SOLEMN MELOS

Choral settings of poems
by Anthony Etherin

by

ANDREW HUGILL

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Solemn Melos is a collection of choral pieces that set the constraint-driven poetry of Anthony Etherin. Etherin's work includes many palindromes, anagrams, and tight formal structures, inviting musical treatments that are both precise and expressive. Each setting explores a different facet of his poetic logic. Rather than merely reflecting the text, the music engages in dialogue with it by treating its constraints as compositional tools.

The set comprises: *Of Music and Memory, Colourscape* and *The Main*, which may all be found in the collection *Slate Petals*, published in 2021 by Penteract Press. That volume's title, it will be noted, is a palindrome, something that I have also used when naming my settings "Solemn Melos".

Solemn Melos is written for unaccompanied SATB choir. *Colourscape* includes parts for optional percussion (tam tam and two tubular bells tuned to B and E) which should be used when performing in spaces that are not very resonant, but may be used in any performance.

Solemn Melos was composed in 2025 for Paul Jackson and the St. Augustine's Singers.

Andrew Hugill, 2025.

OF MUSIC AND MEMORY

Of Music and Memory is a pair of poems. "Distant Music", is an ottava rima* in iambic tetrameter** and is also a palindrome. "Distant Memory", is a triolet*** in iambic tetrameter and also a perfect anagram of "Distant Music".

The musical setting retains these rather extreme constraints. The duration of each note or chord is determined by the number of letters in each word of the poem, with punctuation giving rests of varying durations. The setting of "Distant Music" is palindromic and the setting of "Distant Memory" uses exactly the same collection of notes and chords as "Distant Music" but organised in a different way.

* Ottava rima = an eight-line stanza form of Italian origin, characterized by an ABABABCC rhyme scheme.

** Iambic tetrameter = a poetic meter characterized by lines containing four iambs (an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable).

*** Triolet = an eight-line poem (or stanza) with a specific rhyme scheme (ABaAabAB) where the first line is repeated as the fourth and seventh, and the second line as the eighth.

DISTANT MUSIC

Emote to me. Refill a note.
By eking, I sedate my awe.

Now all I give, lines dash, promote,
to visit inward - rose, yet raw.

Art eyes, or drawn it is. I vote
to morph sad, senile vigil, law....

One way met a design I key.
Be tonal, life remote to me!

DISTANT MEMORY

I grow a distant memory
of yellow petals knit in verse.

I weave the woodland's eye, to see -
I grow a distant memory.

I bleed time gone. I leave, to be
a limitation I rehearse:

I grow a distant memory
of yellow - petals, knit in verse.

COLOURSCAPE

Colourscape is an "aelinscape" (a series of forms in which two or more poems share metrical feet). Colourscape presents an ottava rima (abababcc) in iambic pentameter, intersected by a Shakespearean sonnet (ababcdcdefefgg) in iambic monometer—such that the third metrical foot of each line of the ottava rima belongs also to the sonnet.

The music reflects the formal structure of the poem, setting the central sonnet as a series of quiet chords and the ottava rima as expressive phrases intersecting them. The music uses my own synaesthesia to transition from green to blue as suggested in the sonnet.

In resonant spaces there is no need to use the percussion. In acoustically dry spaces, one member of the sopranos should also play the tubular bells (pitches B and E, soft and hard beaters) and one member of the basses the tam tam (medium size, normal tam tam beater).

Colourscape

(The night
was green.
It might
A day that might have been was painted black.
A brush erased the moss and amber leaves.
Then, any light that came was given back —
consumed and flung across aborted eves —
as time and space, the frame, began to crack....
Beneath the new, the old dimension grieves:
That day became stained glass — an onyx mass.
Soon, every truth I'm told will likewise pass.
the grass
and dew
were blue.)

— *Anthony Etherin*

THE MAIN

The Main consists of four sonnets that are perfect anagrams of each other. All are in iambic dimeter.* Three of the sonnets obey the Shakespearean rhyme scheme, while the fourth is Petrarchan. Moreover, the third sonnet is a palindrome-by-letter. Two of the sonnets ("Risen Siren" and "Poisoned Poseidon") are named for mythology-inspired phrasal anagrams and two ("Man-o-war" and "Sloop-o-war") are named for warships.

When I saw these verses, which are laid out in columns on facing pages, with their extreme constraints and thematic unity, I was strongly reminded of the isorhythmic motets of the Franco-Flemish masters of the early Renaissance, such as Guillaume de Machaut (1300-1377) and Guillaume Du Fay (1397-1474). These composers similarly delighted in tight constraints and would set multiple texts simultaneously in amazing displays of contrapuntal ingenuity.

At the heart of an isorhythmic motet is a cantus firmus or fixed melody known as the "color", held by the tenor. These melodies mostly came from books of plainchant or sometimes well-known folk tunes. The motet breaks up the melody into repeating rhythmic phrases called "talea" that are always the same (hence "isorhythm"). Against these may be set a "contratenor" line which might itself also be isorhythmic (usually with a different pattern). Above these, one or two or more upper voices would sing elaborate settings of texts that were sometimes on topics unrelated to those of the tenor and contratenor, but which nonetheless revealed some kind of thematic unity.

I chose for my cantus firmus a sea shanty named "Lowlands Away", which was written down by Stan Hugill,** the last working shantyman, in his book Shanties from the Seven Seas, first published in 1961. This fitted the nautical theme of Etherin's verses, but there were other reasons for choosing it: it had exactly the same number of notes as there are syllables in the poems; the "Lowlands" of the title are the Low Countries, home to those same Franco-Flemish masters; and the melody itself, which is described by Hugill as "sentimental", has great expressive power.

The rest of my composition is pure contrapuntal invention, reflecting Etherin's rigour through a mixture of imitative counterpoint and strict canon. The iambic dimeter feel of the verse is retained throughout and the motet reflects the 4+4+3+3 structure of the verses. In keeping with the poem, the talea in the tenor is palindromic, whereas the contratenor (bass) is not. The piece concludes with a brief cadential statement of "Lowlands Away", replacing the "Amen" that would traditionally end sacred motets.

* Iambic dimeter: each line contains two iambs consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

** I have been told that I am distantly related to Stan Hugill, but to date I have not been able to verify this. Nevertheless, our shared name encouraged me still further to find the cantus firmus melody in his wonderful book.

THE MAIN

RISEN SIREN

In opal day,
a siren swarm,
a gauge away,
allowed a form.

I aged. (I look
a trident's leap;
your open book
in idle deeps...)

One ripple woke.
I sailed up brine.
Atop, God spoke

a pious line:
"To Glory! – Land
of gilded sand!"

POISONED POSEIDON

Poseidon spilt
Aegean Sea.
A league rebuilt
your wail of plea.

Yet, oil amid
a plying dark,
a nereid
flew up a spark:

"Poseidon, look!
a godly sign."
A drowned god took

a poison-wine.
Poseidon bled
a primal red.

MAN-O-WAR

Keels, in a tide,
keep rid and log.
I buoy, topside
pooled under fog....

I ran. I saw
pools yell a gap:
a man-o'-war,
raw, on a map.

A galley-sloop
was in a rig
of red: Nude, looped,

I spot you! Big
old nadir peeked,
I tan, I sleek...

SLOOP-O-WAR

On lookout, see
a sloop-of-war,
its sodden floor
askew to me....

I dipped: "Pray, we!"
(A siren's roar!
In pagan lore,
I keep a key.)

A gale, by gull;
a winding main;
a saline odd

obeyed a lull,
applied our pain.
God pitied God.

