Birthday Quartet

for Violin, Viola, Violoncello, and Piano

Bill Robinson

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Composed May 9—October 20, 2013; Aug. 29—October 5, 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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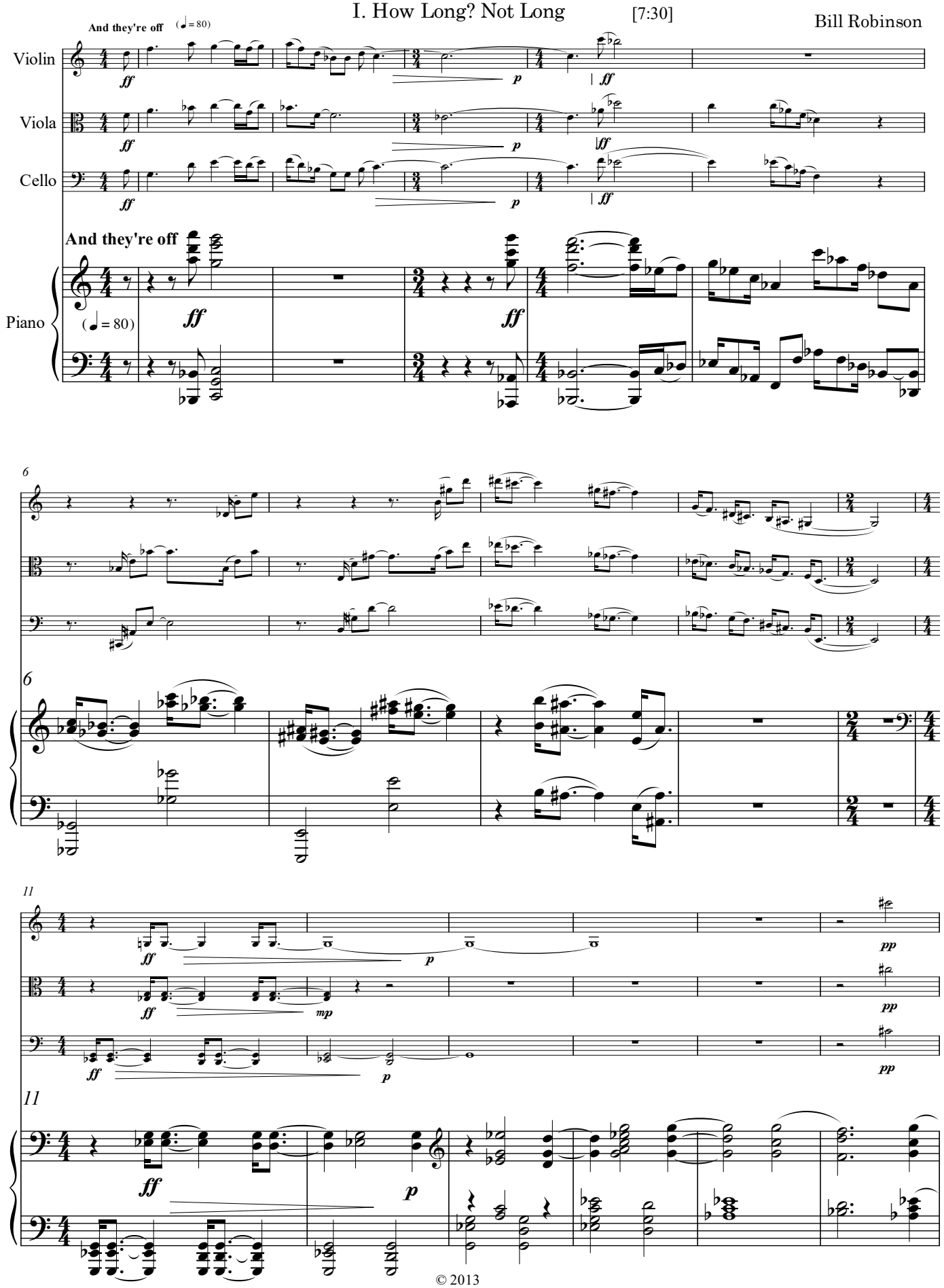
www.billrobinsonmusic.com

cover photograph; March on Washington, August 28, 1963

Birthday Quartet

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

Bill Robinson



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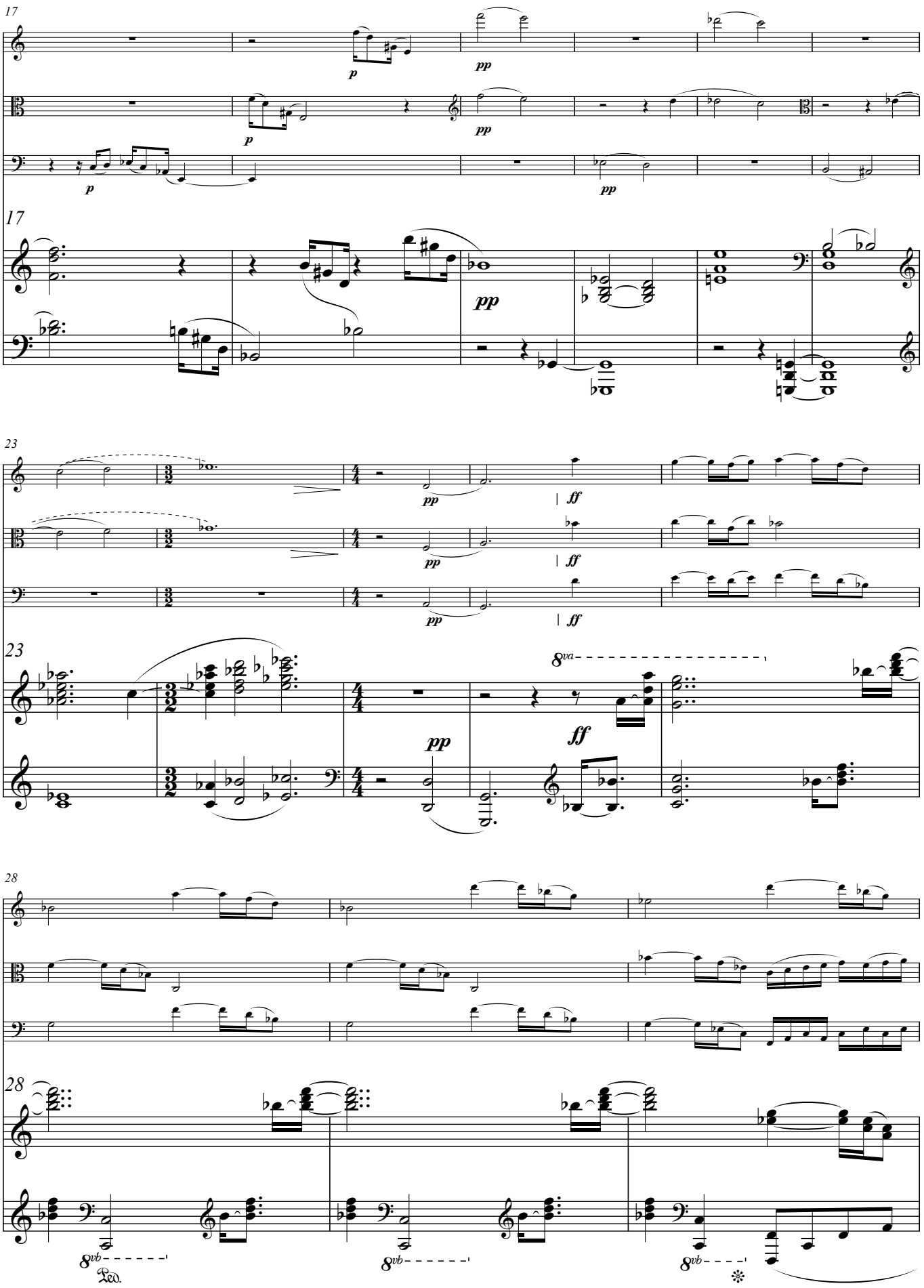
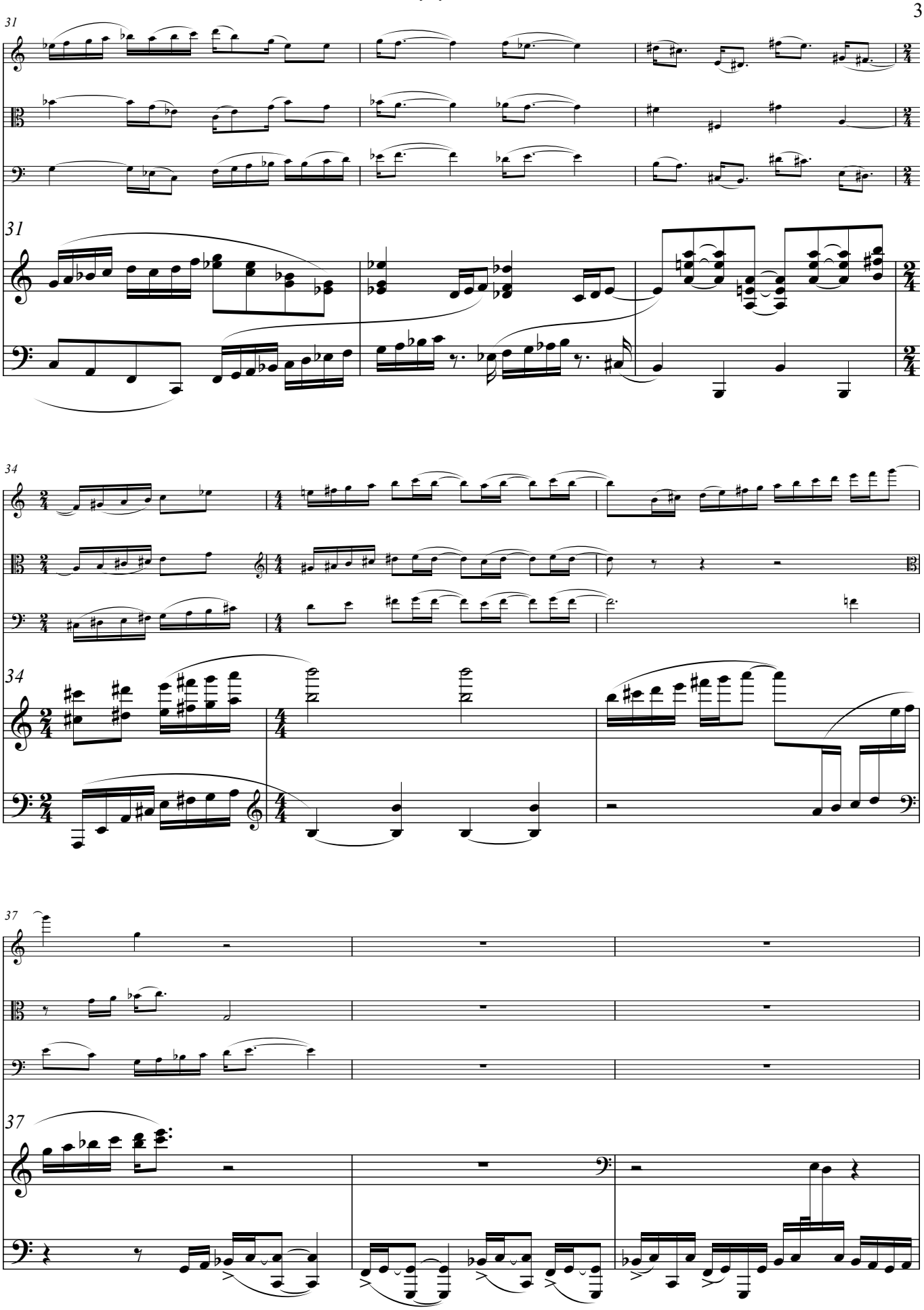

17
p
pp
17
pp
23
pp
ff
23
8va
pp
ff
28
8vb
Ped.
8vb
8vb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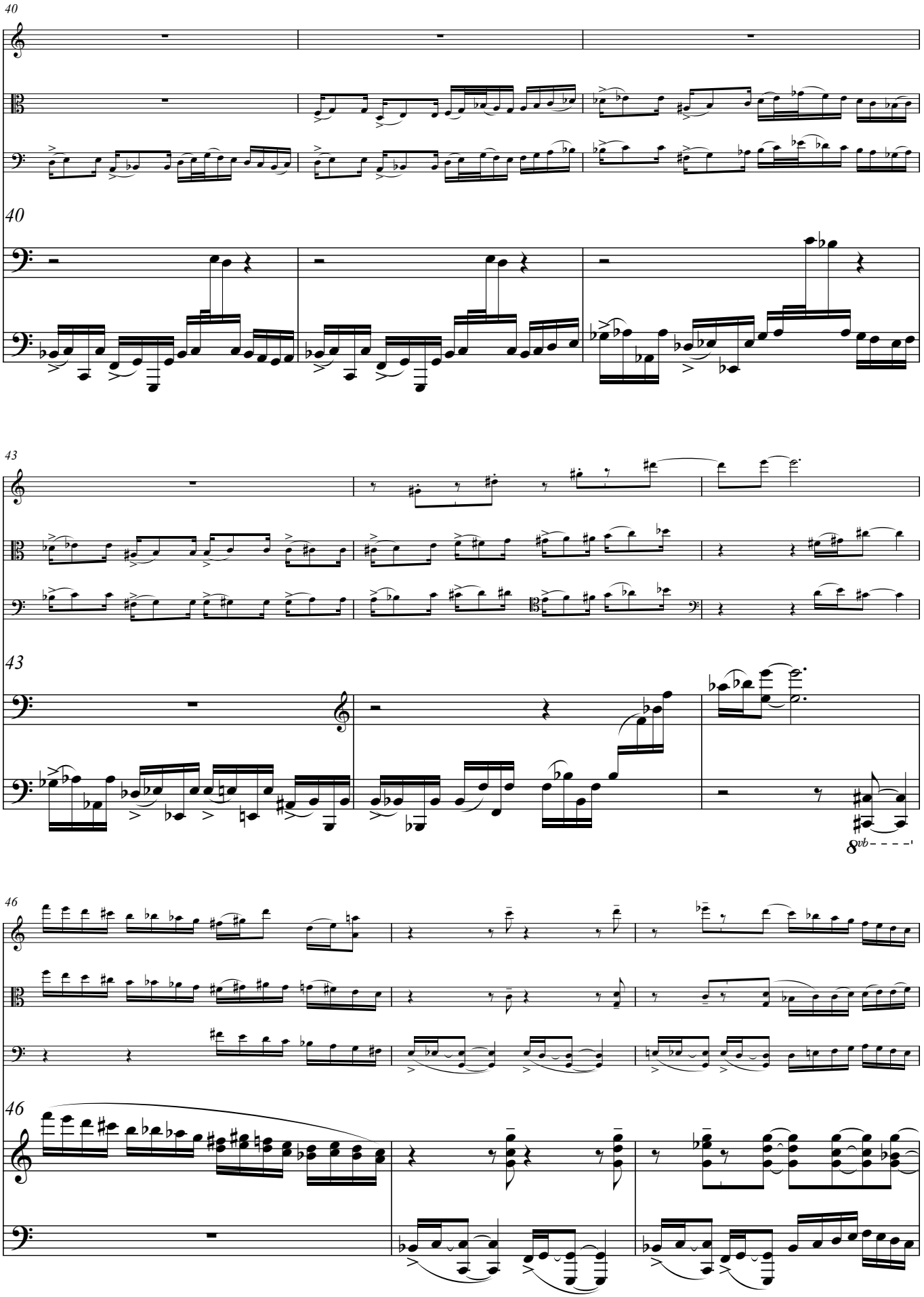
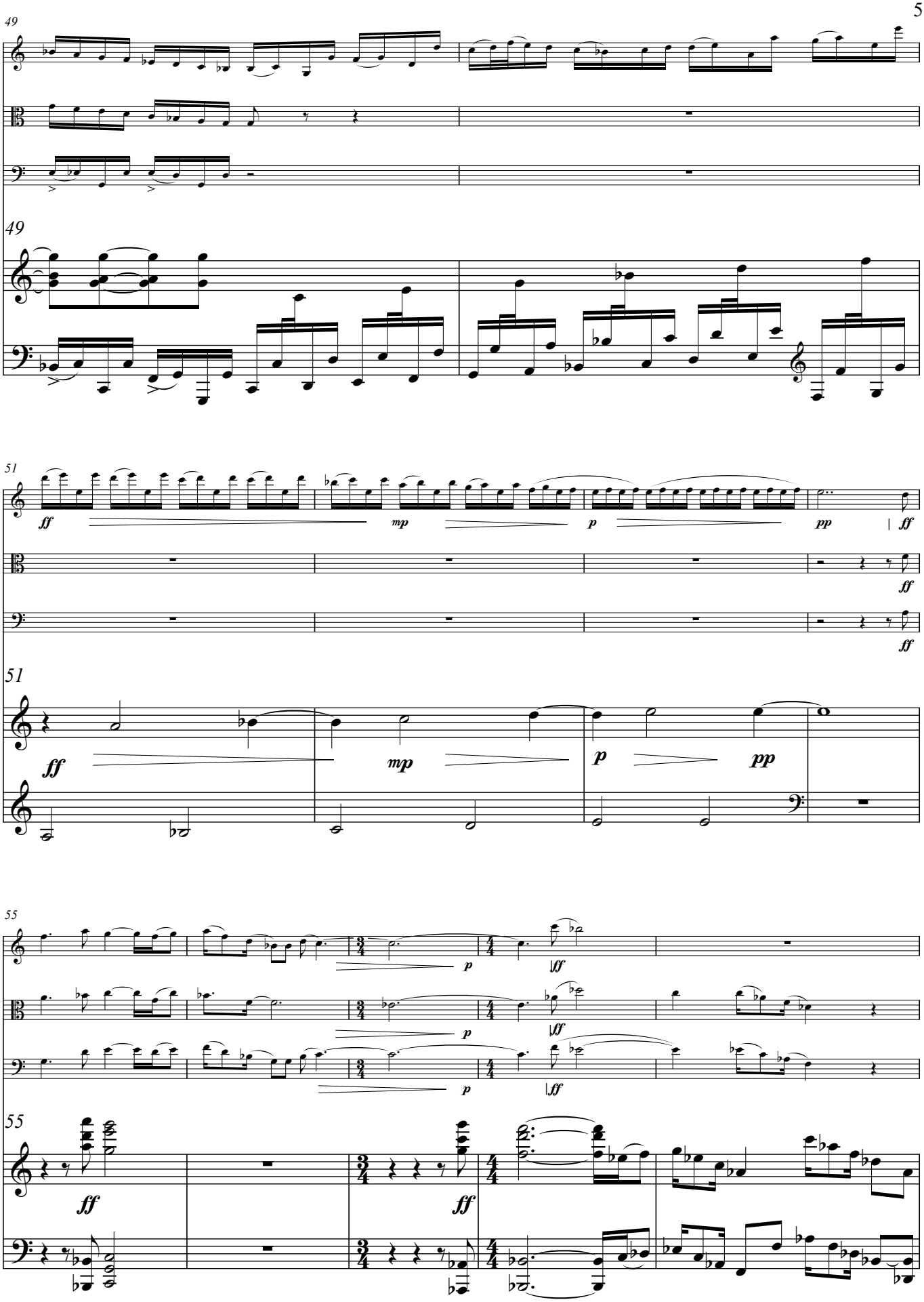
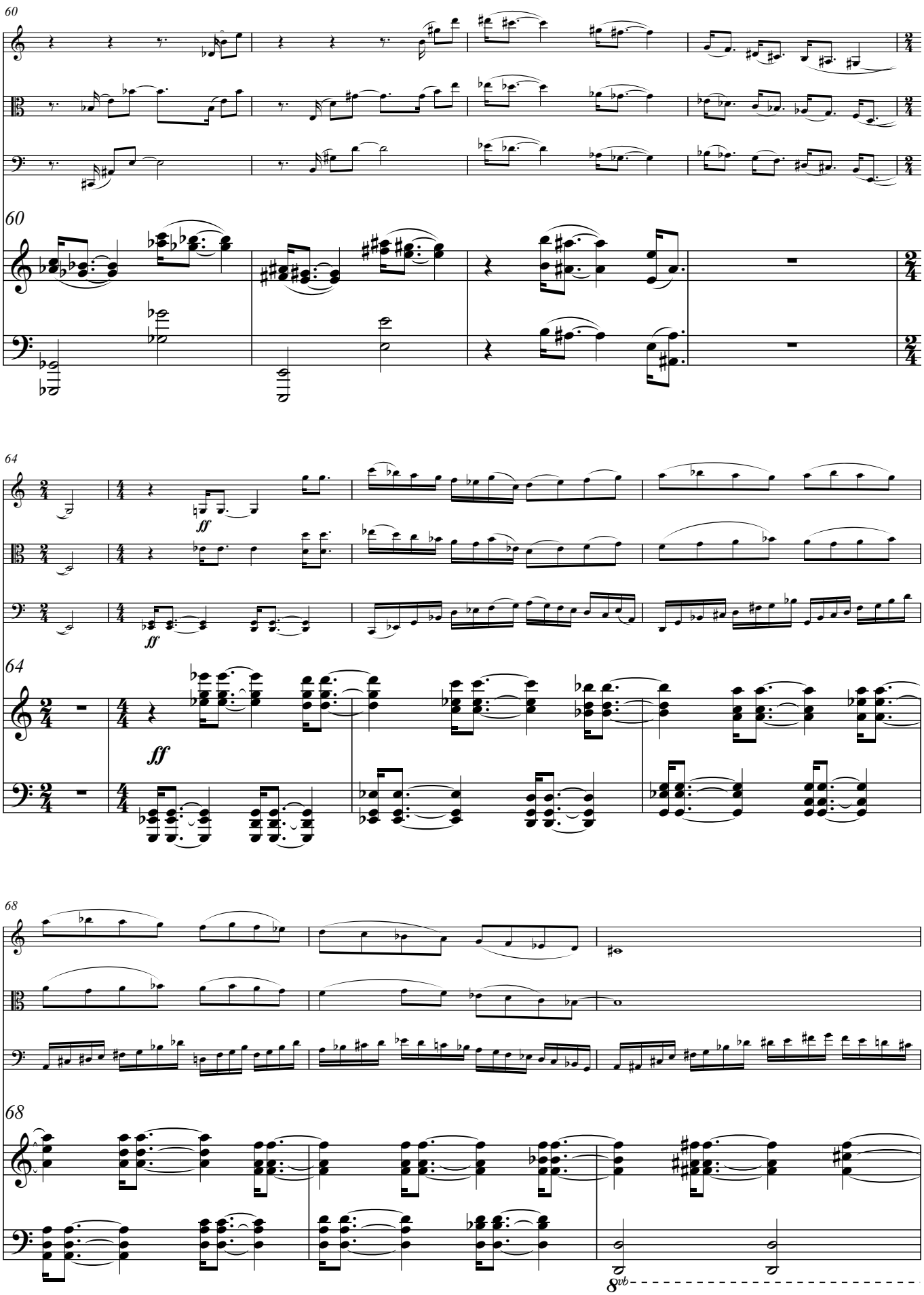
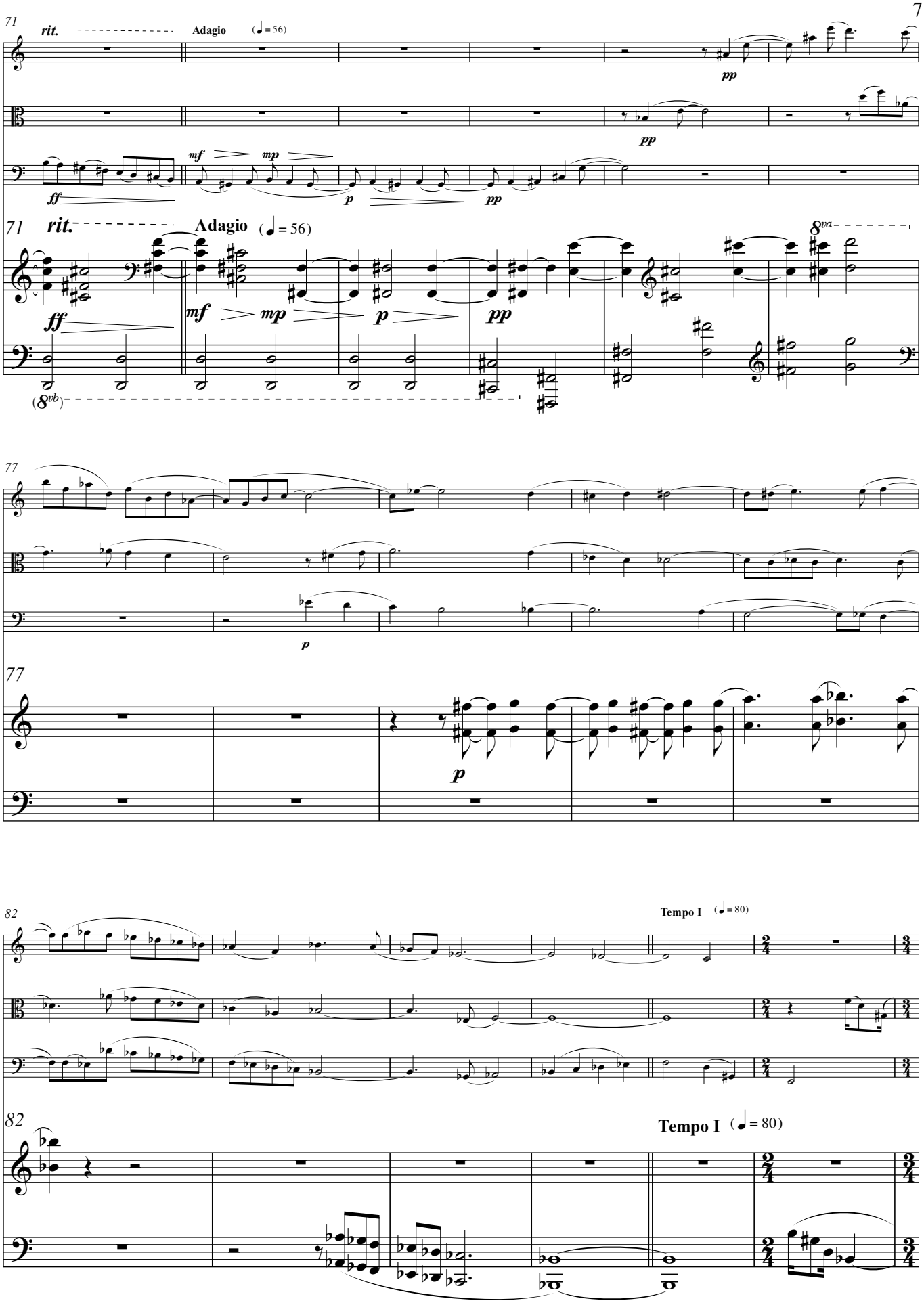
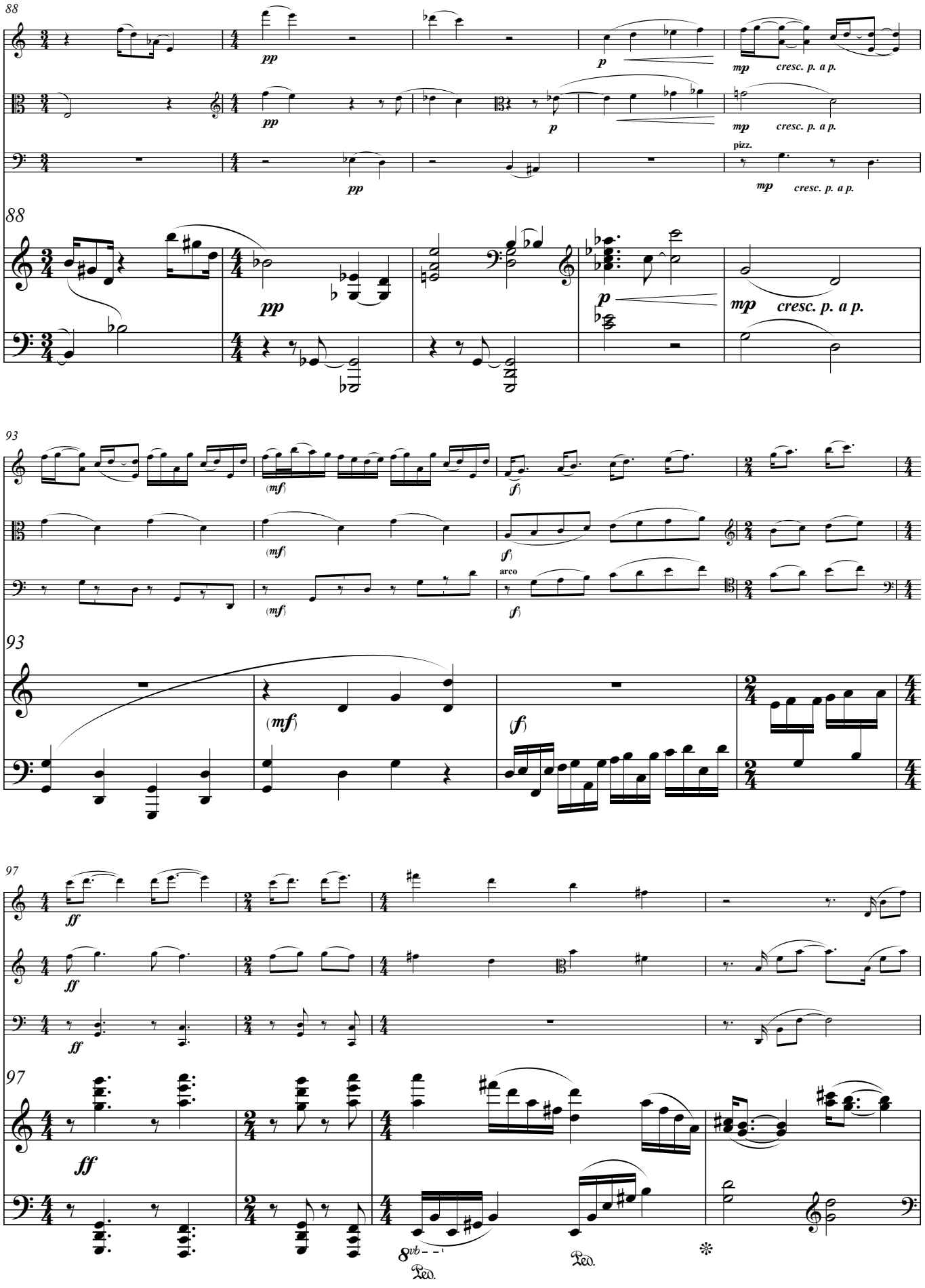
31
34
34
37
37

