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Where the streams share a course: an exploration of postcolonial African urban soundscape

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Where the streams share a course: An exploration of postcolonial African urban soundscape

by

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A portfolio submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Music

in the

Wits School of Arts, Faculty of Humanities,
University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg.

Supervisor: Dr Andile Khumalo

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Introduction

This research investigated how composers of Igbo choral art music (ICAM) engage with the socio-economic, political and philosophical developments in the postcolonial Nigerian urban society using hybridity as a fundamental resource to composition. Through the lenses of Igbo choral art music, the research interrogated the meanings of hybridity as a critical aspect of African art music today. The practice of combining European art music and African music principles in composition is a means through which African composers have over the years engaged with the socio-economic, political, and philosophical ideologies that continuously emerge in the African societies. As such, hybridity in African art music has been interpreted by many scholars (Allen 2003, Coplan 2001, Sanga 2010, Olwage 2006) as a means through which African composers project colonial resistance, cultural identity, and national cohesion. In Nigeria, for instance, the combination of European art music and Nigerian traditional music has been interpreted as a strategy for colonial resistance and cultural renaissance amongst composers. Hybridity has also been interpreted as an artistic practice through which Nigerian composers project their European music training and cultural identities through music composition (Omojola 1995). Since music (and the arts in general) exists as a reflection of the society and time within which it is created, the thesis analysed hybridity in African art music as a representation of the realities of postcolonial African societies, particularly in urban spaces. Therefore, hybridity in African art music was interpreted beyond the narratives of national cohesion, colonial resistance and indigenous cultural identities.

For example, if we consider hybridity as a means of colonial resistance in Nigerian art music, then the structure may not be necessary in the present times, when Nigeria is no longer under British colonial domination. If hybridity is interpreted along the narrative of African cultural identity, it can be argued that European musical practices such as philharmonic orchestration, SATB choral arrangement and harmonic progression, are not part of African cultures, and

cannot constitute cultural identity in African art music. Furthermore, if hybridity implies national cohesion as espoused by some scholars (Omojola 1995, Sadoh 2010 and others) it can also be argued that European musical practices are not necessary for promoting unity amongst the indigenous cultures of the African continent. The above highlighted scenario led to the argument in the thesis that hybridity in African art music is an artistic practice through which composers project their personal identities and reflect the realities of the postcolonial African urban societies where cultural multiplicity stands as an identity.

Through the above standpoint, the thesis analysed scholarly writings on hybridity in African art music and observed that existing discussions project the genre as musical creations that primarily blend African music and European art music into a new style. In line with this position, composers are expected to extract sonic resources from African traditional music and synthesise them with European art music paradigms to create a new composition that reflect 'African identity'. Although the above approach has been critical towards the advancement of the genre till date, I have argued that such an approach presents a challenge to the genre's position as part of postcolonial identities in Africa.

My observation was that a musical work created within such an artistic framework will only reflect the European training and African cultural identities of the composer. Such a composition will not project the lived experiences of the immediate society – the urban centre – in which the composer resides. It can be summarised that such a composition is not a holistic representation of the composers' identities as a postcolonial African. In advancing the above argument, the thesis did not jettison the fact that African traditional music is very critical in creating hybrid musical works by African composers. It rather advocates for the expansion of the framework of musical hybridity in African art music through the incorporation of the urban sounds.

This advocative position stems from the fact that African composers' identities are drawn from at least three spaces, that of formal education, African culture, and urban culture. When the composers are expected to create musical works that combine European art music and traditional African music alone, only two aspects of their identity are put into perspective, that is, formal education and African culture – thus neglecting the rich cultural phenomenon of the composers' immediate (urban) environment in the composition. This portfolio is aimed at raising the consciousness of composers in the African continent to be more observant of the social contexts of their immediate environment, that is the urban centre, and how such contexts are reflected through the arts, particularly music. The portfolio proposes a way forward in which younger composers of African art music can extend the foundations of the genre by being more sensitive towards their urban surroundings, and extracting creative resources from such spaces. This portfolio presents a mixture of compositional techniques, some rooted in African music heritage mixed with modern compositional techniques. It is aimed at creating not only hybridity in mixing of cultures on the surface level but also to reflect how such creative thinking across cultures can allow new compositional approaches that expand our understanding and existing paradigms of creating modern African art music. There are altogether five pieces in the portfolio: (1) Echoes of the distant, (2) Expeditions, (3) Home away from home, (4) One day in a town, and (5) Vibes of the mother land

Echoes of the distant

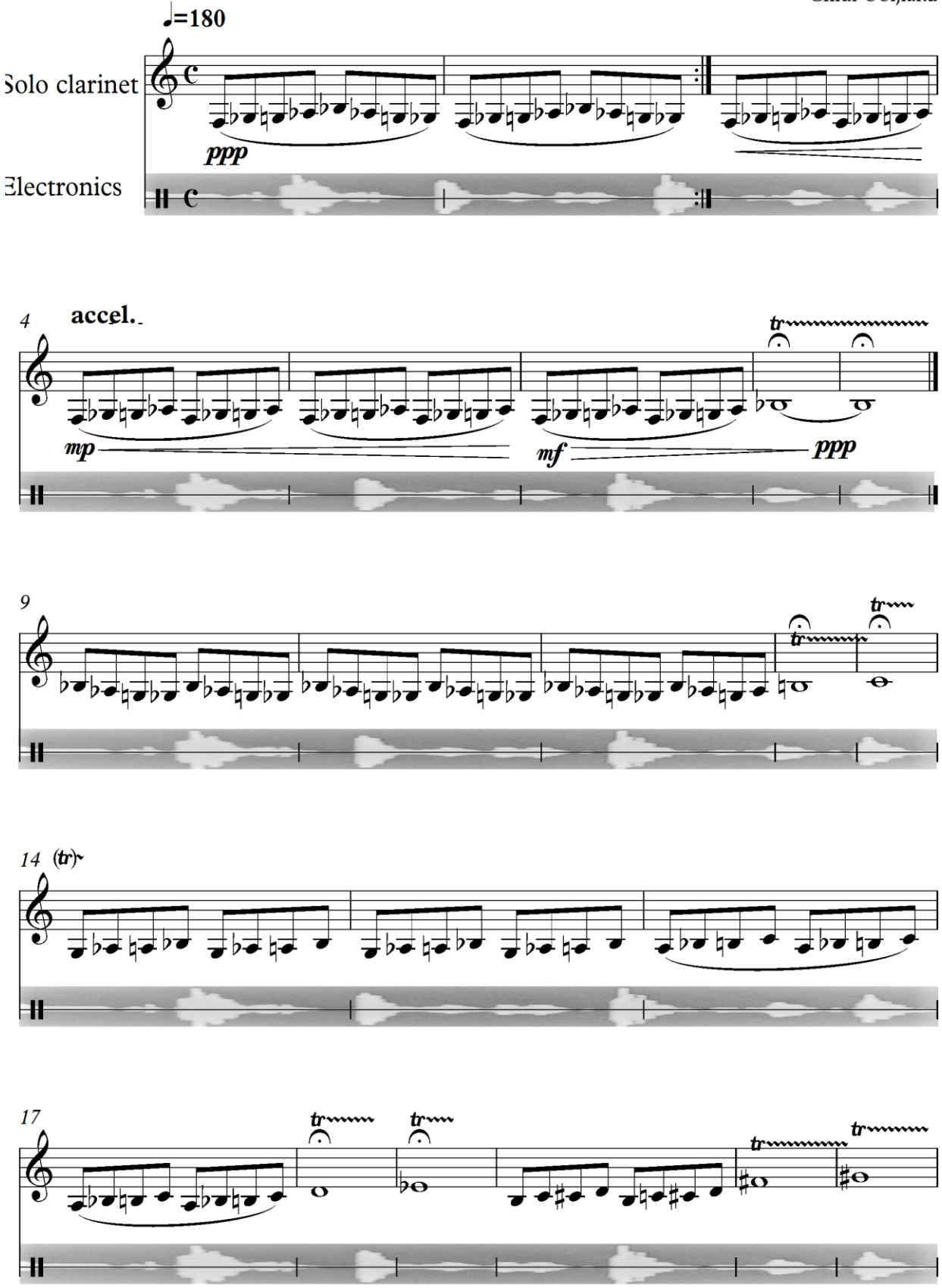
The composition was inspired by the situation of a resident who has lived for so long in an urban centre far away from his indigenous community. Although such a person has become acclimatised to the living style of the urban society, s/he continuously reminisces the cultural standards of his indigenous community of origin. Such reminiscences may be strong at some points and weak at others depending on the situation, time and event in the immediate urban residence – the urban culture is very present while the indigenous culture is only an 'echo' in the mind of such a person – hence the title echoes of the distant.
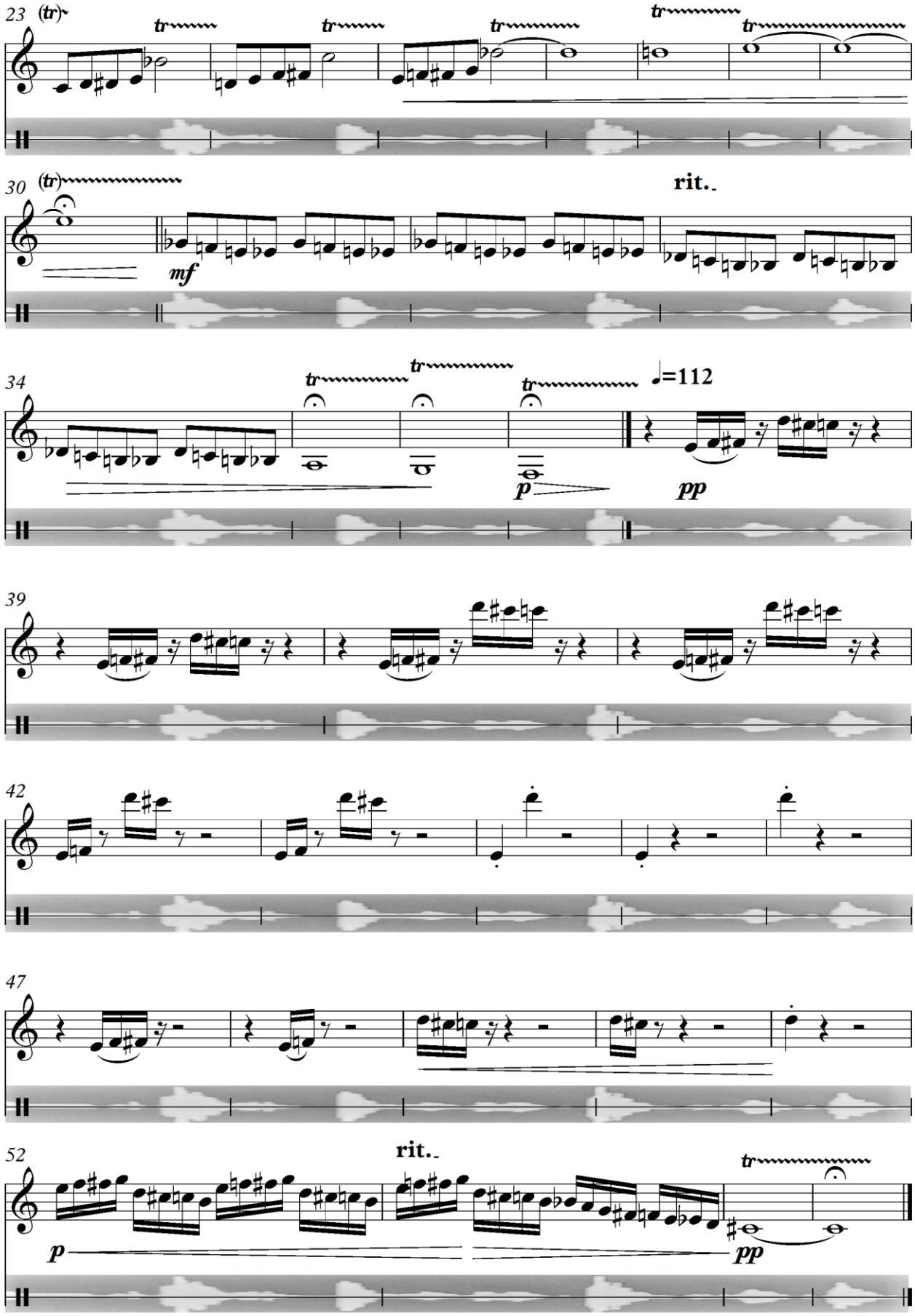
Compositional approach

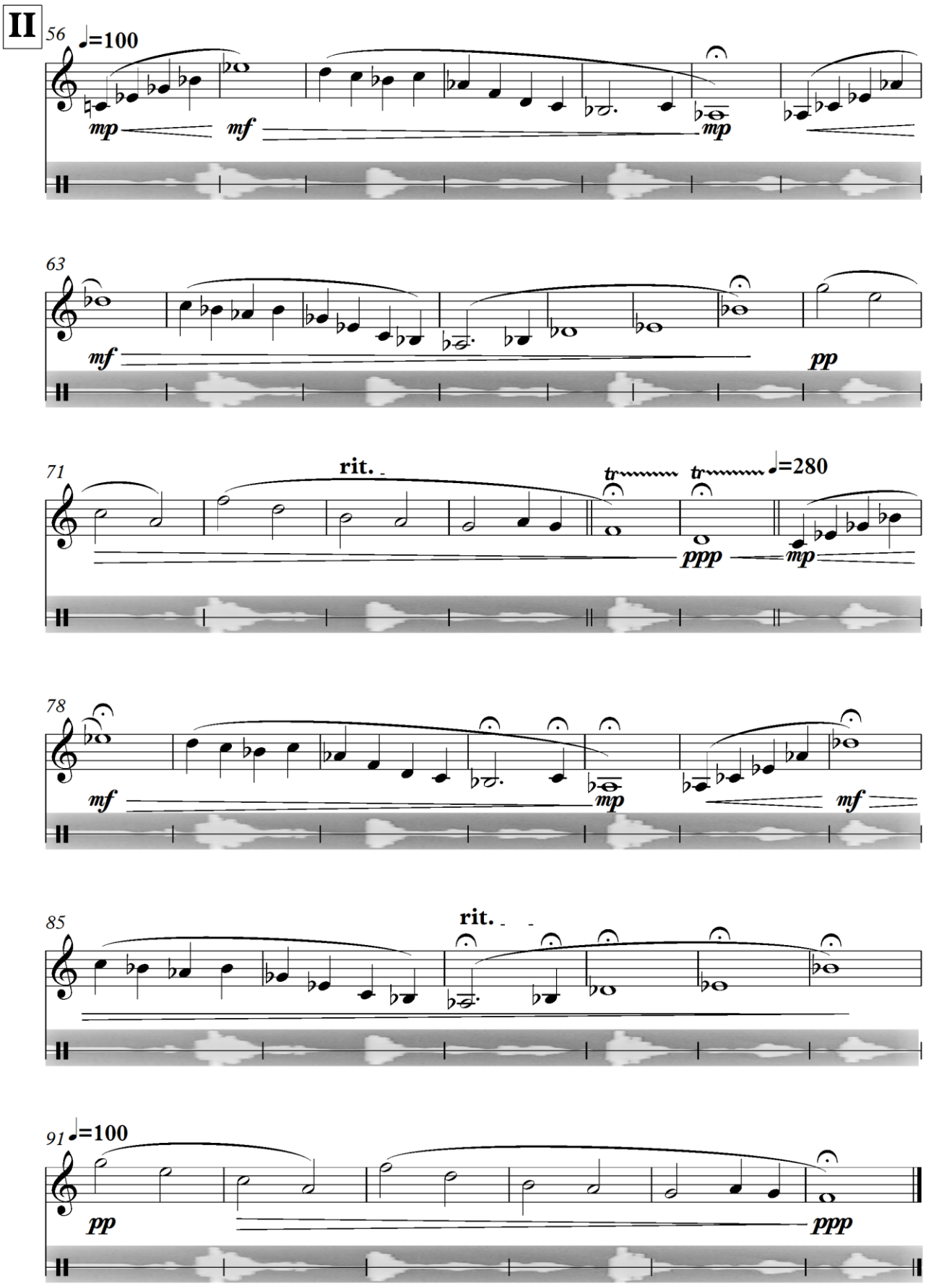
The piece is composed for solo clarinet and electronics. While the clarinet part is notated, the electronics part is un-notated but structured from and integrated with the notated clarinet score. In structuring the electronics part, I have used techniques (in Logic) such as reharmonization and flexing of pitch of the audio version of the clarinet score to produce a choir of clarinets that engages with the solo clarinettist in live performance. The idea here is to create a piece which has both fixed and flexible parts combining into a wholistic musical artwork. Although the above structure is basic to Igbo choral art music (ICAM) which was thoroughly analysed in my thesis, this composition was primarily aimed at extending the boundaries of the genre which is set on the blend of the notated choral part with the un-notated instrumental part into a unified whole. In this work, I aimed at reversing the basic structure of ICAM by producing a notated solo clarinet score to represent the instrumental part while structuring an un-notated clarinet choir part that blends with and completes the score using electronics. While the solo clarinet score is fixed, the electronics part is always flexible – variables such as volume and effects are applied according to the artistic ingenuity of the performers. The approach of this work also provides a new perspective and a challenge to ICAM composers to create musical works in the genre that involve modern technology in its composition and performance – this approach to music creation has not been in place in over sixty years of ICAM's existence.

