Birthday Quartet

for Violin, Viola,
Violoncello, and Piano

Bill Robinson

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Composed May 9—October 20, 2013; Aug.29—October 9, 2015
Duration: about 30 minutes

In early 2010, I had a peculiar dream of a respectful conversation with Elvis Presley. He said I should write a symphony based on speeches by Martin Luther King Jr. Well—who can refuse the King of Rock and/or Roll? Especially since I share my birthday, January 15, with MLK, and classical radio stations frequently play a composer's music on his birthday.

The speeches of Martin Luther King are copyrighted, and the MLK Center is notoriously litigious. Thus this cannot be a choral work, nor can it have direct references to texts in the score. Instead I use the rhythms and inflections from speeches that are incorporated in themes. The first movement uses a few phrases from the "How long? Not long" speech of March 25, 1965 at the Alabama State Capitol. The second movement is based on the Buddhist mantra "Gate gate, paragate, parasamgate, bhodi swaha"; this can be roughly translated (as by Ram Dass) as "Beyond, beyond the beyond, beyond the beyond the beyond, hail the goer." The third movement returns to MLK and uses bits of the "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech given on April 3, 1968 in Memphis Tennessee. The first version of the fourth movement (started writing it Aug. 28, 2013) used the final section of the Dream Speech given at the March on Washington on August 28, 1968, with narrator. After hearing the chamber version, I thought this first version of the fourth movement was not suitable, and I withdrew it.

On August 29, 2015, I started writing a second version of the last movement. The beginning uses the rhythm of the words "And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood." The music then departs from the text, with the motives from "table of brotherhood" and "I have a dream" used repeatedly. Next comes "Let freedom ring" along with other phrases from the speech. The movement closes with "Free at last, free at last (repeated), thank God almighty we are free at last!"

After writing this version for clarinet quartet, I orchestrated the score, which was performed by the Raleigh Symphony Orchestra in 2016; the last movement was performed by the Durham Symphony. However, I was displeased with my orchestration, and in 2023 I withdrew the symphonic version.

The premiere performance of this piece was of the chamber edition for violin, clarinet, cello and piano on February 18, 2014, with the original fourth movement, without narrator. I made this additional chamber version for piano quartet at the same time.

Accidentals hold through the measure and not beyond, and do not refer to other octaves. Sometimes I include courtesy accidentals to avoid confusion.

Bill Robinson

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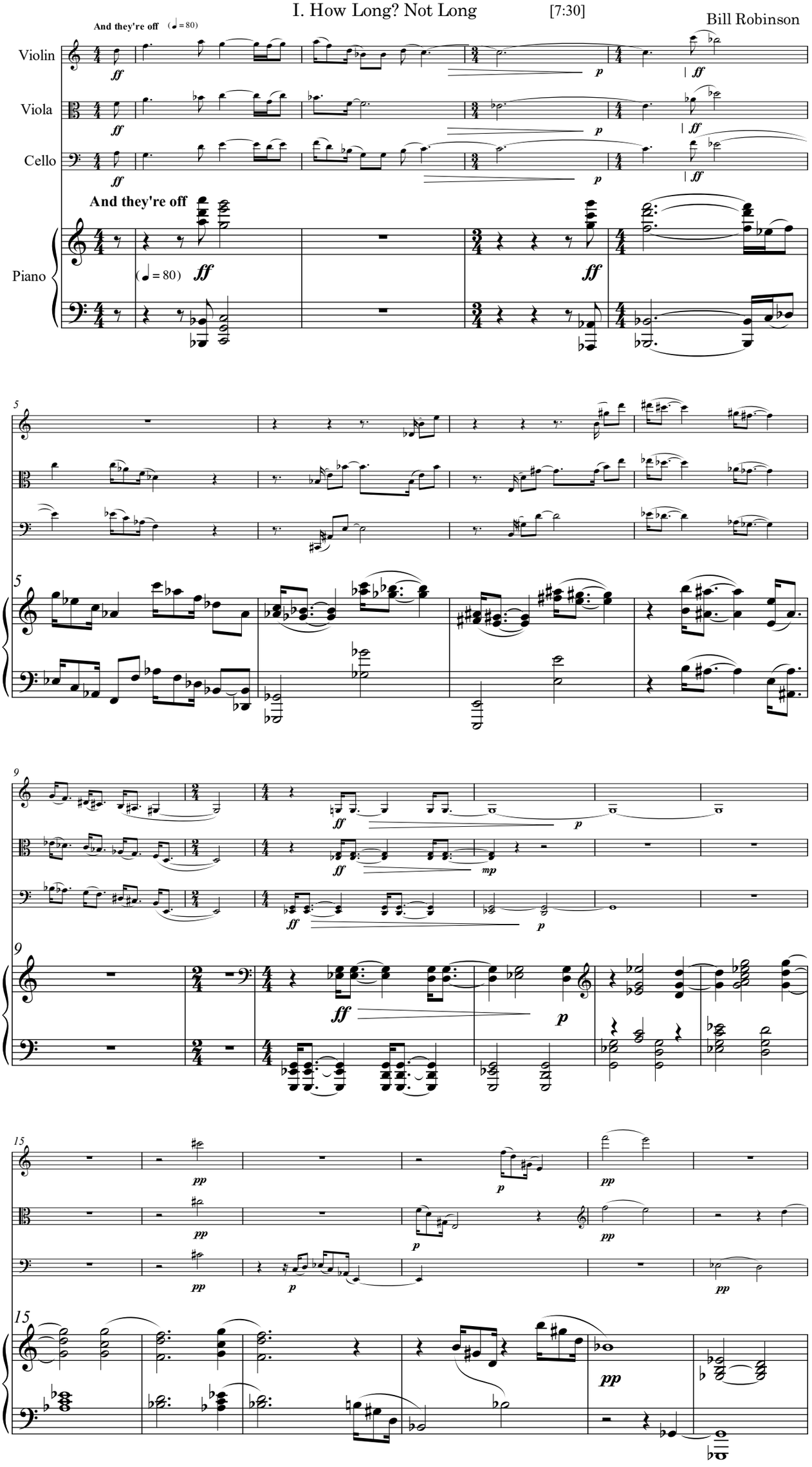
www.billrobinsonmusic.com

cover photograph; March on Washington, August 28, 1963

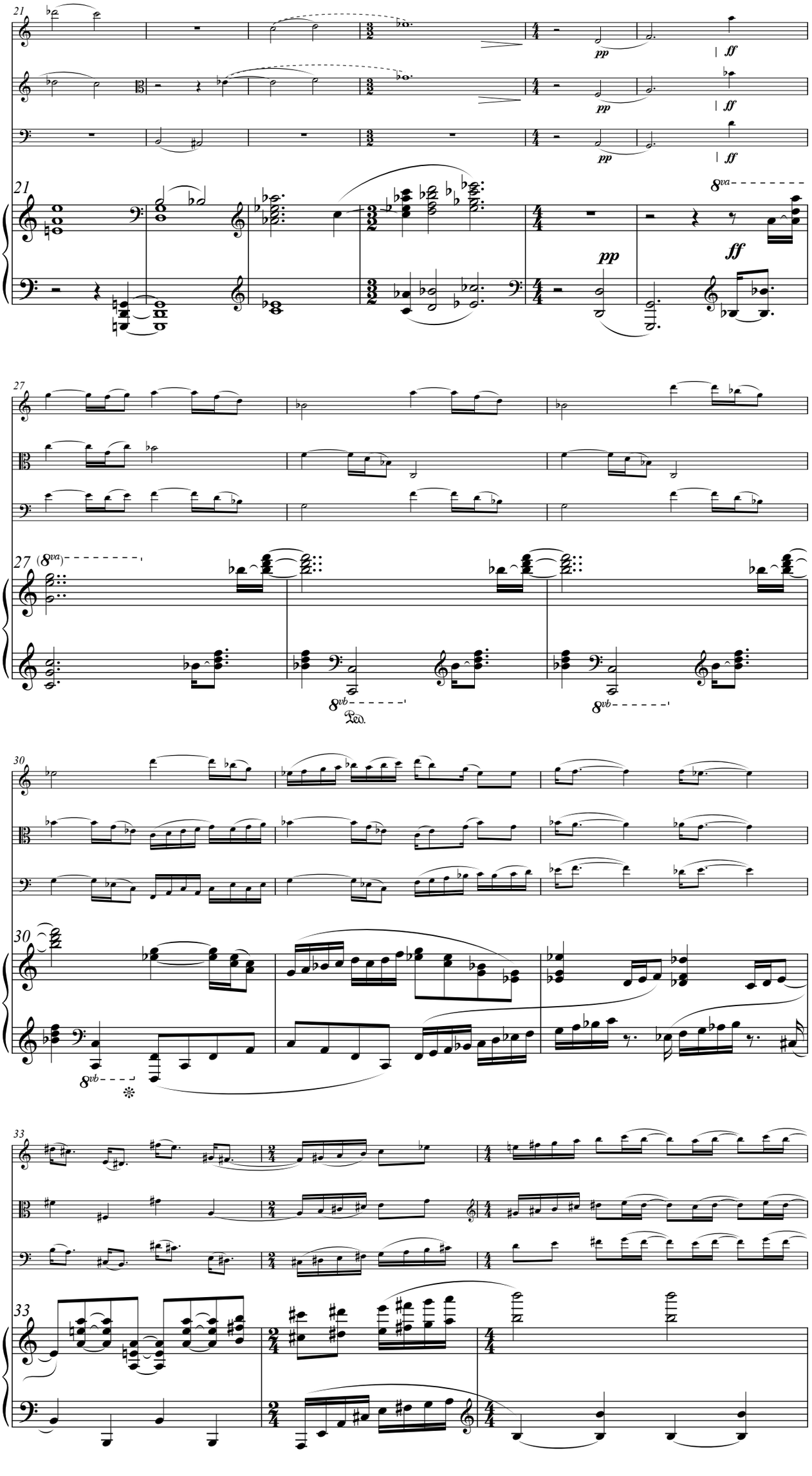
Birthday Quartet

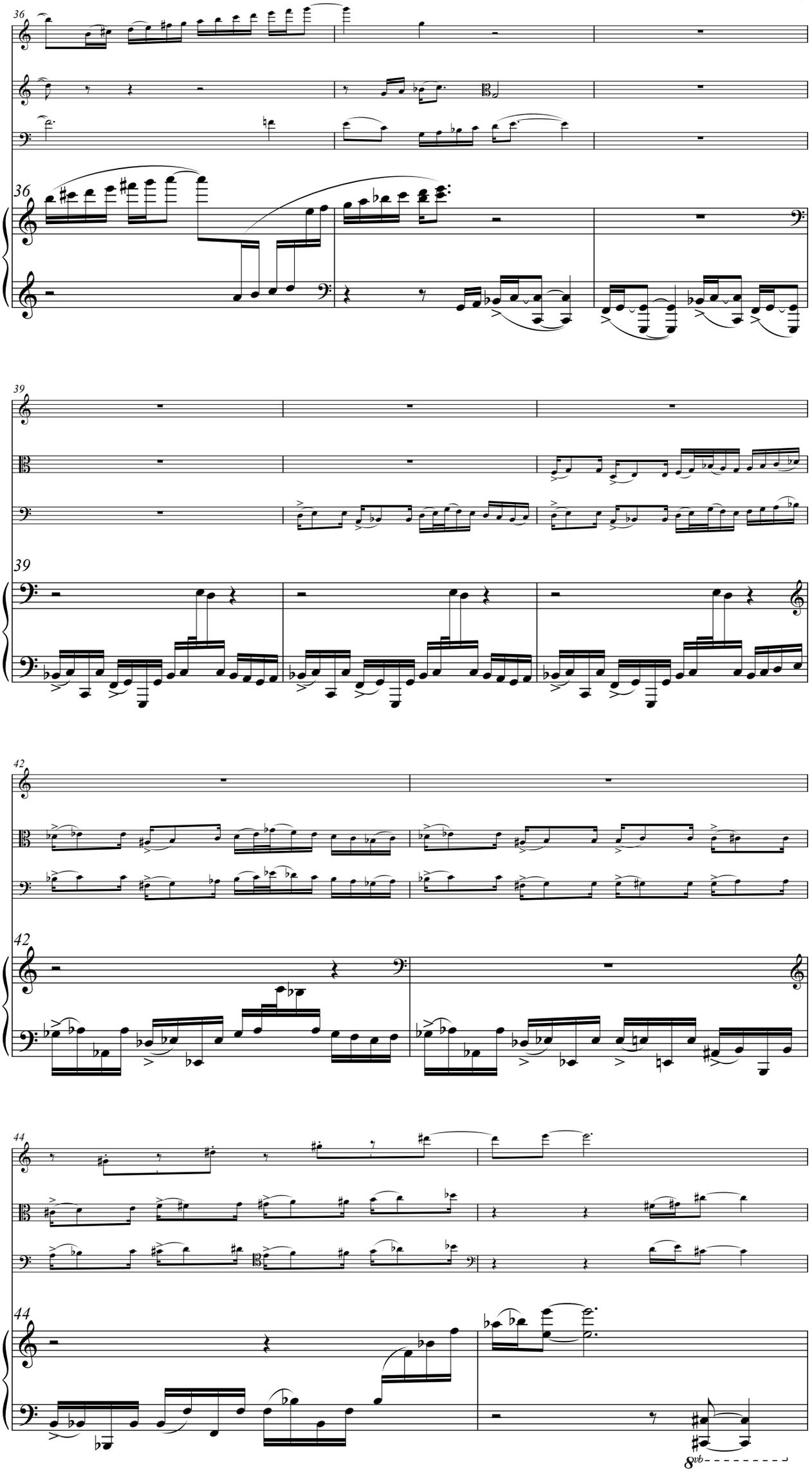
I. How Long? Not Long [7:30]