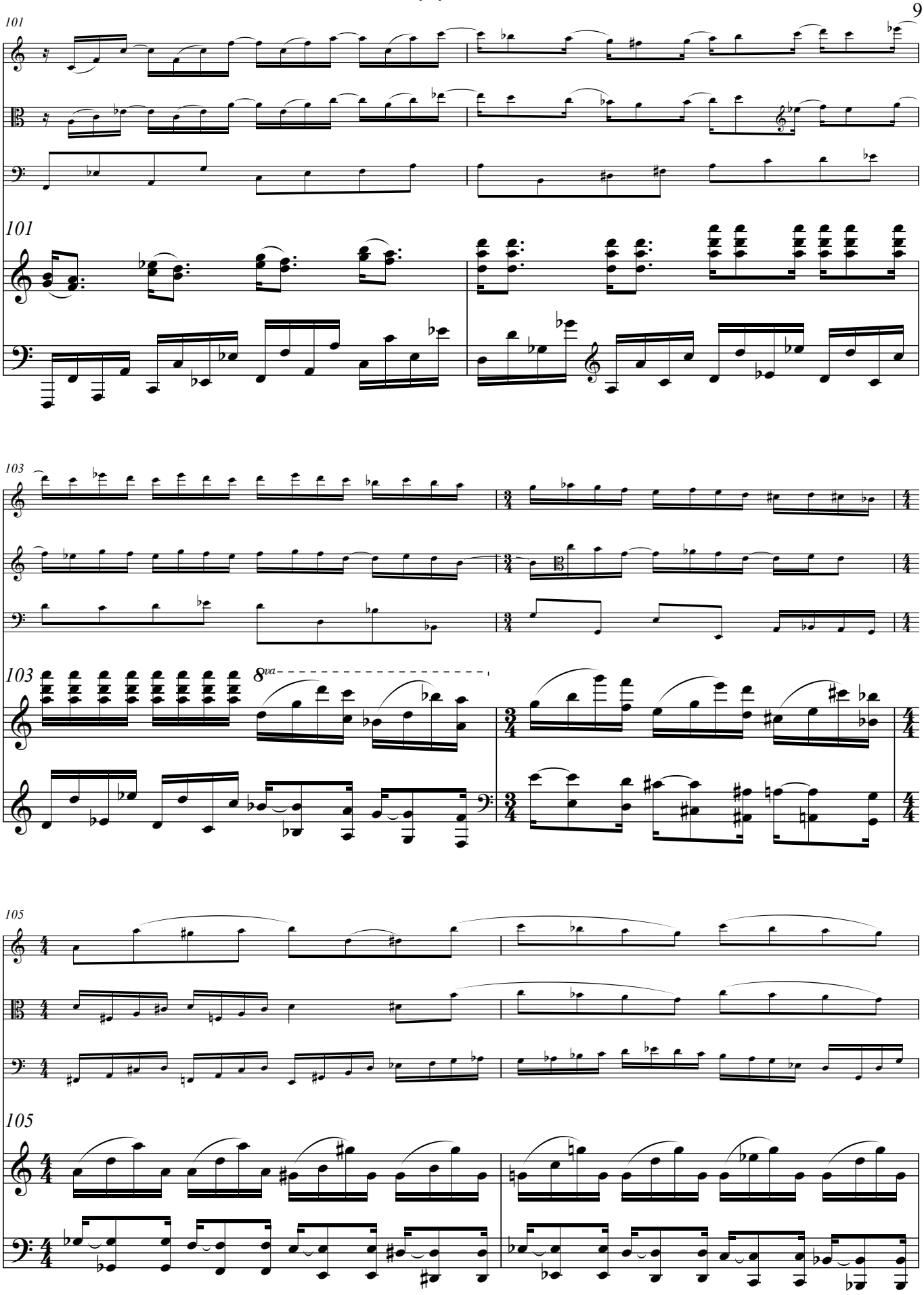

40
40
43
43
8vb
46
46

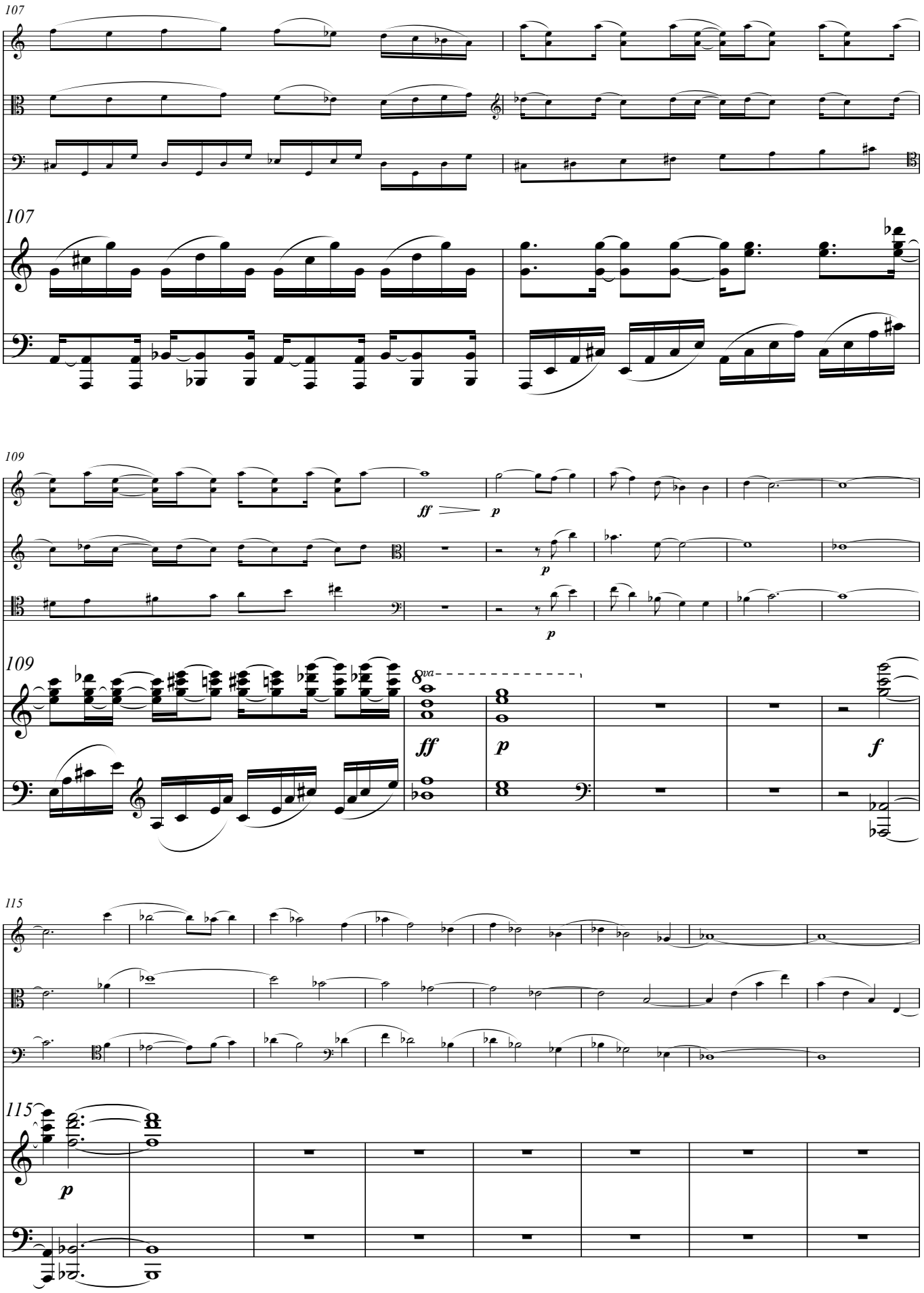

49
49
51
ff
mp
p
pp
ff
51
55
55

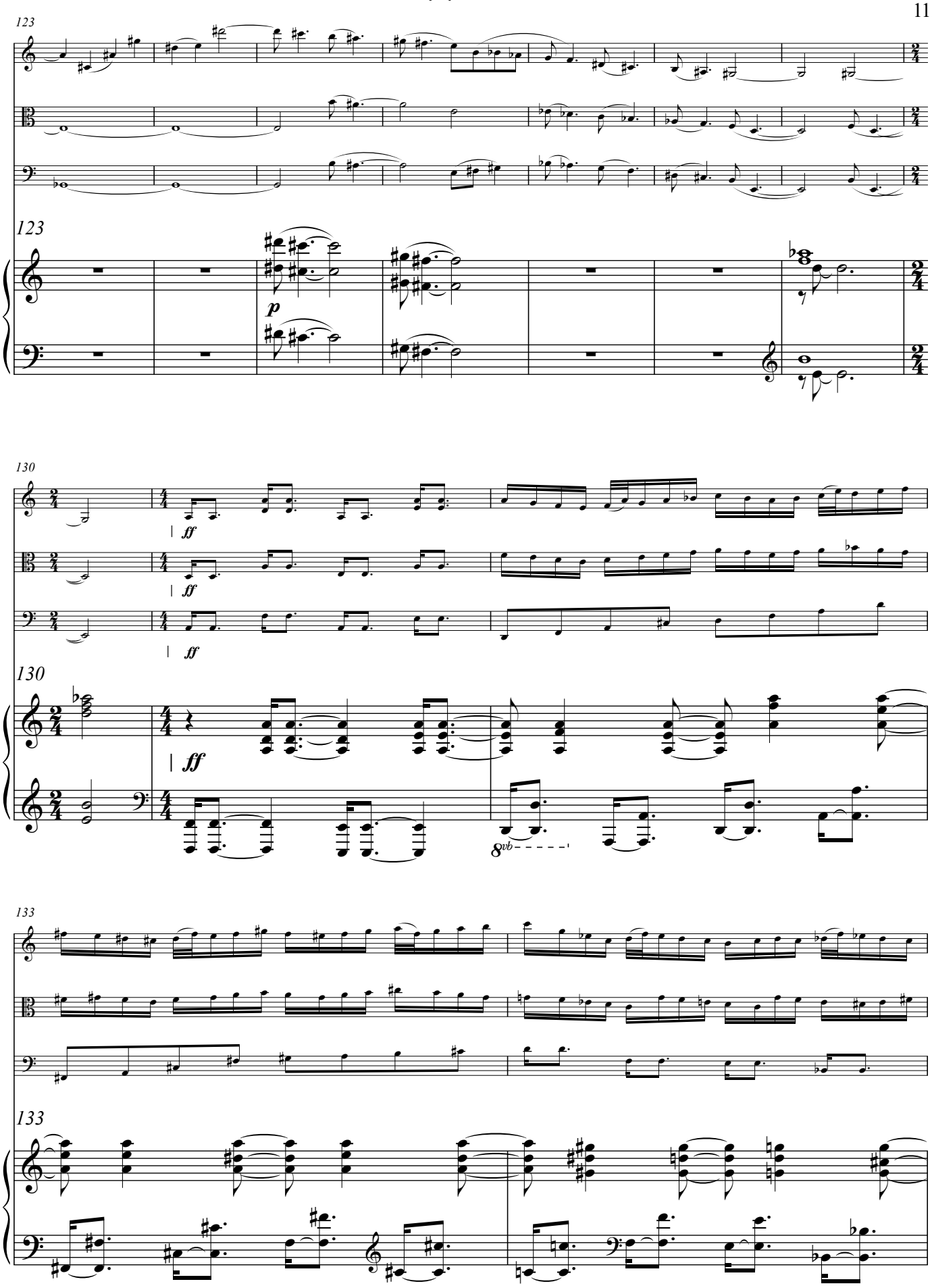

60
60
64
ff
ff
64
68
68
8vb

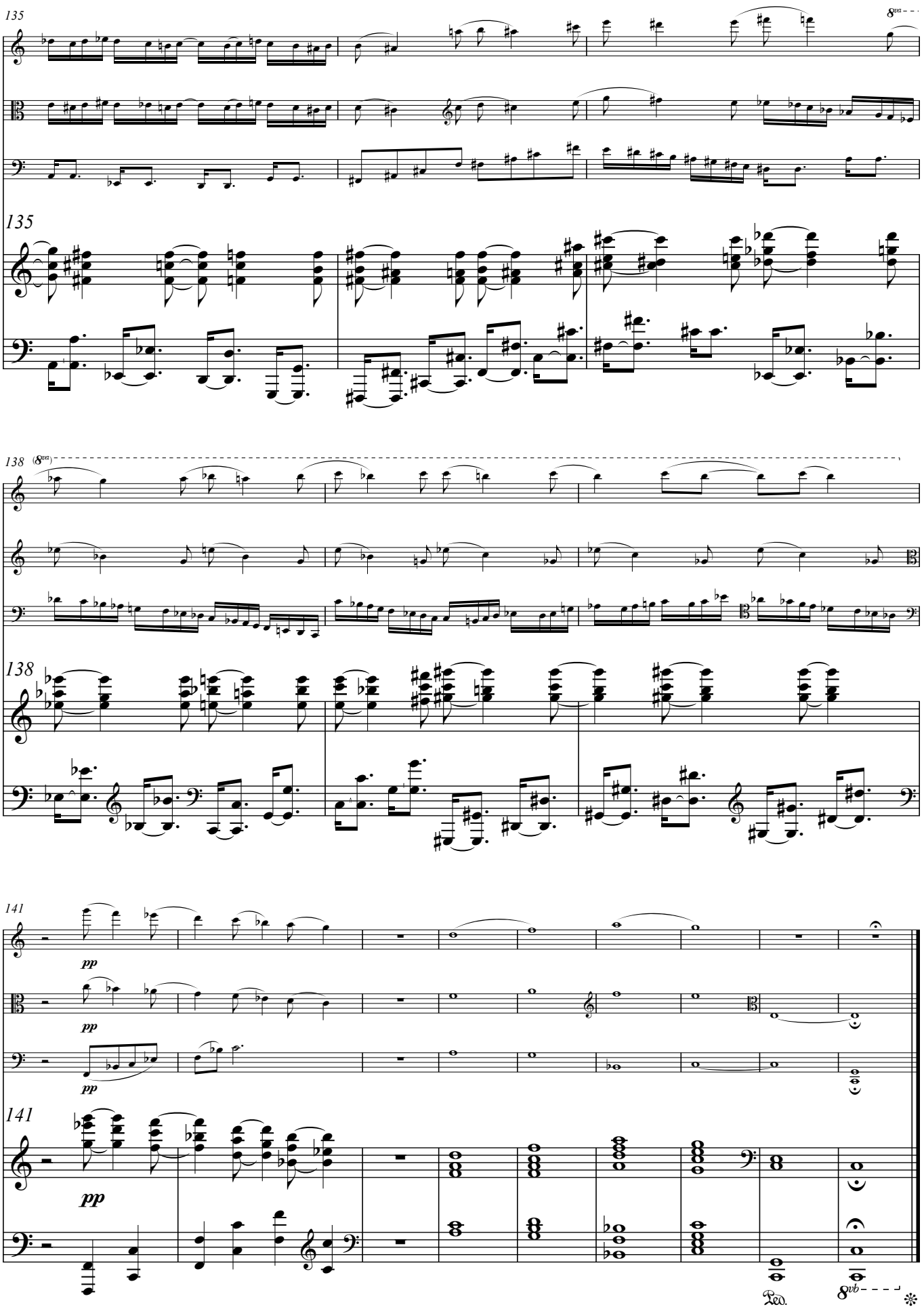

71
rit.
Adagio
(♩= 56)
pp
pp
ff
mf
mp
p
pp
71
rit.
Adagio
(♩= 56)
8va
ff
mf
mp
p
pp
(8vb)
77
p
77
p
82
Tempo I
(♩= 80)
82
Tempo I
(♩= 80)

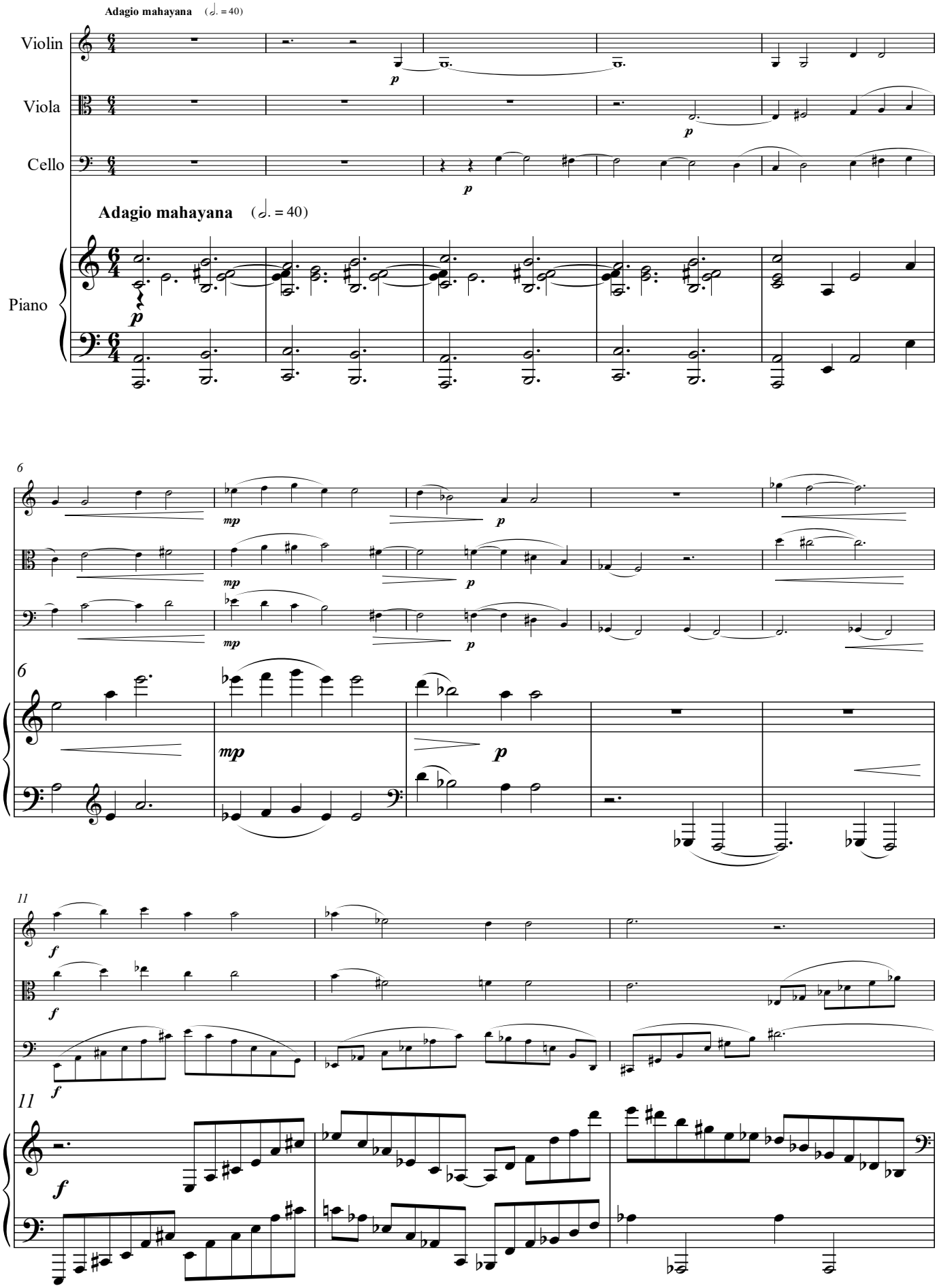

88
pp
p
mp
cresc. p. a p.
pizz.
88
93
(mf)
(f)
arco
93
97
ff
97
8vb
Ped.
Ped.

