commissioned by Paul Schenly
in honour of Barbara Goldowsky

First there was light

for mezzosoprano and piano

poems by Barbara Goldowsky
music by Jeffrey Ryan

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First there was light

for mezzosoprano and piano

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Performance notes:

Total performance time: c. 13'
Total vocal range: G^3-A^{b5}
Pedal markings must be carefully observed.

Programme note:

When pianist Paul Schenly approached me to commission a song cycle in honour of his friend, Barbara Goldowsky, he gave me a book of her poetry from which to select texts. The choice was not easy! Barbara's style is exceedingly musical, and her poems are rich with powerful images and emotions. In the end, I selected six poems encompassing a general theme of love in many manifestations, with an initial burst of primal creation earth-energy unfolding through a continuous and evolving thread of images and relationships.

The poems are taken from *Ferry to Nirvana and New Poems* by Barbara Goldowsky.

First there was light was premiered in June 1996 by mezzosoprano Joanne Uniatowski and pianist Michael Borowitz at Gartner Auditorium, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio.

LOS ALAMOS
First there was light:
a mirror for the Powerful
showing his burnished image
to the god.
And Earth grew round
and fruitful with his light.
But in men's hearts, desire grew
to steal his awesome fire,
reveal the hidden face.
And with the man-created flash,
the searing mushroom cloud,
the quality of light was changed:
Now menace glows where mercy
used to reign

CHEMISTRY
Distill our love
in Erlenmeyer flasks
rarefy refine and purify
etherize all noble gases
leave but the hardened core
reagents cannot etch
combine and heat us
in the crucible
let us burn

MORNING PRAYER
We wake to a cool summer morning.
The tall acacia tree
makes the sound of a Chinese painting:
silky brushing
of leaves against sky.
I can't imagine
waking without you.
Sometimes I pray to
the greybeard squirrel
(pretending it's a true tree-spirit)
That I may never see a morning
which doesn't contain
some breath of you.

INVENTORY
My mother's things,
inventory of a simple life:
Big Ben alarm clock always set
ten minutes early, cheating morning
of an extra drop of sleep;
teacups that have lost their mates
so long ago (as she lost hers)
that memory has blurred the pattern.
Begonias overgrowing window sill
(she never pruned them, fearing hurt)
Photos trellised in the corridor
babies growing teenaged as you step
with them along the hall;
refrigerator packed with eyedrops
vitamins heart medication
and good German wine;
her horoscope next to a book
by Swedenborg, assuring us
that this is not our only turn on earth…
O Mother! If you'd just come back
a minute, wind the clock
or water those begonias,
I could believe not only Swedenborg
but worship any mystery
or find the truth in stars.

LOVE LETTER
I send you my love—
A flock of geese to arrow through the clouds
And graze in peaceful numbers
Your springtime fields
I send you my love—
A merlin hawk dividing sky
To mark for you the royal prey
In its unerring grasp.
I think of you while far away
And send you all my love and my desire—
Lancelot's hundred captives thrown
On the mercy of his Queen.

WATERMILL
I would not be the millstone
but the wind to fill your sails
Or I could be the flowing brook
that turns the wheel.
Or better yet
I'll be the cloud that scatters rain
on the harvest for your mill.

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Poems from *Ferry to Nirvana and New Poems*, published by Amereon, Limited (Mattituck, New York), and © 1991 by Barbara Goldowsky. Reprinted with permission of the poet.

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First there was light
Los Alamos

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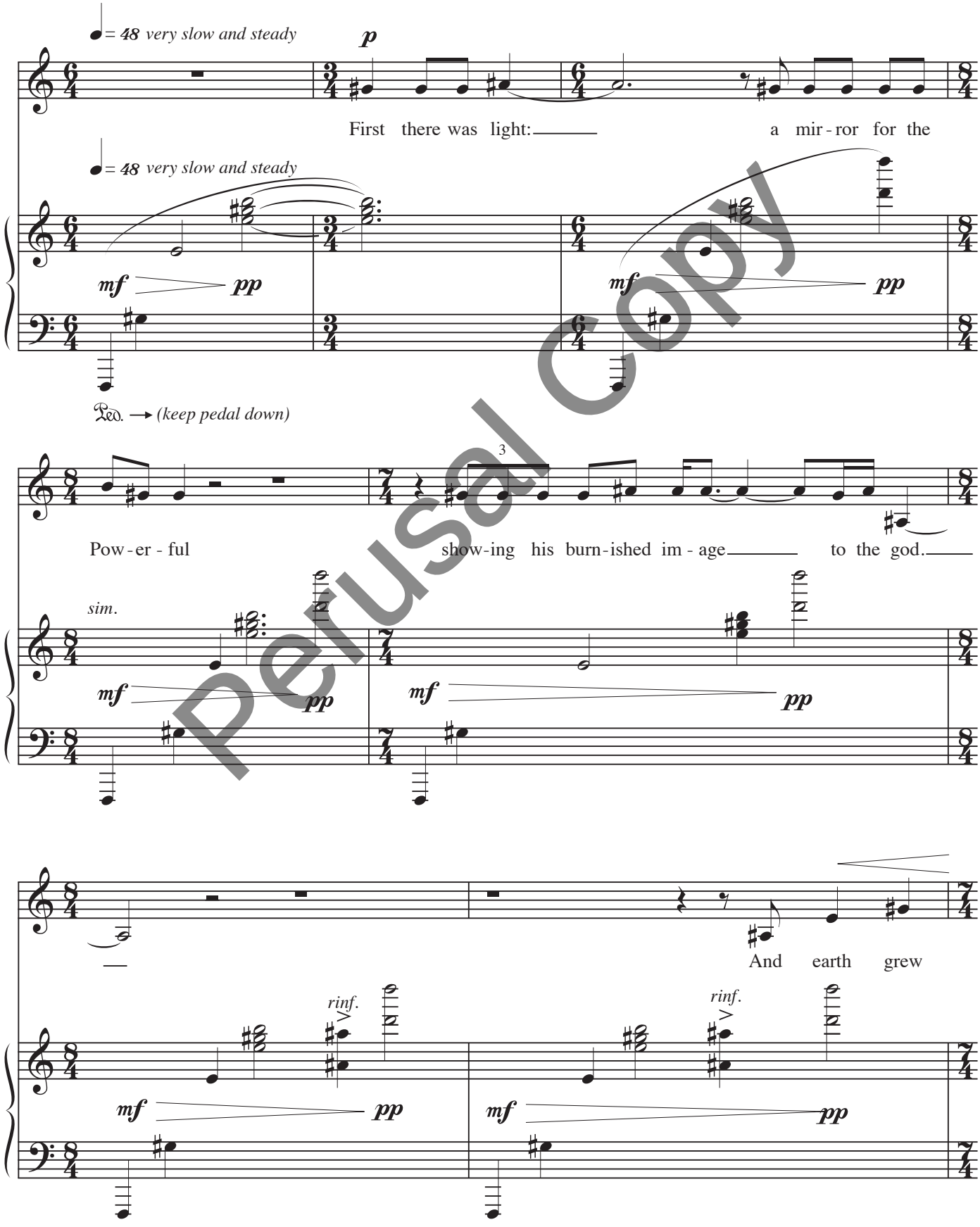

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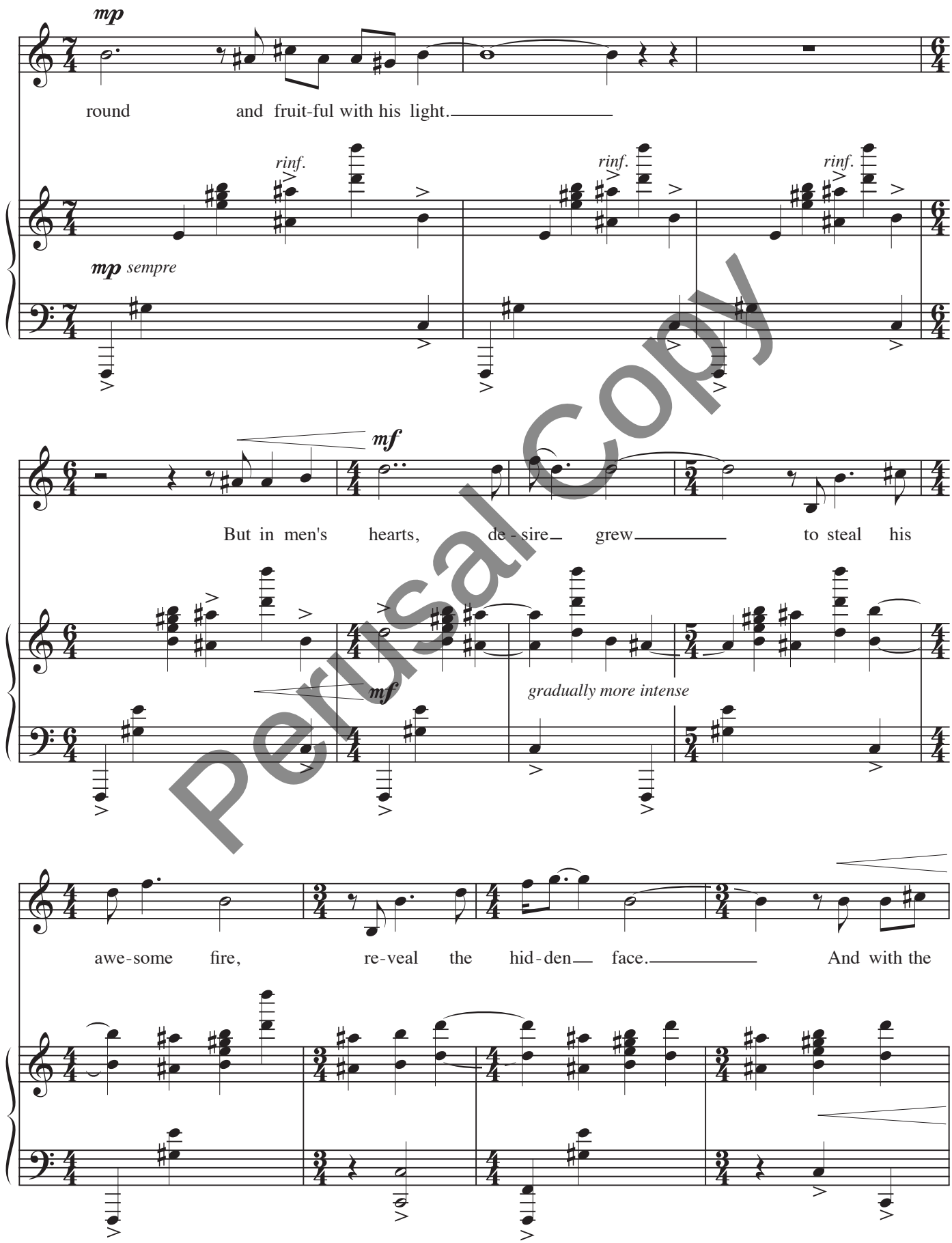