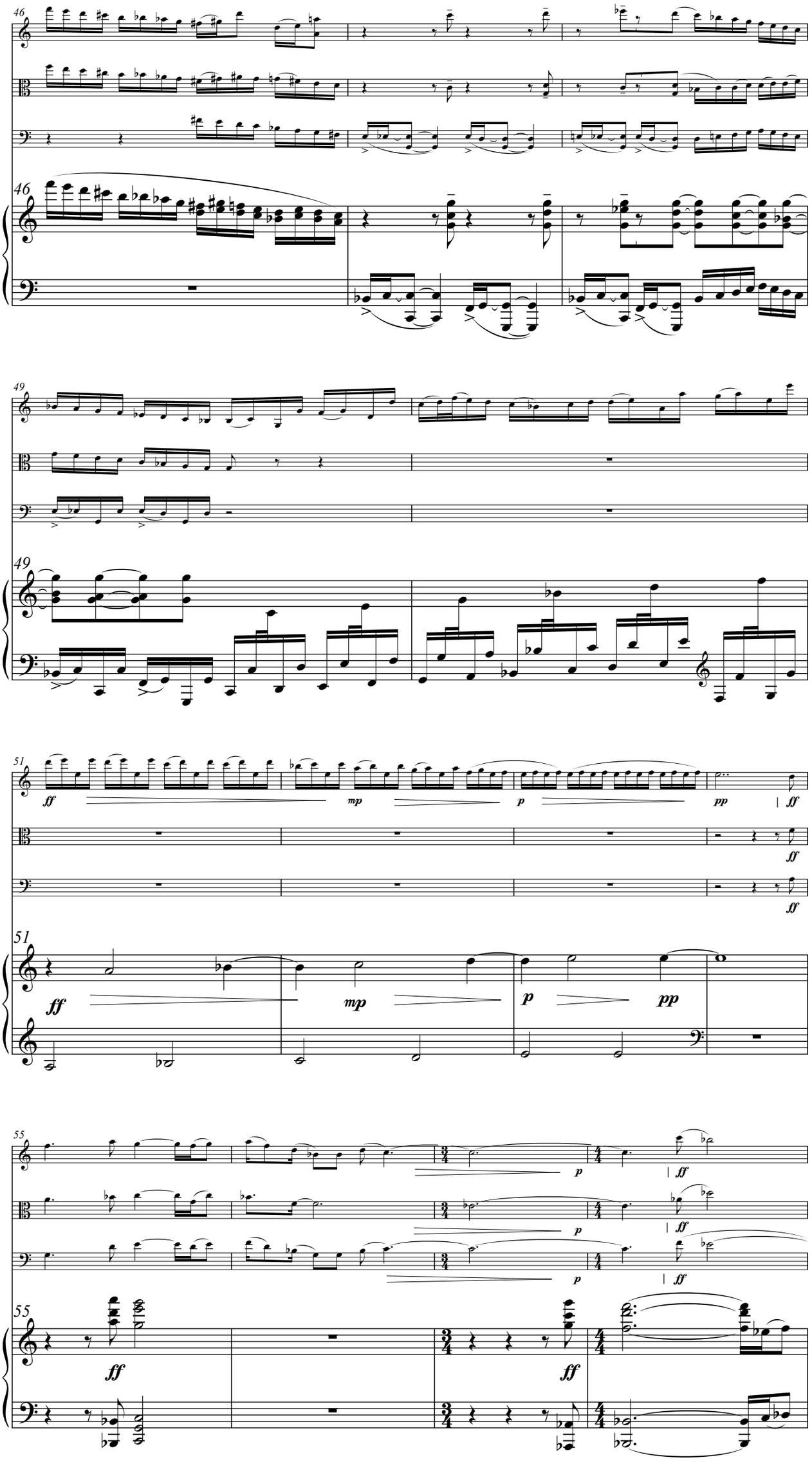
Bill Robinson

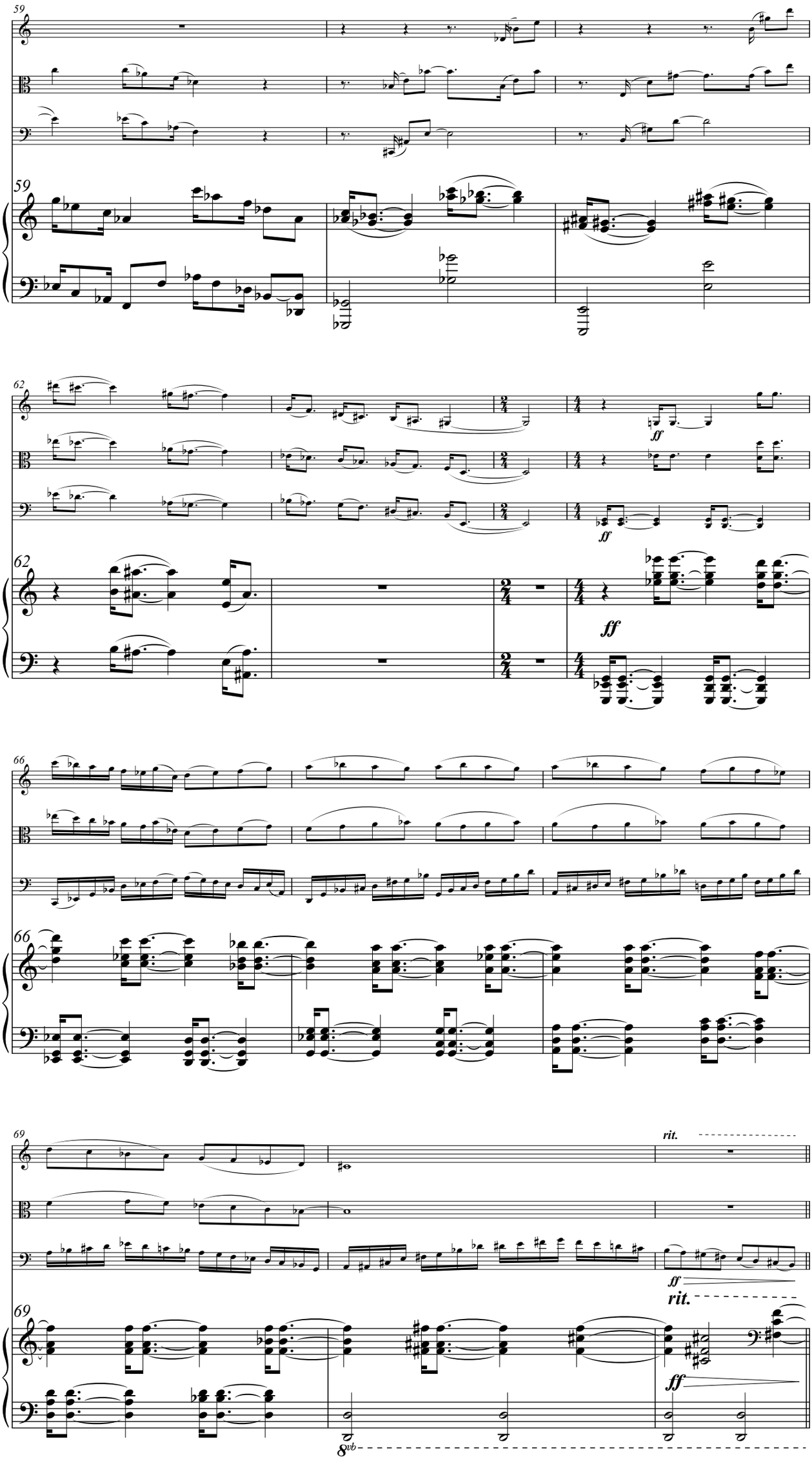


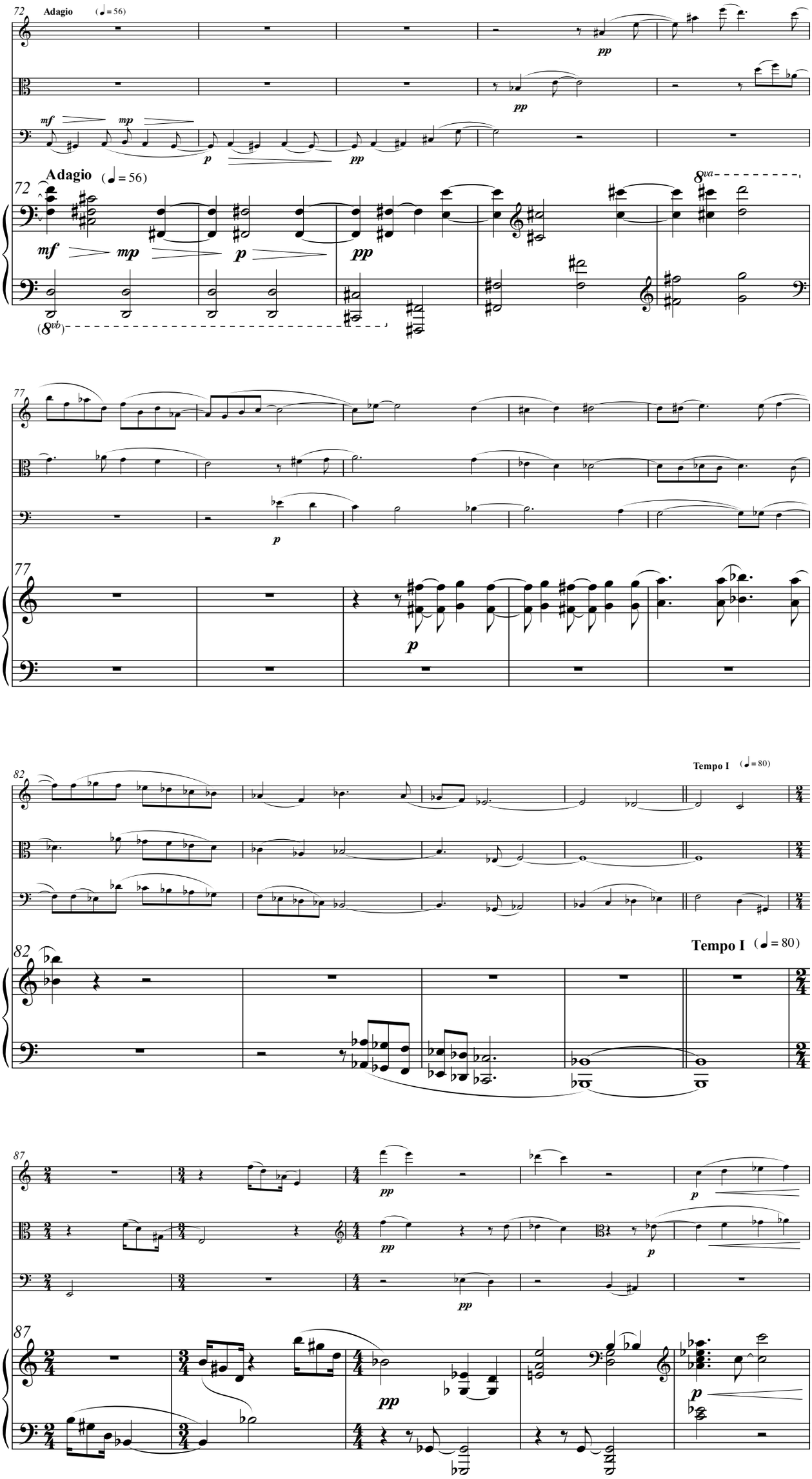
© 2013

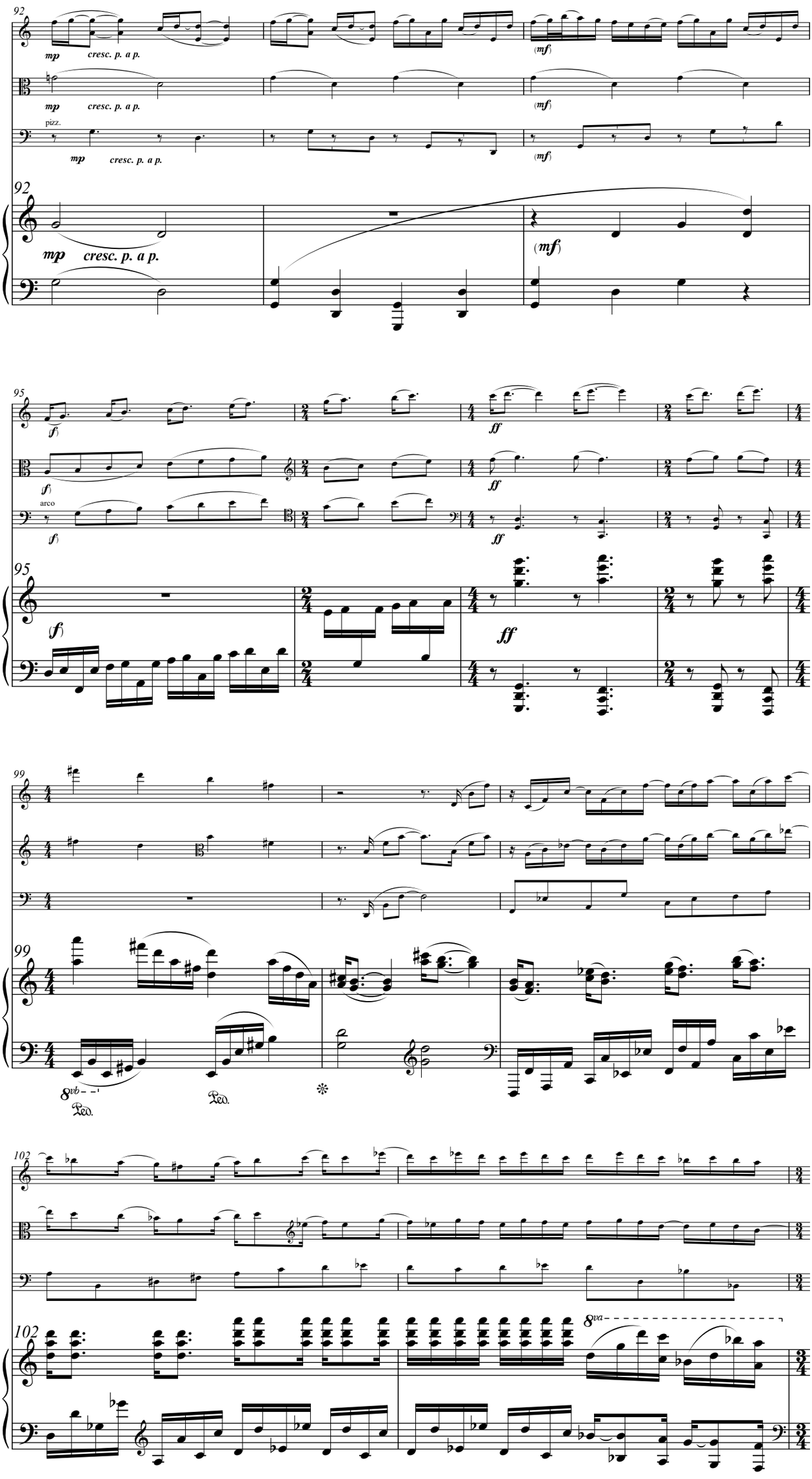

21
pp
ff
8va
27
(8va)
8vb
Ped.
30
33

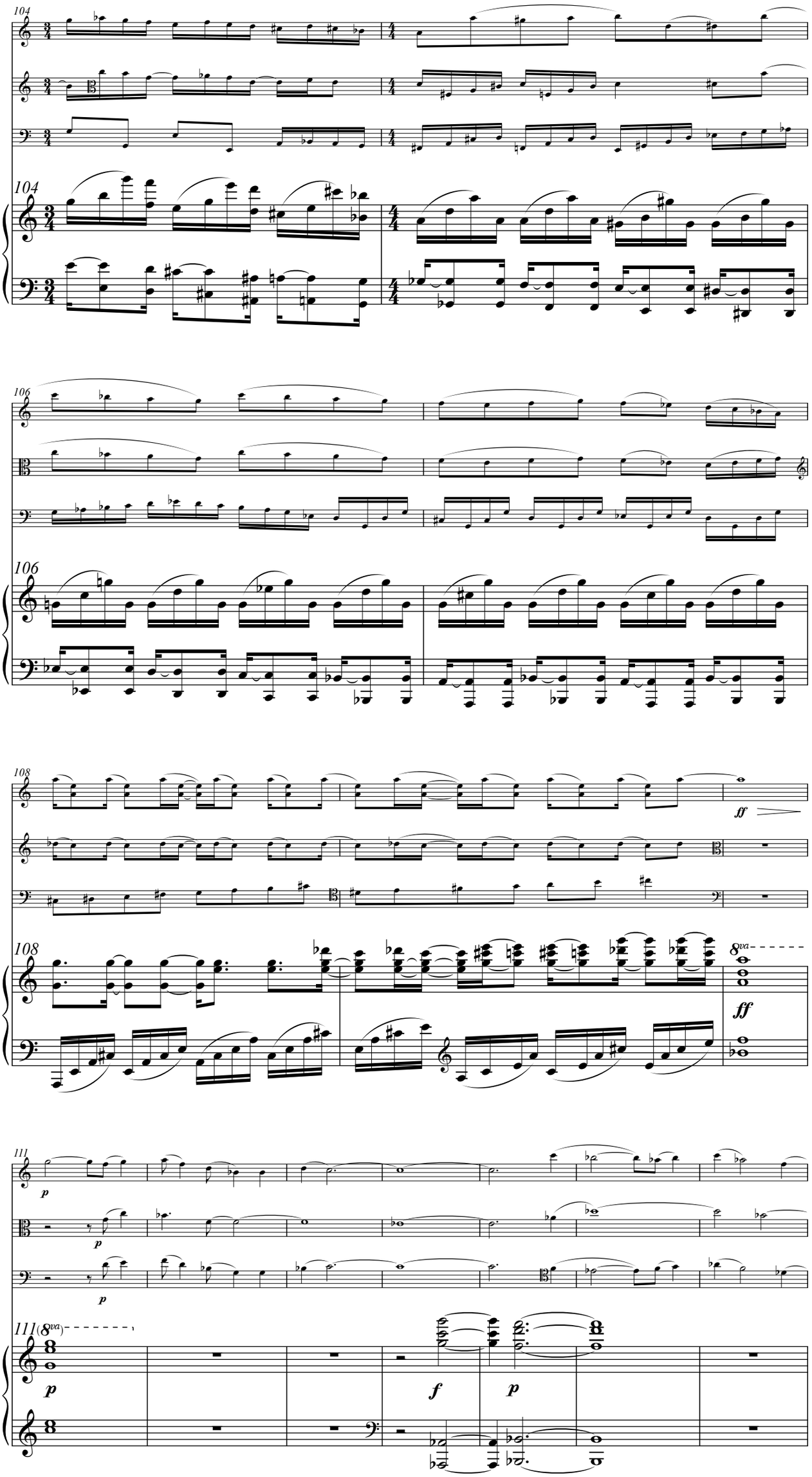

36
39
42
44
8vb

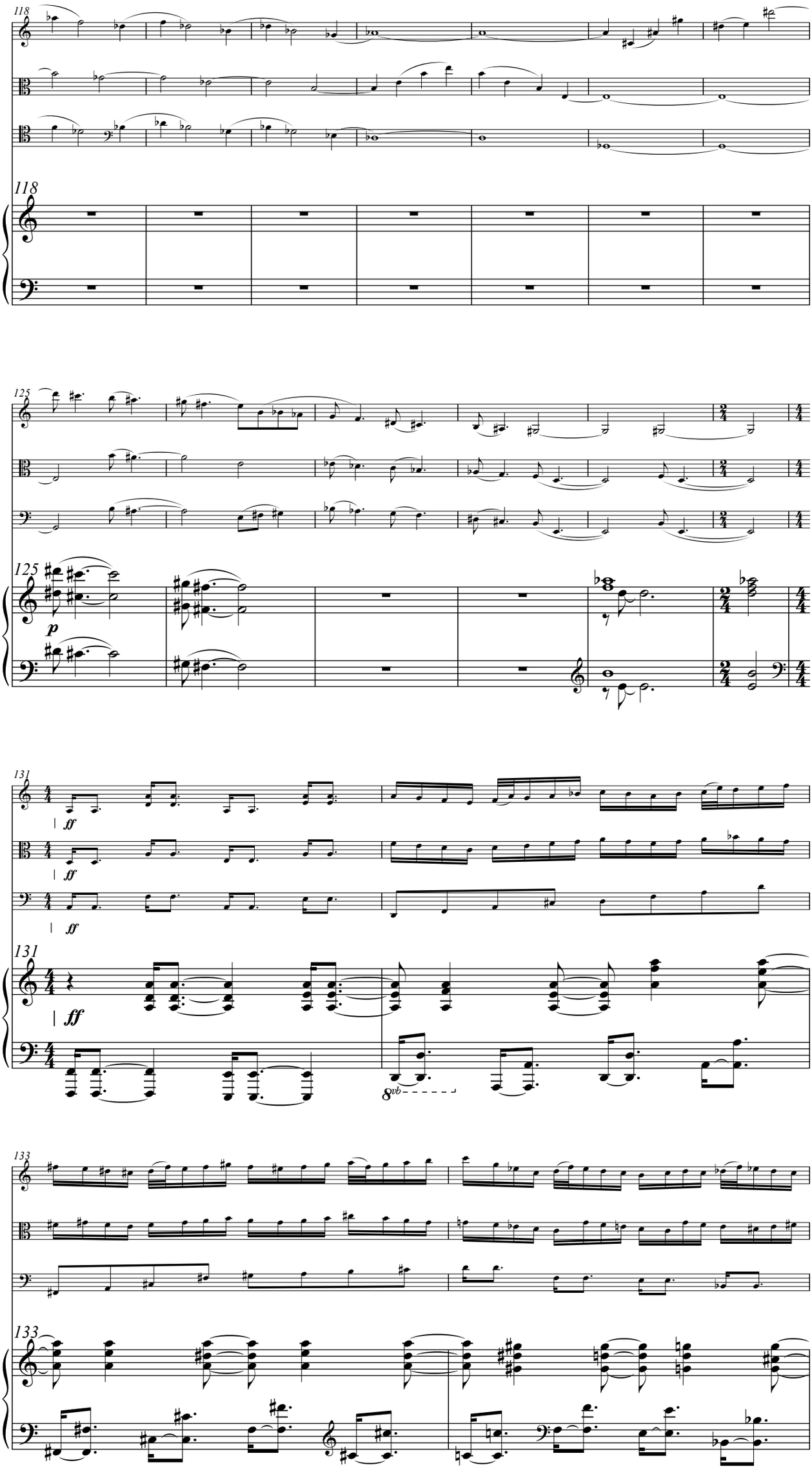

46
49
51
ff
mp
p
pp
55
ff
p

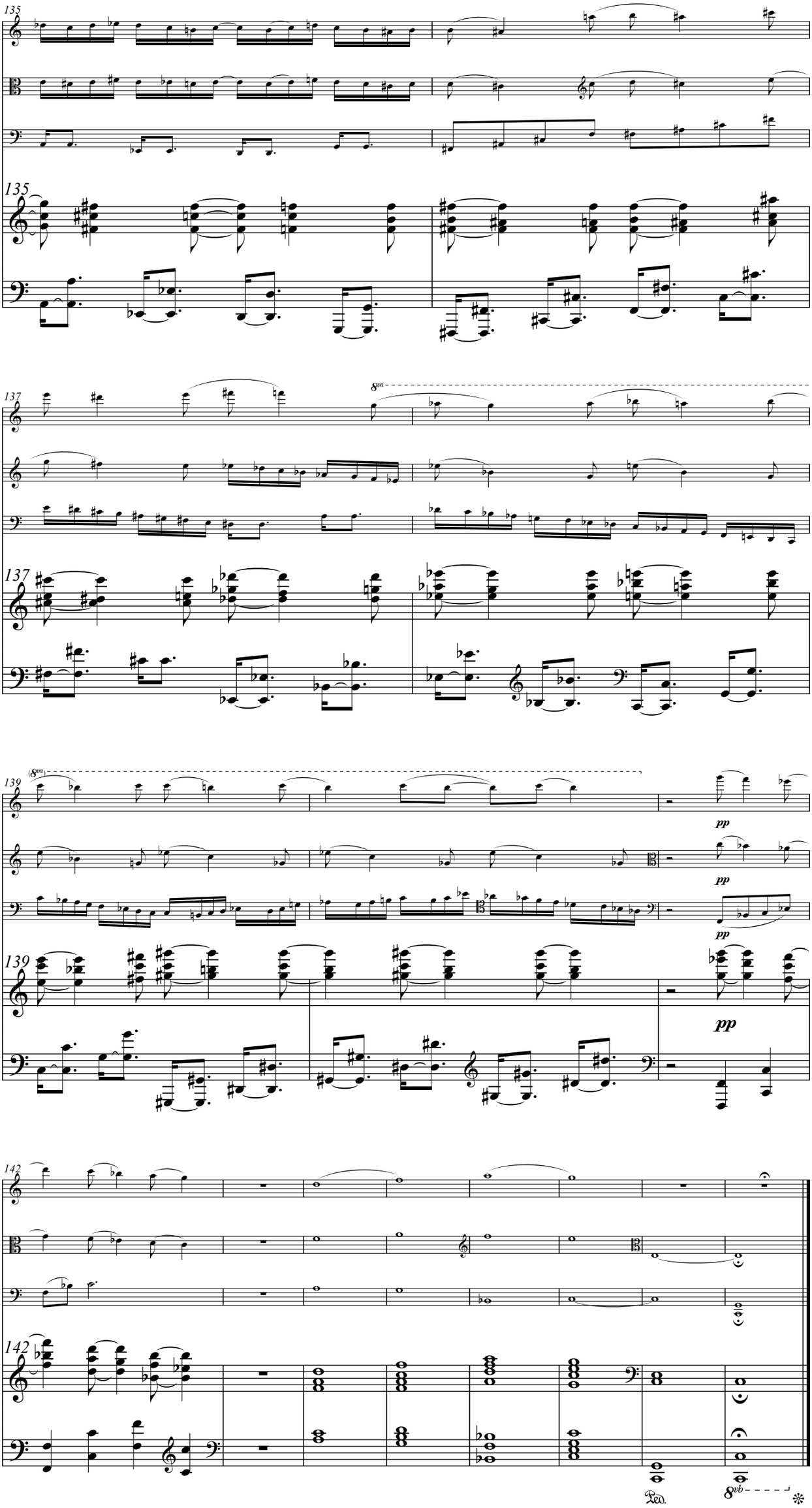

59
62
ff
66
69
rit.
ff
rit.
ff
8vb

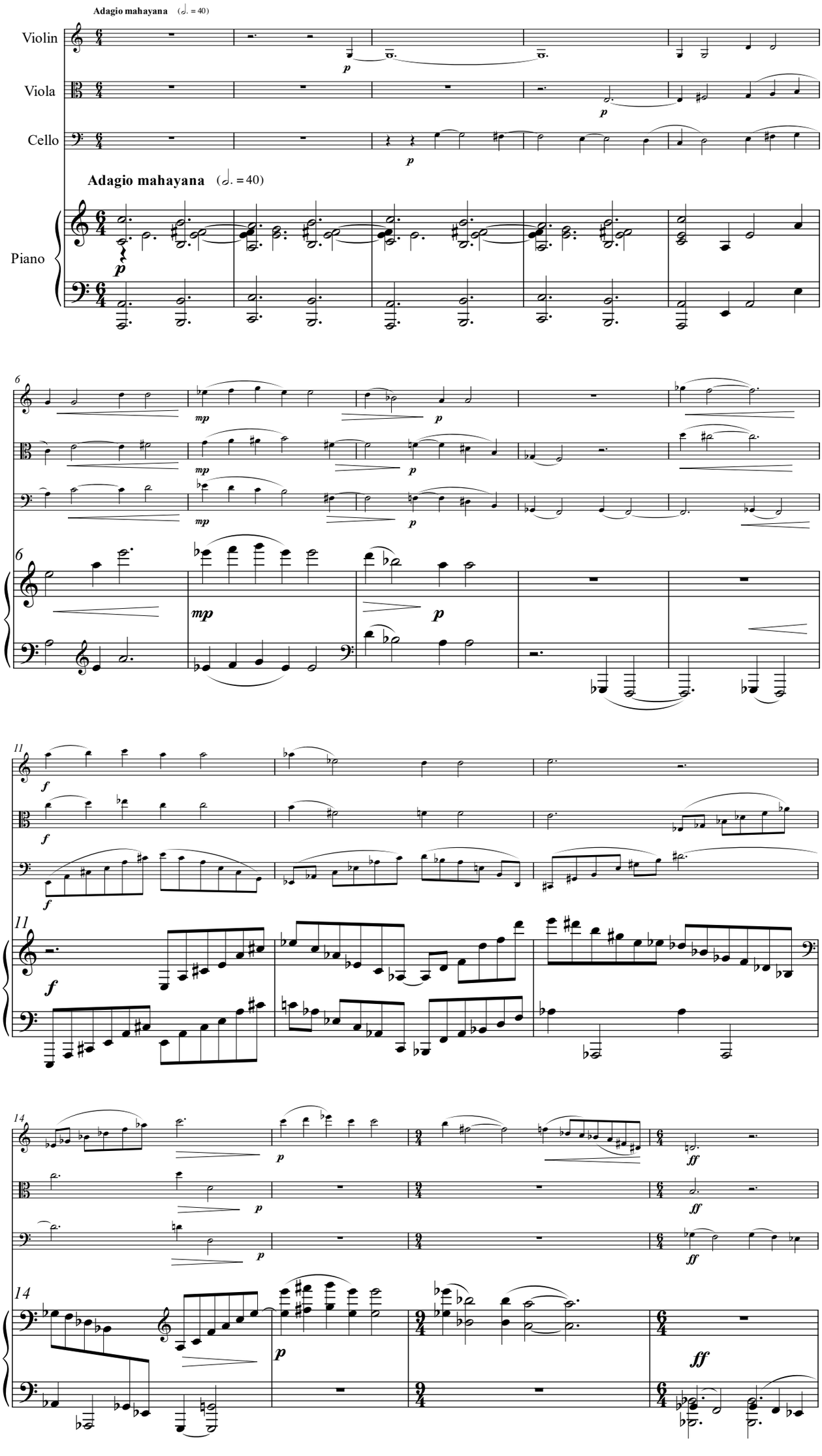

72
Adagio (♩= 56)
mf
mp
p
pp
8va
(8vb)
77
82