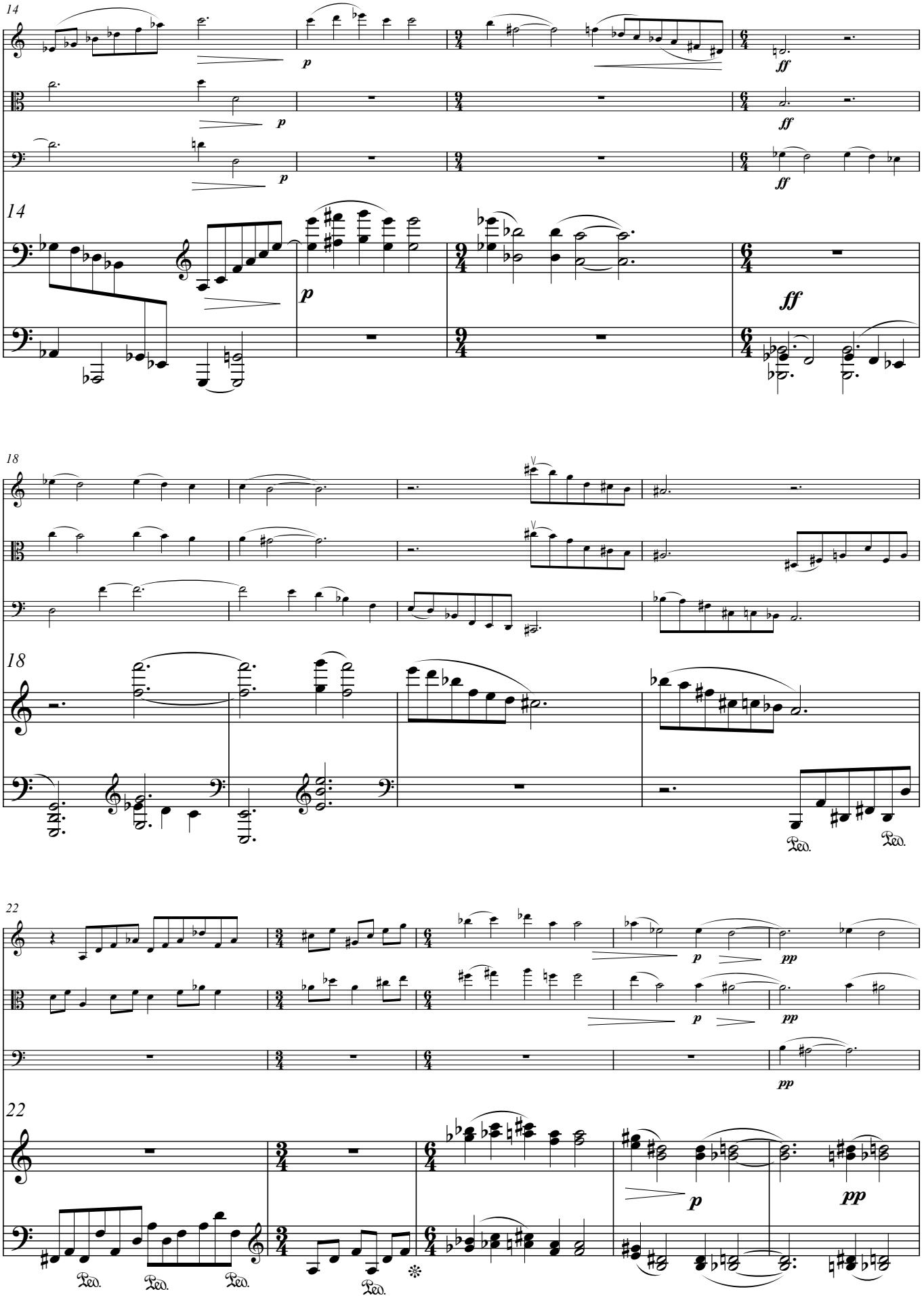

101
101
103
103
8va
105
105

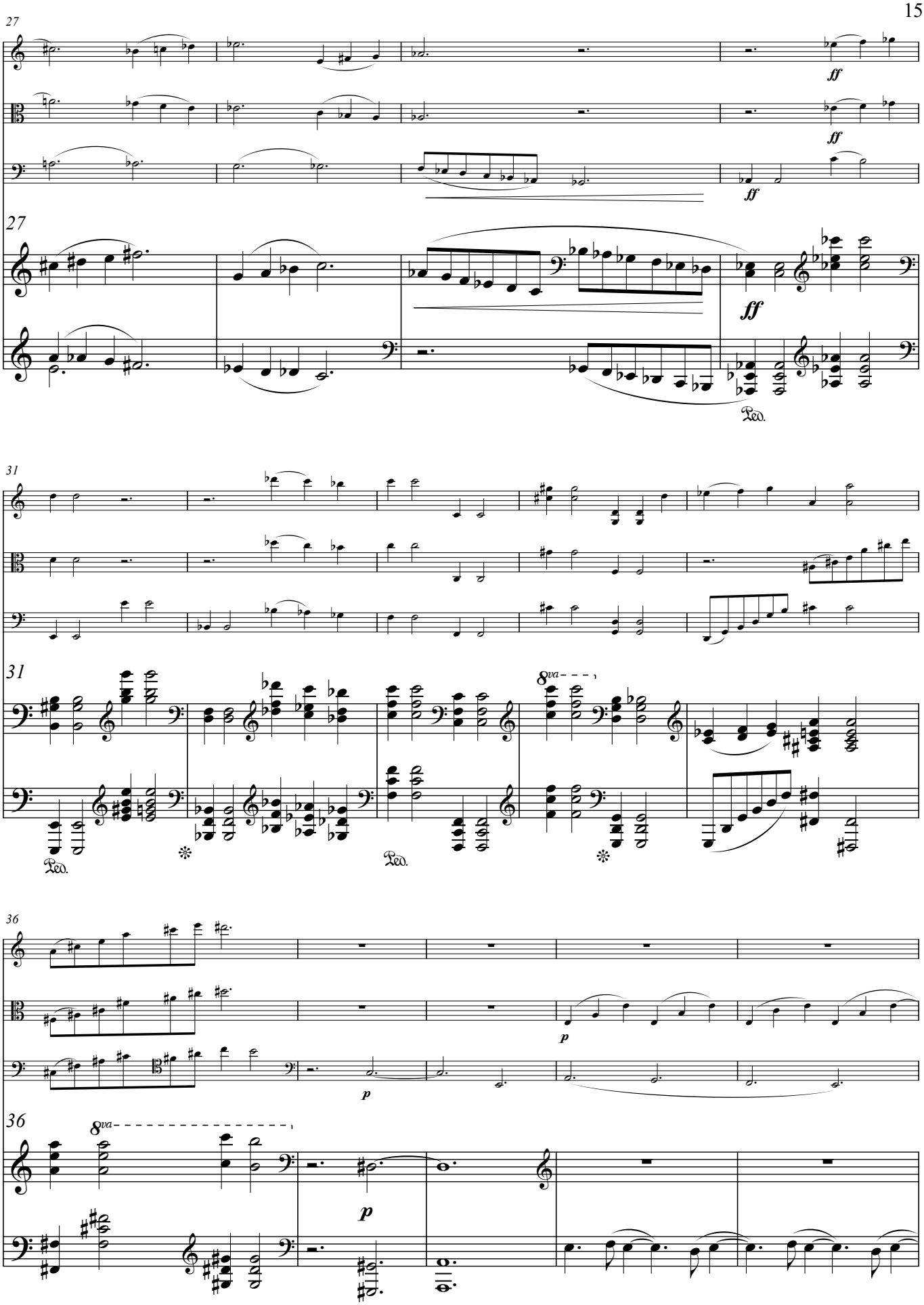

107
107
109
ff
p
p
109
8va
ff
p
f
115
115
p

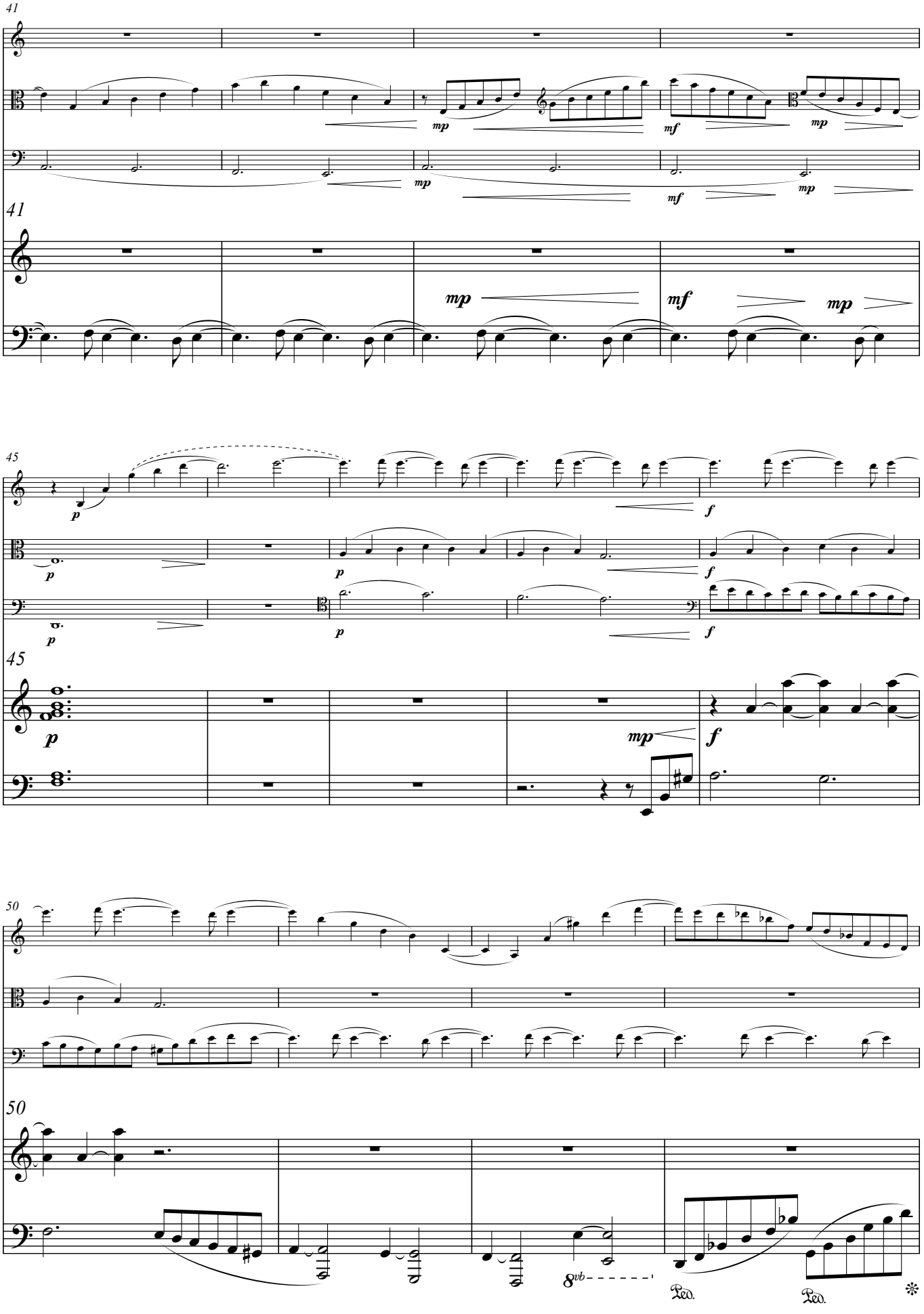

123
123
p
130
ff
ff
ff
130
8vb
133
133

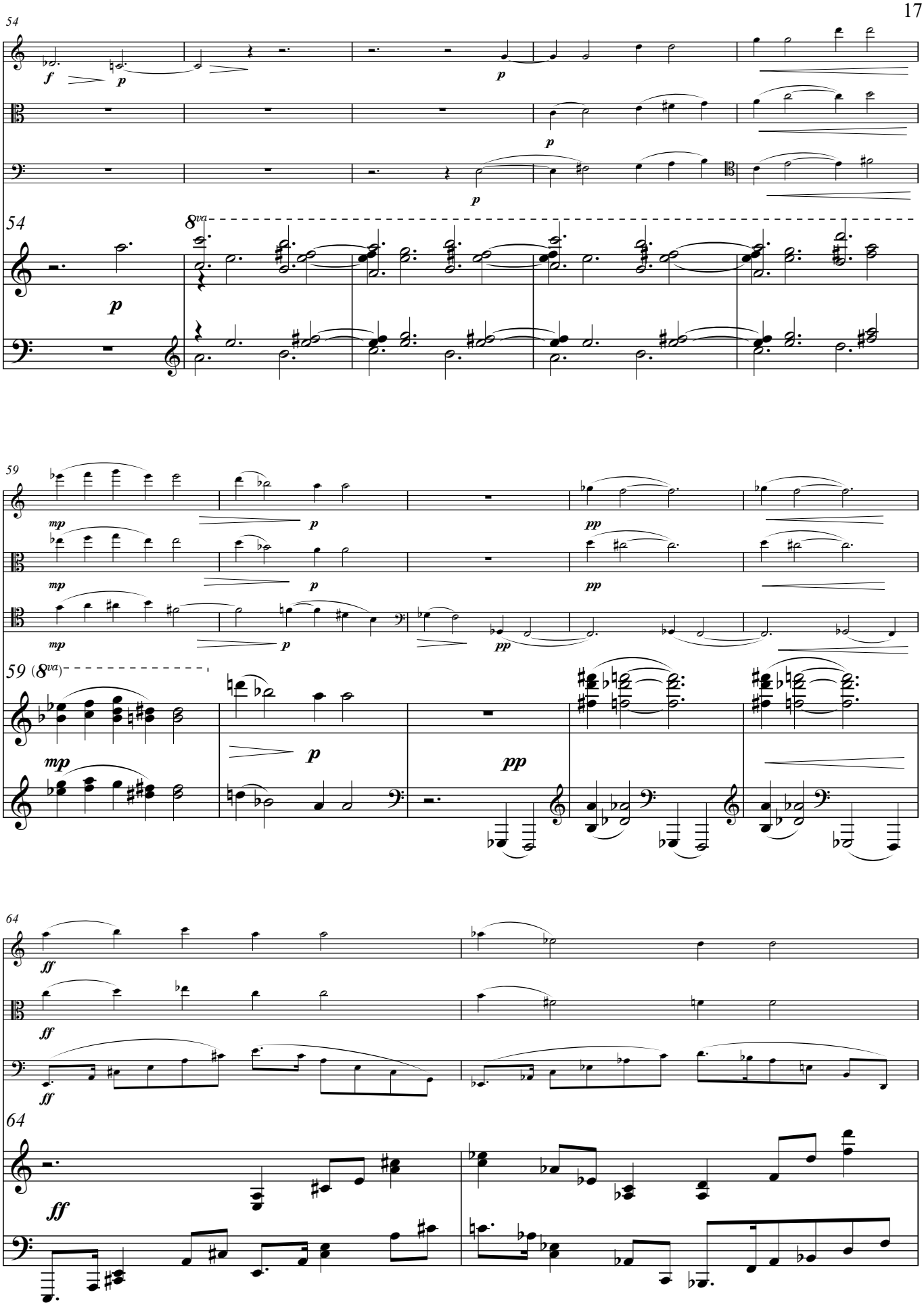

135
8va
135
138
(8va)
138
141
pp
pp
pp
141
pp
Ped.
8vb

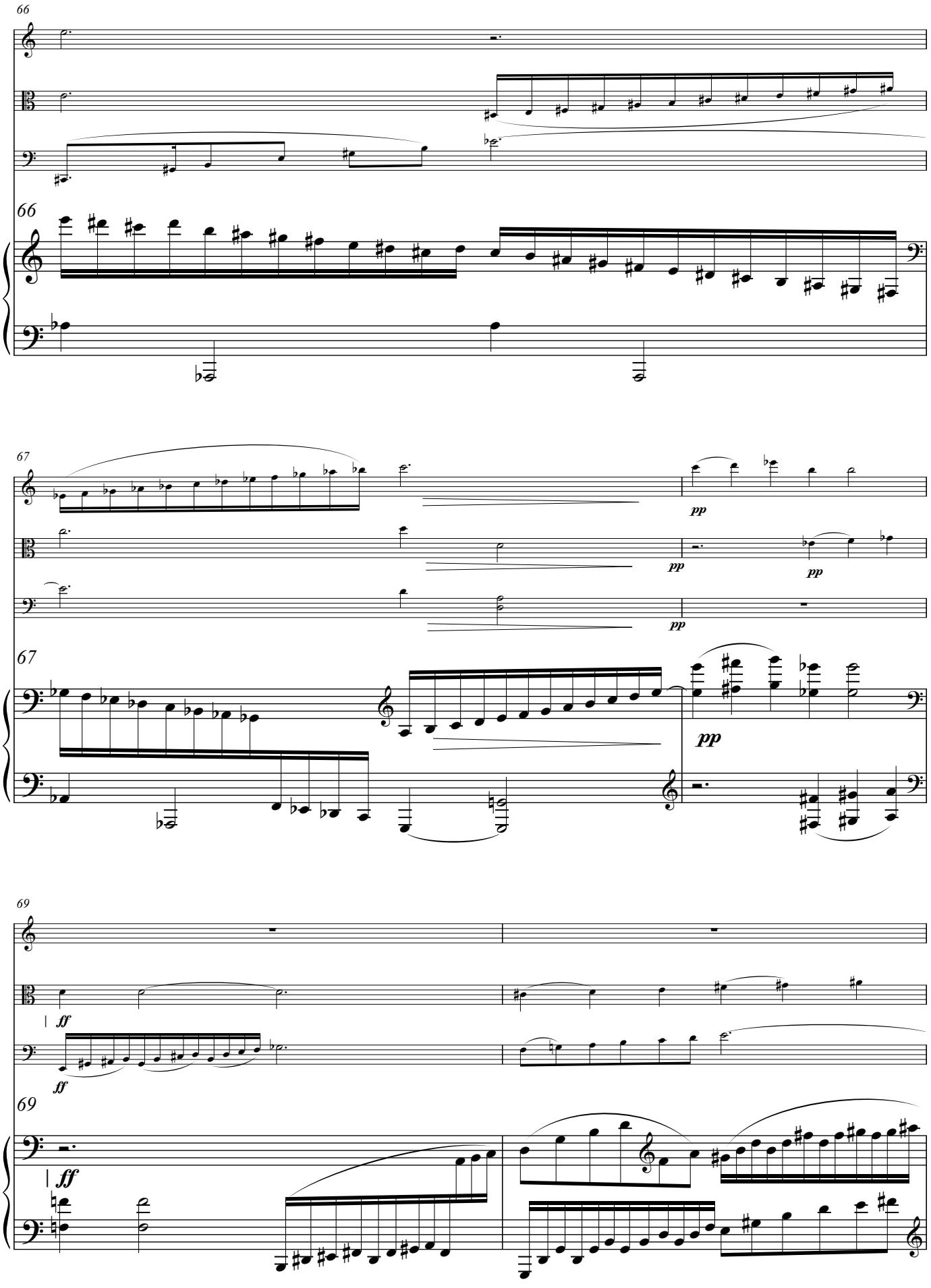

Adagio mahayana (𝅗𝅥. = 40)
Violin
Viola
Cello
Piano
Adagio mahayana (𝅗𝅥. = 40)
6
11

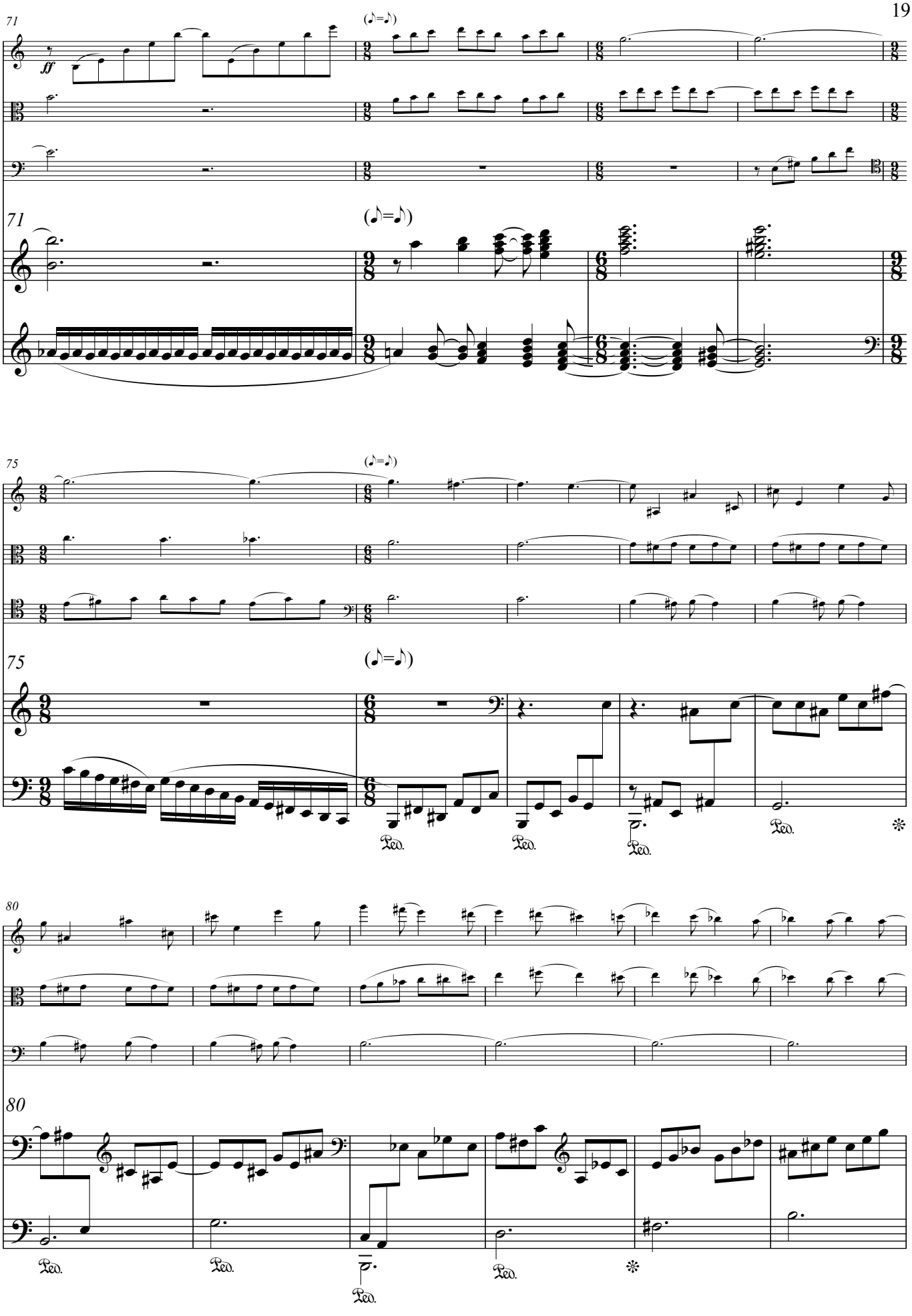

14
p
ff
18
22
pp
Ped.

