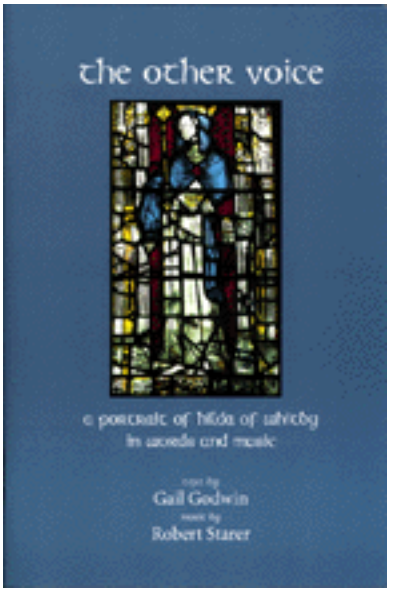

the other voice

a portrait of hilda of whitby in words and music

text by

Gail Godwin

music by

Robert Starer

Selah Publishing Co.

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The Other Voice: A Portrait of Hilda of Whitby was first performed at Holy Cross Church, Kingston, N.Y., on October 24 and 25, 1998. Musical direction was by Barbara Pickhardt and stage direction was by Stephen Kitsakos. Set was designed by Leslie Bender and constructed by Ed Peters, costumes were created by Diana Haines, and graphic design was by Lynn Bondar, CRSR Designs.

Hilda	Barbara Hardgrave
Elfleda	Andrea Buergers
Rolf	Tom Miller
Caedmon	Jeffrey Brown

Johana Hall and Ed Peters assisted in the staging. Members of the chorus were Virginia Barthel, Leeta Damron, Bill Damron, Judy Damron, Sheila France, Bill Goleeke, Diana Haines, and Renee Samuels.

Notes

Scene I

It is the late 660's, and spring is finally on its way to the cold coast of Northeast England. Hilda, beloved abbess of Whitby, esteemed far and wide as the most influential woman in Anglo-Saxon Christendom, is where she most likes to be: alone with God, taking refreshment and courage from her prayers. She is in her mid-fifties. Her early adult life remains undisclosed, but we know that at age thirty-three she took vows as a nun, ruled over the monastery of Hartlepool as abbess, and went on to transform a desolate Whitby cliff overlooking the North Sea into a thriving monastery for men and women, a center of learning, and a place visited by kings, princes, bishops and other seekers of her wisdom and advice. The famous Synod of Whitby where Celtic and Roman-trained Bishops argued their differences before King Oswy to settle the date of Easter, took place at Hilda's monastery in 664.

Hilda has also raised the Princess Elfleda, whose father, King Oswy, gave the baby princess to the Christian God as a thank offering for letting him defeat the heathen king Penda in battle. Elfleda, who will soon be taking her first vows as a nun, interrupts Hilda's prayers. The teenage princess has just come back from an ecstatic evening walk along the cliff, where she heard the ice cracking, saw Caedmon the herdsman delivering a new lamb, and stopped to chat with Rolf the Reeve, who oversees the workings of the monastery estate. The Princess admires Rolf because he "says interesting things," but Hilda is angered when she hears that the oversociable pagan reeve has raised doubts in the princess about her forthcoming marriage to Christ. Hilda reassures Elfleda, and they sing a Sixth Century Latin hymn, "To Thee Before the Close of Day."

Scene II

Alone again, Hilda warms herself into a fine, focused anger at Rolf the Reeve. She asks God why he sent her this troublesome man who, though he's a good manager, insinuates himself into people's personal business and forgets his station. Rolf is far too smart for his own good, "though not smart enough to see the good of you, Lord." Then she puts on her cloak and goes out into the night to confront the reeve, asking God to focus her wrath and sharpen her tongue to meet its target. Rolf apologizes for getting too personal with Elfleda, but explains that it's not easy for a communicative fellow like himself to live with his brother Caedmon, who prefers

talking to animals. Hilda warns Rolf not to repeat the offense and is preparing to leave when she hears another voice, which is Caedmon making up a song to welcome a new lamb into the fold. She tells Rolf that a gift like his brother's is meant for more than lambs. If Caedmon were to sing the stories of the scriptures, she says, he would make more lambs for God. After she leaves, warning Rolf again to mend his ways or be fired, Rolf confronts Caedmon: If she asks you up there to sing, you'd better open your mouth and sing.

Scene III

Hilda and Elfleda are rehearsing for Elfleda's clothing ceremony on the morrow, when she will take her first vows as a nun. Elfleda confesses that she is uncertain and that she isn't ready to leave Hilda. The abbess shores up the girl's doubts and, during their duet, Hilda's stronger purpose slowly turns the girl's nostalgic lament at leaving the carefree world of a young girl wandering the cliffs into a joyful acceptance of her destiny as the future abbess. After Elfleda exits, Hilda droops as she realizes that tomorrow she will be losing the child who was her closest and dearest earthly companion.

Scene IV

Some months have gone by. Hilda has sorely missed her lost daughter who is now enclosed as a novice. One morning Rolf arrives unexpectedly at the monastery, dragging Caedmon. His brother has just had a heavenly visitor, he announces to the abbess. He prods the unwilling Caedmon to repeat to the abbess what the otherworldly voice instructed him to do. Hilda, that wisest of women, understands that she is being given a divine gift through her canny reeve. She has known God long enough to know He accomplishes His purposes through many voices, not all of them issuing from the mouths of the deserving or even the truthful. And she is seasoned enough in the ways of the world to know exactly how to put these "other voices" to work for God's glory. She laughs for the first time in months.

Scene V

It is the year 680. The Abbess Hilda is now 66 and close to death. The abbess has been ill for six years. As Bede, her only know biographer[1] writing within 50 years of her death, when memories of her were still fresh, tells us: "It pleased the Author of our salvation to try her holy soul by a long sickness, in order that…her strength

might be perfected in weakness." Knowing her time on earth is short, Hilda has sent for Rolf the Reeve, who has outlived Caedmon. We learn that Hilda taught Rolf to read so that he could "feed" the scriptures to his brother,[2] who was then inspired, as Hilda had foreseen, to make songs that reached the hearts of the unconverted. Through giving Rolf another voice, that of literacy, the wise abbess has given his irrepressible communicative energies a purposeful focus.

The concluding Requiem for Hilda, sung by the Abbess Elfleda, was inspired by text found in 2 Esdras 2:15–33 and by the final prayer of the Burial Service in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

Mother, embrace thy children
And bring them up with gladness;
Make their feet as fast as a pillar;
For I have chosen thee, saith the Lord.
Those that be dead will I raise up again
And bring them out of their graves.
Fear not, thou mother of the children,
For I have chosen thee, saith the Lord.

Be joyful, O thou mother, with thy children
For I will deliver thee, saith the Lord.
Remember thy children that sleep,
For I shall bring them out of the sides
Of the earth and shew mercy unto them.

Rest eternal grant to her, O Lord
And let light perpetual shine upon her.

–Gail Godwin, October 12, 1998

[1] The Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, was completed in 731 at the monastery of Jarrow, 50 miles up the coast from Whitby. In Bede's life of St. Cuthbert, he often quotes Cuthbert's special friend, the Abbess Elfleda of Whitby, who most likely was also a source for what we know about her spiritual mother, Hilda.

[2] Bede tells us that Caedmon's superior, the reeve, took him before the abbess to report Caedmon's dream of a man ordering him to sing in his native tongue about the creation of all things. We have made the reeve and the cowherd brothers, which is not at all impossible. Bede tells us Caedmon later became a brother in the monastery, but he apparently never learned to read. According to Bede, Caedmon stored up in his memory all that was read to him, "and like and animal chewing the cud, turned it into such melodious verse that his delightful renderings turned his instructors into his audience."

The Other Voice is Robert Starer's and Gail Godwin's eighth collaboration. The first was *The Last Lover*, premiered at the Caramoor Festival in 1975. Then came *Anna Margarita's Will*, recorded by CRI under a grant from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1976. *Journals of a Songmaker* was commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts for William Steinberg's farewell concert as music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony in 1976. Their fourth collaboration was *Apollonia*, a full-length opera written for the Minnesota Opera Company. Next came *Remembering Felix*, recorded by Robert J. Lurtsema for Albany Records in 1987, and *Letter to a Composer* (1996) recorded by Parnassus Records. In 1996 came *Gregory the Great*, a Vespers pageant with music and chant, performed at St. Gregory's Church, Woodstock, N.Y.

The Other Voice: A Portrait of Hilda of Whitby in Words and Music was written and composed during the spring of 1998.

