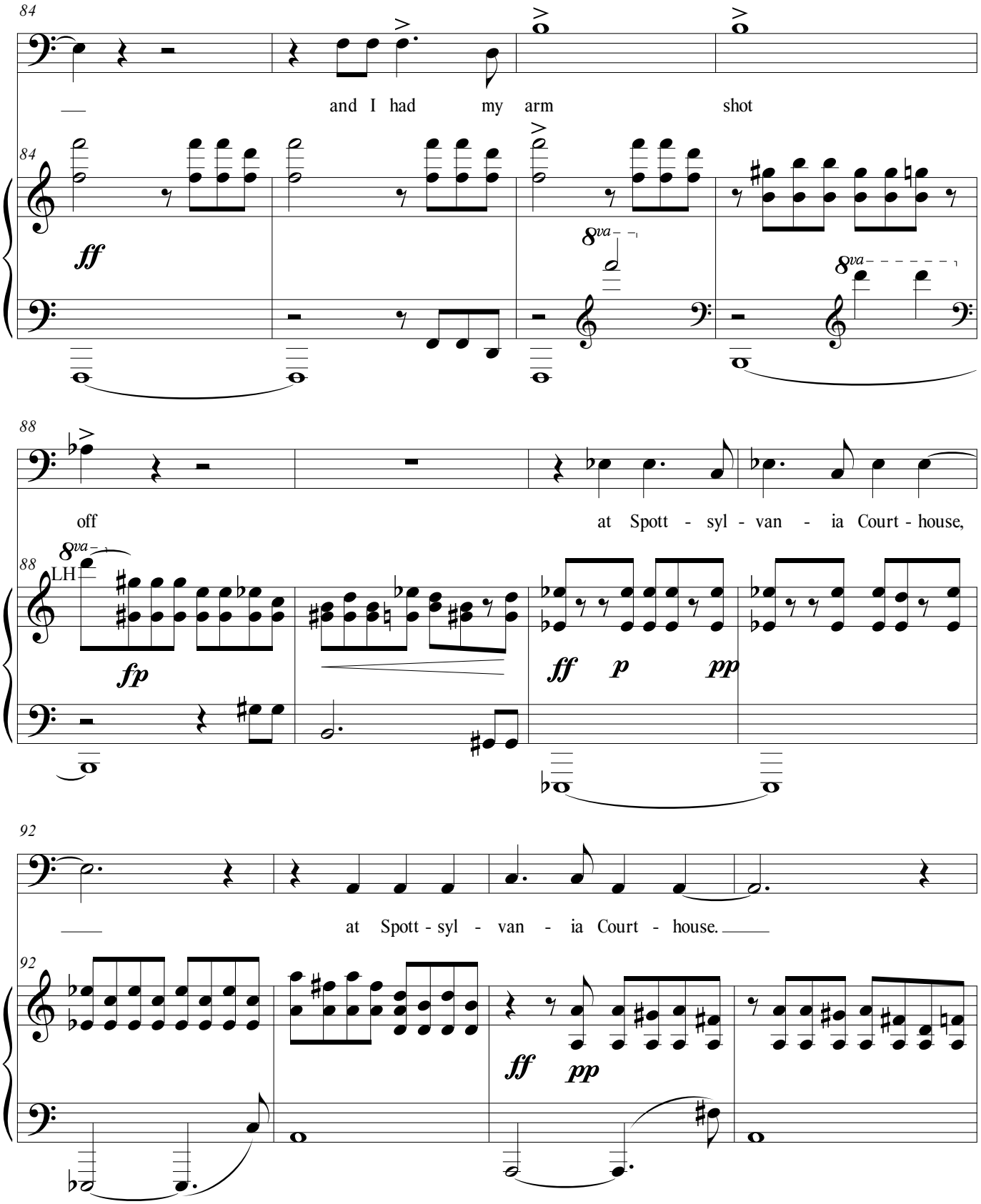

24
work you Tus-can bas-tard, Rome calls for a man who can drive
ff
f
ff
28
hor - ses, a man who can drive
p
32
hor - ses. The u - nits of
ff
p
pp

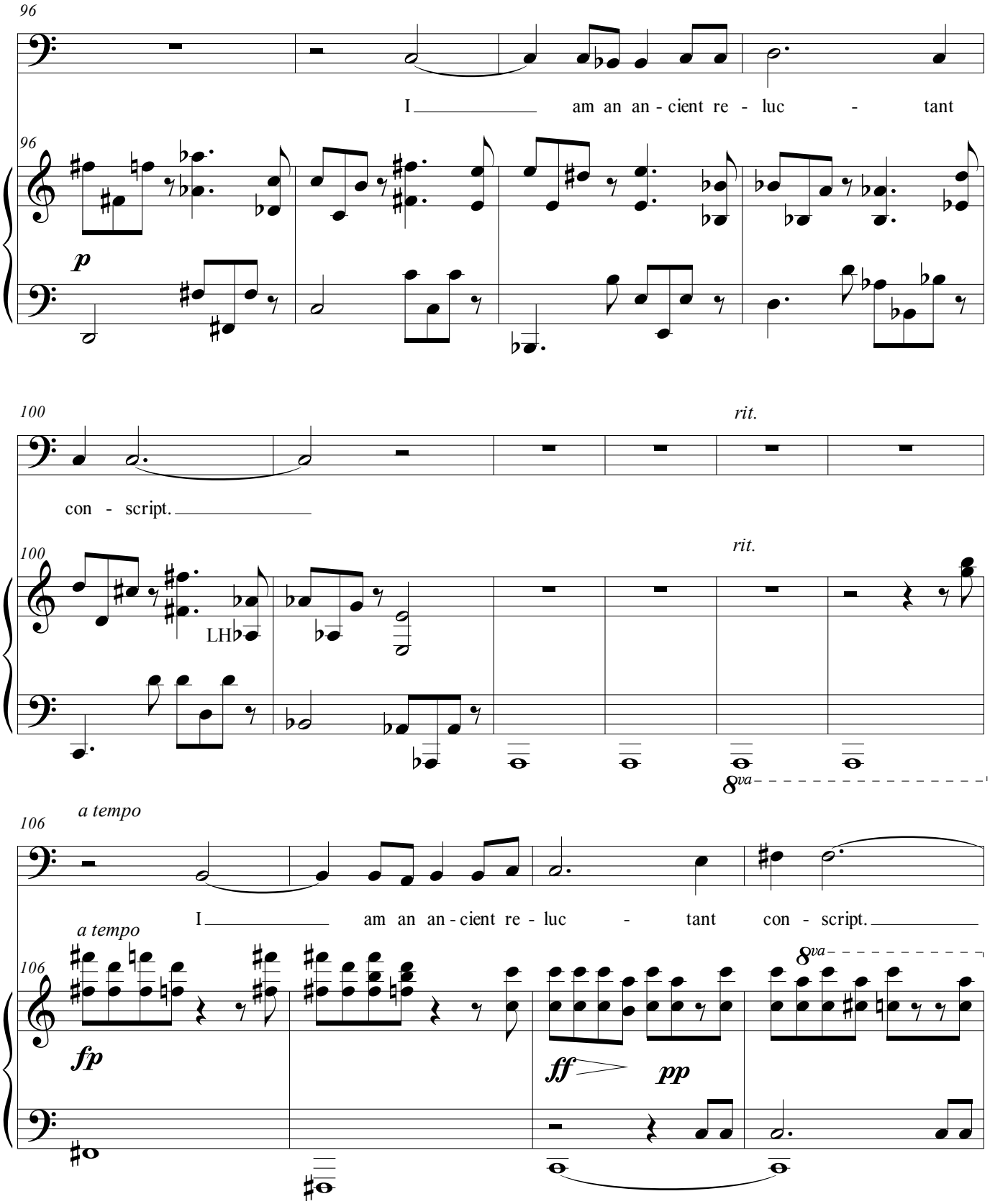

35
con - quest led by Charles the Twelfth, They
35
ff pp
38
saw me. The
38
p
8va
Ped.
42
whirl - ling whim - si-cal Na-po-le - on - ic co - lumns,
42

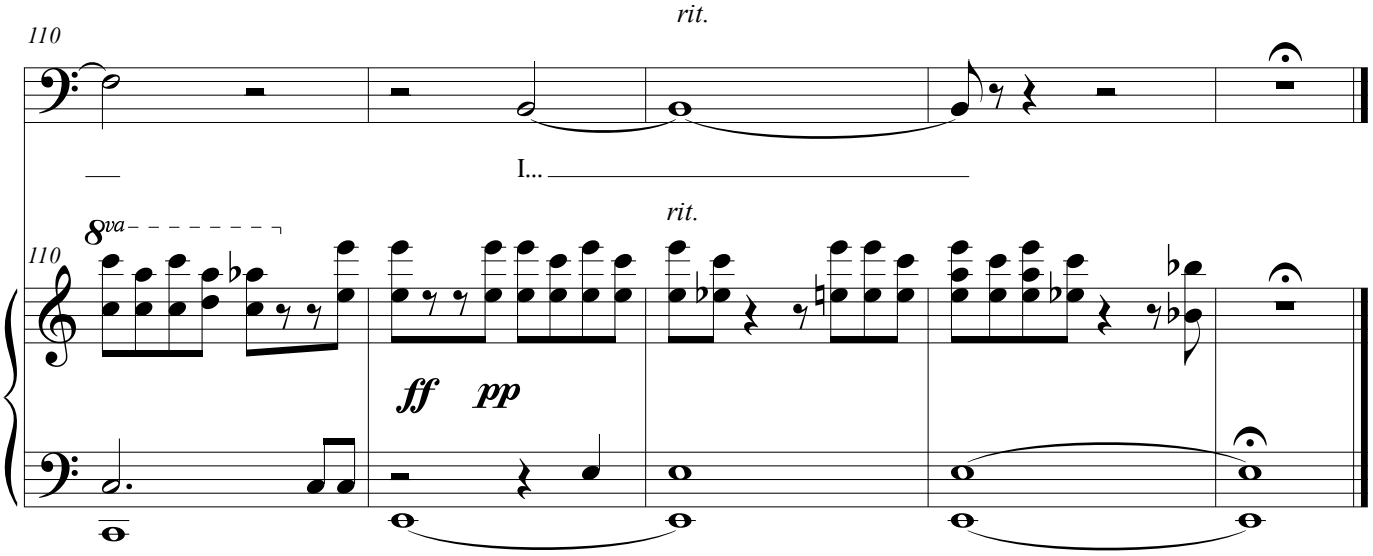

46
ff
They saw me.
They saw me.
46
fff
8va
52
They saw me as one of the
52
p
56
horse - shoers.
56


