commissioned by Michael Borowitz

Jeffrey Ryan

Sound Frozen

Three Poems of Helen Hunt Jackson

for soprano and piano

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Found Frozen

Three Poems of Helen Hunt Jackson

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Programme note:

When pianist Michael Borowitz commissioned me to write a song cycle for himself and soprano Tina Selvaggio, I searched diligently for the poems that would inspire the perfect vehicle for this talented team. I knew that I especially wanted work by a female poet, preferably American (as the performers are), and preferably something with a sense of emotional "sweep" to highlight the communicative gifts of both musicians.

My search ended when I discovered the work of the American poet Helen Hunt Jackson (1830-1885). A contemporary of Emily Dickinson, Jackson was considered by Emerson, among others, to be one of the best women poets of her time. She turned to poetry after the death of her first husband in 1863; her early work (much of which was published anonymously or under pseudonyms, as was still common for women poets at the time) attracted an unusual amount of attention, and she soon became self-supporting—no small feat for *any* poet of *any* age. Later in life, she published under her own name, and many more of her poems were collected and published posthumously.

The three poems in this cycle all reflect upon the richness of a life now shadowed by the spectre of death. In each, Jackson's simple, declarative style gives room to tremendous emotional breadth, reaffirming the joy and exhilaration of the present moment, and finding solace in the knowledge of a life well-lived.

Found Frozen is dedicated with love to Michael and Tina.

Performance notes:

Total performance time: ca. 12'30"
Vocal range: $C\#^4$ to $C\#^6$ (ossia B^5)
Pedal markings should be carefully observed throughout.

Found Frozen

She died, as many travellers have died,
O'ertaken on an Alpine road by night;
Numbed and bewildered by the falling snow,
Striving, in spite of failing pulse, and limbs
Which faltered and grew feeble at each step,
To toil up the icy steep, and bear
Patient and faithful to the last, the load
Which, in the sunny morn, seemed light!
And yet
'T was in the place she called her home, she died;
And they who loved her with the all of love
Their wintry natures had to give, stood by
And wept some tears, and wrote above her grave
Some common record which they thought was true;
But I, who loved her last, and best,—*I* knew.

Poppies on the Wheat

Along Ancona's hills the shimmering heat,
A tropic tide of air with ebb and flow
Bathes all the fields of wheat until they glow
Like flashing seas of green, which toss and beat
Around the vines. The poppies lithe and fleet
Seem running, fiery torchmen, to and fro
To mark the shore.
The farmer does not know
That they are there. He walks with heavy feet,
Counting the bread and wine by autumn's gain,
But I,—I smile to think that days remain
Perhaps to me in which, though bread be sweet
No more, and red wine warm my blood in vain,
I shall be glad remembering how the fleet,
Lithe poppies ran like torchmen with the wheat.

Her Eyes

That they are brown, no man will dare to say
He knows. And yet I think that no man's look
Ever those depths of light and shade forsook,
Until their gentle pain warned him away.
Of all sweet things I know but one which may
Be likened to her eyes.
When, in deep nook
Of some green field, the water of a brook
Makes lingering, whirling eddy in its way,
Round soft drowned leaves; and in a flash of sun
They turn to gold, until the ripples run
Now brown, now yellow, changing as by some
Swift spell.
I know not with what body come
The saints. But this I know, my Paradise
Will mean the resurrection of her eyes.

From *Poems* by Helen Hunt Jackson,
published by Roberts Brothers, Boston, 1892.

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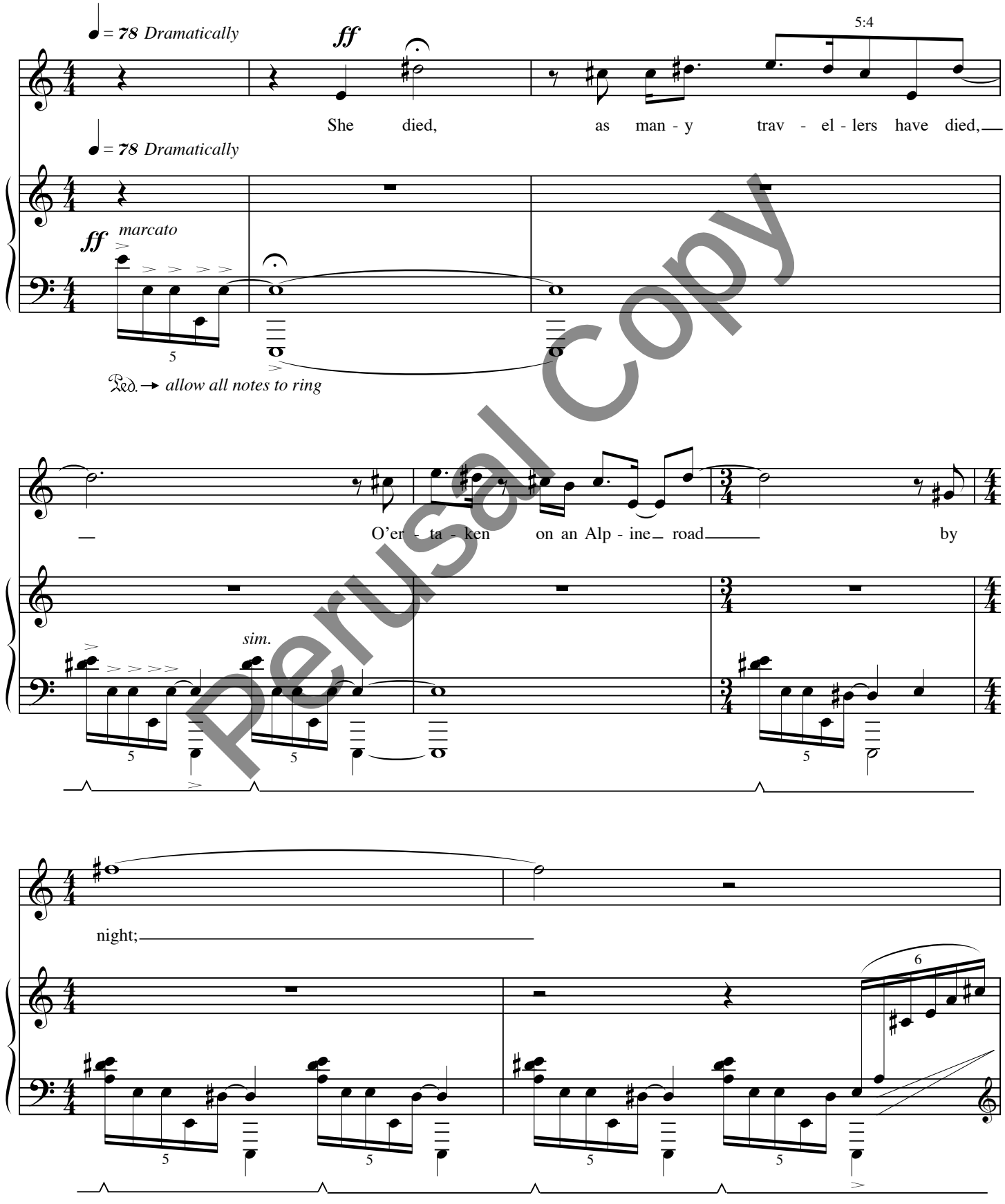
poem by
Helen Hunt Jackson

Found Frozen

music by
Jeffrey Ryan



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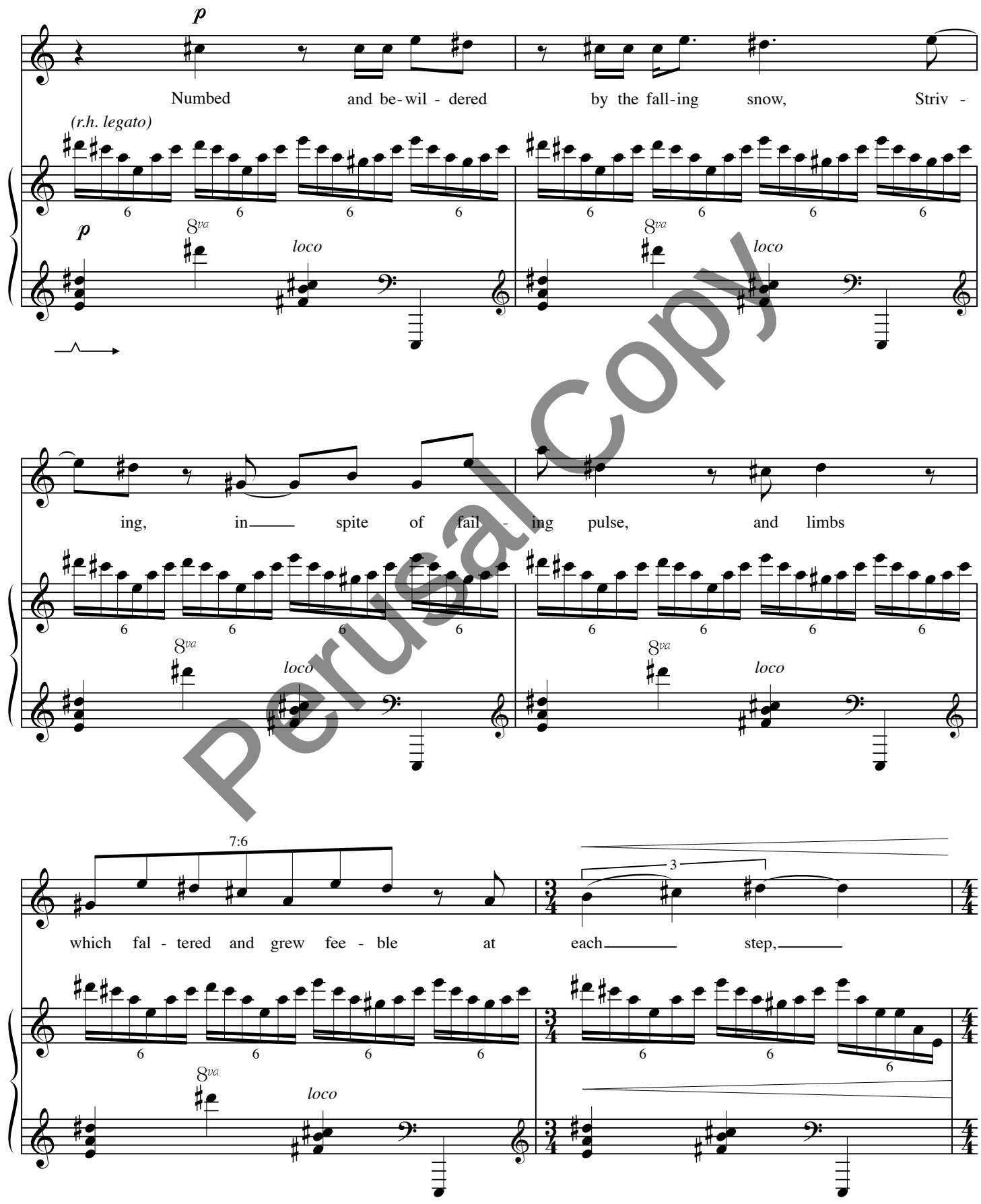

