NIGHT

ERIC SHANFIELD

NIGHT

Eric Shanfield | ENS.2006.5 | 9’

Poem by C. K. Williams

Baritone

Viola

The poem *Night* by C. K. Williams—a poet whose work I have always admired—first appeared in 2006 in *The New Yorker*, where it struck me not only for its crepuscular loveliness but for its apparent or at least temporary repudiation of the extremely lengthy poetic line Williams had long since staked out as his special territory.

The six small verses seemed to lend themselves well to my composition style, so I set them for baritone voice with guitar and viola. After *Sea Change* I was very interested in dark timbres, and the third *Velvet Underground* album with John Cale’s viola matching Lou Reed’s electric guitar was a clear touchpoint.

Unfortunately, at the time I had no idea how to write for guitar, and the part that was composed turned out to be unidiomatic and virtually unplayable. Though over the next several years I tried making versions of the piece for various instruments none of them satisfied me.

A decade passed. In 2016 I was idly looking over a version I had made of some of the movements a couple of years before for baritone with viola alone, which had been abandoned because a solo viola didn’t seem sufficient to perform the polyphony envisioned for some of the movements, when I realized that if instead of trying to recreate the original parts I used idiomatic string techniques to translate rather than transcribe the original textures I could finally make a definitive version of the work for baritone and solo viola. So I did.

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NIGHT

C. K. Williams

1.

Somehow a light plane
coming in low at three
in the morning to a local airstrip
hits a complex of tones
in its growl so I hear mingled
with it a peal of church bells,
swelling in and out
of audibility, arrhythmic,
but rich and insistent, then,
though I try to hold them,
they dissolve, fade away;
only that monochrome
drone bores on
alone through the dark.

2.

This is one of our new
winters, dry, windless
and warm, when even
the lightest cover is stifling.
A luxuriant flowering
pear tree used to shelter
the front of our house,
but last August a storm
took it, a bizarrely focused
miniature tornado never
before seen in this climate,
and now the sky outside
the window is raw, the inert
air viscous and sour.

3.

I was ill, and by the merest
chance happened to be
watching as the tree fell,
I saw the branches helplessly
flail, the fork of the trunk
with a great creak split,
and the heavier half start
down, catch on wires,
and hang, lifting and subsiding
in the last barbs of the gale
as though it didn't know yet
it was dead, then it did,
and slipped slowly sideways
onto its own debris in the gutter.

4.

When Ivan Karamazov
is reciting his wracked disquisition
about the evils perpetrated
on children, opining whether
human salvation would be worth
a single child's suffering,
you know he's closing to breaking
down, sobbing in shame
and remorse, and I wonder
if he'd imagined our whole planet,
the children with it,
wagered in a mad gamble
of world against wealth,
what would he have done?

5.

What do I do? Fret
mostly, and brood, and lie
awake. Not to sleep
wasn't always so punishing.
Once, in a train, stalled
in mountains, in snow,
I was roused by the clank
of a trainman's crowbar
on the undercarriage of my car.
I lifted the leathery shade
and across a moon-dazzled
pine-fringed slope
a fox cut an arc; everything
else was pure light.

6.

I wanted it to last forever,
but I was twenty, and before
I knew it was back in my dream.
Do I ever sleep that way
now, innocent of everything
beyond my ken? No,
others are always with me,
others I love with my life,
yet I'll leave them scant
evidence of my care, and little
trace of my good intentions,
as little as the solacing shush
the phantom limbs of our slain
tree will leave on the night.

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1

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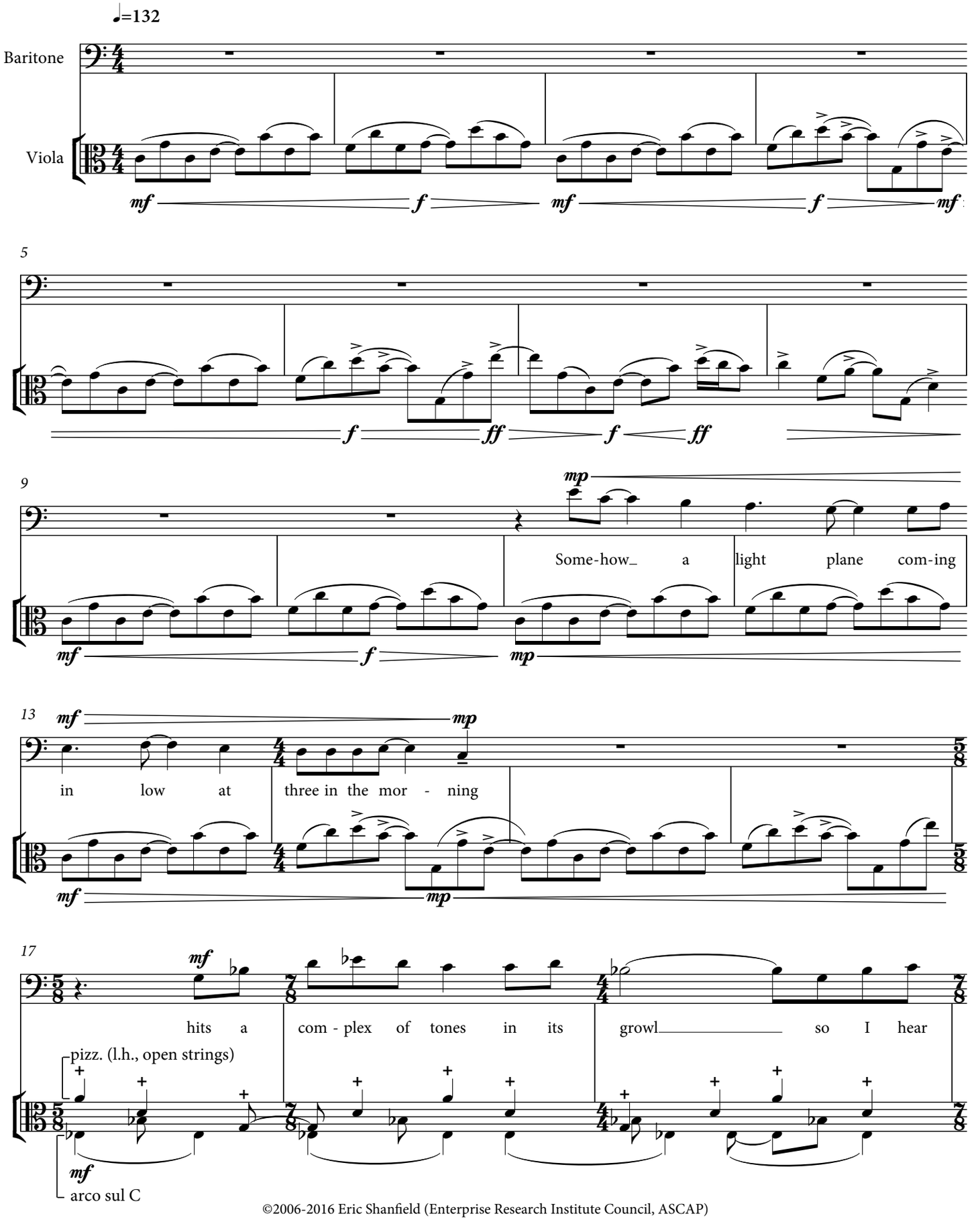