60
I trimmed the feet of a white horse
ff
pp
f
64
Bo - na - parte swept the night stars
ff
68
with. Lin - coln said, "Get in - to the
3
pp

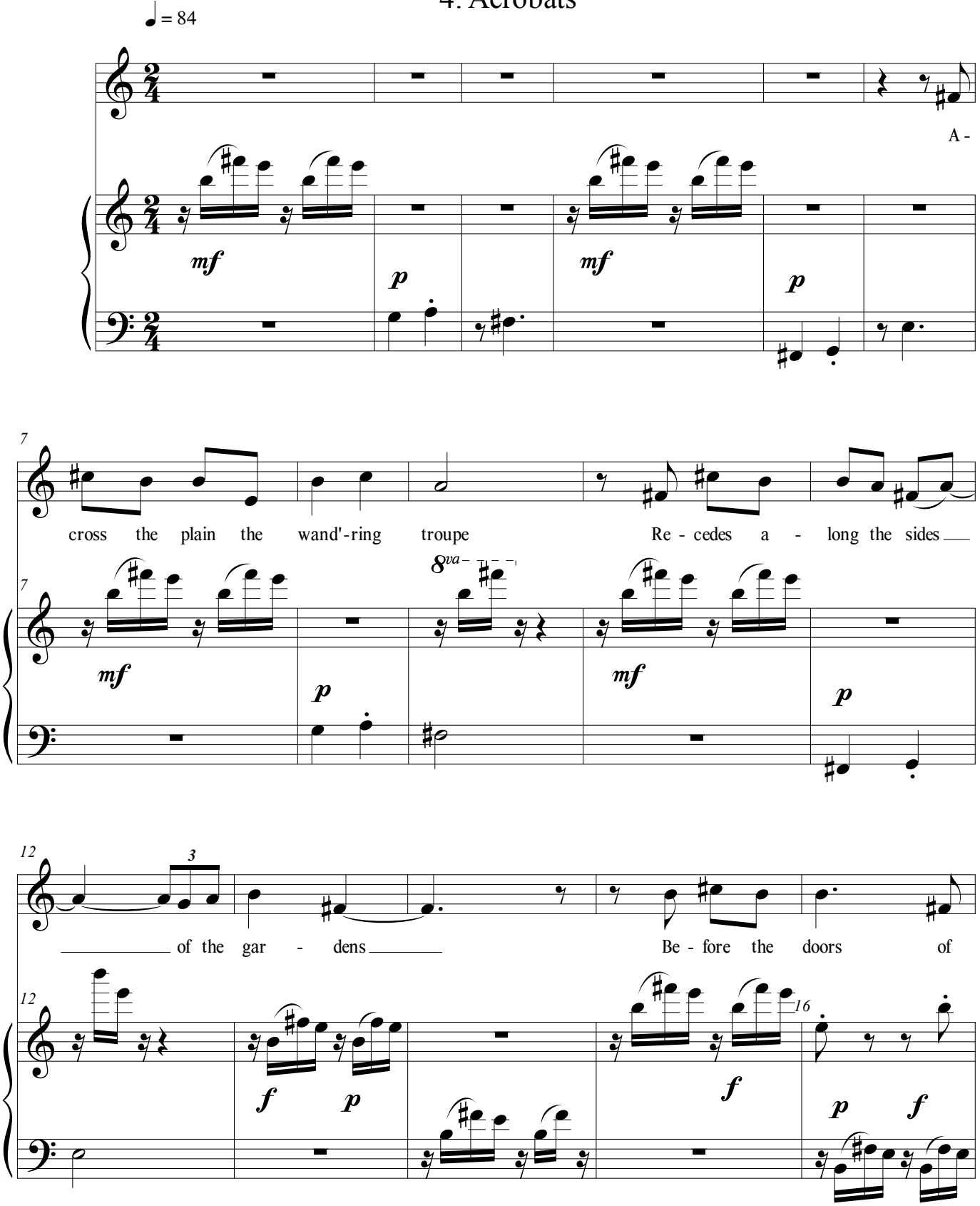

72
3
game," he said, he said, "Get in-to-the game, your
72
p
76
na - tion takes you." And I drove a wa-gon and
76
f
ff
p
80
team, And I drove a wag - on and tream,
80
f

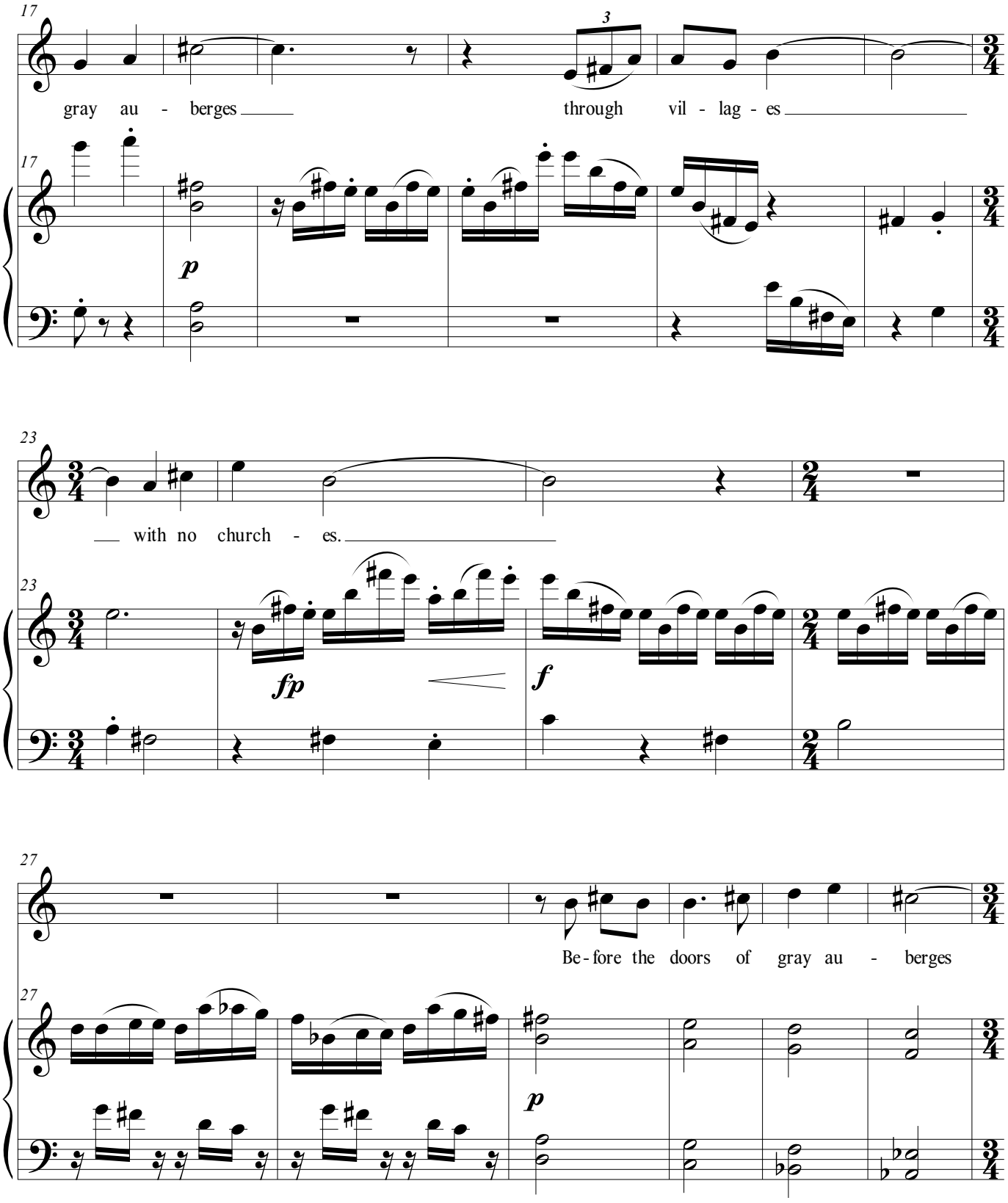

84
and I had my arm shot
ff
8va
88
off at Spott - syl - van - ia Court - house,
LH
fp
ff p pp
92
at Spott - syl - van - ia Court - house.
ff pp