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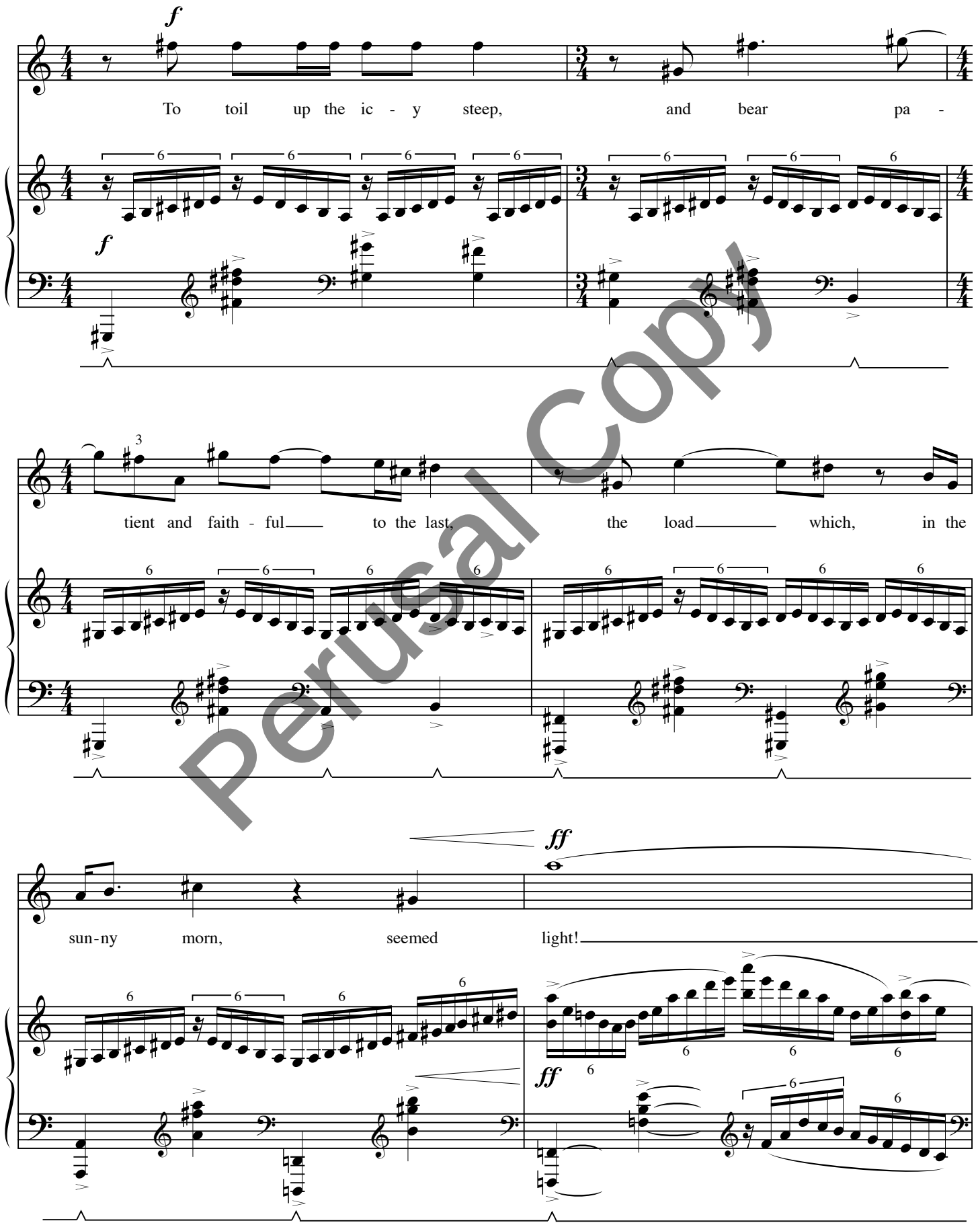

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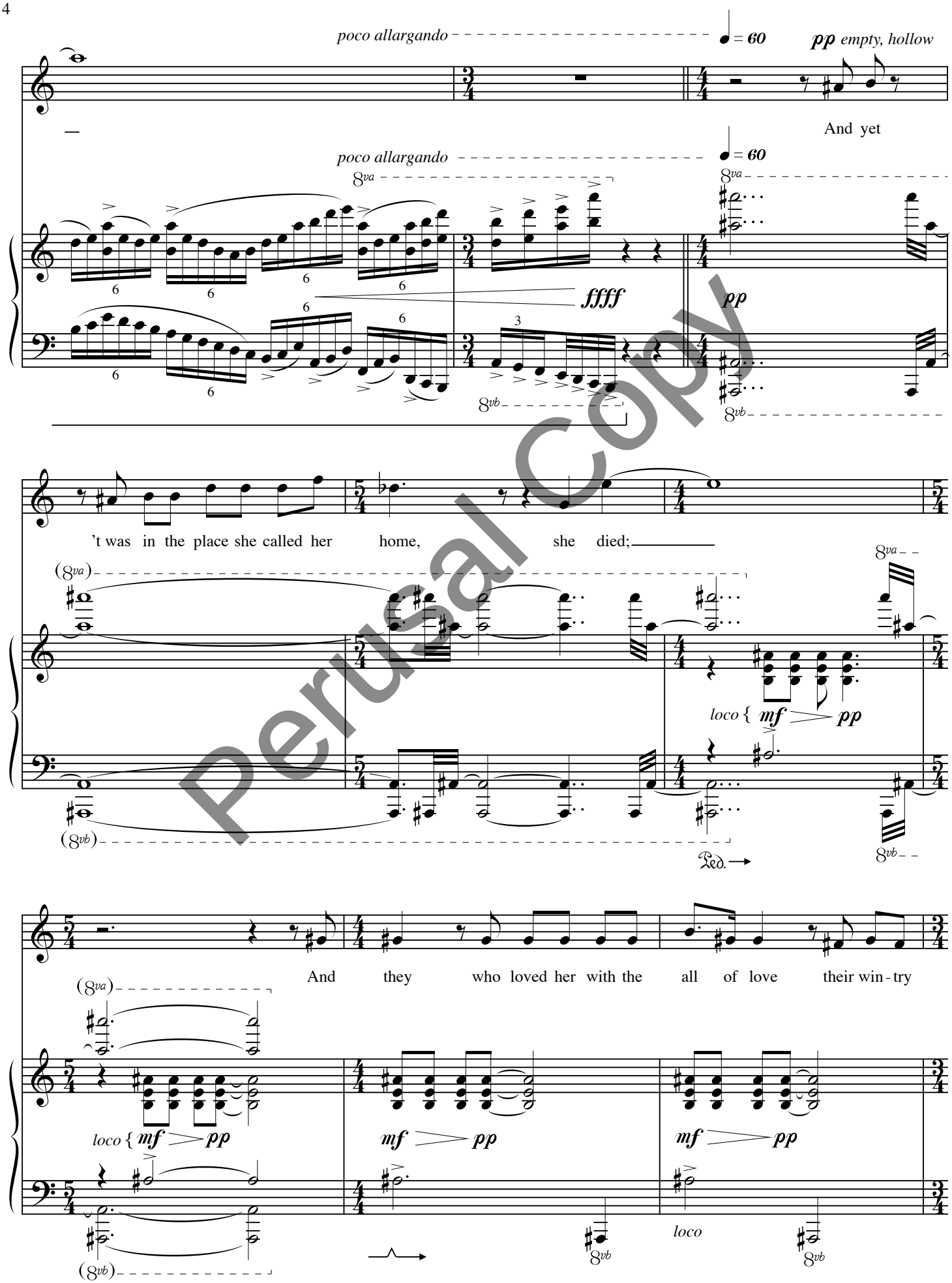

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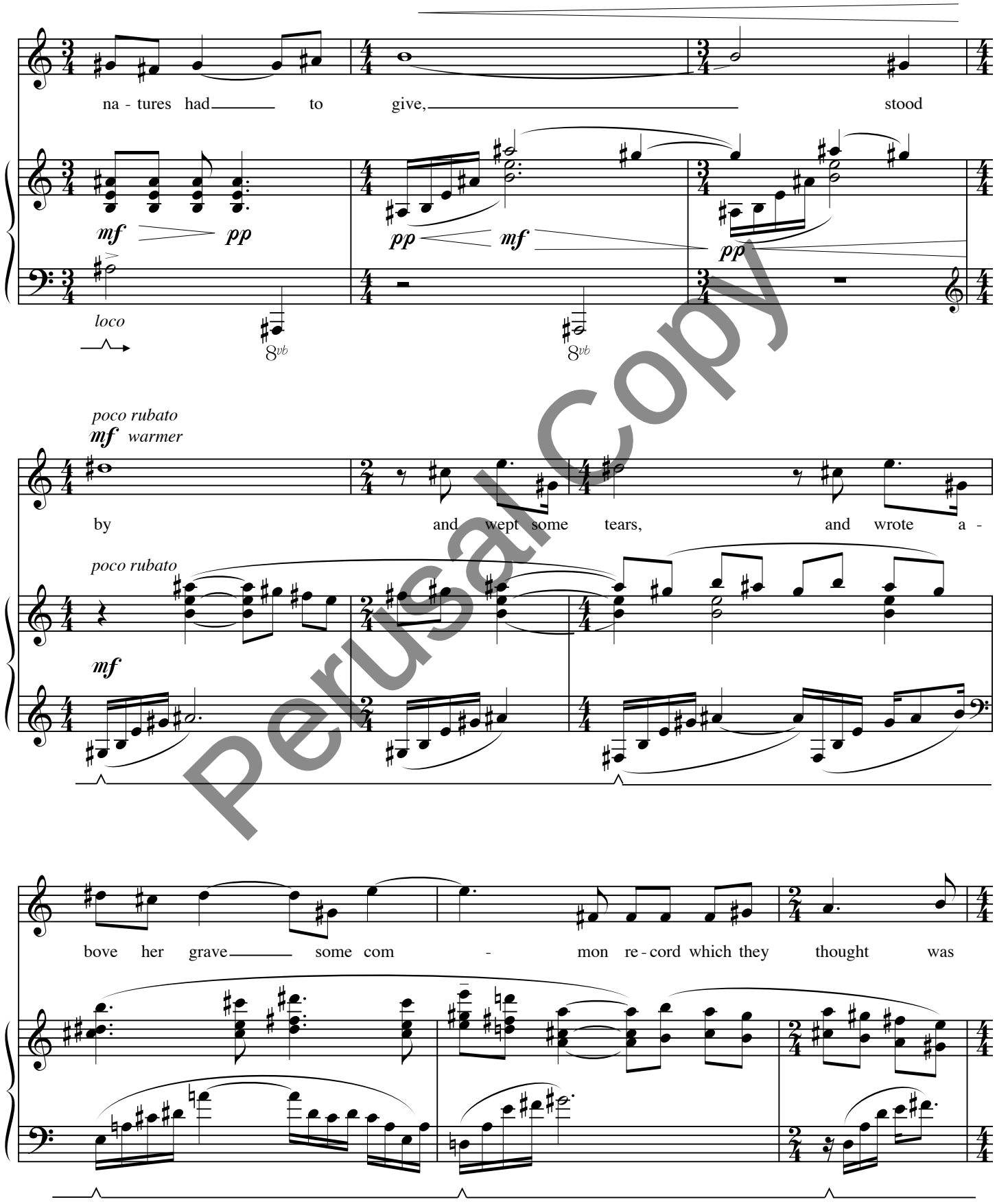

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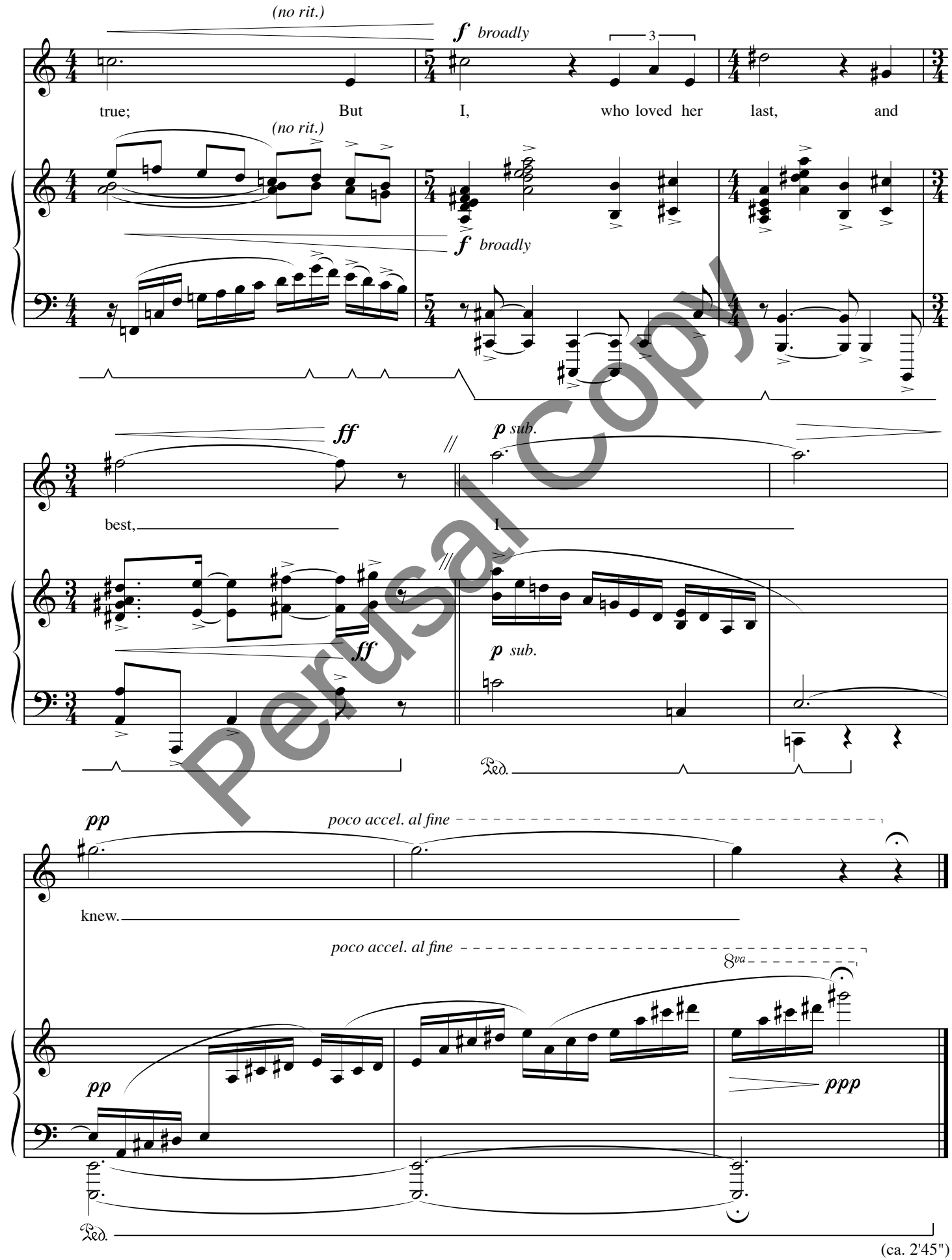