Solemn Melos

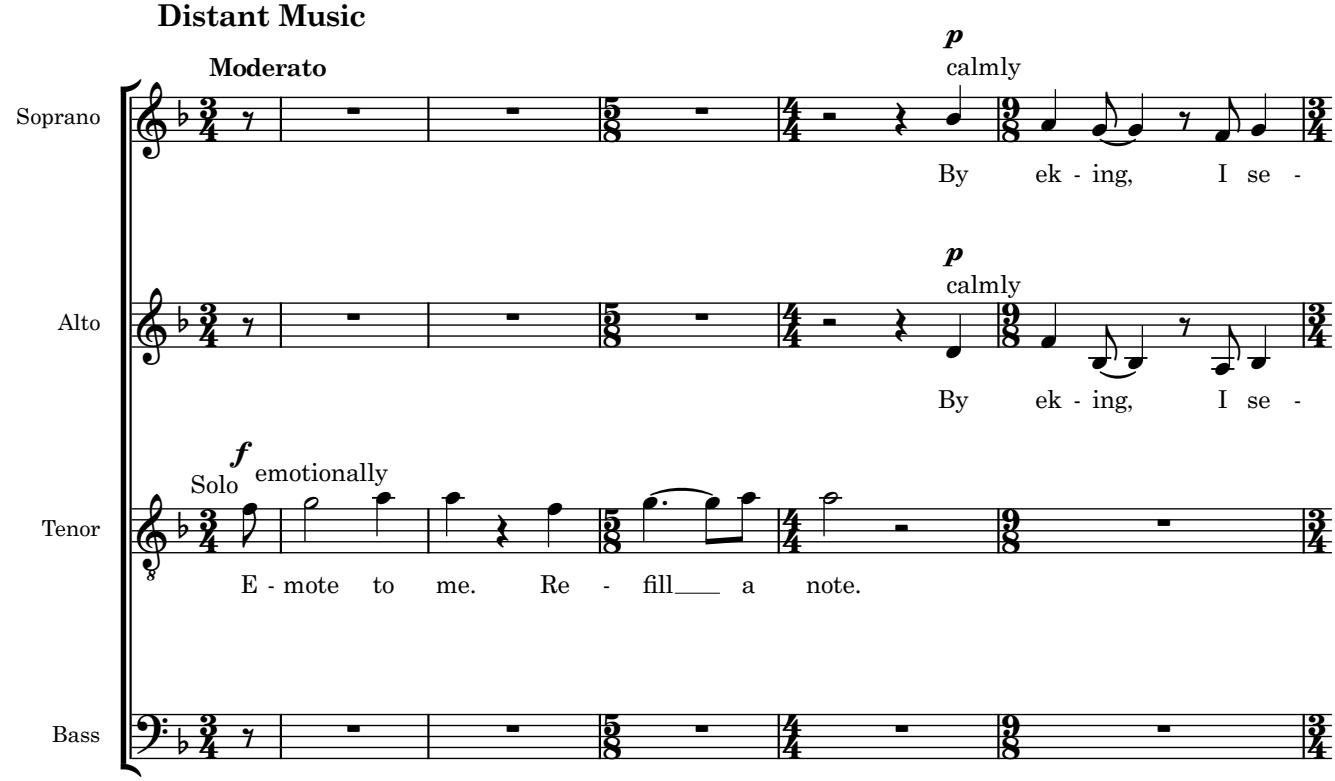
Words: Anthony Etherin

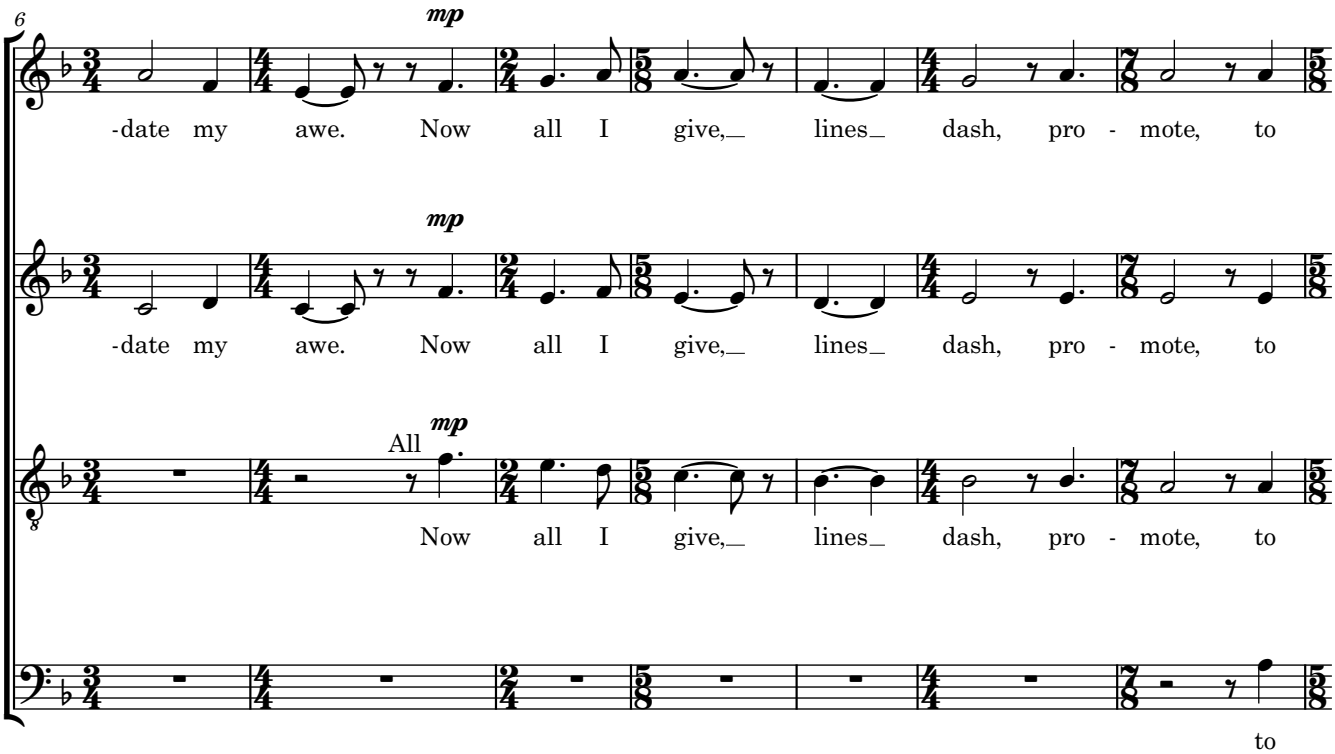
Music: Andrew Hugill

1. Of Music and Memory

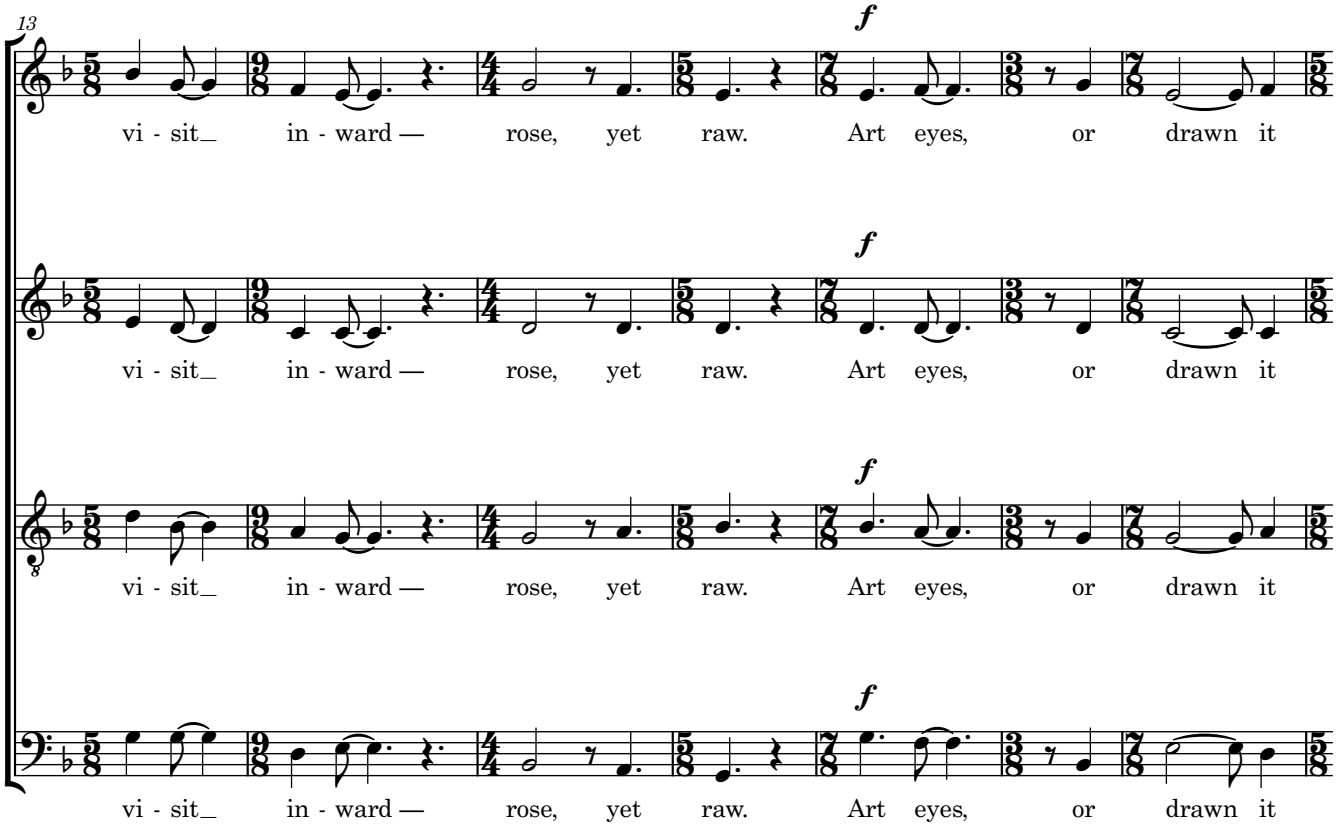
Distant Music

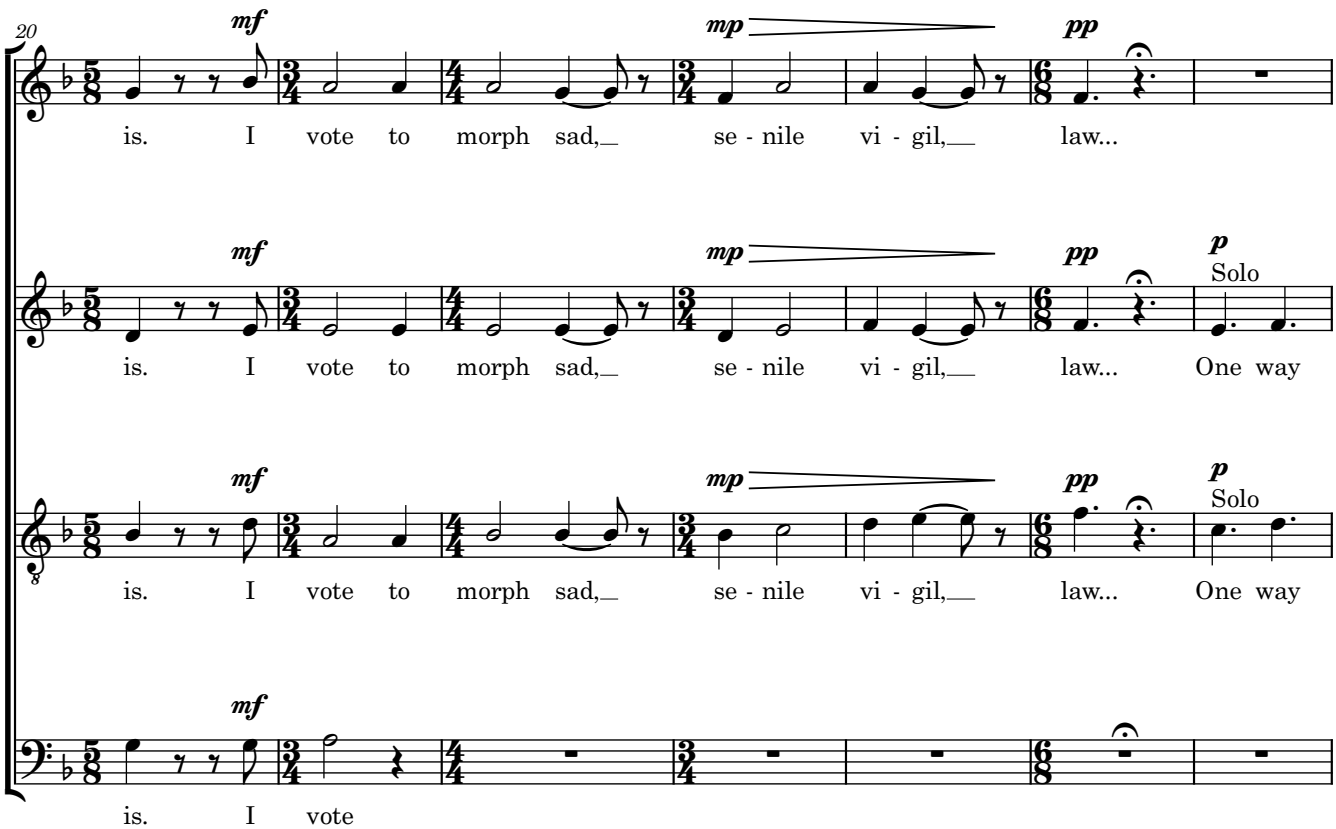
Moderato

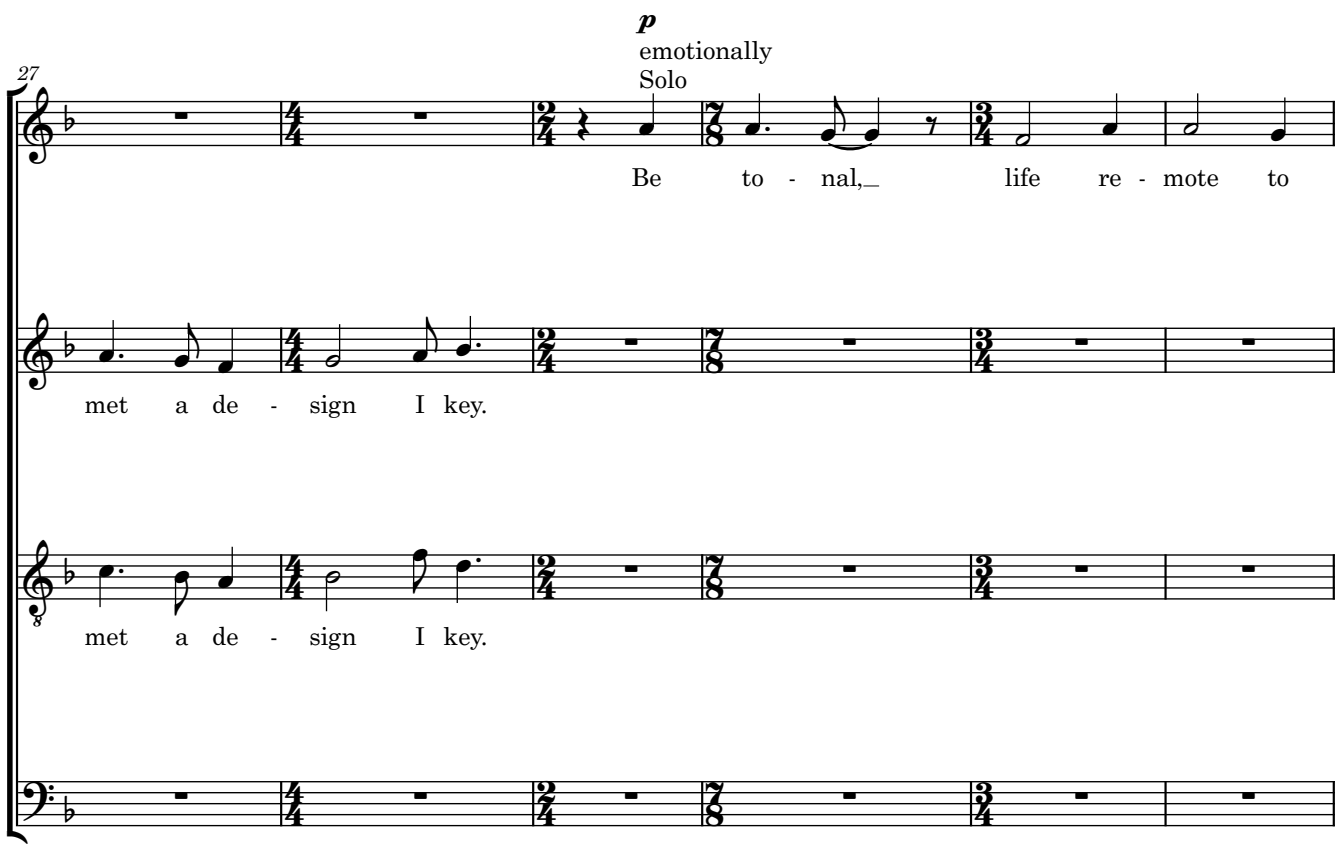




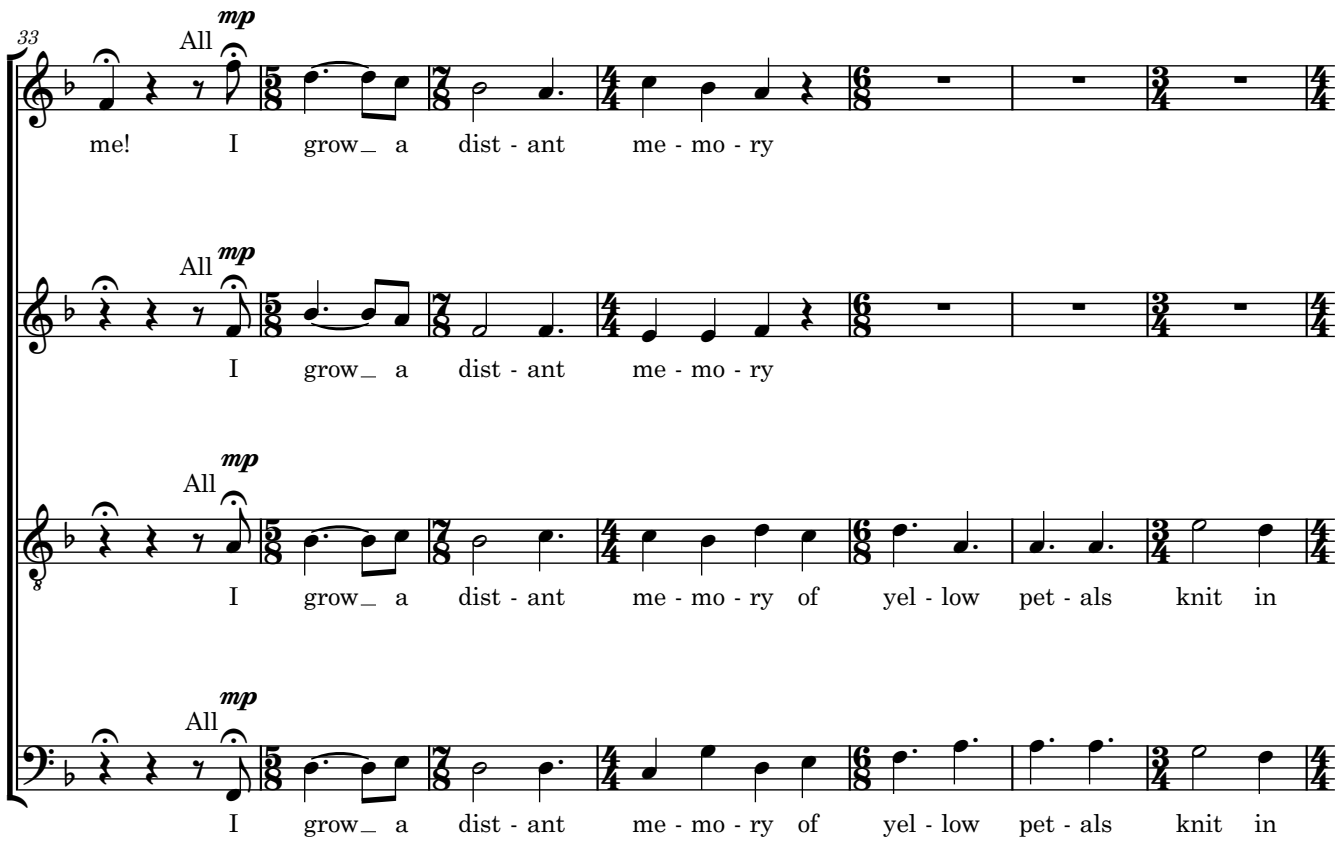
© Andrew Hugill

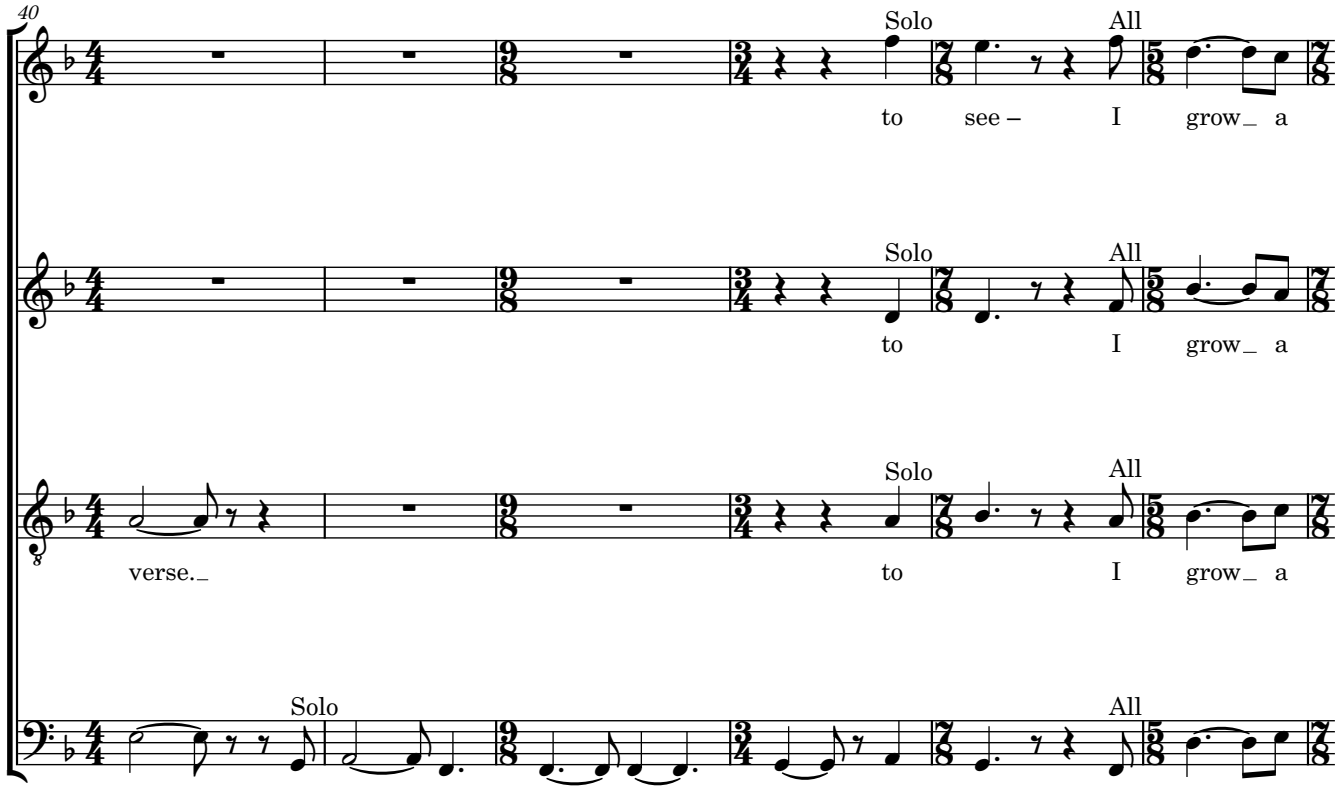

13
f
vi - sit_ in - ward — rose, yet raw. Art eyes, or drawn it
