Jessica Rudman

Iseult Speaks

for Mezzo-soprano and Piano

with Text by Elizabeth Hamilton

2016
ca. 40:00

Iseult Speaks

for Mezzo-soprano (range: A3-G5) and Piano

Performance Notes

- Breaks between movements should be short. Movements marked "Attacca" must be played without a break, and other movements may be performed with or without a break as desired.
- Grace notes should be played before the beat.
- Rolled chords should be played on the beat.
- Tapping on the body of the piano is notated with an x notehead and a text indication.

Program Notes

Iseult Speaks is an extended song cycle based on a retelling of the Tristan/Iseult myth. For those of you who might not be familiar with the story, the basic outline—and there are many variations on this skeleton—is that Tristan is supposed to bring Iseult to marry his uncle, but on the way they fall in love, usually because of a potion they accidentally ingest. Portrayals of Iseult range from passive cypher to tragic heroine to wanton seductress, but she is almost always cast as a one-dimensional accessory to Tristan.

Elizabeth Hamilton's evocative and provocative poems reexamine the legend from Iseult's point of view, here somewhat omniscient and shaded with a modern sensibility that links the tale to contemporary experiences. The text touches on questions of gender roles, societal pressure, and personal power as the narrator contemplates her life, rages against the unfairness of fate, wallows in memories of physical affection, condemns Tristan for his inaction, and vacillates between confidence, insecurity, hope, and despair.

It has been a pleasure setting these gorgeous poems, and I want to thank Elizabeth for trusting me with her words!

Composer Contact Information

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TEXT

1. Iseult Speaks
What we have is myth
but that doesn't make it
any less true. I've known that
from the start, knew it even
when you married another
and silence stretched
to fit distance.
Magic is a bitter thing,
Tristan. Are you surprised
to hear me say this?
More fool you, then.
What you perceive
as gentleness, as generosity,
is really just resignation.
Yours are the only hands
I can feel. If I survive
you, my skin will starve.

2. Iseult Sings
A shoulder here, ankle there.
His hands wrapped in my hair.
One finger, two finger, three.
Beggar, balm, barren me.

3. Iseult Swims
In the alternate story, I jump
when the wind dies. Above
the white-caps, my head,
a glimmer of gold, bobbing
there, and then there,
in the green-black
waves. I wade to shore,
blue-lipped, breath heaving,
with wet skirts
wrapped around my legs —
a maiden who
saves only herself
and leaves you behind
to die of thirst
in a stalled wooden
box of a boat.

4. Iseult Skewers
Sometimes I wonder if you
even realize what you are:
the captor caught in his
own net, the warrior who
meant to dump the maiden
on shore for another man's
amusement and then ended
up stuck with her for life.
All this ache, all this useless
desire — what's the point
of a knight with more honor
than courage? I suggest you
hand me the sword. At least
I'm willing to use it.

5. Iseult Sees
The future, with its troublesome
noise, unfurls. This is the power
of myth. Here are those
who came later, wearing their worn
stories. Those doomed Italian
lovers. The knight and his ridiculous
hair shirt. The guilt-ridden queen.
Tragic, sure, but they've got
nothing on us. At least they had
free will. But did they escape doom?
No. They learned nothing from
our mistakes, not even how
to avoid the deaths that come like
twin stars, one burst of light,
followed by the other.

6. Iseult Speaks
This is what I know about
choice: mine was always
limited, even before the
potion. Yours, less so,

simply by virtue of being
a man, but eventually you,
too, were stuck. Still, if
we were being honest,

we'd have to admit that
love is never about choice.
The only difference magic
makes is it removes the

possibility of making
a different choice. But don't
take my word for it. Build
another life, brick by brick.

I don't even have to raise
my eyes to knock it down.

7. Iseult Sparks
Your wife might be the one
with the white hands,
but my candied fists call
you back to the forest
where you wade waist
deep in the tinder of my
body. Friend, I was not born
for this, but I confess this
possession, if we must call it
that, has its merits. Your hands
are the ones that matter, after all.
Winged, lit. The proof pours
from the floor of my body.
Ah, lovely goner, dark
wind. Come back.
Make ash.

8. Iseult Stagnates
The birds cannot compete
with my longing, but when
twilight settles over
the distant treetops and
the umber air feathers
with song, I know they have
heard my lament and call
from their branches, singing
up to the sky, singing
the same song their whole lives.

9. Iseult's Short-Breathed Sestina
What kind of woman am I to submit
to this empty breath? His absence a lone
gull wheeling within, noisy with hunger.

This is not a complaint about hunger,
which is worse than longing, but I submit
that I will end in grief's rattling shell, alone

as a last breath, tenderness out on loan
to one who does not remember hunger's
sharp demands or desire's command: submit!

Submissive, I hang by my own, lone thread.

10. Iseult Storms
I blame you for absolutely
everything: Every hour
of absence that turns
bird song blank, all
unwanted advances,
my unnatural attachment
to the blind adoration
of dogs, the feel of thunder
through my feet, what is left
on the table when the King
finishes, the wasted remains
of a woman.

11. Iseult Speaks

Eventually, I donned the hair shirt myself.
I know — absurd, especially after I mocked
poor Lancelot for his atonement. I felt
I had no choice, but not because love never
excuses sin. I reject Catholic guilt. I prefer
Lawrence and his crude ode to sensuality, his
    We fucked a flame into being,
which encapsulates, it seems, our every
hour together. No, if I repent
anything, it is not the passion but
each eternal hour I forsook passion.
In other words, the hours I forsook you.

12. Interlude

13. Iseult Steels (Herself)

If only this would end the way
they say it will — our hearts

stopped after a few years

of torment. We know better.
Our curse is to live without

each other for a full lifetime,

until the only thing left of us
is our longing — a lone stem,

green in a frost-bitten field.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Iseult Speaks: "What we have is myth" — 1
2. Iseult Sings — 5
3. Iseult Swims — 16
4. Iseult Skewers — 24
5. Iseult Sees — 29
6. Iseult Speaks: "This is what I know about choice"— 37
7. Iseult Sparks — 42
8. Iseult Stagnates — 49
9. Iseult's Short-Breathed Sestina — 53
10. Iseult Storms — 60
11. Iseult Speaks: "Eventually…" — 65
12. Interlude — 71
13. Iseult Steels (Herself) — 72

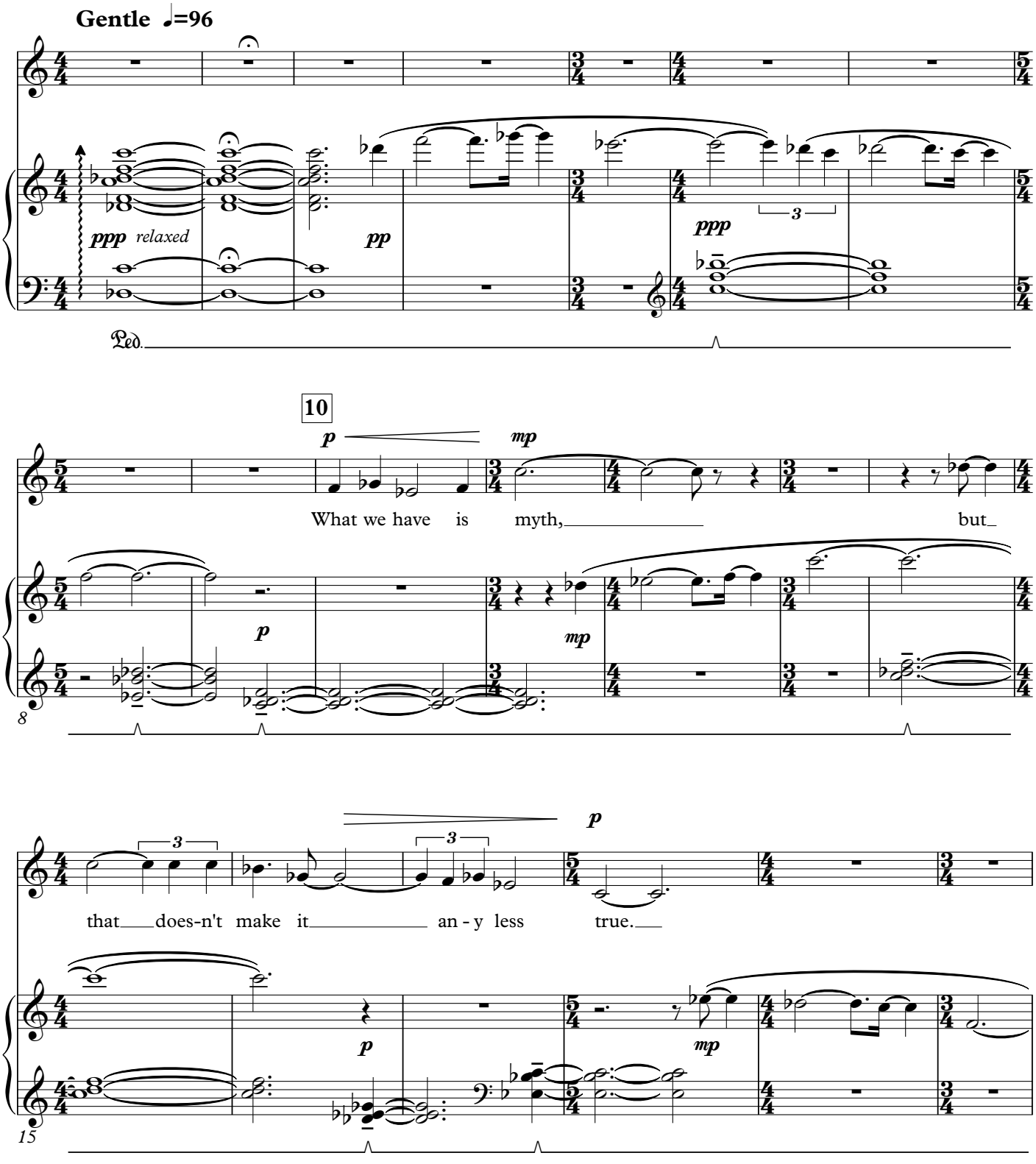
Commissioned by the Hartford Independent Chamber Orchestra
with generous support from the City of Hartford Arts & Heritage Jobs Grant Program, Pedro Segarra, Mayor.

Iseult Speaks

Elizabeth Hamilton

Jessica Rudman (b. 1982)

1. Iseult Speaks: "What we have is myth"



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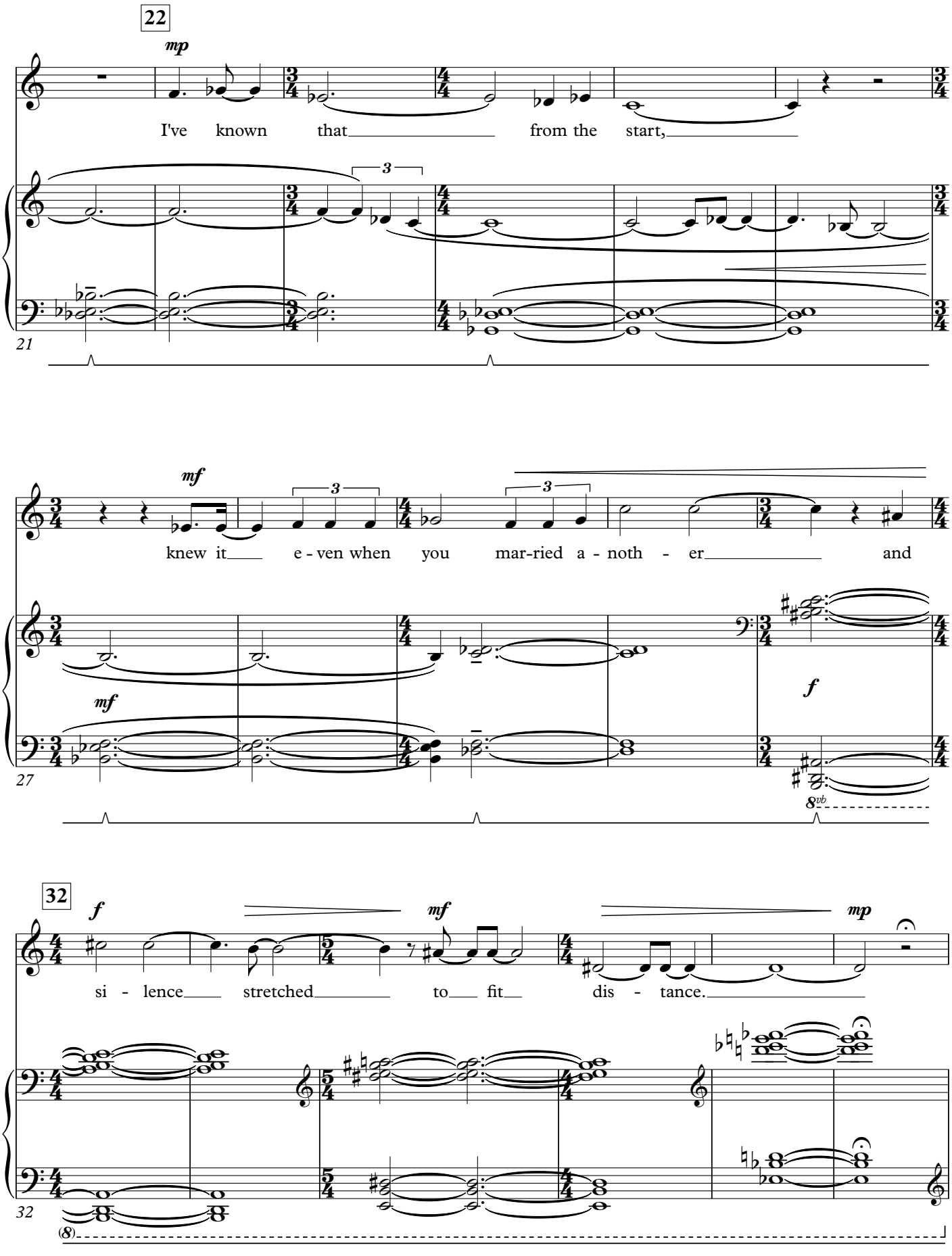
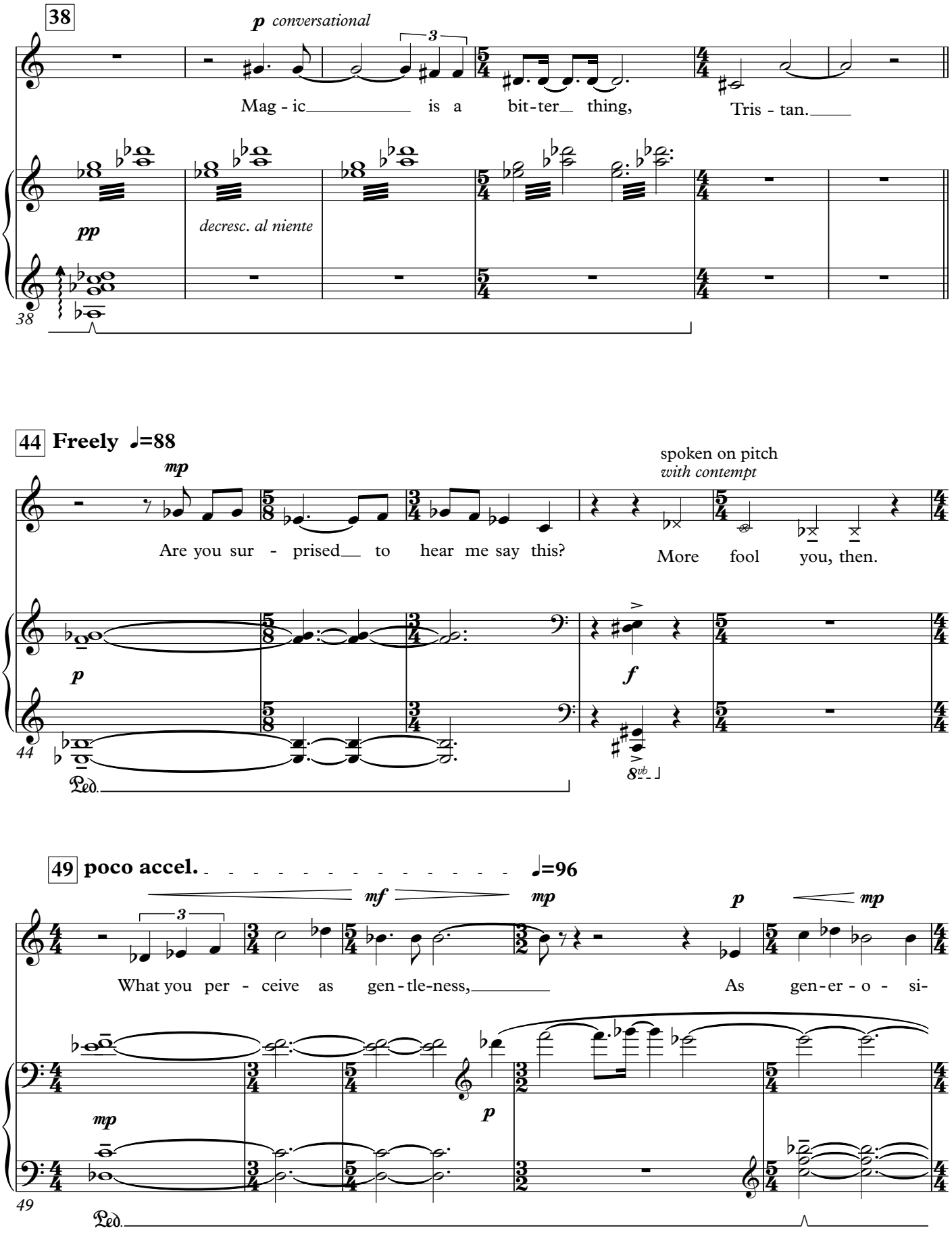
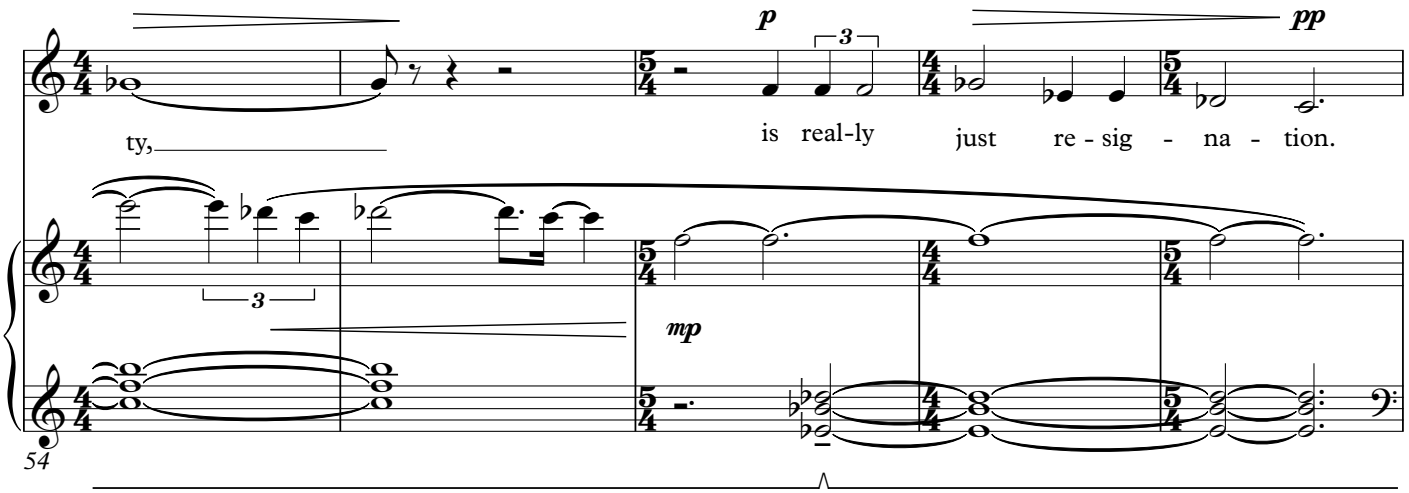
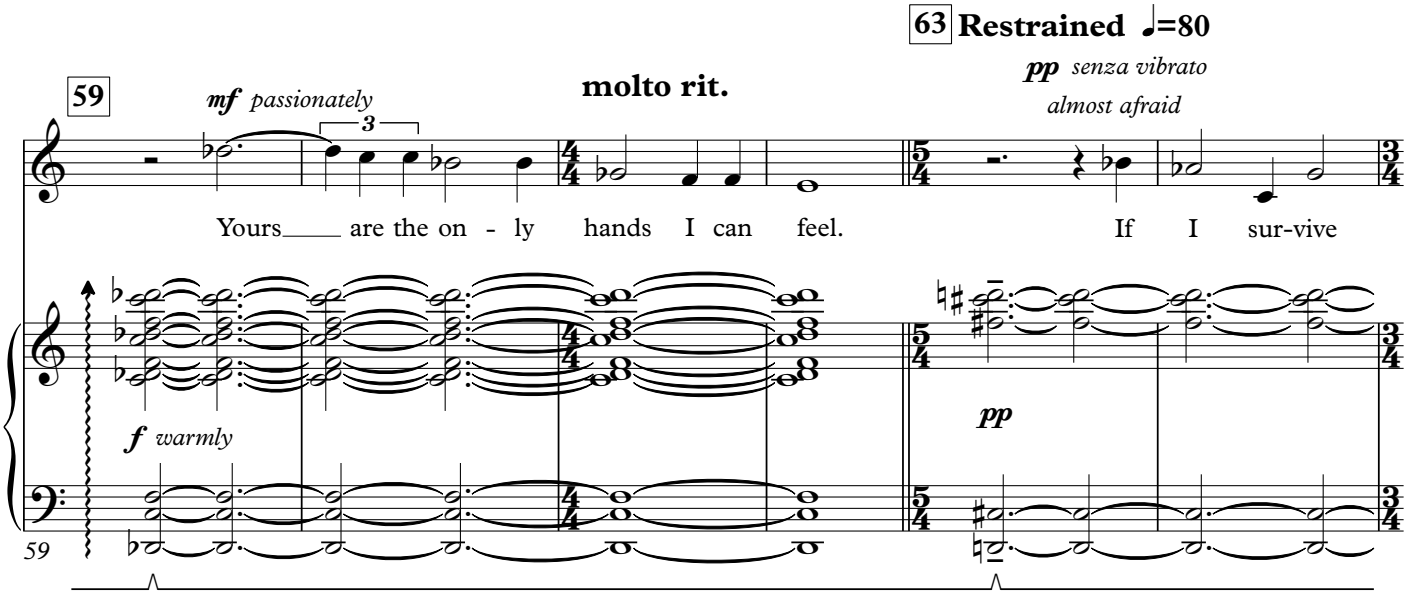
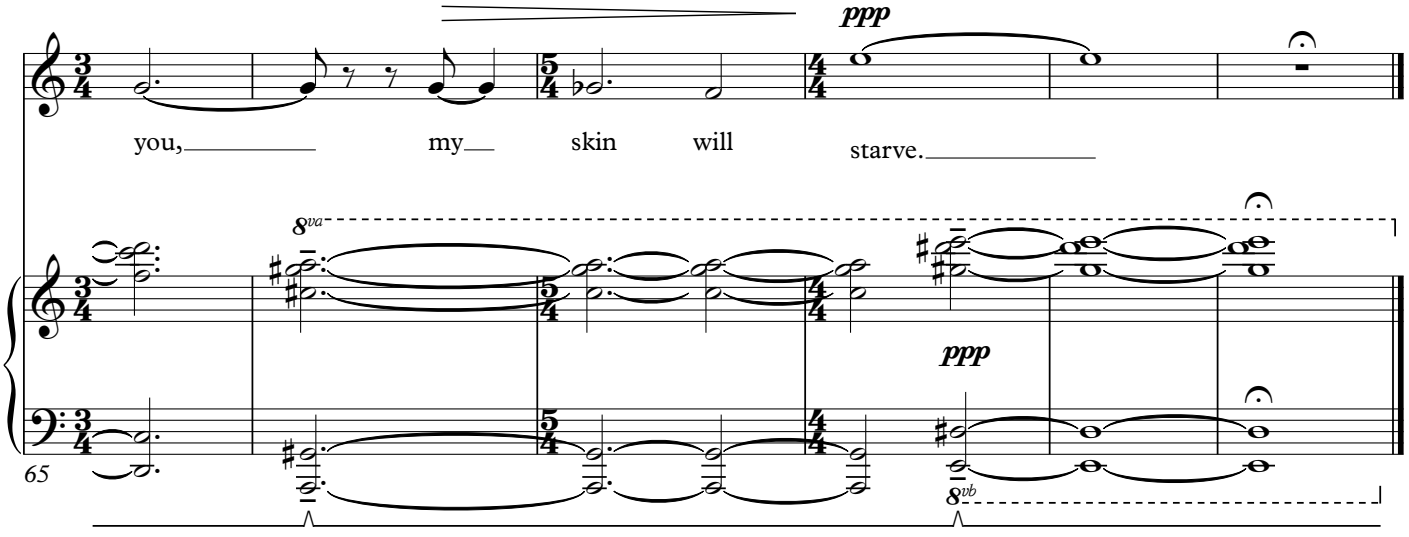

22
mp
I've known that from the start,
21
mf
knew it e - ven when you mar-ried a - noth - er and
mf
f
27
8vb
32
f
mf
mp
si - lence stretched to fit dis - tance.
32
(8)


38
p conversational
3
Mag - ic is a bit - ter thing,
Tris - tan.
pp
decresc. al niente
38
44 Freely ♩=88
mp
spoken on pitch
with contempt
Are you sur - prised to hear me say this?
More fool you, then.
p
f
8vb
44
Ped.
49 poco accel.
♩=96
mf
mp
p
mp
3
What you per - ceive as gen - tle-ness,
As gen - er - o - si-
mp
p
49
Ped.

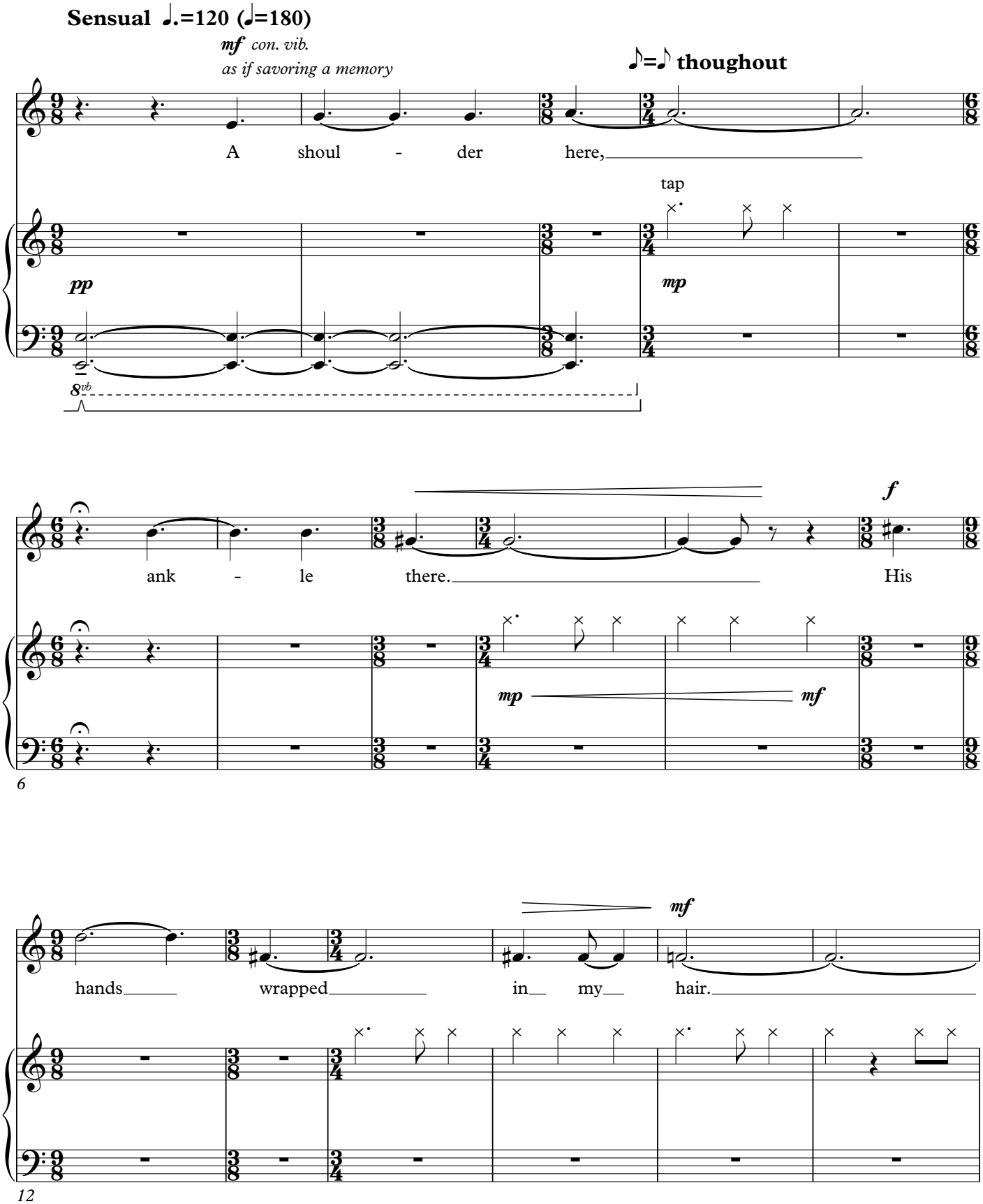

p
3
pp
ty,
is real-ly just re - sig - na - tion.
mp
54

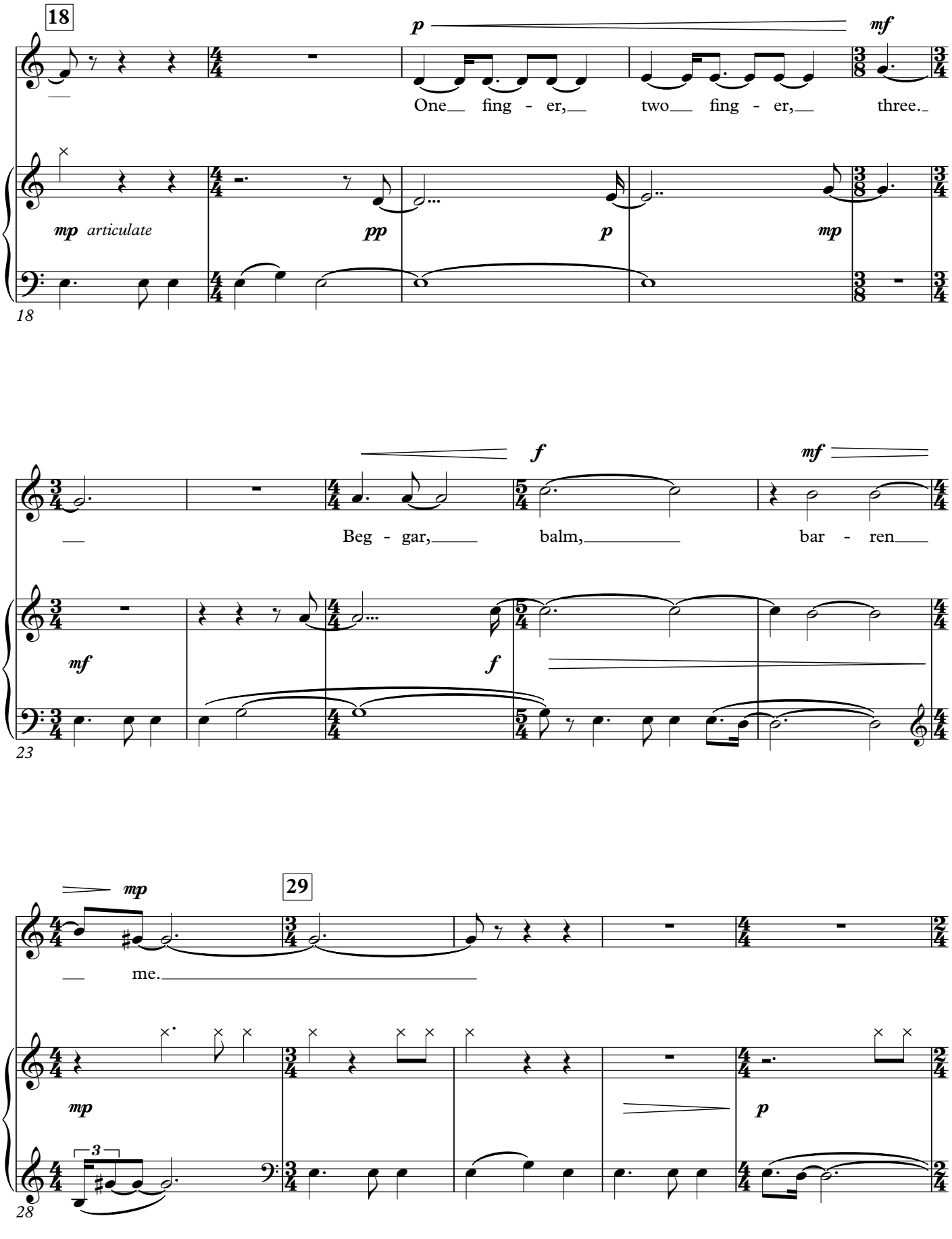

63 Restrained ♩=80
pp senza vibrato
almost afraid
59
mf passionately
3
molto rit.
Yours are the on - ly hands I can feel.
If I sur-vive
f warmly
pp
59