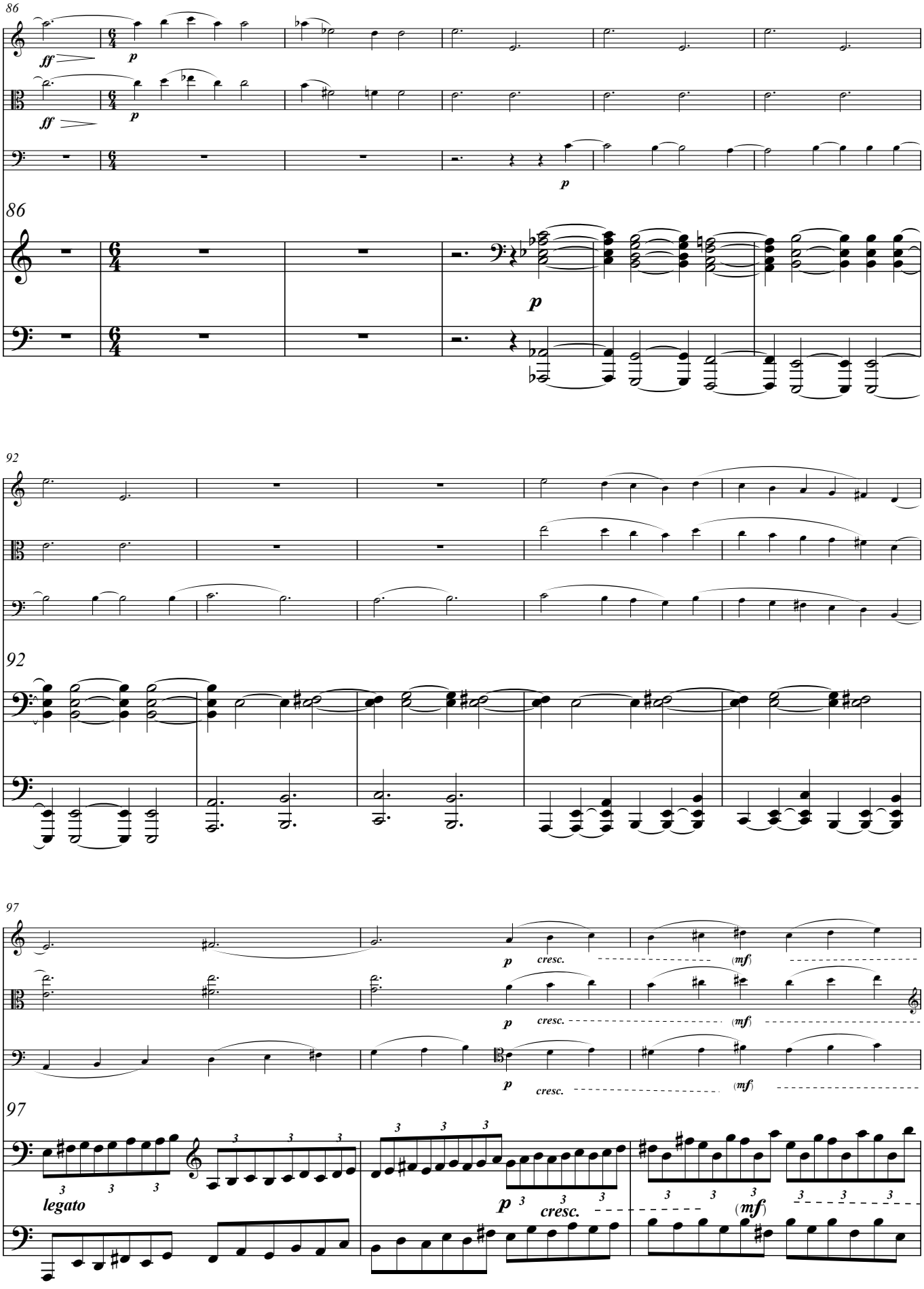

27
ff
ff
27
ff
Ped.
31
31
8va
Ped.
Ped.
36
p
p
36
8va
p

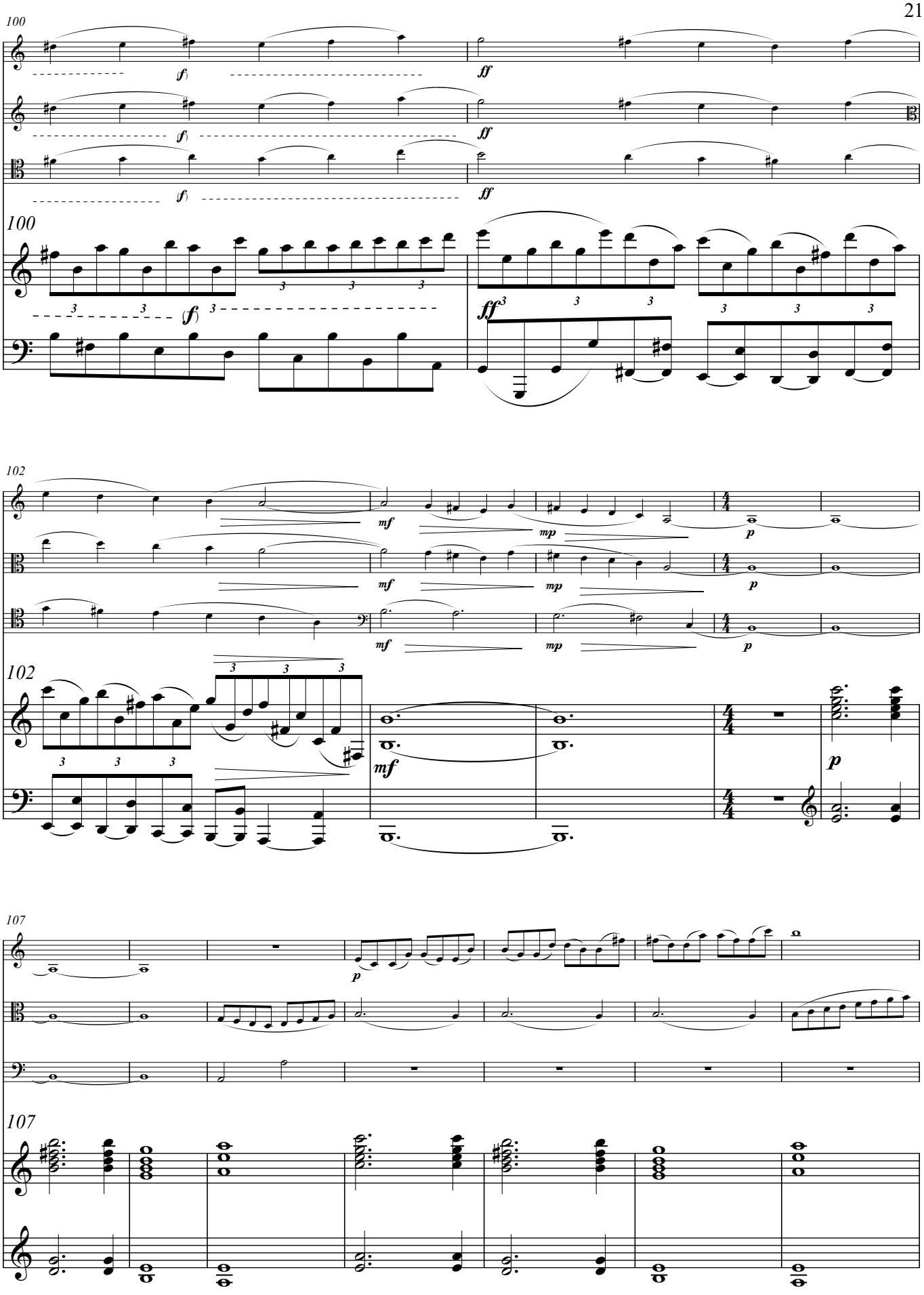

41
mp
mf
mp
41
mp
mf
mp
45
p
f
45
p
mp
f
50
8vb
Ped.
Ped.
50

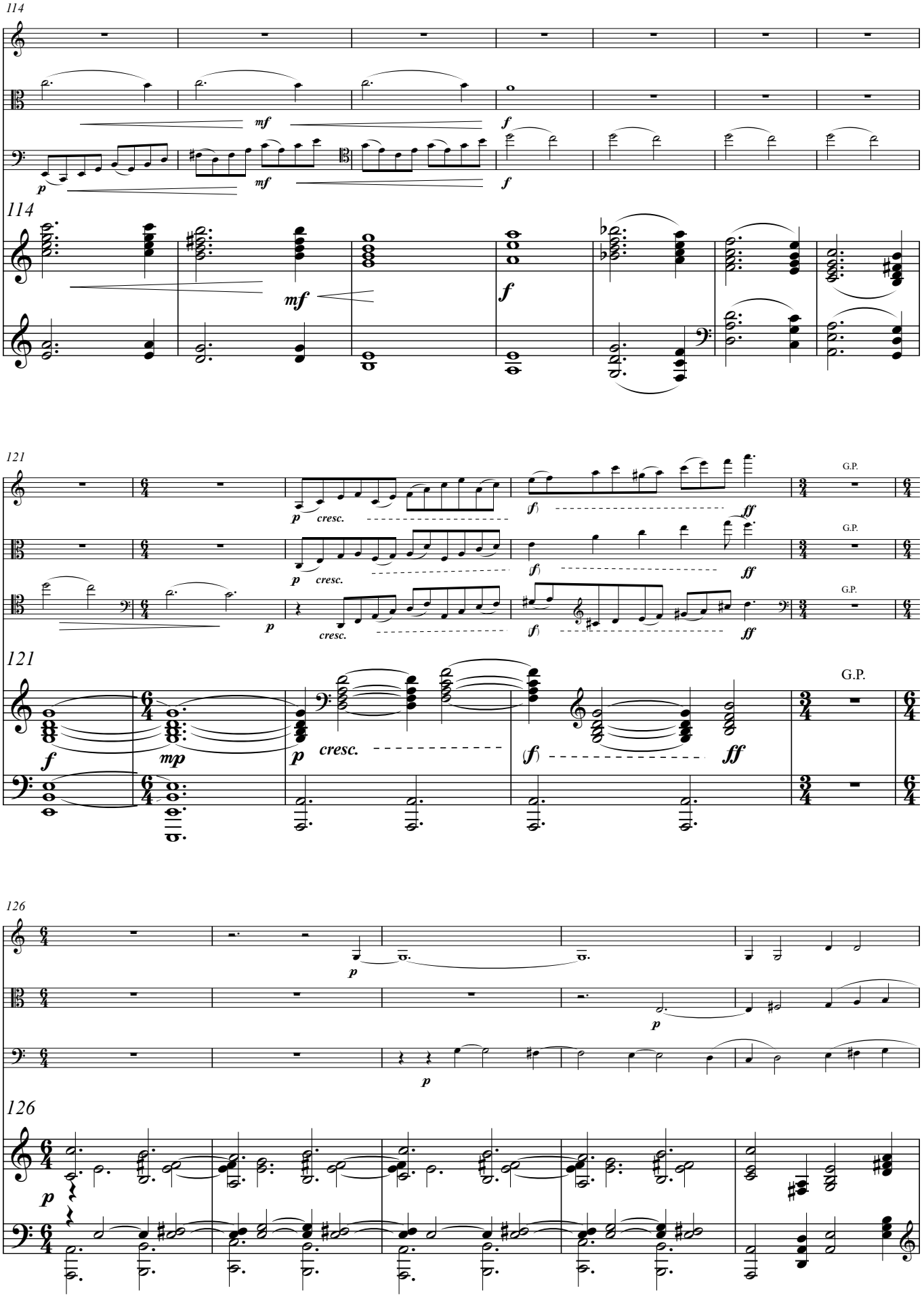

54
f
p
p
p
54
8va
p
59
mp
p
pp
mp
p
pp
mp
p
pp
59 (8va)
mp
p
pp
64
ff
ff
ff
64
ff

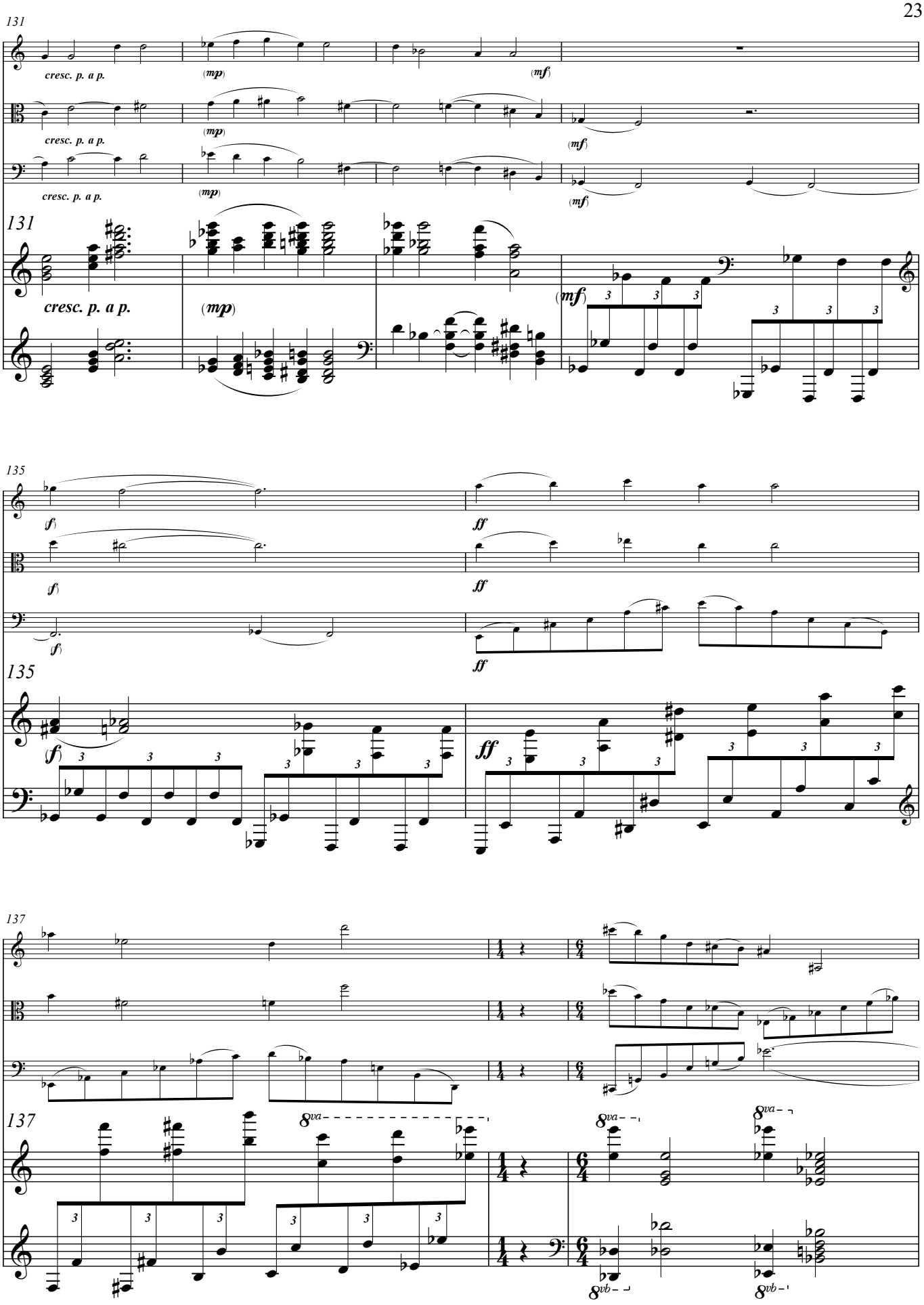

66
66
67
67
pp
pp
pp
pp
69
69
ff
ff
ff

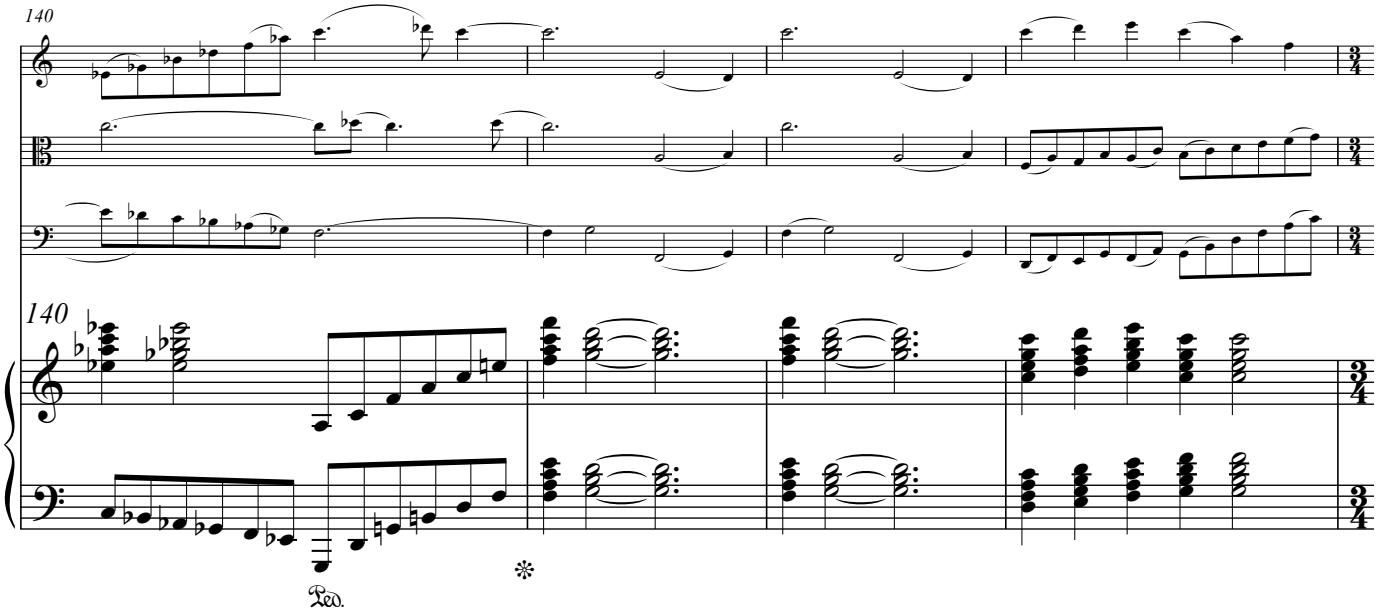

71
ff
(♪=♪)
71
(♪=♪)
75
(♪=♪)
75
(♪=♪)
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
80
80
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.

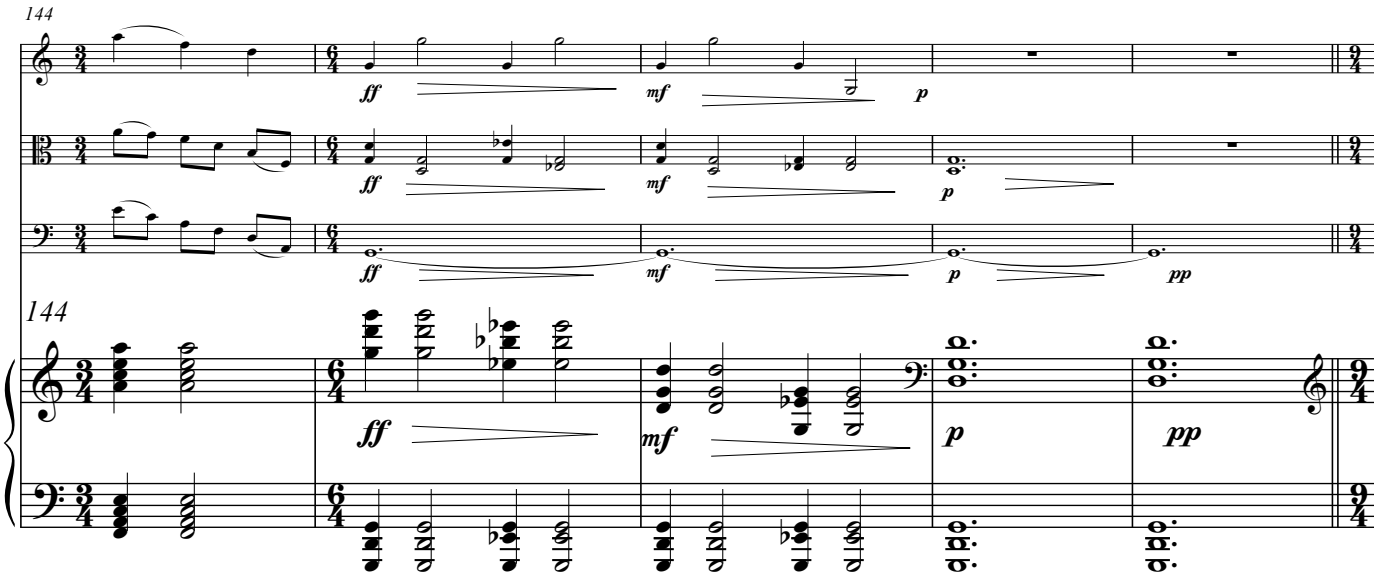

86
ff
p
86
92
92
97
p
cresc.
(mf)
97
legato

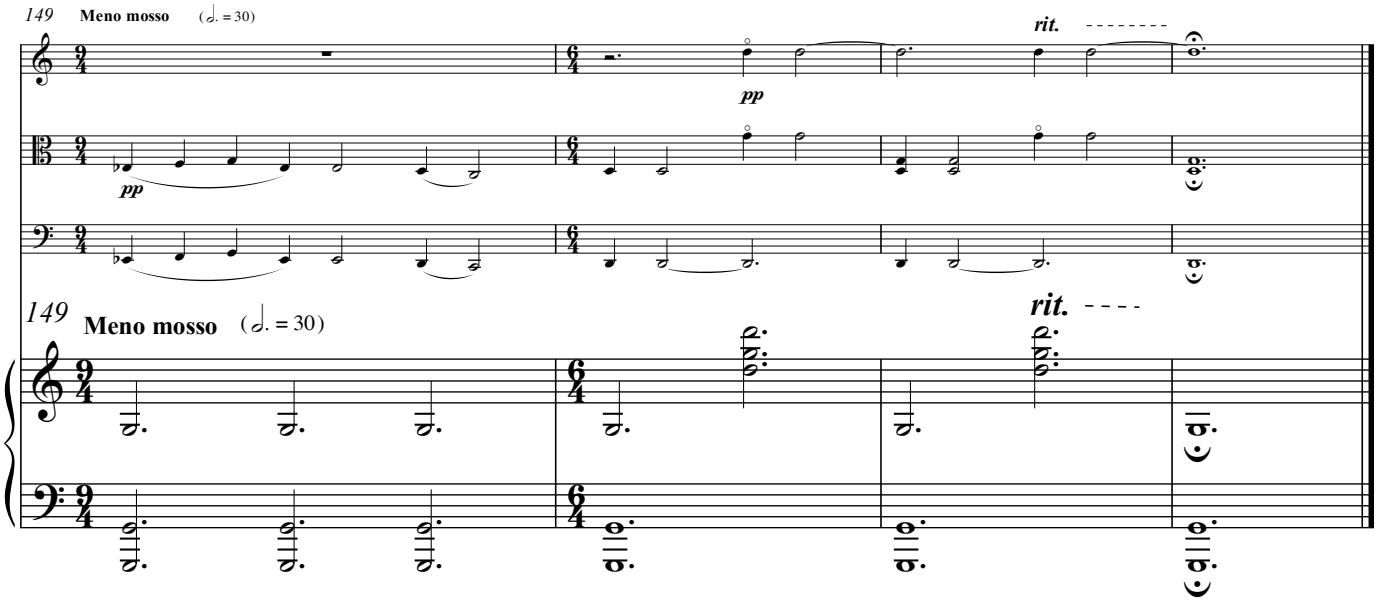

100
102
107

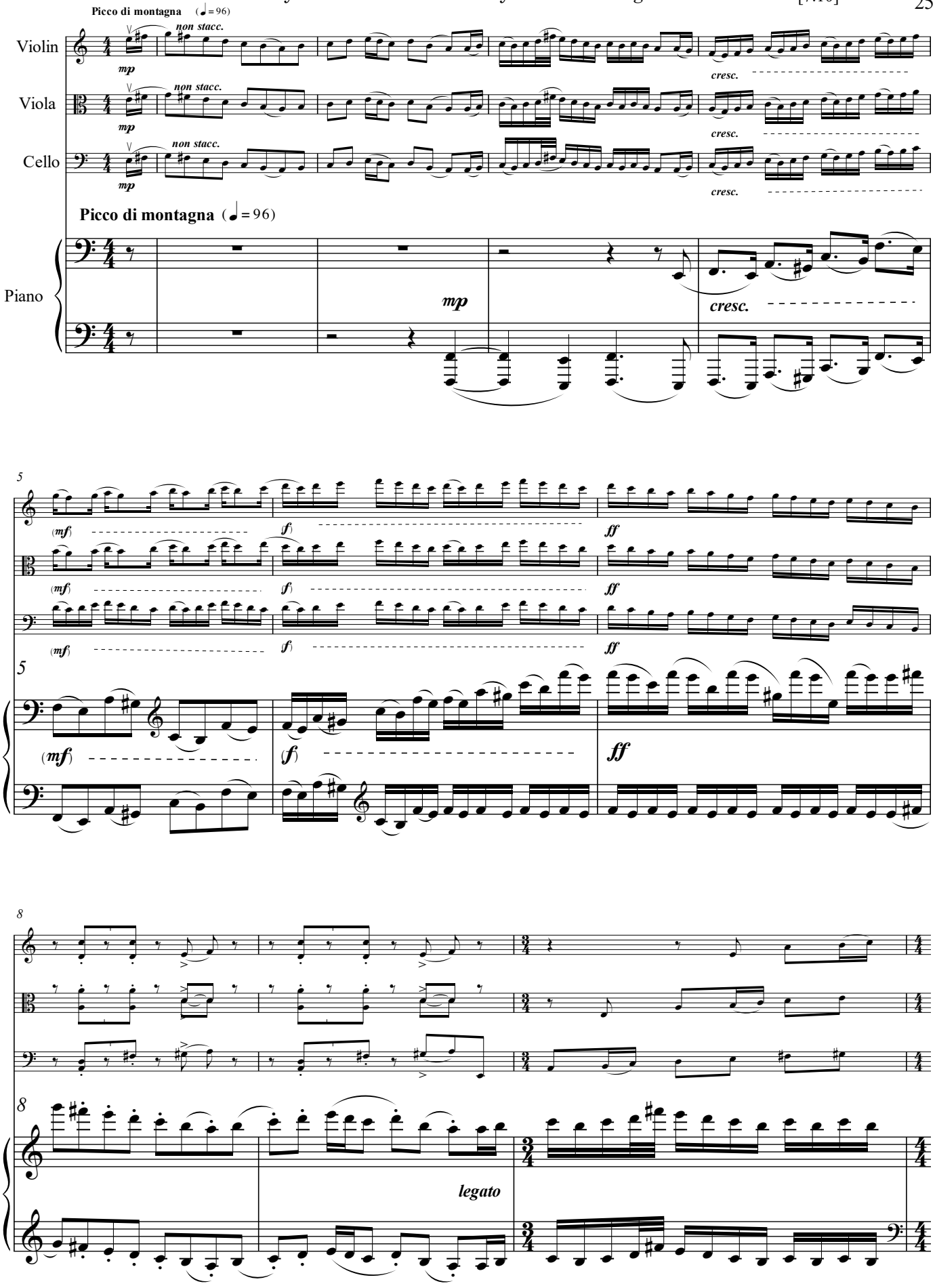

114
mf
f
p
mf
f
114
mf
f
121
p
cresc.
f
ff
G.P.
p
cresc.
f
ff
G.P.
p
cresc.
f
ff
G.P.
121
f
mp
p
cresc.
(f)
ff
G.P.
126
p
p
126
p

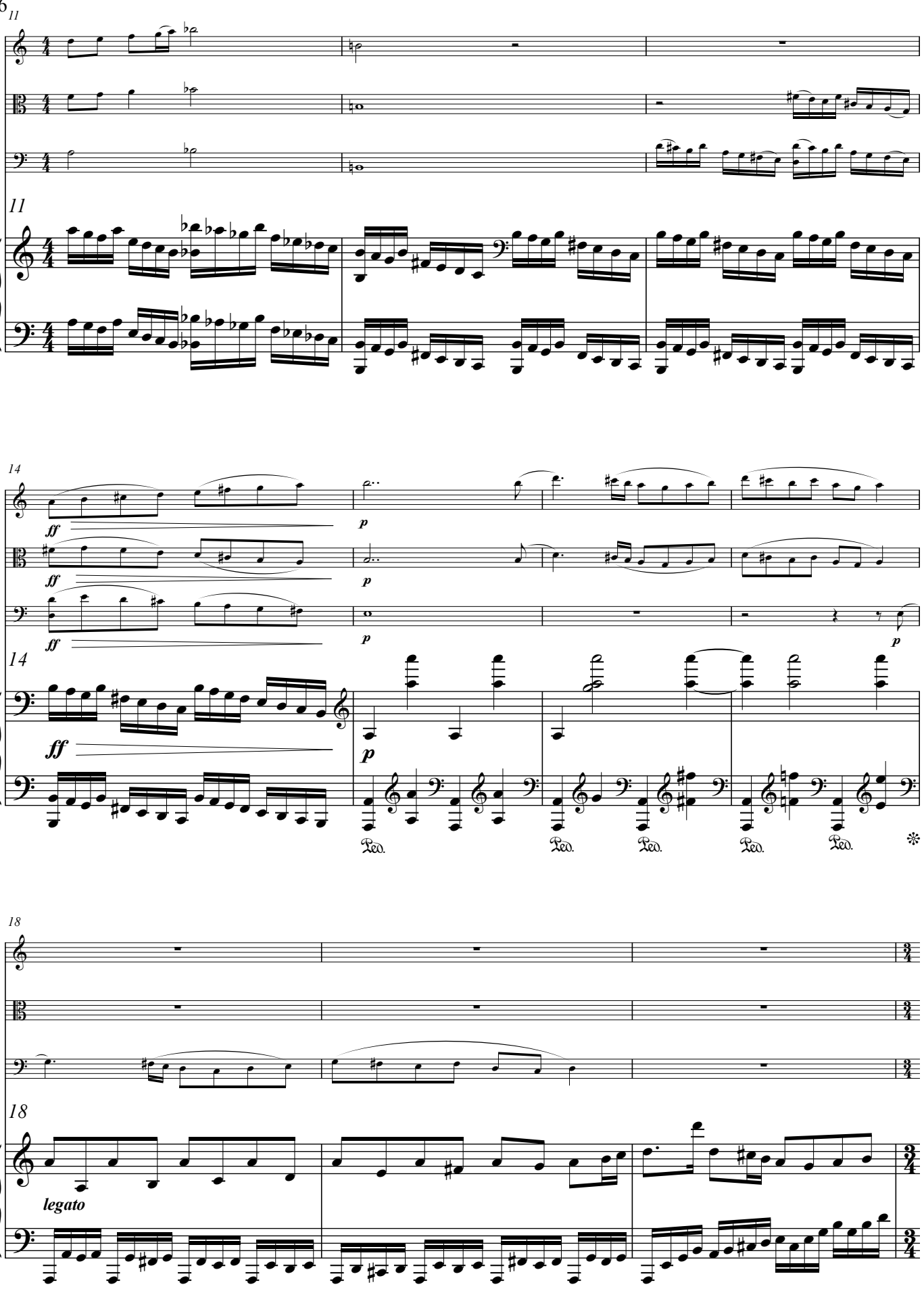

131
cresc. p. a p.
(mp)
(mf)
131
cresc. p. a p.
(mp)
(mf)
135
(f)
ff
135
(f)
ff
137
8va
8vb
137
8va
8va

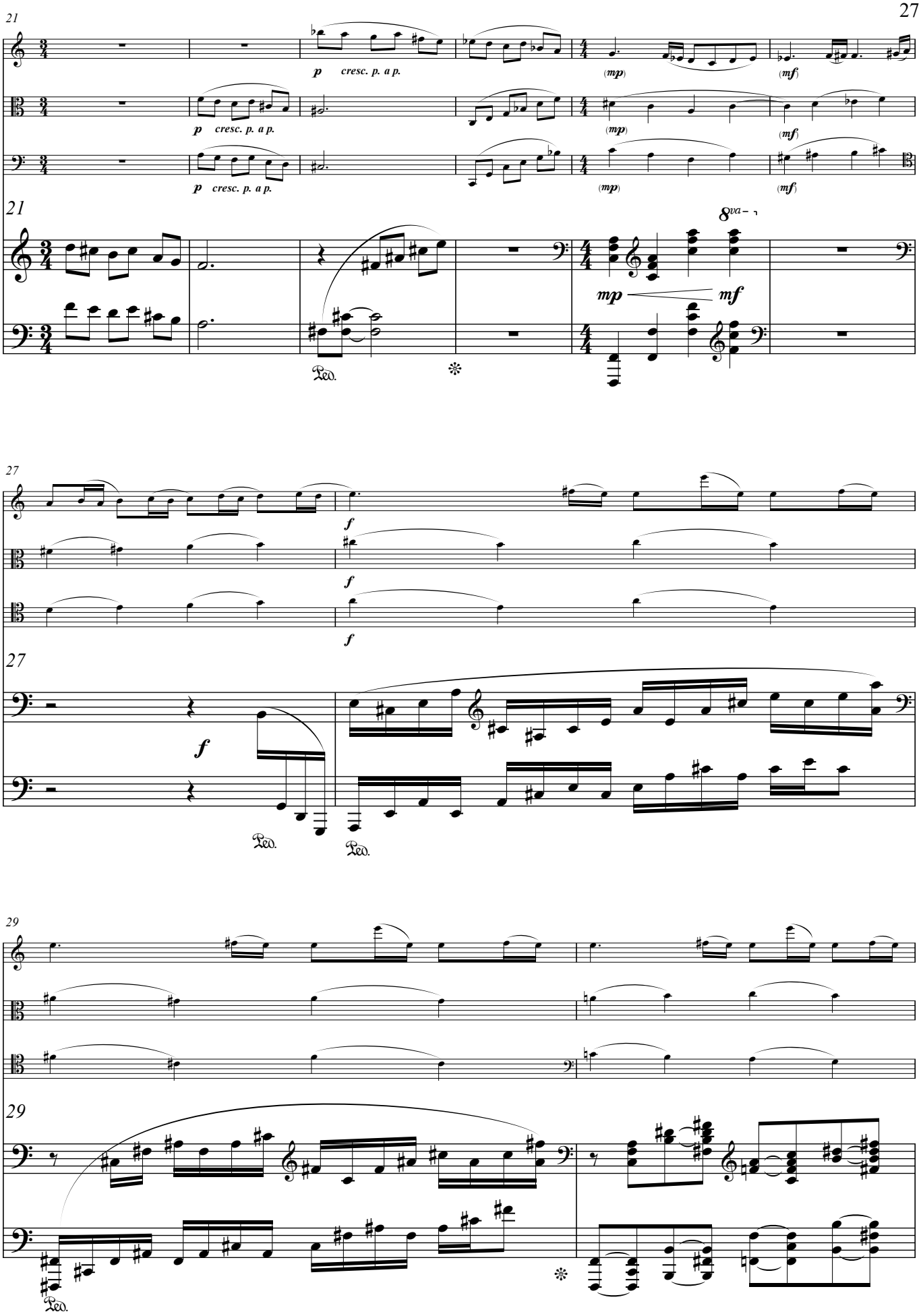

140
140
Ped.