f
vi - sit_ in - ward — rose, yet raw. Art eyes, or drawn it
f
vi - sit_ in - ward — rose, yet raw. Art eyes, or drawn it
f
vi - sit_ in - ward — rose, yet raw. Art eyes, or drawn it

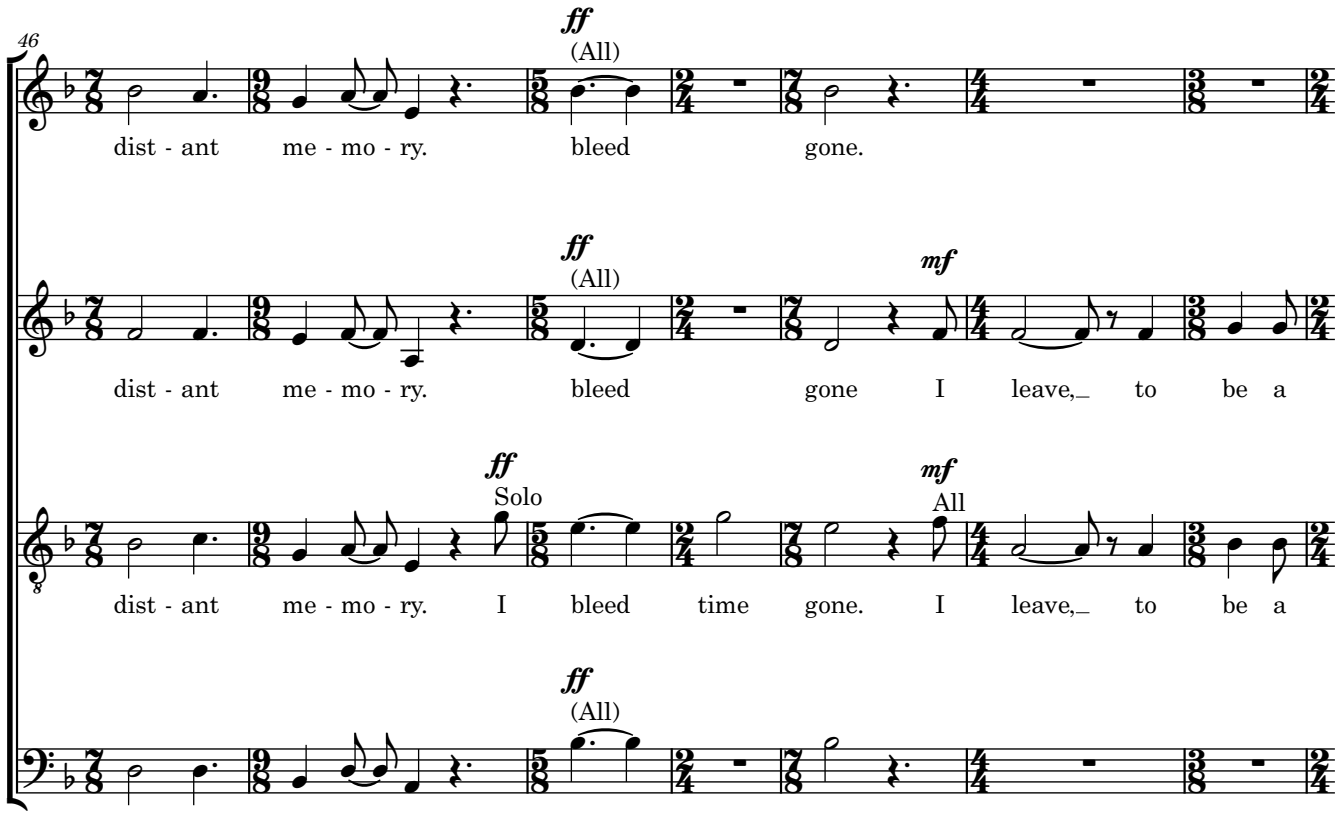

20
mf
mp
pp
is. I vote to morph sad,_ se - nile vi - gil,__ law...
mf
mp
pp
p
Solo
is. I vote to morph sad,_ se - nile vi - gil,__ law... One way
mf
mp
pp
p
Solo
is. I vote to morph sad,_ se - nile vi - gil,__ law... One way
mf
is. I vote

