*commissioned by the Goulburn Regional Conservatorium*

# the weight of light

Words: Nigel Featherstone

Music: James Humberstone

## Synopsis

On a sheep and cattle farm, Southern Tablelands, New South Wales: a mother and father know that their older son, a lieutenant in the Australian Army, has returned from his latest tour of Afghanistan; they expect that he will be given leave and hope he will come home because they have tragic news. Meanwhile, at an army base in Sydney, the soldier decides that the first thing he will do on leave is see his family – he has felt the call of home.

While driving a hire-car on the Hume Highway the soldier thinks about spending time with his mother, father, and little brother. He is looking forward to seeing them; he is also looking forward to feeling 'alright'.

The soldier stops at a highway diner to get something to eat. While waiting in the line, a young girl stares at him; she appears to know that he is hiding a dark secret. When back on the road, the incident with the girl in the diner forces the soldier to think about his most recent tour of Afghanistan, during which he enjoyed hearing from his brother, but he also gets the flash of a terrible mistake that he made during a military skirmish.

The soldier reaches his home town. At a café in the mainstreet, as it was arranged, he has a coffee with his former high-school sweetheart – they've had an on-again, off-again relationship throughout their twenties. She has organised the meeting because she has something to tell him: she is carrying his child, a result of a drunken night they had six months earlier during his previous leave.

Back in the car and driving on a country road out to the family farm, and knowing now that he is going to be a father, the soldier thinks more about his brother, who was a delicate, effeminate young man nine years his junior. The older brother can't wait to tell the younger brother about the news of a child.

The soldier reaches the farm, where he finds his mother waiting at the main gate. She tells him that his brother died during the previous winter 'by his own dear hand' and that they've been waiting for him so they can scatter the ashes as a family.

Distraught, the soldier walks away into the paddocks. Not only does he think about his brother, he is forced to recall the event that he keeps to himself: he had accidentally shot and killed a young Afghan girl – this is what the girl in the diner 'saw'.

Later, in the middle of the night, the soldier has a nightmare: he believes that the loss of his brother is linked to killing the girl. After calling out, his father comes into the soldier's bedroom to offer comfort and advice. As it begins to rain, the father tells him to be strong, because in the morning they will farewell their 'beautiful boy'.

The next day, the rain having cleared, the family scatters the brother's ashes.

The soldier's girlfriend comes to the farm-house and tells him that she's having twins. Now that the soldier has scattered his brother's ashes, he has been given a new challenge: to stay and be a good partner/parent/son. The soldier says yes, he will stay, but he will need to be carried.

The healing process begins.

- Nigel Featherstone, 2017

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## Performance instructions

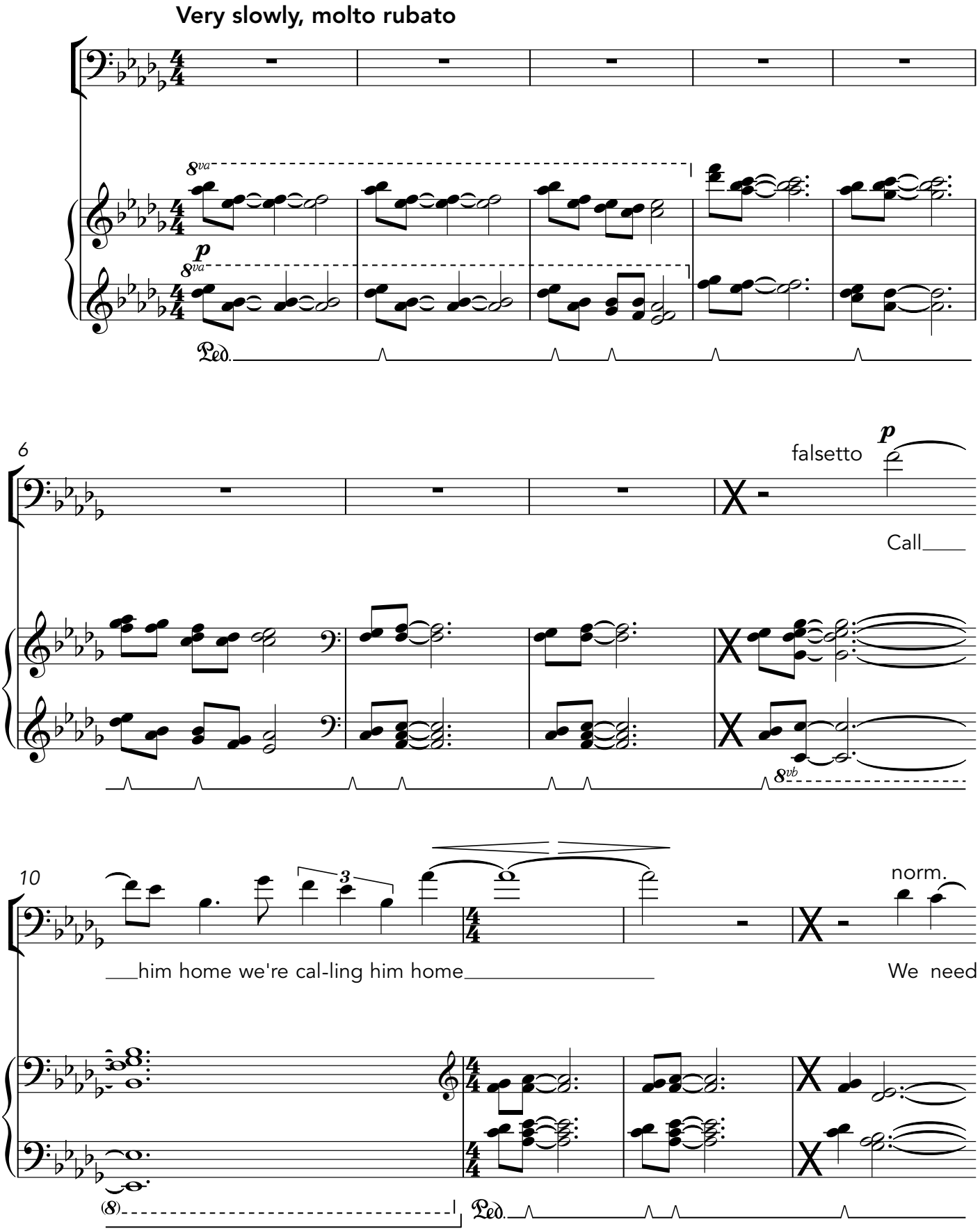
**Preparation for piano extended techniques**

*The Weight of Light* involves four extended techniques that require preparation. The first is to place one or two pieces of A4 or Letter paper over the strings. The second is to pluck strings - a plectrum is required. The third is to bow specific strings - horsehair should be placed around the following pitches before performance: Eb3, E5, G5. Finally, some harmonics are to be played by touching third nodes on the strings (no tool required, but some practice on the instrument to be used).

**Use of Sprechstimme**

In *The Weight of Light*, any sprechstimme sections are marked in degrees of effect per Berg's Wozzeck. A single staff with cross notehead means *any* pitch, rhythm definite. When a 'normal' 5-line staff is used, notes with X through the stem have only approximate, relative pitch, and notes with a single line through the stem means sung at pitch but with a spoken inflection.

# THE CALL

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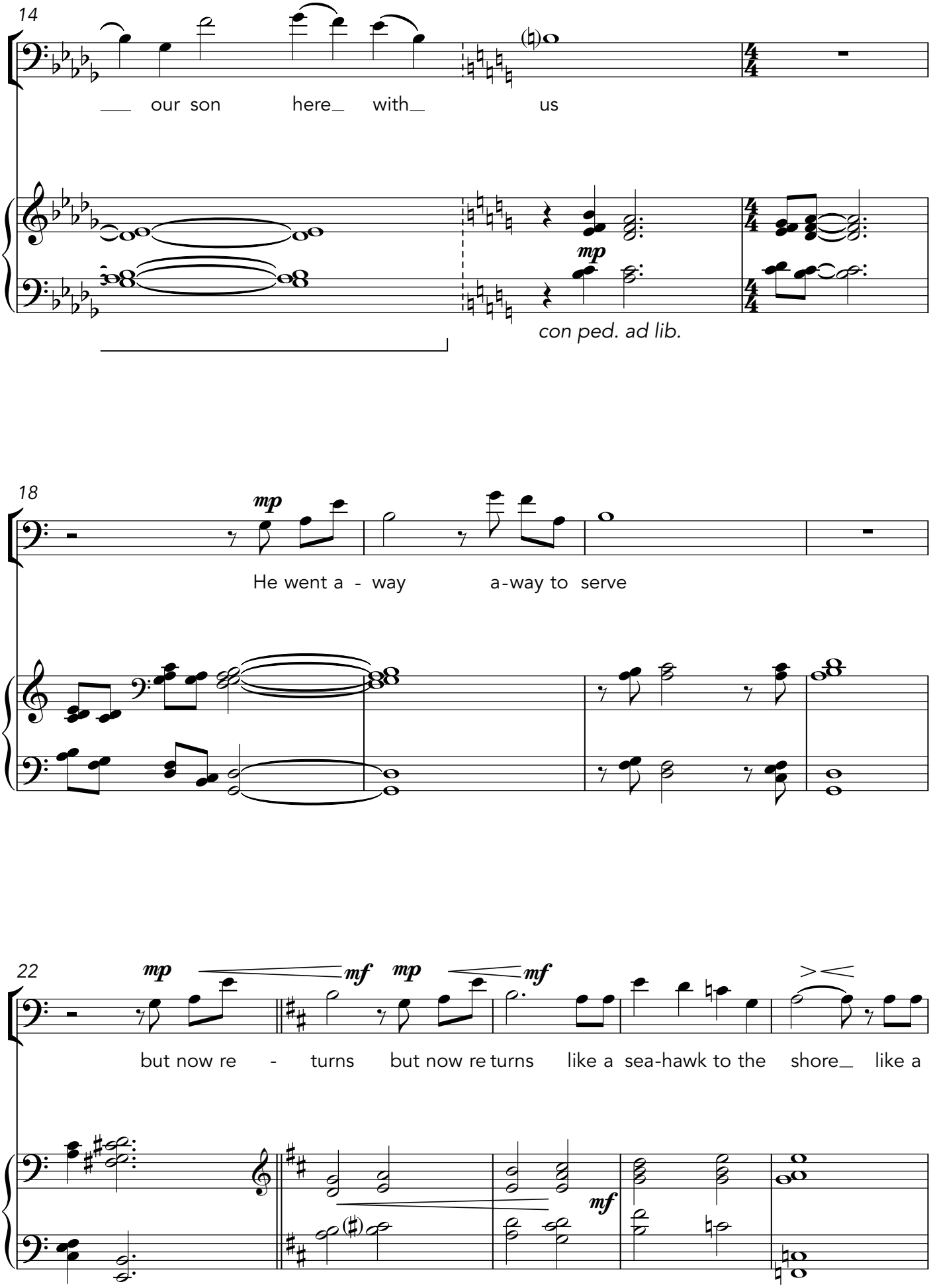
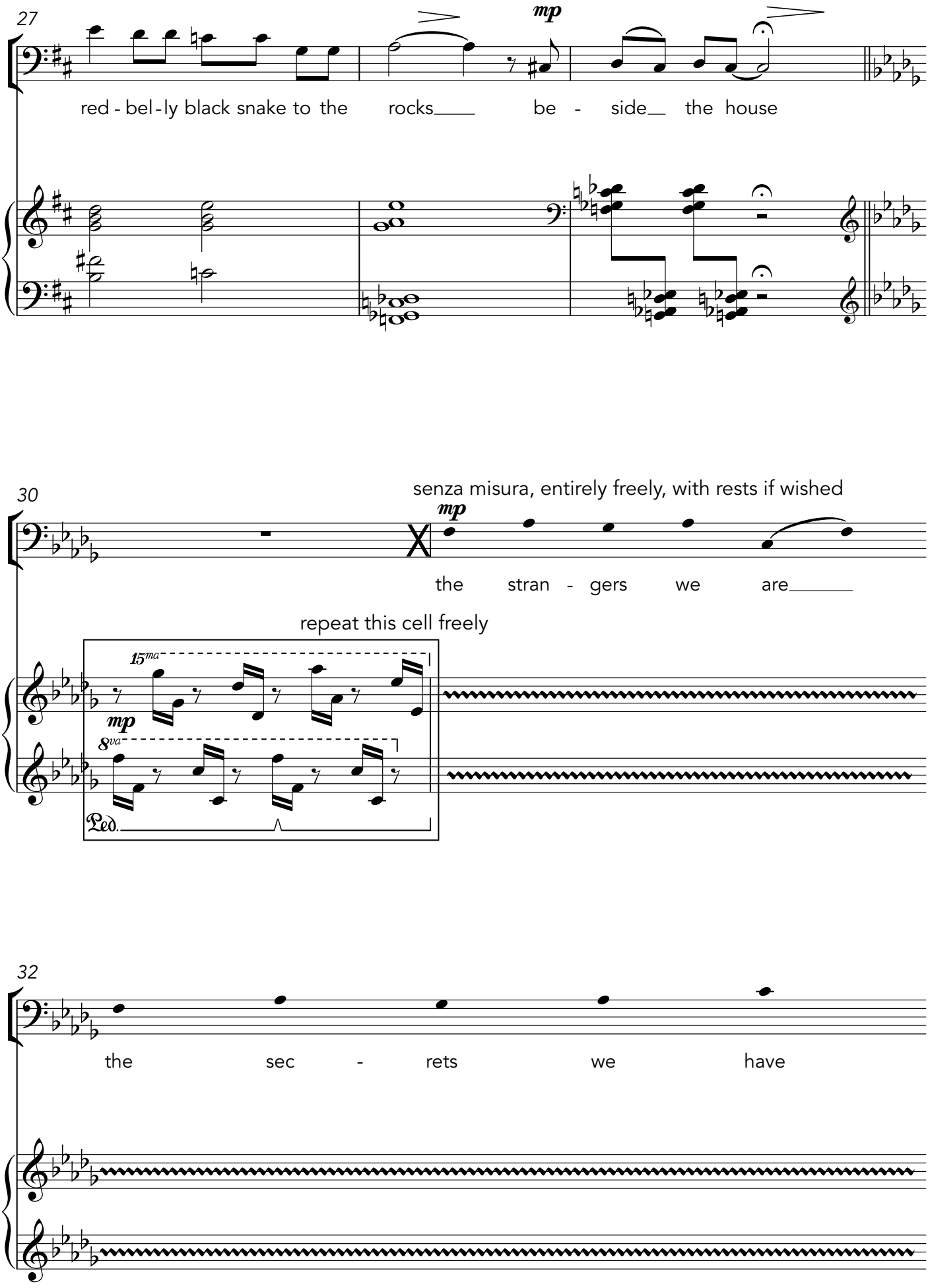
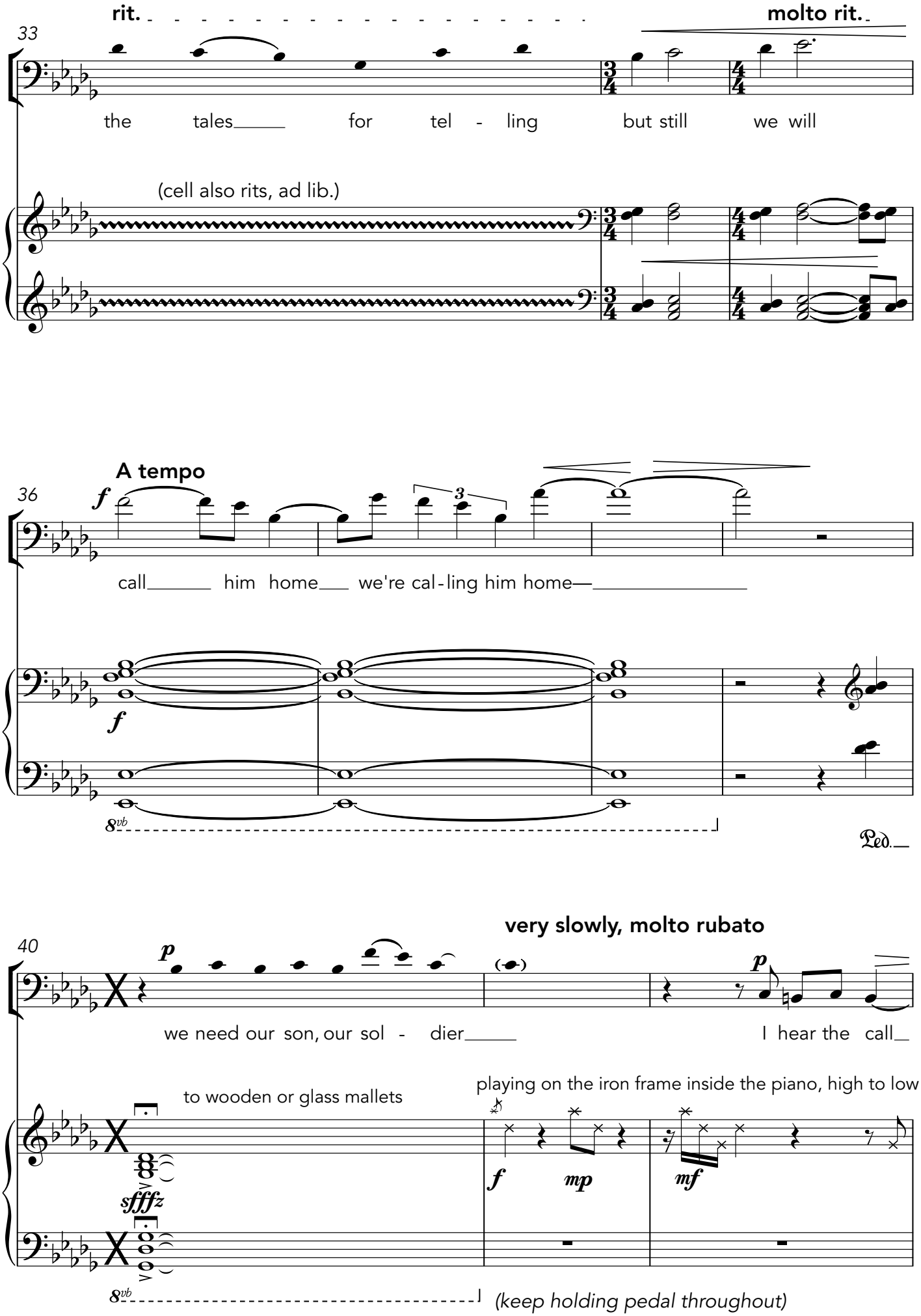
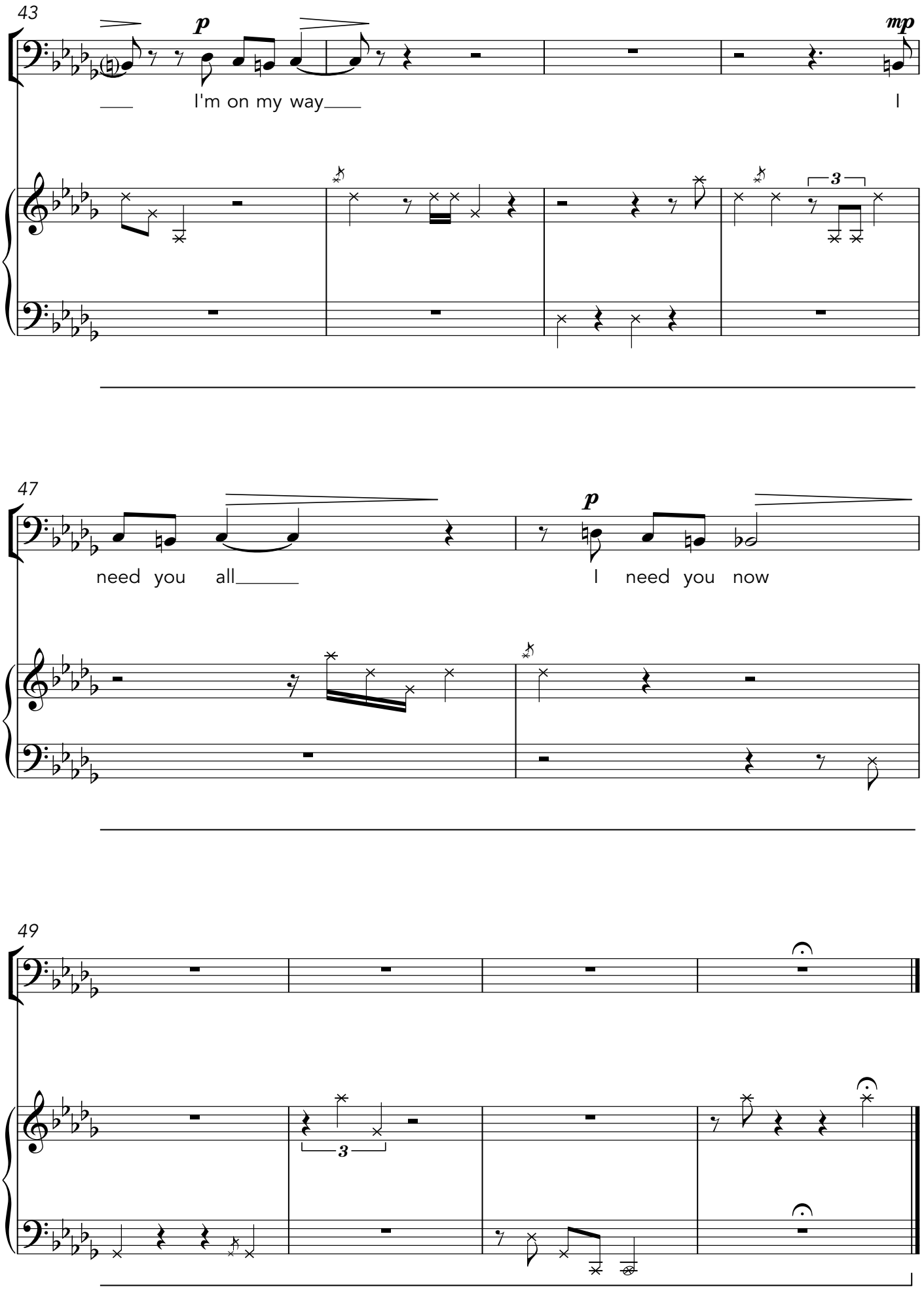
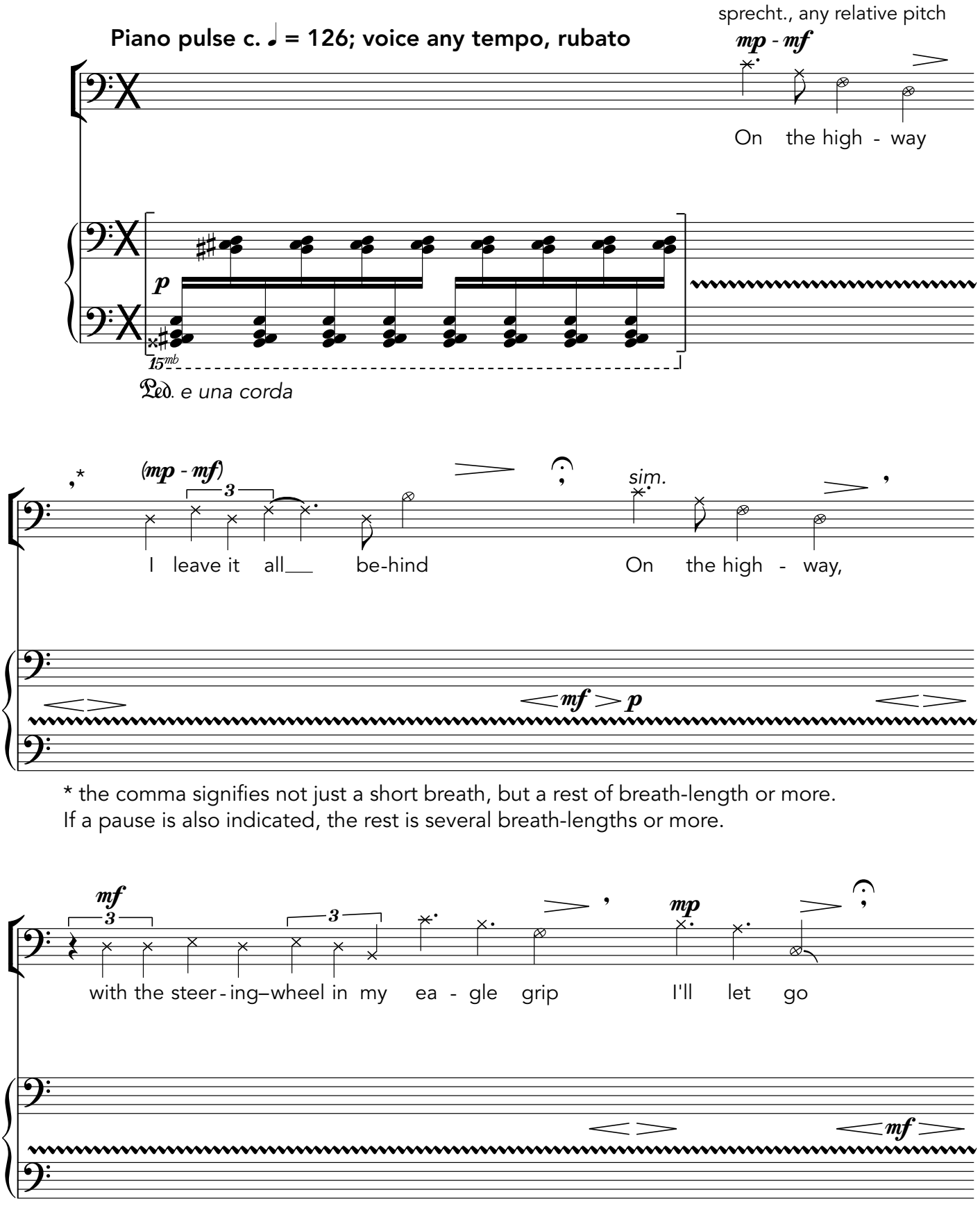

14
our son here with us
mp
con ped. ad lib.
18
mp
He went a - way a-way to serve
22
mp
mf
mp
mf
but now re - turns but now re turns like a sea-hawk to the shore like a
mf

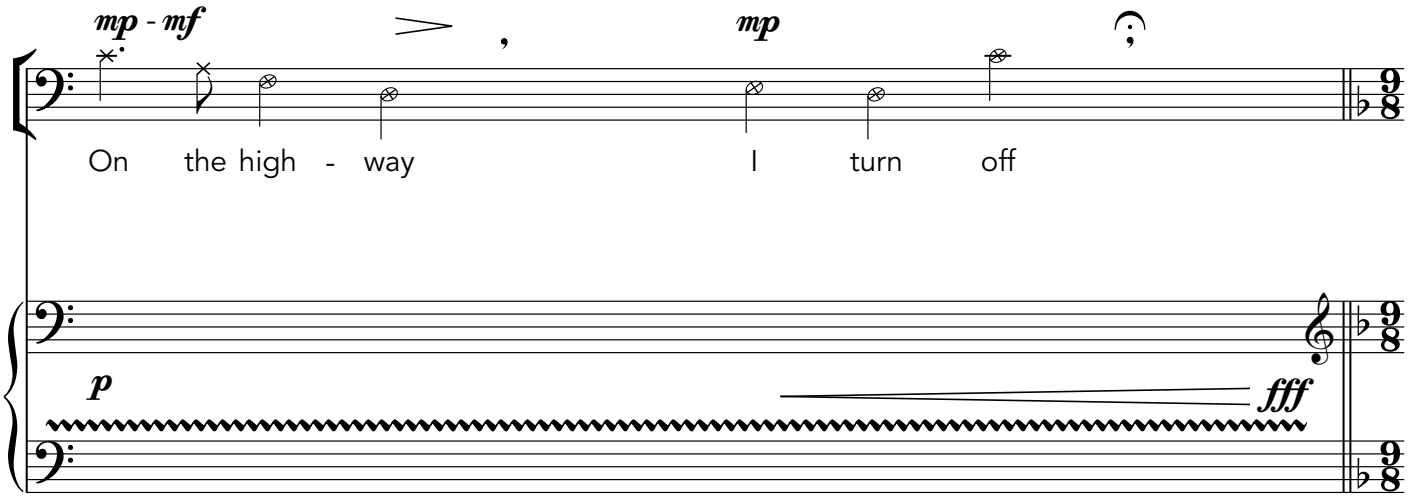

27
mp
red - bel - ly black snake to the rocks be - side the house
30
senza misura, entirely freely, with rests if wished
mp
the stran - gers we are
repeat this cell freely
15ma
mp
8va
Ped.
32
the sec - rets we have

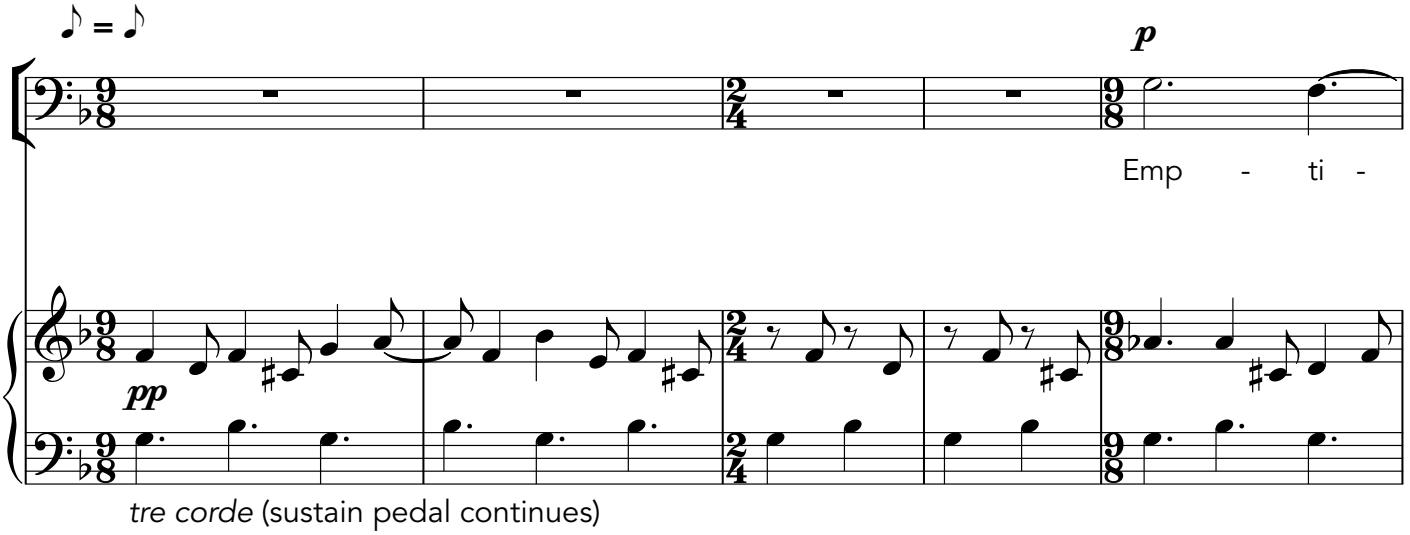

rit.
molto rit.
33
the tales for tel - ling but still we will
(cell also rits, ad lib.)
A tempo
36
f
call him home we're cal-ling him home
3
8vb
Ped.
very slowly, molto rubato
40
p
we need our son, our sol - dier
I hear the call
to wooden or glass mallets
playing on the iron frame inside the piano, high to low
sfffz
f
mp
mf
8vb
(keep holding pedal throughout)

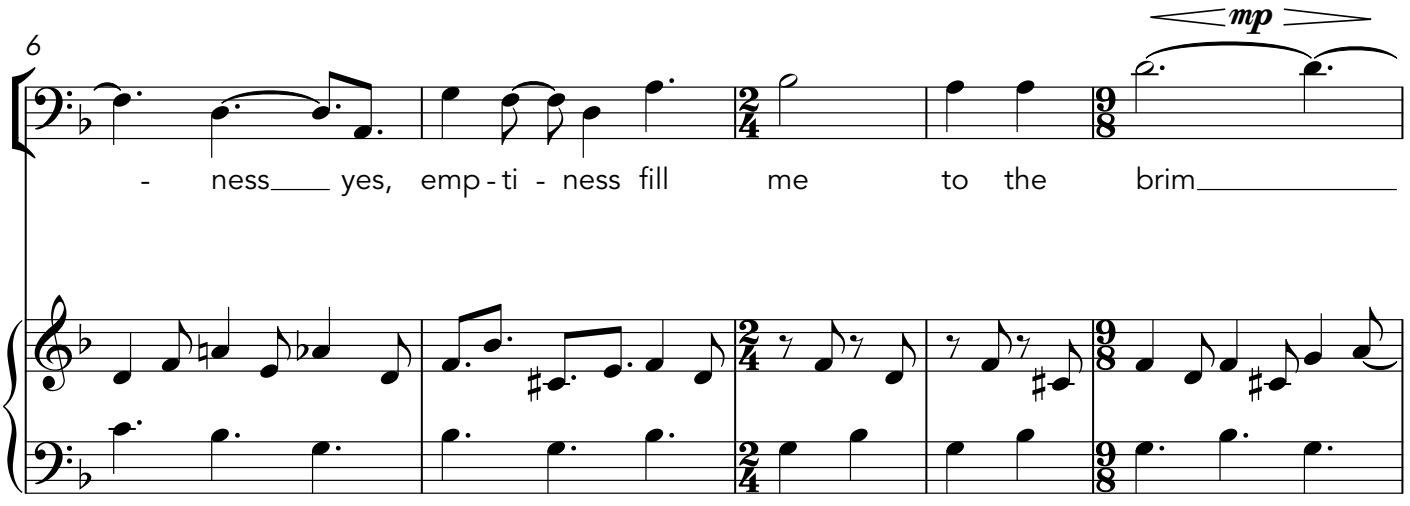

43
p
mp
I'm on my way
I
47
p
need you all
I need you now
49
3

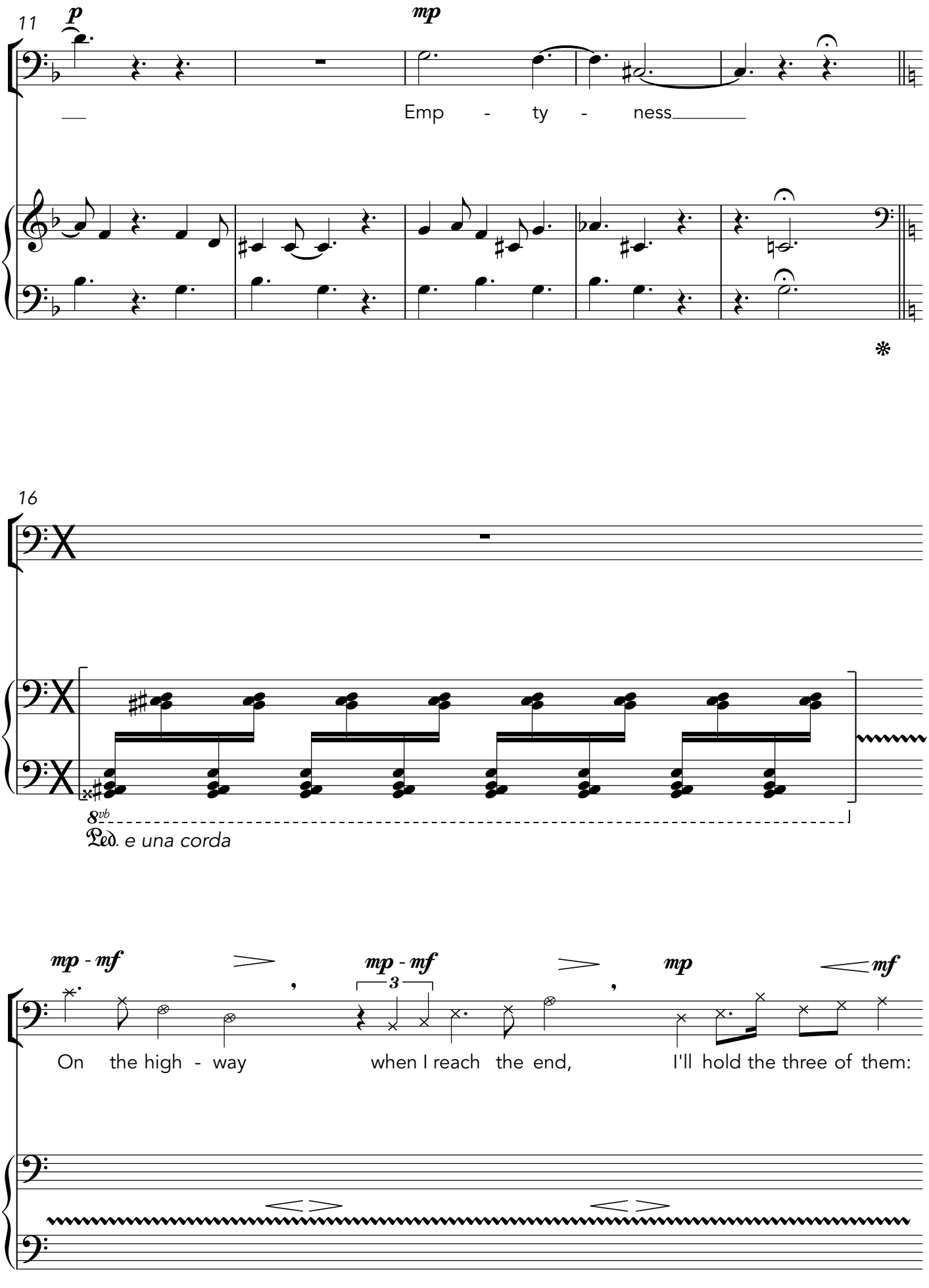
# ON THE HIGHWAY

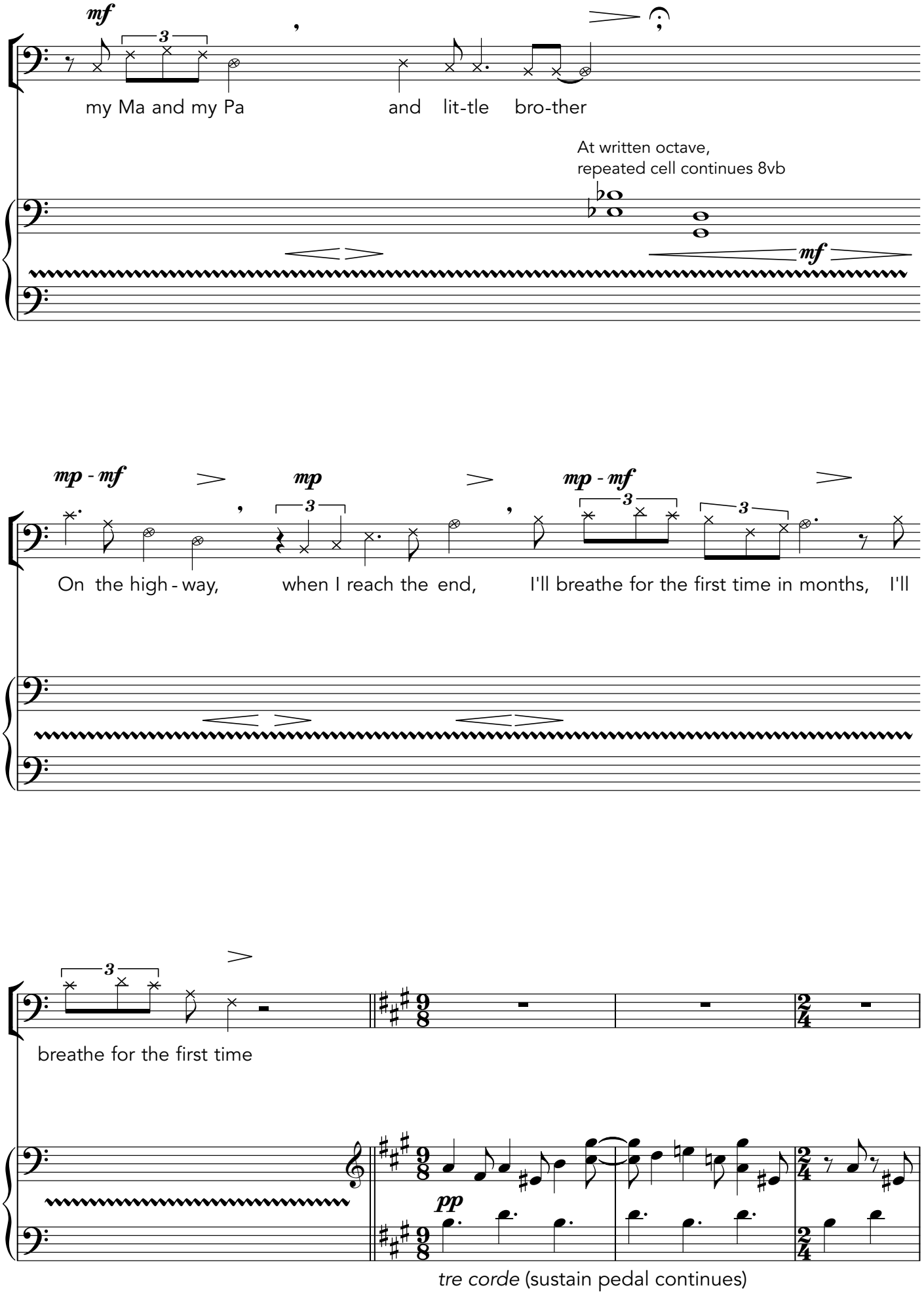


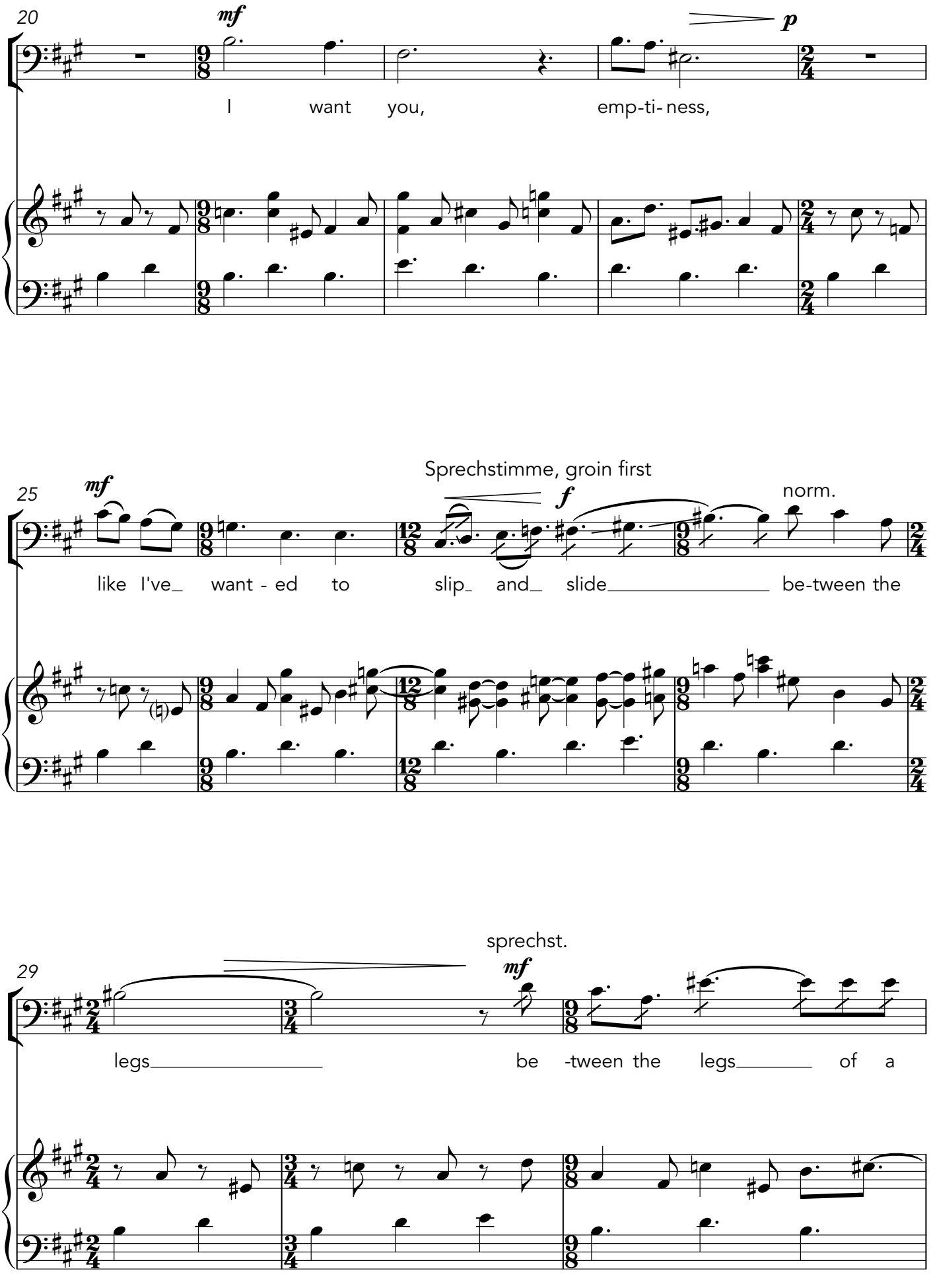

mp - mf
mp
On the high - way I turn off
p
fff

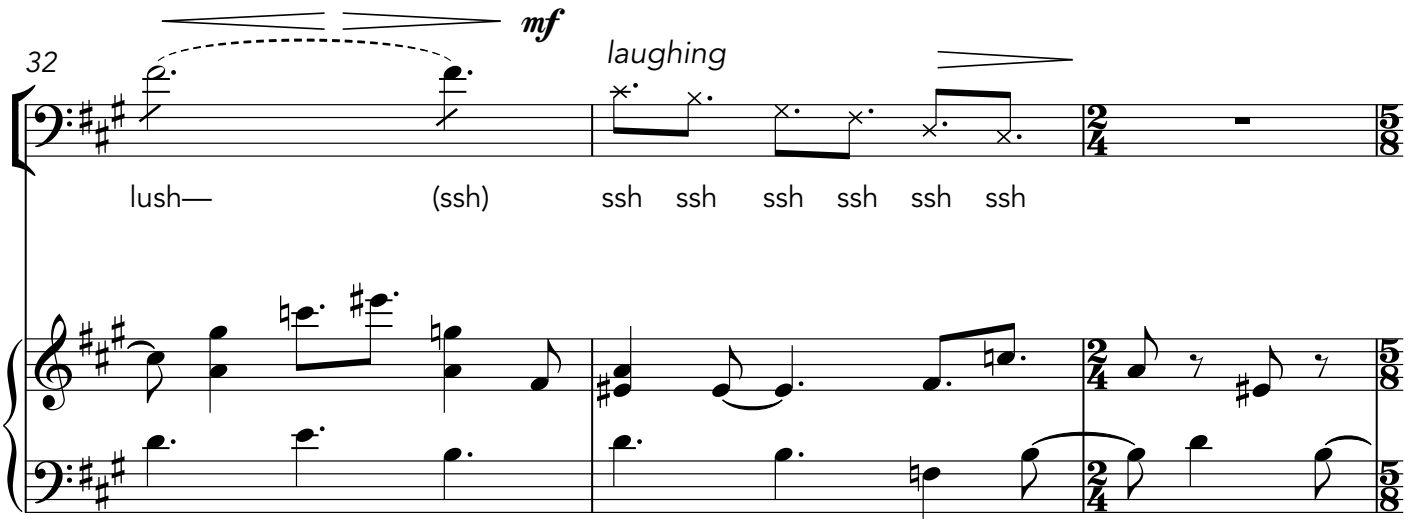

♪ = ♪
p
Emp - ti -
pp
tre corde (sustain pedal continues)

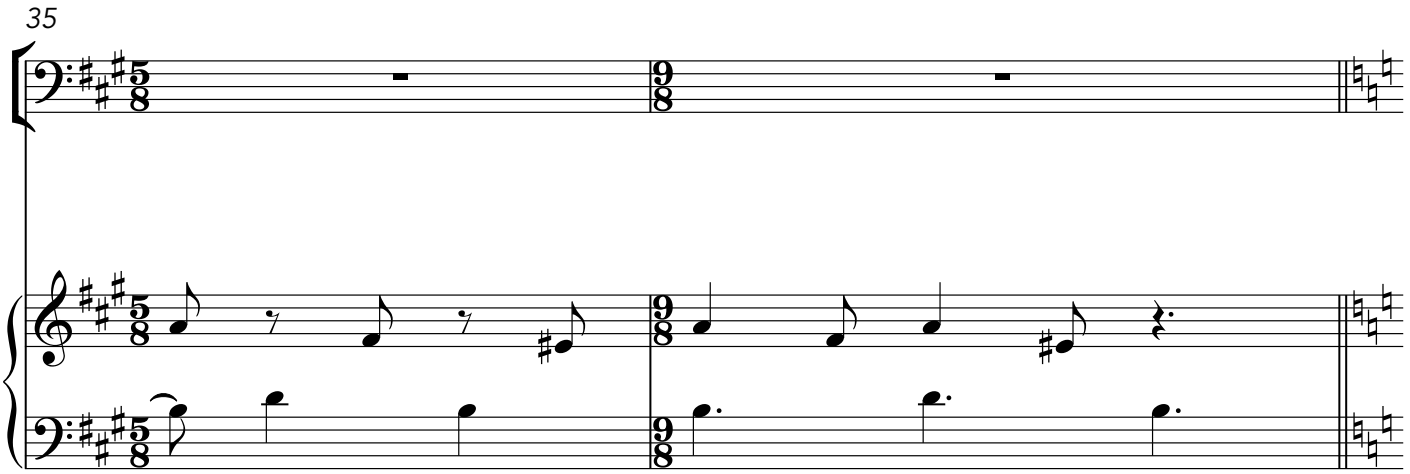

6
mp
- ness yes, emp - ti - ness fill me to the brim

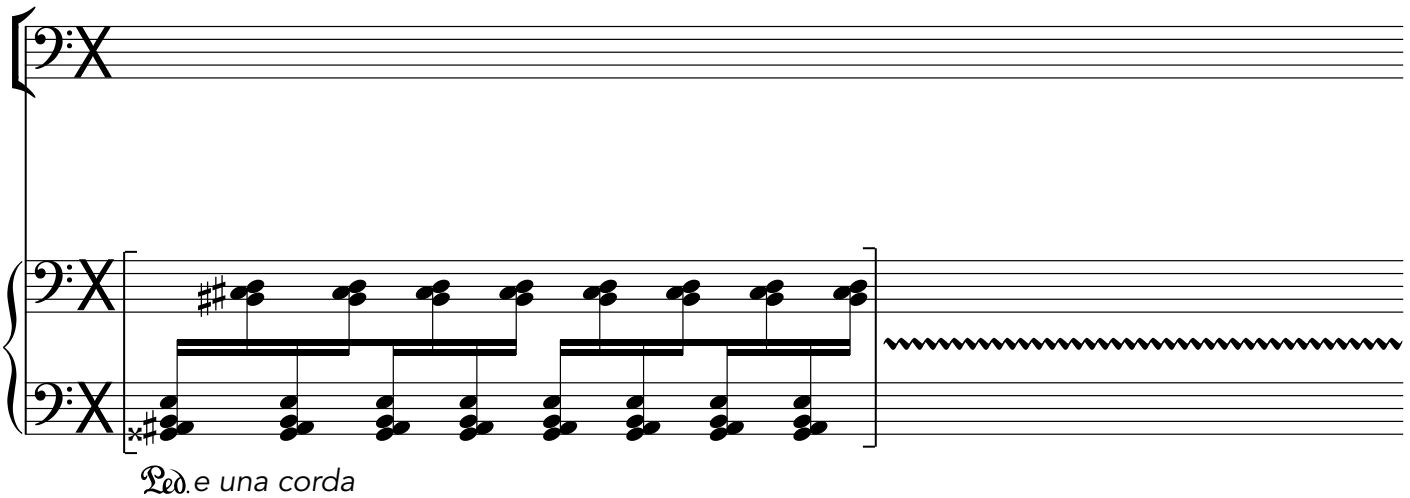

11
p
mp
Emp - ty - ness
16
8vb
Ped. e una corda
mp - mf
mp - mf
3
mp
mf
On the high - way
when I reach the end,
I'll hold the three of them:

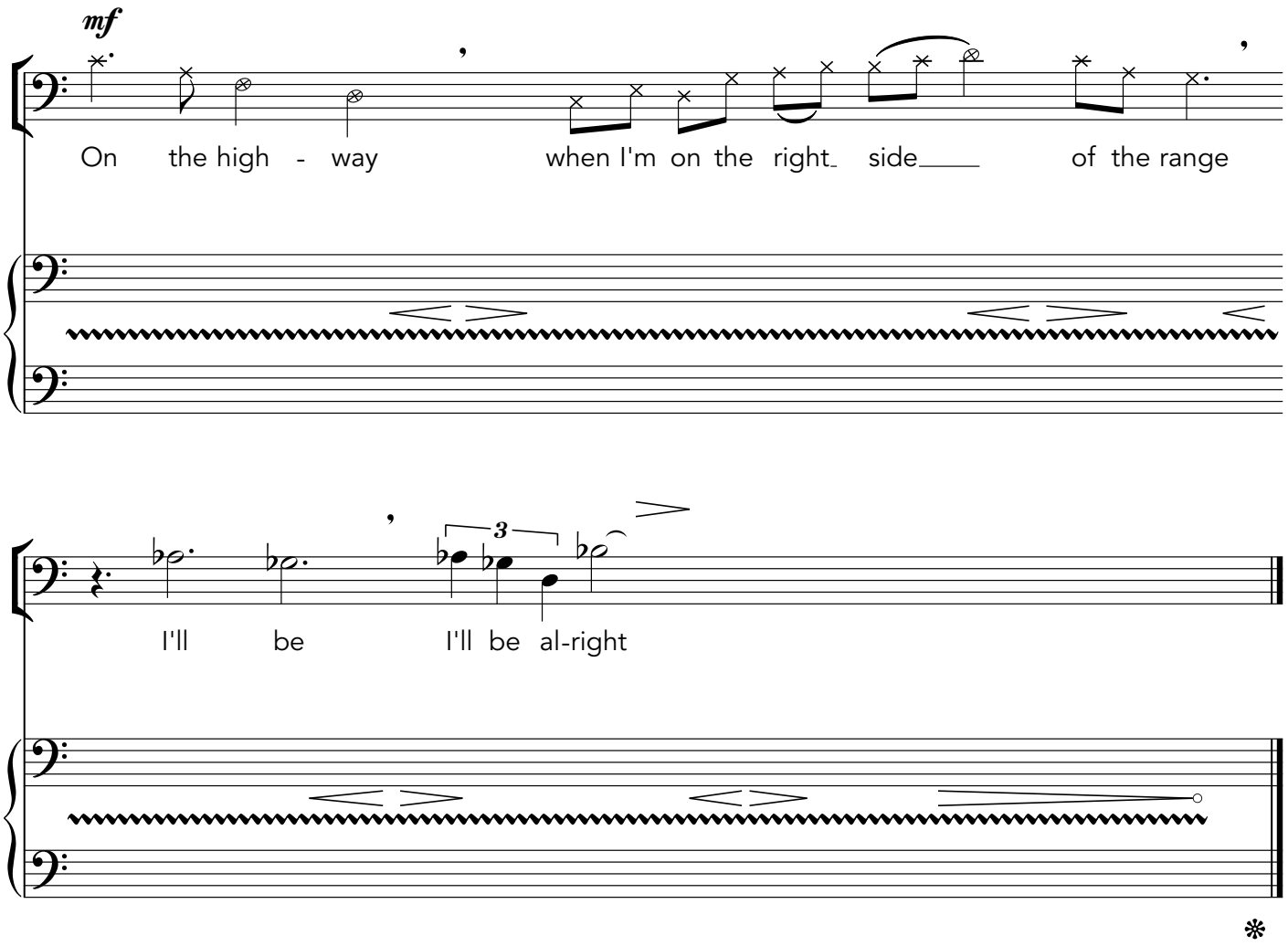

mf
my Ma and my Pa
and lit-tle bro-ther
At written octave,
repeated cell continues 8vb
mf
mp - mf
mp
mp - mf
On the high - way,
when I reach the end,
I'll breathe for the first time in months,
I'll
breathe for the first time
pp
tre corde (sustain pedal continues)


