A Suite from *King Lear*: A Collaborative Experiment in Critical Response

John Carpenter, Craig Thomas and Stuart E. Omans*

Introduction: The Origins of an Experiment

This article records a ten-month experiment in Shakespearean critical response. It is a curious article in that its full understanding really depends upon the reader's hearing a musical performance (score follows this essay).

We began the experiment at the end of a senior-level Shakespeare class. After reading and acting in selected scenes from *King Lear*, two students (Craig Thomas and John Carpenter) who were interested in both literature and music commented to their professor, Stuart E. Omans, that from their artistic perspective, talking about the play seemed so severely limited in emotional response as to seem almost futile. Having felt the same fears in trying to lecture on *Lear*, the instructor was open to more completely exploring their mutual sense of frustration. What did they want to do as an alternative to the assigned course paper?

Mr. Thomas suggested that "somehow" he thought he would feel comfortable with trying to musically respond to, at least, some of the play's moments. He felt that he already had a beginning because while reading certain scenes, he had simultaneously started to hear instruments and the beginnings of musical themes. Mr. Carpenter was excited because he had experienced similar responses. Could they collaborate in developing their musical ideas? The thought was intriguing. The result was a collaborative piece. Subsequent discussions led to a three-way agreement to initiate a more sustained experiment in criticism to climax in scoring and then performing

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our collective response to one character, in one scene. After about three weeks of composing and rehearsing, we had a three minute tone poem in response to Cordelia during her opening moments of the play. We were elated with the results, so elated, we decided to try and score the rest of the play! (Faint hearts beat not in these Shakespeare-filled breasts.) After actually beginning, we were seized by reason, concluding that such a project was too complicated, indeed probably impossible, if only because of the play's emotional richness and a student-composer-musician's limitation in composing time and instrumentation. Further, we feared that we would not be able to musically organize our material and that the results of so much work might be unfocused and wandering. But we did not abandon the idea entirely. After further discussion, we decided to restrict ourselves to composing musical responses to what we collectively could agree on as the principal emotional changes within three characters—Lear, Cordelia, and the Fool, and to begin by augmenting the Lear piece. By the time we had finished discussing and reworking Lear, we had five movements. (1) A Prologue; (2) First Questions; (3) Memories; (4) Reprise; and (5) No Resolution.

Lear

1. A Prologue

Lear's music begins in response to Cordelia's answer of "nothing" just after he has asked his question soliciting her opulent public expression of love. The first notes are to echo his initial, conscious realization that she has taken an unalterable stance. The electric guitar opens the section, expressing Lear's internal wail. It is the human voice before it finds words to express its anguish as articulate anger. The musical effect is achieved by the musician's stretching the guitar's strings while increasing the instrument's volume. It is this section's most piercing and important sound because it also acts as a bridge and as a repeated motif for Lear's entire piece. Not only is it intended to express the feeling of a human cry, but augmented, it becomes the wailing of a whirlwind. Therefore, the sound is our attempt to suggest Lear's internal storm as well as the later external storm of the play.

The dominant rhythm is 7/4, our attempt to create a tense, breathless feeling, like that of a man frantically running away to no destination. It is also the sound of terrible disappointment. Lear realizes that his careful plans are shattering. It is aimless; it is desperate. As the section develops, the music thickens. The pulse increases as Lear runs from embarrassment, from his own responses, from others' disloyalty, from his increasing self-mistrust, from his loss of power, from his terror at the ugliness of his remaining daughters, from his old age and white hairs.

As this section thickens in rhythm and chords, a thunder in bass and guitar threatens to take over, rushing past us and him like a swollen stream thundering toward the ocean.

A growing and terrifying desperation, underscored by a terrible sadness is the feeling we are trying to achieve in the prologue.

2. First Questions: "What Can It Be That We Have?"

When Lear finds his voice, his words are clear, but troubled. We have made his the most lyric of all three movements because Shakespeare tells us so much more about him. Of all three characters, he is the one who has so much pent up if he can only find the right words and so, when he finally speaks, his songs are in the form of pressured, self-probing questions and anguished, self-discovered answers. We want the effect of a sudden explosion into song to convey the sense that beneath the embarrassed head of state, beneath robes and crown, there is a man who feels much more than he is used to revealing. Therefore, his opening lyric explodes, but is still only an undertone, a musical subtext of what is to come, once the floodgates of his mind are opened all the way. The first words are his first private statement tearing through the public situation: "What can it be that we have?" Conveyed here is the royal "we" giving way before the private "we." And with this, Lear's mind, unhappy with his answers, begins to cloud over in storm. We are trying for a lyric that conveys his hurt, jealousy, and disappointment at not receiving what he wants in a personal way. At this point, Lear looks to the past and at one level of his growing consciousness realizes that he has never really thought about his relationship to Cordelia until this terrible moment. As King he has been occupied with public business. He fictionalized relationships when he even took the time to consider them. Suddenly, his naïve view of relationships is shattered and he unconsciously yearns, but is afraid to look at his relationships as they really are. He is terrified by what he sees "as rocks in the stream" which before his eyes turn into events changed in time. What events were, or more accurately, what he thought they were, they no longer are. At this point, the music, still in 7/4 increases in volume. It then returns to a calm 4/4; and then once again shifts to 7/4 and its loud, frenzied quality.

Lear's agitation grows and then diminishes, grows and diminishes, one rhythm shifting into another until there seems to be no concrete time signature. There are only echoes of one in another.

3. Memories: "I remember you as a little child."

This section begins with a distorted guitar solo, undirected, furious. It then grows quieter as Lear recedes into his deepest memories of Cordelia. When he remembers her "as a little child" his music repeats the theme of his memories of rocks in the stream. His memories are clear, those rocks are the same, but now everything else is different. The guitar cries as he realizes the change and asks, "What has happened to you? What has happened to me?" It is, at this moment, that we want Lear's mind to clear, that we want him to have for just a moment, a true, open vision of himself. Here the music must have a folk quality. Lear says simply and honestly, "I am an old man and you [Cordelia] are a gentle essence."

4. Reprise: "Is It So Crazy?"

Lear cannot sustain these simple, filled moments of facing his reality. When he admits to the problems at hand, the old part of his mind still wants to

turn away, turn back to rage for solace. His old music rebuilds; the quiet is destroyed. The effect is a pattern of reprise and turmoil; reprise and turmoil. But now always reprise wins out. Now, finally, it is really important to know what his daughter really thinks. Lear quietly asks "Is it so crazy . . . ?"

Lear is not yet ready to answer this question. The question is embodied in an unresolved chord whose impression should sound primitive: it could be Celtic or Oriental or even modern country. What we want is a universal quality in this chord. It must approximate Lear's inability to leave this question—"Is it so crazy?" alone. The chord and the question must be one. Together they must suggest his ongoing torture which is, in reality, his ongoing self-examination.

The chord can only be resolved when Lear can say "I am a king who has no power" without caring that he has no power.

5. No Resolution

In completing the Lear music we were divided on whether Lear can ever really completely accept this resolution. Craig Thomas, who worked on most of this piece, won out, feeling that Lear, by himself, can never stop picking this wound. As a result, the music returns to its opening 4/4 section, this time characterized by an increased frenzy. For us, even at the end of Lear's life, after the storm, he cannot leave the past alone. The last chord is unresolved.

Cordelia

By the time we had finished Cordelia's music we had seven movements (1) Cordelia in G; (2) Sounds of Banishment; (3) Discovering a New Reality; (4) Finding a Clearing in France; (5) Struggling to the Clearing; (6) Return; (7) Resolution: No Regrets.

1. Development: Cordelia in G

We began to rework the original Cordelia piece, this time necessarily with an eye to musically integrating it to the other two characters. We realized that all three should be built upon the play's thematic line(s) that made the greatest emotional impact on us all. Without much difficulty, we agreed that the one note that continually asserted itself was this: without an ability first to recognize, and then to sustain, bonds with our loved ones, life would end as meaningless. A secondary note was that, too often, as in Lear himself, there is a countering human reluctance to fully accept and nurture these bonds.

In Cordelia, we believed we had found the one character who has the seed of this ability, and who, when forced to by circumstances, could nurture it. We decided to plant this seed at the beginning of her piece and be certain to nurture it throughout.

Its first appearance is a clear and simple theme, musically unembellished and unembroidered. As her piece unfolds, Cordelia's theme complicates in ways that suggest her discovering levels in her love for Lear.

Her basic strength initially appears in the steady and smooth, but quick pulsing 4/4 time, in her music's sustained rapidity, in its tenacity, all

controlled by the unchanging strength of the piano's left hand. G is her dominant tone throughout the piece, adding B, D, E and A. With the addition of A, we decided to add a ninth chord, trying in this way for a tense strength, a power more than we had achieved in the opening, dominant G chord. The decision to use G did not come without trial failures. At first, we tried C in the treble; this *sounded* fine, but *felt* wrong. The key felt too simple. G, slightly more complicated, seemed more appropriate to Cordelia's apparent simplicity—a certain smug quality that serves to mask her potential for growth. Also, G impressed us as somehow having a clear, solid bell quality—absent in C, and the other keys we tried.

We built the right hand, at the outset, on sustained major chords: F, G, C and D. E minor is added eight measures later. Our attempt here is to underscore the left hand pulse, while at the same time, creating a base for the changing lead instruments (violin, viola and flute) to work over. We introduced a sustained bell-like chord in the key of G, the tonic key, trying to suggest the strength of Cordelia's character that dominates her love. We wanted this chord to approximate the sound achieved when one strikes a crystal goblet: ringing, sustained, beautiful and flawless.

2. Banishment

As her second section begins, we are trying to portray the disintegration of Cordelia's world. The violin enters simply, a high D starkly hanging in the air, calling attention to itself. It is Cordelia's honest but self-conscious reply of "nothing" to her father's inquiry, "What can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters?" It is at this point that the musical complexity slowly increases. From here the opening D is surrounded, multiplied, irregularized. What seemed simple, strong, and inoffensive, grows crazy, off balance—the world's wheel gone awry.

A radical time sequence occurs here: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7; 1 2 3 4 5 6; 1 2 3 4 5 6 7; 1 2 3 4 5, creating a strange syncopation. If we were to give a time signature to the counting in eighth notes, 6/8 would probably be the designated time. But this, of course, changes quickly and unpredictably: 7 beats, 6 beats, 7 beats, 5 beats, i.e. four changes per musical line. As the line beats change, there is concurrently a noting change. We begin with G9, move to G to F (twice) to C and D (twice). The time pattern changes: 7C to 6D to 5E to 4F to 2G. The cumulative impact of heavy syncopation, time changes, and chord shifts makes the second section difficult to listen to. The audience needs to readjust to each new counting system, but has preciously limited time available to make the adjustment. The musical feeling should affect the audience as the experience affects Cordelia. They should have the sense of being tossed about in some swirling current. At the same time, behind this confusion, is the repeated twenty-four note arpeggio in the left hand, a strength in Cordelia that remains solid despite the swirling current. . . .

3. Discovering A New Reality

Her third section is characterized by rhythmic complexity and sonic simplicity. Instrumentation shifts from dominant violin to dominant flute.