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Helen Hunt Jackson

Poppies on the Wheat

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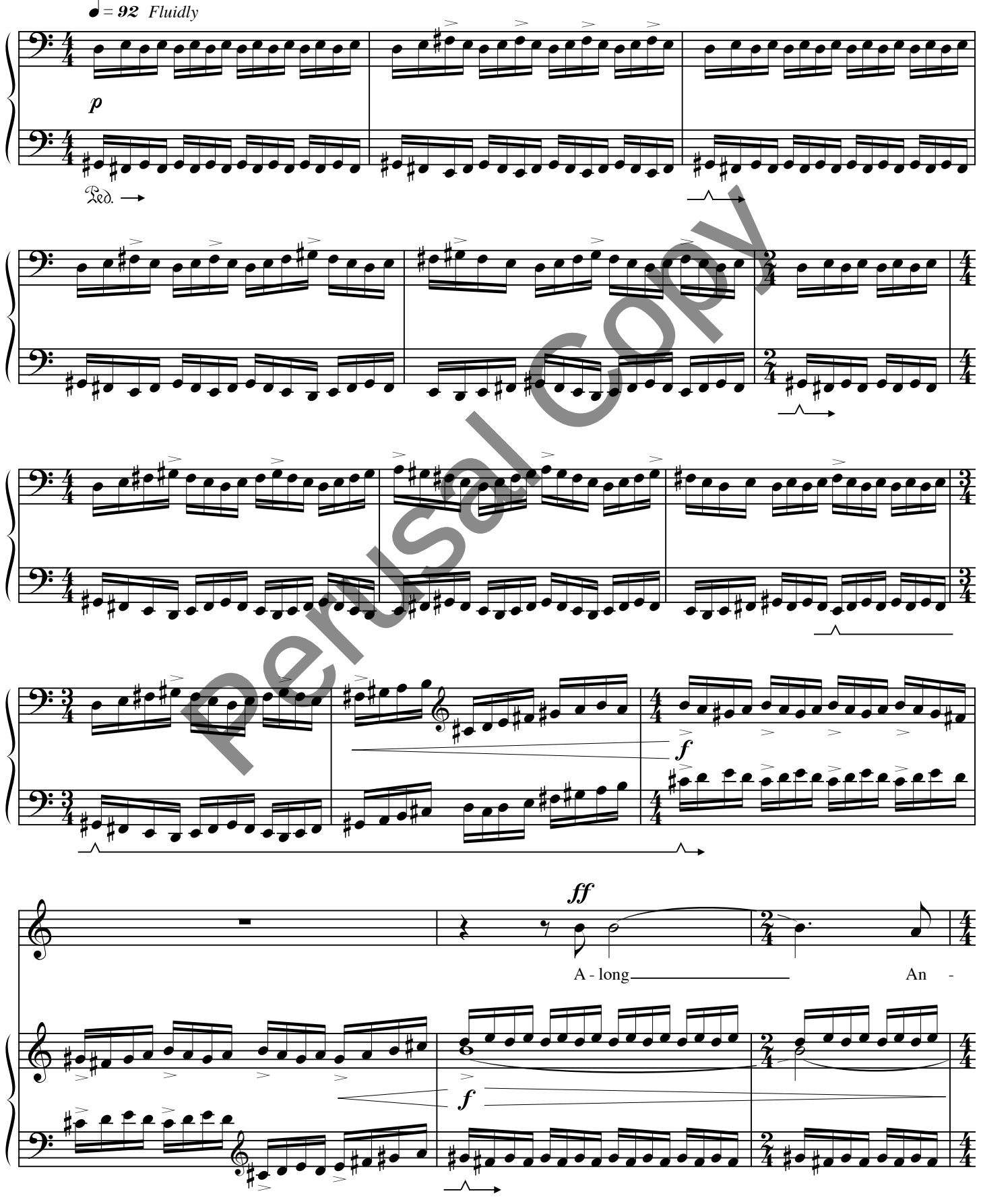

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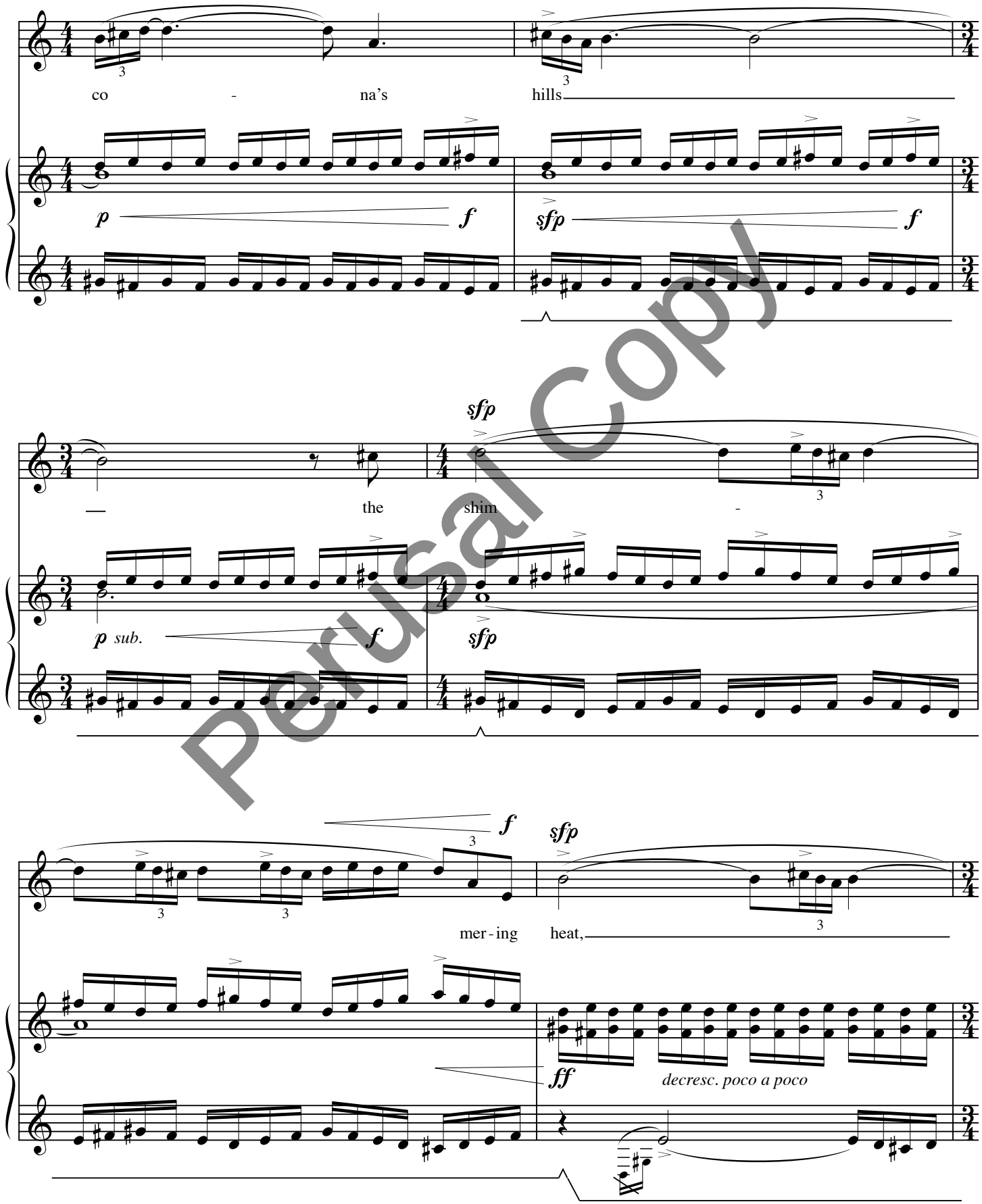

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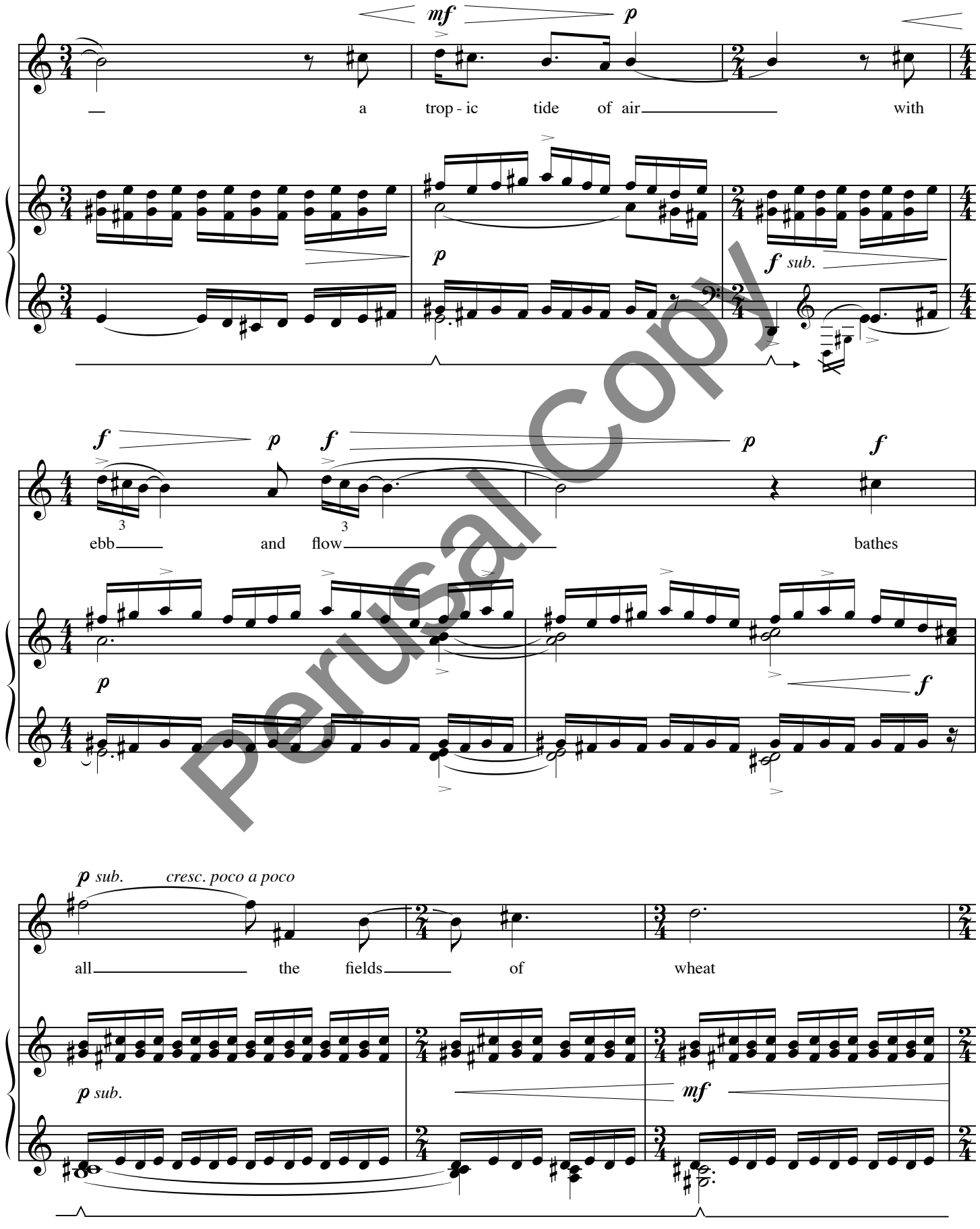

