Pleasing Myself

Six songs after the textile images of Janet Bolton

For soprano and piano

Words and music by Nigel Morgan

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ISMN 979-0-57043-146-5 (Full Score)

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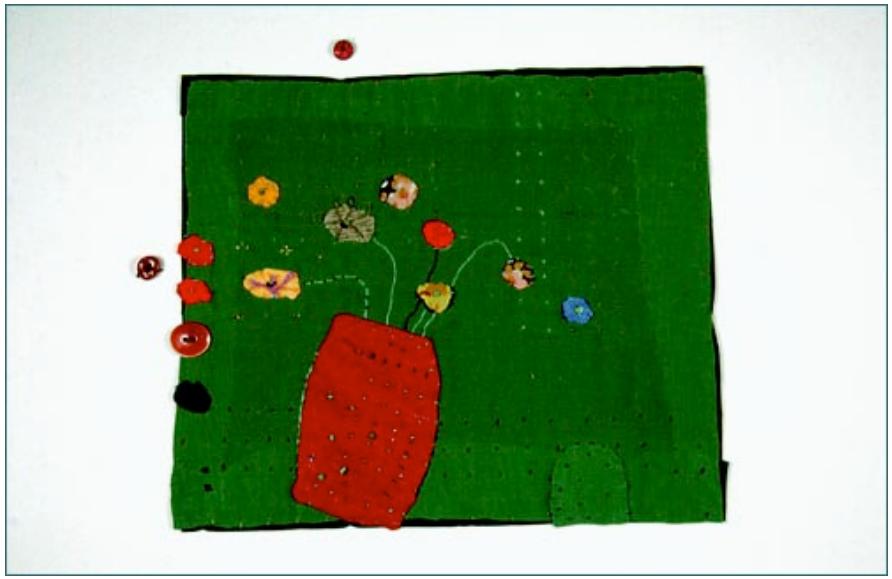
These six songs represent my first venture in creating my own words for music. *Pleasing Myself* began life following a talk and exhibition by Janet Bolton at the Saltaire Festival in 2009. I was smitten by the simplicity and charm of her textile 'stories', miniature quilts that played on and with my imagination. I wrote about my reaction to her images on the Internet and this particular 'blog' continues to receive more hits per day than any other I have written. Janet's textile images I now realise affect many people. They tell stories that relate to the gentle mainstream of personal and family life. When we view them they touch our memories and we invest them with our past and possibly, in what they say about children, our hopes for the future too.

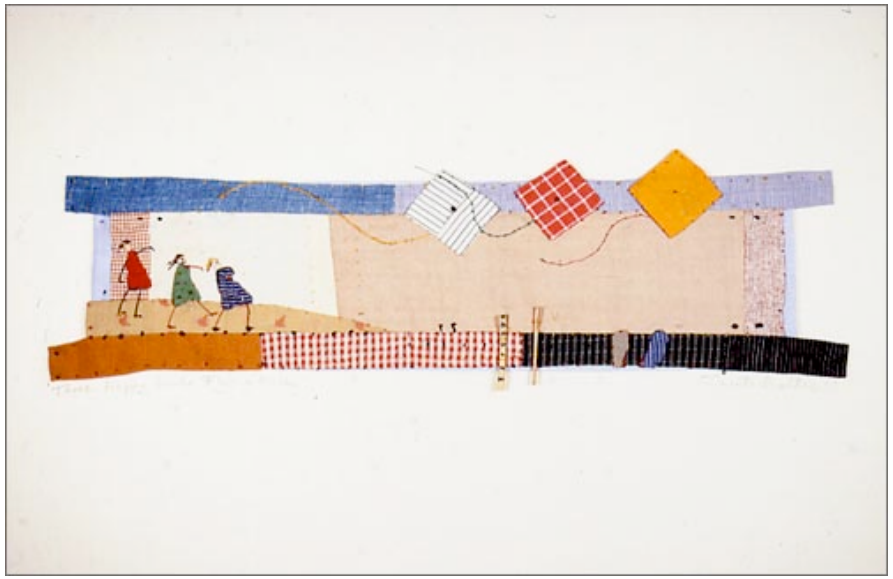
The poems I have written are influenced stylistically by Arthur Waley's timeless translations of poems from the ancient Chinese, poems that I set as a teenager and which still resonate for me today as vividly as they did 40 years ago. The music, almost wholly based on the motif and harmony of the opening bar, explores aspects of harmony someway between Purcell and modal jazz. The keyboard part may be played on electric piano, an instrument found in many of my recent scores including the song cycle *Stone and Flower*. Expressive markings, tempo, dynamics and articulation are to be considered as guides, no more.

Pleasing Myself was written for the mezzo-soprano and actress Philippa Reeves and the pianist Michael Appleton.

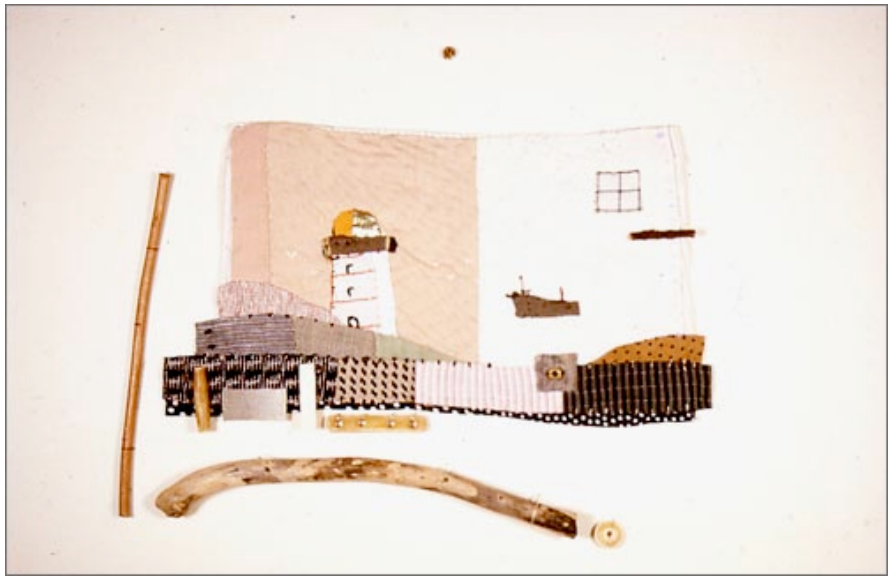
I wake.
The sky is clear blue
above the rooftops
whose shadows the sun
sharpens on the grass.
Dew on bare toes,
the limb-caressing air,
my garden breathes, waits, breathes
for you
these flowers . . .
I gather them against my breasts
and lay them flat
on a cold slab,
cut, then grasp their stems as one:
to place in the red flower vase.



Clearing the town
of its Sunday streets,
up to the close-cropped
grass of playing fields
green and red and blue
frocked girls pig-tailed
in the Spring wind
brace their yet-to-be-shaped
bodies against the breeze
tugging at their kites
tossed in the air
by invisible hands . . .
Turn and spin,
climb and soar,
float, dive, dive, float
spin, float, spin, climb
and soar.

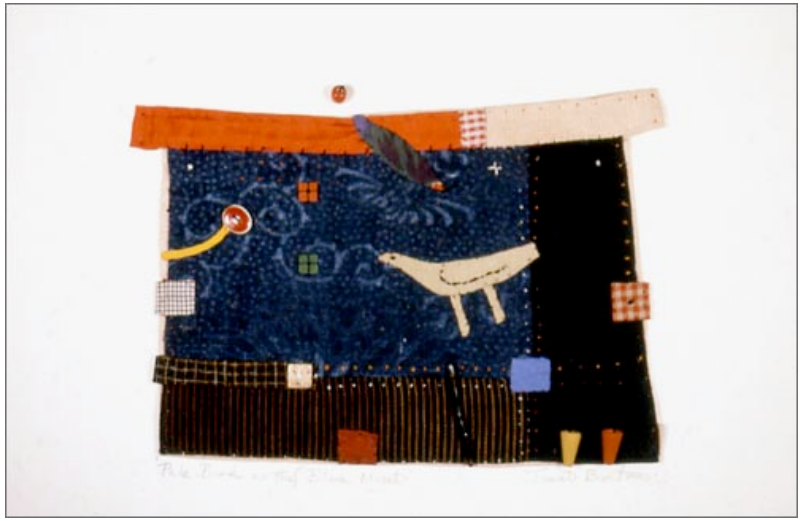


I shield my eyes
against the glare
and see the lighthouse
far distant
stand erect
before the sleeping sea
the tired strand
where seabirds wade
children play and
parents guard their
moves and makings.
. . . at my feet
the detritus of time:
tide-gathered wood,
salt-stripped,
sea-stained yet
polished by the restless
turn and tilt
of the absent moon.



(Chorus)

There is a pale bird
In the blue night.
It stays awake
Beneath my window.
It does not sing.
It has no call,
And in the morning
It is gone.



(Verse I)

Life so rich.
Thoughts so full.
Intentions mainly
Firm and good and strong.
My children sleep.
And I at peace,
My husband's arms
Surround my selfish foes and fears.

