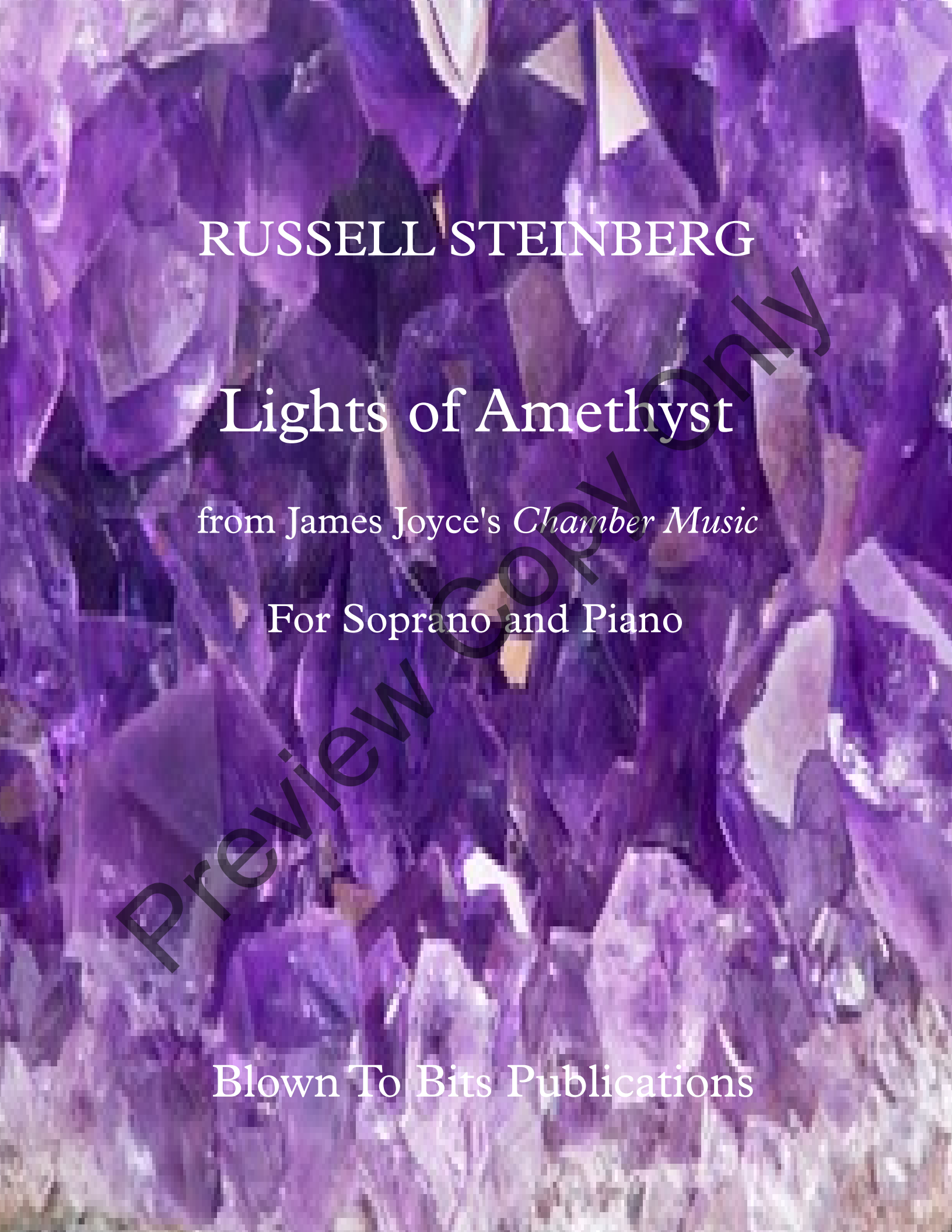

RUSSELL STEINBERG

Lights of Amethyst

from James Joyce's *Chamber Music*

For Soprano and Piano

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RUSSELL STEINBERG

Lights of Amethyst

from James Joyce's *Chamber Music*

op. 85

For Soprano and Piano

1. Strings in the earth and air
2. The twilight turns to amethyst
3. O lonely watcher of the skies
4. Goldenhair
5. To and fro
6. I hear an army charging upon the land

Duration: 22 minutes

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Lights of Amethyst
for Soprano and Piano
Music by Russell Steinberg

1. Strings in the earth and air
2. The twilights turns to amethyst
3. O lonely watcher of the skies
4. Goldenhair
5. To and fro
6. I hear an army charging upon the land

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Lights of Amethyst
Poetry of James Joyce (from *Chamber Music*)

1. Strings in the earth and air
Strings in the earth and air
Make music sweet;
Strings by the river where
The willows meet.

There's music along the river
For Love wanders there,
Pale flowers on his mantle,
Dark leaves on his hair.

All softly playing,
With head to the music bent,
And fingers straying
Upon an instrument.
***

2. The twilight turns from amethyst
The twilight turns from amethyst
To deep and deeper blue,
The lamp fills with a pale green glow
The trees of the avenue.

The old piano plays an air,
Sedate and slow and gay;
She bends upon the yellow keys,
Her head inclines this way.

Shy thoughts and grave wide eyes and hands
that wander as they list—
The twilight turns to darker blue
With lights of amethyst.
***

3. O lonely watcher of the skies
At that hour when all things have repose,
O lonely watcher of the skies,
Do you hear the night wind and the sighs
Of harps playing unto Love to unclose
The pale gates of sunrise?

When all things repose do you alone
Awake to hear the sweet harps play
To Love before him on his way,
And the night wind answering in antiphon
Till night is overgone?

Play on, invisible harps, unto Love,
Whose way in heaven is aglow
At that hour when soft lights come and go,
Soft sweet music in the air above
And in the earth below.

4. Goldenhair
Lean out of the window,
Goldenhair,
I heard you singing
A merry air.

My book was closed;
I read no more,
Watching the fire dance
On the floor.

I have left my book,
I have left my room,
For I heard you singing
Through the gloom.

Singing and singing
A merry air,
Lean out of the window,
Goldenhair.
***

5. To and fro
All day I hear the noise of waters
Making moan,
Sad as the sea-bird is, when going
Forth alone,
He hears the winds cry to the waters'
Monotone.

The grew winds, the cold winds are blowing
Where I go.
I hear the noise of many waters
Far below.
All day, all night, I hear them flowing
To and fro.
***

5. I hear an army charging upon the land

I hear an army charging upon the land,
And the thunder of horses plunging, foam about
their knees:
Arrogant, in black armor, behind them stand,
Disdaining the reins, with fluttering whips, the
charioteers.

They cry unto the night their battle-name:
I moan in sleep when I hear afar their whirling
laughter.
They cleave the gloom of dreams, a blinding flame,
Clanging, clanging upon the heart as upon an
anvil.

They come shaking in triumph their long, green
hair:
They come out of the sea and run shouting by
the shore.
My heart, have you no wisdom thus to despair?
My love, my love, my love, why have you left me alone?
***

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Performance Notes

At a post-concert reception, Hila Plitmann spontaneously asked me to write her a piece. Was she serious? Did she even know my music? I had heard her magnificent operatic voice in performances with the LA Philharmonic and wondered how it might glow in more intimate art song. I had recently discovered James Joyce's poem "The Twilight Turns From Amethyst" (from his early poetry collection titled *Chamber Music*). The way Joyce described the changing colors of the darkening sky, that was how I imagined the changing colors in Hila's voice. Months later I wrote the song, invited her over to read it through, and her simple reaction, "Great. Why don't you write some more."

"More" became this collection of six songs distilled from the larger Joyce collection. In deceptively simple language, Joyce illuminates the beauty of earthly life, while all the time actually speaking about love and the pain of love's loss. The journey begins with Love sounding a string instrument along the river. Then the sound of an old piano drifts in the air as twilight enfolds the earth. That piano becomes a harp of the heavens at night. Reading by the hearth, the poet imagines the golden-haired lover singing cheerfully, leaning out the window. Then a meditation on the tide of the sea, "the noise of waters making moan…flowing to and fro." Finally, a dream vision of an army on horseback charging from the sea, arrogant, shouting, and laughing, tearing away denial, raining despair, and wresting a final heart-wrenching plea from the poet: "My love, my love, my love, why have you left me alone?"

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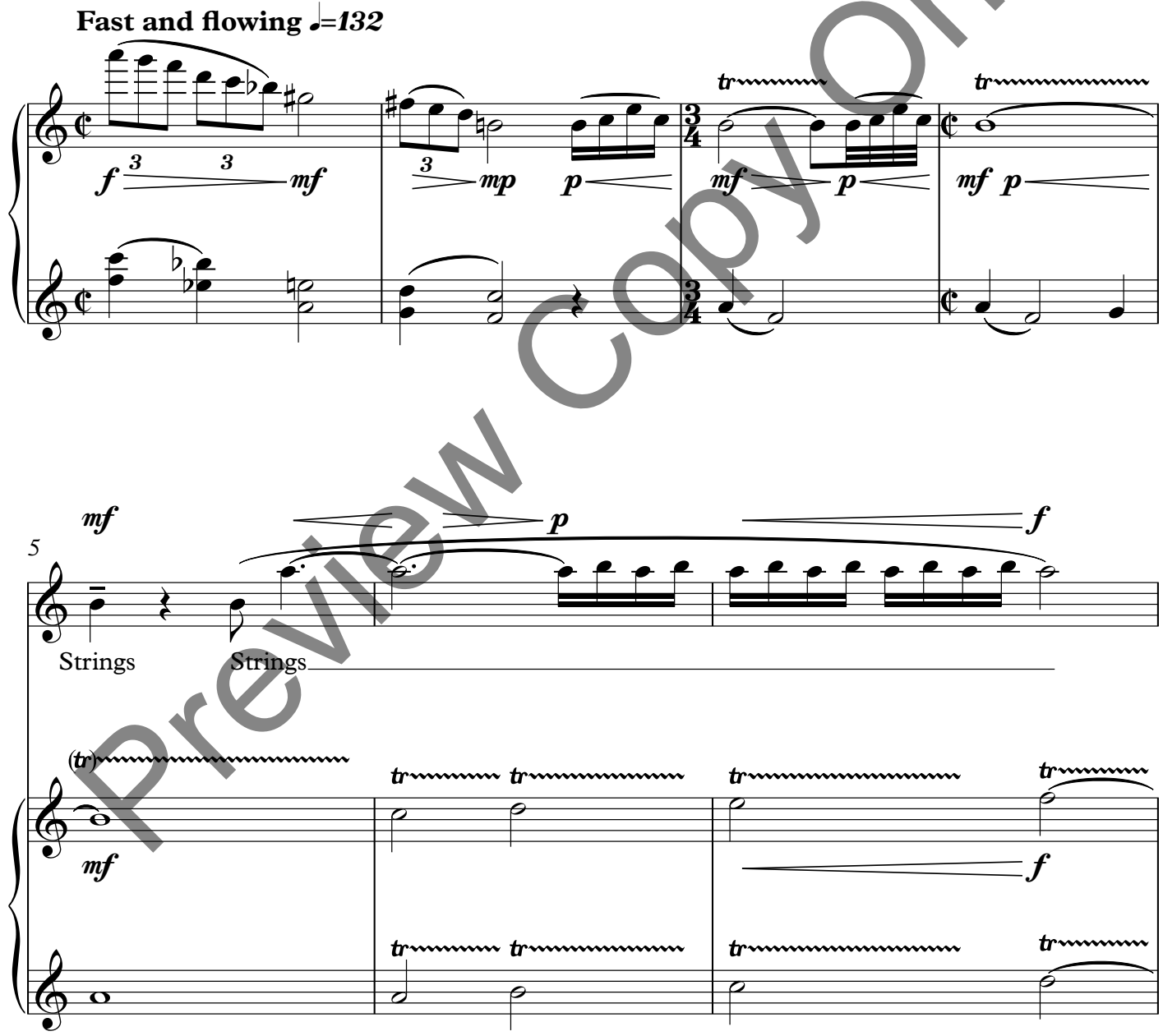
for Hila Plitmann

1. Strings in the earth and air

Poems by James Joyce

Music by Russell Steinberg



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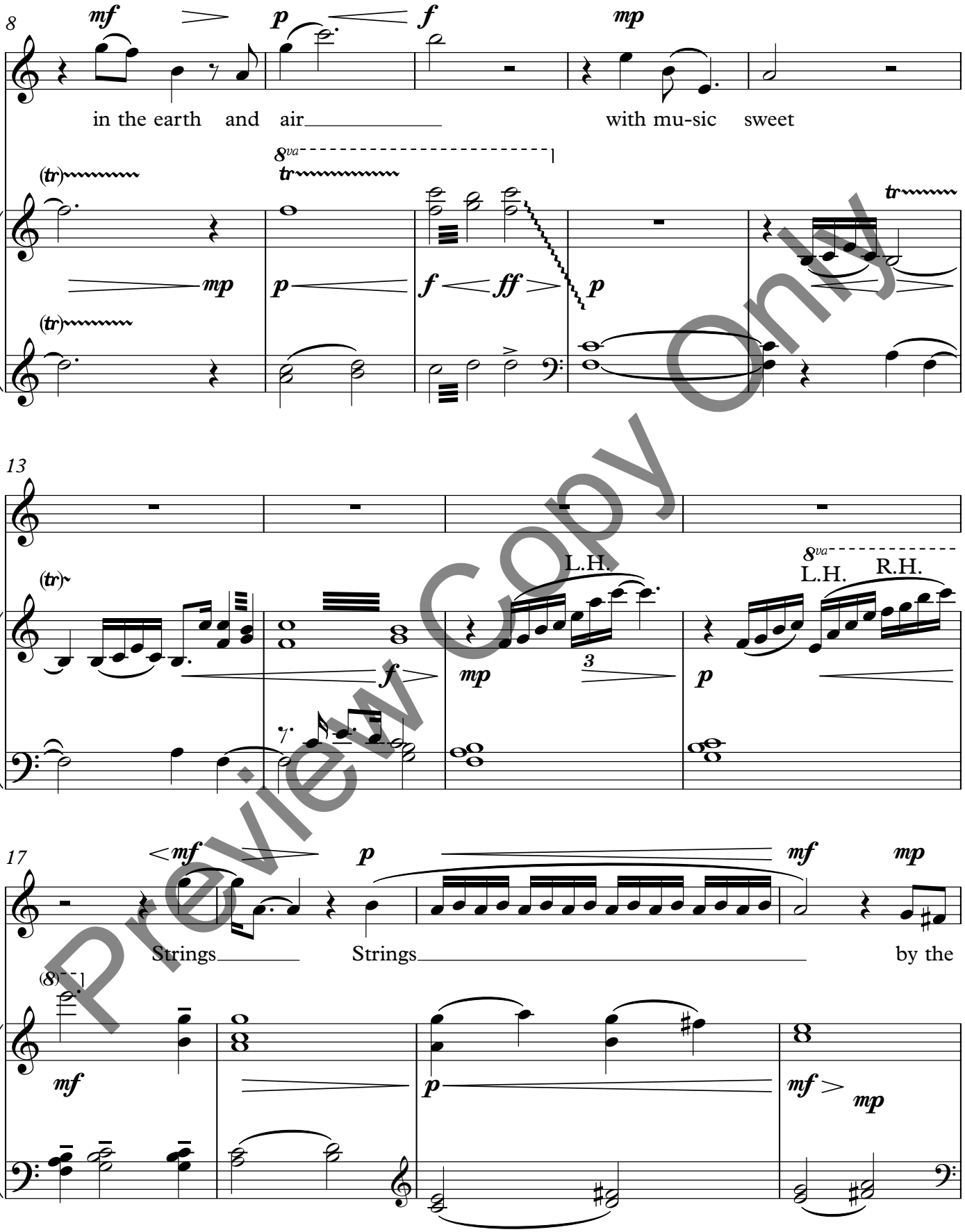

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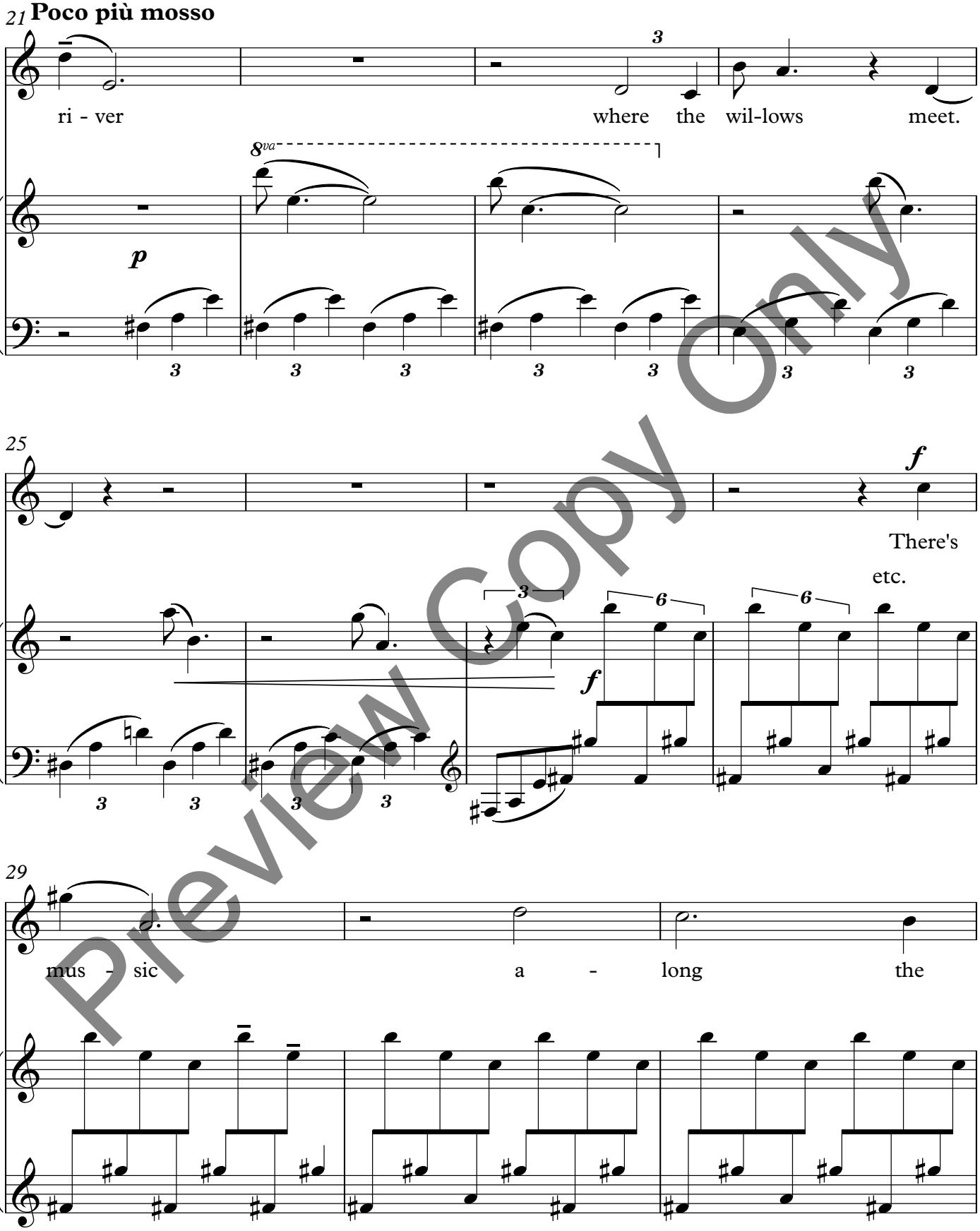

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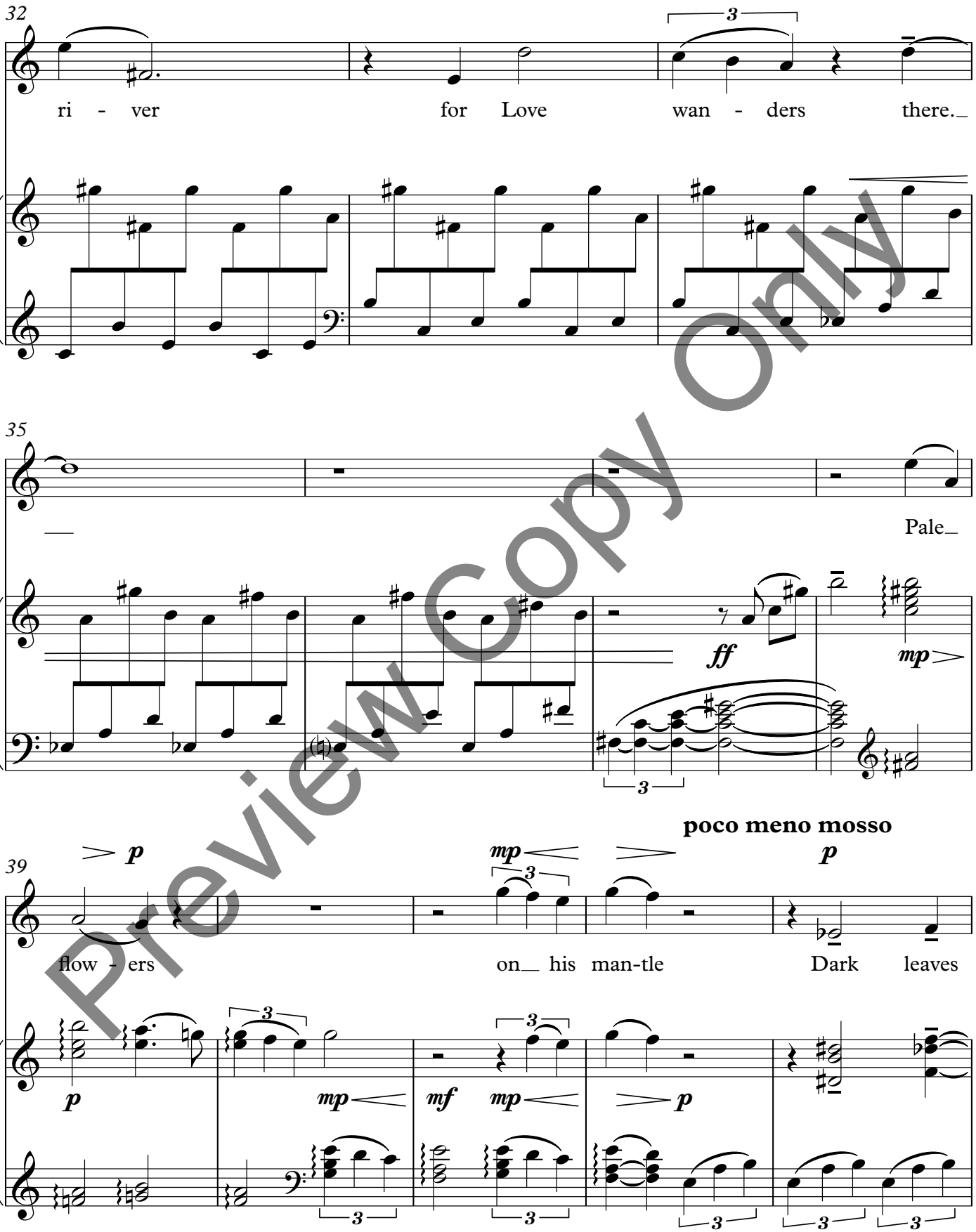

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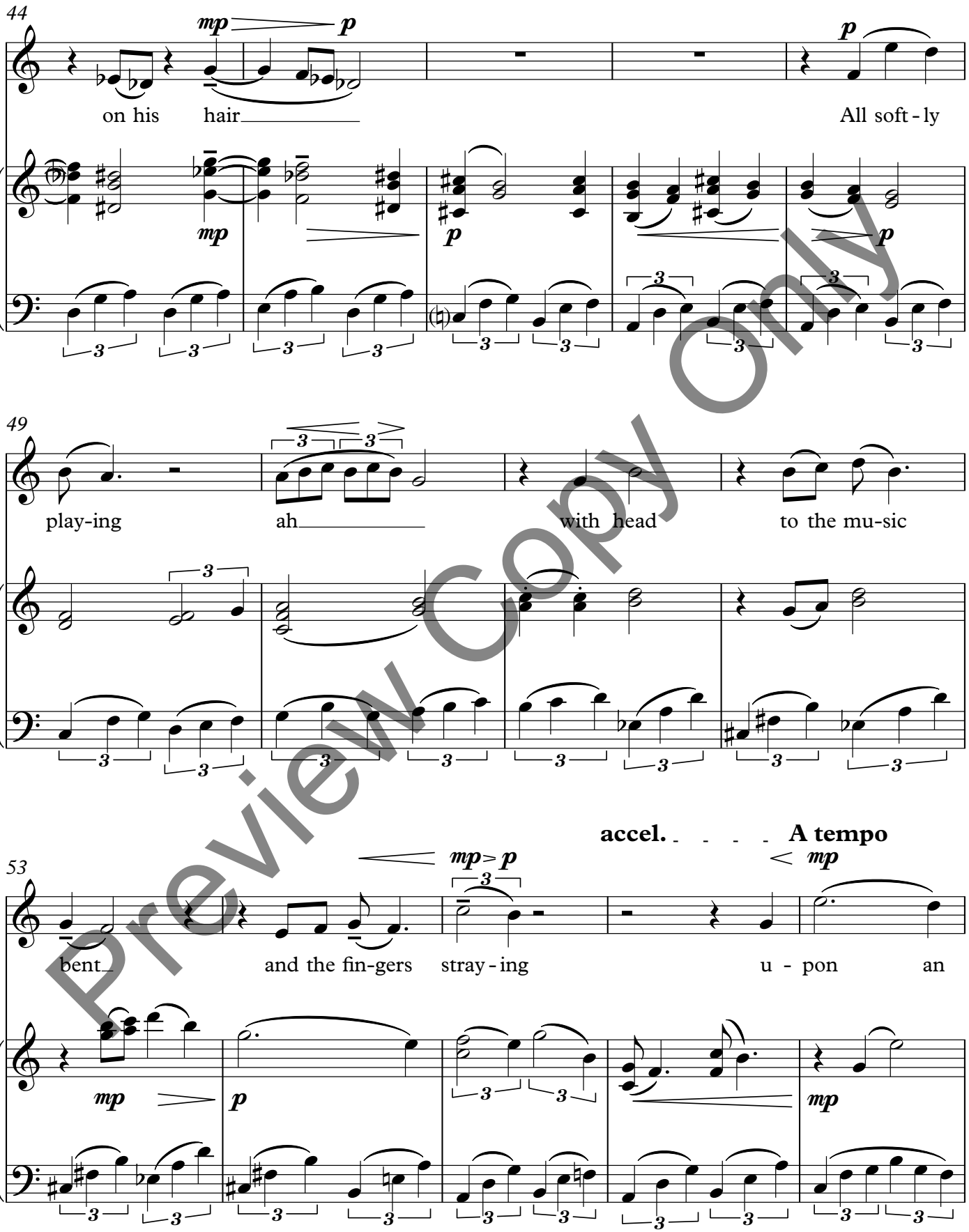

