for Sarah Walker

Songs from Spoon River

Opus 39

by

Andrew Downes

Preview File Only

Five settings of poems by

Edgar Lee Masters

for mezzo-soprano and piano

LYNWOOD MUSIC
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ANDREW DOWNES: SONGS FROM SPOON RIVER Opus 39 (1986) Duration 22'

Andrew Downes' setting of 5 poems from Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* for mezzo soprano and piano was recorded for broadcast on BBC Radio 3 by Sarah Walker with Roger Vignoles (piano) in December 1988. This first performance was broadcast on 22nd July 1990 in a programme entitled 'Early Life and After Life'. The programme was produced by Jillian White

The cycle was performed by New York Metropolitan Opera Soloist, Patricia Blythe, at the Tanglewood Festival, USA, in August 1994, and by Carin Logue with Joe McCanna at the University of New Mexico Composers' Symposium in March 1995.

In 2000 Paula Downes performed the songs in the Chapel of Trinity College, Cambridge, with accompanist David Trippett, and in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, accompanied by Ian Palmer. She sang the songs at the Conservatoire National de Region of Aubervilliers, Paris, accompanied by Laura Temim, in April 2001; and has recorded them on CD accompanied by David Trippett. The CD, entitled *'Old Love's Domain'* (LYNWCD001) also includes two other song cycles by Andrew Downes: 'Old Love's Domain' and 'Lost Love', both settings of poems by Thomas Hardy.

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SONGS FROM SPOON RIVER - Opus 39 ANDREW DOWNES

This Cycle is a setting of five of the poems from EDGAR LEE MASTERS' Spoon River Anthology, which is a collection of monologues in verse given by former inhabitants (real and imaginary) of Spoon River, an area near Lewistown, Illinois. The characters are all dead, and tell of their former lives as if reciting their own epitaphs from their graves.
The five monologues chosen for the Cycle are given by five very different women. The singer is required to become these five contrasting characters. Different hats or other props are suggested at the beginning of each song to help bring each character to 'life'.

Song 1 OLLIE McGEE..... Page 1

Ollie, treated badly by her cruel husband throughout their marriage is avenged in the grave as she watches her husband live on his life racked with guilt.

Text: Have you seen walking through the village
A man with downcast eyes and haggard face?
That is my husband who, by secret cruelty
Never to be told, robbed me of my youth and my beauty;
Till at last, wrinkled and with yellow teeth,
And with broken pride and shameful humility,
I sank into the grave.
But what think you gnaws at my husband's heart?
The face of what I was, the face of what he made me!
These are driving him to the place where I lie.
In death, therefore, I am avenged.

Song 2 RUSSIAN SONIA..... Page 8

A dancer, cheerful even in the grave, tells of her travels and love affairs with dukes, counts, artists, poets and businessmen.

Text: I, born in Weimar
Of a mother who was French
And a German father, a most learned professor,
Orphaned at fourteen years,
Became a dancer, known as Russian Sonia,
All up and down the boulevards of Paris,
Mistress betimes of sundry dukes and counts,
And later of poor artists and of poets.
At forty years, passee, I sought New York
And met old Patrick Hummer on the boat,
Red-faced and hale, though turned his sixtieth year,
Returning after having sold a ship-load
Of cattle in the German city, Hamburg.
He brought me to Spoon River and we lived here
For twenty years - they thought that we were married!
This oak tree near me is the favourite haunt
Of blue jays chattering, chattering all the day.
And why not? for my very dust is laughing
For thinking of the humorous thing called life.

Song 3 REBECCA WASSON..... Page 22

.. lived to an age of over 100 years and lay bed-ridden for many years, languishing with her memories of her John and their life together.

Text: Spring and Summer, Fall and Winter and Spring
After each other drifting, past my window drifting!
And I lay so many years watching them drift and counting
The years till a terror came in my heart at times,
With the feeling that I had become eternal; at last
My hundredth year was reached! And still I lay
Hearing the tick of the clock, and the low of cattle
And the scream of a jay flying through falling leaves!

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Day after day alone in a room of the house
Of a daughter-in-law stricken with age and gray.
And by night, or looking out of the window by day
My thought ran back, it scarned, through infinite time
To North Carolina and all my girlhood days,
And John, my John, away to the war with the British,
And all the children, the deaths, and all the sorrows.
And that stretch of years like a prairie in Illinois
Through which great figures passed like hurrying horsemen,
Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Webster, Clay.
O beautiful young republic for whom my John and I
Gave all of our strength and love!
And O my John!
Why, when I lay helpless in bed for years,
Praying for you to come, was your coming delayed?
Seeing that with a cry of rapture, like that I uttered
When you found me in old Virginia after the war,
I cried when I beheld you there by the bed,
As the sun stood low in the West growing smaller and fainter
In the light of your face!

SONG 4 DORA WILLIAMS..... Page 43

.. collected husbands and fortunes throughout her dubious life and was finally poisoned by an Italian Count.

Text: When Reuben Pantier ran away and threw me
I went to Springfield. There I met a lush,
Whose father just deceased left him a fortune.
He married me when drunk. My life was wretched.
A year passed and one day they found him dead.
That made me rich. I moved on to Chicago.
After a time met Tyler Rountree, villain.
I moved on to New York. A gray-haired magnate
Went mad about me - so another fortune.
He died one night right in my arms, you know.
(I saw his purple face for years thereafter)
There was almost a scandal. I moved on,
This time to Paris. I was now a woman,
Insidious, subtle, versed in the world and rich.
My sweet apartment near the Champs Elysees
Became a center for all sorts of people,
Musicians, poets, dandies, artists, nobles,
Where we spoke French and German, Italian, English.
I wed Count Navigato, native of Genoa.
We went to Rome. He poisoned me, I think.
Now in the Campo Santo overlooking
The sea where young Columbus dreamed new worlds,
See what they chiselled: "Contessa Navigato
Implora eterna quiete."

SONG 5 SARAH BROWN..... Page 61

.. sings to her former lover and tells him not to weep because she is in Paradise. She, he and her husband will be reconciled in Heaven.
The Cycle ends on a note of hope - all Earth's problems will be replaced by love in Heaven...

Text: Maurice, weep not, I am not here under this pine tree.
The balmy air of spring whispers through the sweet grass
The stars sparkle, the whippoorwill calls,
But thou grievest, while my soul lies rapturous
In the blest Nirvana of eternal light!
Go to the good heart that is my husband,
Who broods upon what he calls our guilty love:-
Tell him that my love for you, no less than my love for him
Wrought out my destiny - that through the flesh
I won spirit, and through spirit, peace.
There is no marriage in heaven,
But there is love.

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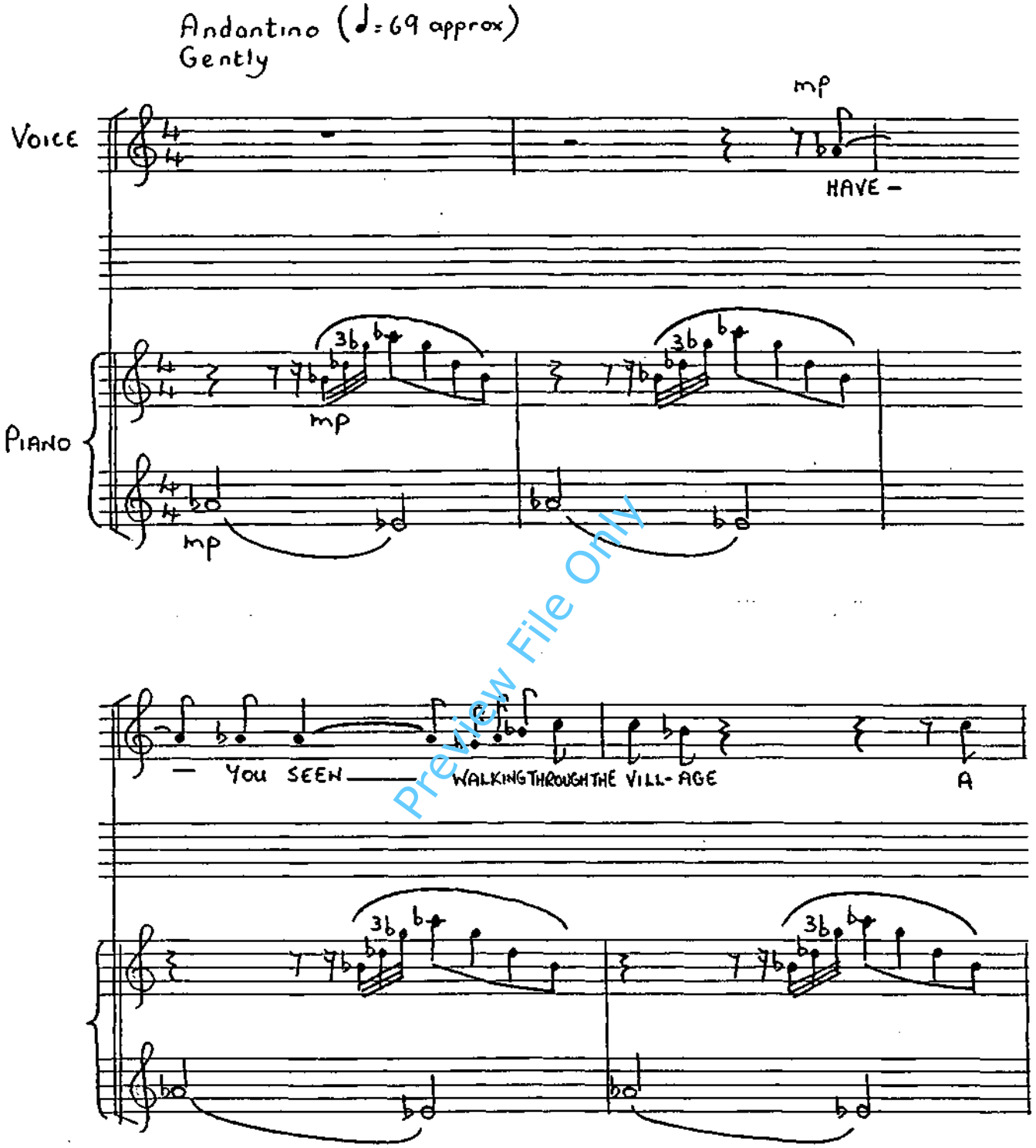
(Suggested prop. Dowdy old hat !)

1. Ollie McGee



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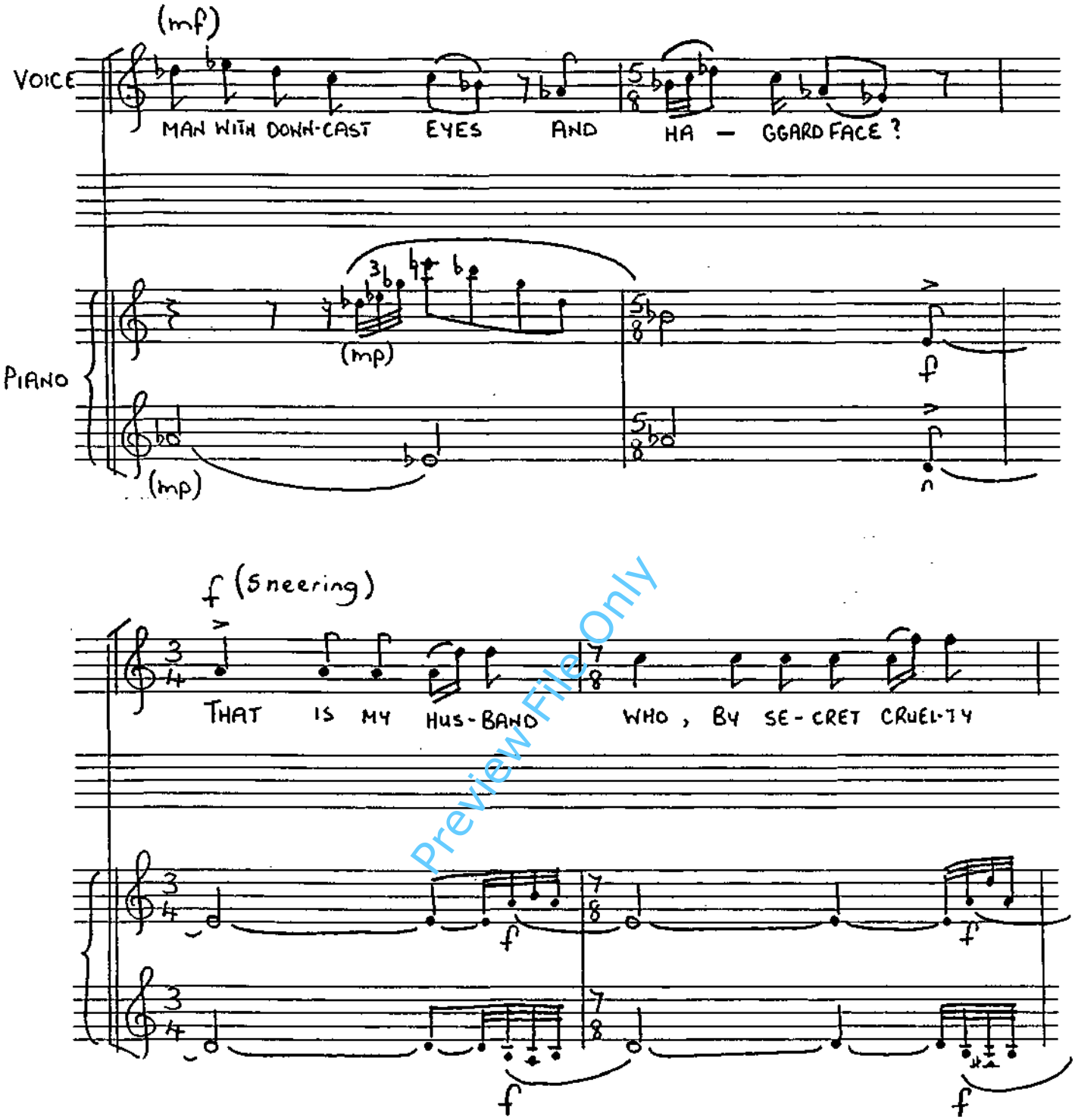

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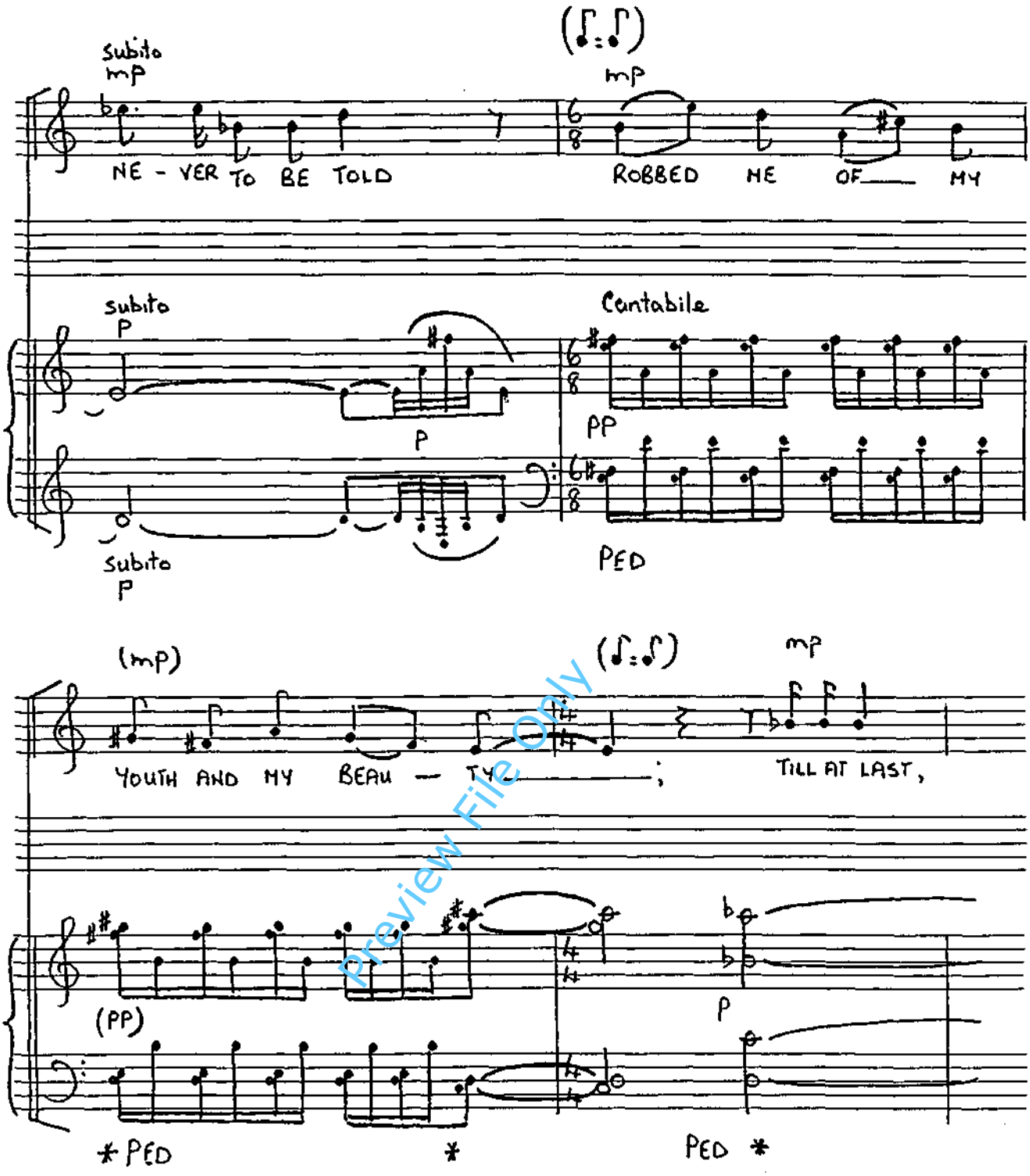

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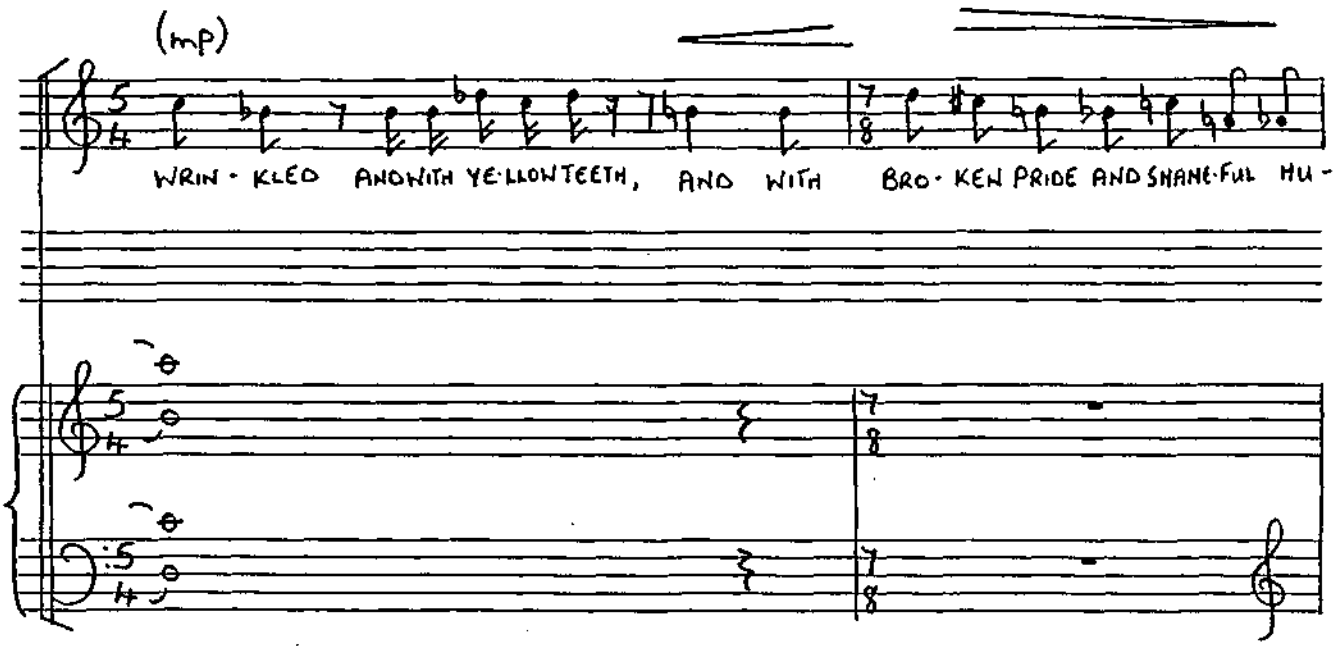

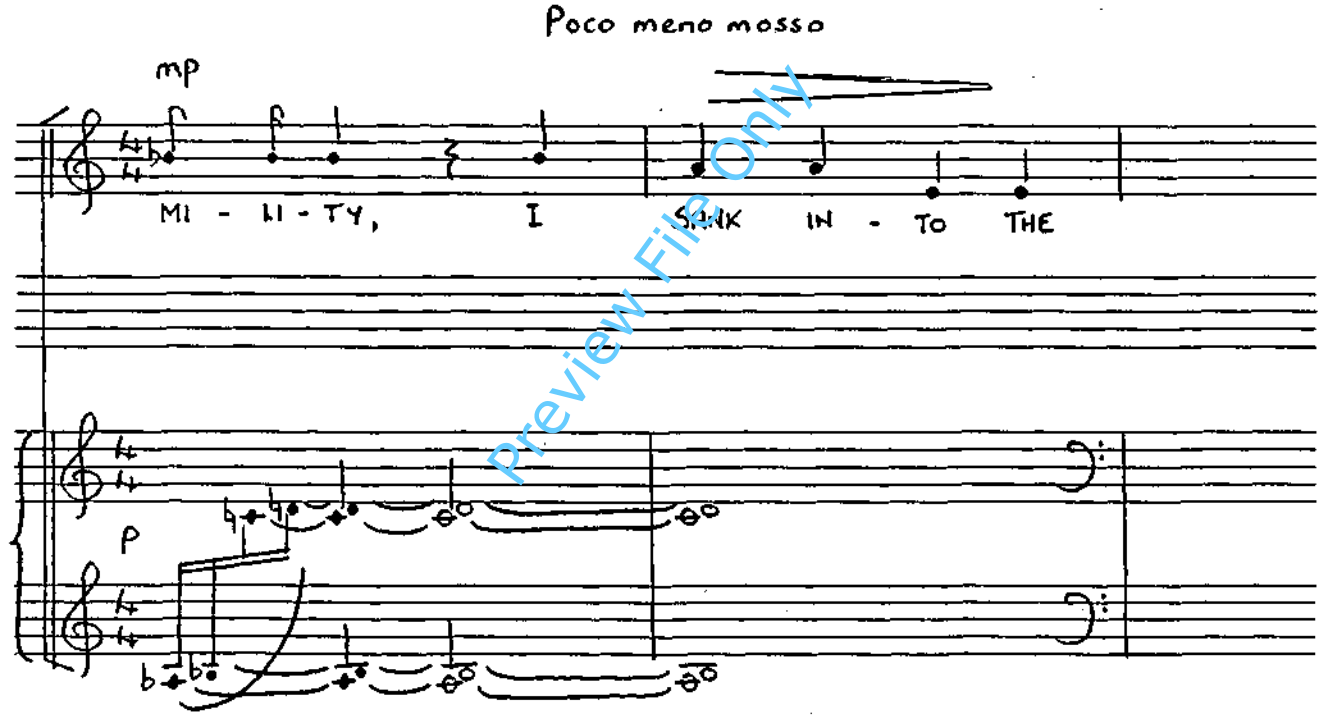

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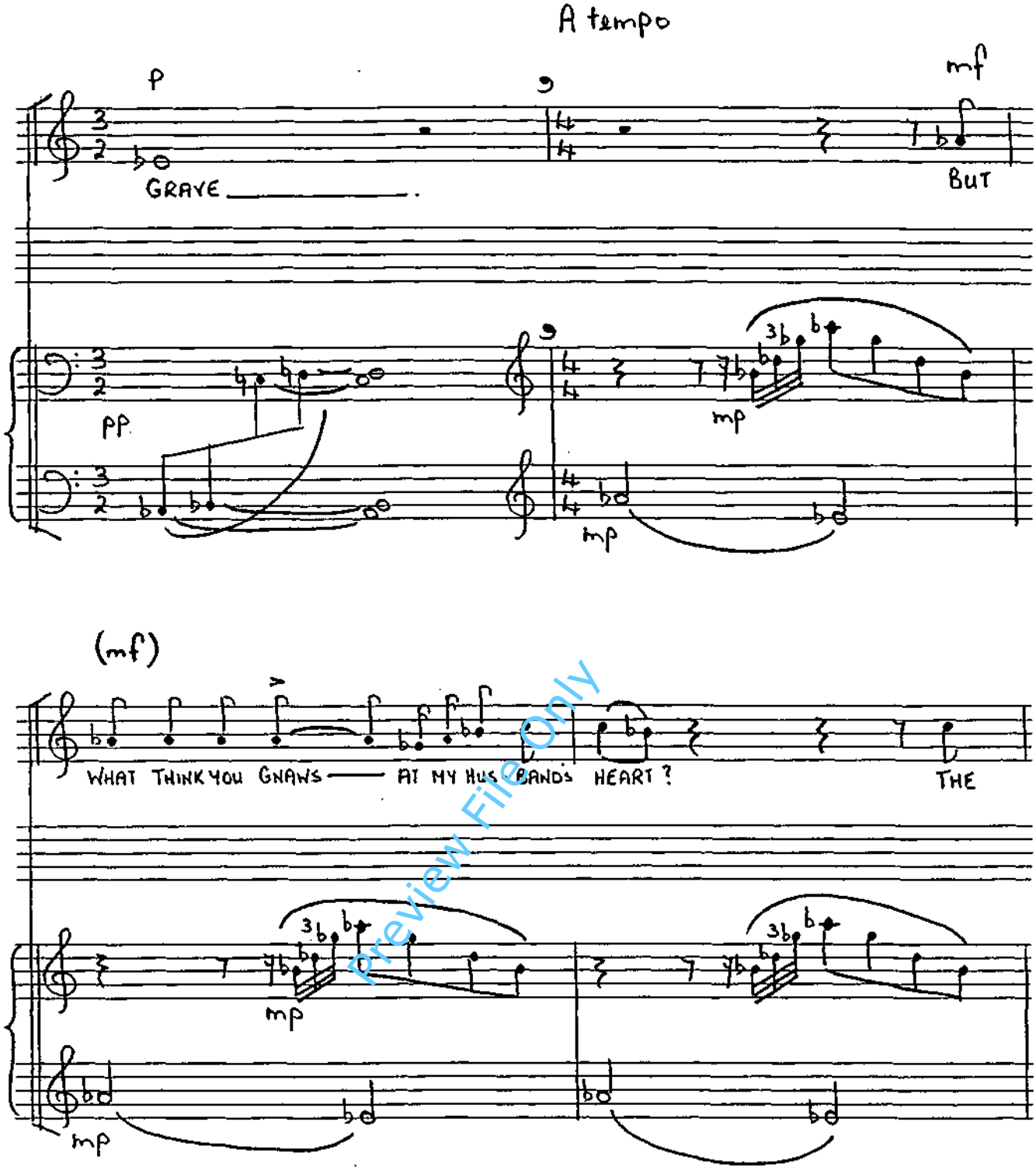

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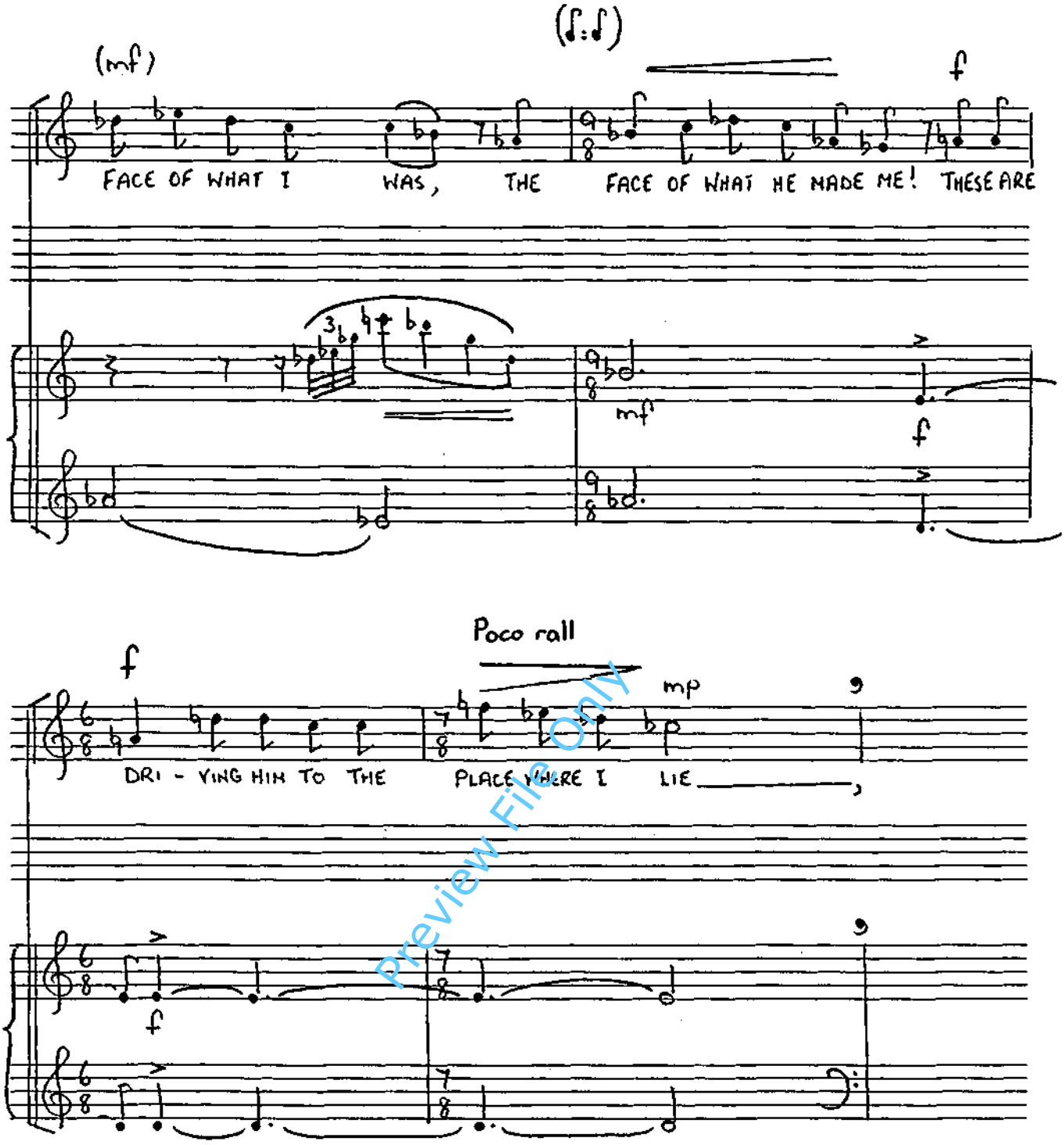

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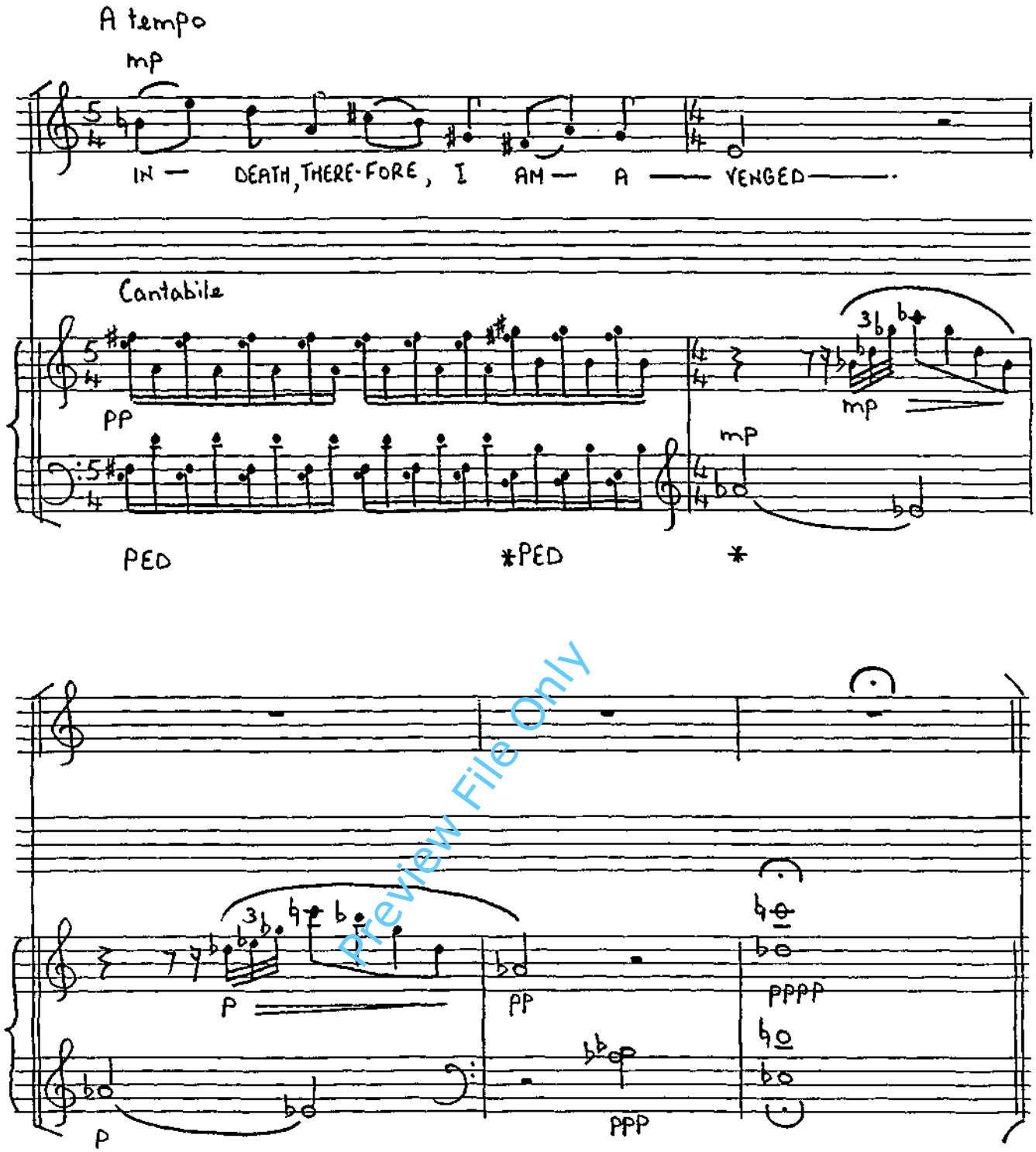

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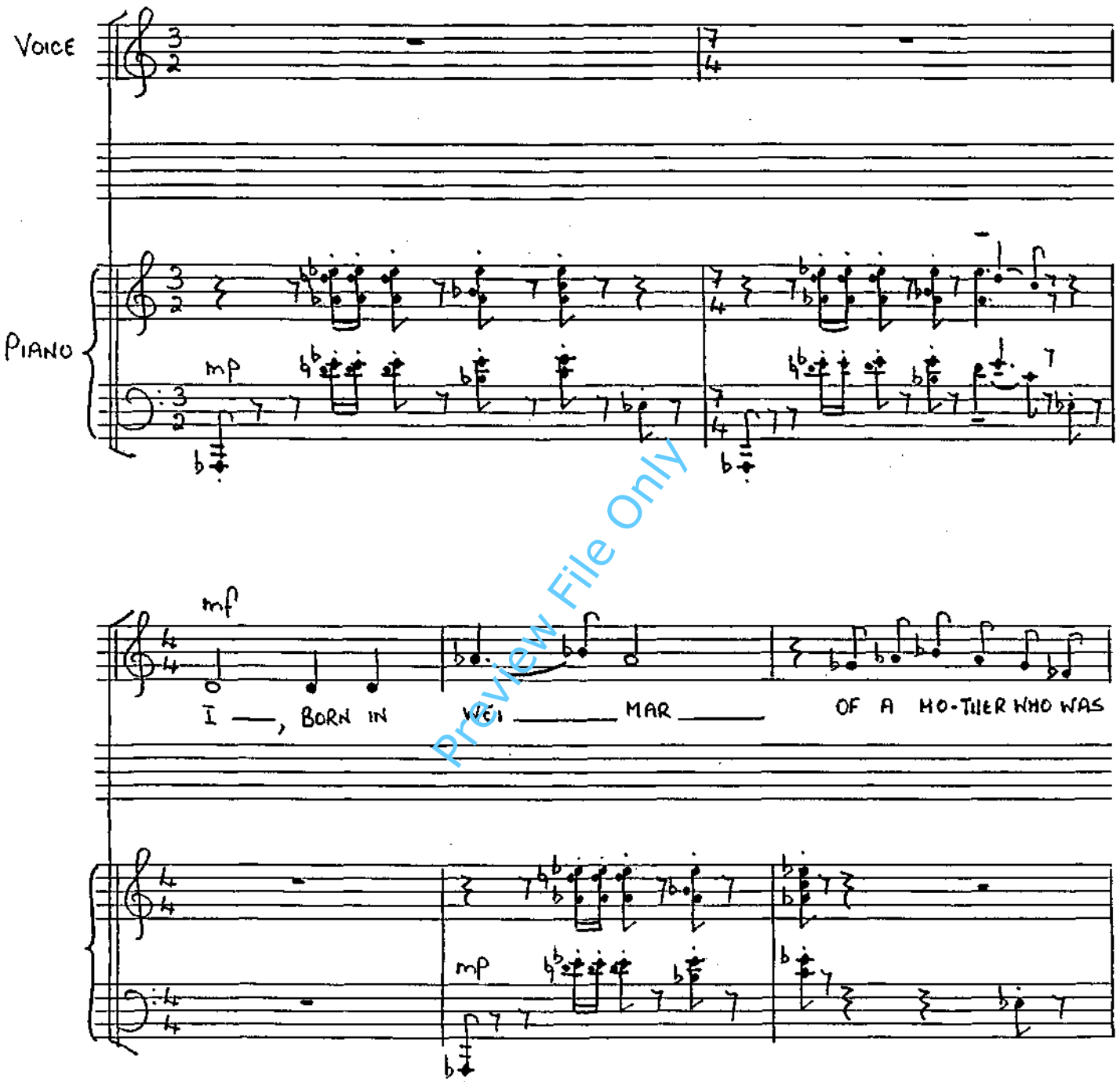
(Suggested prop. long ostrich feather with scarf or stoll)