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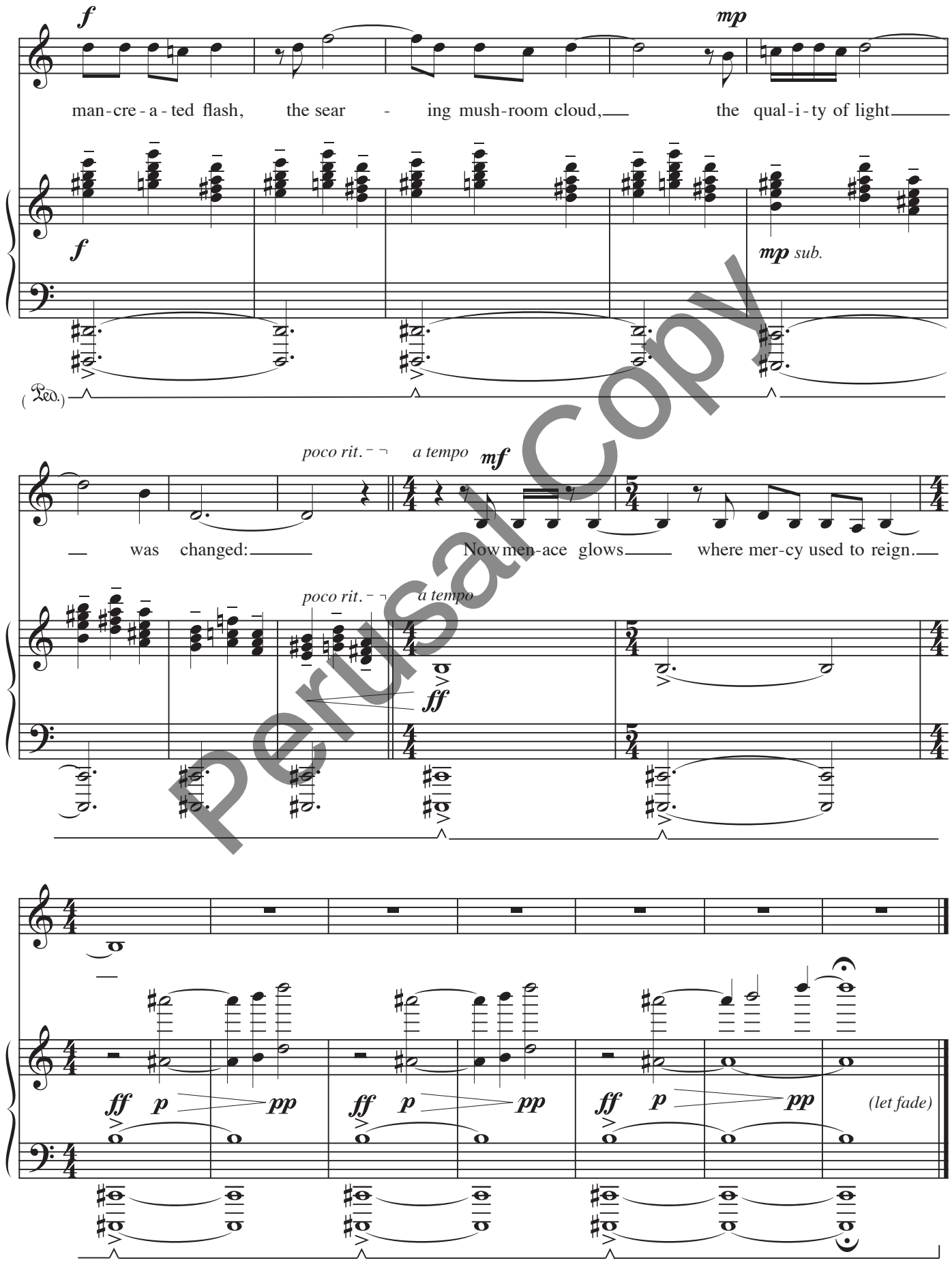

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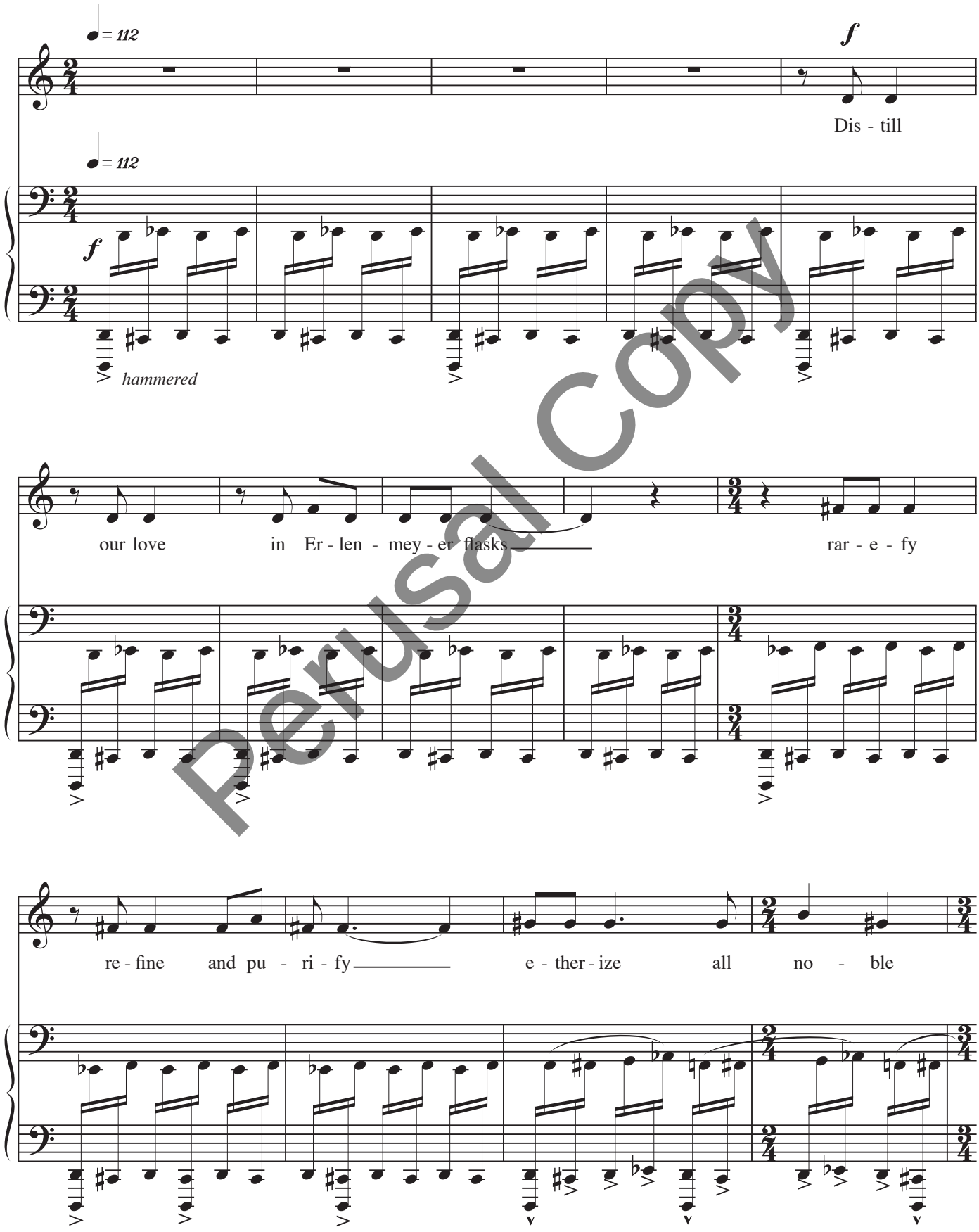
Chemistry



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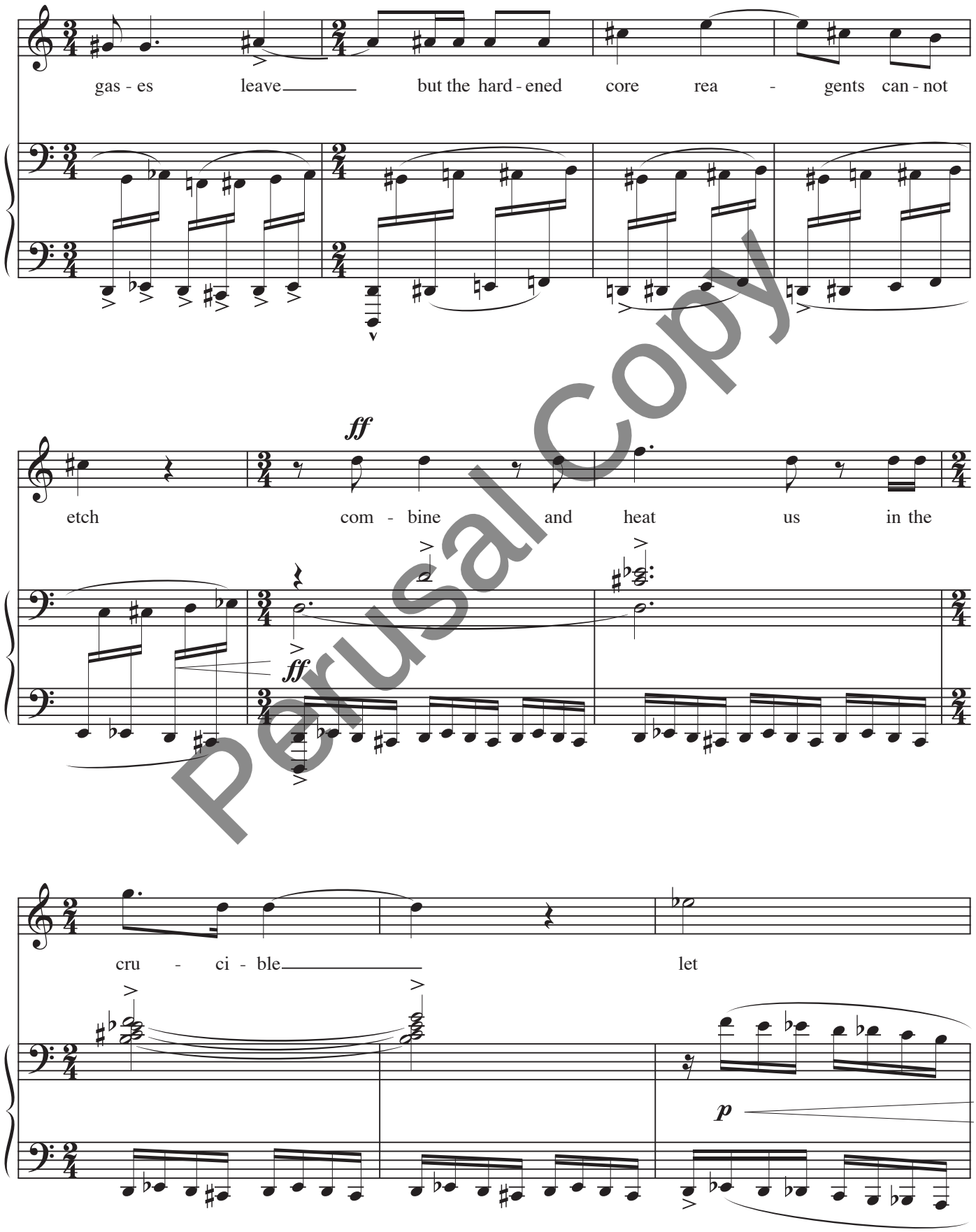