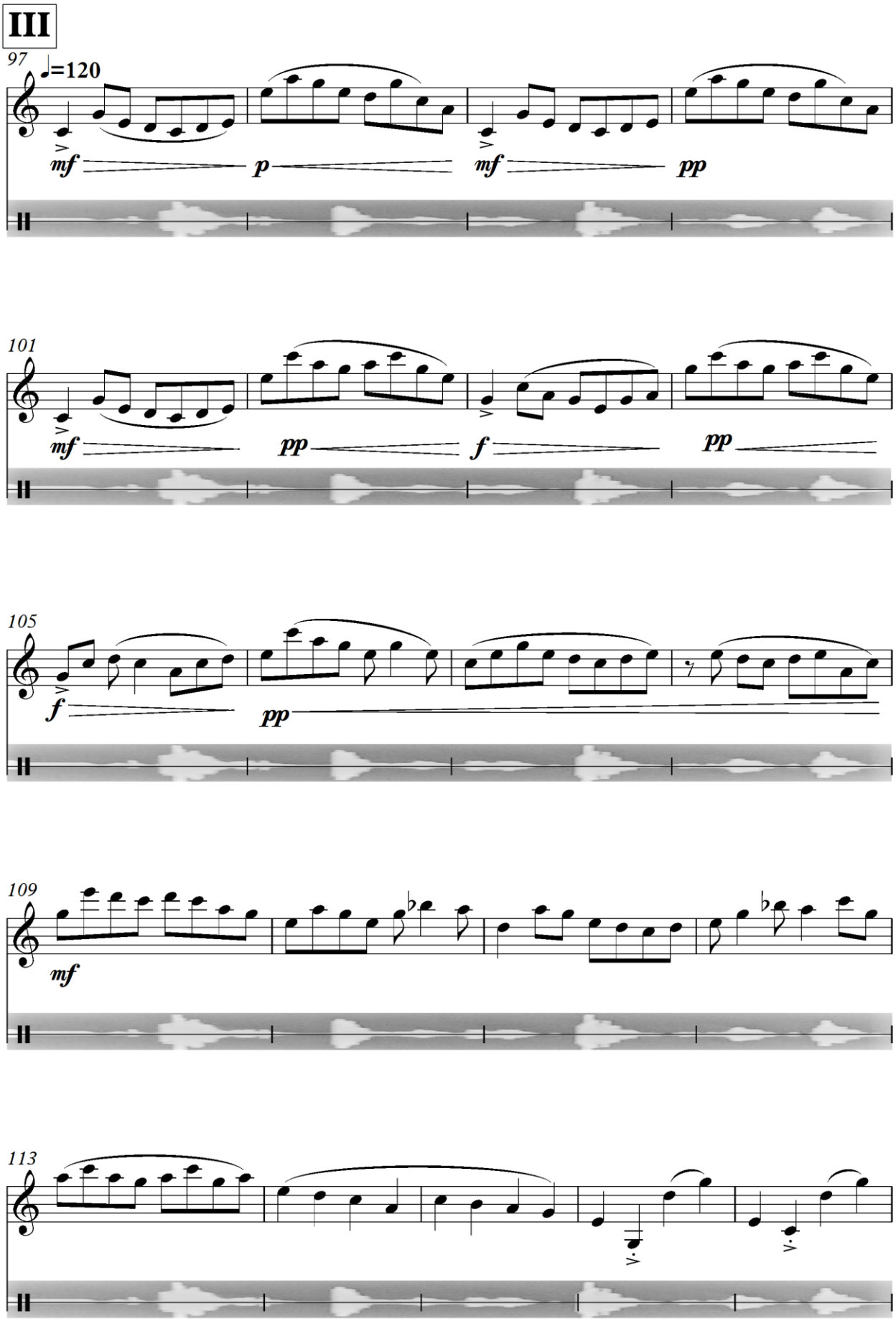
Echoes of the distant

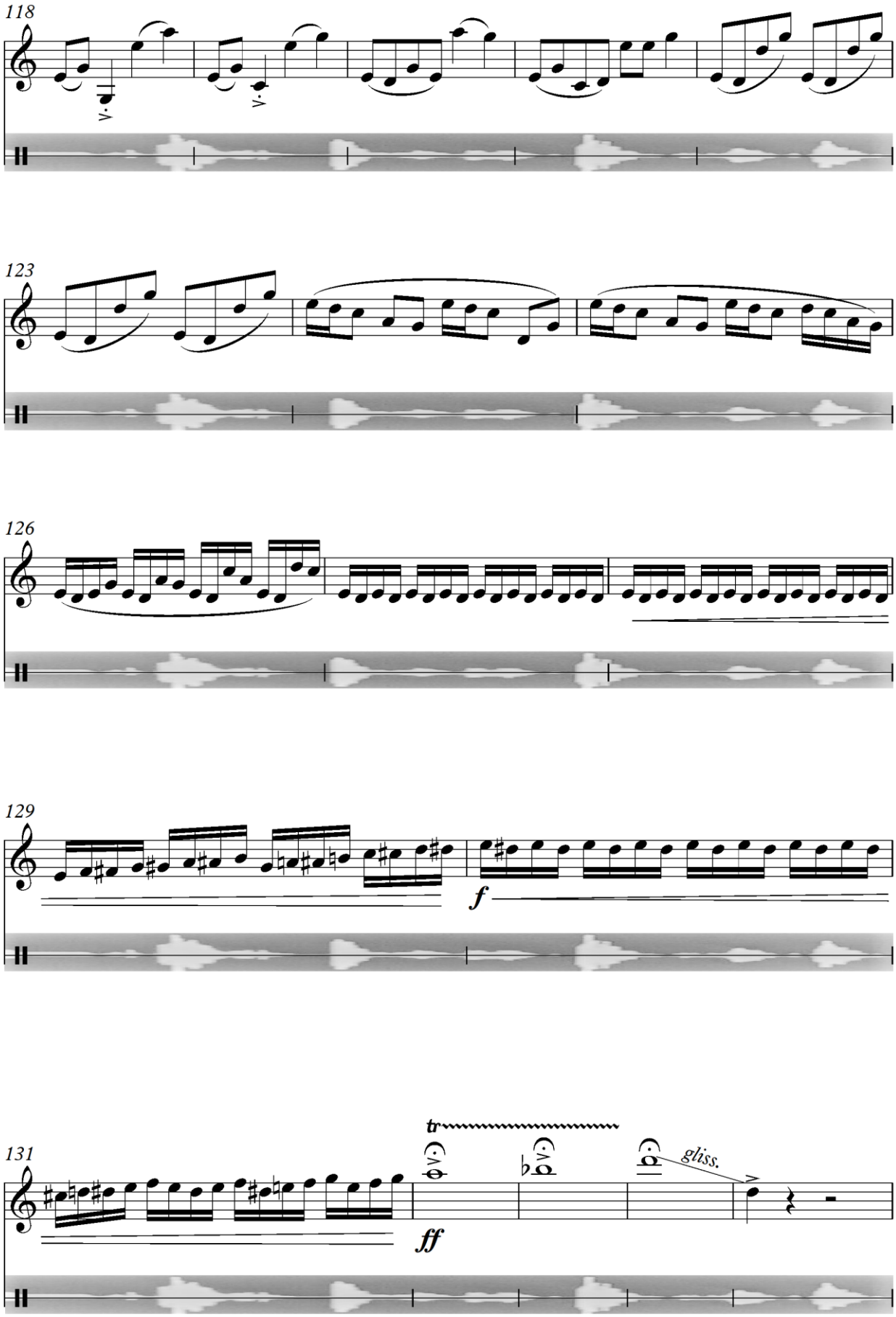
Chidi Obijiaku

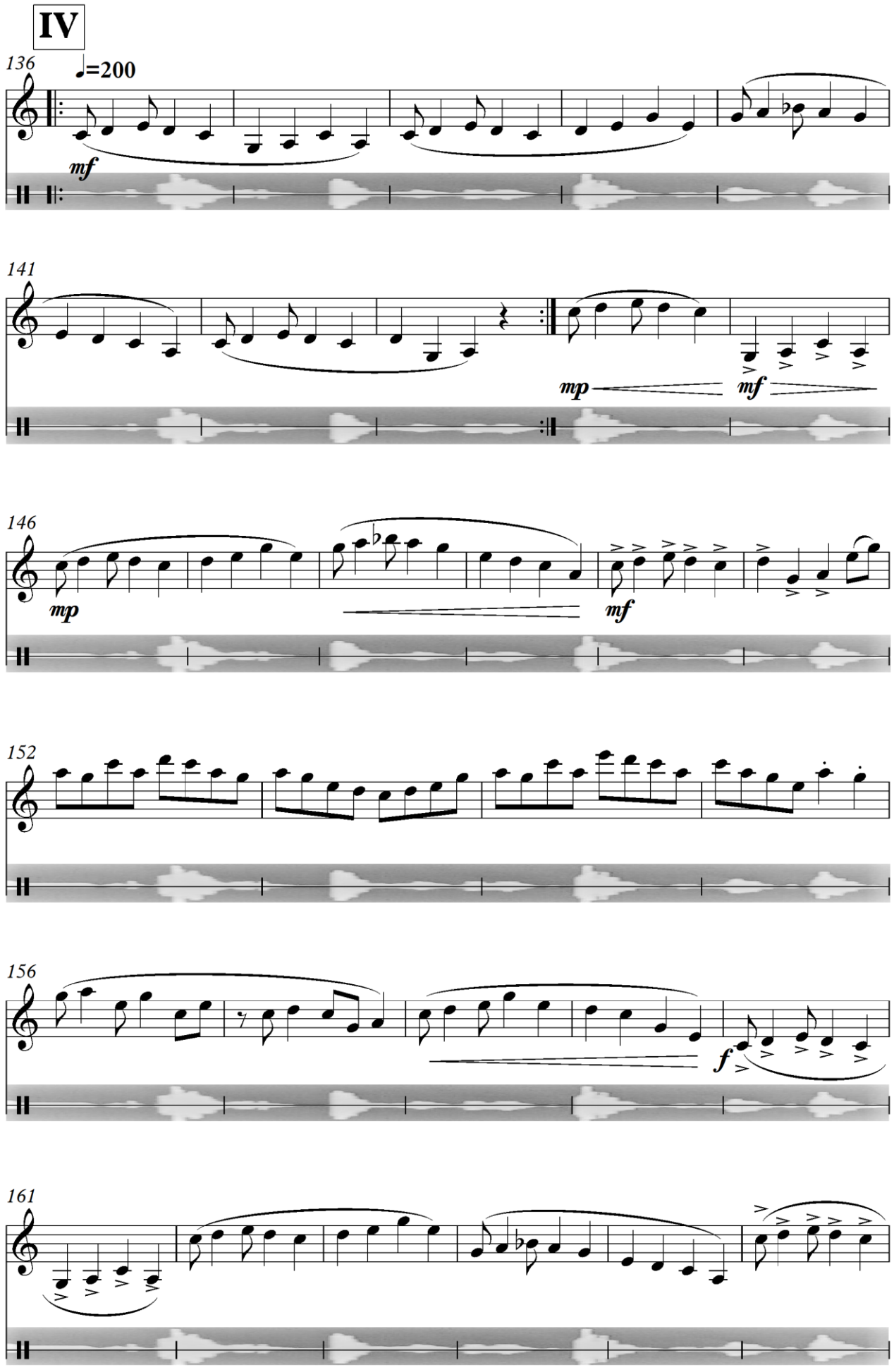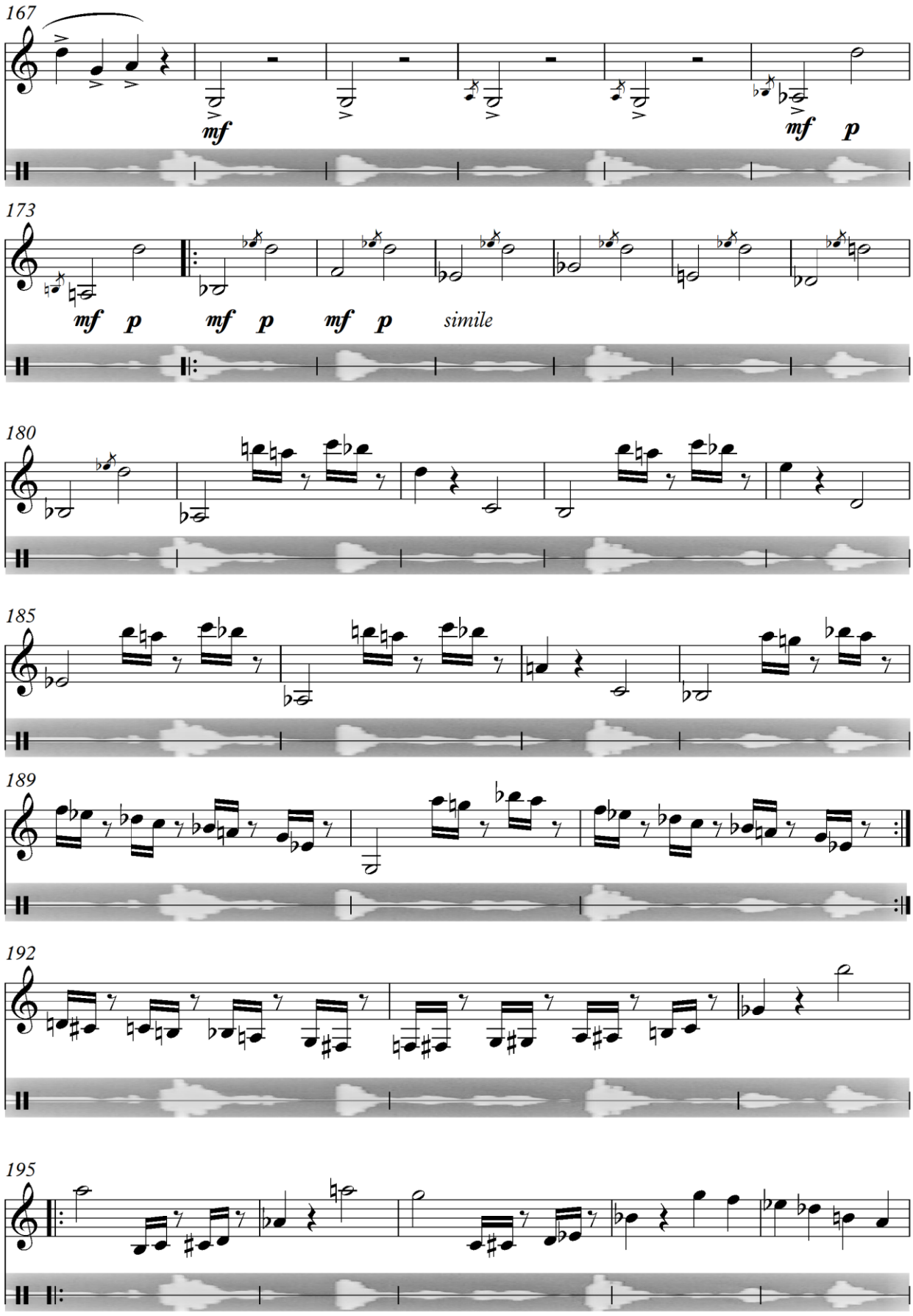



23
(tr)
tr
tr
tr
tr
tr
30
(tr)
rit..
mf
34
tr
tr
tr
♩=112
p
pp
39
42
47
52
rit..
tr
p
pp
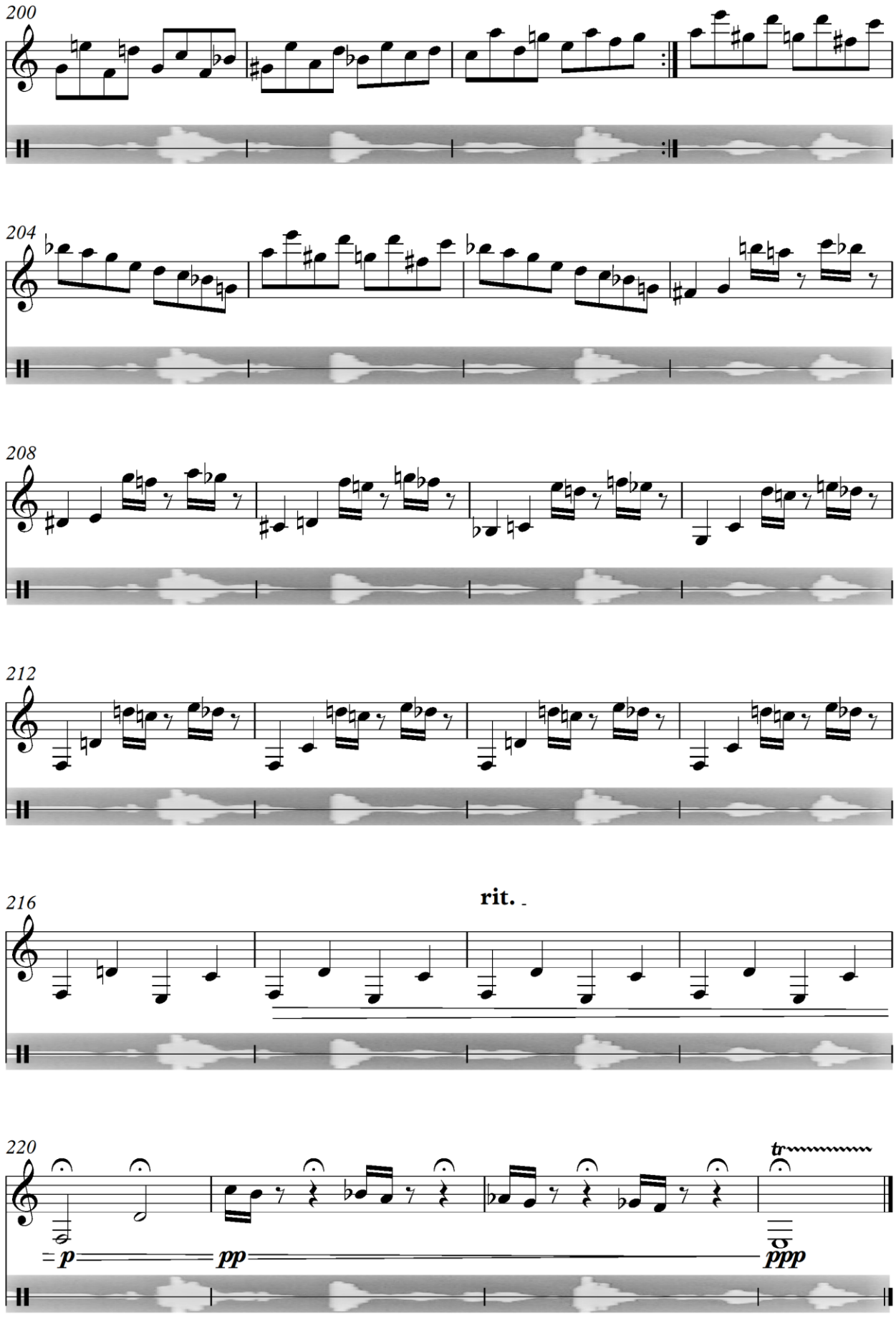

II
56
♩=100
mp
mf
mp
63
mf
pp
71
rit.
tr
tr
♩=280
ppp
mp
78
mf
mp
mf
85
rit.
91
♩=100
pp
ppp


III
97
♩=120
mf
p
mf
pp
101
mf
pp
f
pp
105
f
pp
109
mf
113


118
123
126
129
f
131
tr
ff
gliss.


IV
136
♩=200
mf
141
mp
mf
146
mp
mf
152
156
f
161


167
mf
mf
p
173
mf
p
mf
p
mf
p
simile
180
185
189
192
195


200
204
208
212
216
rit.
220
p
pp
tr
ppp

Expeditions
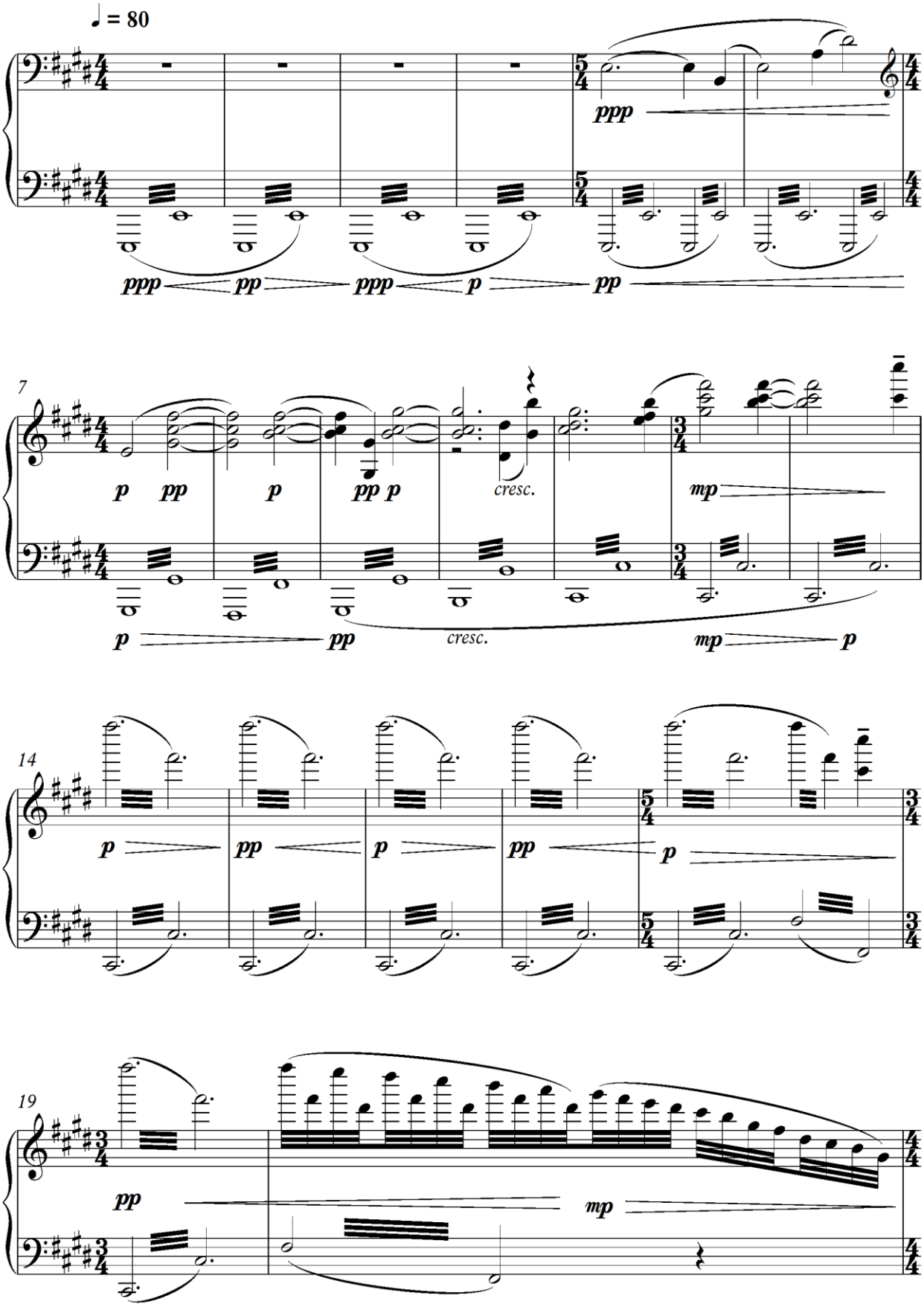
'Expeditions' is based on the understanding of urban centres as spaces where individuals from different cultural, social and economic backgrounds converge for different reasons. The converging cultures blend with one another into a new hybrid culture – the urban culture. At the surface level, the individual cultures in an urban centre seem to have a perfect blend amongst themselves; however, there always exists a constant tension and repulsion in the process that lead to the emergence of the urban hybrid culture. These tensions are usually very minute to be witnessed by an observer. The work foregrounds the underlying conflicts that intermittently resurface between the cultures that make up an urban space as they negotiate with one another to form a new cultural unit.
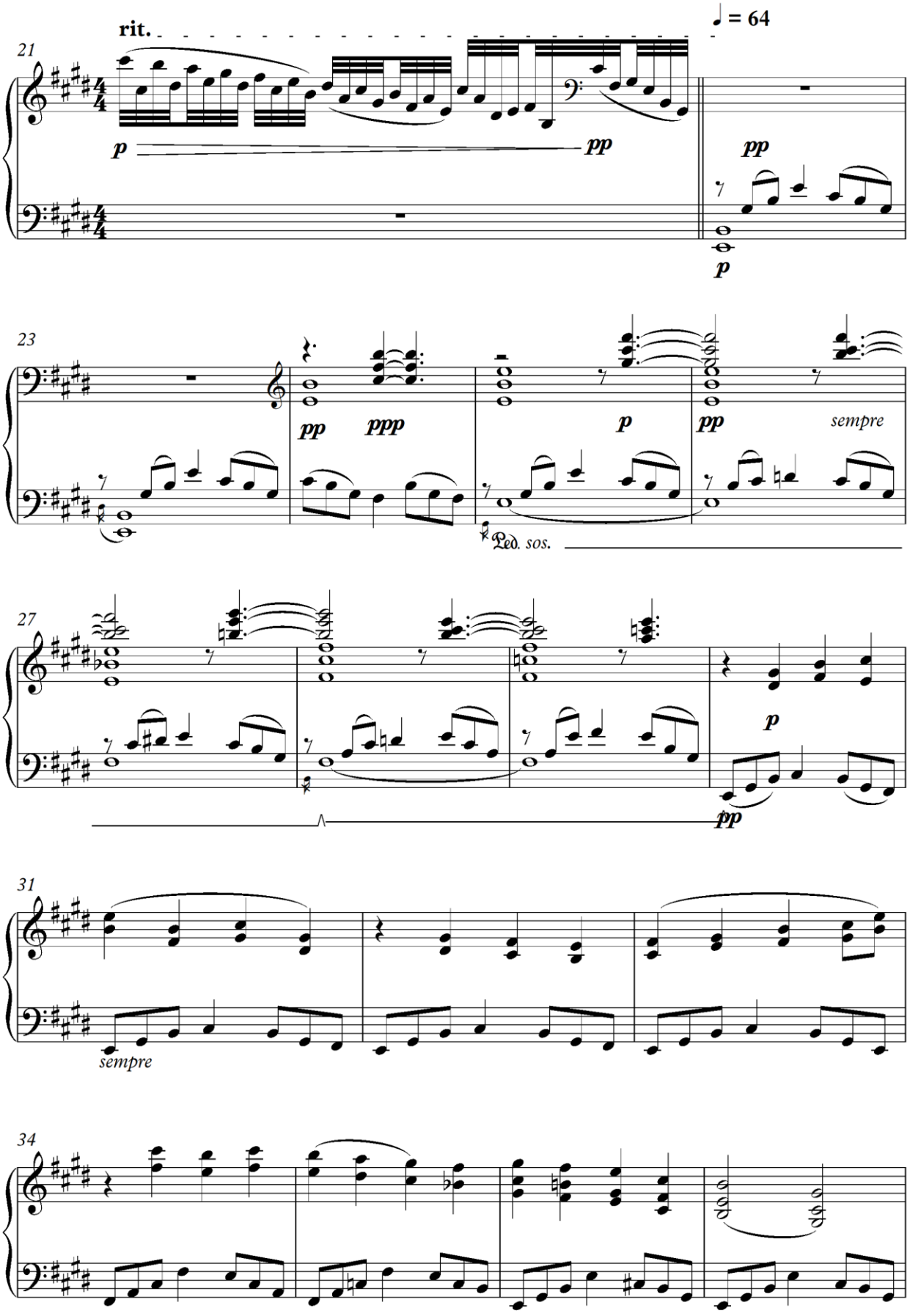
Approach to composition
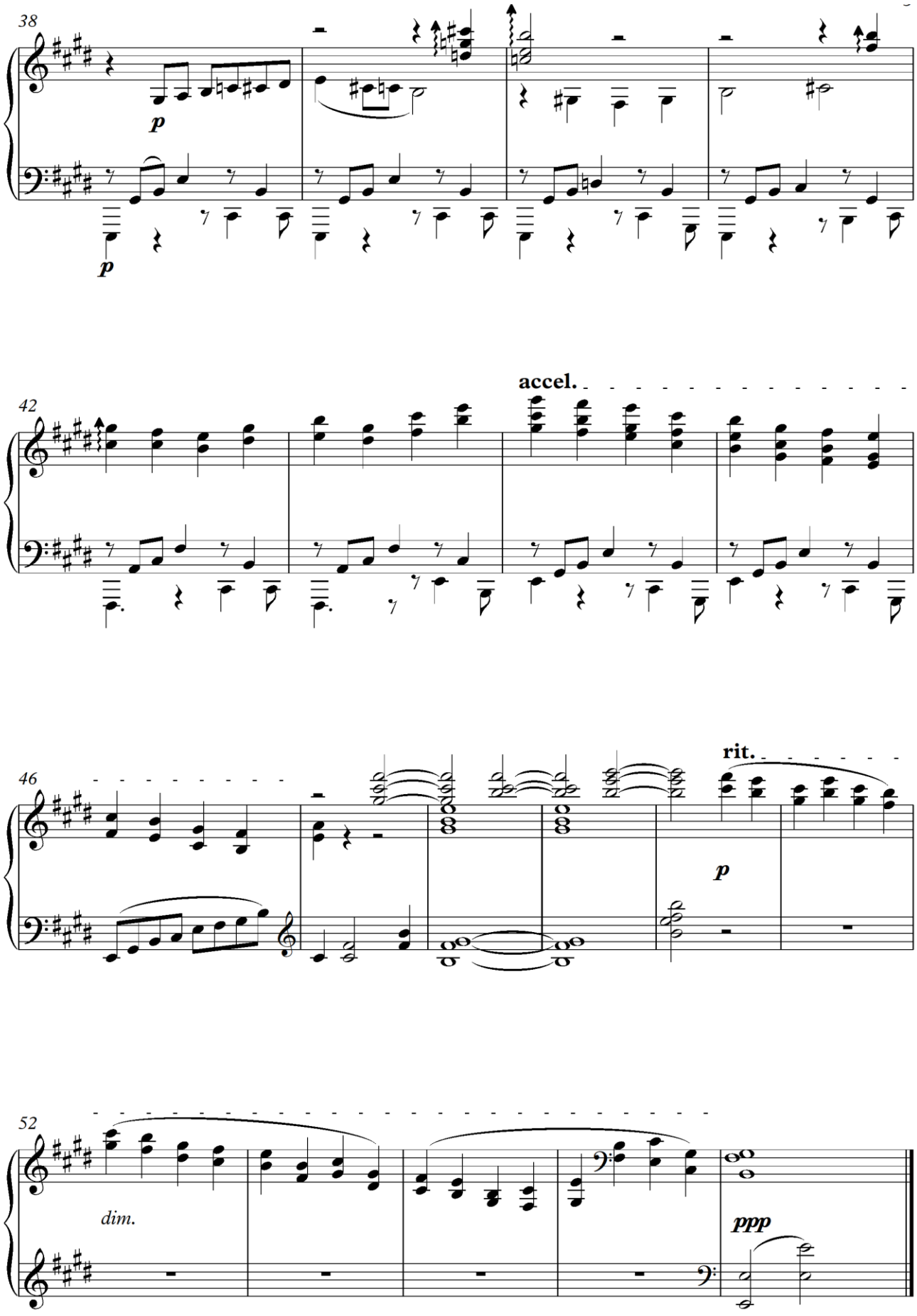
This piano work is structured in a way that the tension introduced (through the use of tremolos in the lower register of the piano) in the beginning is constantly reinstated and transformed in different movements of the work until it becomes almost undiscernible. In the second movement, the tension is reintroduced through increase in tempo, the use of chromaticism and fast-moving scales from the upper register to the lowest register of the piano. In the third movement, the tension appears as a tremolo on the lowest register, interspersed by chords on the high registers of the piano. The space created by the gap between the lower voice and the upper voices towards the end of the third movement makes the tension less intense than its appearance in the first movement where the voices are closer together. In the fourth movement, the tension is almost not perceived anymore as the piece moves to a climax. This is as a result of the closeness of the voices in the upper register where the tremolo is in the highest voice and the dynamics are very soft. This work is primarily structured on the reality that although the strong repulsion that initially exists between different cultures in the urban spaces continues to decrease as the individuals interact over a long period, such tensions do not completely disappear, rather, they move below the surface, while still contributing to the lived experiences of the urban dwellers.
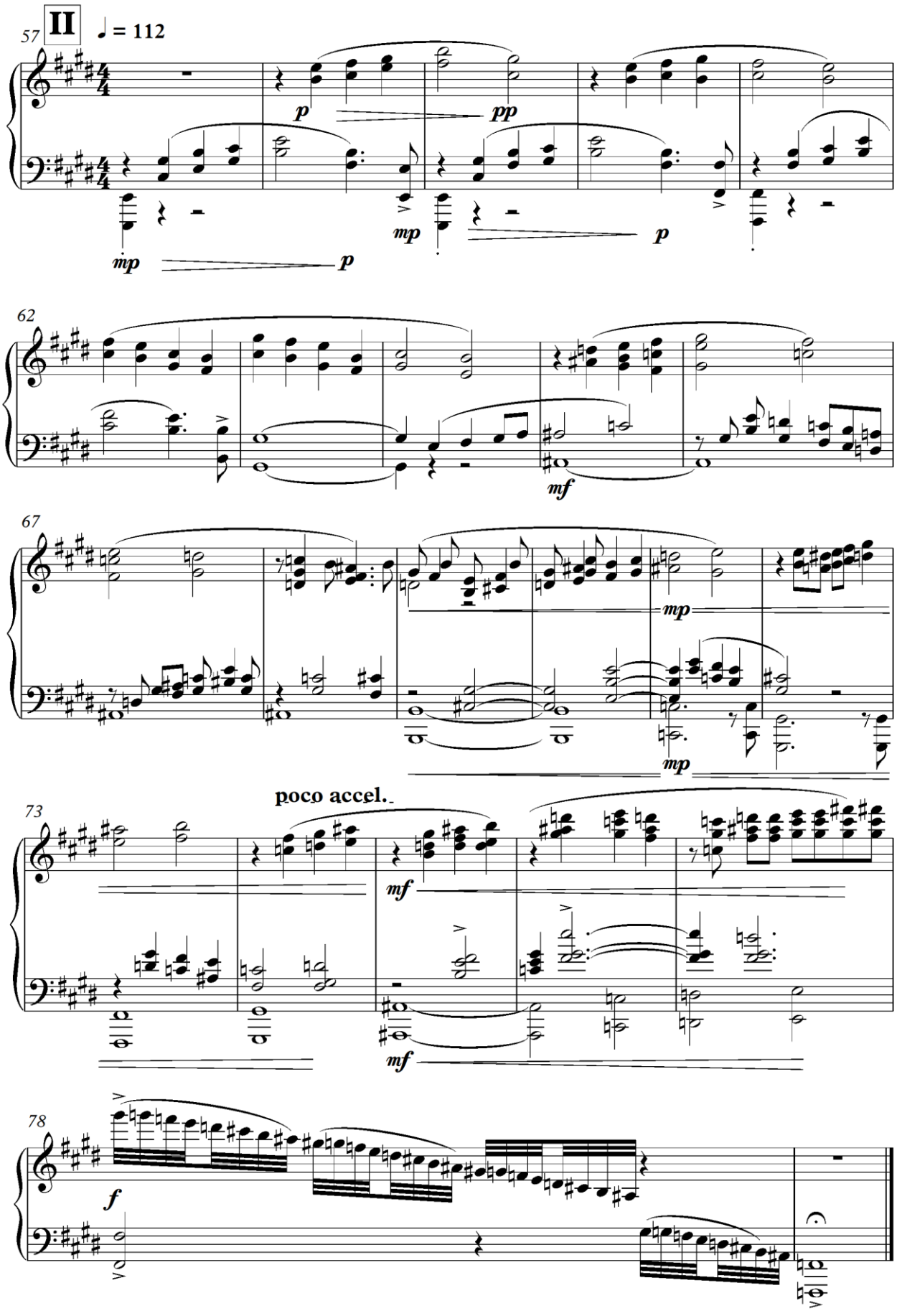
Expeditions
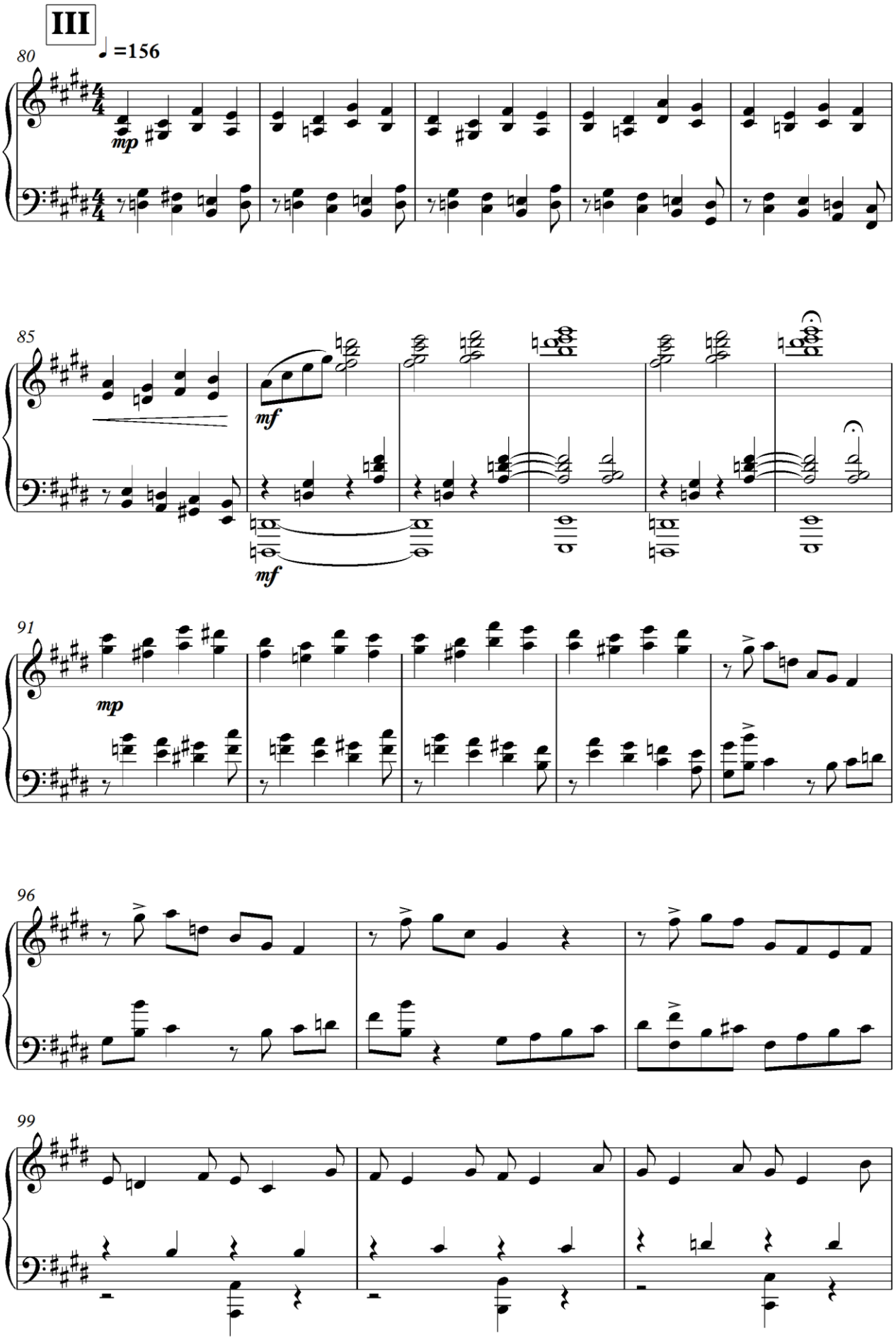
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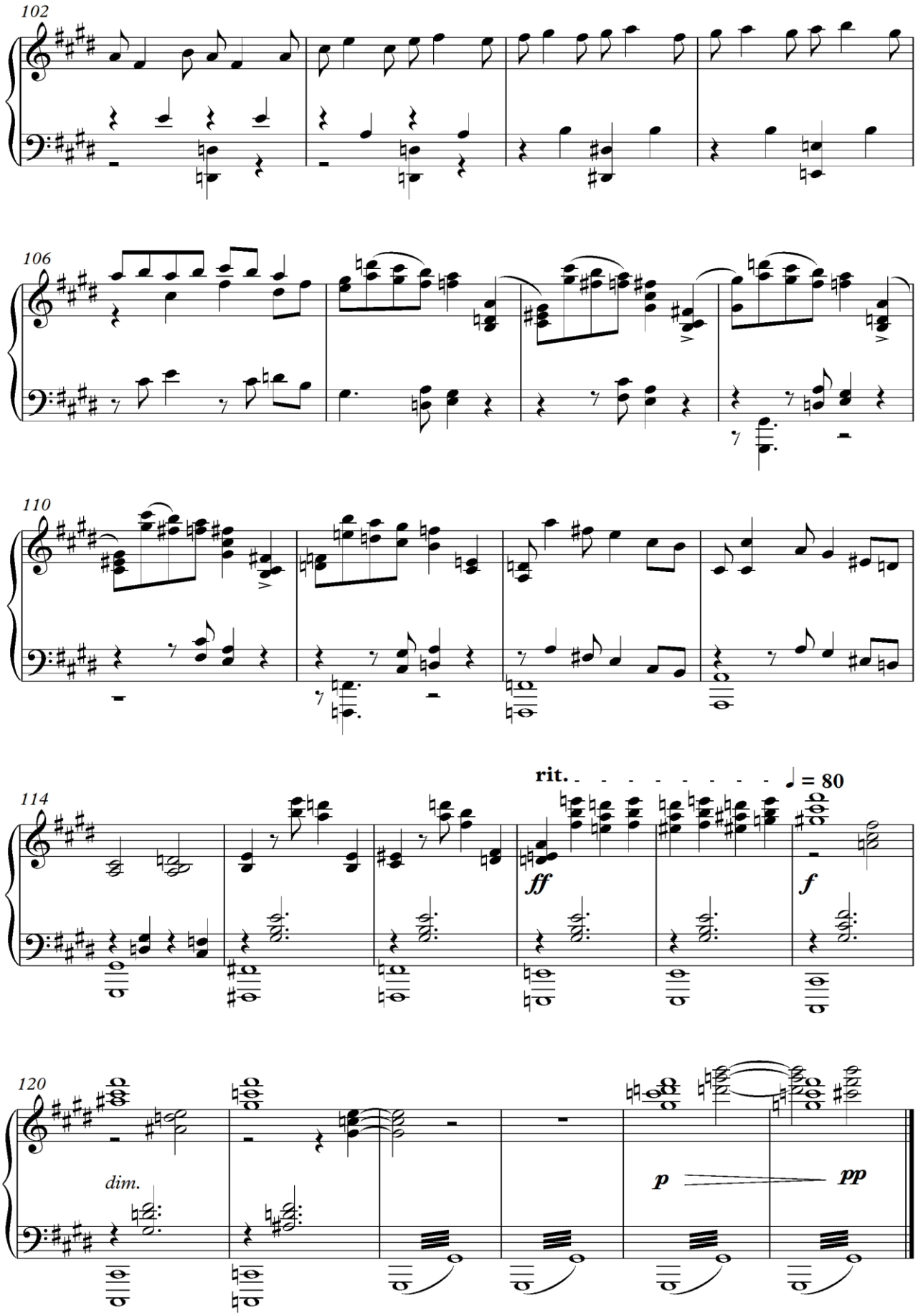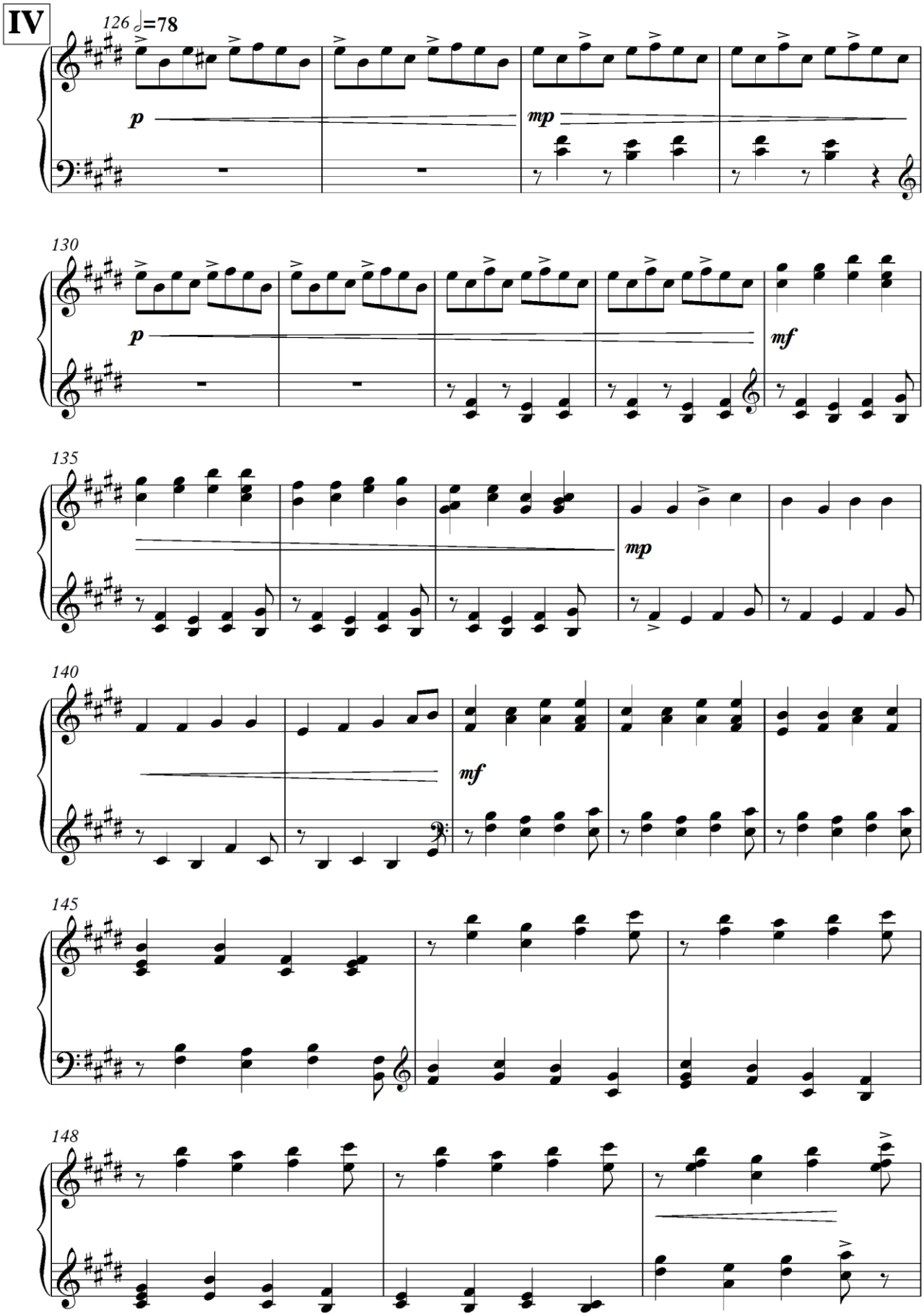