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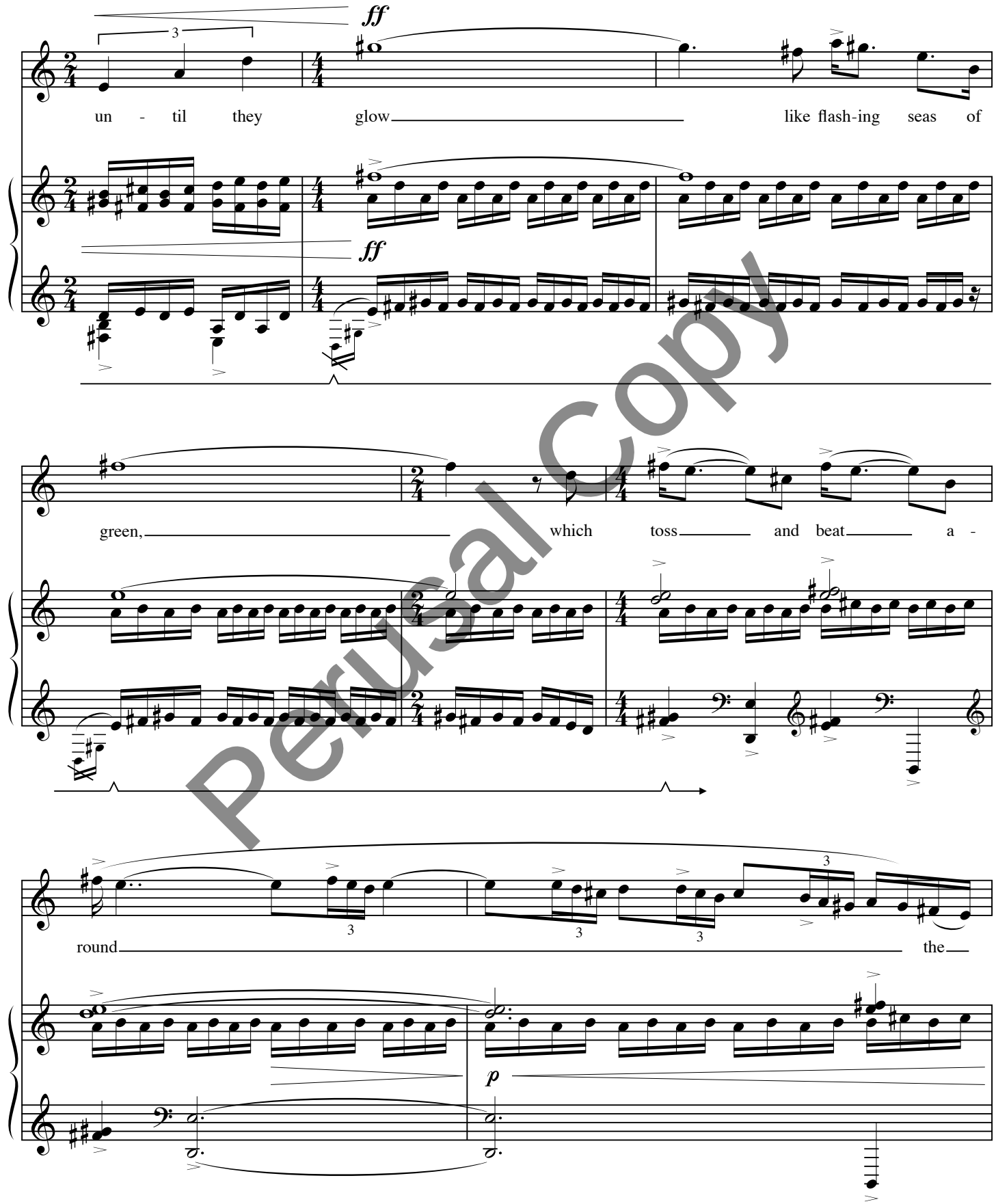

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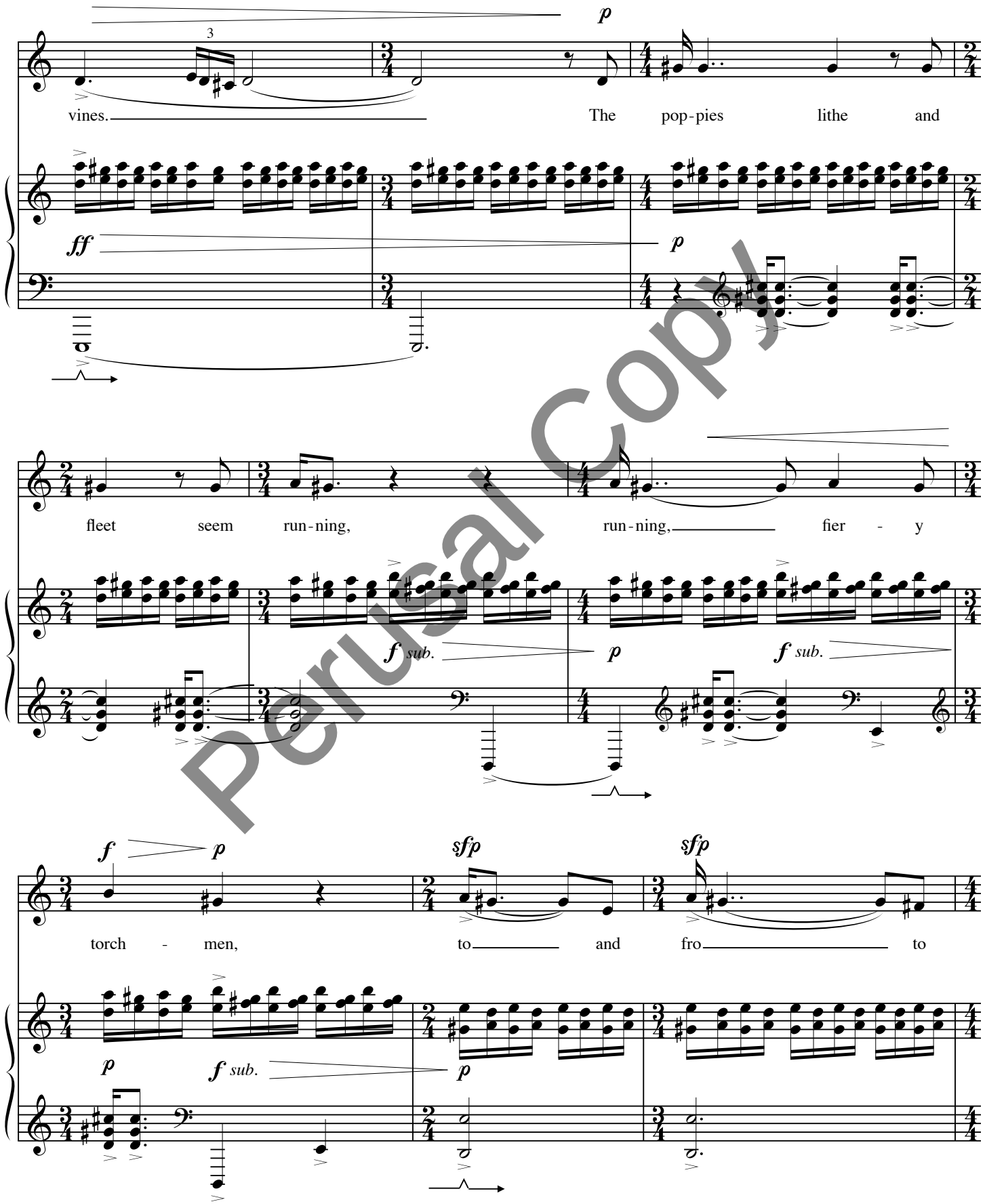

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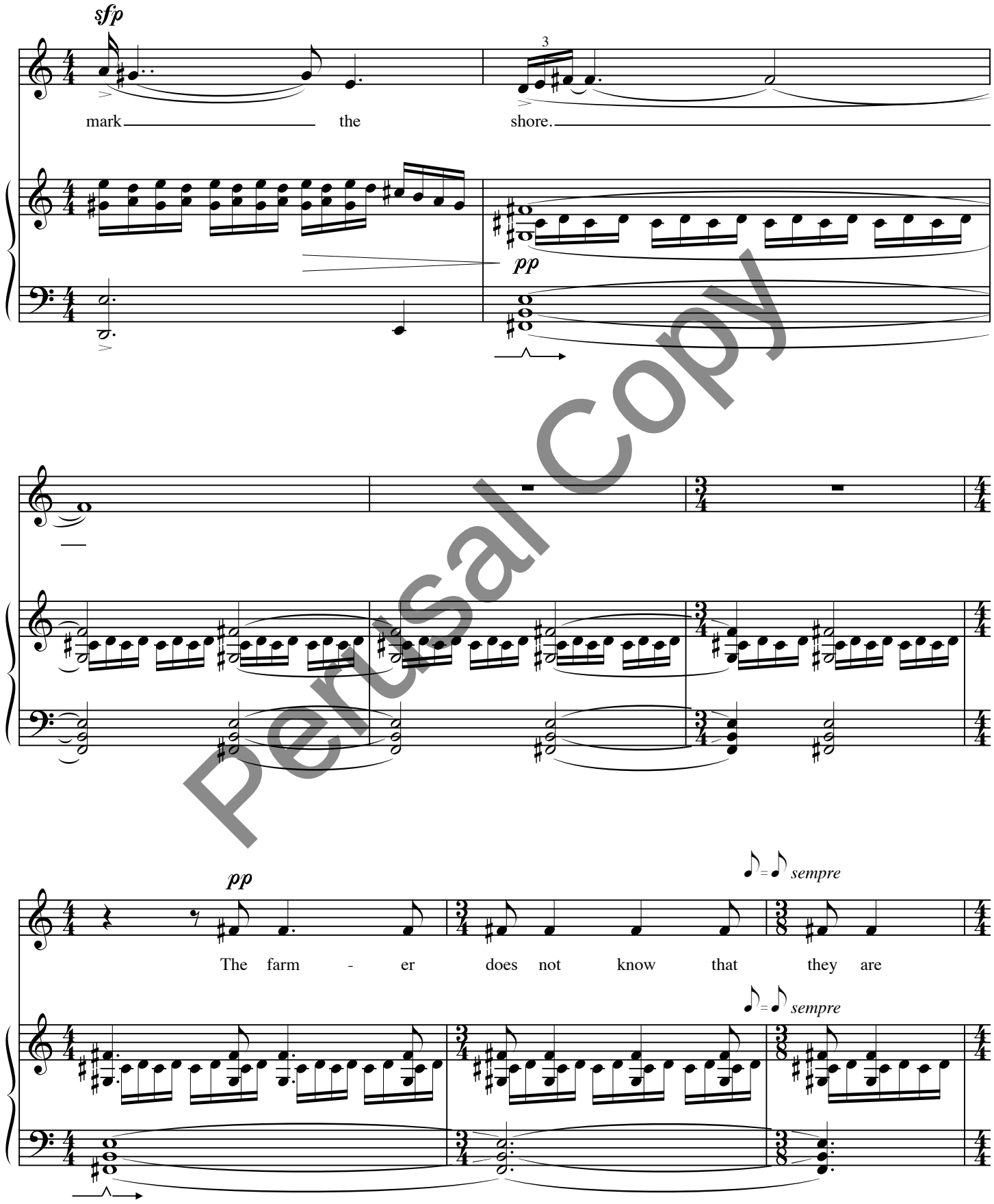