20
mf
p
I want you, emp-ti- ness,
25
mf
Sprechstimme, groin first
f
norm.
like I've_ want - ed to slip_ and_ slide_____ be-tween the
29
sprechst.
mf
legs_____ be -tween the legs_____ of a

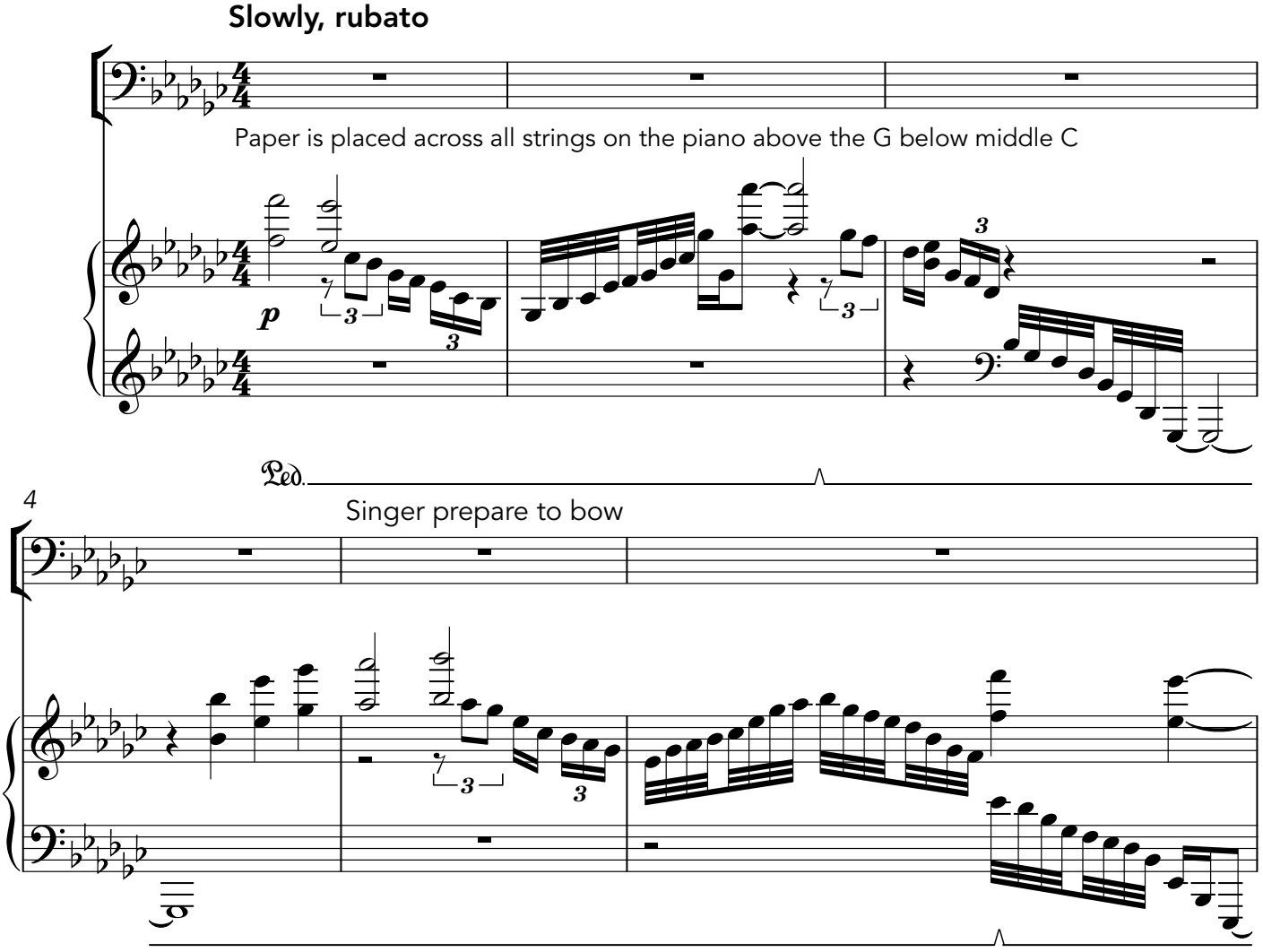

32
mf
laughing
lush— (ssh) ssh ssh ssh ssh ssh ssh

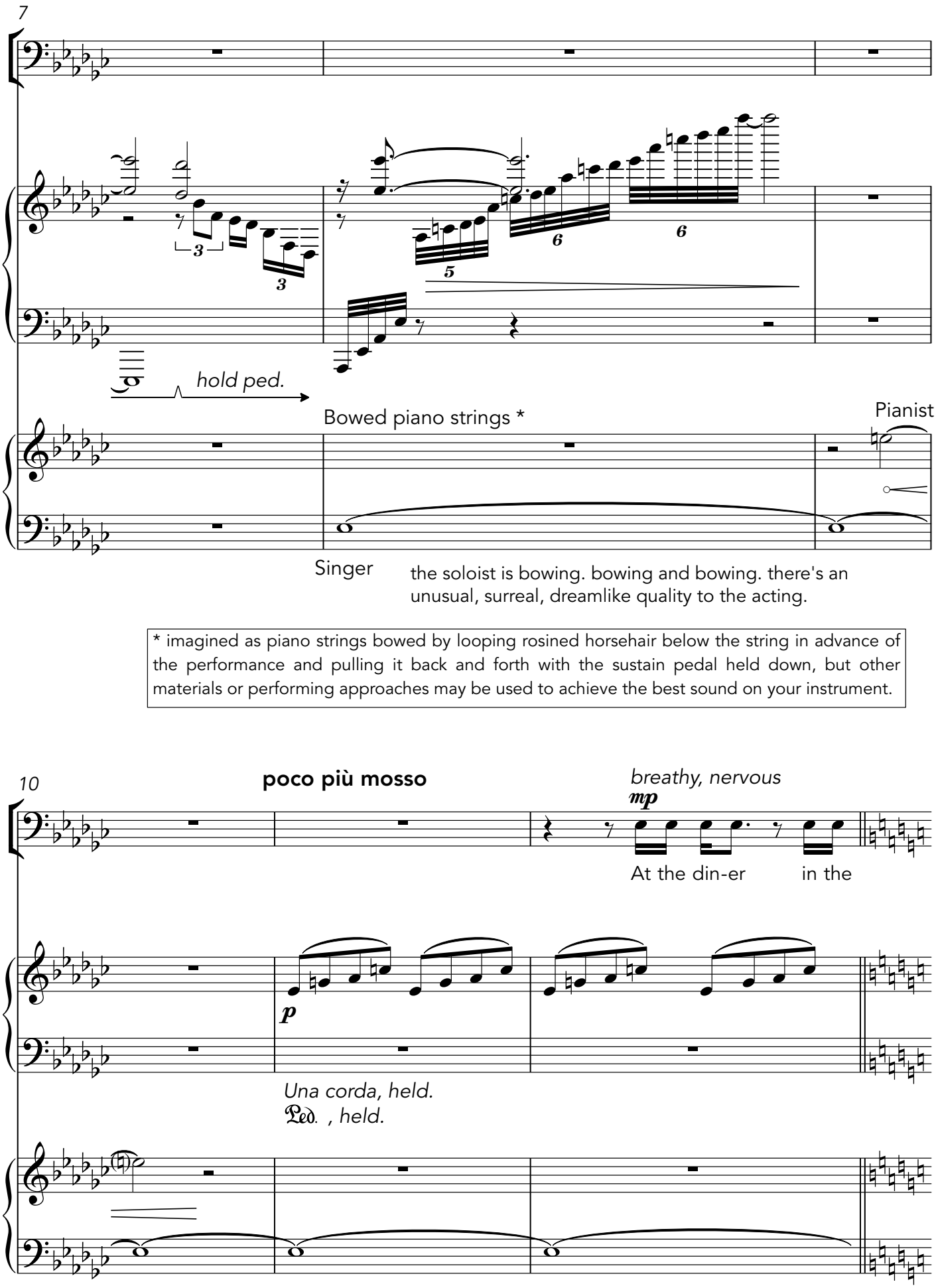

35

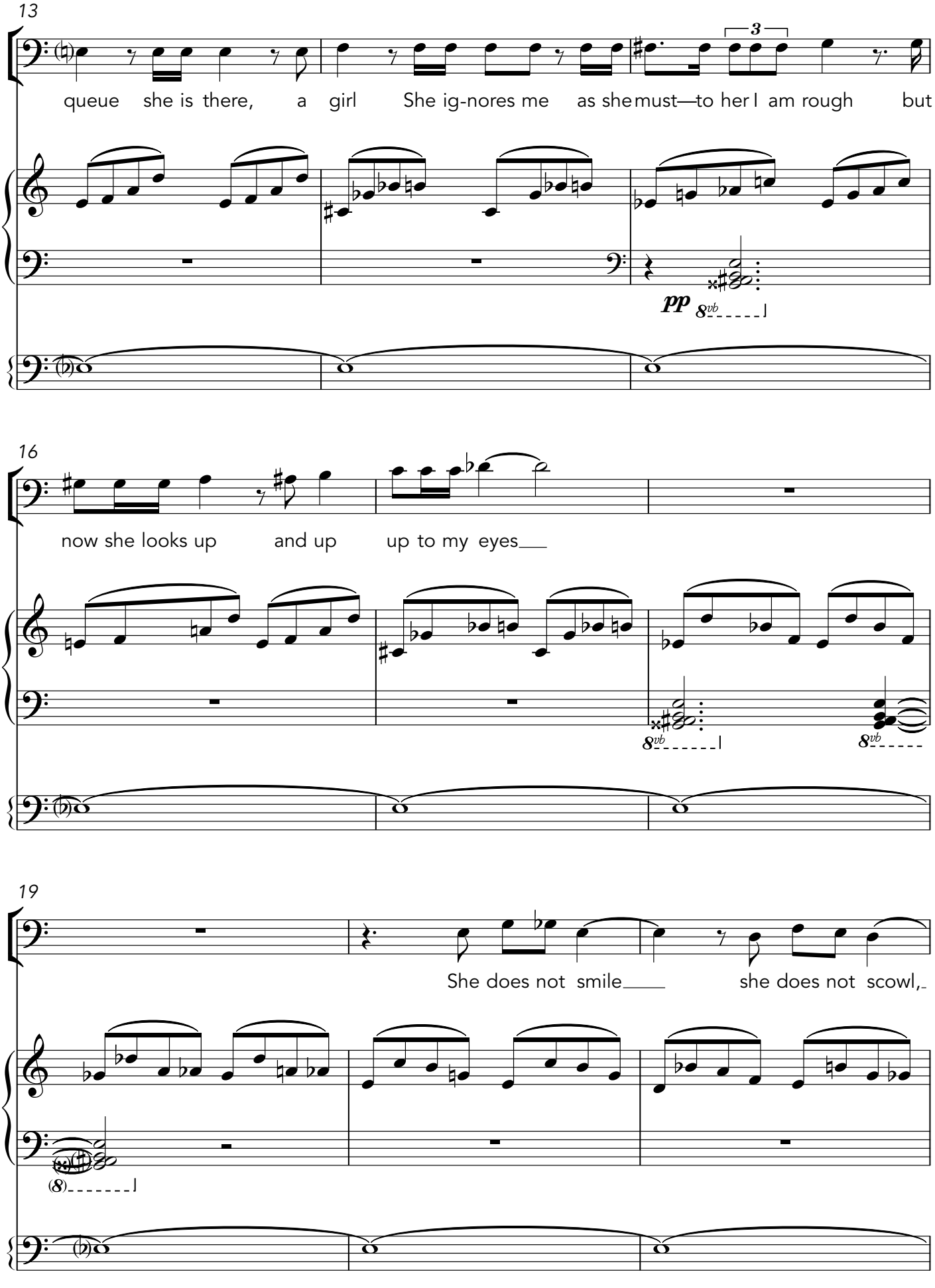

Ped. e una corda

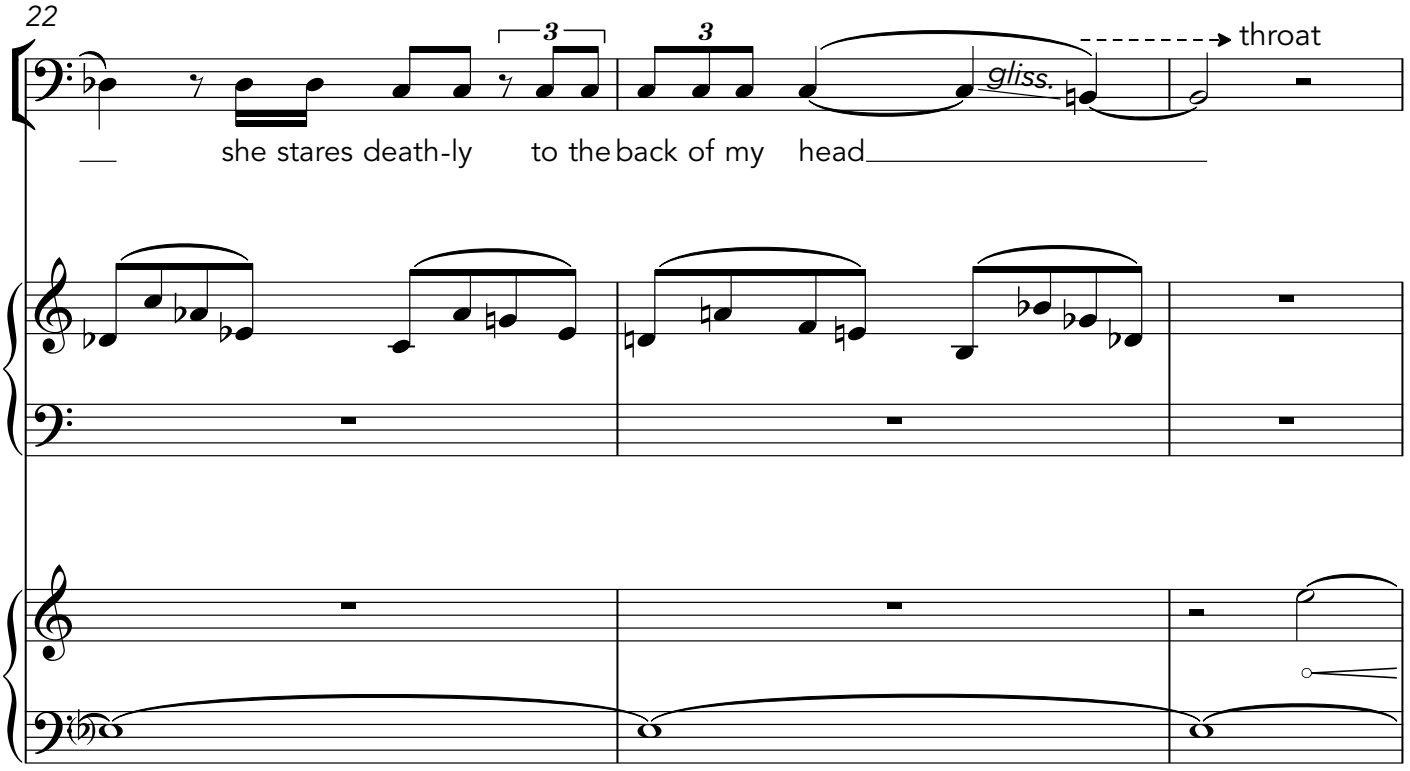

mf
On the high - way when I'm on the right side of the range
3
I'll be I'll be al-right

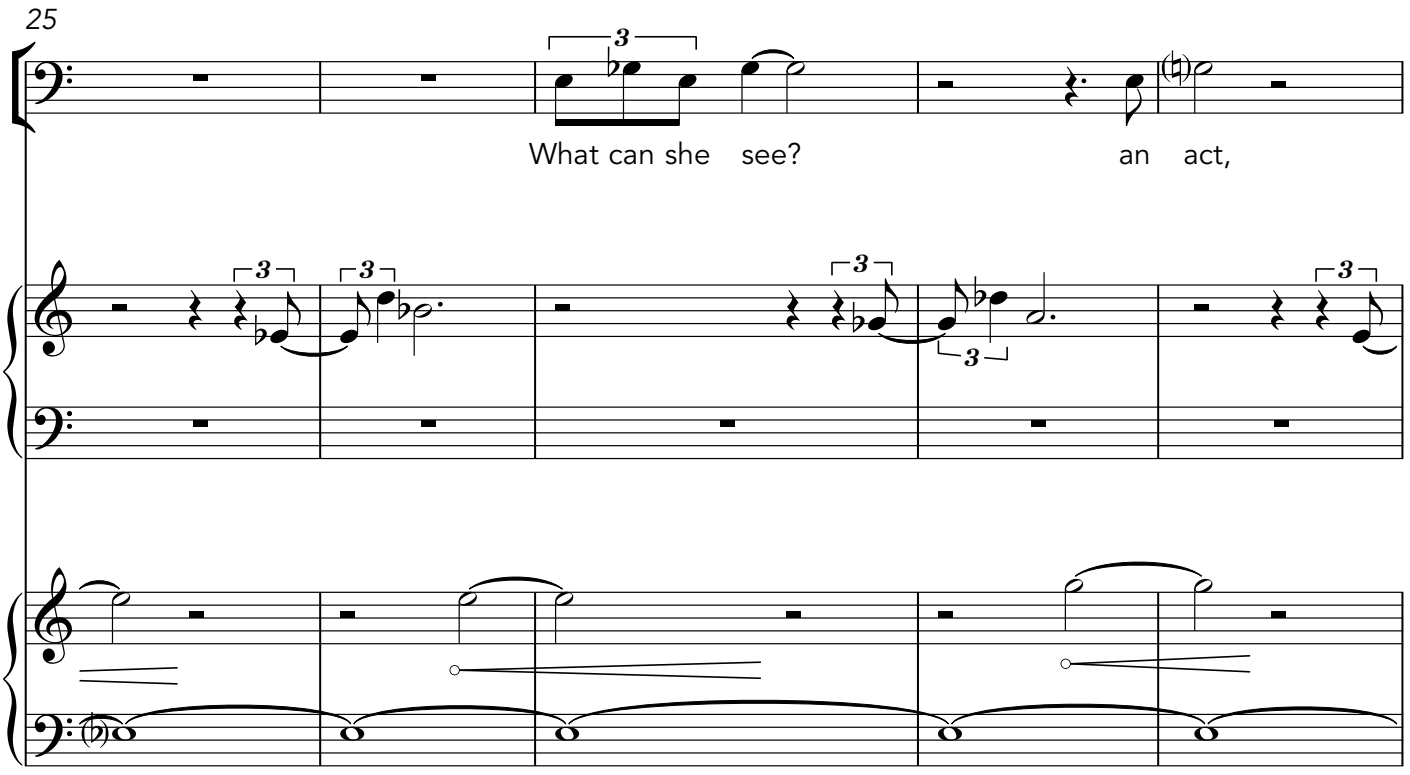
# DISTRUST

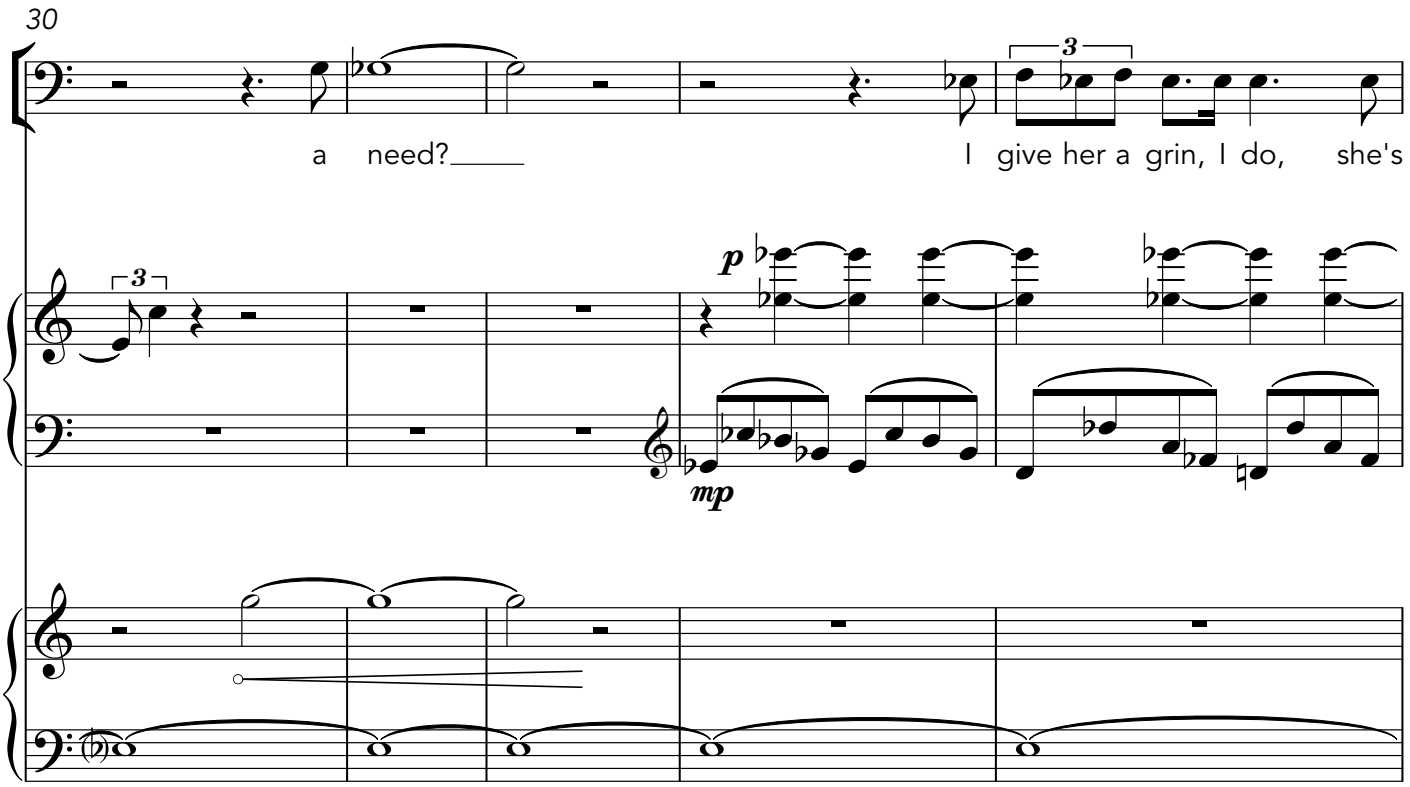

Slowly, rubato
Paper is placed across all strings on the piano above the G below middle C
p
Ped.
4
Singer prepare to bow

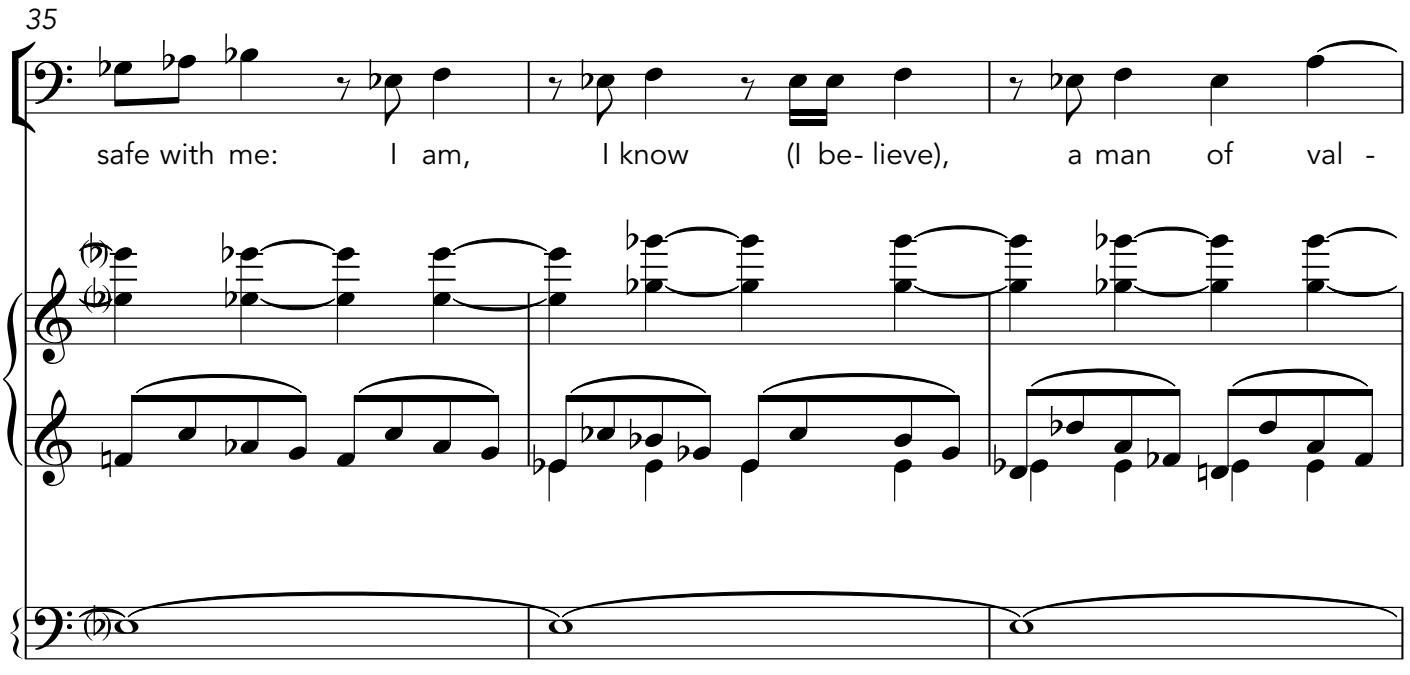

7
hold ped.
Bowed piano strings *
Pianist
Singer
the soloist is bowing. bowing and bowing. there's an unusual, surreal, dreamlike quality to the acting.
* imagined as piano strings bowed by looping rosined horsehair below the string in advance of the performance and pulling it back and forth with the sustain pedal held down, but other materials or performing approaches may be used to achieve the best sound on your instrument.
10
poco più mosso
breathy, nervous
mp
At the din-er in the
p
Una corda, held.
Ped. , held.

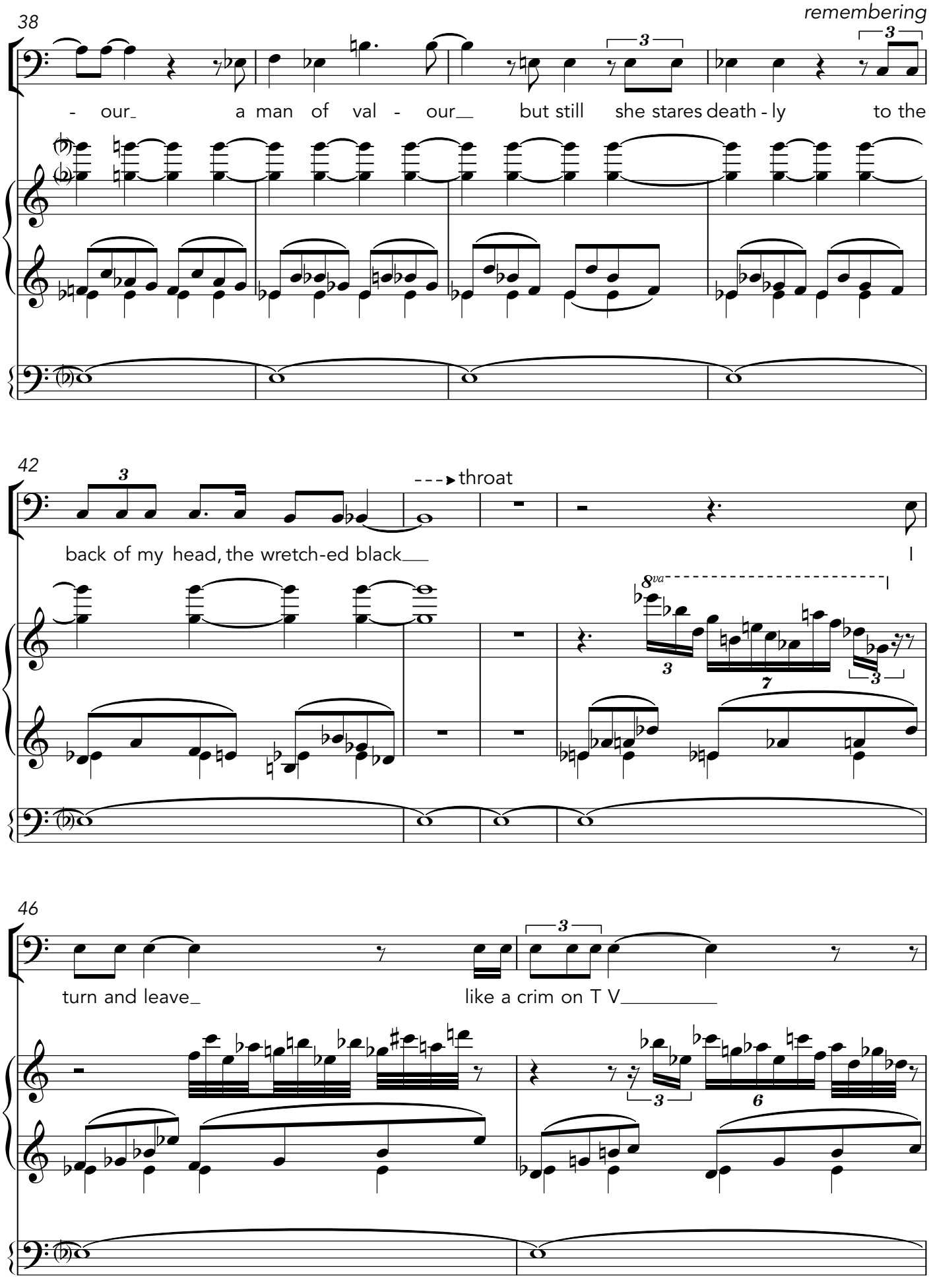

13
queue she is there, a girl She ig-nores me as she must—to her I am rough but
pp
16
now she looks up and up up to my eyes
19
She does not smile she does not scowl,

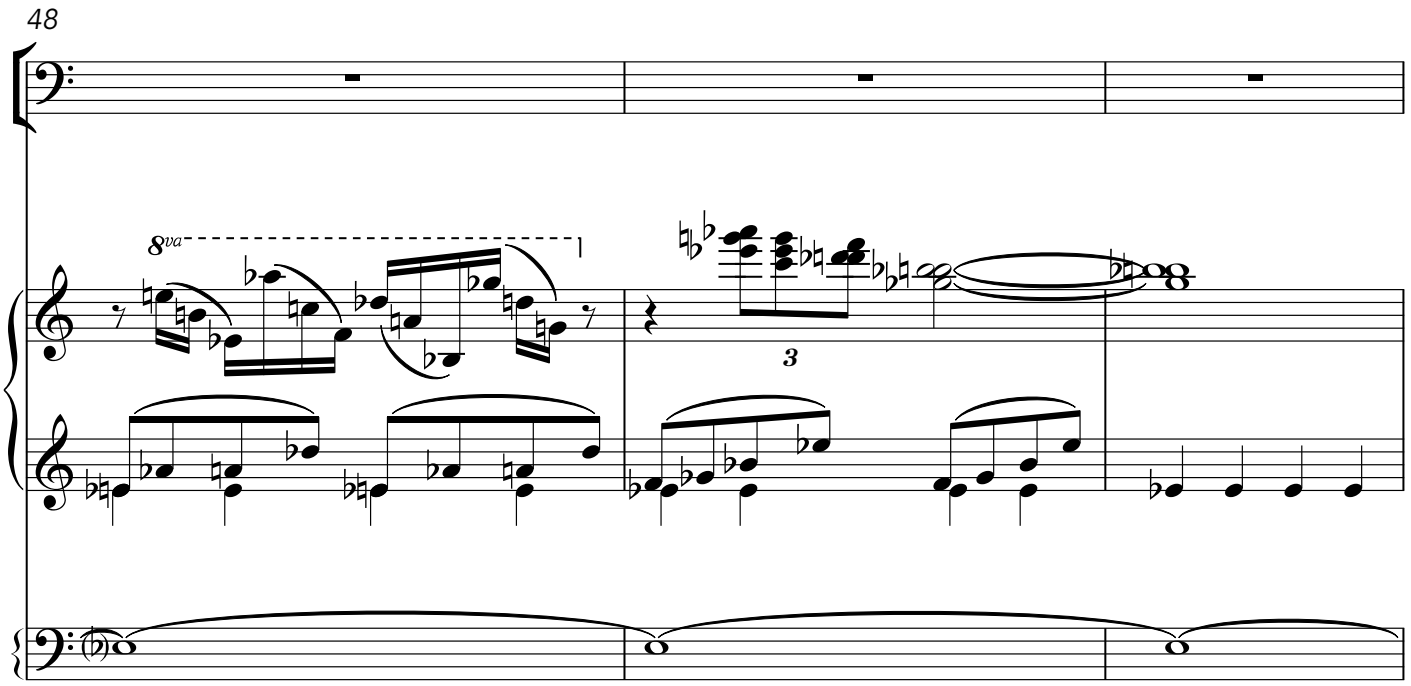

22
throat
gliss.
she stares death-ly to the back of my head

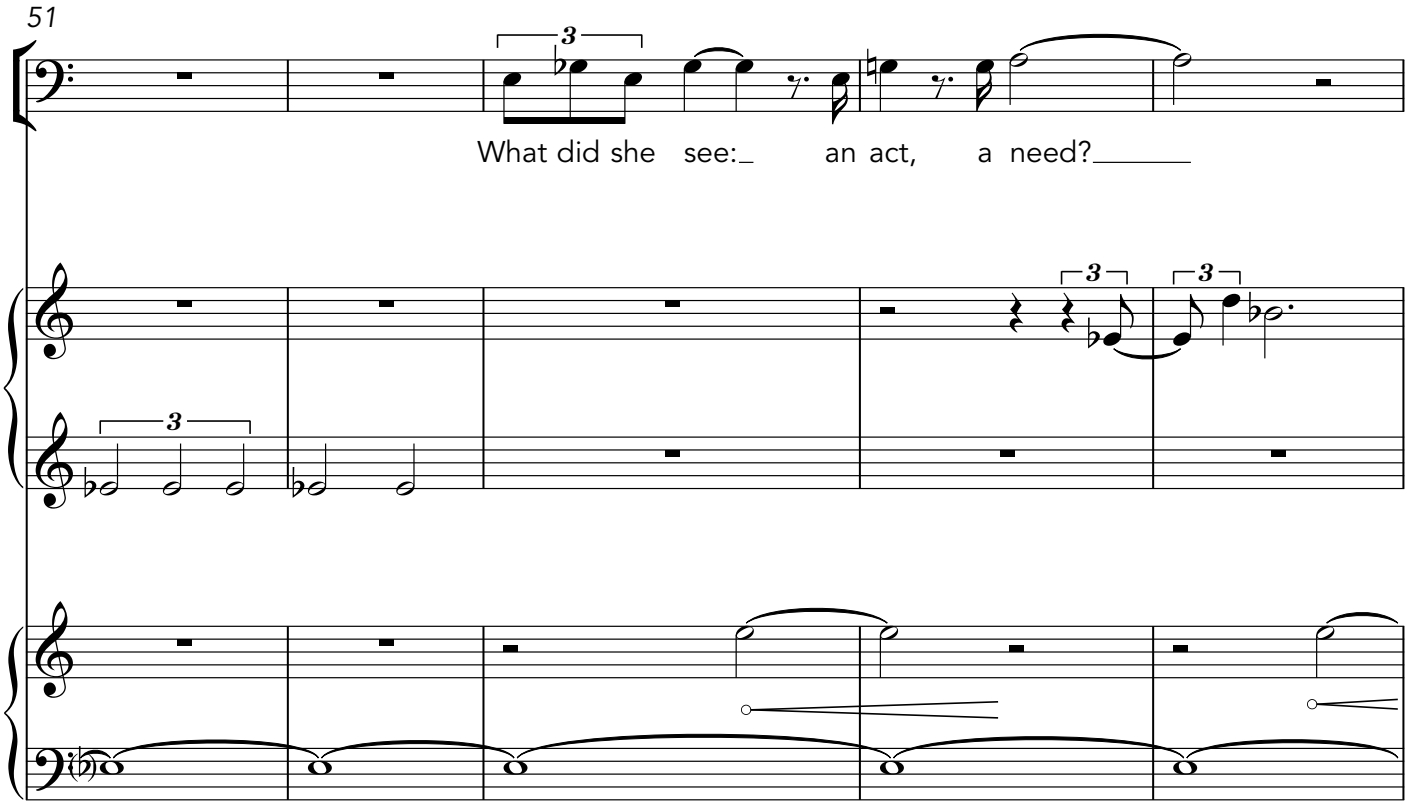

25
What can she see?
an act,

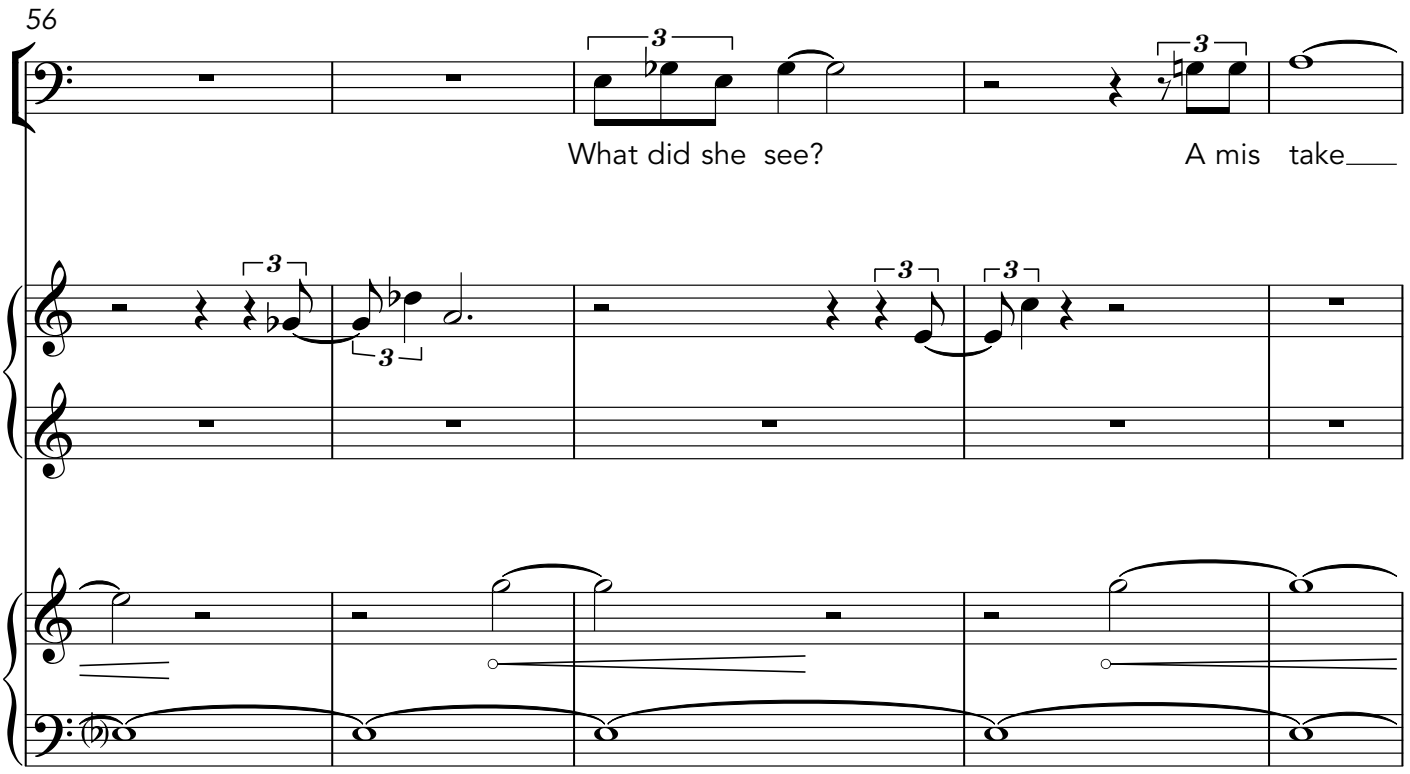

30
a need?
I give her a grin, I do, she's
3
3
p
mp

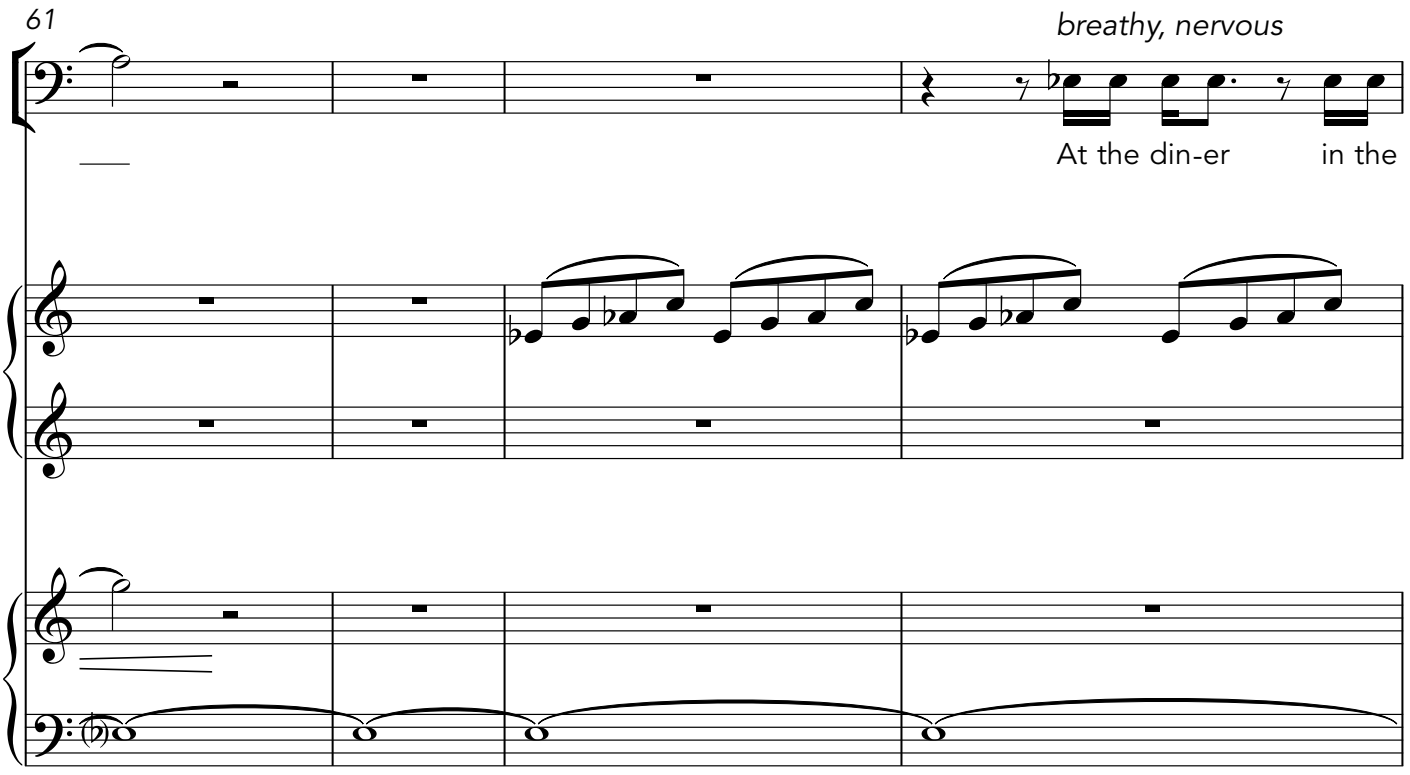

35
safe with me: I am, I know (I be- lieve), a man of val -

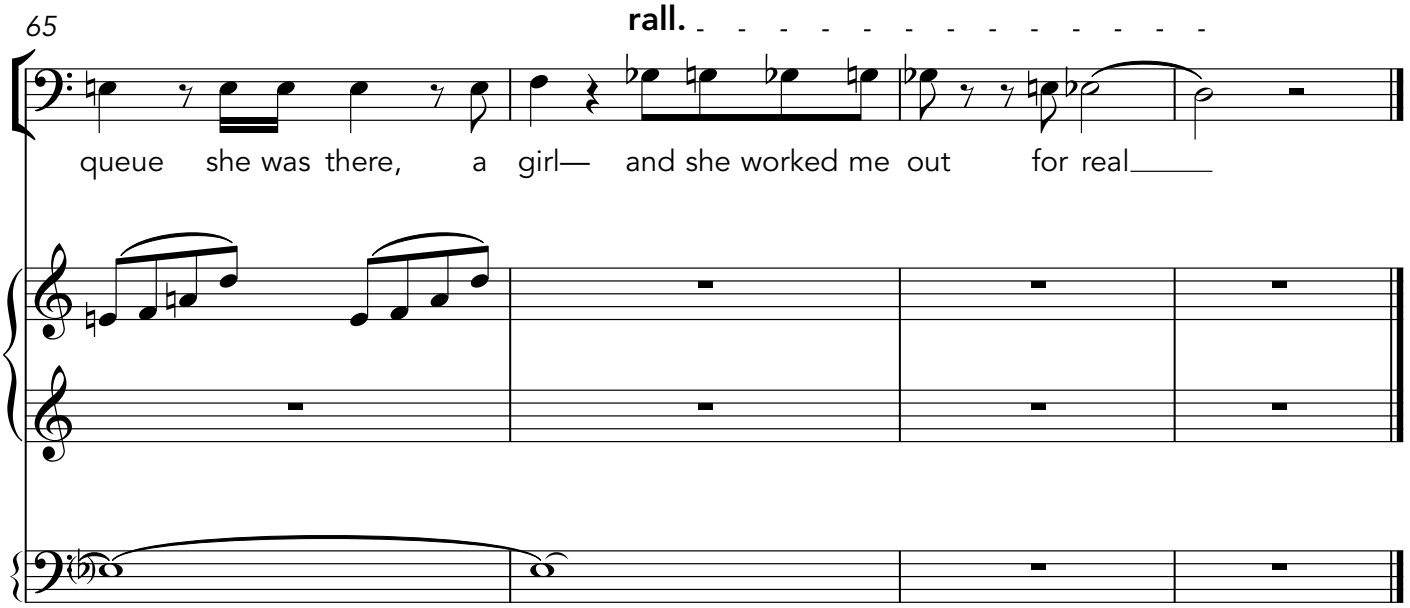

remembering
38
- our_ a man of val - our__ but still she stares death - ly to the
42
throat
back of my head, the wretch-ed black___ I
8va
46
turn and leave_ like a crim on T V_____


