Susan Porter

# Performing Anglo-American Opera: Why and How?

This summer I chanced to see a performance of a thoroughly mutilated modern version of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals*. My sorrow at seeing Sheridan's sparkling, witty language reduced to a parody of the worst of 1890s banality and cliché was tempered somewhat by the consideration that it was being performed. Modern audiences are at least aware of such eighteenth-century dramatic masterpieces as Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* and *The Rivals*, and Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*.

When was the last time you saw an eighteenth-century English opera performed? We re still fighting the ridiculous notion that all eighteenth-century English opera was "ballad opera" and that John Gay's 1729 *The Beggar's Opera* (the only title that most people know) is the epitome of accomplishment in the field. Far from it! *The Beggar's Opera*, while clever and innovative, was thoroughly outdated within a decade or two. Its music, like that of its imitators, was largely simple and familiar tunes assembled by the playwright and supplied with parodied texts. The musicians' job was to play the familiar tune (normally once through) and supply a simple harmony.

By 1750 the professional musicians attached to most English theatres had taken things in hand and were providing more interesting music. Under the pressure of limited money and time, they collected music wherever they could find it, but took advantage of their broader experience to find music from "real" operas by English and Italian composers as well as from popular and traditional music sources. They began to collaborate more closely with the playwright to provide a better wedding of music and text, and they began to write more interesting accompaniments.

By the end of the century, theatrical musicians were still doing a certain amount of borrowing and recycling, due as much to the appropriateness of the musical style as to the demands of the job. They had become not just arrangers, however, but real theatrical composers, writing the great majority of the music used for most new productions, and borrowing only when necessary or appropriate. The resulting operas were performed in every playhouse in England and America, and while they were not always considered the epitome of culture, they were the most secure money makers in the repertoire for theatre troupes and managers.

The music found in these late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century musical entertainments has a rich variety of forms, genres, and styles. What was funny then is usually still funny today, and there are hilarious songs with

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wild and witty texts, often specifically designed for the clever character actors who performed them. Charles Dibdin was a master performer, author, and composer of patter arias. In *Lionel and Clarissa*, for example, he had Mr. Parsons singing:

> Zounds sir then I'll tell you without any Jest
> The thing of all things which I hate and detest
> A Coxcomb, a Fop, a dainty Milk-sop
> Who essenc'd and dizen'd from bottom to top
> Looks just like a doll for a Milliner's shop,
> A thing full of prate
> and Pride and Conceit
> All Fashion no weight
> that shrugs and takes snuff
> and carries a Muff
> A minikin, finikin, French powder Puff.
> Now sir I fancy I've told you enough.

The whole thing (including text reprises within lines) is repeated at a faster speed. This and other works by Dibdin are full of such pieces, many of them written for his own performance. Worthy of Gilbert and Sullivan? Say, rather, "Did Gilbert and Sullivan live up to the tradition of Charles Dibdin?"

The eighteenth century produced a series of coloratura singers, mostly sopranos and tenors, whose skill has never been surpassed. The da capo aria was a standard in English opera. Songs written for such singers as Elizabeth Billington (1765-1818) reveal an endless variety of highly ornamented arias written for a soprano with an extensive range and an even more extensive breath control. In *Richard Coeur de Lion*, William Shield provided her an aria which goes up to F two and one-half octaves above middle C, regularly demands a series of held notes and runs each with up to six measures on a single breath, and allows for an improvised cadenza at the end (Figure 1).

Mozart was the master of ensemble writing in the late eighteenth century, but he was by no means alone in his accomplishment. English composers regularly wrote ensembles at dramatic climaxes or as act finales. There are comic ensembles, such as that in *The Two Misers* where a young couple (Harriet and Lively), mired in the mechanical difficulties of elopement, try to retrieve their lost travel money from a well, badgered continually by advice and instructions from her maid, then interrupted by the unexpected (and oblivious) appearance of their guardians, Hunks and Gripe, the two misers (Figure 2). Drama abounds in ensembles like the one in *Blue Beard* where two sisters and their servant sing of their hopes and despairs, while Blue Beard threatens his wife's immediate execution. Musical complexities enhance others, like the triple chorus of men settlers, women settlers, and Indians in Stephen Storace's *The Cherokee*, with the women lamenting, the men sing-

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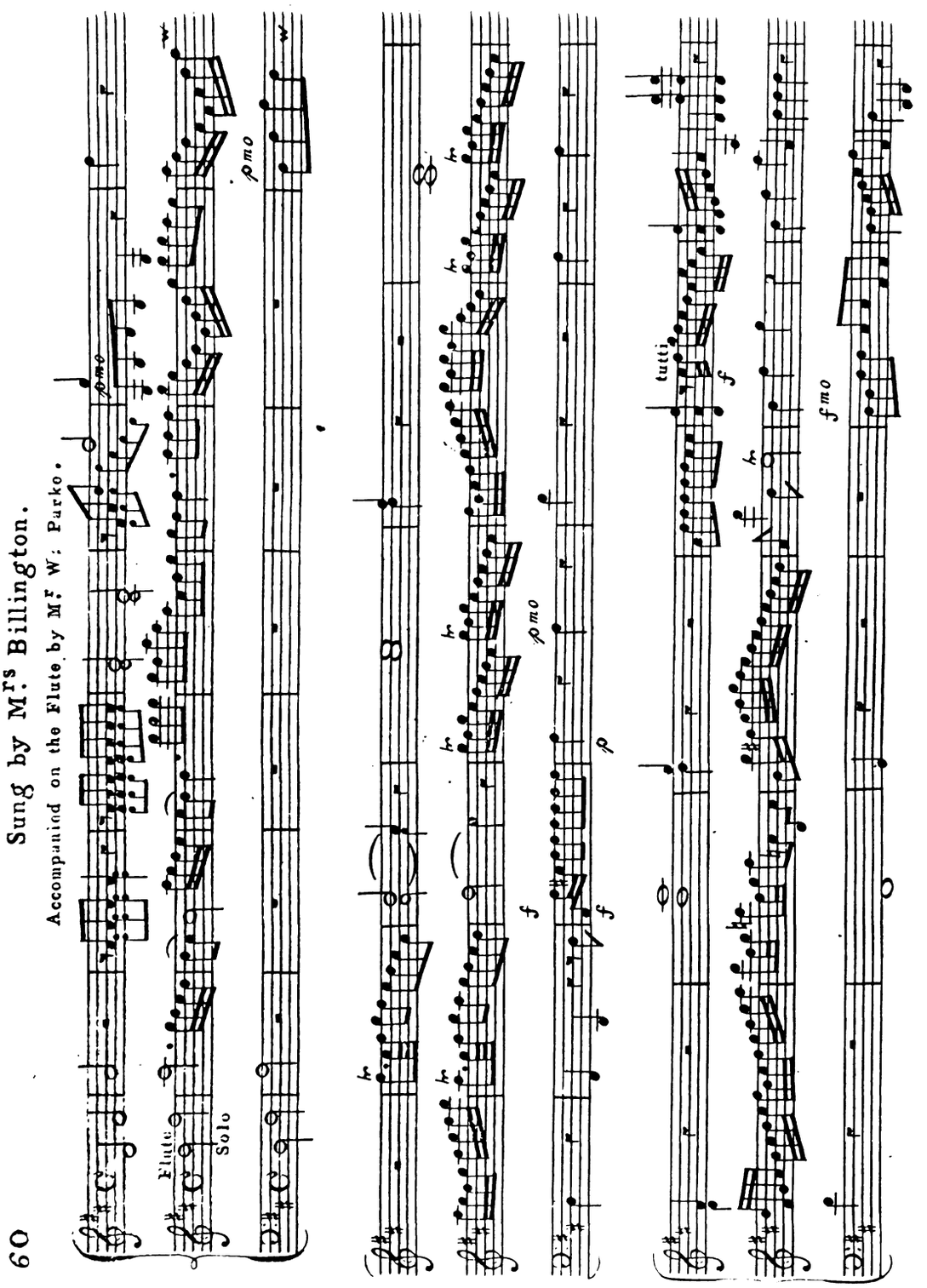


Figure 1. "Daughter of heav'n," *Richard Coeur de Lion*

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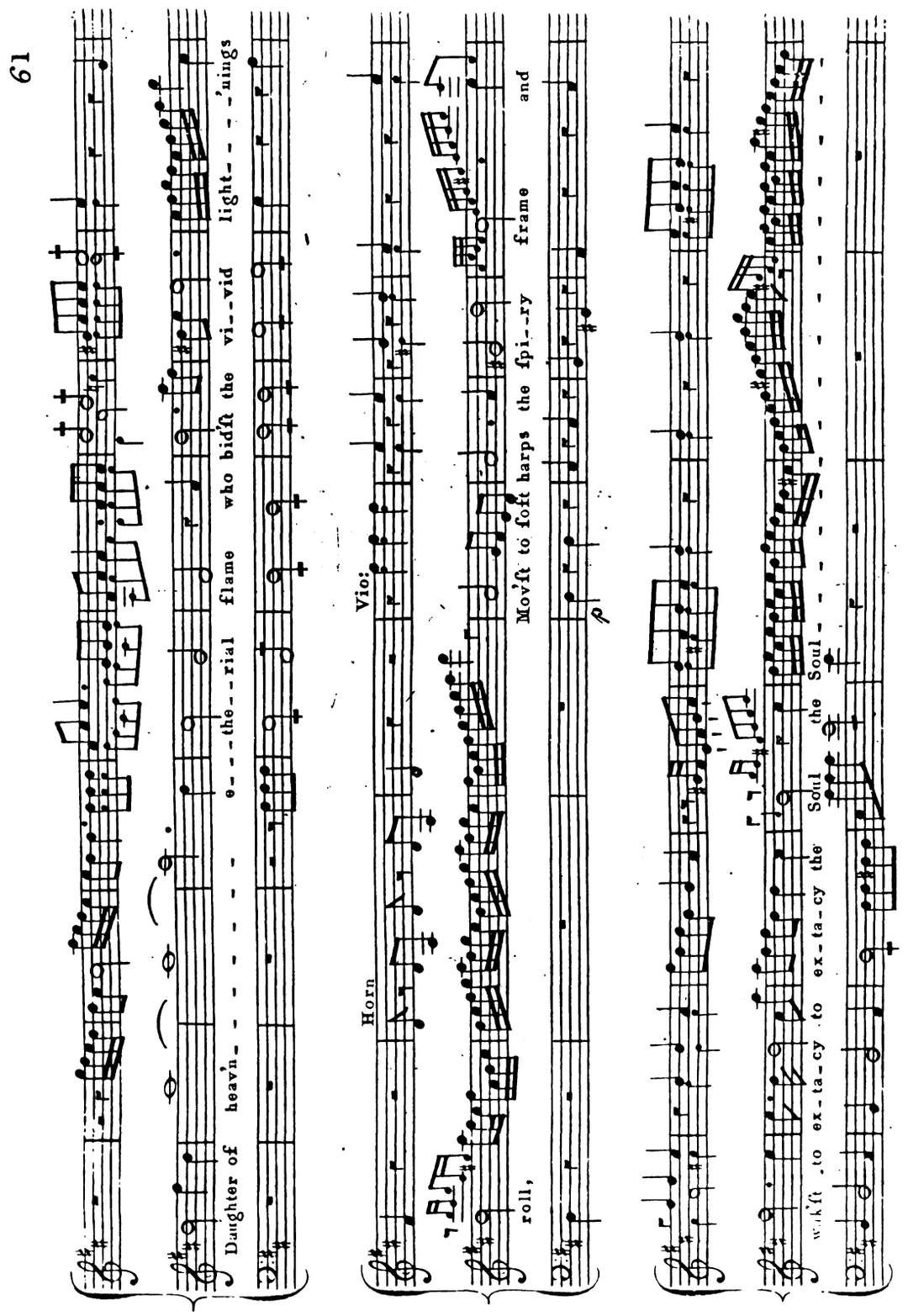