2. Russian Sonia

Allegro moderato (♩= 112 approx)



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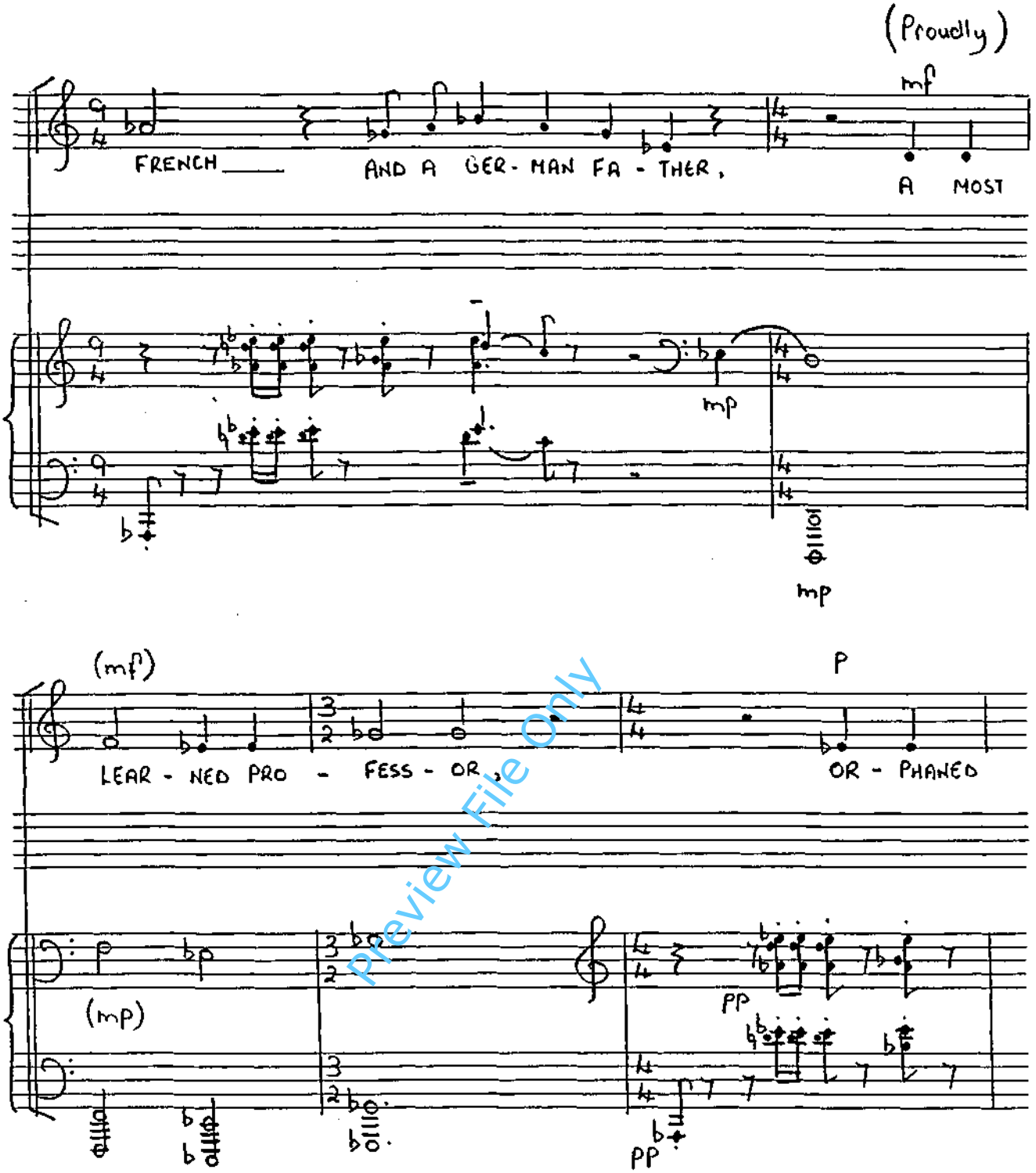

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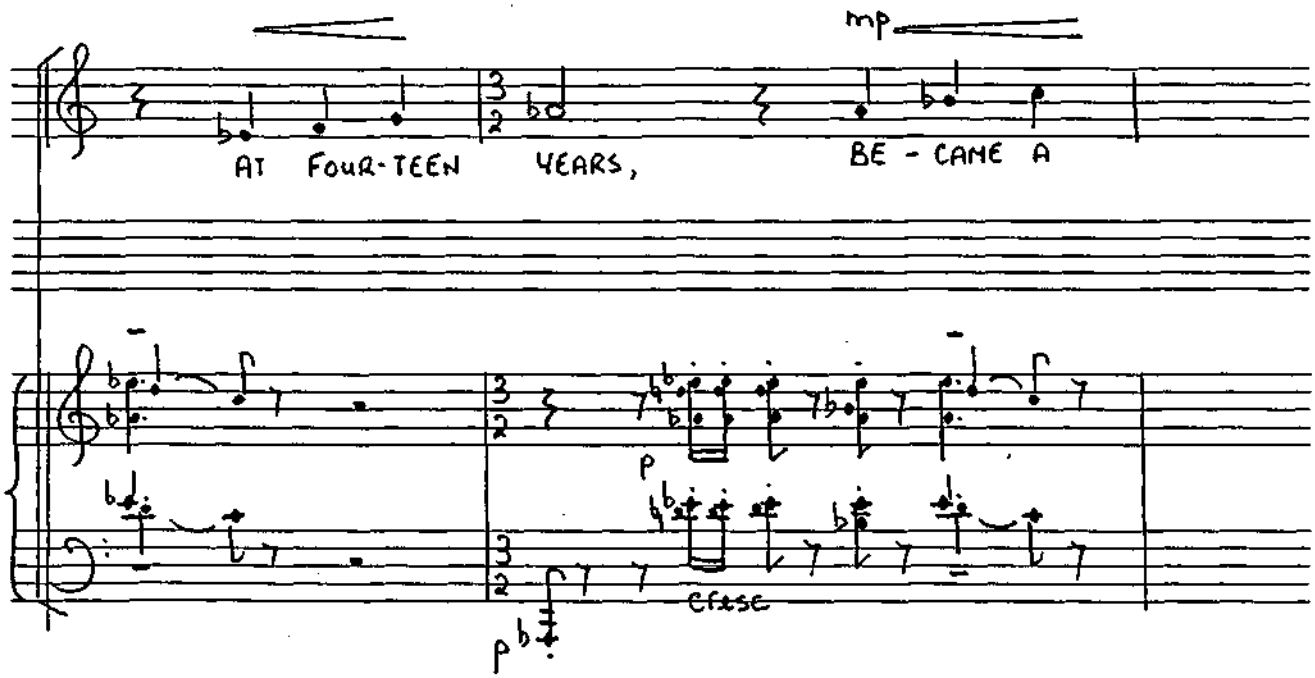

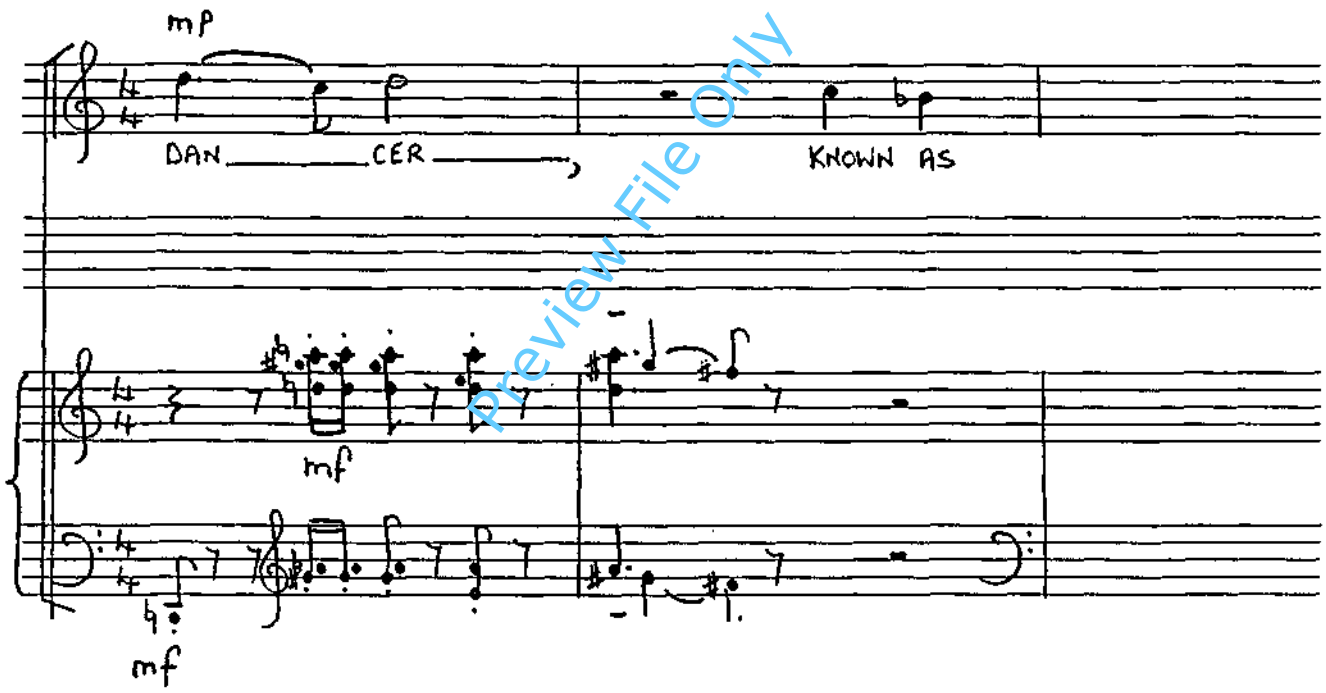

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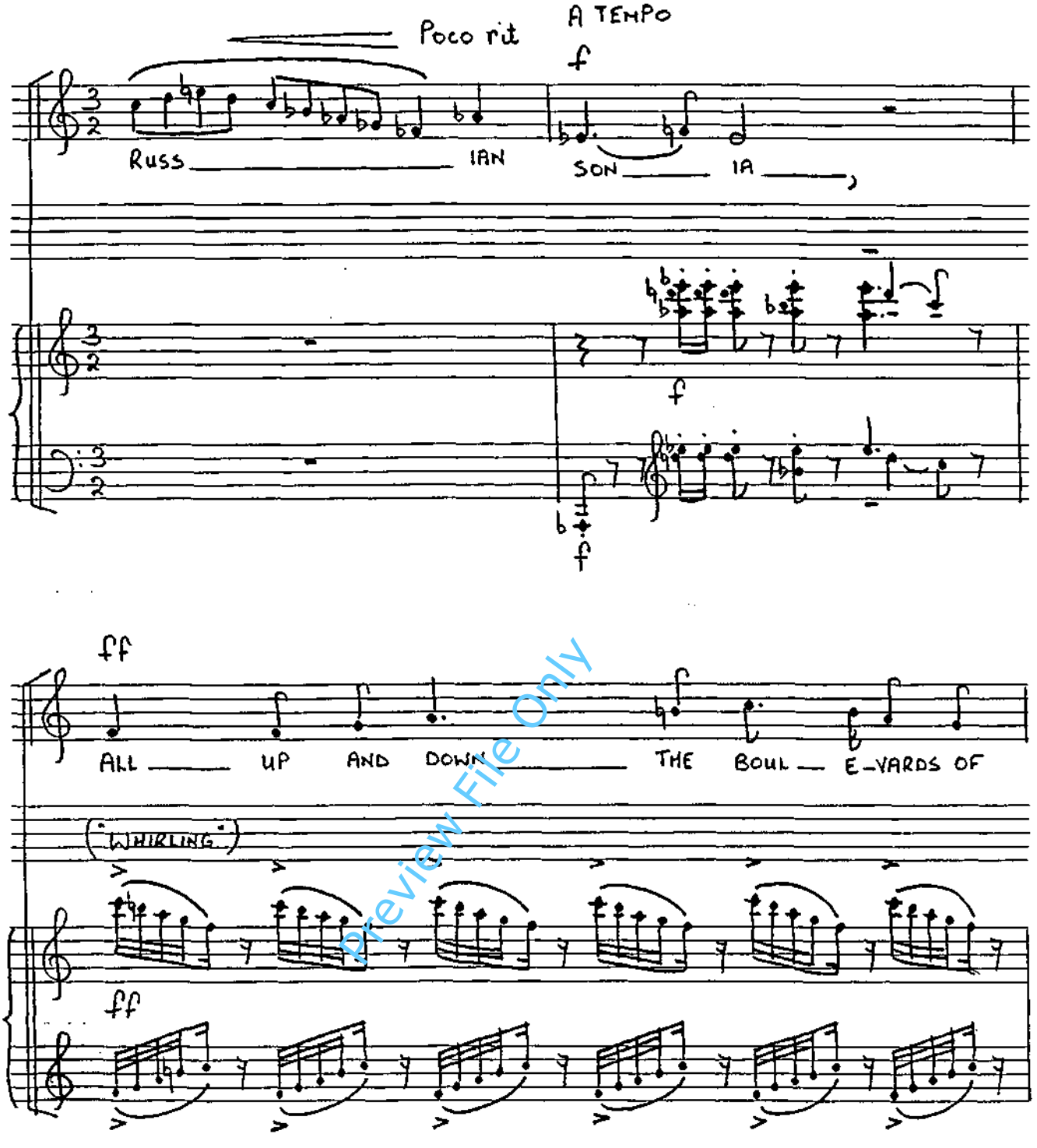

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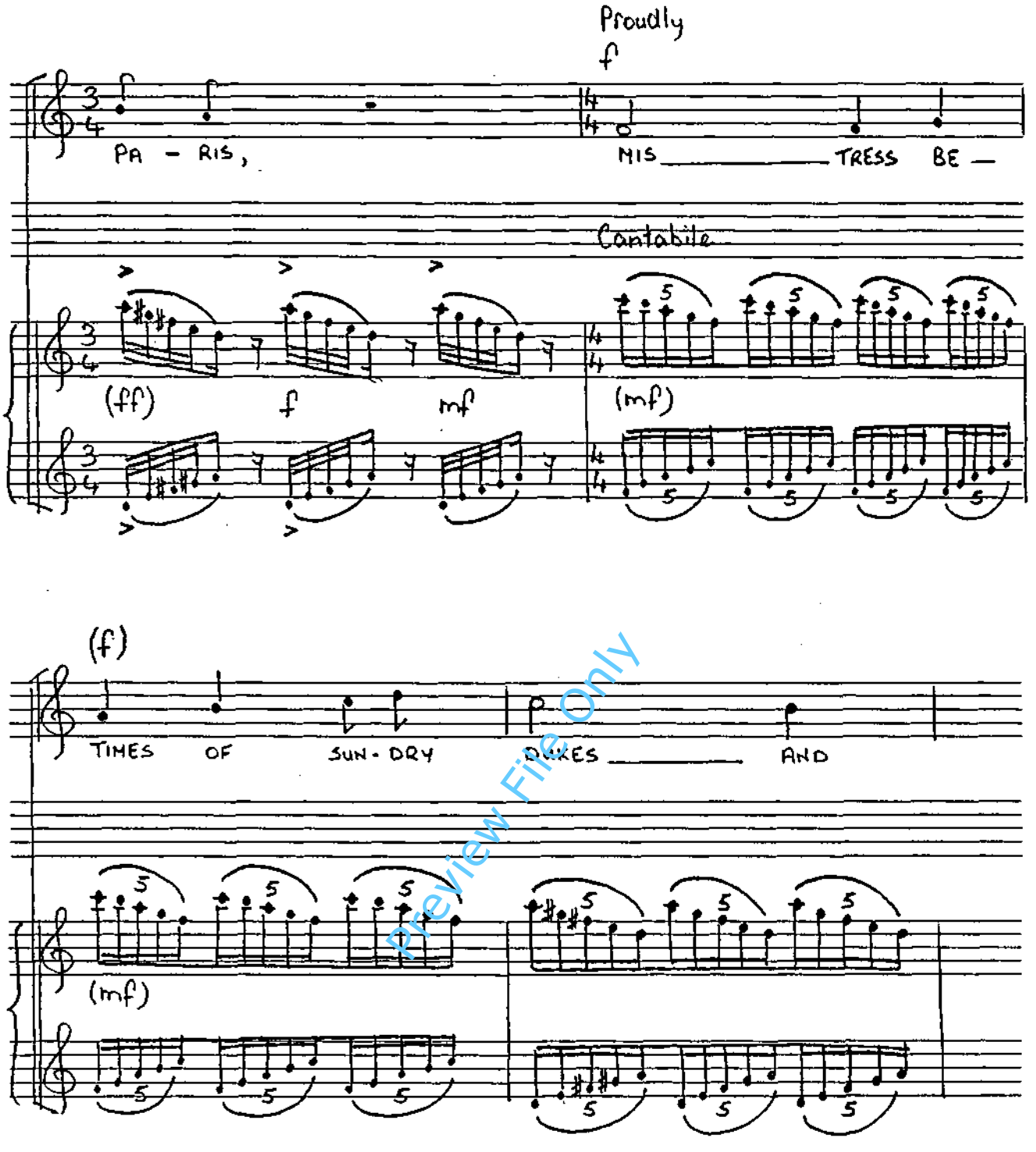

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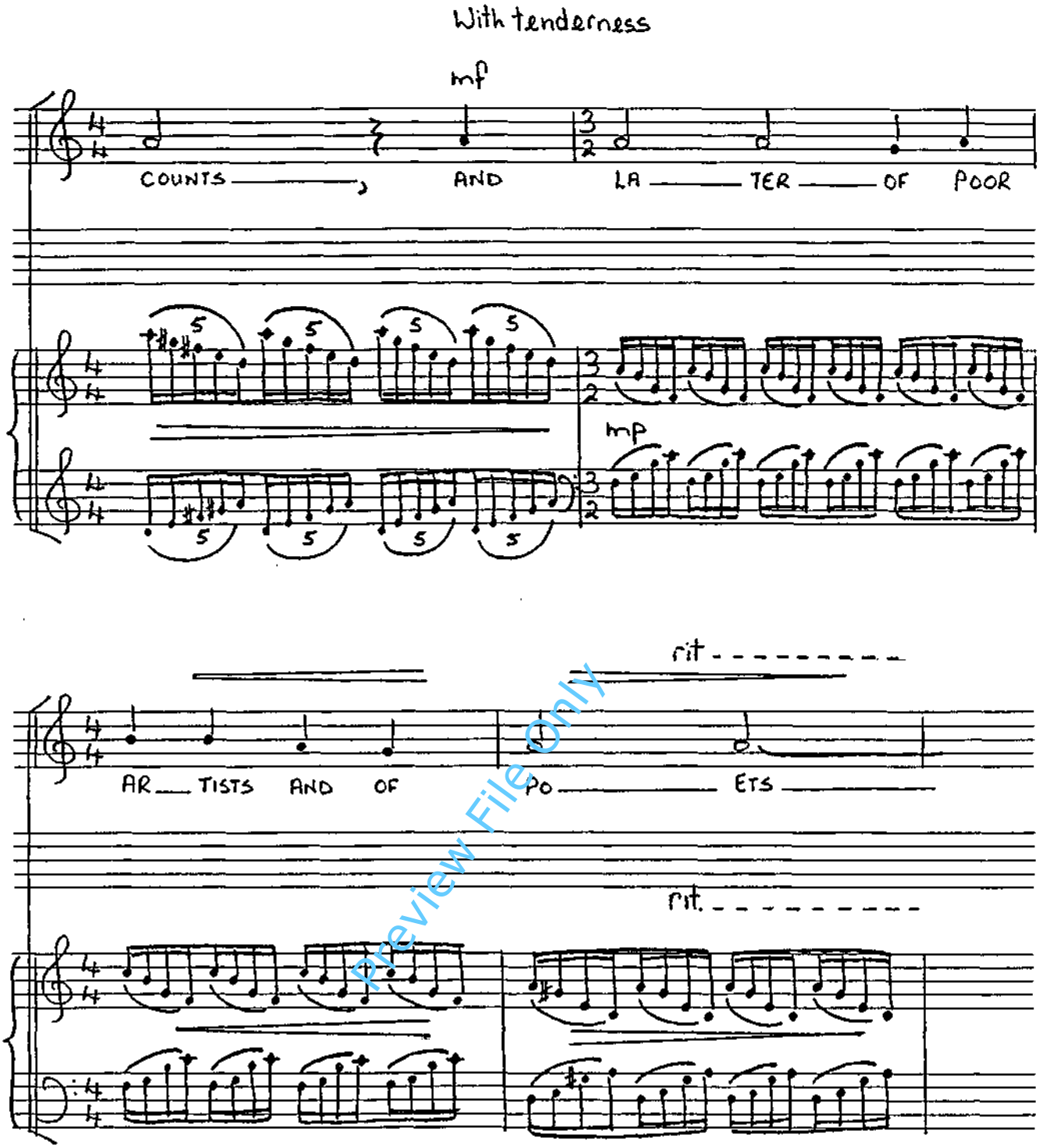

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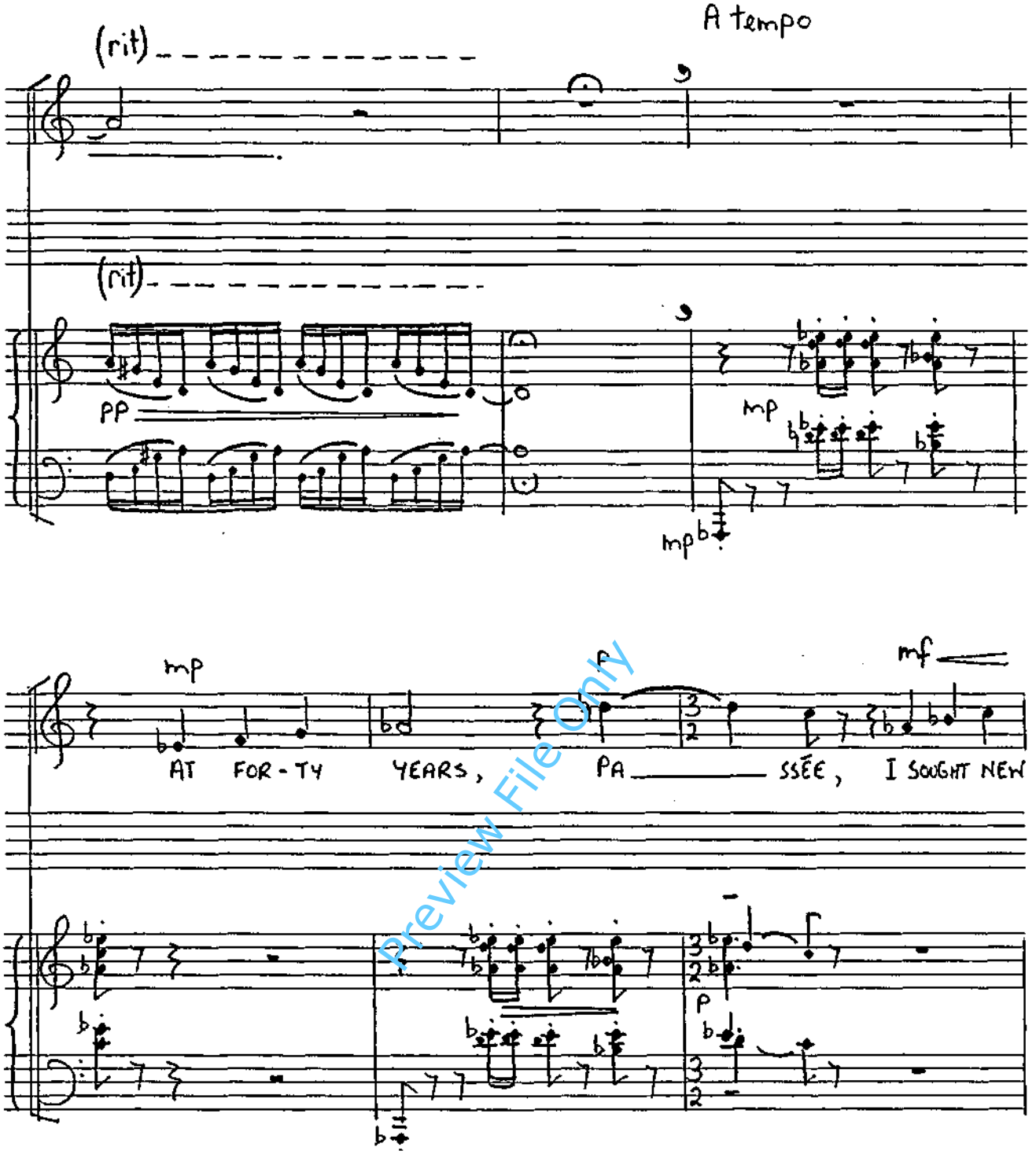

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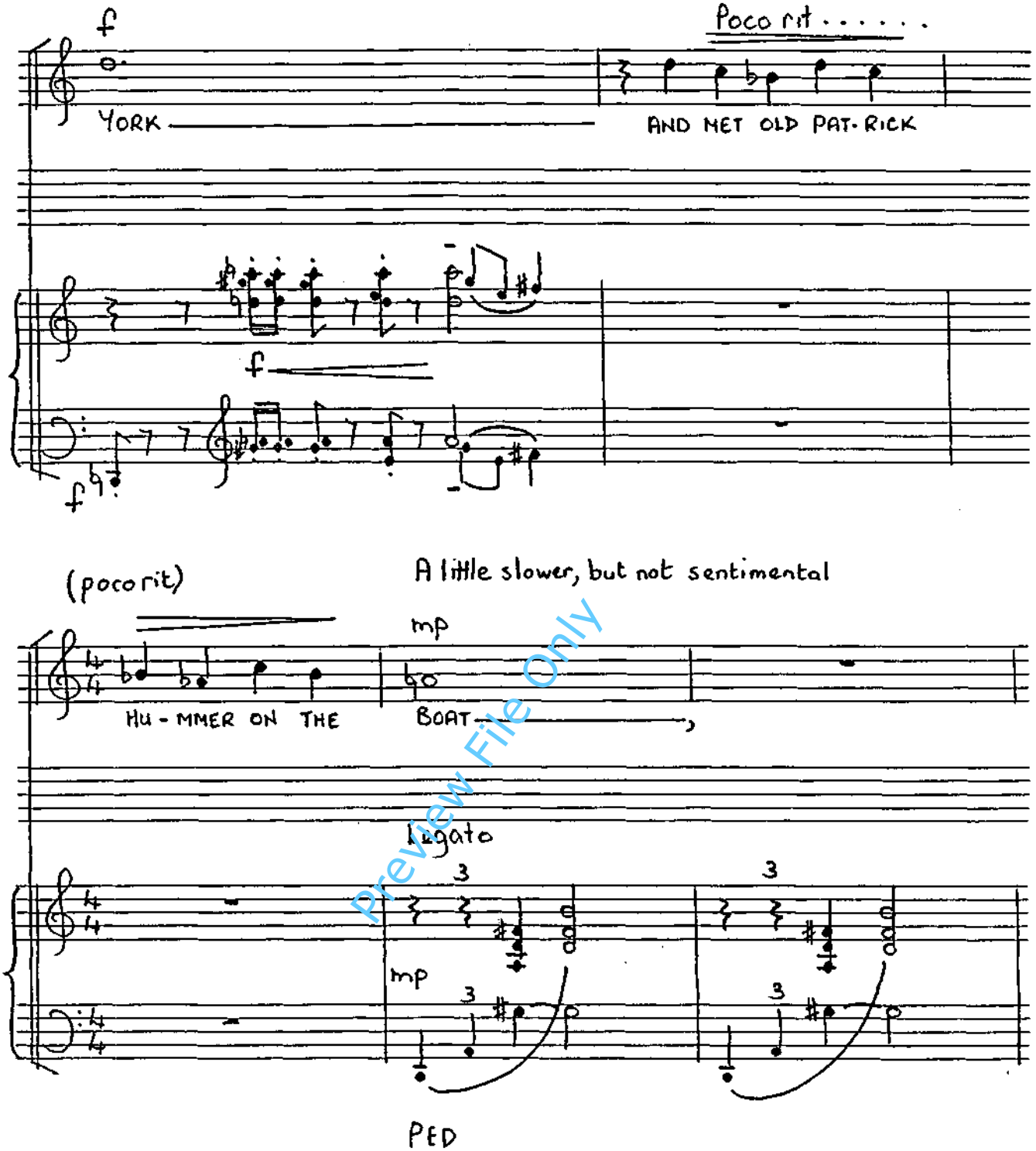

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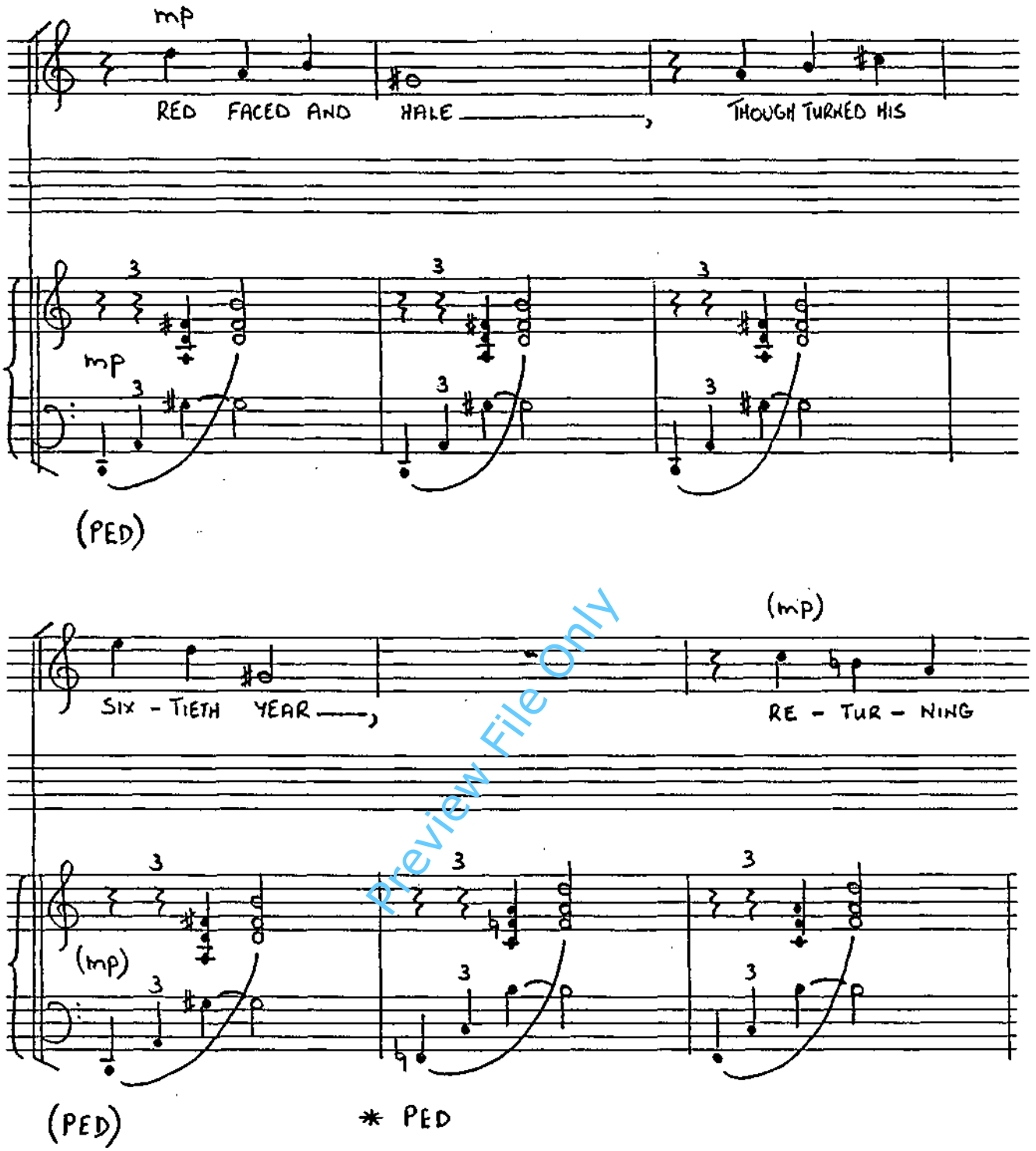

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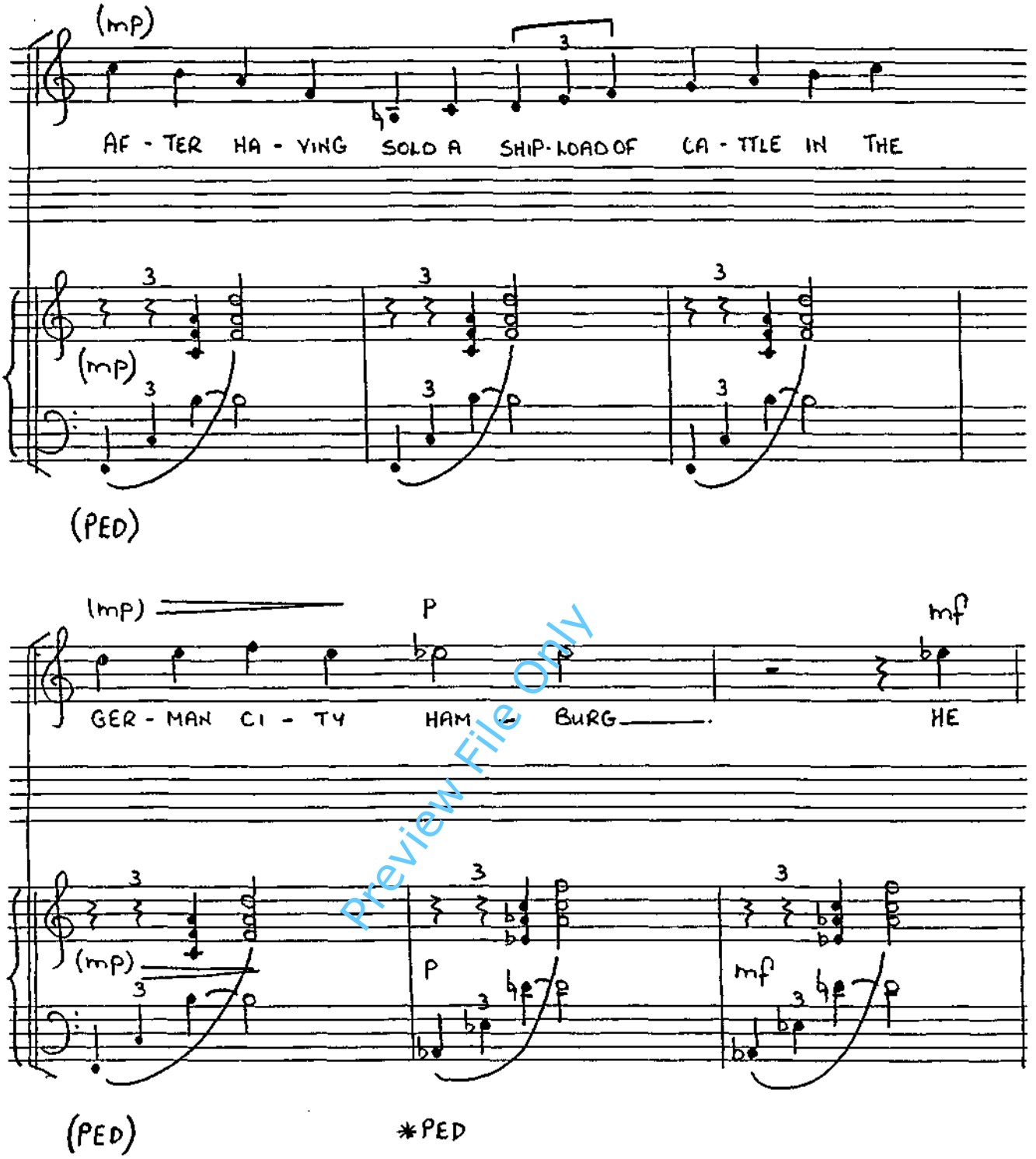

