The Course of Empire

For String Quartet

Nell Shaw Cohen

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(2008)

I. The Savage State ... p. 1

II. The Pastoral State ... p. 5

III. Consummation ... p. 9

IV. Destruction ... p. 15

V. Desolation ... p. 20

Front cover: Thomas Cole, “The Consummation of Empire” (1835-36)

Program Note

This piece is based on Thomas Cole's "The Course of Empire" (1834-36), a series of five paintings depicting the rise and fall of a fantastical Greco-Roman civilization. Each movement represents one of the paintings. These are canvases of a monumental scale, with incredibly vivid imagery. In "Empire" Cole envisions a dark ages, a primal stage in which nature dominates man (*The Savage State*); a utopia in which people live according to peace and rationality, perfectly in balance with nature (*The Pastoral State*); an era of decadence (*Consummation*); war and chaos (*Destruction*); and finally, an uninhabited world in which the ruins of mankind are being overtaken by nature (*Desolation*).

The narrative presents a conventional view of Western civilization, but the most intriguing features of Cole's approach are his use of continuity and change within the images and his ability to reflect the significance of the narrative on multiple levels, from the overall composition to the smallest detail. The story takes place in one landscape, from slightly different angles, during progressive times of day (the first painting is dawn; the final painting is twilight). A distant cliff on the horizon is ever-present, and I have represented this with a five-note theme that appears, in more or less recognizable forms, in each movement with the exception of *Consummation* (the point at which man-made structures overwhelm the natural landscape). Cole imbues each view of the landscape with a distinct emotional state, seen vividly in his skies – for instance, the swirling, primordial clouds opening towards the light in *The Savage State* are paralleled by the billows of smoke closing out the sky in *Destruction* (the key transitional moments of the narrative, one moving towards civilization and the other moving away from it). I tended to take the skies and the larger compositional shapes as the primary cue for what kind of physical motion the music should embody (flowing, busy, loose, square, etc).

The conceptual implications of the individual paintings influenced my structural and stylistic choices. In *The Savage State*, there are two primary musical materials: isorhythmic melodies and a continuous sixteenth-note figure. These are combined, altered and transposed to produce a sense of upward forward motion and a dark, amorphous atmosphere that reflects the dynamic quality of the painting. I chose stylistic elements of Medieval music for *The Pastoral State* (which is built on a droning cantus firmus of the cliff motive in the cello) to evoke antiquity and rustic living. *Consummation* has a martial, quasi-Baroque feel, for me the most appropriate response to the pomp and circumstance depicted in the painting. *Destruction* is the hard-rocking movement, with constantly shifting meters, dynamic extremes, and an overall density of texture, recreating the almost cartoonish anxiety and chaos of the painting. I may have taken the most liberty with my interpretation of *Desolation*: in representing the emptiness after the fall of civilization, I attempted to produce a musical character that felt otherwordly and foreign, yet glimmering with life – the beginning of a new reign of nature.

– Nell Shaw Cohen, December 2008

Performance Notes

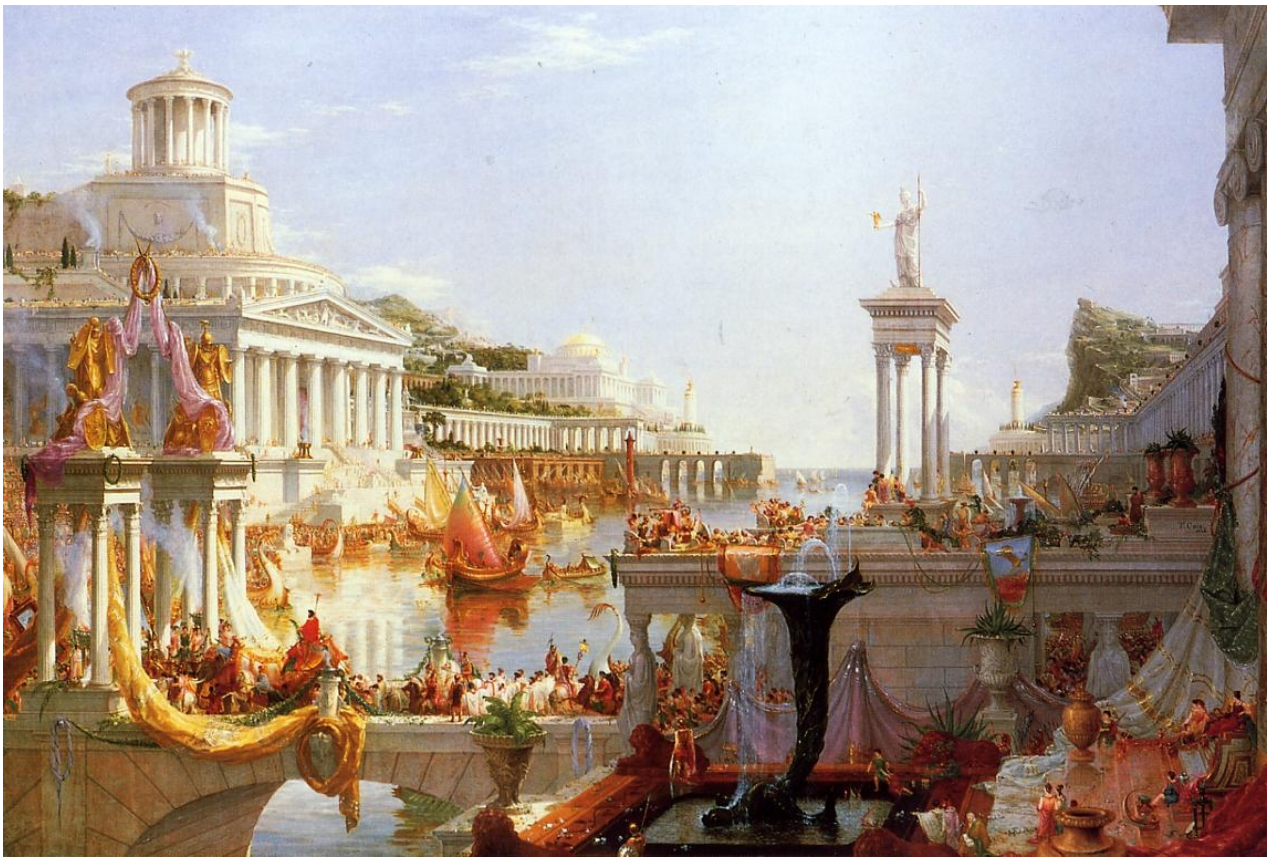
Accidentals remain in effect for the duration of the measure.
There is no pause between movements III and IV.

Approximate durations:

I. The Savage State: 2'
II. The Pastoral State: 2'
III. Consummation: 3'
IV. Destruction: 2'30"
V. Desolation: 4'
Total: ca. 13'30"

“The Savage State”

“The Pastoral State”



"The Consummation of Empire"

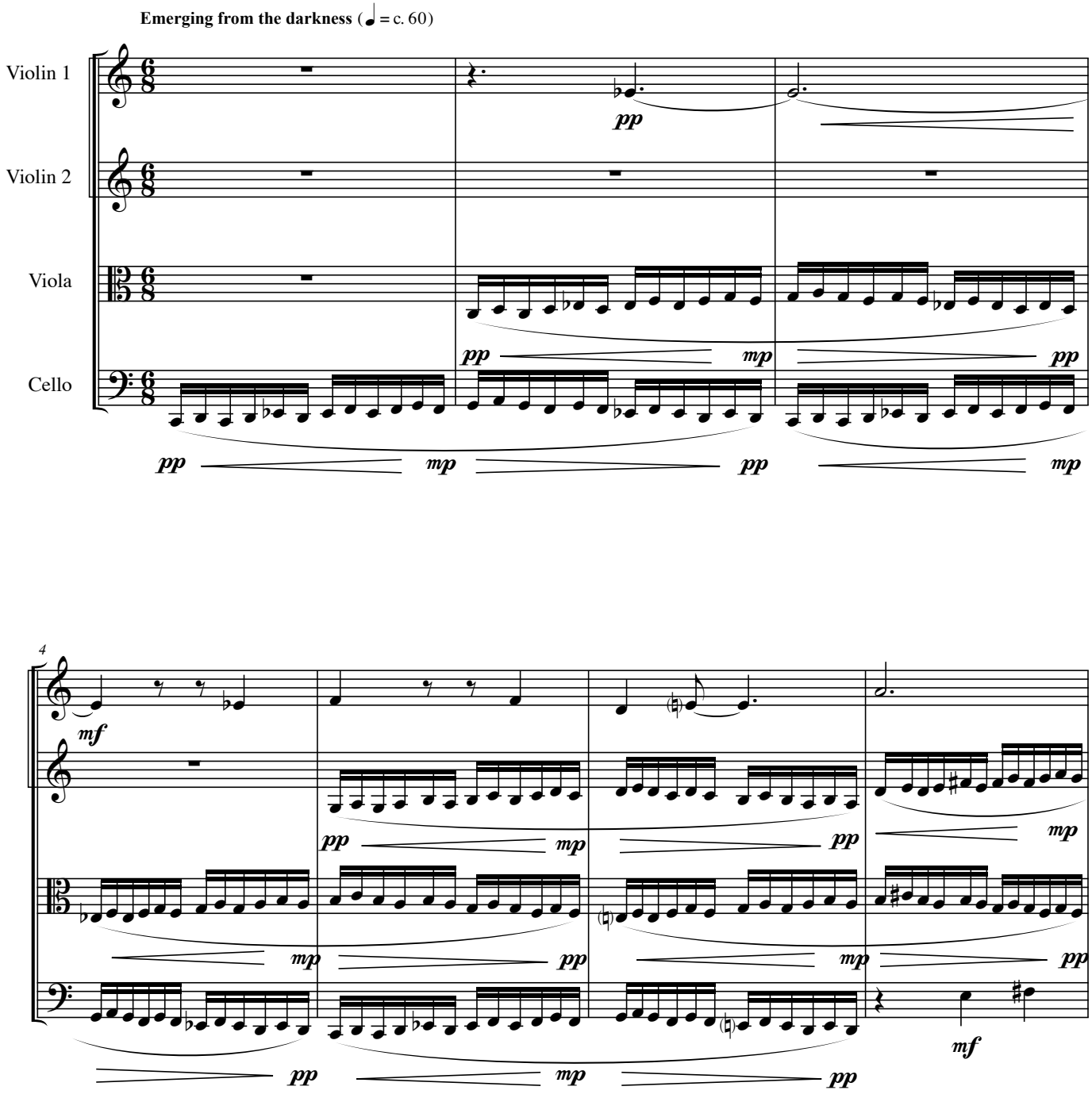
"The Destruction of Empire"

“Desolation”

The Course of Empire

I. The Savage State

Nell Shaw Cohen (2008)