rit.
♩ = 64
21
p
pp
pp
p
23
pp
ppp
p
pp
sempre
Ped. sos.
27
p
pp
31
sempre
34
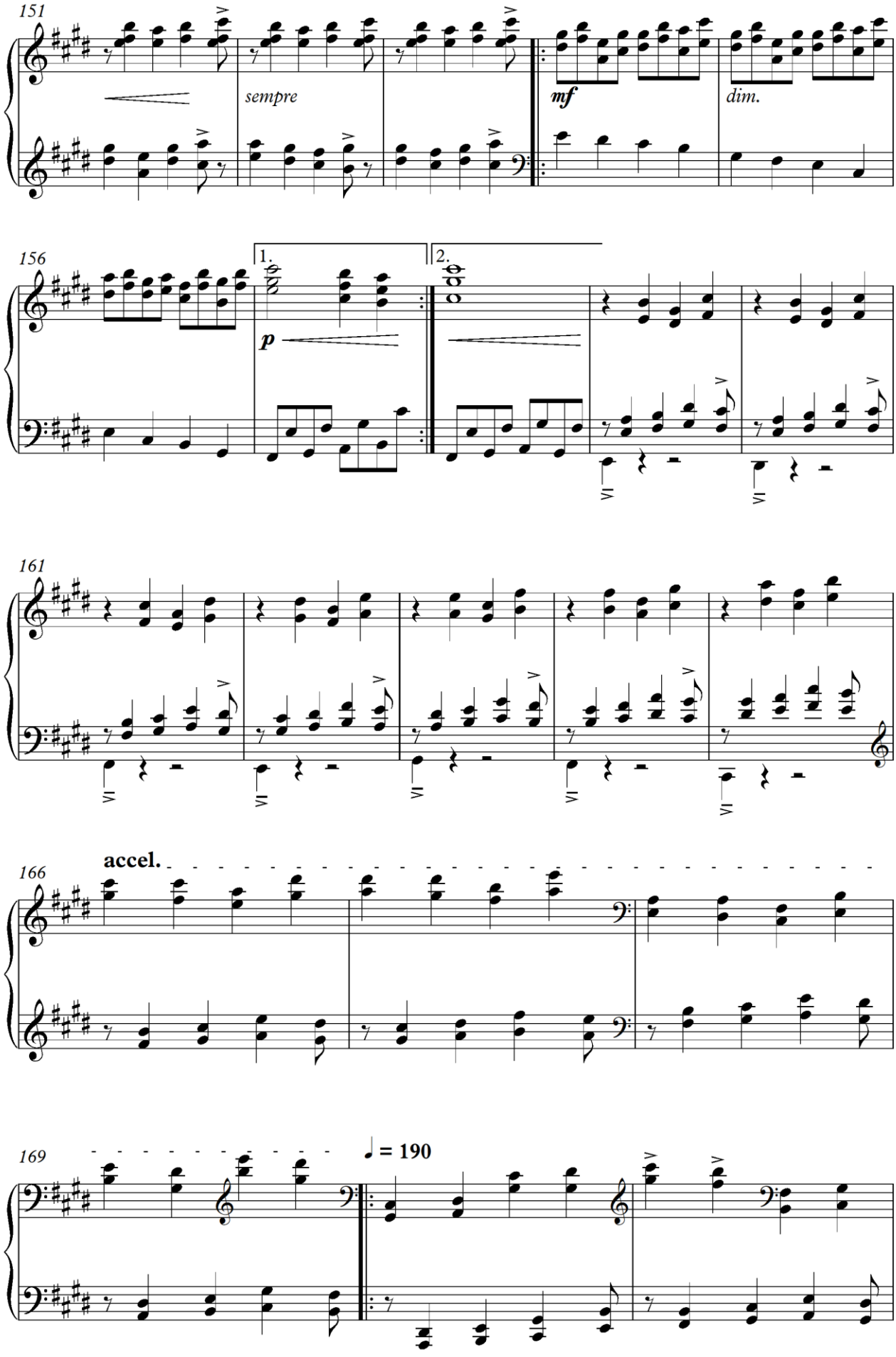

38
p
p
42
accel.
46
rit.
p
52
dim.
ppp

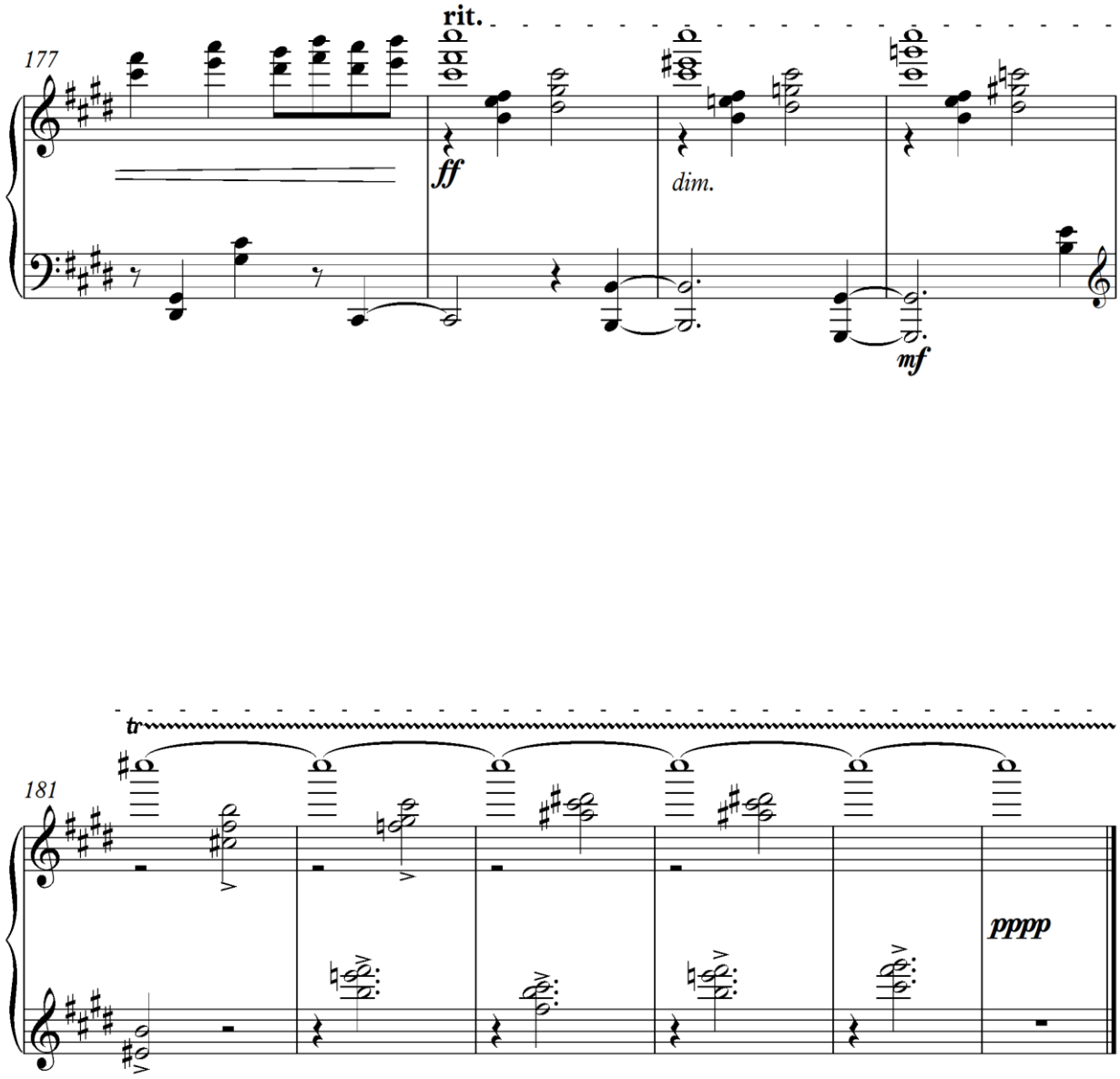

II
♩ = 112
57
p
pp
mp
p
62
mf
67
mp
mp
73
poco accel.
mf
mf
78
f


III
♩ =156
80
mp
85
mf
mf
91
mp
96
99


102
106
110
114
rit.
♩ = 80
ff
f
120
dim.
p
pp


IV
126 ♩=78
p
mp
130
p
mf
135
mp
140
mf
145
148


151
sempre
mf
dim.
156
1.
2.
p
161
166
accel.
169
♩ = 190


rit.
177
ff
dim.
mf
tr
181
pppp

Home away from home

This work is inspired by my lived experience in Johannesburg. Although I am studying in South Africa which is very far away from my country Nigeria, walking downtown in Johannesburg brought home images live to me. These images were not only in the Nigerian poplar music that I heard from the shops, the pidgin language and the clothing, but also the way some of the people carried themselves. This scenario reminded me of the marketplace in the city of Onitsha where I lived for a long time before coming to Johannesburg; it was like being home away from home, hence the title of the work.