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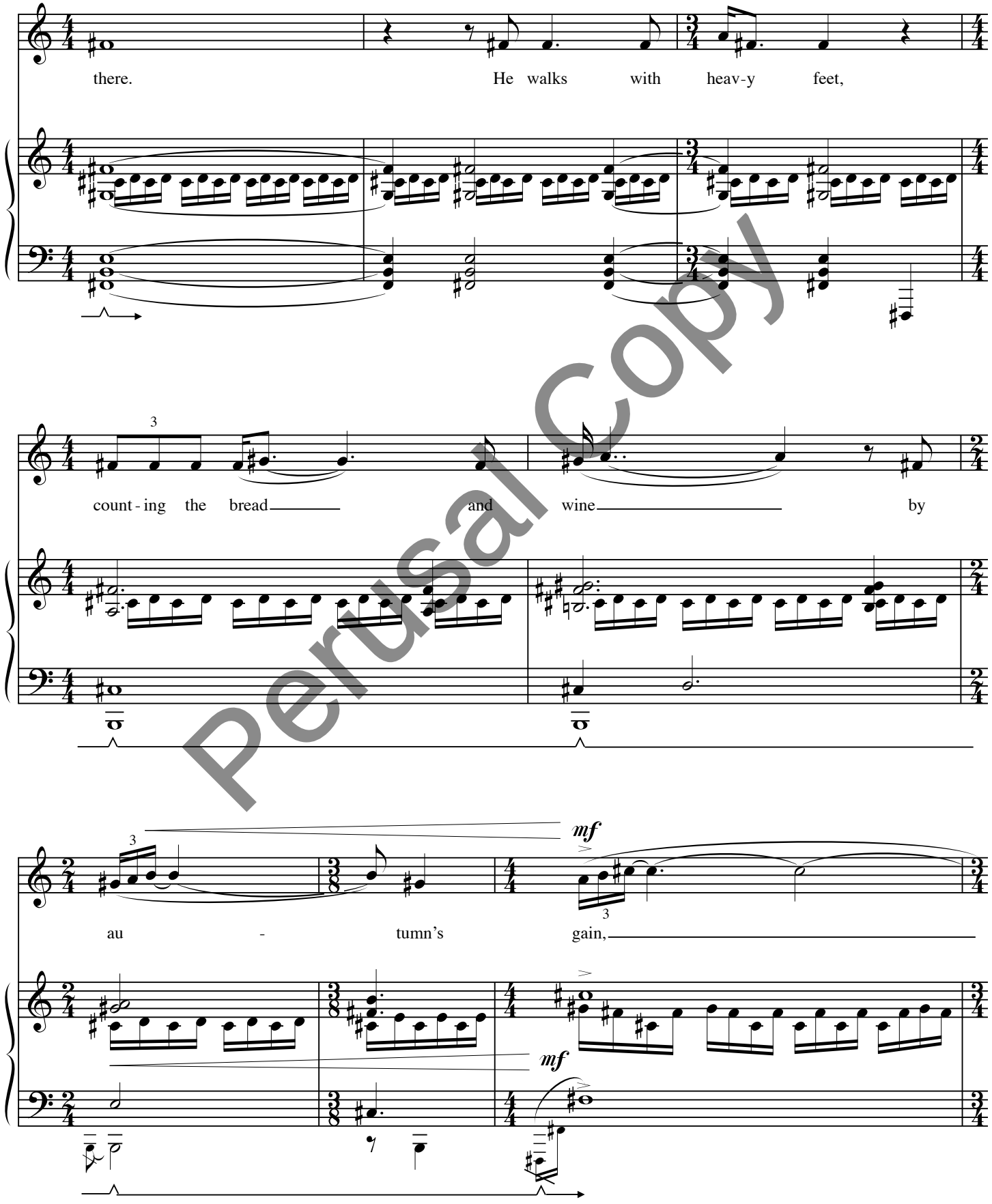

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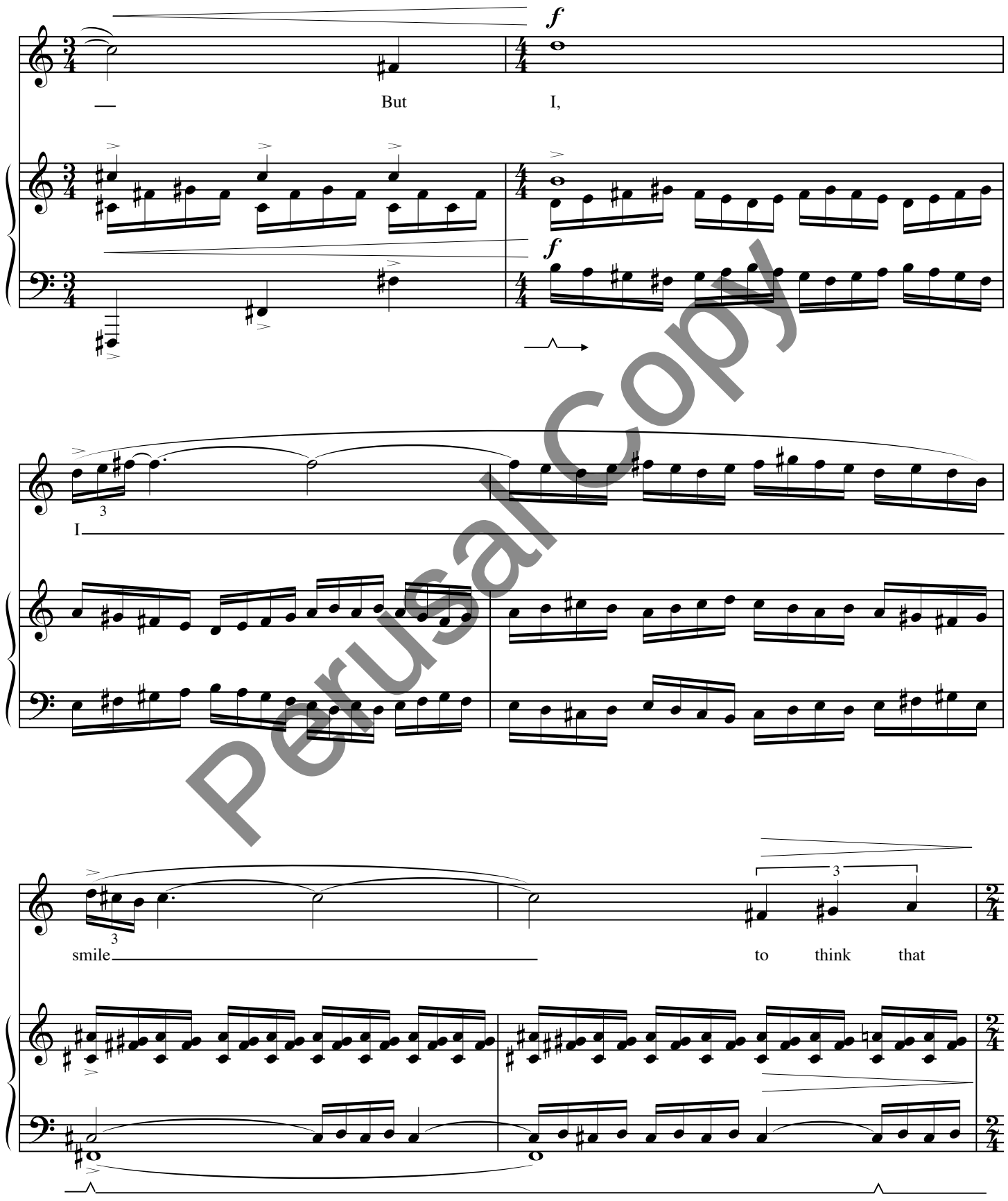

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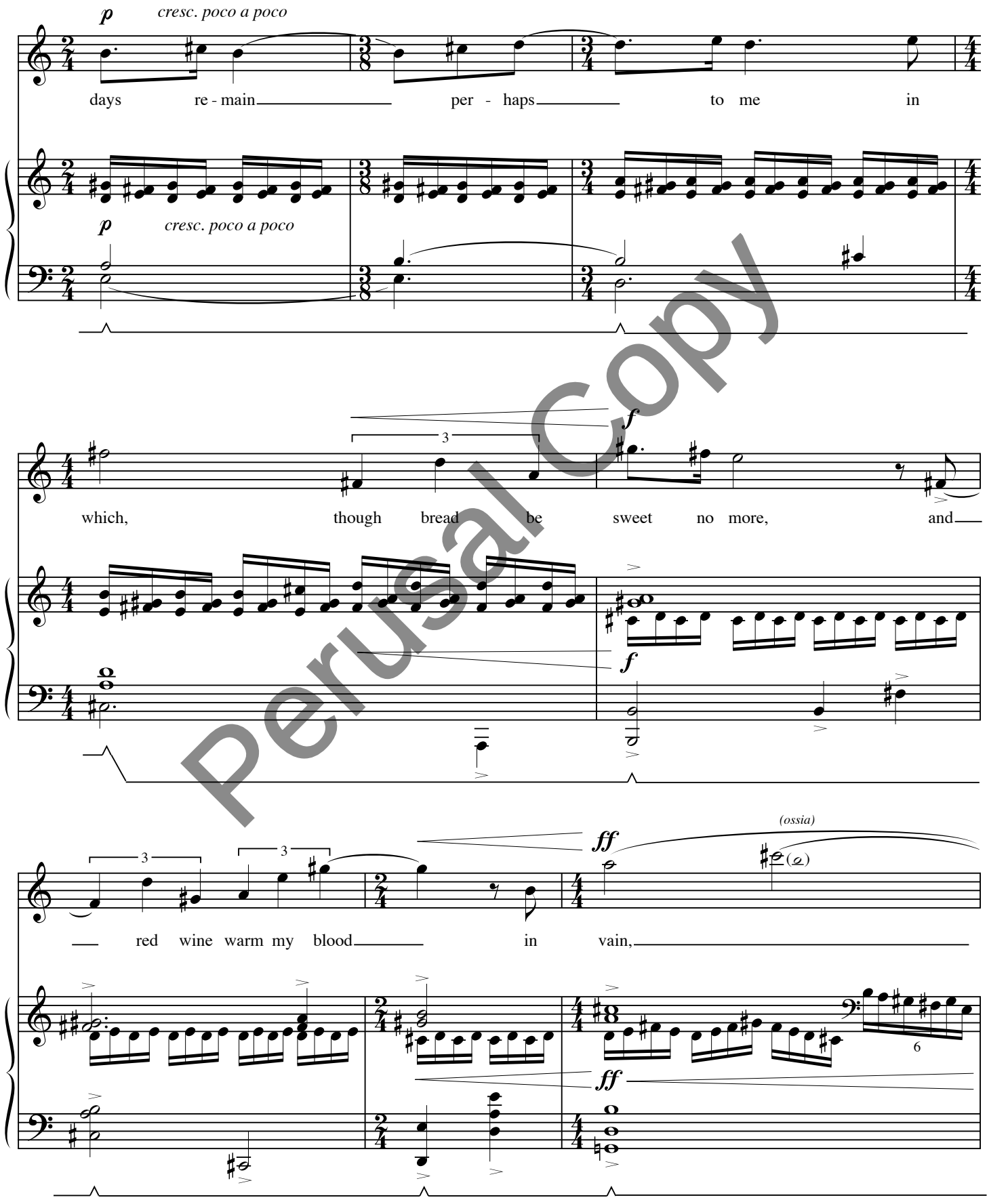