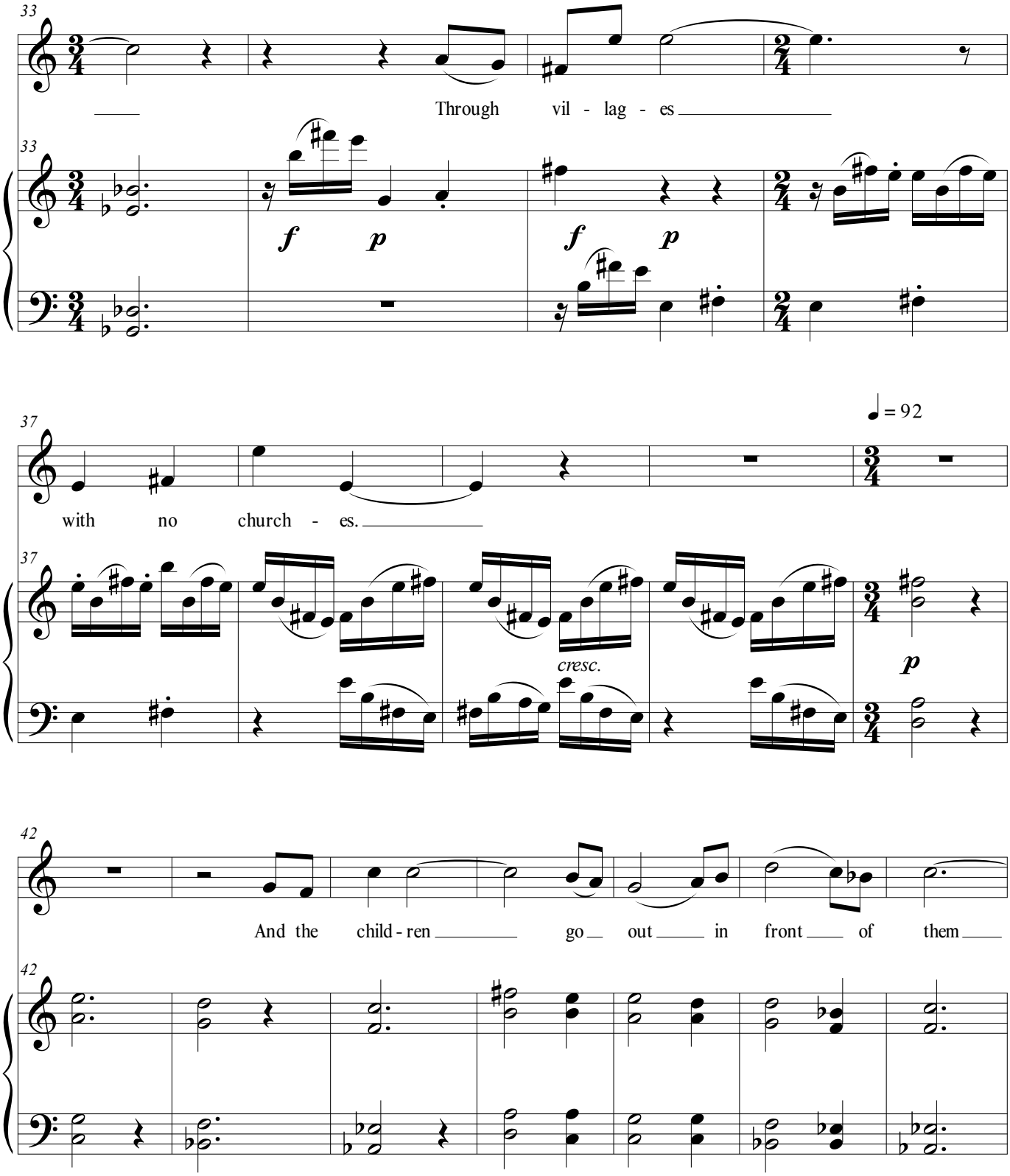

96
I am an an - cient re - luc - tant
p
100
rit.
con - script.
LH
8va
106
a tempo
I am an an - cient re - luc - tant con - script.
fp
ff
pp