Approach to composition
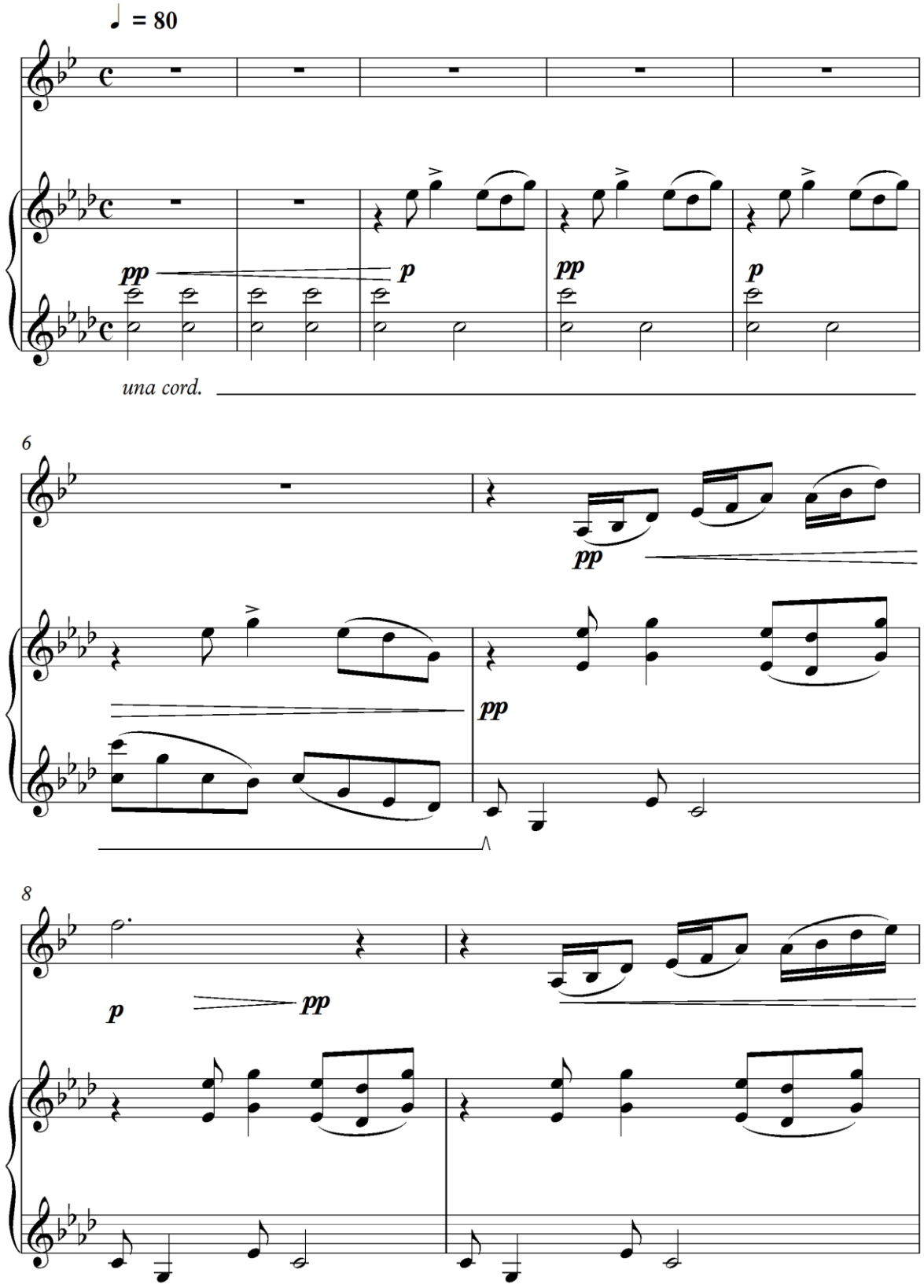
There is tonal ambiguity in the way I approached the tonal language of the piece, which gives a sense of foundation in tonality and yet, the perceived illusion is that it is not tonal. This was done by the use of particular tonal spaces reminiscent of Africa and often associated with other parts of the world such as Asia particularly the pentatonic tonal space which is found in both Africa and Asia. However, the Hirajoshi scale (on A flat) used mainly in Japanese music, gives the work a sense of familiarity with its reference to the African five-tone scales, and yet at the same time, foreignness to the African-ness because this particular pentatonic scale is not associated with African music.
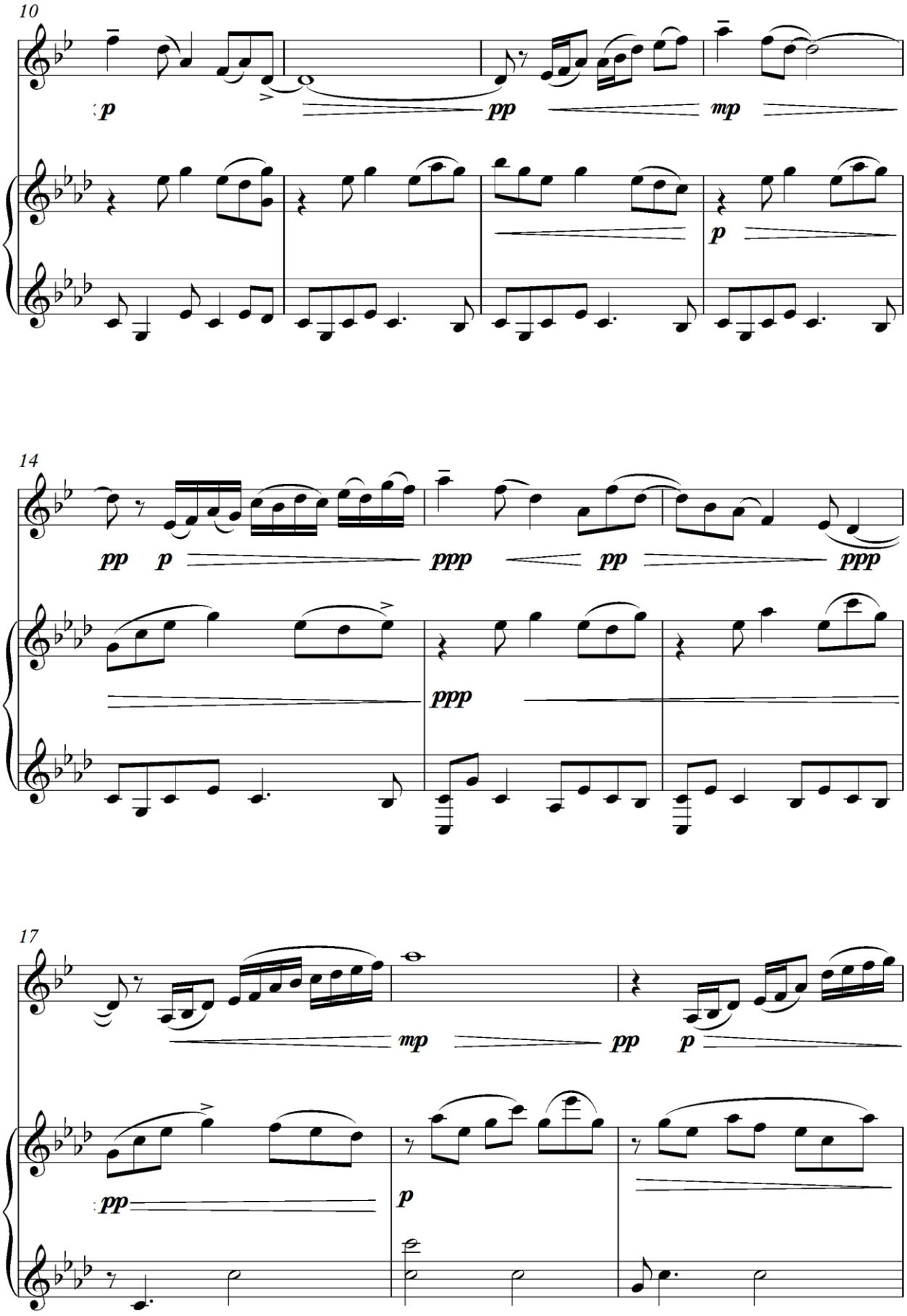
The work blends aspects of African traditional music and urban popular music. What blends the two aspects in the first movement is the usage of the techniques found in both cultures, such as call and response. In the first movement, the clarinet plays the role of a lead singer, while the piano functions as a supporting choir (the community as it were).
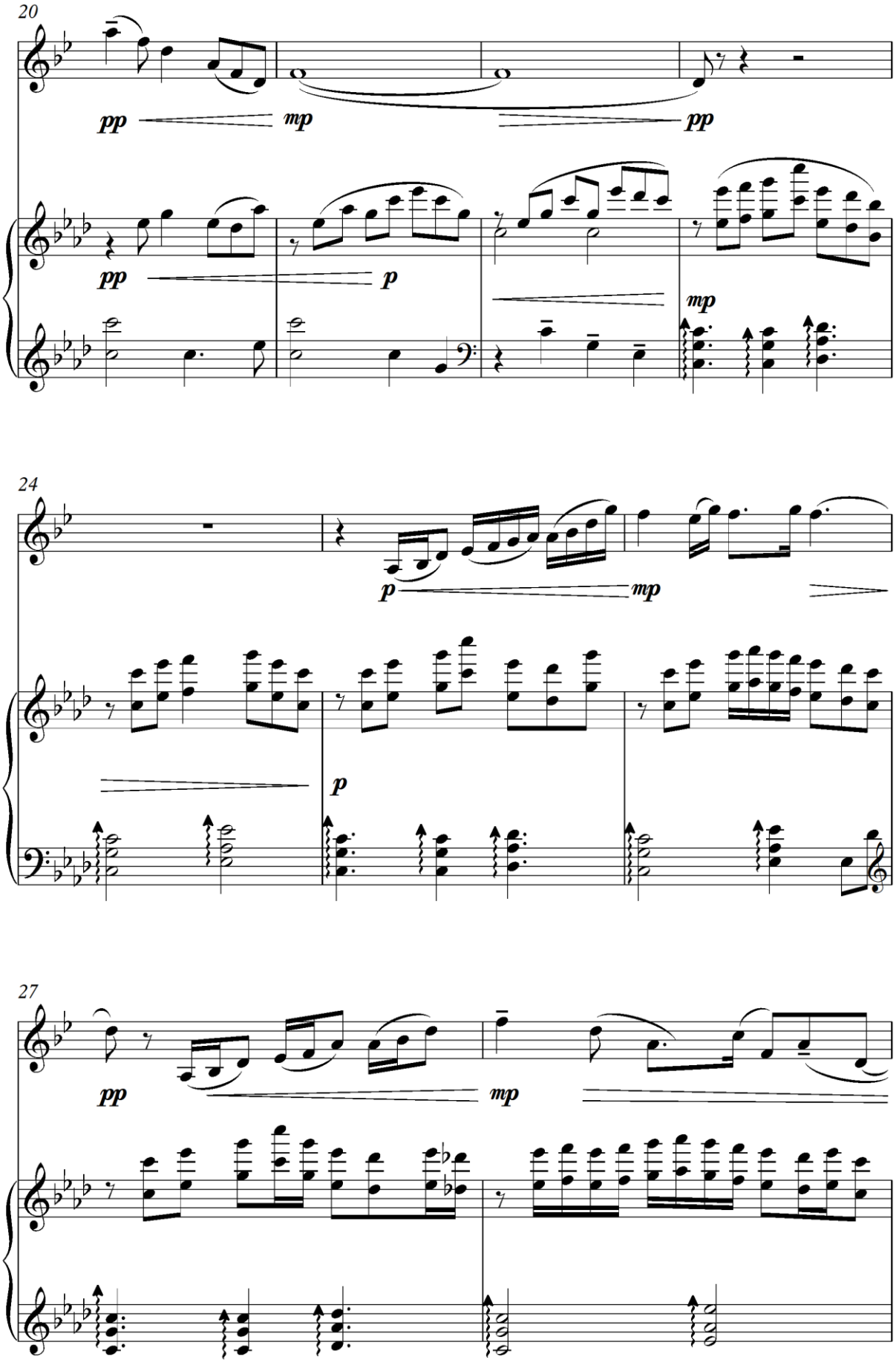
The second movement is highly rhythmic and conceived as an African dance where the clarinet functions as a flute in a traditional ensemble. The final movement is a slight variation of the first. The idea behind this piece is to present the perceived consciousness that exists through sound. The R&B represent not only urban space but also a dream world of delusionary success for villagers that being in the city represents success and a better life. So is the image of Nigerians back home that Nigerians in the diaspora have become successful. At the same time, the Nigerian popular music that are played in other countries such as South Africa, gives Nigerians in these foreign countries a sense of home away from home. The sound gives a possibility to travel through the world and a sense of different experiences of the same lived experience. This piece, in its entirety, projects the effortless blend of postcolonial Africans within the different cultural, social, and psychological spaces that exists in present-day Africa.
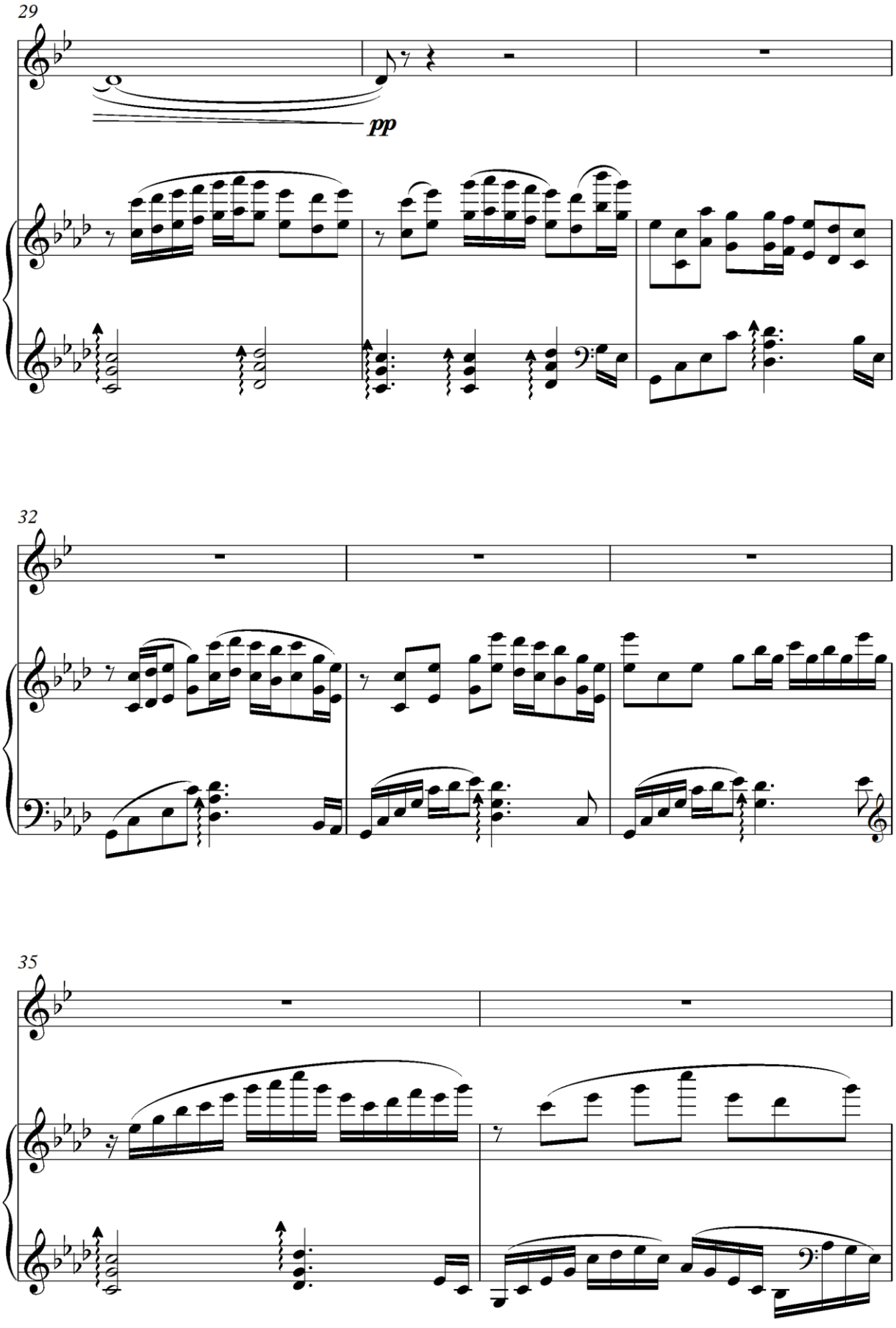
Home away from home
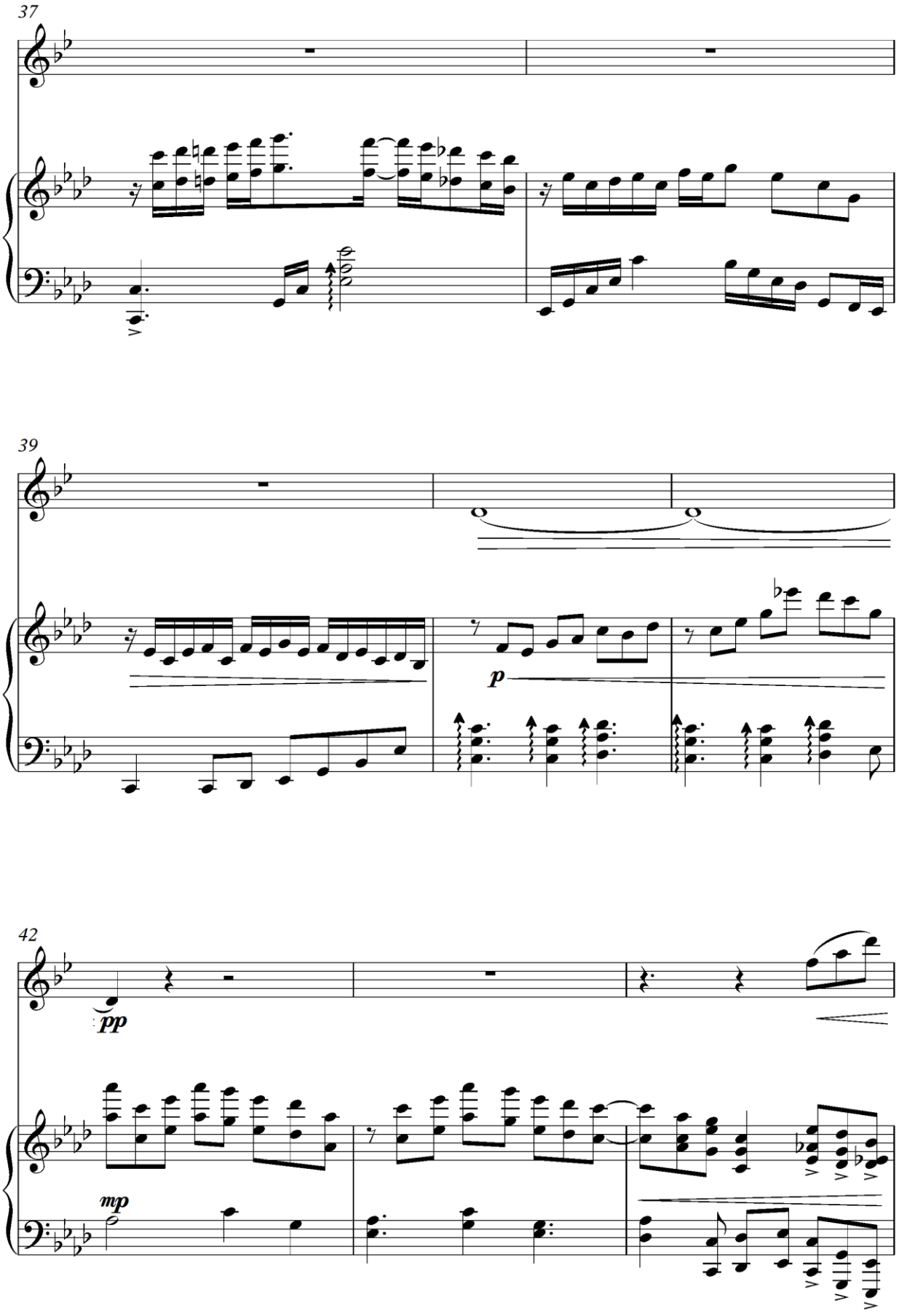
Chidi Obijiaku
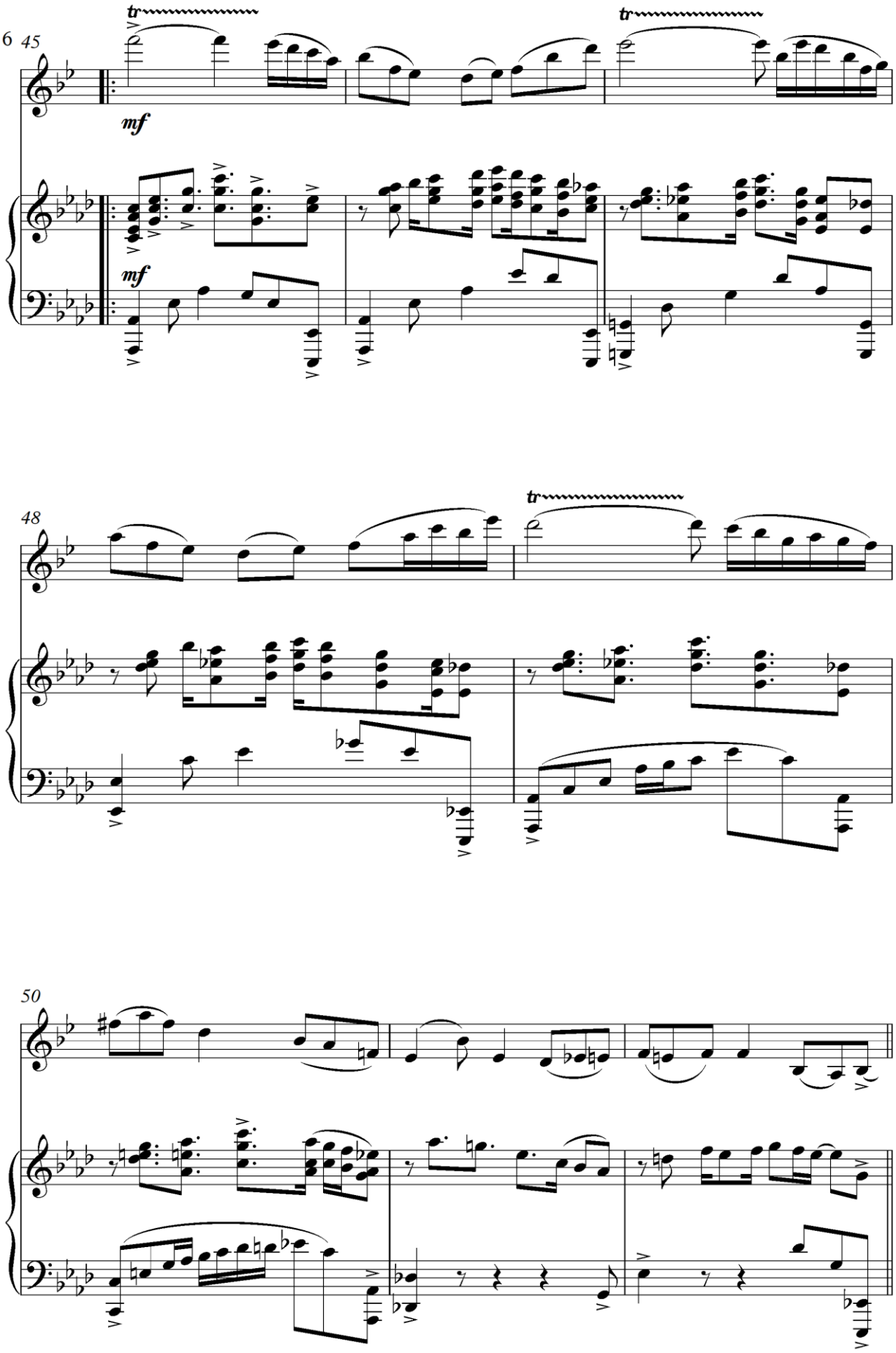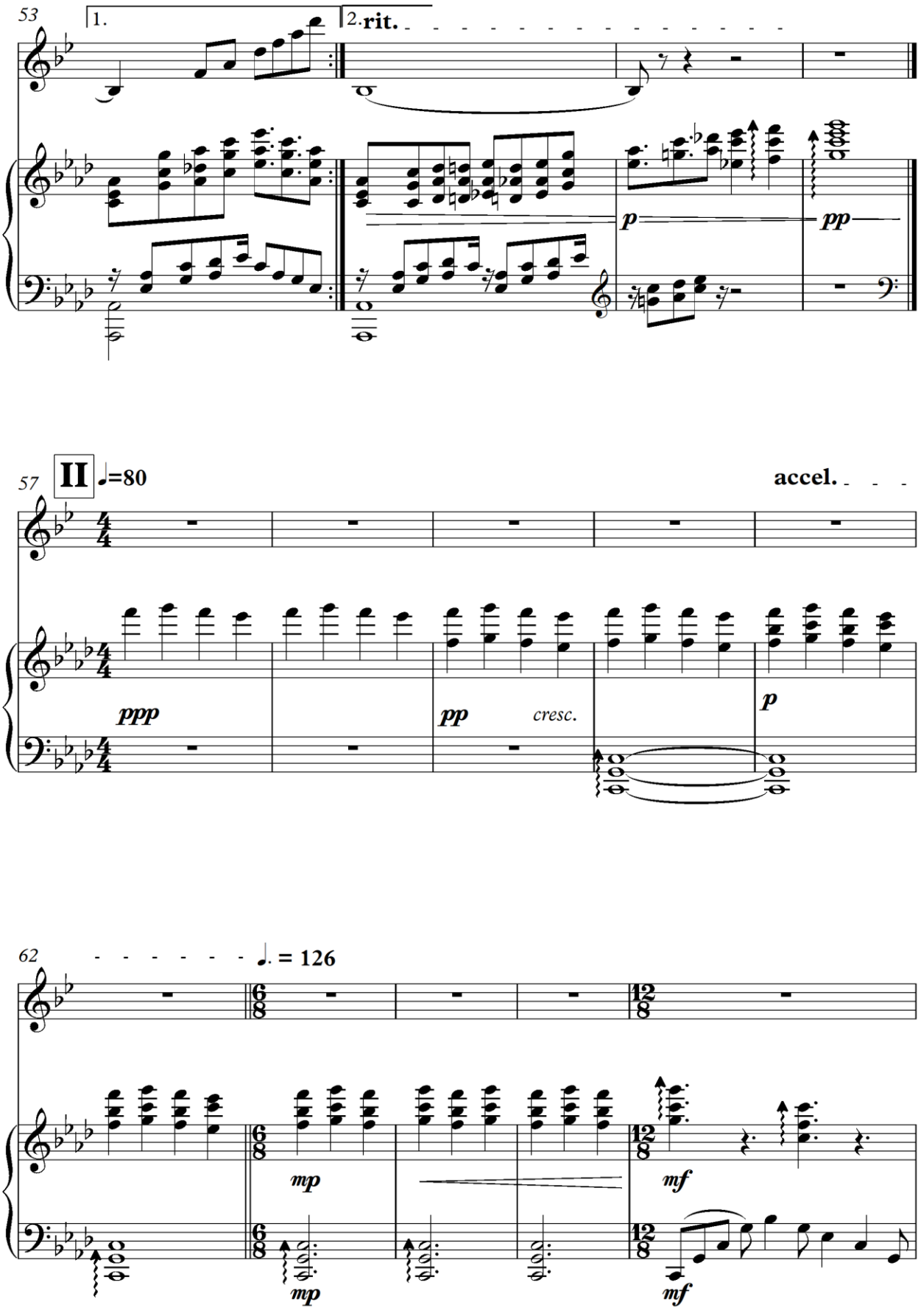



10
p
pp
mp
p
14
pp
p
ppp
pp
ppp
ppp
17
mp
pp
p
pp
p
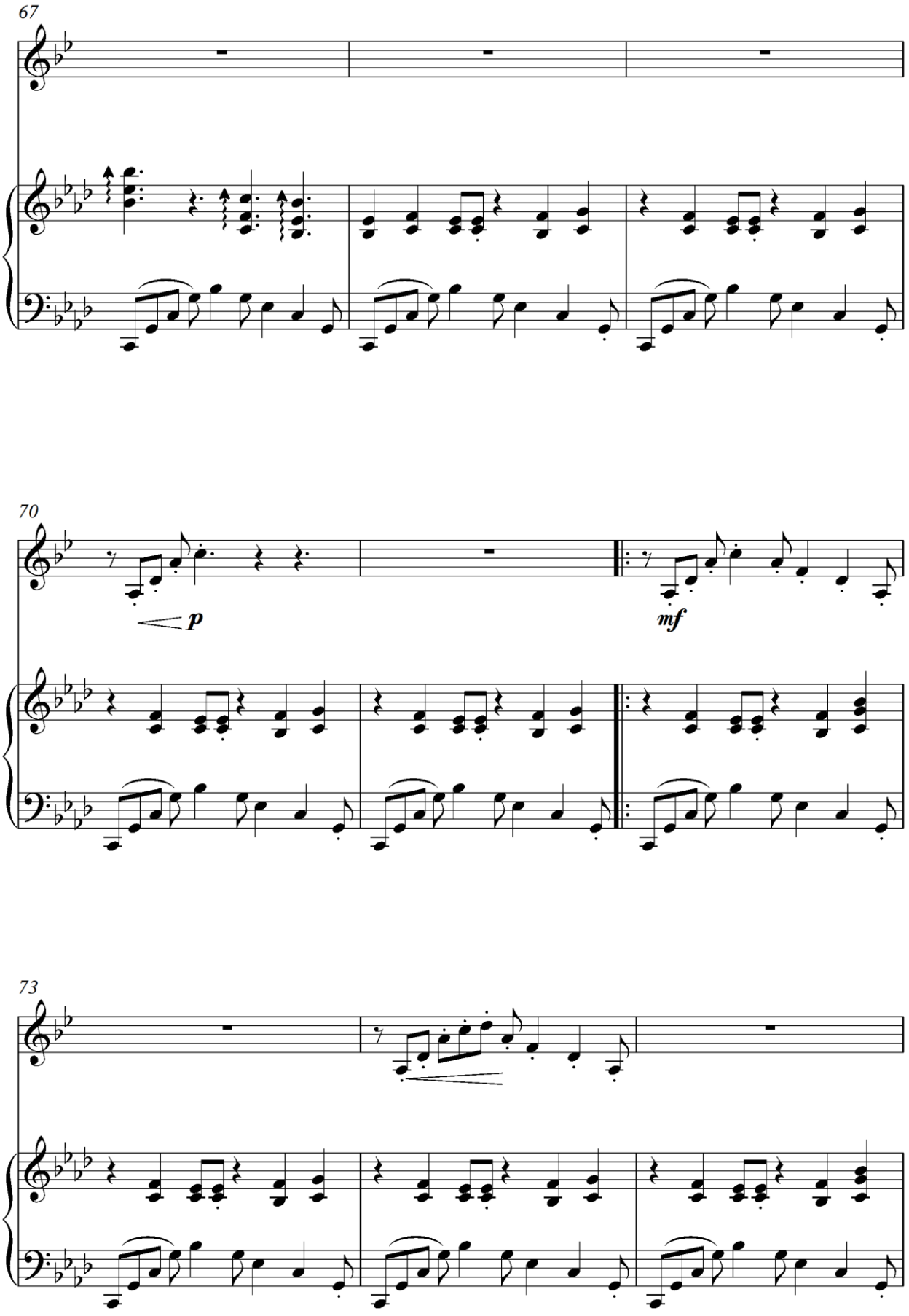