The effect we want is a kind of out-of-sequence, surprising folk dance. The flute sound is simple, but its rhythms are complex. There is a triple feeling here. The flute suggests first, a new set of emotions, second, a personal reinventory, and finally, a discovery of strengths in the face of adversities never imagined.

The flute's entrance is a surprise. Occurring midstream in the piece, it emerges rushing, like a recessed emotional quality that only surfaces as one moves through the process of encountering some new, formerly unimaginable adversity. Filled with varying rhythms, trills, volumes, at odds and in counterpoint to those of the piano, the flute section should feel like a continuing surprise. The musicians' sense is to try and find a way of cementing the piano's solidity and the flute's variations.

As the section concludes, the flute fades and the piano dominates once again, quietly, slowly asserting strength.

4. A Clearing in France

This is a strange section because it approximates nothing actually provided in the play's text. Rather, it is our attempt to explore Cordelia's experience while in France. It is probably a heresy in literary criticism, but seems appropriate for us here. The section is slow, even, in sustained 4/4 time. For the first time, we hear lyrics in Cordelia's voice. The voice is strong as she comes to understand and express the love she feels for her father.

We believe that the music represents internal discoveries she makes while living with her husband in exile. It is here in France that she actually sorts out her allegiances to her husband and father which she too glibly expressed in Act I. It is here that she has the time to think, and through self-reflection, come to understand how important her father really is to her. There is no glibness here, no sharpness either. There is no tension between flute and piano. Here there is the heartbreak of separation and the longing for home and reconciliation. This section portrays the private Cordelia opening to herself.

5. Struggling to the Clearing

Here the instrumentation changes, adding a much heavier use of electric guitar, flute and bass. The bass dominates the beginning of the movement suggesting an increased strength and a recognized need to shift her way of looking at reality. She is to reunite with her father. The dominant scale here, *G minor*, is dramatically different than any yet played. Through it we are attempting to show a young woman learning to deal with a foreign country. And it is in this foreign country, in new circumstances, physically and emotionally that an even greater shift occurs. Suddenly, there is a recorder and we are mainly in 12/8, almost a jig. The bass and recorder are arguing. Cordelia is having to look at herself, as others later too will look at themselves. The sound is primitive, perhaps even on the edge of madness. It is a bedrock: Who am I? Here there are no chords and only two taunting melodic lines weaving in and out of one another. The rhythms are primitive. To find herself and the full implications of her earlier words, she too must run the risk of losing herself.

6. Return

This section is the culmination of the last two movements. The violin reenters. Rhythms are more even. Chords return and are clear and unguarded. Cordelia is ready to return to the external world. She is almost ready to say, "The most important thing is forgiveness." There are no principles here. There are no lyrics here. For just a moment (actually in four bars) there is a shift back within to remembrance of the whirlwind with the reappearance of the syncopated sequence 1-7; 1-6; 1-6; 1-5, but it is only momentary and is balanced now by a long, controlled 4-note sequence.

7. A Resolution: No Regrets

In this last movement the piano returns, restating its basic theme, but now strengthened. She now knows herself better than ever before. There is another level of personality here which she never dreamed she could achieve. Cordelia sings here because she knows what she really wants and is willing to do whatever she must do to achieve it. The music is emotionally even in 4/4 time. In the piano's left hand there is power; in the right, sweetened bell-like chords. The violin is here again, but rather than a stark D hanging in the air and calling attention to itself, there are complex scales, more strings, more use of the instrument—a willingness to take all chances as if emotionally laying itself, herself, out to another.

The resolution is carried in the piano's right hand: slow, precise, clear and light.

The Fool

1. Creating A Musical Enigma

The Fool's section is the shortest and most rhythmically complex. It is built around a trio of instruments: piano, bass and guitar. Each plays in its own time signature: piano in 12/8; guitar in 3/4; bass in 6/4. At no time does one of the instruments prevail over the others. The collective effect is difficult to articulate. The closest explanation is, appropriately, a question that we hope will subconsciously arise in the listener: am I hearing two separate patterns and one underlying melody or three distinct interwoven patterns, or one pattern and two interwoven melodies? We want the listener to feel as if there is an underlying pattern to it all and, of course, there is, but it should be disturbingly difficult to define.

All of the section is built around a twelve note sequence that begins on a B and descends two octaves. We chose this sequence because it can be almost infinitely subdivided, disbursed among the three time signatures. Therefore, the Fool's basic melodic line adds to the listener's sense of enigma. Indeed, it is fascinating that when John Carpenter, the composer of this section, first chose the twelve note sequence, he had the key of A major in mind, but when the other musicians heard it, they seemed to hear it in B minor and played their initial response in this key. The chords are, of course, related, i.e., the chords have common notes. The musicians' perception raises a question

buried deep in the music of the piece: how well does the Fool, himself, ever understand the *complete* impact of what he is saying? How well can he understand how Lear hears his song? Is he like our acoustic guitarist's first response as he played in two keys at once, an enigma unto himself?

Internal chord changes in the first nine bars of the Fool, are in keeping with his music's problematic quality. They are all sequentially in half-tones. The guitar moves from A to B to B to B to A; and later B to B to B to A. The piano and bass move from B to C to $C^{\#}$. In each instrument, the chord shift is the smallest one possible. What the composer wanted here was the greatest intensity of musical paradox. He achieves this by being certain that the tiny changes in one instrument are occurring simultaneously to similar changes in the other instrument, playing in another key. For example, A has three sharps; B(b) has two flats; and B has five sharps. The effect is organized, related, cacophony. It is our collective belief that this is a large part of the Fool's personality. He does not know what is going to emerge from his mind at any moment. He can never rationally explain himself to himself. There are too many keys, so many chords, and often at apparent cross purposes.

Suddenly, about a third of the way through the piece, the bass suddenly and unexpectedly emerges as the lead instrument. It plays one note, C, and the others, as if in sympathy, play a corresponding chord. Having gained strength and elicited the correct chord in the opposing instruments, the bass goes on with G, then C again and so on.

The bass, traditionally the background but sustaining rhythm in most popular music, the dimension of music usually not noticed until it is absent, emerges here as the Fool's purest reality. It should seem as if the Fool's deepest recess and fullest dimension—his devotion to Lear that even he cannot rationally understand—has taken over.

Once the bass has emerged, the third and final section has begun and as it progresses, it grows more intense by changing rhythms: 1 2 3; 1 2 3; 1 2 3 4 5; 1 2 3; 1 2 3; 1 2 3; 1 2 3 4 5. The overwhelming sense should be of emotions out of control. There are wild musical shifts and a dissonant drive, like a music of death. It is as if the Fool is trying to stop, but cannot. The music wails, grows oriental in 4/4 time and then abruptly, there is a burst of sound—and it is over. The Fool's music concludes more enigmatically and emotionally than it began. It concludes without lyrics, without explanations: it is raw. Our suggestion is that perhaps like the character to the character himself, it is inexplicable.

Post Script

"The Suite From *King Lear*: Performance As Criticism" continues to have a diverse career. Its first public reading and performance was during a faculty seminar at the University of Central Florida. O.B. Hardison, former Director of the Folger Shakespeare Theatre, now Professor of English at Georgetown University was in attendance and was impressed enough by the project to write recommending it to Winton Blount, founder of the Alabama Shakespeare Theatre and to Jim Volz, the Theatre's Managing Director. Subsequently, after hearing the Suite and reading the article, Volz made plans to

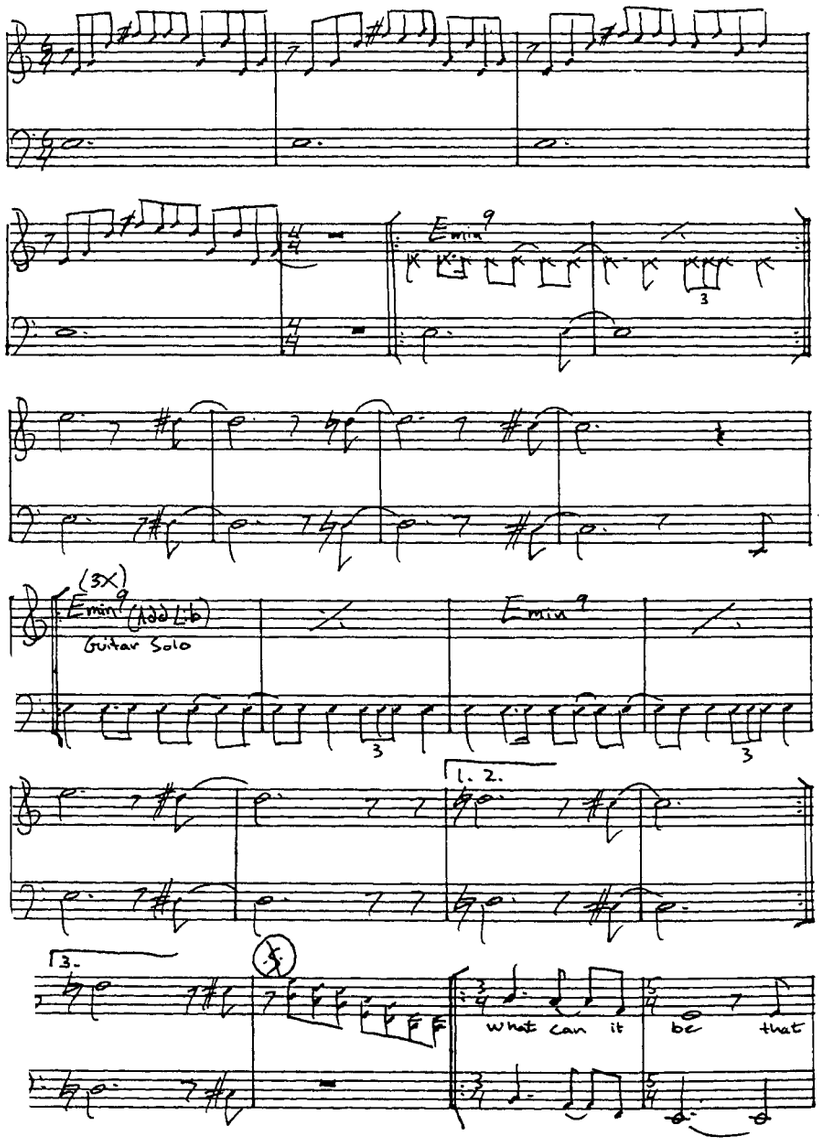
include the Suite as part of the Theatre's 1987 concert series. In the meantime, the Suite was presented in abbreviated form at Florida State's 1986 Comparative Drama Conference, and accepted for publication in the second issue of *The Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. A month later it was chosen as one of two conference-wide symposia for the national meeting of the 1987 College English Association in Charleston, South Carolina April 2-3 1987.