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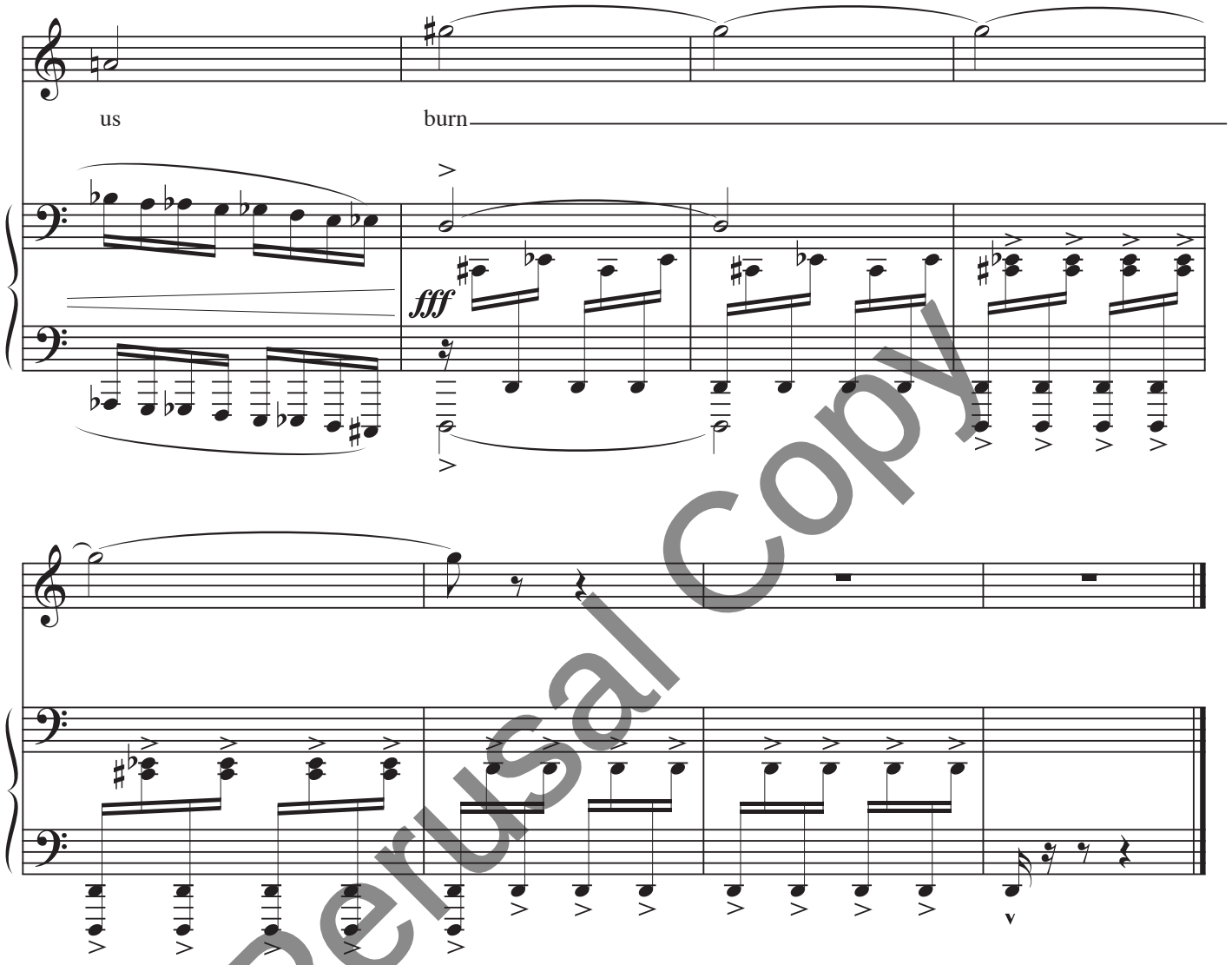

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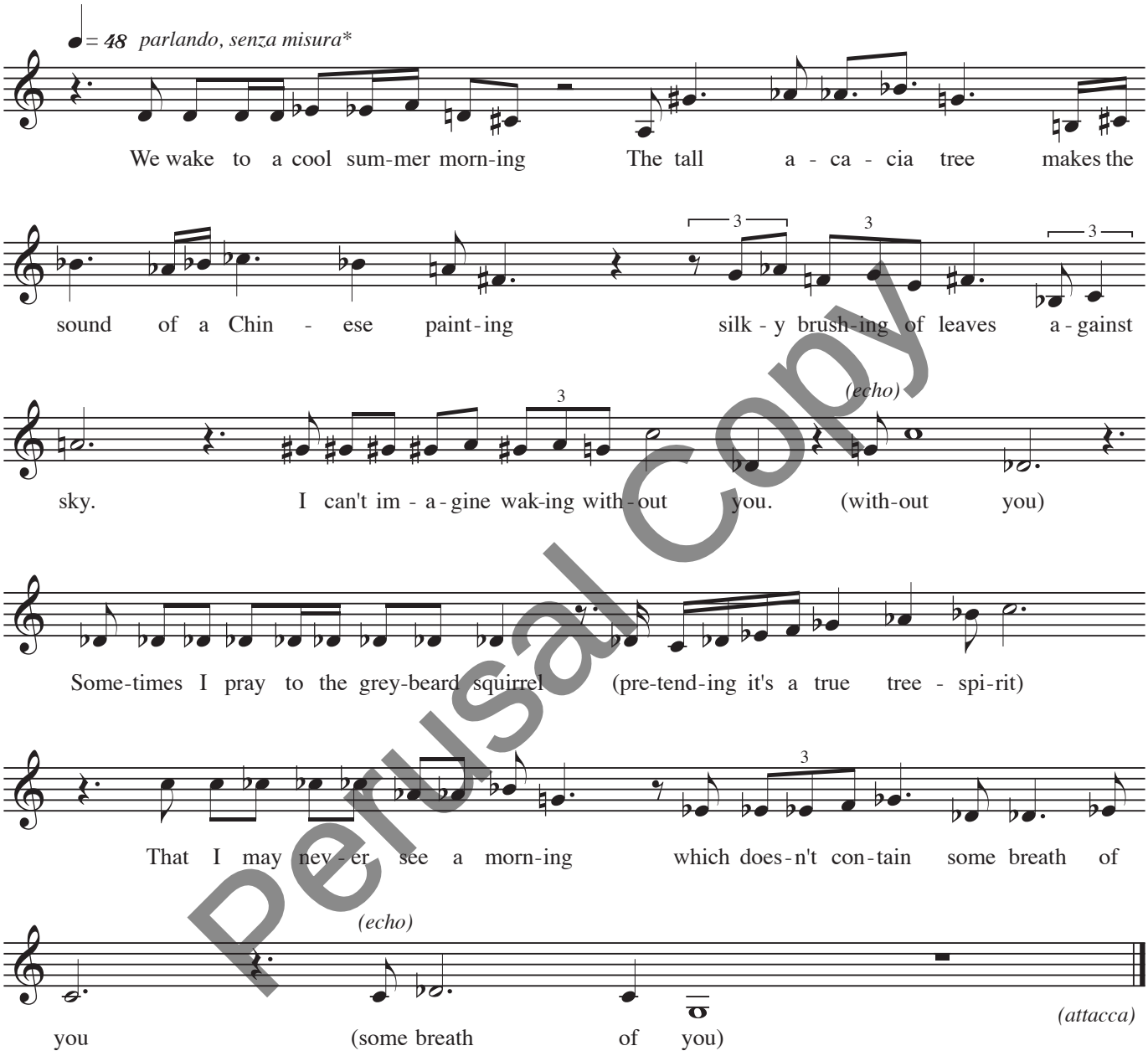
Morning Prayer



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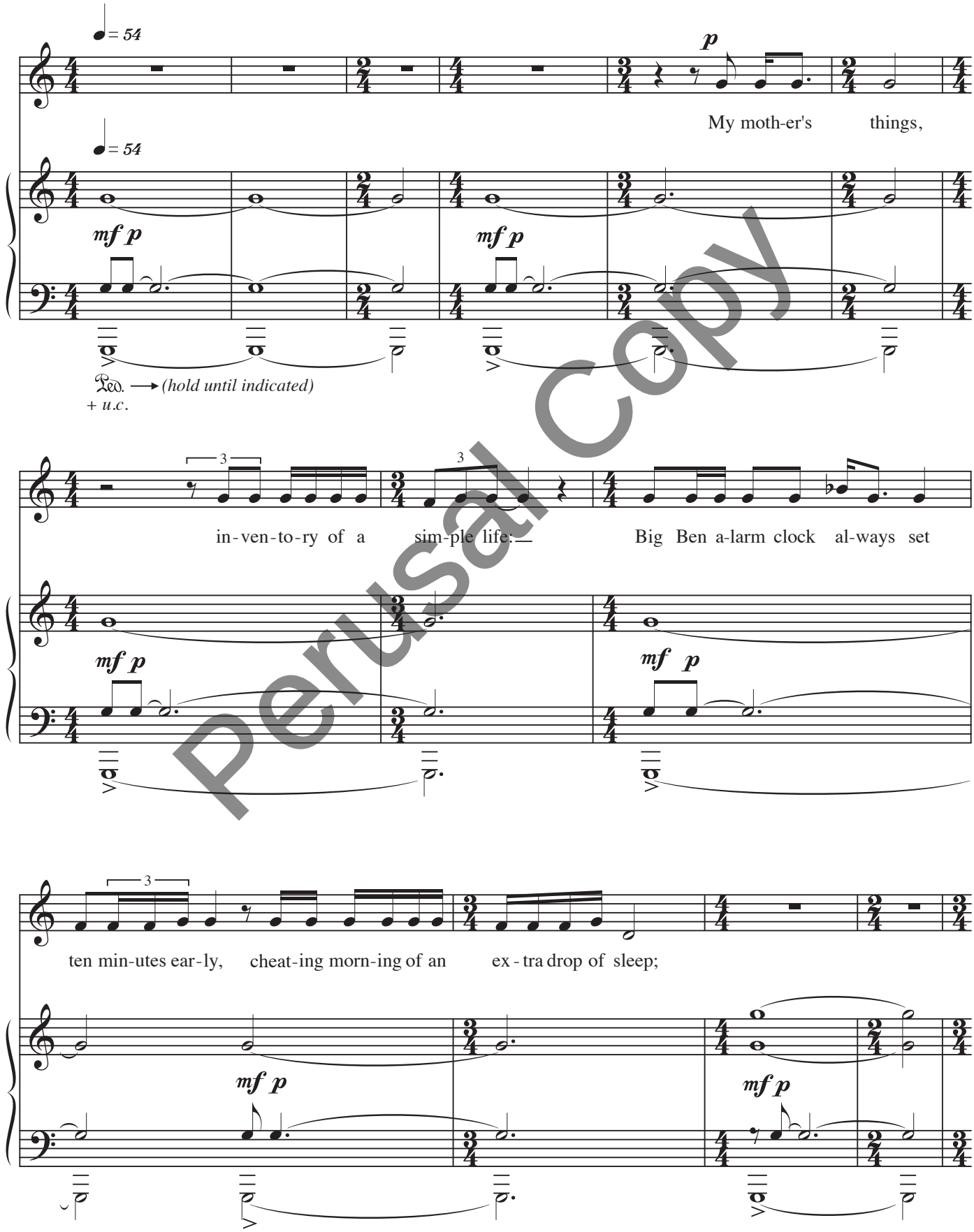
** **Notes to performers:** Rhythm and tempo should be considered as guidelines only. Dynamics and other performance considerations (except for the requested echo effects) are left to the interpretation of the singer. The piano is tacet for this movement, but the pianist should be prepared to begin the next song immediately so as not to lose the dramatic flow.*