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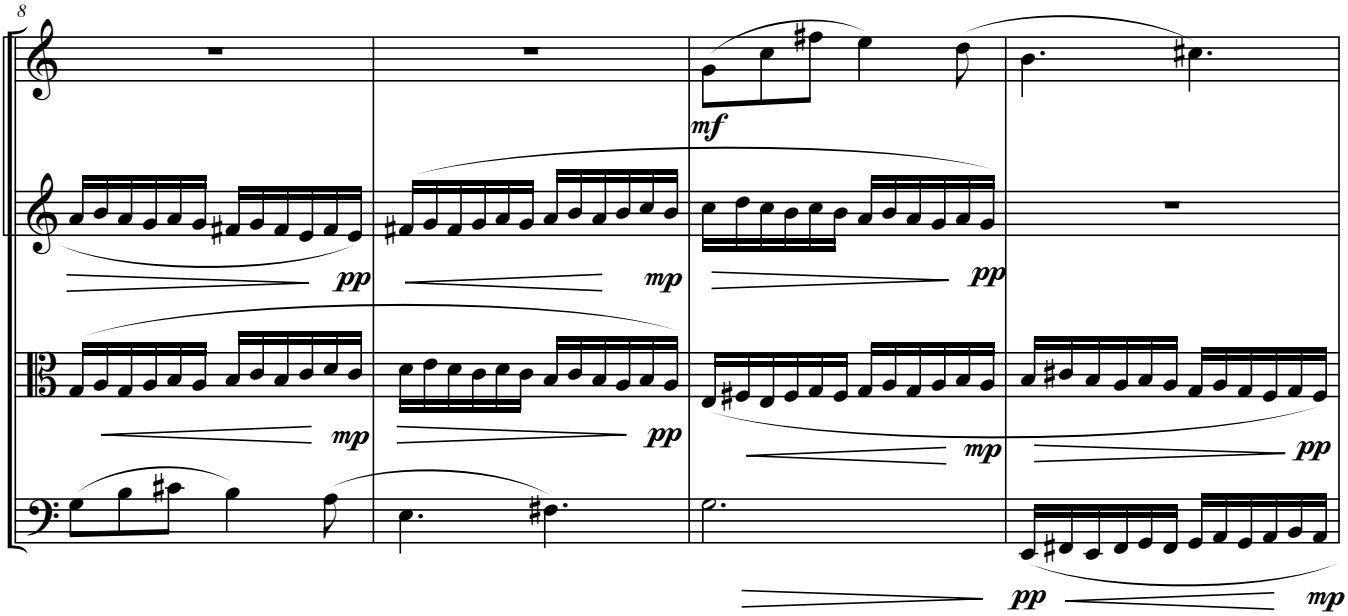
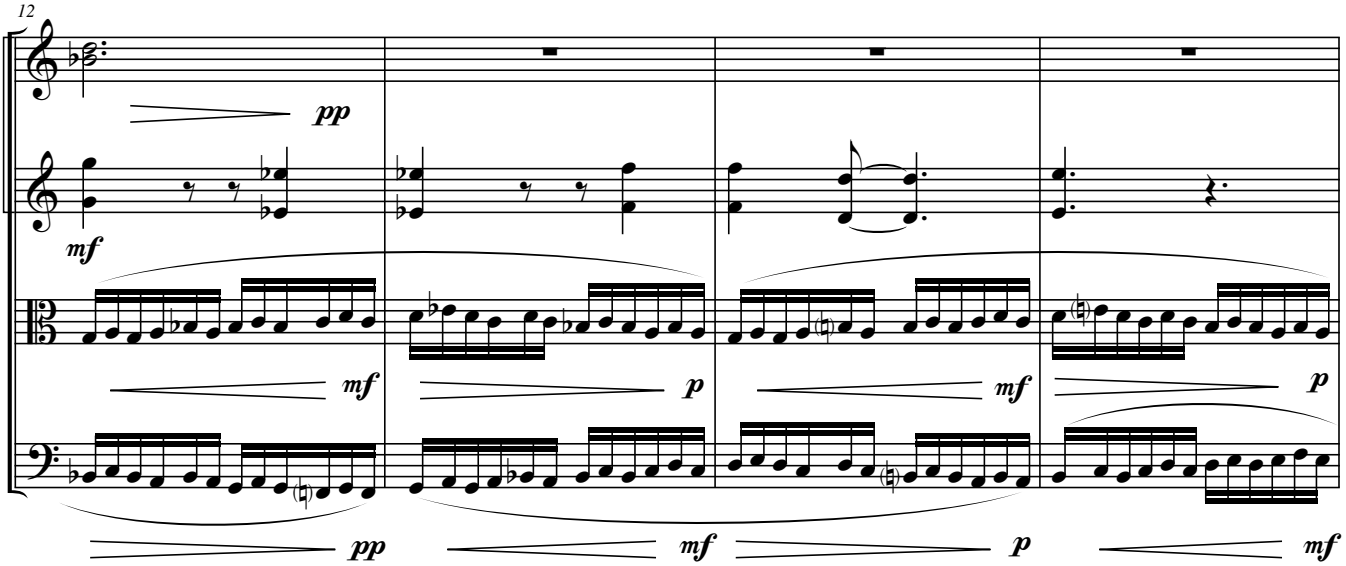
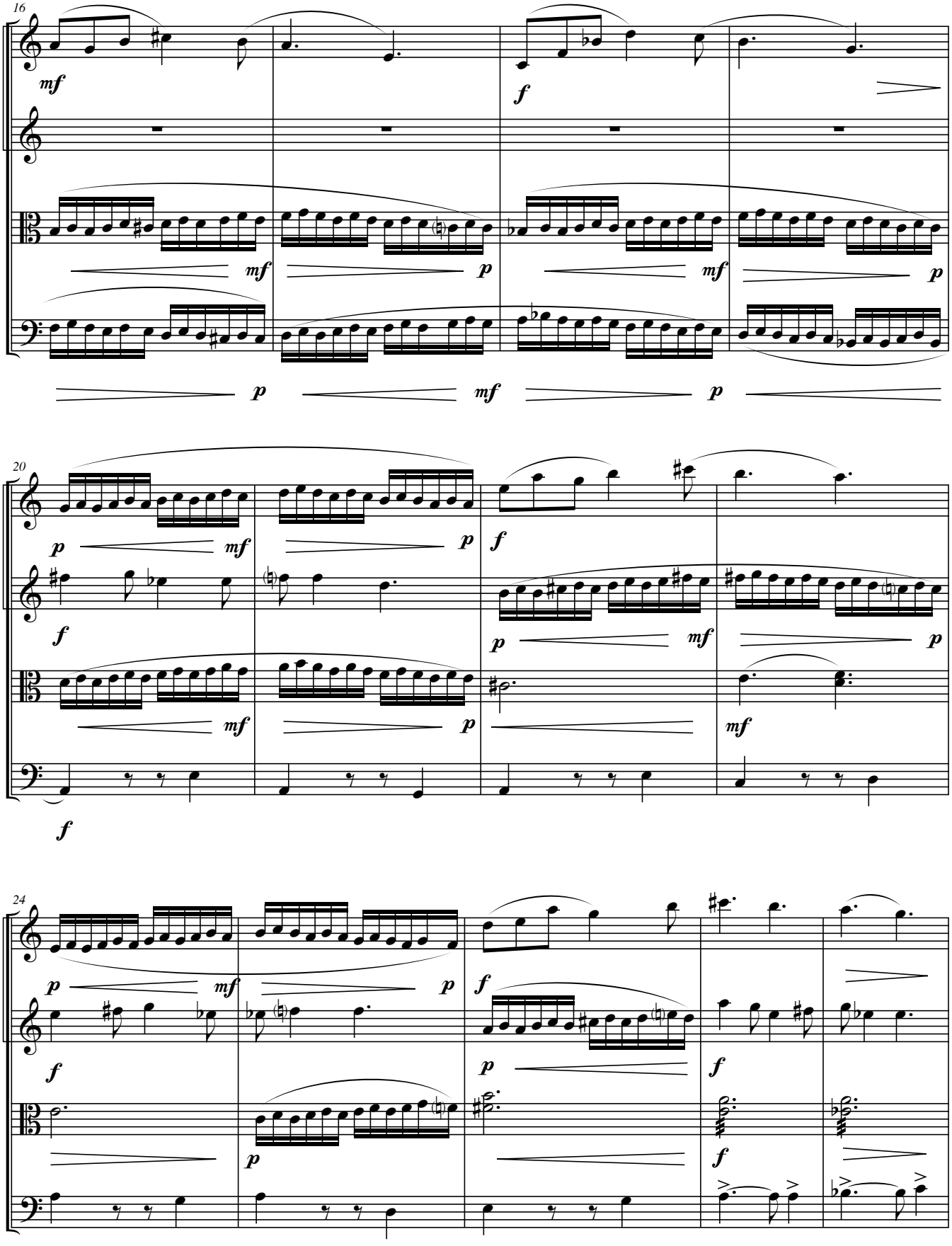
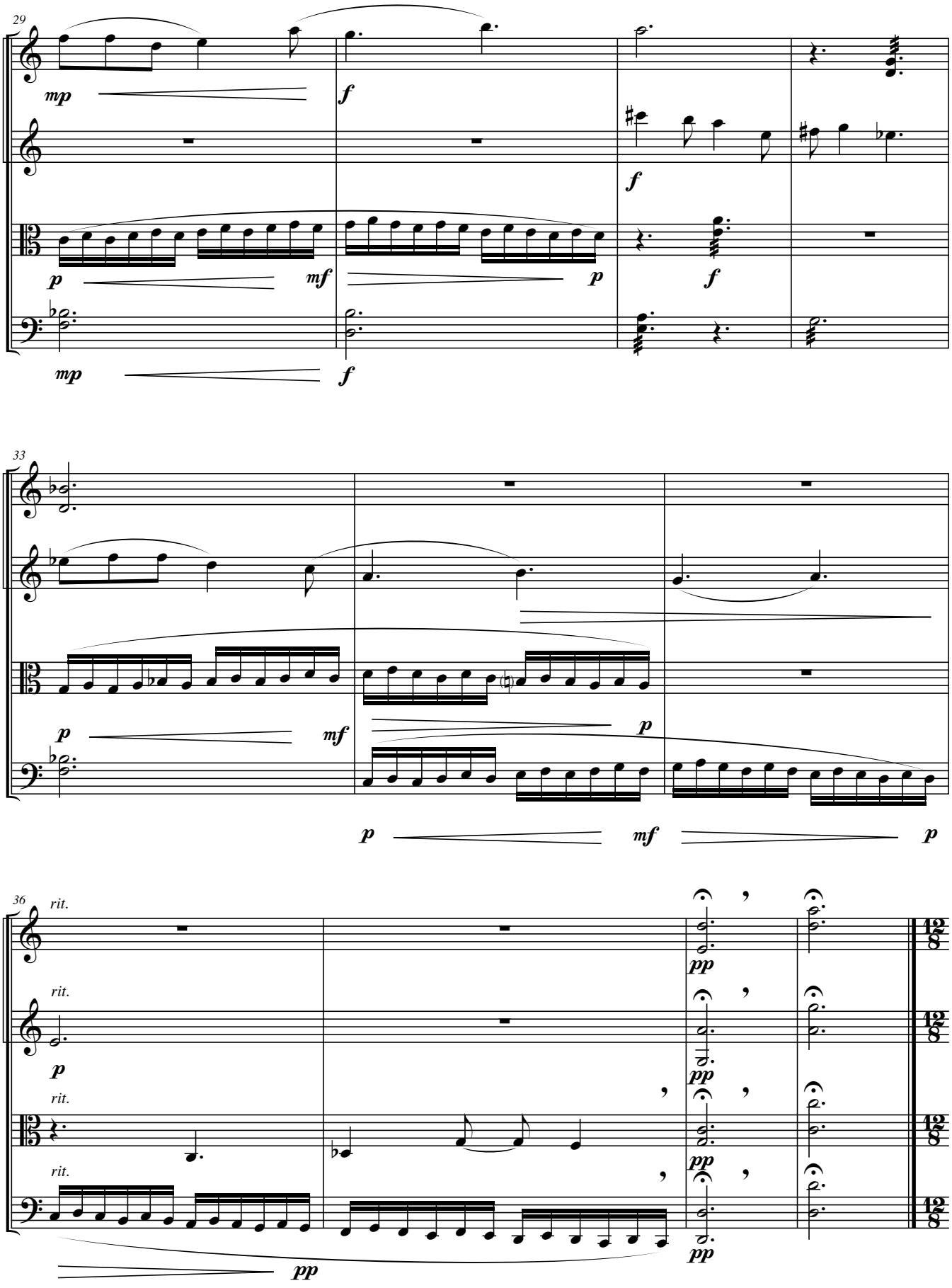
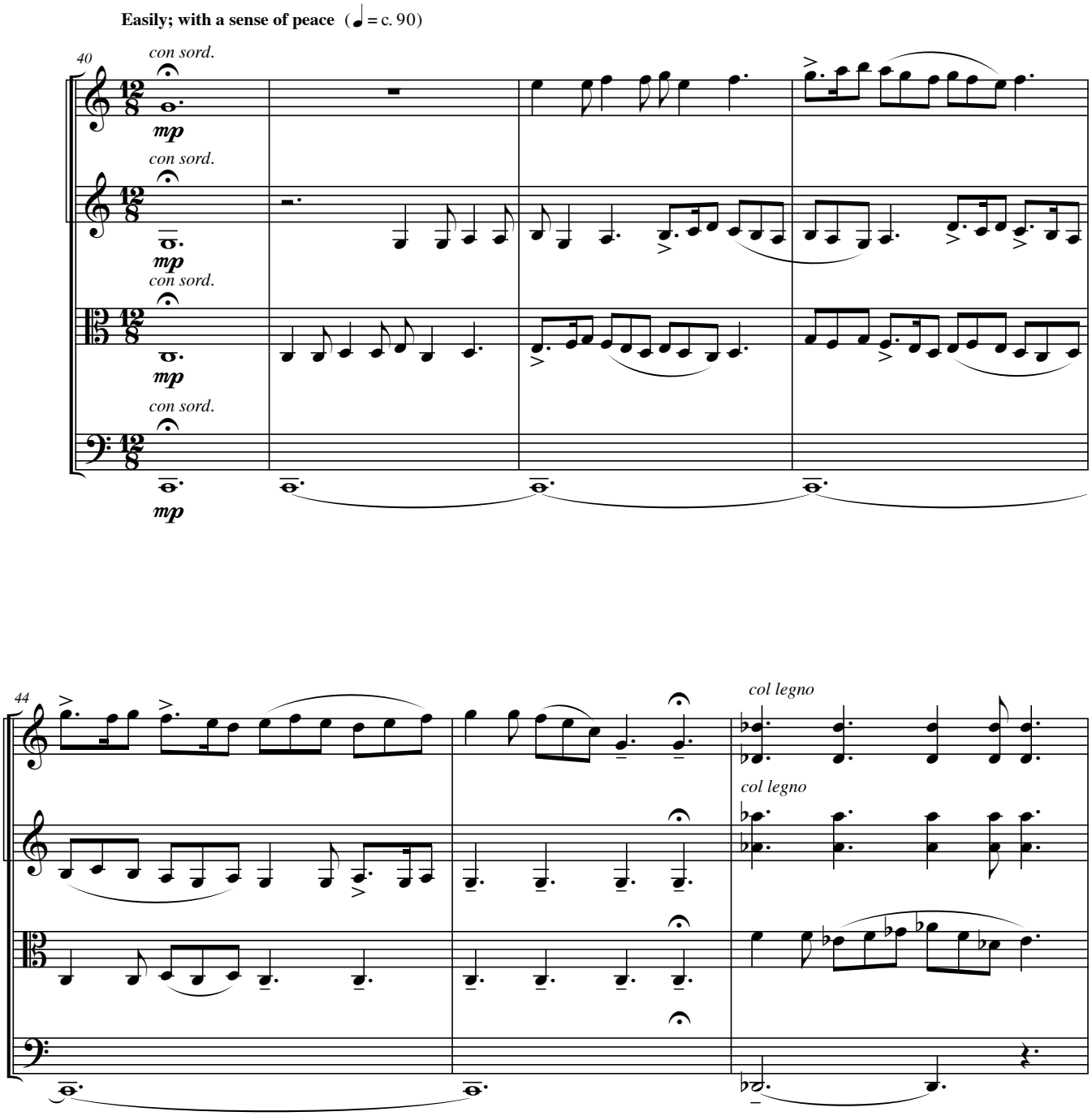