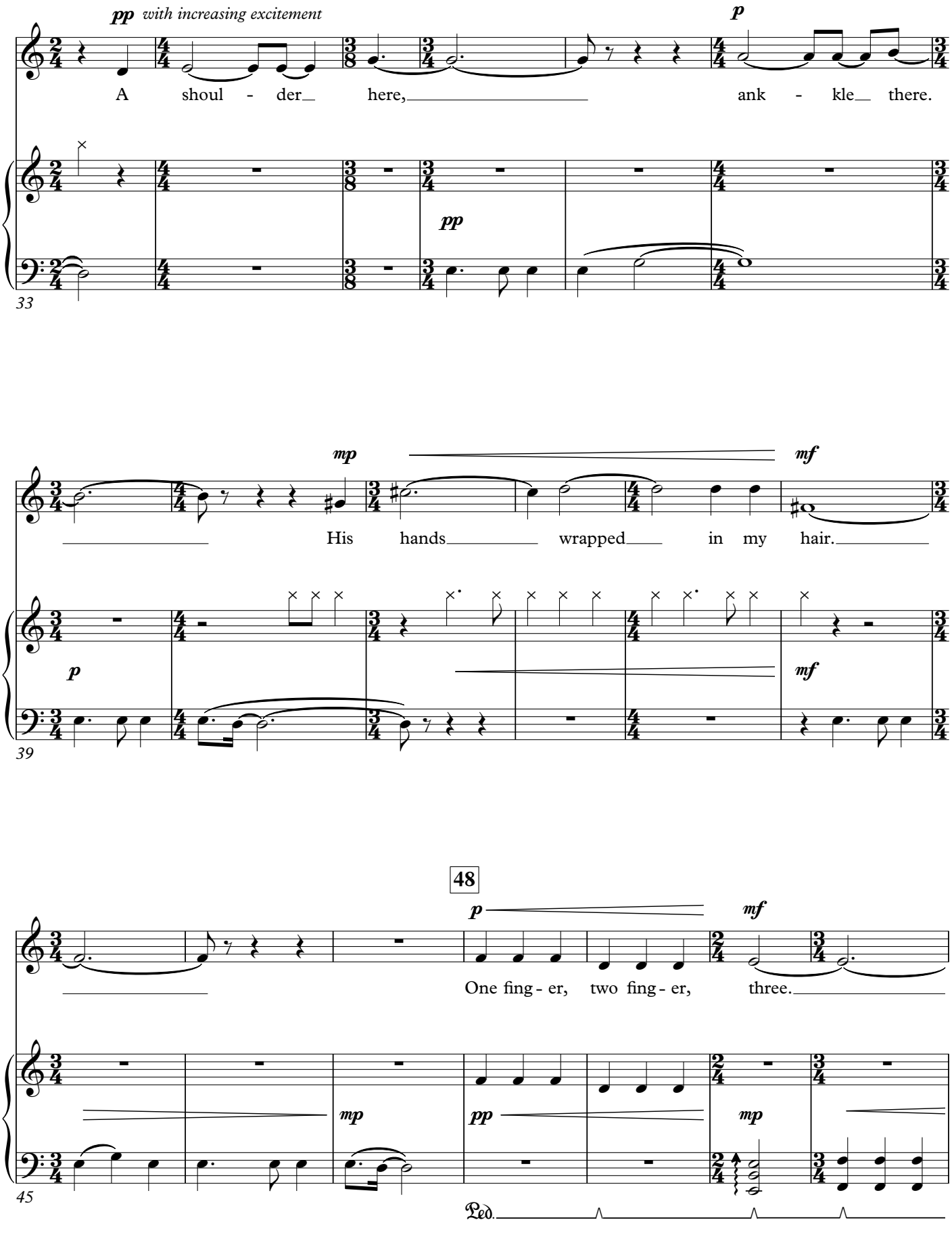

ppp
you, my skin will
starve.
8va
ppp
8vb
65

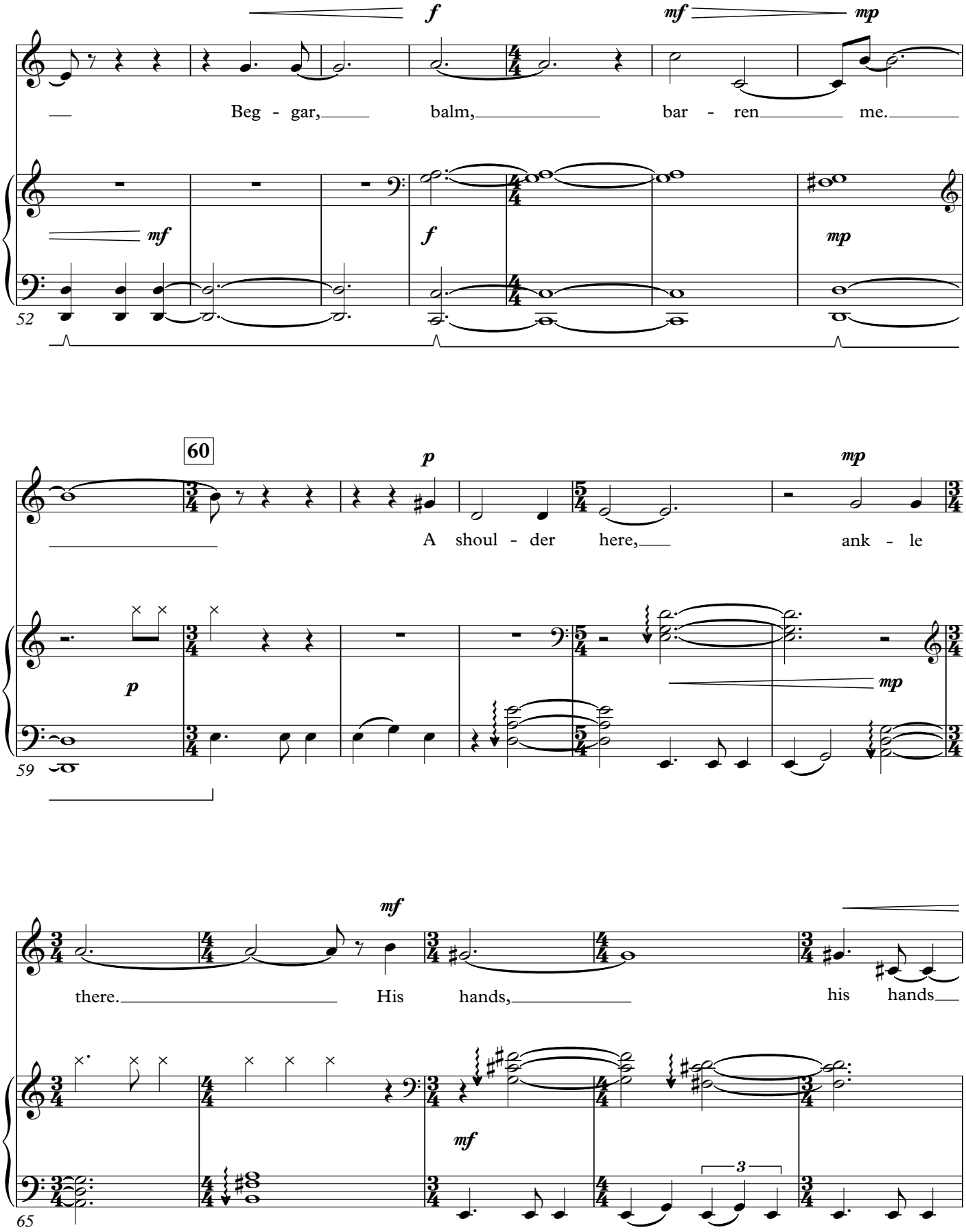
ATTACCA

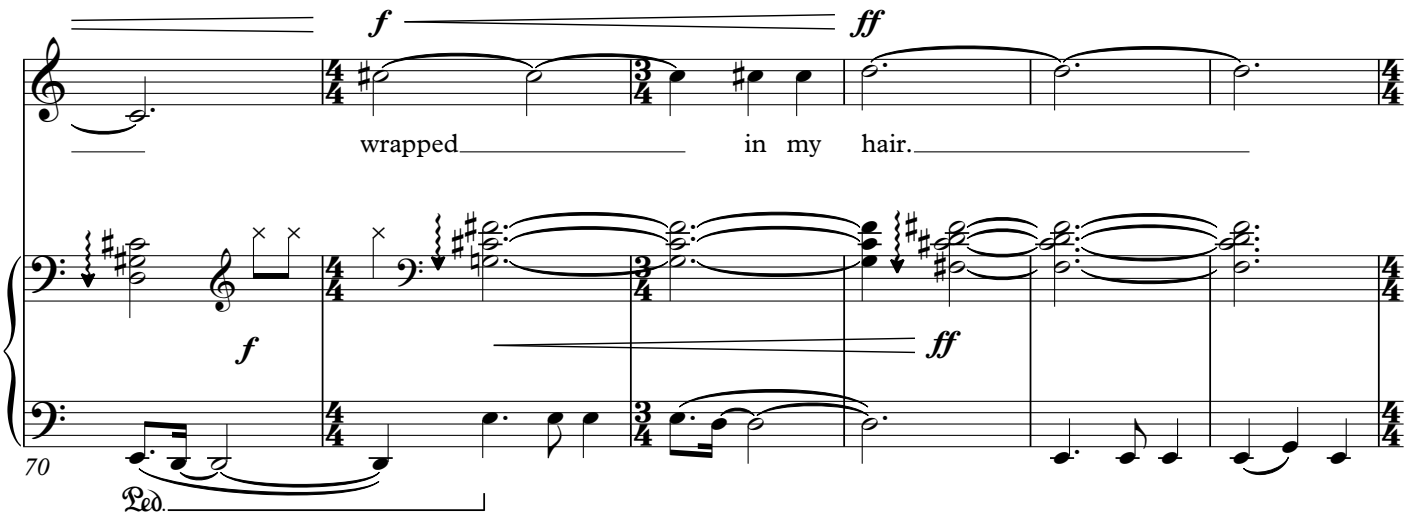
2. Iseult Sings

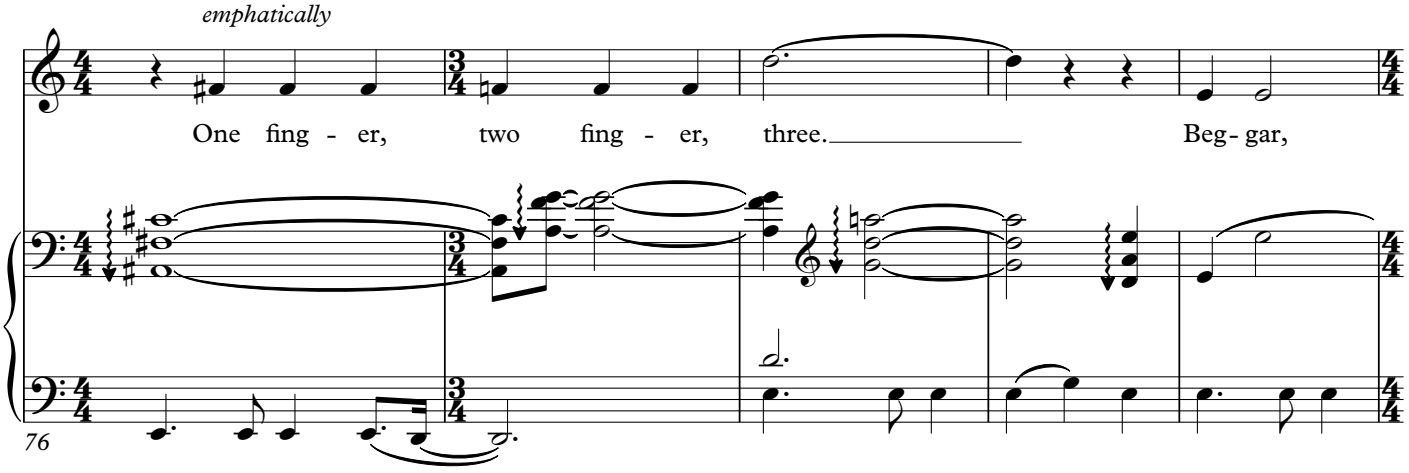


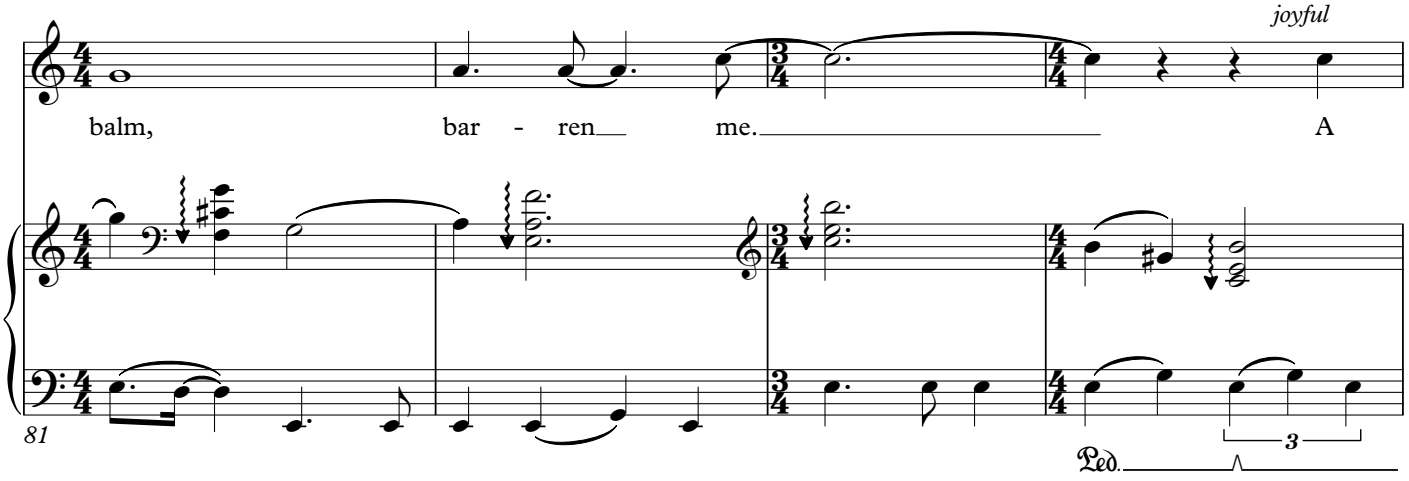

18
p
mf
One fing - er, two fing - er, three.
mp articulate
pp
p
mp
18
f
mf
Beg - gar, balm, bar - ren
mf
f
23
mp
29
me.
mp
p
3
28

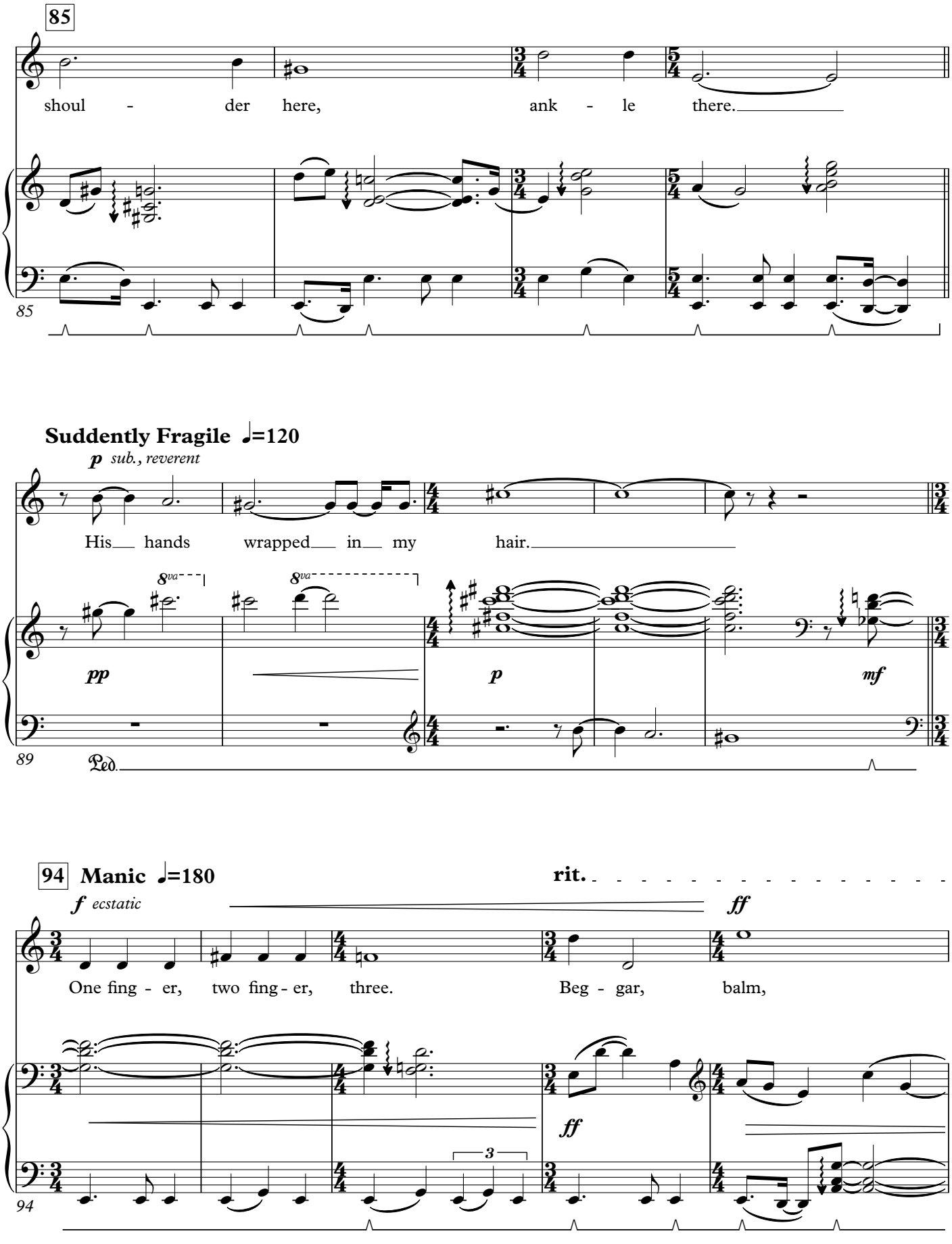

pp with increasing excitement
A shoul - der here, ank - kle there.
p
pp
33
mp
mf
His hands wrapped in my hair.
p
mf
39
48
p
mf
One fing - er, two fing - er, three.
mp
pp
mp
45
Ped.

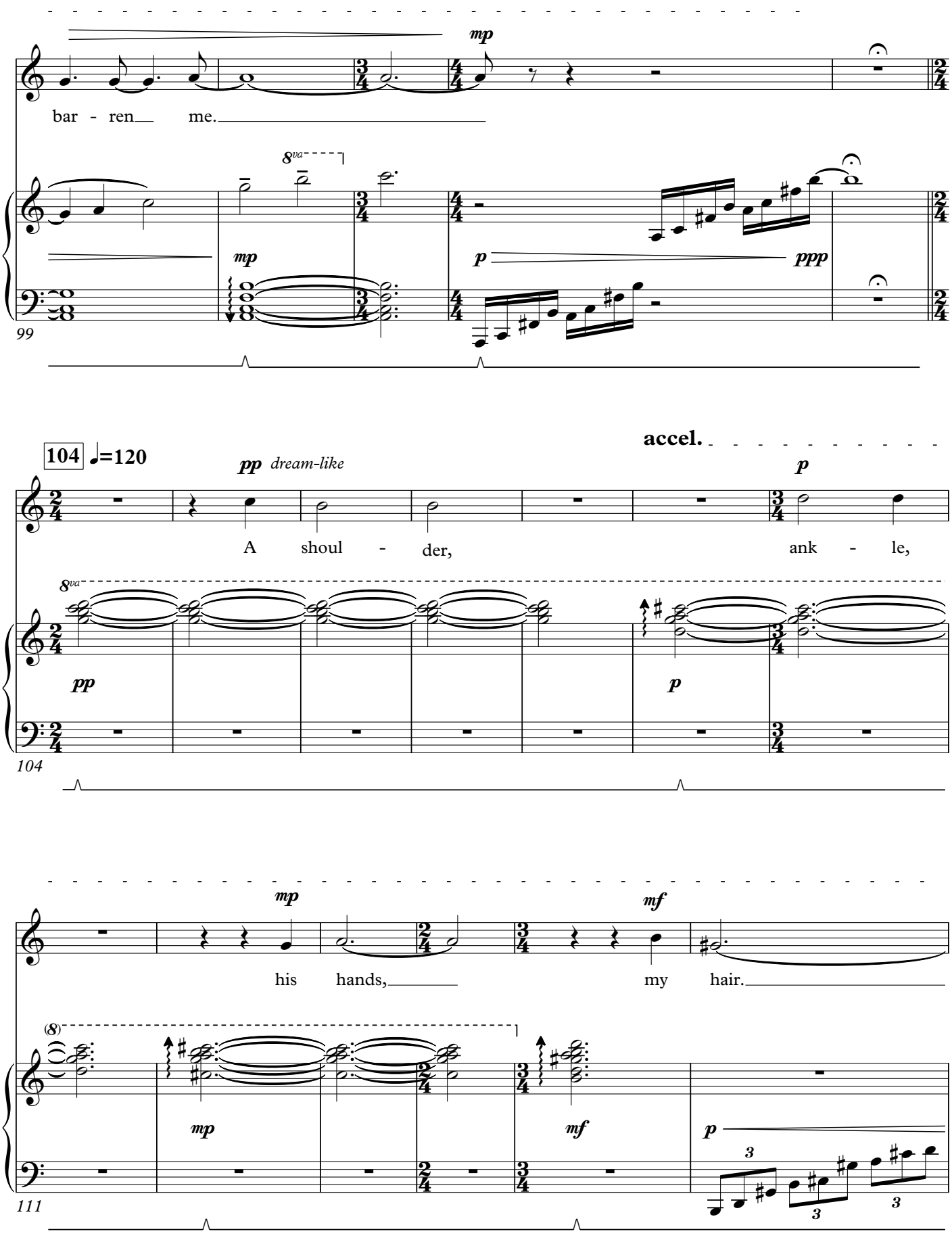

f
mf
mp
Beg - gar, balm, bar - ren me.
mf
f
mp
52
60
p
mp
A shoul - der here, ank - le
p
mp
59
mf
there. His hands, his hands
mf
3
65

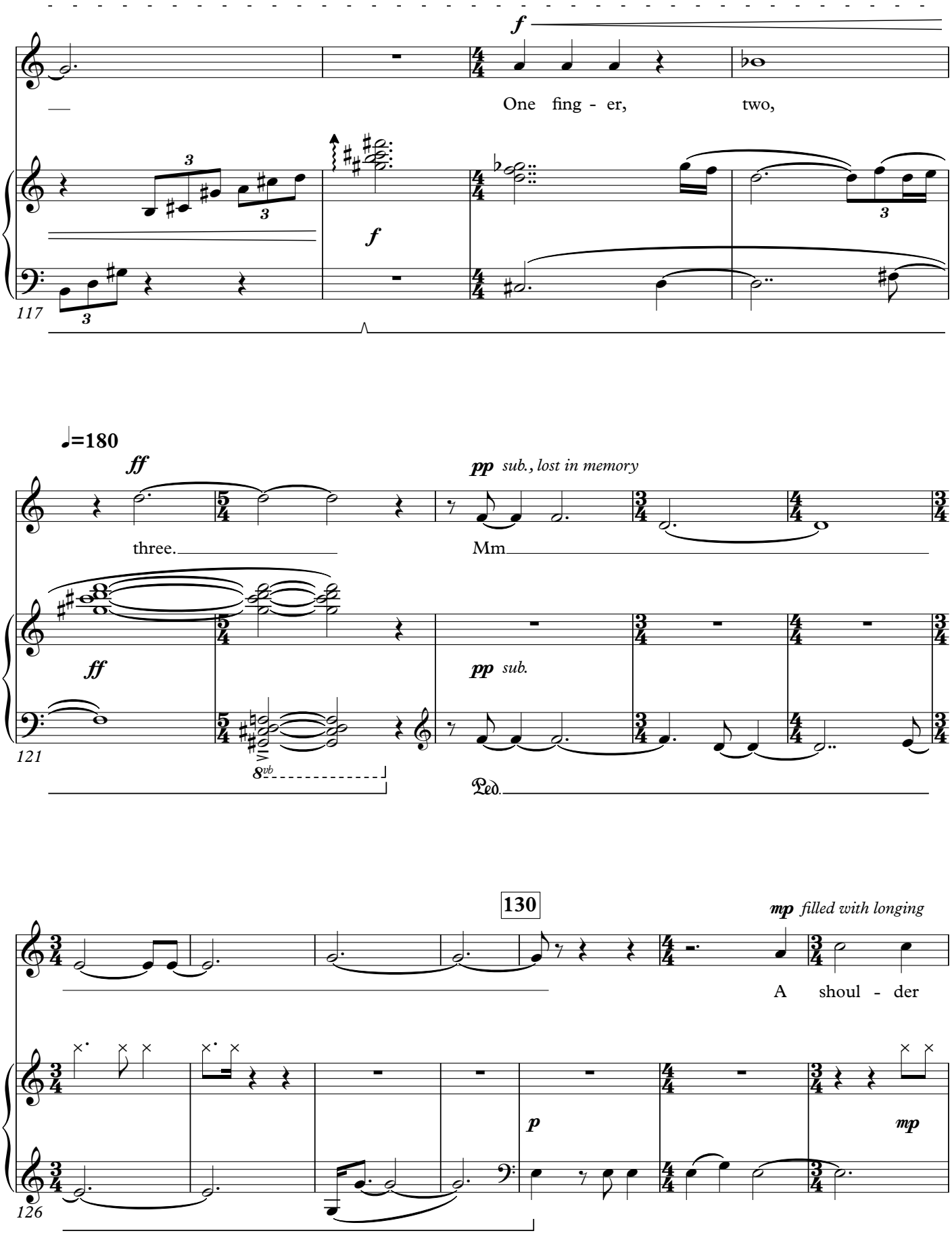

f
ff
wrapped in my hair.
f
ff
70
Ped.

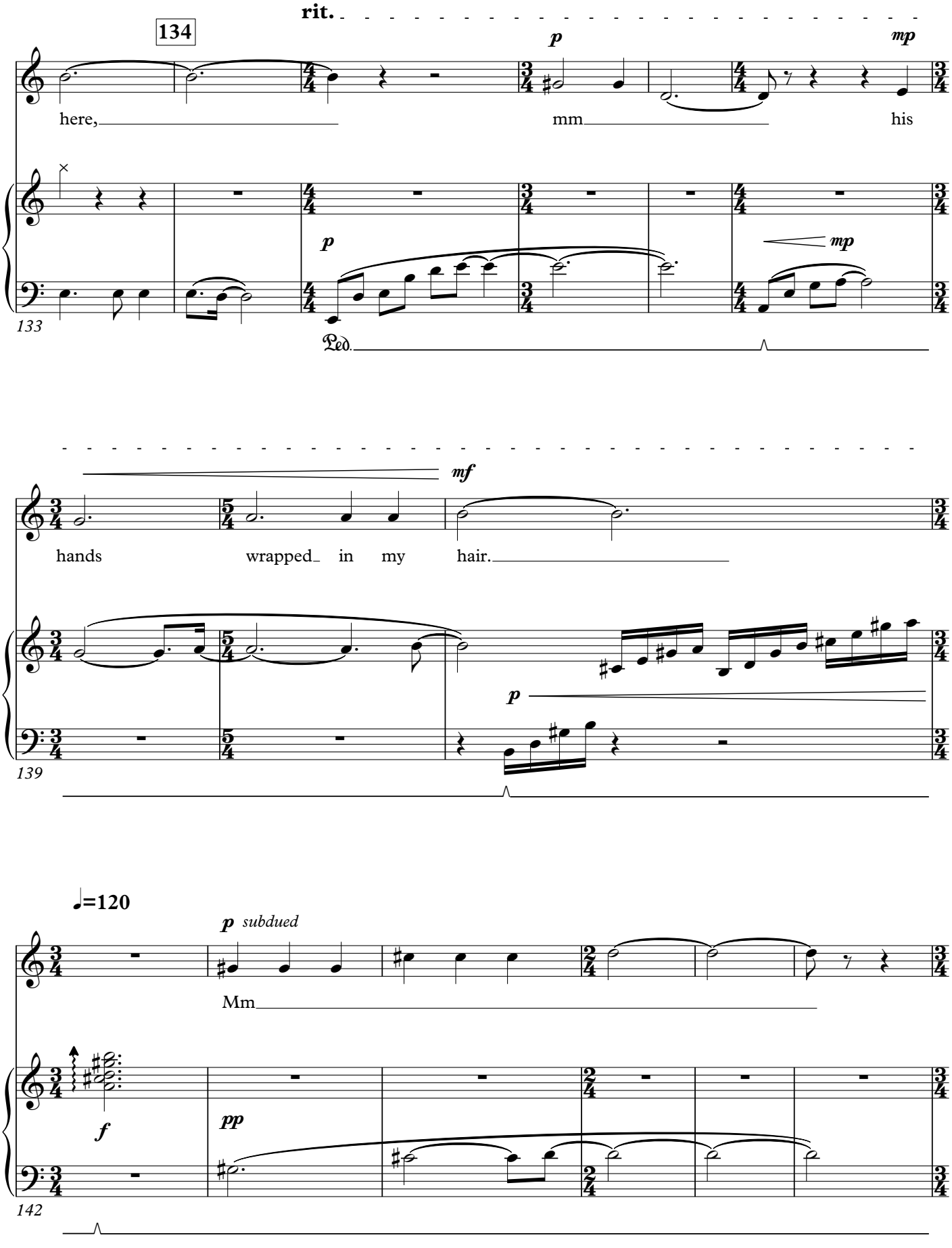

emphatically
One fing - er, two fing - er, three. Beg - gar,
76

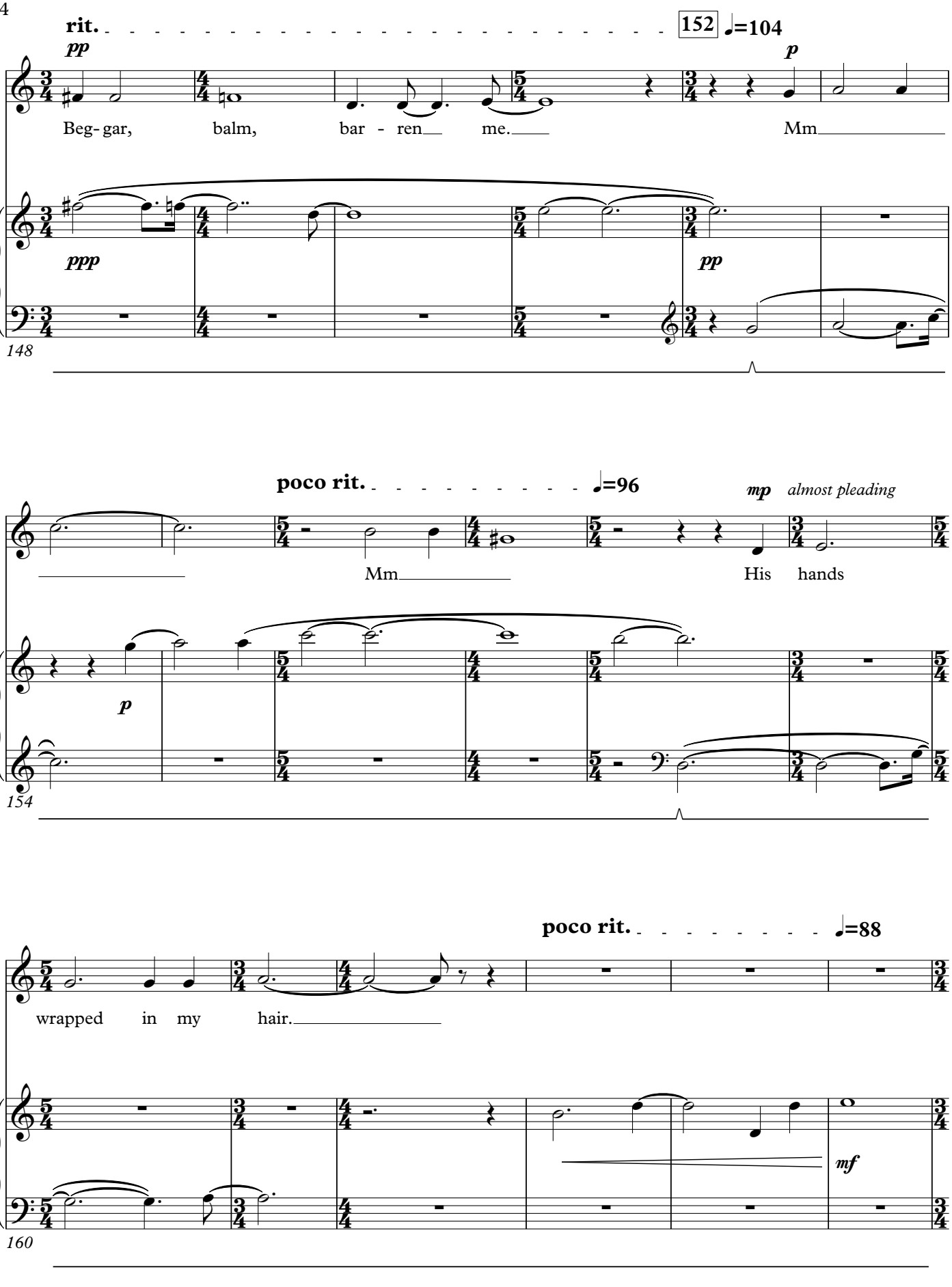

joyful
balm, bar - ren me. A
81
3
Ped.

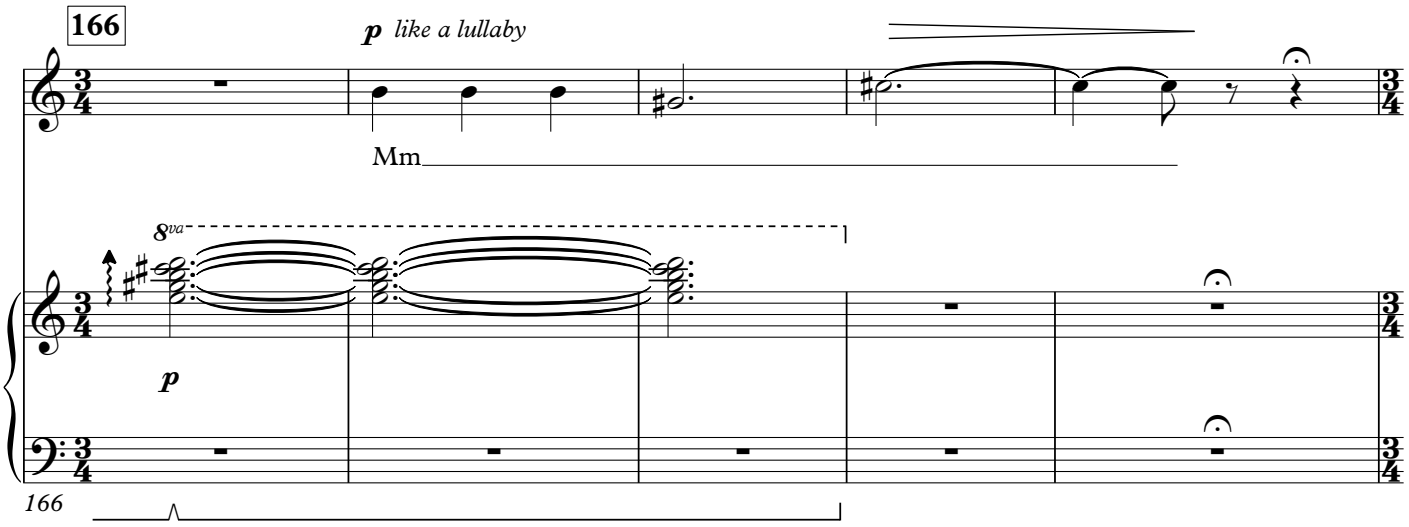

85
shoul - der here, ank - le there.
85
Suddenly Fragile ♩=120
p sub., reverent
His hands wrapped in my hair.
8va
8va
pp
p
mf
89
Ped.
94 Manic ♩=180
rit.
f ecstatic
ff
One fing - er, two fing - er, three. Beg - gar, balm,
3
ff
94

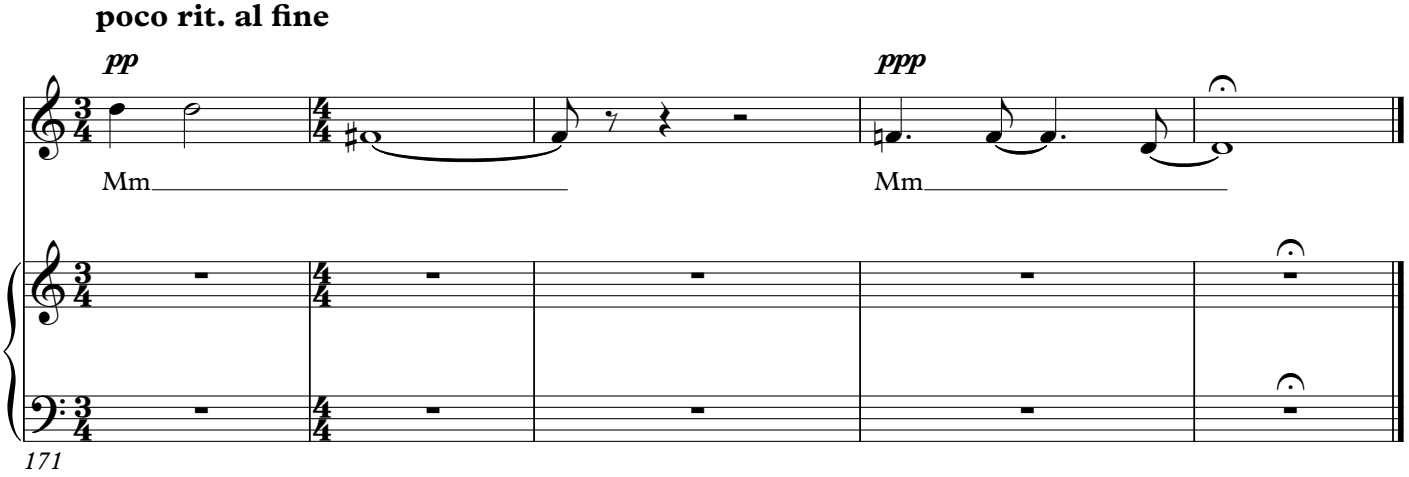

mp
bar - ren me.
8va
mp
p
ppp
99
104 ♩=120
pp dream-like
accel.
p
A shoul - der, ank - le,
8va
pp
p
104
mp
mf
his hands, my hair.
(8)
mp
mf
p
3
3
3
111


f
One fing - er, two,
117
♩=180
ff
three.
pp sub., lost in memory
Mm
ff
pp sub.
121
8vb
Ped.
130
mp filled with longing
A shoul - der
p
mp
126

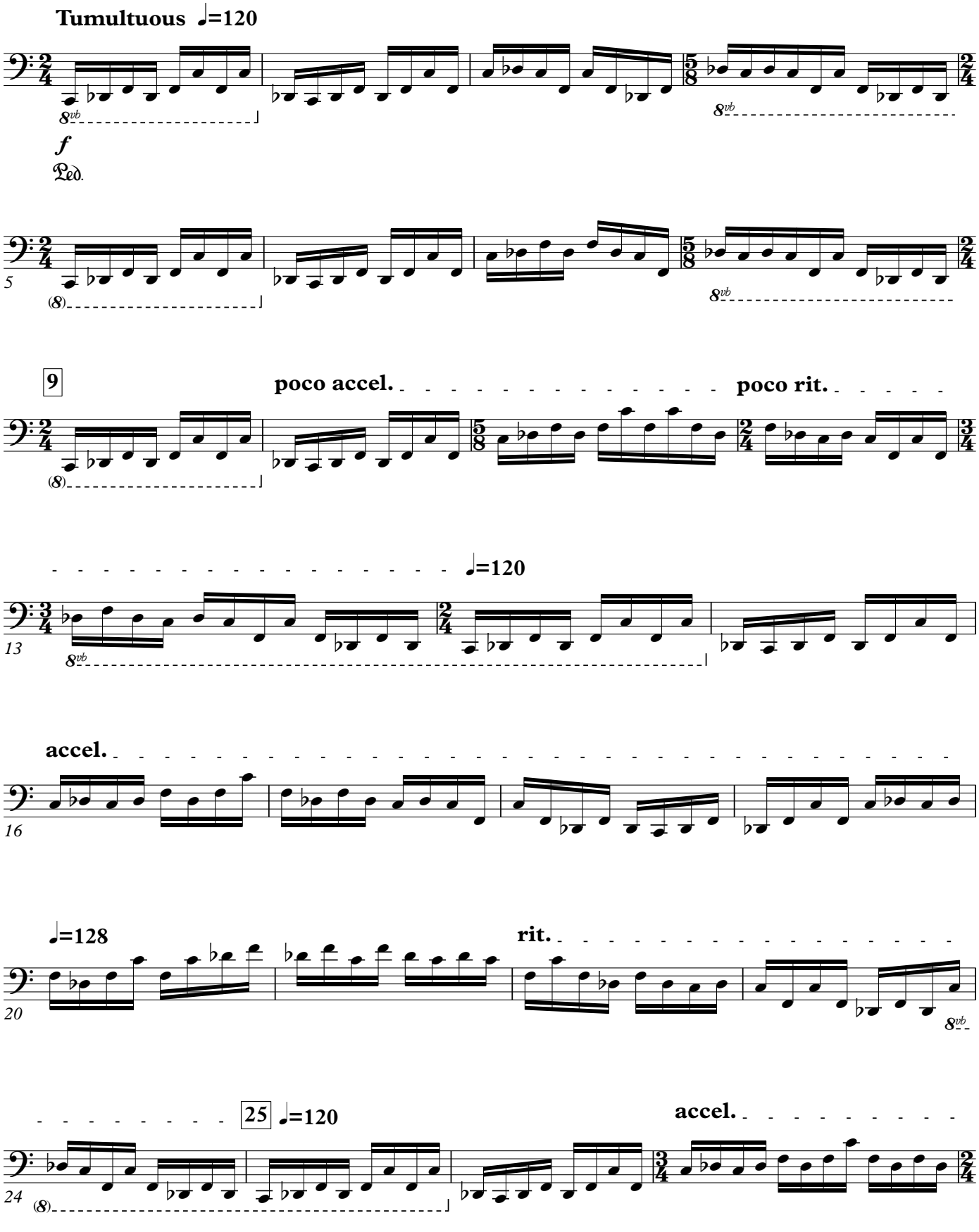

rit.
134
p
mp
here,
mm
his
p
mp
133
Ped.
mf
hands
wrapped in my
hair.
p
139
♩=120
p subdued
Mm
f
pp
142