Inventory



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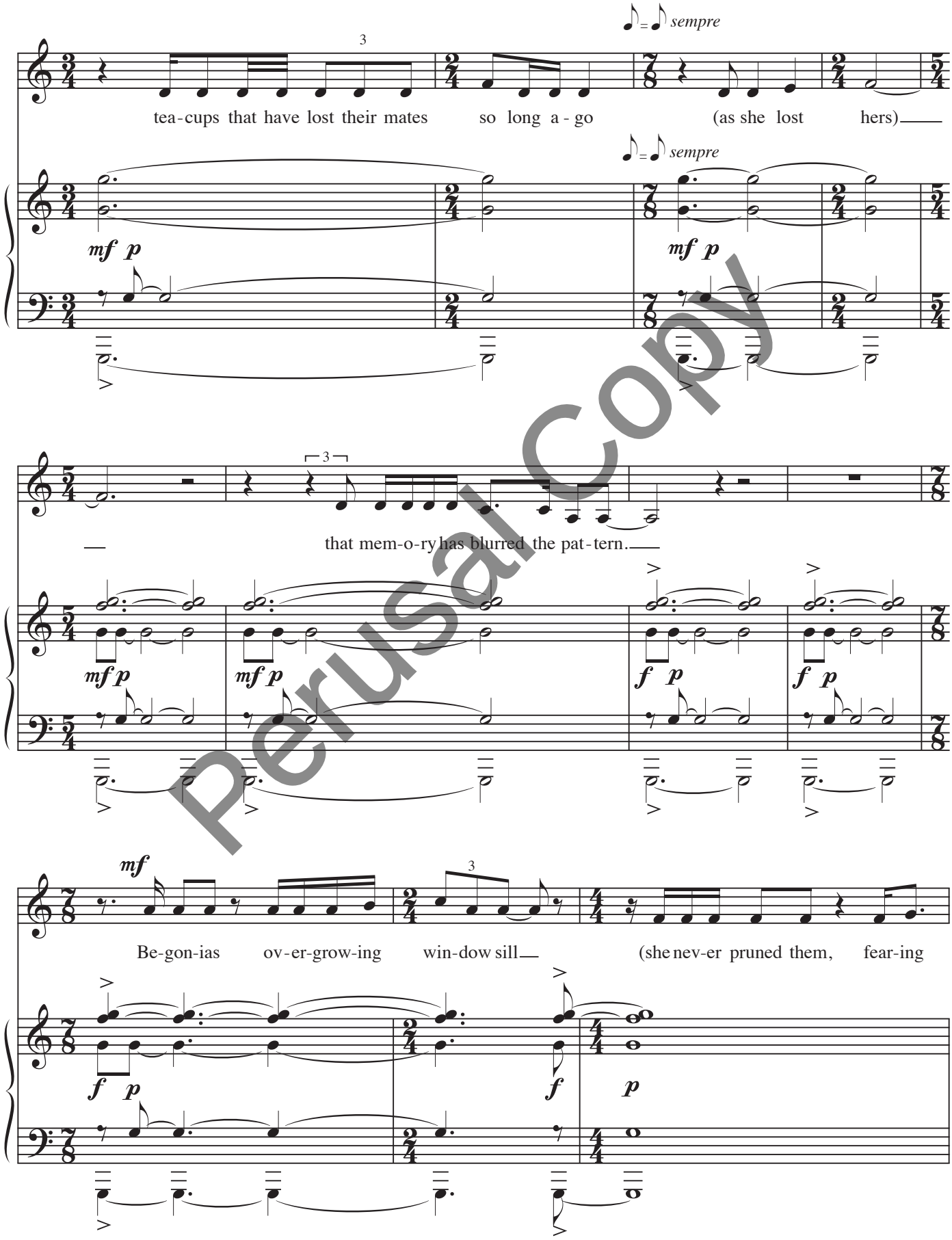

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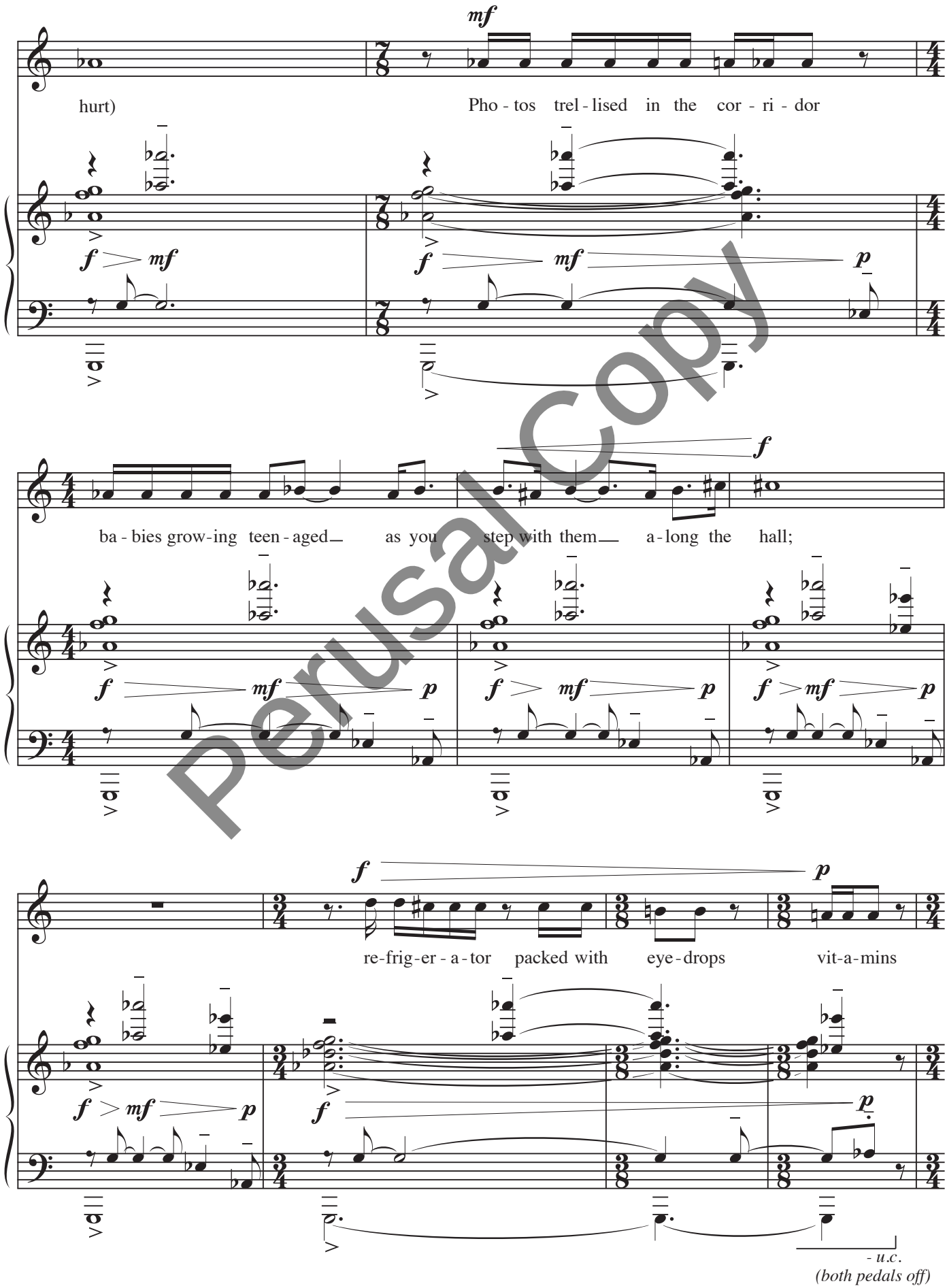

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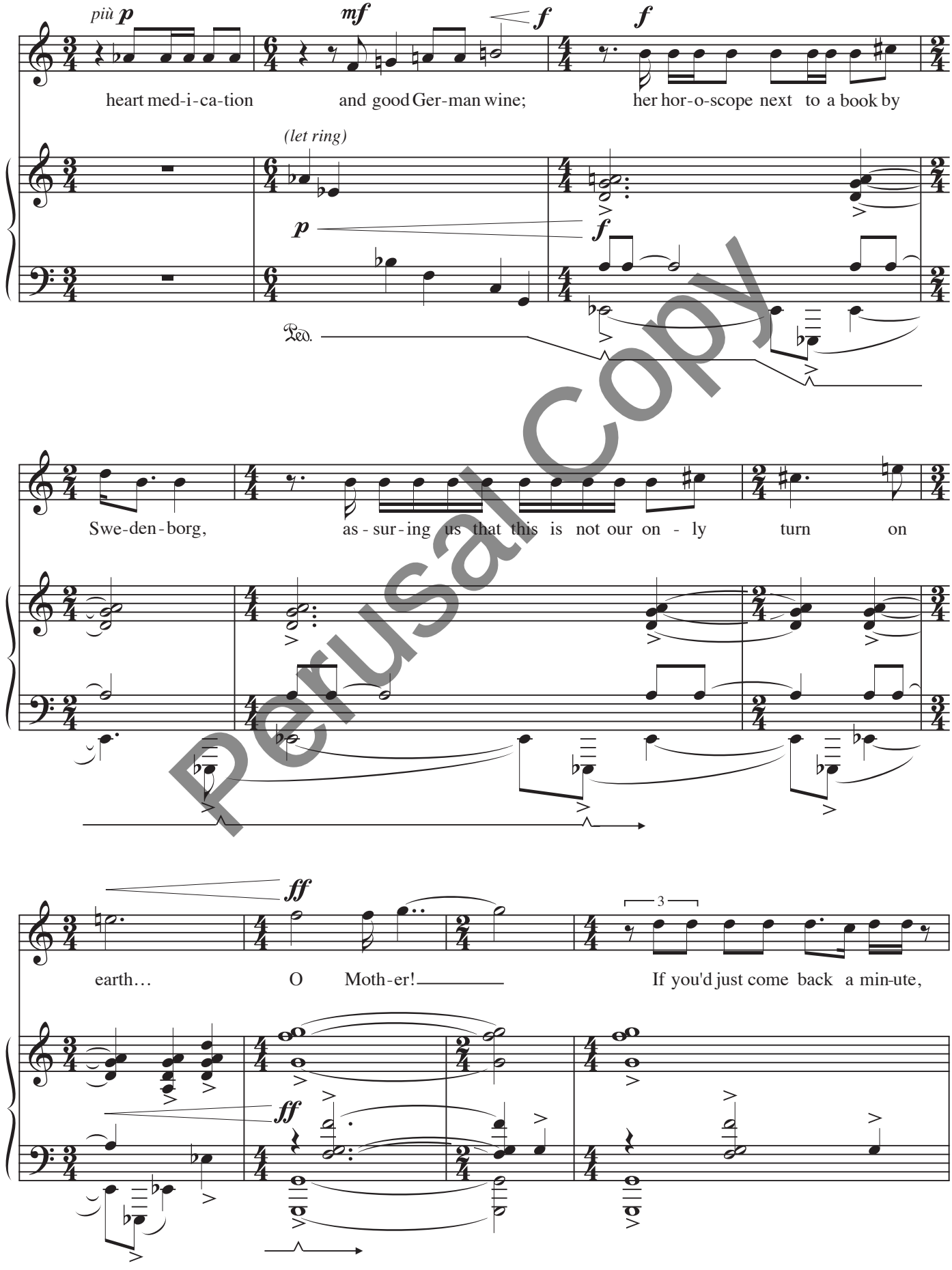