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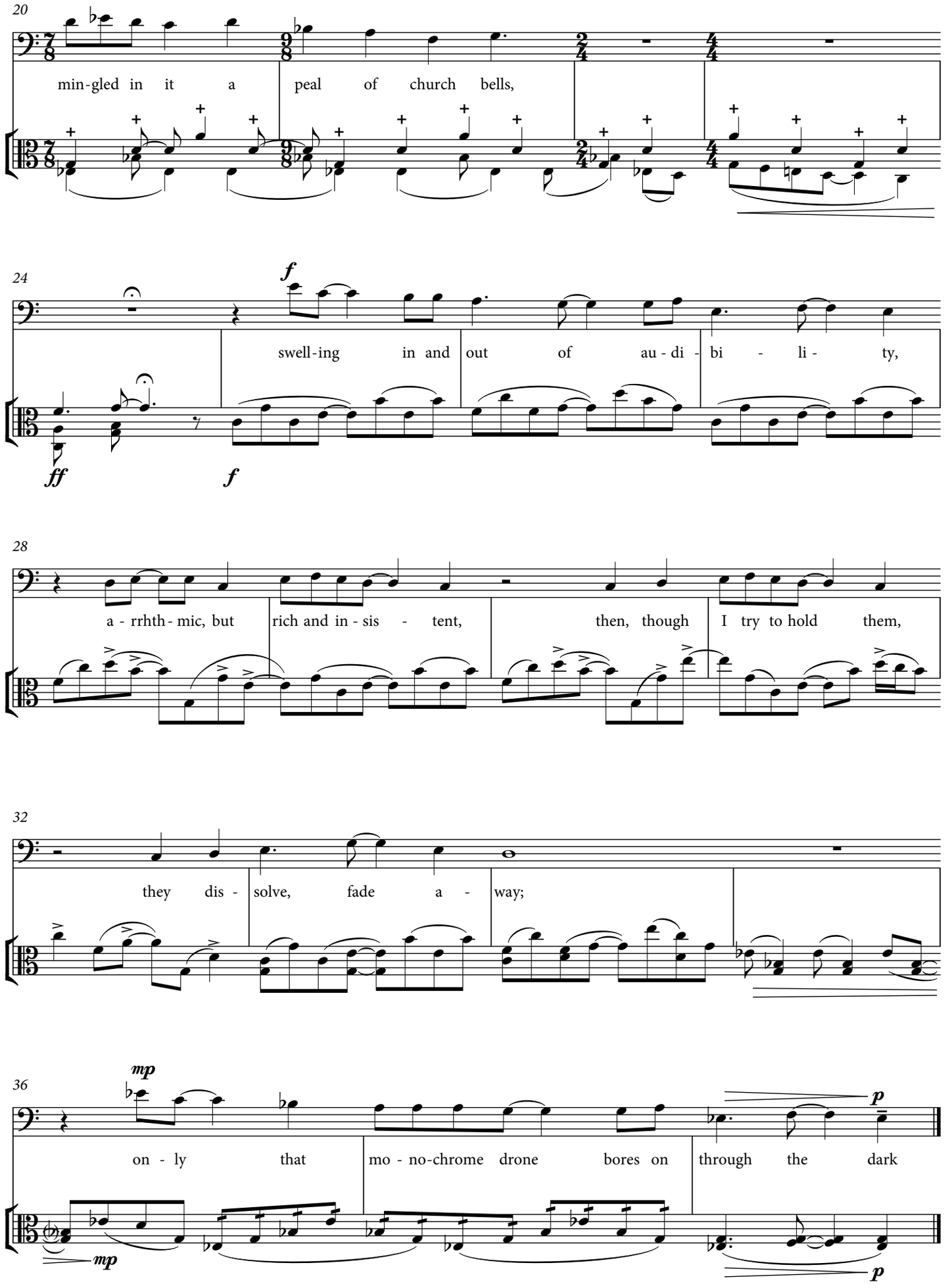
20
min-gled in it a peal of church bells,
24
f
swell-ing in and out of au - di - bi - li - ty,
ff
f
28
a - rrhth - mic, but rich and in - sis - tent, then, though I try to hold them,
32
they dis - solve, fade a - way;
36
mp
on - ly that mo - no-chrome drone bores on through the dark
mp
p
p

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2

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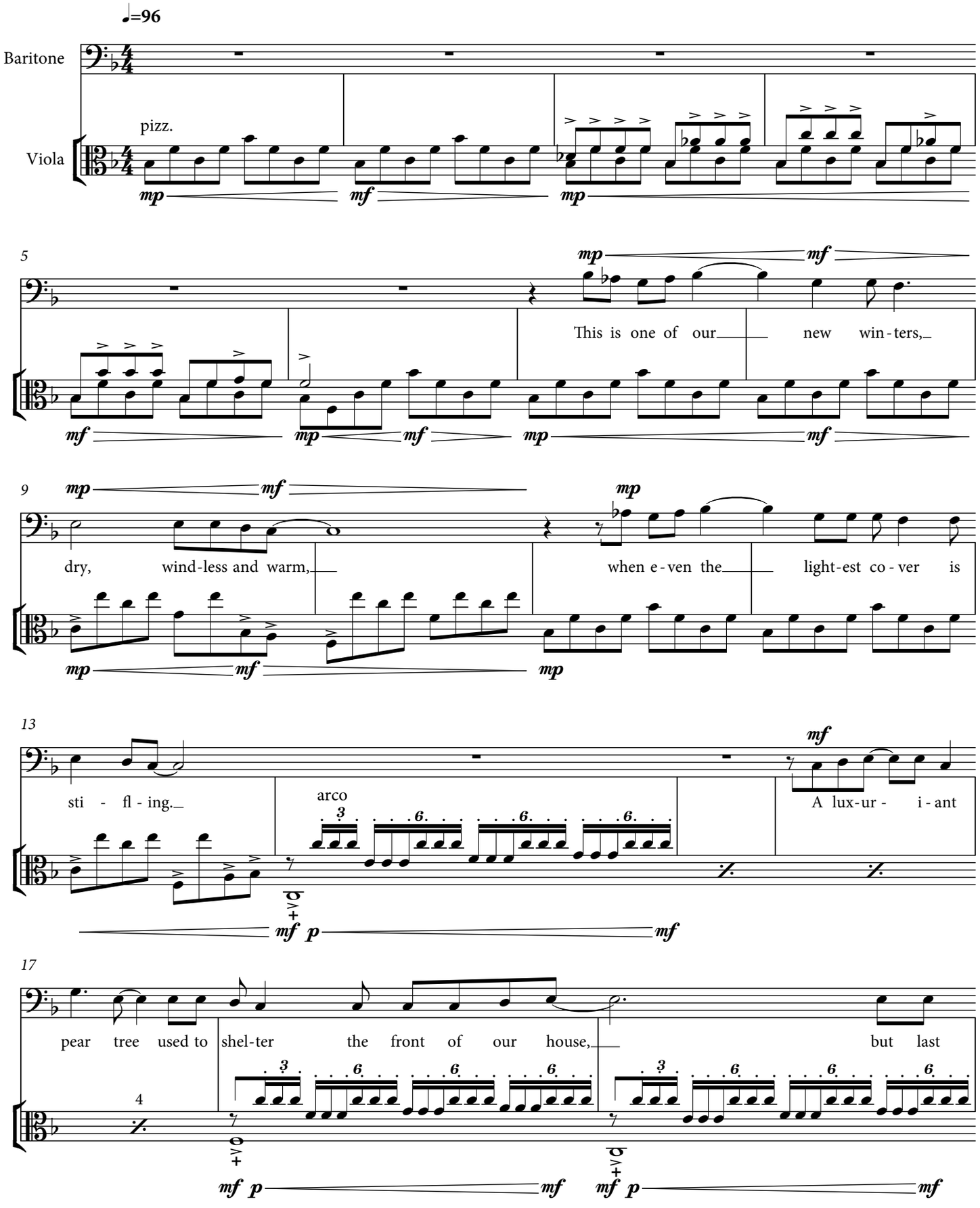