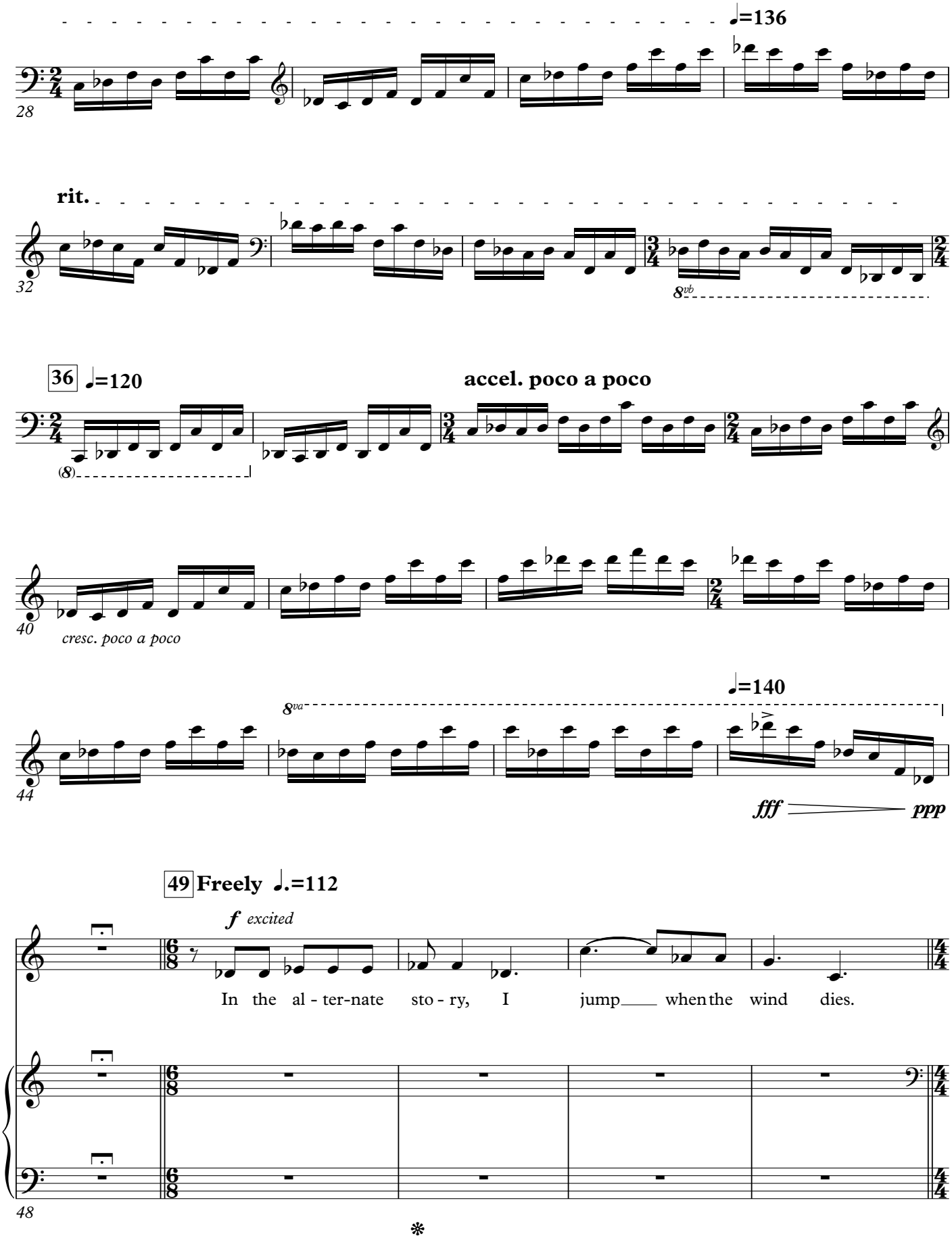

rit.
152
♩=104
pp
p
Beg- gar, balm, bar - ren me. Mm
ppp
pp
148
poco rit.
♩=96
mp
almost pleading
Mm
His hands
p
154
poco rit.
♩=88
wrapped in my hair.
mf
160


166
p like a lullaby
Mm
8va
p
166

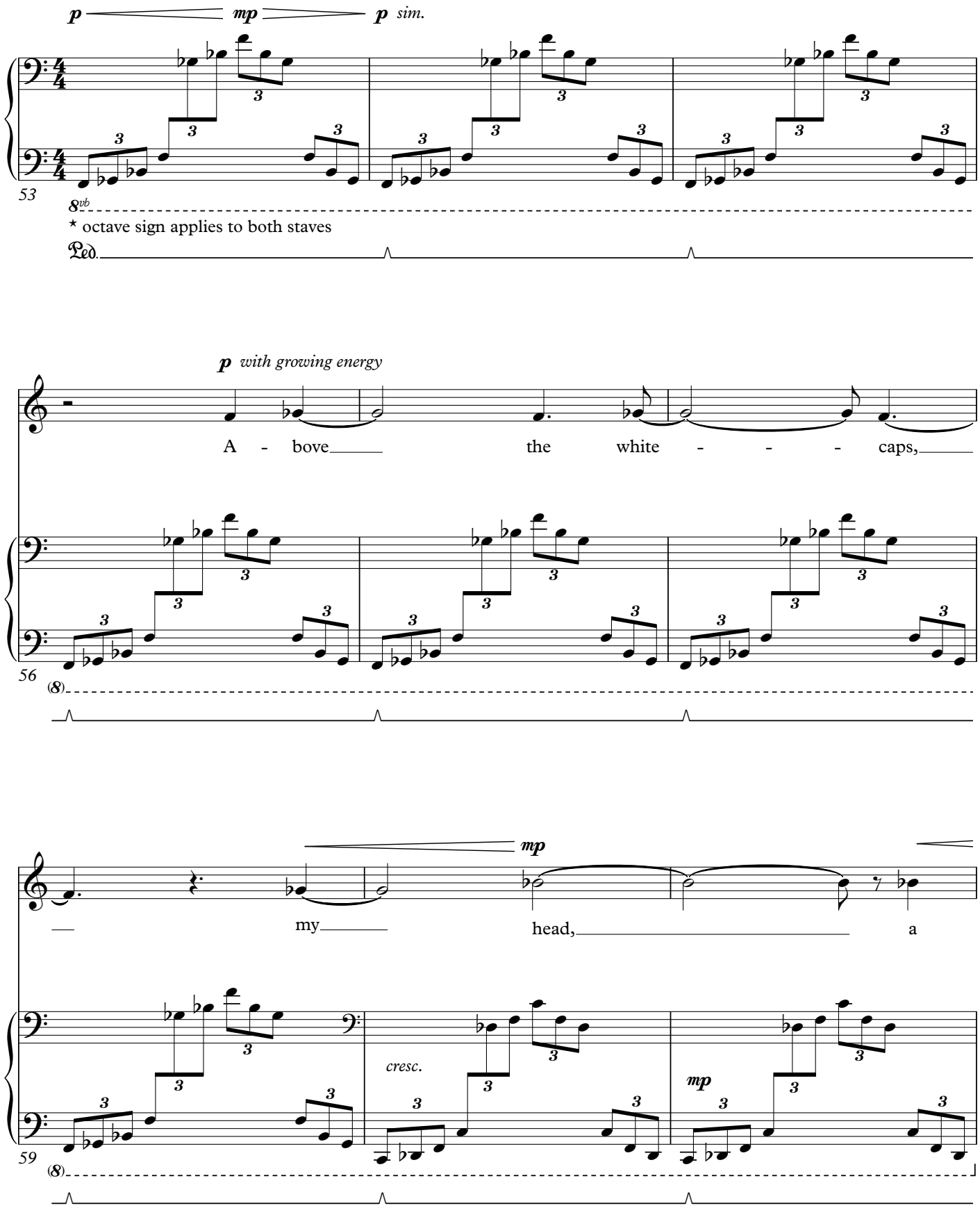

poco rit. al fine
pp
ppp
Mm
Mm
171

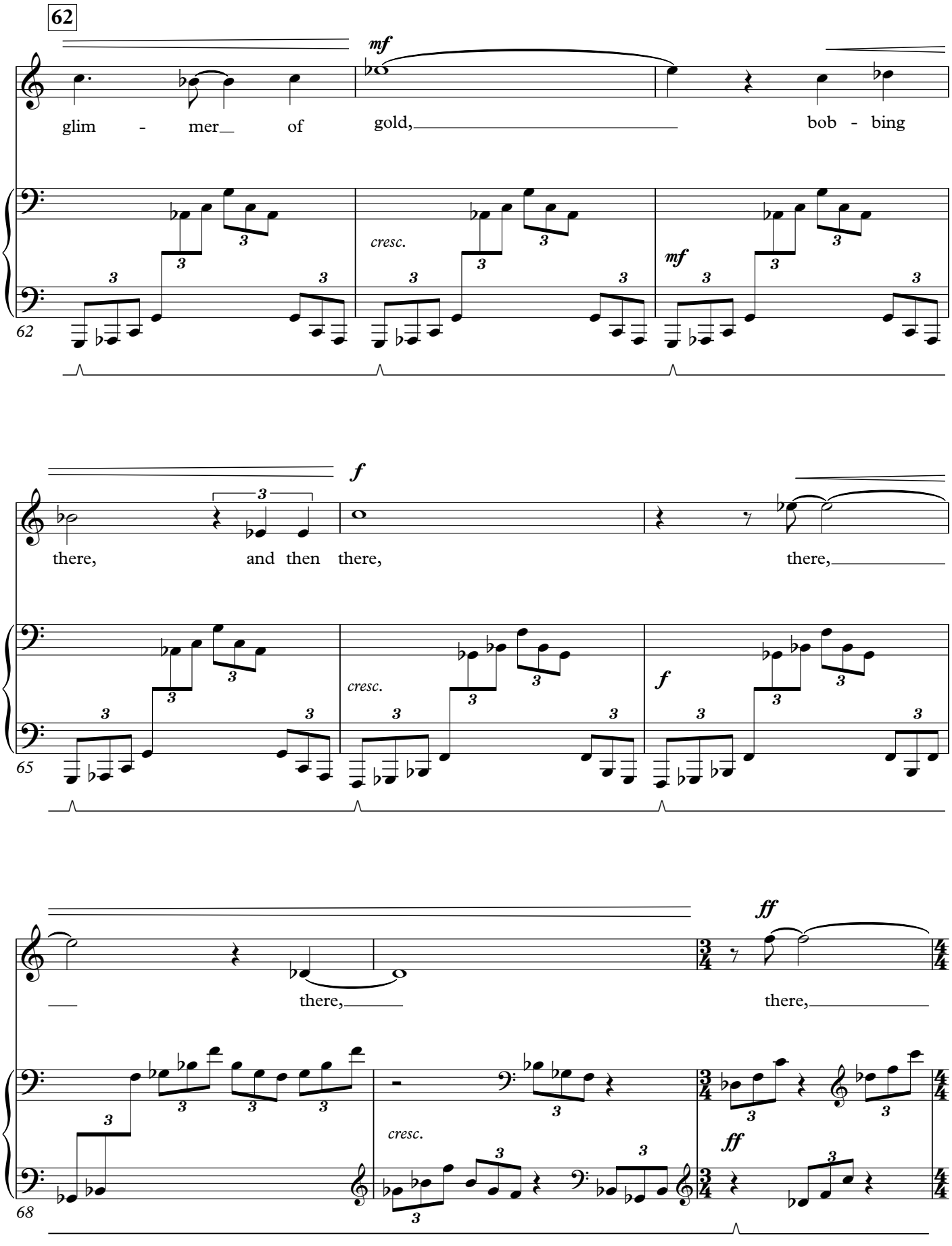
3. Iseult Swims

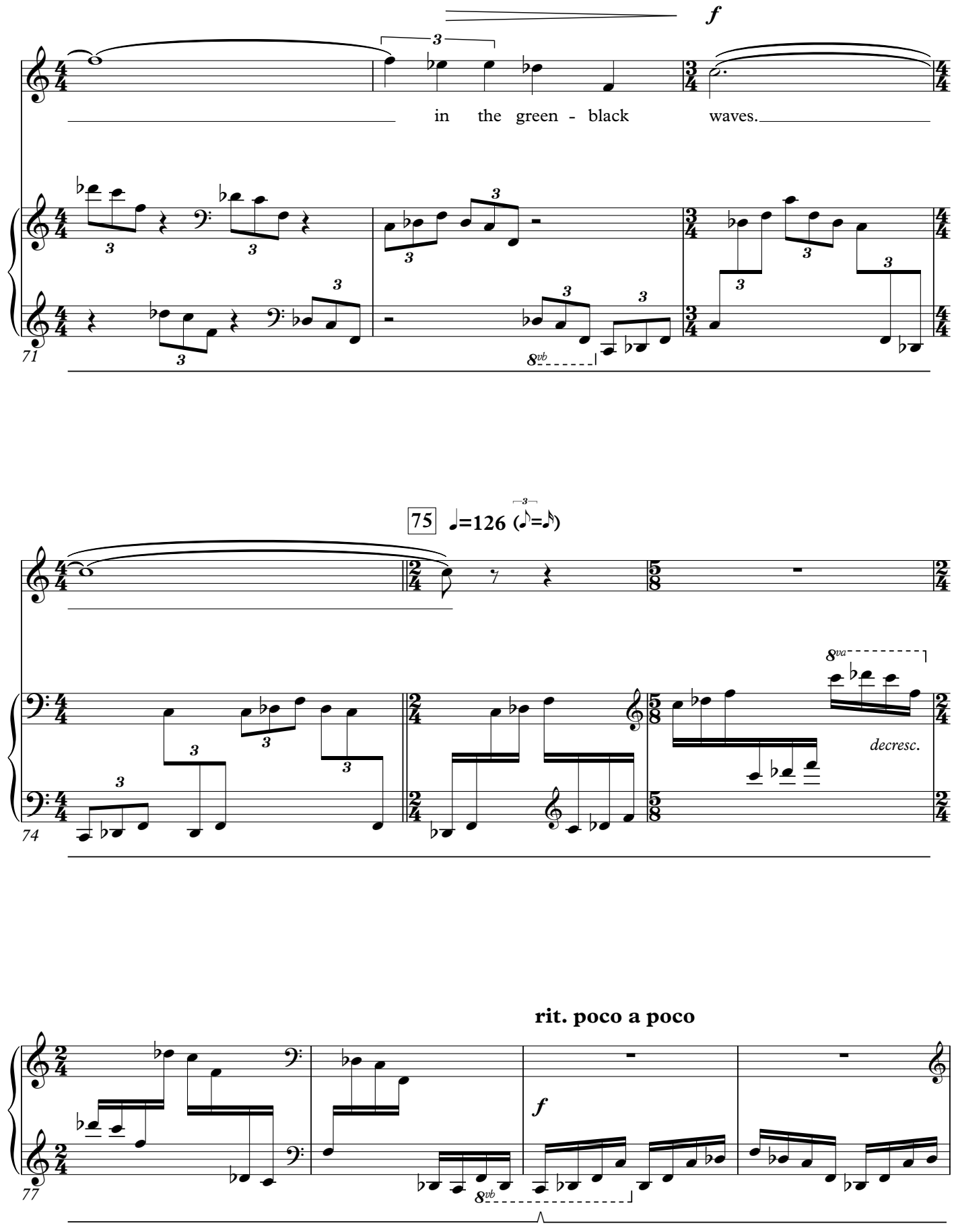


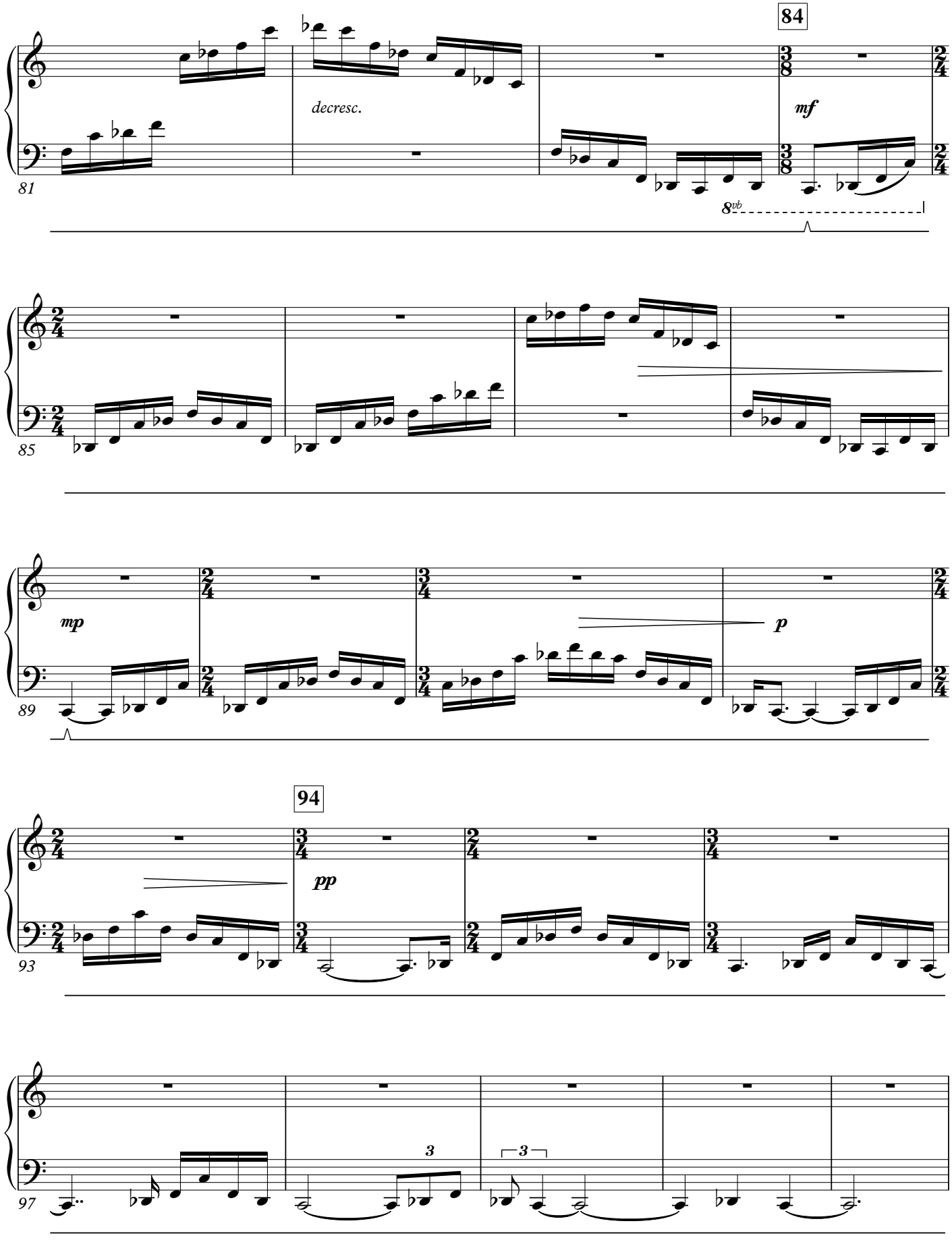

♩=136
28
rit.
32
8vb
36
♩=120
accel. poco a poco
(8)
40
cresc. poco a poco
♩=140
8va
44
fff
ppp
49
Freely ♩.=112
f excited
In the al - ter-nate sto - ry, I jump when the wind dies.
48

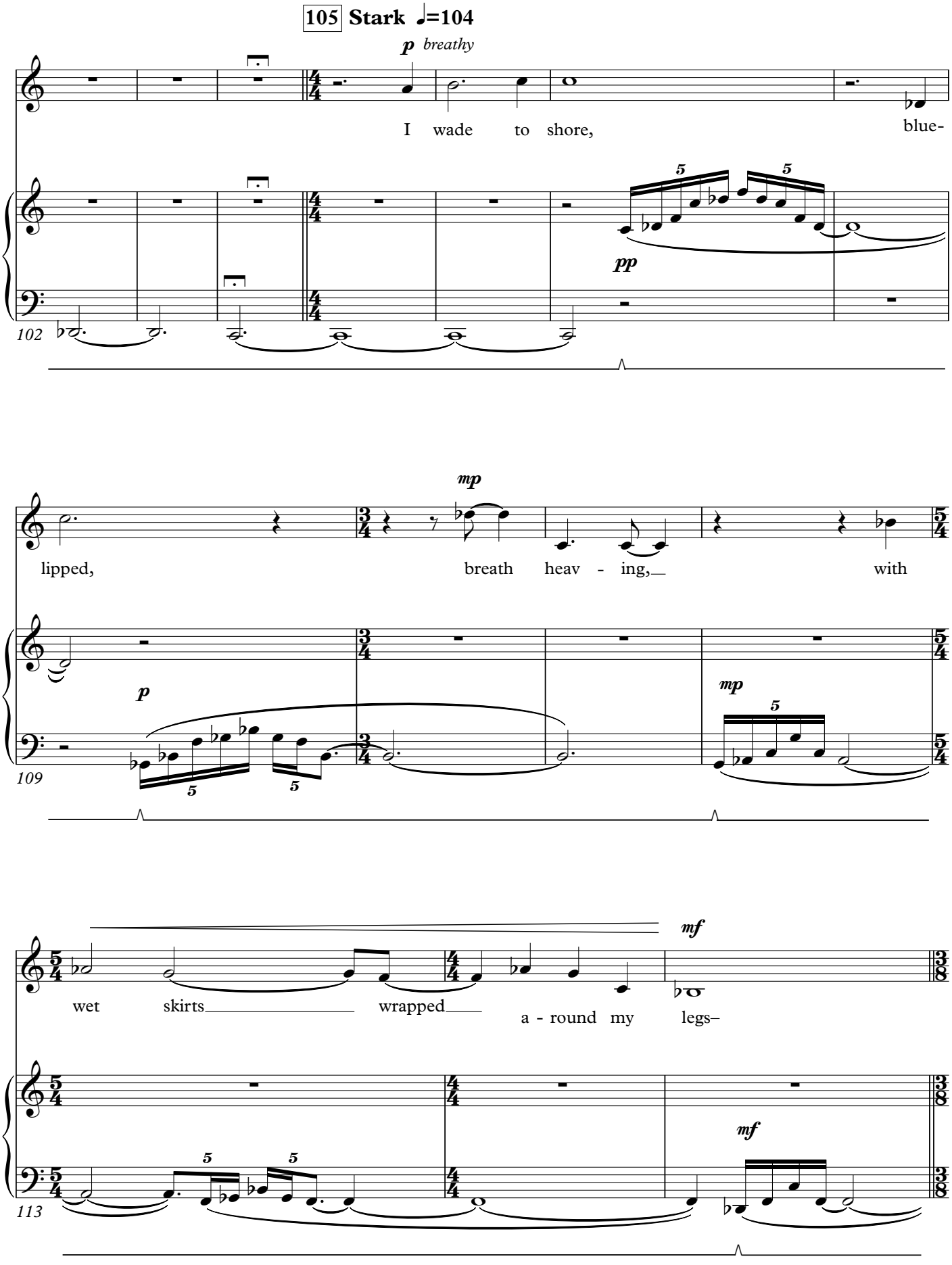
53 Flowing (♪=♪, ♩=168)

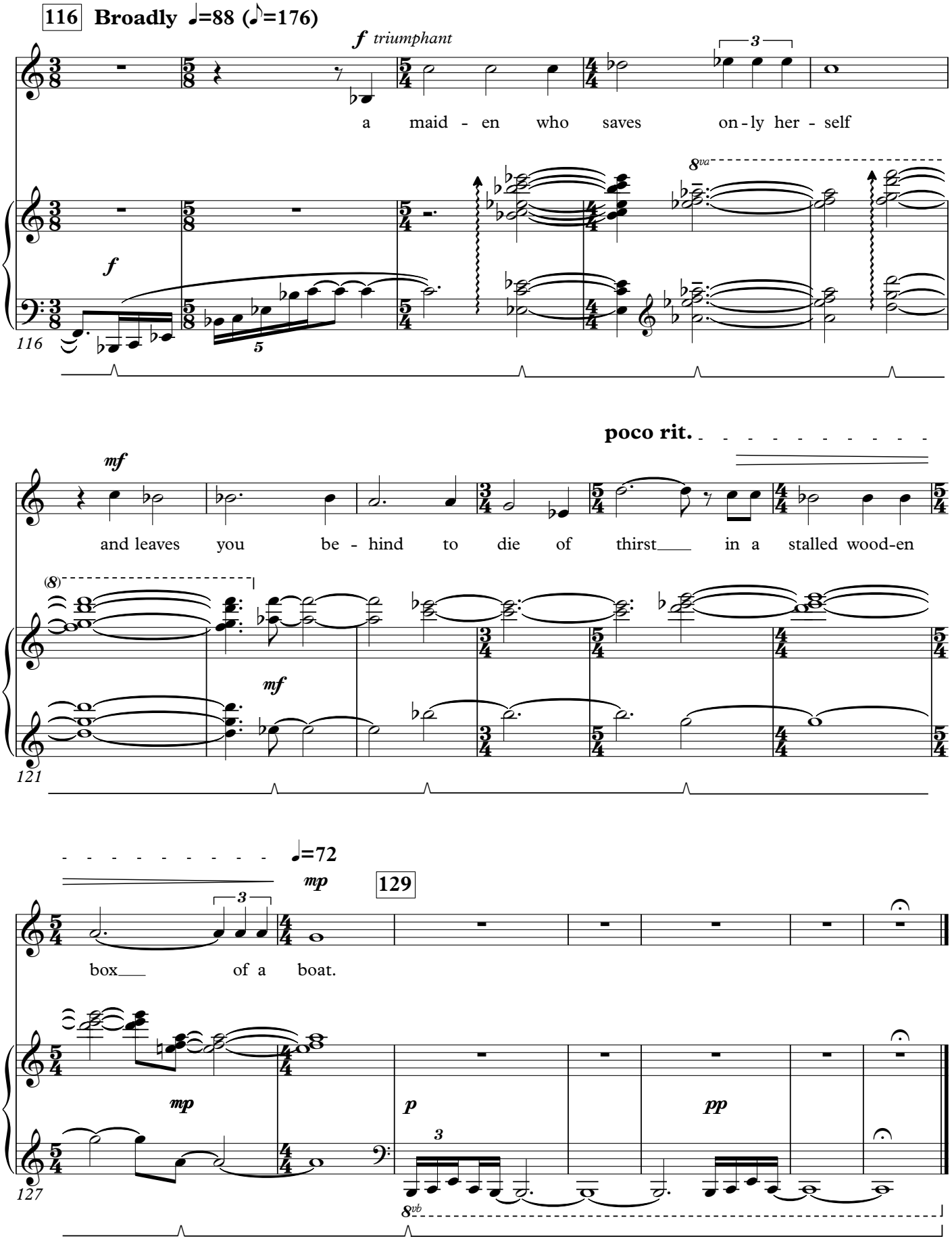



62
mf
glim - mer of gold, bob - bing
cresc.
mf
62
f
there, and then there, there,
cresc.
f
65
there, there,
ff
cresc.
ff
68

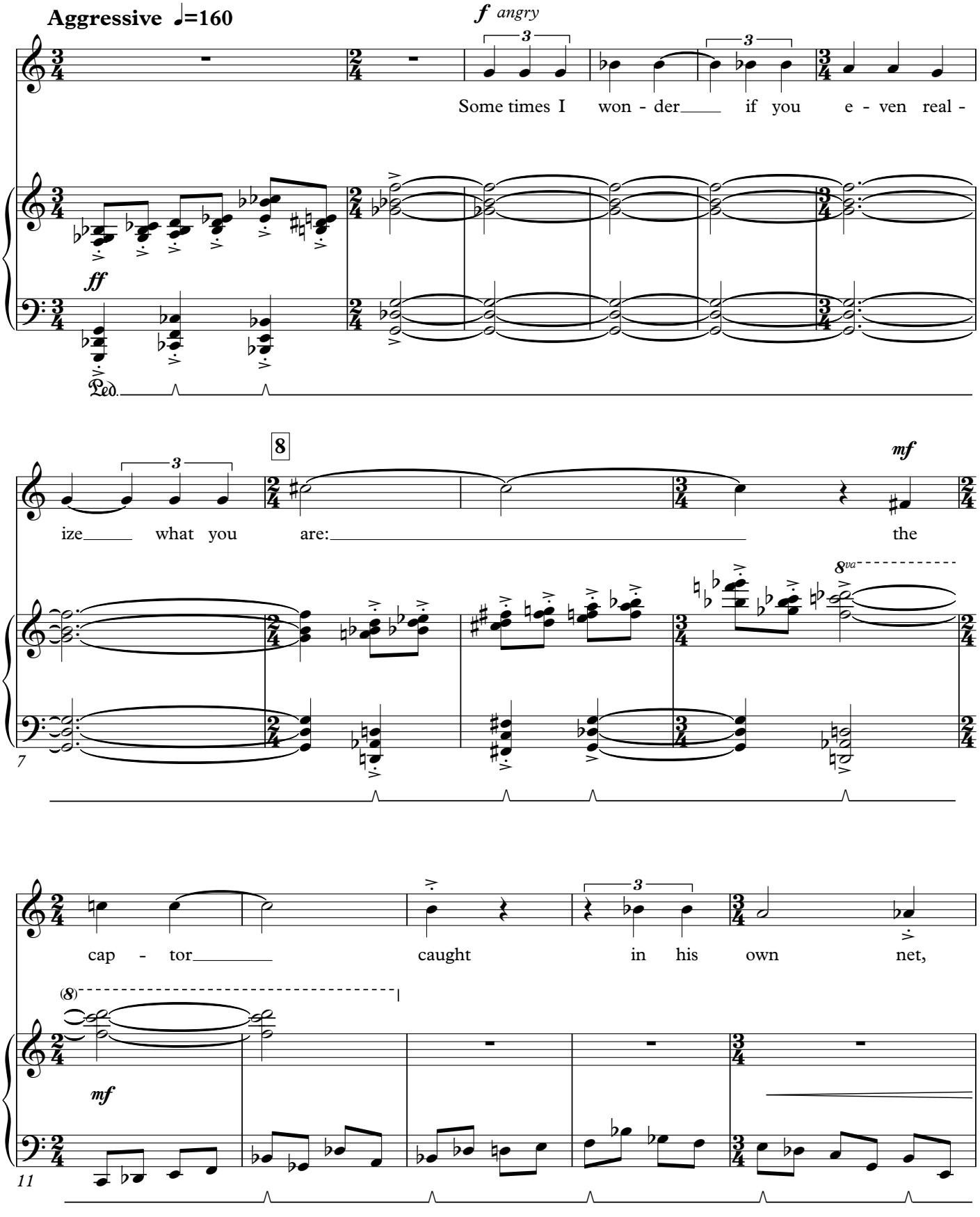

f
in the green - black waves.
71
8vb
75
♩=126 (♪=♪)
8va
decresc.
74
rit. poco a poco
f
77
8vb

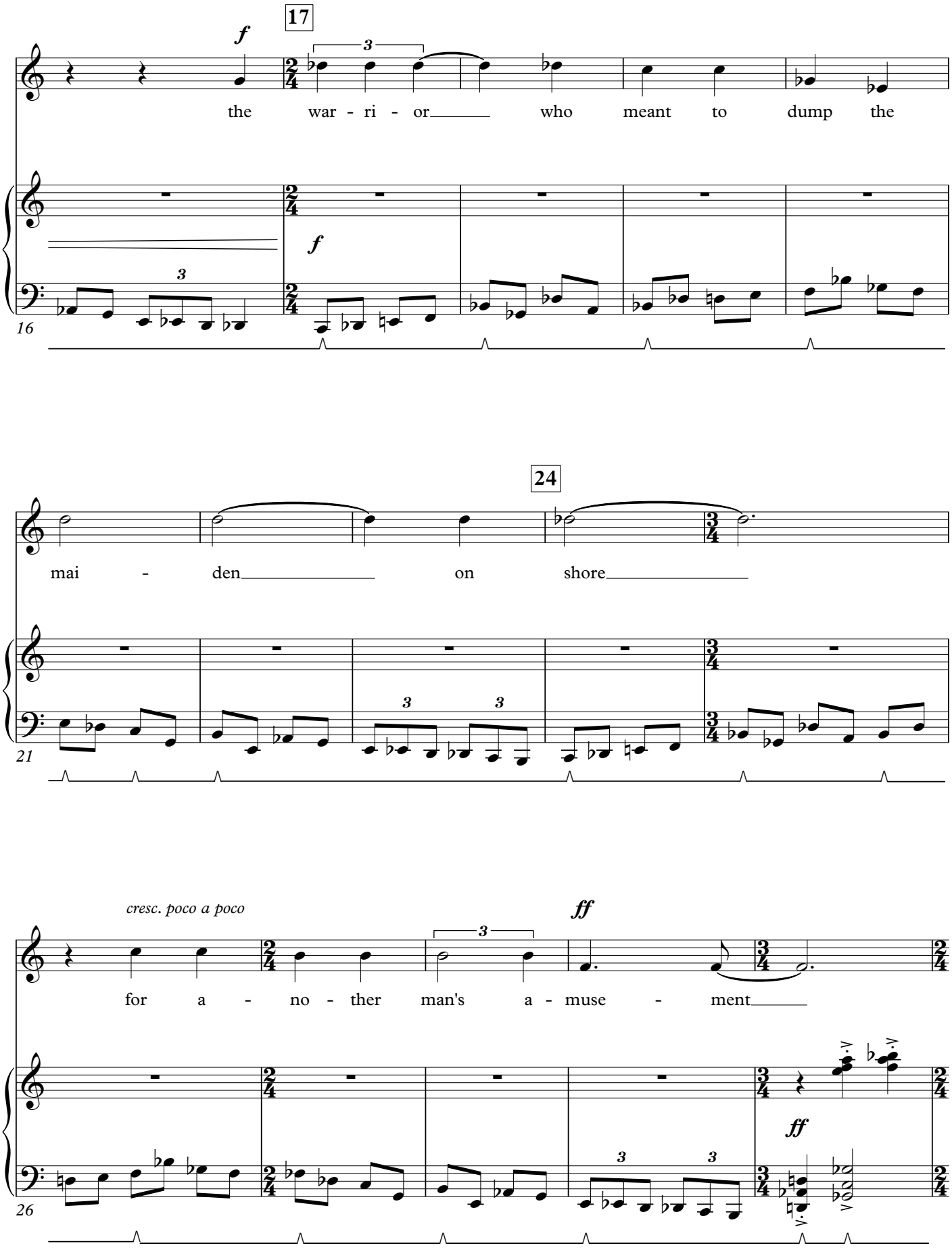

84
decresc.
mf
8vb
81
85
mp
p
89
94
pp
93
3
3
97

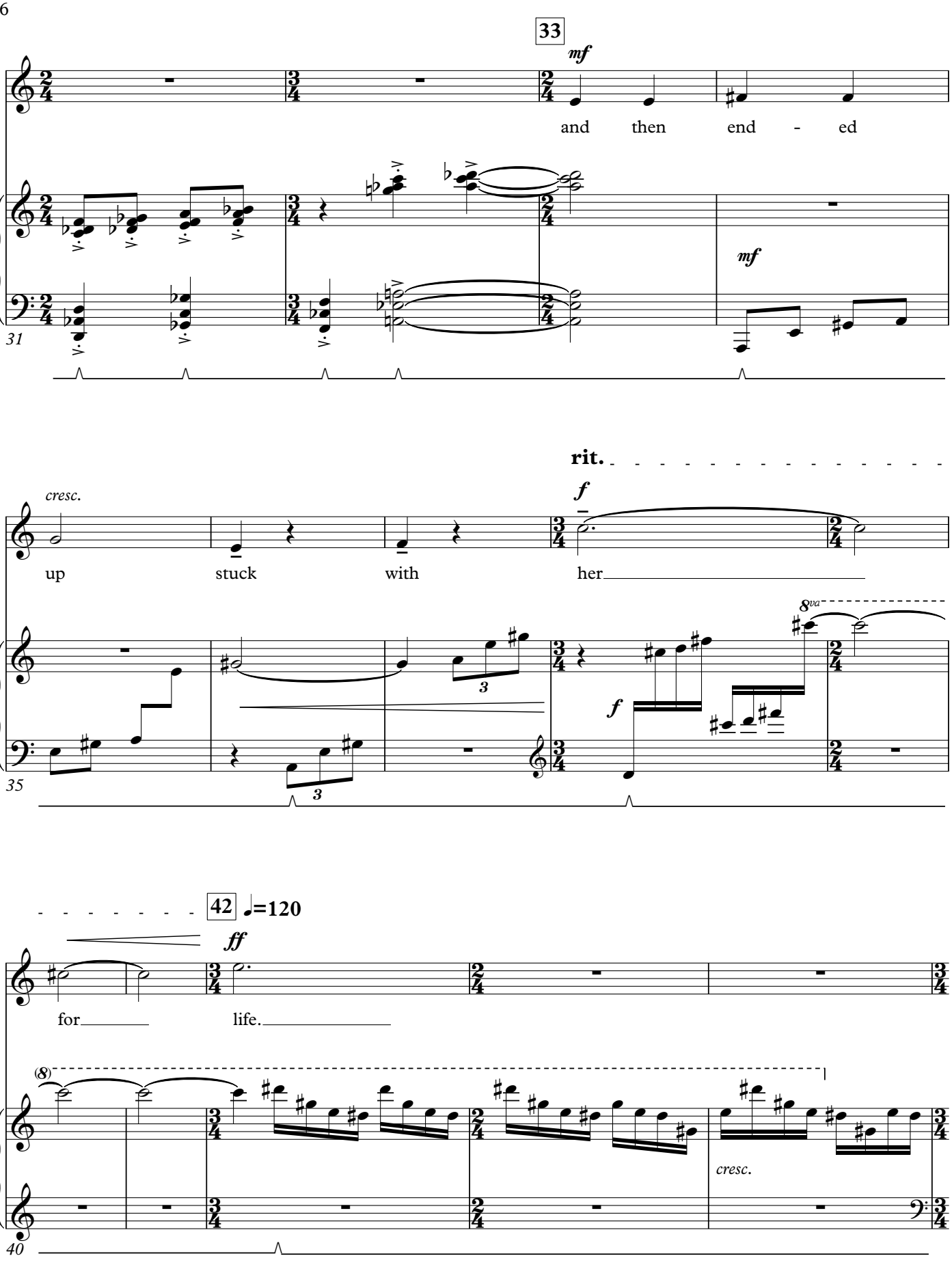

105 Stark ♩=104
p breathy
I wade to shore, blue-
pp
102
mp
lipped, breath heav - ing, with
p
mp
109
mf
wet skirts wrapped a - round my legs–
mf
113