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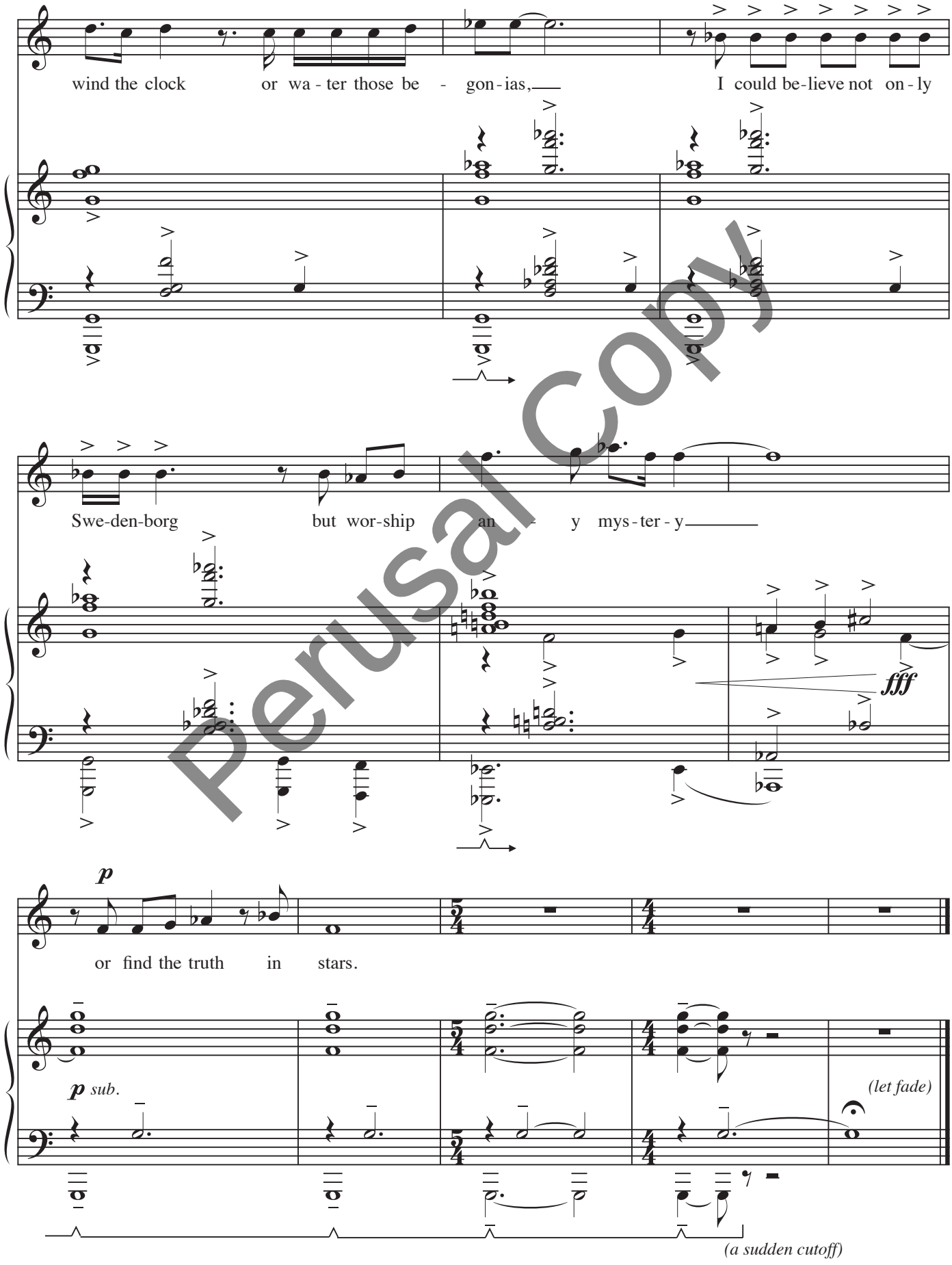

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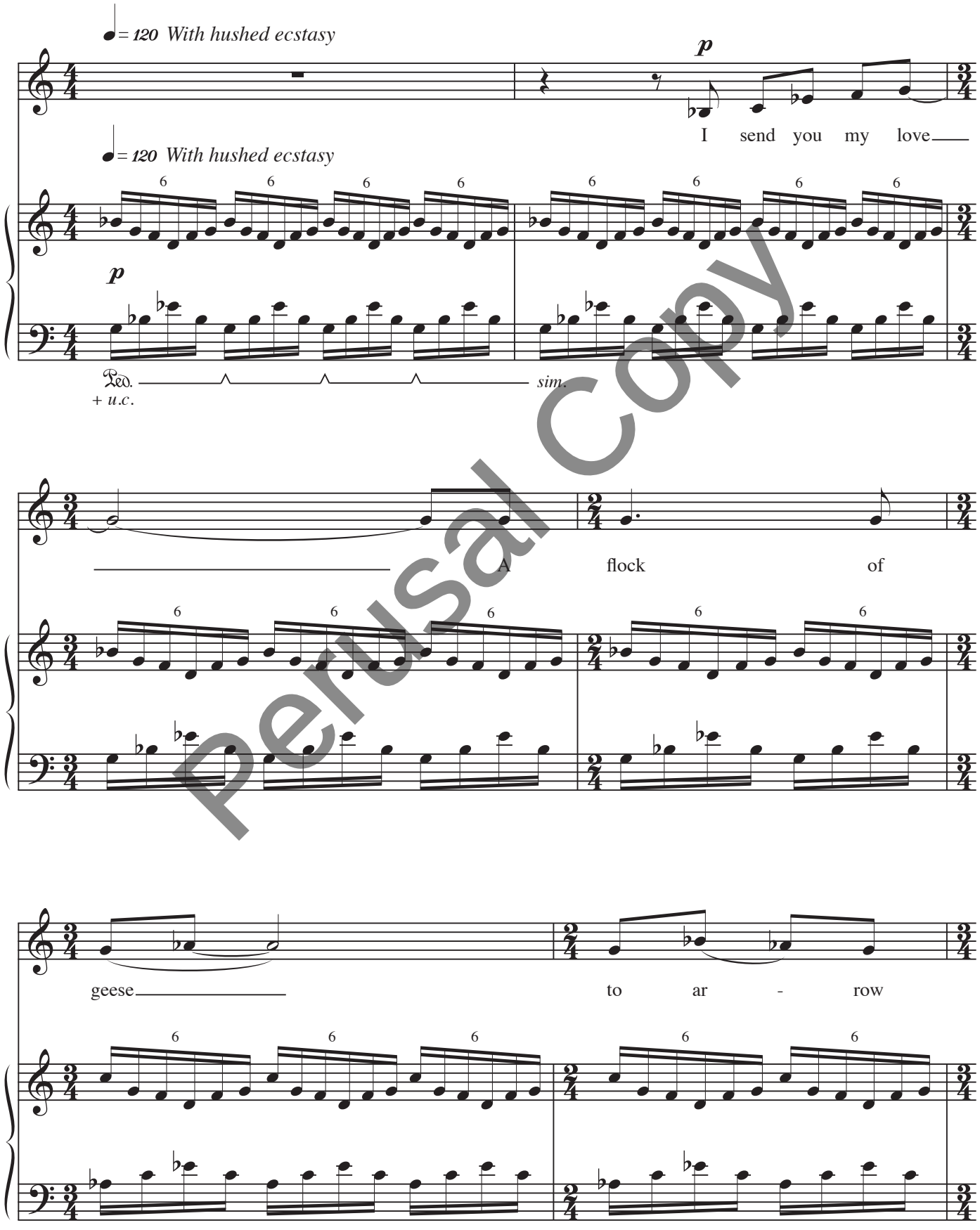
Love Letter



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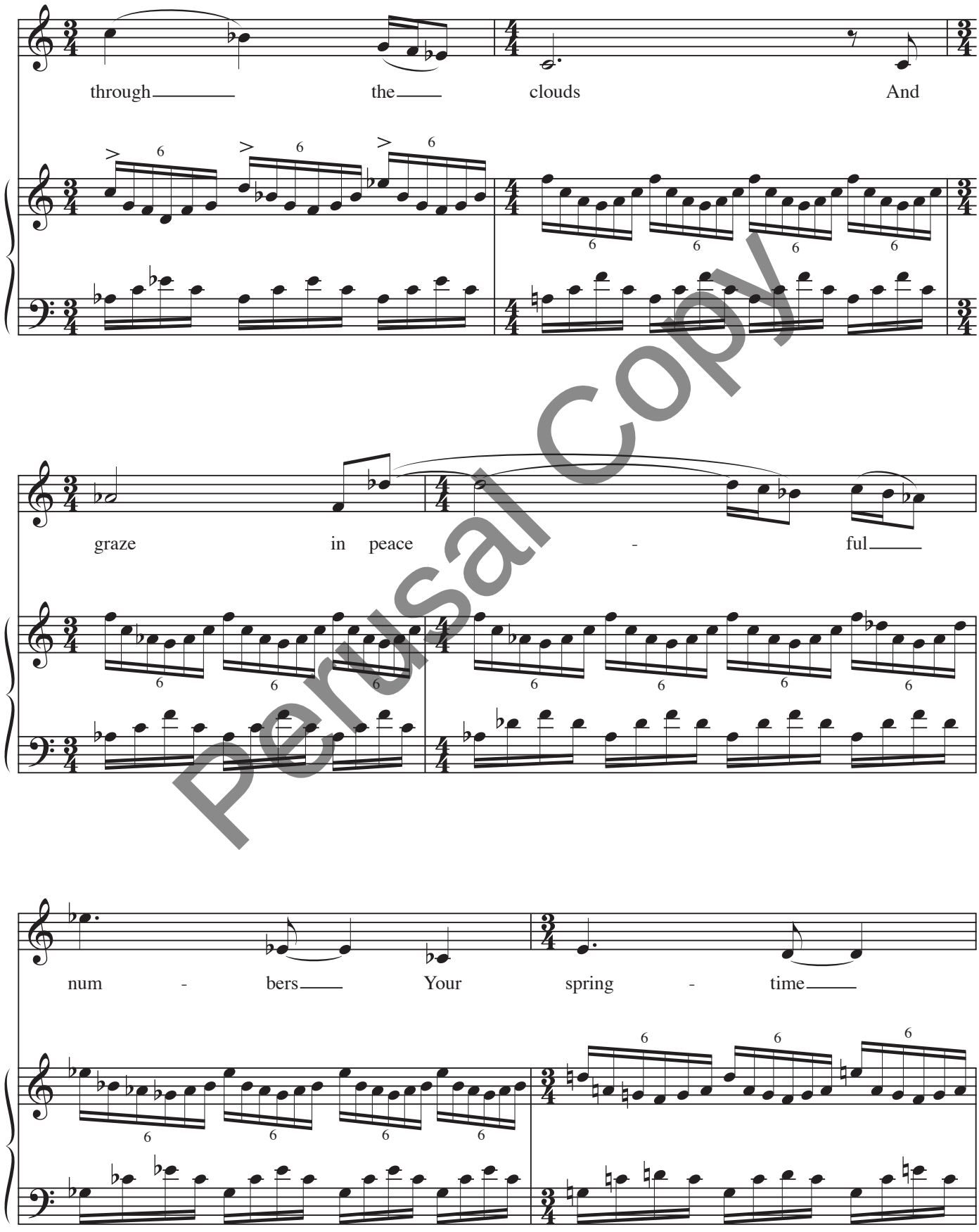

