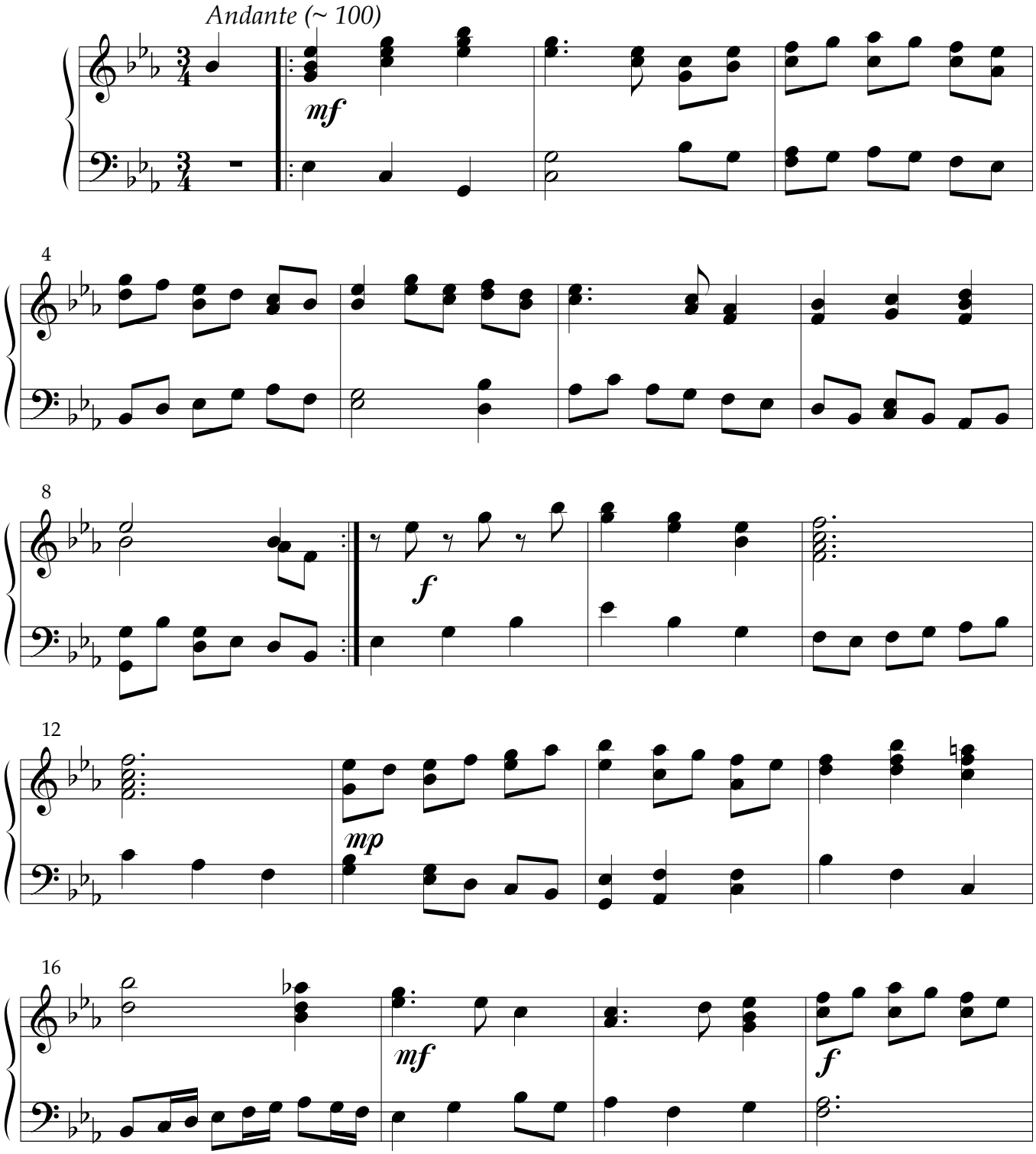
BEAUTY IN TEARS

T. O Carolan (1660-1738)



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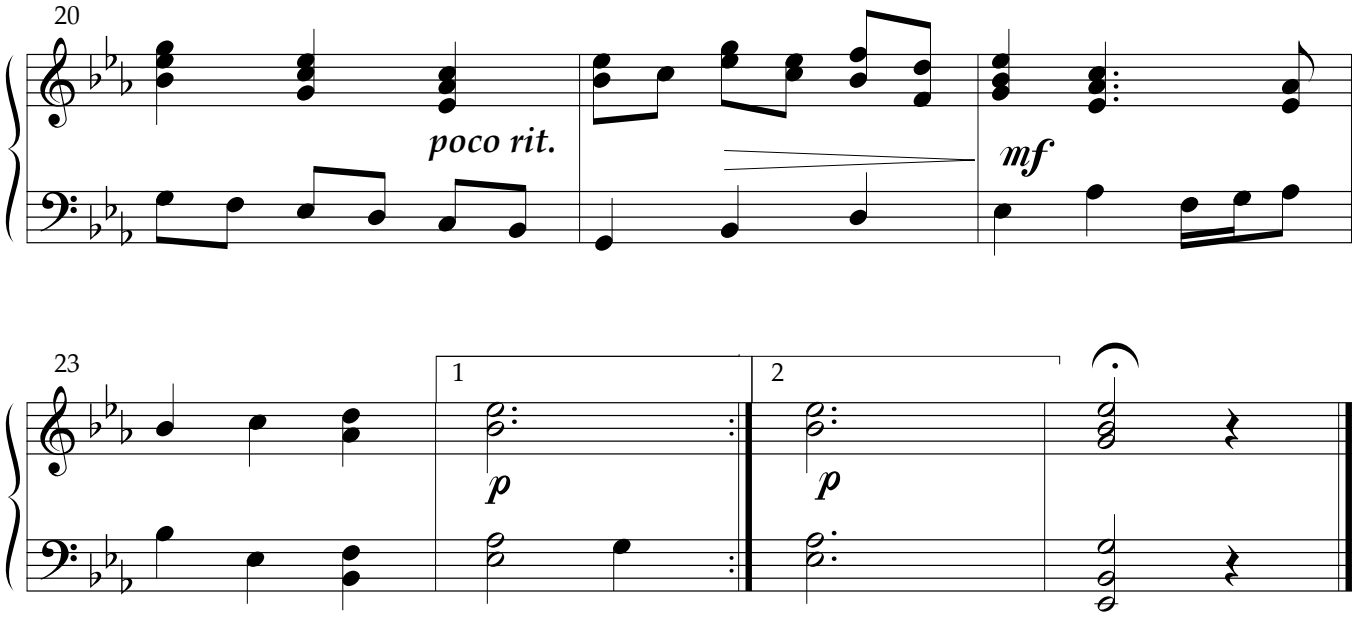

A composition attributed to the best-known of Irish harpers, Turloch O Carolan (1660-1738), many of whose works - still played and loved today - share characteristics with those ofthe continental Baroque musicians of the day.

O'Carolan is often referred to as the "last of the Irish bards", those poet/musicians whose importance to their society is attested in the earliest histories of Ireland. Like so many other harpers of his age, he was blind, although not born so; his living as an itinerant musician - which he began after attempts to live the settled life of a farmer ended ingloriously - was made less burdensome through the kindness of various patrons of the nobility and landed gentry who, in the true bardic tradition, welcomed the harper into their houses for as long as he wished to remain. This laudable practice, certainly appreciated by O'Carolan, was lovingly commemorated by him in his compositions. The titles of many of these works include the names of patrons, often preceded by the word "Planxty", a term whose origin is obscure but whose general meaning Implies "pleasant celebration," "revels," or in a more 21st Century jargon, a "fun time".Such cheerful pieces are certainly among the most popular of O'Carolan's works, but his versatility as composer is clearly manifest in pieces such as "Beauty in Tears" or "O'Carolan's Lament", or certainly his valedictory "Farewell to Music", compositions whose musical feel is altogether different from that of the lighter-hearted Planxties.

"Beauty in Tears" shares many characteristics with the popular Welsh tune "The Ash Grove", which dates from the early 18th century and was widely known in Carolan's day, but which tune is the "original" - or if both are based on an even more remote common ancestor - is probably impossible to say at this point.