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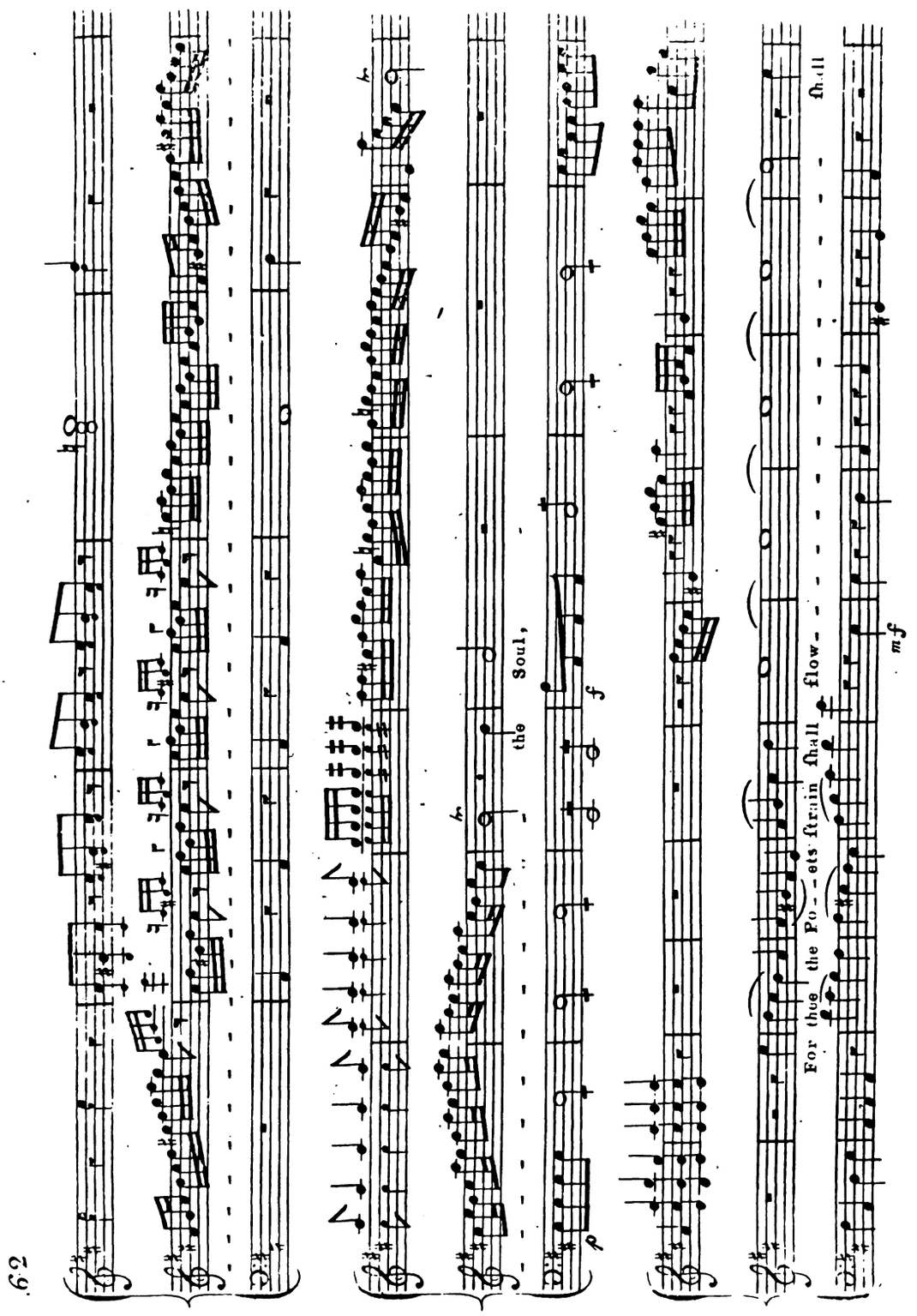


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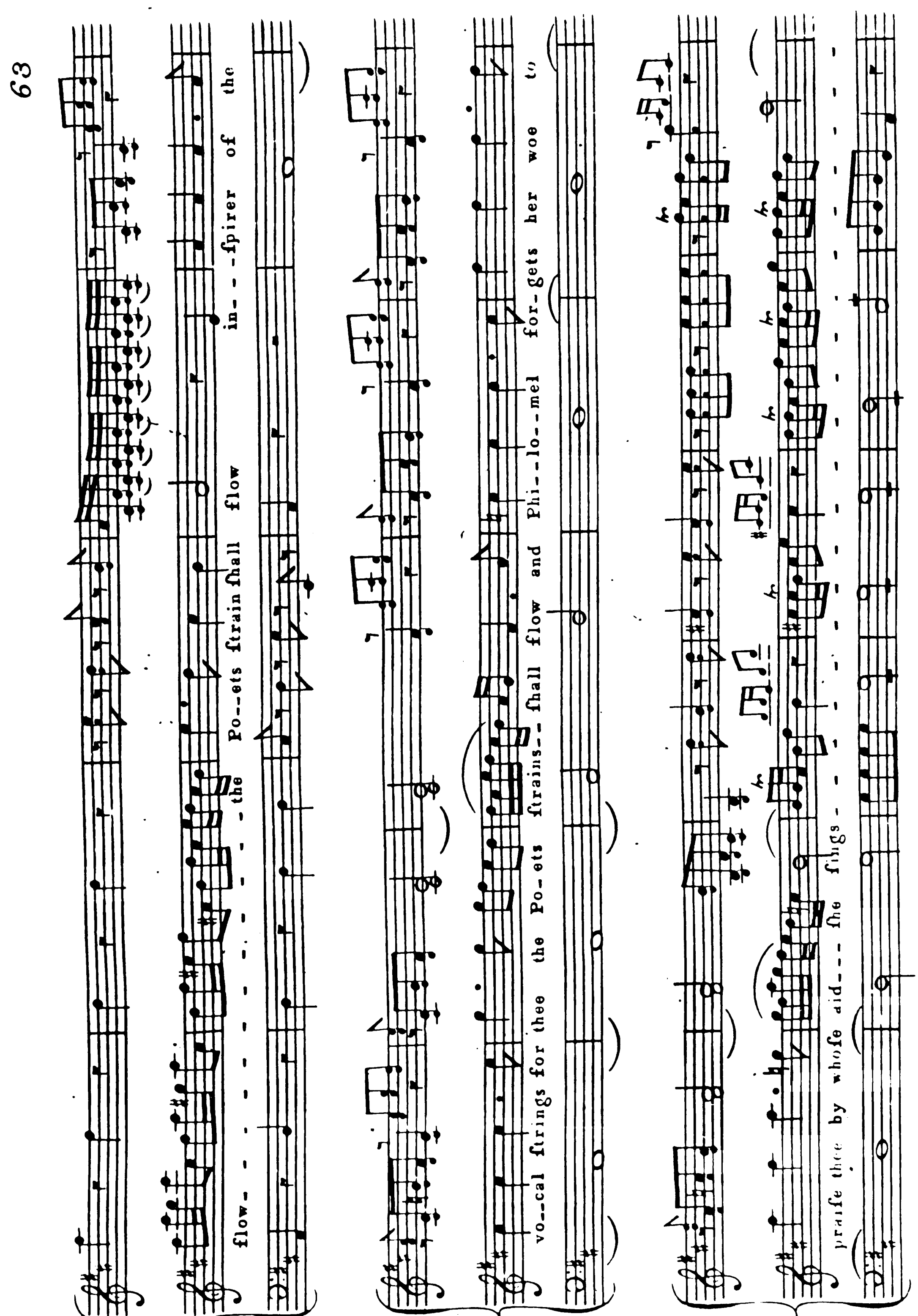