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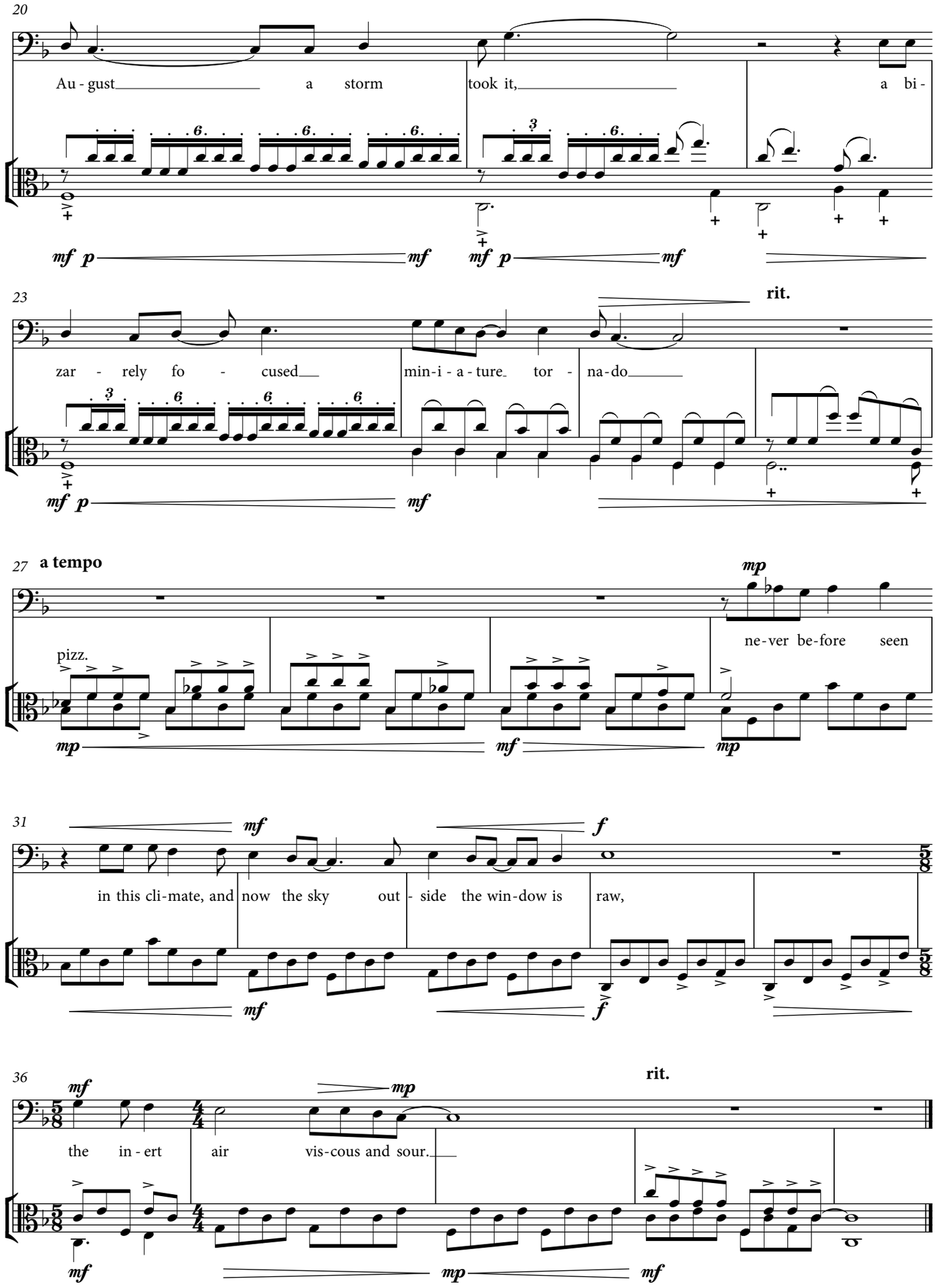
20
Au - gust a storm took it, a bi -
mf p mf mf p mf
23
rit.
zar - rely fo - cused min-i - a - ture tor - na-do
mf p mf
27
a tempo
mp
pizz.
ne-ver be-fore seen
mp mf mp
31
mf f
in this cli-mate, and now the sky out - side the win-dow is raw,
mf f
36
mf mp
rit.
the in - ert air vis-cous and sour.
mf mp mf

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3

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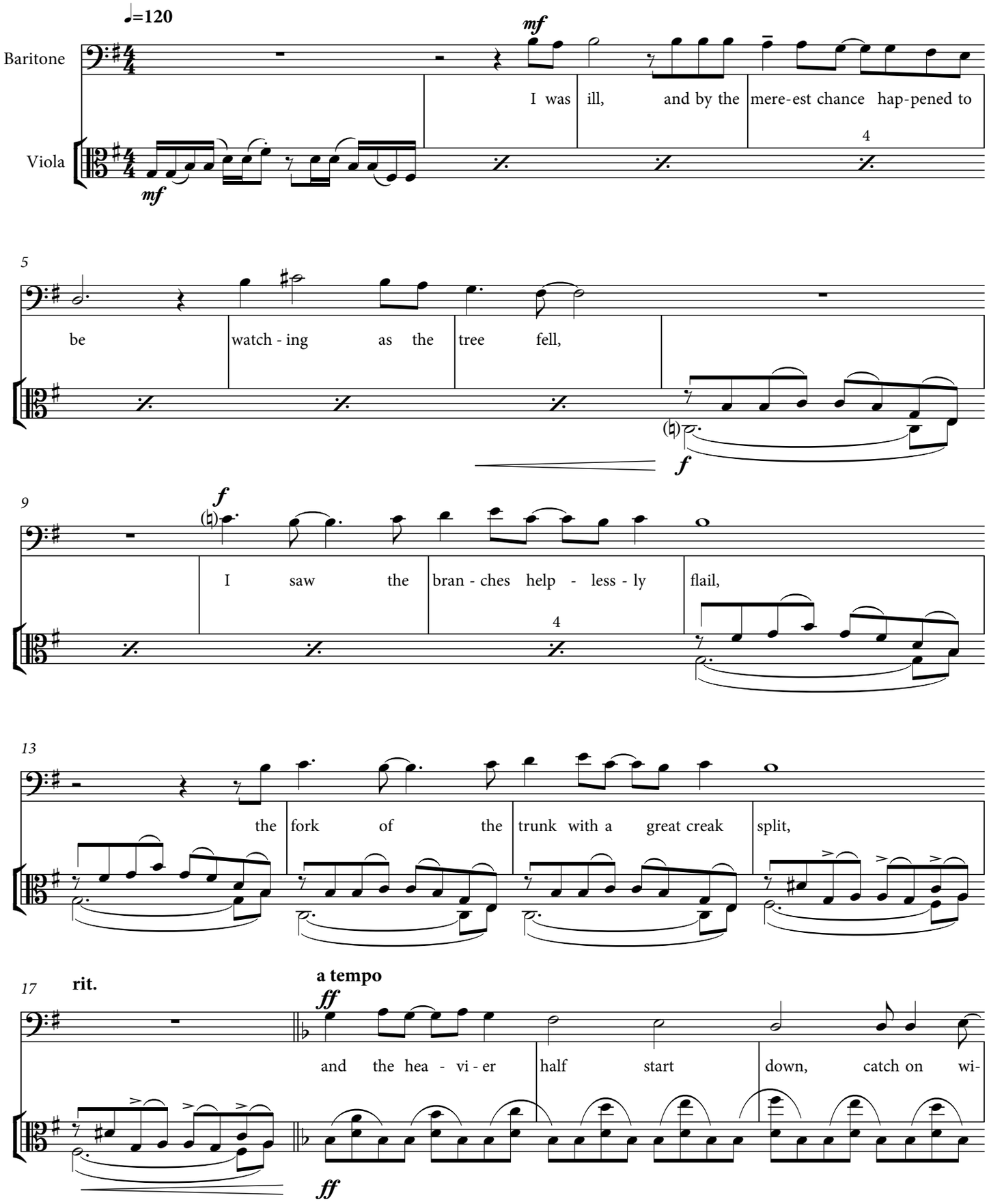