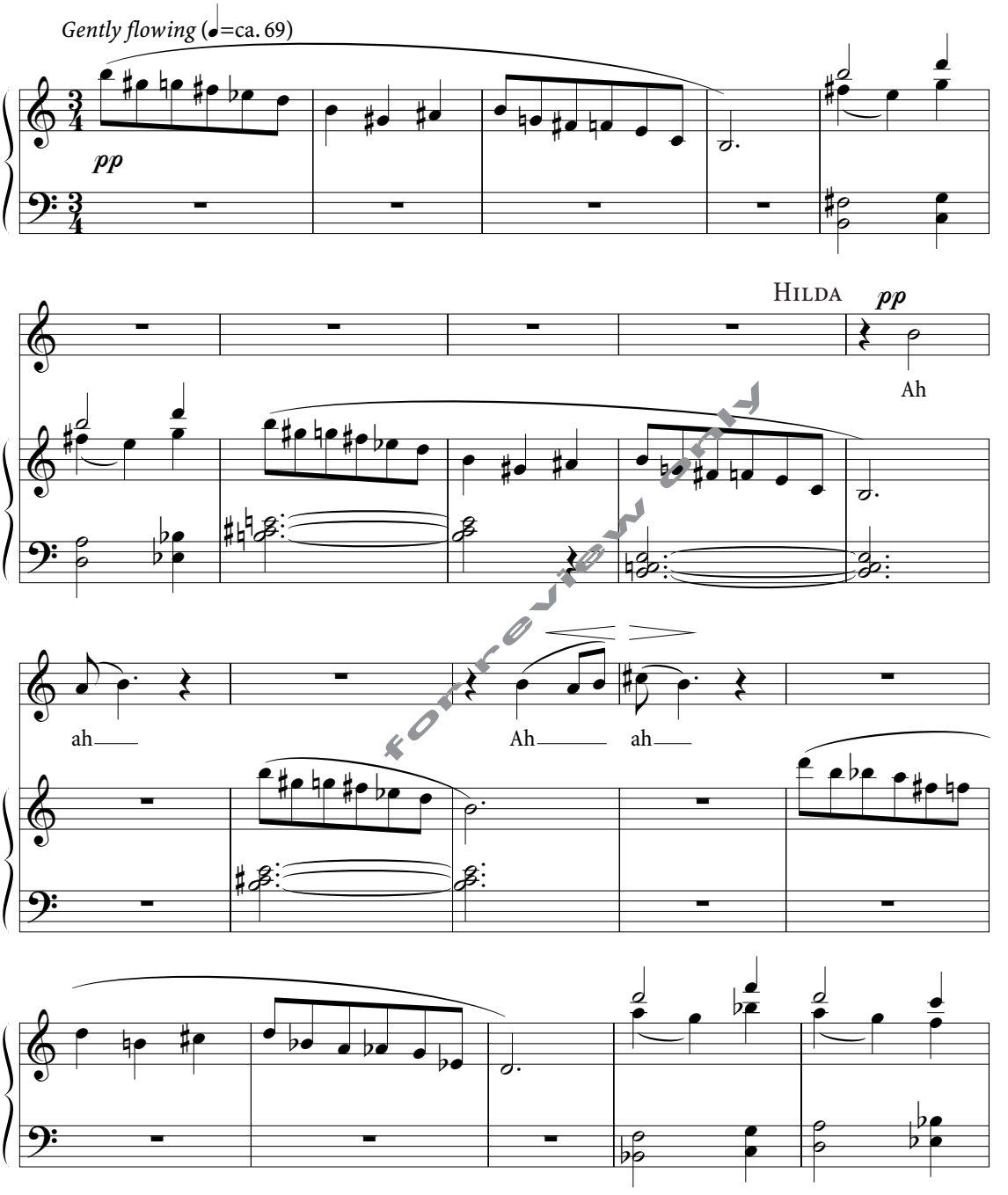
Cast

Hilda, Abbess of Whitby	Mezzo-Soprano
Elfleda, Princess and Nun	Soprano
Rolf the Reeve	Baritone
Caedmon, Cowherd and Poet	Tenor

The accompaniment may be played on an organ, on the piano, or on a synthesizer with judiciously selected sound-images. The chorus used in the last scene is optional.

Scene I

During the late 660's, at the abbey of Whitby, on the coast of Northumbria. Hilda, Abbess of Whitby, is alone at night in her chambers: in shadowed profile. No features should be seen. Just a veiled figure kneeling. Maybe a candle.



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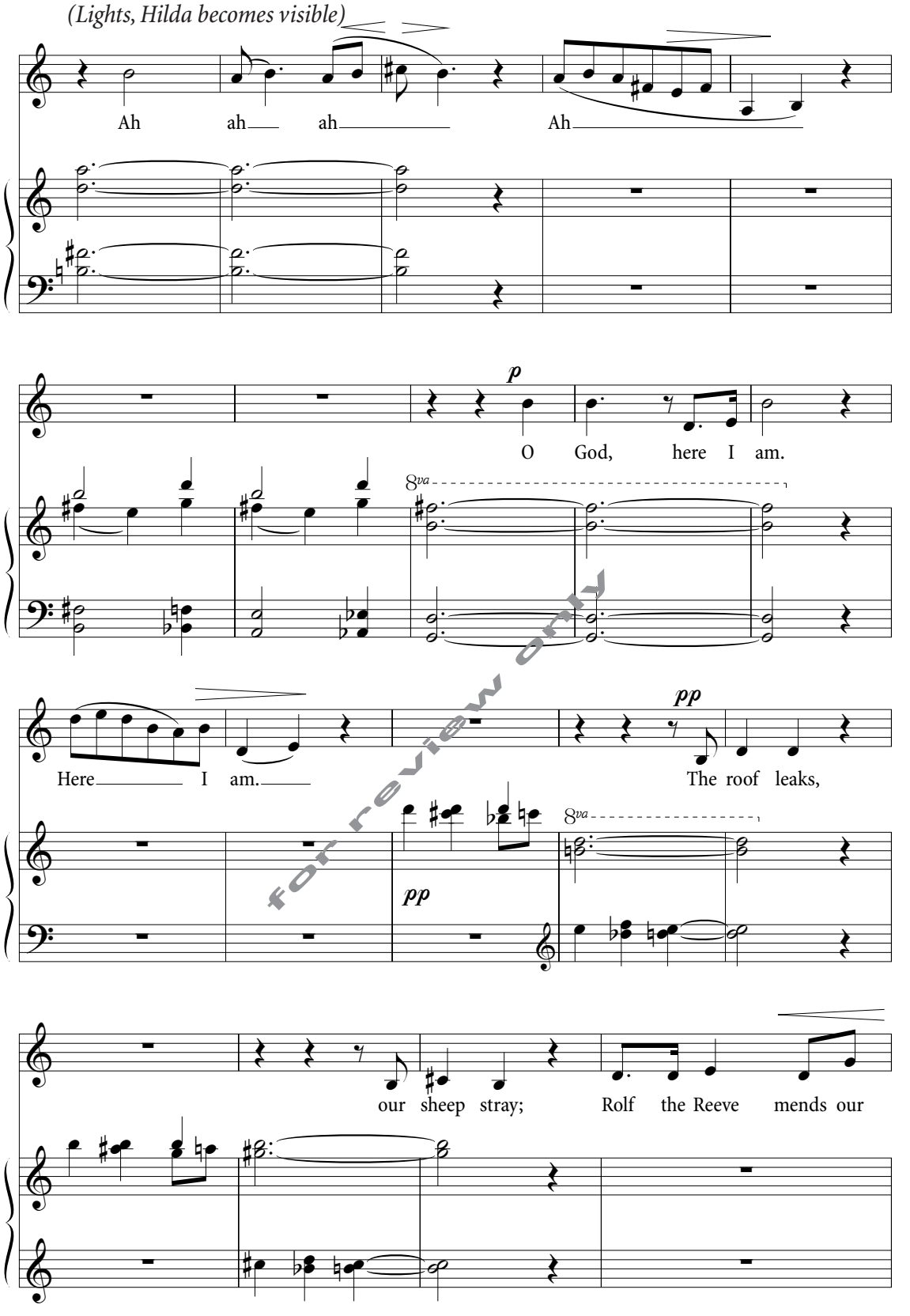

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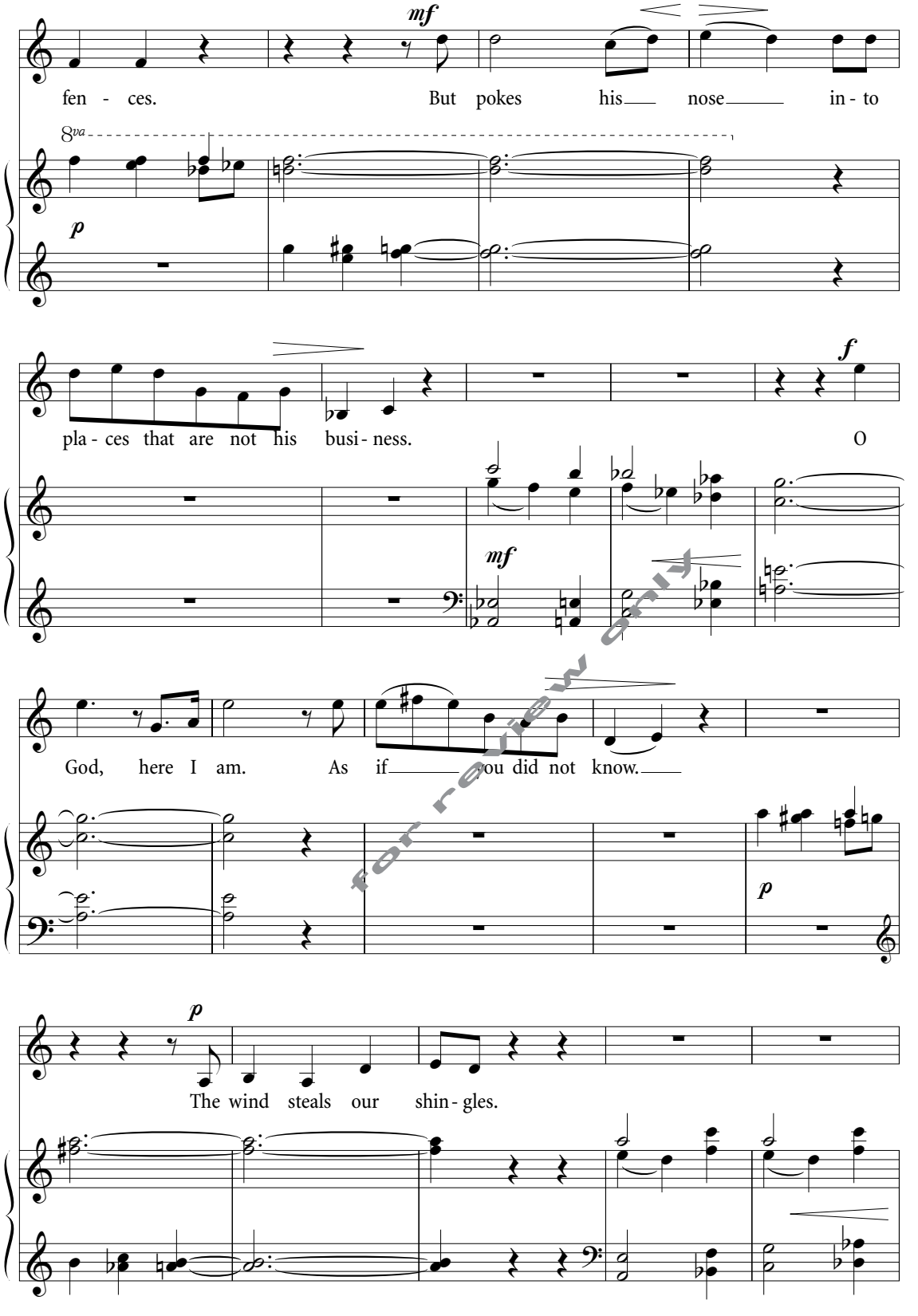