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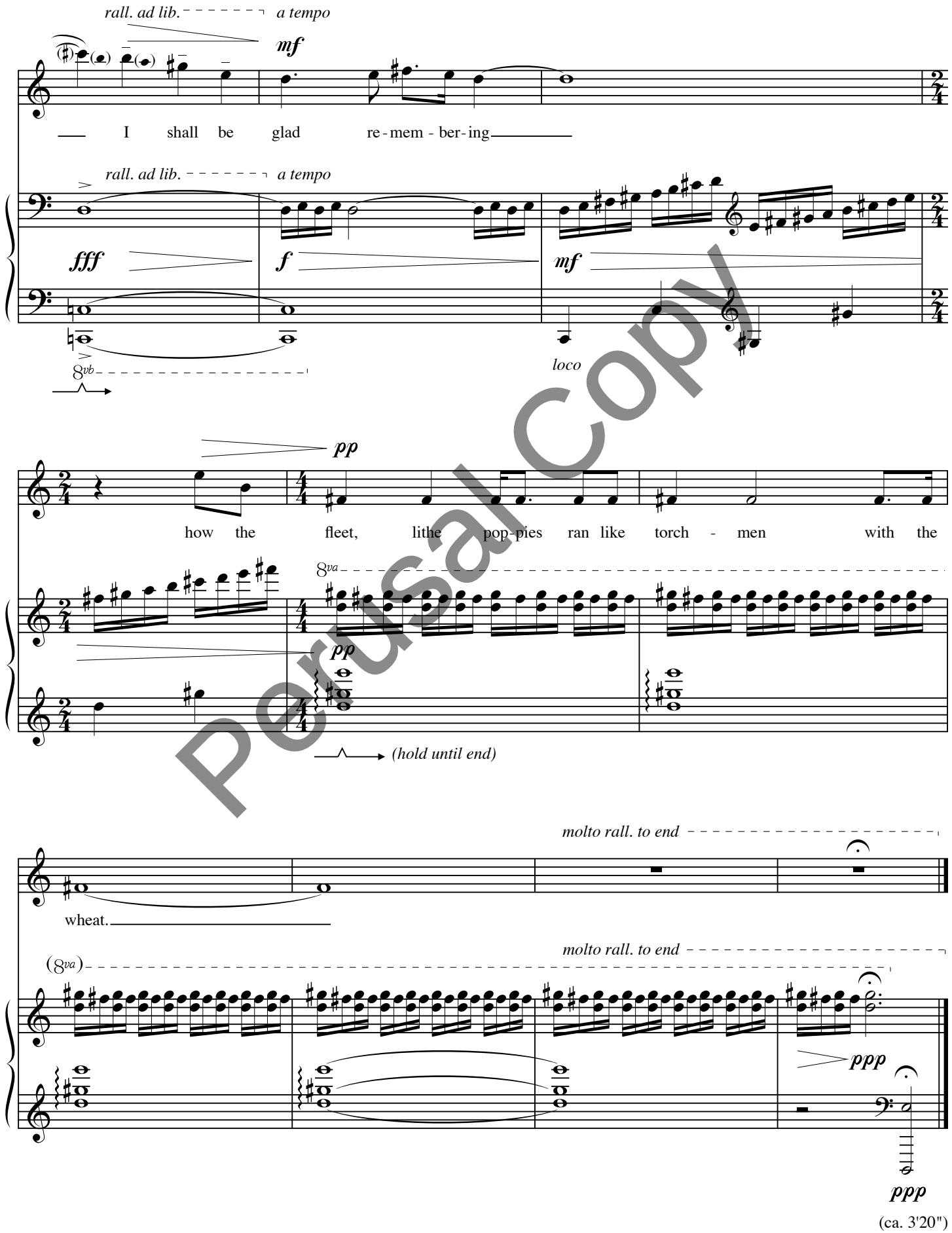

(ca. 3'20")

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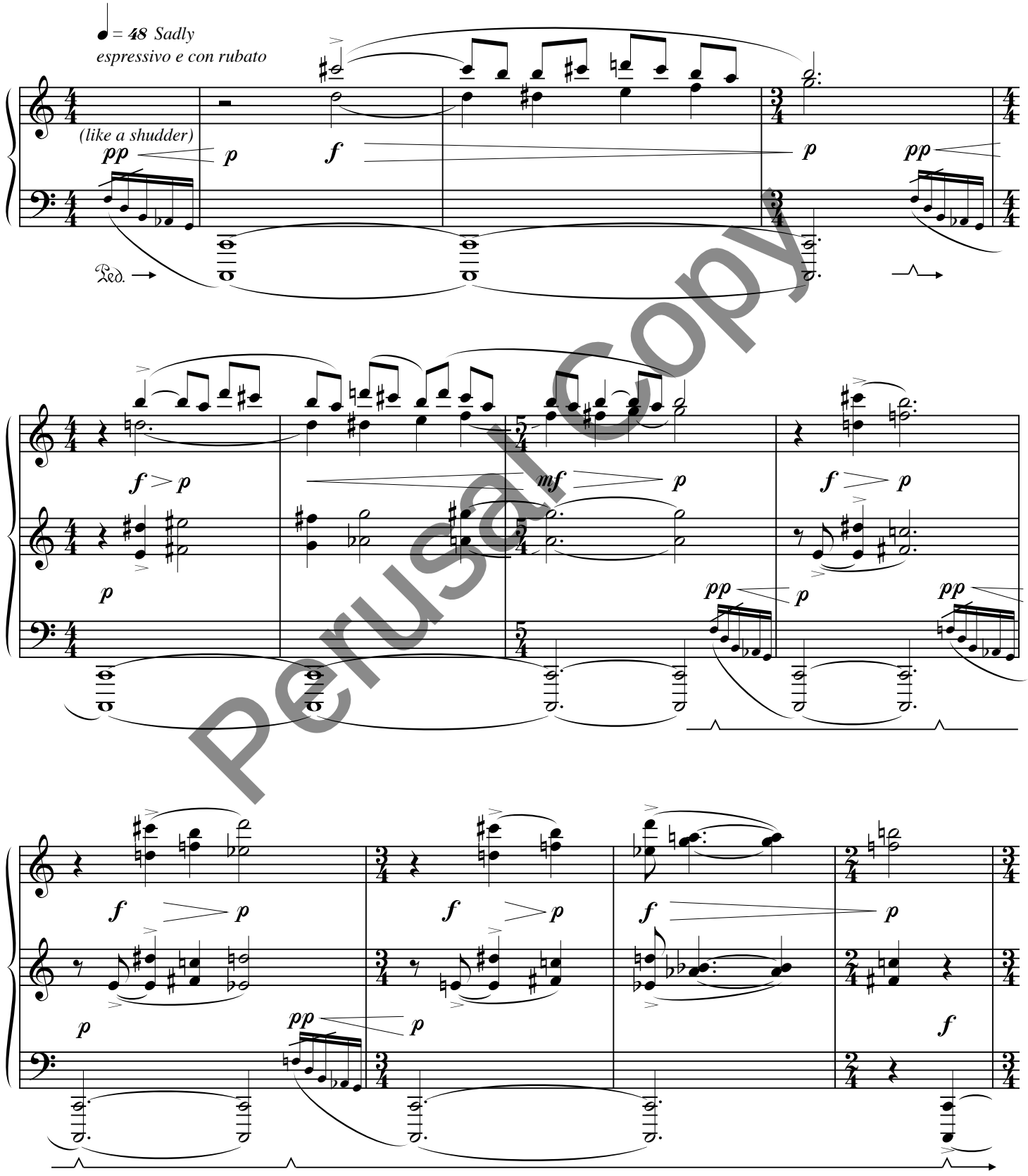
poem by
Helen Hunt Jackson

Her Eyes

music by
Jeffrey Ryan



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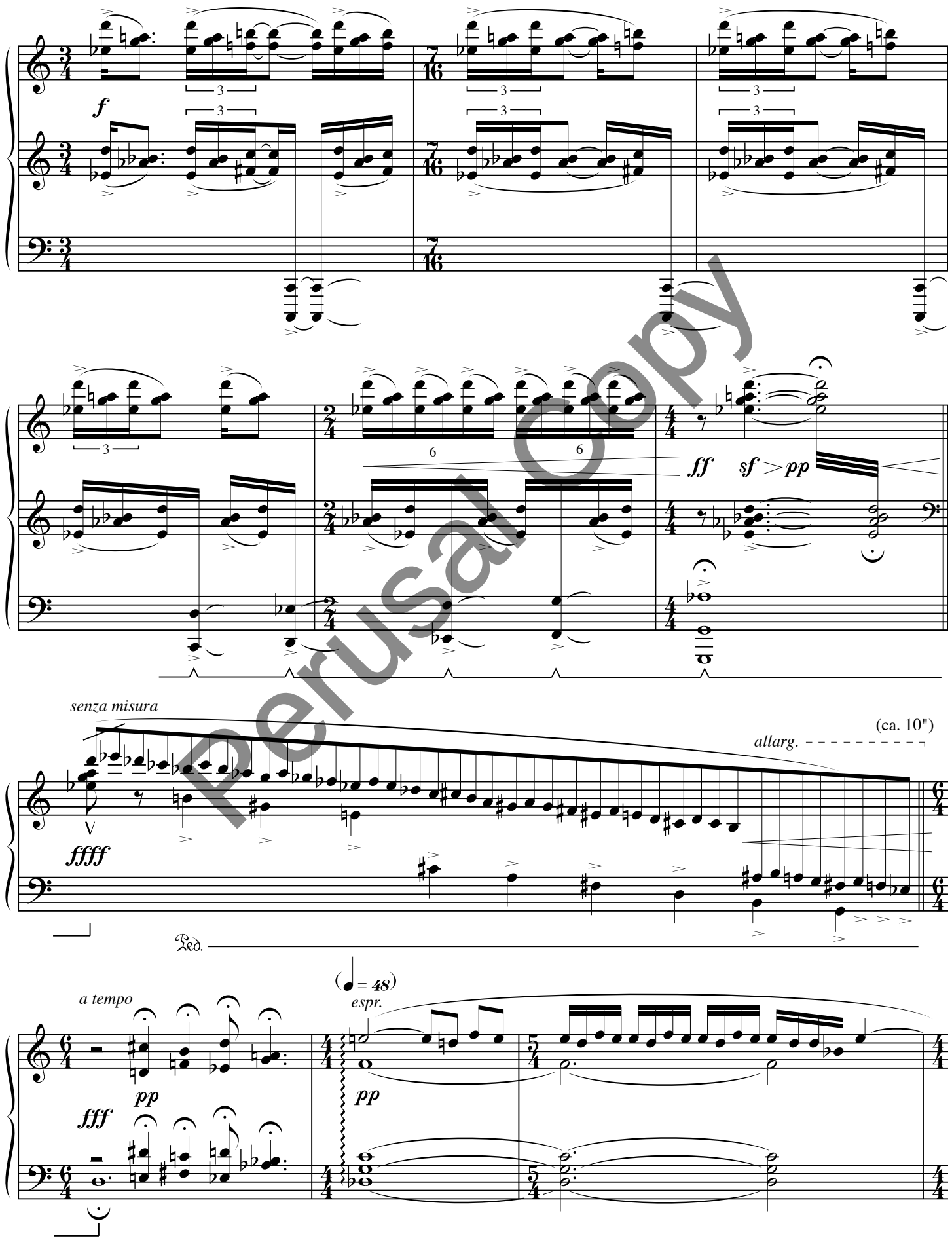

