Katharina Mueller (2023)
Text by Henry David Thoreau

Five Thoreau Songs

for Soprano and Piano

Ca 18:00'

I Melting Space
II Turning of the Mould (with a Spade)
III Parting Grounds
IV Somnolence
V Nest Sounds

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Five Thoreau Songs is composed for the occasion of Deborah Valenze's 70th birthday, from her friends at Yellow Barn.

These songs take their texts from the vivid and eloquent prose of American writer Henry David Thoreau, extracted from chapters of his infamous 1854 *Walden.* A root of the American transcendentalism movement, Thoreau chose to remove himself from the certain over-saturation and disconnection he experienced in the larger society and culture and live by his own means in a cabin on Walden pond, outside of Concord, Massachusetts. *Walden is a* catalog of his experiences, reflections and revelations from this time of simple life in defiance. The texts used in these songs do not always come consecutively in Thoreau's writing, but rather are selected passages drawn together to express particular experiences and convictions that prove timeless as we encounter them centuries later.

For Seth Knopp and Elaine Daiber, who I had the pleasure of meeting through the Yellow Barn Music Festival in Putney, Vermont, with heart.

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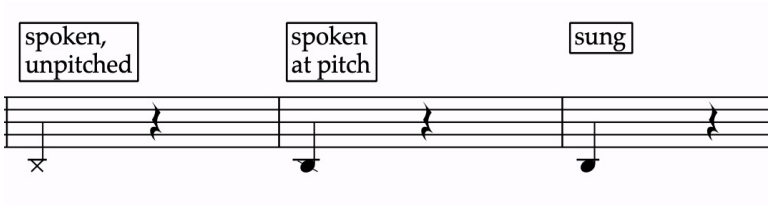
General Notes:

Where the singer should speak as opposed to sing is indicated by different note-heads



spoken, unpitched - refers to voiced speaking, but with no regard for pitch, or voiceless whispering

spoken at pitch - refers to speaking with the intonation of the pitch given

clear voice - as one would sing a folk tune, or as a child sings, with little to no vibrato. The piece asks for this clearer voice in the context of the text highlighting simplicity. This is in contrast to the standard, highly projected classically-trained voice with heavy vibrato.

un poco vib. - invites a small amount of vibrato, especially tastefully on sustained notes, but still engaging with the "clear tone" voice and having a focused, pure sound.

full vibrato - invites heavy vibrato on every note, and the highly projected voice of classical training

I Melting Space 2.5'

> What at such a time are histories, chronologies, traditions, and all written revelations?
> The brooks sing carols and glees to the spring. The marsh hawk, sailing low over the meadow, is already seeking the first slimy life that awakes. The sinking sound of melting snow is heard in all dells, and the ice dissolves apace. The grass flames up on the hillside like a spring fire — "et primitus oritur herba imbribus primoribus evocata" — as if the earth sent forth an inward heat to greet the returning sun; not yellow but green.

From Chapter XVII: Spring

Note: To be always performed with melodic flow as the deciding factor for phrasing. The rhythm should be free, treated with the same liberty to shape and stretch the phrase as an instrumental cadenza, especially the freedom to ritard at the end of a line, or extend certain notes. Triplet quarter notes can be felt as especially wide, and any rhythm that ties over a beat is an invitation to feel syncopation.

This movement especially features arrow indications, which ask that the singer gradually transition from one voice technique to another across the indicated measures, for example gradually introducing vibrato (m. 6-8 and m. 28-30), or starting with text spoken at pitch and gradually introducing a sung quality (m. 35-37).

Vibrato vs non-vibrato is used along with dynamics to create subito changes, measure 9, 18 and 41 should have the effect of a clearing of texture, within the context of a solo voice piece.

II Turning of the Mould (with a Spade) 4.5'

> As I drew a still fresher soil drew a still fresher soil about the rows,
> I disturbed the ashes of unchronicled nations.
>
> Near at hand, upon the topmost spray of a birch, sings the brown thrasher.
> You may wonder what his rigmarole, his amateur Paganini performances,
> have to do with your planting, and yet prefer it to leached ashes or plaster.
>
> Ancient poetry and mythology suggest, at least, that husbandry was once a sacred art;
> but with irreverent haste and heedlessness by us, we have no festival, nor procession, nor ceremony.
> The farmer sacrifices not to Ceres and the Terrestrial Jove, but to the infernal Plutus rather.
> By avarice and selfishness, and a groveling habit, from which none of us is free,
> the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives.
> He knows Nature but as a robber.

From Chapter VII: The Bean Field

Note: For the pianist, the "Flitting, Jingling" gestures in box notation are meant to be played in both hands, vertical and attacked. These should be angular, birdlike, like cranes folded from sheets of thin metal, hanging from strings on the ceiling and colliding into one another. Rather than treating the rhythms as exact, treat them as grace note gestures, as written-our trills with nuance in their contour and dyad collisions of pitches. The flitting gestures in their highest register should be performed with the pedal down to accumulate a ghostly white noise.

From m. 51 to m. 72, the singer may take liberty in their timing as is suitable to the phrase, especially in their last line at m. 60. The piano, in all its entrances, should be relentlessly in tempo, re-instating the 96 bpm pulse with each entrance, until finally a dramatic ritardando into m. 72, the pulse finally deflating.

The music can certainly move into measure 80, but unlike its parallel moment at m. 22, m. 80 should not have any remarkable accelerando. Save the accelerando for measures 87-94. The accelerando into m. 94 is not so extreme as to create a tempo elision -- eighth note triplet is not equal to new sixteenth note triplet -- rather m. 94 should sound like a jump in pace and a burst of energy exploding into the new section.

For the singer, the spoken text at pickup to m. 84 does not have to adhere strictly to the durations indicated, but should be spoken with the rhyhtms of natural speech as much as possible. As far as tone, this should be quiet but still voiced (as opposed to whispered) and sharply articulated, like a parent telling off a child in a quiet space. Pickup to m. 103 as well should have organic durations, generally more sustained than m. 84, and with the addition of sustained, whispered “s” hiss sounds on certain syllables as indicated. This should be in a voiceless whisper, projected as much as possible, a stage whisper.

At and after m. 116, the singer and piano may take more liberty with the timing, the singer especially, and that libery can increase as the music moves to the end of the piece, and as rhythmic durations get slower.

III Parting Grounds 3.5'

> One generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels.
>
> I think that we may safely trust a good deal more than we do.
>
> How vigilant we are! determined not to live by faith if we can avoid it; all the day long on the alert, at night we unwillingly say our prayers and commit ourselves to uncertainties. So thoroughly and sincerely are we compelled to live, reverencing our life, and denying the possibility of change. This is the only way, we say; but there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one centre.

From Chaper I: Economy

Note: In the beginning, the consistency of the piano half and whole notes should be unyielding, like a great mass slowly moving. Pick-up notes on beats three and four should lead directly into the next measure, and down beats in general should come with utmost insistence on time. The idea of mass should also translate to some amount of warmth and roundness on the lowest notes.

Conversely any breaking away from that constancy should be underscored: The fermatas at m. 32 and m. 41 should be substantial and should temporarily cease the flow of metric time, as should the instances of grace notes preceding a chord.

For the singer, repeated notes in the vocal line mimic chant, and as such the rhythm should be slightly flexible to the delivery of the words. This rhythm should be flexible especially and despite the fact that the piano part is rhythmically rigid.

The middle section, "Driving" should be more impassioned but not faster. The end should be relaxed, yet still with great intention, meditative and even prayerful.

IV Somnolence 4'

> There was pasture enough for my imagination.
>
> I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear.
>
> In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items. Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; it is error upon error, and clout upon clout; and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail.
>
> Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.

From Chapter II: Where I Lived and What I Lived For

Note: The pianist at the beginning and end should lean into those notes that have tenutos, and where tenutos begin an ascending scale, these notes can be generously drawn out in duration. However, the pianist should not lose touch with a slow, measured pulse. While there can be push and pull within sixteenth-note scales, there should be as if an unspoken impulse and impetus to move forward, revealed finally at m. 14 and gathering speed from there.

The transition into the more relentless motion of m. 14 should come organically from hints of relentless motion before. In general, smoothly transition from one tempo to the next as a matter of accumulated energy or, conversely, increased friction.

At m. 34 to m. 39 the accents should have extra volume above the general forte of the scales, shaped as sforzandi followed by a slight decay.

The singer at m. 30, should deliver the text as a president or minister would deliver a profound and grave speech, with a loud, full-bodied voice, but still controlled, not screaming or nasal. Starting at m. 33, the singer should still be speaking, but at pitch, and then over the course of the next three measures should introduce a sustained sung tone more and more (even in notes with only brief duration) to be back to a full singing voice at m. 36.

V Nest Sounds 3'

As the sparrow had its trill, sitting on the hickory before my door,
so had I my chuckle or suppressed warble which he might hear out of my nest.

The chickadee lisps amid the evergreens, and the partridge and rabbit skulk beneath,
the whip-poor-wills chant* their vespers referring* to the setting of the sun

Late in the evening, the baying of dogs. The lowing of some disconsolate cow

When other birds are still, the screech owls take up the strain. tu-whit tu-who.

The shore rings* with the trump of bullfrogs, the sturdy spirits of ancient wine-bibbers and wassailers, still unrepentant, trying to sing a catch in their Stygian lake, though their voices have waxed hoarse and solemnly grave.

From Chapter IV: Sounds
**tenses changed from original text*

Note: For the pianist, the grace notes at the beginning, and after measure 44, “Shadowy”, should come immediately before the beat, with the characteristic of bird chirps and trills. From measure 33 to measure 44, the grace notes should be landed on heavily and should be treated as expansions of the beat, the grace note itself at least a sixteenth note in duration before the full quarter note beat. Tenuto marks in this song are simply to distinguish them from the stark staccato articulations that otherwise occur.

The tempo change from ♩=90 to ♩=100 at measure 5 should be sudden, similarly at m. 18 and especially at “Suddenly ♩=90” at m. 23. In contrast, the changes at m. 9, the broadening starting around m. 21, and the transition into m. 33 can all be much more organic and marked by rubato.

For the singer, starting at m. 44 should recall the solo expressive melodic singing of “Melting Space” from the beginning of the cycle, now with sparse piano support.