48
8va
3


51
3
What did she see: an act, a need?
3
3
3

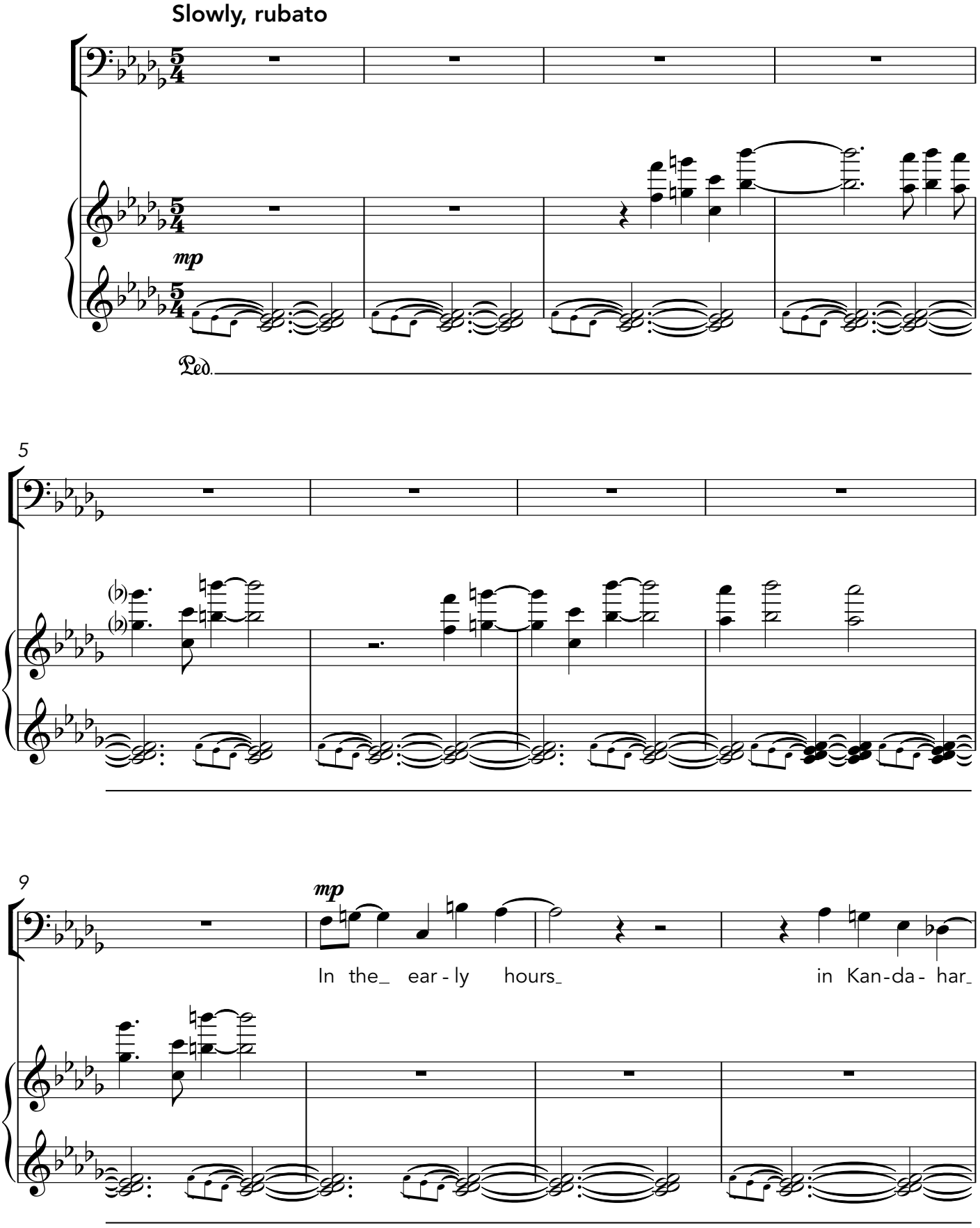

56
What did she see?
A mis take

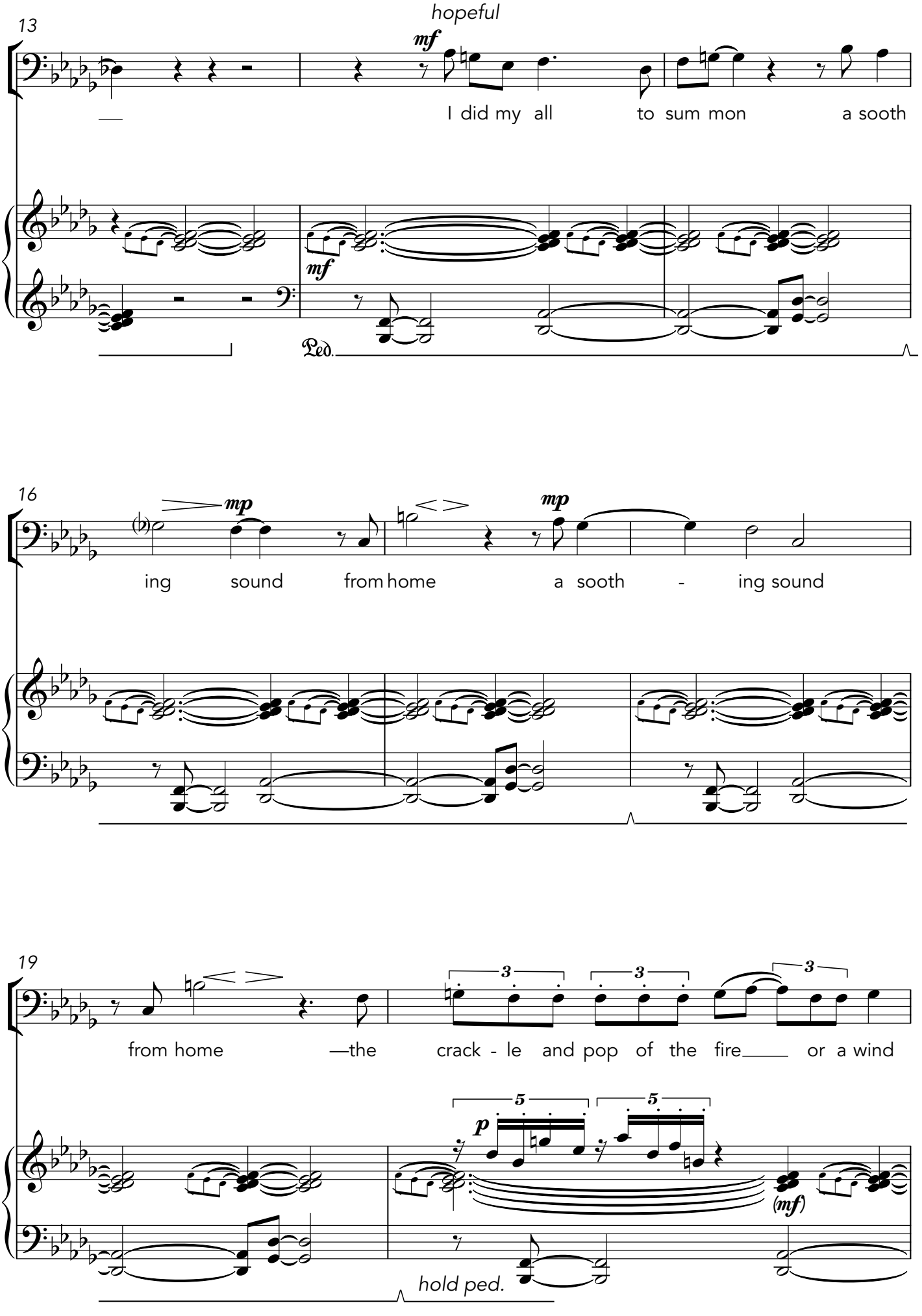

61
breathy, nervous
At the din-er in the

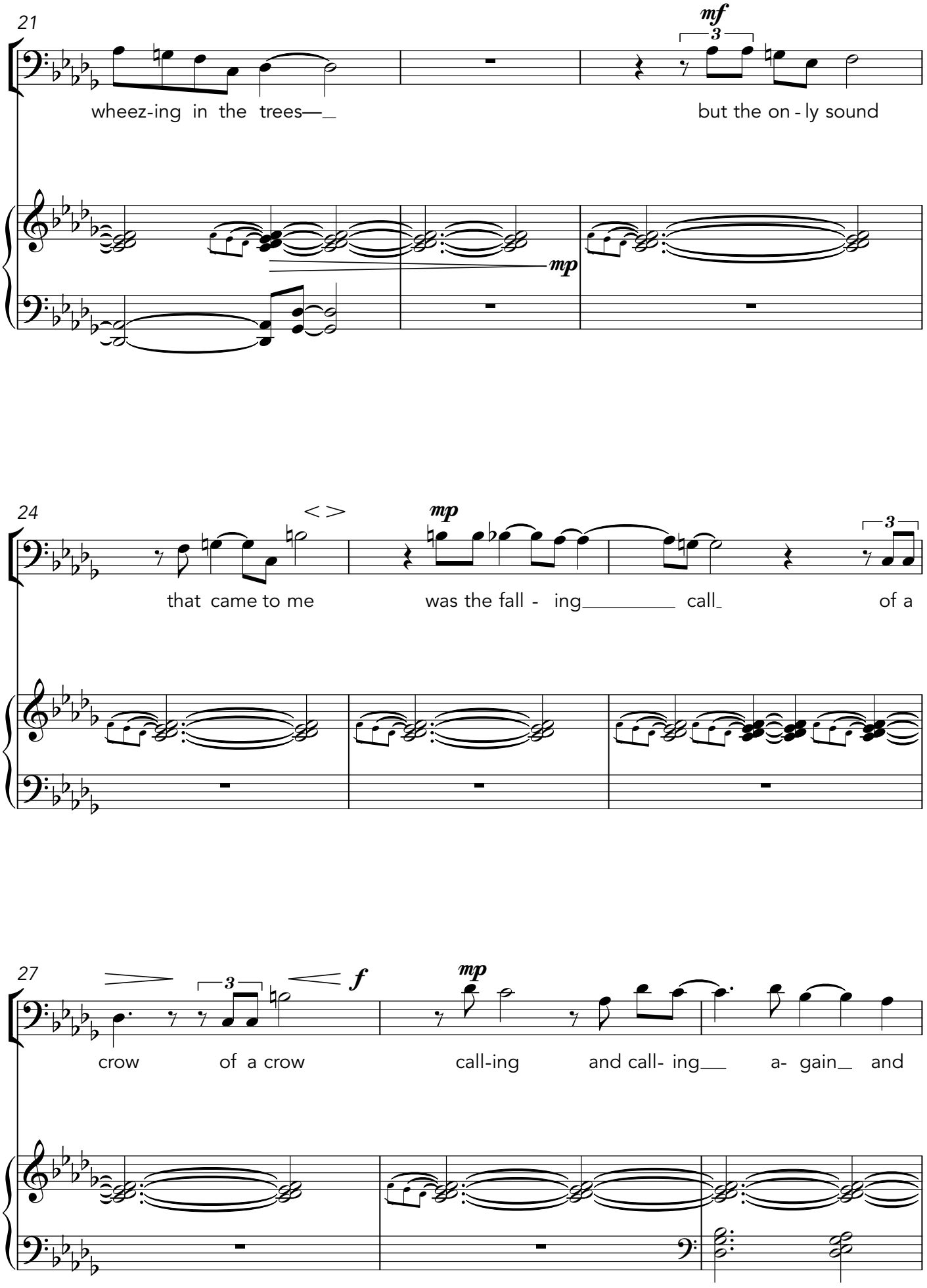


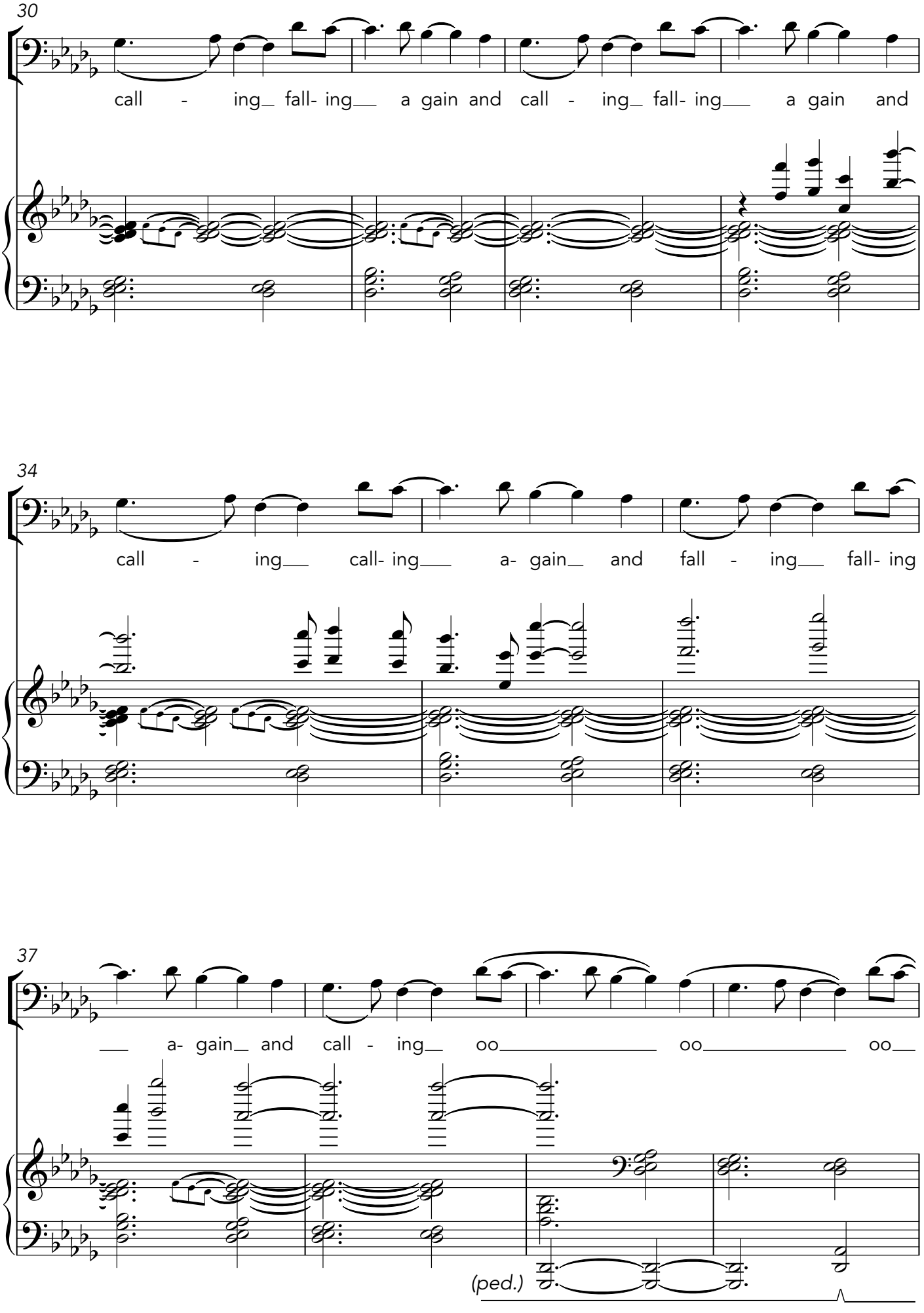

Remove paper from piano.

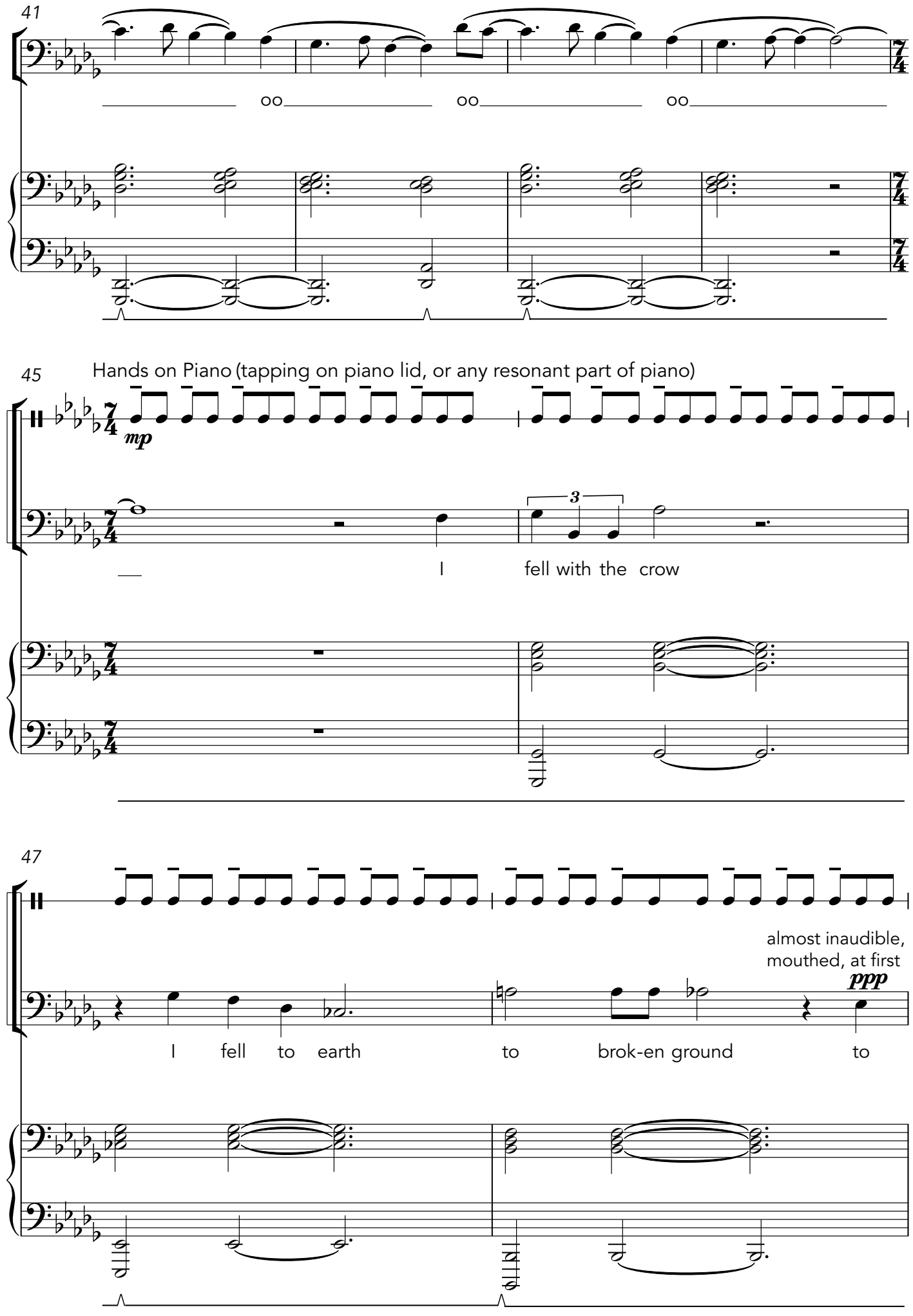
# IN KANDAHAR

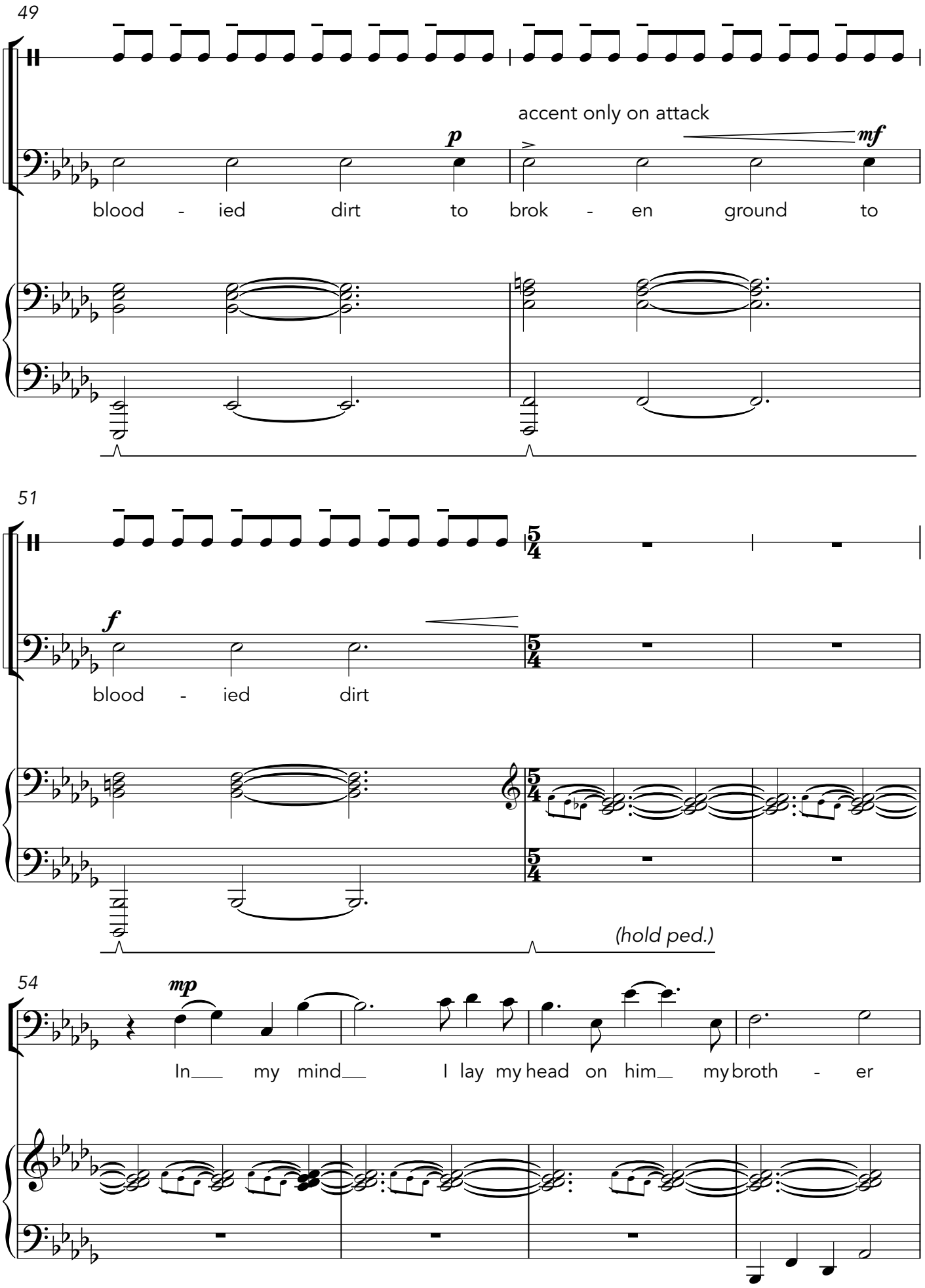


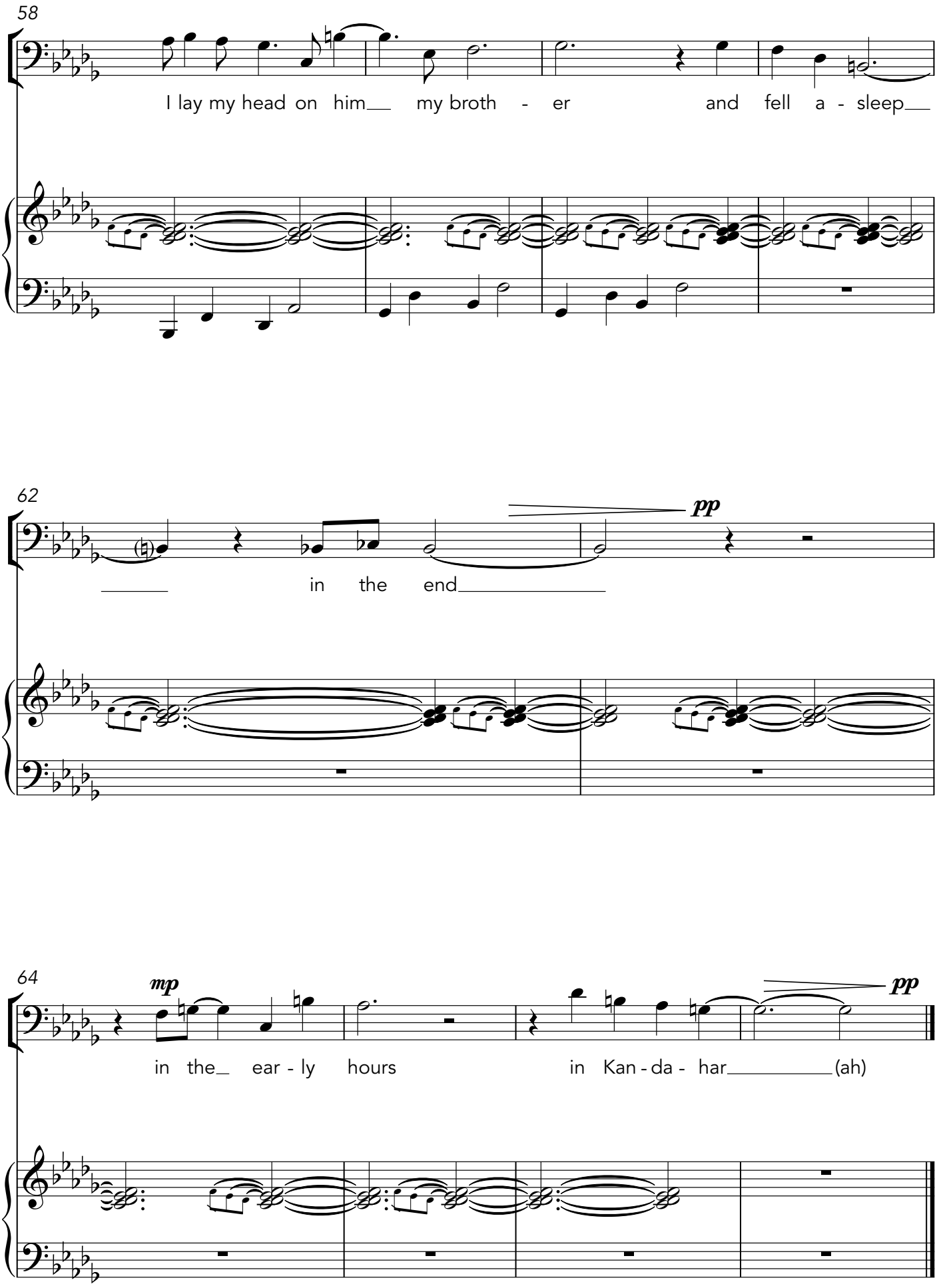

hopeful
13
mf
I did my all to sum mon a sooth
mf
Ped.
16
mp
mp
ing sound from home a sooth - ing sound
19
from home —the crack - le and pop of the fire or a wind
3
3
3
5
5
p
(mf)
hold ped.


21
mf
3
wheez-ing in the trees—_
but the on - ly sound
mp
24
< >
mp
3
that came to me
was the fall - ing_____ call_
of a
27
3
f
mp
crow
of a crow
call-ing
and call- ing___
a- gain_
and


30
call - ing_ fall- ing__ a gain and call - ing_ fall- ing__ a gain and
34
call - ing__ call- ing__ a- gain_ and fall - ing__ fall- ing
37
__ a- gain_ and call - ing_ oo_____ oo_____ oo__
(ped.)

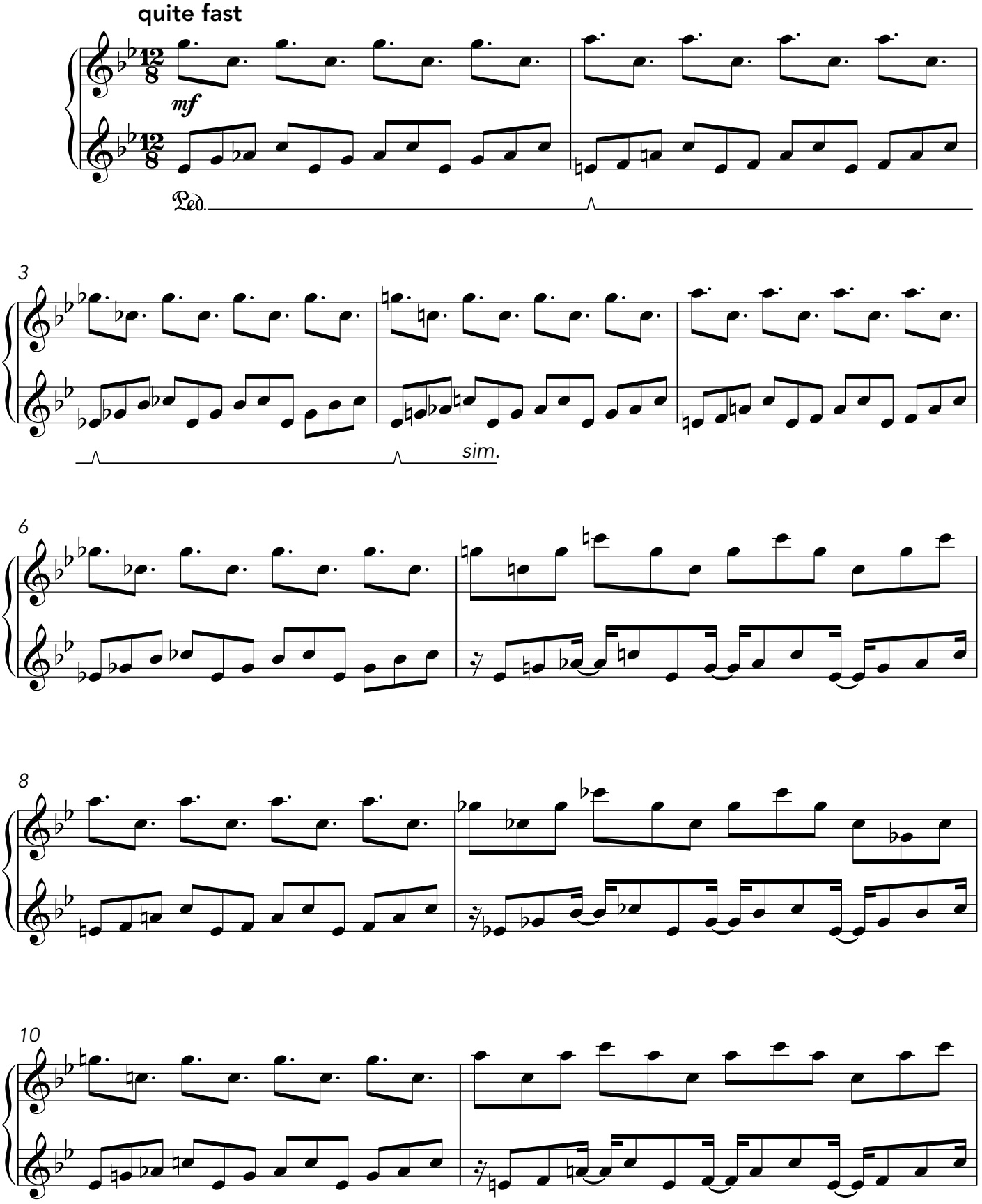

41
45
Hands on Piano (tapping on piano lid, or any resonant part of piano)
mp
3
I fell with the crow
47
almost inaudible,
mouthed, at first
ppp
I fell to earth to brok-en ground to

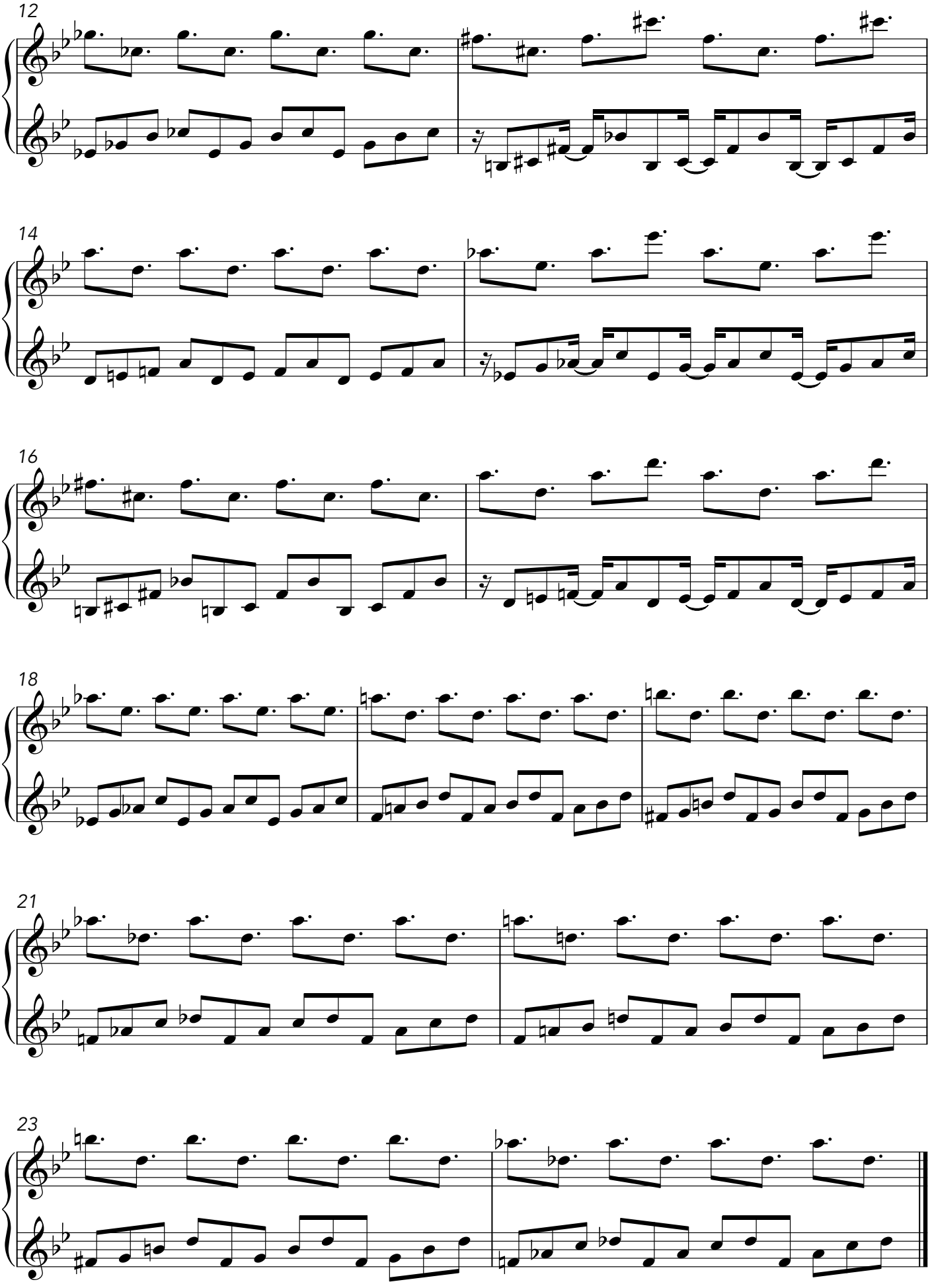

49
accent only on attack
p
mf
blood - ied dirt to brok - en ground to
51
5/4
f
blood - ied dirt
(hold ped.)
54
mp
In my mind I lay my head on him my broth - er


58
I lay my head on him my broth - er and fell a - sleep
62
pp
in the end
64
mp
pp
in the ear - ly hours in Kan - da - har (ah)

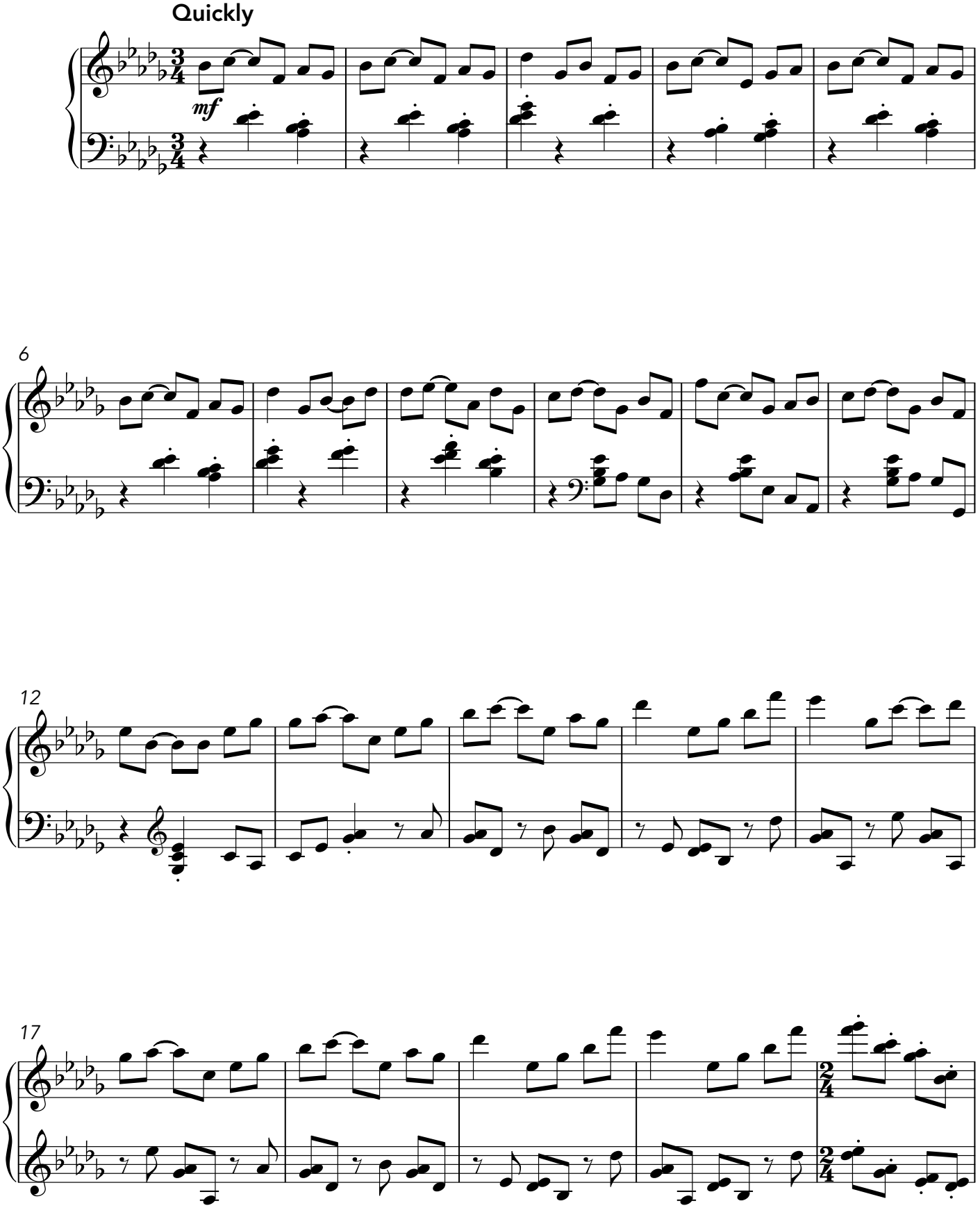
# lacuna1

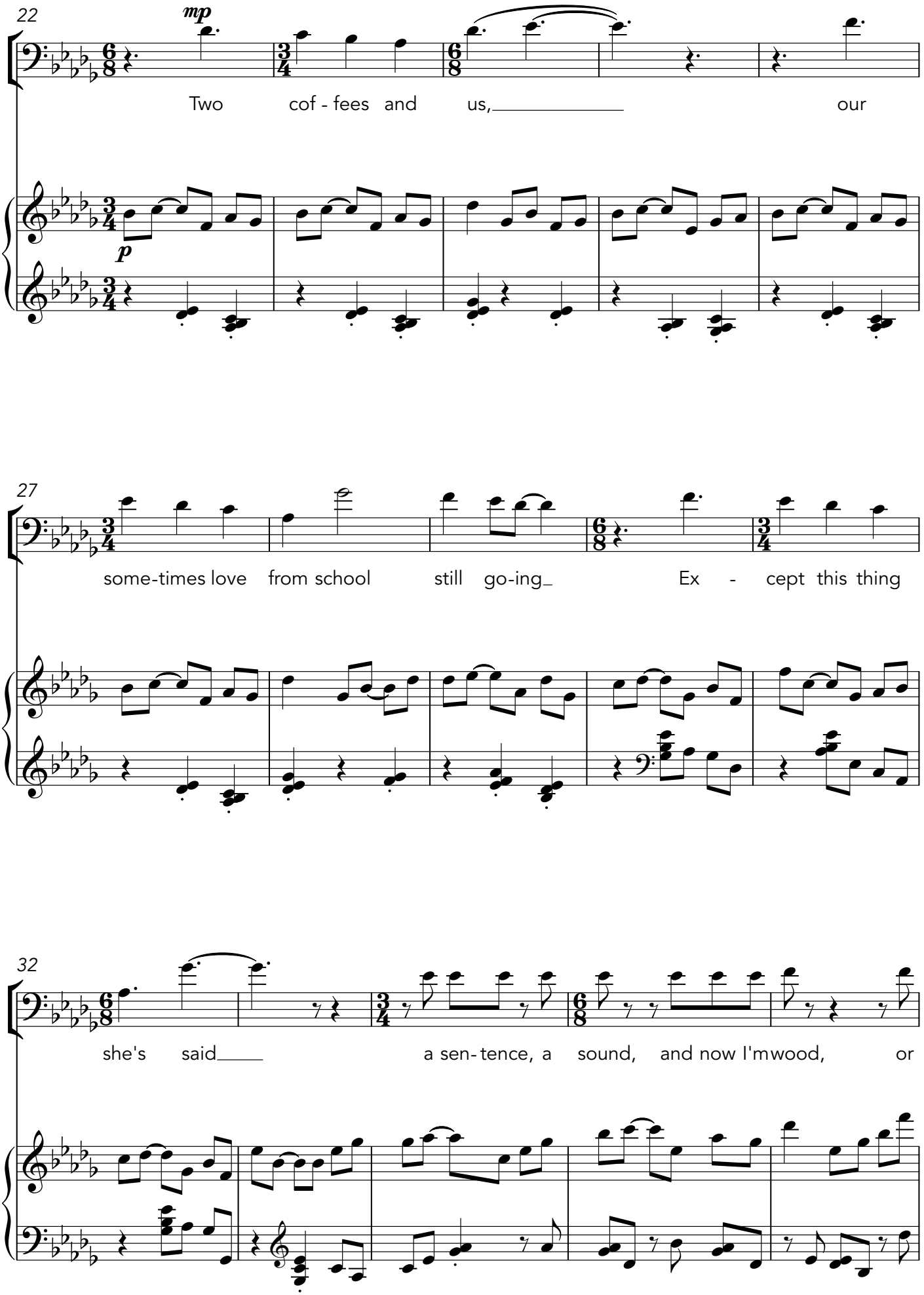
(entr'acte)

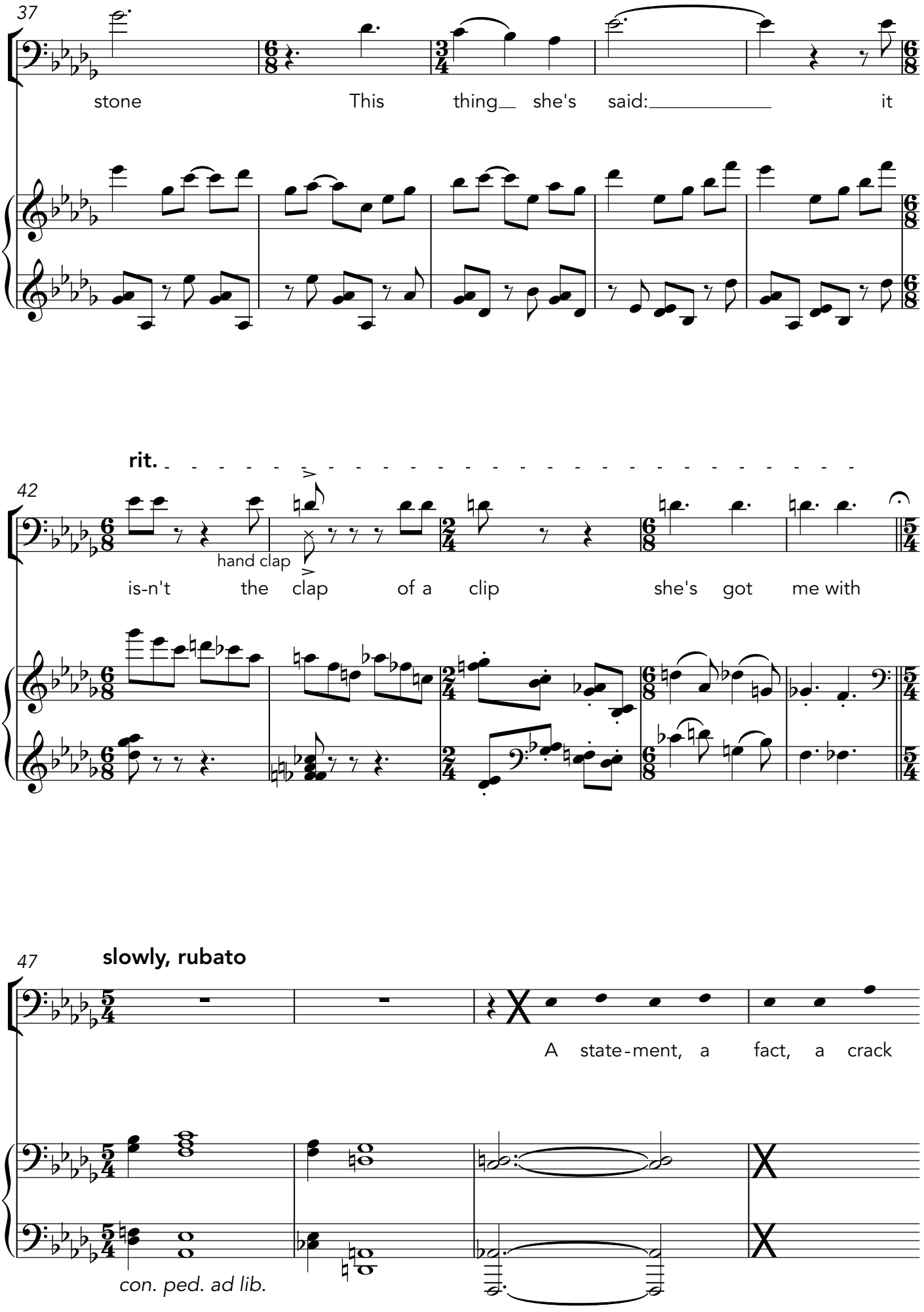


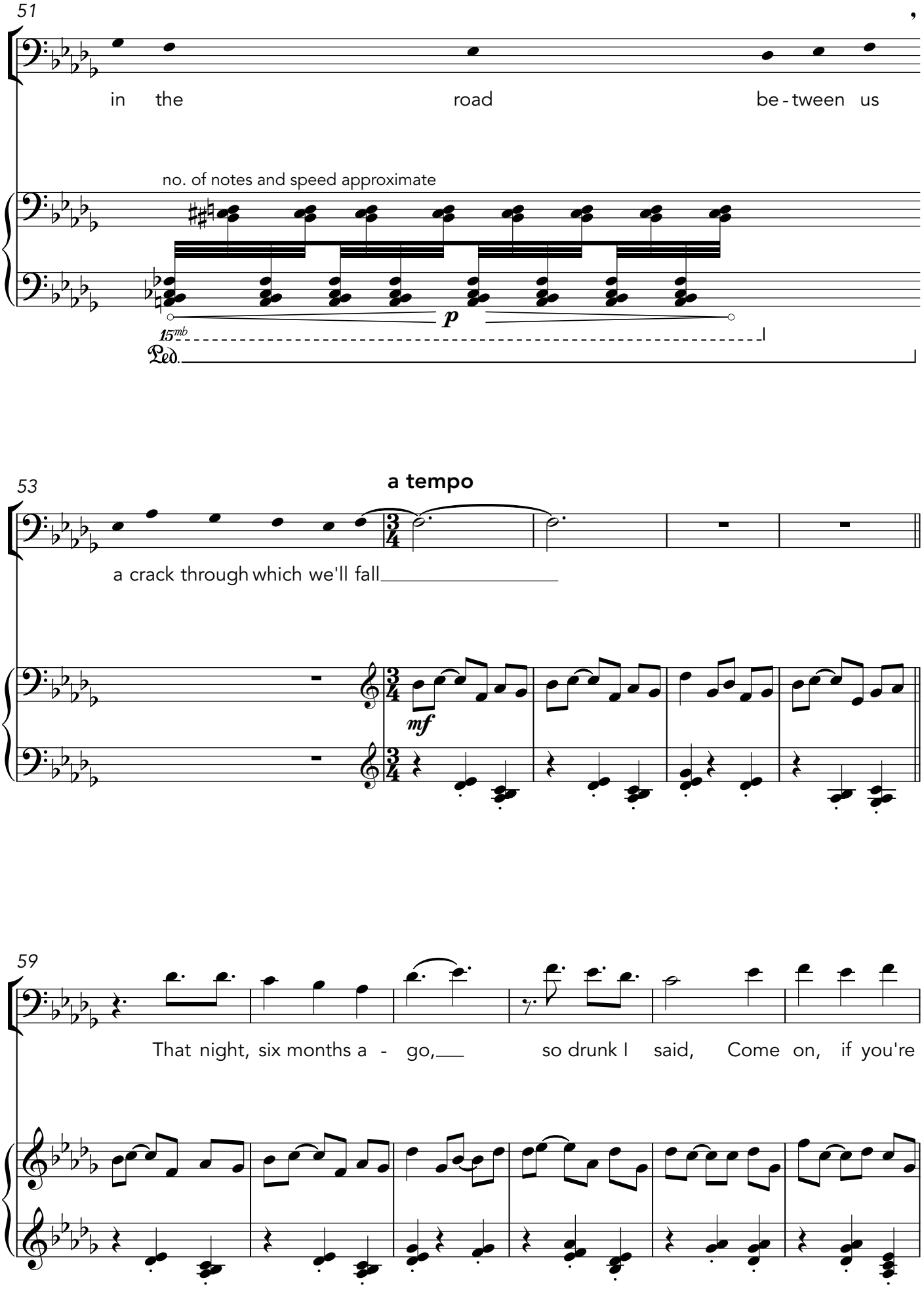

12
14
16
18
21
23

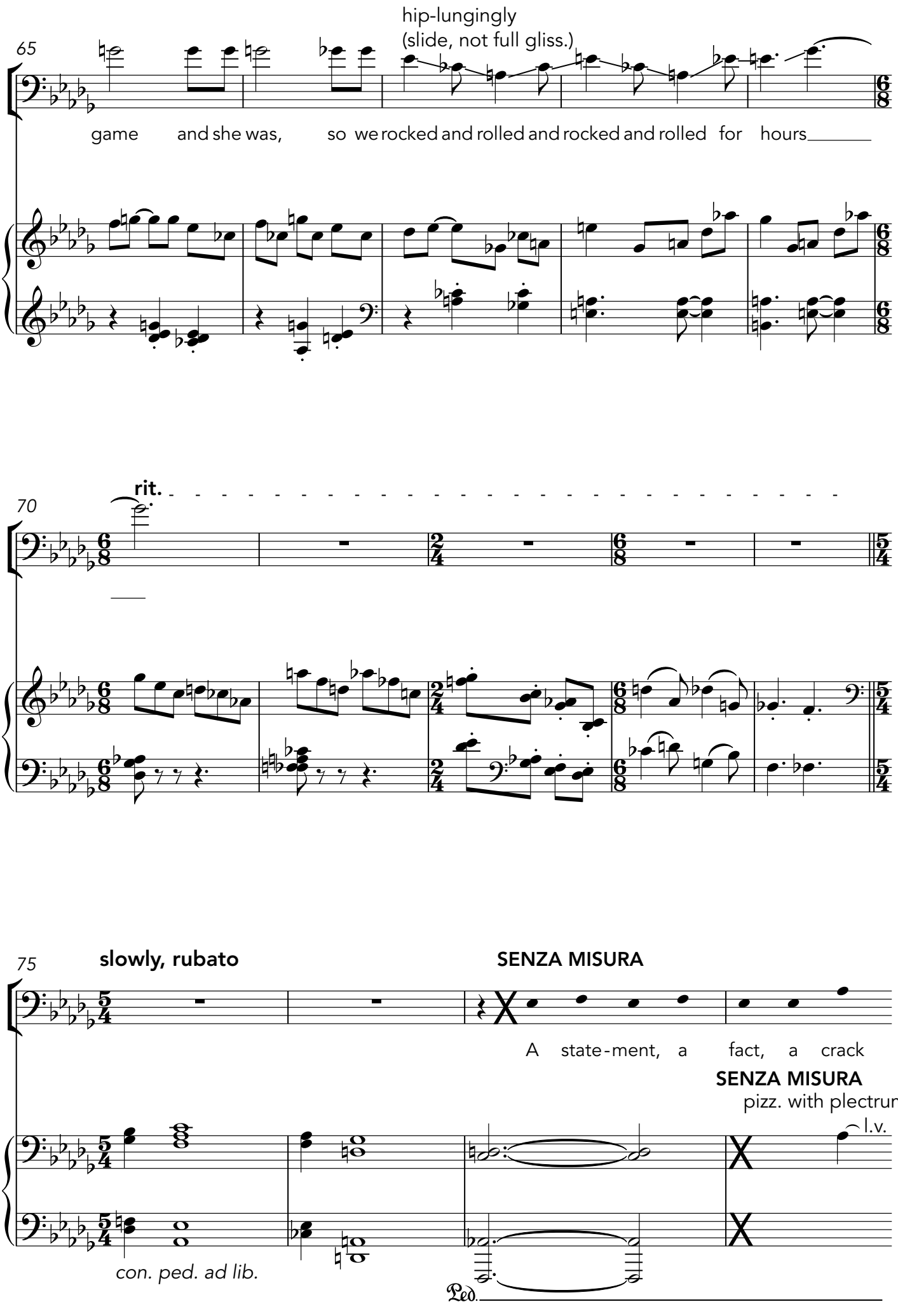
# HEADLONG

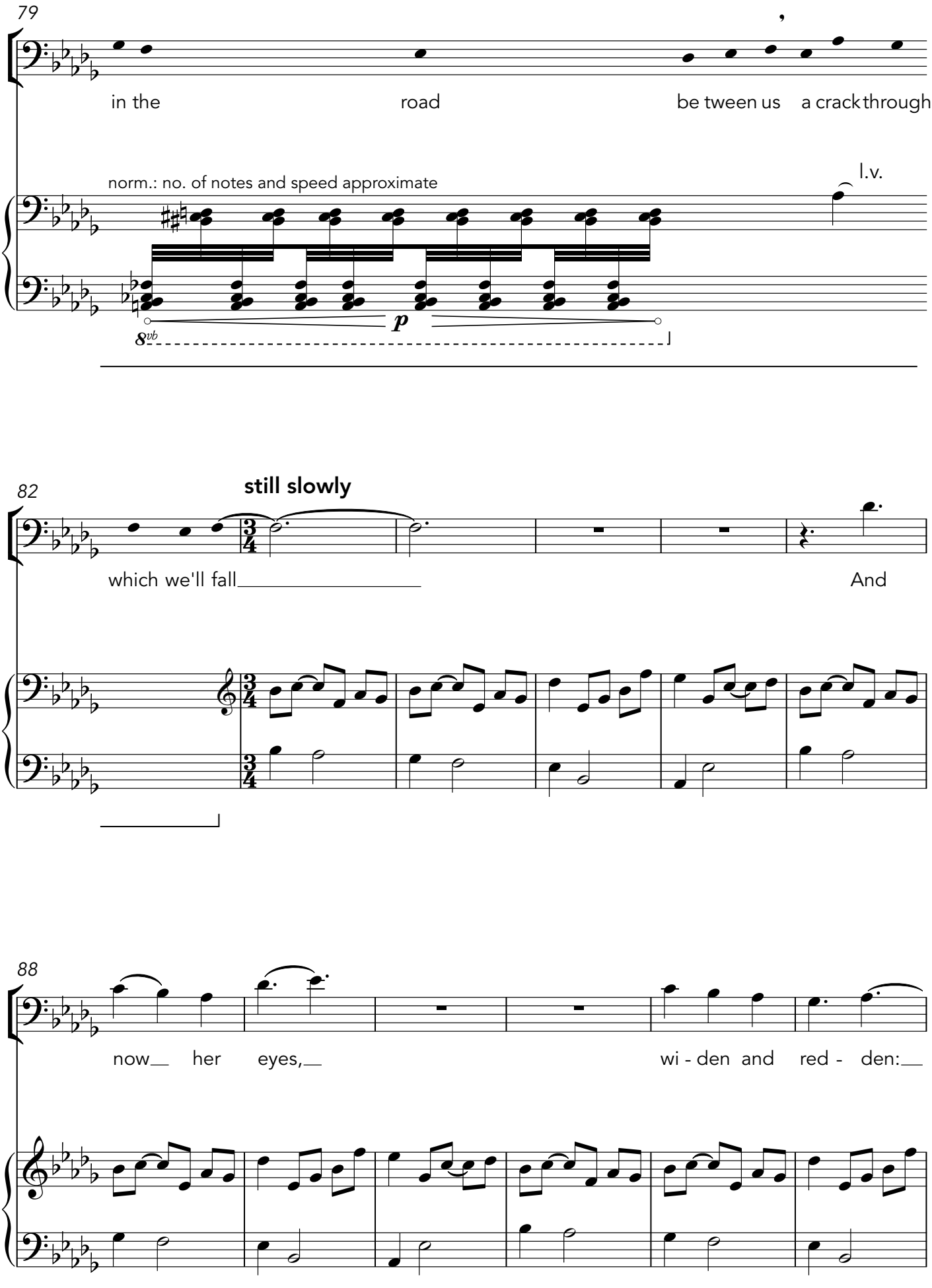


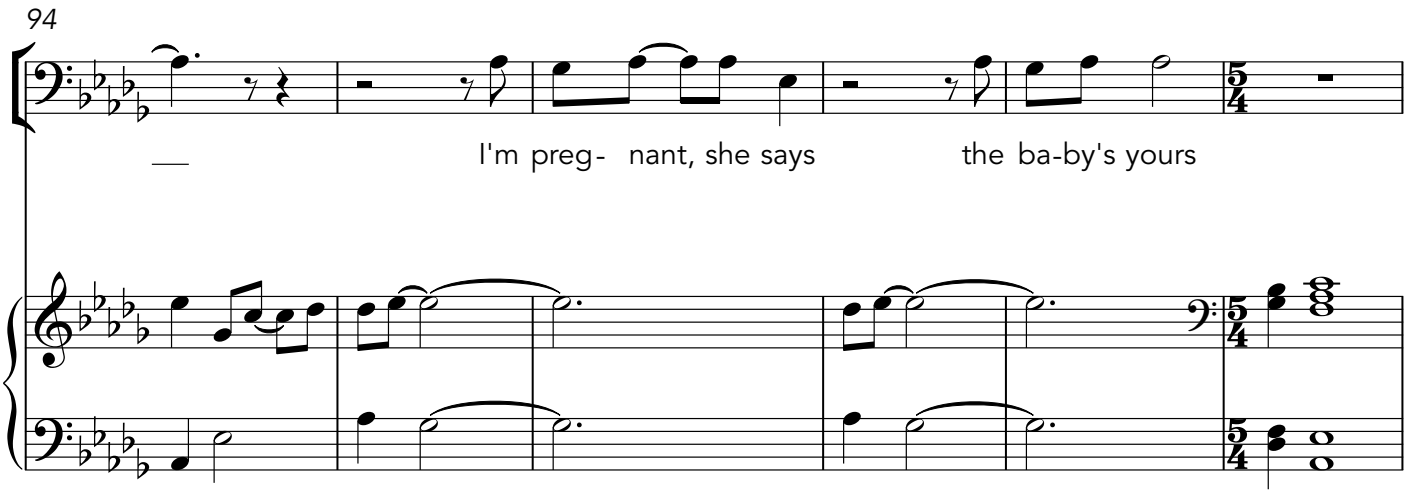

22
mp
Two cof - fees and us, our
p
27
some-times love from school still go-ing Ex - cept this thing
32
she's said a sen-tence, a sound, and now I'm wood, or

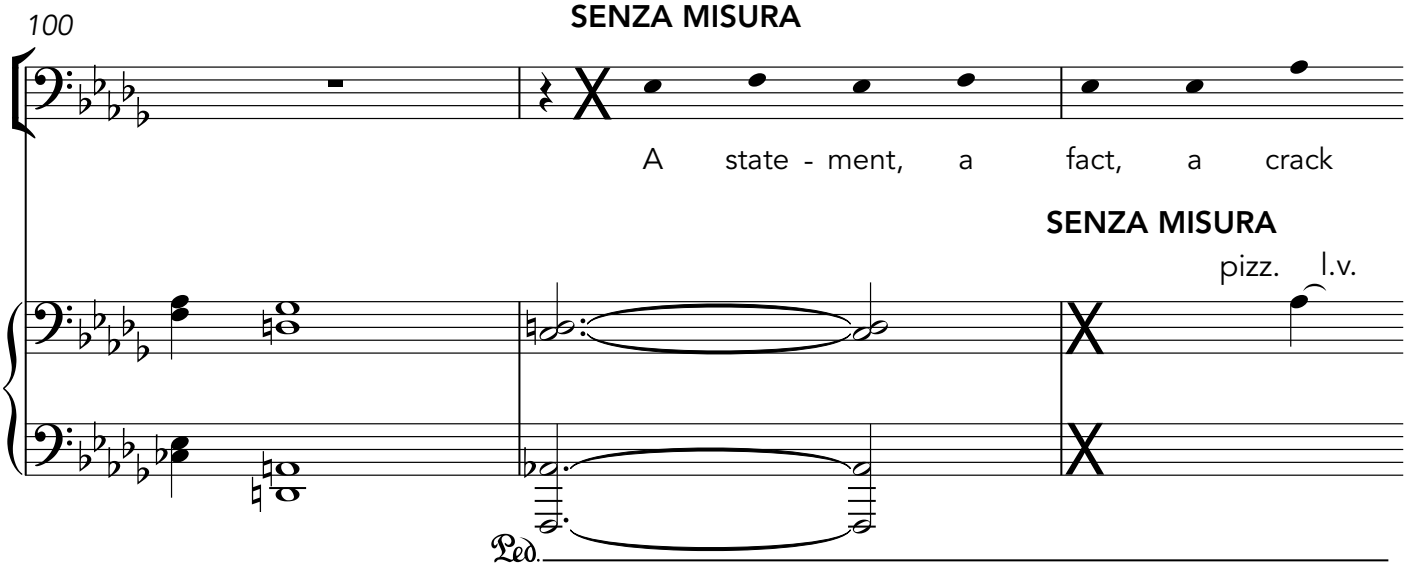

37
stone
This thing she's said: it
rit.
42
hand clap
is-n't the clap of a clip she's got me with
47
slowly, rubato
A state-ment, a fact, a crack
con. ped. ad lib.

