

Birds

Mezzo-Soprano, Piano

LUKE CARLSON MUSIC

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(2026)

Composed for Jill Phillips and Ruoyang Xiang
Dedicated to Suzanne Underwood Rhodes

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Program Notes

I structured this song cycle in three sets of pairs. The first two songs are characterized by contemplation, thoughtfulness, and wistfulness. The middle two are energetic and intense, with a bit of playfulness and humor. The third pair is introspective, poignant, and sorrowful, drawing on themes of loss and death.

In lieu of further musical or textual analysis, I will simply add that Suzanne Underwood Rhodes's poetry resonated with me immediately. Birds, of course, have captivated writers and composers throughout history, not only for their natural musical skills and vibrant visual beauty, but also for their grace and freedom. But subject matter alone is not what captivated me. These poems are gems, mined and polished then finely crafted into personal & precious objects whose meaning & secrets only the reader knows.

Texts

I. White Music at Dusk

An egret preens in a tree back-
lighted by the pendant sun slipping
to gild each strand

and you catch it all on film:
the royal bird, the branch,
before the world goes dark.

We ride our bikes home
past the grave, blank sea,
past years when I never knew
how to picture my life.

But here the pine-strewn path in lowlight
returns the day's honey to my mind:
gold in the branches, the rinsed air,
the thought of you holding my face
as your brightest world.

II. Gray Distances

The loneliness of their long whistles,
the sound full of their whiteness,
even in community they are lonely,
miles of loneliness across the rain-
beaten water as they have come to overwinter,
to fly the gray distances from there to here,
to be the wings of longing, to plumb
the sky and sea, landing and leaving
like arrows from the bow of God,
the air crying for love of swans.

III. Peacock Lost in Tornado

When the great wind
took aim at the Harper's farm,
it swallowed only Peabody.

The barn was damaged,
implements twisted,
but not a hair on a head
was lost, only
Peabody's feathers.

Later that day, a rainbow.

IV. Warlord

Creature scarcely bumblebee size
launches from God's own finger.
Fierce among flowers, he's a Samurai
fending off rivals brazen to venture near
his private nectar sipped from bee balm's
lips, those scarlet beauties shielded by mighty
wingbeats driven by his furious heart.

V. Missing Persons

The finch's nest sprang up
one secret day in May
in my unguarded wreath.

I dared not disturb it,
a living story
embedded in my heart
whose guidance was,
don't come close,
check the mail some other way.

No one, not me nor you,
(had you been here),
was allowed passage
through the door
with its window letting me
glimpse the play of shadows
and the hatchlings
dimly shifting,
their beaks crying
with hunger going back
to the beginning
of every child's
mother laboring
to nourish the trembling body
under her wings.

After weeks, the finches fledged.
All but one I found
when I took down the wreath,
a sad little rag
whose death was known
by the glare of day
who might, says my heart,
be alive in the air
where you are.

VI. Birds at Night

Birds have their own nightfall,
a darkness not from here.
They slip into their wings
and quell the air.

Soon the warbling stops,
the fences disappear,
morning glories too,
the world keeps there.

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for Suzanne Underwood Rhodes

