Kelvin Thomson

Babel

for soprano voice and piano

2014

Kelvin Thomson

Babel

for soprano voice and piano

2014

© 2014 by Kelvin Thomson
70 Potters Lane
Barnet
Herts
EN5 5BQ
UK

+44 (0) 7949 069 270
kelvin_thomson@yahoo.com

Babel was commissioned by the PCC of St John's Friern Barnet
for a First World War memorial concert.

The first performance was given by
Tami Tal (soprano), and Kelvin Thomson (piano) at
St John's Friern Barnet, North London on 8th November 2014

Duration: c. 6 minutes

Performance materials available from the composer

Babel

Therefore is the name of it called Babel

AND still we stood and stared far down
Into that ember-glowing town
Which every shaft and shock of fate
Had shorn unto its base. Too late
Came carelessly Serenity.

Now torn and broken houses gaze
On to the rat-infested maze
That once sent up rose-silver haze
To mingle through eternity.

The outlines, once so strongly wrought,
Of city walls, are now a thought
Or jest unto the dead who fought . . .
Foundation for futurity.

The shimmering sands where once there played
Children with painted pail and spade
Are drearly desolate, afraid
To meet Night's dark humanity,

Whose silver cool remakes the dead,
And lays no blame on any head
For all the havoc, fire, and lead,
That fell upon us suddenly.

When all we came to know as good
Gave way to Evil's fiery flood,
And monstrous myths of iron and blood
Seem to obscure God's clarity.

Deep sunk in sin, this tragic star
Sinks deeper still, and wages war
Against itself ; strewn all the seas
With victims of a world disease.
–And we are left to drink the lees
Of Babel's direful prophecy.

OSBERT SlTWELL[1]

[1] Osbert Sitwell, 'Babel' in *The Muse in Arms* ed. by E. B. Osborn (London: John Murray, 1917).

Performance instructions

Piano: where pedal markings are not specified, the pianist should use phrase marks to guide legato pedaling according to taste. The una corda pedal can also be used according to taste.

Programme note

I chose to set Osbert Sitwell's first published poem 'Babel' (1916) in *Babel* for soprano voice and piano, a commissioned song for a First World War memorial event.[2] I was seduced by the poem's direct and vivid metaphorical links, in this case between war's futility and the Tower of Babel's chaos. Sitwell (1892-1969), Edith's younger brother, wrote poetry during his time spent in the trenches near Ypres, and his poem doesn't generate pity for combatants or victims. Nevertheless, I wished to musically encapsulate the disturbing emotions Sitwell's poem stirred in me.

The setting follows the poem's seven stanza structure with overt word-painting. For example, an allusion to a children's nursery rhyme in stanza four (bar 37 ff.) to evoke stanza four's suggested poignant memories: 'where once there played | Children with painted pail and spade'. Or exploiting the full soprano voice range from Middle C to a top $B^{\flat 5}$ to point the word 'world' in the phrase 'With victims of world disease' (bar 97). The hidden connection in this case was a musical cipher based on the letters B-A-B-E-L – translated into musical notes as B-A-B♭-E-G♯

KT

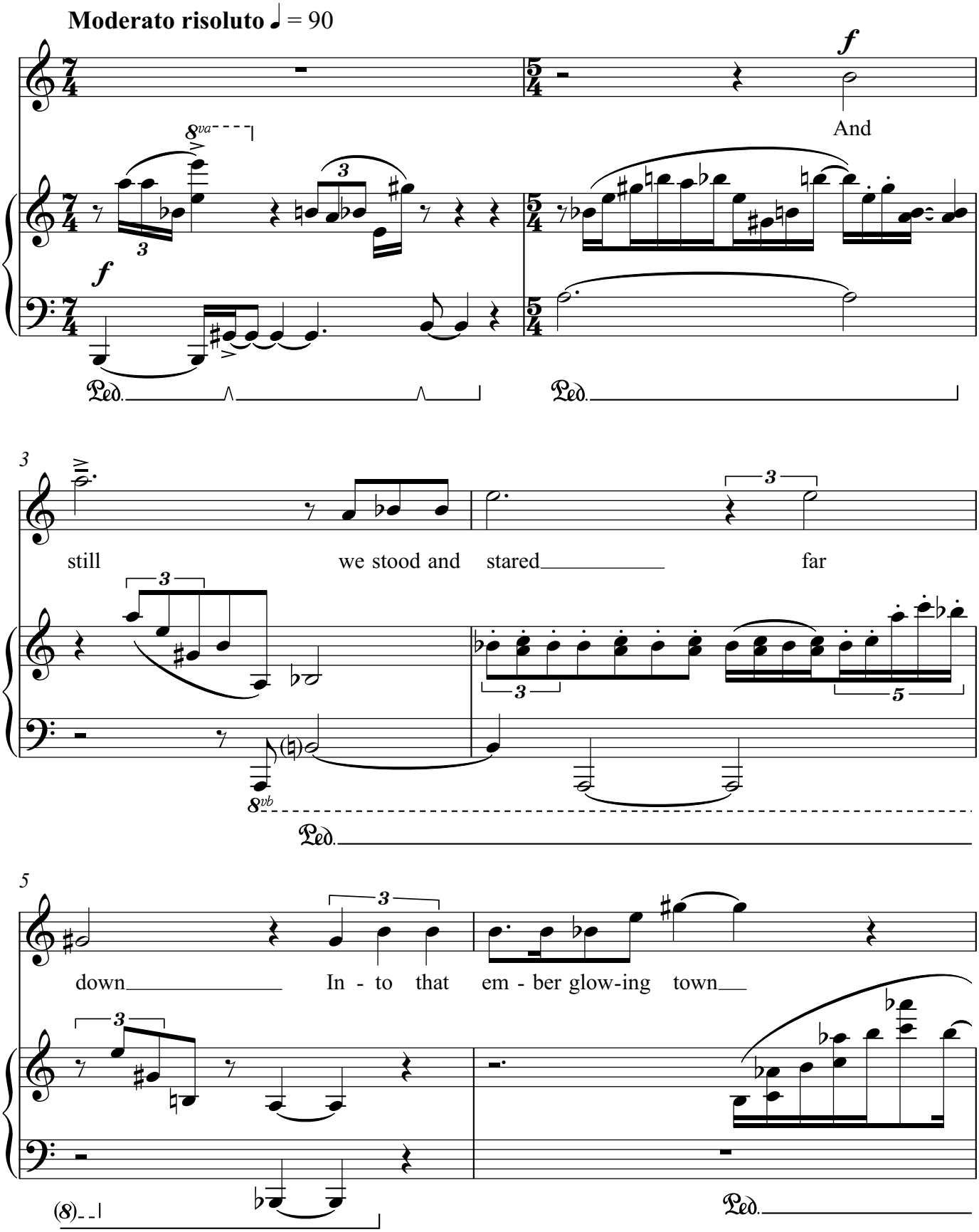
2 Osbert Sitwell, 'Babel' in *The Muse in Arms*, ed. by E. B. Osborn (London: John Murray, 1917), p. 38, in *Internet Archive*

