Crossing the Water

Cantata for Soprano, Baritone, Male Speaking Voice, and Piano

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Crossing the Water

Text adapted from William Carlos Williams's *The Wanderer: A Rococo Study* (1917).

1. ADVENT

She sprang from the nest, a young crow,
Whose first flight circled the forest.
I know now how then she showed me
Her mind, reaching out to the horizon,
She close above the tree tops.

I saw her eyes straining at the new distance
And as the woods fell from her flying
Likewise they fell from me as I followed
So that I strongly guessed all that I must put from me
To come through ready for the high courses.

But one day, crossing the ferry,
With the great towers of Manhattan before me,
Out at the prow with the sea wind blowing,
I had been wearying many questions
Which she had put on to try me:
How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?

When lo! in a rush, dragging
A blunt boat on the yielding river
Suddenly I saw her! And she waved me
From the white wet in midst of her playing!

She cried me, "Haia! Here I am, son!
See how strong my little finger is!
Can I not swim well?
I can fly too!" And with that a great sea-gull
Went to the left, vanishing with a wild cry.

2. CLARITY

"Come!" cried my mind and by her might
That was upon us we flew above the river
Seeking her, grey gulls among the white
In the air speaking as she had willed it:

"I am given," cried I, "now I know it!
For surely
Either there in the rolling smoke spheres below us
Or here with us in the air intercircling,
Certainly somewhere here about us

I know she is revealing these things!"

And as gulls we flew and with soft cries
We seemed to speak, flying, "It is she,
The mighty, recreating the whole world:
This the first day of wonders!

3. BROADWAY

It was then she struck--from behind,
In mid air, as with the edge of a great wing!
And instantly down the mists of my eyes
There came crowds walking--men as visions
With expressionless, animate faces;
Empty men with shell-thin bodies
Jostling close above the gutter,
Hasting--nowhere!

Silent, her voice entered at my eyes
And my astonished thought followed her easily:
"Well, do their eyes shine, do their clothes fit?
These live I tell you! Old men with red cheeks,
Young men in gay suits! See them!

4. ABROAD I

Never, even in a dream,
Have I winged so high nor so well
As with her, she leading me by the hand,
That first day on the Jersey mountains!

And never shall I forget
The trembling interest with which I heard
Her voice in a low thunder:

"You are safe here. Look child, look open-mouth!
The patch of road between the steep bramble banks;
The tree in the wind, the white house there, the sky!

Speak to men of these, concerning me!
For never while you permit them to ignore me
In these shall the full of my freed voice
Come grappling the ear with intent!

Never while the air’s clear coolness
Is seized to be a coat for pettiness;
Never while richness of greenery
Stands a shield for prurient minds;

Never, permitting these things unchallenged
Shall my voice of leaves and varicolored bark come free through!"
At which, knowing her solitude,
I shouted over the country below me:

"Waken! my people, to the boughs green
With ripening fruit within you!
Waken to the myriad cinquefoil
In the waving grass of your minds!
Waken to the silent phoebe nest
Under the eaves of your spirit!"

5. PATERSON: THE STRIKE

At the first peep of dawn she roused me!
I rose trembling at the change which the night saw!
For there, wretchedly brooding in a corner
From which the old eyes glittered fiercely
"Go!" she said, and I hurried shivering
Out into the deserted streets of Paterson.

--Hot for savagery,
Sucking the air! I went into the city,
Out again, baffled onto the mountain!
Back into the city!
Nowhere
The subtle! Everywhere the electric!

A short bread-line before a hitherto empty tea shop:
No questions--all stood patiently, dominated
By one idea: something that carried them
As they are always wanting to be carried.

“But what is it?” I asked those nearest me,
“Can it be anything but brutality?
On that at least they’re united! That at least
Is their bean soup, their calm bread and a few luxuries!
How, since I have failed them,
Can it be anything but brutality?”

It sank deep into the blood, that I rose upon
The tense air enjoying the dusty fight!
The women’s wrists, the men’s arms, red
Used to heat and cold, to toss quartered beeves

And barrels, and milk-cans, and crates of fruit!
Faces all knotted up like burls on oaks,
Sagging breasts and protruding stomachs,
Rasping voices, filthy habits with the hands.

Nowhere you! Everywhere the electric!
Ugly, venomous, gigantic!
Tossing me as a great father his helpless
Infant till it shriek with ecstasy
And its eyes roll and its tongue hangs out!

6. ABROAD II

Then she, the old one, laughing
Seized me and whirling about bore back
To the city, upward, still laughing
Until the great towers stood above the marshland
Wheeling beneath: the little creeks, the mallows
That I picked as a boy, the Hackensack
So quiet that seemed so broad formerly:
The crawling trains, the cedar swamp on the one side
All so old, so familiar--so new now
To my marveling eyes as we passed.

7. ST. JAMES GROVE

And so it came to that last day
When, she leading by the hand, we went out

Early in the morning, I heavy of heart
For I knew the novitiate was ended
The ecstasy was over, the life begun.

In my woolen shirt and the pale blue necktie
My grandmother gave me, there I went
Past the houses of my friends
Down the hill to the river
As on any usual day, any errand.

Alone, walking under trees,
I went with her, she with her wild hair,
By Santiago Grove and presently
She bent forward and knelt by the river,
The Passaic, that filthy river.

And there dabbling her mad hands,
She called me close beside her.
Raising the water then in the cupped palm
She bathed our brows wailing and laughing:

"River, we are old, you and I,
Lo, the filth in our hair, our bodies stink!
Old friend, here I have brought you
The young soul you long asked of me.

Stand forth, river, and give me
The old friend of my revels!
For here I have made a room for it!”

And the filthy Passaic consented!
Then the river began to enter my heart,
Eddying back cool and limpid
Into the crystal beginning of its days.

But with the rebound it leaped forward:
Muddy, then black and shrunken
Till I felt the utter depth of its degradation,
And dropped down knowing this was me now.

I could have shouted out in my agony
At the sight of myself departing
Forever.
Then she: "Be silent!" And
Turning to the river she spoke again:

"For him and for me, river, the wandering,
But by you I leave for happiness
Deep foliage, the thickest beeches--
Though elsewhere they are all dying--
Tallest oaks and yellow birches
That dip their leaves in you, mourning,
As now I dip my hair, immemorial of me,
Immemorial of these our promises!

Here shall be a bird’s paradise,
They sing to you remembering my voice:
Live, river, live in luxuriance
In remembrance of me and my sorrow
And of the new wandering!"

Crossing the Water was composed for a concert in Santa Fe in August, 2011, at the Eighth International Meeting of the International Association for Word and Music Studies (WMA), by the Association’s resident ensemble: Walter Bernhart, piano, Michael Halliwell, baritone, and Suzanne Lodato, soprano, with Simon Williams, speaker. The theme of theme of the conference was voice, and the composition is an exploration of voice in multiple planes and registers: singing voice, speaking voice, the voice of utterance, the voice of quotation, performative voice, and, metaphorically, the “voice” of visionary poetry, the search for which is the topic of William Carlos William’s *The Wanderer: A Rococo Study* (1917; public domain) from which the text shown above was quarried with much cutting and a modicum of rewriting. Williams puts a self-consciously modern twist on his traditional theme by making his Muse quite different from the idealized Eternal Feminine: she is haggard, tough, extravagant, indignant, and bossy—no one you want to mess with. *Crossing the Water* lasts about a half hour. The three vocalists should position themselves at some distance from each other.

I: PROLOGUE*

SPEAKER:
O what is it in me that makes me tremble so at voices?
Surely whoever speaks to me in the right voice, him or her I shall follow,
As the water follows the moon, silently, with fluid steps, anywhere
around the globe.

AS the speaker recites the next stanza, the soprano and baritone whisper as follows:

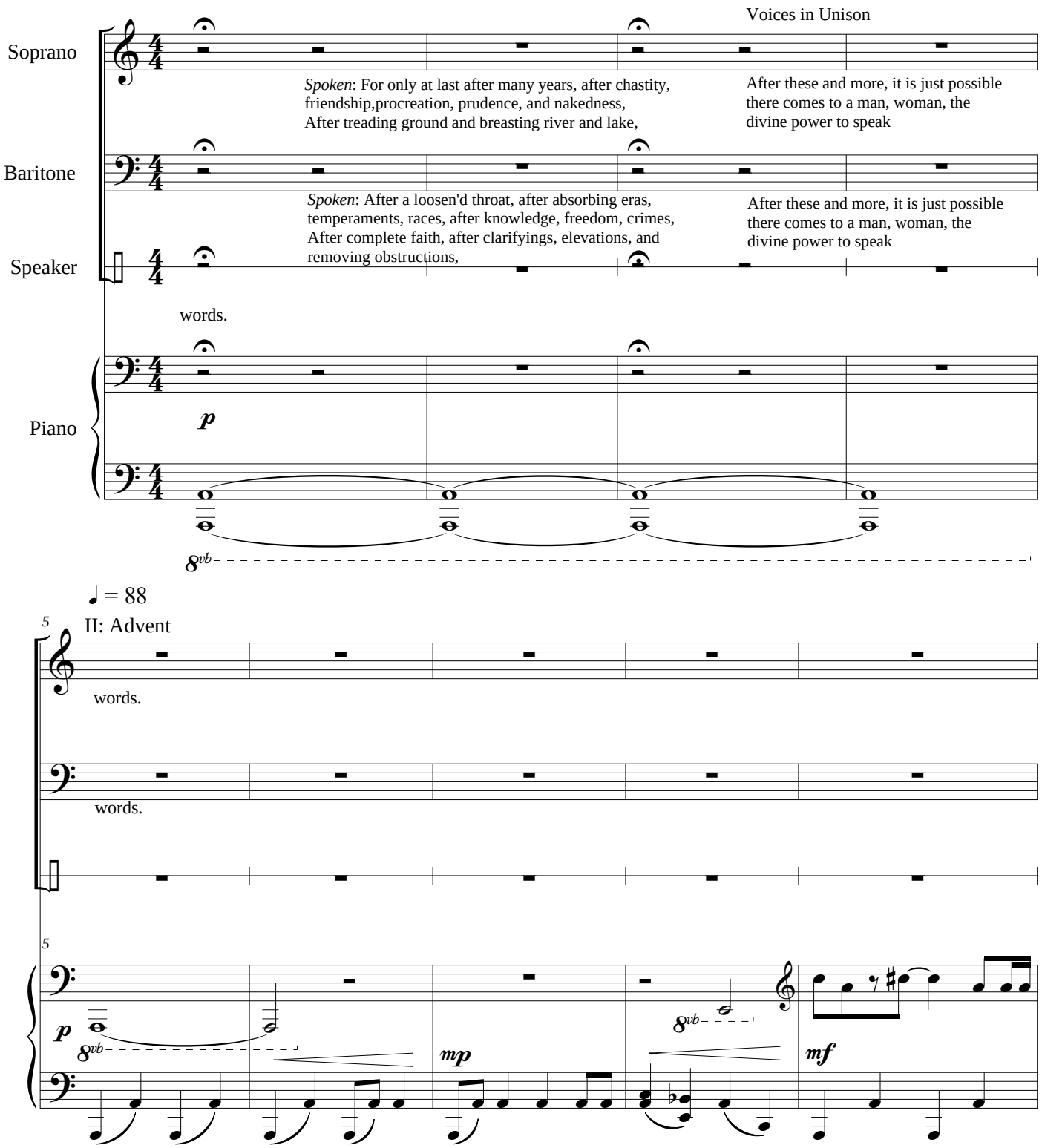
SOP: For only at last after many years (after many years, for only, for many, etc.)
BAR: Do you move in these broad lands (do you move, move in these, do you, etc.)
SPEAKER:
All waits for the right voices;
Where is the practis'd and perfect organ? where is the develop'd soul?
For I see every word utter'd thence has deeper, sweeter, new sounds,
impossible on less terms.

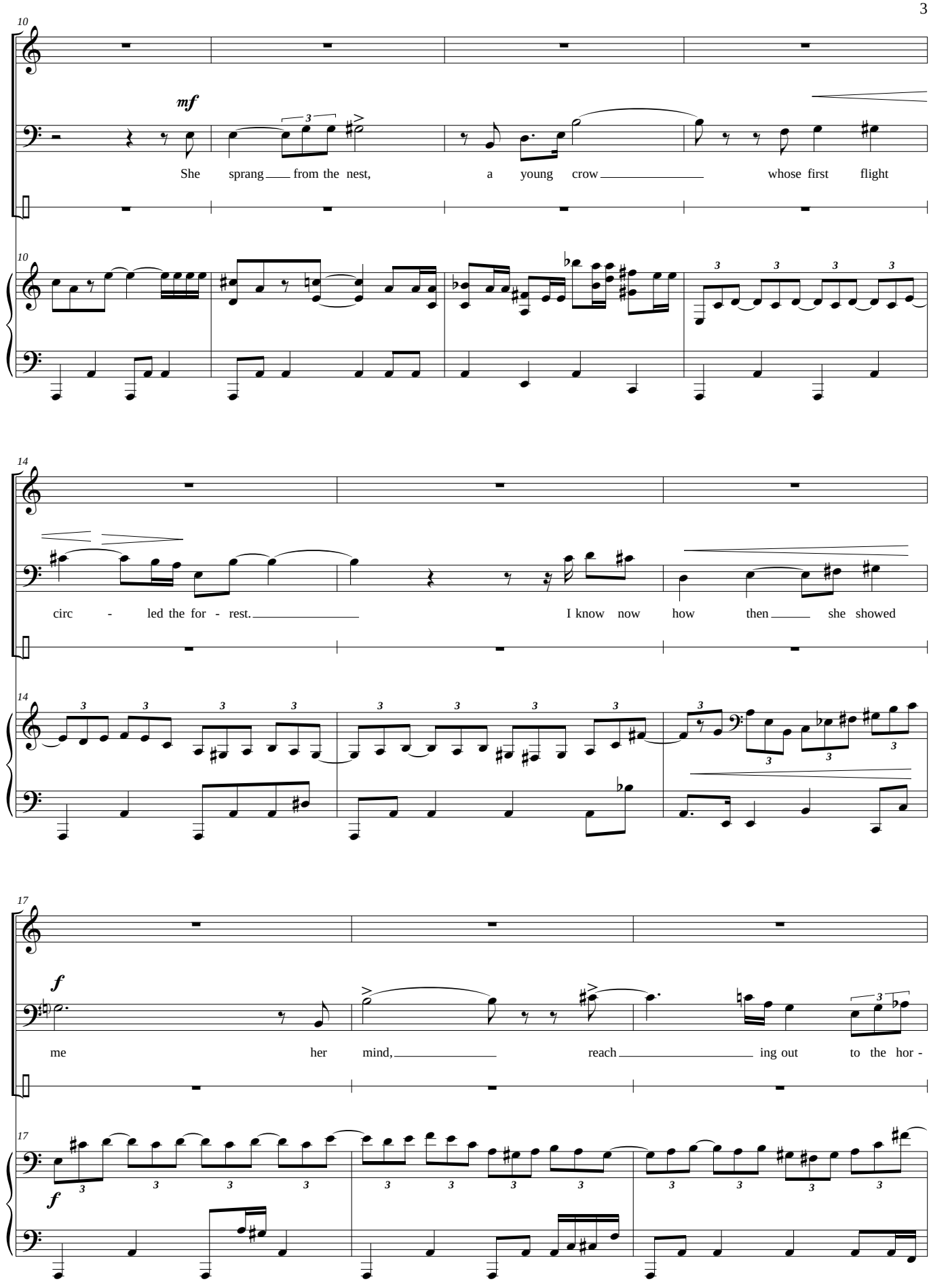
AS the speaker recites the last stanza, the soprano and baritone murmur as follows, gradually becoming louder, but remaining indistinct:

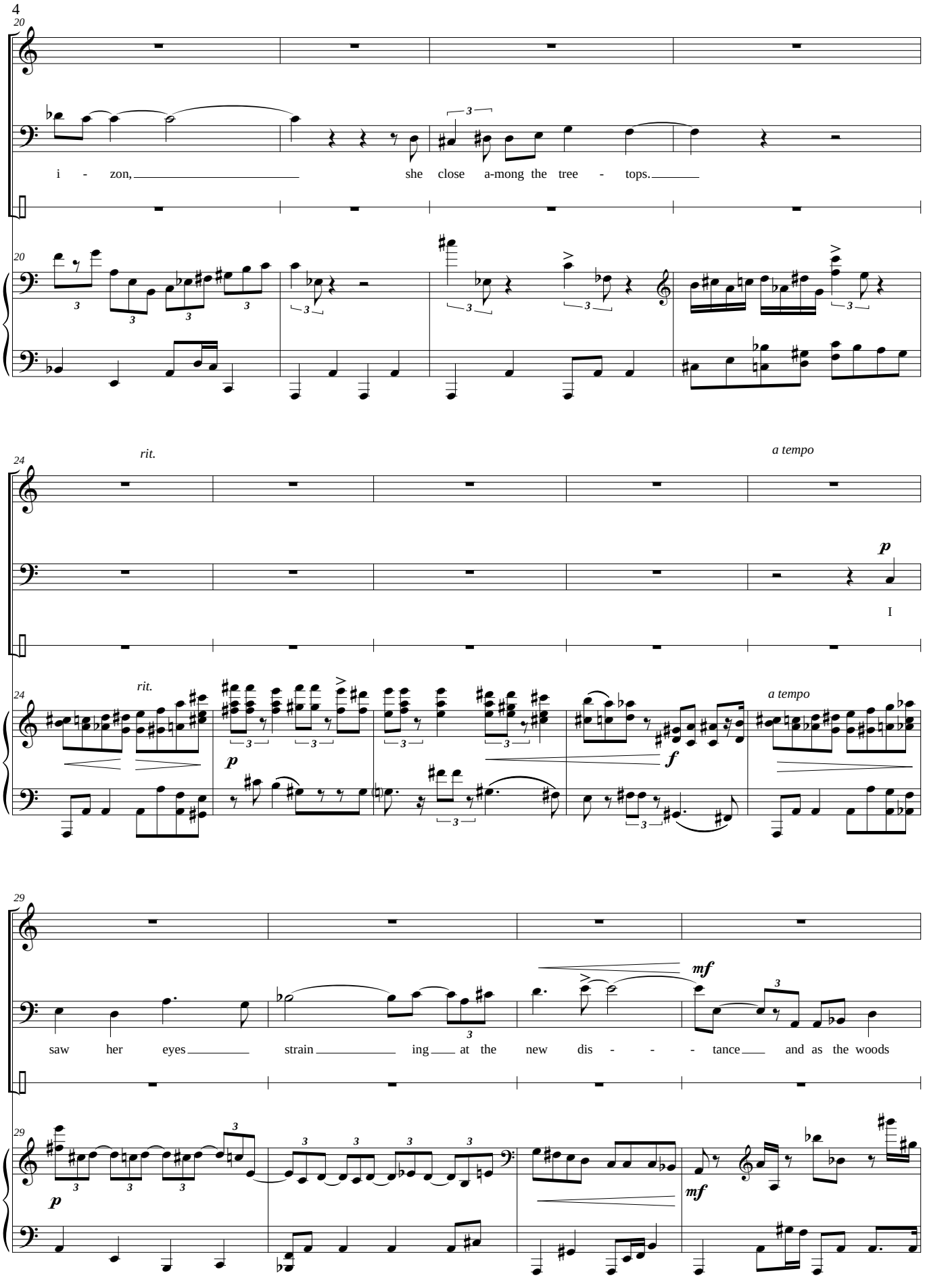
SOP: After chastity, friendship, procreation, prudence, and nakedness, after treading ground (repetition ad lib.)
BAR: After treading ground and breasting river and lake, after a loosen'd throat (repetition ad lib.)
SPEAKER:
I see brains and lips closed, tympans and temples unstruck,
Until that comes which has the quality to strike and to unclose,
Until that comes which has the quality to bring forth what lies
slumbering forever ready in all words.