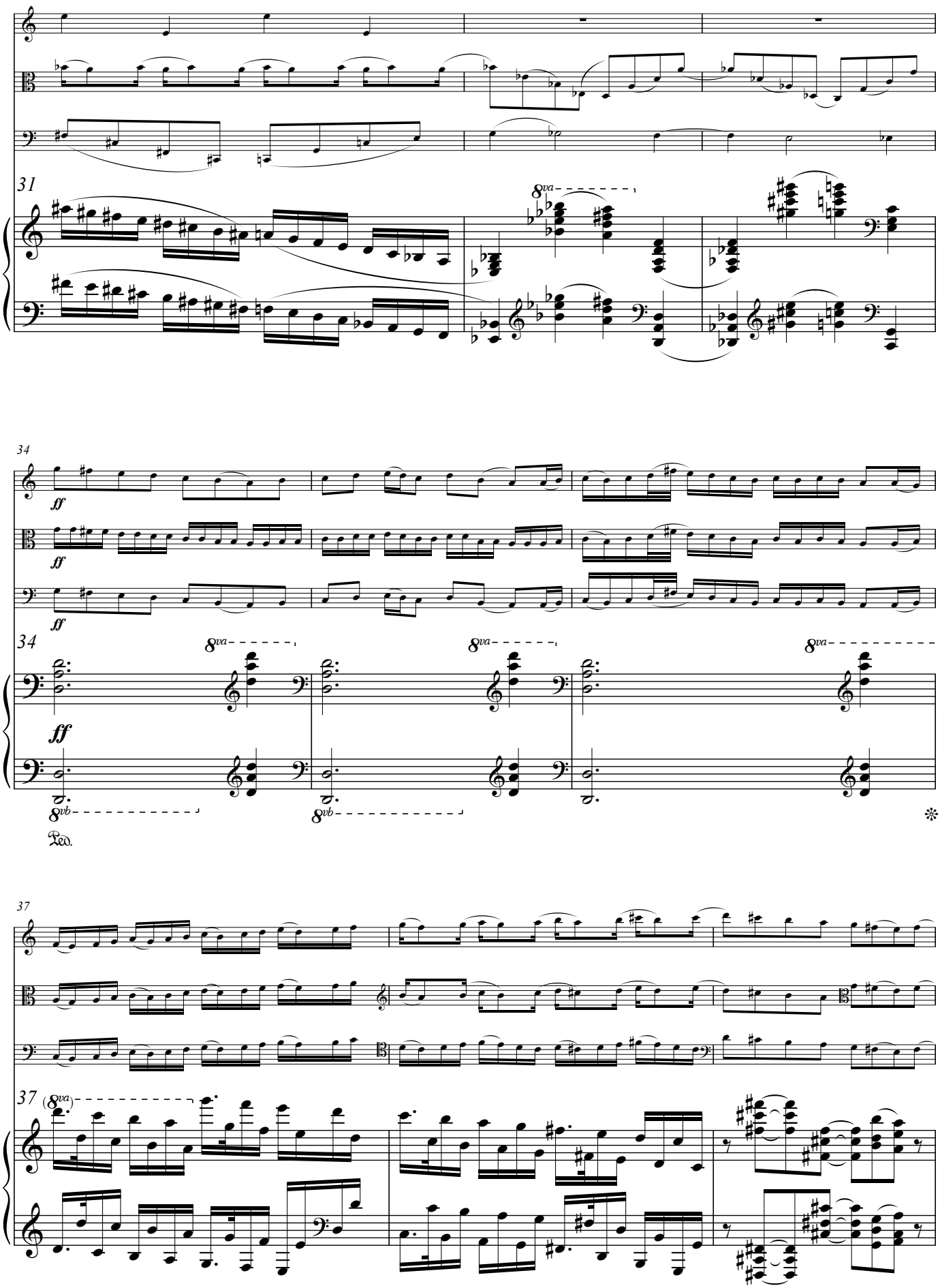

144
ff
mf
p
pp
144

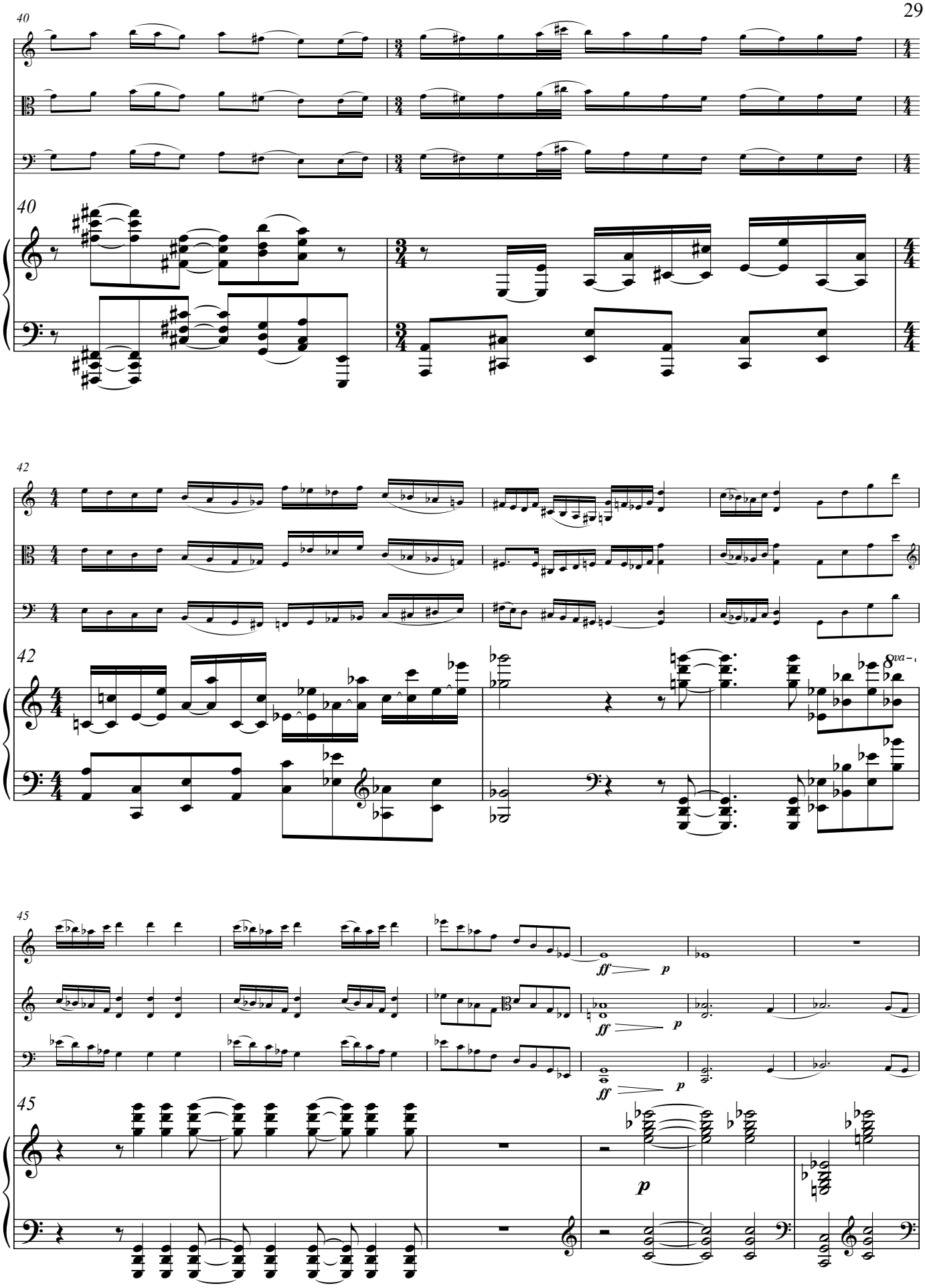

149
Meno mosso
(𝅗𝅥. = 30)
rit.
pp
149
Meno mosso
(𝅗𝅥. = 30)
rit.

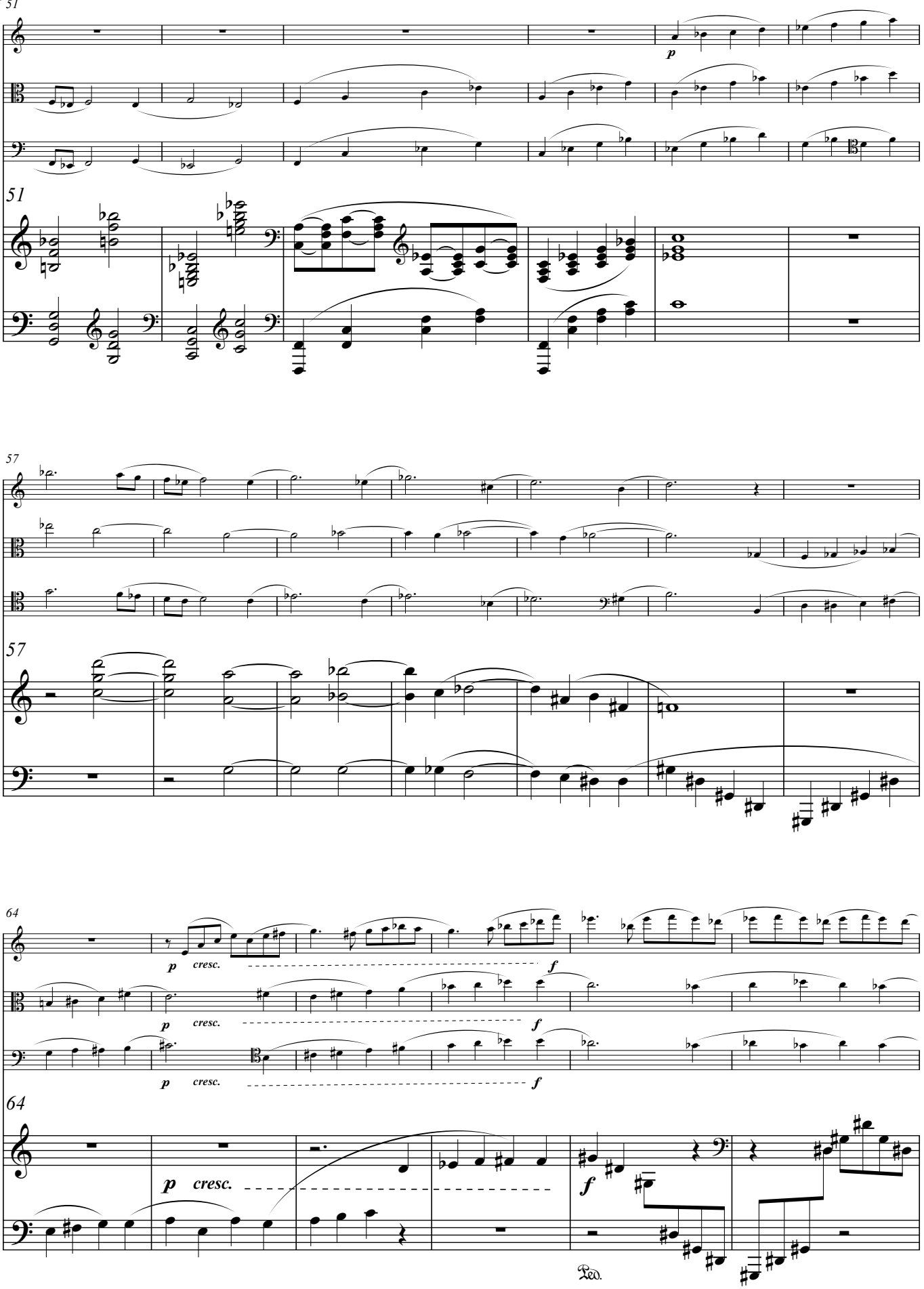

Picco di montagna (♩= 96)
non stacc.
Violin
Viola
Cello
mp
cresc.
Piano
5
(mf)
f
ff
8
legato

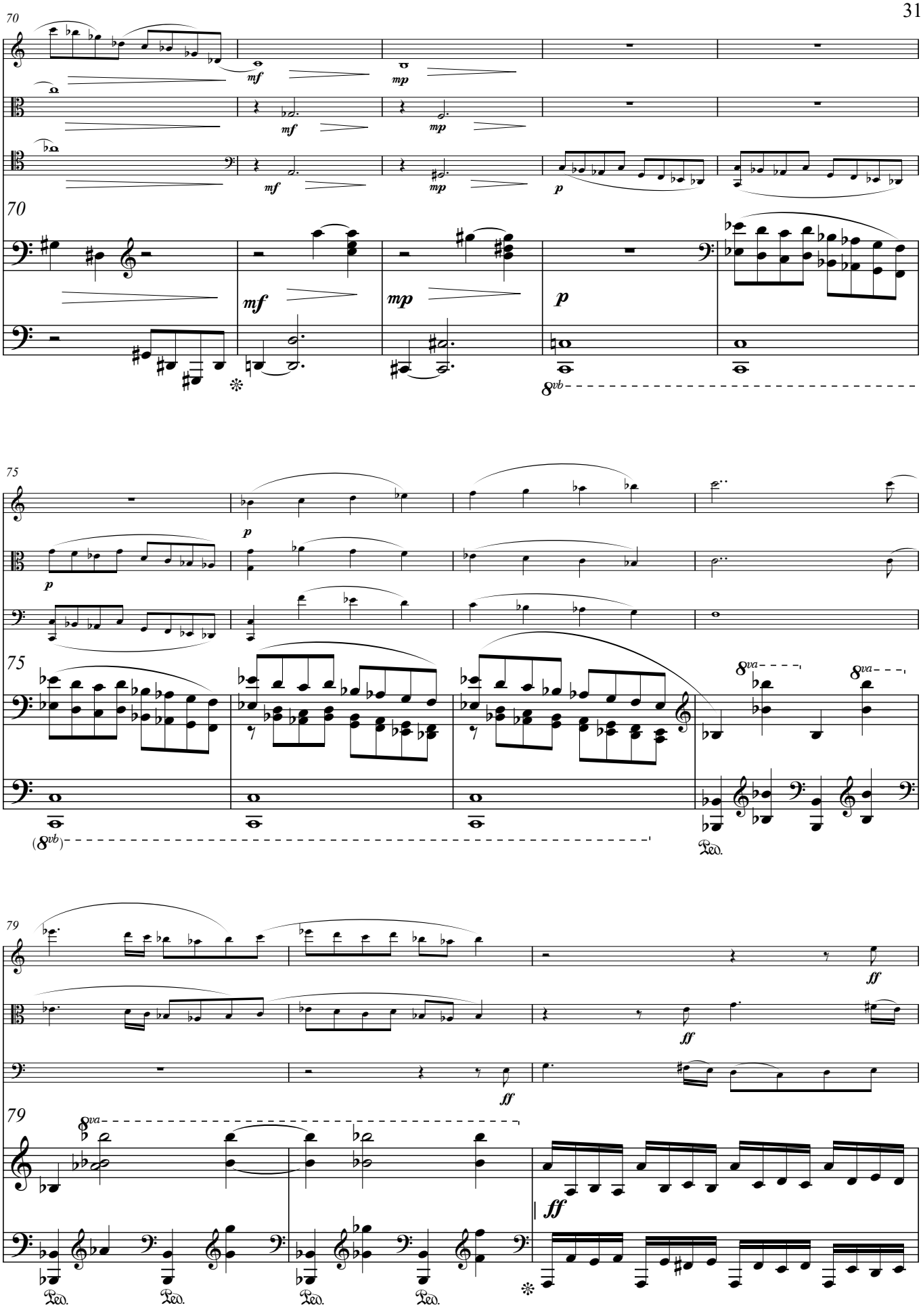

11
11
14
ff
p
14
ff
p
Ped.
18
18
legato

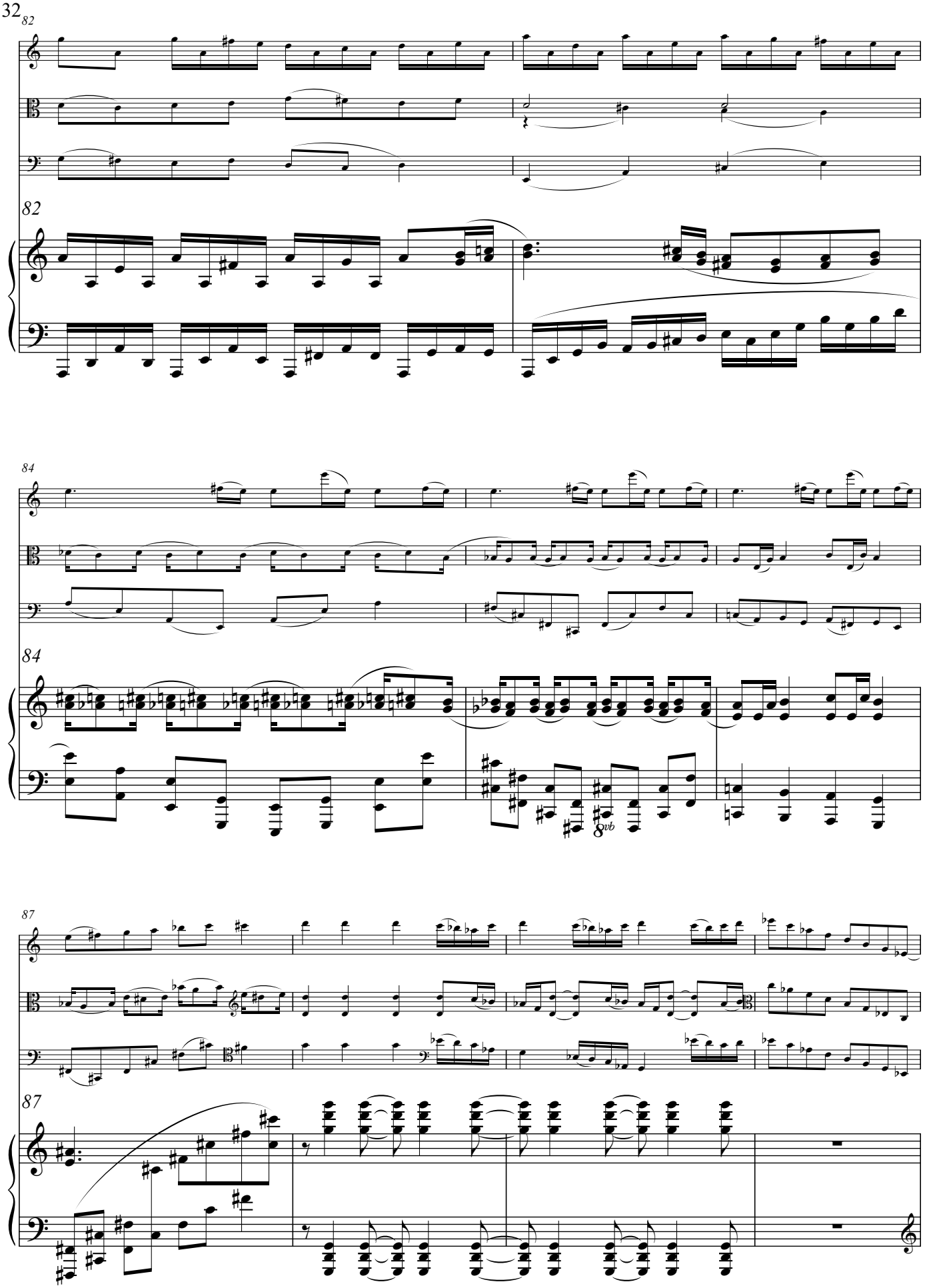

21
p cresc. p. a p.
(mp)
(mf)
8va
mp
mf
Ped.
27
f
29

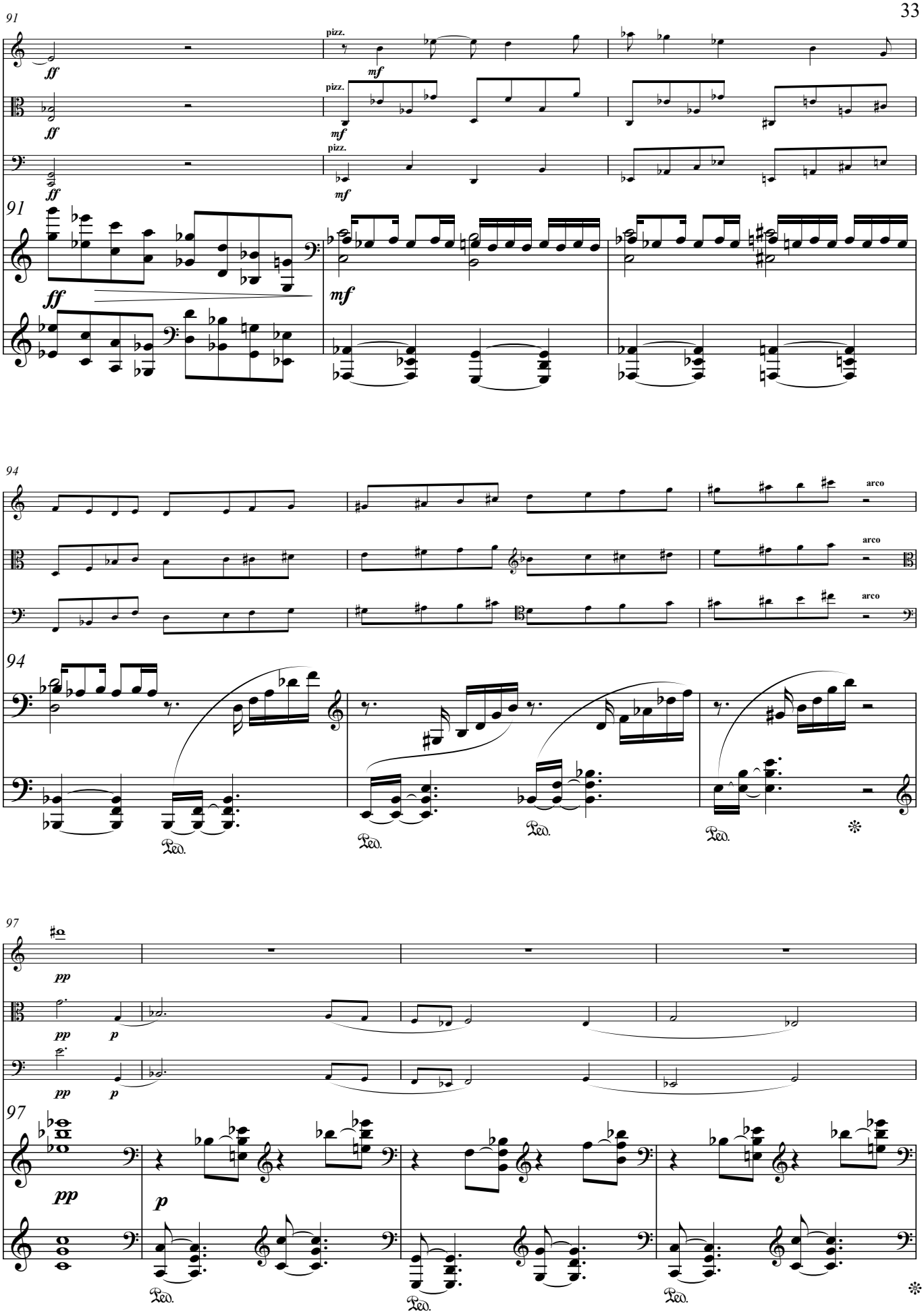

31
31
8va
34
ff
ff
ff
34
8va
8va
8va
ff
8vb
8vb
Ped.
37
37
(8va)

