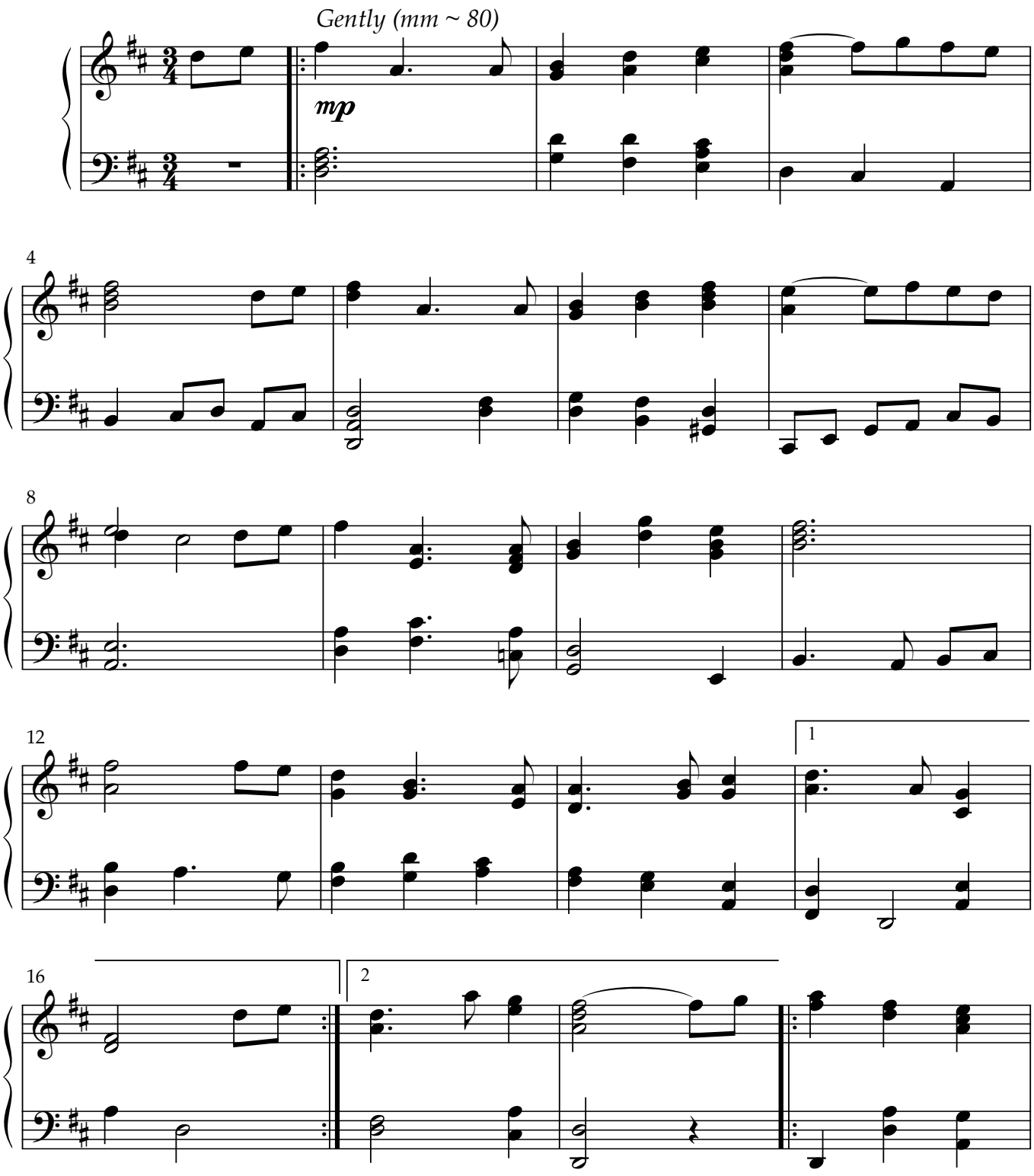
FOR IRELAND I'D NOT TELL HER NAME

Ar Éirinn Ní Neosfainn Cé hÍ

traditional harp tune



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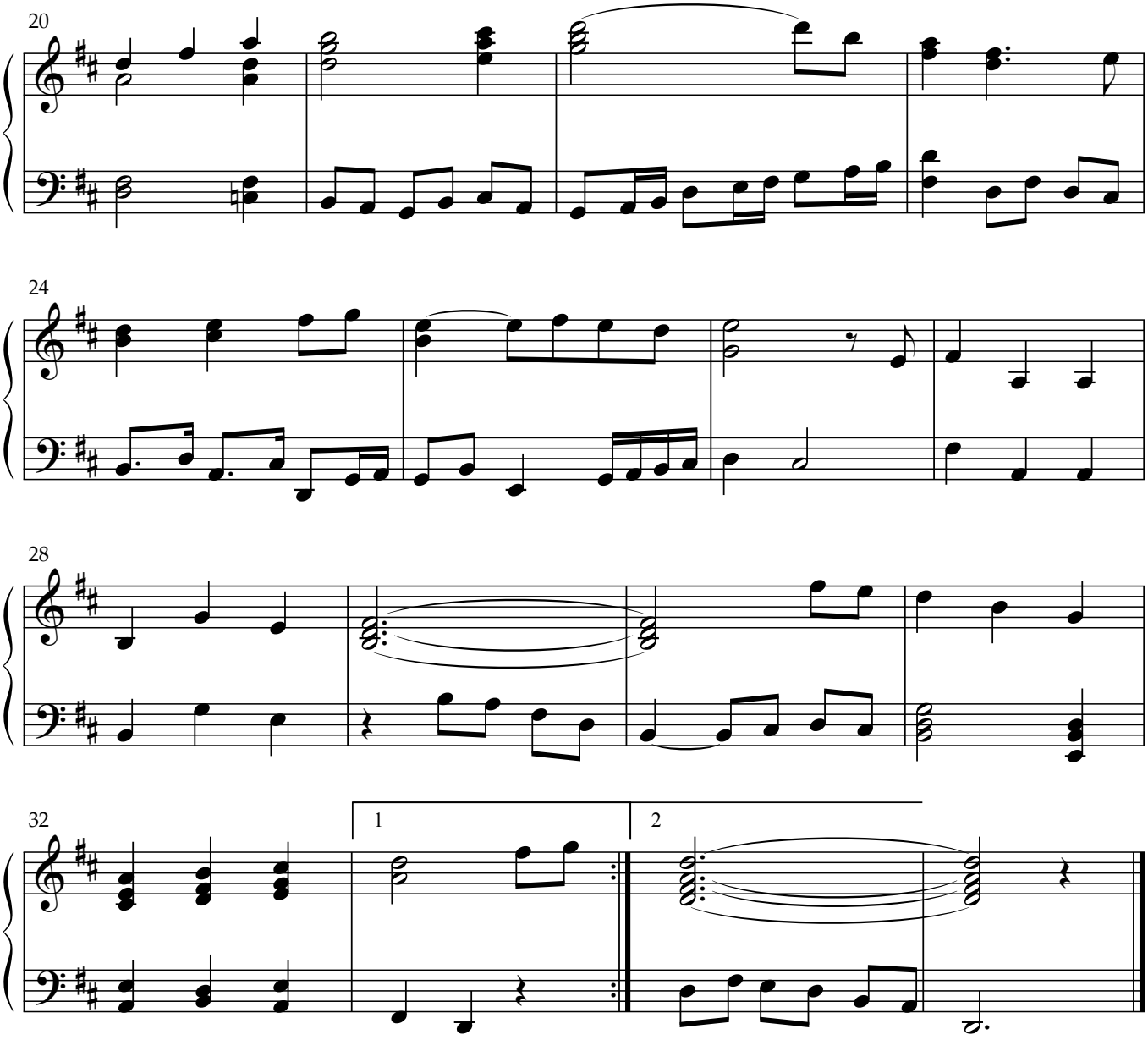

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Speaking about this song a few years back, an Irish native speaker told a radio interviewer " [This song] is a story about a priest who fell in love with his brother's wife. [The priest] said, 'For the whole of Ireland I wouldn't tell her name.' "

Well, maybe, but the version of the song that appears in the *Ceolta Gael* collection is clearly of the type referred to as an "aisling" or "vision", in which Ireland is personified as a beautiful young damsel in distress - often referred to as a "spéir-bhean" or "heavenly woman" - who calls on the poet/singer for assistance: "Roisin Dubh" - "The Little Black Rose" - is a better-known song of the same type. The allegorical nature of "aisling" songs and their relationship to the Irish political situation in the days when open discussion of the topic - in English - was unwise at best has been well documented, although as Donal O Sullivan points out, the poets writing in Irish "placed no restraint whatever on the expression of their views about the English."

This piece is a beautiful example of what Irish traditional musicians refer to as a "slow air". The simple definition of that term is probably most easily understood in negative terms, i.e. a "slow air" is not a tune you could dance to (in its original form; some slow airs in 3/4 time can be played as waltzes, as this piece and "Give Me Your Hand" [see below] often are). The first printed references to this tune appear in the mid-19th Century works of the tune collectors Petrie and Joyce.

Since it was not an uncommon practice for the composer of an "aisling" to take existing love song material and re-work it into a political allegory, the idea of one melody serving two or more purposes - in this case, recounting the tale of the unhappy priest as well as that of the young patriot - is by no means out of the ordinary. I'll conclude this lengthy note with an interesting quote from harpist Mary O'Hara: "The melody of this song has travelled far. Clondillon relates hearing a Roumanian folk singer sing the tune believing it to be a Roumanian folksong. Perhaps some soldier of fortune belonging to the Wild Geese [17th century Irish exiles] had the gift of song! "