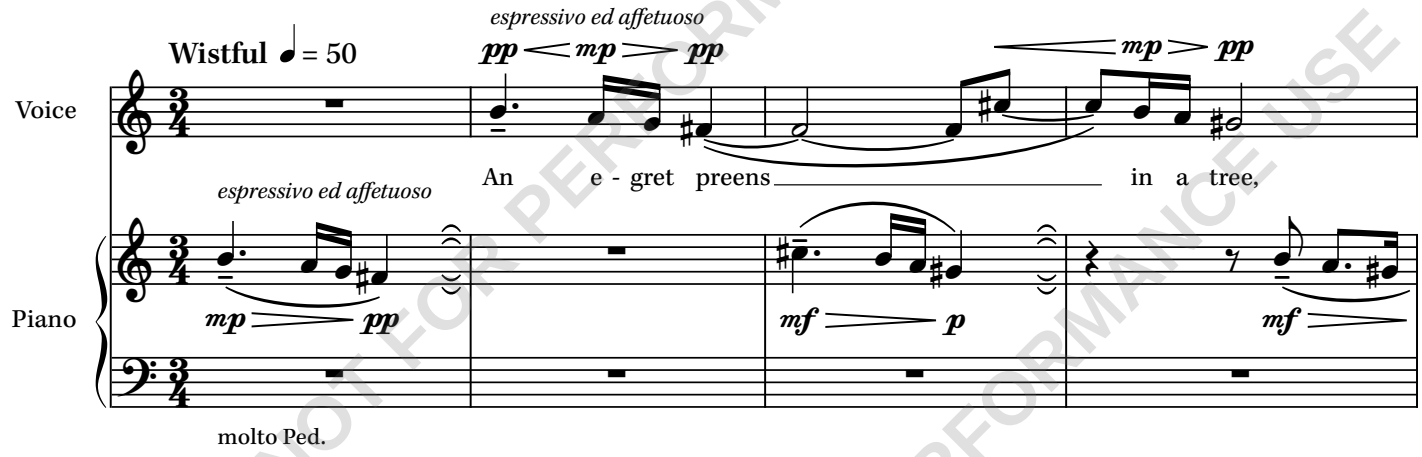
Birds

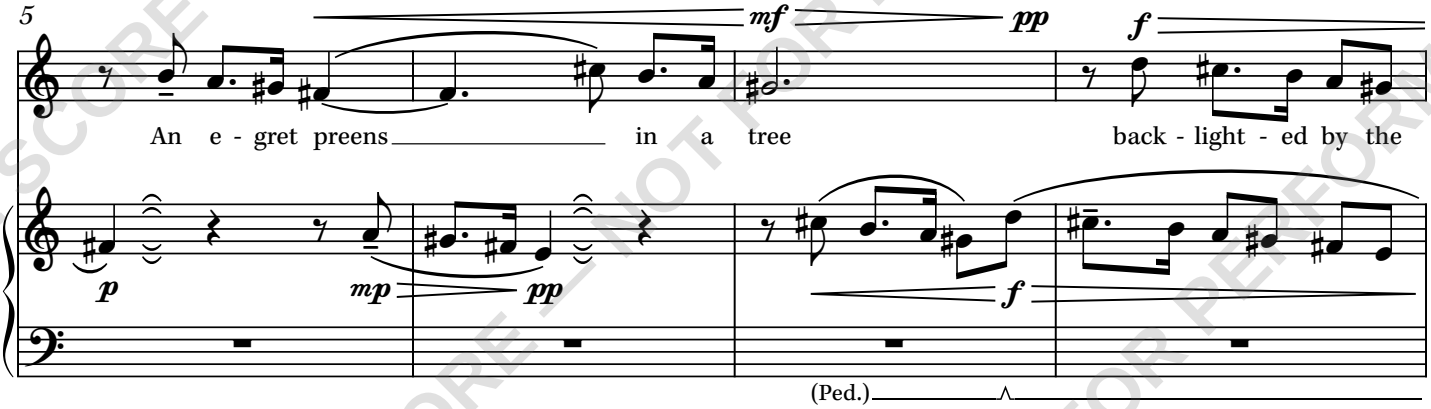
Mezzo-Soprano, Piano

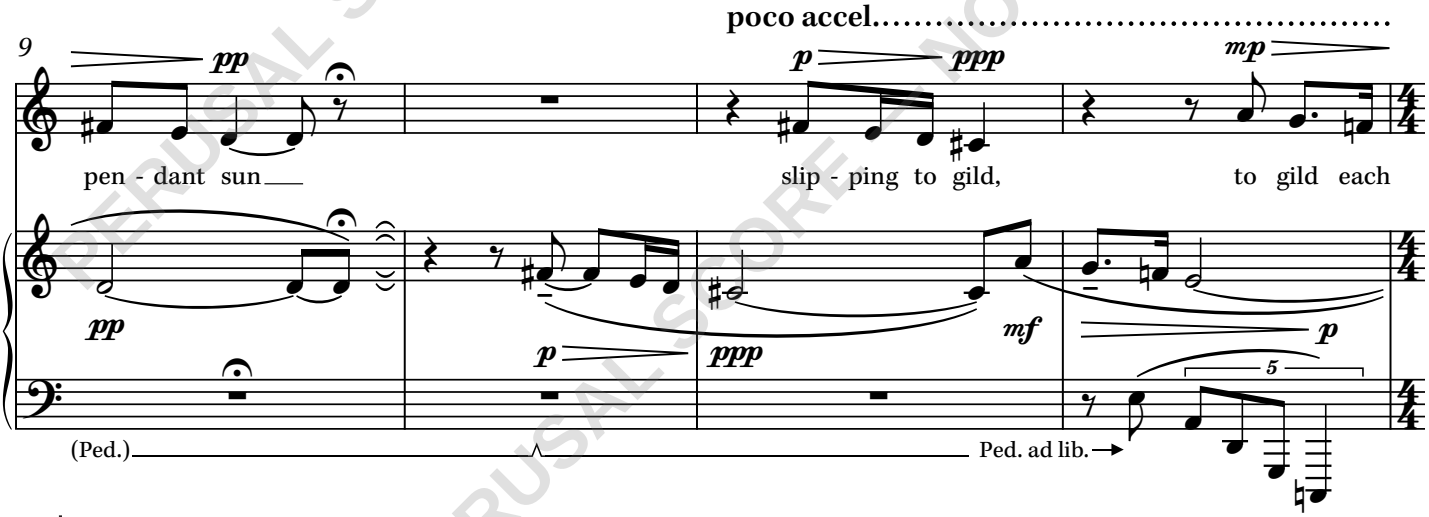