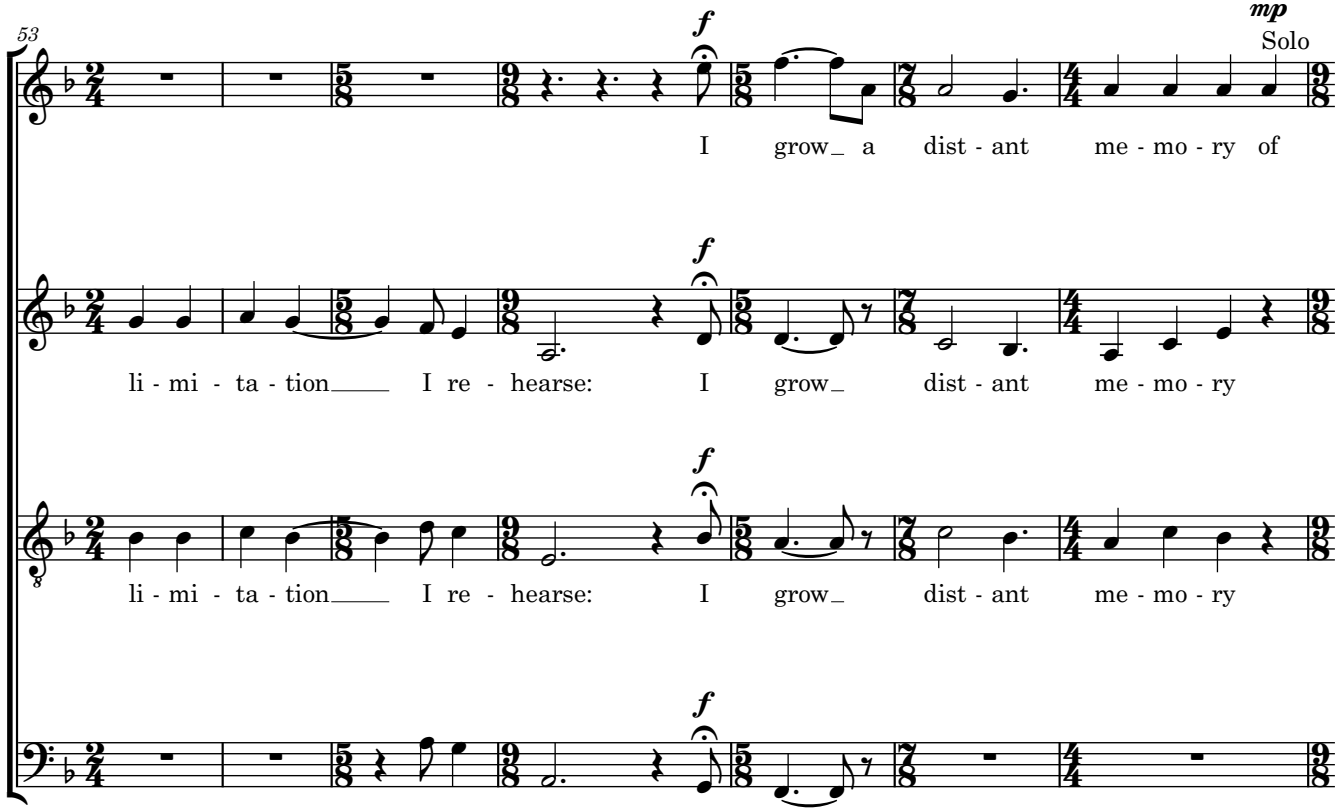


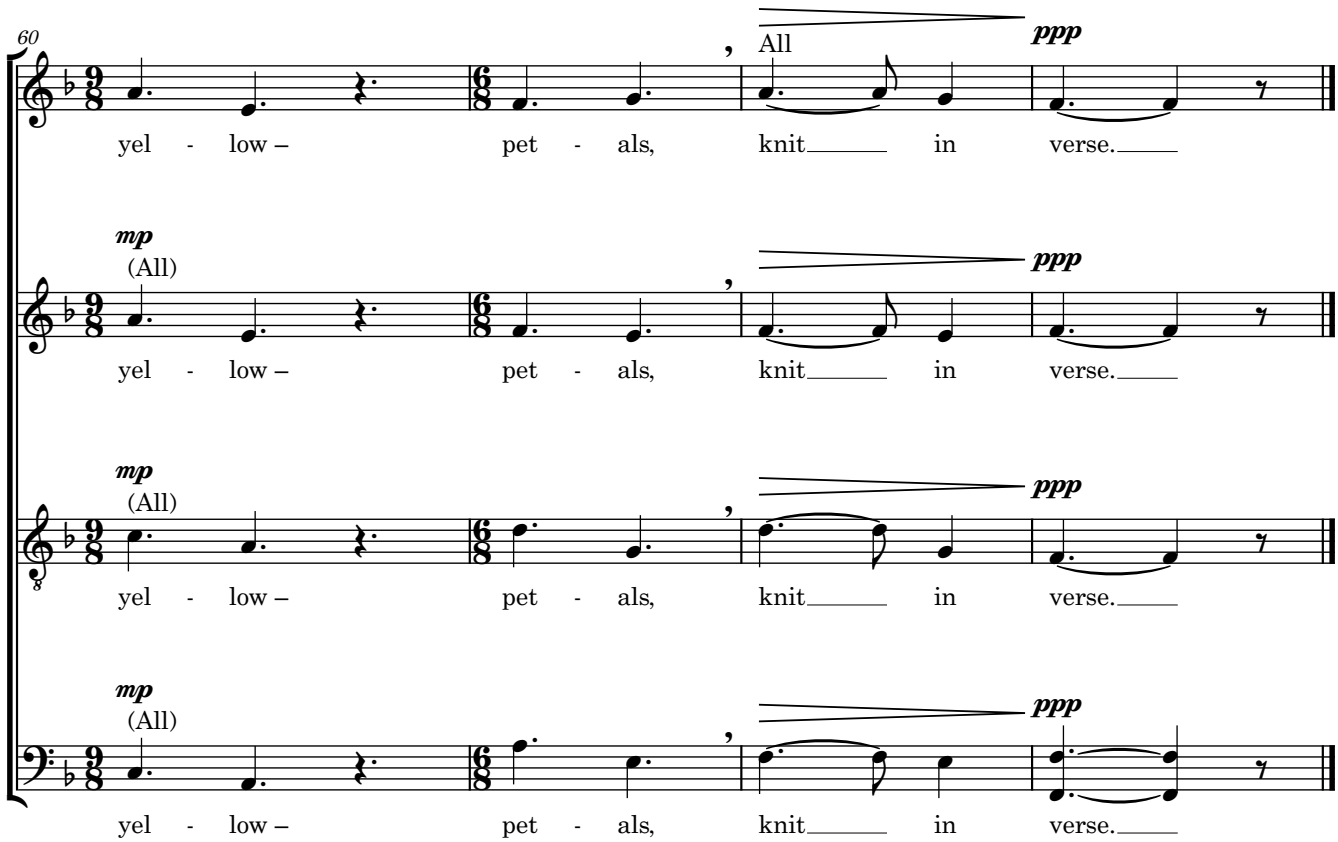
Distant Memory




40
Solo
All
to see – I grow_ a
Solo
All
to I grow_ a
Solo
All
verse._ to I grow_ a
Solo
All
verse._ I weave the wood - land's eye,_ to see – I grow_ a

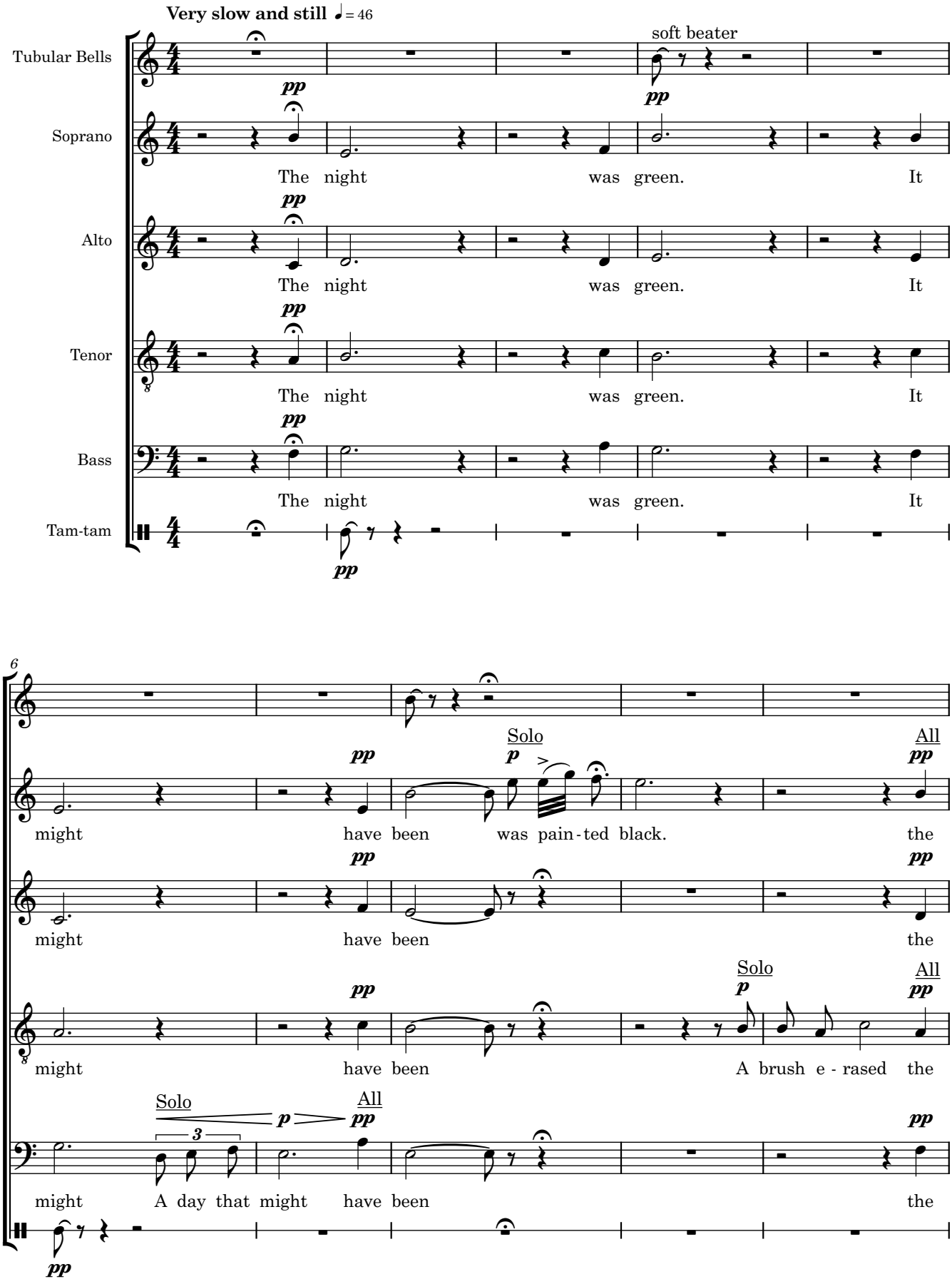

46
ff
(All)
dist - ant me - mo - ry. bleed gone.
ff
(All)
mf
dist - ant me - mo - ry. bleed gone I leave,_ to be a
ff
Solo
mf
All
dist - ant me - mo - ry. I bleed time gone. I leave,_ to be a
ff
(All)
dist - ant me - mo - ry. bleed gone.