(Verse 2)

Oh palest bird,
With moon and stars
Your only friends,
You keep this vigil long.
Sing in my heart
A silent song
To reach beyond
The curtain of my doubts and dreams

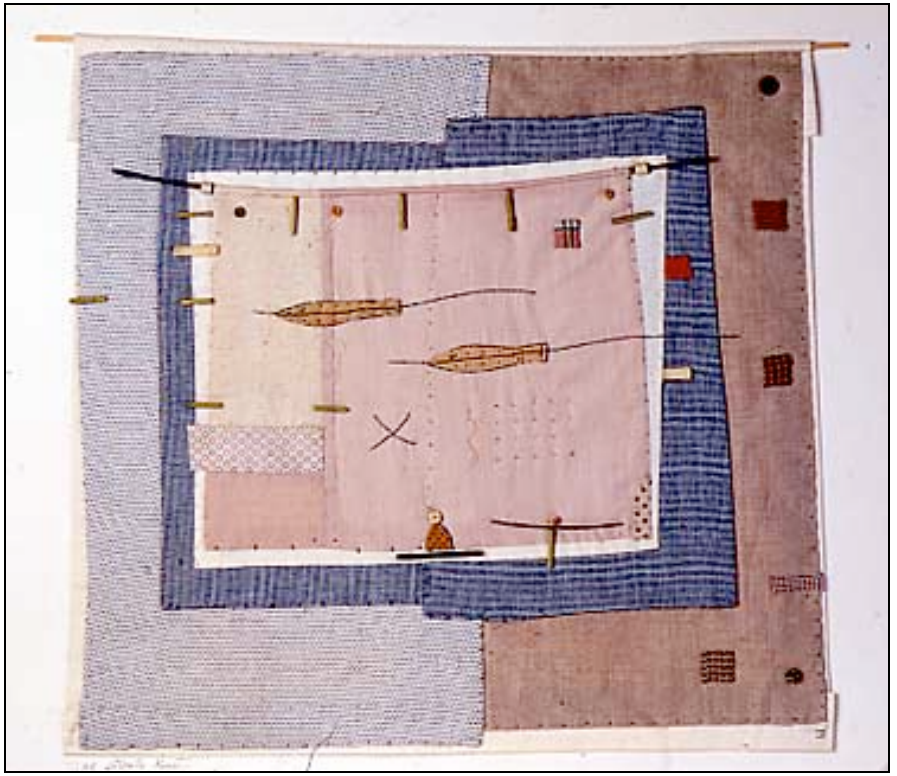
(Verse 3)

And then one night
I'll sense you've gone.
Oh pale bird taken
From its garden home.
What will I do?
Where shall I go?
The door now closed
On tenderness in sight and sound.

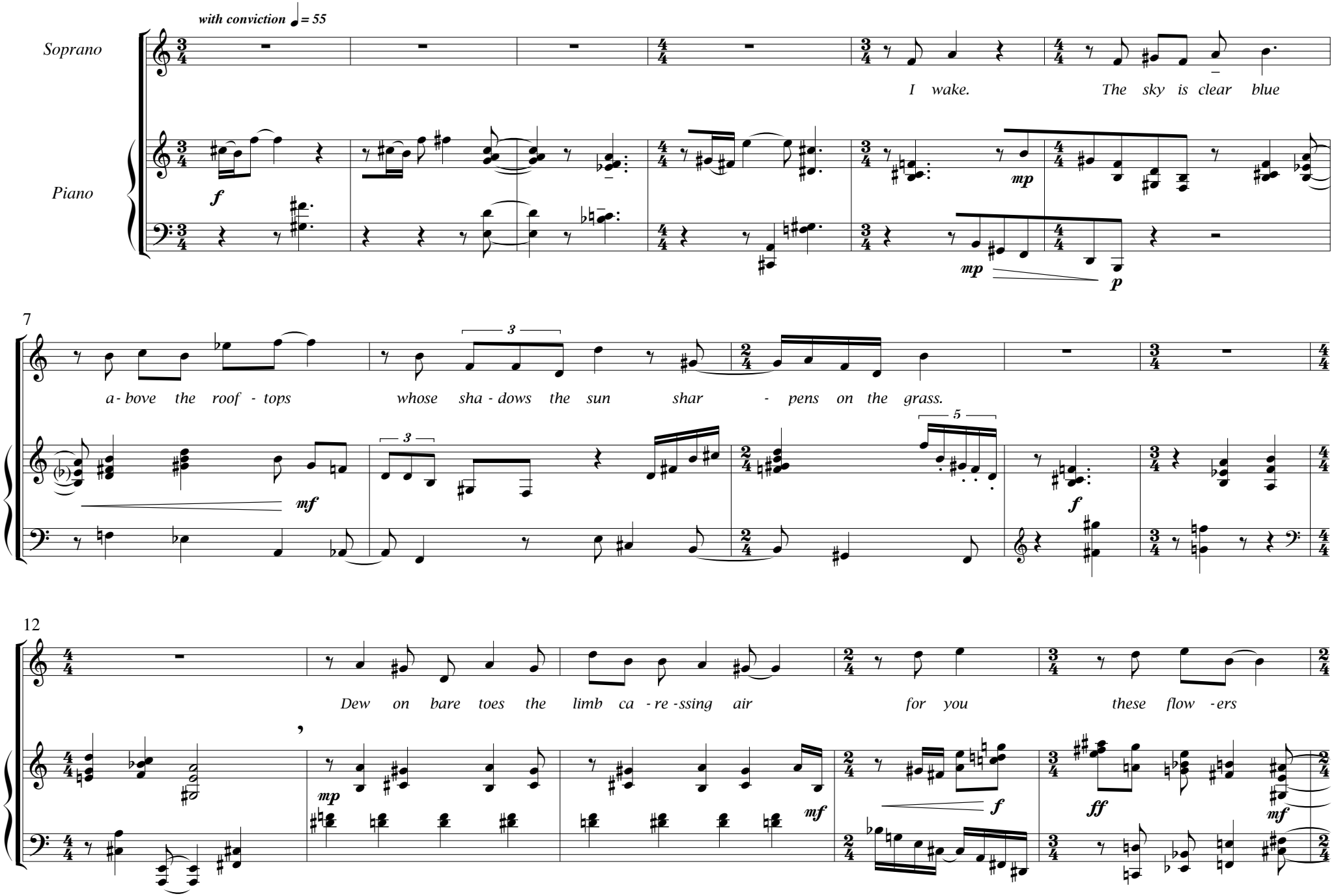
Oh sweet garden.
Dearest friend,
My conscience,
Confidant,
Companion-perennial,
My hands' desire,
Let me be your Guardian
Angel among the flowers.
Not for me
H.C. Anderson's grisly tale
of sunbeams and sick children,
with the angel filching the flowers
to bloom more brightly in
heaven than on earth.
God forbid!
My garden is my heaven,
and I'll make myself wings
if I must
to fool such
fair-weather flowers.

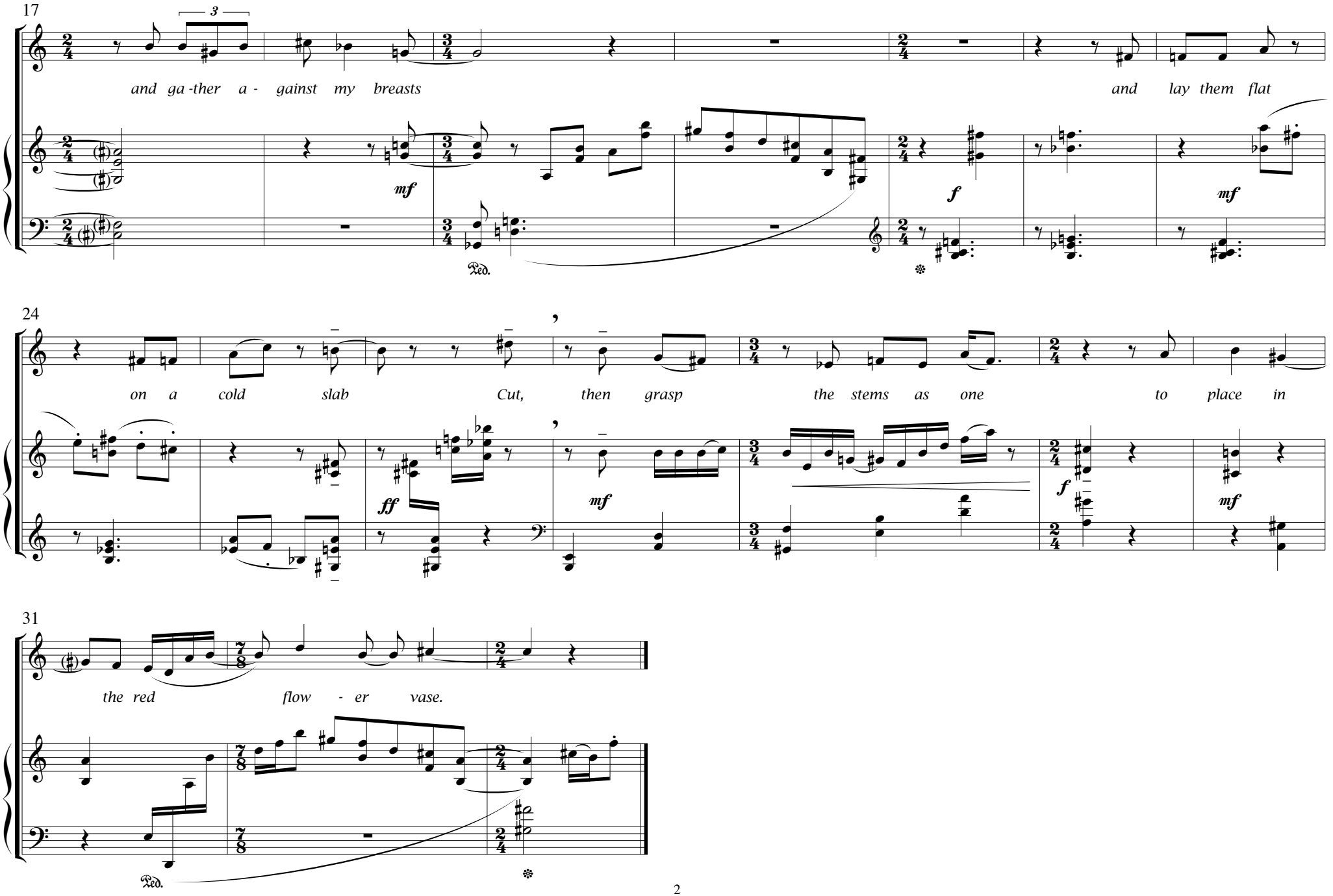
As the light dies
I pace the field edge
to the square pond
enclosed, hedged and treed.
The water,
once revealed,
lies cold
in the still air.