Copyright held by David Higham Associates.

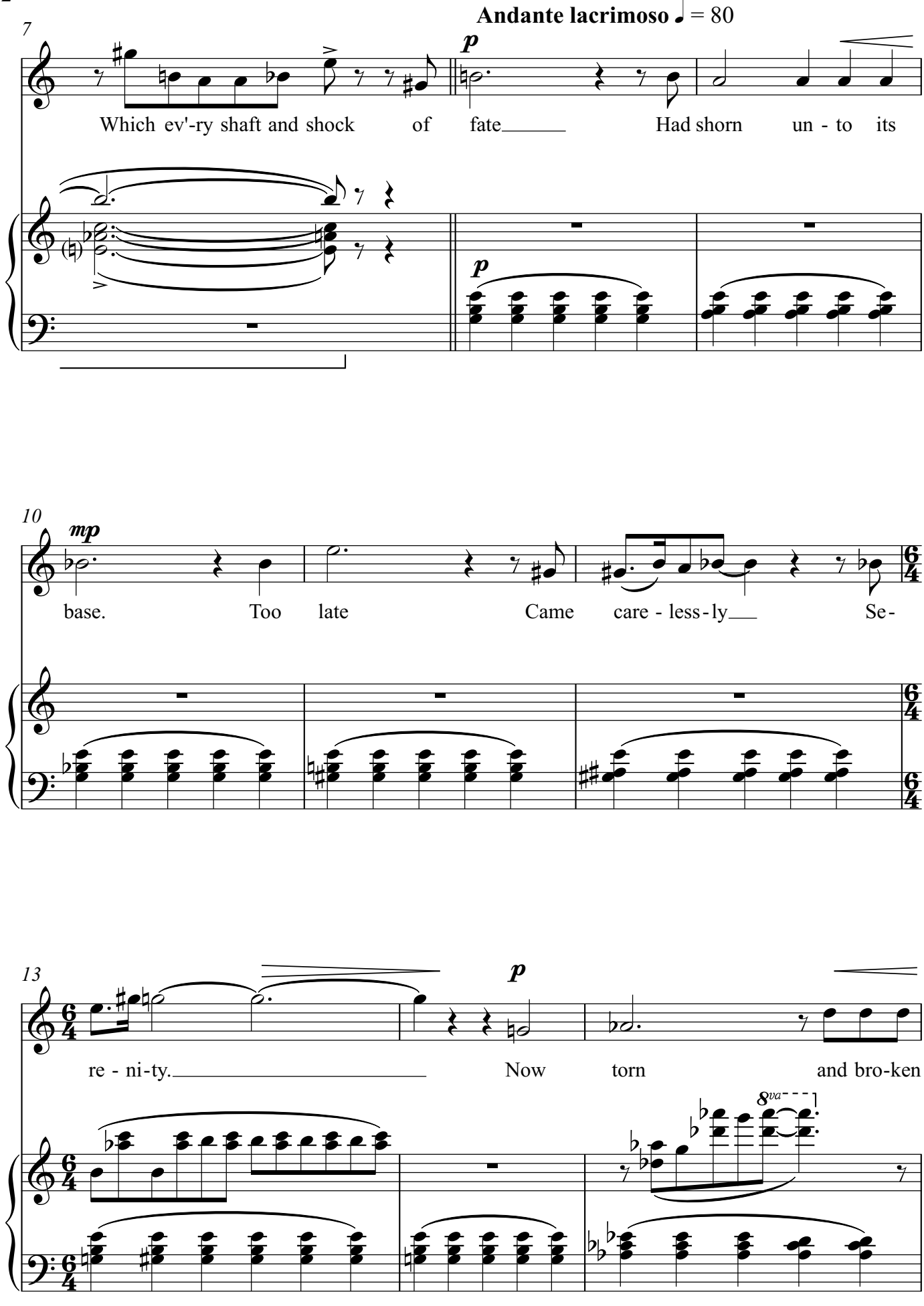
for Nigel

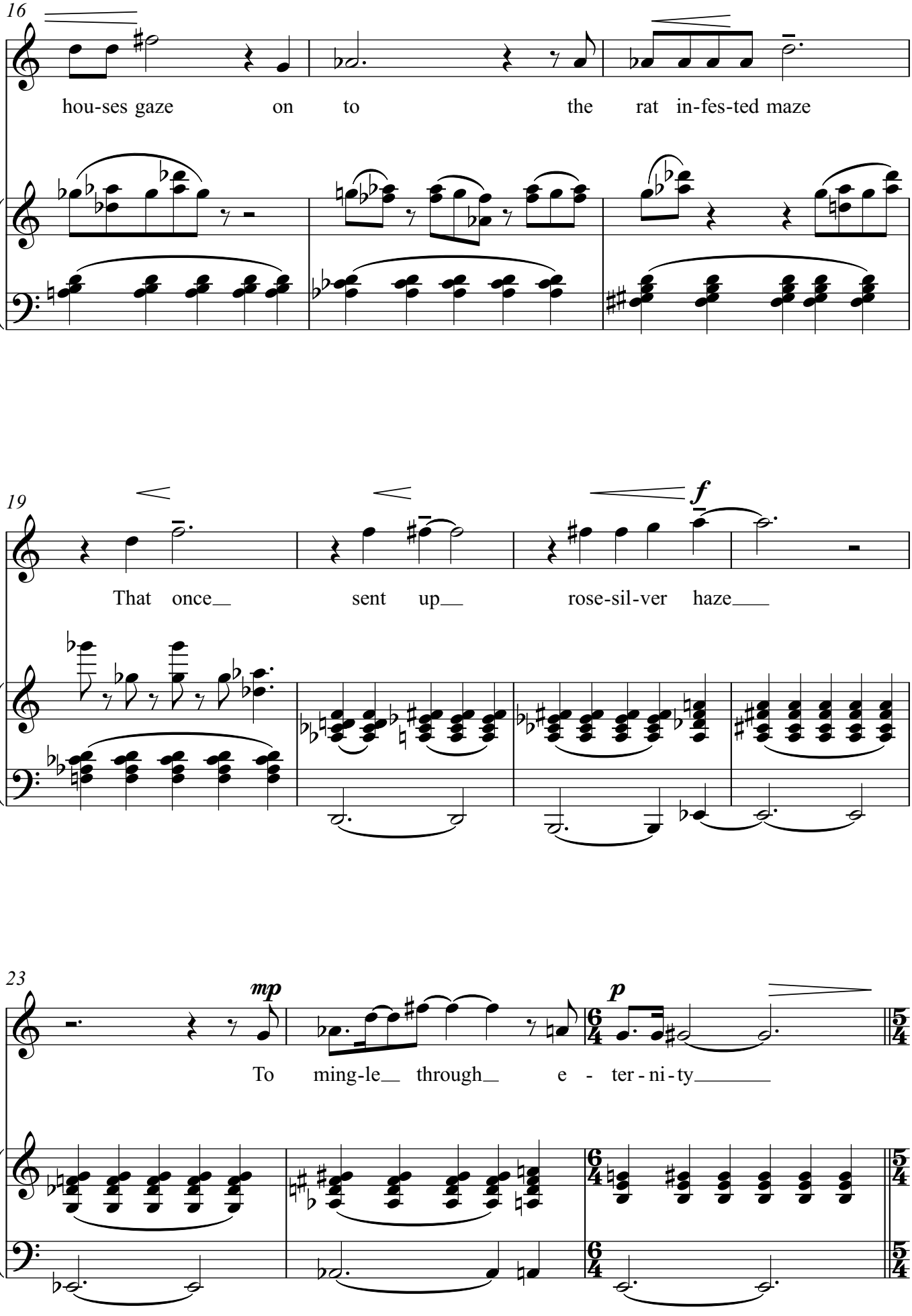
Babel

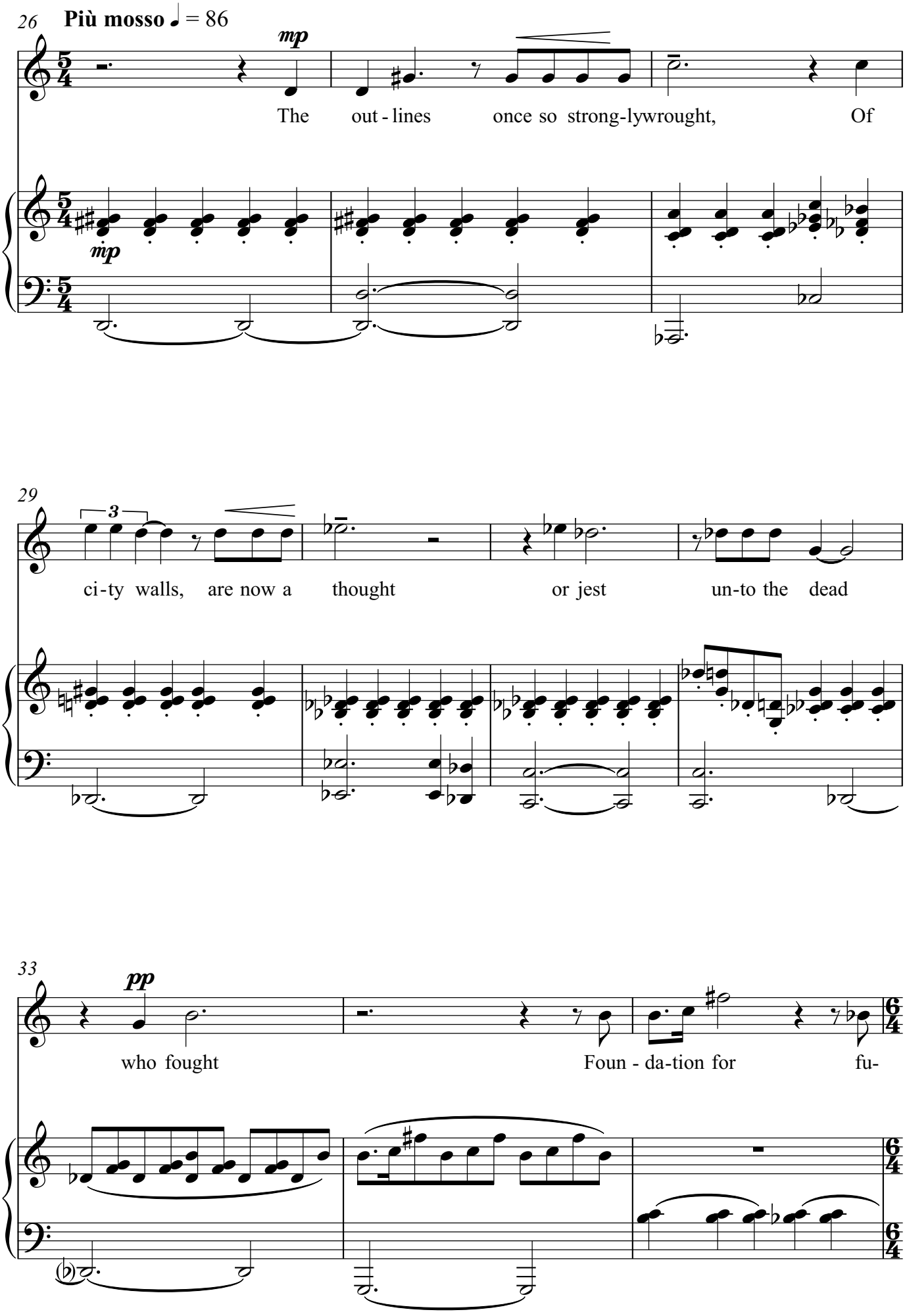
Osbert Sitwell (1892-1969) Kelvin Thomson



Copyright © 2014 by Kelvin Thomson


Andante lacrimoso ♩ = 80
7
p
Which ev'-ry shaft and shock of fate Had shorn un - to its
