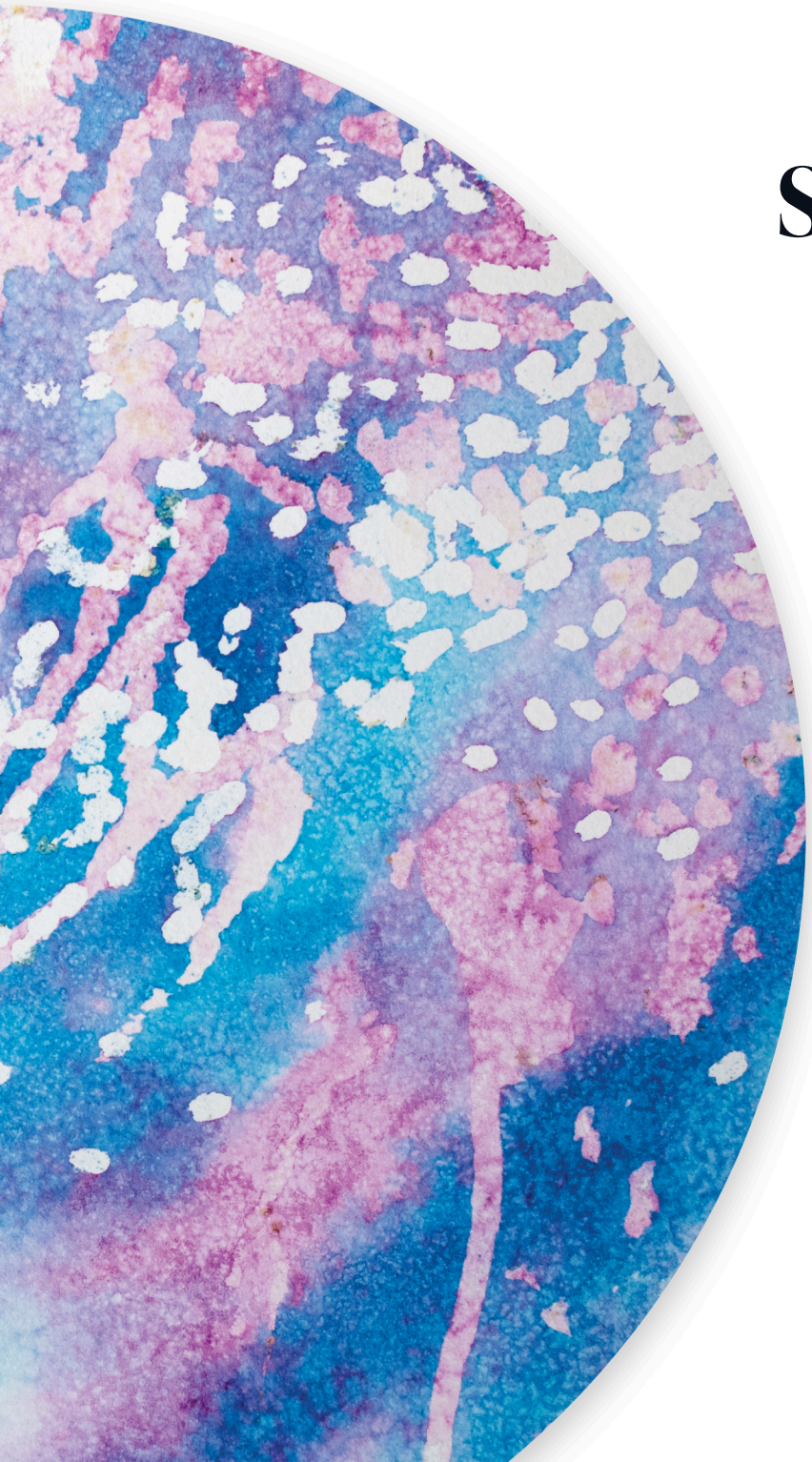

Songs of Nature, Light, & Life

Voice & Piano

LUKE CARLSON MUSIC

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(2017)