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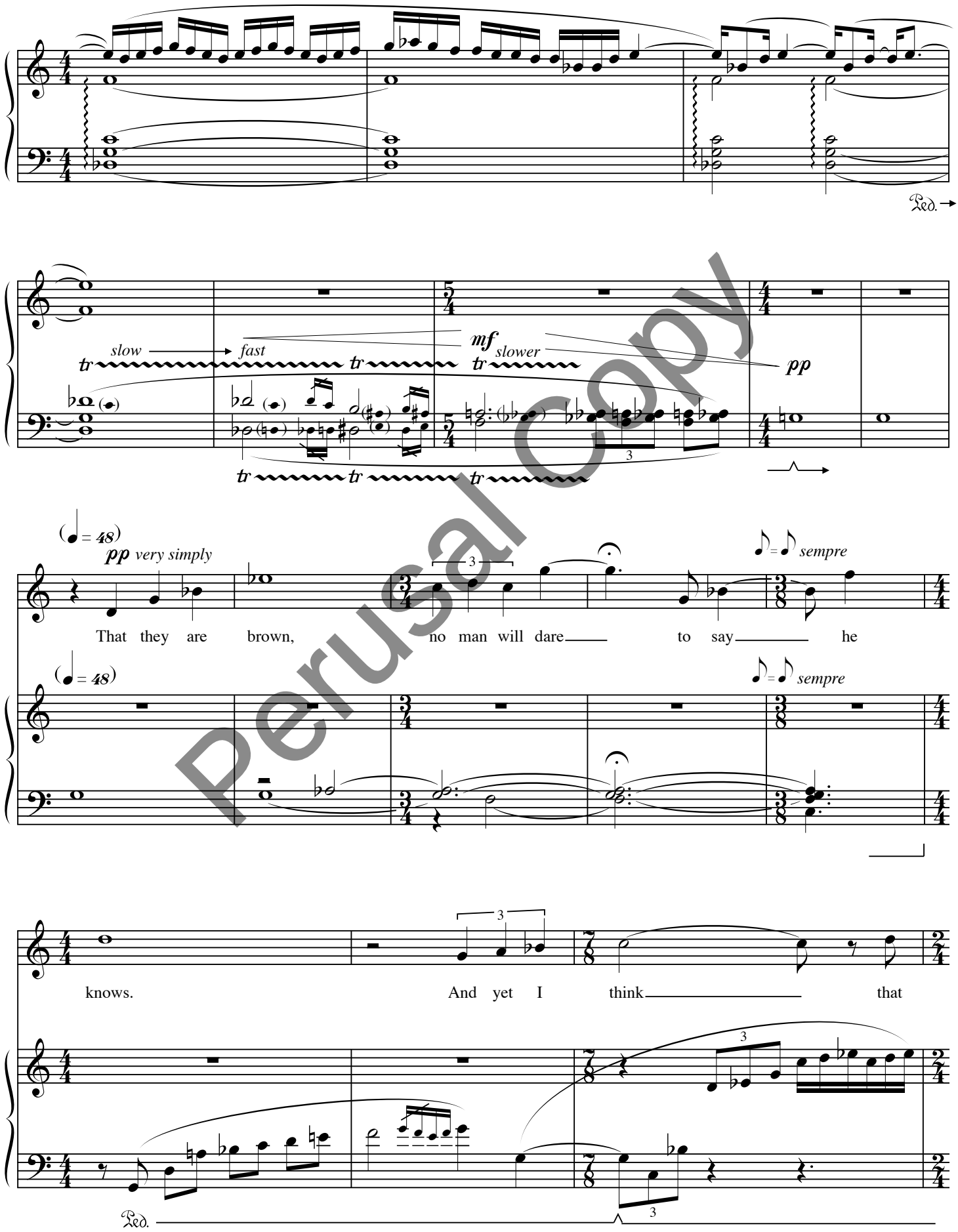

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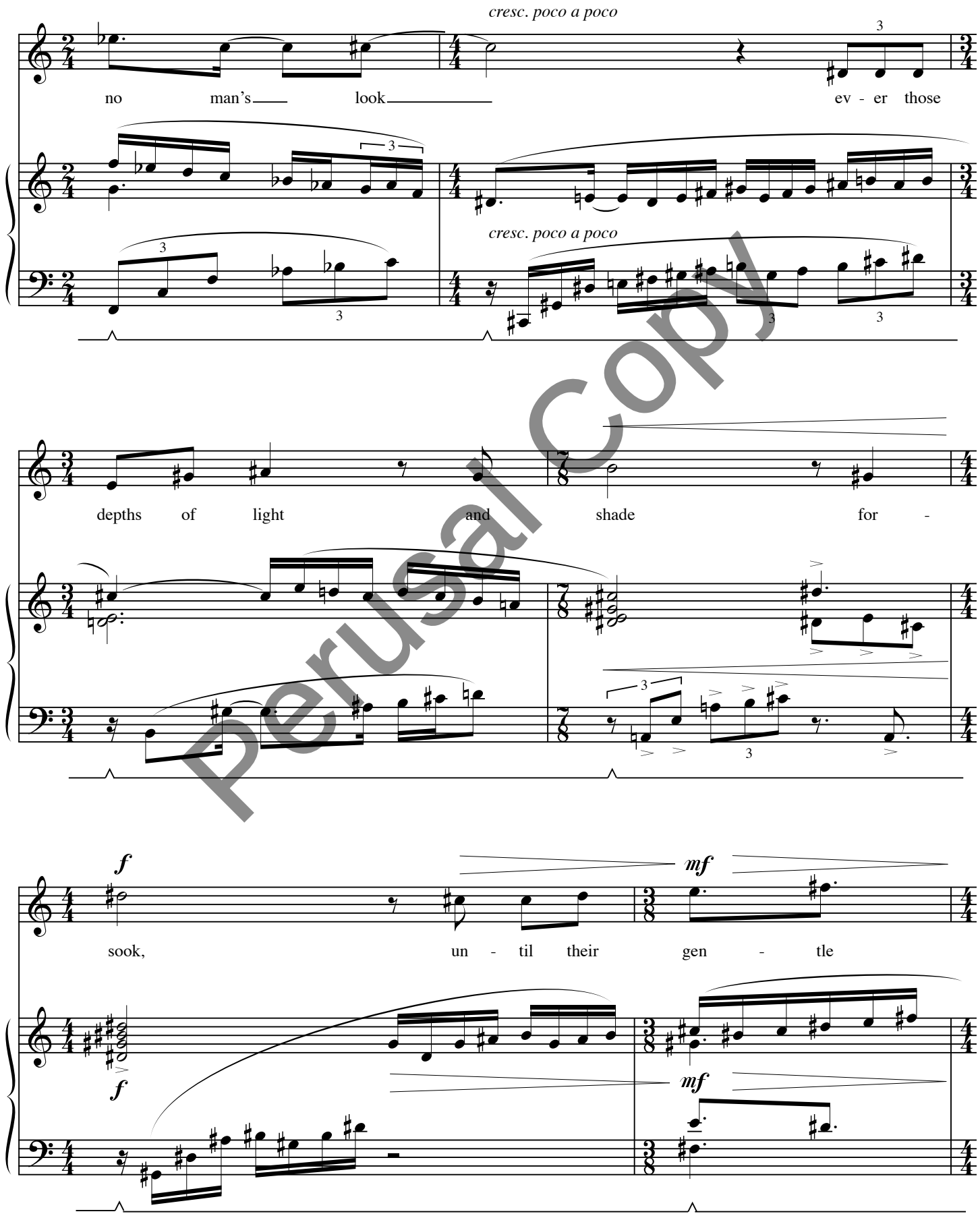

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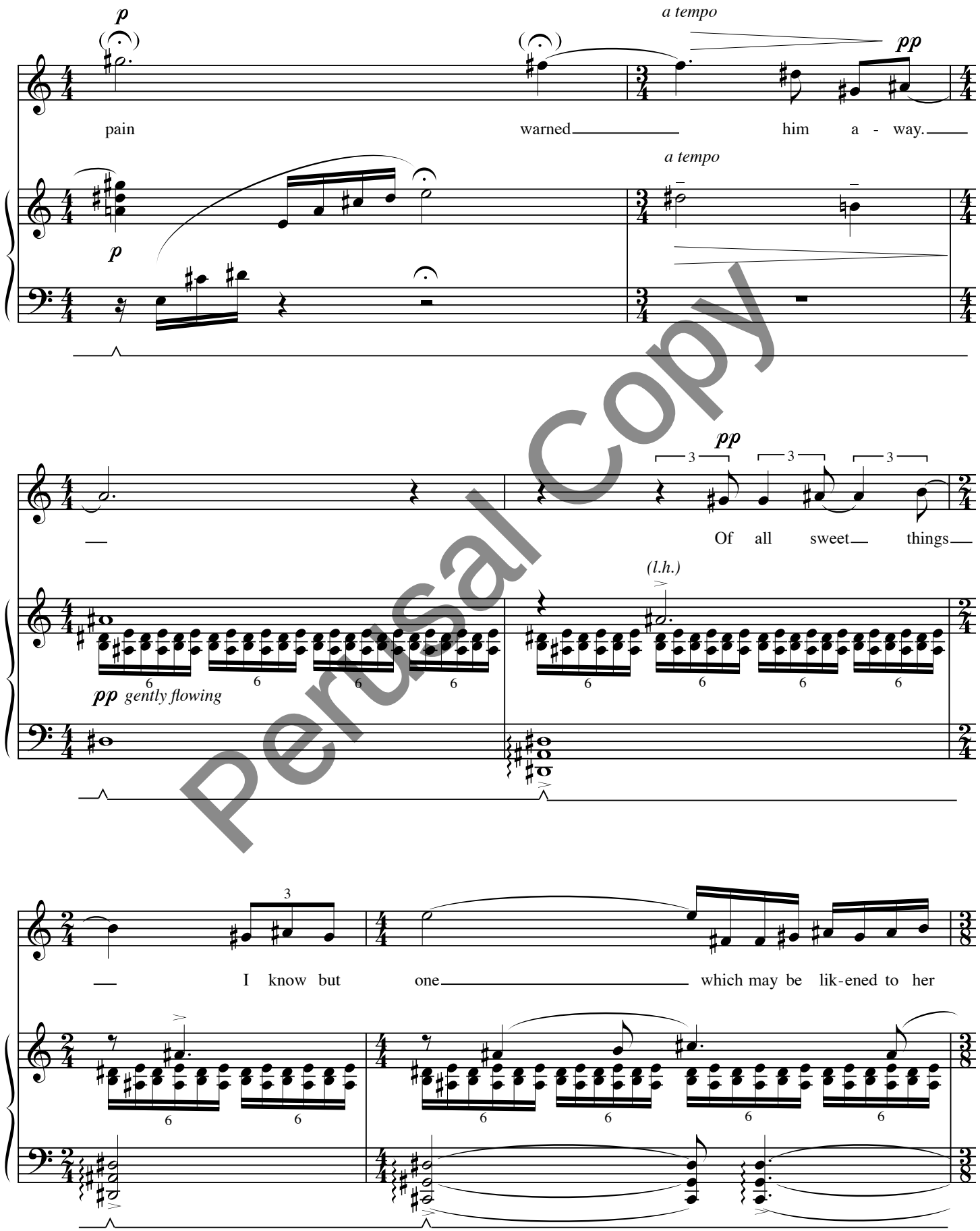

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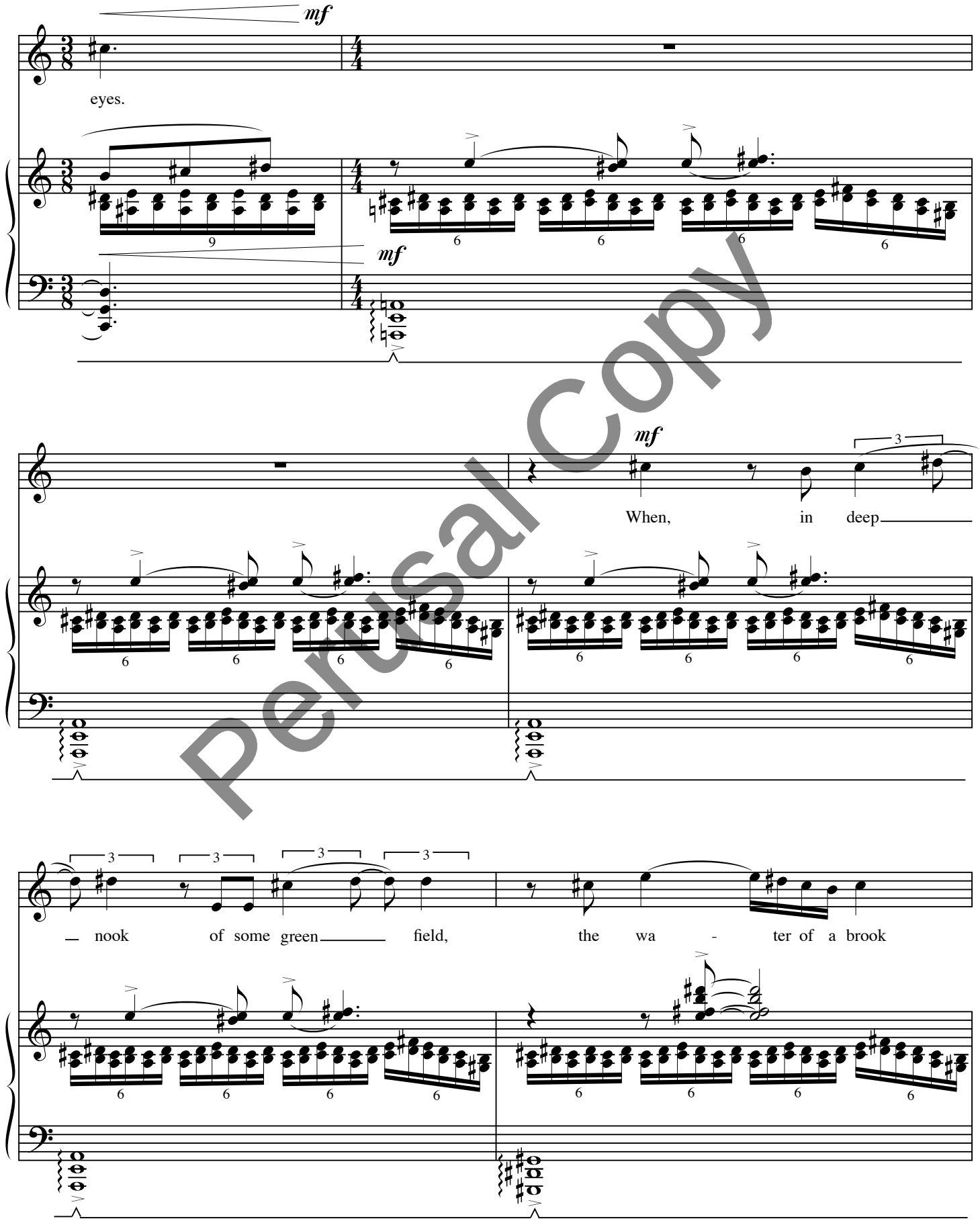