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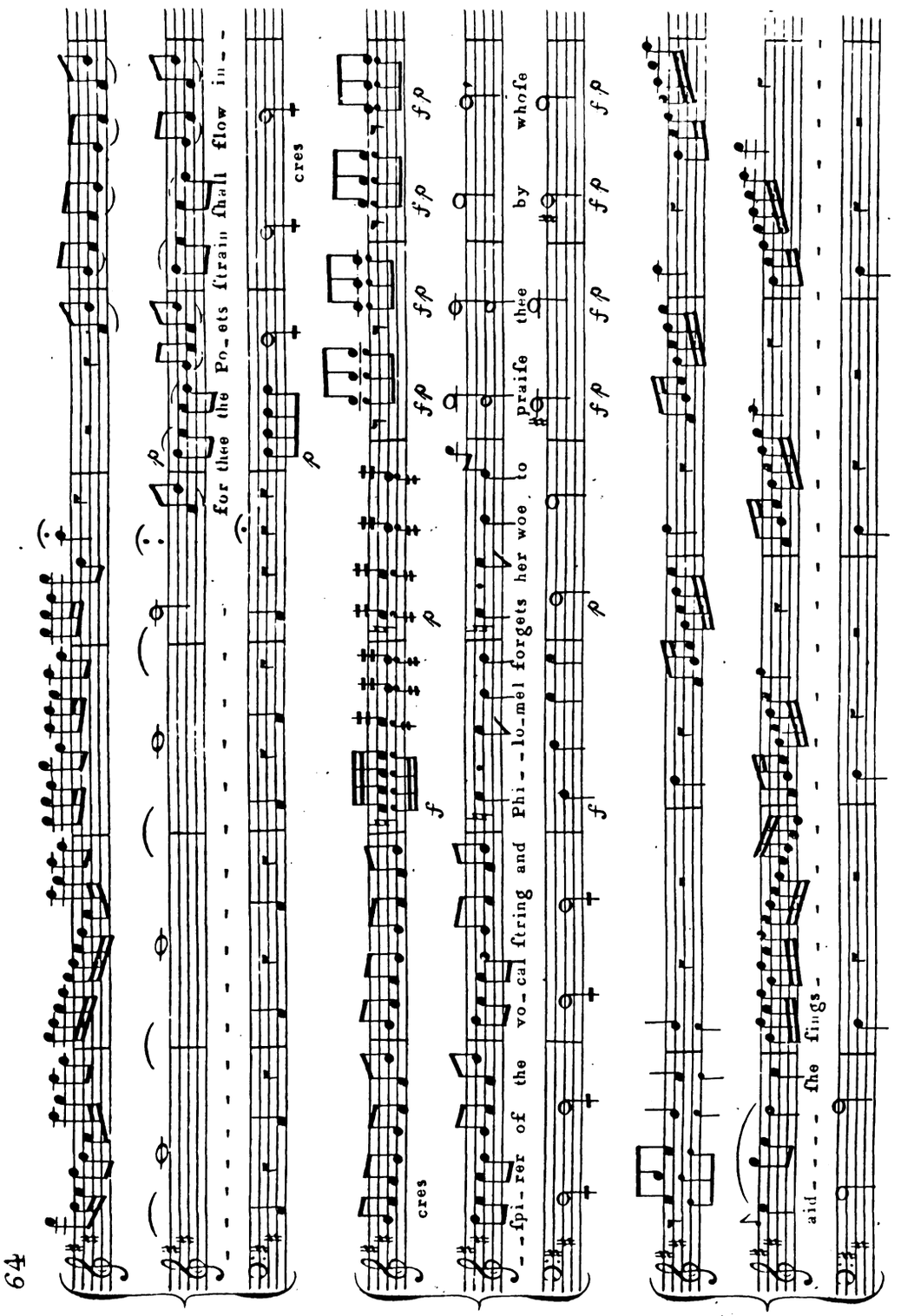


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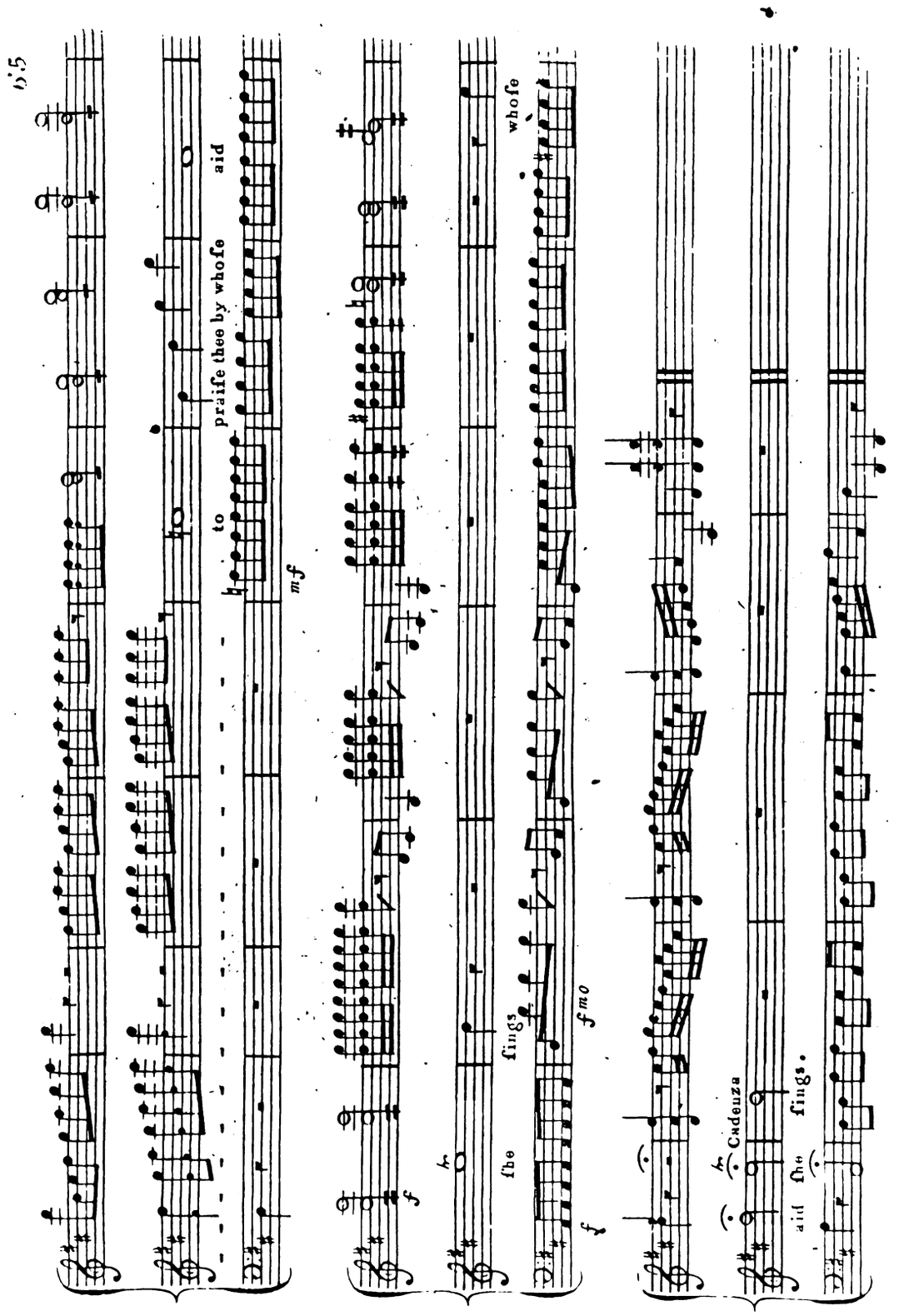


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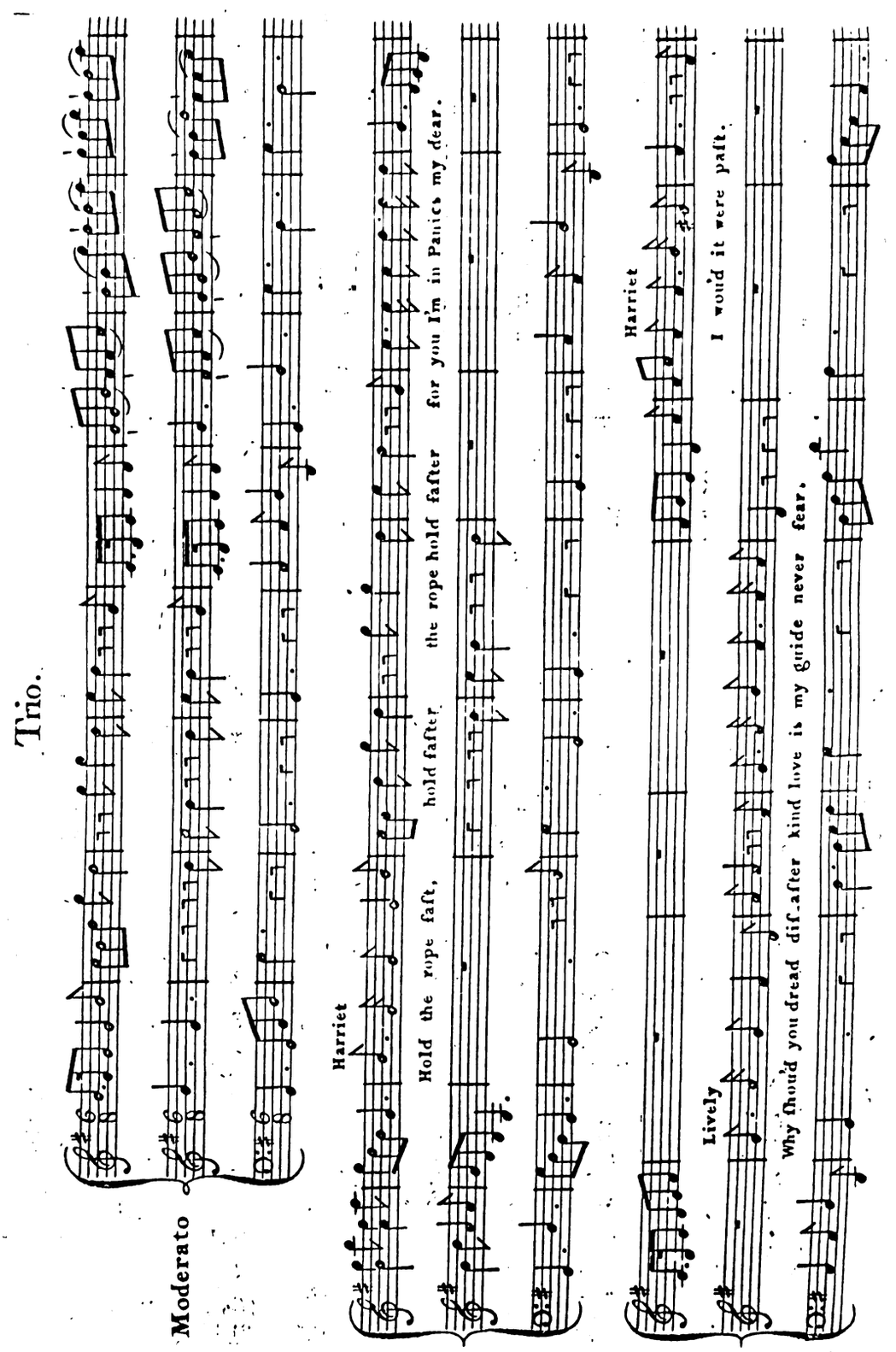


