BENJAMIN BRITTEN
AND
W. H. AUDEN

Cabaret Songs

for voice and piano

Faber Music Limited
London

At the beginning of 1937 Britten was busy composing the incidental music for *The Ascent of F6*, the famous play by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood. It was first performed by the Group Theatre, at the Mercury Theatre, London, on 26th February 1937.

One of the most striking musical numbers was a Blues (in Act II, scene v), a setting of Auden's text 'Stop all the clocks'. Hedli Anderson, the singer, who was later to become the wife of Louis MacNeice, was a member of the original cast. She made a very considerable impression in the Blues, perhaps not least on the composer and his colleagues.

Later in 1937, in June, when Britten was visiting Auden at Colwall (near Malvern), where the poet was teaching at a prep school, he not only wrote a 'new version' of the *F6* Blues – almost certainly the solo version that is published here: Hedli Anderson, too, was at Colwall on this occasion and the song was tried out on the boys with great success – but also busied himself with what he described as 'cabaret songs', though not naming them individually, as he did in the case of 'Stop all the clocks'.

We know in fact, from Britten's 1937 diary, that 'Johnny' had already been composed on 5th May; that another cabaret song was sketched the next day; another on the 7th; and yet another on the 8th. It was only 'Johnny', however, that was named.

On the 10th Britten went through the songs with Hedli Anderson and her accompanist – 'they are going to be hits, I feel!' wrote the composer in his diary. The successive entries would seem to indicate that at least five cabaret songs should exist from this time, including, that is, the 'new version' of the *F6* Blues, but excluding 'Tell me the truth about love' and 'Calypso', the first of which belongs to early January 1938 and the second to 1939 – the poem belongs to May or early June, by which time both the poet and composer were in North America, Britten in Canada, Auden in the States (hence the geography of 'Calypso'). So it seems there are still some cabaret songs to be discovered, among them one entitled 'I'm a jam tart'.

Whatever the total turns out to be, the four collected together here are splendid examples of the genre. They not only provide ample evidence of the composer's and poet's wit and high spirits, but are also wholly characteristic of a particular kind of vernacular music that resulted from the collaboration between two brilliantly endowed young men in the thirties. They were also partners in another kind of music, of course. It is important to remember that Britten's settings of Auden's poems, *On this Island*, belong to precisely this same period. The two contrasting styles mirror the world and the times in and through which they moved.

The songs of course carry no dedication. But as this note makes clear, they were written for – indeed, inspired by – Hedli Anderson (1907–1990); and I am sure both the composer and the poet would have wanted her name to have been associated with the songs in their published form.

For two of the songs we have included metronome marks as an indication of the composer's tempi. These are based on informal recorded performances by Britten and Peter Pears in the possession of The Britten-Pears Library at Aldeburgh.

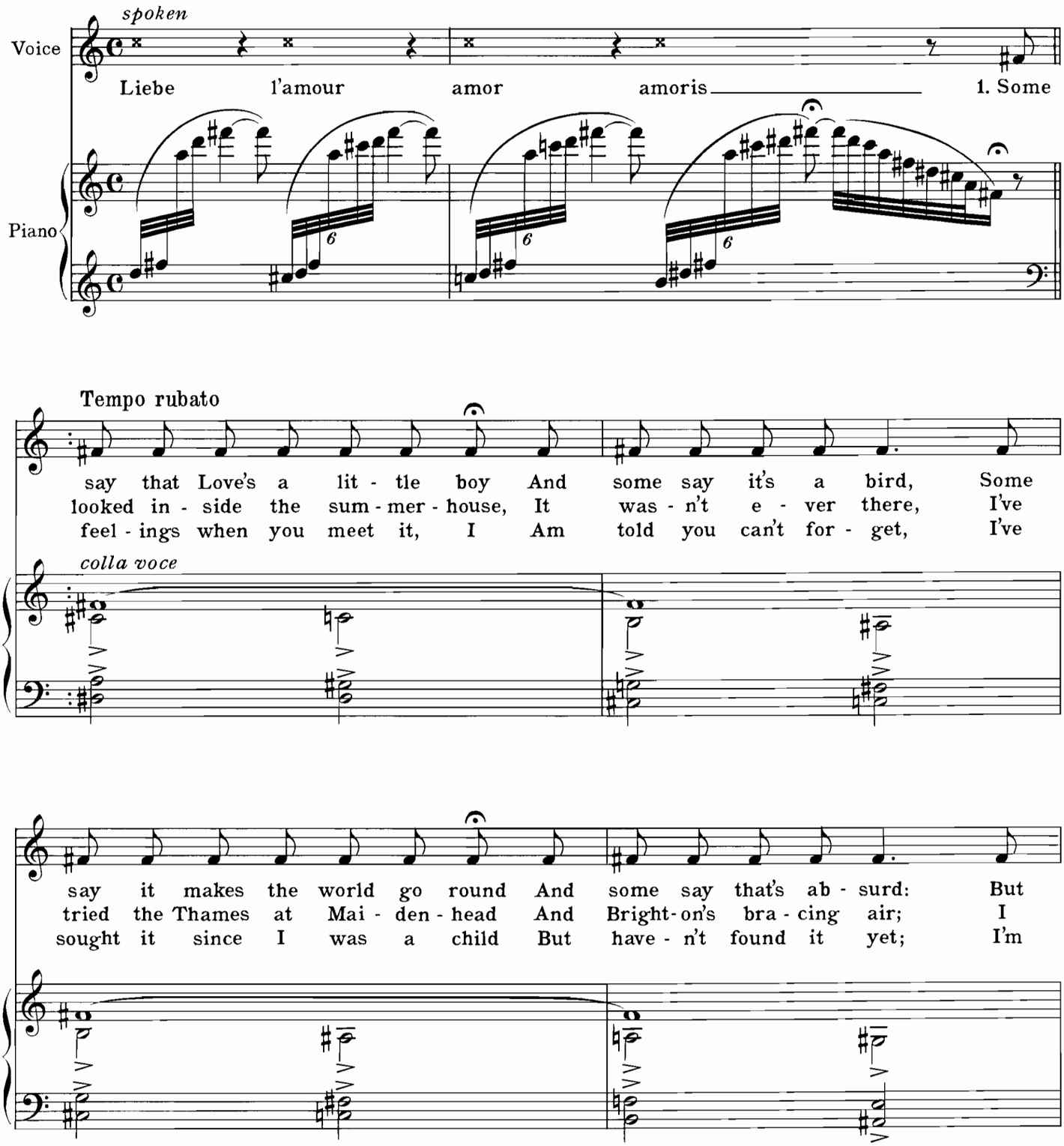
DONALD MITCHELL

CABARET SONGS

W. H. AUDEN
(1907-1973)

BENJAMIN BRITTEN
(1913-1976)