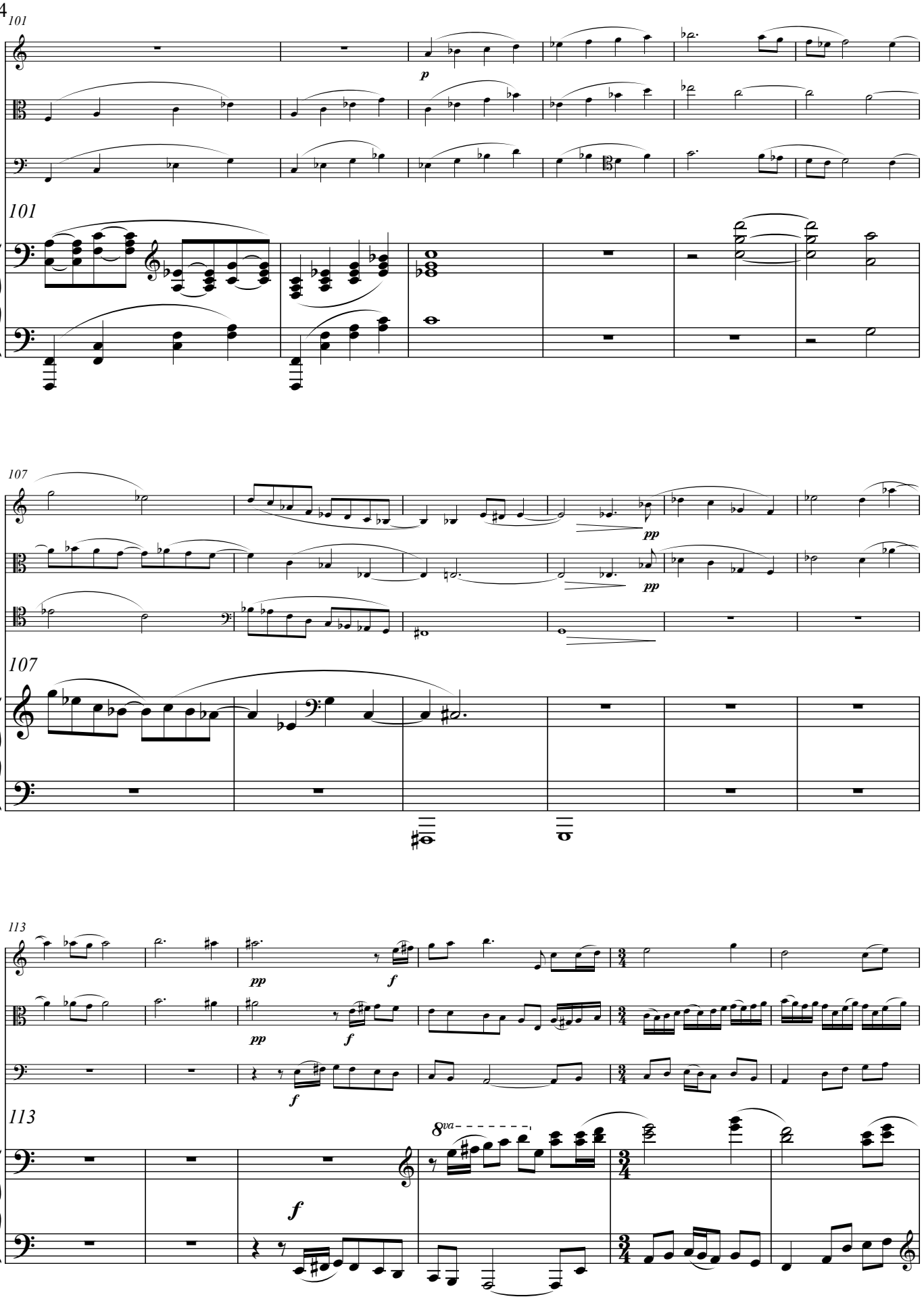

40
42
45
ff
p
8va

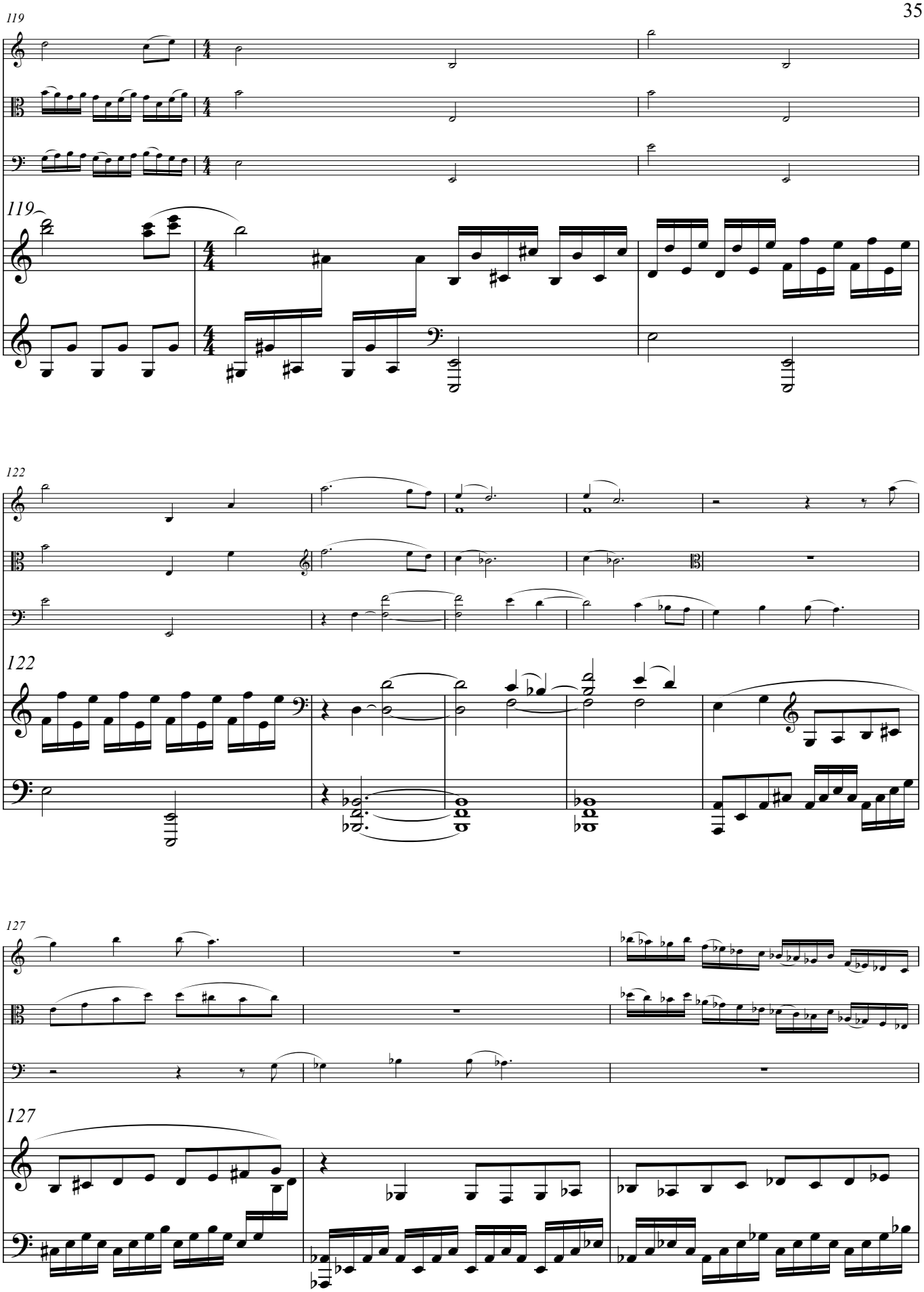

51
p
51
57
57
64
p cresc.
f
64
p cresc.
f
Ped.

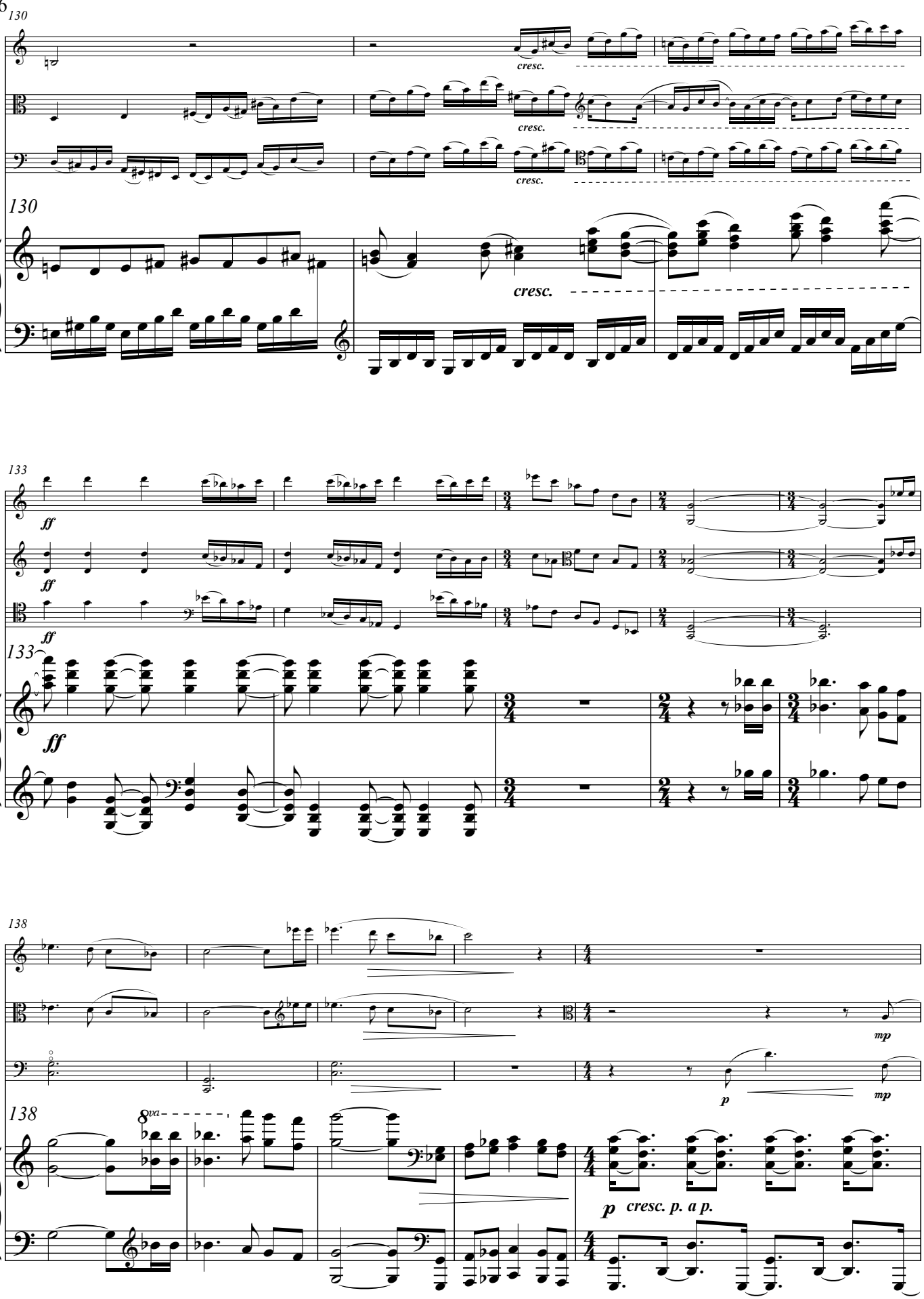

70
mf
mp
p
8vb
75
8va
Ped.
79
ff

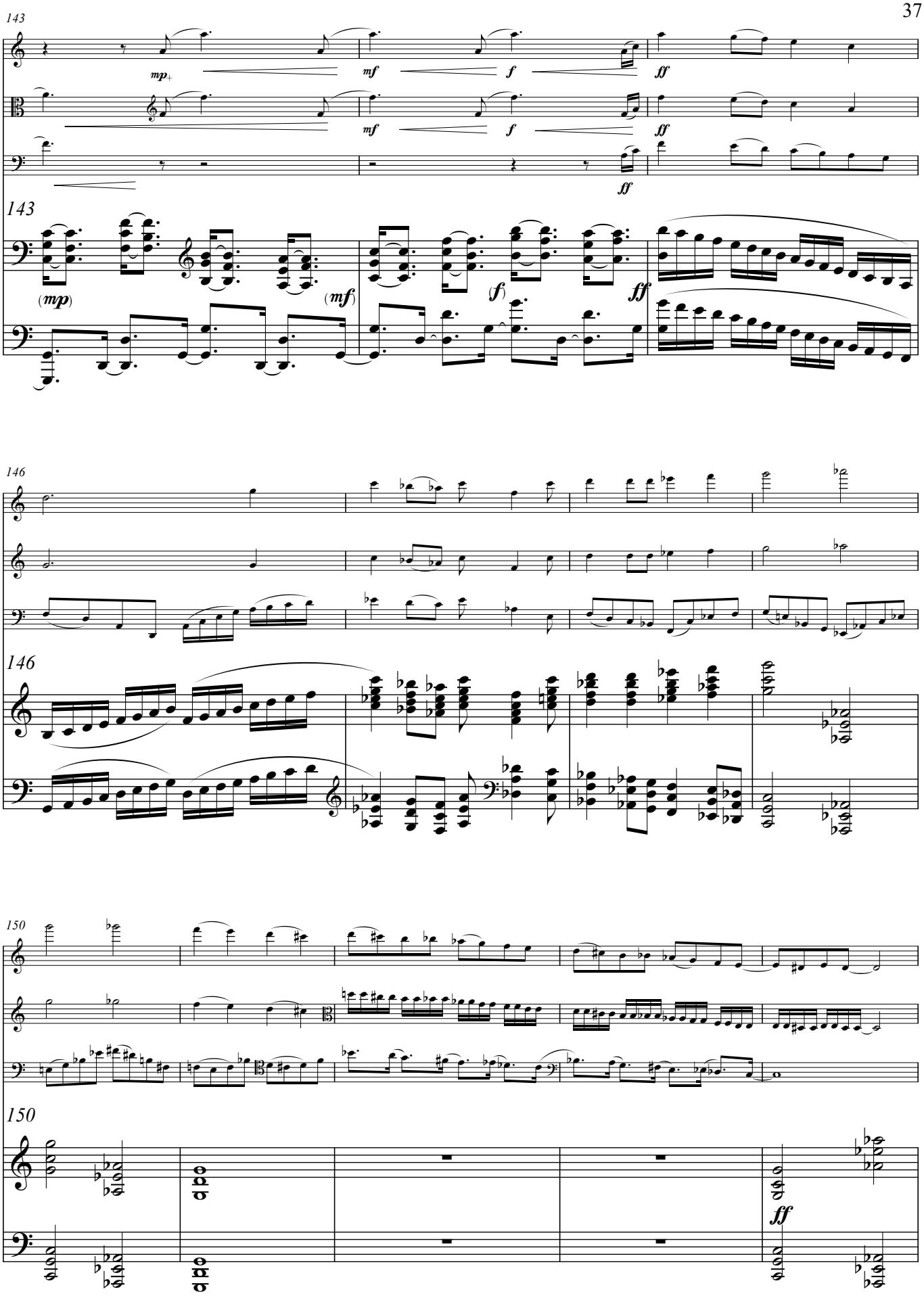

82
82
84
84
8vb
87
87

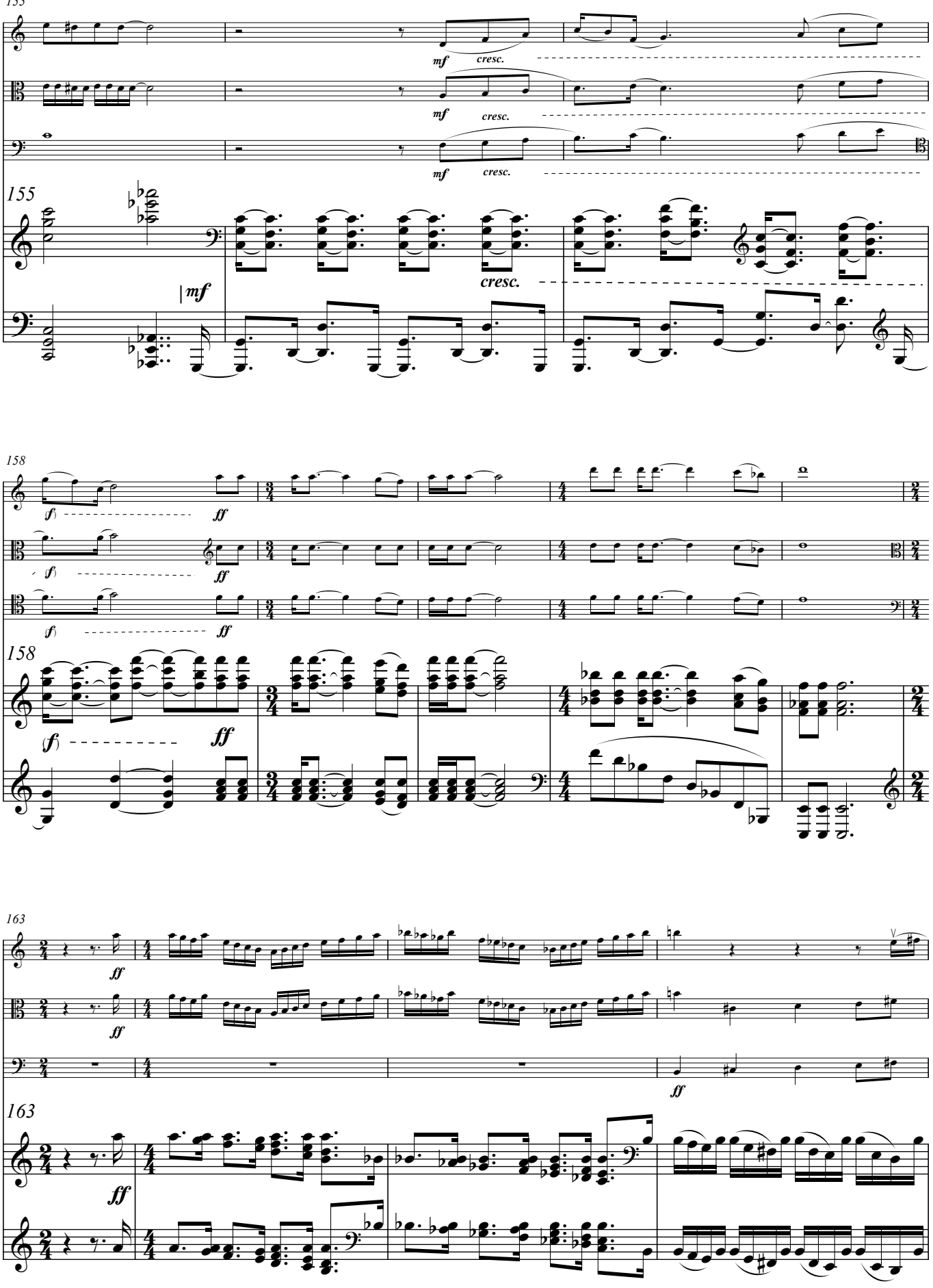

91
pizz.
ff
mf
91
94
arco
Ped.
94
97
pp
p
97

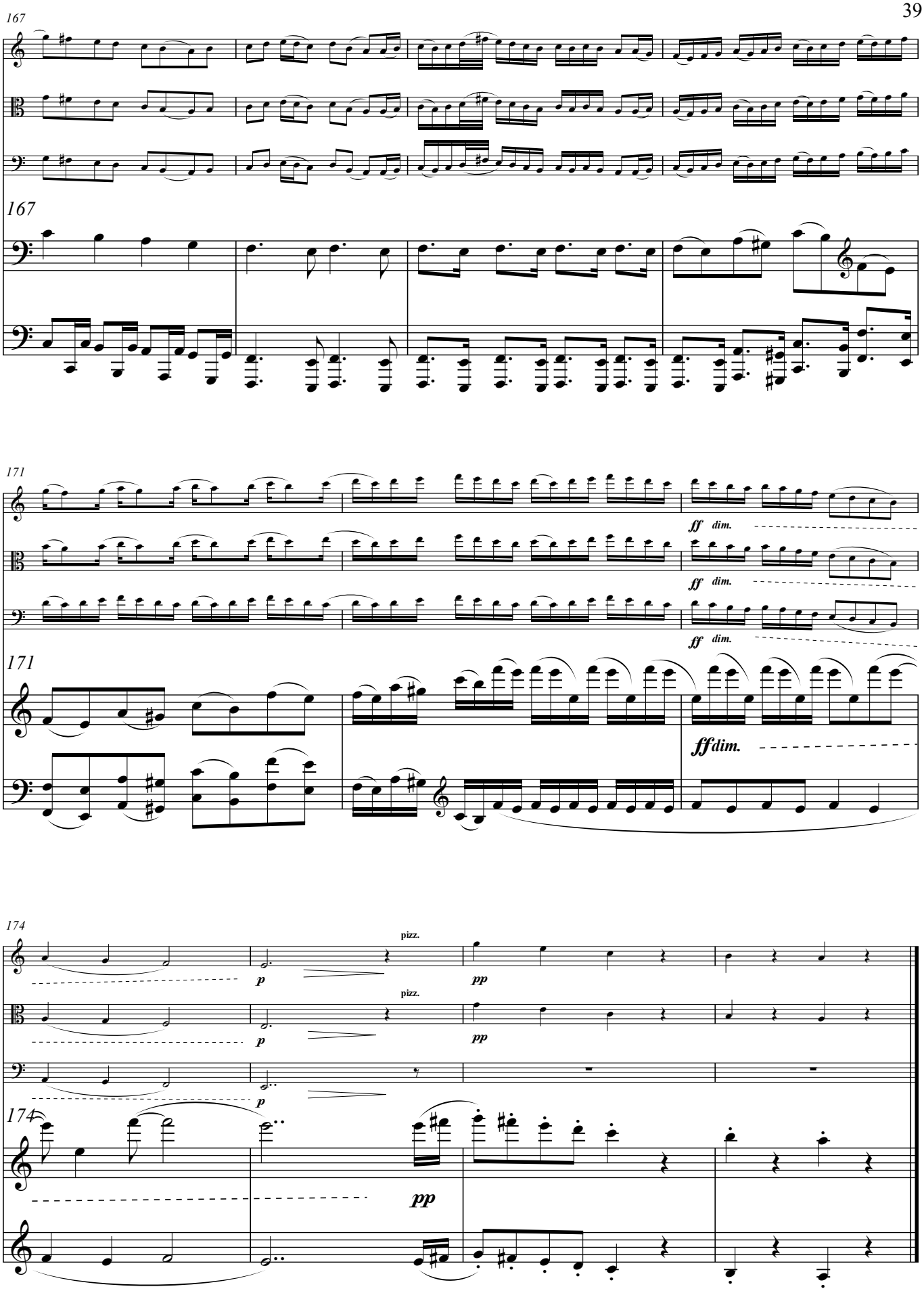

101
p
101
107
pp
pp
107
113
pp
f
pp
f
f
113
8va
f


119
119
122
122
127
127


130
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
130
cresc.
133
ff
ff
ff
133
ff
138
mp
p
mp
138
8va
p cresc. p. a p.


