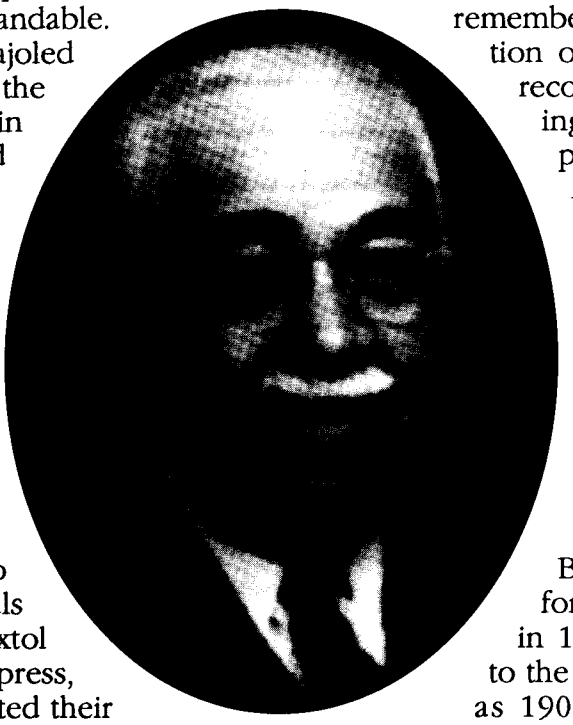
Through Moanin' Pines

Although the African-American composer and singer Harry T. Burleigh deserves to be remembered for his own impressive achievements, history's emphasis on his providential encounter with Dvorak is understandable. The world-famous Dvorak was cajoled into accepting the directorship of the National Conservatory of Music in New York in 1892. He agreed with the school's founder that American concert music should express the character of the country through the use of folk idioms. When he met Burleigh, a scholarship voice student, Dvorak leaped at the chance to study spirituals with such a source—a musician who had learned them not from books, but at his grandfather's knee.



Harry T. Burleigh

Dvorak often asked Burleigh to come to dinner and sing spirituals for him. Not only did Dvorak extol these richly varied songs in the press, but also, more persuasively, adopted their style for his own Symphony "From the New World." The spirit of black (and Native American) music gives this symphony its special earthiness and emotional candor—while I cannot disagree with those who find it imperfectly constructed, it never fails to elevate my pulse. (For pianists, Dvorak left as American souvenirs the *Humoresques*.) He publicly acknowledged Burleigh by presenting him as soloist in Dvorak's tasteful orchestration of "Old Folks at Home," and dedicating the manuscript to him.

Burleigh said it was Dvorak's reaction that convinced him that spirituals should be made available to all people. In 1917, with his simple but evocative "Deep River," Burleigh began his celebrated series of spiritual settings for solo voice and piano. For the first time, this body of folksong, already internationally popularized by such touring choruses as the Fisk Jubilee Singers, could be included in conventional recitals. Burleigh's spirituals have become so indispensable to the repertoire that effort is required to remember what a sensational novelty they were when first espoused by concert singers—both black and white—in the teens and twenties. In response to the songs themselves, his accompaniments range from the overflowing exuberance of "Ev'ry Time I Feel de Spirit" to the austere archaism of "Weepin' Mary," and successfully navigate between the Scylla of self-conscious cleverness and the Charybdis of dutiful timidity.

Although Burleigh modestly wished to be remembered primarily for his dissemination of black folksong, he was in fact recognized as one of America's leading art song composers before he published his first spiritual. His *Five Songs of Laurence Hope* (a stirring cycle for those willing to surrender to the exhibitionistic emotionality of the once-famous poems) was premiered in a 1915 Carnegie Hall recital by no less than John McCormack. Among other famous singers to feature his original songs were Bori, Schumann-Heink, and Amato.