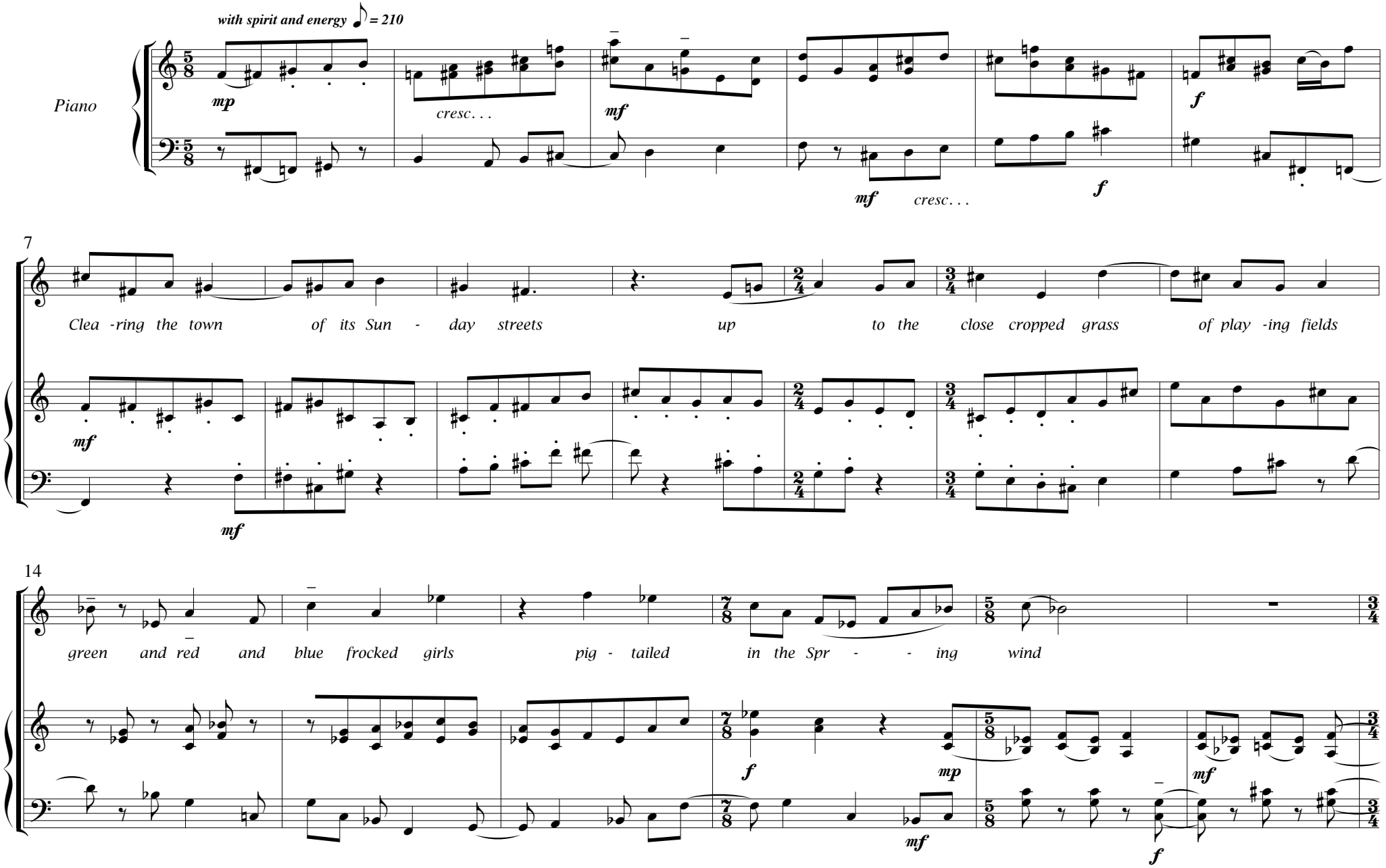
At its bank,
solitary,
I let my thoughts of you
float on the surface.
And like two boats
moored abreast
at the season's end,
our reflections merge
in one dark form.