I. WHITE MUSIC AT DUSK

Suzanne Underwood Rhodes

Luke Carlson







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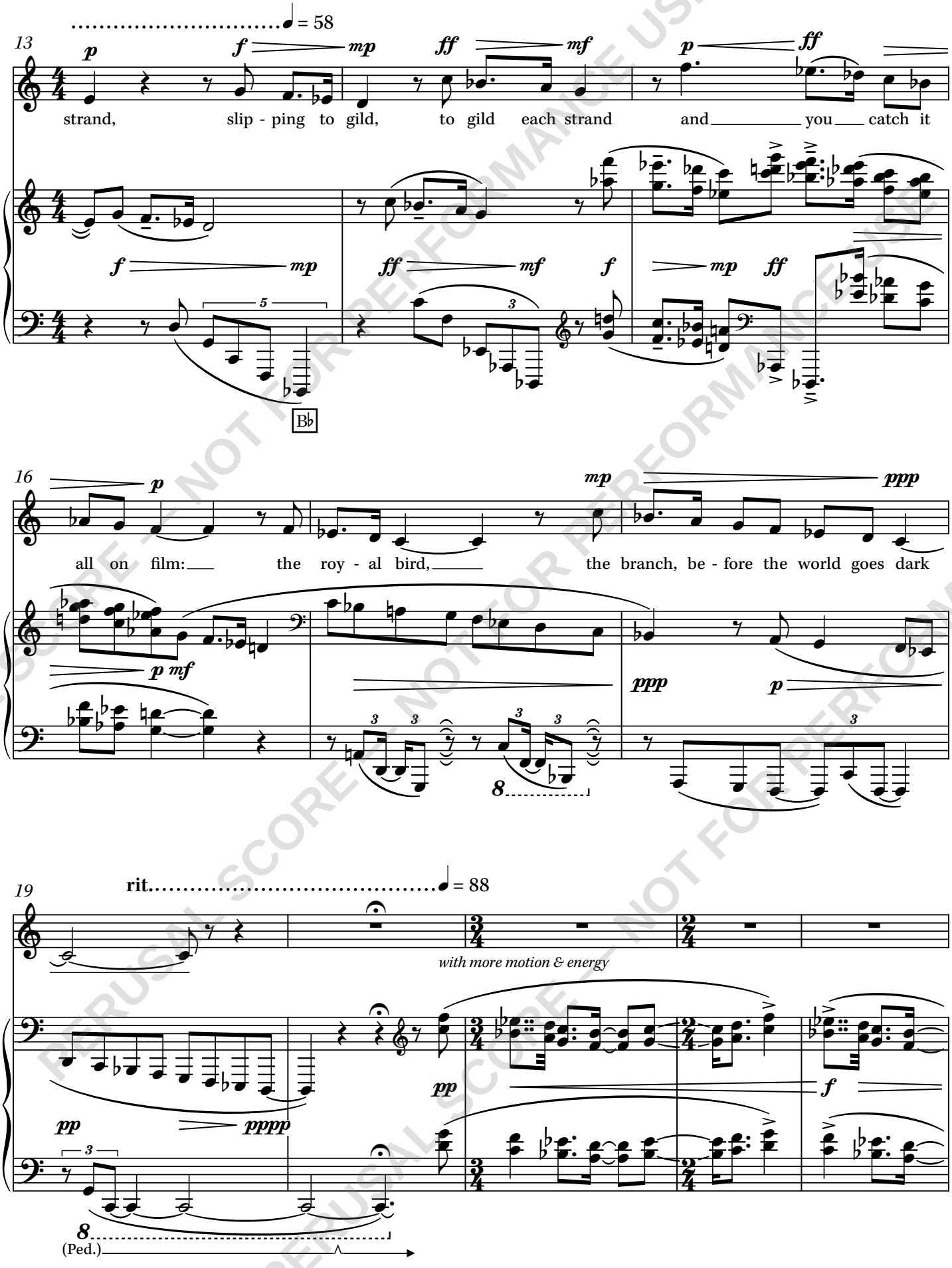