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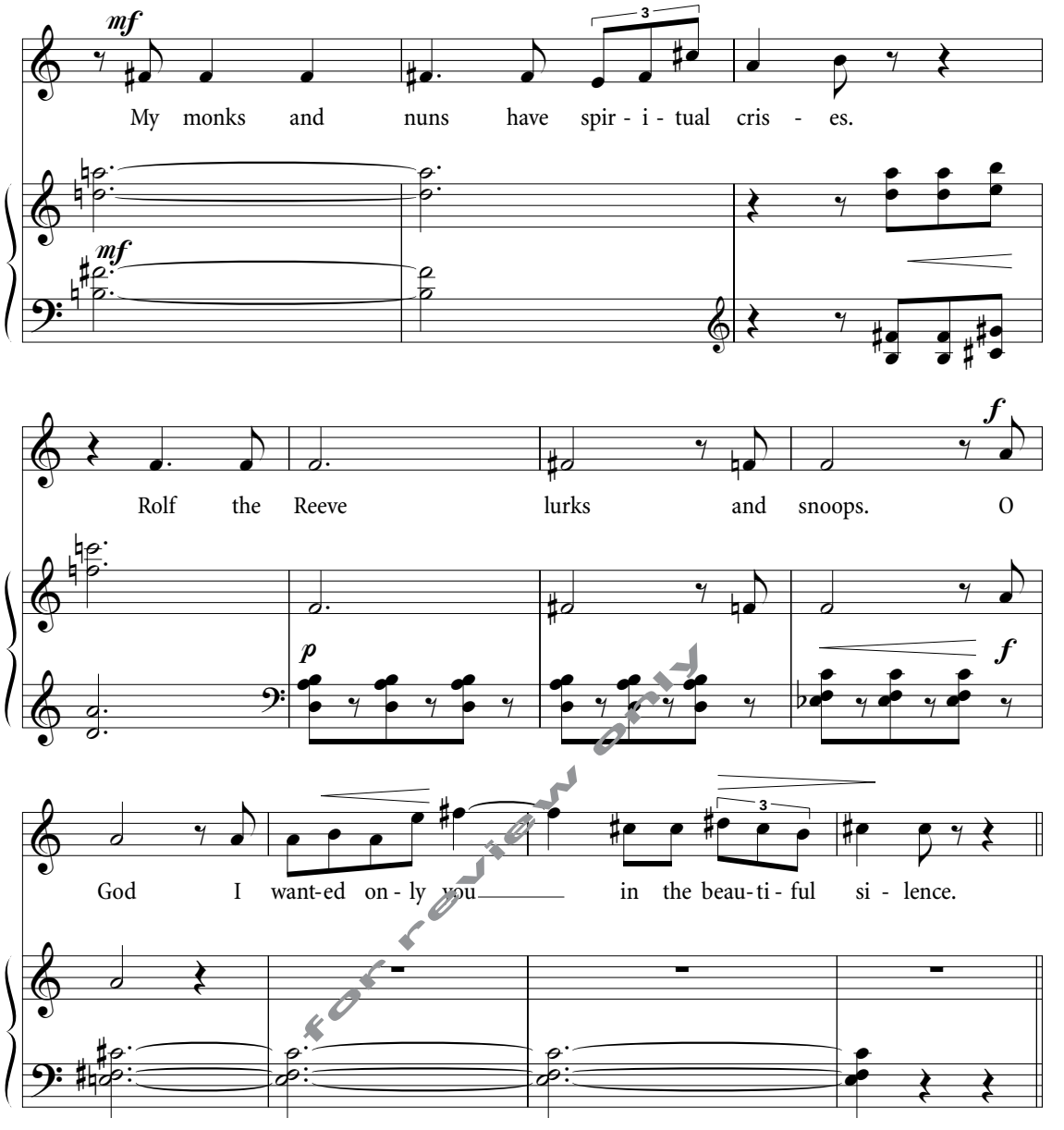

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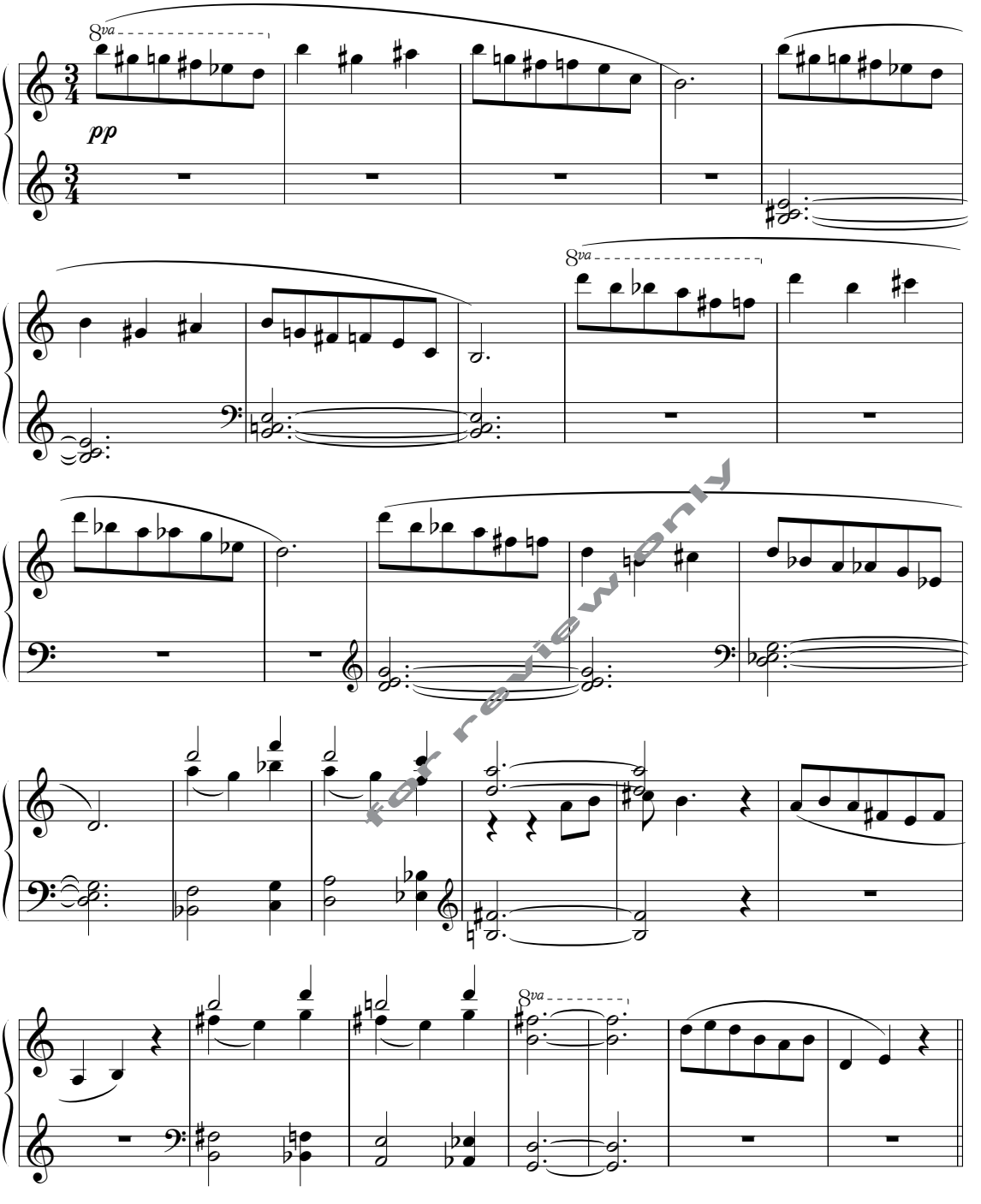
HILDA: I wanted only you in the beautiful silence.
Not all these others: leaking roofs…falling shingles…straying sheep and straying souls. So many duties to so many personalities.
But here I am
As you well know.

While Hilda speaks, beginning with "You put me here" and ending with "and I will miss her sorely," the following music should be played softly without any attempt at synchronization with the words



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You put me here
in this wild sea-swept place
even the Romans abandoned.
You said build,
I built.
You said teach,
I taught.
You said mediate
between men bickering over the date of Easter
I opened my doors to them
and let them fight it out.
You said be mother to a baby princess
and raise her and teach her my ways.
I have been her mother
though it hasn't always been easy
and soon she will leave
and I will miss her sorely.

But here I am, as always,

As if you didn't know
you who knit me together in my own mother's womb

What assignment do you have next for me written in your book?

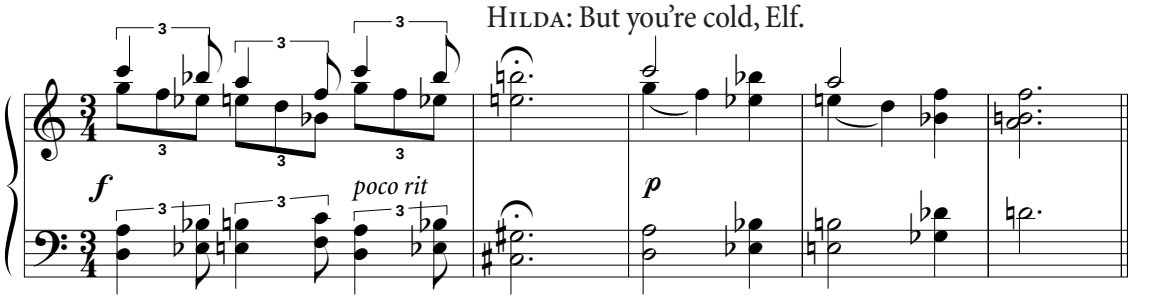
(Elfleda bursts in, wearing cloak, out of breath; stops short when she sees Hilda kneeling)

Elfleda: *Sorry*, Mother. You were praying.

Hilda *(rising from her knees and turning to face the audience full-front for the first time; we see a wise, open, and humorous face.):* Half-praying, half-fretting, my daughter.

(She opens her arms to the girl, who rushes to embrace her.)

Hilda: But you're cold, Elf.