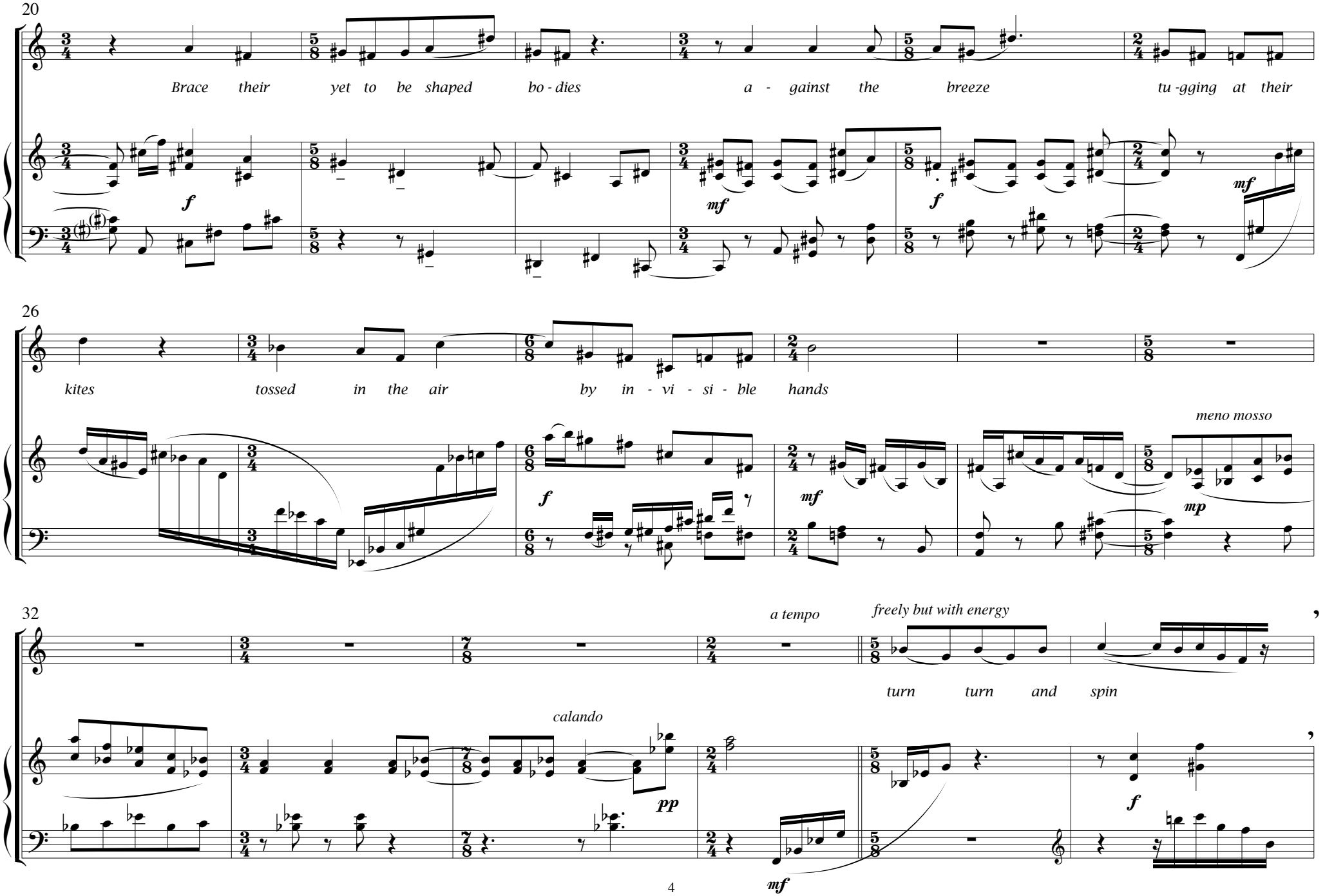


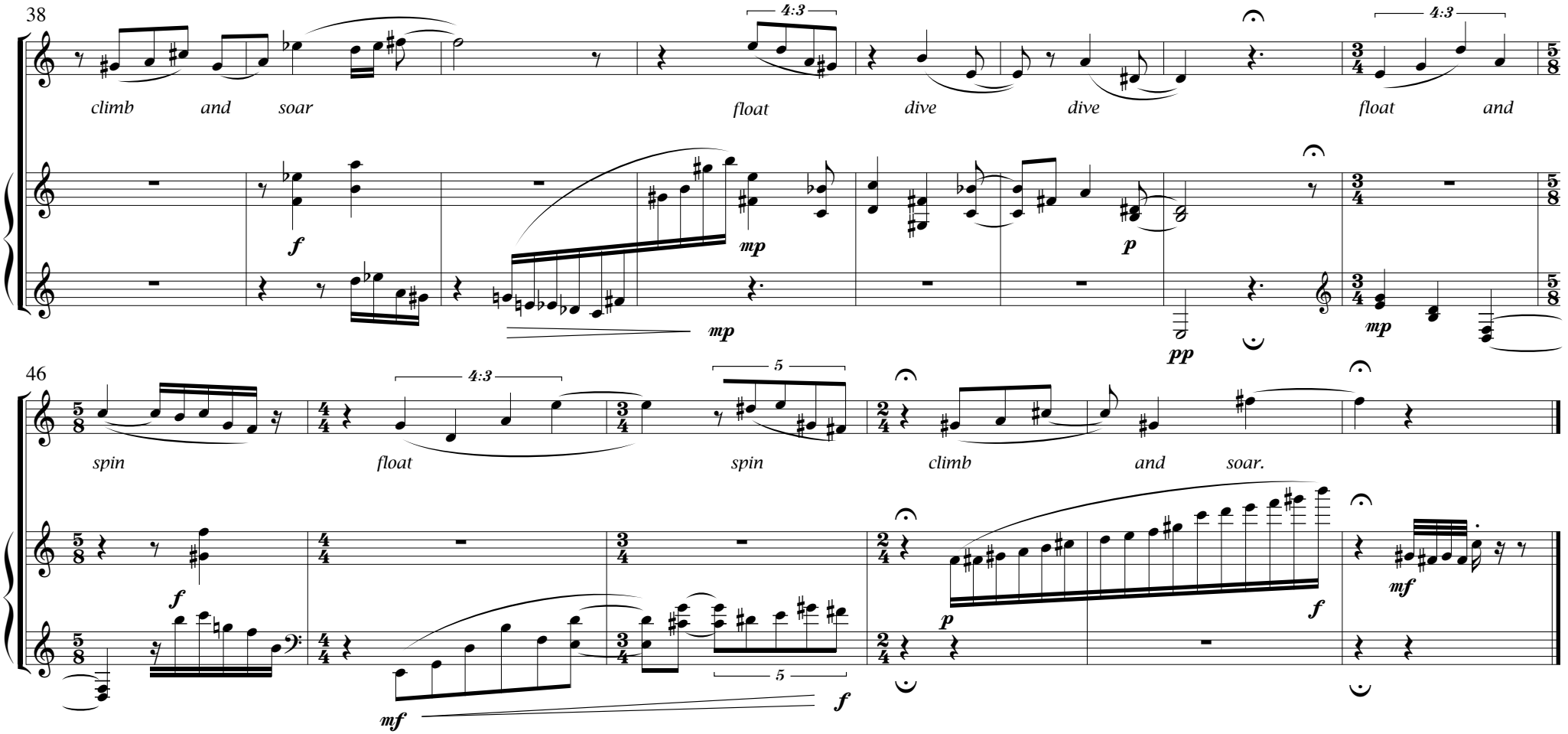
The Red Flower Vase

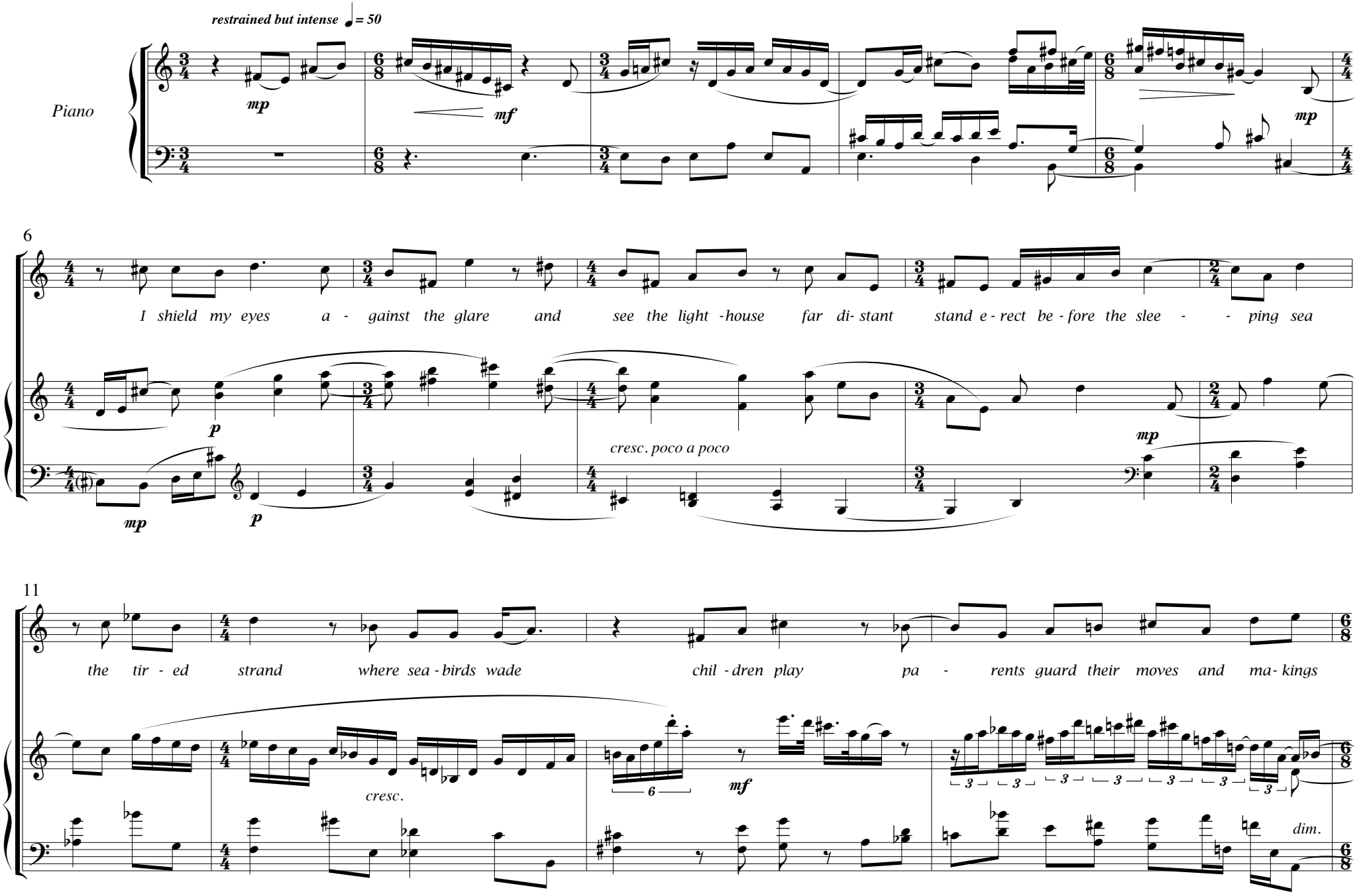


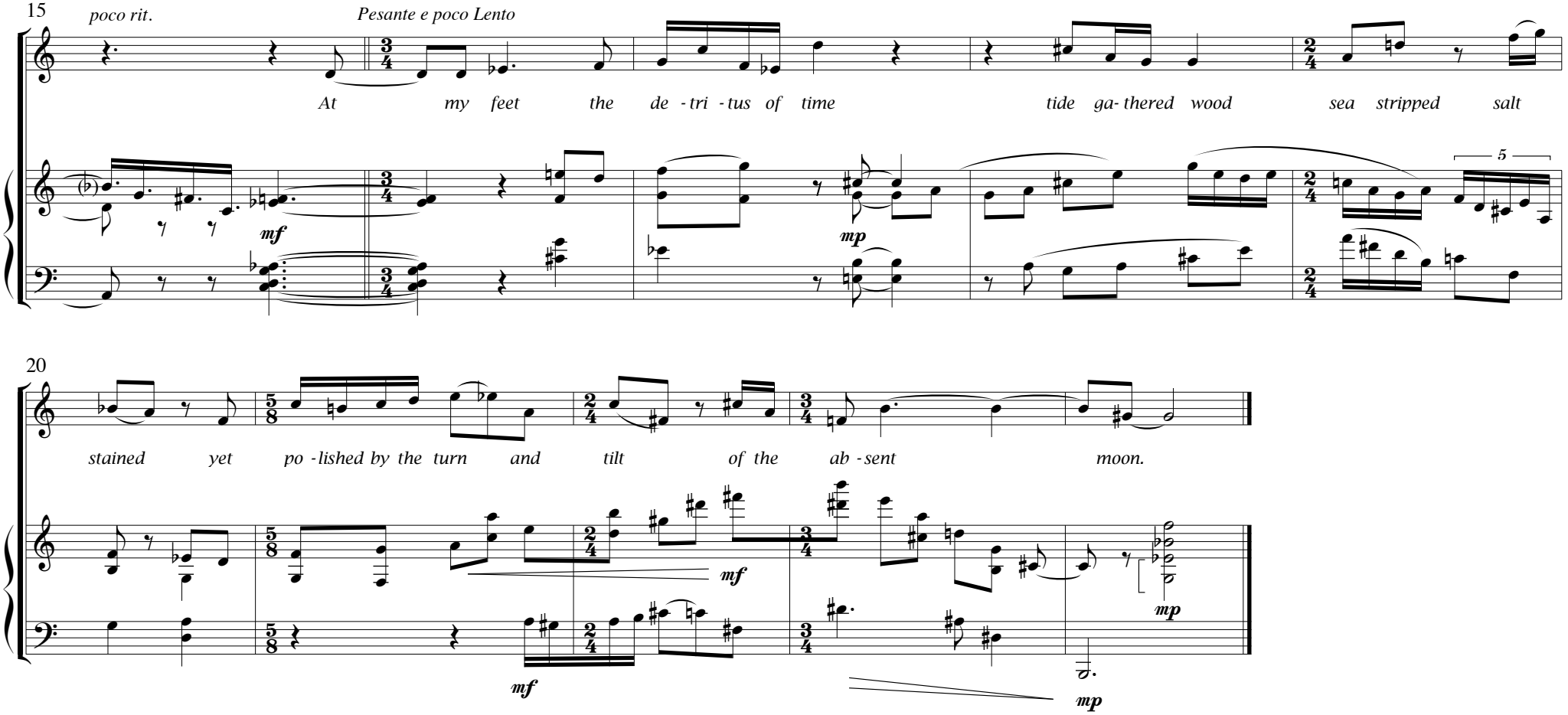

17
and ga -ther a - gainst my breasts
and lay them flat
24
on a cold slab
Cut, then grasp
the stems as one
to place in
31
the red
flow - er
vase.

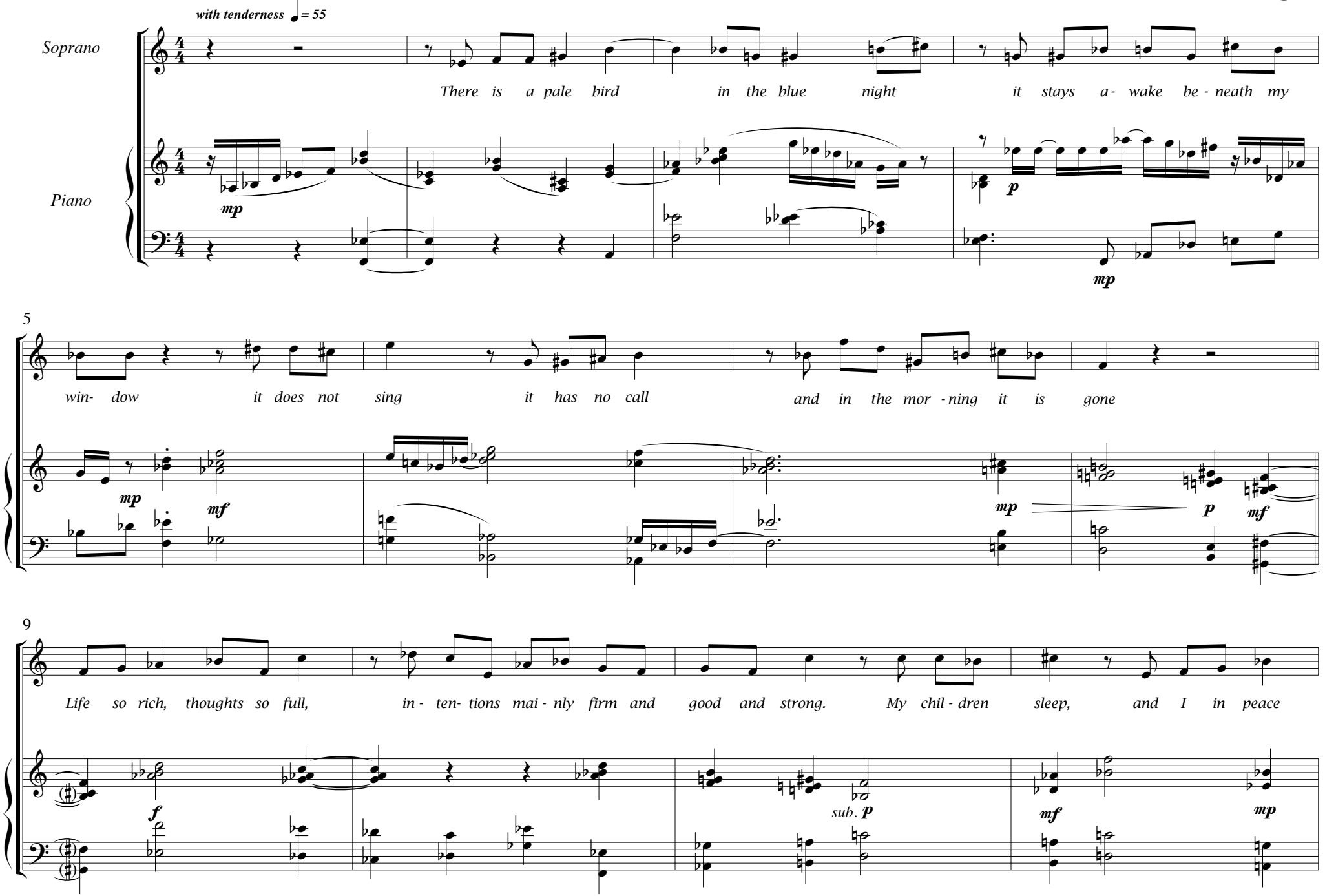

with spirit and energy ♪ = 210
Piano
mp
cresc. . .
mf
mf
cresc. . .
f