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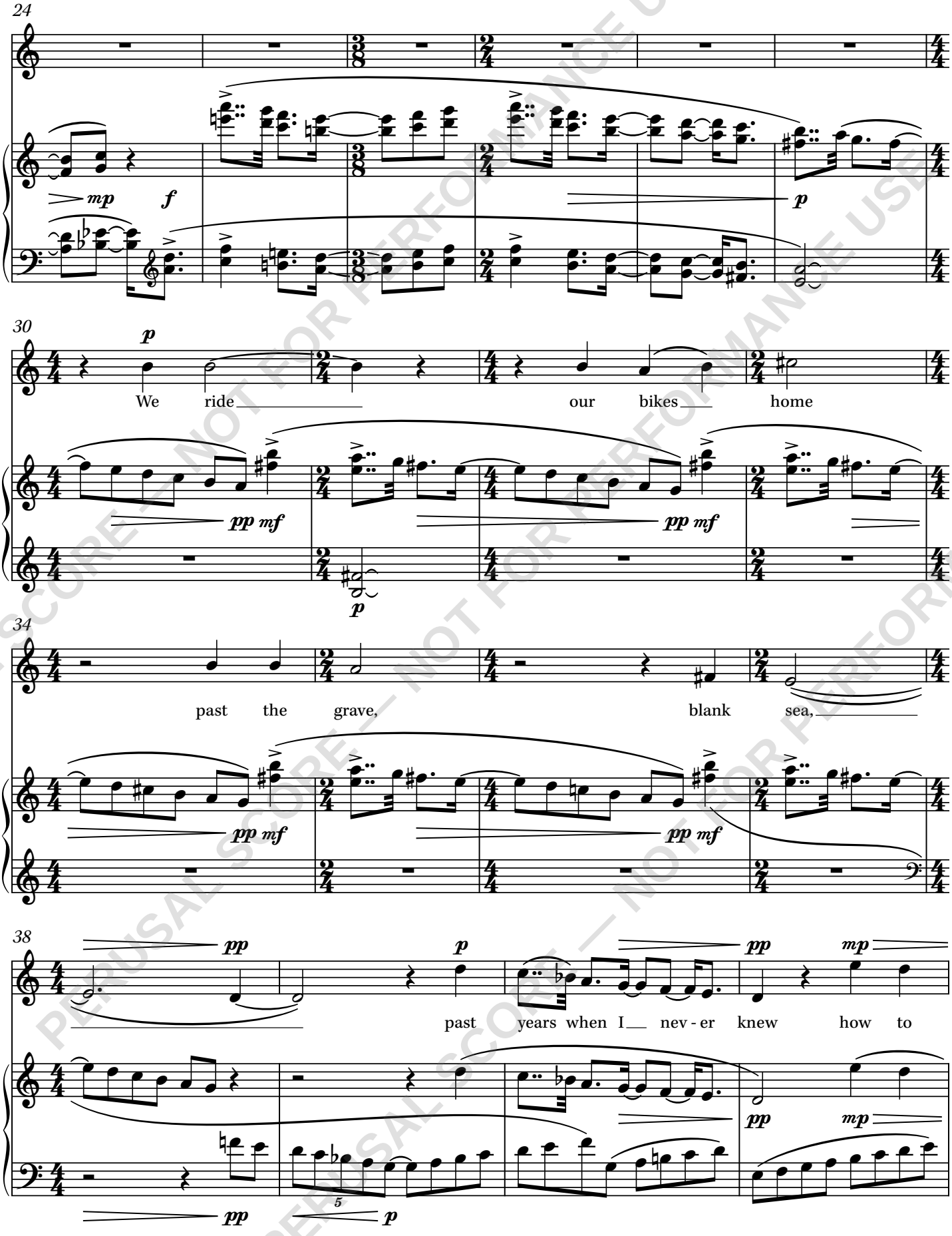