1. Tell me the truth about love



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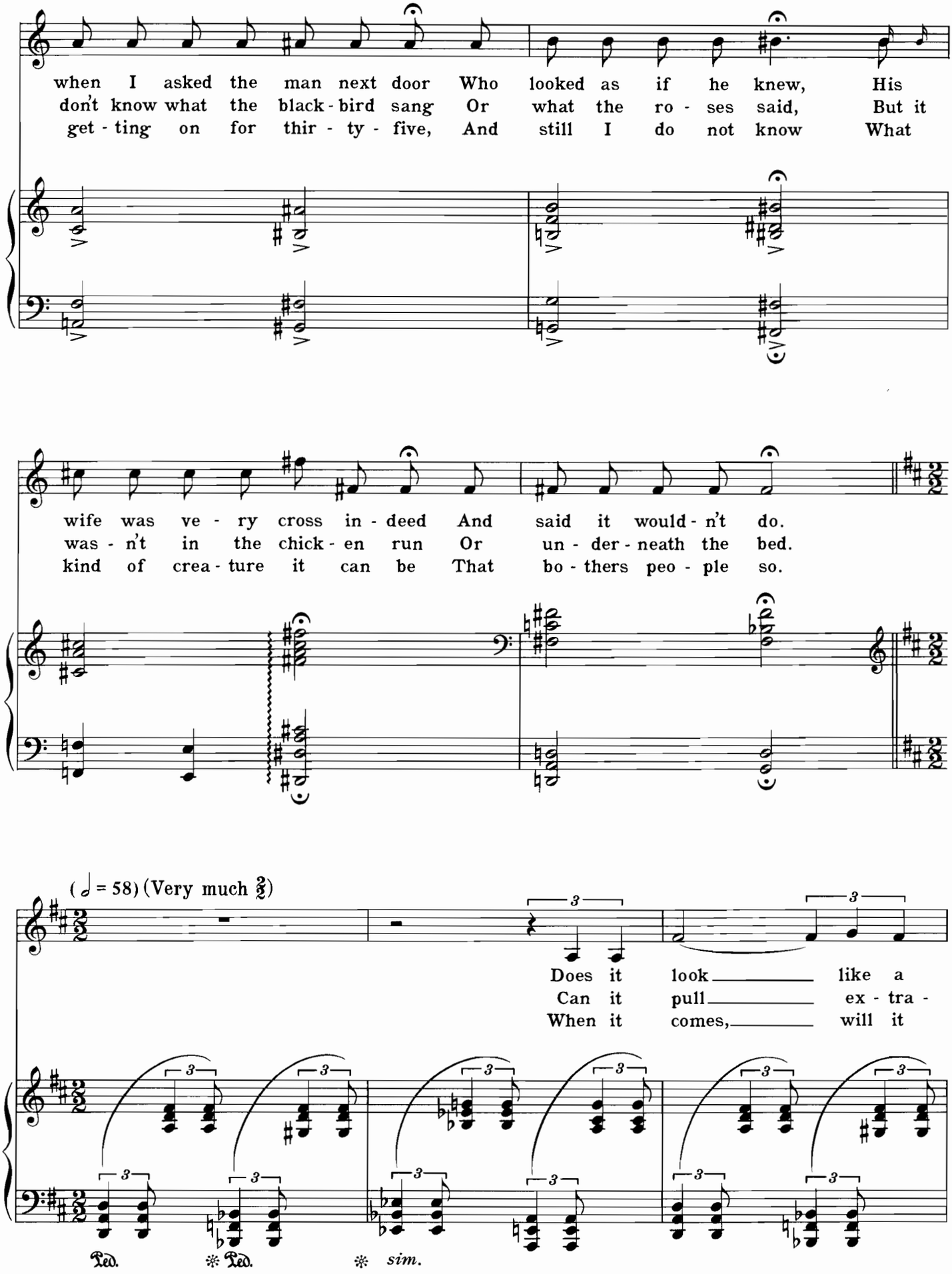
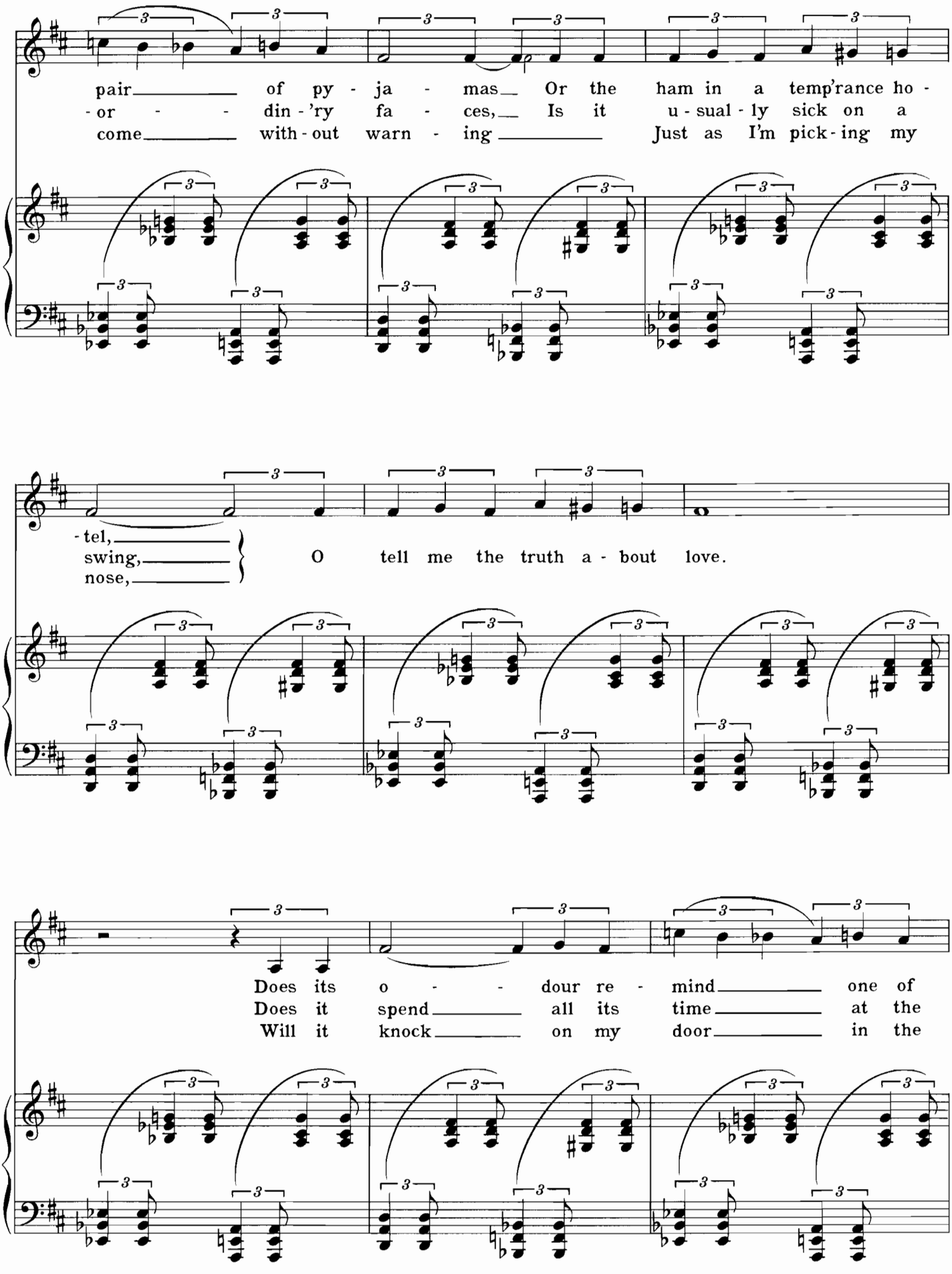
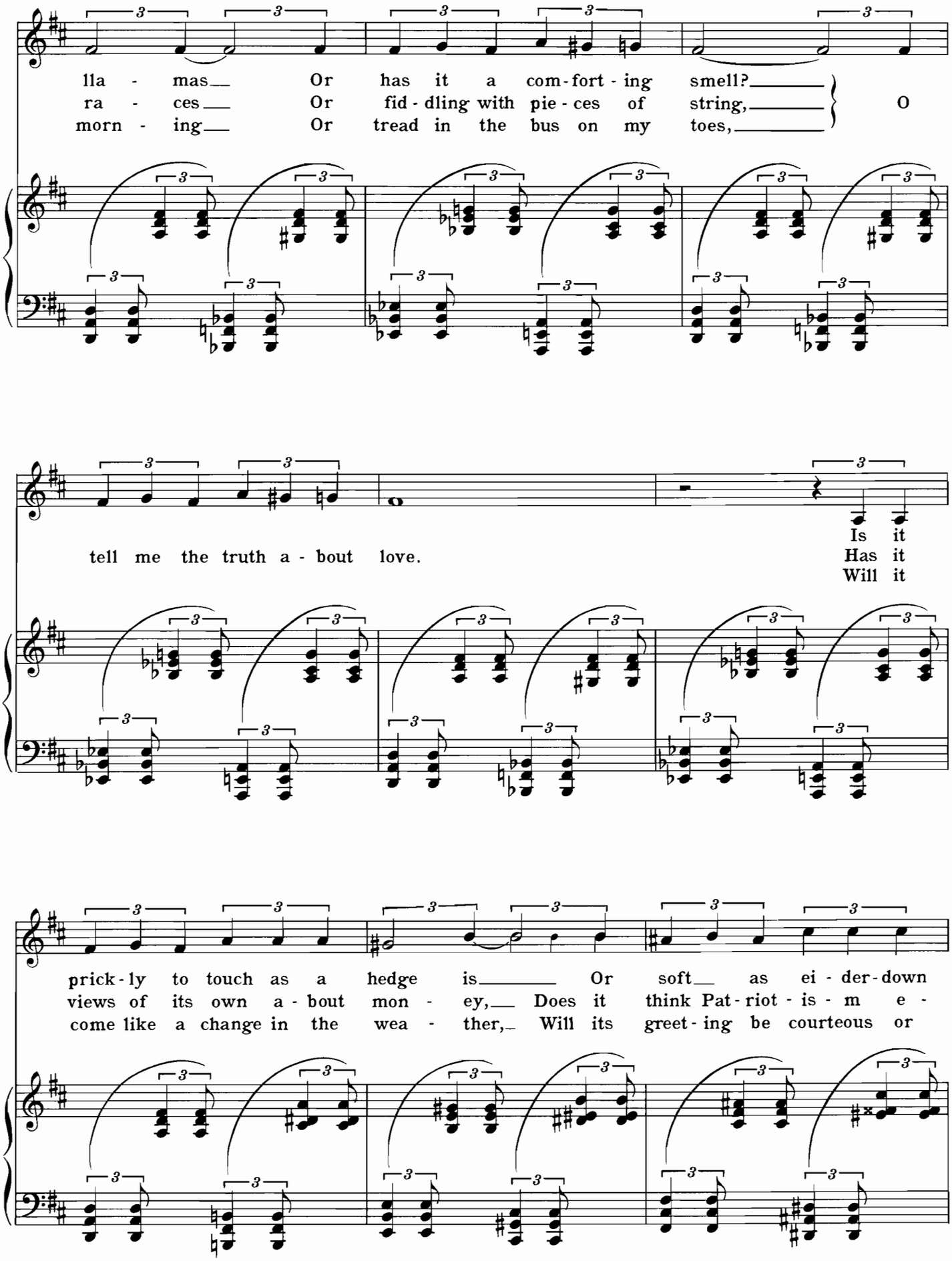
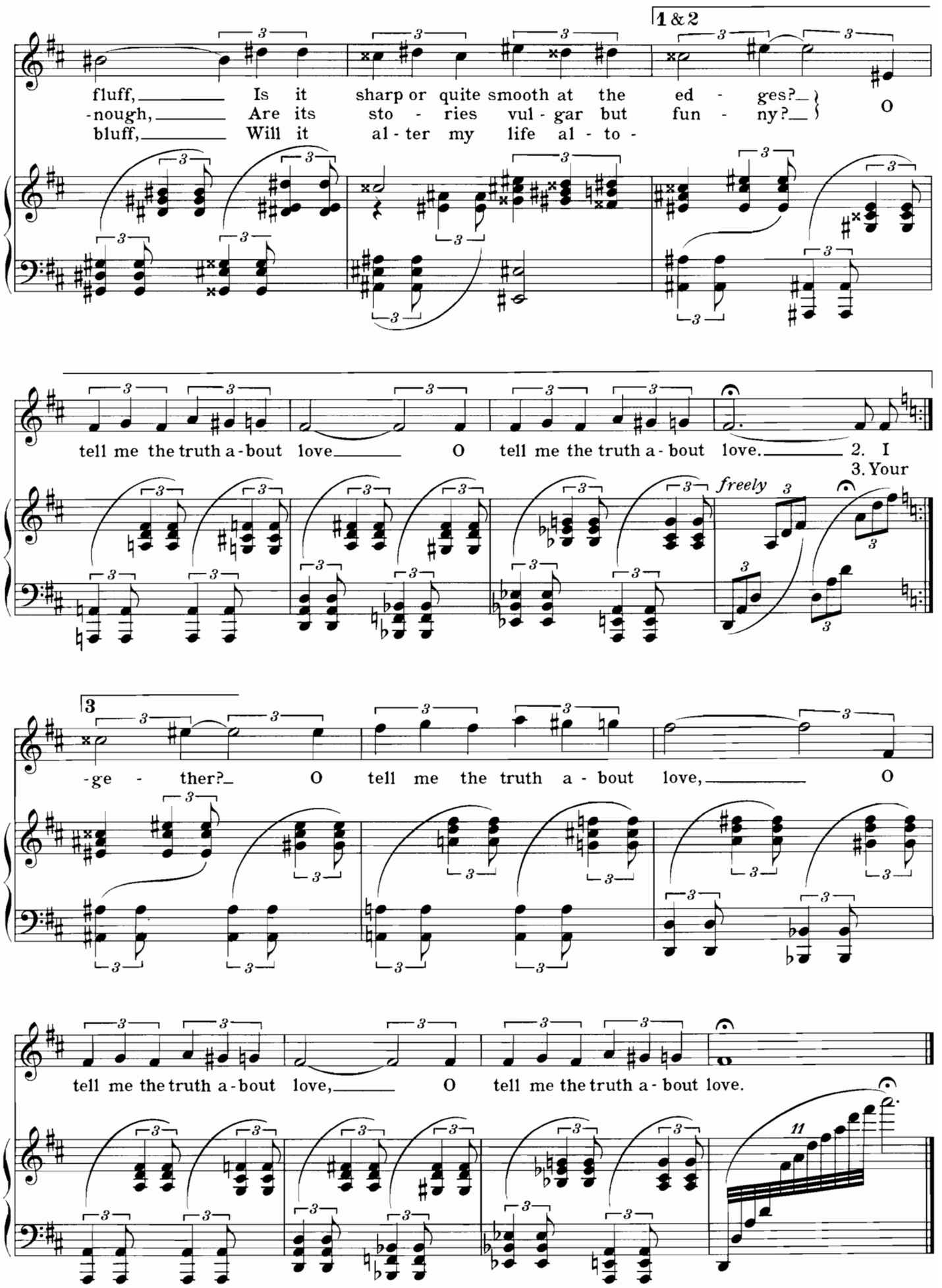
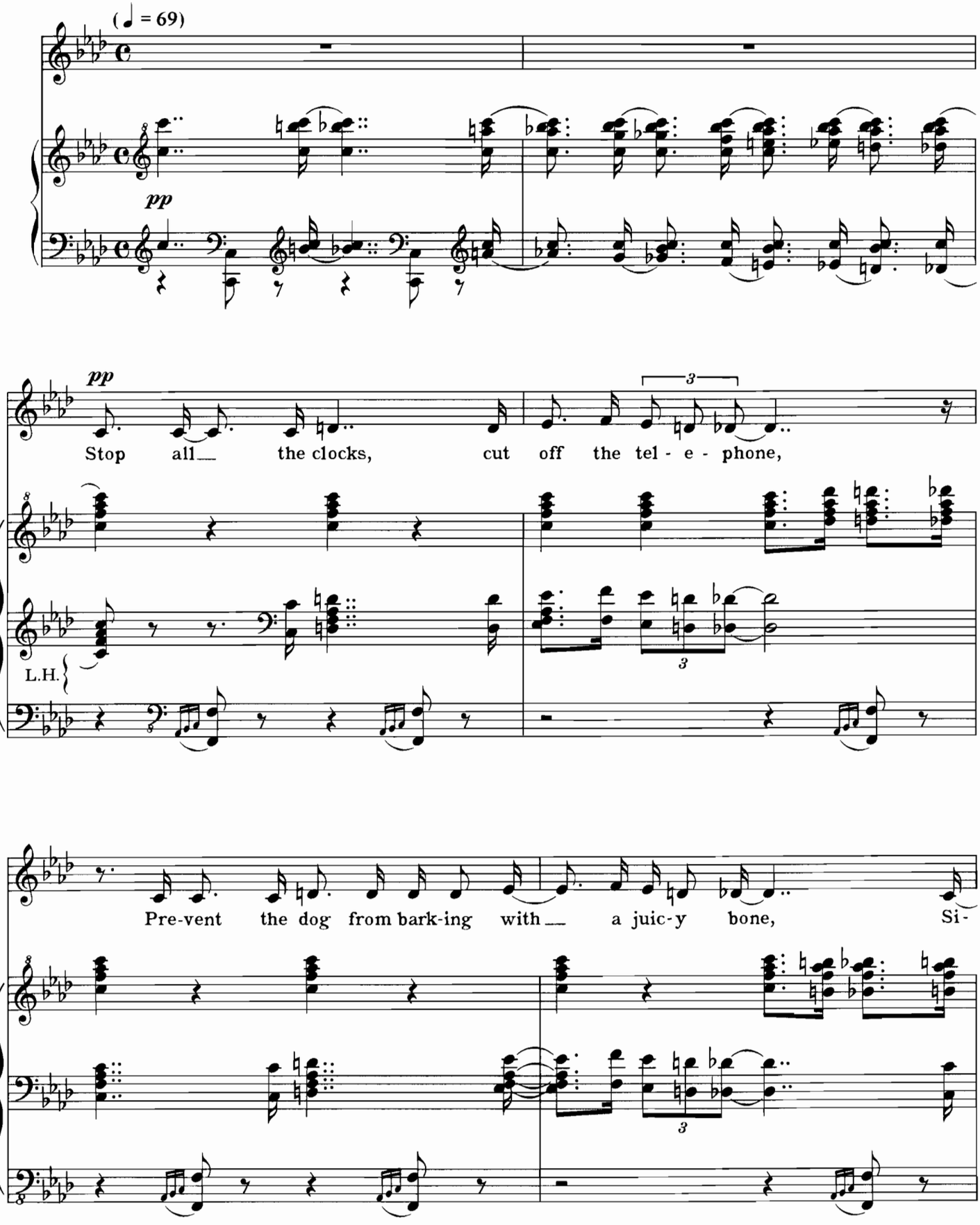

when I asked the man next door Who looked as if he knew, His
don't know what the black-bird sang Or what the ro-ses said, But it
get-ting on for thir-ty-five, And still I do not know What
wife was ve-ry cross in-deed And said it would-n't do.
was-n't in the chick-en run Or un-der-neath the bed.
kind of crea-ture it can be That bo-thers peo-ple so.
(♩ = 58) (Very much 𝅗𝅥)
Does it look like a
Can it pull ex-tra-
When it comes, will it
Ped.
Ped.
sim.