f
7
Clea -ring the town of its Sun - day streets up to the close cropped grass of play -ing fields
mf
mf
14
green and red and blue frocked girls pig - tailed in the Spr - - ing wind
f
mp
mf
mf
f

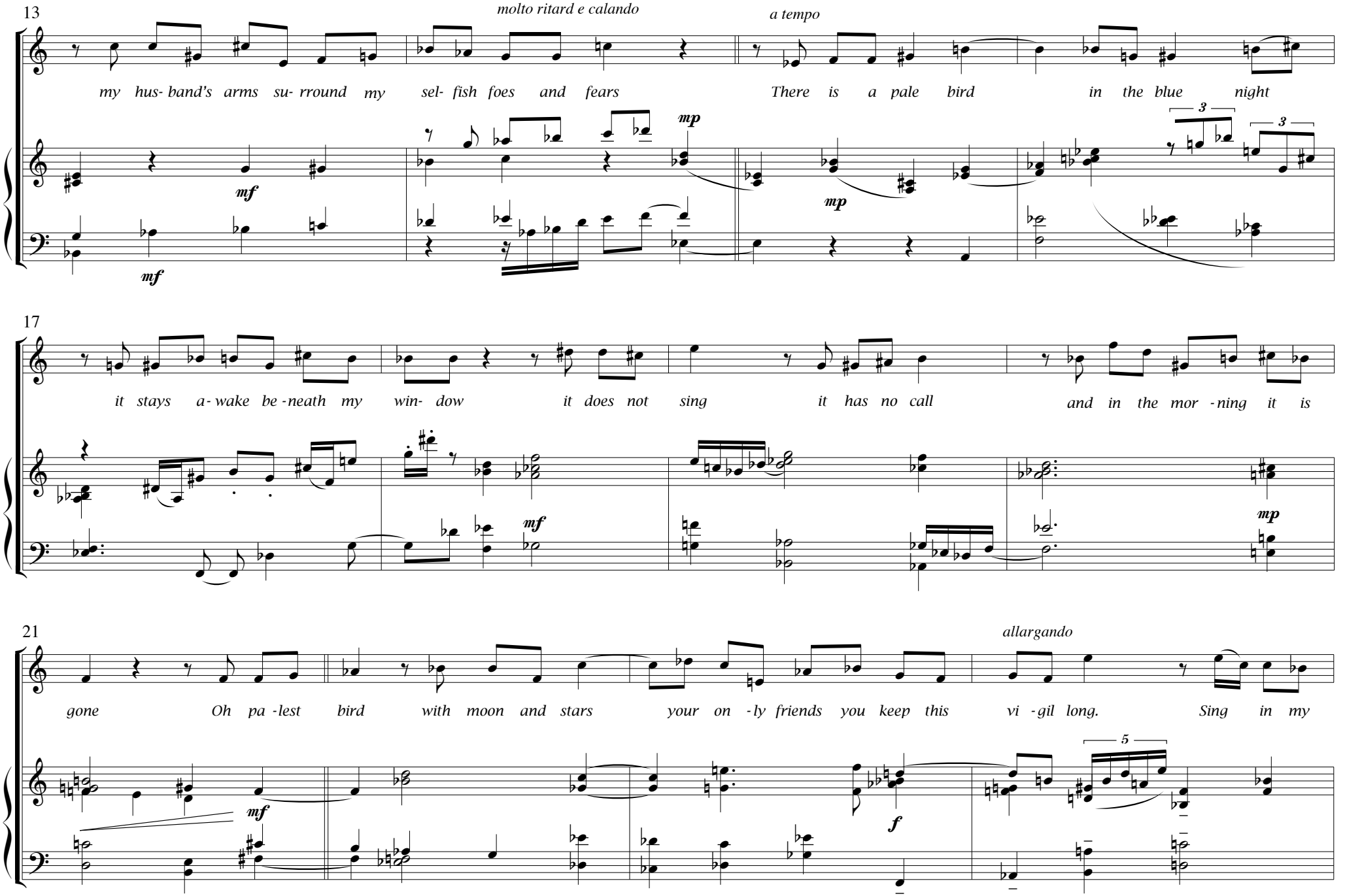

20
Brace their yet to be shaped bo - dies a - gainst the breeze tu -gging at their
26
kites tossed in the air by in - vi - si - ble hands
meno mosso
32
a tempo
freely but with energy
turn turn and spin
calando