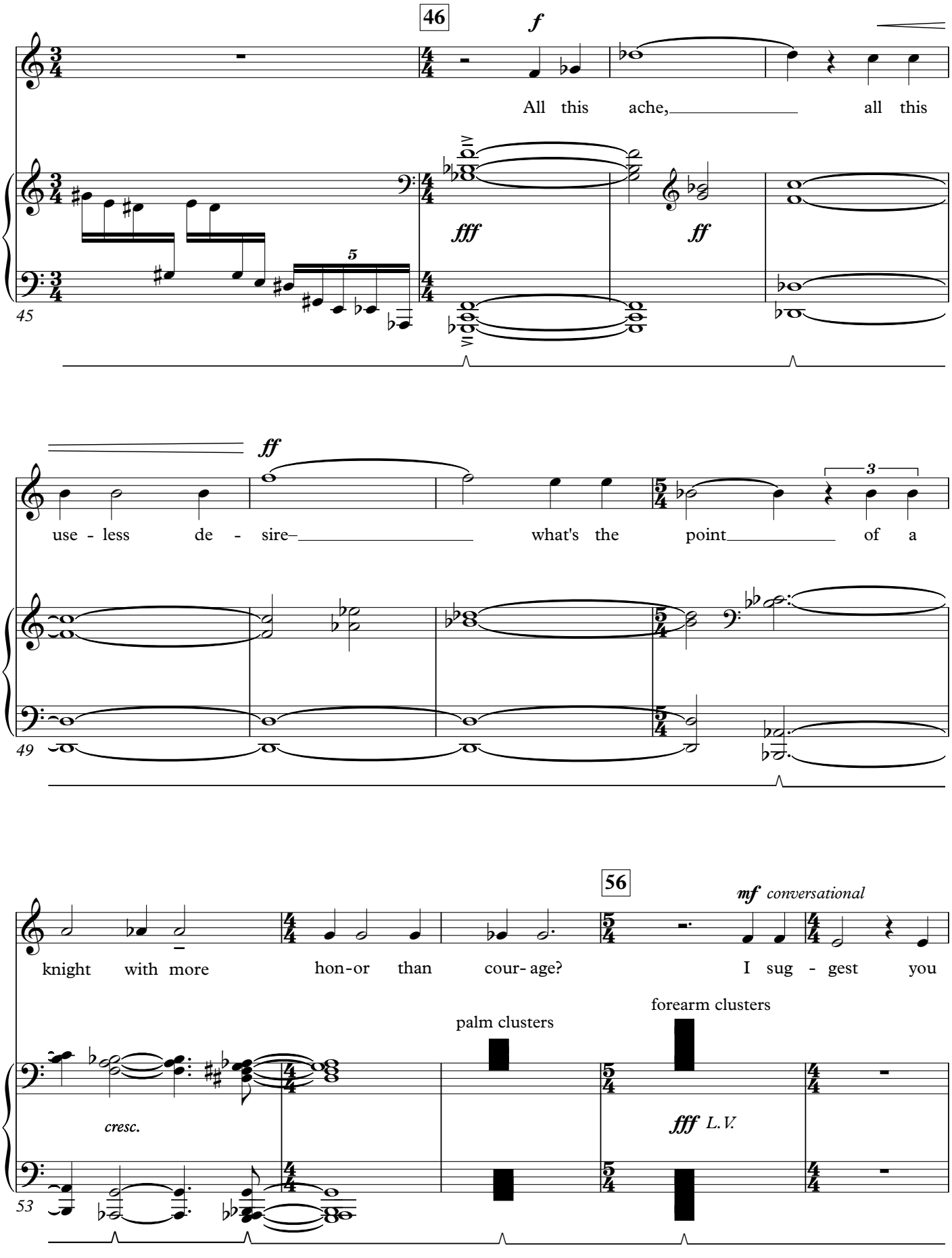

116 Broadly ♩=88 (♪=176)
f triumphant
a maid - en who saves on - ly her - self
8va
f
116
poco rit.
mf
and leaves you be - hind to die of thirst in a stalled wood-en
(8)
mf
121
♩=72
mp
129
box of a boat.
mp
p
pp
8vb
127

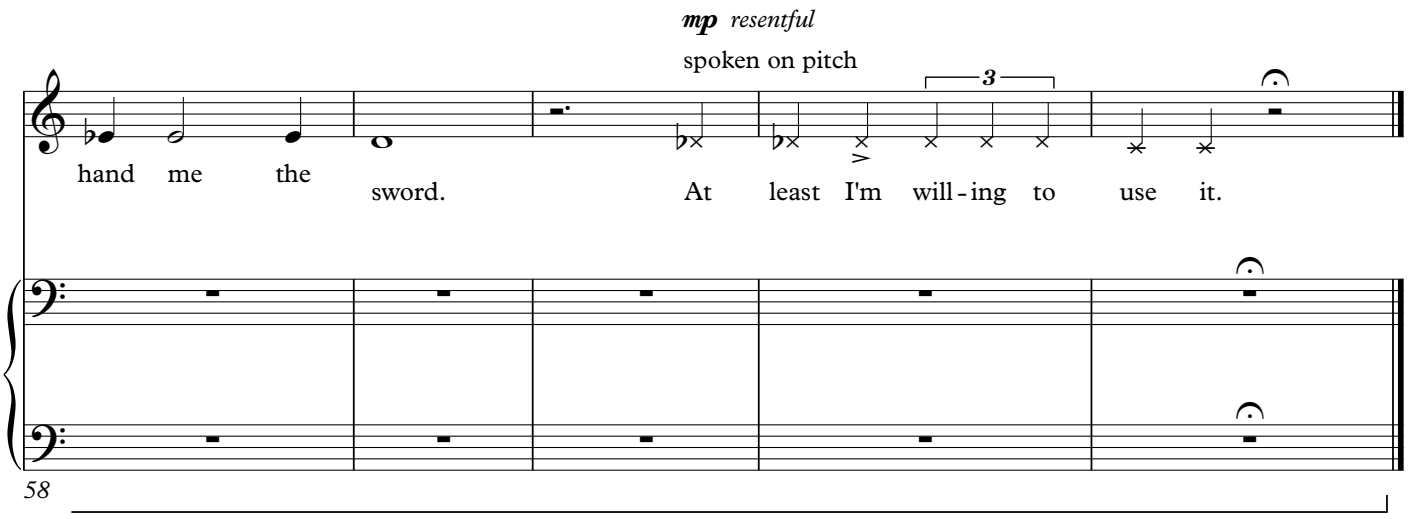
4. Iseult Skewers



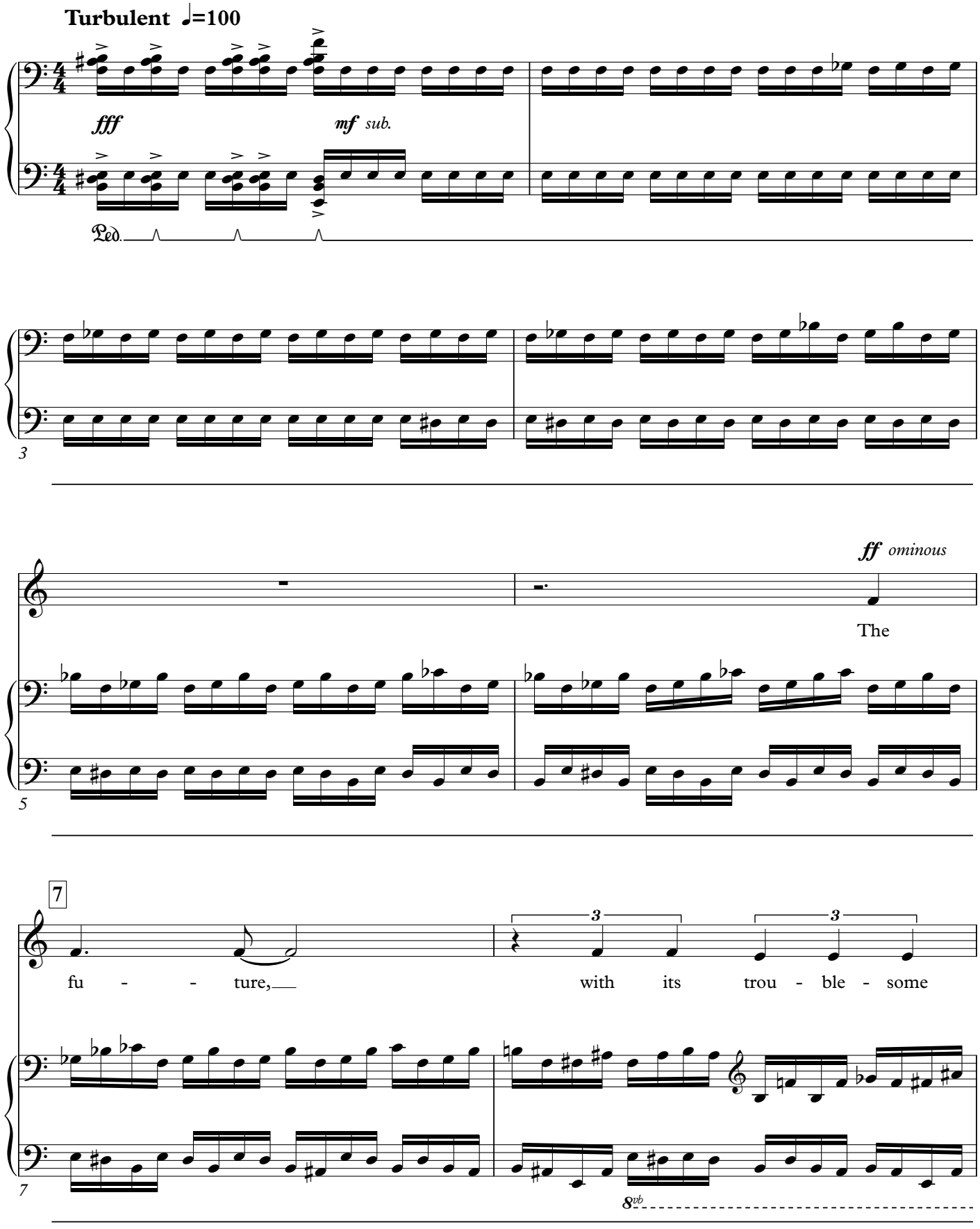

17
f
the war - ri - or who meant to dump the
f
16
24
mai - den on shore
21
cresc. poco a poco
ff
for a - no - ther man's a - muse - ment
ff
26

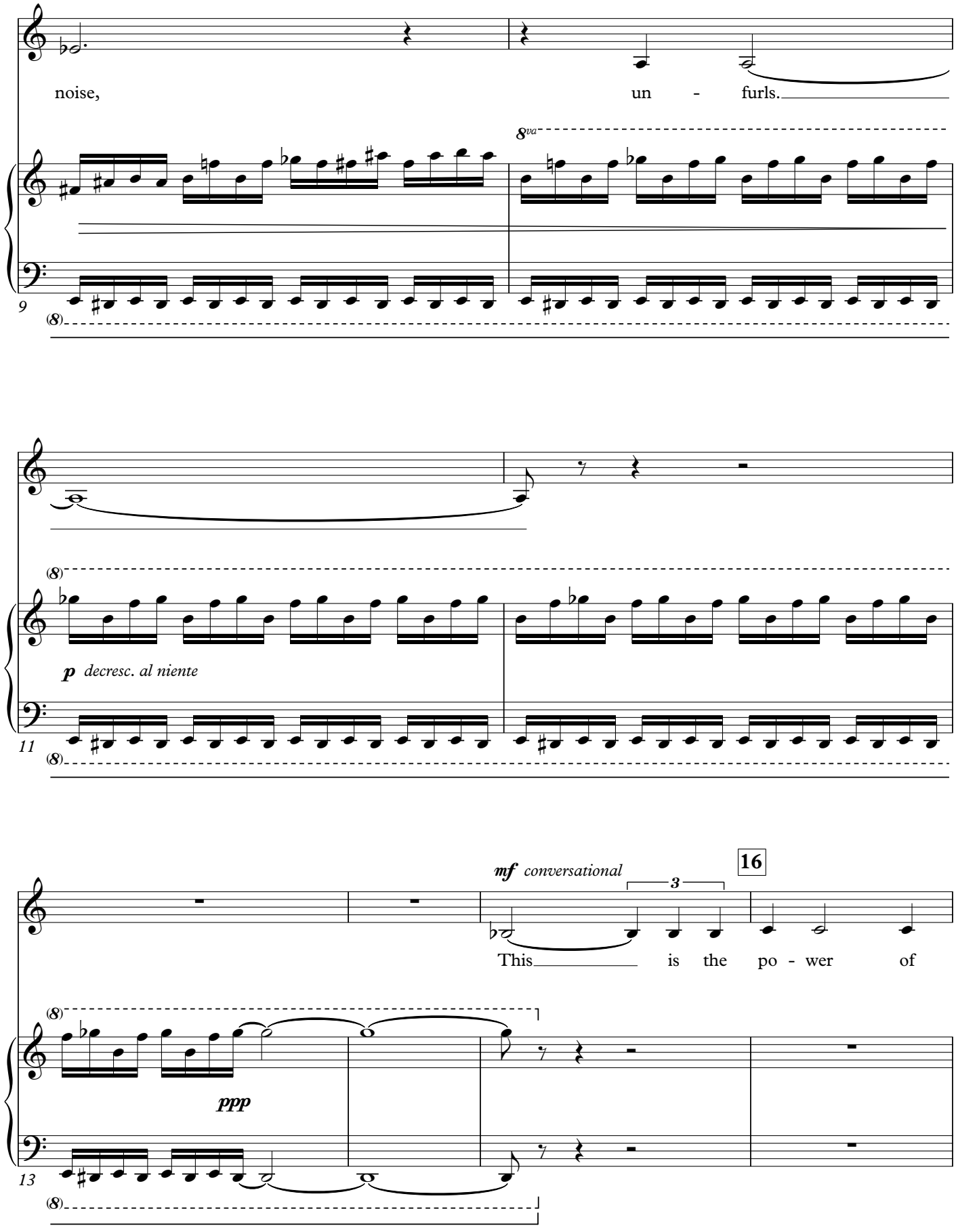

33
mf
and then end - ed
mf
31
rit.
cresc.
f
up stuck with her
8va
f
35
42
♩=120
ff
for life.
(8)
cresc.
40

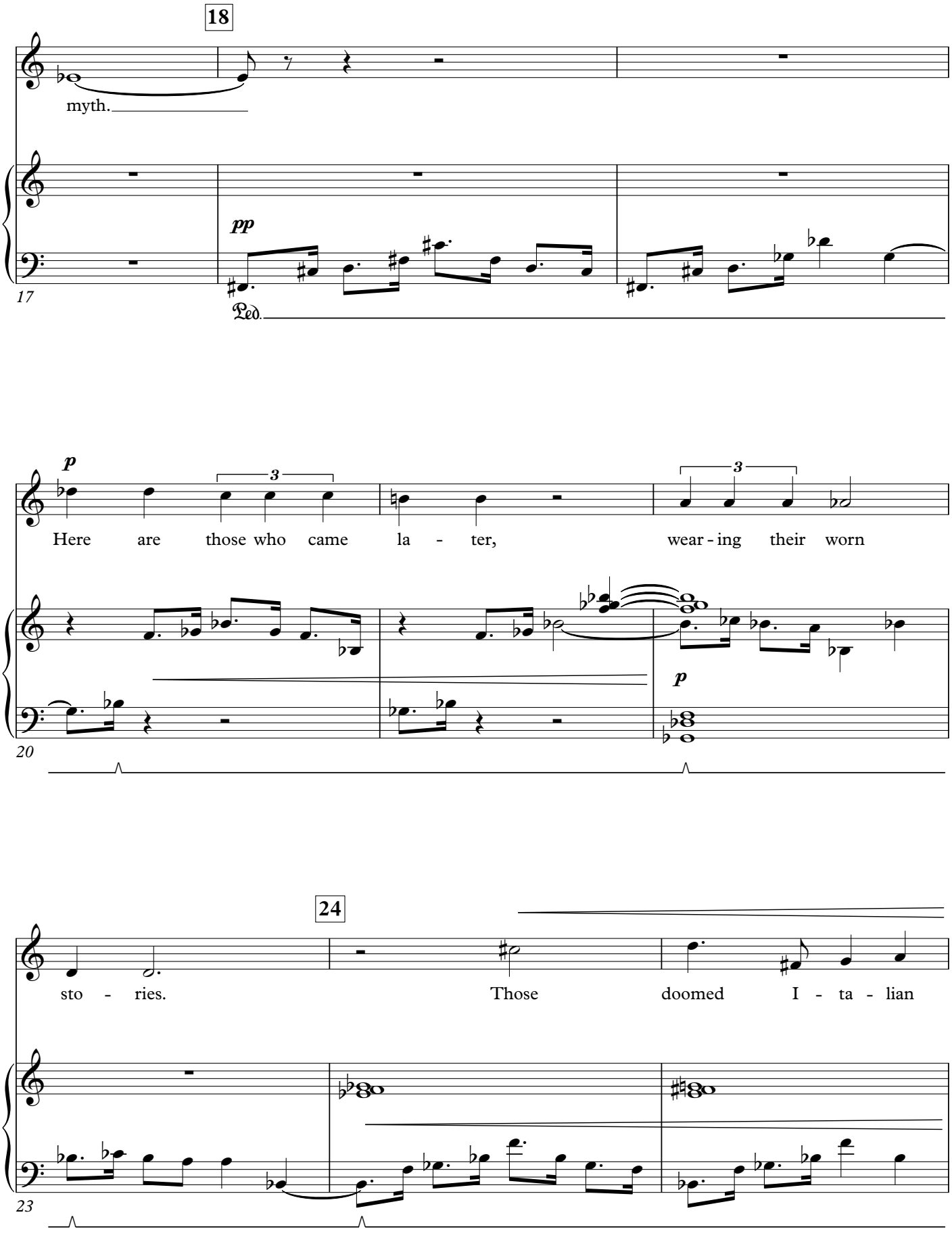

46
f
All this ache, all this
fff
ff
45
ff
use - less de - sire– what's the point of a
3
49
56
mf conversational
knight with more hon-or than cour- age? I sug - gest you
palm clusters
forearm clusters
cresc.
fff L.V.
53

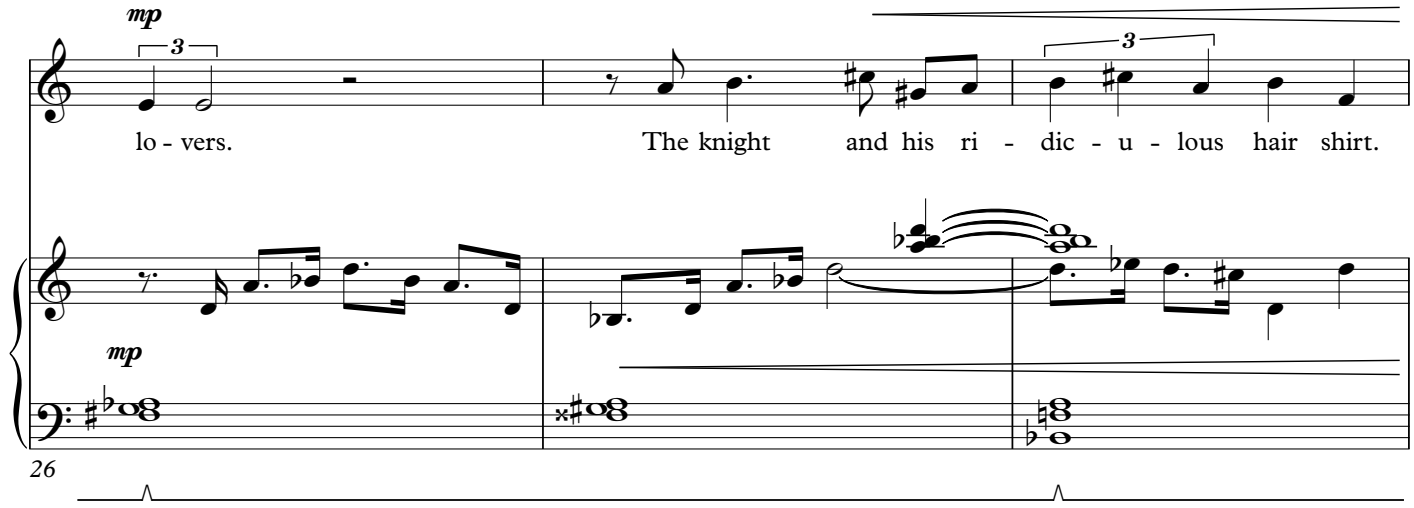

mp resentful
spoken on pitch
3
hand me the sword. At least I'm will - ing to use it.
58

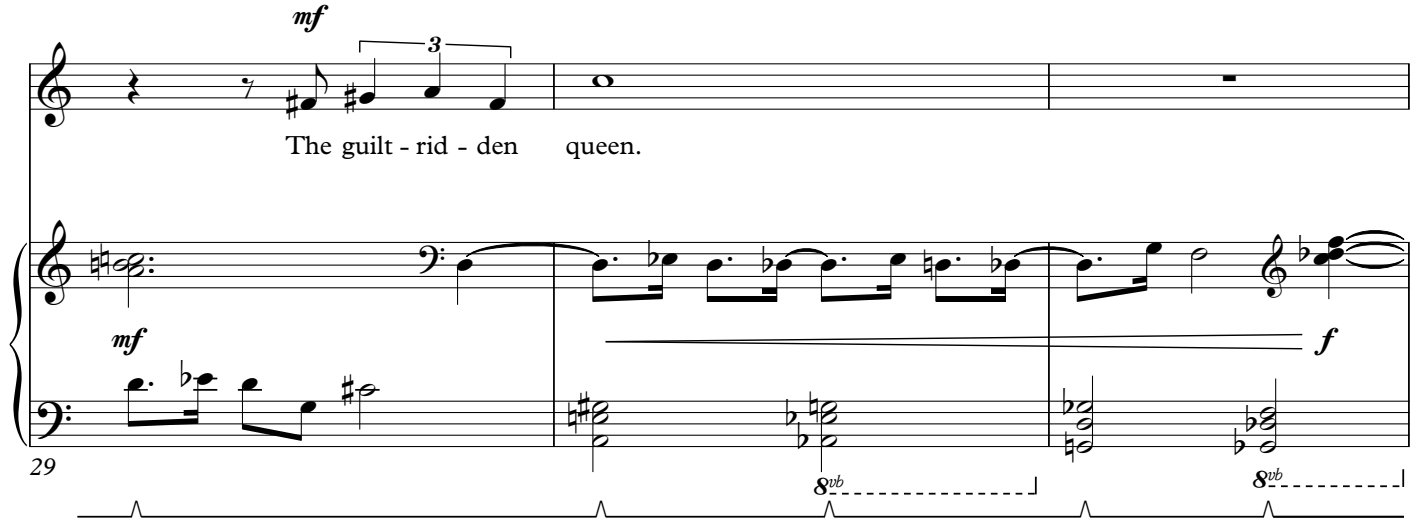
5. Iseult Sees

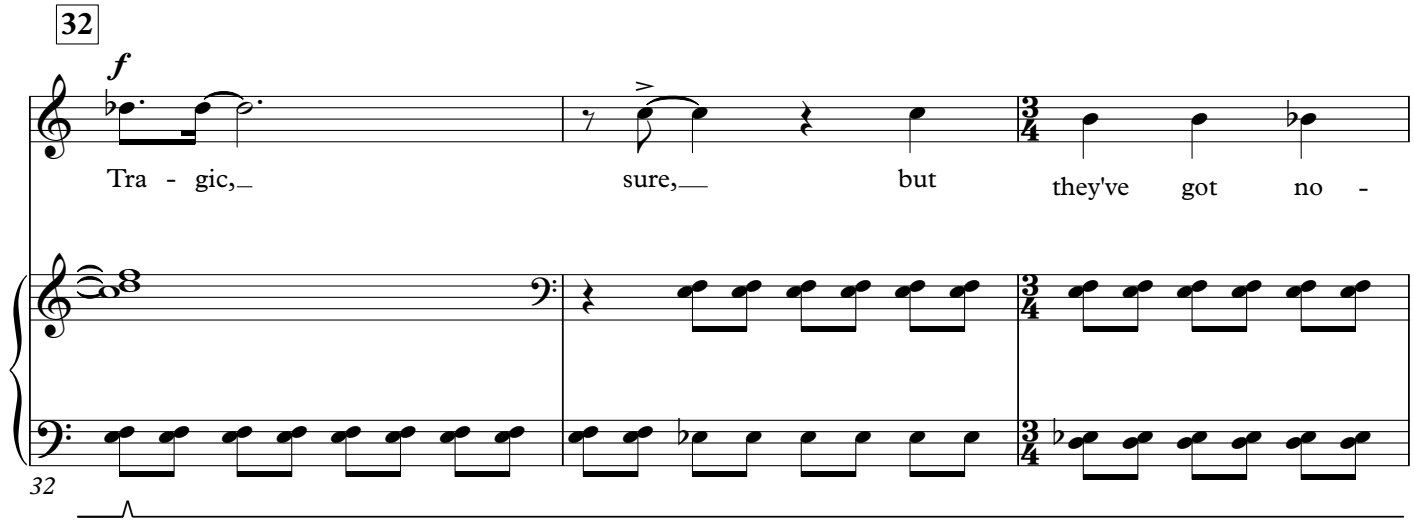


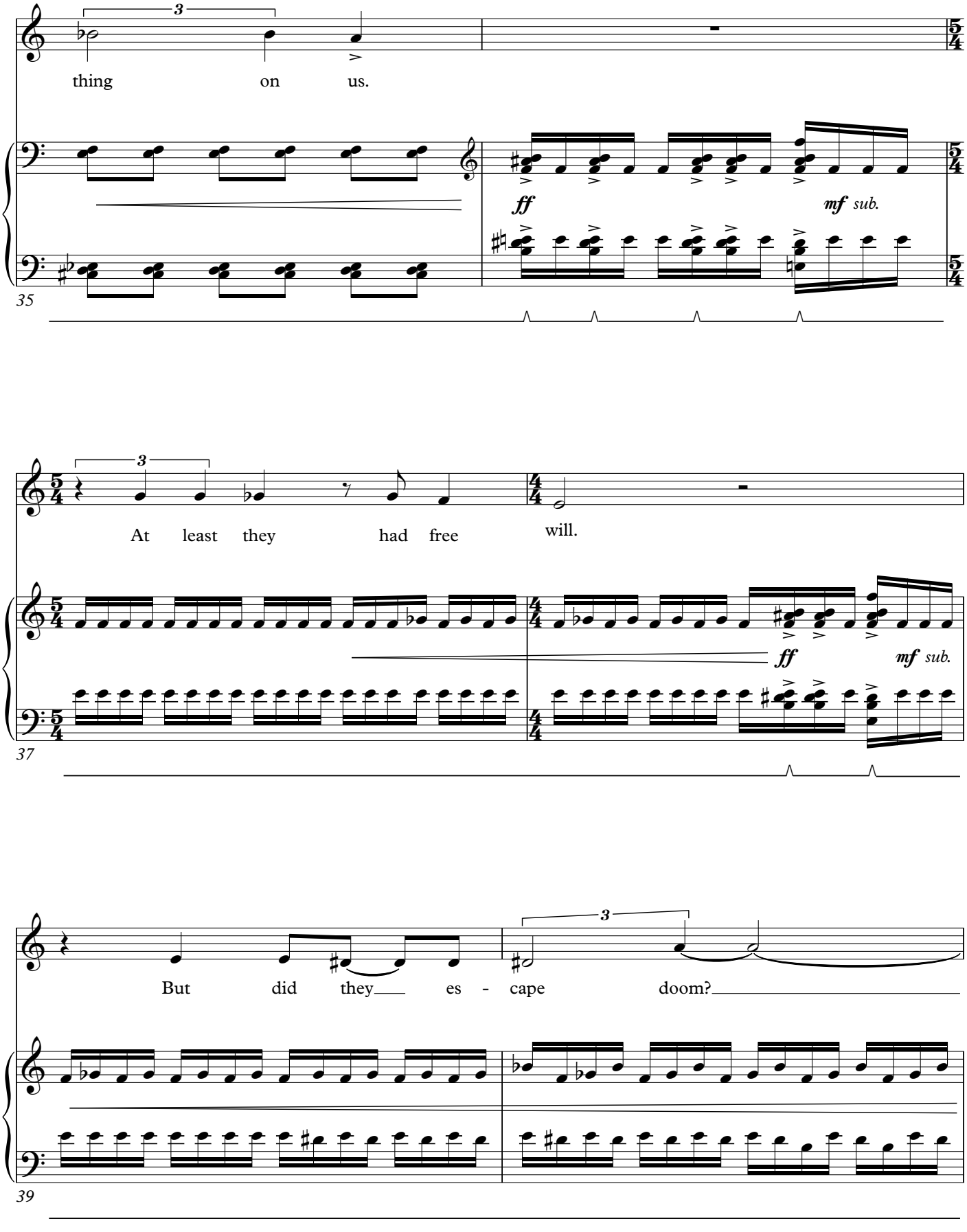

noise,
un - furls.
8va
9
(8)
(8)
p decresc. al niente
11
(8)
mf conversational
3
16
This is the po - wer of
(8)
ppp
13
(8)

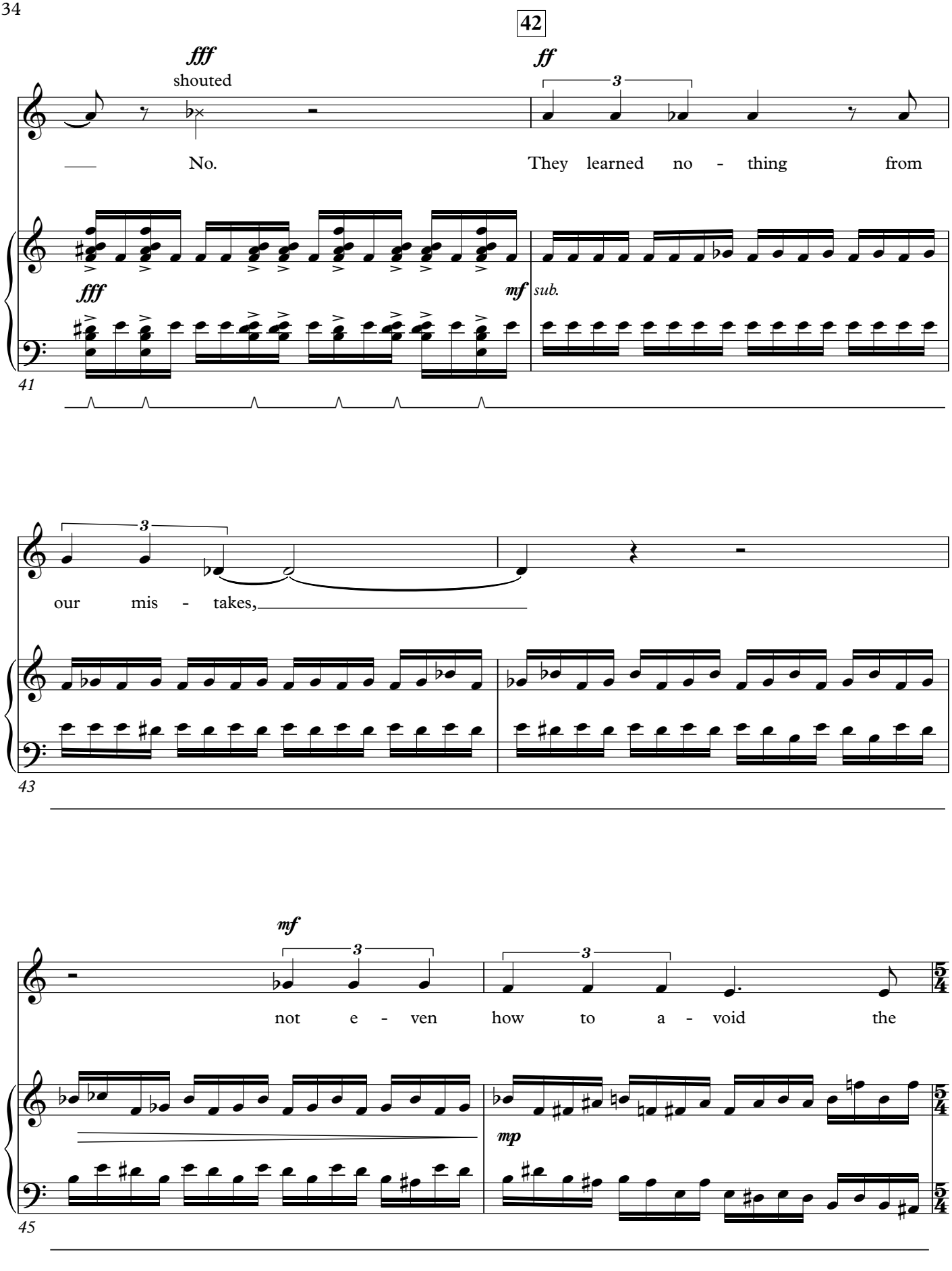

18
myth.
pp
Ped.
17
p
3
Here are those who came la - ter,
3
wear - ing their worn
p
20
24
sto - ries.
Those doomed I - ta - lian
23

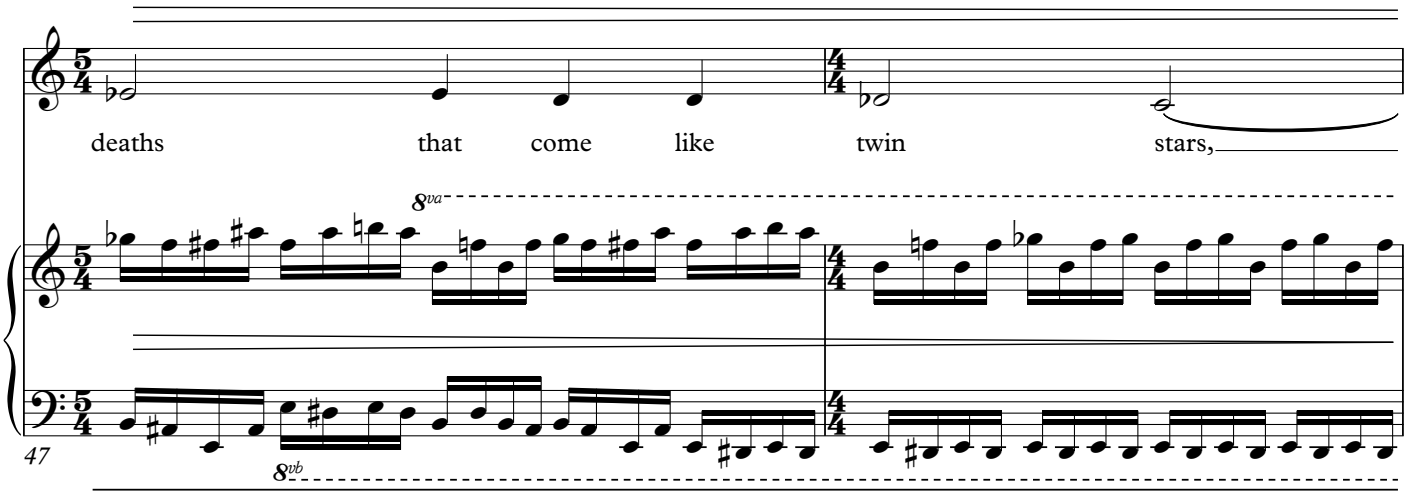

mp
lo - vers.
The knight and his ri - dic - u - lous hair shirt.
mp
26

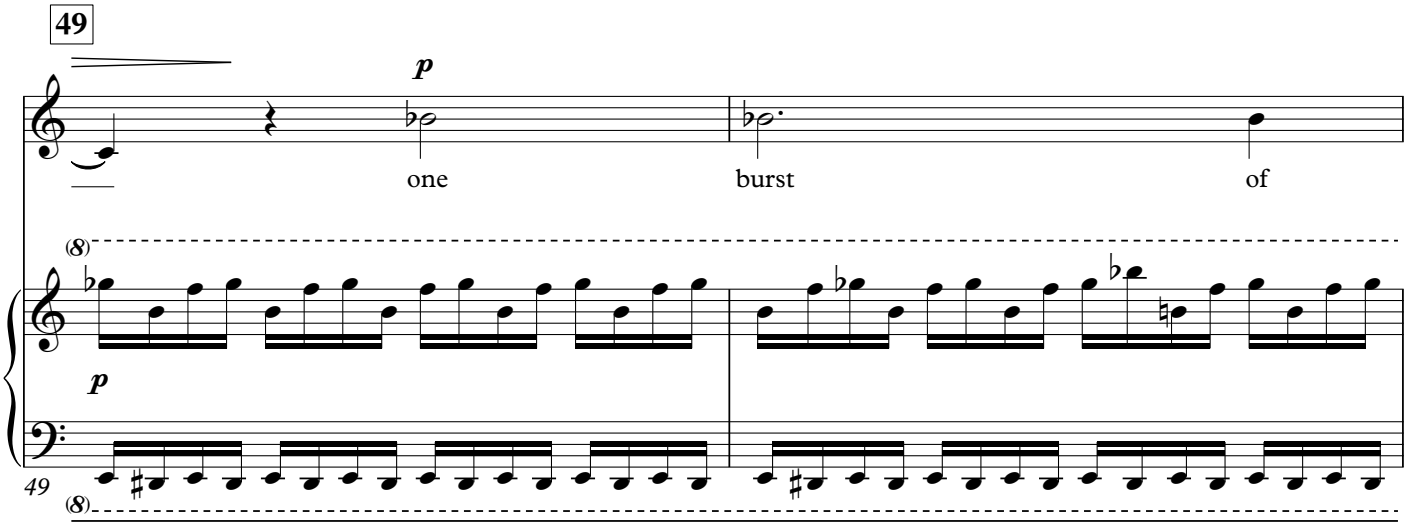

mf
The guilt - rid - den queen.
mf
f
29
8vb
8vb

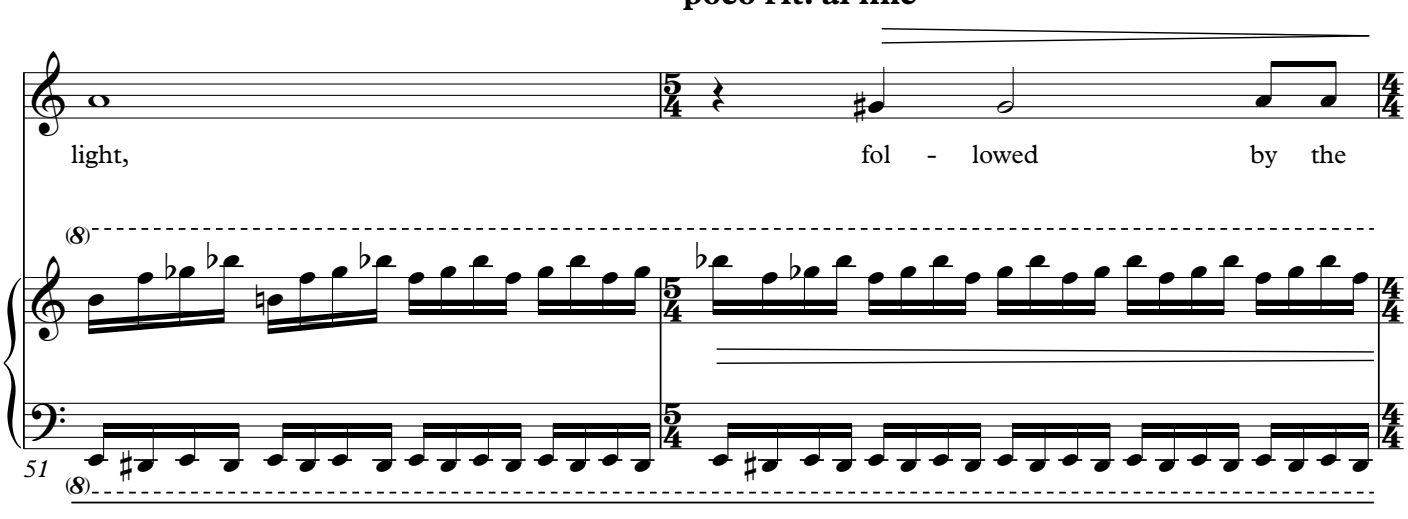

32
f
Tra - gic, sure, but they've got no -
32

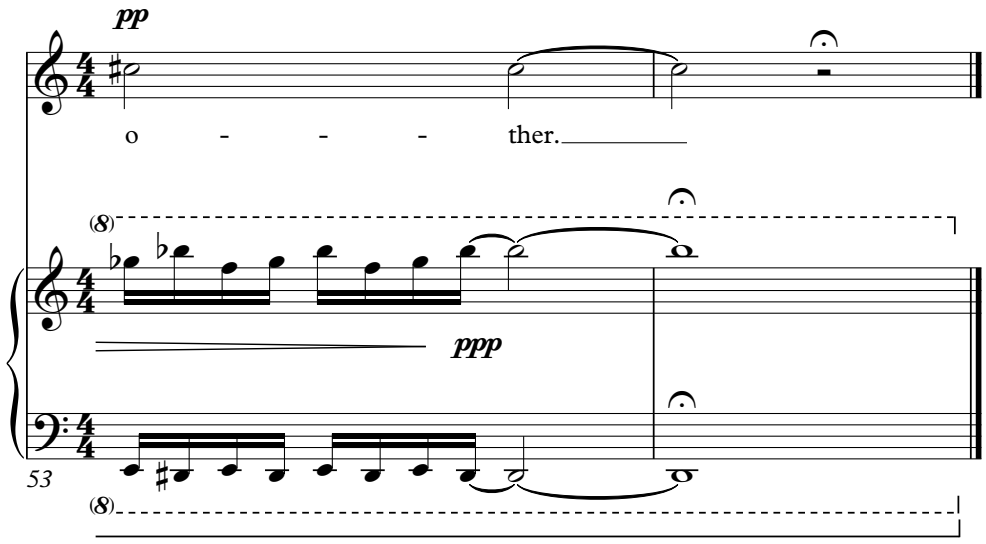

thing on us.
ff
mf sub.
35
At least they had free will.
ff
mf sub.
37
But did they es - cape doom?
39