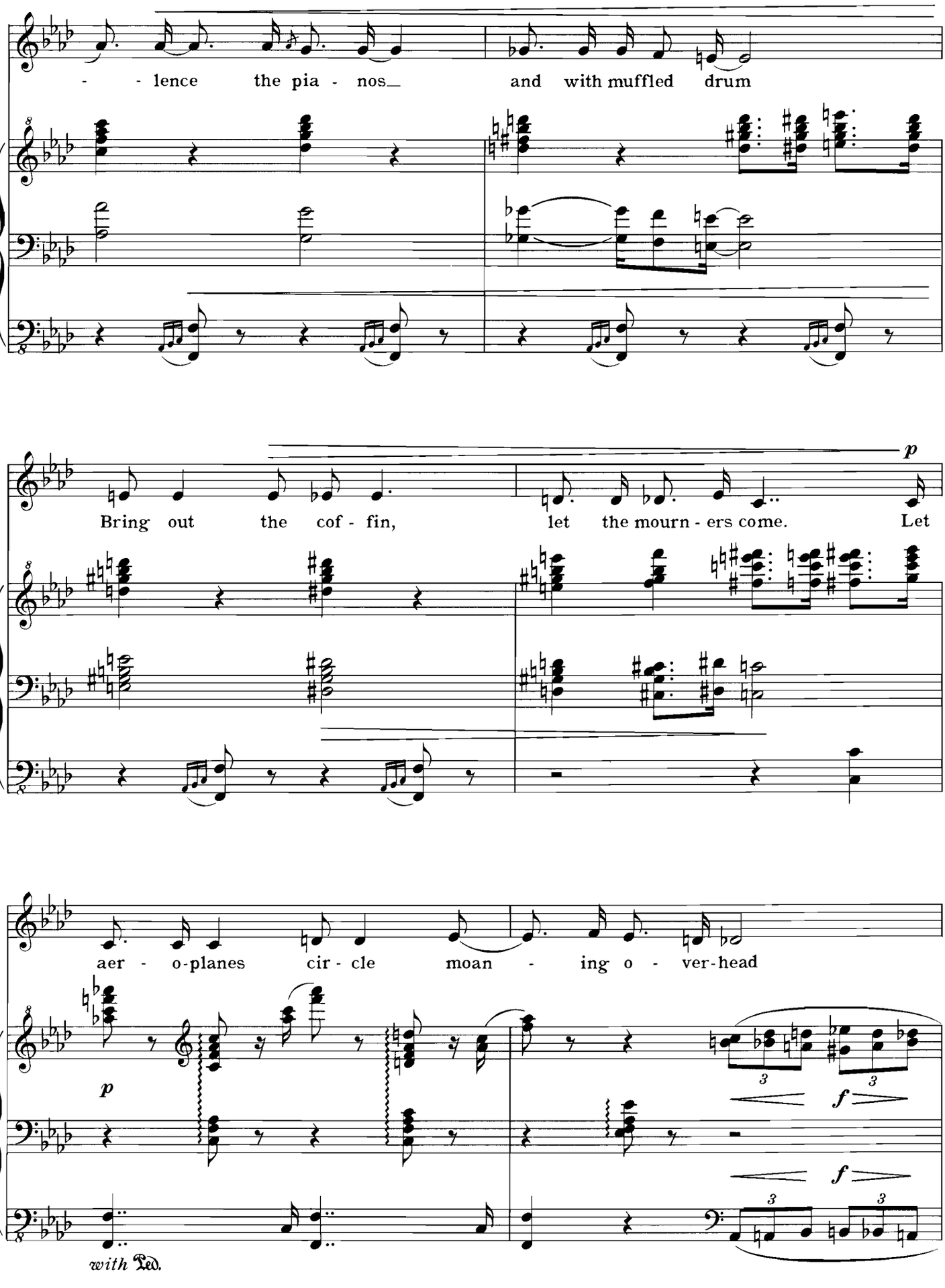

pair of py - ja - mas Or the ham in a temp'rance ho -
-or - - din - 'ry fa - ces, Is it u - sual - ly sick on a
come with - out warn - ing Just as I'm pick - ing my
- tel,
swing,
nose,
O tell me the truth a - bout love.
Does its o - - dour re - mind one of
Does it spend all its time at the
Will it knock on my door in the

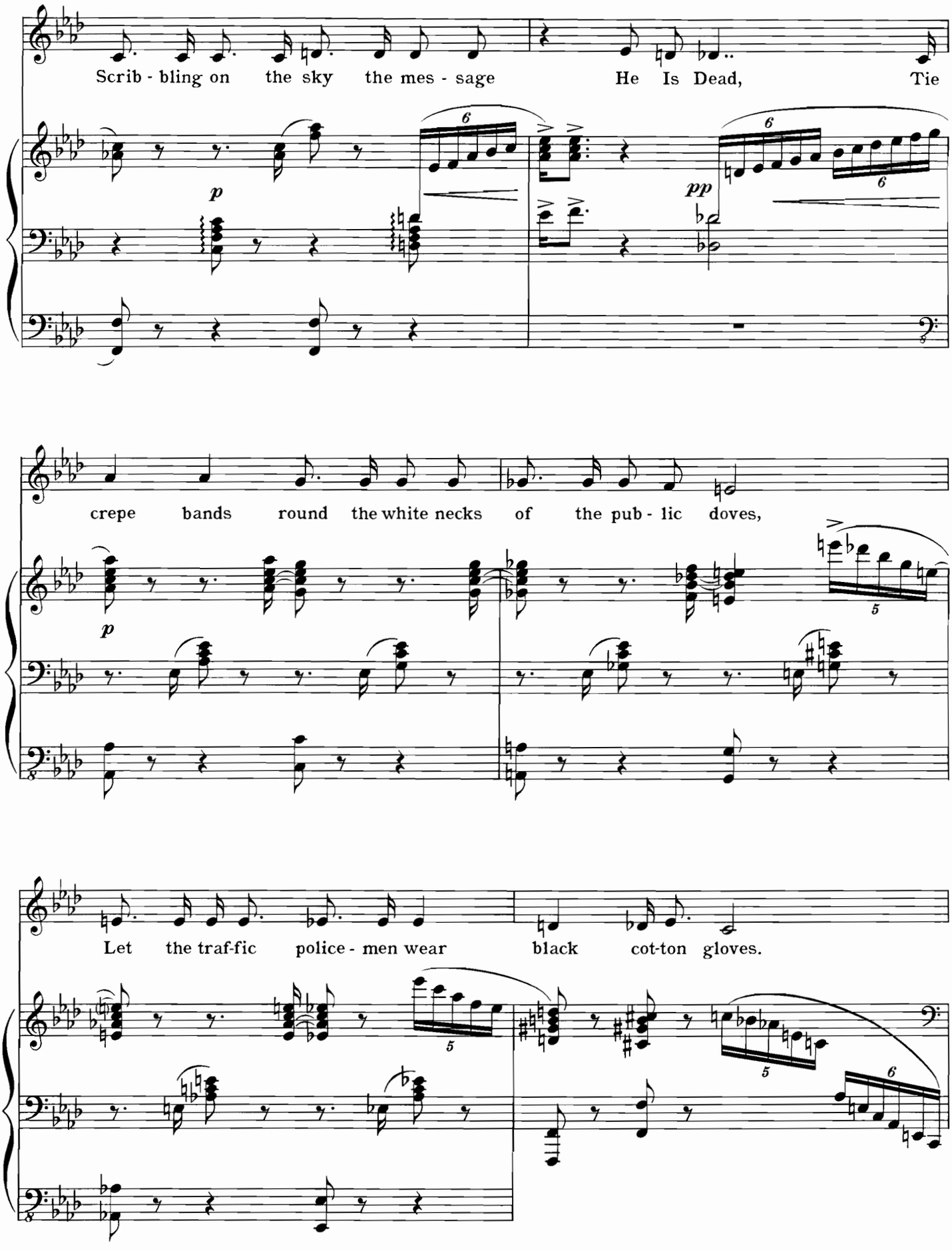

lla - mas Or has it a com - fort - ing smell?
ra - ces Or fid - dling with pie - ces of string,
morn - ing Or tread in the bus on my toes,
O
tell me the truth a - bout love.
Is it
Has it
Will it
prick - ly to touch as a hedge is Or soft as ei - der - down
views of its own a - bout mon - ey, Does it think Pat - riot - is - m e -
come like a change in the wea - ther, Will its greet - ing be courteous or

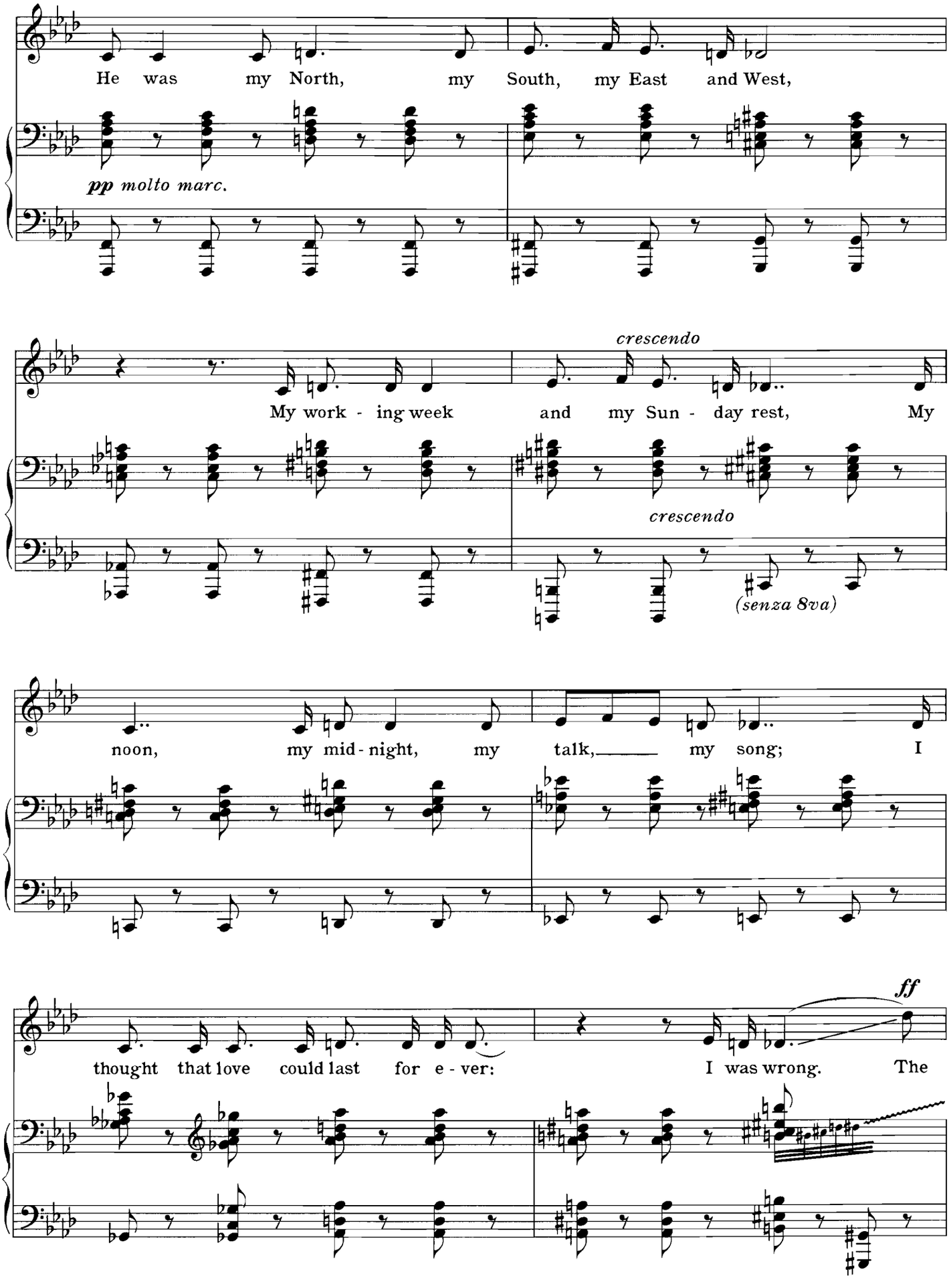

1 & 2
fluff, Is it sharp or quite smooth at the ed - ges?
-nough, Are its sto - ries vul - gar but fun - ny?
bluff, Will it al - ter my life al - to -
O
tell me the truth a - bout love O tell me the truth a - bout love. 2. I
3. Your
freely
3
-ge - ther? O tell me the truth a - bout love, O
tell me the truth a - bout love, O tell me the truth a - bout love.
11