for Elaine Daiber and Seth Knopp

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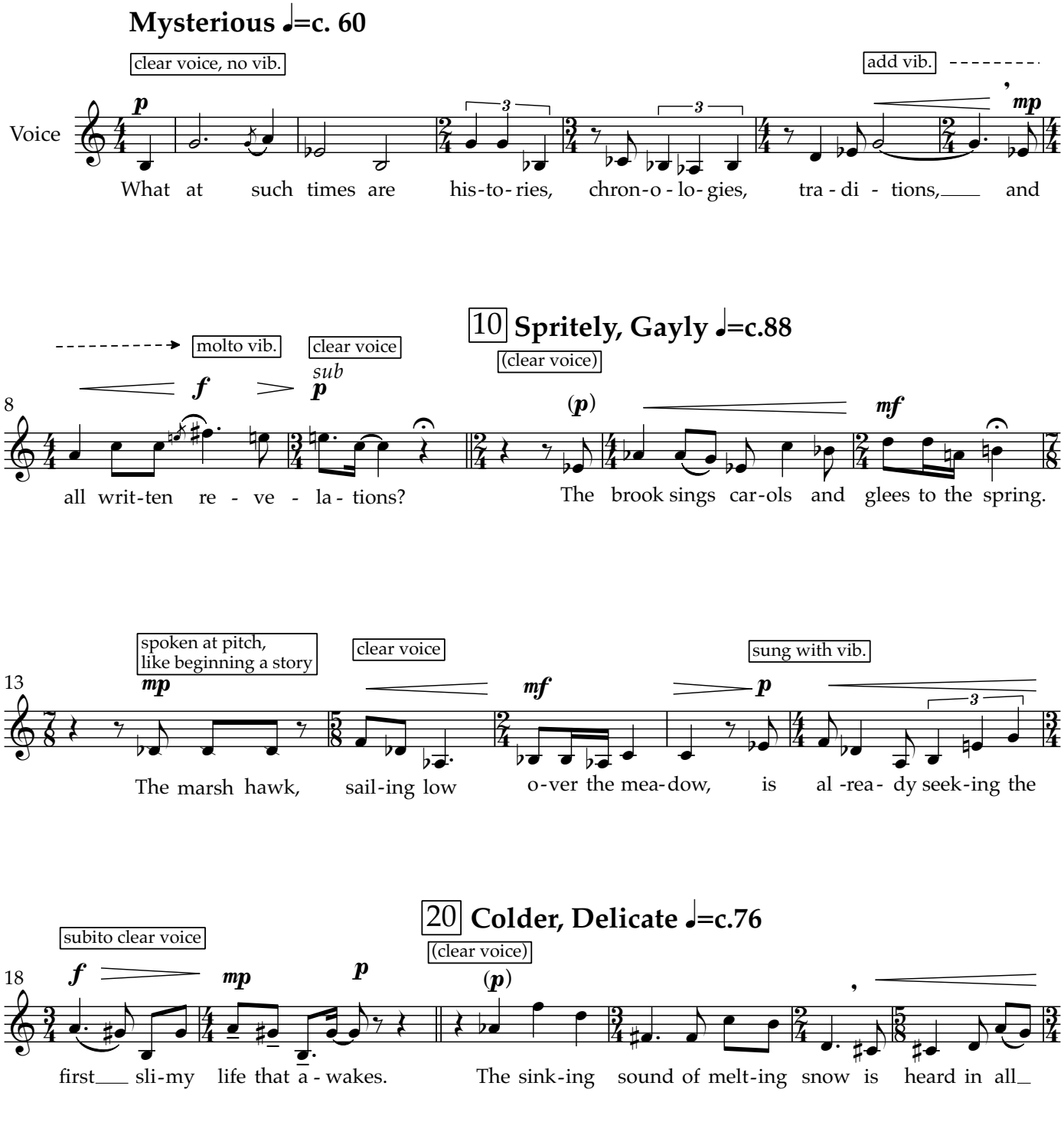
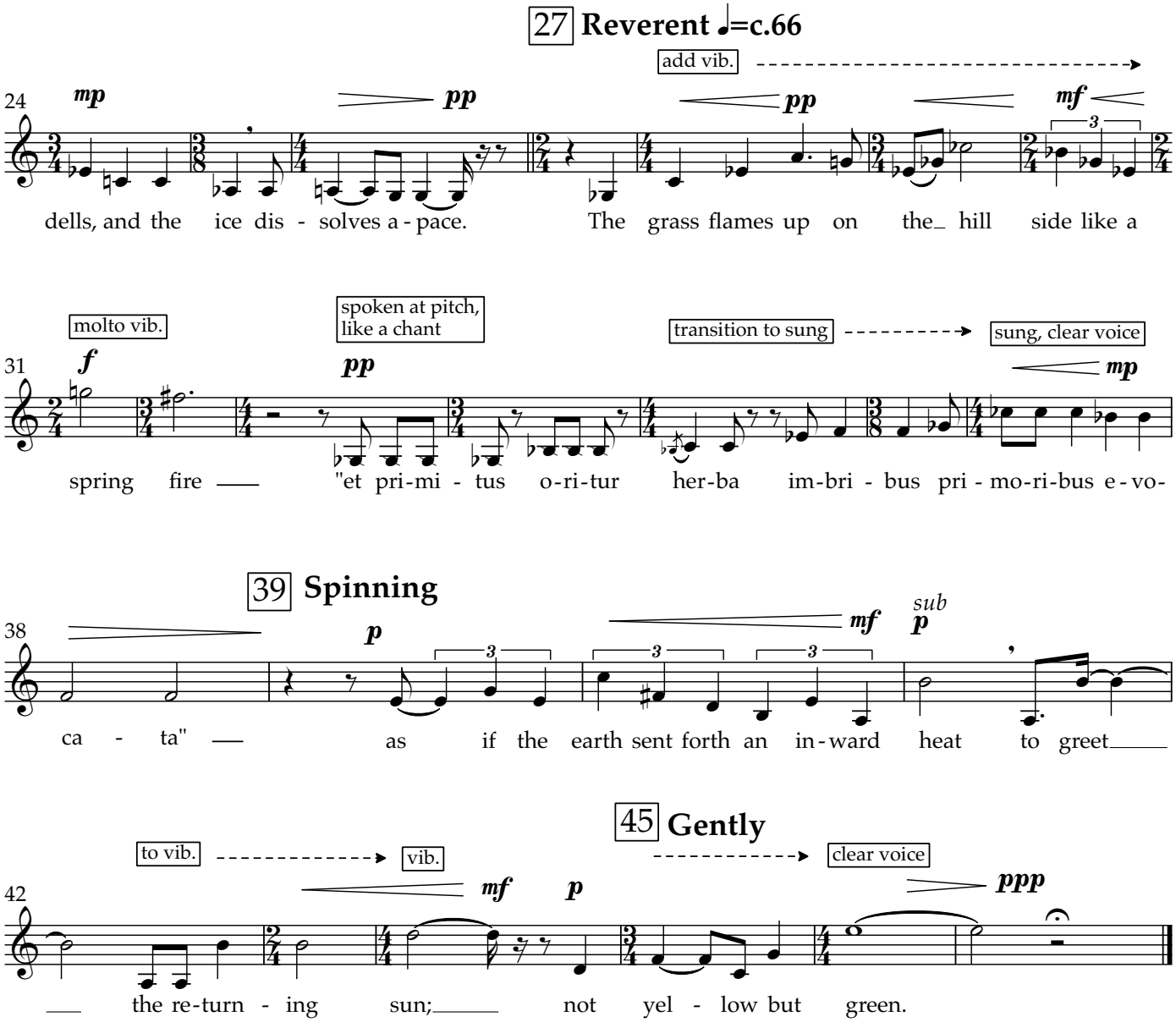
Henry David Thoreau

Katharina S. G. Mueller (2023)

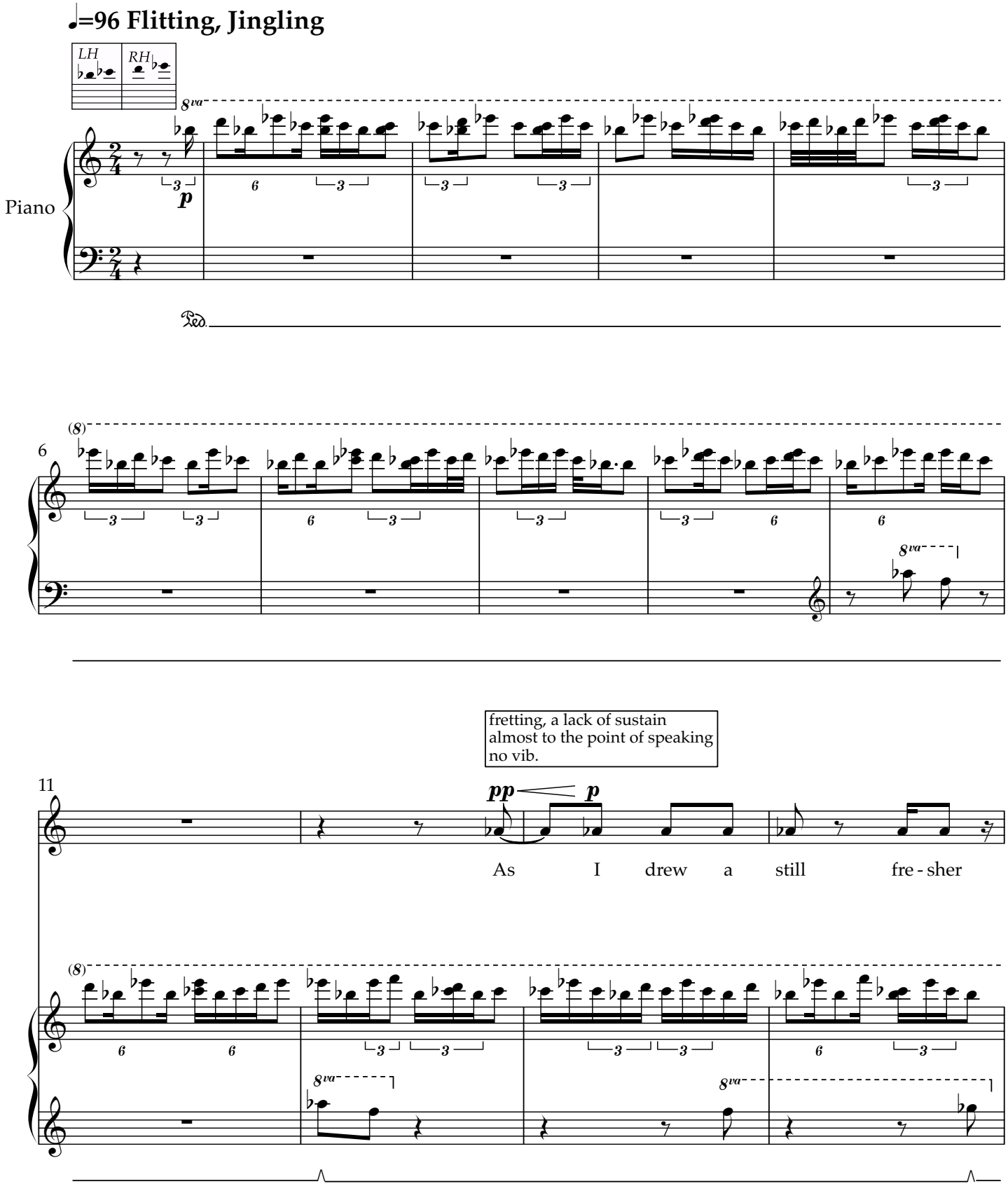
I Melting Space

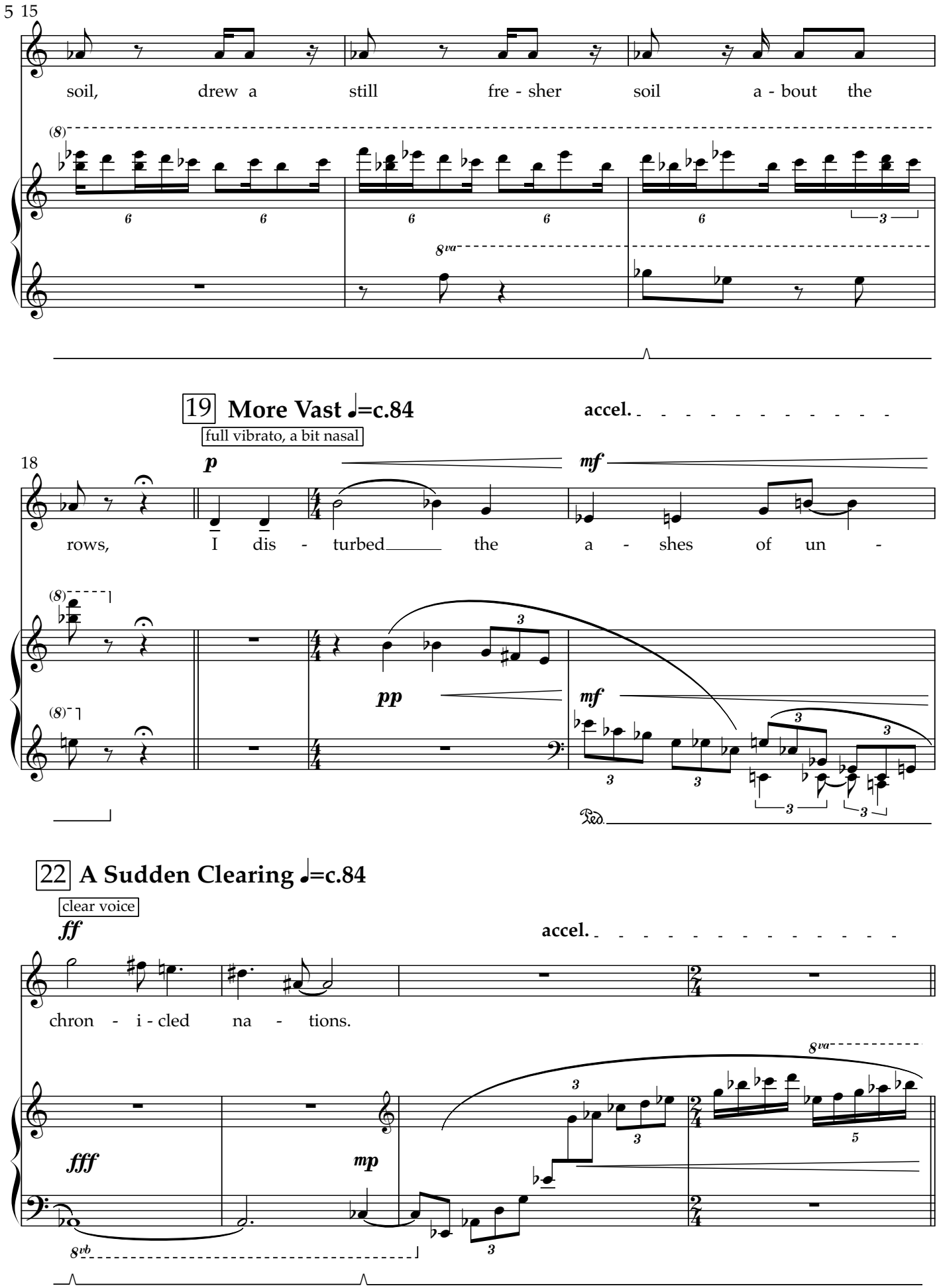



27 Reverent ♩=c.66
add vib.
24
mp
pp
pp
mf
dells, and the ice dis - solves a - pace. The grass flames up on the_ hill side like a
molto vib.
spoken at pitch, like a chant
transition to sung
sung, clear voice
31
f
pp
mp
spring fire "et pri-mi - tus o-ri-tur her-ba im-bri - bus pri - mo-ri-bus e - vo-
39 Spinning
38
p
mf
sub p
ca - ta" as if the earth sent forth an in - ward heat to greet
45 Gently
to vib.
vib.
clear voice
42
mf
p
ppp
the re-turn - ing sun; not yel - low but green.