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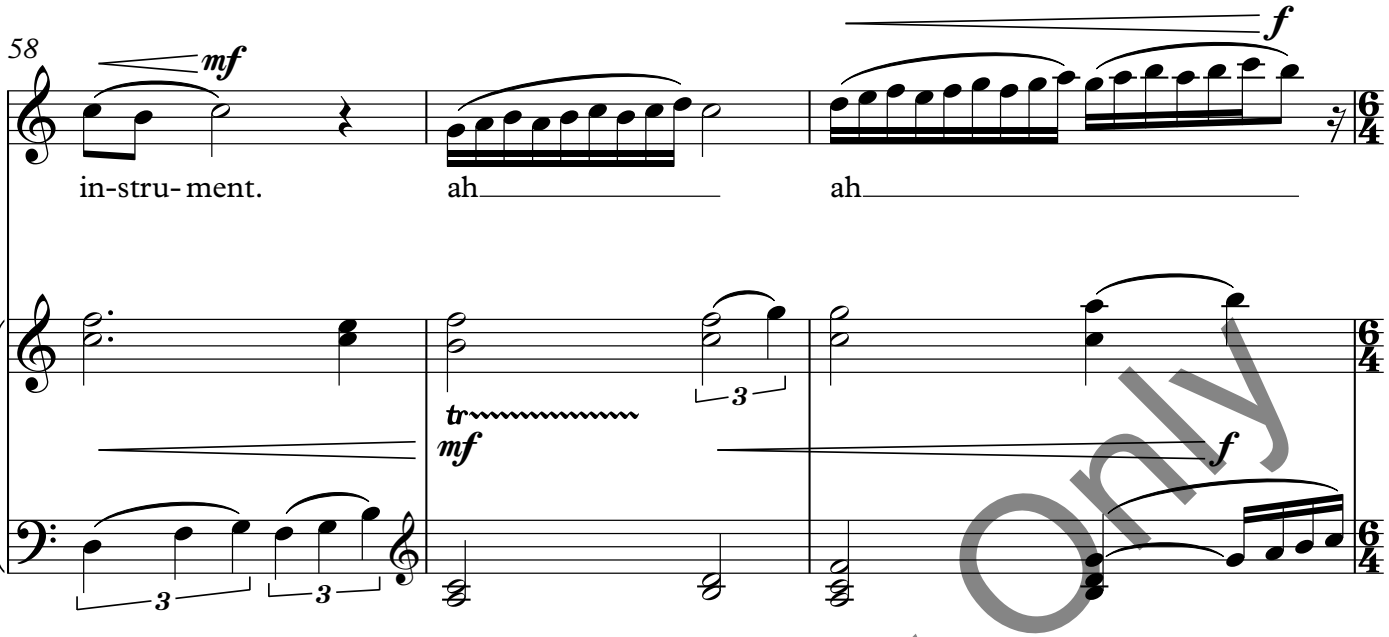

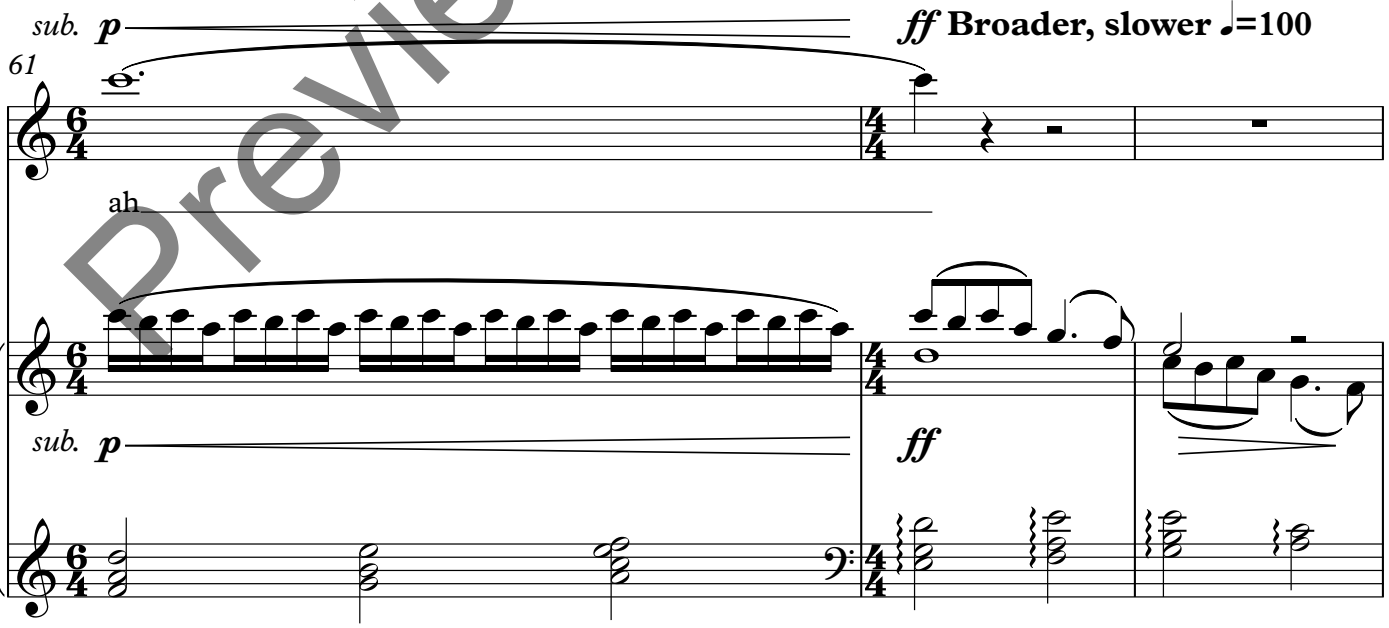

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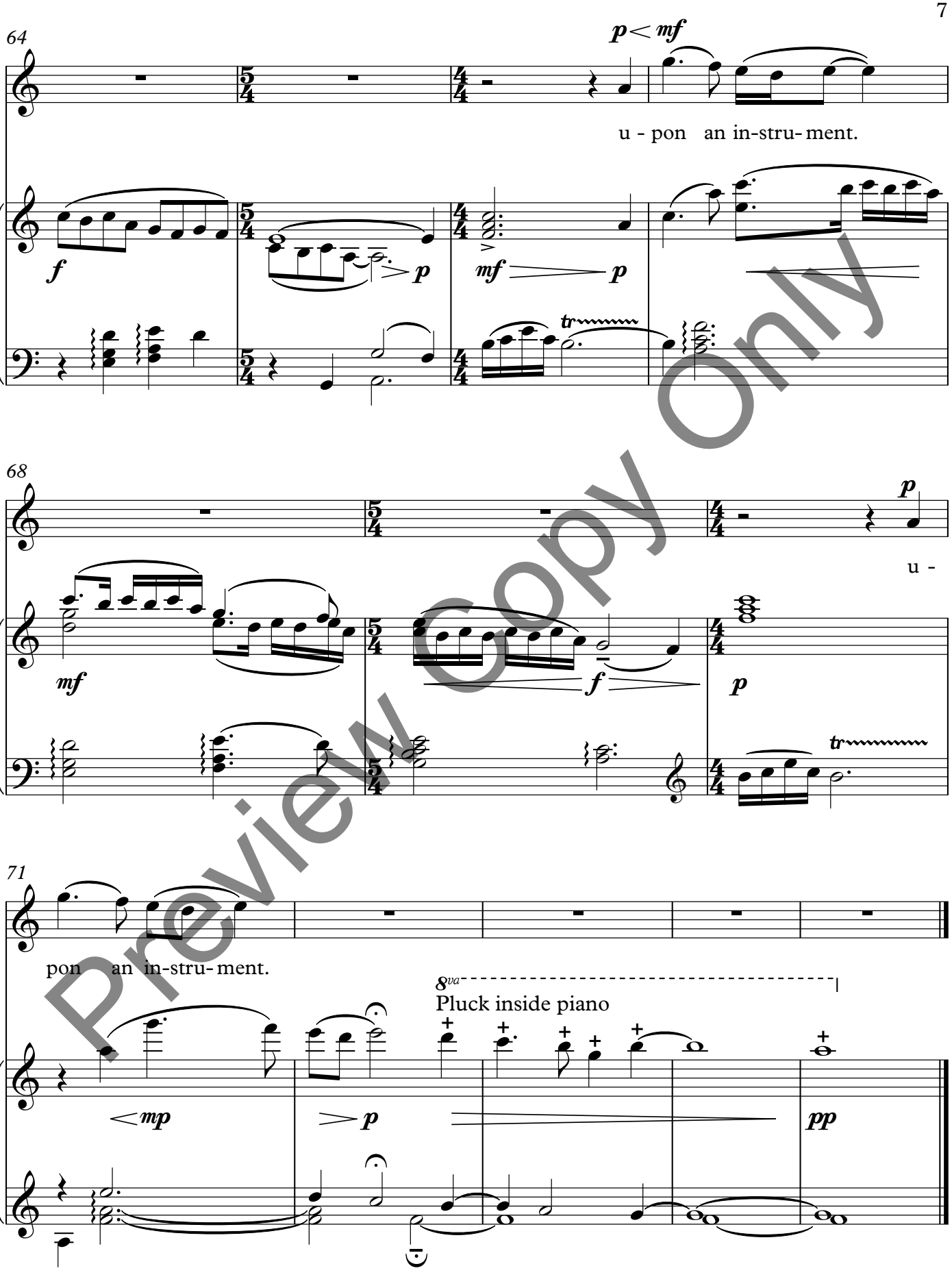

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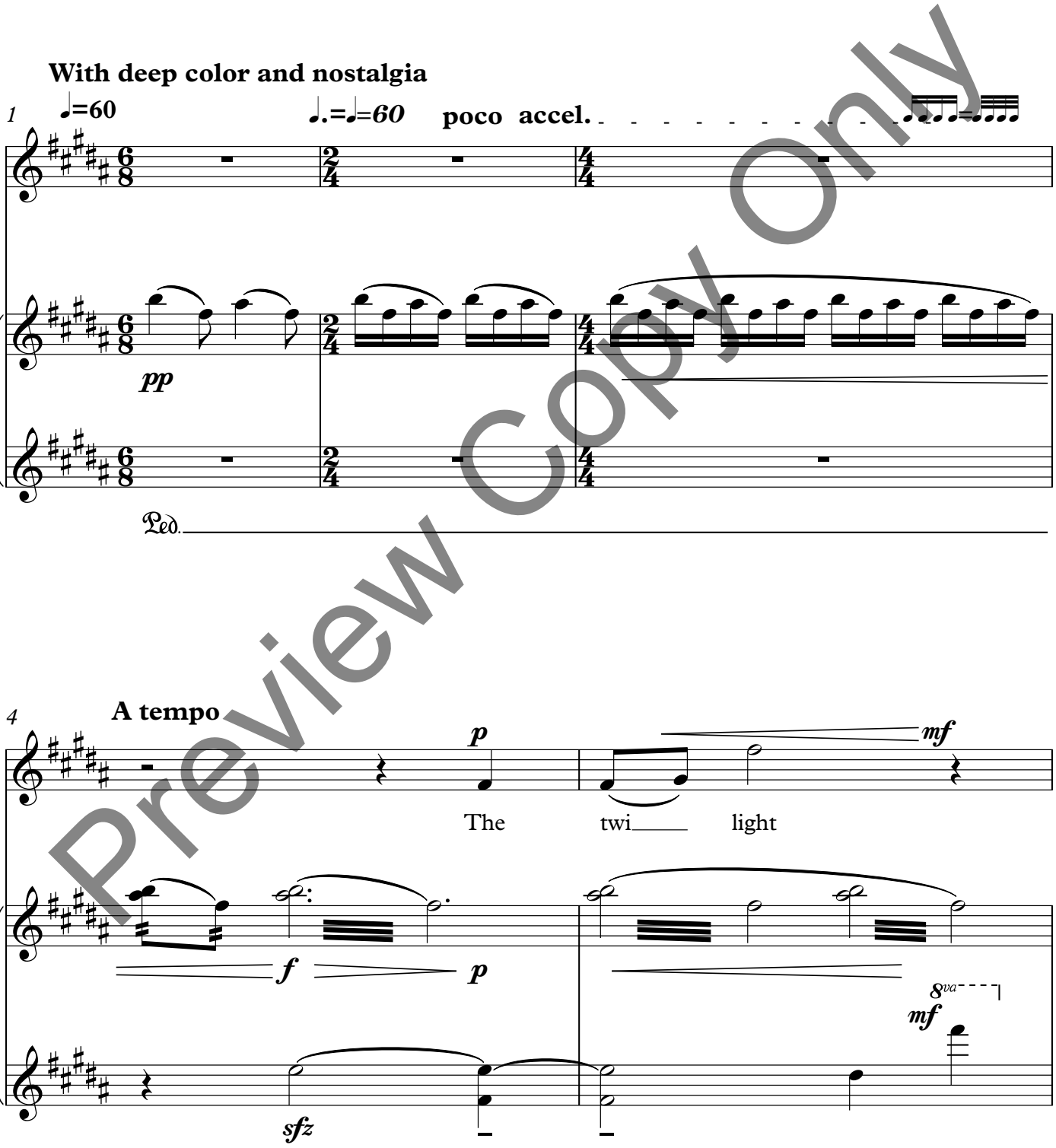
for Hila Plitmann

2. The twilight turns from amethyst



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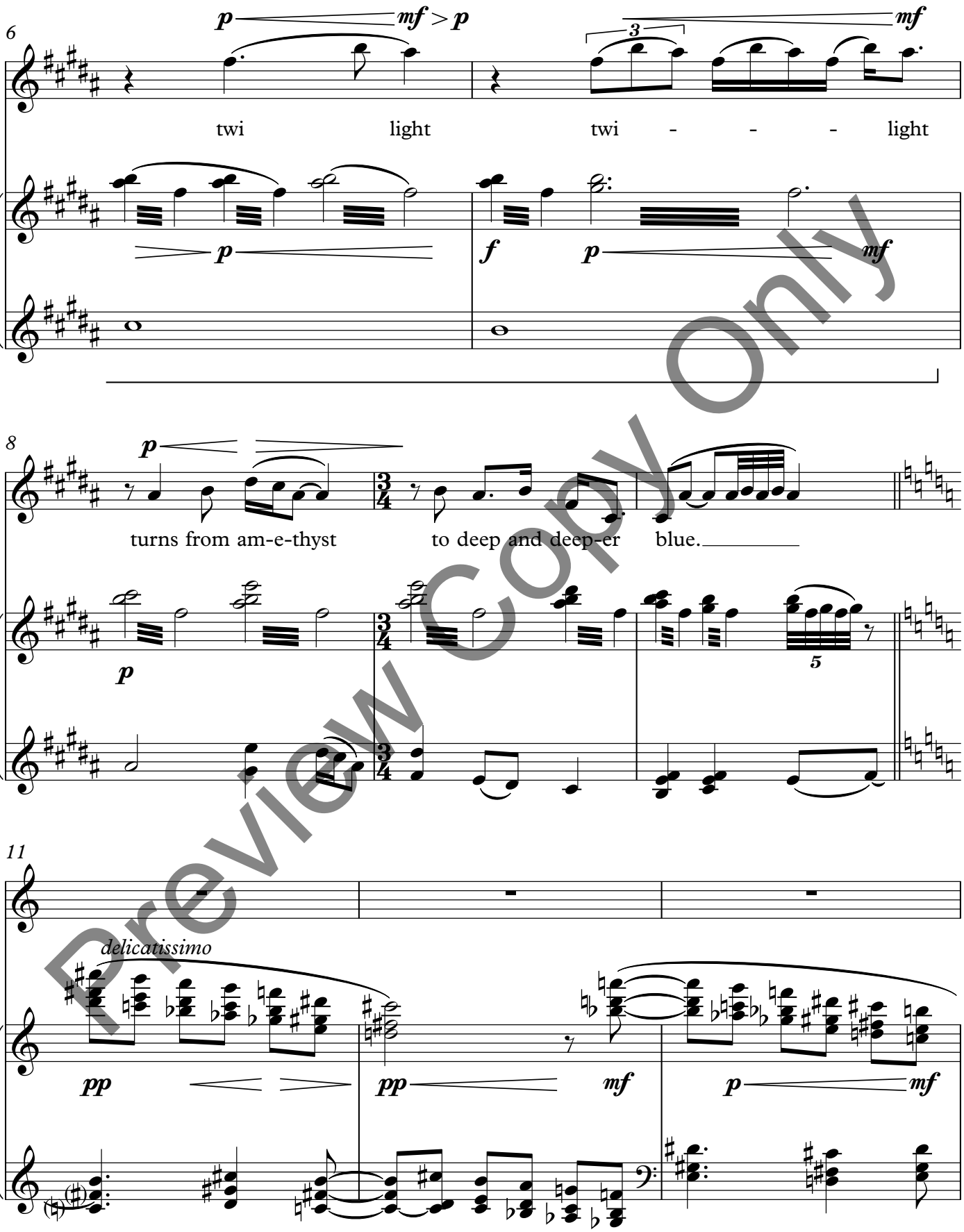

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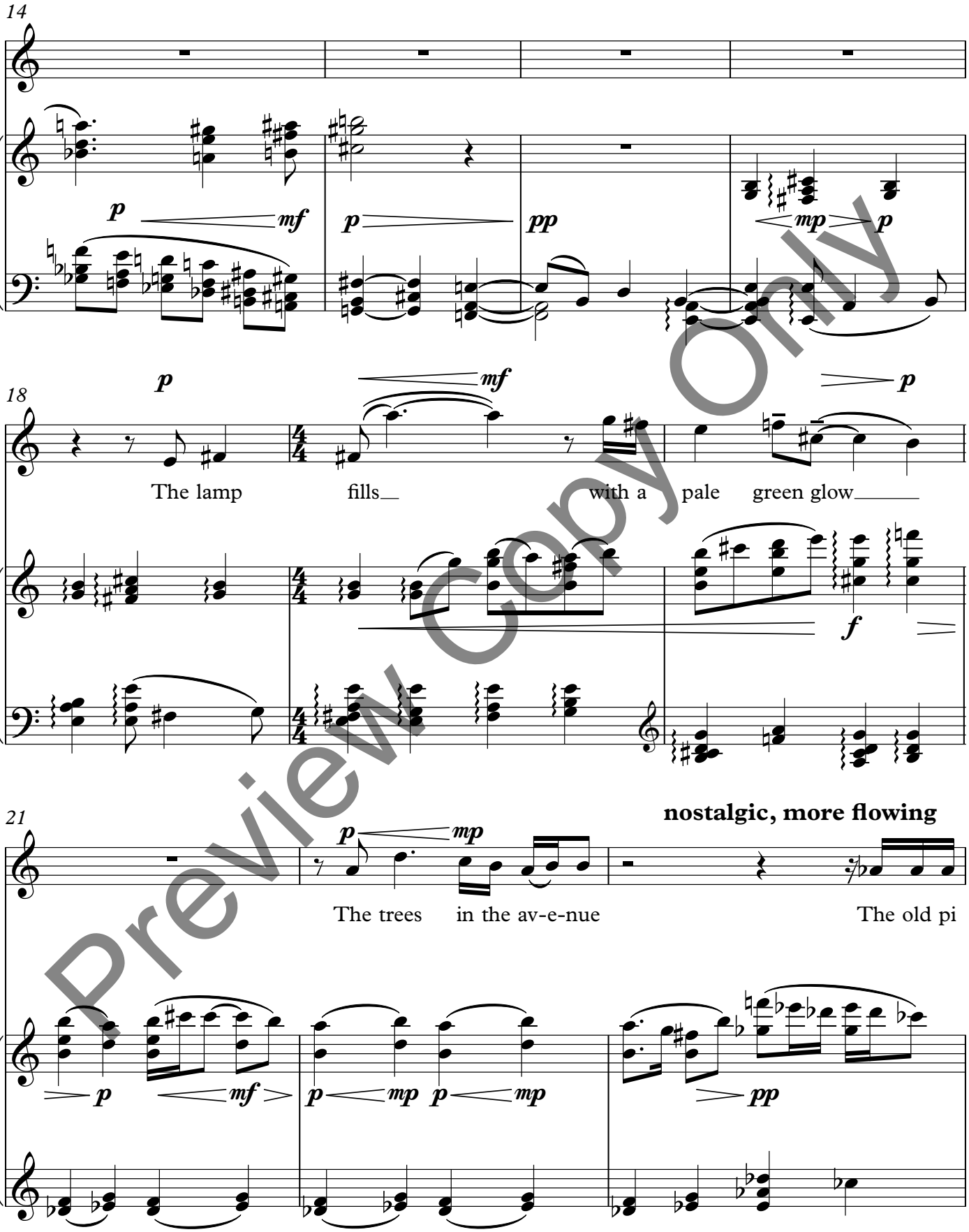

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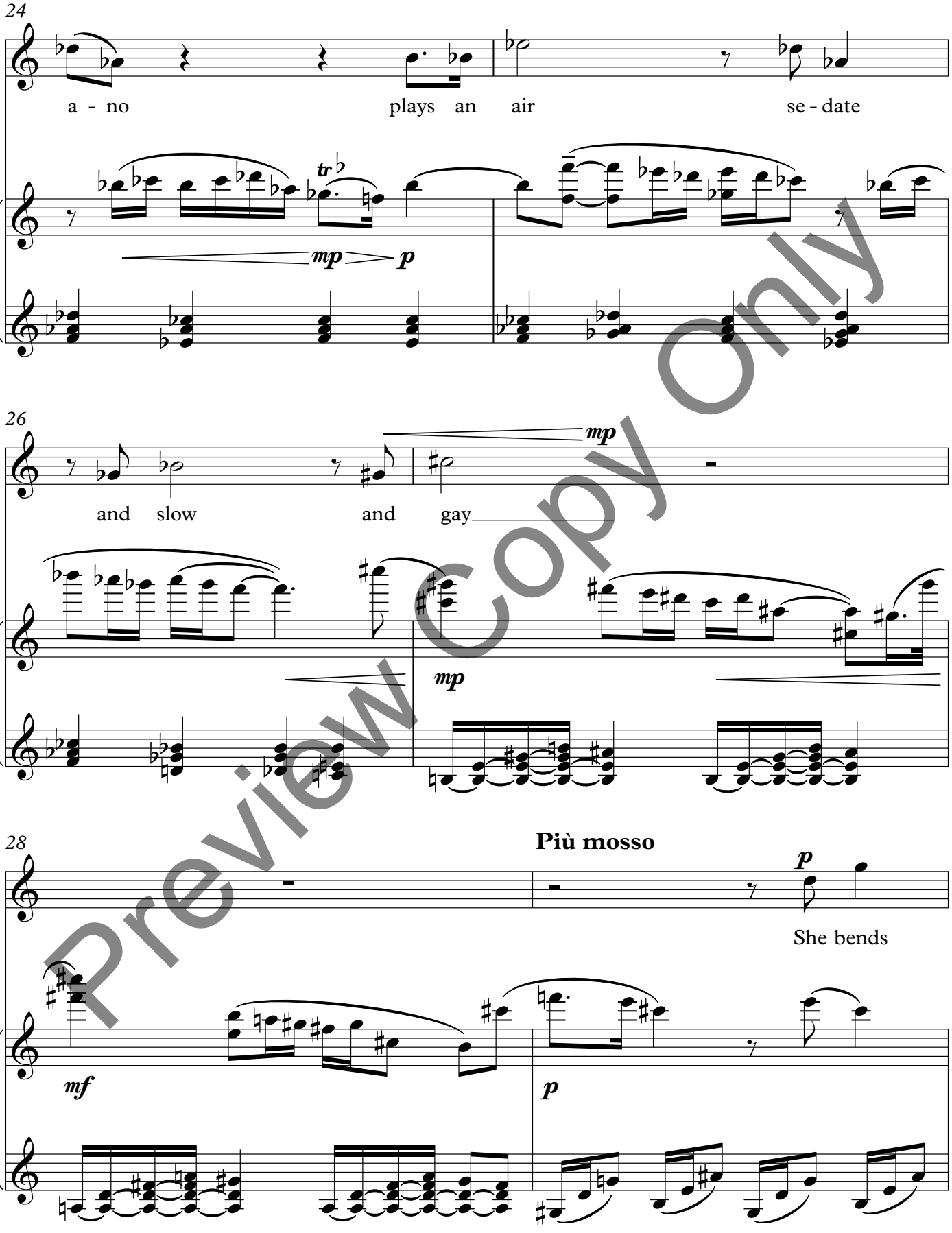