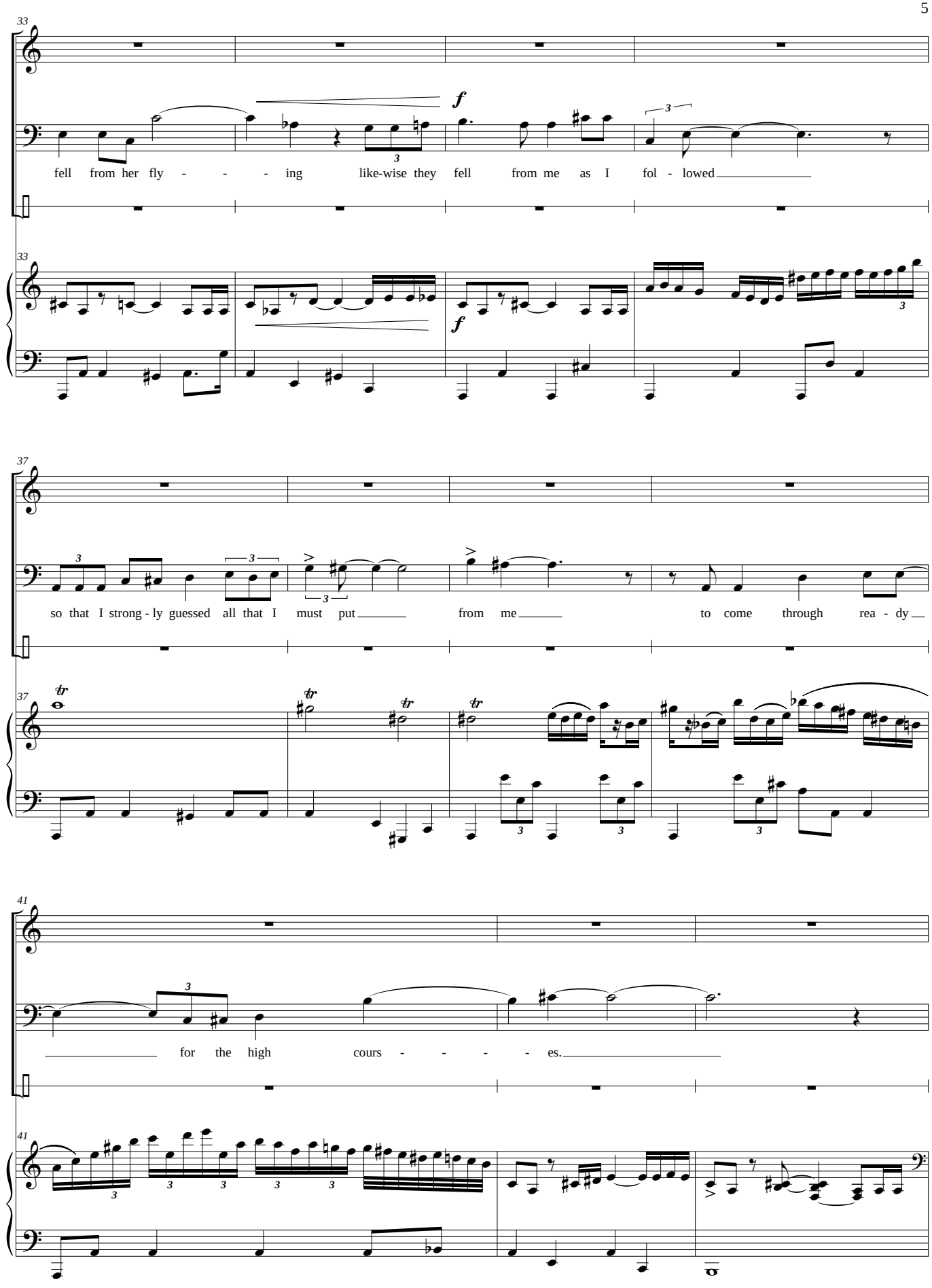
*The speaker's "*words*" coincides with the piano chord at the start of the score.*

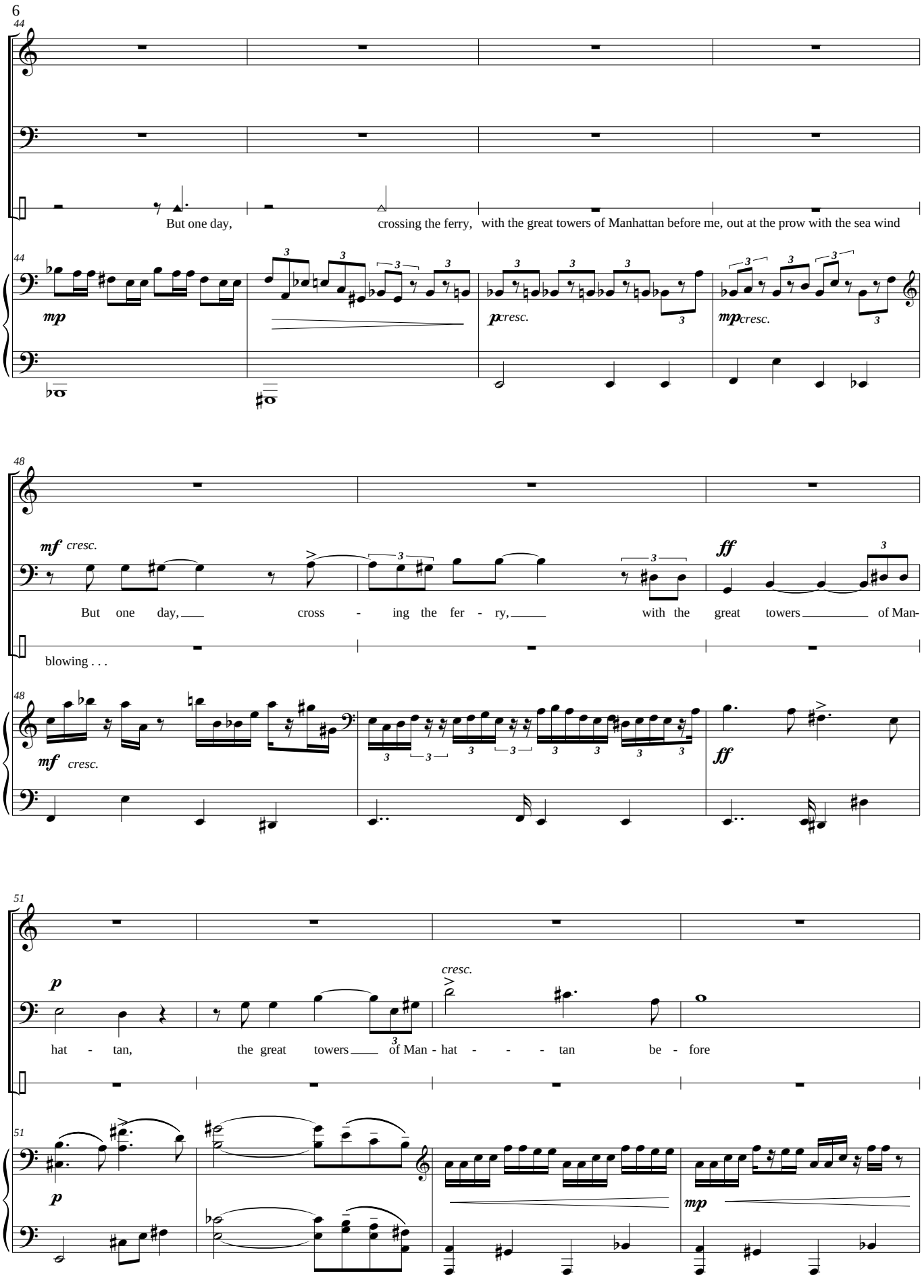
*From "Vocalism," by Walt Whitman.

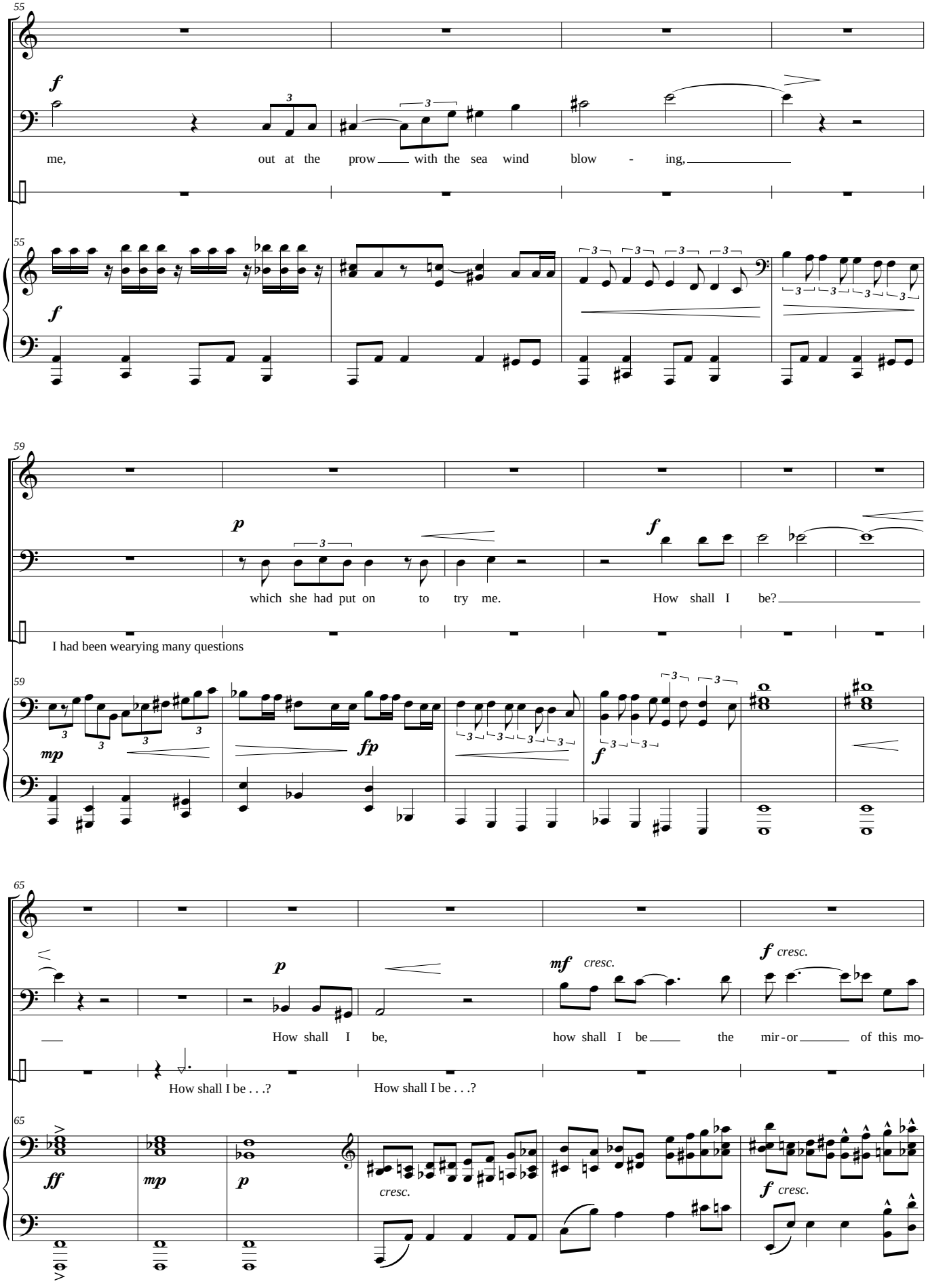

Voices in Unison
Soprano
Spoken: For only at last after many years, after chastity, friendship,procreation, prudence, and nakedness, After treading ground and breasting river and lake,
After these and more, it is just possible there comes to a man, woman, the divine power to speak
Baritone
Spoken: After a loosen'd throat, after absorbing eras, temperaments, races, after knowledge, freedom, crimes, After complete faith, after clarifyings, elevations, and removing obstructions,
After these and more, it is just possible there comes to a man, woman, the divine power to speak
Speaker
words.
Piano
p
8vb
♩ = 88
5
II: Advent
words.
words.
5
p
8vb
mp
8vb
mf


10
mf
She sprang from the nest, a young crow whose first flight
14
circ - led the for - rest. I know now how then she showed
17
f
me her mind, reach ing out to the hor -
f


20
i - zon, she close a-mong the tree - tops.
24
rit.
a tempo
p
I
rit.
p
f
a tempo
29
saw her eyes strain ing at the new dis - - - tance and as the woods
p
mf
mf


33
f
fell from her fly - - - ing like-wise they fell from me as I fol - lowed
33
f
37
so that I strong - ly guessed all that I must put from me to come through rea - dy
37
41
for the high cours - - - - es.
41


44
But one day, crossing the ferry, with the great towers of Manhattan before me, out at the prow with the sea wind
mp
p cresc.
mp cresc.
48
mf cresc.
But one day, cross - ing the fer - ry, with the great towers of Man-
blowing . . .
ff
51
p
cresc.
hat - tan, the great towers of Man - hat - - - tan be - fore
mp


55
f
me, out at the prow with the sea wind blow - ing,
59
p
which she had put on to try me.
f
How shall I be?
I had been wearying many questions
mp
fp
f
65
p
How shall I be,
mf cresc.
how shall I be the mir - or of this mo-
f cresc.
How shall I be . . .?
How shall I be . . .?
ff
mp
p
cresc.
f cresc.

71

p

der-ni-ty? And she waved me from the white wet

When lo! in a rush, dragging a blunt boat on the yielding river suddenly I saw her!

76

accel.

in the midst of her play - ing.

accel.

f

sf

80

a tempo

pp

rit.

mf

a tempo

f

"Hai - a!

p

She cried me,

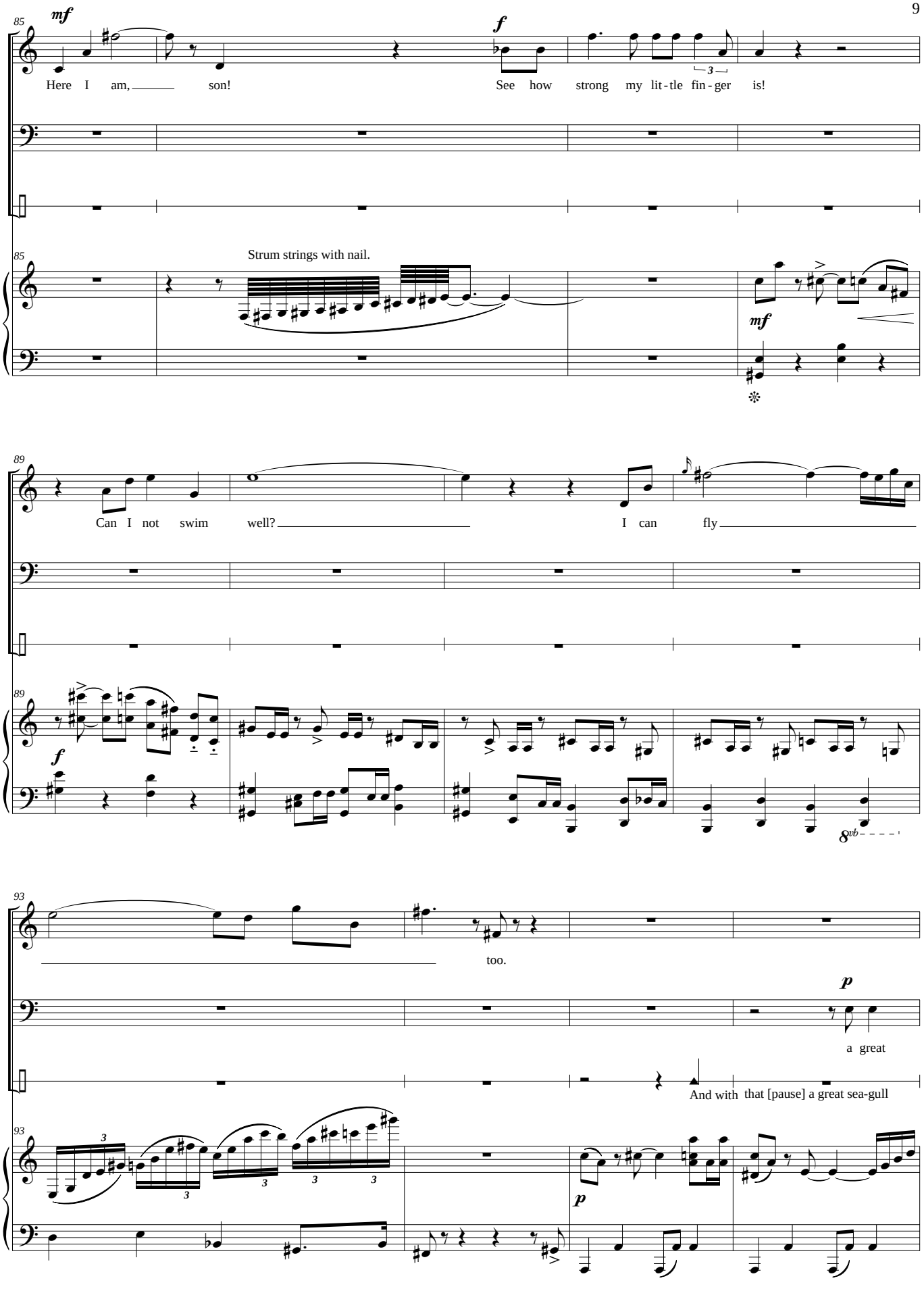
a tempo

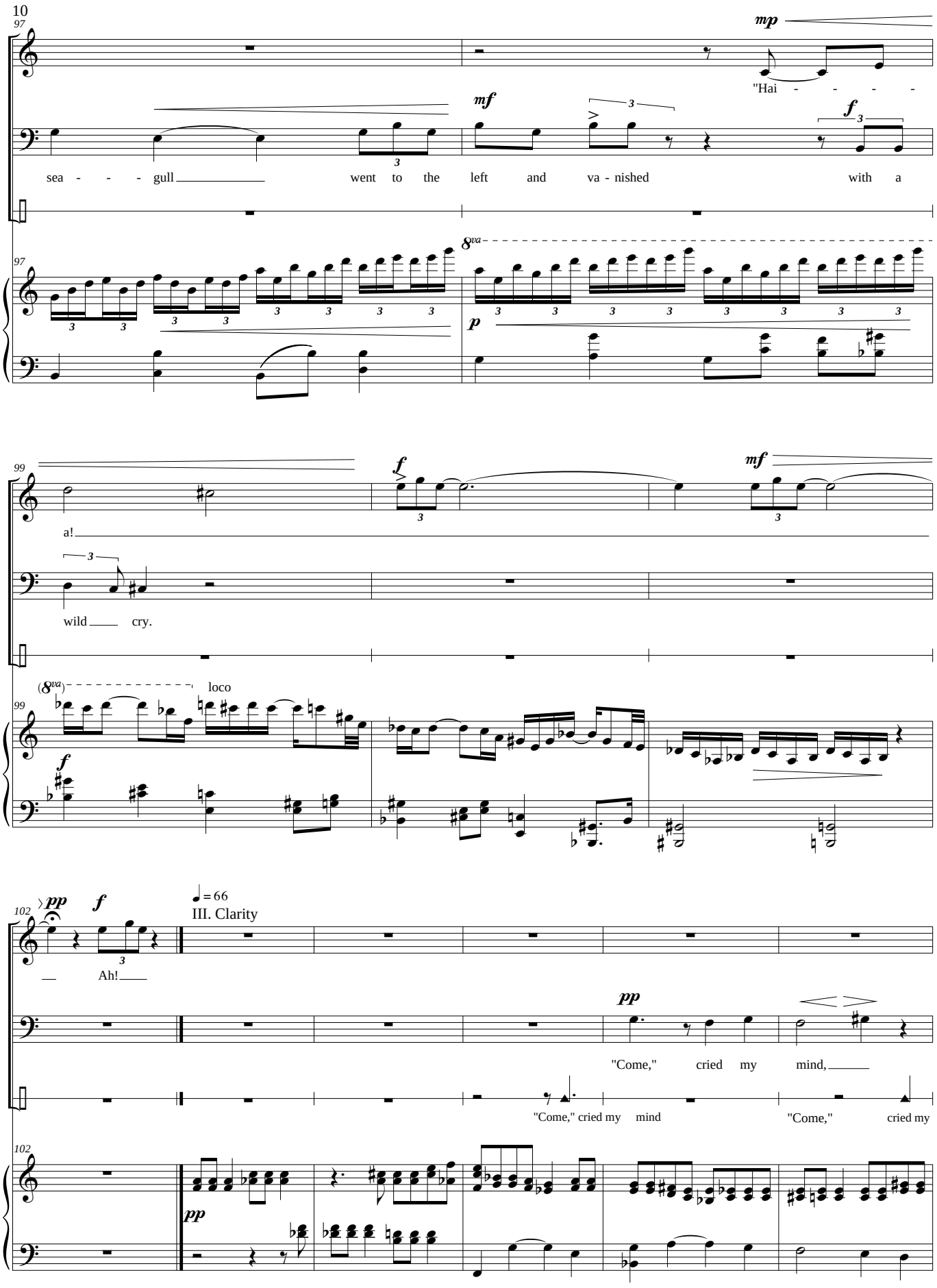
Strum strings with nail.

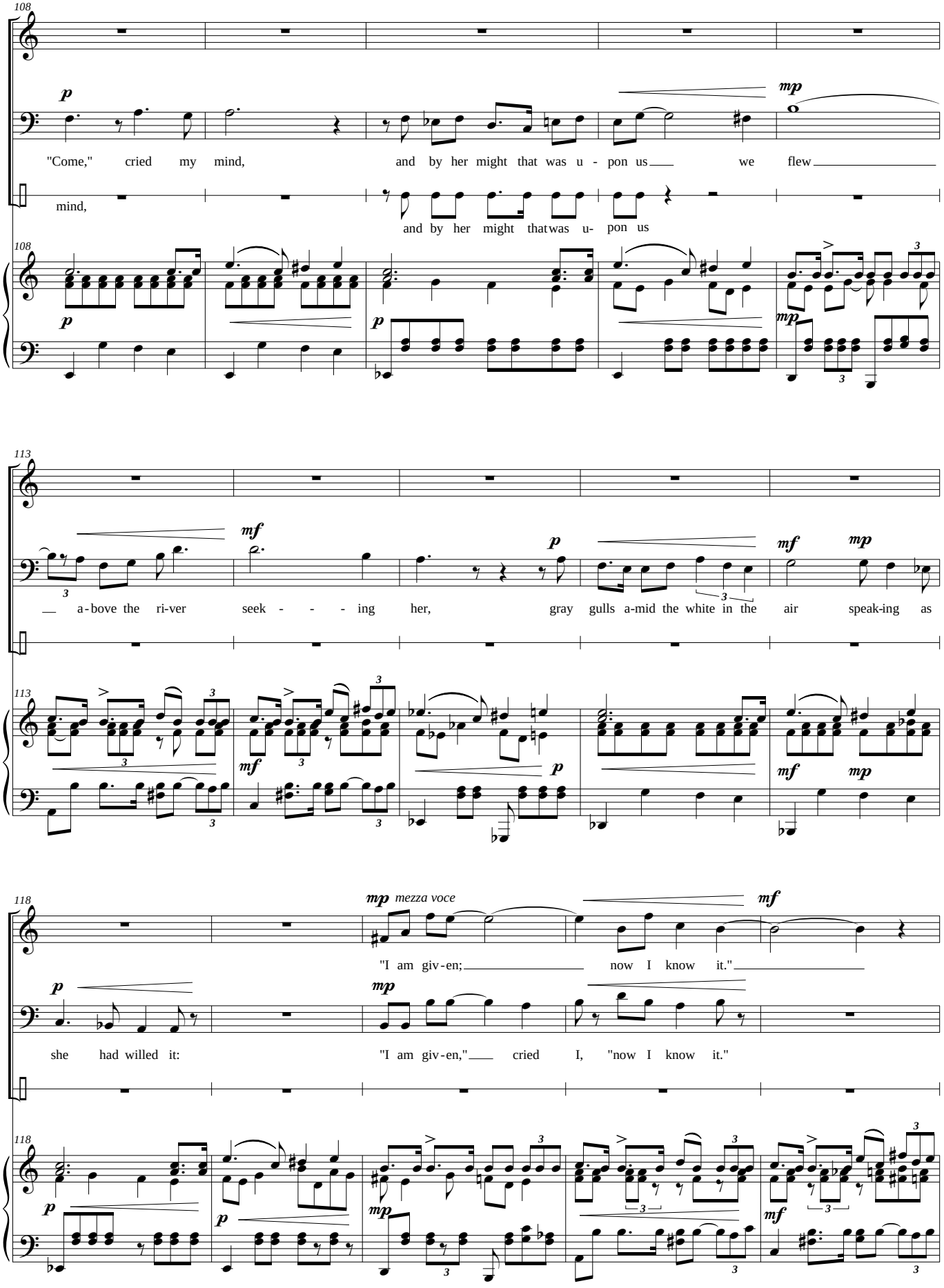
fp *fp*

f

Ped.