8
mf
pp
mp
pp
mp
pp
mp
pp
pp
mp

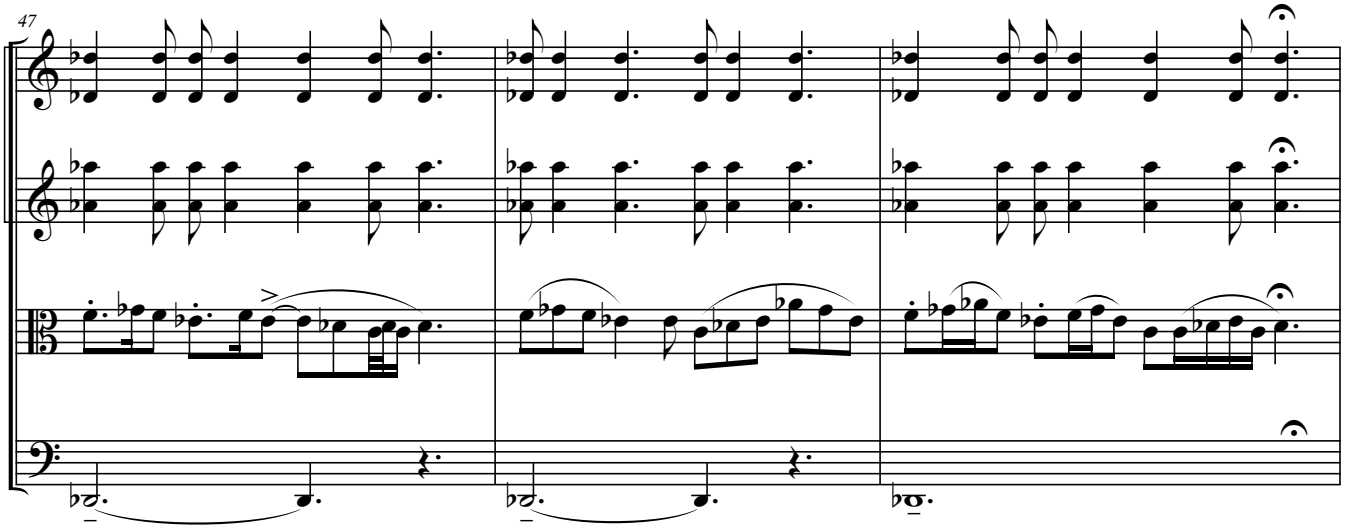

12
pp
mf
mf
p
mf
p
pp
mf
p
mf


16
mf
f
mf
p
mf
p
p
mf
p
20
p
mf
p
f
f
p
mf
p
mf
p
mf
f
24
p
mf
p
f
f
p
f
p
f
f


29
mp
f
f
p
mf
p
f
mp
f
33
p
mf
p
p
mf
p
36
rit.
rit.
rit.
rit.
pp
p
pp
pp
pp
12/8

II. The Pastoral State

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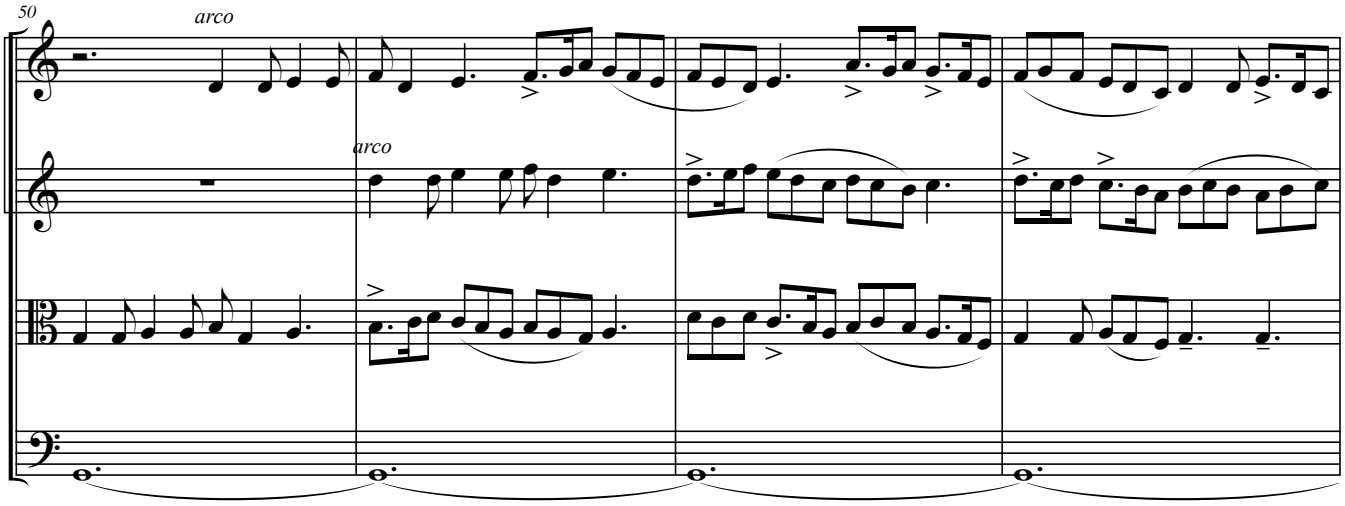
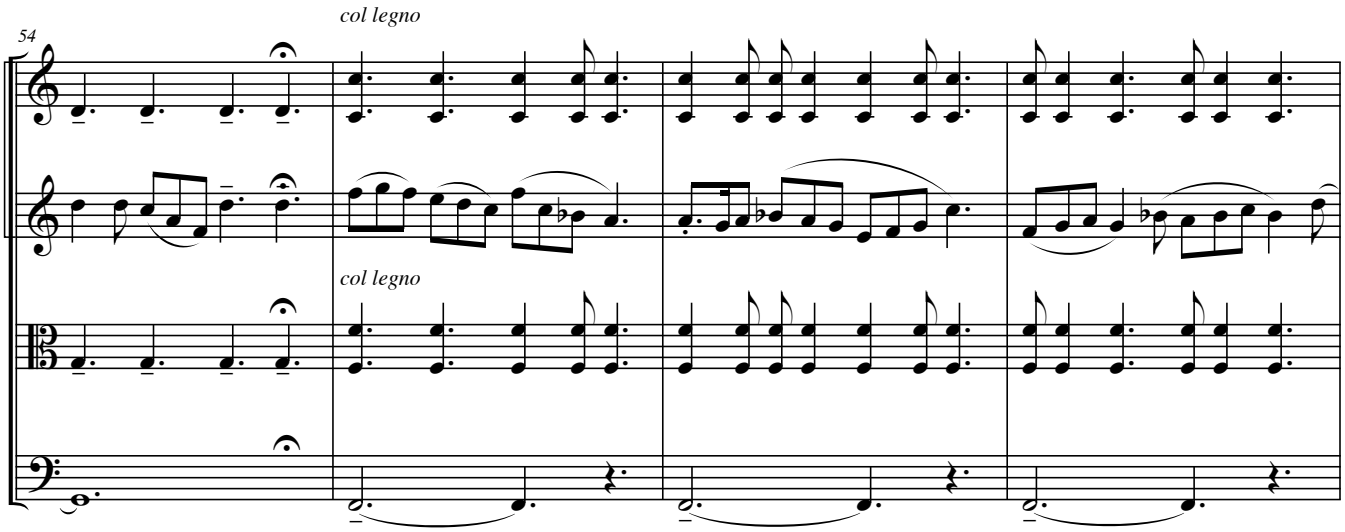
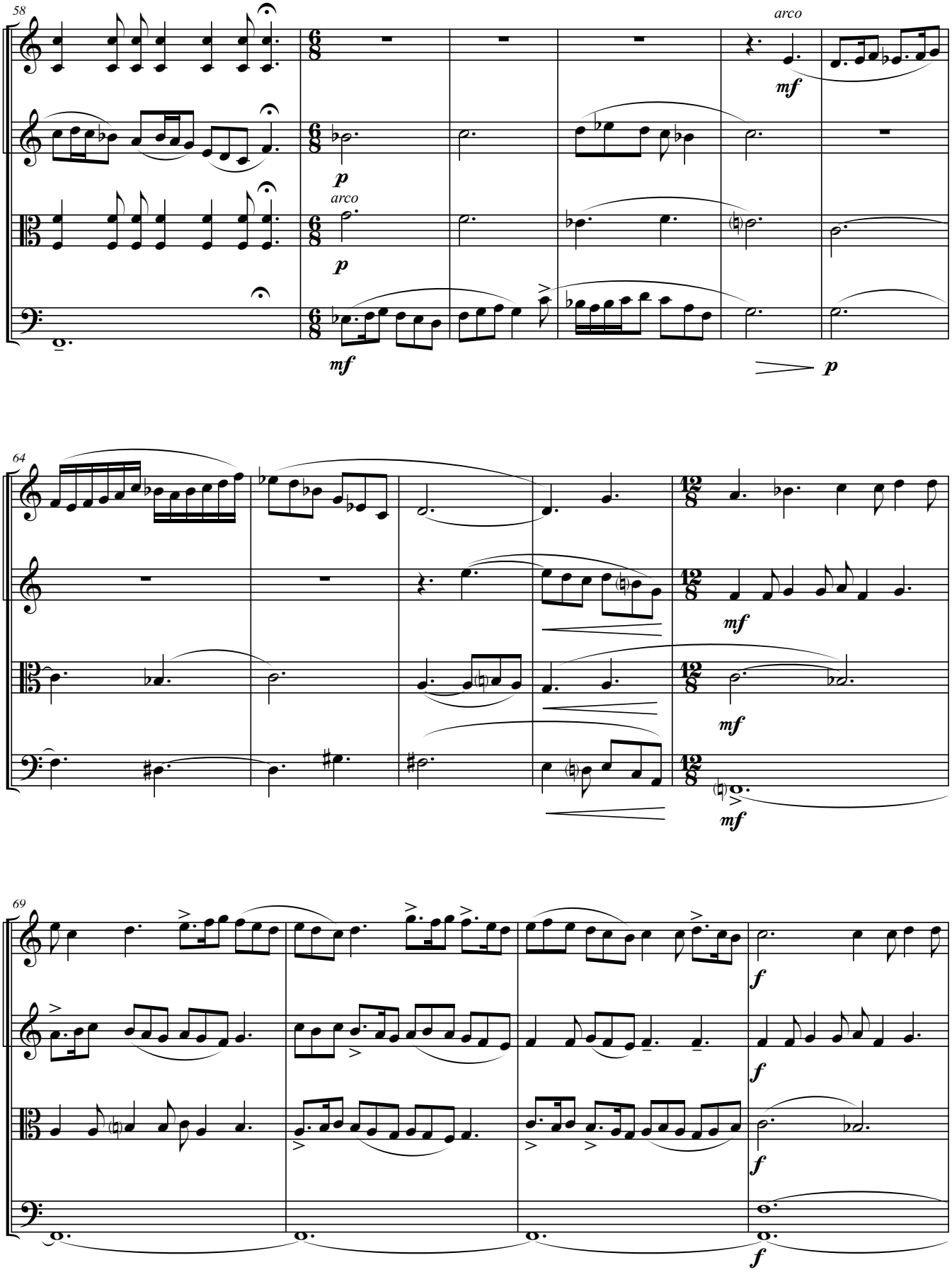
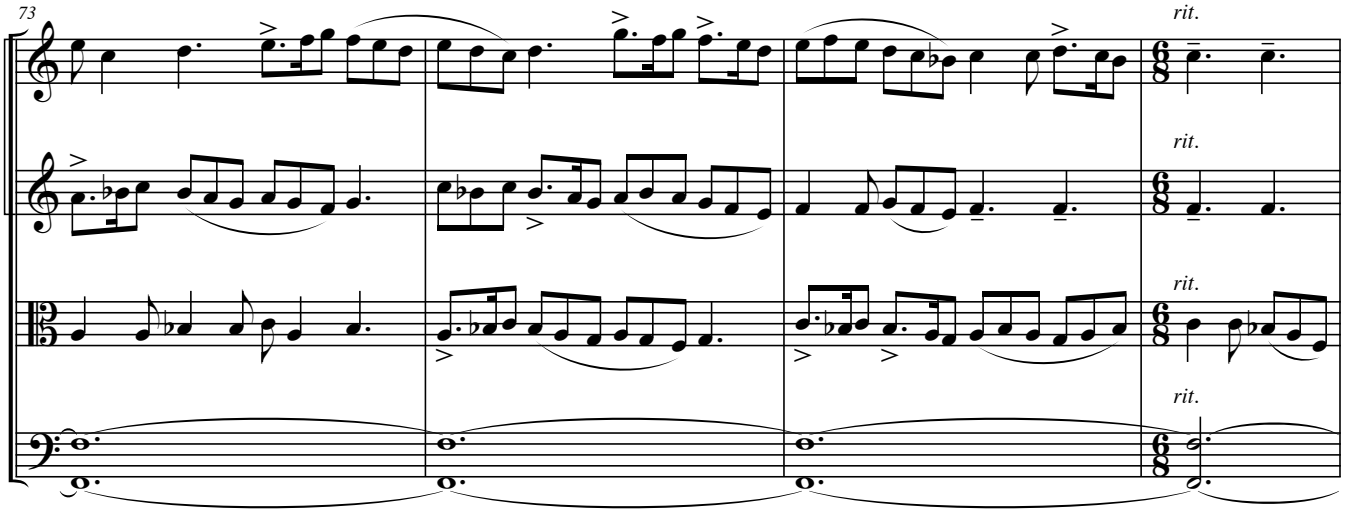
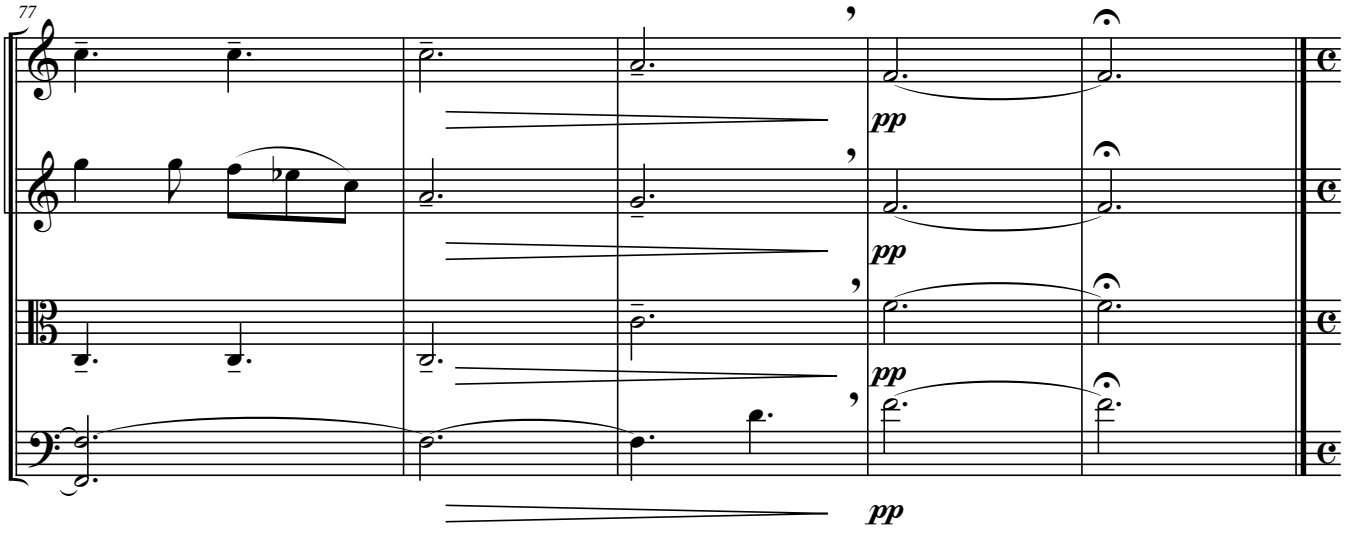