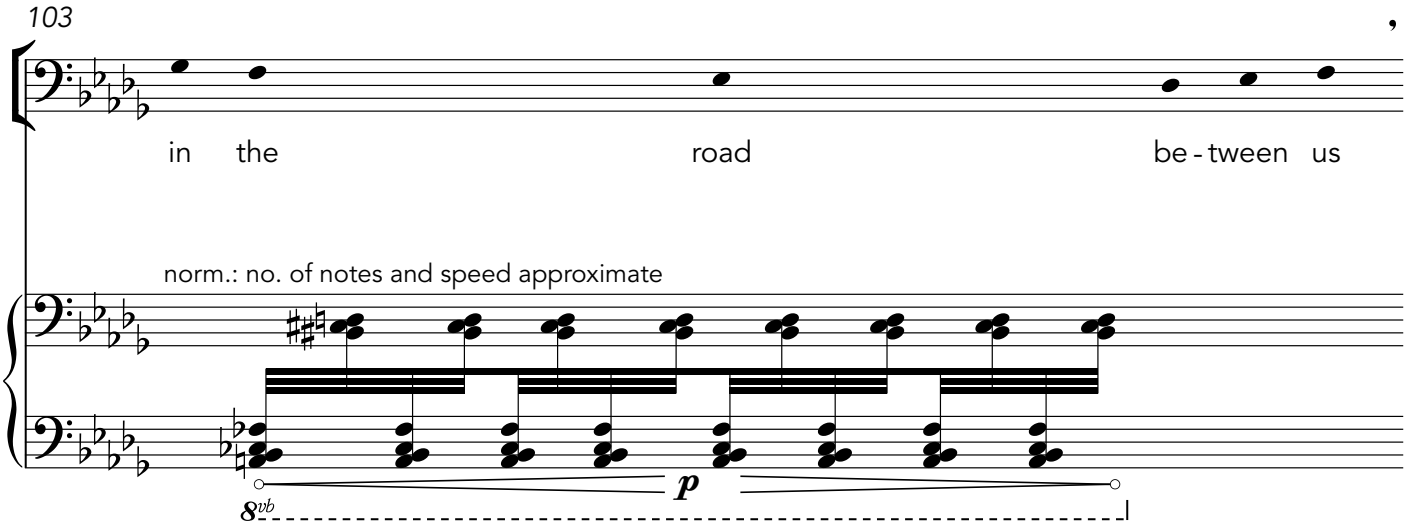

51
in the road be - tween us
no. of notes and speed approximate
p
15mb
Ped.
53
a tempo
a crack through which we'll fall
mf
59
That night, six months a - go, so drunk I said, Come on, if you're

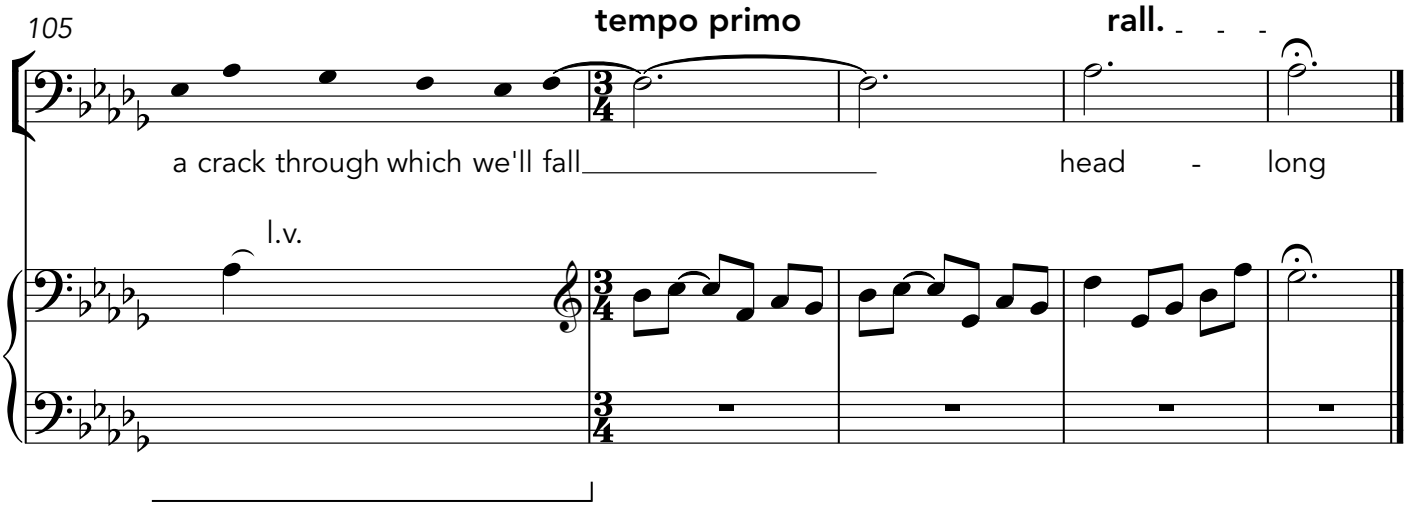

hip-lungingly
(slide, not full gliss.)
65
game and she was, so we rocked and rolled and rocked and rolled for hours
rit.
70
slowly, rubato
75
SENZA MISURA
A state-ment, a fact, a crack
SENZA MISURA
pizz. with plectrum
l.v.
con. ped. ad lib.
Ped.


79
in the road be tween us a crack through
norm.: no. of notes and speed approximate
l.v.
p
8vb
82
still slowly
which we'll fall
And
88
now her eyes,
wi - den and red - den:

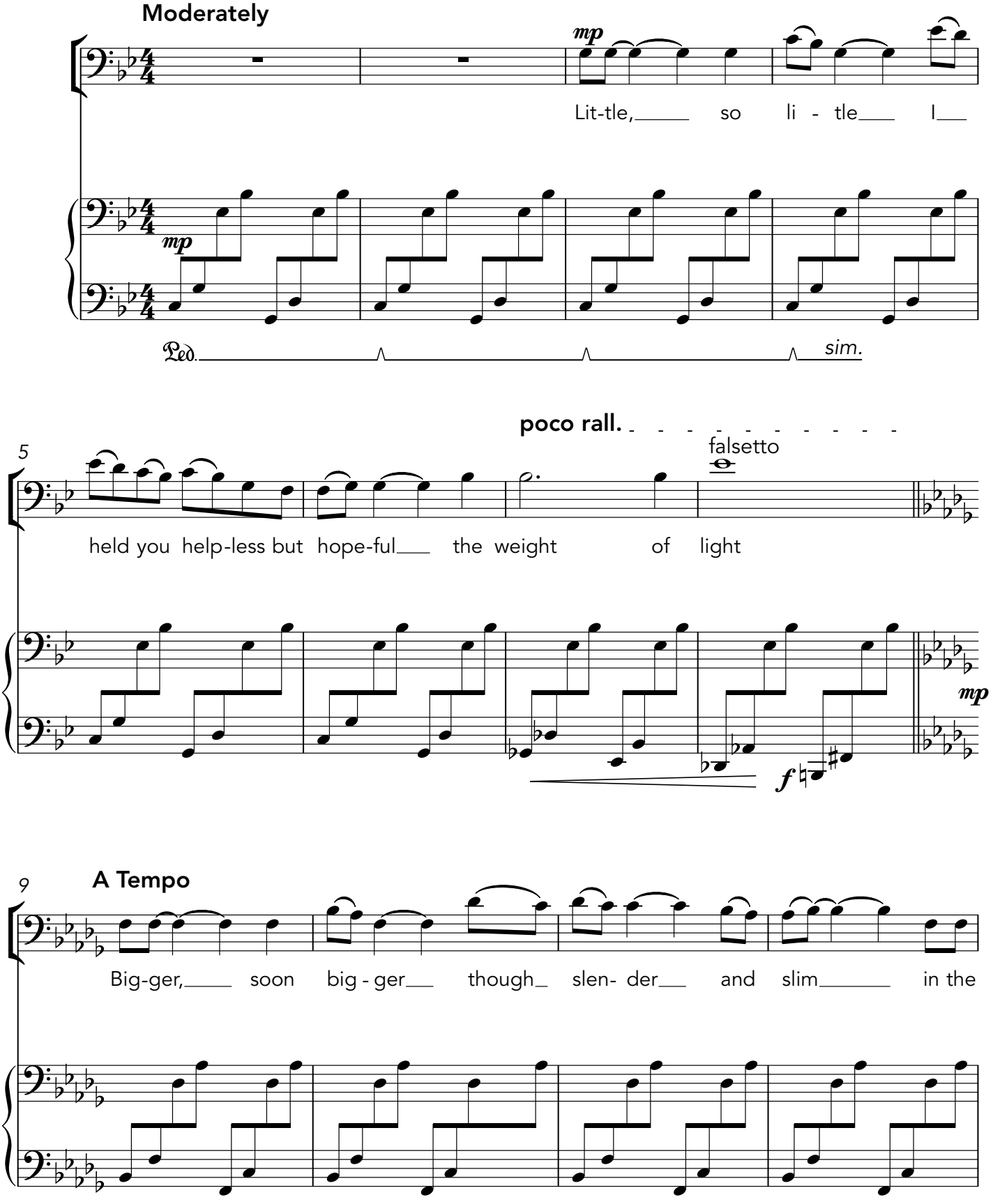

94
I'm preg- nant, she says the ba-by's yours
con. ped. ad lib.

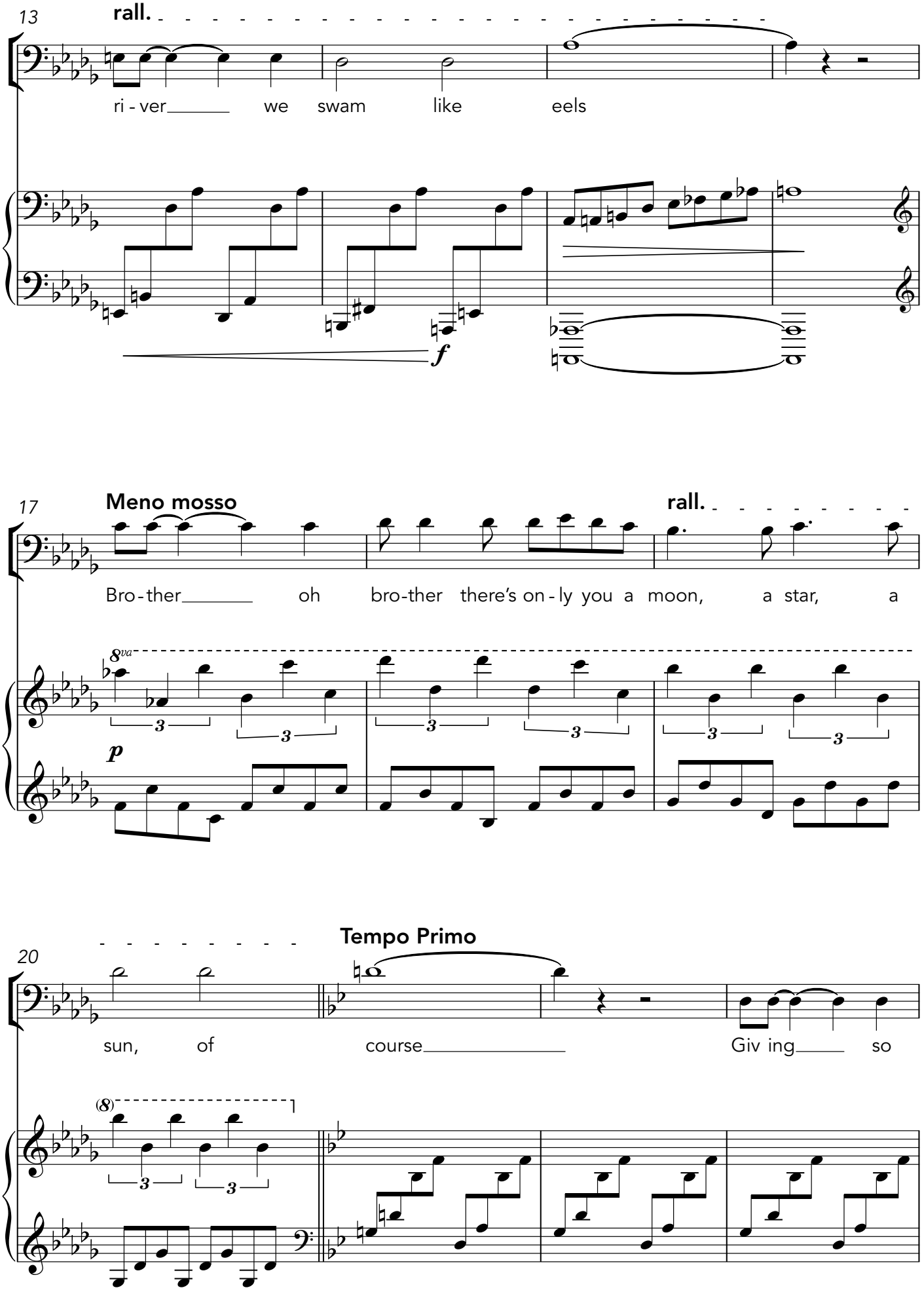

100
SENZA MISURA
A state - ment, a fact, a crack
SENZA MISURA
pizz. l.v.
Ped.

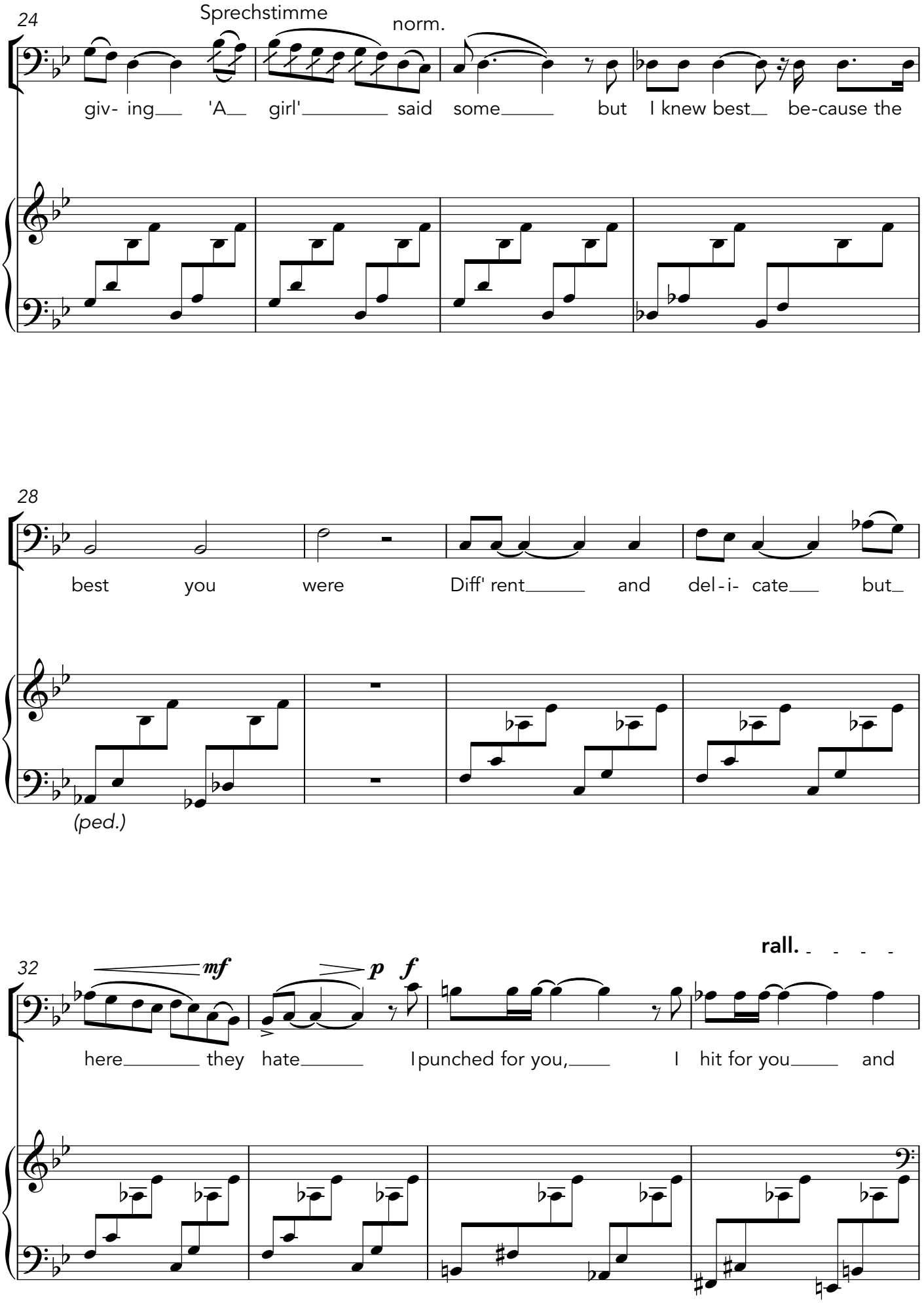

103
in the road be - tween us
norm.: no. of notes and speed approximate
p
8vb

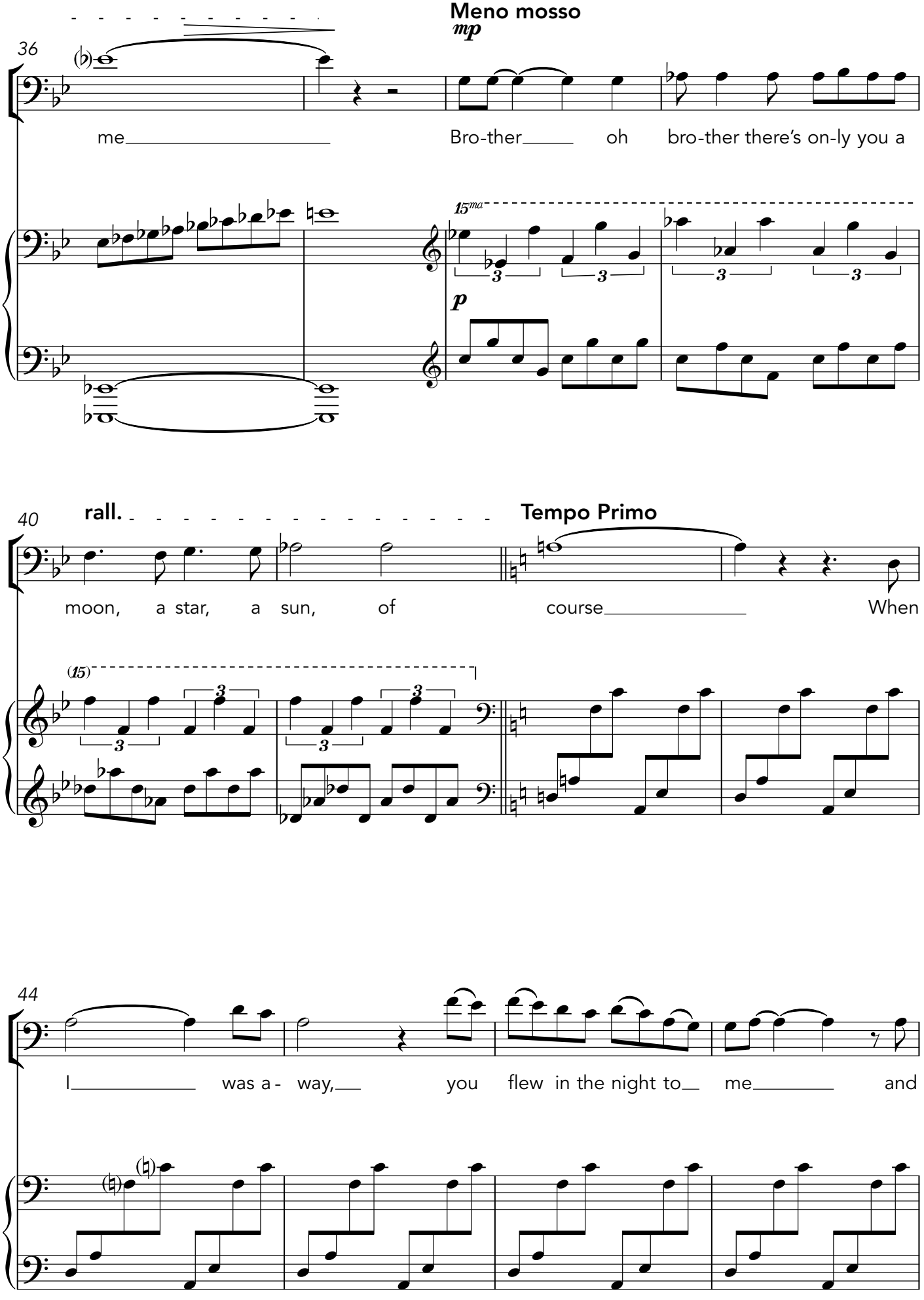

105
tempo primo
rall.
a crack through which we'll fall
head - long
l.v.

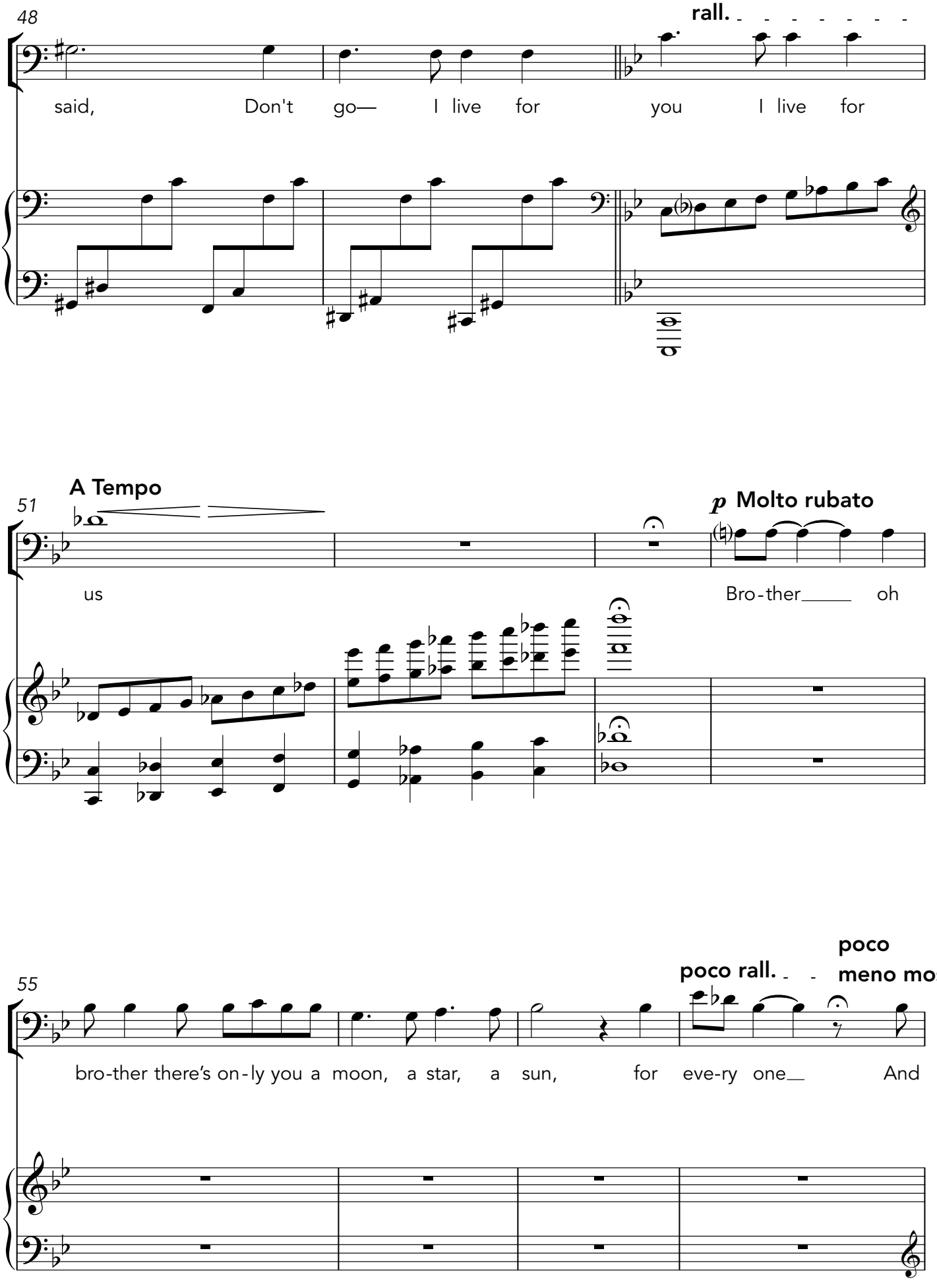
# BROTHER OH BROTHER

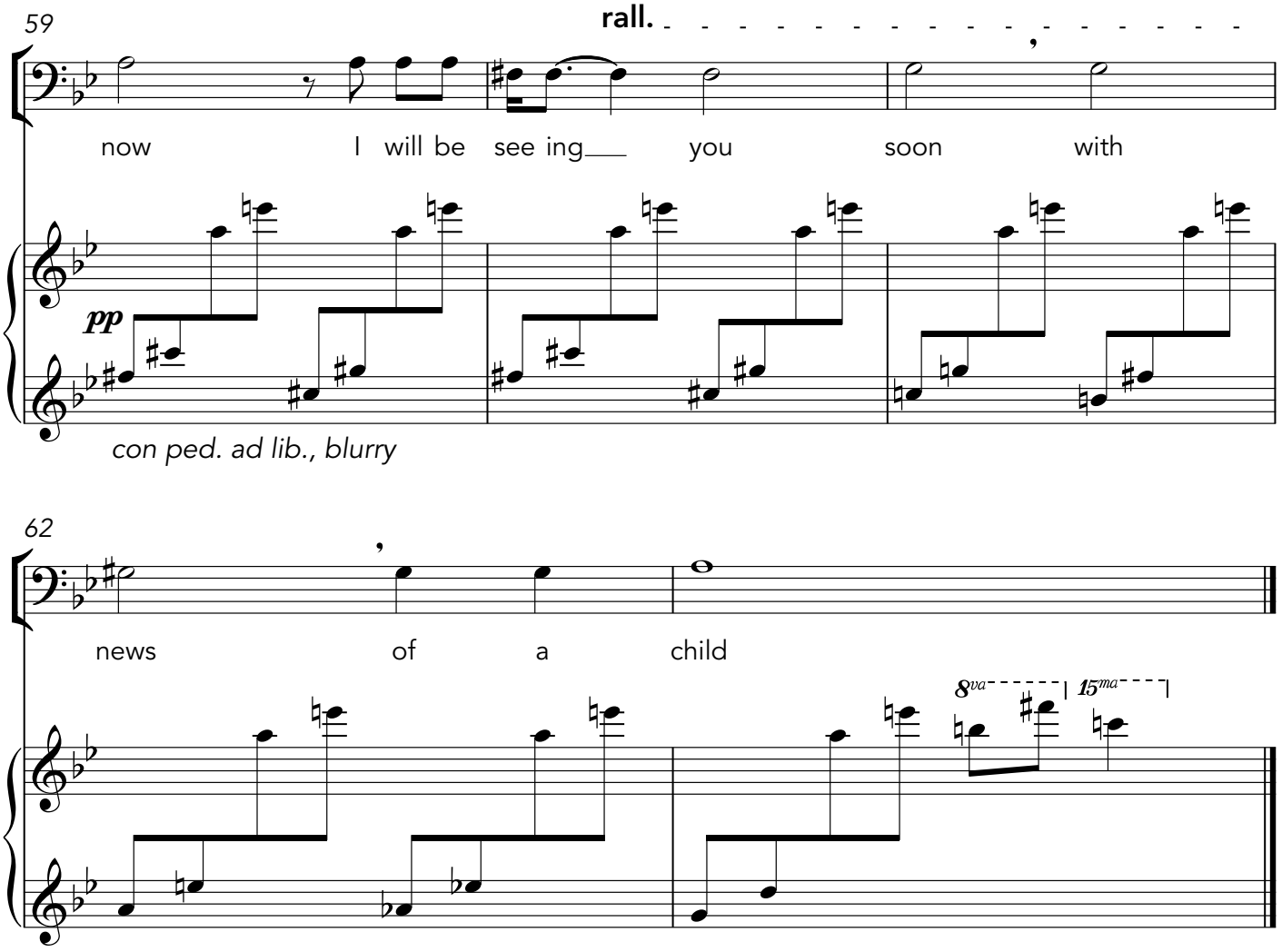



13
rall.
ri - ver we swam like eels
f
17
Meno mosso
rall.
Bro - ther oh bro-ther there's on - ly you a moon, a star, a
8va
p
20
Tempo Primo
sun, of course Giv ing so
(8)

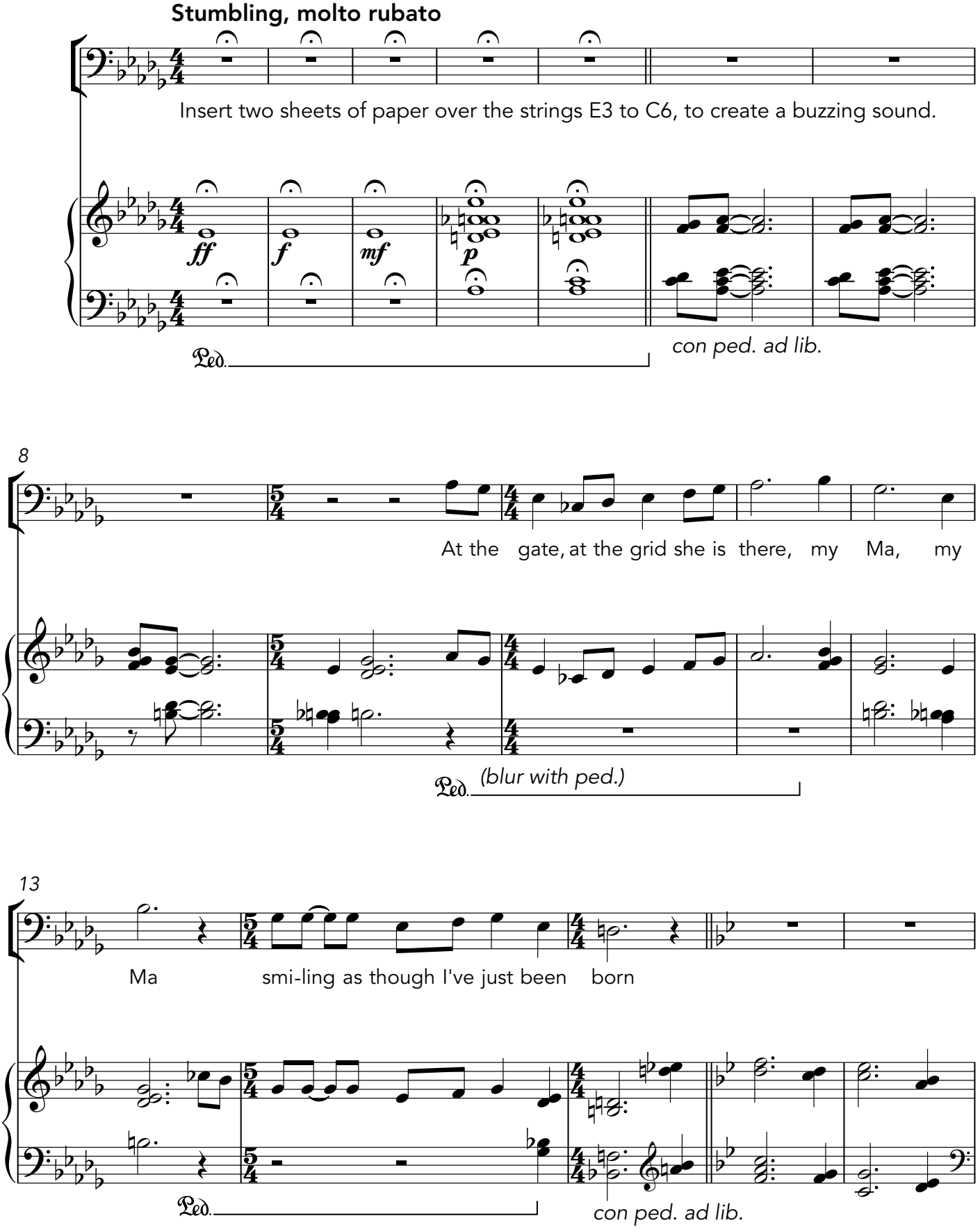

24
Sprechstimme
norm.
giv- ing 'A girl' said some but I knew best be-cause the
28
best you were Diff' rent and del - i- cate but
(ped.)
32
mf
p
f
rall.
here they hate I punched for you, I hit for you and

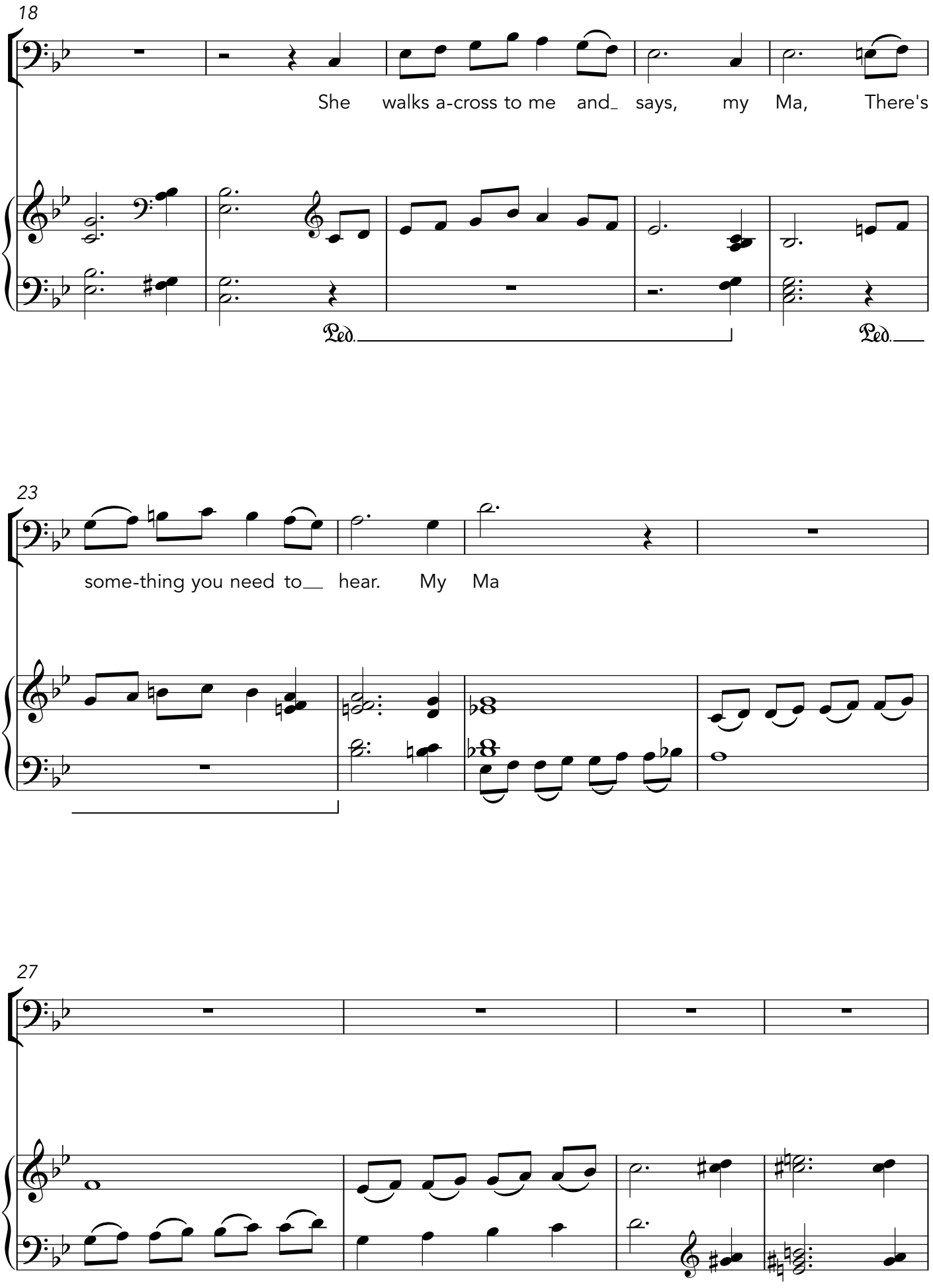

Meno mosso
mp
36
me
Bro-ther
oh
bro-ther there's on-ly you a
15ma
p
rall.
Tempo Primo
40
moon, a star, a sun, of
course
When
(15)
44
I
was a - way,
you flew in the night to
me
and

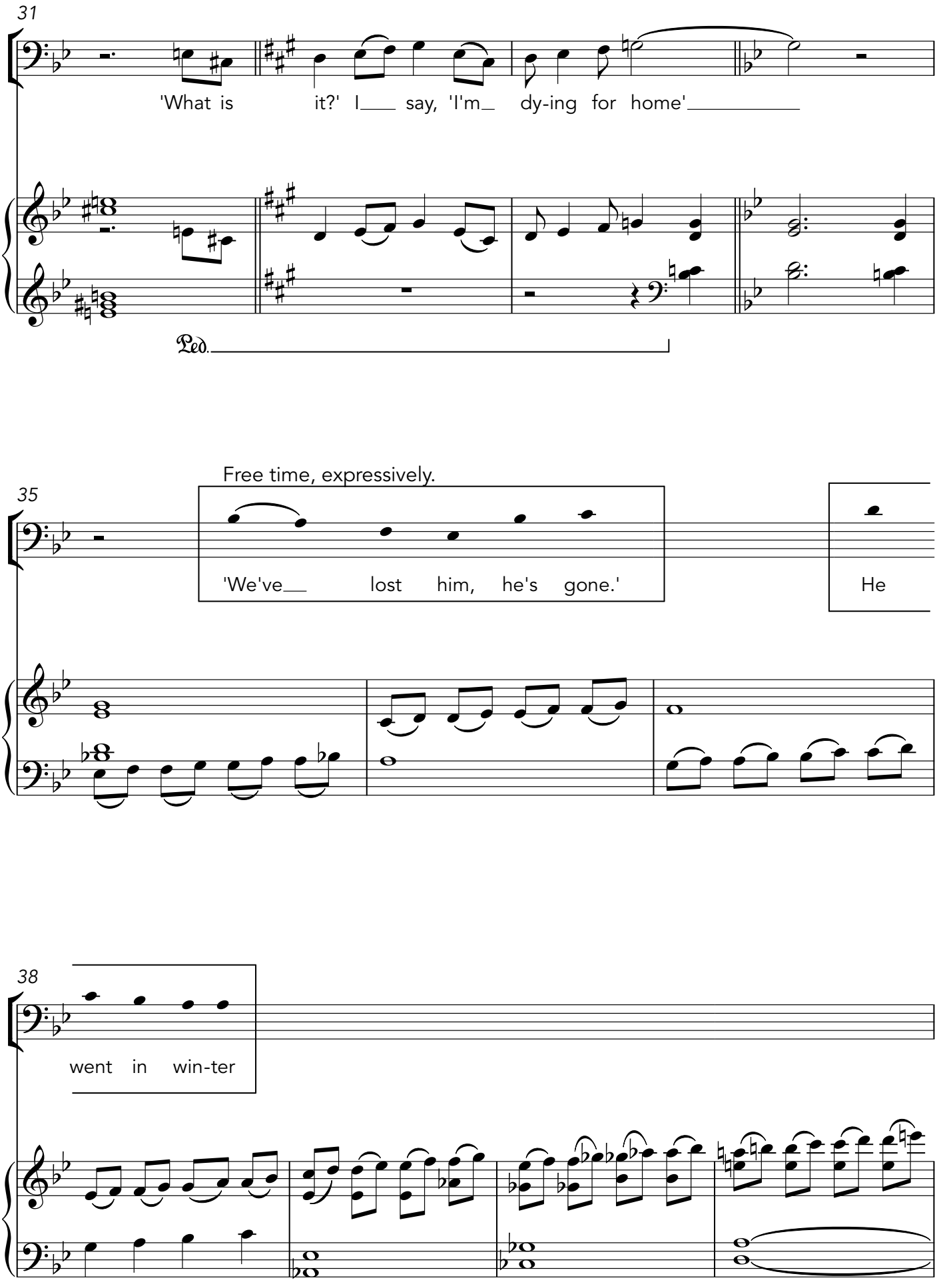

48
rall.
said, Don't go— I live for you I live for
51
A Tempo
p Molto rubato
us
Bro-ther oh
55
poco rall.
poco
meno mosso
bro-ther there's on-ly you a moon, a star, a sun, for eve-ry one And

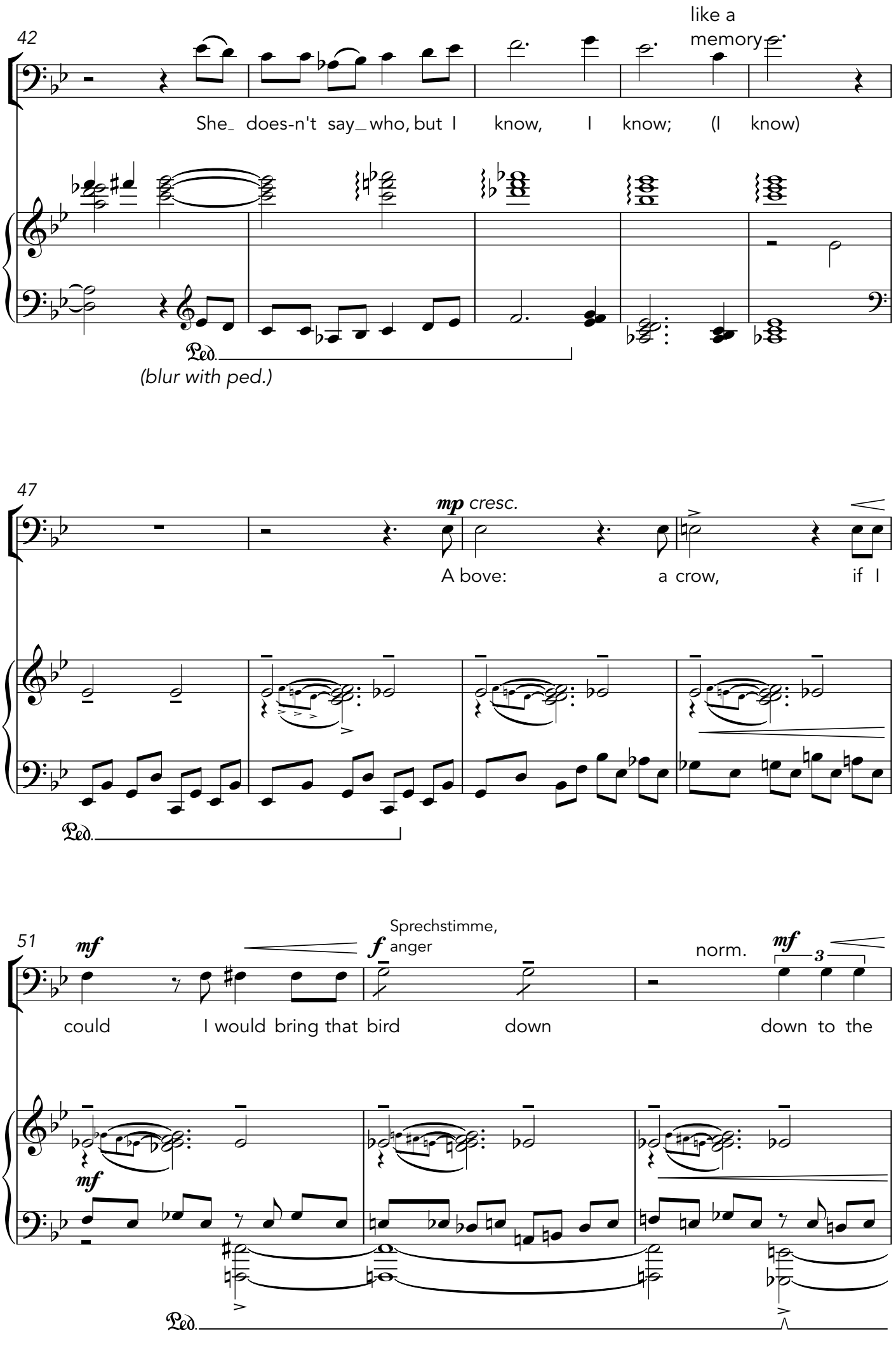

59
rall.
now I will be see ing you soon with
pp
con ped. ad lib., blurry
62
news of a child
8va
15ma

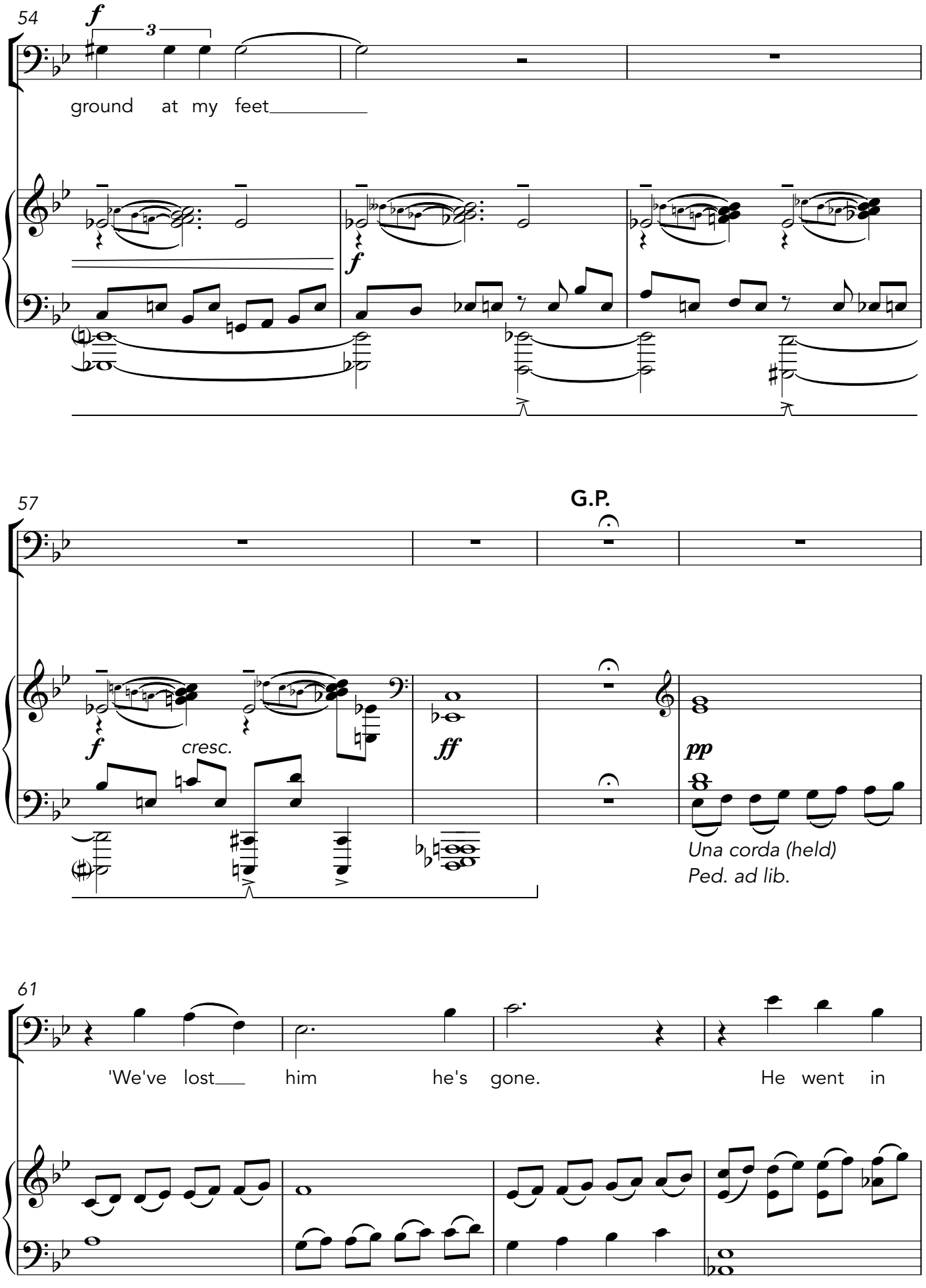
# AT THE GATE

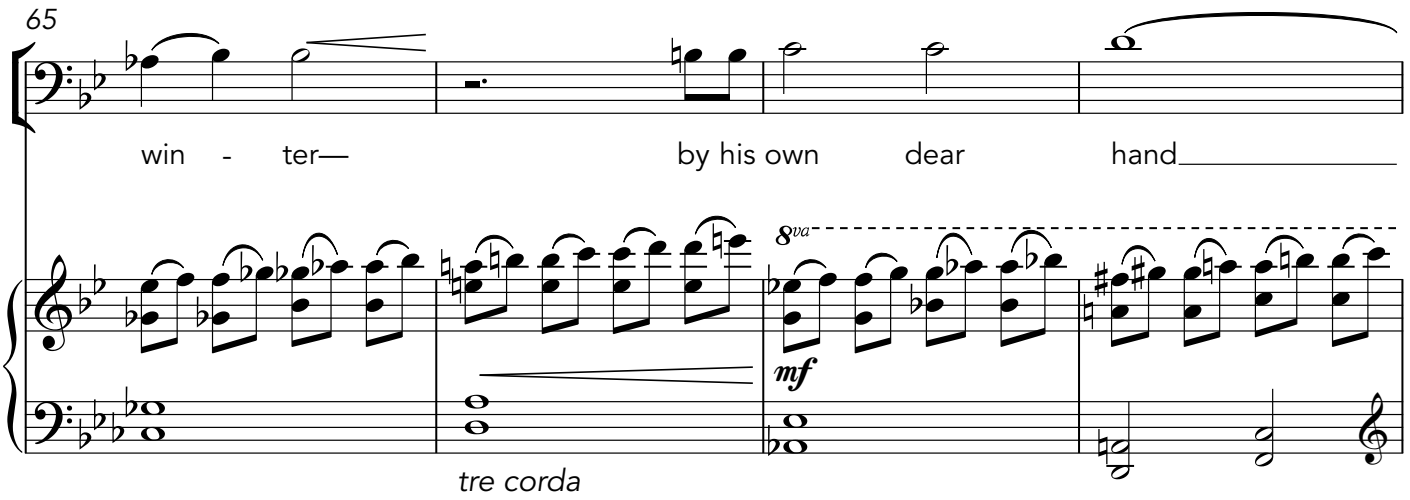

Stumbling, molto rubato
Insert two sheets of paper over the strings E3 to C6, to create a buzzing sound.
ff
f
mf
p
Ped.
con ped. ad lib.
8
At the gate, at the grid she is there, my Ma, my
Ped.
(blur with ped.)
13
Ma smi-ling as though I've just been born
Ped.
con ped. ad lib.