Figure 2. Comic ensemble, *The Two Misers*

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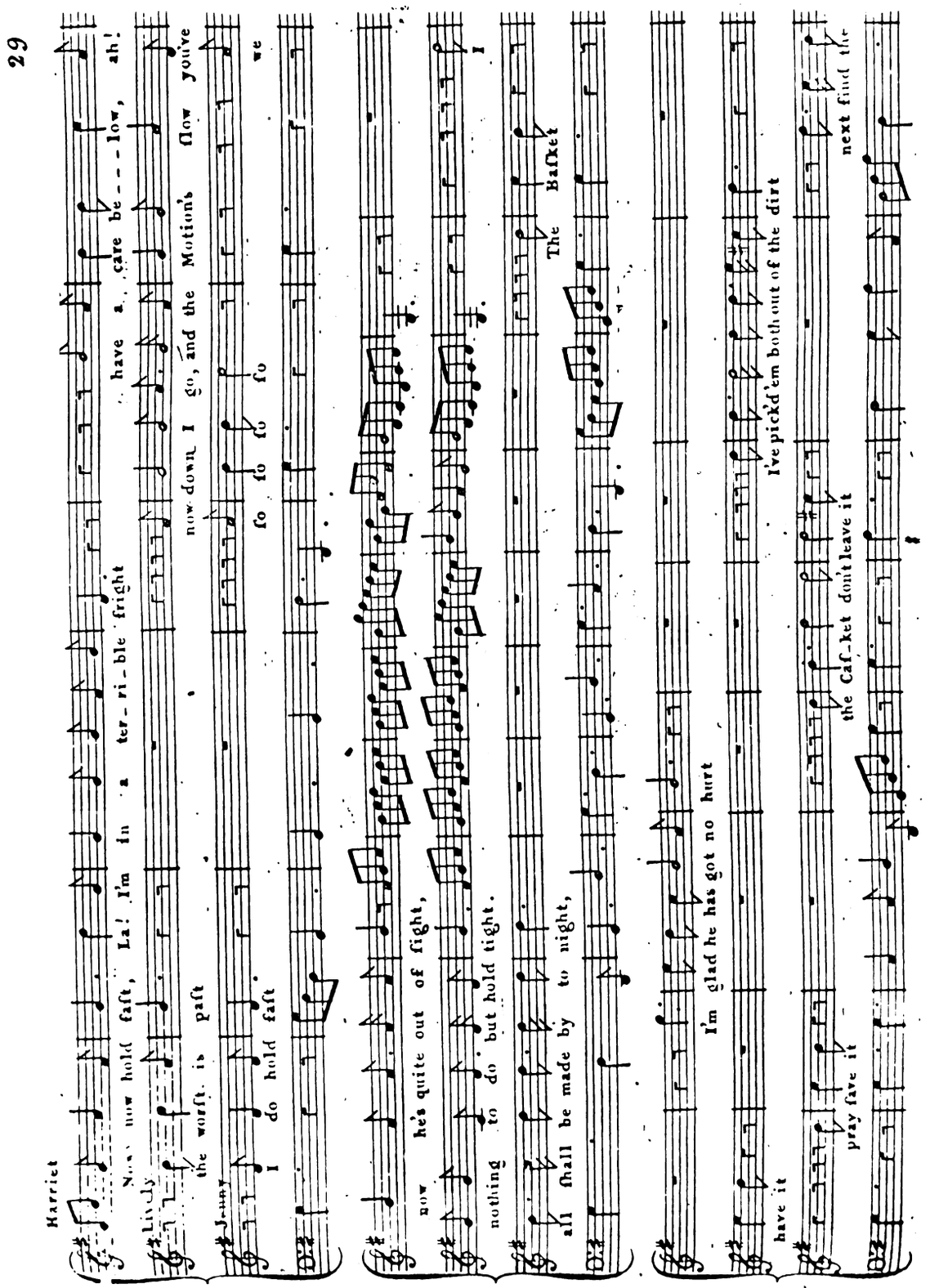


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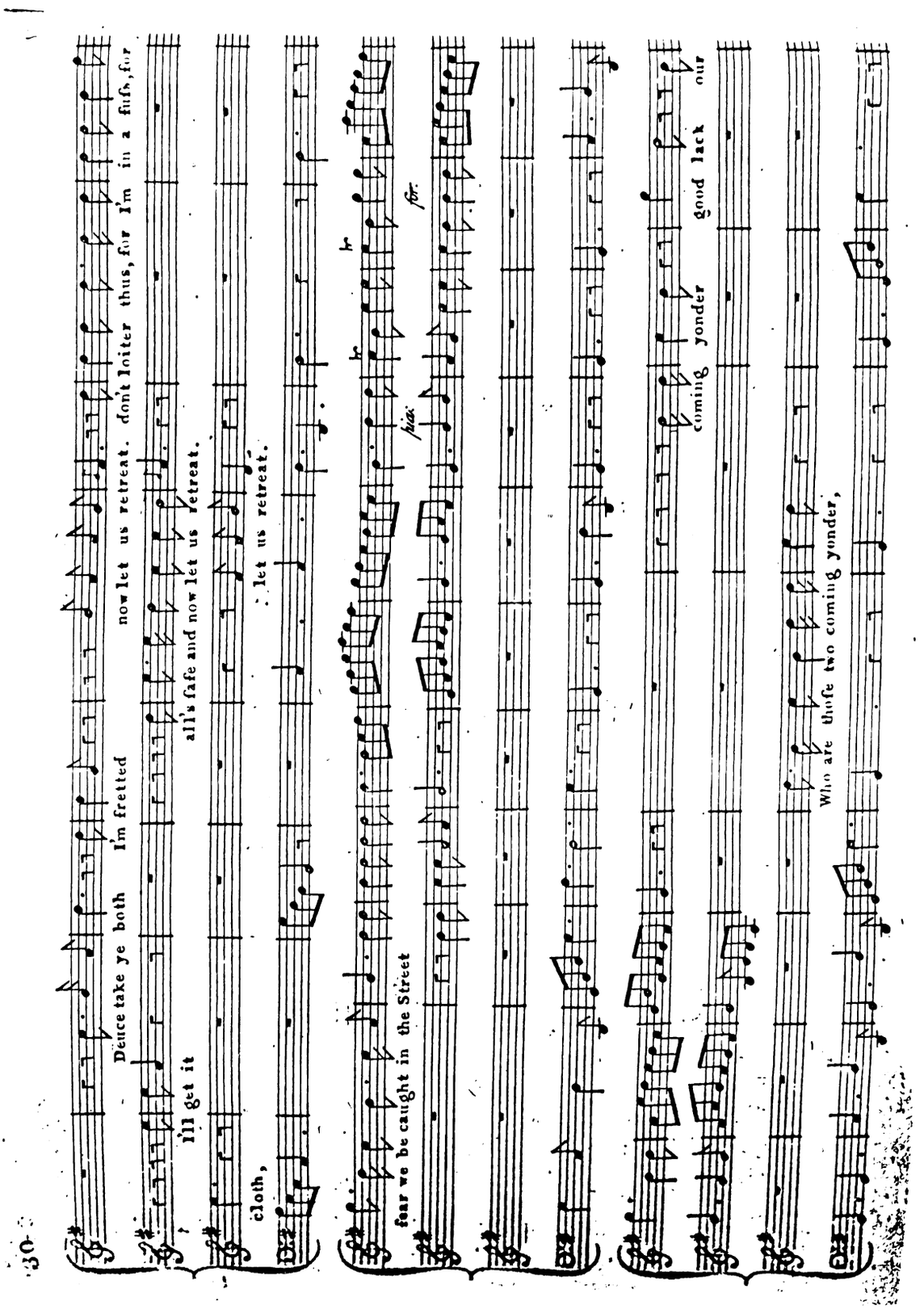


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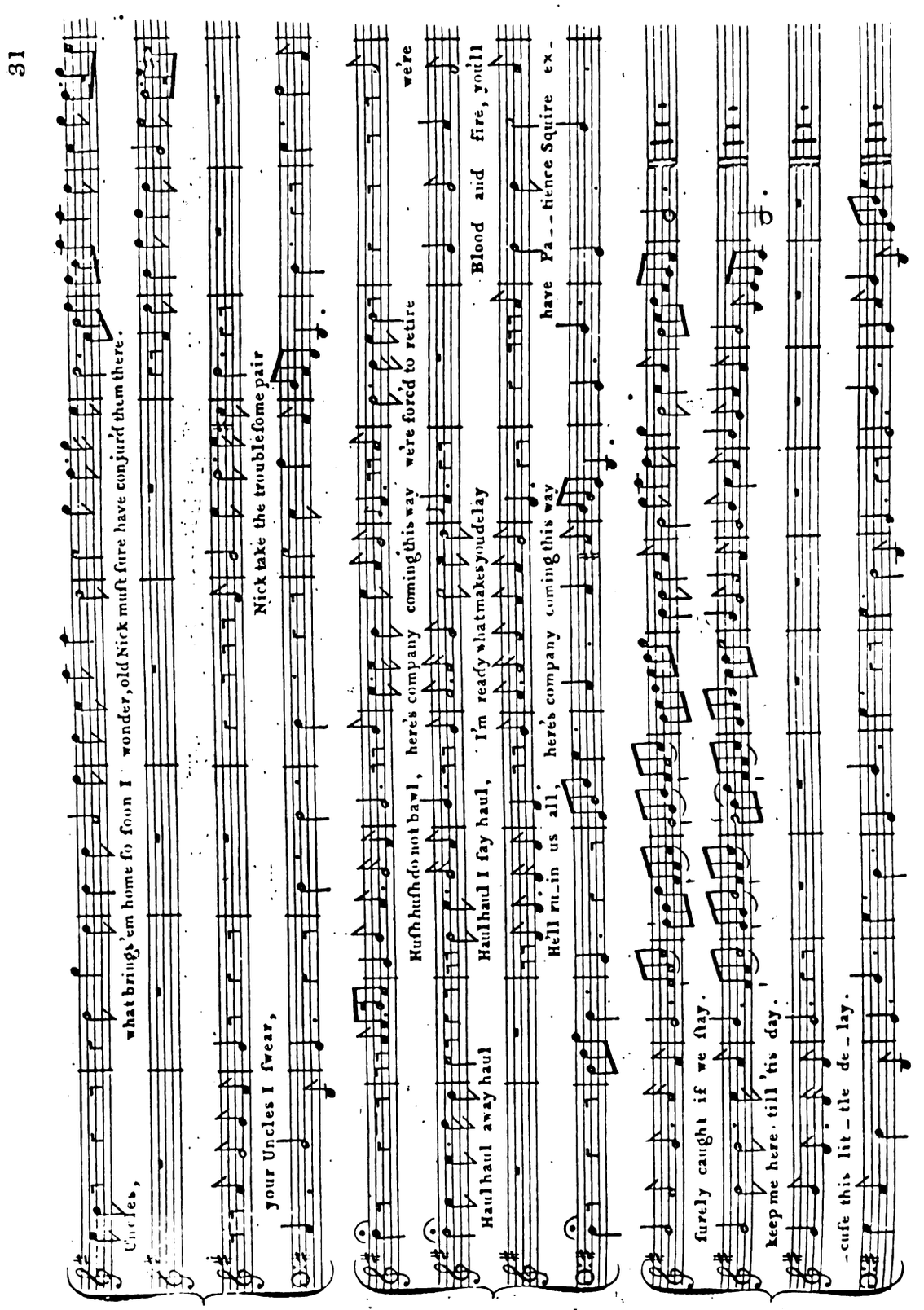