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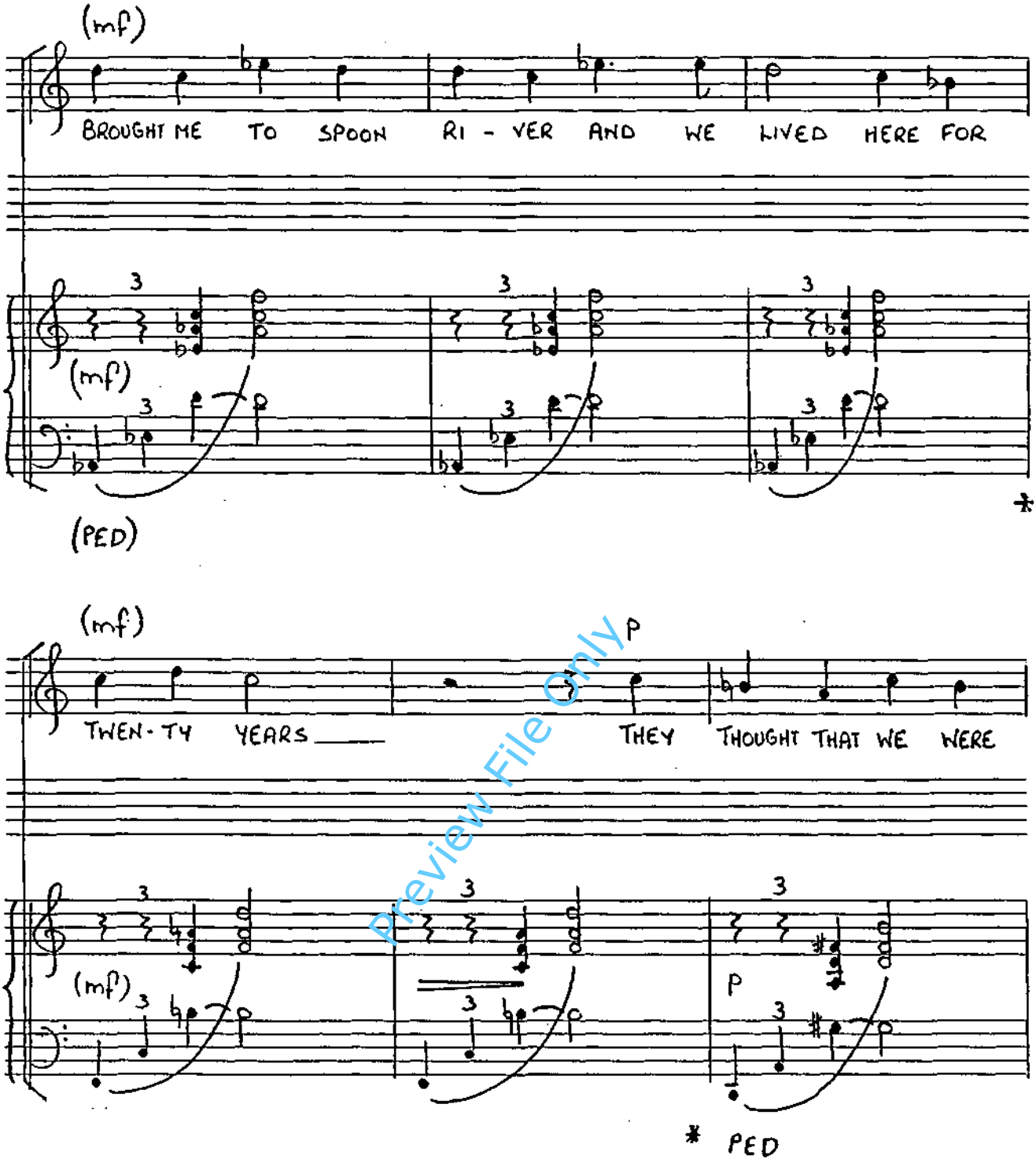

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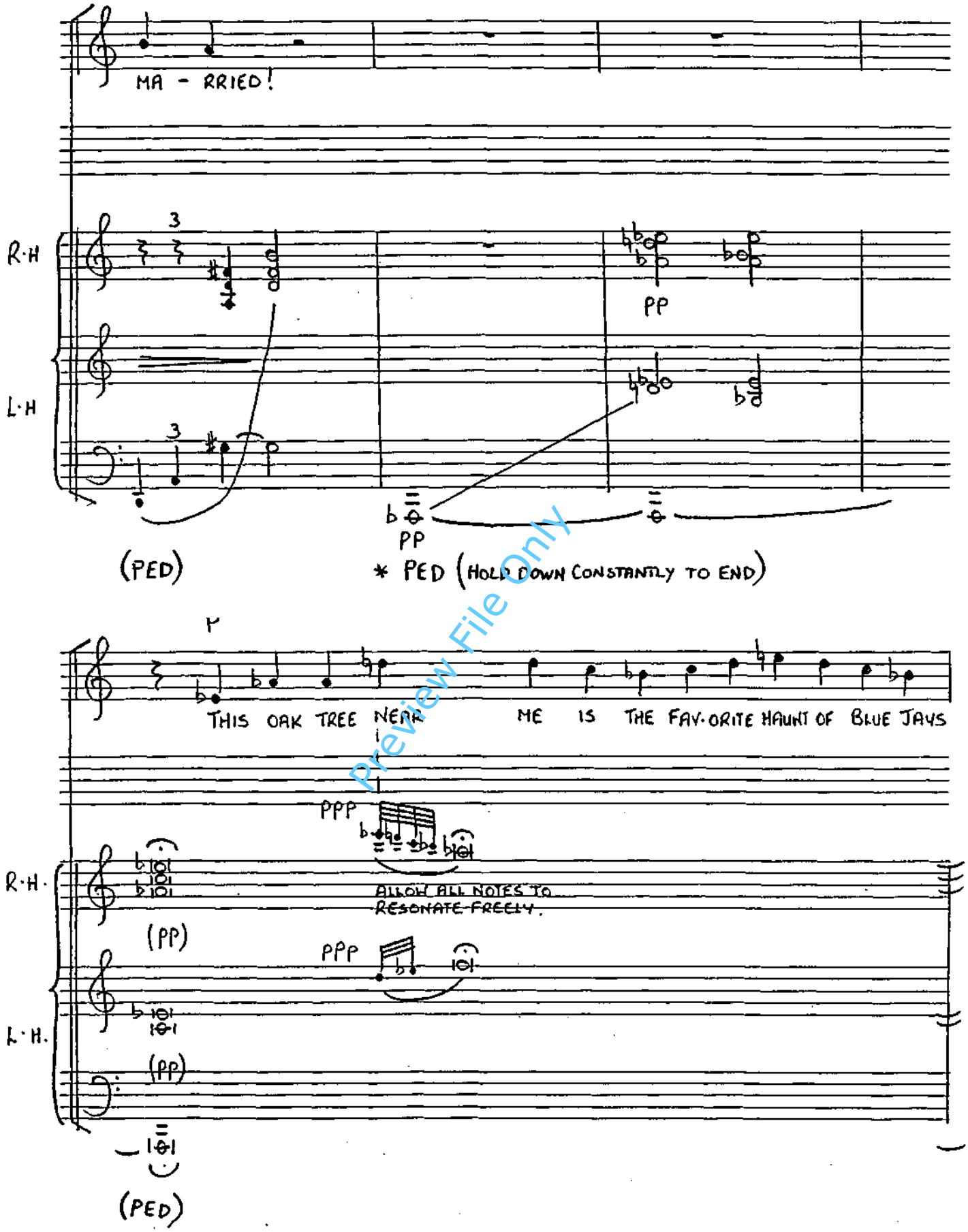

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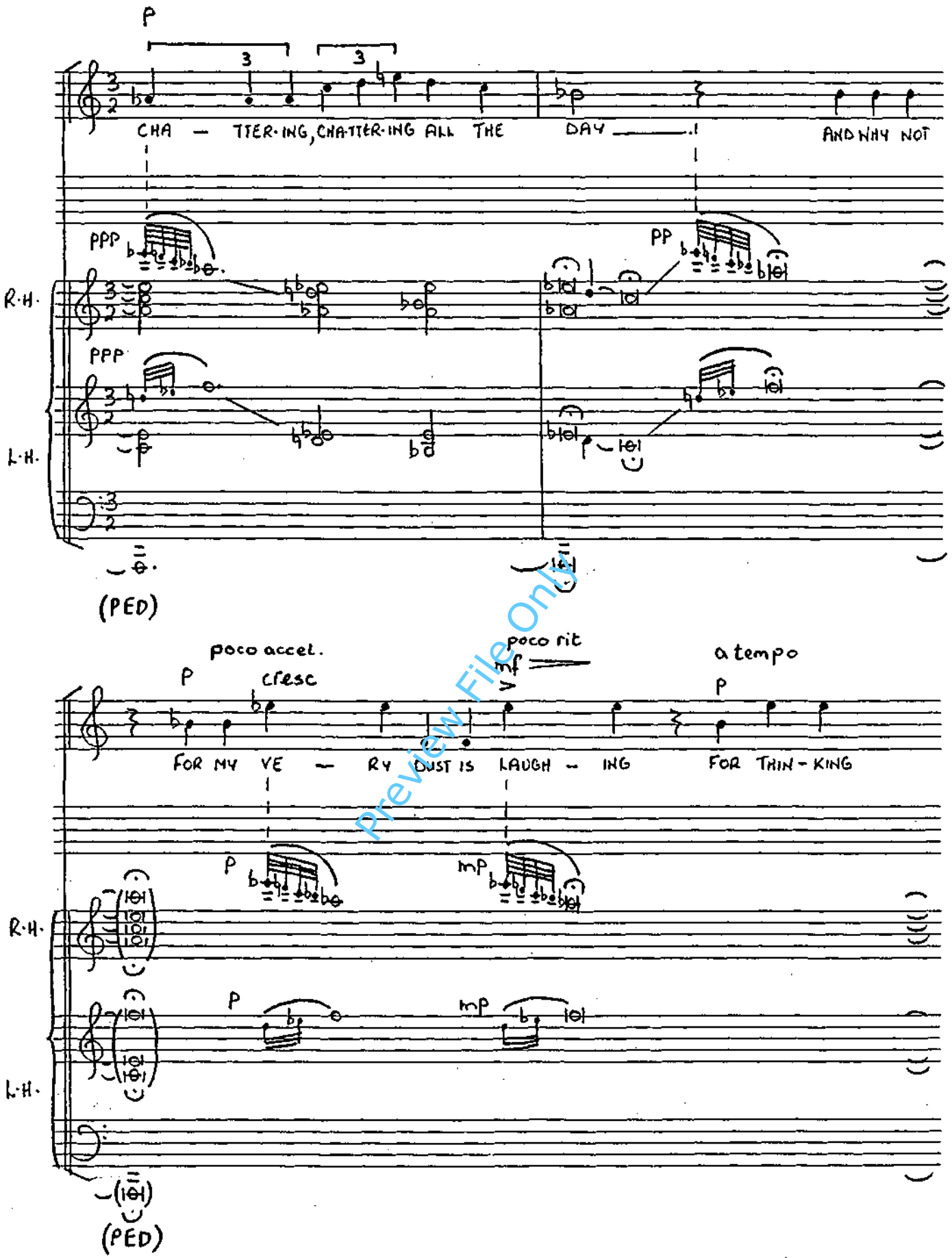

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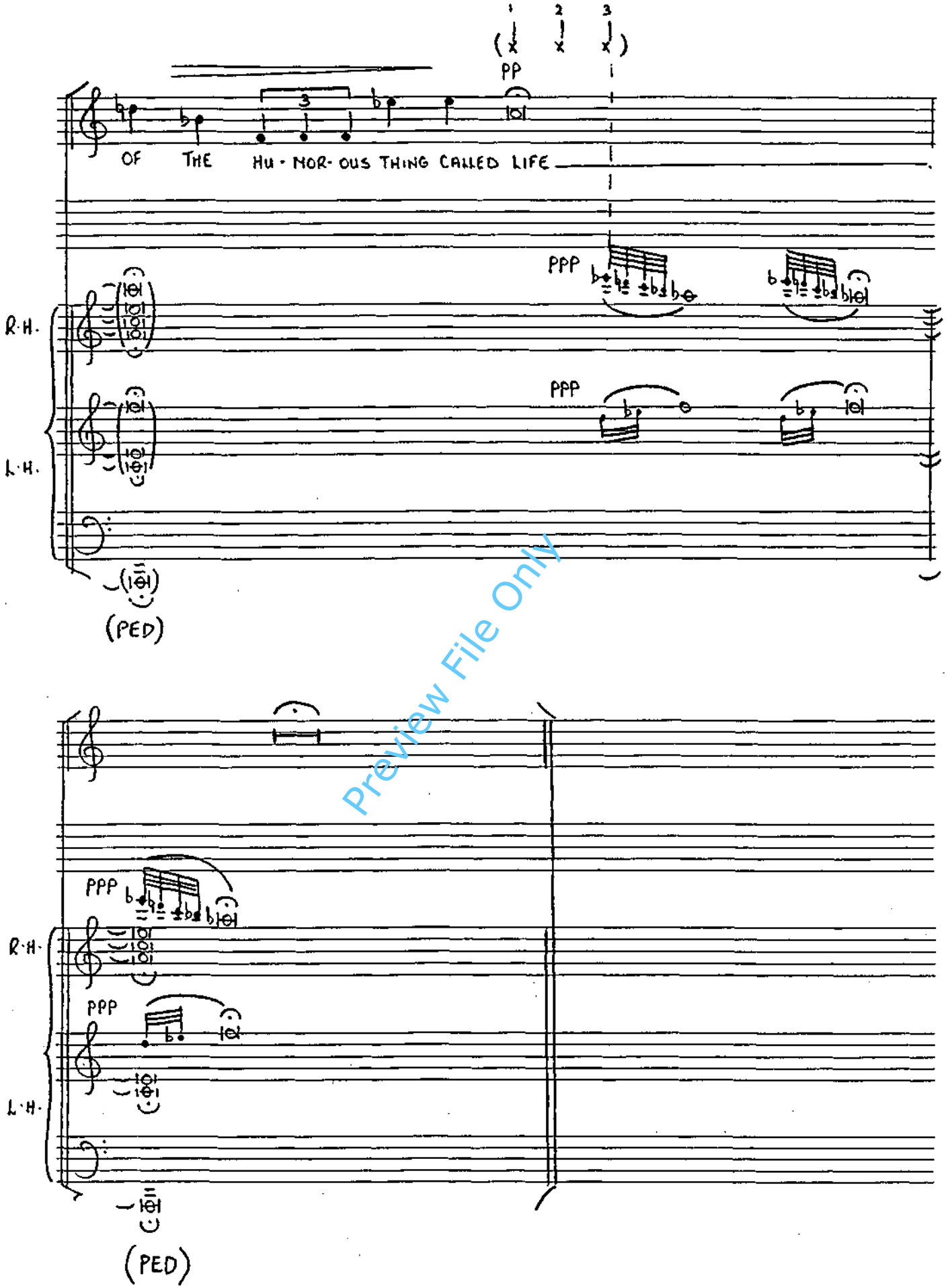

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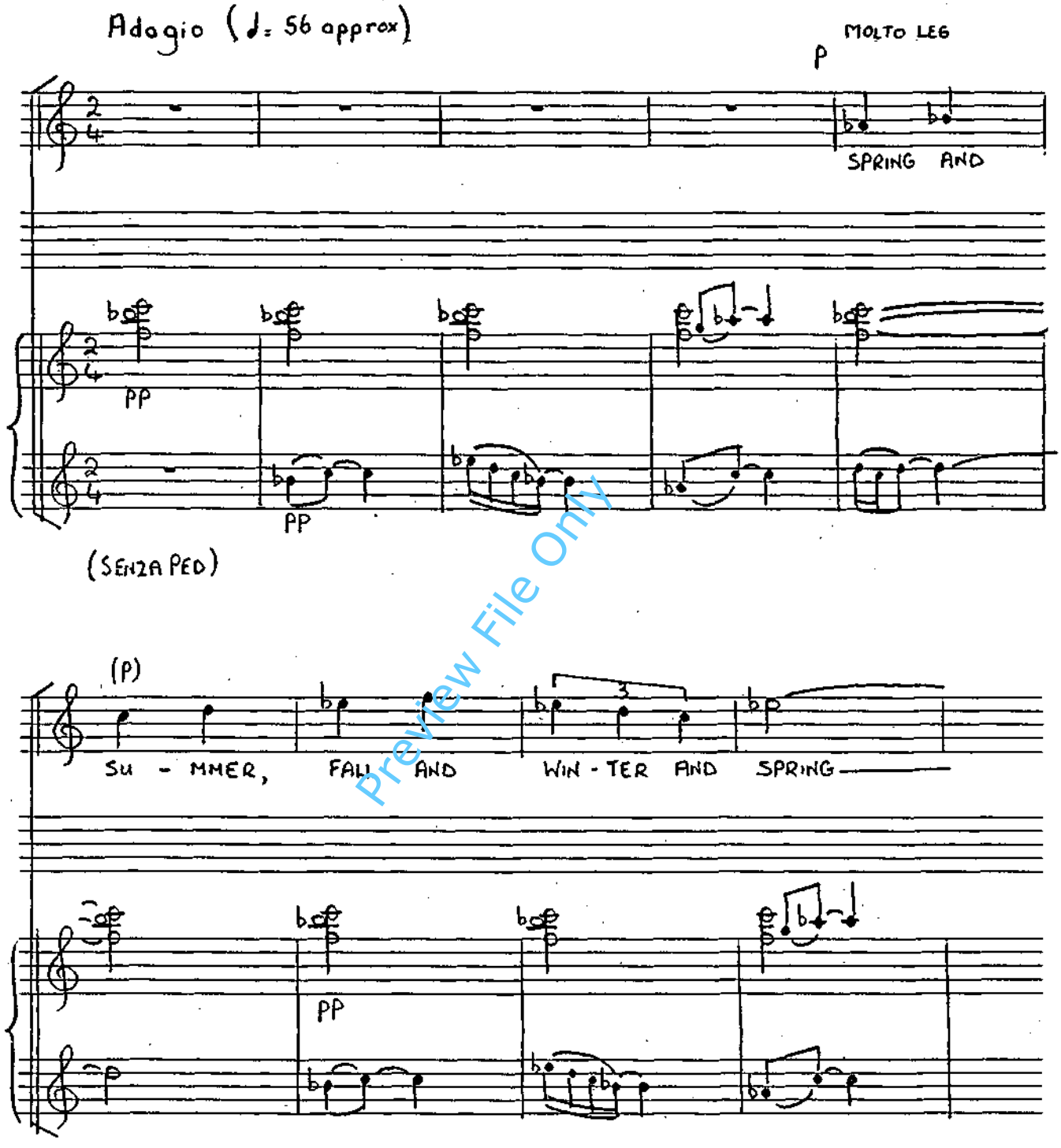
(Suggested prop.
Old lady's shawl)

3. Rebecca Wasson



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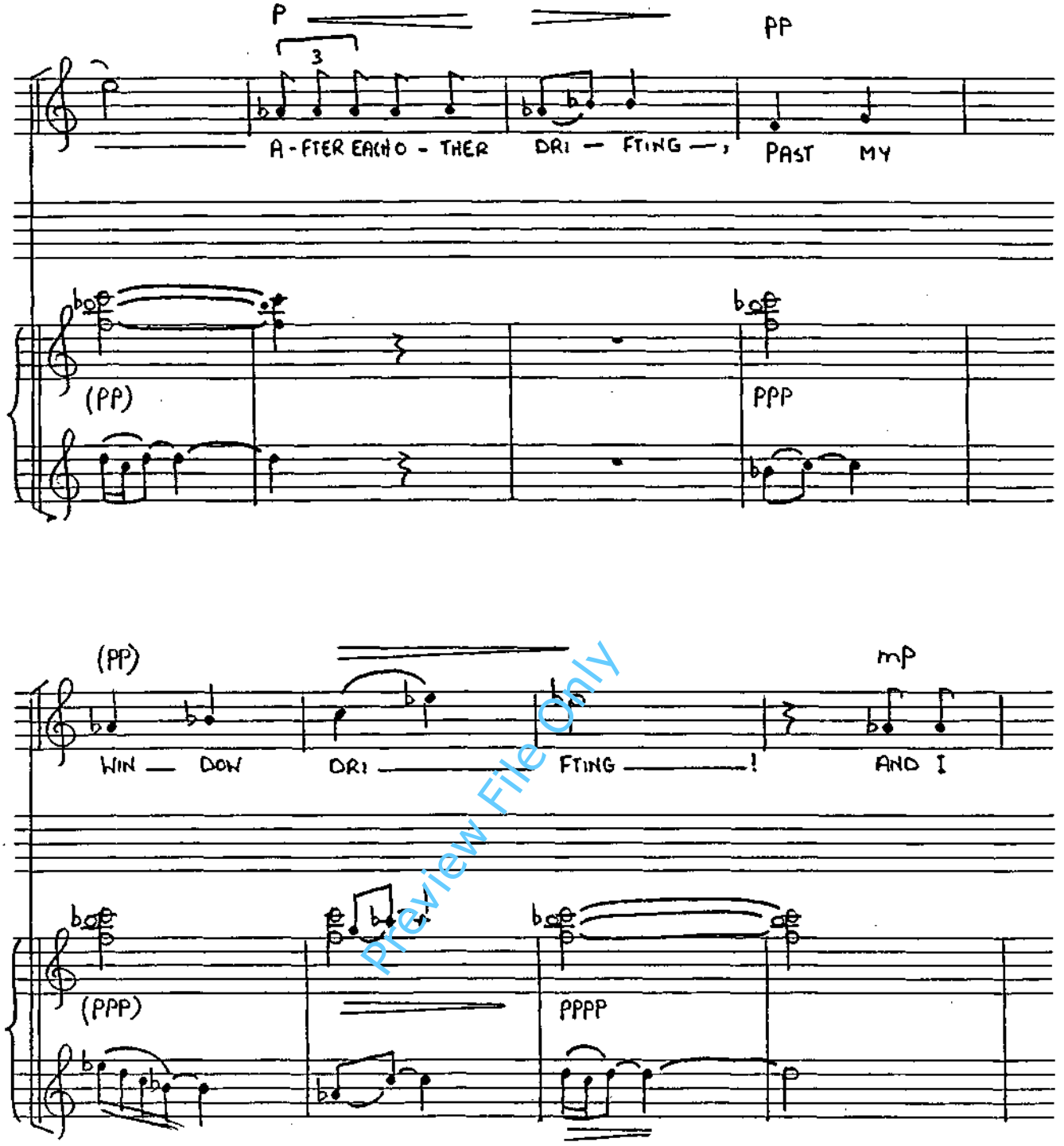

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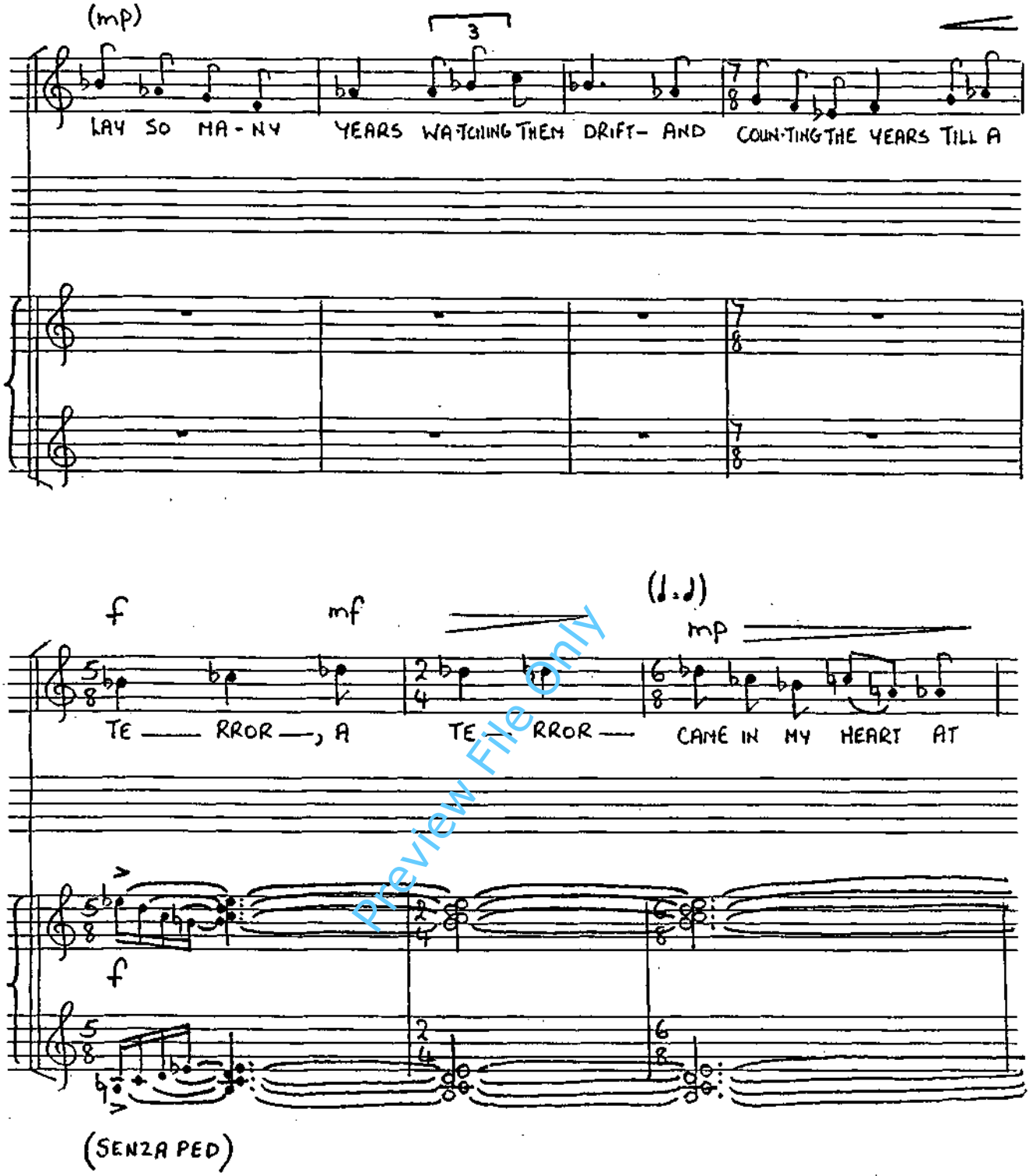

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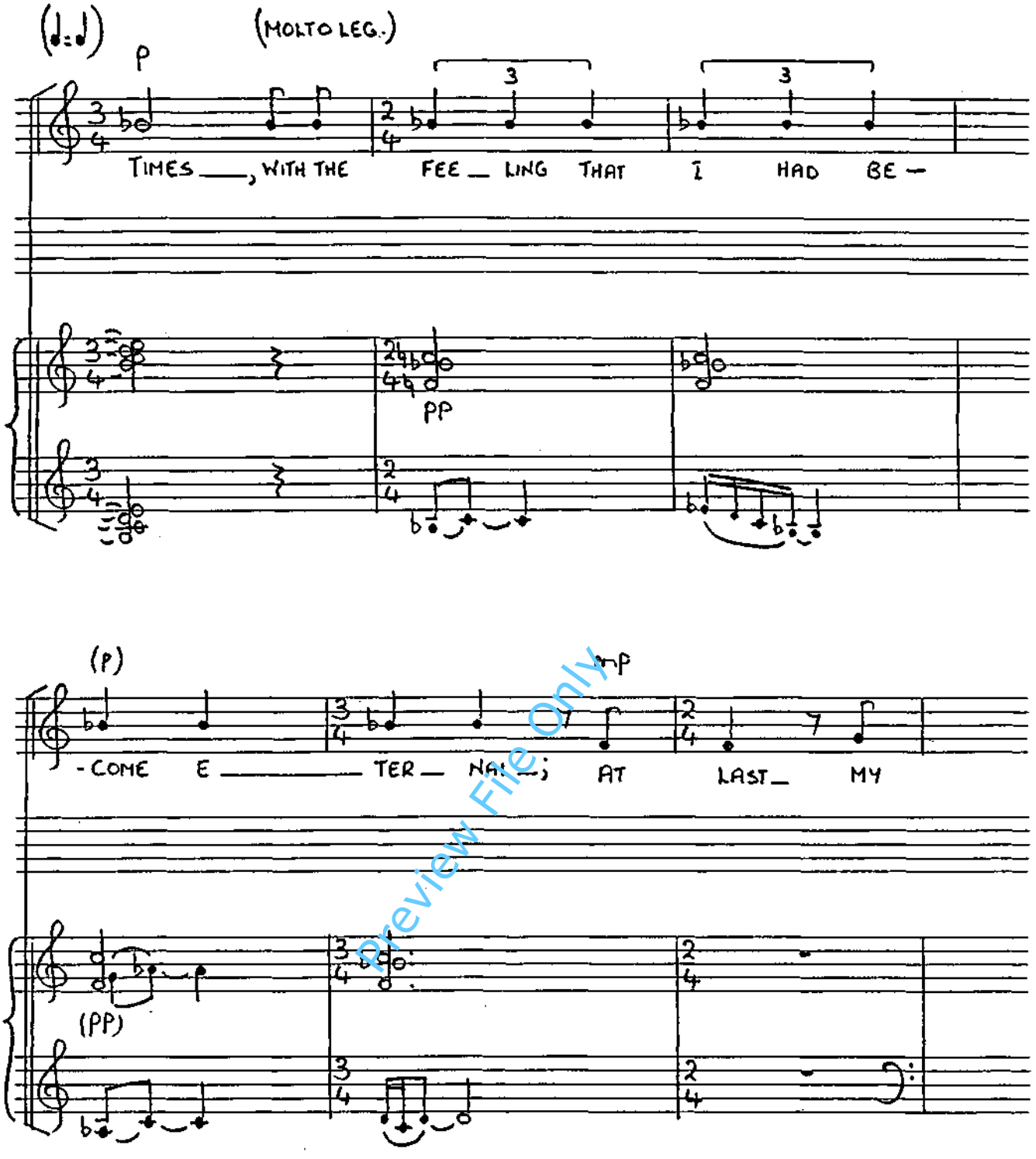

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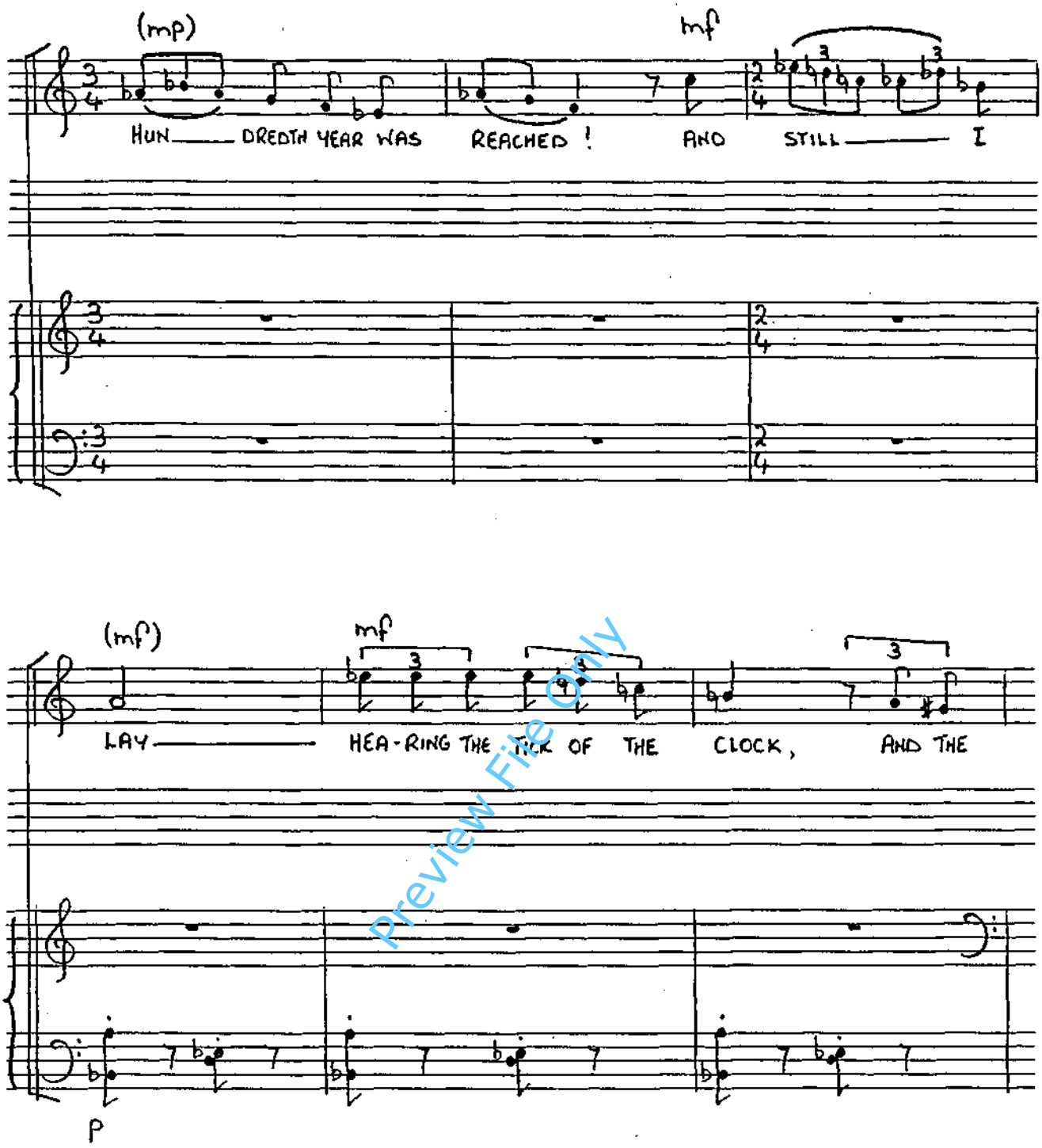

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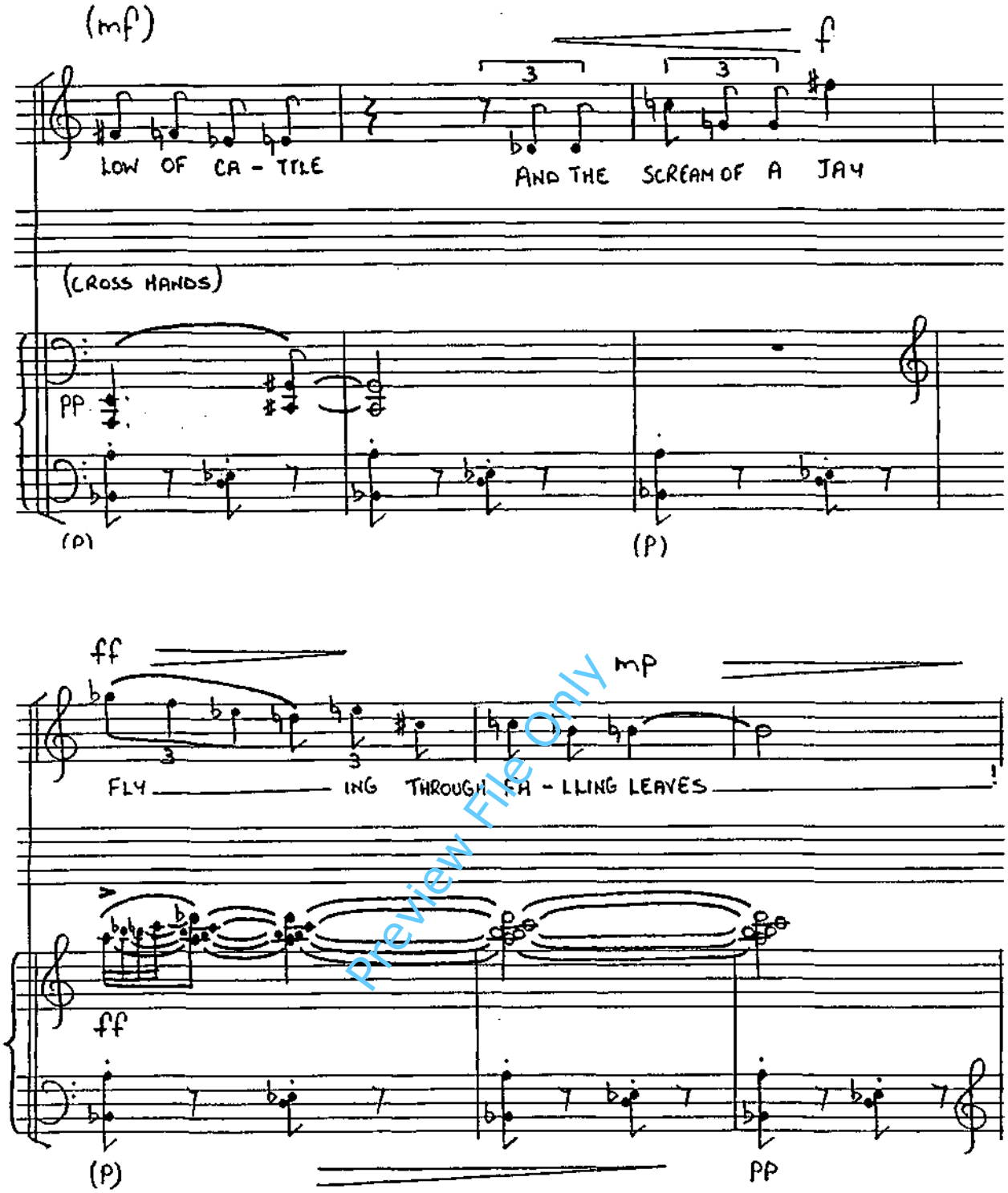