Tempo I (♩= 80)
87

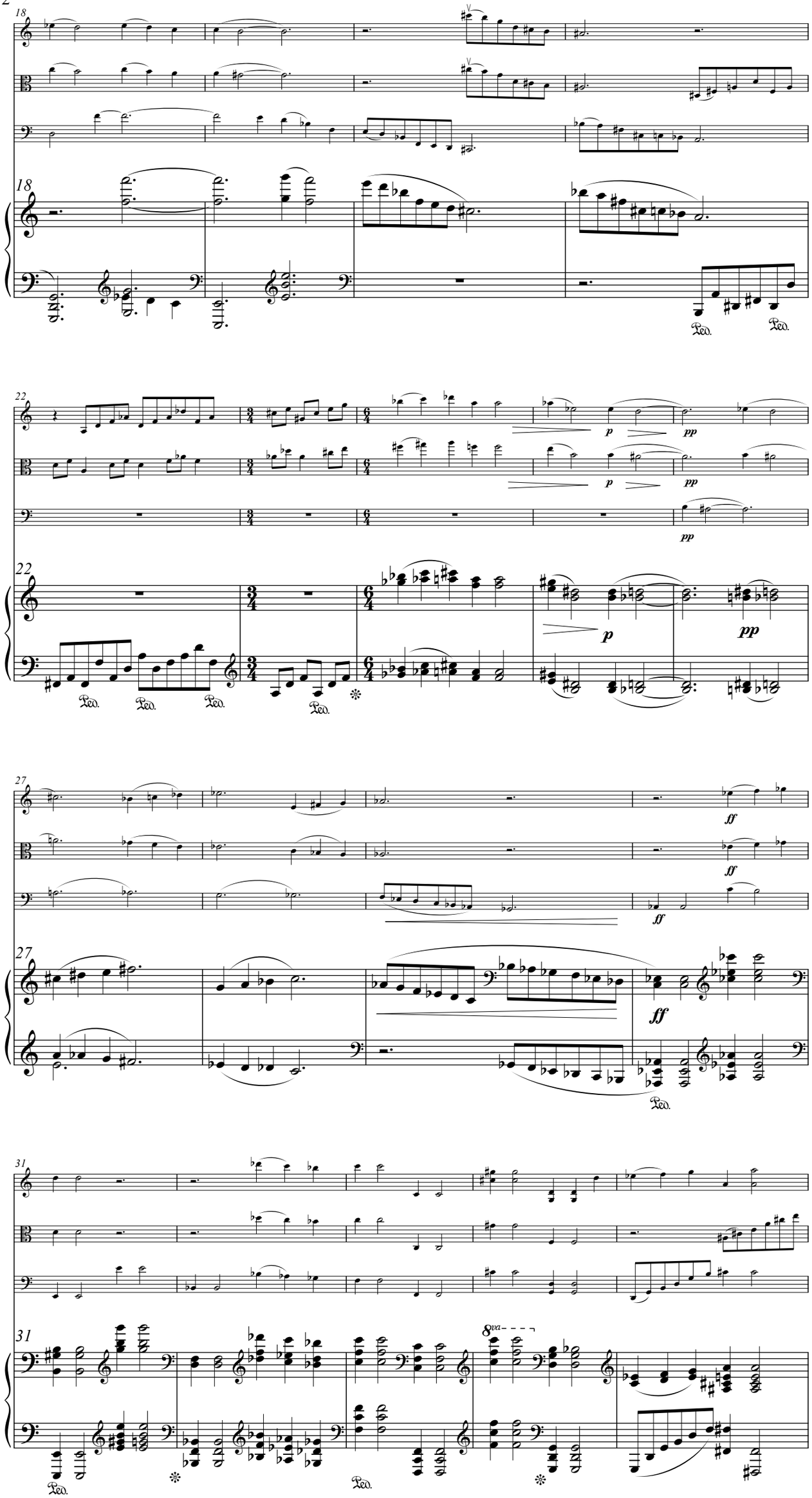

92
mp
cresc. p. a p.
(mf)
pizz.
arco
95
(f)
ff
99
8vb
Ped.
102
8va

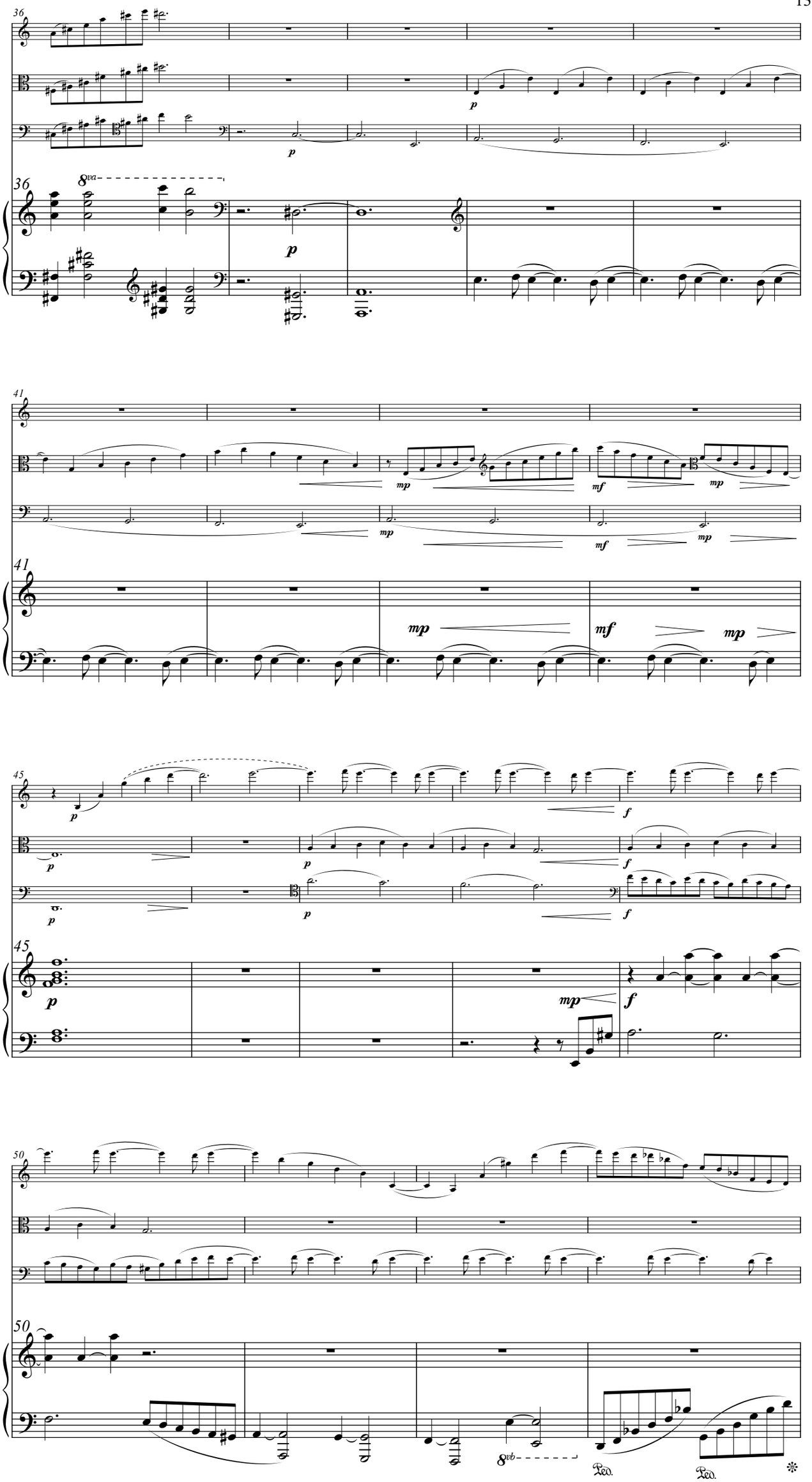

104
106
108
111
8va
ff
p
f

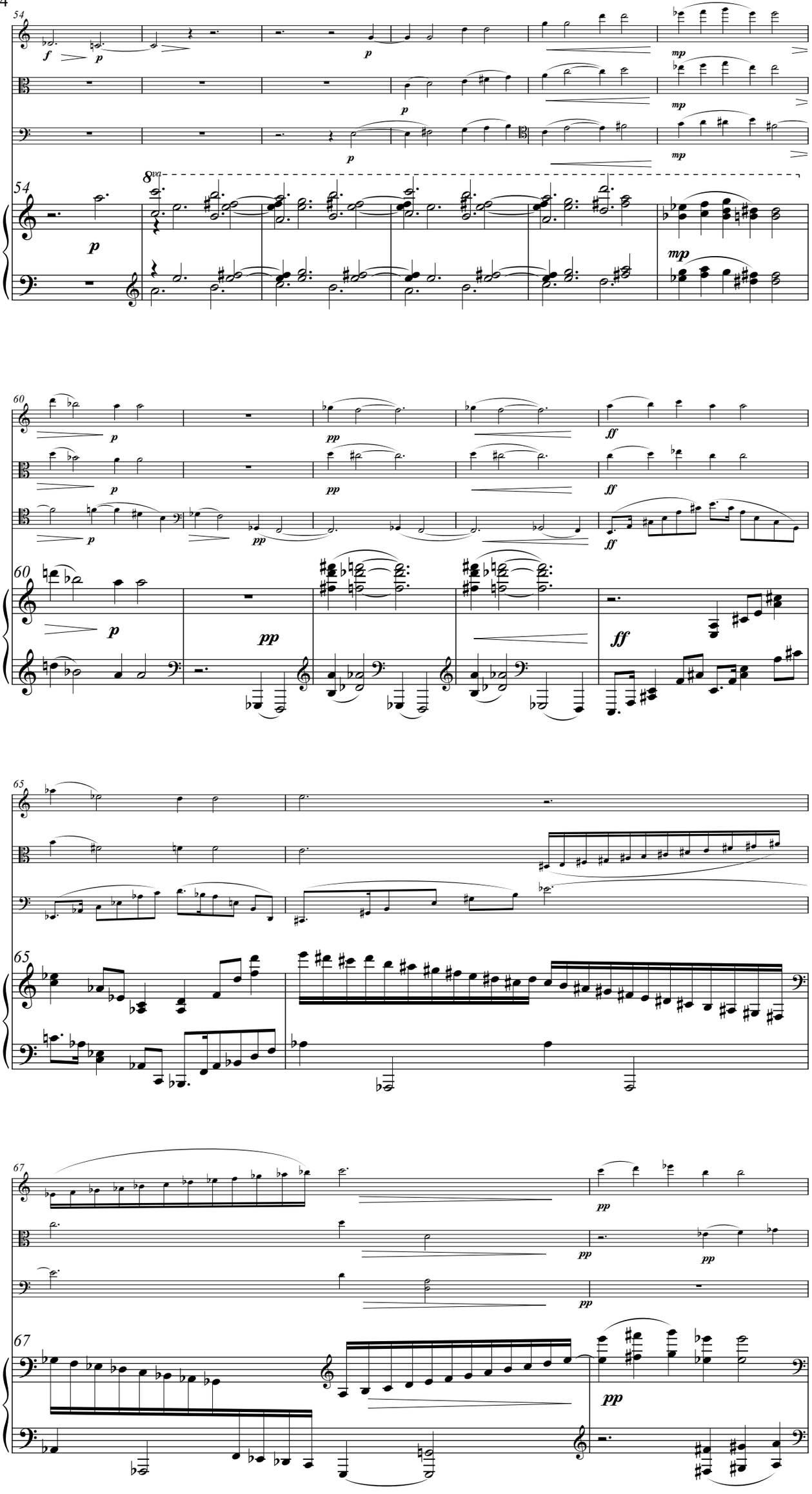

118
118
125
125
p
131
ff
ff
ff
131
8vb
133
133

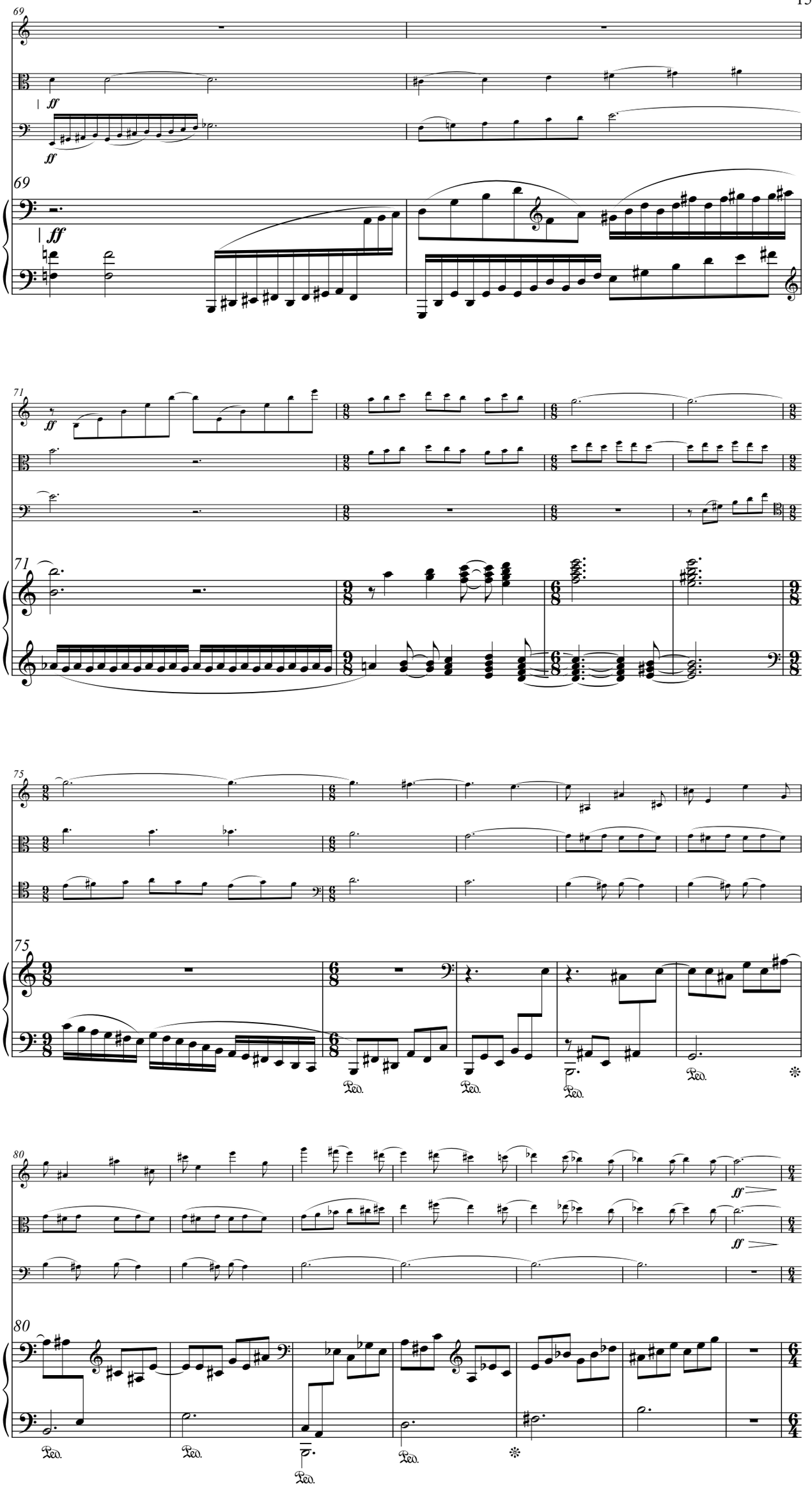

135
135
137
8va
137
(8va)
139
pp
pp
pp
139
142
142
Ped.
8vb

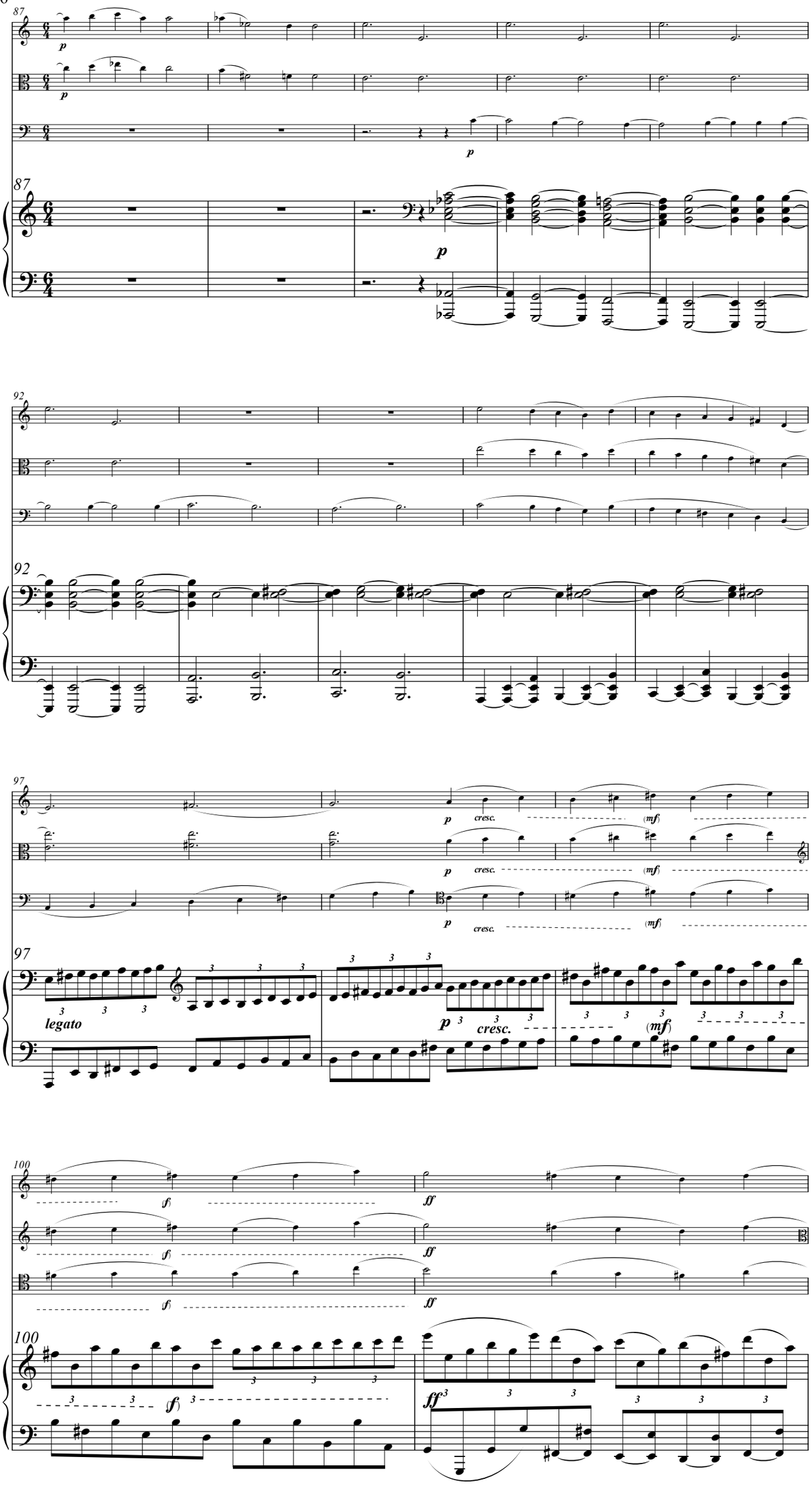

Adagio mahayana (𝅗𝅥. = 40)
Violin
Viola
Cello
Adagio mahayana (𝅗𝅥. = 40)
Piano
6
11
14
p
mp
f
ff