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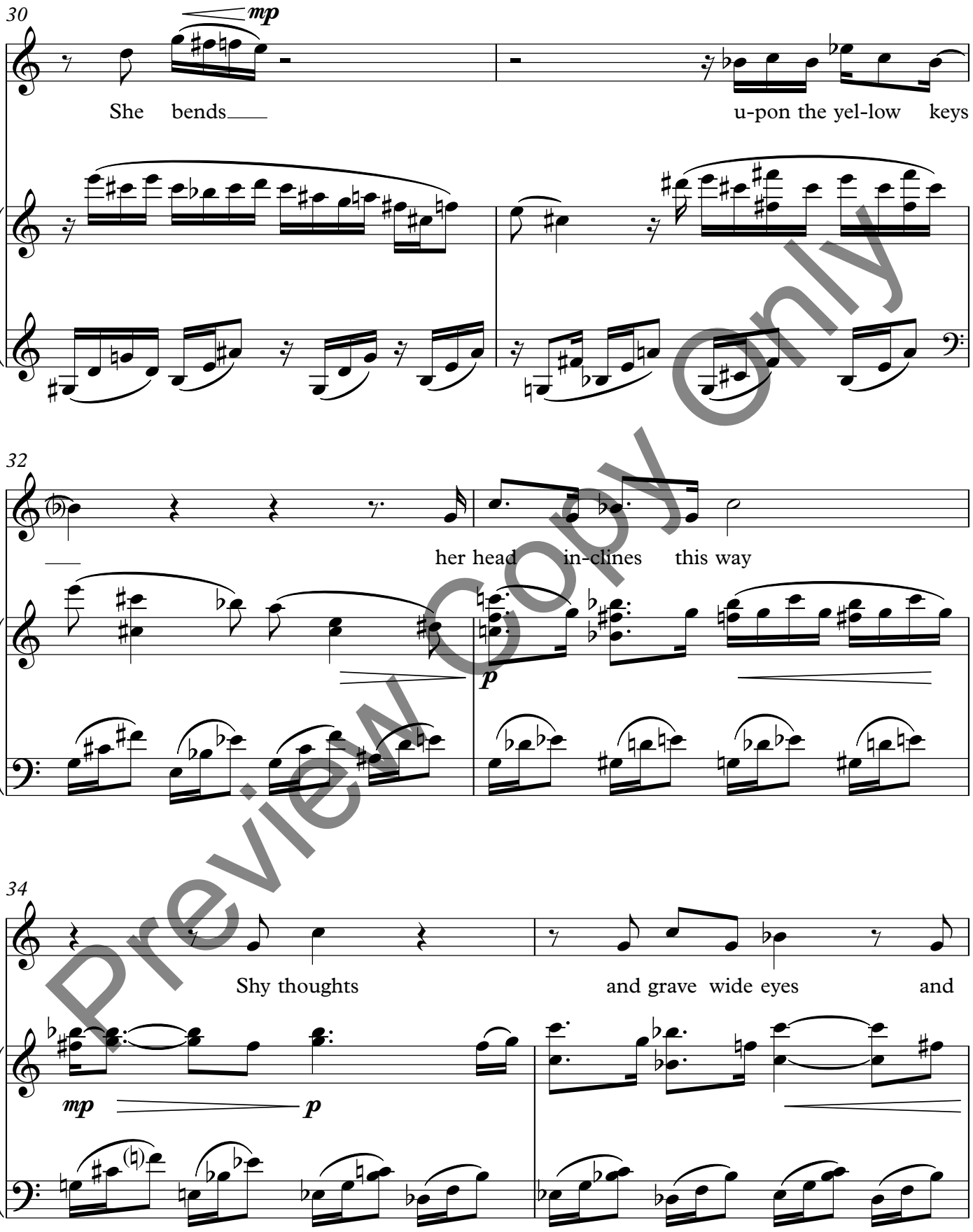

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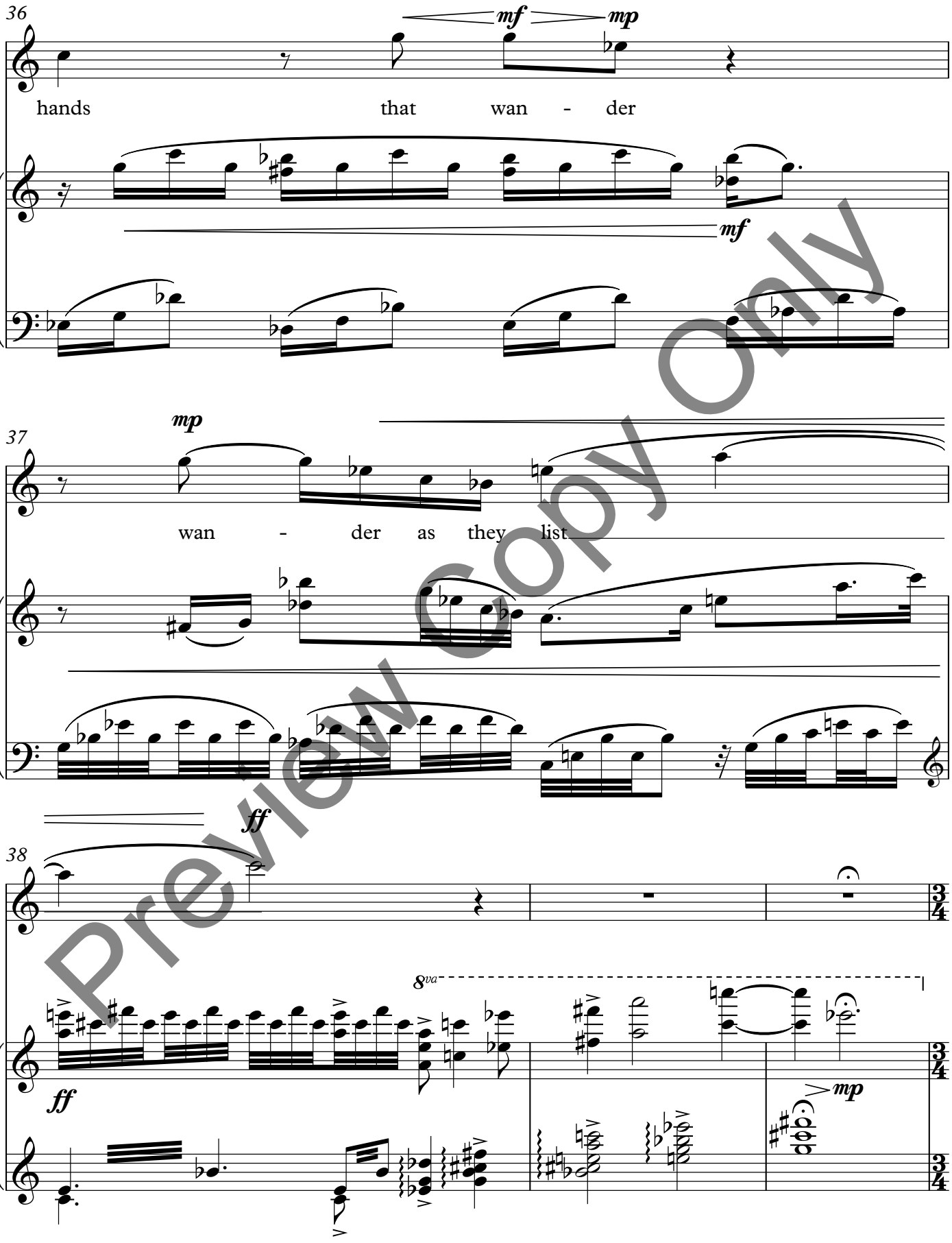

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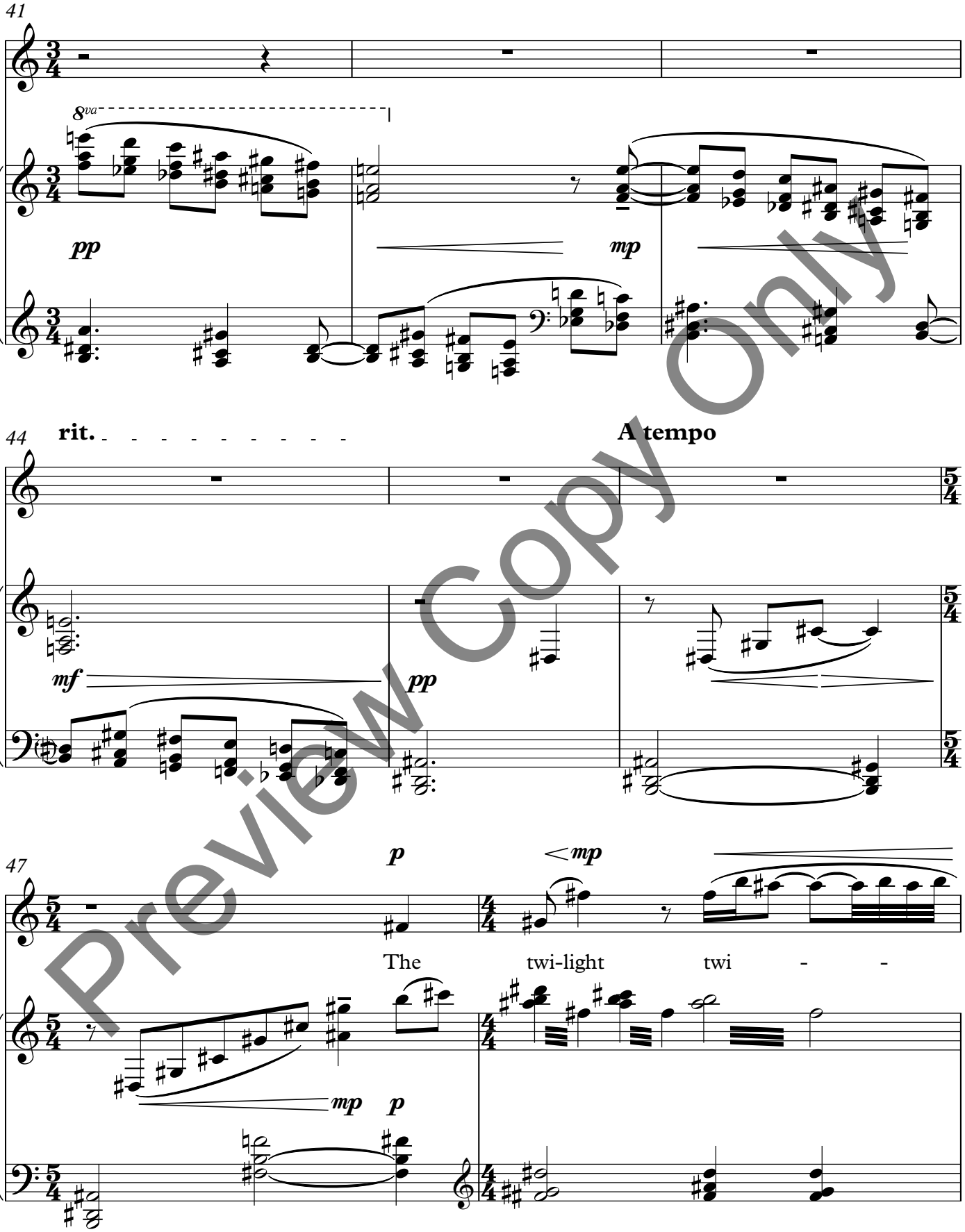

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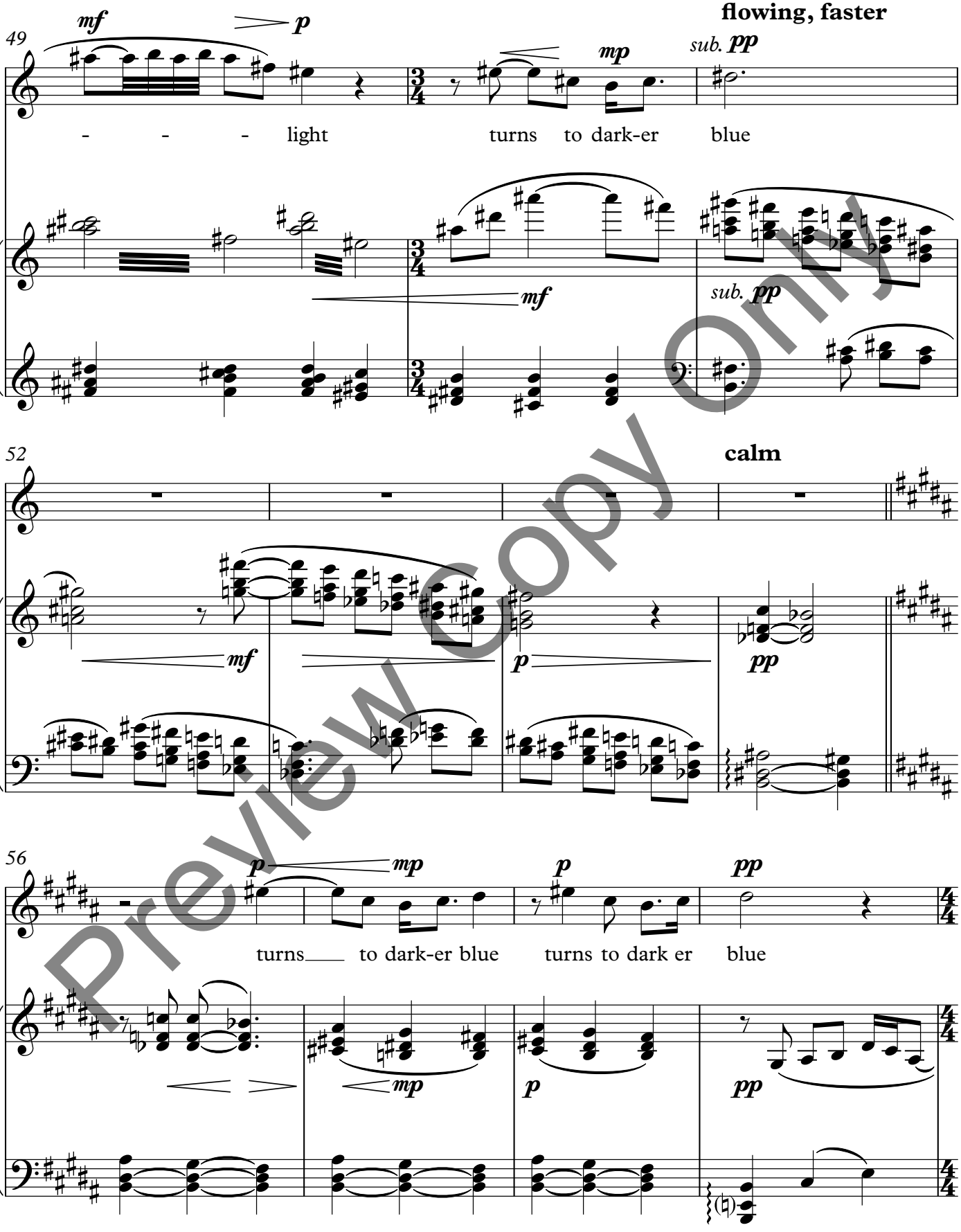

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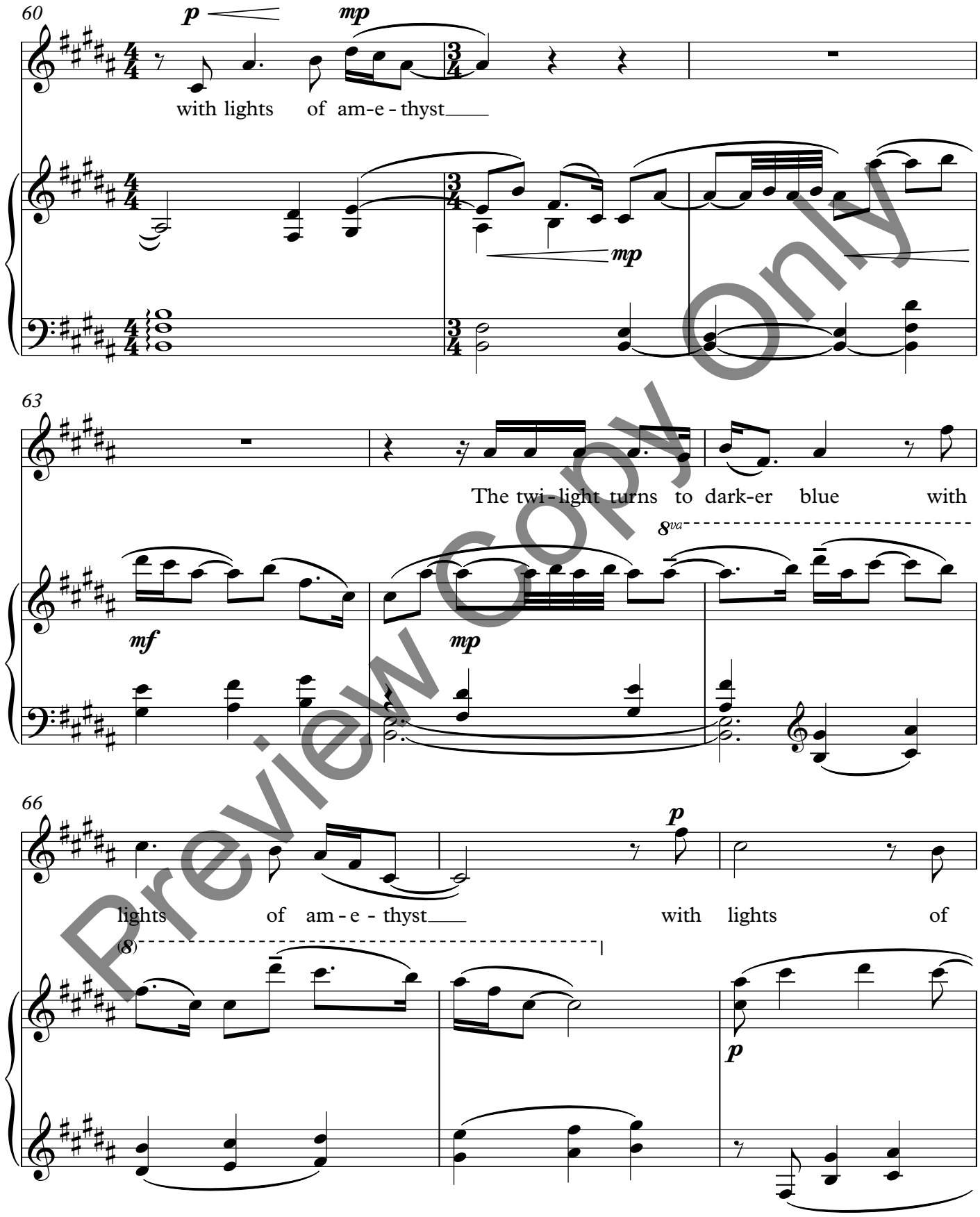

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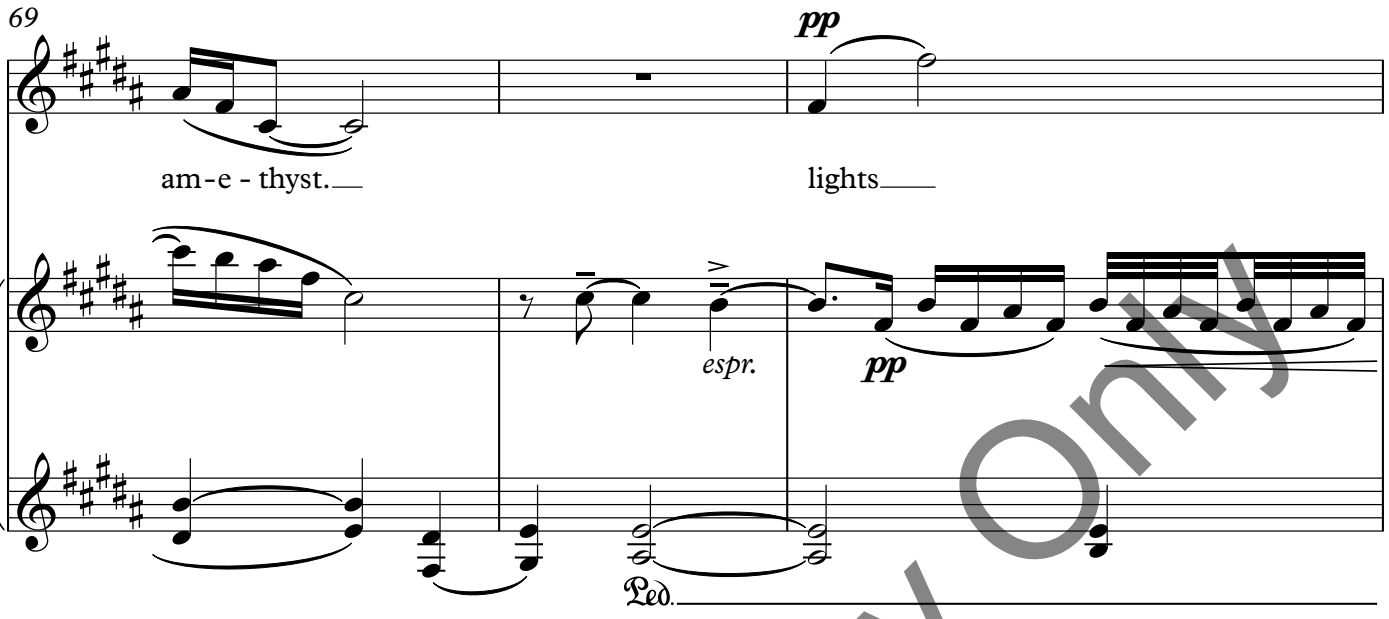

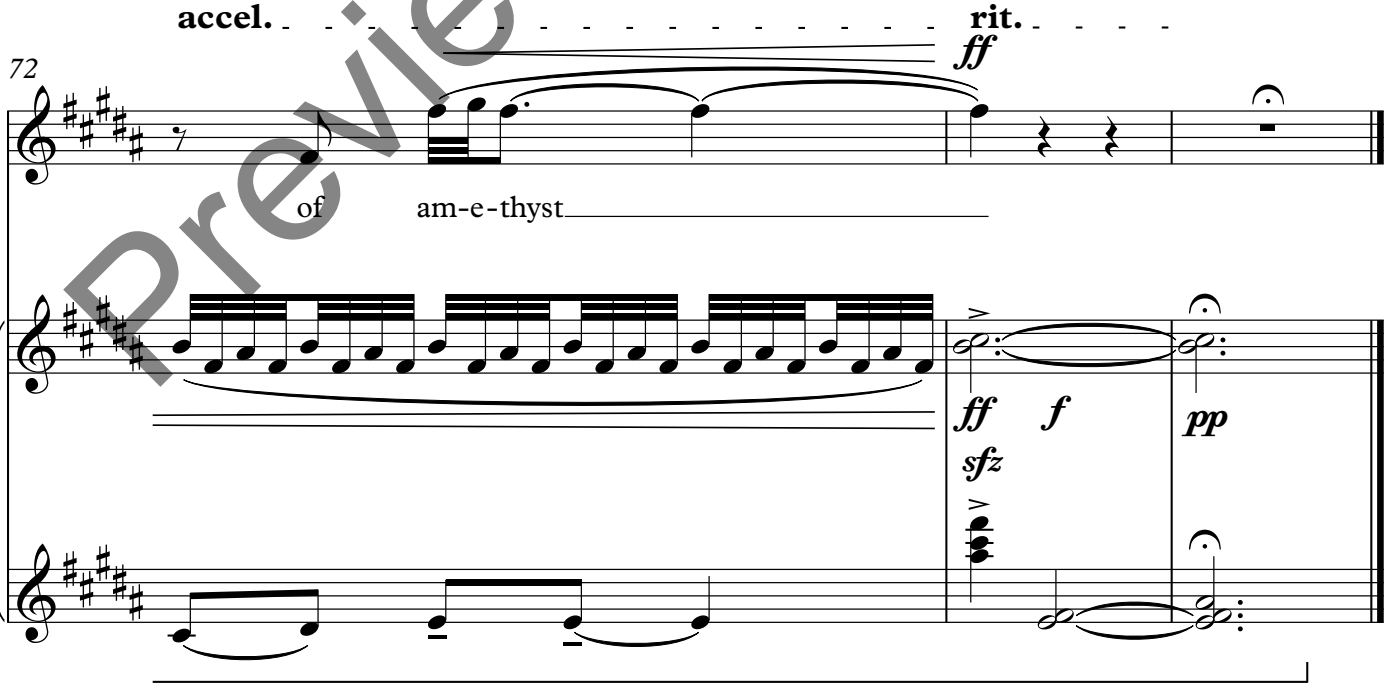

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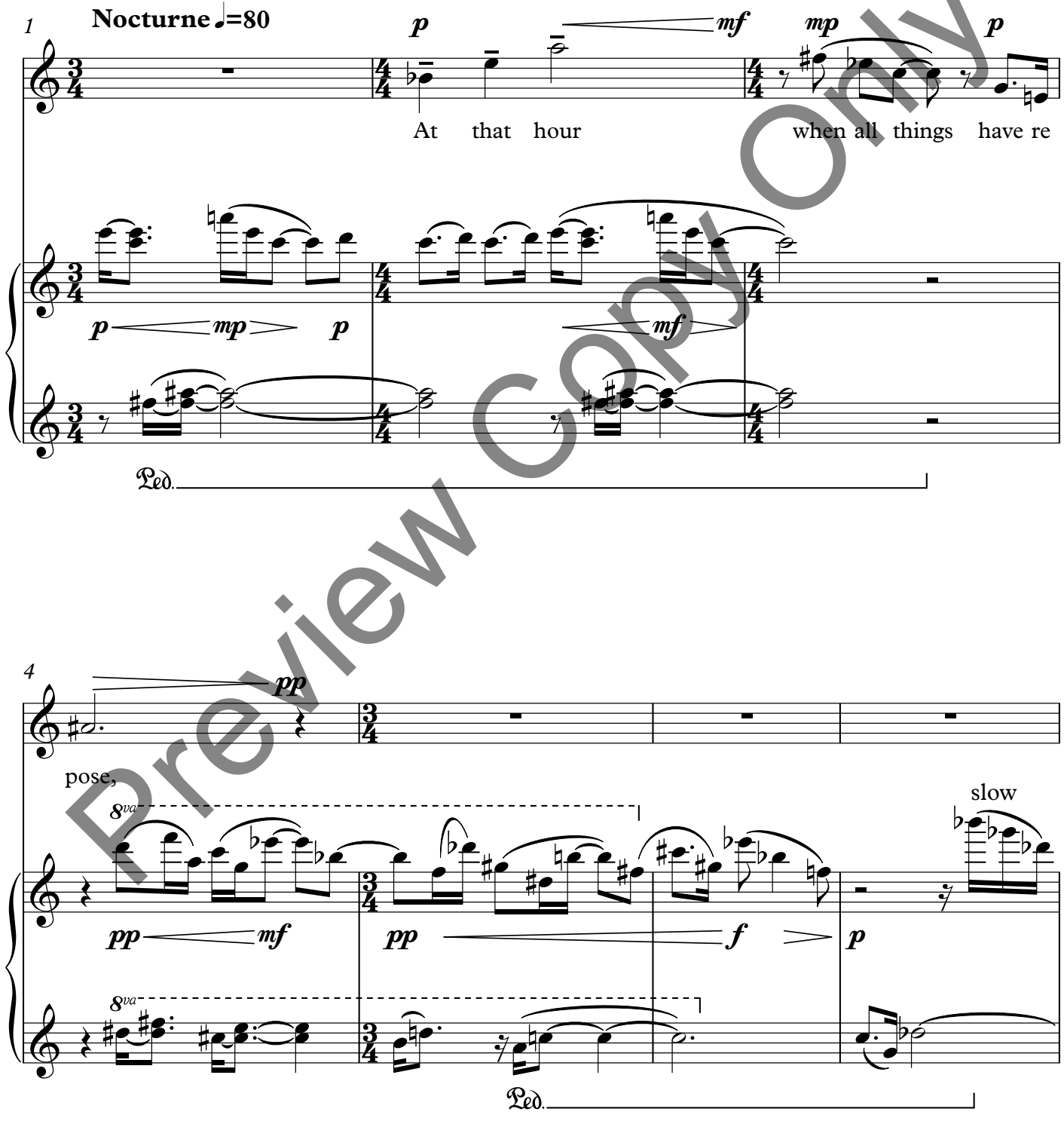
3. O lonely watcher of the skies



