How Firm A Foundation

Irvin T. Nelson

Composer's Notes:

How Firm A Foundation is one of my favorite hymns. I love the traditional tune (FIDELITY, attr. J. Ellis, ca. 1889). It is big and powerful, and I love to play it on the organ. But I'm always frustrated because seldom are the last four verses sung, which to me are by far the most important. Admittedly, it is a long hymn. It takes about five minutes to sing all seven verses (but it feels more like 10 minutes with all the repeated lyrics at the end of each verse). So, the norm in many congregations is to just sing the first three verses. What a travesty! When I wrote this tune in 2005, my motivation was to shorten the time it takes to sing all seven verses. I succeeded; this tune takes about three minutes. It is not as powerful and majestic as the original, nor is it written for choir or congregation, but it makes a nice vocal solo.

In 2023, I revisited the hymn and improved the piano accompaniment. I also decided to revise the lyrics. First published in 1787, the original lyrics (attr. Robert Keen, ca. 1787) are written in the antiquated formal language that was commonly used in religious settings at that time, which for most people today is difficult to understand. Additionally, it is a very awkward lyric because it is hard to determine who is speaking. If you analyze it carefully, the first two verses are spoken by a person (a minister?) and the last five verses are spoken by God, but there is no obvious transition. I remember as a child being confused by this. Also, in some verses God calls us "you" and in others he calls us "thee". This was also confusing to me at a young age. In my revised lyrics, Jesus Christ speaks all seven verses, in the singular first person, to you as an individual. The message of the hymn is unchanged, but it is communicated in contemporary English.

I hope you will enjoy this hymn as much as I have enjoyed composing it.