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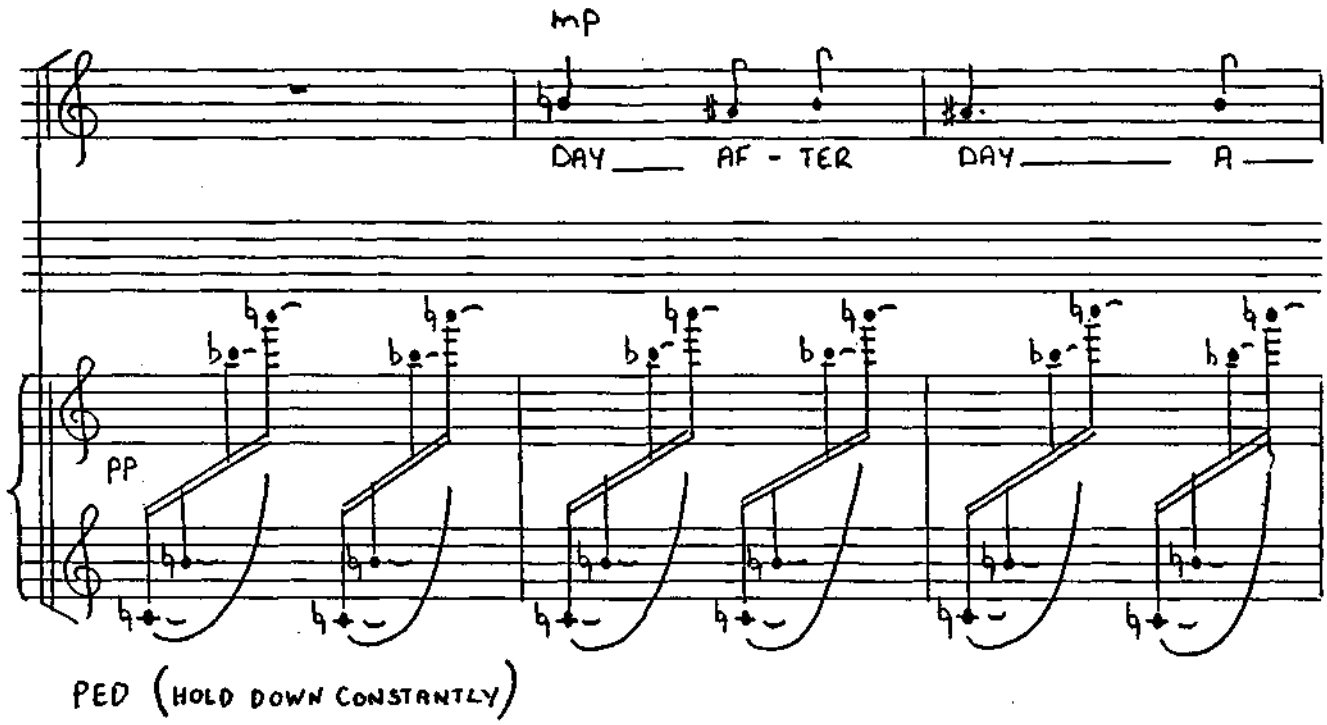

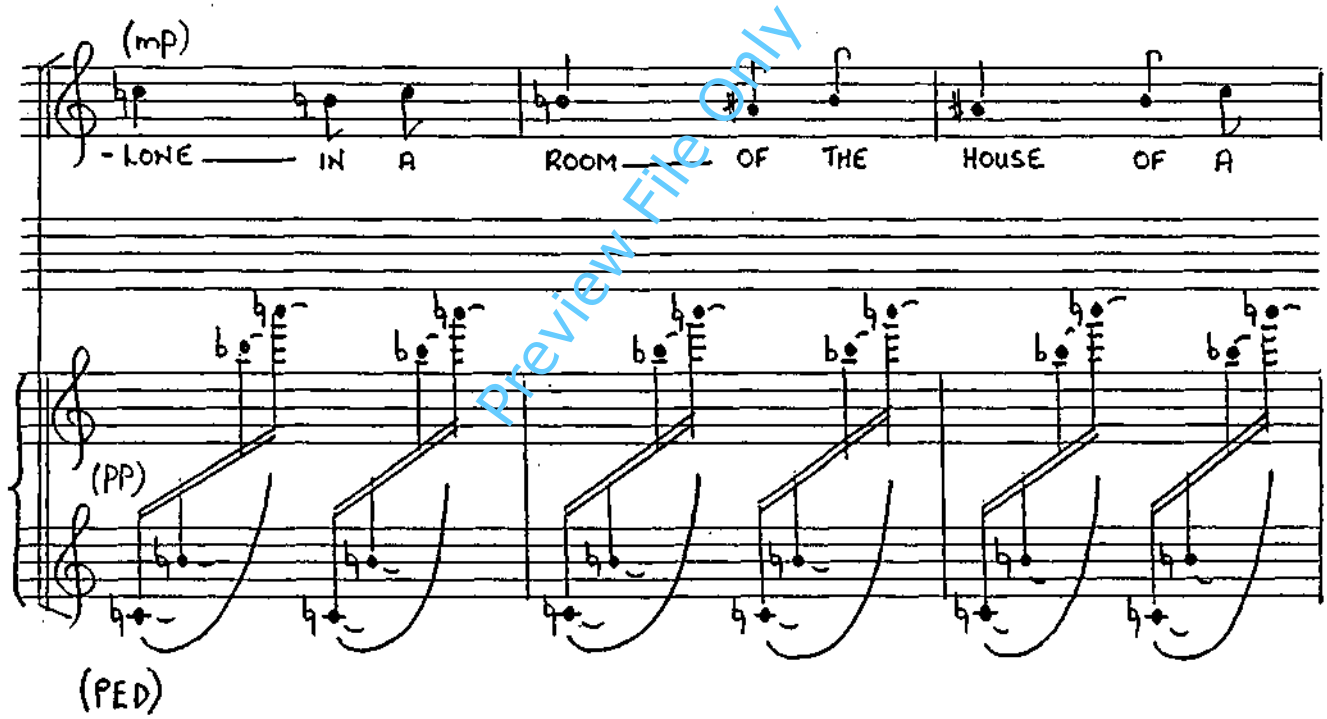

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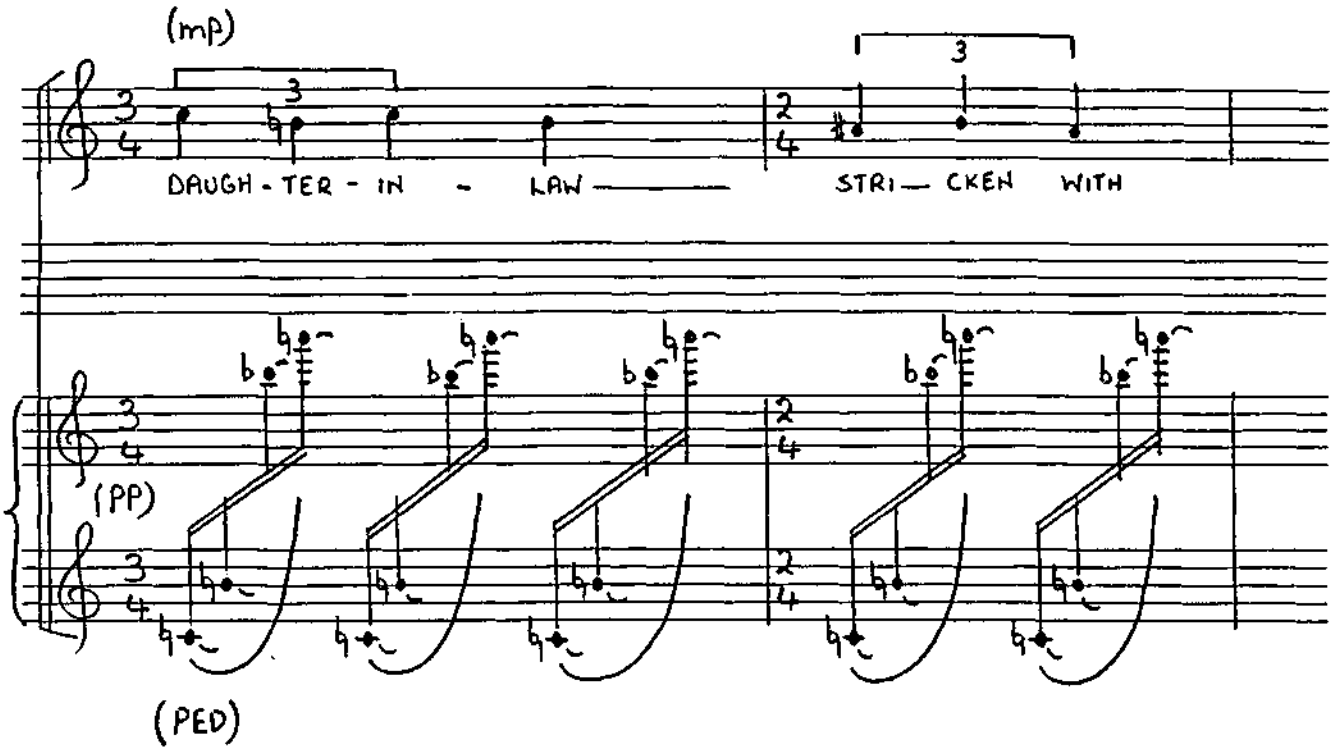

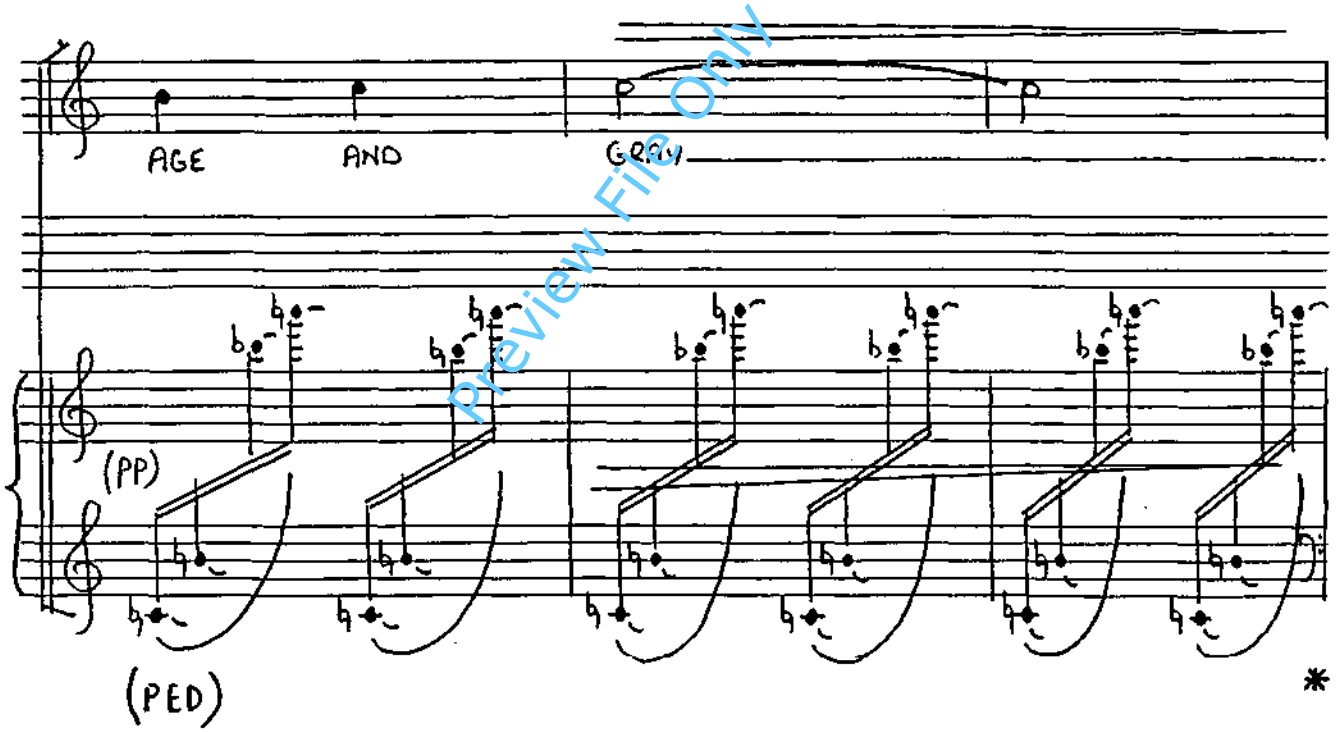

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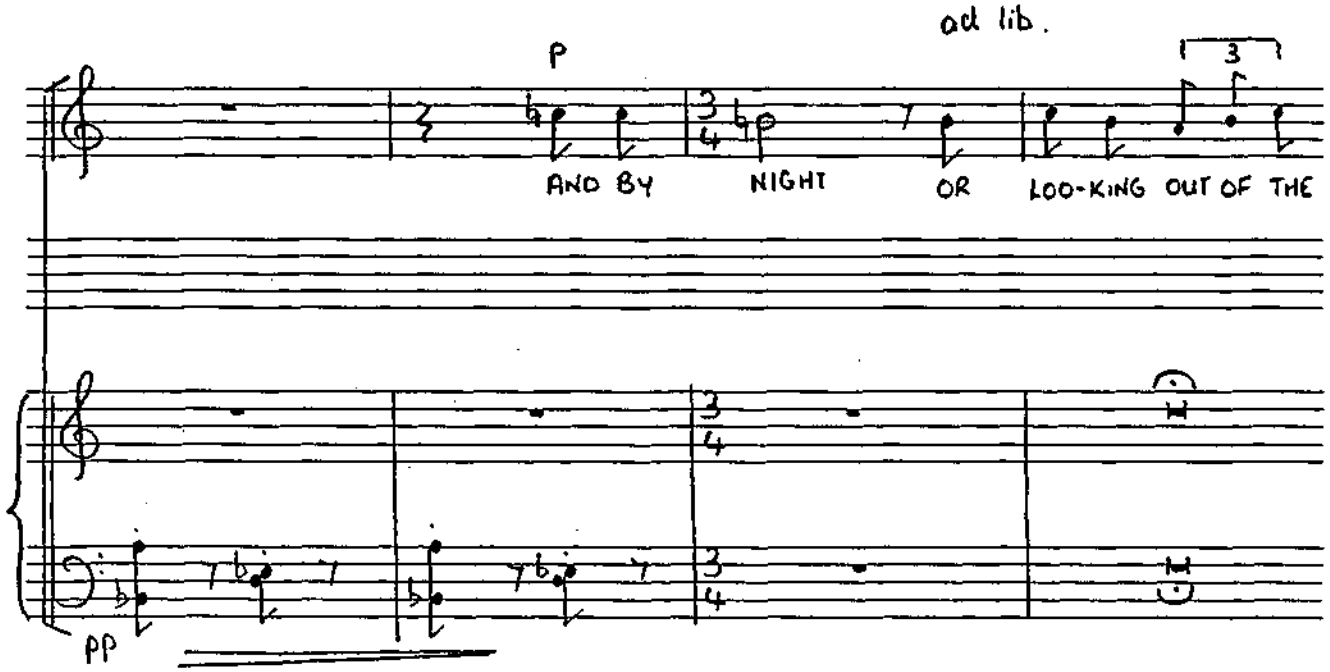

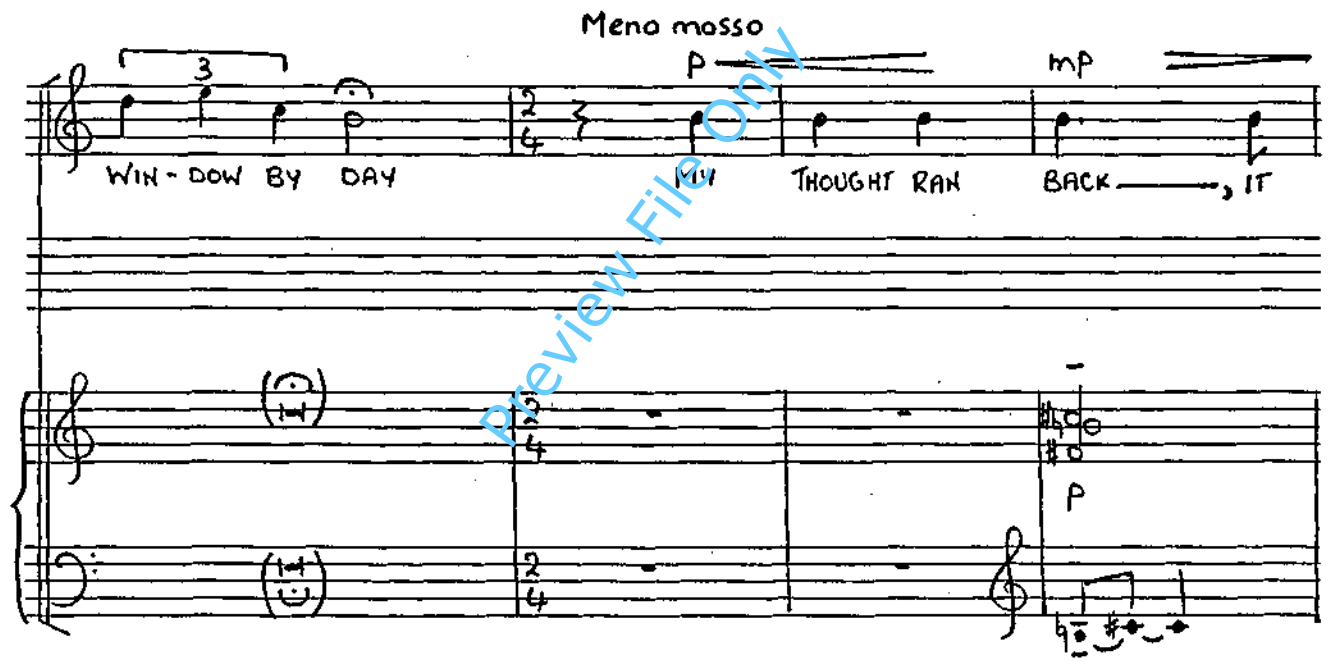

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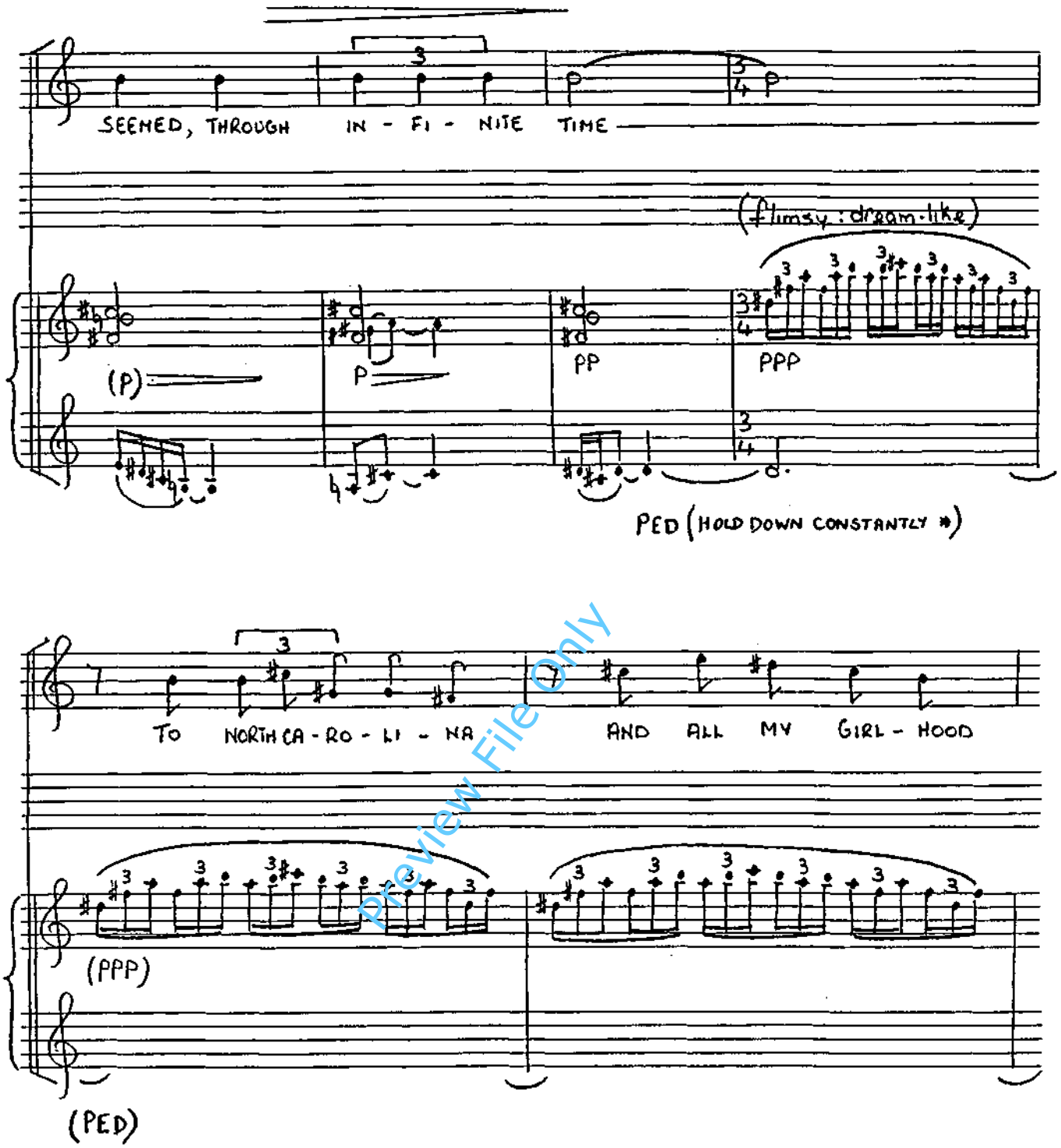

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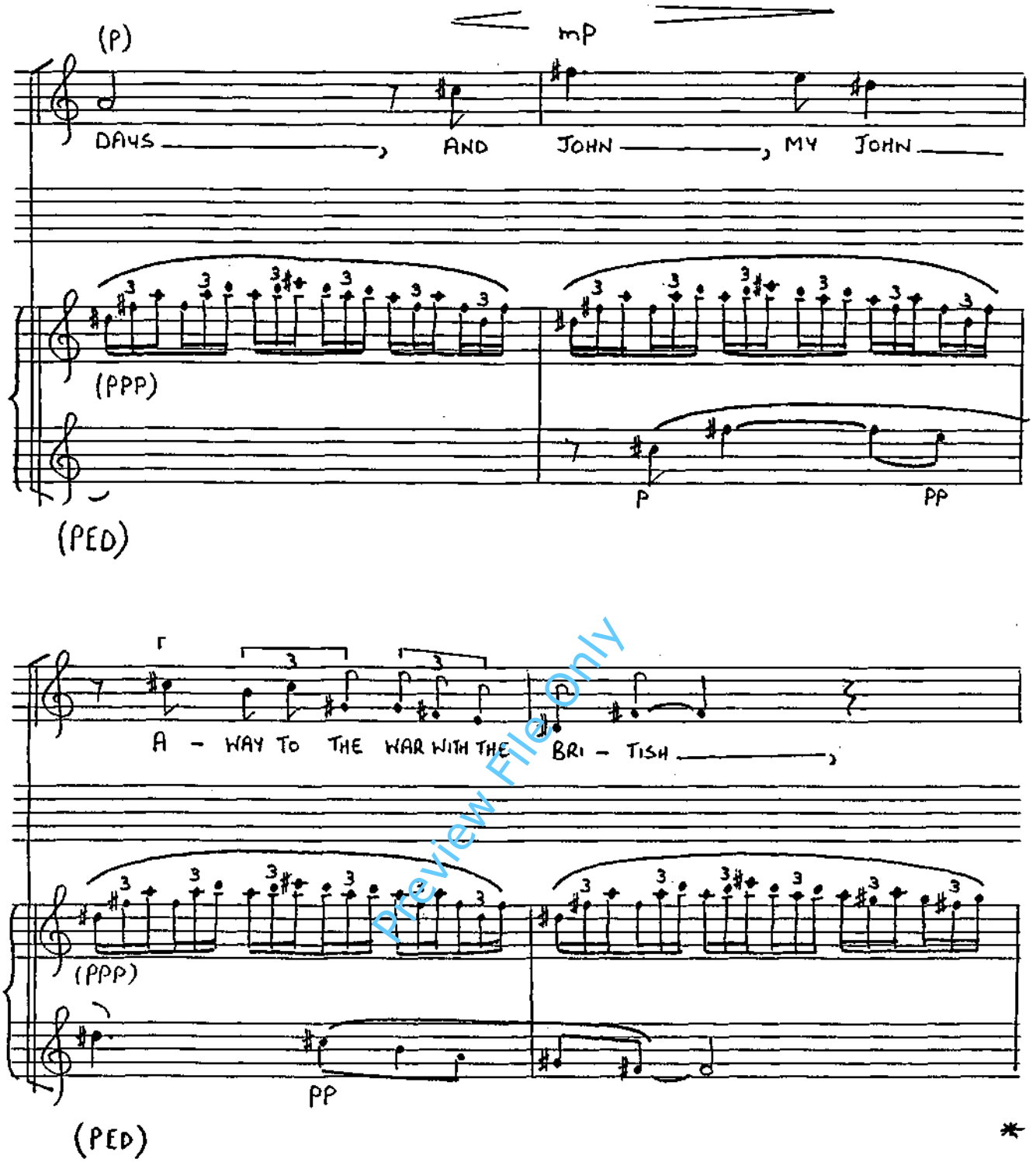

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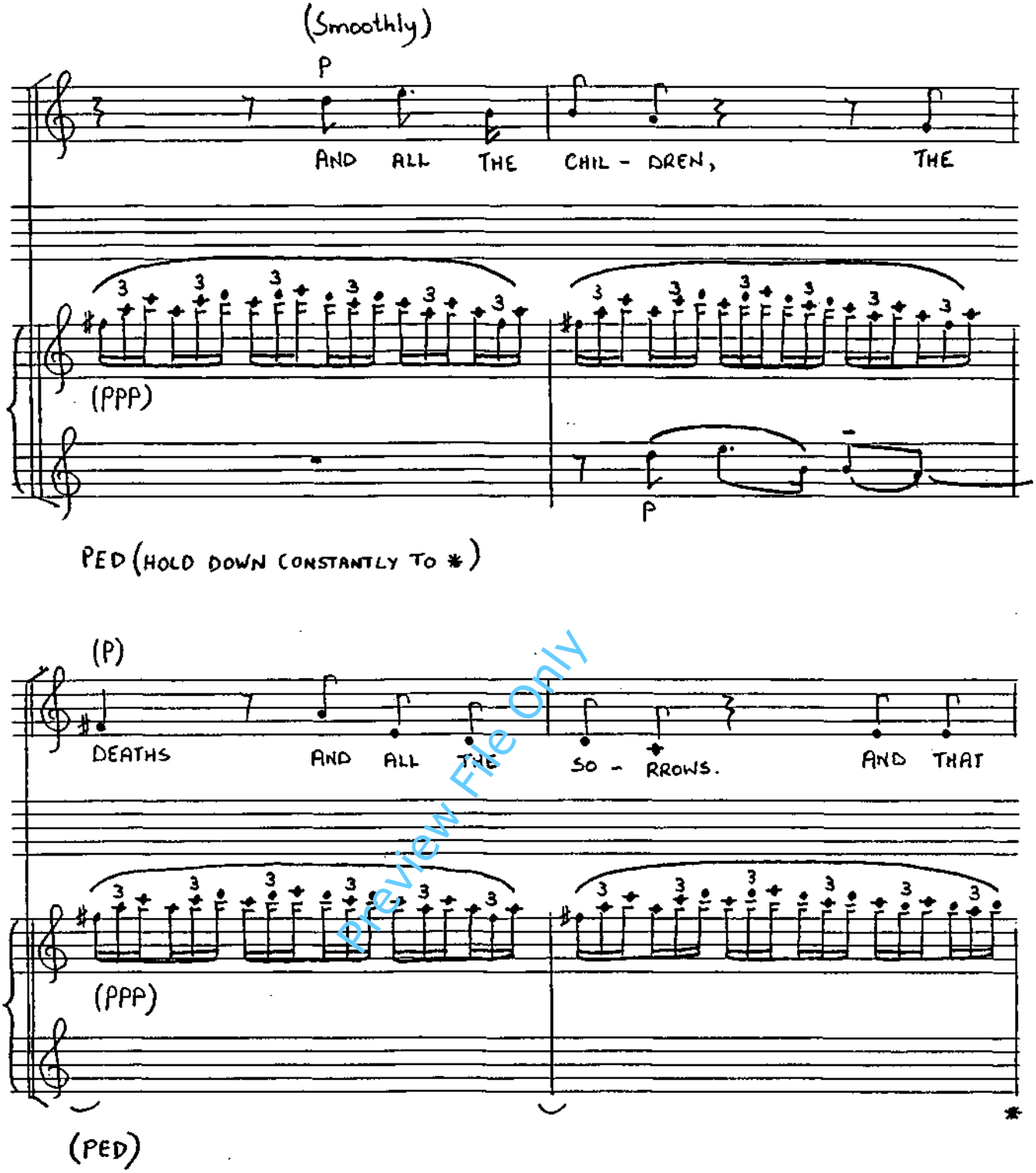

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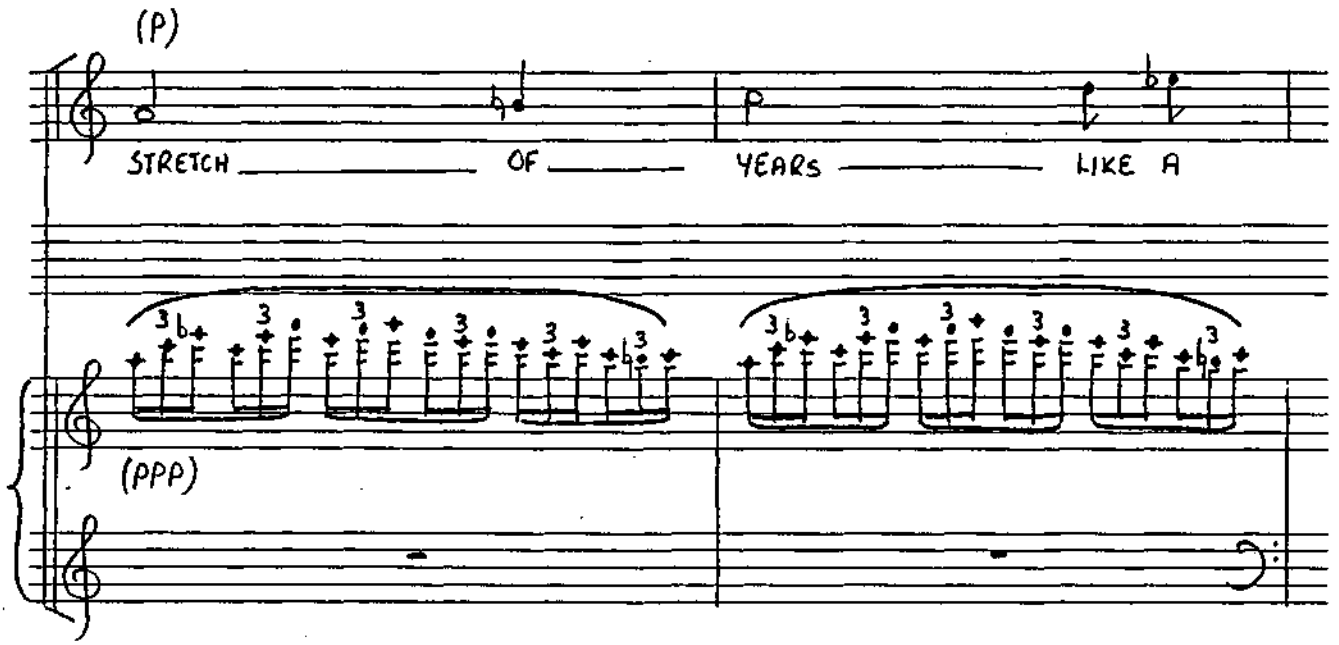

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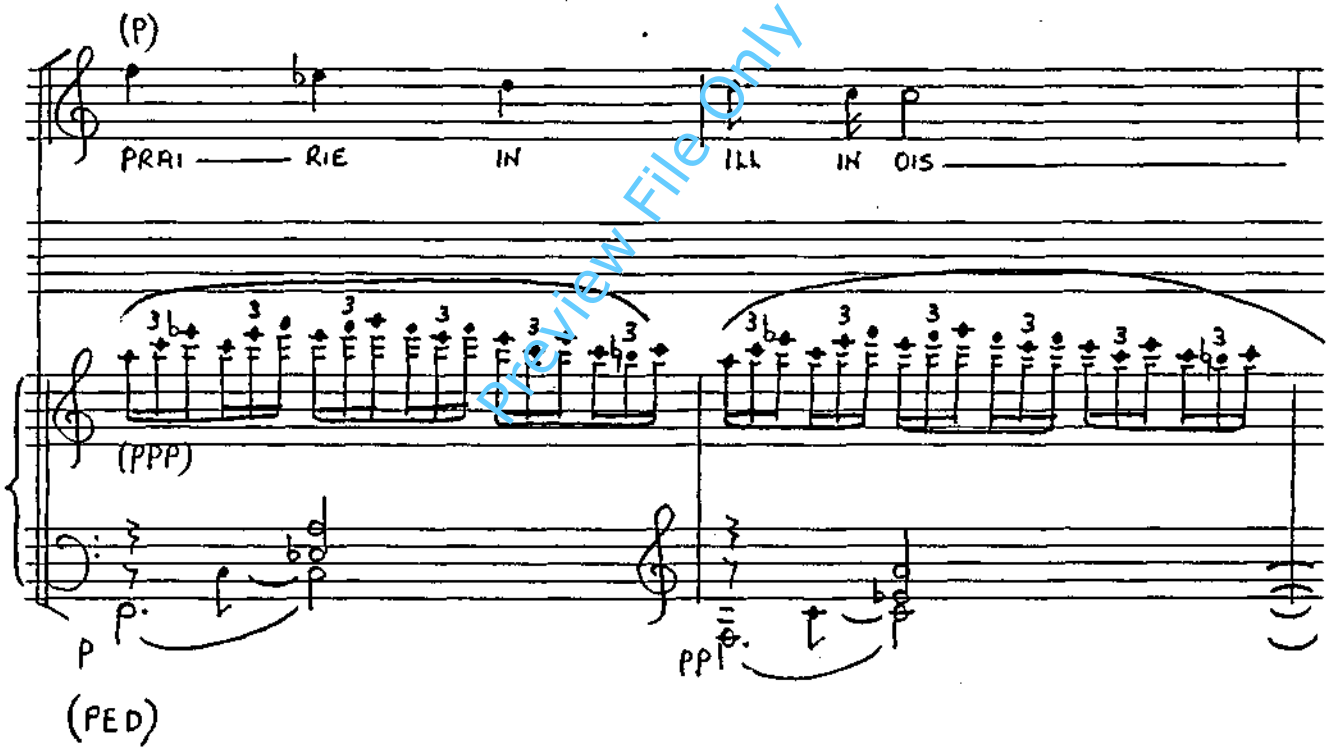

