Break of Day

Five Songs for High Voice and Piano

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1986

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Break of Day was composed in 1986 and premiered the following year in a version for voice and orchestra with Lucy Shelton, soprano, and the Hudson Valley Philharmonic conducted by Leon Botstein; the cycle received some light revision in 2009-10.

These five songs form the third installment of a trilogy of cycles, *America Singing*, the earlier members of which are composed to poems by Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Whitman and Dickinson appear in this third cycle too because they play prominent roles in Hart Crane's compact epic, *The Bridge* (1930), extracts from which form the text of the first, third, and fifth songs; the first and fifth form the two halves of a setting of a single poem, *The Harbor Dawn,* the narrative of which gives the cycle its title.

The songs in *Break of Day* oscillate between different modes of dawn and its mirror image, twilight: the erotic dawn that Crane celebrates by New York Harbor in sight of the Brooklyn Bridge; the grim dawn of a morning during the Civil War in Whitman's *A Sight in Camp*, where the awakening of love is no less fervent but entirely tragic; the gloomy twilight of the year, and of an era, in the conclusion of Crane's *Quaker Hill;* and the consoling maternal twilight of Dickinson's *Nature--the Gentlest Mother,* which leads the cycle home to the ecstatic dawn pouring through Crane's harbor window.

Duration: about 22 minutes.

A few very small liberties--minor cuts, condensations, and one name change--have been taken with the texts. The extracts from *The Bridge* are used by permission of the original American publisher, Horace Liveright, and the poem by Emily Dickinson by permission of the trustees of Harvard University Press.

The Harbor Dawn
Hart Crane
(Songs 1 and 5, divided at "around me lay.")

Insistently through sleep--a tide of voices--
They meet you listening midway in your dream,
The long, tired sounds, fog-insulated noises:
Gongs in white surplices, beshrouded wails,
Far strum of fog horns…signals dispersed in veils.

And then a truck will lumber past the wharves
As winch engines begin throbbing on some deck;
Or a drunken stevedore's howl and thud below
Comes echoing alley-upward through dim snow.

And if they take your sleep away sometimes
They give it back again. Soft sleeves of sound
Attend the darkling harbor, the pillowed bay;
Somewhere out there in blankness steam

Spills into steam, and wanders, washed away
--Flurried by keen fifings, eddied
Among distant chiming buoys--adrift. The sky,
Cool feathery fold, suspends, distills
This wavering slumber. . . slowly--
Immemorially the window, the half-covered chair
Ask nothing but this sheath of pallid air.

And you beside me, blessed now while sirens
Sing to us, stealthily weave us into day--
Serenely now, before day claims our eyes
Your cool arms murmurously about me lay.

While myriad snowy hands are clustering at the panes--

your hands within my hands are deeds;
my tongue upon your throat--singing
arms close; eyes wide, undoubtful
dark
drink the dawn--
a forest shudders in your hair!

The window goes blond slowly. Frostily clears.
From Cyclopean towers across Manhattan waters
--Two-three bright window-eyes aglitter, disk
The sun, released--aloft with cold gulls hither.

The fog leans one last moment on the sill.
Under the mistletoe of dreams, a star--
As though to join us at some distant hill--
Turns in the waking west and goes to sleep.

A Sight in Camp
Walt Whitman
(Song 2)

A sight in camp in the day-break grey and dim,
As from my tent I emerge so early sleepless,
As slow I walk in the cool fresh air the path near by the hospital tent,
Three forms I see on stretchers lying, brought out there, untended lying,
Over each the blanket spread, ample brownish woolen blanket,
Grey and heavy blanket, folding, covering all.

Curious I halt and silent stand;
Then with light fingers I from the face of the nearest the first just lift the blanket;
Who are you elderly man so gaunt and grim, with well-grey'd hair, and flesh all sunken about the eyes?
Who are you my dear comrade?

Then to the second I step--And who are you my child and darling?
Who are you, sweet boy with cheeks yet blooming?

Then to the third--a face nor child nor old, very calm, as of
beautiful yellow-white ivory;
Young man, I think I know you--I think this face is the face of the Christ himself;
Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.

From *Quaker Hill*.
Hart Crane
(Song 3)

So, must we from the hawk's far stemming view,
Must we descend as worm's eye to construe
Our love of all we touch, and take it to the Gate
As humbly as a guest who knows himself too late,
His news already told? Yes, while the heart is wrung,
Arise-yes, take this sheaf of dust upon your tongue!
In one last angelus lift throbbing throat-
Listen, transmuting silence with that stilly note

Of pain that Emily, that Isadora knew!
While high from dim elm-chancels hung with dew,

That triple-noted clause of moonlight-
Yes, whip-poor-will, unhusks the heart of fright,
Breaks us and saves, yes, breaks the heart, yet yields
That patience that is armour and that shields
Love from despair-when love foresees the end-
Leaf after autumnal leaf
   break off,
      descend-
                  descend-

(Note: "Isadora" [Duncan] is changed in the song to "Walt")

Nature - the Gentlest Mother is
Emily Dickinson
(Song 4)

Nature -- the Gentlest Mother is,
Impatient of no Child --
The feeblest -- or the waywardest --
Her Admonition mild --

In Forest -- and the Hill --
By Traveller -- be heard --
Restraining Rampant Squirrel --
Or too impetuous Bird --

How fair Her Conversation --
A Summer Afternoon --
Her Household -- Her Assembly --
And when the Sun go down --

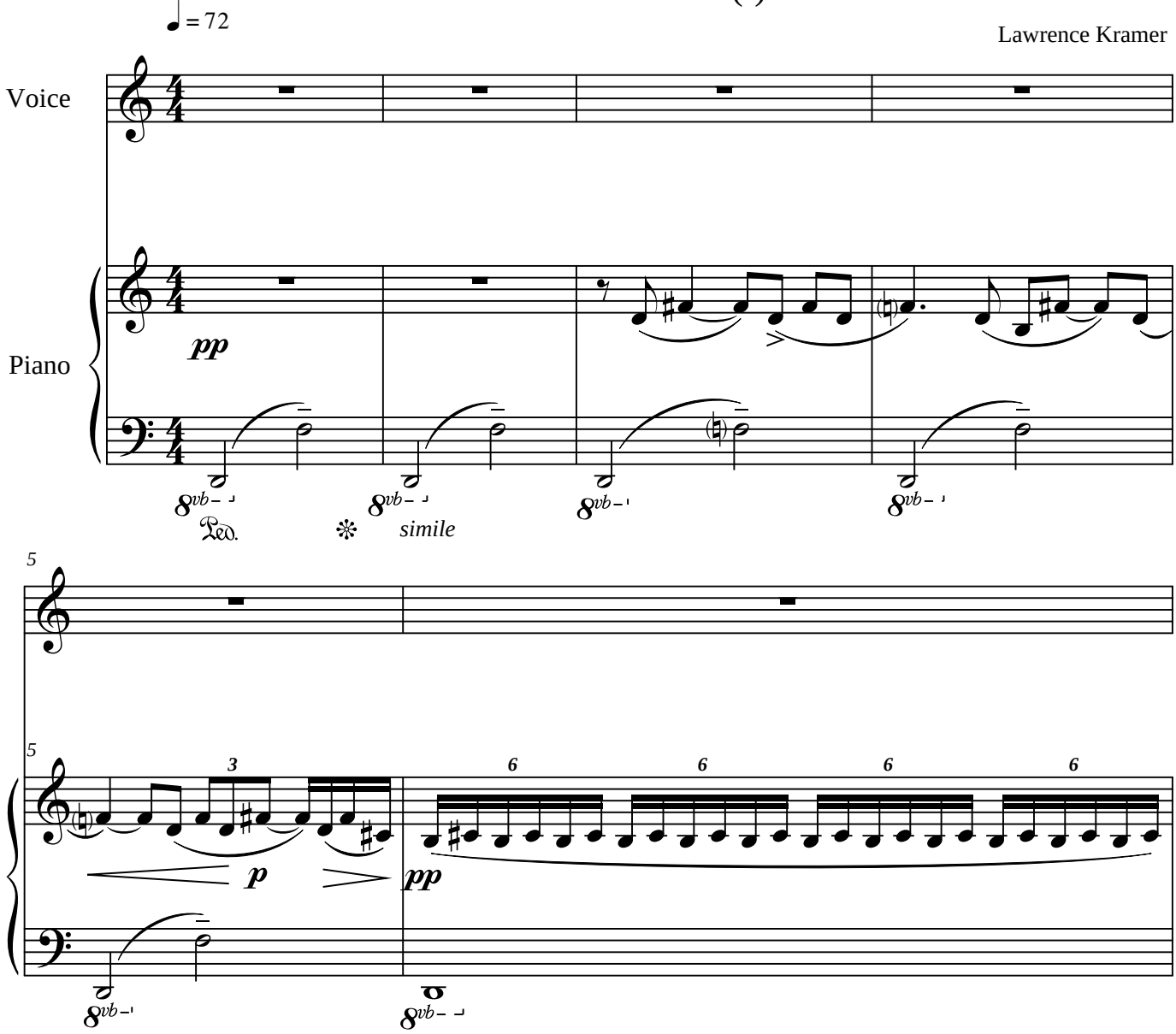
Her Voice among the Aisles
Incite the timid prayer
Of the minutest Cricket --
The most unworthy Flower --

When all the Children sleep --
She turns as long away
As will suffice to light Her lamps --
Then bending from the Sky --

With infinite Affection --
And infiniter Care --
Her Golden finger on Her lip --
Wills Silence -- Everywhere --

Break of Day

1. The Harbor Dawn (I)



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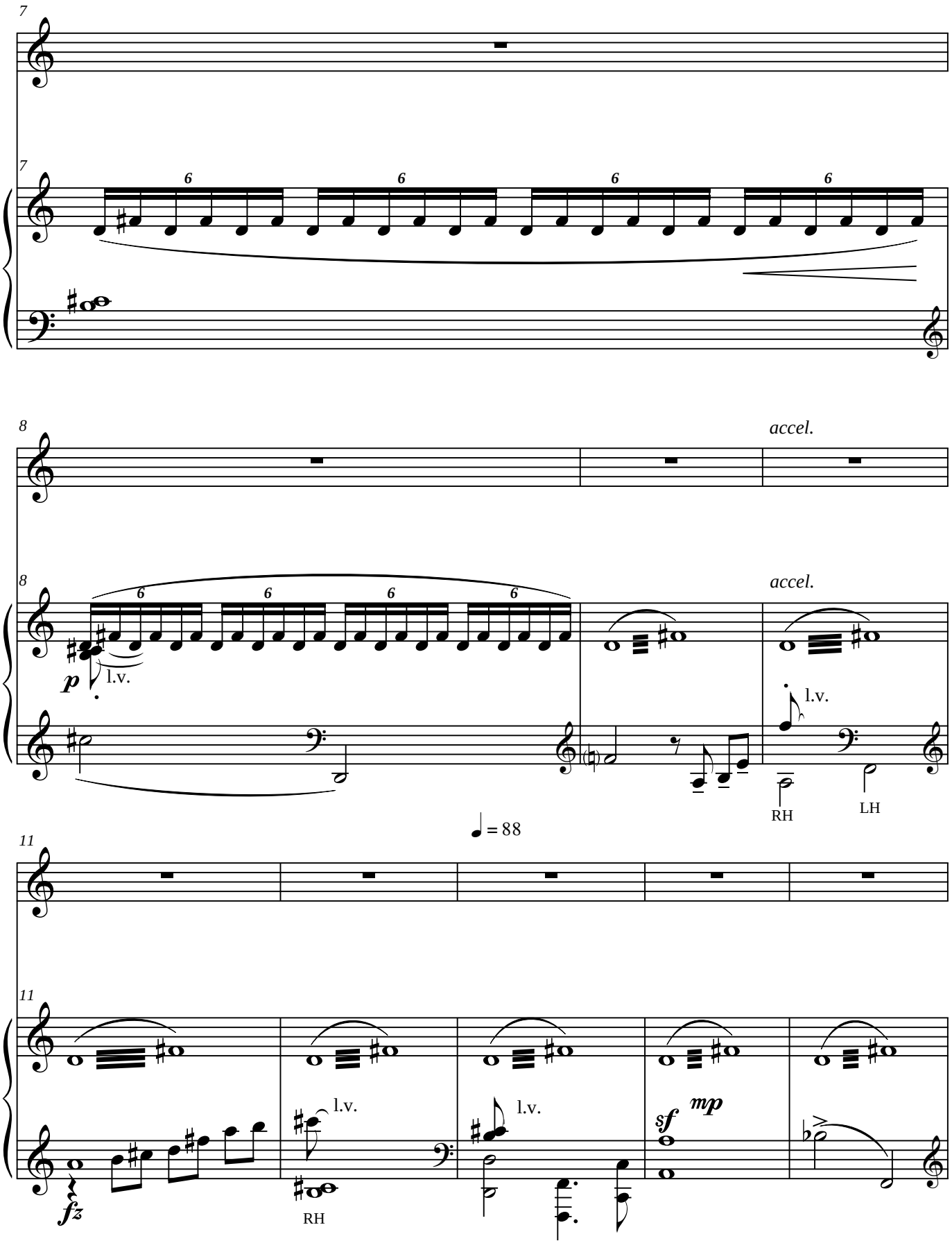
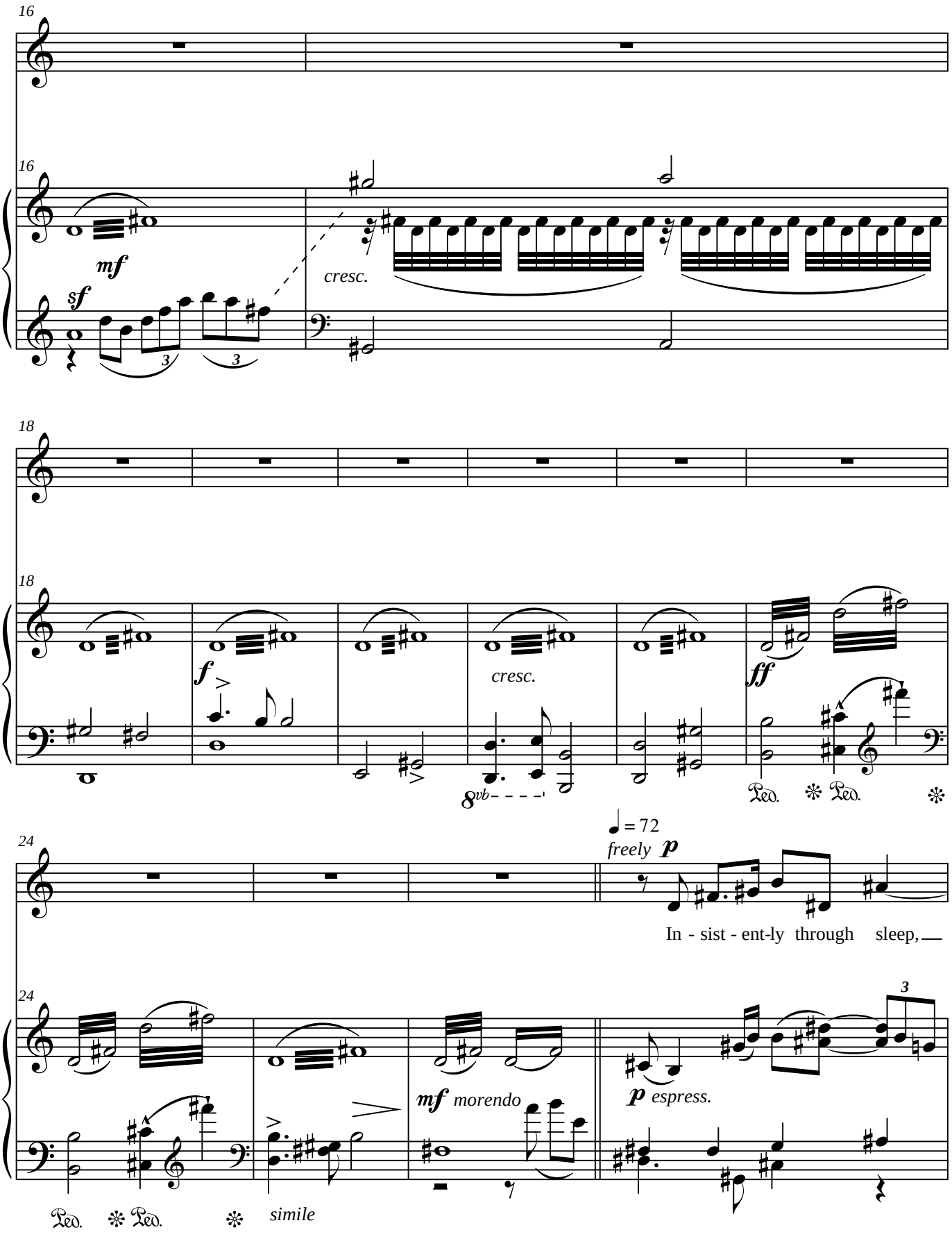
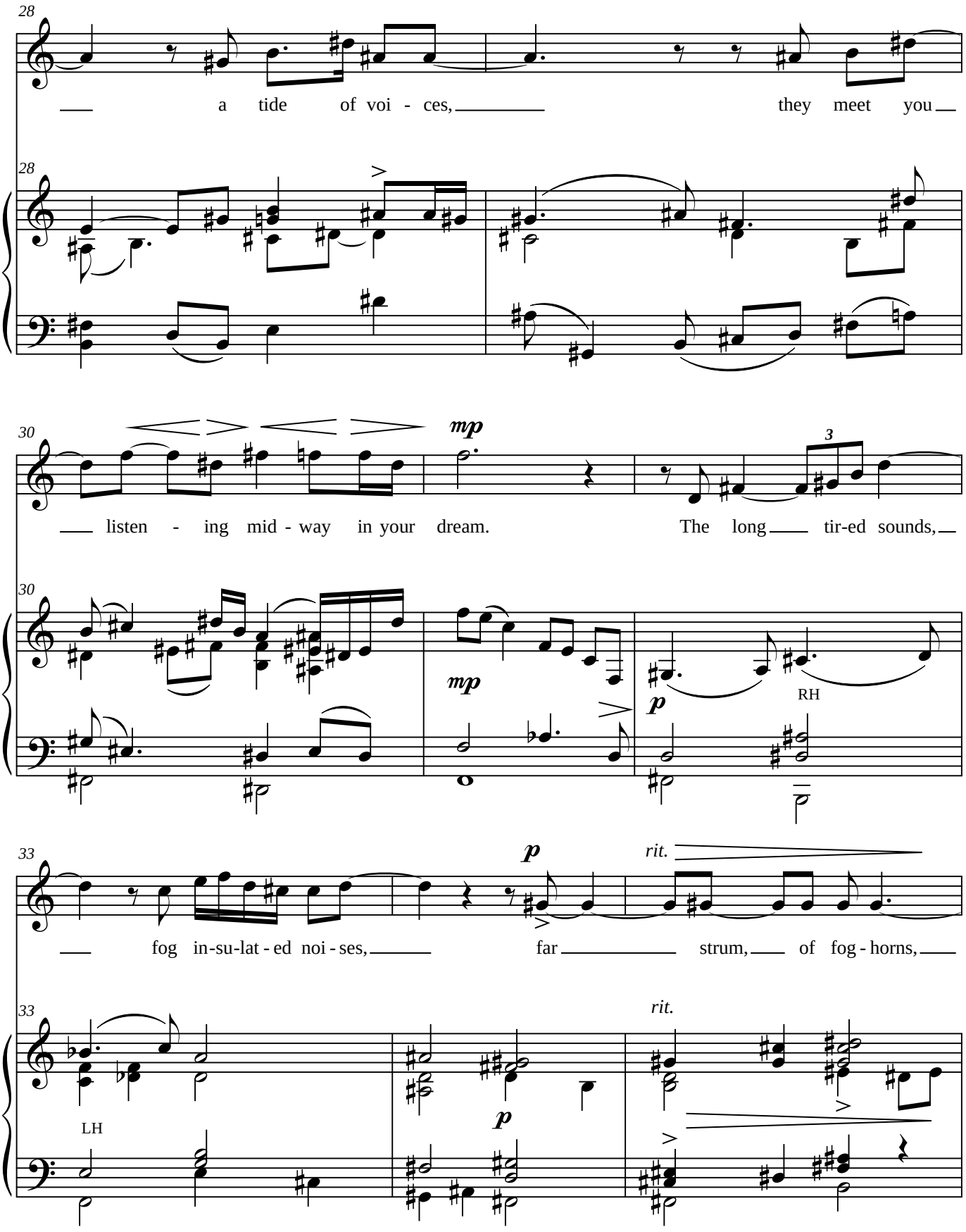
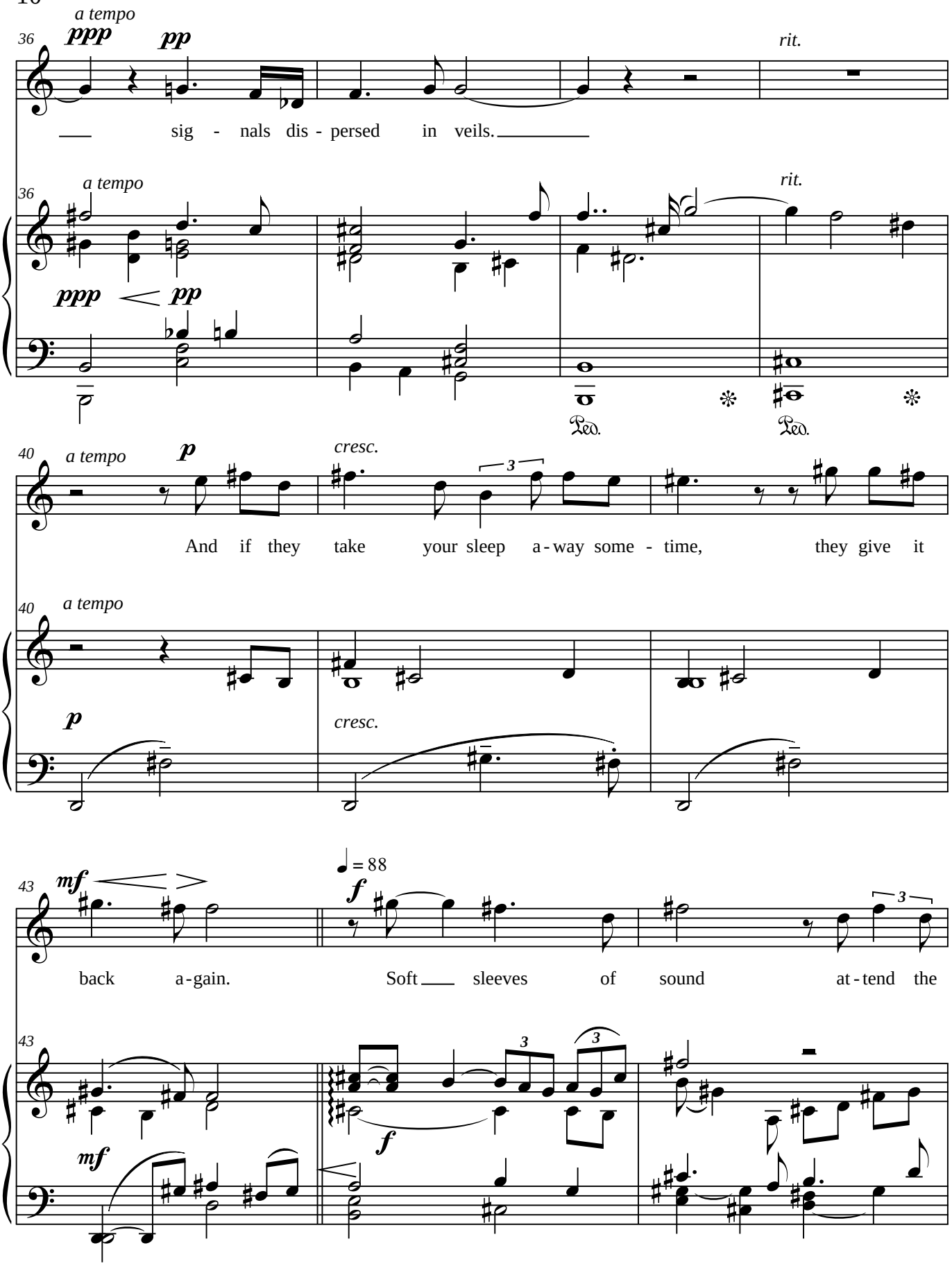
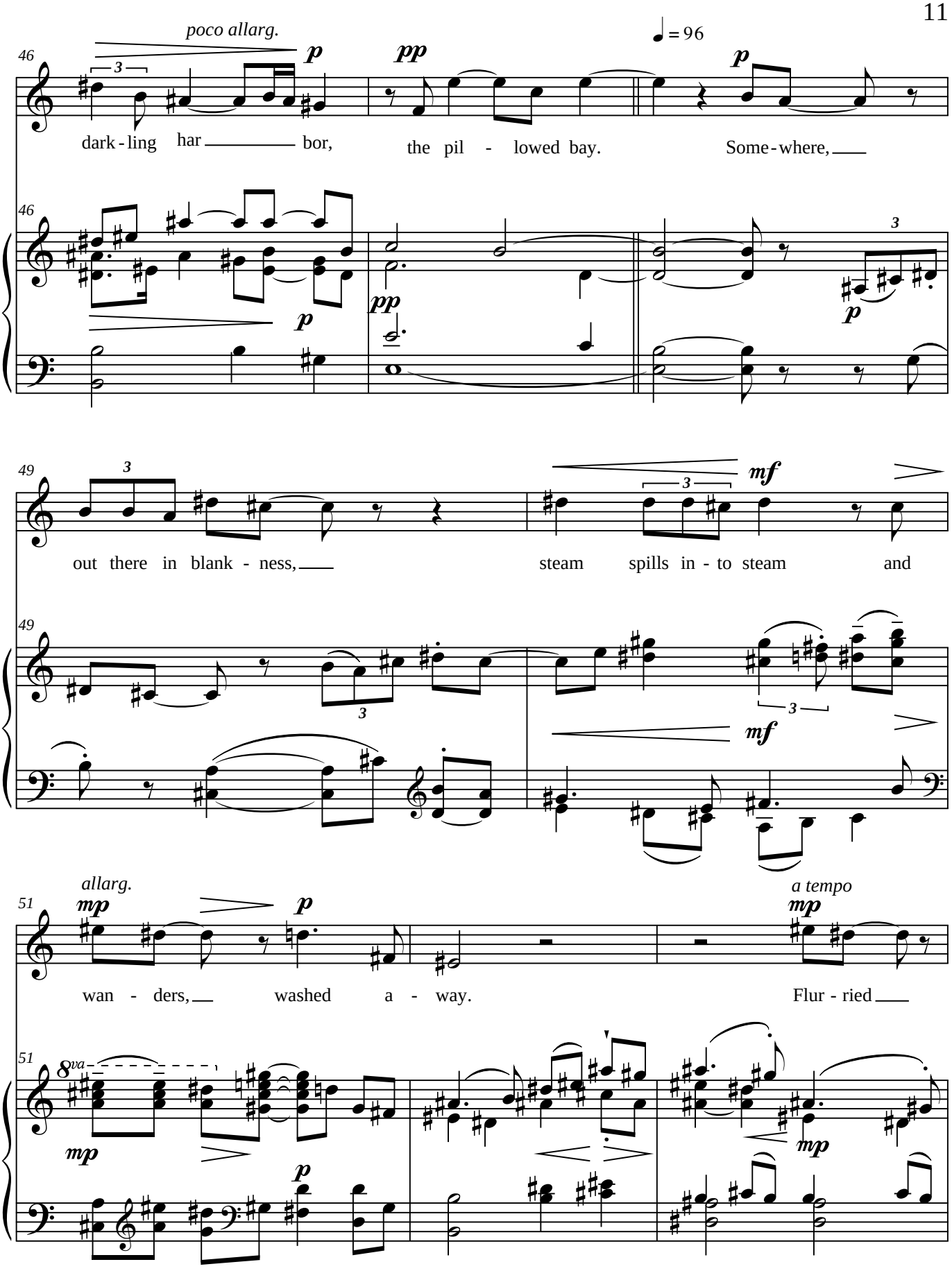
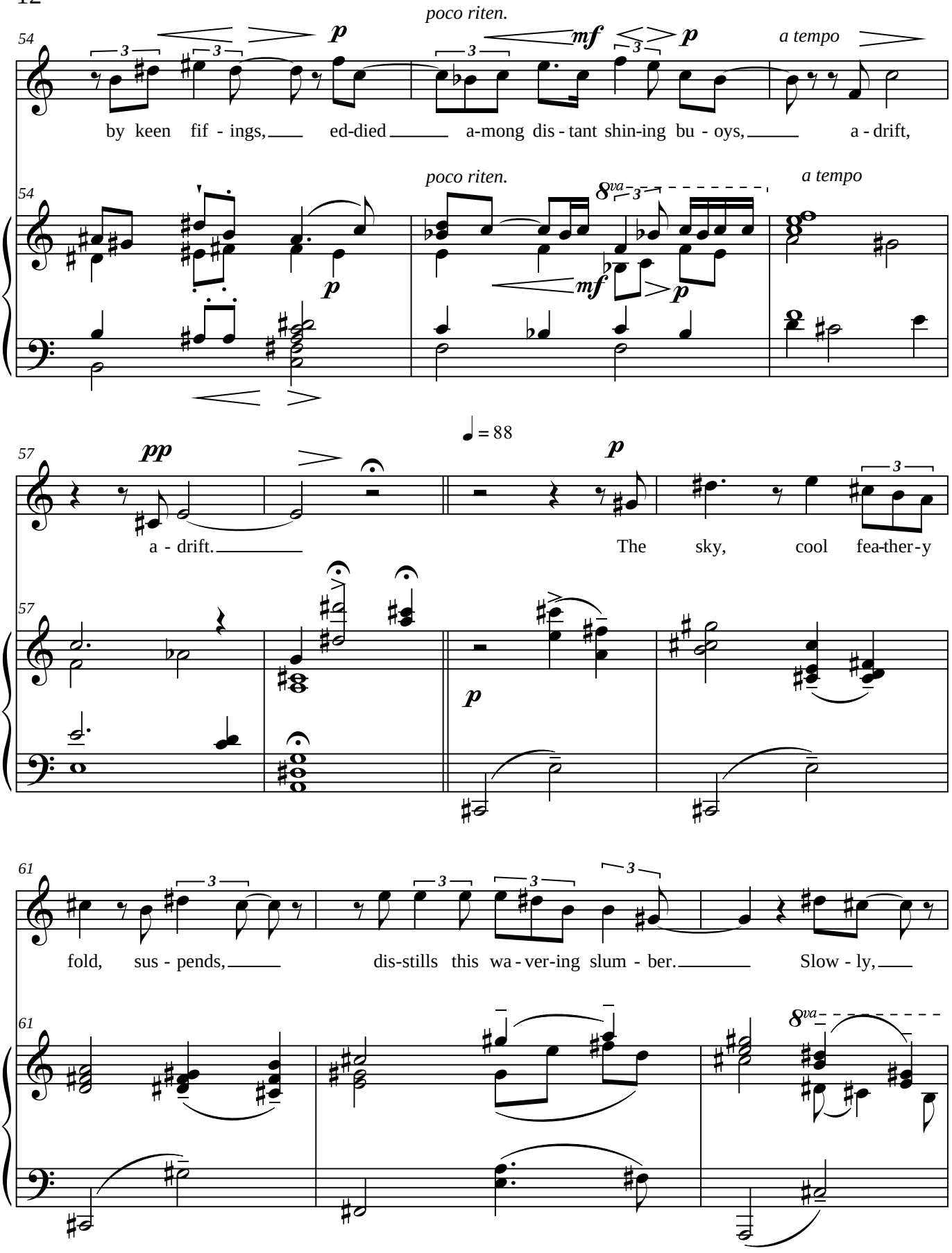