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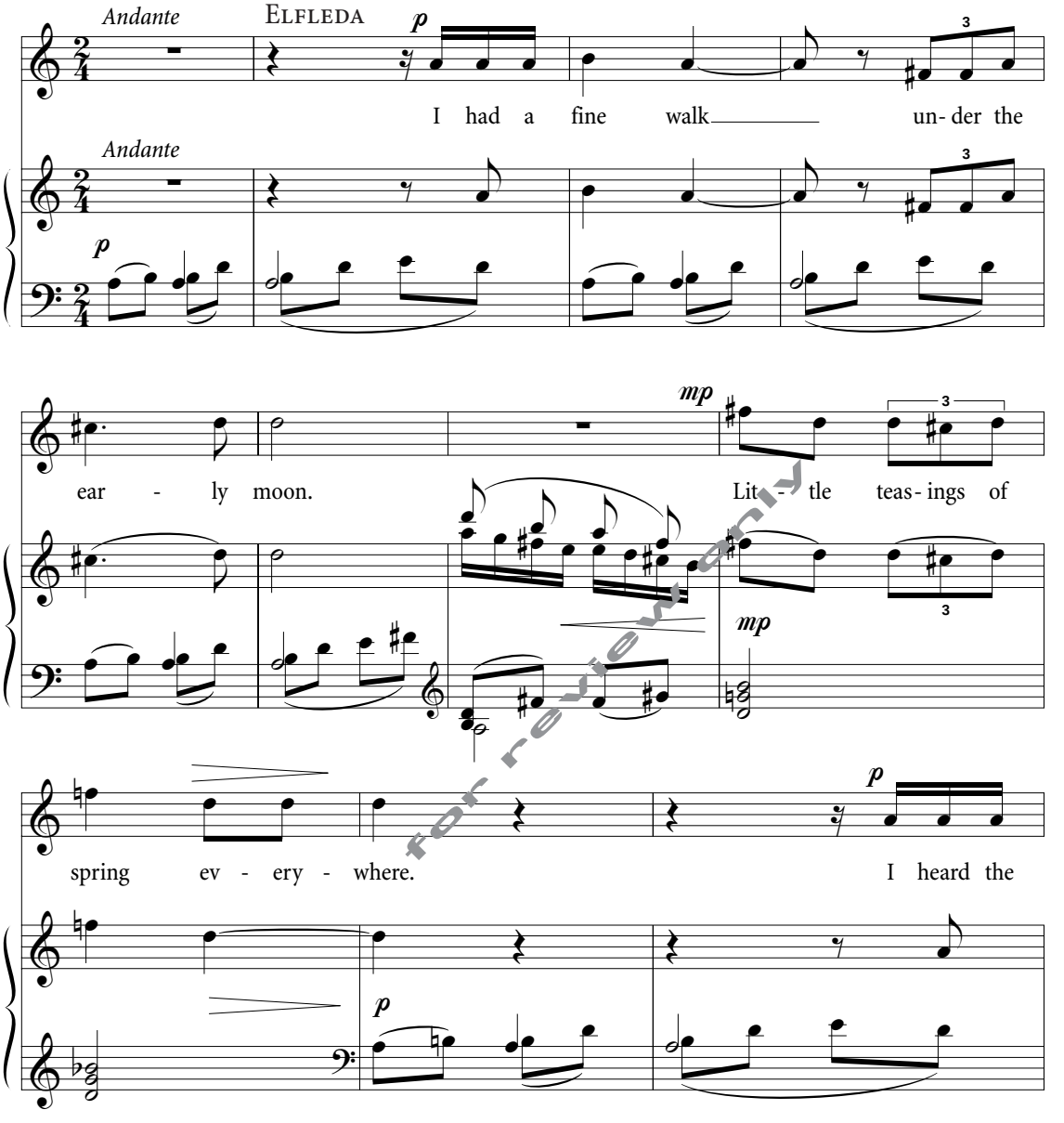
Hilda rubs the girl's cheeks and hands briskly.

ELFLEDA (Knocks back the hood of her cloak; she's spilling over with radiant youth and energy.):



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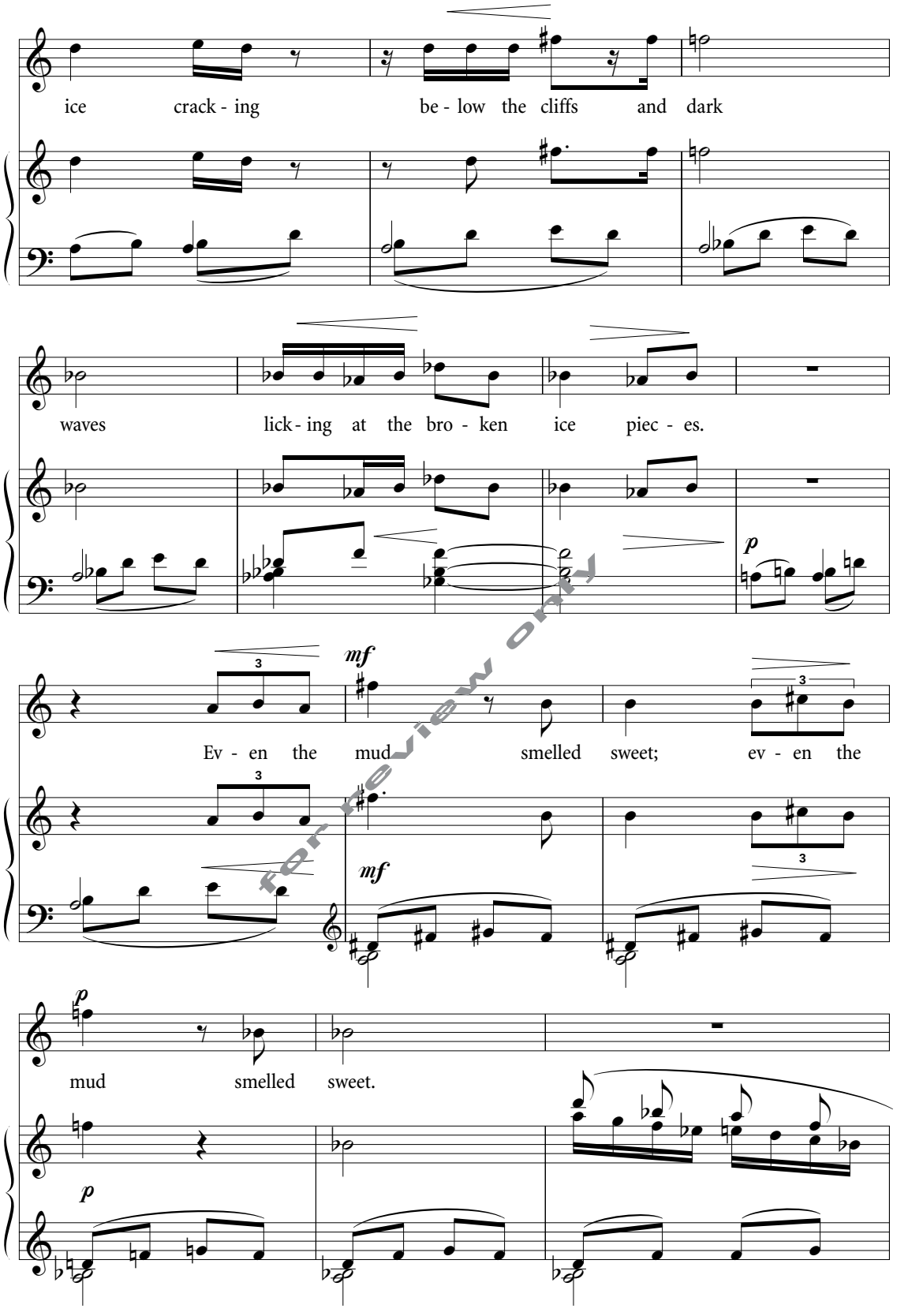

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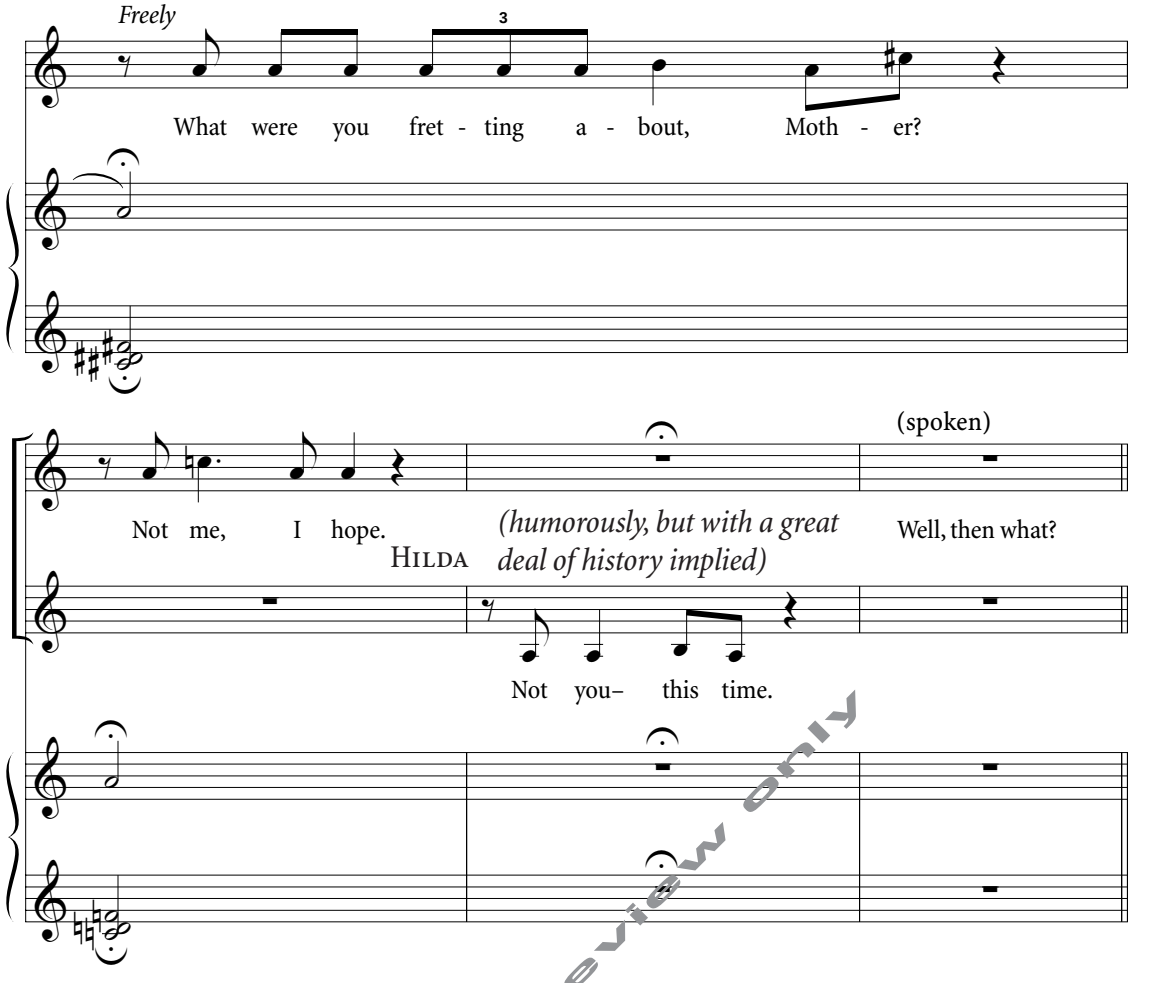