II Turning of the Mould (with a Spade)

♩=96 Flitting, Jingling




5 15
soil, drew a still fre - sher soil a - bout the
19 More Vast ♩=c.84
accel.
full vibrato, a bit nasal
18
p
mf
rows, I dis - turbed the a - shes of un -
pp
mf
22 A Sudden Clearing ♩=c.84
clear voice
ff
accel.
chron - i - cled na - tions.
fff
mp

26 ♩=96 **Flitting, Jingling**

fretting, more sustain than before
un poco vib.

p

Near at hand,

LH RH

(8)

f

30

u - pon the top most spray of a birch,

(8)

f

34

mp

sings the brown thrash - er.

(8)

p *f* *p*

39

38

pp

You may won - der what his

(8)

pp

+U.C.

add more vib.

full vib.

42

mp

p

rig - - ma - role his a - ma -

LH RH

8va

f

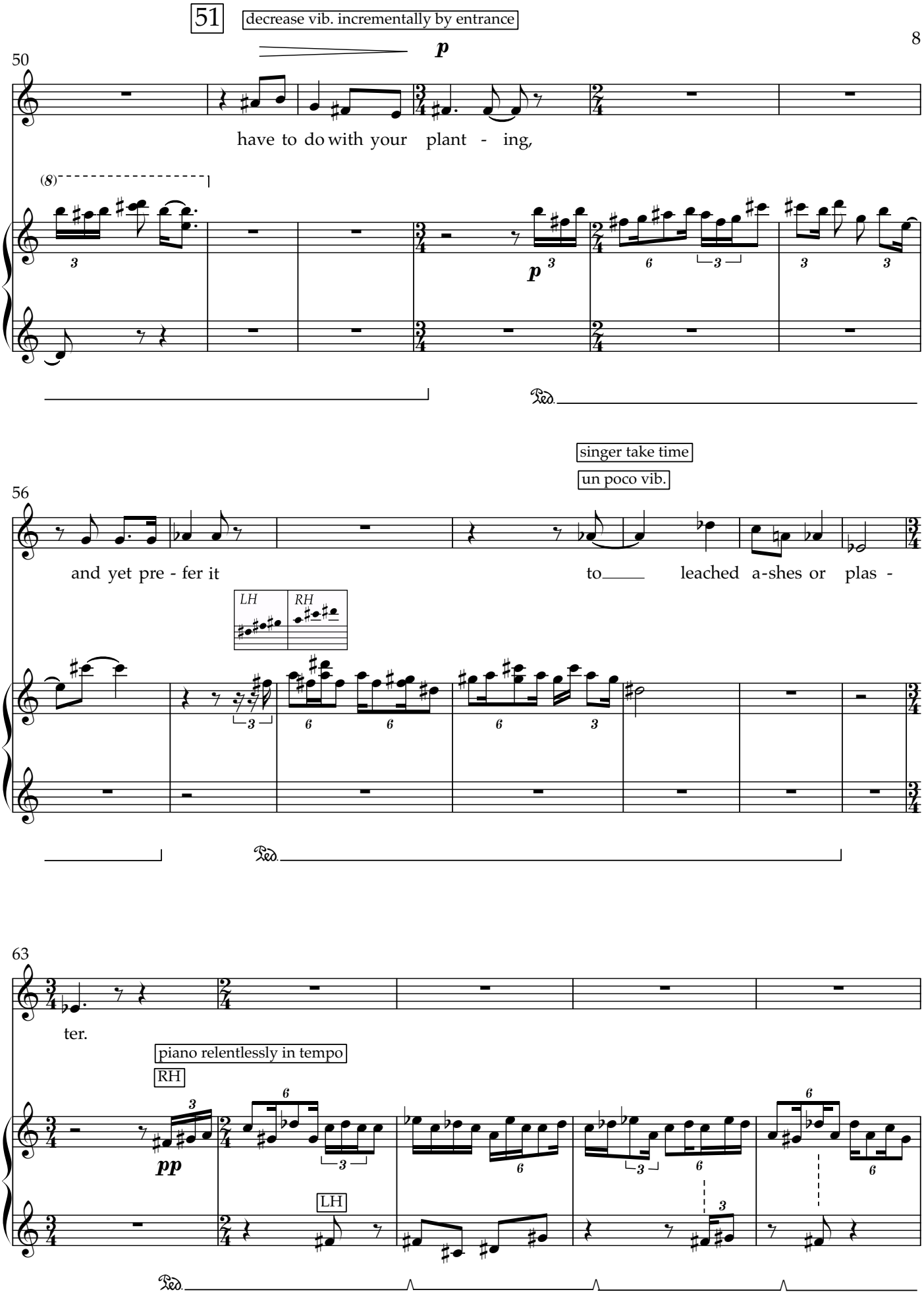
-U.C.

46

mf

teur Pa - ga - ni - ni per - for - man - ces,

(8)


51
decrease vib. incrementally by entrance
p
50
have to do with your plant - ing,
(8)
p
Ped.
singer take time
un poco vib.
56
and yet pre - fer it to leached a-shes or plas -
LH
RH
Ped.
63
ter.
piano relentlessly in tempo
RH
pp
LH
Ped.

68

molto rit.

ppp

72 **Watterlogged, Swaying ♩=c.54**

full vib.

p

An - cient

p

pp

Ped.

+U.C.

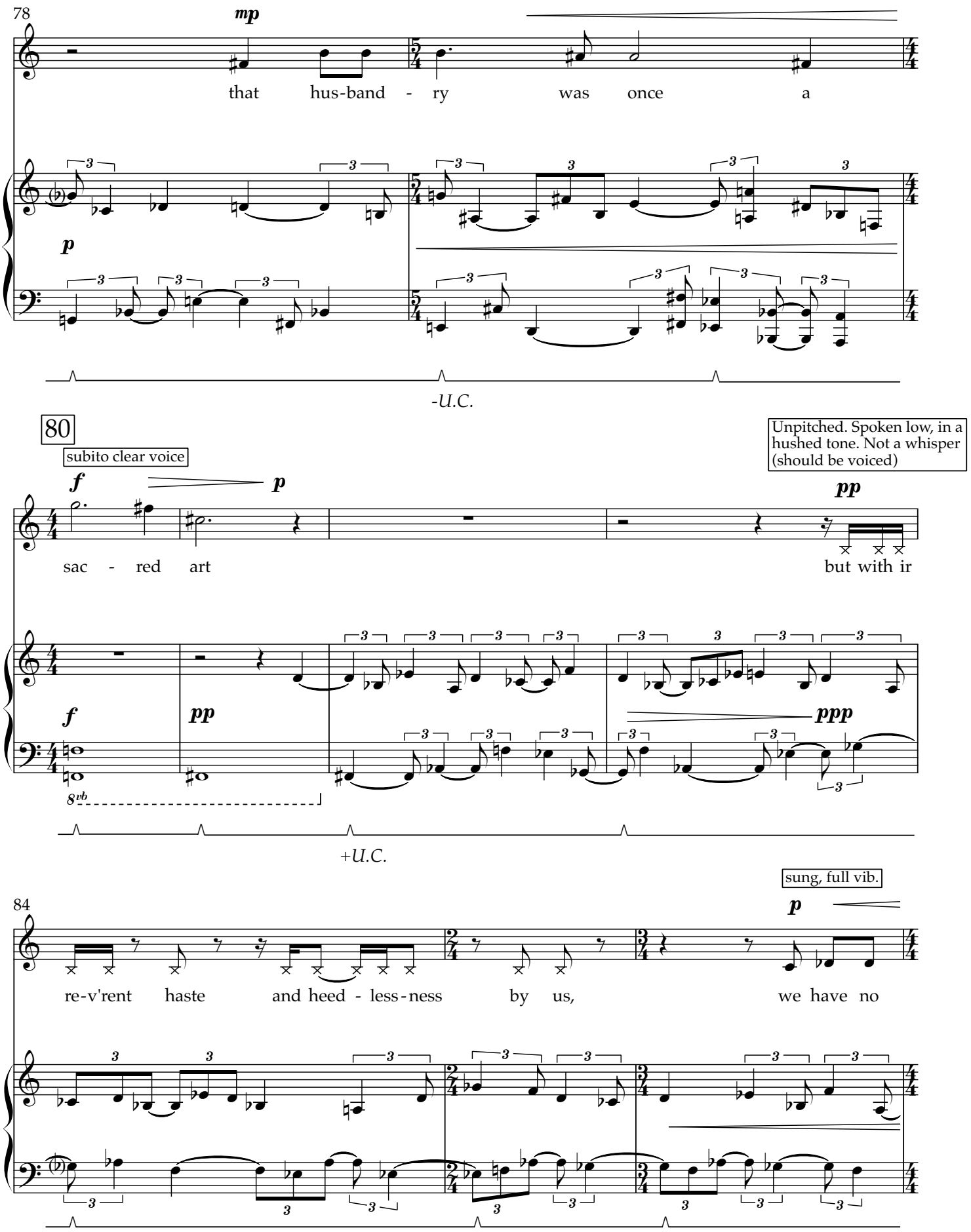
75

mf p mp

po - e - try and my - tho - lo-gy sug - gest, at least,

p

pp


78
mp
that hus-band - ry was once a
p
-U.C.
80
subito clear voice
f
p
Unpitched. Spoken low, in a hushed tone. Not a whisper (should be voiced)
pp
sac - red art
but with ir
f
pp
ppp
8vb
+U.C.
84
sung, full vib.
p
re-v'rent haste and heed - less-ness by us, we have no

poco accel. 89 ♩=72 Moving Forward

87

mp f

fest - i - val, nor pro - ce-ssion,_ nor ce - re-mo - ny. The

p mp mf

accel.