50
arco
arco

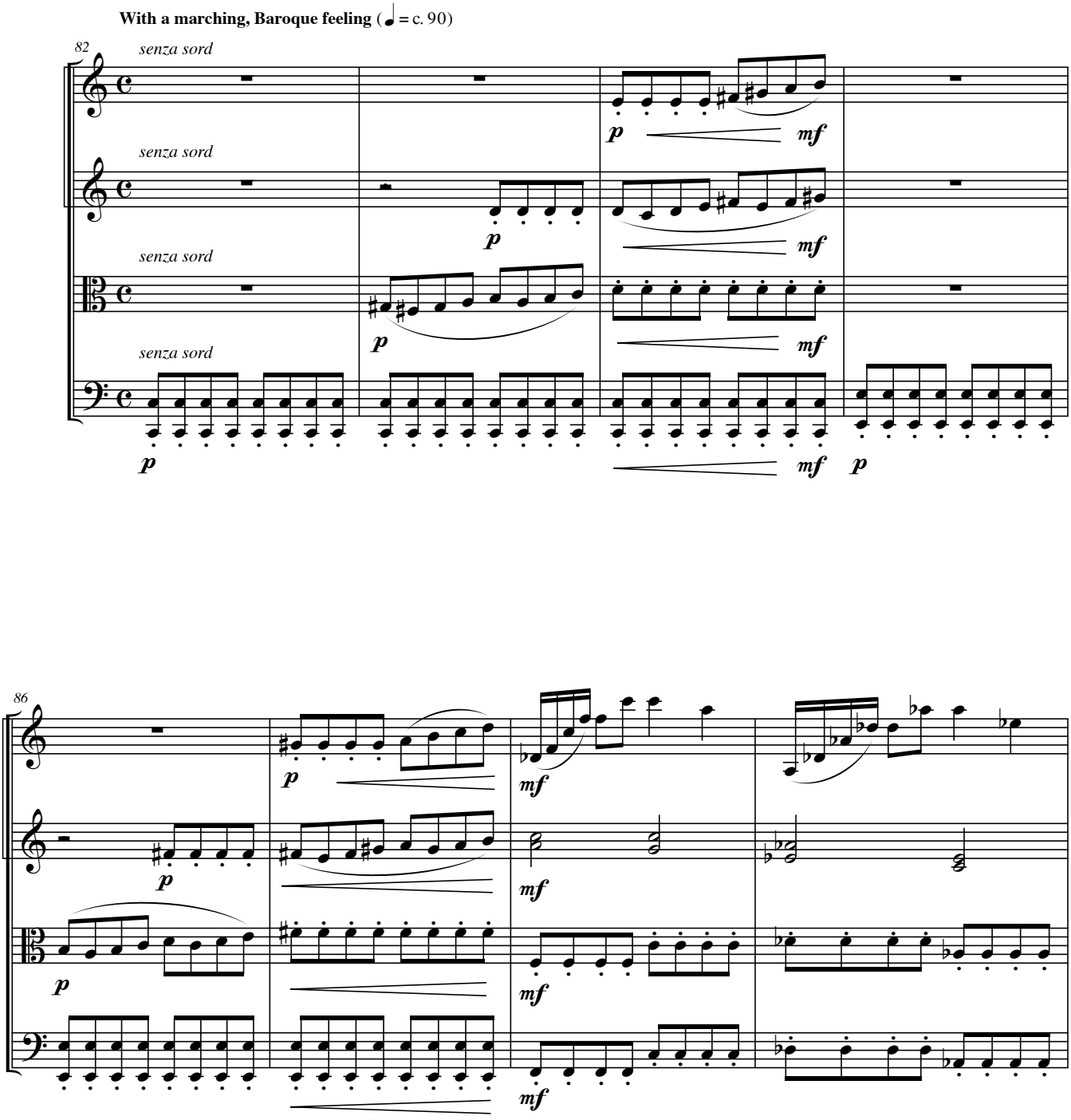

54
col legno
col legno

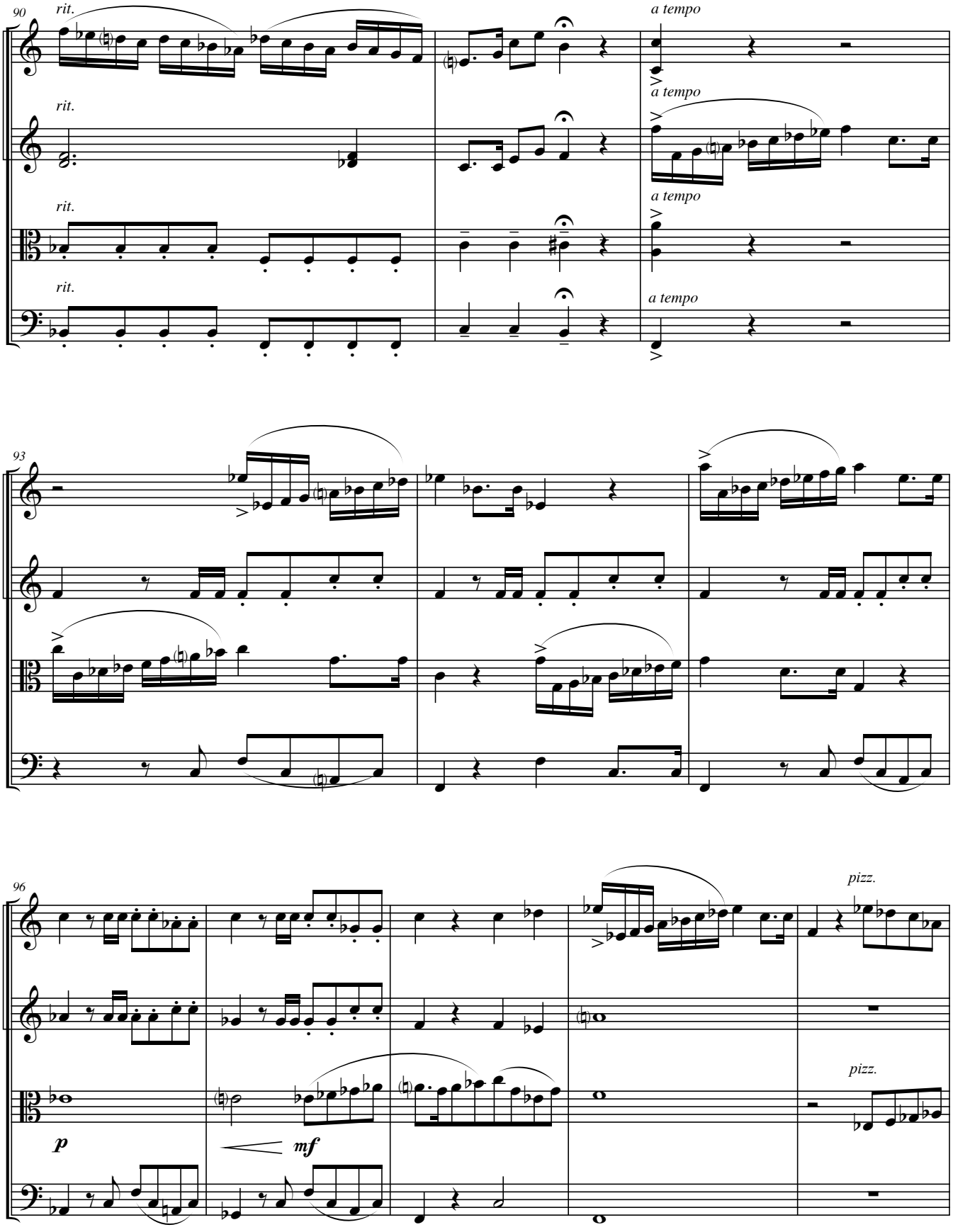

58
arco
mf
p
arco
p
mf
p
64
mf
mf
mf
69
f
f
f
f

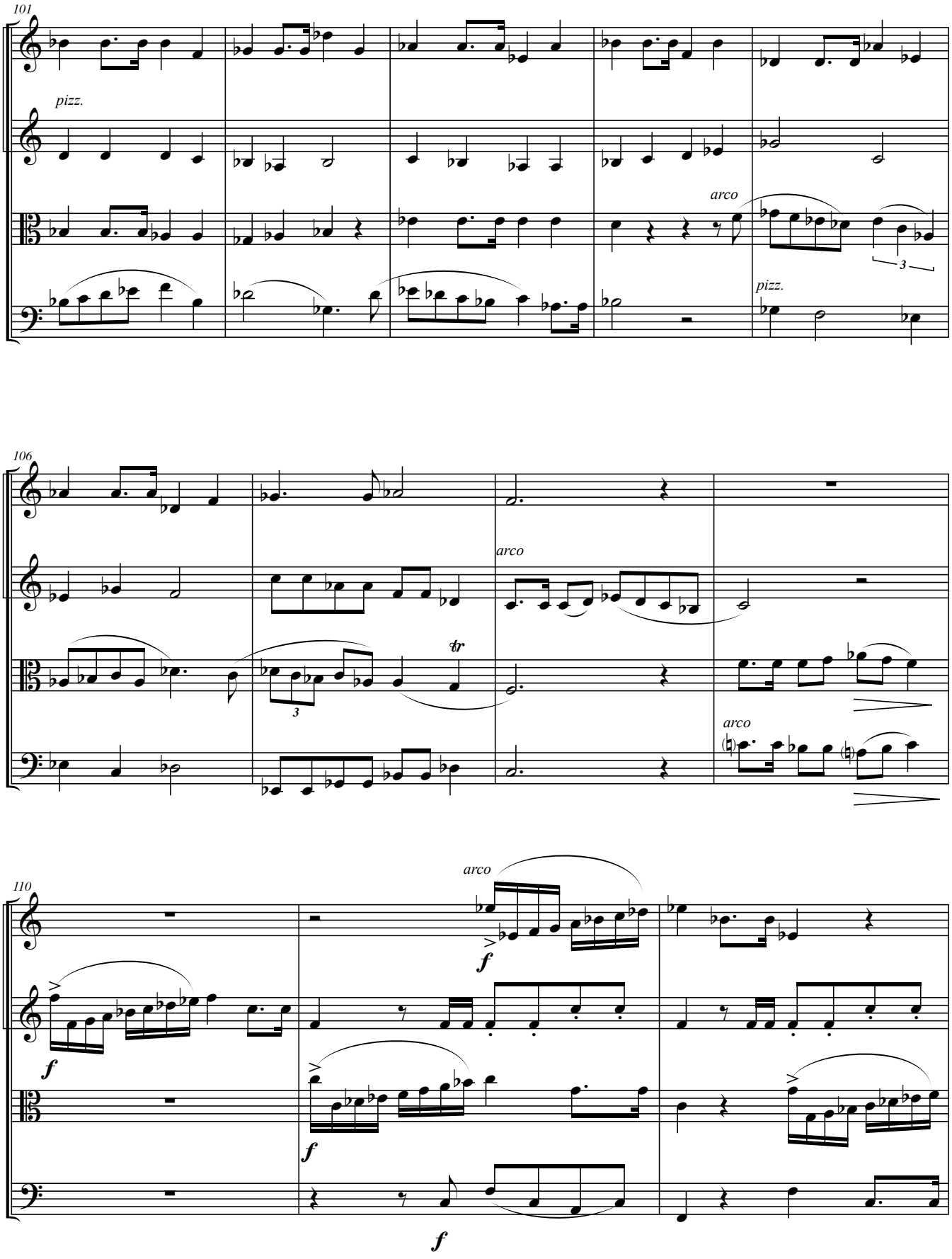

73
rit.
rit.
rit.
rit.