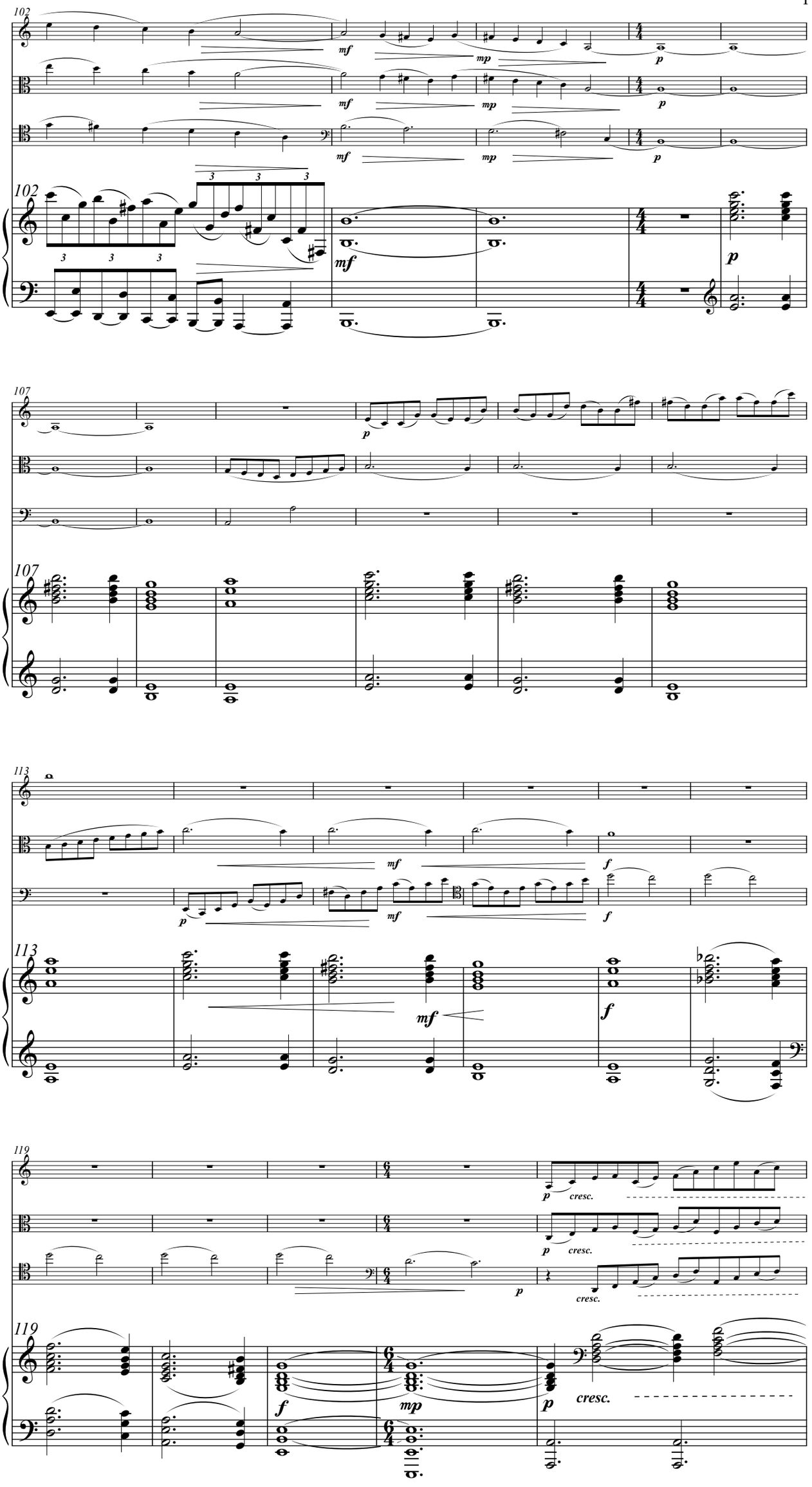

18
22
27
31
p
pp
ff
Ped.
8va

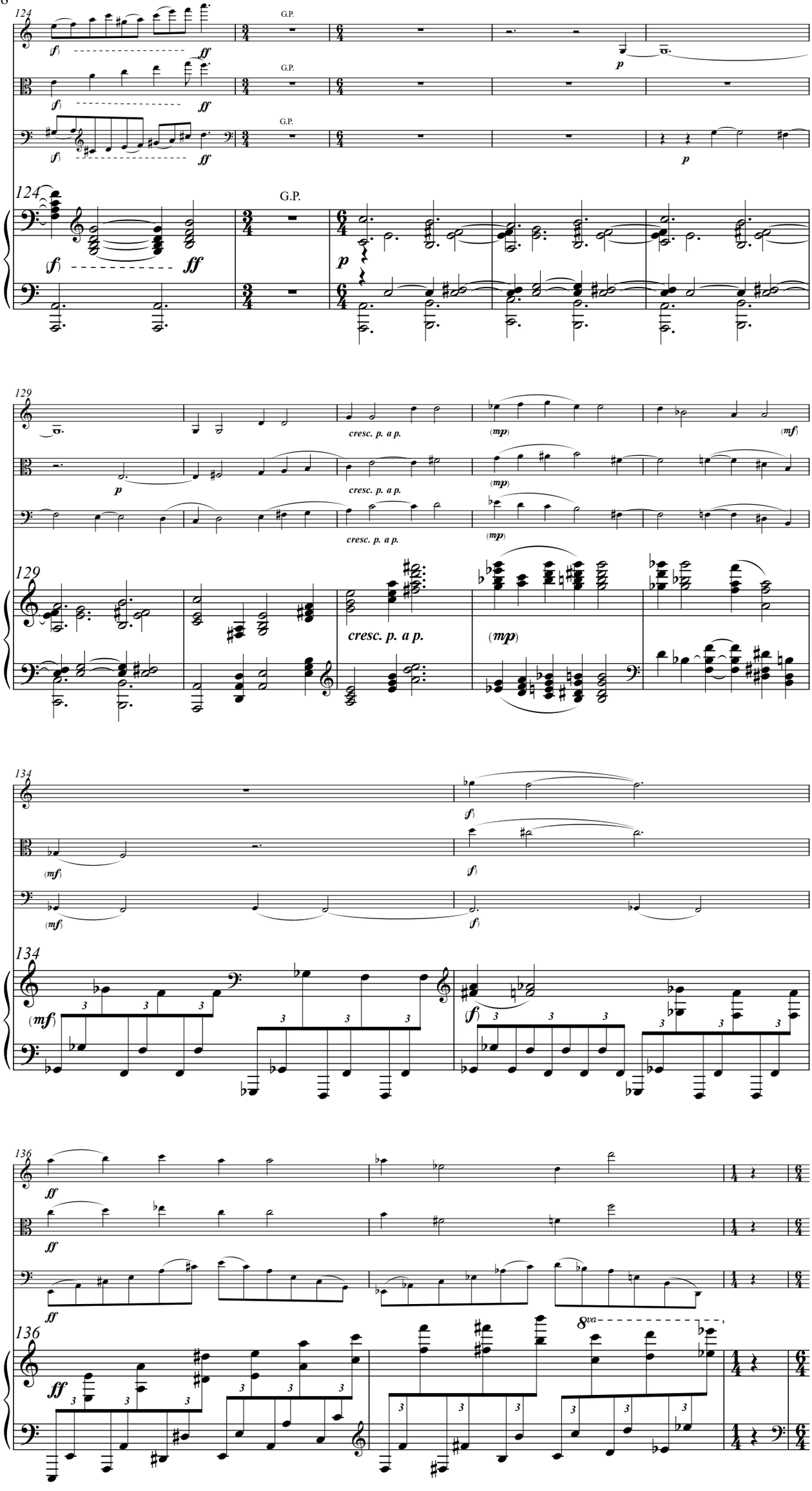

36
8va
p
41
mp
mf
mp
45
f
50
8vb
Ped.
Ped.

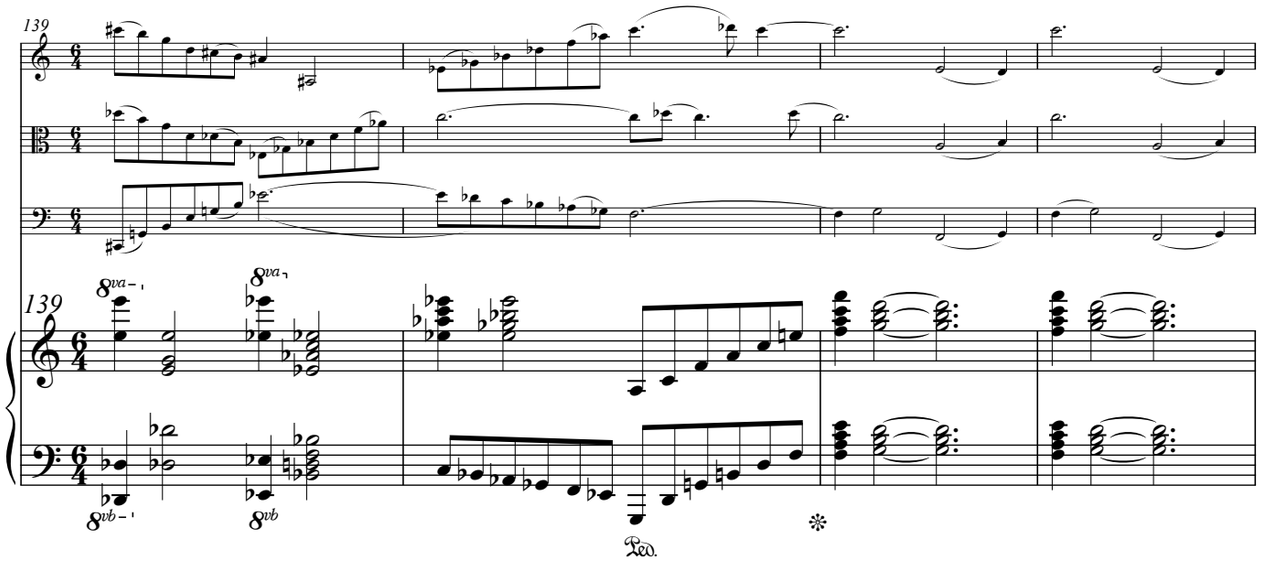

54
f
p
mp
8va
60
pp
ff
65
67

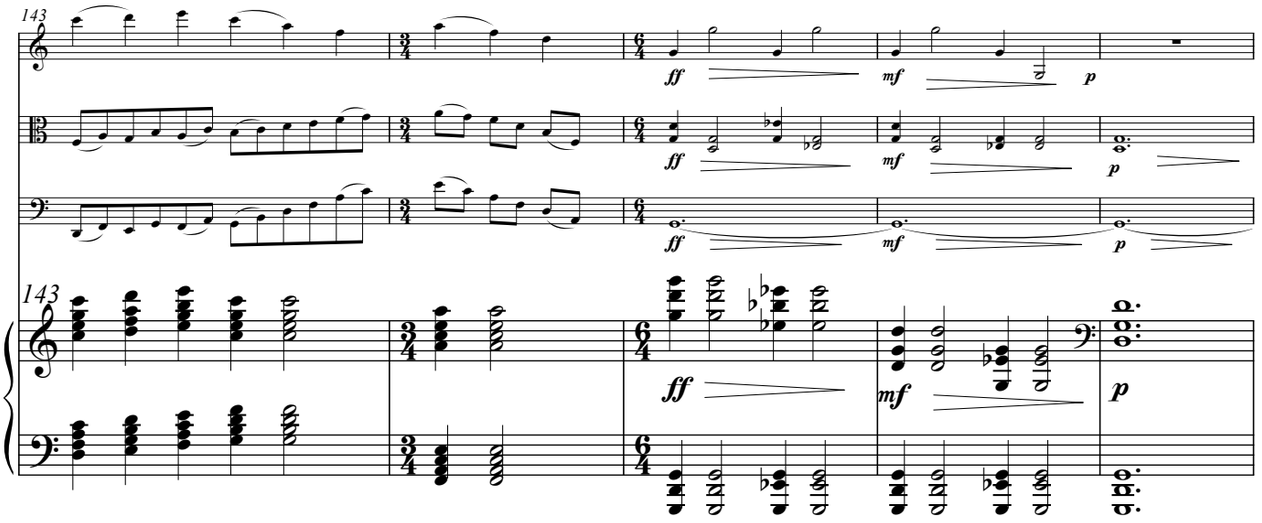

69
ff
ff
69
ff
71
ff
71
75
75
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
80
ff
ff
80
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.

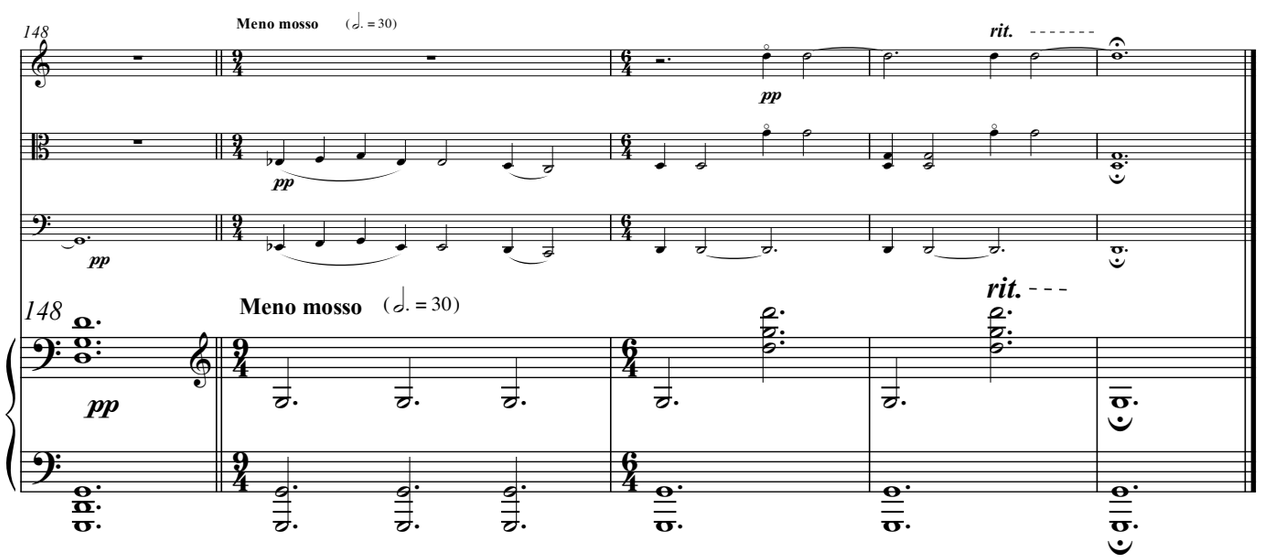

87
p
87
p
92
92
97
p
cresc.
(mf)
97
legato
p
cresc.
(mf)
100
(f)
ff
100
(f)
ff

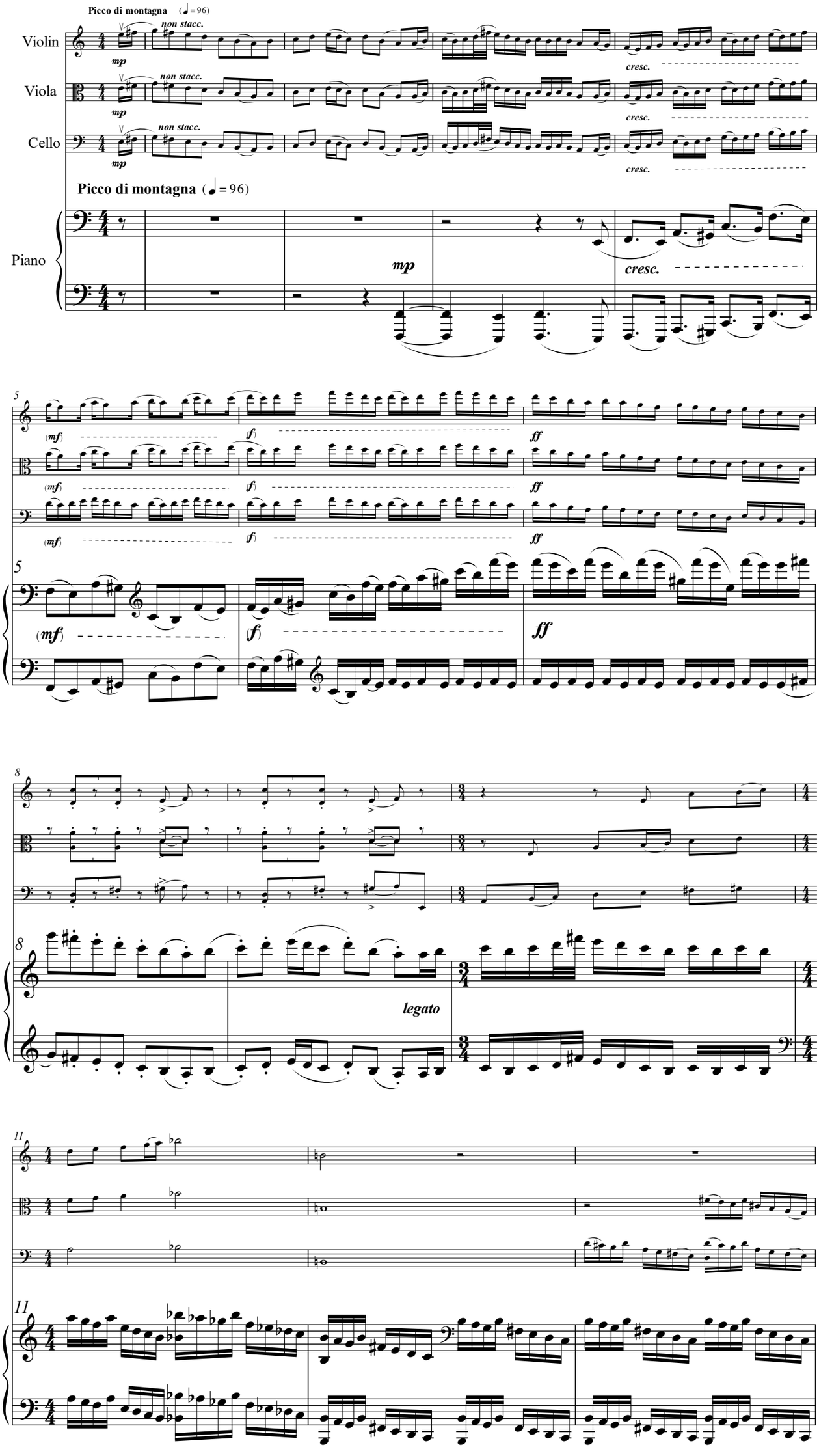

102
mf
mp
p
3
107
113
119
cresc.