85
mf
Here I am, son!
f
See how strong my lit-tle fin-ger is!
3
Strum strings with nail.
mf
89
Can I not swim well?
I can fly
f
8vb
93
too.
p
a great
And with that [pause] a great sea-gull
3
p


97
mp
"Hai - - - - -
mf
f
sea - - - gull went to the left and va - nished with a
8va
p
99
f
mf
a!
wild cry.
(8va) loco
f
102
pp
f
= 66
III. Clarity
Ah!
pp
"Come," cried my mind,
"Come," cried my mind
"Come," cried my
pp


108
p
mp
"Come," cried my mind, and by her might that was u - pon us we flew
mind, and by her might that was u- pon us
113
mf
p
mf
mp
a-bove the ri-ver seek - - - ing her, gray gulls a-mid the white in the air speak-ing as
118
mp mezza voce
mf
"I am giv-en; now I know it."
p
mp
she had willed it: "I am giv-en," cried I, "now I know it."

123

f *ff*

ah!

123

f *ff*

127

ff

For sure-ly ei - ther there in the rol - ling smoke spheres be - low us,

127

130

f

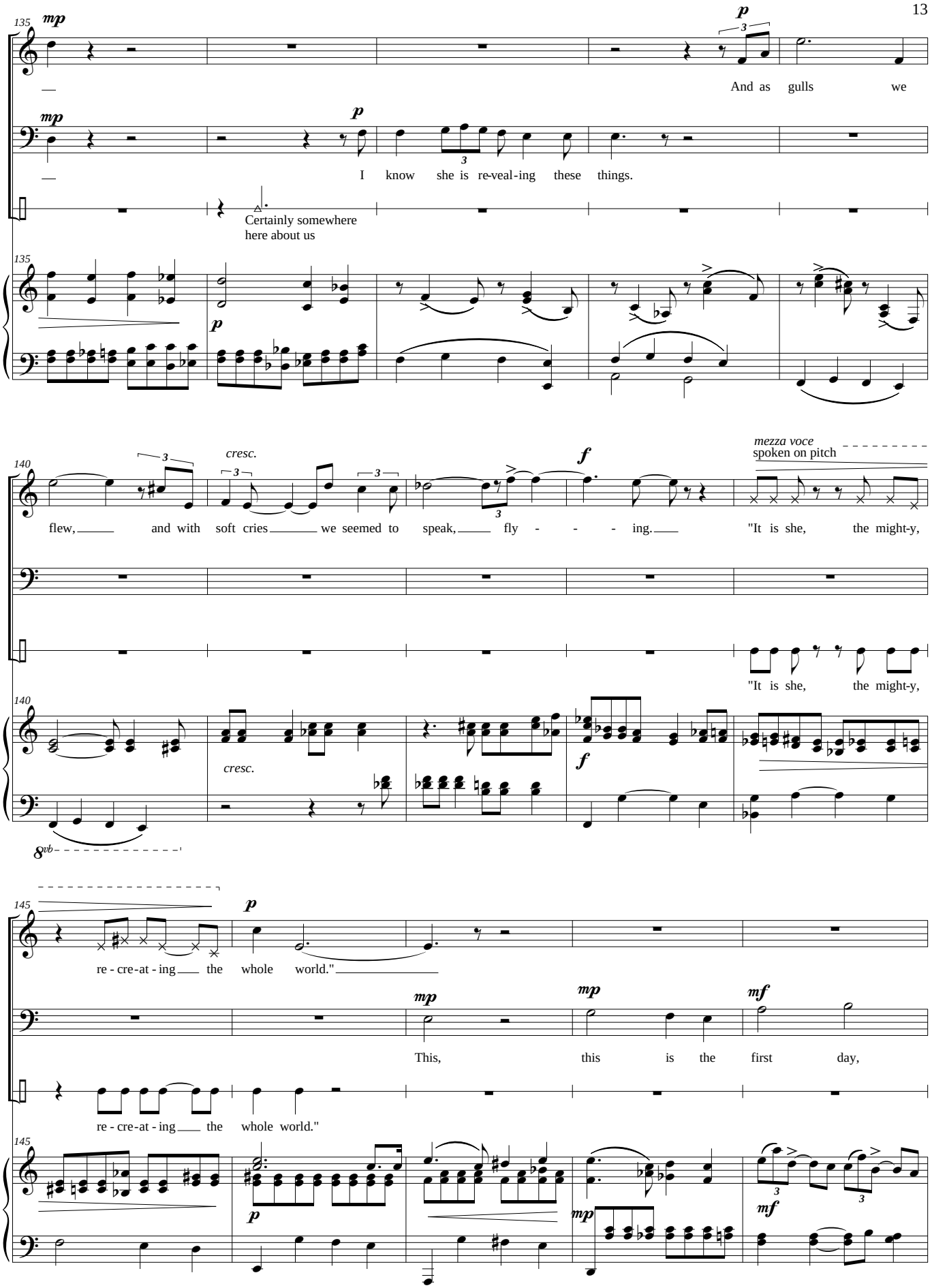
or here with us in the air in - ter - circ - ling

f

or here with us in the air in - ter - circ - ling

130

f


135
mp
p
3
And as gulls we
mp
p
3
I know she is re-veal-ing these things.
Certainly somewhere
here about us
135
p
140
3
cresc.
3
3
3
f
mezza voce
spoken on pitch
flew, and with soft cries we seemed to speak, fly - - - ing.
"It is she, the might-y,
"It is she, the might-y,
140
cresc.
f
8vb
145
p
re - cre-at - ing the whole world."
mp
mp
mf
This, this is the first day,
re - cre-at - ing the whole world."
145
p
mp
mf
3
3

150

mp p

this is the first day of won - ders.

It was then she struck--from behind, in mid air, as with the edge of a great wing!

150

mp p

♩ = 104

156 IV. Broadway

mf parlando

And in-stant-ly down the mists of my

156

pp mf mp f mp f ff fff

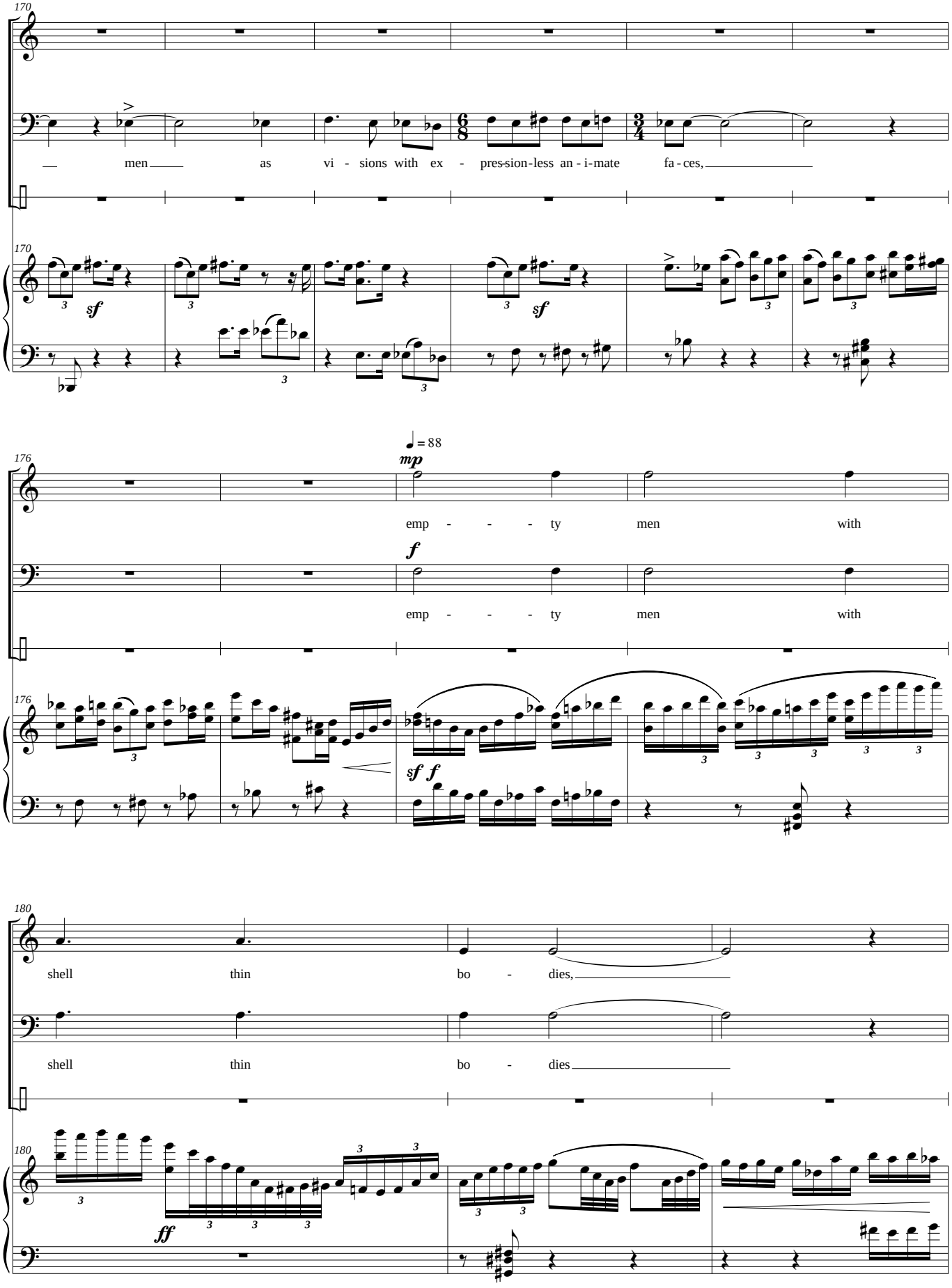
163

p f

eyes there came crowds walk - ing, men as vi - sions,

163

mf p mf p sf f


170
men as vi - sions with ex - pres-sion-less an - i-mate fa - ces,
sf
sf
176
♩ = 88
mp
emp - - - ty men with
f
emp - - - ty men with
sf f
180
shell thin bo - dies,
shell thin bo - dies
ff

183

pp

jost - - - - - ling close a - - - bove the

p

jost - - - - - ling close a - - - bove the

183

p

186

f

gut - ters,

f

gut - ters, hast - ing no - where.

186

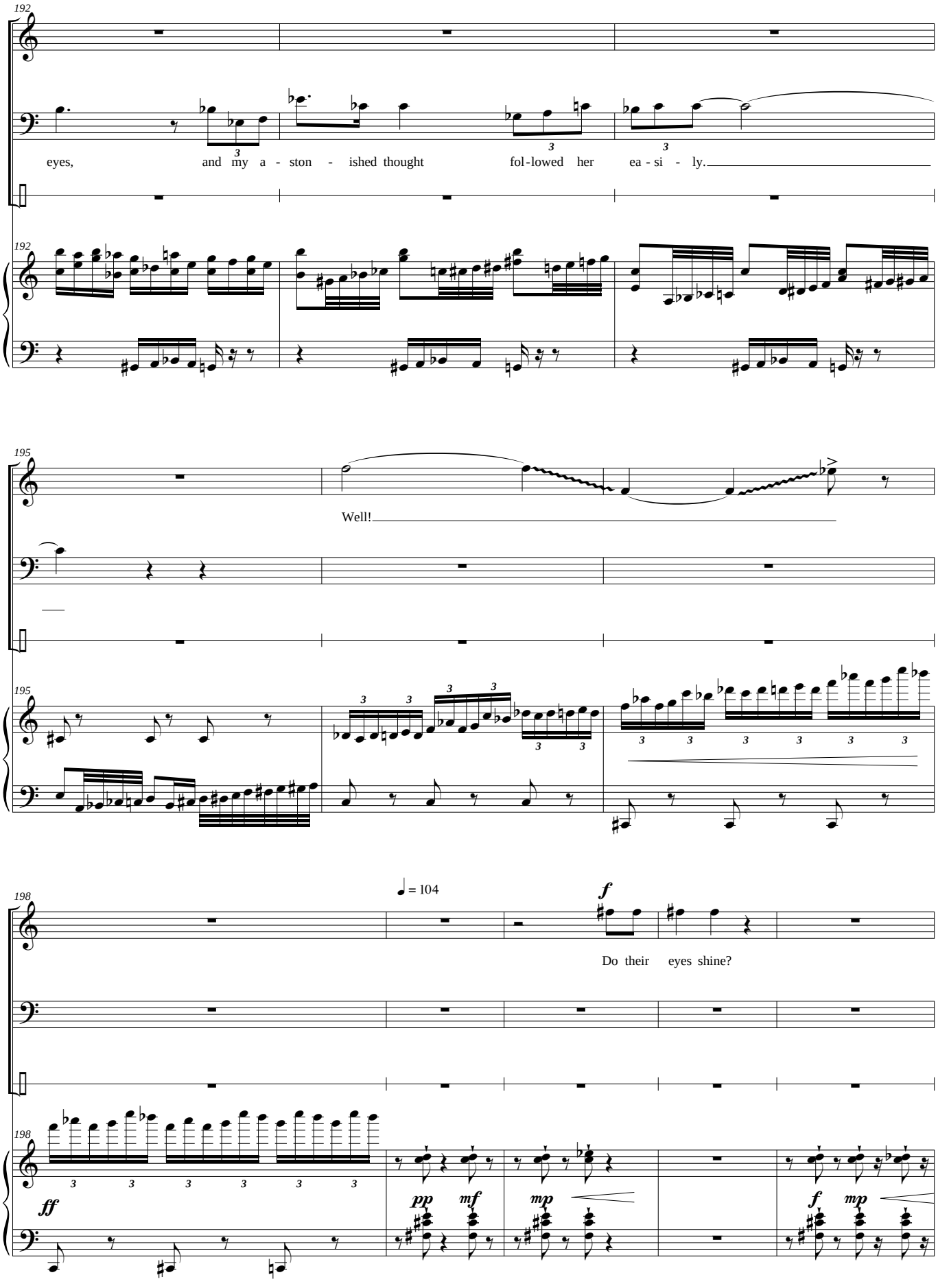
3 3

f

189

Si - - lent, her voice en-tered at my

189


192
eyes, and my a - ston - ished thought fol-lowed her ea - si - ly.
192
195
Well!
195
198
♩ = 104
f
Do their eyes shine?
198
ff
pp
mf
mp
f
mp

18

203

pp *sottovoce*

Do their clothes fit? These live, I tell you, old men with red cheeks,

mp *mf*

f *ff* *p* *pp* *mf*

210

f

Young men in gay suits: See them!

rit.