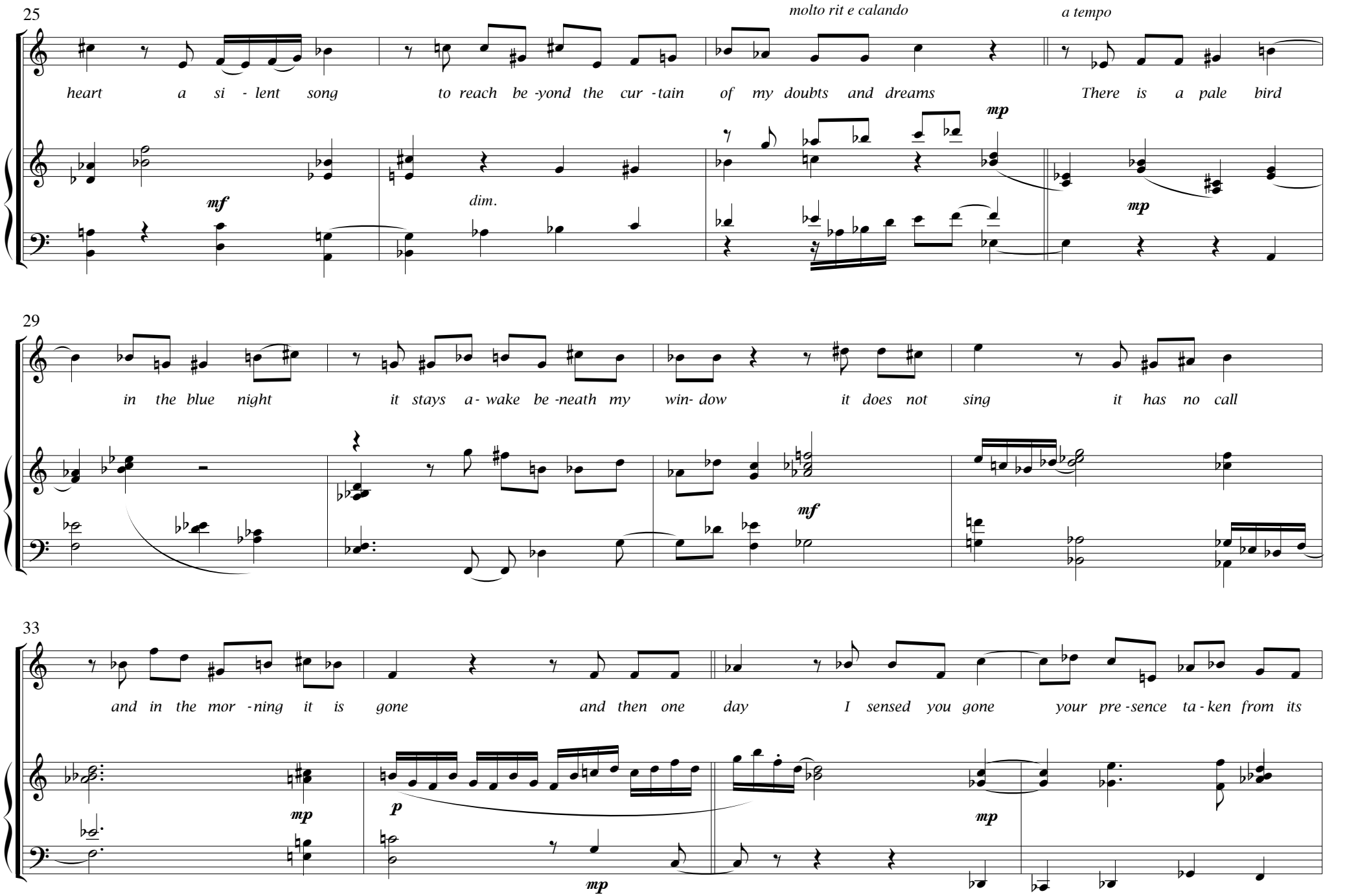

38
climb and soar
4:3
float
dive
dive
4:3
float and
46
spin
4:3
float
spin
5
climb and soar.
5

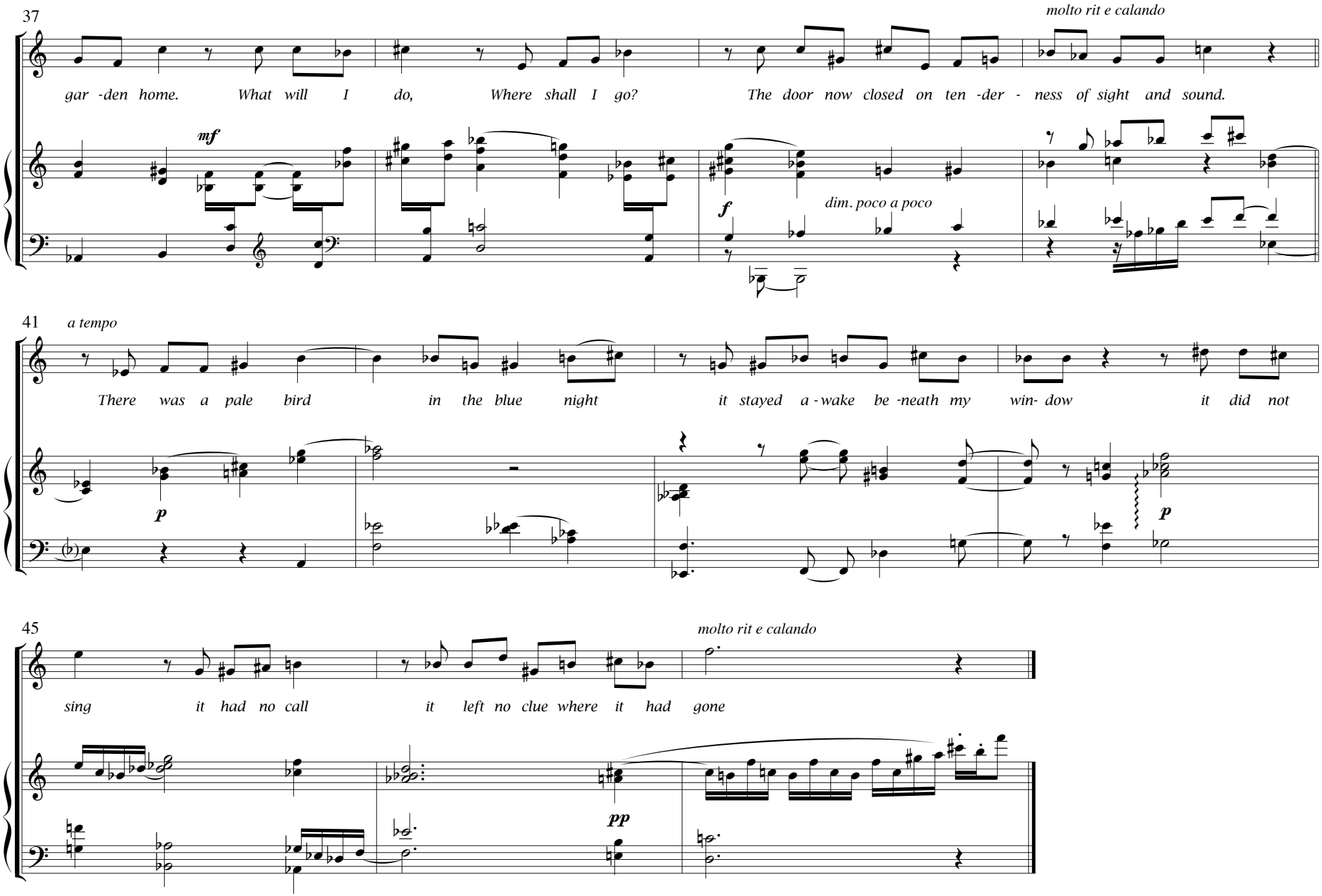

restrained but intense ♩ = 50
Piano
mp
mf
mp
6
I shield my eyes a - gainst the glare and see the light -house far di- stant stand e - rect be - fore the slee - - ping sea
p
mp
p
cresc. poco a poco
mp
11
the tir - ed strand where sea - birds wade chil - dren play pa - rents guard their moves and ma- kings
cresc.
6
mf
dim.