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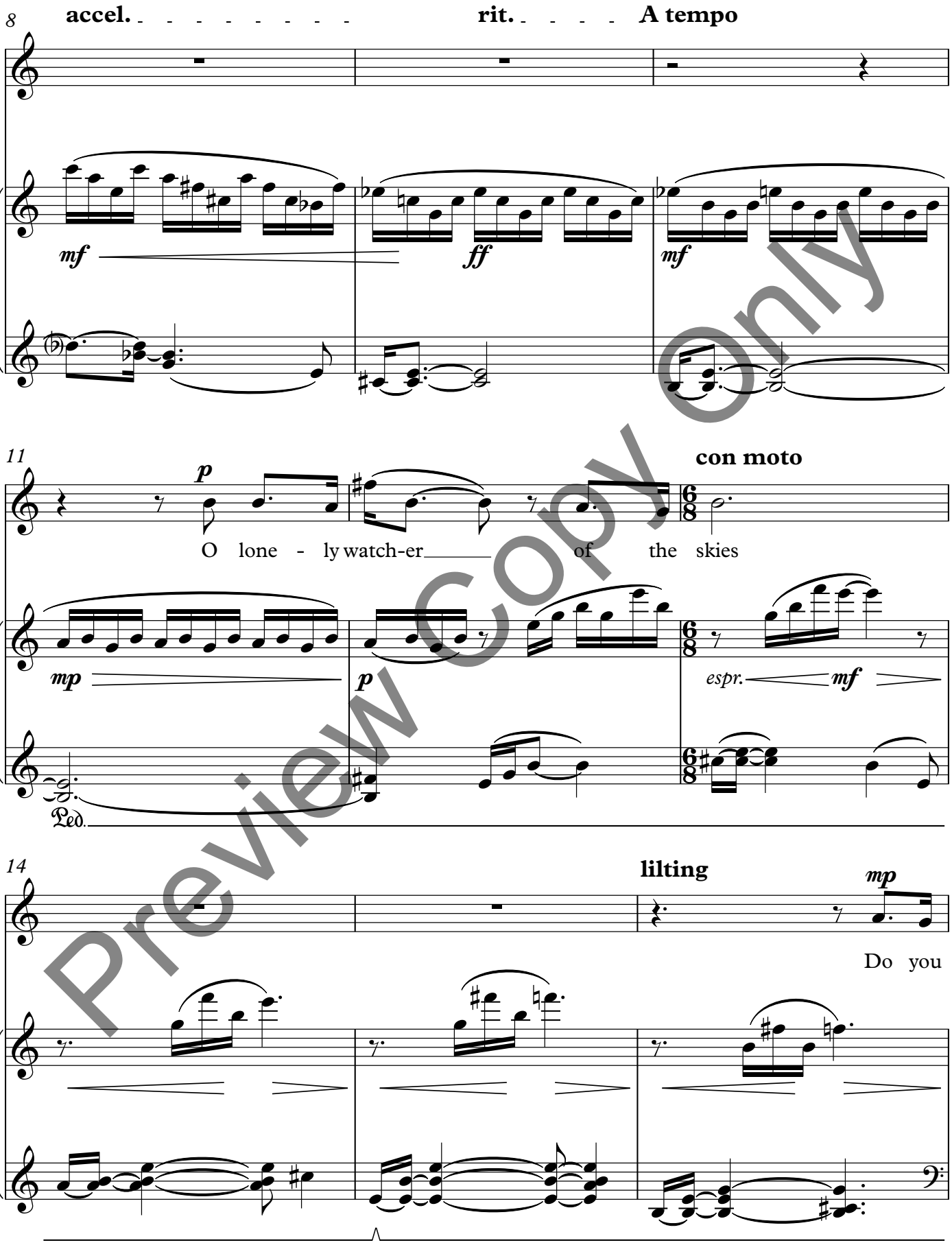

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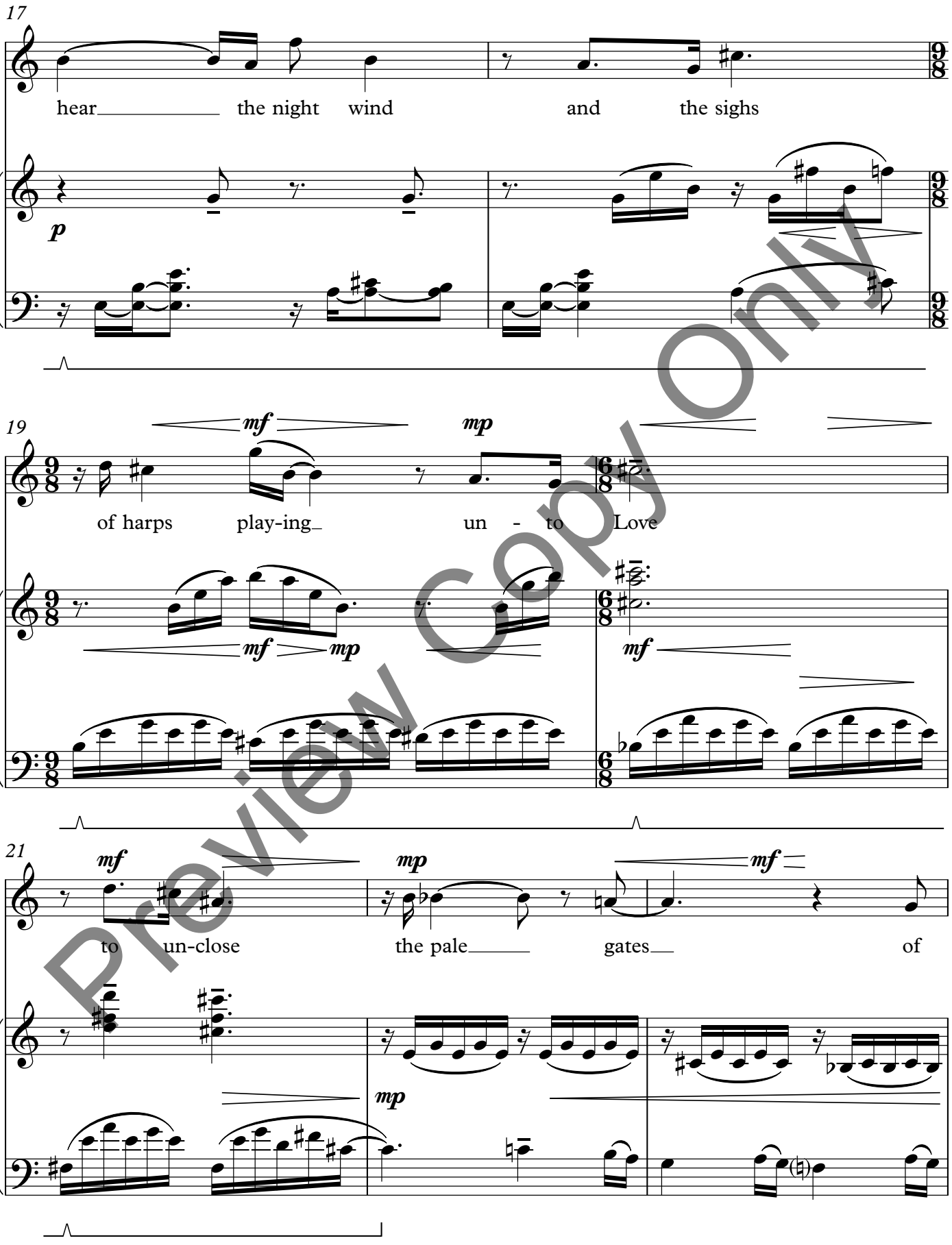

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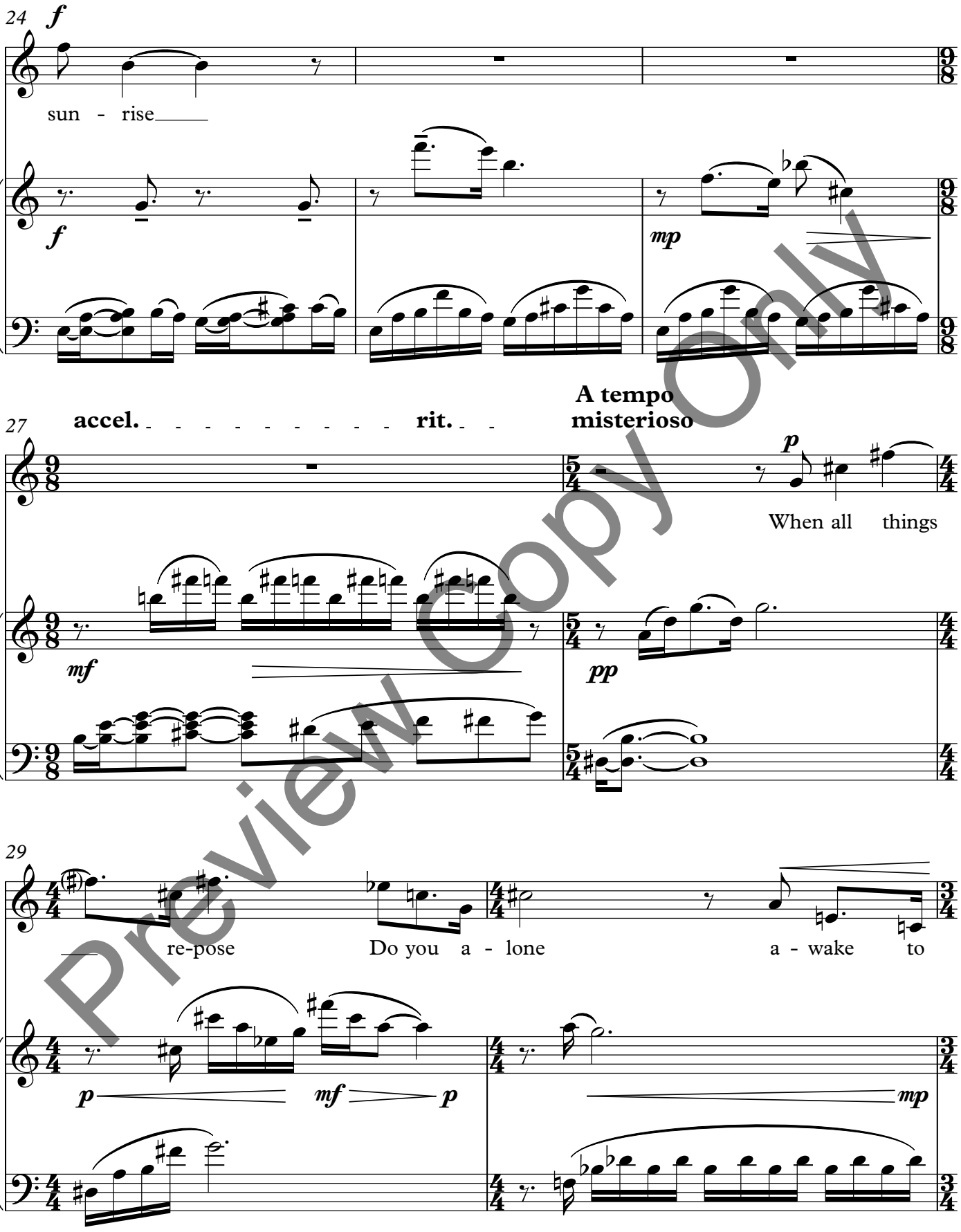

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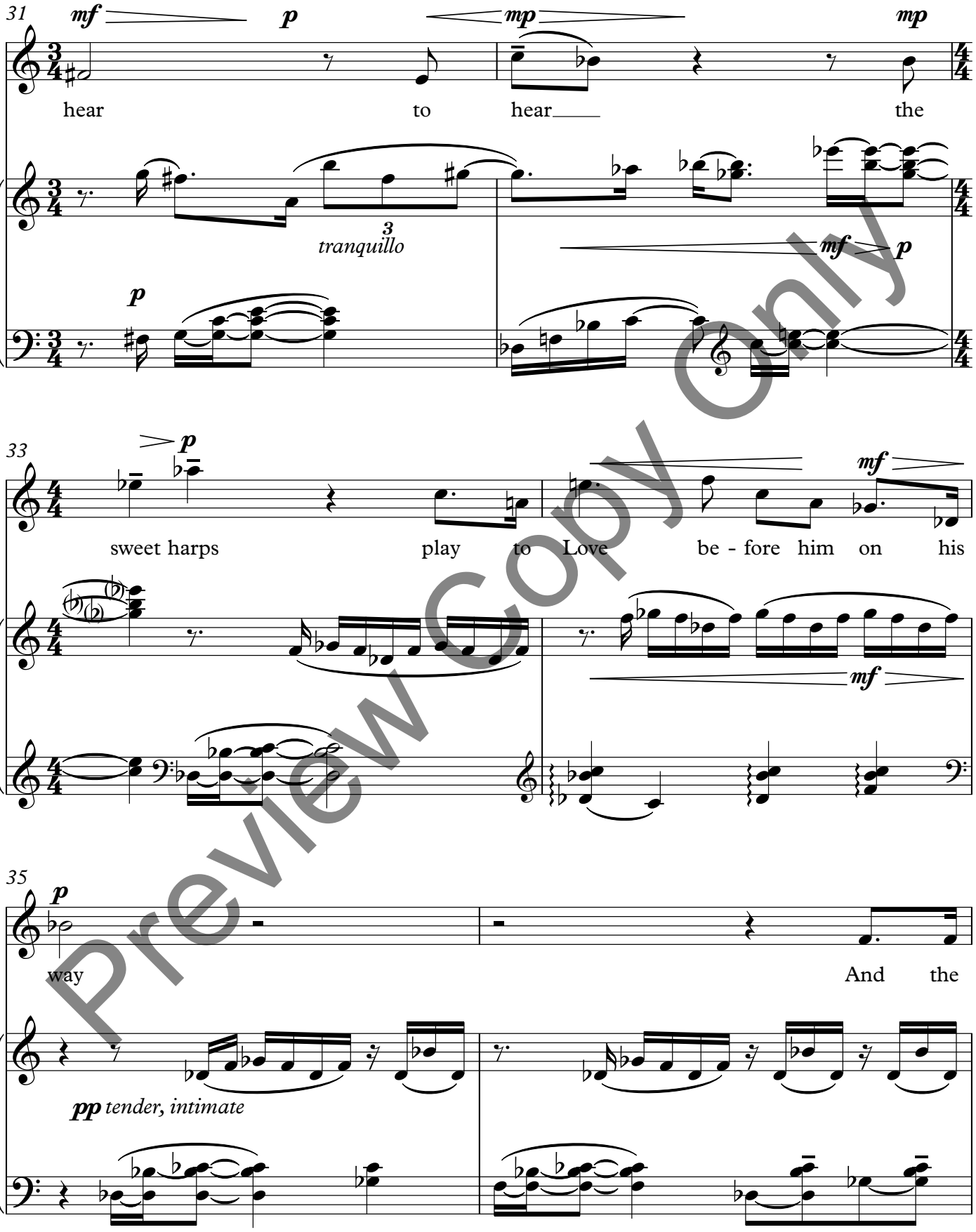

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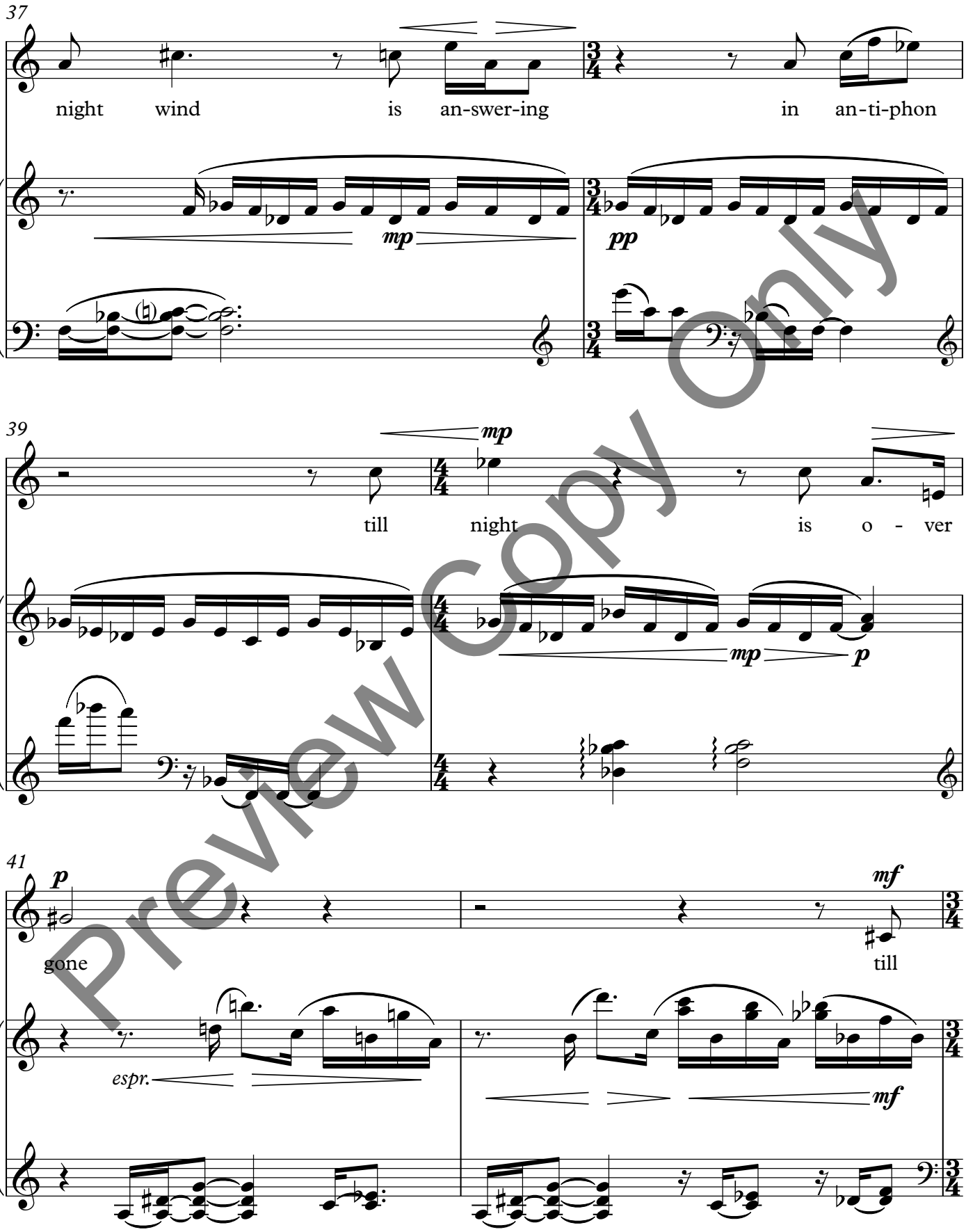

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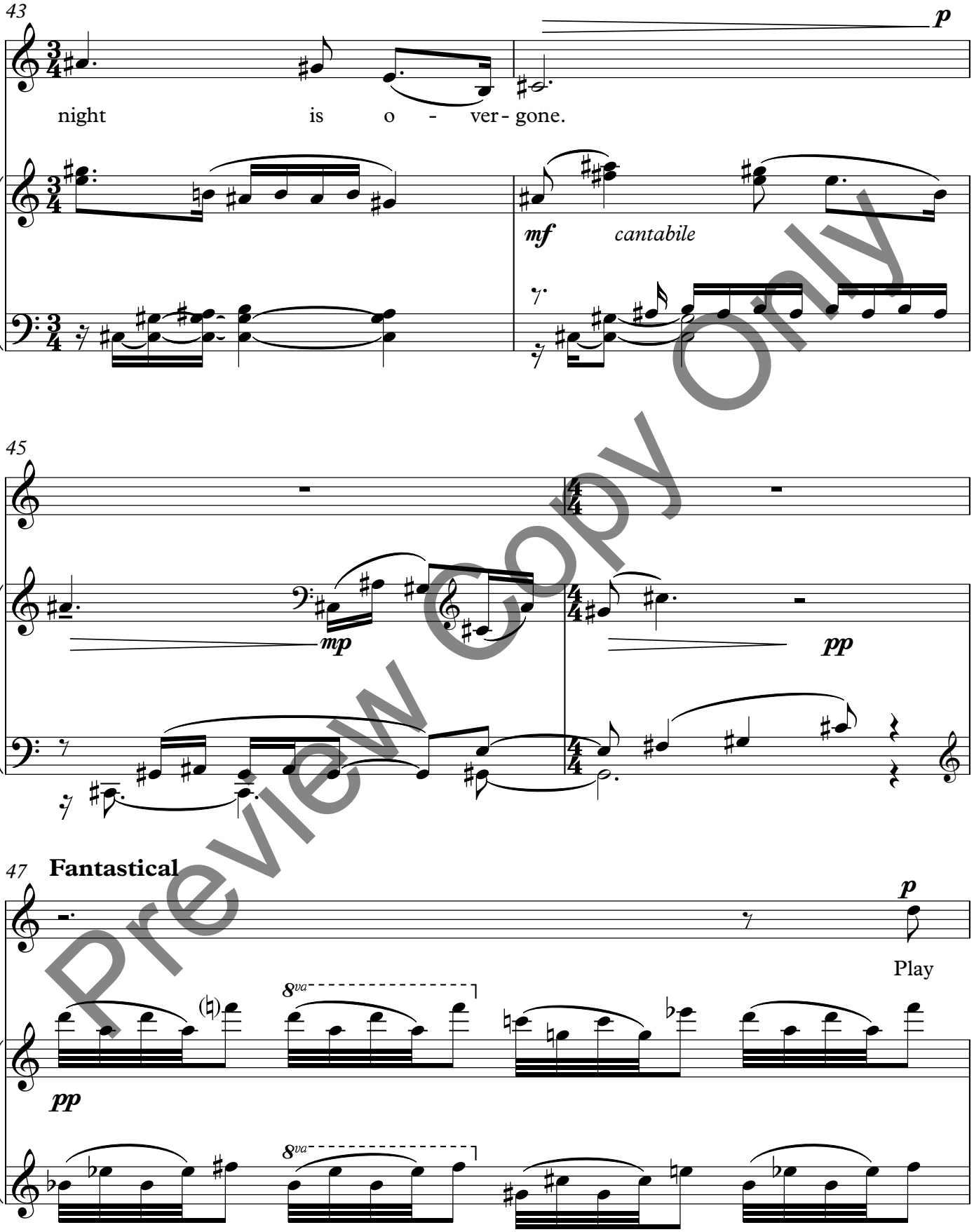

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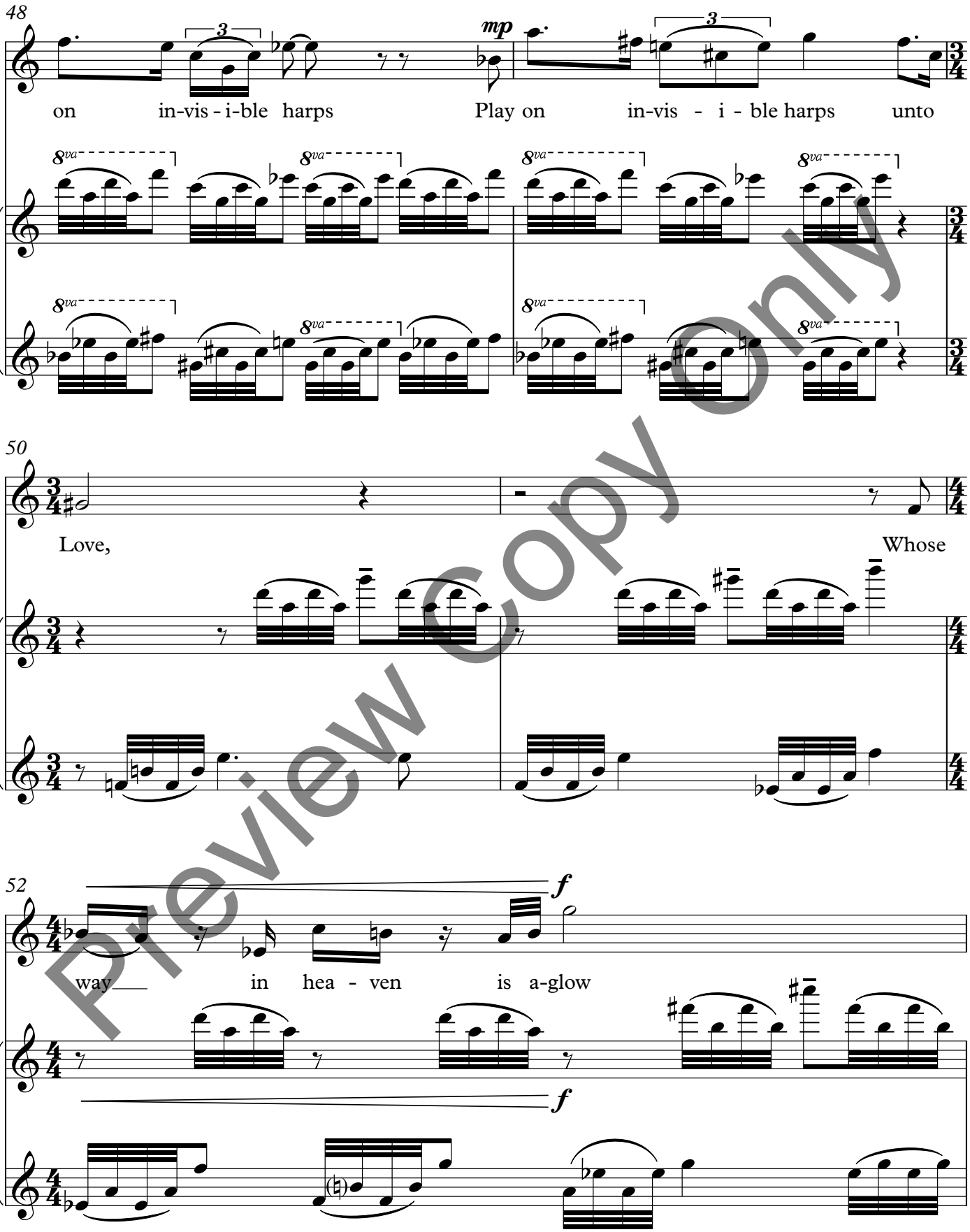