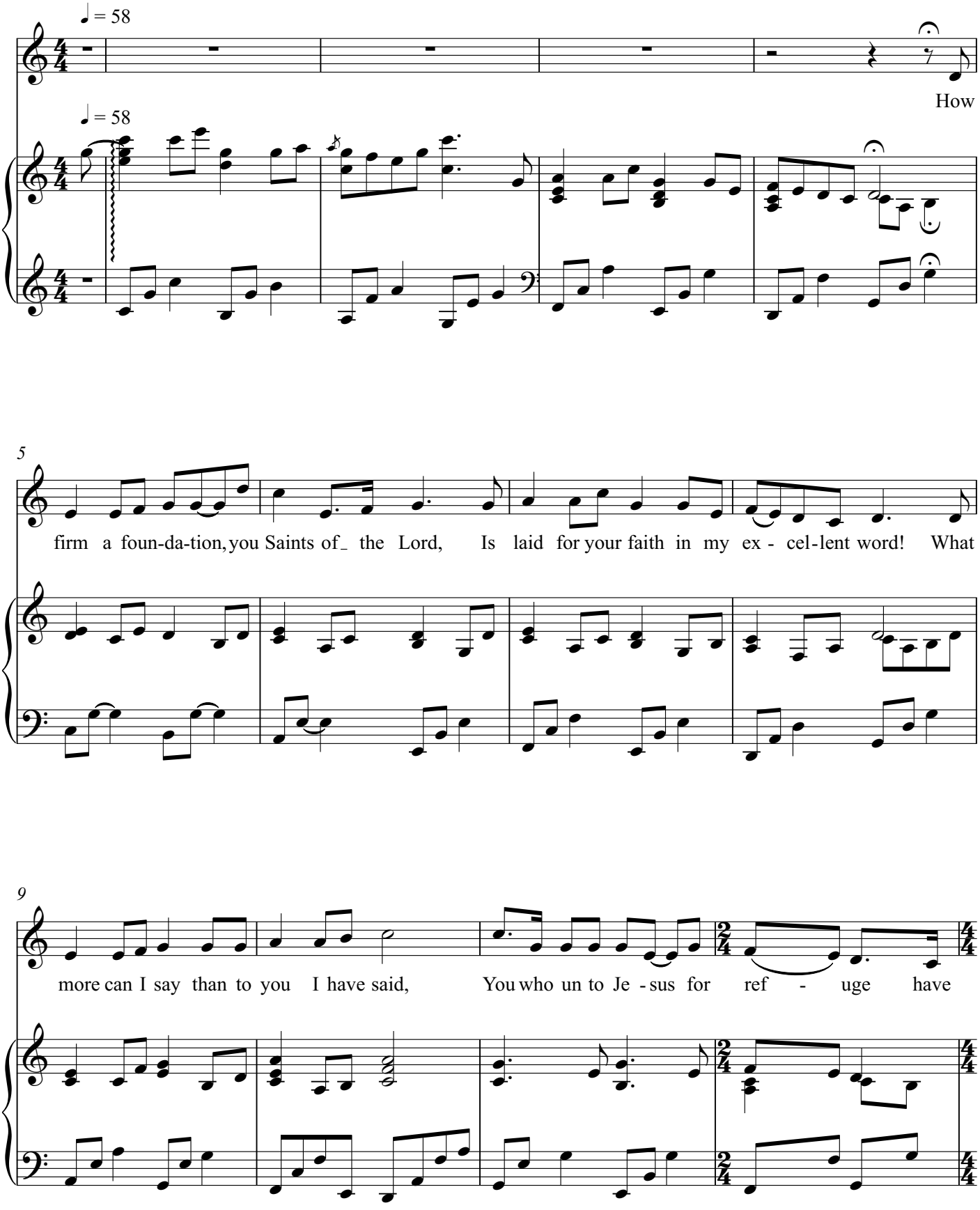
Irv Nelson
July 28, 2023

Lyrics attr. to Robert Keen, ca. 1787
Modernized by Irvin T. Nelson

How Firm A Foundation

Tenor Solo