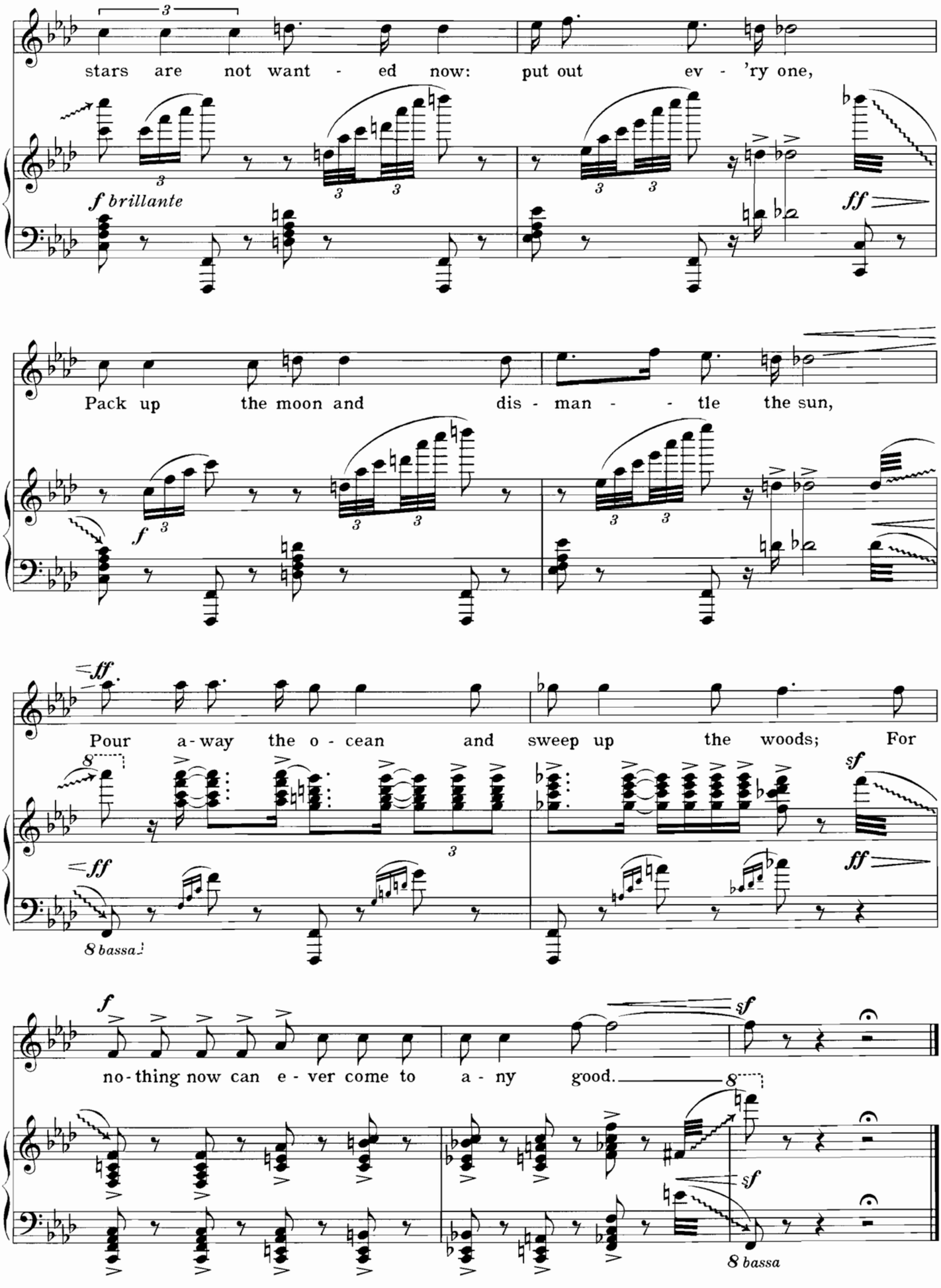
2. Funeral blues



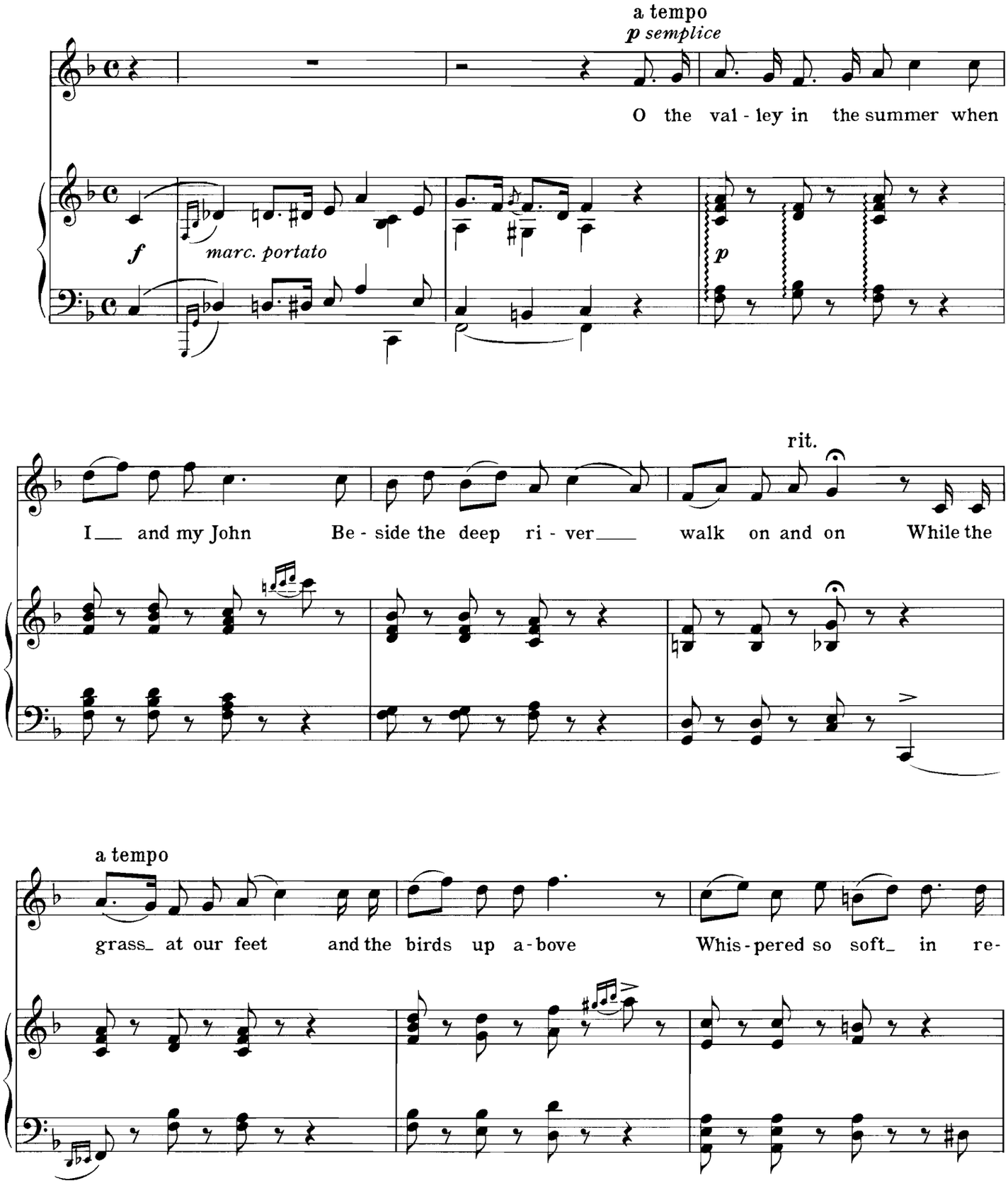

- - lence the pia - nos_ and with muffled drum
Bring out the cof - fin, let the mourn - ers come. Let
p
aer - o-planes cir - cle moan - ing o - ver-head
p
f
f
with Ped.

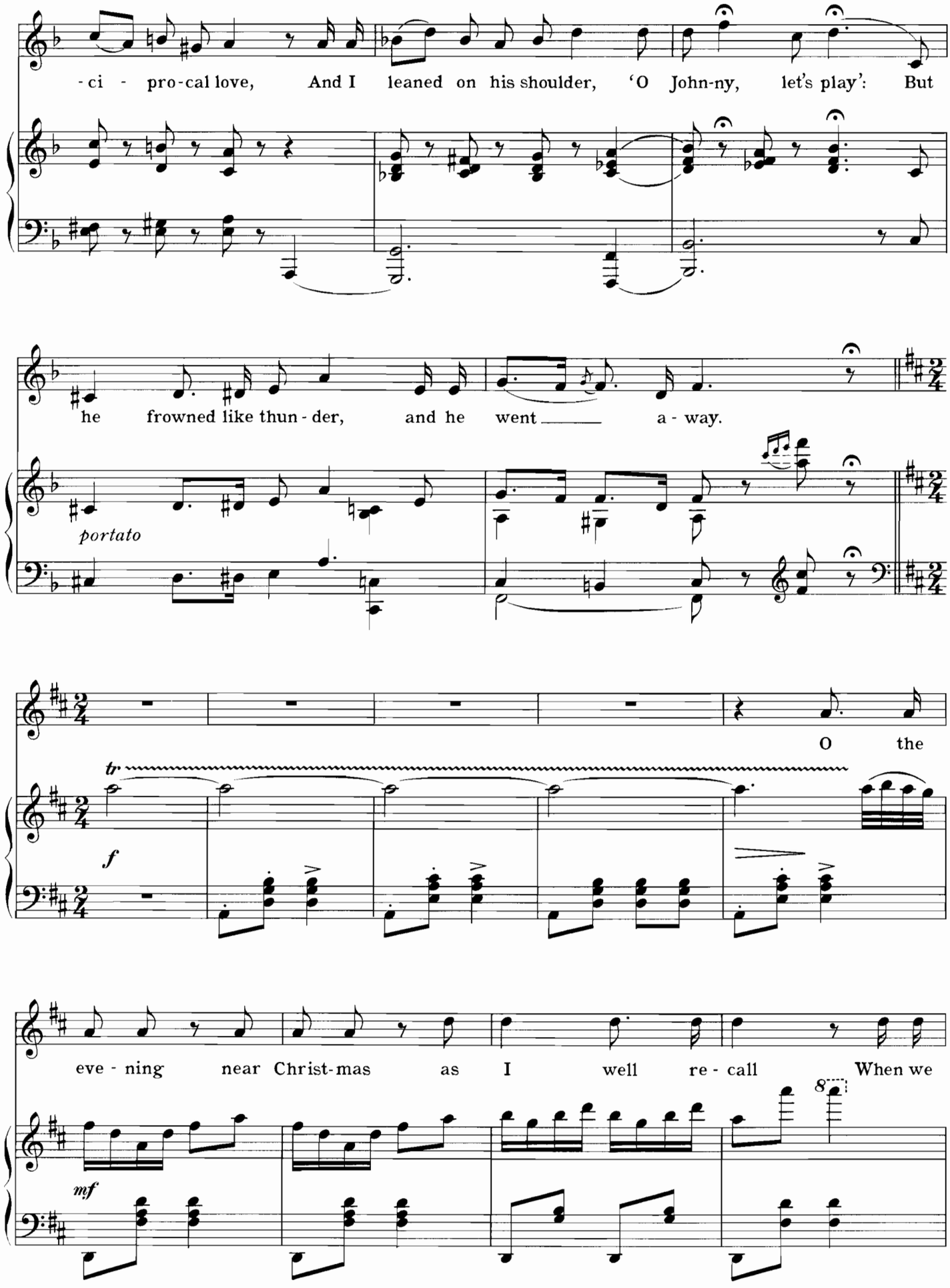

Scrib - bling on the sky the mes - sage He Is Dead, Tie
p
pp
crepe bands round the white necks of the pub - lic doves,
p
Let the traf-fic police - men wear black cot-ton gloves.