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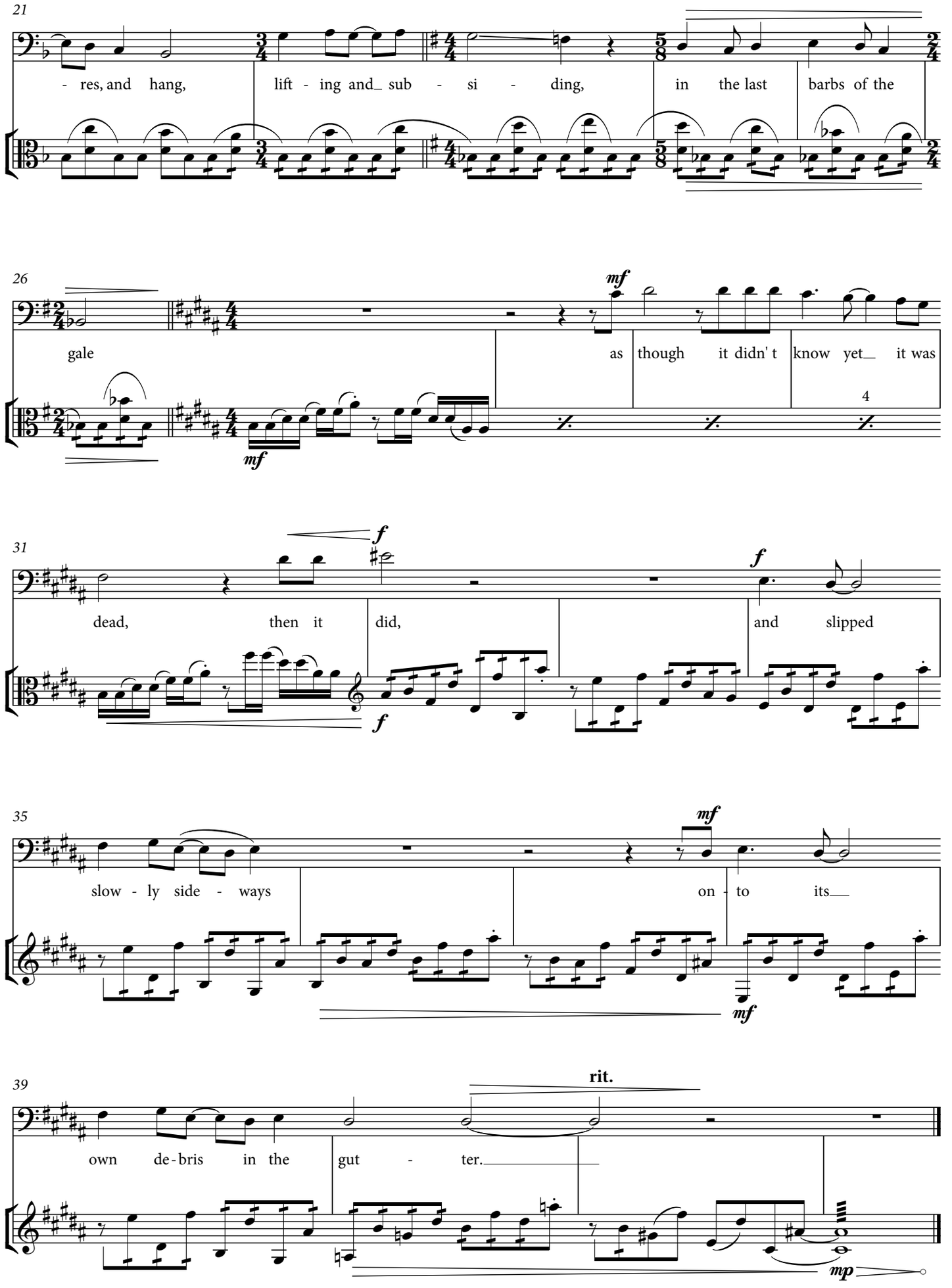
21
- res, and hang, lift - ing and_ sub - si - ding, in the last barbs of the
26
gale as though it didn' t know yet_ it was
4
mf
mf
31
dead, then it did, and slipped
f
f
f
35
slow - ly side - ways on - to its_
mf
mf
39
rit.
own de - bris in the gut - ter._
mp

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4

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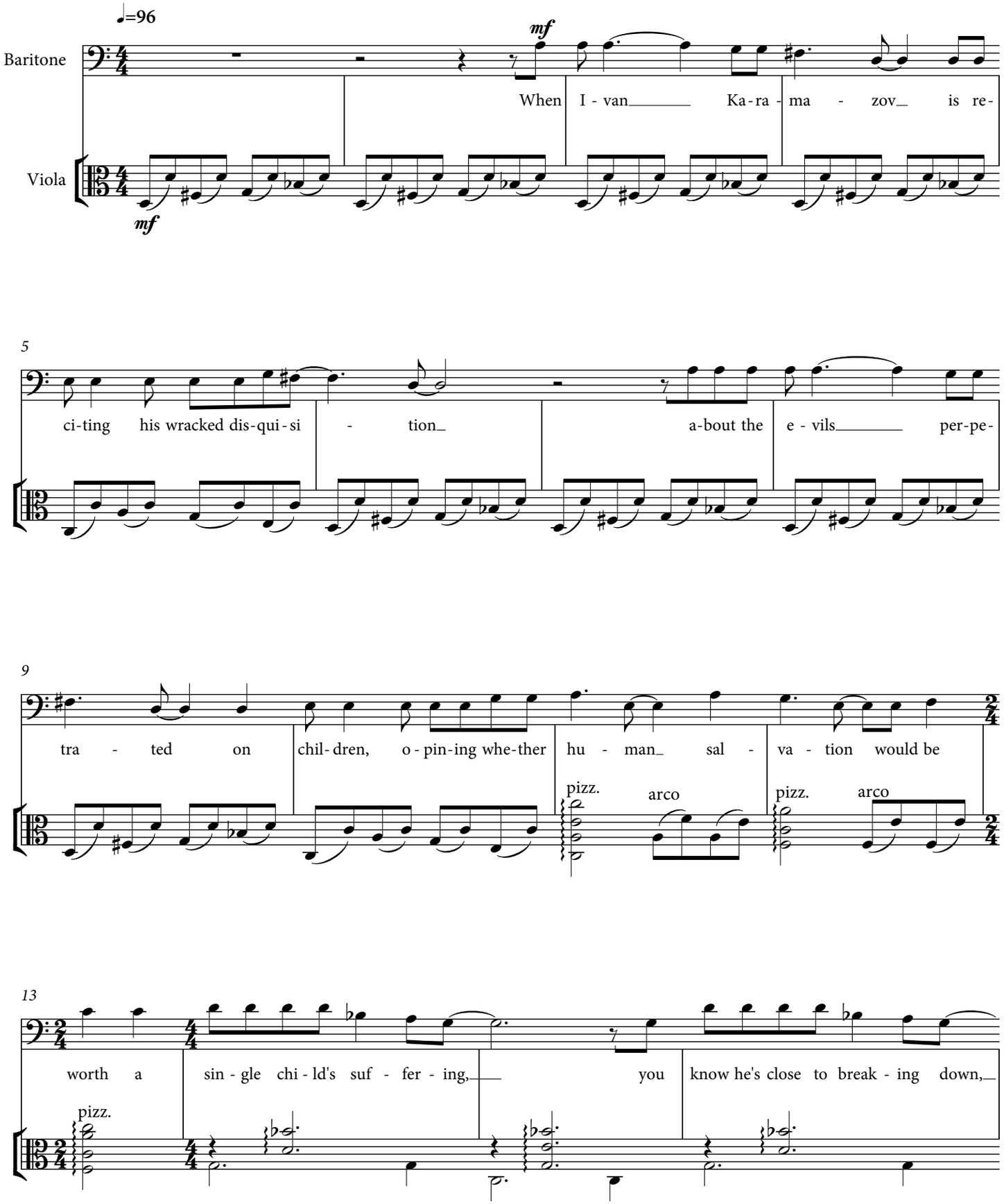