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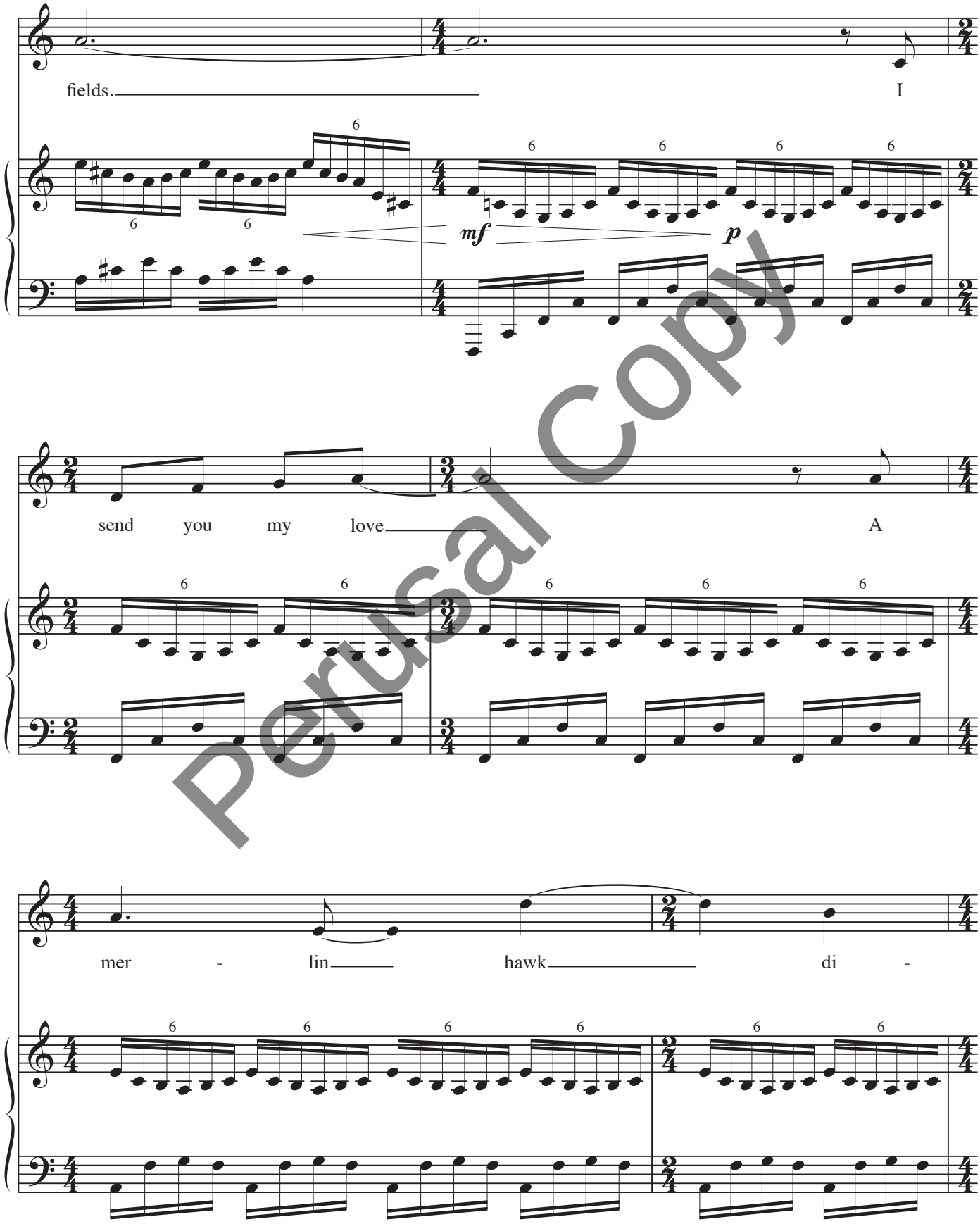

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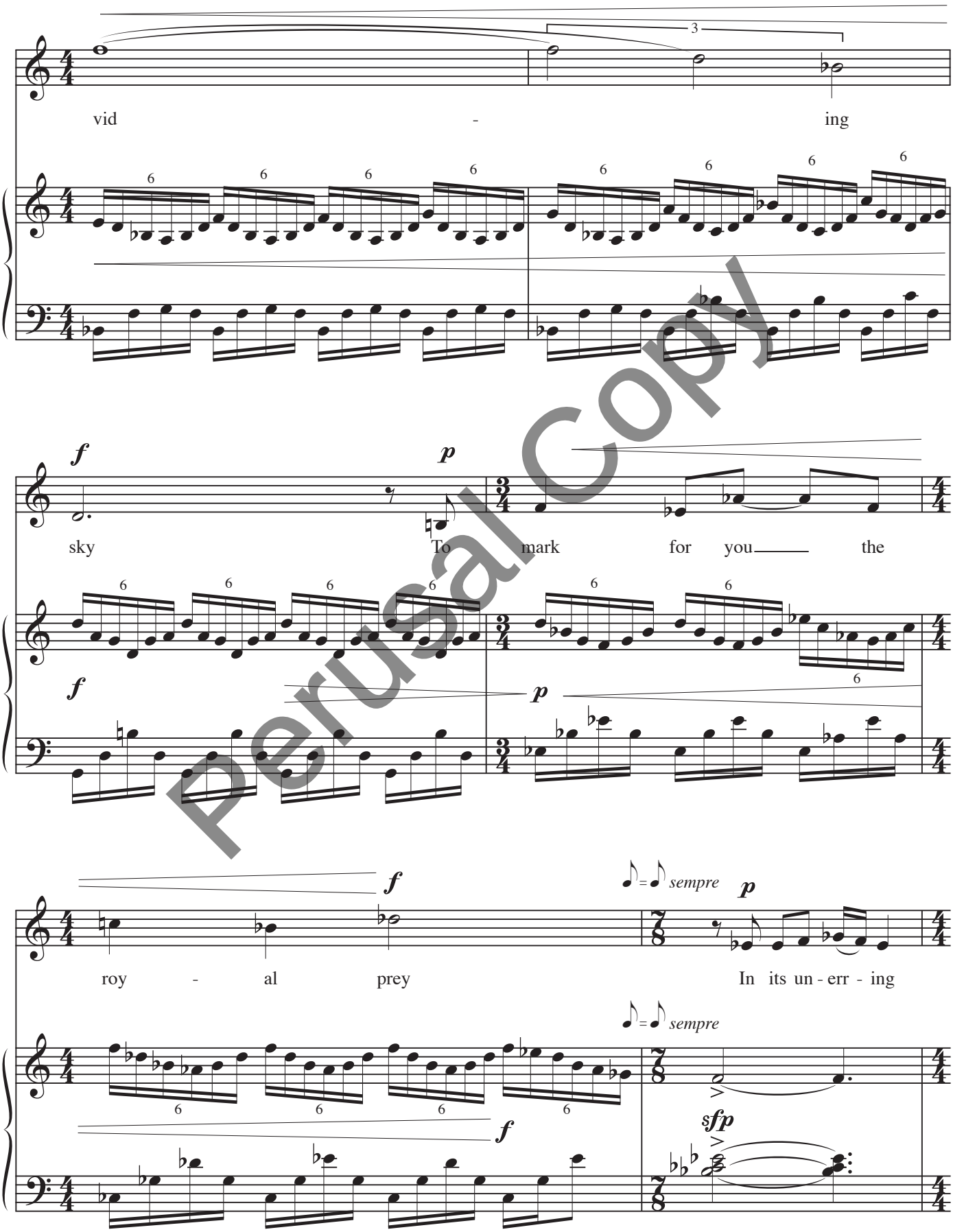
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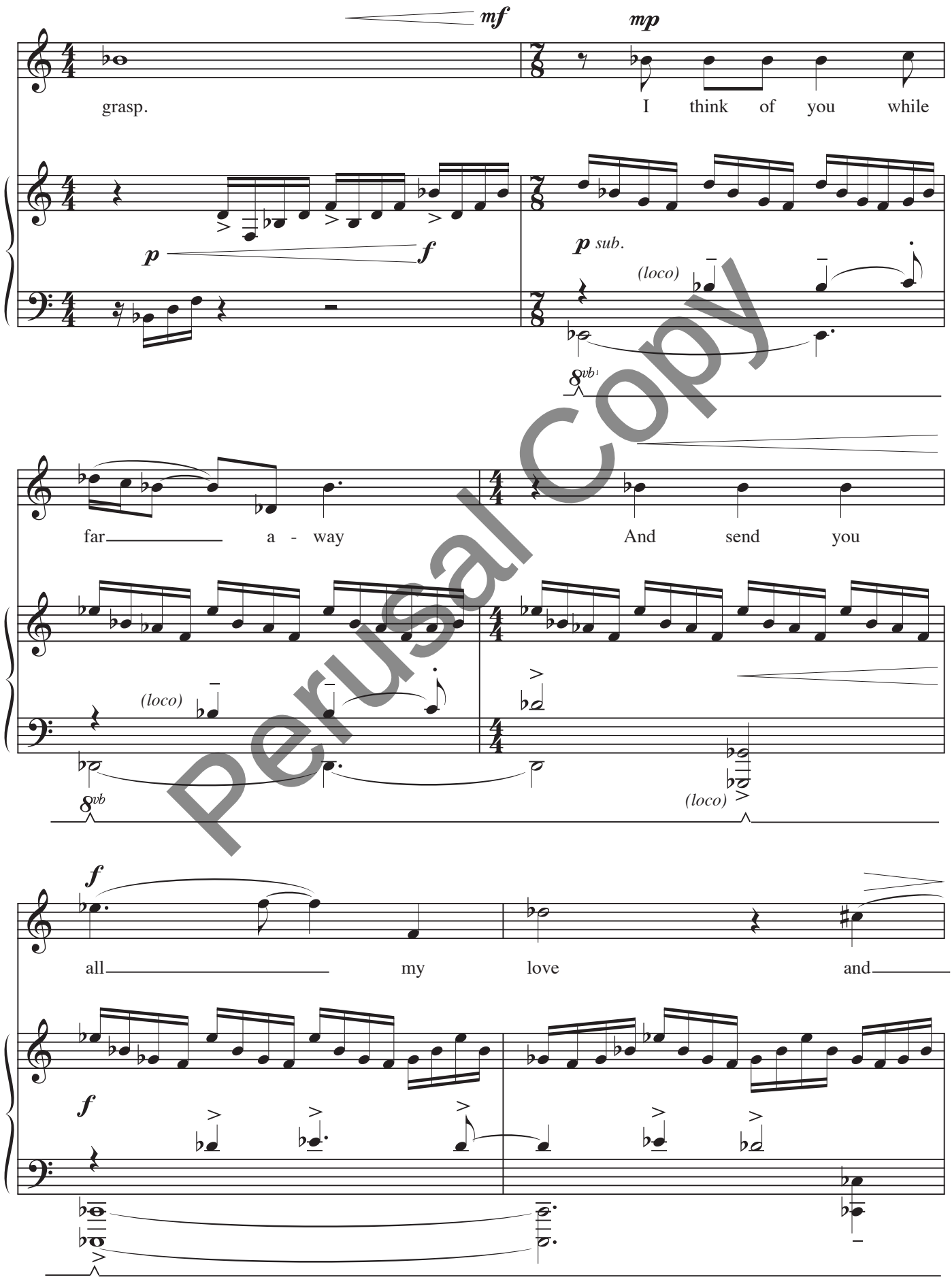