p
10
mp
base. Too late Came care - less - ly Se-
13
p
re - ni - ty. Now torn and bro-ken
8va


16
hou-ses gaze on to the rat in-fes-ted maze
19
That once sent up rose-sil-ver haze
f
23
mp
To ming-le through e - ter - ni - ty
p
6/4
5/4


26
Più mosso ♩ = 86
mp
The out - lines once so strong-lywrought, Of
mp
29
3
ci-ty walls, are now a thought or jest un-to the dead
33
pp
who fought Foun - da-tion for fu-

36

rall.

Dolce, calmo
quasi lullaby

♩. = 72

p

tu - ri-ty.

The shim-mer-ing sands

pp *semplice*

40

where once there played

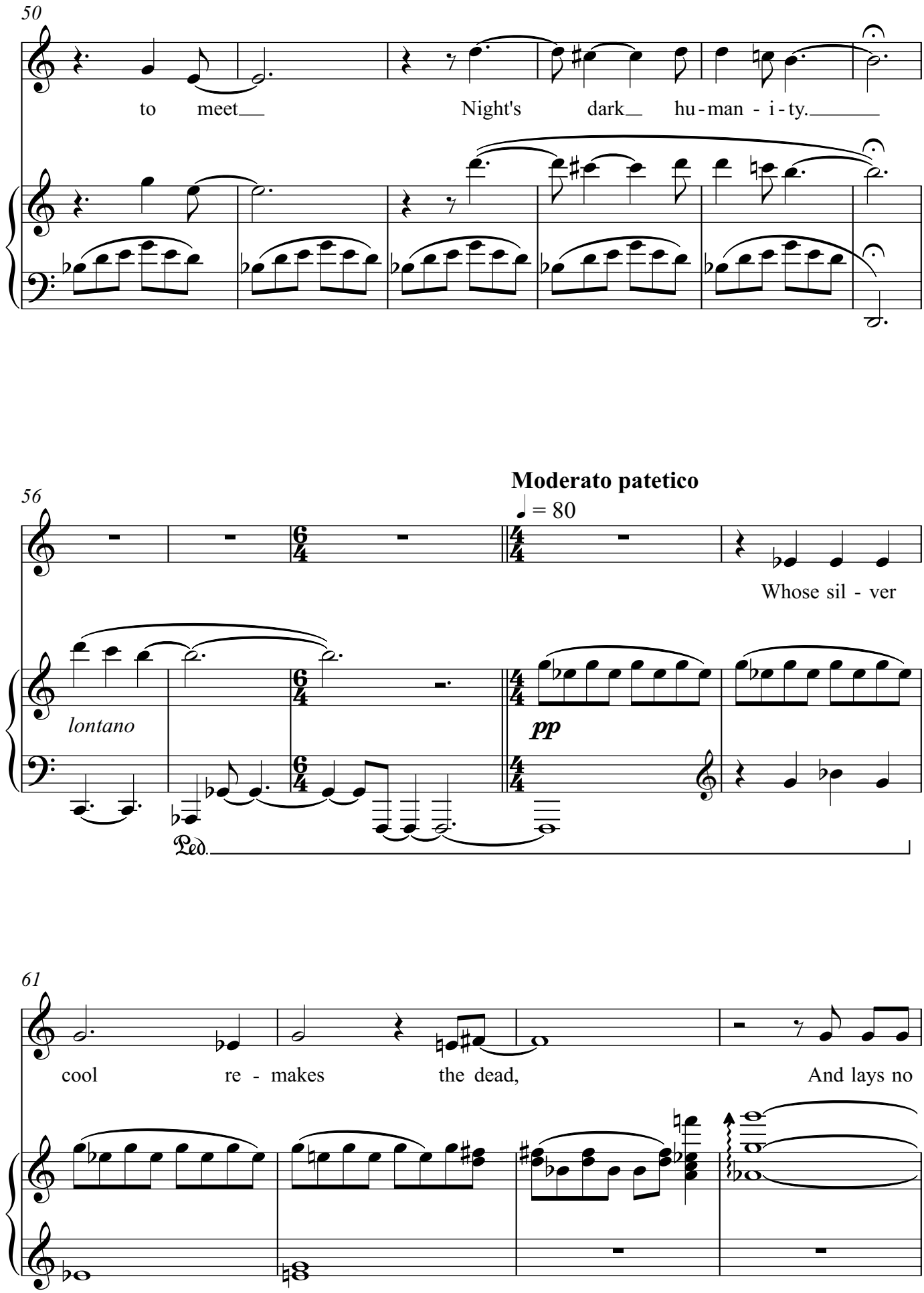
Chil-dren with pain - ted pail and spade