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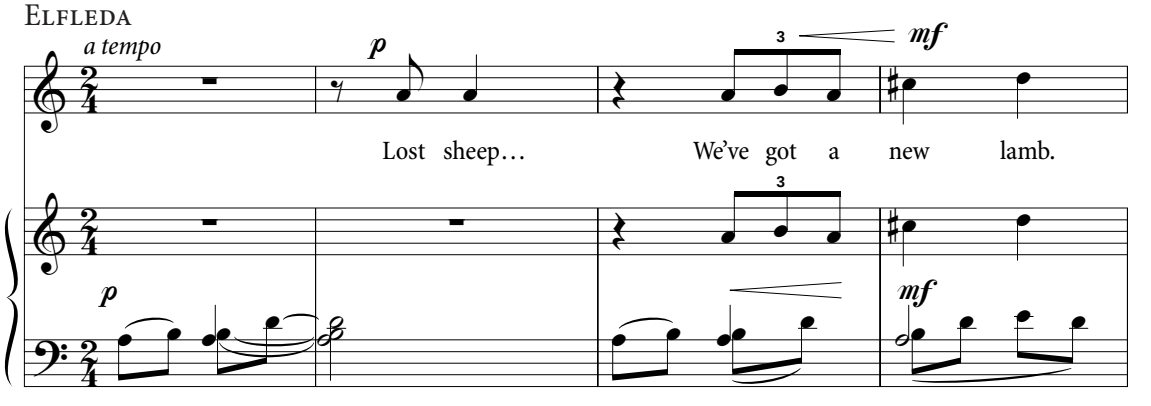
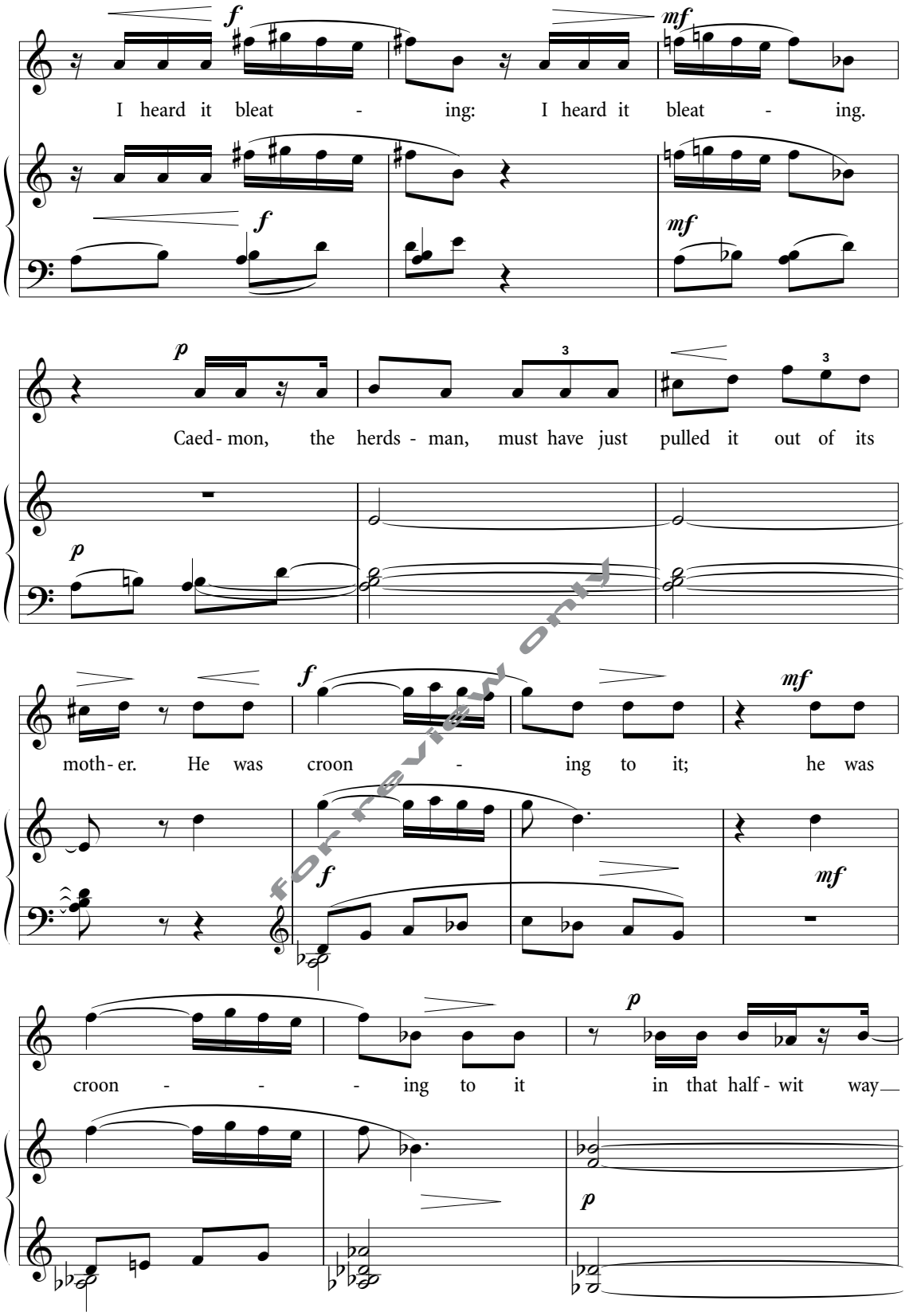
Hilda: Just the usual care-wanderings of an abbess. Leaking roofs, problems of certain monks and nuns…menus for important visitors…lost sheep…





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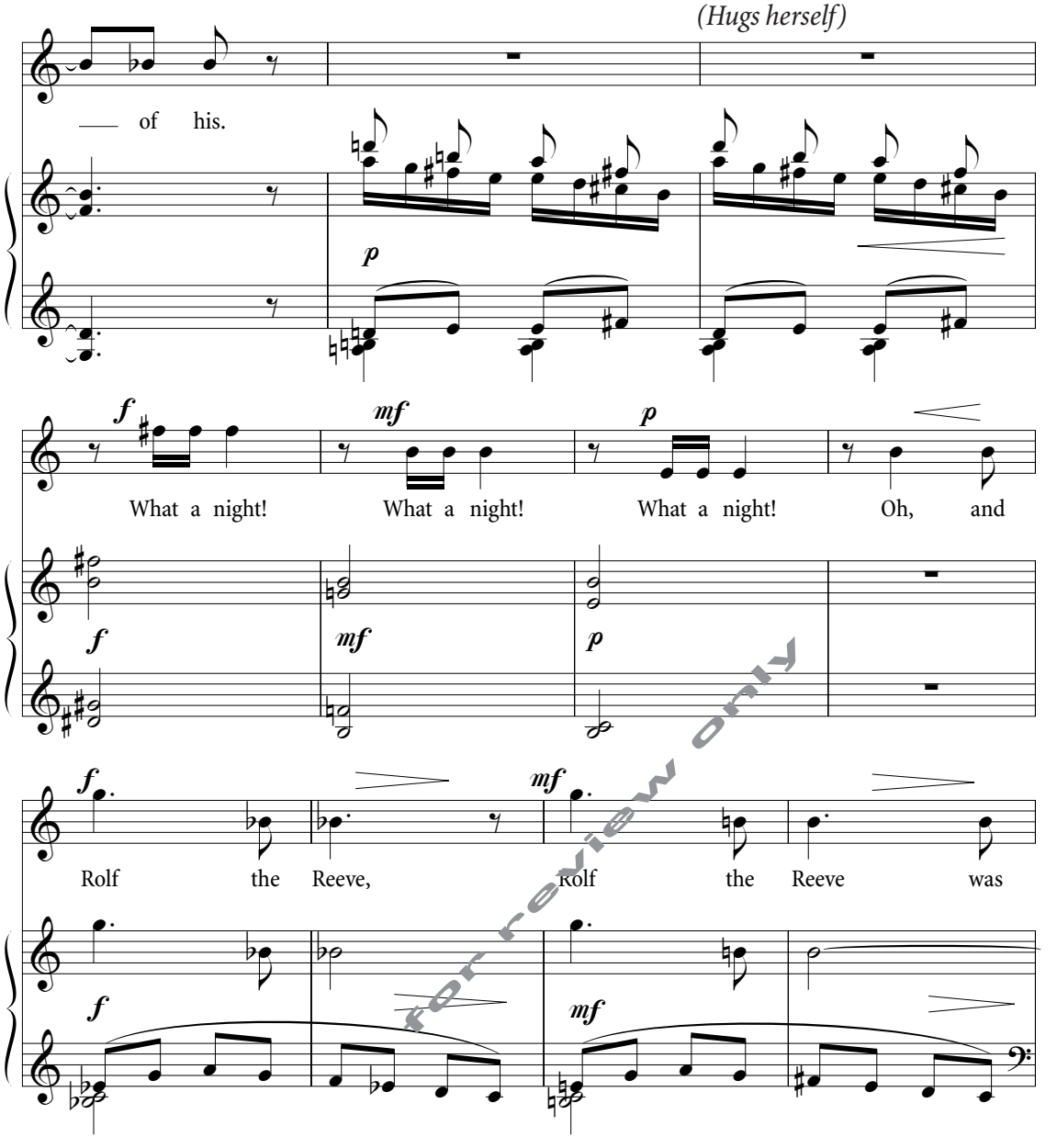

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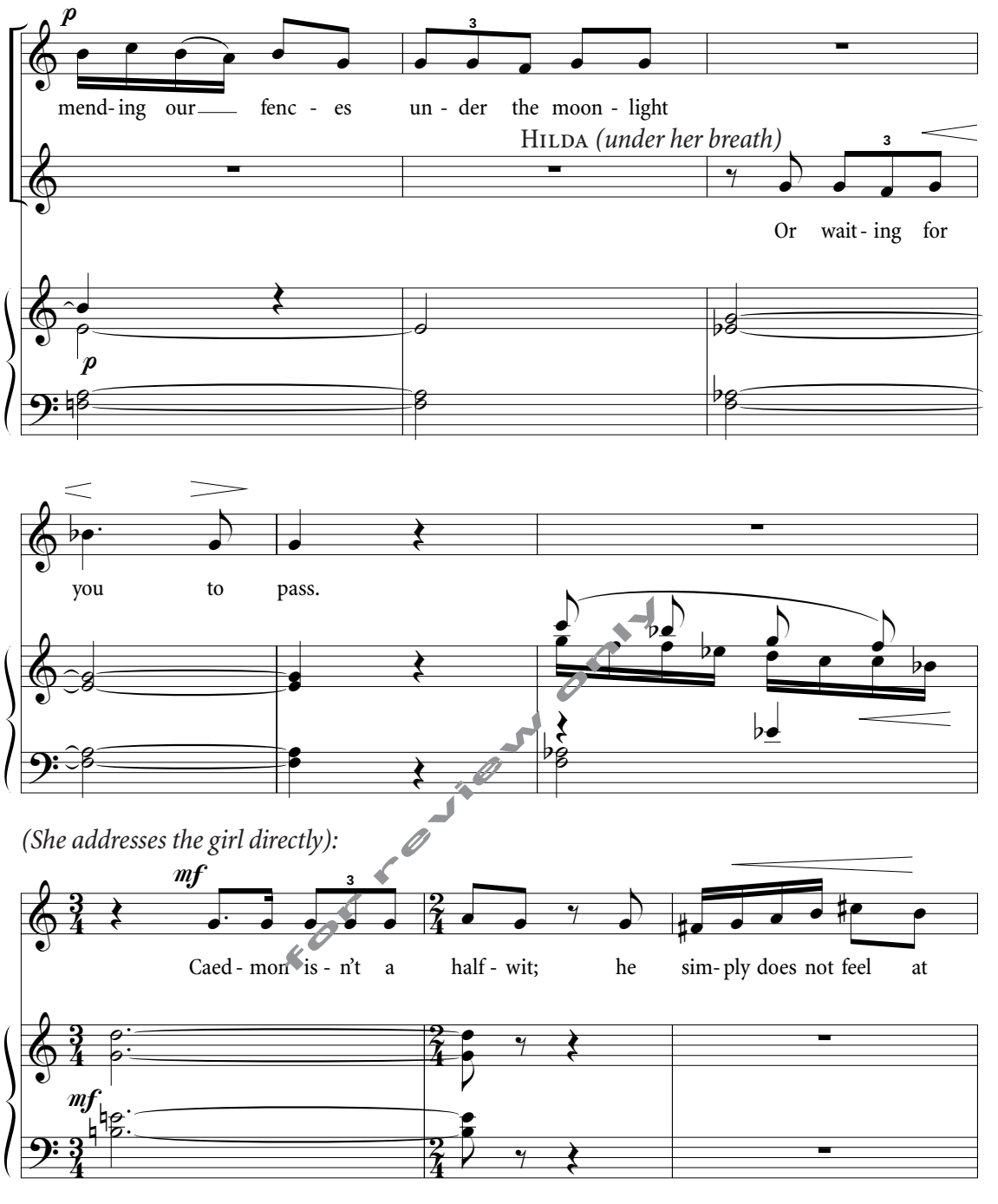