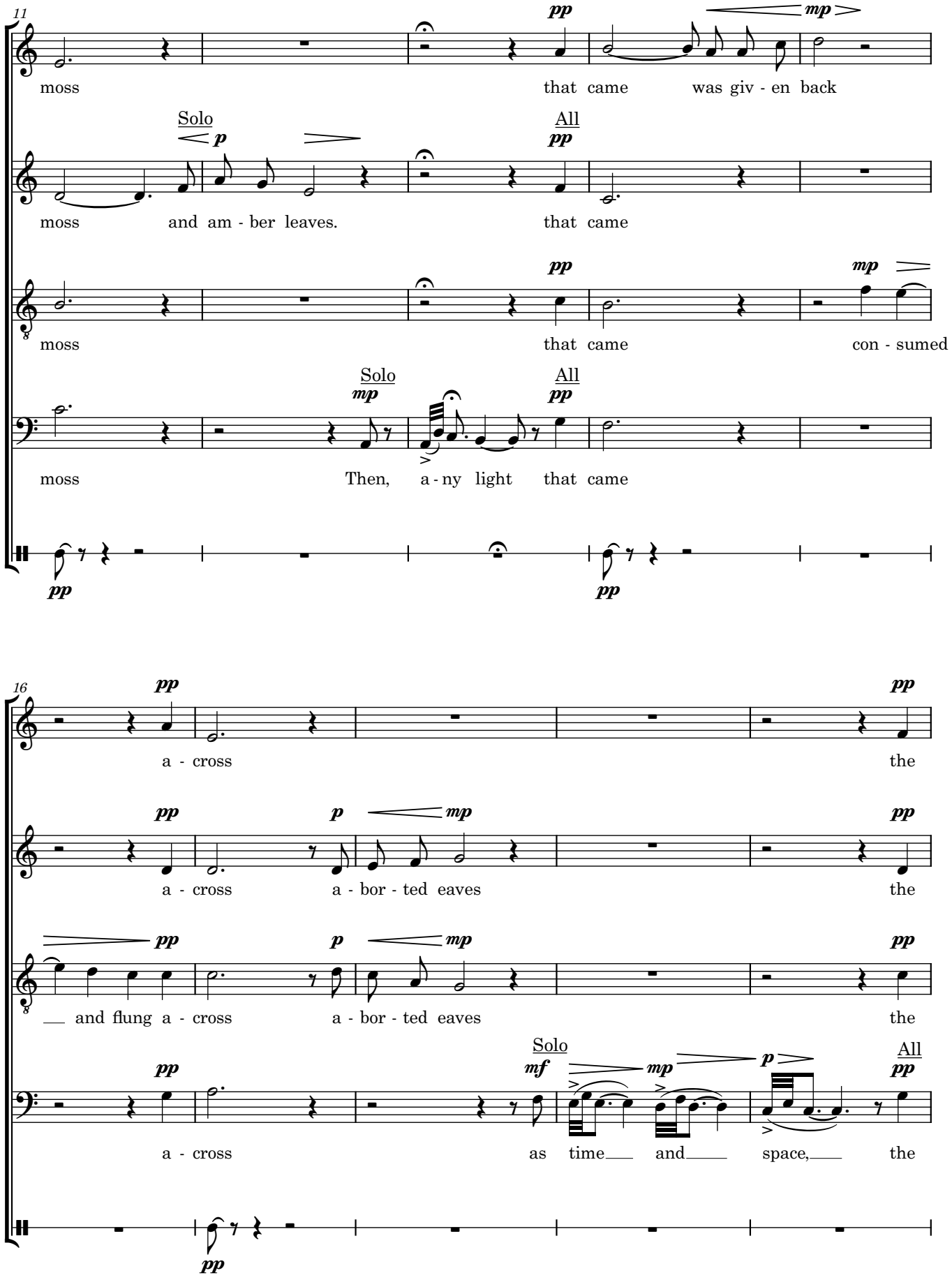

53
f
mp
Solo
I grow_ a dist - ant me - mo - ry of
li - mi - ta - tion_____ I re - hearse: I grow_ dist - ant me - mo - ry
li - mi - ta - tion_____ I re - hearse: I grow_ dist - ant me - mo - ry
I re - hearse: I grow_