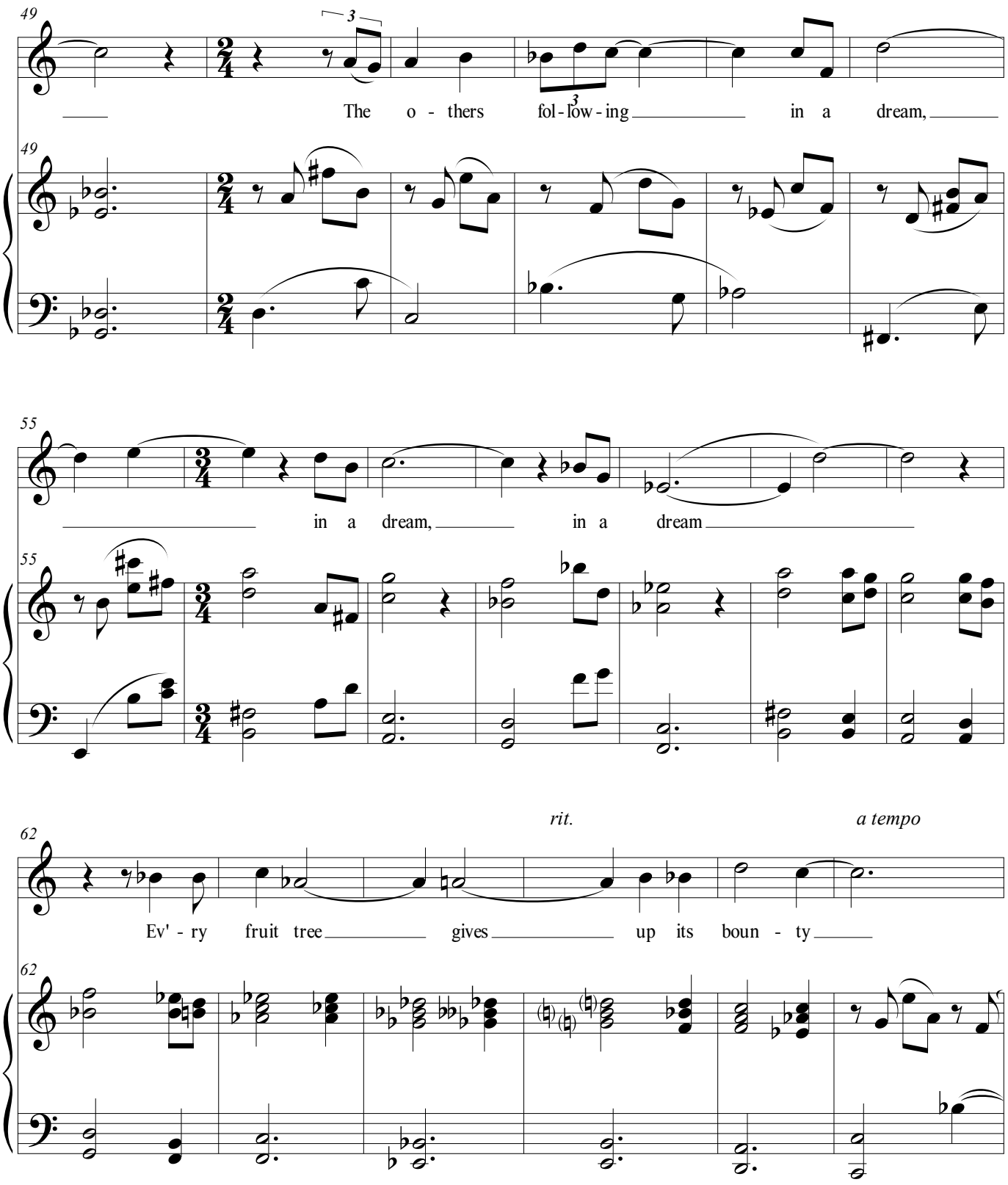

rit.
110
I...
rit.
8va
110
ff
pp

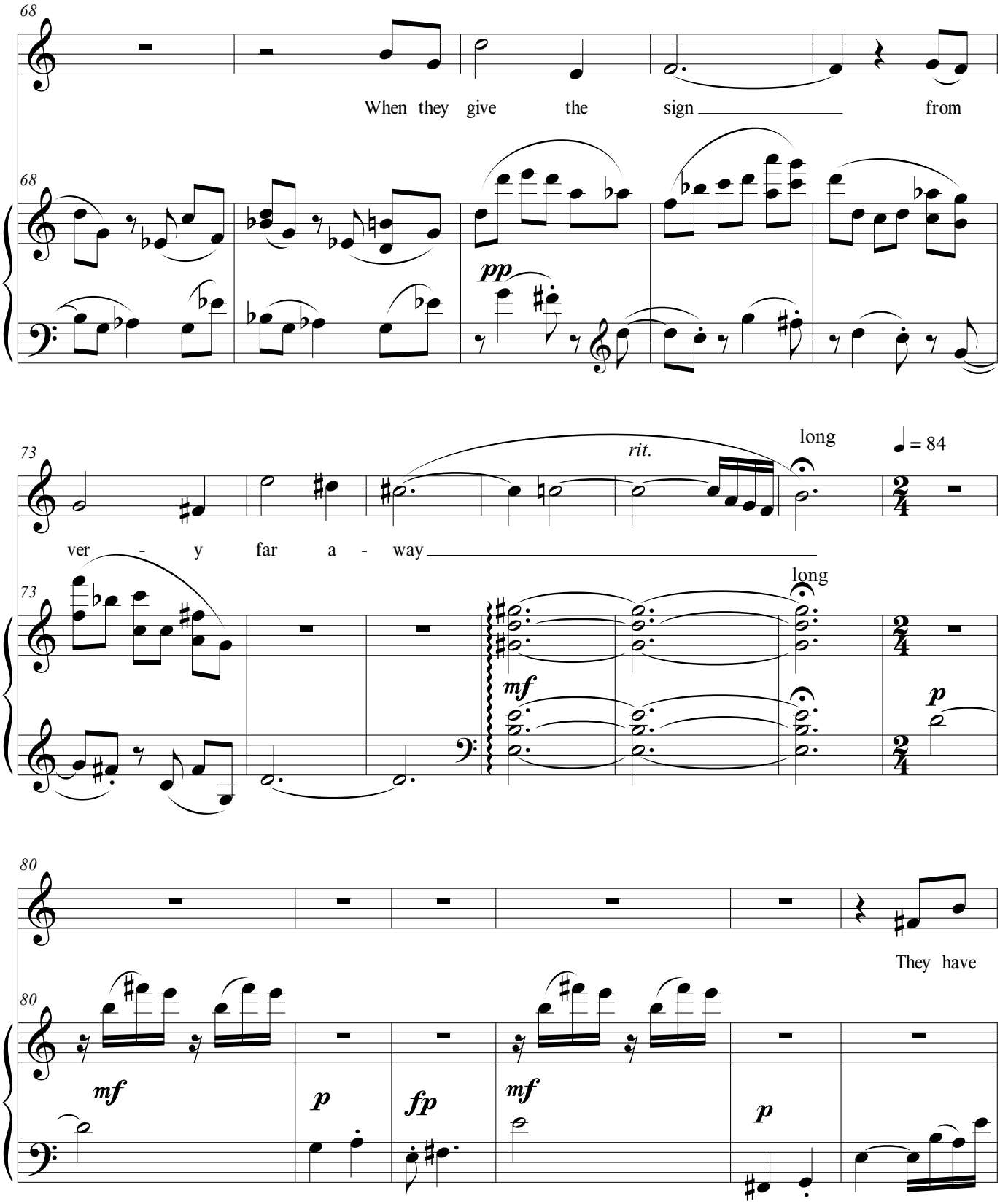
4. Acrobats

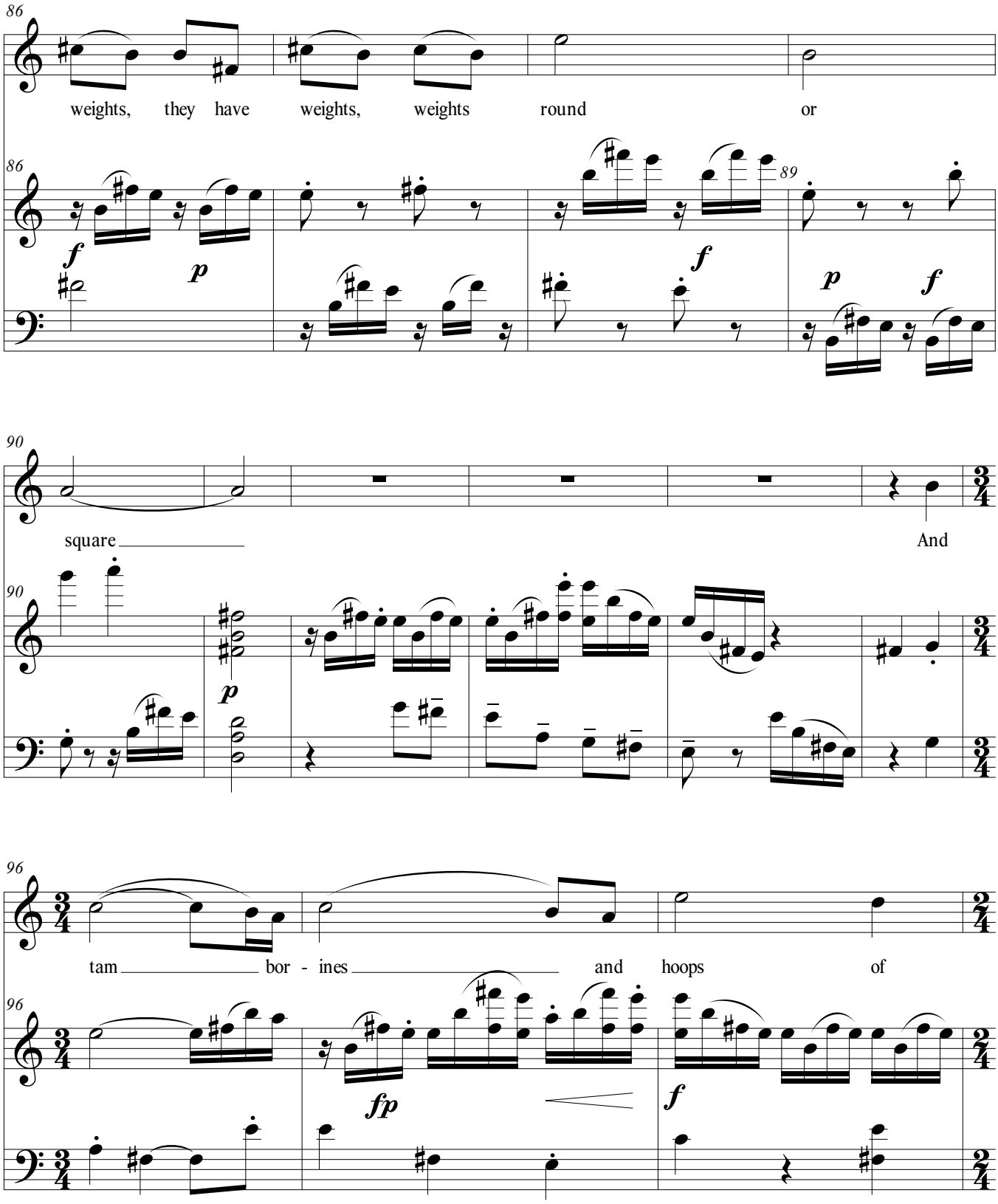

♩ = 84
A -
mf
p
mf
p
7
cross the plain the wand'-ring troupe
Re - cedes a - long the sides
8va
12
3
of the gar - dens
Be - fore the doors of
16
f
p
f
p
f

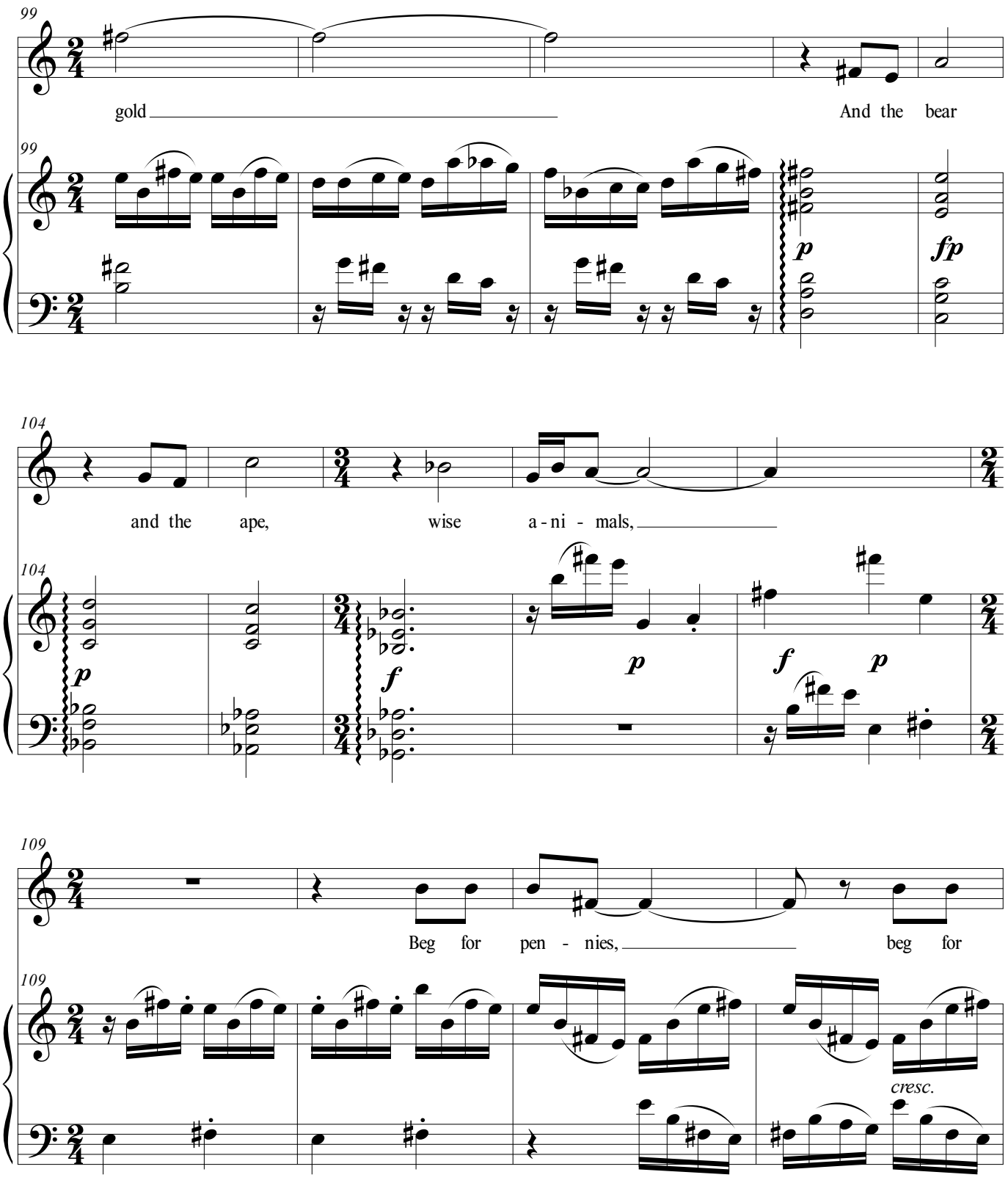

17
gray au - berges
3
through vil - lag - es
p
23
with no church - es.
fp
f
27
Be - fore the doors of gray au - berges
p

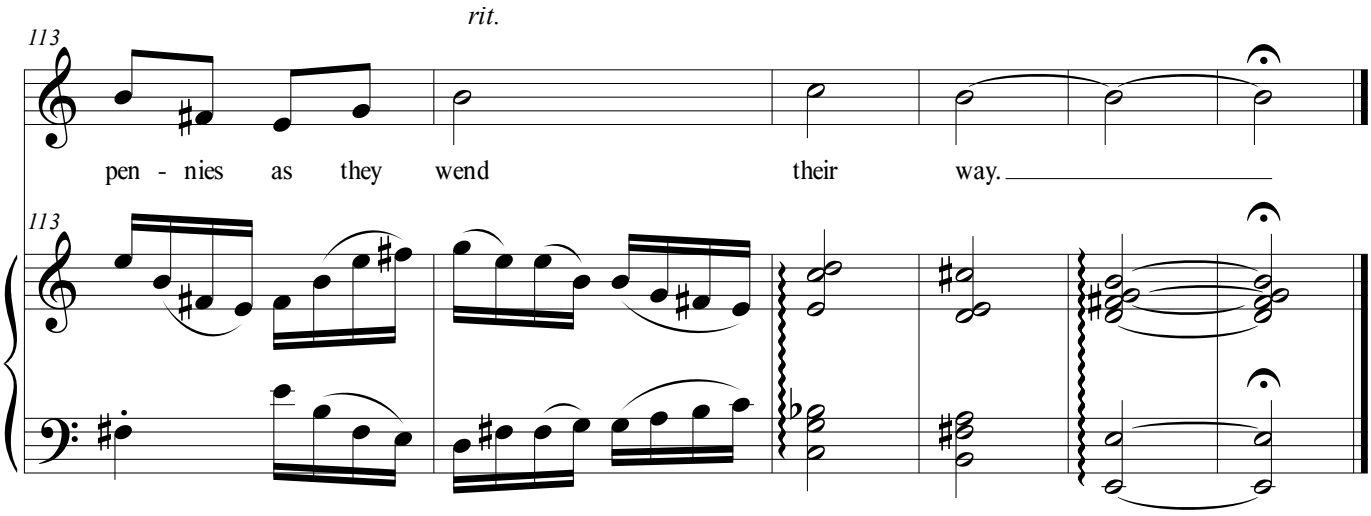

33
Through vil - lag - es
33
f p f p
37
♩ = 92
with no church - es.
37
cresc.
p
42
And the child - ren go out in front of them
42