f *sf* *f* *mp* *f* *ff* *fff*

8vb

IV. Abroad (I)

217

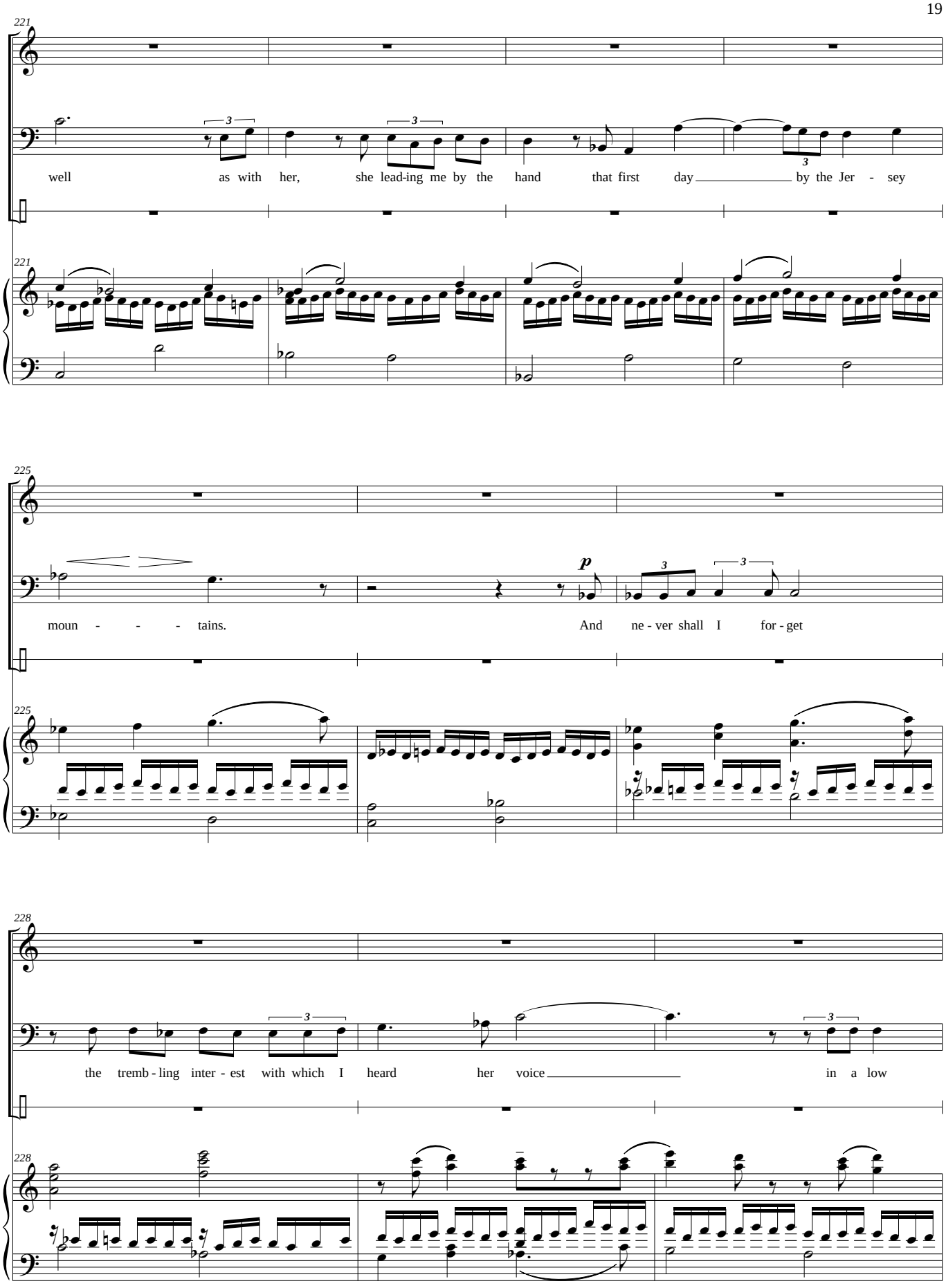
♩ = 94

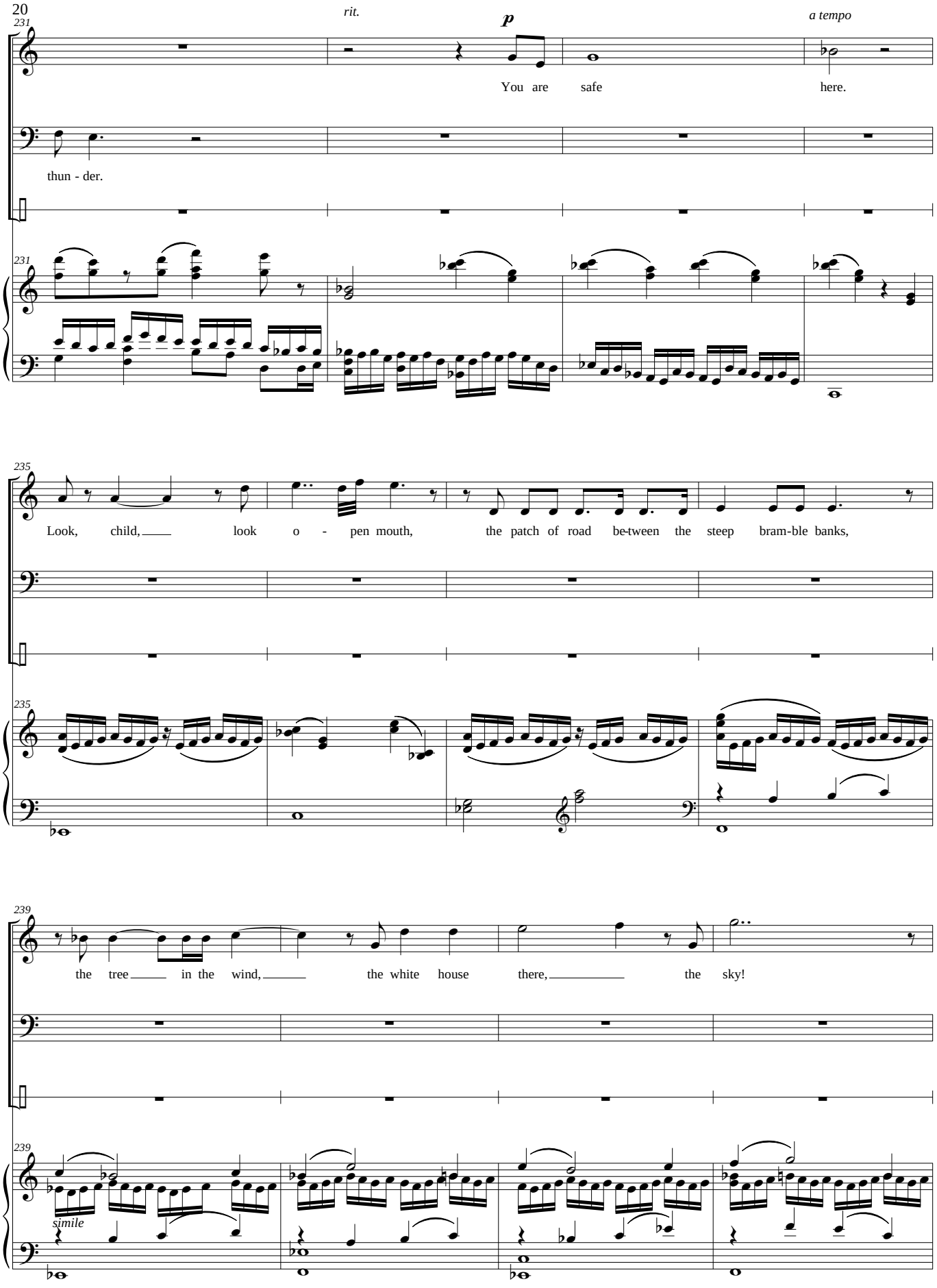
p

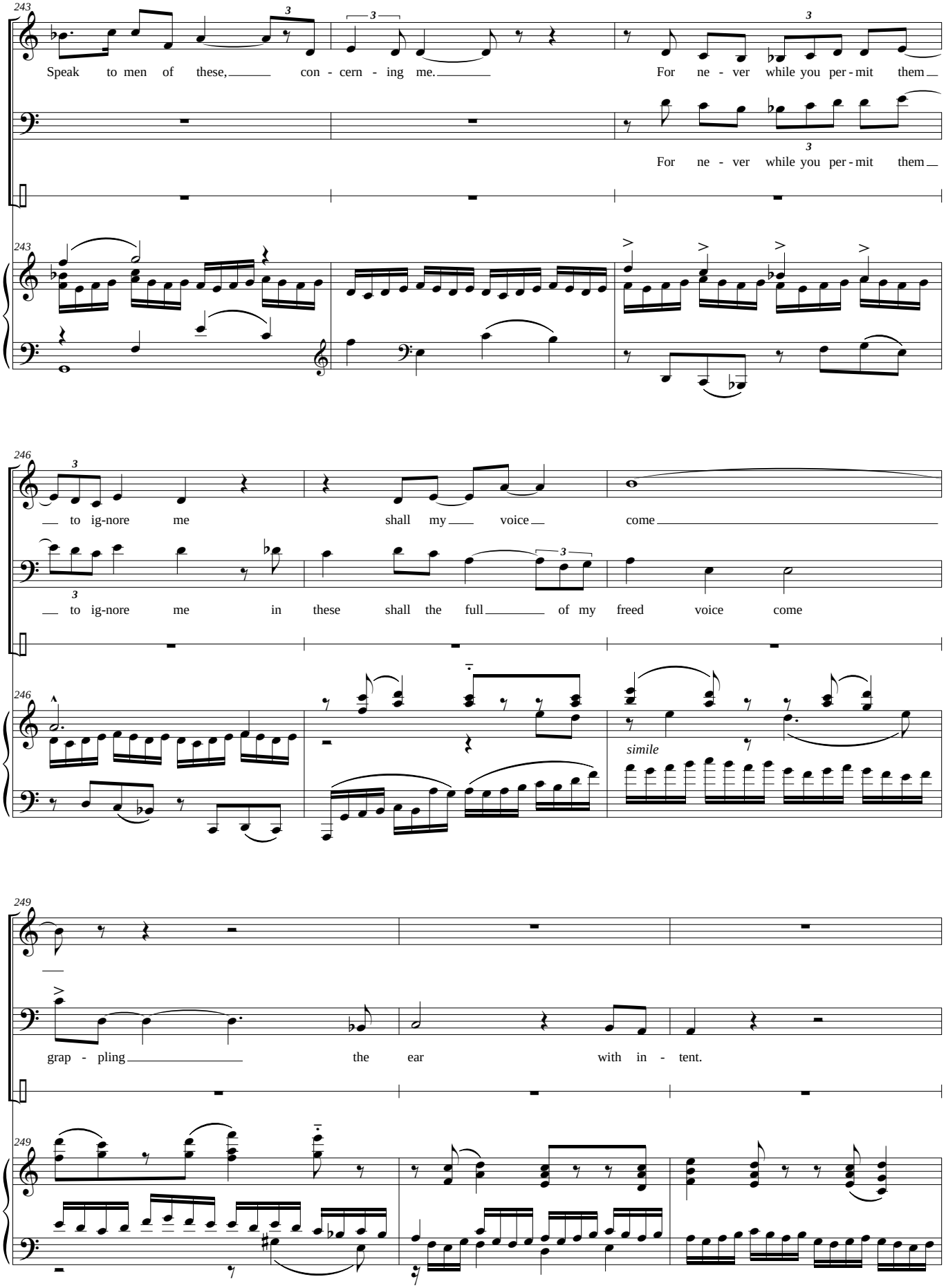
Ne - ver, e - ven in a dream, have I winged so high nor so

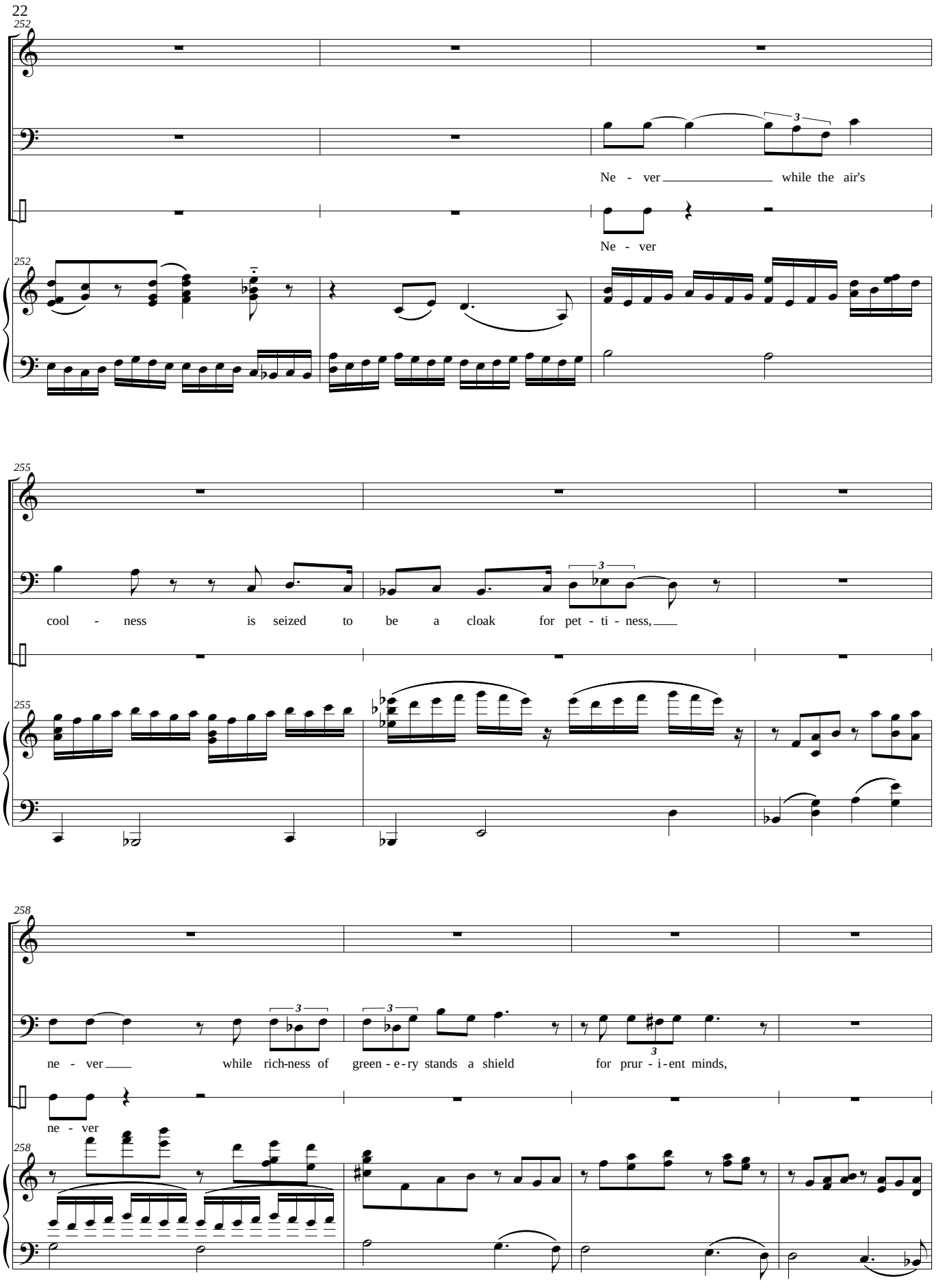
p *simile*

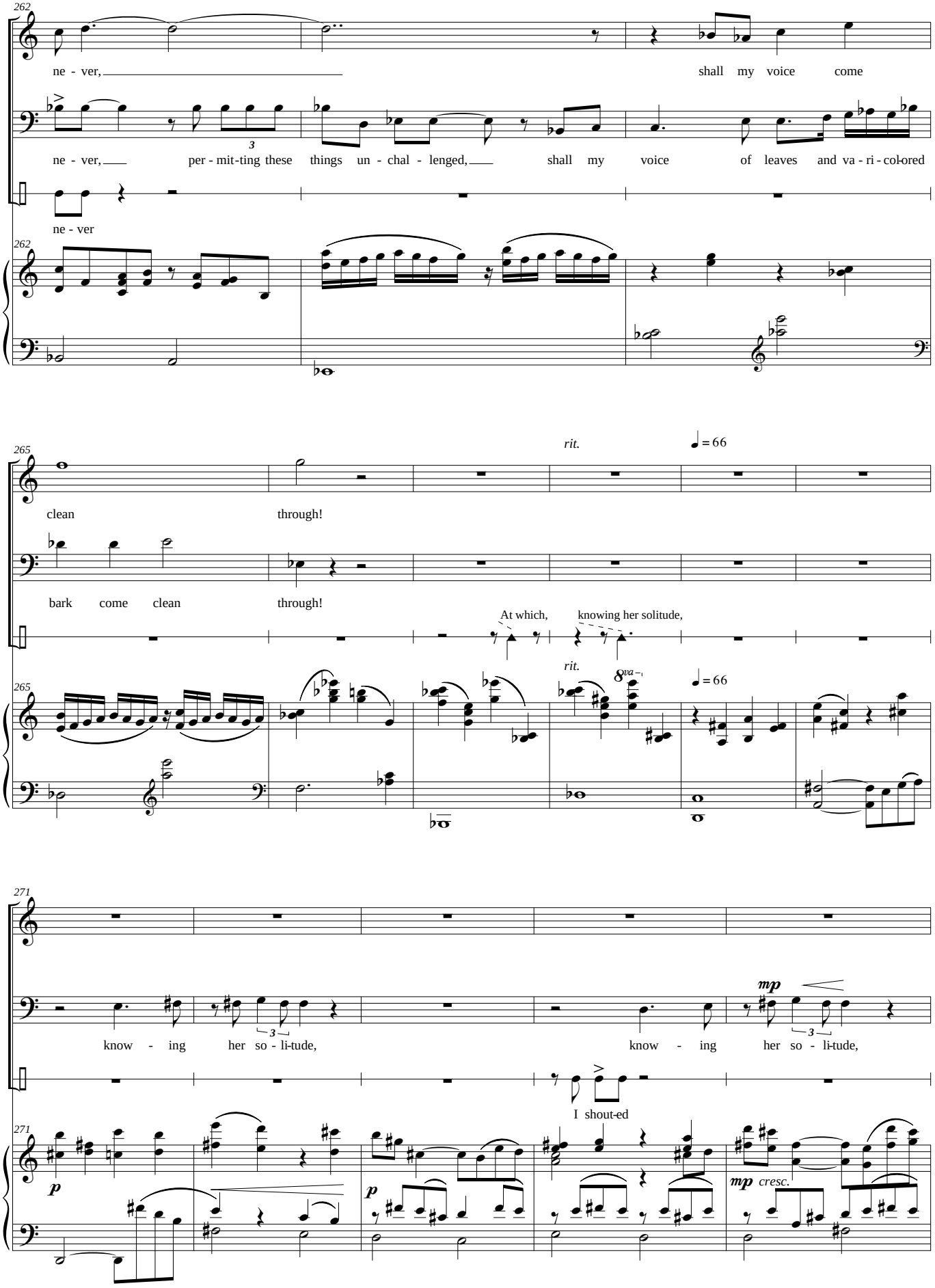
Ped. ✻ Ped. ✻ *simile*

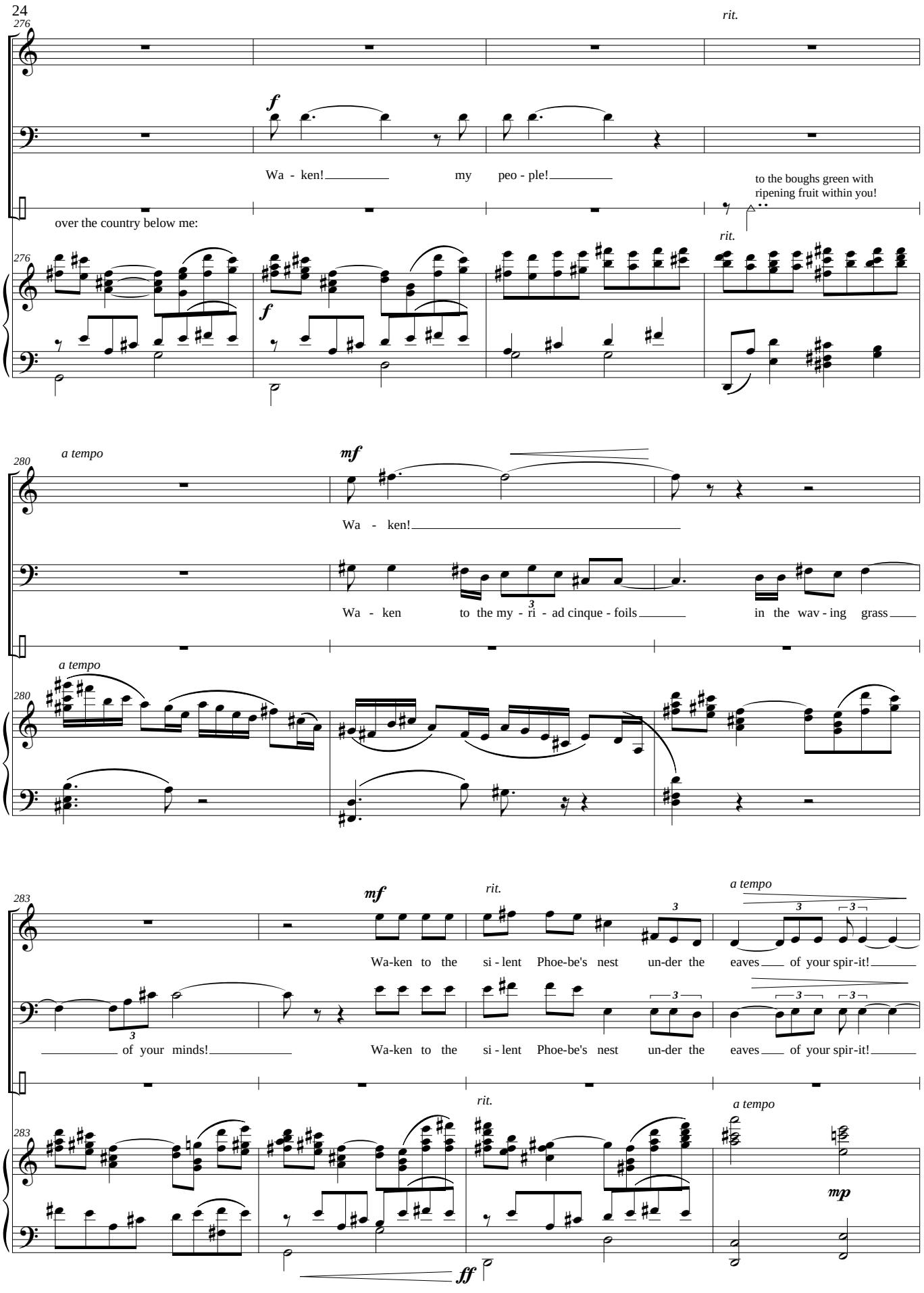

221
well as with her, she lead-ing me by the hand that first day by the Jer - sey
221
225
moun - - - tains. And ne - ver shall I for - get
225
228
the tremb - ling inter - est with which I heard her voice in a low
228

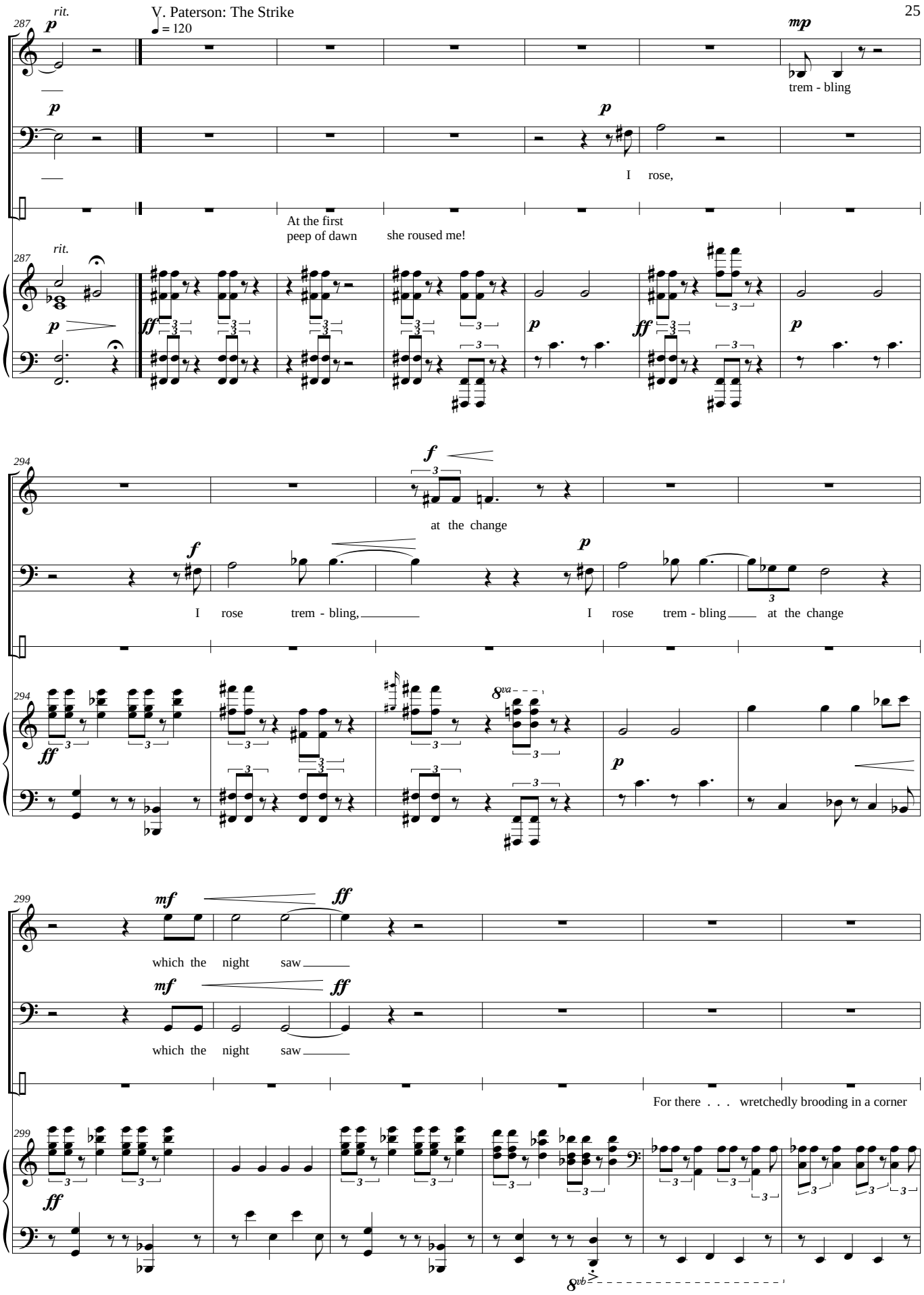

231
rit.
p
a tempo
You are safe here.
thun - der.
231
235
Look, child, look o - pen mouth, the patch of road be-tween the steep bram-ble banks,
235
239
the tree in the wind, the white house there, the sky!
239
simile


243
Speak to men of these, con - cern - ing me.
For ne - ver while you per - mit them
For ne - ver while you per - mit them
243
246
to ig-nore me shall my voice come
to ig-nore me in these shall the full of my freed voice come
246
simile
249
grap - pling the ear with in - tent.
249