7
7
8
accel.
8
accel.
p
l.v.
l.v.
RH
LH
= 88
11
11
fz
l.v.
RH
l.v.
sf
mp

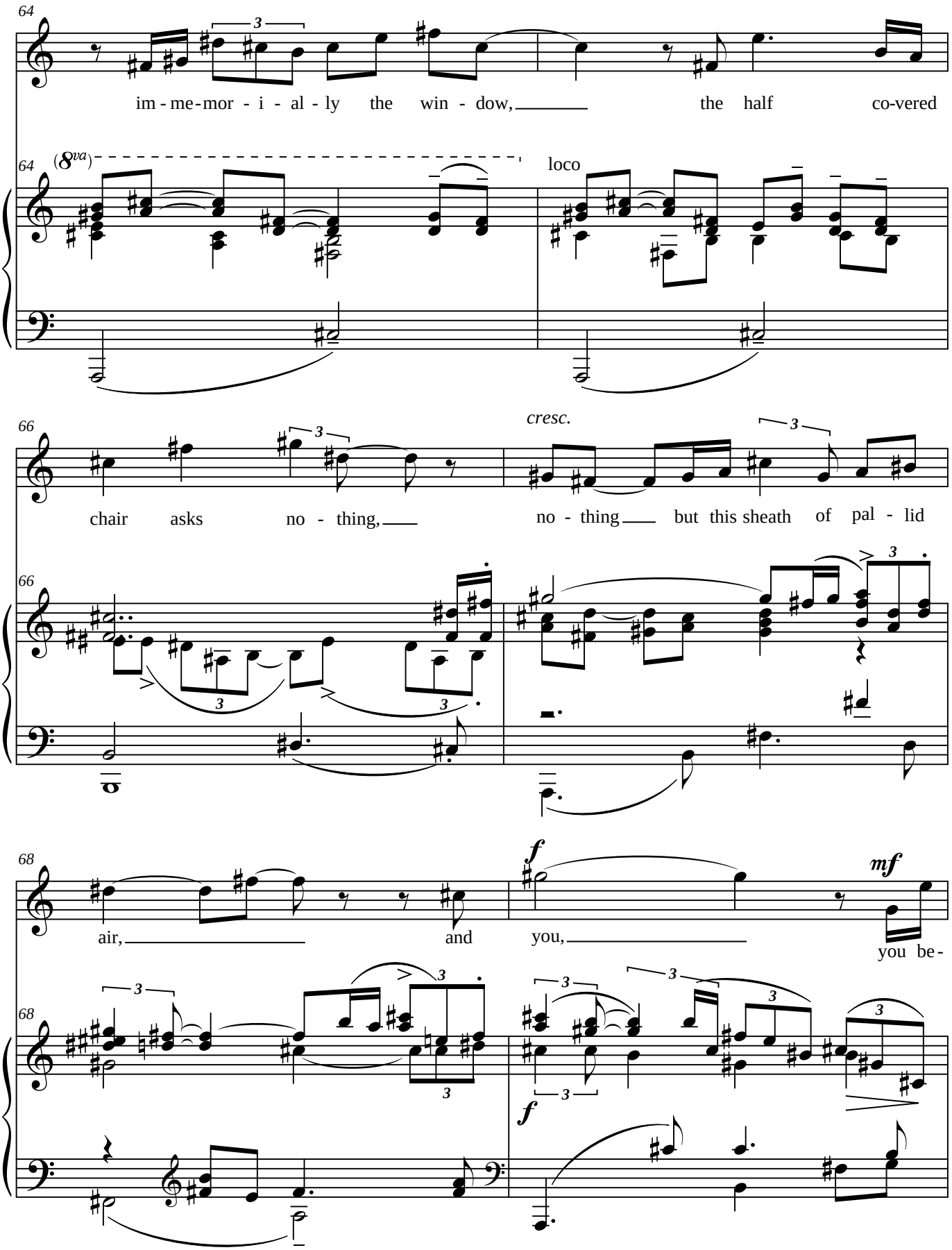

16
mf
sf
cresc.
18
f
cresc.
ff
8vb
Ped.
24
= 72
freely p
In - sist - ent-ly through sleep,
mf morendo
p espress.
simile

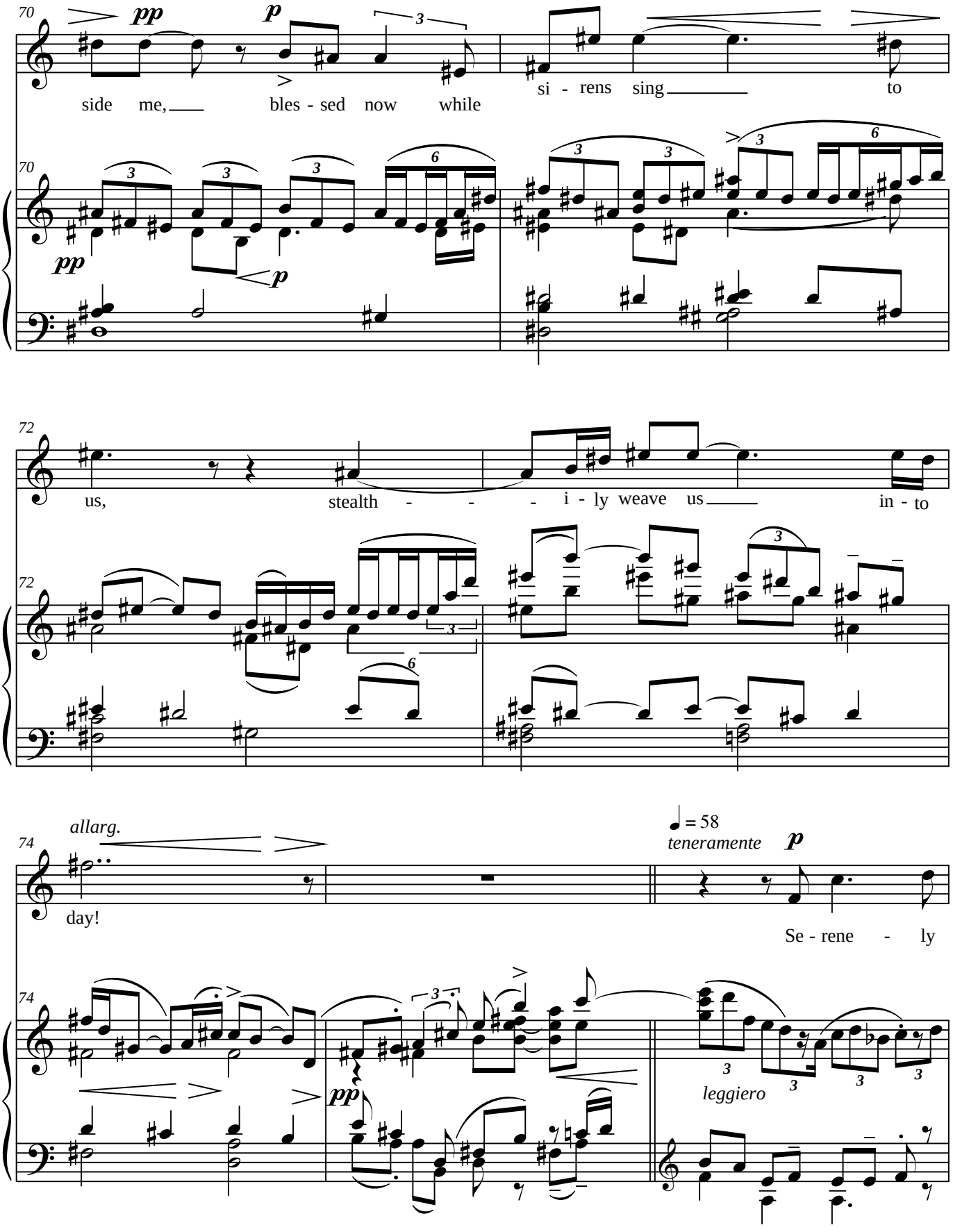

28
a tide of voi - ces,
they meet you
28
30
mp
3
listen - ing mid - way in your dream.
The long tir-ed sounds,
30
mp
p
RH
33
p
rit.
fog in-su-lat - ed noi - ses,
far
strum,
of fog - horns,
33
rit.
LH
p

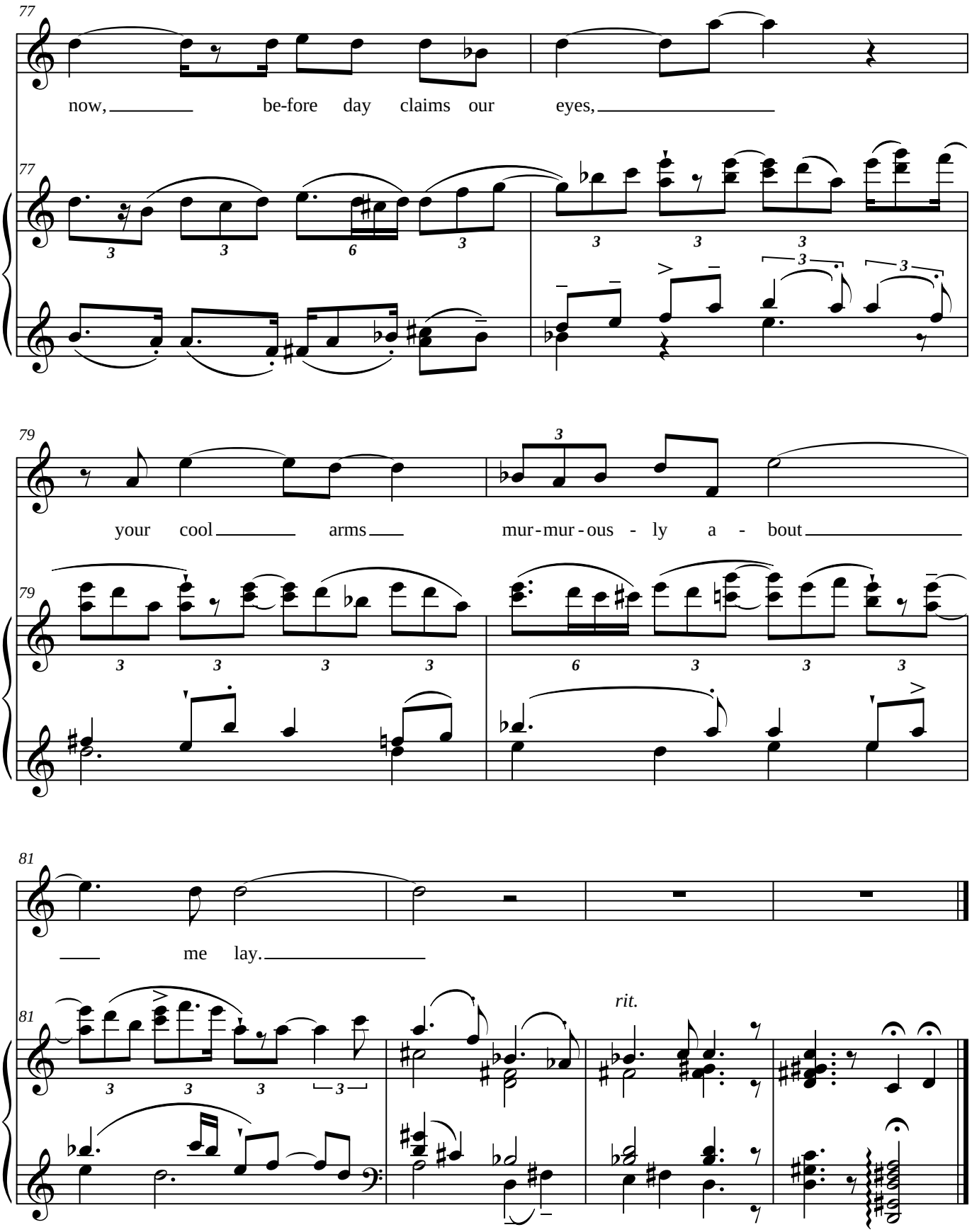

a tempo
ppp
pp
36
rit.
sig - nals dis - persed in veils.
a tempo
36
rit.
ppp
pp
Ped.
Ped.
40
a tempo
p
cresc.
3
And if they take your sleep a - way some - time, they give it
40
a tempo
p
cresc.
43
mf
♩ = 88
f
3
back a - gain. Soft sleeves of sound at - tend the
43
mf
f
3
3


poco allarg.
♩ = 96
dark - ling har bor, the pil - lowed bay. Some - where,
out there in blank - ness, steam spills in - to steam and
allarg.
a tempo
wan - ders, washed a - way. Flur - ried