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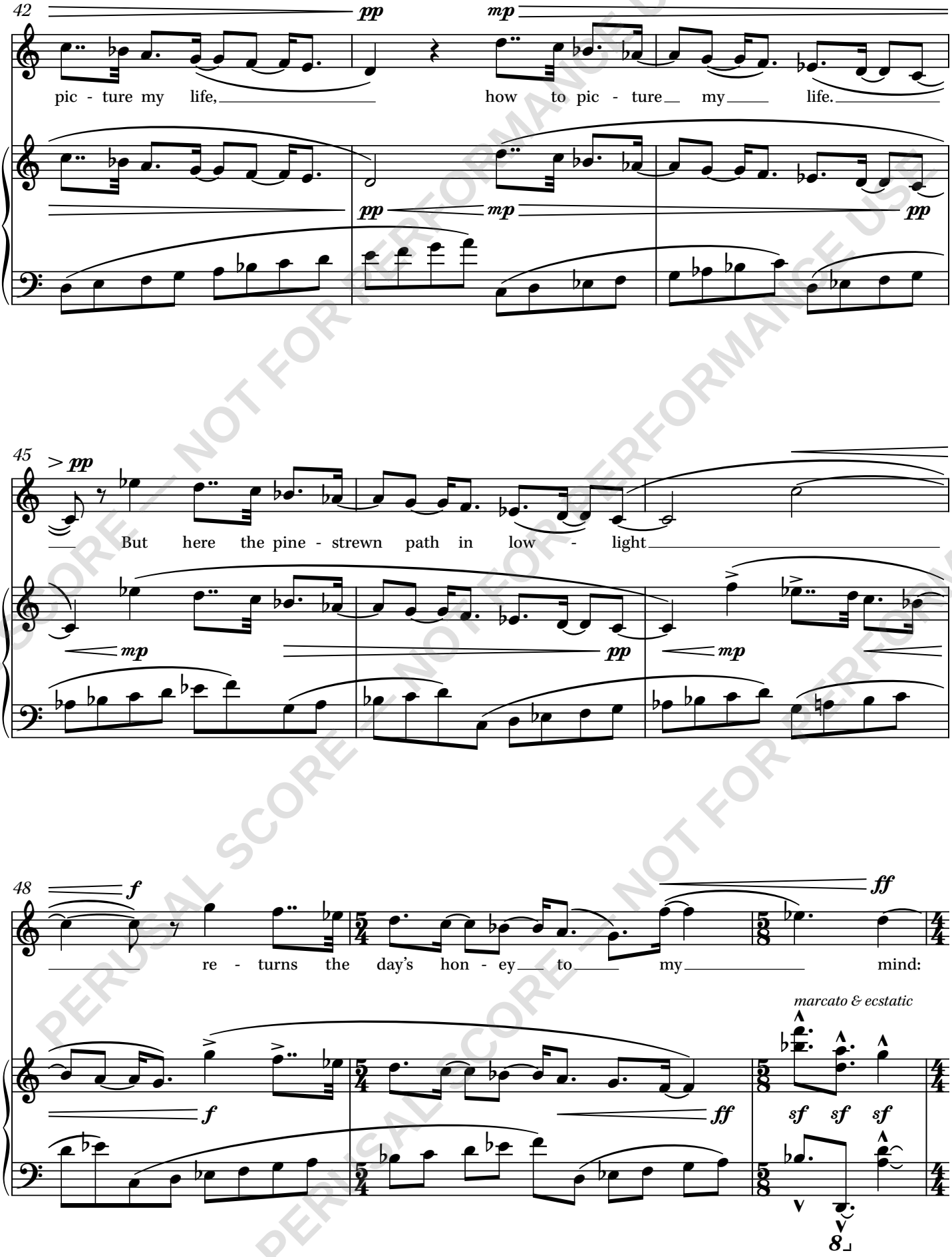

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