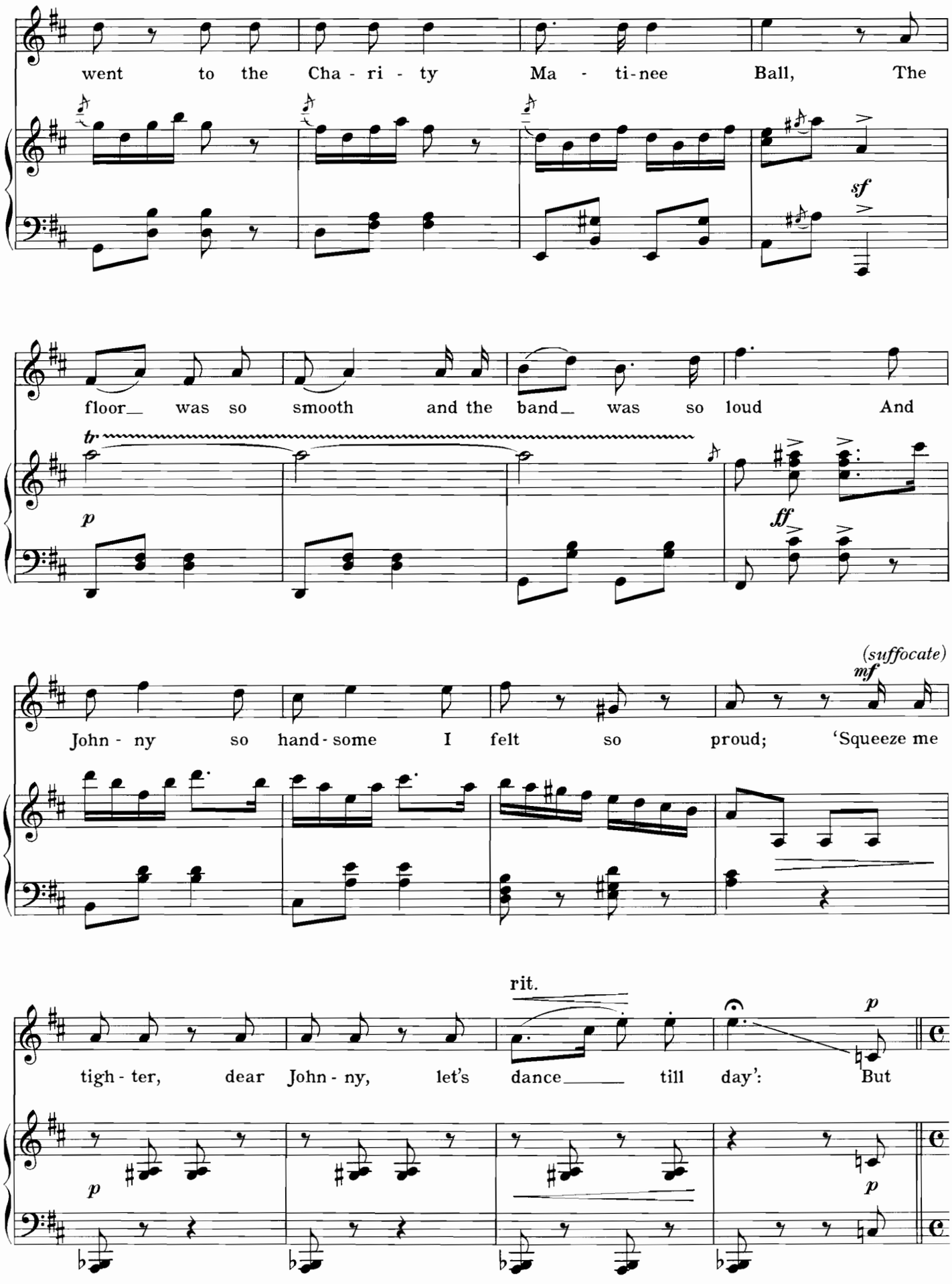

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
pp molto marc.
crescendo
My work - ing week and my Sun - day rest, My
crescendo
(senza 8va)
noon, my mid - night, my talk, my song; I
ff
thought that love could last for e - ver: I was wrong. The

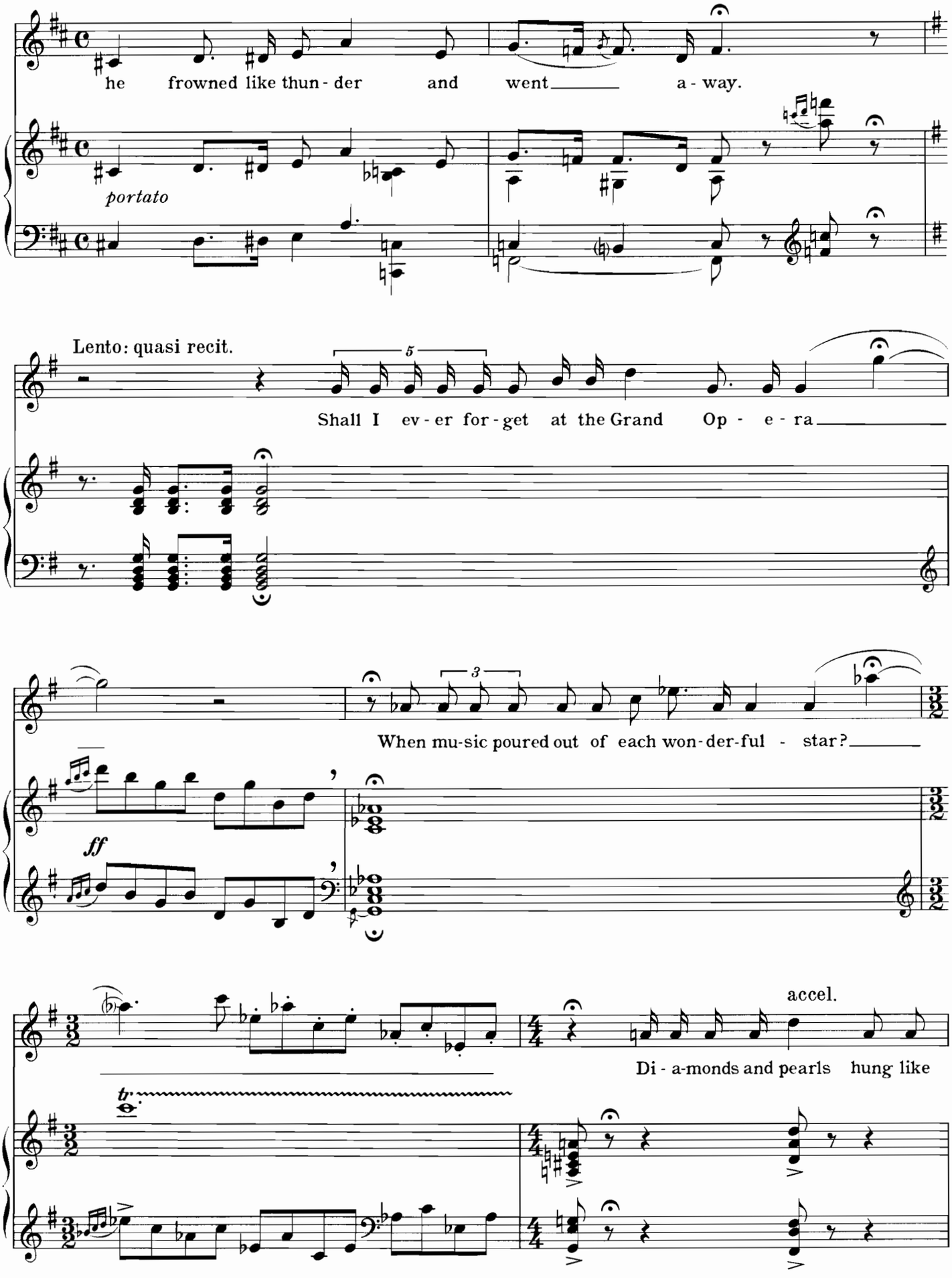

stars are not want - ed now: put out ev - 'ry one,
f brillante
ff
Pack up the moon and dis - man - - tle the sun,
f
Pour a-way the o - cean and sweep up the woods; For
ff
8 bassa
sf
no-thing now can e - ver come to a - ny good.
8 bassa

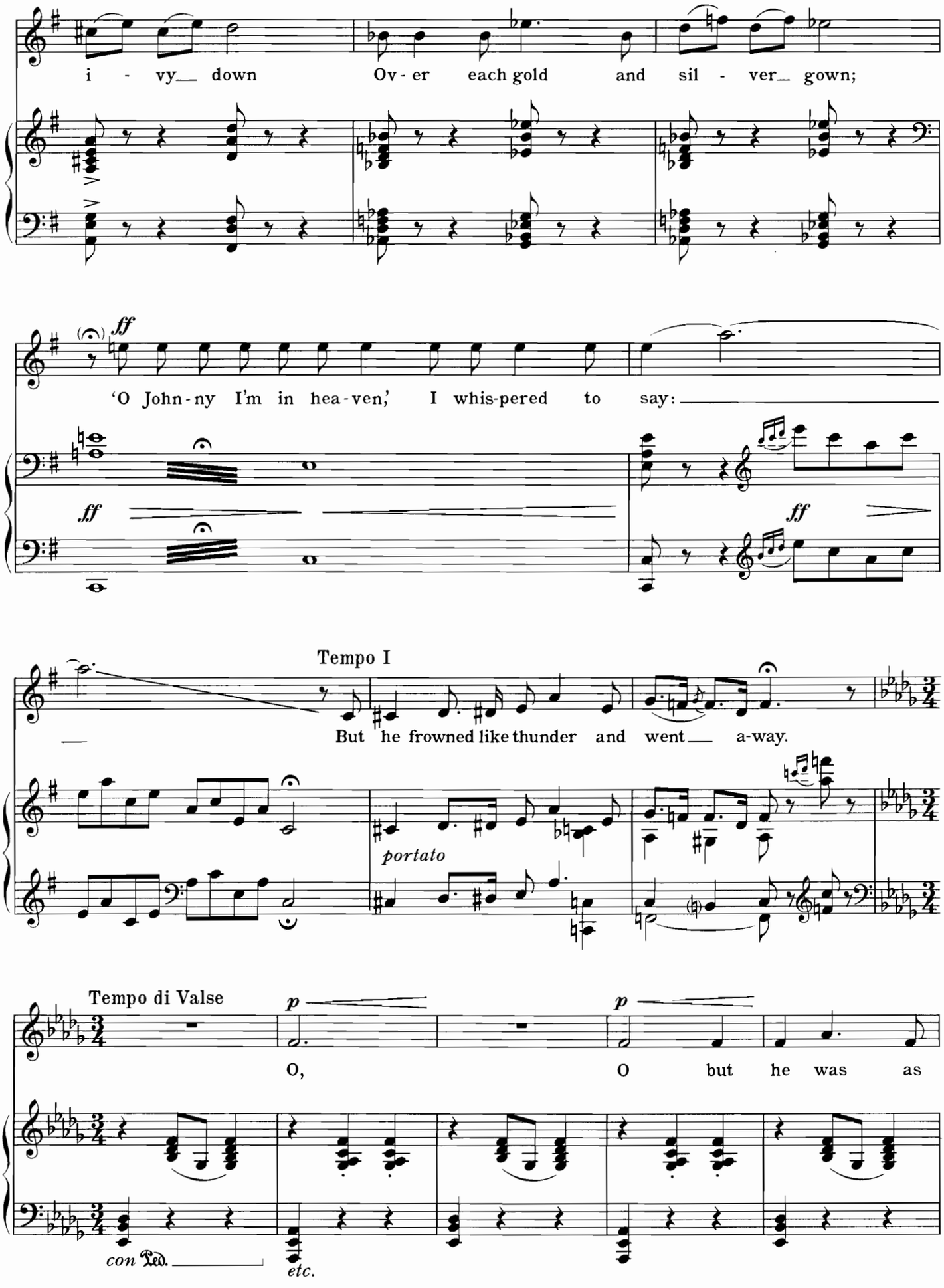
3. Johnny

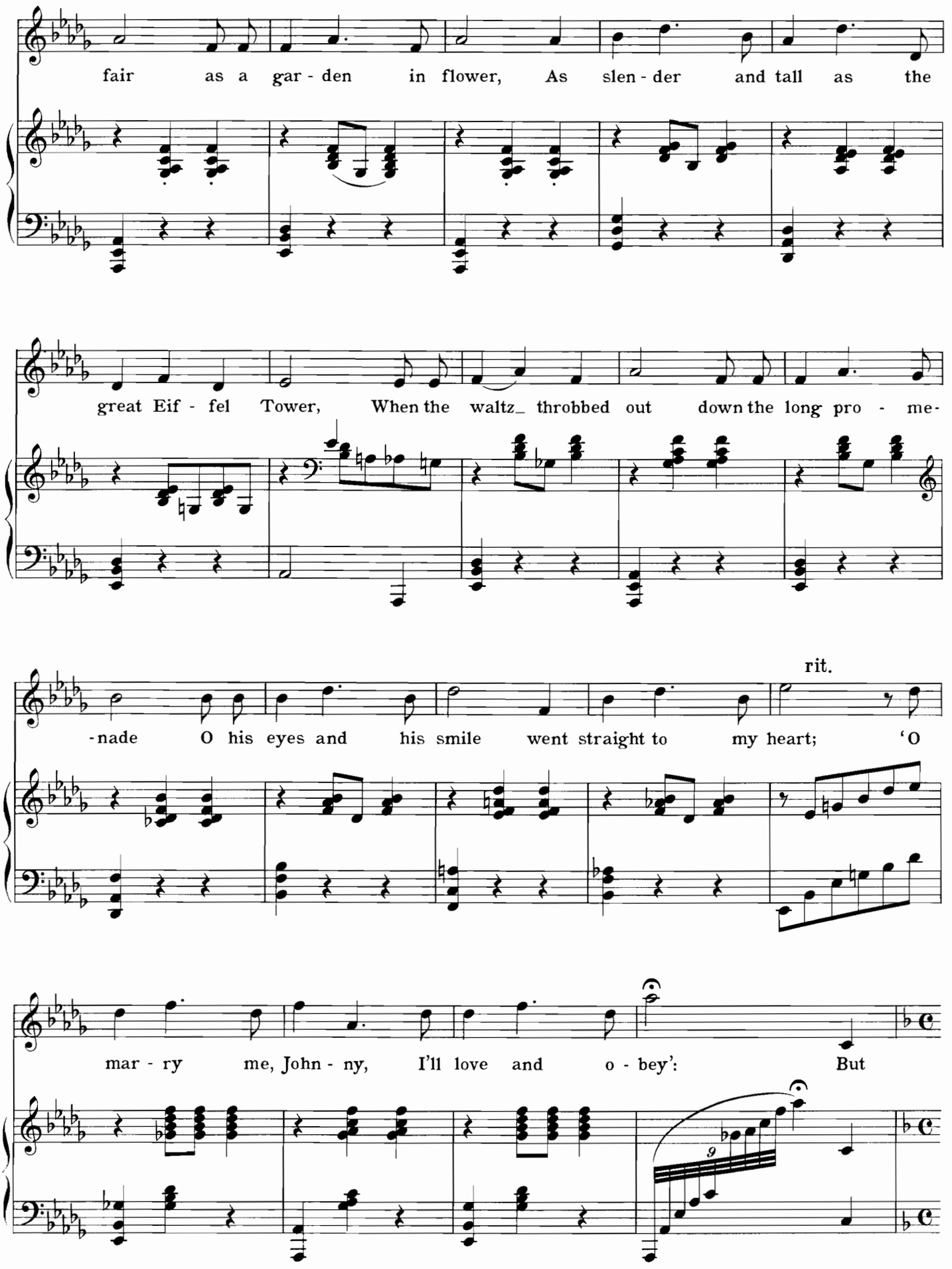

a tempo
p semplice
O the val - ley in the summer when
f
marc. portato
p
rit.
I and my John Be - side the deep ri - ver walk on and on While the
a tempo
grass at our feet and the birds up a - bove Whis - pered so soft in re-