49
3
The o - thers fol - low - ing in a dream,
49
55
in a dream, in a dream
55
62
rit.
a tempo
Ev' - ry fruit tree gives up its boun - ty
62

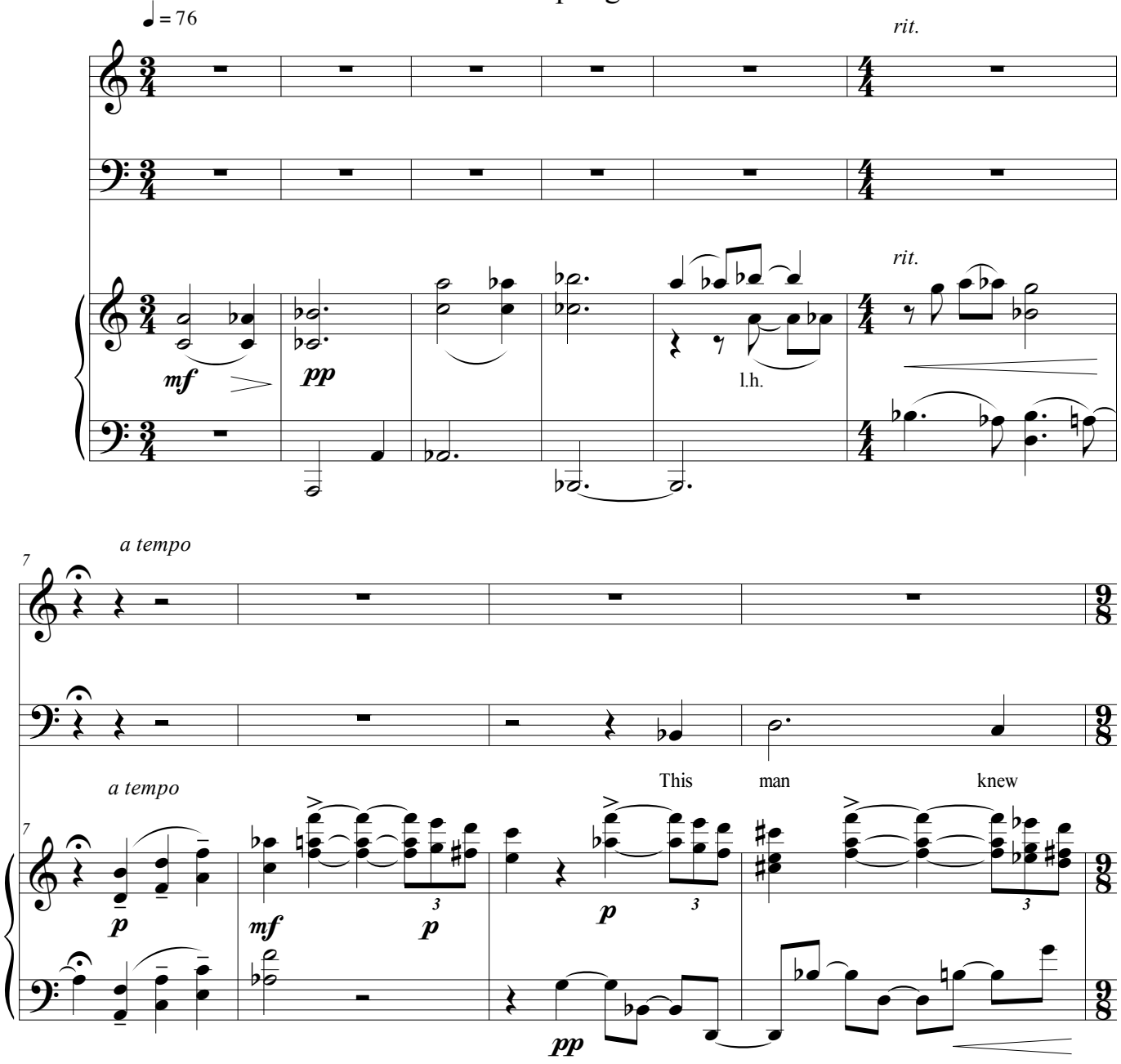

68
When they give the sign from
68
pp
73
rit.
long
♩ = 84
ver - y far a - way
73
long
mf
p
80
They have
80
mf
p
fp
mf
p


86
weights, they have weights, weights round or
86
89
f
p
f
p
f
90
square
And
90
p
96
tam bor - ines and hoops of
96
fp
f


99
gold
And the bear
p
fp
104
and the ape,
wise
a - ni - mals,
p
f
p
f
p
109
Beg for pen - nies,
beg for
cresc.