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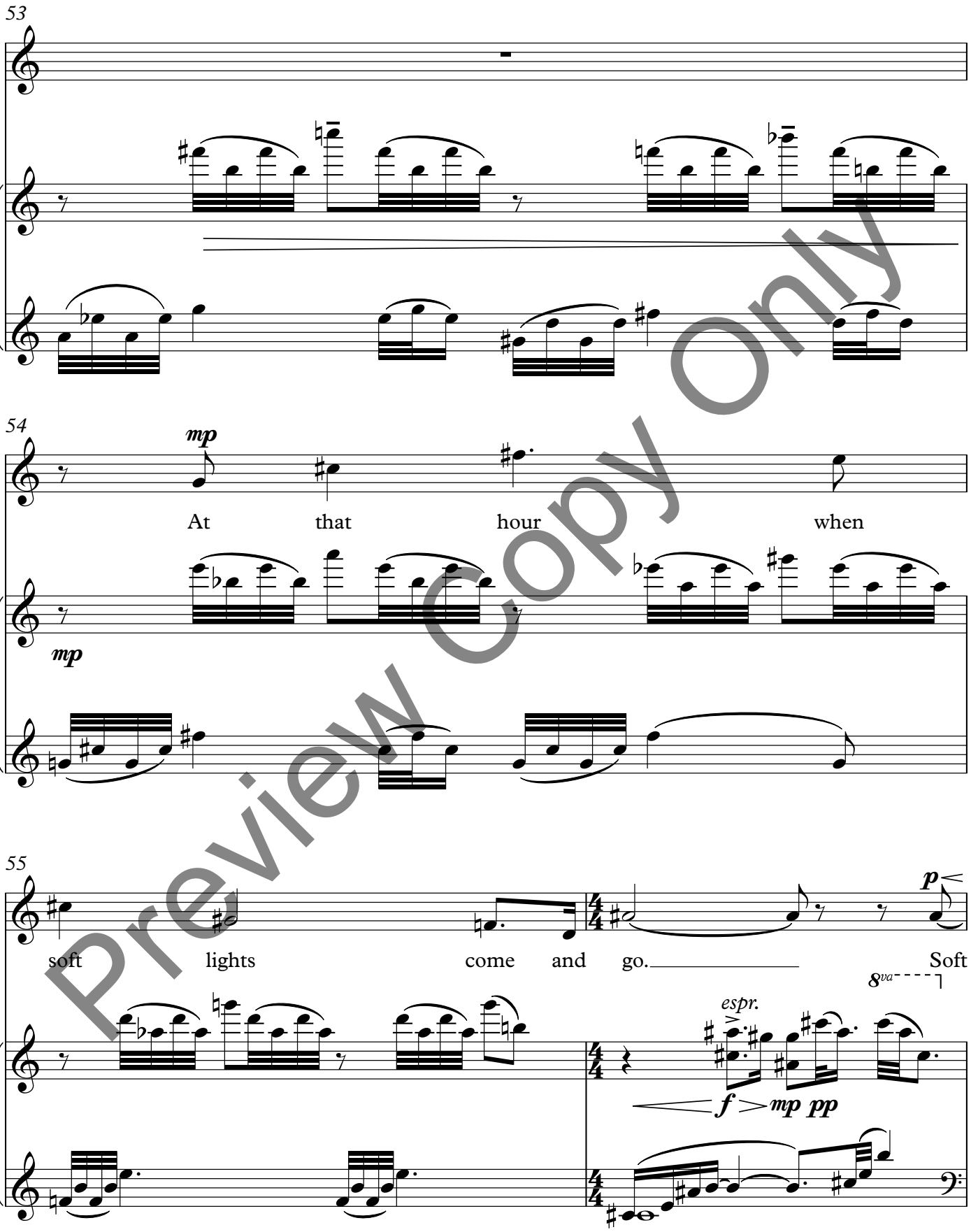

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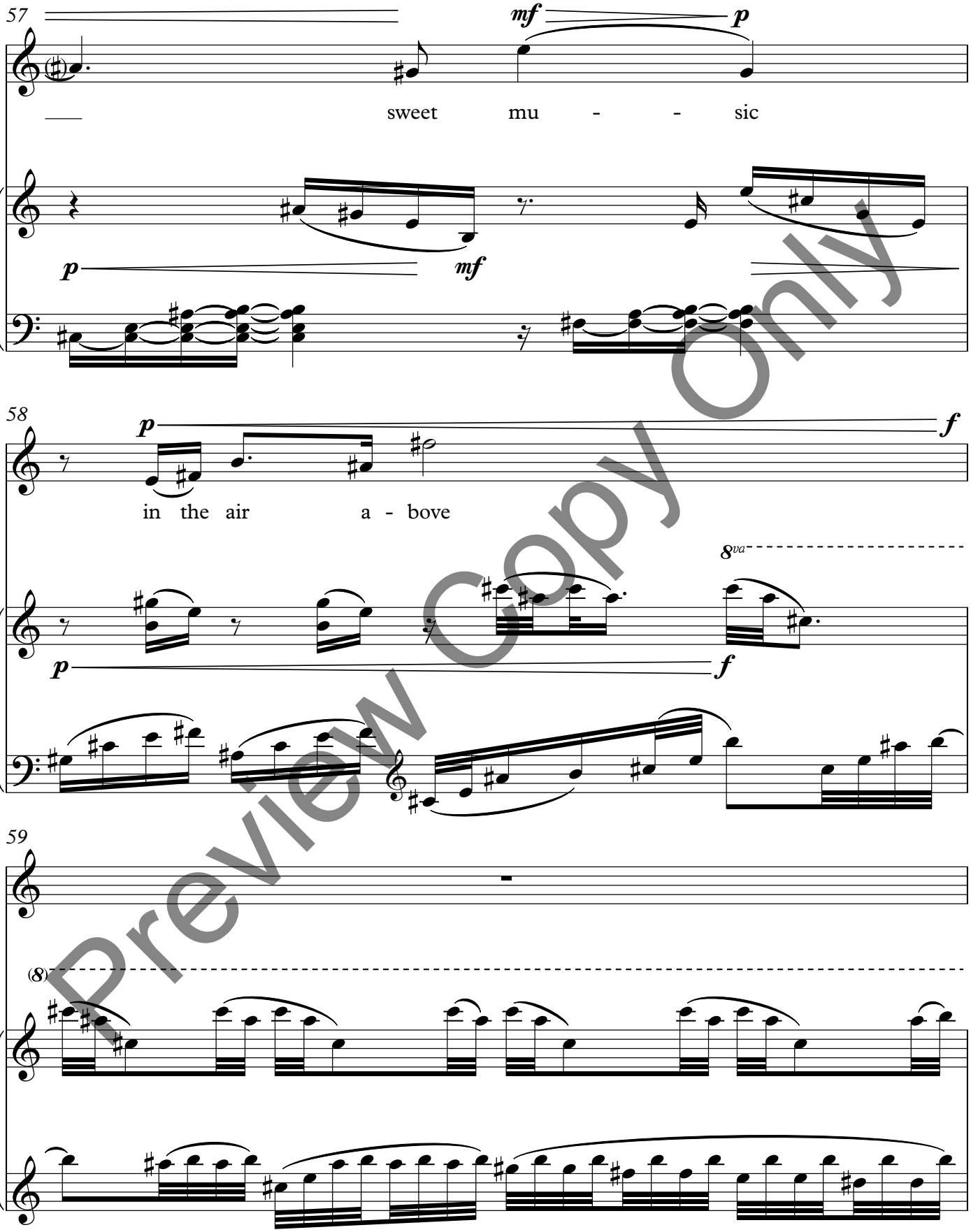

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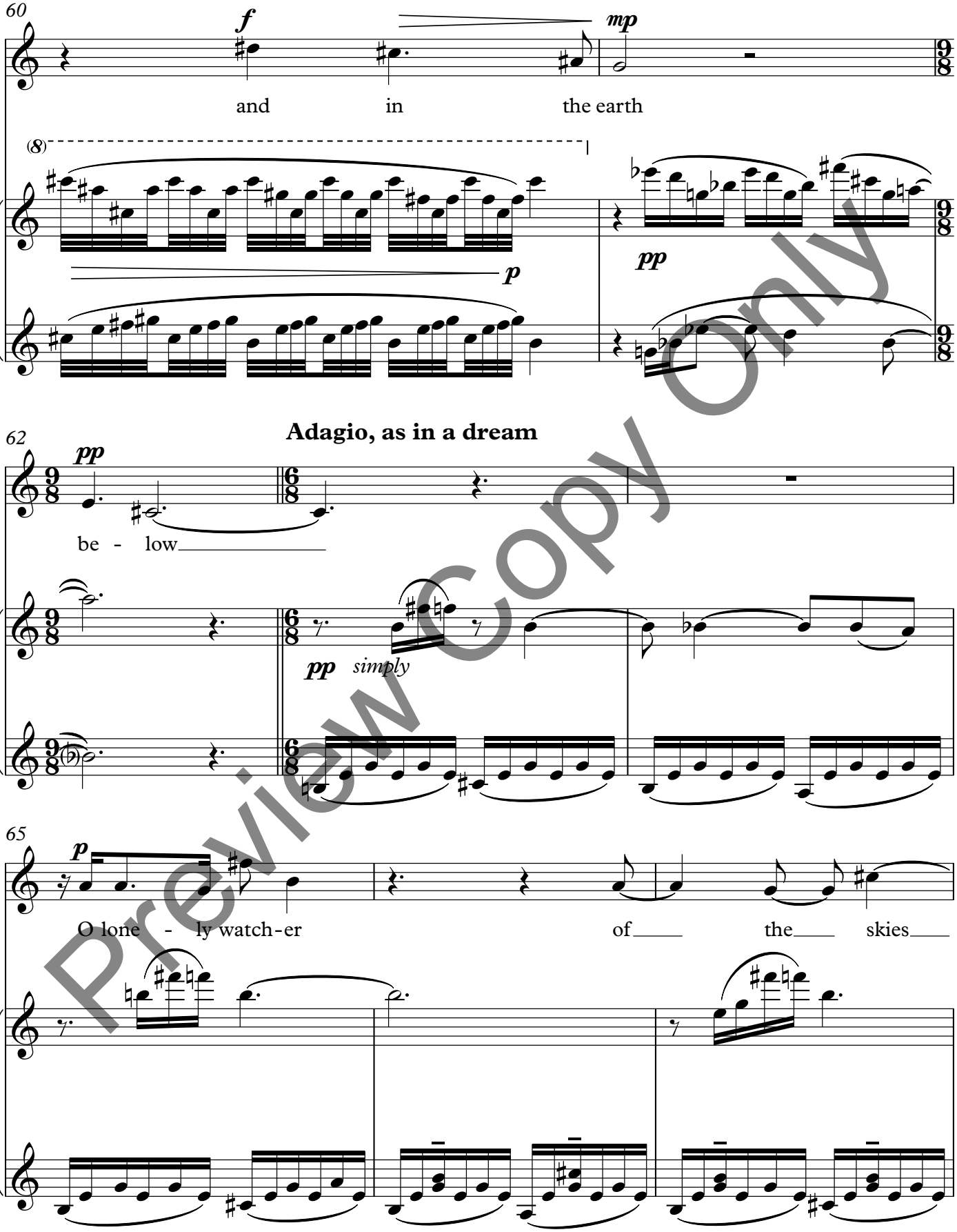

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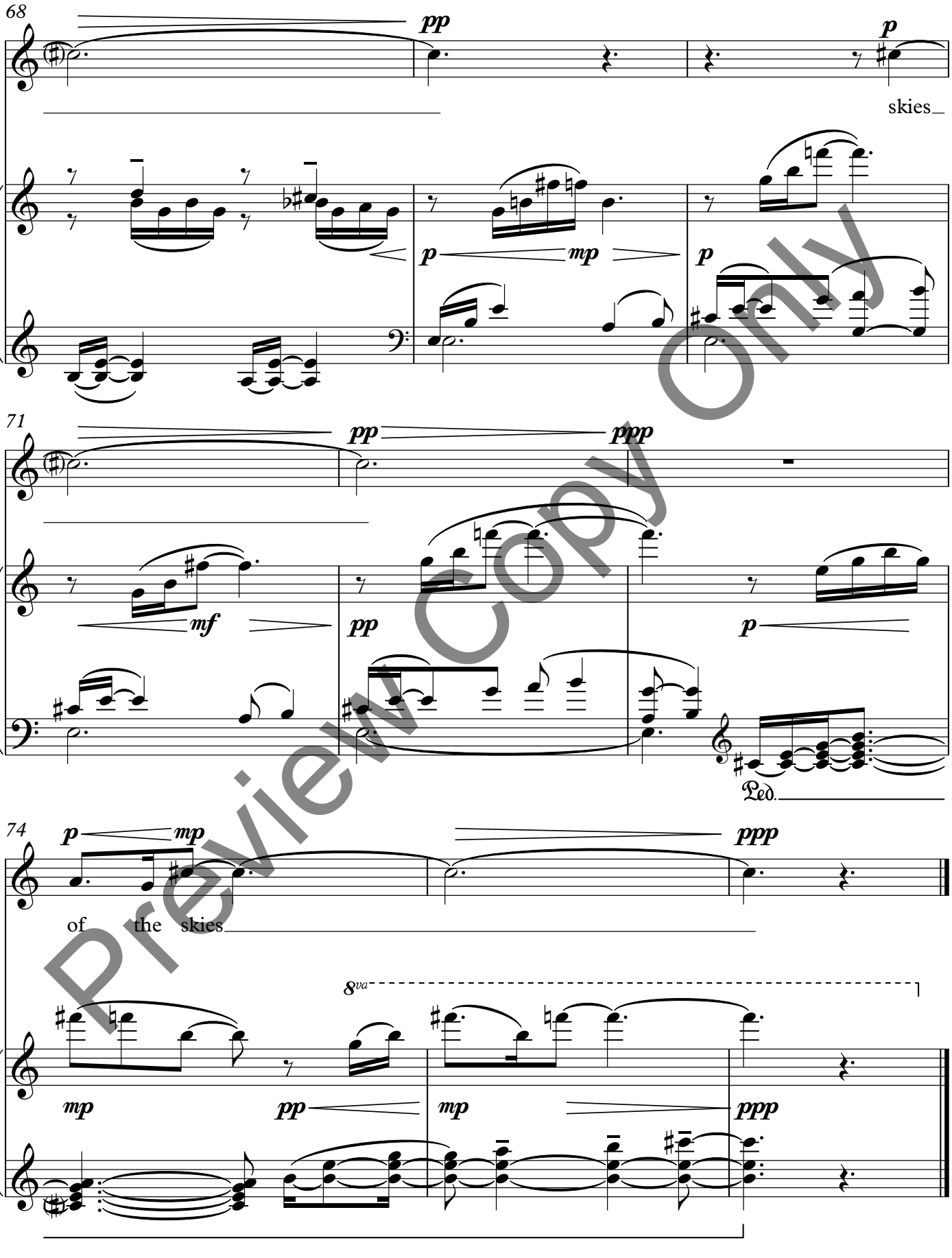

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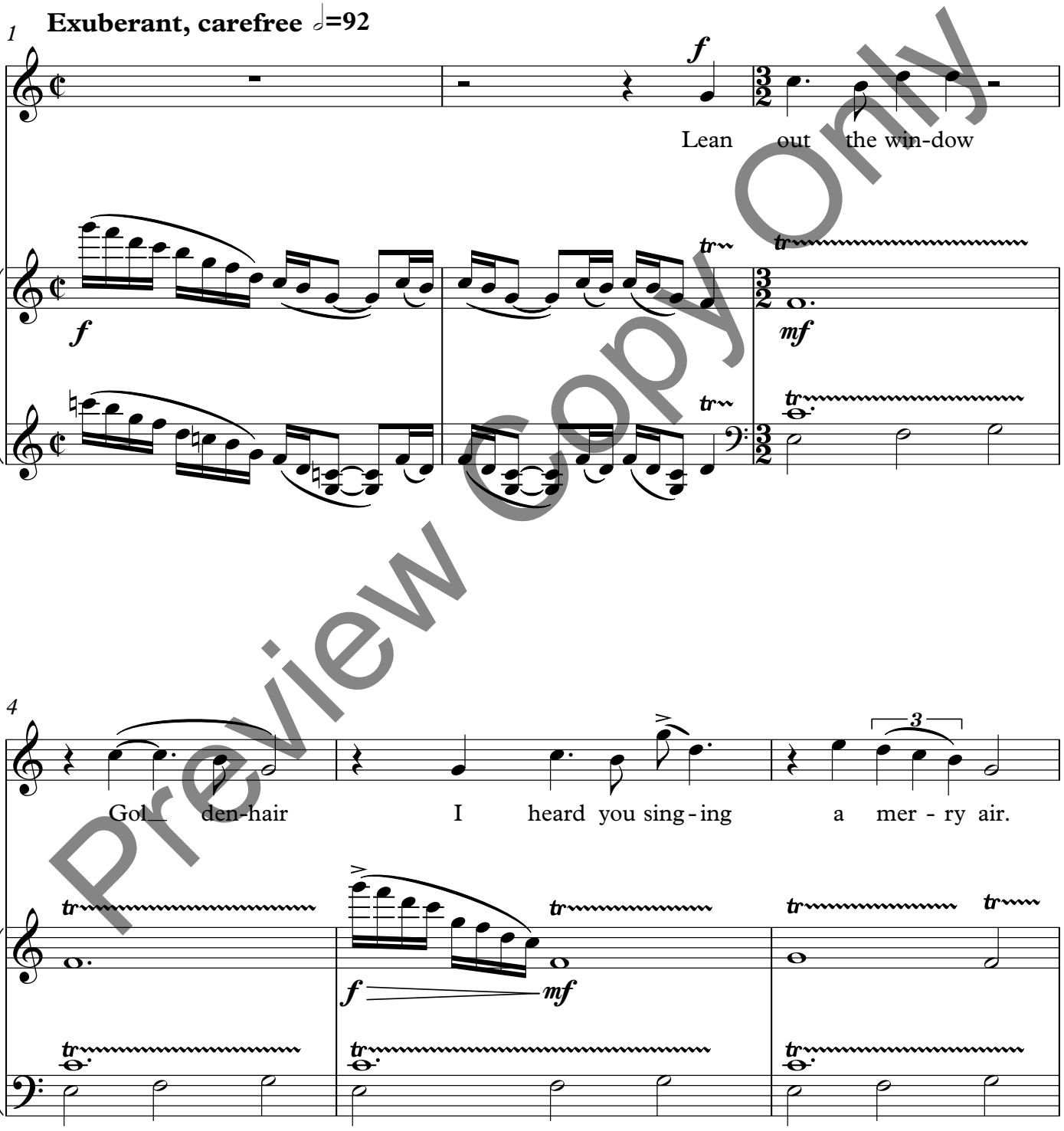

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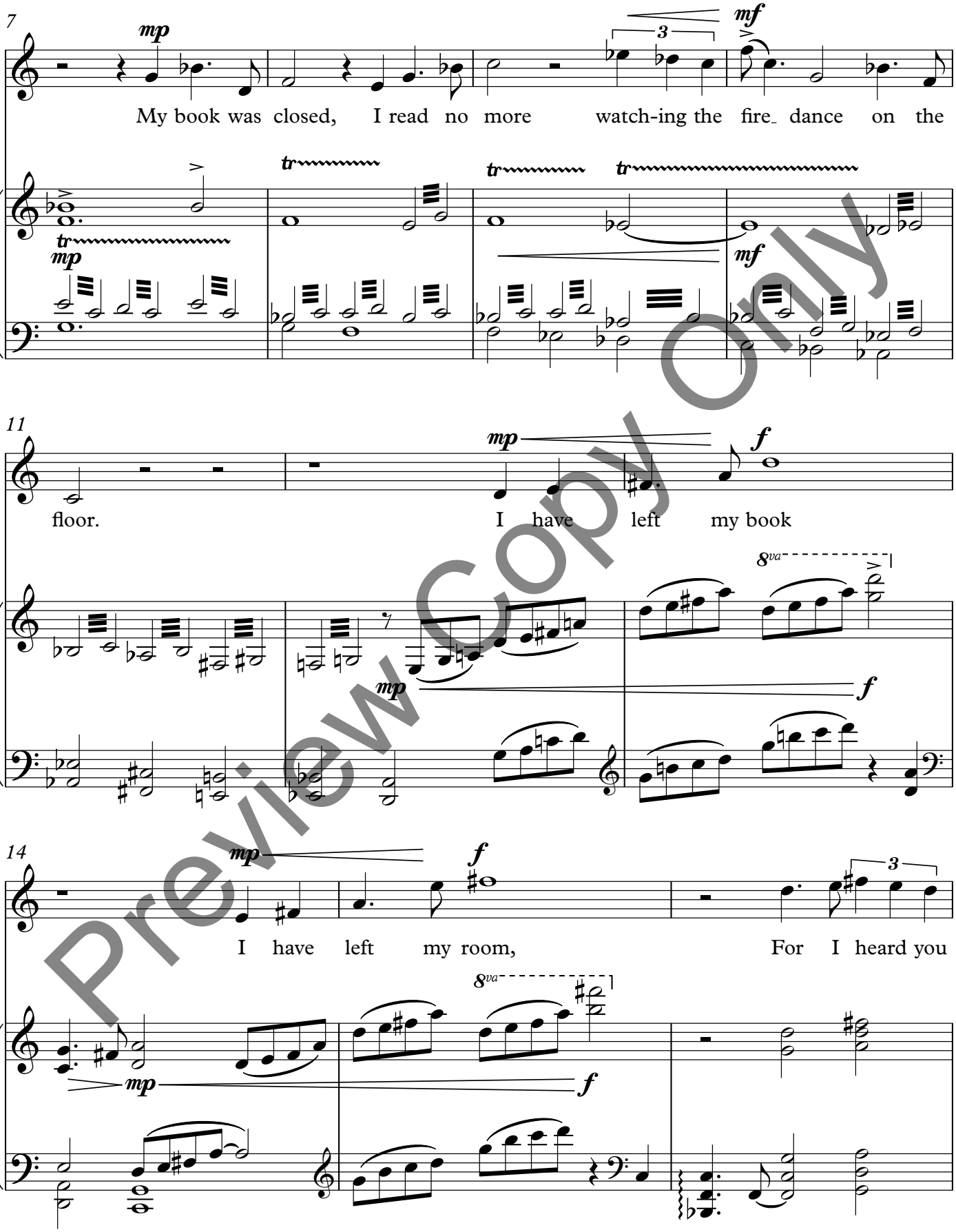

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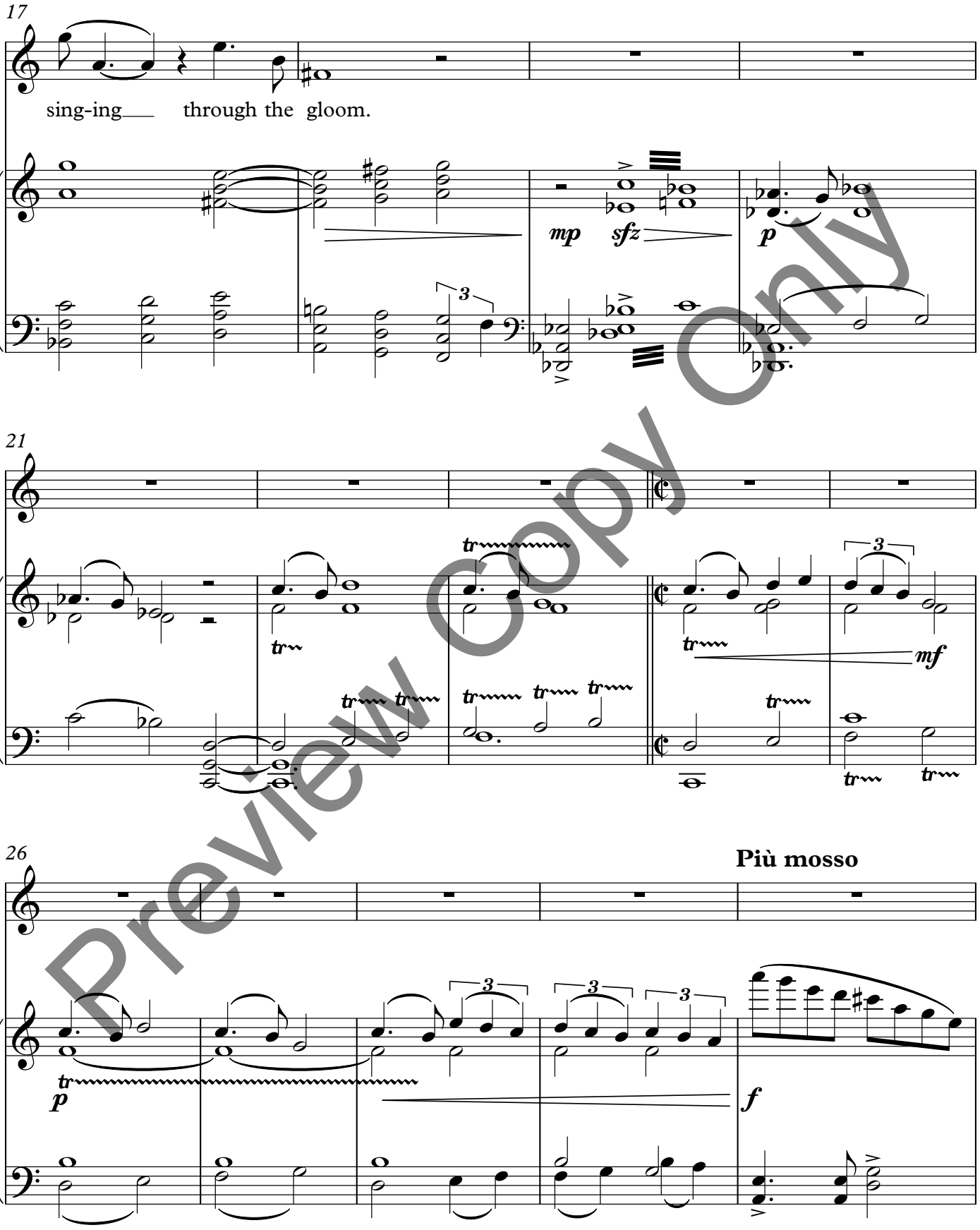

