Ancient Holistic Healing: Chinese Philosophy & Medicine

Chinese Five Elements and Music

Perhaps the spiritual nature of music is a reflection or mirrored image of the something heavenly or not of this world. It can exist as an invitation to another way of living, perhaps something beyond our everyday lives. Music can transport us. In this lesson we will cover some of the beautiful spiritual aspects of harp therapy.

Over the past years, I have taken an interest in the Chinese Five Elements and the music that is used in China to balance these energies. I have had the opportunity to discuss and explore these ideas and concepts with Dr. Elizabeth Chen Christenson and others who are familiar with the language and concepts. As a result, I have delved in depth into how these subtle energy systems of the body interact when harp music is played.

At this point, I am going to refer you to read the chapter in the Cradle of Sound book on the Chinese Five Elements. I included an article written by Dr. Christenson that was the result of our collaboration. Dr. Christenson, in addition to being a medical doctor and acupuncturist, is also a certified harp practitioner and graduate of the International Harp Therapy Program.

For those unfamiliar with Chinese Medicine, it is a generally accepted premise that the five elements - wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, while present in all of nature, are also present in varying degrees in each individual. In general, however, there is one specific element or combination (i.e. metal/earth or fire/wood), and its unique qualities that tends to pre-dominate in each individual at a specific time.

As harp therapy practitioners, if we can begin to gain an understanding of these elements that are present in all human beings, we can be more effective in our work as we seek to respond to specific clients' needs and orientations. Obviously, we are not seeking to be acupuncturists! However, it is helpful to have a working knowledge of this complex field and to know terms that may prove helpful in our work as harp therapists. For example, someone might be exhibiting predominantly water or earth qualities at the time we are with them and we would want to address that in our music. Dr. Christenson gives a good summary of the characteristics of each element and the complex way that each element continually influences the other elements and aspects of any individual.

We can use the Elemental music in so many ways – that of calming "excitable" children, that of relaxing "worried" folks, or bringing structure to someone who is "scattered". In these notes, however, I feel it is important to discuss the modes of music as they related to the Chinese Five Elements that are best suited for the dying process. This information also appears in the Cradle of Sound Harp Therapy Manual.

Using the Five Elemental Music in the Dying Process

In this book, *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. Rinpoche kindles a hope in people with his sacred vision of what it is in us that is changeless and survives death. He teaches us to look after the dying with love and compassion and to help them from a spiritual perspective, in the broadest ecumenical sense of the word. He reminds us of the trials and rewards of a spiritual path and thus he inspires us to work in the world in such a way as to take a direct part in looking after the future of all beings, by being a "servant of peace."

According to Rinpoche, the Tibetans view the outer dissolution of life in the body from the standpoint of the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water. The process is considered to begin with density and become more subtle, as vital energy returns into the central channel and dissolves into prana (Universal Energy). As prana dissolves, each chakra dissolves.
An excess of any element in the body will precipitate a struggle in that chakra. As one becomes increasingly disconnected with the outside world, the dying person turns inward. The Tibetan elements described below are Earth, Fire, Water, Air and Space. Air replaced the Metal Element later on during the Bronze Age.

As a person goes into each into element, each element grows more intense before it dissolves. This is an interesting phenomenon that we see repeated again and again in the natural world: the intense flash of the sun before it sets or science's recording of the great flash (that's flash in astronomical terms – it could take years!) of light when a star dies, for example.

The element of greatest density, the Earth element, is the first to leave the body. It reflects solidity - connection to the ground. A person may begin to feel very heavy or have a sensation of being crushed; they may feel weak and exhausted; they may feel as though they are losing all means of bodily support. The body appears to shrink into itself. They may ask for more pillows. The digestive function and metabolism slows down. As the earth element declines, a dying person may feel as though they are sinking; they may become bewildered, lose touch with reality or become depressed. Musically speaking, I would play Earth Element music, a slow *Ionian mode* with a steady, left-hand support system. *Suo Gan* is an especially good song here.

During the next stage of dying, the Earth element dissolves into the Water element. Vision is connected with the Water element and during this time, the vision can become blurred or they lose the ability to see. The brightness of their complexion begins to fade during this stage and they may lose the ability to control their bodily functions – incontinence. The mouth and tongue dry out as well, and the eyes may become dry. The lymph and blood slows down. Patients may become thirsty, disconnected, unresponsive and not interested in the outside world. During this time, I may modulate to the *Aeolian mode,* the primary mode of the Water element, offering the sense of flow down the river to the sea. This Aeolian mode is deeper and slower than the Aeolian mode of the Wood element.

The Water element then dissolves into the Fire element. A person may feel like they are burning up (actually, they are losing body heat). The sense of smell goes at this point. The person who is dying may no longer be able to recognize loved ones or recognize things in the environment; the life force diminishes. The throat chakra is closing and at this point, the patient may be unable to talk. I would continue to stay in the *Aeolian mode* during this Fire element shutdown, because the Water element will offer relief to the sense of burning. It is also calming.

And finally, the Fire element dissolves into the Air element. The breathing becomes labored and the rattling chest noise may be noticeable. During this time, people may lose the swallowing ability. The sense of taste leaves. Patients have the sense of floating, of being blown around, the feeling of disembodiment. During this time, I match this sense of floating, of being suspended by using the Locrian mode. I use it sparsely for it does not need many notes. It has no place it needs to go. It just hovers in space. Holding that sacred space, creating that “Cradle of Sound” as the journey begins is profound.

Many times, we enter into a room of the patient while they are in a liminal state. They are both within and outside of time, neither here nor there but in that place between. It may be likened to the womb. Liminality can be unsettling. Many of the distinctions have left and what seems to remain is the human heartbeat and breath.

It is important to understand the circulatory-respiratory system and the effect that music has on these systems. This knowledge will be the basis for determining the type of music that you will play. As people enter the last stages of the dying process and into the liminal state, the use of non-metered music helps to assist the unbinding process. Students learn the signs of these stages so that they may best administer the music accordingly. We look for signs of reaching out for Major modes of music; signs for reflection for minor modes of music; signs of warmth for cooling “water” modes of music; signs of cooling for warming “earth” or “fire” modes of music. Sometimes, we work in conjunction with aroma therapists and energy workers to bring about the comfort level of the patient.

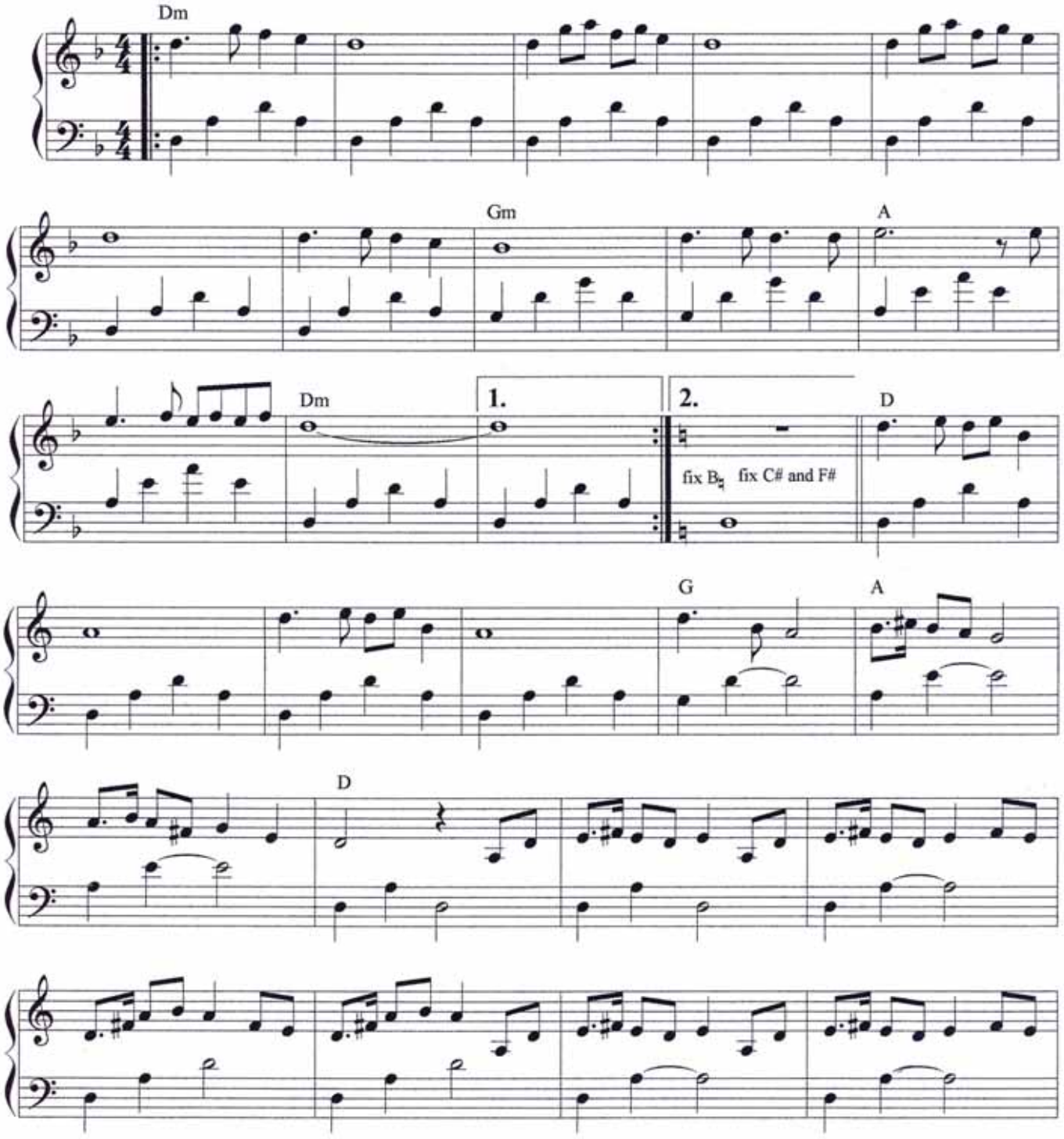
Chart of Correspondences of the 5 Elements

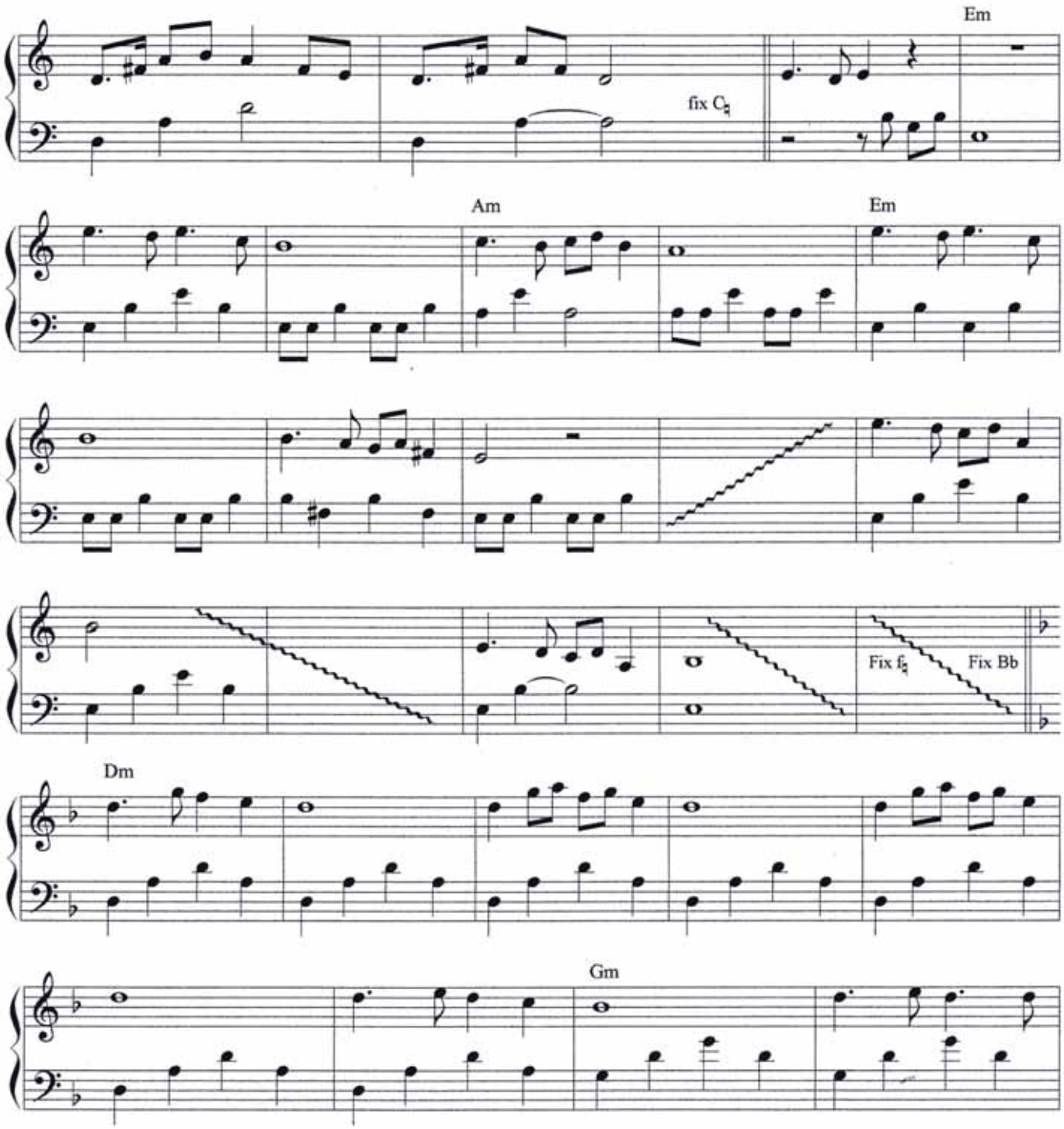
Correspondence	**Wood**	**Fire**	**Earth**	**Metal**	**Water**
Seasons	Spring	Summer	Late summer	Autumn	Winter
Directions	East	South	Center	West	North
Climates	Wind	Heat	Dampness	Dryness	Cold
Organs	Liver & Gallbladder	Heart & Small Intestine	Spleen & Stomach	Lungs & Large Intestine	Kidneys & Bladder
Colors	Green	Red	Yellow	White	Black
Taste	Sour	Bitter	Sweet	Pungent	Salty
Balanced Emotion	Decisive, Creative	Joy	Compassion Sensitivity	Sorrow, Acceptance	Courage, Faith Fear, anxiety,
Imbalanced Emotion (Underactive or Overactive)	Indecisive or Anger, frustration resentment	Lack of Joy or Overexcitement	Obsessions or over thinking, over sensitive, constant "brooding	Prolonged sadness and worry, or excessive grief, unable to let go	shock
Tone	Jue	Zhi	Gong	Shang	Yu
Musical notes	E, Mi	G, Sol	C, Do	D, Re	A, La