rit.
113
pen - nies as they wend their way.
113

5. Epilogue



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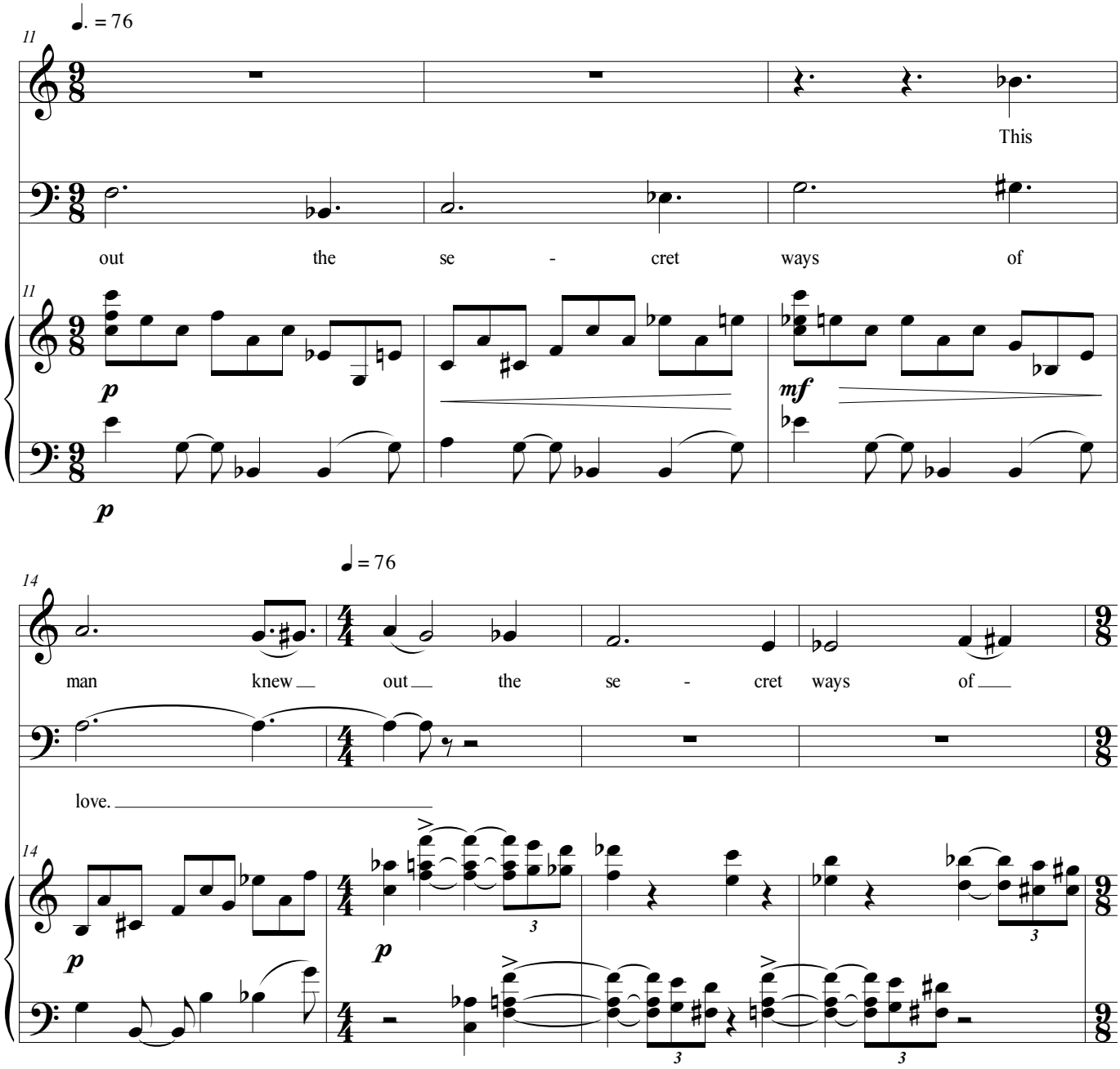
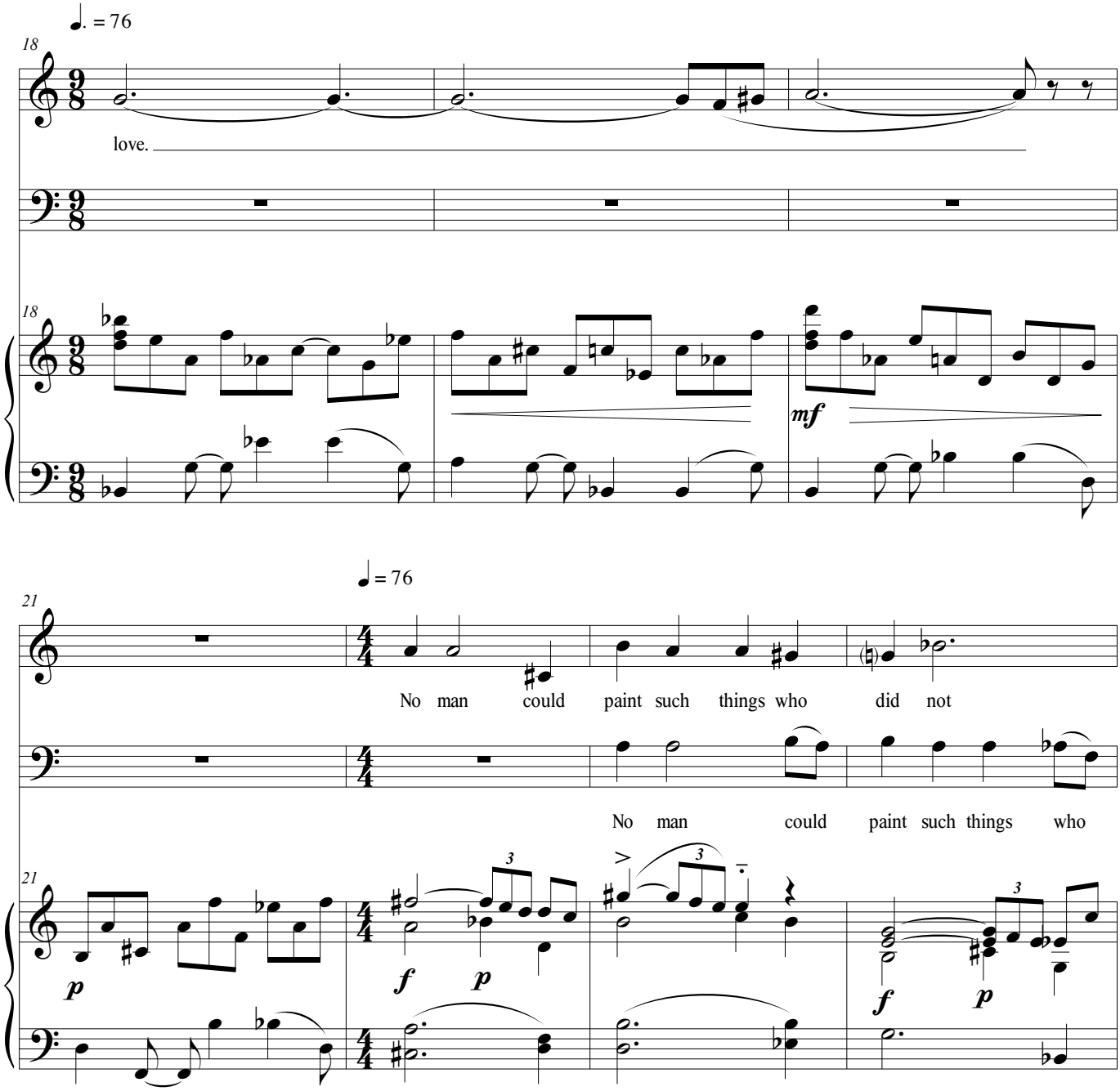
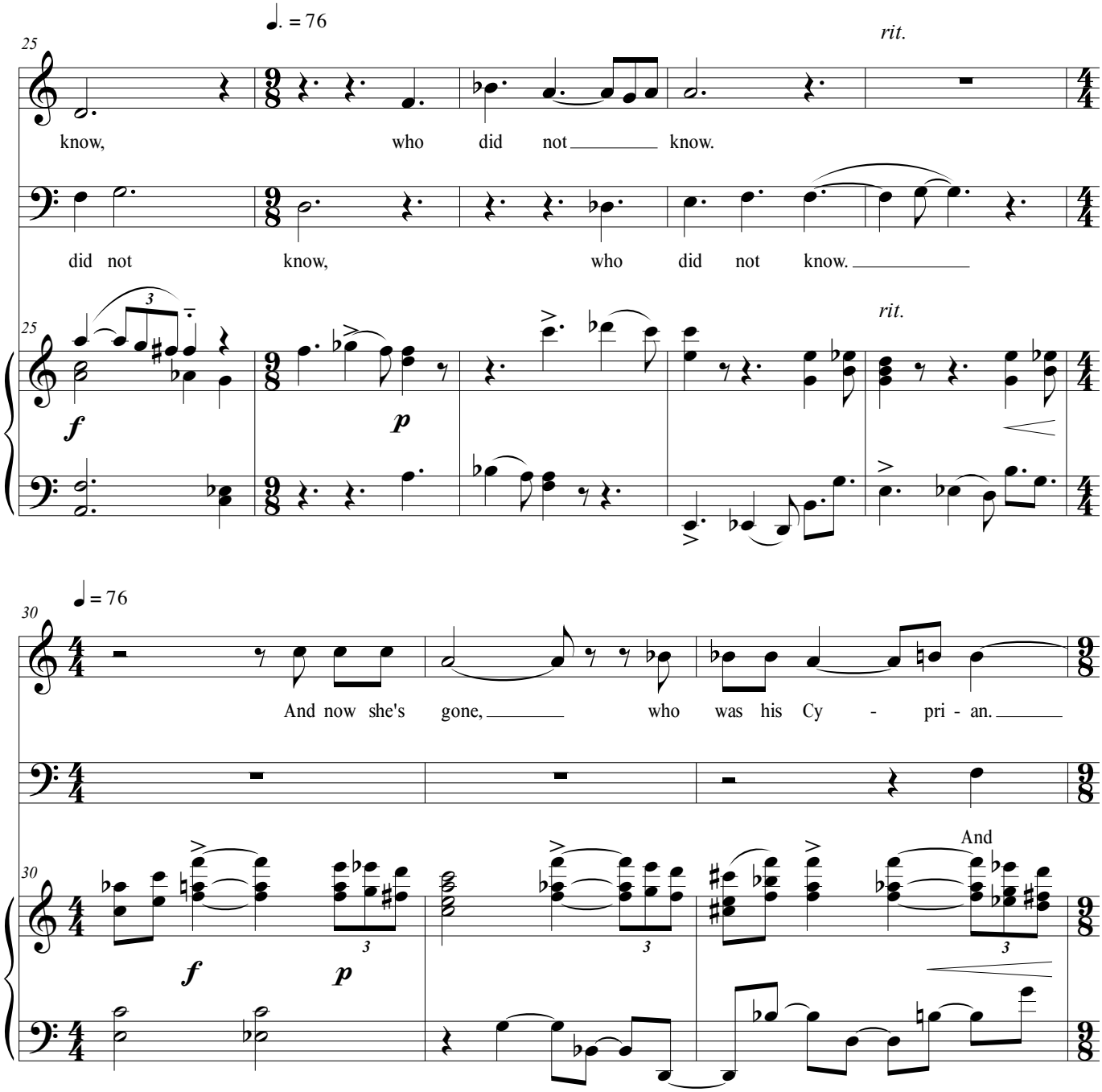
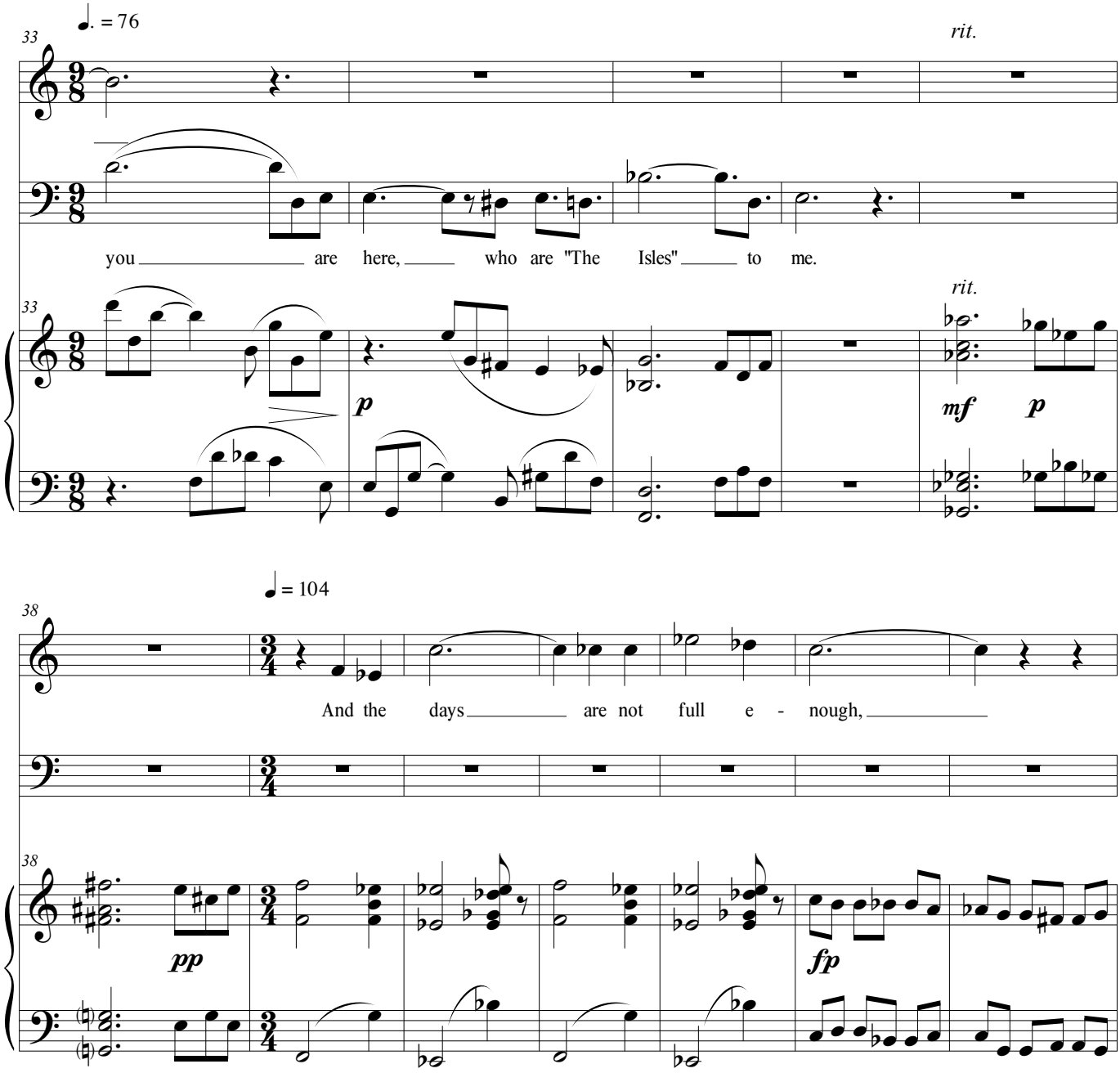
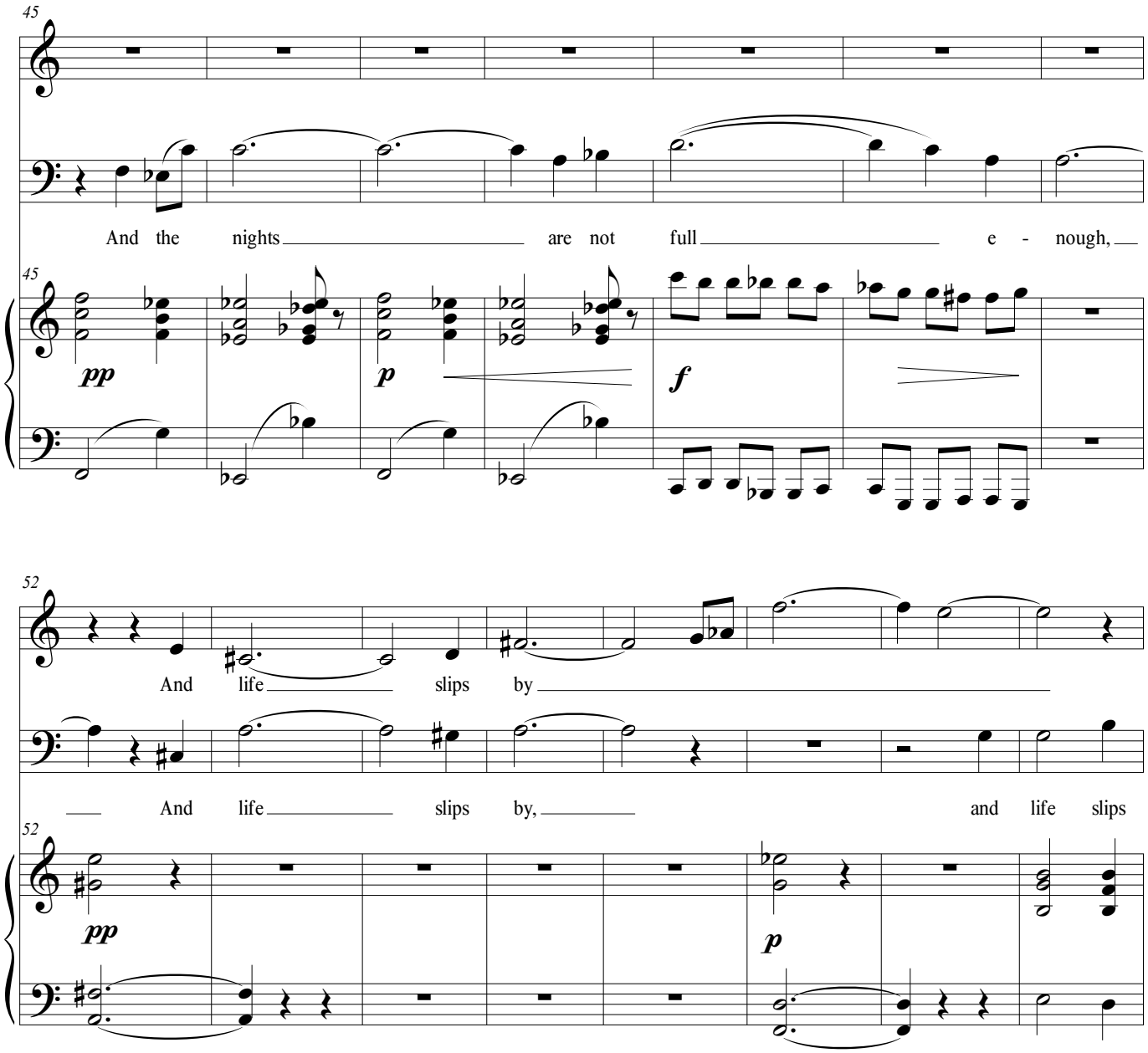
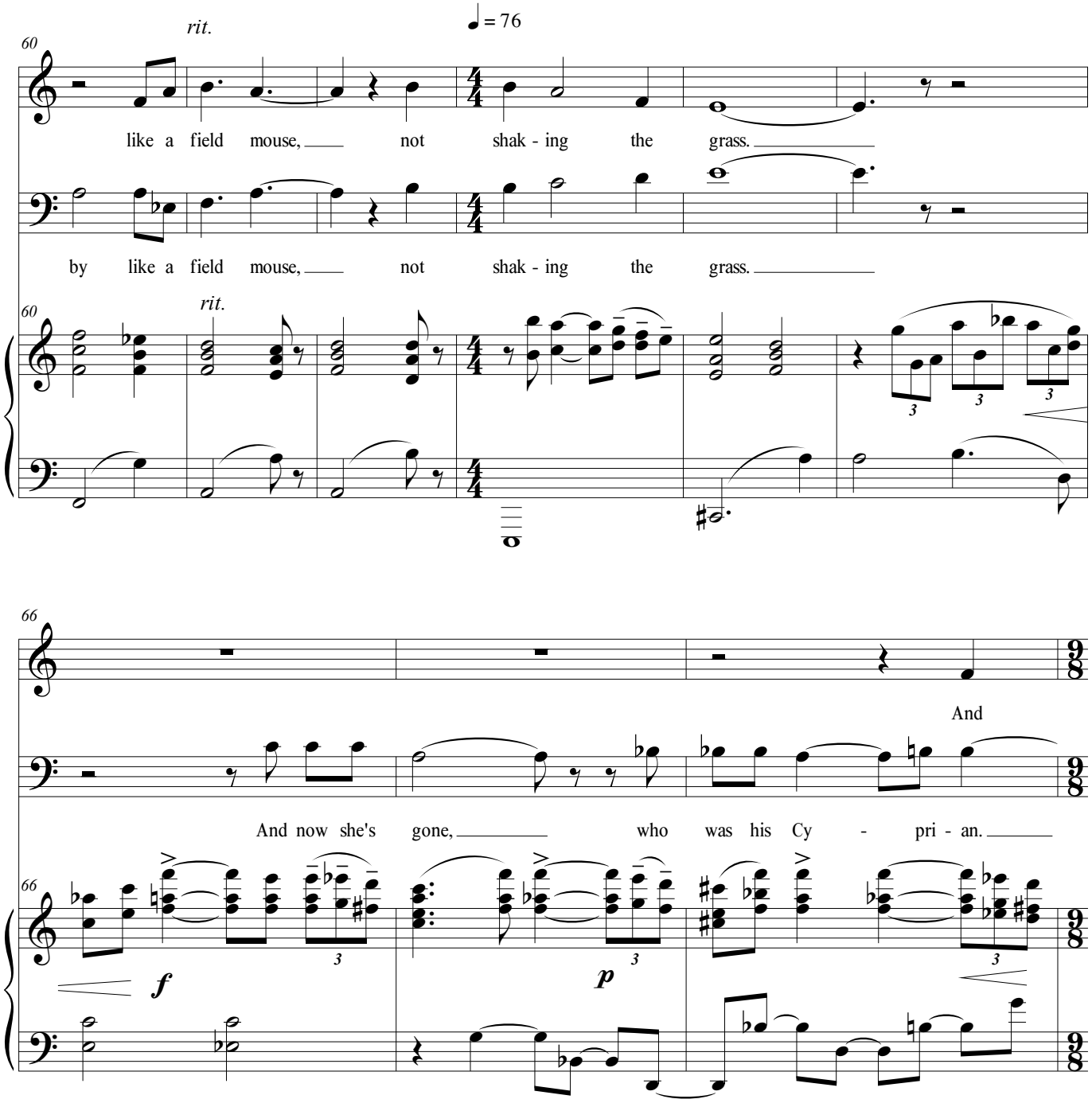