Duration: 23 minutes

For Anne Schantz, mezzo-soprano

LUKE CARLSON MUSIC

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Program Notes

There is an inherent tension in Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetry. His fascination with the intricate detail of nature is contrasted by the spiritual, a desire to transcend the world. Each poem in this cycle deals with this tension in different ways; some more, some less. This leads to varying levels of interpretive opacity and challenges the reader to engage with the text at multiple levels. The vivid immediacy of Hopkins's descriptions are delightfully tangible—from the first two lines of "Spring": "Nothing is so beautiful as Spring—when weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush." Here, the musical setting is naturally optimistic and joyful, brimming with life and energy. In "Pied Beauty," the poet crosses the boundary from nature into spirituality, praising God for His creative brilliance: "Glory be to God for dappled things—for skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow." The music is again bright, ecstatic, and ebullient. "Inversnaid" is also primarily about nature. A small rural community on the east bank of Loch Lomond in Scotland, "Inversnaid" is a landscape deftly described. The poet yearns for the wildness of the countryside, weaving the reader through fast-flowing water accompanied by all the intricacies of the scene. The music is slightly manic, based on a relentless ostinato that mimics the unstoppable flow of water through the wilderness.

The tone shifts dramatically in the two poems about light, "The Candle Indoors" and "The Lantern out of Doors." Each poem delves into the deeper subjects of desire, conscience, death, and ultimately, salvation. Hopkins presents two views, as one outside looking in toward a candle and as one inside looking out at a lantern passing by. These contrasting views frame the same issue from two perspectives; as one who sees the light and accepts it, the other sees a passing light and yearns for that person to enter in as he has done. But the poet realizes that only Christ can move them, He is "their ransom, their rescue, and first, fast, last friend." Musically, these songs are plaintive and melancholic, featuring repetition of figures and a steady flow throughout.

The first and last movements serve as thematic and emotional bookends to the other songs. The first, "God's Grandeur," is emphatic and grandiose. The timeless conflict between God's grand creation and man's corruption of it is presented with stark and brutal contrast. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil." The power of these words is brought to a crushing low by the truth of man's fallen state, "and all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; and wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil." But there is resolution and triumph because God will restore His creation, "the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."

The final movement, "The Windhover," is grammatically and structurally the most difficult poem in the cycle. Hopkins begins with nature, tracing the hovering flight of a bird and marveling at the control and mastery of the flier. But the poem shifts in focus from the flight of the bird to a view of humanity and of God. Hopkins alludes to the spark, "blue-bleak embers," within our souls when we model ourselves after God's will. Of course, our efforts pale in comparison to Christ's achievement on the cross, "the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion times told lovelier, more dangerous." Our only potential for greatness then is associating ourselves with Christ, expressing faith in the power of his "gold-vermilion" blood, shed for us. To convey the circular nature of the poem—the bird's circuitous flight and conceptual flow from bird, to man, to God—I created a piano accompaniment that is based on a continually transposing sequence of notes. This pitch series acts as a sort of unbroken ostinato, always in motion and always fluctuating, much like the dense and rich language of the poem.

Texts

I. God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
    It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
    It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
    And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
    And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
    There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
    Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
    World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright
wings.

II. Inversnaid

This darksome burn, horseback brown,
His rollrock highroad roaring down,
In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam
Flutes and low to the lake falls home.

A windpuff-bonnet of fáwn-froth
Turns and twindles over the broth
Of a pool so pitchblack, féll-frówing,
It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning.

Degged with dew, dappled with dew
Are the groins of the braes that the brook treads through,
Wiry heathpacks, flitches of fern,
And the beadbonny ash that sits over the burn.

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

III. The Candle Indoors

Some candle clear burns somewhere I come by.
I muse at how its being puts blissful back
With yellowy moisture mild night's blear-all black
Or to-fro tender trambeams truckle at the eye.

By that window what task what fingers ply,
I plod wondering, a-wanting, just for lack
Of answer the eagerer a-wanting Jessy or Jack
There / God to aggrándise, God to glorify.—

Come you indoors, come home; your fading fire
Mend first and vital candle in close heart's vault:
You there are master, do your own desire;

What hinders? Are you beam-blind, yet to a fault
In a neighbour deft-handed? Are you that liar
And, cast by conscience out, spendsavour salt?

IV. Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things—
    For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
        For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
    Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
        And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
    Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
        With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
            Praise him.