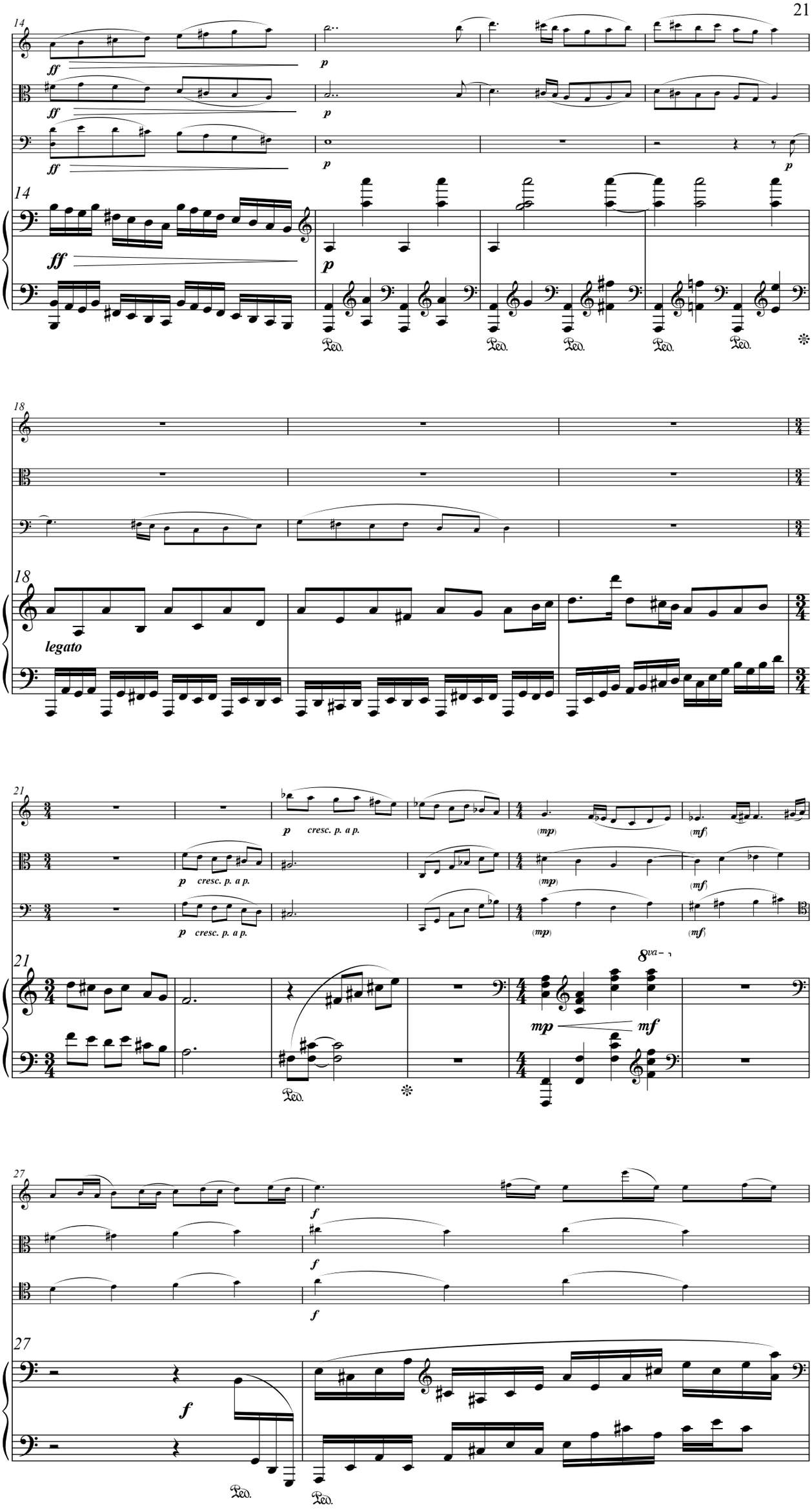

124
G.P.
(f)
ff
p
129
cresc. p. a p.
(mp)
(mf)
134
136
8va

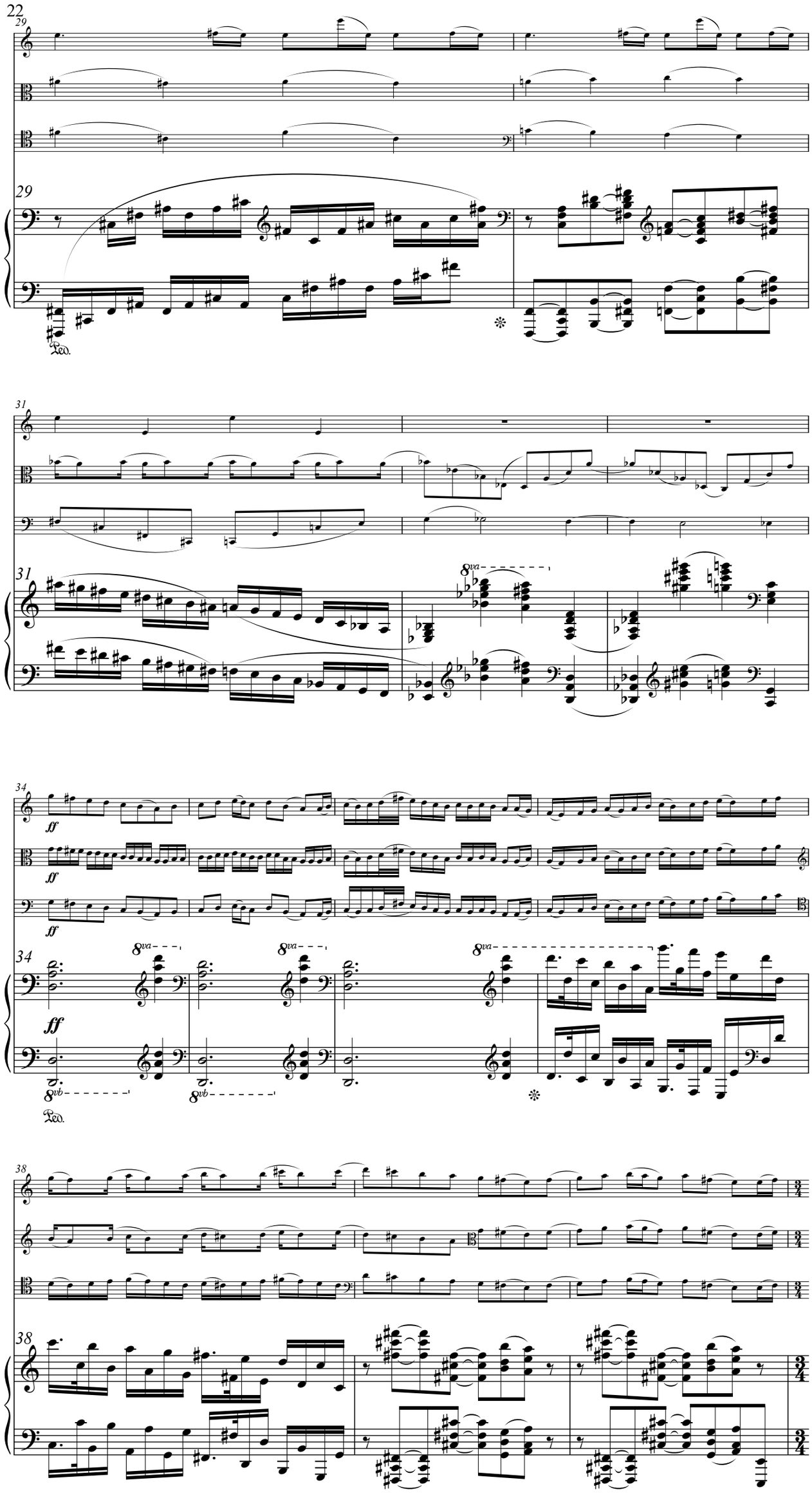

139
8va
8vb
Ped.

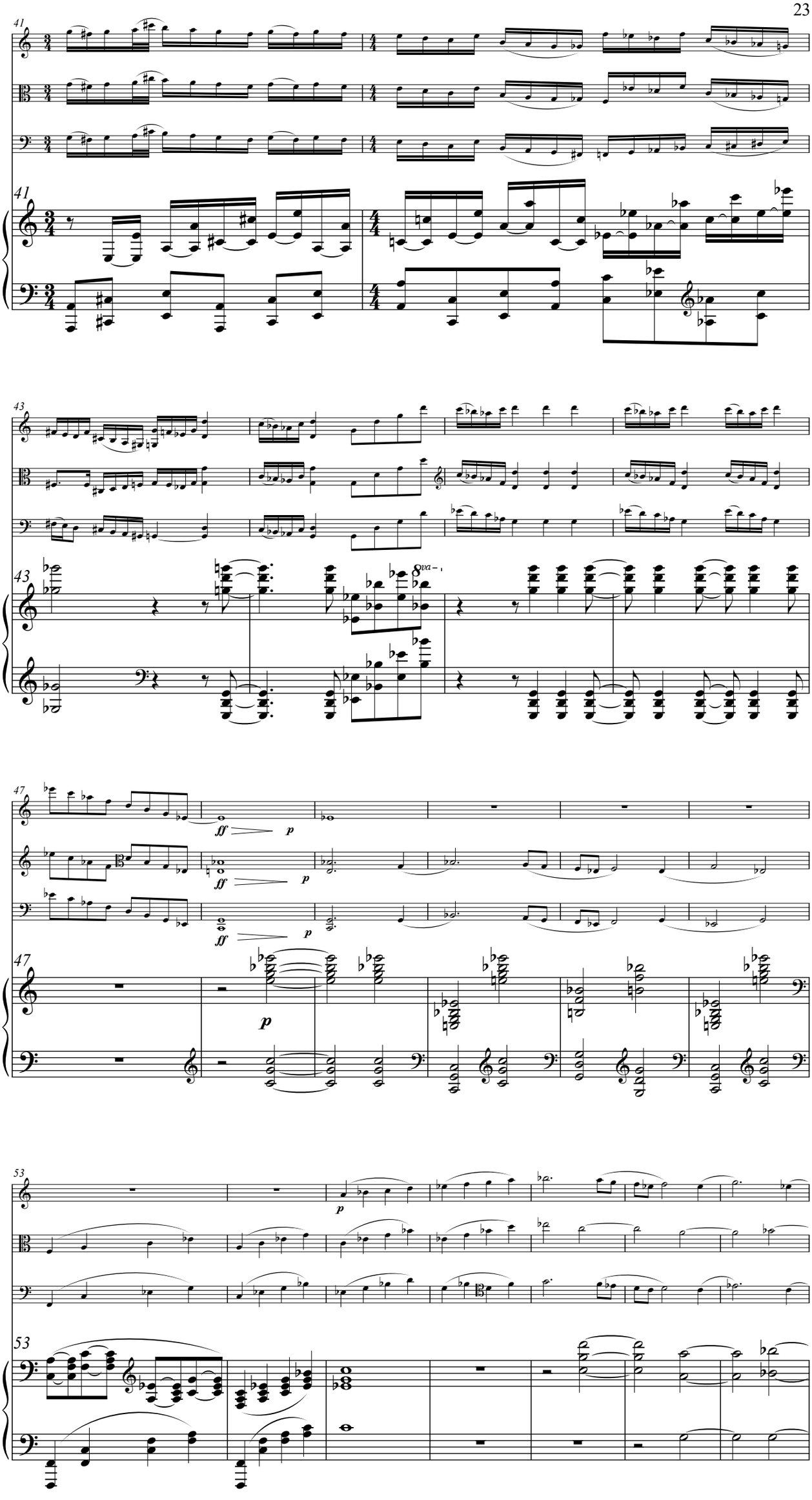

143
ff
mf
p

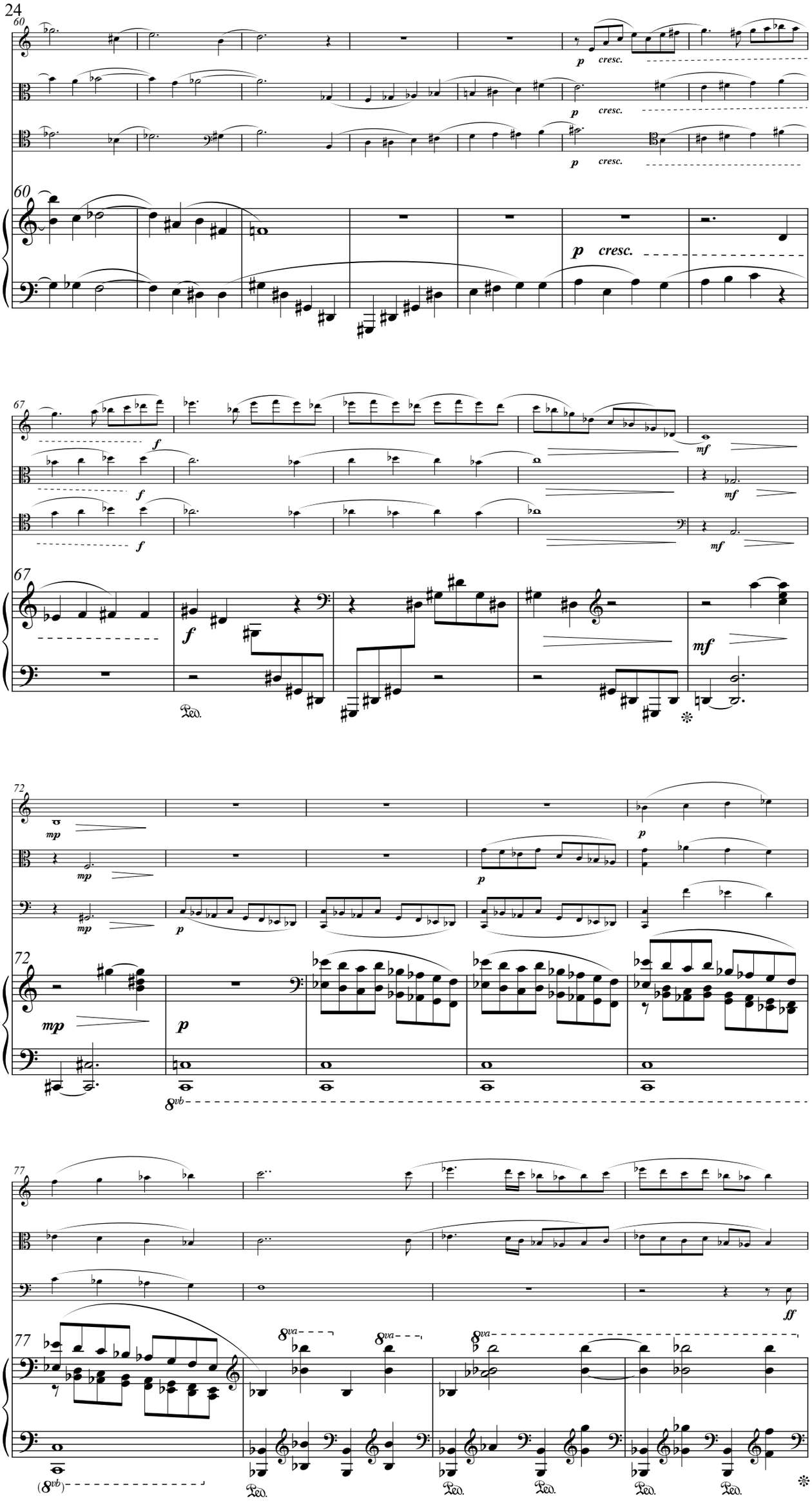

148
Meno mosso
(𝅗𝅥. = 30)
pp
rit.

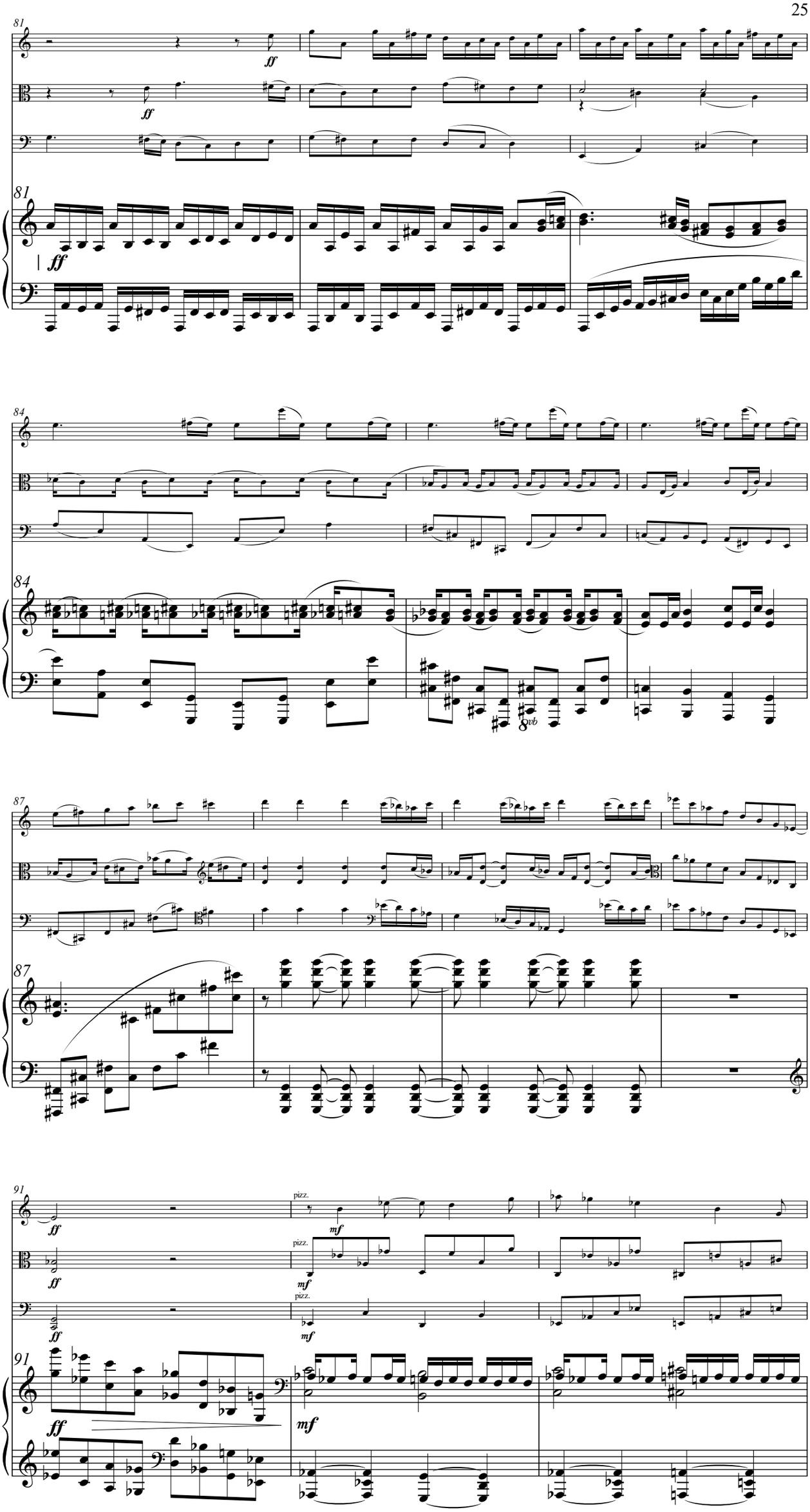

Picco di montagna (♩= 96)
non stacc.
Violin
Viola
Cello
Piano
mp
cresc.
5
(mf)
f
ff
8
legato
11

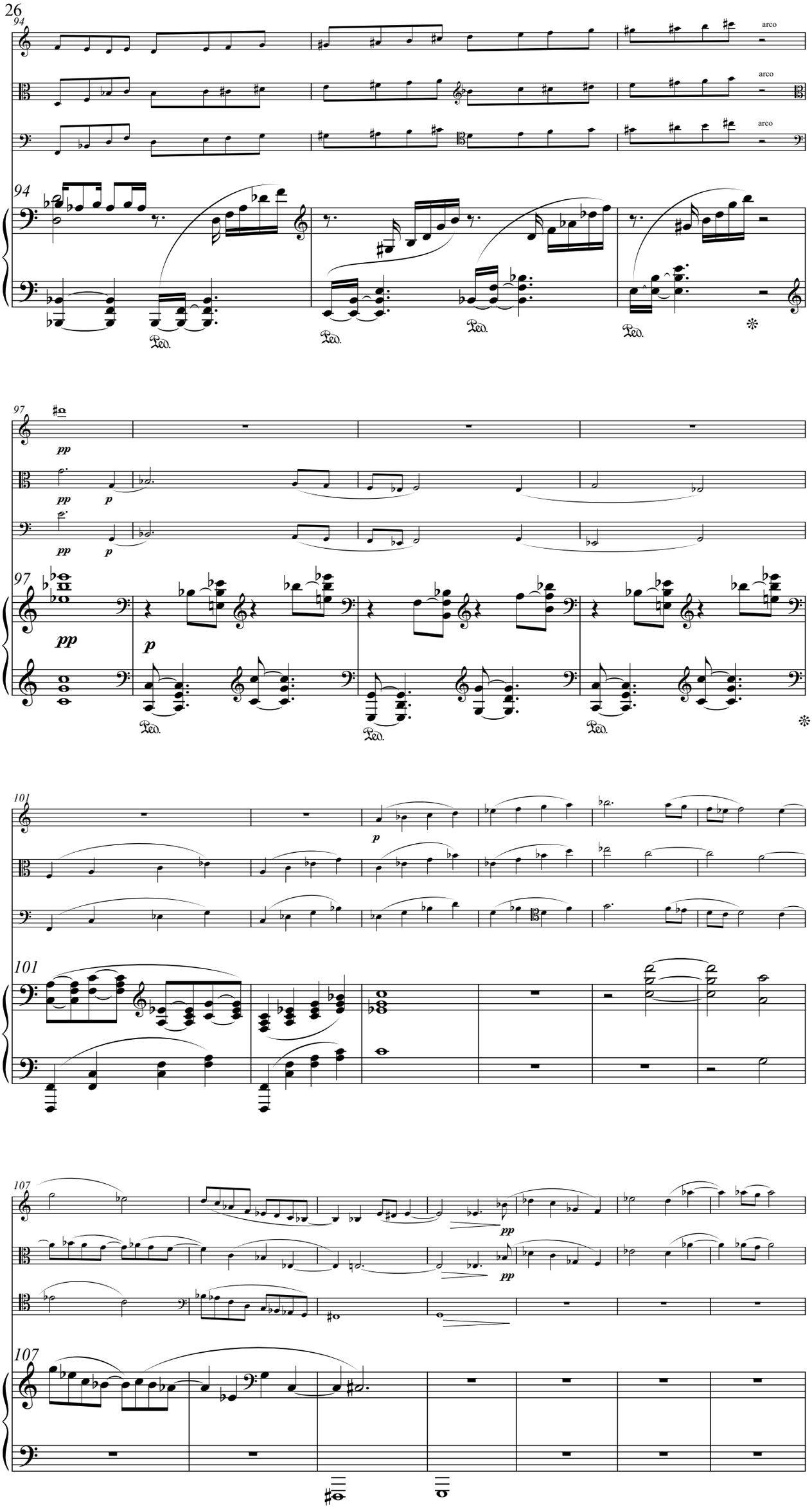

14
ff
p
Ped.
18
legato
21
p cresc. p. a p.
(mp)
(mf)
8va
mp
mf
27
f
Ped.