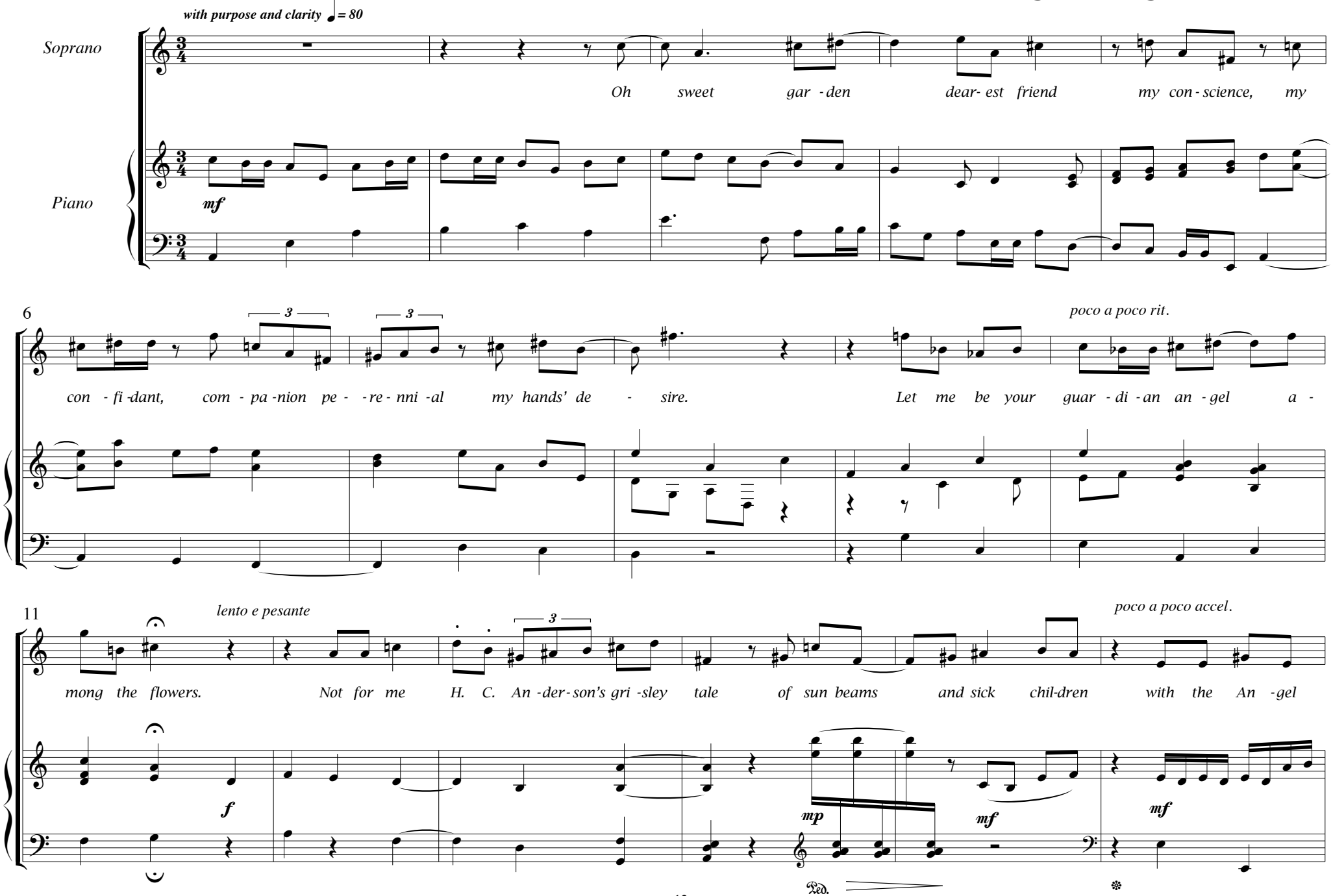

15
poco rit.
Pesante e poco Lento
At my feet the de - tri - tus of time
tide ga- thered wood
sea stripped salt
mf
mp
5
20
stained yet po - lished by the turn and tilt of the ab - sent moon.
mf
mf
mp
mp

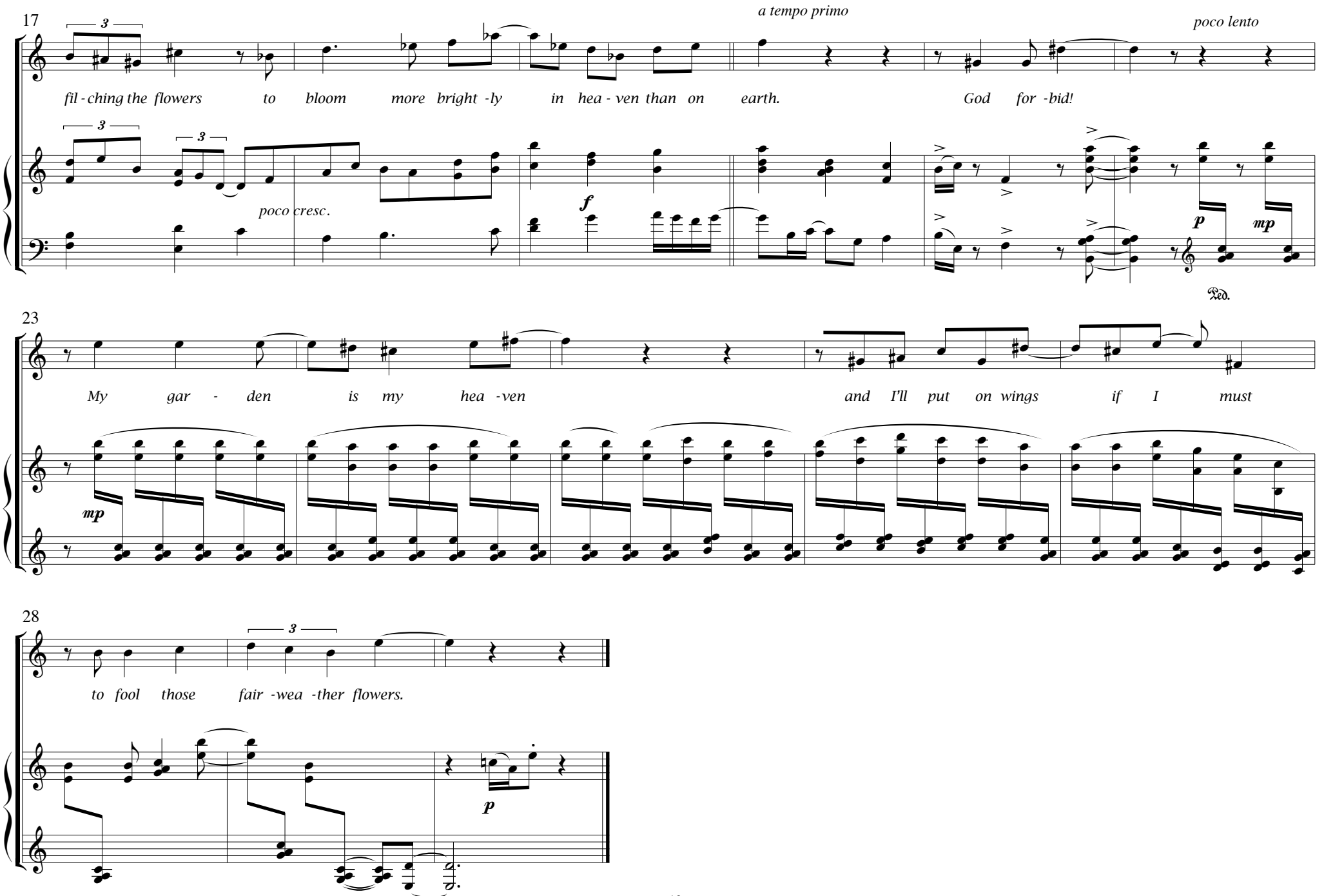

with tenderness ♩= 55
Soprano
Piano
There is a pale bird in the blue night it stays a- wake be- neath my
win- dow it does not sing it has no call and in the mor- ning it is gone
Life so rich, thoughts so full, in- ten- tions mai- nly firm and good and strong. My chil- dren sleep, and I in peace
sub. p
5
9