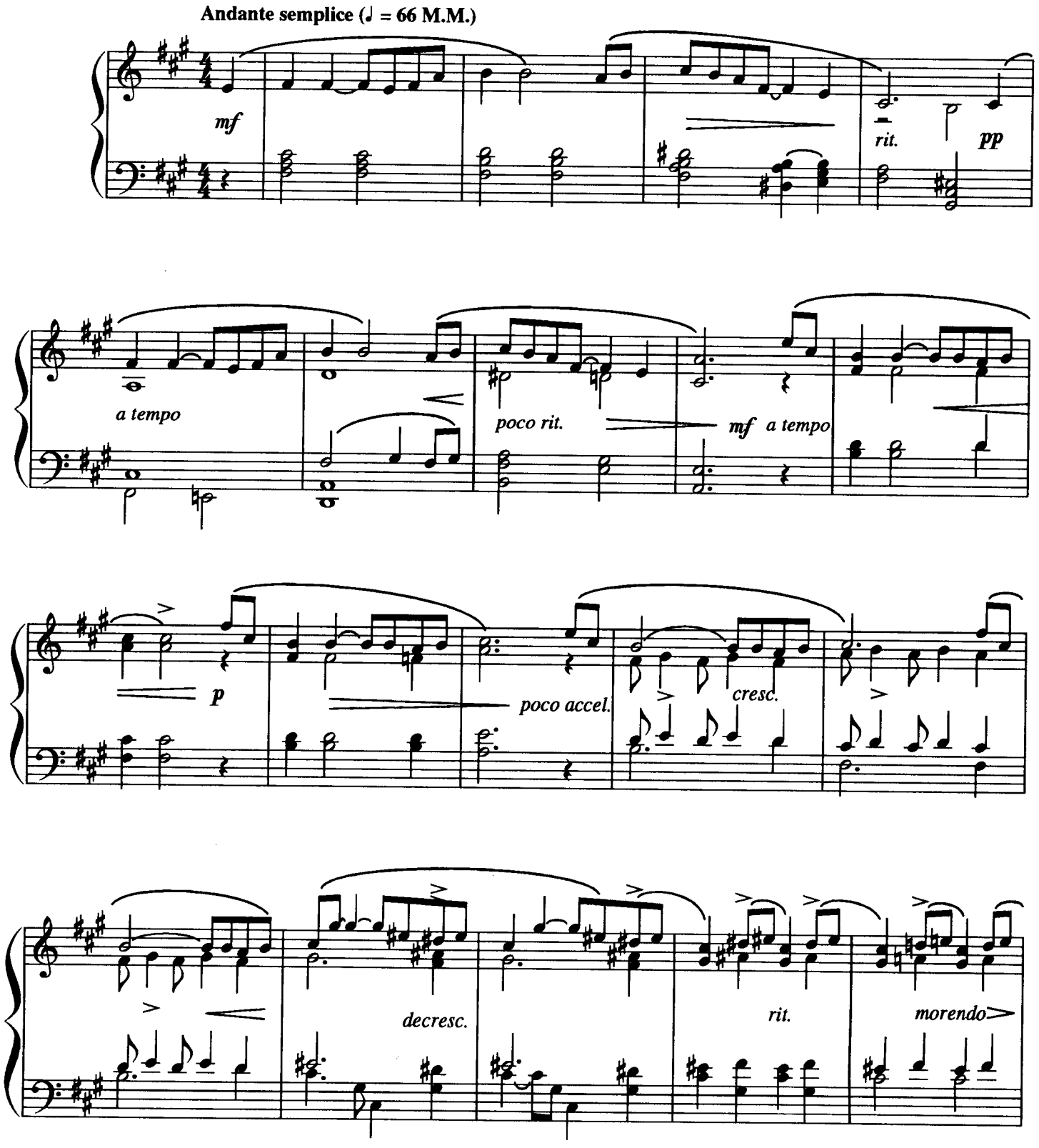
Burleigh composed his only work for solo piano, *From the Southland,* in 1907. (Regrettably, the liner notes to the recent Burleigh CD give this date as 1904—more regrettably, I am the writer who made this error.) While some of the pieces incorporate spiritual strains, others, like "Through Moanin' Pines," offer original melodies in folk style. Two passages epitomize Burleigh's palpable delight in harmonic elaboration; the expected return of the opening melody is tantalizingly delayed by a melting sequence of rich chords, and the piece's lingering, reluctant conclusion experiments with three different harmonizations of the same melodic fragment before moving on to the final phrase. (A movement from the suite was included in the historic 1912 Clef Club concert of black music in Carnegie Hall, as scored for the 125-piece orchestra of strings, brass, percussion, mandolins, banjos, and fourteen upright pianos.)