143
mp
mf
f
ff
143
(mp)
(mf)
(f)
ff
146
146
150
150
ff


155
mf
cresc.
158
f
ff
163
ff


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

IV. August 28, 1963 [8:50]

I still have dream (♩=60)

Violin

Viola

Cello

I still have dream (♩=60)

Piano

p

6

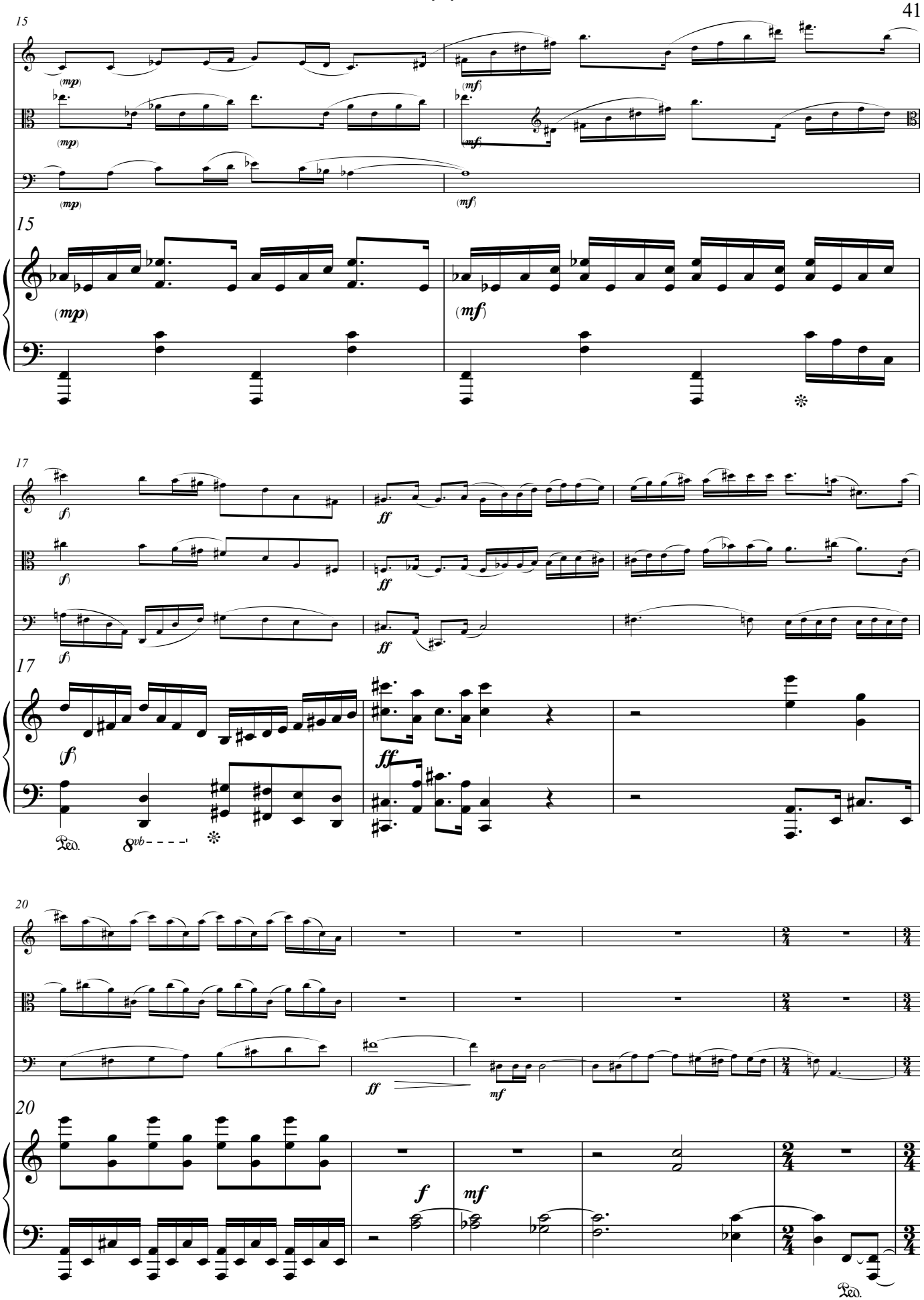
11

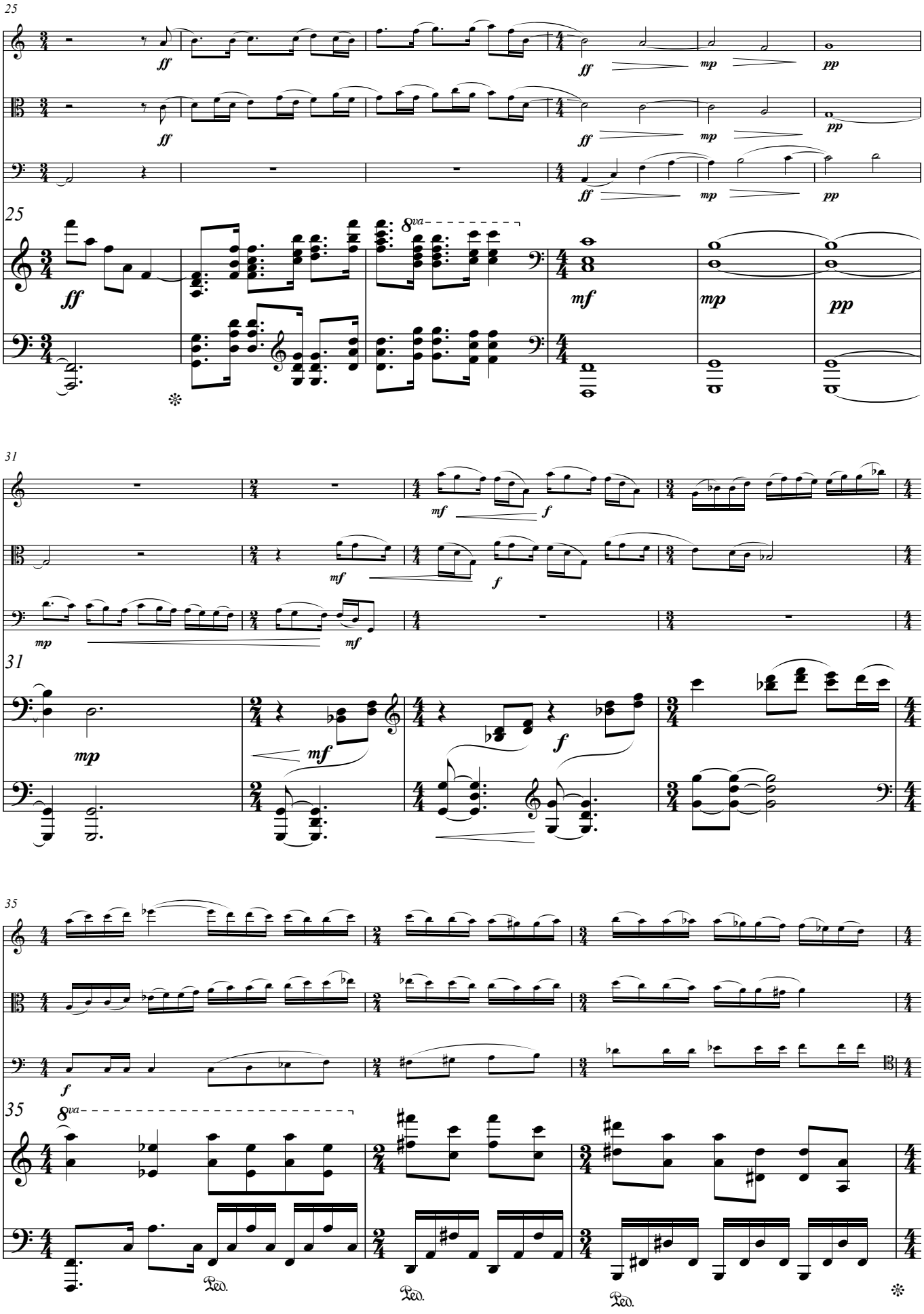
accel.

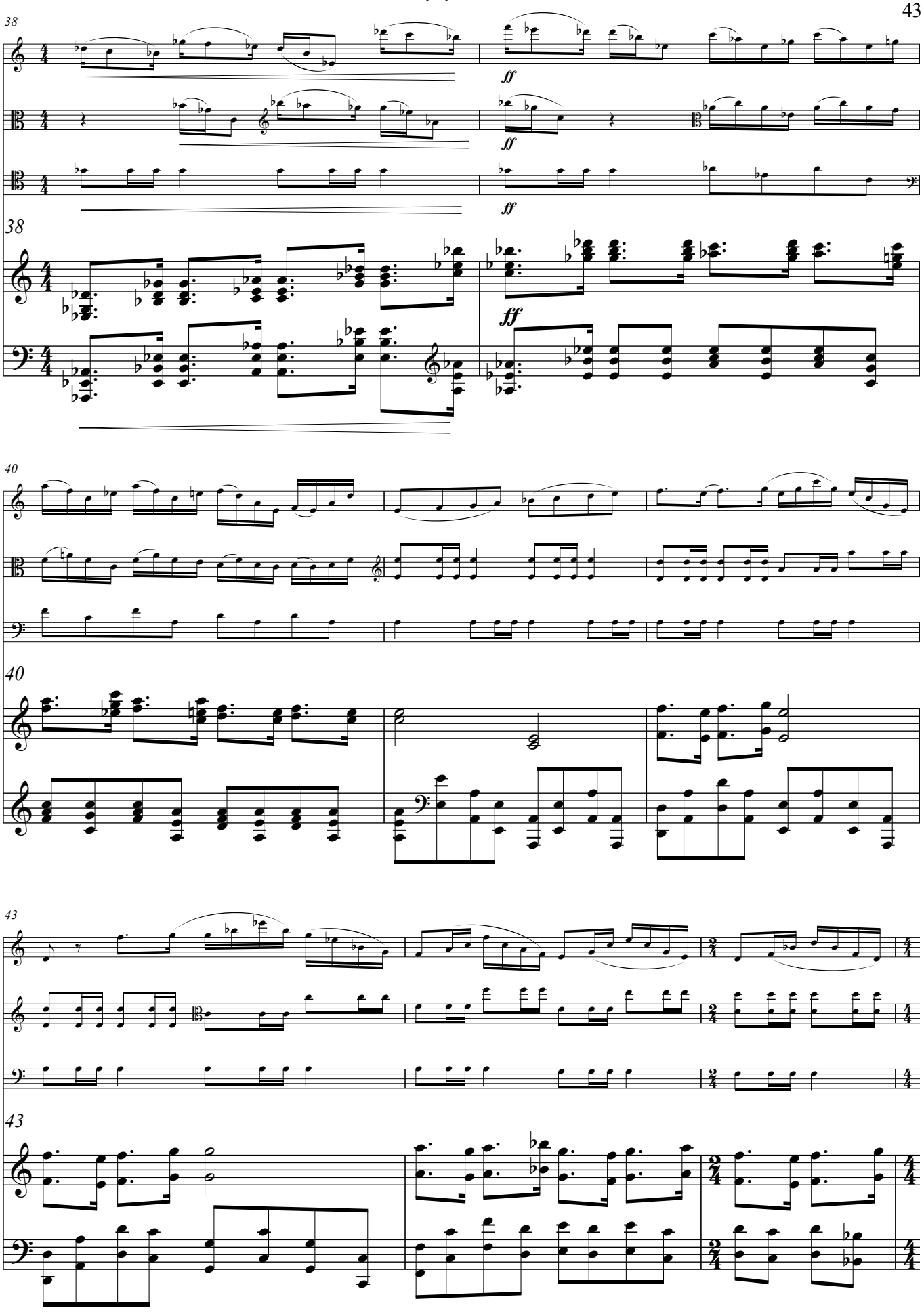
Table of brotherhood (♩= 74)

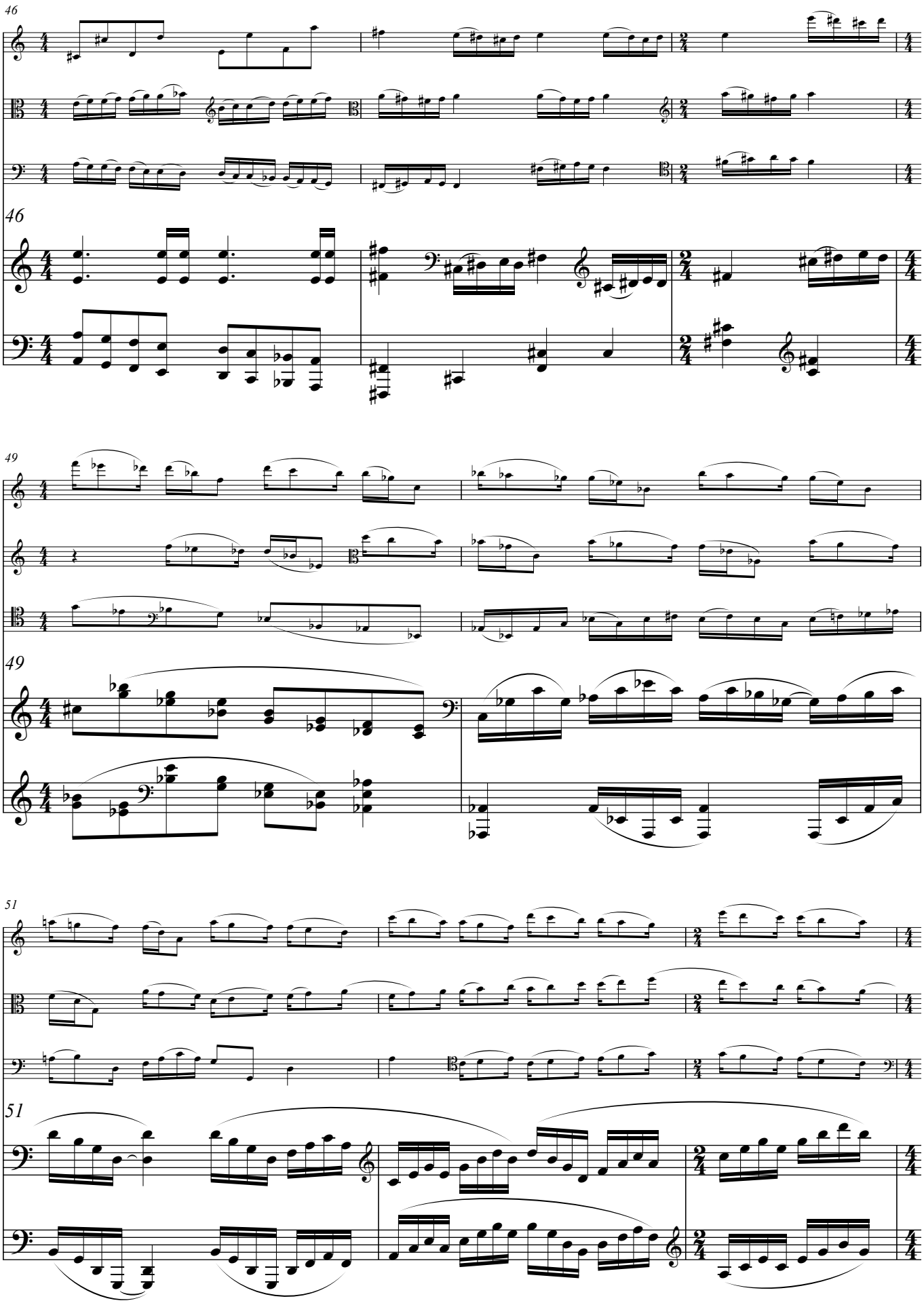
cresc. p. a p.

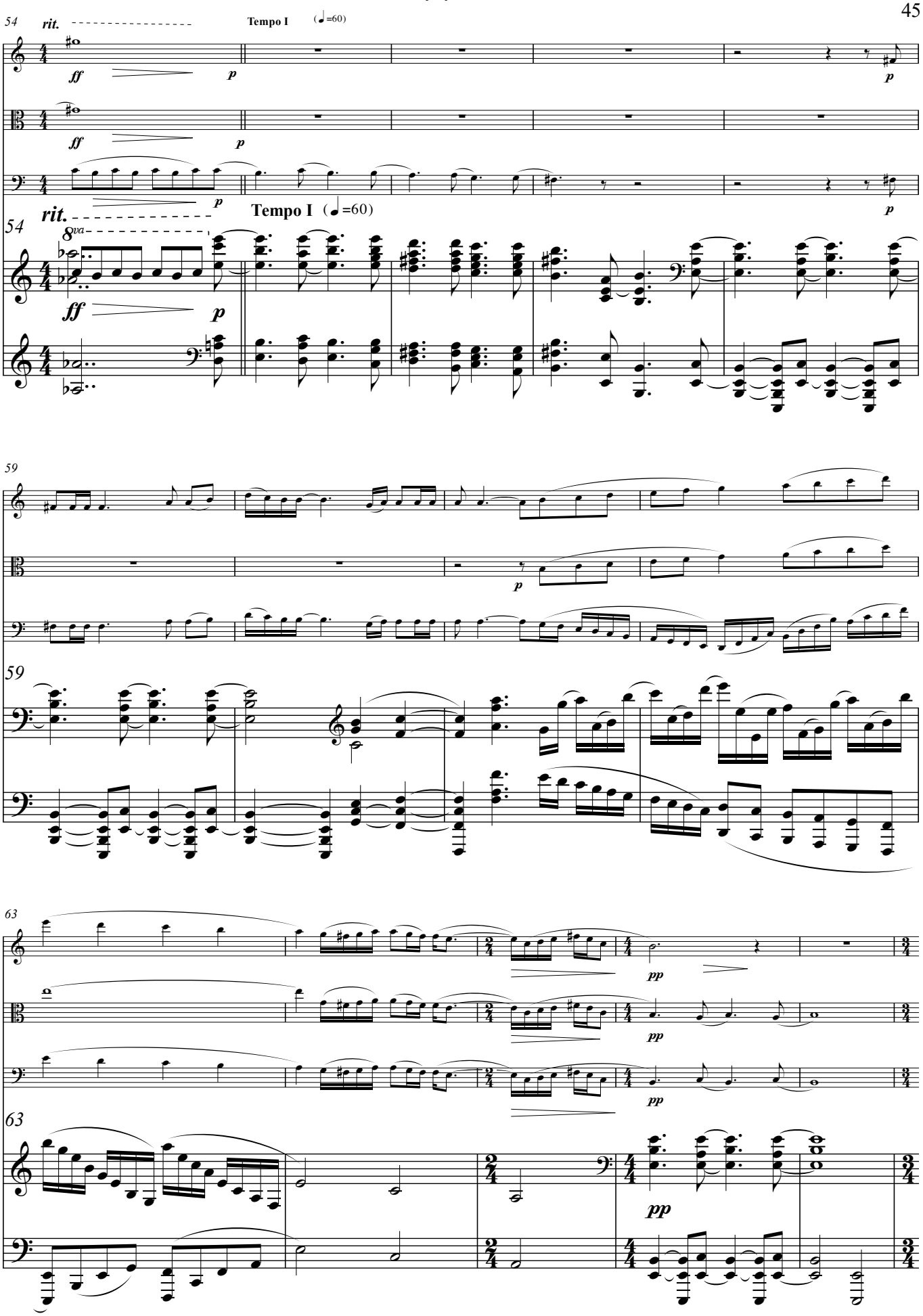
Ped.

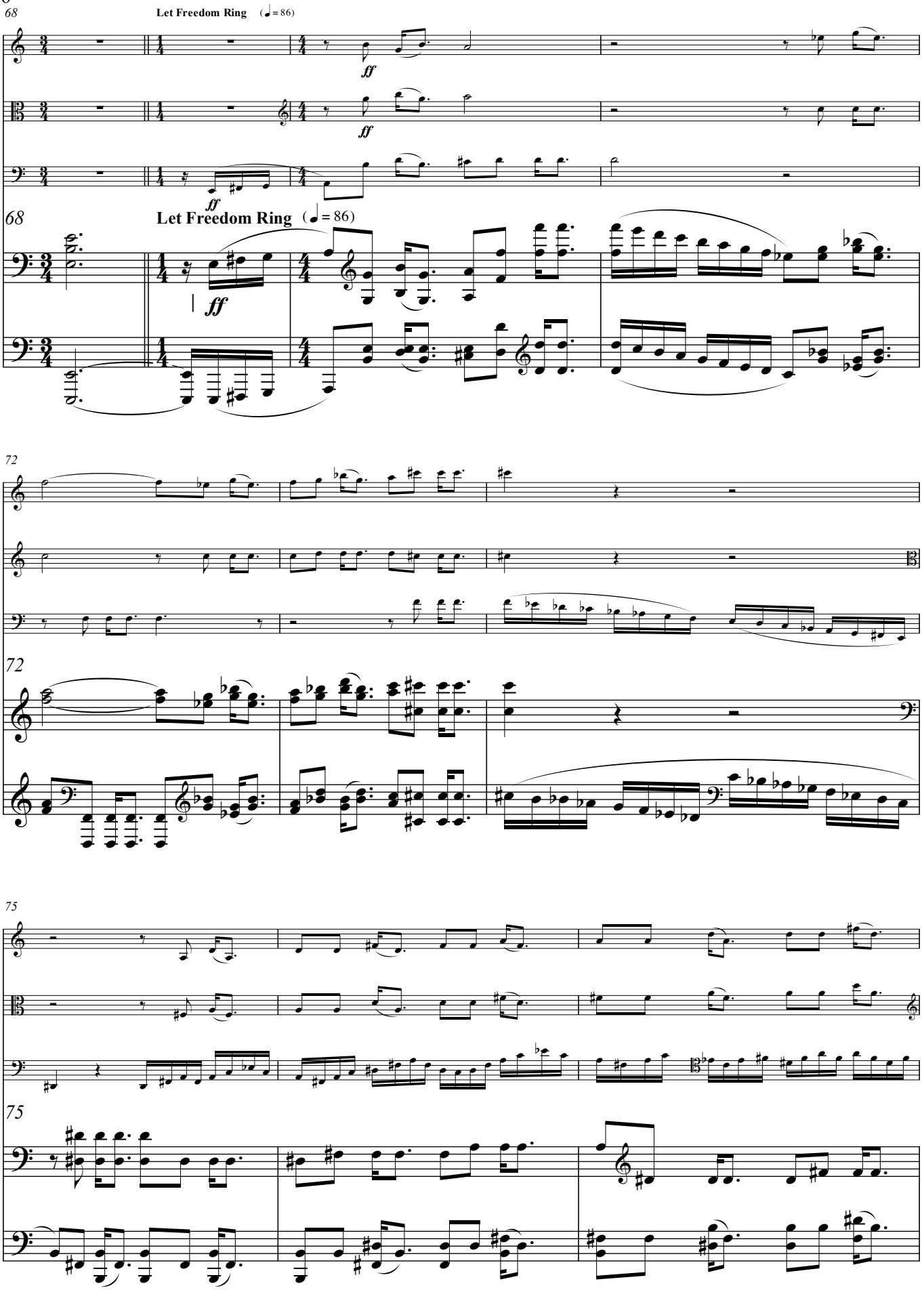

15
(mp)
(mf)
17
(f)
ff
Ped.
8vb
20
f
mf

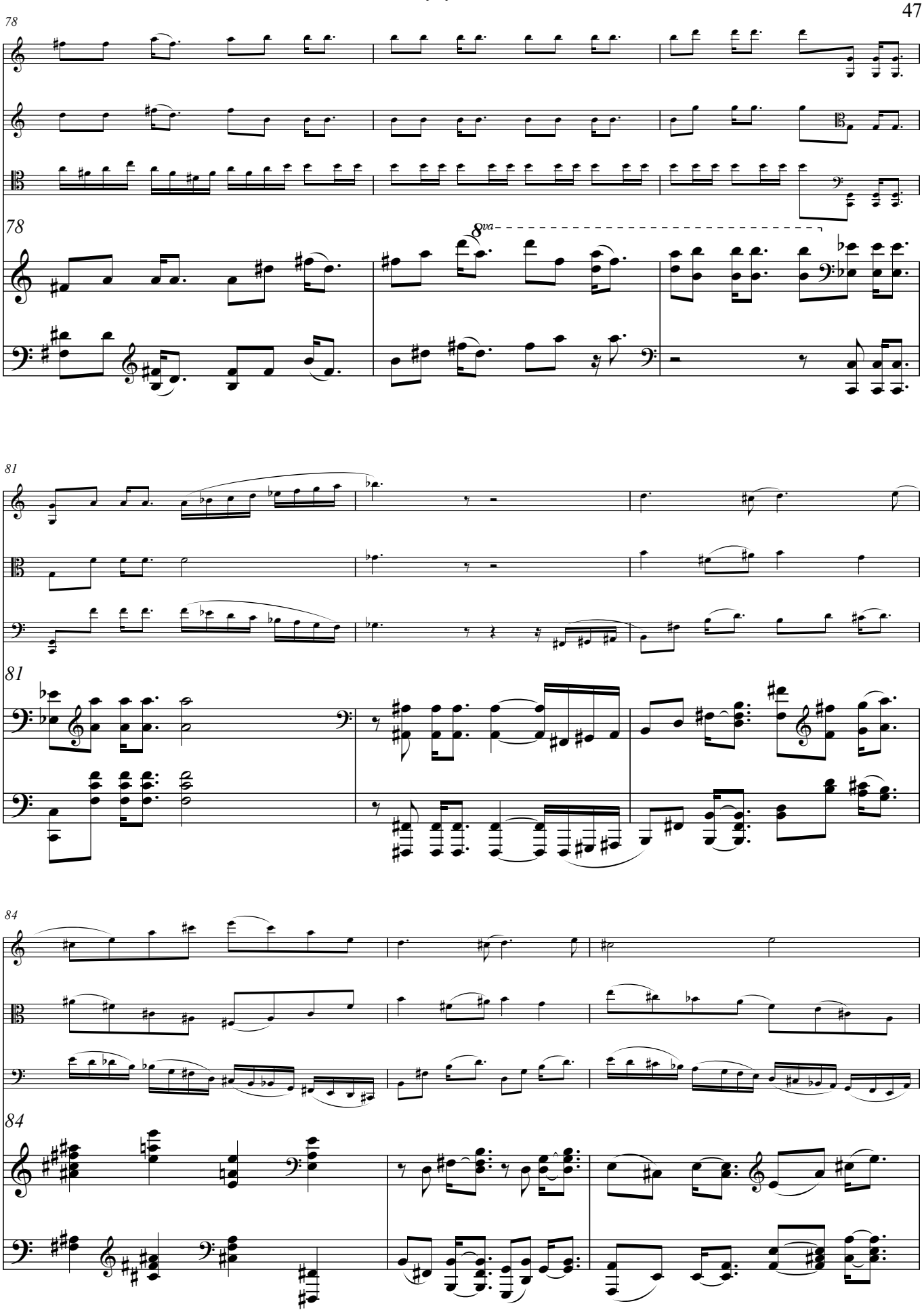

25
ff
mp
pp
8va
mf
31
f
35
Ped.