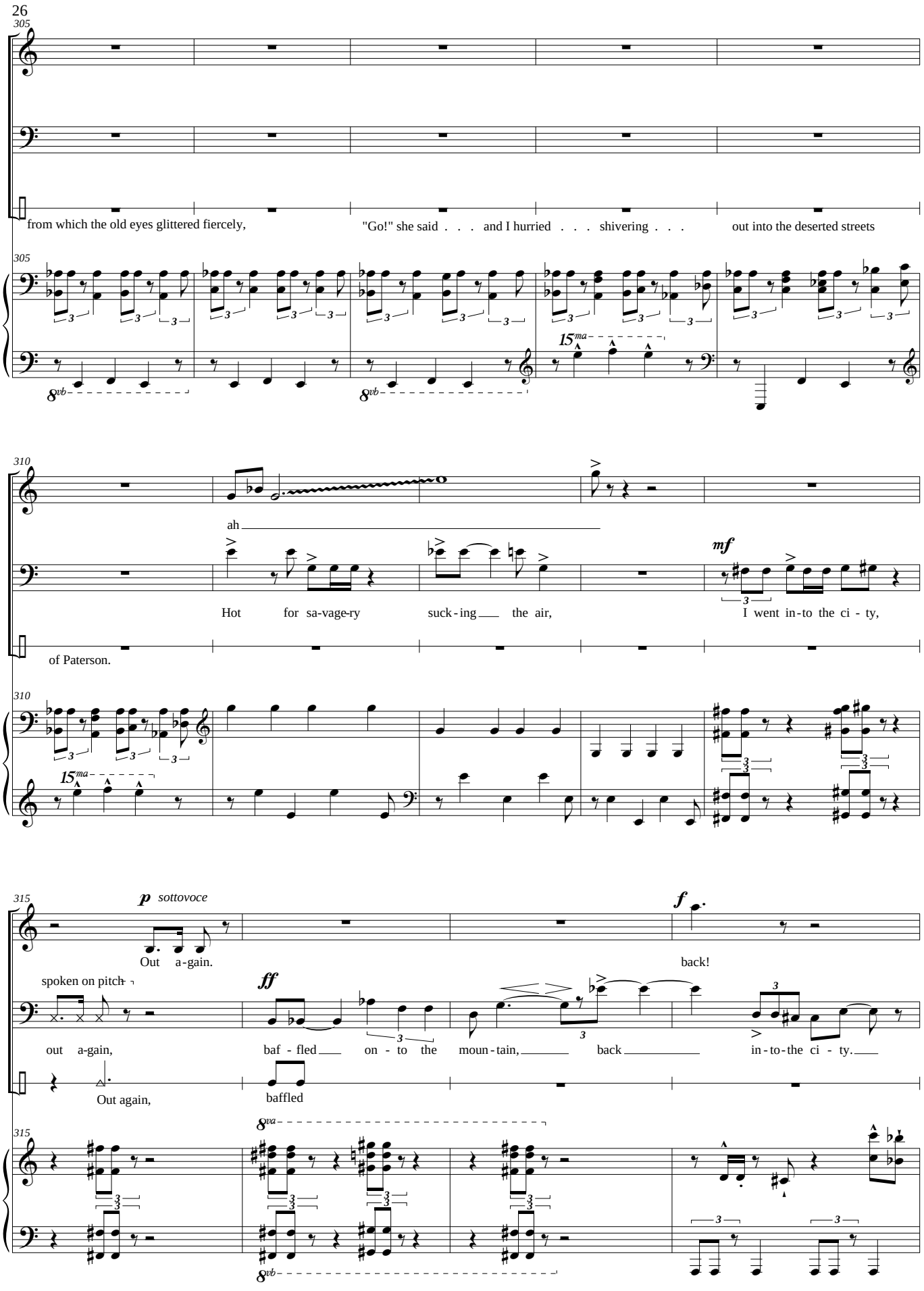

252
Ne - ver while the air's
Ne - ver
255
cool - ness is seized to be a cloak for pet - ti - ness,
258
ne - ver while rich-ness of green - e - ry stands a shield for prur - i - ent minds,
ne - ver

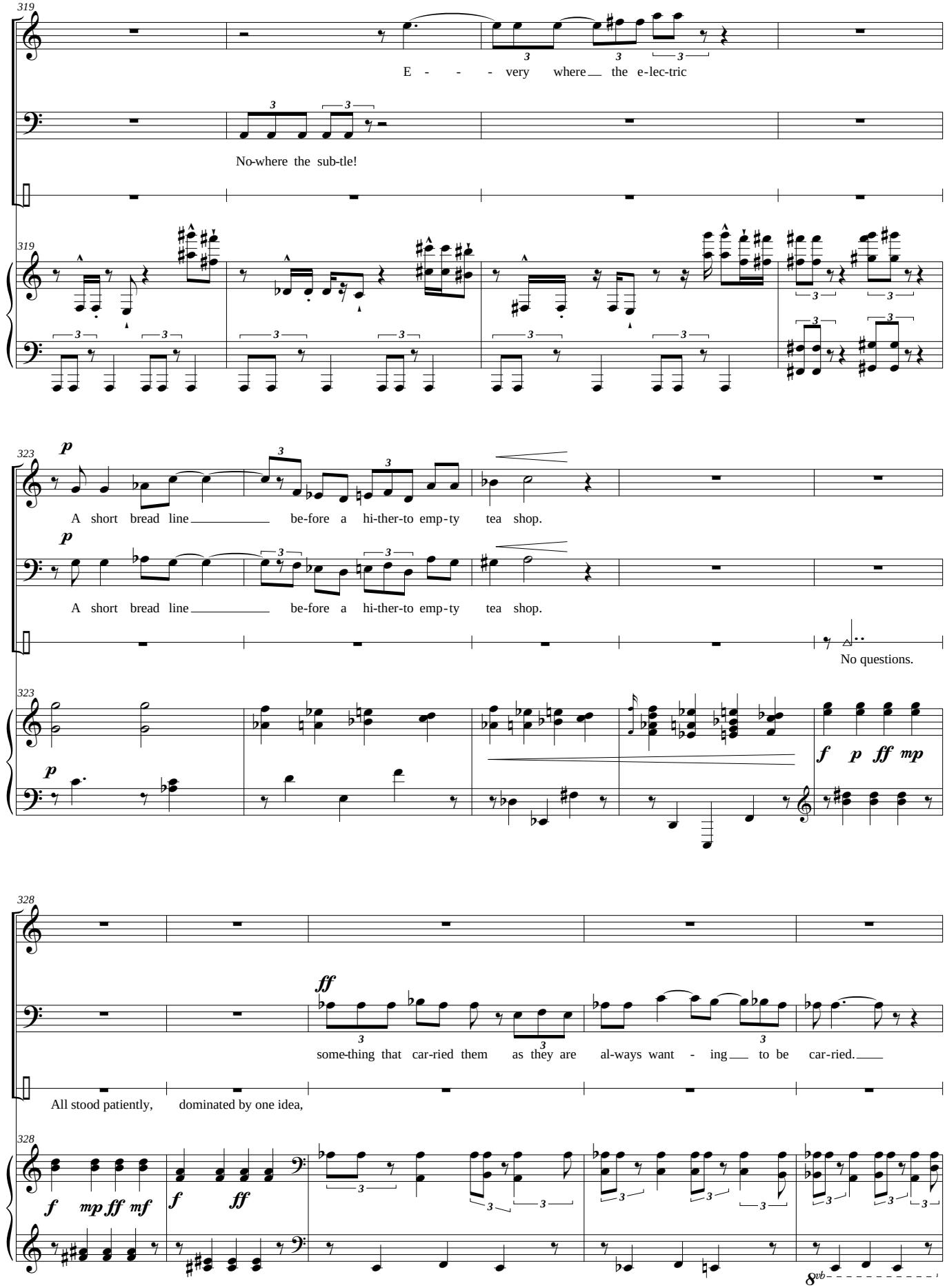

262
ne - ver,
shall my voice come
ne - ver,
per - mit-ting these things un - chal - lenged,
shall my voice of leaves and va - ri - col-ored
ne - ver
262
265
rit.
♩ = 66
clean through!
bark come clean through!
At which,
knowing her solitude,
rit.
8va
♩ = 66
265
271
mp
know - ing her so - li-tude,
know - ing her so - li-tude,
I shout-ed
271
p
p
mp cresc.

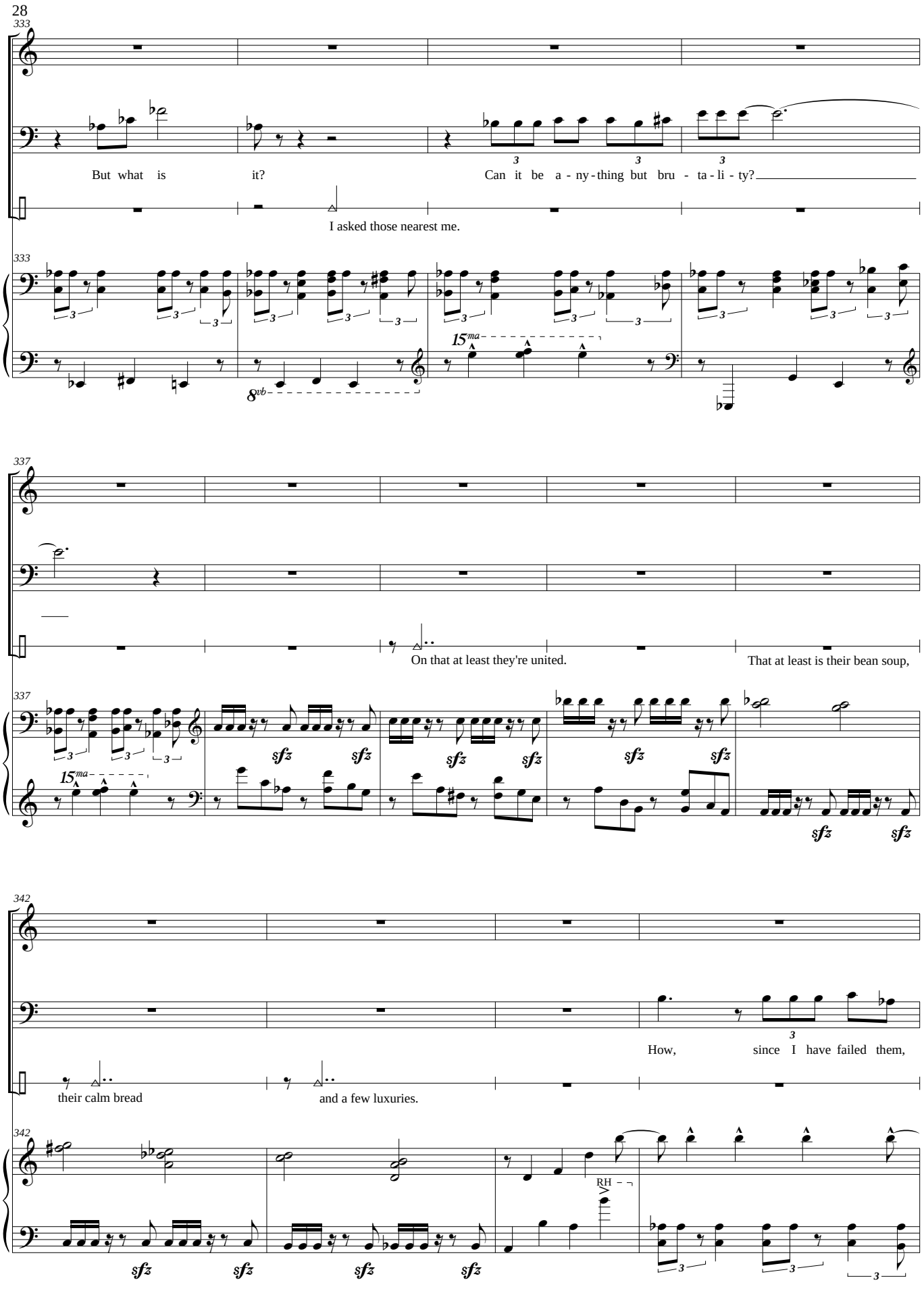

276
rit.
f
Wa - ken! my peo - ple!
to the boughs green with ripening fruit within you!
over the country below me:
rit.
276
f
280
a tempo
mf
Wa - ken!
Wa - ken to the my - ri - ad cinque - foils in the wav - ing grass
a tempo
280
283
mf
rit.
a tempo
Wa-ken to the si - lent Phoe-be's nest un-der the eaves of your spir-it!
of your minds! Wa-ken to the si - lent Phoe-be's nest un-der the eaves of your spir-it!
rit.
a tempo
283
mp
ff

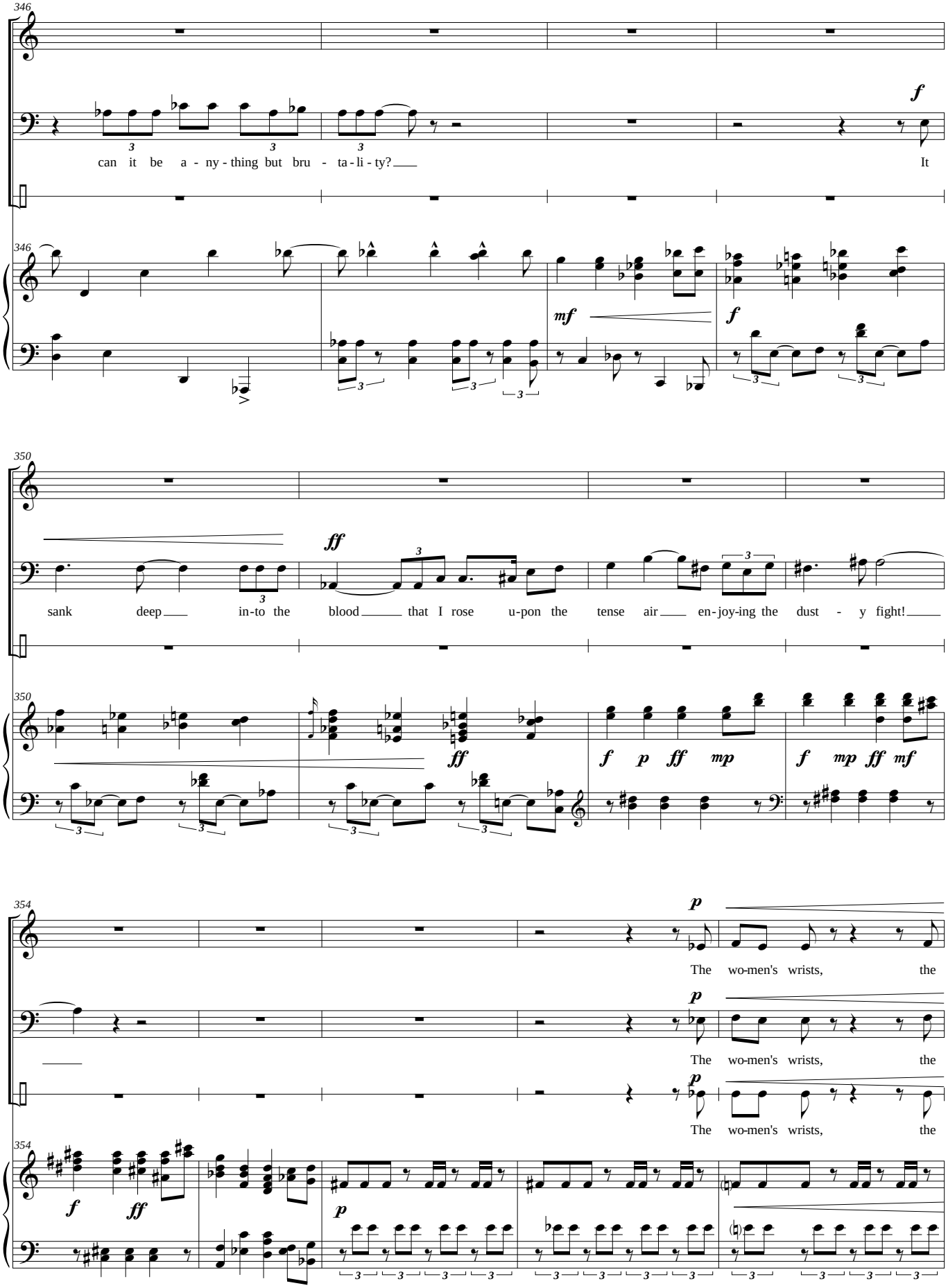

V. Paterson: The Strike

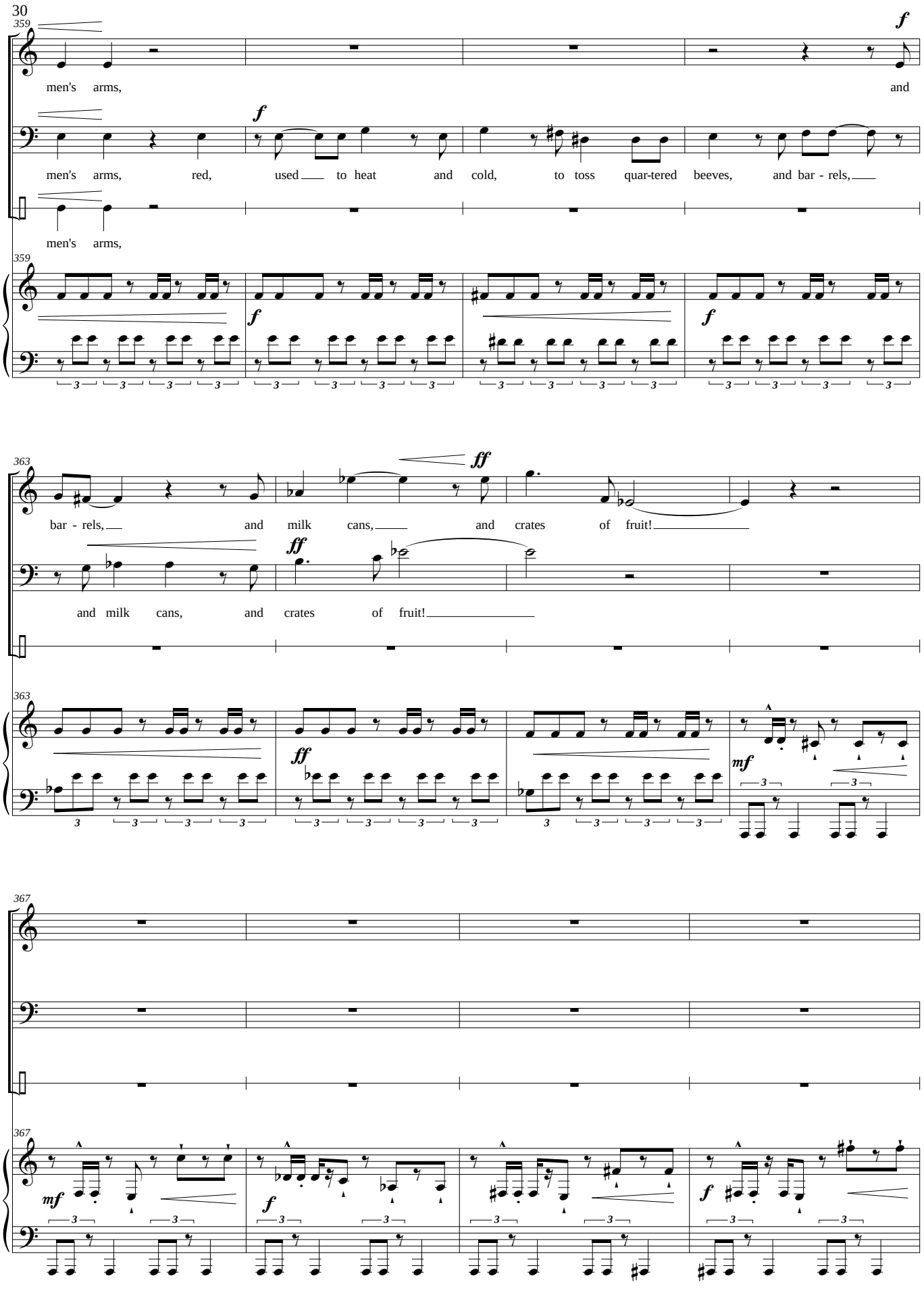
rit.
trem - bling
I rose,
At the first
peep of dawn she roused me!
at the change
I rose trem - bling, I rose trem - bling at the change
which the night saw
which the night saw
For there . . . wretchedly brooding in a corner