Music by Irvin T. Nelson



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13

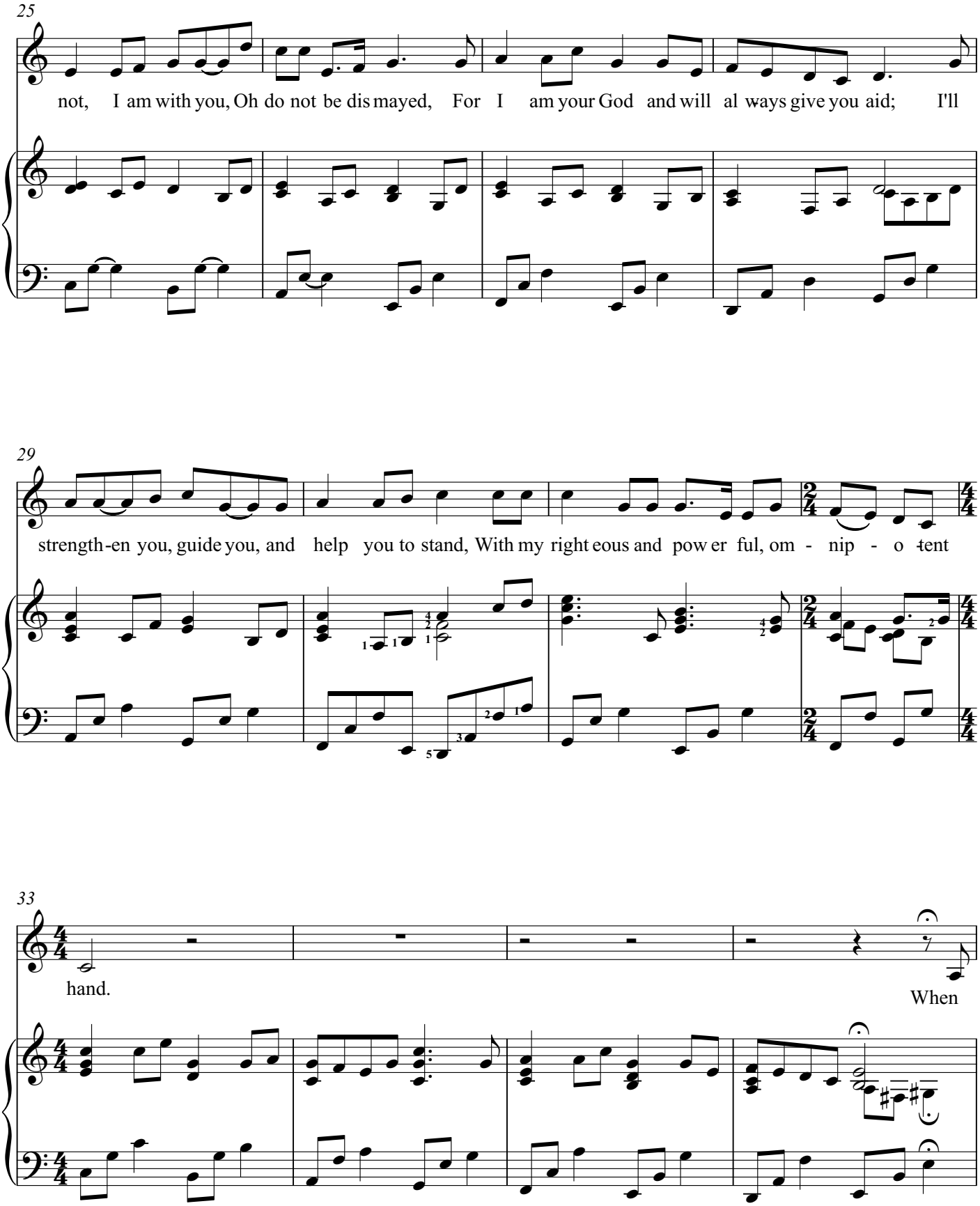
fled? In ev' - ry con di tion, in sick - ness, in health, In