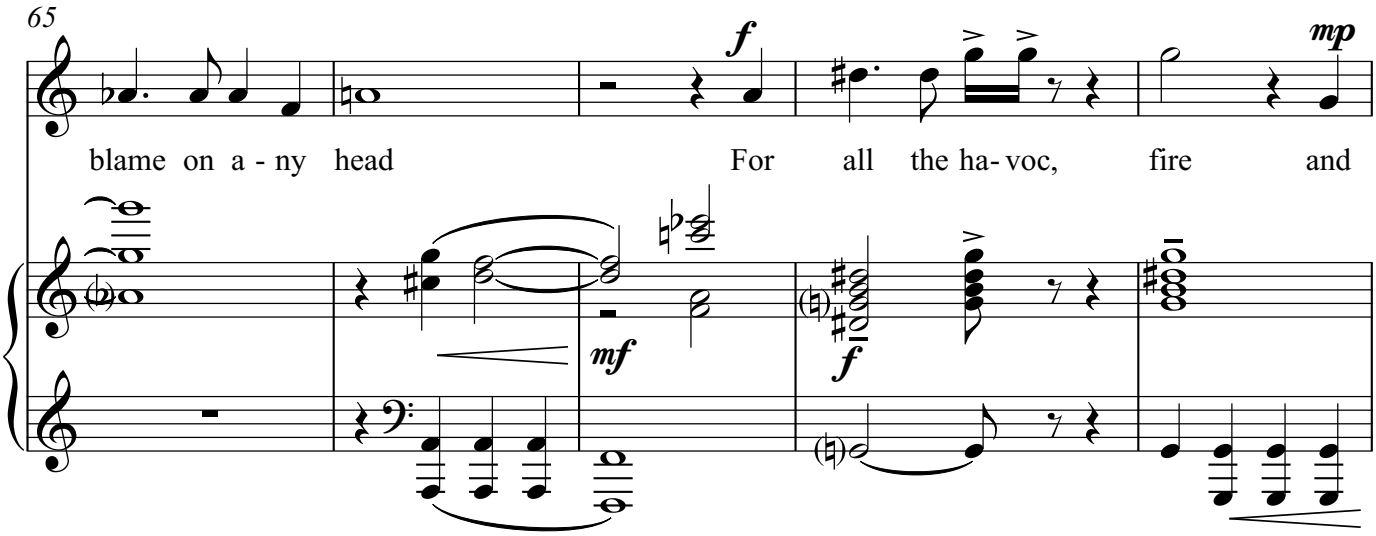
45

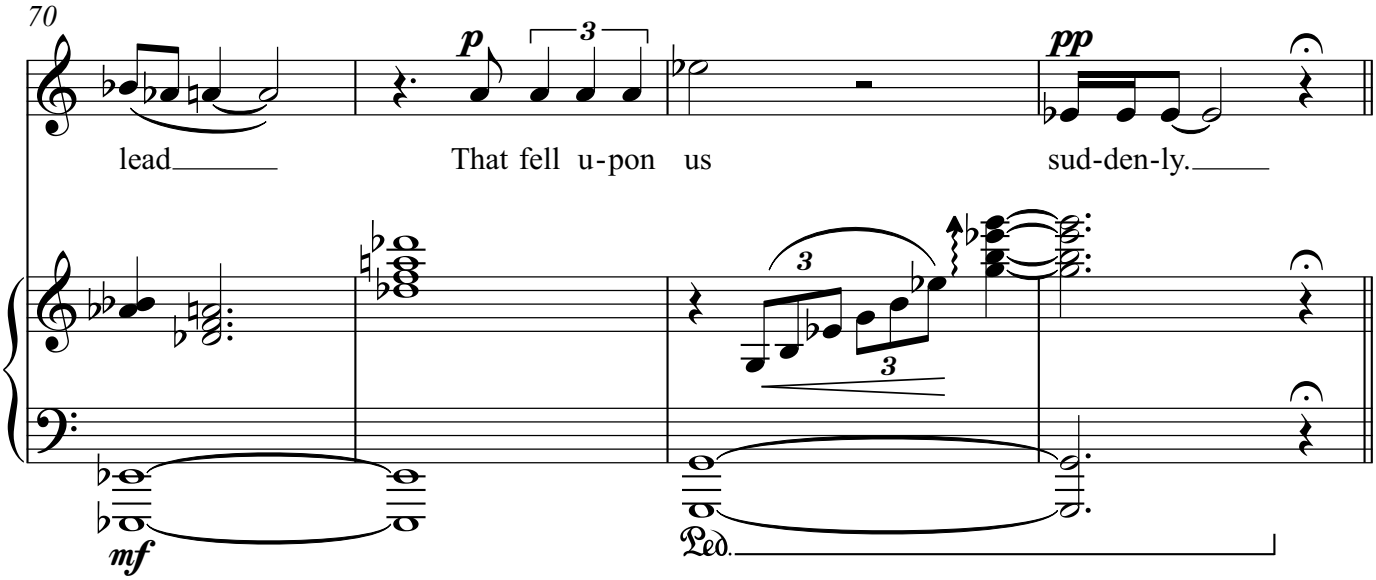
are drea-ri - ly

de-so-late

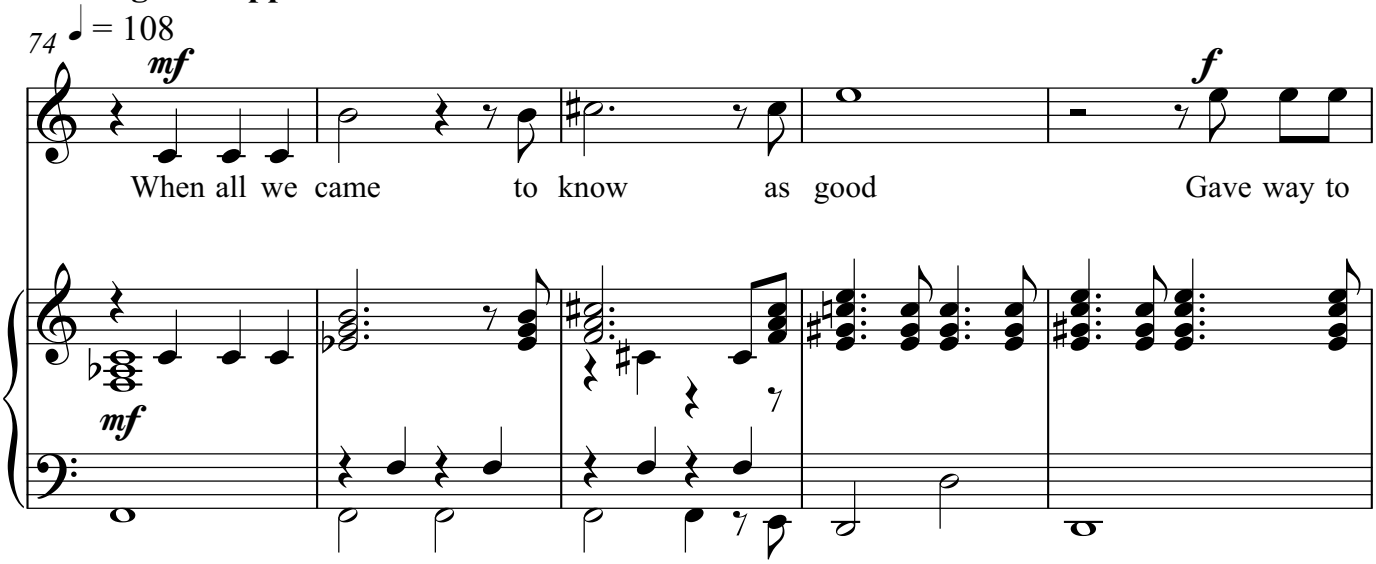
a - fraid