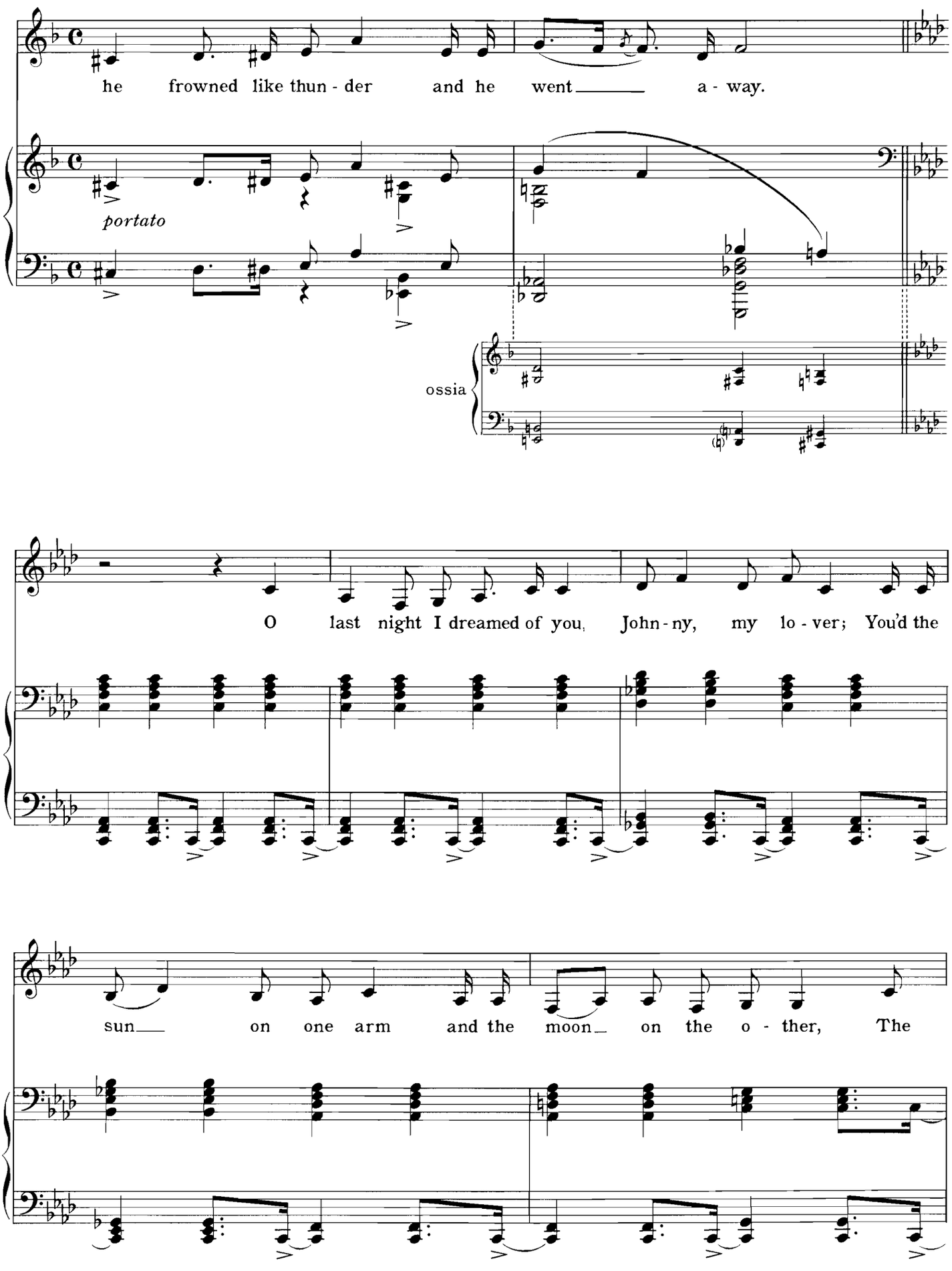

-ci - pro-cal love, And I leaned on his shoulder, 'O John-ny, let's play': But
he frowned like thun-der, and he went a-way.
portato
O the
eve-ning near Christ-mas as I well re-call When we
tr
f
mf
8

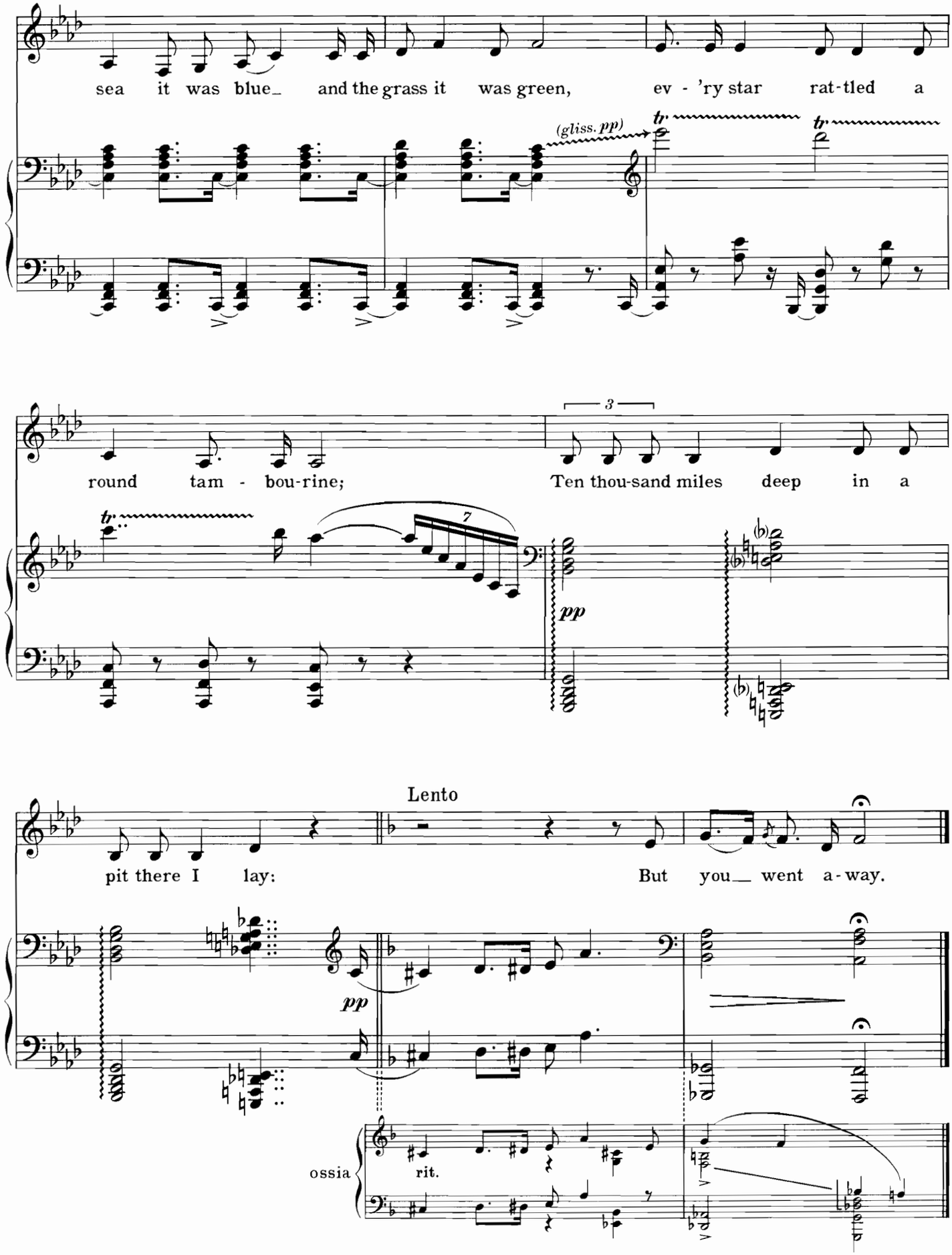

went to the Cha - ri - ty Ma - ti-nee Ball, The
sf
floor_ was so smooth and the band_ was so loud And
tr
p
ff
(suffocate)
mf
John - ny so hand - some I felt so proud; 'Squeeze me
rit.
p
tigh - ter, dear John - ny, let's dance_____ till day': But
p
p


he frowned like thun - der and went a - way.
portato
Lento: quasi recit.
Shall I ev - er for - get at the Grand Op - e - ra
When mu-sic poured out of each won-der-ful - star?
ff
accel.
Di - a-monds and pearls hung like

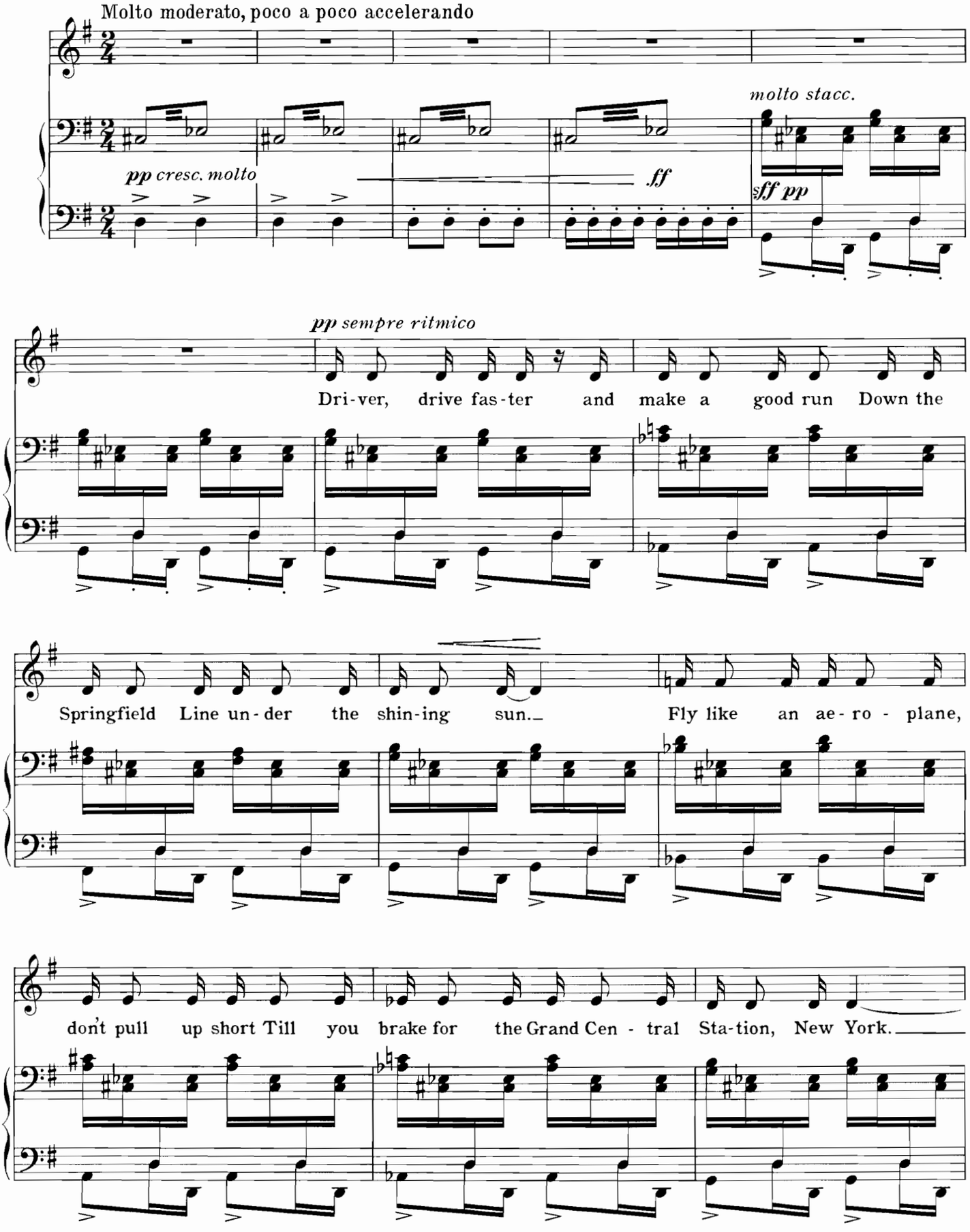

i - vy__ down
Ov - er each gold and sil - ver__ gown;
ff
'O John-ny I'm in hea-ven,' I whis-pered to say:
ff
ff
Tempo I
But he frowned like thunder and went__ a-way.
portato
Tempo di Valse
p
p
O,
O but he was as
con Ped.
etc.