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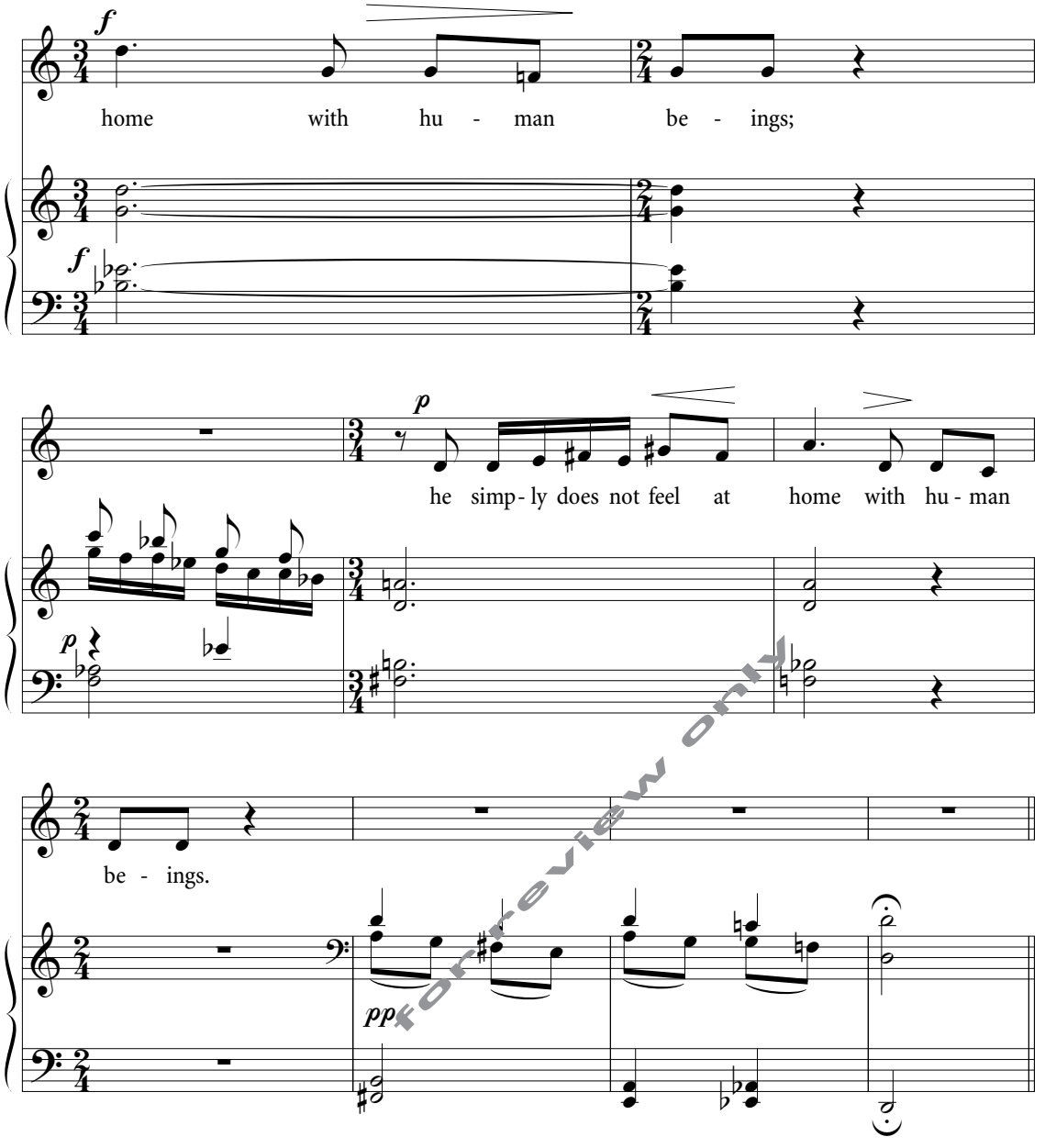

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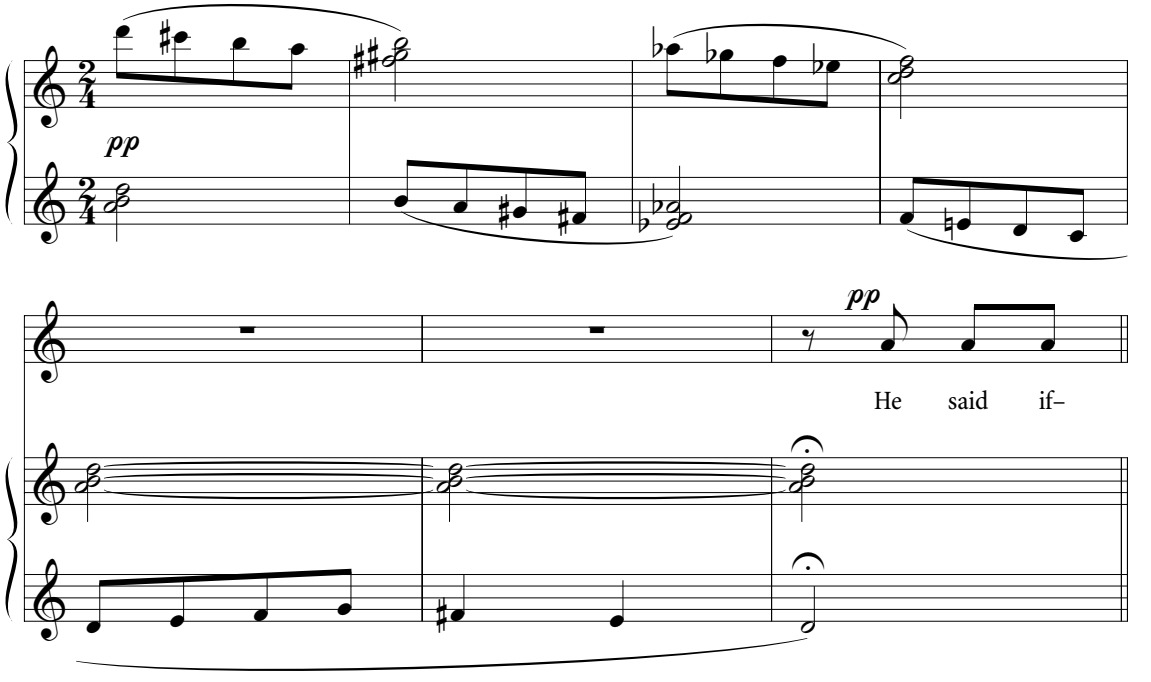
Elfleda: I stopped to chat with Rolf. He's so perceptive. He says things that make me go away thinking.

Hilda (*warily*): And what have you come home thinking tonight?



ELFLEDA: (*plunges ahead*)—if the gods had given *him* a daughter like me, he wouldn't have given her away to the Christian God just so he could win a bloody old battle.