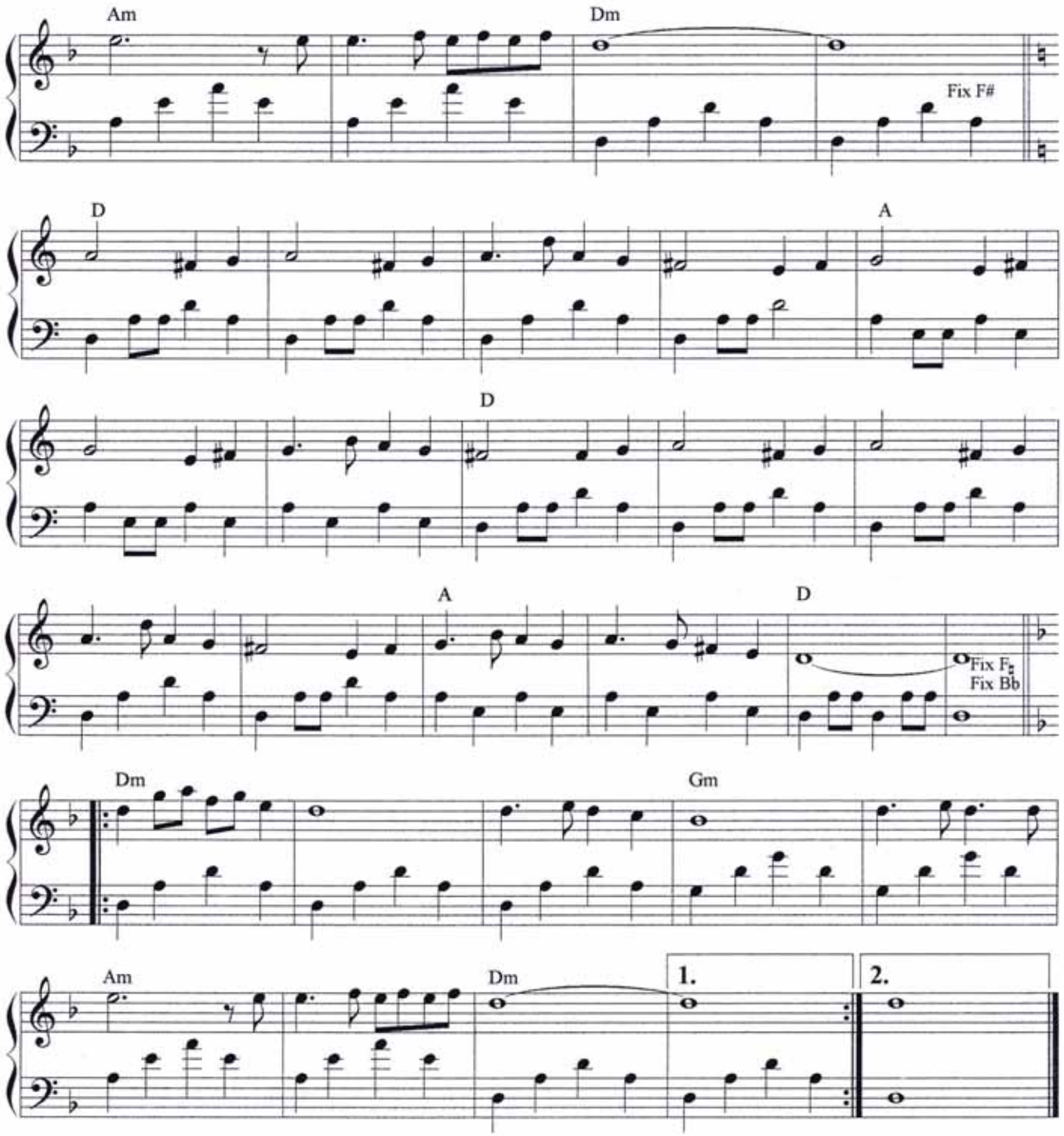
WATER

adapted for harp
by
Christina Tourin

Aeolian/Ionian/Aeolian




Em
fix C♯
Am
Em
Fix f♯
Fix Bb
Dm
Gm



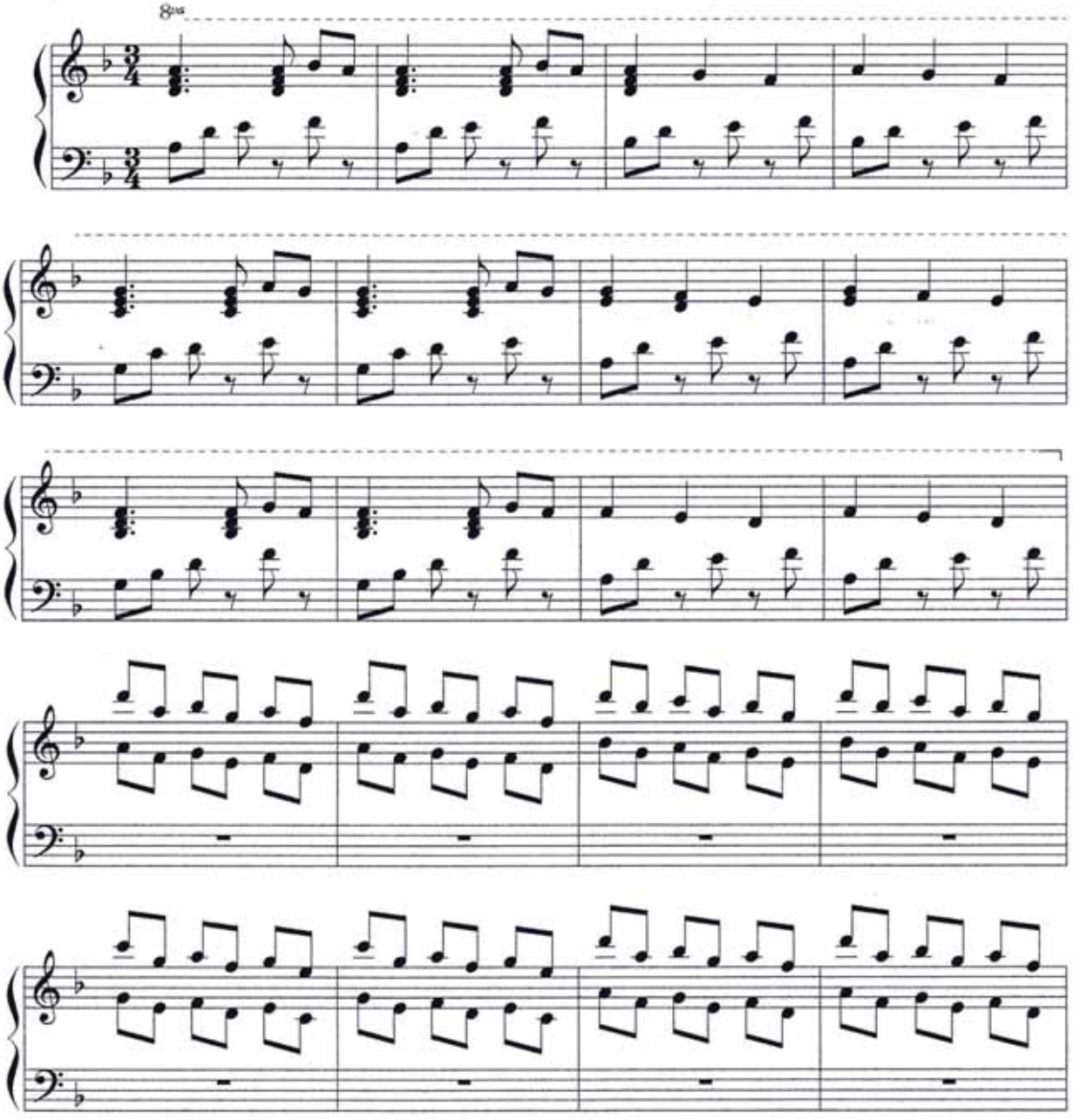
Original by: Messrs. Ma Xin Jian, Wang Jian Ming and Wu Xiao Ping
based on the text "Yi-Ching Music for Health" by Mr. Wang Xu Dong and Ms. Fan Xin Sheng
performed by the Shanghai Traditional Orchestra - Water Element CD available from Wind Records - 1-800-850-5015

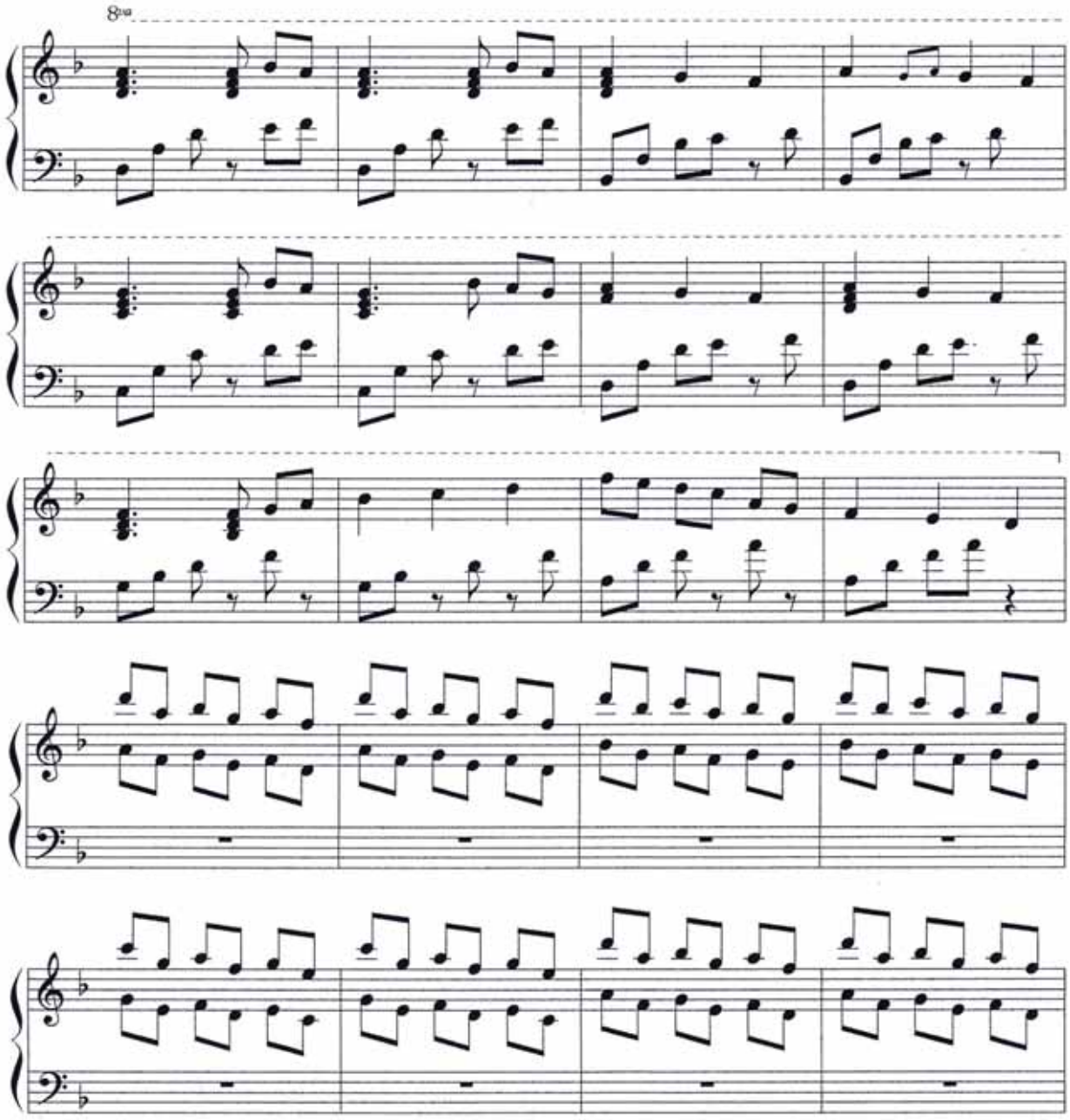
Int. - Larger Harps
Key of Dm
Aeolian - Improvise on Dm, C
Reflective, Good for Hospice