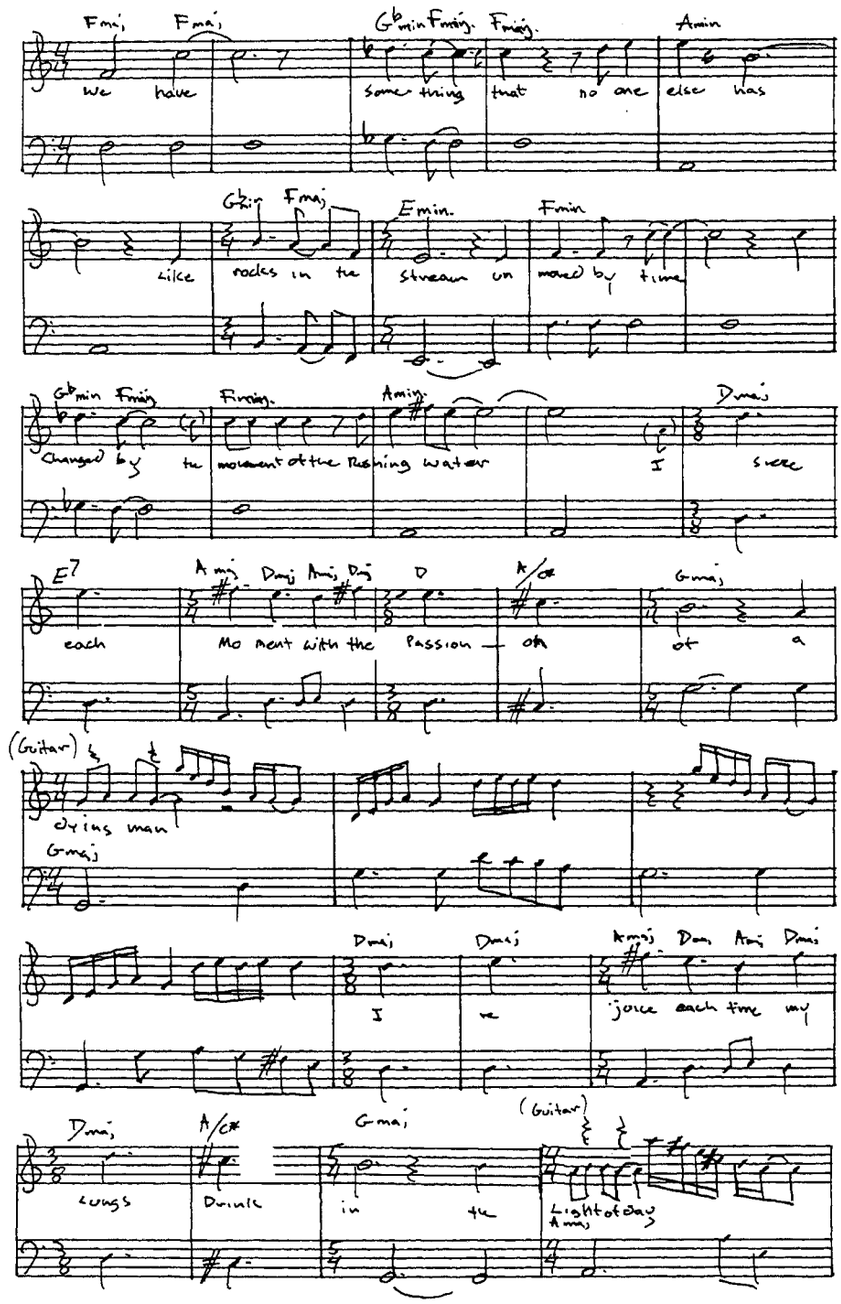
University of Central Florida

The Suite from *King Lear*

John Carpenter, Craig Thomas, and Stuart E. Omans

LEAR




Fmaj Fmaj Gbmin Fmaj. Fmaj. Amin
we have some thing that no one else has
Gbmin Fmaj Emin. Fmin
like rocks in the stream un moved by time
Gbmin Fmaj Fmaj. Amin. Dmaj
changed by the movement of the Rushing water I see
E7 Amaj. Dmaj Amaj. Dmaj D A/C# Gmaj
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(Guitar)
dying man
Gmaj
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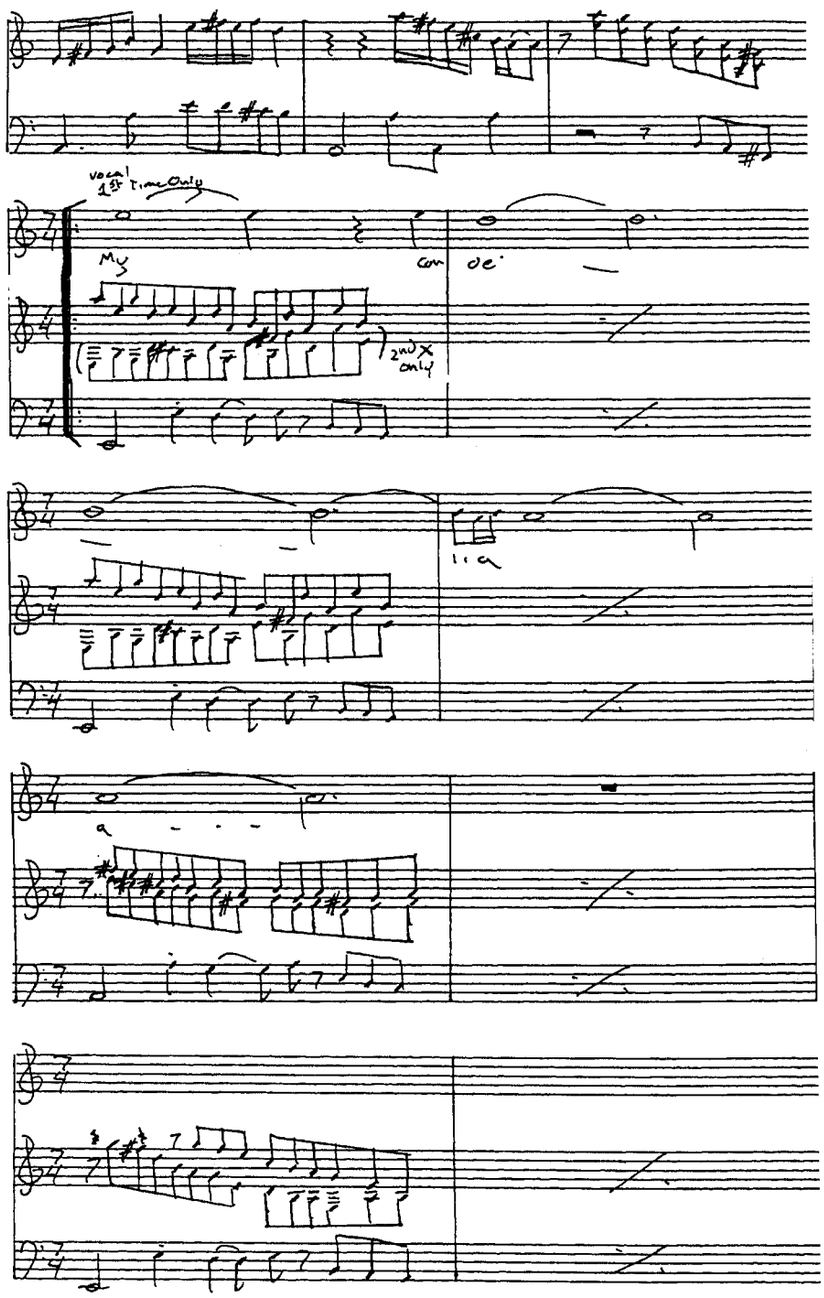
Dmaj A/C# Gmaj (Guitar)
lungs Drink in the Light of Day
Amaj