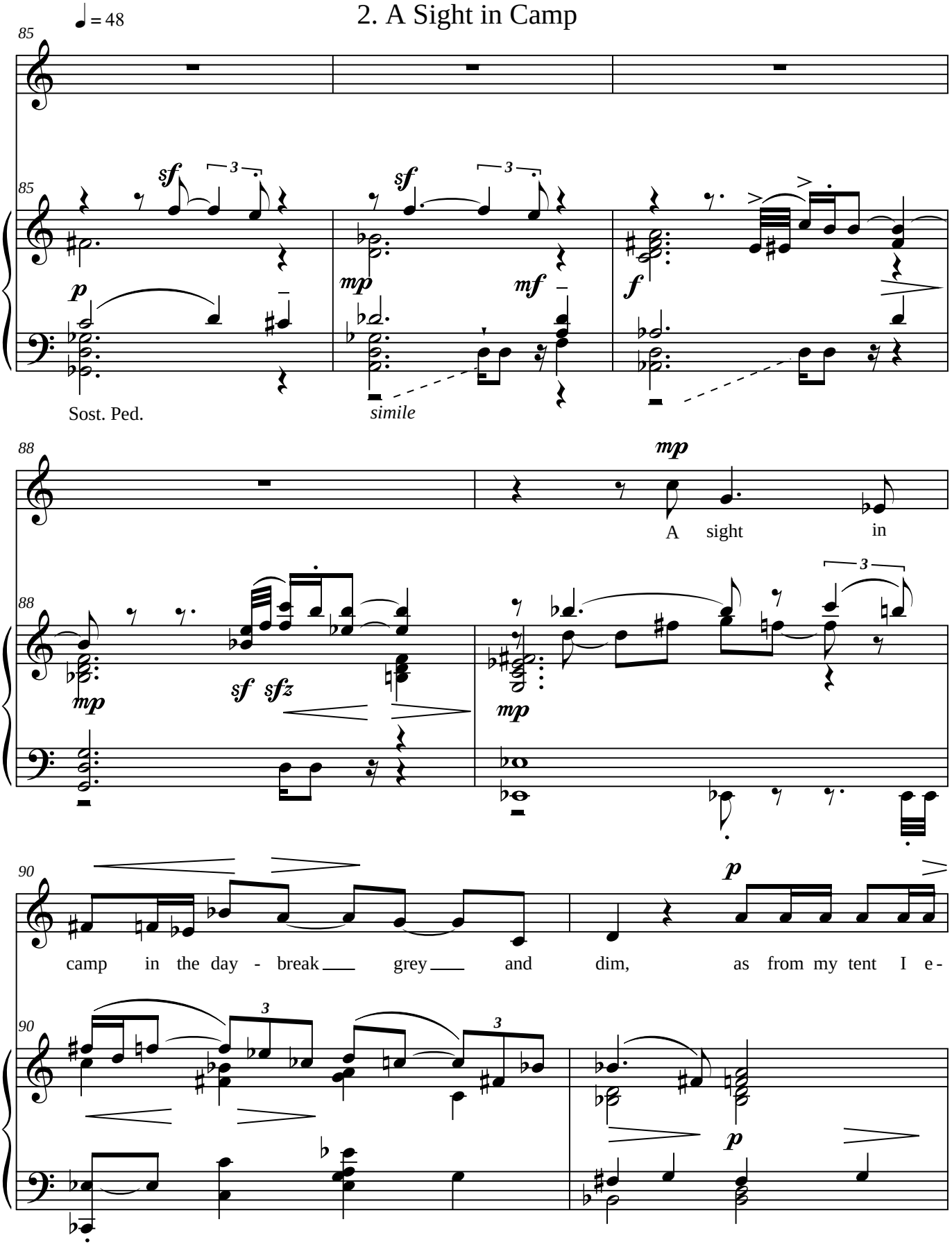

poco riten.
a tempo
by keen fif - ings, ed-died a-mong dis - tant shin-ing bu - oys, a - drift,
8va
= 88
a - drift.
The sky, cool fea-ther-y
fold, sus - pends, dis-stills this wa - ver-ing slum - ber. Slow - ly,

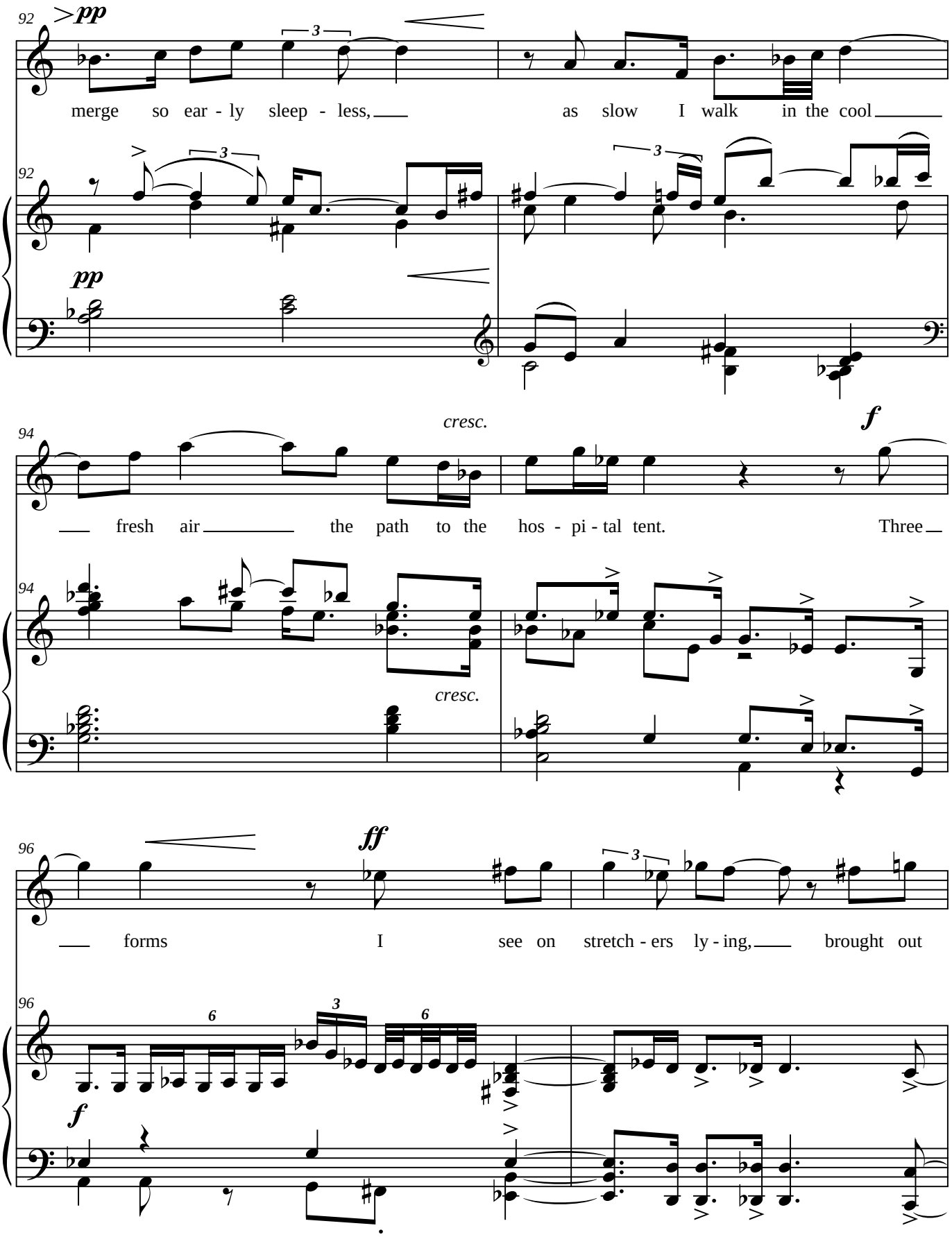

64
im - me - mor - i - al - ly the win - dow, the half co-vered
(8va)
loco
66
chair asks no - thing, no - thing but this sheath of pal - lid
cresc.
68
air, and you, you be -
f
mf

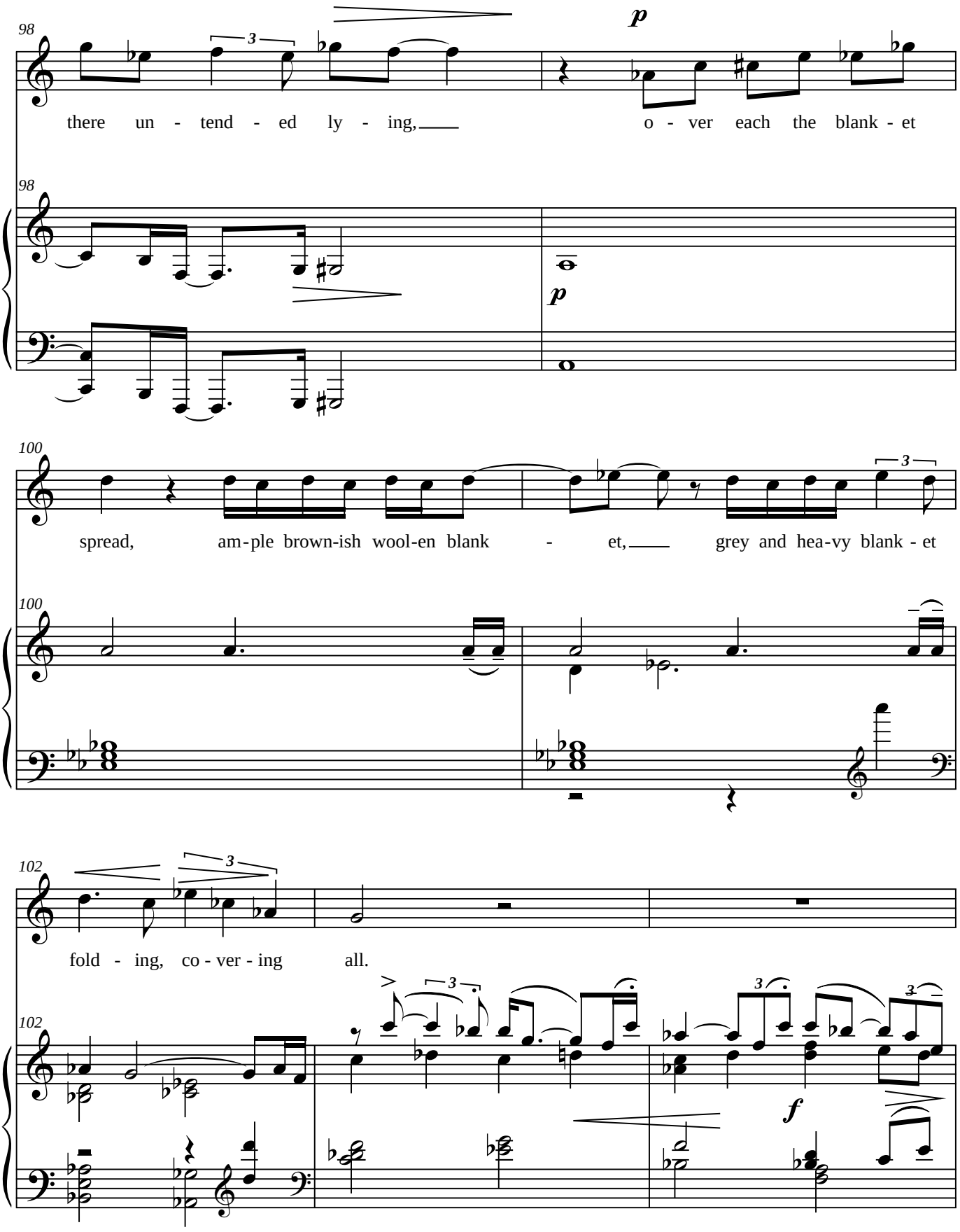

70
pp
p
side me, bles - sed now while
si - rens sing to
70
pp
p
72
us, stealth - - - i - ly weave us in - to
72
allarg.
74
day!
= 58
teneramente
p
Se - rene - ly
74
pp
leggiero

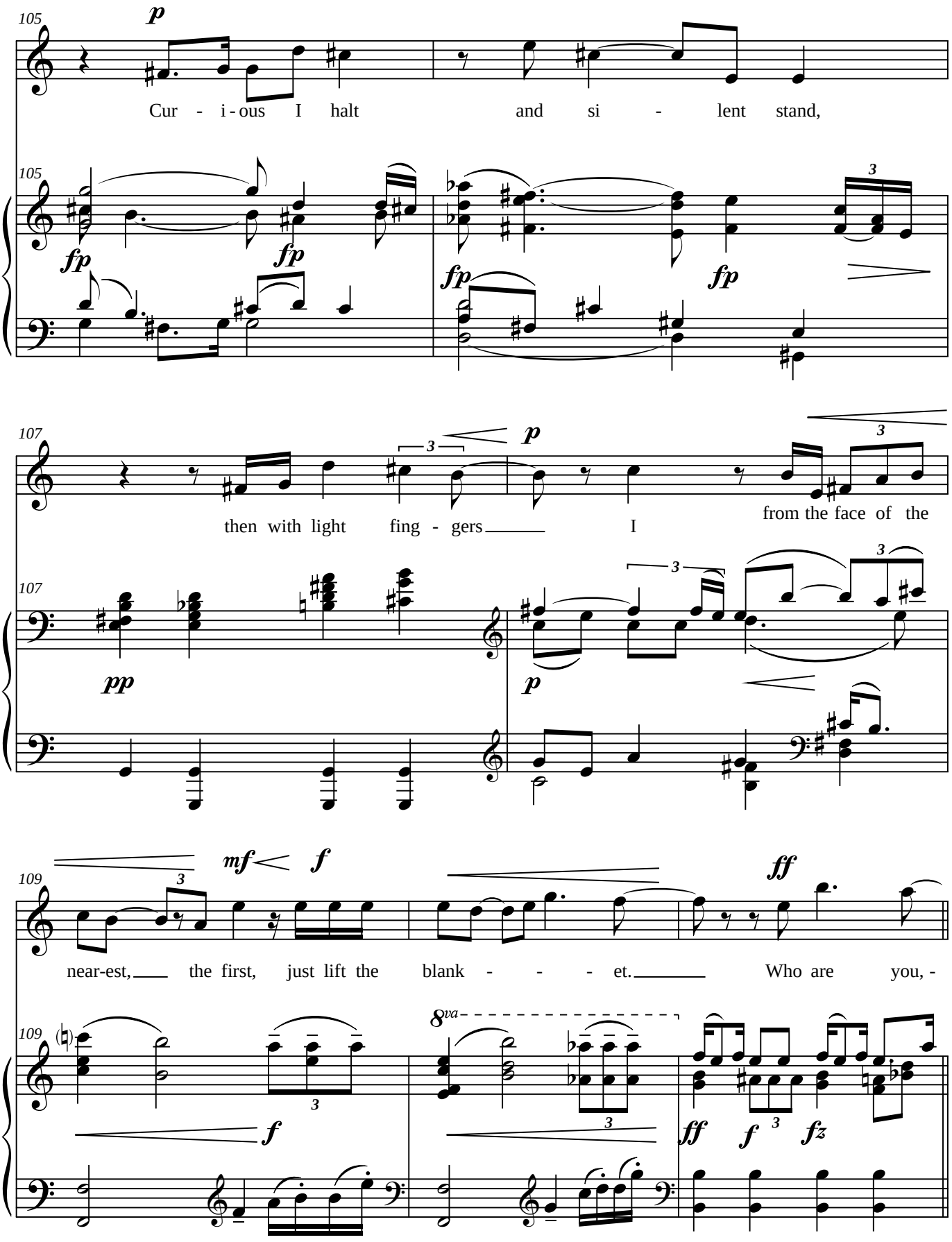

77
now, be-fore day claims our eyes,
77
79
your cool arms mur-mur-ous - ly a - bout
79
81
me lay.
81
rit.