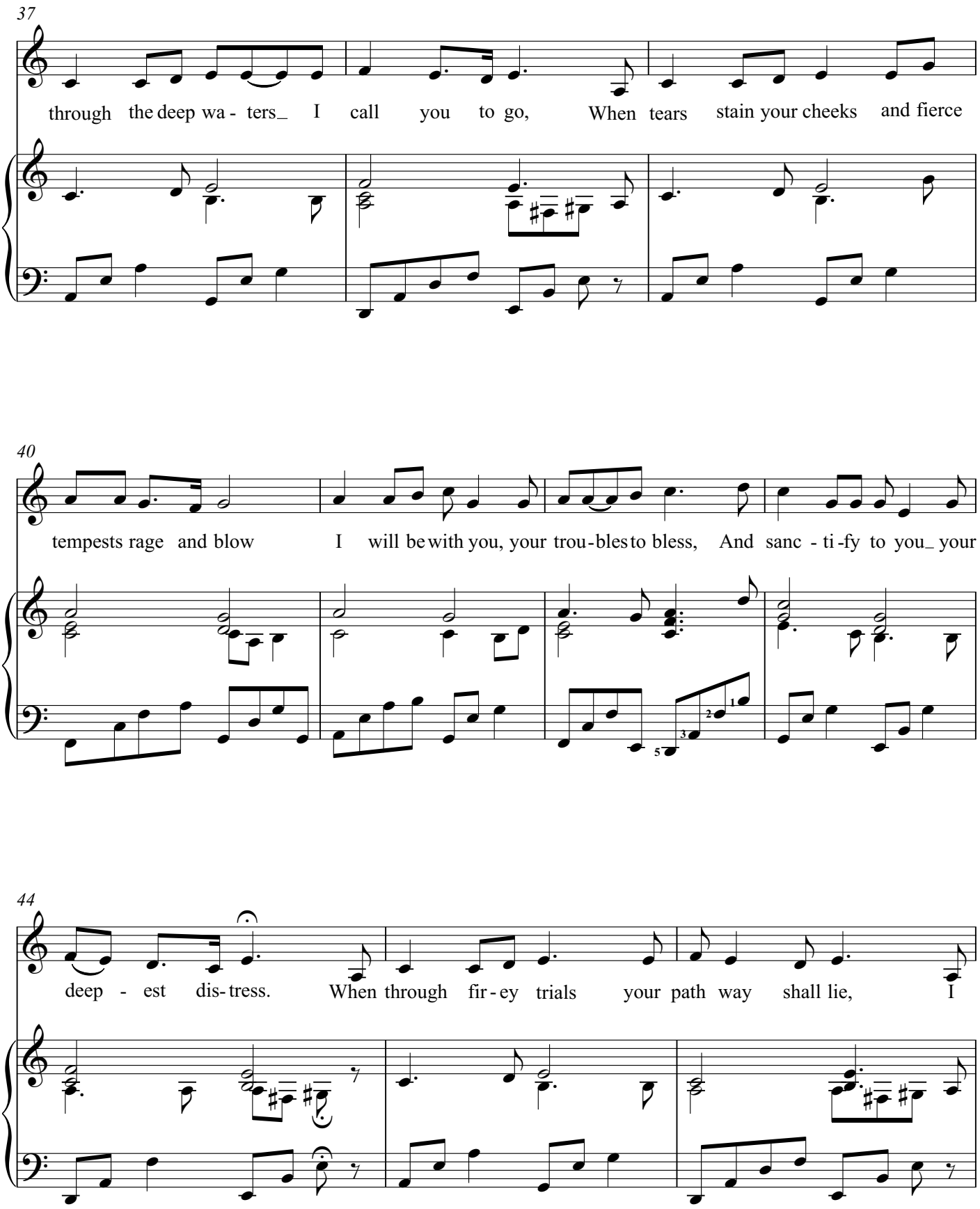
17

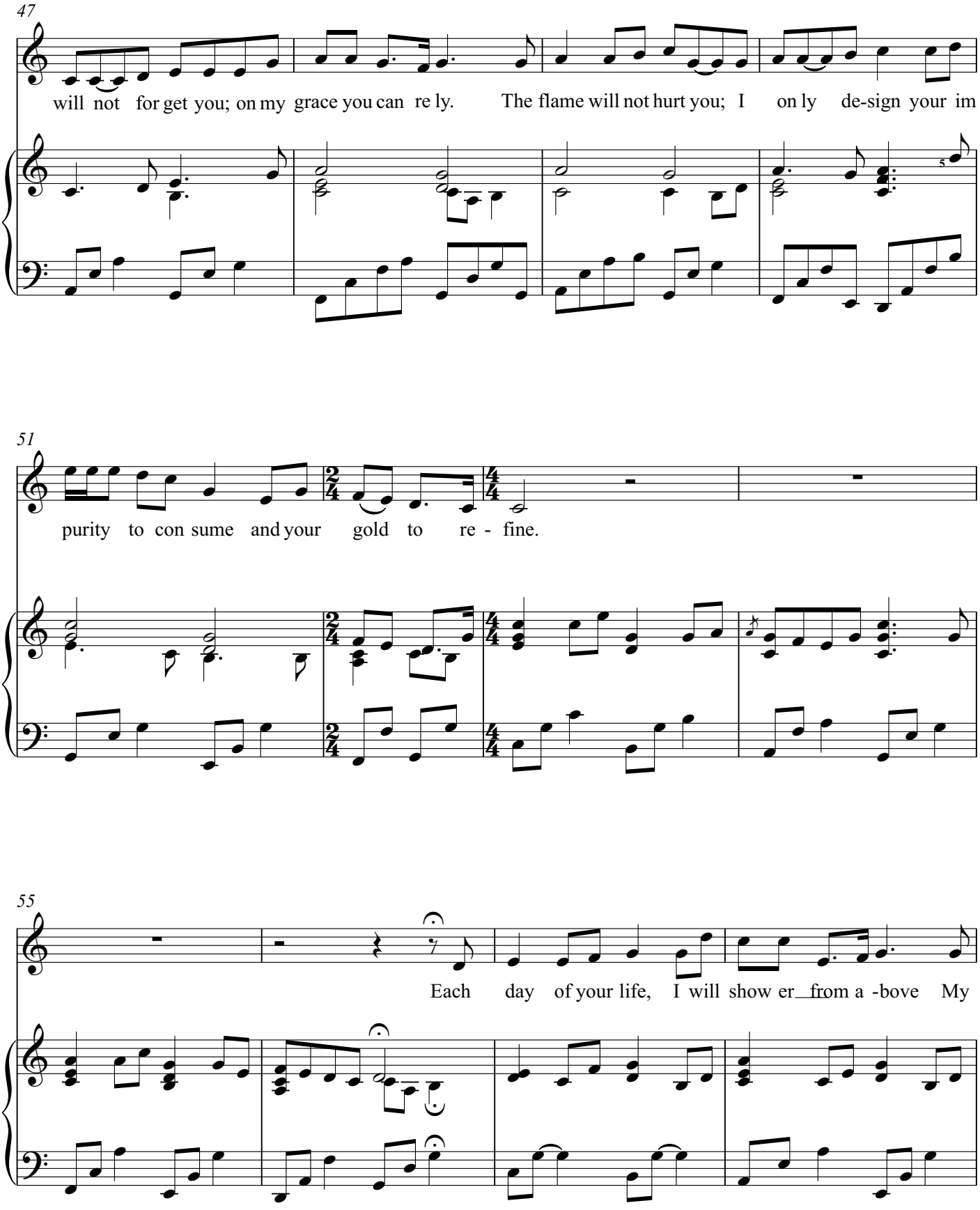
pov - er - ty's depths or a - bound-ing in wealth, At home or a broad, on the land or the sea, What-