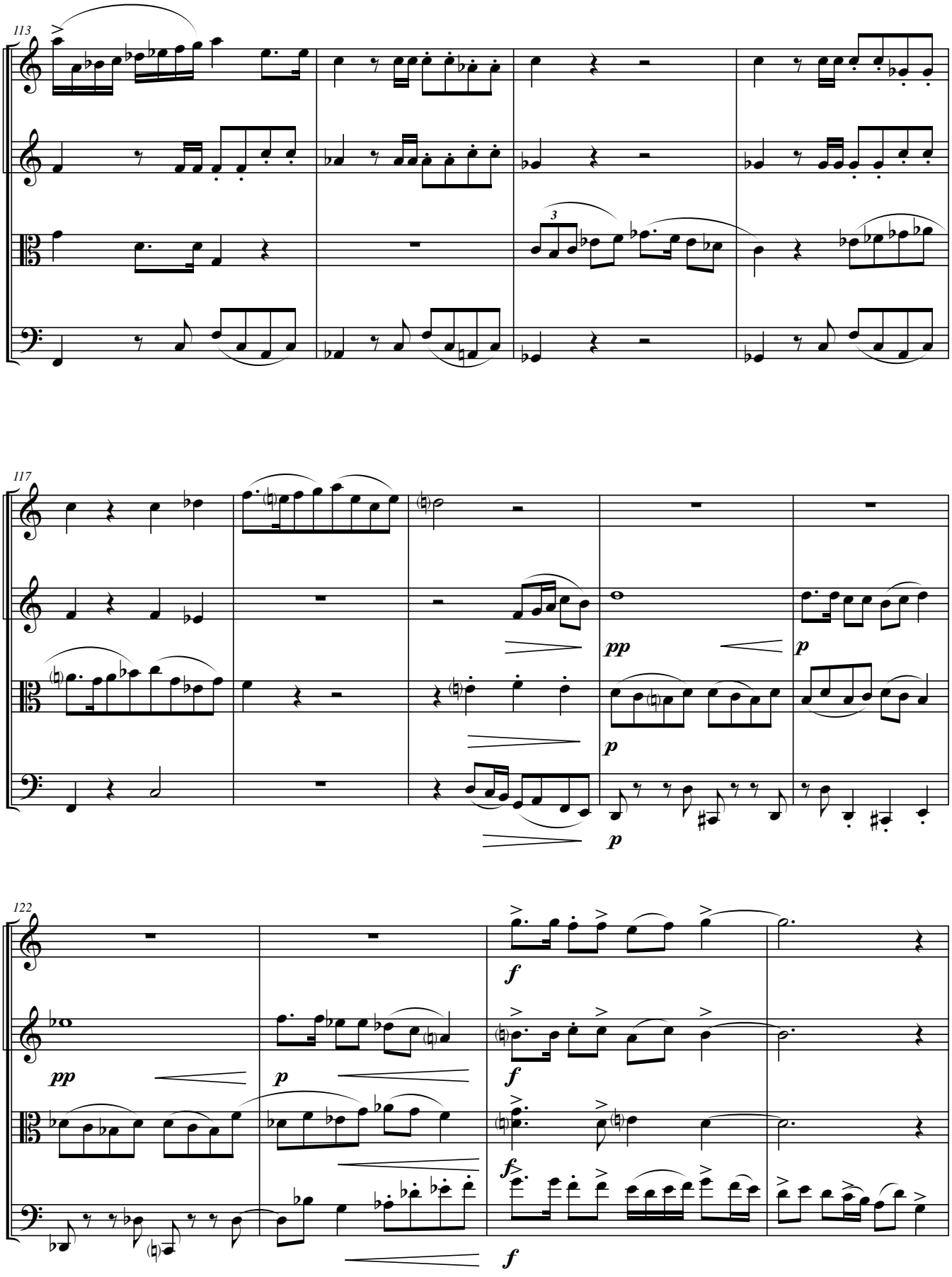

77
pp
pp
pp
pp

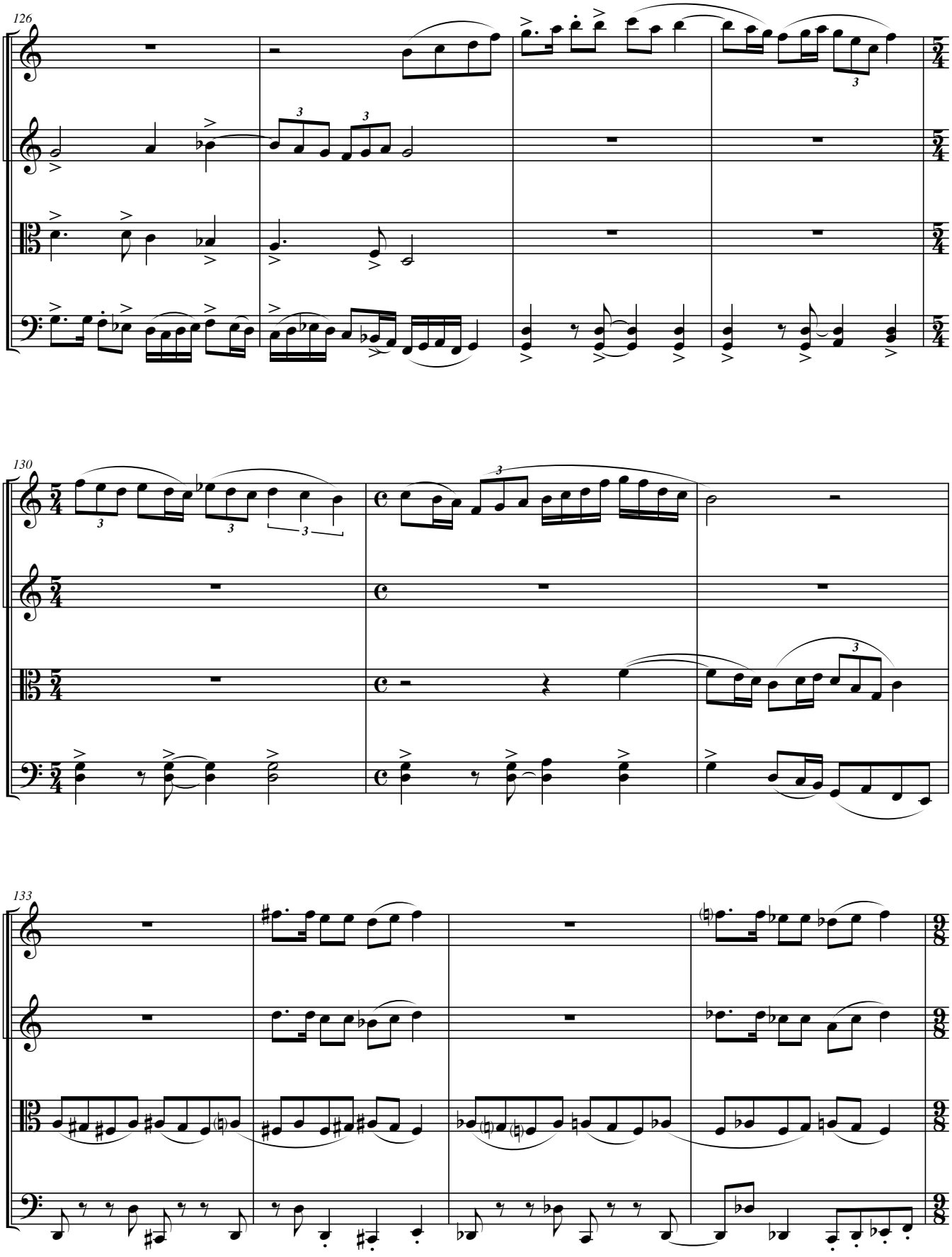
III. Consummation

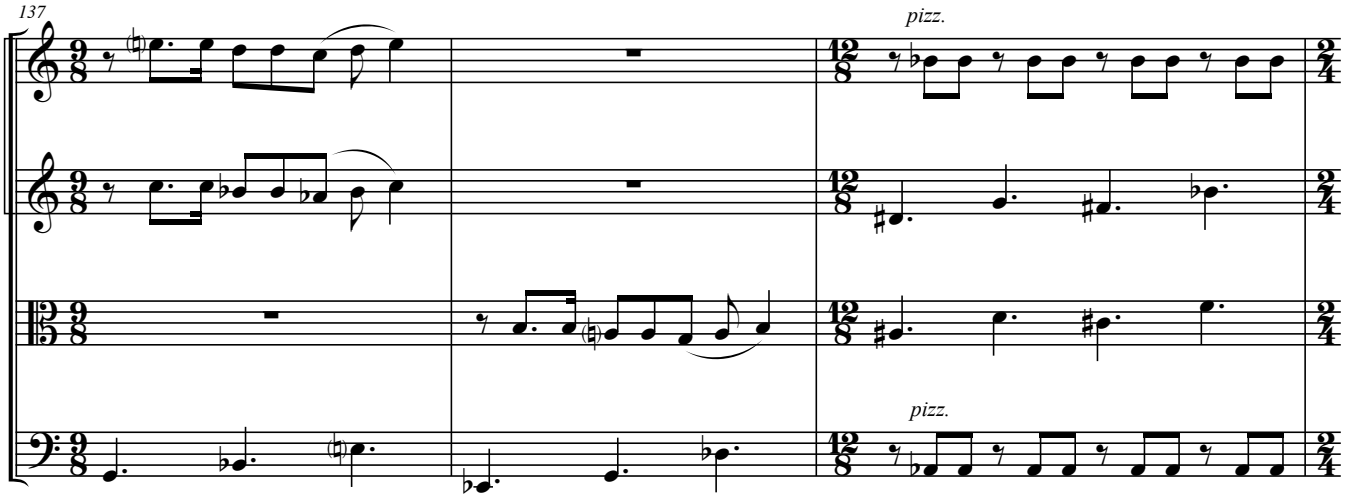



90
rit.
rit.
rit.
rit.
a tempo
a tempo
a tempo
a tempo
93
96
p
mf
pizz.
pizz.