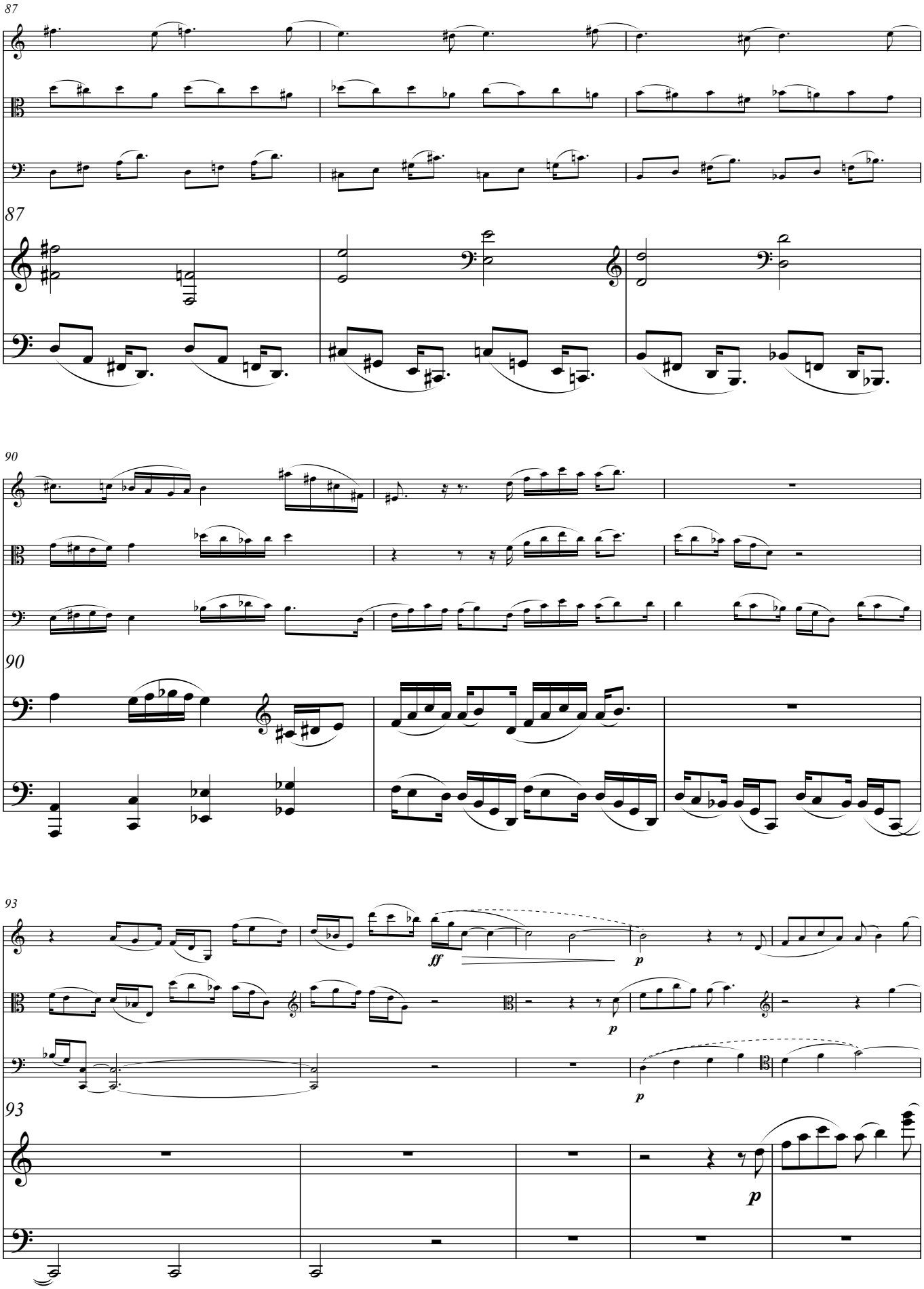

38
ff
ff
38
ff
40
40
43
43

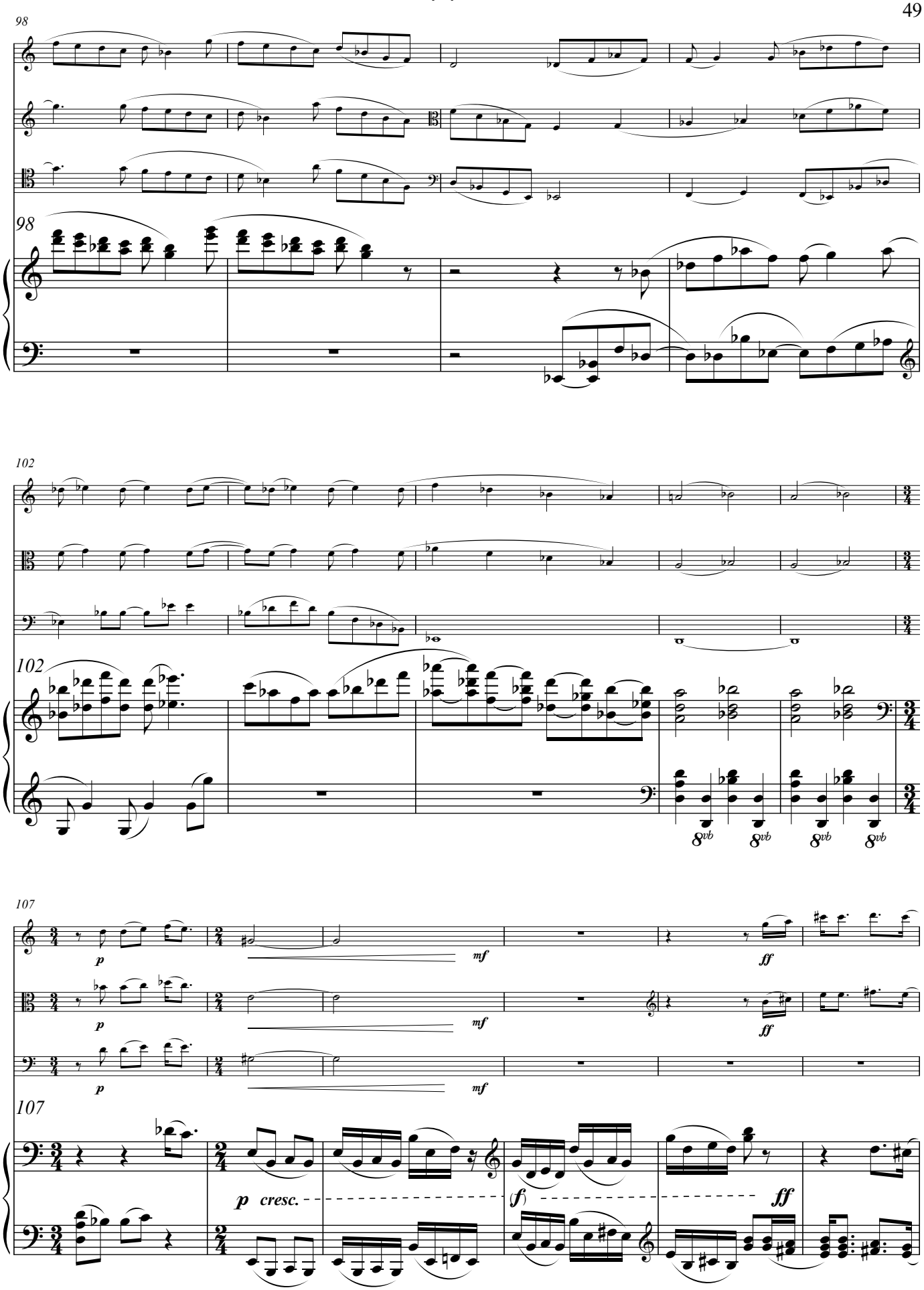

46
46
49
49
51
51

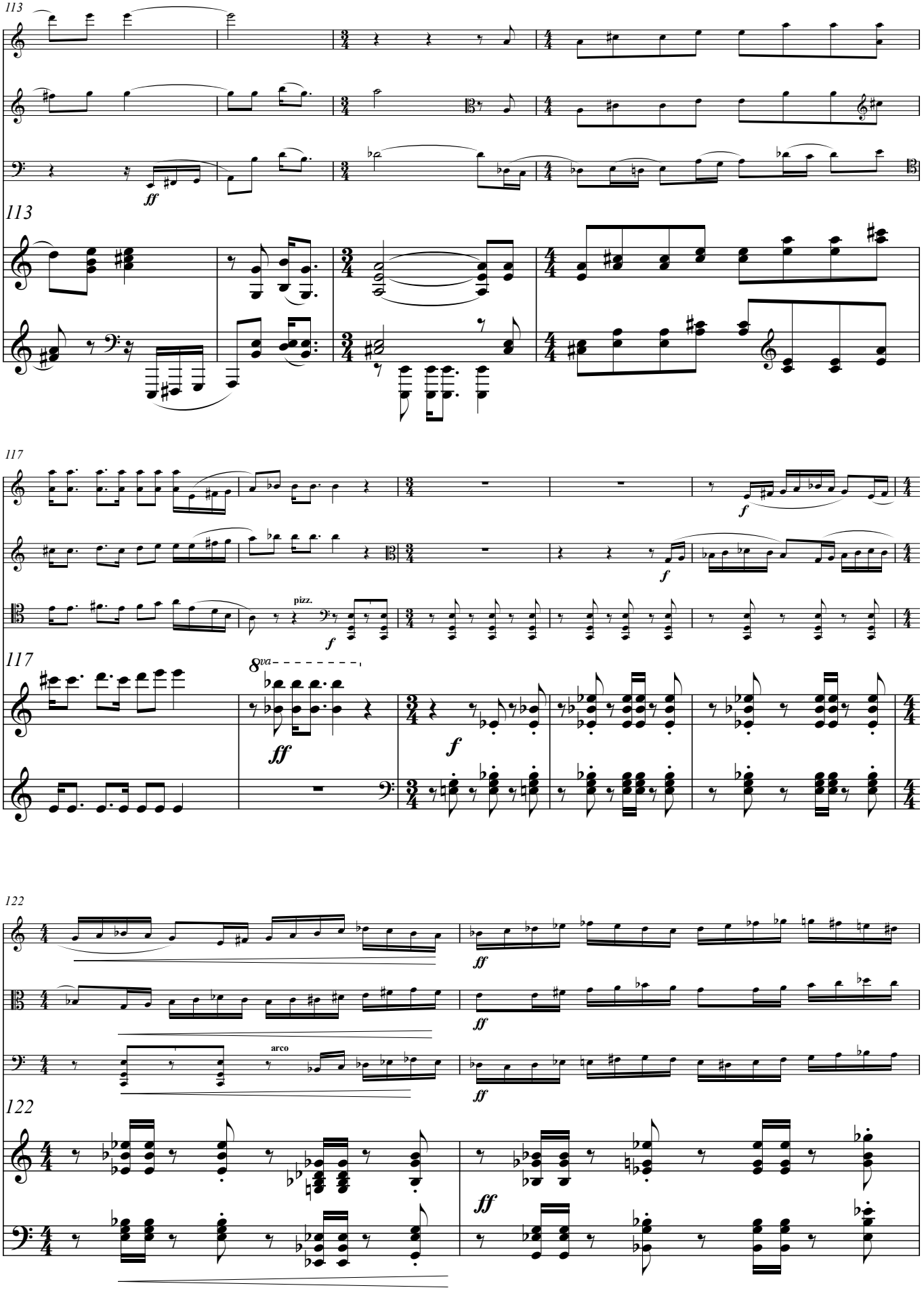

54
rit.
Tempo I (♩=60)
ff
p
8va
59
63
pp

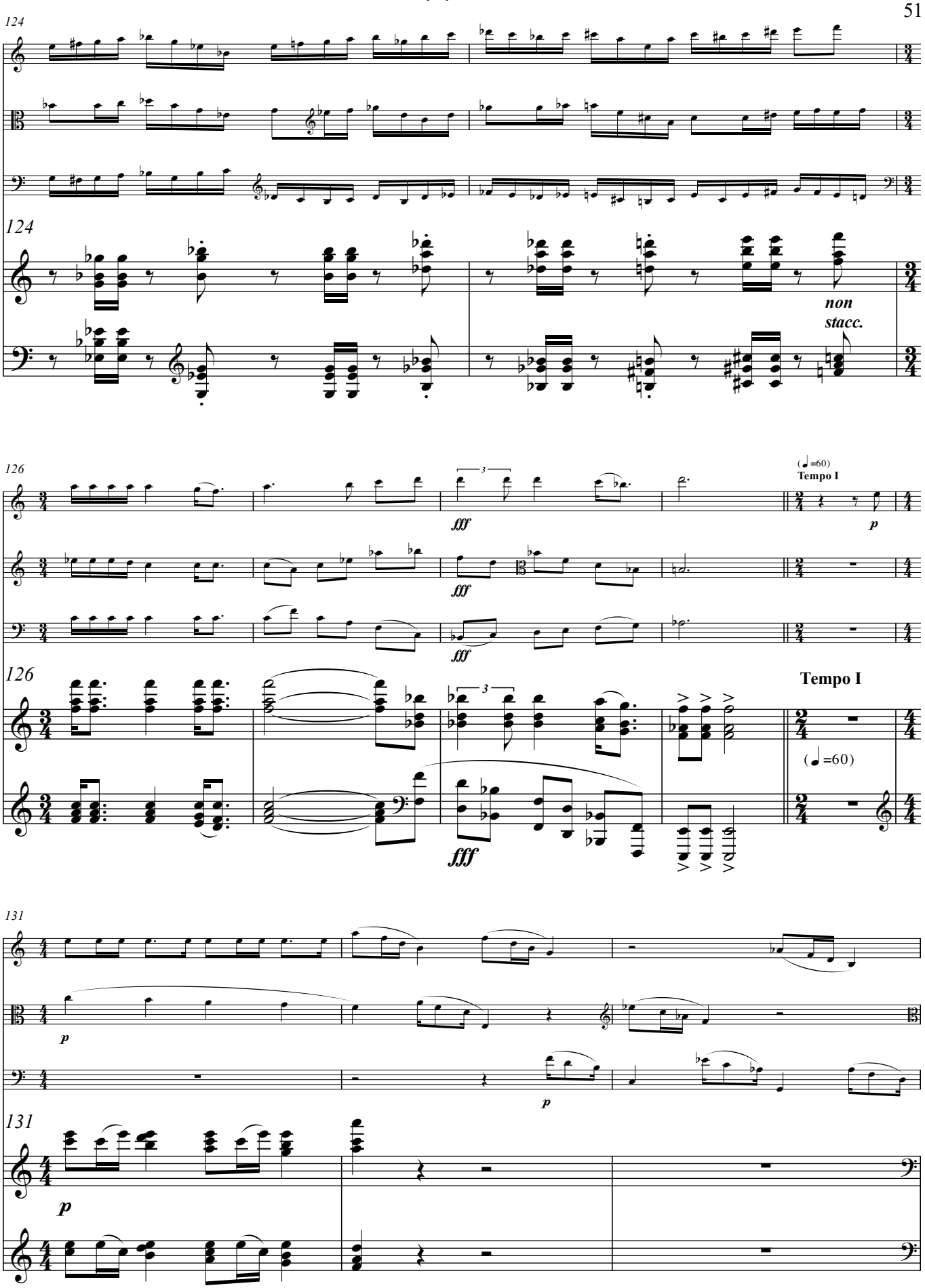

68
Let Freedom Ring (♩= 86)
ff
72
75

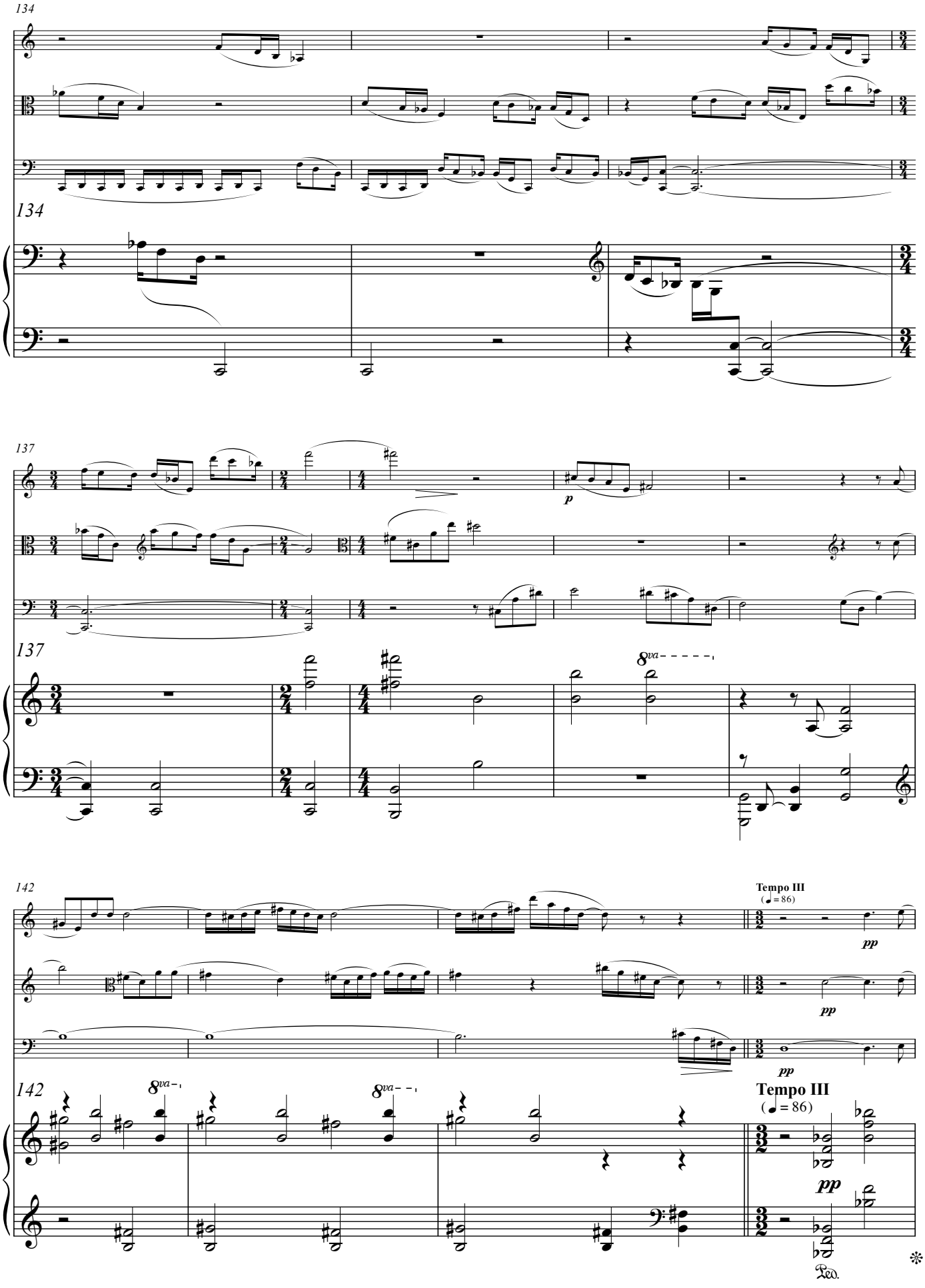

78
78
8va
81
81
84
84

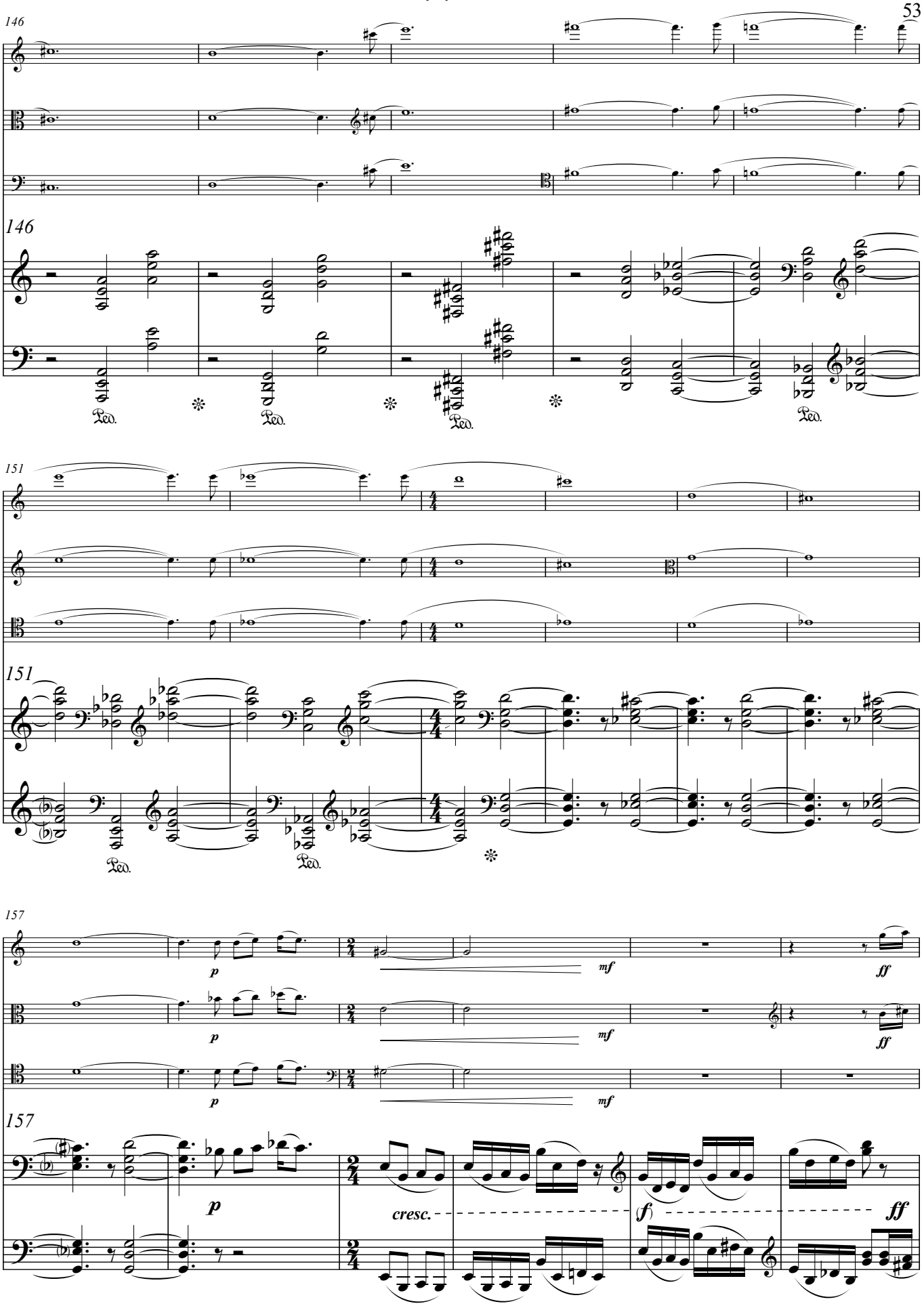

87
87
90
90
93
ff
p
p
p
93
p

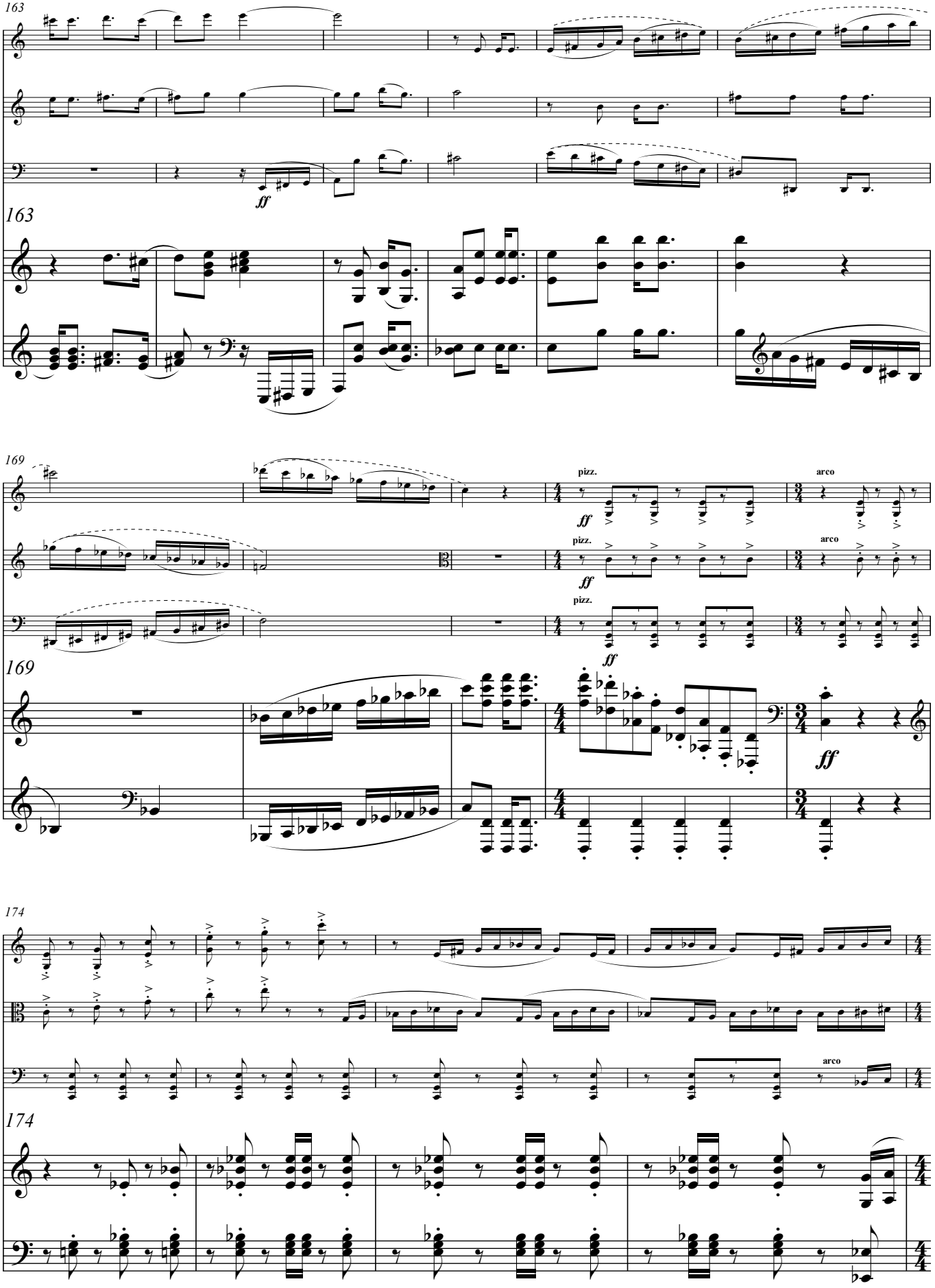

98
98
102
102
8vb
8vb
8vb
8vb
107
p
mf
ff
p
mf
ff
p
mf
107
p cresc.
f
ff


113
ff
113
117
f
f
pizz.
f
117
8va
ff
f
122
ff
ff
arco
ff
122
ff


124
non
stacc.
126
fff
(♩=60)
Tempo I
131
p


134
137
p
8va
142
Tempo III
(♩= 86)
pp
Ped.


146
146
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
151
151
Ped.
Ped.
157
157
p
mf
ff
cresc.
f
ff


163
ff
163
169
pizz.
ff
arco
pizz.
ff
arco
pizz.
ff
169
ff
174
arco
174

178

178

180

180

8va

182

(♩ = 80)
Thank God Almighty

fff

182

(8va)

(♩ = 80)
Thank God Almighty

fff