42
fff
shouted
No.
ff
3
They learned no - thing from
fff
mf
sub.
41
3
our mis - takes,
43
mf
3
3
not e - ven how to a - void the
5/4
mp
45

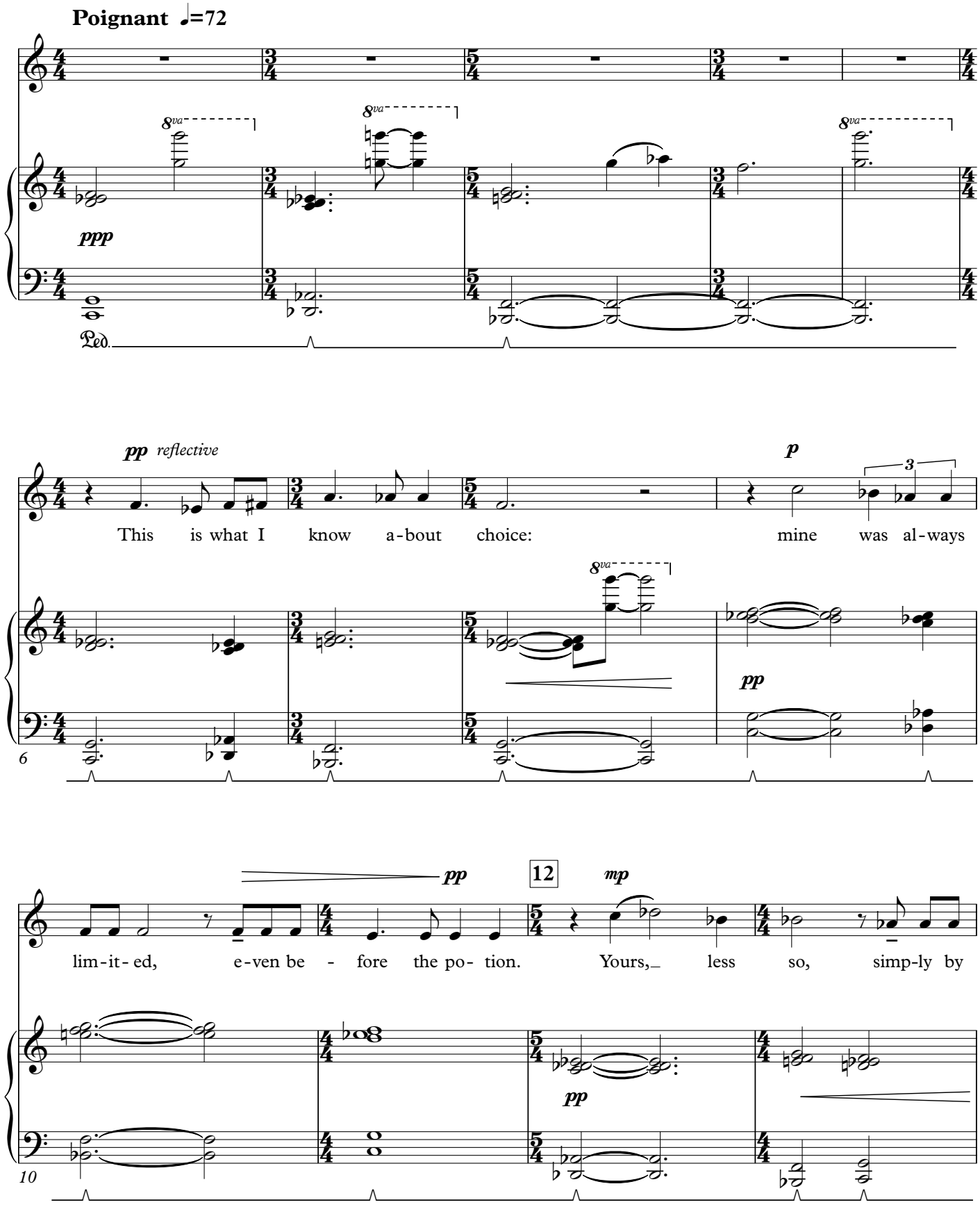

deaths
that
come
like
twin
stars,
8va
8vb
47

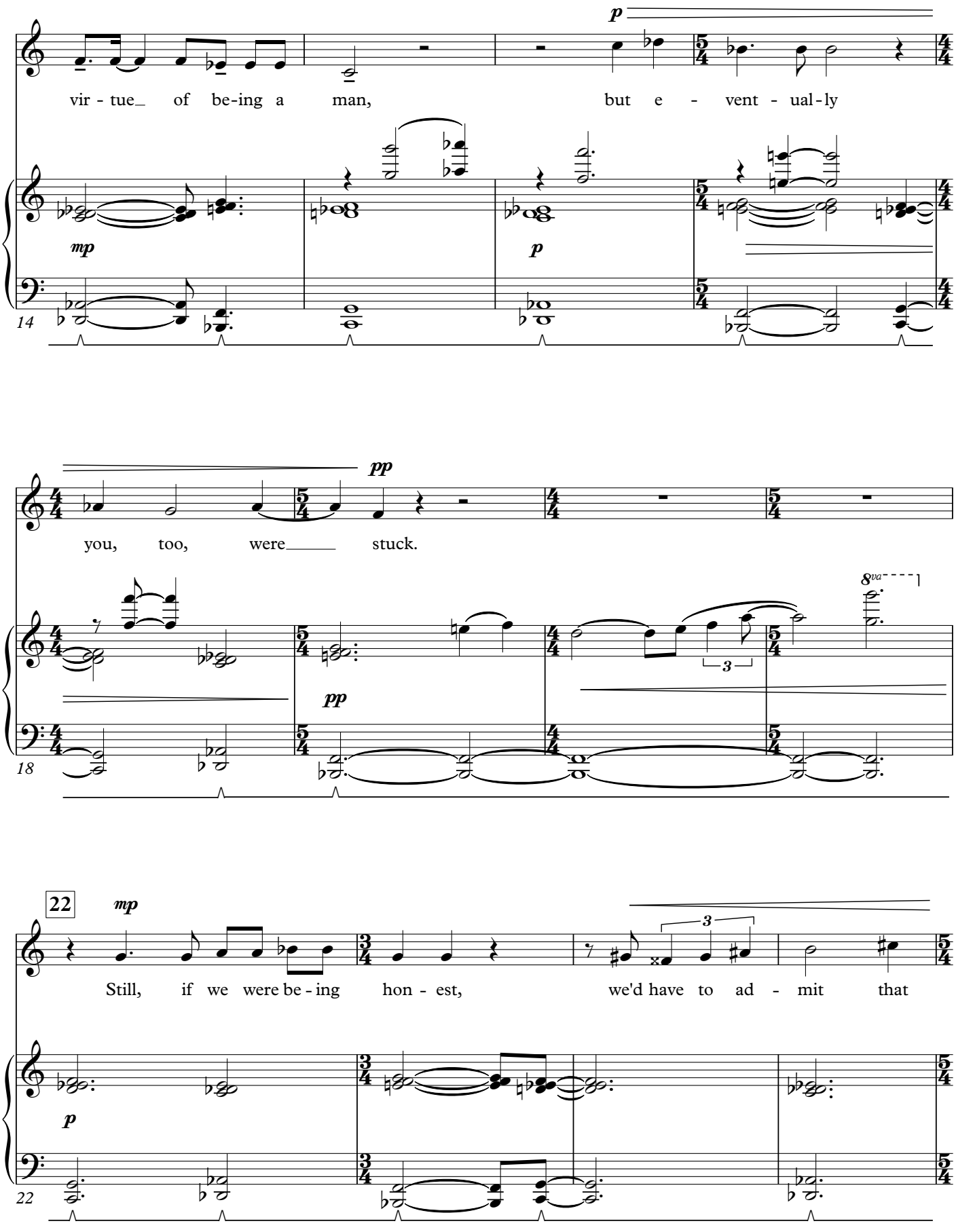

49
p
one
burst
of
(8)
p
49
(8)

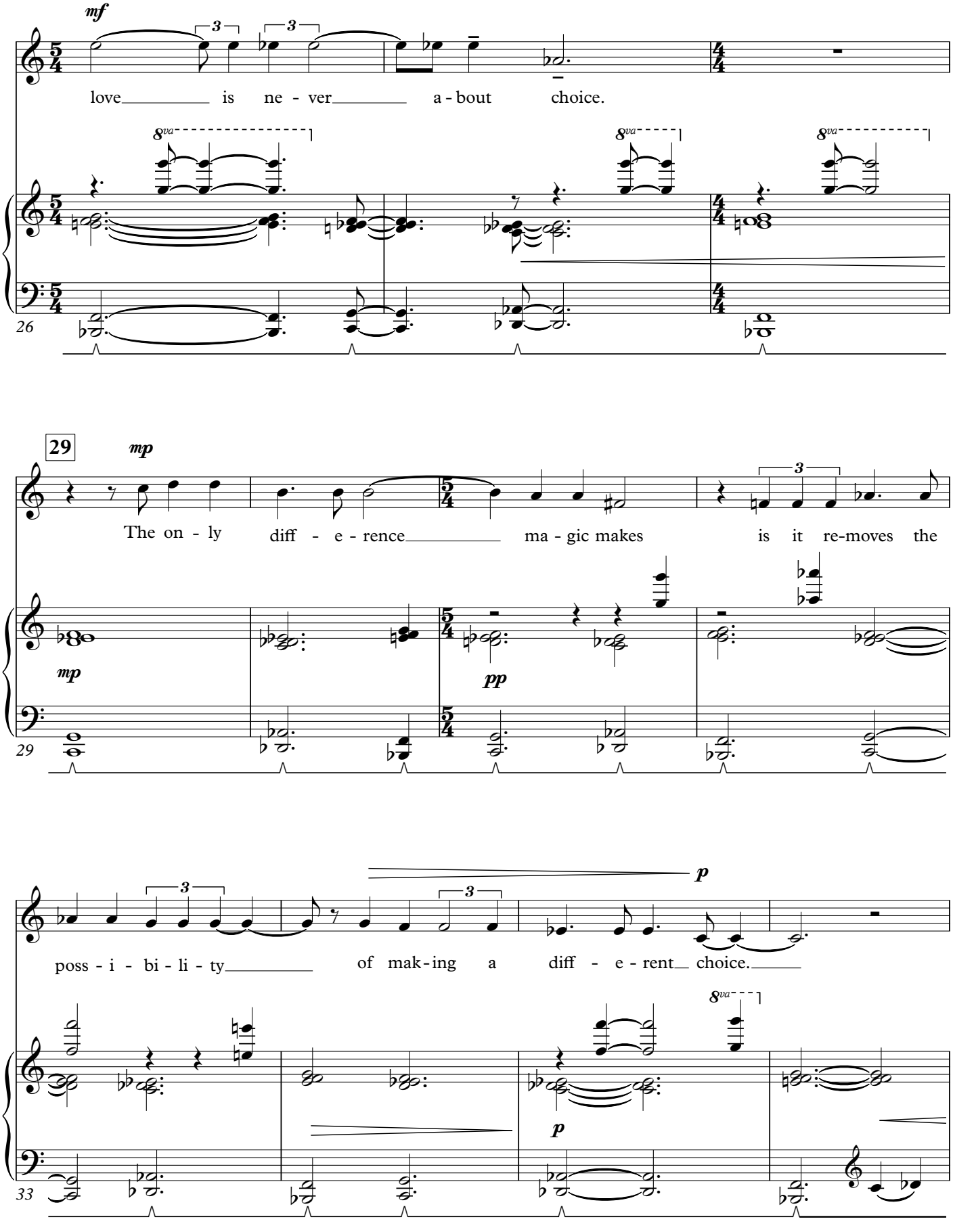

poco rit. al fine
light,
fol - lowed
by the
(8)
51
(8)

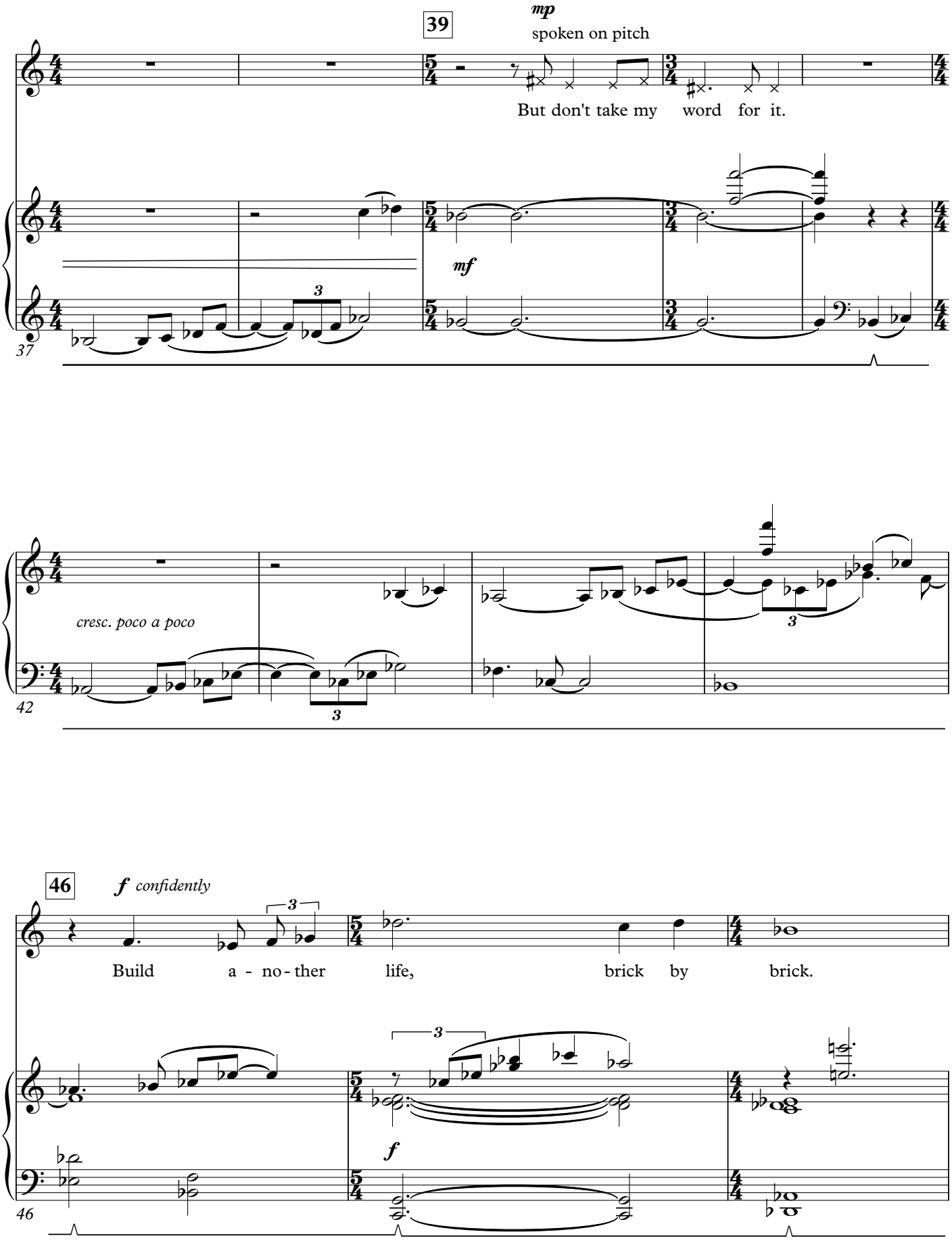

pp
o - - - ther.
(8)
ppp
53
(8)

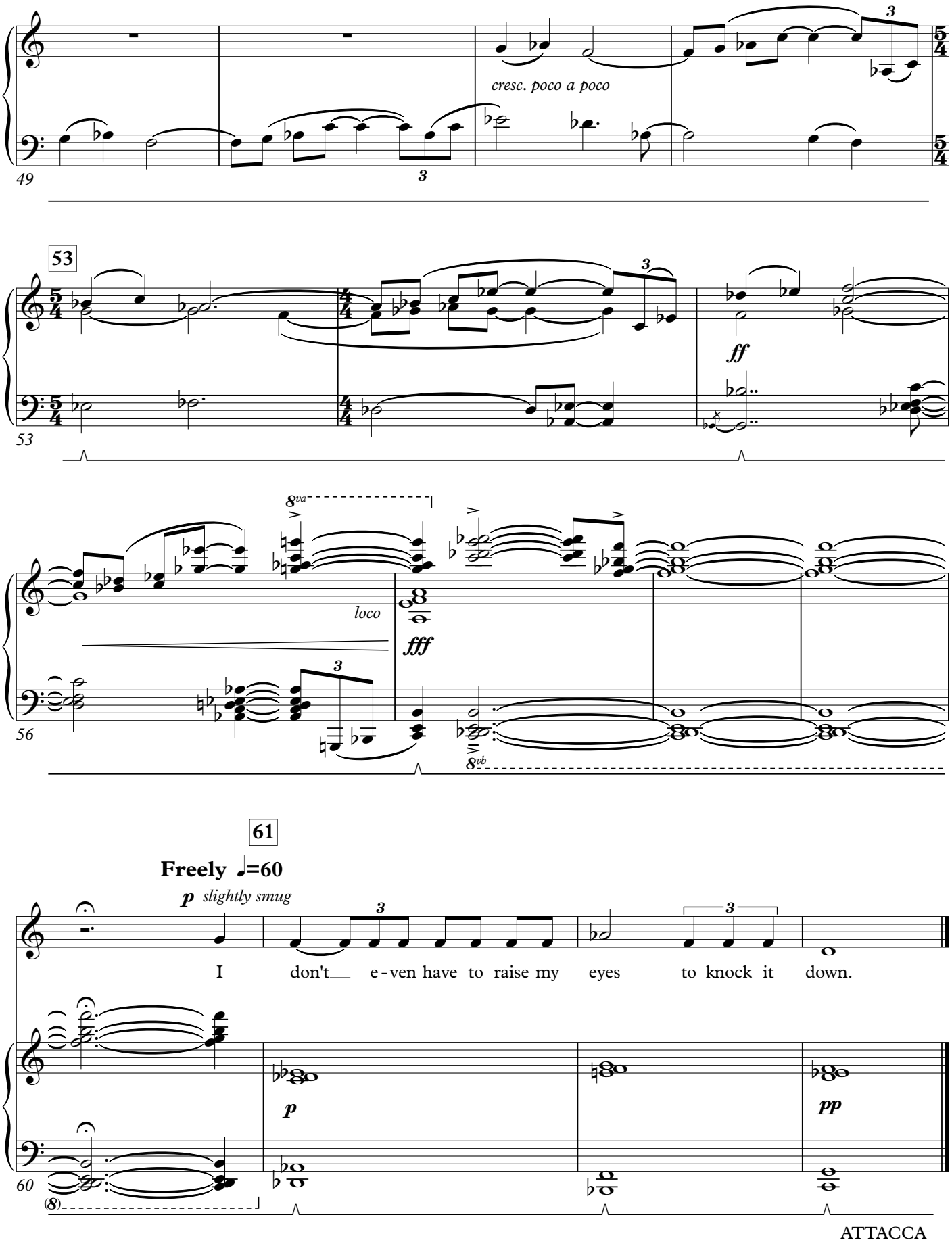
6. Iseult Speaks: "This is what I know about choice"




p
vir - tue_ of be-ing a man, but e - vent - ual-ly
mp
p
14
pp
you, too, were_____ stuck.
8va
3
pp
18
22
mp
Still, if we were be - ing hon - est, we'd have to ad - mit that
3
p
22

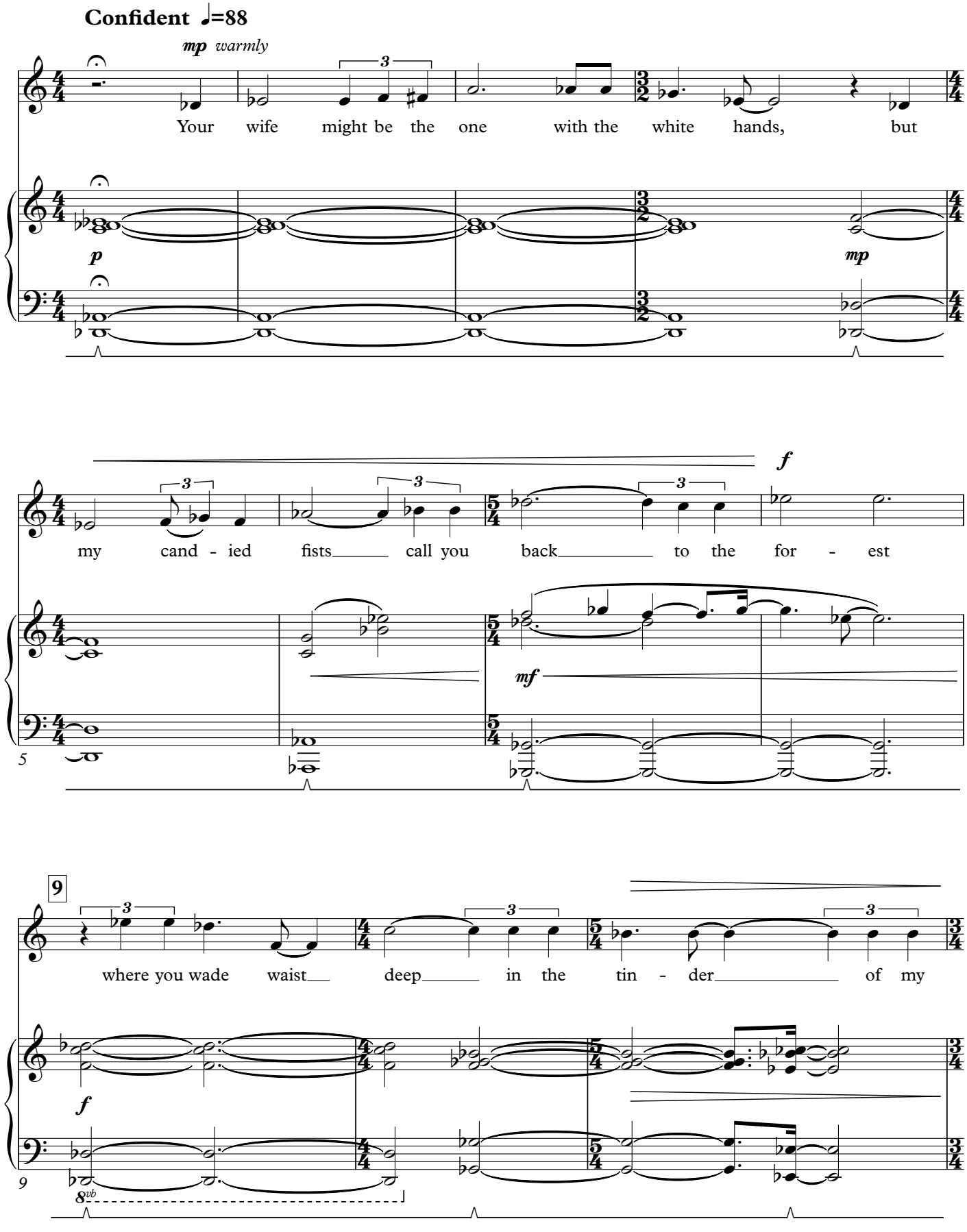

mf
love is ne - ver a - bout choice.
8va
26
29
mp
The on - ly diff - e - rence ma - gic makes is it re-moves the
mp
pp
29
p
poss - i - bi - li - ty of mak - ing a diff - e - rent choice.
8va
p
33

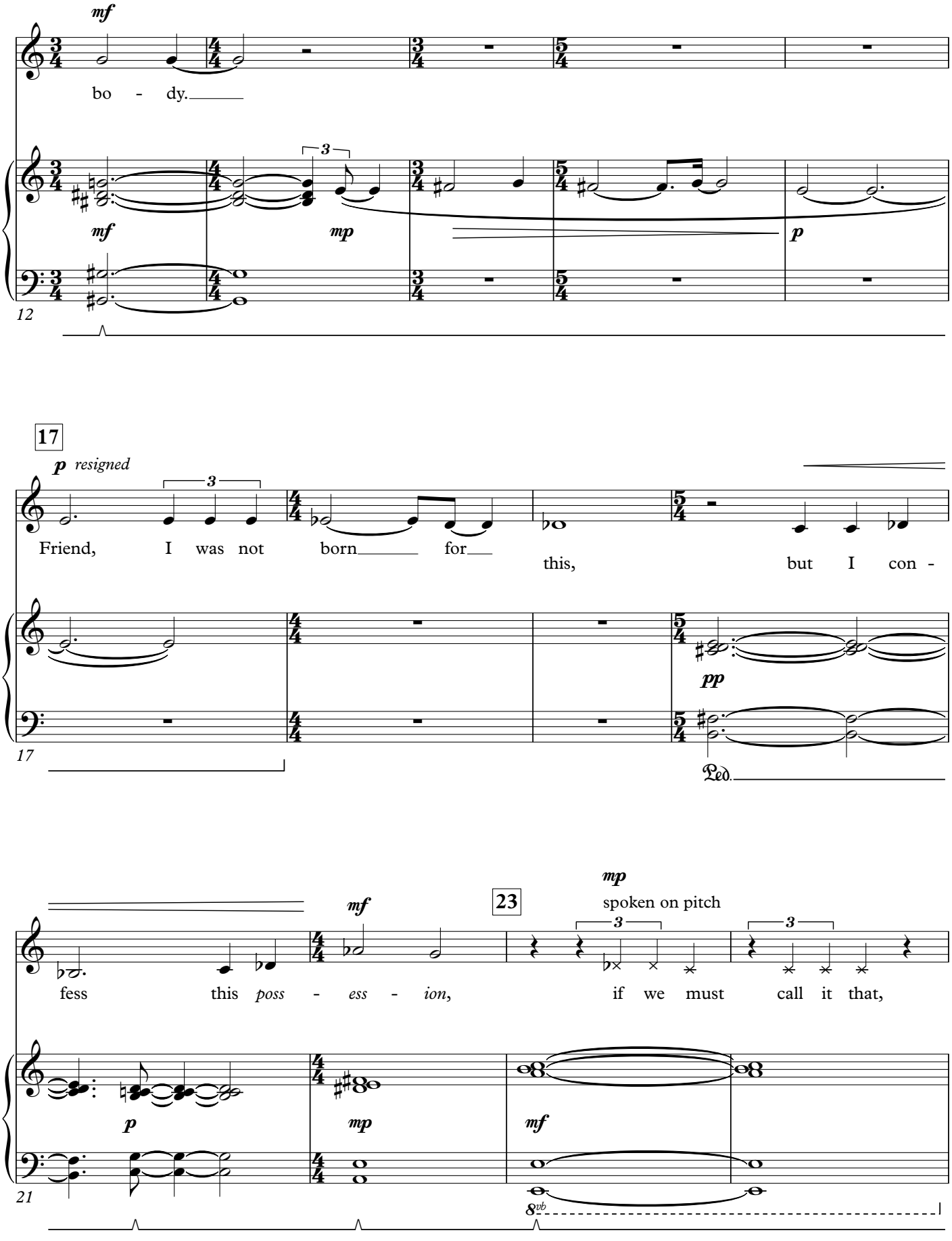

39
mp
spoken on pitch
But don't take my word for it.
mf
37
cresc. poco a poco
42
46
f confidently
Build a - no - ther life, brick by brick.
f
46

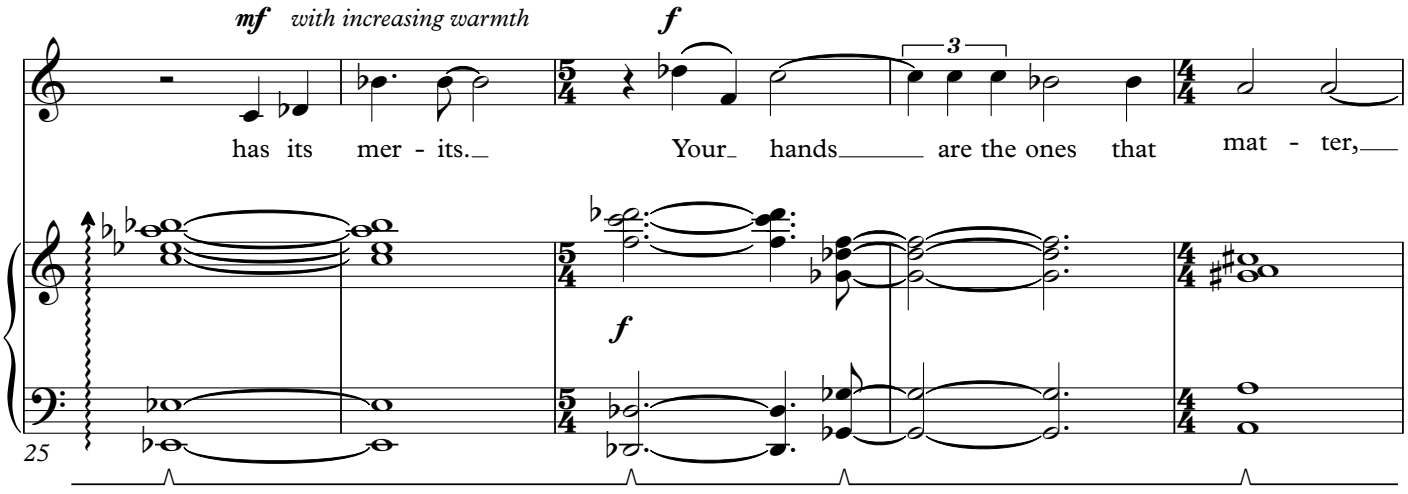

49
cresc. poco a poco
53
53
ff
8va
loco
fff
56
8vb
61
Freely ♩=60
p slightly smug
I don't e-ven have to raise my eyes to knock it down.
p
pp
60
(8)