20
pp
mp
pp
pp
p
mp
24
p
mp
p
27
pp
mp
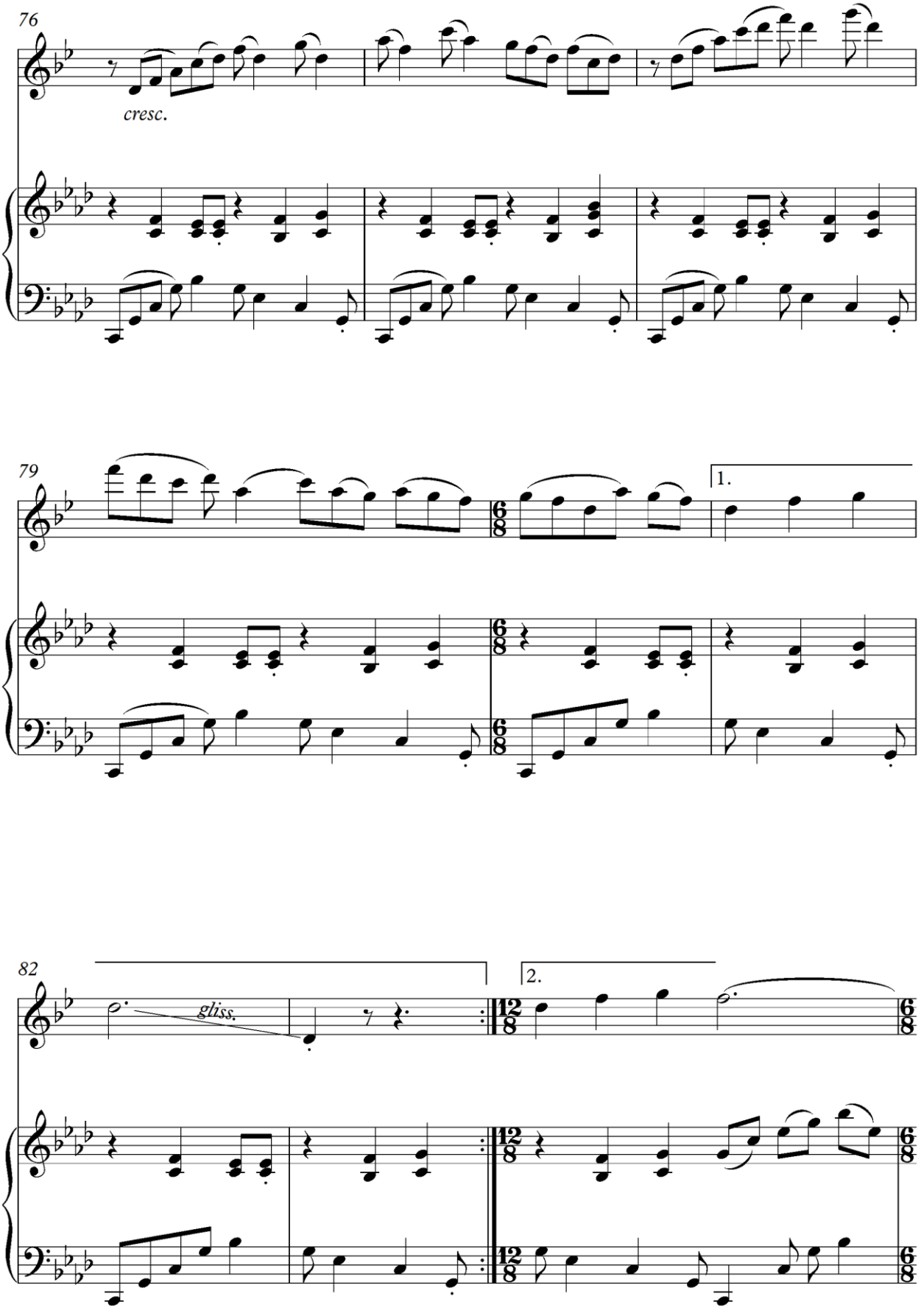

29
pp
32
35
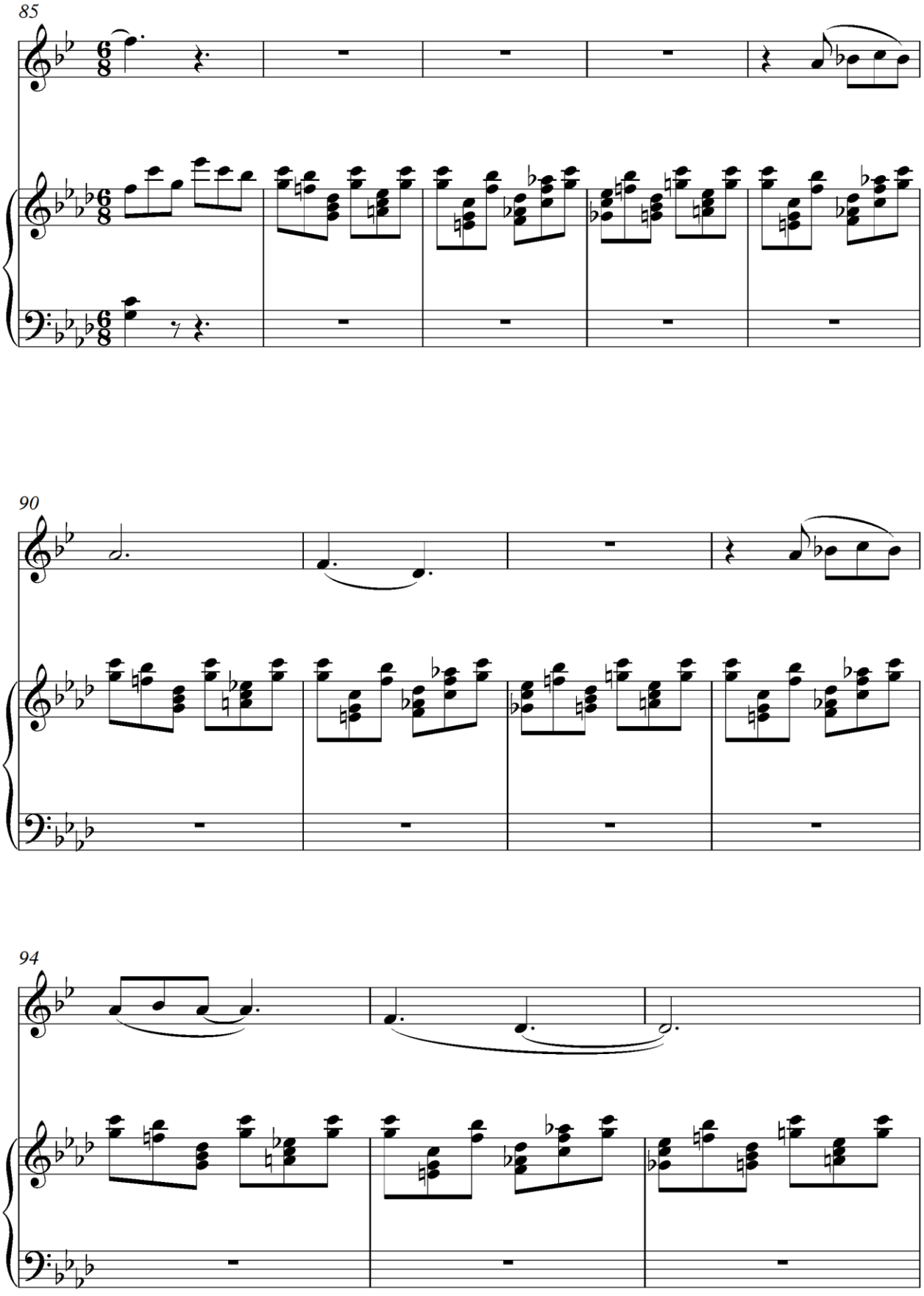

37
39
p
42
pp
mp
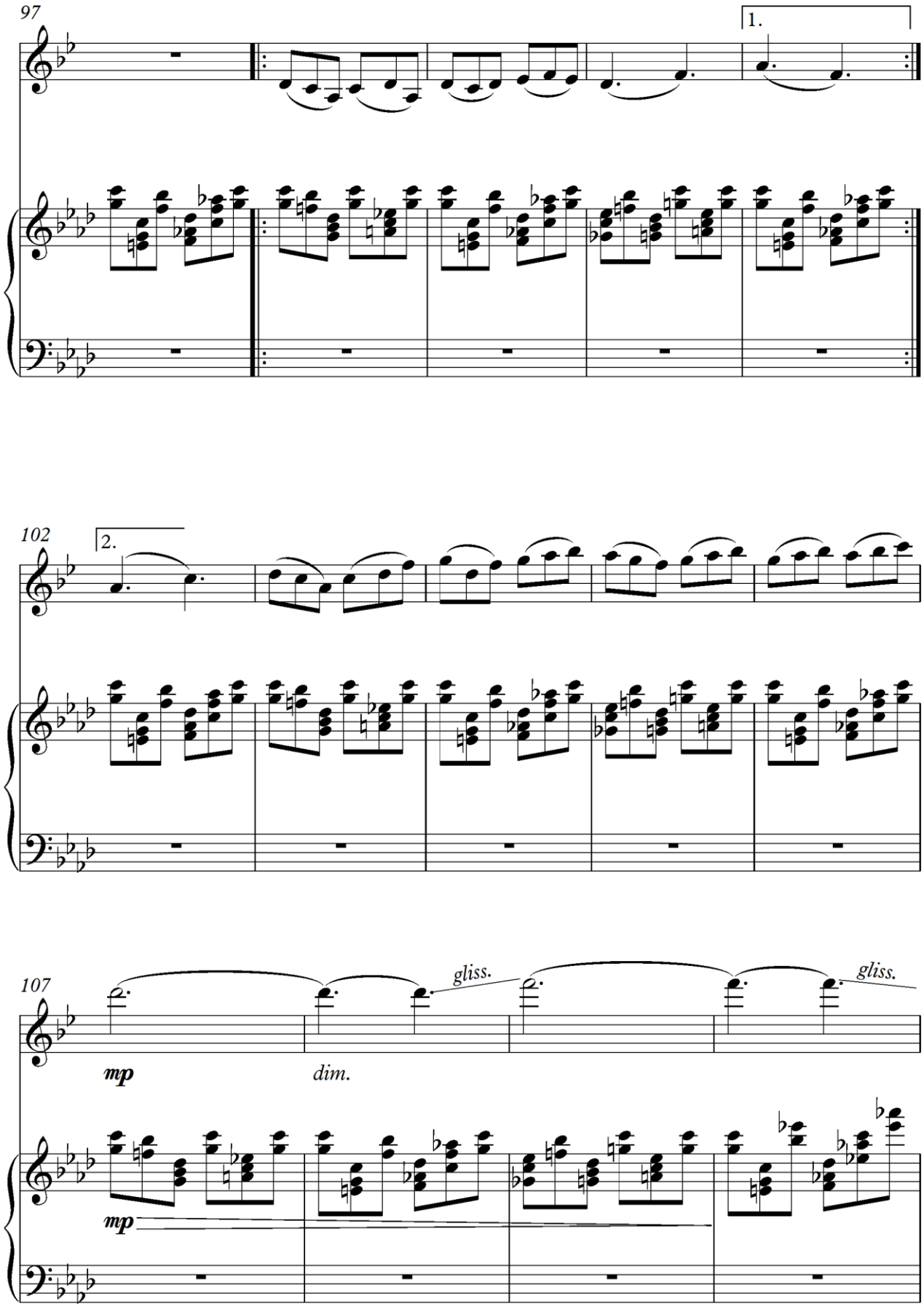

6
45
tr
mf
tr
mf
48
tr
50

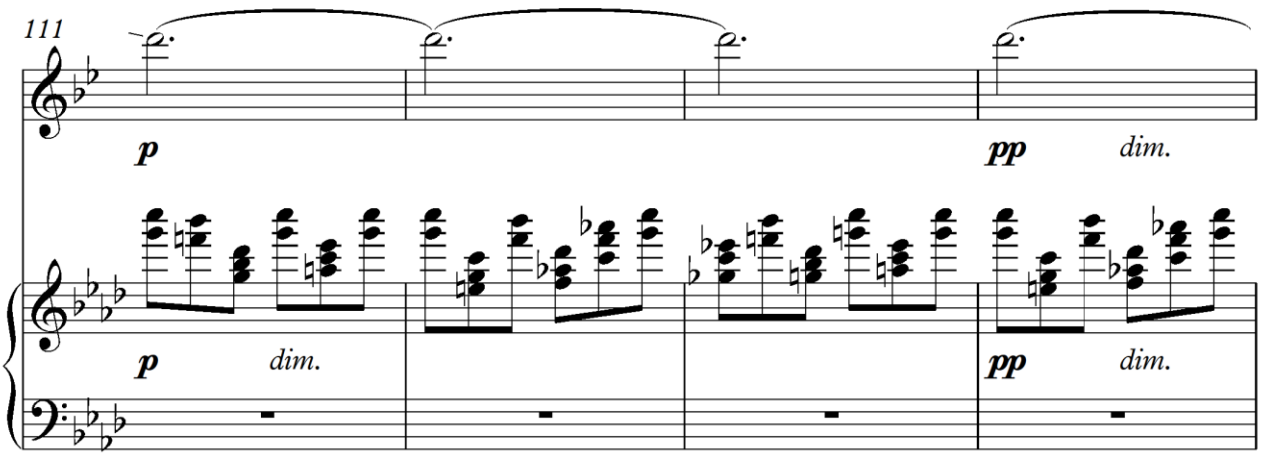

53
1.
2. rit.
p
pp
57
II
♩=80
accel.
ppp
pp
cresc.
p
62
♩. = 126
mp
mp
mf
mf

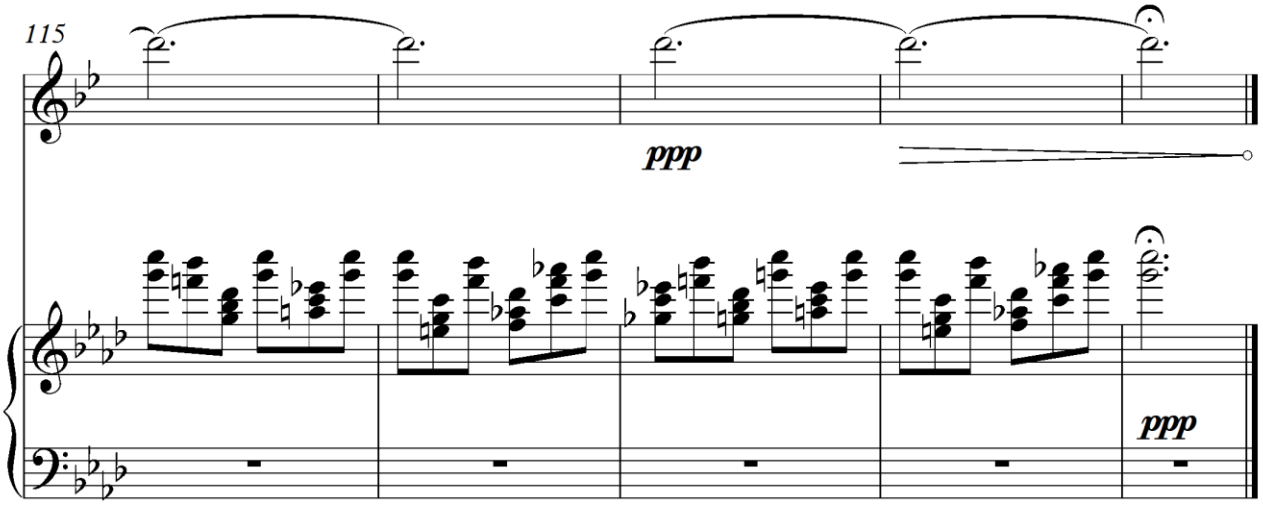

67
70
p
mf
73

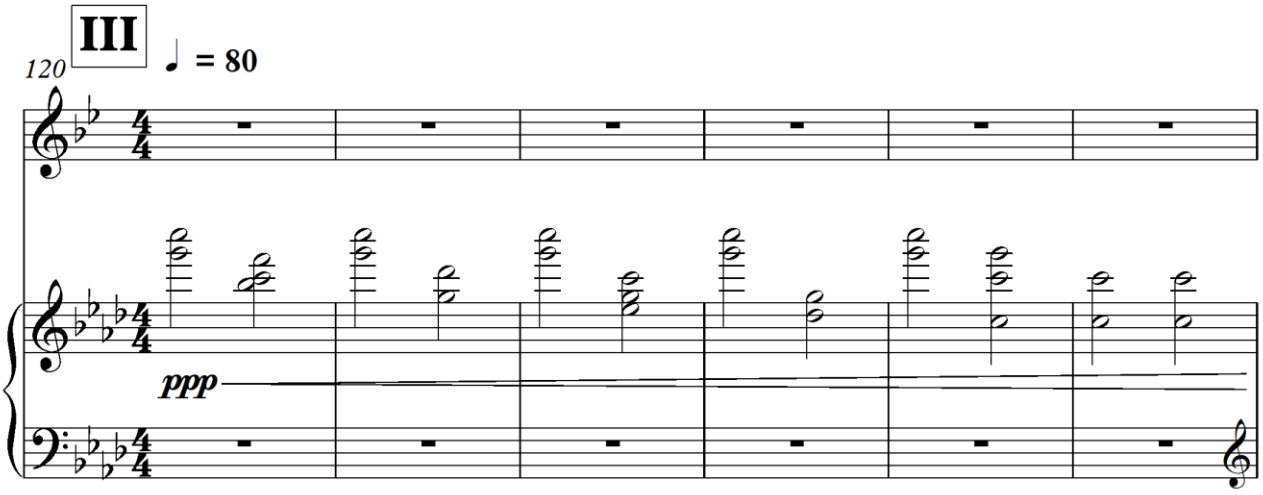

76
cresc.
79
1.
82
gliss.
2.
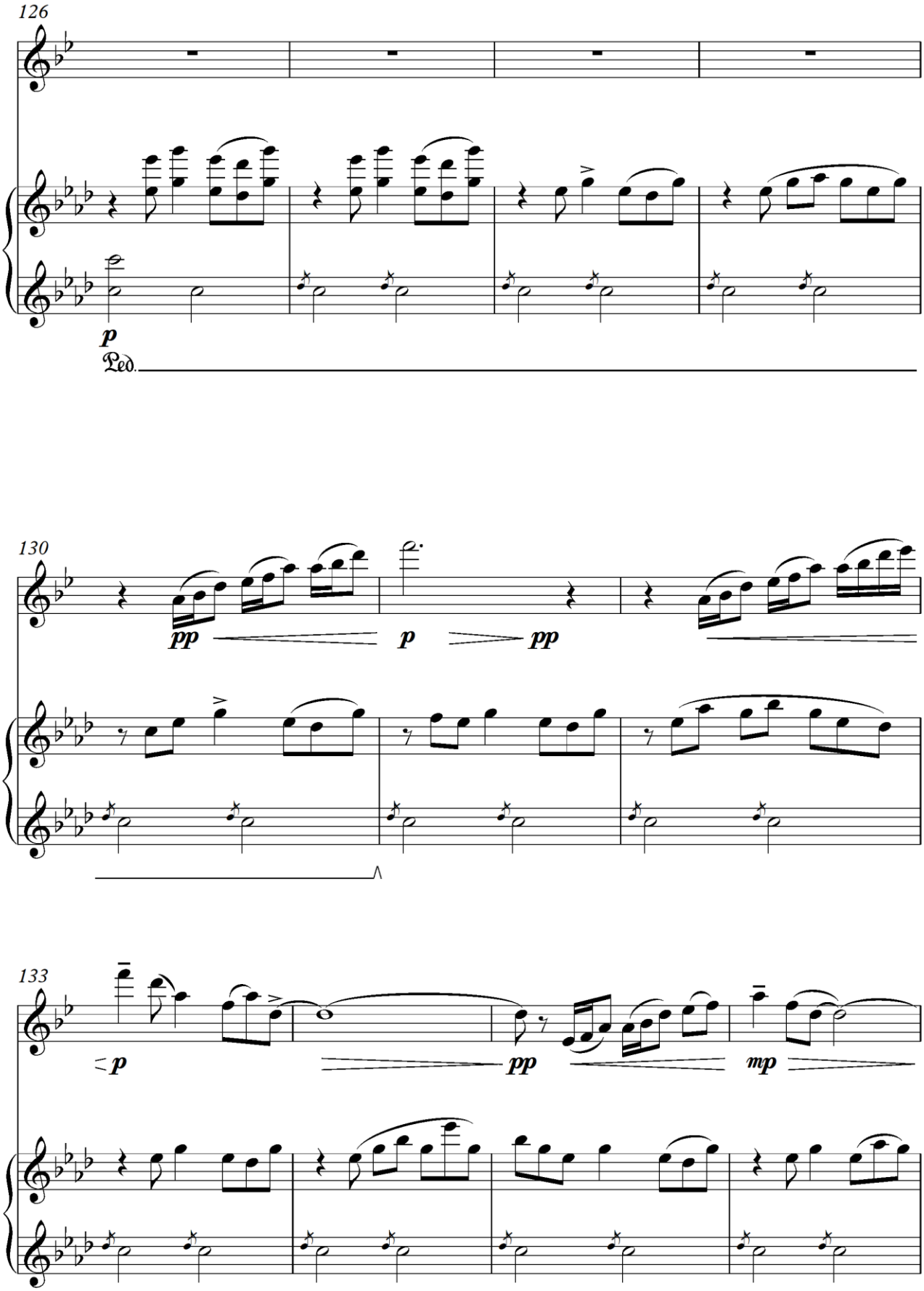

85
90
94
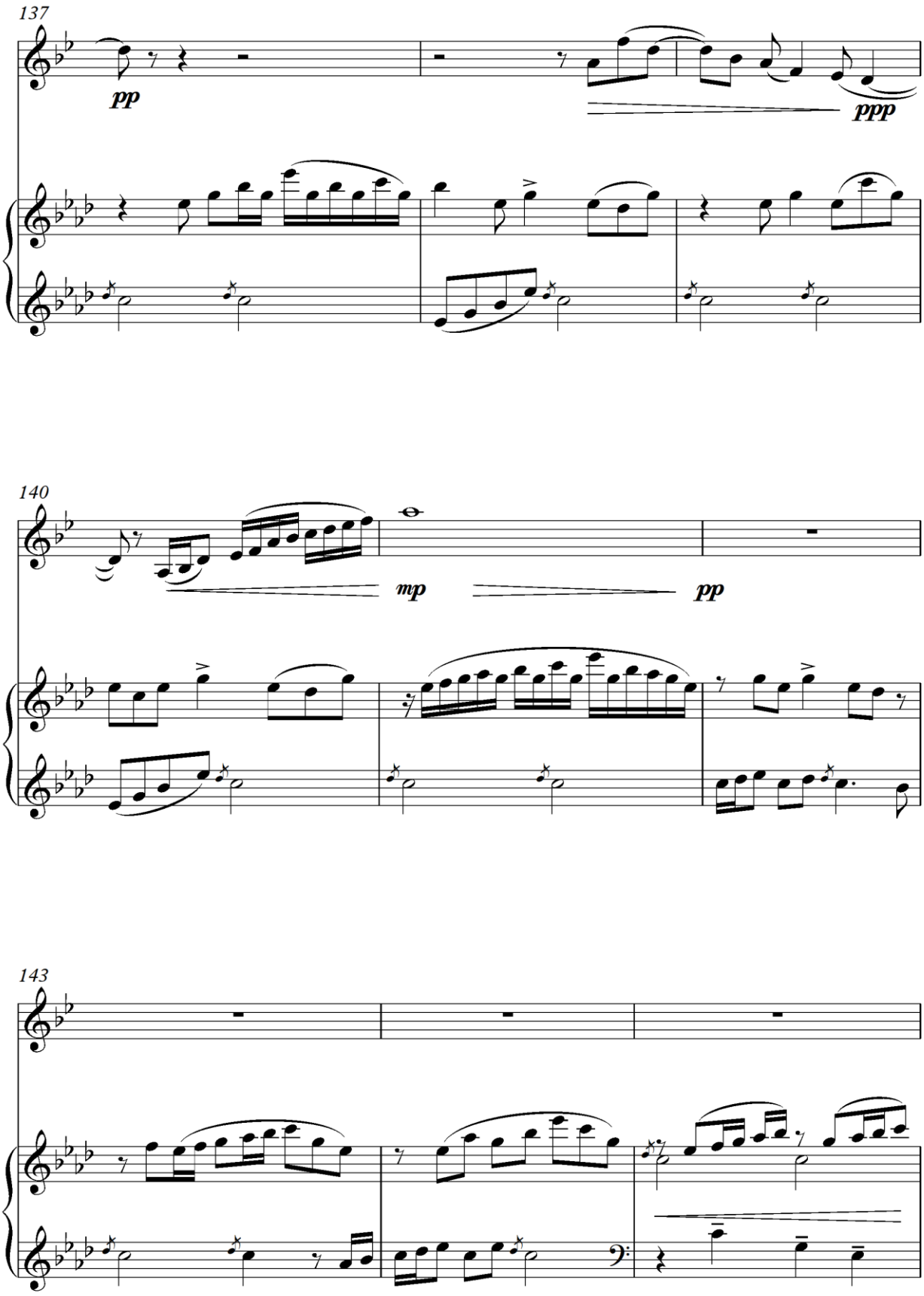

97
1.
102
2.
107
gliss.
gliss.
mp
dim.
mp
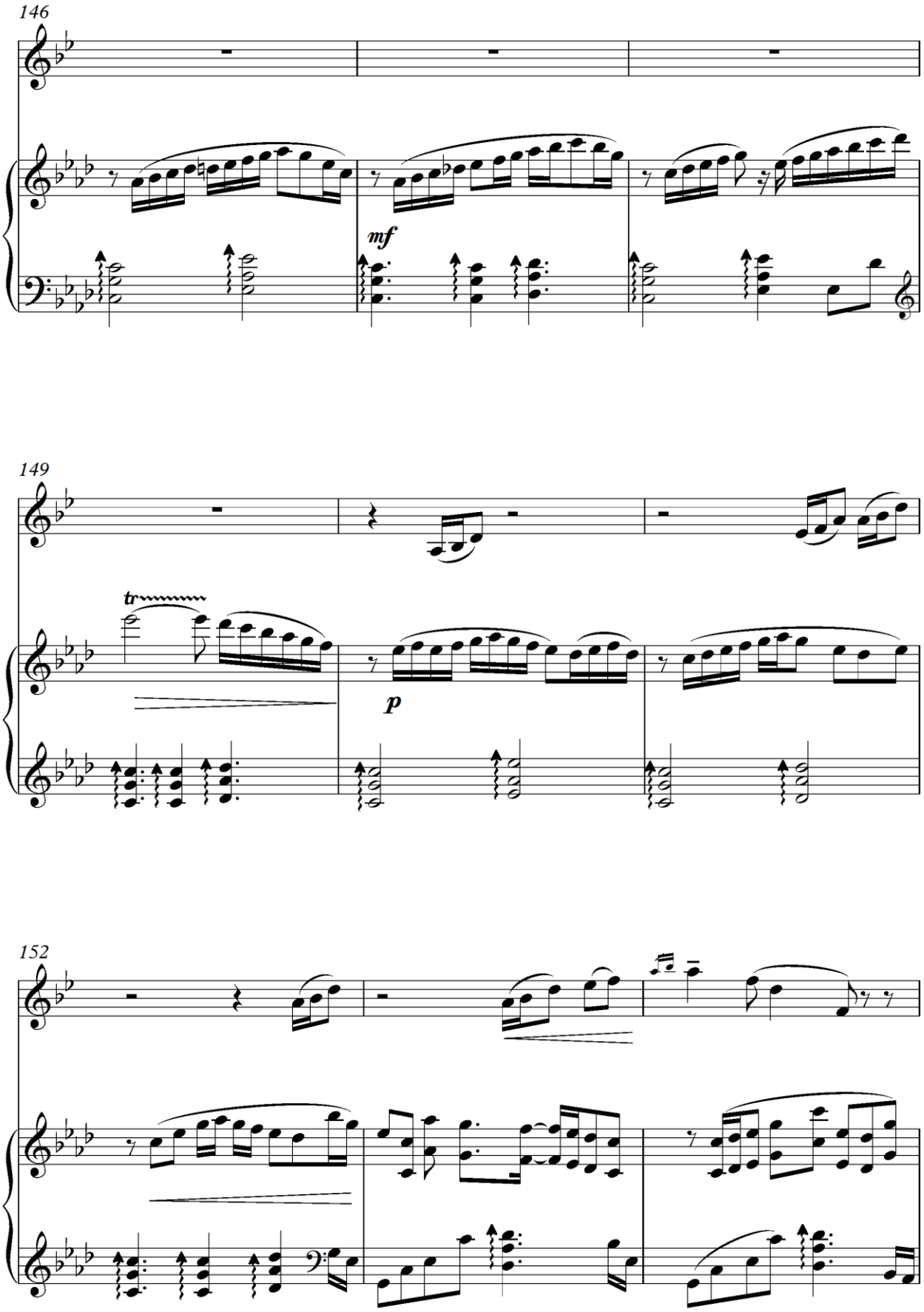