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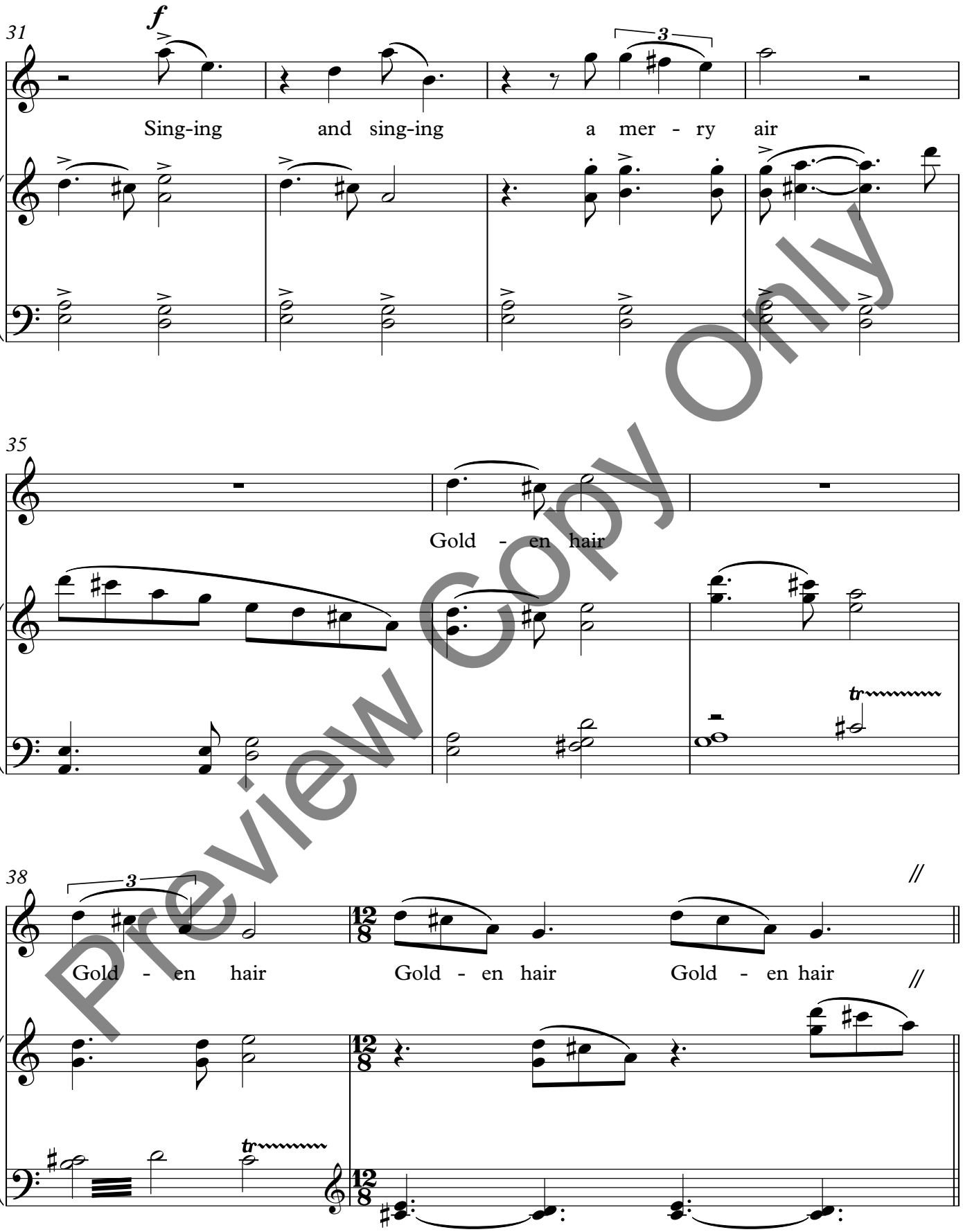

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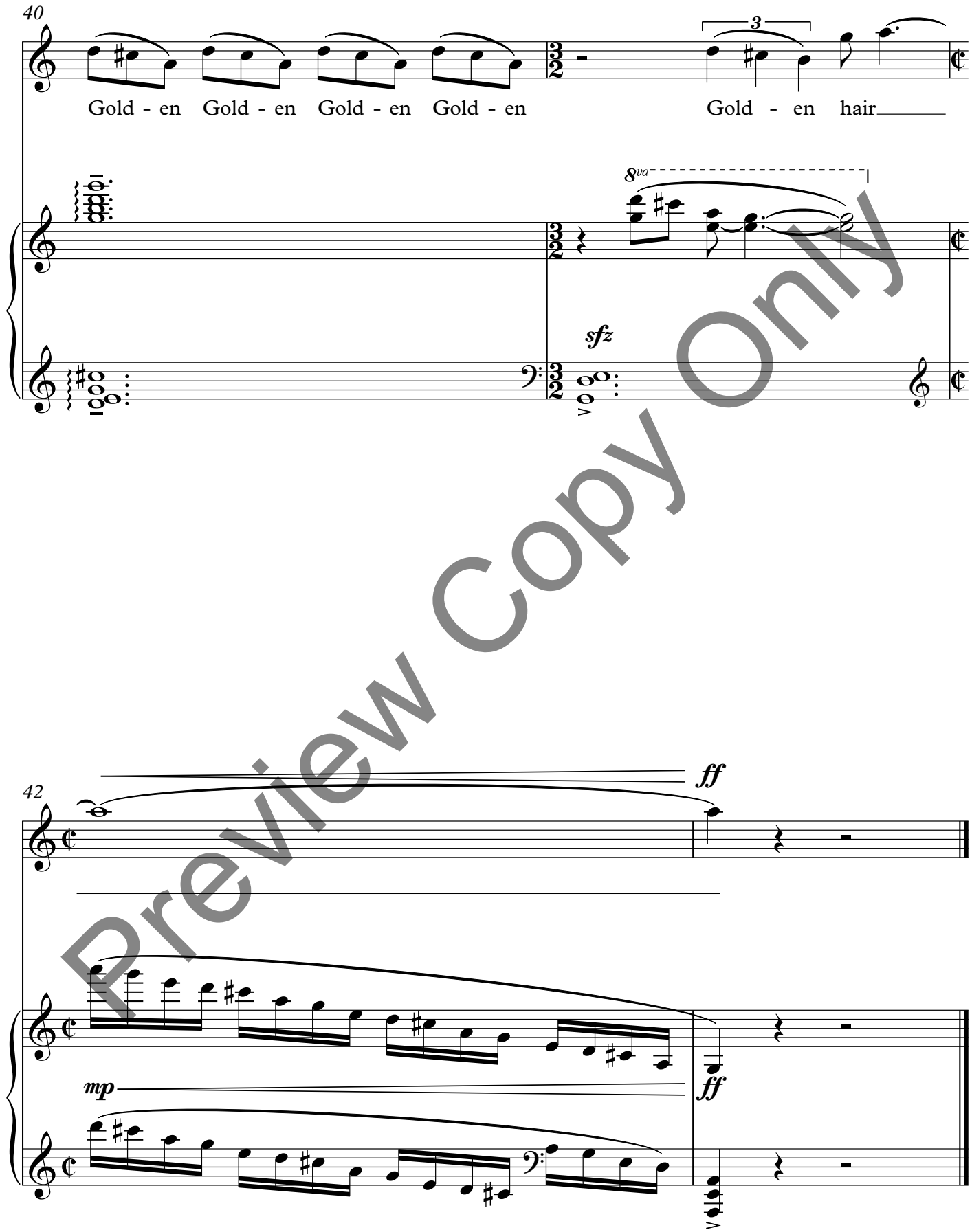

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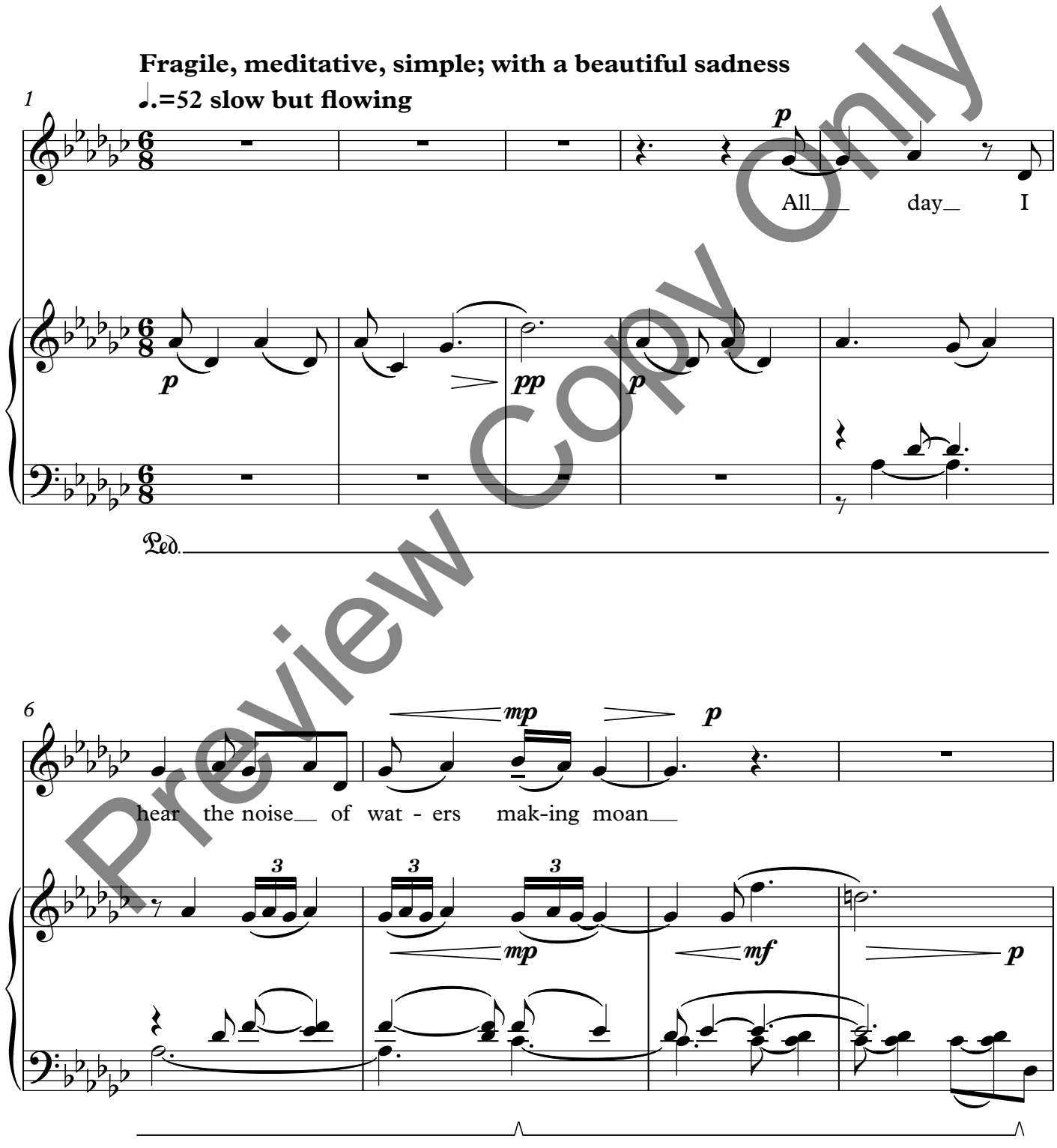

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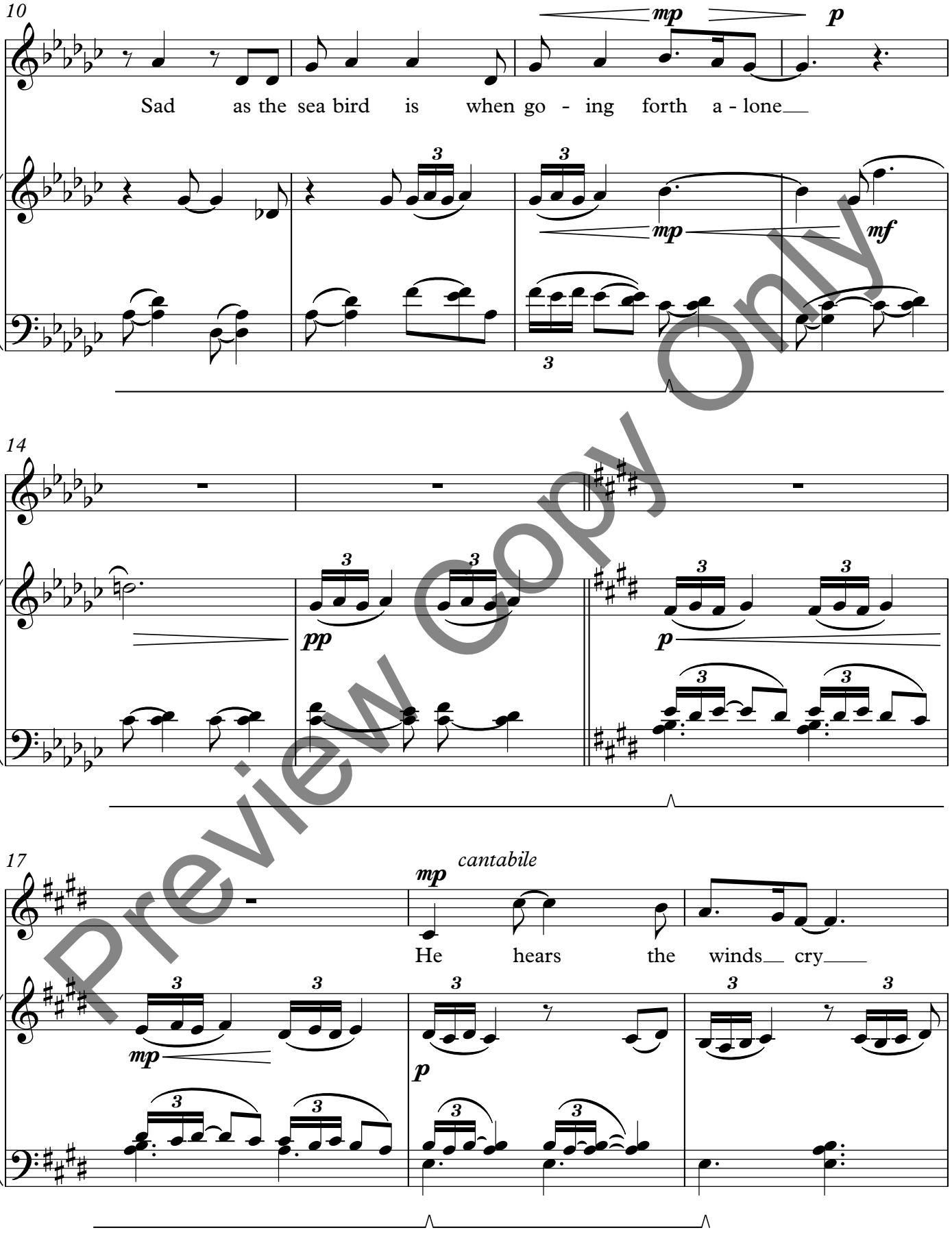

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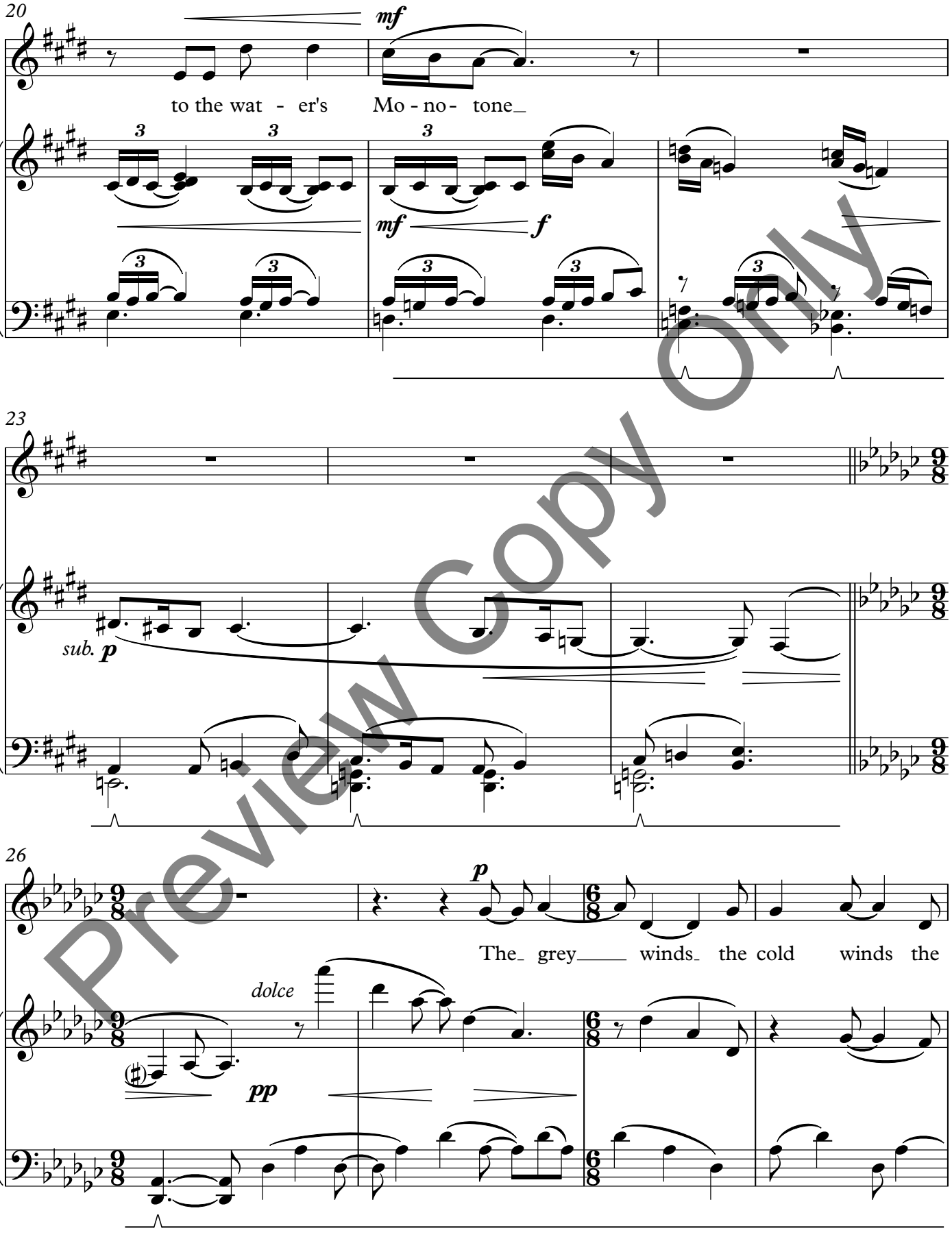

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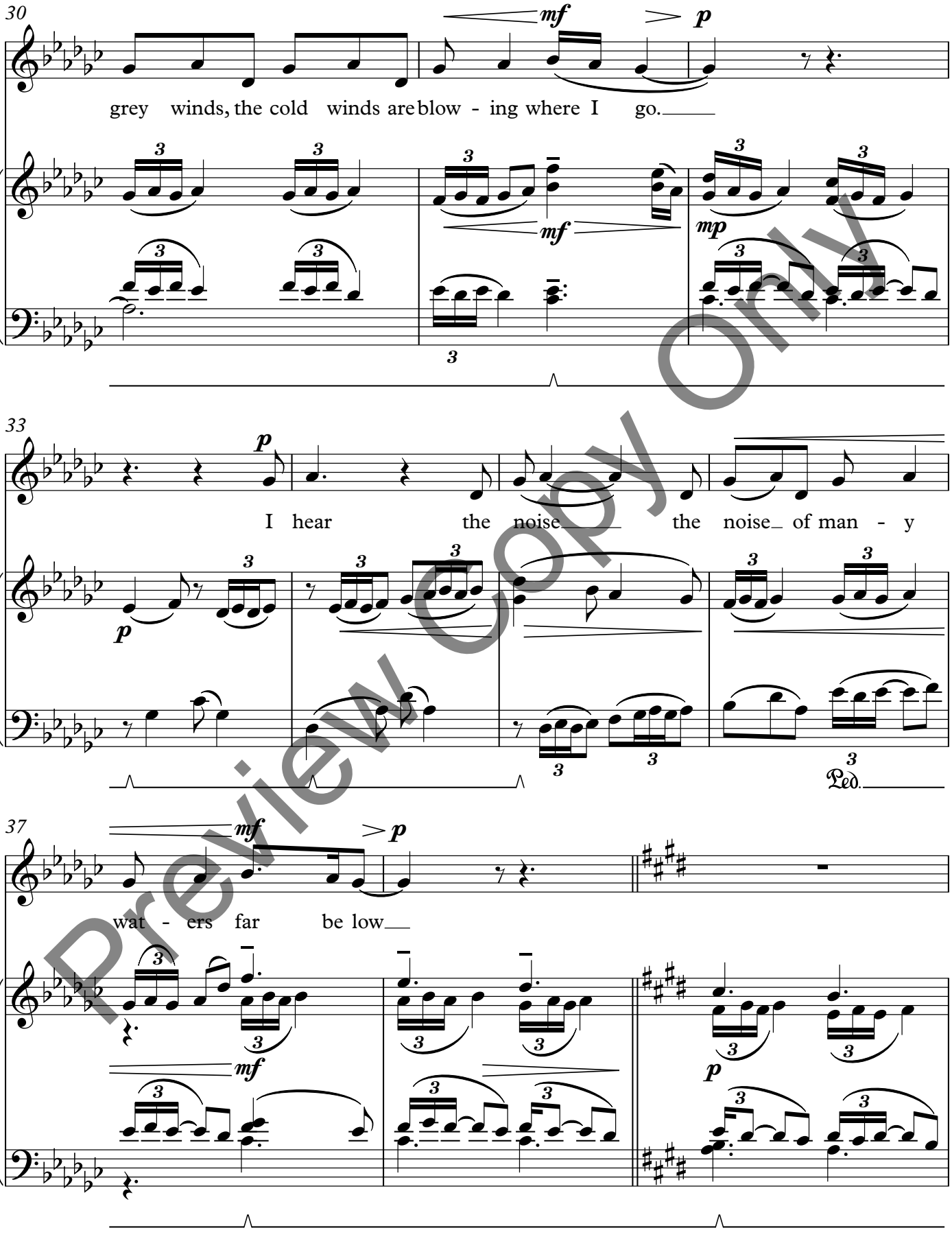

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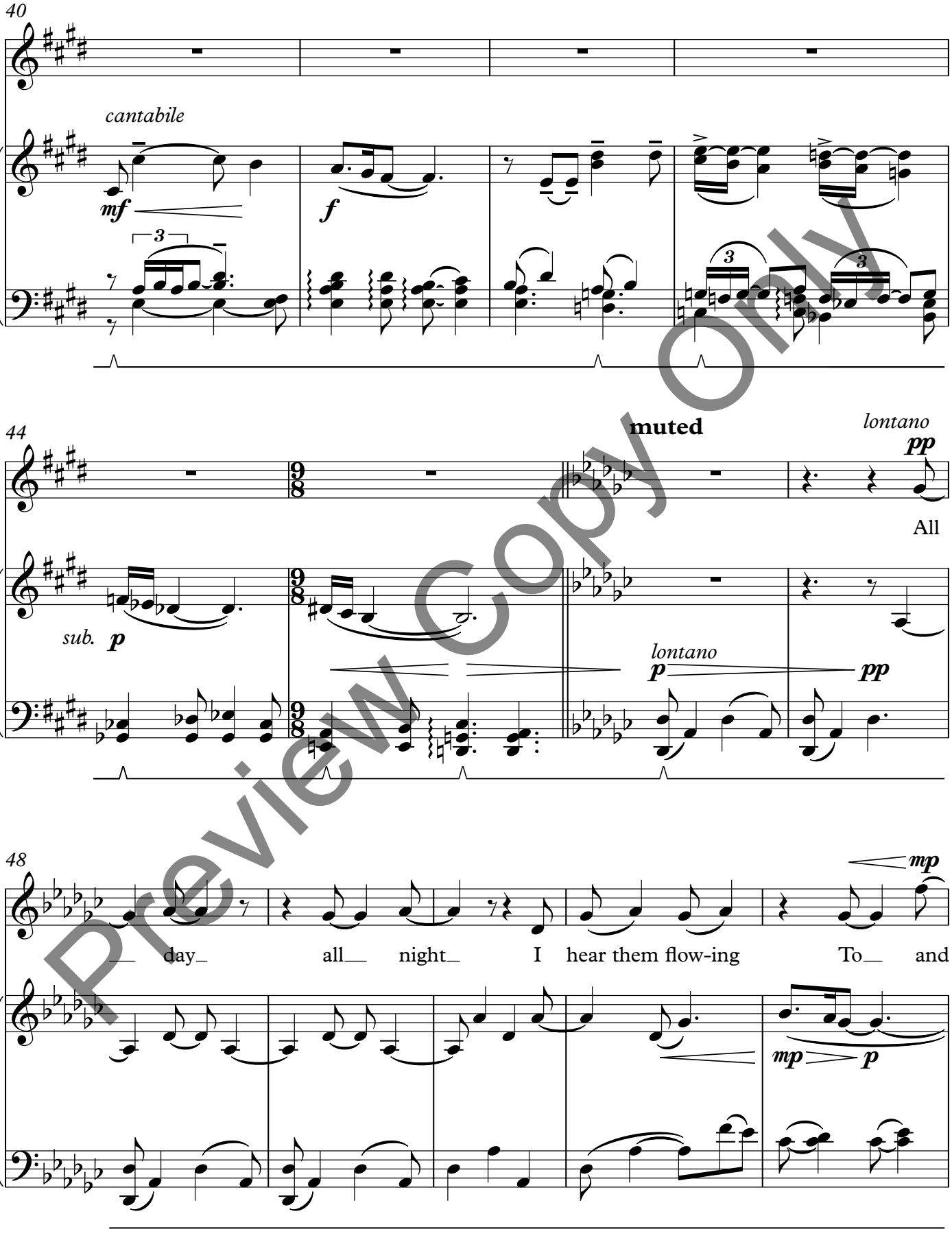