V. The Lantern out of Doors

Sometimes a lantern moves along the night.
    That interests our eyes. And who goes there?
    I think; where from and bound, I wonder, where,
With, all down darkness wide, his wading light?

Men go by me whom either beauty bright
    In mould or mind or what not else makes rare:
    They rain against our much-thick and marsh air
Rich beams, till death or distance buys them quite.

Death or distance soon consumes them: wind
    What most I may eye after, be in at the end
I cannot, and out of sight is out of mind.

Christ minds: Christ's interest, what to avow or amend
    There, éyes them, heart wánts, care haúnts, foot fóllows kínd,
Their ránsom, théir rescue, ánd first, fást, last friénd.

VI. Spring

Nothing is so beautiful as Spring—
    When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;
    Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;
    The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush
    The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush
With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.

What is all this juice and all this joy?
    A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning
In Eden garden.—Have, get, before it cloy,
    Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,
    Most, O maid's child, thy choice and worthy the winning.

VII. The Windhover

To Christ our Lord

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
    dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
    Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
    As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
    Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
    Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!
    No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
    Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

for Anne Schantz

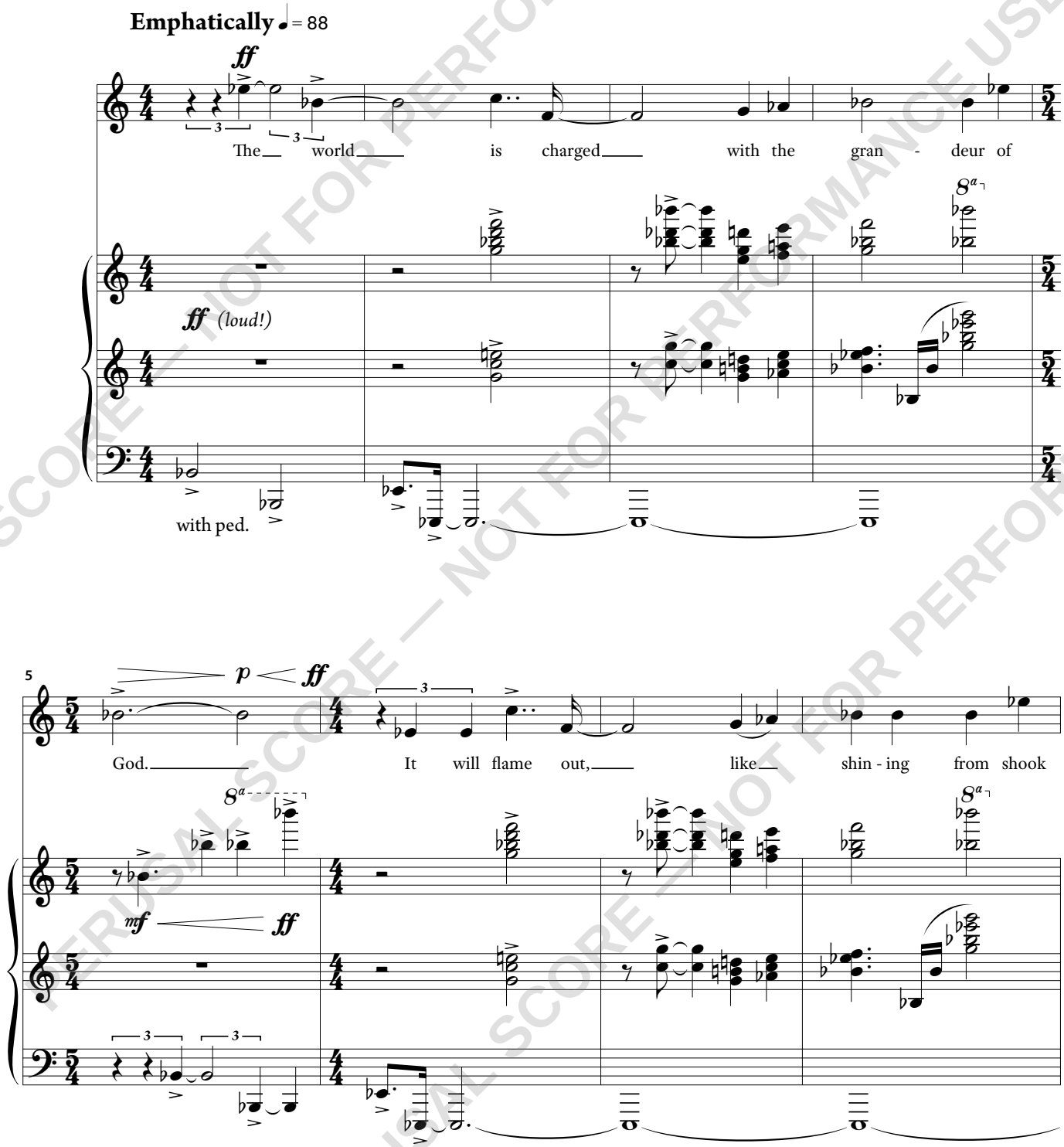
Songs of Nature, Light, & Life

voice and piano

I. God's Grandeur

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Luke Carlson



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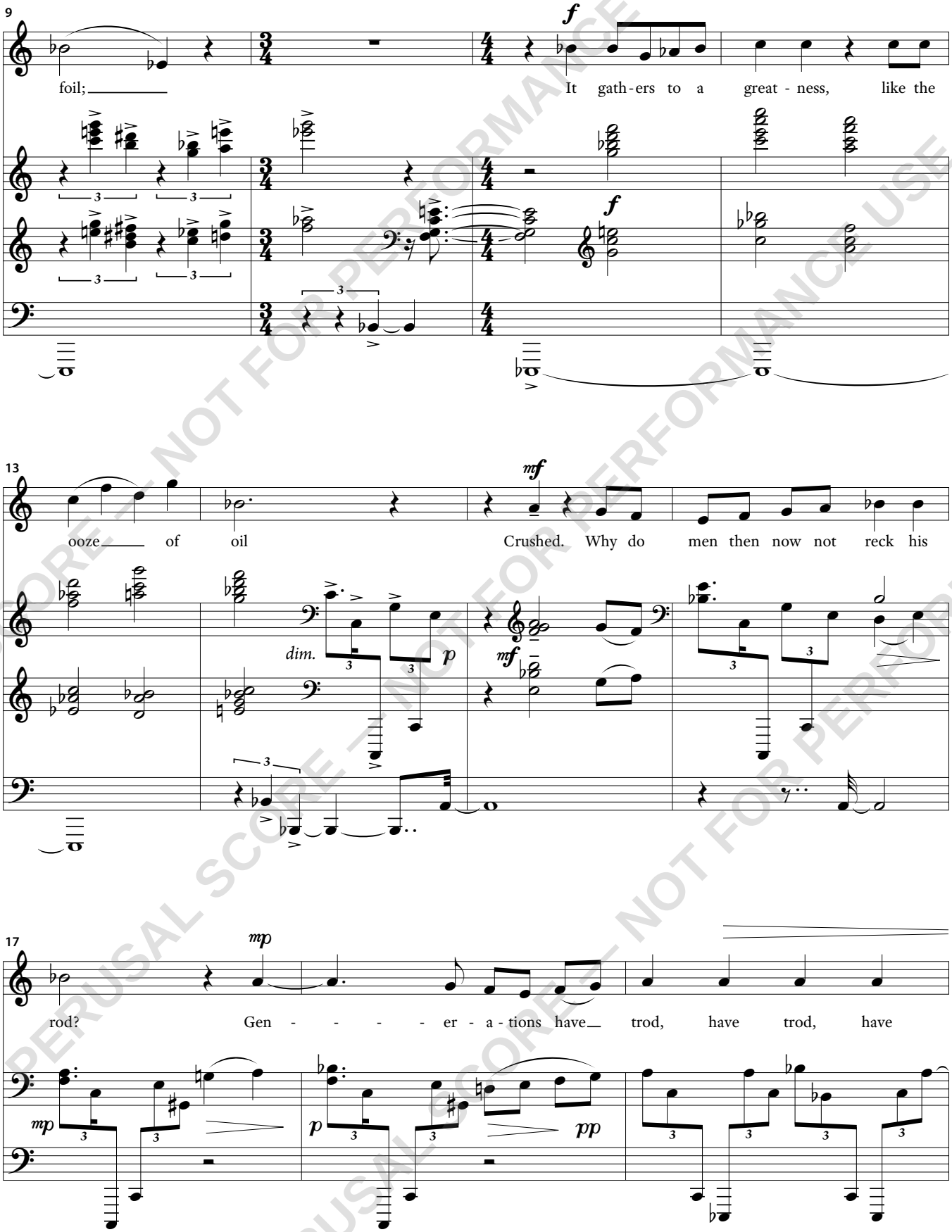