111
p
pp
dim.
p
dim.
pp
dim.
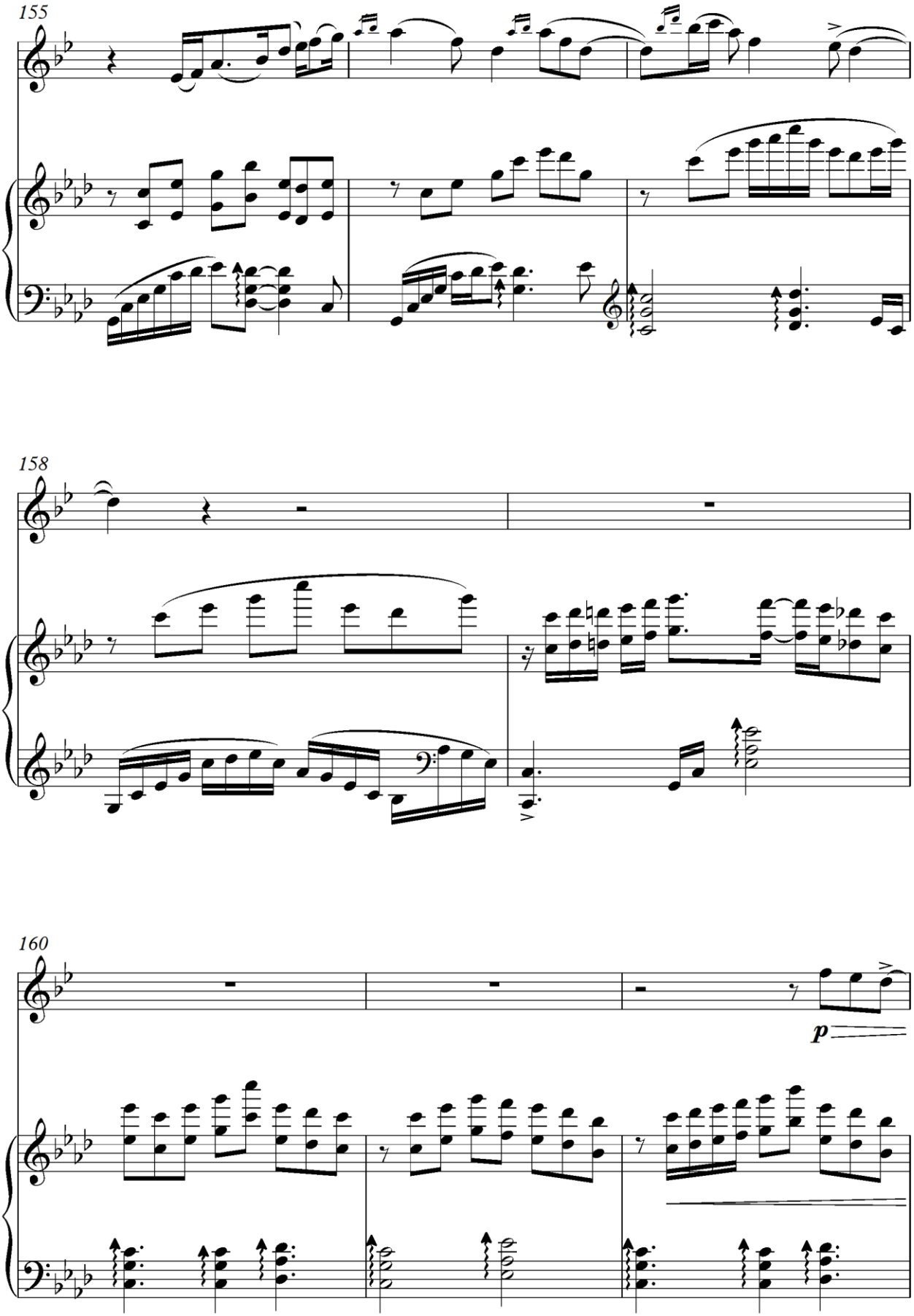

115
ppp
ppp
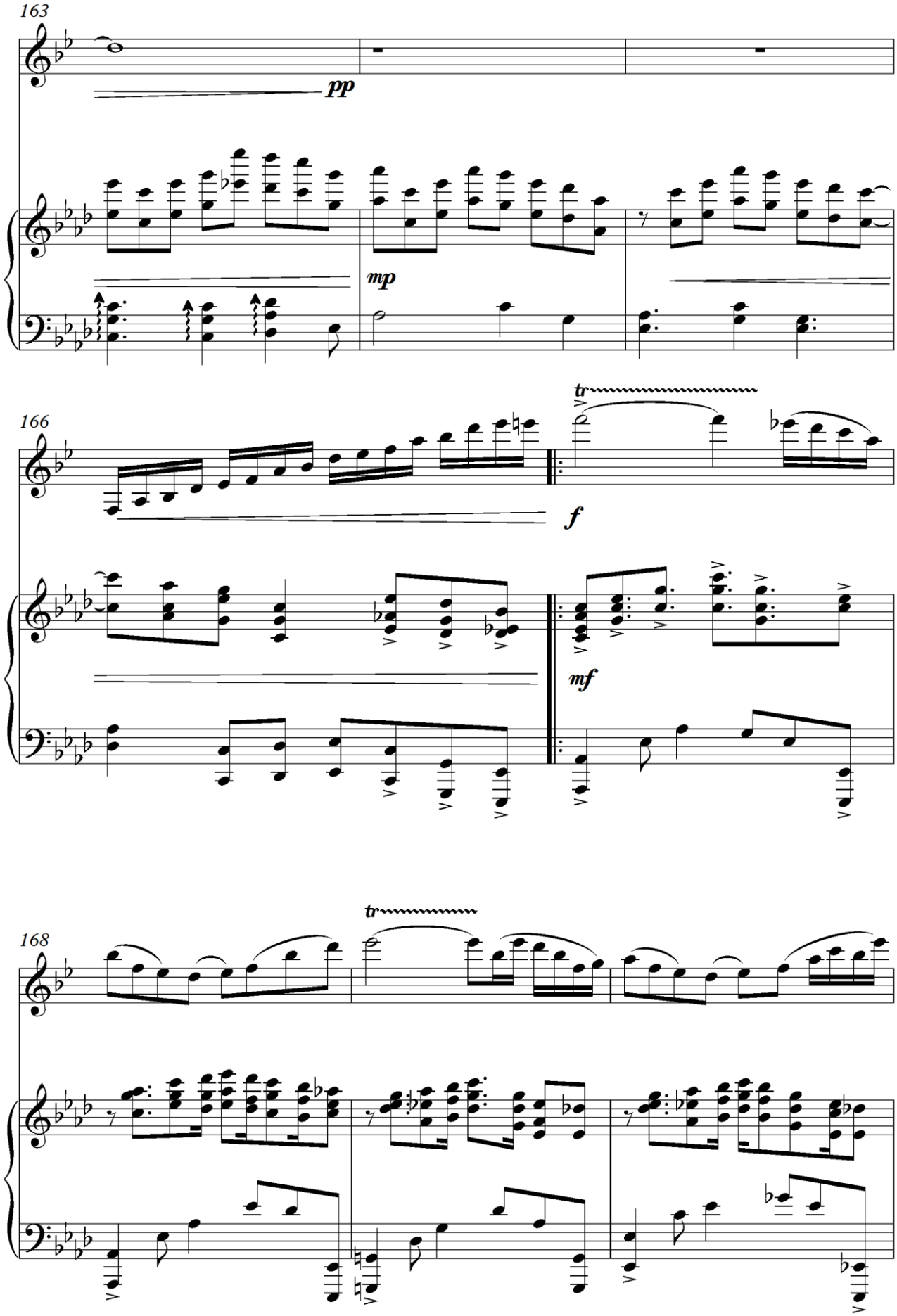

III
120
♩ = 80
ppp
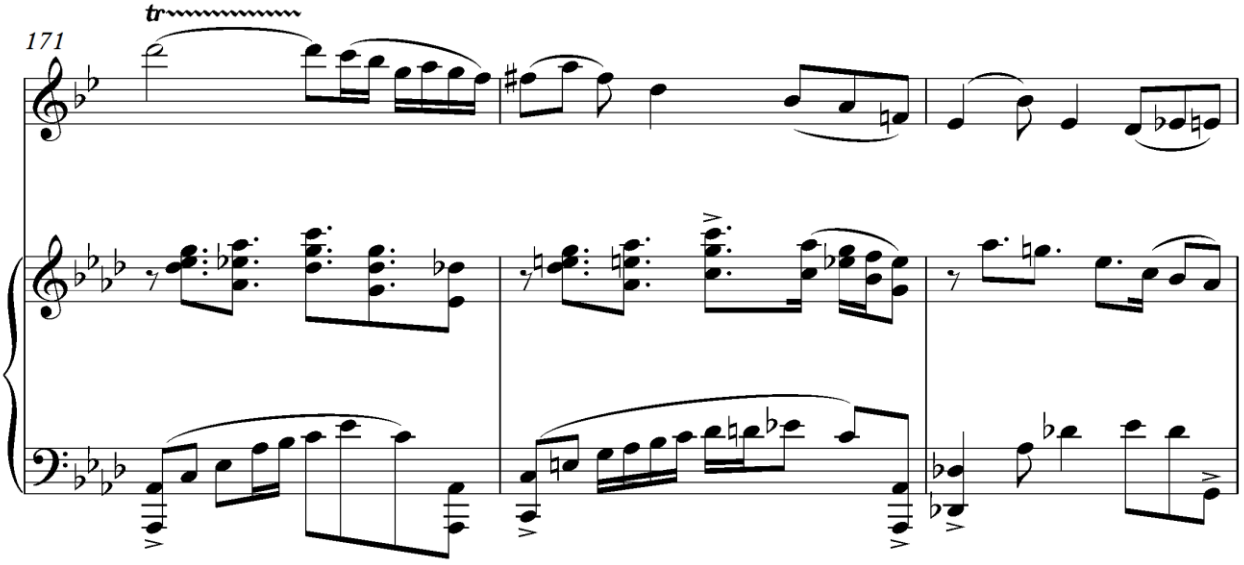

126
p
Ped.
130
pp
p
pp
133
p
pp
mp
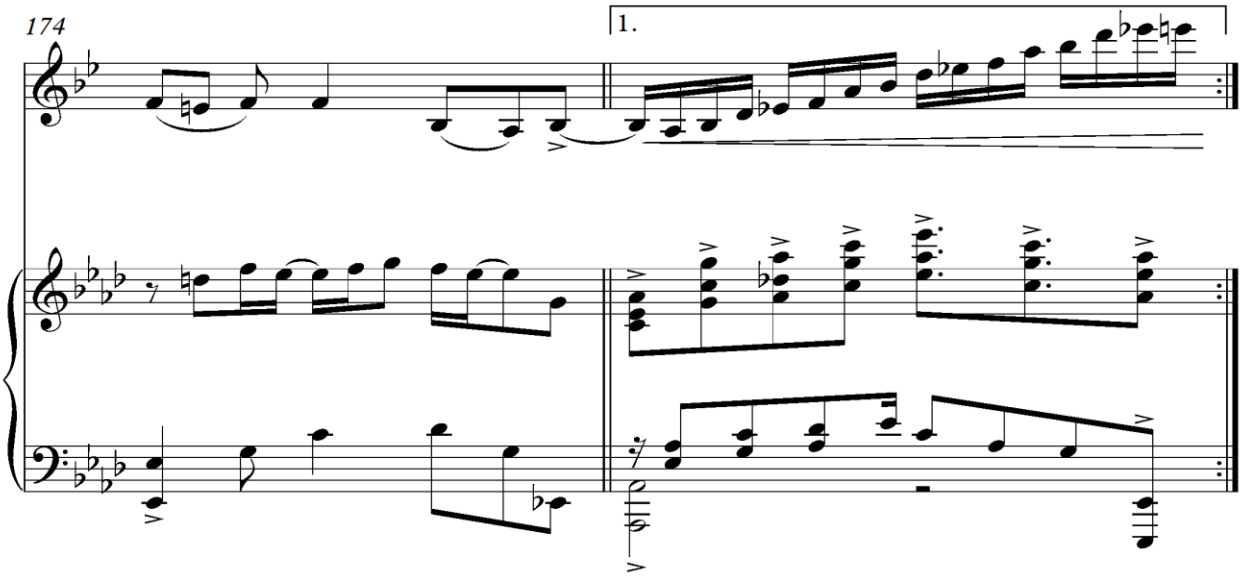

137
pp
ppp
140
mp
pp
143


146
mf
149
tr
p
152


155
158
160
p


163
pp
mp
166
tr
f
mf
168
tr


171
tr


174
1.

One day in a town
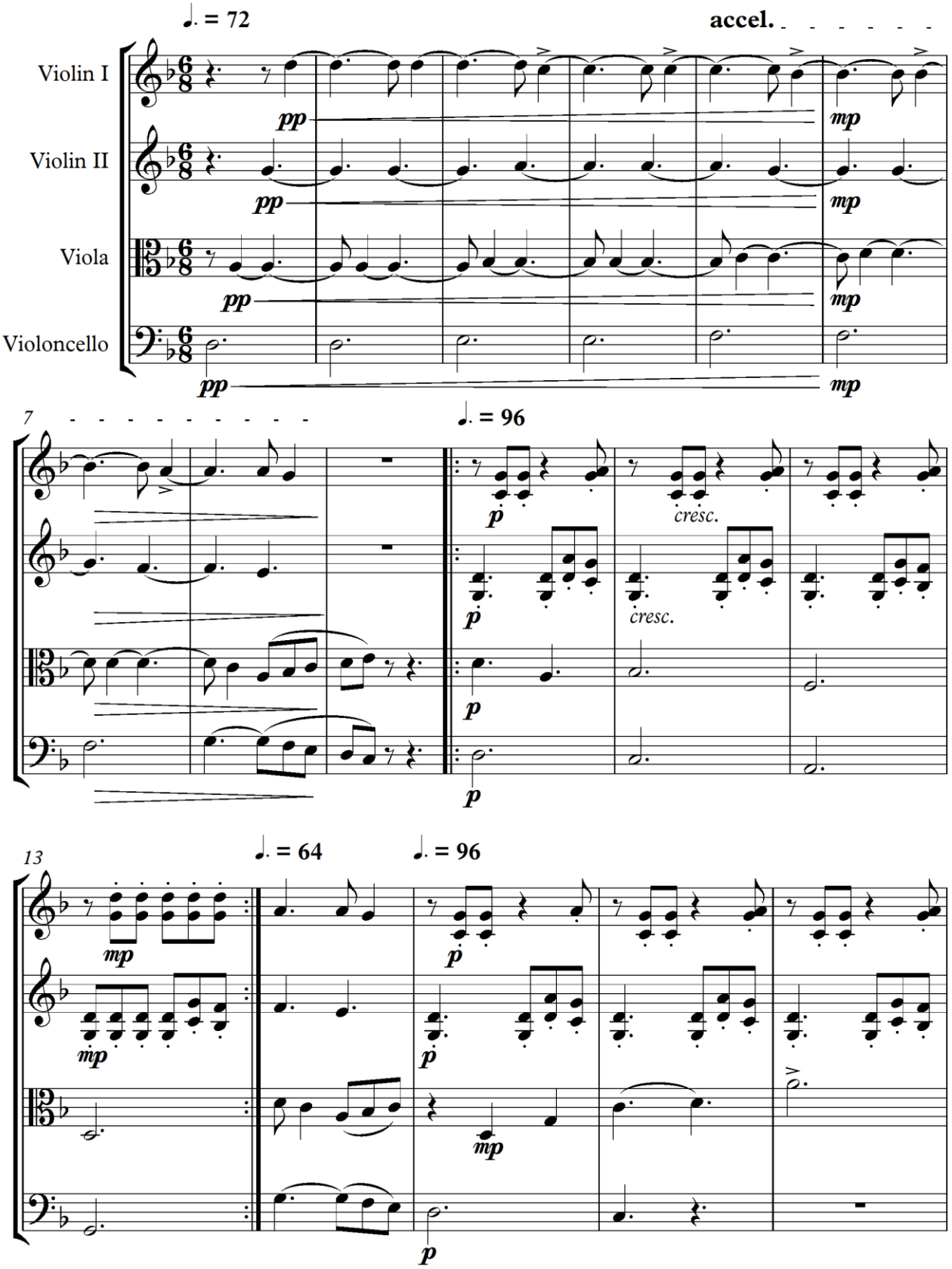
The day was Tuesday, the time was 5 pm as I alighted from the bus, fatigued from my very long ride. As soon as I alighted, I needed no one to inform me that 5pm here is a time when markets are closing for the day, school buses are seen in their numbers ferrying learners to their various residences, with some learners who cannot afford the bus making their way home on foot. By the side of the road are petty traders displaying their wares as other merchants were closing their shops for the day. From my position, I could see passengers struggling to get into taxes and buses as if these commercial transporters were on a free promo ride to the passengers' destinations. Behind me, a record shop was playing a new hip-hop release at a full blare as I was flanked by two ice cream vehicles playing their tunes to attract consumers. Right in front of me stood a gigantic building staring directly into my face and pouring out sounds on me; there were churches in there – nine of them I could count from the number of banners hanging around the building: It was time for Tuesday prayer and the nine churches were all in full participation. I stood still, trying to reconcile where I was coming from and where I was standing. I tried with little success to convince myself that I was still on earth; alive and not dead yet. The more I tried the deeper I sunk into the chaos. Will I ever survive here? How? When? It was my first day in the biggest commercial city of eastern Nigeria where I now call home. Here I am now, fifteen years later, in the same place that was a nightmare on my first day. Here now, I sleep, I wake, I go to work, I have found a living.

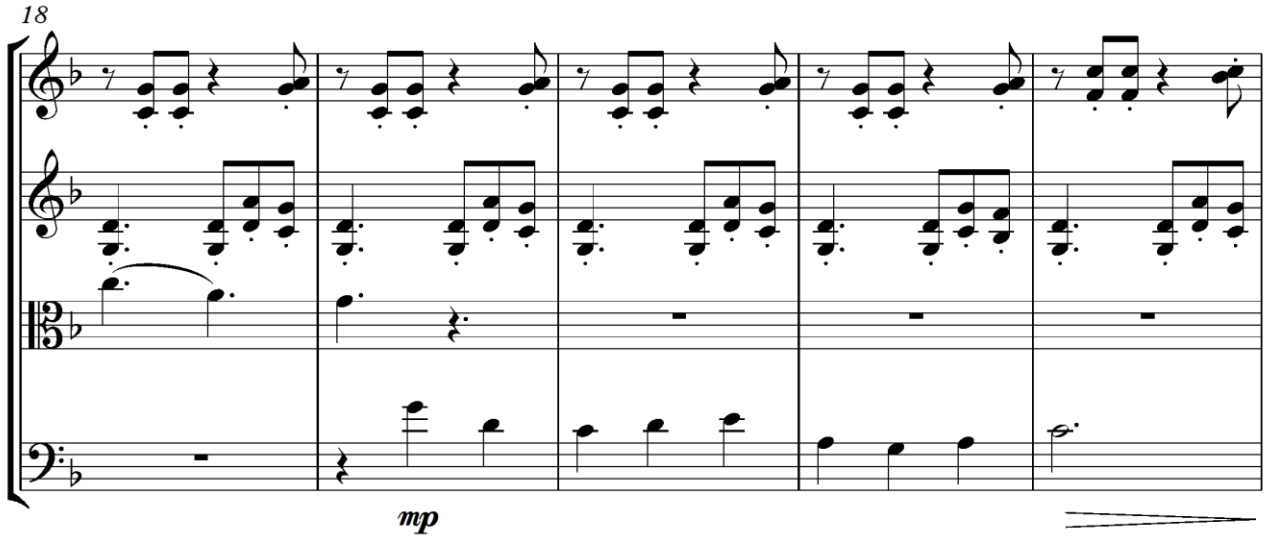
Compositional approach

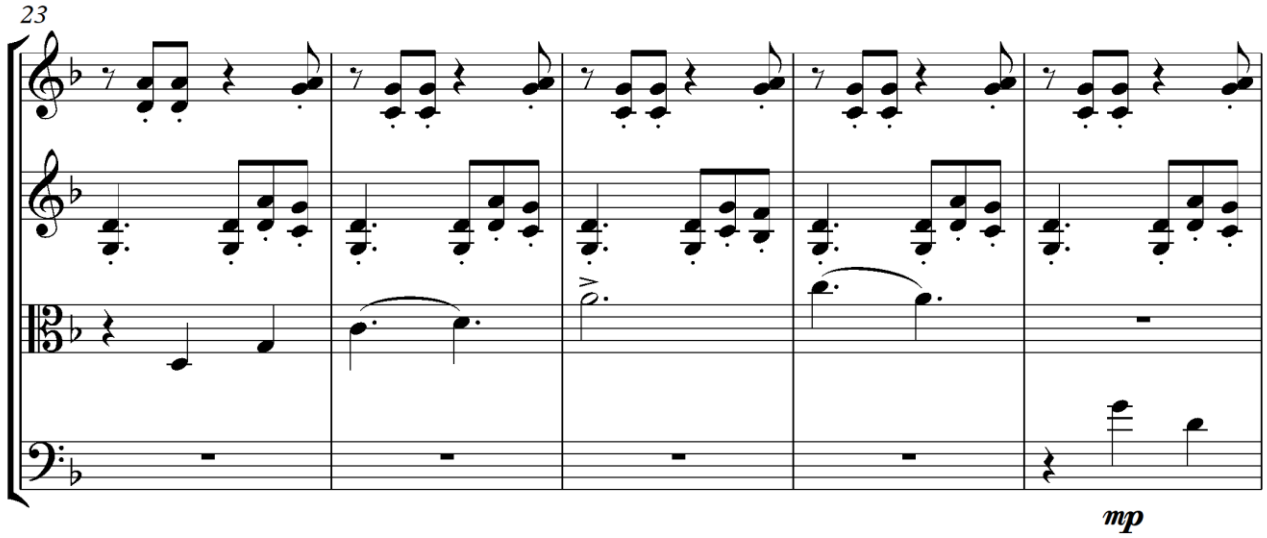
The work is composed for a string orchestra and makes extensive use of interlocking. The idea projected in the first movement is that of a conversation between the different parts of the orchestra but within the framework of the interlocking rhythms established in the beginning of the movement. In the (slow) second movement, the ongoing conversion breaks into a clear dialogue between the viola and the cello, with the interlocking passage as response to the dialogue. In the third movement, the interlocking response becomes very present and more rhythmically exciting and the dialogue ceases to exist as the piece progresses to a climax. The basic idea of this piece is to represent the experience of a person who has just arrived from the village to settle in an urban centre. While such a person comes in contact with a new living style distinct from the village, s/he is in continuous internal conversation regarding how to fit into the new environment. This conversation continues for a long time until the person is able to blend with the environment and other urban residents.
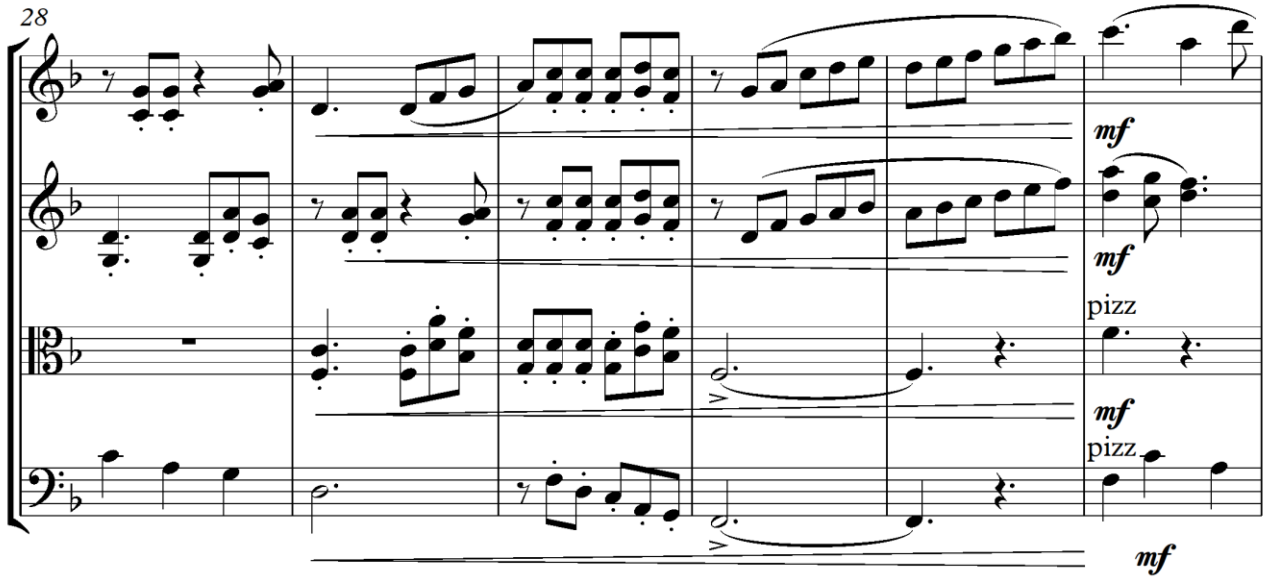
One Day in a Town
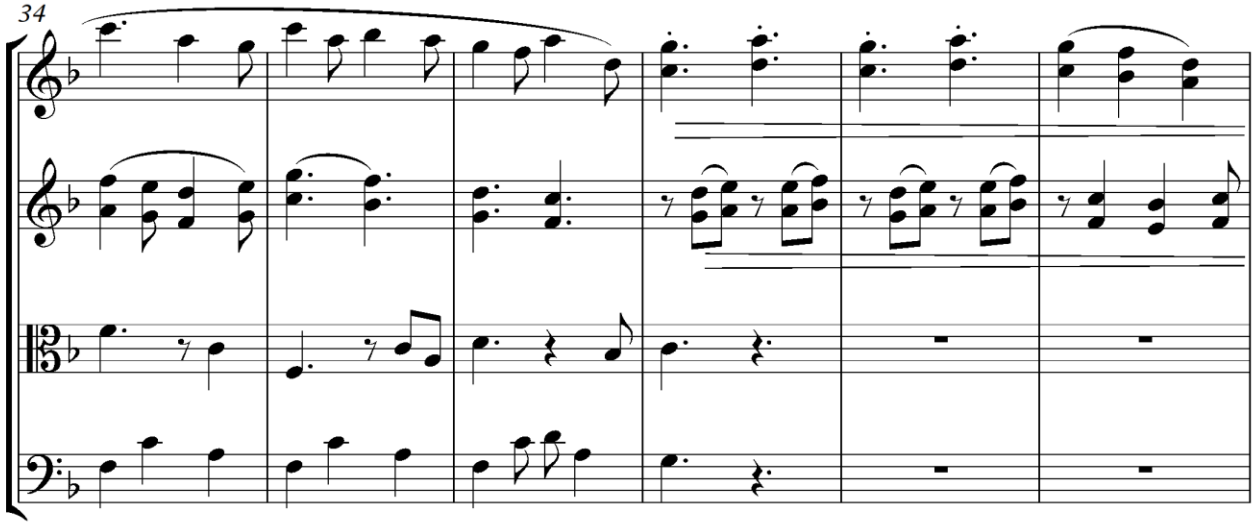
Chidi Obijiaku
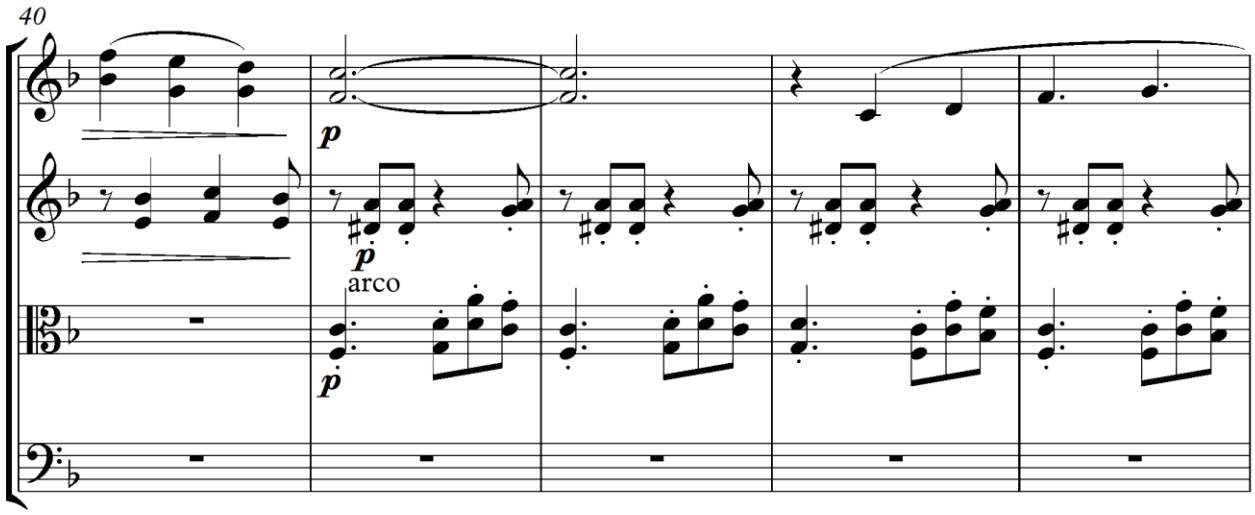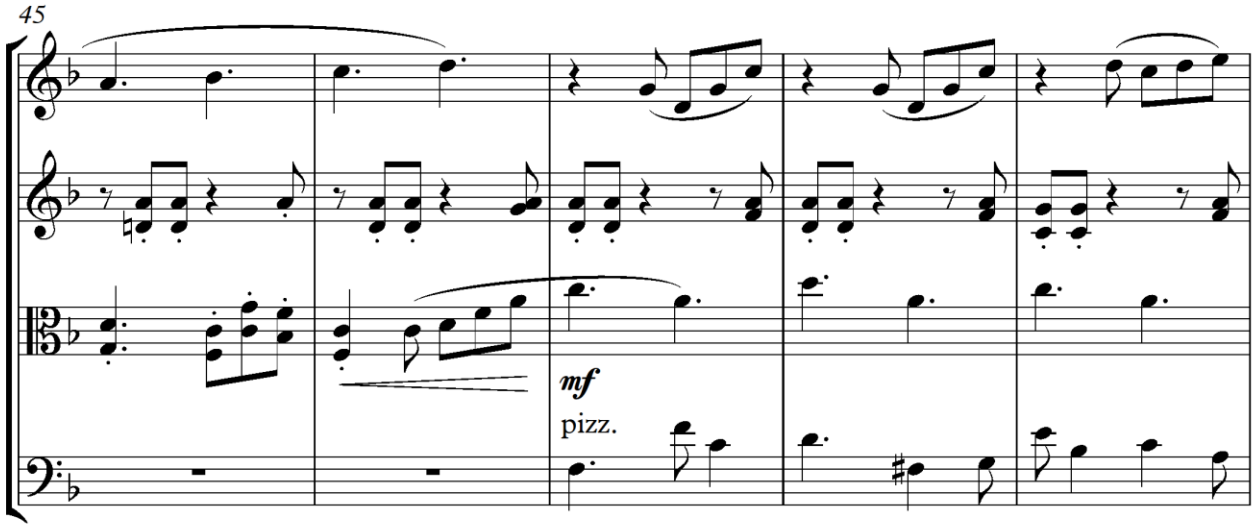