11
♩. = 76
This
out the se - cret ways of
p
mf
p
14
♩ = 76
man knew out the se - cret ways of
love.
p
p
3
3
3

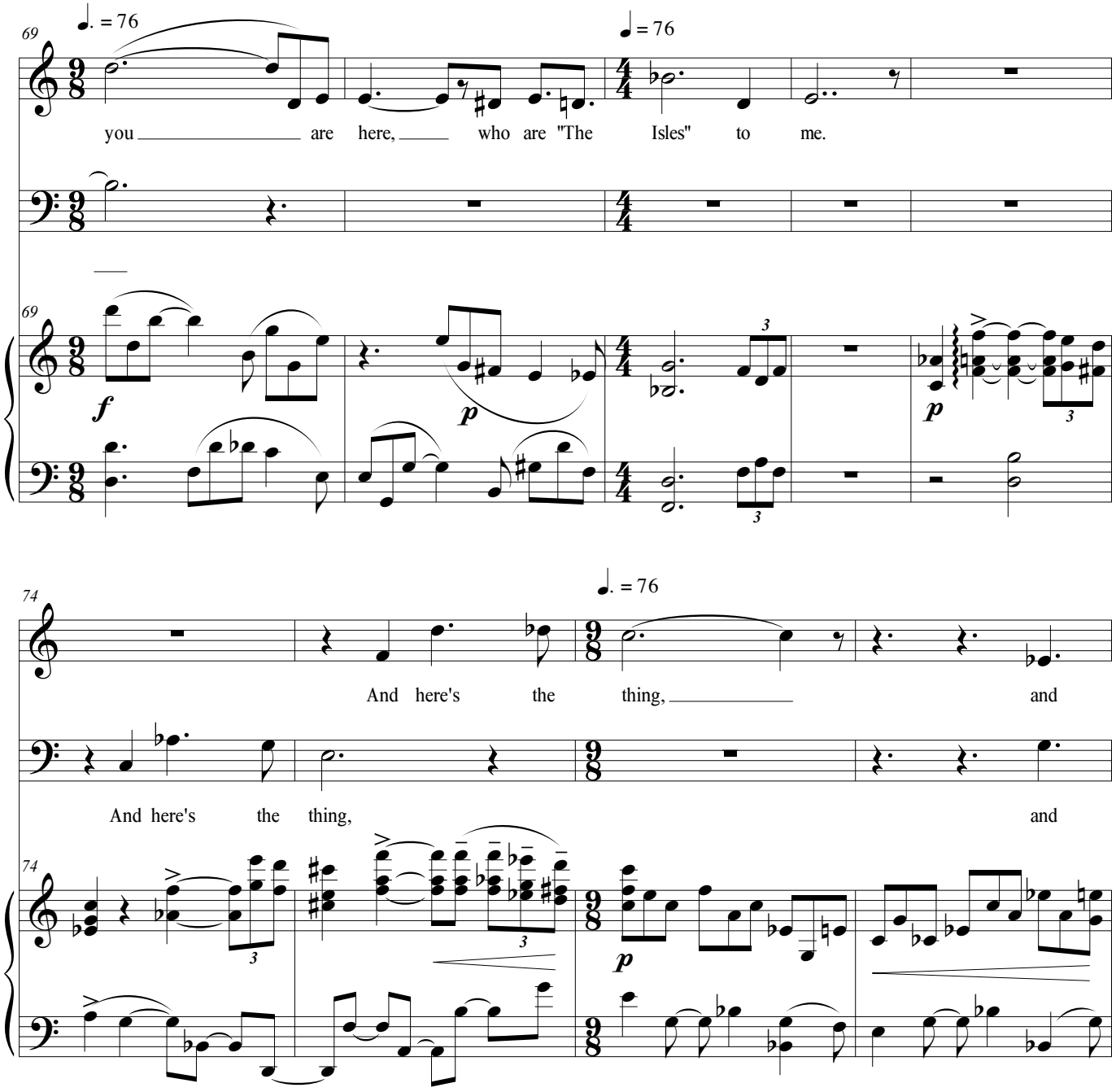

♩. = 76
18
love.
18
mf
♩ = 76
21
No man could paint such things who did not
No man could paint such things who
21
p
f
p
3
3
f
p
3