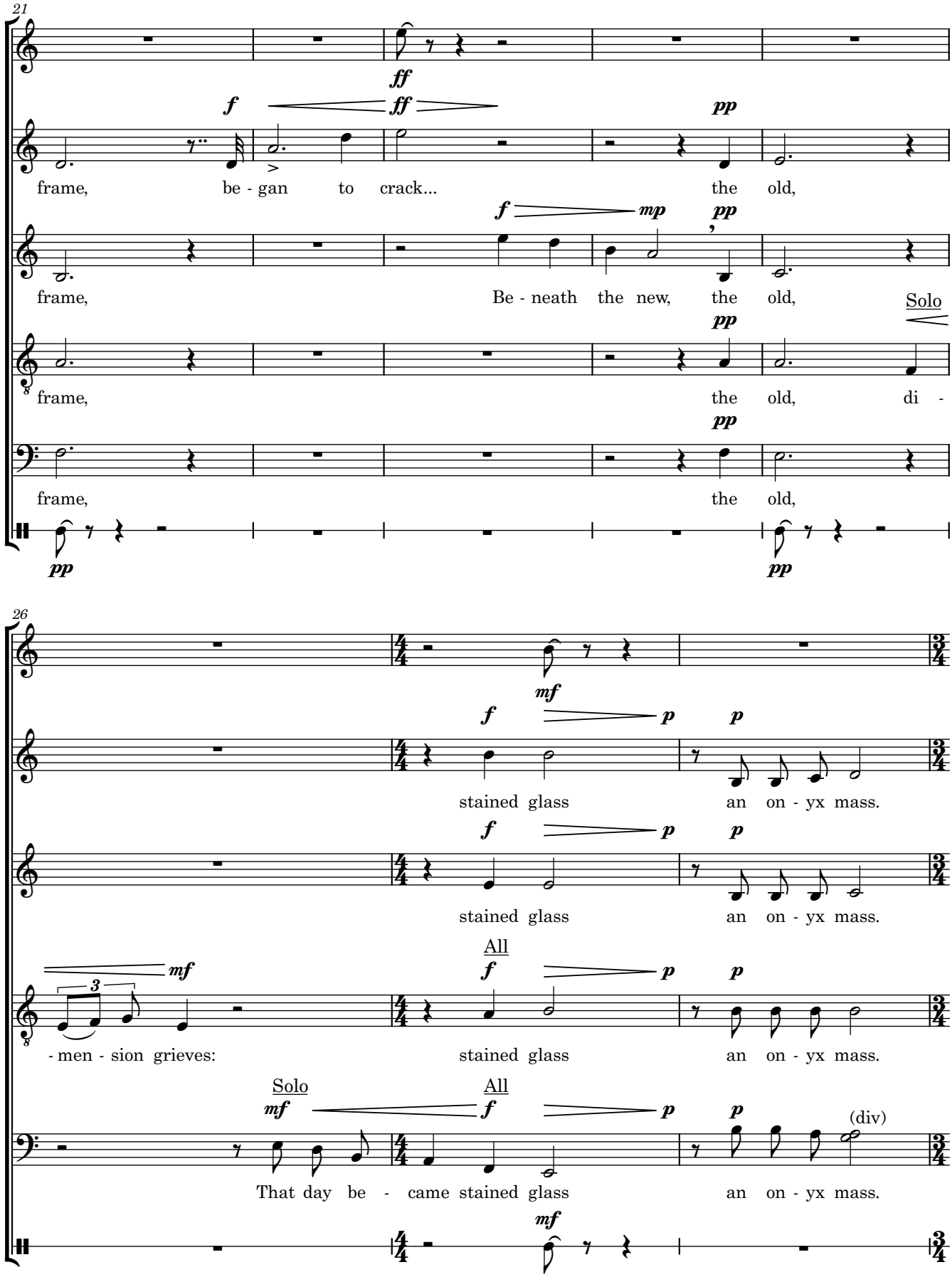

60
All
ppp
mp
(All)
yel - low – pet - als, knit_____ in verse._____

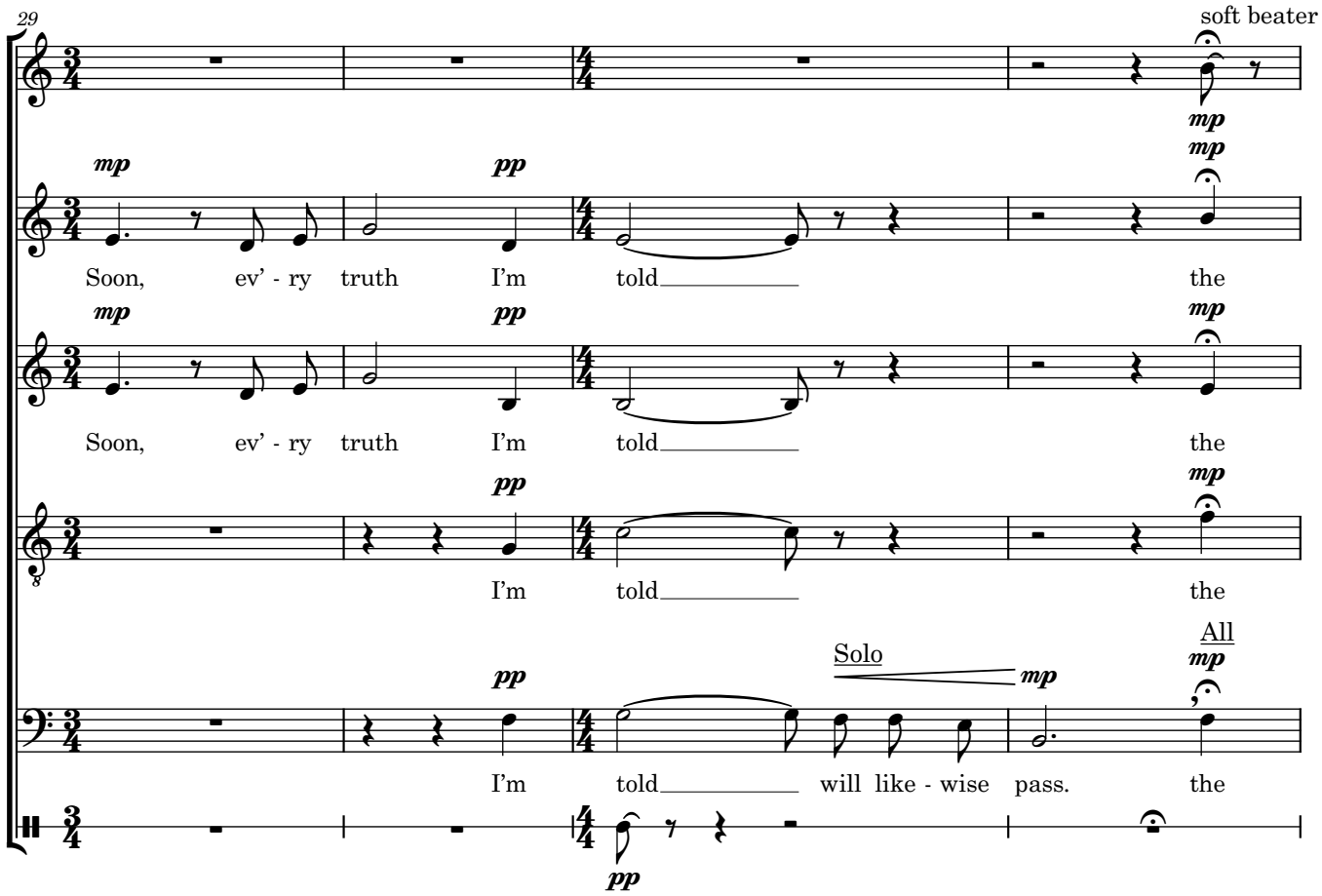
Solemn Melos

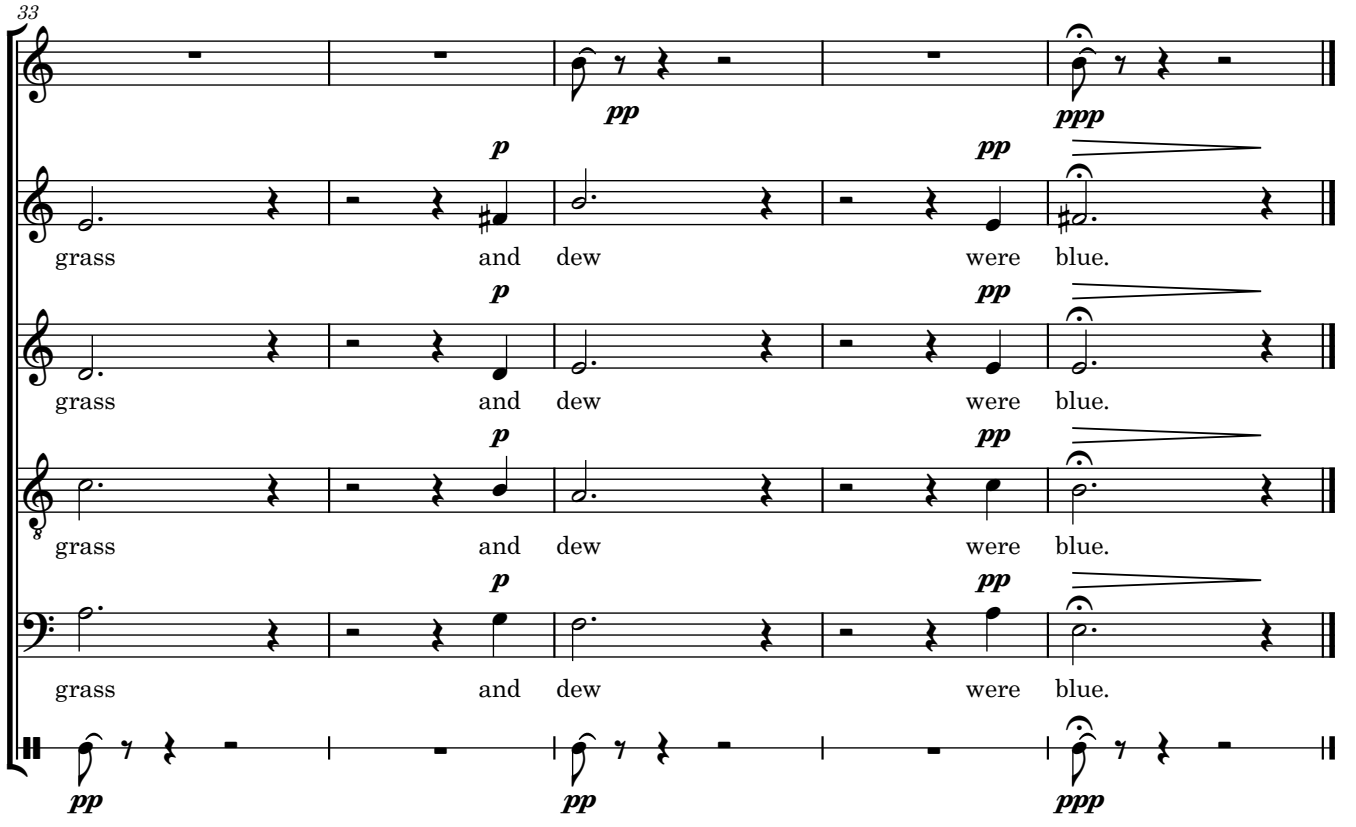
2. Colourscape




11
pp
mp
moss
that came
was giv - en back
Solo
p
All
pp
moss
and am - ber leaves.
that came
pp
mp
moss
that came
con - sumed
Solo
mp
All
pp
moss
Then,
a - ny light
that came
pp
pp
16
pp
pp
a - cross
the
pp
p
mp
pp
a - cross
a - bor - ted eaves
the
pp
p
mp
pp
and flung a - cross
a - bor - ted eaves
the
pp
Solo
mf
mp
p
All
pp
a - cross
as time and space,
the
pp

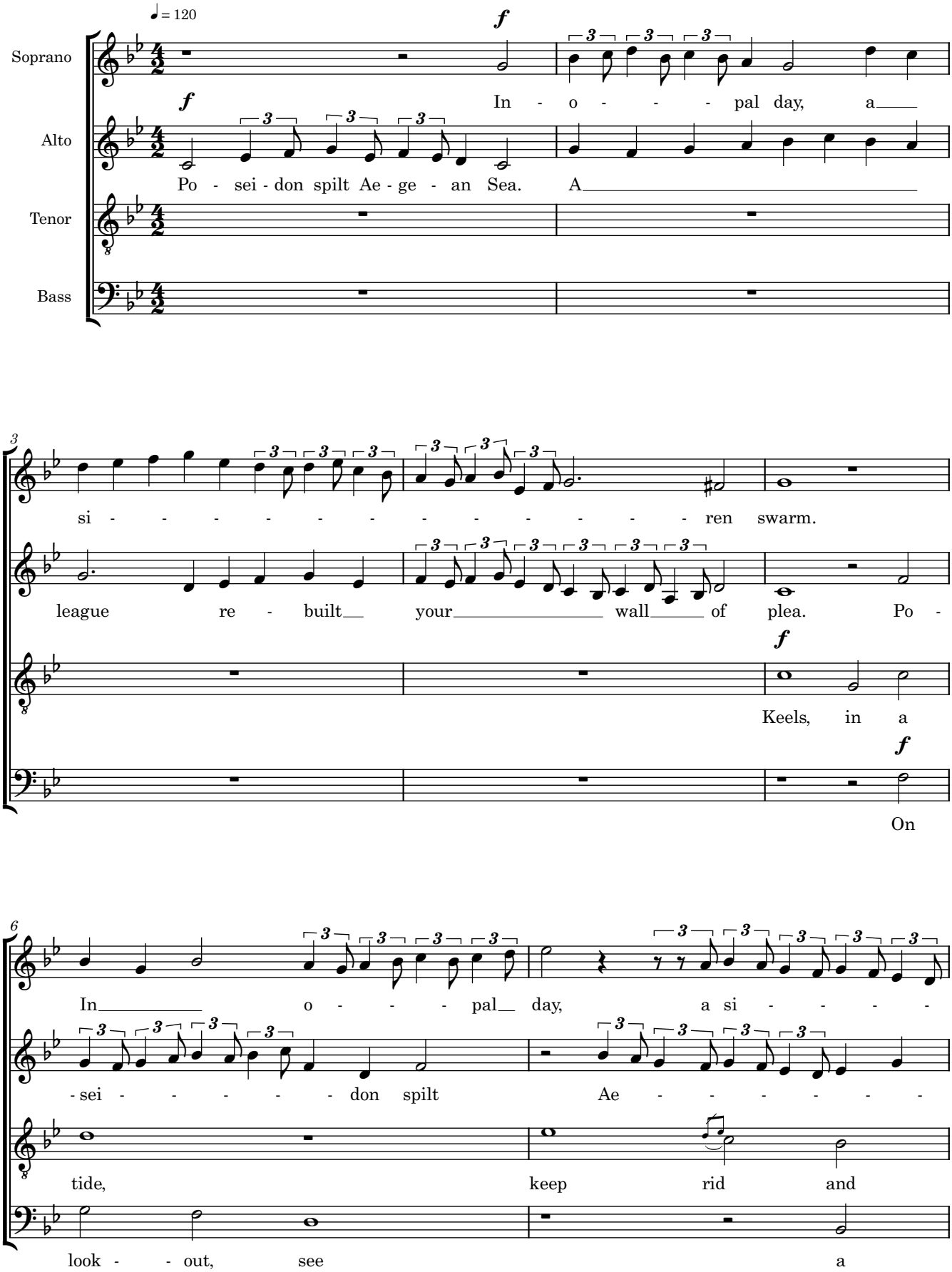

21
ff
f
ff
pp
frame, be - gan to crack... the old,
f
mp
pp
frame, Be - neath the new, the old,
Solo
pp
frame, the old, di -
pp
frame, the old,
pp
pp
26
mf
f
p
p
stained glass an on - yx mass.
f
p
p
stained glass an on - yx mass.
All
mf
f
p
p
3
- men - sion grieves: stained glass an on - yx mass.
Solo
All
mf
f
p
p
(div)
That day be - came stained glass an on - yx mass.
mf

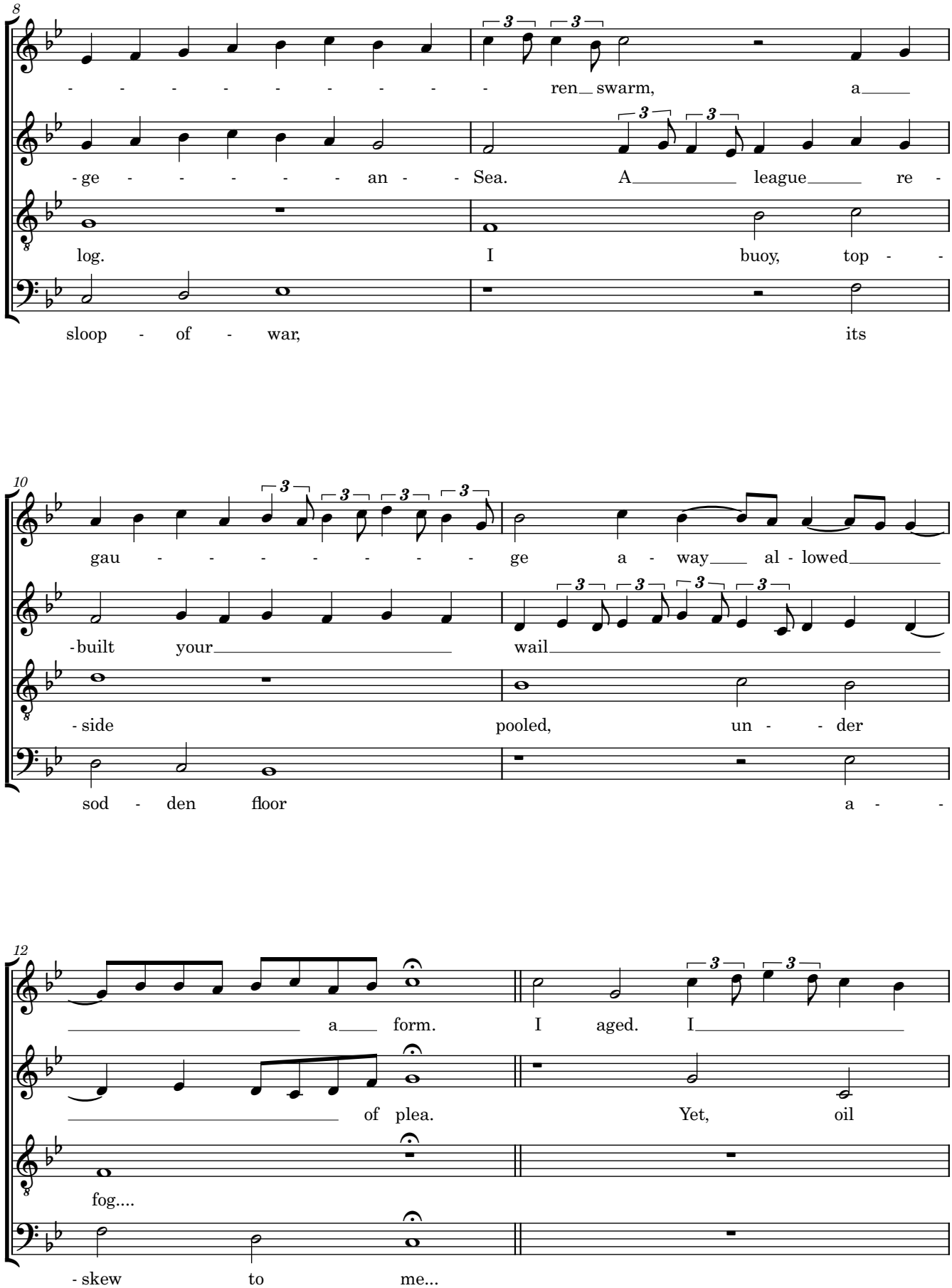

29
soft beater
mp
mp
Soon, ev' - ry truth I'm told the
mp
pp
mp
Soon, ev' - ry truth I'm told the
pp
mp
I'm told the
pp
Solo
mp
All
mp
I'm told will like - wise pass. the
pp