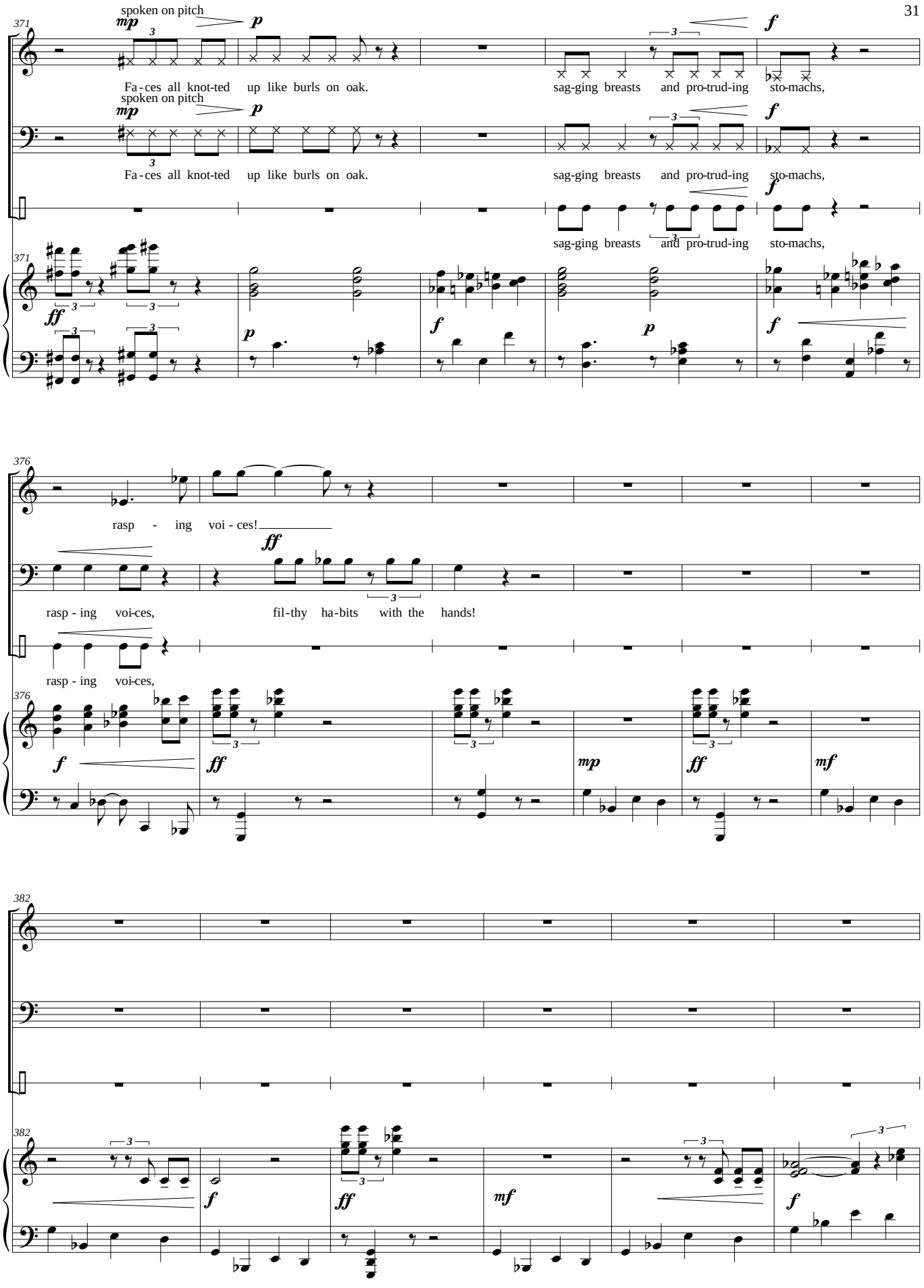

305
from which the old eyes glittered fiercely,
"Go!" she said . . . and I hurried . . . shivering . . .
out into the deserted streets
310
ah
Hot for sa-vage-ry suck-ing the air,
mf
I went in-to the ci - ty,
of Paterson.
315
p sottovoce
Out a-gain.
f
back!
spoken on pitch
ff
out a-gain, baf - fled on - to the moun-tain, back in-to-the ci - ty.
Out again,
baffled

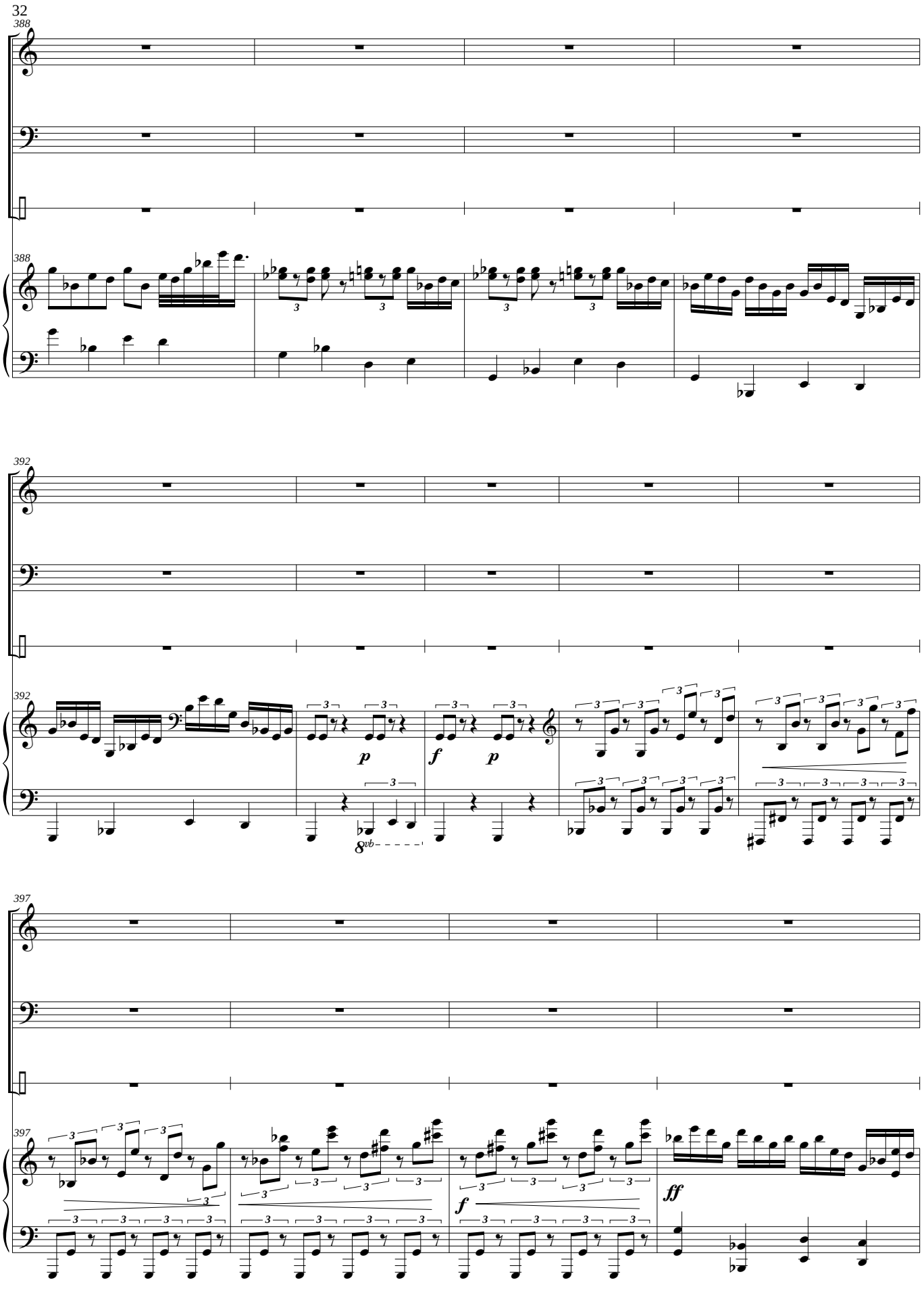

319
E - - - very where the e-lec-tric
No-where the sub-tle!
323
p
A short bread line be-fore a hi-ther-to emp-ty tea shop.
No questions.
f p ff mp
328
ff
some-thing that car-ried them as they are al-ways want - ing to be car-ried.
All stood patiently, dominated by one idea,
f mp ff mf
f ff
8vb

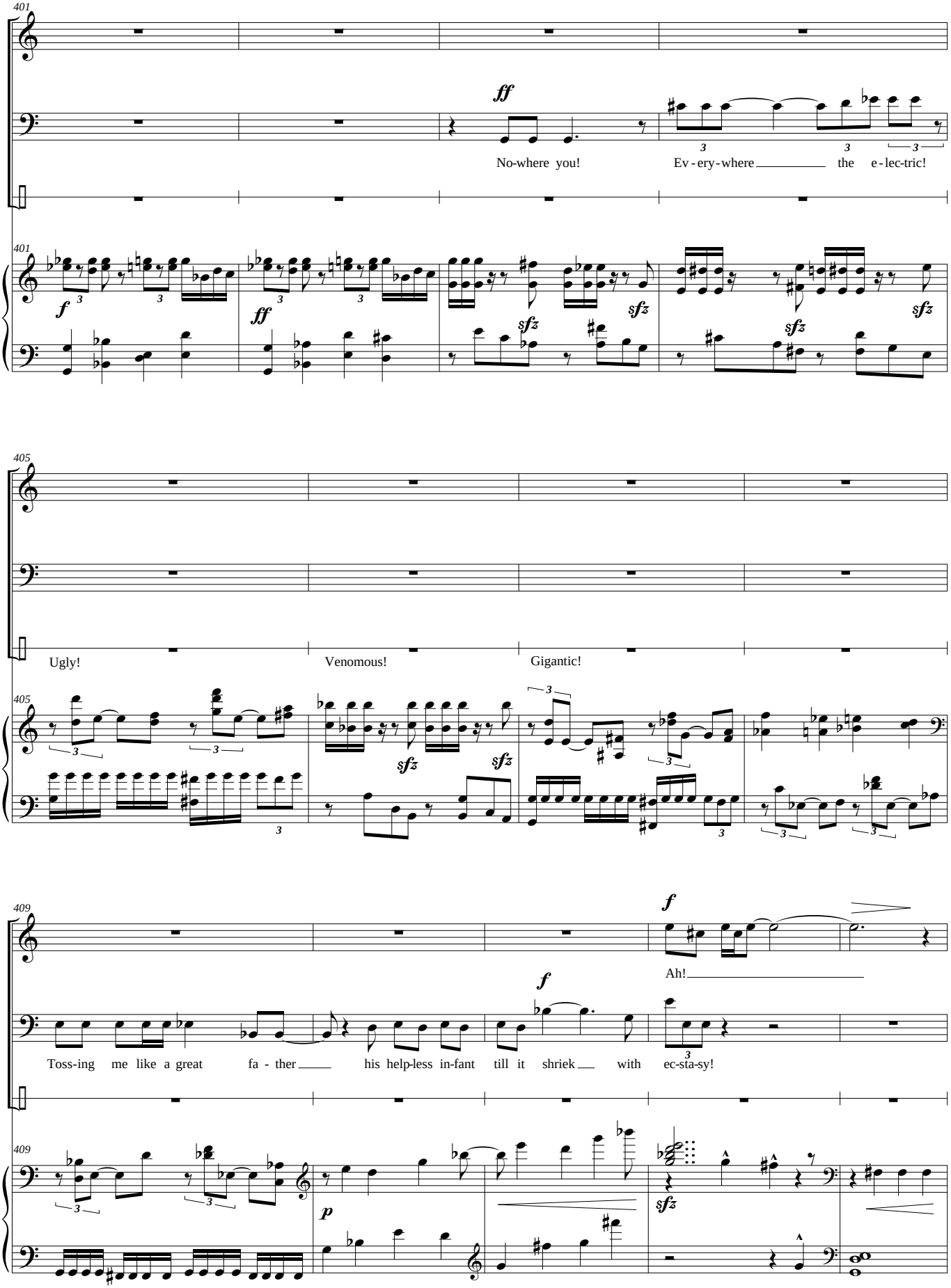

28
333
But what is it?
Can it be a - ny - thing but bru - ta - li - ty?
I asked those nearest me.
15ma
8vb
337
On that at least they're united.
That at least is their bean soup,
sfz
342
How, since I have failed them,
their calm bread
and a few luxuries.
RH


346
can it be a - ny - thing but bru - ta - li - ty?
It
346
mf
f
350
sank deep in-to the blood that I rose u-pon the tense air en-joy-ing the dust - y fight!
ff
350
ff
f p ff mp
f mp ff mf
354
The wo-men's wrists, the
The wo-men's wrists, the
The wo-men's wrists, the
354
f ff
p


30
359
men's arms,
and
men's arms, red, used to heat and cold, to toss quar-tered beeves, and bar - rels,
men's arms,
363
bar - rels, and milk cans, and crates of fruit!
and milk cans, and crates of fruit!
367


371
spoken on pitch
mp
p
f
Fa-ces all knot-ted up like burls on oak.
sag-ging breasts and pro-trud-ing sto-machs,
ff
376
rasp - ing voi - ces!
rasp - ing voi-ces, fil-thy ha-bits with the hands!
mp
mf
382


388
388
392
392
8vb
397
397
p
f
p
f
ff


401
ff
No-where you!
Ev - ery - where the e - lec-tric!
401
f
ff
sfz
sfz
sfz
sfz
405
Ugly!
Venomous!
Gigantic!
405
sfz
sfz
409
f
Ah!
f
Toss-ing me like a great fa - ther his help-less in-fant till it shriek with ec-sta-sy!
409
p
sfz

414

p *p* *f*

And its eyes roll, and its tongue hangs out.

414

fp *fp* *f*

non legato

417

sfz *sf* *sf* *pp* *mp*

tré corde

una corda

VII. St. James's Grove

♩ = 66

421

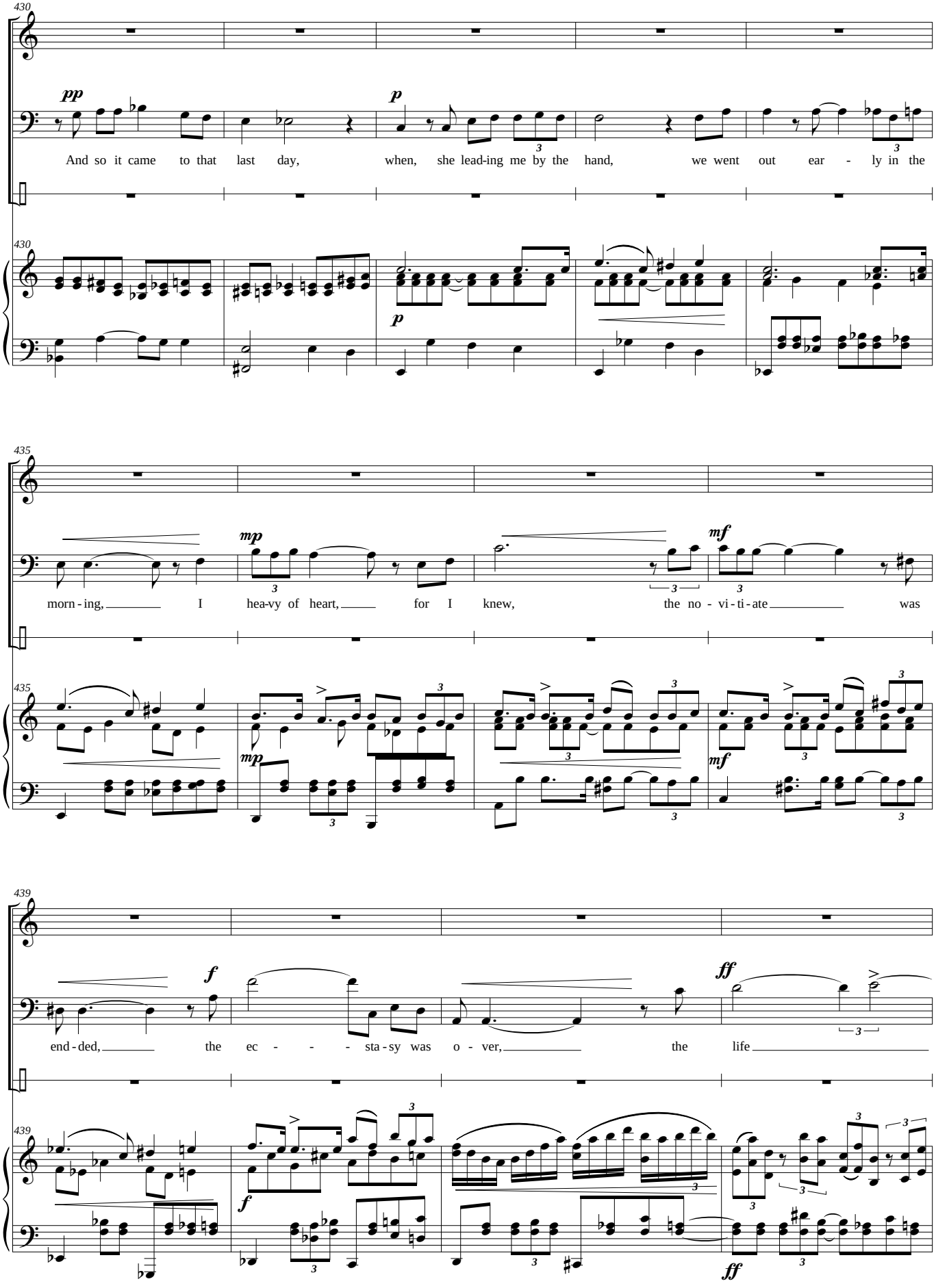
VI. Abroad (II)

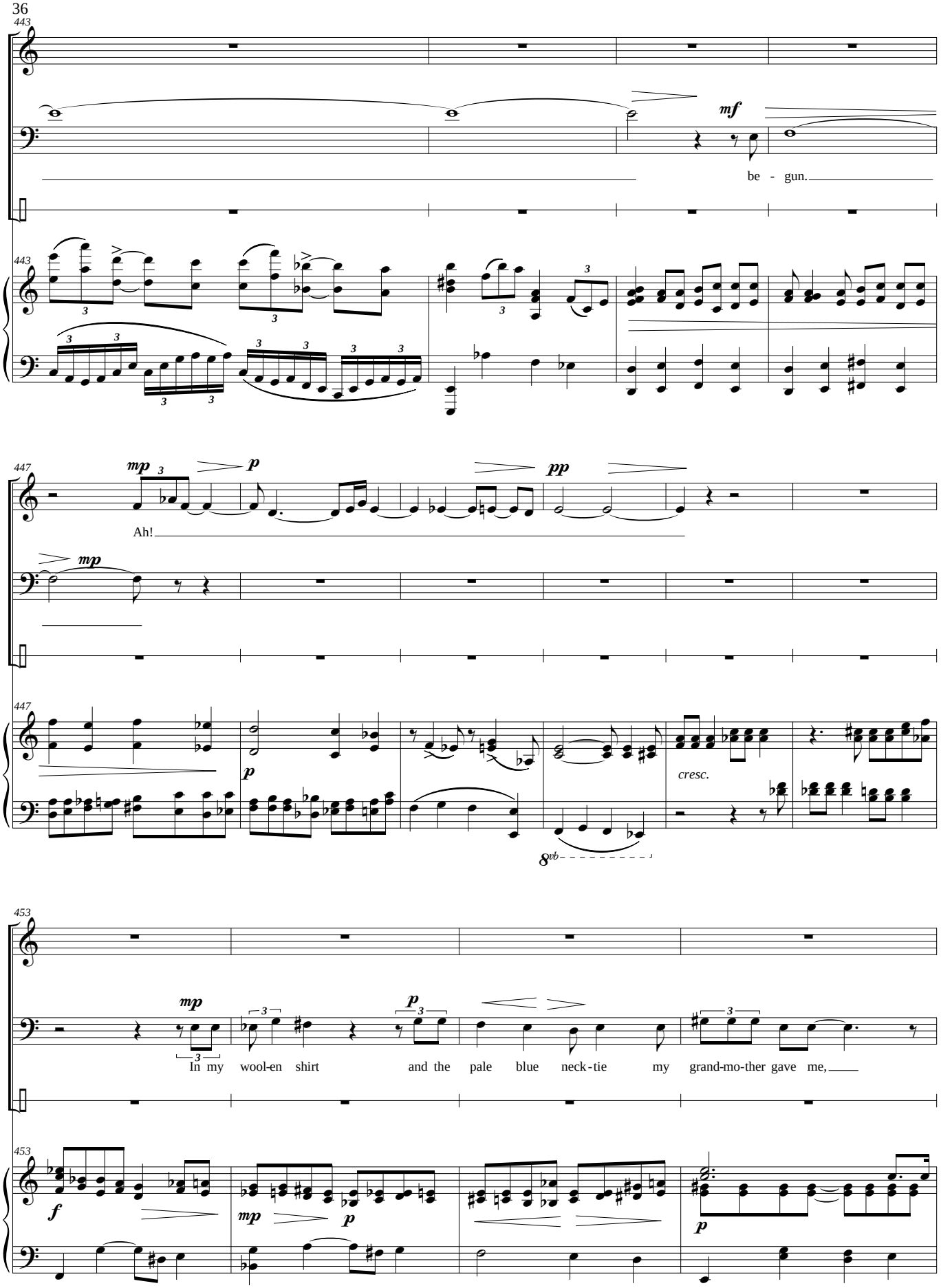
Then she, the old one, laughing, seized me and whirling bore back to the city, upward, still laughing, until the great towers stood above the marshland whirling beneath:

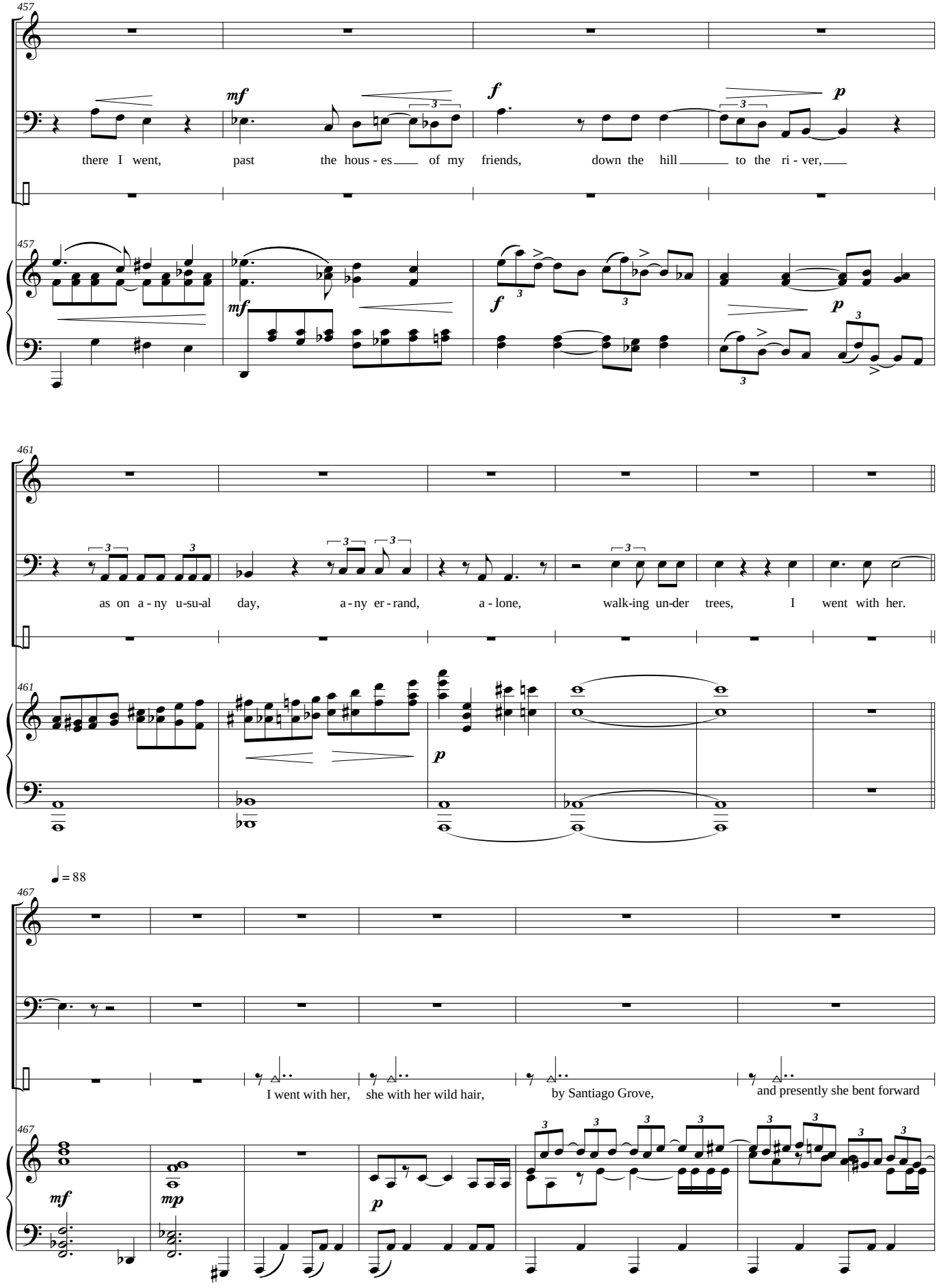
the little creeks, the mallows that I picked as a boy, the Hackensack so quiet that seemed so broad formerly, the crawling trains, the cedar swamp on the one side, all so old, so familiar--so new now to my marveling eyes as we passed.