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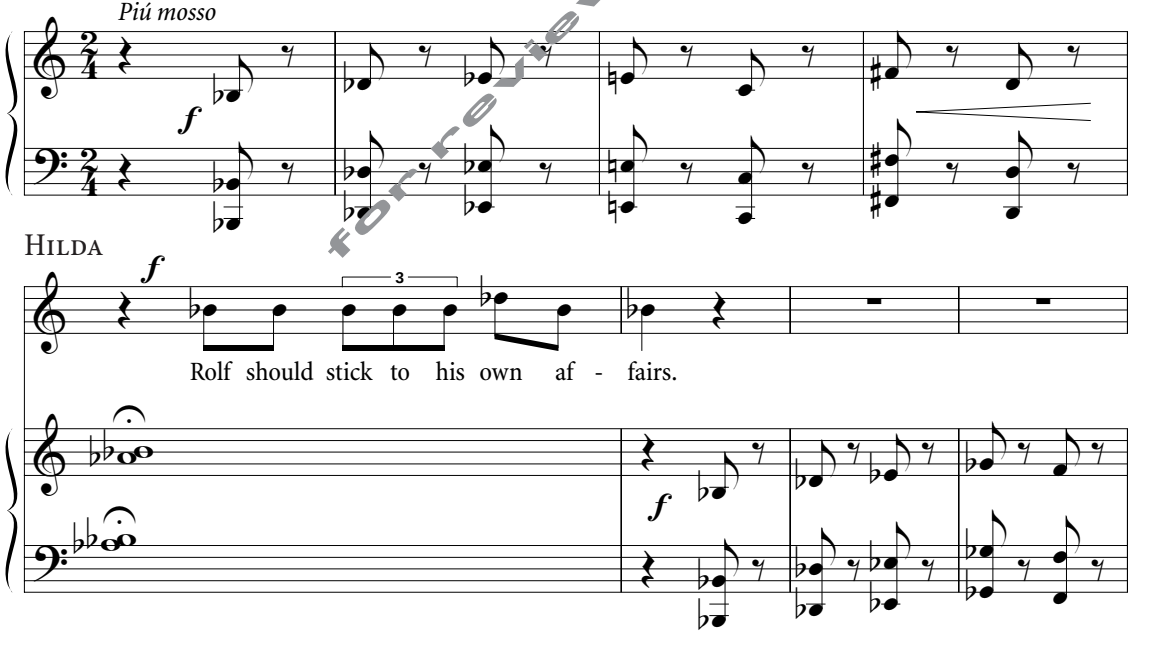
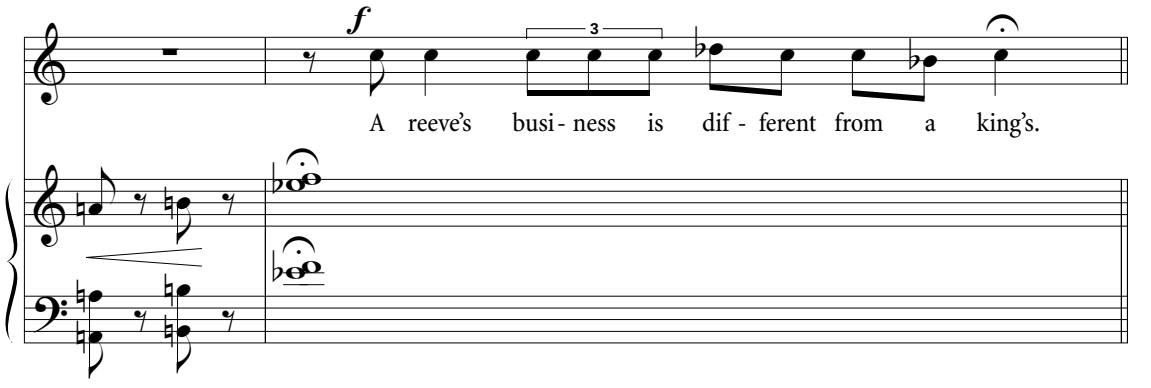
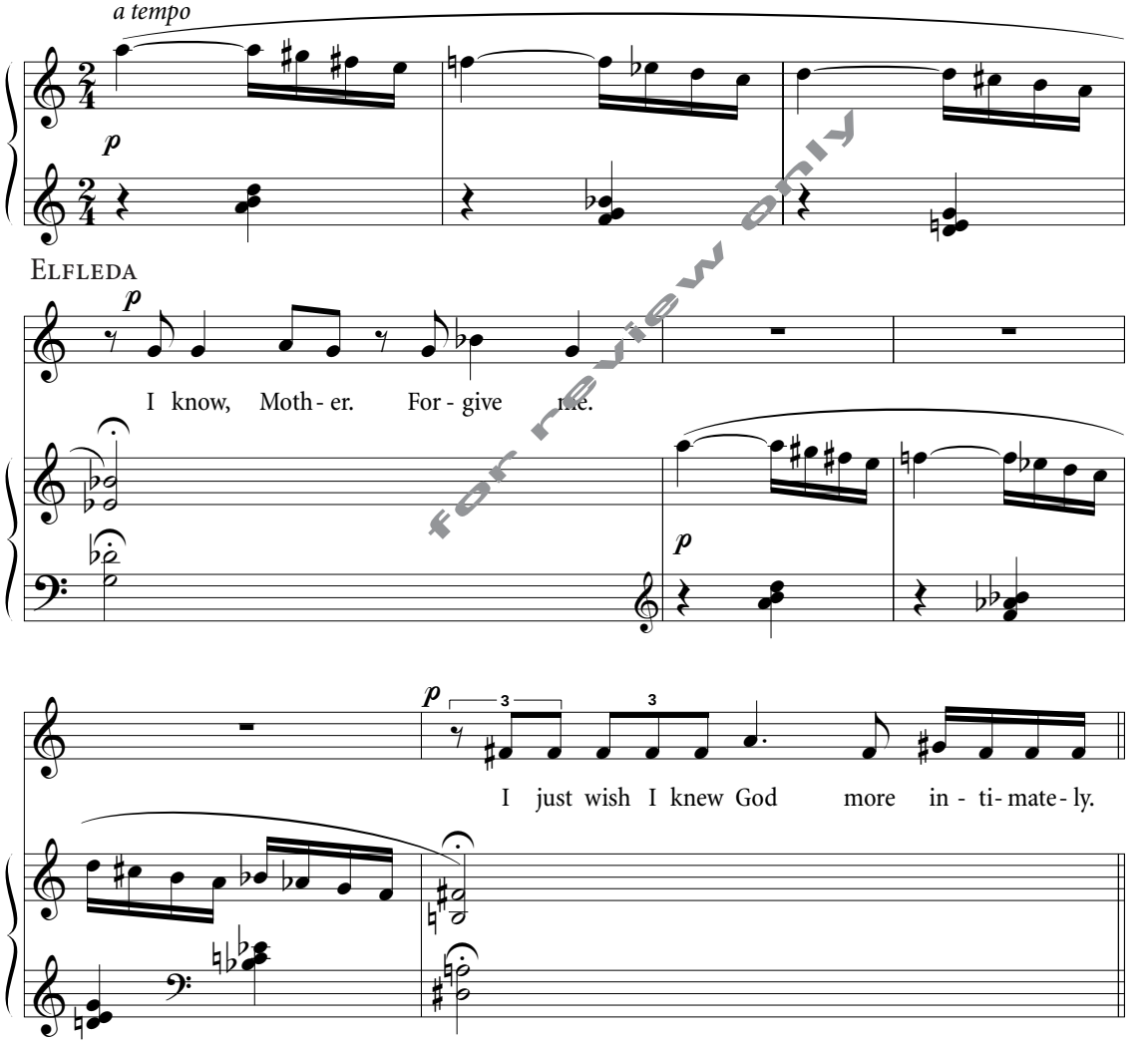




HILDA (*visibly reining in her anger*): And the God your father promised you to is evolutions away from Rolf's tree and thunder spirits.



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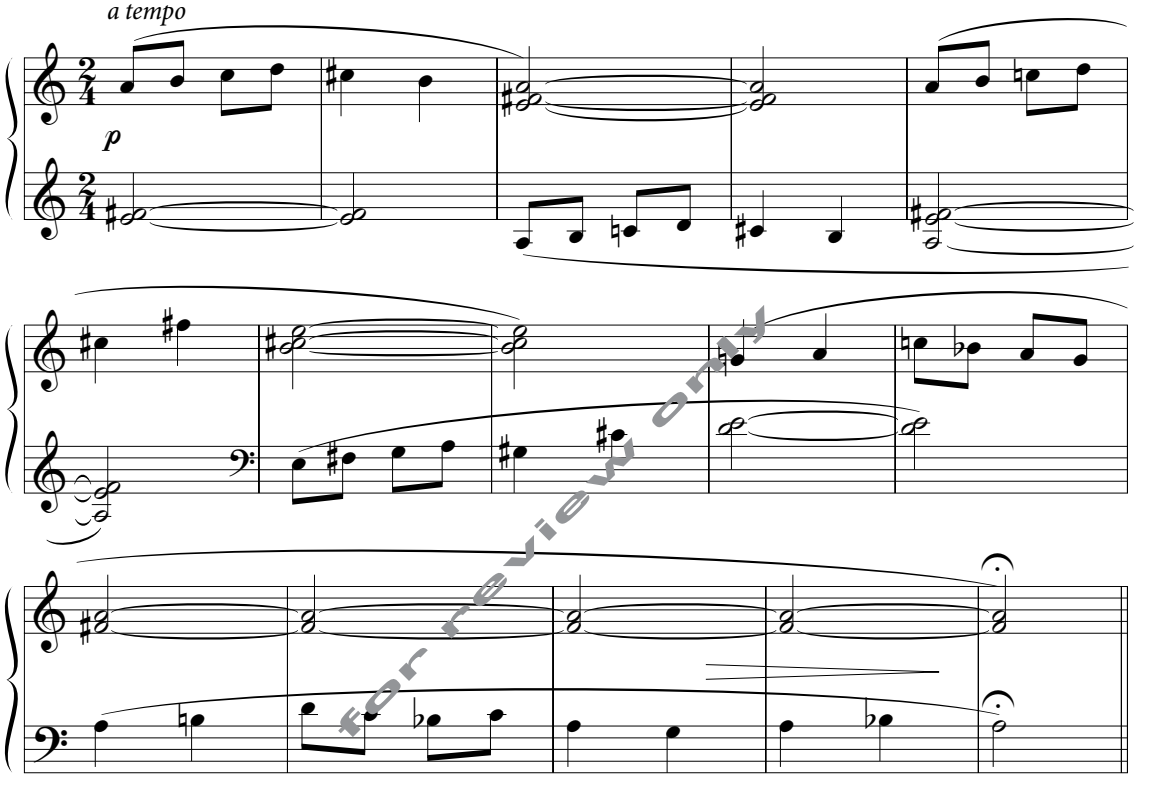
ELFLEDA: Since I *have* been promised to him. Sometimes it seems like…well, just an arranged marriage I'm going toward: The Princess Elfleda promised to a king she's never met. (*Anguished pause.*) *Will* I ever meet him, Mother? Can even *you* promise me that?

HILDA: Come here, Elfleda. I love you as my own child. You slept in my chamber when you were scarcely older than that lamb born tonight.

ELFLEDA: I love you, too, Mother. More than anything. If only I could love God half as much as I love you. But I don't know God. I know you.



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HILDA: How many hours would you say you have talked to me, ever since you could talk?

ELFLEDA: How many…? (*Stymied.*) Oh, impossible to count.

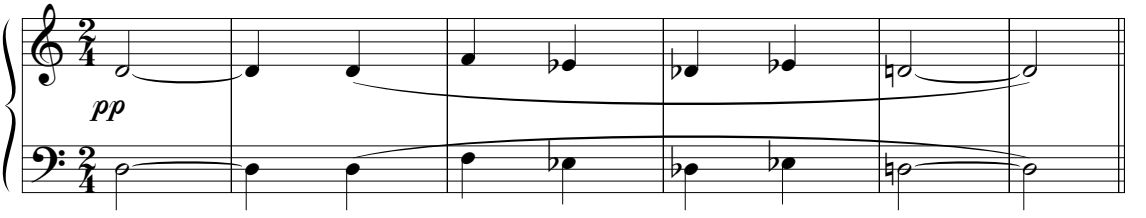
HILDA: When you have talked to God as many hours as you've talked to me, my child, I promise you will love him better than you are able to imagine now.

ELFLEDA: Not better than you.