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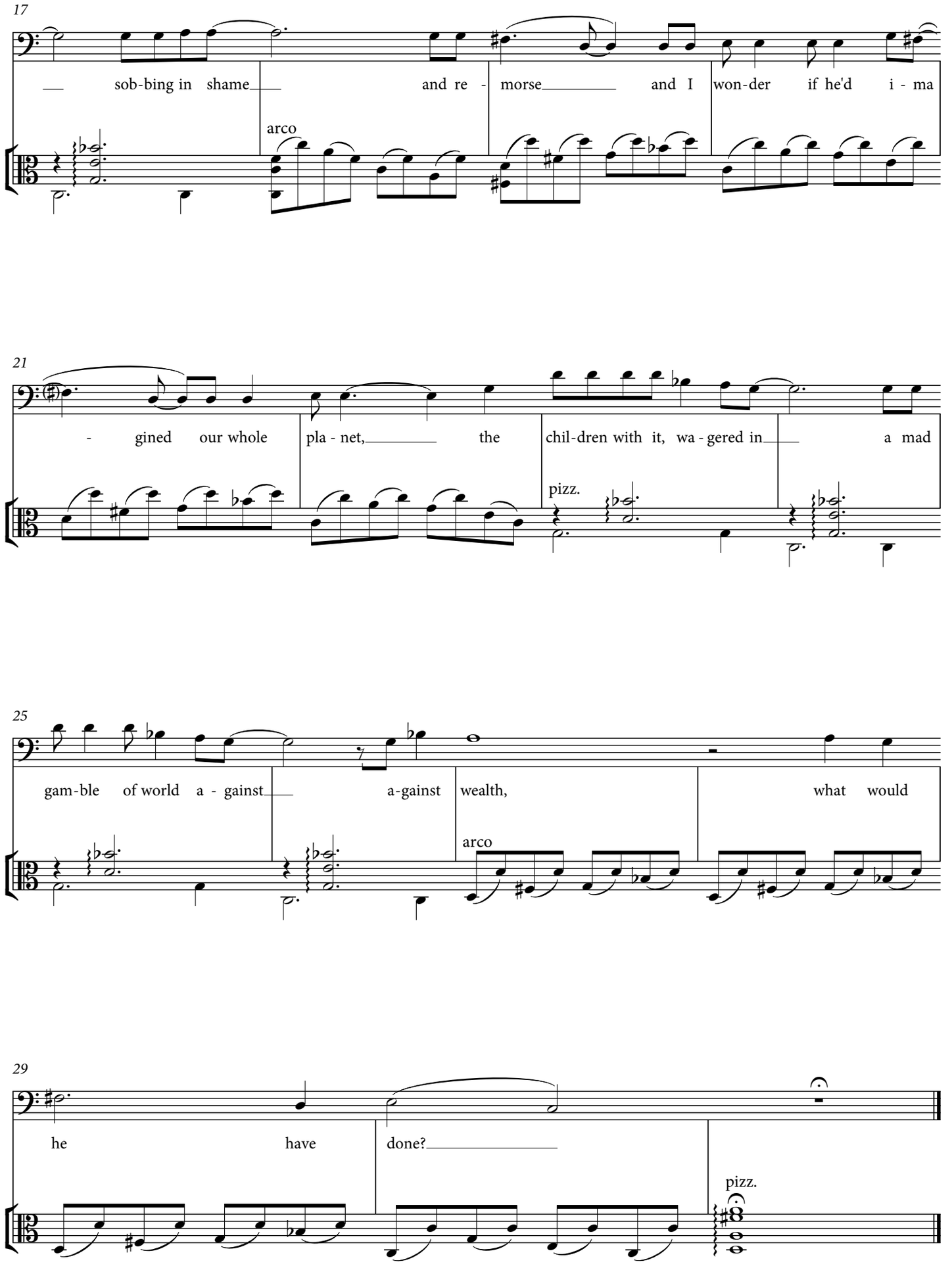
17
sob-bing in shame and re - morse and I won-der if he'd i - ma
arco
21
- gined our whole pla - net, the chil-dren with it, wa - gered in a mad
pizz.
25
gam-ble of world a - gainst a-gainst wealth, what would
arco
29
he have done?
pizz.