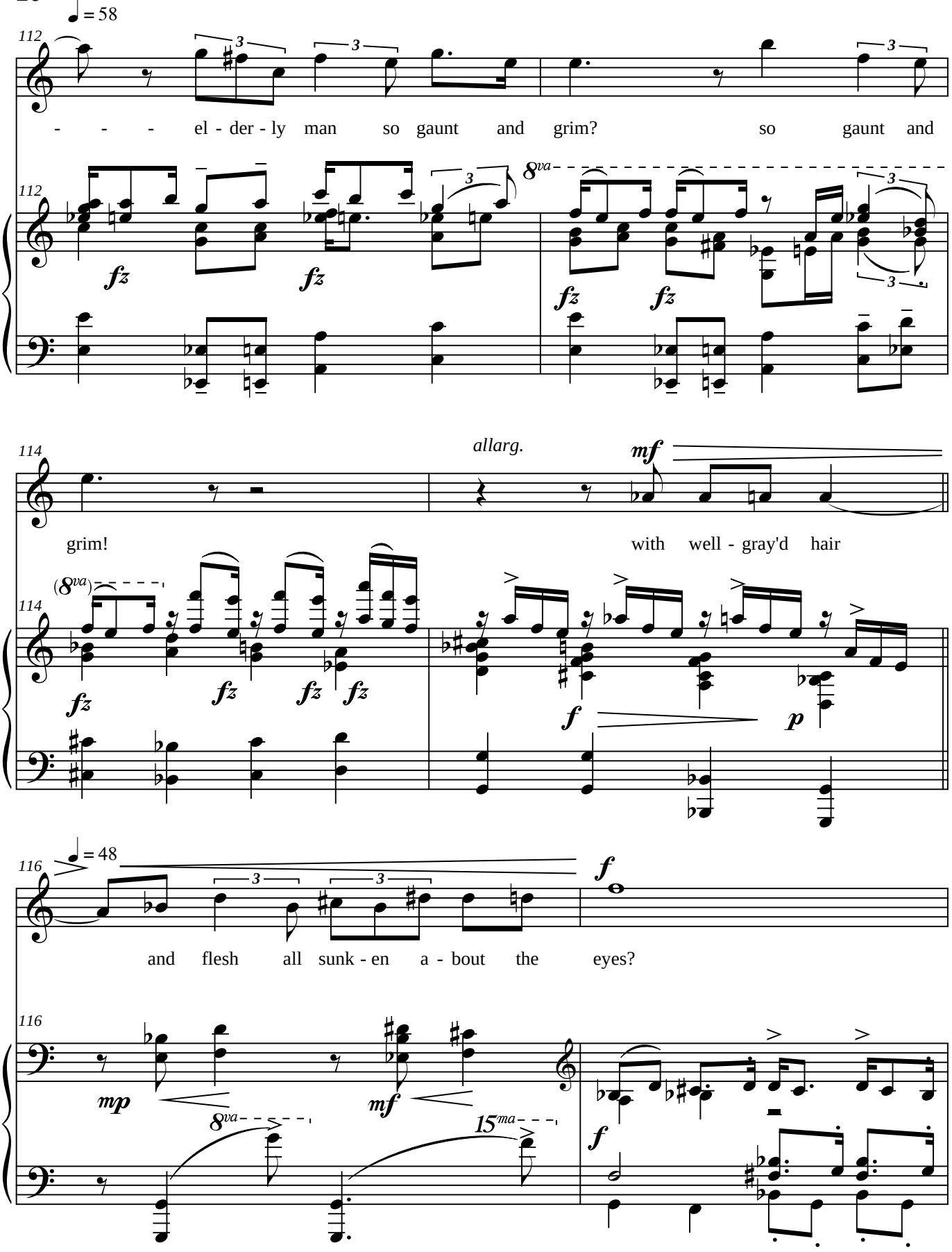
2. A Sight in Camp

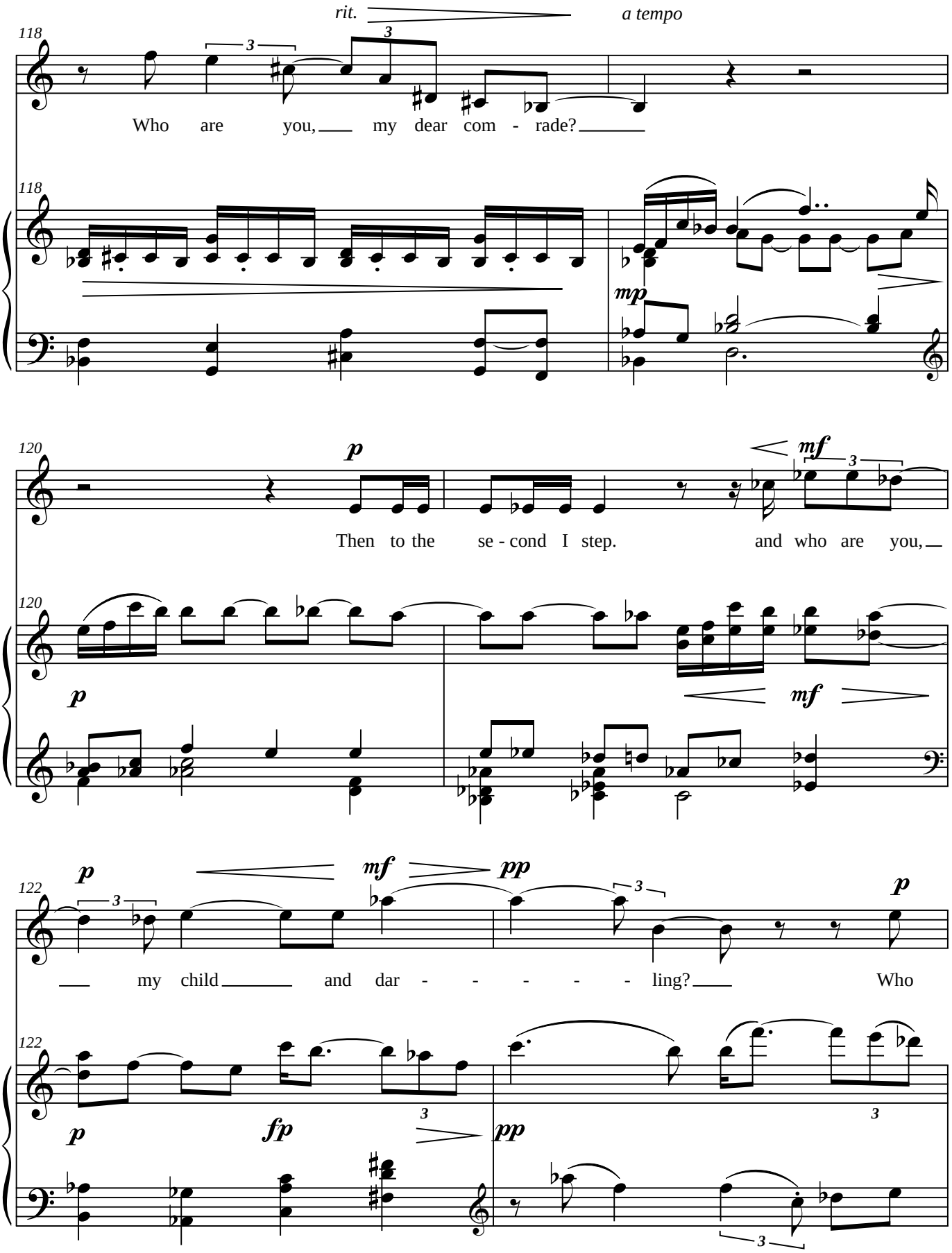


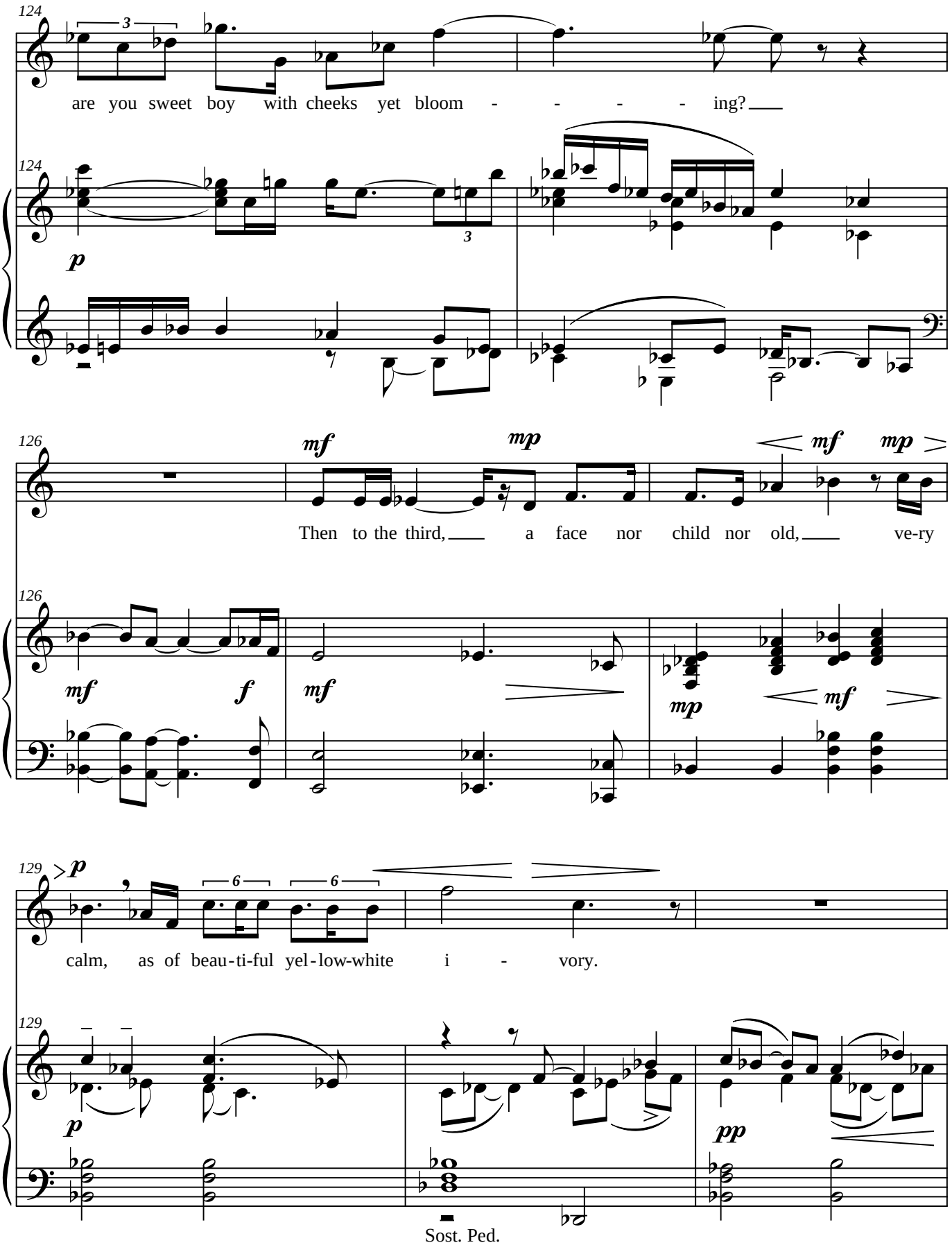

92
pp
merge so ear - ly sleep - less, as slow I walk in the cool
92
pp
cresc.
94
f
fresh air the path to the hos - pi - tal tent. Three
94
cresc.
96
ff
forms I see on stretch - ers ly - ing, brought out
96
f

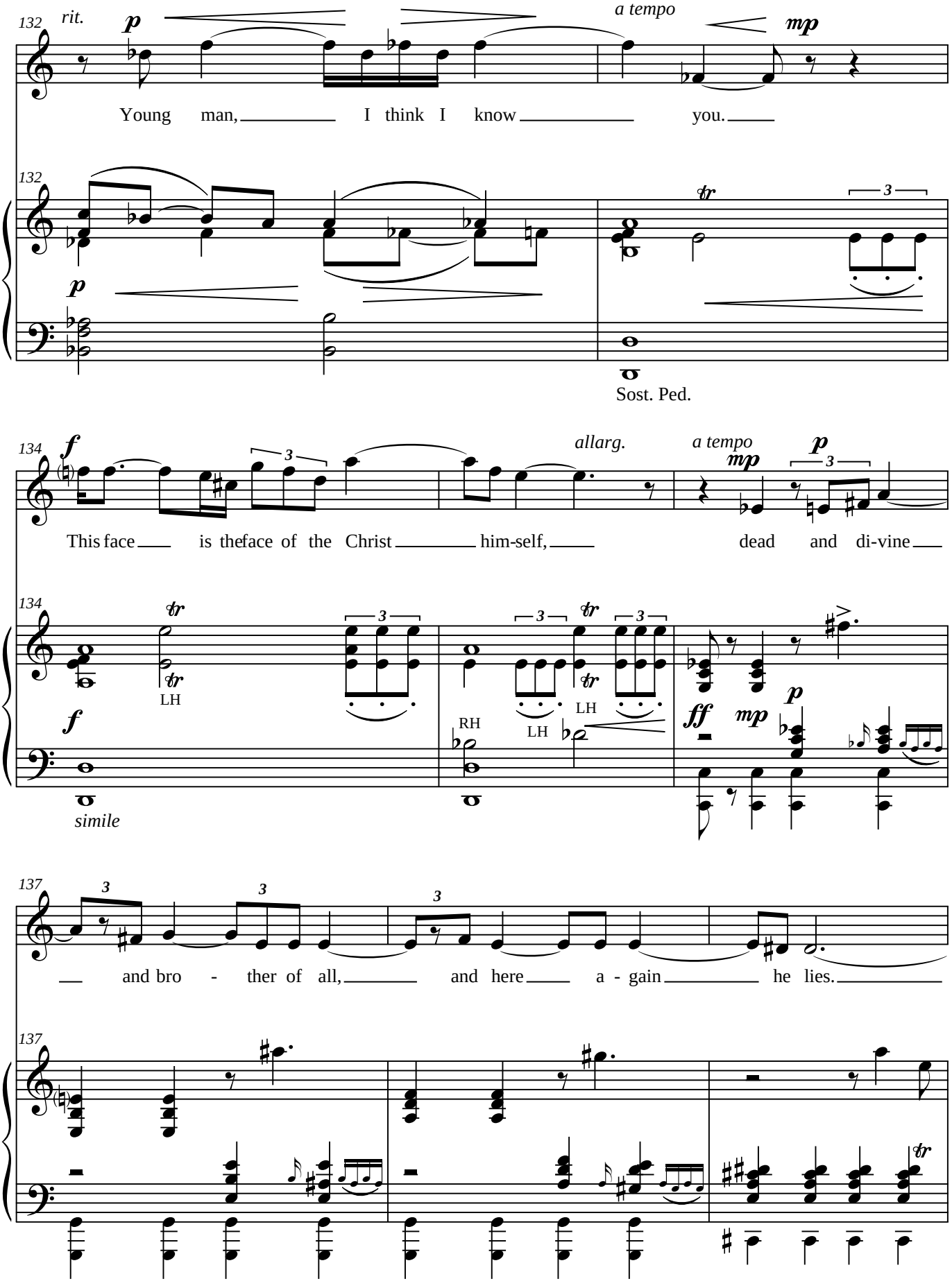

98
there un - tend - ed ly - ing,
o - ver each the blank - et
98
100
spread, am-ple brown-ish wool-en blank - et,
grey and hea-vy blank - et
100
102
fold - ing, co - ver - ing all.
102

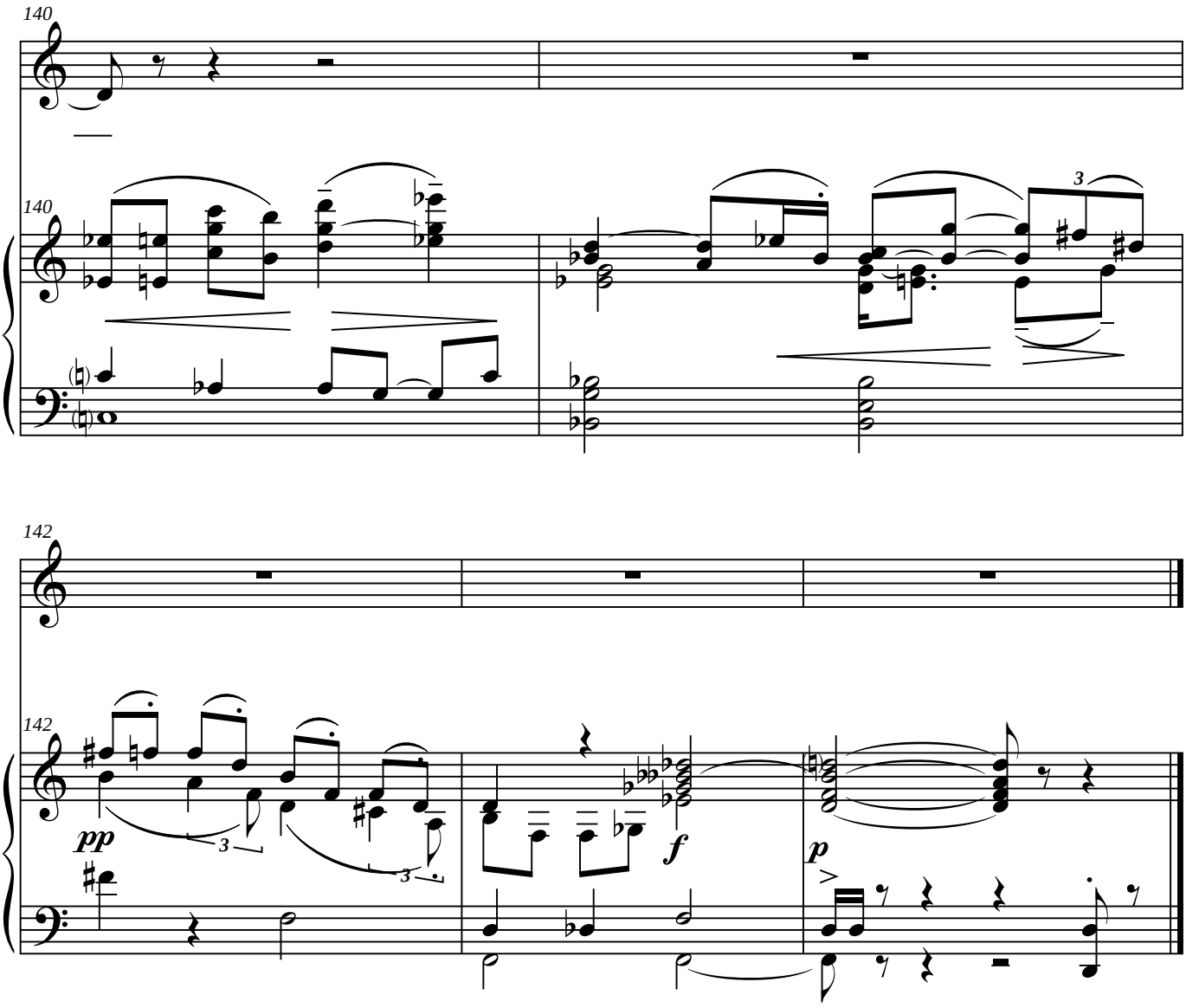

105
p
Cur - i - ous I halt and si - lent stand,
105
fp
fp
fp
fp
3
107
3
p
then with light fing - gers I
from the face of the
107
pp
p
3
3
109
mf
f
3
near-est, the first, just lift the blank - - - et.
ff
Who are you, -
109
8va
f
3
3
ff
f
3
fz


♩ = 58
112
- - - el - der - ly man so gaunt and grim? so gaunt and
8va
fz
114
allarg.
mf
grim!
with well - gray'd hair
(8va)
f
p
♩ = 48
116
and flesh all sunk - en a - bout the eyes?
mp
mf
8va
15ma

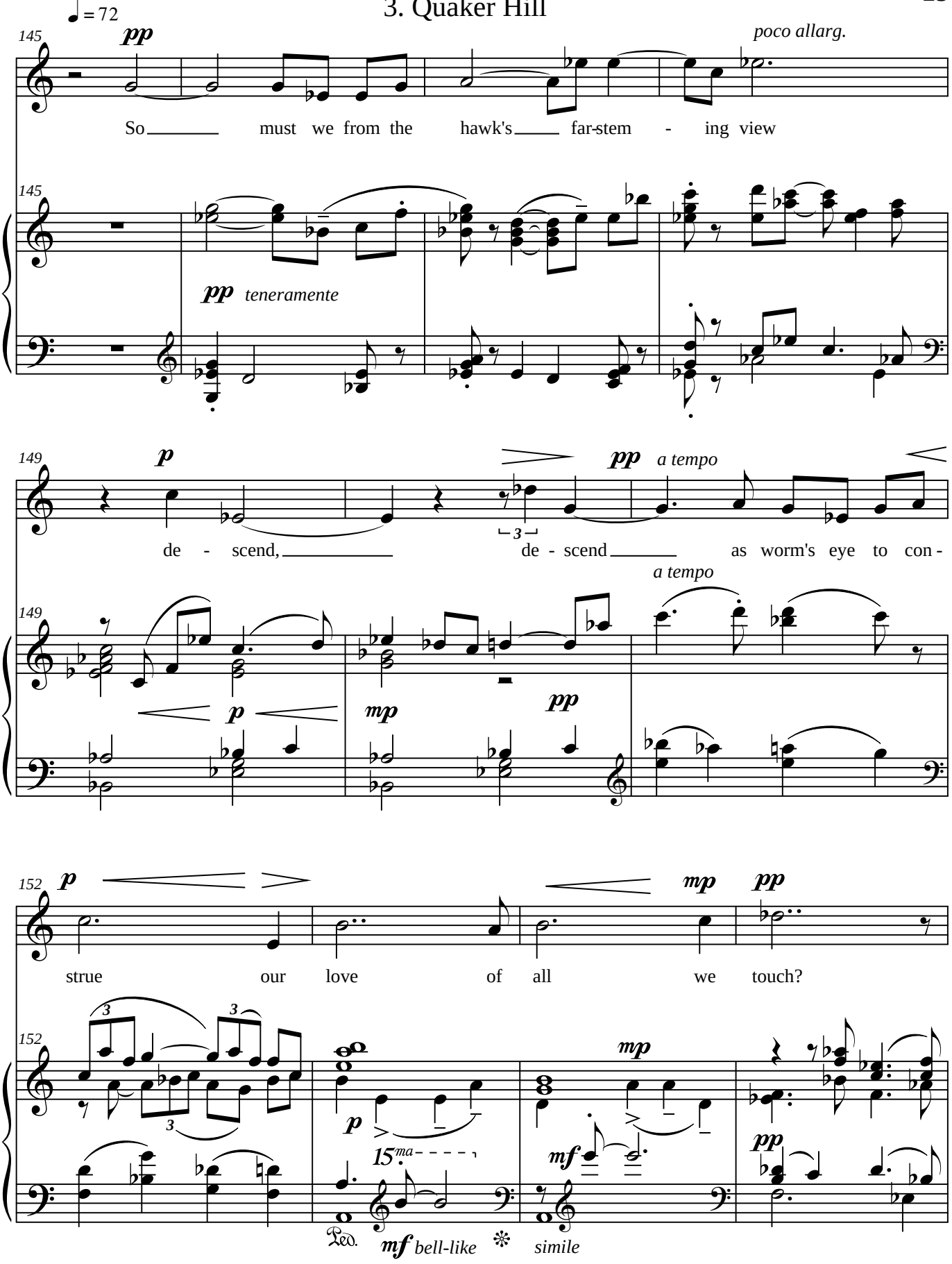

rit.
a tempo
118
Who are you, my dear com - rade?
mp
120
Then to the se - cond I step. and who are you,
p
mf
122
my child and dar - - - - - ling? Who
p
mf
pp
fp

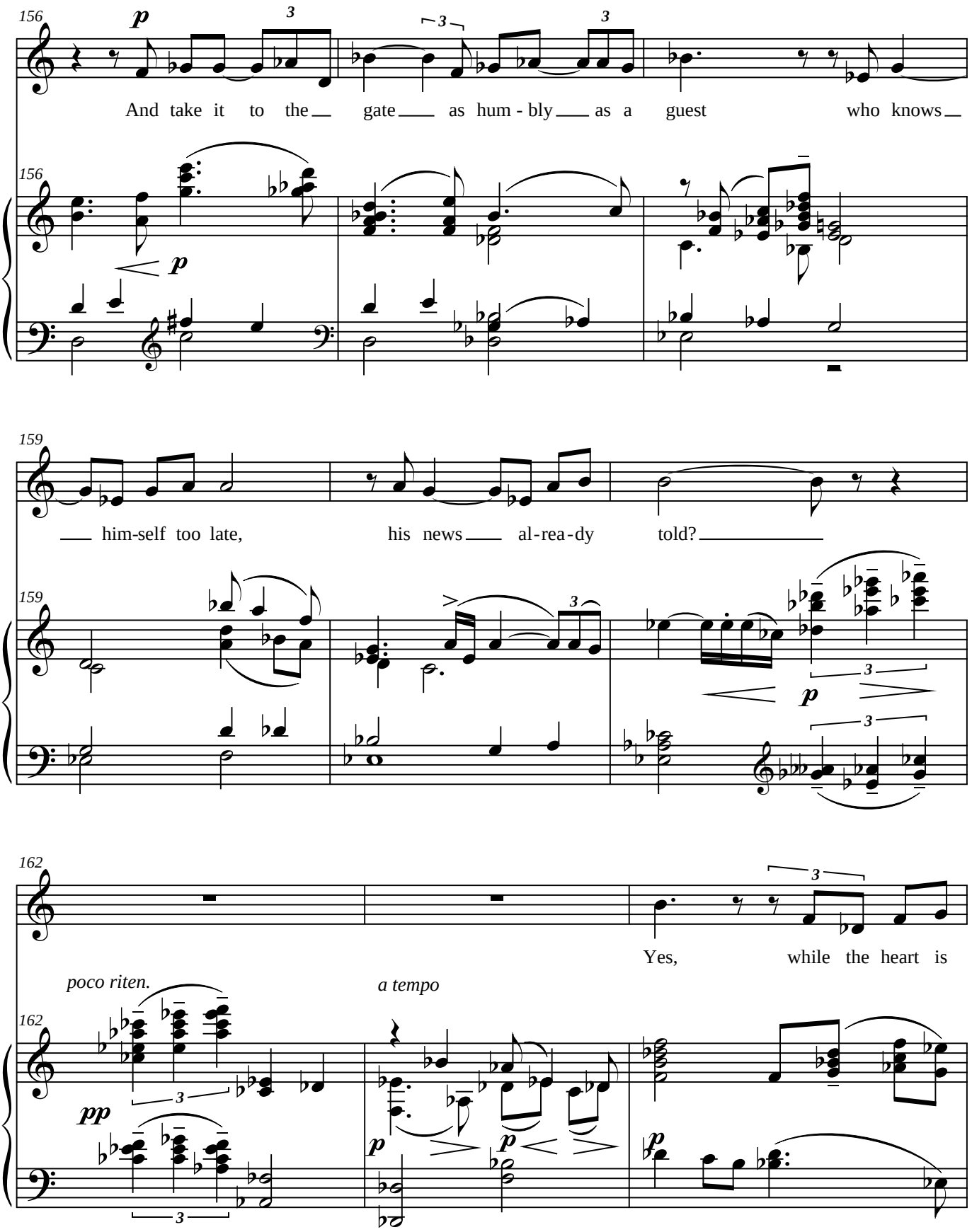

124
are you sweet boy with cheeks yet bloom - - - - ing?
p
126
Then to the third, a face nor child nor old, ve-ry
mf
mp
f
129
calm, as of beau-ti-ful yel-low-white i - vory.
pp
Sost. Ped.