vocal 1st time Only
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con
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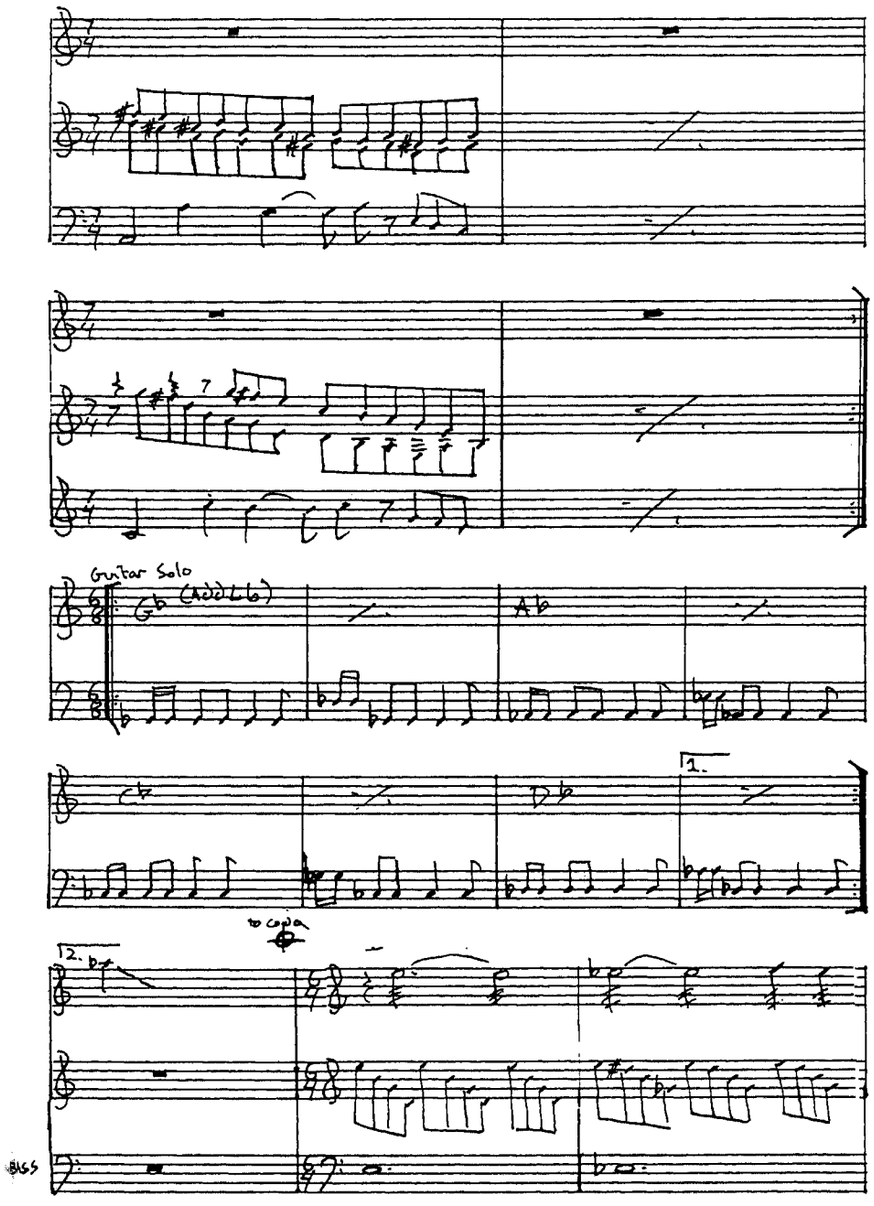
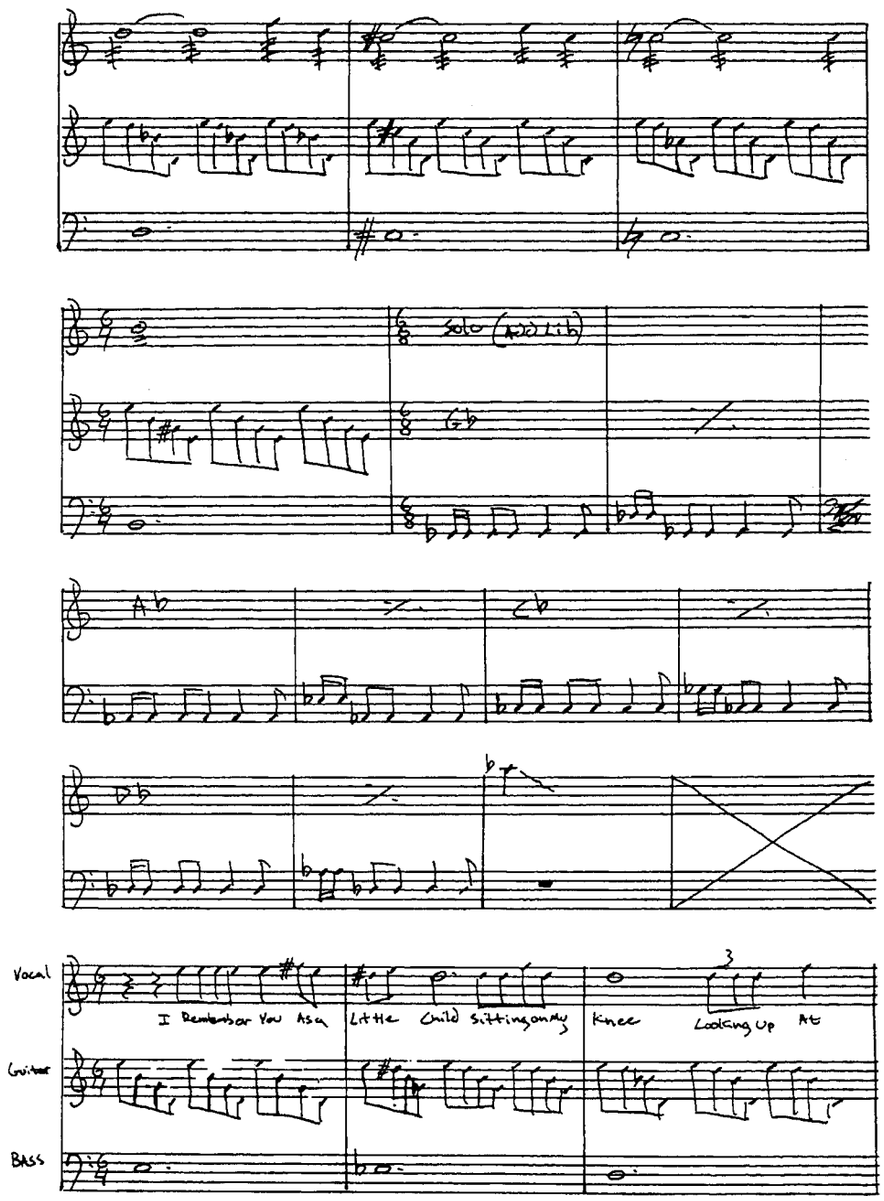
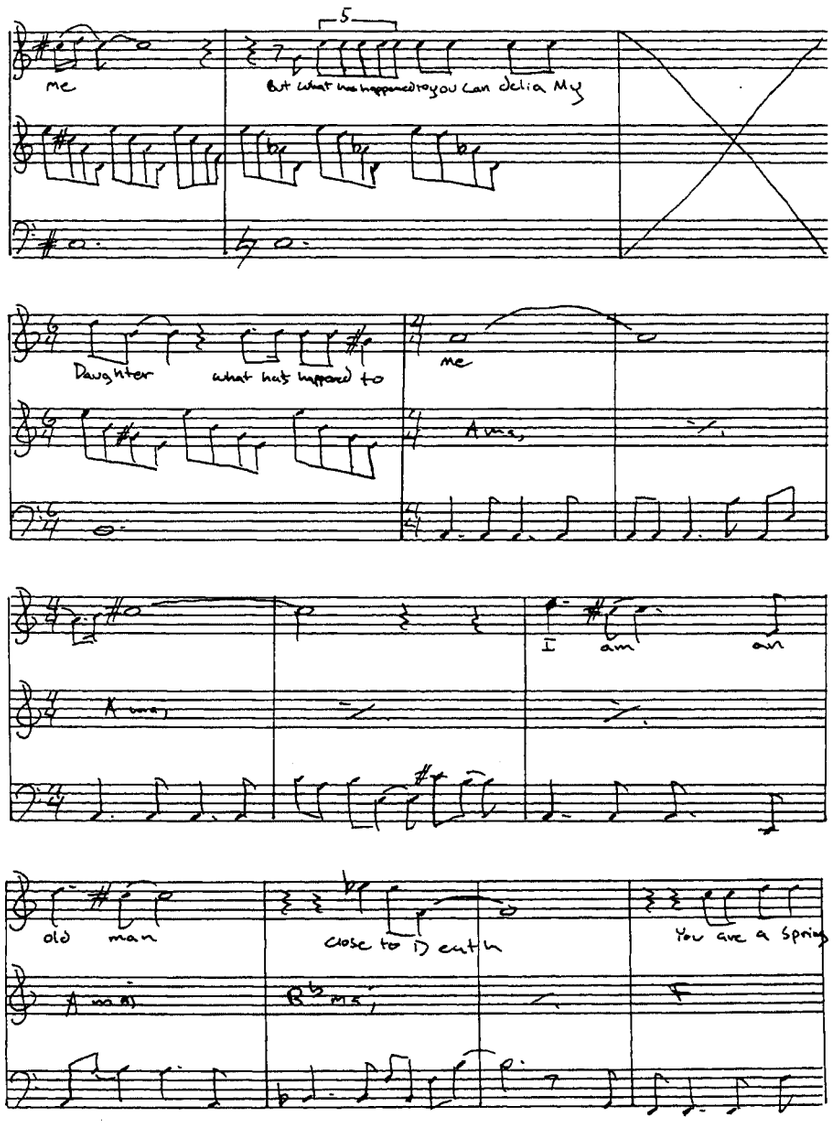

Guitar Solo
Gb (add Lb)
Ab
Cb
Db
1.
2.
to coda
Bass


Solo (ad lib)
Vocal
I Remember You As a
Little Child Sitting on My
Knee
Looking Up At
Guitar
BASS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me
But what has happened to you can delia My
Daughter
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me
I
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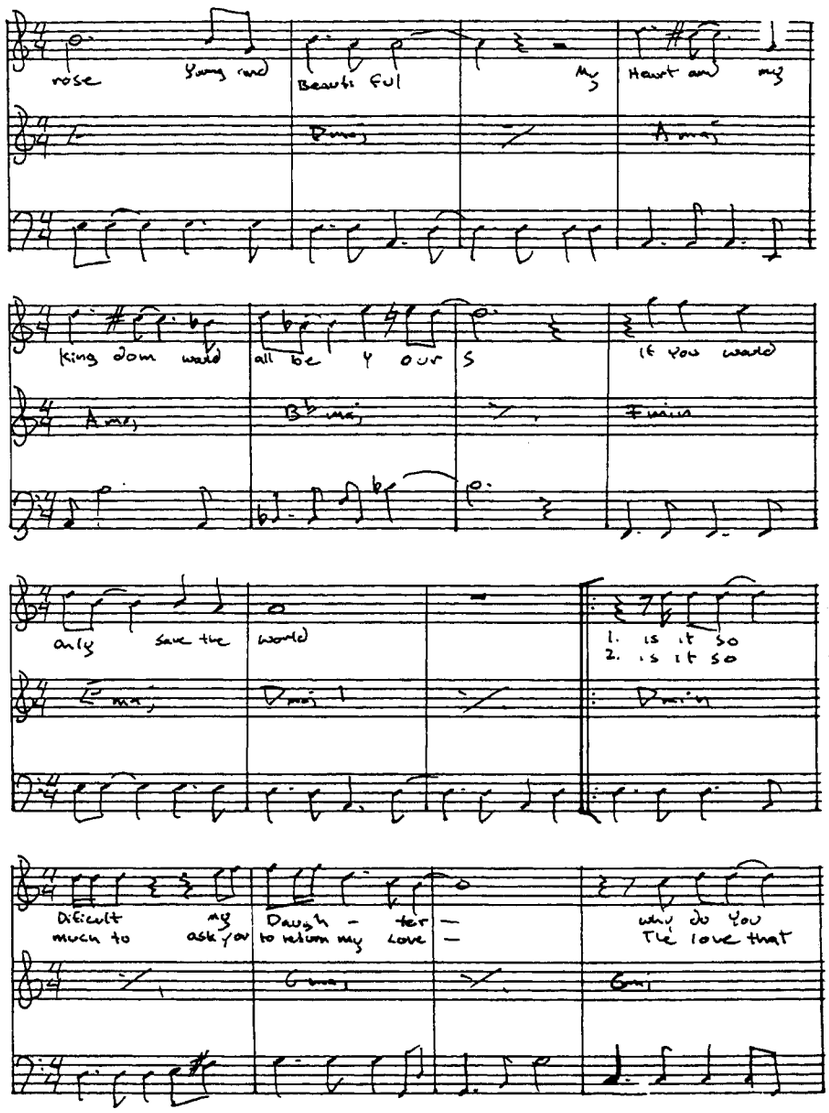
You are a Spring