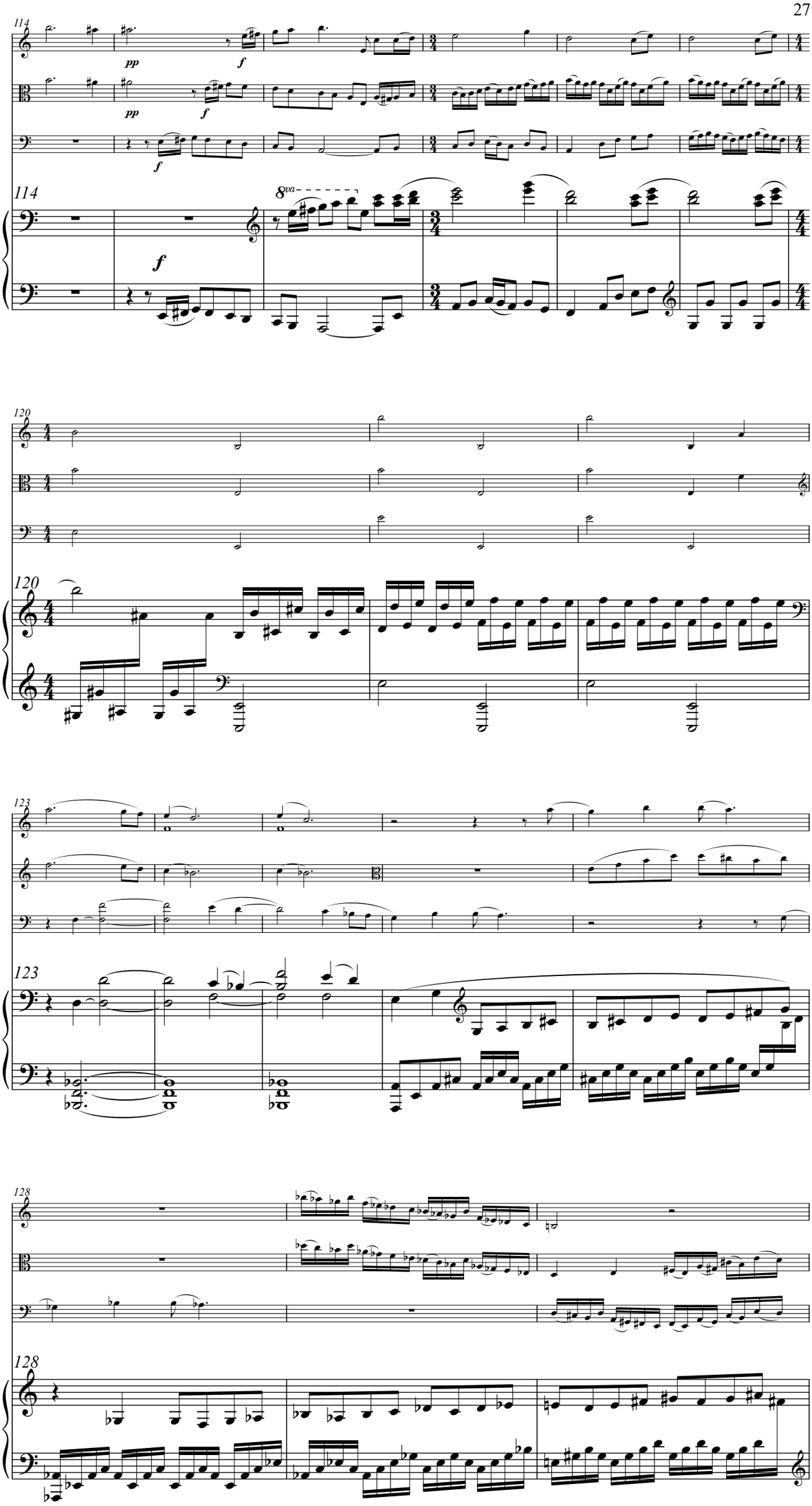

22
29
Ped.
31
34
ff
8va
8vb
38
3/4

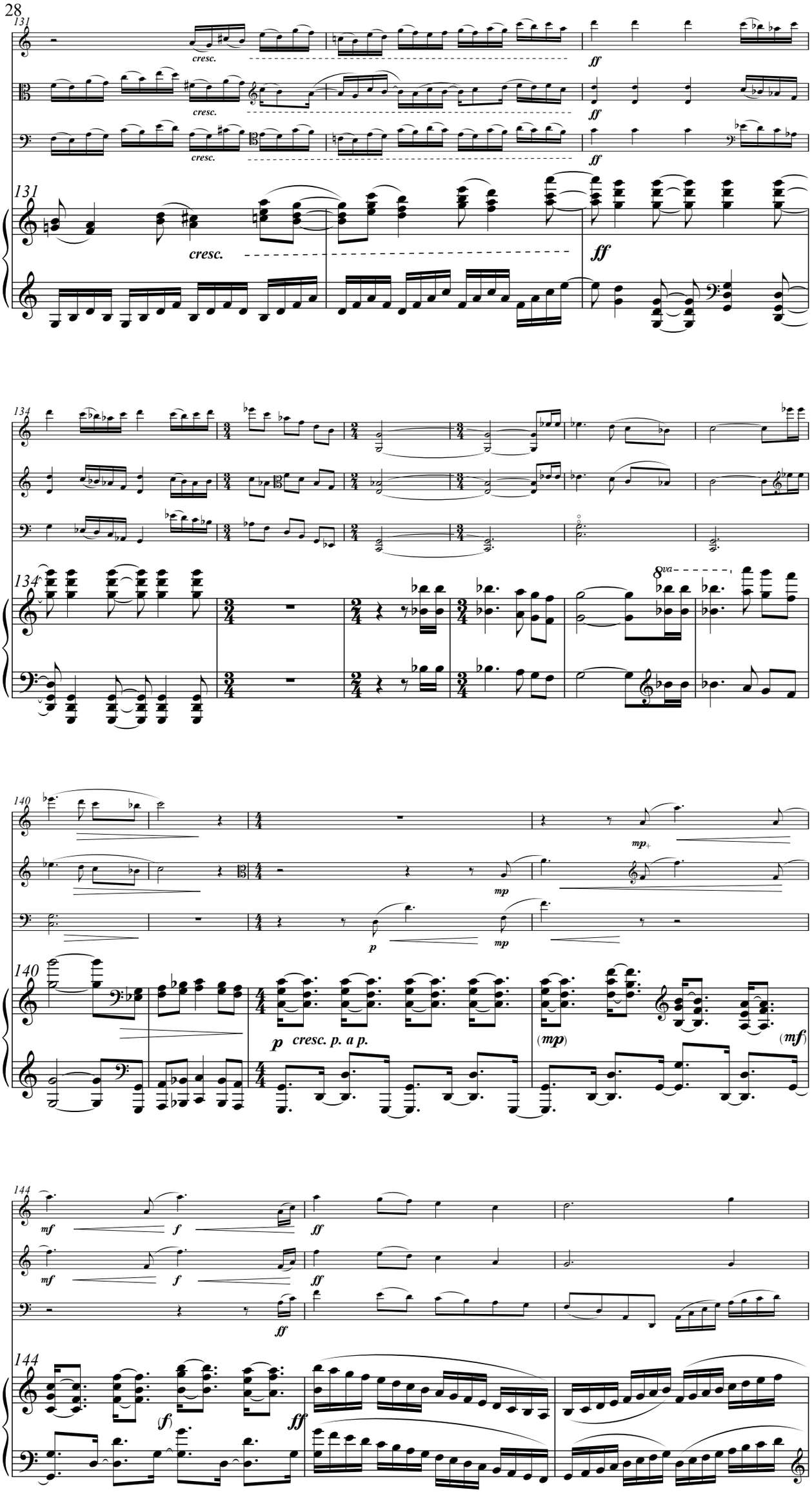

41
43
8va
47
ff
p
53

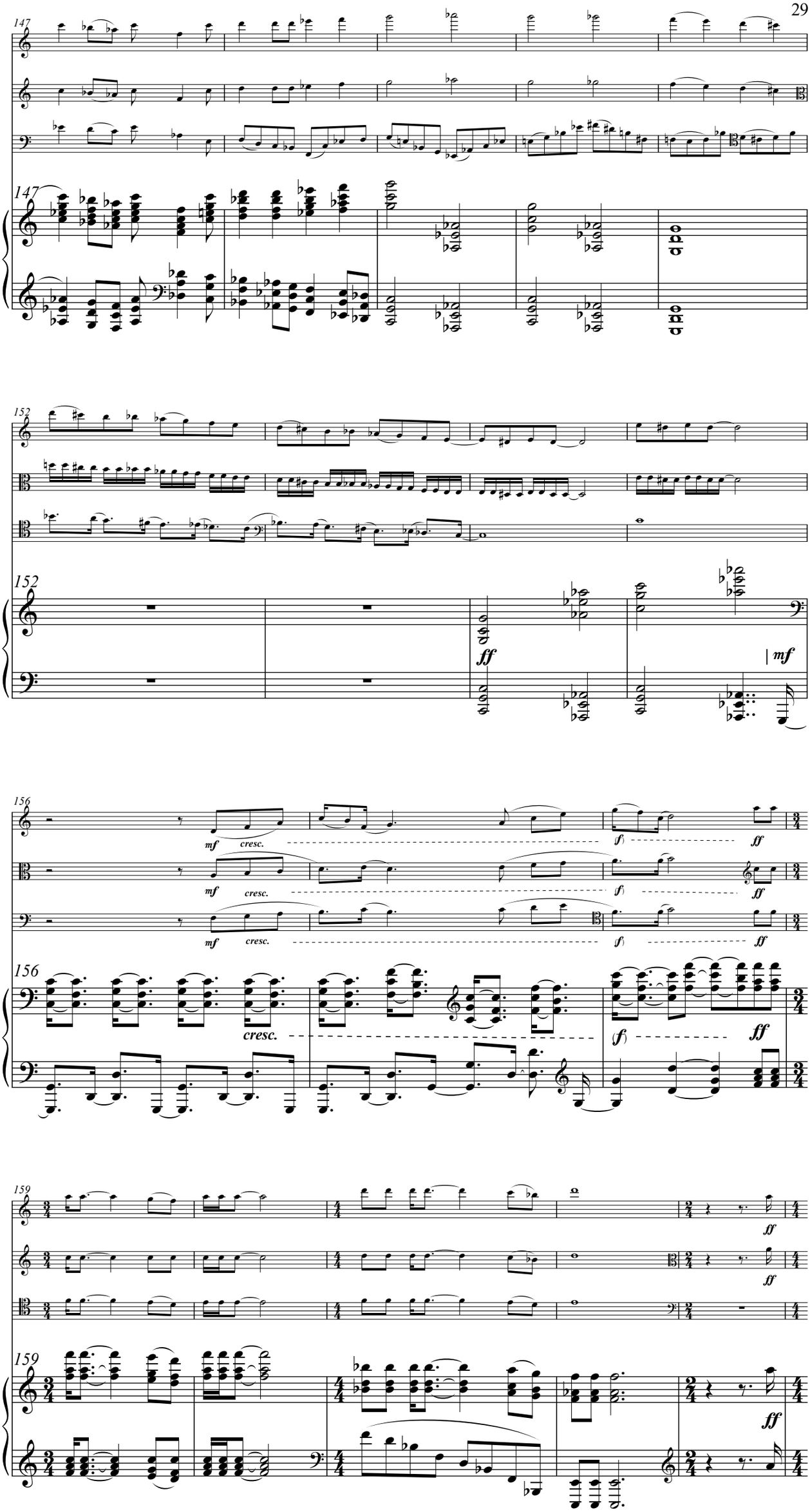

60
p cresc.
60
p cresc.
67
f
mf
67
f
mf
72
mp
p
72
mp
p
8vb
77
ff
77
8va
8va
8va
(8vb)
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.

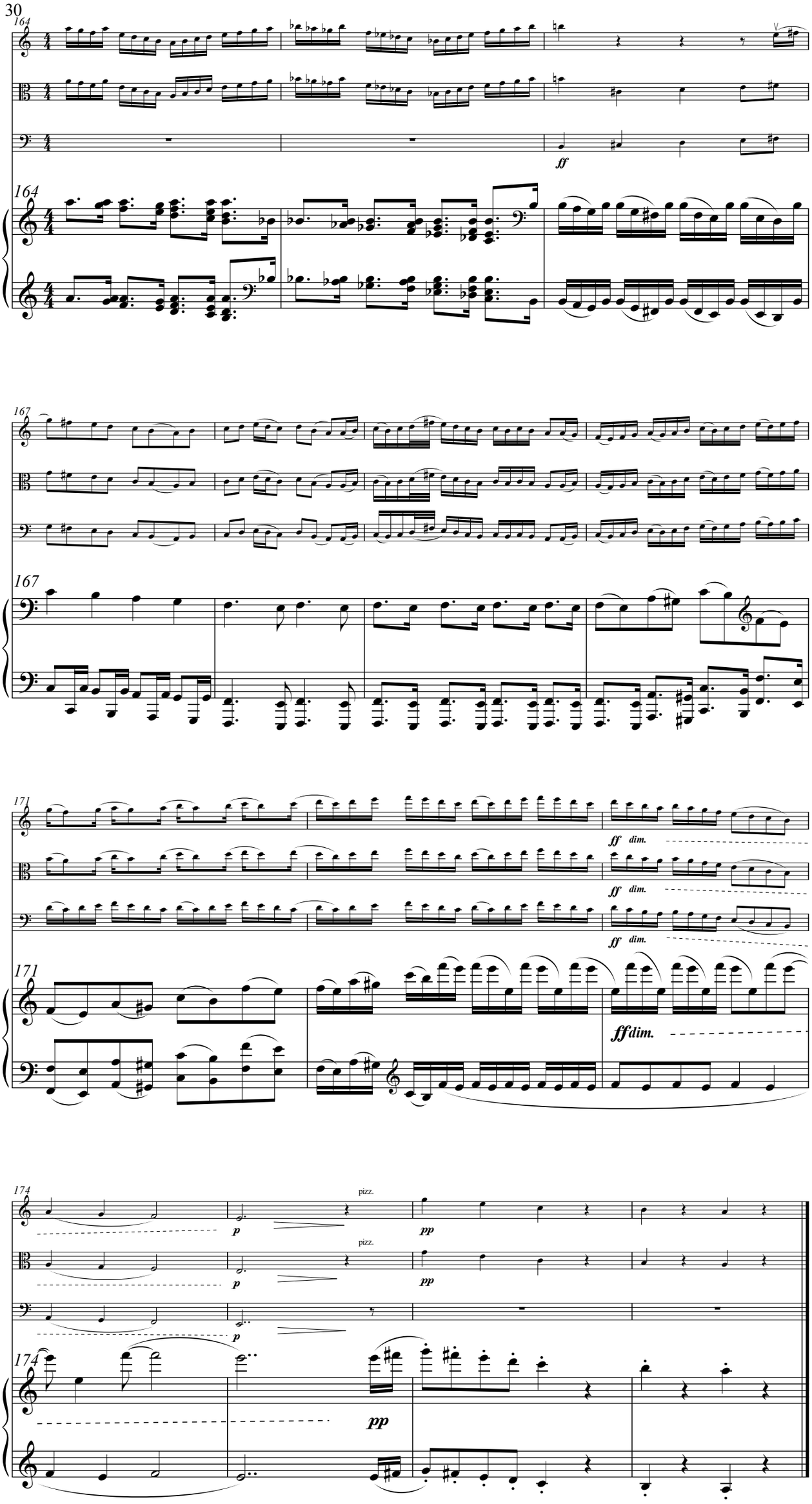

81
ff
81
ff
84
84
8vb
87
87
91
pizz.
mf
pizz.
mf
pizz.
mf
91
ff
mf

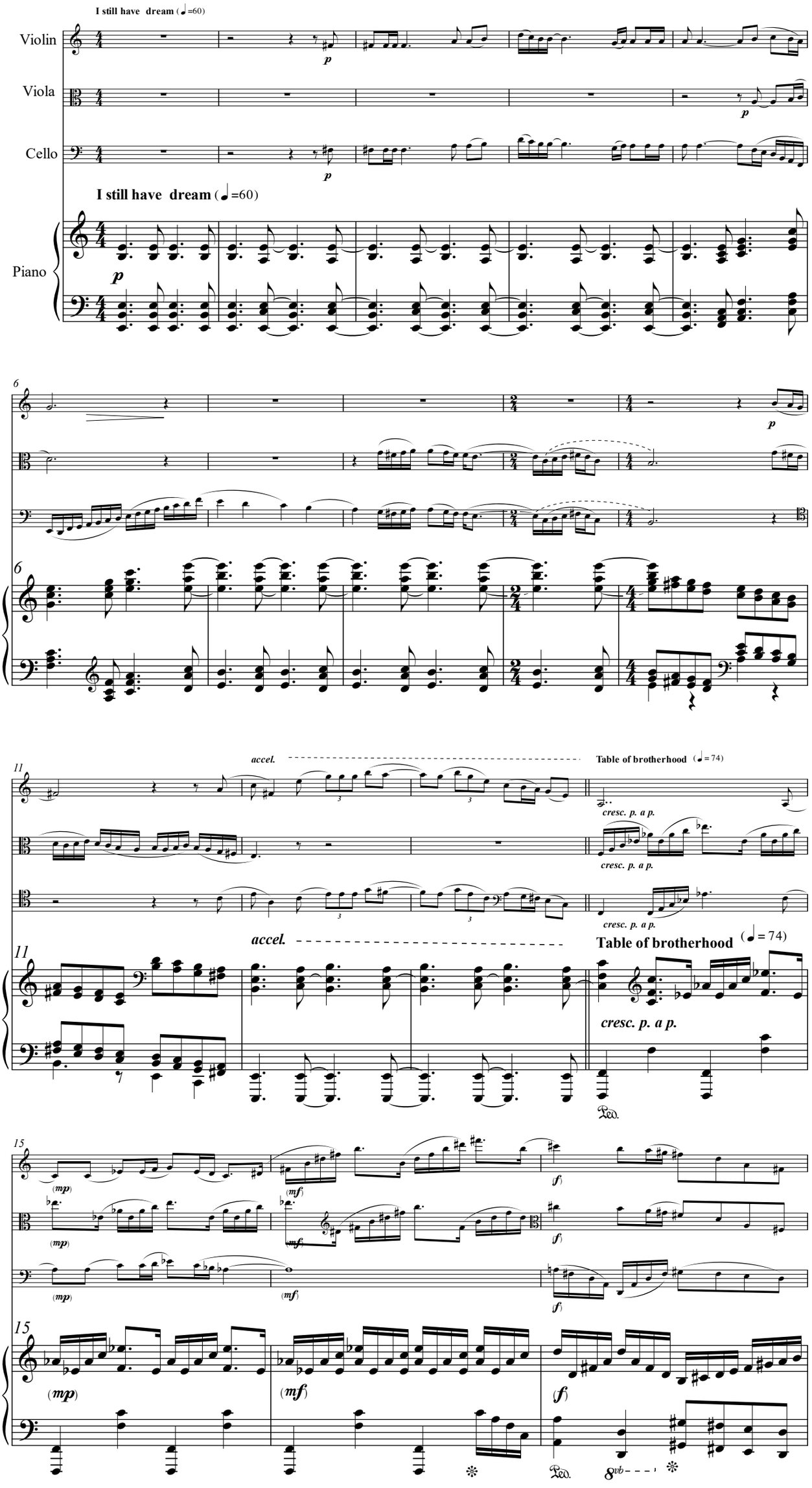

94
arco
arco
arco
94
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
97
pp
pp
p
pp
97
pp
p
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
101
p
101
107
pp
pp
107