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5

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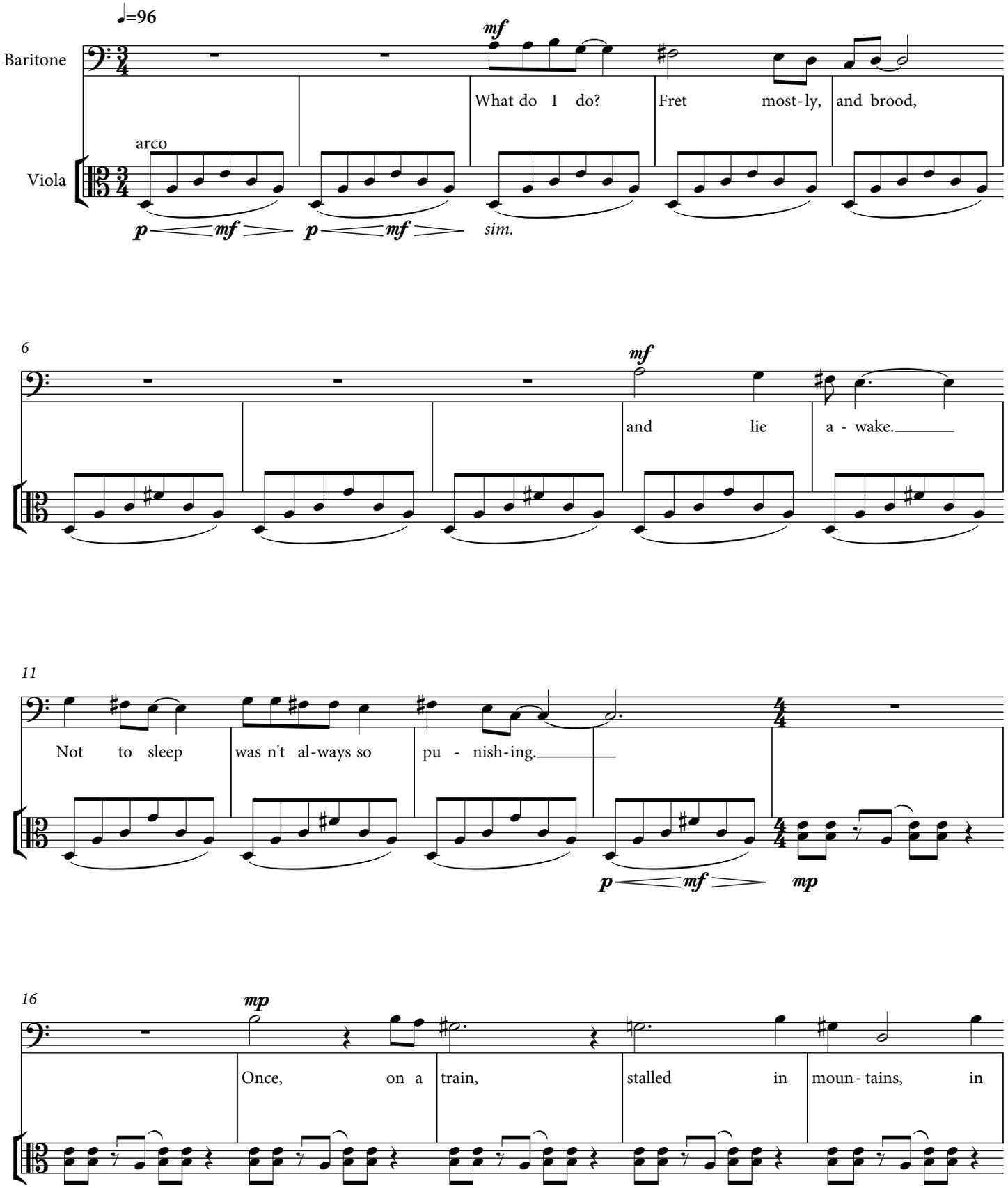

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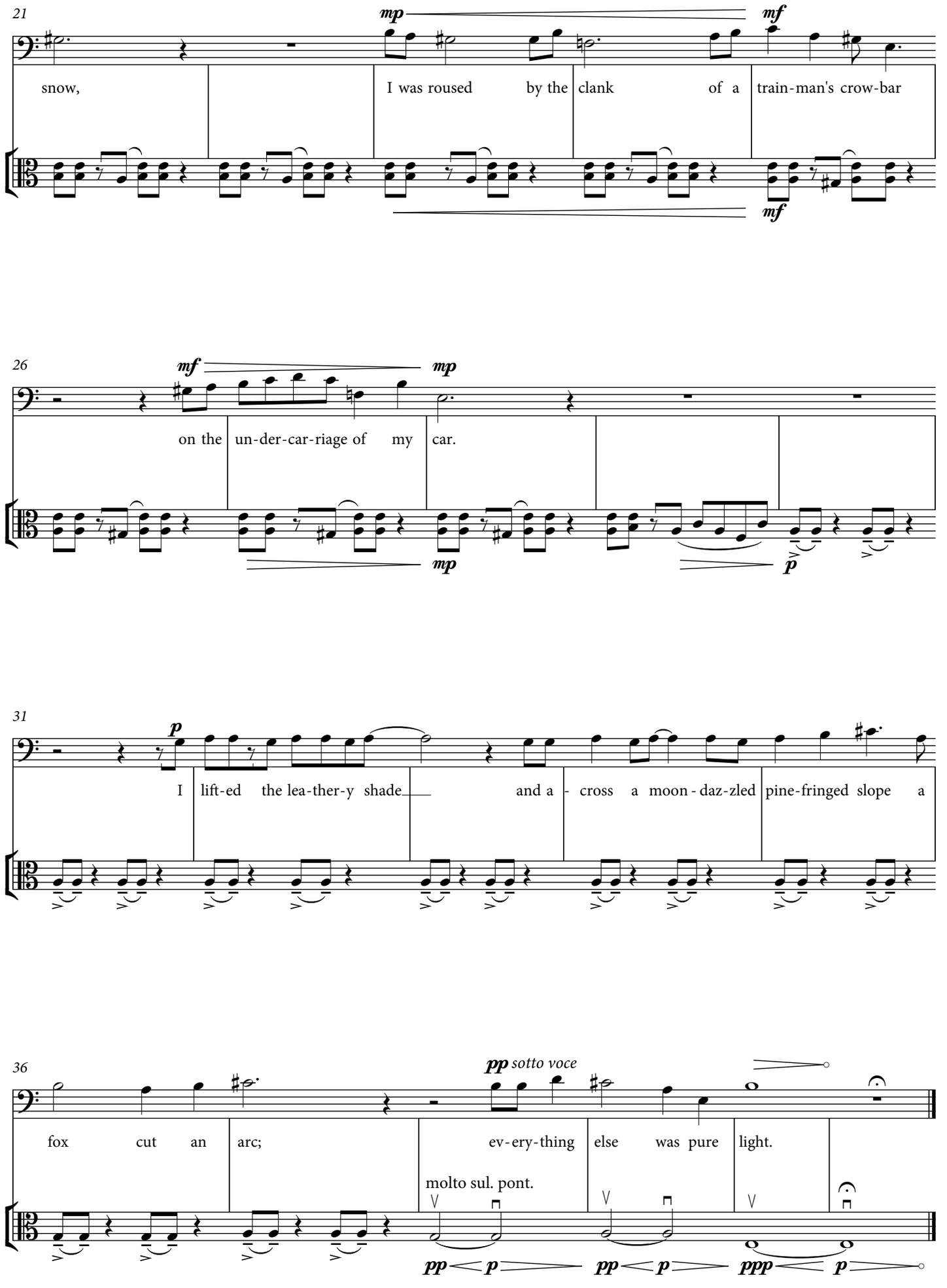
21
mp
mf
snow,
I was roused by the clank of a train-man's crow-bar
mf
26
mf
mp
on the un-der-car-riage of my car.
mp
p
31
p
I lift-ed the lea-ther-y shade and a - cross a moon - daz-zled pine-fringed slope a
36
pp sotto voce
fox cut an arc;
ev-ery-thing else was pure light.
molto sul. pont.
pp p pp p ppp p