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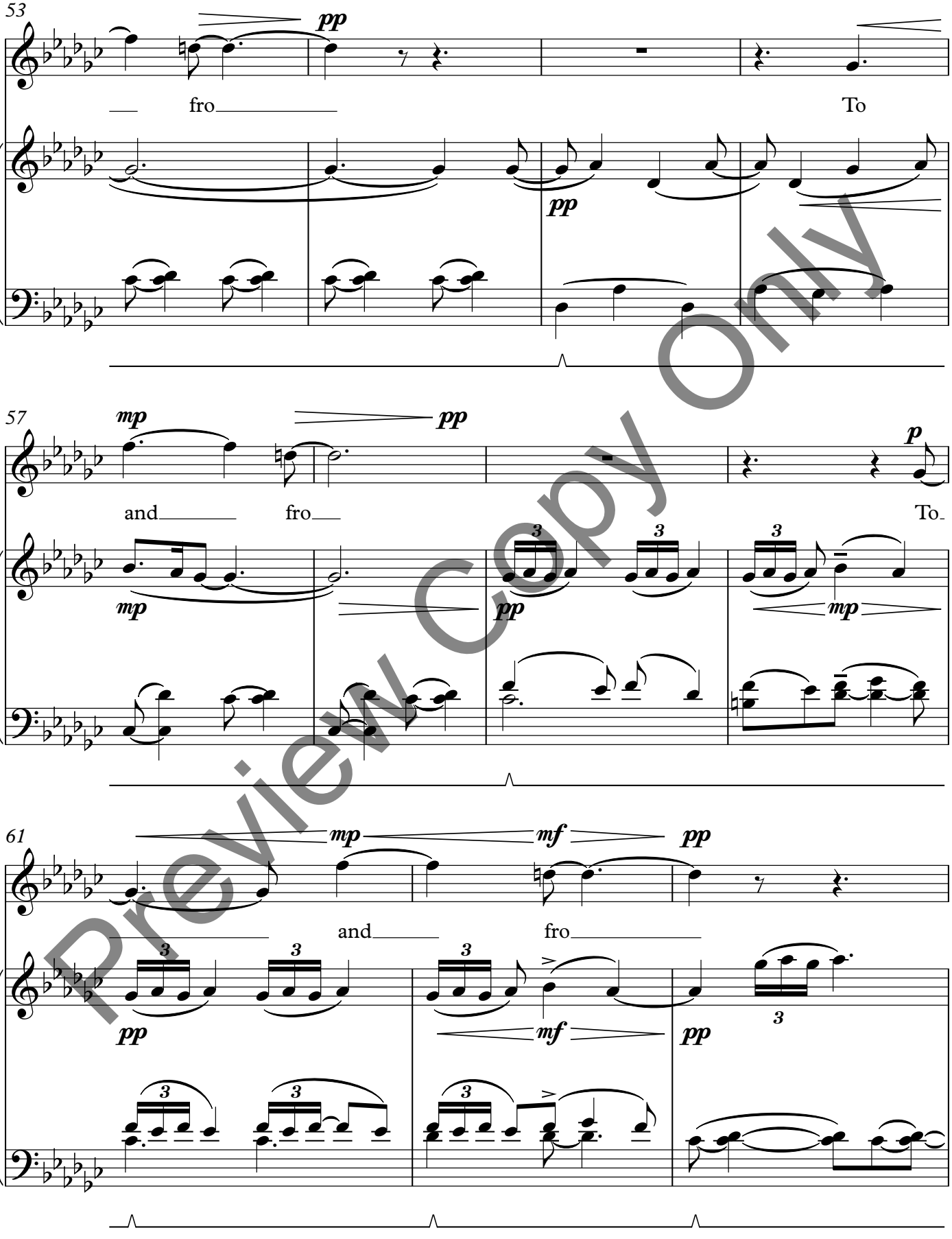

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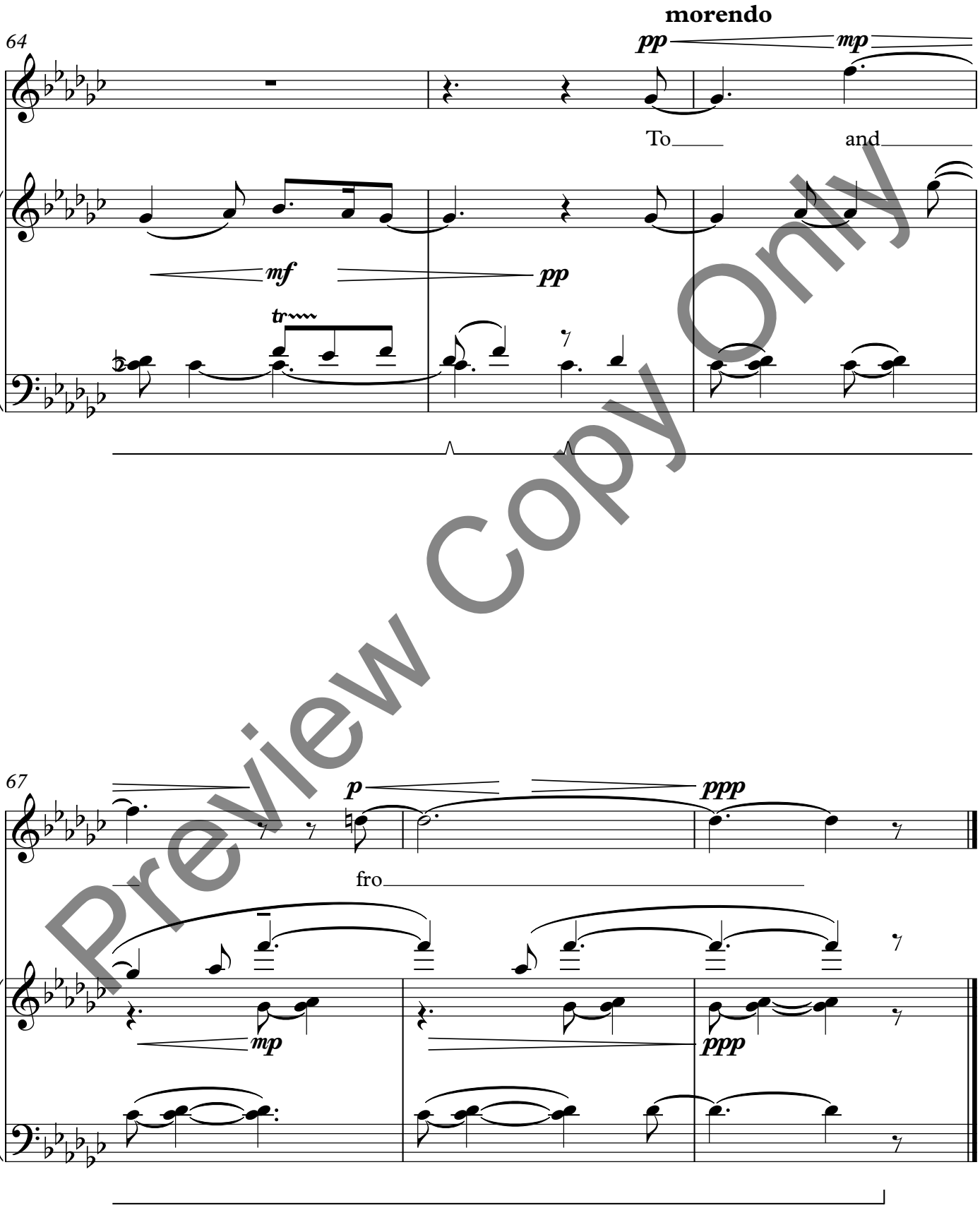

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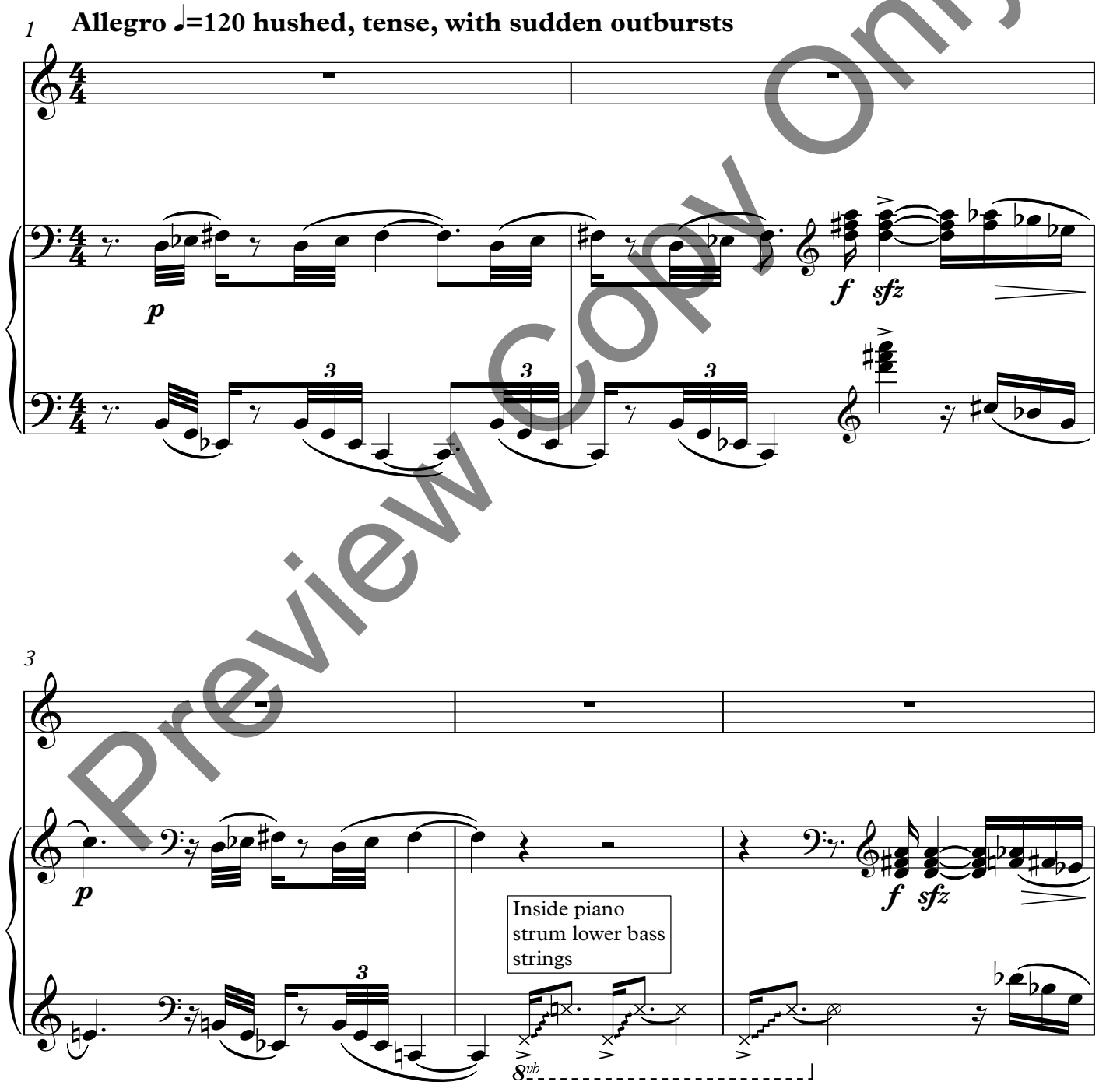
6. I hear an army charging upon the land



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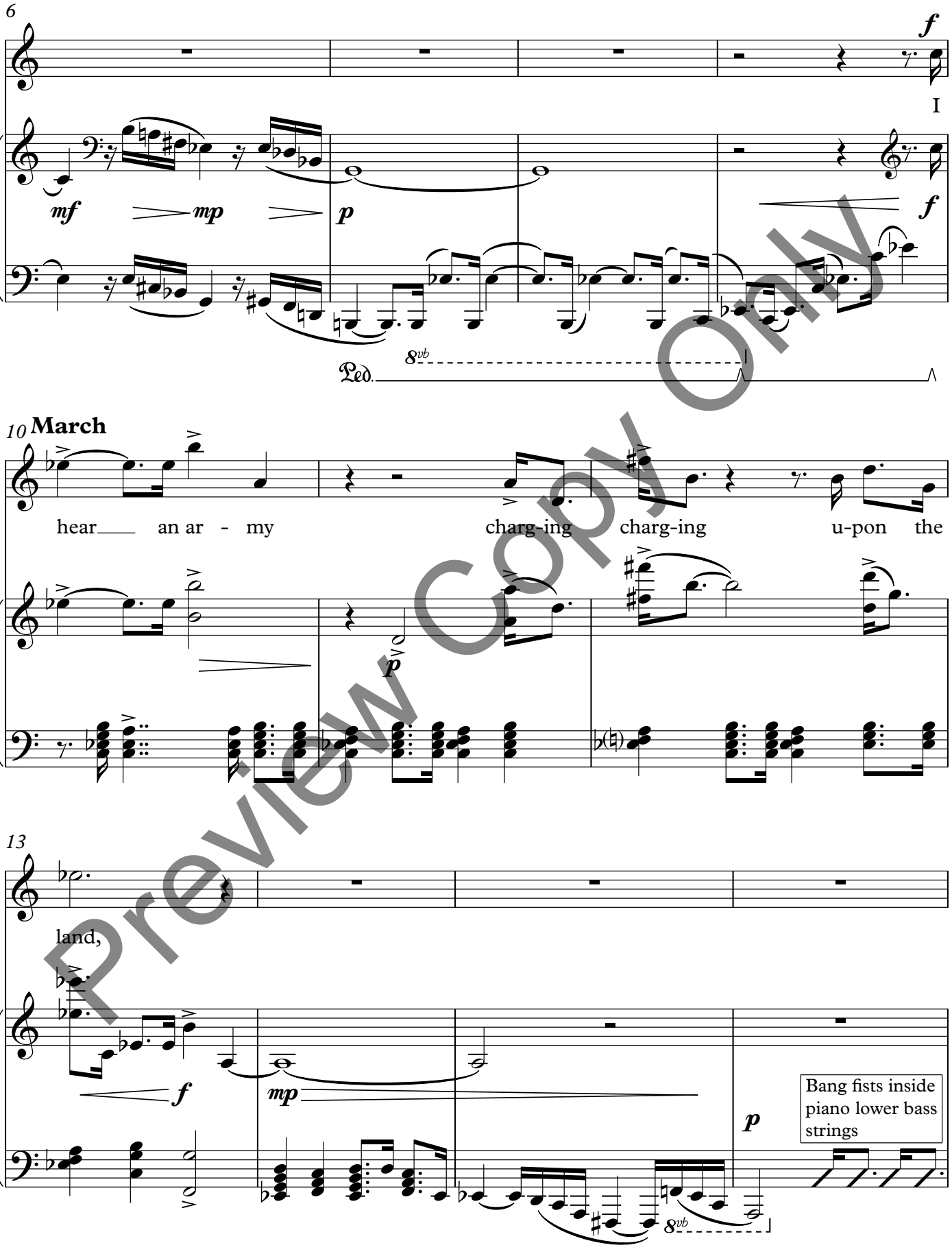

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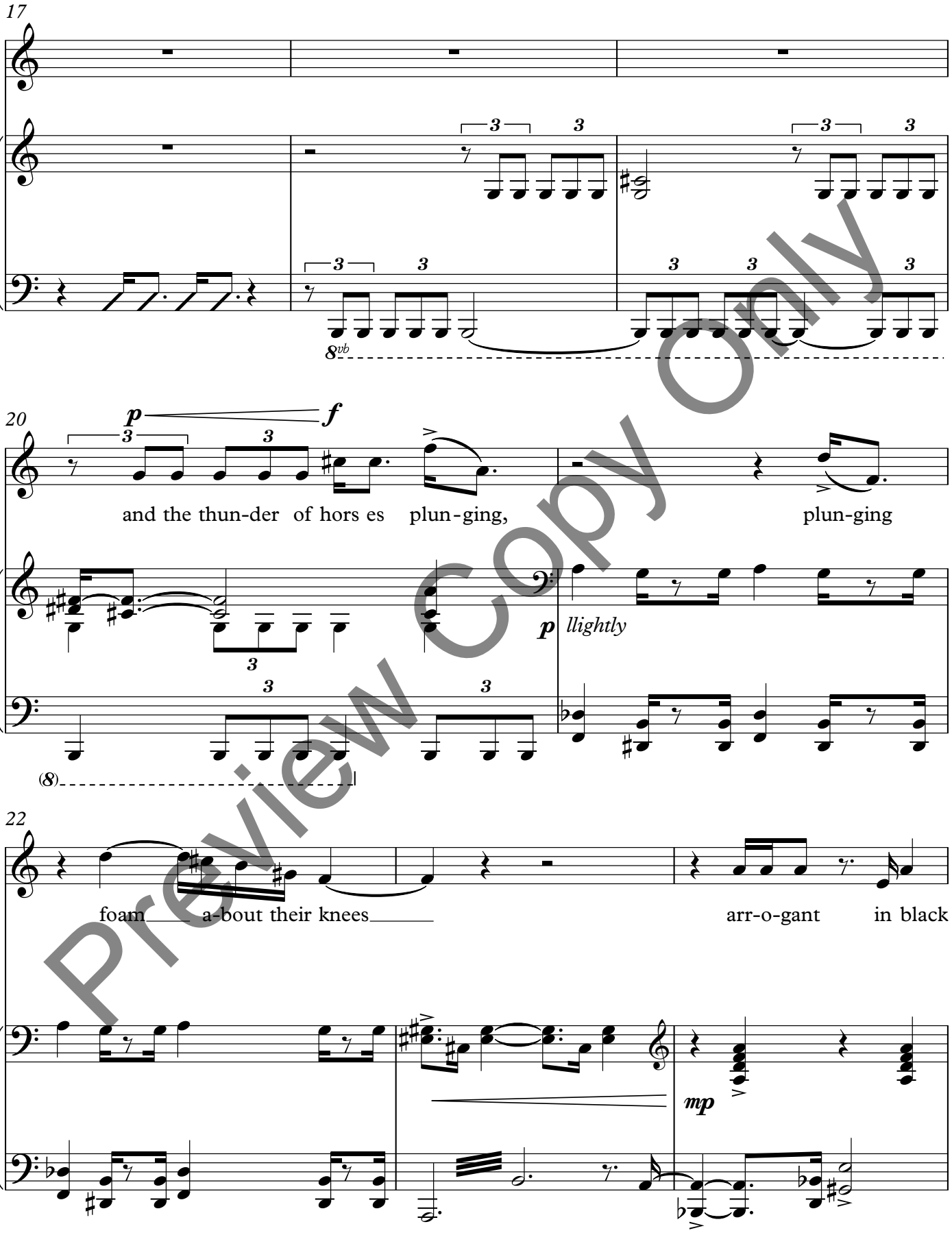

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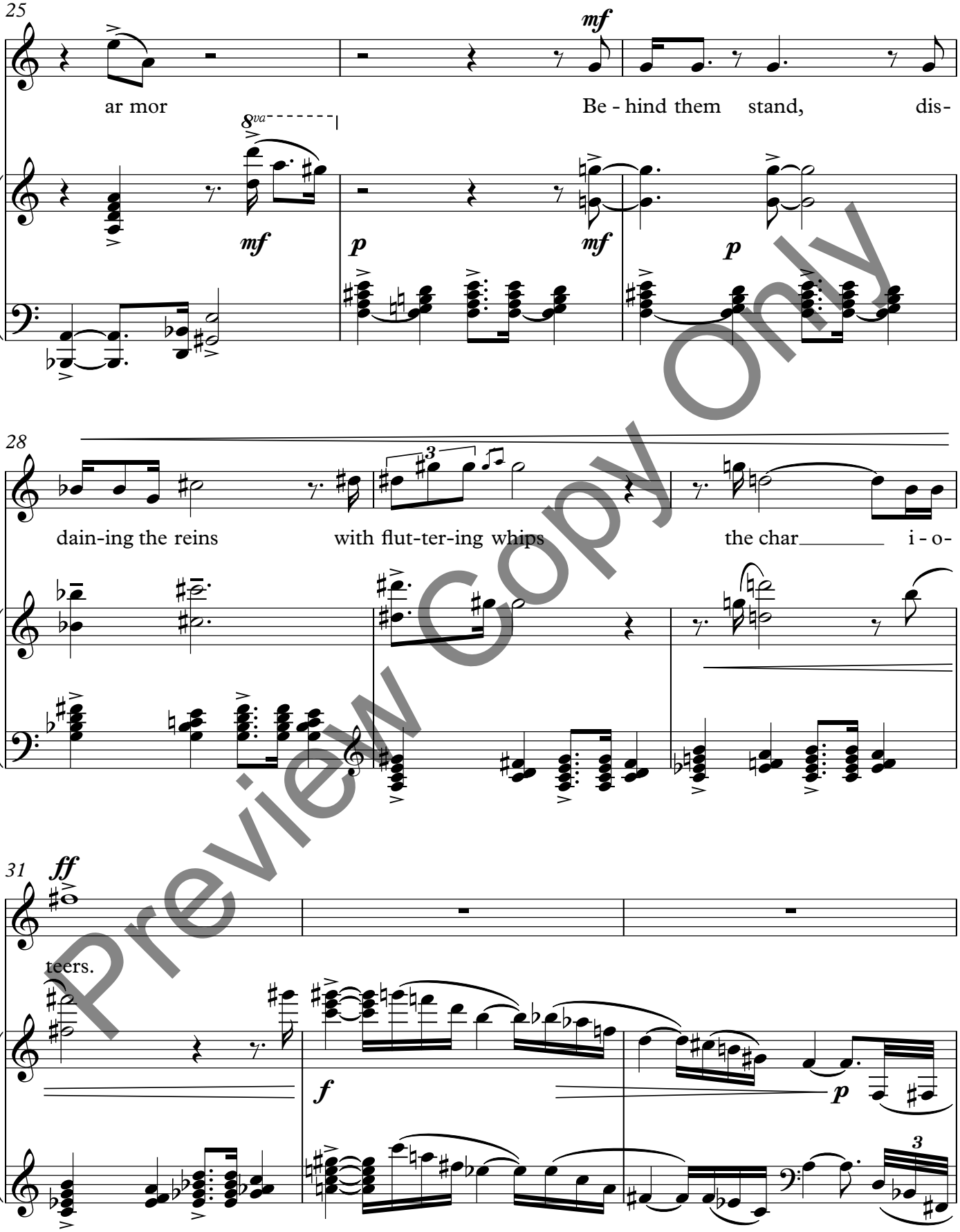

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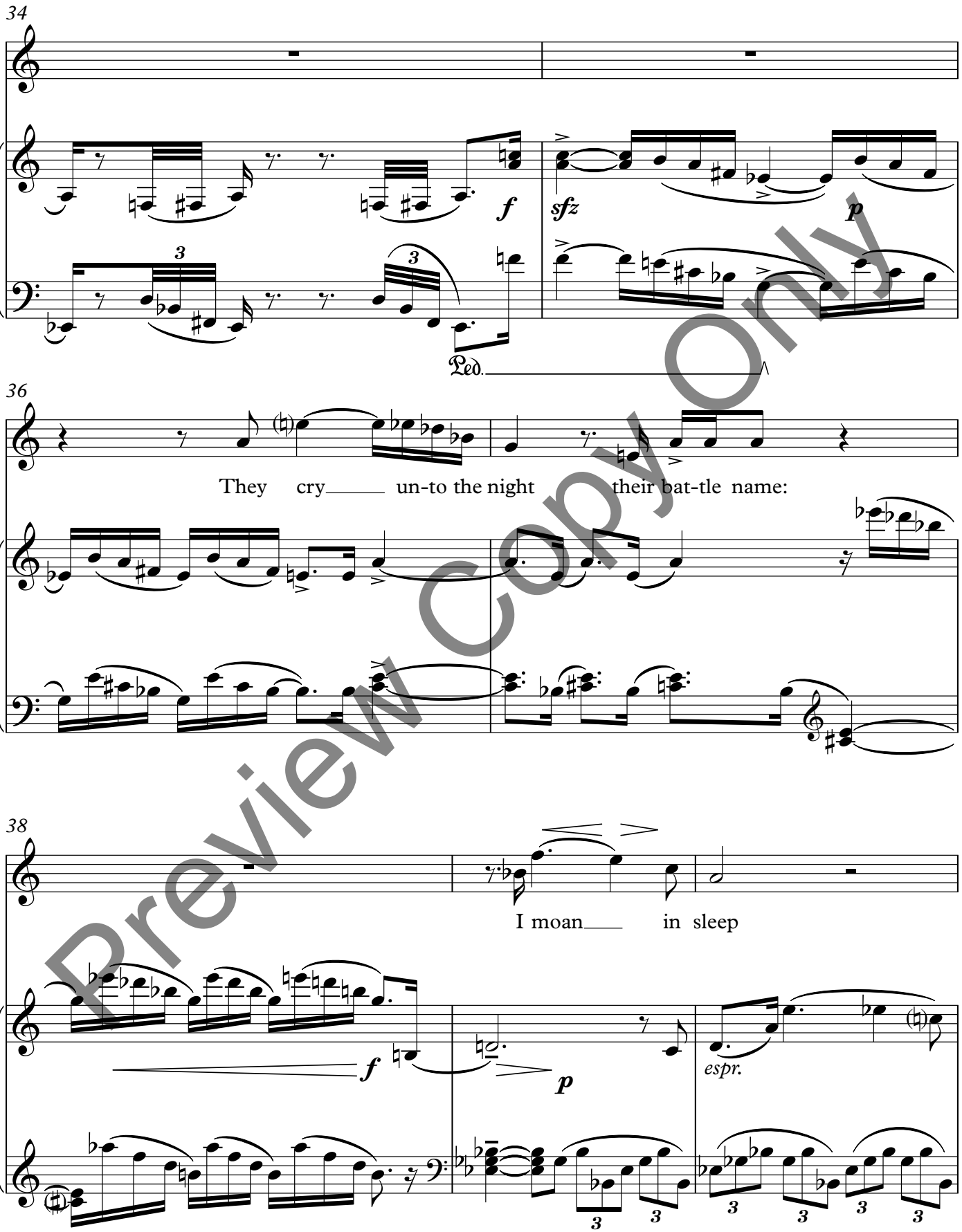