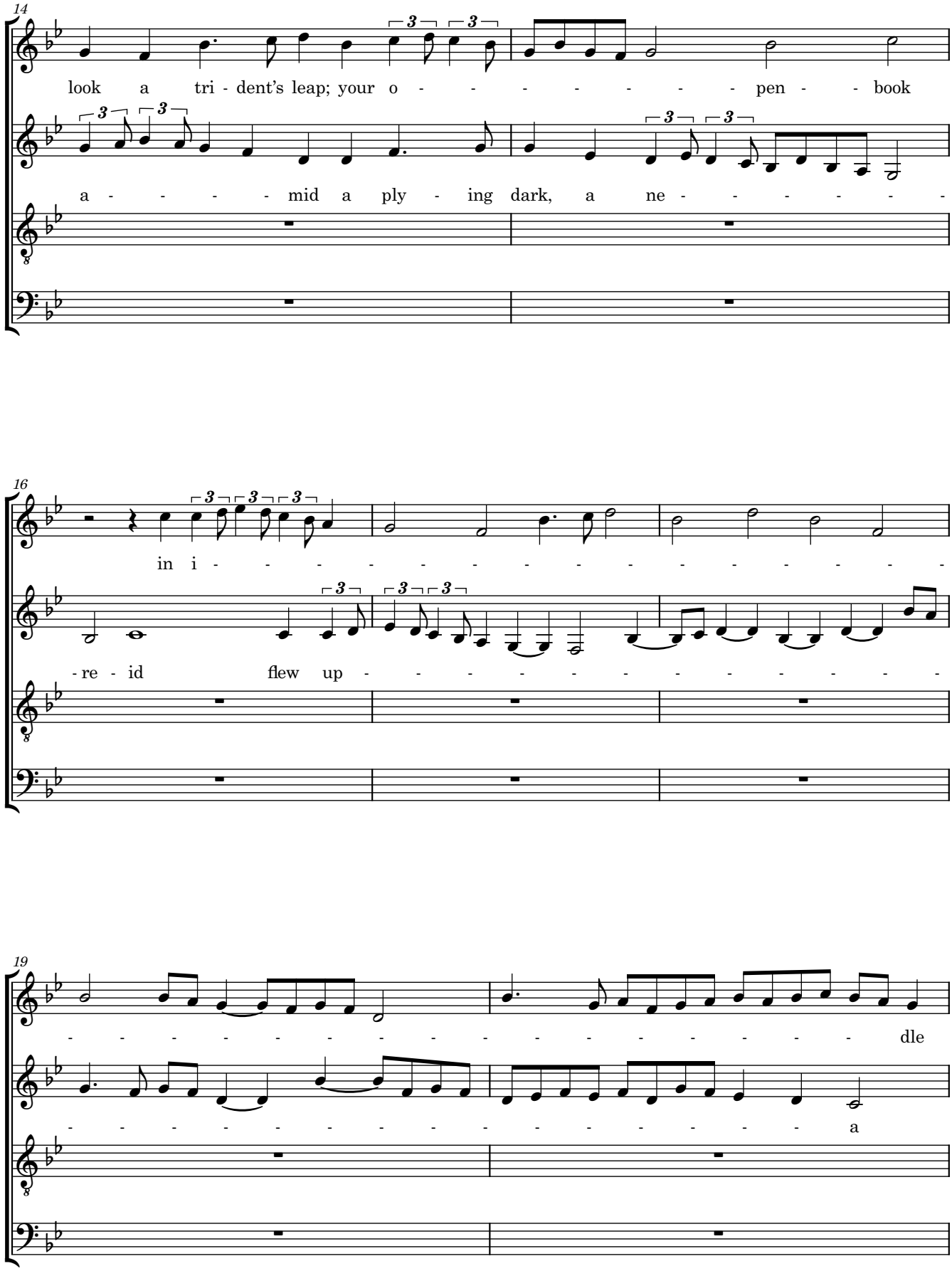

33
pp
ppp
p
pp
grass and dew were blue.
p
pp
grass and dew were blue.
p
pp
grass and dew were blue.
p
pp
grass and dew were blue.
pp
pp
ppp