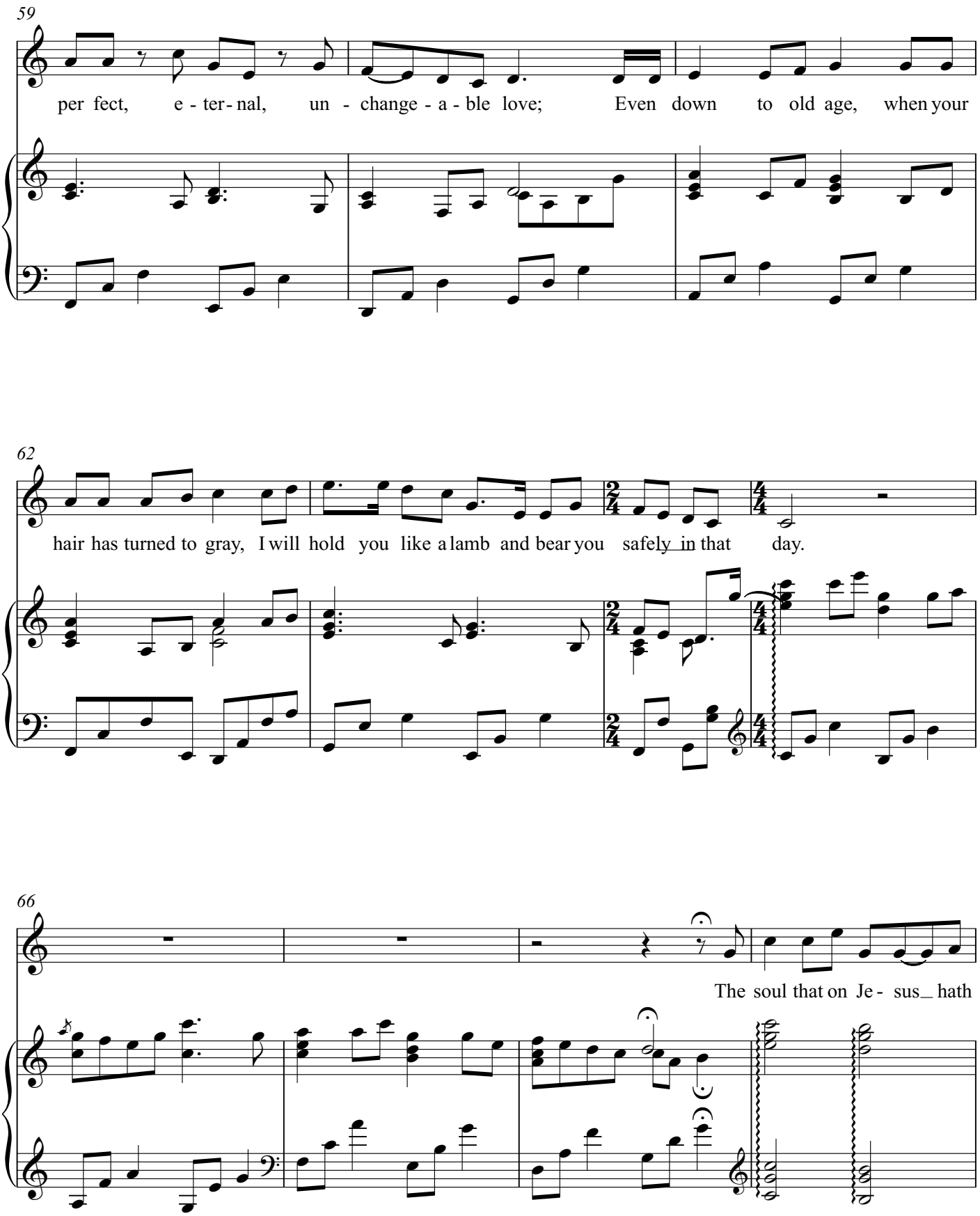
21

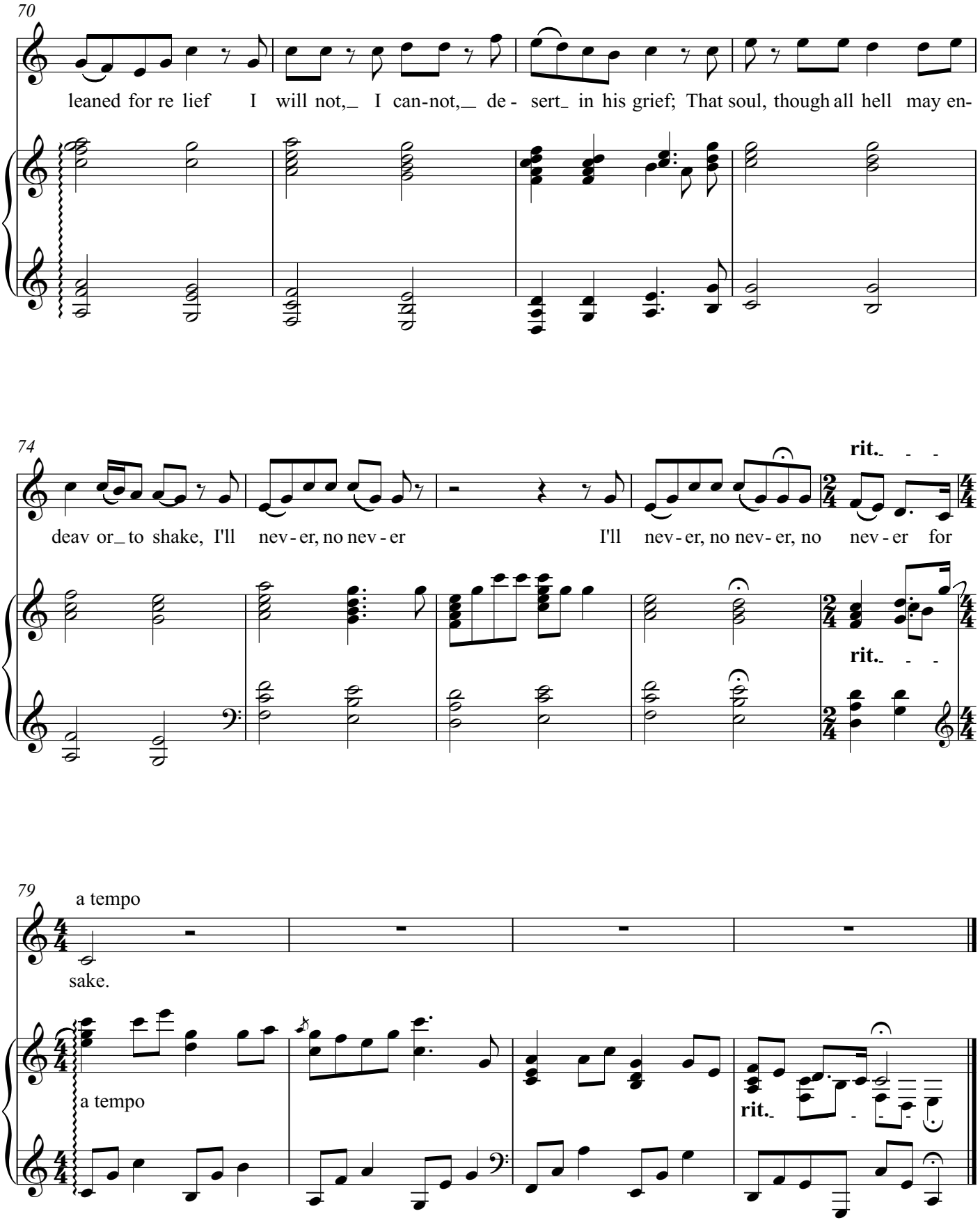
ev - er you are facing, I your strength will ev - er be. Fear


25
not, I am with you, Oh do not be dis mayed, For I am your God and will al ways give you aid; I'll
29
strength-en you, guide you, and help you to stand, With my right eous and pow er ful, om - nip - o tent
33
hand.
When


37
through the deep wa - ters_ I call you to go, When tears stain your cheeks and fierce
40
tempests rage and blow I will be with you, your trou-bles to bless, And sanc - ti-fy to you_ your
44
deep - est dis-tress. When through fir-ey trials your path way shall lie, I


47
will not for get you; on my grace you can re ly. The flame will not hurt you; I on ly de-sign your im
51
purity to con sume and your gold to re - fine.
55
Each day of your life, I will show er from a -bove My


59
per fect, e - ter - nal, un - change - a - ble love; Even down to old age, when your
62
hair has turned to gray, I will hold you like a lamb and bear you safely in that day.
66
The soul that on Je - sus hath


70
leaned for re lief I will not,_ I can-not,__ de - sert_ in his grief; That soul, though all hell may en-
74
rit.
deav or_ to shake, I'll nev - er, no nev - er I'll nev - er, no nev - er, no nev - er for
rit.
79
a tempo
sake.
a tempo
rit.