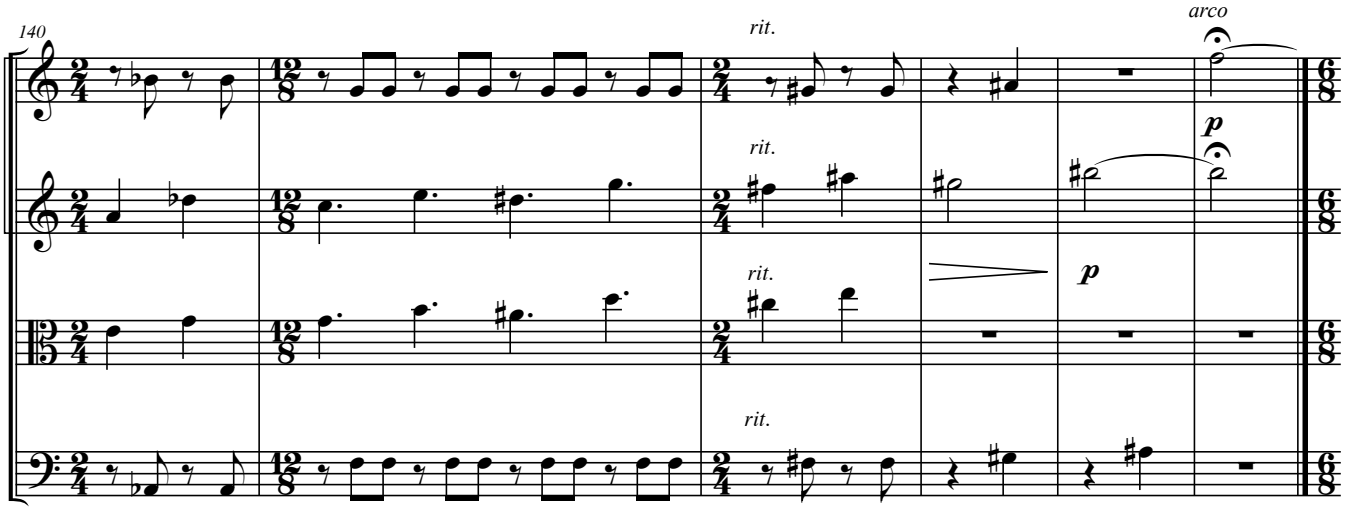

101
pizz.
arco
pizz.
106
arco
tr
arco
110
arco
f
f
f
f


113
3
117
pp
p
p
p
122
pp
p
f
f
f
f

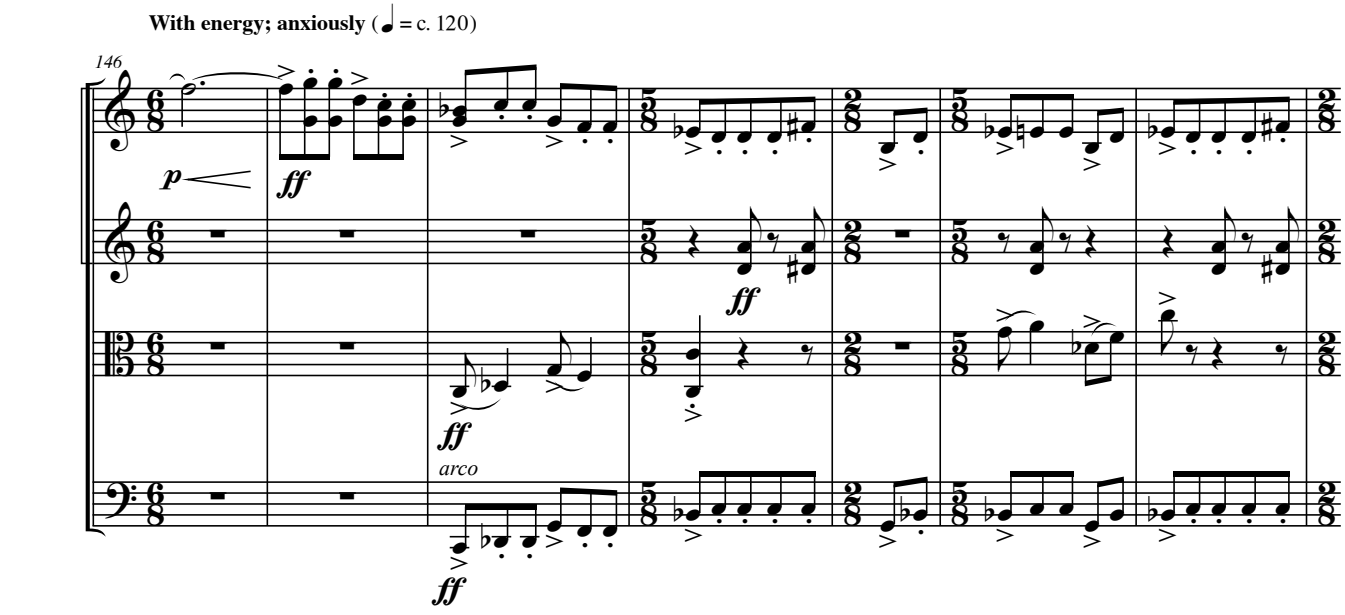

126
130
133

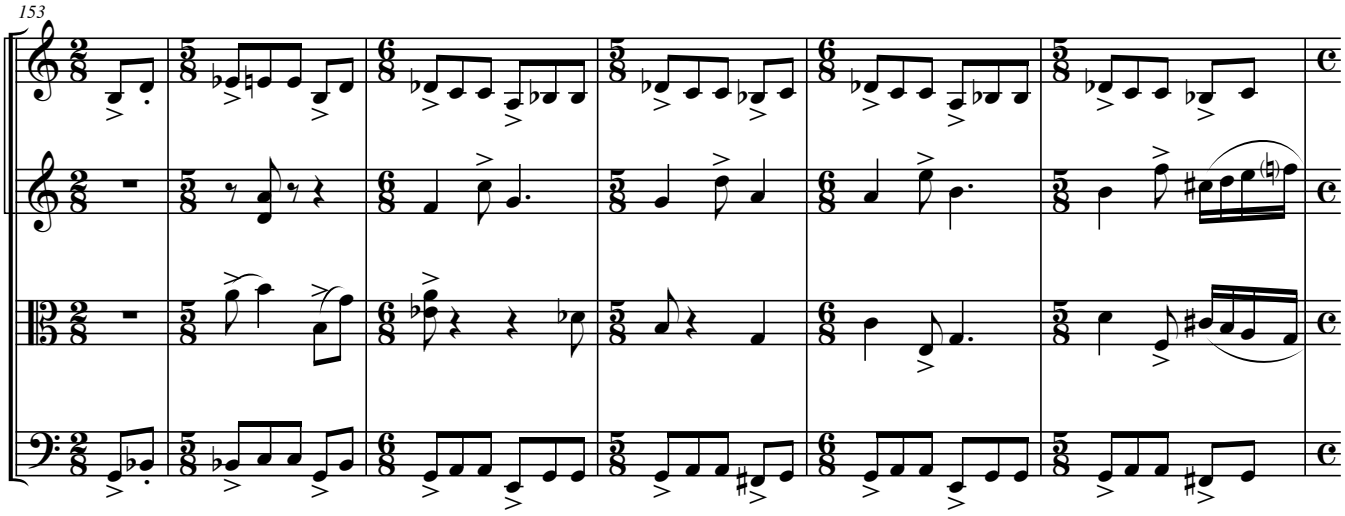


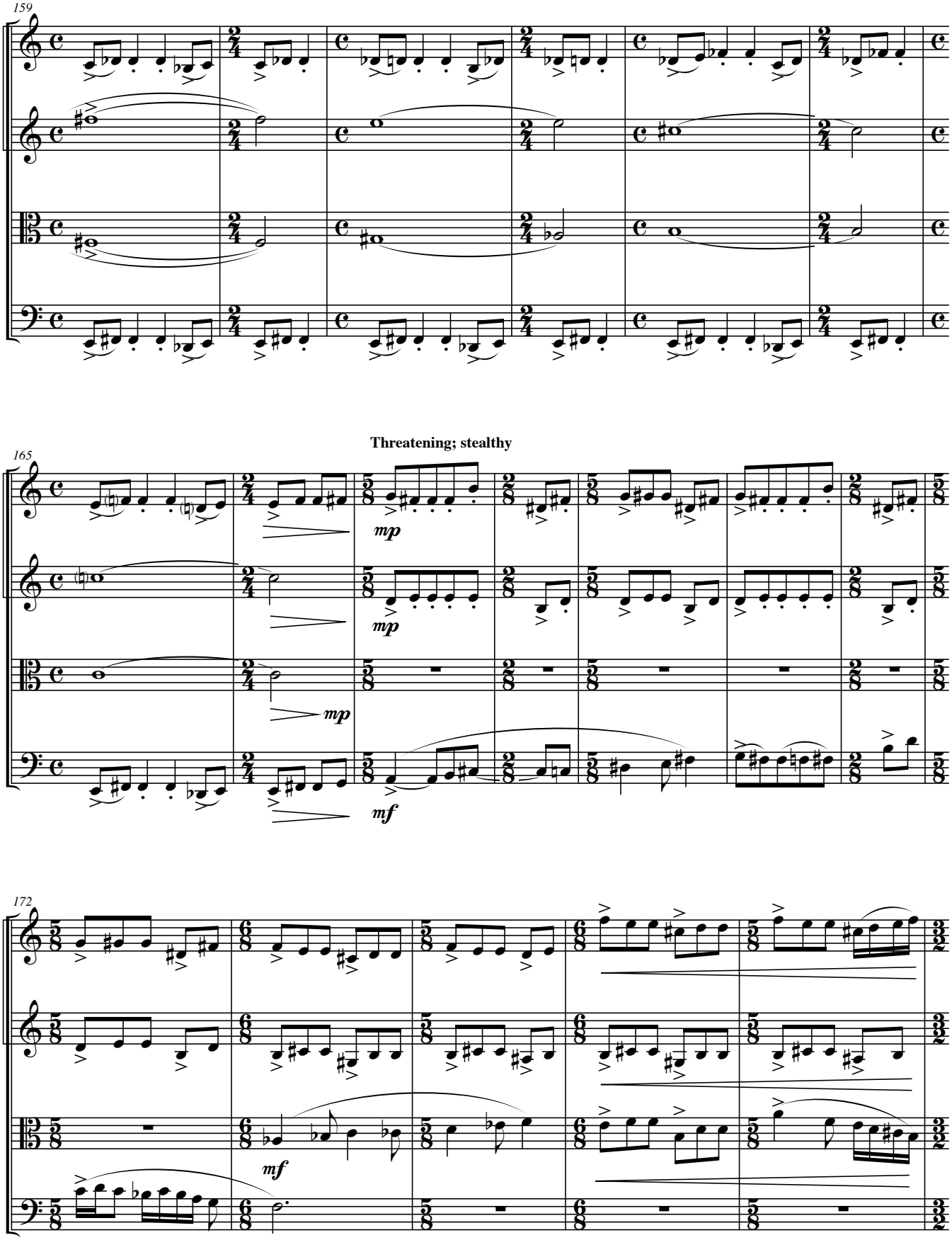
Link seamlessly to next movement.