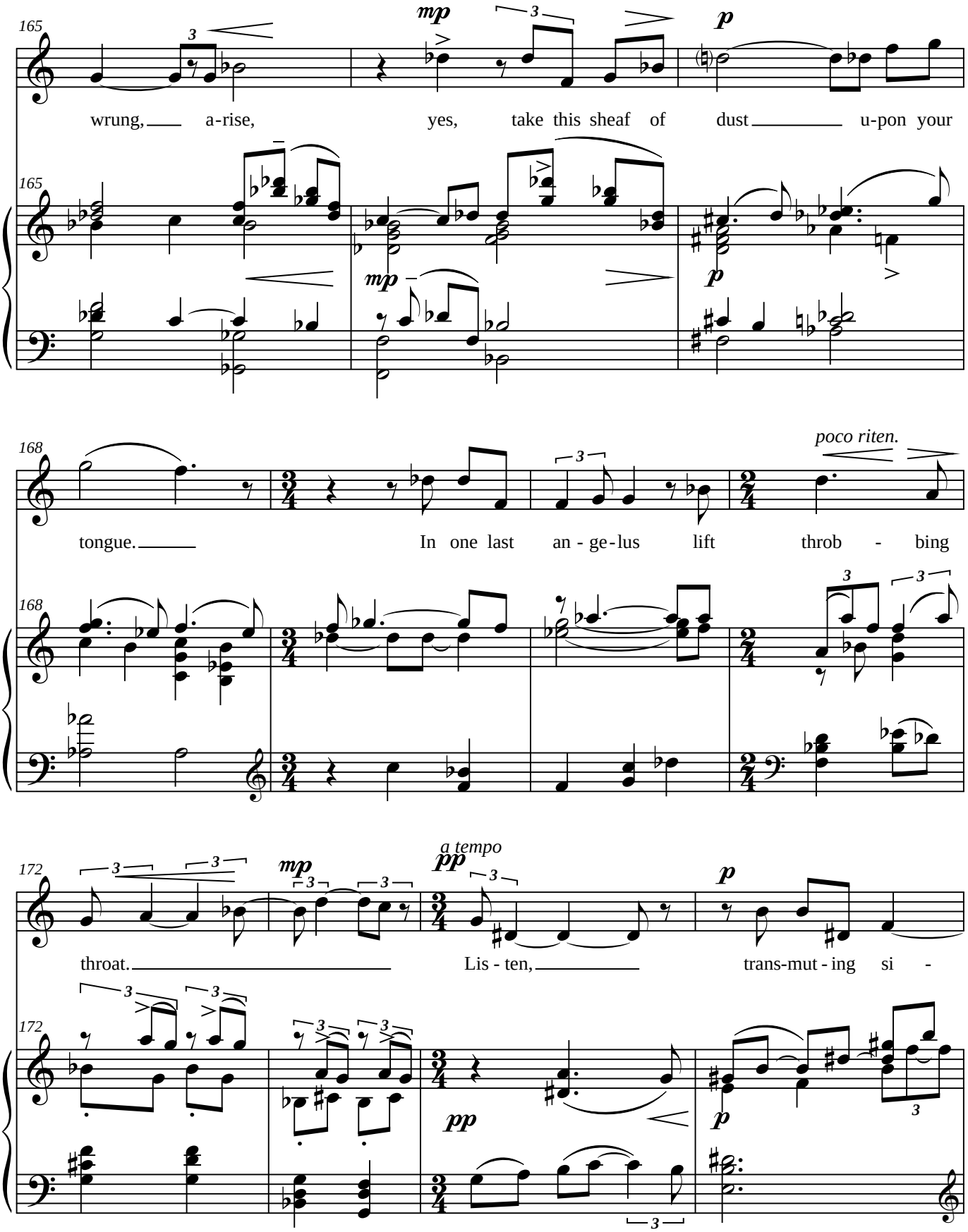

132
rit.
a tempo
Young man, I think I know you.
Sost. Ped.
134
allarg.
a tempo
This face is theface of the Christ him-self, dead and di-vine
LH
RH
simile
137
and bro - ther of all, and here a - gain he lies.

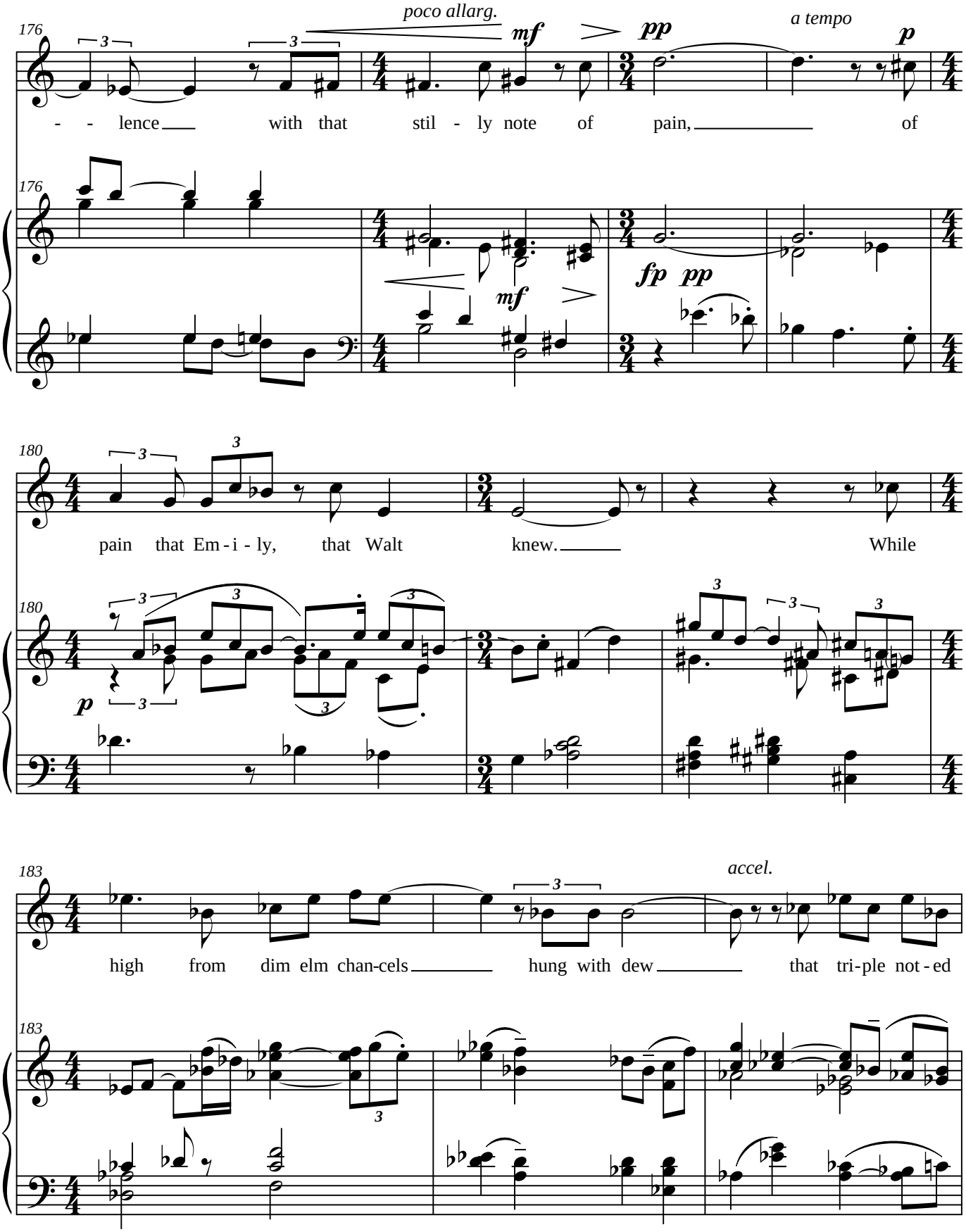

140
140
3
142
142
pp
3
3
f
p

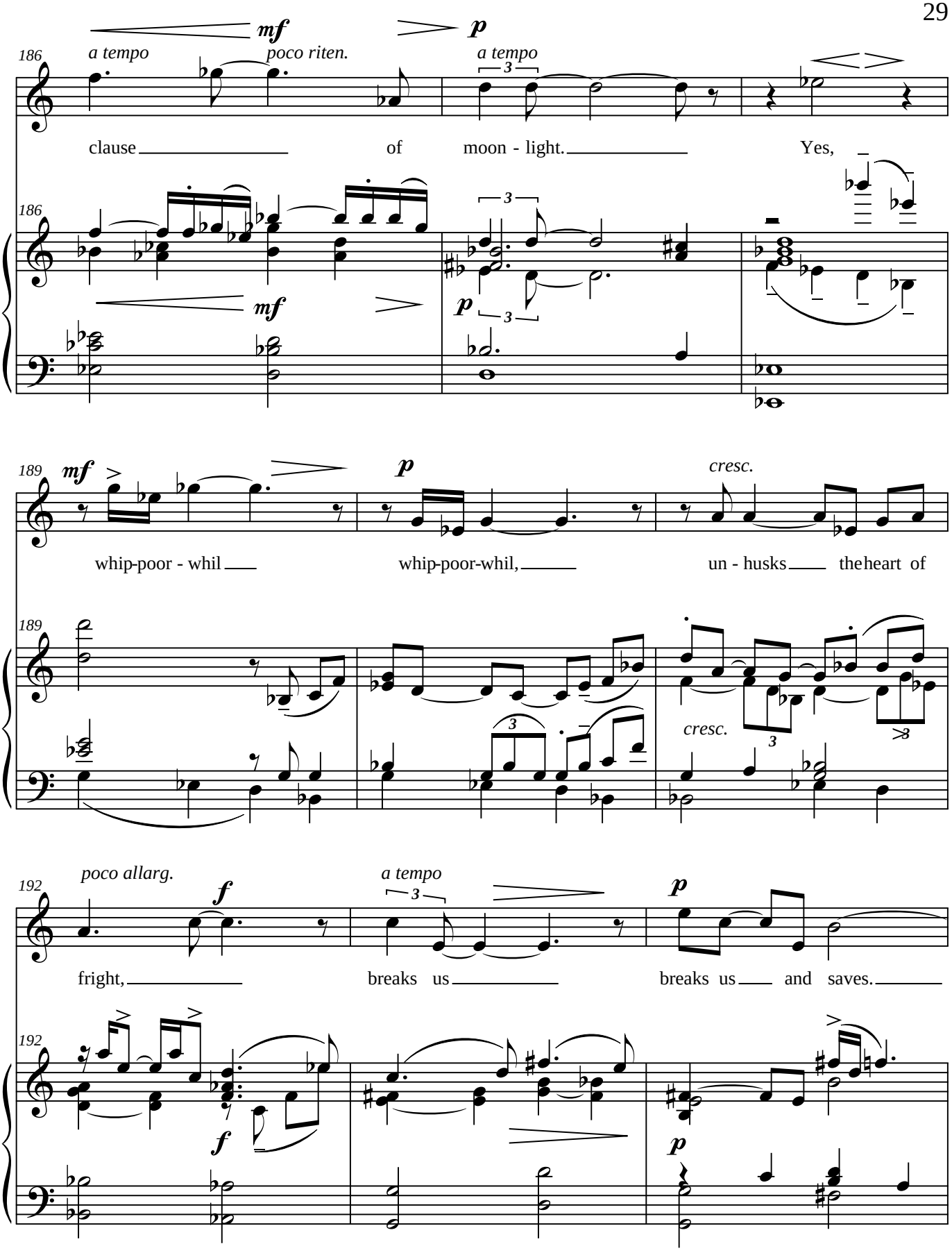
3. Quaker Hill

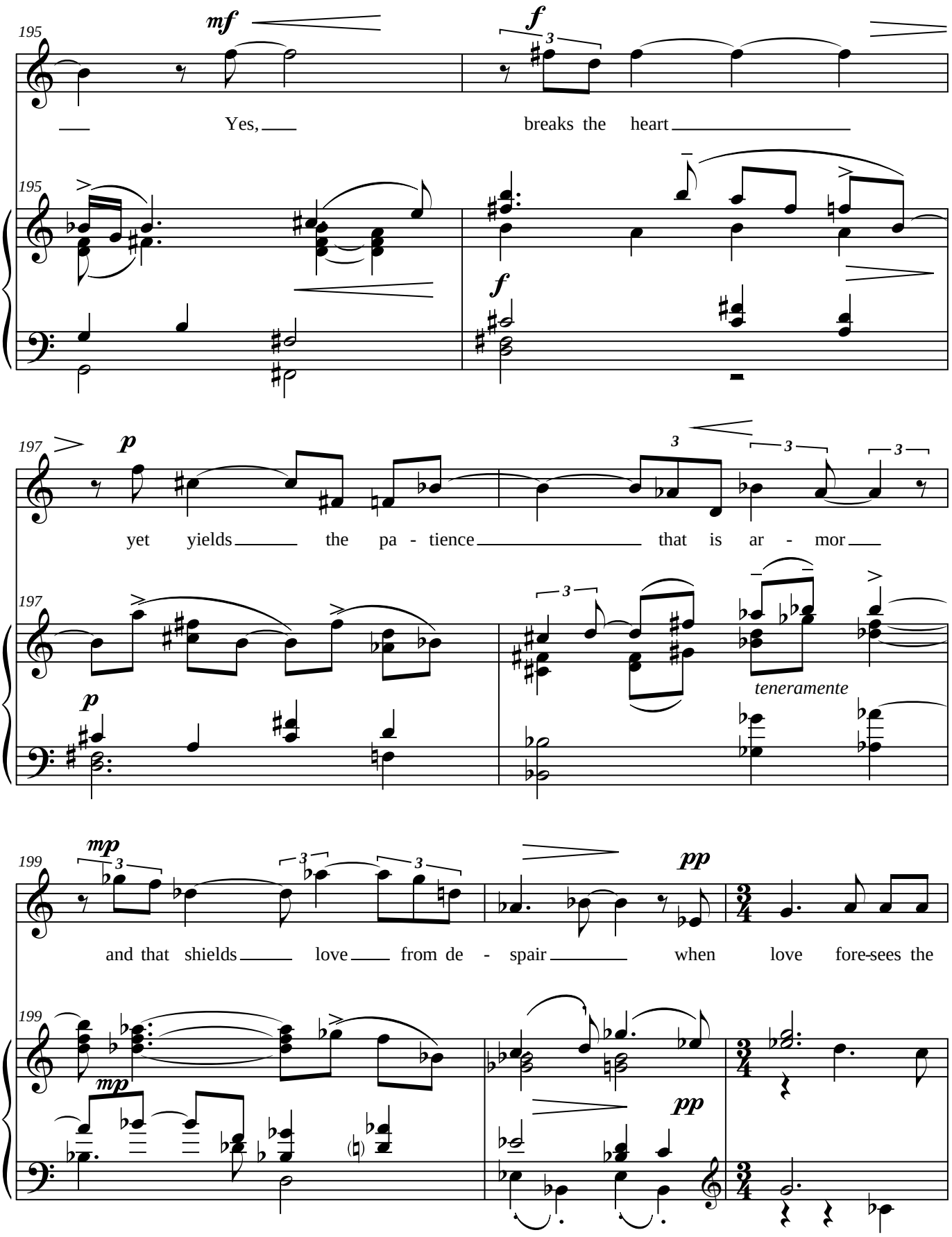


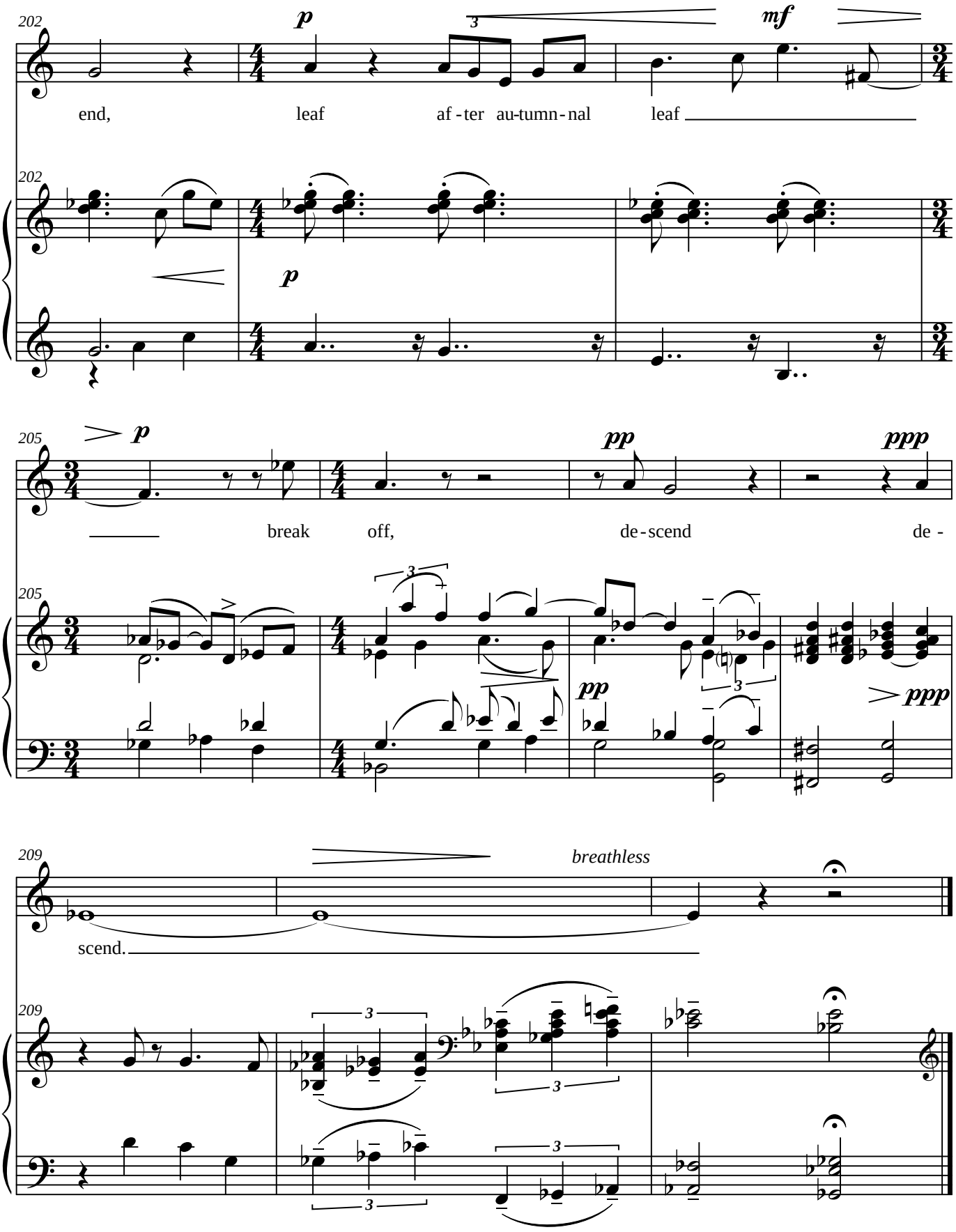

156
p
3
And take it to the gate as hum - bly as a guest who knows
156
p
159
him-self too late, his news al-rea-dy told?
159
3
p
3
162
Yes, while the heart is
3
poco riten.
a tempo
162
pp
3
3
p
p
p


165
mp
p
wrung, a-rise, yes, take this sheaf of dust u-pon your
mp
p
168
poco riten.
tongue. In one last an - ge-lus lift throb - bing
172
a tempo
mp
pp
p
throat. Lis - ten, trans-mut - ing si -
pp
p

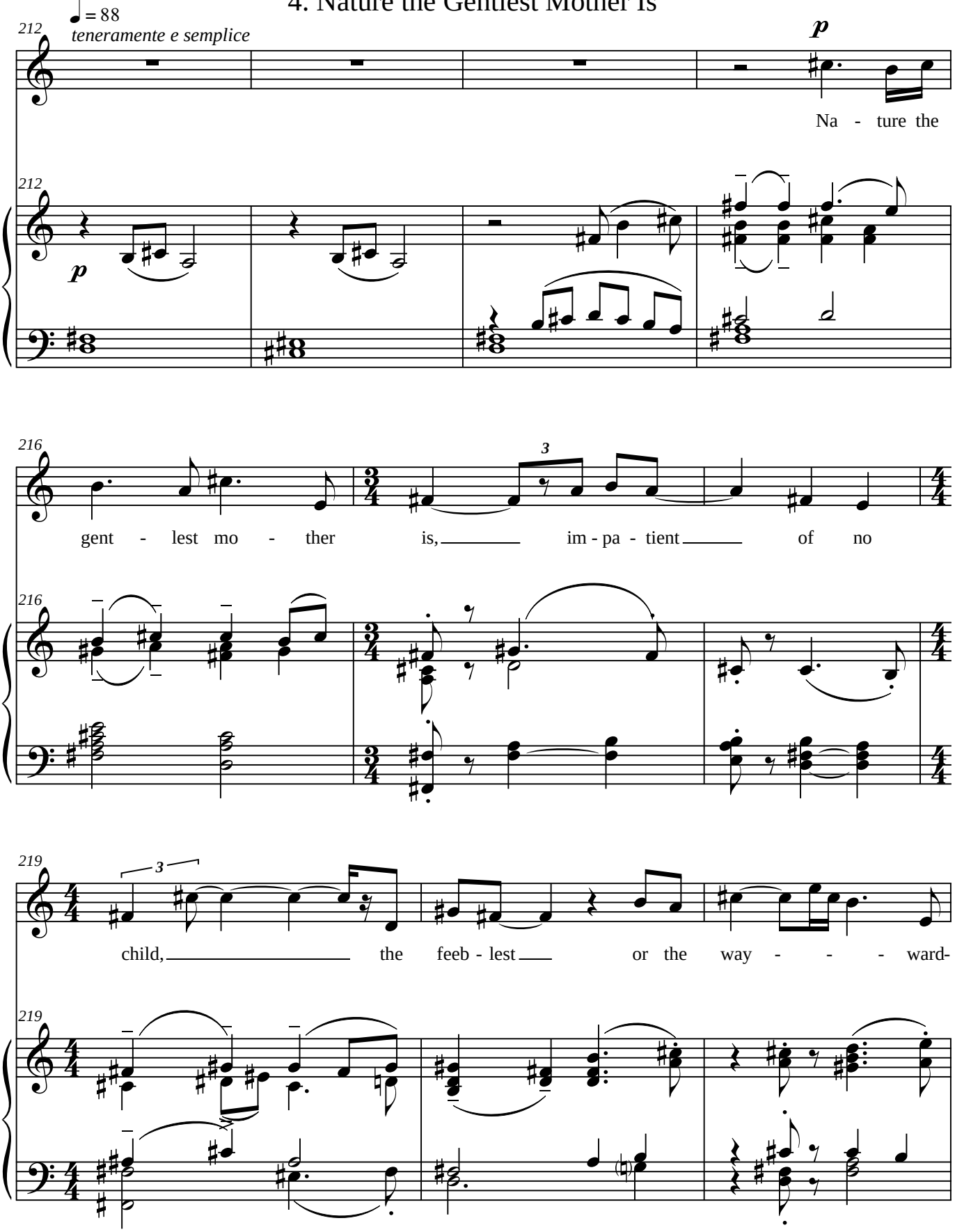

poco allarg.
a tempo
176
- - lence with that stil - ly note of pain, of
pain that Em - i - ly, that Walt knew. While
180
high from dim elm chan-cels hung with dew that tri-ple not - ed
183
accel.