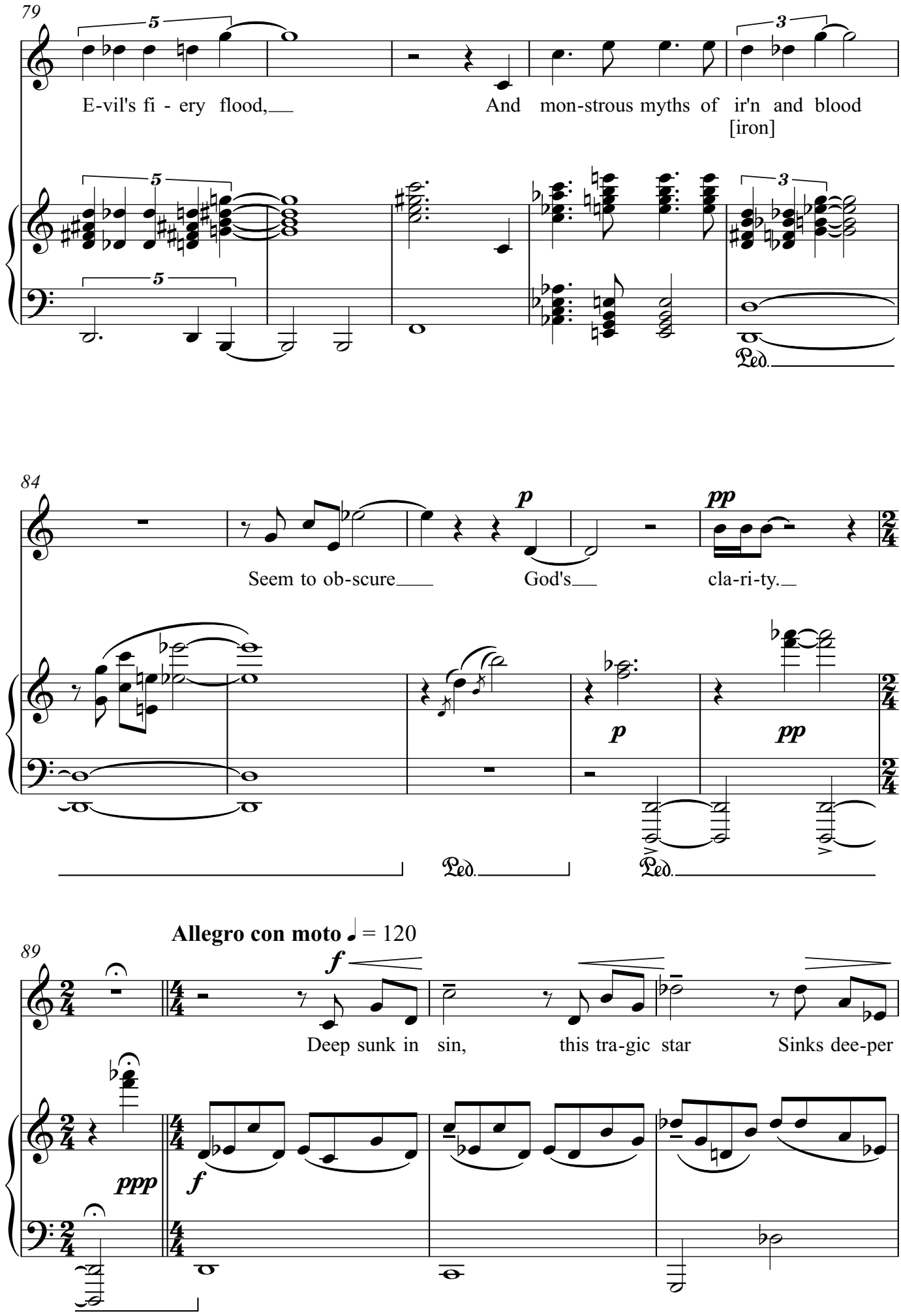

50
to meet Night's dark hu - man - i - ty.
56
Moderato patetico
♩ = 80
Whose sil - ver
lontano
pp
Ped.
61
cool re - makes the dead, And lays no