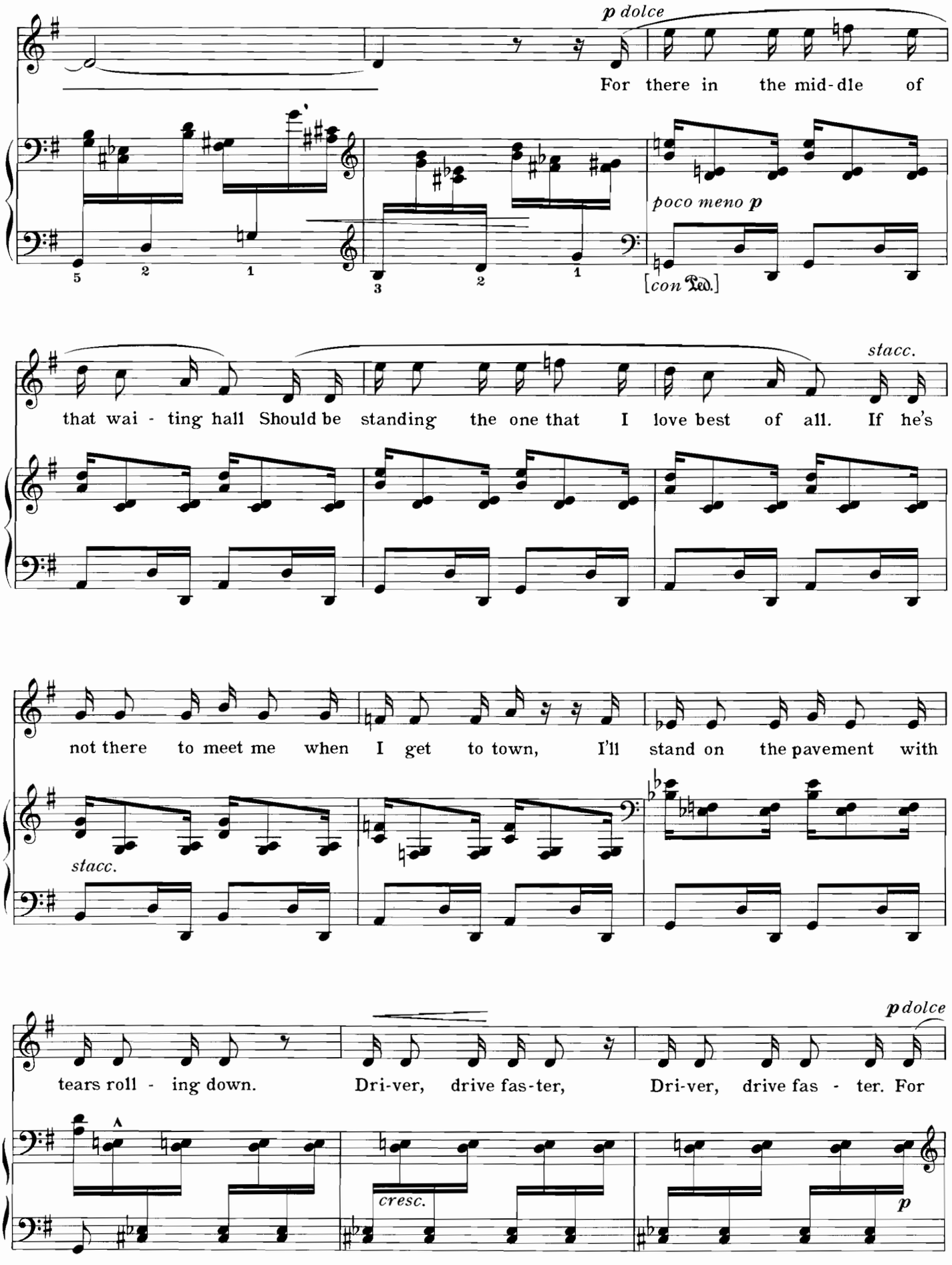

fair as a gar - den in flower, As slen - der and tall as the
great Eif - fel Tower, When the waltz_ throbbed out down the long pro - me-
-nade O his eyes and his smile went straight to my heart; 'O
rit.
mar - ry me, John - ny, I'll love and o - bey': But

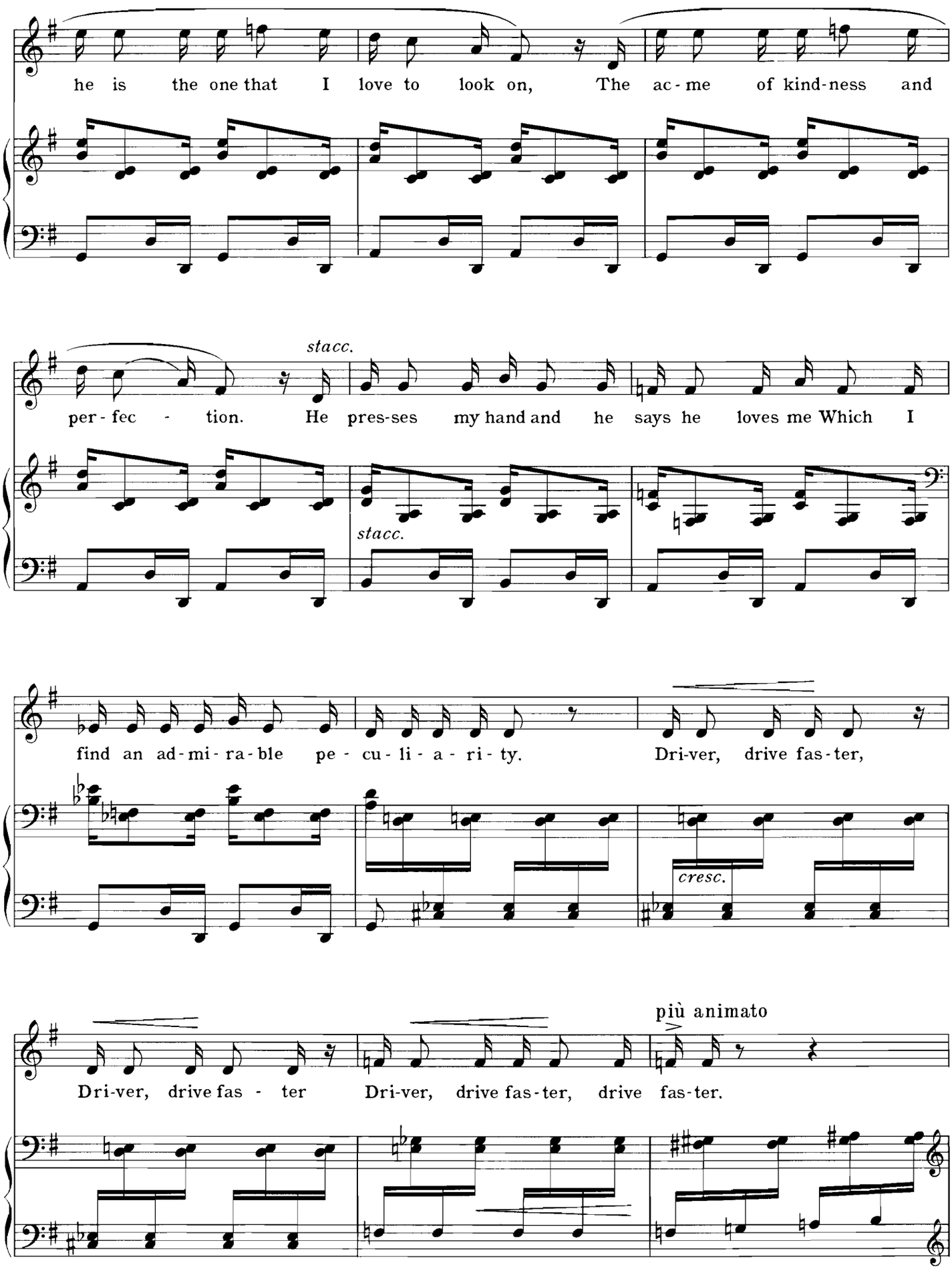

he frowned like thun - der and he went a - way.
portato
ossia
O last night I dreamed of you, John - ny, my lo - ver; You'd the
sun on one arm and the moon on the o - ther, The

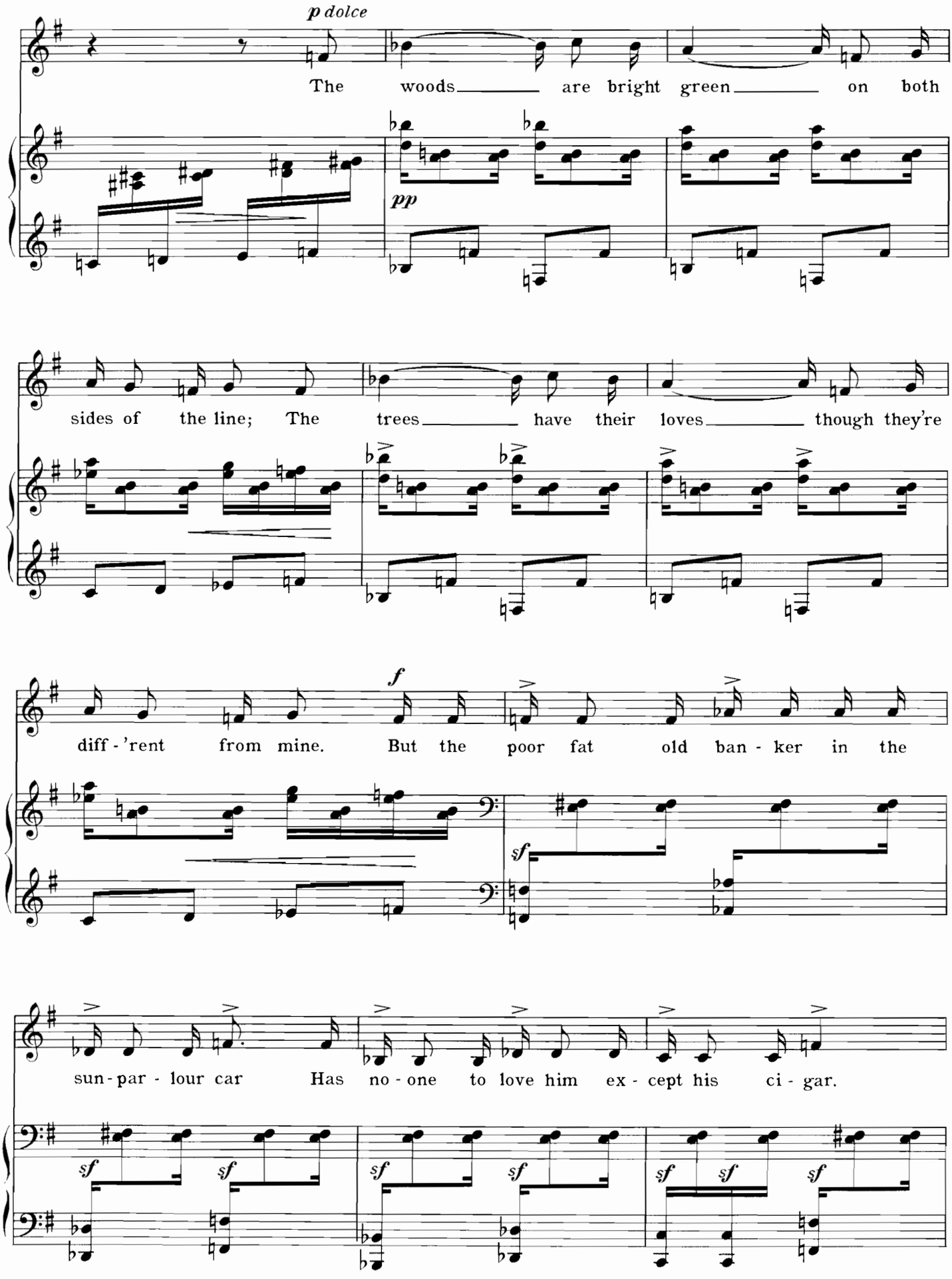

sea it was blue_ and the grass it was green, ev - 'ry star rat-tled a
(gliss. pp)
tr
tr
round tam - bou-rine; Ten thou-sand miles deep in a
3
7
pp
Lento
pit there I lay: But you__ went a-way.
pp
ossia
rit.