90

far - mer sac - ri_ fi - ces not to Ce - res or the Ter - res - tri - al Jove, but to the in

f

94 ♩=96 Flitting

93

ff

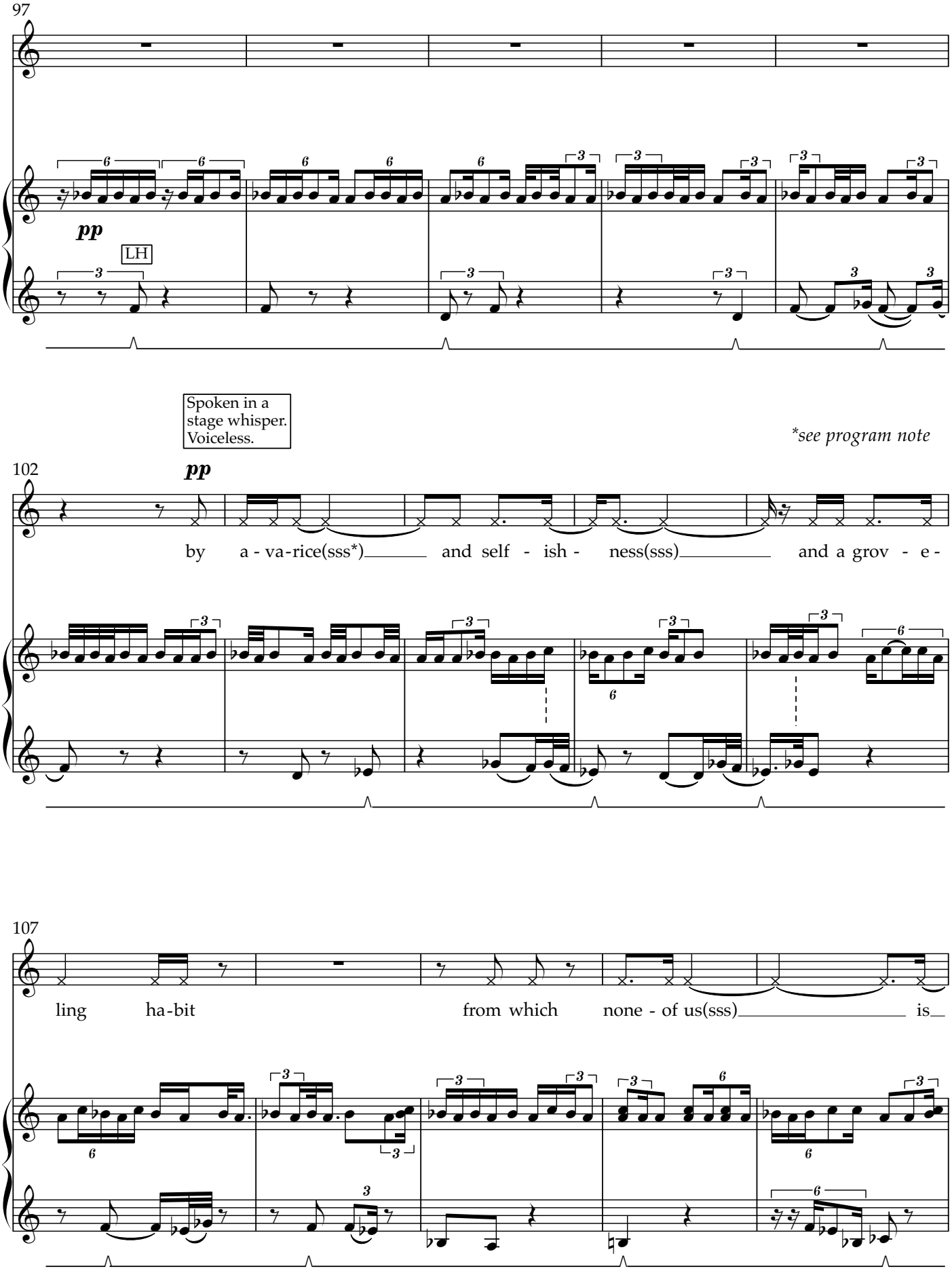
fer - nal Plu_____ tus ra - ther

RH

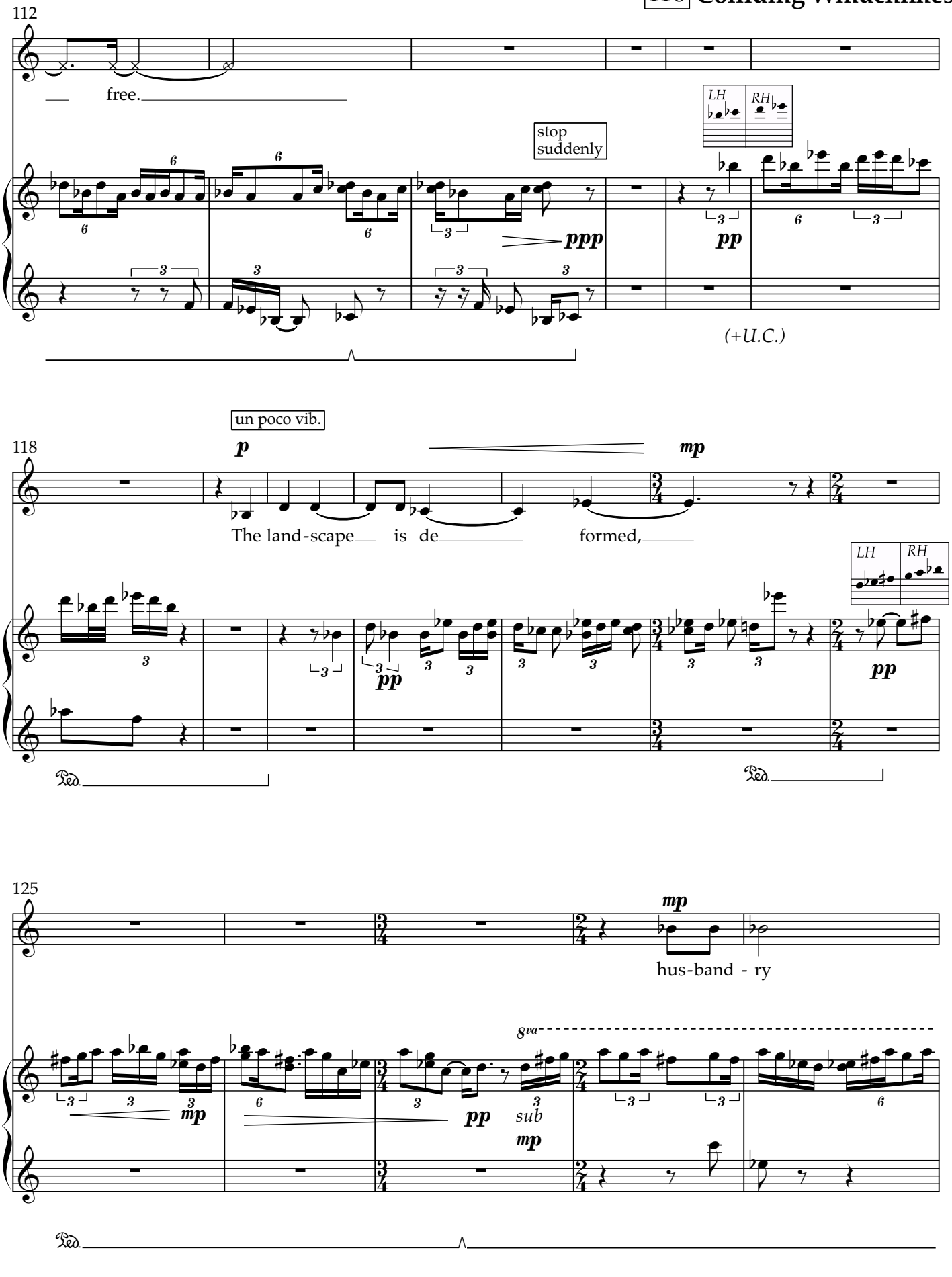
ff pp

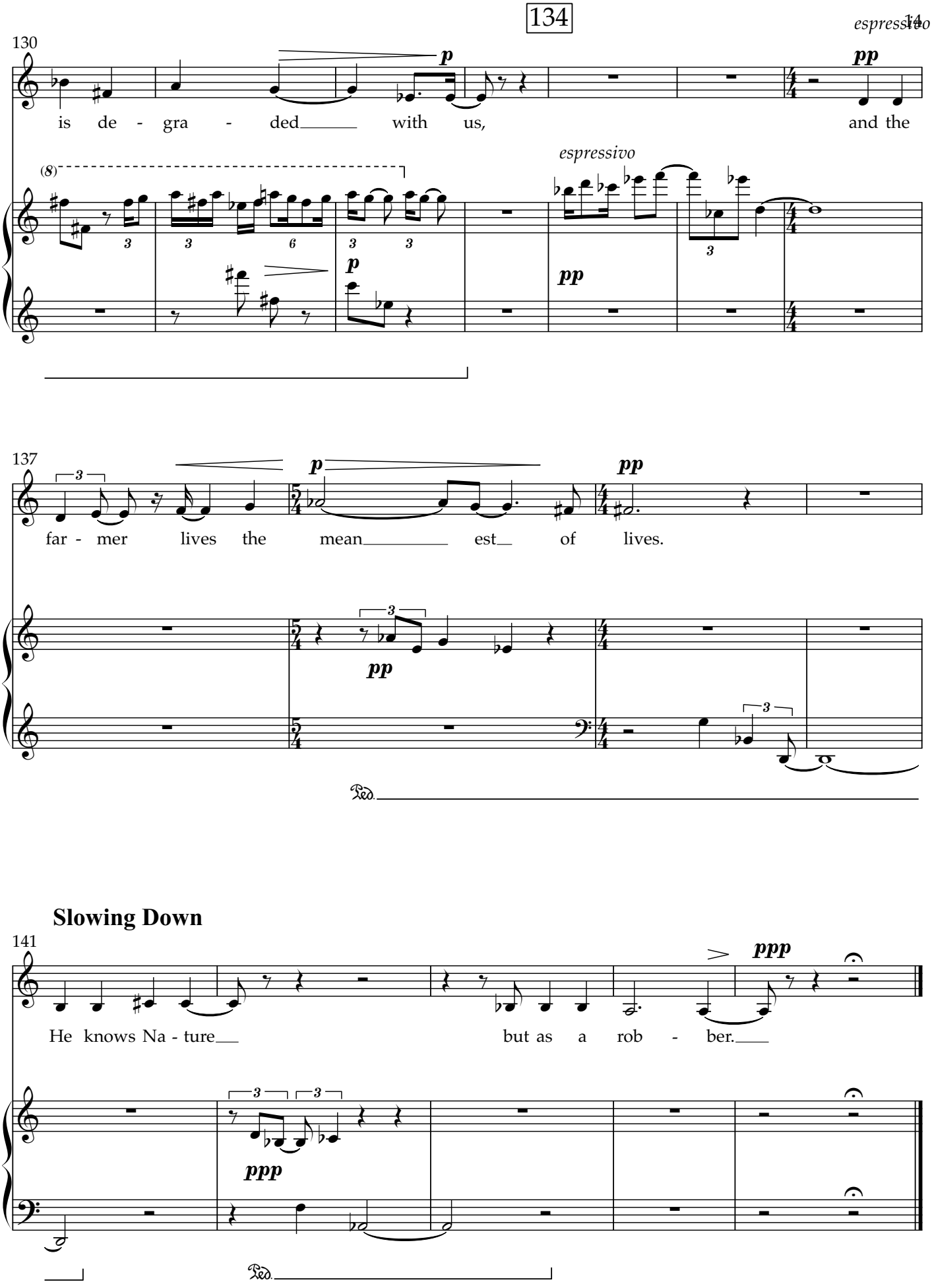
8vb

+U.C.

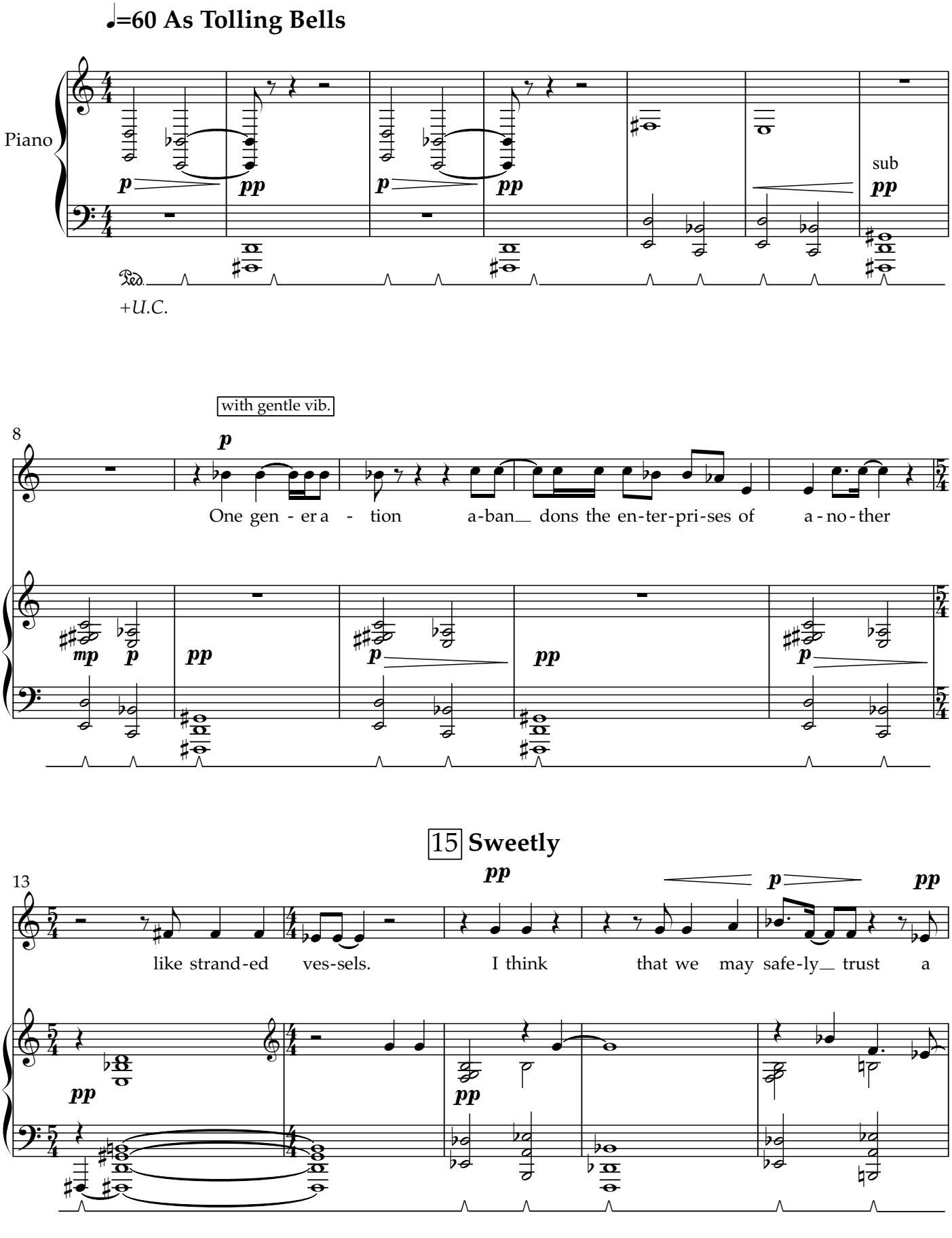

97
pp
LH
Spoken in a stage whisper. Voiceless.
*see program note
102
pp
by a - va-rice(sss*) and self - ish - ness(sss) and a grov - e -
107
ling ha-bit from which none - of us(sss) is

116 Colliding Windchimes




130
espressivo
p
pp
is de - gra - ded with us, and the
(8)
espressivo
p
pp
137
p
pp
far - mer lives the mean est of lives.
pp
Ped.
Slowing Down
141
ppp
He knows Na - ture but as a rob - ber.
ppp
Ped.