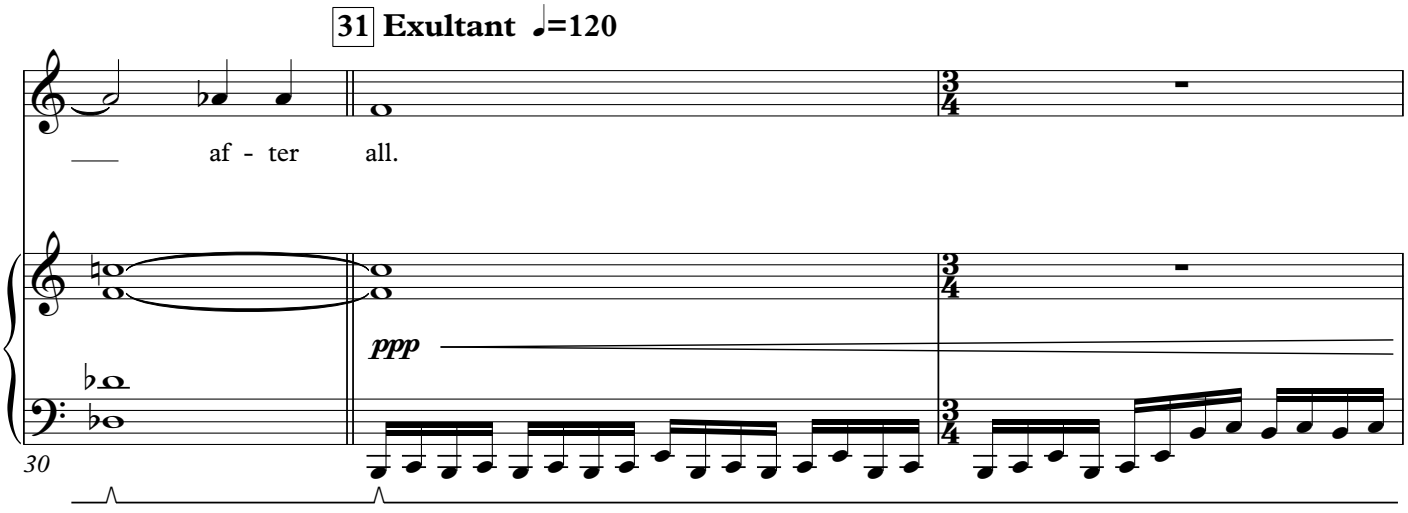
ATTACCA

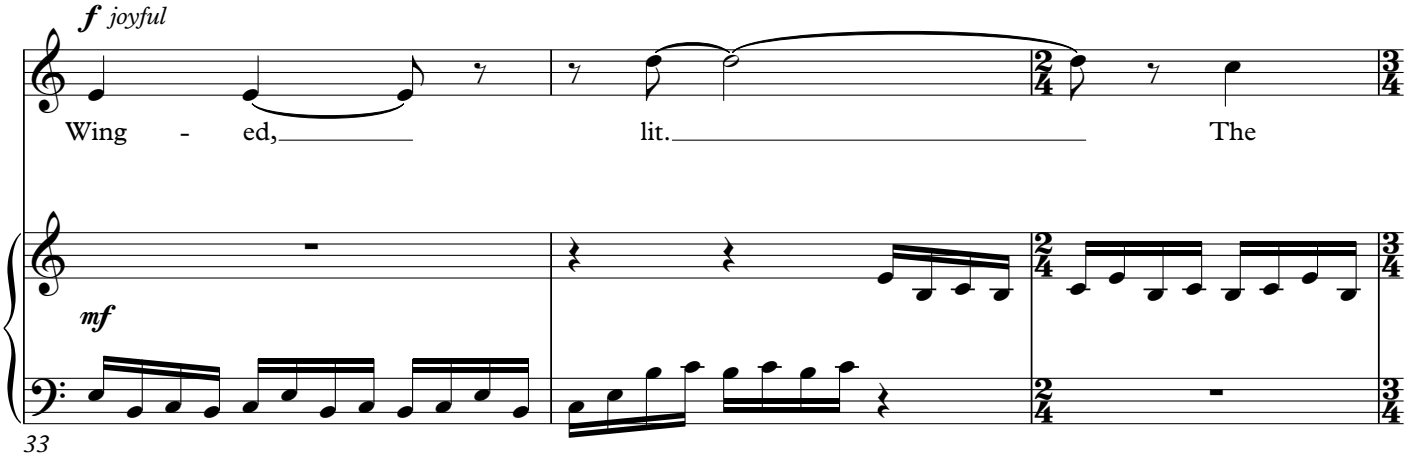
7. Iseult Sparks

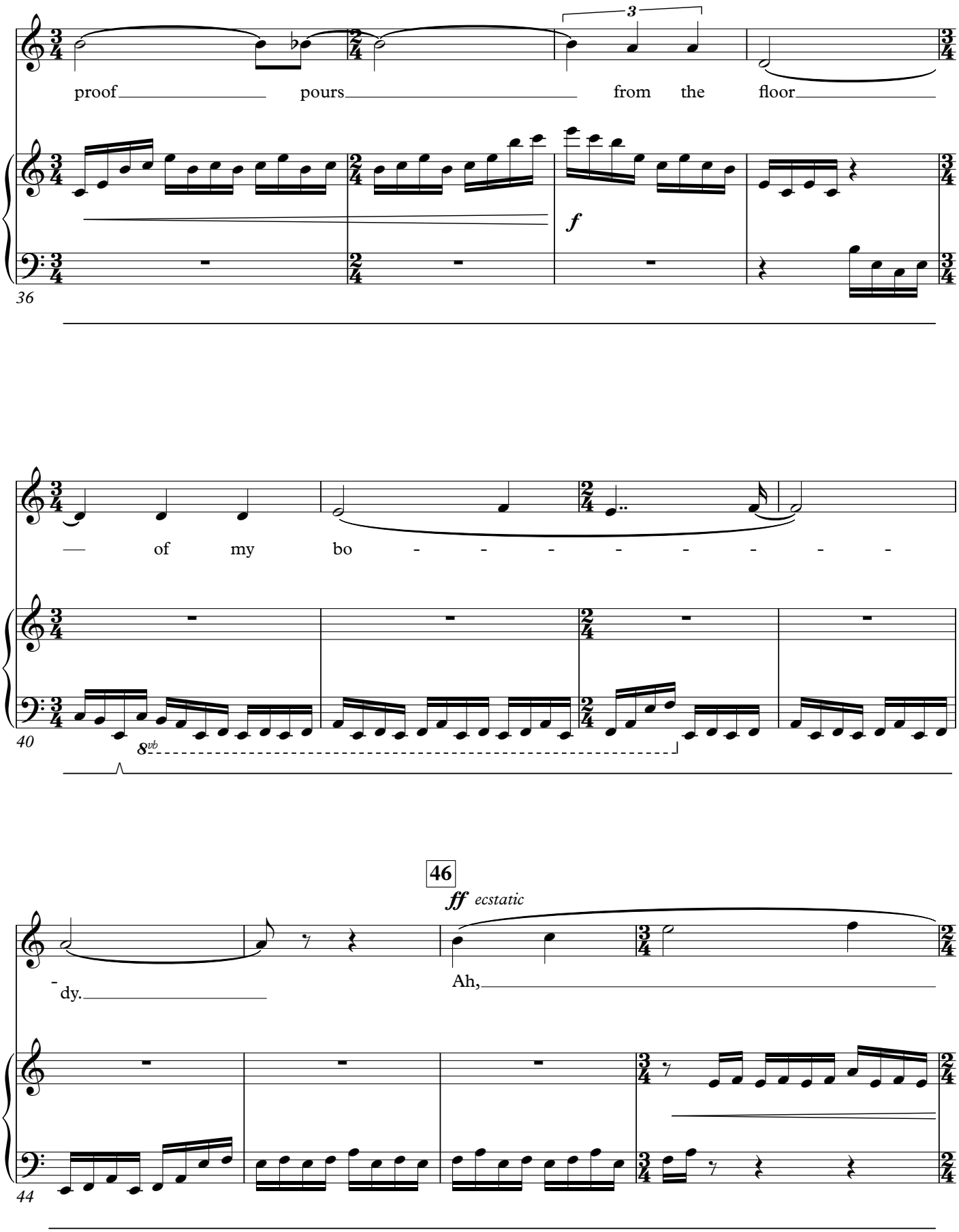


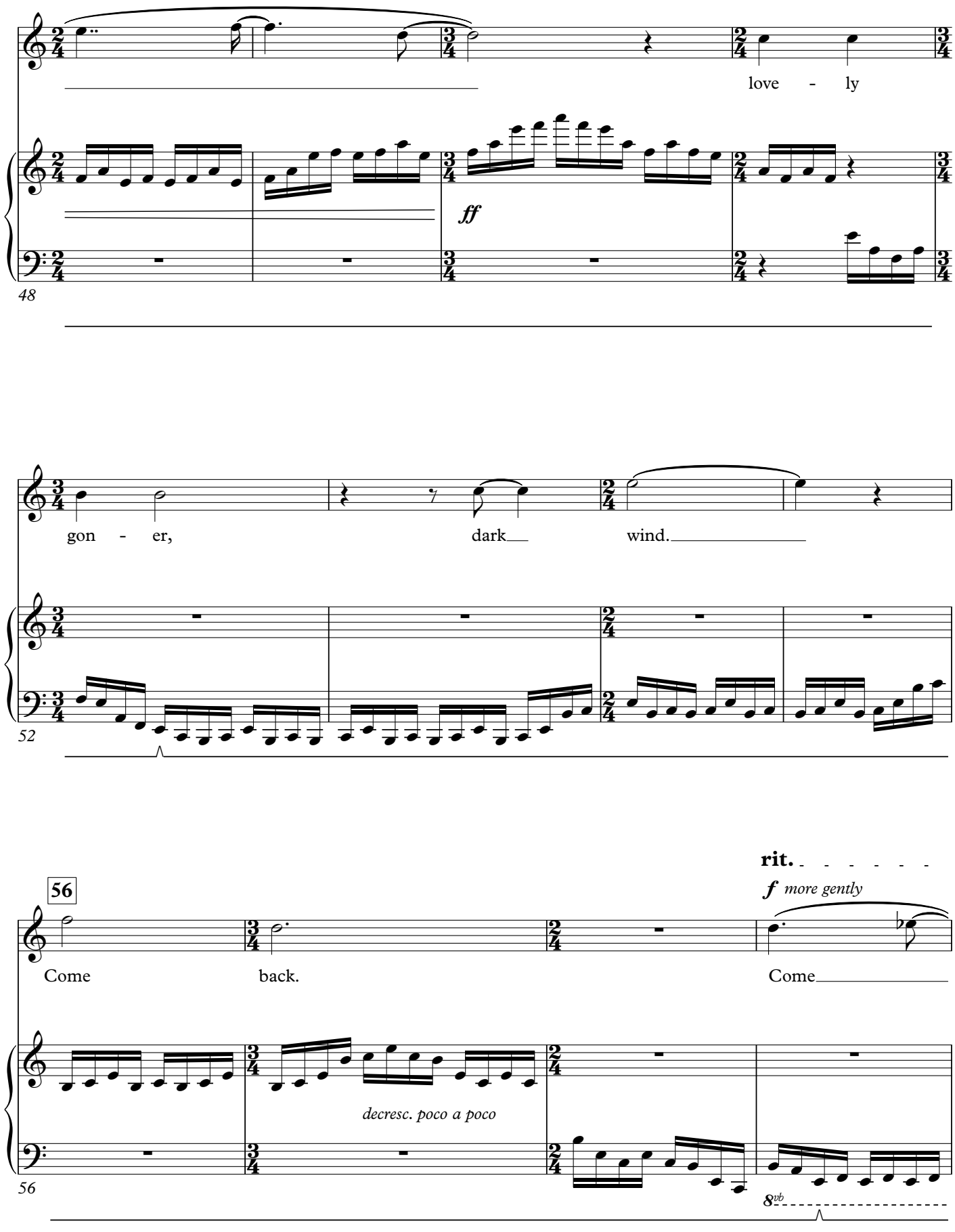

mf
bo - dy.
mf
mp
p
12
17
p resigned
Friend, I was not born for
this, but I con -
pp
Ped.
17
mp
spoken on pitch
mf
23
fess this poss - ess - ion,
if we must call it that,
p
mp
mf
8vb
21

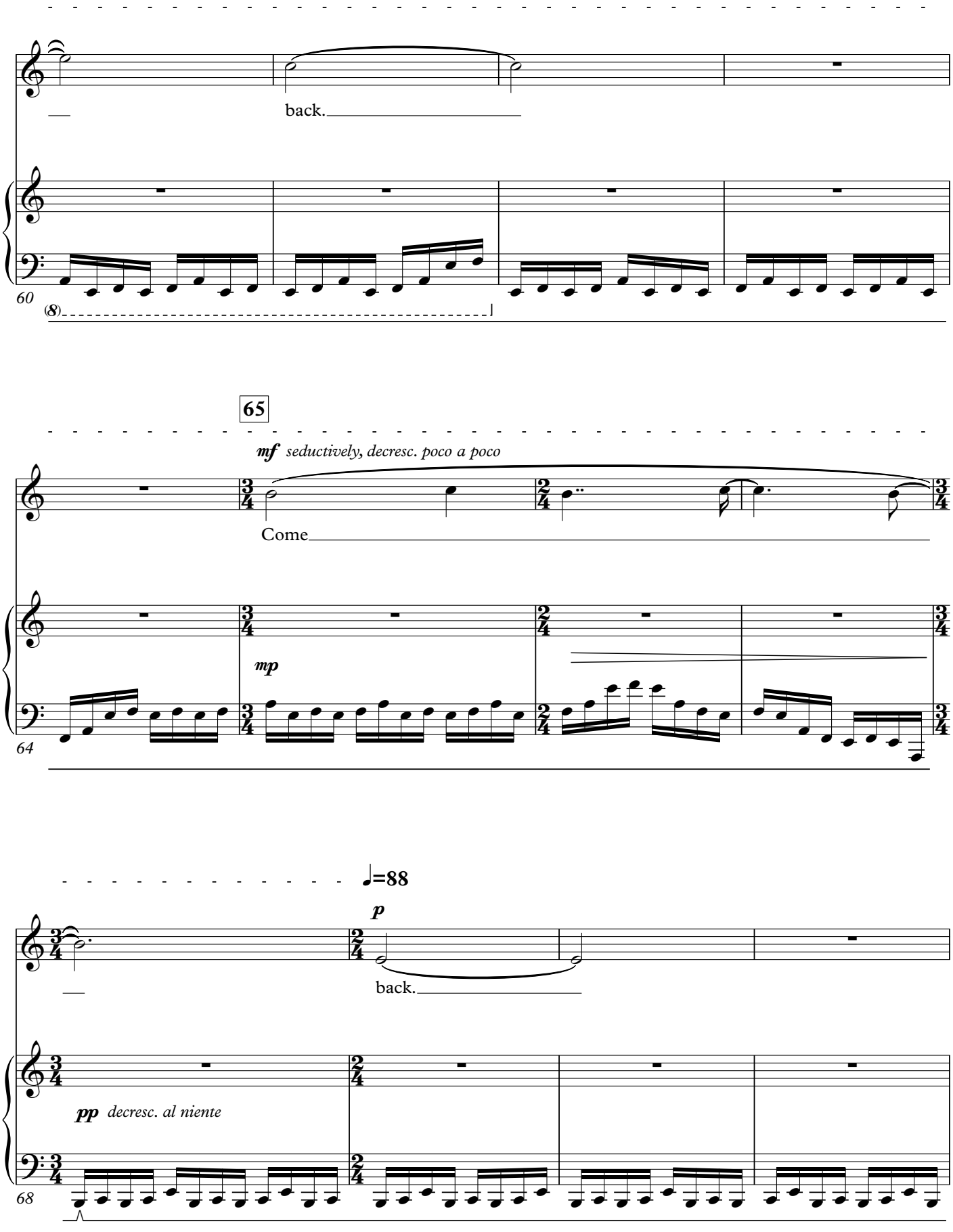

mf with increasing warmth
f
3
has its mer - its.
Your hands are the ones that mat - ter,
f
25

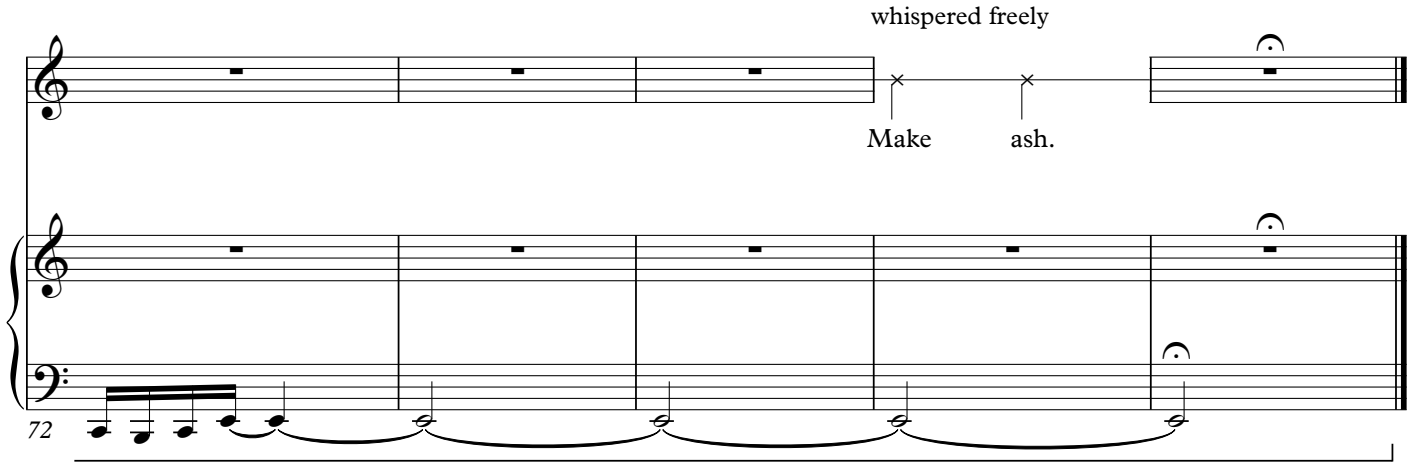

31 Exultant ♩=120
af - ter all.
ppp
30


f joyful
Wing - ed,
lit.
The
mf
33

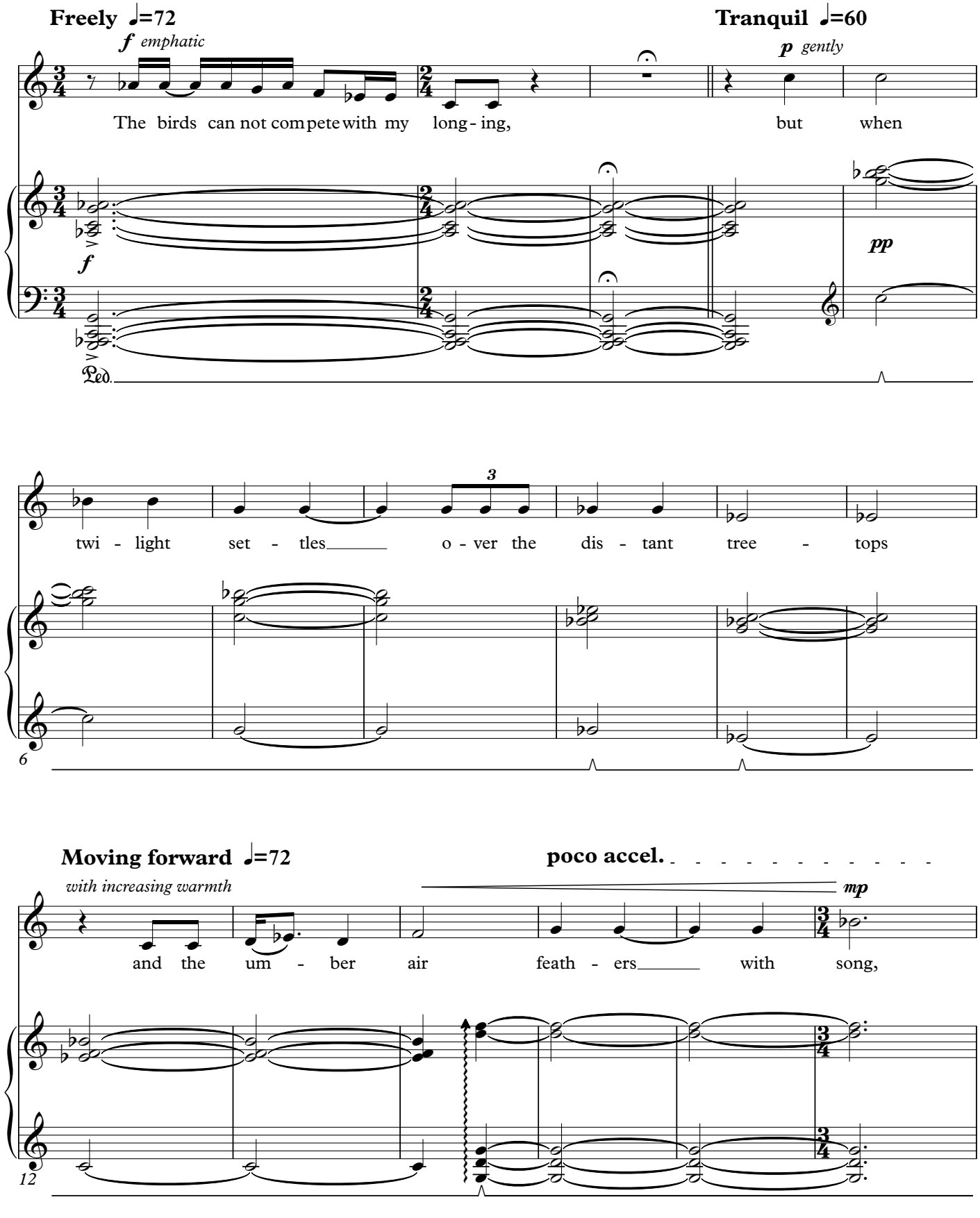

3
proof pours from the floor
f
36
of my bo - - - - - - - -
8vb
40
46
ff ecstatic
dy.
Ah,
44

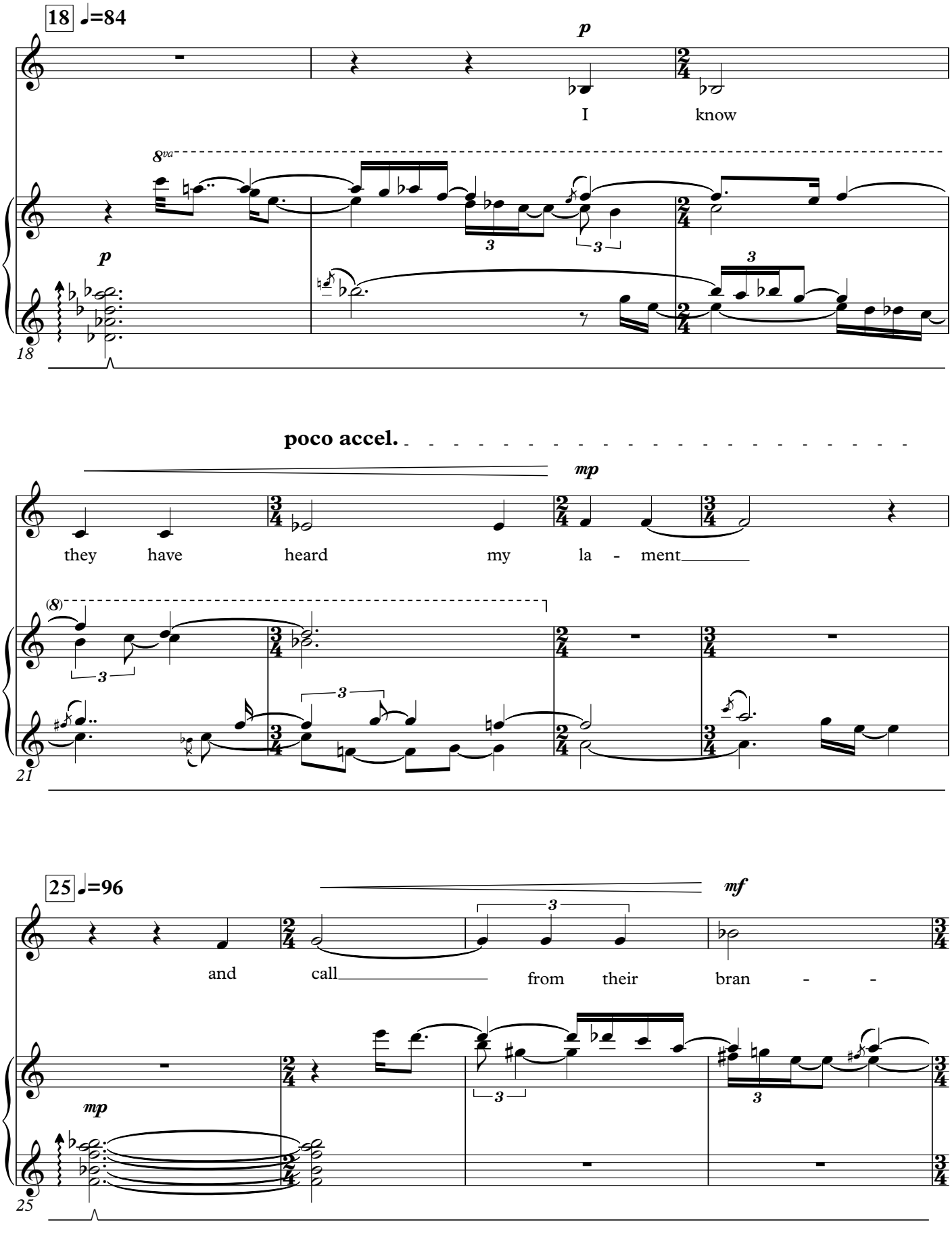

love - ly
ff
48
gon - er,
dark
wind.
52
56
rit.
f more gently
Come
back.
Come
decresc. poco a poco
56
8vb

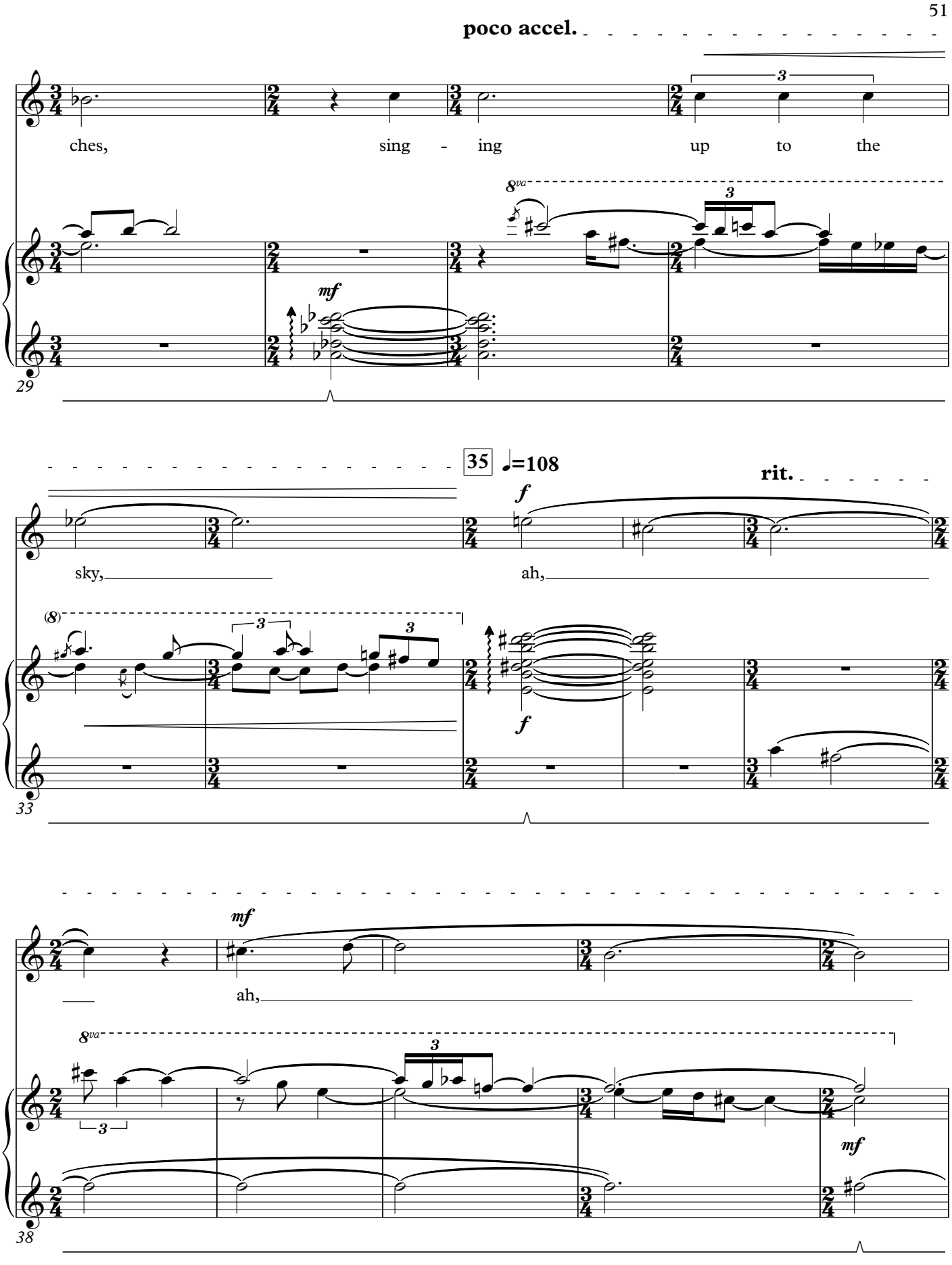

back.
60
(8)
65
mf seductively, decresc. poco a poco
Come
mp
64
♩=88
p
back.
pp decresc. al niente
68

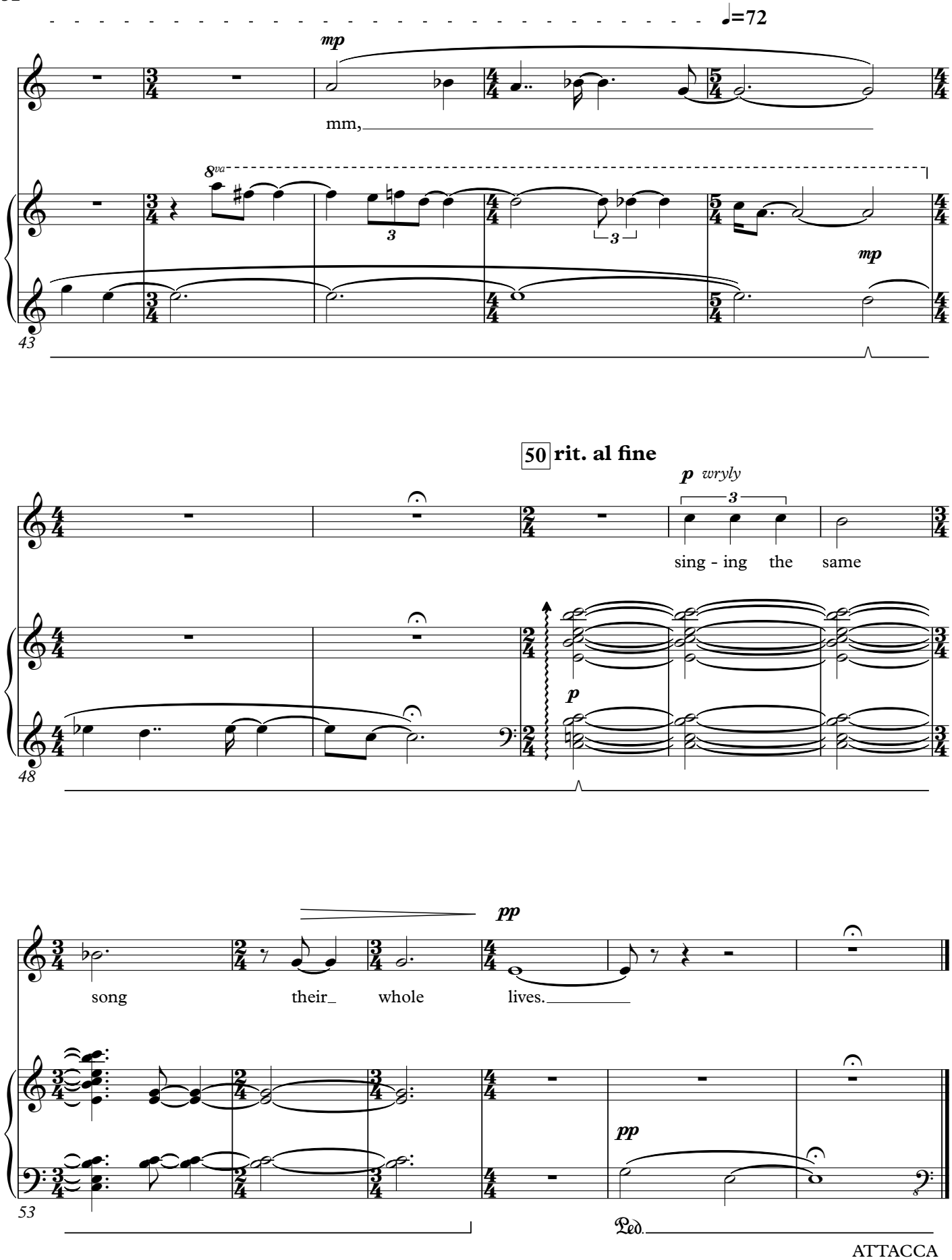

whispered freely
Make
ash.
72

8. Iseult Stagnates

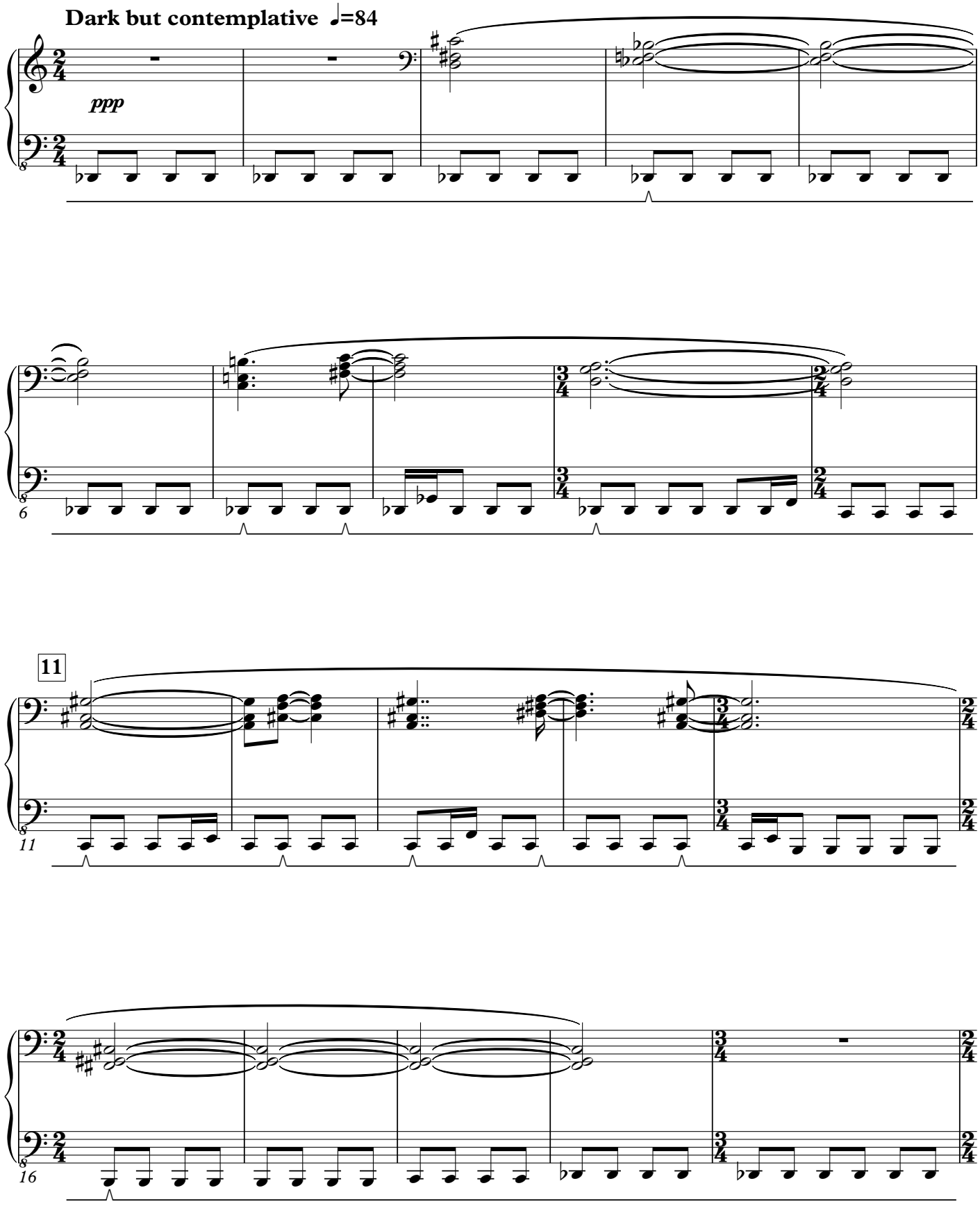


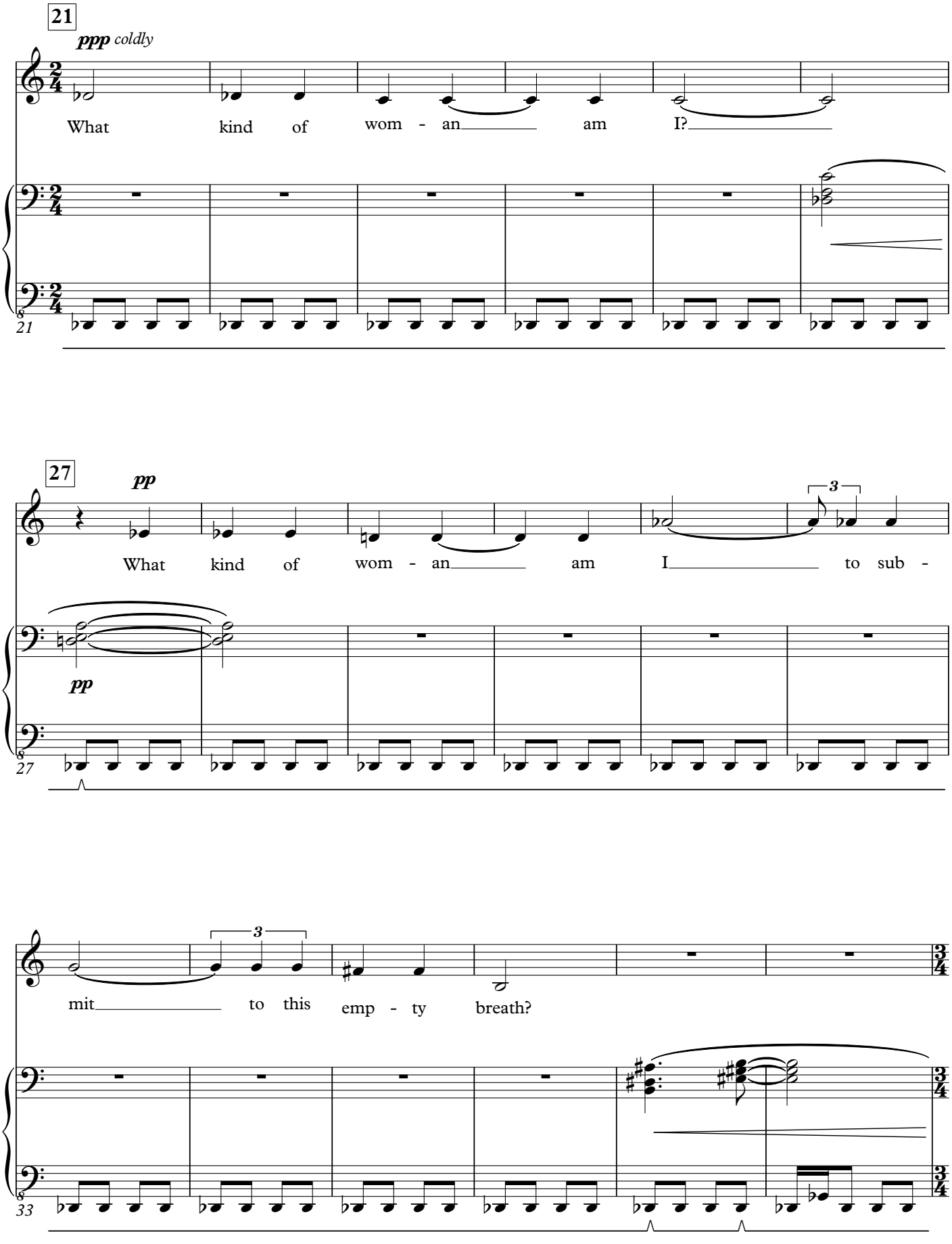

18 ♩=84
p
I know
8va
p
18
poco accel.
mp
they have heard my la - ment
(8)
21
25 ♩=96
mf
and call from their bran - -
mp
25

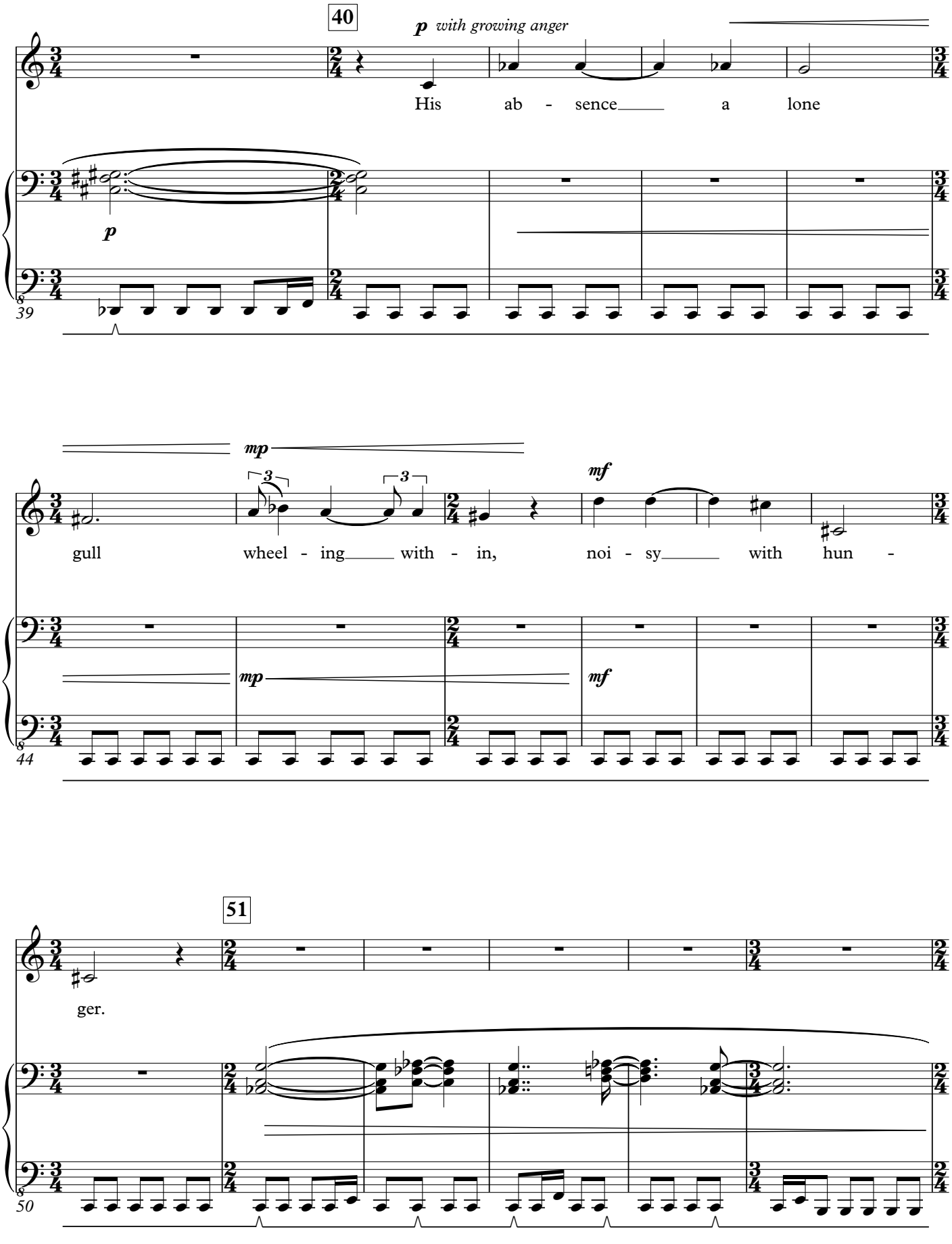

poco accel.
ches, sing - ing up to the
8va
3
mf
29
35
♩=108
rit.
sky,
ah,
(8)
f
33
mf
ah,
8va
mf
38