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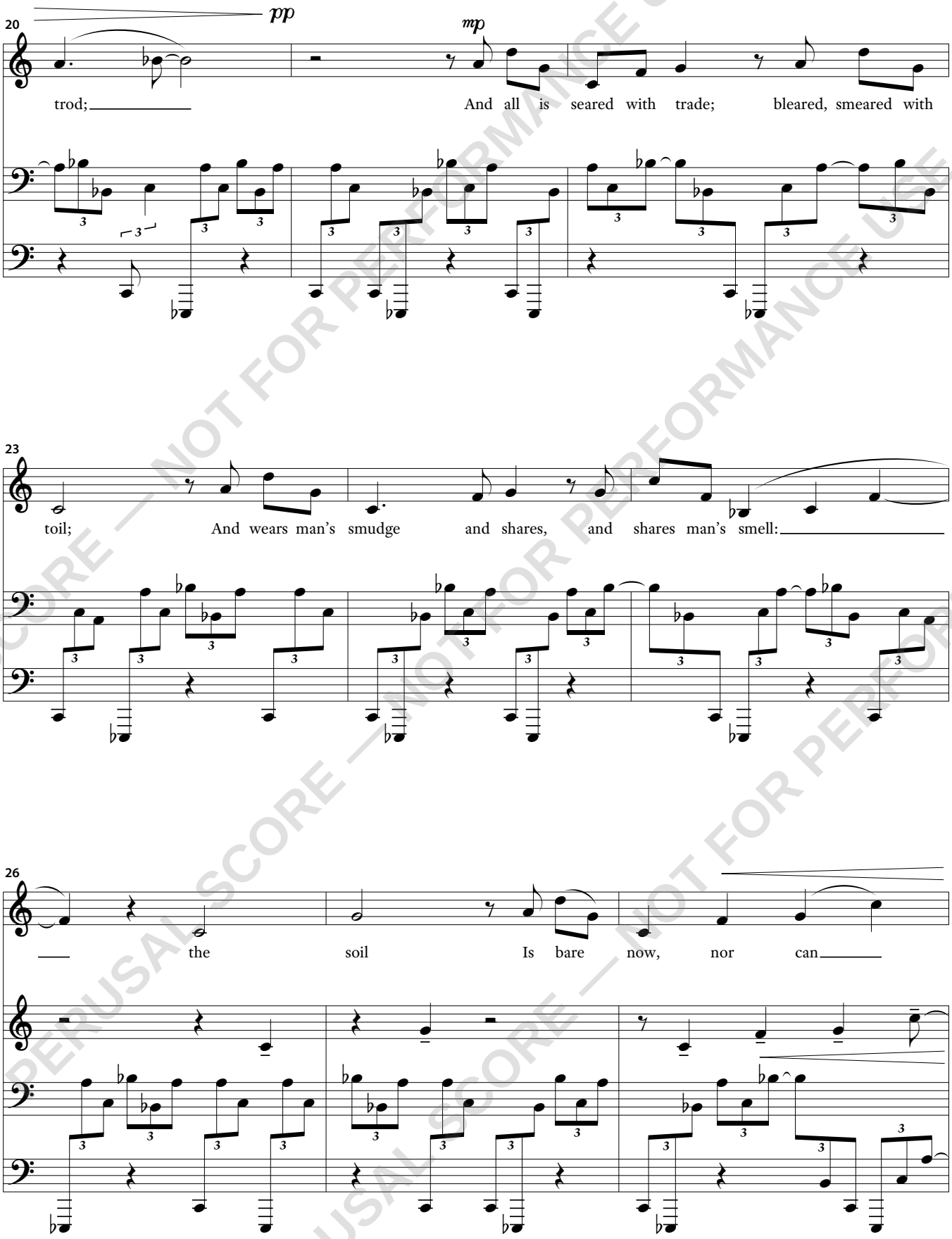