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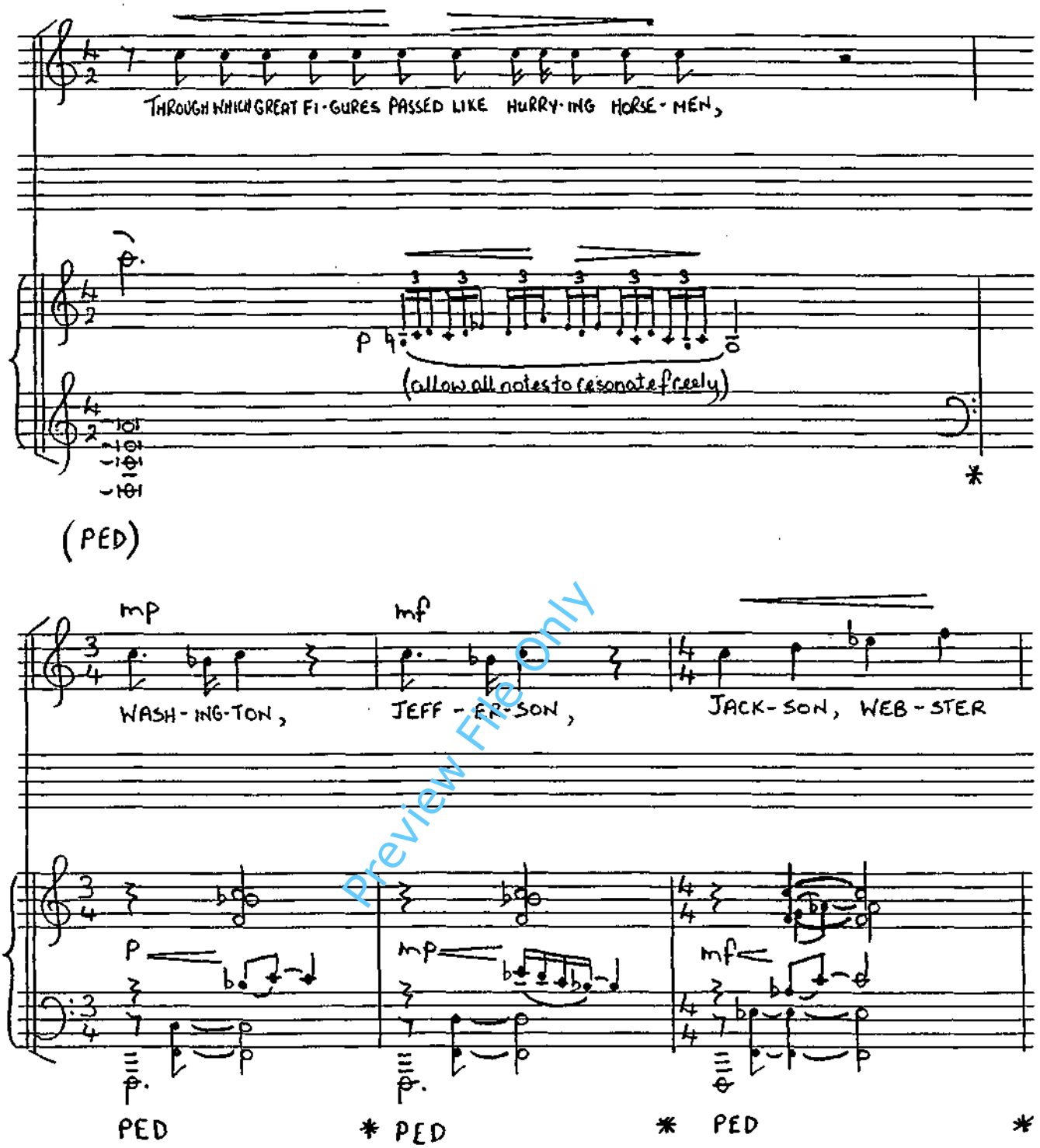

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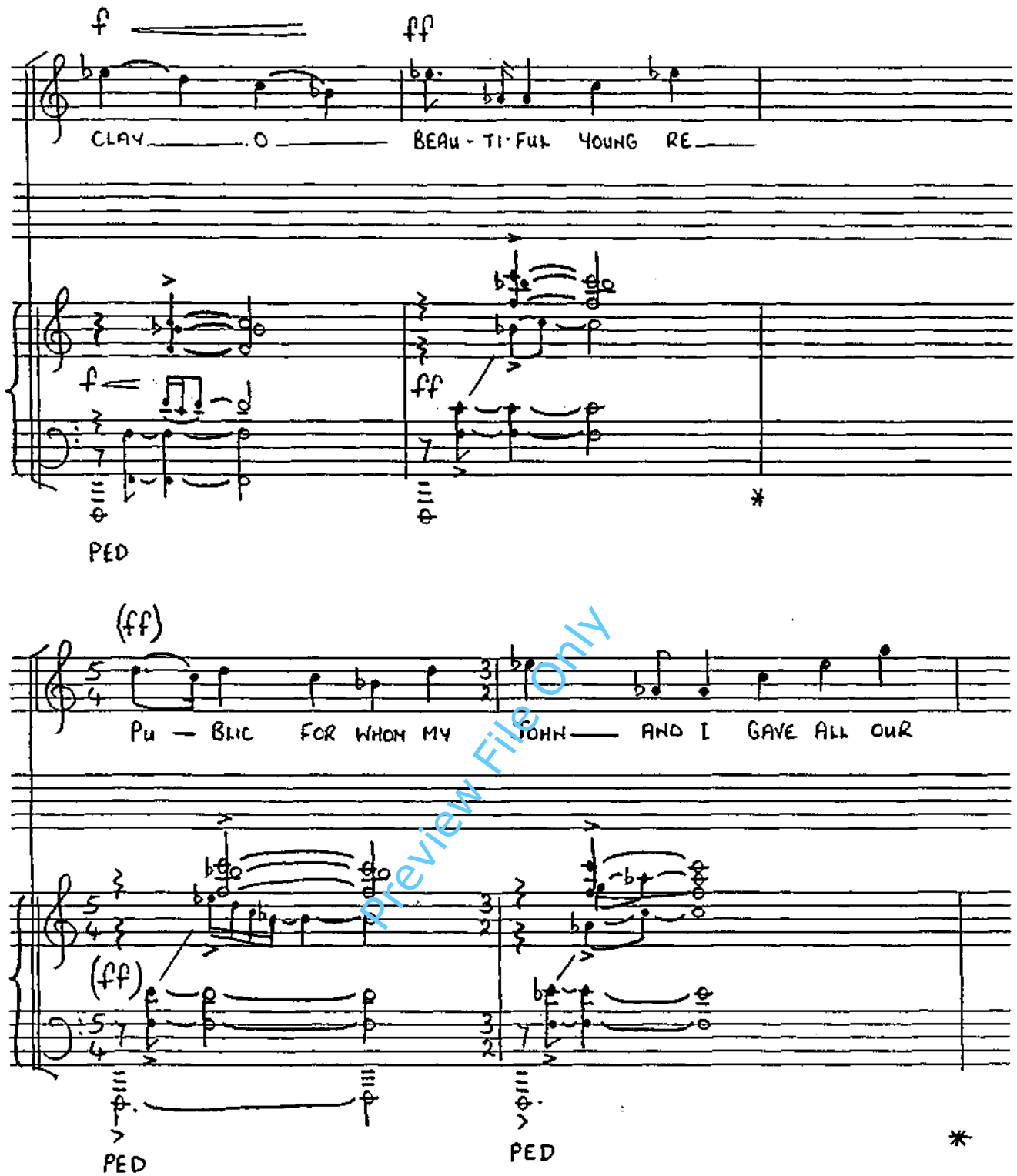
VERY EXPANSIVE



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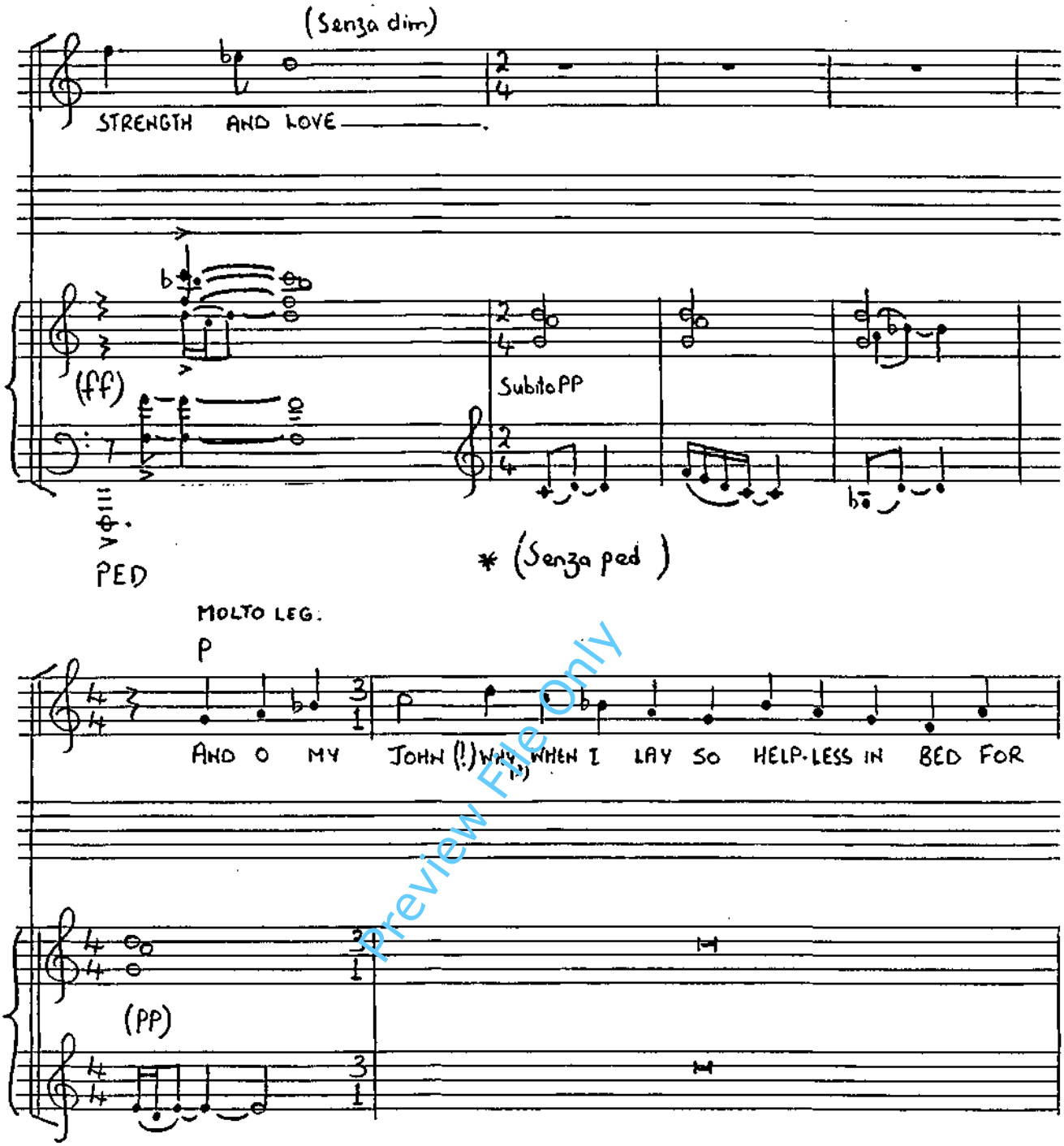

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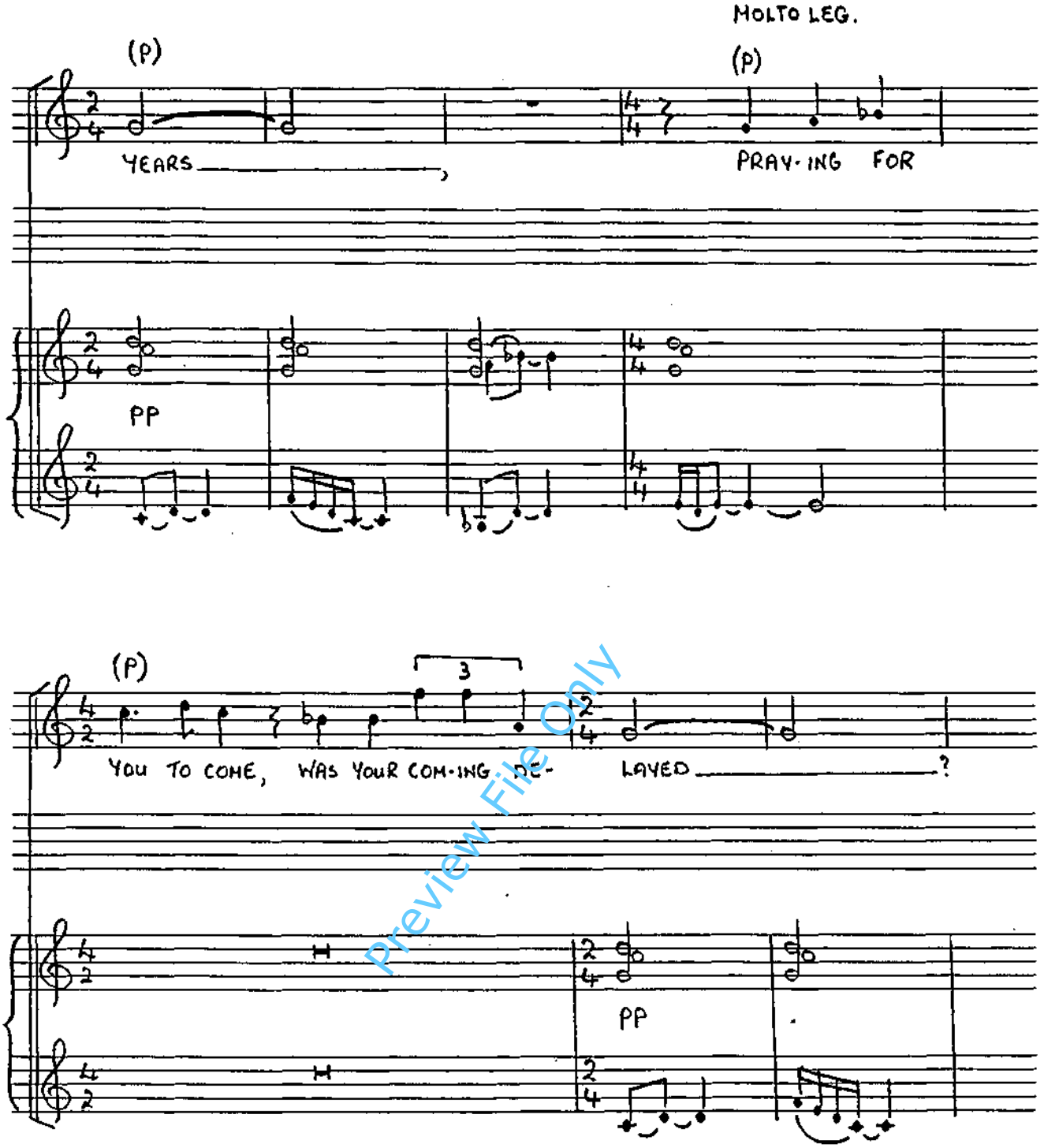

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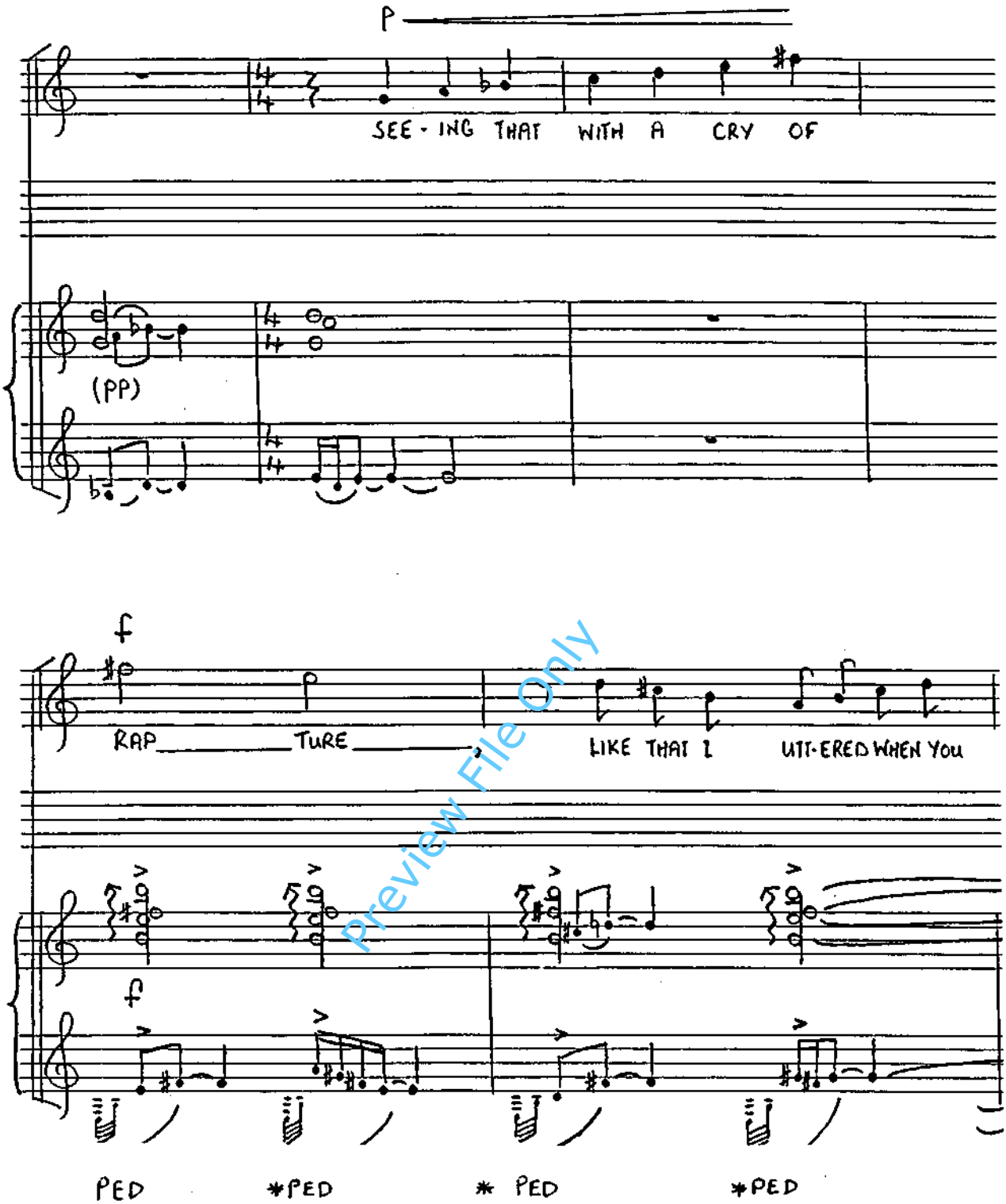

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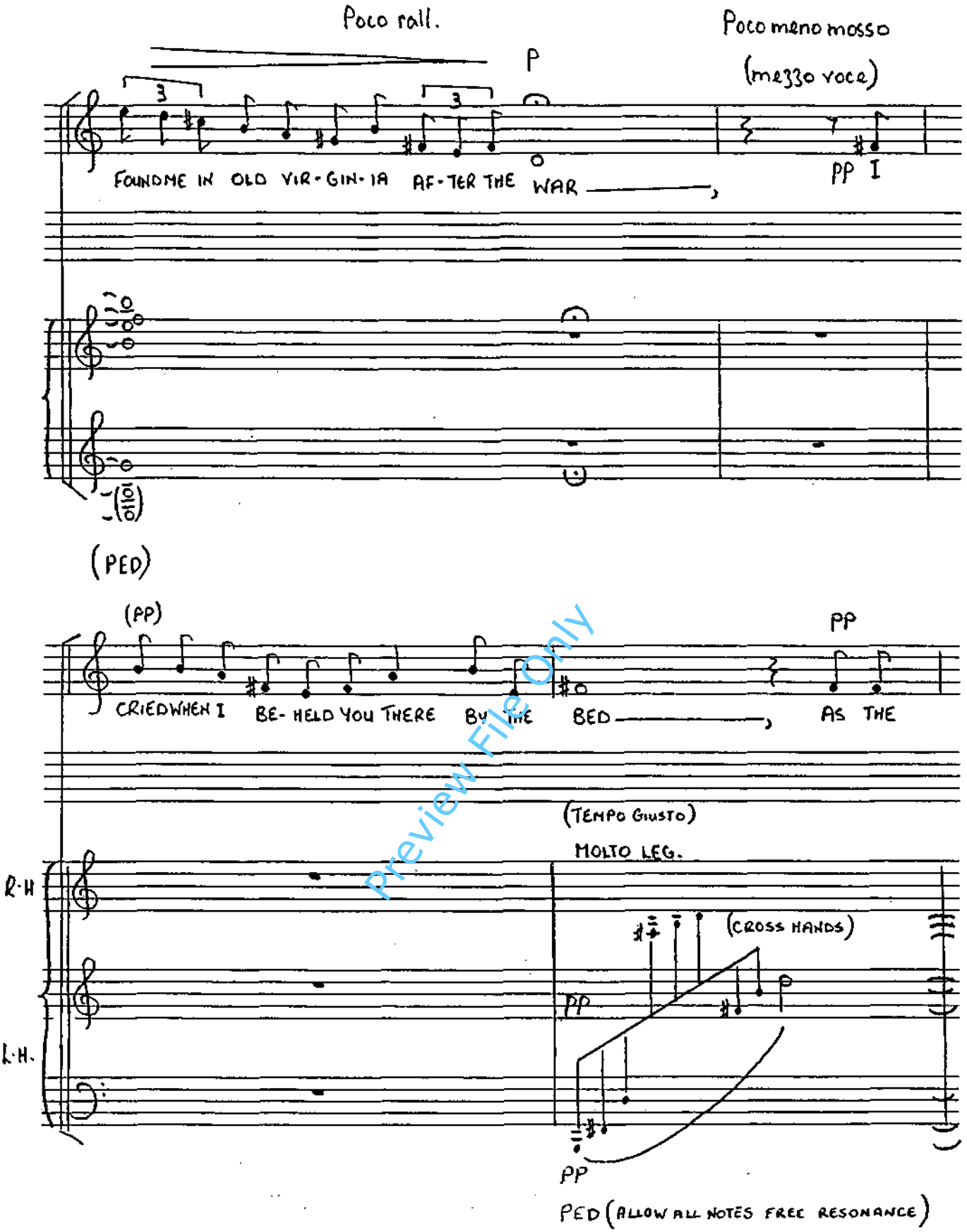

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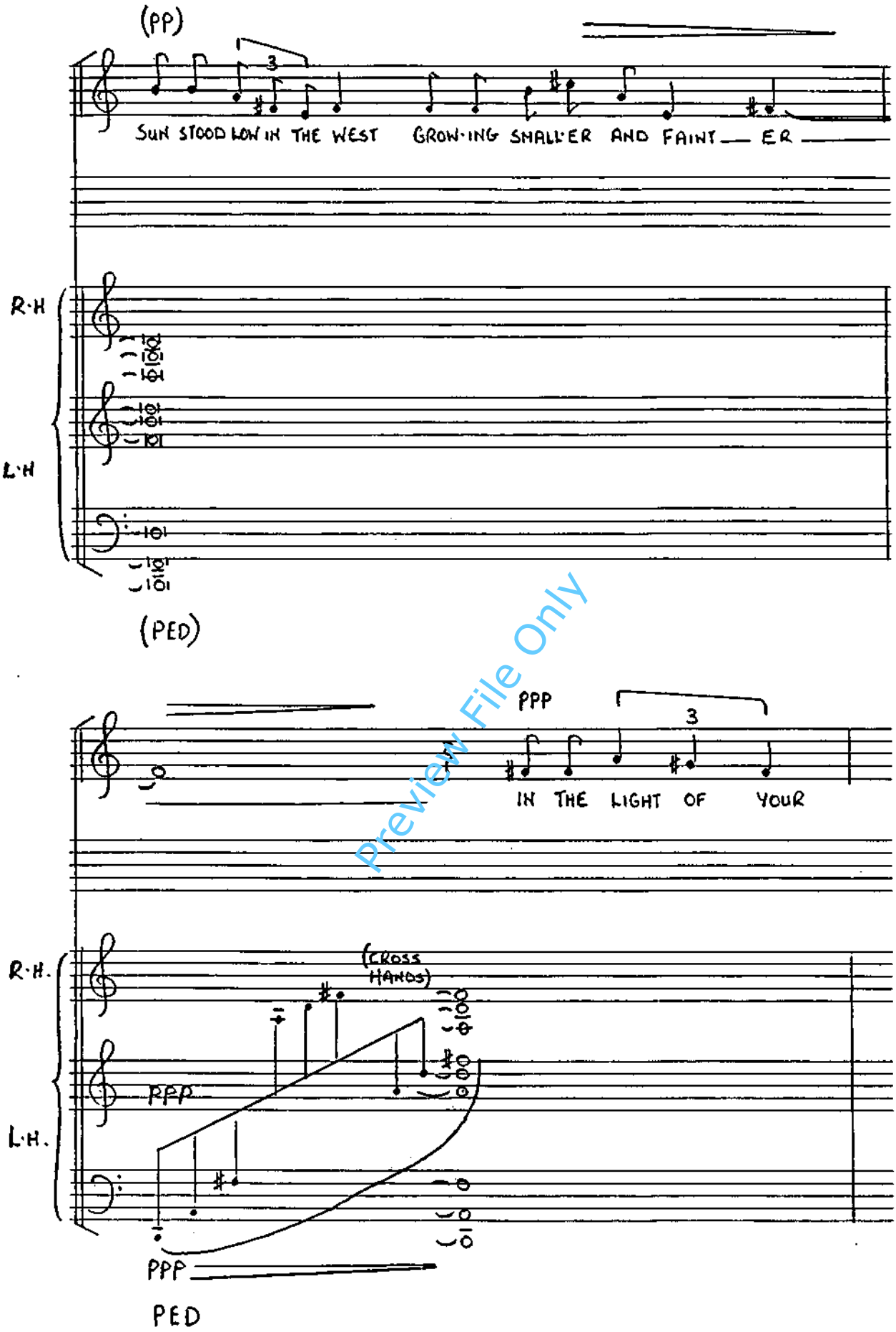

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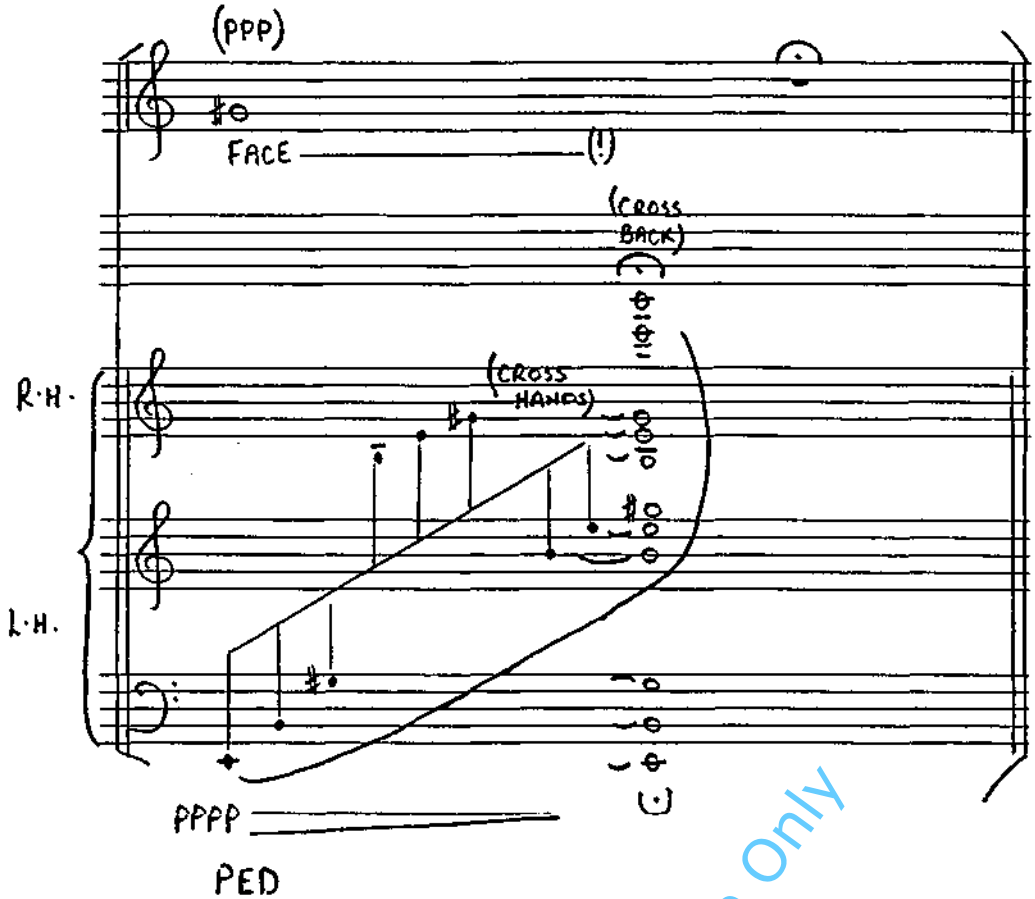

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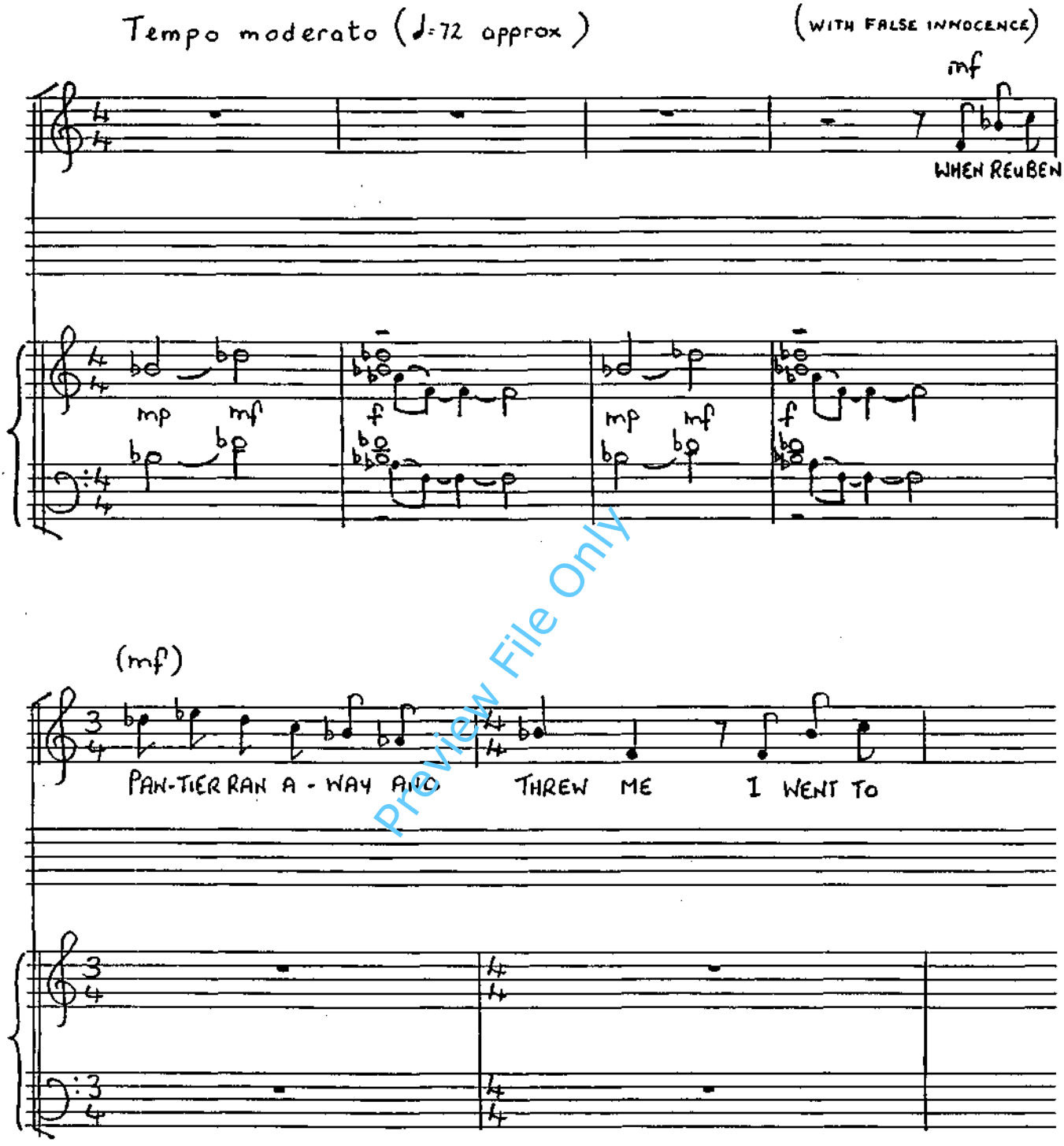
(Suggested prop. Black hat with net)

4. Dora Williams



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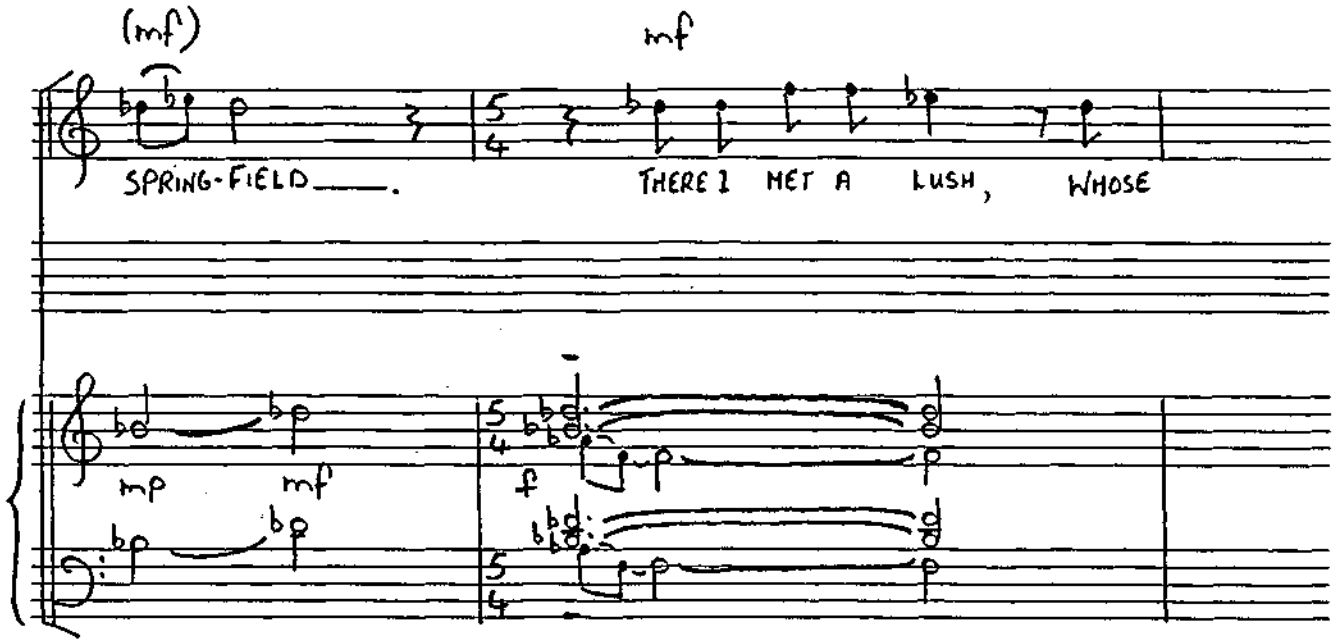