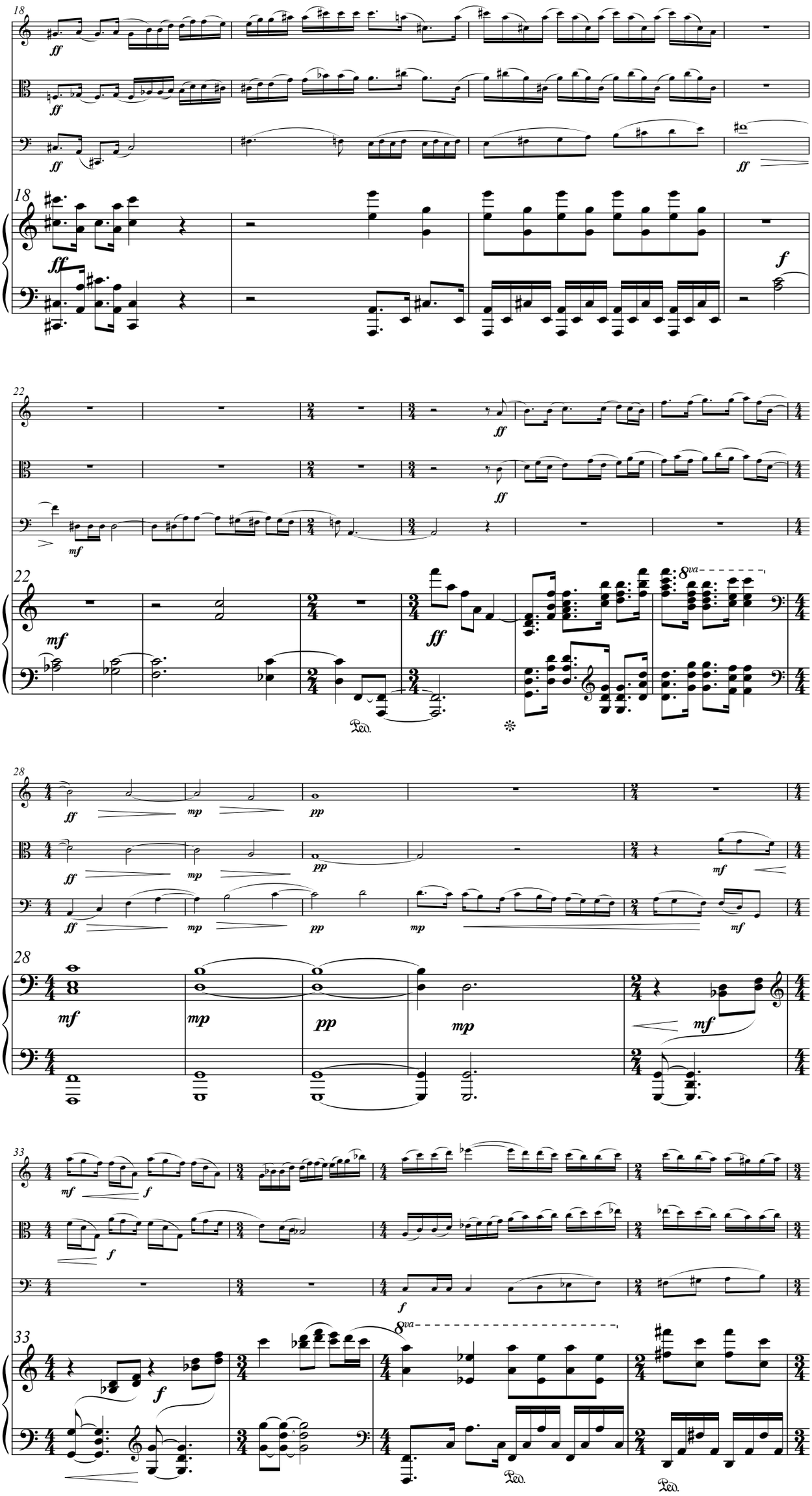

114
pp
f
8va
120
123
128

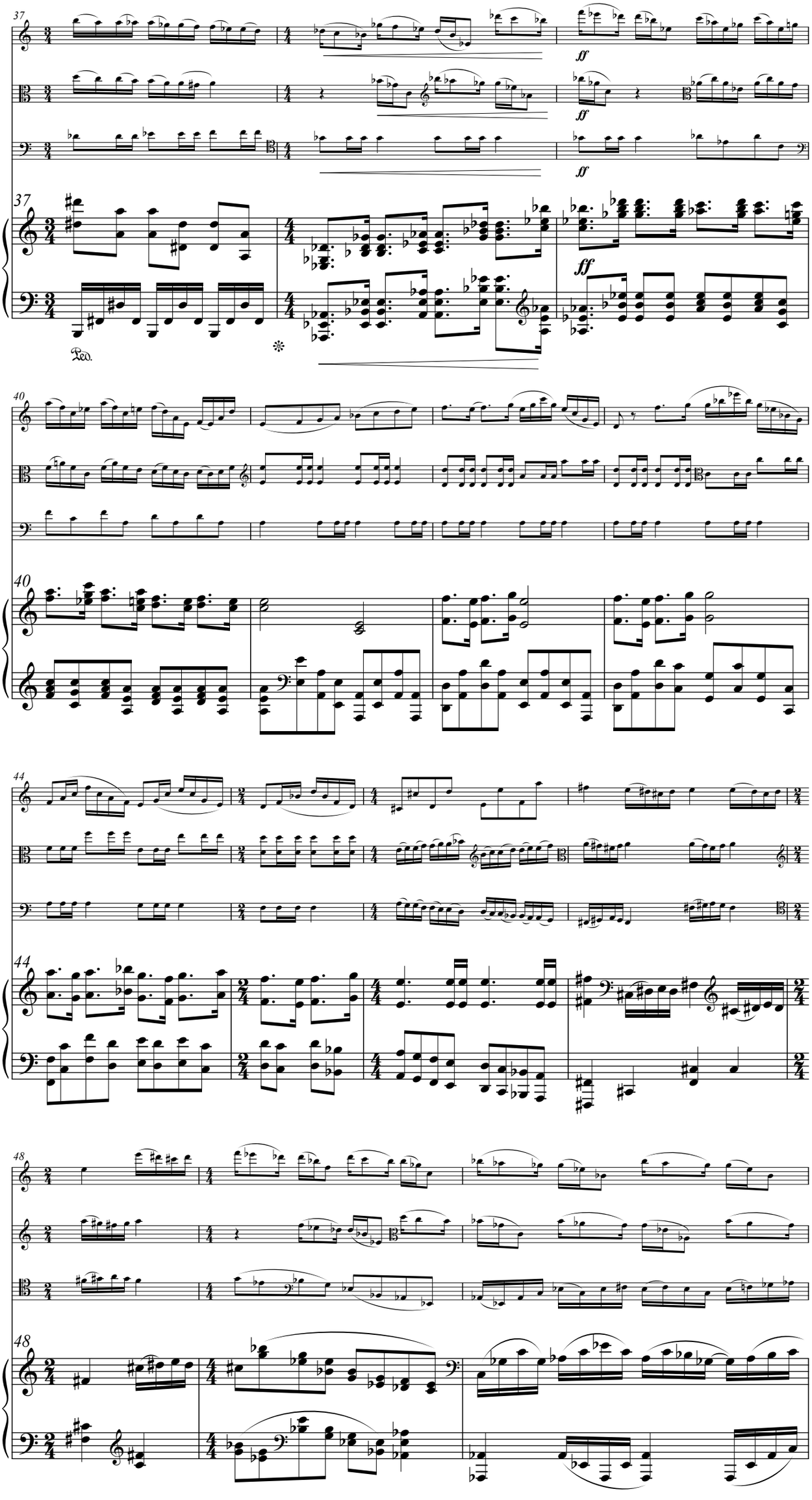

131
cresc.
ff
134
8va
140
mp
p
cresc. p. a p.
(mp)
(mf)
144
mf
f
ff
(f)

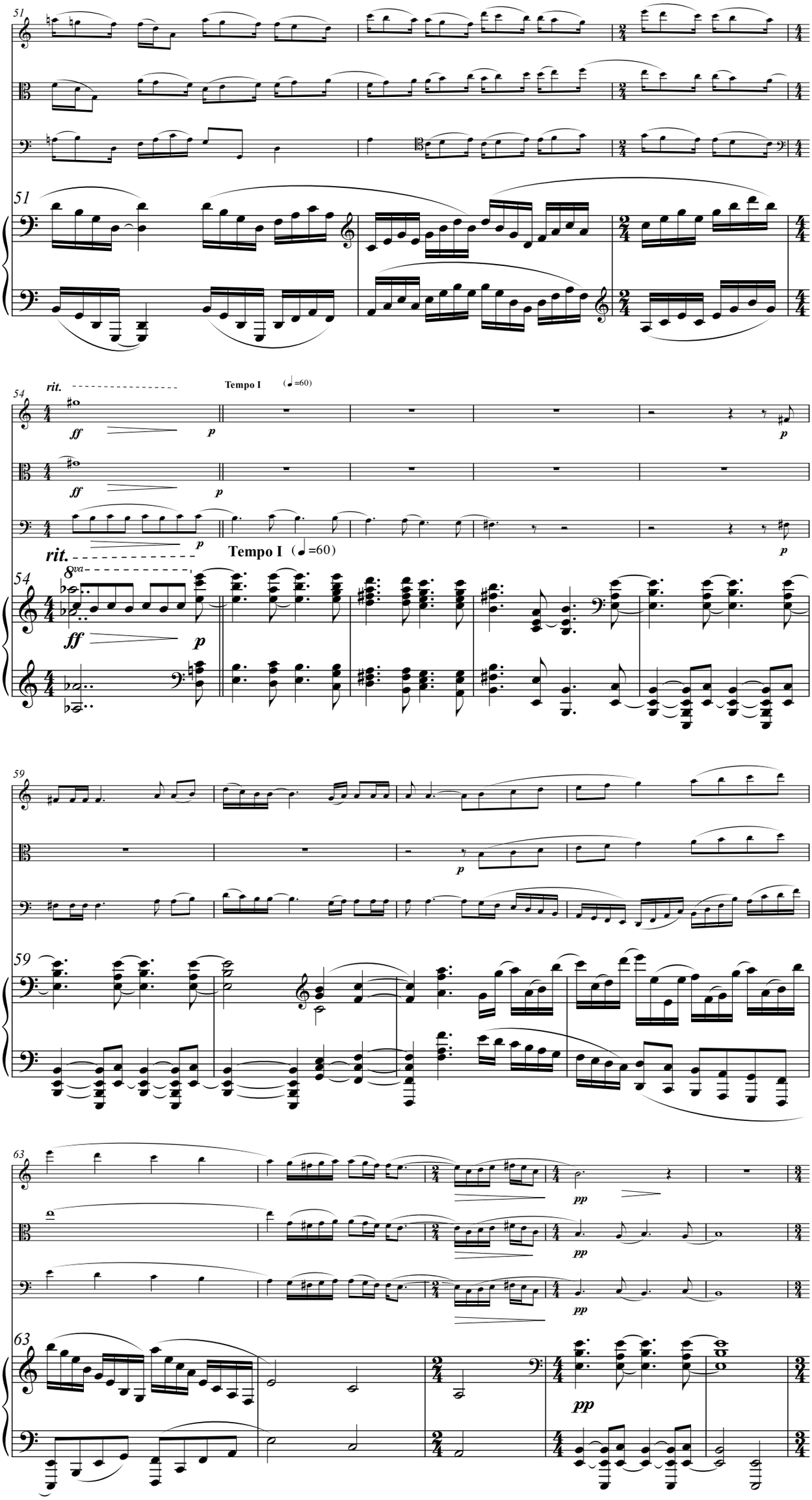

147
147
152
152
ff
mf
156
156
mf
cresc.
f
ff
159
159
ff

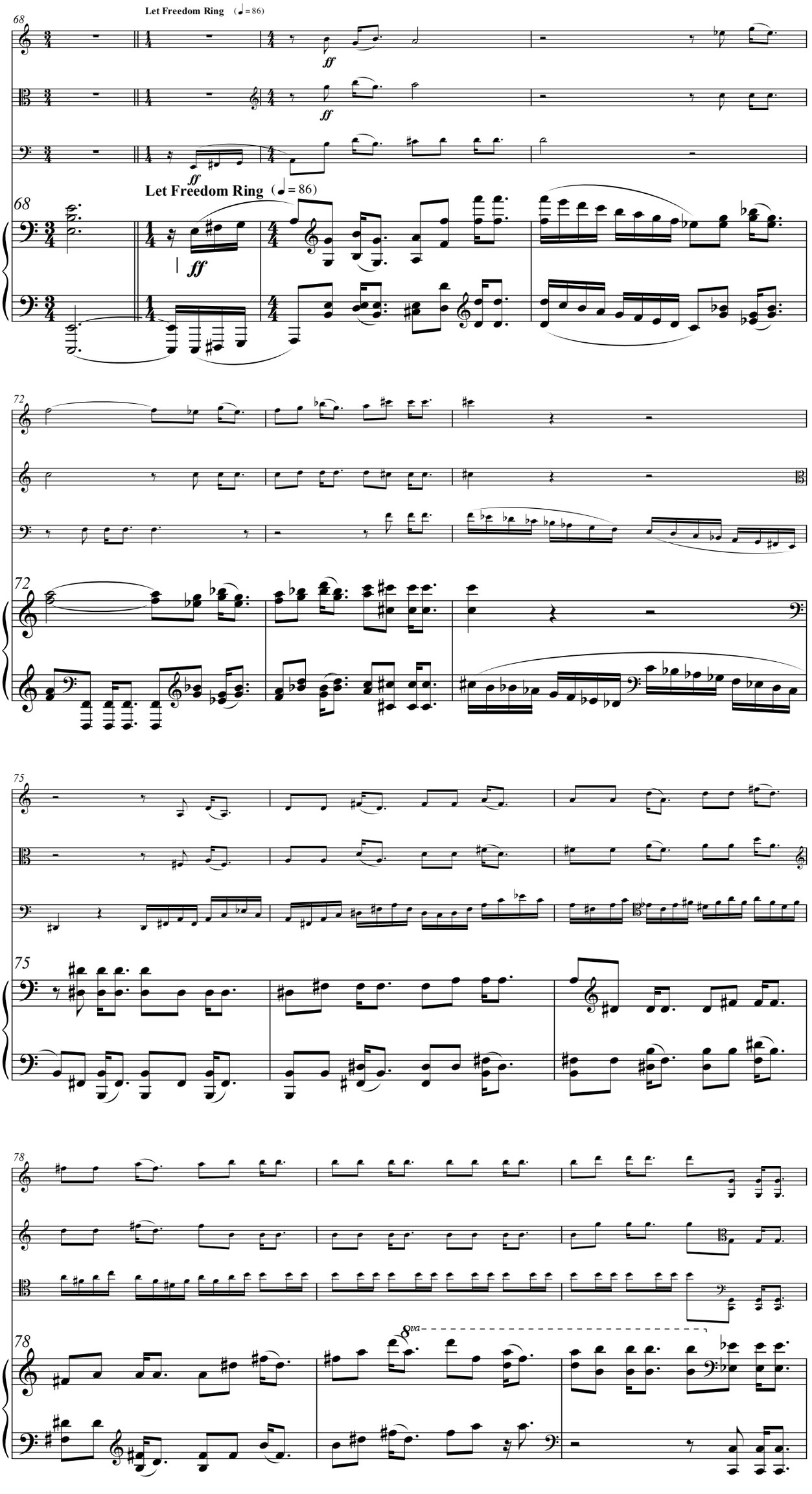

164
ff
167
171
ff dim.
ff dim.
ff dim.
ffdim.
174
pizz.
p
pp
pizz.
p
pp
p
pp

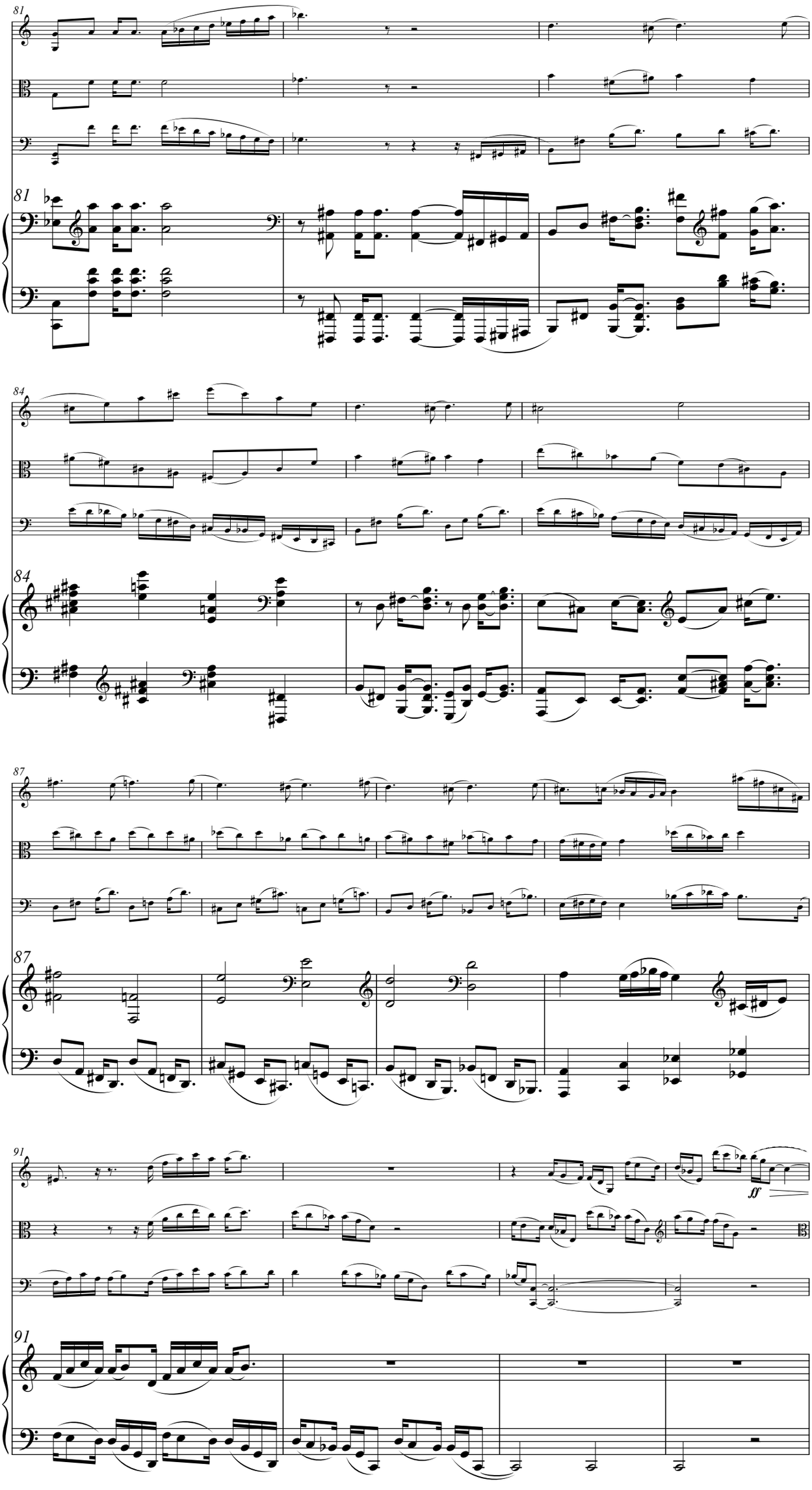

I still have dream (♩=60)
Violin
Viola
Cello
I still have dream (♩=60)
Piano
p
6
accel.
Table of brotherhood (♩= 74)
cresc. p. a p.
11
15
(mp)
(mf)
(f)
Ped.
8vb

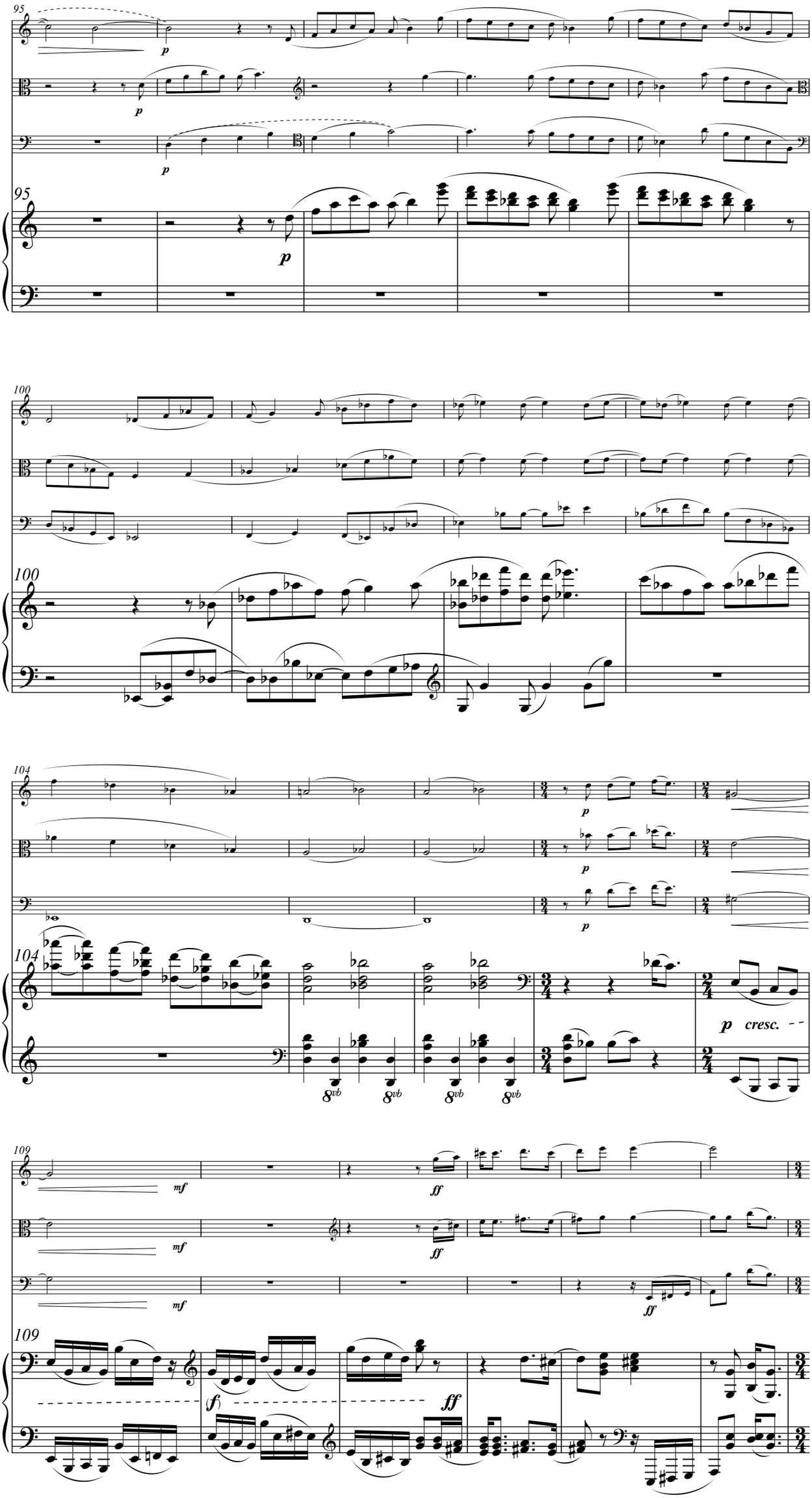

18
ff
ff
ff
ff
18
ff
f
22
ff
ff
mf
22
mf
ff
8va
Ped.
28
ff
mp
pp
ff
mp
pp
mf
ff
mp
pp
mp
mf
28
mf
mp
pp
mp
mf
33
mf
f
f
f
33
f
8va
Ped.
Ped.