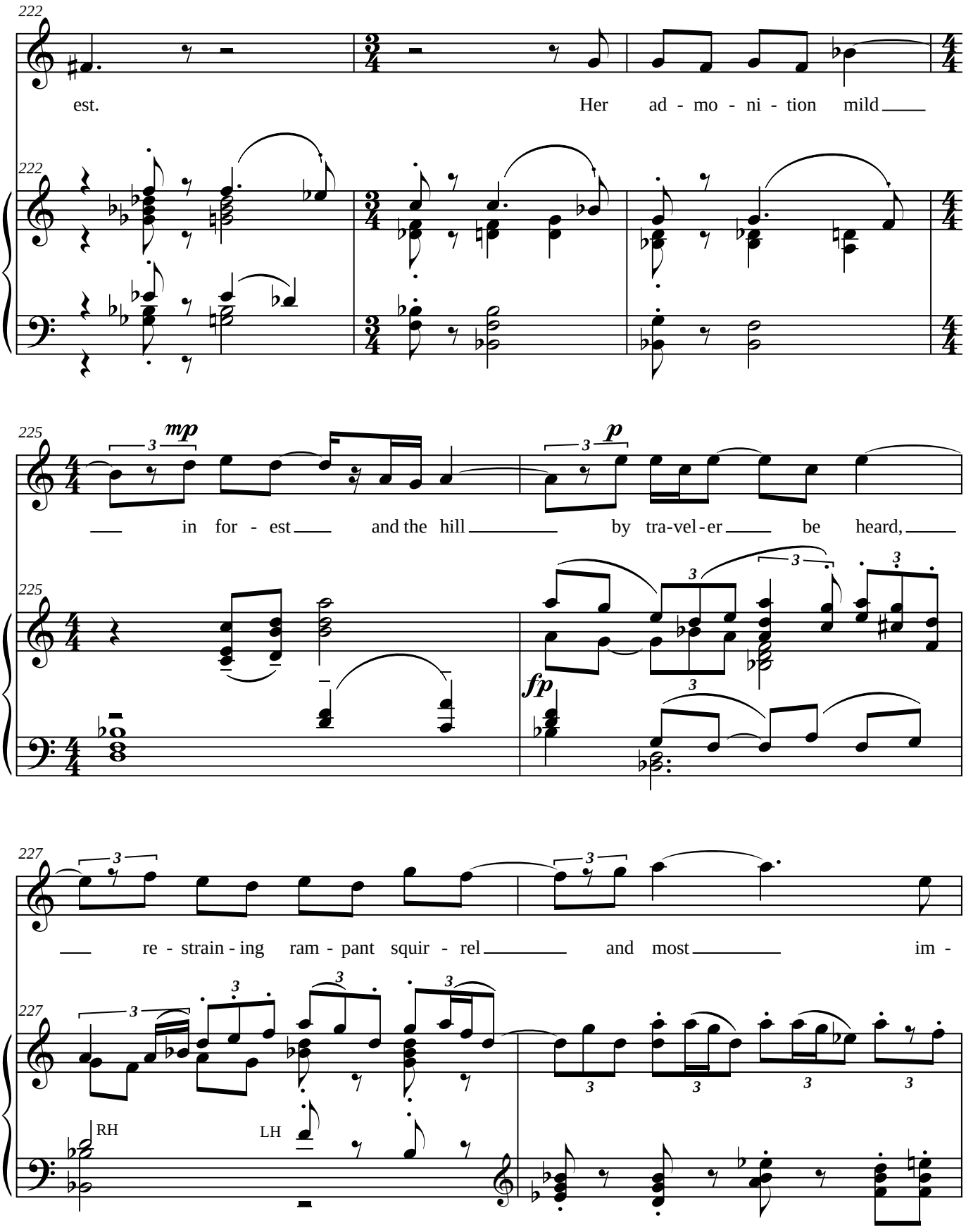

186
a tempo
mf
poco riten.
p
a tempo
clause of moon - light. Yes,
186
mf
p
189
mf
p
cresc.
whip-poor - whil whip-poor-whil, un - husks the heart of
189
cresc.
poco allarg.
192
f
a tempo
p
fright, breaks us breaks us and saves.
192
f
p

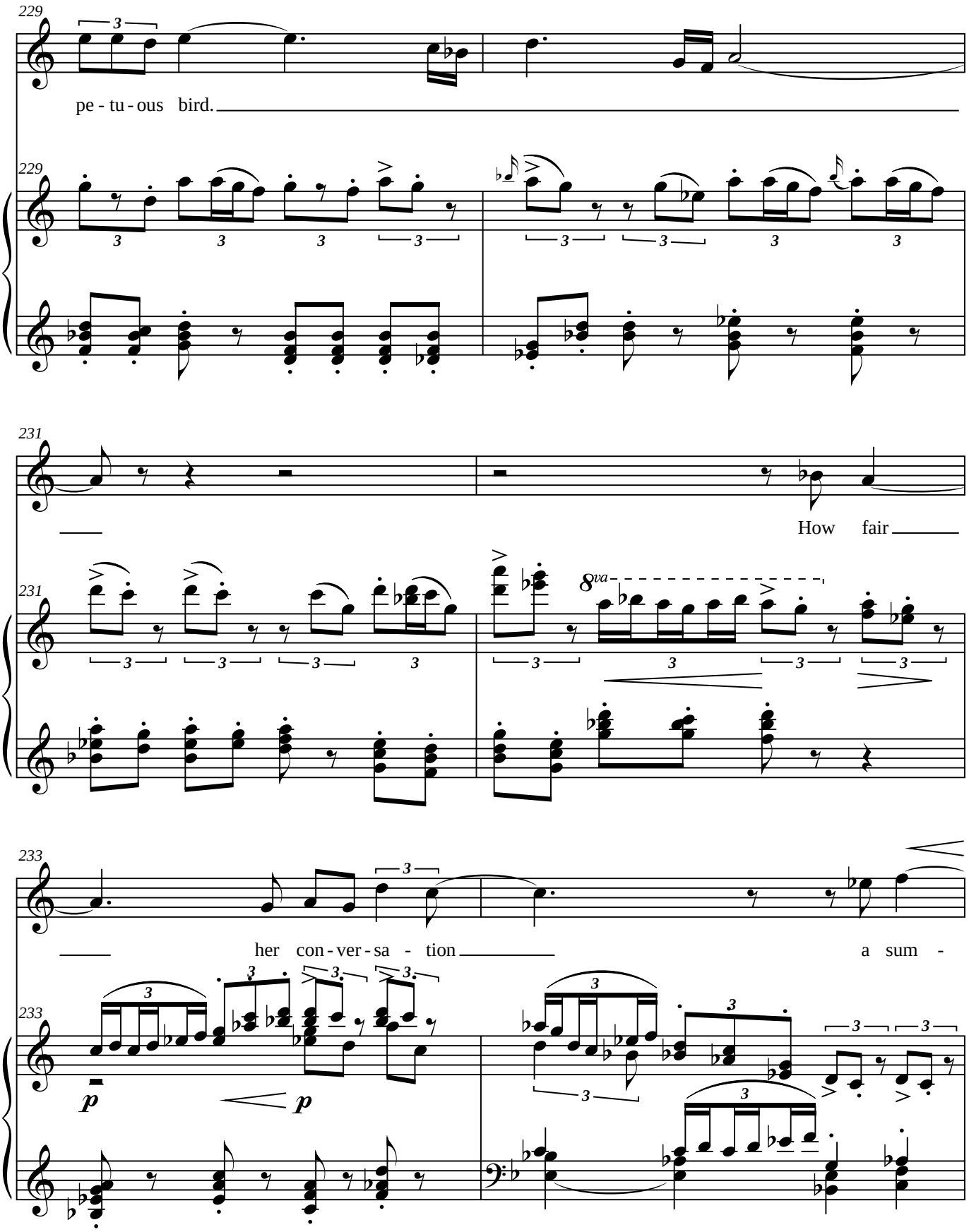

195
mf
f
Yes,
breaks the heart
195
f
197
p
yet yields the pa - tience that is ar - mor
197
p
teneramente
199
mp
pp
and that shields love from de - spair when love fore-sees the
199
mp
pp

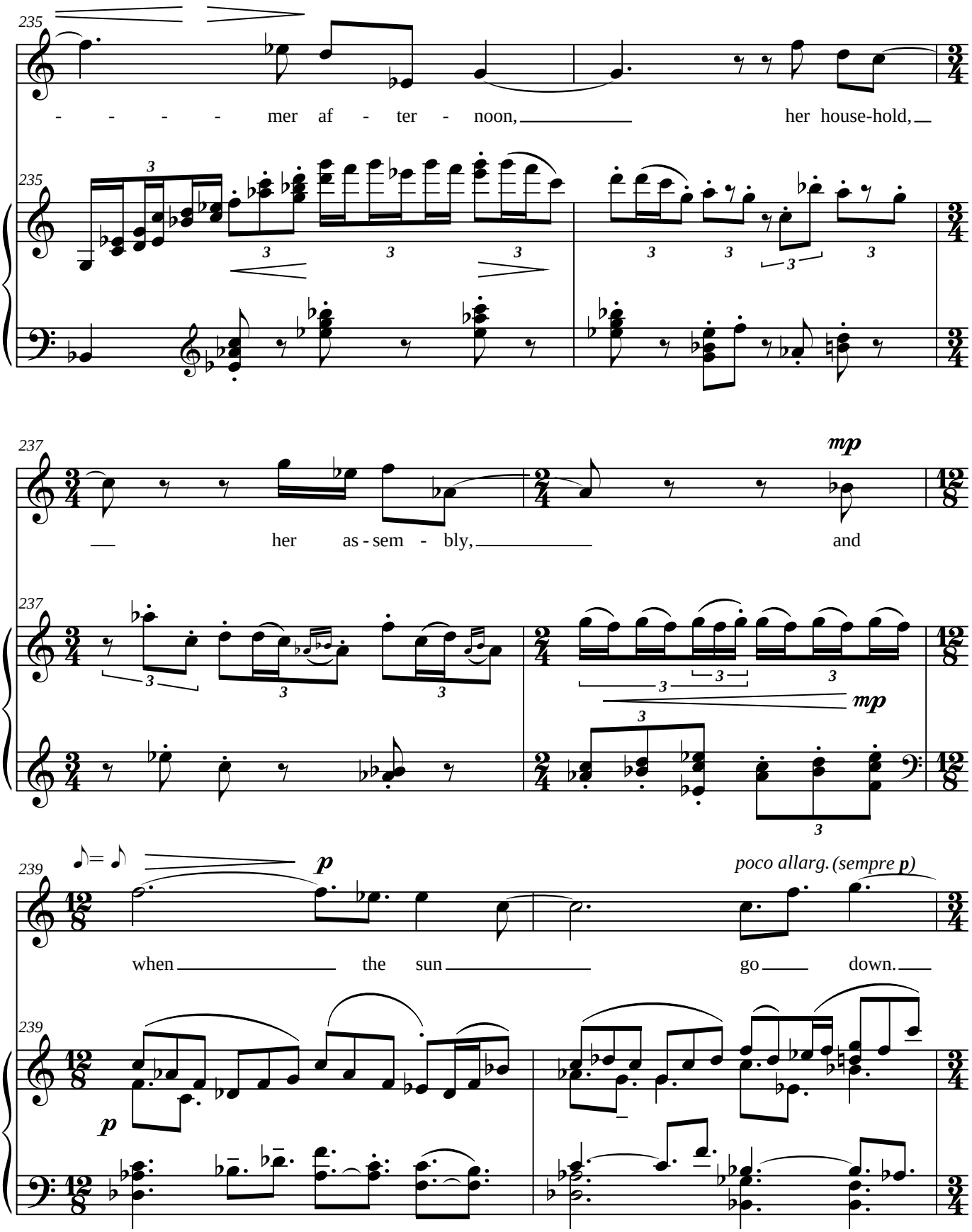

202
p
mf
end,
leaf
af - ter
au-tumn - nal
leaf
202
p
205
p
pp
ppp
break
off,
de - scend
de -
205
pp
ppp
209
breathless
scend.
209