♩=90

HARBOR COVE

Composed by
Christina Tourin

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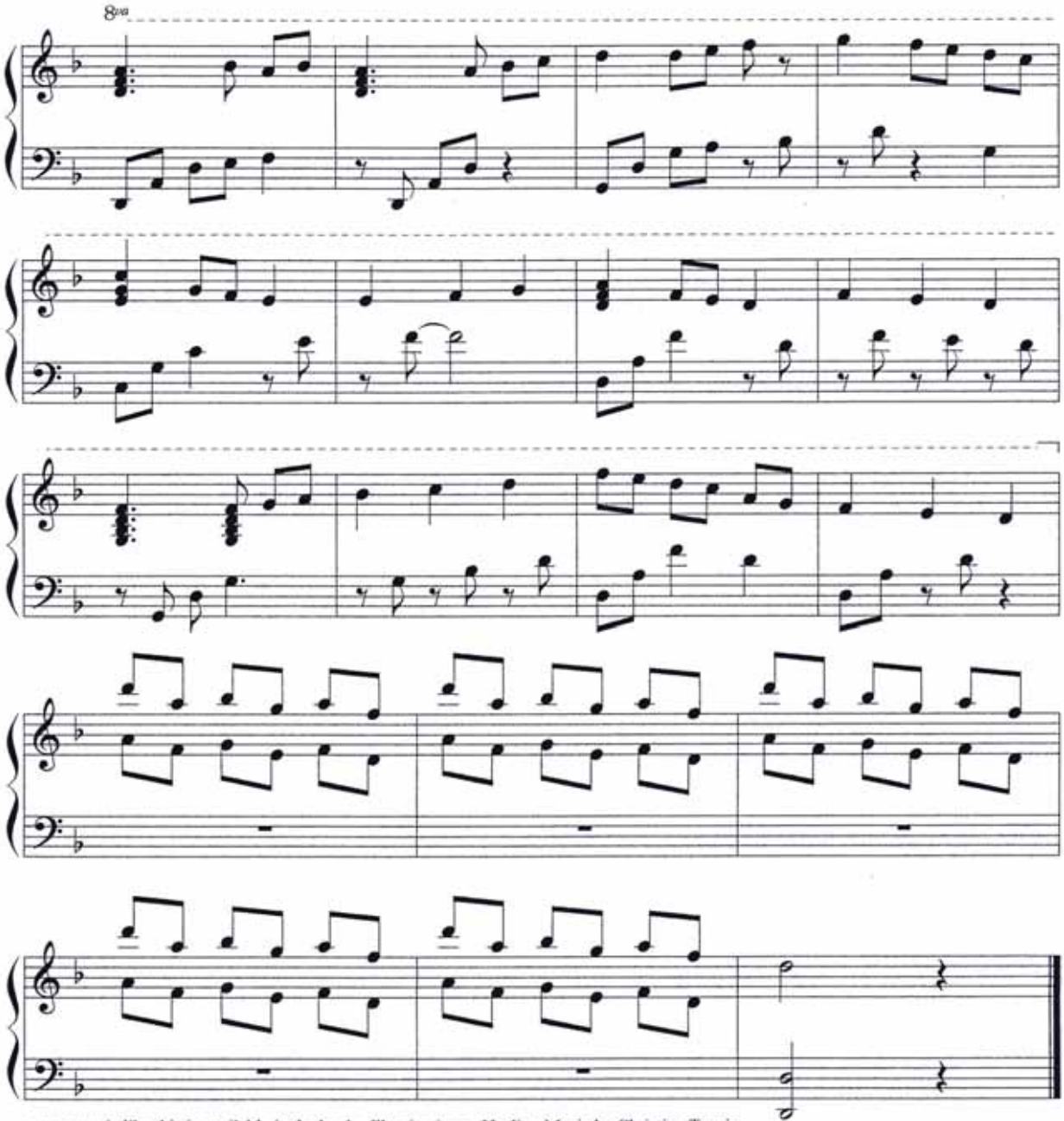
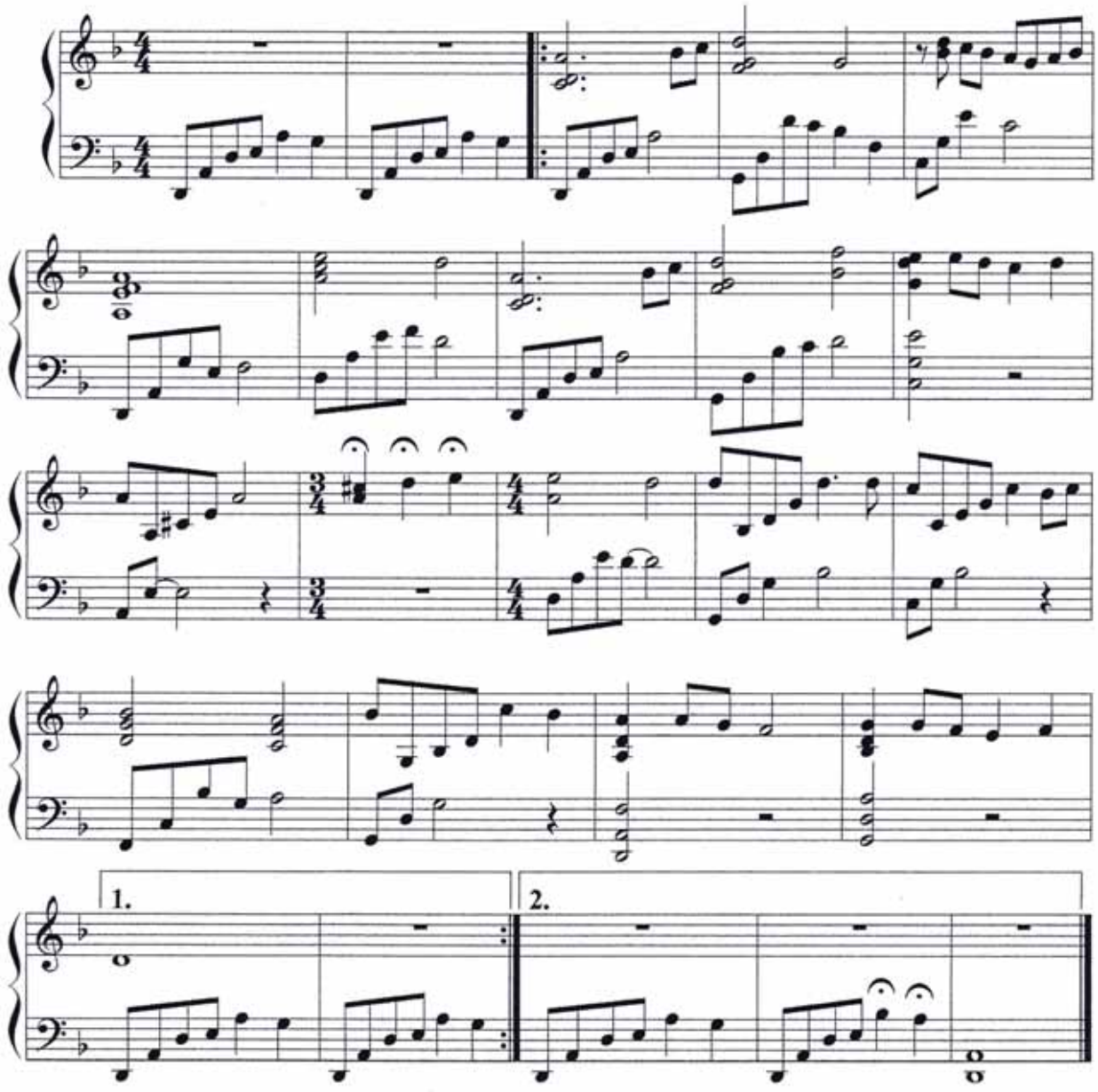


more music like this is available in the book: Illuminations - Healing Music by Christina Tourin