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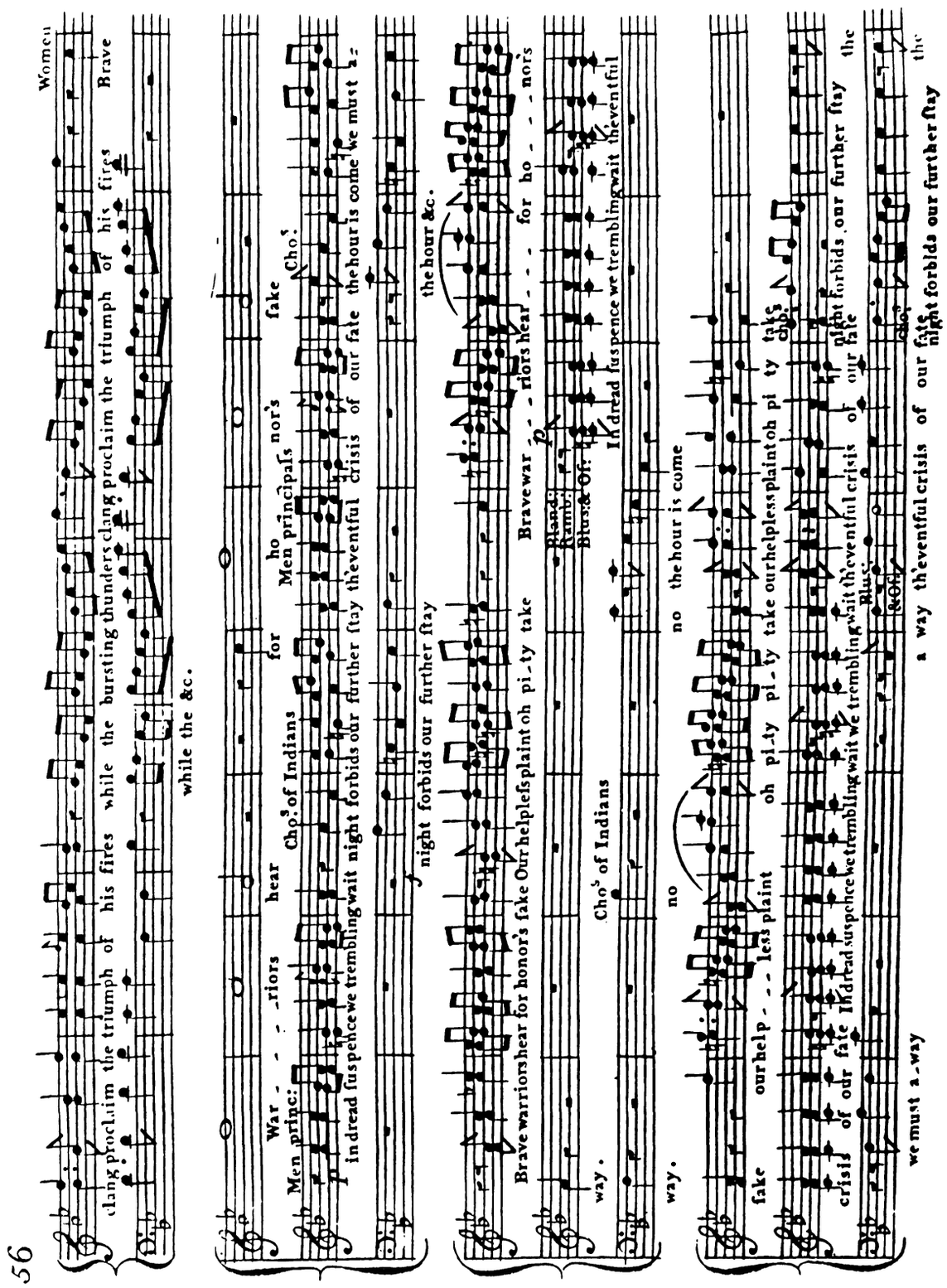


Figure 3. Triple chorus, *The Cherokee*

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ing their defiance of death, and the Indians gloating over their expected victory and trying to hurry things along (Figure 3).

There are also numerous catches and glees, a delight for both singer and listener. Many remained part of the repertory for amateur singers for years after their first performance. These include drinking songs by the score, along with hunting songs, pastoral songs, boating and mariners' songs, and many others. There are also overtures, marches, dances, and other instrumental works.

Traditional tunes were still part of many comic operas. Numerous authentic examples of Scots and Irish songs, as well as traditional songs from other cultures, real or imagined, can be found. The Irish and Scots songs were often provided with the ornamentation typical of their eighteenth-century performance. Theatrical composers seemed hard put to provide realistic music for Indians, Russians, Turks, and Arabs, but clichés abounded then as now, and there are plenty of attempts.

So why aren't these operas and entertainments still performed today? The answer is simple. Very few were published in full score, and very few manuscript full scores or parts survive. Most people are intimidated by the prospect of preparing scores and parts on the basis of existing piano/vocal scores. It is my hope, though, that the recent explosion of music software with the ability to transpose, to duplicate doubled parts, and to create parts from scores will make this prospect more appealing or at least more practical. So, if you or a friend has this ability, where do you begin?

The first thing to do is to find a work to perform. One guideline is to see how popular the work was with eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century audiences. If the piece didn't work for contemporary audiences, the chances are very small that it will turn out to be a hit now. If it only got a performance or two, keep looking. Find yourself a libretto, and see if you like the story. (Better yet, use the American Music Research Center's notebook of opera synopses as a starting point.) Then dig out the score and play through it. You should be able to find one or several that you'll like. Although most of these entertainments call for a cast which includes more men than women, the number, gender, and age of casts varies widely. Many operas have plenty of roles for amateur actors who can sing a little, but most have a role or two which demand skill and musical training.

No matter what work you select, the chances are strong that you will have to do a good portion of the orchestration yourself. Before you begin your score, you'll need to decide what the size and instrumentation of your orchestra will be. You can, of course, use just a keyboard instrument (harpsichord for early eighteenth century, piano for works written in the 1780s and later). The work will be greatly enhanced, however, by adding just a few instruments, perhaps in this order:

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* a violin, to play the melody on instrumental introductions, interludes, and postludes and figuration or harmony during songs;
* a cello to double the bass line;
* a flute or oboe to add variety of tone color and/or a harmony part on instrumental sections.

If you want to write for a characteristic small orchestra of the period, and are willing to spend more time providing figuration, countermelodies, rhythmic support, and harmonies typical of the time, you could get by very nicely with the following instrumentation:

| | |
|---|---|
| 2-3 | first violins |
| 2-3 | 2nd violins |
| 1-2 | viola |
| 1 | cello |
| 1 | bass |
| 2 | flutes |
| 2 | oboes or clarinets |
| 1-2 | bassoons |
| 2 | horns (doubling on trumpets) |

The next step is to locate all available scores for the work selected. These may range from an occasional printed full score (as in Roger Fiske's *Musica Britannica* edition of *No Song, No Supper*), to printed piano/vocal scores with just two staves containing unannotated melody and bass lines. In between are a few sets of manuscript orchestra parts (like those available at the British Museum for *Rosina* or at the New York Public Library for *The Voice of Nature*) and piano/vocal scores with all levels of completeness, instrumental suggestions, and written parts. If the score was reprinted at different times and places (i.e., once in London and once in Dublin, or perhaps once for Covent Garden and once for Drury Lane theatres in London), try to find a copy of each. You may find different settings of the musical numbers, totally new numbers added for a different performance, or simply more information about the musical possibilities available.

The American Music Research Center has a very large and useful collection of scores, almost all photocopied from English sources. Be sure to check major American libraries, such as the Library of Congress, New York Public Library, Boston Public Library, and Harvard Libraries for additional copies. Check, too, for possible American additions to the operas, which don't normally show up in AMRC files at this time. You may also find facsimile editions, such as those published by Kalmus in recent years, or modern editions, such as several useful volumes in the Recent Researches in American Music series from A-R Editions. The new Garland collection of nineteenth-

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century American theatre music will contain facsimile editions of several operas from this era, including *Children in the Wood* and *Blue Beard.*

In most cases, finding the score is only the first step in acquiring the orchestral parts which will actually be useful to you in your performance. Once you've assembled all the available materials, think of yourself as an eighteenth-century theatre musician, doing what had to be done in every theatre to prepare for the next opening. You can also consider yourself a musical detective, looking for clues which will reveal hidden riches of music for your chosen opera.

If all you have available for your use is a simple 2-stave piano/vocal score, you can still make some reasonable assumptions about orchestration.

* The first violin will probably play the melody much of the time, either alone or doubling the voice.
* In the 14-18 member orchestra suggested above, as many as six (violas, cello, bass, bassoons) may be doubling on the bass line at any time. (Yes, violas sometimes play harmony parts, and bassoons and cellos occasionally get melodies.)
* Any harmony cues provided in the upper staff are probably from the second violin part.
* Flutes and oboes or clarinets often double the violins.
* Horns most frequently play harmony parts (and clarinets sometimes do too).