18
mp
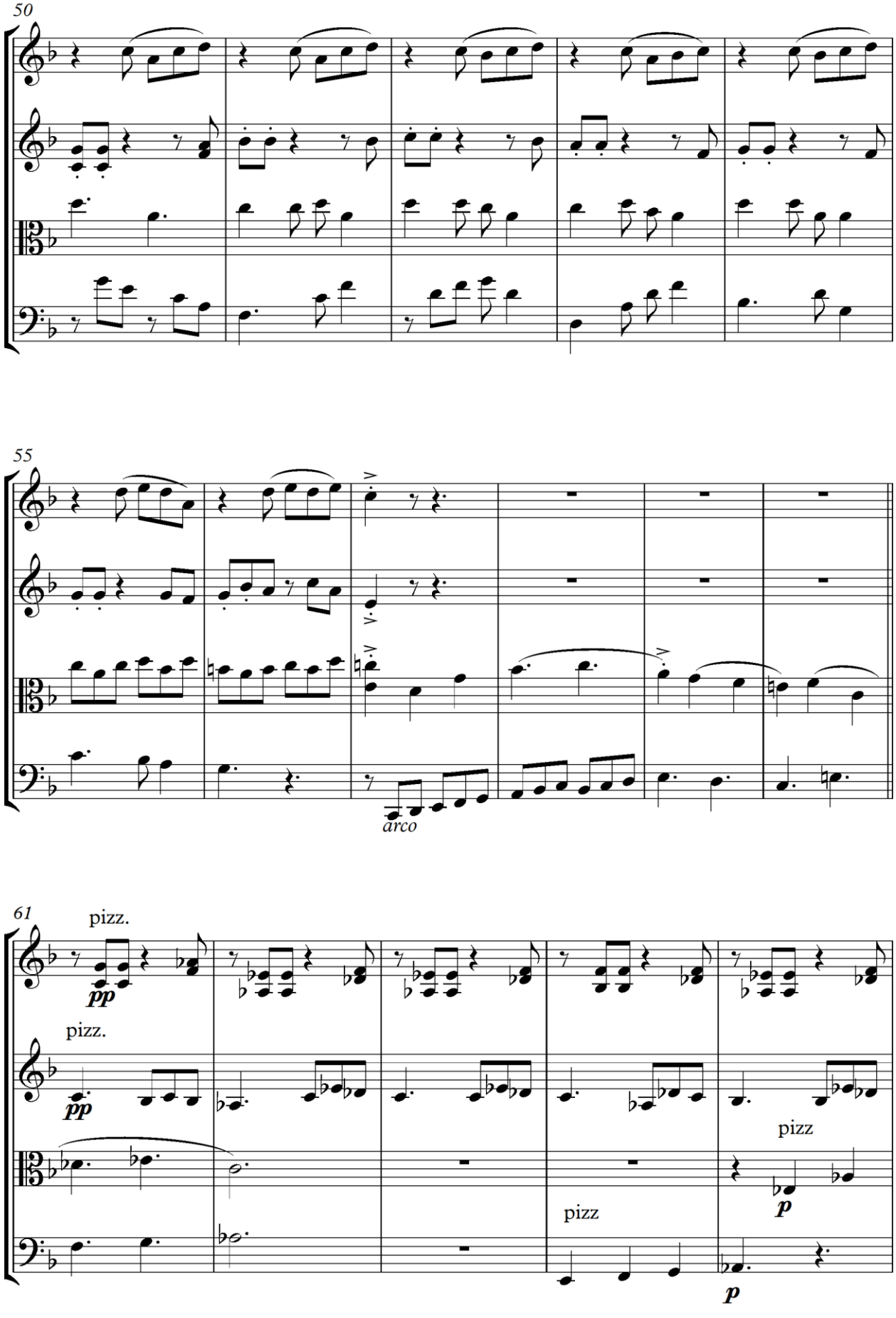

23
mp
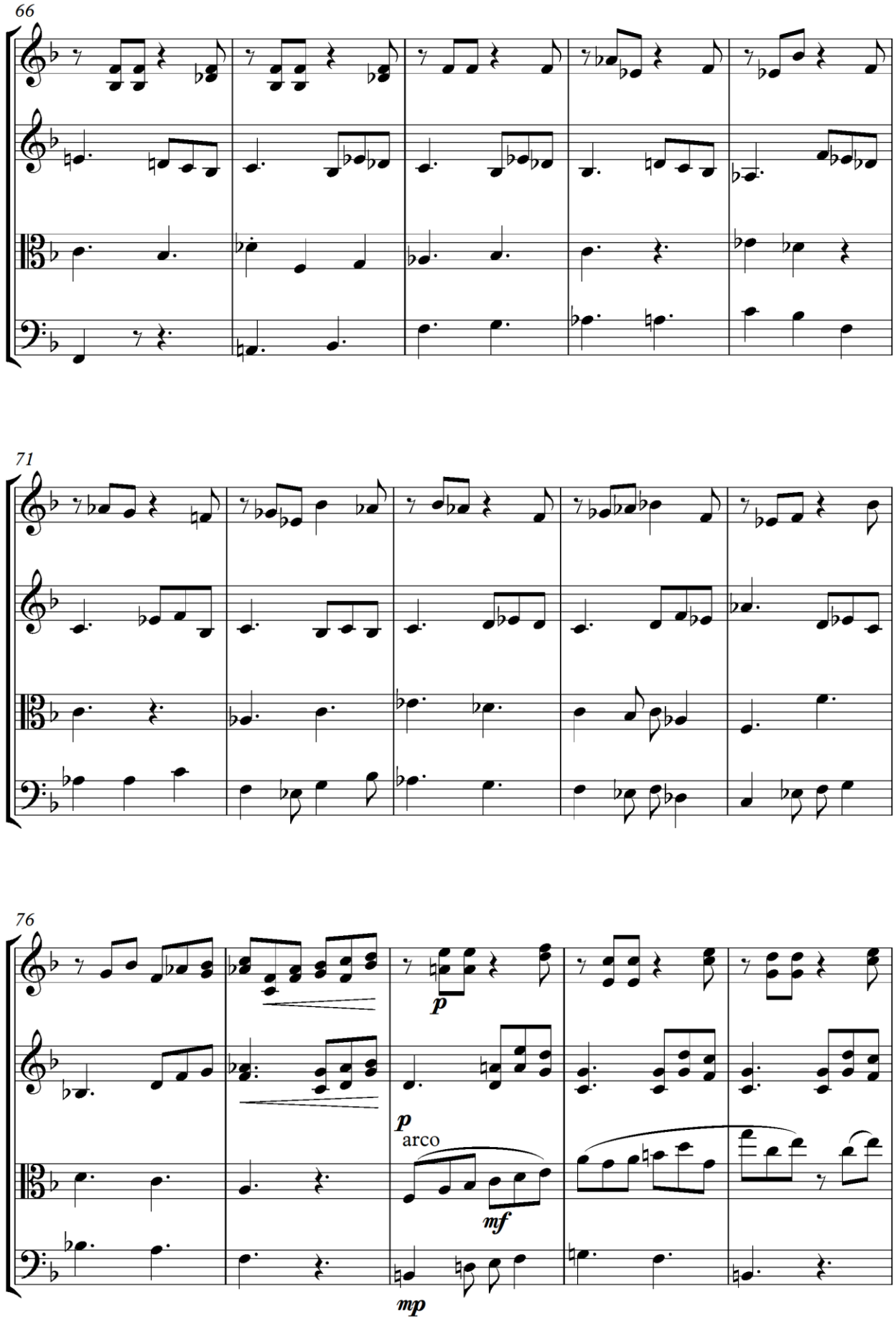

28
mf
mf
pizz
mf
pizz
mf
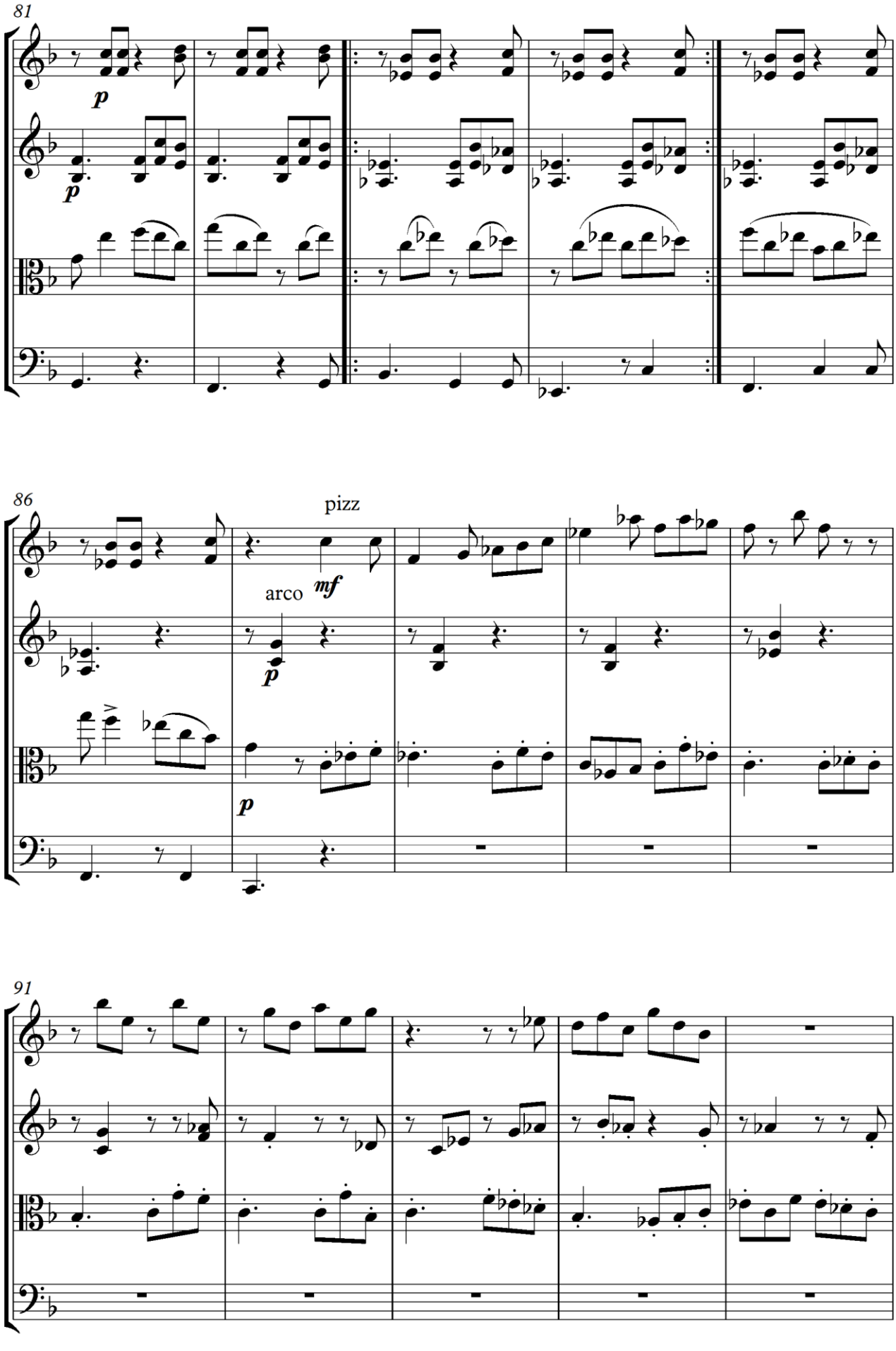

34
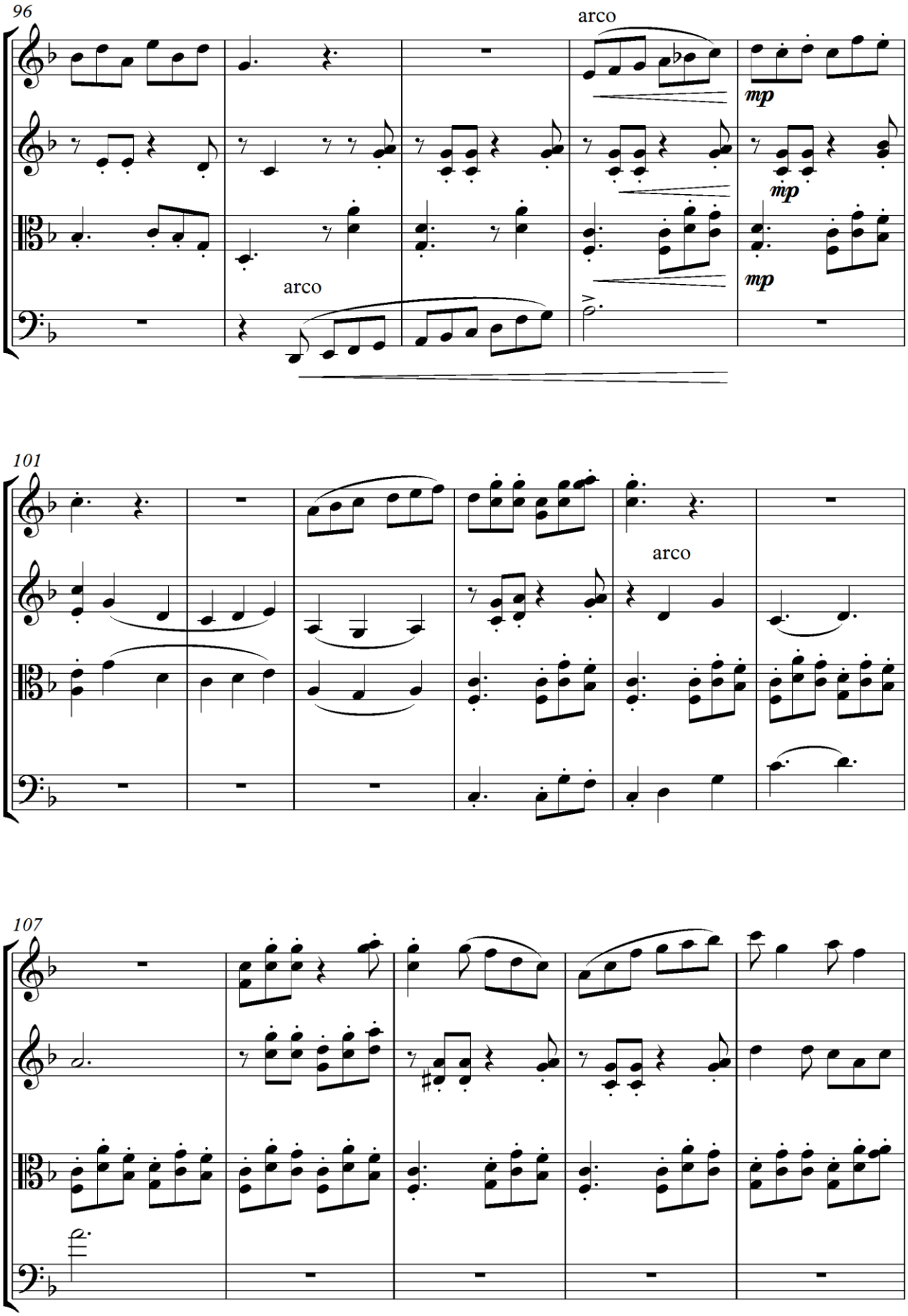

40
p
p
arco
p
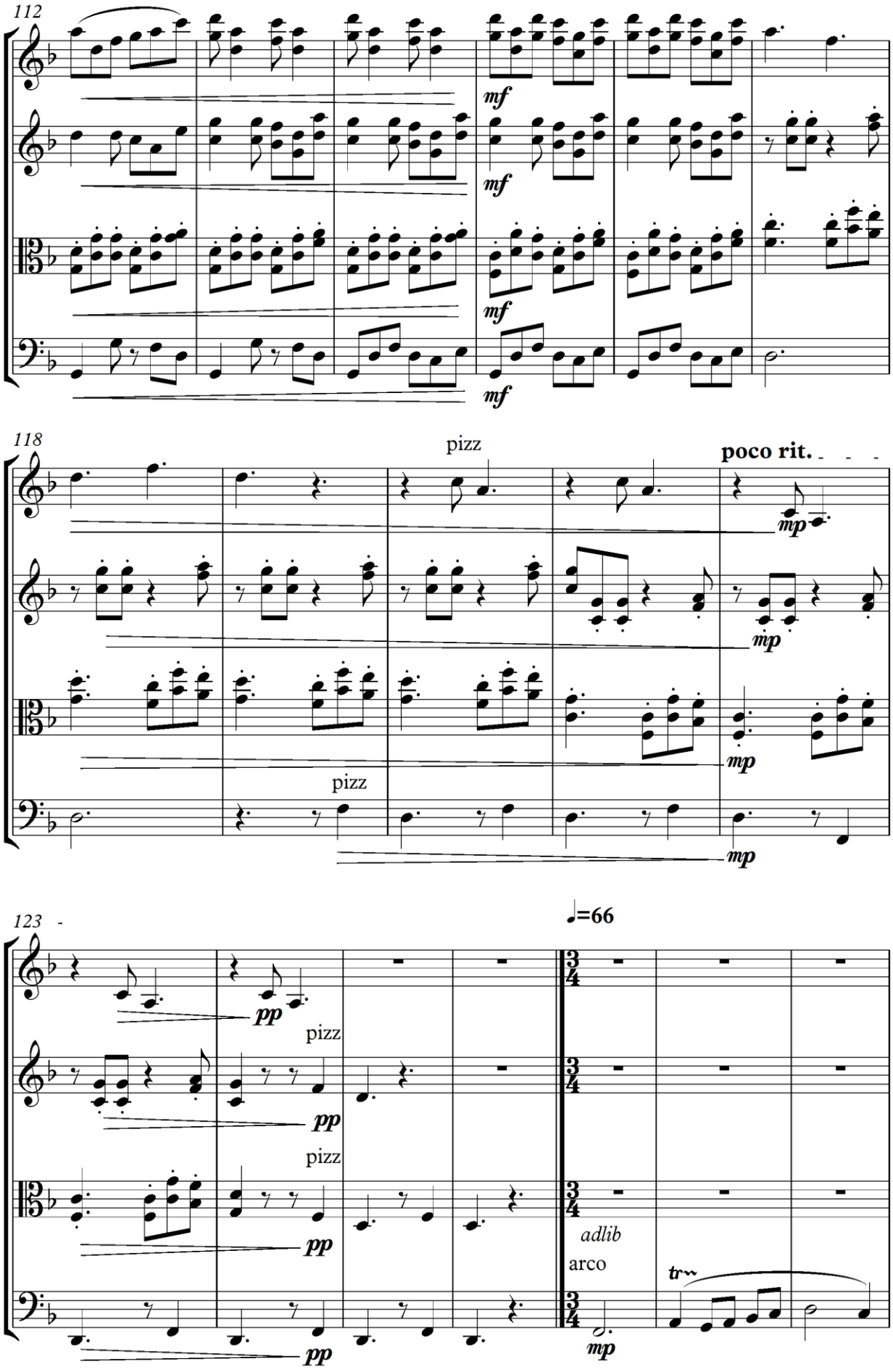

45
mf
pizz.

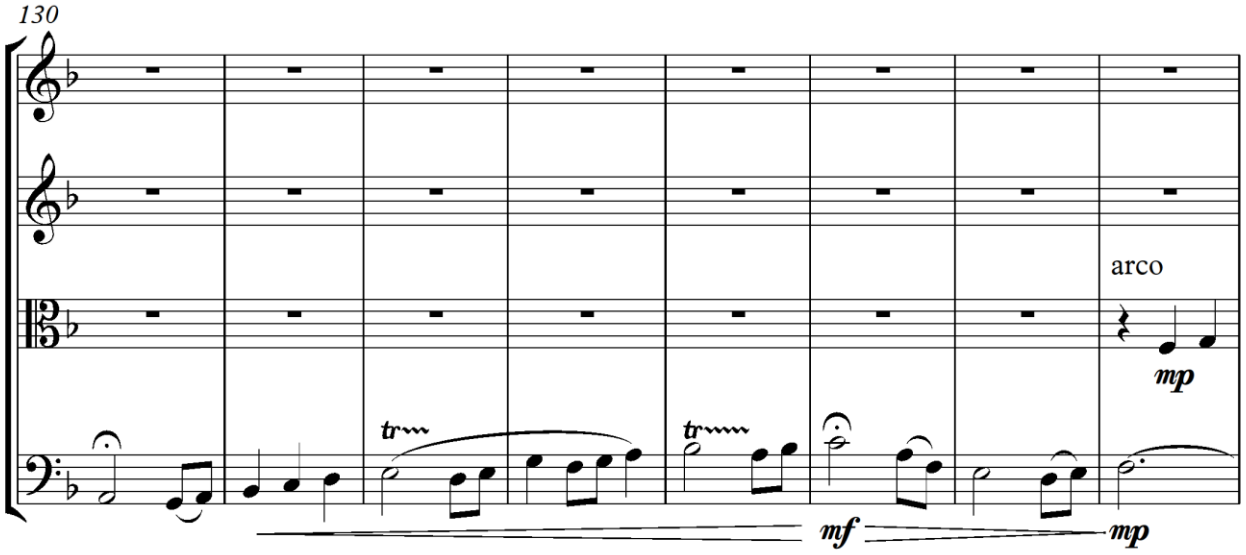

50
55
arco
61
pizz.
pp
pizz.
pp
pizz
p
pizz
p
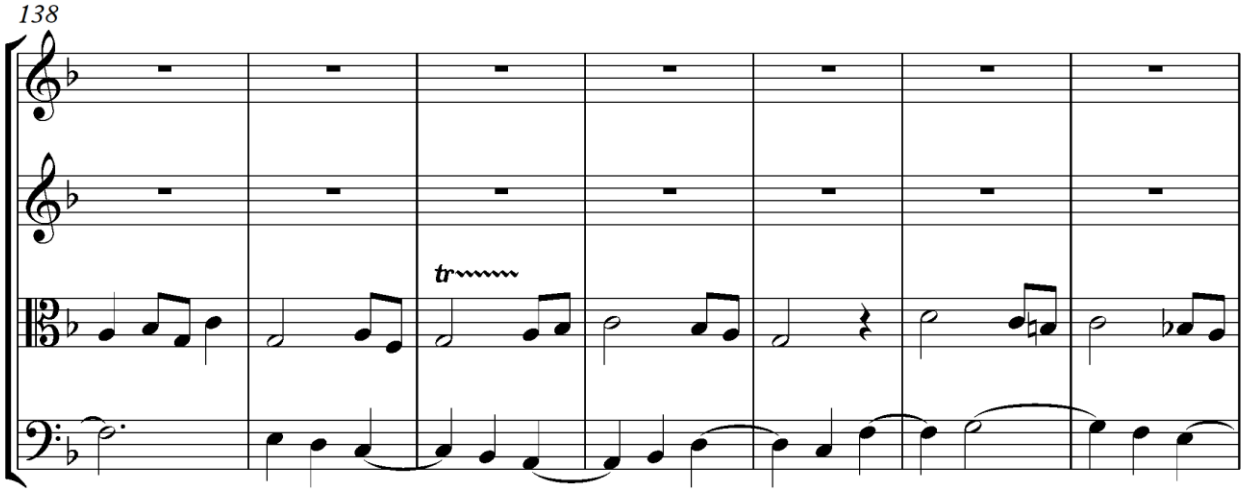