REFLECTIONS

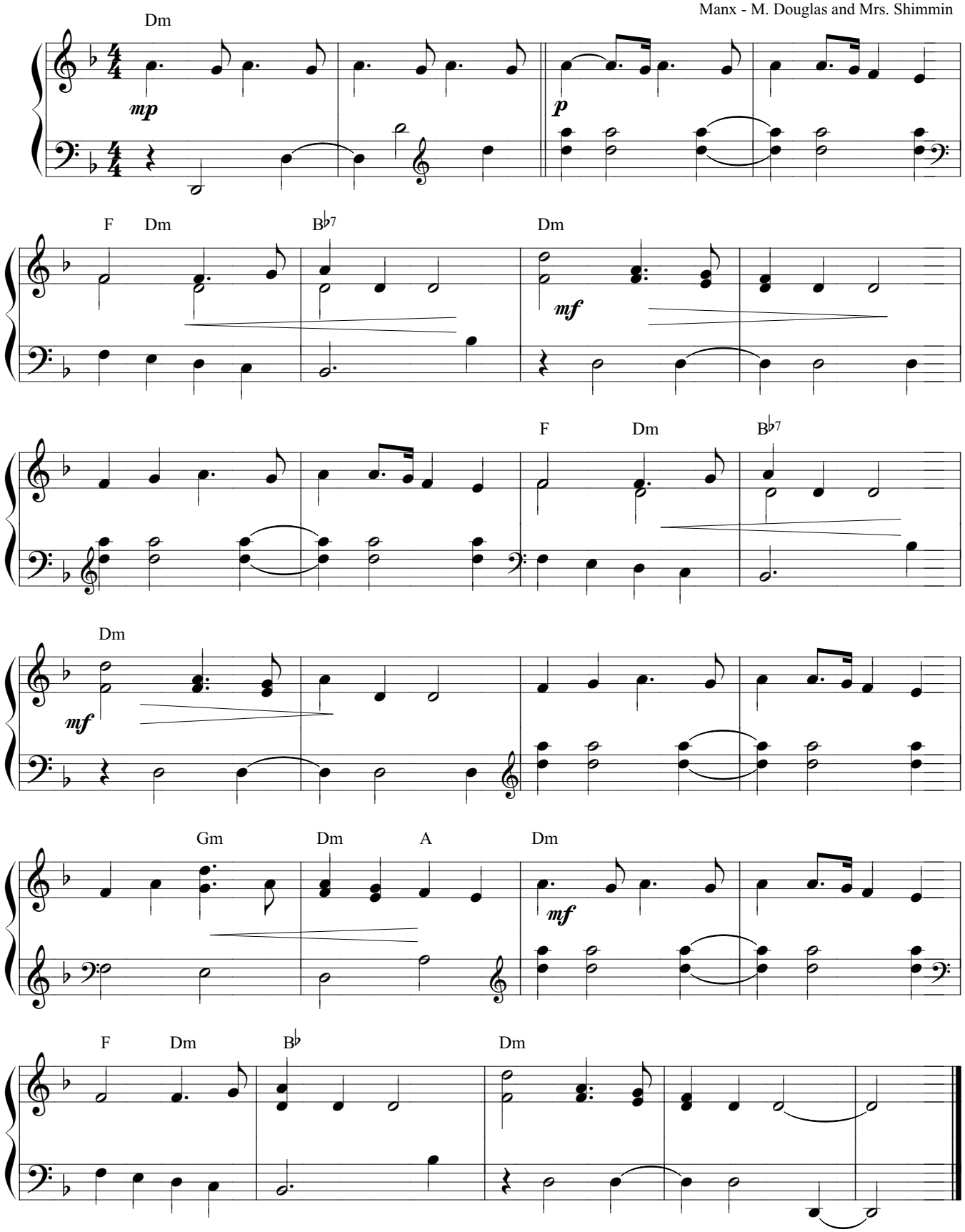
♩= 90

Composed by
Christina Tourin



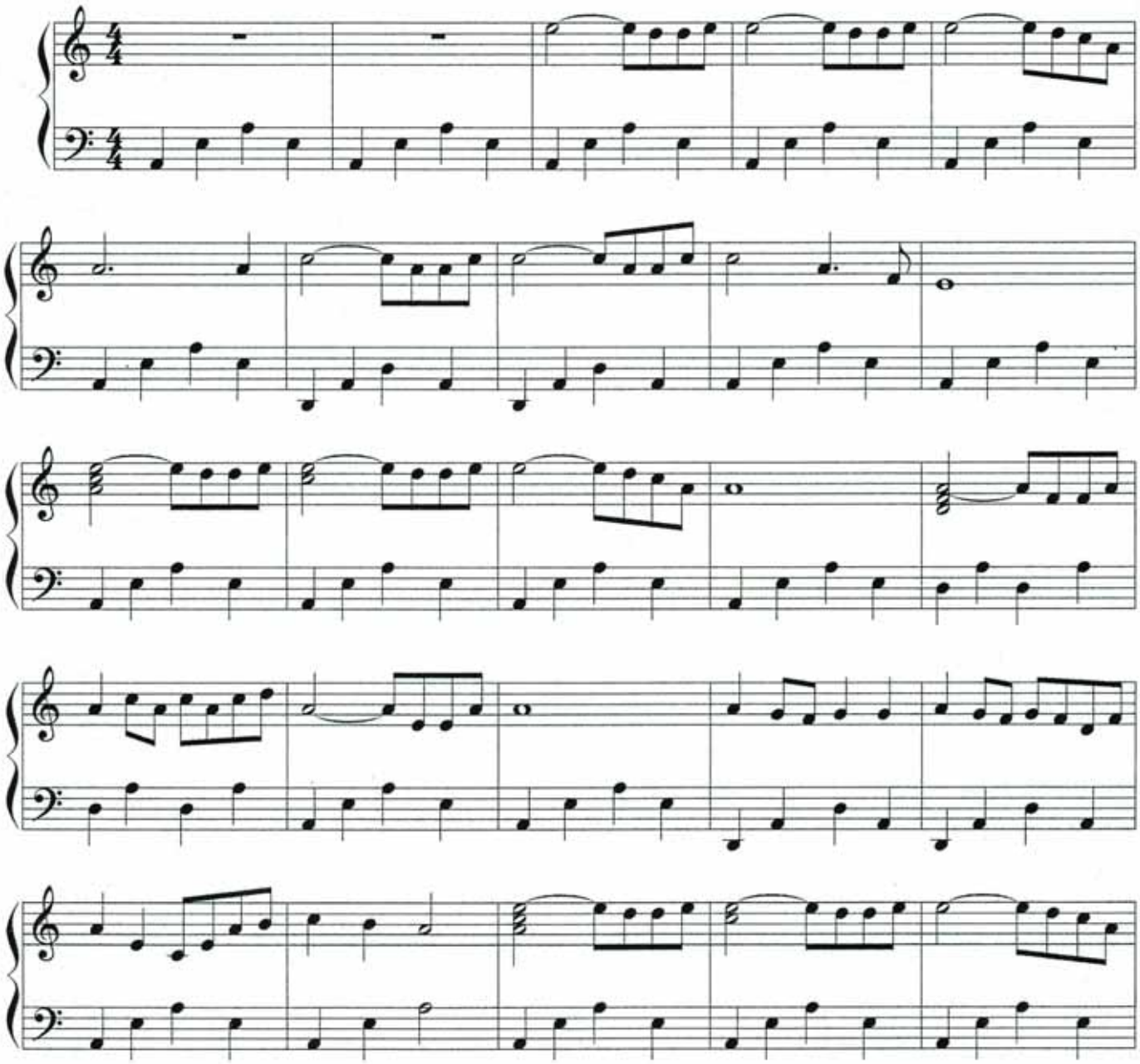
The Sea Invocation

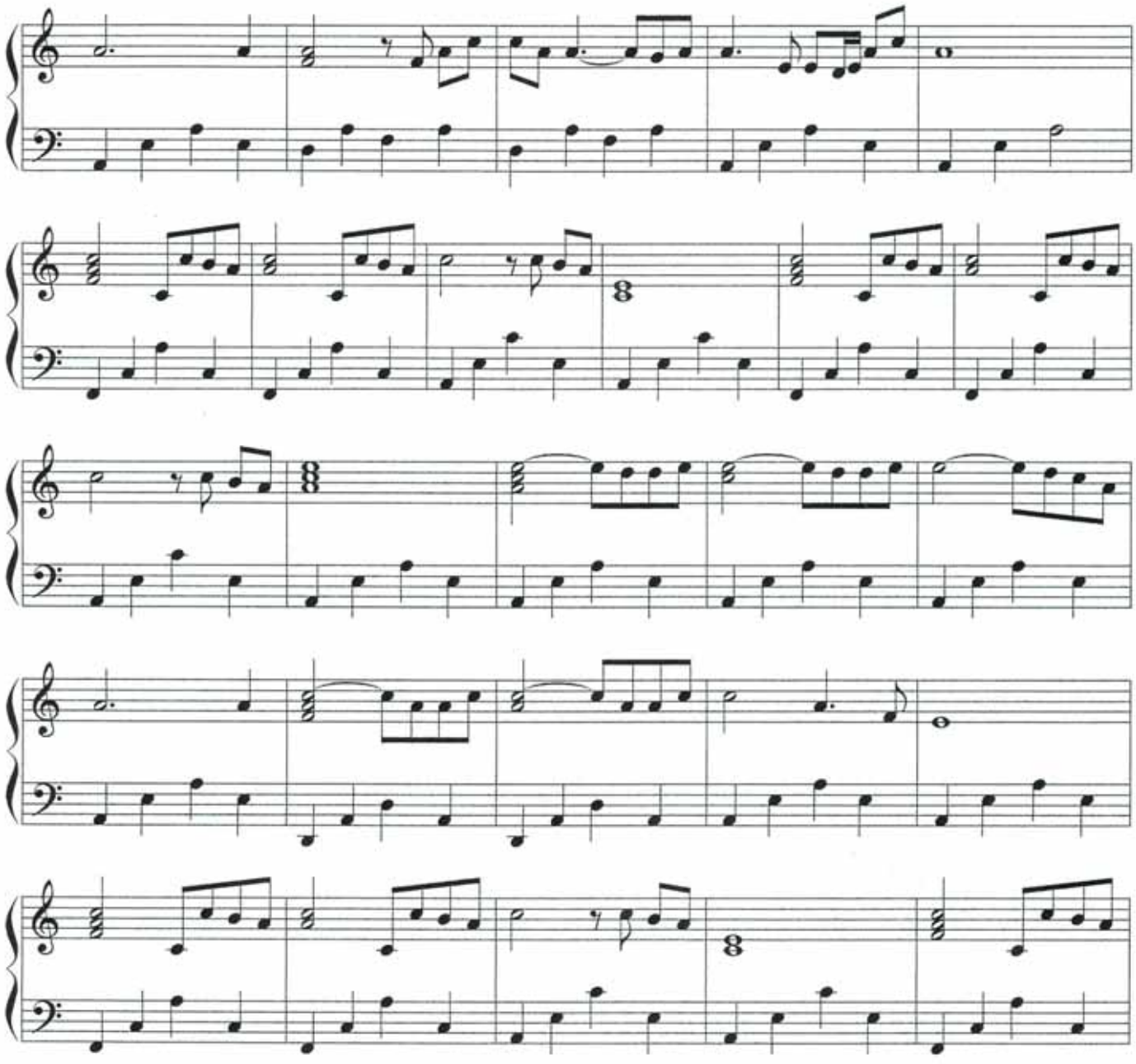
Manx - M. Douglas and Mrs. Shimmin

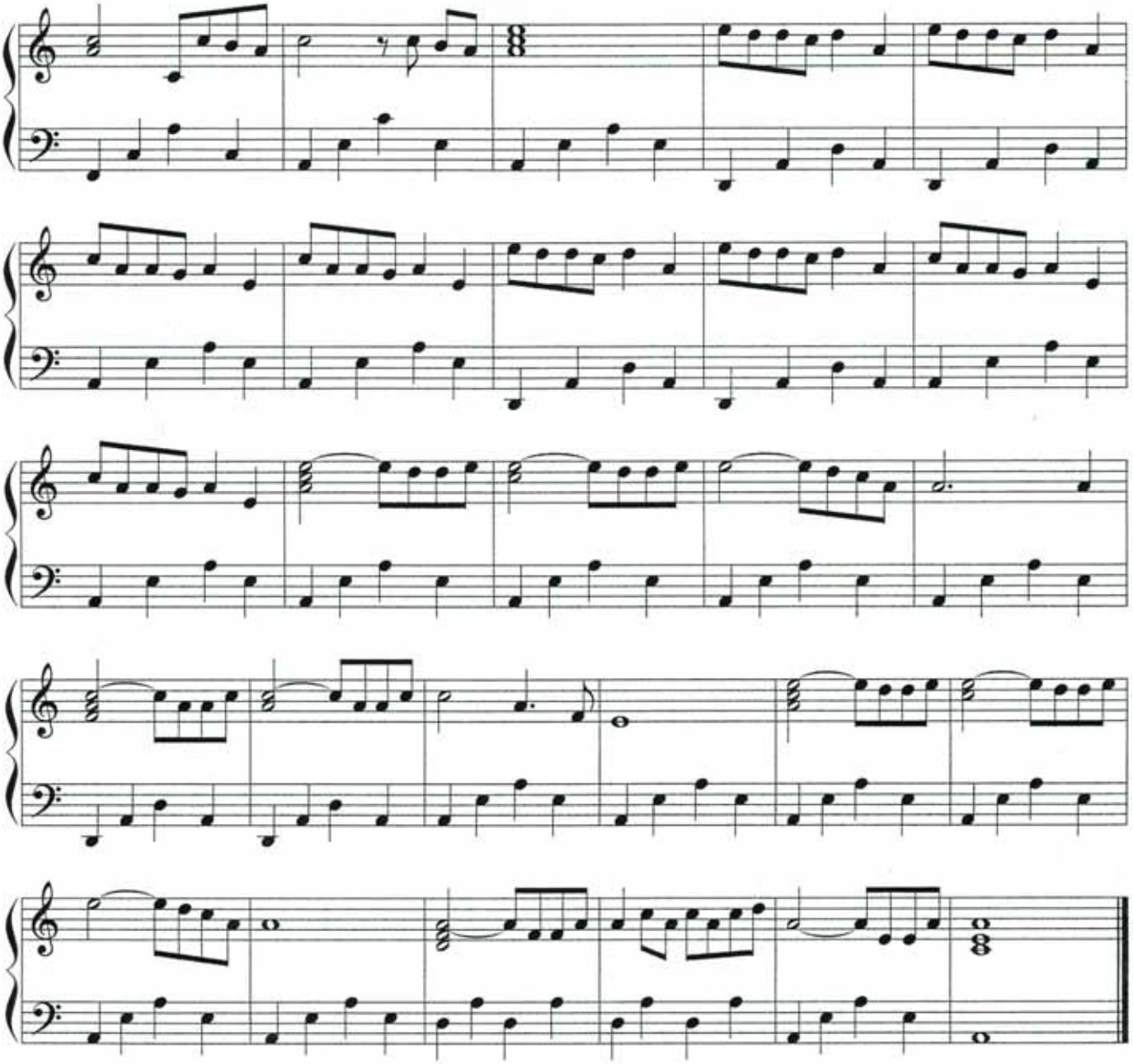


WOOD