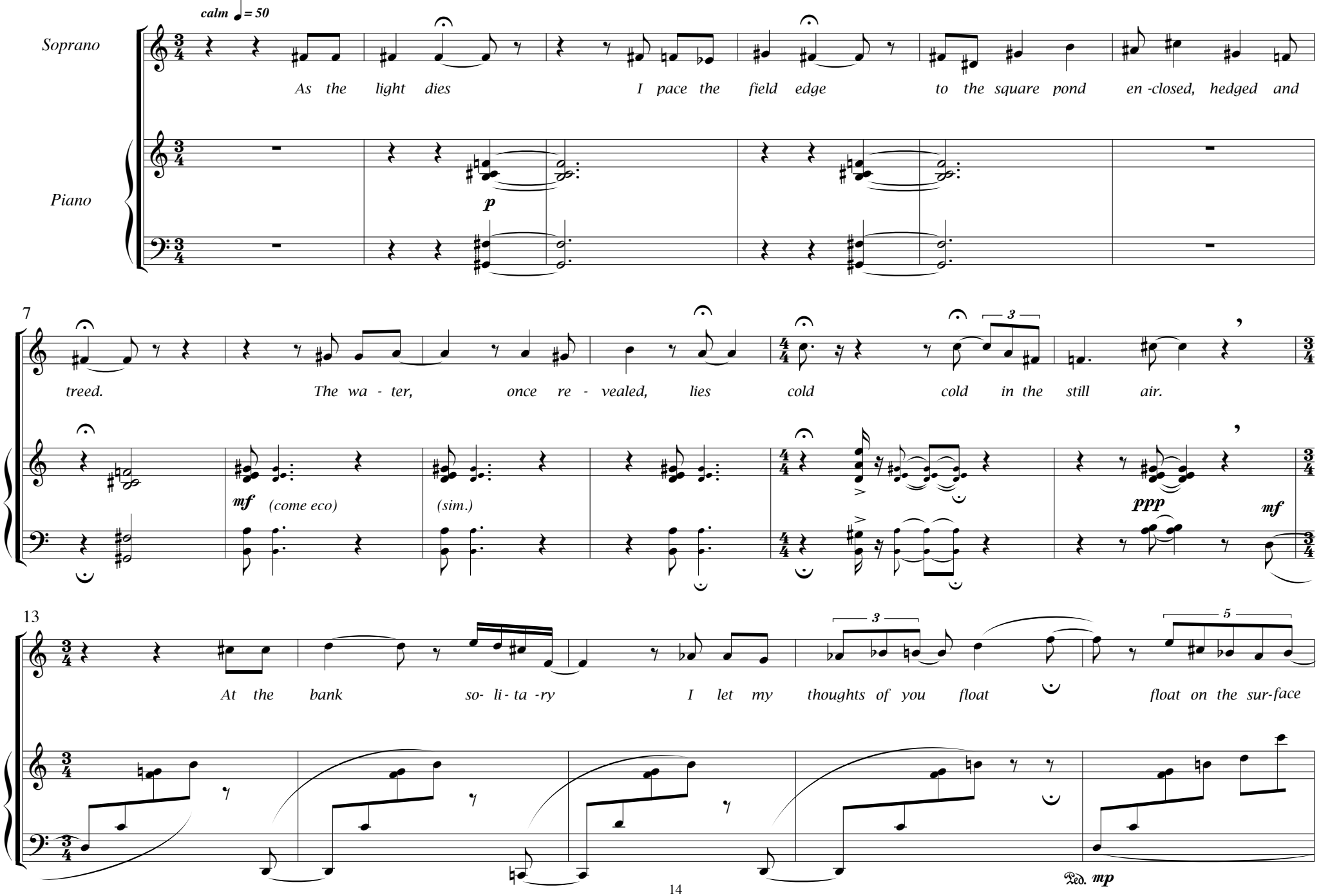

13
molto ritard e calando
a tempo
my hus- band's arms su- rround my sel- fish foes and fears
There is a pale bird in the blue night
mf
mf
mp
mp
3
3
17
it stays a- wake be -neath my win- dow it does not sing it has no call and in the mor -ning it is
mf
mp
21
allargando
gone Oh pa -lest bird with moon and stars your on -ly friends you keep this vi -gil long. Sing in my
mf
f
5

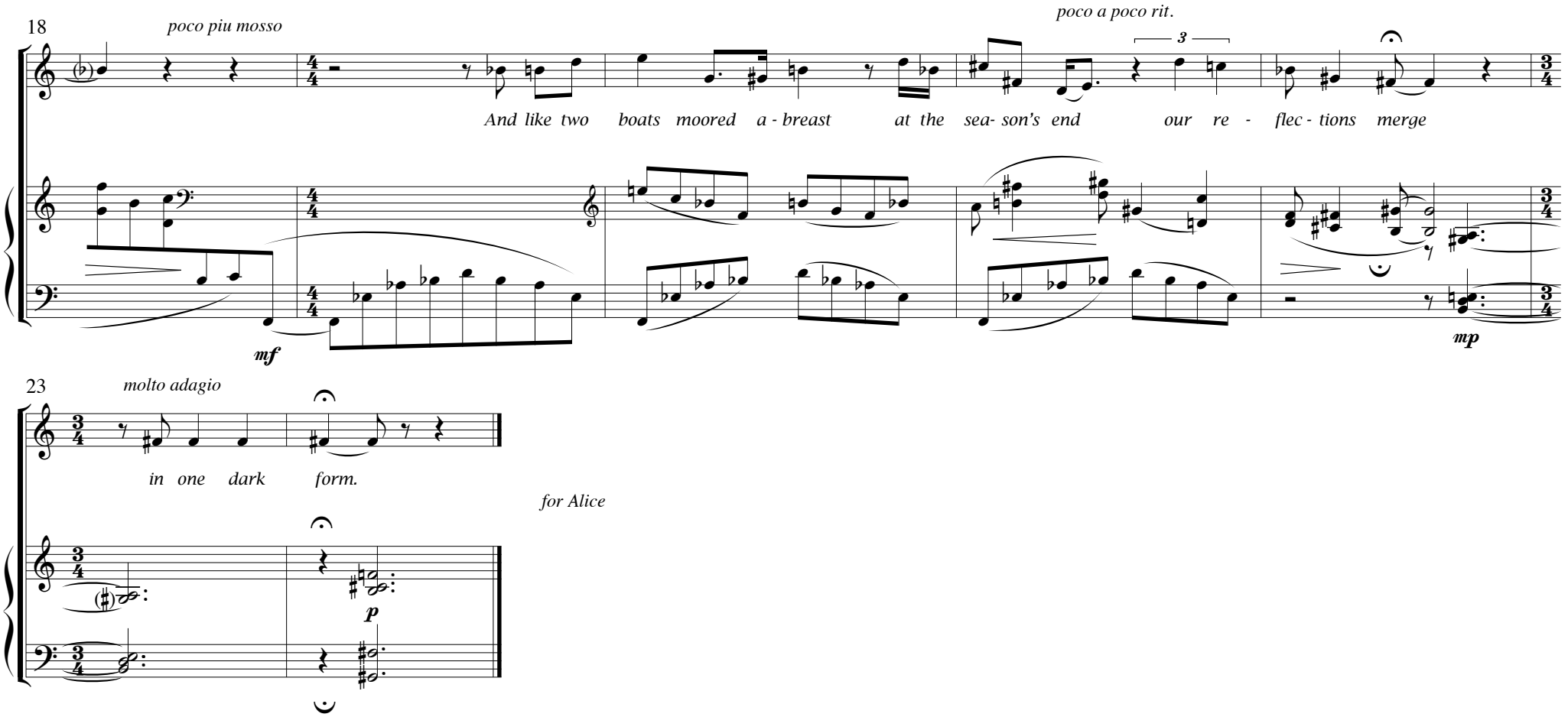

25
molto rit e calando
a tempo
heart a si - lent song to reach be -yond the cur -tain of my doubts and dreams There is a pale bird
mf
dim.
mp
mp
29
in the blue night it stays a - wake be -neath my win- dow it does not sing it has no call
mf
33
and in the mor -ning it is gone and then one day I sensed you gone your pre -sence ta - ken from its
mp
p
mp
mp


37
molto rit e calando
gar -den home. What will I do, Where shall I go? The door now closed on ten -der - ness of sight and sound.
mf
f
dim. poco a poco
41
a tempo
There was a pale bird in the blue night it stayed a -wake be -neath my win- dow it did not
p
p
45
molto rit e calando
sing it had no call it left no clue where it had gone
pp


with purpose and clarity ♩= 80
Soprano
Piano
mf
Oh sweet gar - den dear- est friend my con - science, my
6
3
3
poco a poco rit.
con - fi -dant, com - pa -nion pe - - re - nni -al my hands' de - sire. Let me be your guar - di - an an - gel a -
11
lento e pesante
poco a poco accel.
mong the flowers. Not for me H. C. An -der- son's gri -sley tale of sun beams and sick chil-dren with the An -gel
f
mp
mf
mf
Ped.


17
a tempo primo
poco lento
fil - ching the flowers to bloom more bright -ly in hea - ven than on earth. God for -bid!
poco cresc.
f
p
mp
Ped.
23
My gar - den is my hea -ven and I'll put on wings if I must
mp
28
to fool those fair -wea -ther flowers.
p


calm ♩= 50
Soprano
Piano
As the light dies I pace the field edge to the square pond en -closed, hedged and
p
7
treed. The wa - ter, once re - vealed, lies cold cold in the still air.
mf (come eco)
(sim.)
ppp
mf
13
At the bank so- li- ta -ry I let my thoughts of you float float on the sur-face
3
3
5
Ped. mp


18
poco piu mosso
poco a poco rit.
3
And like two boats moored a - breast at the sea- son's end our re - flec - tions merge
mf
mp
23
molto adagio
in one dark form.
for Alice
p