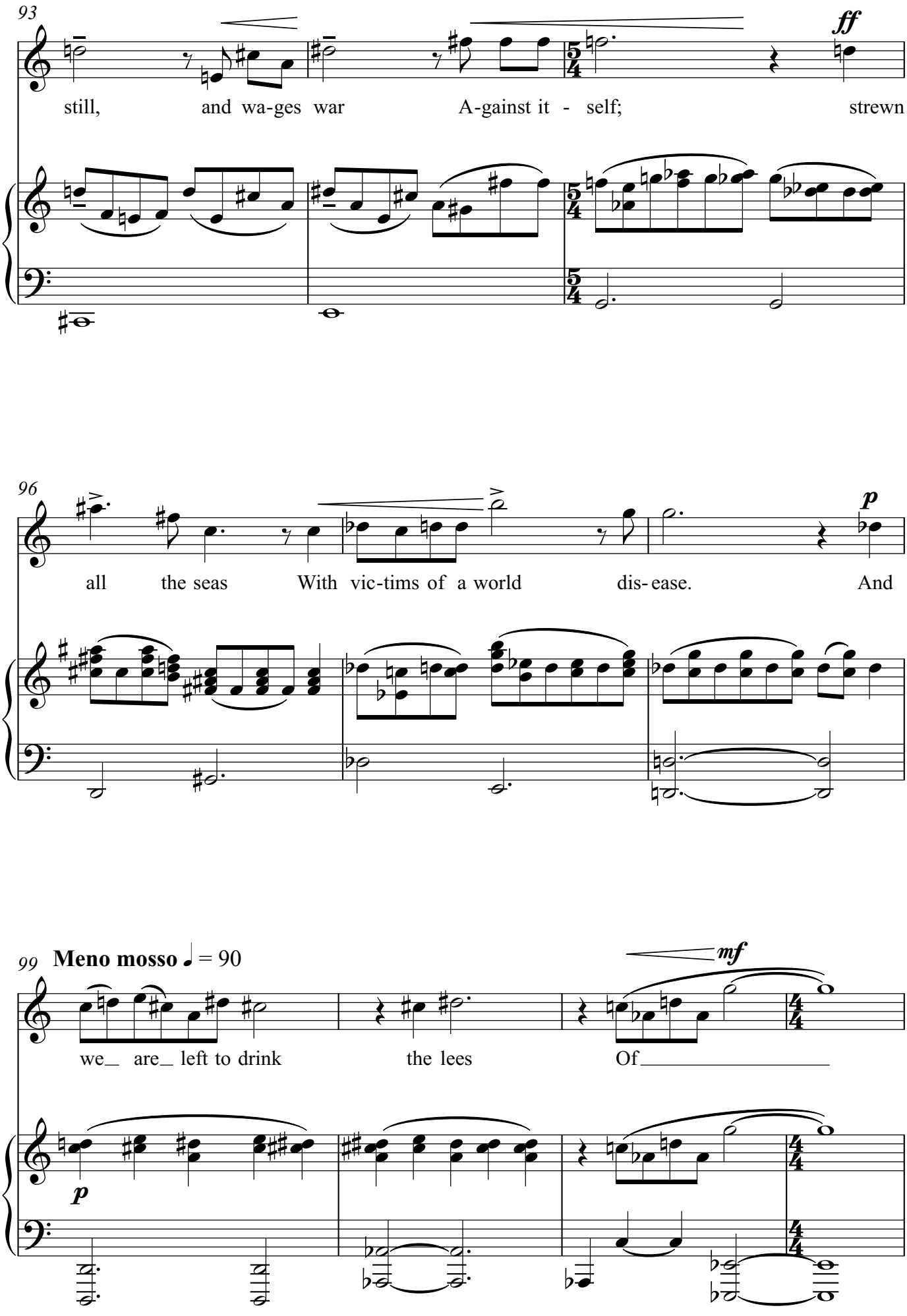


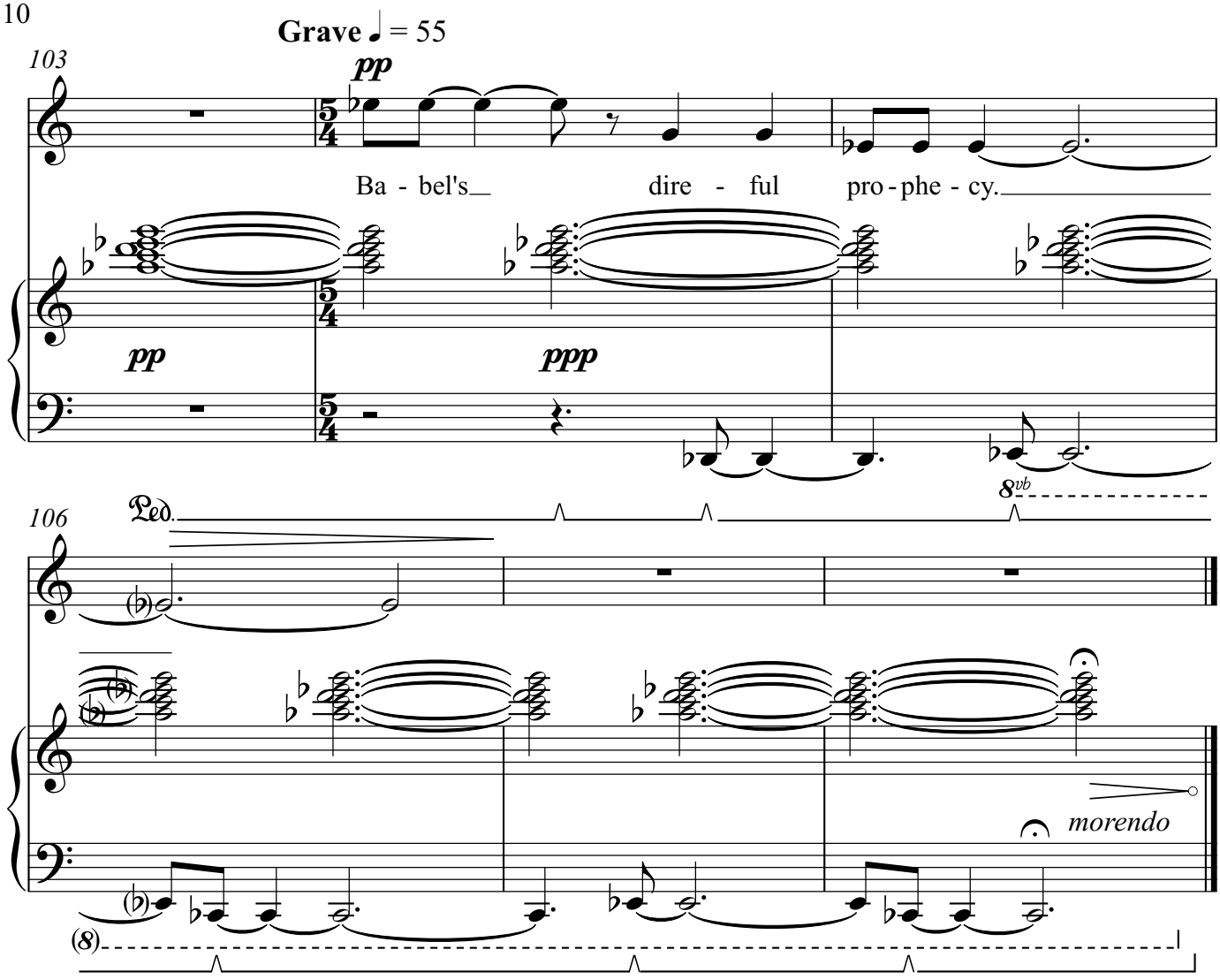


Allegretto appassionato




79
E-vil's fi - ery flood,
And mon-strous myths of ir'n and blood
[iron]
Ped.
84
Seem to ob-scure
God's
cla-ri-ty.
p
pp
p
pp
Ped.
Ped.
Allegro con moto ♩ = 120
89
f
Deep sunk in sin,
this tra-gic star
Sinks dee-per
ppp
f


93
ff
still, and wa-ges war A-gainst it - self; strewn
96
p
all the seas With vic-tims of a world dis-ease. And
99 Meno mosso ♩ = 90
mf
we_ are_ left to drink the lees Of_
p


Grave ♩ = 55
103
pp
Ba - bel's dire - ful pro - phe - cy.
pp
ppp
8vb
106
Ped.
morendo
(8)