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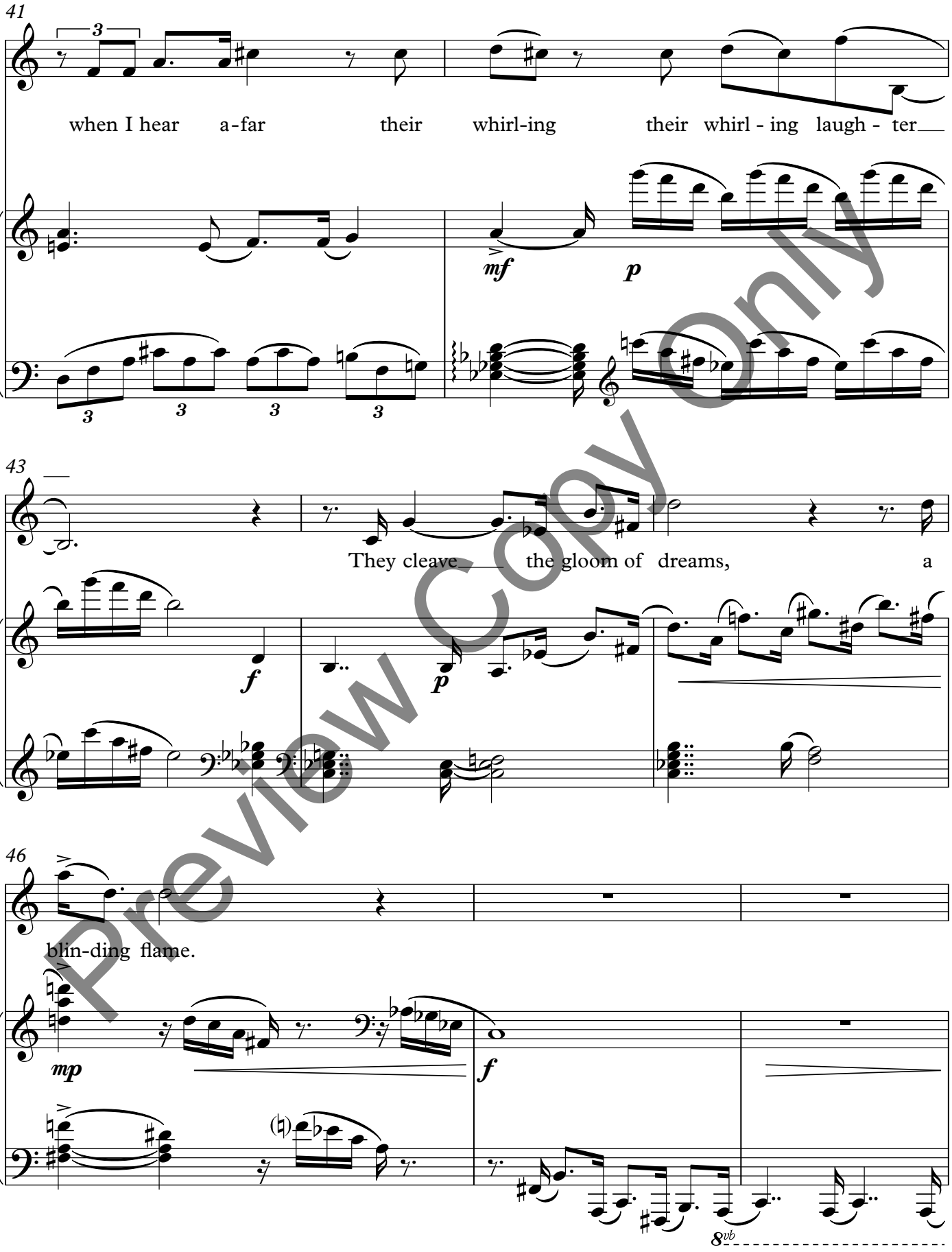

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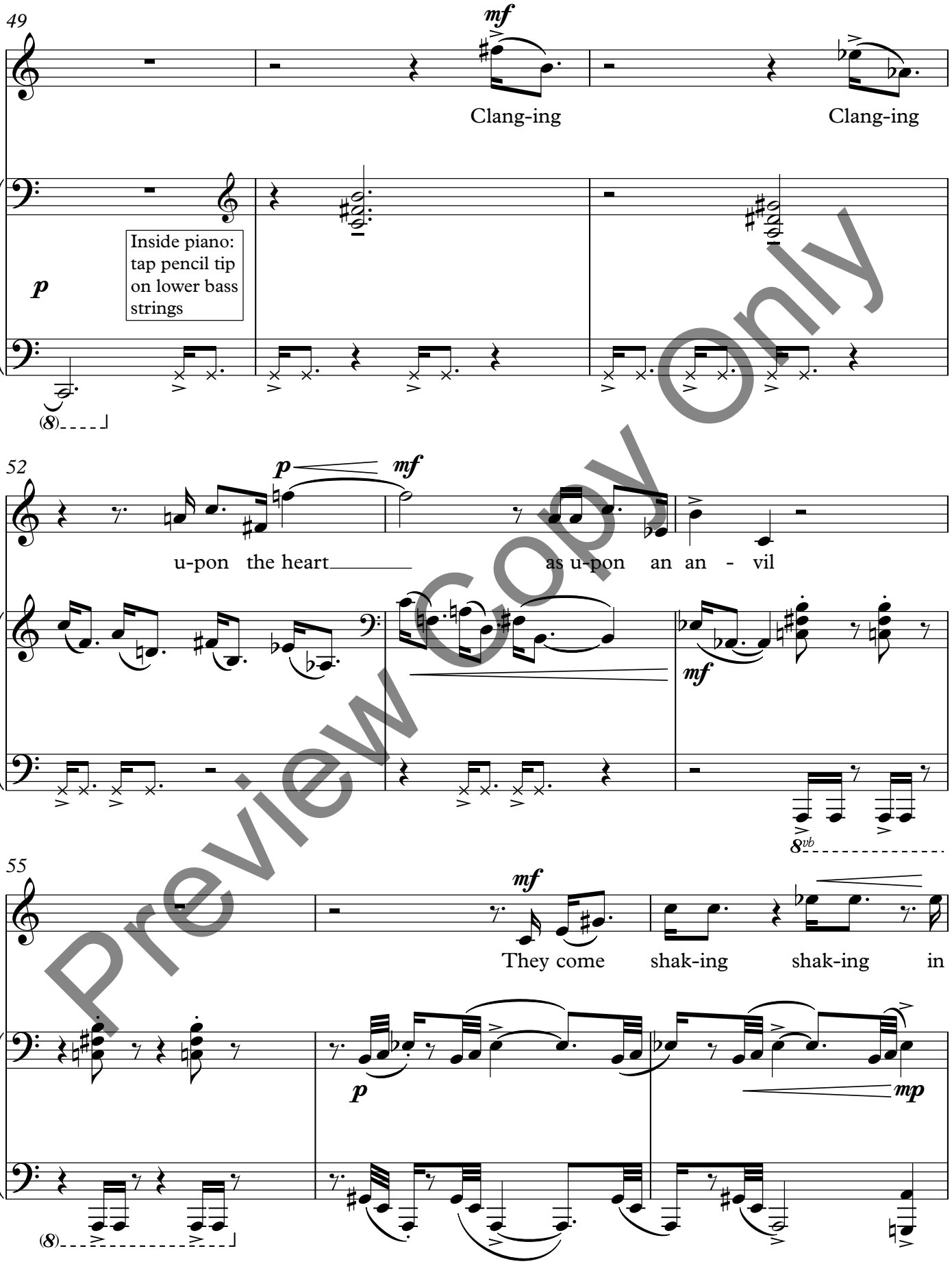

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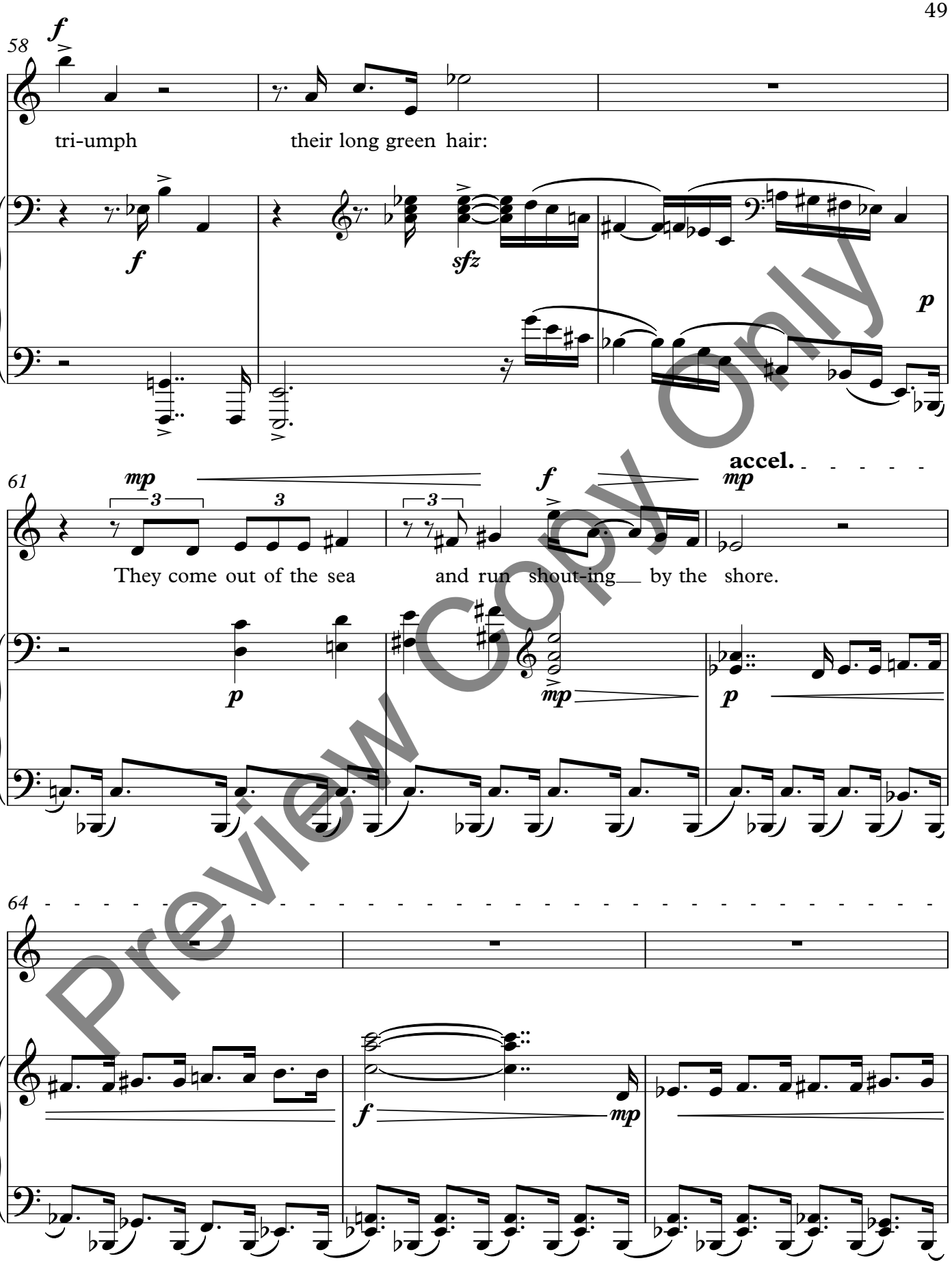

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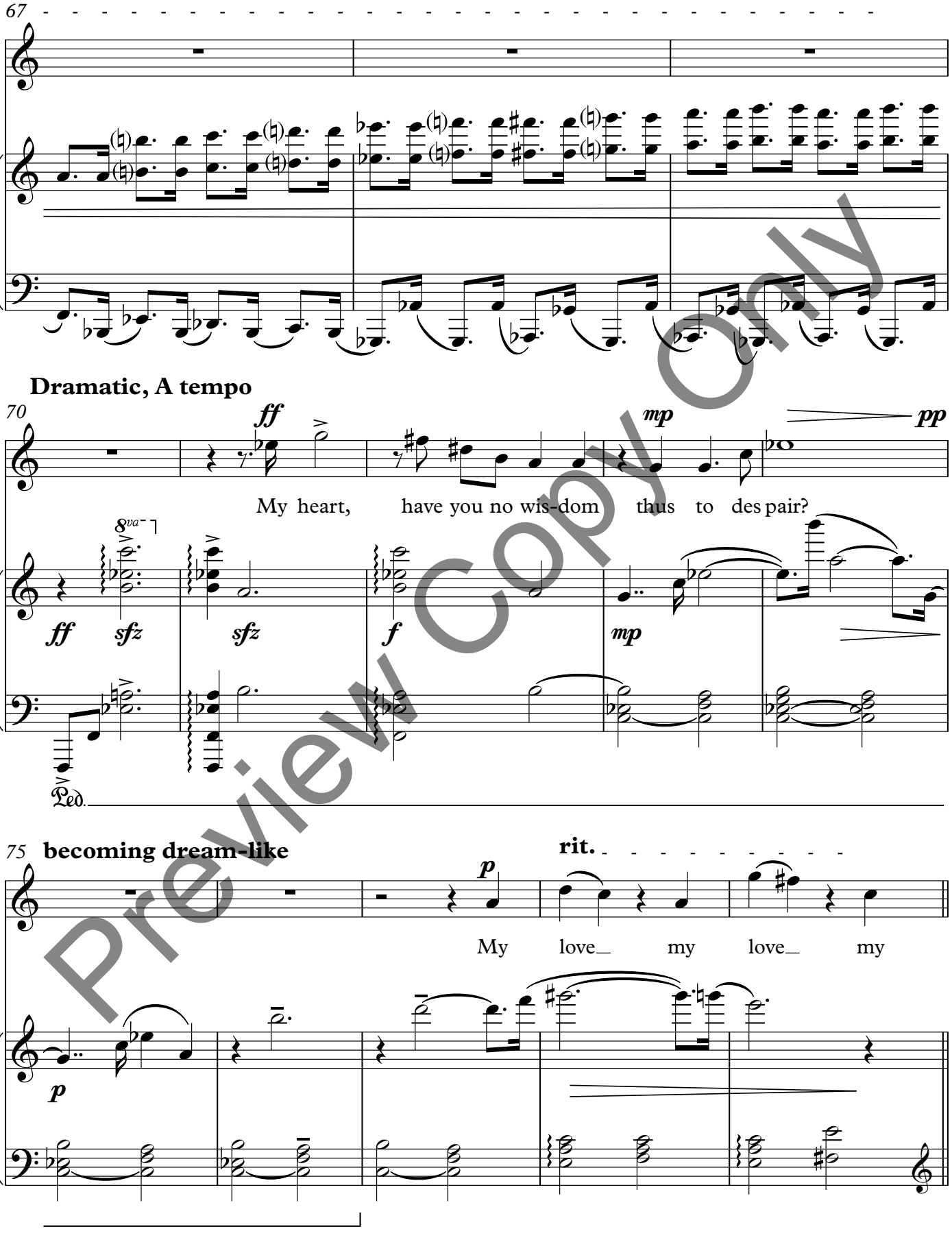

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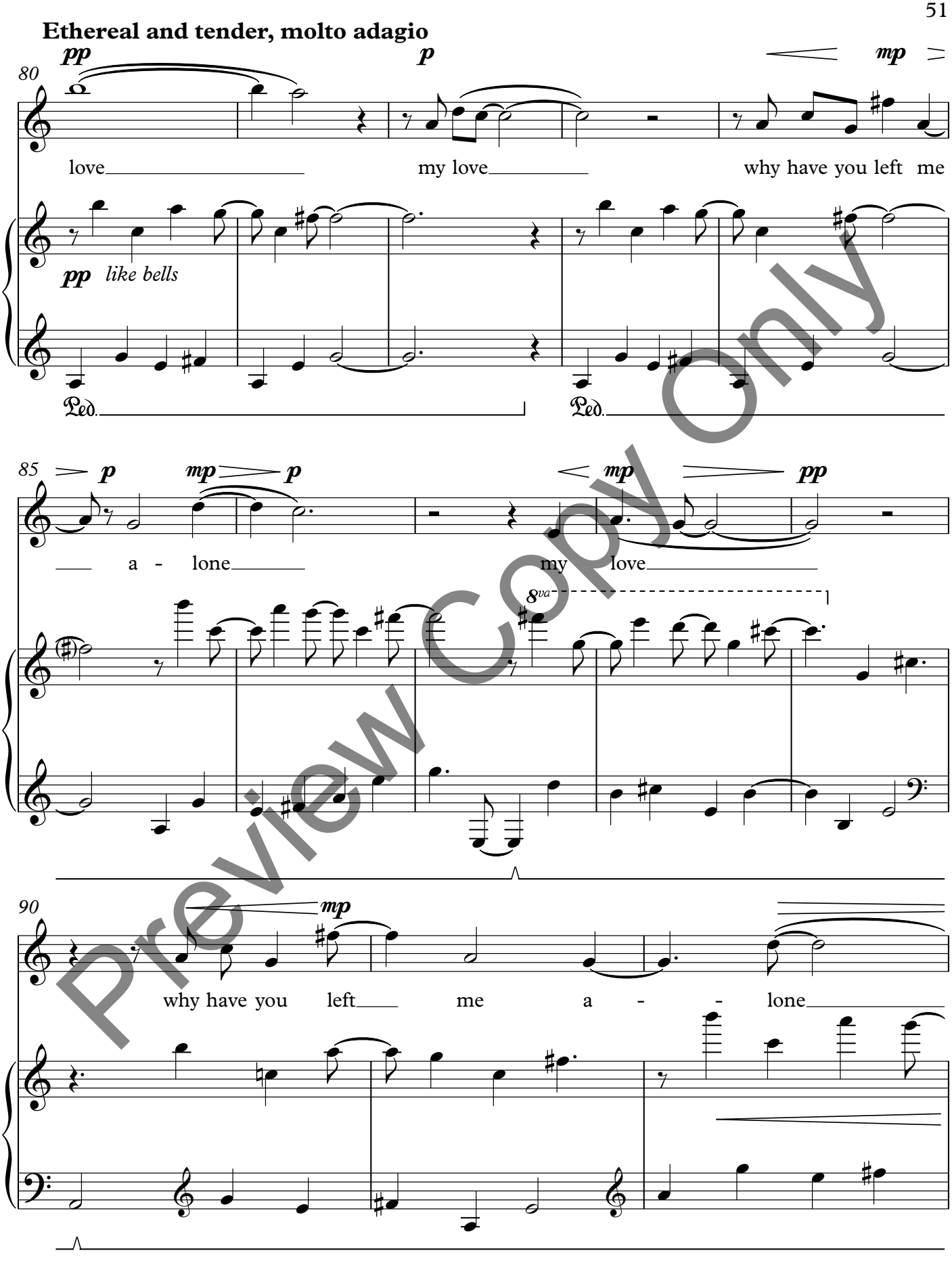

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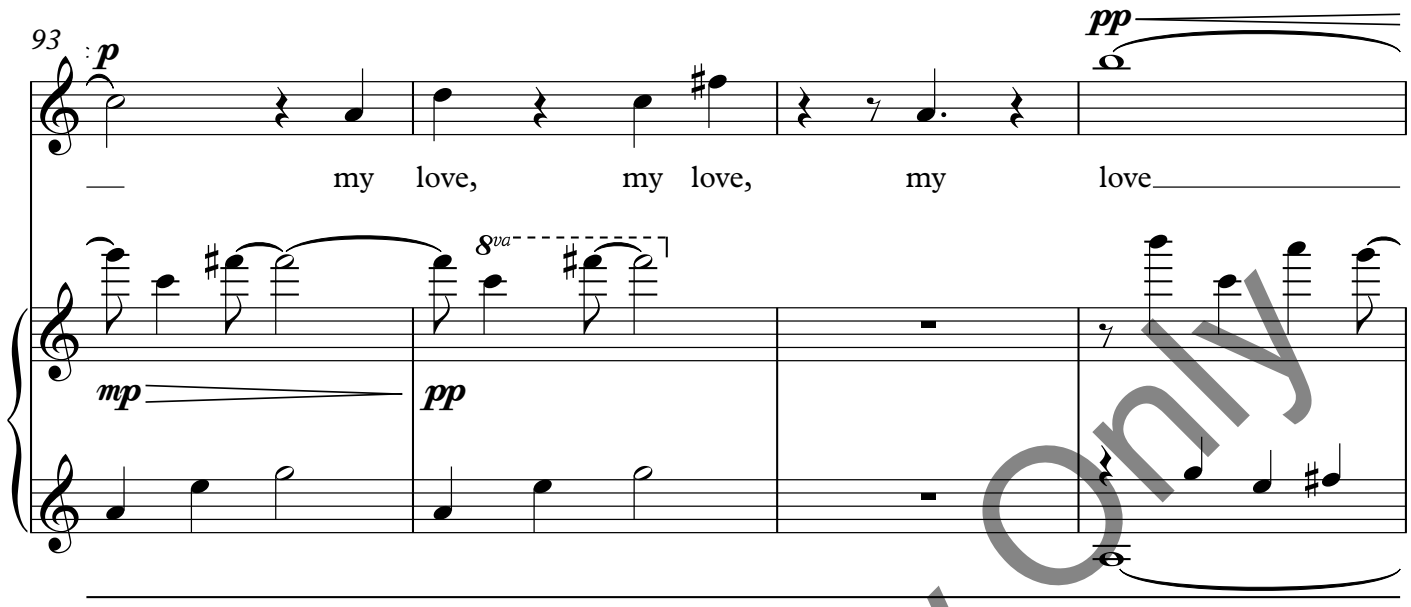

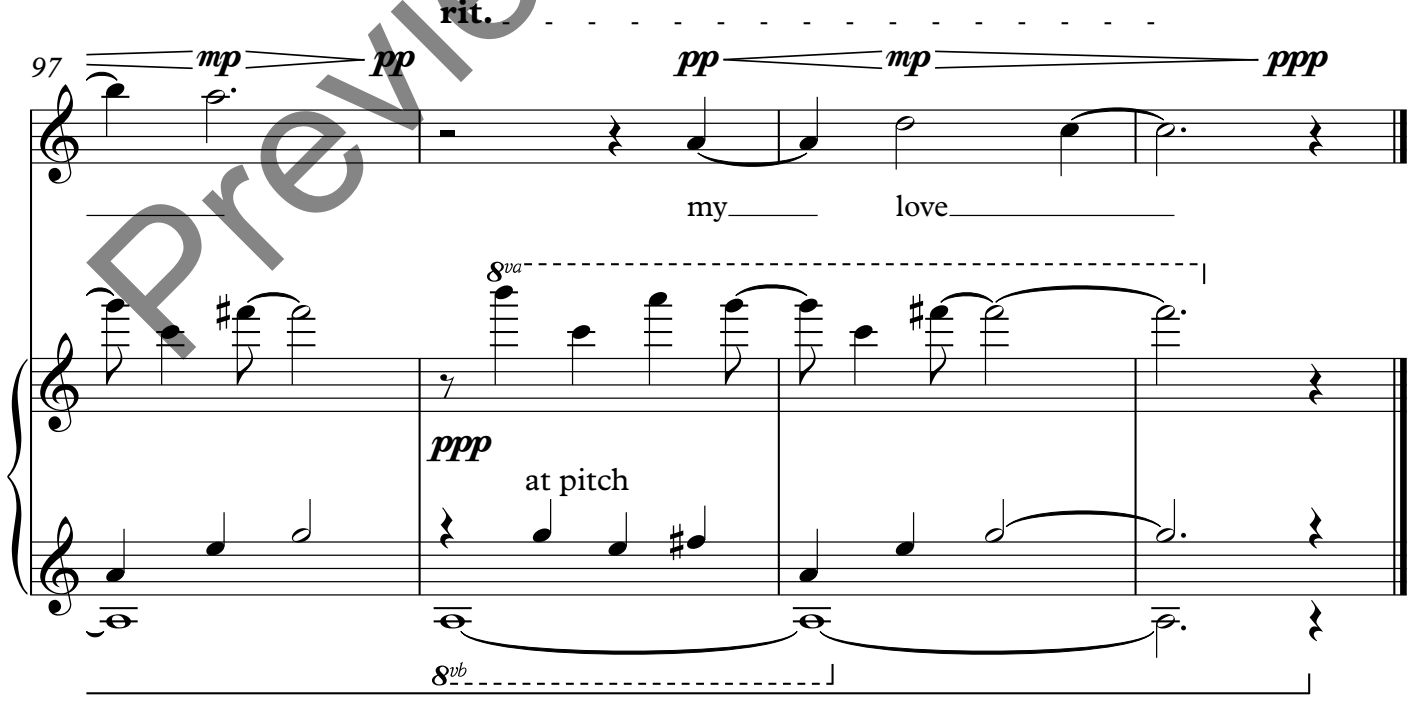

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