rose
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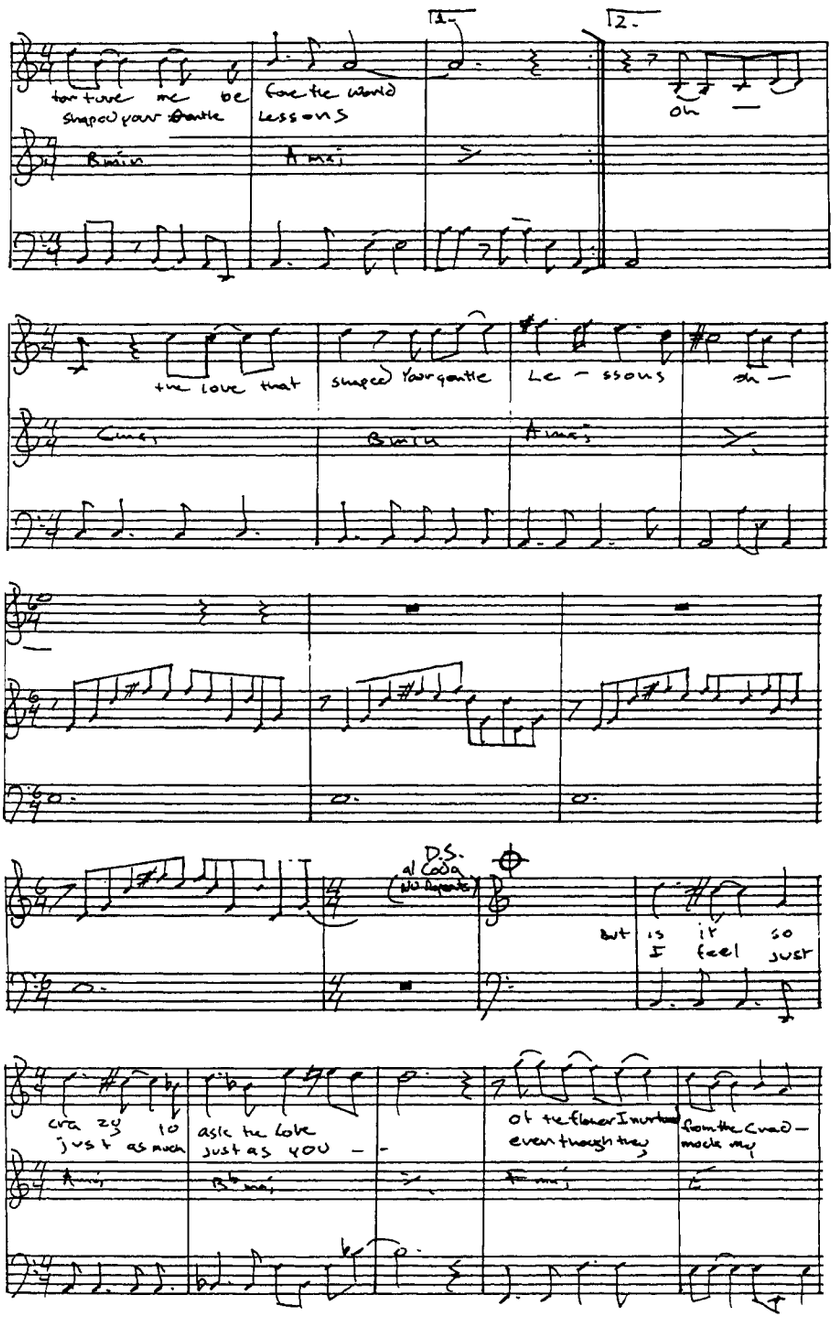
1.
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Amaj
the love that
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Le - ssons
oh —
Cmaj
Bmin
Amaj
D.S.
al Coda
(No Repeats)
but is it so
I feel just
cra zy to
just as much
ask the love
just as you - -
of the flower I nurtured
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from the Cradmock my
Amaj
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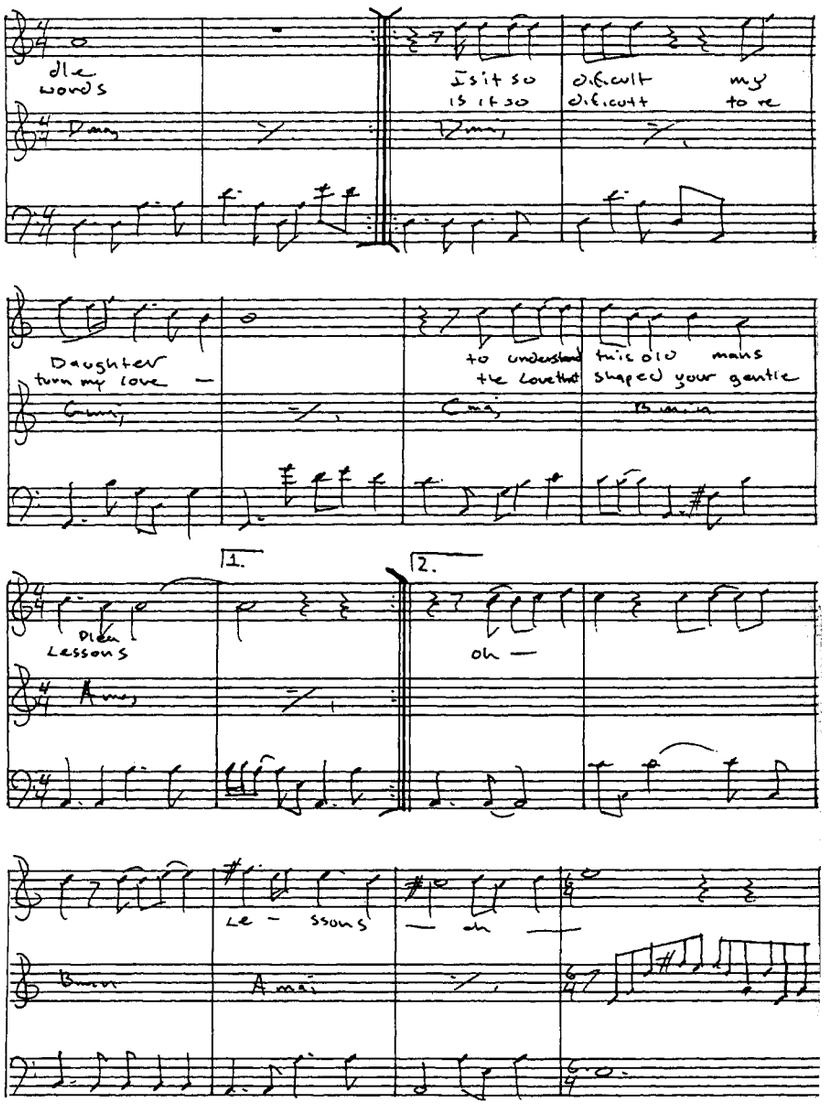
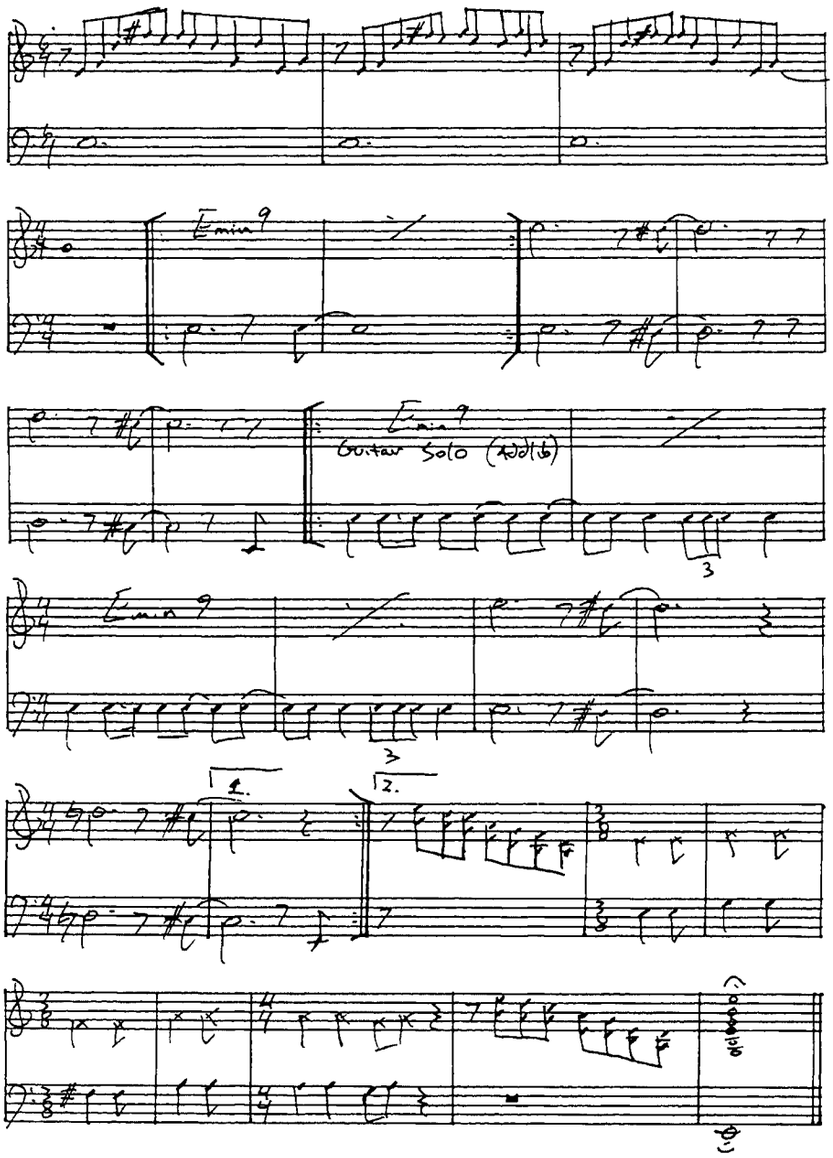
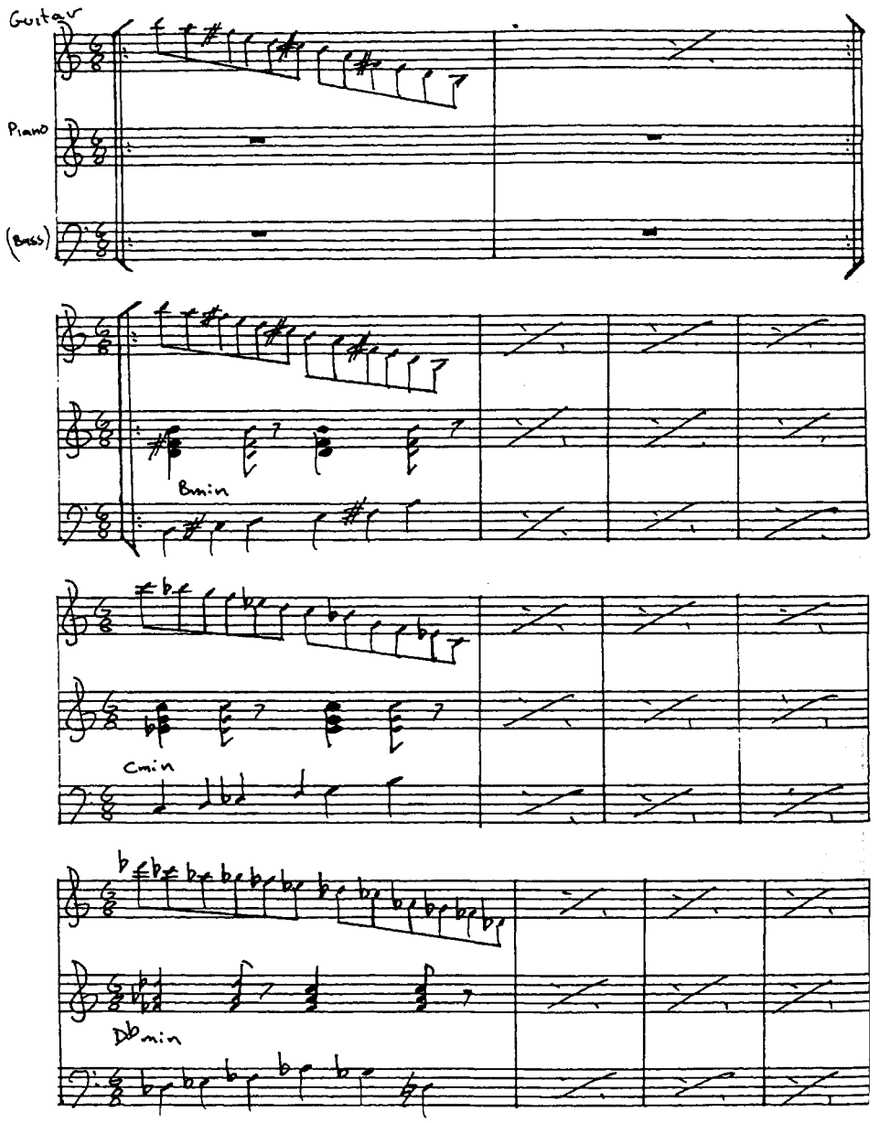
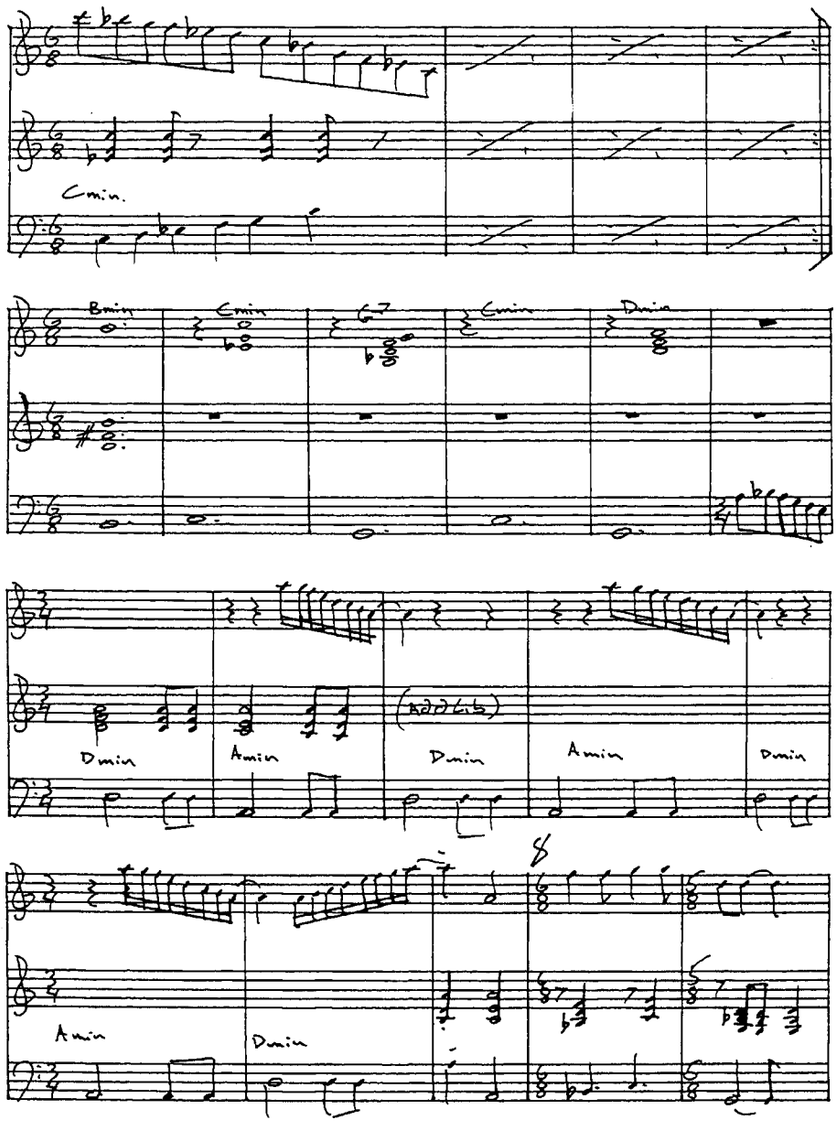
F maj
E