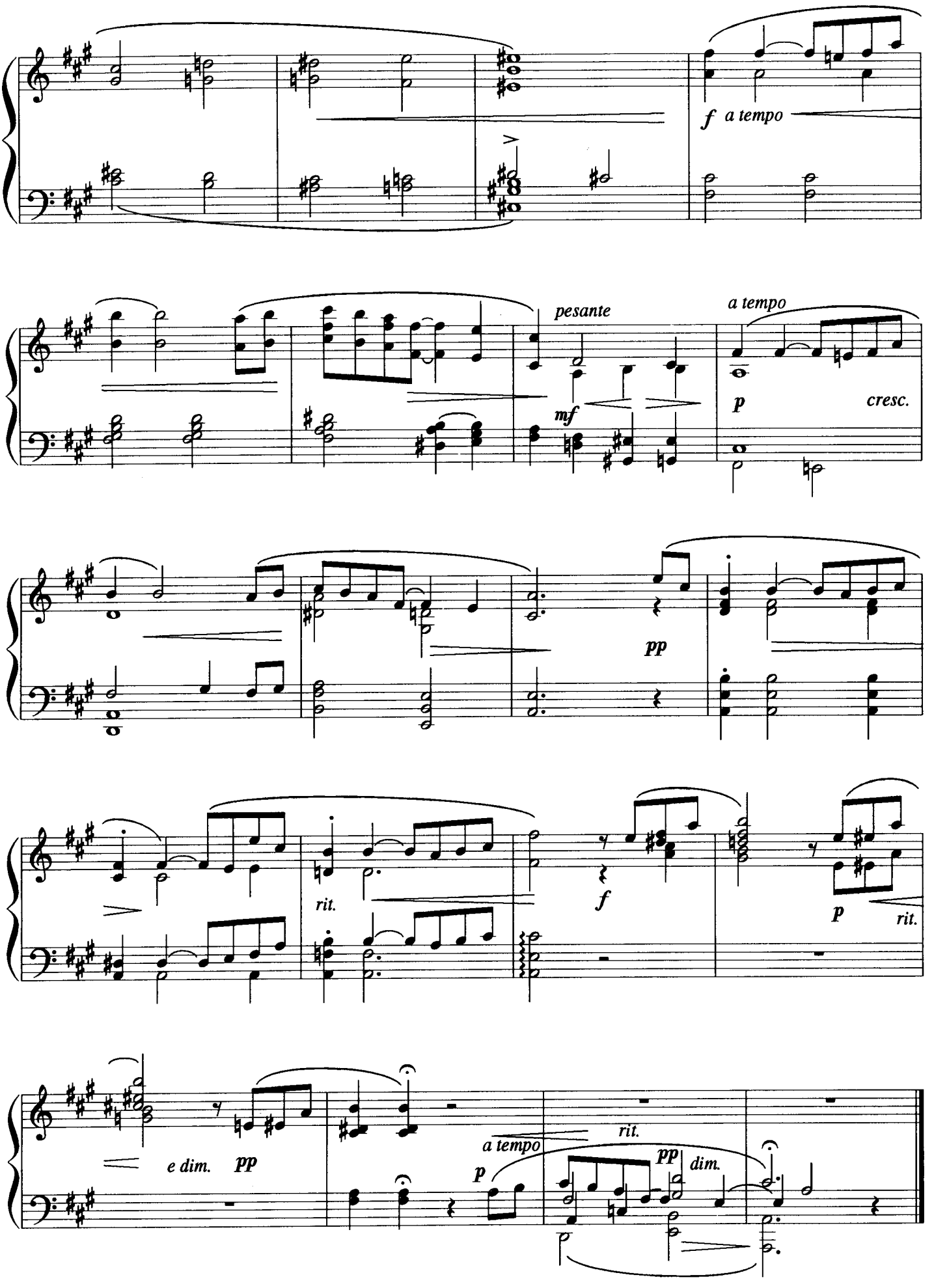
From the Southland (Premier 1041) includes Burleigh's piano suite, art songs, and spirituals. Hilda Harris, Philip Creech, Steven Cole, and Arthur Woodley sing, and I am the pianist. The first Burleigh biography ever, *Hard Trials,* by Anne Key Simpson, was published by Scarecrow Press in 1993.

The complete *In the Southland* has been published by G. Schirmer in *Four Early 20th Century Piano Suites by Black Composers* and also separately, as edited by Joseph Smith.

Through Moanin' Pines

Harry T. Burleigh
(1866-1949)

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