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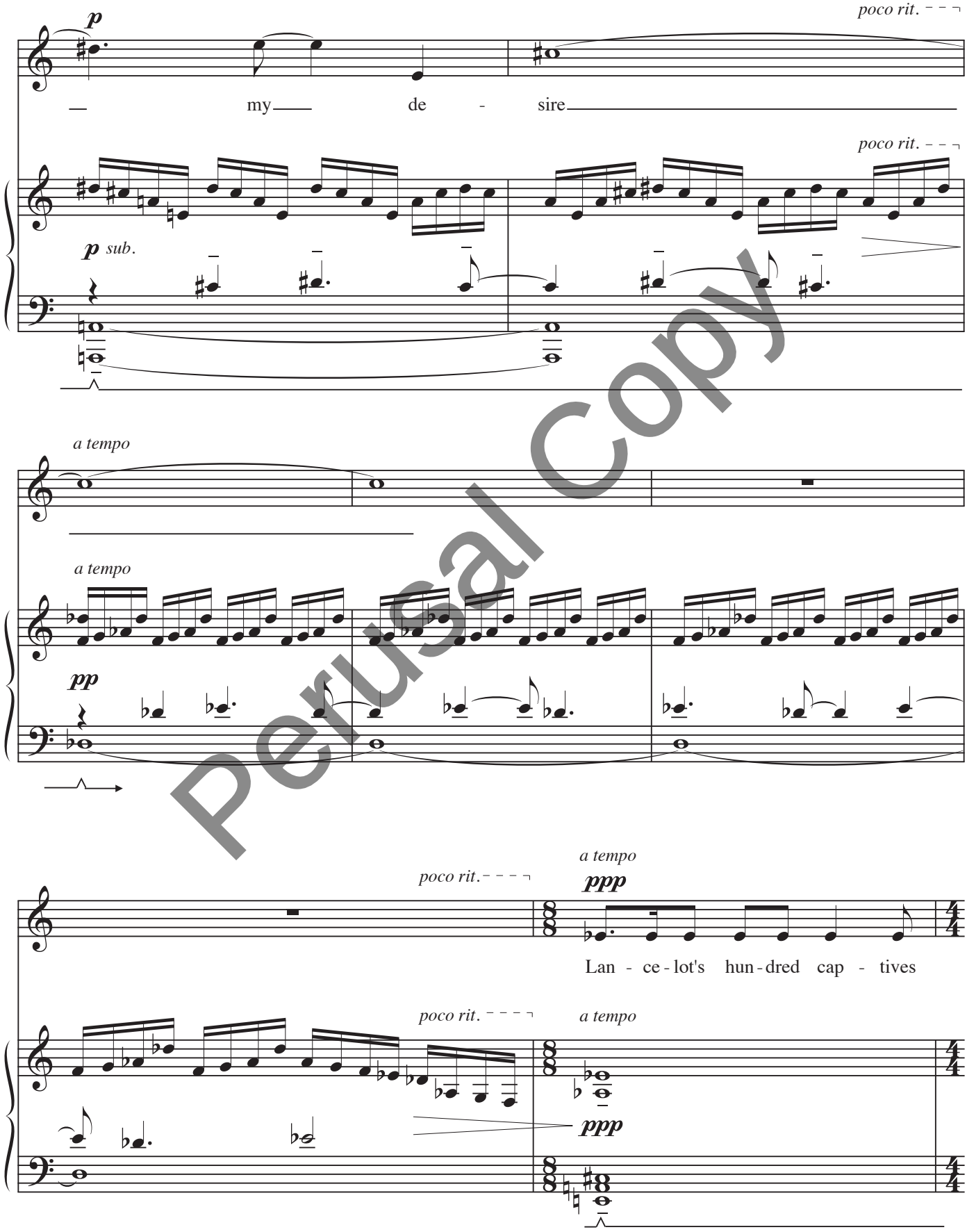

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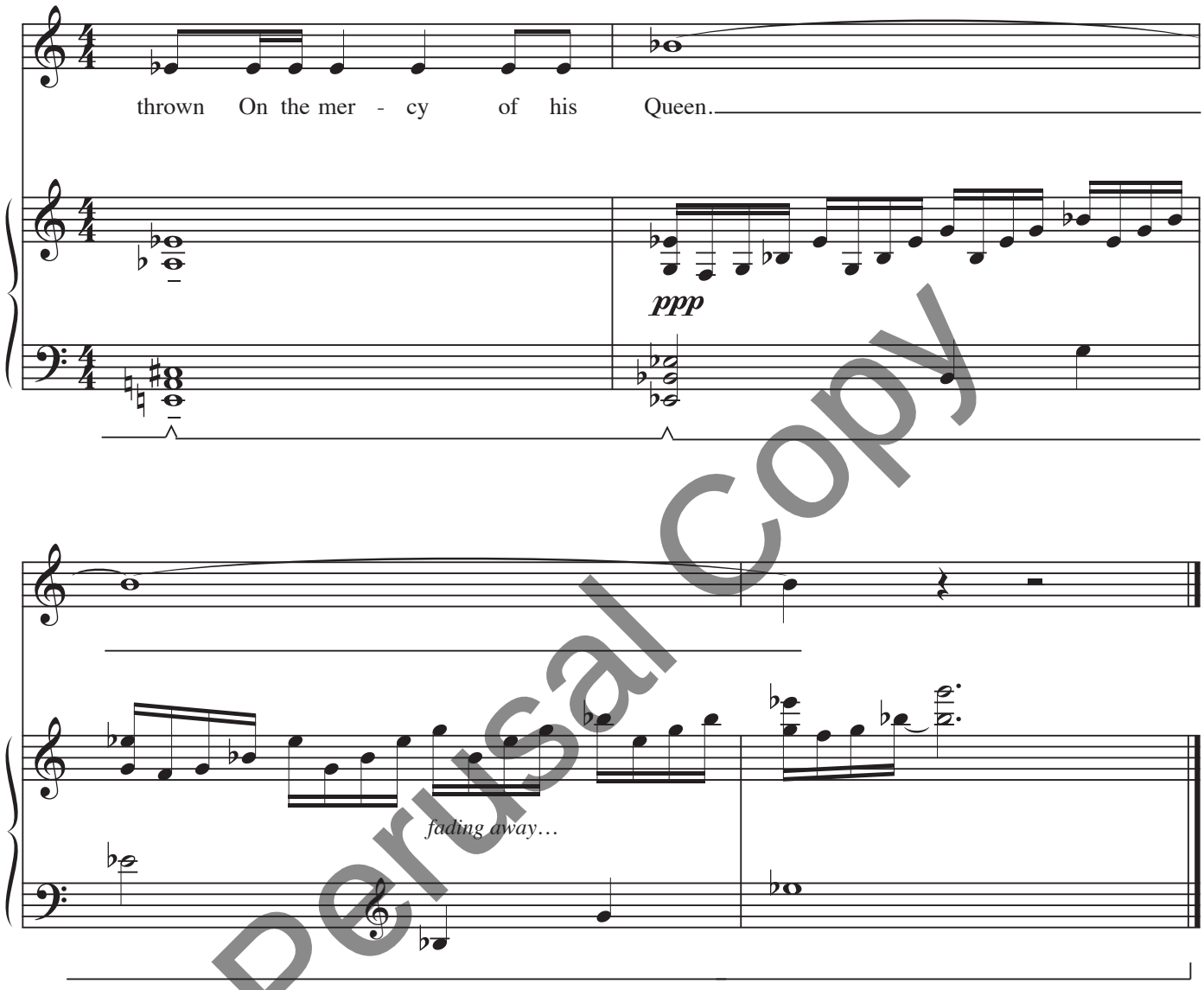

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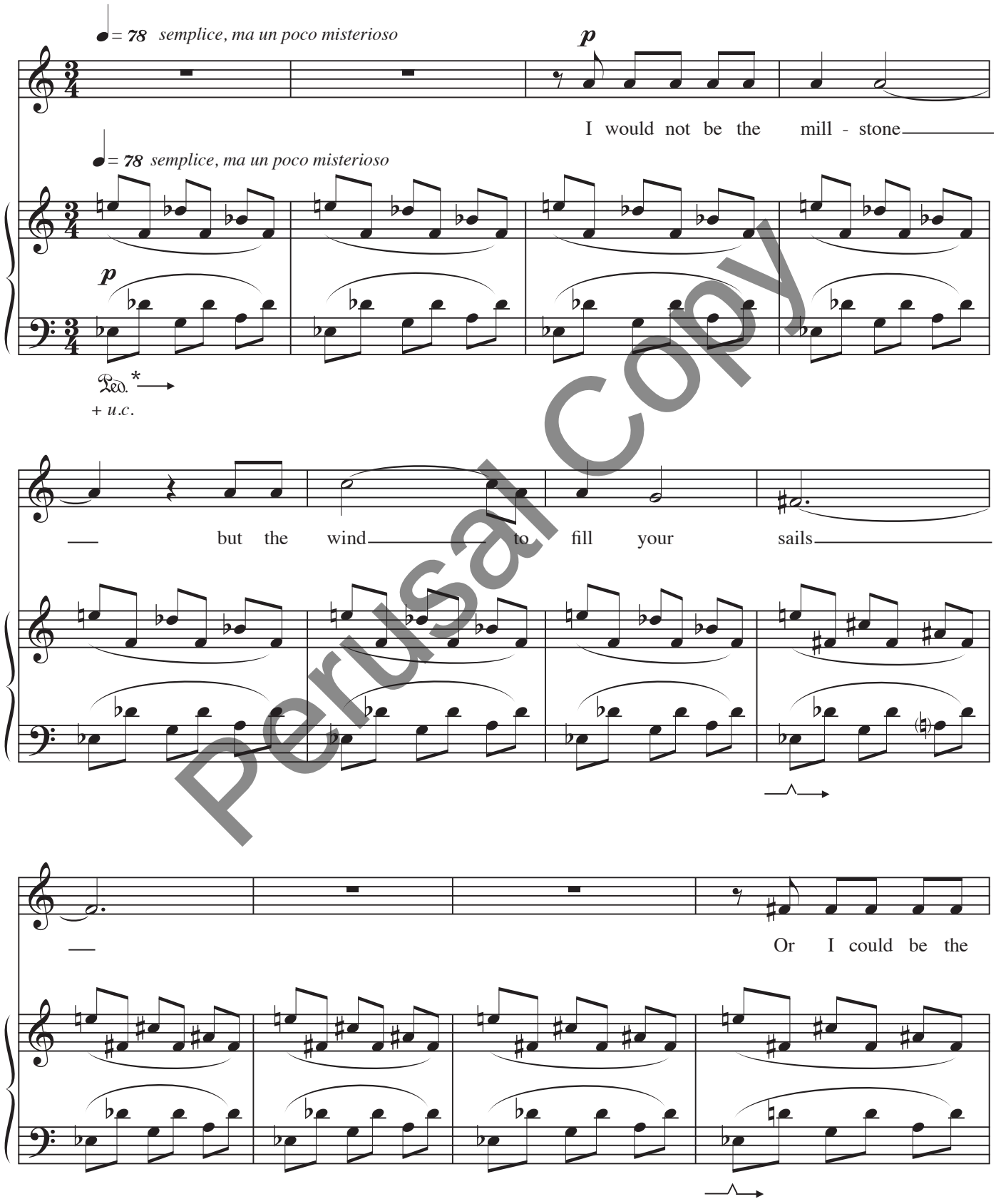