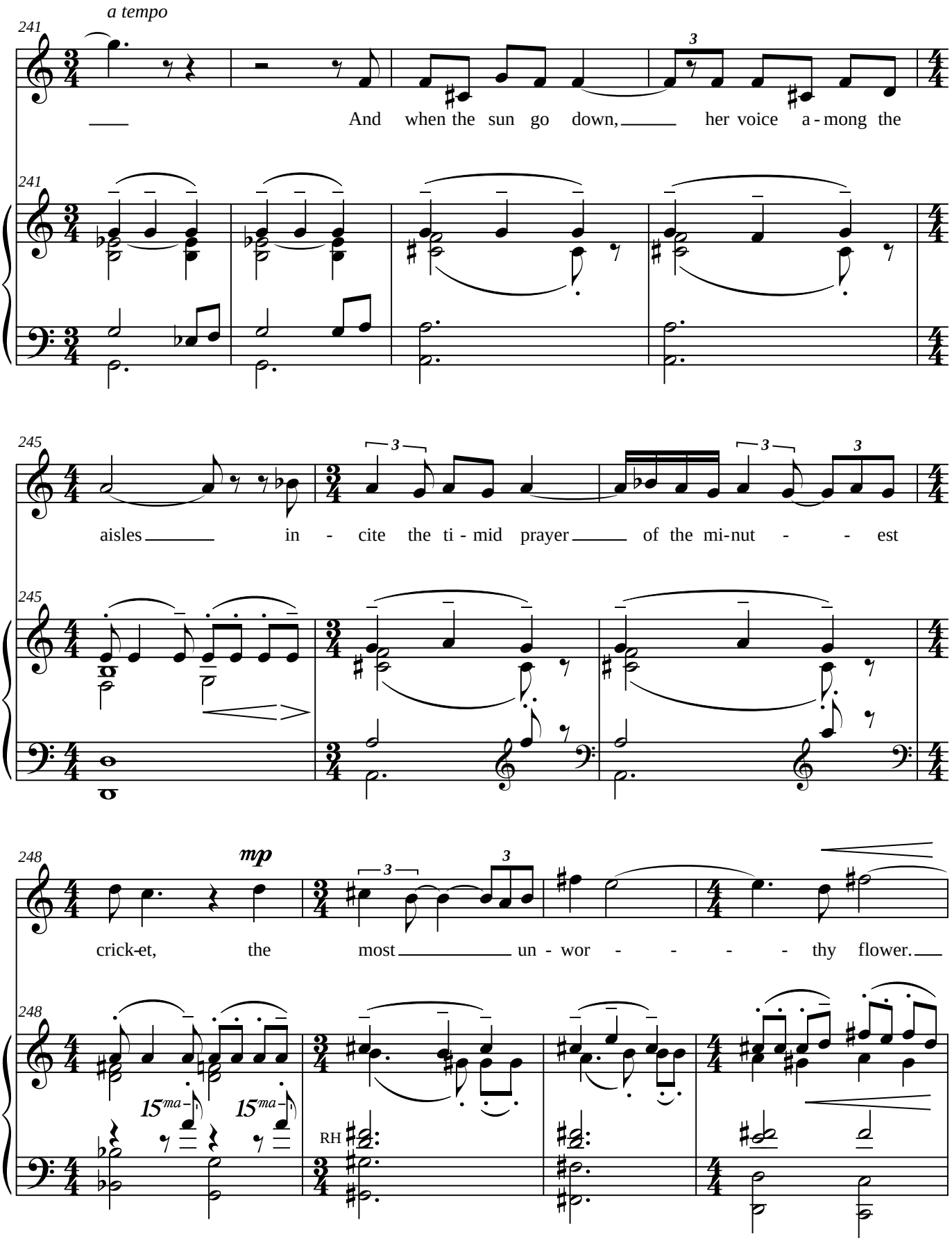
4. Nature the Gentlest Mother Is

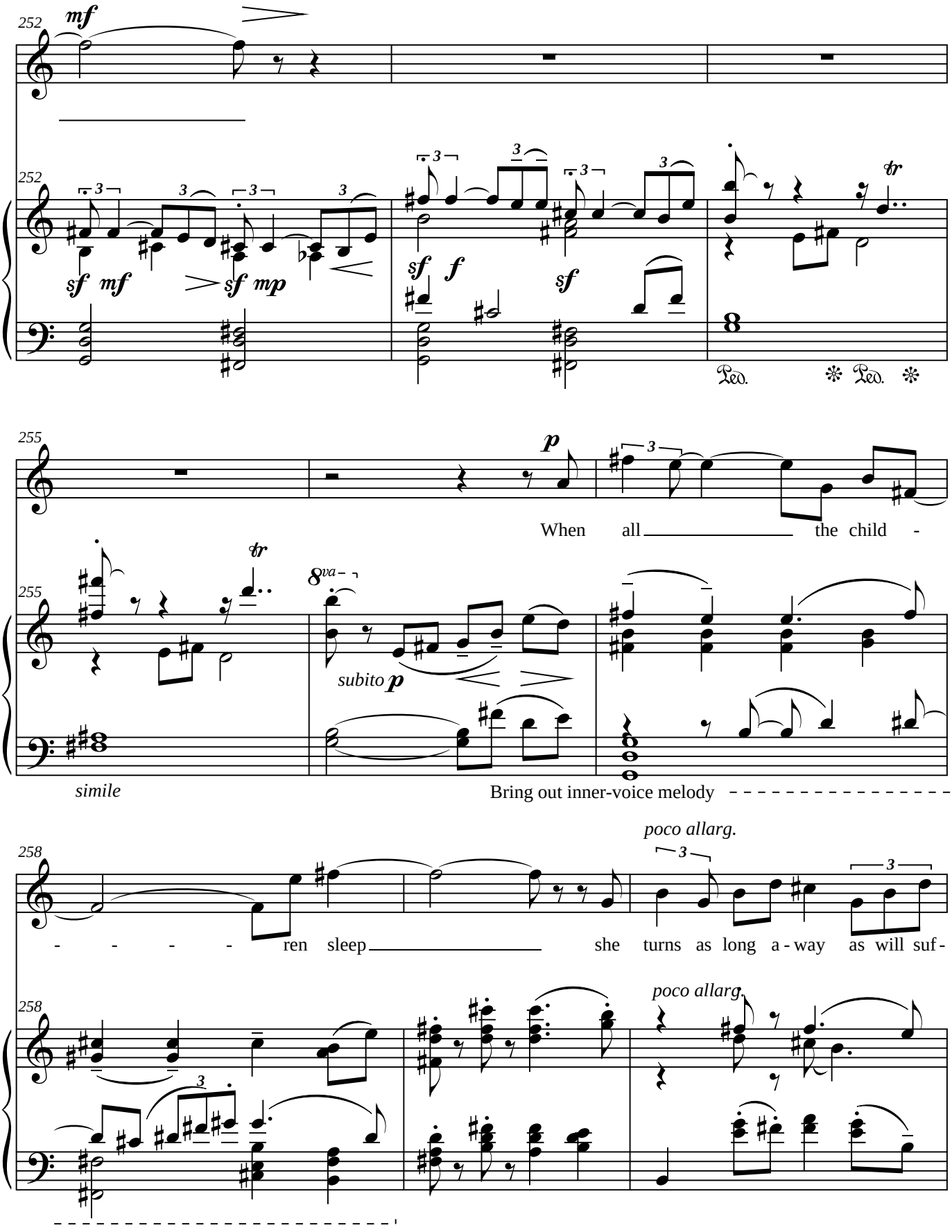


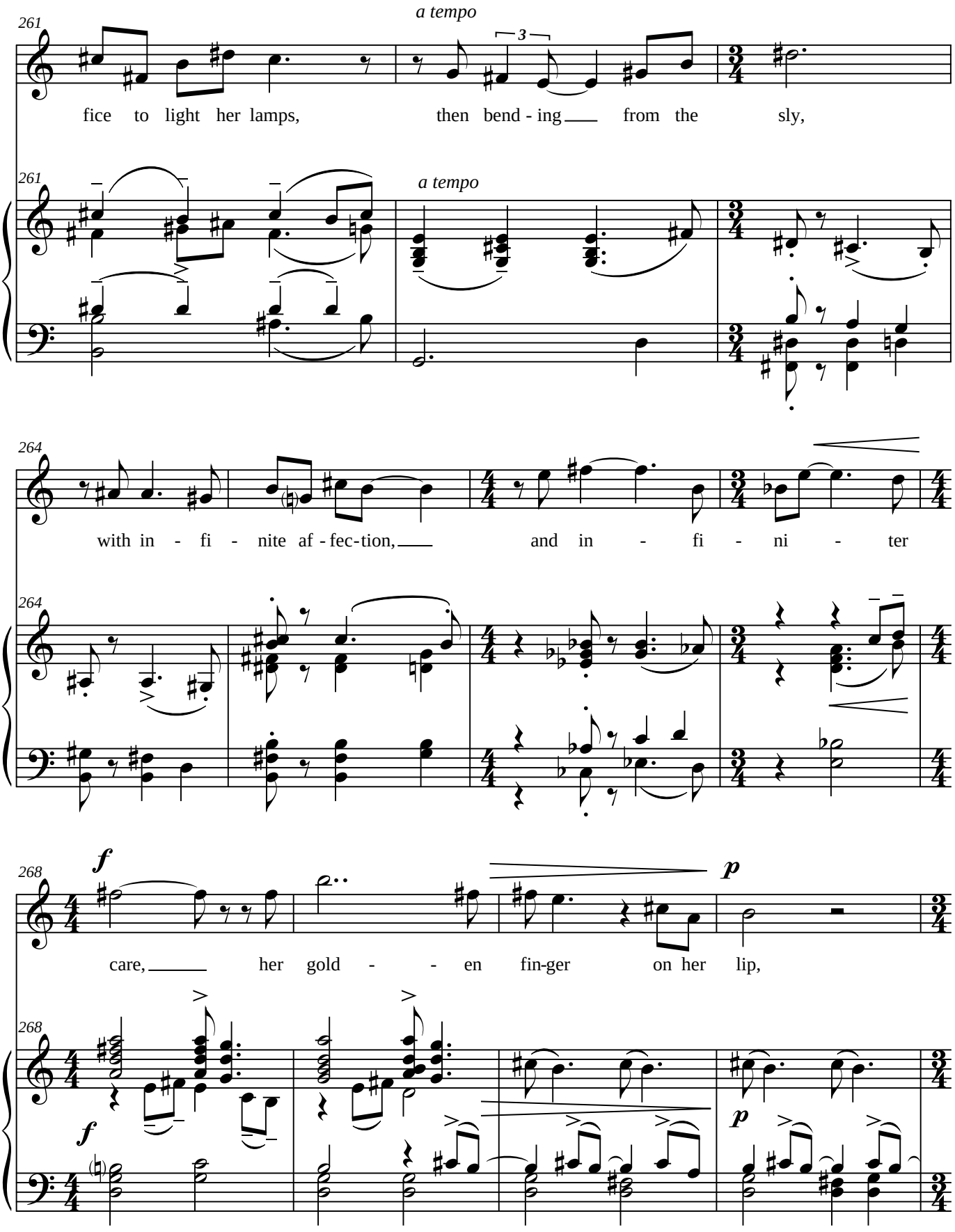

222
est.
Her ad - mo - ni - tion mild
222
225
mp
p
in for - est and the hill by tra-vel-er be heard,
225
fp
227
re - strain - ing ram - pant squir - rel and most im -
227
RH
LH

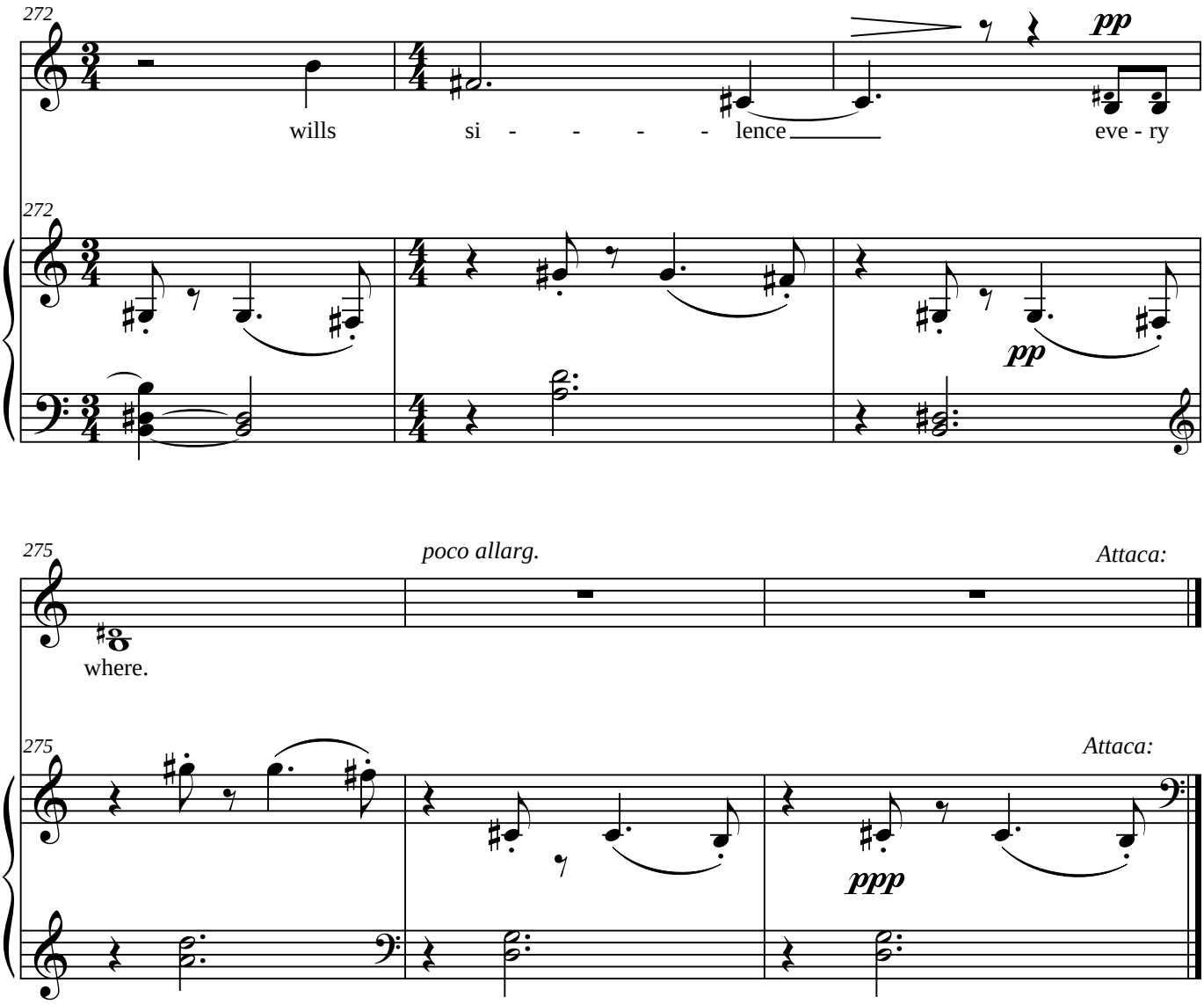

229
pe - tu - ous bird.
229
231
How fair
231
8va
233
her con - ver - sa - tion
a sum -
233
p
p


235
- - - - mer af - ter - noon, her house-hold,
235
237
mp
her as - sem - bly, and
237
mp
239
p
poco allarg. (sempre p)
when the sun go down.
239
p

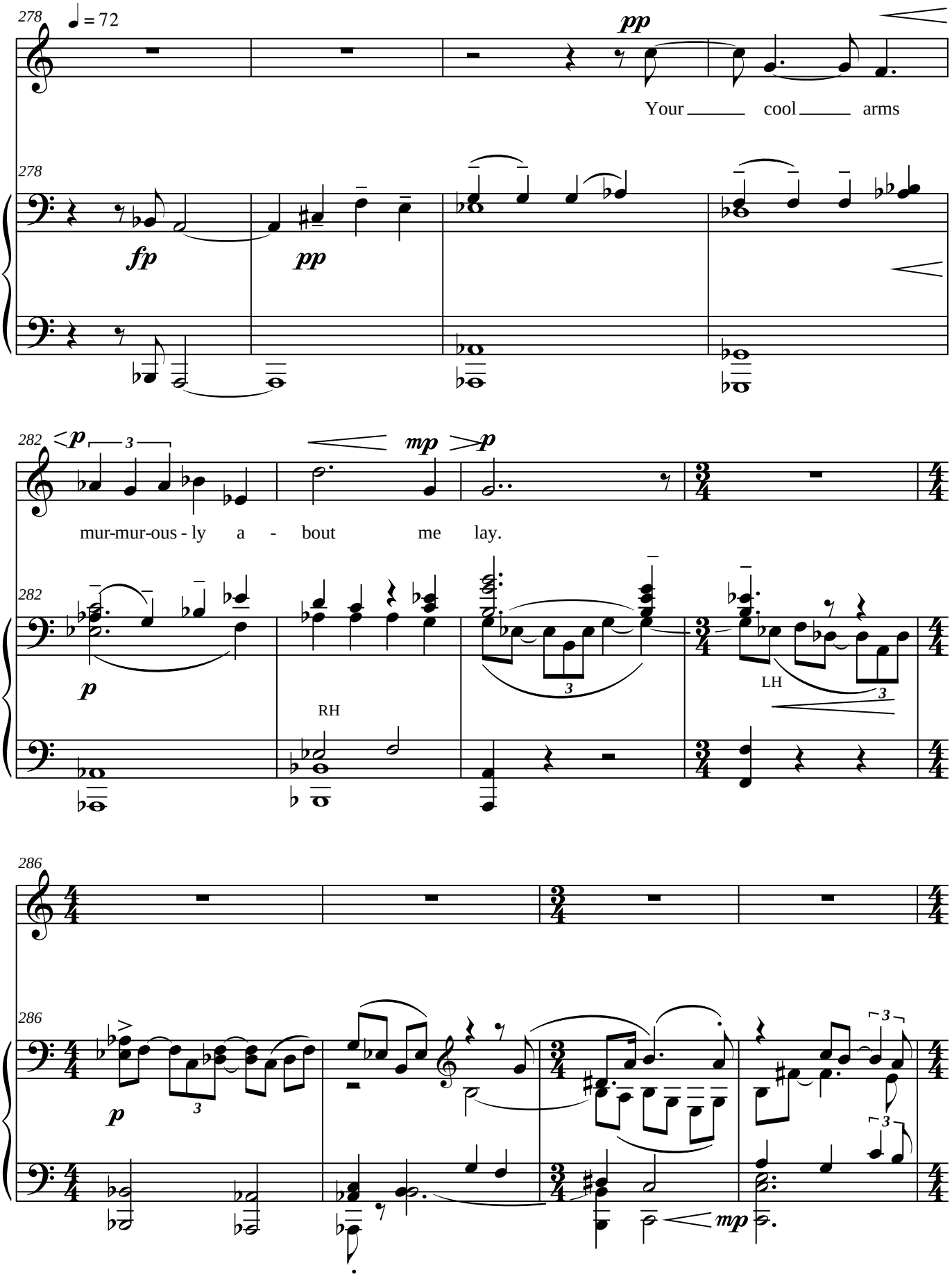

a tempo
241
And when the sun go down, her voice a - mong the
241
245
aisles in - cite the ti - mid prayer of the mi-nut - - est
245
248
mp
crick-et, the most un - wor - - - - thy flower.
248
15ma
15ma
RH

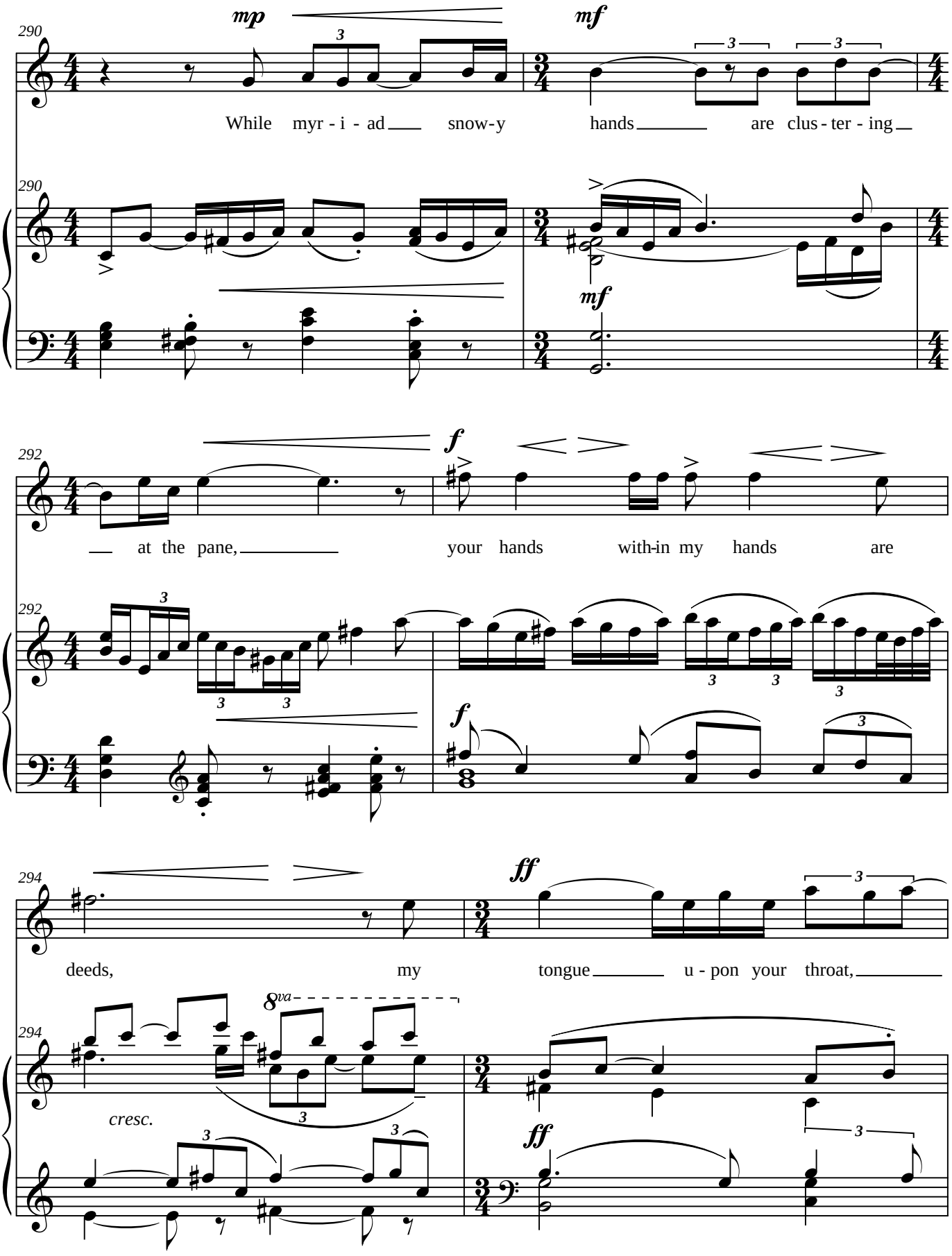

252
mf
sf mf
sf mp
sf f
sf
Ped.
Ped.
255
p
When all the child -
subito p
simile
Bring out inner-voice melody
258
poco allarg.
- - - - ren sleep she turns as long a - way as will suf -
poco allarg.

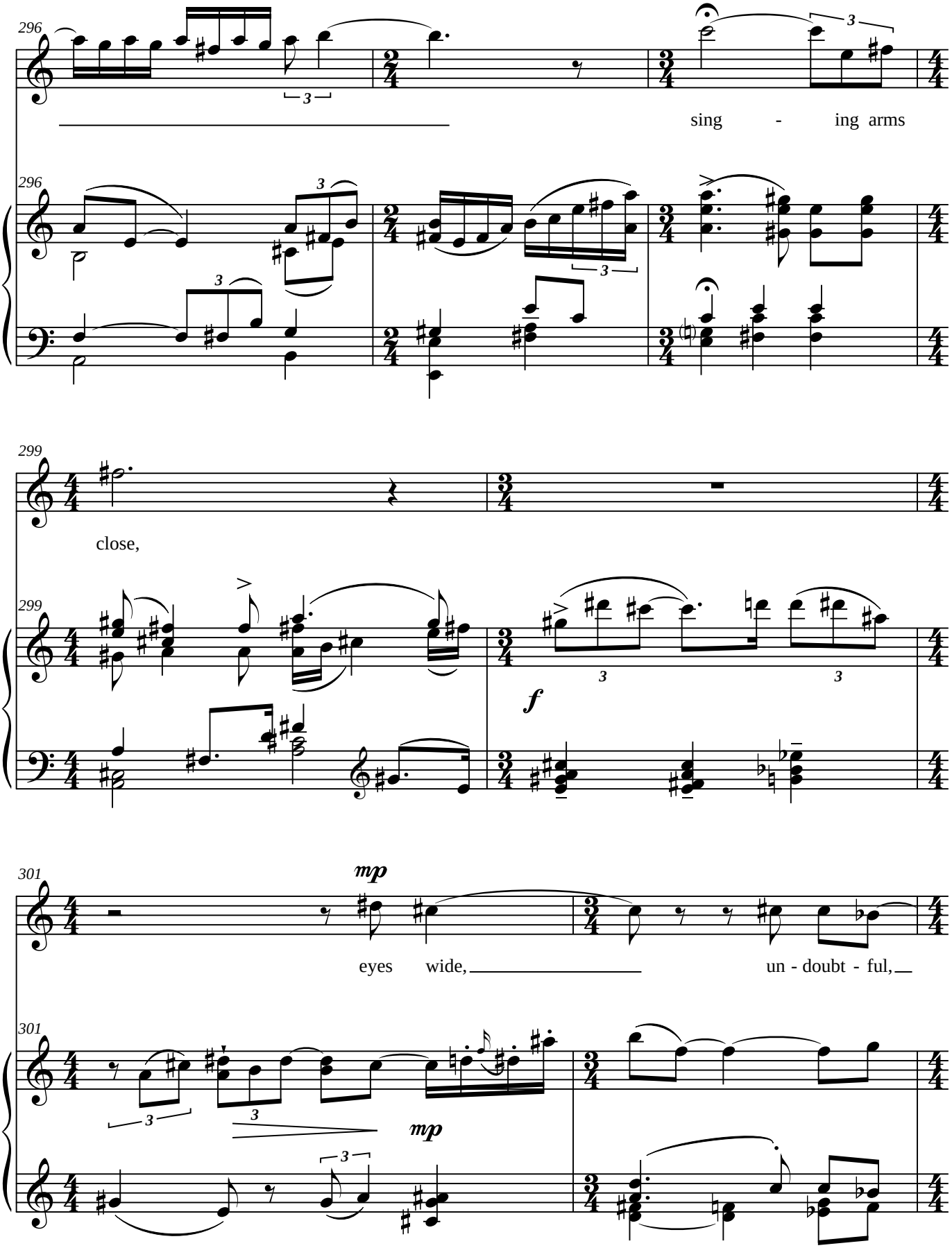

261
a tempo
3
fice to light her lamps,
then bend - ing
from the sly,
261
a tempo
264
with in - fi - nite af - fec-tion,
and in - fi - ni - ter
264
268
f
care,
her gold - - en fin-ger on her lip,
p
268
f
p

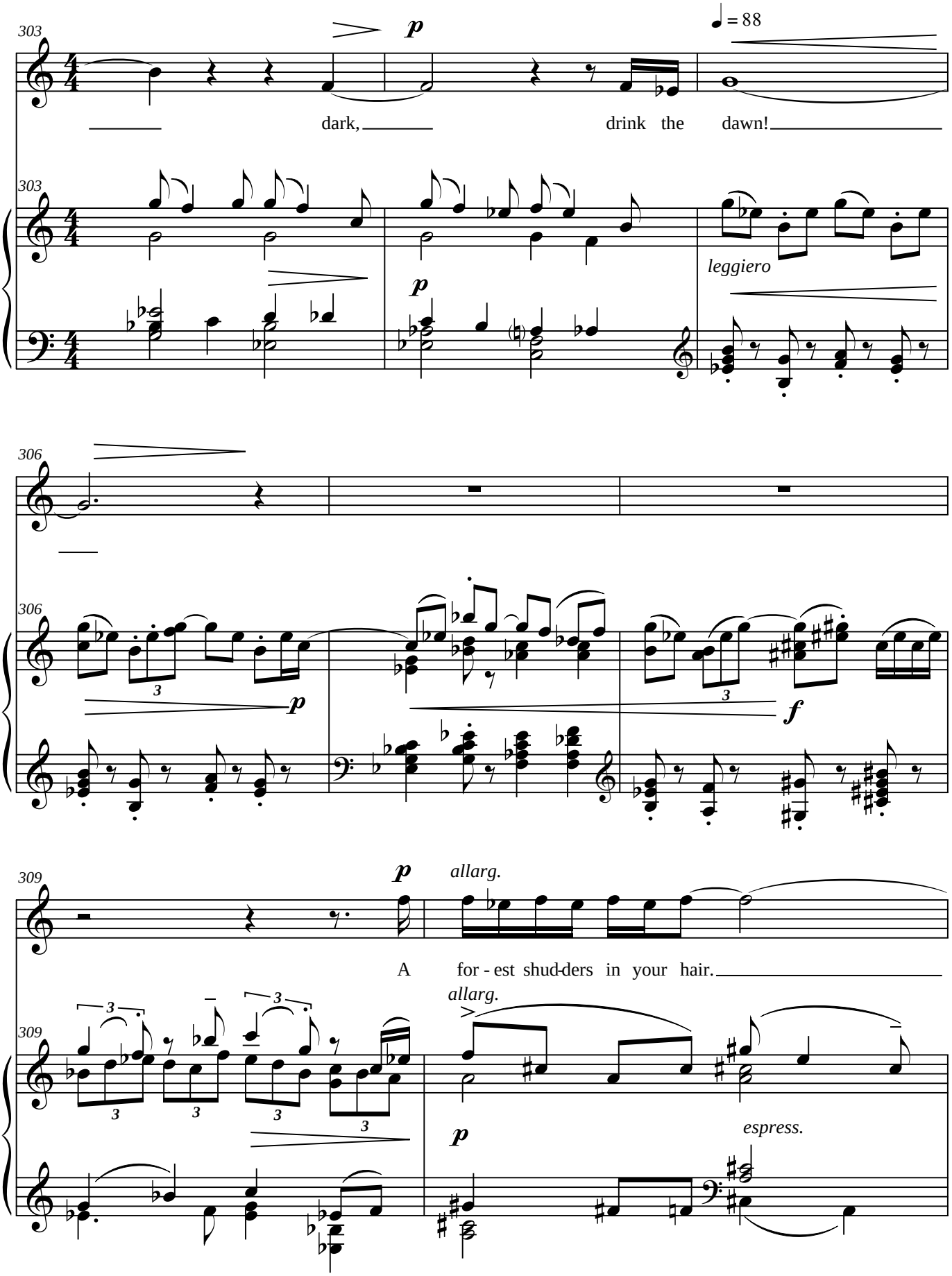

272
wills
si - - - - - lence
eve - ry
pp
272
pp
275
where.
poco allarg.
Attaca:
275
Attaca:
ppp