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6

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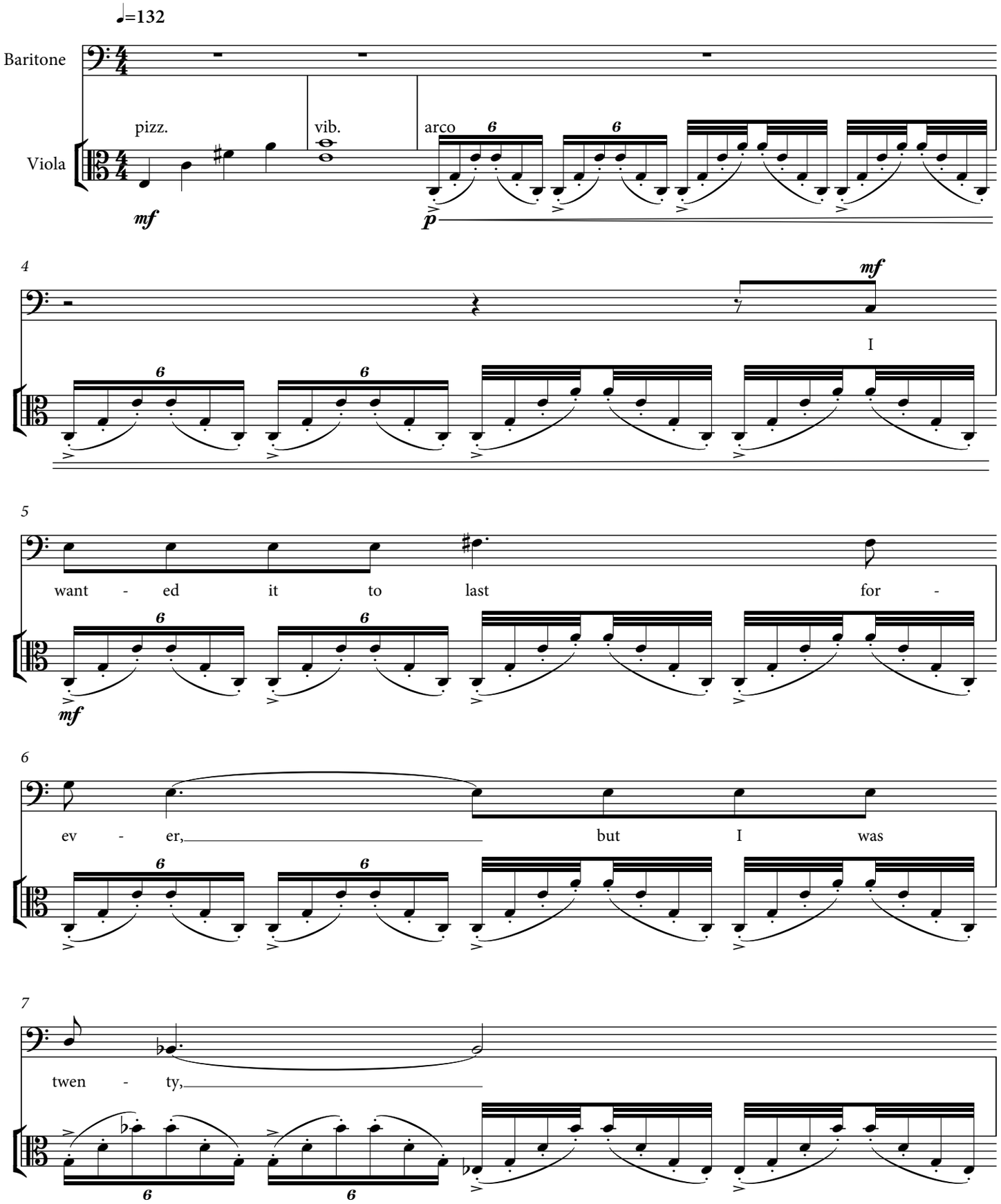