Sometimes a great deal more is to be learned from a two-stave piano/vocal score. Look, for example, at the beginning of the score for the aria "Ye Gloomy Thoughts ye Fears perverse" from Charles Dibdin's setting of *Lionel and Clarissa or The School for Fathers* (Figure 4). This score provides only two staves, but a great deal of other useful information is included. The introduction provides most of the parts needed for both first and second violin, as well as a complete bass line. By comparing the figuration in the introduction with the opening of the vocal line, you can see immediately the rhythm which Dibdin has in mind to accompany that section. As the singer enters with the rondo theme, Dibdin supplies a figured bass which helps to determine richer harmonies for the strings, while they play chords using the rhythm from the introduction (four eighth notes then a rest in the treble, continual eighth notes in the bass).

Dibdin provides even more information by the use of small-note cues within the vocal line. The small notes after the words perverse, disperse, and wind provide the first violin part (the first two identical with the figuration in the introduction). At the words "gloomy thoughts ye fears perverse" on the fourth system and "Like sullen vapors" on the fifth system, we have a harmonic rhythm which changes twice in each measure. I'd probably have the entire string section playing the eighth notes (paying careful attention to

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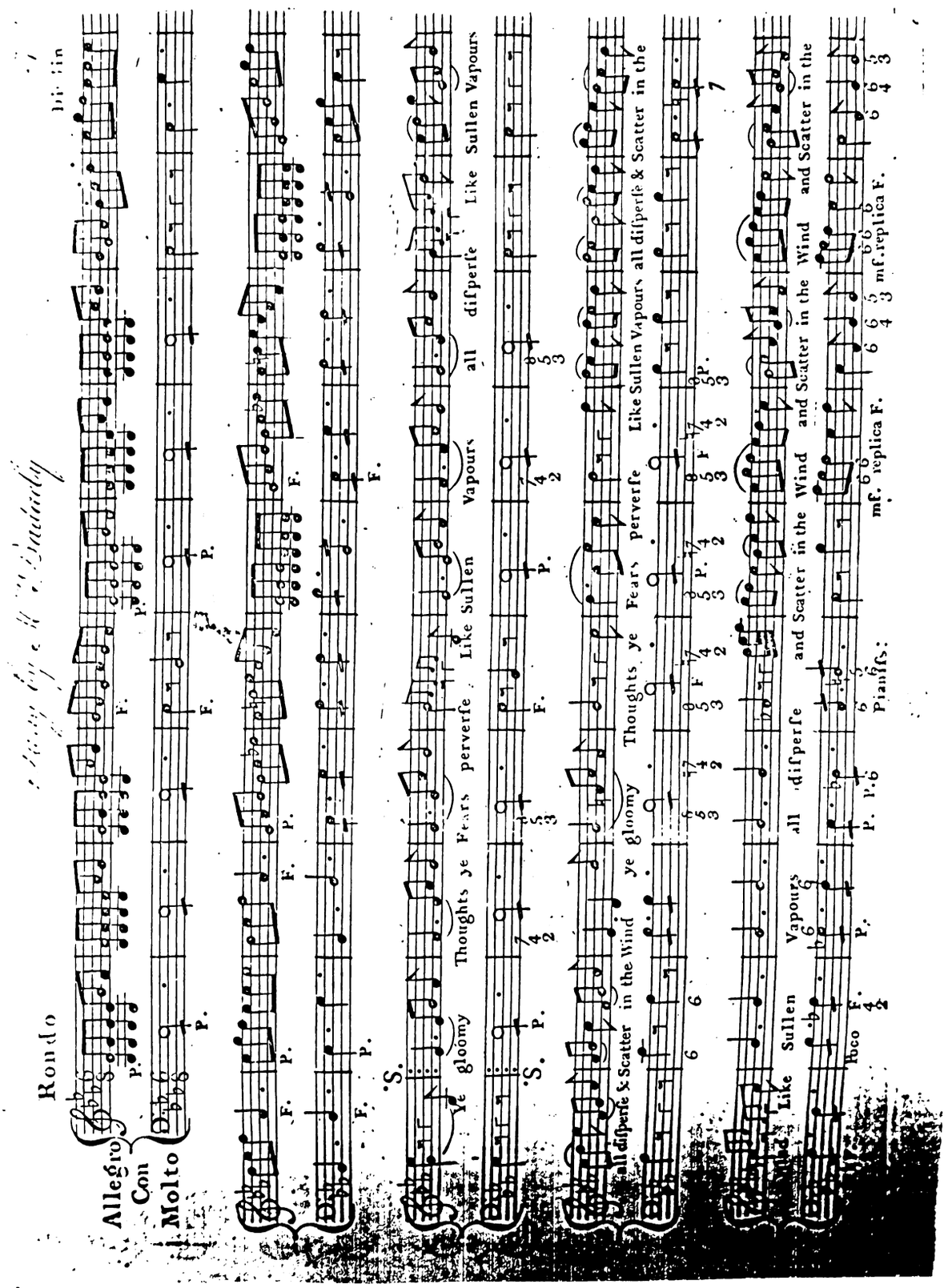


Figure 4. "Ye Gloomy Thoughts," *Lionel and Clarissa*

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Dibdin's dynamic markings). The marking at the end of the page "mf replica F" seems to be an indication that the same pattern is repeated (as it is two measures later) but with growing volume.

Another two-stave score is provided for "Once more my Lyre" from William Shield's *Richard Coeur de Lion* (Figure 5). Here the first four measures of the introduction are identical with the first four measures of the vocal part, and probably provide first and second violin parts and bass in both cases. All parts, including the bass, appear to be legato in this section. As the second phrase begins, the bass part changes style, and is more rhythmically disjunct. Now we need to consider the text. The lyre has just been told "be still" and we have an ominous warning. Perhaps a figure similar to that in the second half of the introduction can be used here (at eighth-note rather than sixteenth-note level). At the word "count" the harmony parts as well as the bass indicate a more legato style. A repeated sixteenth-note growling begins in the bass as we move through a phrase about "evil works and evil days," while the violins continue to support the vocal line with doubling and with harmony. At "And now my lyre" the style changes once again, with separation in the bass line, once again perhaps suggesting the syncopation of the previous passage. Here, though, we have another important clue, supplied seemingly as an afterthought. The word "arco" in the last vocal measure surely indicates that the passage before, in at least the bass part, was pizzicato. This offers interesting possibilities, then, for the previous six measures, where we may have an imitation of the lyre by means of pizzicato chords. If we have this pattern in those measures, what about measures 5-6 as well? And then, shouldn't we at least consider pizzicato for the end of the introduction as well?

Another possibility to consider is using flute or oboe to double the voice, particularly on the second verse. This is appealing because of the reference to "my pipe" in the text, and because if the strings are playing pizzicato chords to imitate the lyre, the traditional doubling of the voice is lacking. The flute or oboe could also be used on the melody in the postlude, doubling the violin.

Another two-stave score, for the air "When beauty's smiling queen alone prepares" in James Hook's *The Double Disguise* (Figure 6), offers other types of information. The introduction (almost identical to the first six measures of the vocal part) opens with just melody and bass. This provides a first violin and bass part, which can easily be supplemented by adding a second violin harmony part. With the pickup to measure 9, the score provides the flute and horn parts. Since there is a tutti marked four measures later, it would be safe to assume that at measure 9 the strings do not play. At the tutti, the strings reenter, with the flutes probably doubling the violins, and the horns playing harmony as in the previous four measures. (One clue to the presence of these horn harmonies is provided at the end of the next interlude, also played by flutes and horns and followed by a tutti, where the tutti section ends with the open sixth typical of horn parts.) A little work filling in the second violin part

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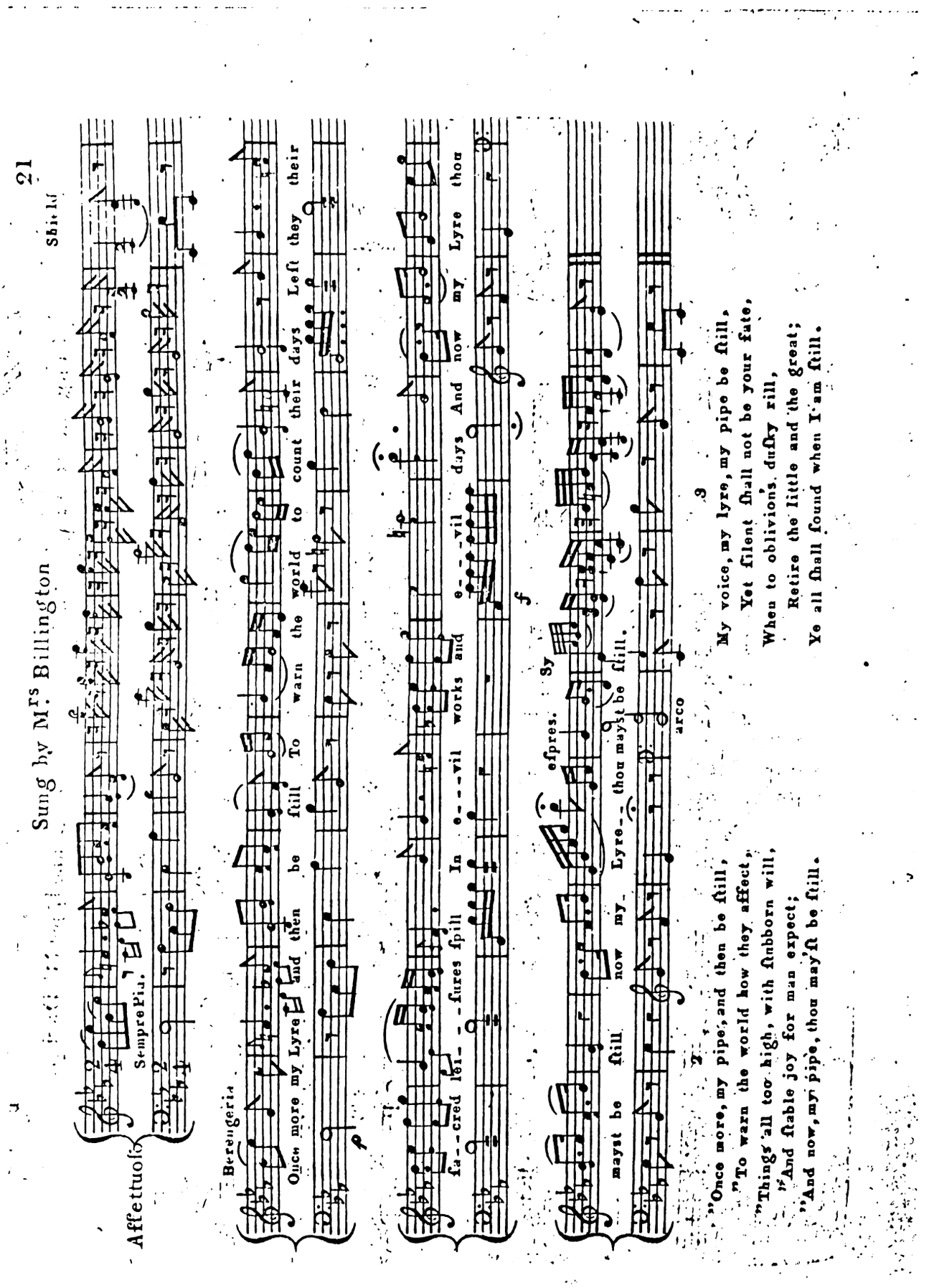