arr. for harp by
Christina Tourin

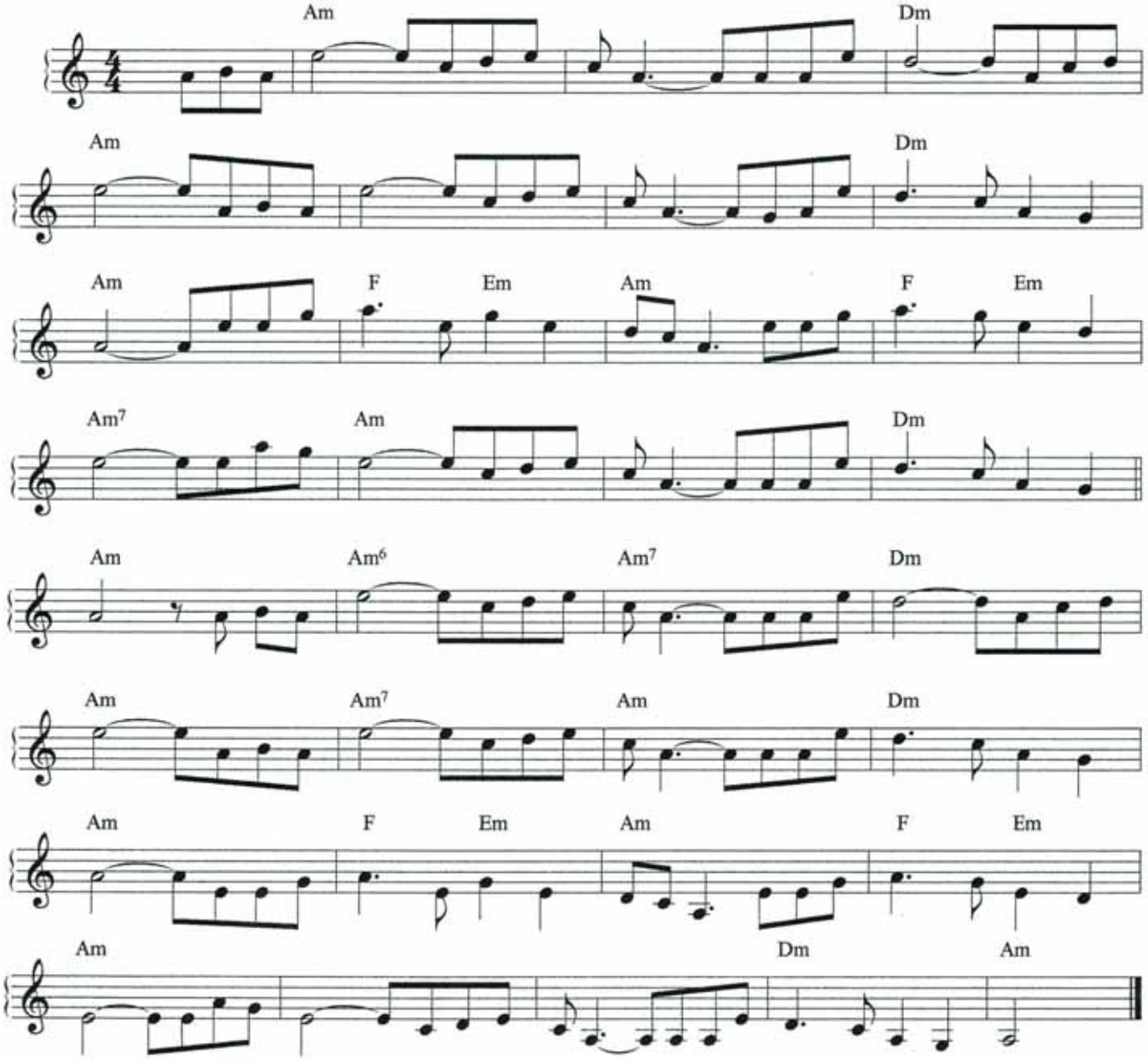






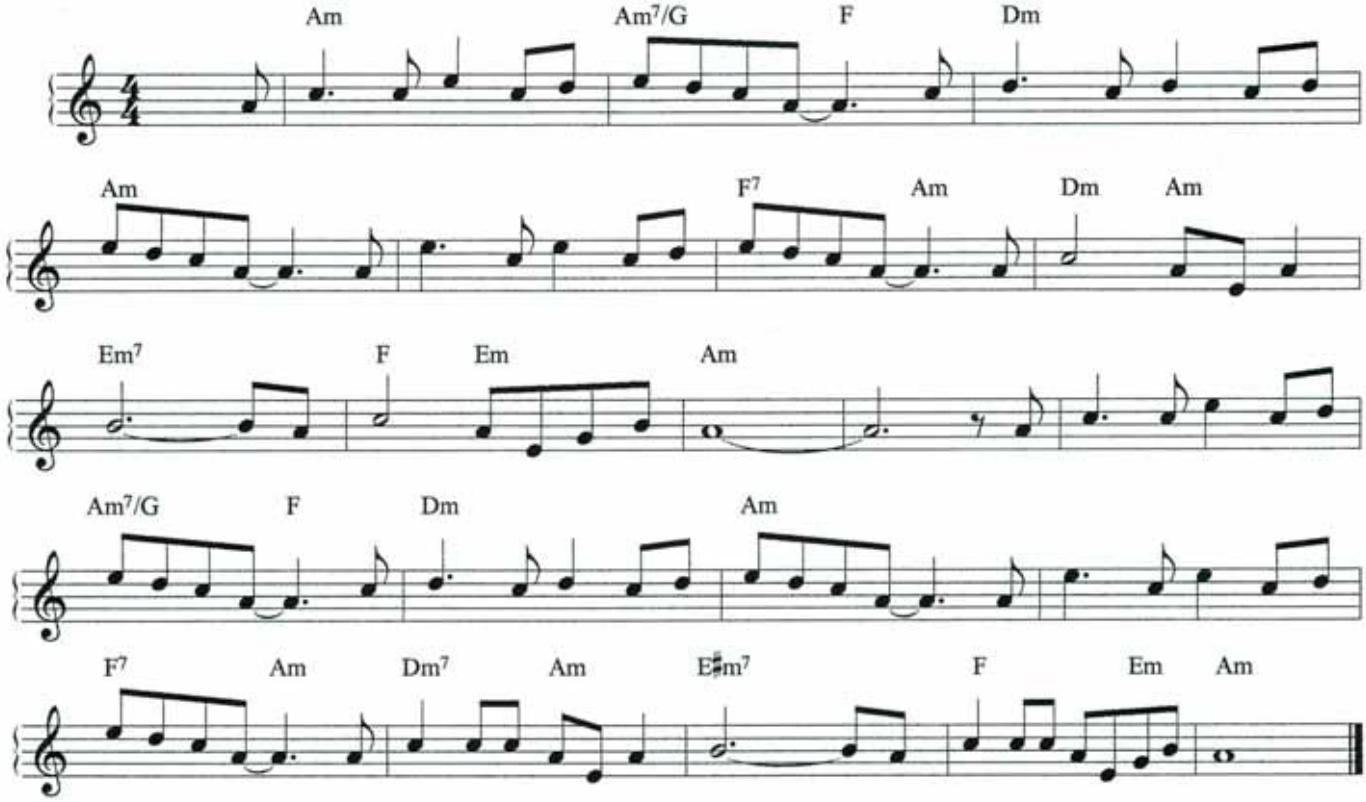
POOR WAYFARING STRANGER

Traditional Spiritual

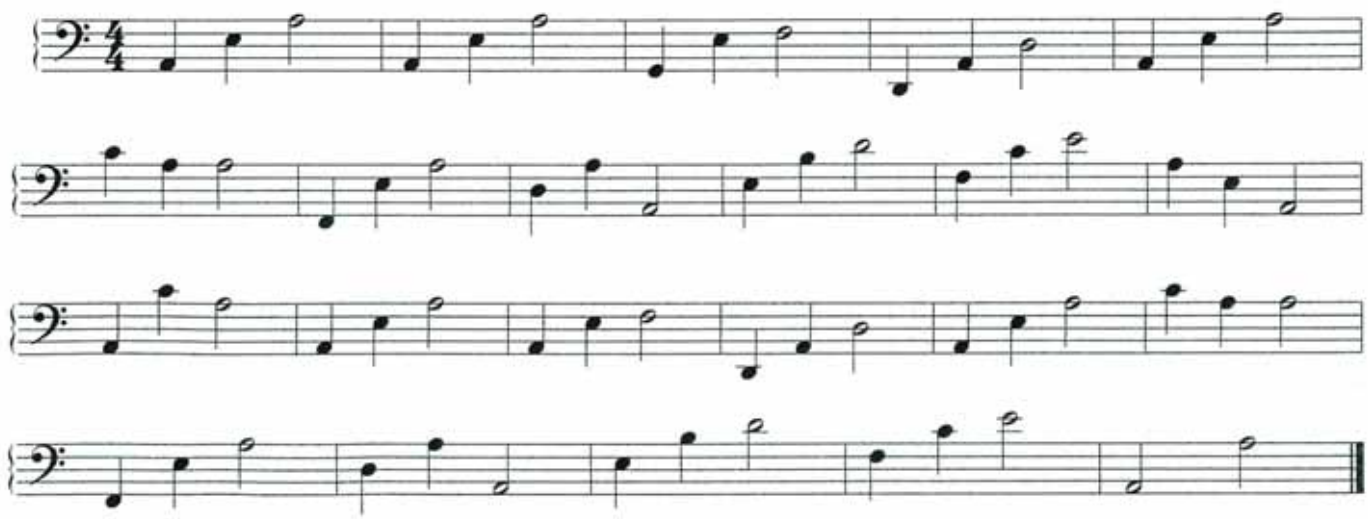


SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD

Traditional Spiritual