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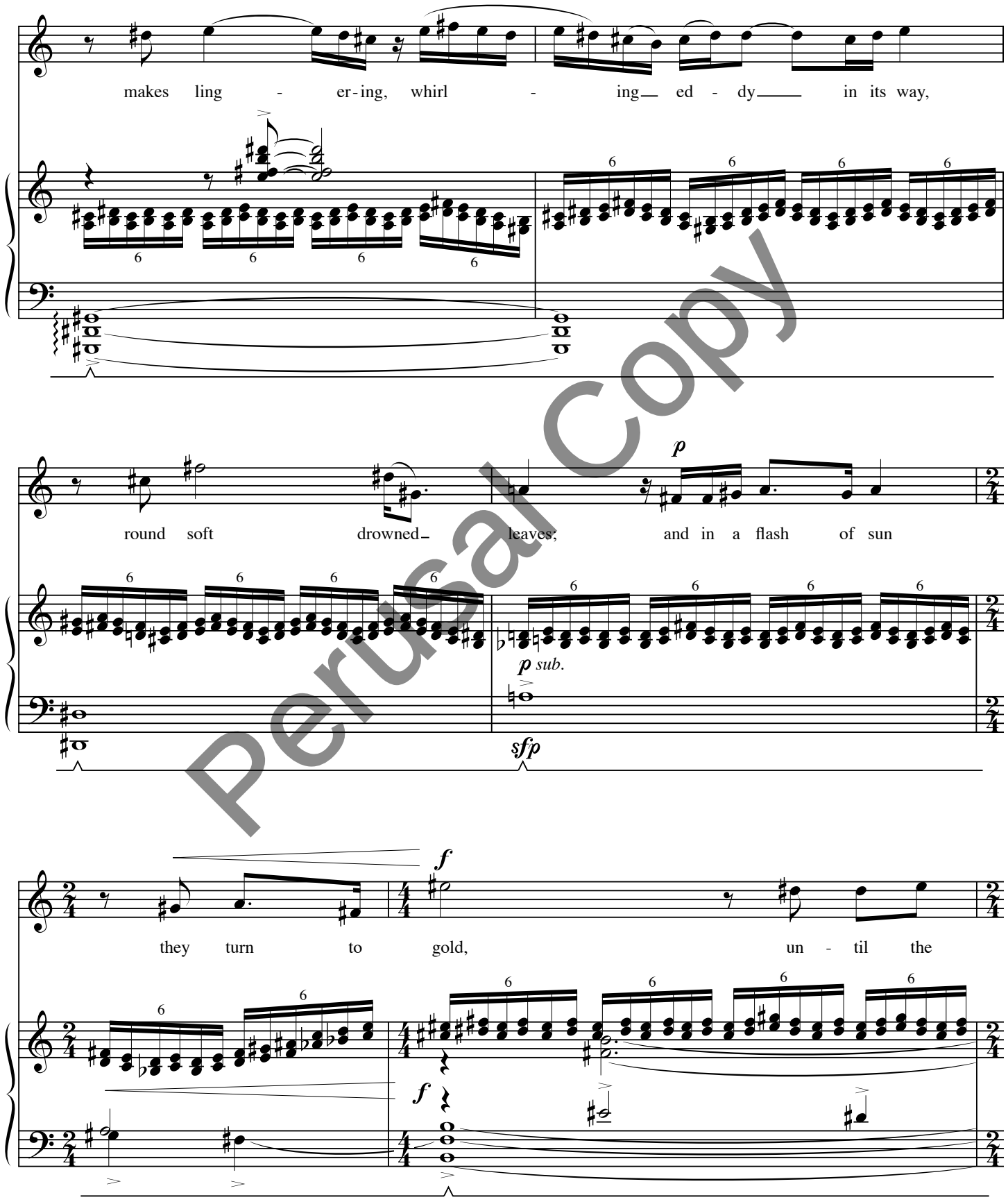

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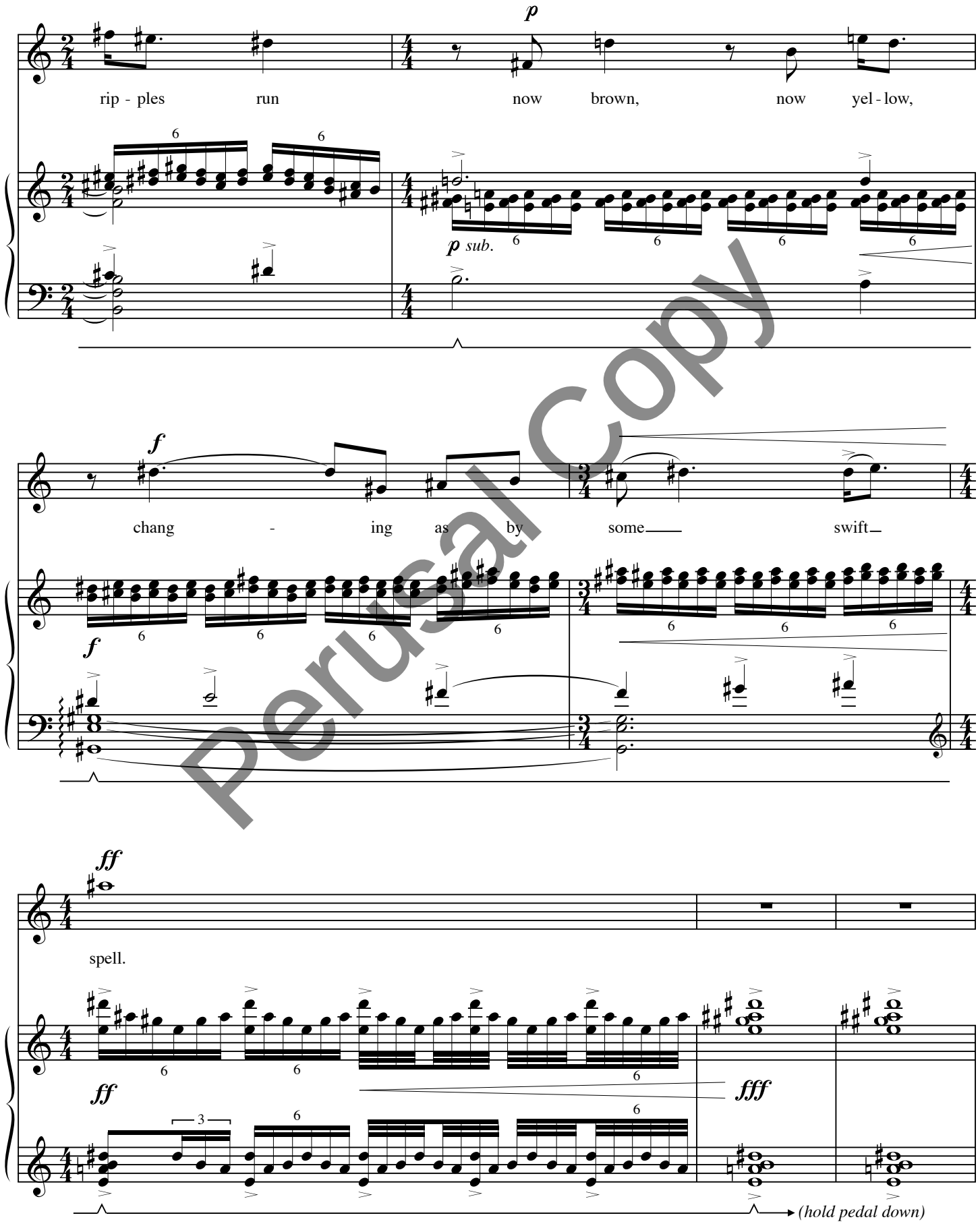

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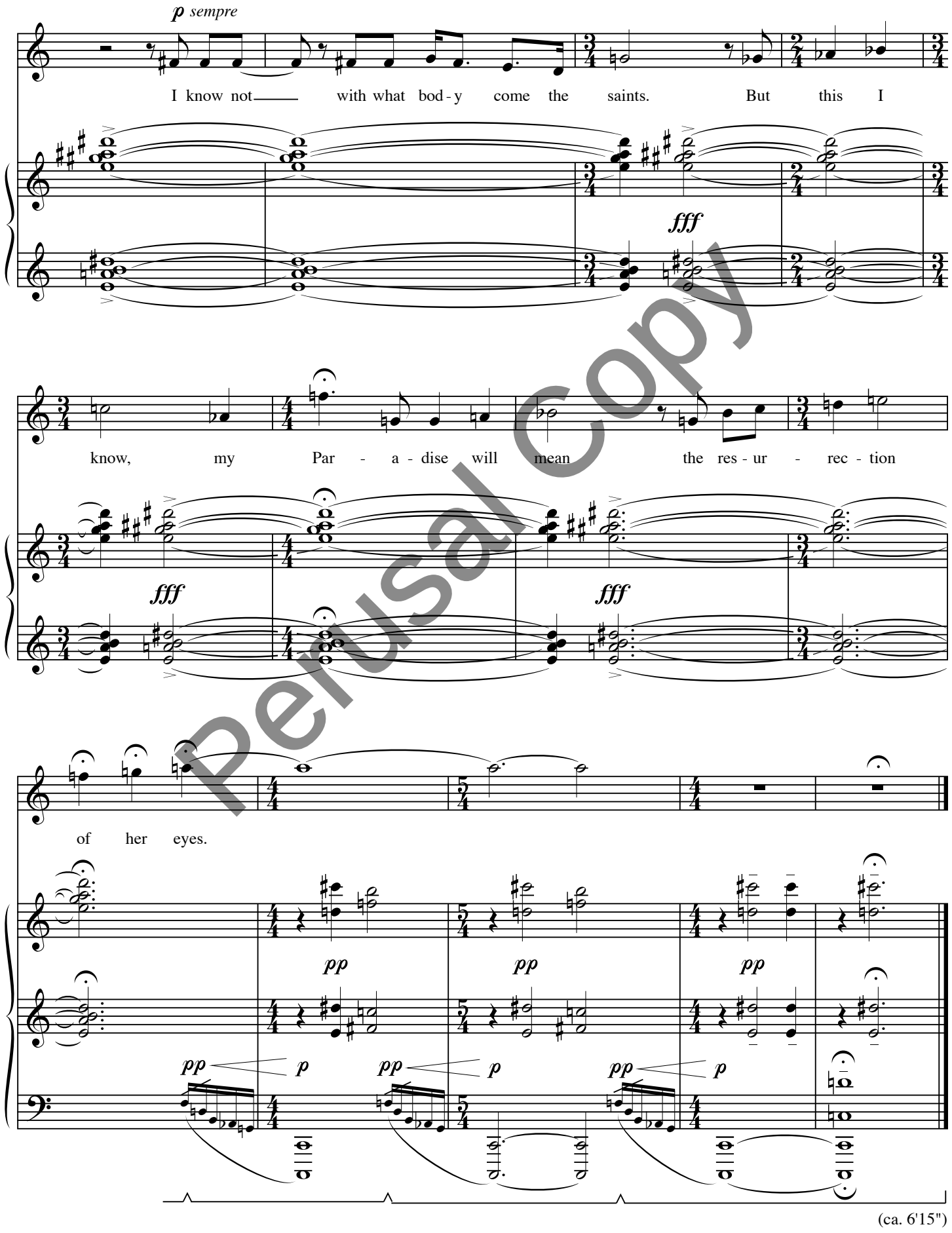

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