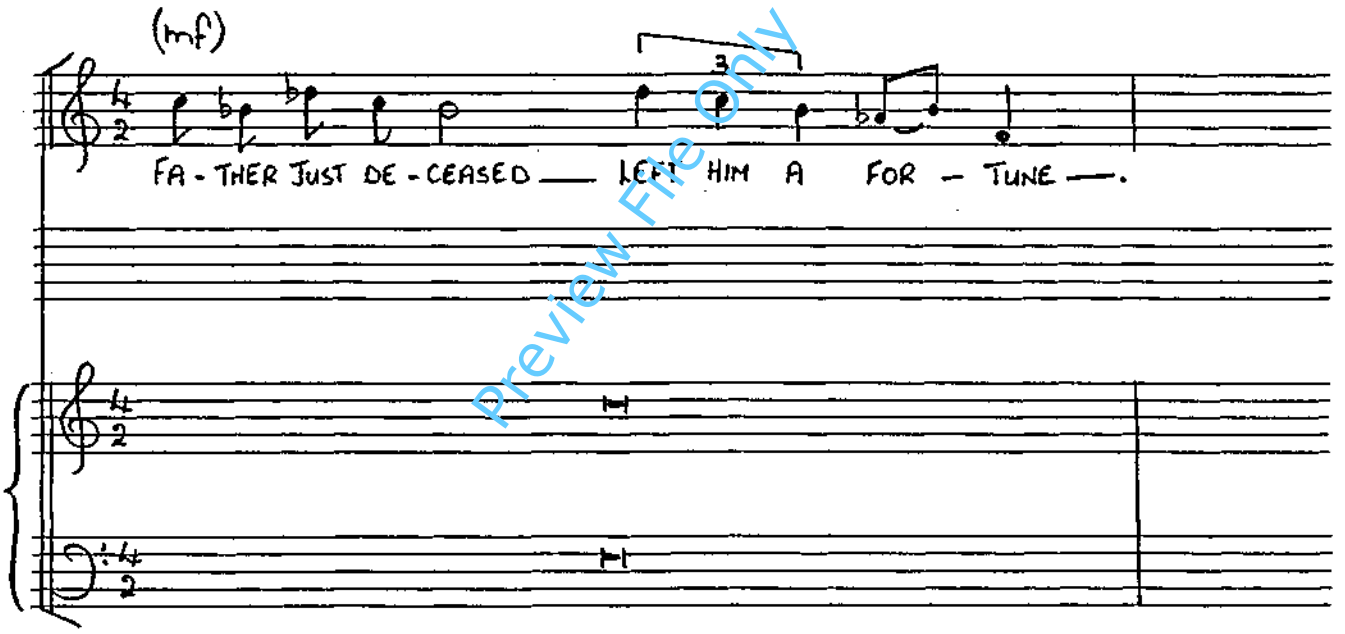

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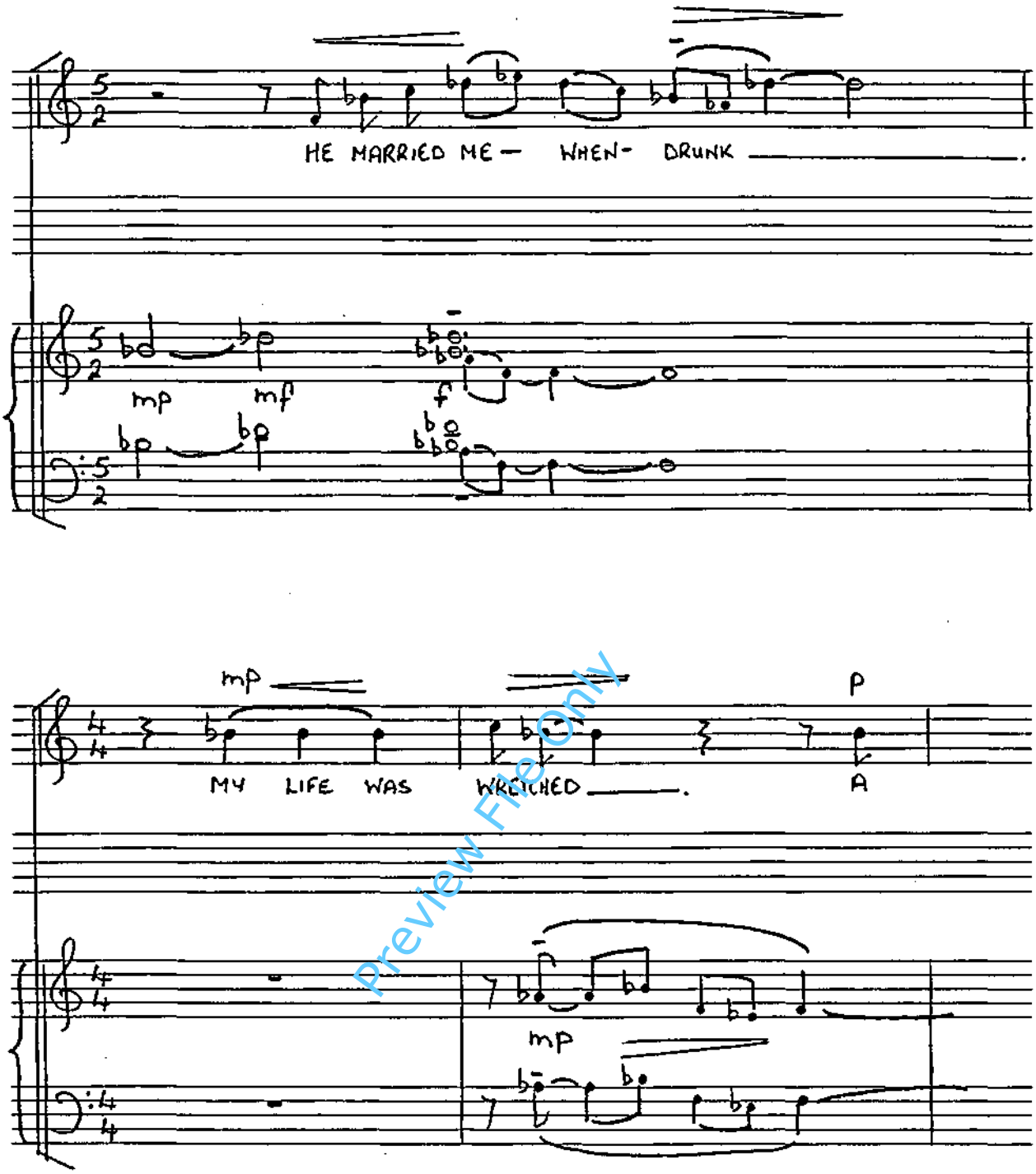

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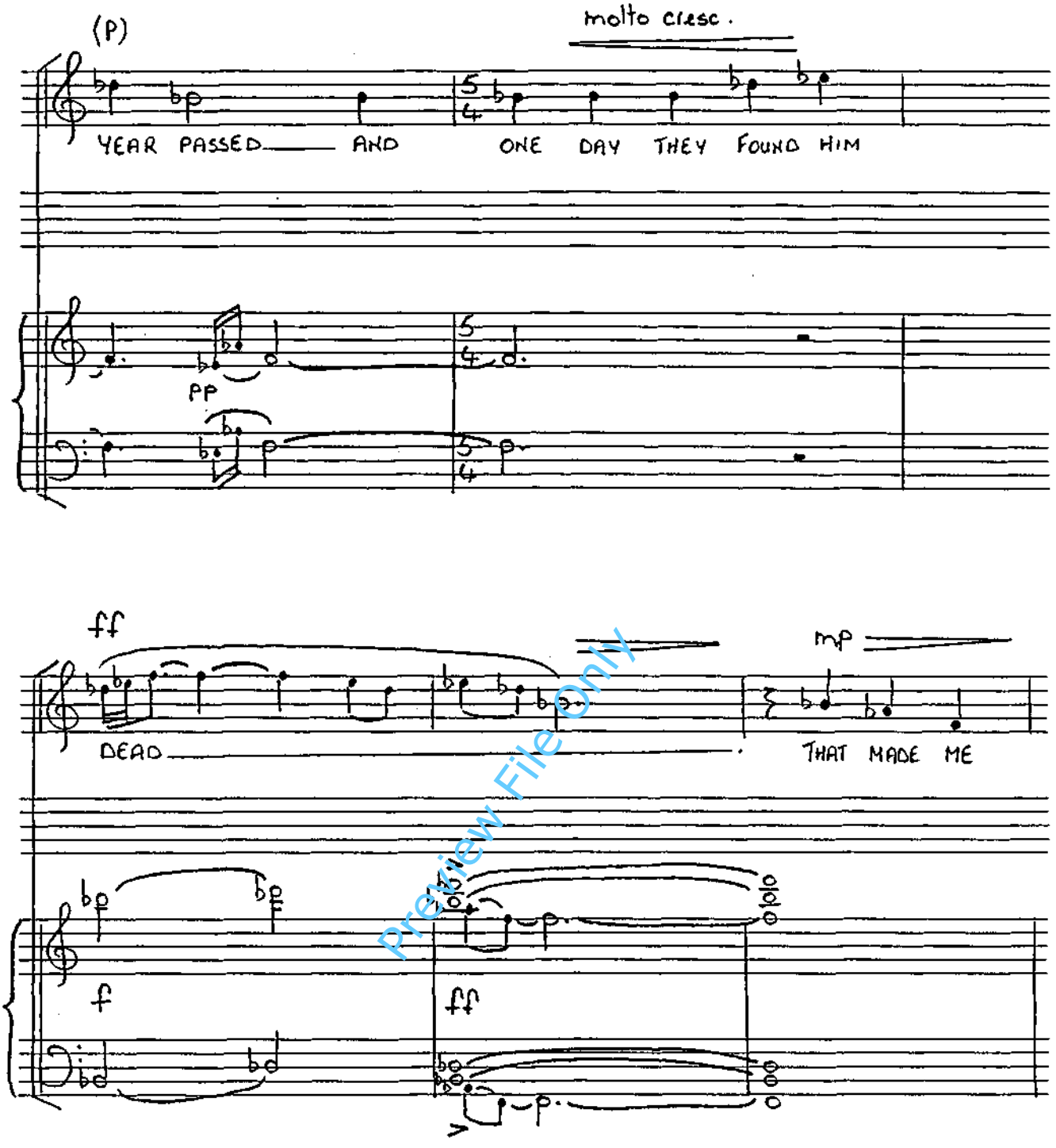

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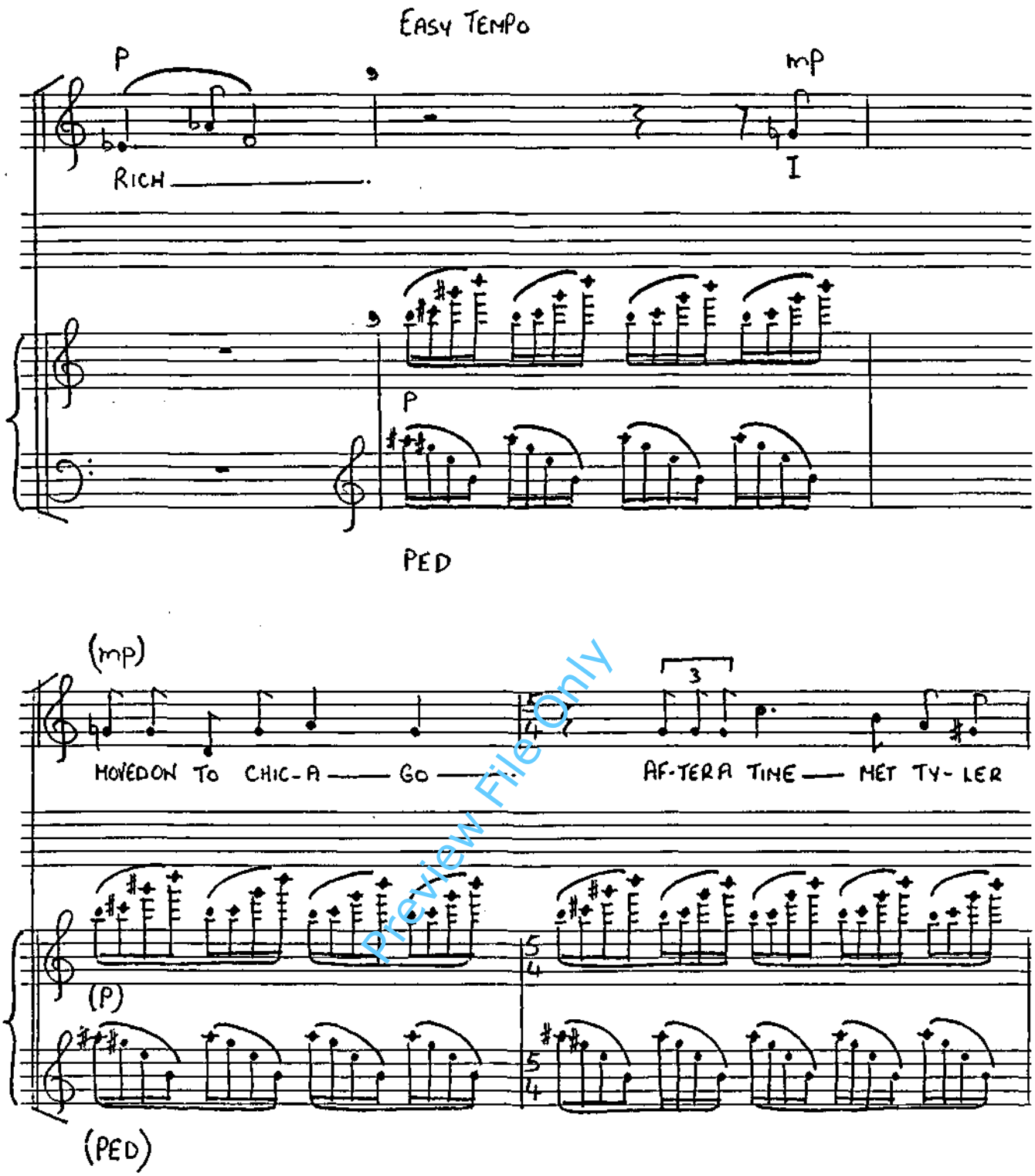

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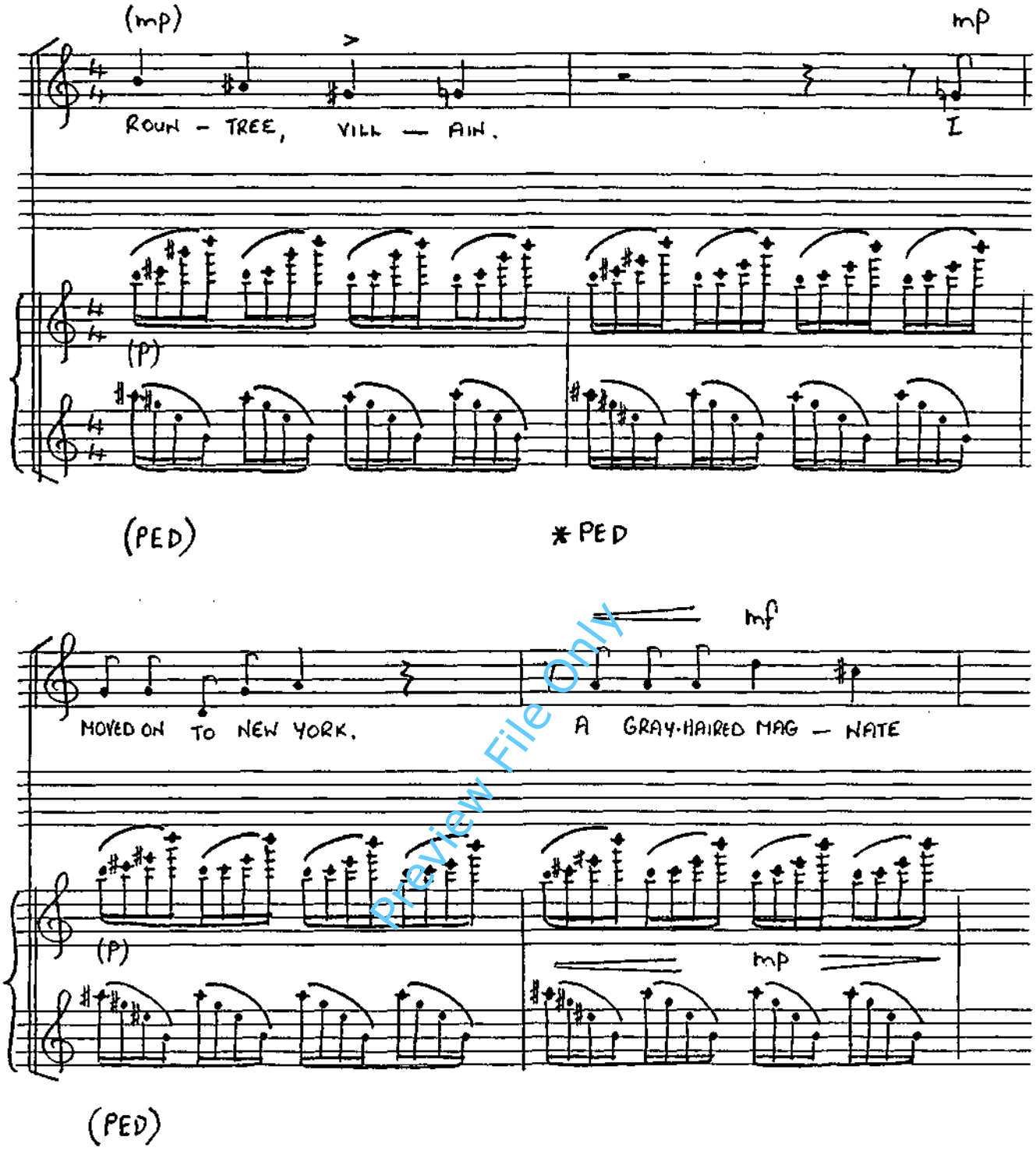

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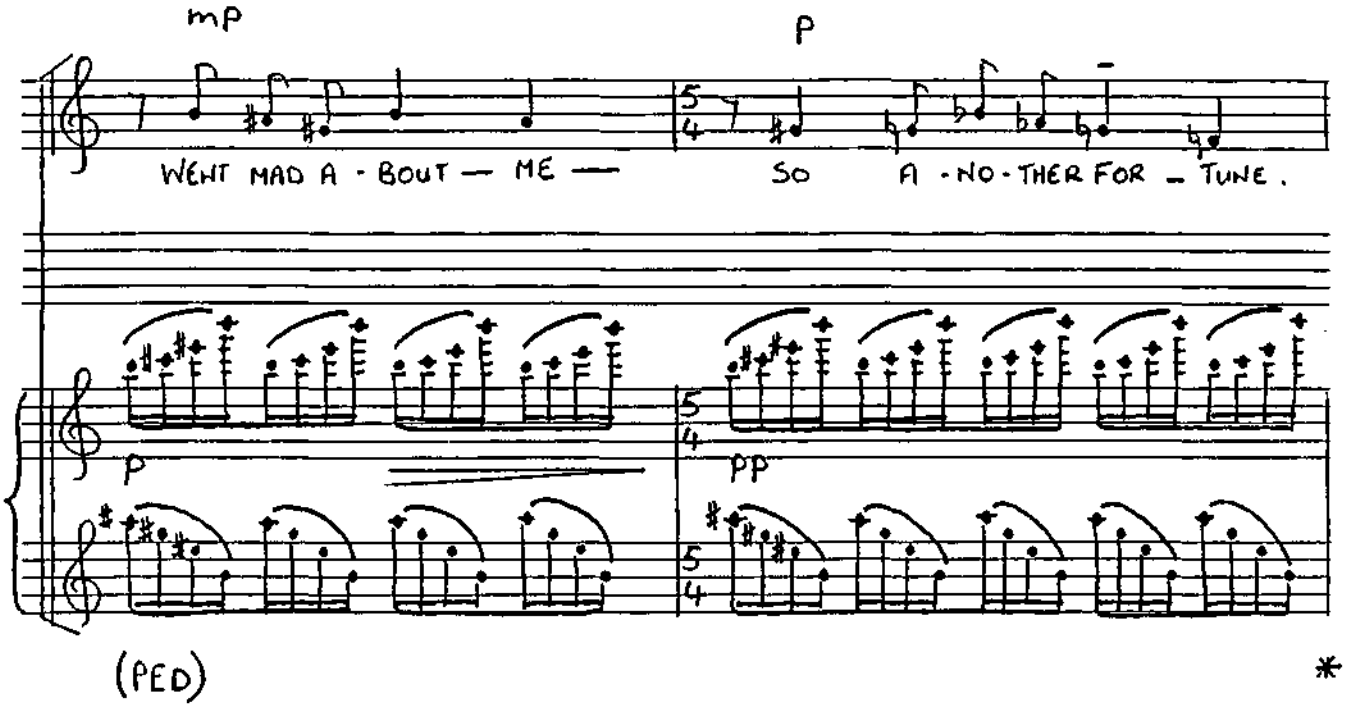

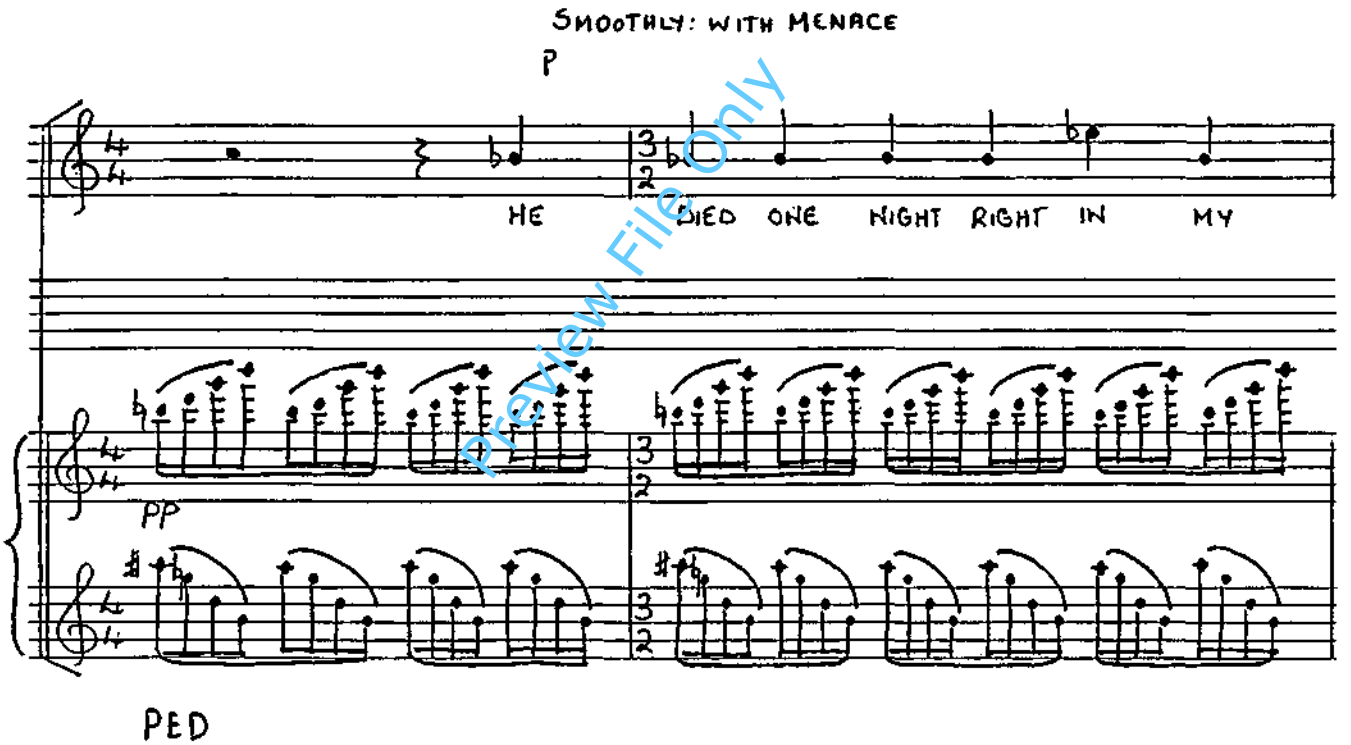

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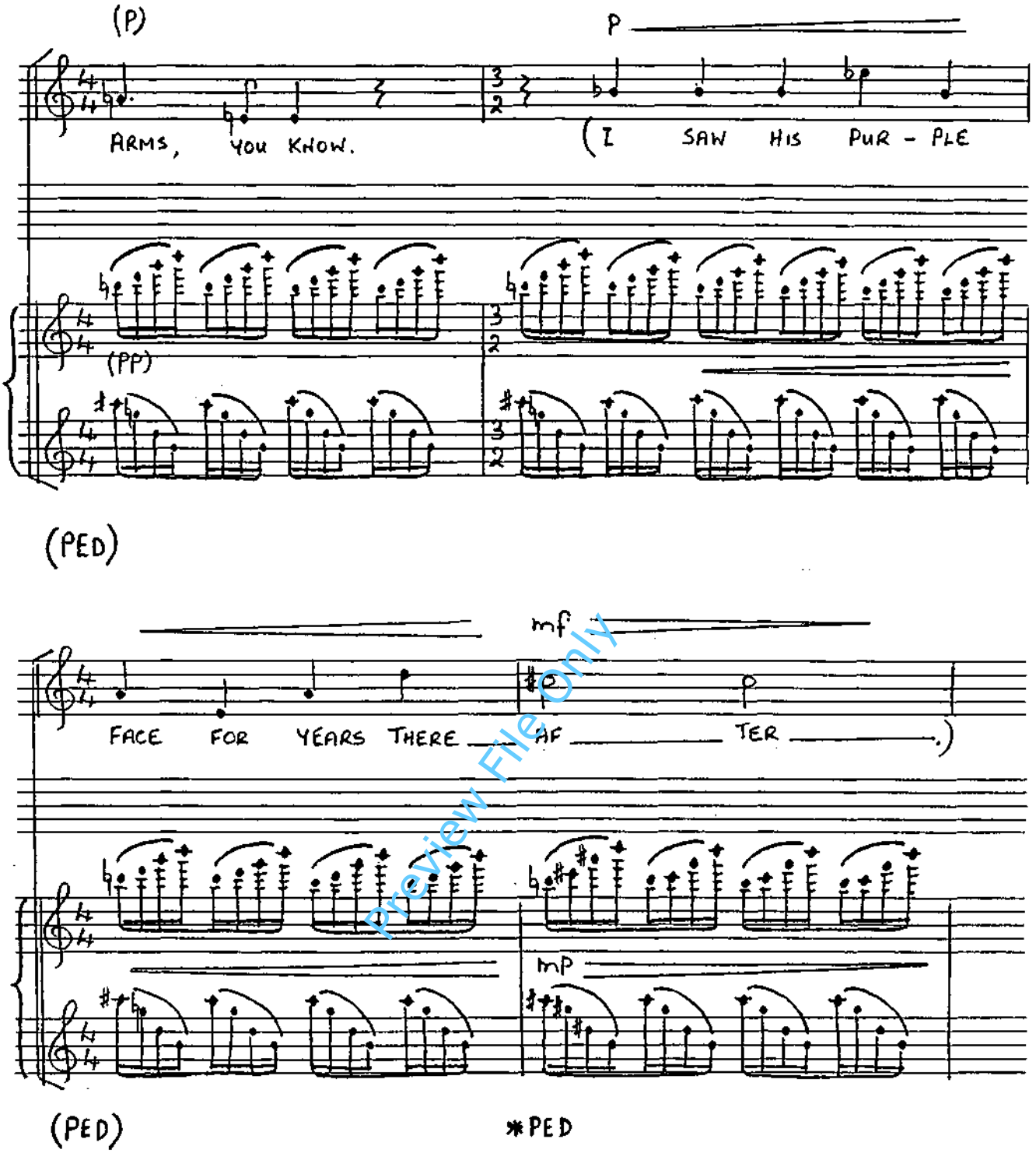

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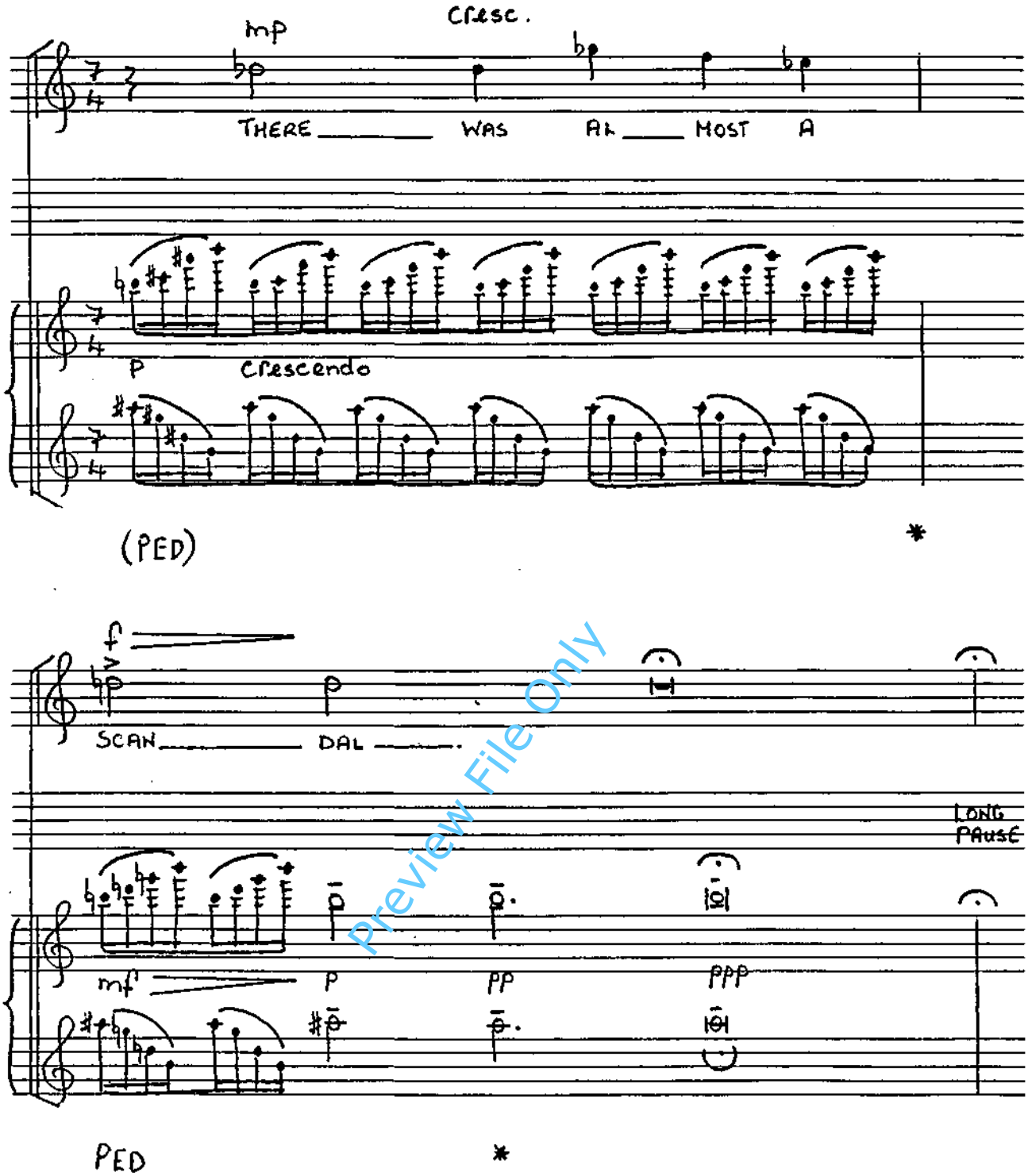

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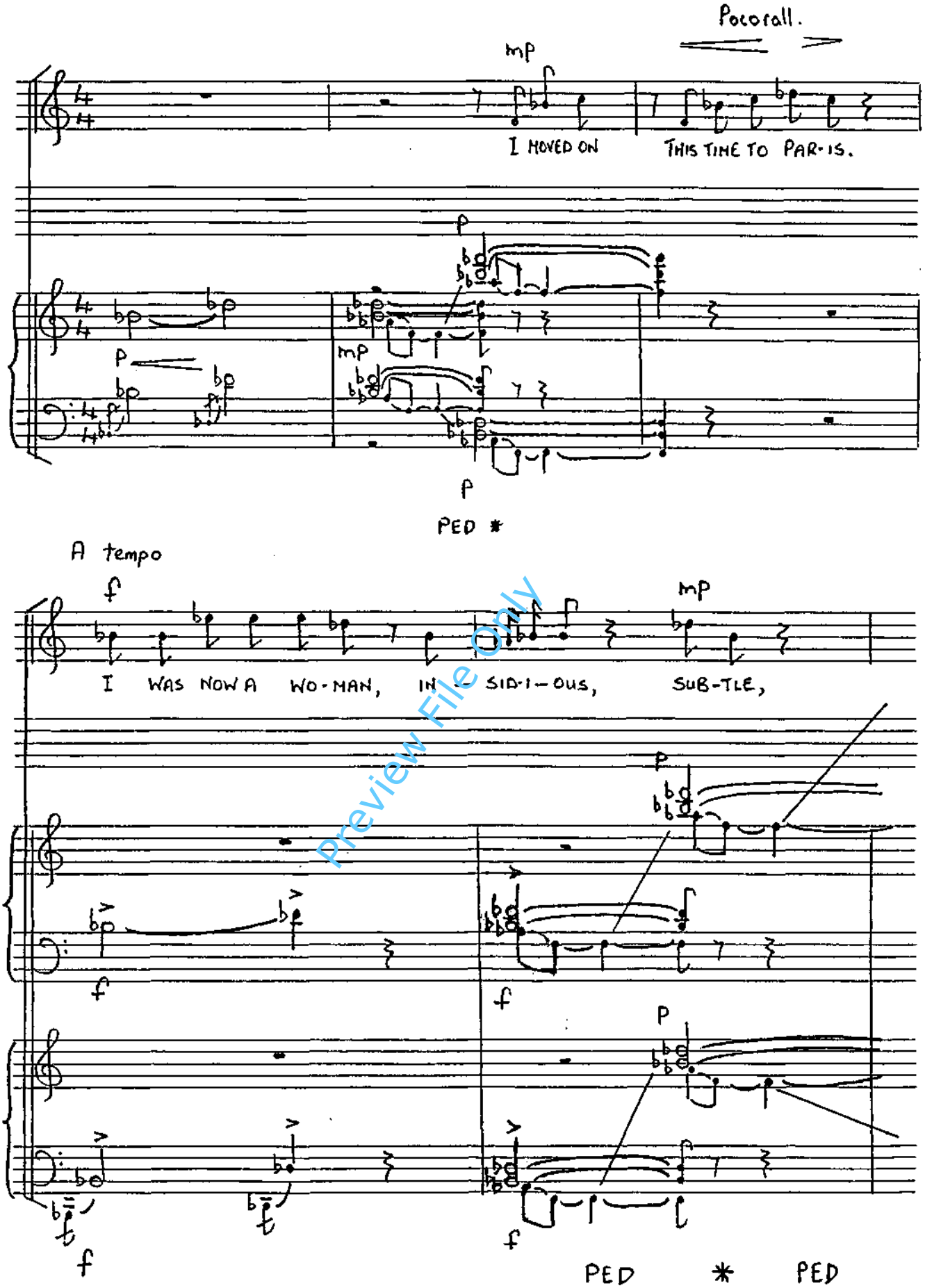

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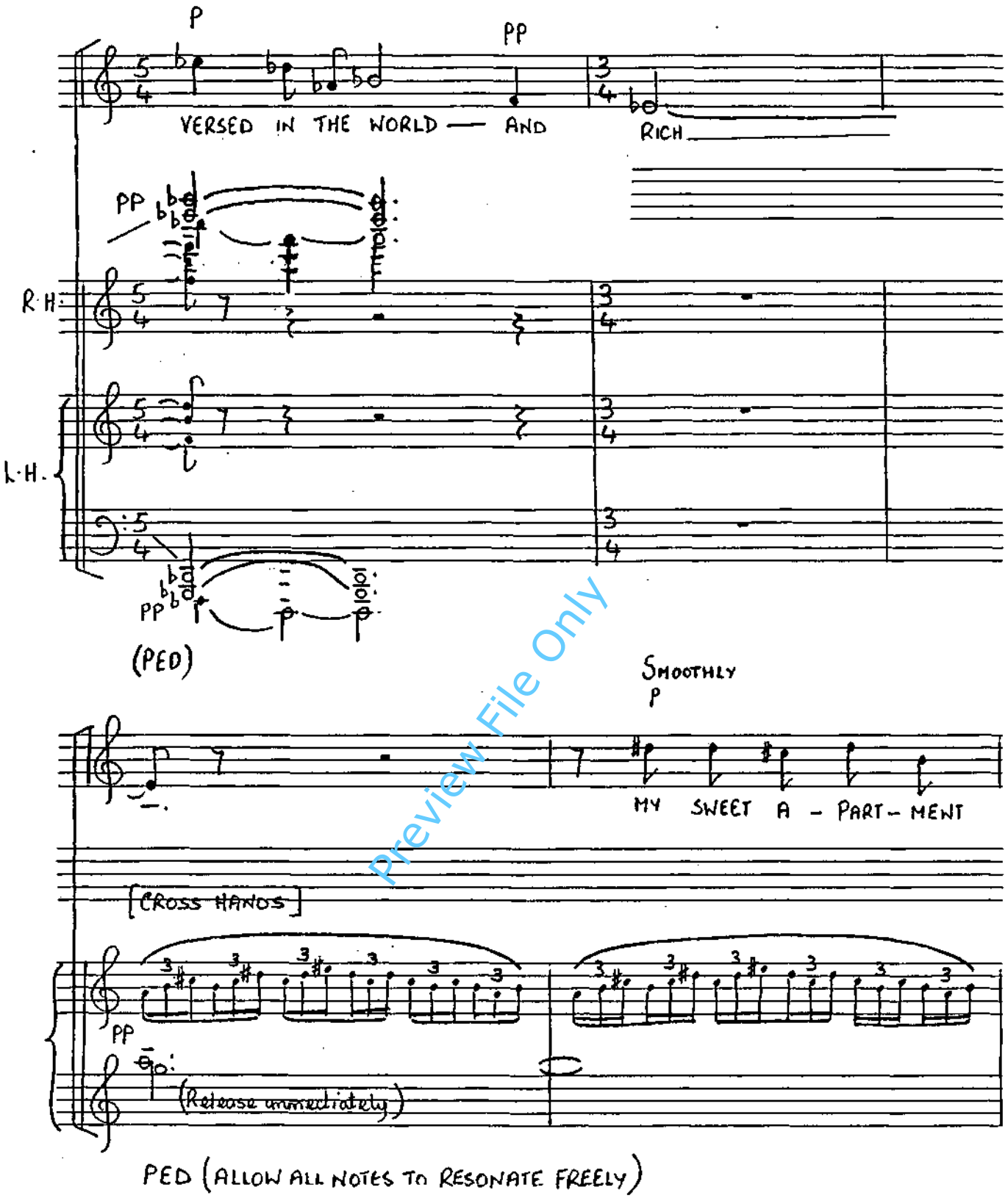