the words
Is it so difficult my to re
Is it so difficult
Daughter turn my love —
to understand the love that
this old man's shaped your gentle
1.
2.
Les sons
Les — sons
— oh —


Emin9
Emin9
Guitar Solo (add lib)
Emin9
1.
2.

FOOL




Cmin.
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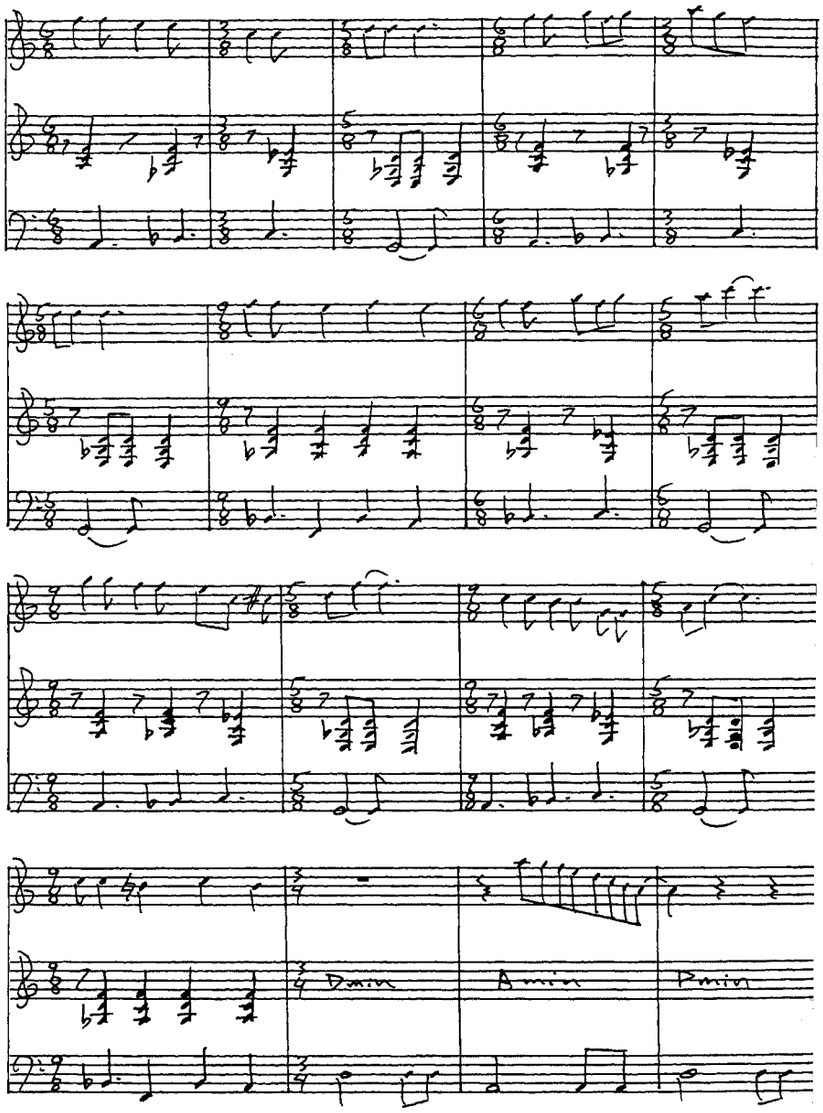
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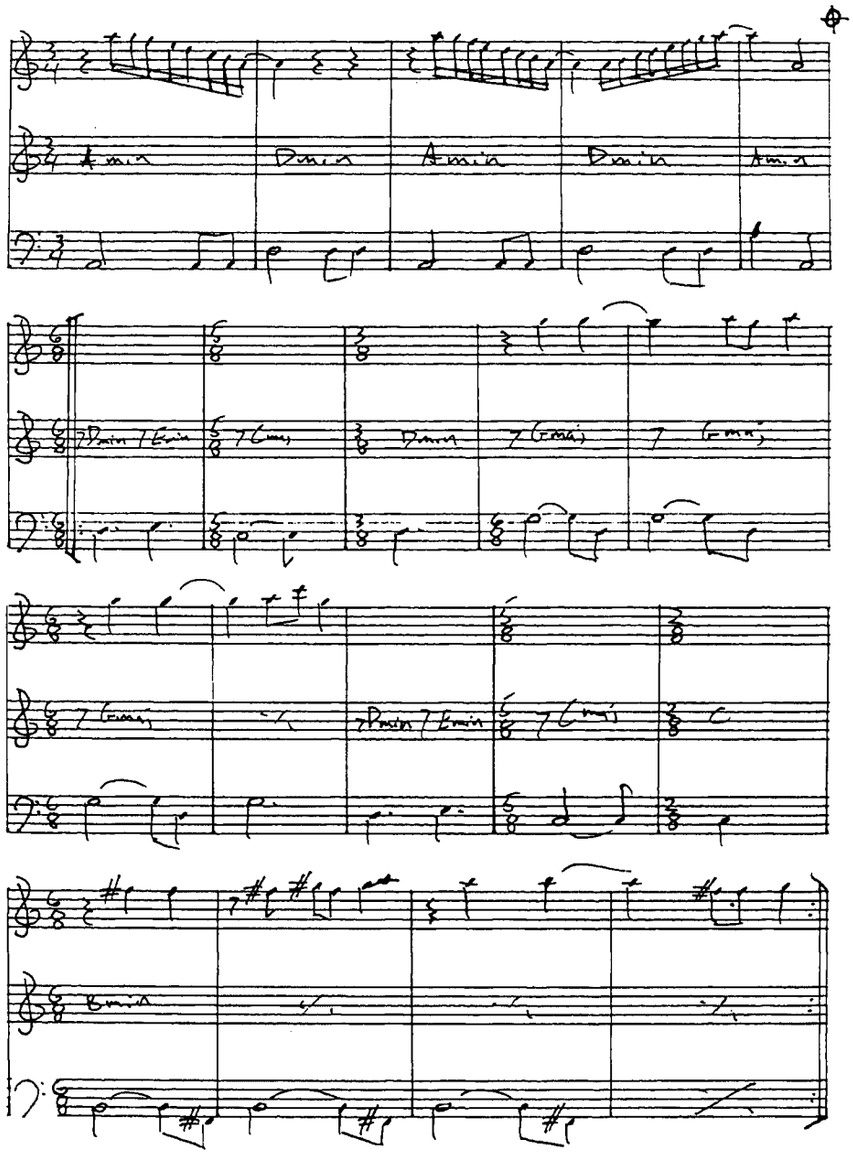
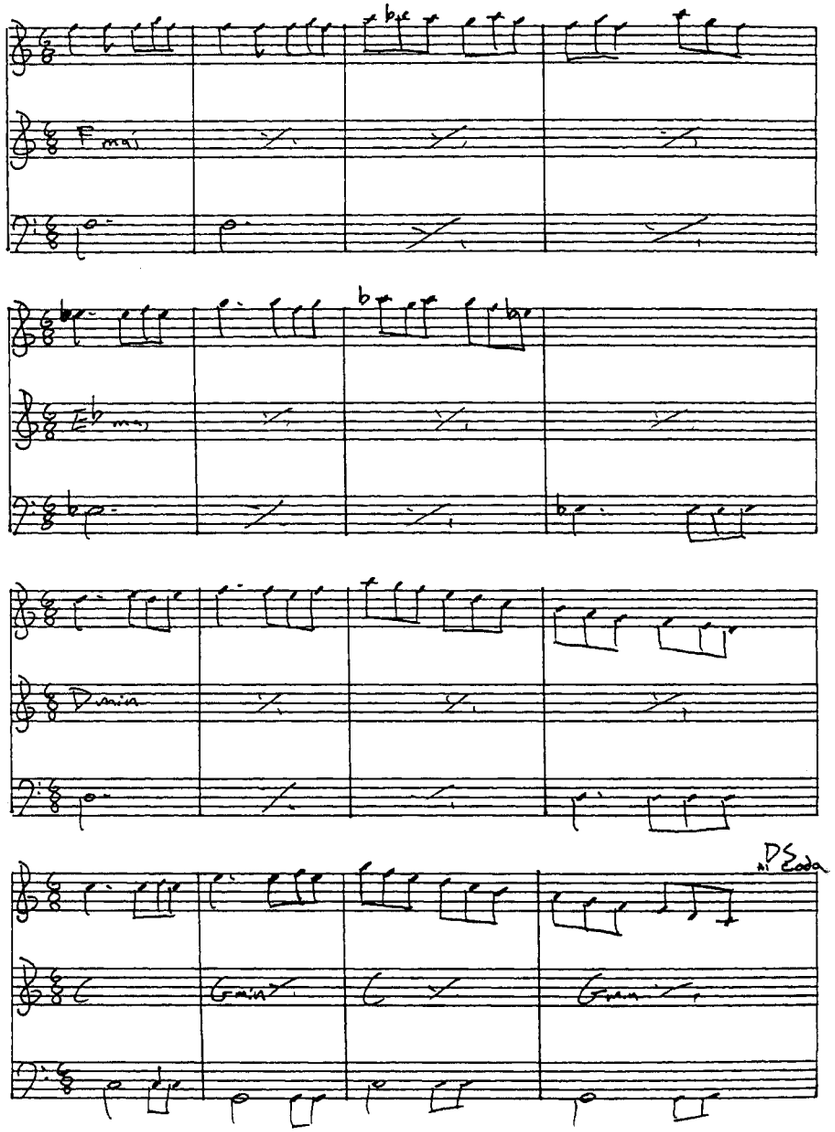
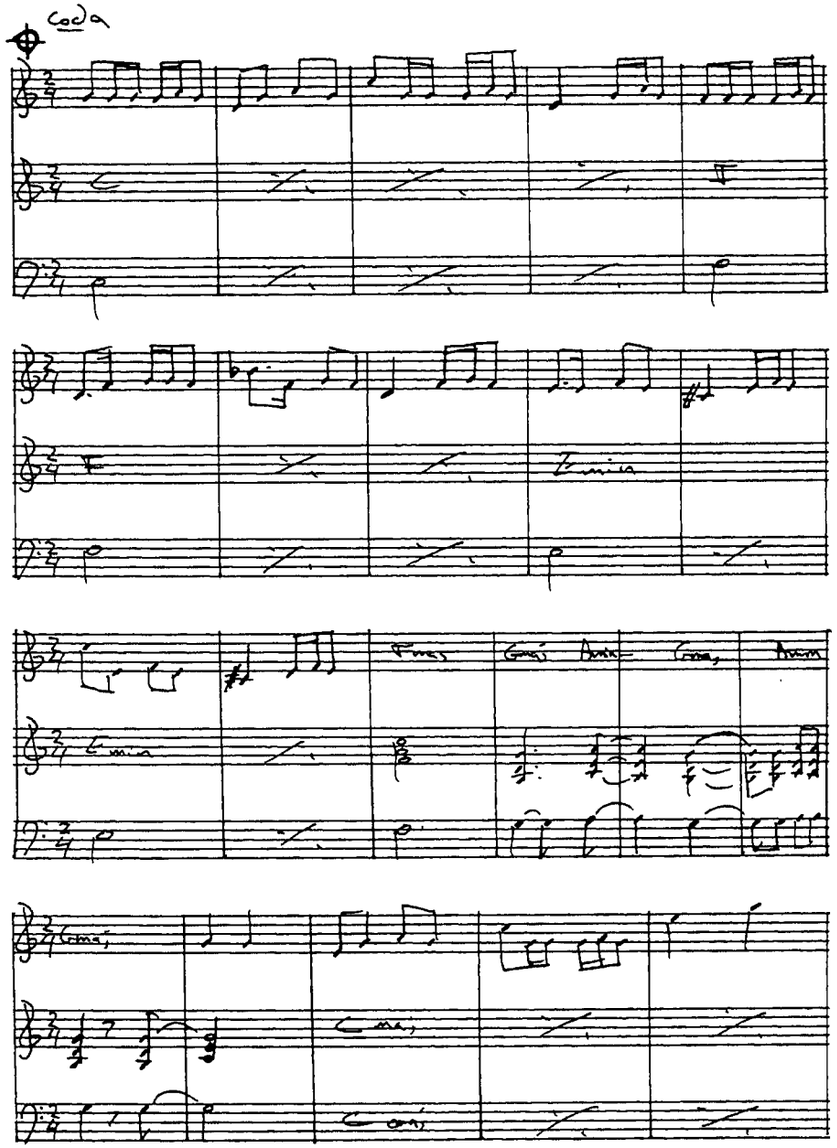
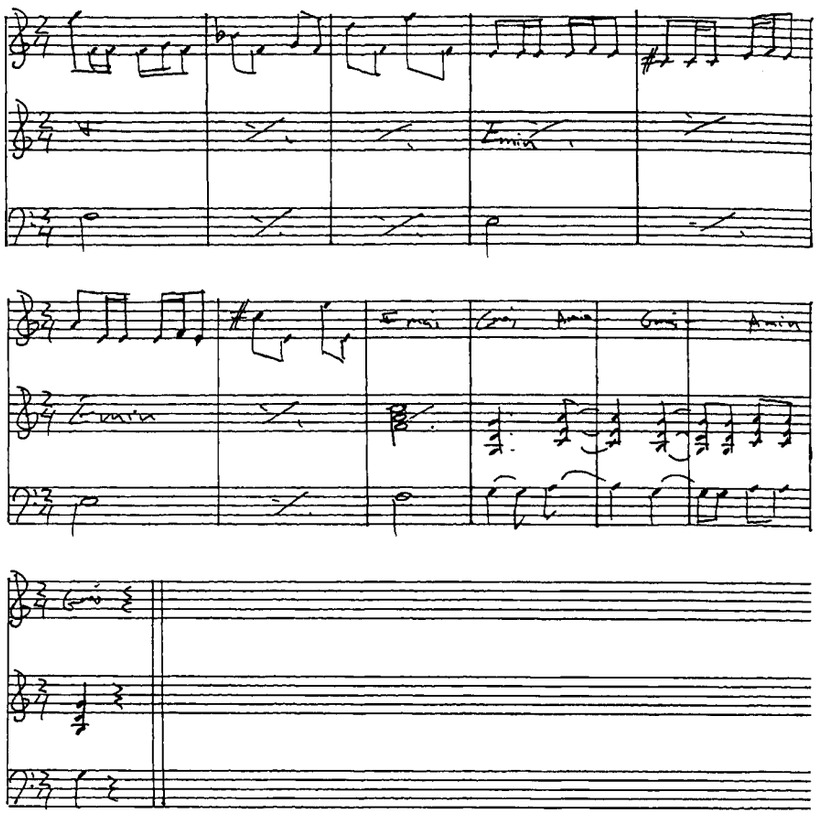
A min
D min