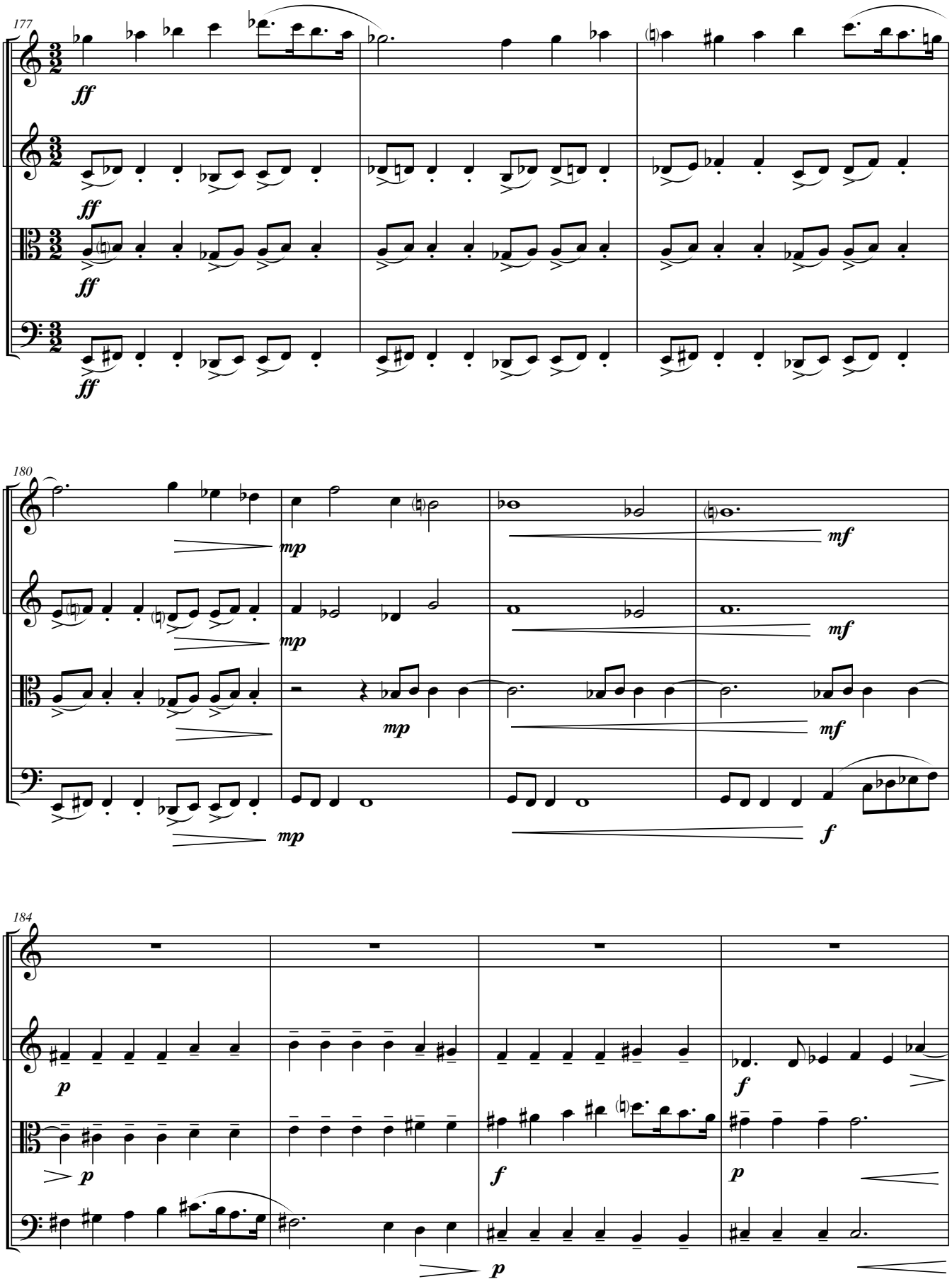


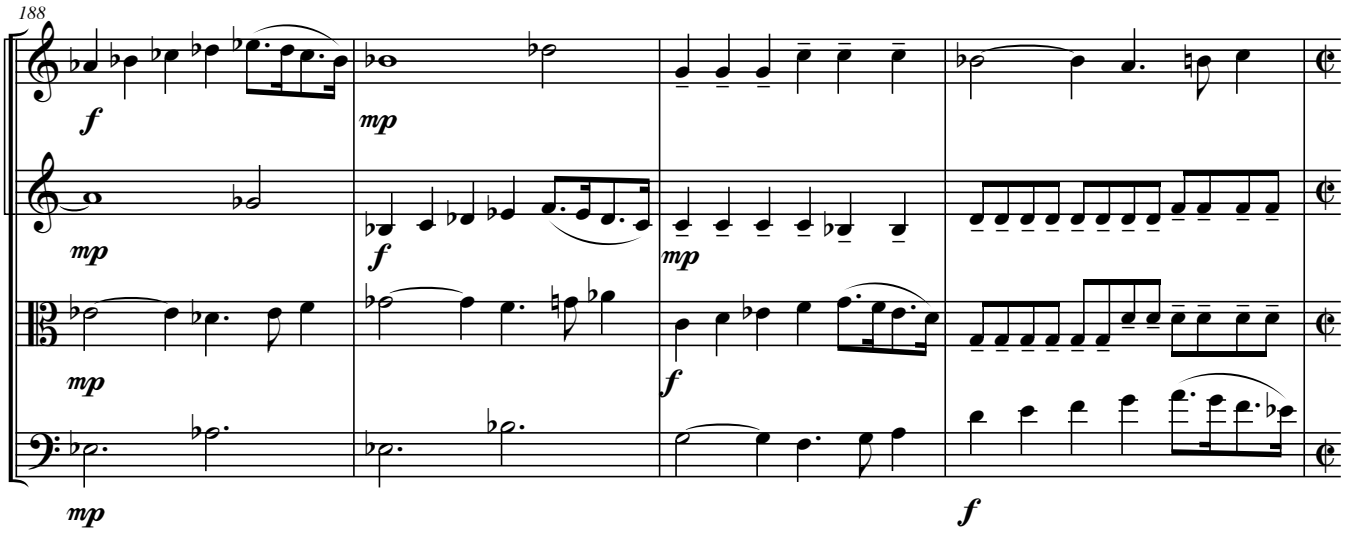
IV. Destruction

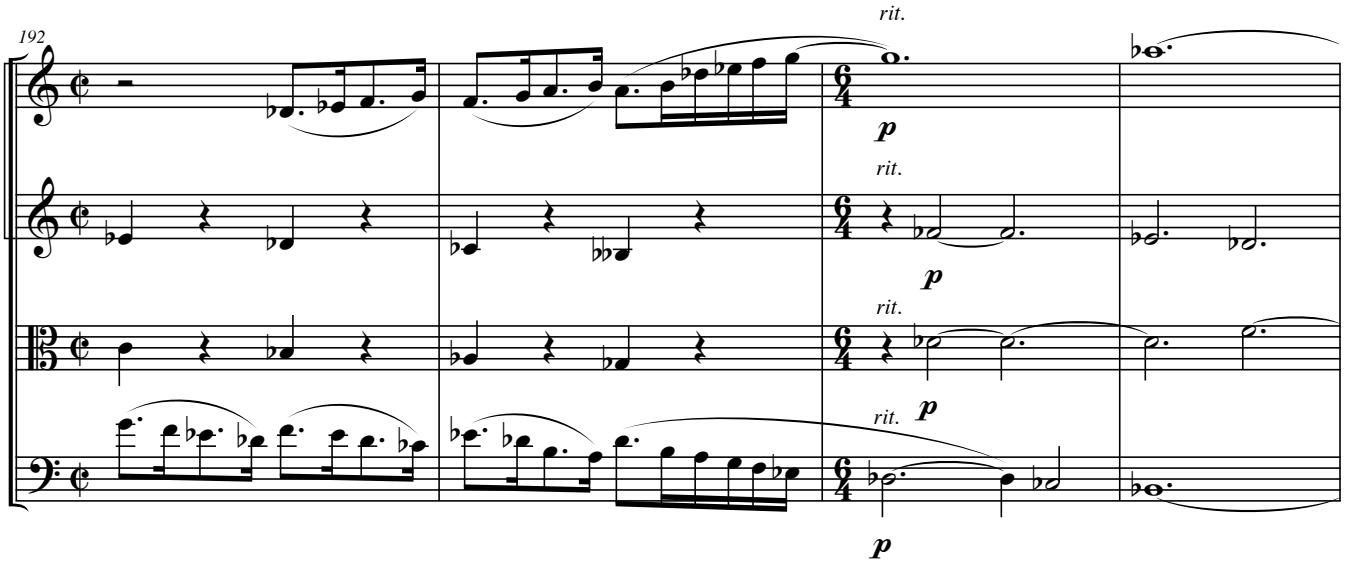




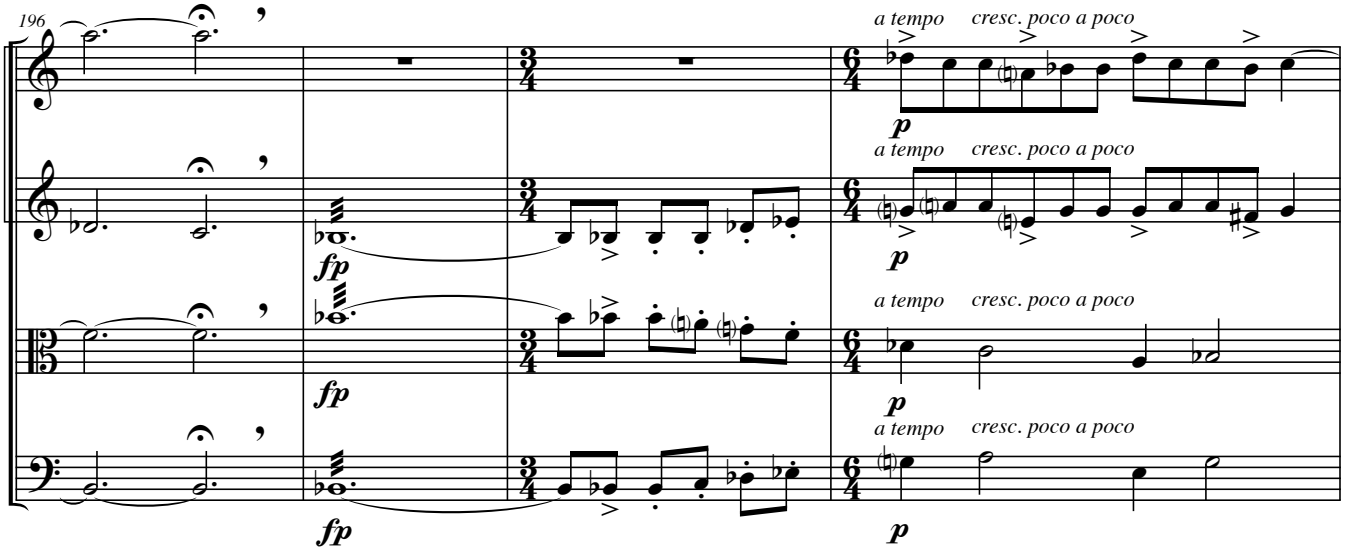

159
Threatening; stealthy
165
mp
mp
mp
mf
172
mf

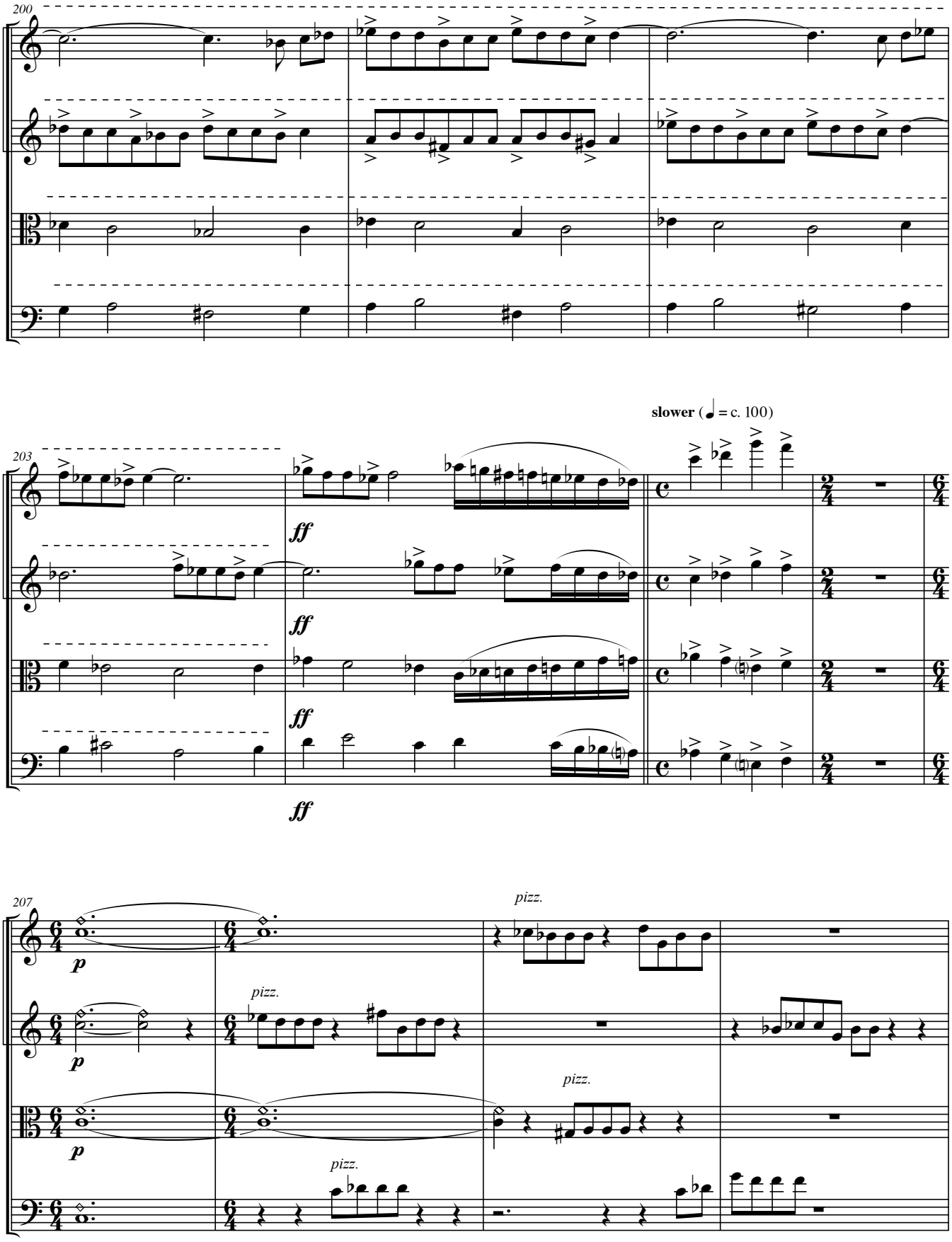

177
ff
ff
ff
ff
180
mp
mp
mp