18
She walks a-cross to me and_ says, my Ma, There's
Ped.
Ped.
23
some-thing you need to__ hear. My Ma
27

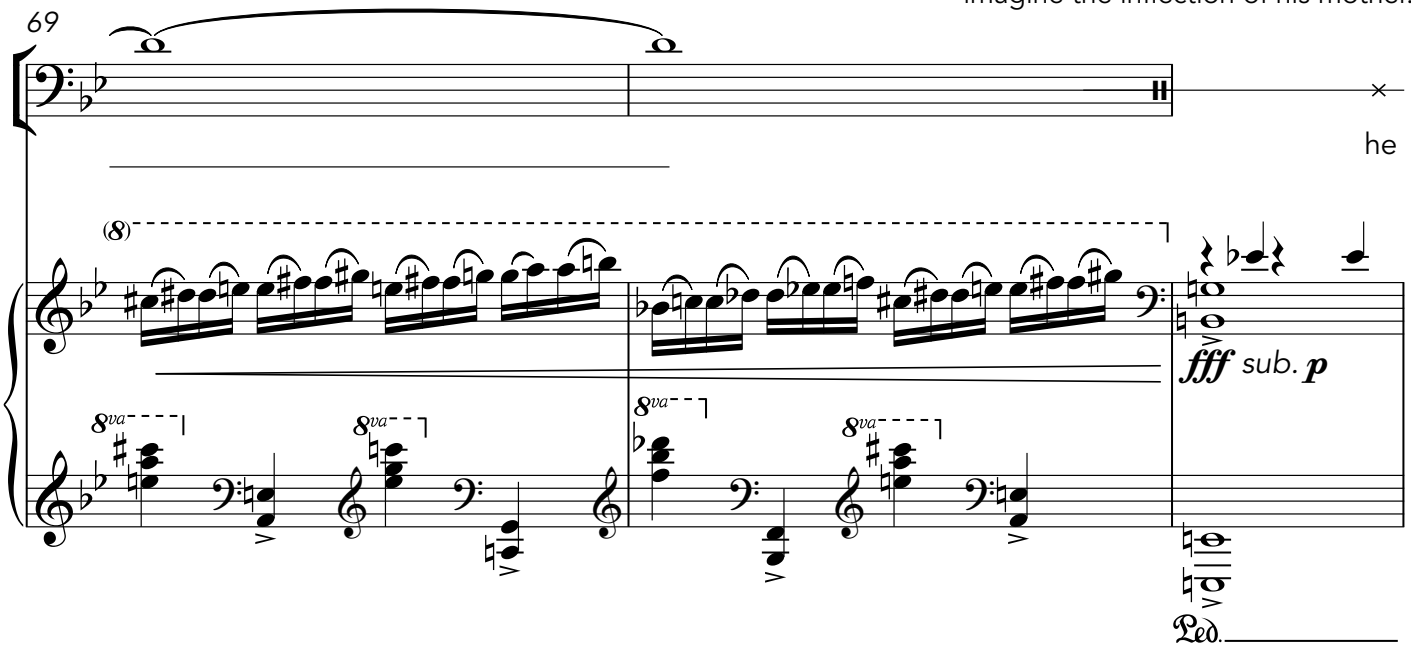

31
'What is it?' I say, 'I'm dy-ing for home'
Ped.
35
Free time, expressively.
'We've lost him, he's gone.'
He
38
went in win-ter

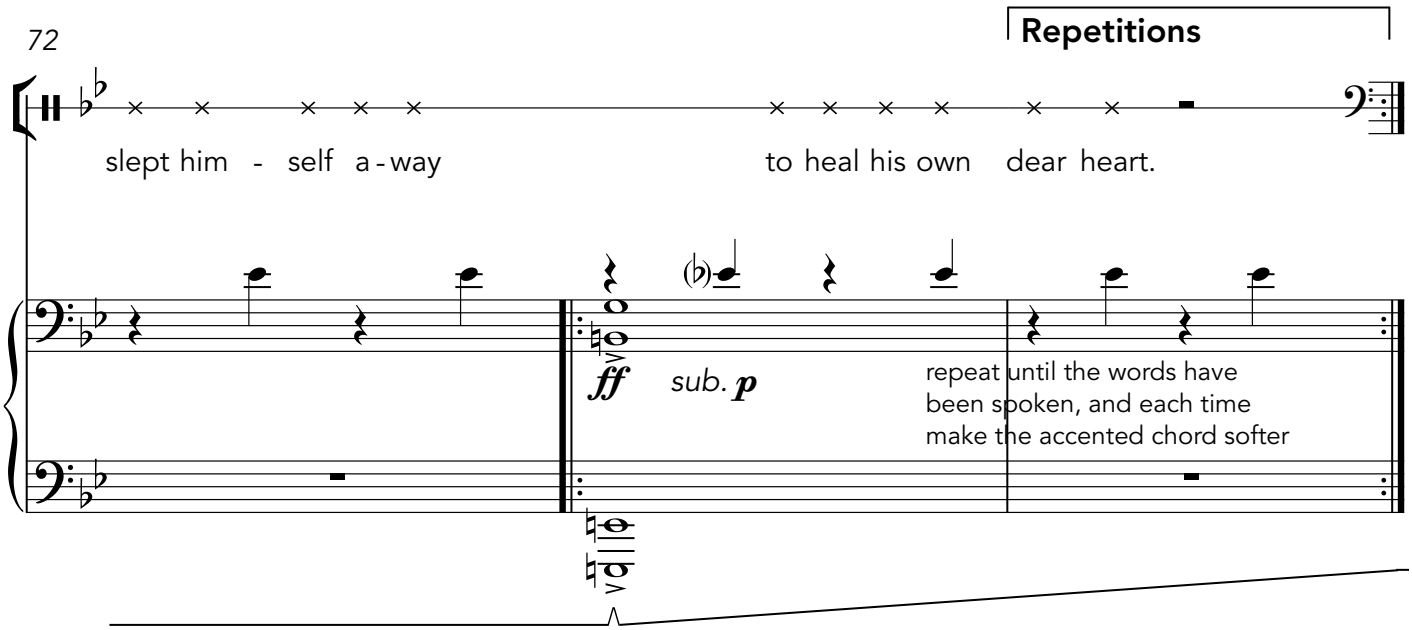

42
like a
memory
She_ does-n't say_ who, but I know, I know; (I know)
Ped.
(blur with ped.)
47
mp cresc.
A bove: a crow, if I
Ped.
51
mf
f
Sprechstimme,
anger
norm.
mf
3
could I would bring that bird down down to the
mf
Ped.

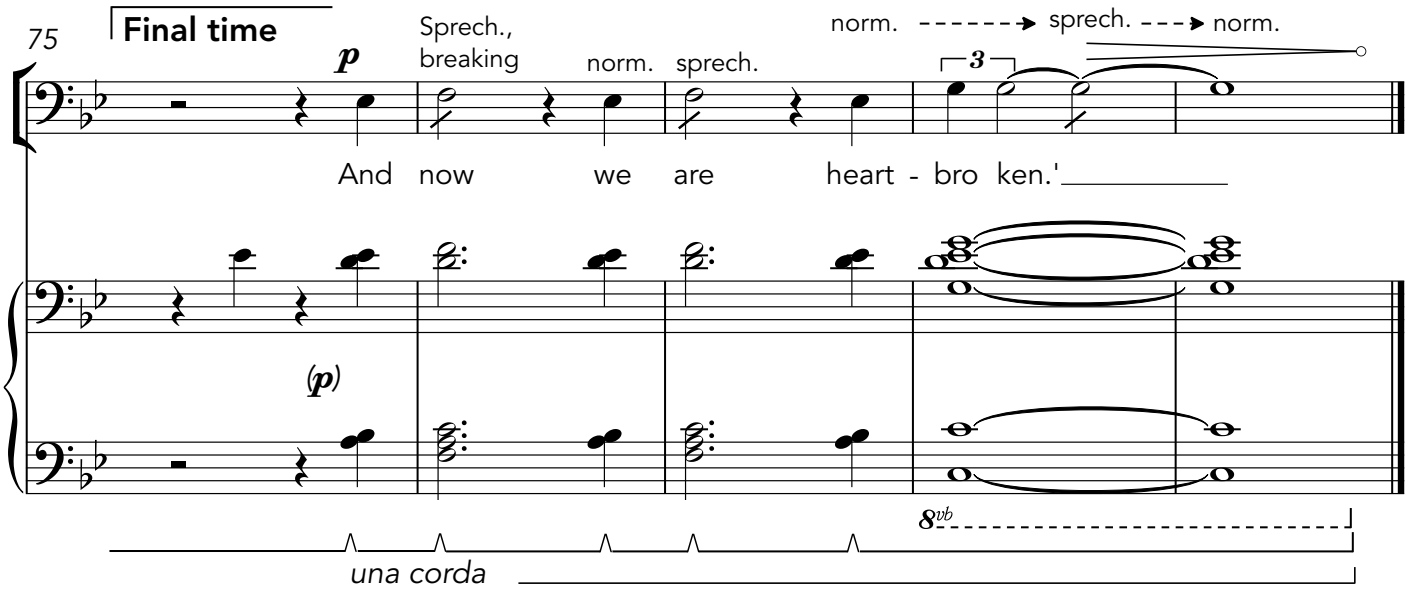

54
f
3
ground at my feet
f
57
G.P.
f
cresc.
ff
pp
Una corda (held)
Ped. ad lib.
61
'We've lost him he's gone. He went in




Sprechstimme, spoken, free rhythm:
imagine the inflection of his mother.



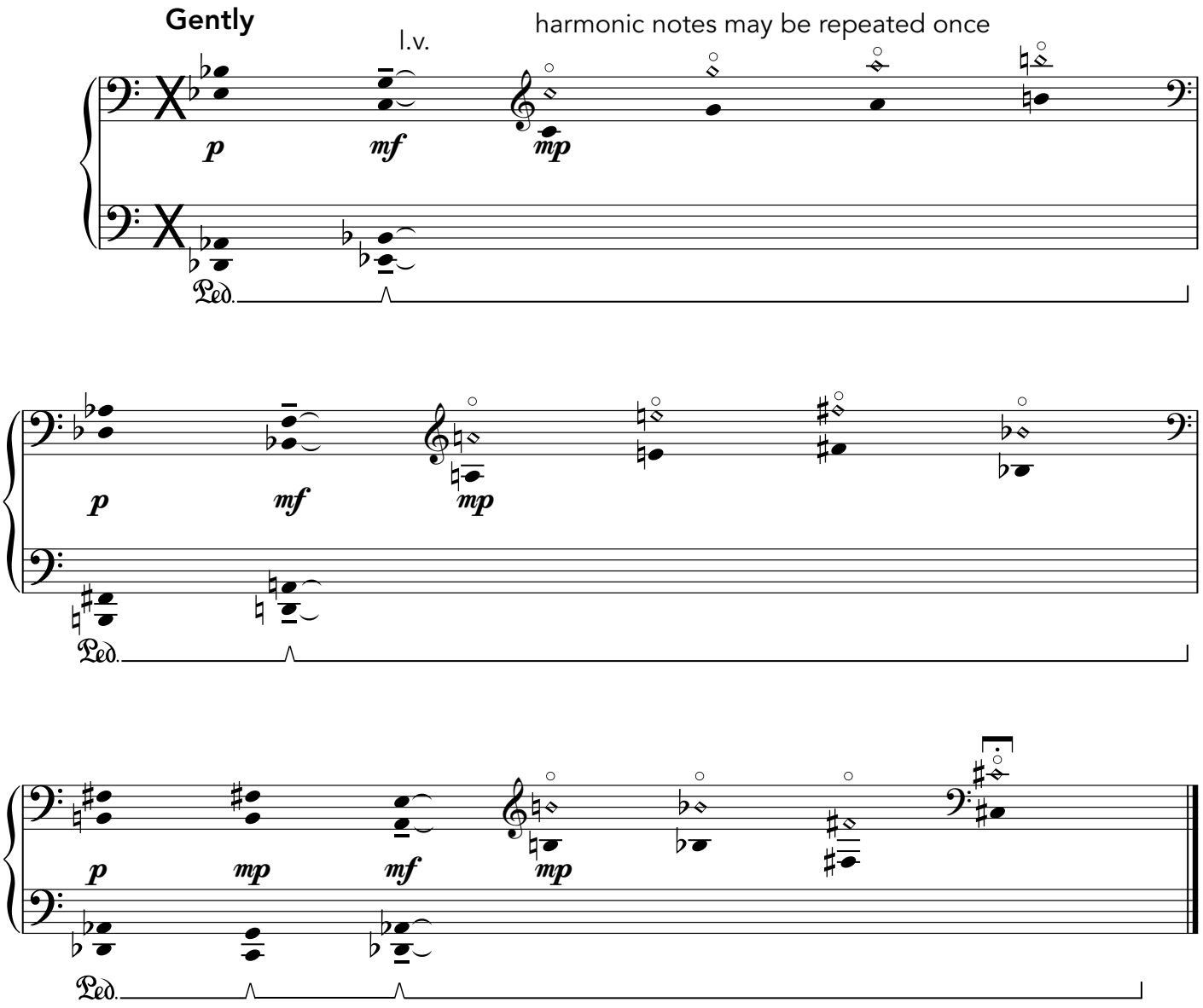





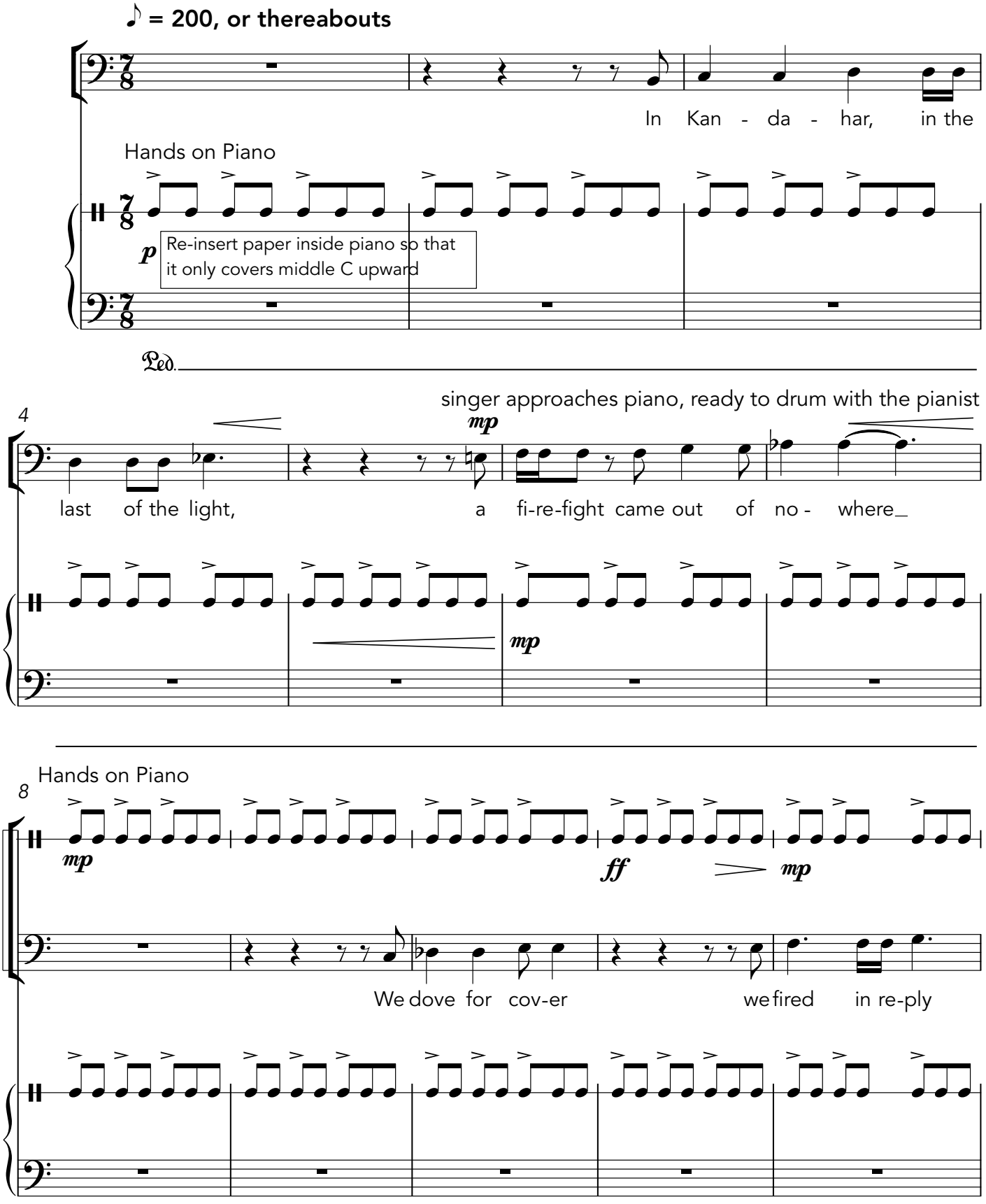

Remove paper from piano.

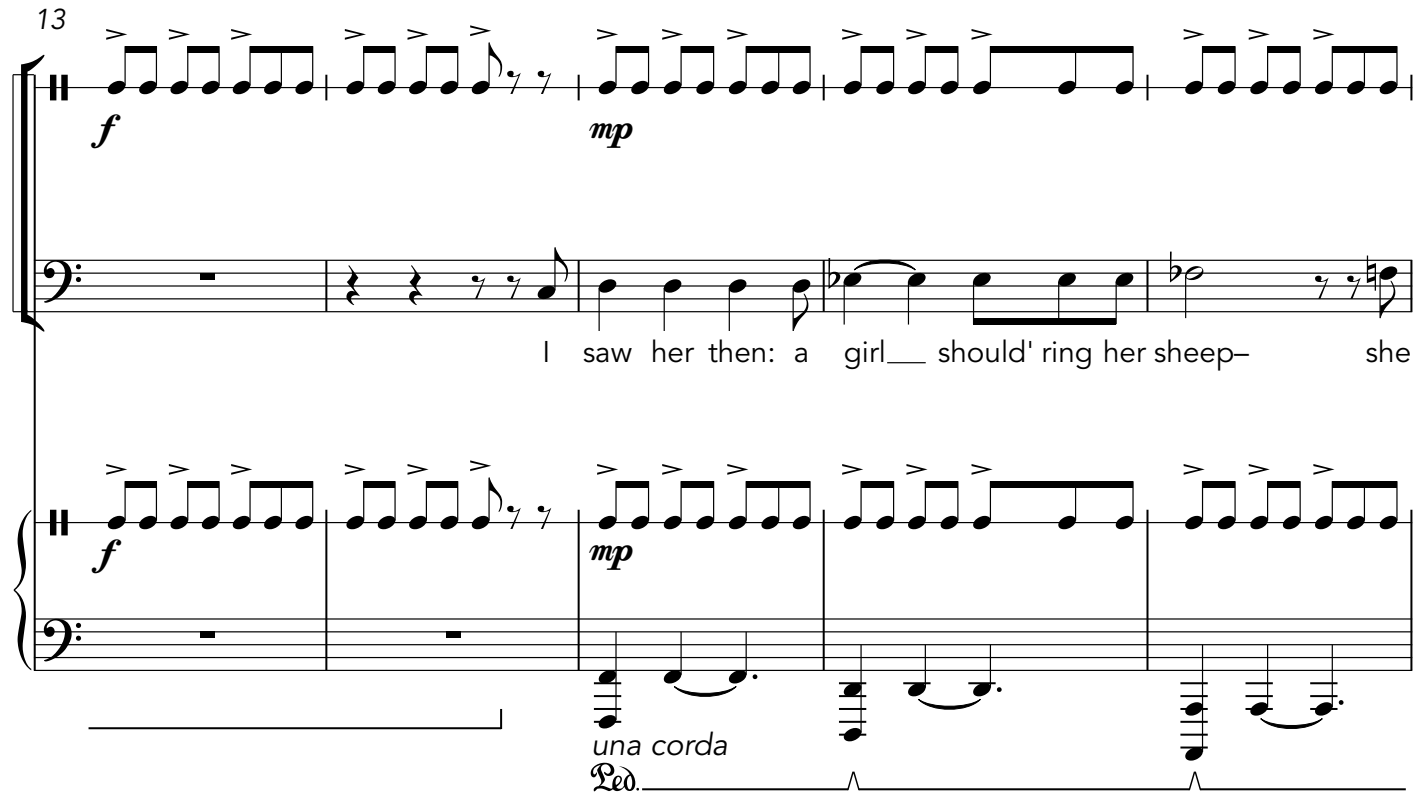
# lacuna2

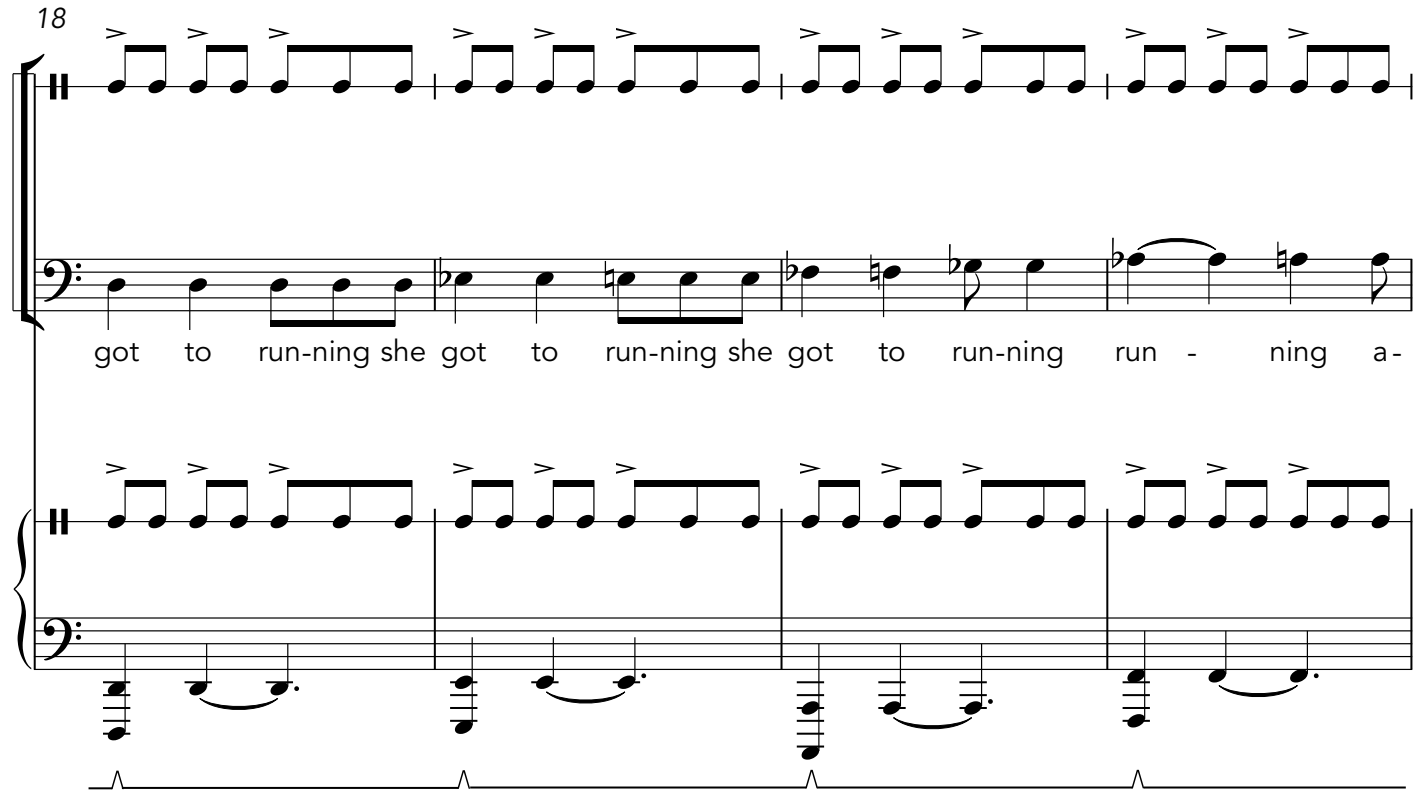
(entr'acte)

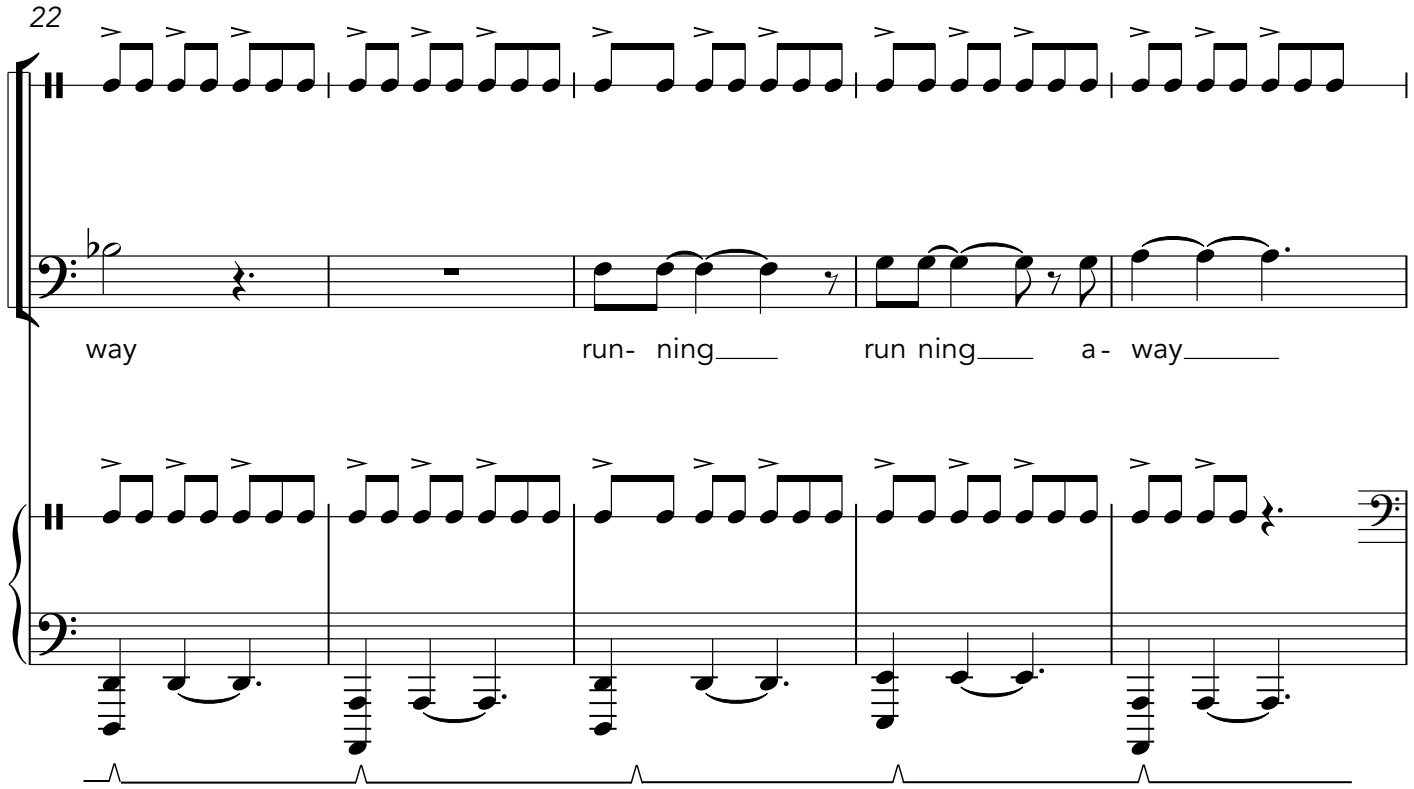


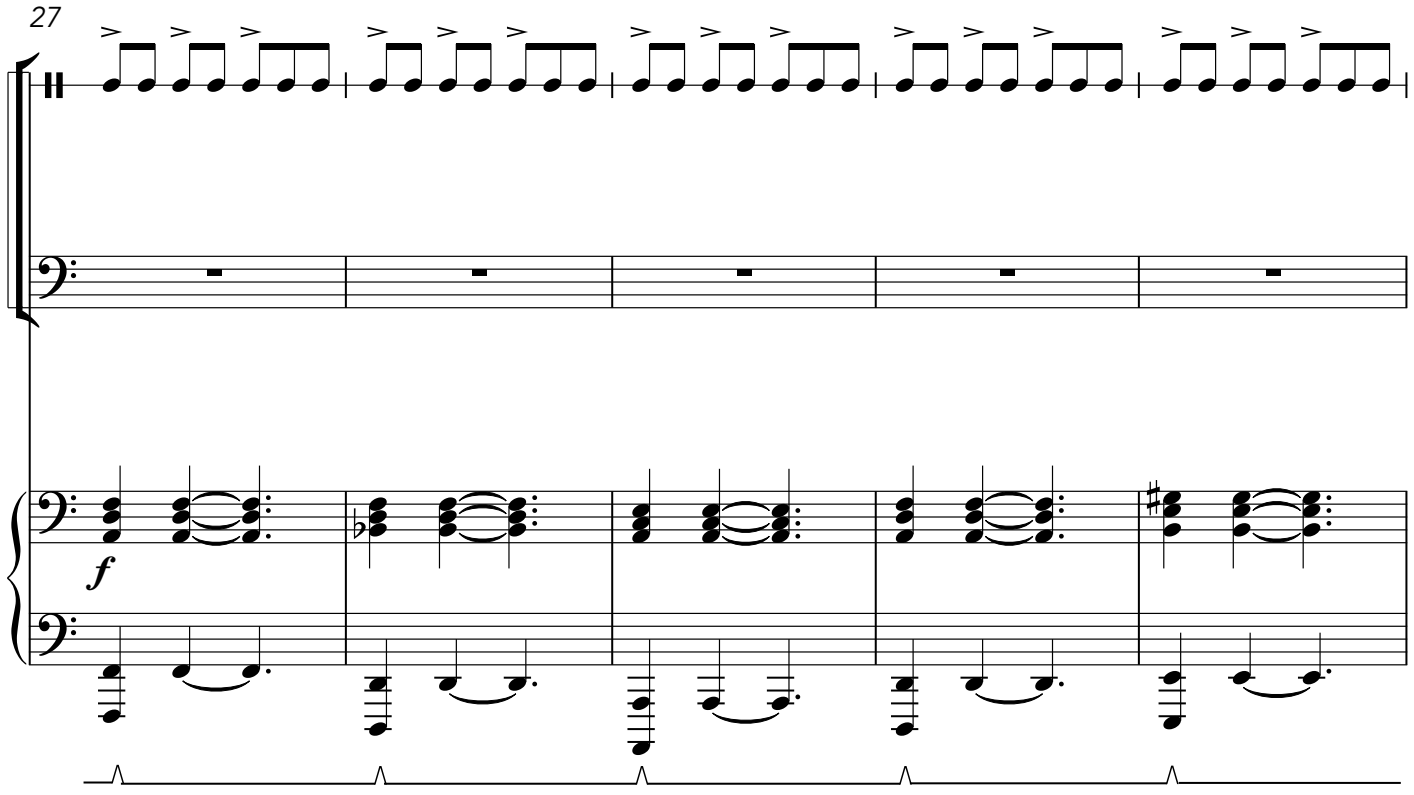
# THE GIRL

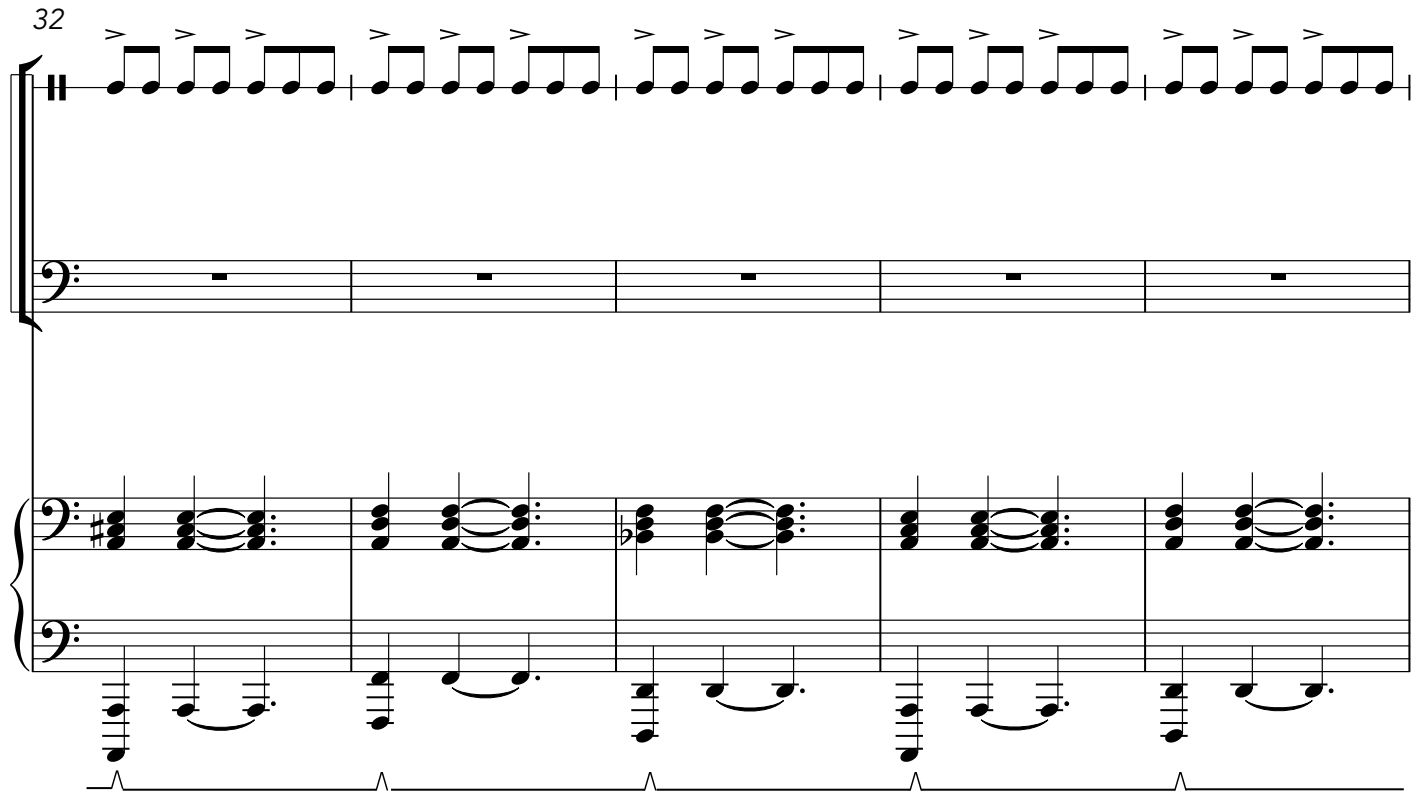

♪ = 200, or thereabouts
In Kan - da - har, in the
Hands on Piano
p
Re-insert paper inside piano so that it only covers middle C upward
Ped.
singer approaches piano, ready to drum with the pianist
4
mp
last of the light, a fi-re-fight came out of no - where_
mp
Hands on Piano
8
mp
ff
mp
We dove for cov-er we fired in re-ply

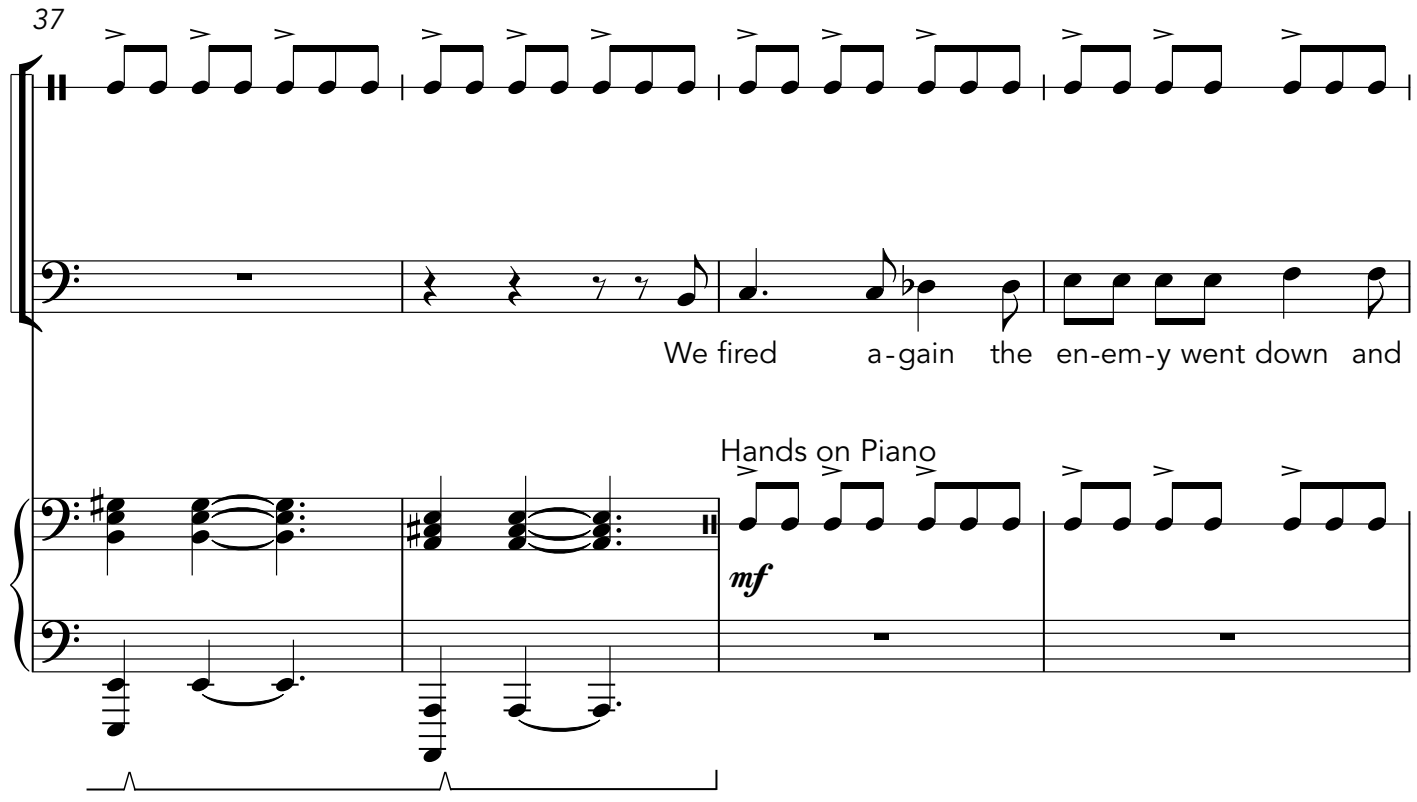

13
f
mp
I saw her then: a girl__ should' ring her sheep– she
f
mp
una corda
Ped.

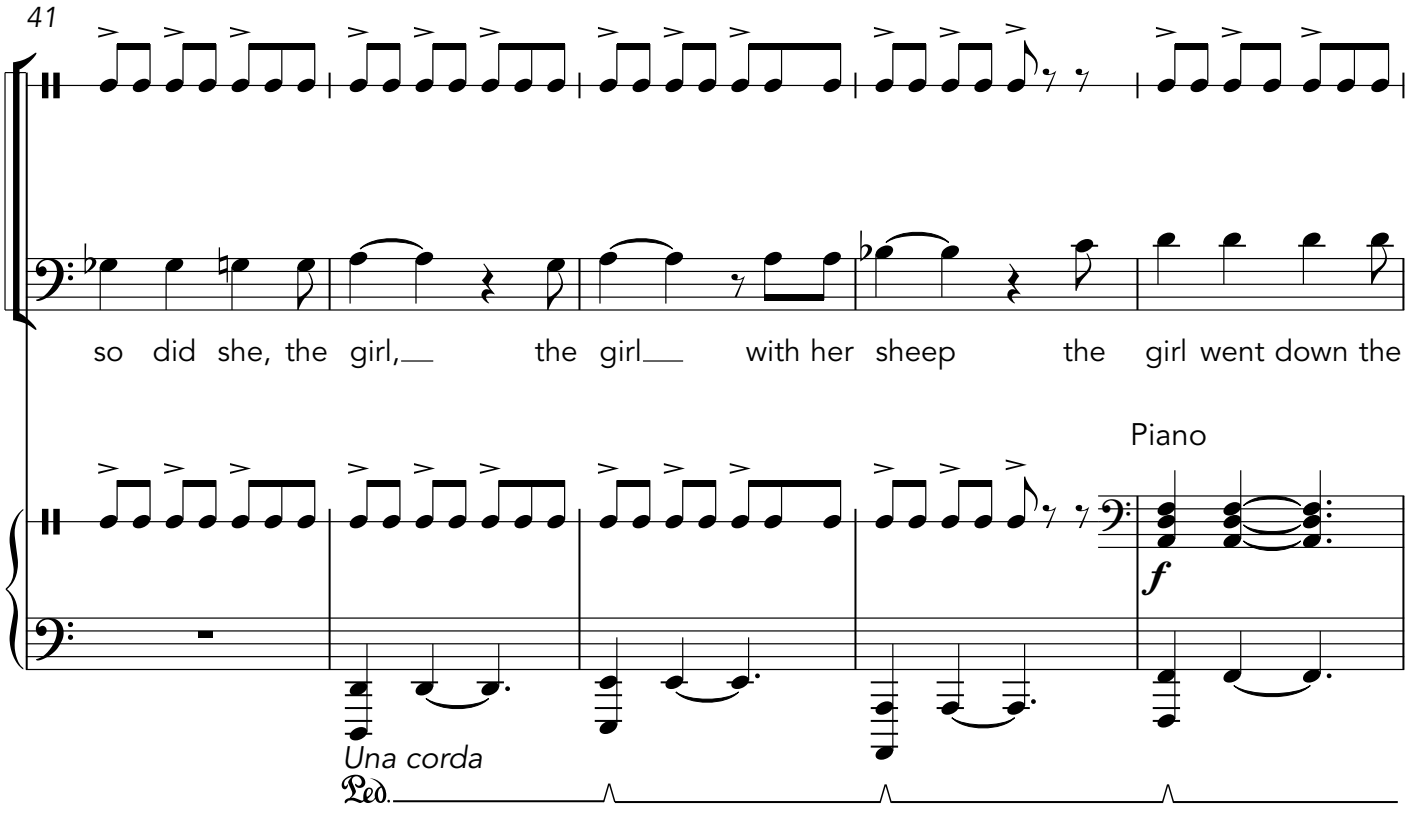

18
got to run-ning she got to run-ning she got to run-ning run - ning a-

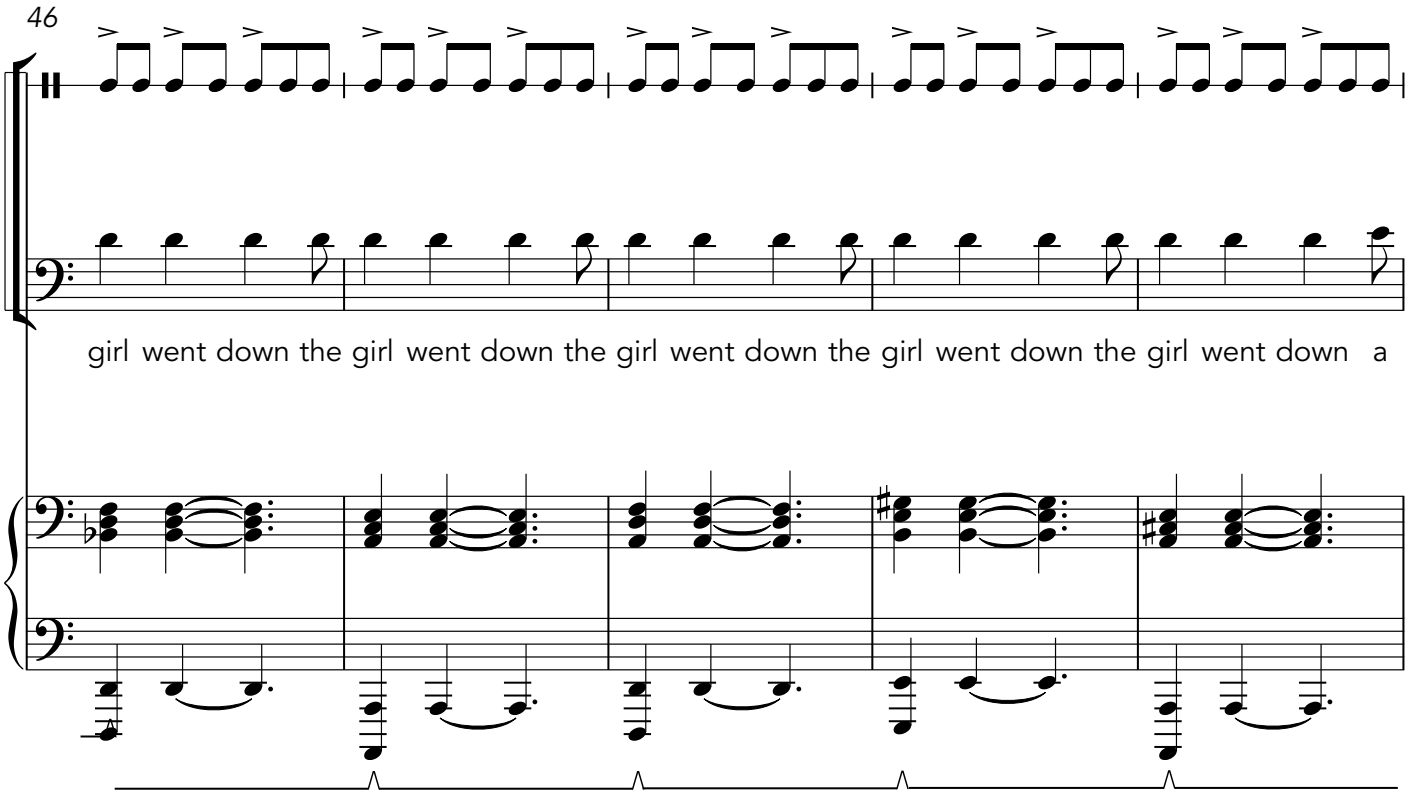

22
way
run- ning
run ning
a- way

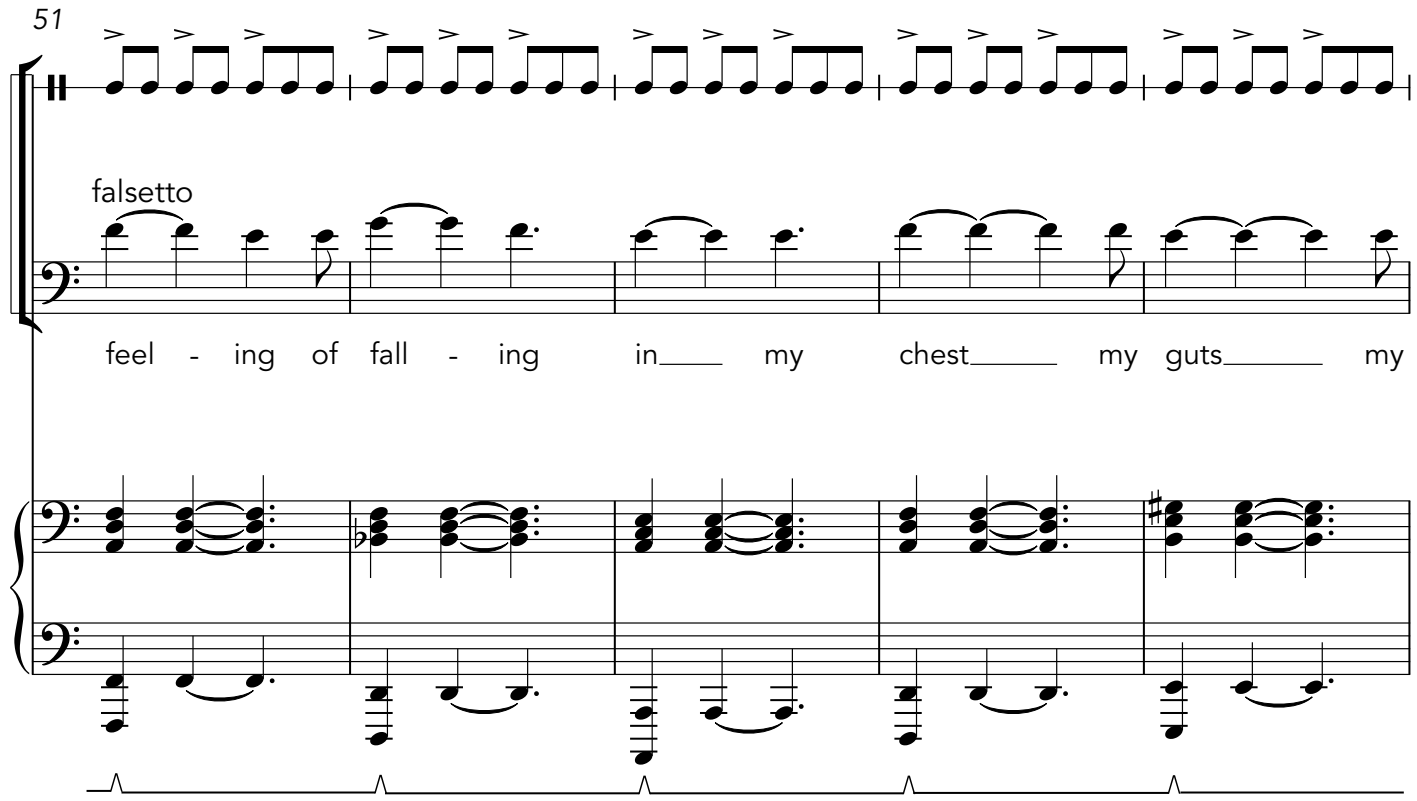

27
f

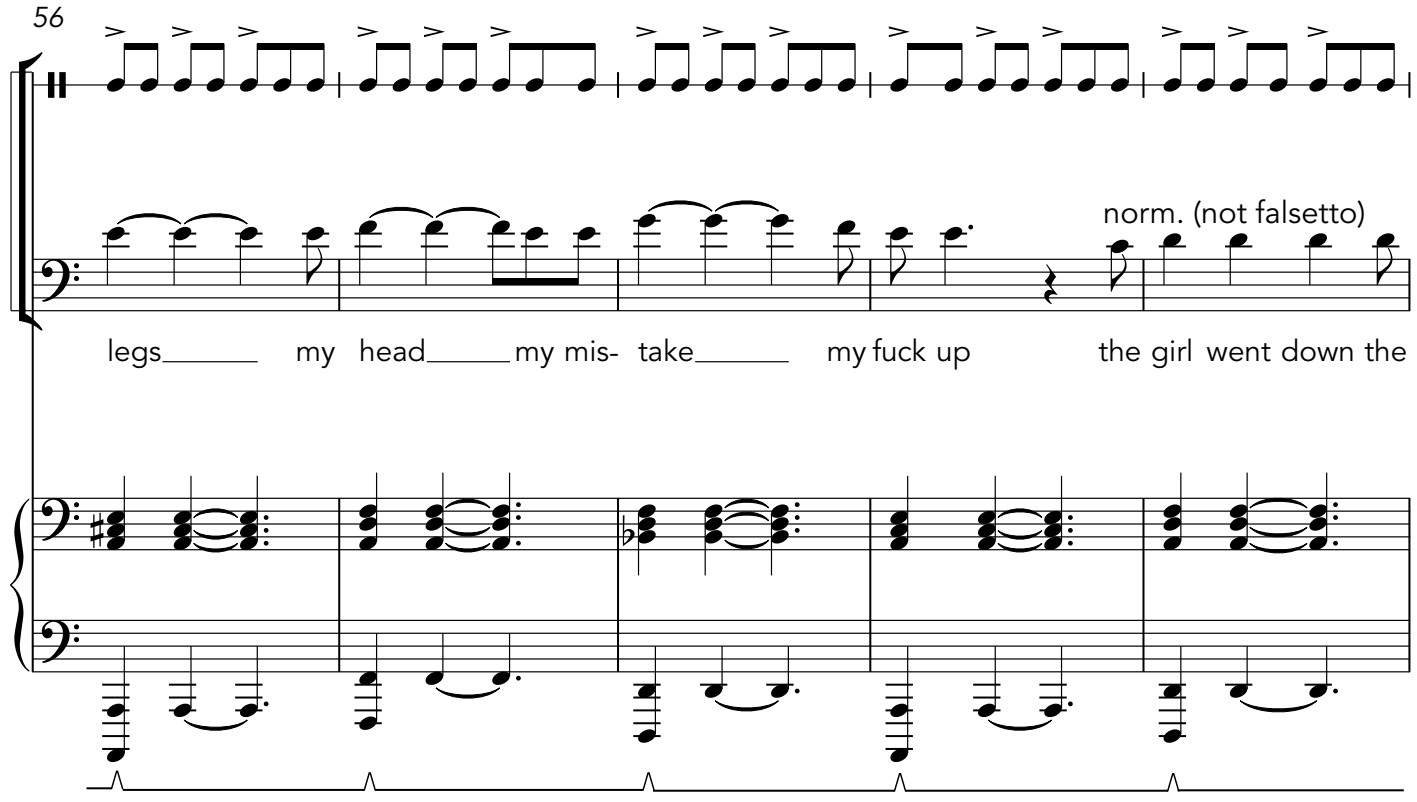

32

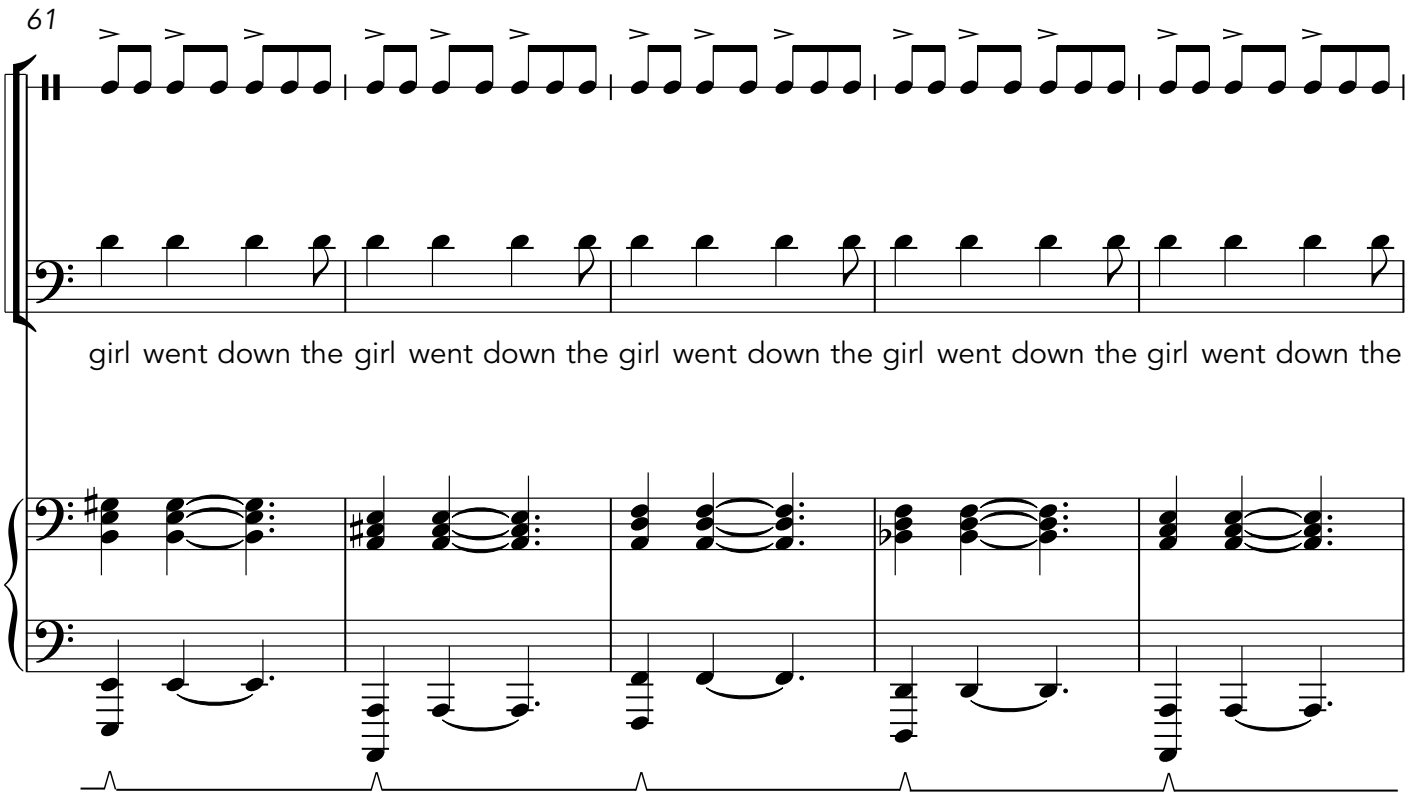

37
We fired a-gain the en-em-y went down and
Hands on Piano
mf

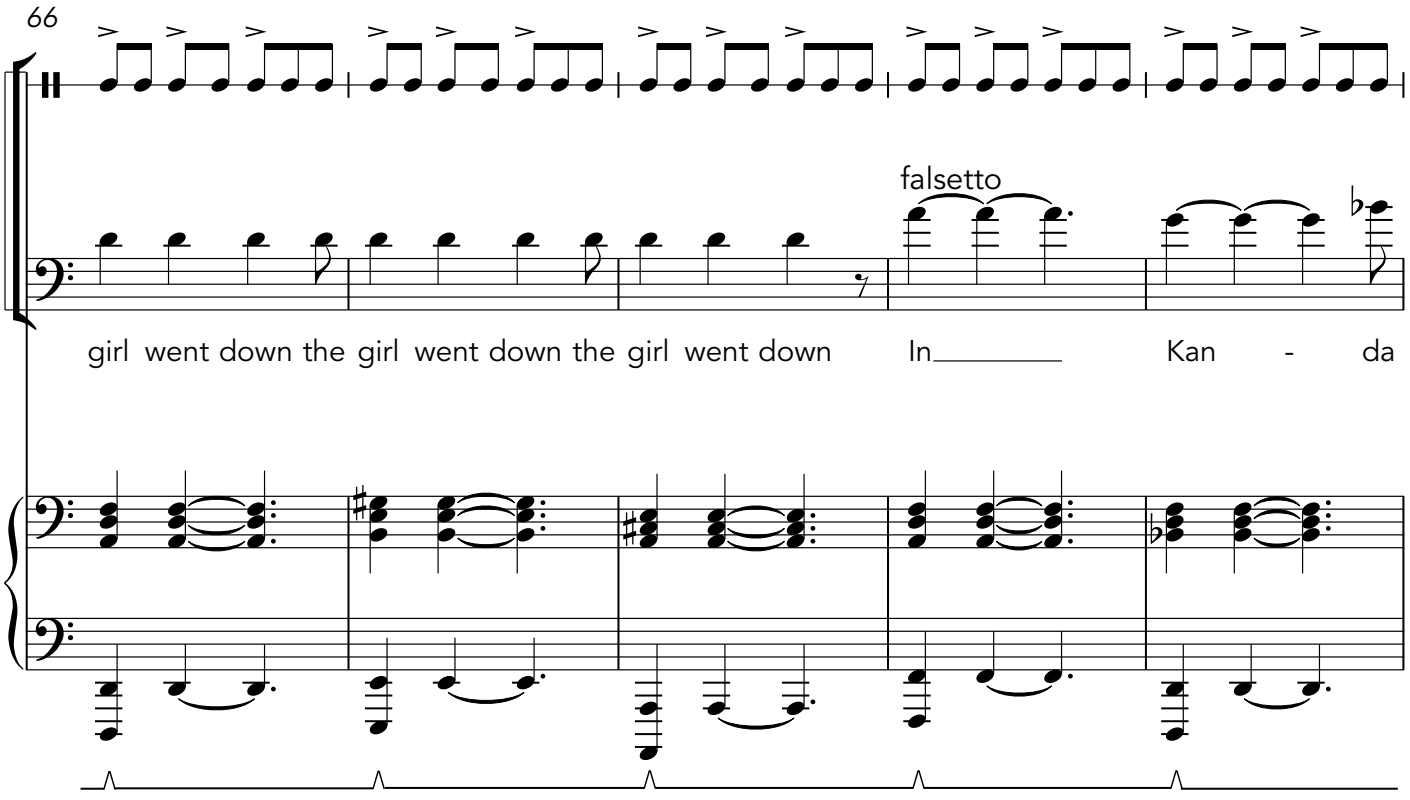

41
so did she, the girl, the girl with her sheep the girl went down the
Piano
f
Una corda
Ped.