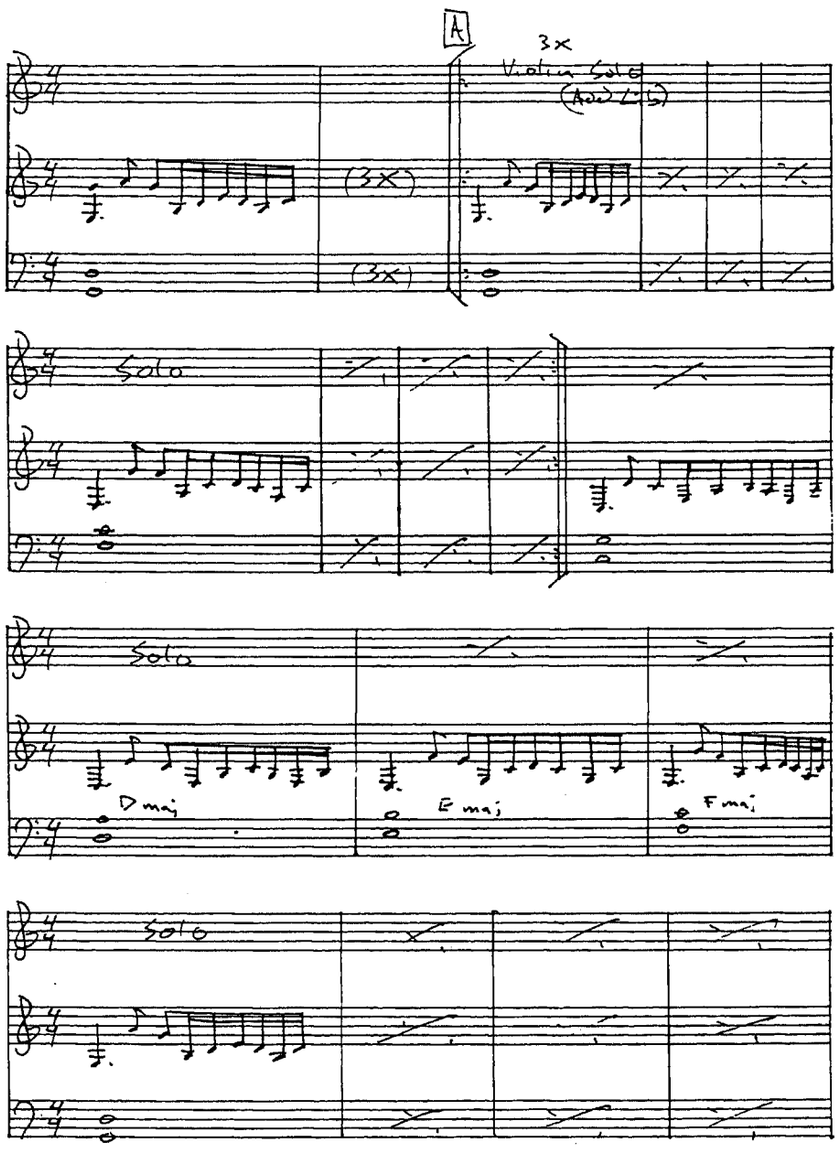

A min
D min
A min
D min
A min
D min 7 E min
7 E min
D min
7 E min
7 E min
7 E min
D min 7 E min
7 E min
E min