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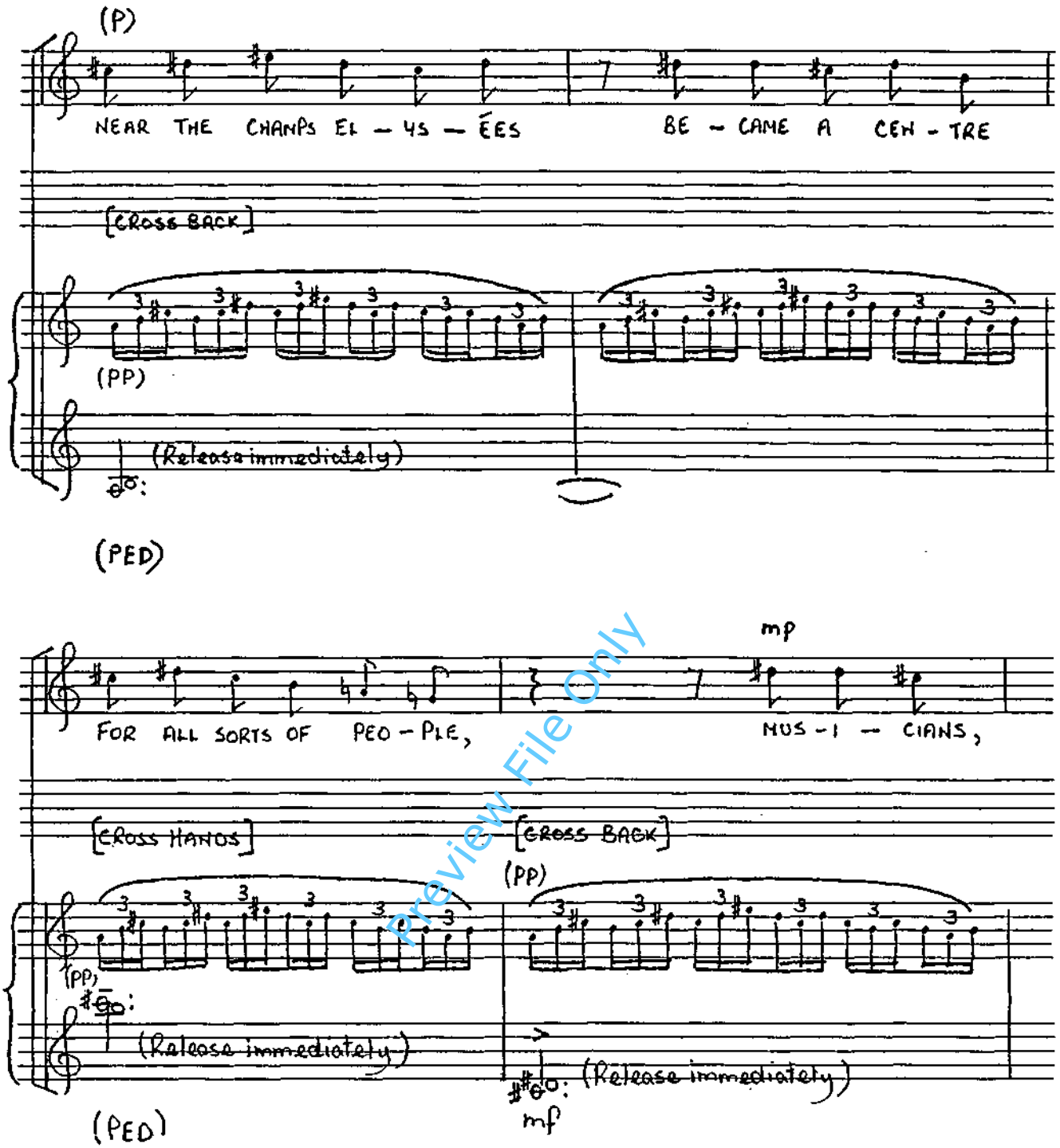

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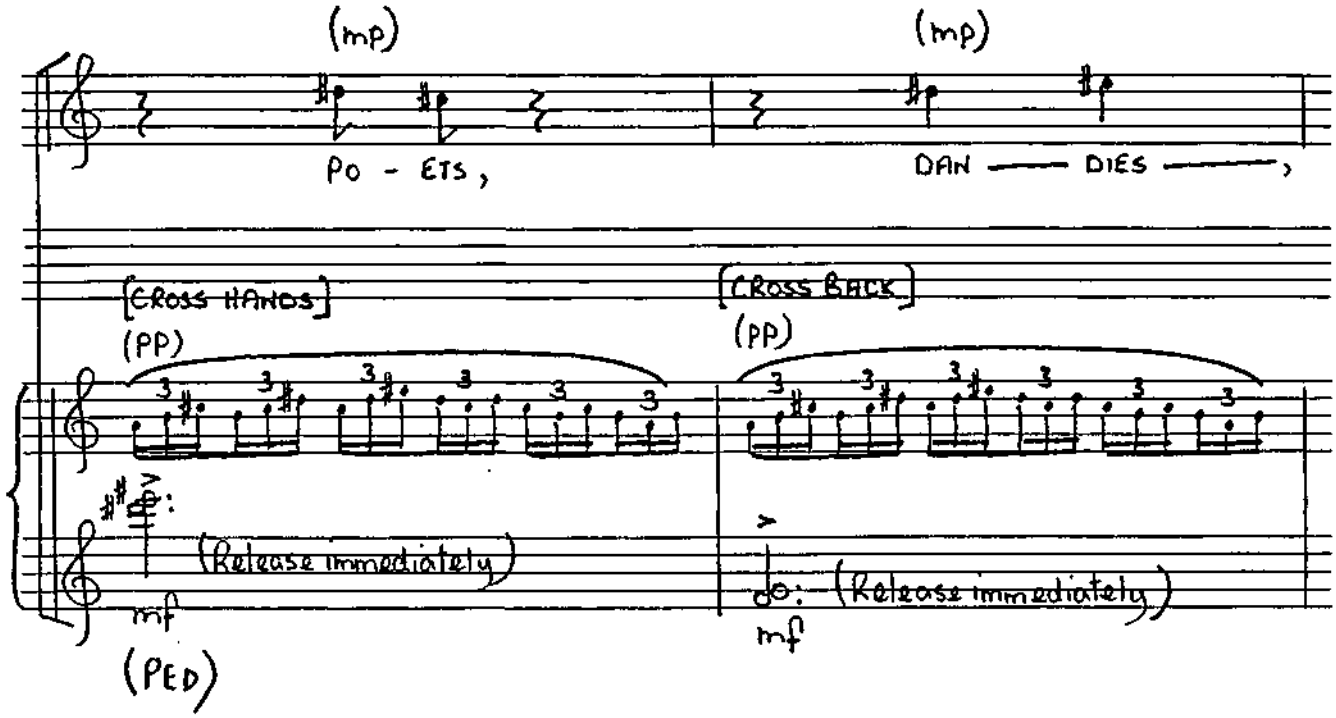

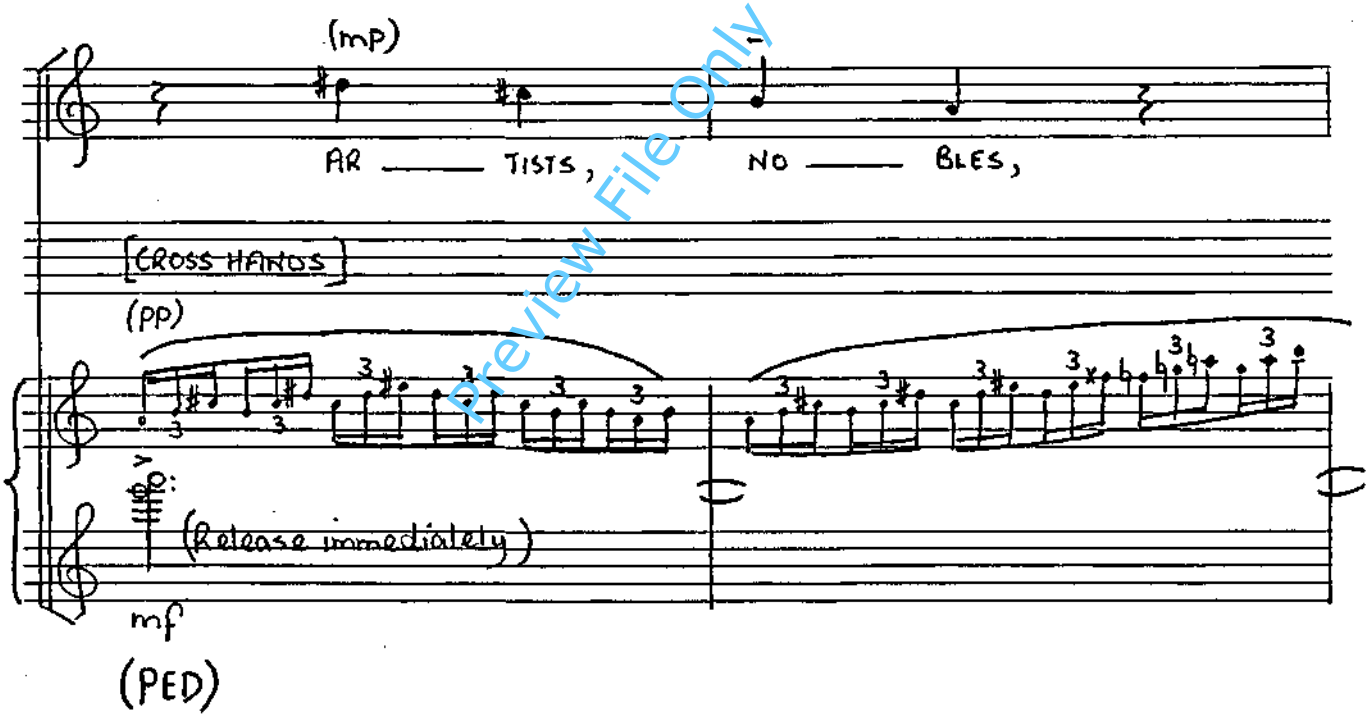

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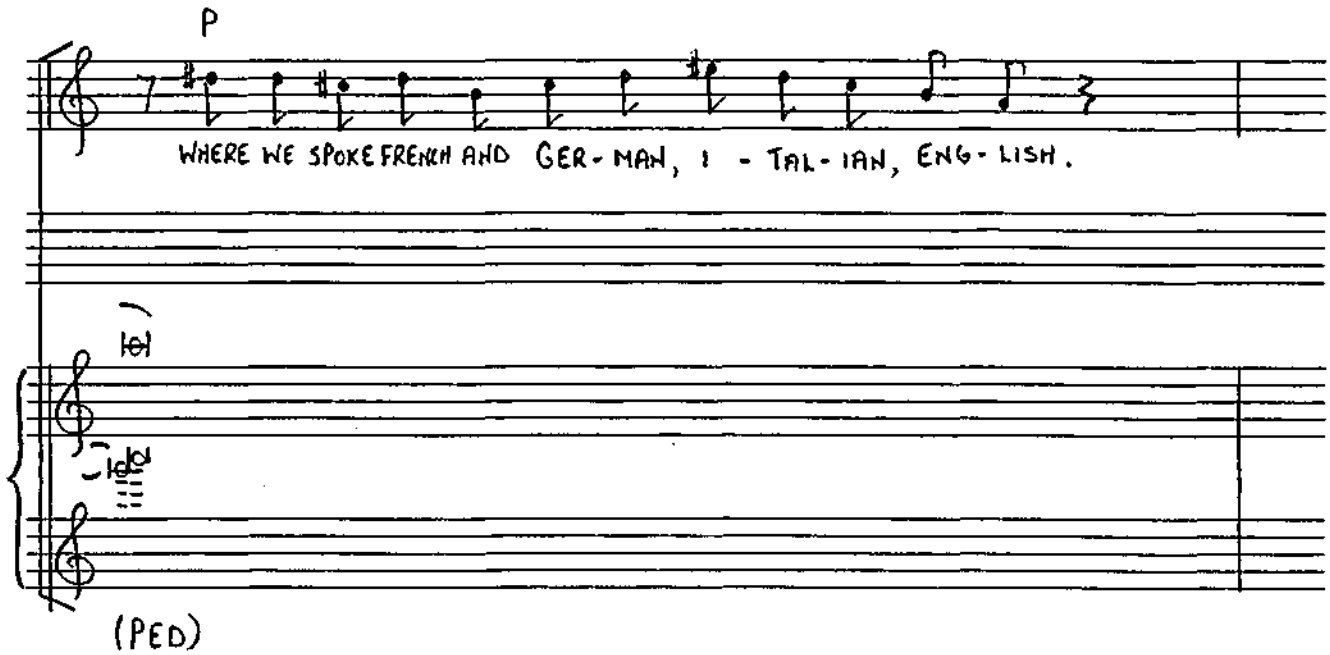

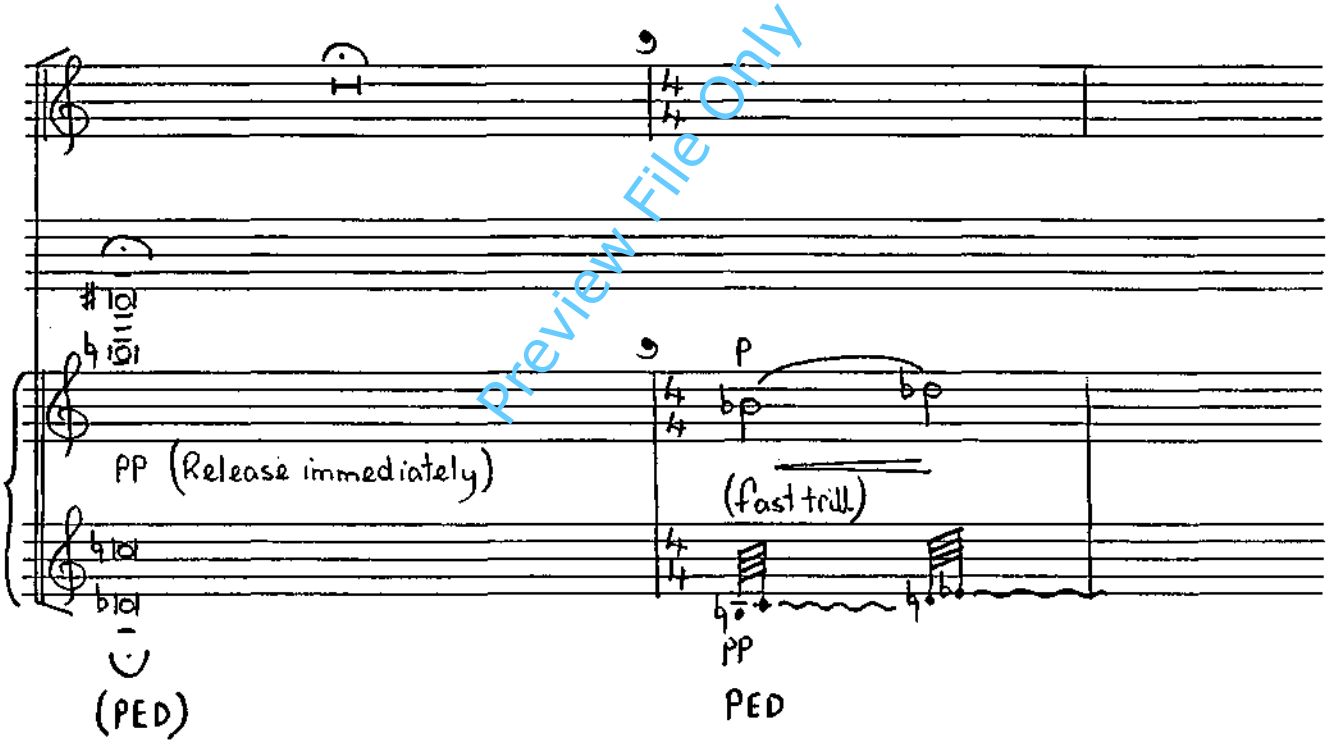

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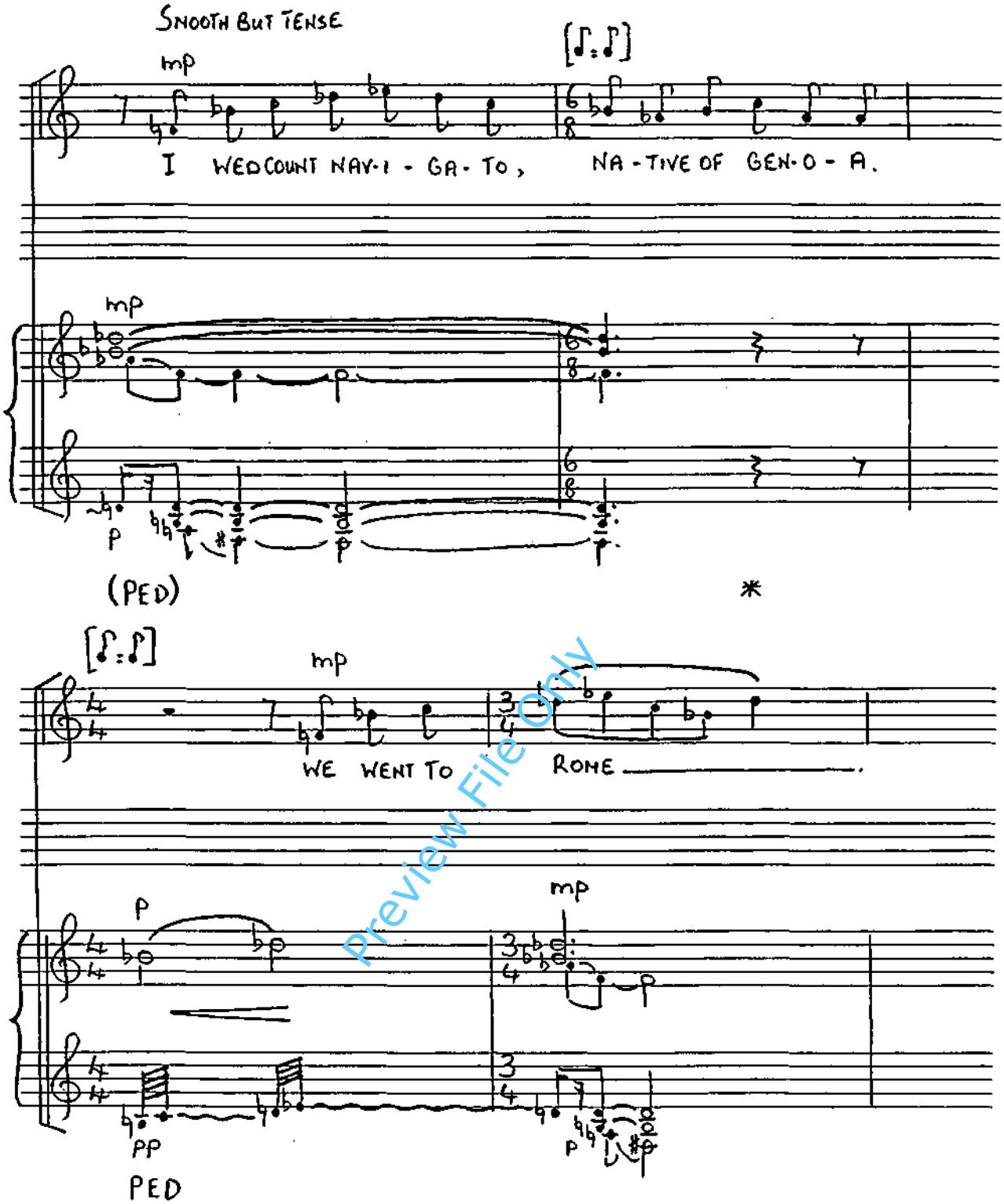

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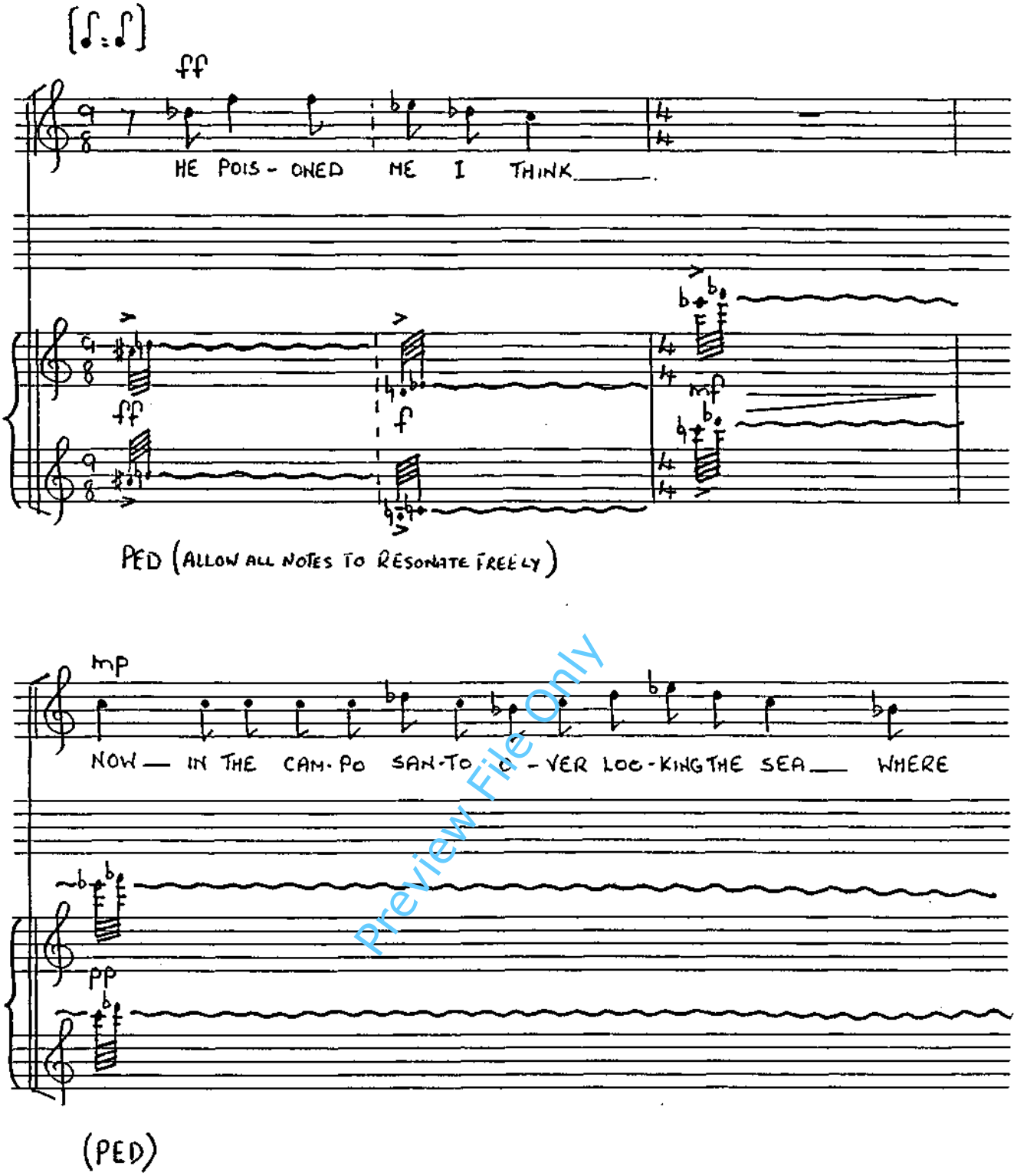

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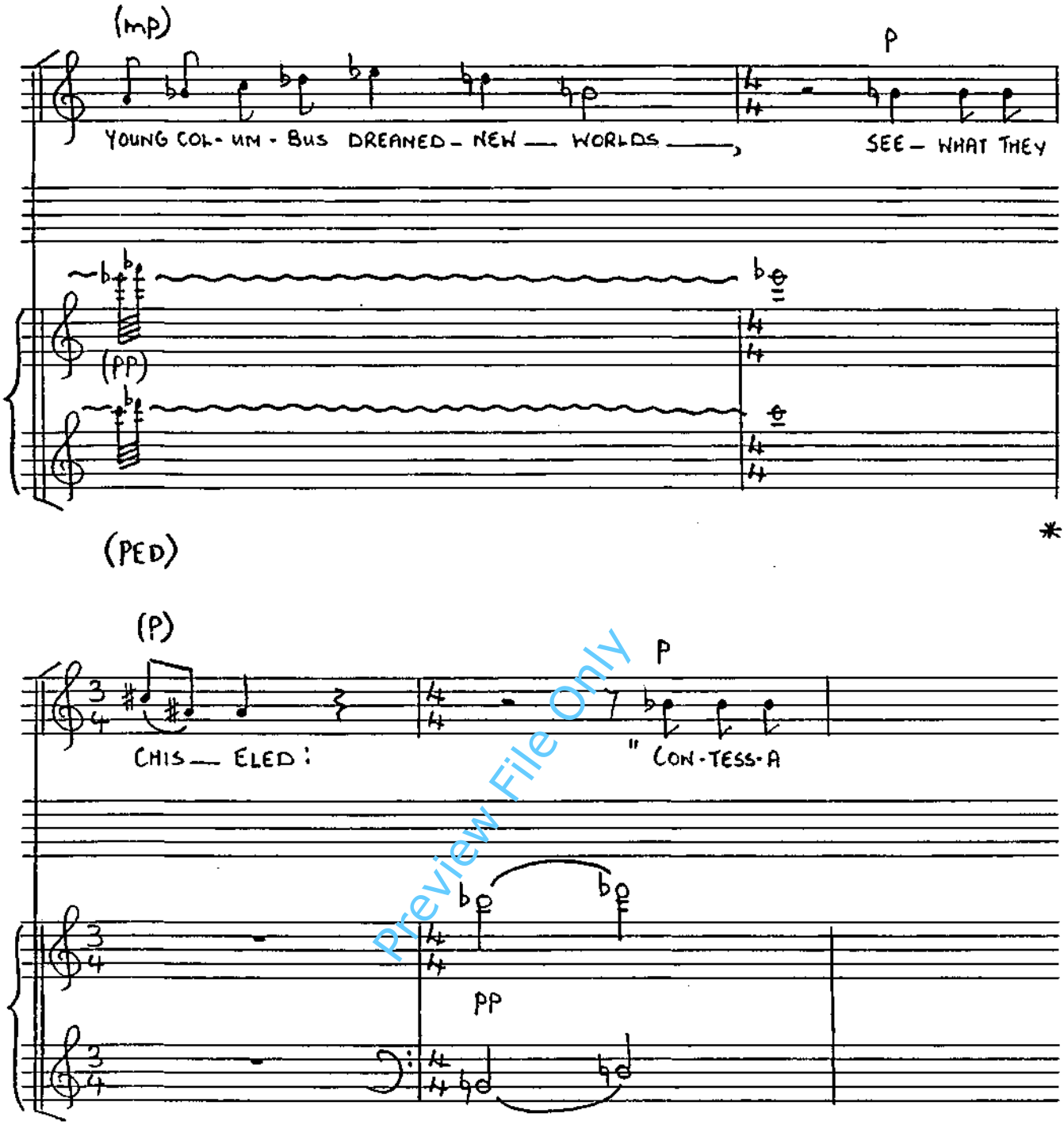

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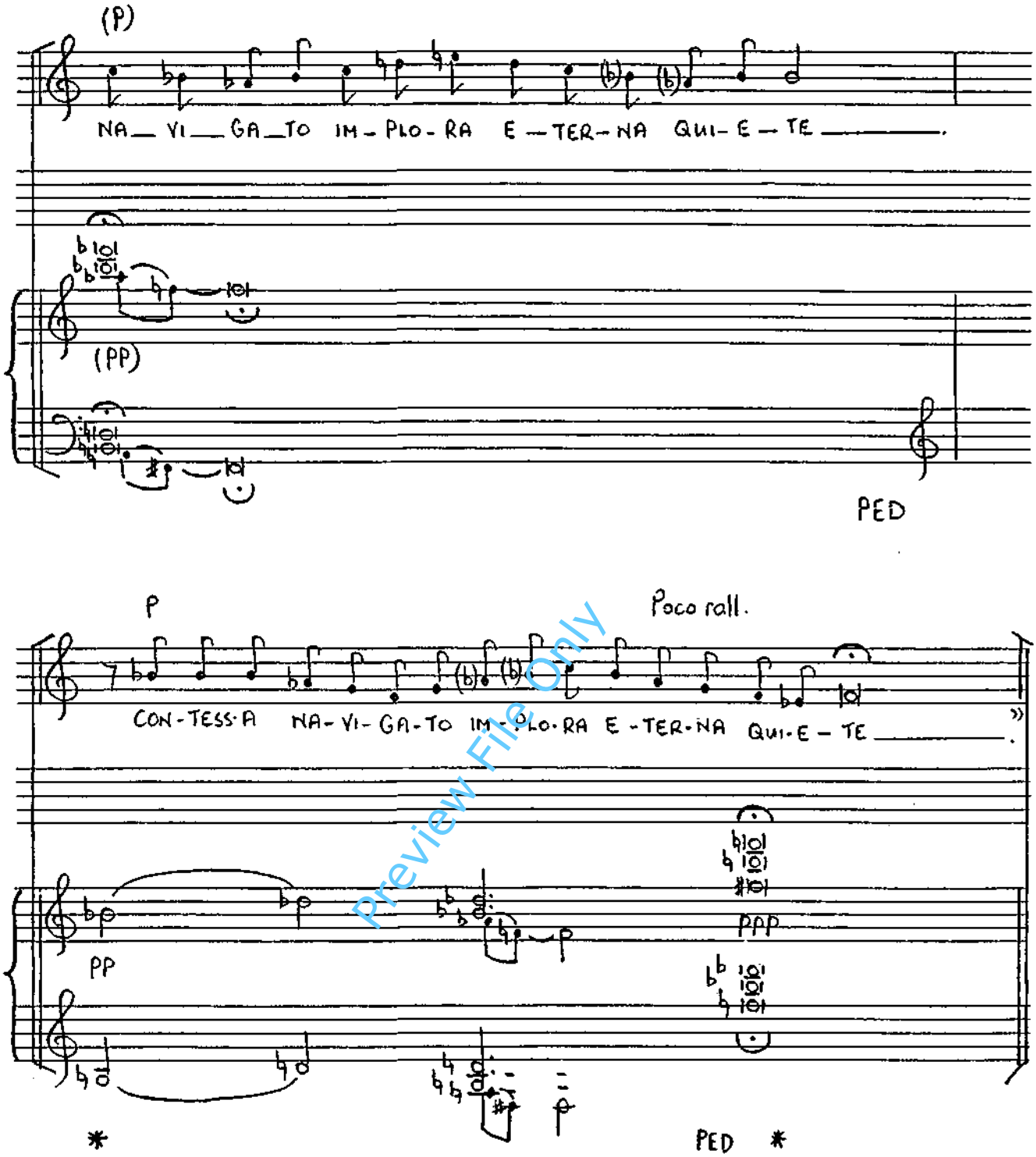

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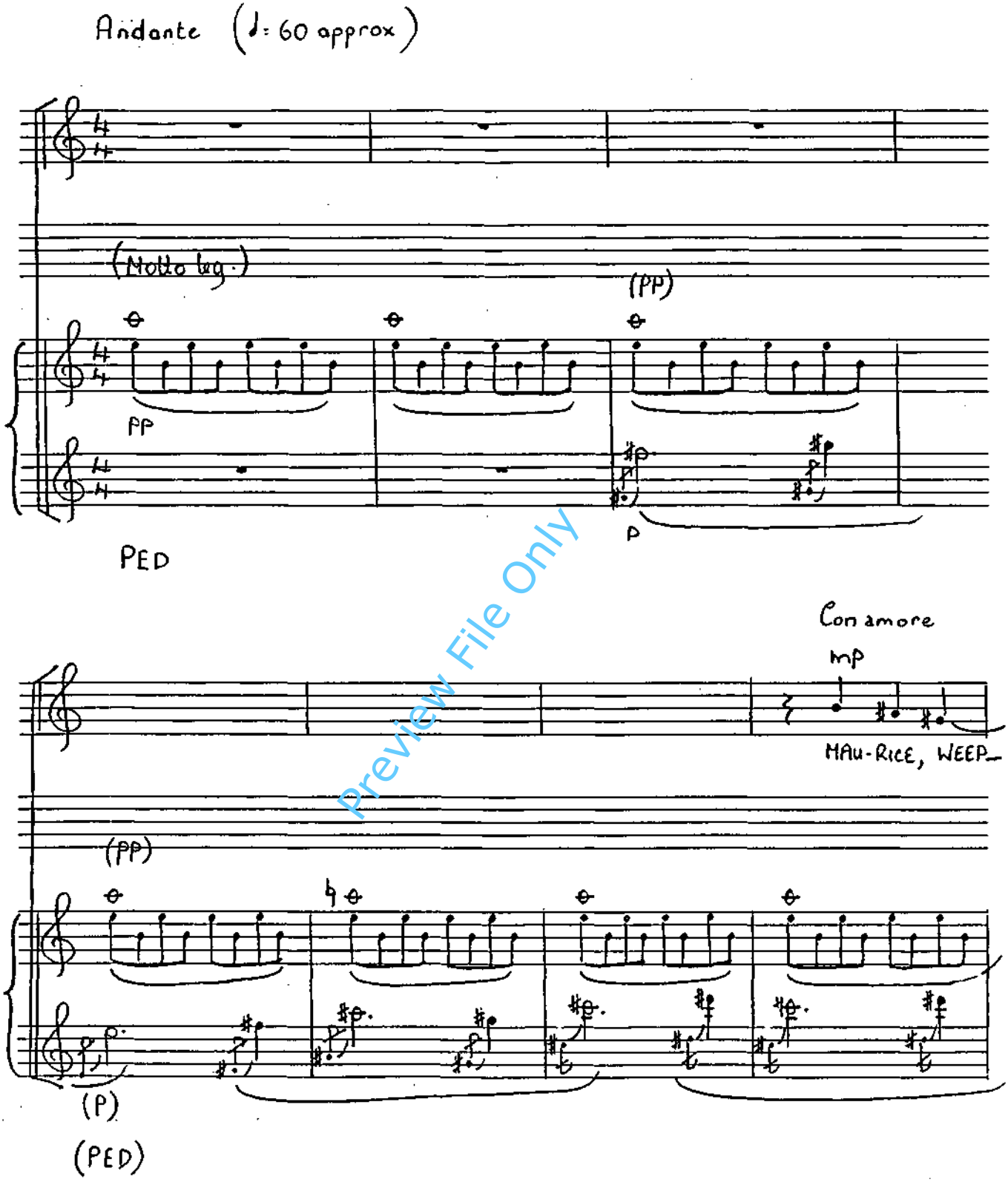
(No props.)