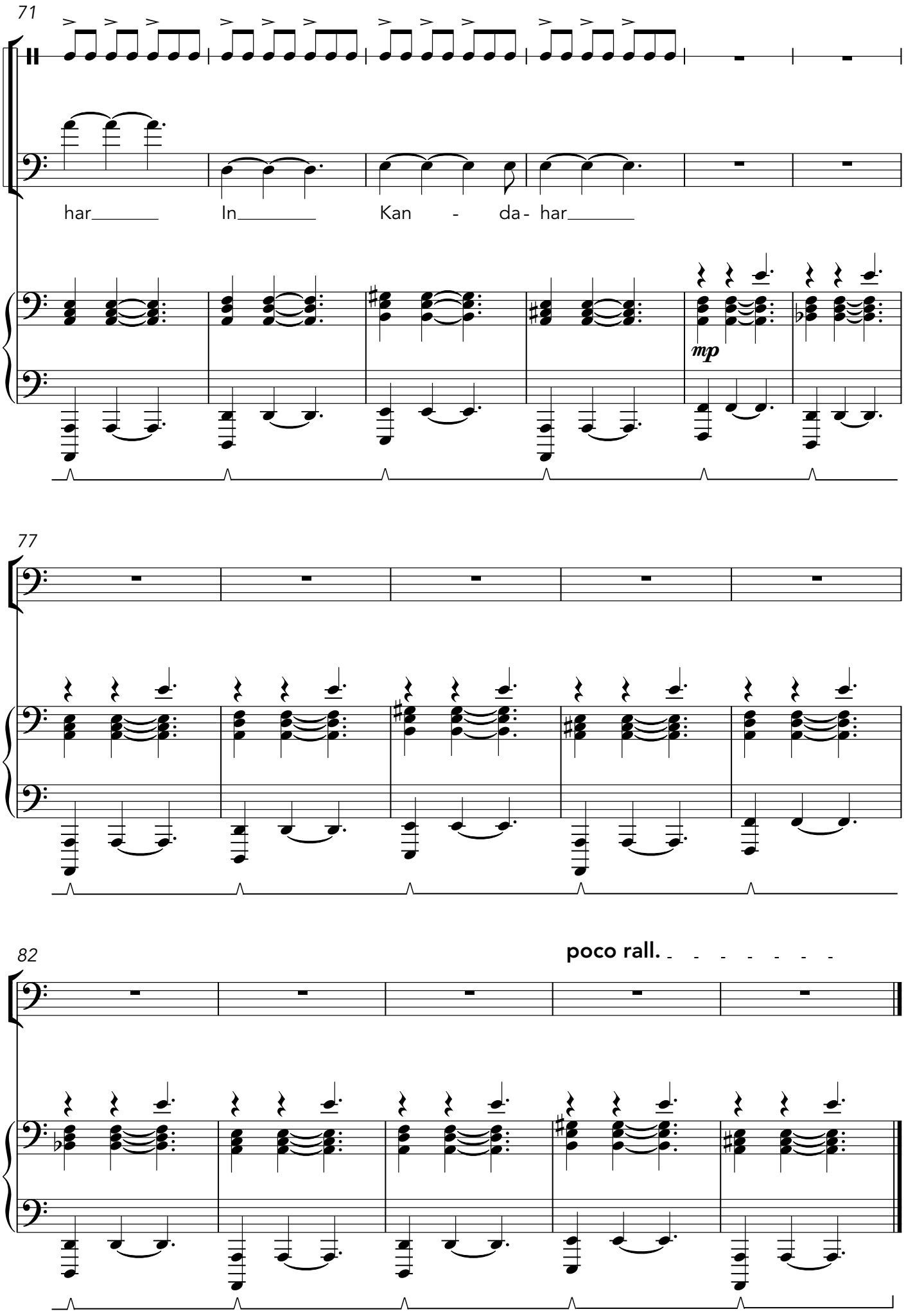

46
girl went down the girl went down the girl went down the girl went down the girl went down a


51
falsetto
feel - ing of fall - ing in my chest my guts my


56
norm. (not falsetto)
legs my head my mis- take my fuck up the girl went down the


61
girl went down the girl went down the girl went down the girl went down the girl went down the

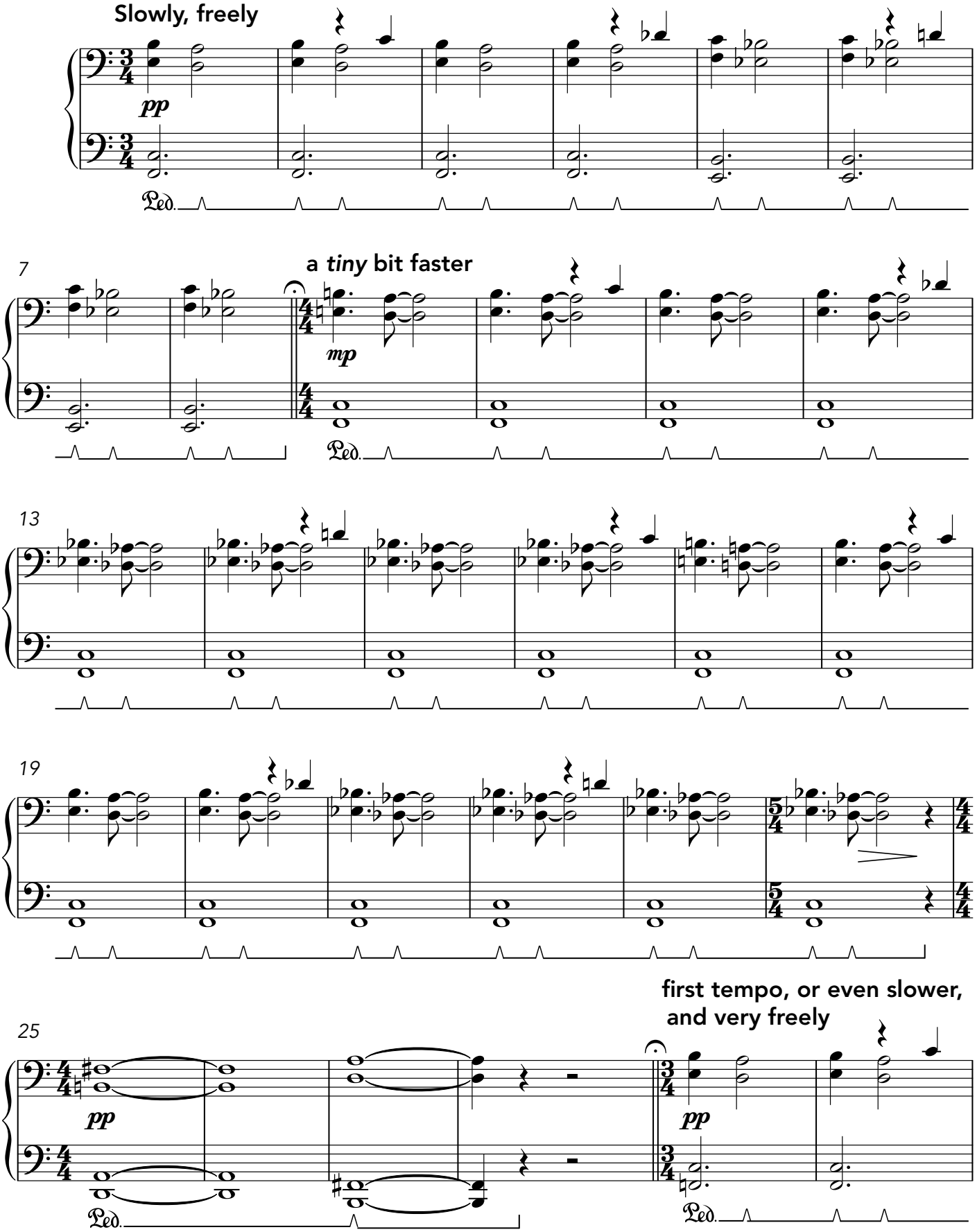

66
falsetto
girl went down the girl went down the girl went down In Kan - da

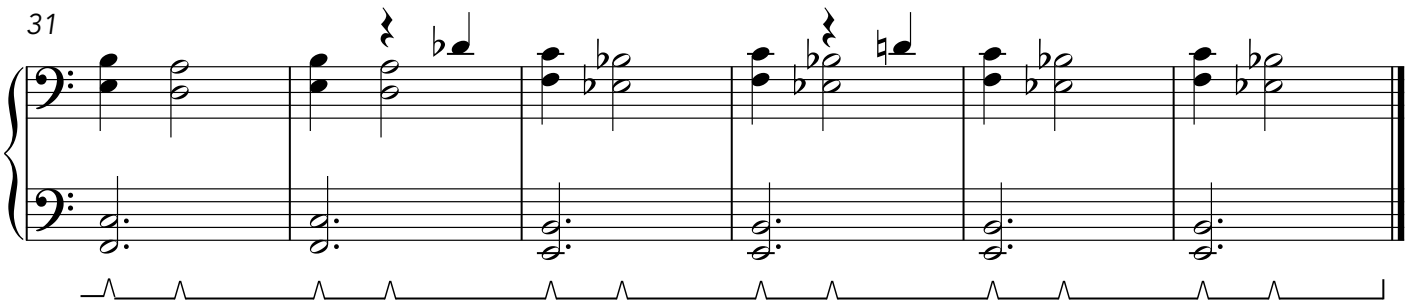

71
har In Kan - da - har
mp
77
82
poco rall.

# lacuna3

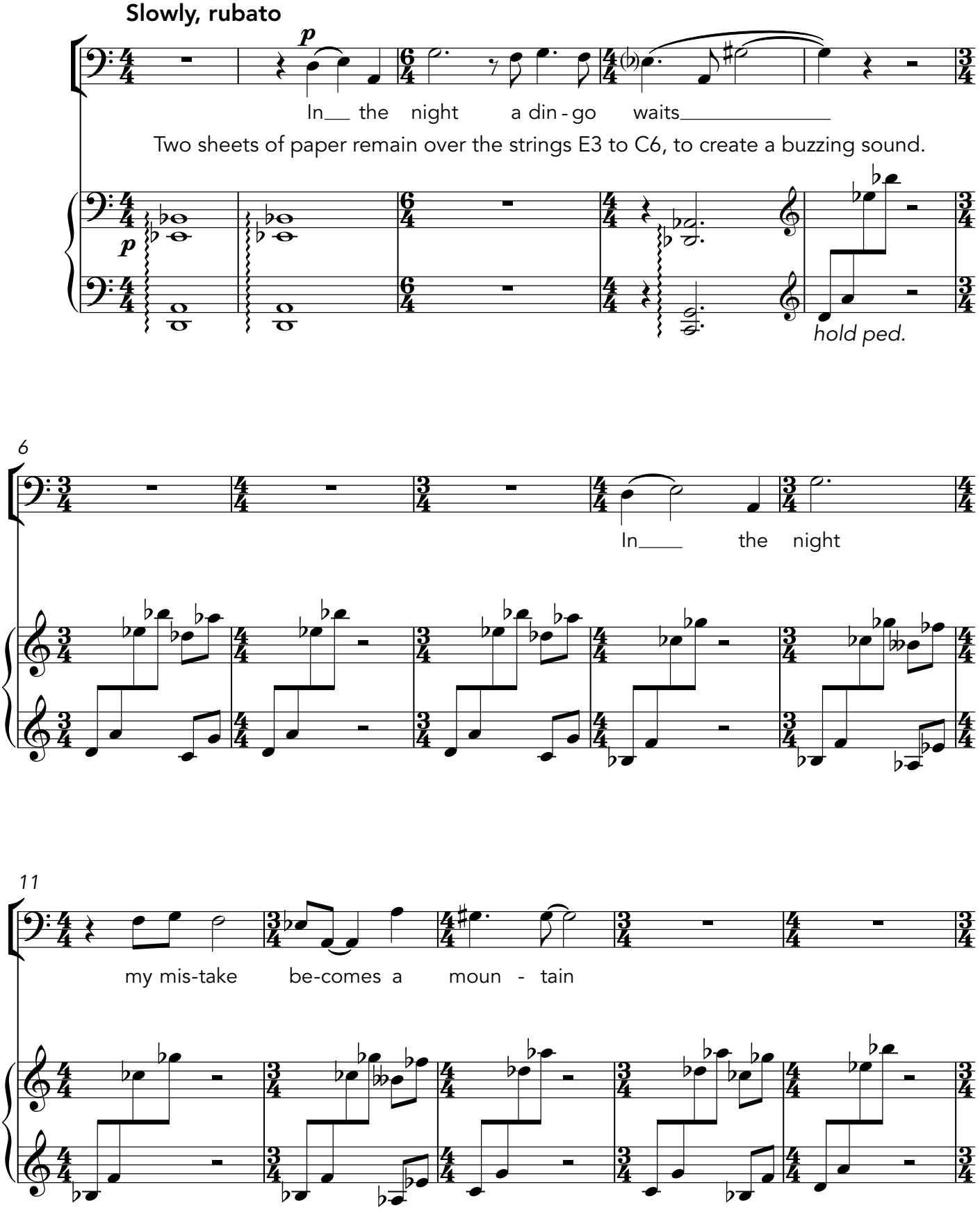
(entr'acte)

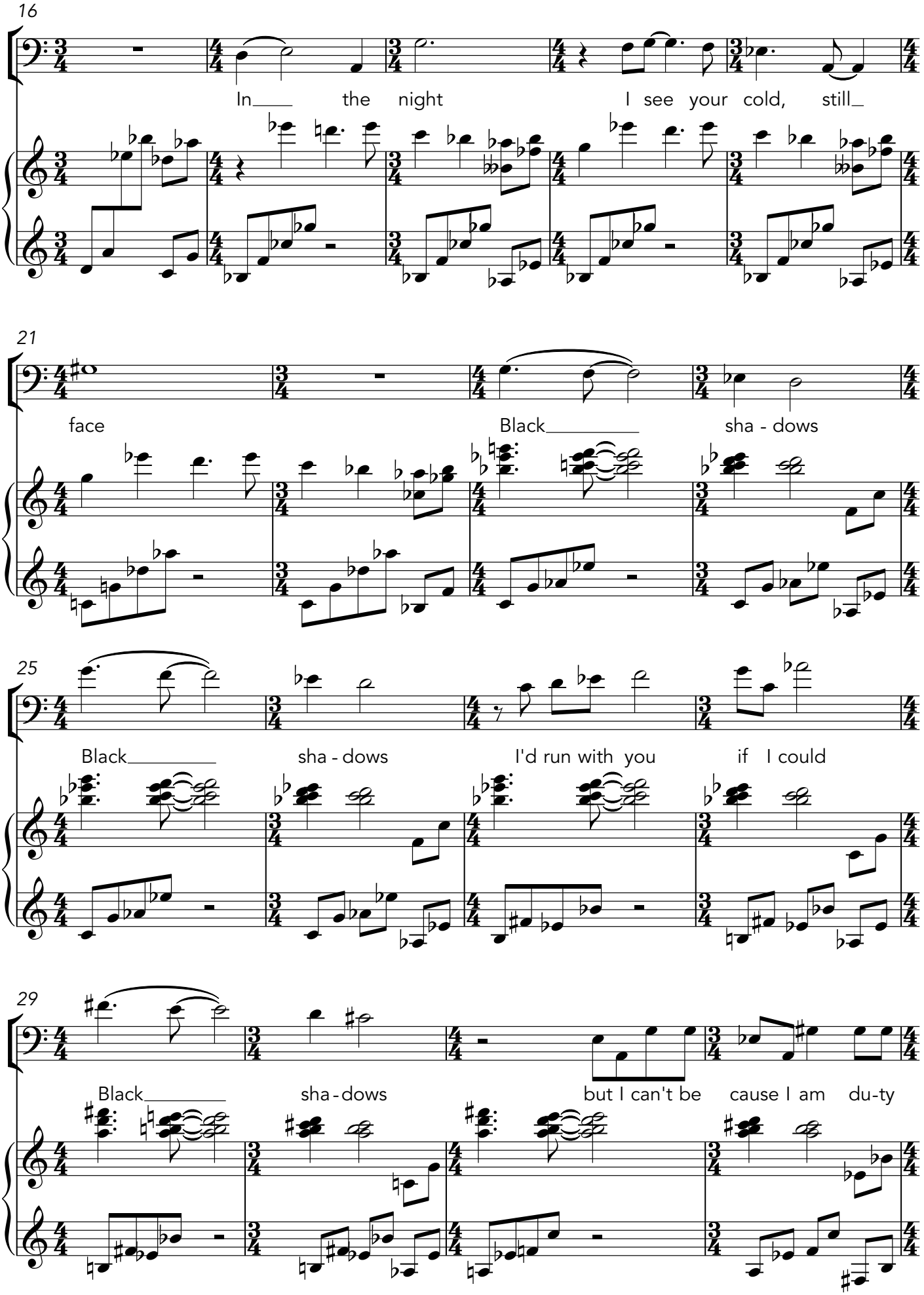
(Paper remains on piano strings)

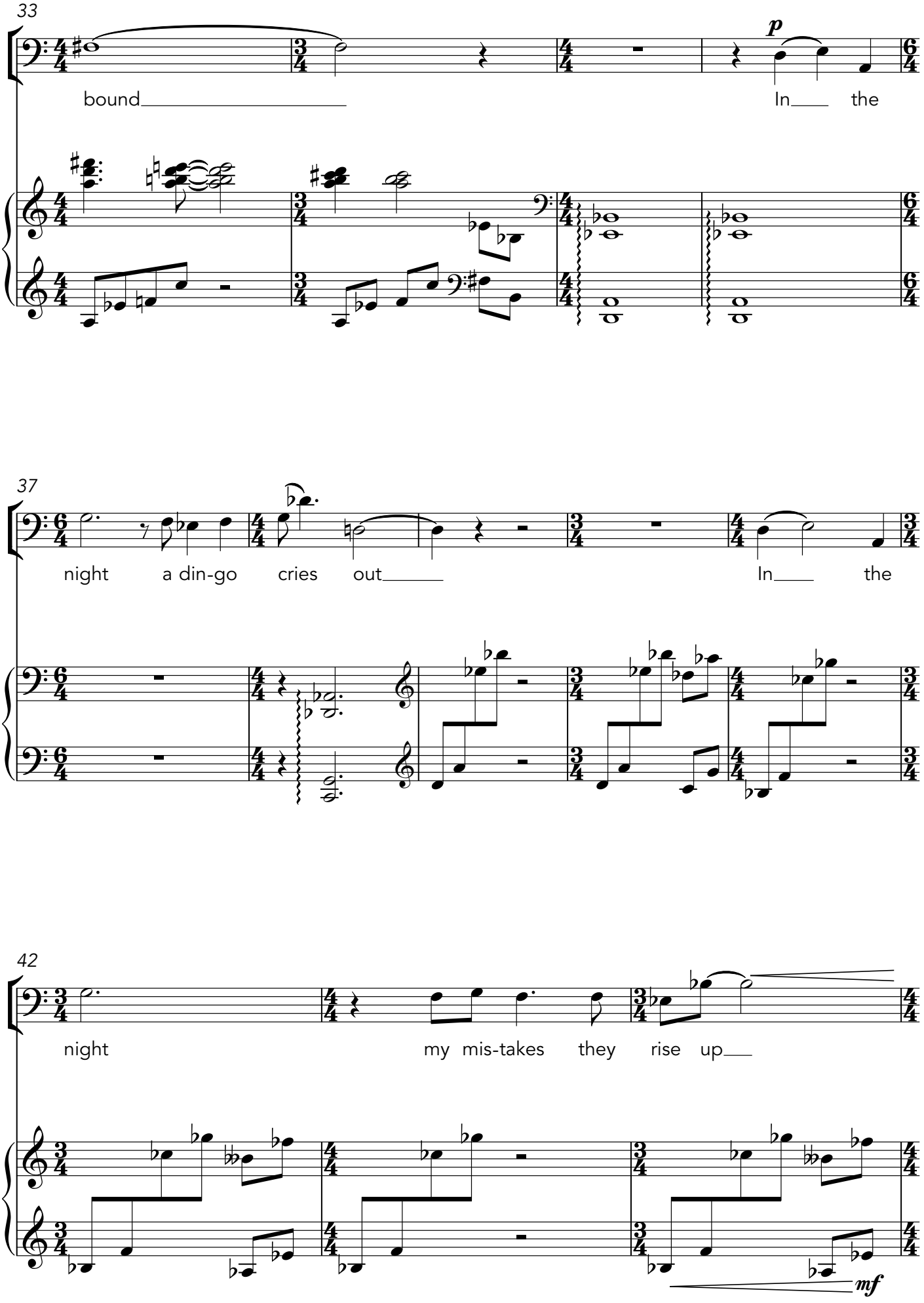


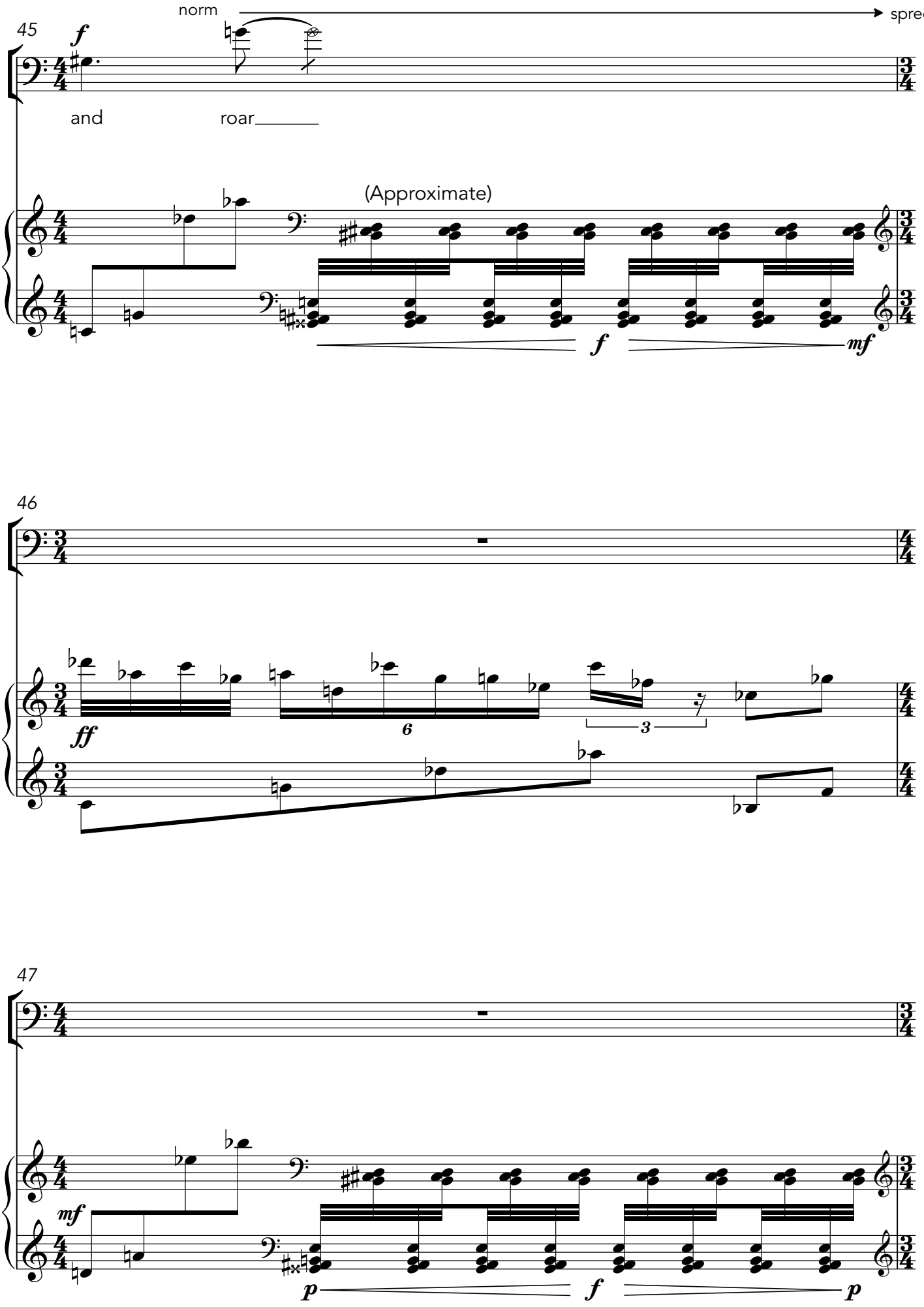

31

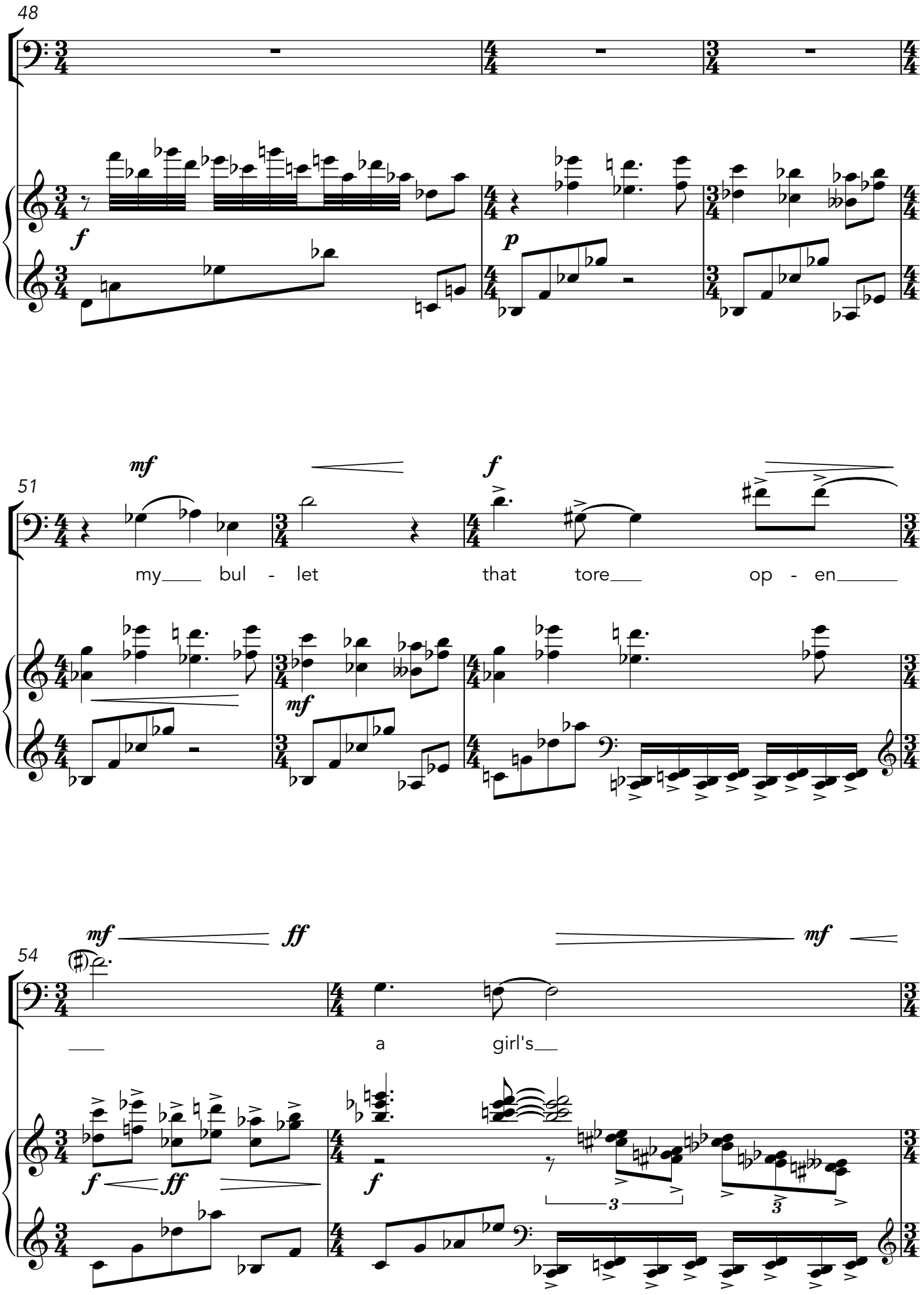
# BLACK SHADOWS

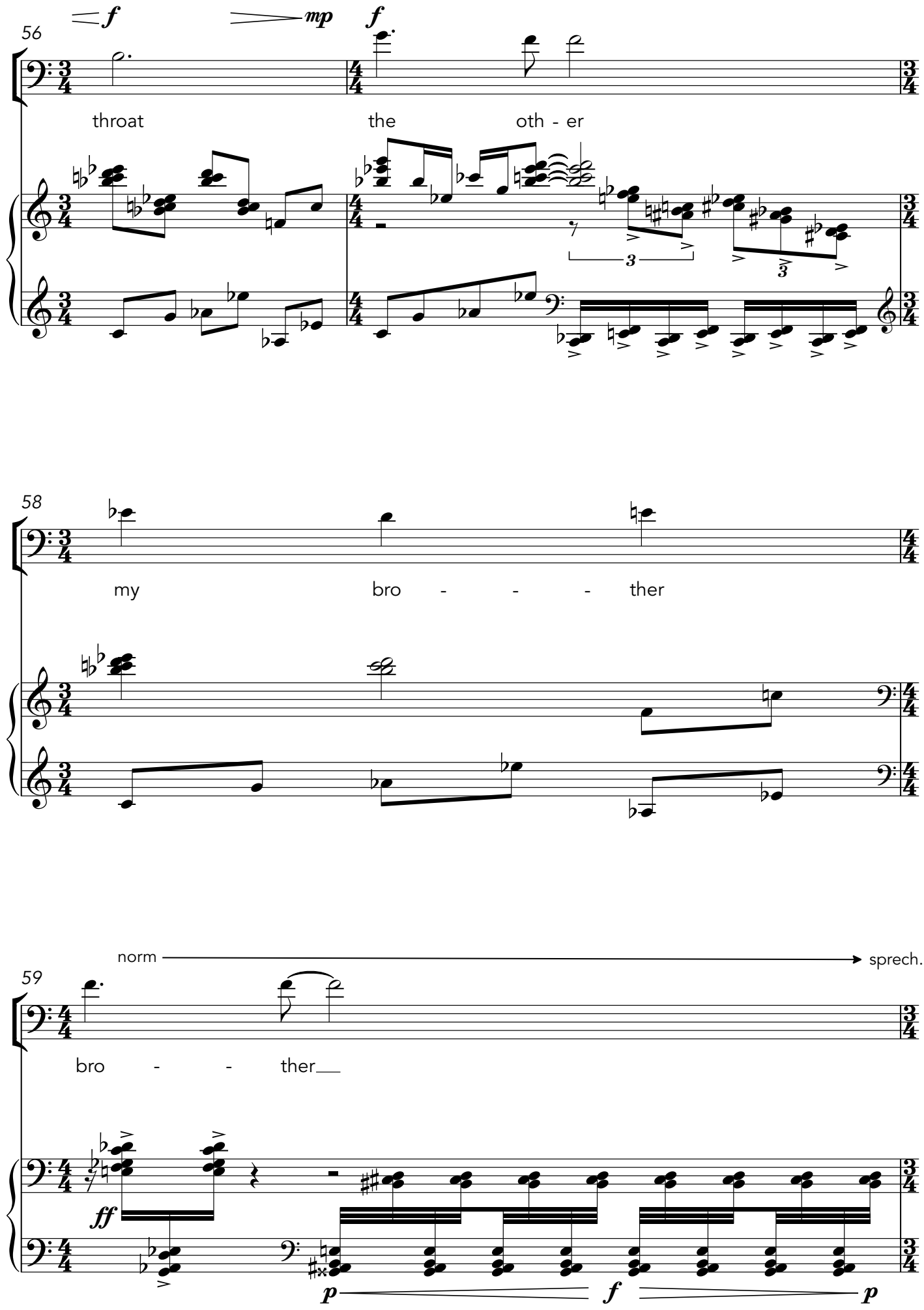


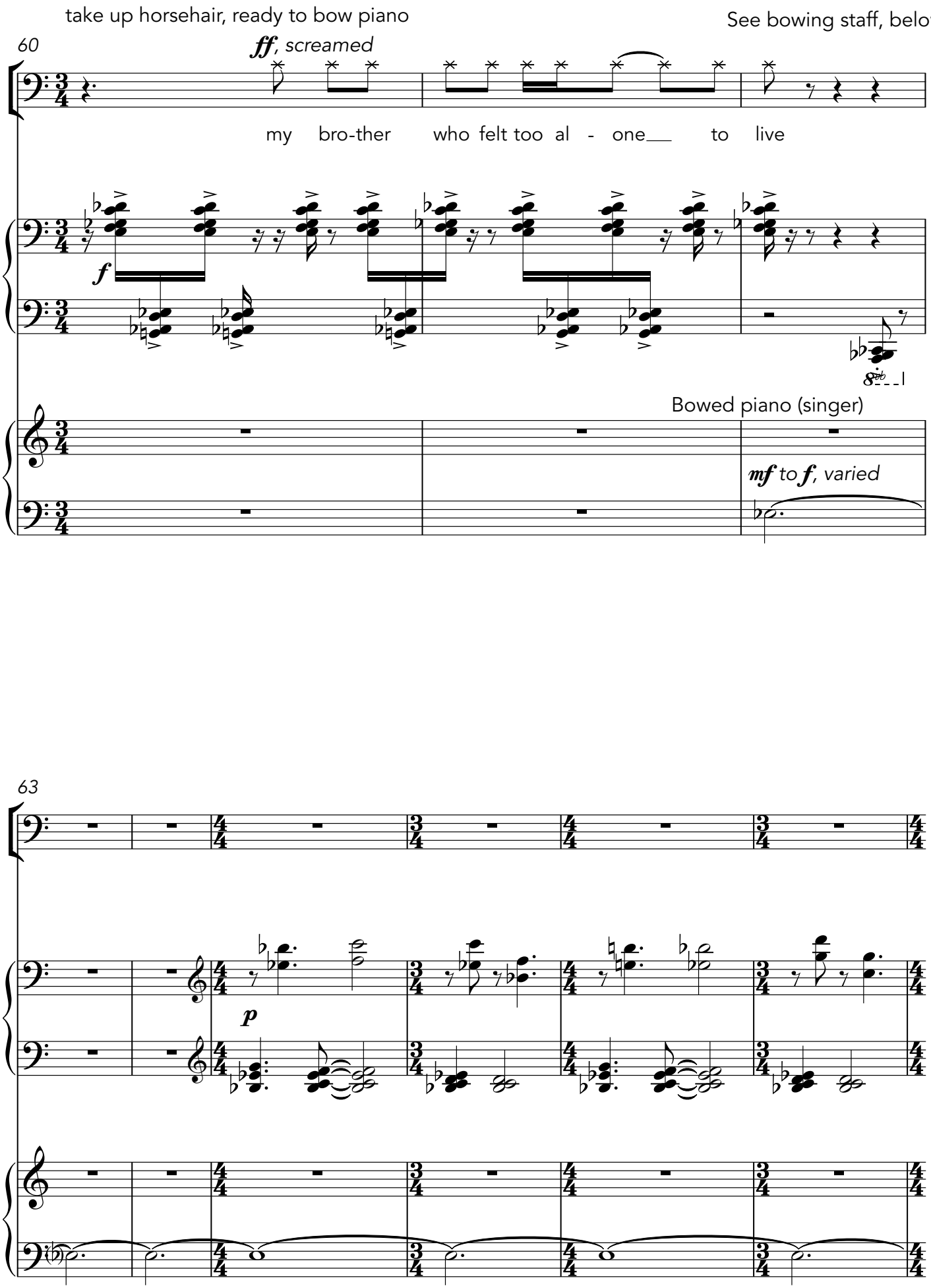

16
In the night I see your cold, still
21
face Black sha - dows
25
Black sha - dows I'd run with you if I could
29
Black sha - dows but I can't be cause I am du-ty

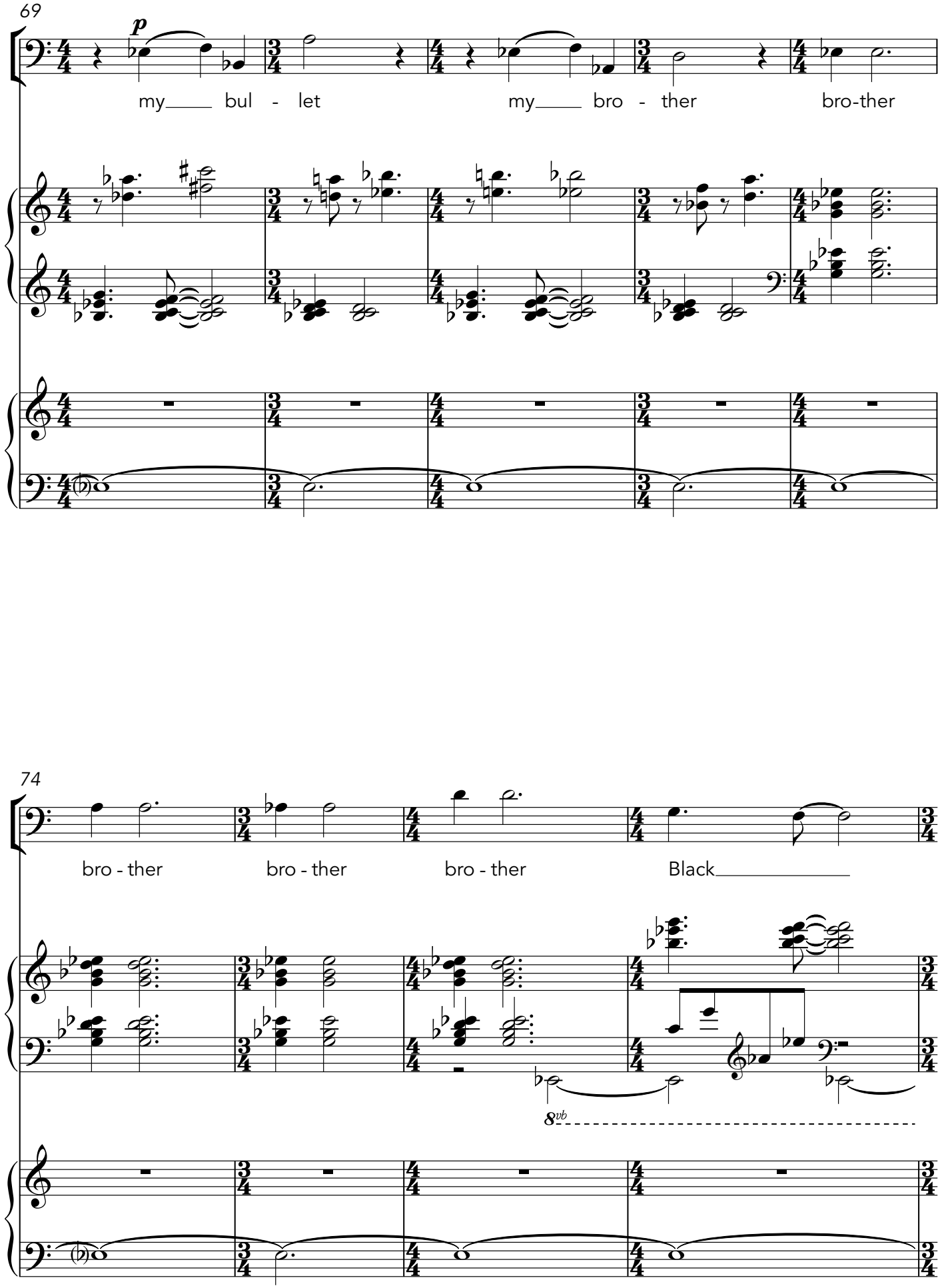

33
bound
p
In the
37
night a din-go cries out
In the
42
night
my mis-takes they rise up
mf

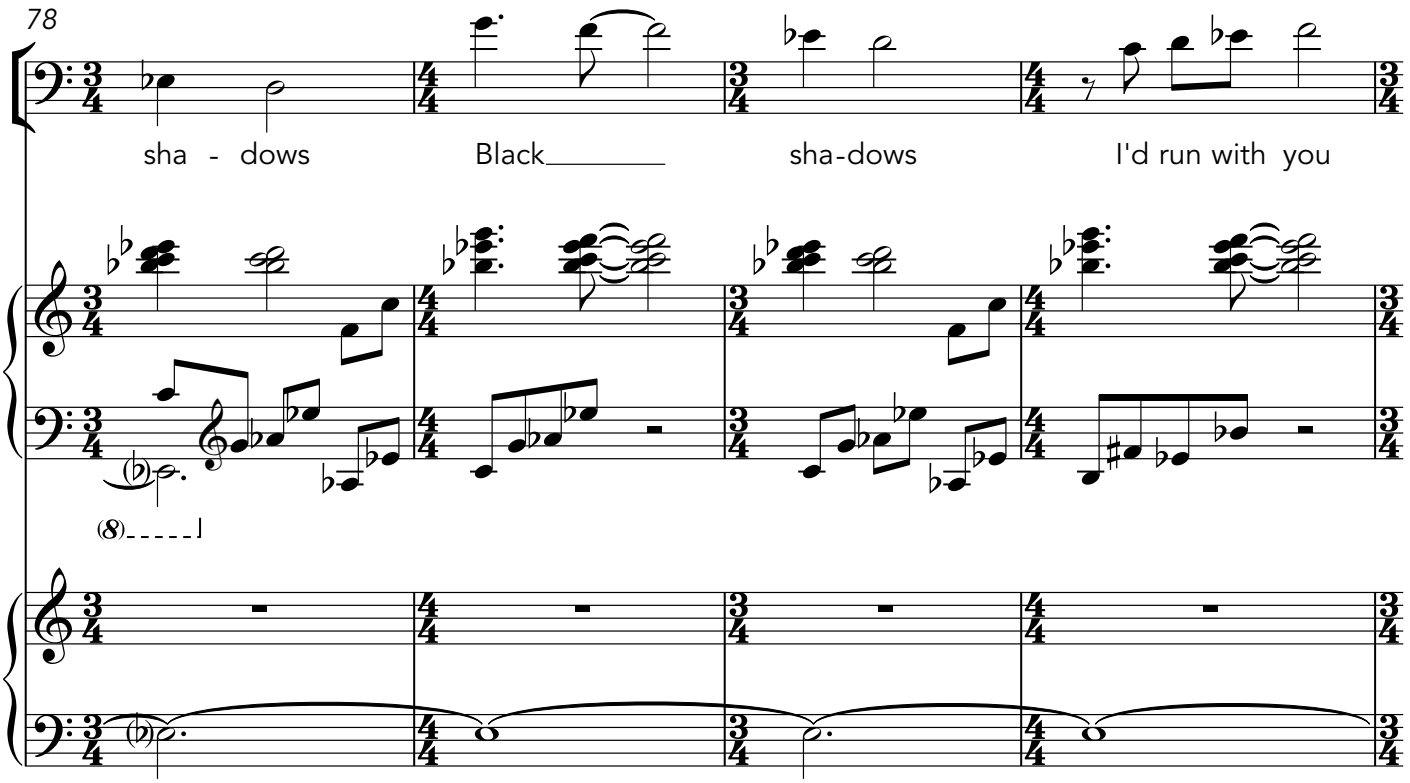

norm
sprech.
45
and
roar
(Approximate)
46
47

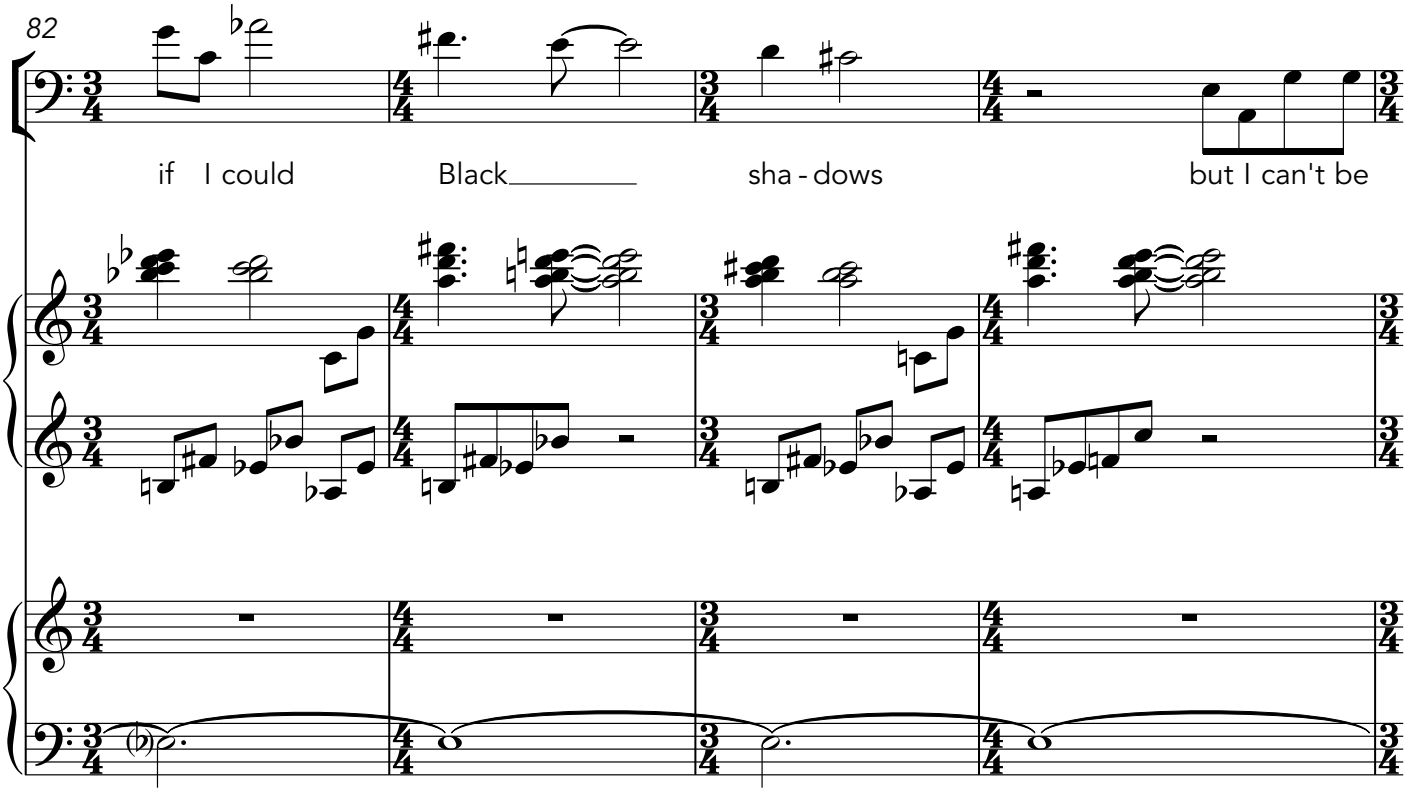

48
51
my bul - let that tore op - en
54
a girl's

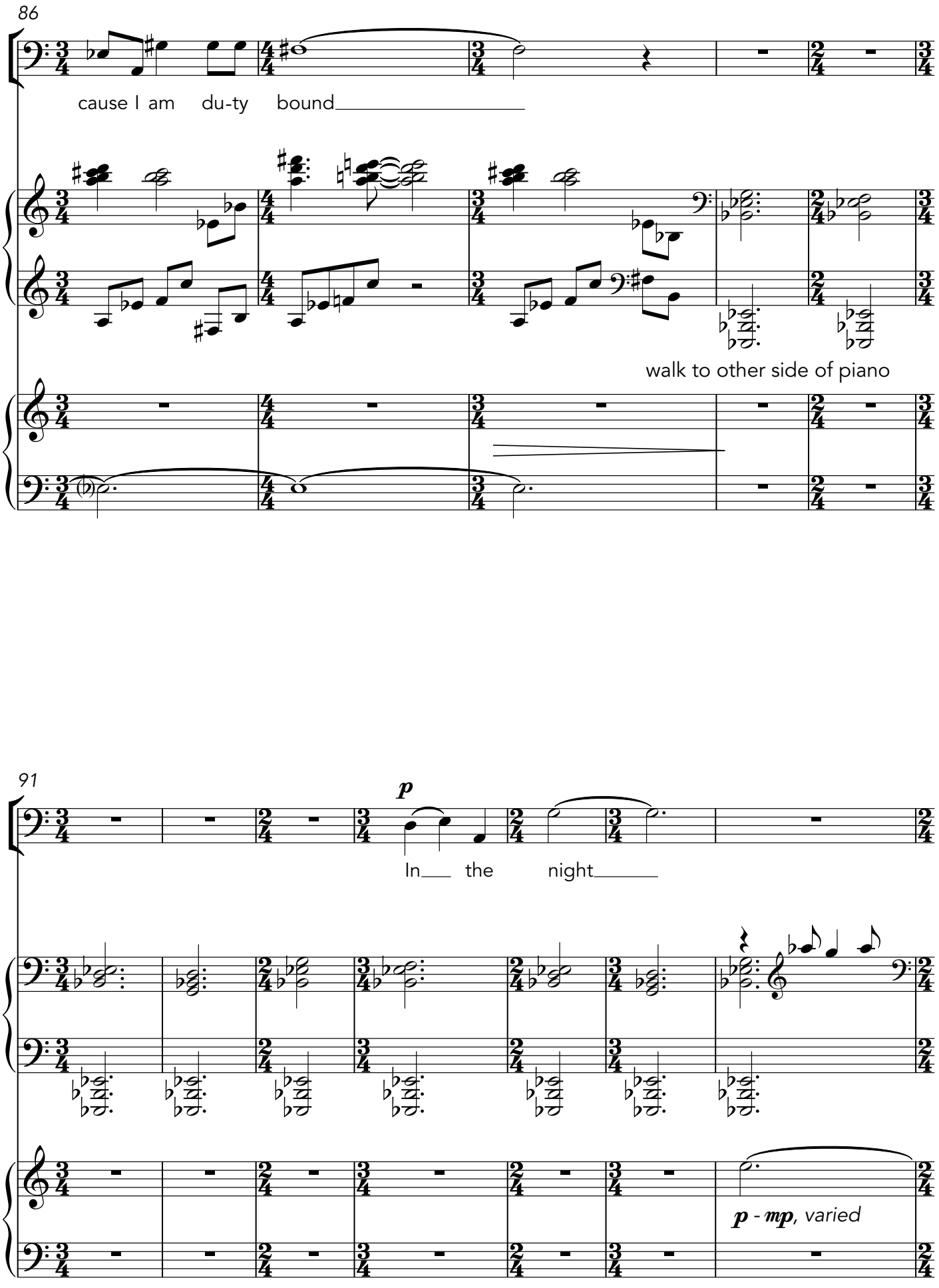

56
f
mp
f
throat
the
oth - er
58
my
bro - - - ther
59
norm
sprech.
bro - - ther
ff
p
f
p