66
71
76
p
arco
mf
mp
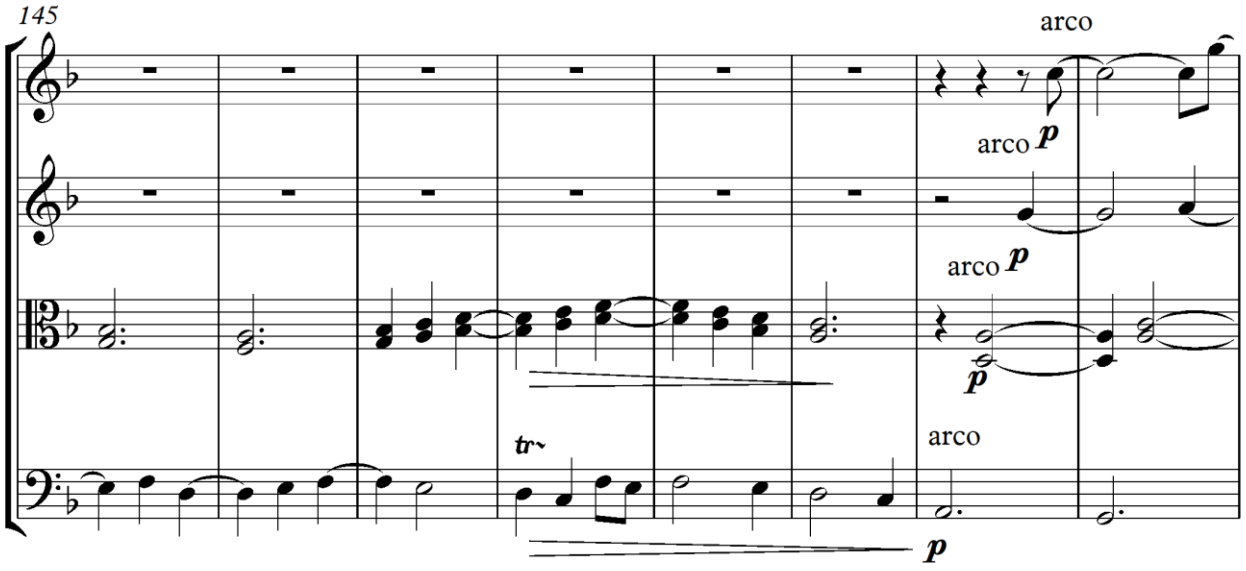

81
p
p
86
pizz
arco
mf
p
p
91
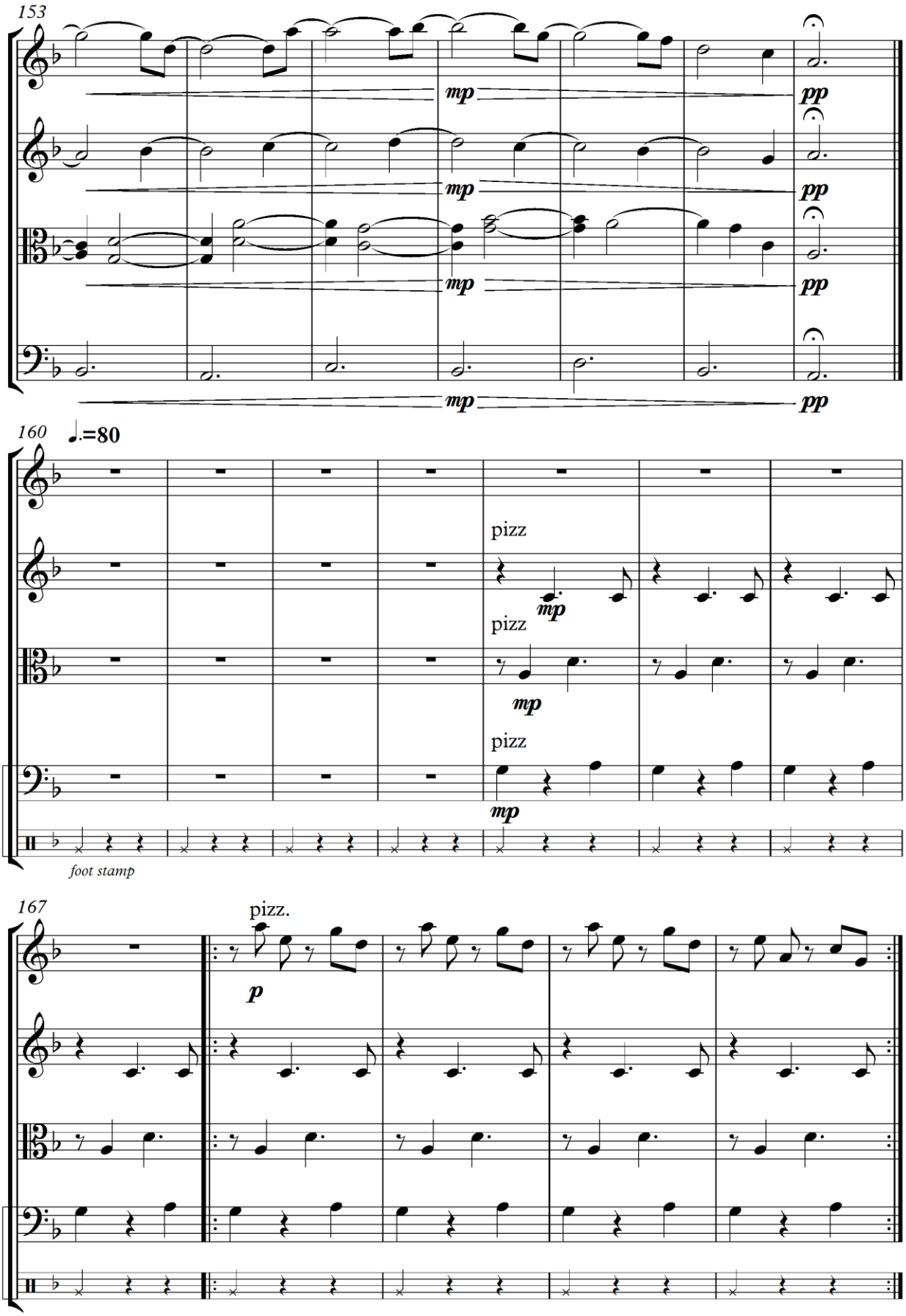

96
arco
mp
mp
arco
mp
101
arco
107
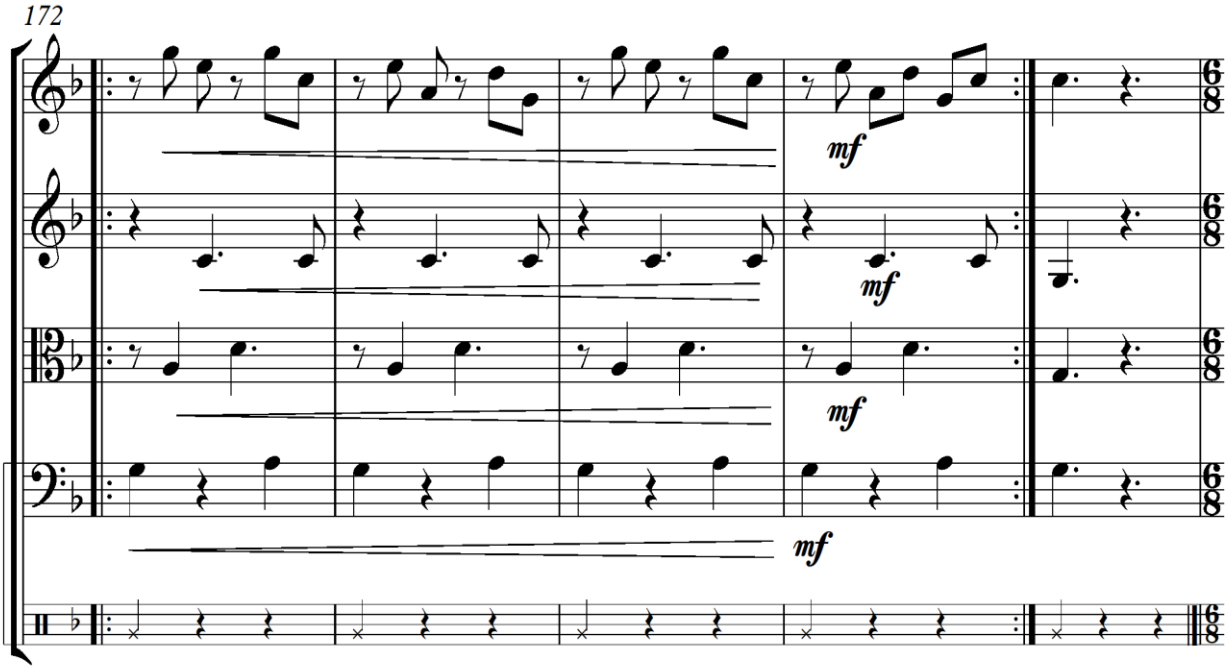

112
mf
mf
mf
mf
118
pizz
poco rit.
mp
mp
pizz
mp
123
pp
pizz
pp
pizz
pp
pp
♩=66
adlib
arco
tr
mp
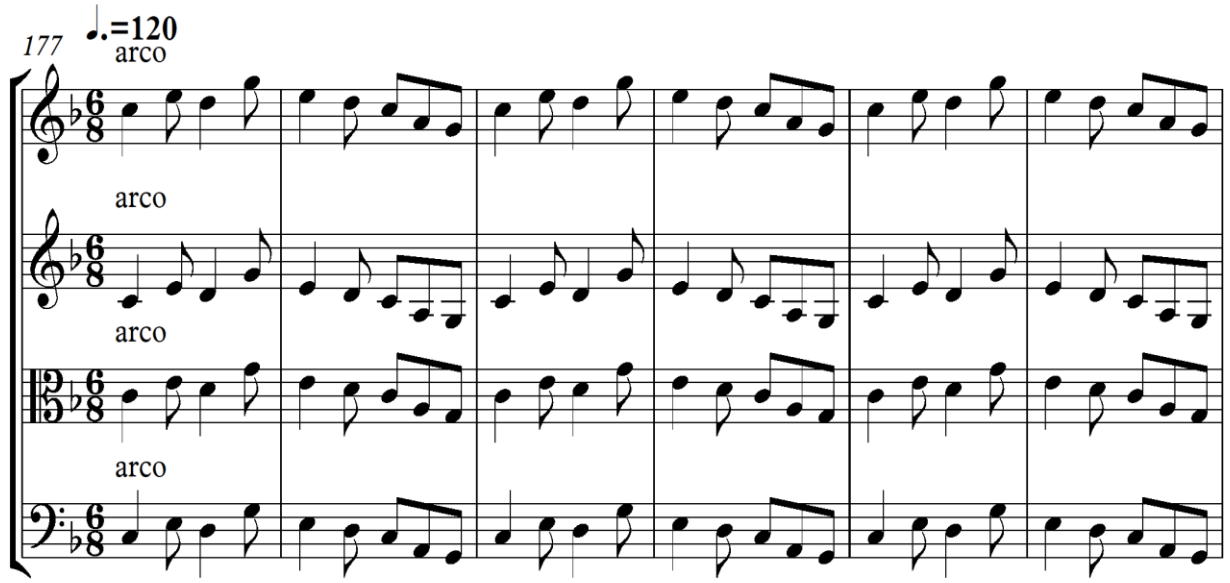

130
arco
mp
tr
tr
mf
mp

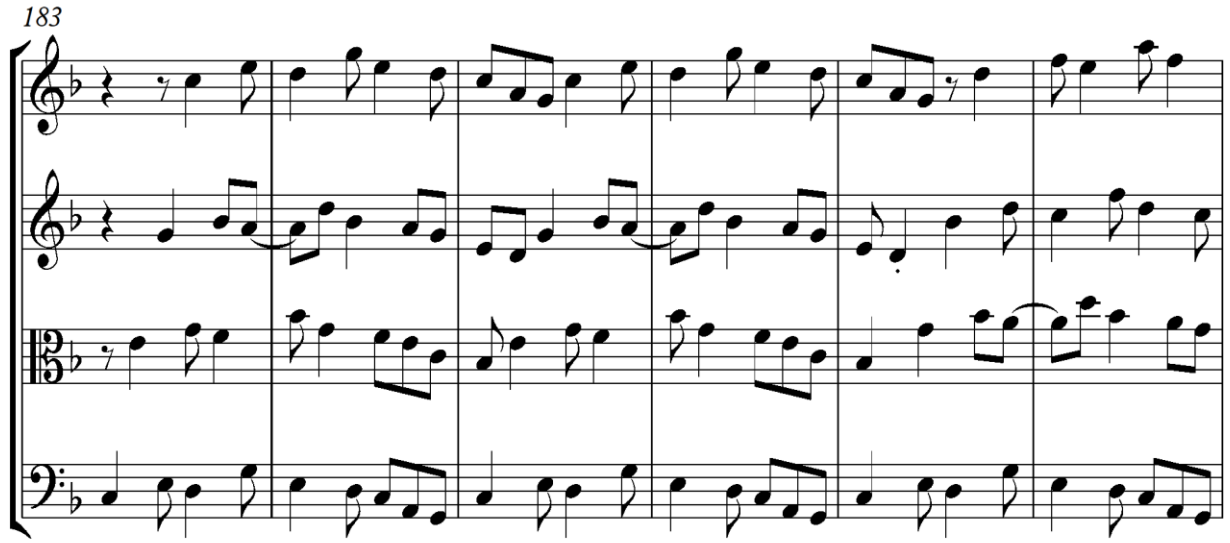

138
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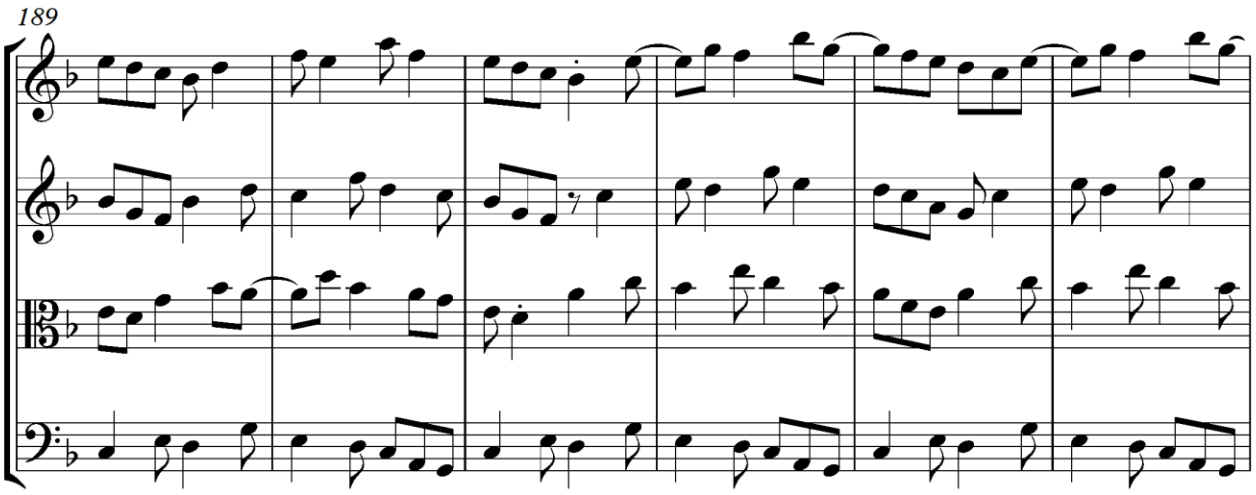

145
arco
arco p
arco p
p
arco
tr
p
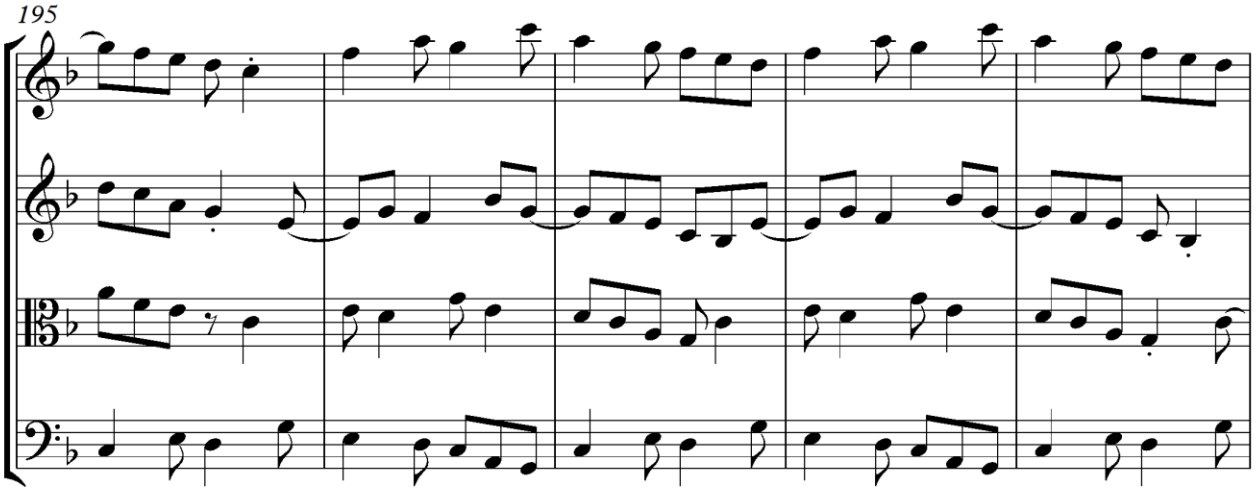

153
mp
pp
160
♩.=80
pizz
mp
pizz
mp
pizz
mp
foot stamp
167
pizz.
p
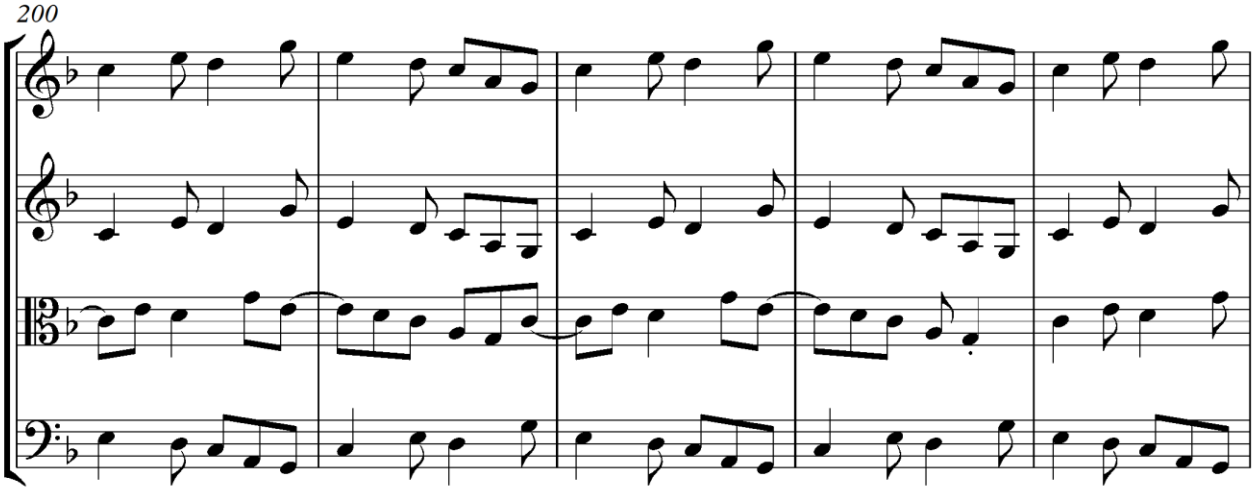

172
mf
mf
mf
mf
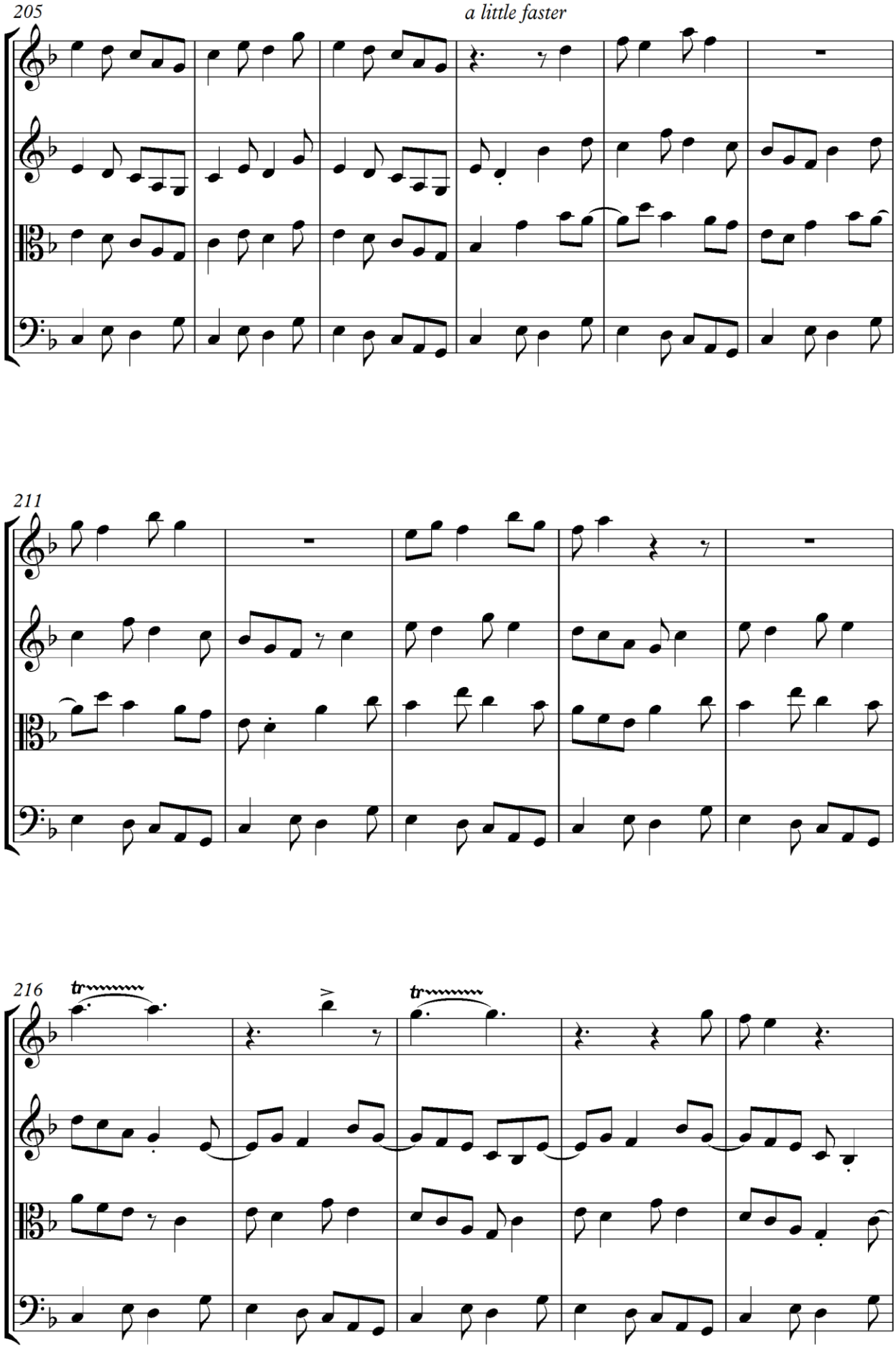

177
♩.=120
arco
arco
arco
arco
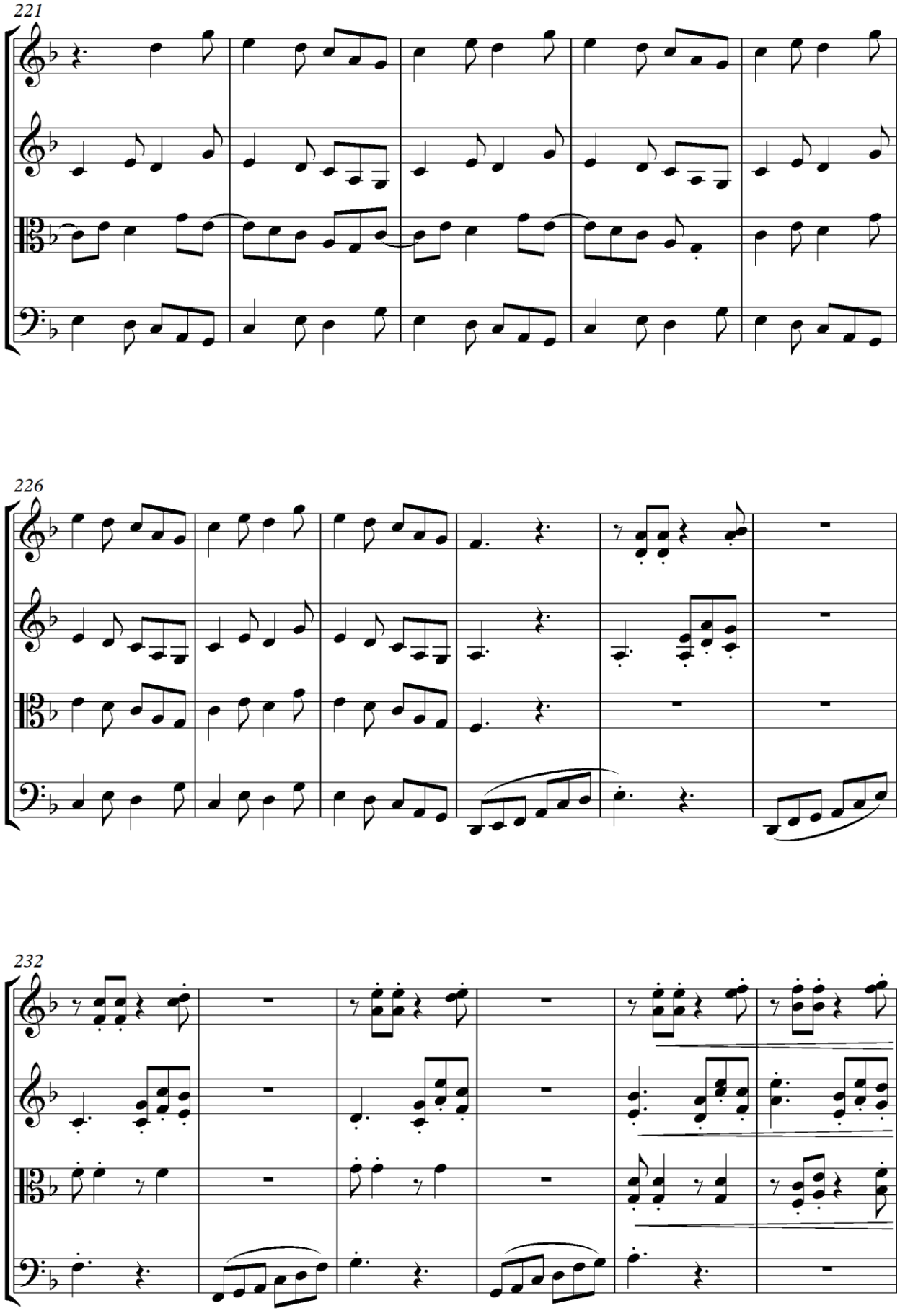

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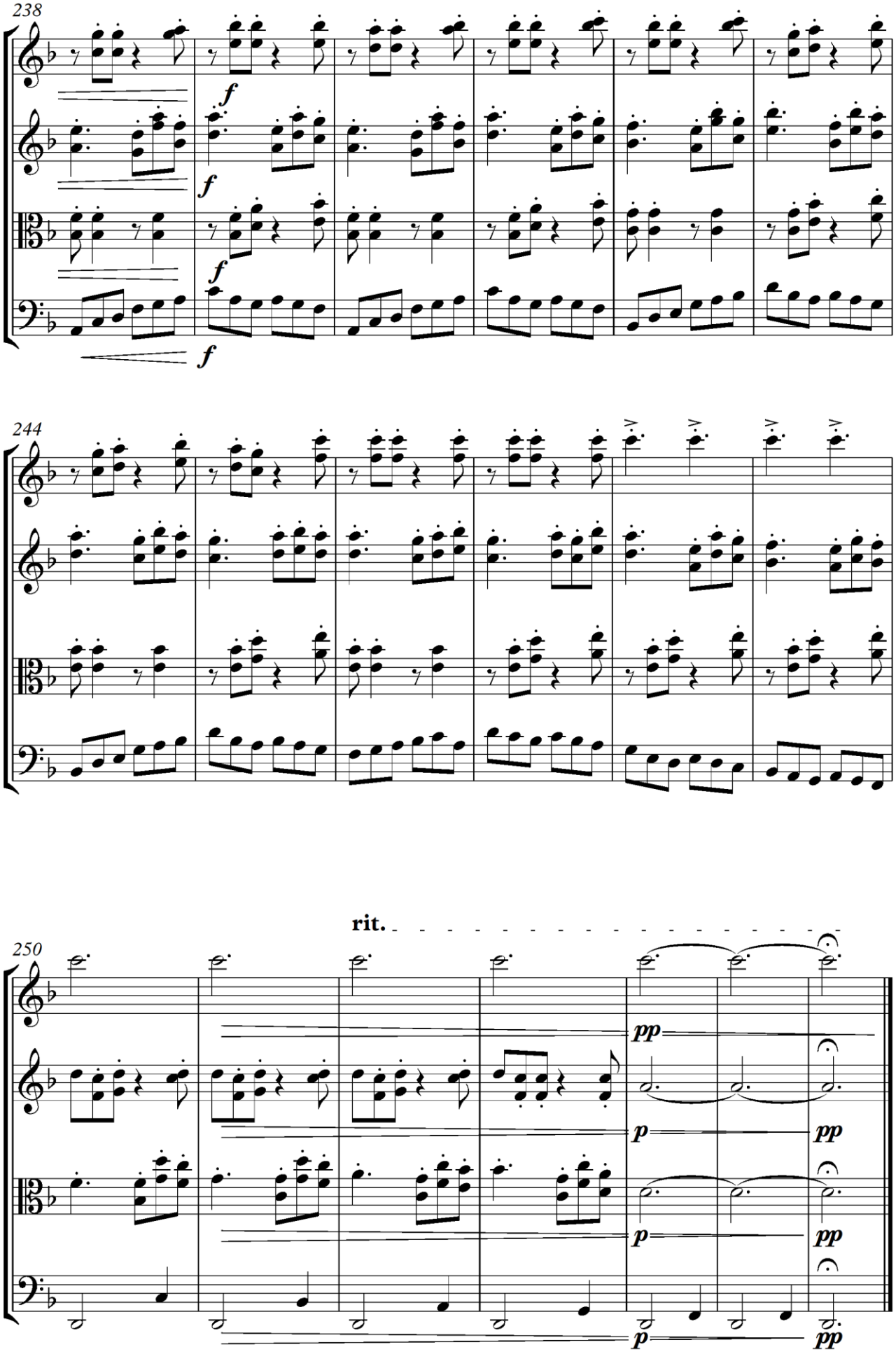

189


195


200


205
a little faster
211
216
tr
tr


221
226
232


238
f
f
f
f
244
rit.
250
pp
p
pp
p
pp
p
pp

Vibes of the mother land

This piece is a representation of the cultural multiplicity that characterise the twenty-first century urban spaces in Africa. The urban cultural phenomenon present in cities in the African continent is a blend of different cultures from across the continent and beyond into a new cultural unit. Although the individuals still carry their distinct cultural peculiarities that distinguish them from one another, the urban culture serves as a unifying living standard for these individuals that have converged into the cities for different reasons.

Compositional approach

This work is a collage of different choral works from across the African continent, which were transformed into a new composition through spectral filtering and flexing in different softwares (especially Logic and Iris). The use of the drums in this work serves as a unifying structure for the continuously changing atmosphere in the composition. The basic idea of this work is to represent the transformation process of the converging cultures in an urban space as they negotiate a blend into a new hybrid culture. The idea is also to emphasize that while the urban residents have come from different social, cultural and economic backgrounds, the urban culture serves as a unifying factor and facilitates the peaceful coexistence of the urban residents.