Figure 5. "Once more my Lyre," *Richard Coeur de Lion*

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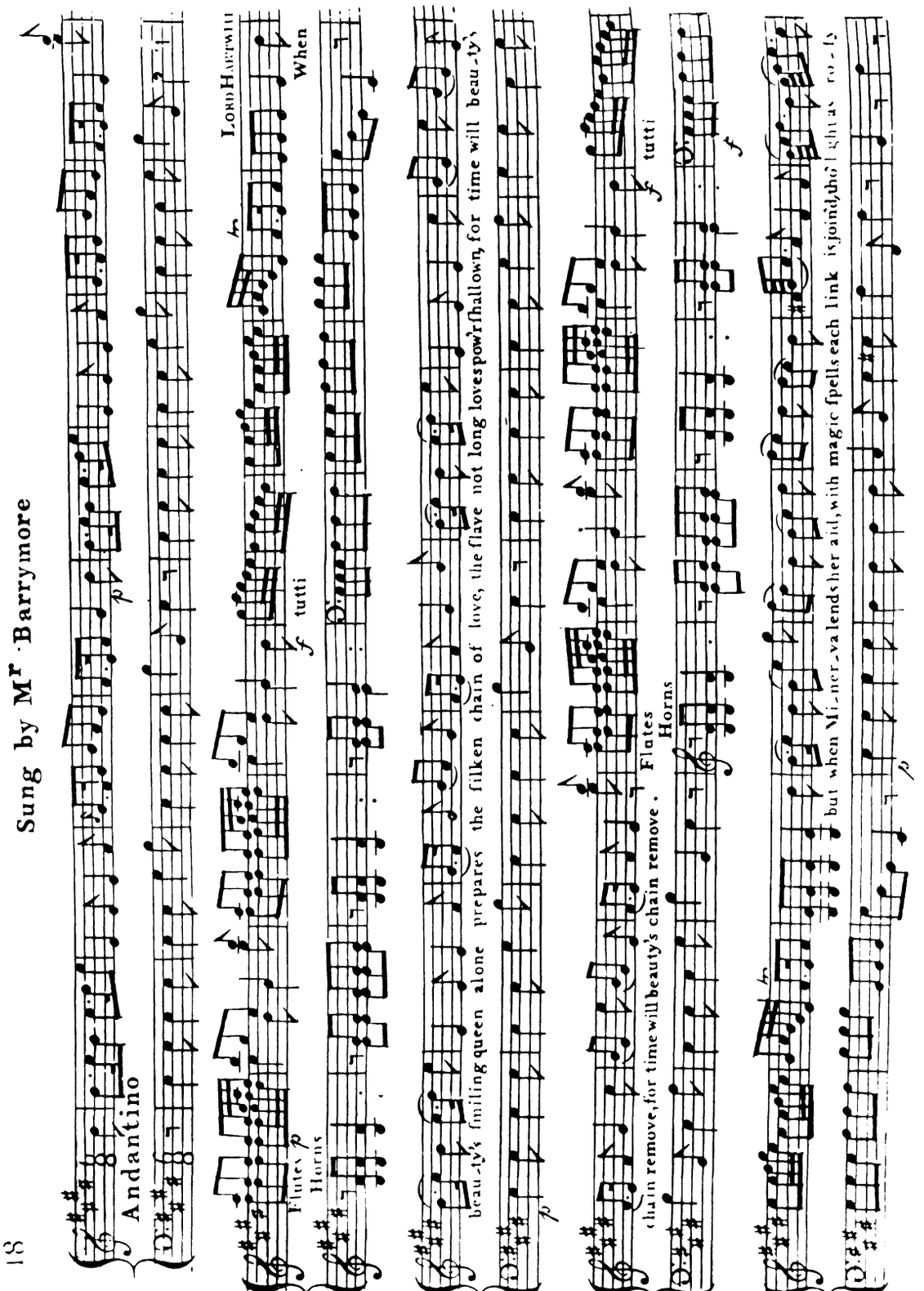


Figure 6. "When beauty's smiling queen," *The Double Disguise*

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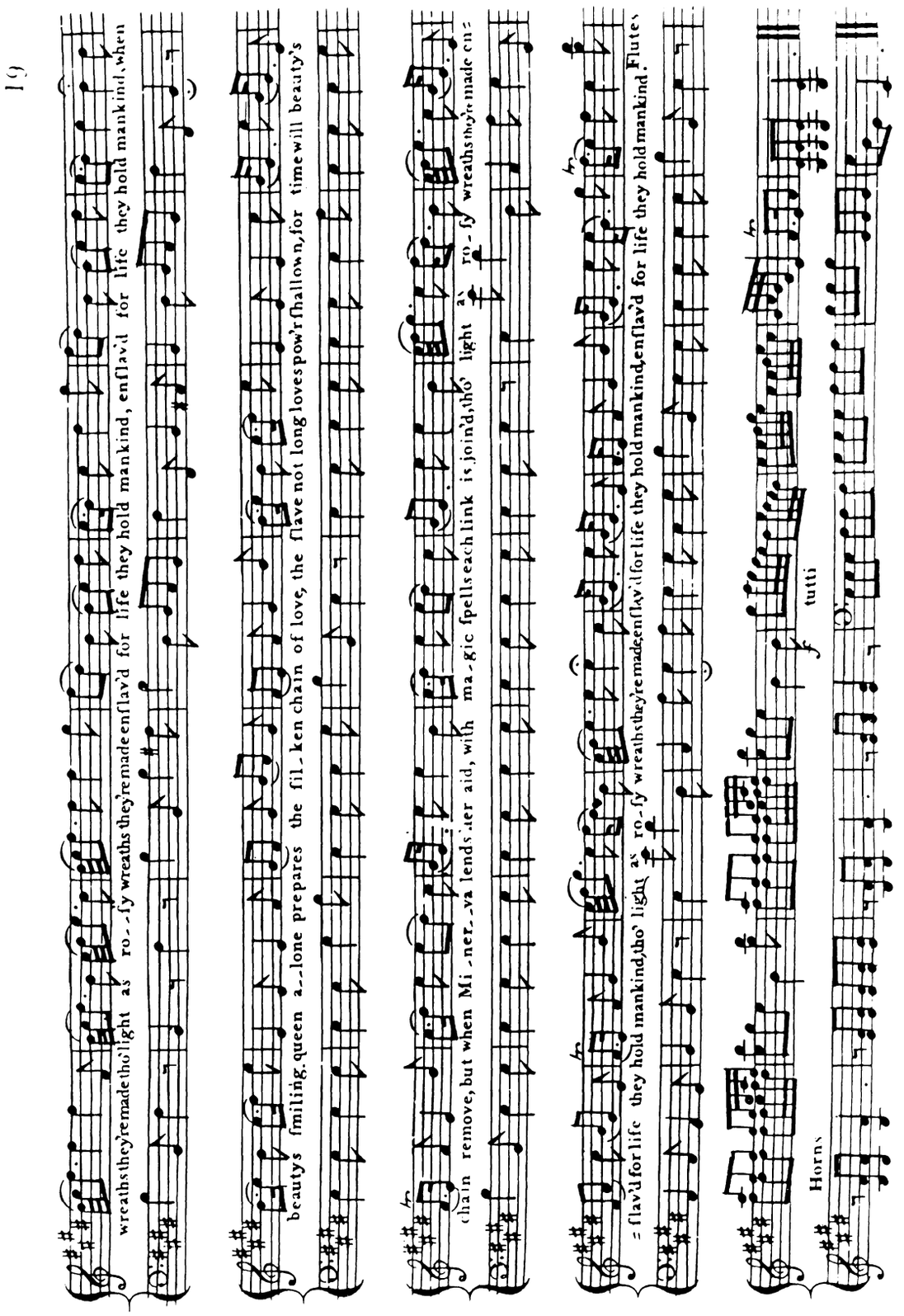


Figure 6 continued

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(an easy enough task) and this piece is done—and quite attractively, too, thanks to James Hook and to you.

When the composer and printer were generous enough with their time and space to provide a third staff, it can contain real treasure for the orchestrator. At the least, it may contain a complete second violin part (assuming, of course, that the first violin normally doubles the voice). In the trio from *The Two Misers* (Figure 2), the second violin parts appears on the second staff in the instrumental sections. More frequently, it appears on the upper staff because the first violin doubled the voice part appearing on the middle staff.

The extra staff may also contain other important instrumental parts. In the aria sung by Mrs. Billington in *Richard Coeur de Lion* (Figure 1), the three-staff score provides almost complete orchestra parts. In the introduction, as many as three string parts (1st and 2nd violin and viola) appear on the upper staff, while the complete flute solo part is in the middle. Four measures from the end of the introduction, the violas or second violins probably play the stems-down passage, while all violins join the tutti at the end.

On score page 61, the top staff of the first system is probably for 1st and 2nd violin. (The flute soloist, even the indefatigable Mr. Parke, probably needed a rest by this time.) He comes in again, however, beginning with the small notes and continuing for the first three measures of the second system, while the horn accompanies, as given on the upper staff. The violins return to the top part, while the flute continues to provide interjections in the vocal line (Don't miss the one in the next to last measure, in the midst of the long vocal run). The flute may double the voice for the next two measures before tossing motives back and forth in the second and third measures at the top of page 62. The violin parts continue, meantime, on the upper staff.

I'd certainly add fuller harmonies at the bottom of page 62 (last five measures), and consider having the flute double the violin on the repeated rhythmic pattern during the held note. Fuller harmonies are surely called for at the top of page 63 as well. At the last measure of page 63, a pattern begins which is well suited for a dialogue between violins and flutes. On the bottom system, the flute part appears once again in small notes in the vocal part, and perhaps at the end of the upper staff as well, while the violin parts continue on the top staff to the end. At the end of the number, Mrs. Billington apparently received all the glory for her cadenza, and the flutist is left without a solo for the postlude. This could easily be remedied, if desired, by having the flute double the violin melody.