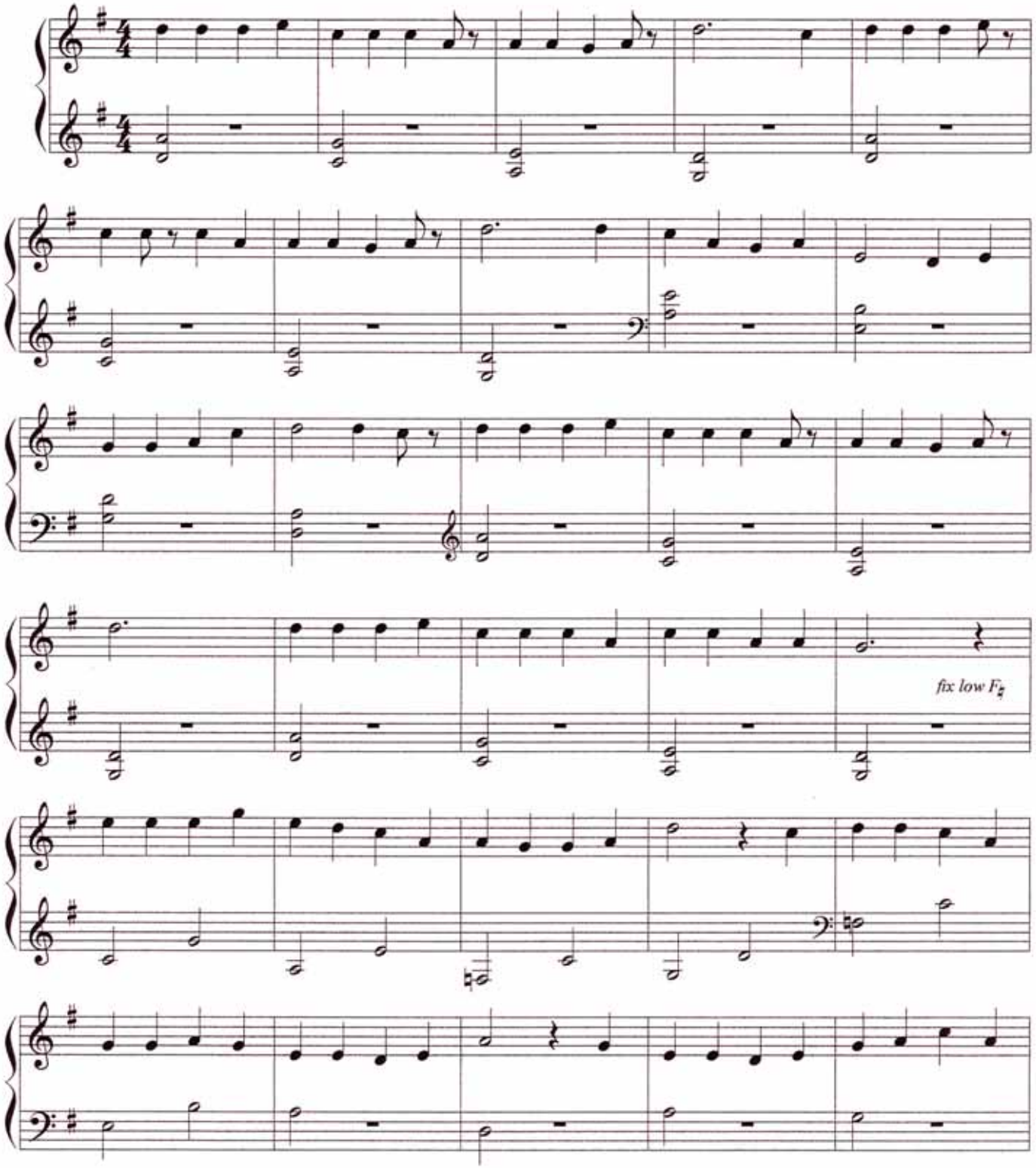
Bass part

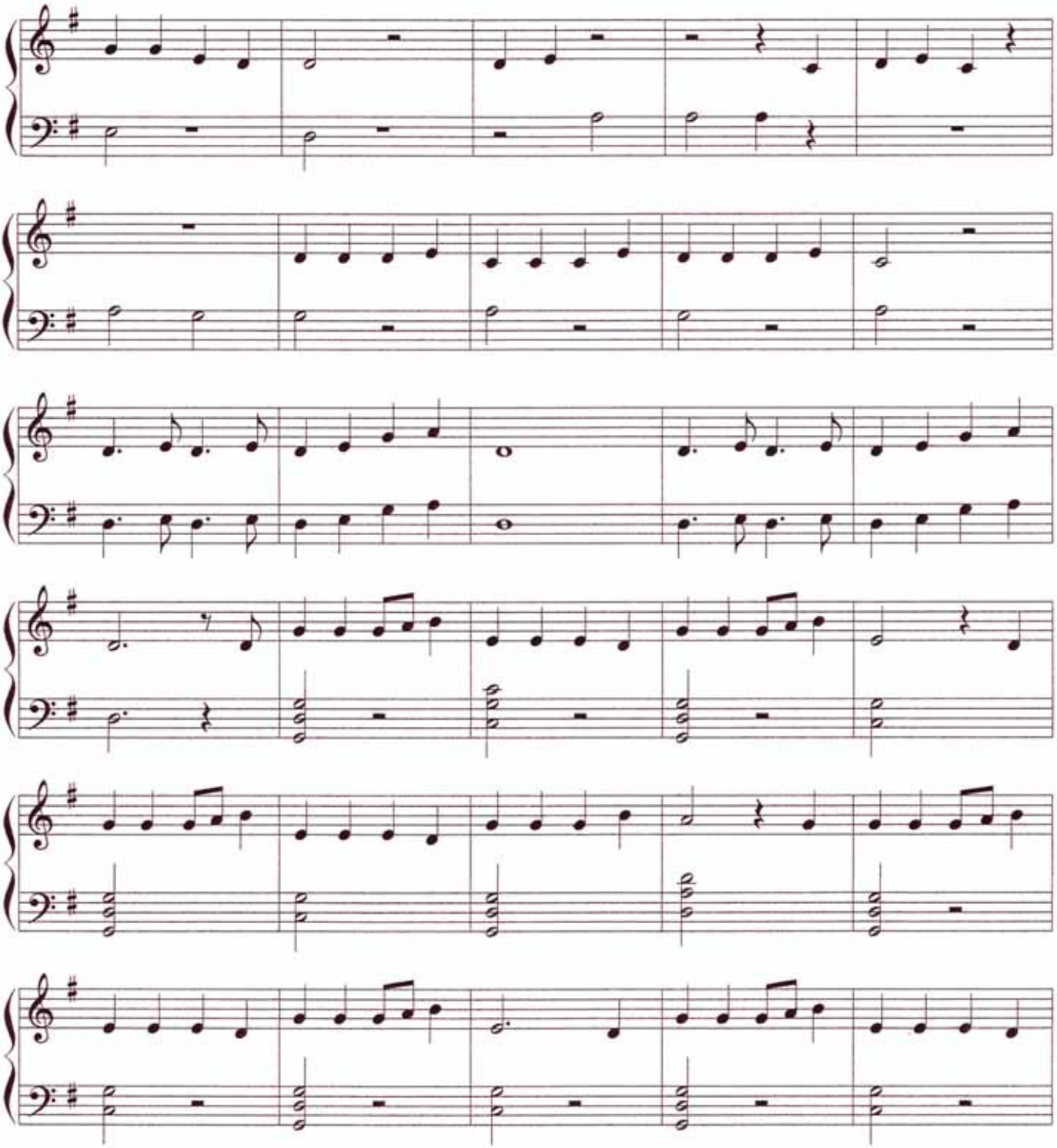


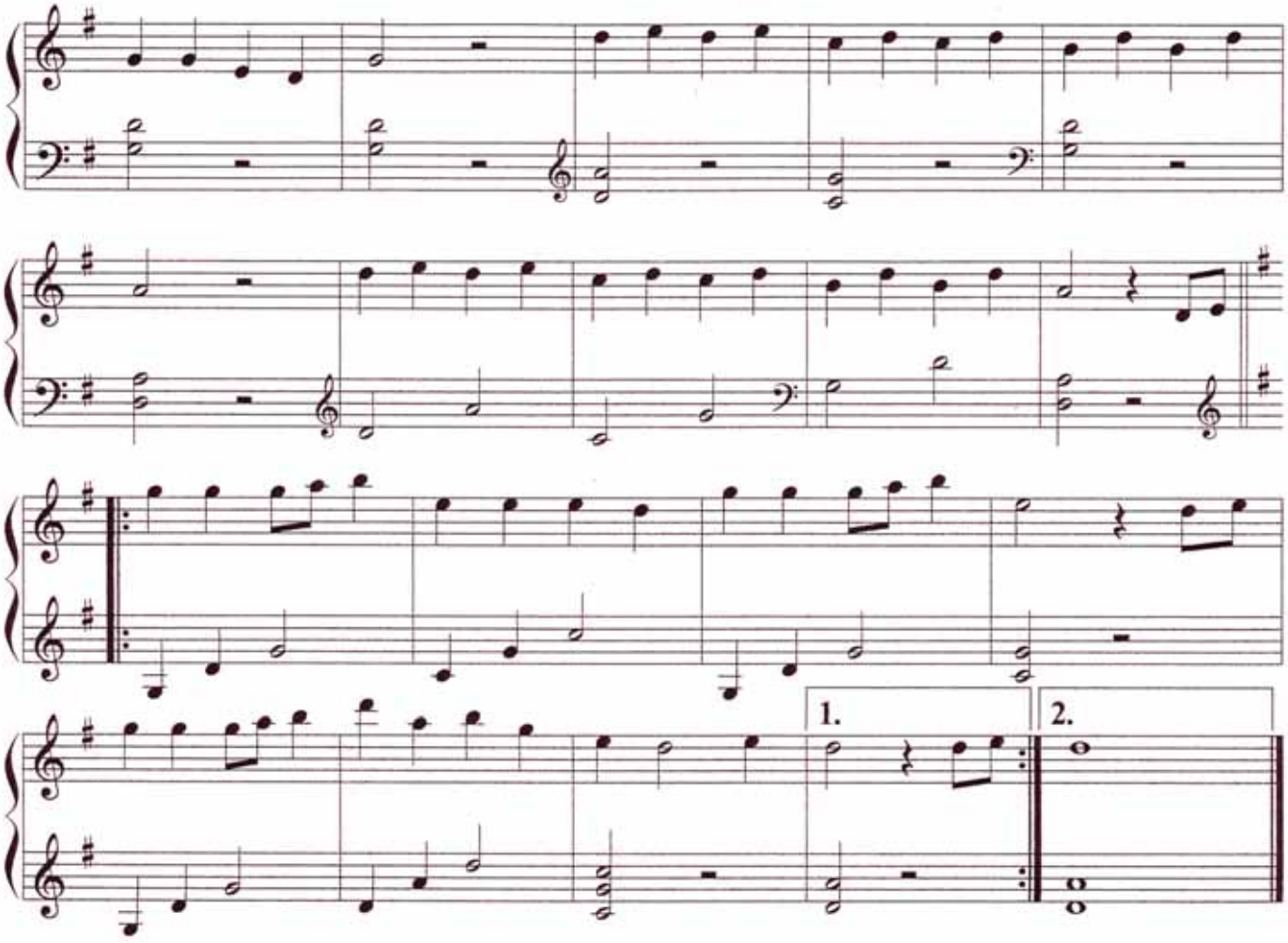
FIRE

mixolydian mode
quarter note equals 258

arr. for harp by
Christina Tourin

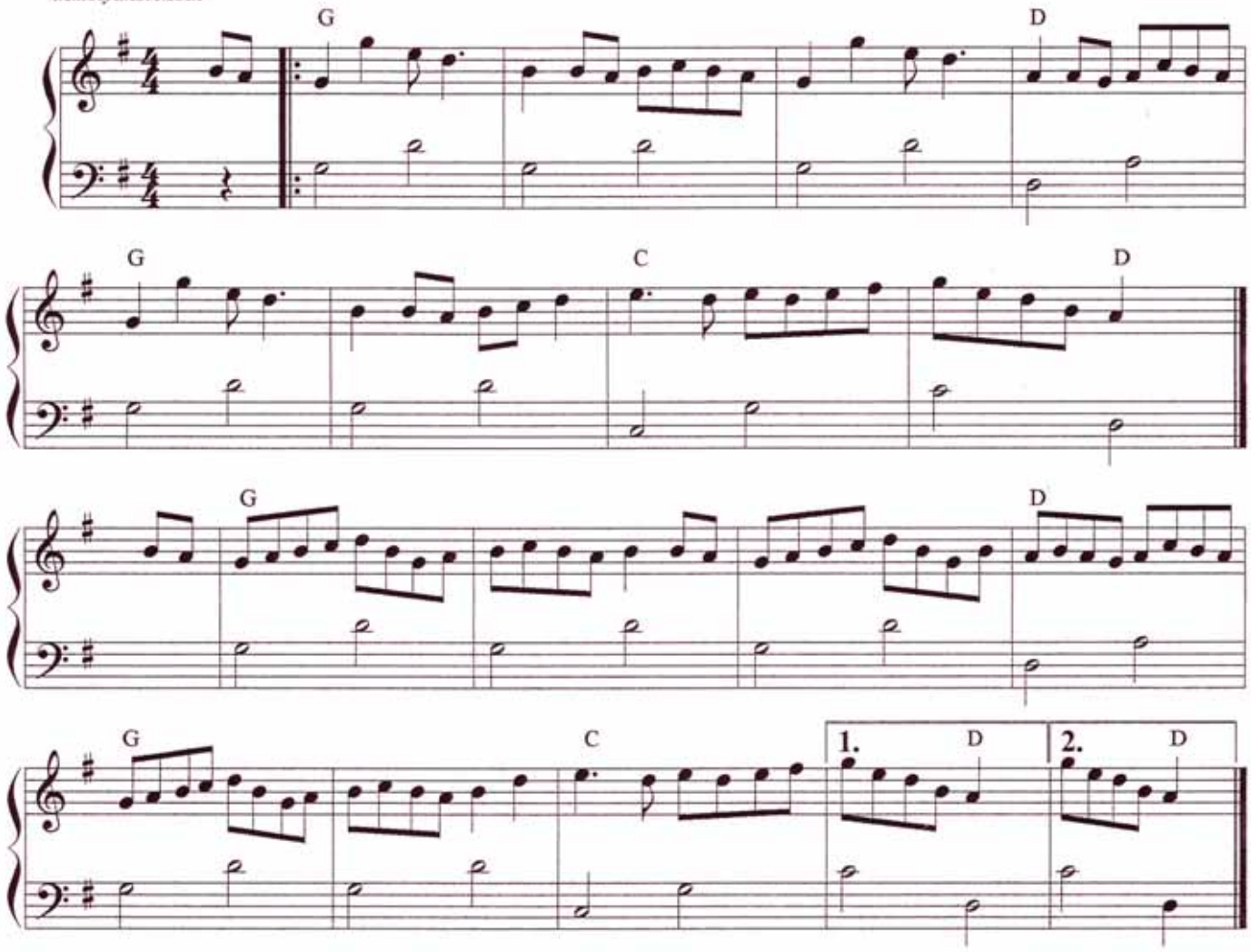





1.
2.