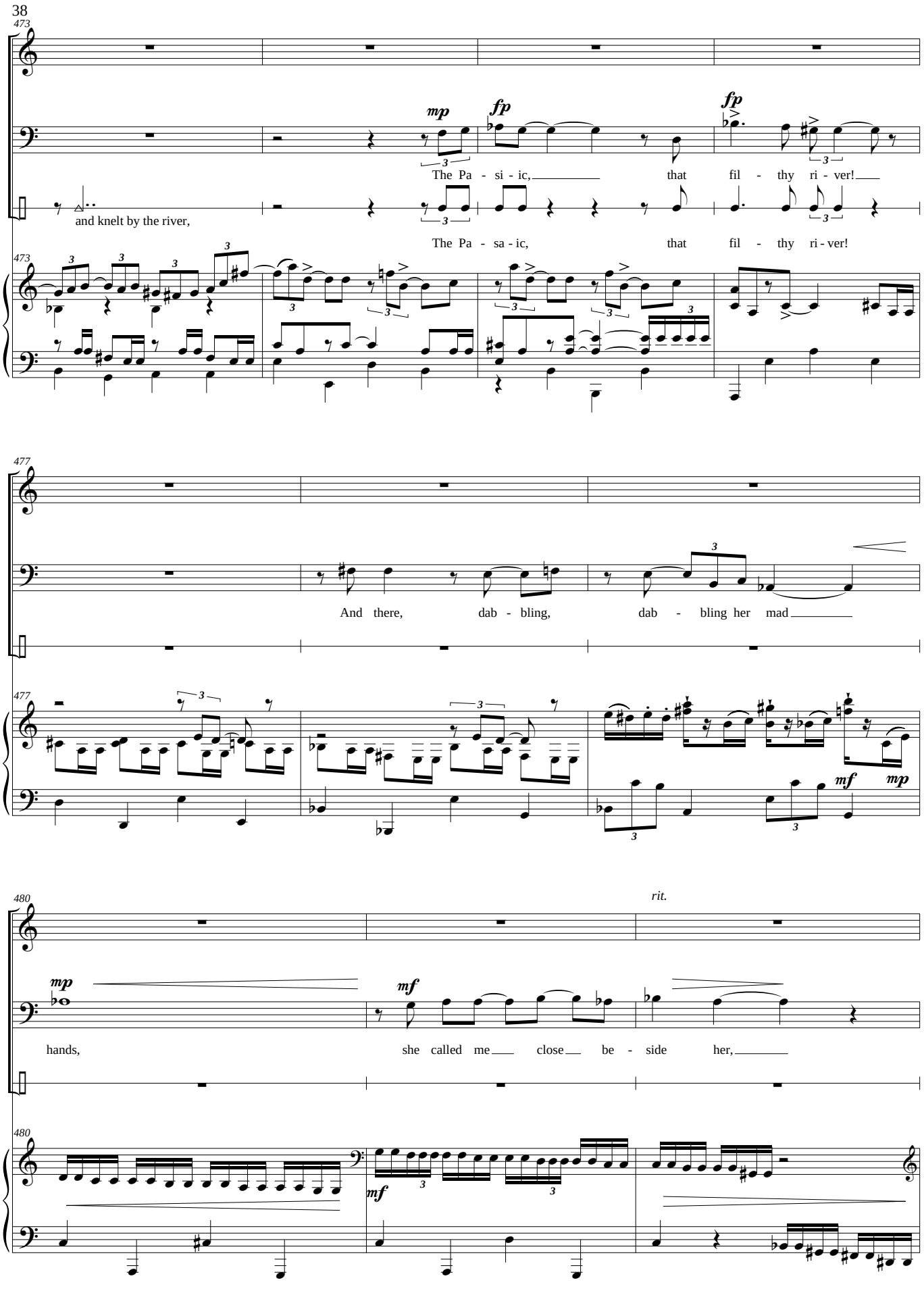
421

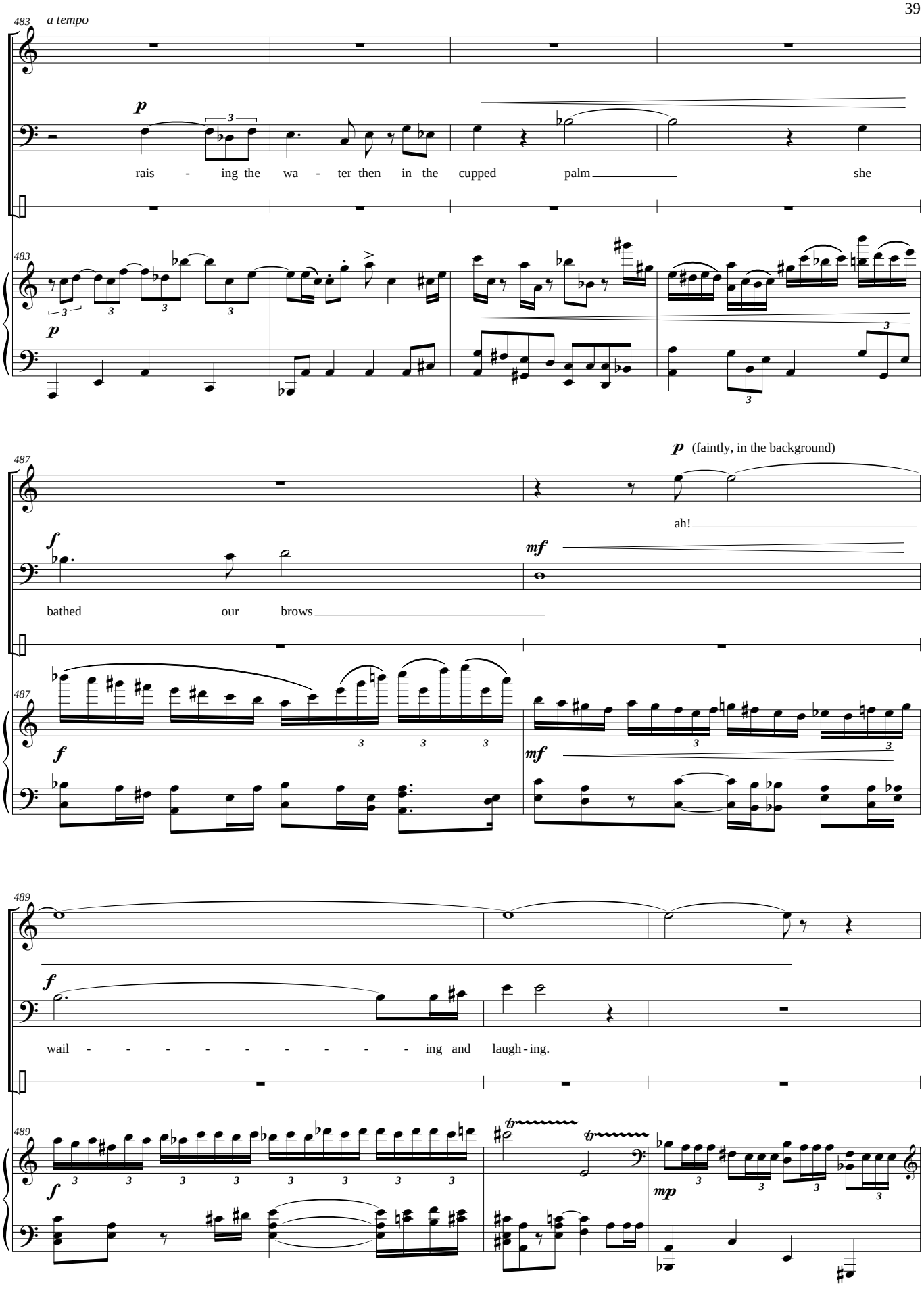
pp

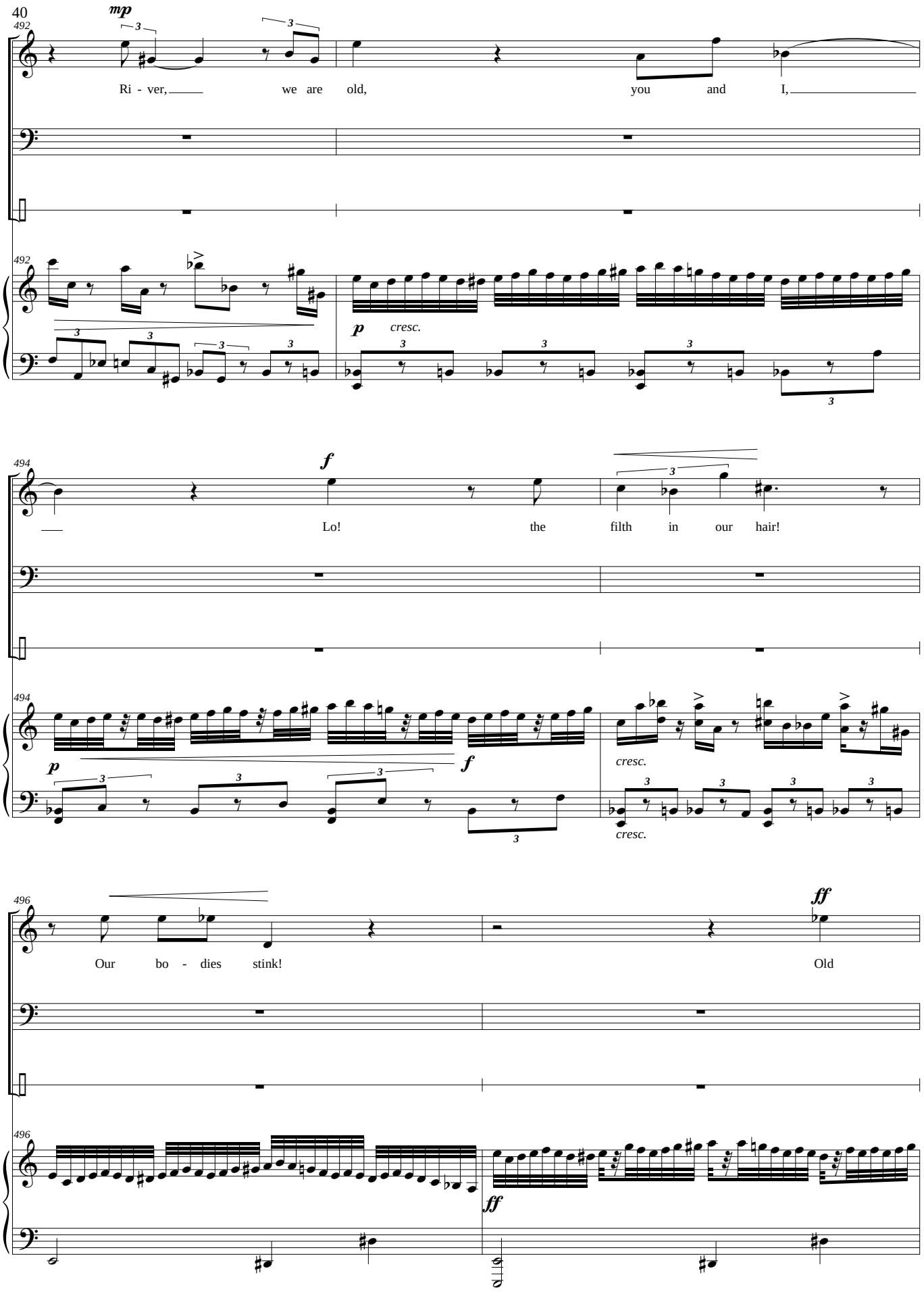

430
pp
p
And so it came to that last day, when, she lead-ing me by the hand, we went out ear - ly in the
430
p
435
mp
mf
morn - ing, I hea-vy of heart, for I knew, the no - vi - ti - ate was
435
mp
mf
439
f
ff
end - ded, the ec - - - sta - sy was o - ver, the life
439
f
ff

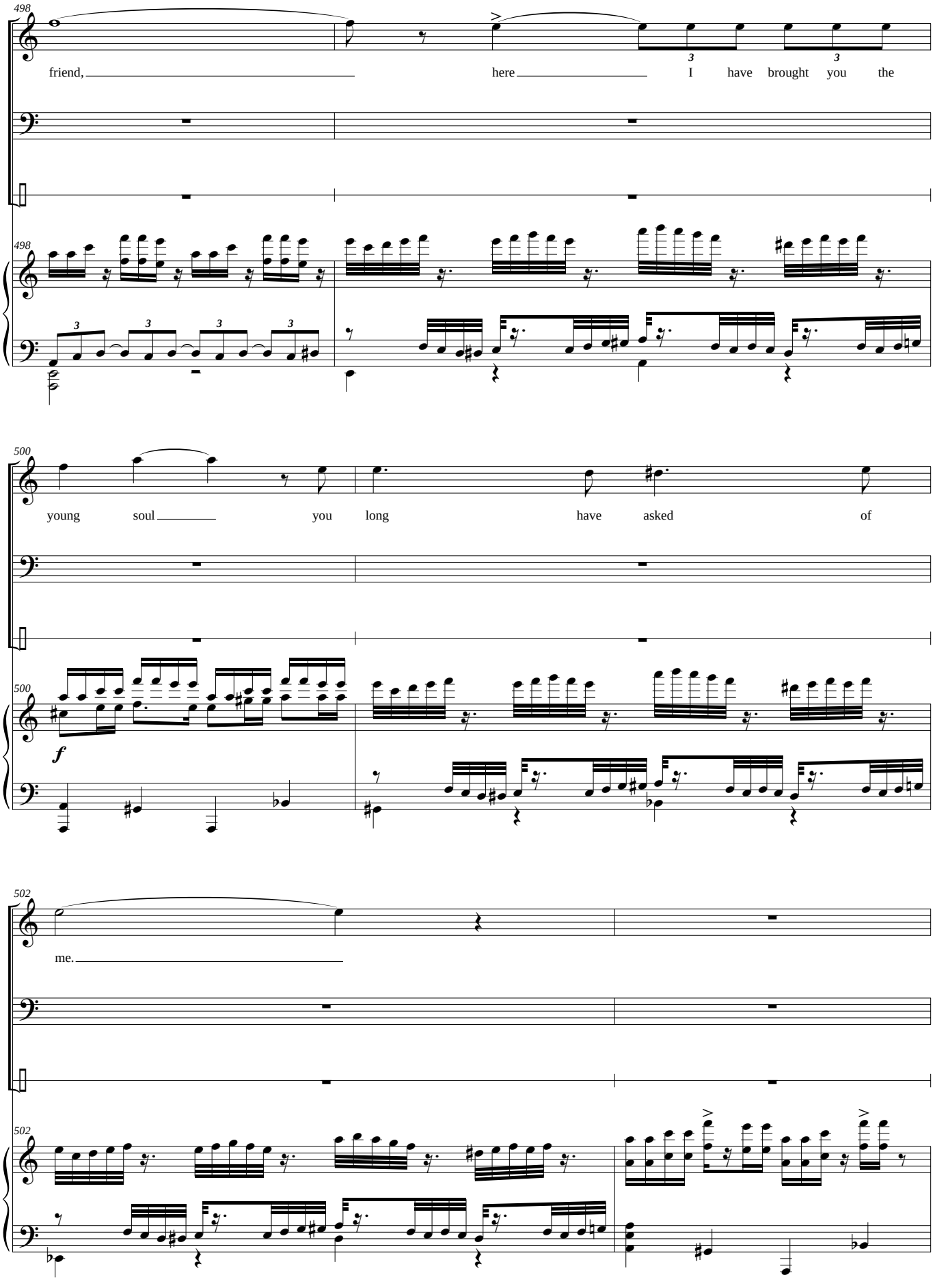

443
mf
be - gun.
443
447
mp
p
pp
Ah!
mp
447
p
cresc.
8vb
453
mp
p
In my wool-en shirt and the pale blue neck-tie my grand-mo-ther gave me,
453
f
mp
p
p

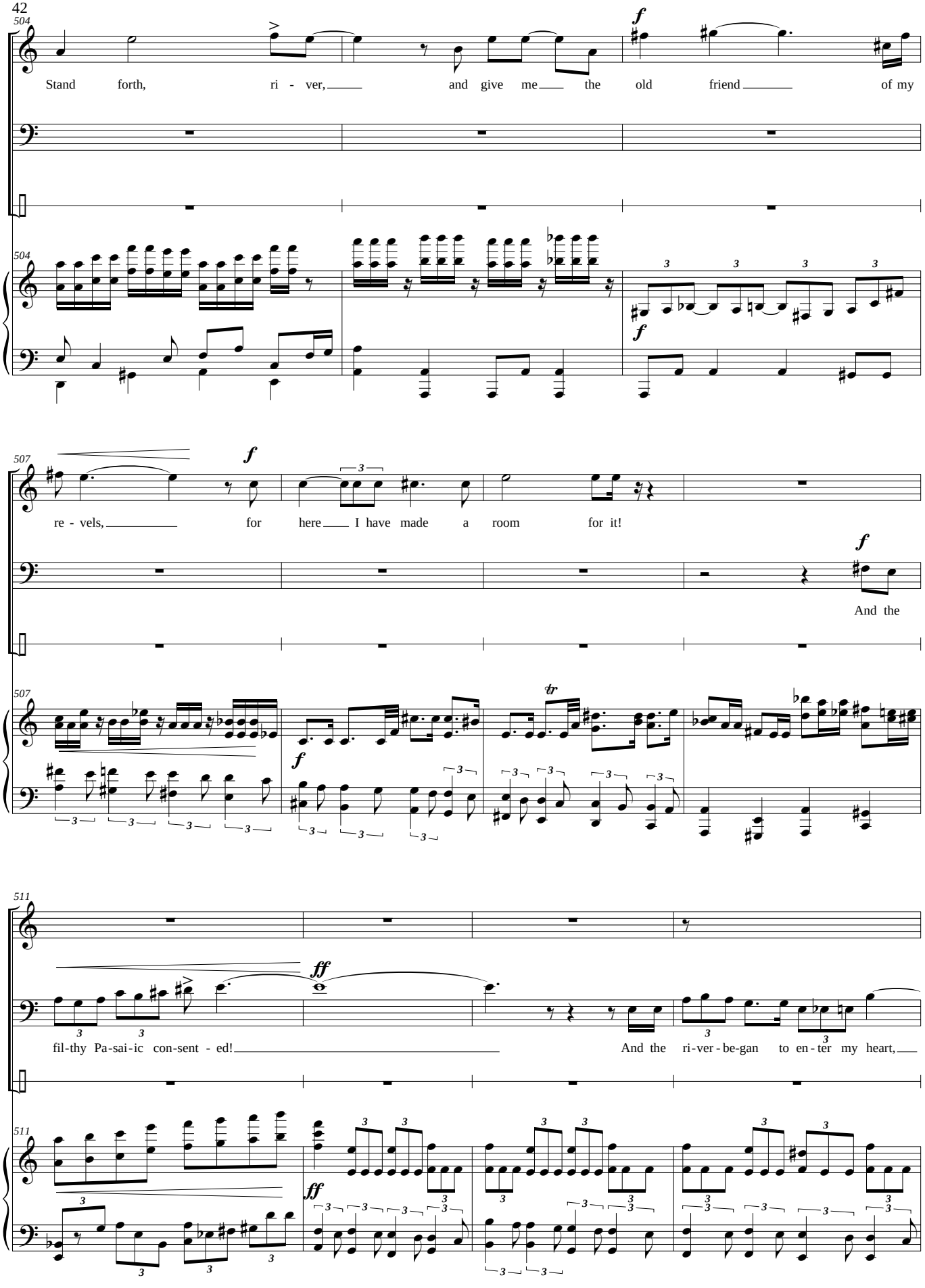

457
mf
f
p
there I went, past the hous - es of my friends, down the hill to the ri - ver,
461
as on a - ny u-su-al day, a - ny er - rand, a - lone, walk-ing un-der trees, I went with her.
♩ = 88
467
I went with her, she with her wild hair, by Santiago Grove, and presently she bent forward
mf
mp
p