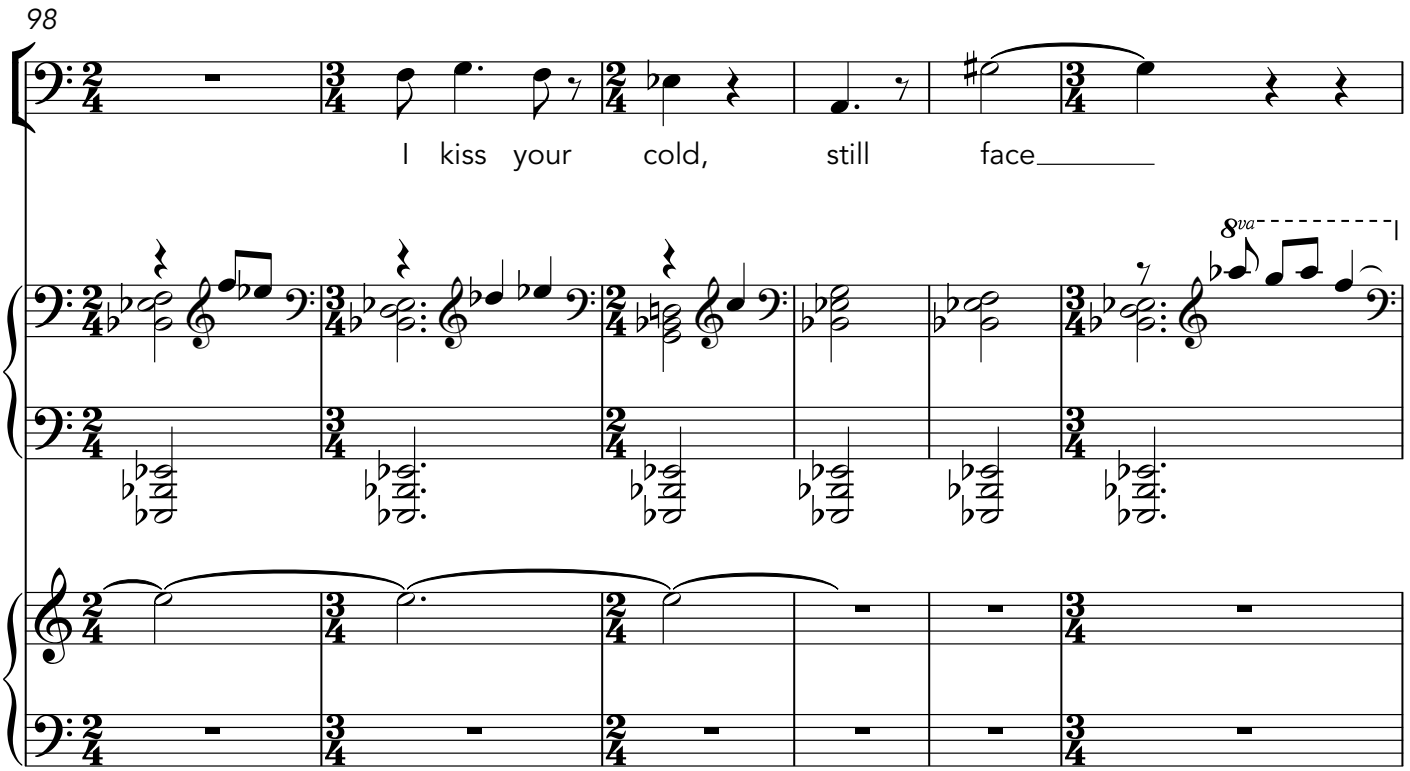

take up horsehair, ready to bow piano
See bowing staff, below.
60
ff, screamed
my bro-ther who felt too al - one___ to live
f
Bowed piano (singer)
mf to f, varied
63
p

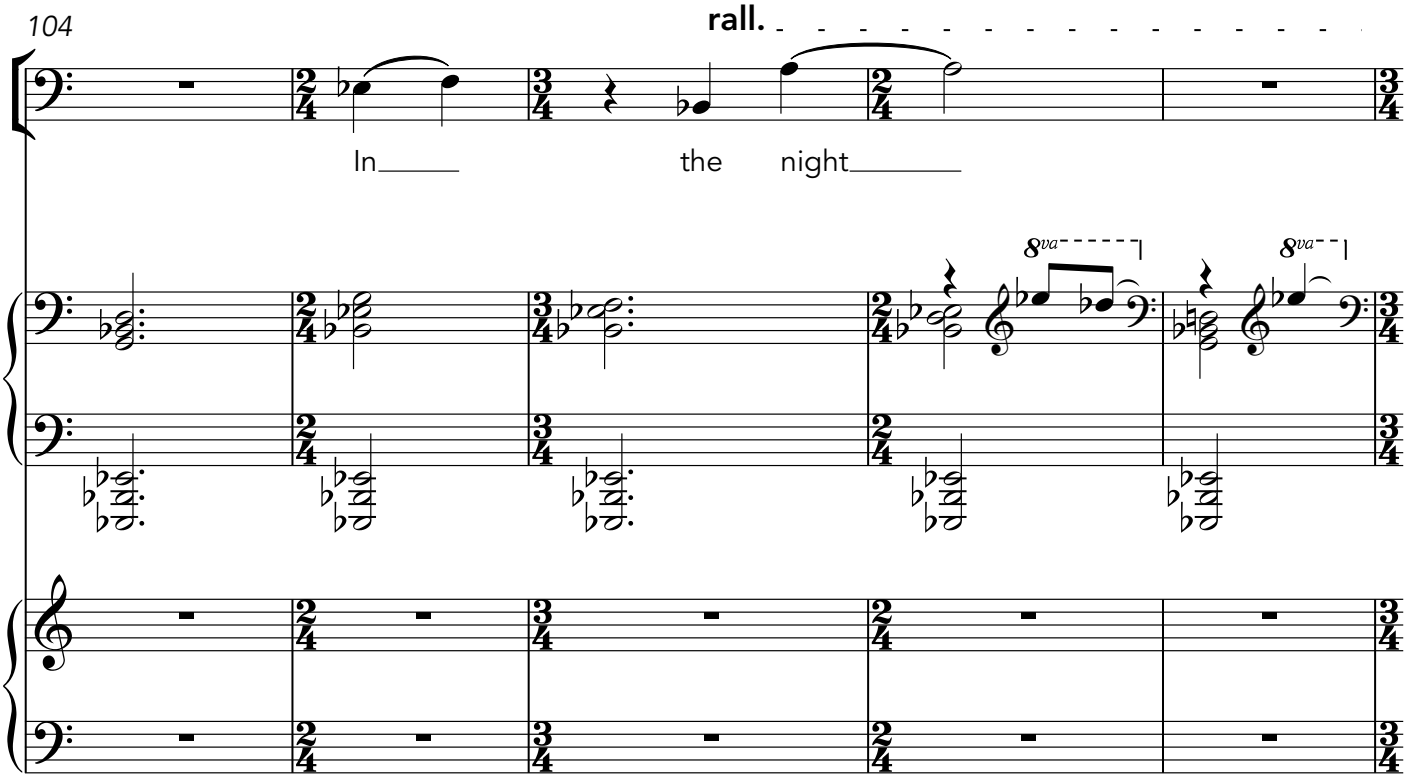

69
p
my bul - let
my bro - ther
bro-ther
74
bro - ther
bro - ther
bro - ther
Black
8vb

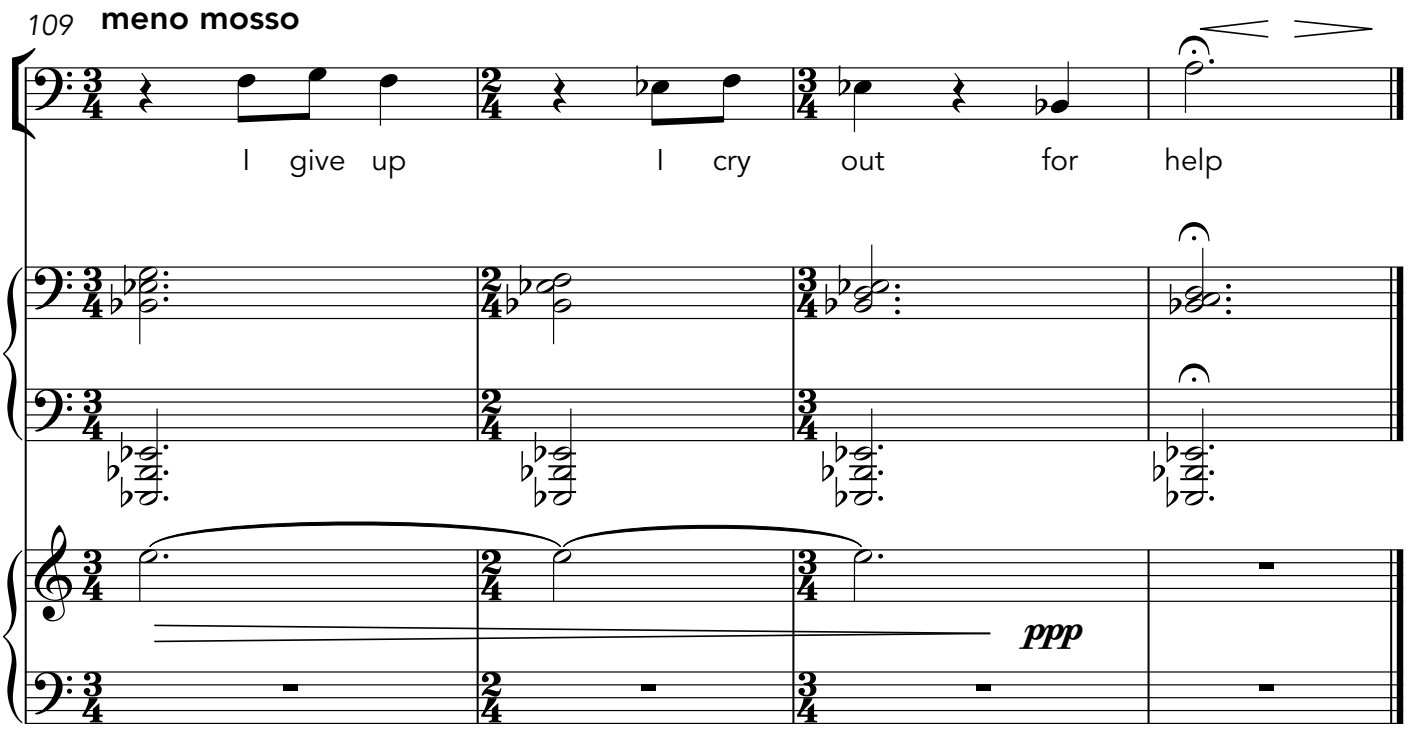

78
sha - dows
Black
sha-dows
I'd run with you


82
if I could
Black
sha - dows
but I can't be


86
cause I am du-ty bound
walk to other side of piano
91
p
In the night
p - mp, varied

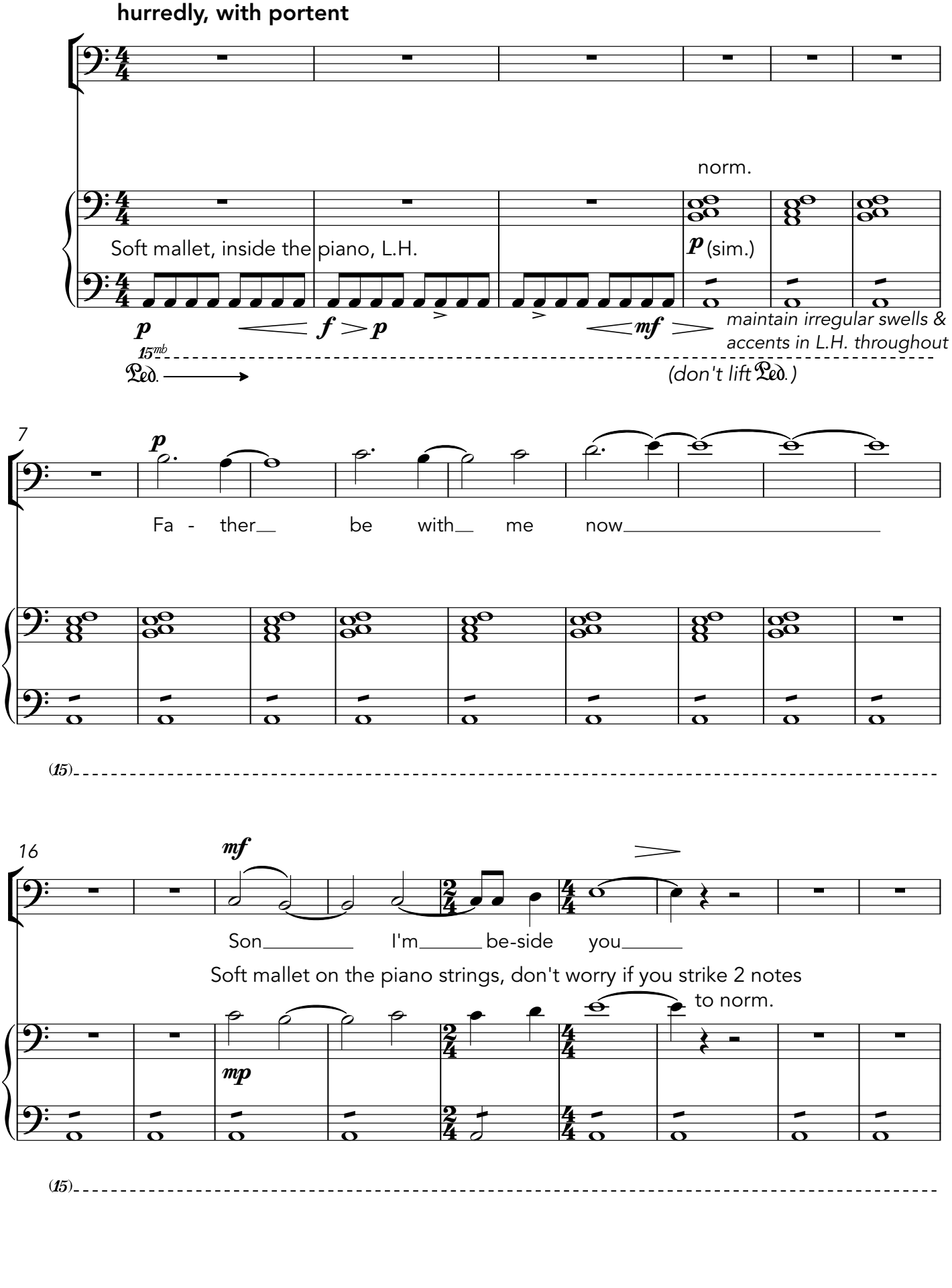

98
I kiss your cold, still face
8va

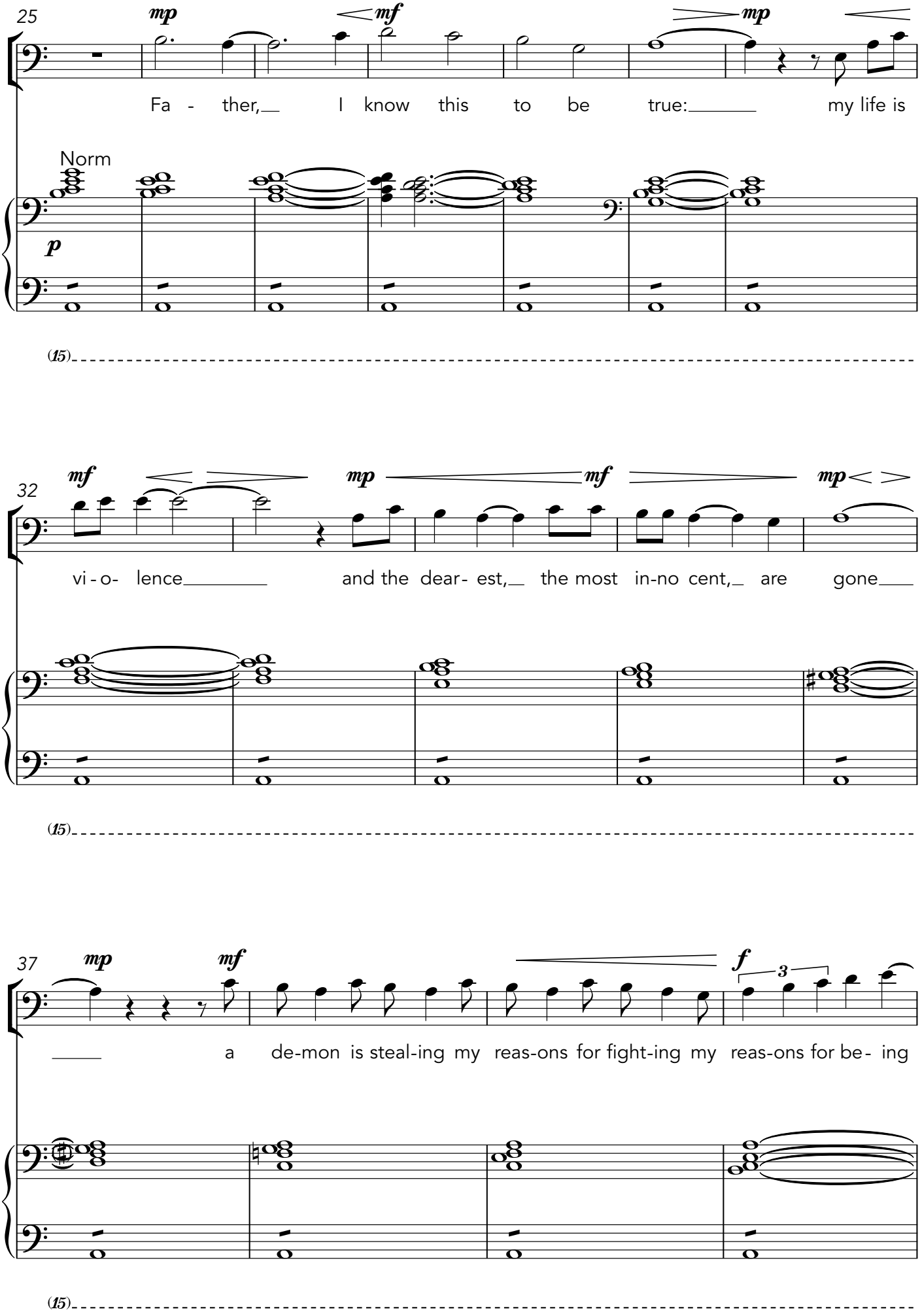

104
rall.
In the night
8va
8va

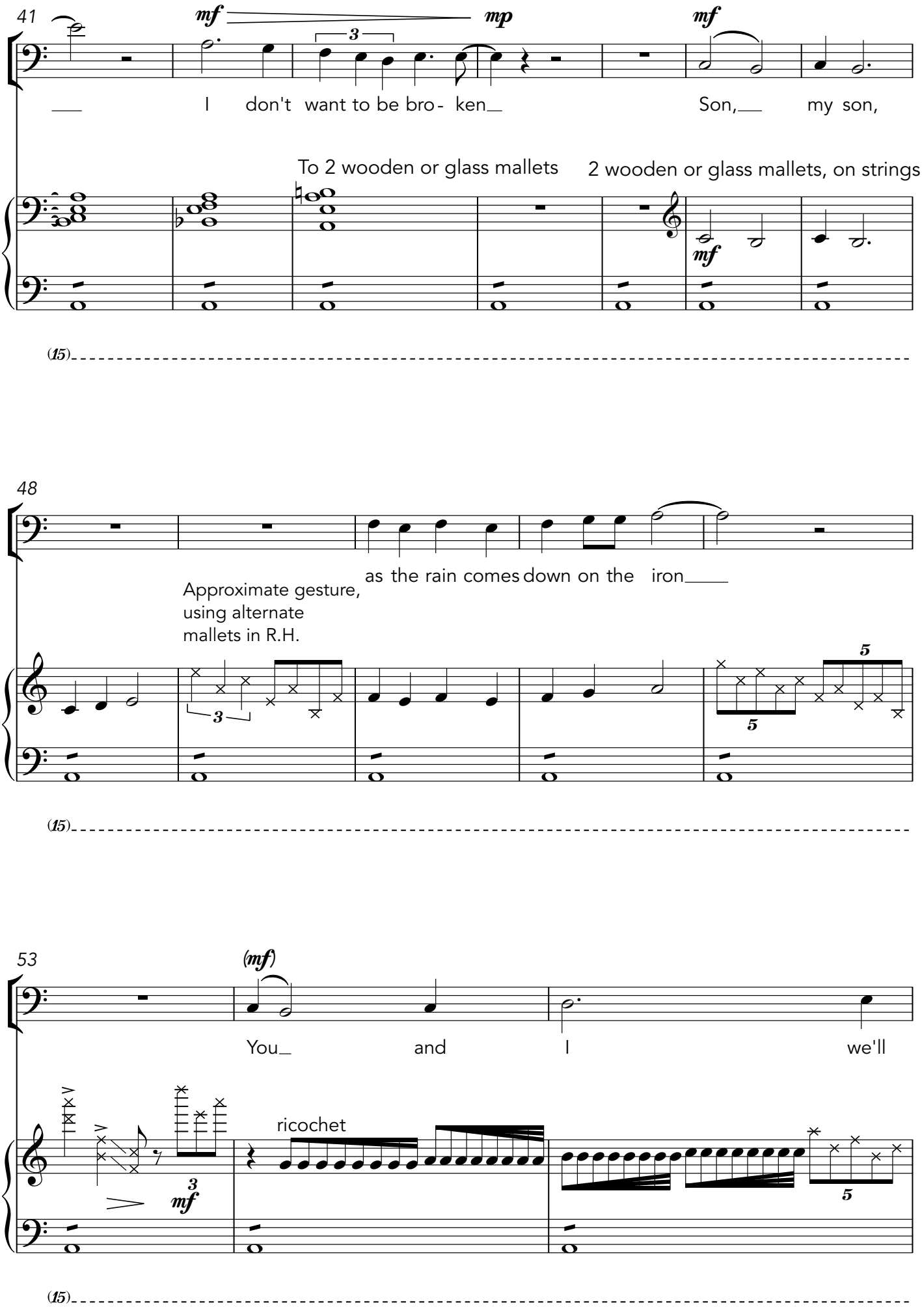


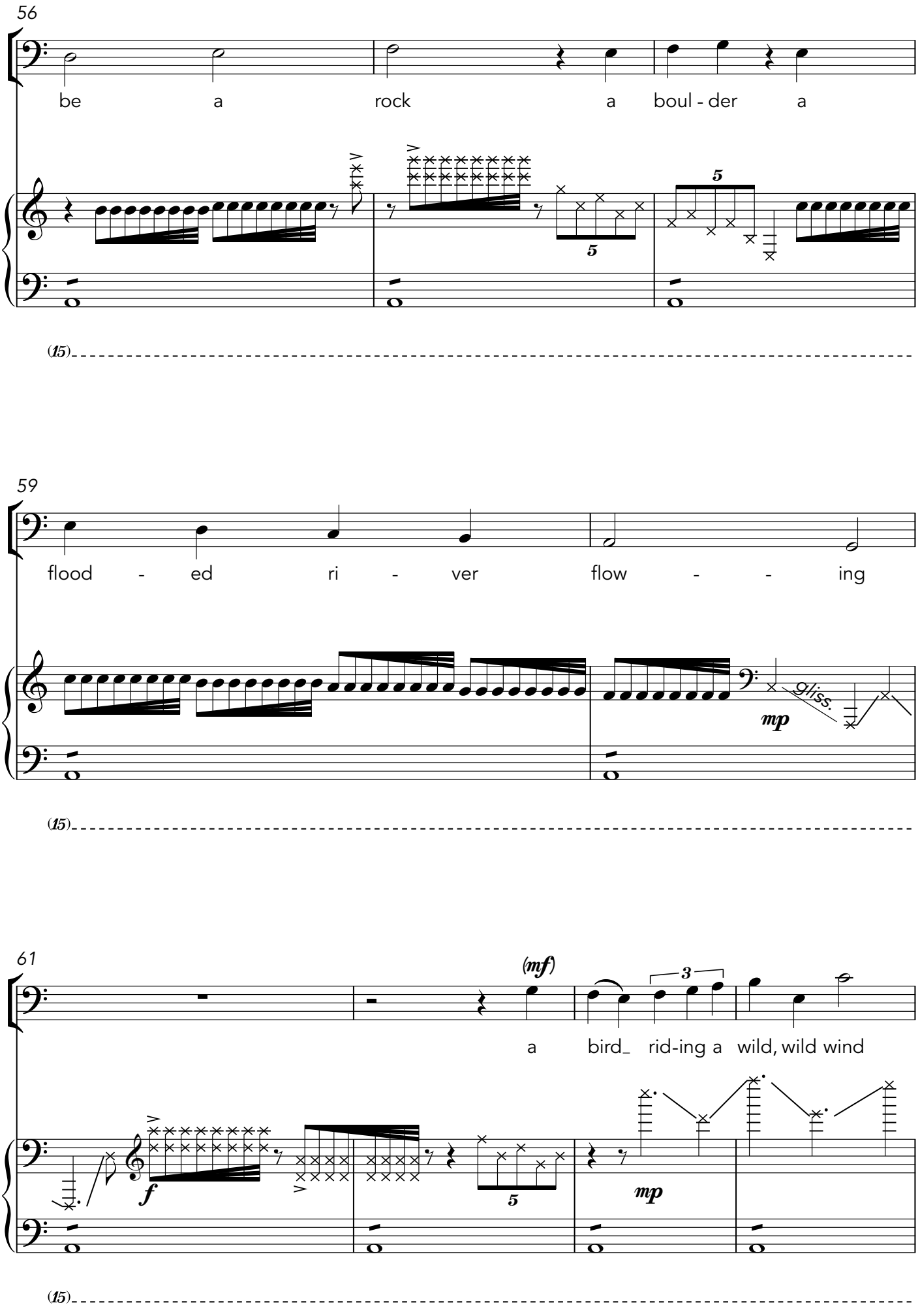

Remove sheets of paper from piano.

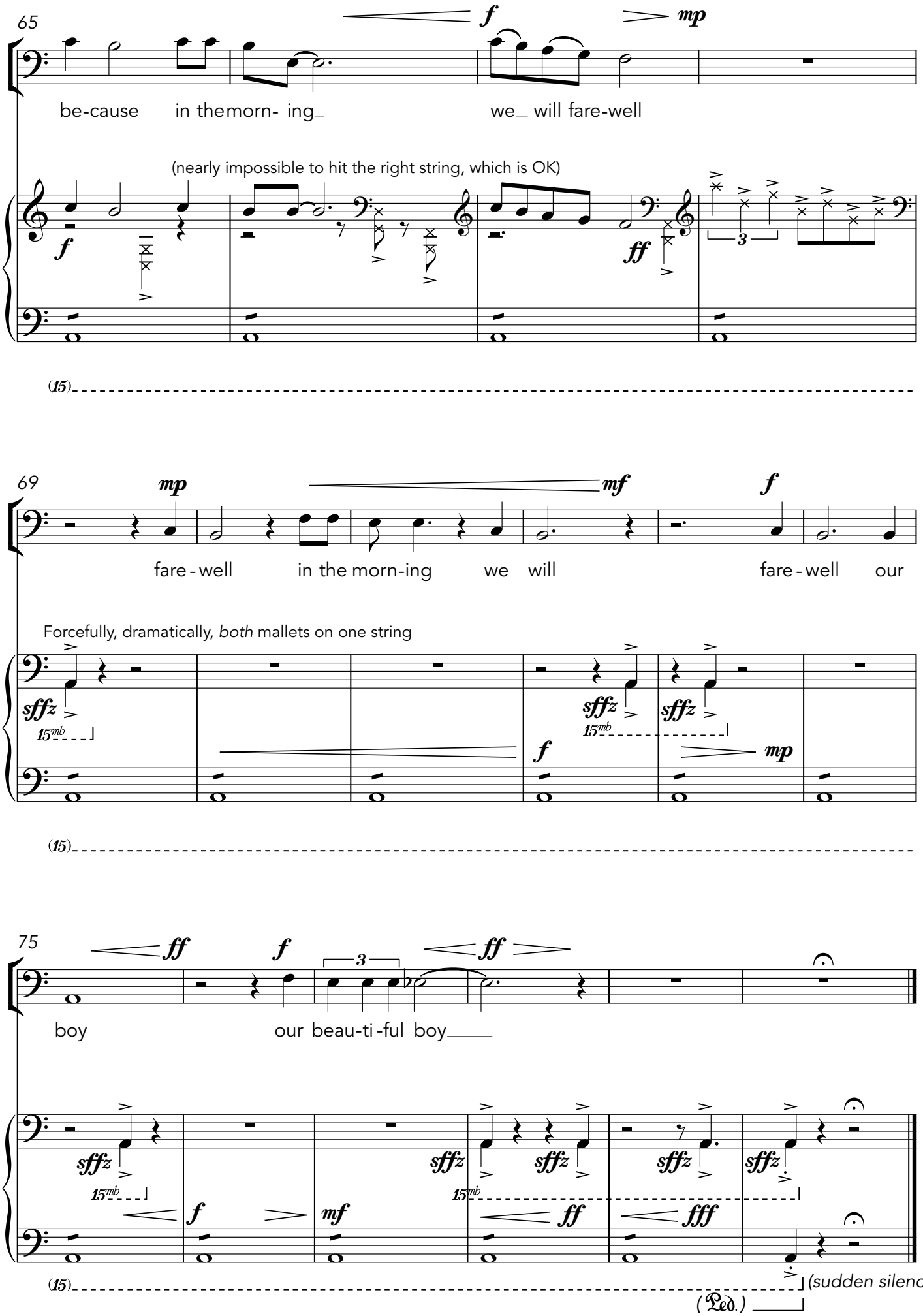
# RAIN ON THE IRON



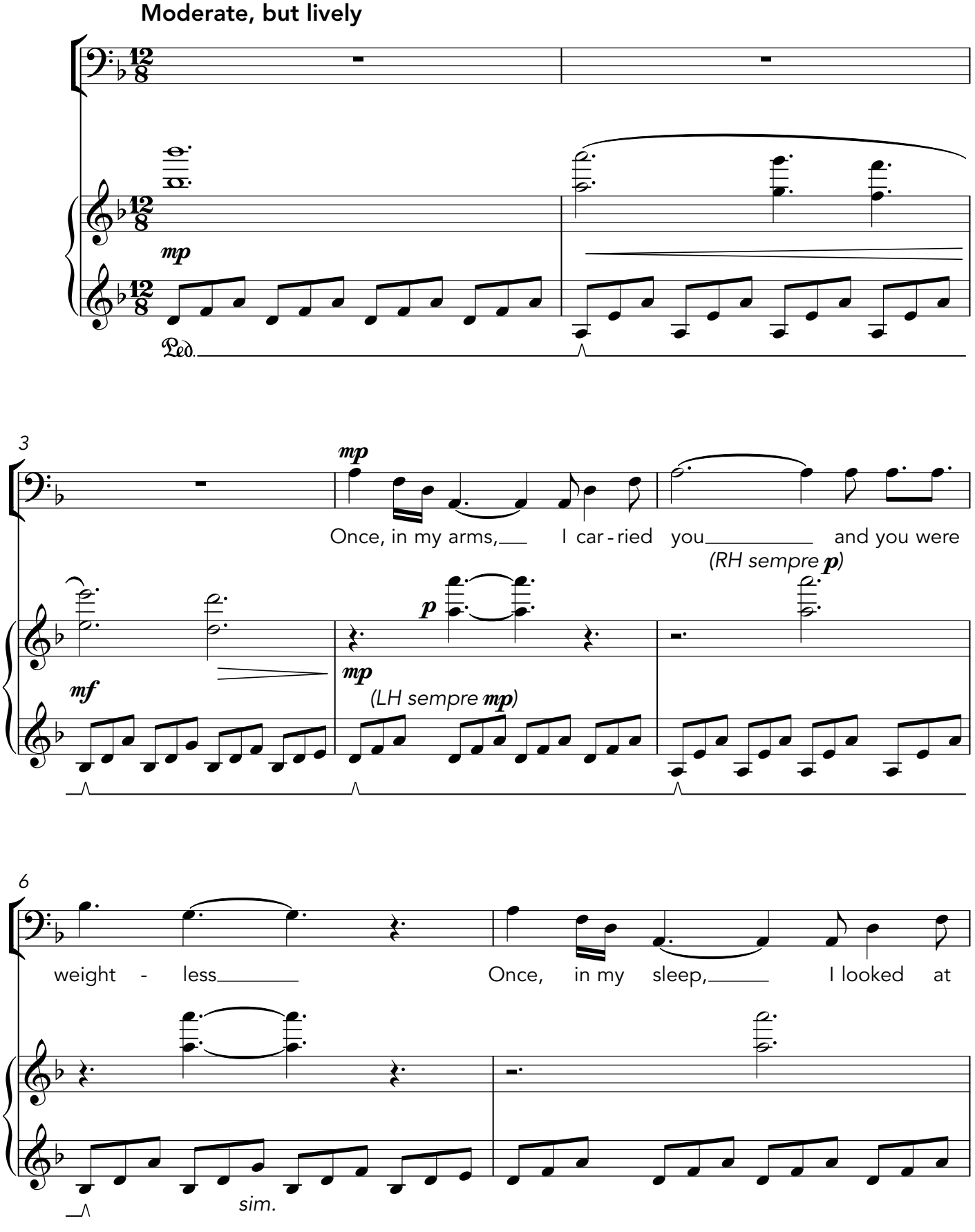

25
mp
mf
mp
Fa - ther, I know this to be true: my life is
Norm
p
(15)
32
mf
mp
mf
mp
vi - o- lence and the dear- est, the most in-no cent, are gone
(15)
37
mp
mf
f
3
a de-mon is steal-ing my reas-ons for fight-ing my reas-ons for be- ing
(15)

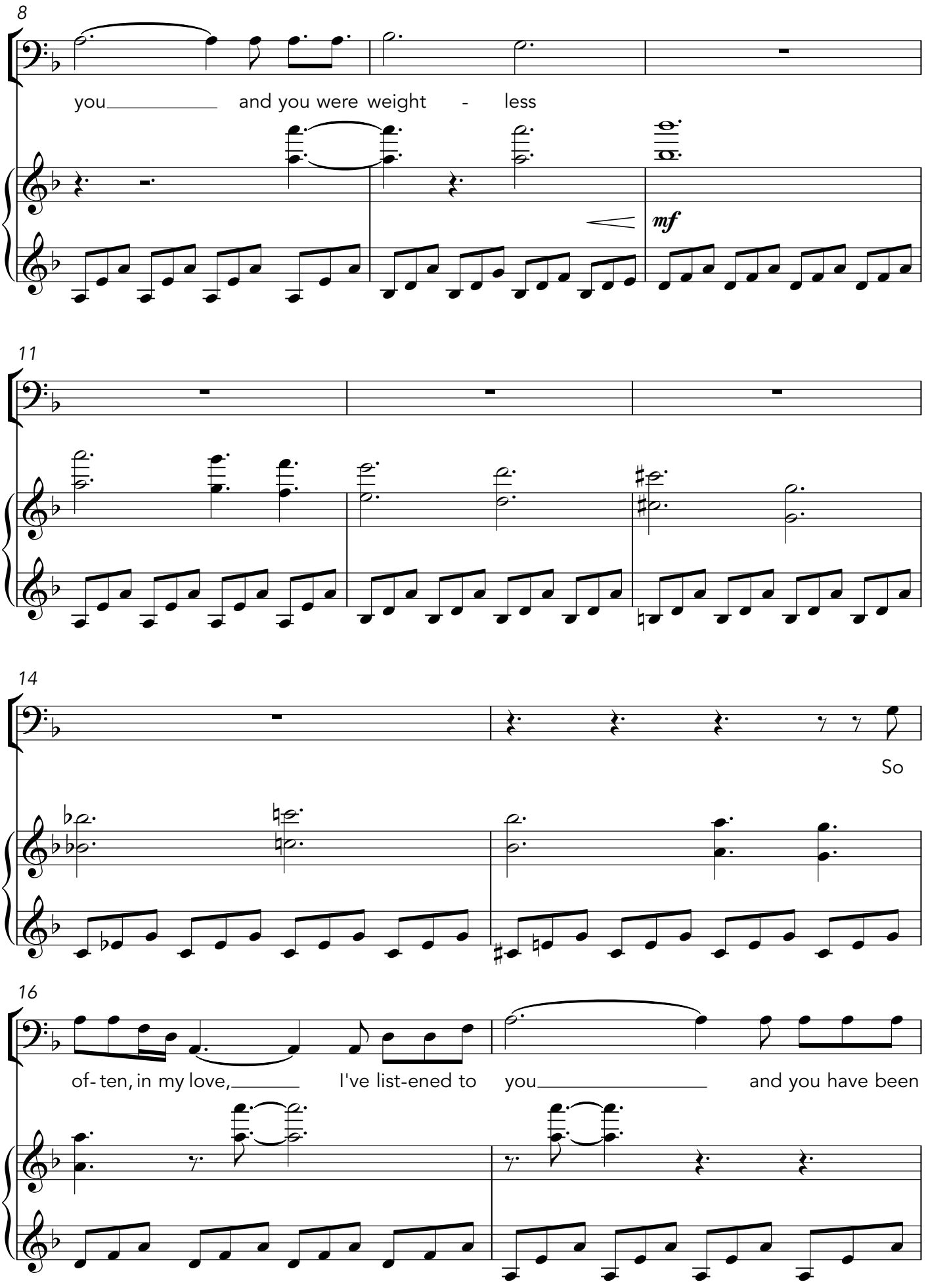

41
mf
mp
mf
I don't want to be bro - ken
Son, my son,
To 2 wooden or glass mallets
2 wooden or glass mallets, on strings
mf
(15)
48
as the rain comes down on the iron
Approximate gesture, using alternate mallets in R.H.
(15)
53
(mf)
You and I we'll
ricochet
mf
(15)

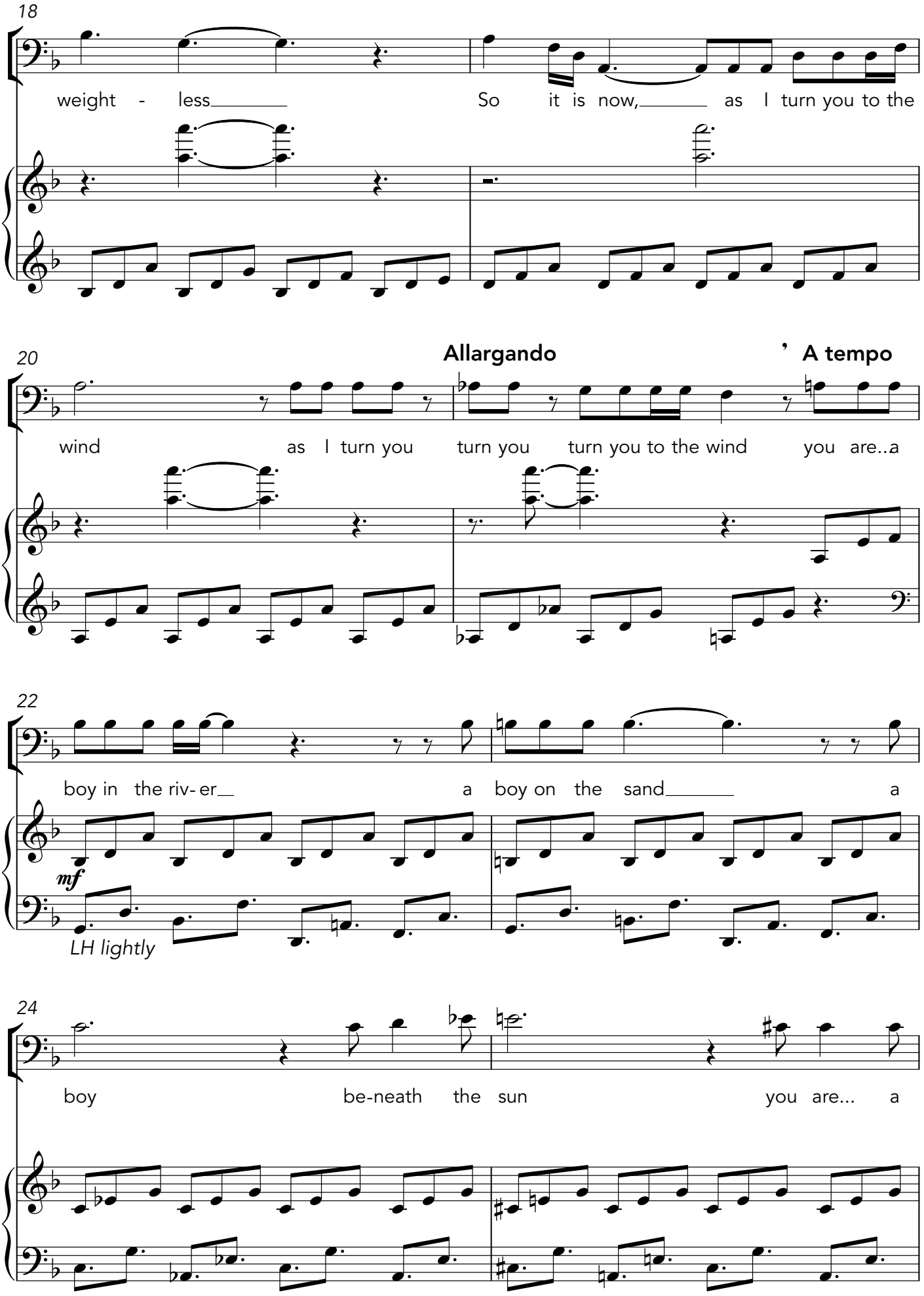

56
be a rock a boul - der a
59
flood - ed ri - ver flow - - ing
gliss.
mp
61
(mf)
a bird_ rid-ing a wild, wild wind
f
mp

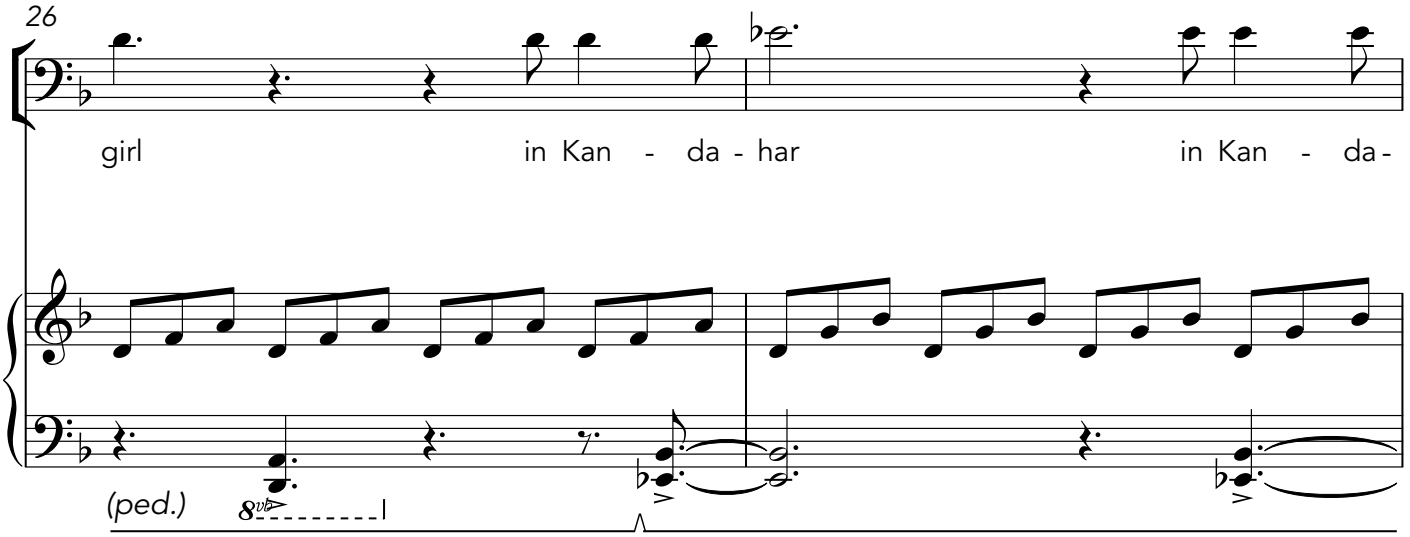

65
f
mp
be-cause in the morn- ing_ we_ will fare-well
(nearly impossible to hit the right string, which is OK)
f
ff
3
(15)
69
mp
mf
f
fare - well in the morn-ing we will fare - well our
Forcefully, dramatically, both mallets on one string
sffz
15mb
f
mp
(15)
75
ff
f
3
ff
boy our beau-ti - ful boy
sffz
15mb
f
mf
ff
fff
(15)
(sudden silence)
(Ped.)

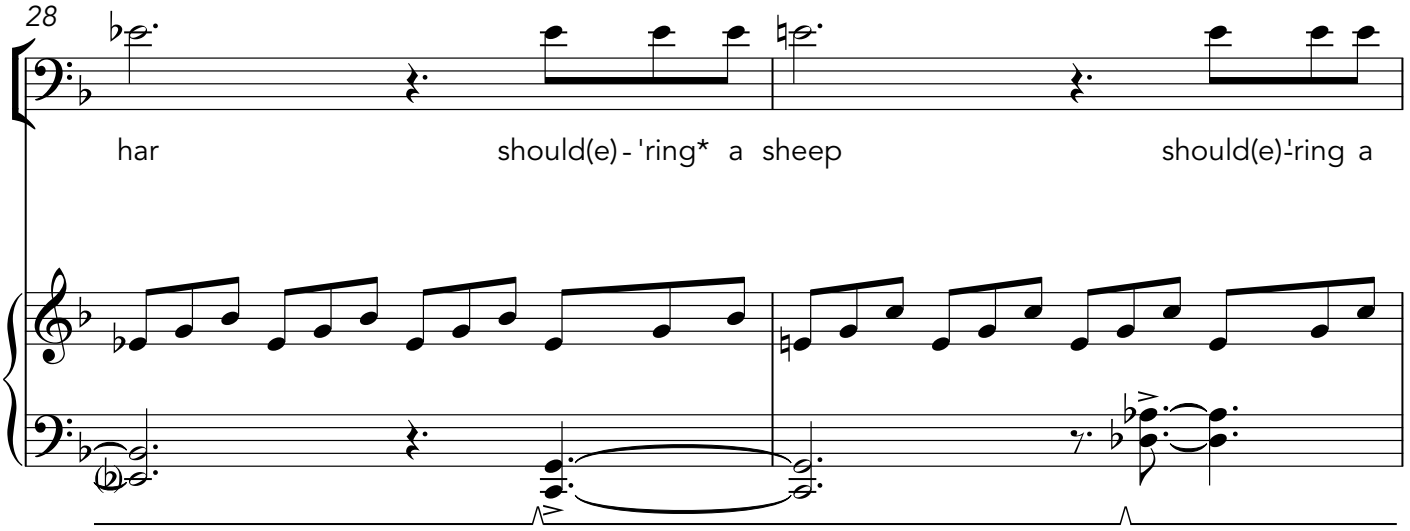
# WEIGHTLESS

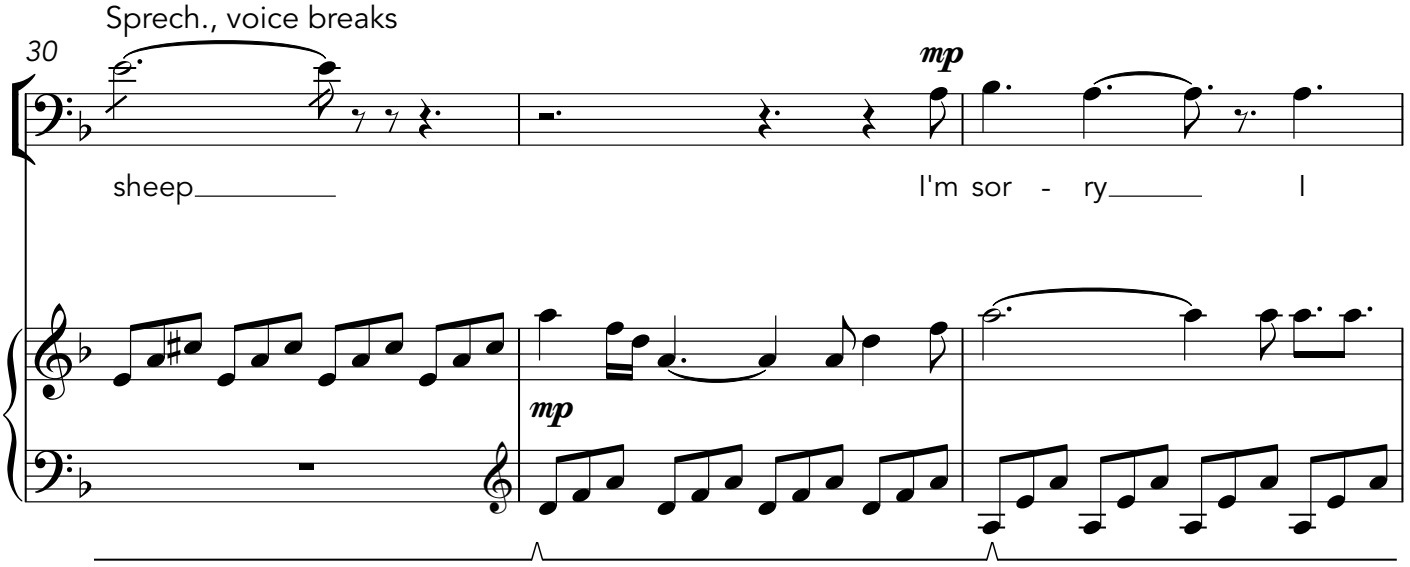

Moderate, but lively
mp
Ped.
3
mp
Once, in my arms, I car - ried you and you were
(RH sempre p)
mf
p
mp
(LH sempre mp)
6
weight - less
Once, in my sleep, I looked at
sim.