III Parting Grounds



21 **Driving (♩=60)**

full vib.

18

mp *pp* *f*

good deal more than we do. How vi-gi-lant we are!

f

-*U.C.*

22

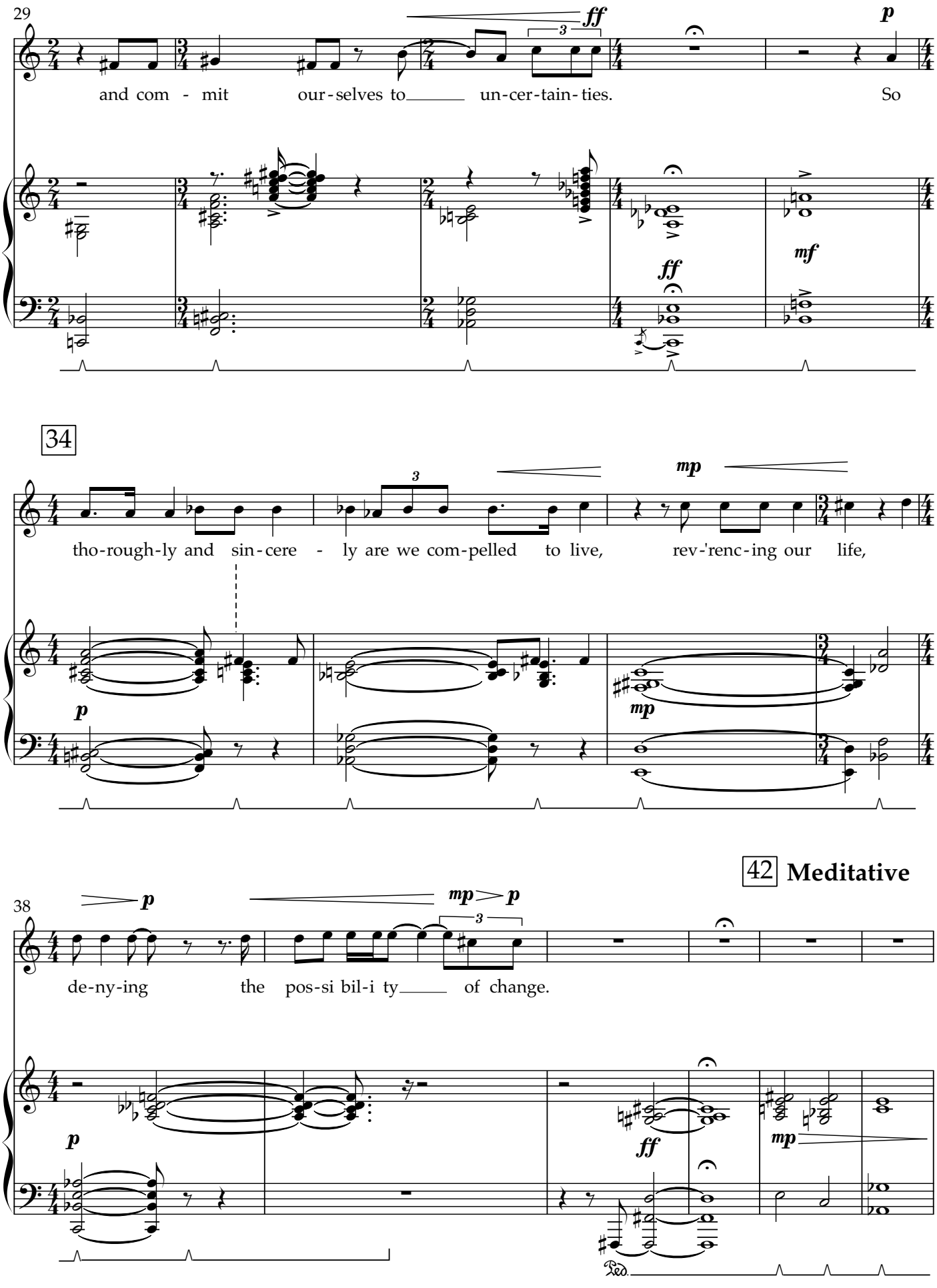
de-ter-mined not to live by faith if we can a-void it; all the day long

25

ff *f*

on the a-lert, at night we un will ling-ly say our prayers

ff *f*


29
ff
p
and com - mit our - selves to un - cer - tain - ties. So
ff
mf
34
mp
tho - rough - ly and sin - cere - ly are we com - pelled to live, rev - 'renc - ing our life,
p
mp
42 Meditative
38
p
mp p
de - ny - ing the pos - si bil - i ty of change.
p
ff
mp
Ped.

Freely, Slower

44

gentle vib.

mp

no vib., whistfully

p

This is the on - ly way we say; but there are as man-y ways as there can be

p

pp

+*U.C.*

In Time ♩=60

Attacca

49

gentle vib.

drawn ra-di-i from one cen tre.