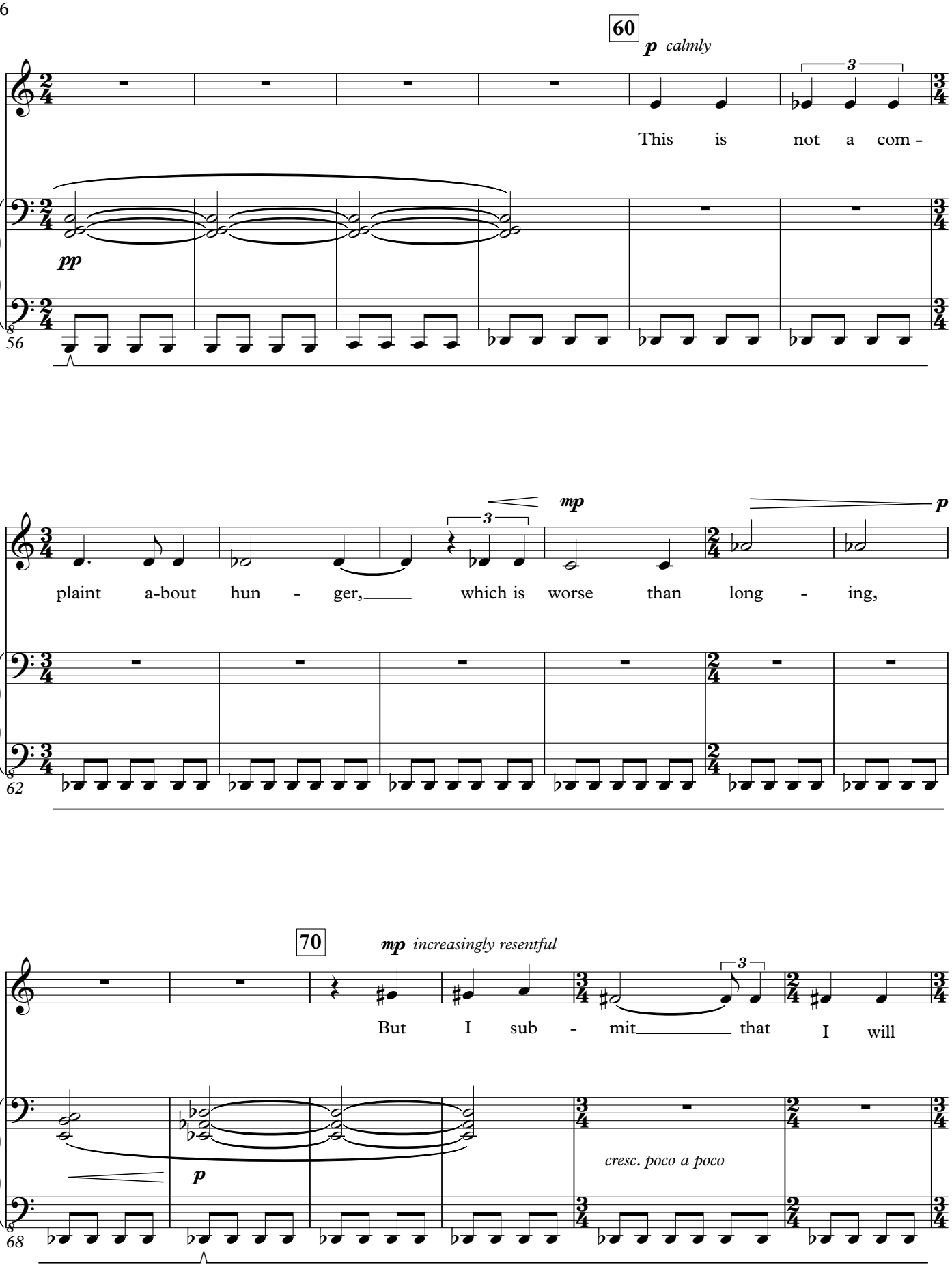

♩=72
mp
mm,
8va
3
3
mp
43
50 rit. al fine
p wryly
3
sing - ing the same
p
48
pp
song their whole lives.
pp
53
Ped.
ATTACCA

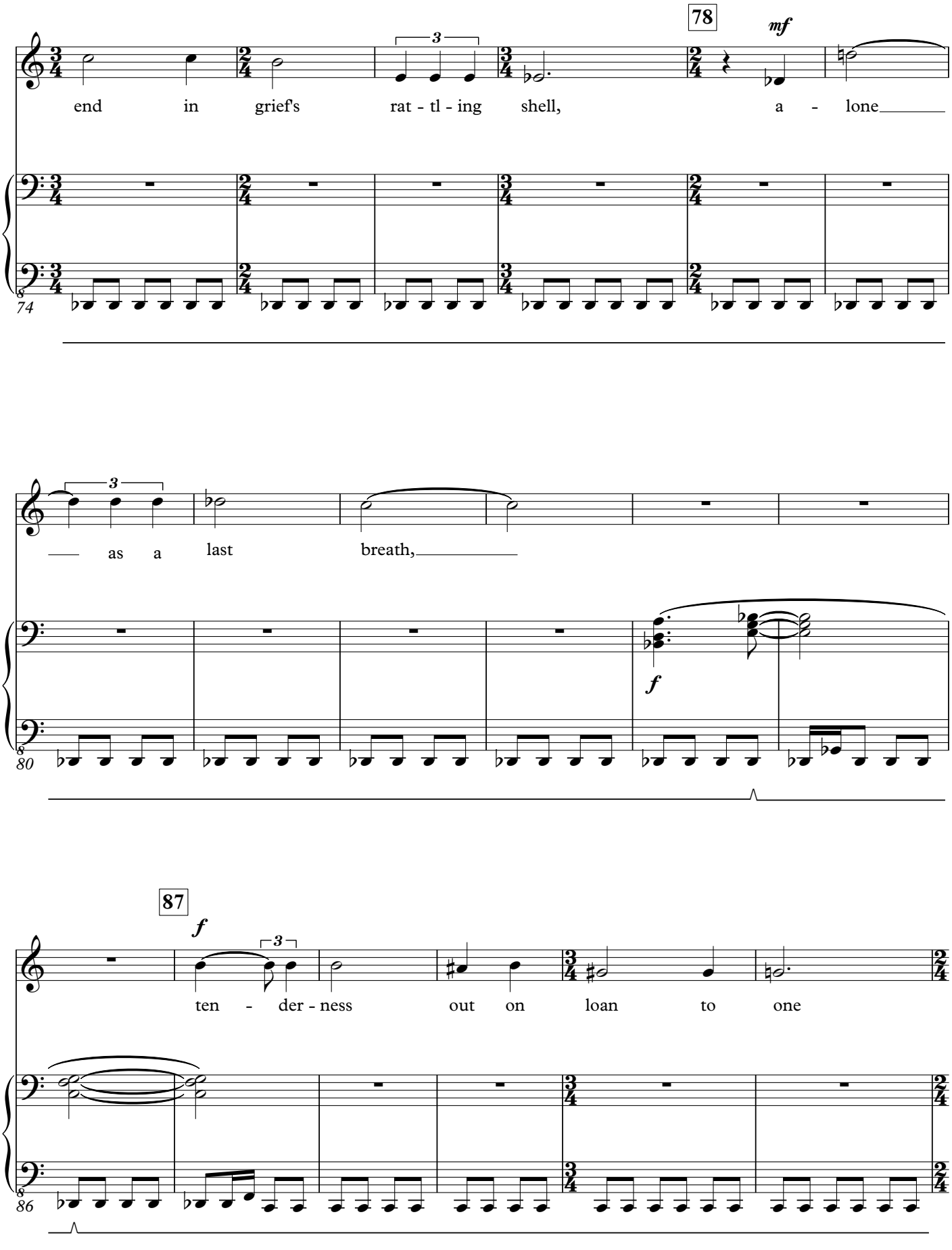
9. Iseult's Short-Breathed Sestina

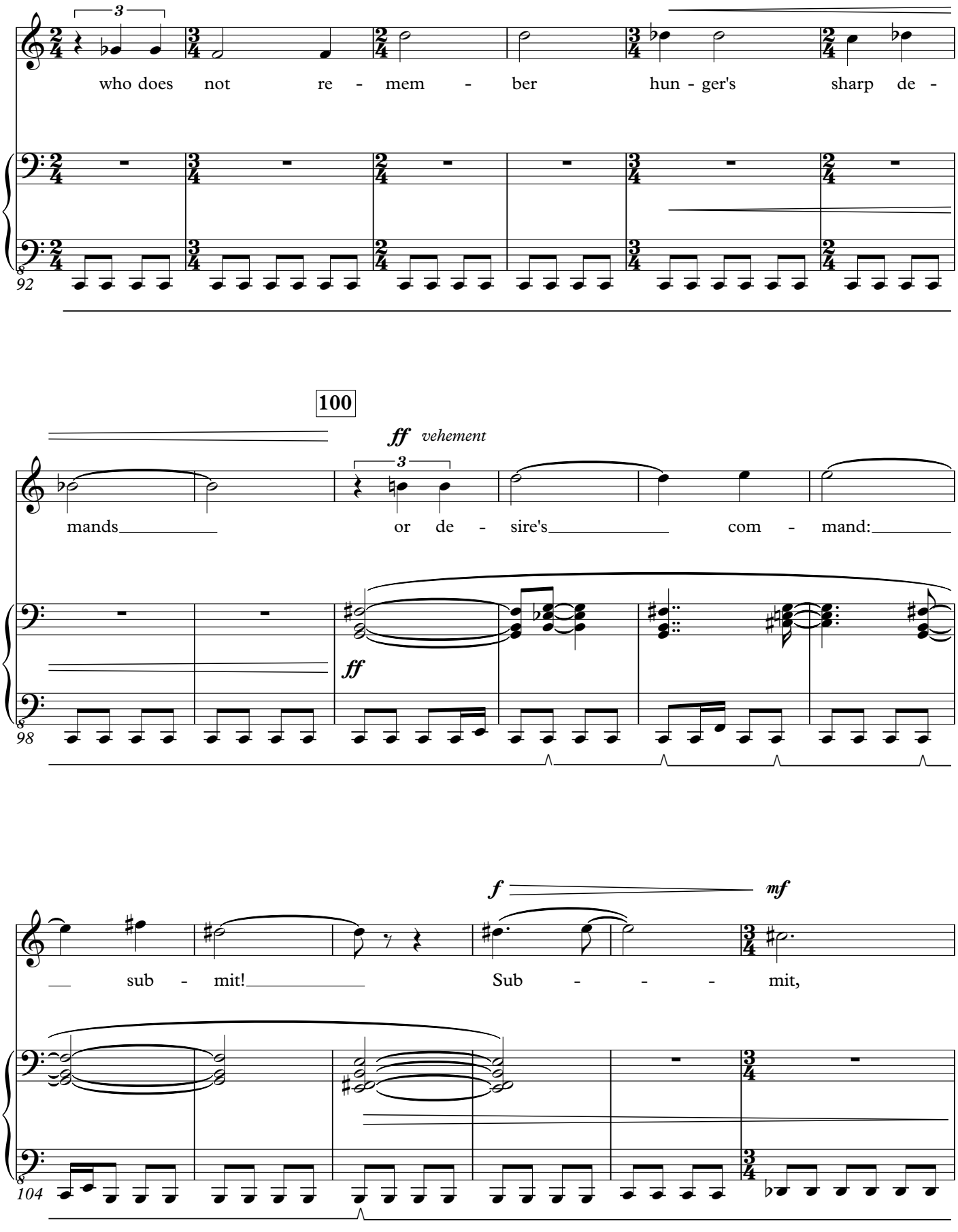


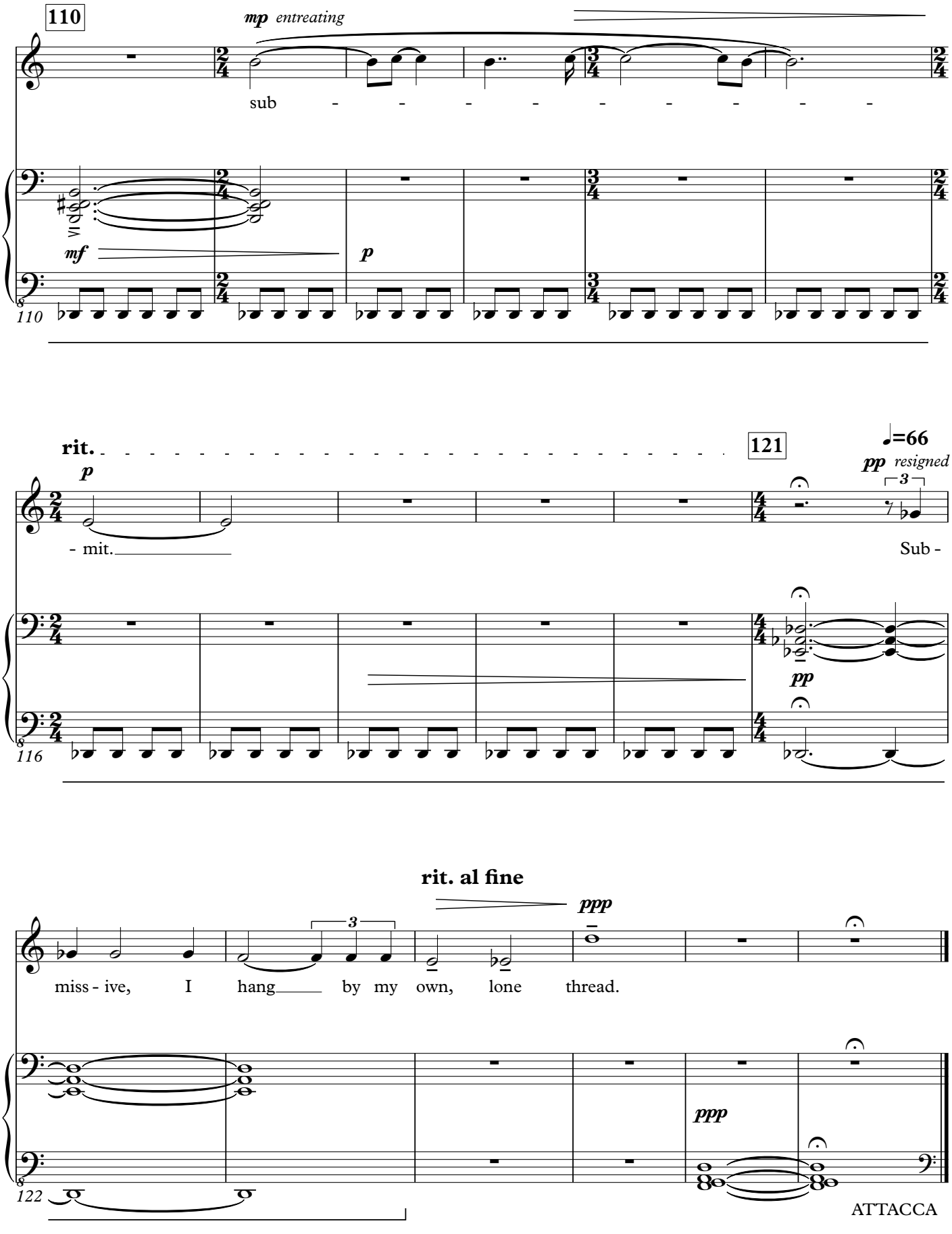

21
ppp coldly
What kind of wom - an am I?
21
27
pp
What kind of wom - an am I to sub -
3
pp
27
mit to this emp - ty breath?
3
33


40
p with growing anger
His ab - sence a lone
p
39
mp
3
3
mf
gull wheel - ing with - in, noi - sy with hun -
mp
mf
44
51
ger.
50

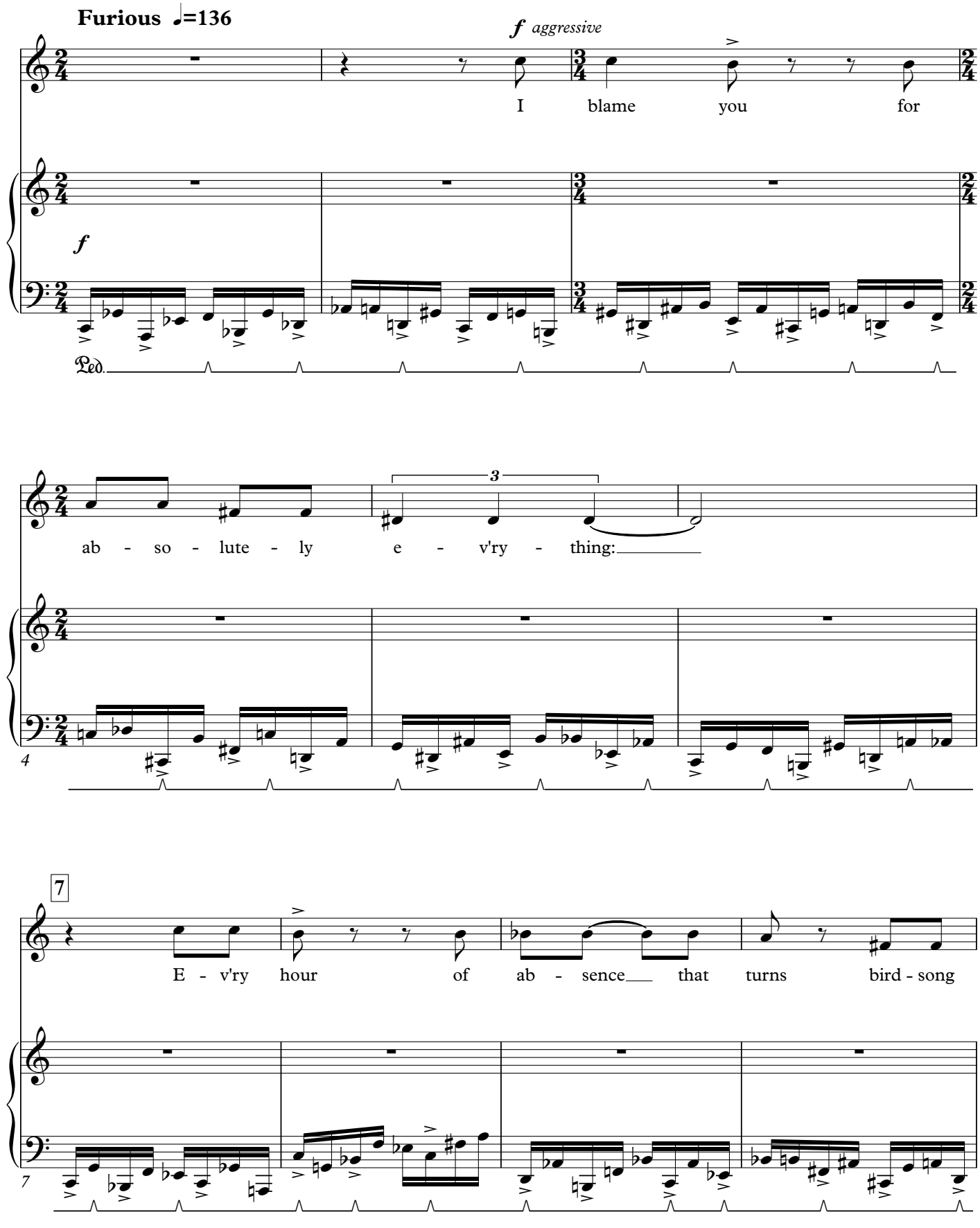

60
p calmly
This is not a com -
pp
56
mp
p
plaint a-bout hun - ger, which is worse than long - ing,
62
70
mp increasingly resentful
But I sub - mit that I will
p
cresc. poco a poco
68

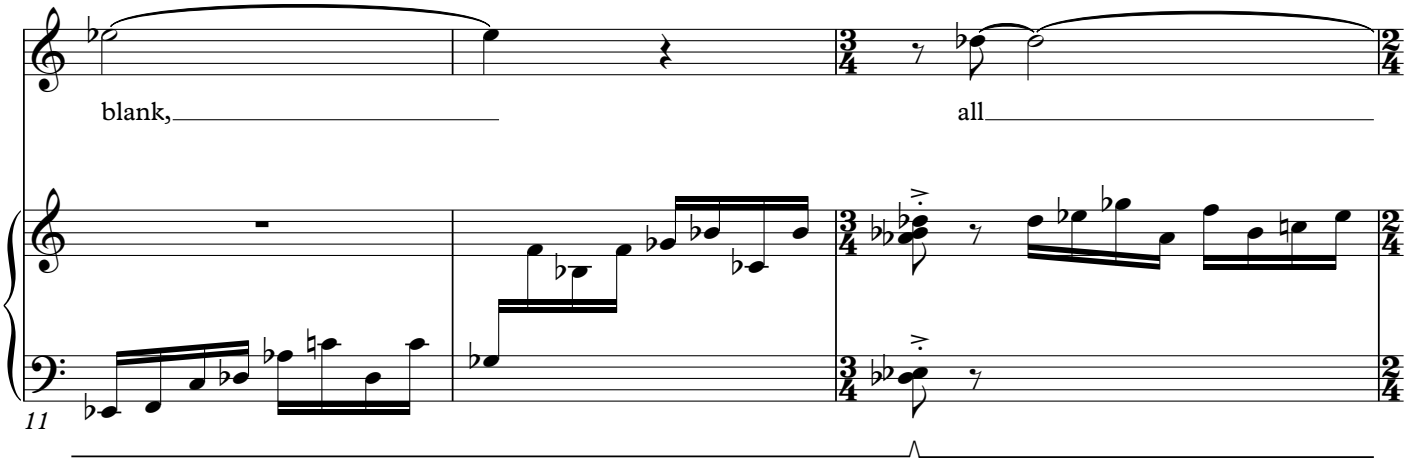

78
mf
end in grief's rat - tl - ing shell, a - lone
74
as a last breath,
f
80
87
f
ten - der - ness out on loan to one
86

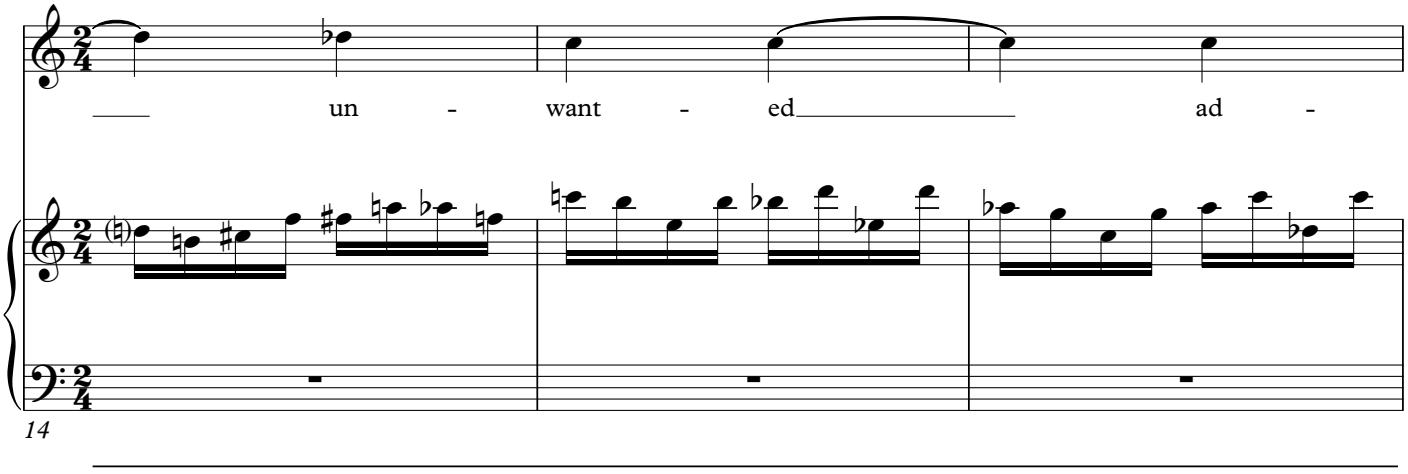

who does not re - mem - ber hun - ger's sharp de -
92
100
ff vehement
mands or de - sire's com - mand:
ff
98
f
mf
sub - mit! Sub - - - - mit,
104

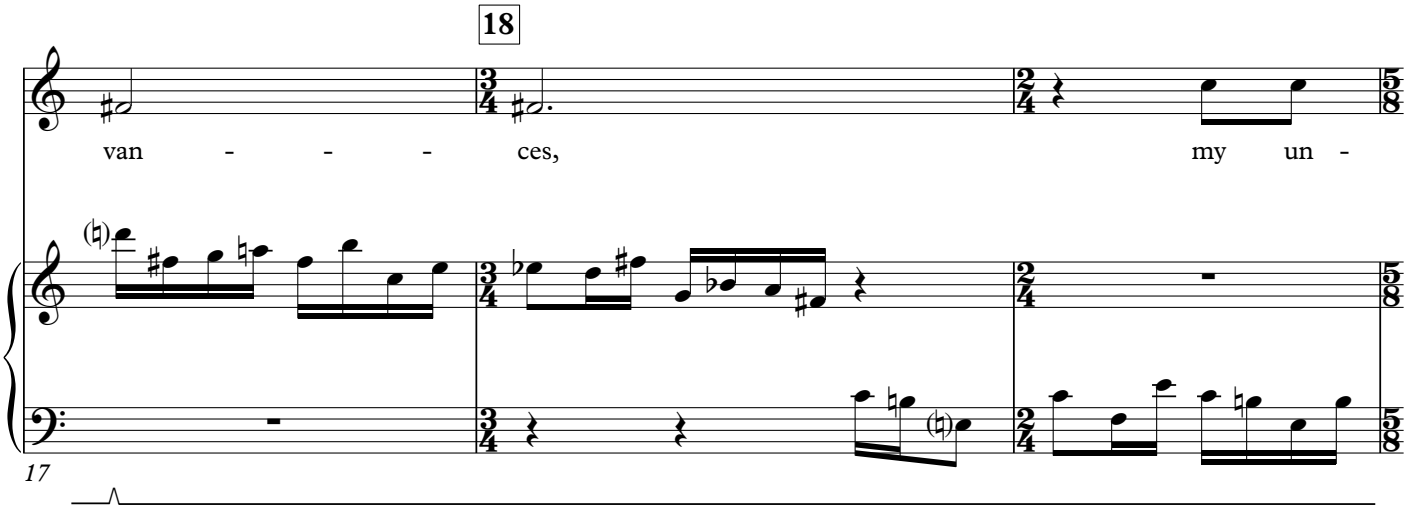

110
mp entreating
sub - - - - - - - - - -
mf
p
110
rit.
p
121
♩=66
pp resigned
3
- mit.
Sub -
pp
116
rit. al fine
ppp
3
miss - ive, I hang by my own, lone thread.
ppp
122
ATTACCA