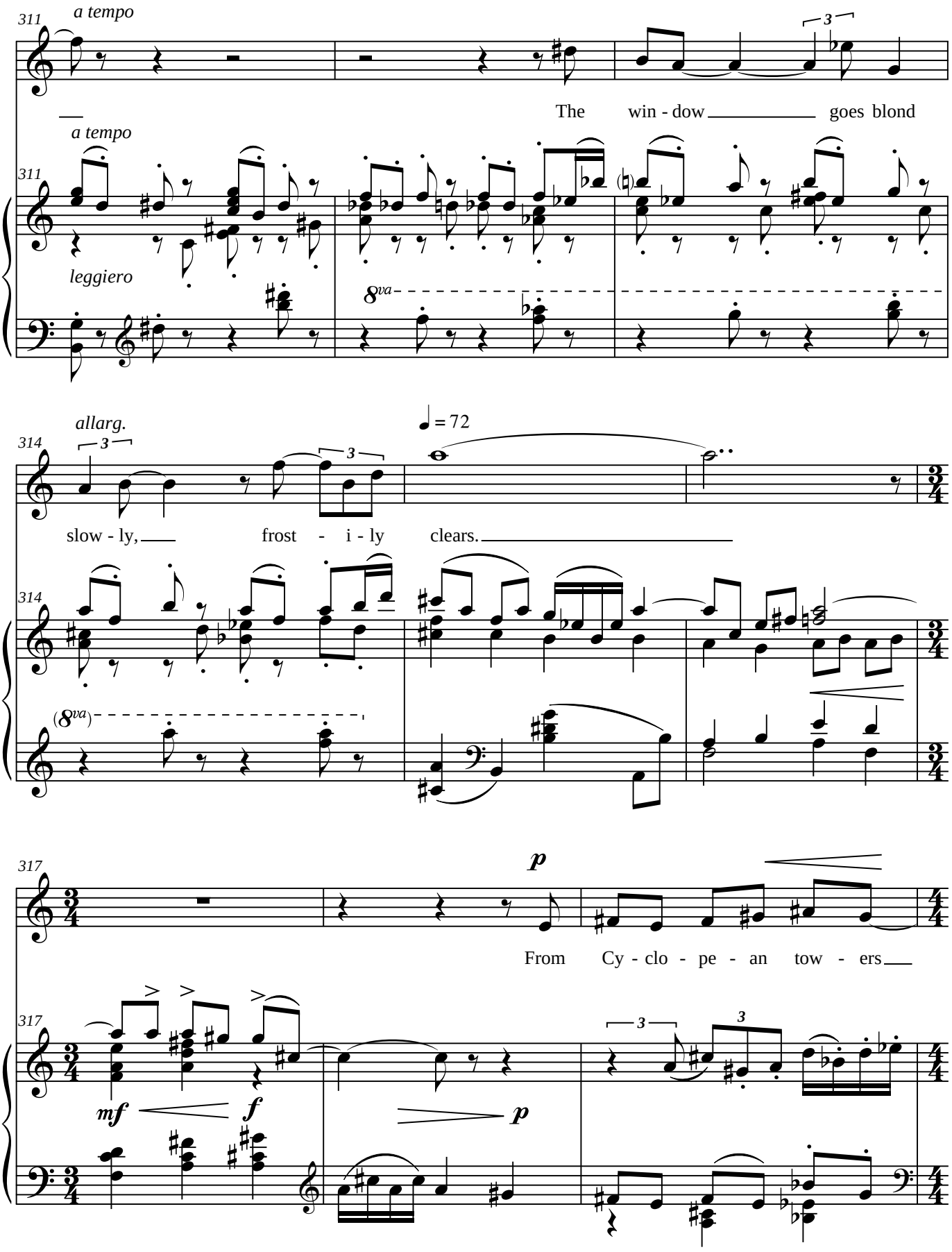
5. The Harbor Dawn (II)

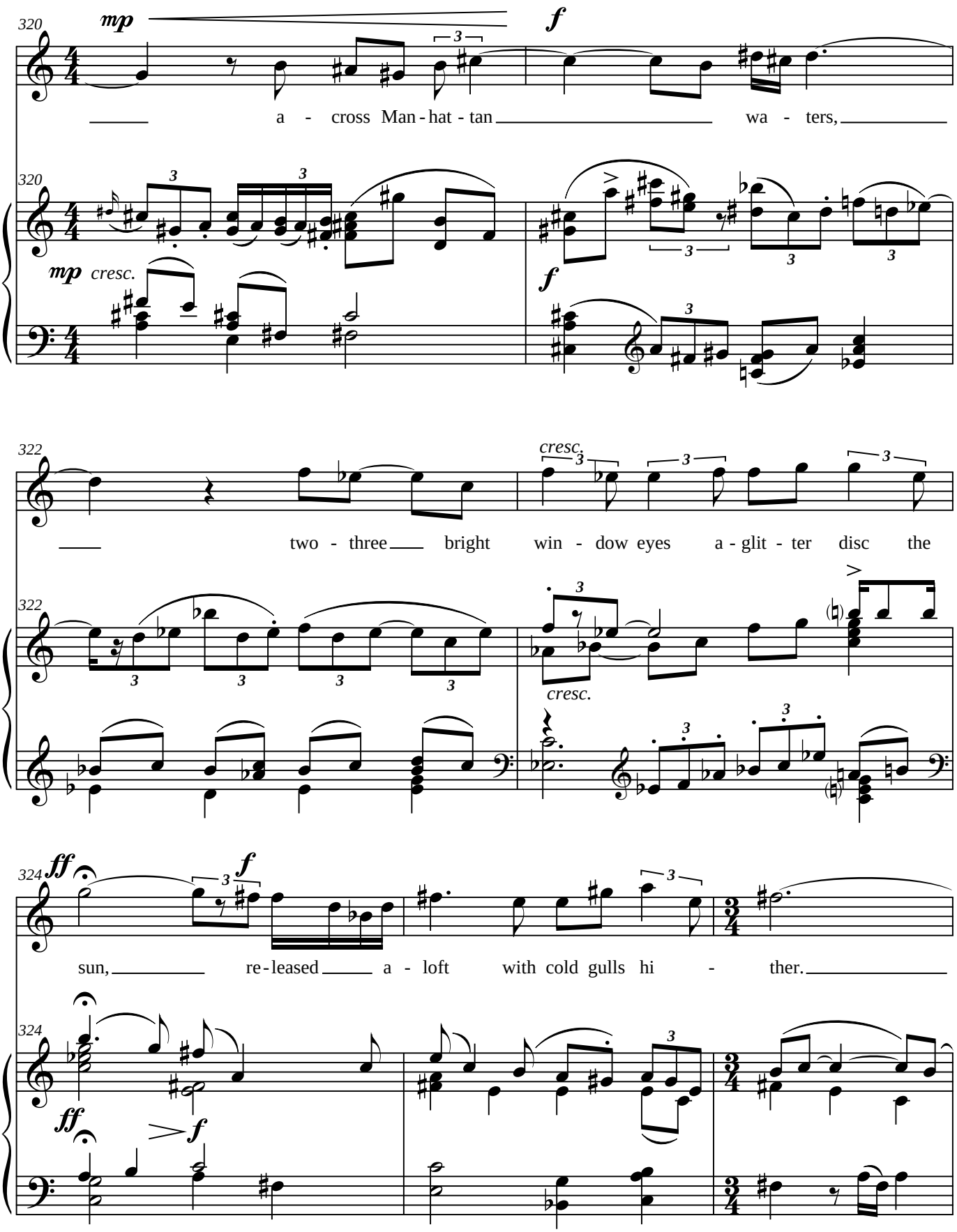


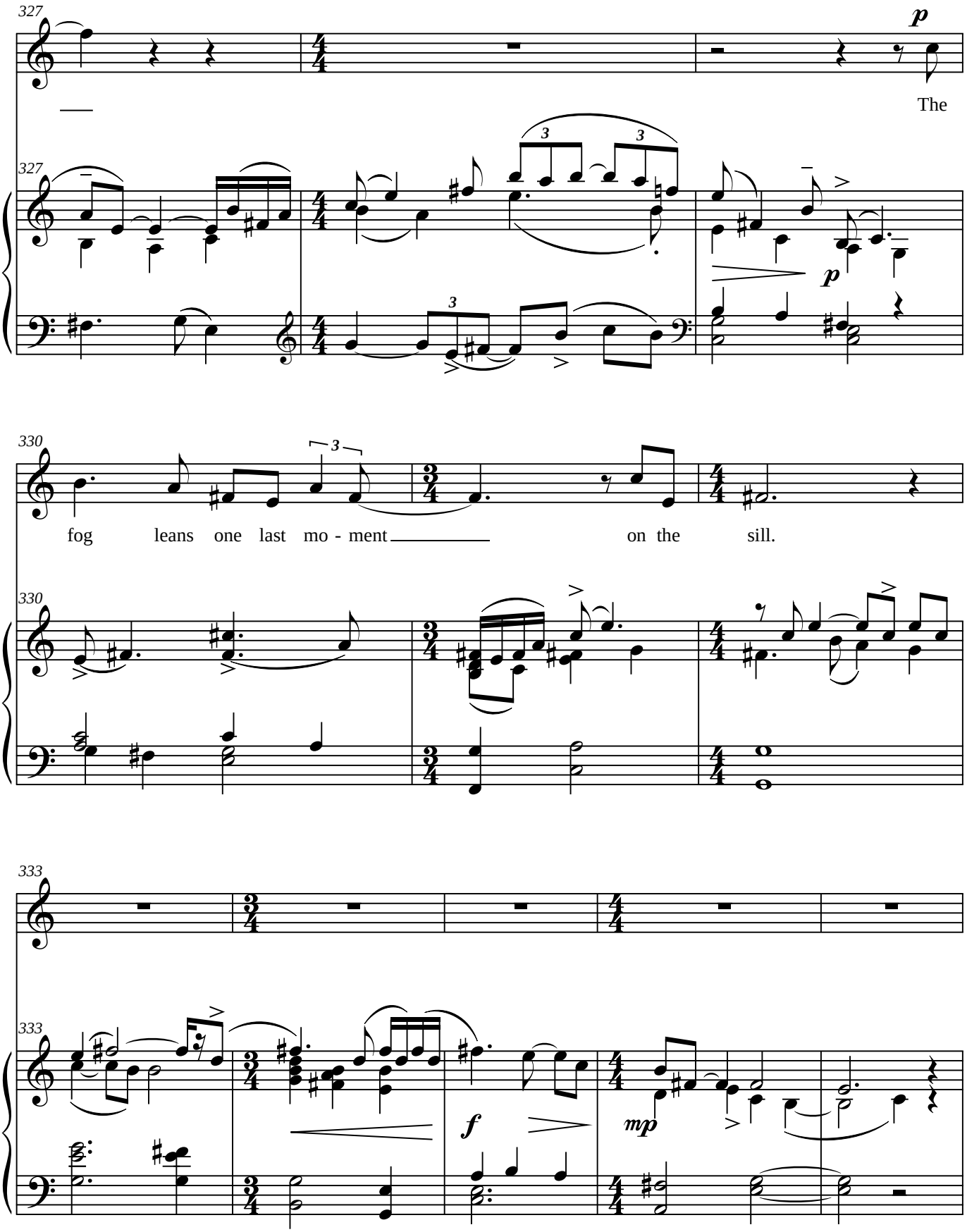

290
mp
mf
While myr - i - ad snow-y hands are clus - ter - ing
290
mf
292
f
at the pane, your hands with-in my hands are
292
f
294
ff
deeds, my tongue u - pon your throat,
294
8va
cresc.
ff

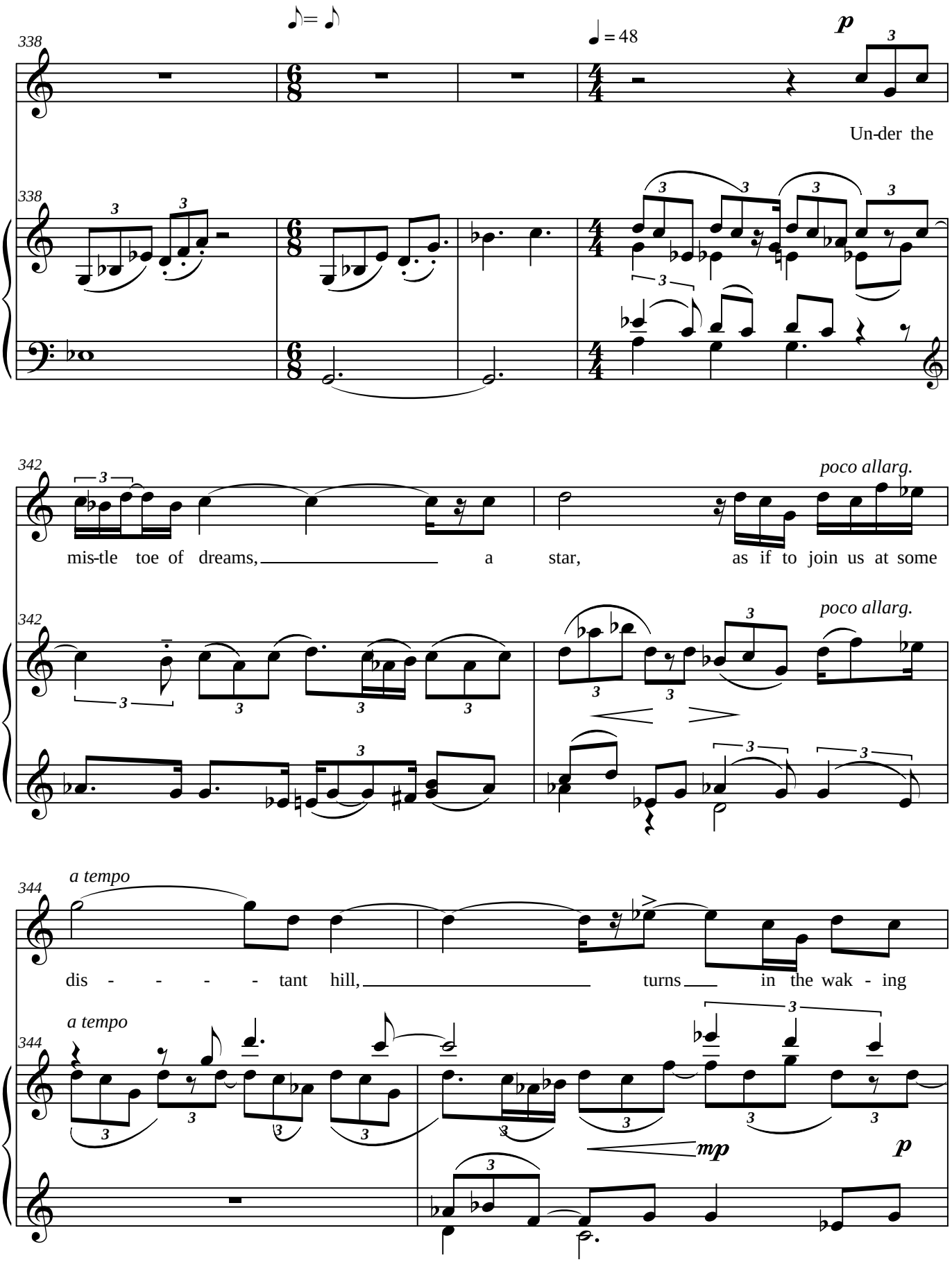

296
sing - ing arms
296
299
close,
299
f
301
mp
eyes wide,
un - doubt - ful,
301
mp

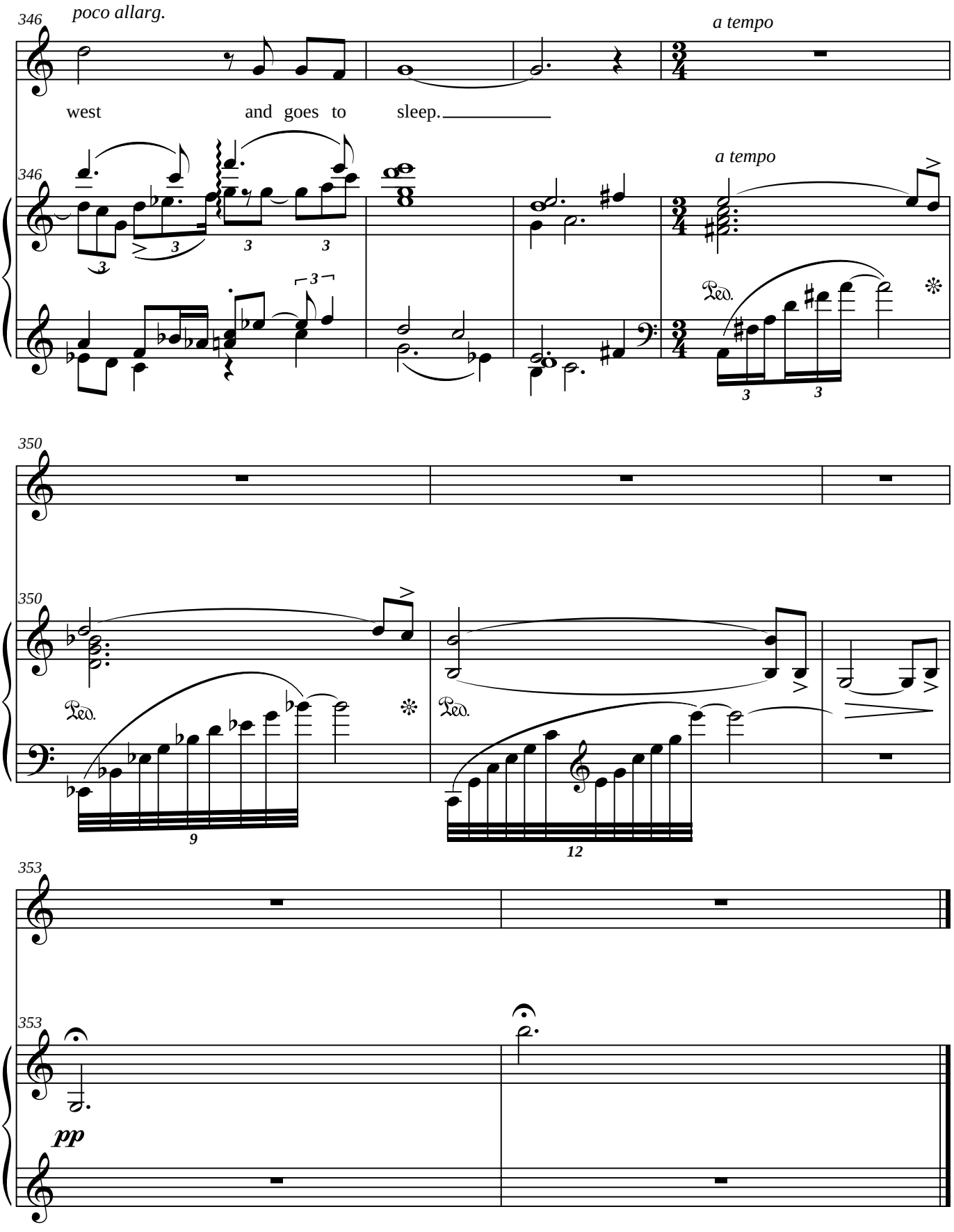

303
p
♩ = 88
dark,
drink the dawn!
303
leggiero
p
306
306
p
f
309
p
allarg.
A for - est shud-ders in your hair.
allarg.
309
p
espress.


311
a tempo
The win - dow goes blond
a tempo
311
leggiero
8va
allarg.
314
3
3
slow - ly, frost - i - ly clears.
♩ = 72
314
(8va)
317
p
From Cy - clo - pe - an tow - ers
317
mf
f
p
3
3


320
mp
f
a - cross Man - hat - tan wa - ters,
mp cresc.
f
322
cresc.
two - three bright win - dow eyes a - glit - ter disc the
cresc.
324
ff
f
sun, re - leased a - loft with cold gulls hi - ther.
ff
f


327
p
The
327
3
3
3
p
330
3
fog leans one last mo - ment on the sill.
330
333
333
f
mp


338
♪= ♪
♩= 48
p
Un-der the
338
342
poco allarg.
mis-tle toe of dreams, a star, as if to join us at some
342
poco allarg.
344
a tempo
dis - - - - - tant hill, turns in the wak - ing
a tempo
344
mp
p


346
poco allarg.
a tempo
west and goes to sleep.
346
a tempo
Ped.
350
350
Ped.
Ped.
9
12
353
353
pp