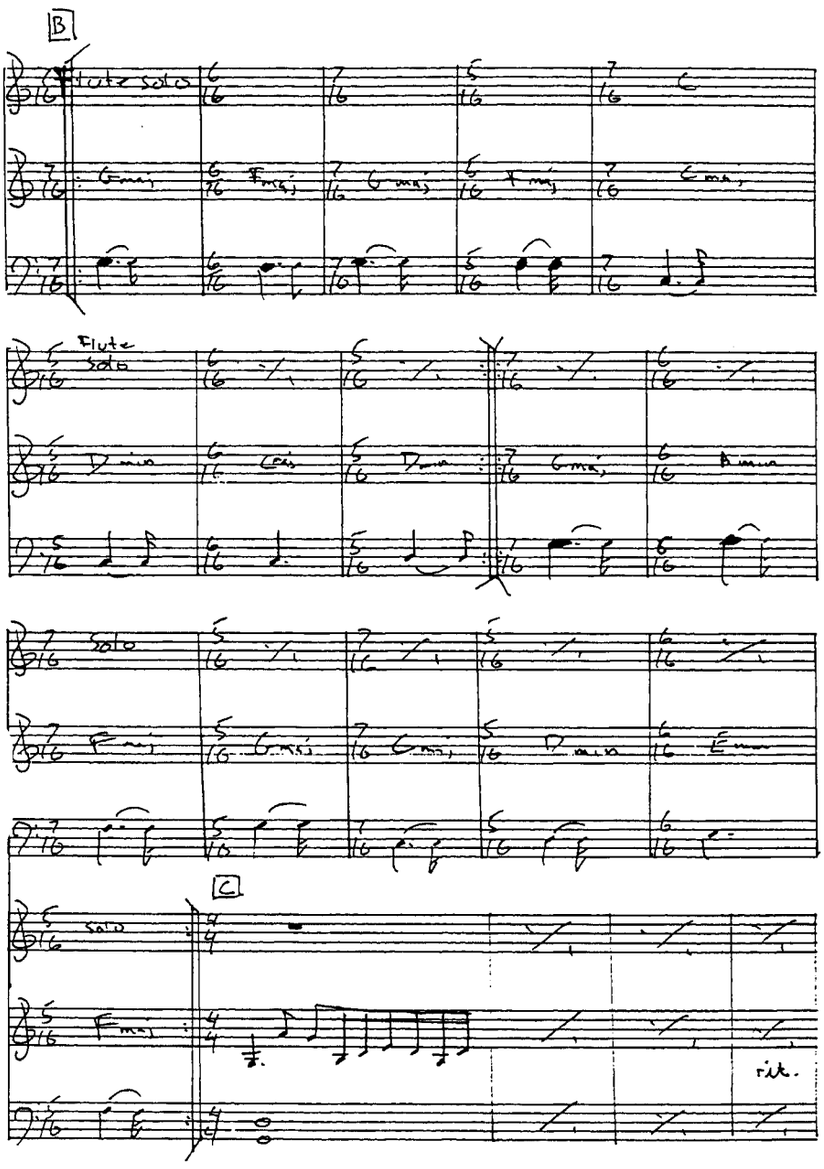

F maj
E♭ maj
D min
G min
D.S. Coda

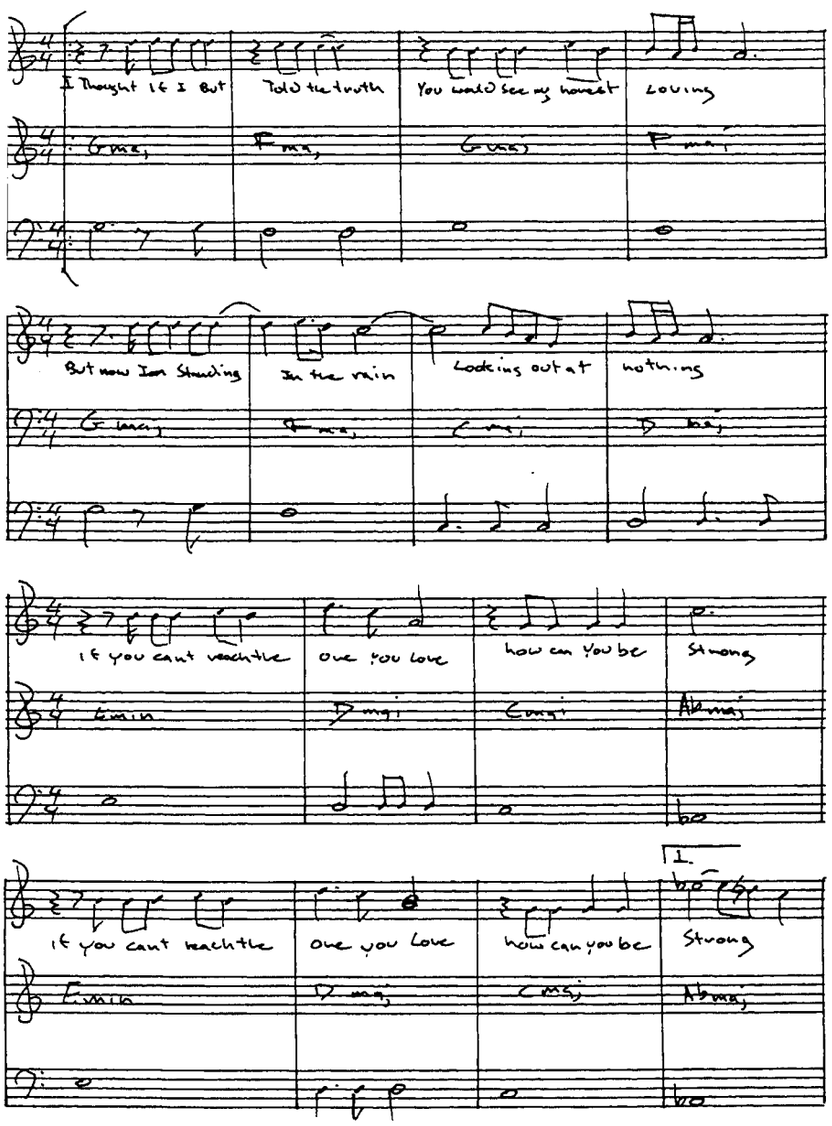

Coda
F maj
G maj
A min
C maj

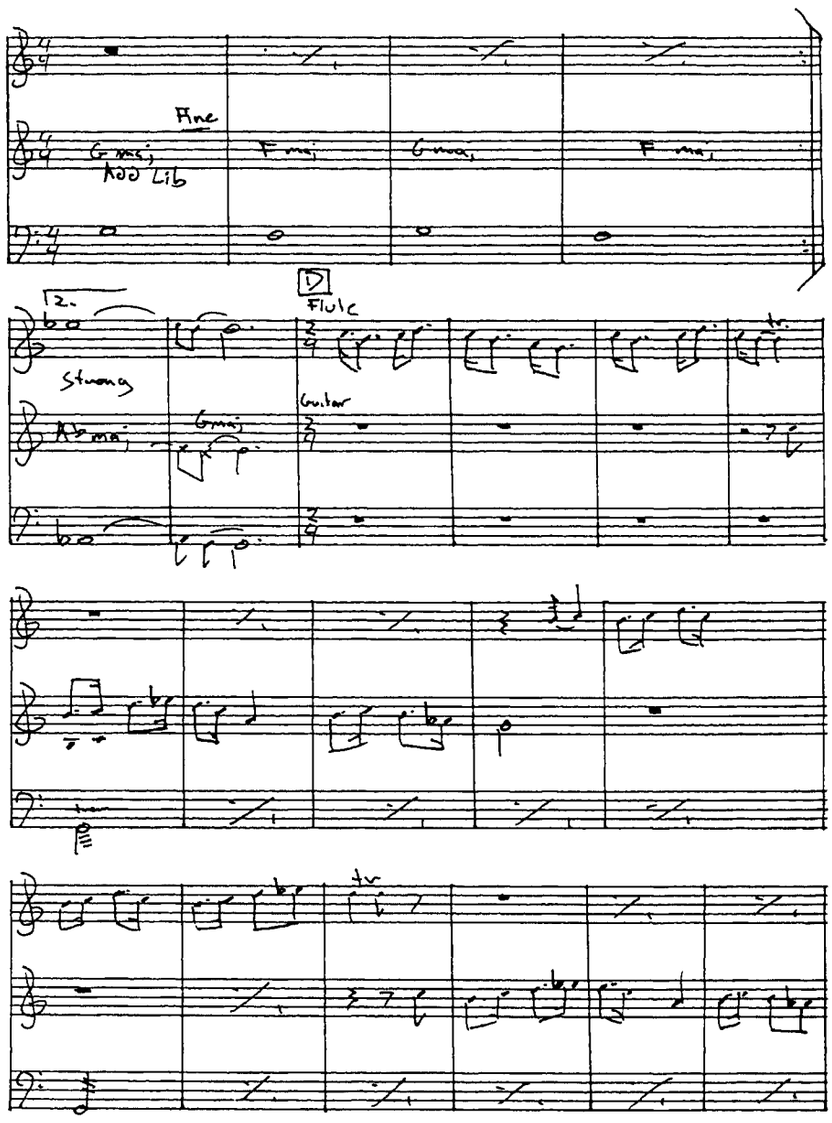


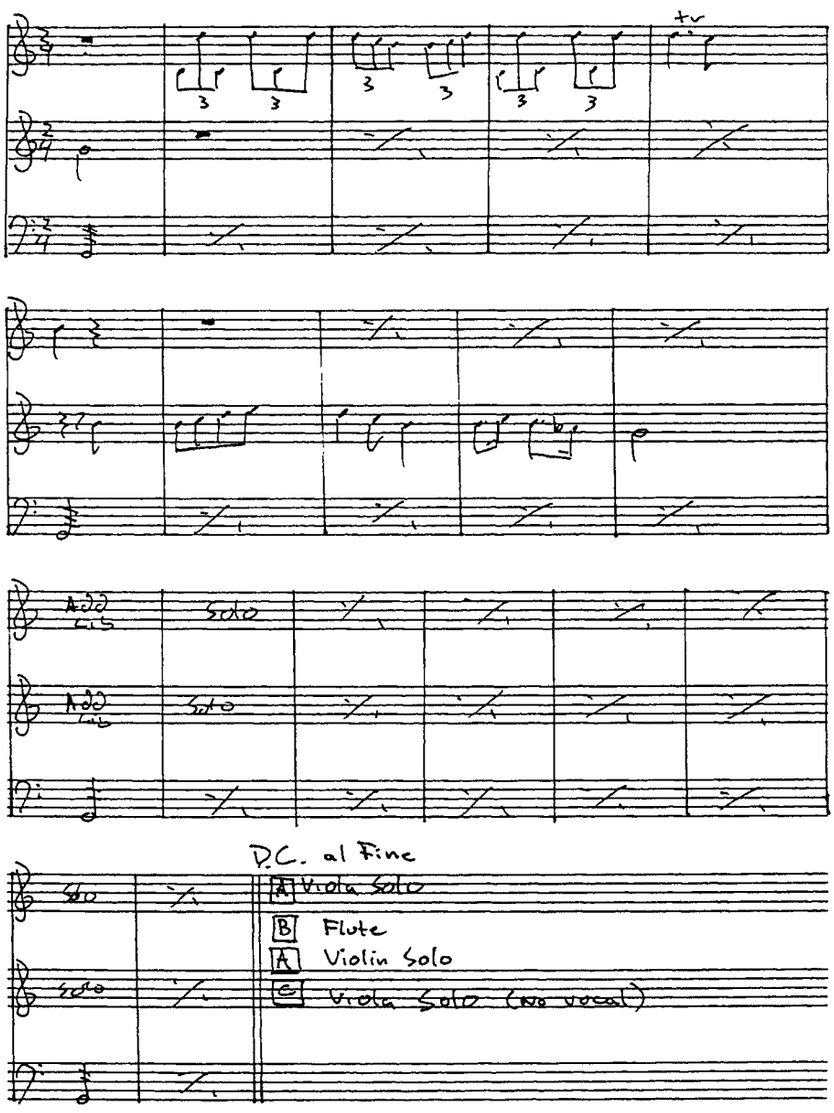
CORDELIA




B
Flute solo
Flute solo
C
rit.


I Thought If I But
Told the truth
You would See my honest
Loving
But now Im Standing
In the rain
Looking out at
nothing
If you cant reachthe
one you love
how can you be
Strong
If you cant reachthe
one you Love
how can you be
Strong
1.


Fine
Add Lib
Flute
Strings
Guitar


tr
3
3
3
3
3
3
Add Lib
Solo
Add Lib
Solo
D.C. al Fine
Solo
A Viola Solo
B Flute
A Violin Solo
Solo
C Viola Solo (no vocal)