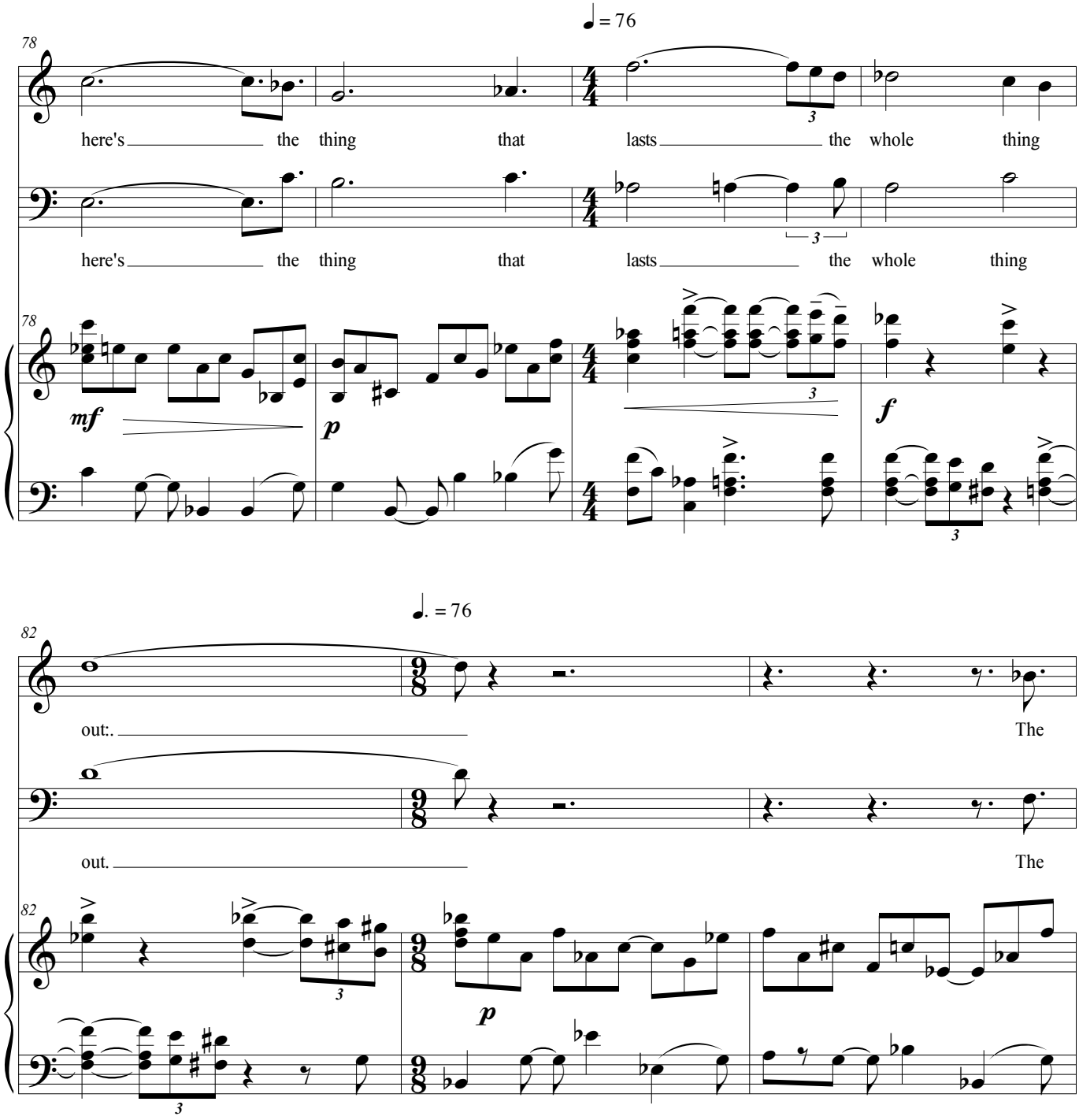

25
♩. = 76
rit.
know, who did not know.
did not know, who did not know.
25
rit.
f
p
30
♩ = 76
And now she's gone, who was his Cy - pri - an.
30
And
f
p

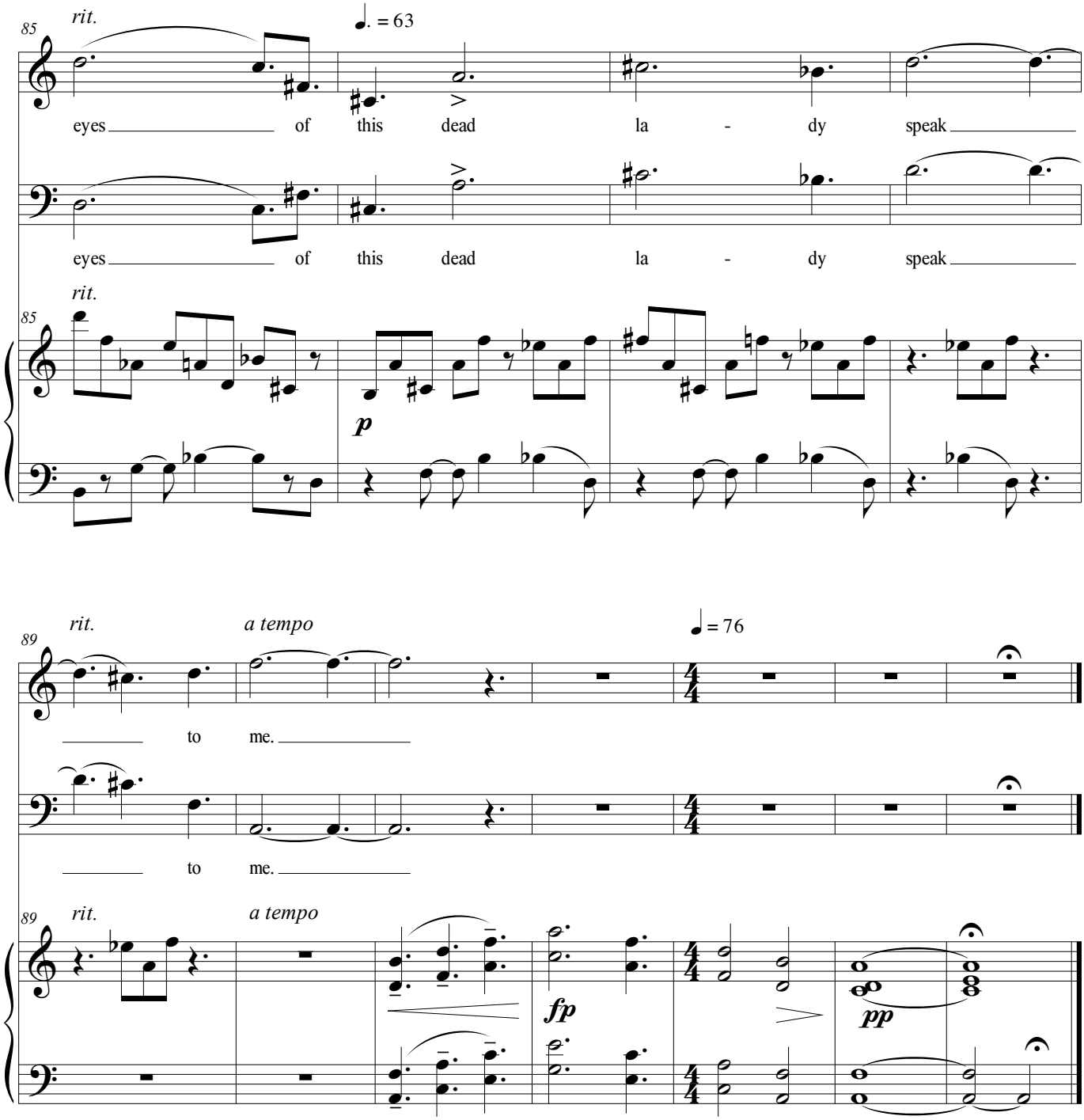

33
♩. = 76
rit.
you are here, who are "The Isles" to me.
33
rit.
p
mf
p
38
♩ = 104
And the days are not full e - nough,
38
pp
fp


45
And the nights are not full e - nough,
45
pp
p
f
52
And life slips by
And life slips by, and life slips
52
pp
p


60
rit.
♩ = 76
like a field mouse, not shak - ing the grass.
by like a field mouse, not shak - ing the grass.
60
rit.
66
And
And now she's gone, who was his Cy - pri - an.
66
f
p


69
♩. = 76
♩ = 76
you are here, who are "The Isles" to me.
69
f
p
p
74
♩. = 76
And here's the thing, and
And here's the thing, and
74
p


♩ = 76
78
here's the thing that lasts the whole thing
here's the thing that lasts the whole thing
mf
p
f
♩. = 76
82
out:. The
out. The
p


85
rit.
♩. = 63
eyes of this dead la - dy speak
eyes of this dead la - dy speak
rit.
85
p
89
rit.
a tempo
♩ = 76
to me.
to me.
89
rit.
a tempo
fp
pp