Another fine example of the information to be gleaned from a three-stave score is the da capo aria "Ask me in vain of what ills I complain" from *Lionel and Clarissa* (Figure 7). It also serves as a fine example of why you should assemble all available sources before starting your project. Roger Fiske (*English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century*, 297-98) points out that in the 1768 vocal score, only the bass line and the melody part appear, giving the impression that the music was hardly worth performing. When Dibdin re-

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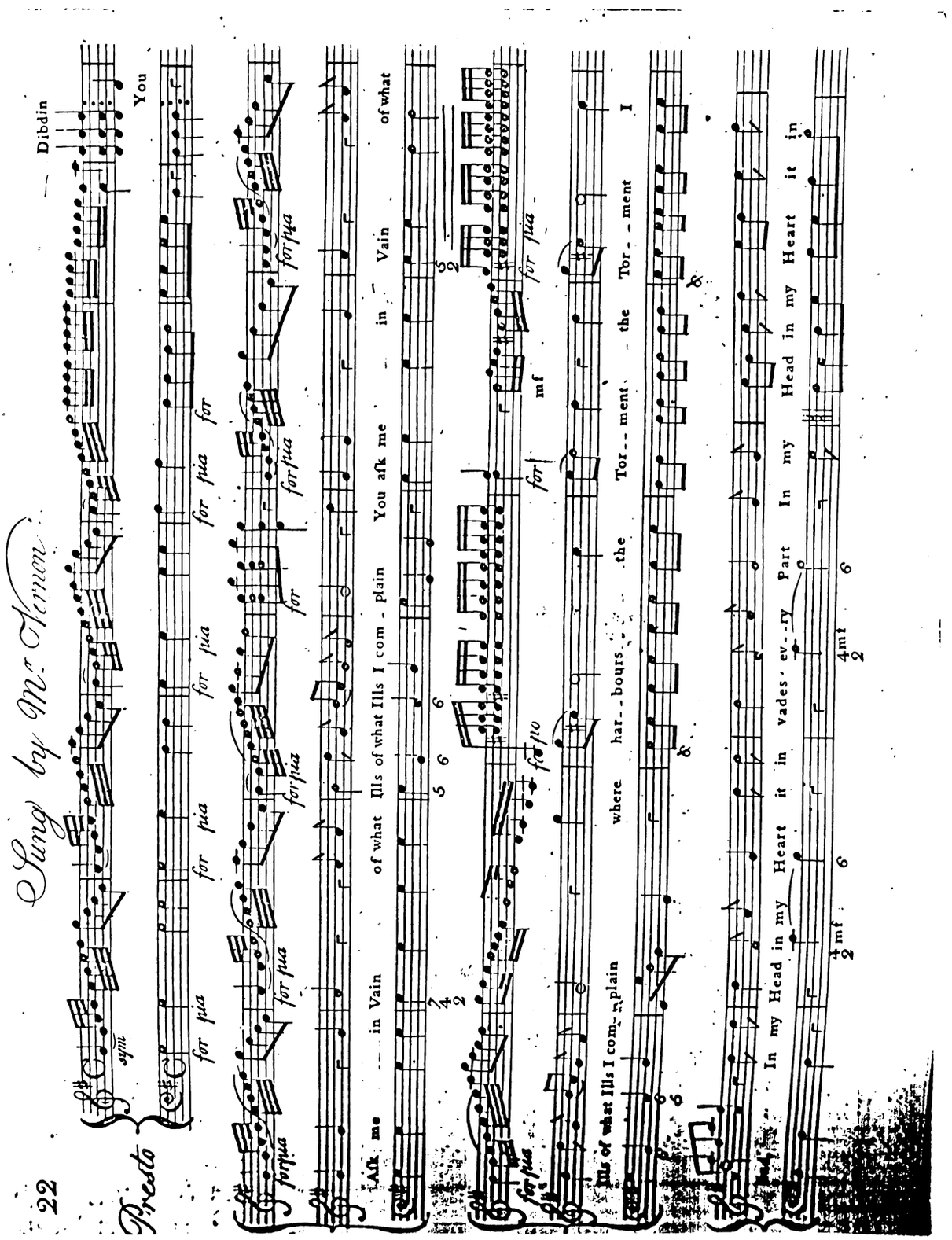


Figure 7. "Ask me in vain," *Lionel and Clarissa*

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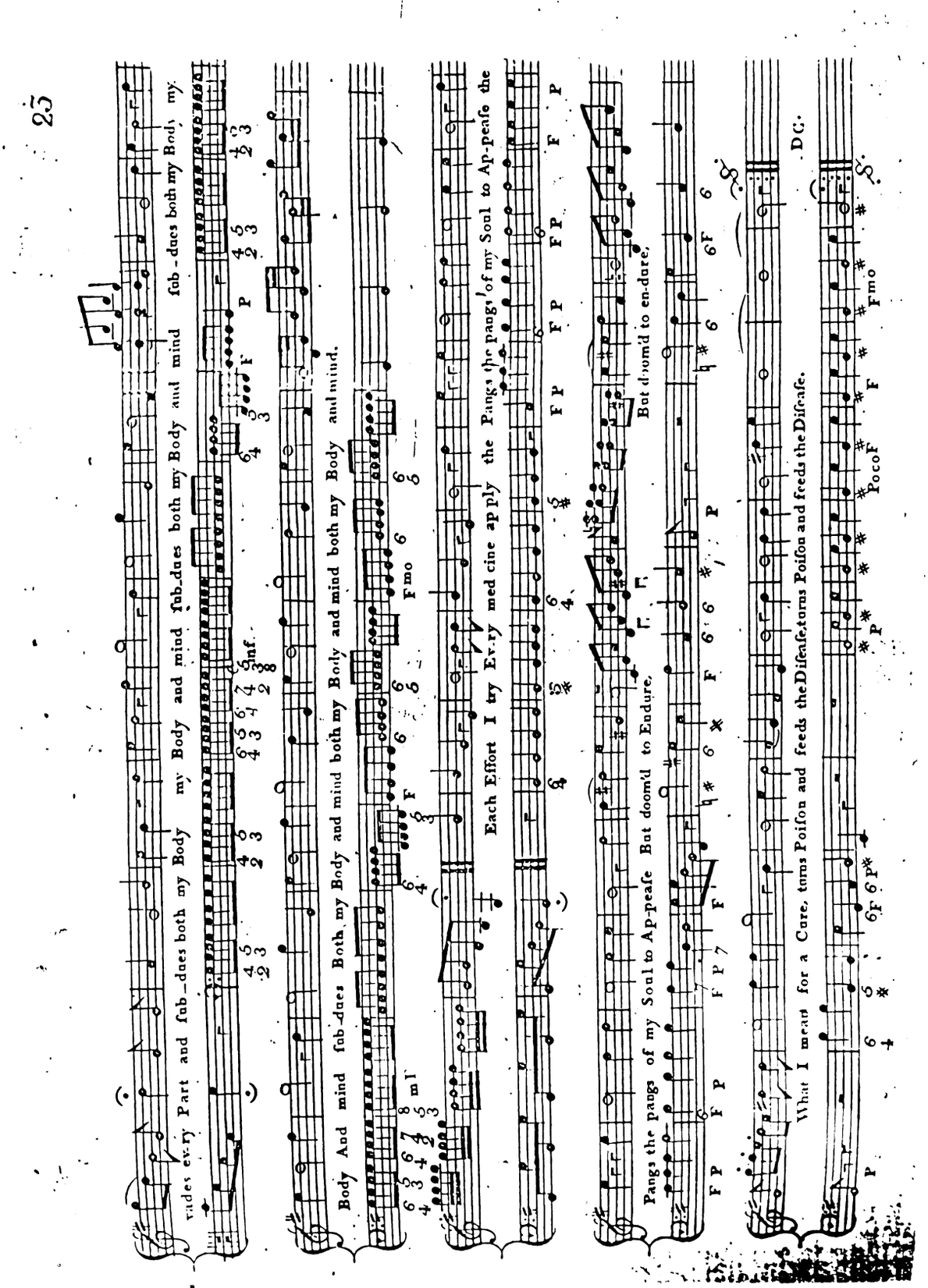


Figure 7 continued

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worked the opera in 1770, the engraver for the new publication apparently had a little extra space, and added the first violin part in the introduction and on a third staff at the beginning of the vocal part. An alert orchestrator might have discovered the proper style of accompaniment for the A section of the aria by studying the introduction, but now we have a wealth of detail. Fiske says "The song leaps to life. It becomes apparent that Lionel is in a rage, and that the orchestra is expressing this rage with unexpected fire. So often in these operas the music looks inept because only the skeleton got printed and none of the flesh."

Unfortunately, the engraver ran out of space at the bottom of score page 22, and the score reverts to two staves with minimal instrumental cues. The repeated eighth notes in the bass from the second measure at the top of page 23 to the end of the vocal line may indicate that figuration like that on the third system of page 22, measures 3-6, might be used. Another clue is the similarity of the figure at the end of that passage on page 22 (1st measure, bottom system) to the figure in measure 8 at the top of page 23, which would end a similar passage. The sixteenth-note pattern could continue all the way to the end of the vocal part, leading into the violin figuration supplied in the instrumental postlude at the end of the A section. This leaves us with the problem of what to do about the "head and heart" passage on the bottom system of page 22 and first measure of page 23. Since the given bass here is distinctive from any other part of the A section, a bit of creativity is needed. The dissonances here may call for sustained chords in the second and third measures, with simple parallel harmonies at the end of the passage.

Little help is given in the B section of the aria, except for the violin parts in the interludes. These are enough, however, to indicate that the "rage and fire" of the A section are missing. A simpler style of accompaniment would seem acceptable, then, for the B section, both to reflect the mood of the text and to provide a contrast before the return of the A section.

Both starting point and final result can vary widely, then, in dealing with musical entertainments of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A bit of detective work may be required, but the results are not at all mysterious. Because they are part of the Anglo-American theatrical tradition which has always allowed for adaptation for exigencies of time, space, money, and performers, these works are natural choices for performing groups of all kinds. The important thing is to remove them from their dusty cupboards, provide the necessary refurbishing and restoration, and display them once more to be "received with great applause" by an admiring public.

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