sustain with pedal until first note of next movement

mp

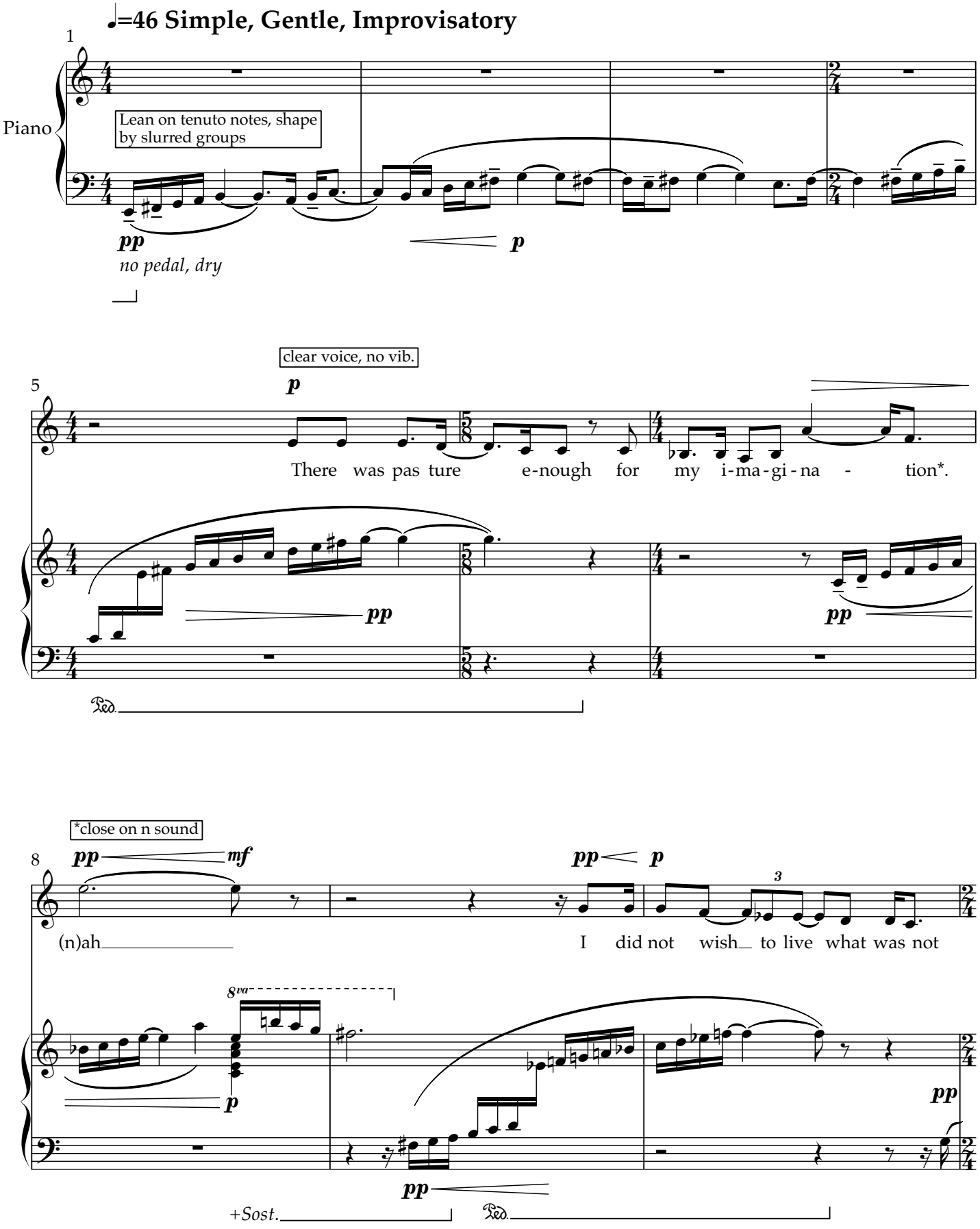
pp

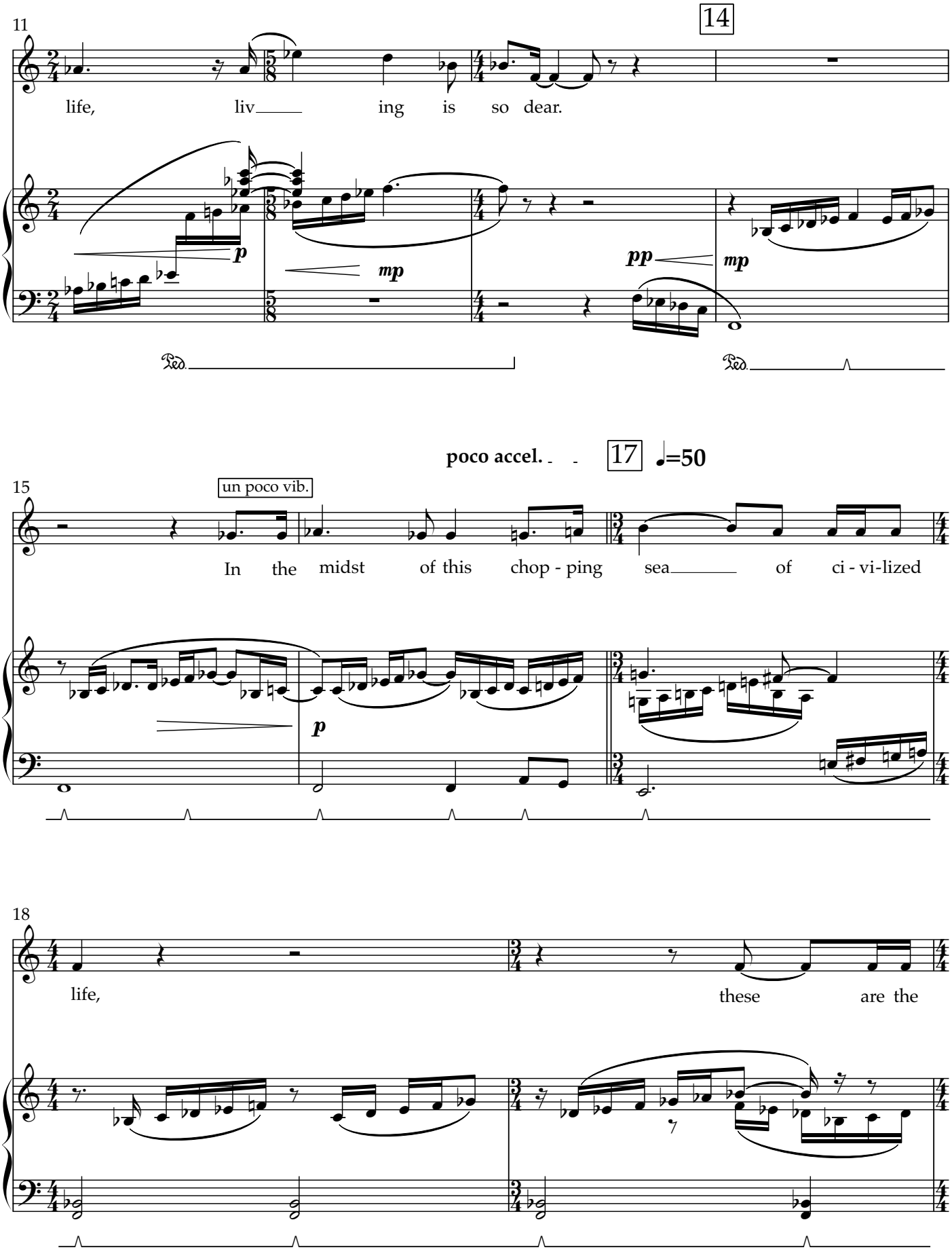
ppp

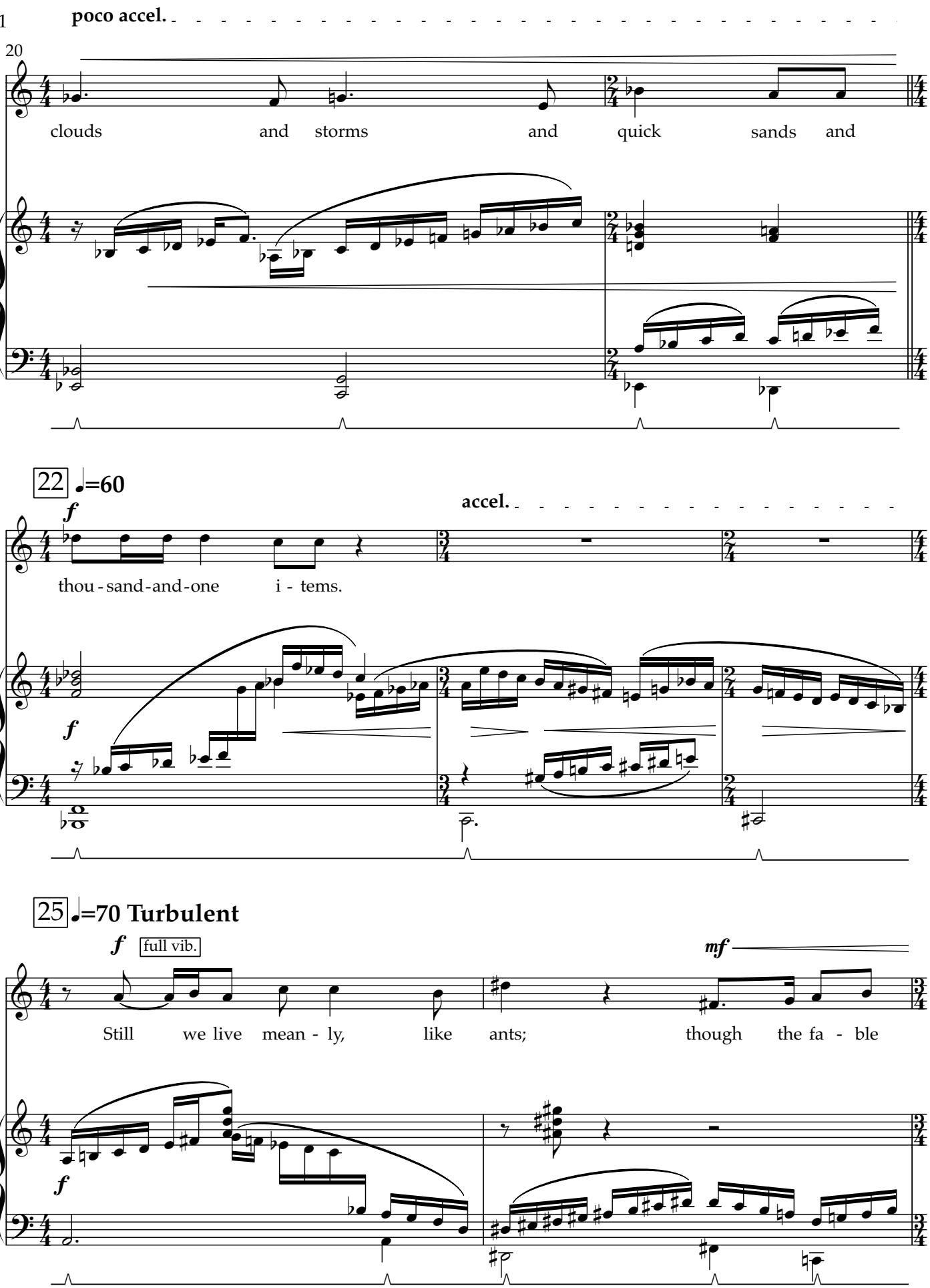
8vb

Ped.

IV Somnolence




11
14
life, liv ing is so dear.
p
mp
pp
mp
poco accel.
17
♩=50
15
un poco vib.
In the midst of this chop - ping sea of ci - vi-lized
p
18
life, these are the


poco accel.
20
clouds and storms and quick sands and
22 ♩=60
f
accel.
thou - sand - and - one i - tems.
f
25 ♩=70 Turbulent
f
full vib.
mf
Still we live mean - ly, like ants; though the fa - ble
f

accel.

27

ff

tells us that we were long a - go changed in - to

30 ♩=80 **Seething and Roiling**

Pitchless. Spoken low and emphatically, as delivering a grave speech. Use natural rhythm of speech.

f

men; it is er - ror u - pon er - ror and

ff *f*

Spoken at pitch. Gradually transition to normal singing over the next three measures

32

clout u - pon clout; and our best vir - tues have for

gradually transition to sung

34

their oc-ca - sion a su - per - flu-ous and e - vi - ta - ble wre tched ness

36

Sung, with full vib.

from which none of us is free. Our

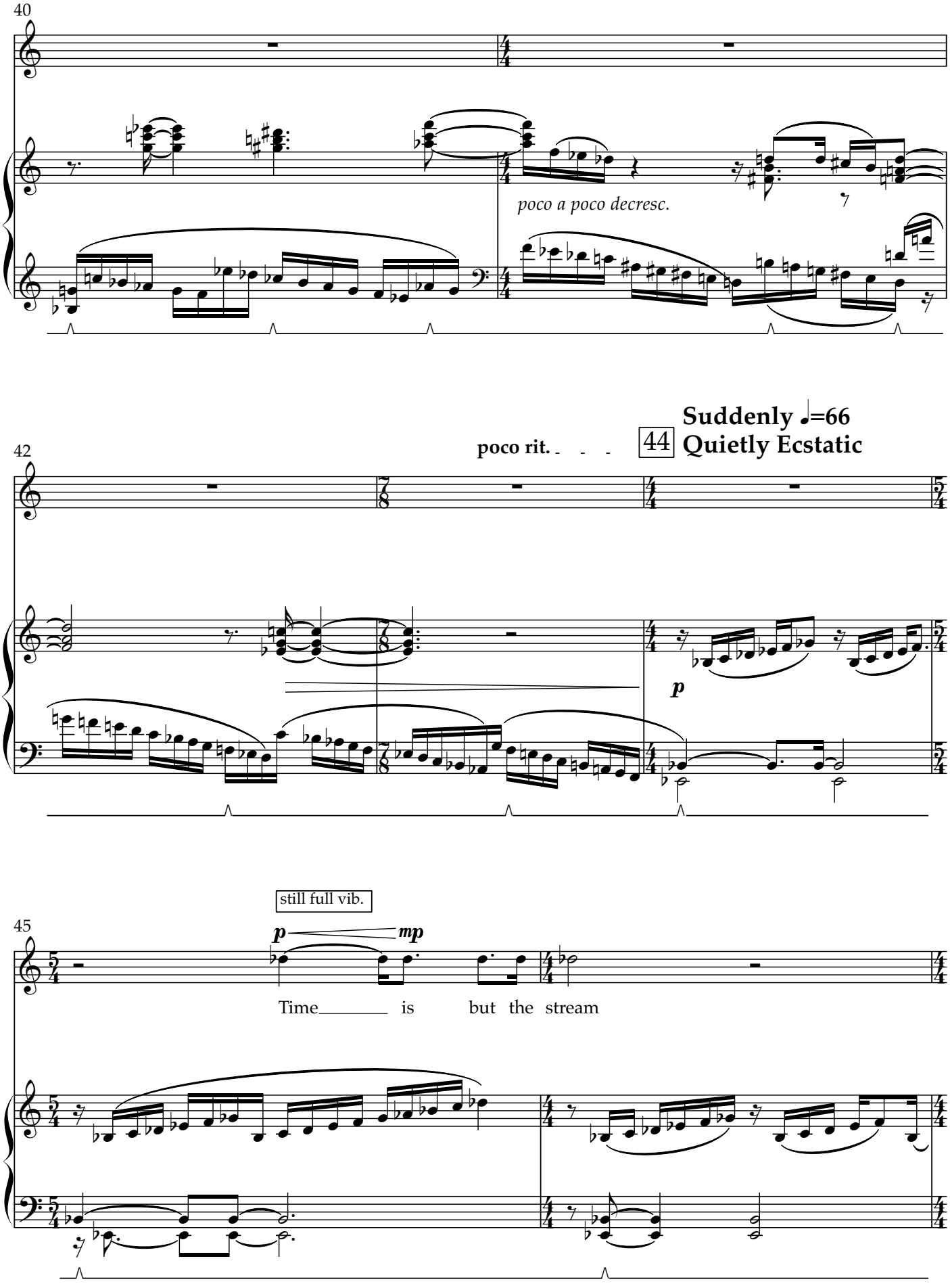
39

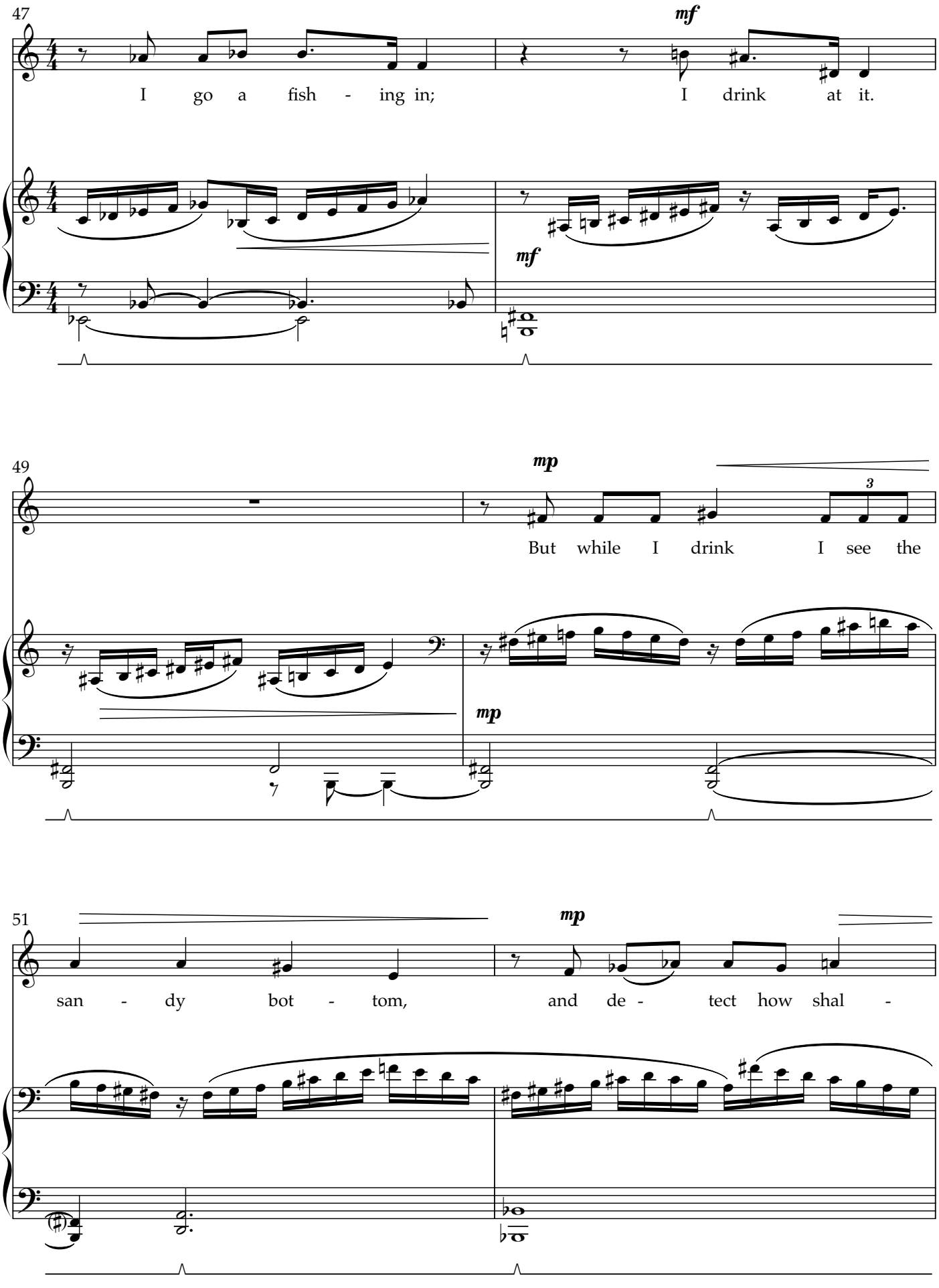
38

ff

lives are frit-tered a-way by de - tail.