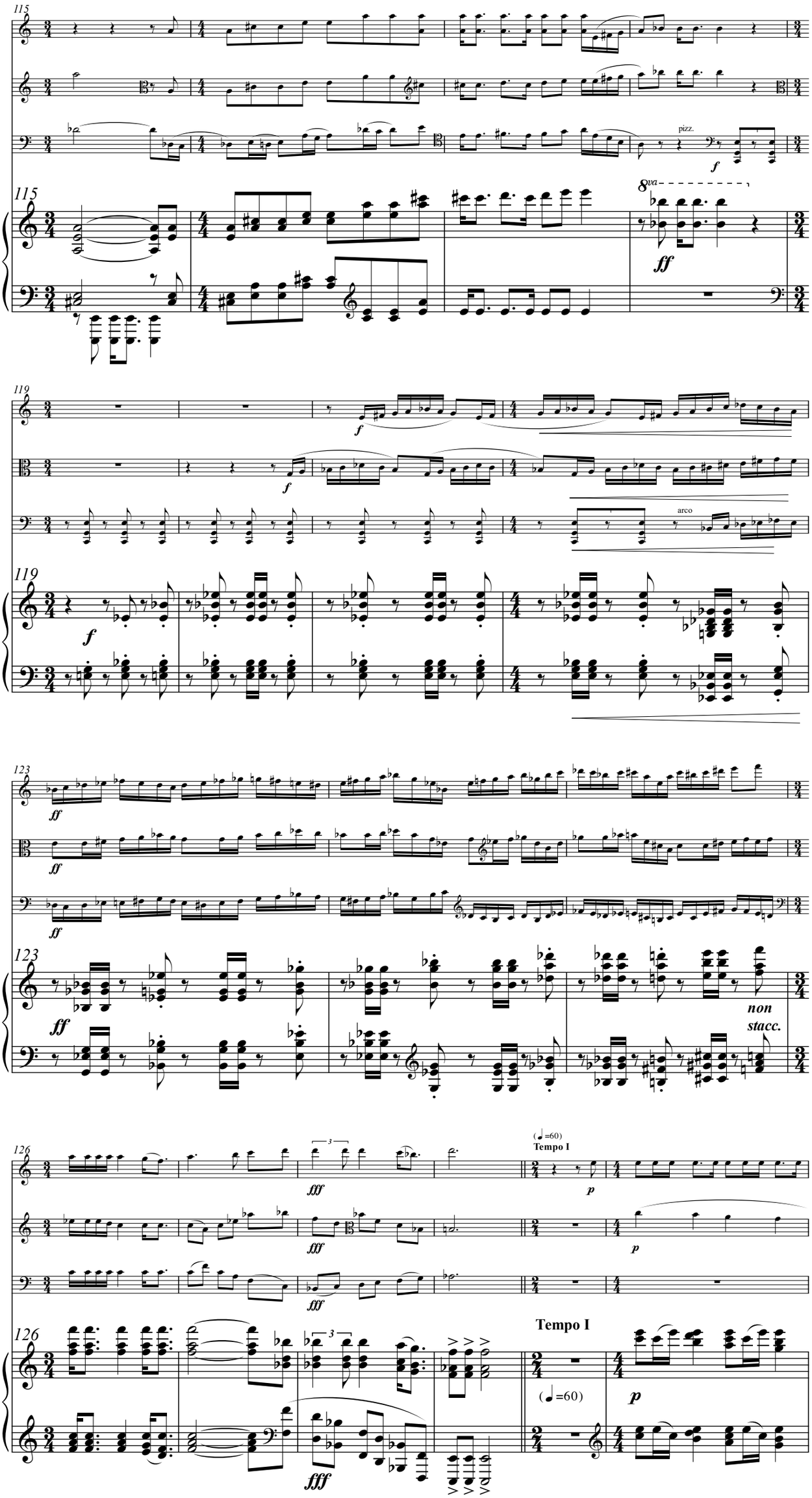

37
ff
Ped.
40
44
48

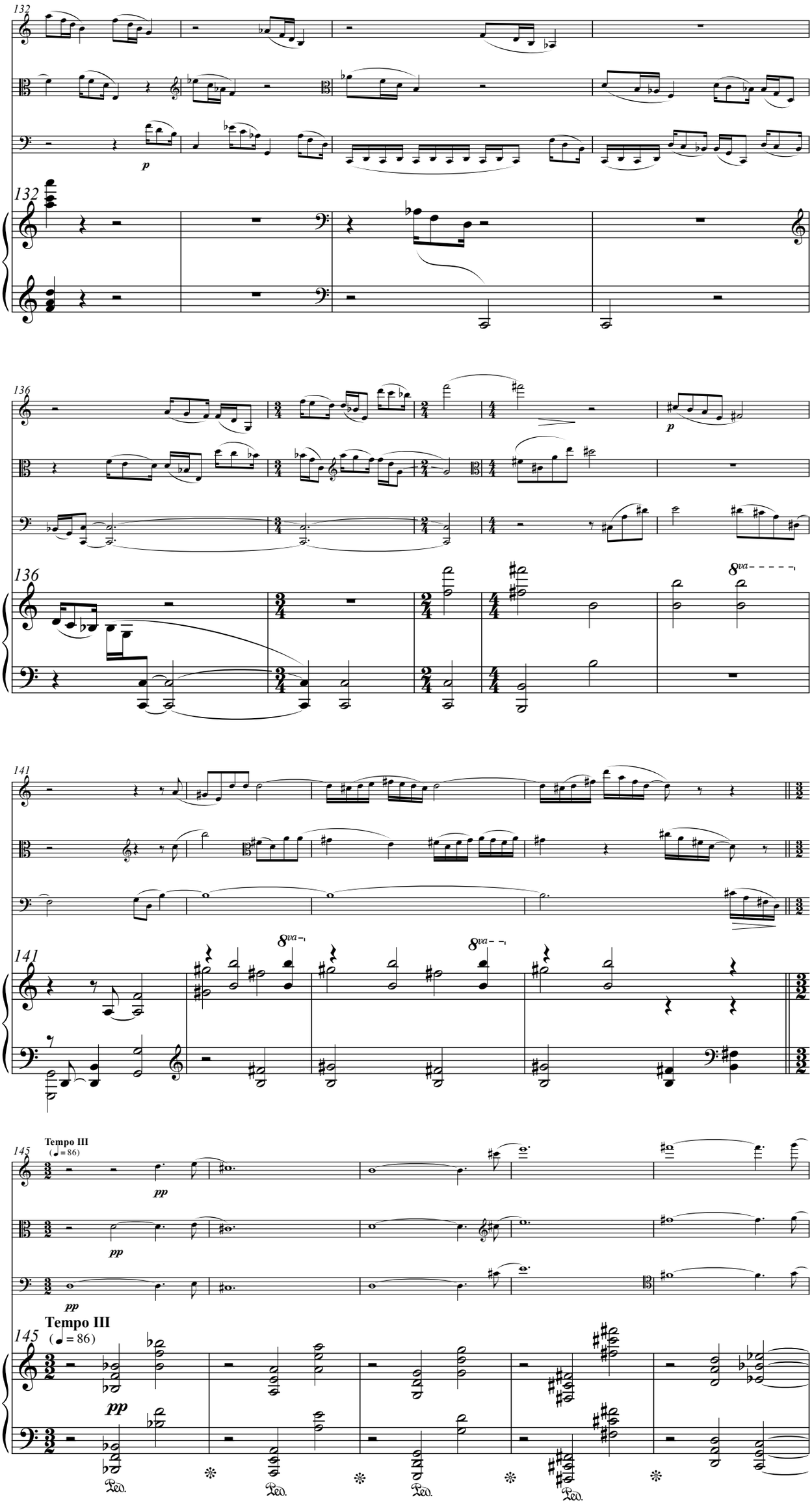

51
rit.
Tempo I (♩=60)
ff
p
54
8va
59
63
pp

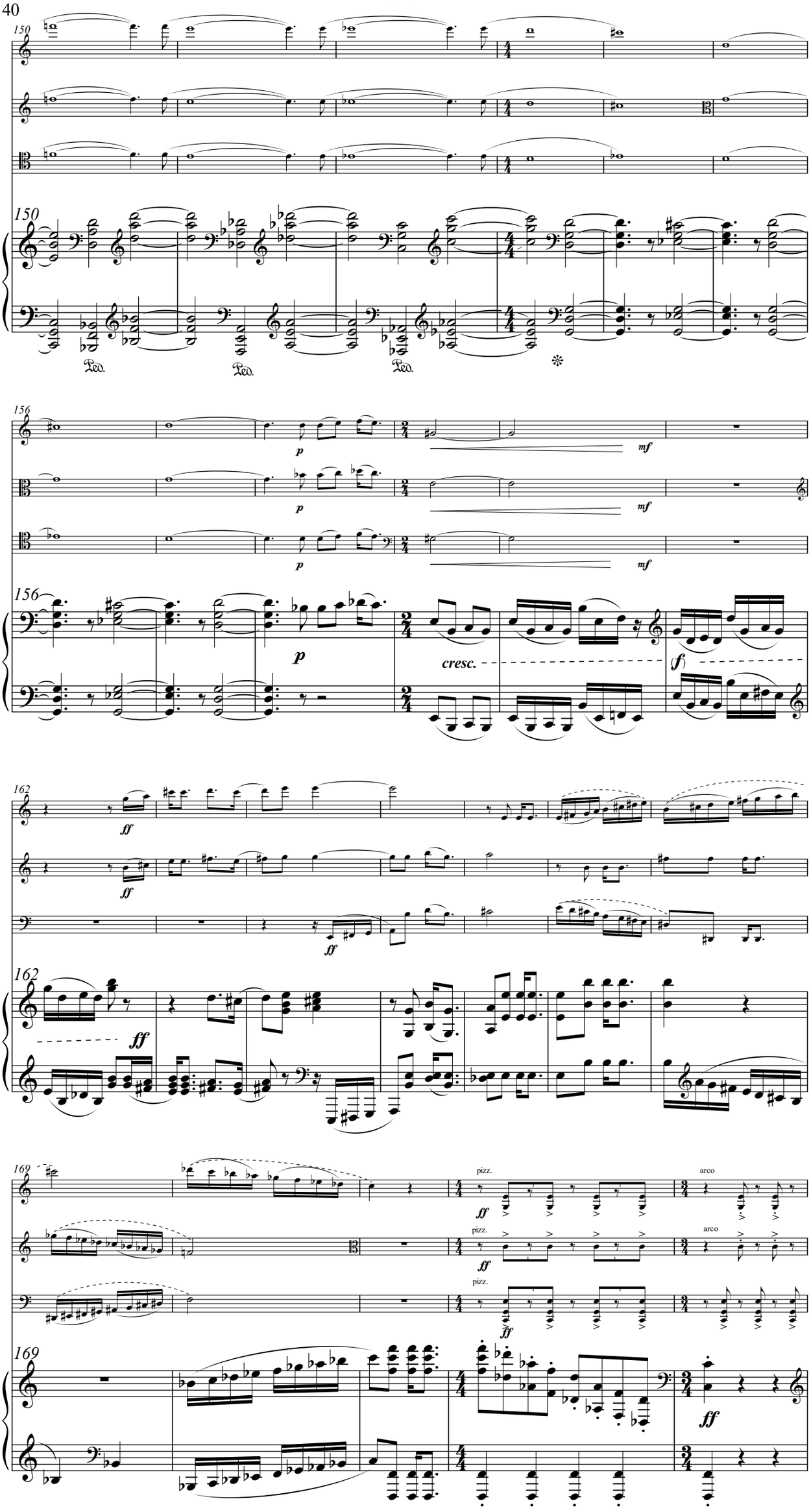

Let Freedom Ring (♩= 86)
68
ff
Let Freedom Ring (♩= 86)
72
75
78
8va

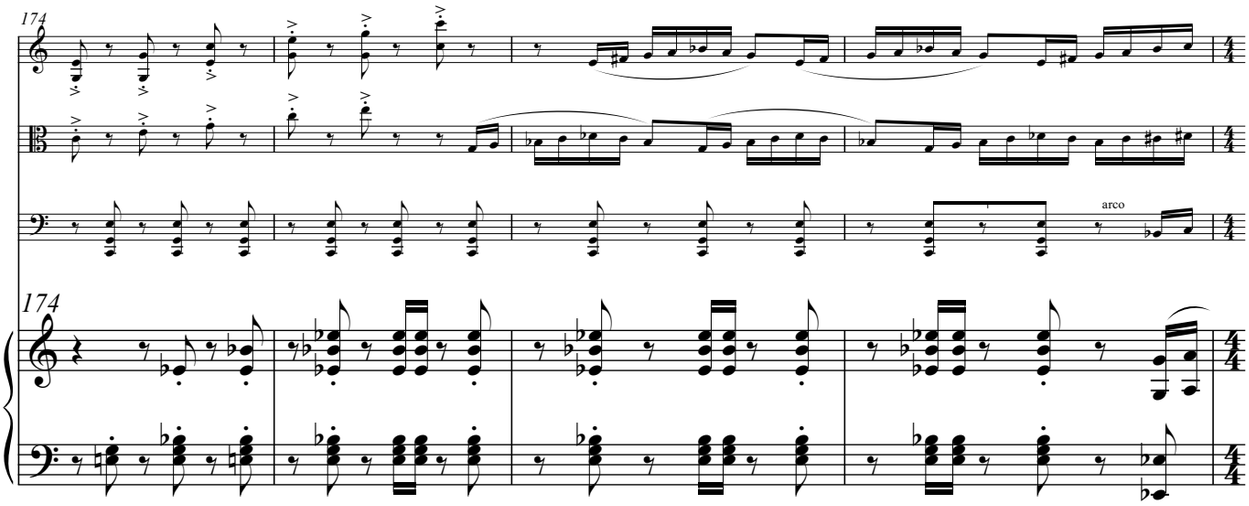

81
84
87
91
ff

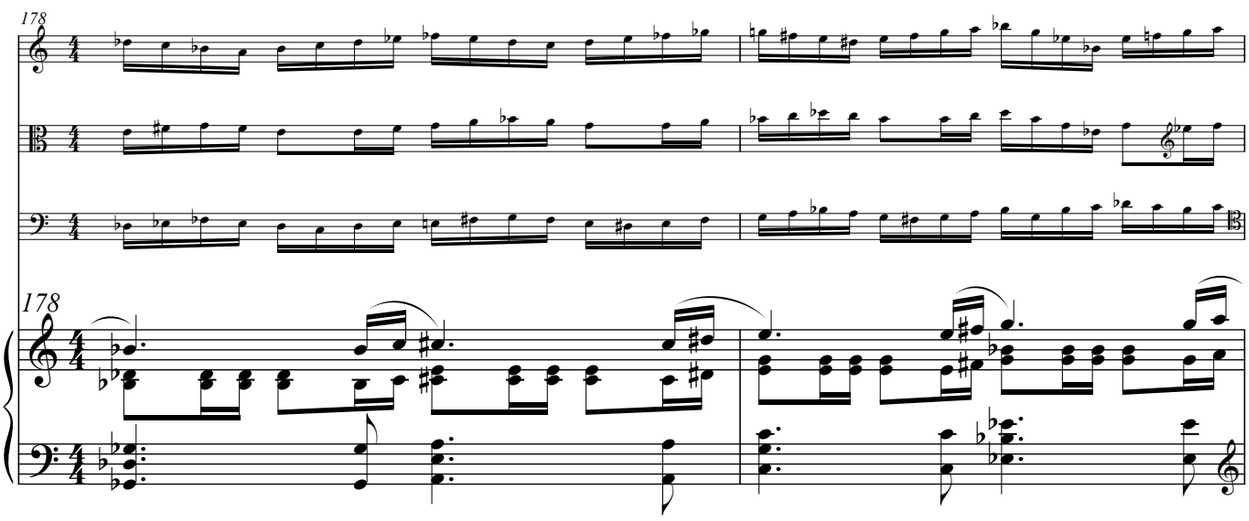

95
p
100
104
8vb
p cresc.
109
mf
ff
f
ff

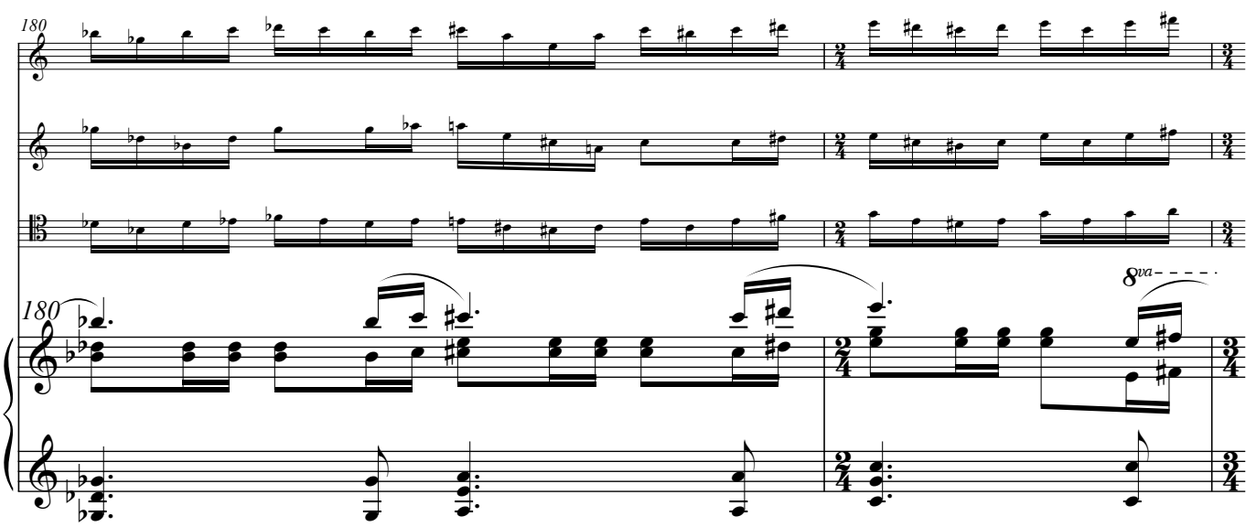

115
pizz.
f
115
8va
ff
119
f
f
arco
119
f
123
ff
ff
ff
123
ff
non
stacc.
126
fff
fff
(♩=60)
Tempo I
p
p
126
fff
fff
Tempo I
(♩=60)
p

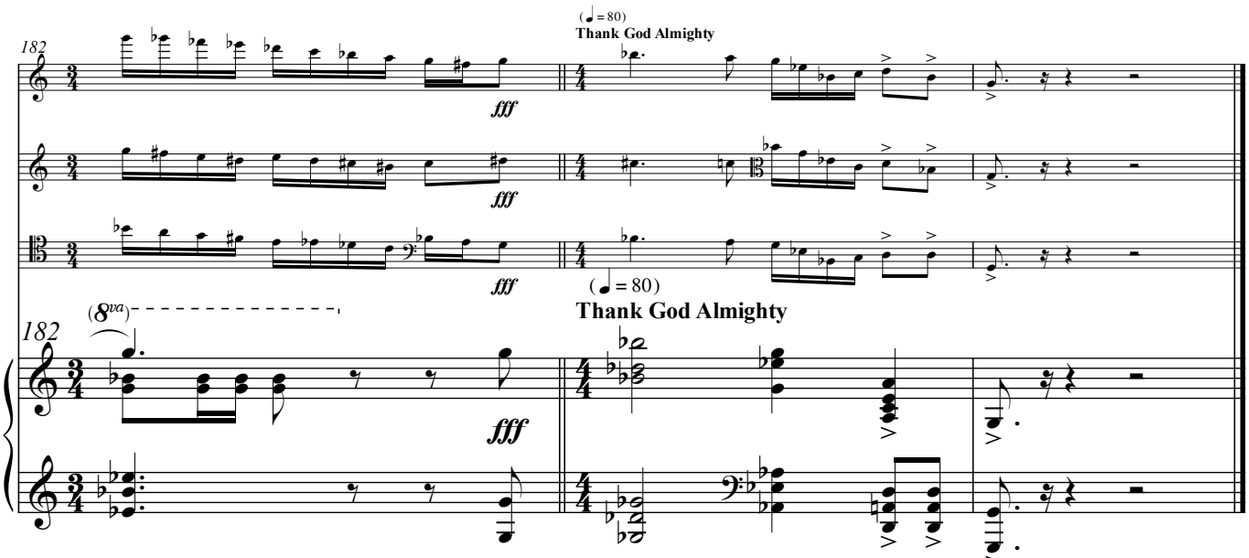

132
p
136
p
8va
141
8va
8va
145
Tempo III
(♩= 86)
pp
pp
pp
Tempo III
(♩= 86)
pp
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.


150
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
156
p
p
p
mf
mf
mf
cresc.
(f)
162
ff
ff
ff
169
pizz.
arco
ff


174
arco
174


178
178


180
8va
180


182
fff
fff
fff
(♩ = 80)
Thank God Almighty
(8va)
182
fff
(♩ = 80)
Thank God Almighty