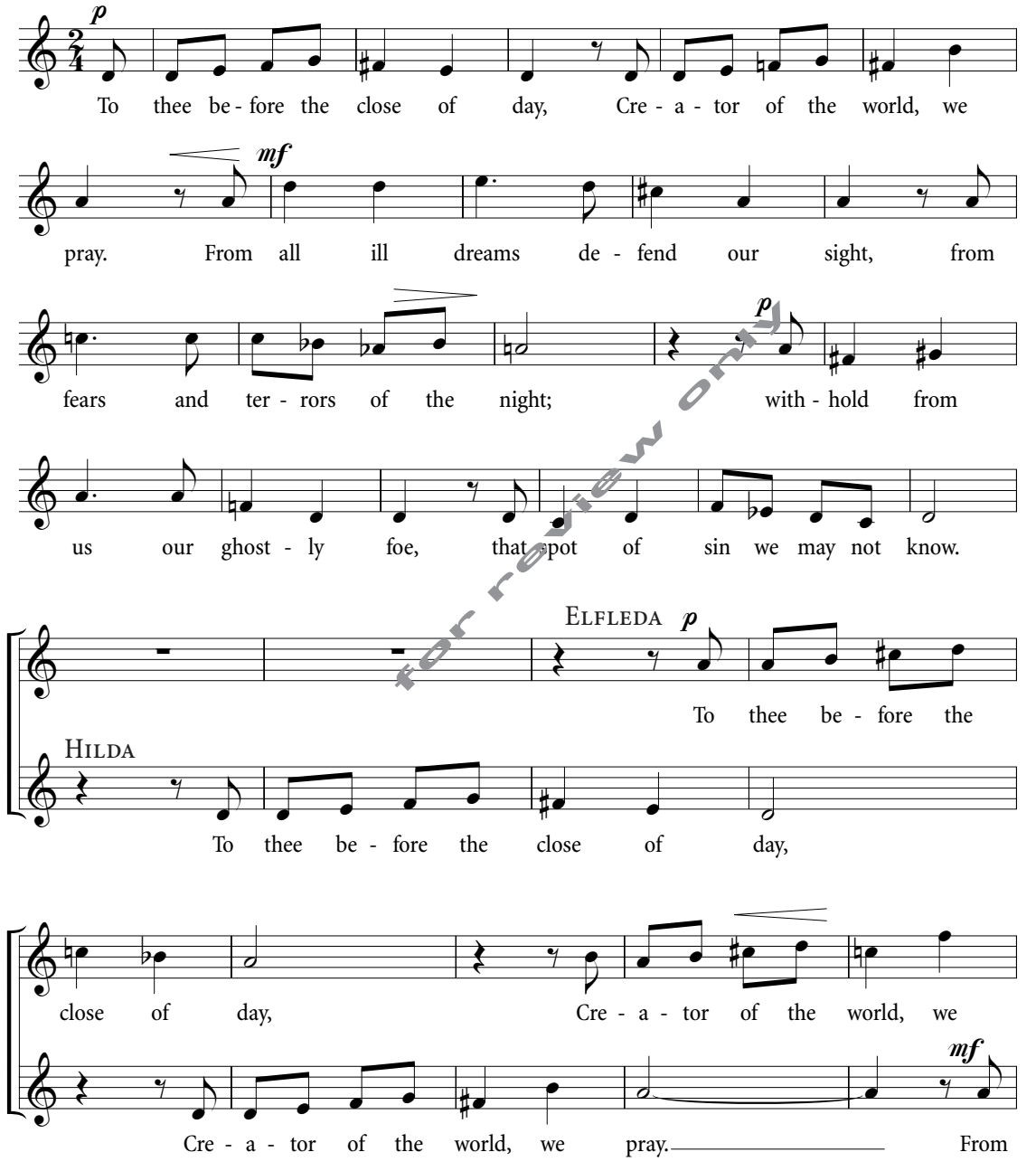
HILDA: Far better. It's a love you will grow into.

ELFLEDA: Why do I feel so sad?

HILDA: Because you're growing. Come, we've talked enough.



Hilda: Kneel here with me and let us talk to him together.



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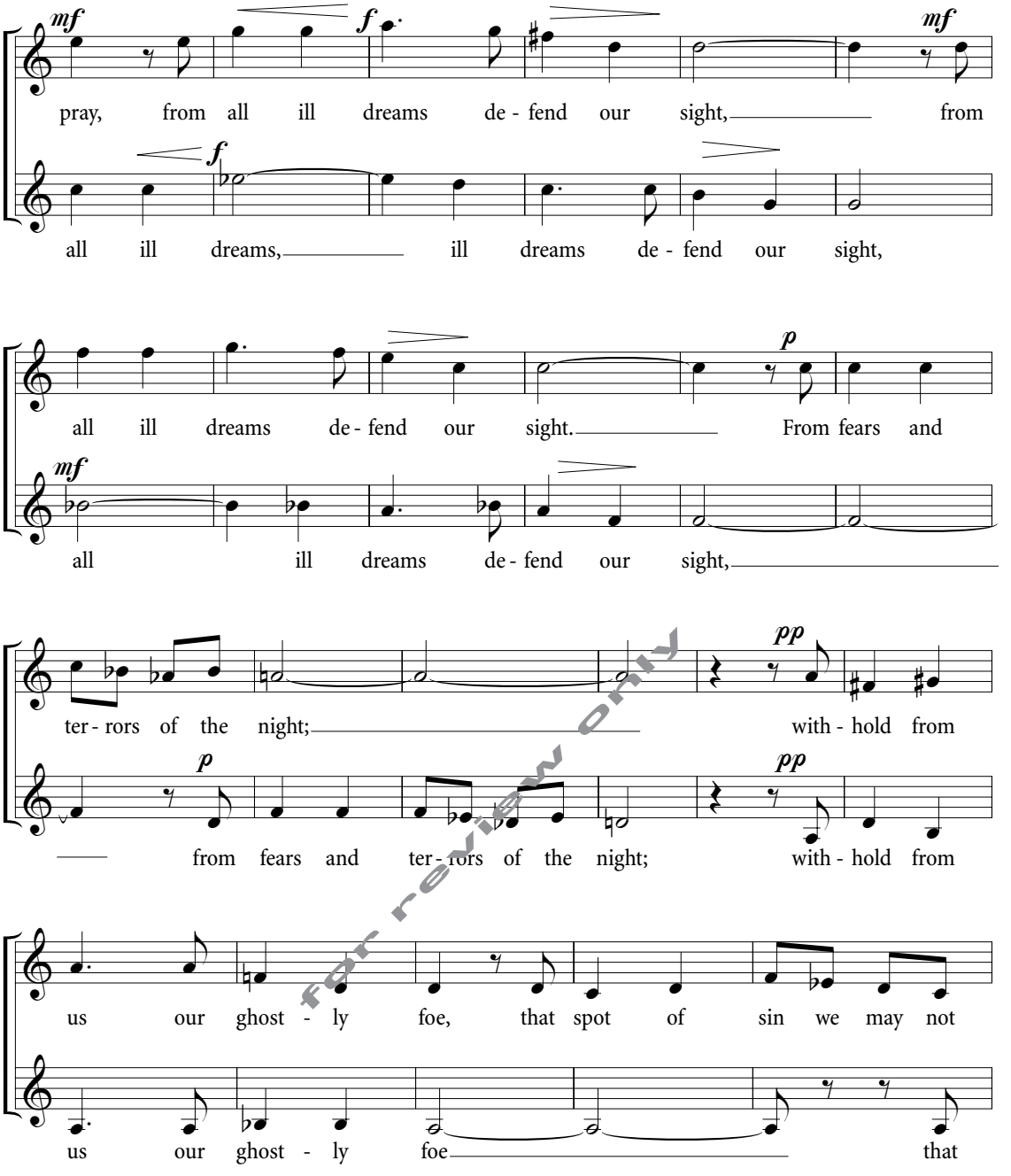

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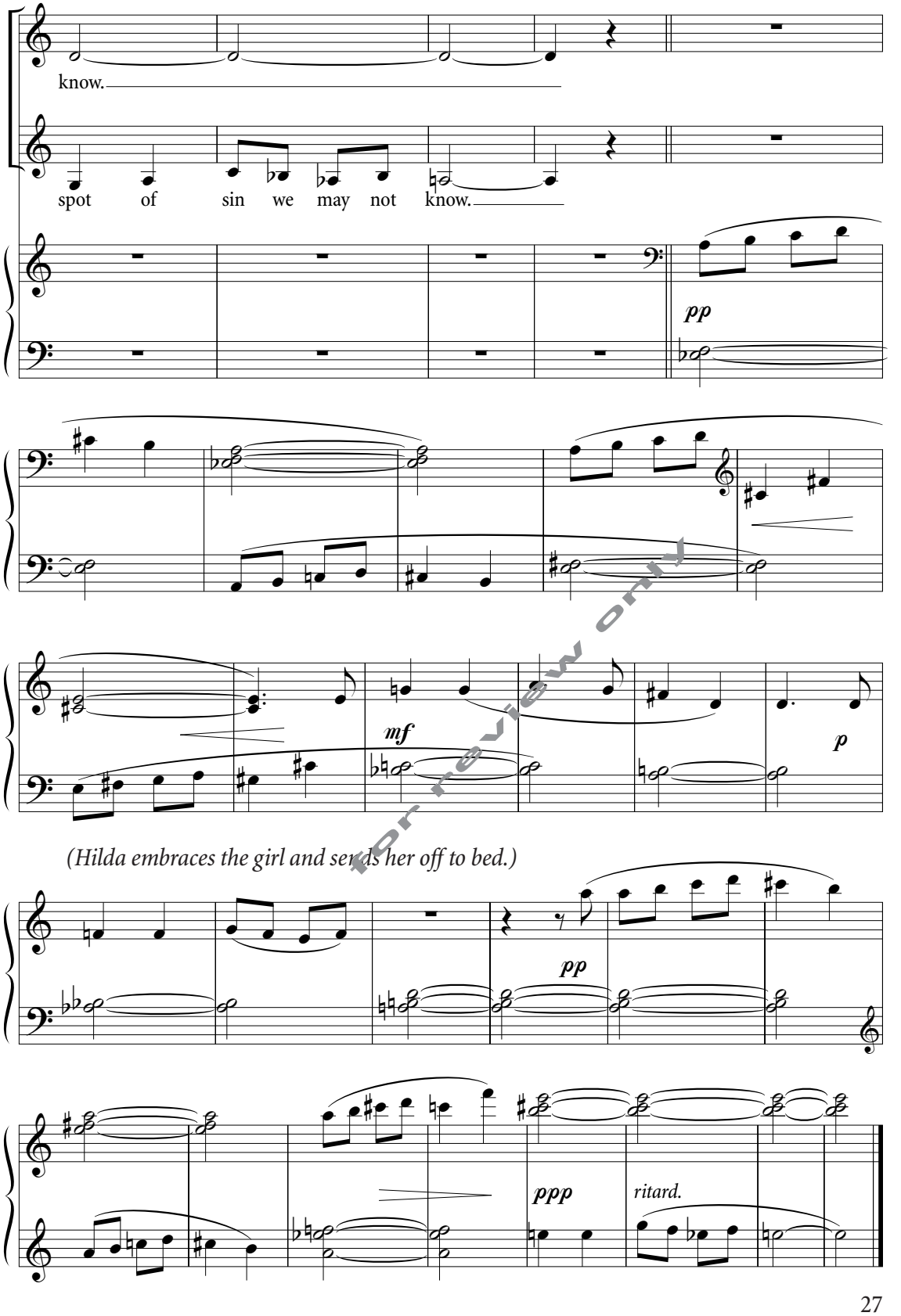

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