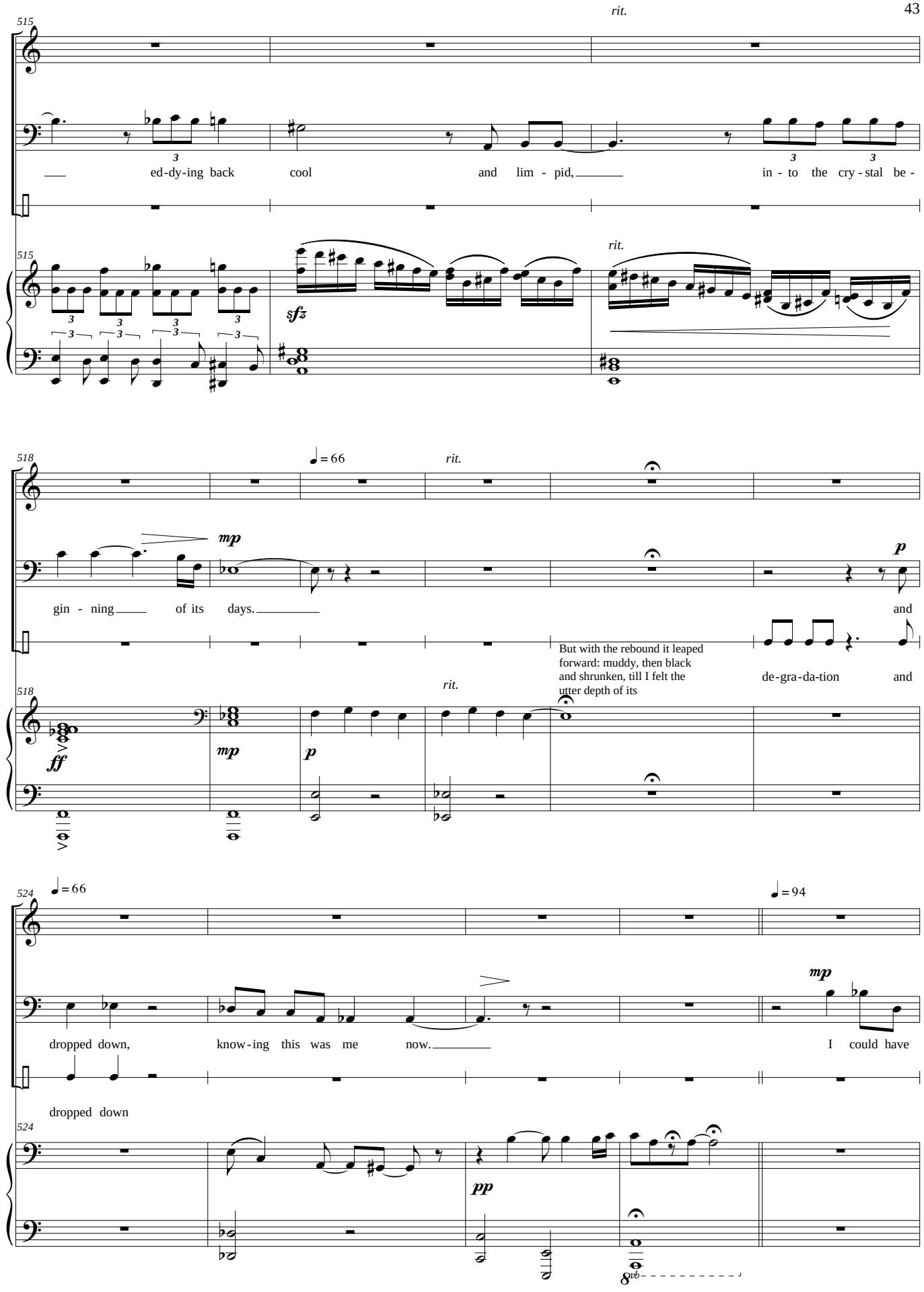

473
mp
fp
fp
The Pa - si - ic, that fil - thy ri - ver!
and knelt by the river,
The Pa - sa - ic, that fil - thy ri - ver!
477
And there, dab - bling, dab - bling her mad
mf
mp
480
rit.
mp
mf
hands, she called me close be - side her,
mf


483
a tempo
p
rais - ing the wa - ter then in the cupped palm she
483
p
487
p (faintly, in the background)
ah!
f
mf
bathed our brows
487
f
mf
489
f
wail - - - - - - - - - - ing and laugh - ing.
489
f
mp


40
492
mp
Ri - ver, we are old, you and I,
p cresc.
494
f
Lo! the filth in our hair!
p
f
cresc.
cresc.
496
ff
Our bo - dies stink!
Old
ff


498
friend, here I have brought you the
498
500
young soul you long have asked of
500
f
502
me.
502


504
Stand forth, ri - ver, and give me the old friend of my
504
507
re - vels, for here I have made a room for it!
And the
507
511
fil-thy Pa-sai-ic con-sent - ed!
And the ri-ver-be-gan to en-ter my heart,
511


rit.
515
ed-dy-ing back cool and lim - pid, in - to the cry - stal be -
sfz
rit.
518
♩= 66
rit.
mp
gin - ning of its days.
p
and
But with the rebound it leaped forward: muddy, then black and shrunken, till I felt the utter depth of its
de-gra-da-tion and
ff
mp
p
rit.
524
♩= 66
♩= 94
dropped down, know-ing this was me now.
mp
I could have
dropped down
pp
8vb

529

rit. *accel.*

mf *mp* *pp*

cried out in my a-go-ny at the sight of my-self de-part-ing for - e - ver.

rit. *accel.*

529

ppp *pp* *non legato*

♩ = 94

534

p

Be si - lent.

Then she: "Be si-lent." And turning to the river she spoke again.

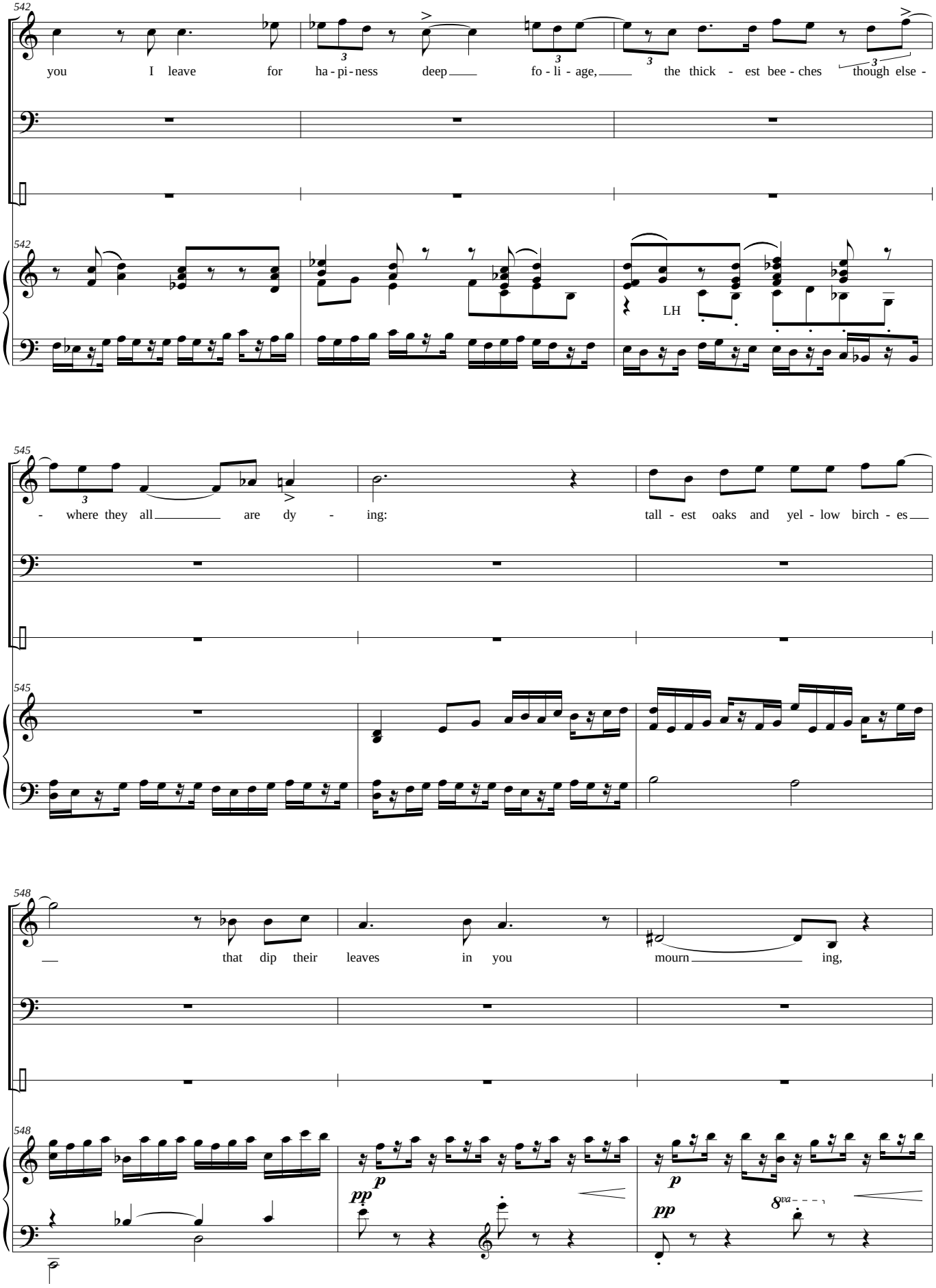
534

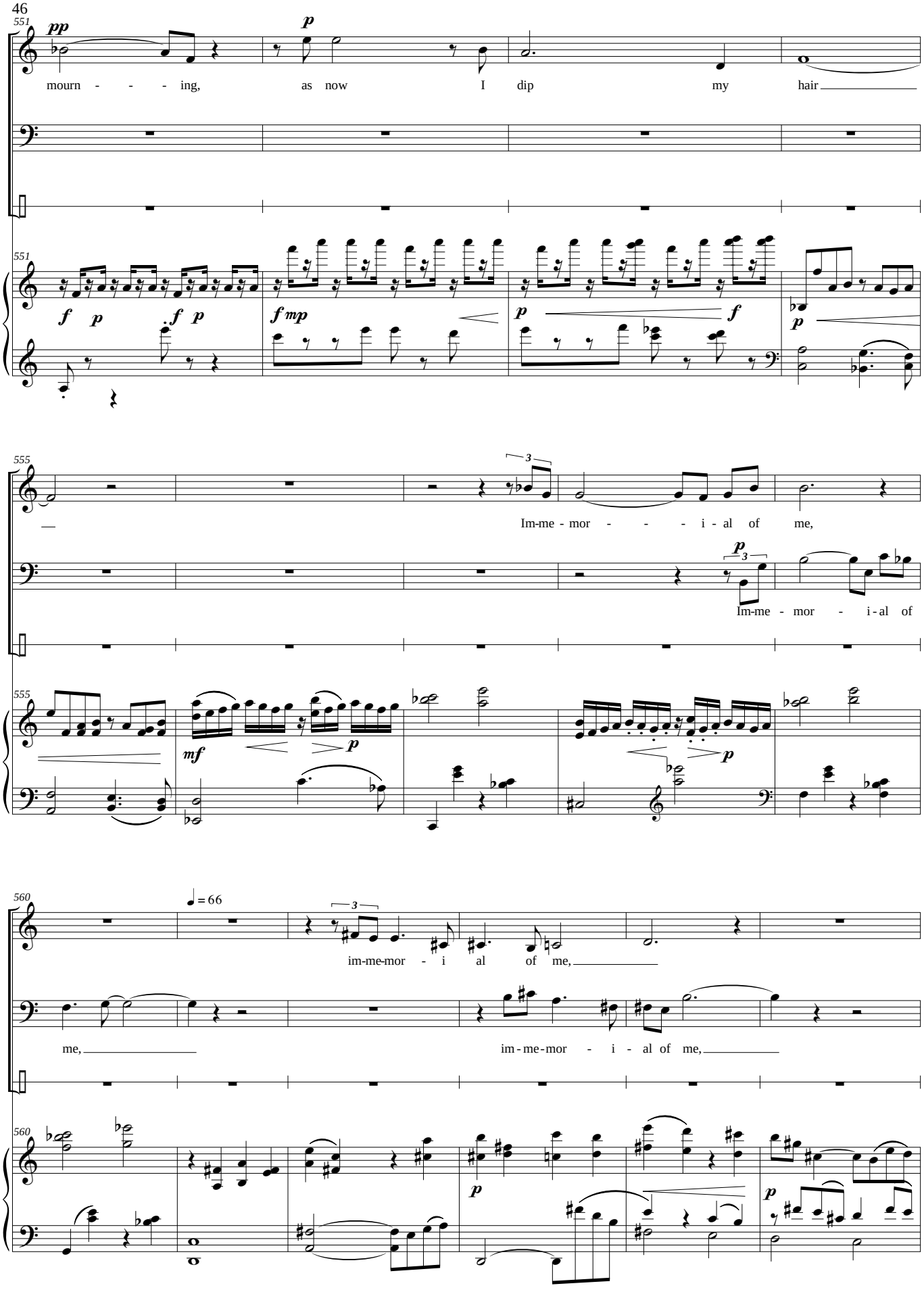
p *non legato*

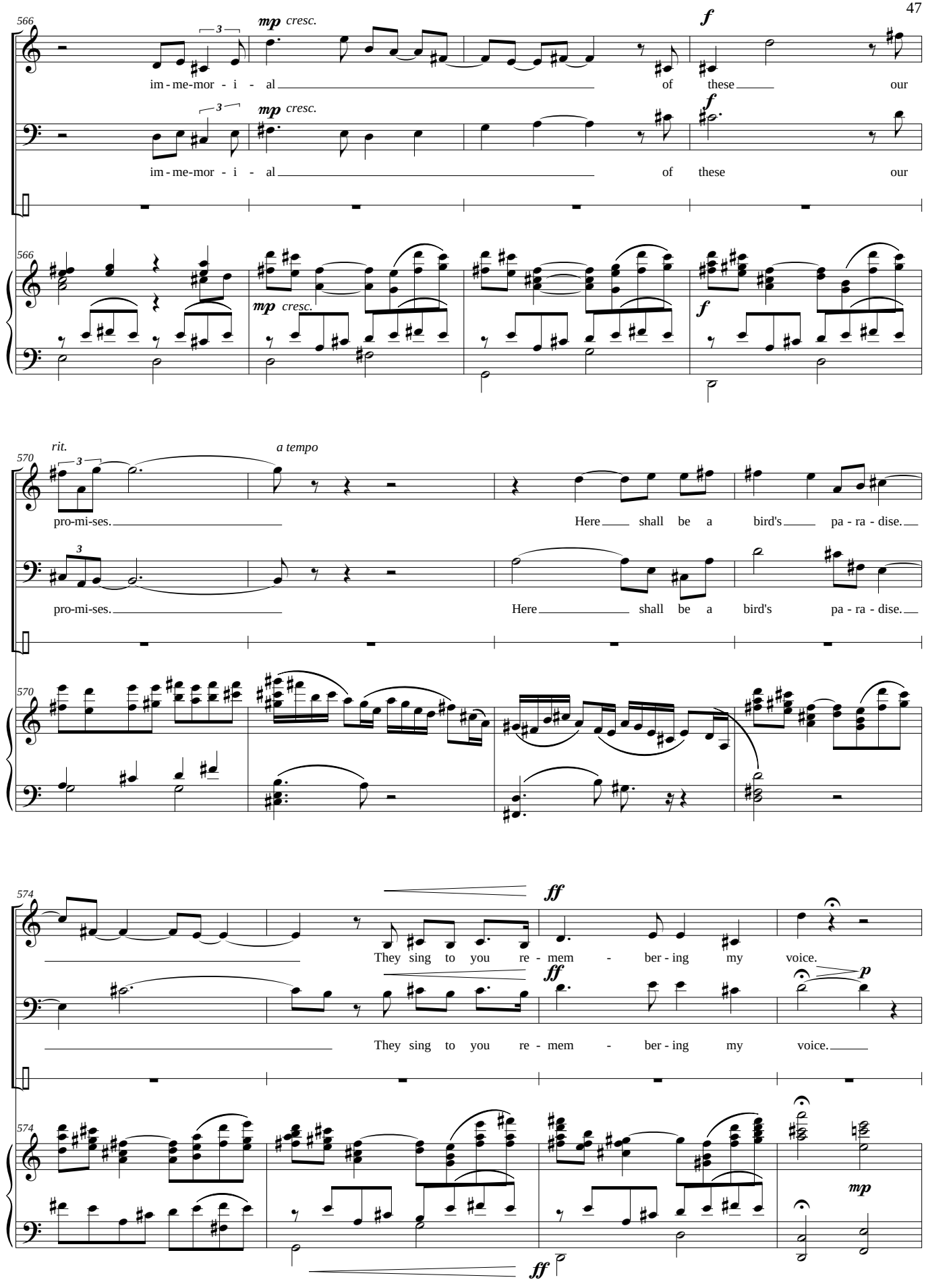
538

For him and me ri - ver, the wan - der-ing. But by

538


542
you I leave for ha - pi - ness deep fo - li - age, the thick - est bee - ches though else -
LH
545
- where they all are dy - ing: tall - est oaks and yel - low birch - es
548
that dip their leaves in you mourn ing,
p
pp
8va


551
pp
mourn - - - ing,
p
as now I dip my hair
f p f p
f mp
p
f
p
555
Im-me - mor - - - i - al of me,
p
Im-me - mor - i - al of
mf
p
p
560
= 66
im-me-mor - i al of me,
me,
im - me - mor - i - al of me,
p
p


566
mp cresc.
f
im - me-mor - i - al of these our
im - me-mor - i - al of these our
570
rit.
a tempo
pro-mi-ses. Here shall be a bird's pa - ra - dise.
pro-mi-ses. Here shall be a bird's pa - ra - dise.
574
ff
They sing to you re - mem - ber - ing my voice.
They sing to you re - mem - ber - ing my voice.
p
mp

578

ff

Live, ri - ver,

ff

Live, ri - ver,

578

p

ff

8vb

581

live in lu - xu - ri - ance,

live in lu - xu - ri - ance,

581

584

pp

in re-mem - - - - brance of me and my

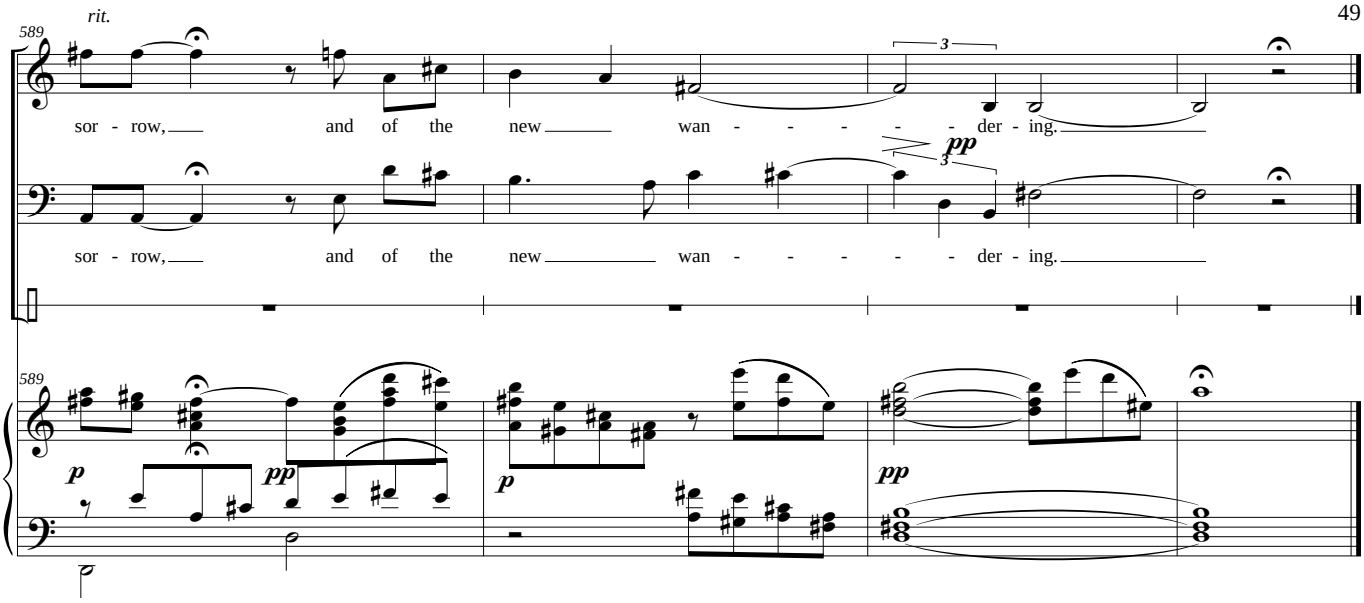
p

in re - mem - - - - brance of me and my

584

p

pp


rit.
589
sor - row, and of the new wan - - - - - der - ing.
pp
3
sor - row, and of the new wan - - - - - der - ing.
589
p
pp
p
pp