ff


40
poco a poco decresc.
42
poco rit.
44
Suddenly ♩=66
Quietly Ecstatic
p
45
still full vib.
p
mp
Time is but the stream


47
mf
I go a fish - ing in;
I drink at it.
mf
49
mp
But while I drink I see the
3
mp
51
mp
san - dy bot - tom,
and de - tect how shal -

rit. 55 ♩=46 Simple, Serene

53

p

low it is.

pp *p*

no pedal

clear voice, only gentle vib., whistful

56

p

Its thin cur__ rent_ slides a__ way, but e - ter - ni-

pp *p*

59

mp

ty re- mains.

p

I would drink deep - er;

fish_

pp *p* *pp*

Ped. Ped.

62

pp

3

— in the sky, whose bot— tom is peb - bly with

pp

64 **Flowing**

mp

stars.

p

Ped.

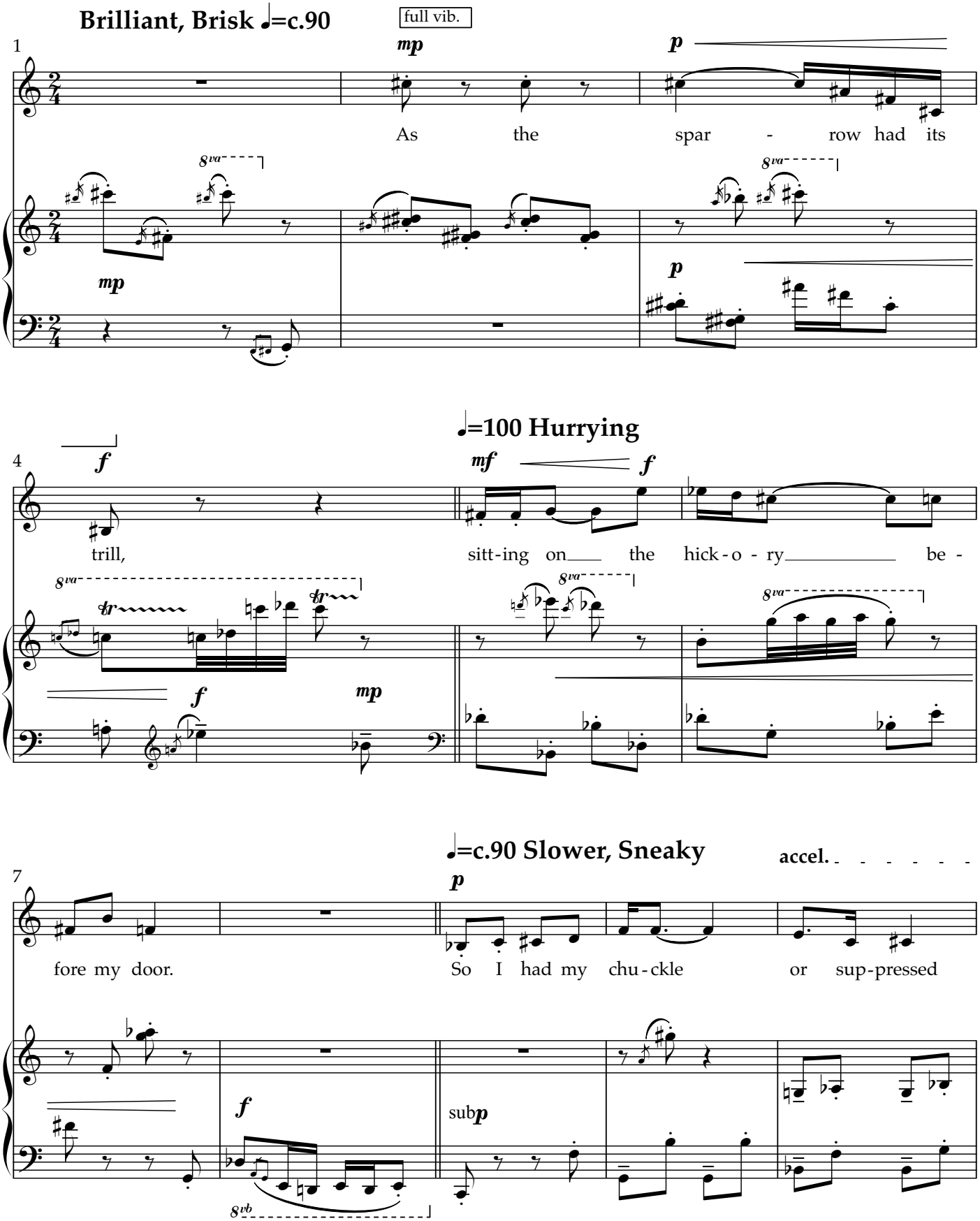
poco rit.

65

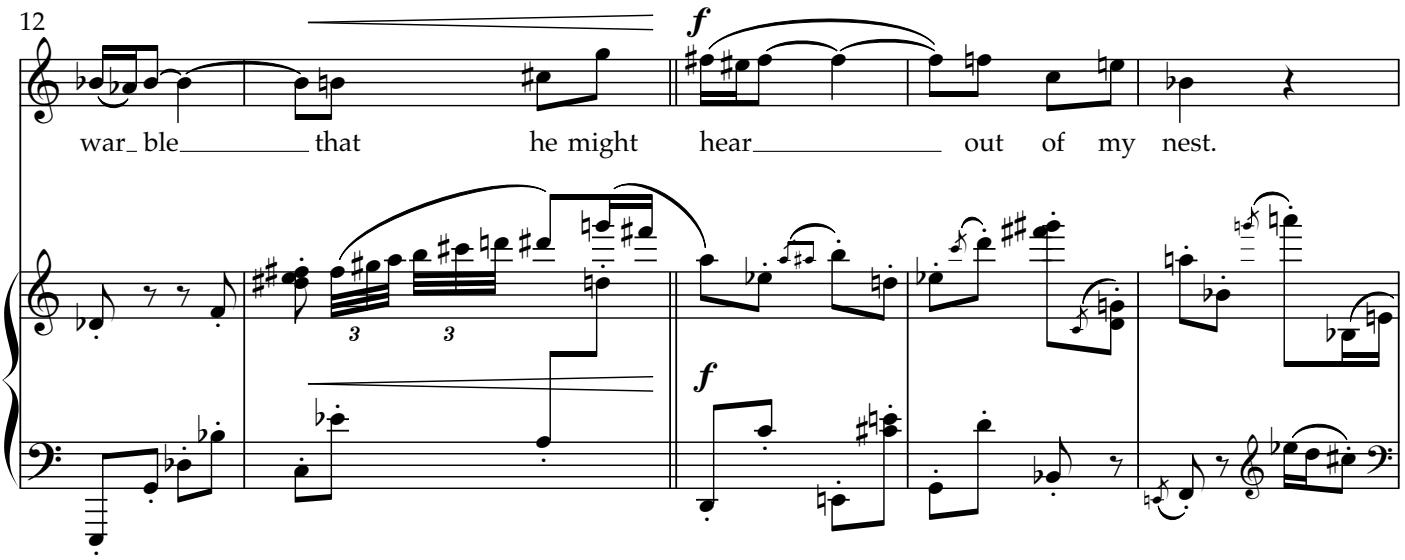
8va

mp

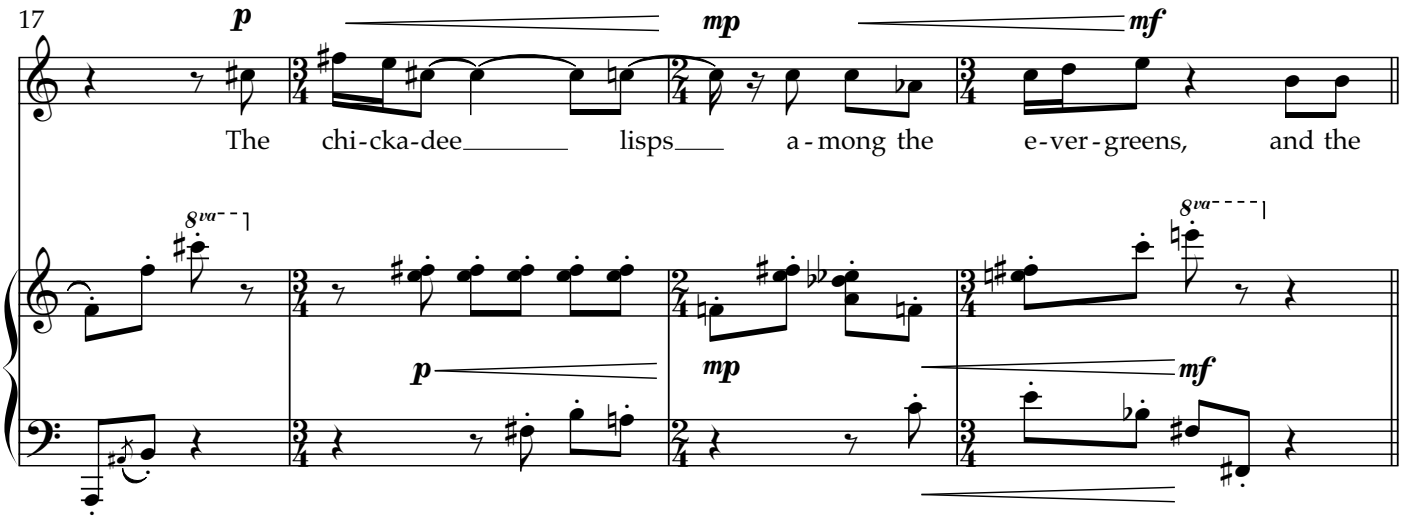
pp *p*


Brilliant, Brisk ♩=c.90
full vib.
1
mp
p
As the spar - row had its
8va
mp
p
♩=100 Hurrying
4
f
mf
f
trill,
sitt-ing on the hick-o - ry be -
tr
f
mp
♩=c.90 Slower, Sneaky
accel.
7
p
fore my door.
So I had my chu-ckle or sup-pressed
f
subp
8vb