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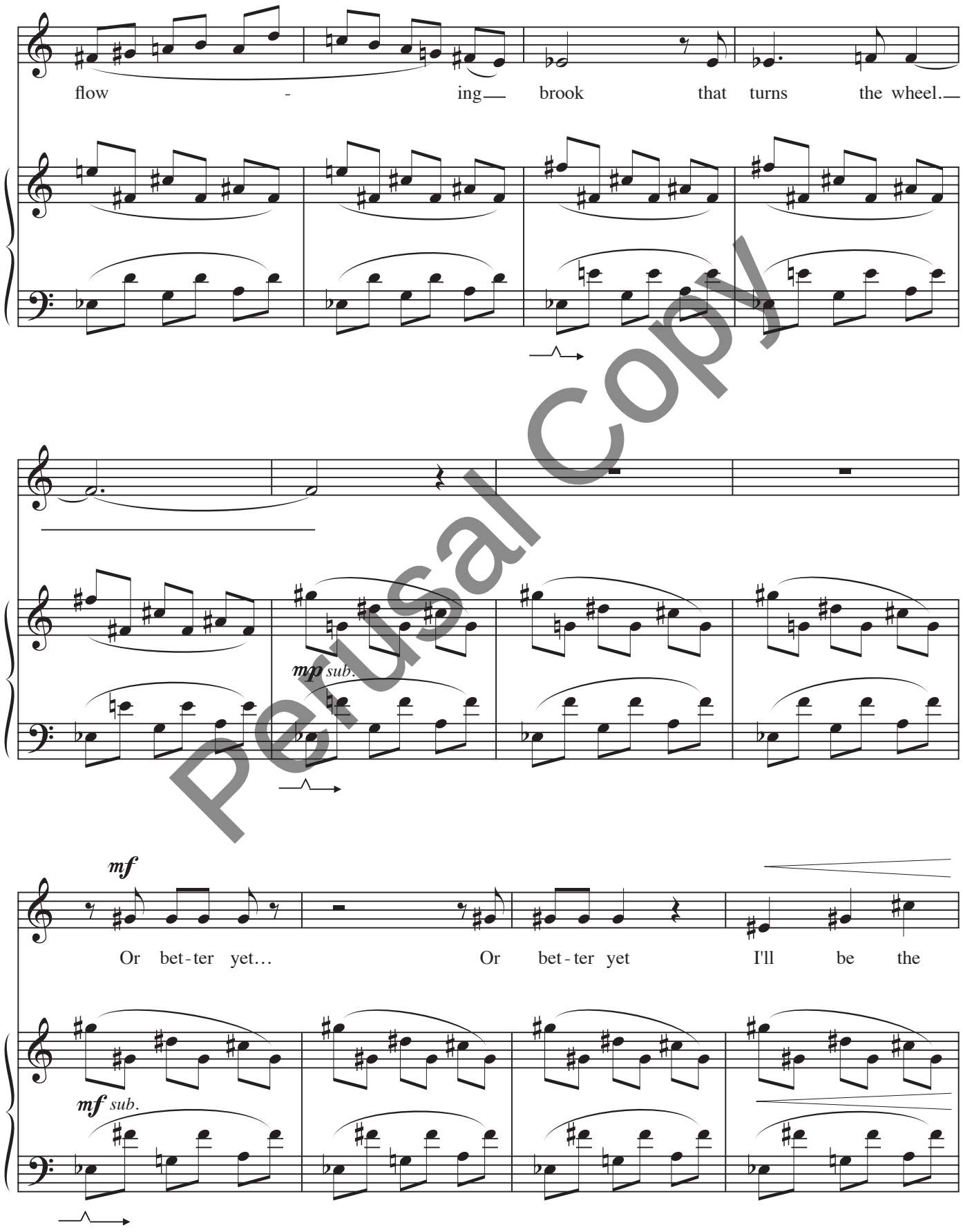
* *Hold una corda pedal down throughout. Change sost. pedal with chord changes as indicated. At the performer's discretion, light pedal changes may be made to clear accumulated sound.*



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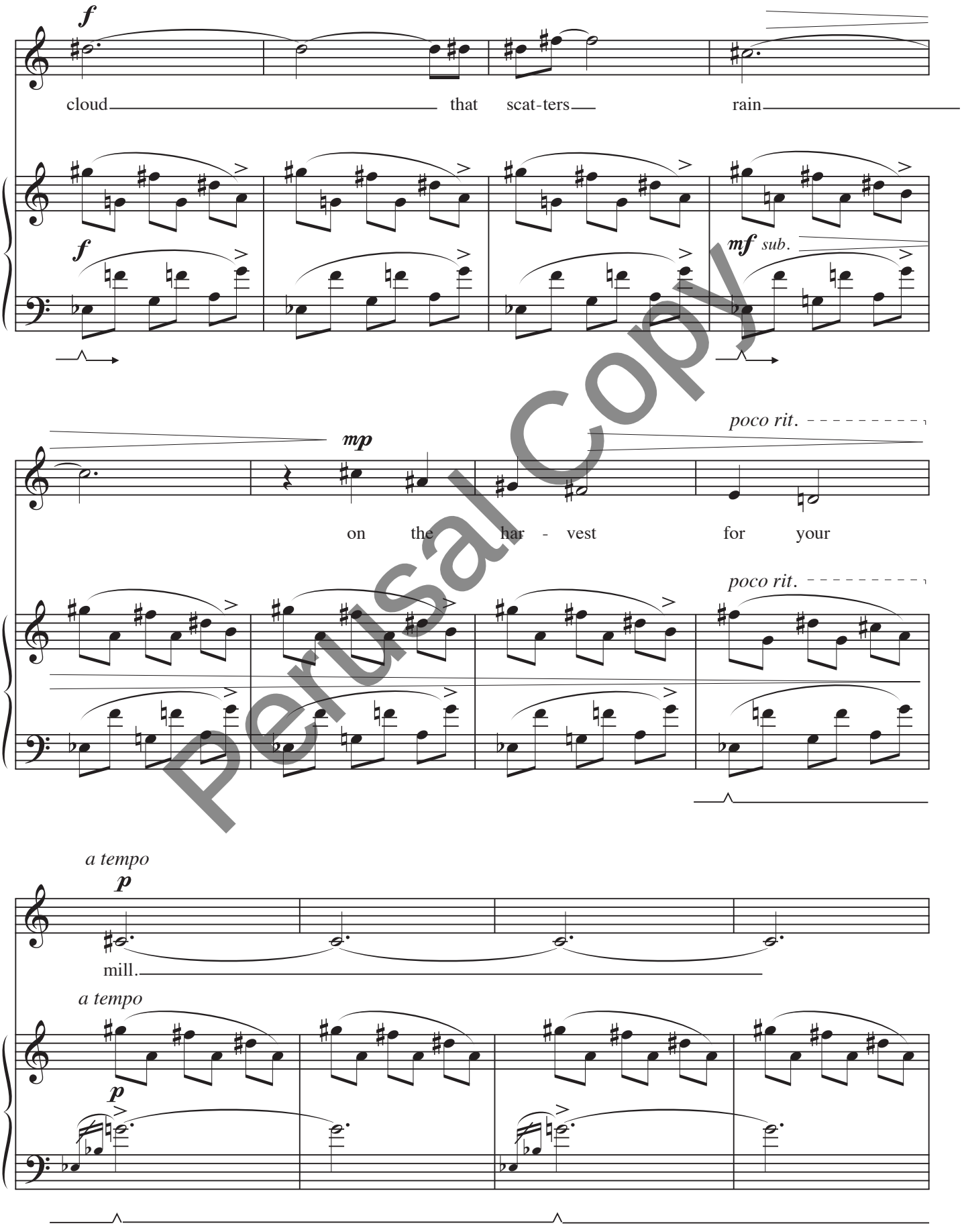

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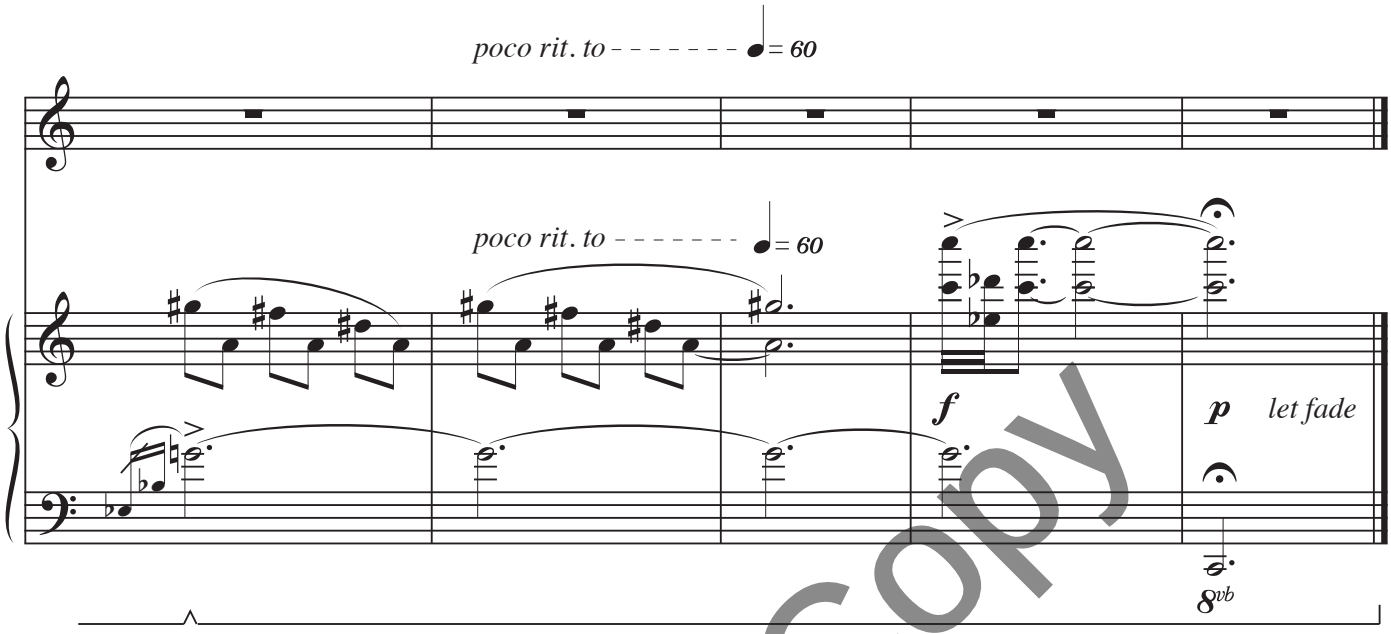

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