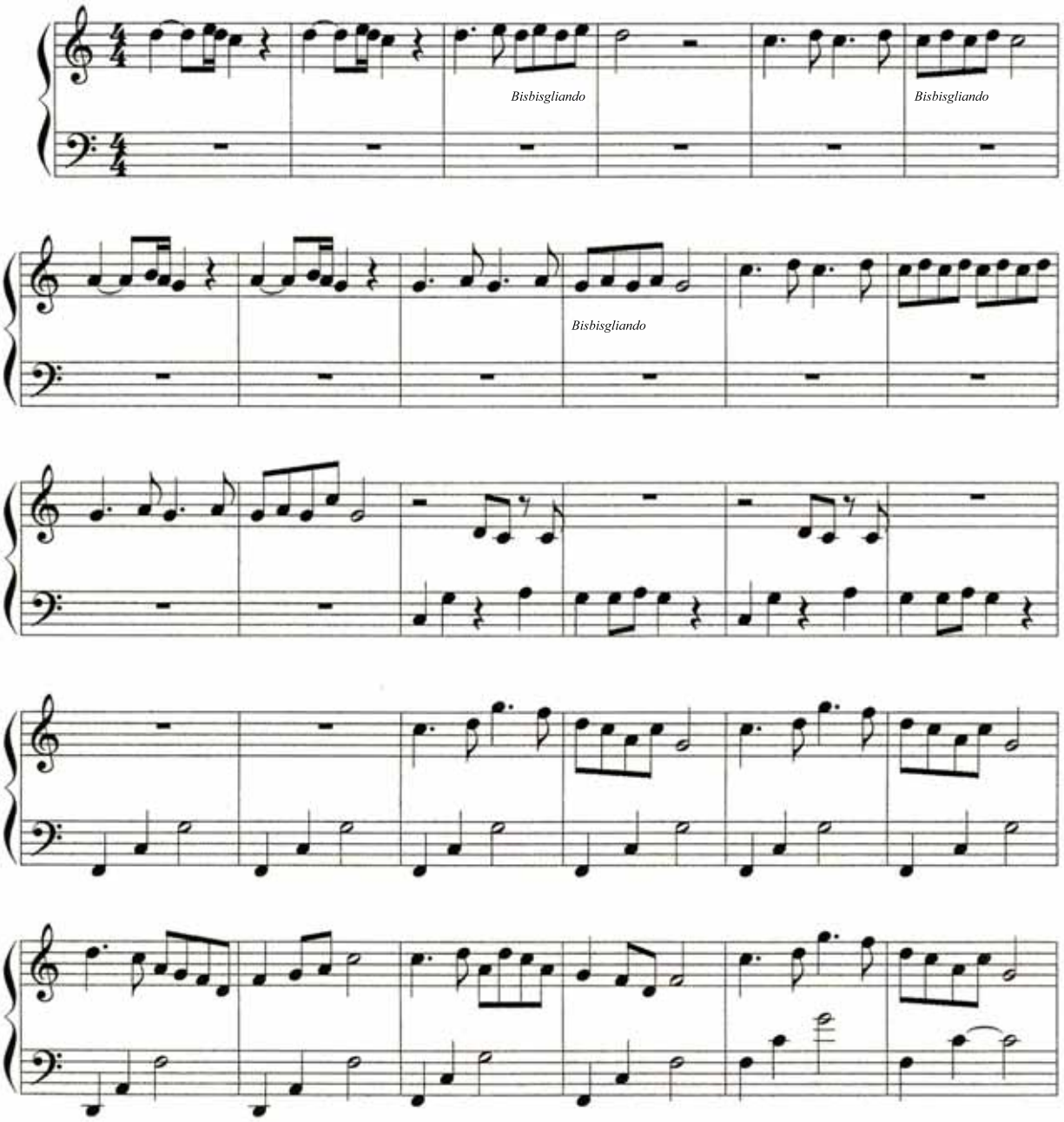
MISS MACLEOD'S REEL

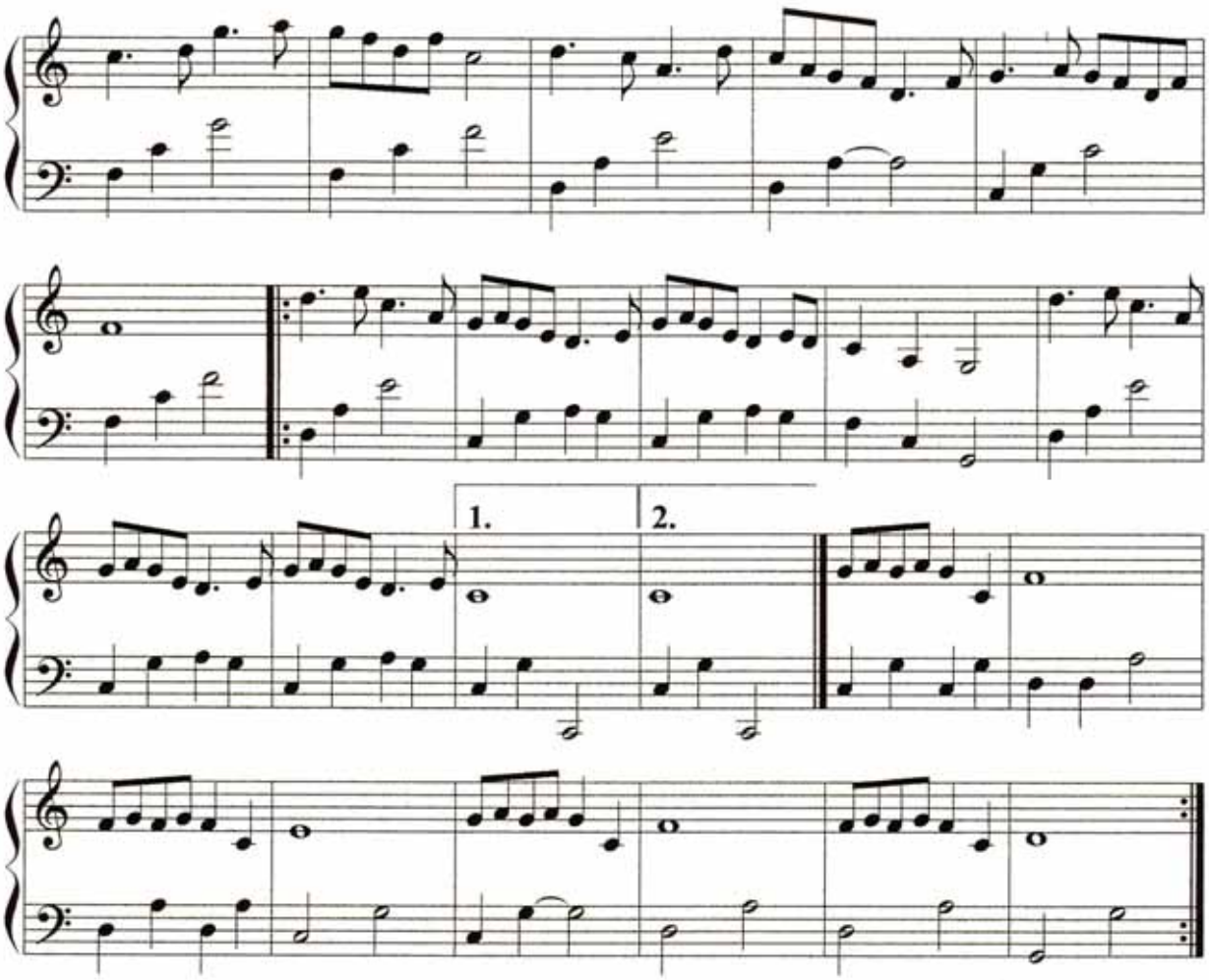
Mixolydian Mode



EARTH

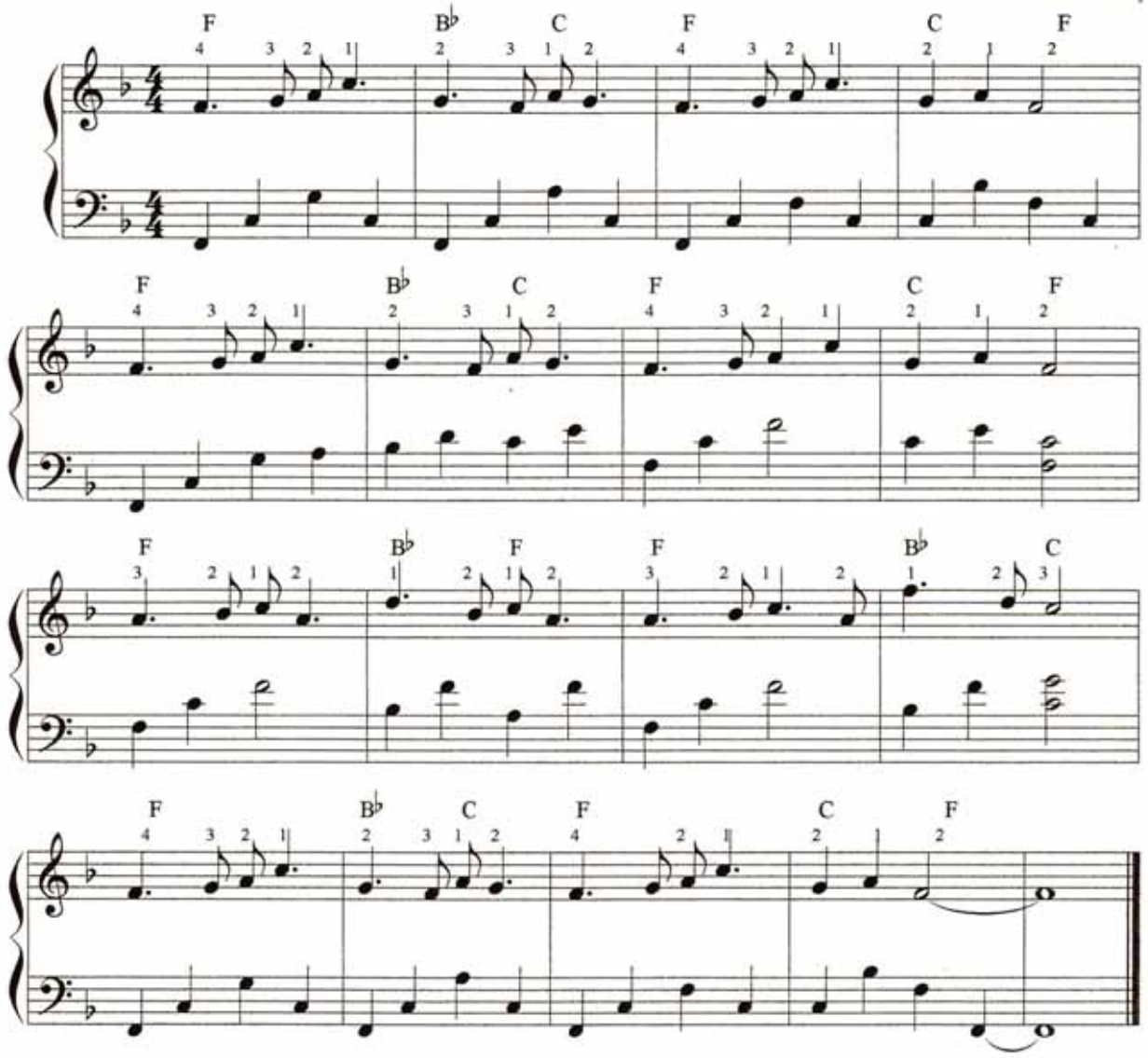
arr. for harp by
Christina Tourin




1.
2.