14 ♩=100 Hurrying



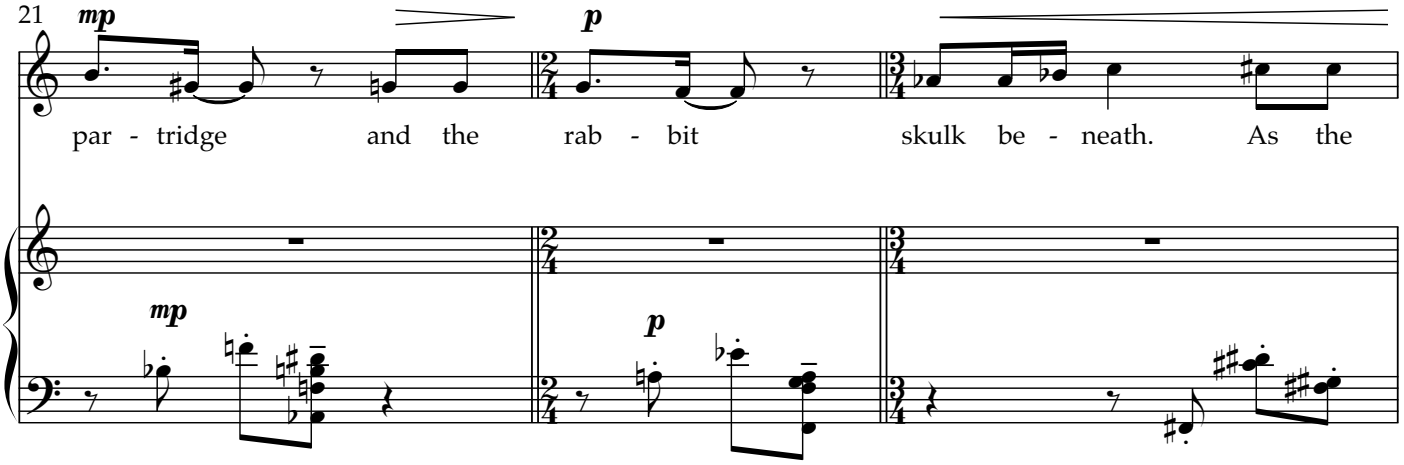
18 ♩=90 Brilliant, Brisk

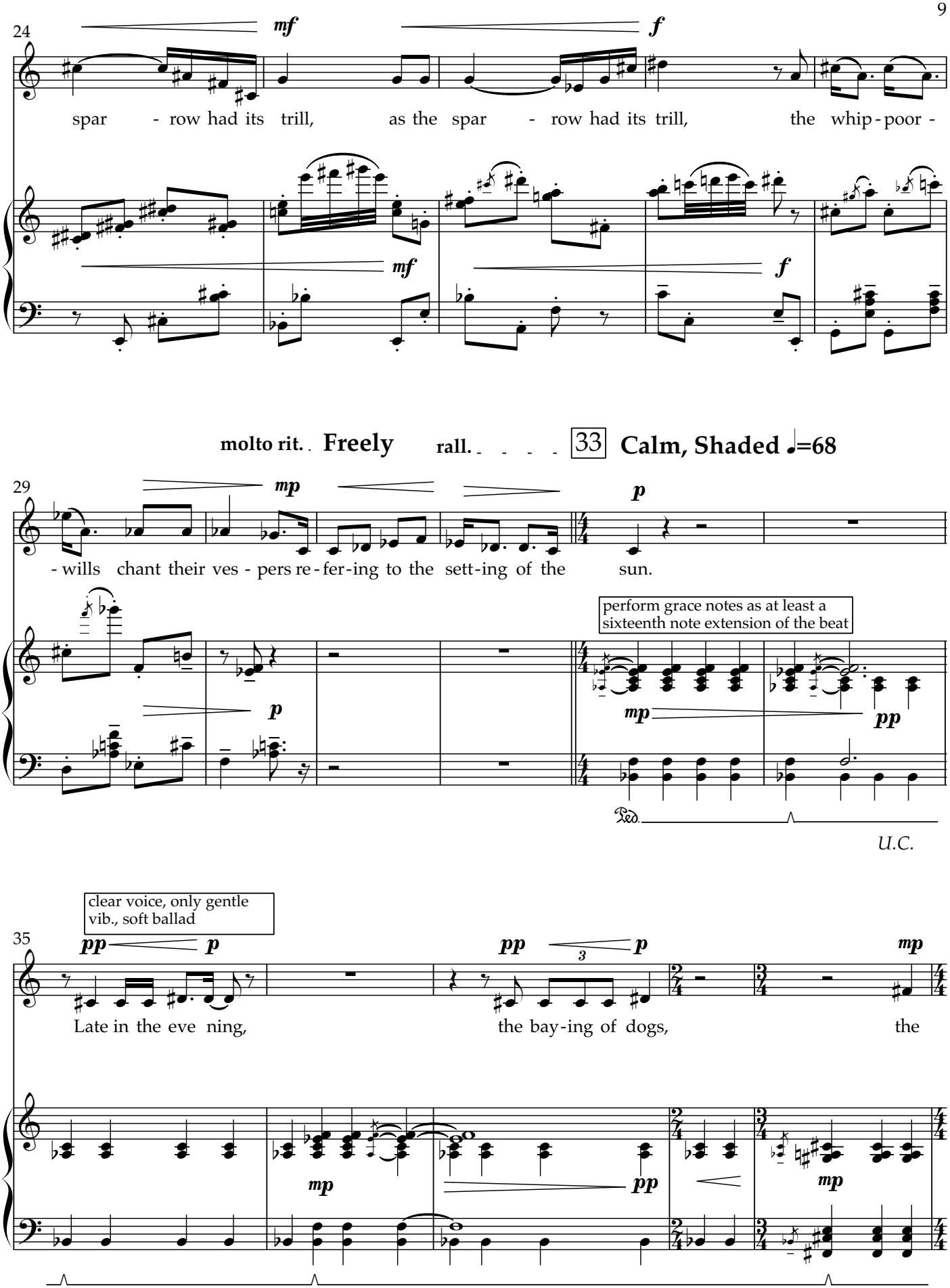


(♩=c.84)
Slightly Sluggish

(♩=c.78)
Even Slower

23 Suddenly ♩=90 Brilliant, Brisk




24
mf
f
spar - row had its trill, as the spar - row had its trill, the whip - poor -
mf
f
molto rit.
Freely
rall.
33
Calm, Shaded ♩=68
29
mp
p
- wills chant their ves - pers re - fer - ing to the sett - ing of the sun.
perform grace notes as at least a sixteenth note extension of the beat
p
mp
pp
Ped.
U.C.
clear voice, only gentle vib., soft ballad
35
pp
p
pp
3
p
mp
Late in the eve ning, the bay - ing of dogs, the
mp
pp
mp

40

mf

low-ing of some dis con-so-late cow.

mf *mp*

44 **Shadowy, Same Tempo**

clear voice, no vib., whistful

pp

When o-ther birds are still,

grace notes terse
as at the beginning

8va

pp

51

p *pp*

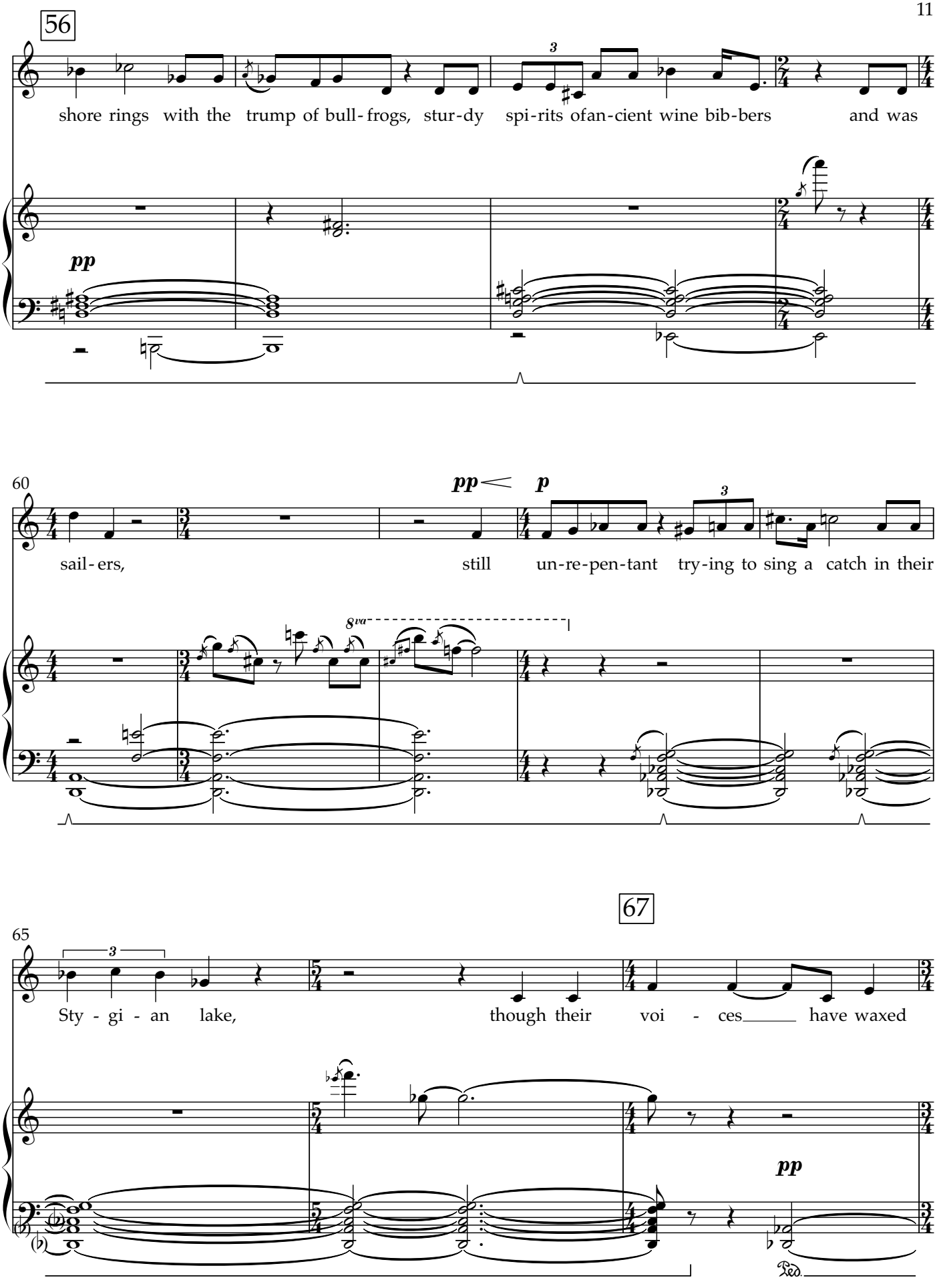
un poco vib.

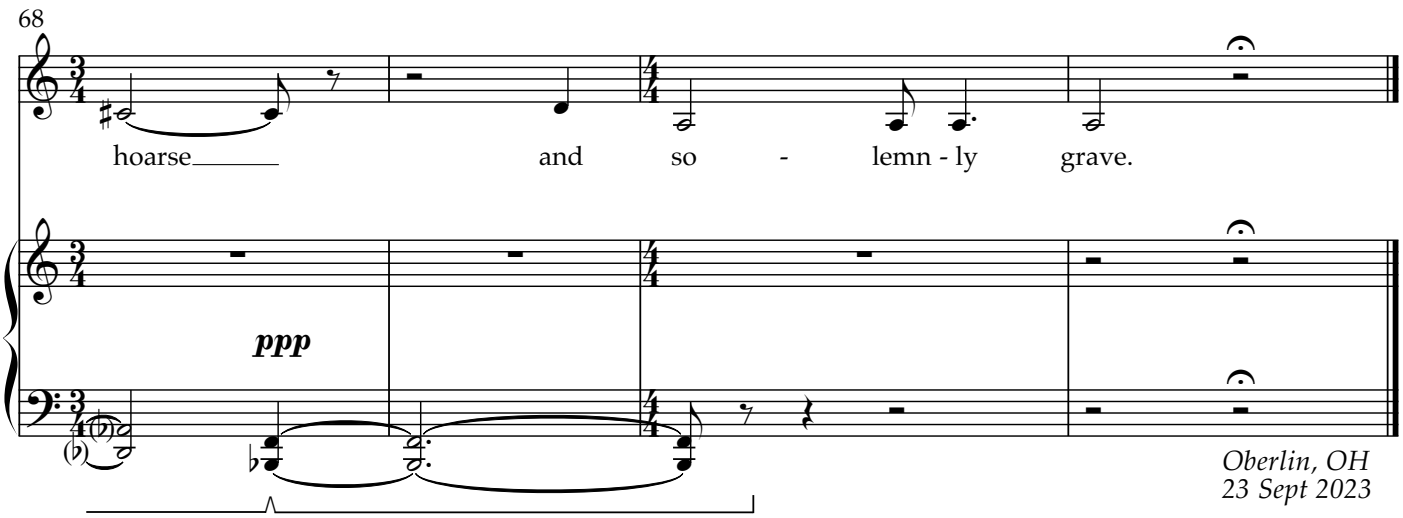
the screech owl takes up the strain tu-whit-tu- who. The

8va

ppp

Ped.


56
shore rings with the trump of bull-frogs, stur-dy spi-rits ofan-cient wine bib-bers and was
pp
60
pp
p
sail-ers, still un-re-pen-tant try-ing to sing a catch in their
8va
65
67
Sty - gi - an lake, though their voi - ces have waxed
pp
Ped.


68
hoarse
and so - lemn - ly grave.
ppp
Oberlin, OH
23 Sept 2023