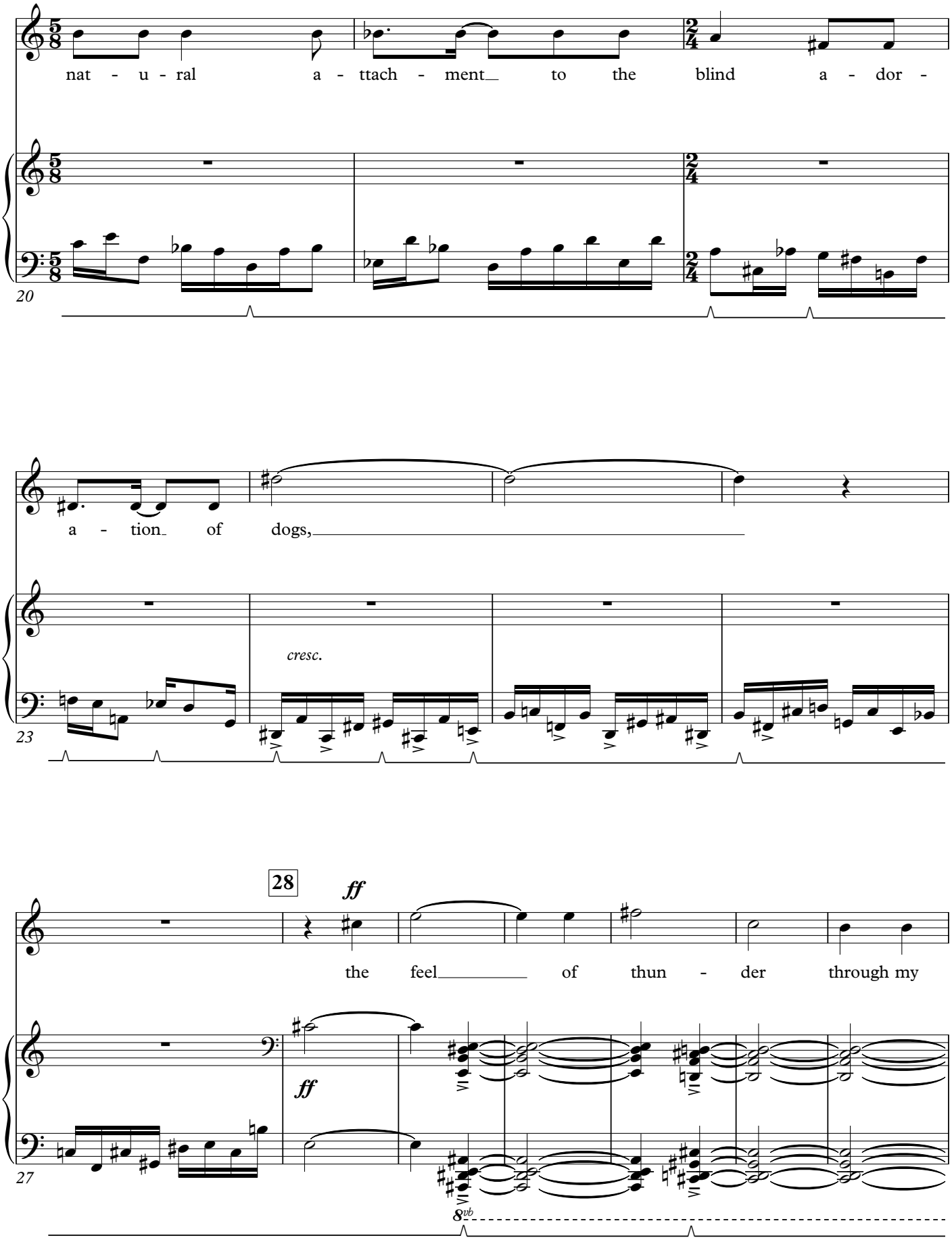
10. Iseult Storms

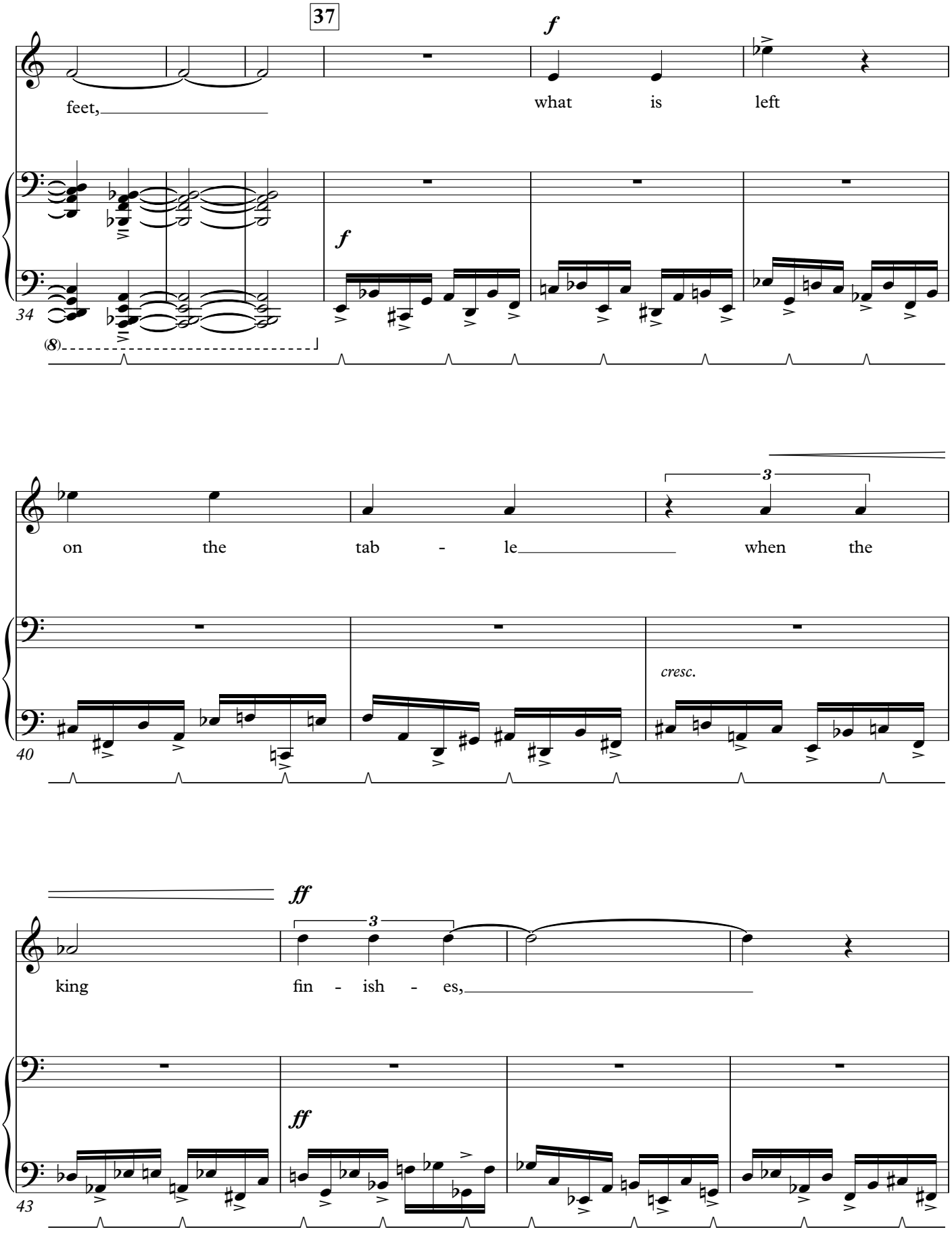


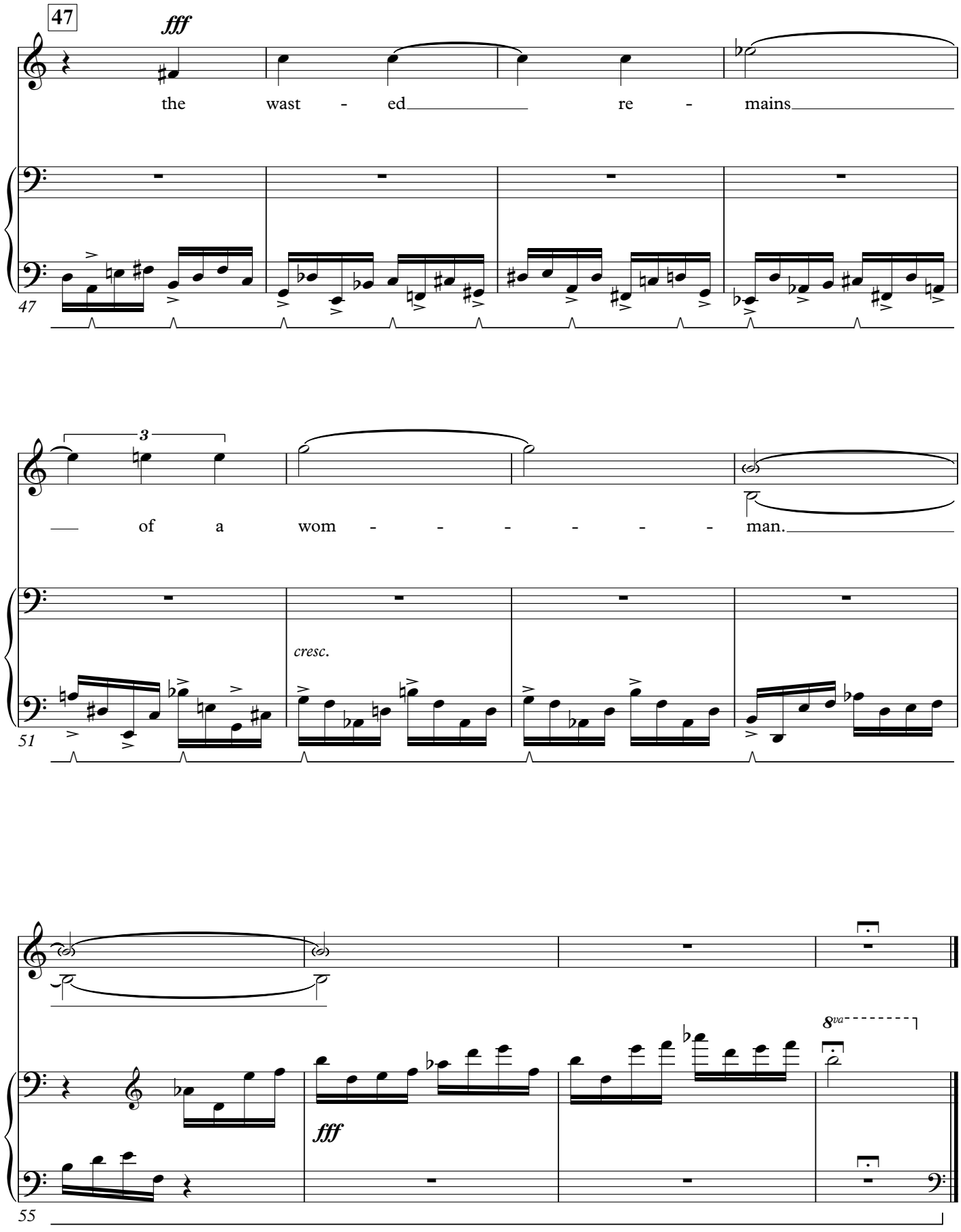

blank,
all
11


un - want - ed
ad -
14

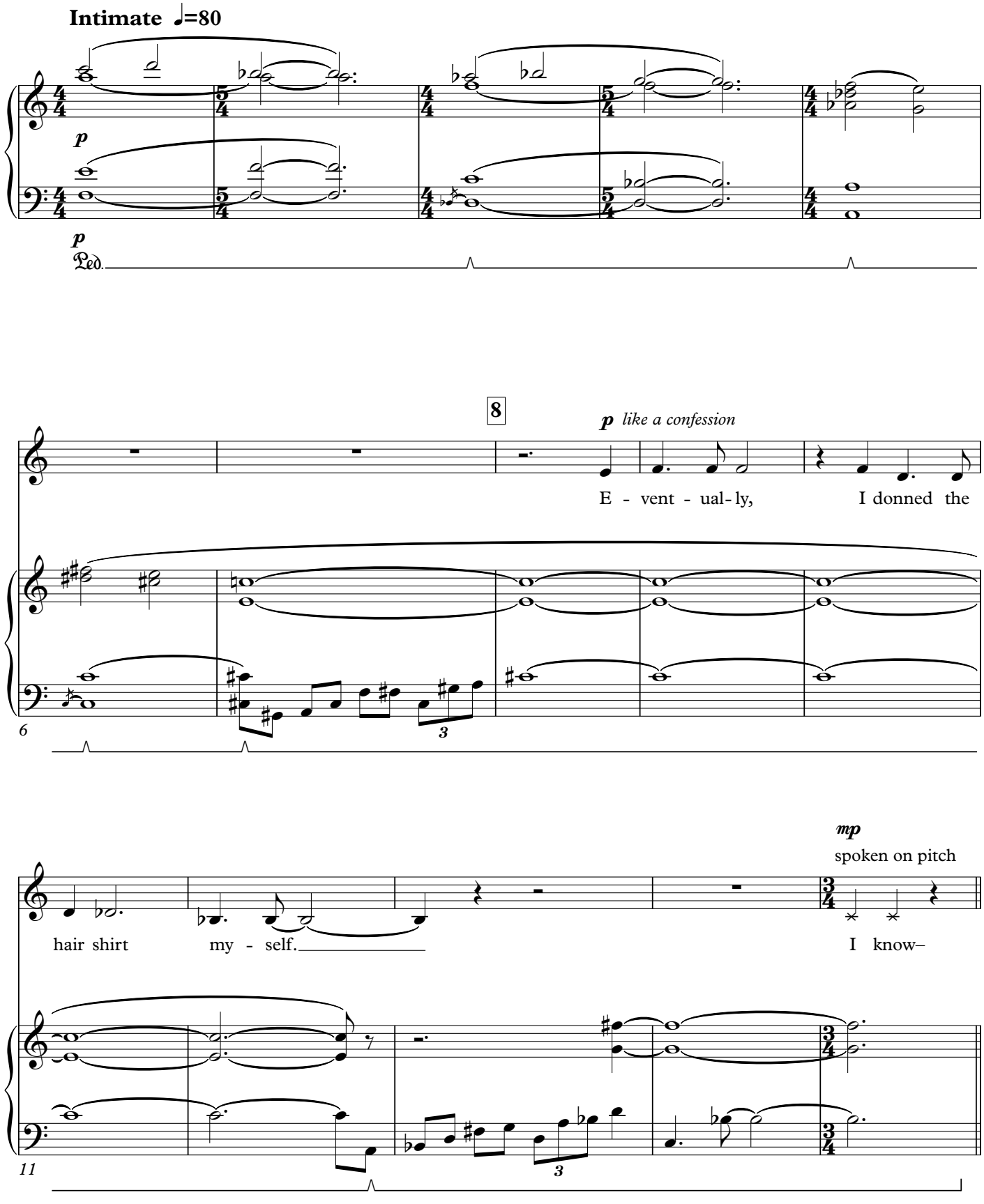

18
van - - - ces,
my un -
17

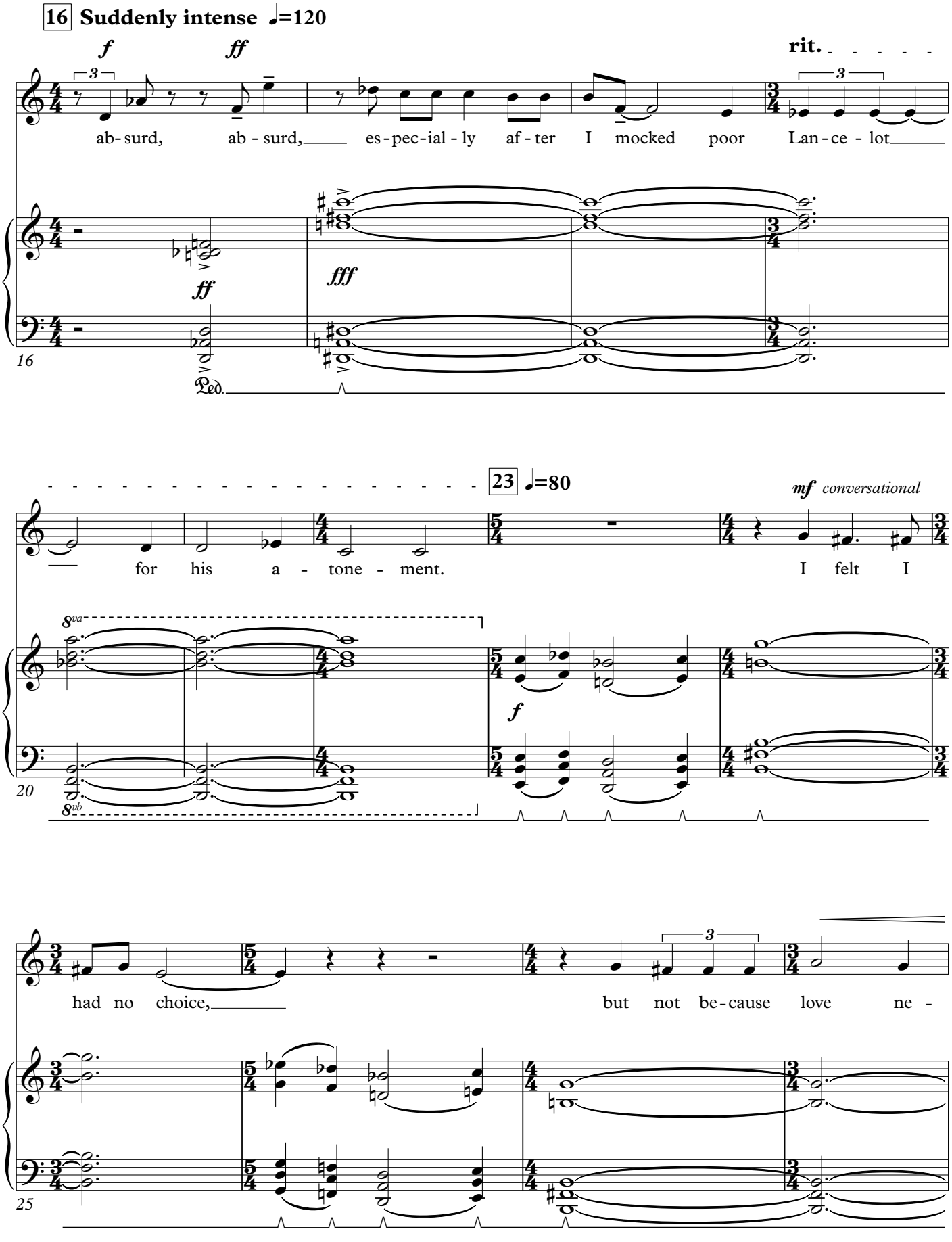

nat - u - ral a - ttach - ment to the blind a - dor -
20
a - tion of dogs,
cresc.
23
28
ff
the feel of thun - der through my
ff
27
8vb

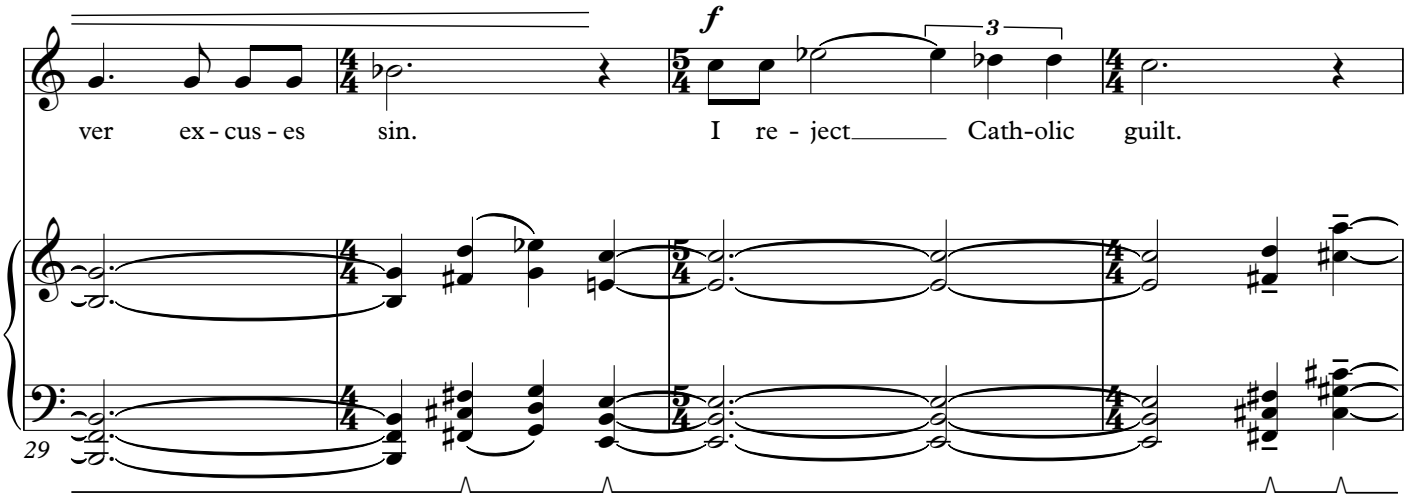

37
f
feet,
what is left
f
34
(8)
on the tab - le
when the
3
cresc.
40
ff
3
king
fin - ish - es,
ff
43

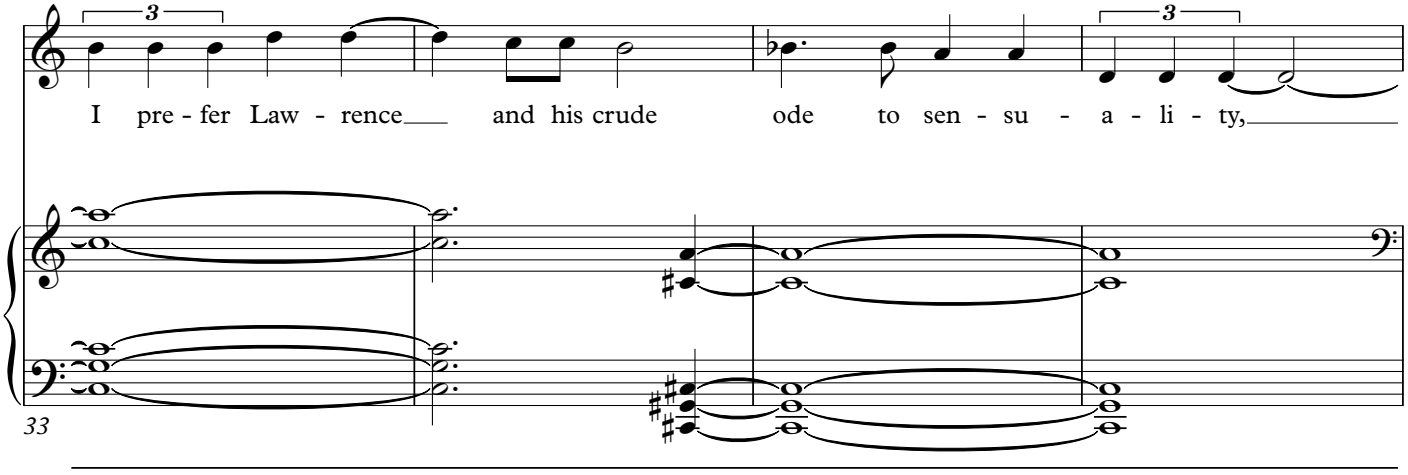

47
fff
the wast - ed re - mains
47
3
of a wom - - - - - - man.
cresc.
51
fff
8va
55

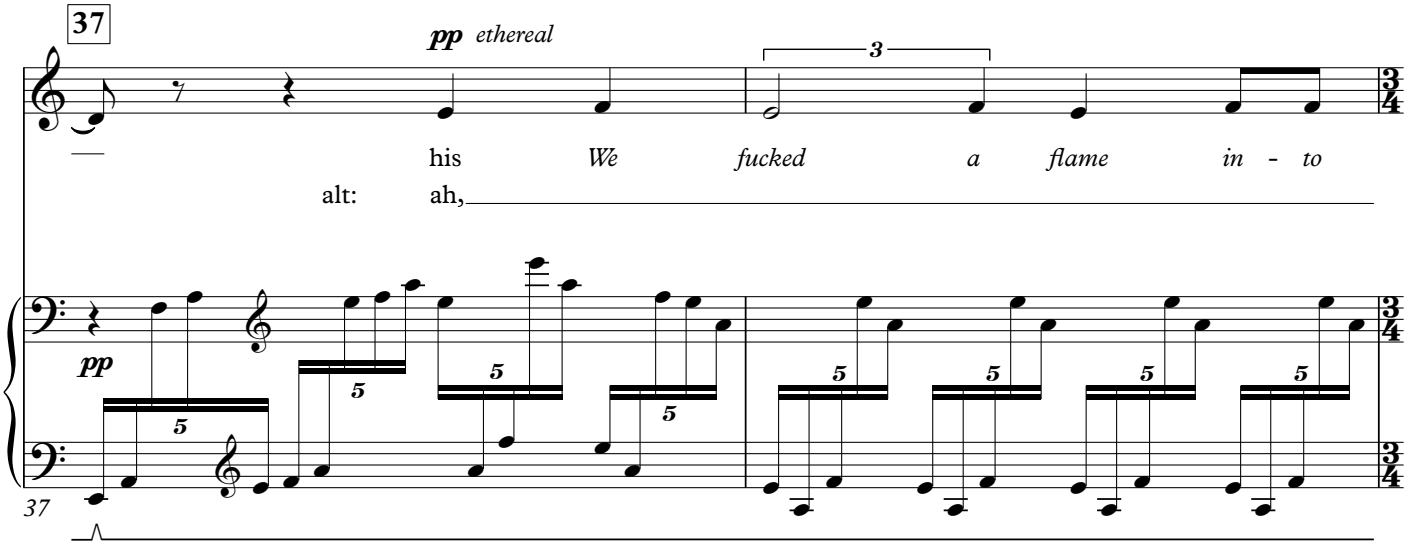
11. Iseult Speaks: "Eventually..."

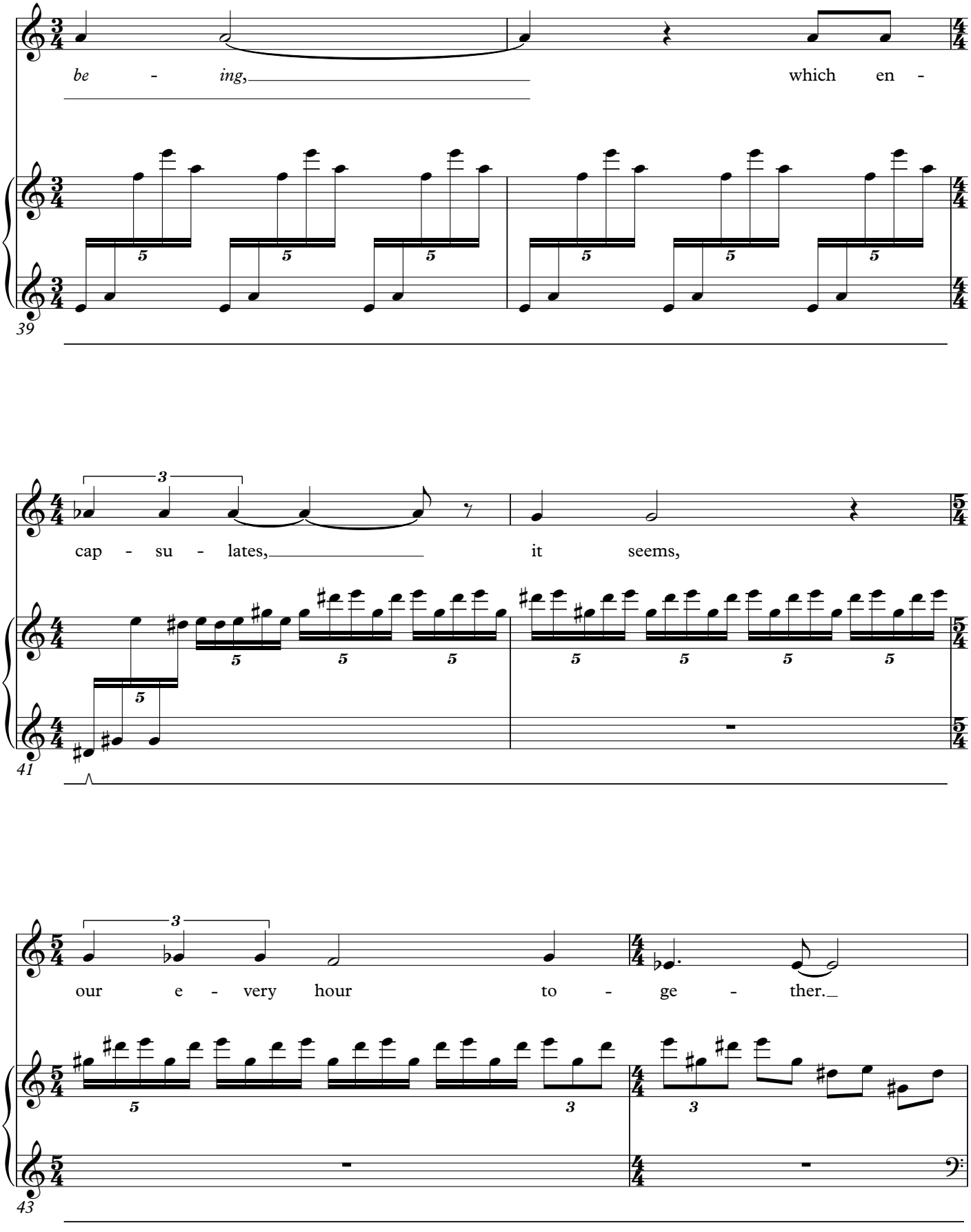


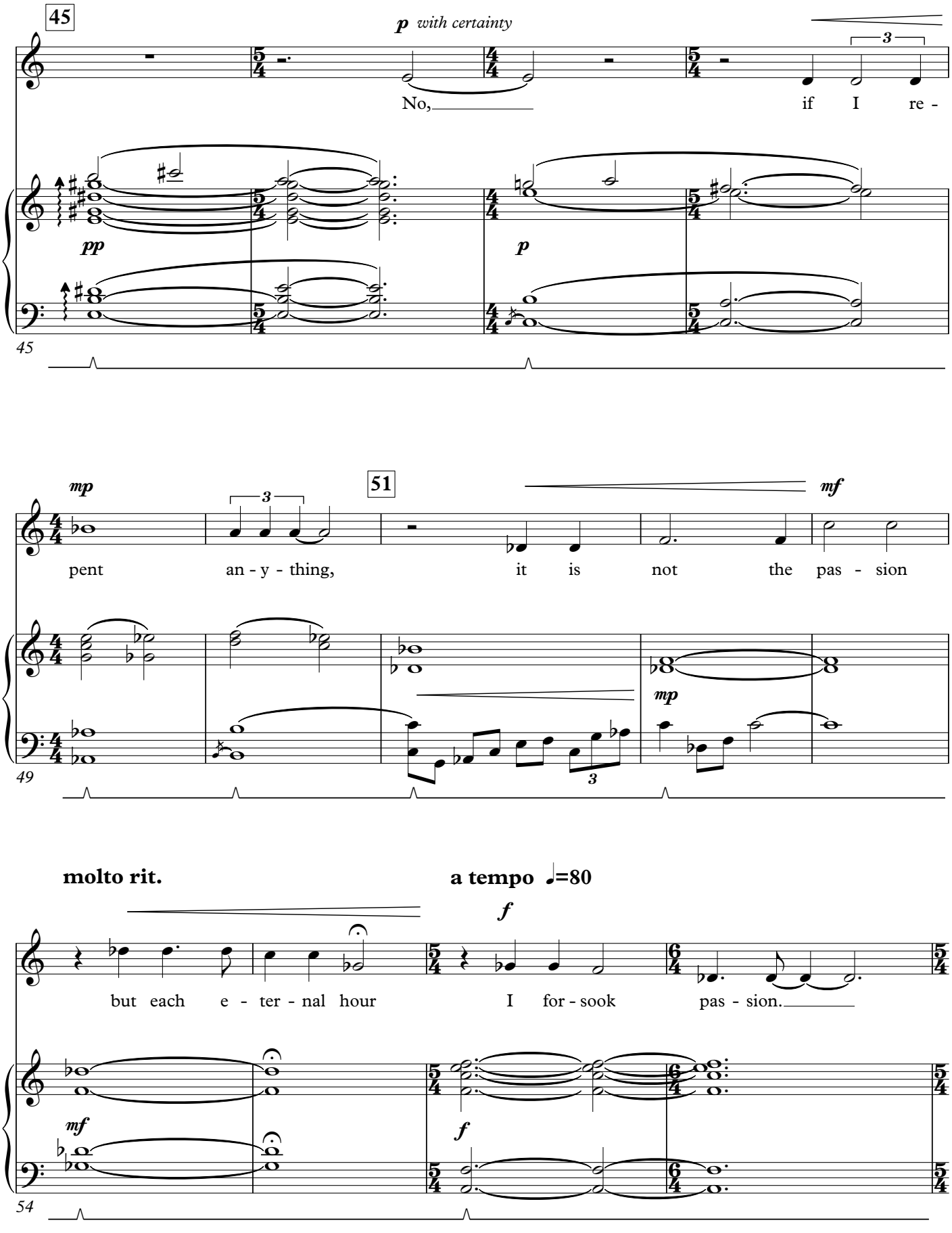

16 Suddenly intense ♩=120
f
ff
rit.
ab- surd, ab - surd, es - pec - ial - ly af - ter I mocked poor Lan - ce - lot
fff
ff
Ped.
16
23 ♩=80
mf conversational
for his a - tone - ment. I felt I
8va
8vb
f
20
had no choice, but not be - cause love ne -
25

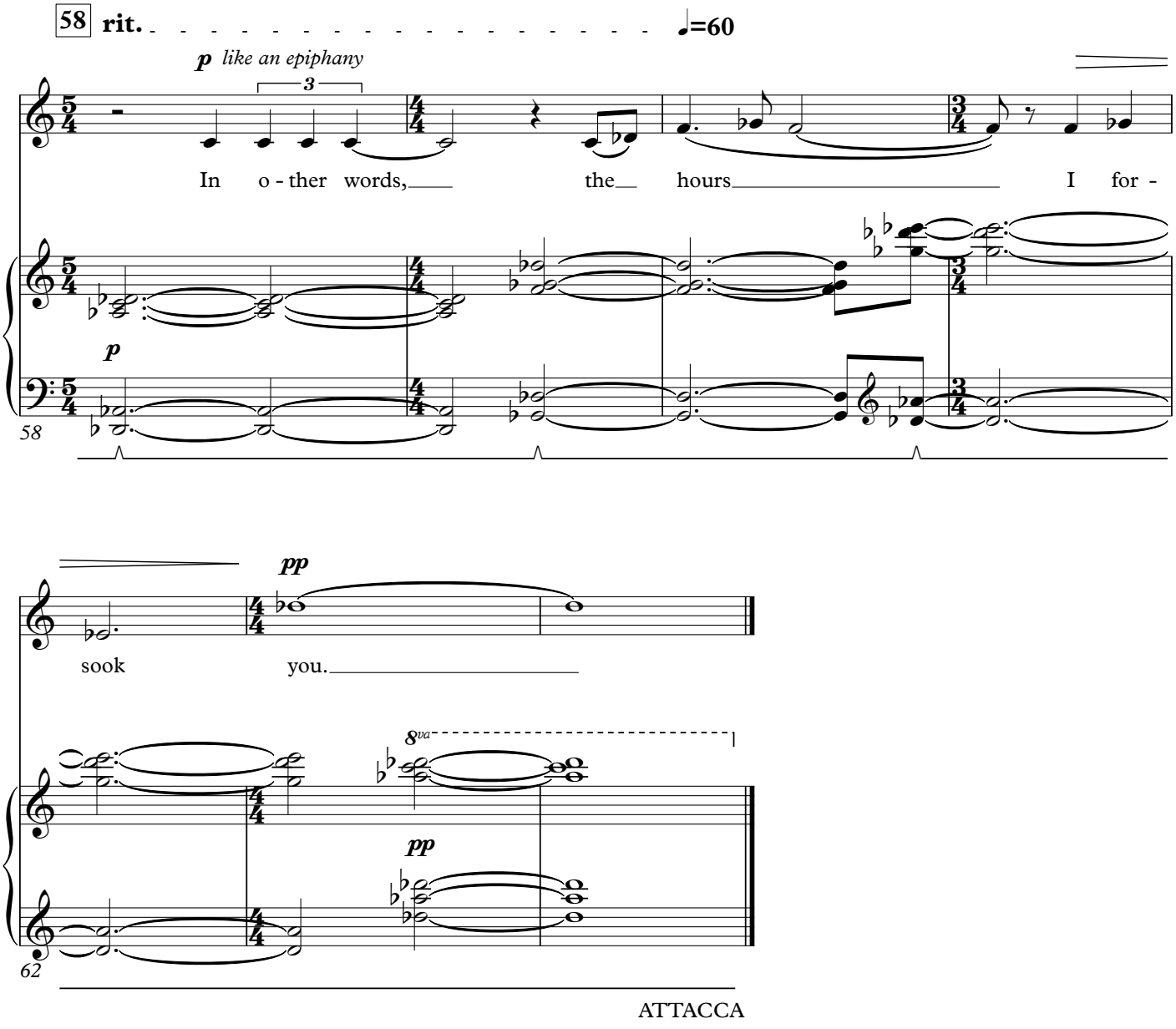

f
ver ex - cus - es sin.
I re - ject Cath-olic guilt.
29


I pre - fer Law - rence and his crude ode to sen - su - a - li - ty,
33


37
pp ethereal
his We fucked a flame in - to
alt: ah,
pp
37


be - ing, which en -
39
cap - su - lates, it seems,
41
our e - very hour to - ge - ther.
43


45
p with certainty
No,
if I re -
pp
p
45
mp
51
mf
pent
an - y - thing,
it is not the pas - sion
mp
49
molto rit.
a tempo ♩=80
f
but each e - ter - nal hour
I for - sook pas - sion.
mf
f
54


58 rit.
♩=60
p like an epiphany
3
In o - ther words, the hours I for -
p
58
pp
sook you.
8va
pp
62
ATTACCA

12. Interlude

Poignant ♩=60 **poco accel.**

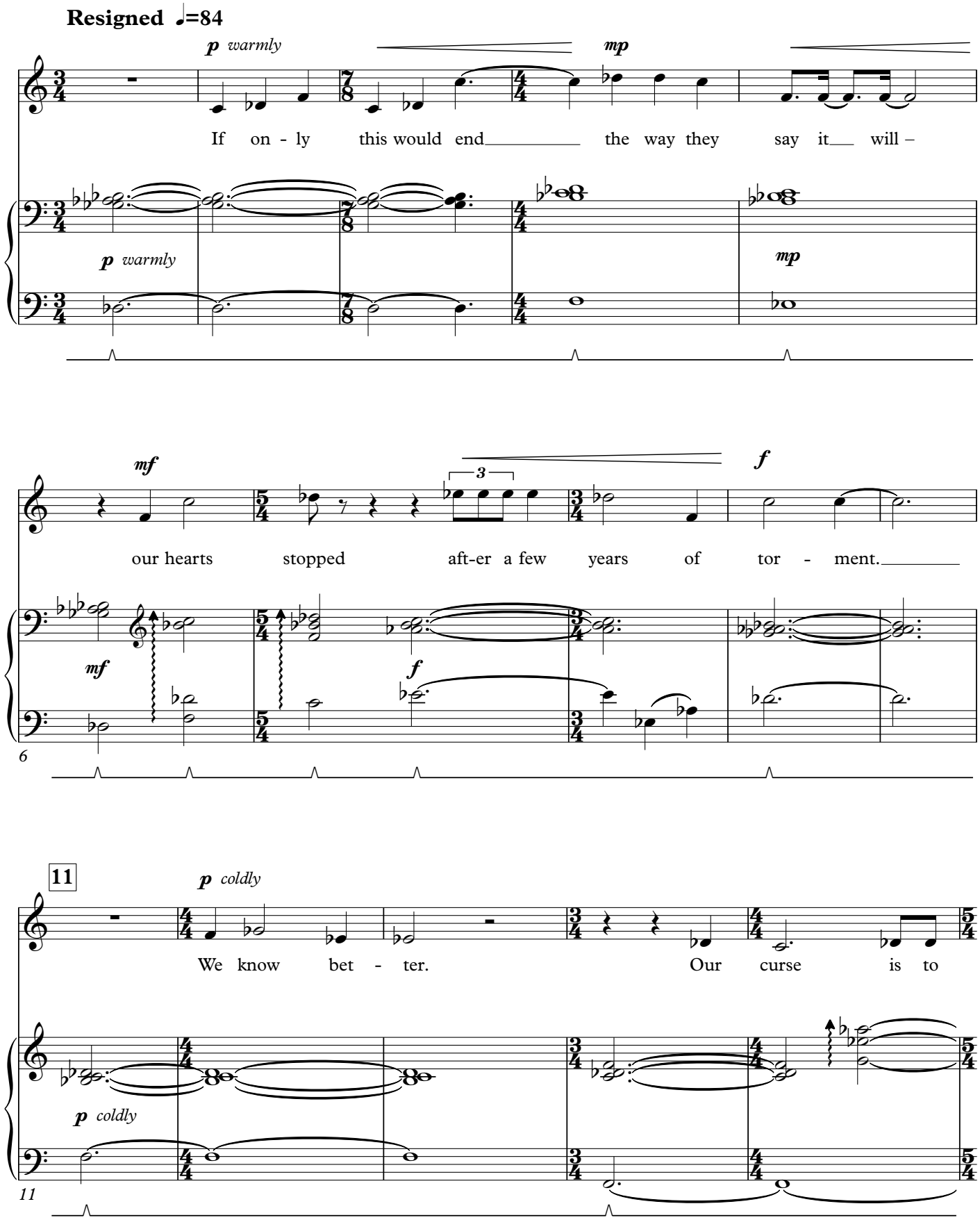
p

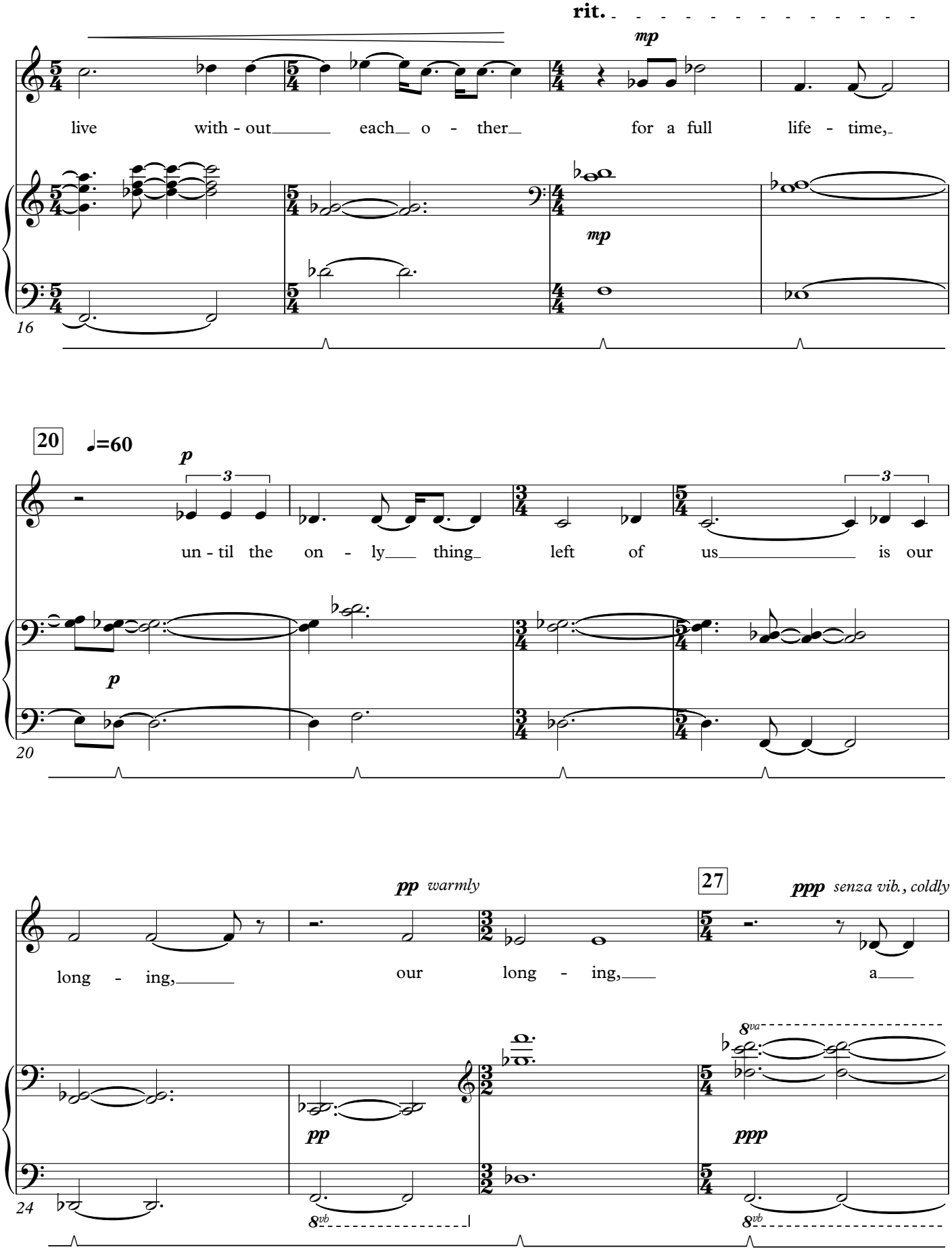
♩=72

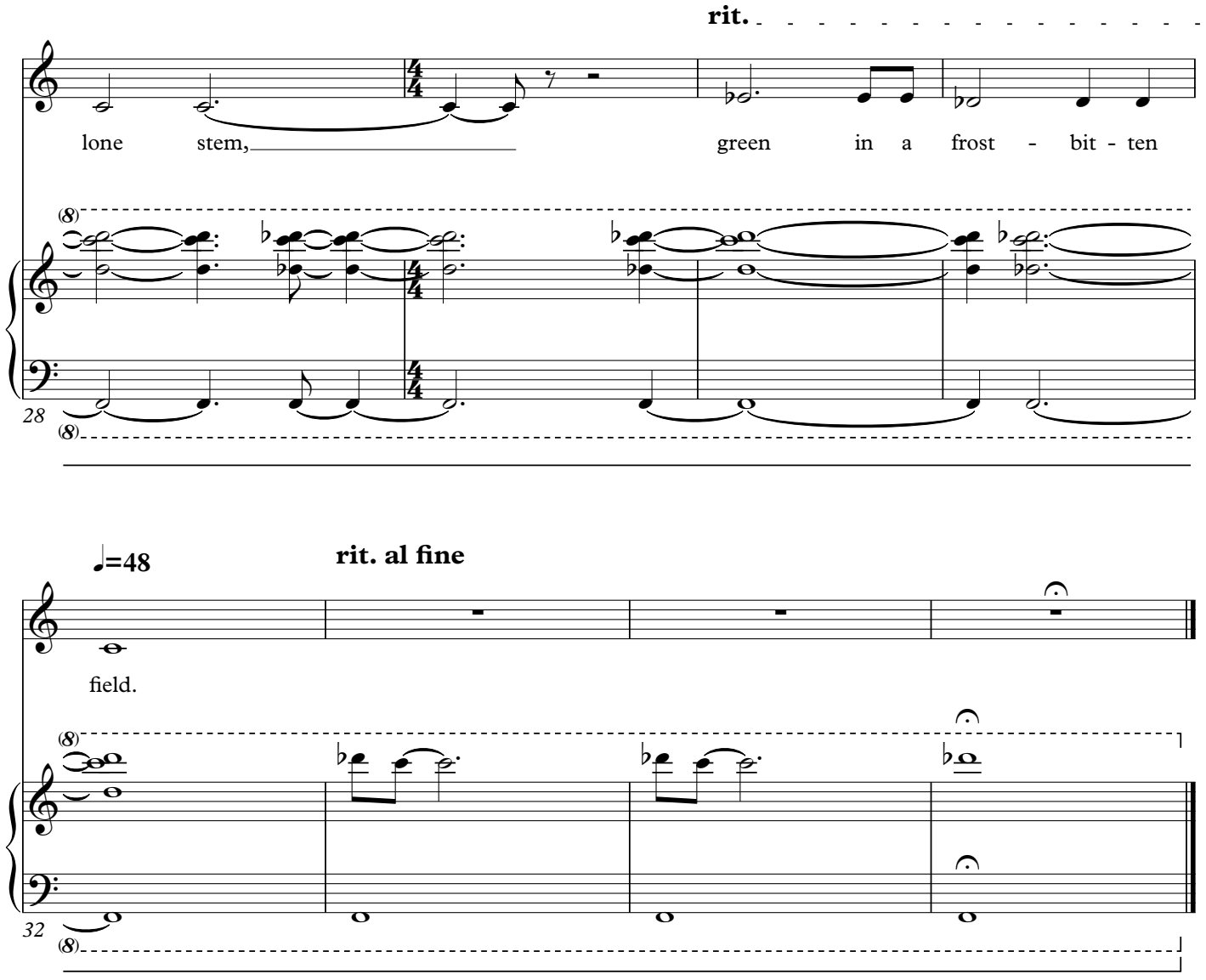
poco rit. al fine

ATTACCA

13. Iseult Steels (Herself)




rit.
mp
live with - out each o - ther for a full life - time,
mp
16
20
♩=60
p
un - til the on - ly thing left of us is our
p
20
pp warmly
27
ppp senza vib., coldly
long - ing, our long - ing, a
8va
pp
ppp
24
8vb
8vb


rit.
lone stem,
green in a frost - bit - ten
28
(8)
(8)

♩=48
rit. al fine
field.
32
(8)
(8)