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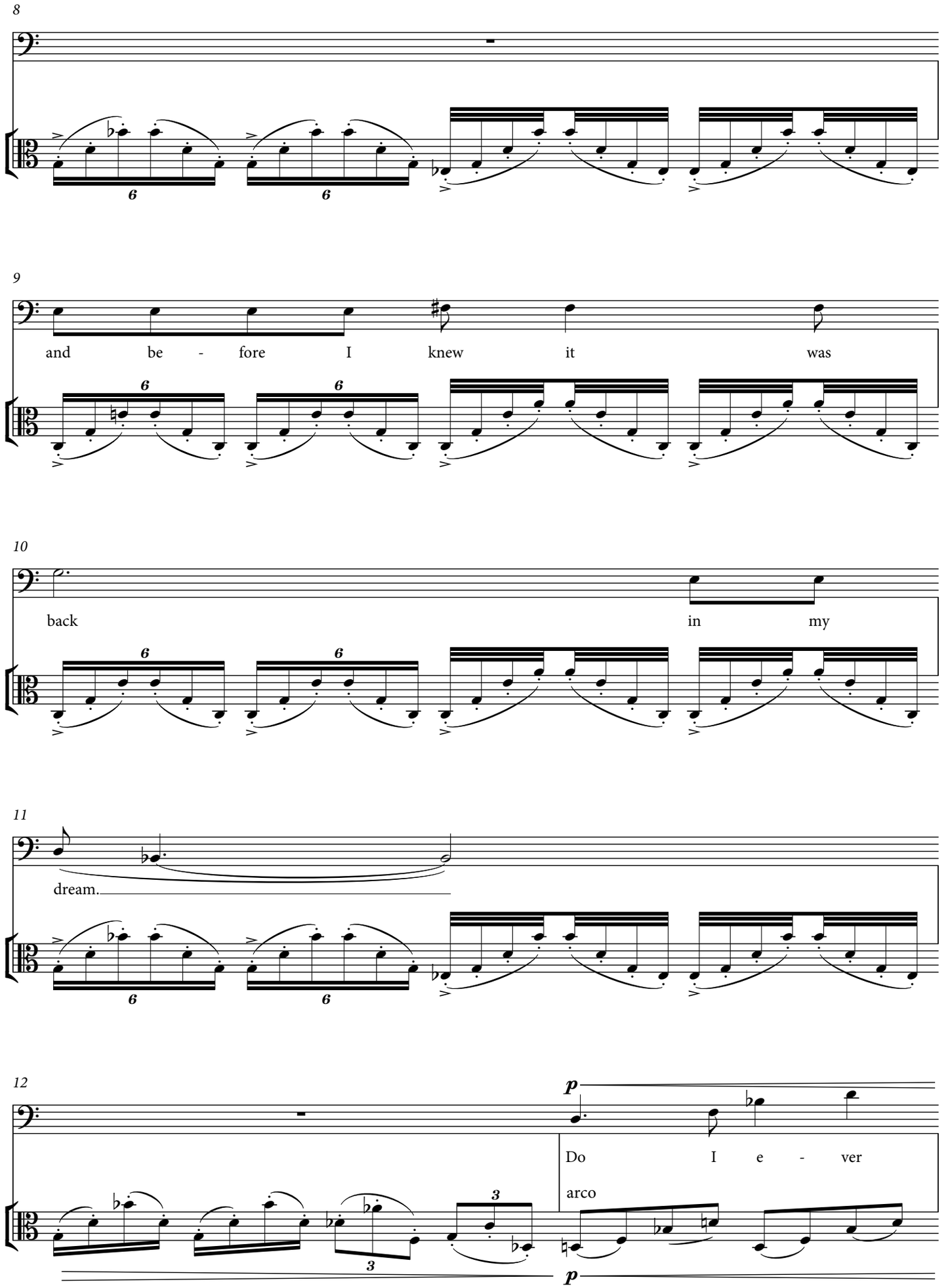
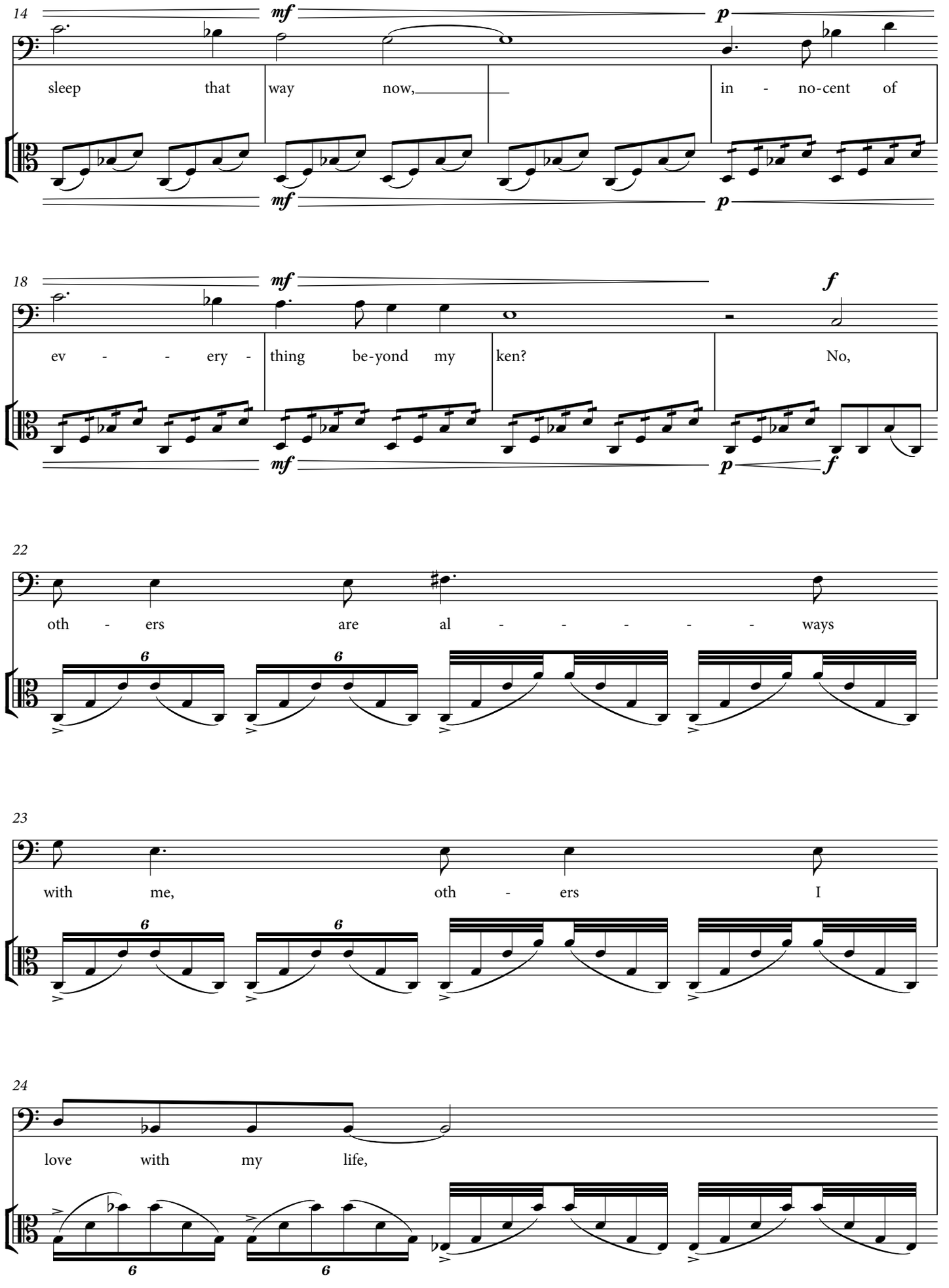
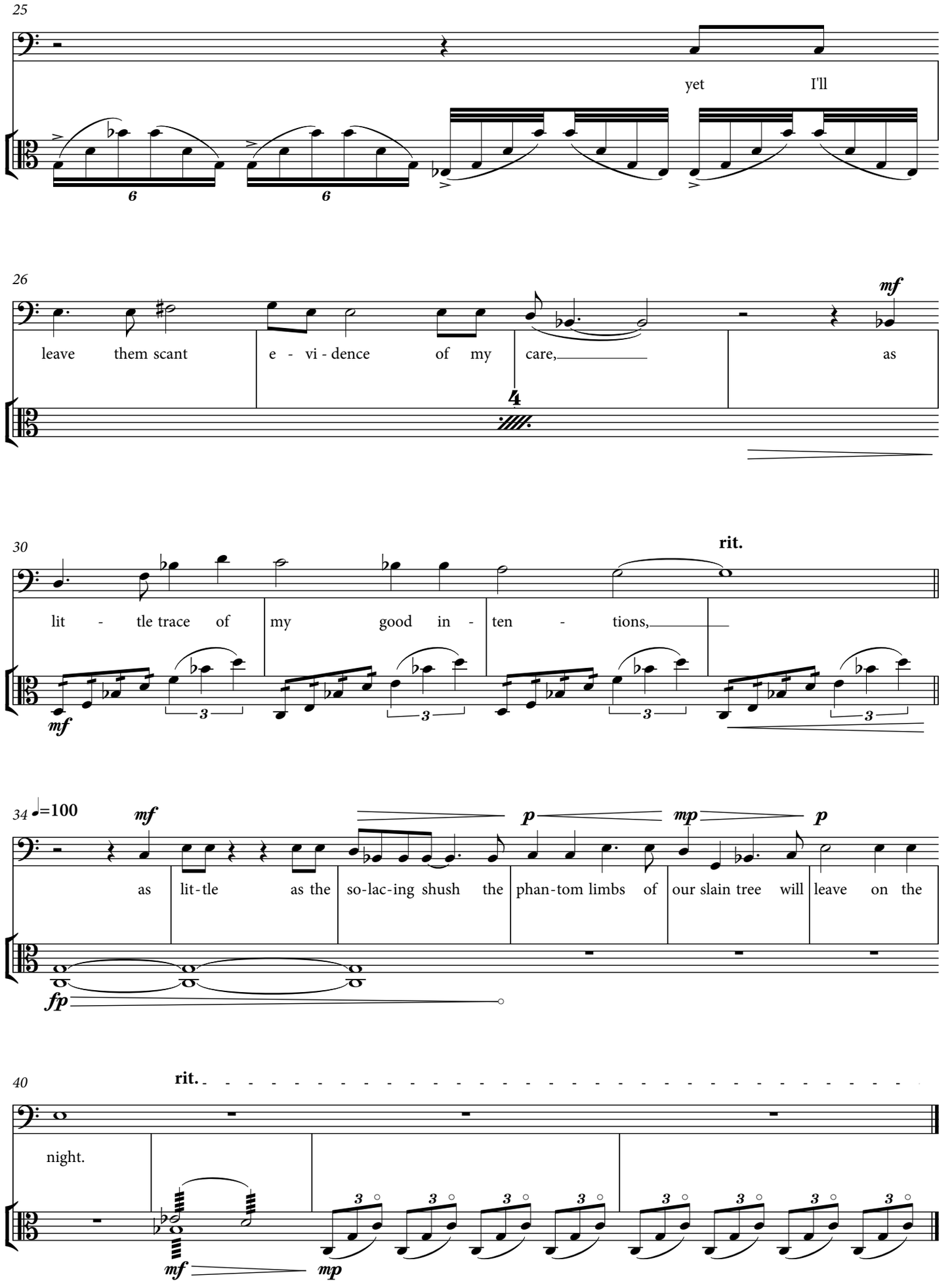

8
9
and be - fore I knew it was
10
back in my
11
dream.
12
p
Do I e - ver
arco
p


14
mf
p
sleep that way now, in - no-cent of
mf
p
18
mf
f
ev - - ery - thing be-yond my ken? No,
mf
p
f
22
oth - ers are al - - - - - ways
23
with me, oth - ers I
24
love with my life,


25
yet I'll
26
mf
leave them scant e - vi - dence of my care, as
4
30
rit.
lit - tle trace of my good in - ten - tions,
mf
34 ♩=100
mf p mp p
as lit-tle as the so-lac-ing shush the phan-tom limbs of our slain tree will leave on the
fp
40
rit.
night.
mf mp