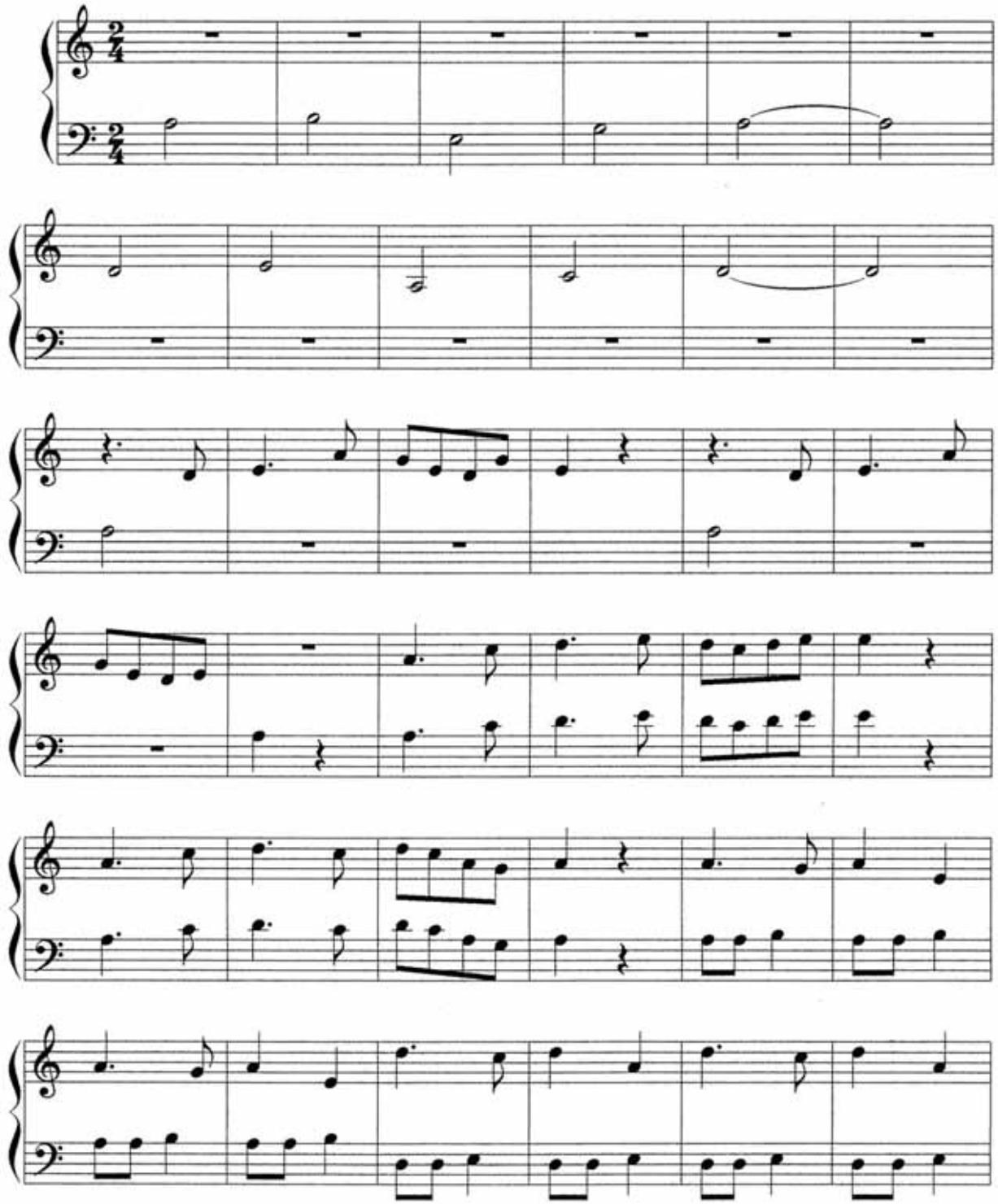
SUO GAN

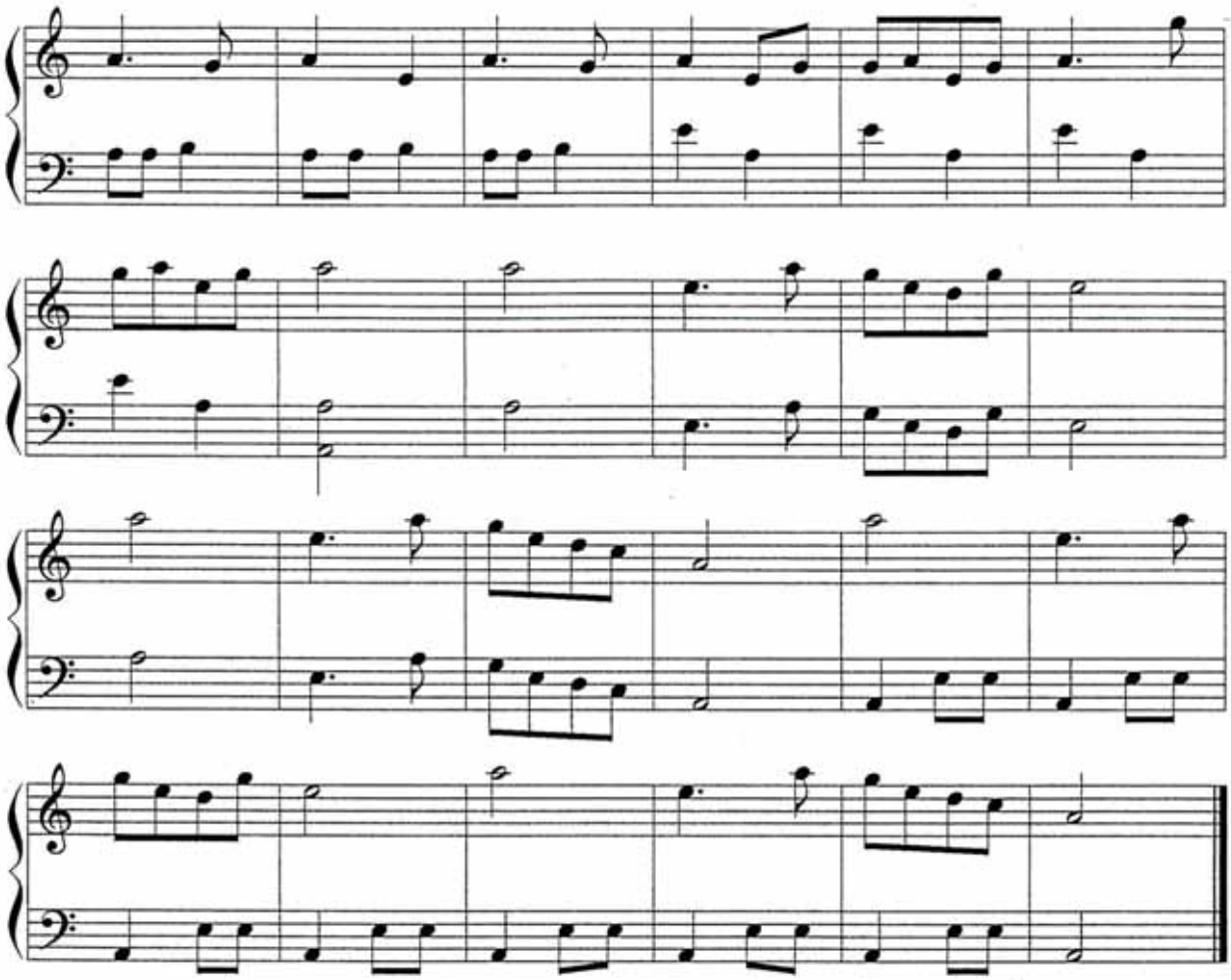
Beginner
Welsh Lullaby



METAL

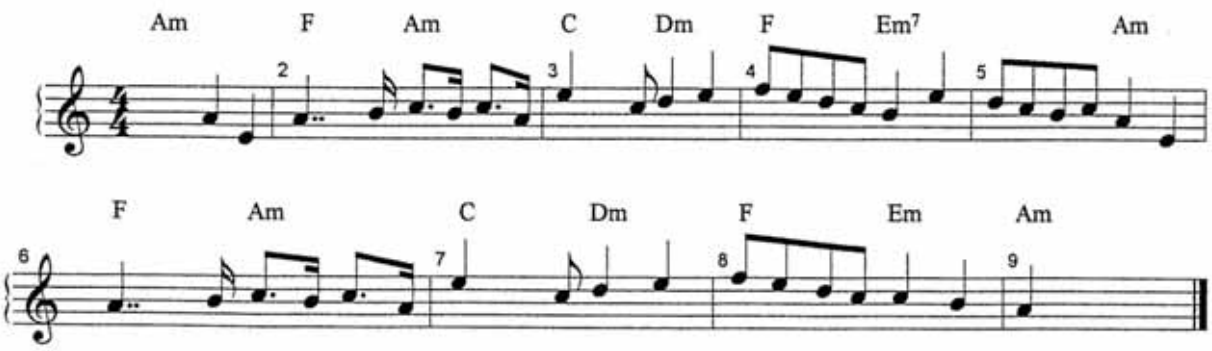
arr. for harp by
Christina Tourin





FARANDOLE

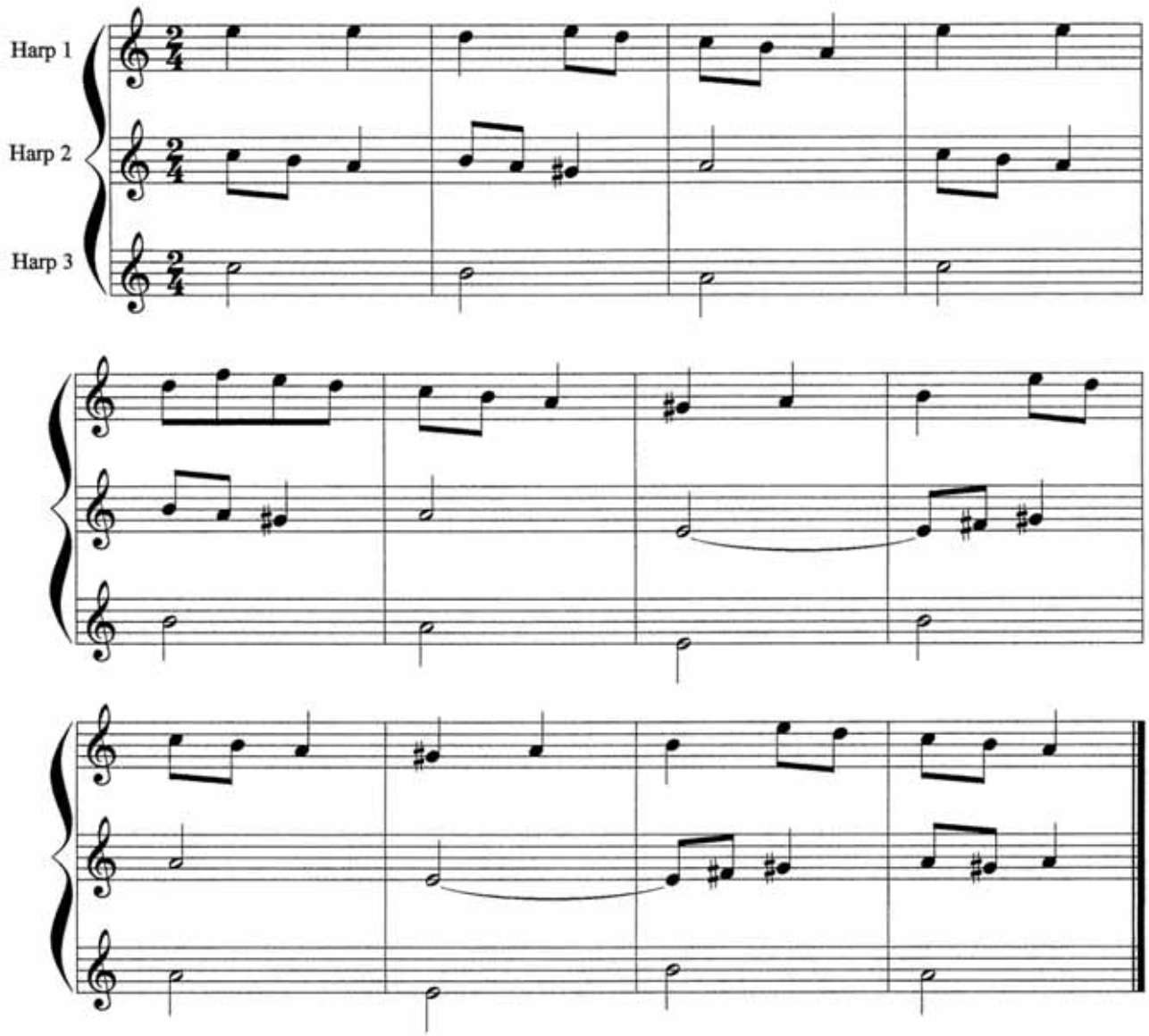
Georges Bizet

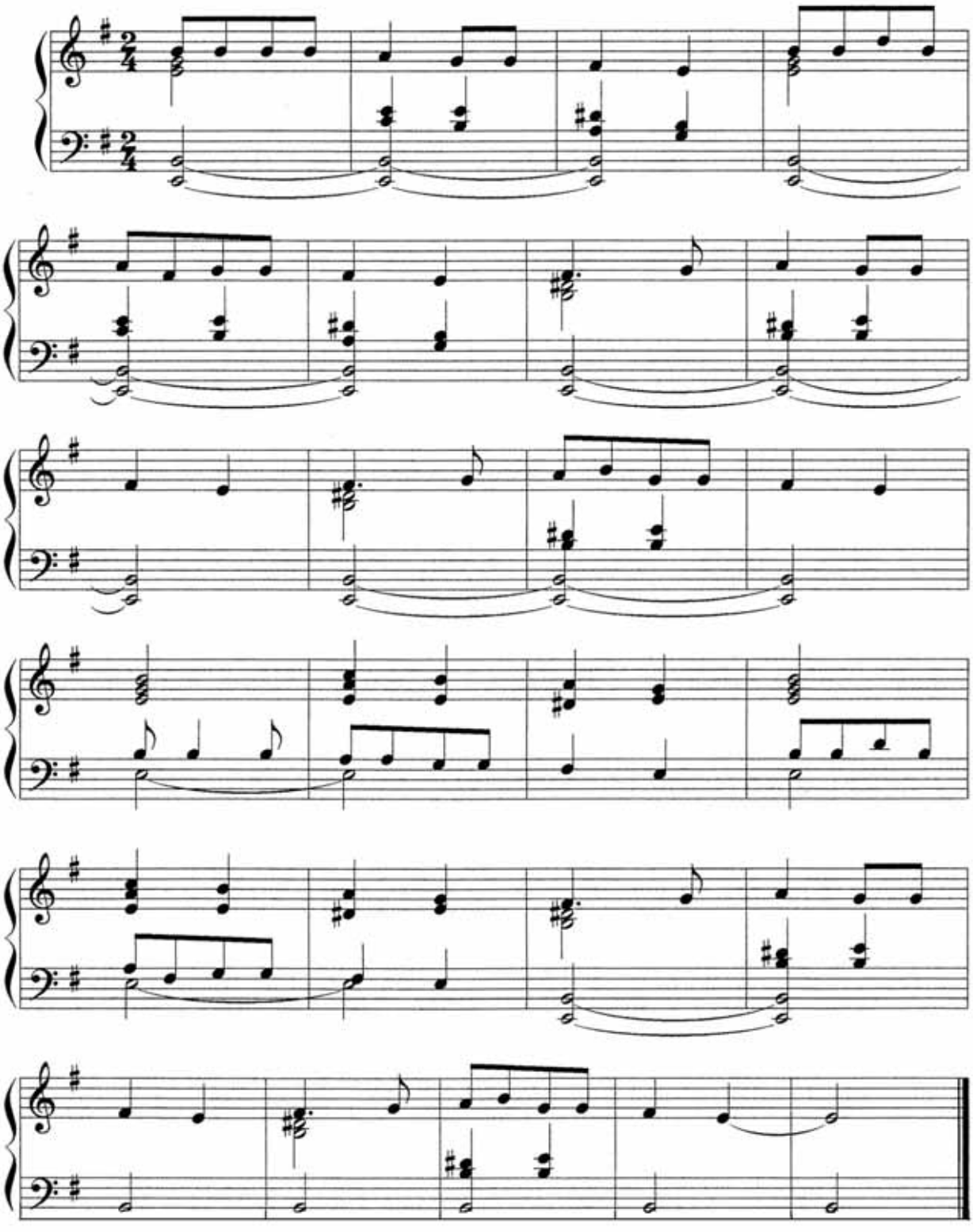


BIRCH TREE - Group

Harp 1 - Fix G# for the whole time
Harp 2 - Fix F# and G# the whole time

Russian



A BIRCH TREE IN THE FIELD

Russian