8
you and you were weight - less
mf
11
14
So
16
of- ten, in my love, I've list-ened to you and you have been

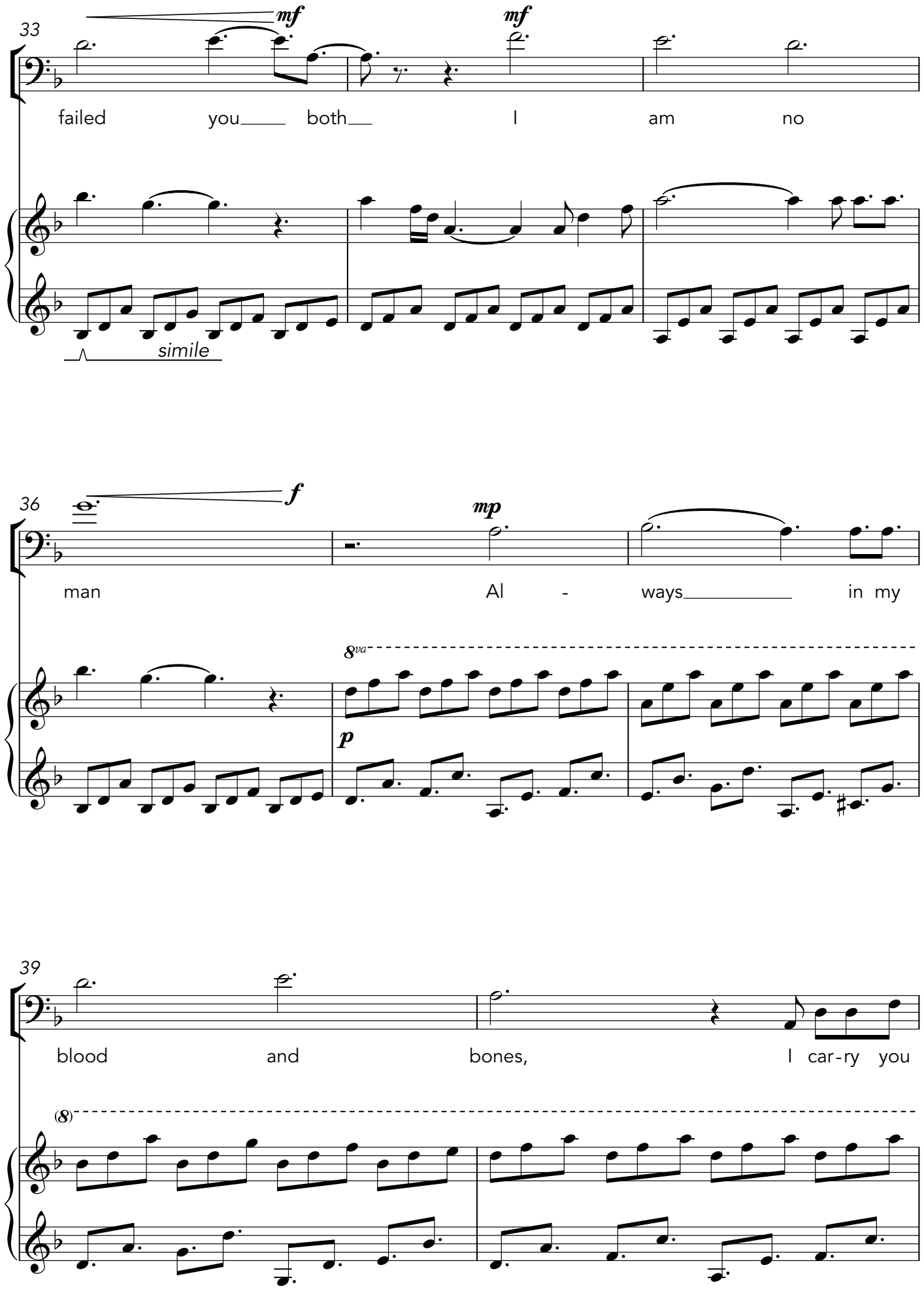

18
weight - less
So it is now,
as I turn you to the
20
Allargando
' A tempo
wind
as I turn you
turn you
turn you to the wind
you are..a
22
boy in the riv- er
a boy on the sand
a
mf
LH lightly
24
boy
be-neath the sun
you are...
a

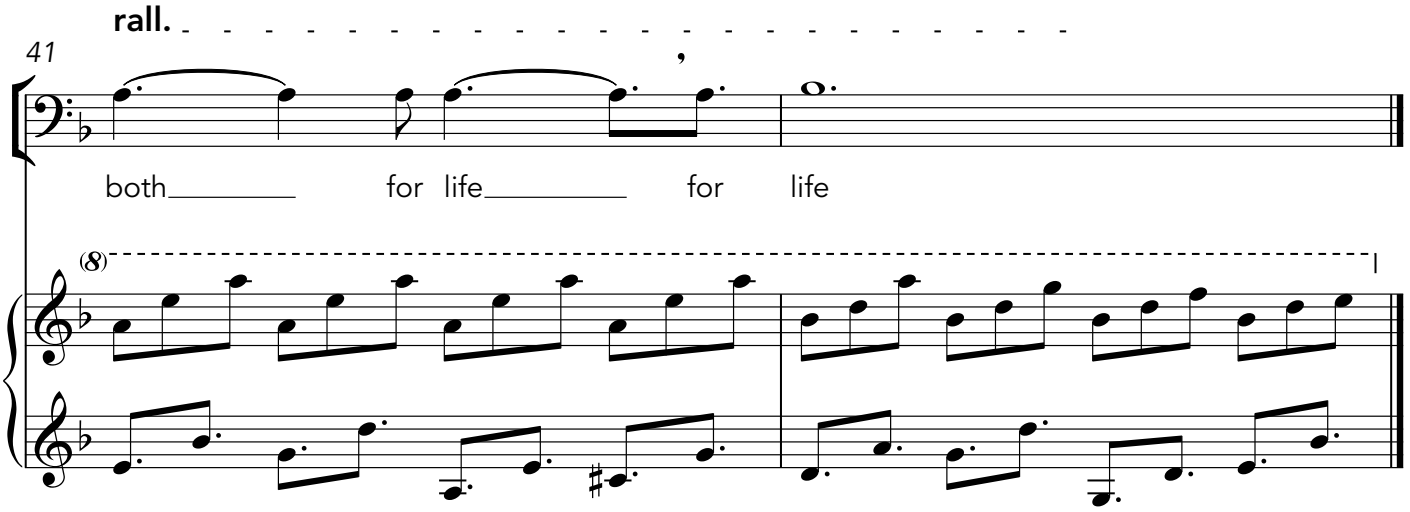


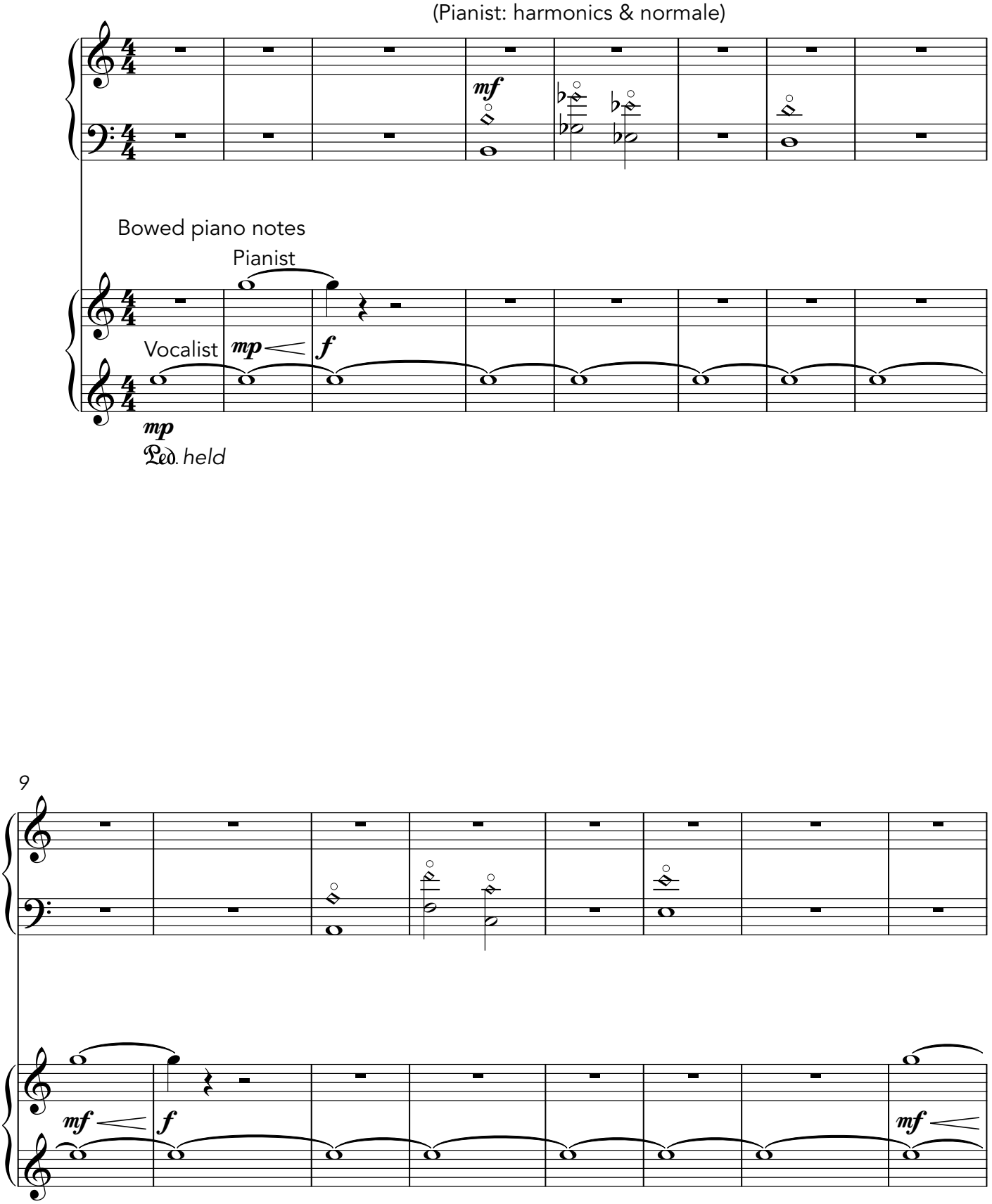



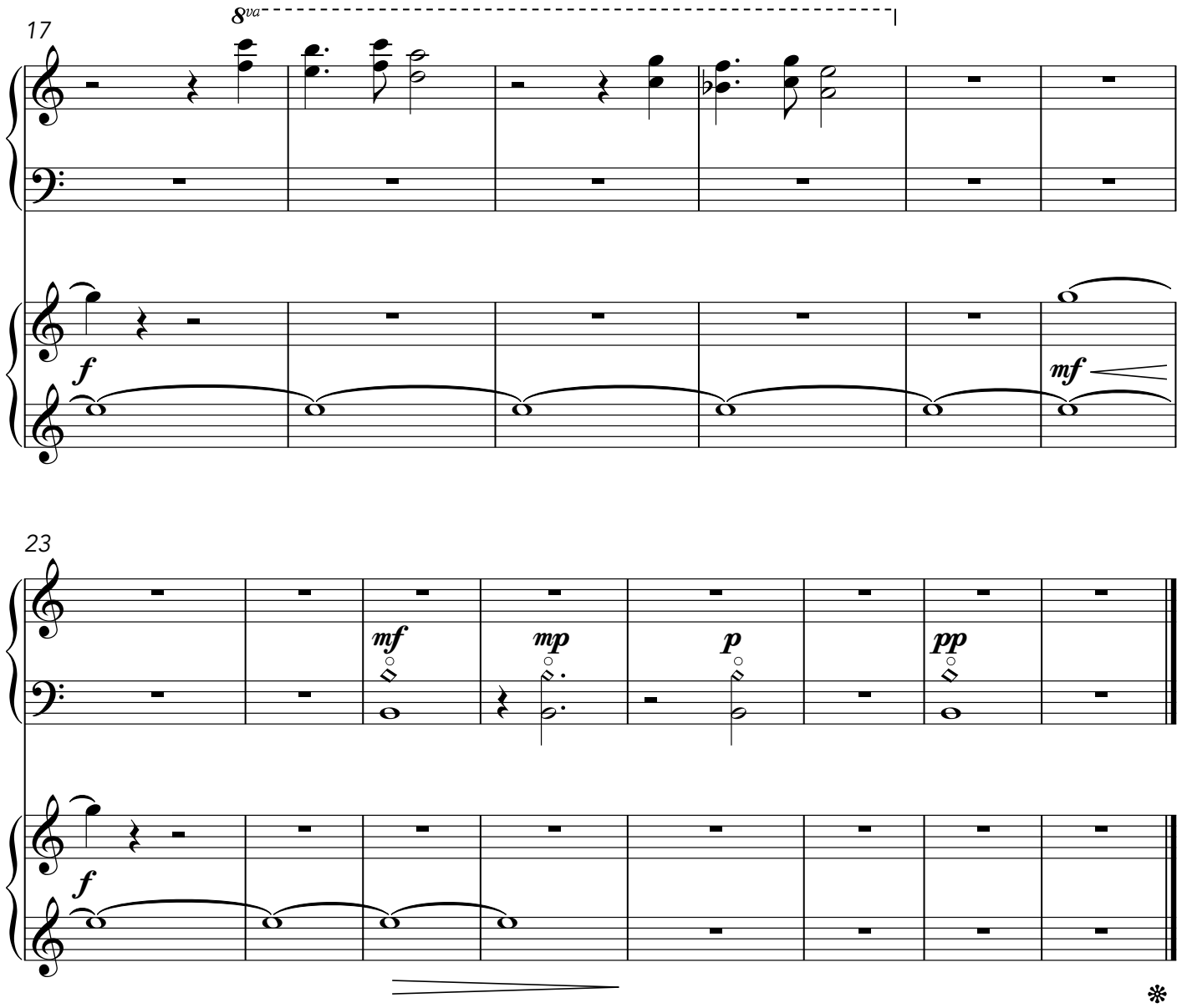

* The word 'shouldering' is pronounced in two syllables, not three.


33
mf
mf
failed you both I am no
simile
36
f
mp
man Al - ways in my
8va
p
39
blood and bones, I car-ry you
(8)

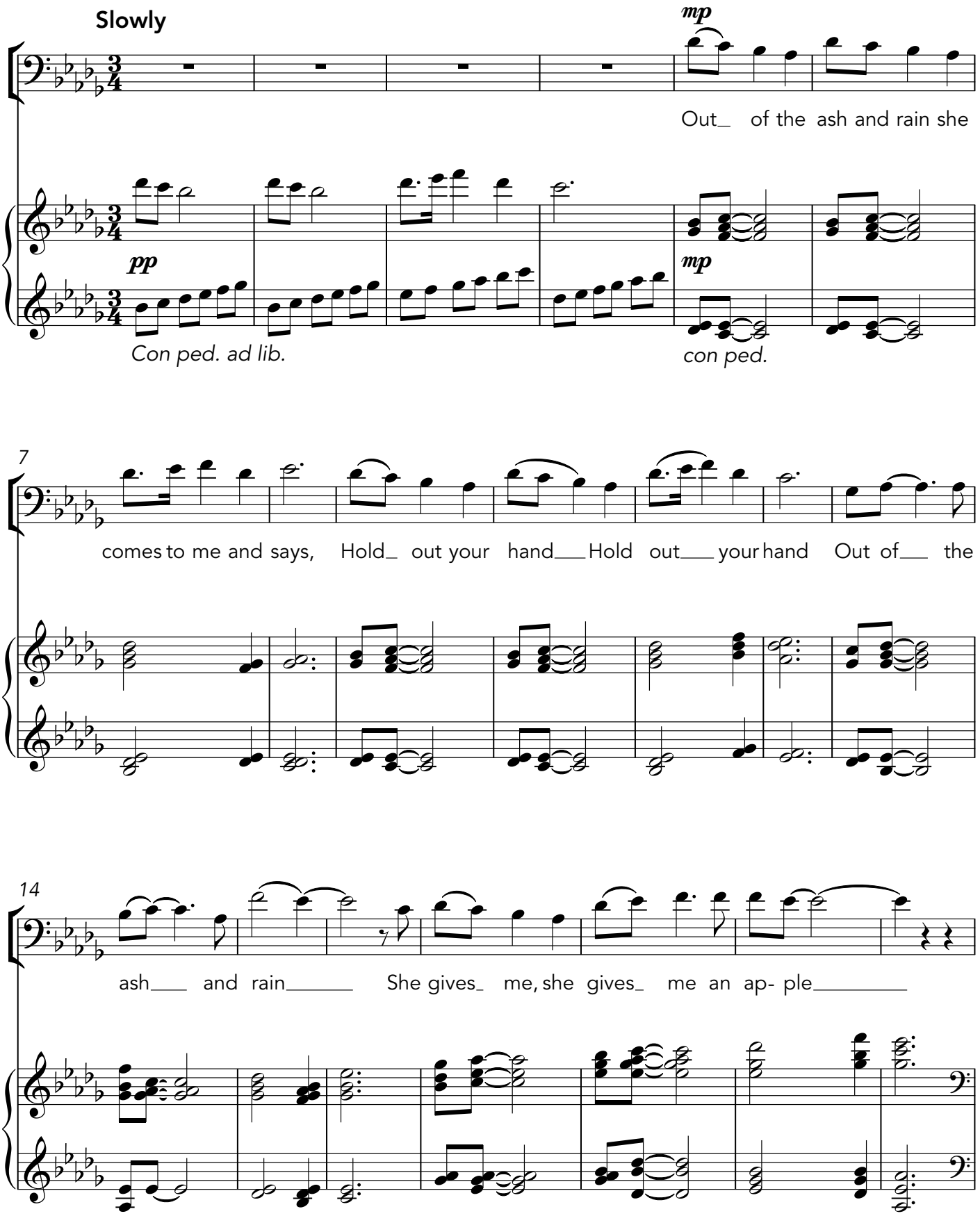

rall.
41
both for life for life
(8)

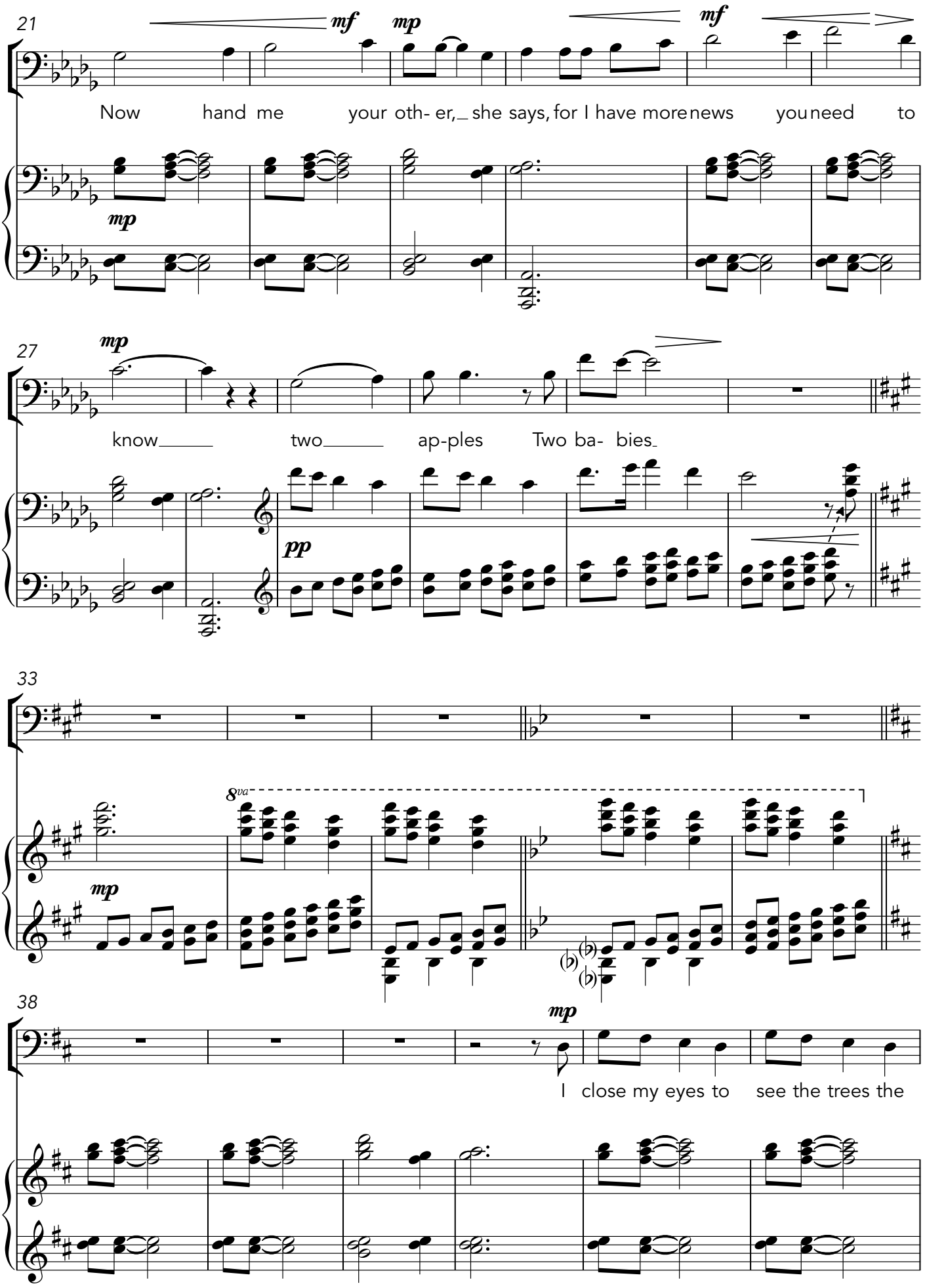
# lacuna 4

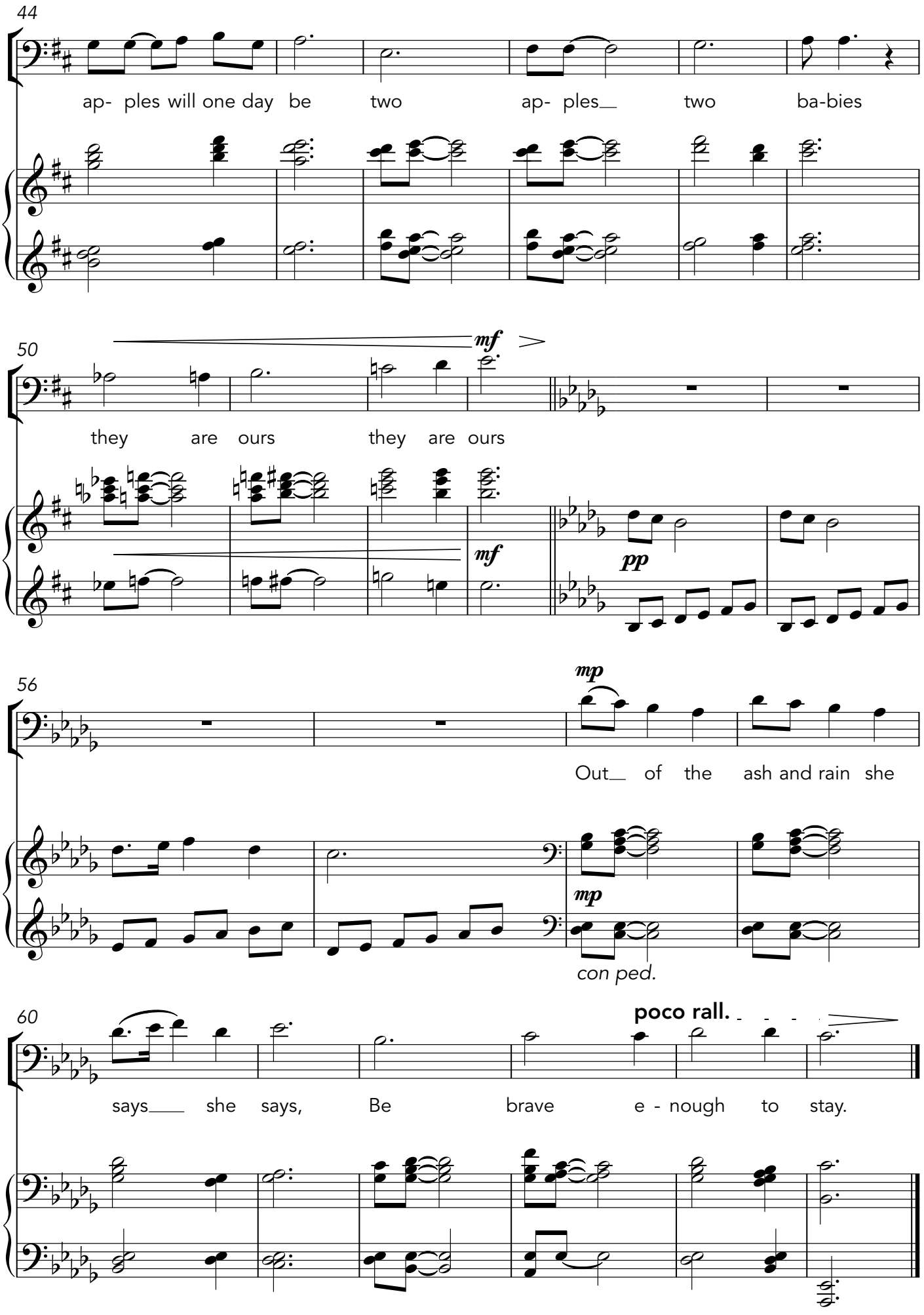

(Pianist: harmonics & normale)
mf
Bowed piano notes
Pianist
Vocalist
mp
f
mp
Ped. held
9
mf
f
mf


17
8va
f
mf
23
mf
mp
p
pp
f
*

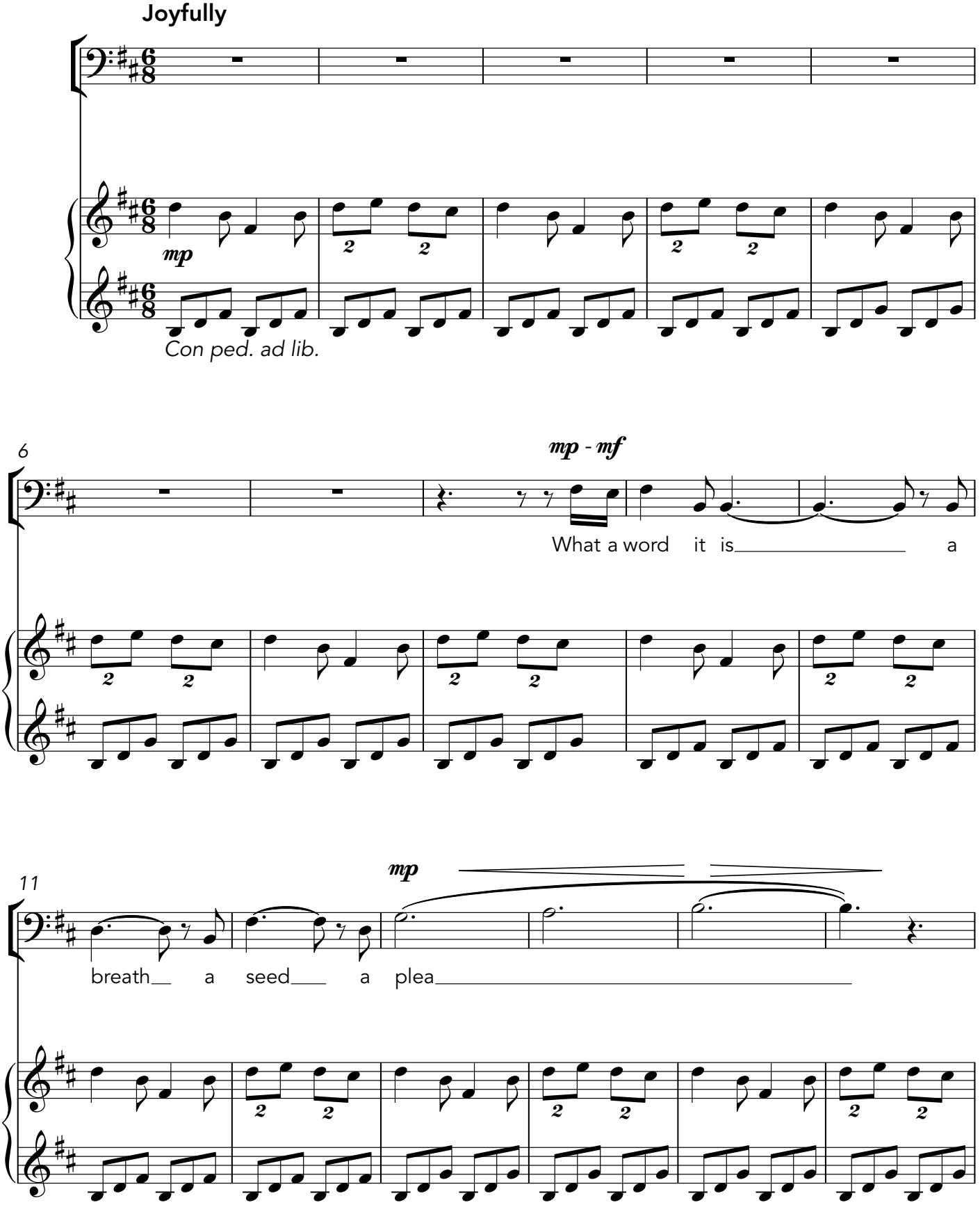
# TWO APPLES

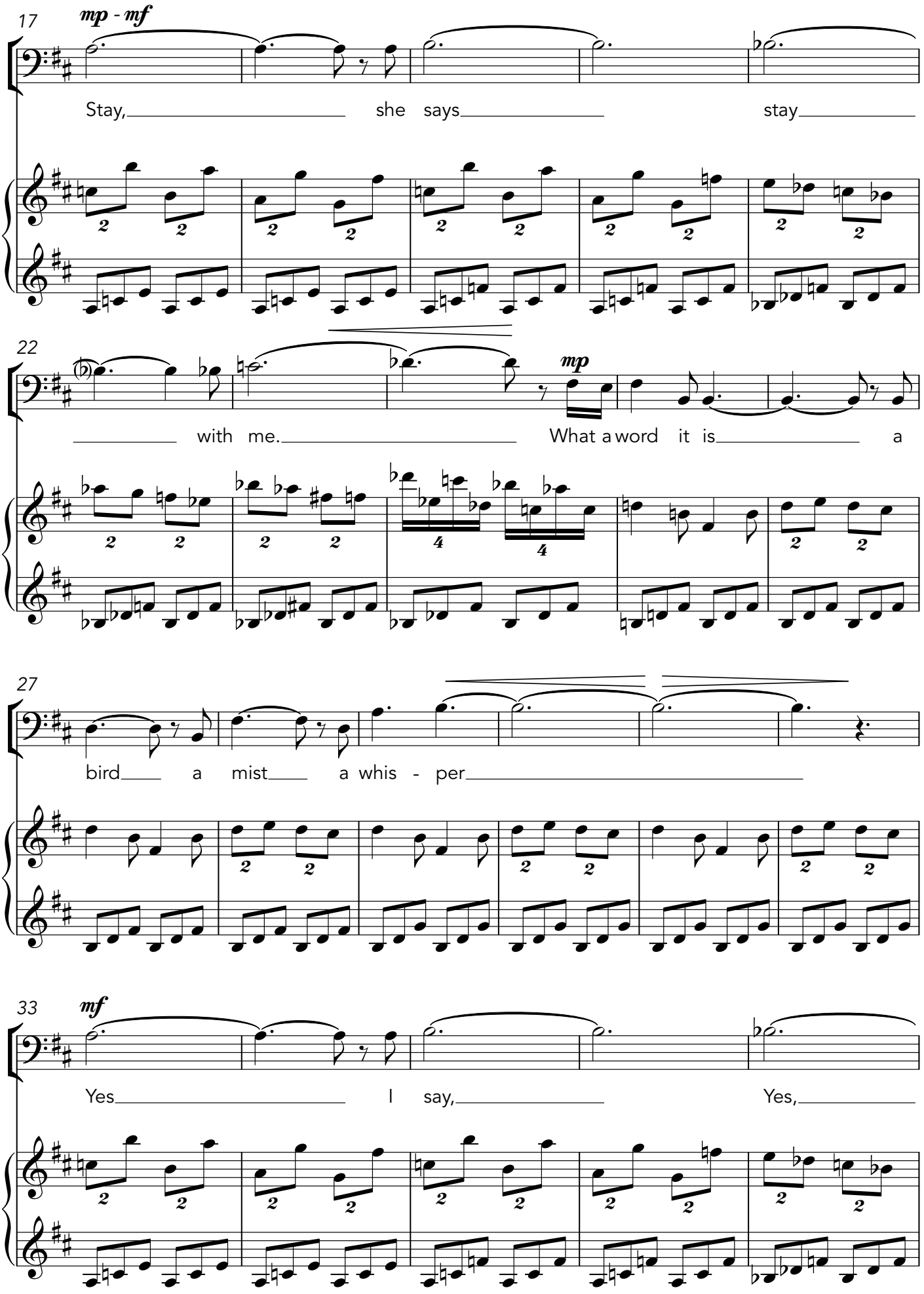

Slowly
mp
Out_ of the ash and rain she
pp
Con ped. ad lib.
mp
con ped.
7
comes to me and says, Hold_ out your hand___ Hold out___ your hand Out of___ the
14
ash___ and rain_____ She gives_ me, she gives_ me an ap- ple_____

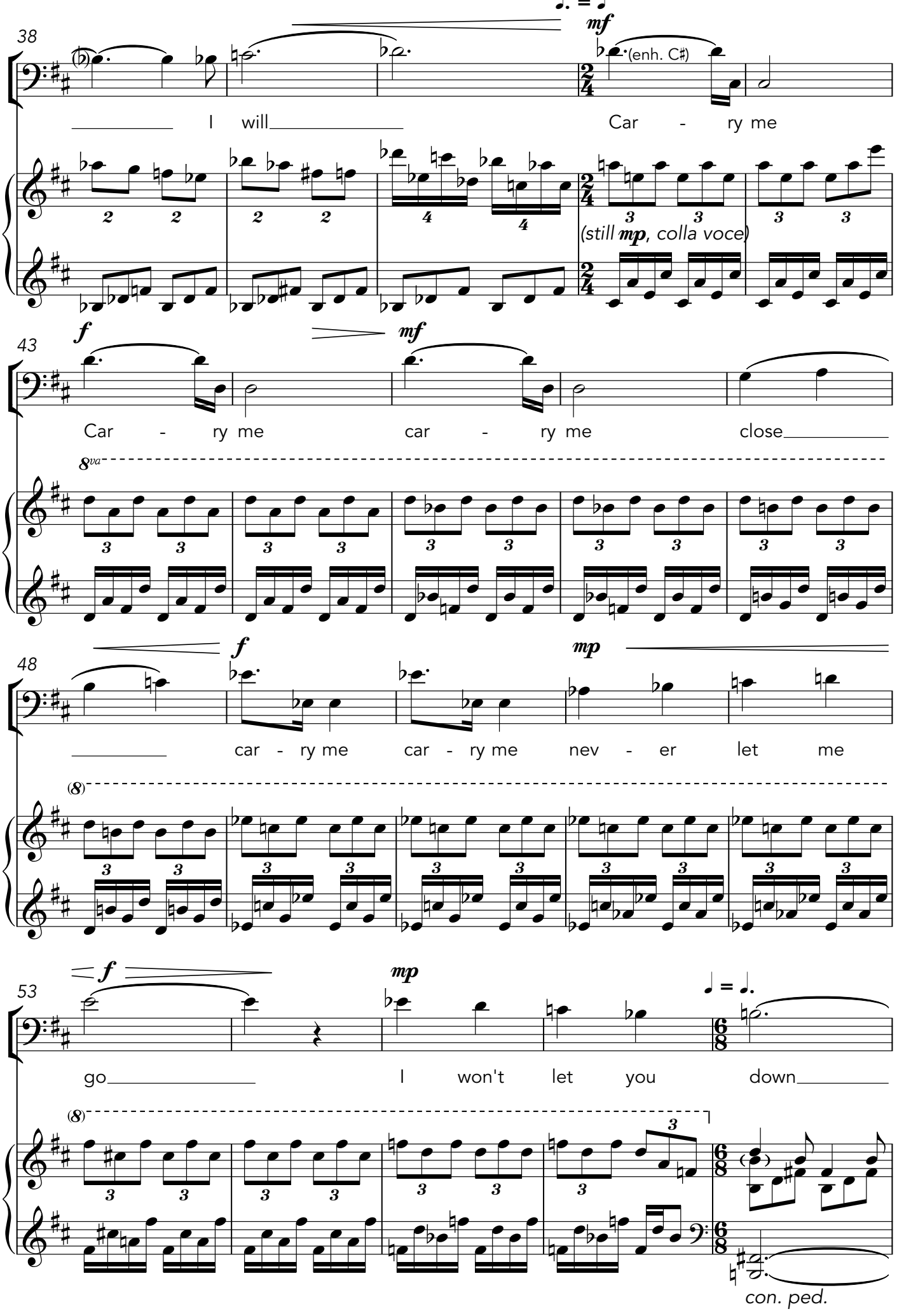

21
mf
mp
mf
Now hand me your oth- er,_ she says, for I have more news you need to
mp
27
mp
know_____ two_____ ap-ples Two ba- bies_
pp
33
8va
mp
38
mp
I close my eyes to see the trees the

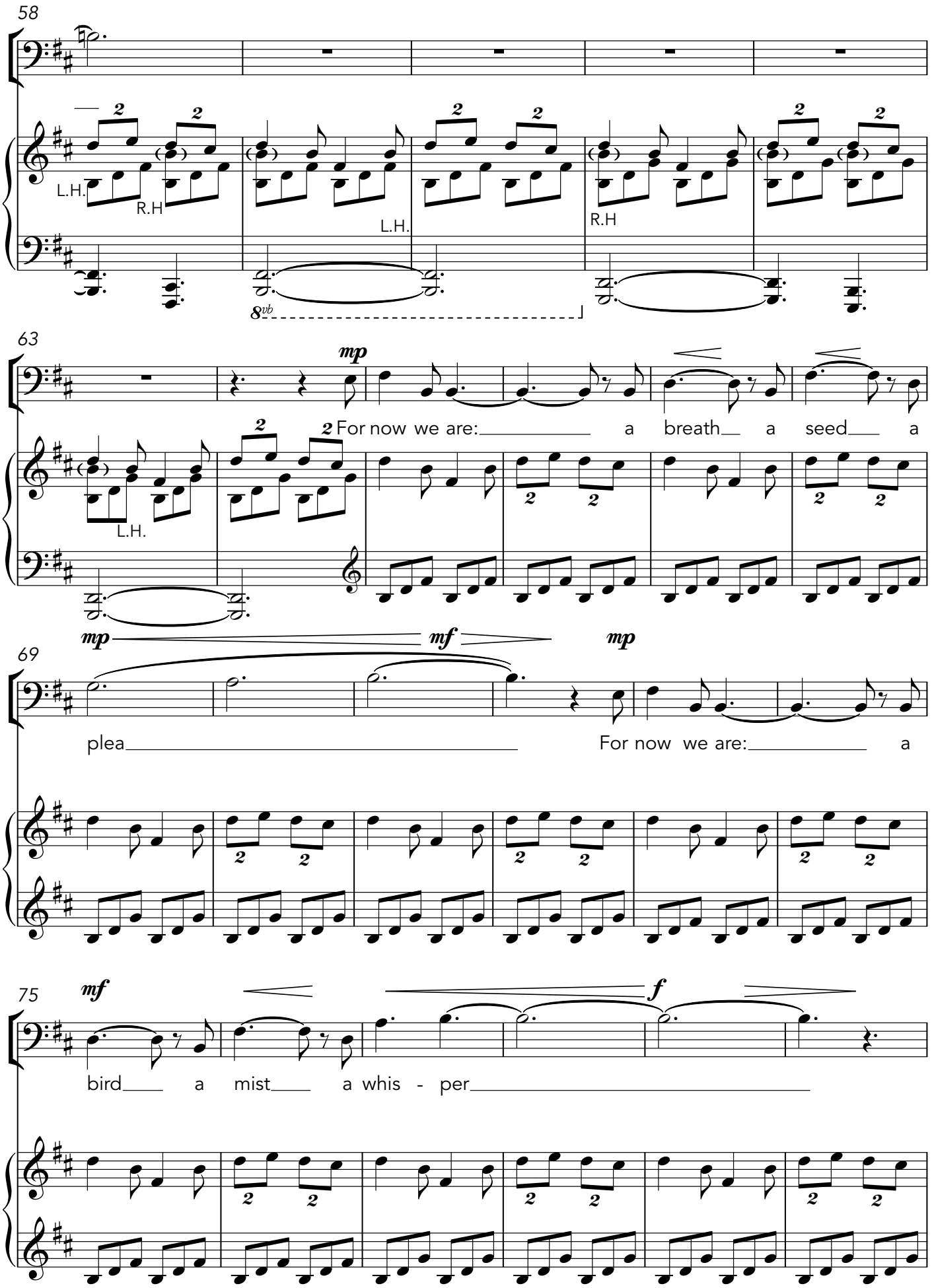

44
ap- ples will one day be two ap- ples two ba-bies
50
mf
they are ours they are ours
mf
pp
56
mp
Out of the ash and rain she
mp
con ped.
60
poco rall.
says she says, Be brave e - nough to stay.

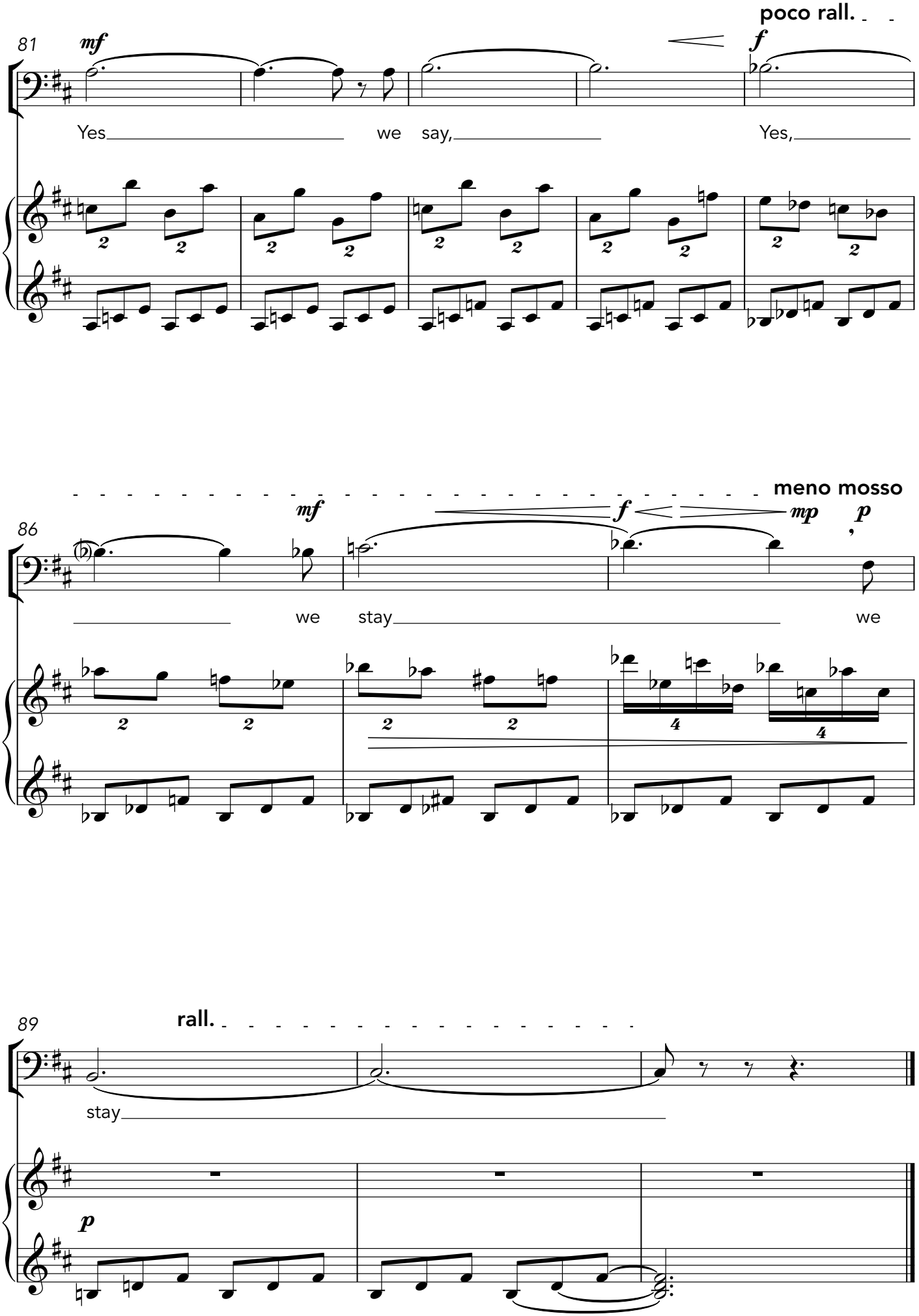
# STAY AND YES


Joyfully
mp
Con ped. ad lib.
6
mp - mf
What a word it is a
11
mp
breath a seed a plea

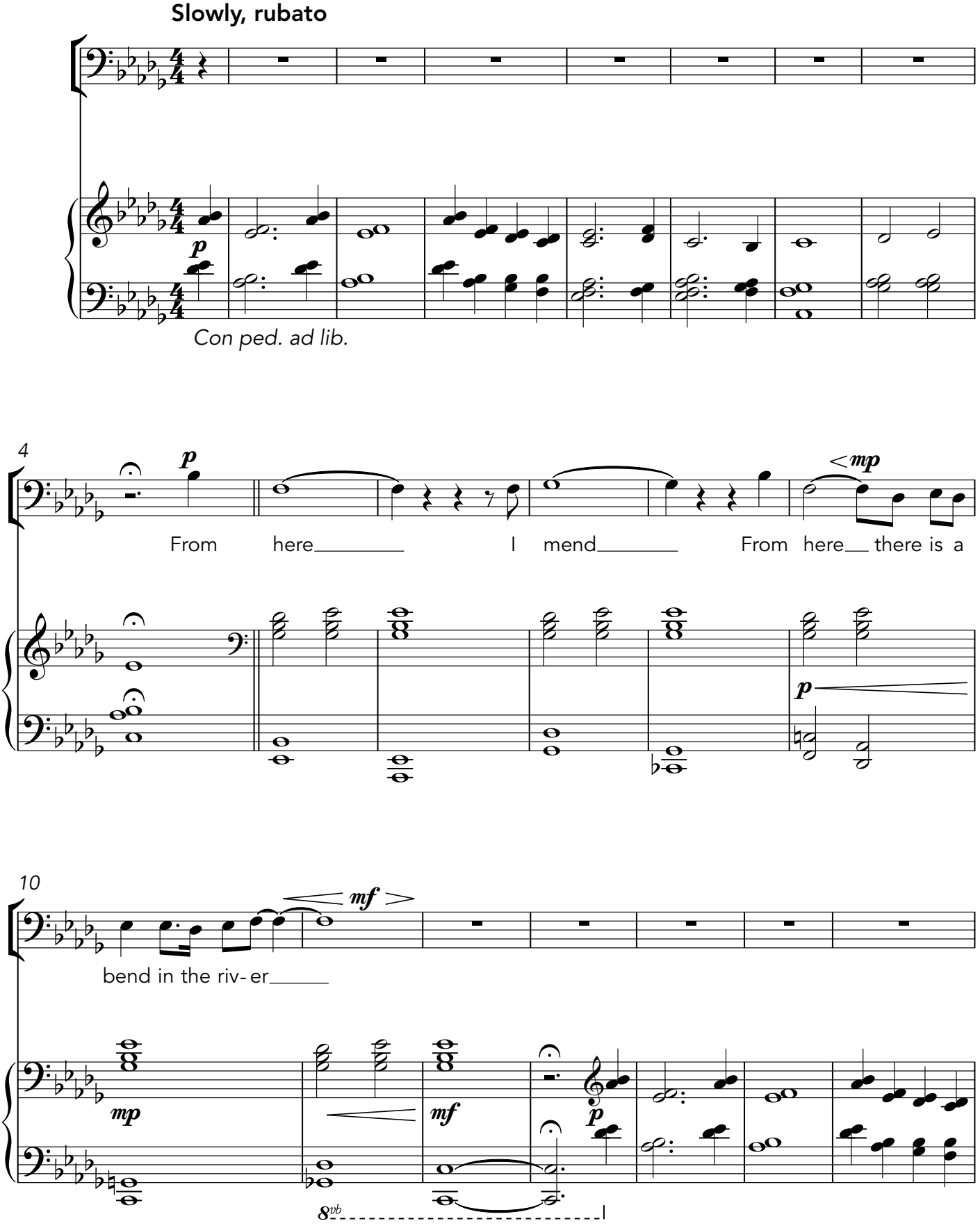

17
mp - mf
Stay, she says stay
22
mp
with me. What a word it is a
27
bird a mist a whis - per
33
mf
Yes I say, Yes,

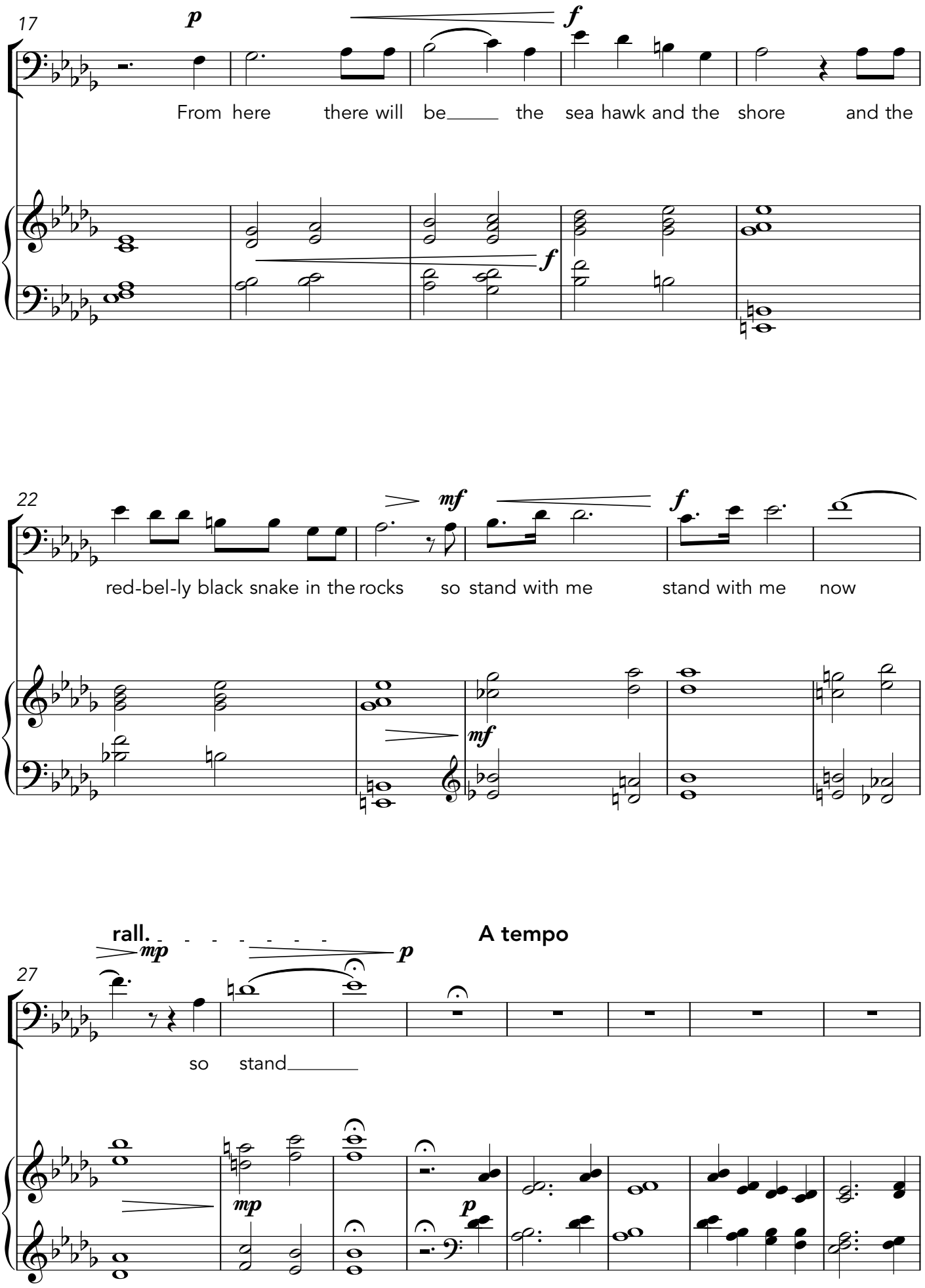

38
mf
(enh. C♯)
I will
Car - ry me
(still mp, colla voce)
43
f
mf
Car - ry me
car - ry me
close
8va
48
f
mp
car - ry me
car - ry me
nev - er
let me
(8)
53
f
mp
go
I won't
let you
down
con. ped.

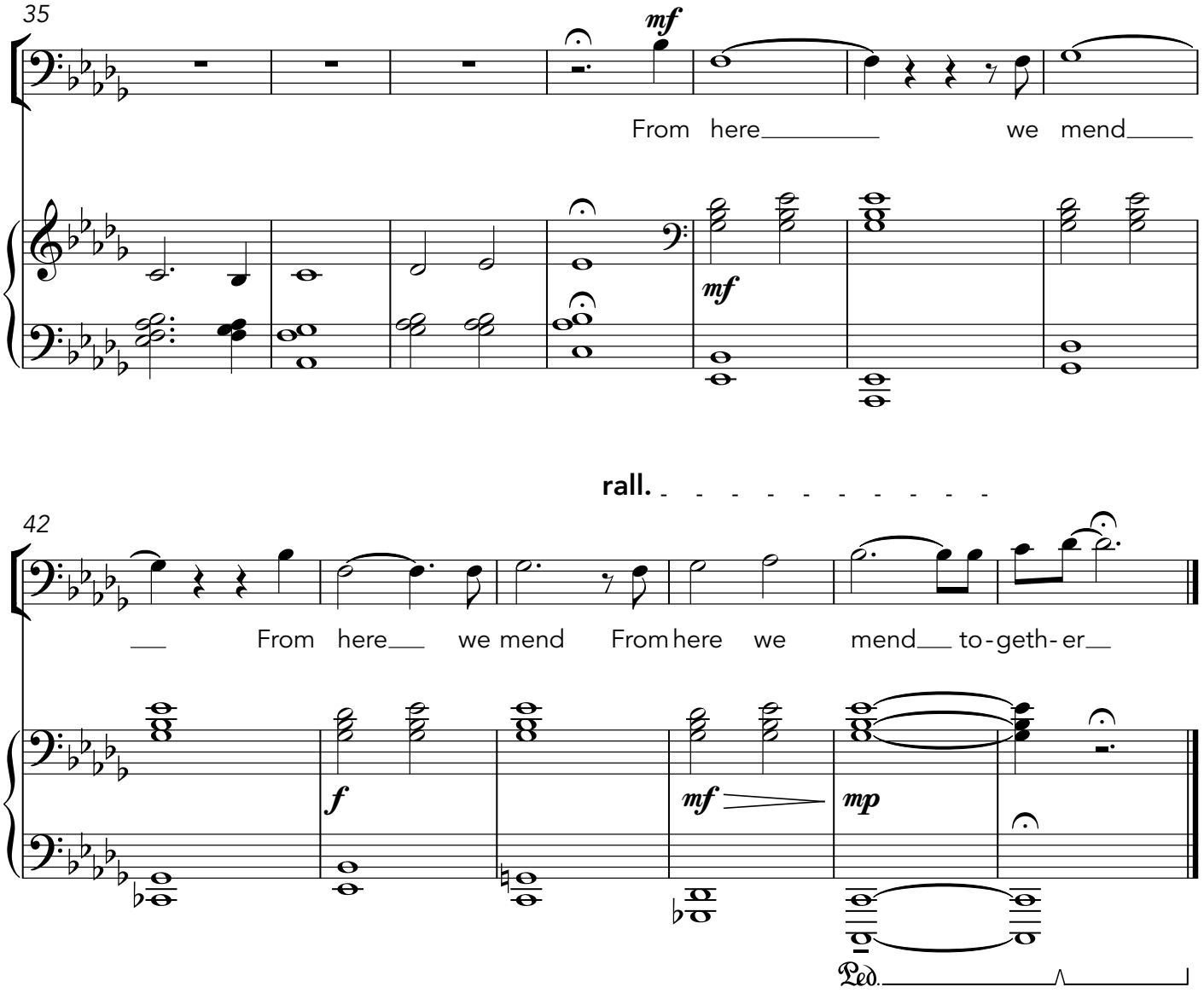

58
L.H.
R.H
L.H.
R.H
8vb
63
mp
For now we are: a breath a seed a
L.H.
mp
mf
mp
69
plea
For now we are: a
75
mf
f
bird a mist a whis - per


poco rall.
81
mf
f
Yes we say, Yes,
meno mosso
86
mf
f
mp
p
we stay we
89
rall.
stay
p

# FROM HERE


Slowly, rubato
p
Con ped. ad lib.
4
p
From here I mend From here there is a
mp
10
mf
bend in the riv- er
mp
mf
p
8vb


17
p
f
From here there will be the sea hawk and the shore and the
f
22
mf
f
red-bel-ly black snake in the rocks so stand with me stand with me now
mf
rall.
mp
p
A tempo
27
so stand
mp
p


35
mf
From here we mend
mf


rall.
42
From here we mend From here we mend to-geth-er
f
mf
mp
Ped.