5. Sarah Brown



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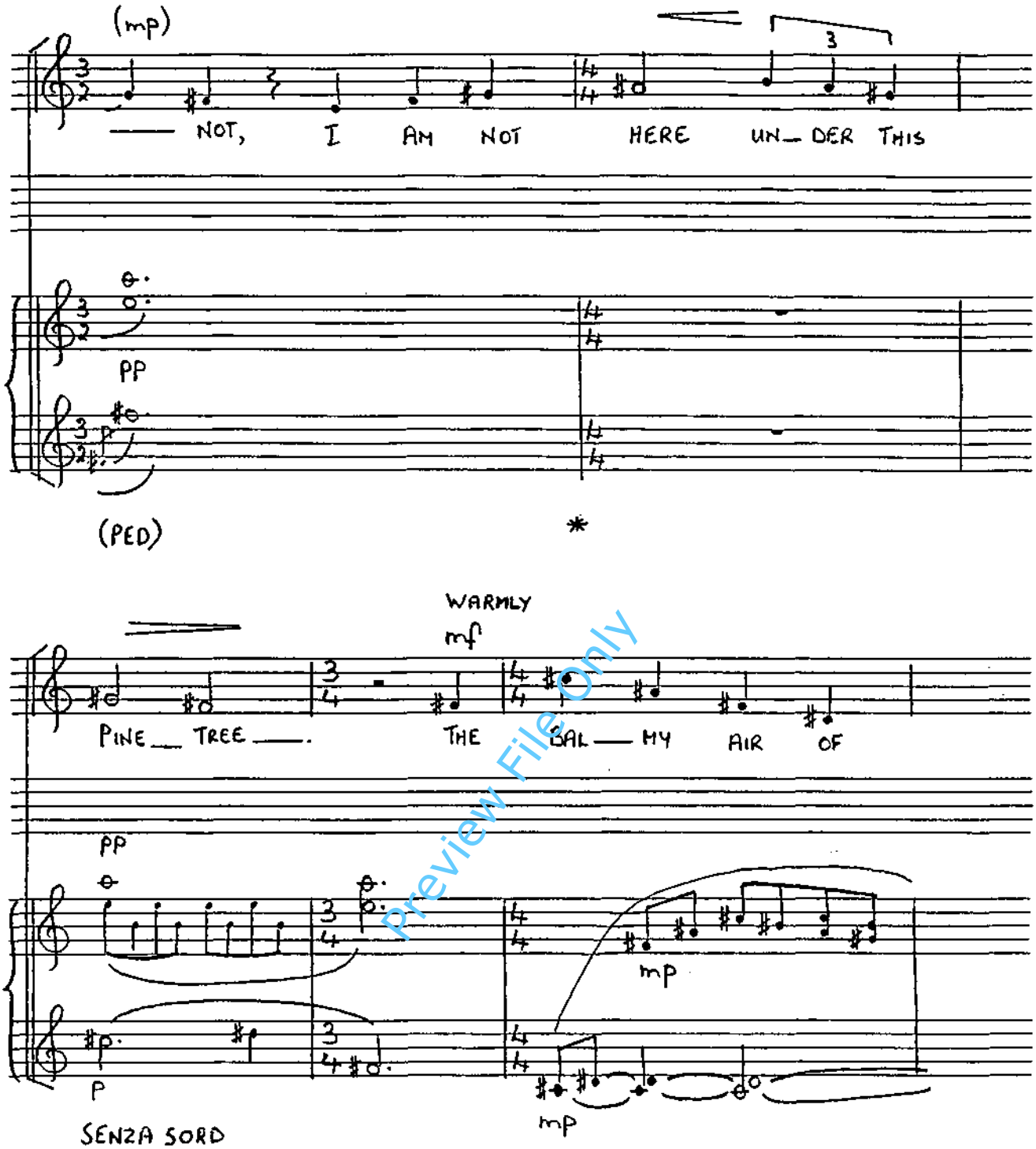

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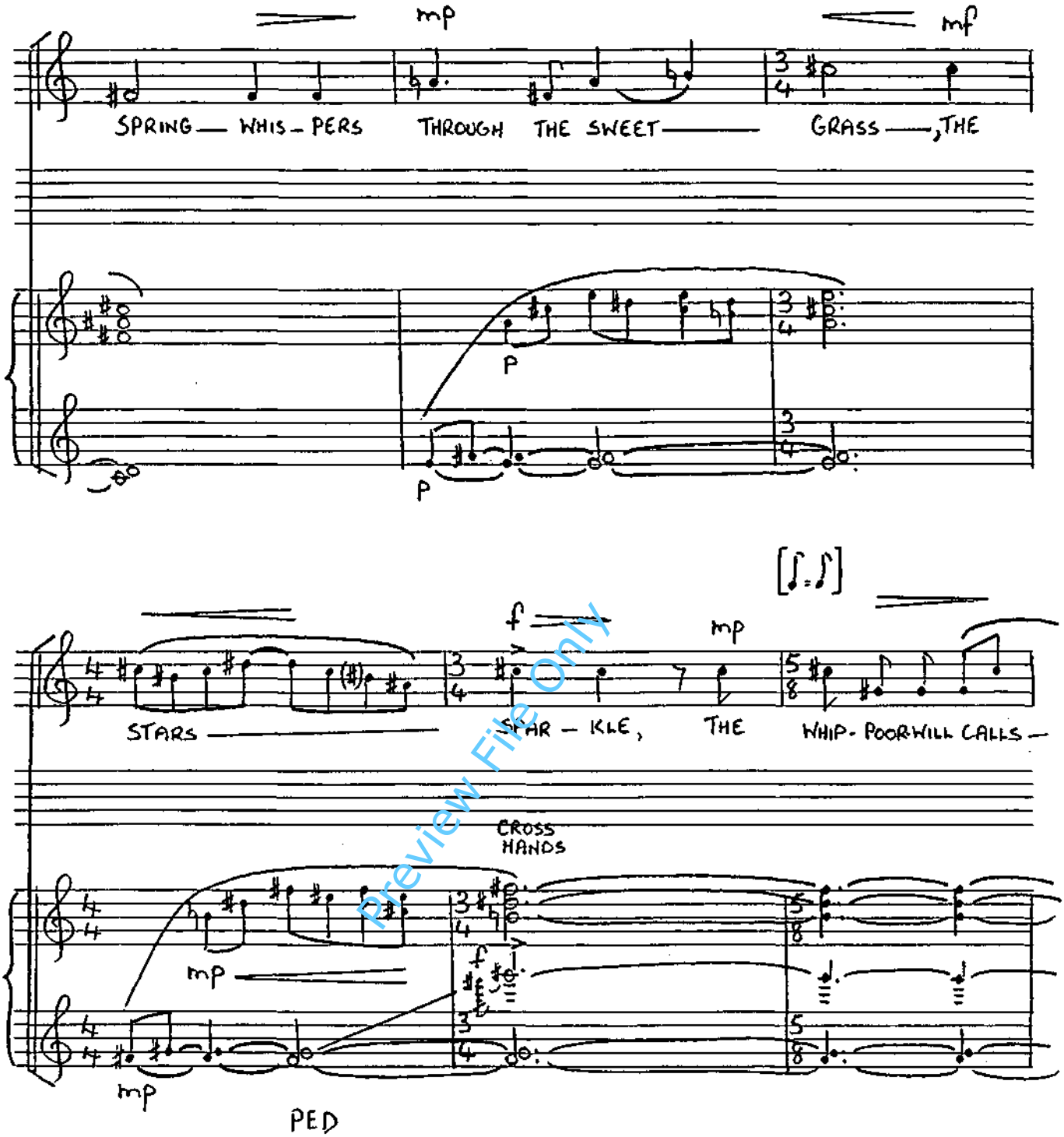

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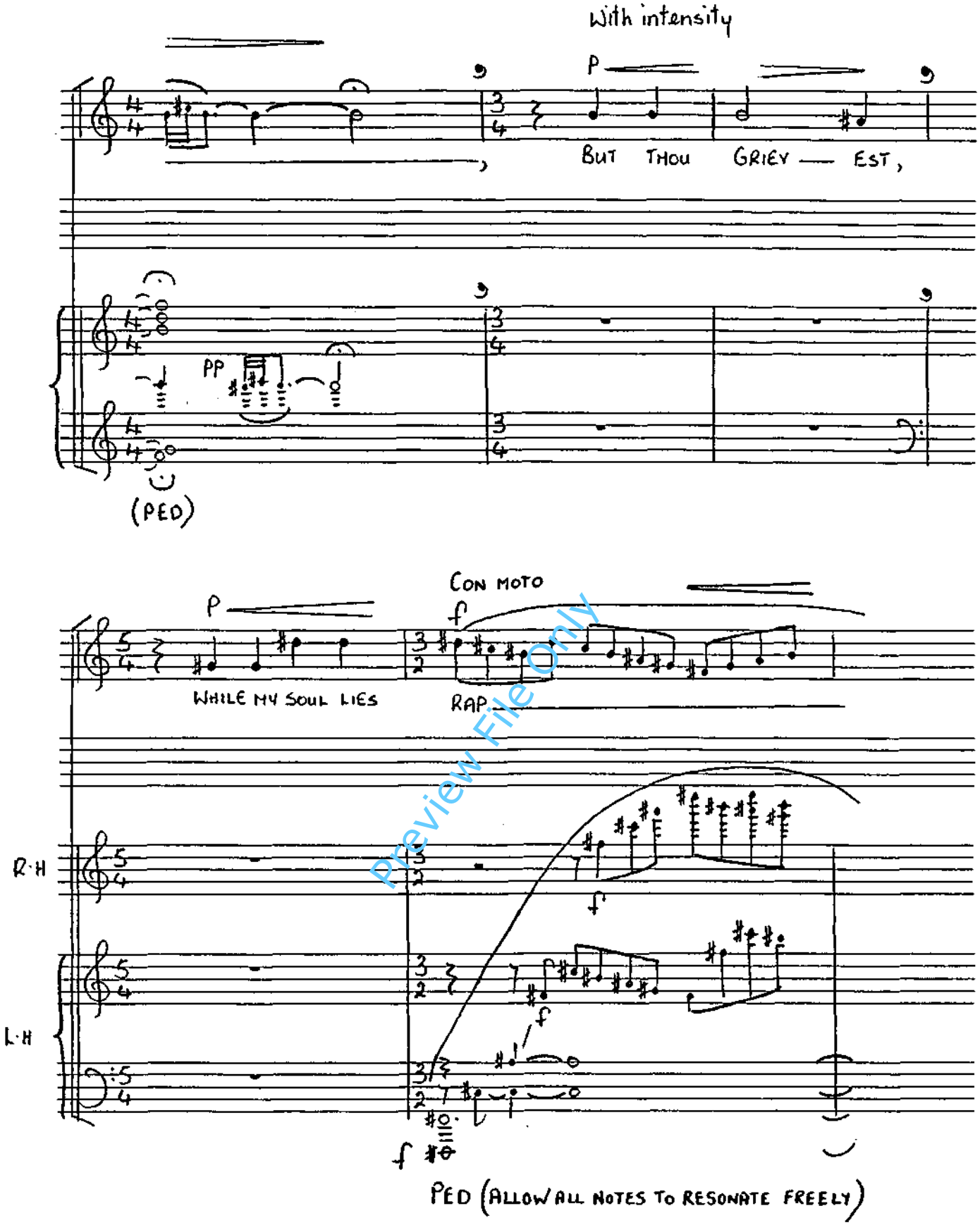

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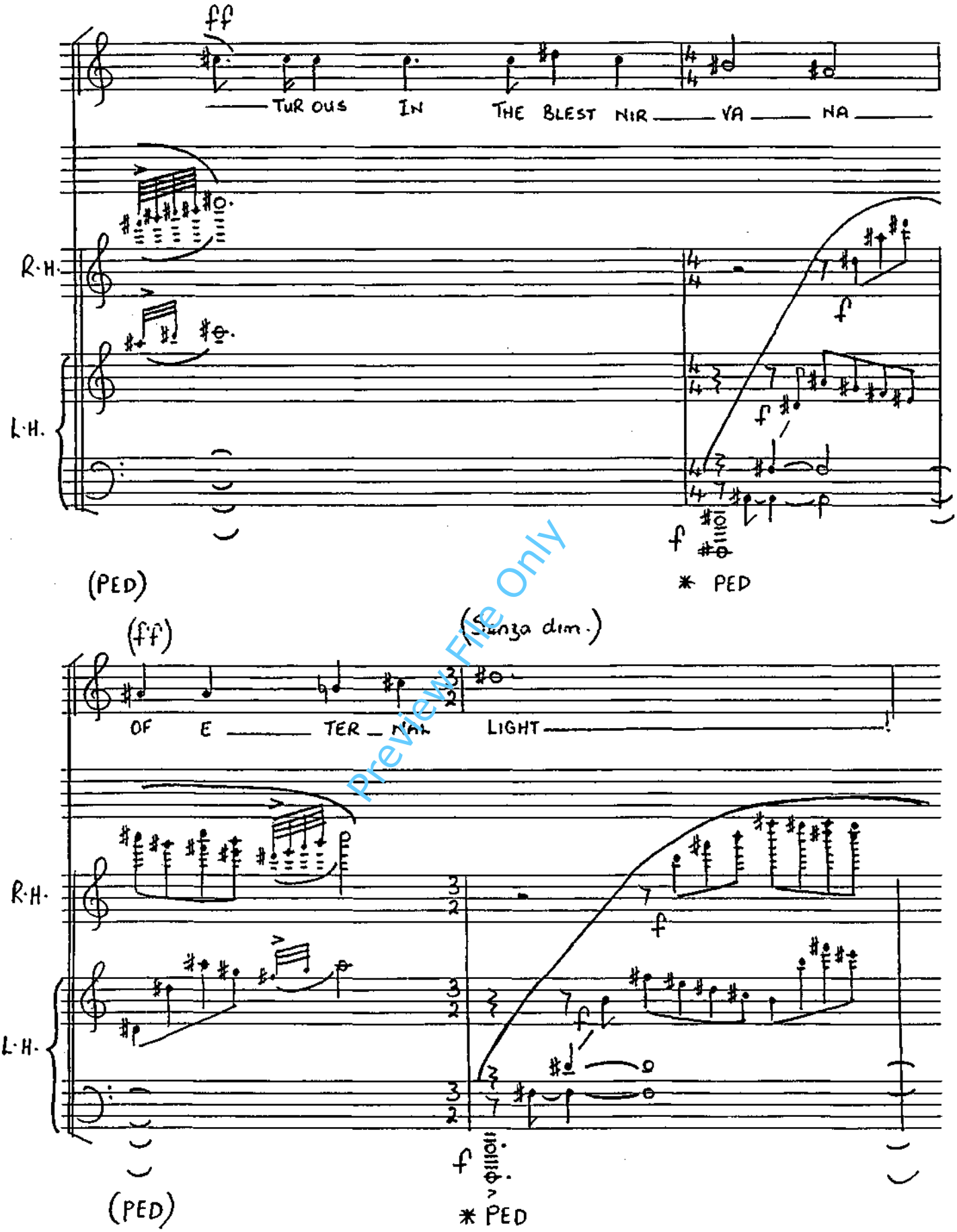

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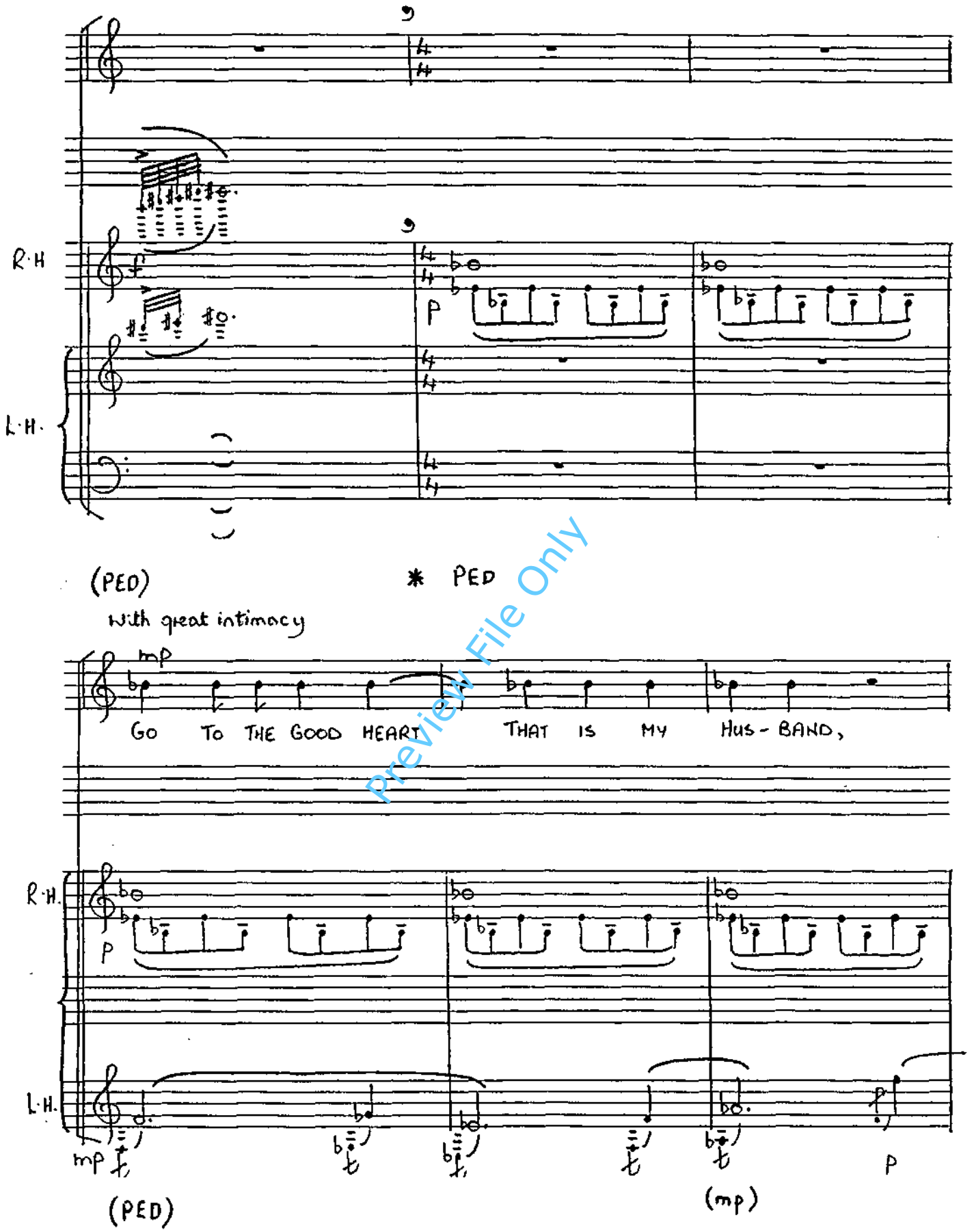

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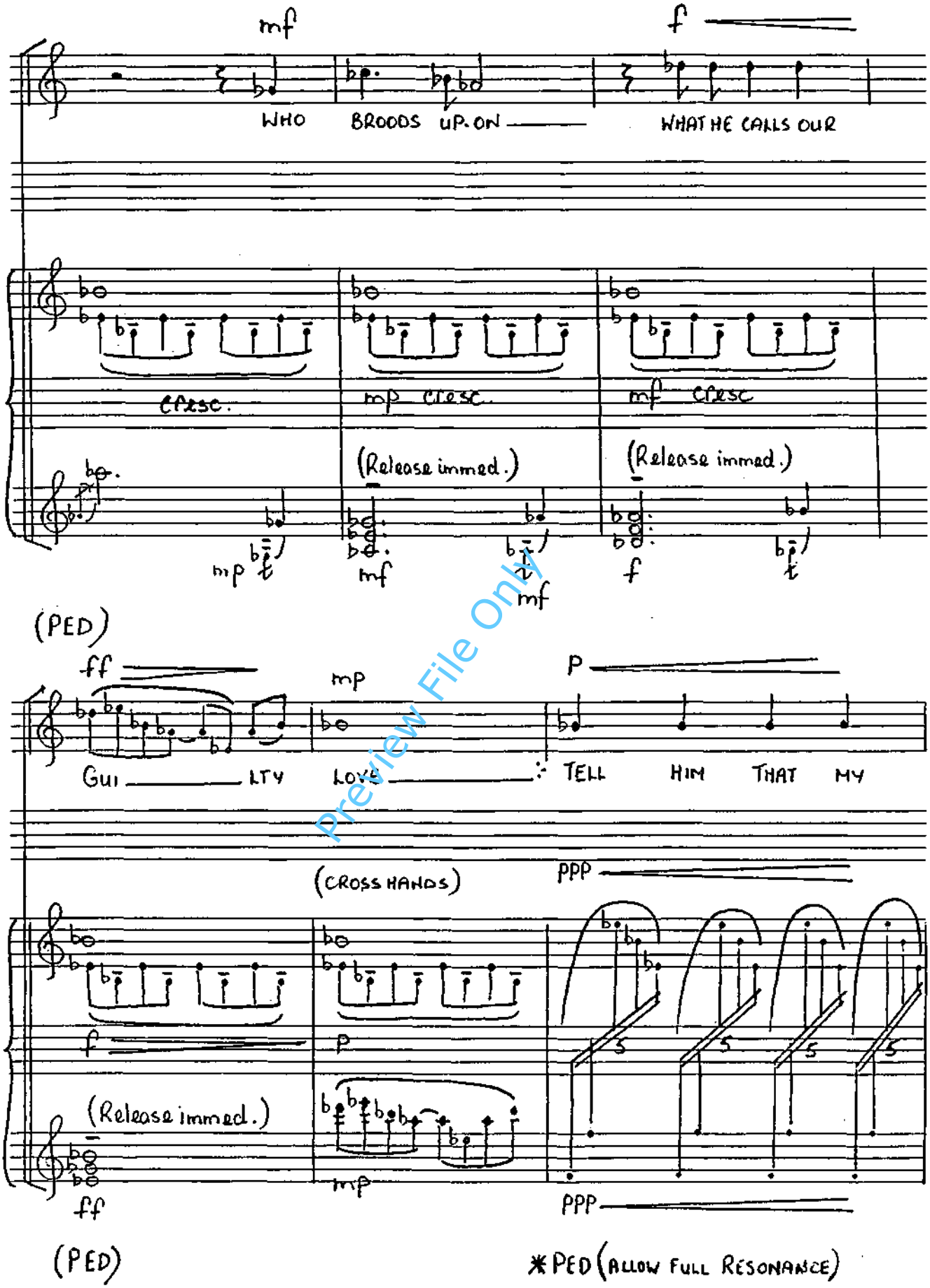

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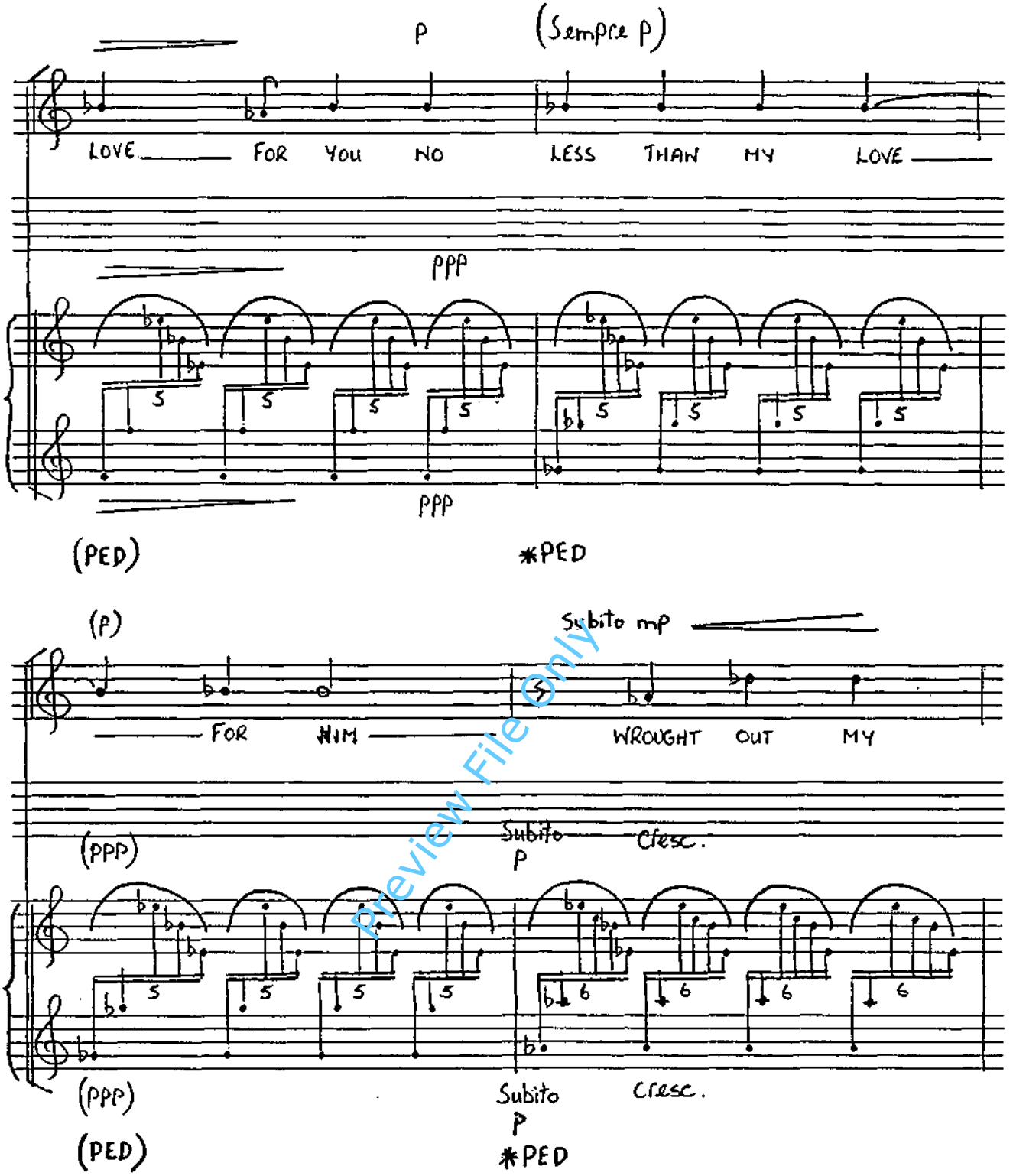

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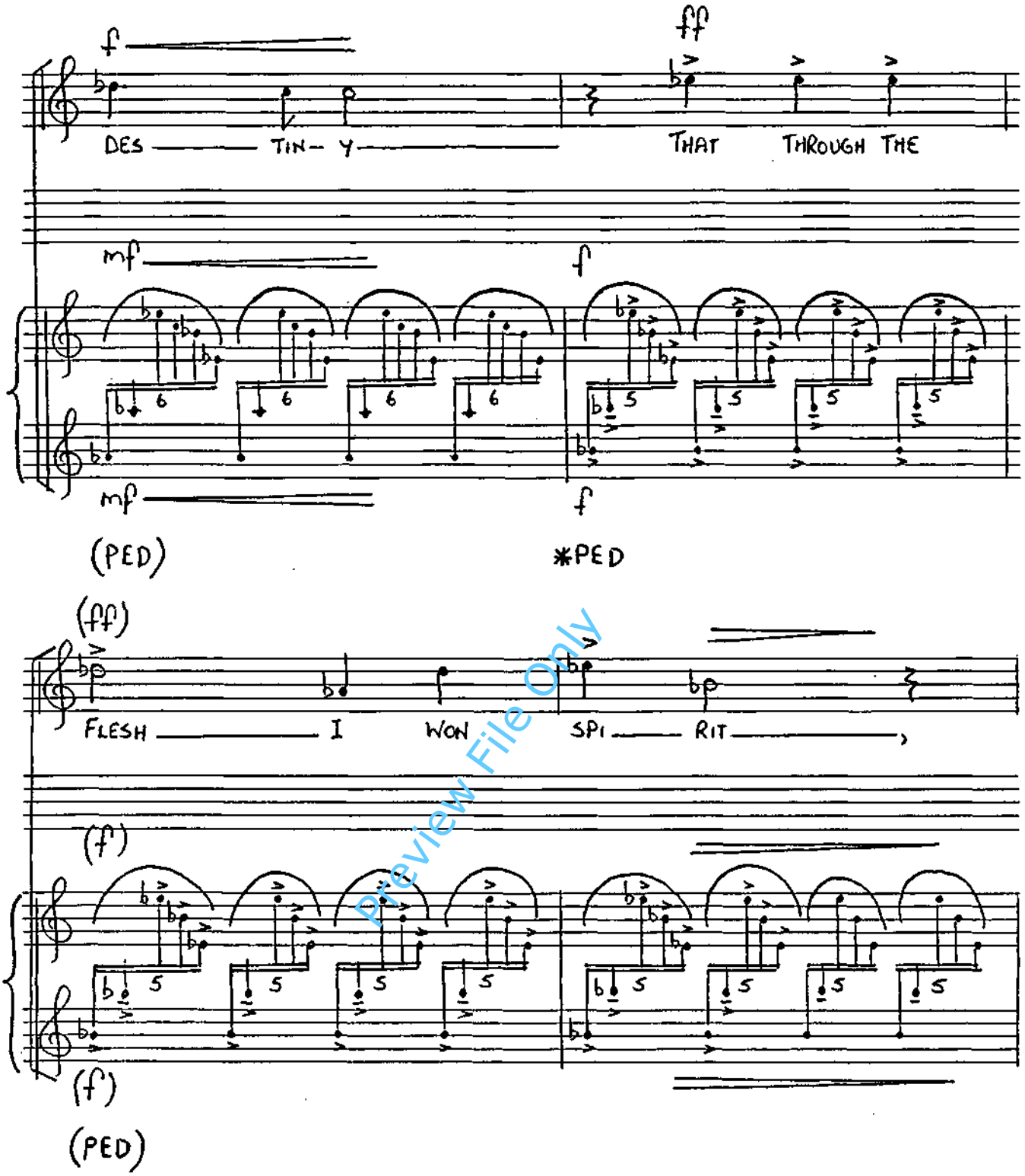

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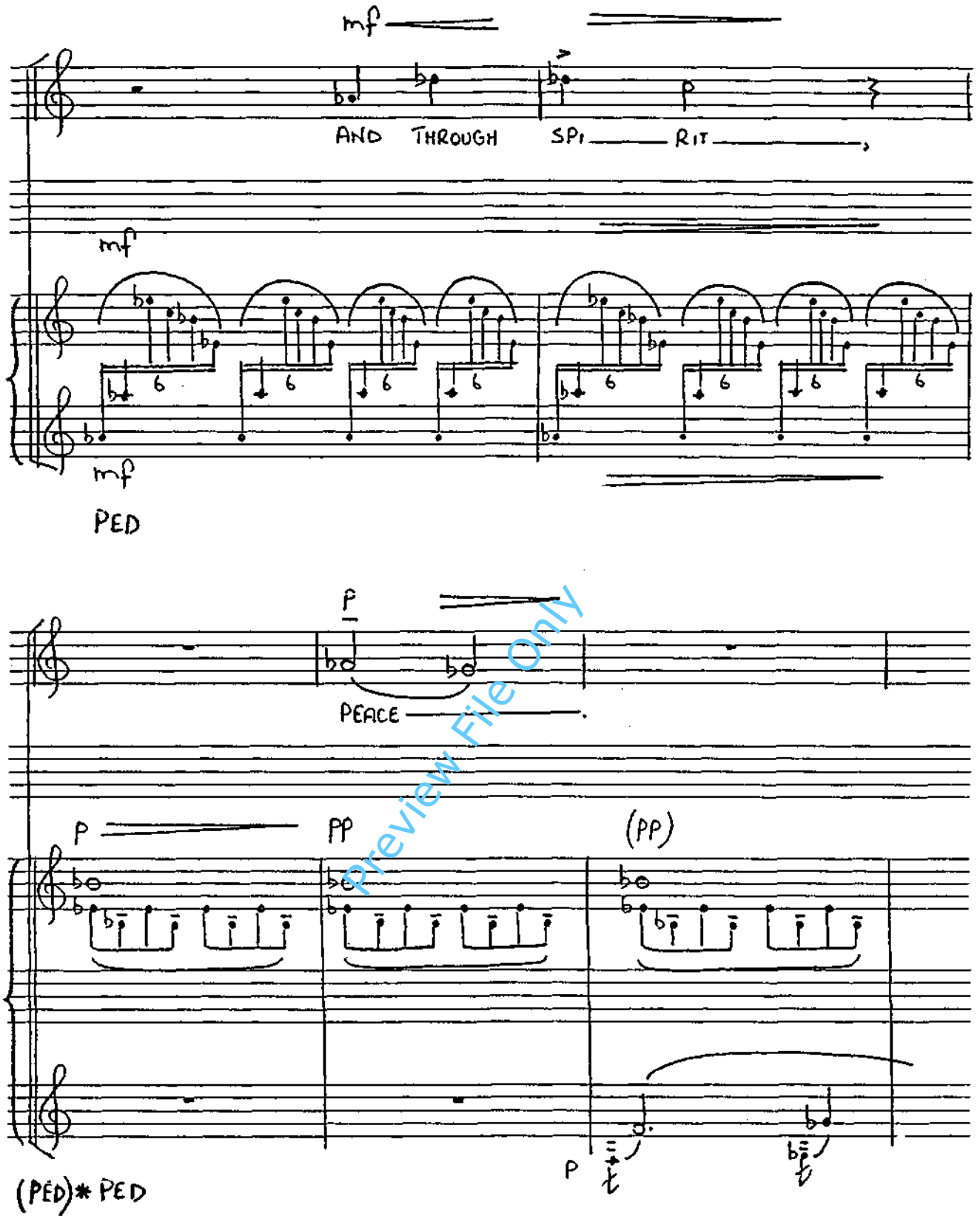

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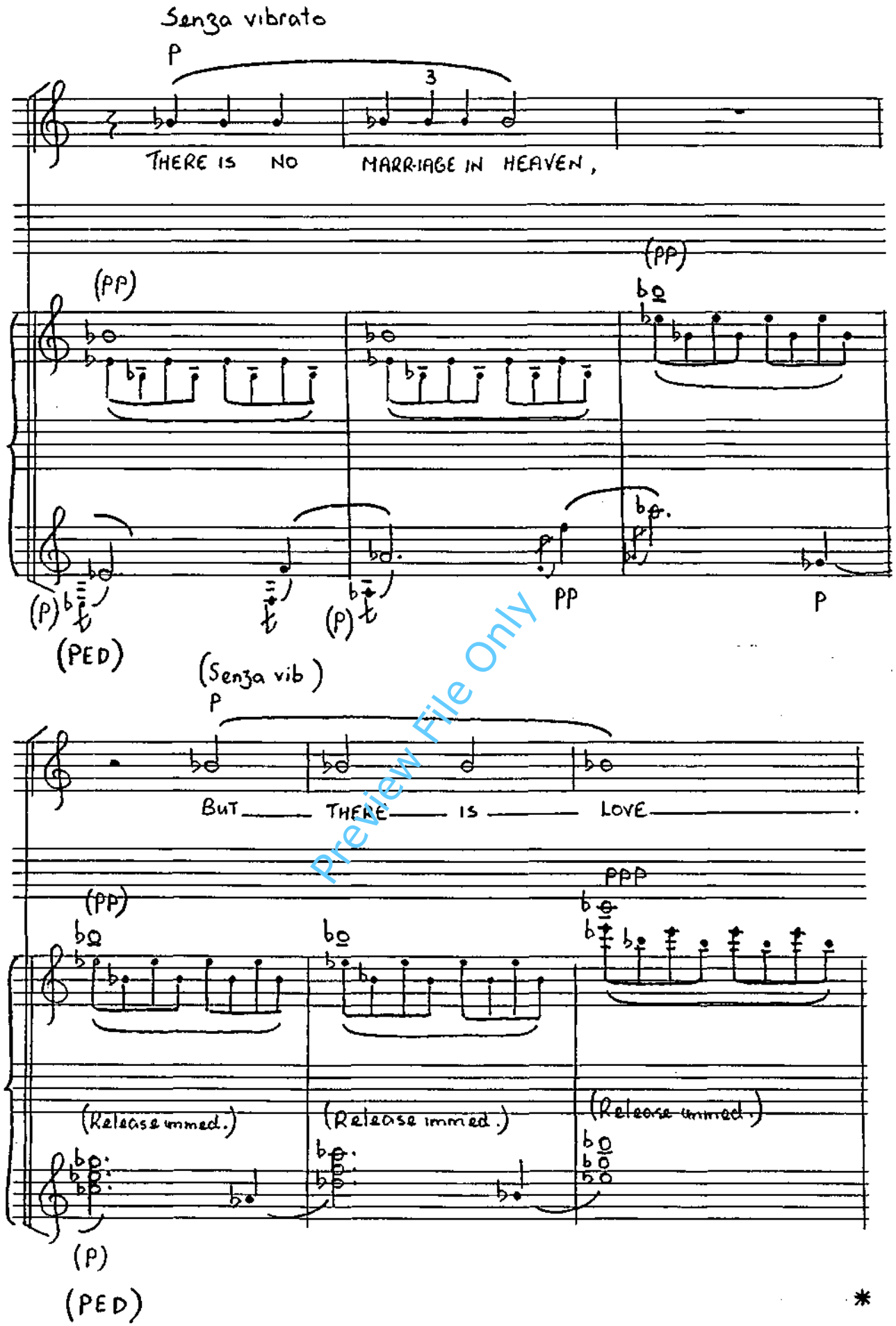

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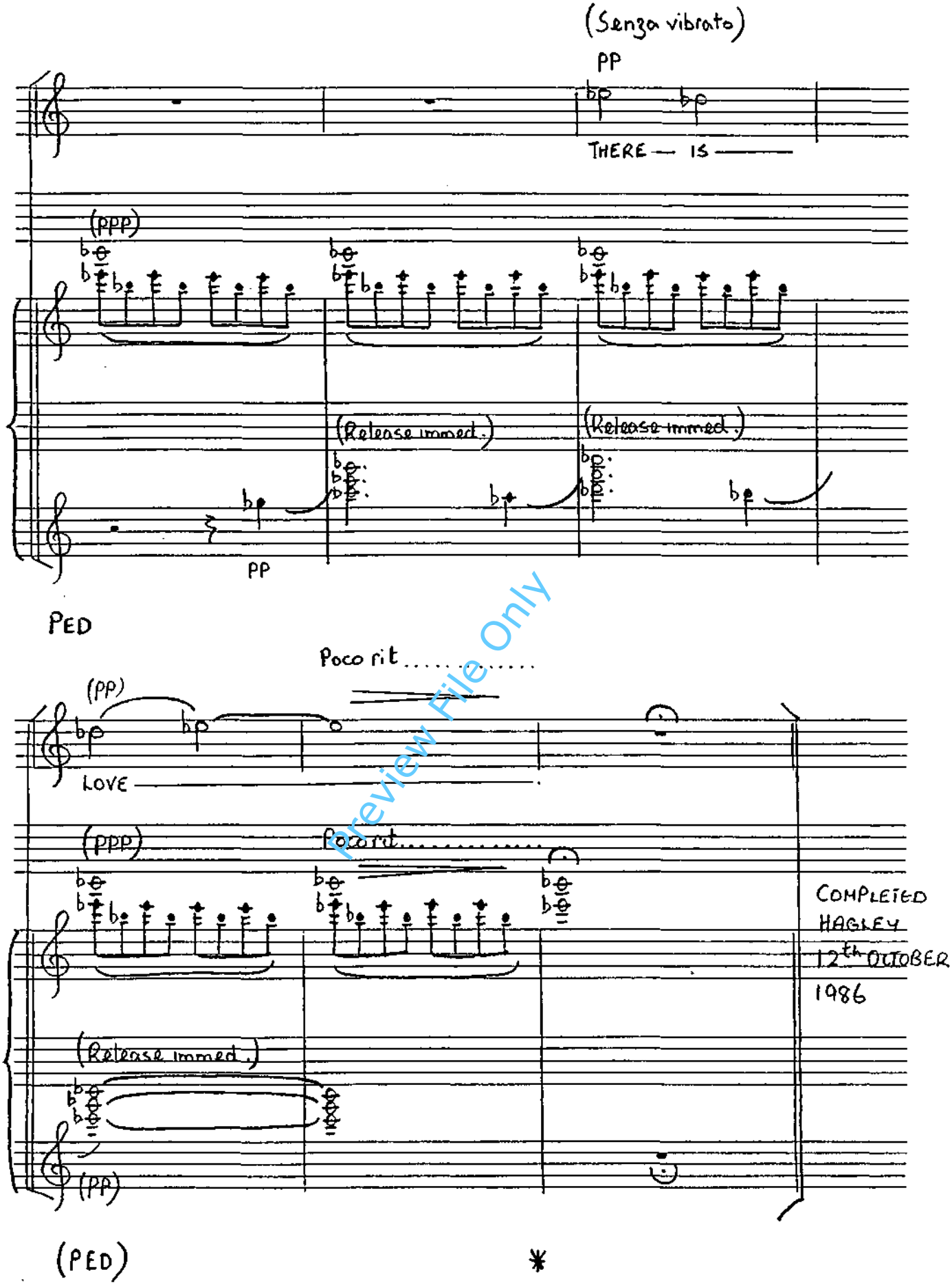

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