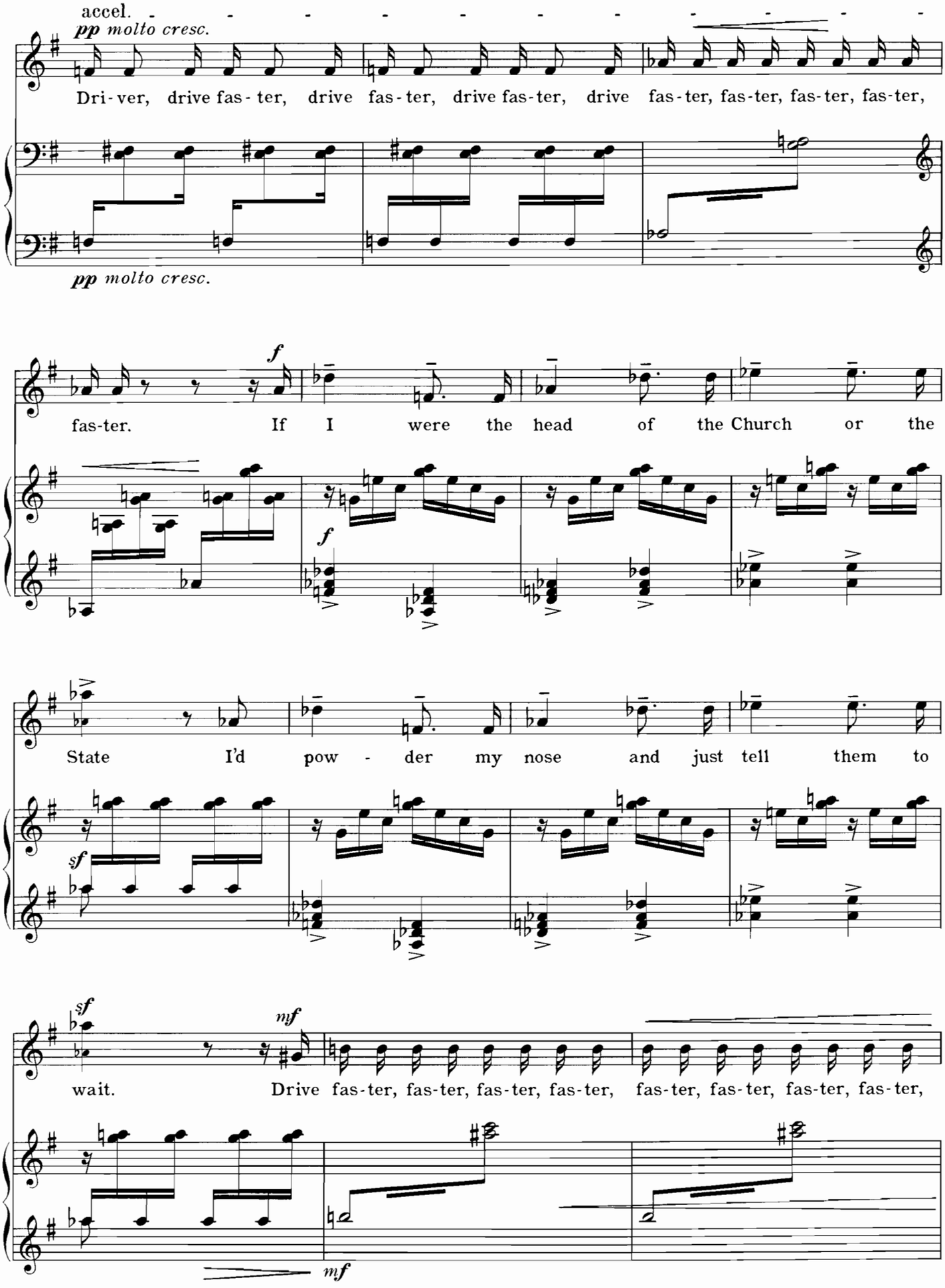
4. Calypso

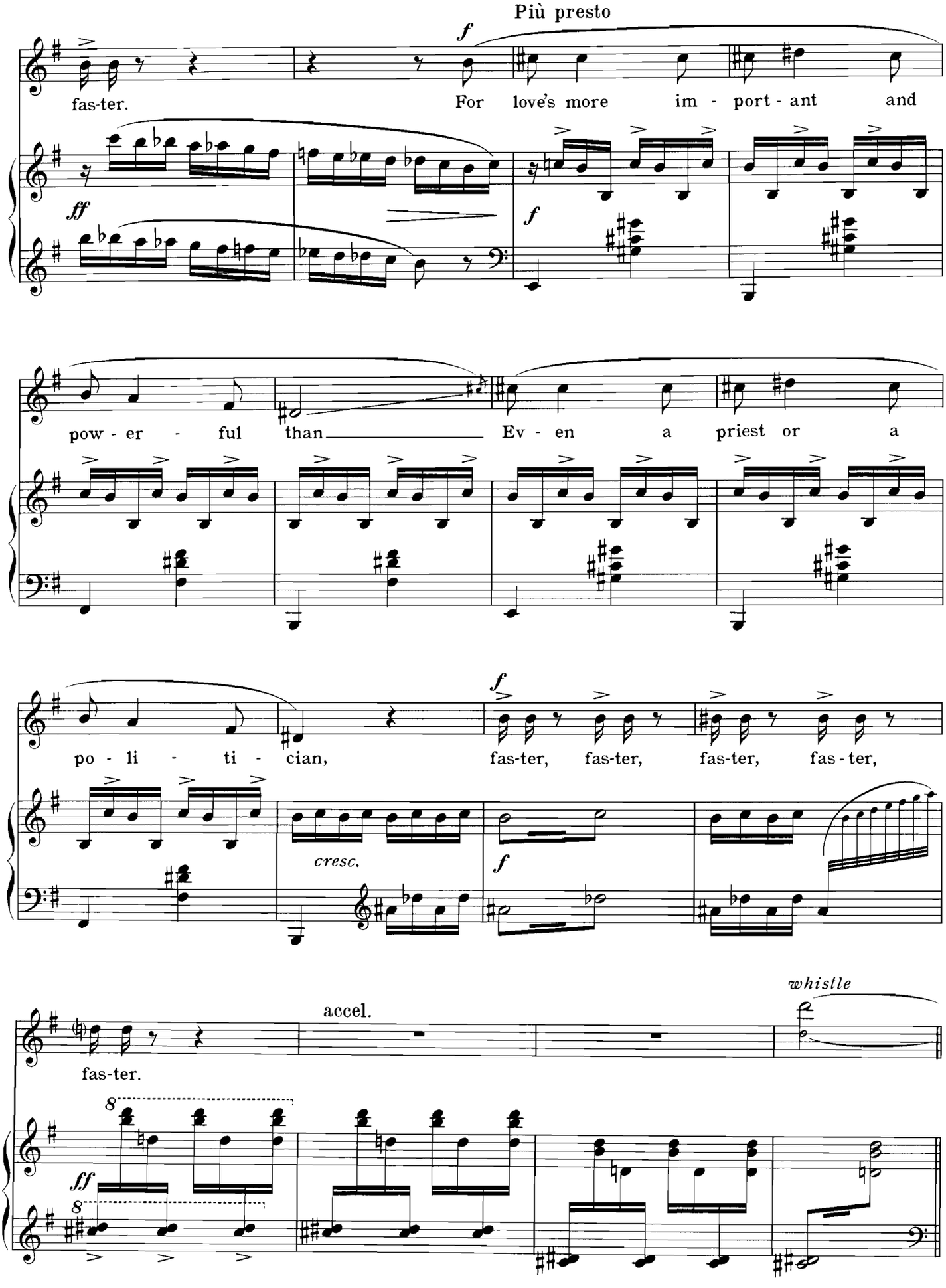

Molto moderato, poco a poco accelerando
pp cresc. molto
ff
molto stacc.
sff pp
pp sempre ritmico
Dri-ver, drive fas-ter and make a good run Down the
Springfield Line un-der the shin-ing sun. Fly like an ae-ro-plane,
don't pull up short Till you brake for the Grand Cen-tral Sta-tion, New York.

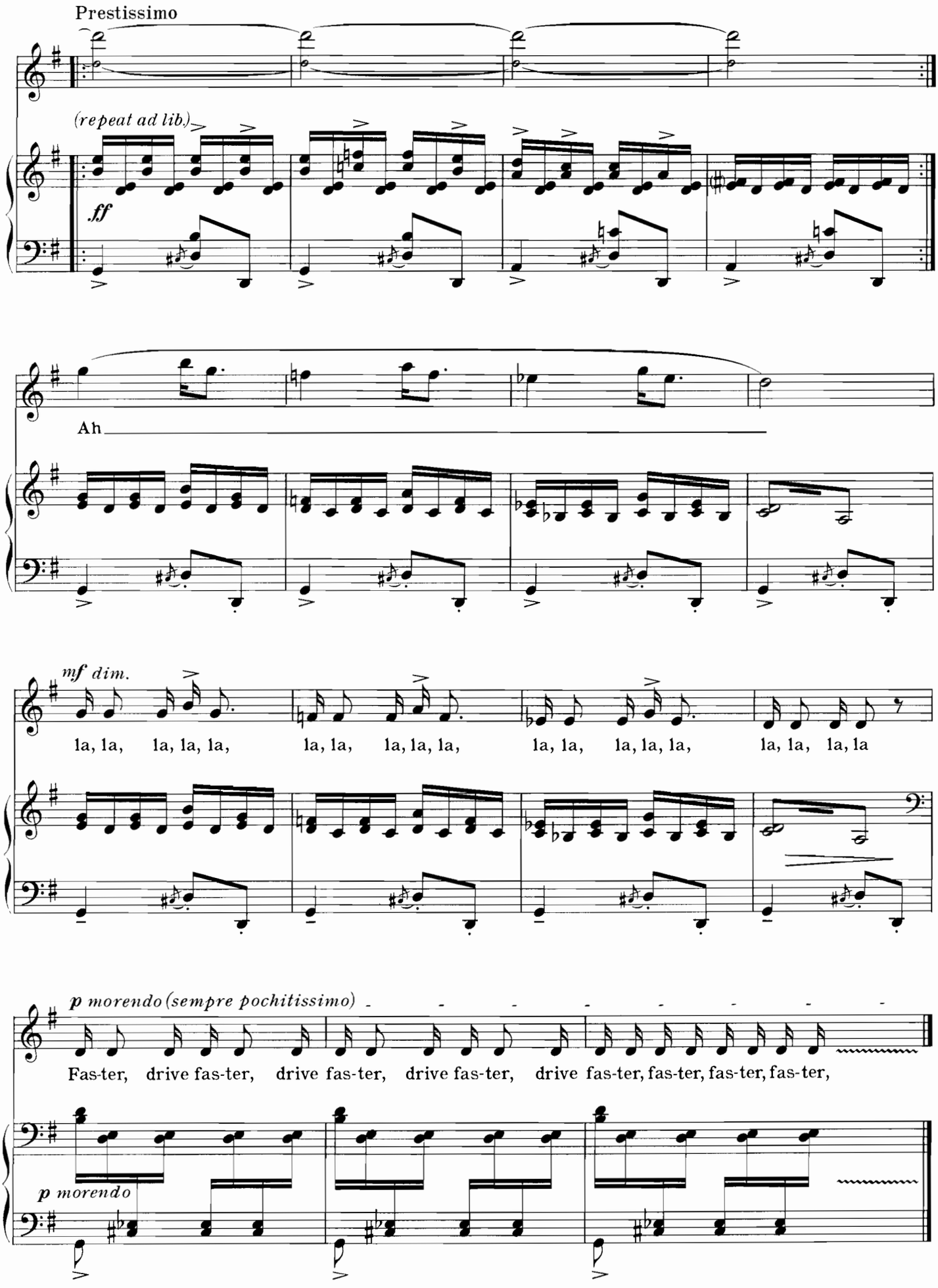

p dolce
For there in the mid-dle of
poco meno p
[con Ped.]
that wai - ting hall Should be standing the one that I love best of all. If he's
stacc.
not there to meet me when I get to town, I'll stand on the pavement with
stacc.
tears roll - ing down. Dri-ver, drive fas-ter, Dri-ver, drive fas - ter. For
p dolce
cresc.
p


he is the one that I love to look on, The ac - me of kind-ness and
stacc.
per - fec - tion. He pres-ses my hand and he says he loves me Which I
stacc.
find an ad - mi - ra - ble pe - cu - li - a - ri - ty. Dri-ver, drive fas-ter,
cresc.
più animato
Dri-ver, drive fas - ter Dri-ver, drive fas-ter, drive fas-ter.


p dolce
The woods are bright green on both
pp
sides of the line; The trees have their loves though they're
f
diff - 'rent from mine. But the poor fat old ban - ker in the
sf
sun - par - lour car Has no - one to love him ex - cept his ci - gar.
sf


accel.
pp molto cresc.
Dri-ver, drive fas-ter, drive fas-ter, drive fas-ter, drive fas-ter, fas-ter, fas-ter, fas-ter,
pp molto cresc.
f
fas-ter. If I were the head of the Church or the
f
State I'd pow-der my nose and just tell them to
sf
sf
mf
wait. Drive fas-ter, fas-ter, fas-ter, fas-ter, fas-ter, fas-ter, fas-ter, fas-ter,
mf


Più presto
fas-ter.
For love's more im - port - ant and
pow - er - ful than
Ev - en a priest or a
po - li - ti - cian,
fas-ter, fas-ter, fas-ter, fas - ter,
cresc.
accel.
whistle
fas-ter.


Prestissimo
(repeat ad lib.)
ff
Ah
mf dim.
la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la
p morendo (sempre pochitissimo)
Fas-ter, drive fas-ter, drive fas-ter, drive fas-ter, drive fas-ter, fas-ter, fas-ter, fas-ter,
p morendo