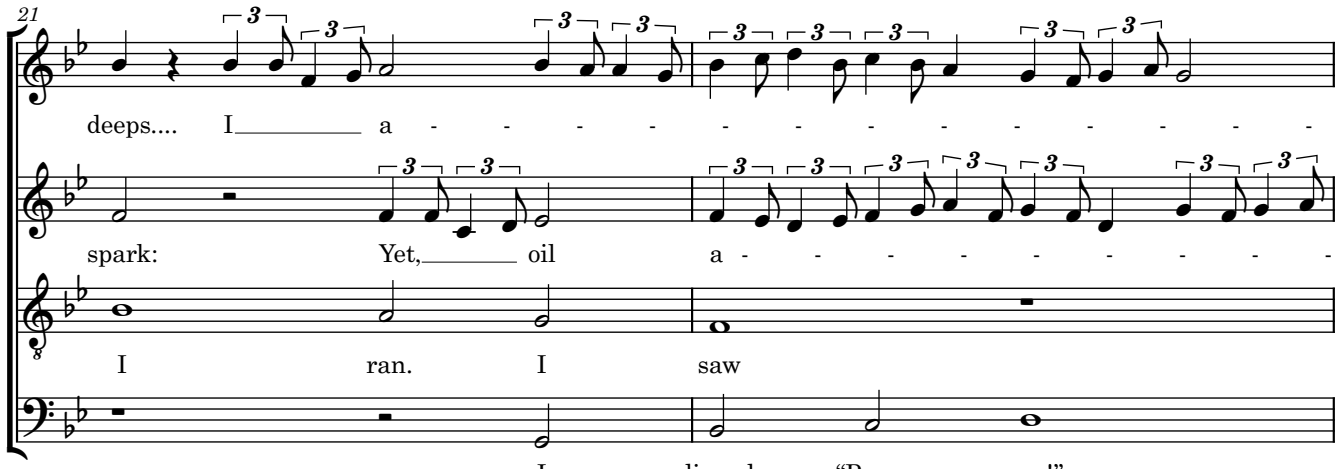
Solemn Melos

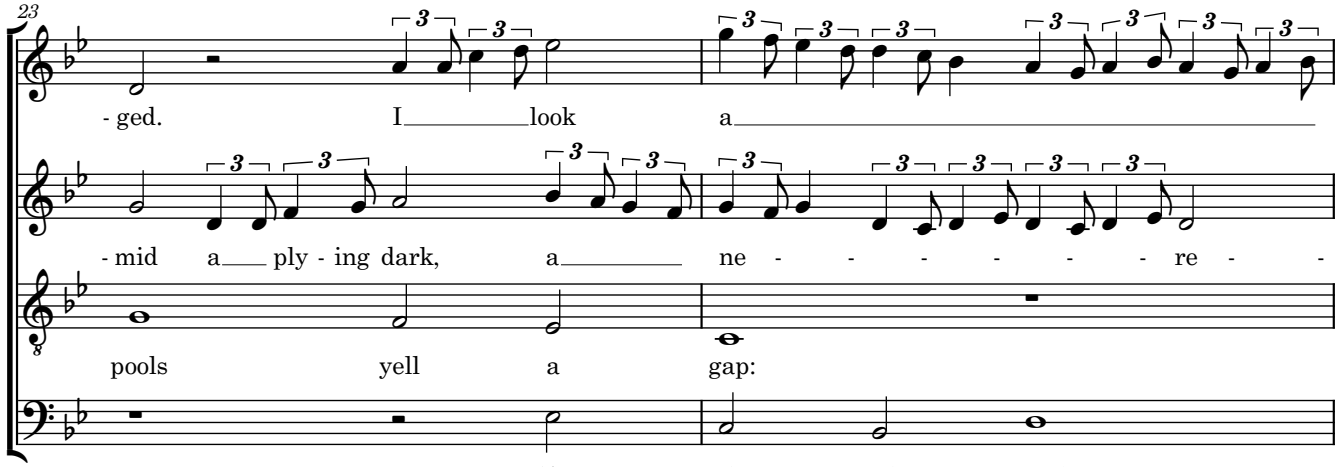
3. The Main

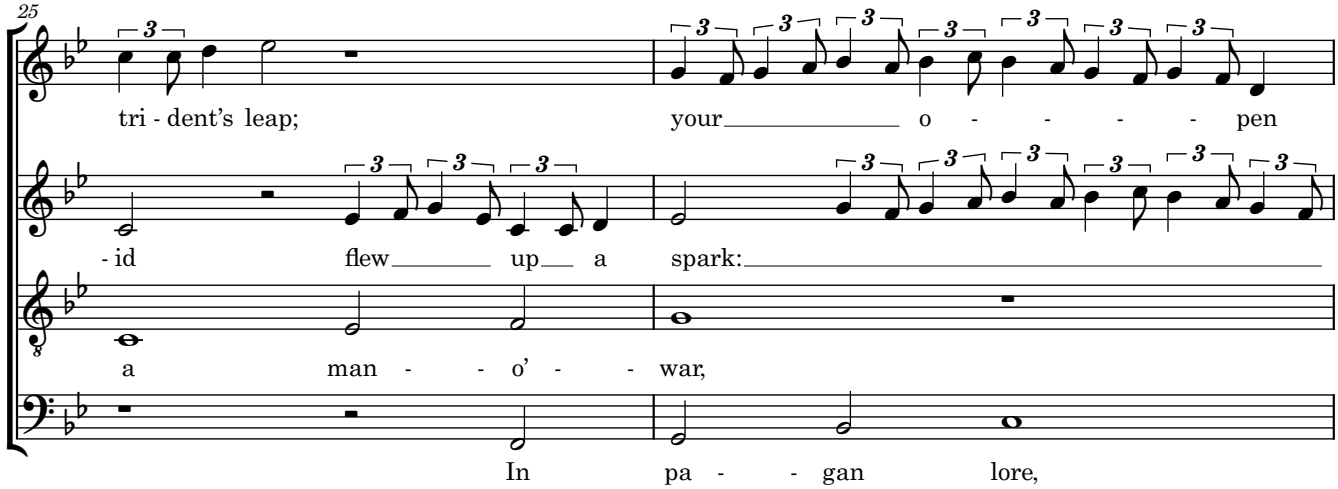


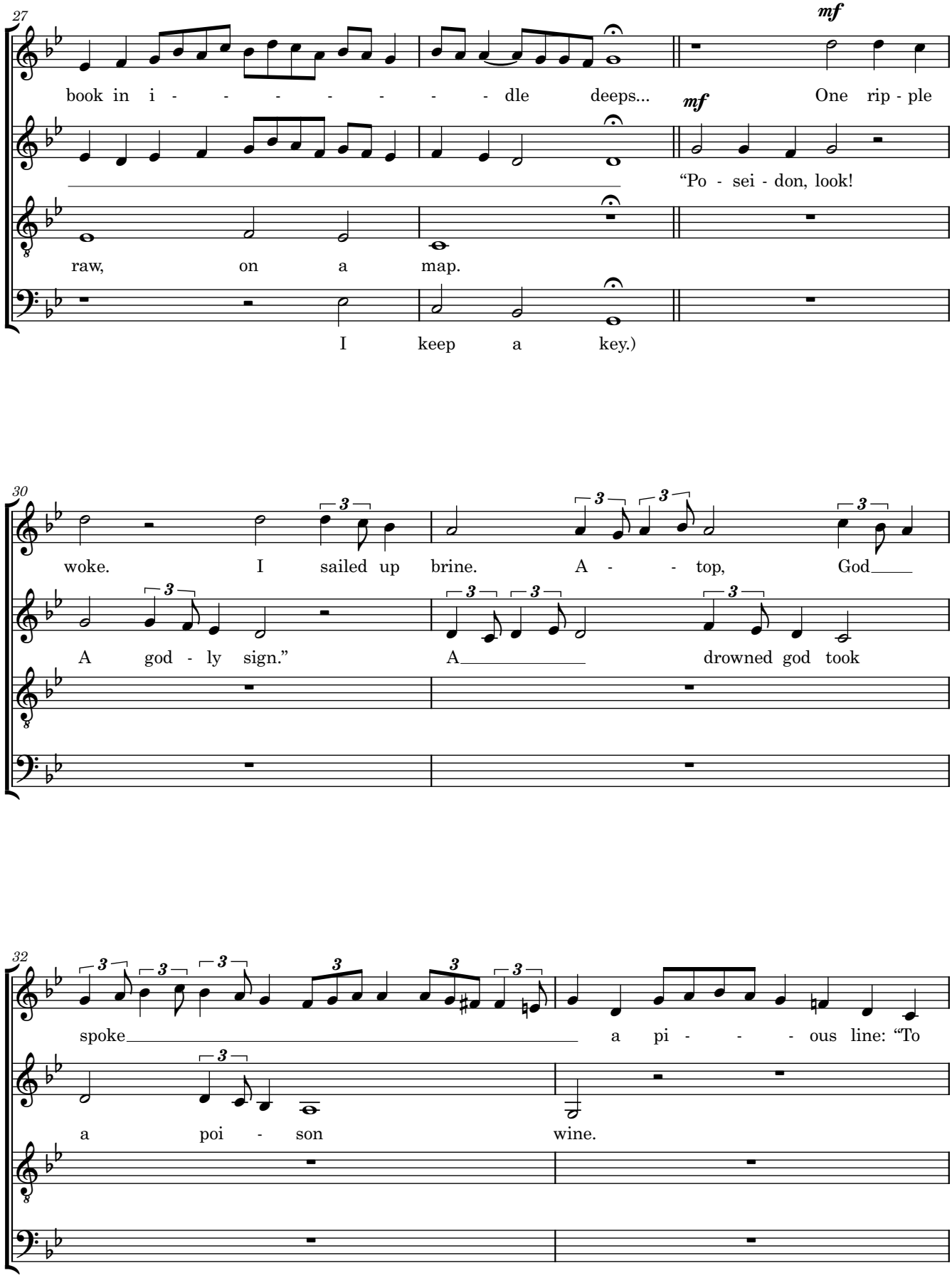

8
- - - - - - - - - - ren swarm, a
- ge - - - - - - an - - Sea. A league re -
log. I buoy, top - -
sloop - of - war, its
10
gau - - - - - - - - - ge a - way al - lowed
- built your wail
- side pooled, un - - der
sod - den floor a - -
12
a form. I aged. I
of plea. Yet, oil
fog....
- skew to me...

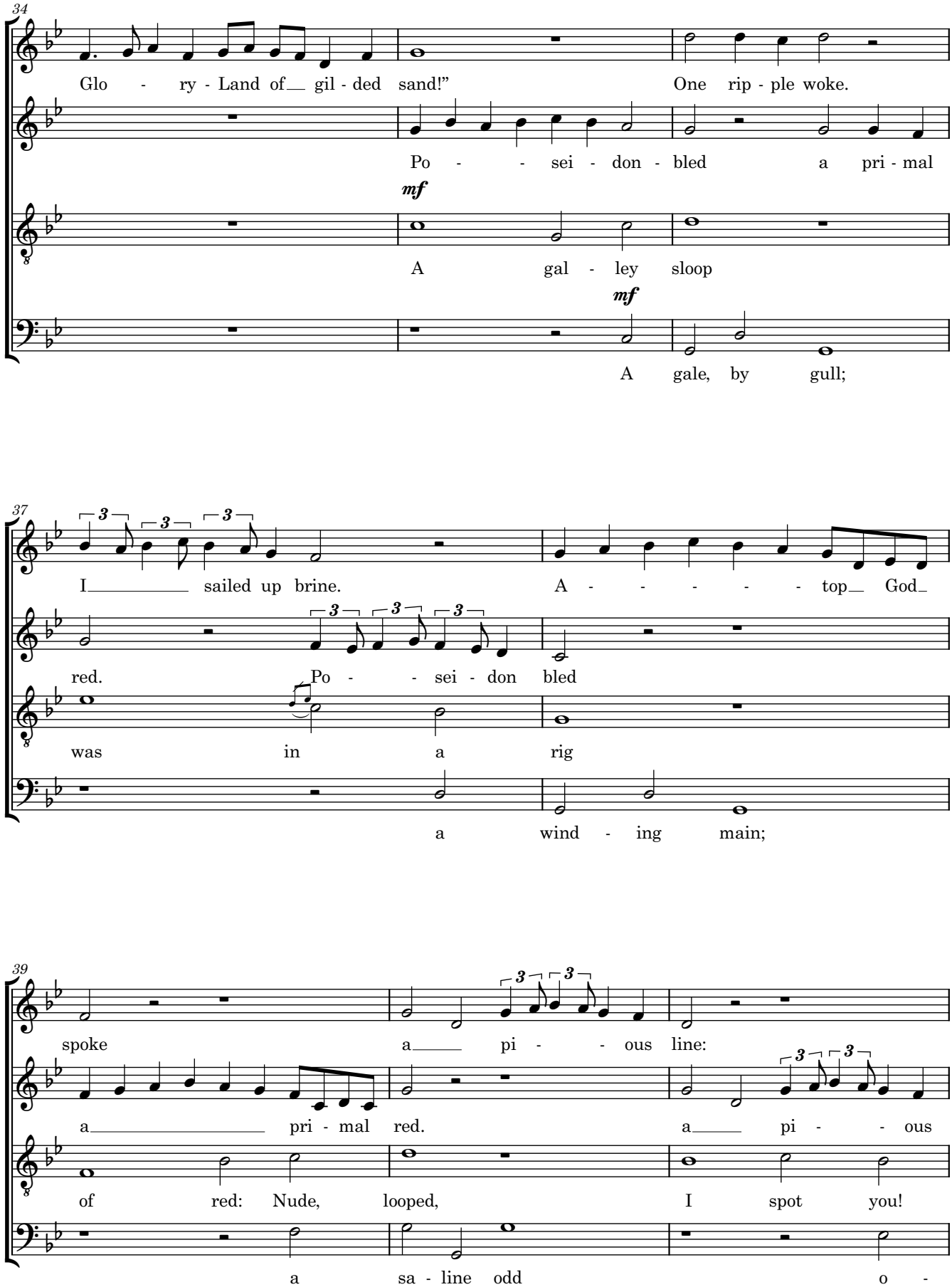

14
look a tri - dent's leap; your o - - - - - - - - pen - - book
a - - - - - mid a ply - ing dark, a ne - - - - - - - -
16
in i - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
- re - id flew up - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
19
- dle
- a

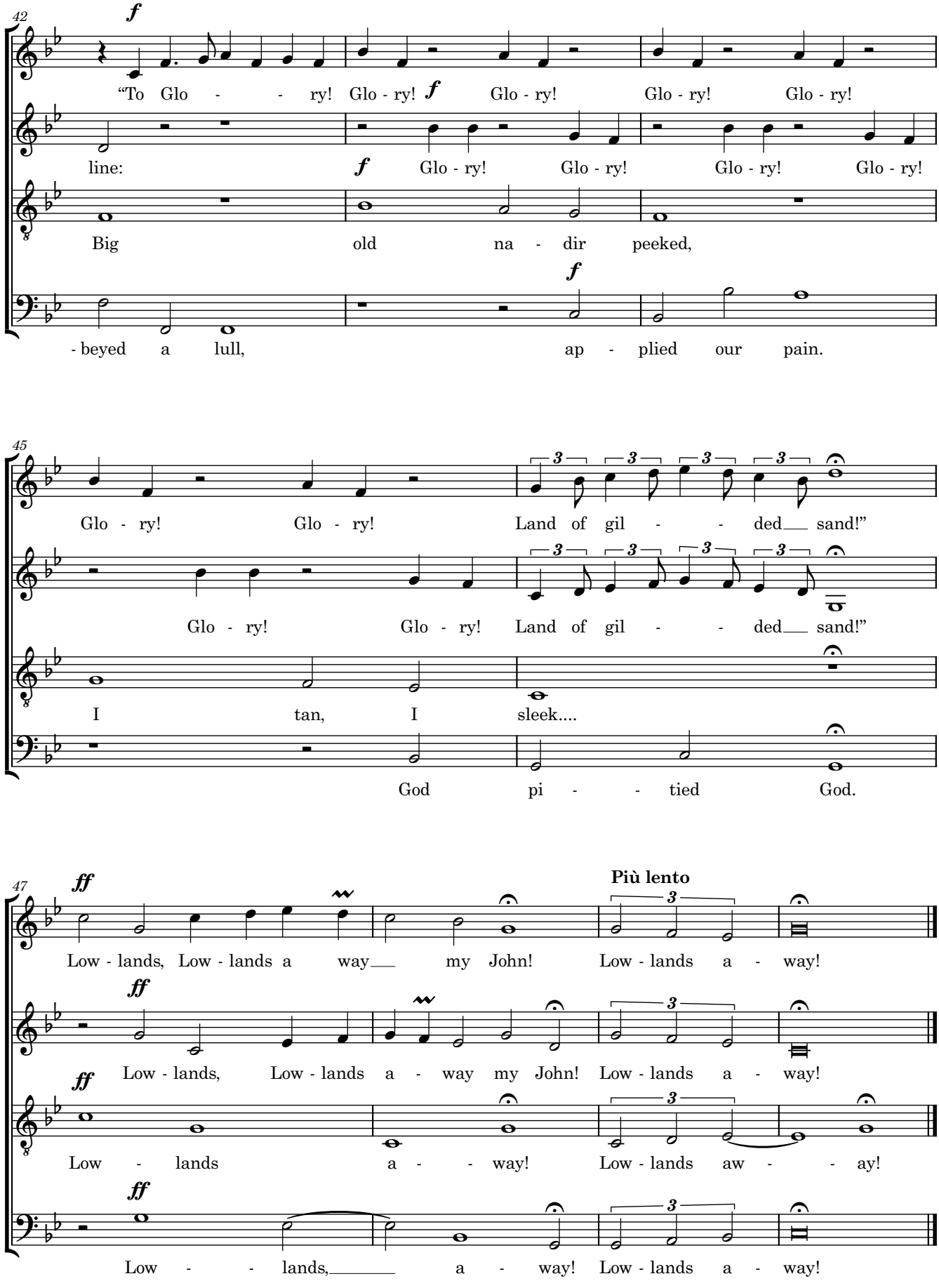

21
deeps.... I a - - - - - - - - - - -
spark: Yet, oil a - - - - - - - - - -
I ran. I saw
I dipped: “Pray, we!”


23
- ged. I look a
- mid a ply - ing dark, a ne - - - - - - - re - -
pools yell a gap:
(A si - - ren’s roar!


25
tri - dent’s leap; your o - - - - - pen
- id flew up a spark:
a man - - o’ - - war,
In pa - - gan lore,


27
mf
book in i - - - - - - - - dle deeps...
mf
One rip - ple
"Po - sei - don, look!
raw, on a map.
I keep a key.)
30
3
woke. I sailed up brine. A - - top, God
A god - ly sign." A drowned god took
32
spoke a pi - - - ous line: "To
a poi - son wine.


34
Glo - ry - Land of gil - ded sand!"
One rip - ple woke.
Po - - sei - don - bled
a pri - mal
mf
A gal - ley sloop
mf
A gale, by gull;
37
I sailed up brine.
A - - - - - top God
red.
Po - - sei - don bled
was in a rig
a wind - ing main;
39
spoke
a pi - - ous line:
a pri - mal red.
a pi - - ous
of red: Nude, looped,
I spot you!
a sa - line odd
o -


42
f
"To Glo - - ry! Glo - ry!
f
Glo - ry! Glo - ry! Glo - ry!
line:
f
Glo - ry! Glo - ry! Glo - ry! Glo - ry!
Big old na - dir peeked,
f
- beyed a lull, ap - plied our pain.
45
Glo - ry! Glo - ry! Land of gil - - ded sand!"
Glo - ry! Glo - ry! Land of gil - - ded sand!"
I tan, I sleek....
God pi - - tied God.
47
ff
Più lento
Low - lands, Low - lands a way my John! Low - lands a - way!
ff
Low - lands, Low - lands a - way my John! Low - lands a - way!
ff
Low - lands a - - way! Low - lands aw - - ay!
ff
Low - - lands, a - way! Low - lands a - way!