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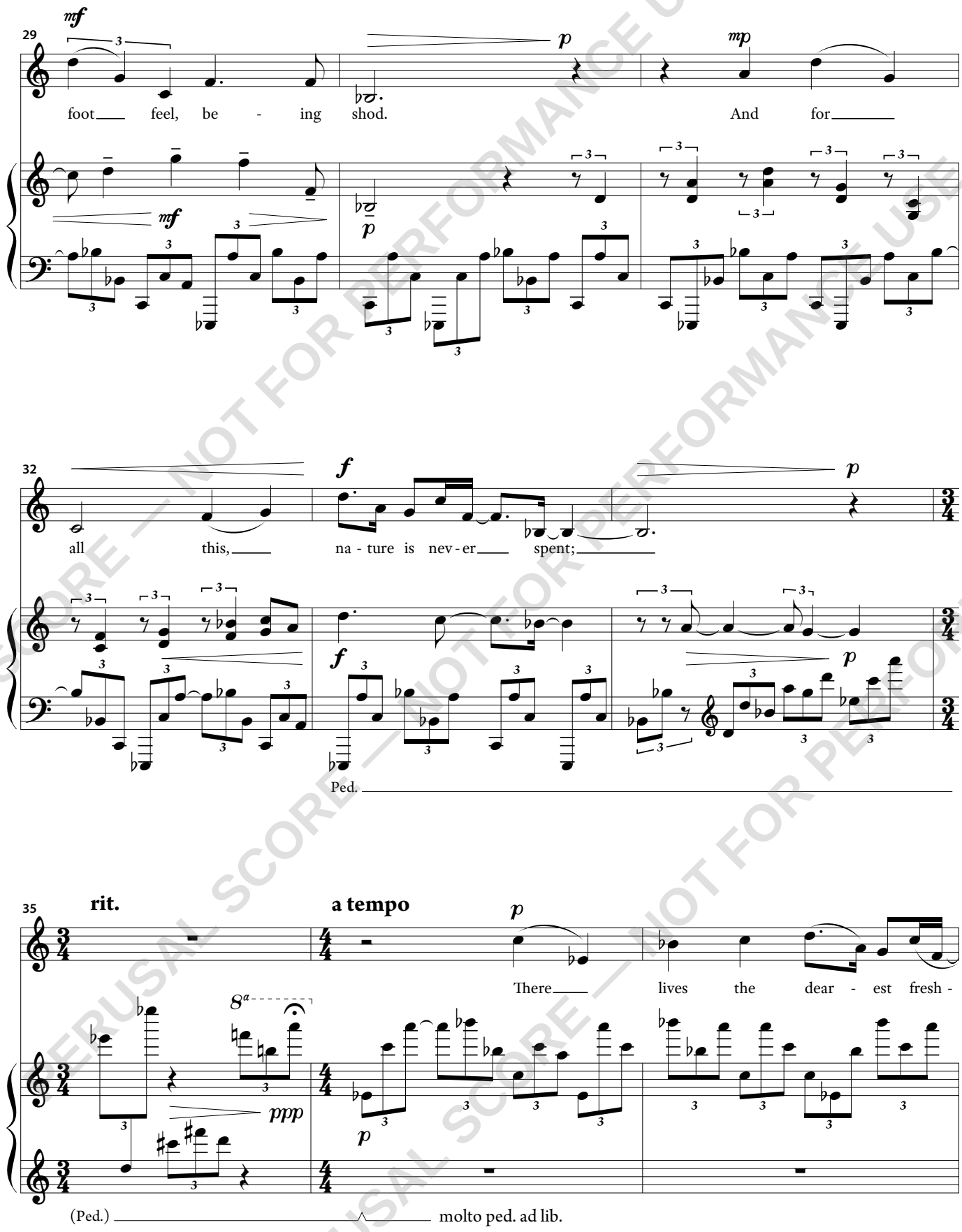

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