mp
mf
mf
mf
f
184
p
p
p
f
f
p

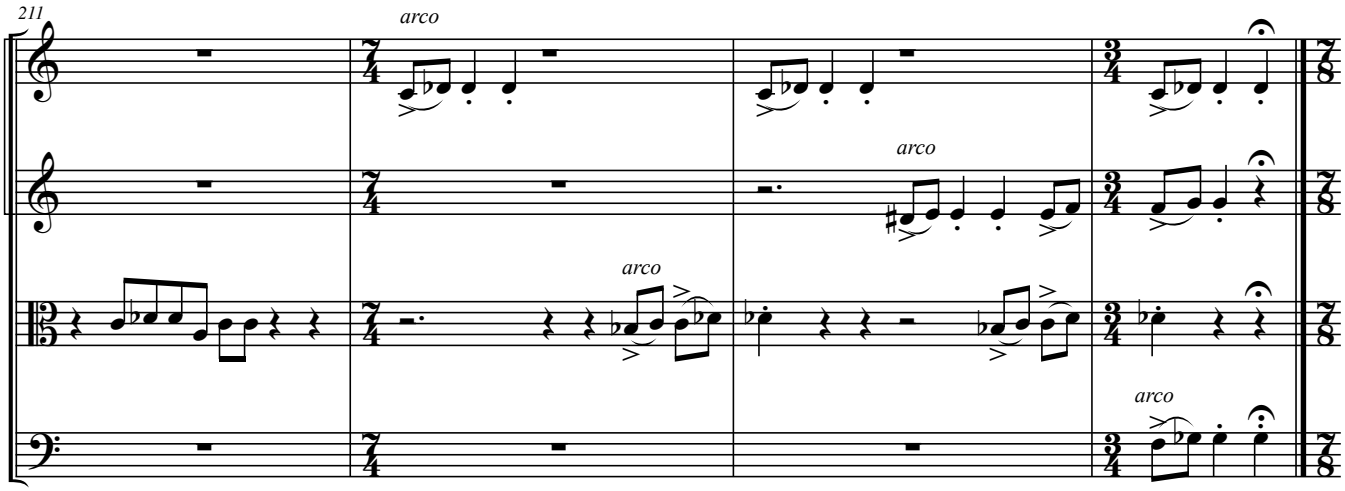




Like an ominous echo of m. 4-13

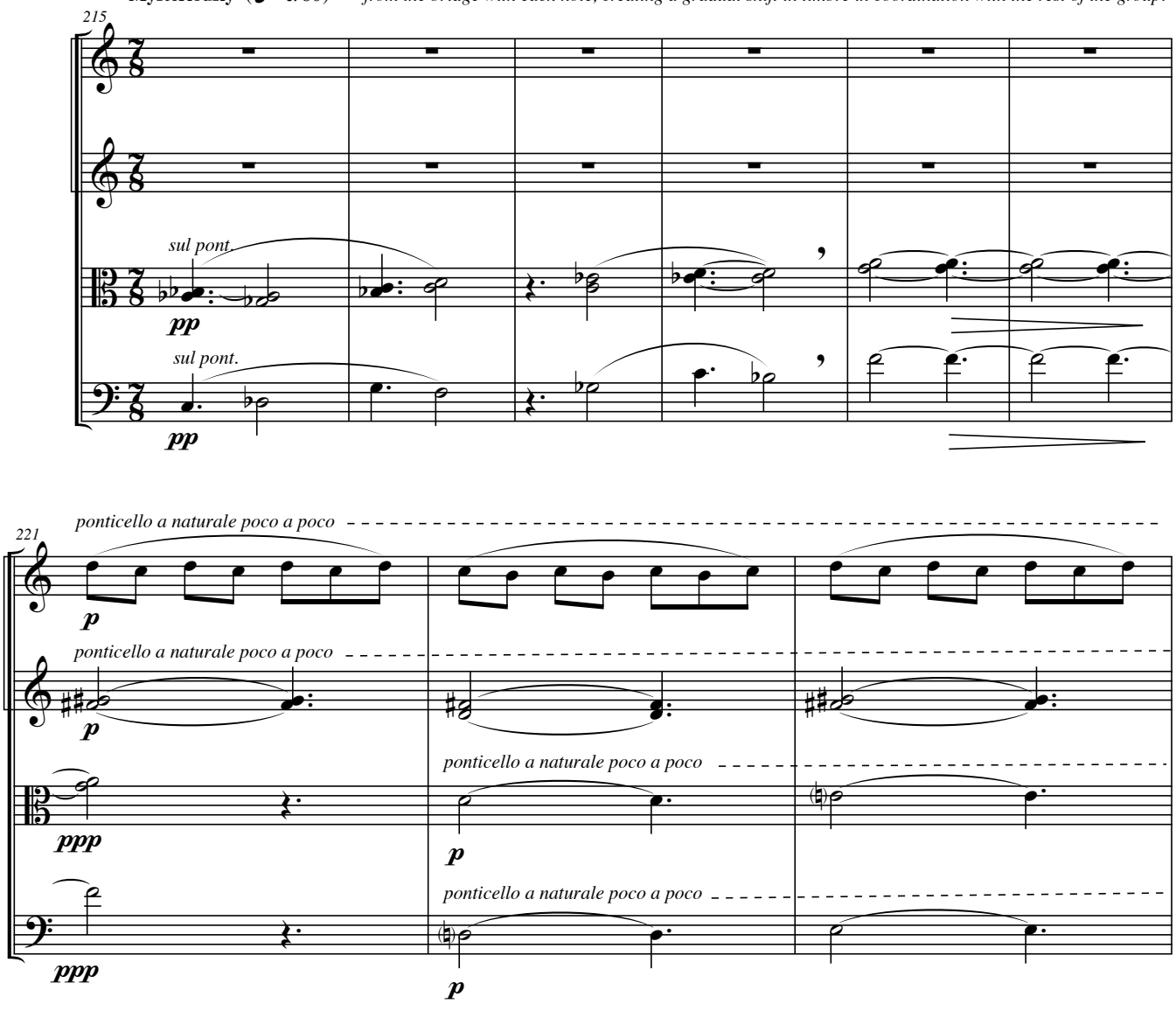


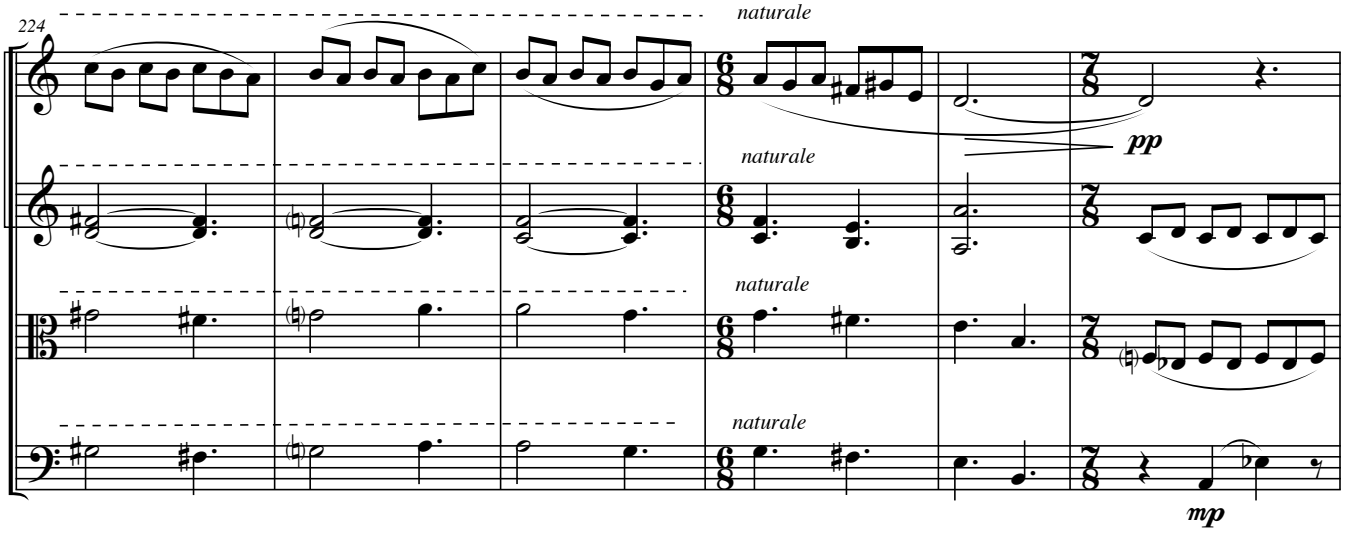

200
203
slower (= c. 100)
ff
ff
ff
ff
207
p
p
p
p
pizz.
pizz.
pizz.
pizz.

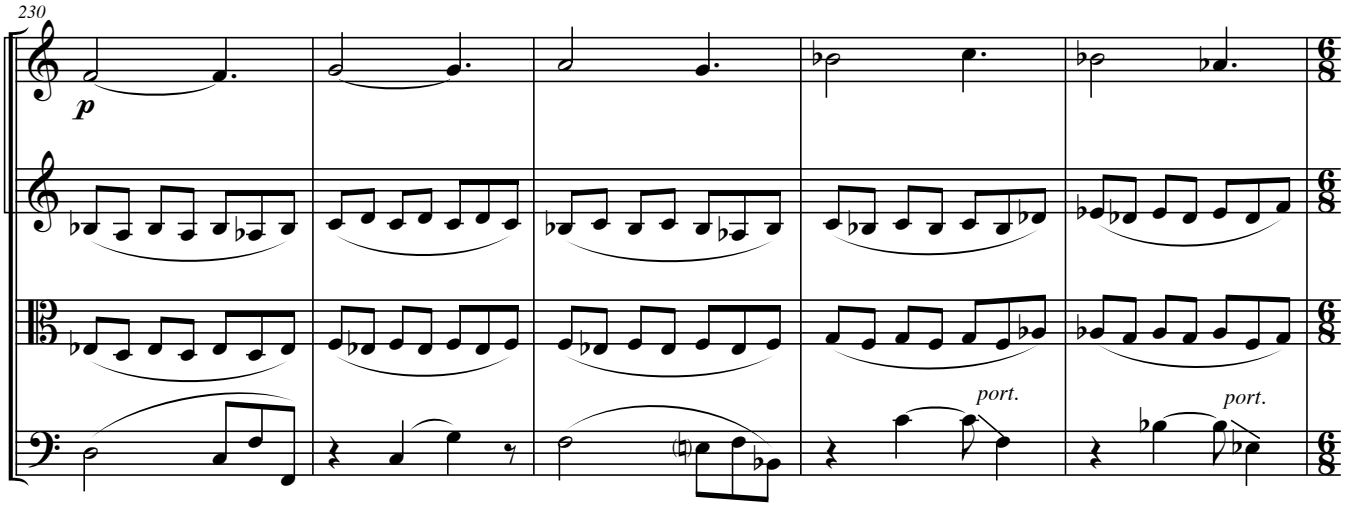


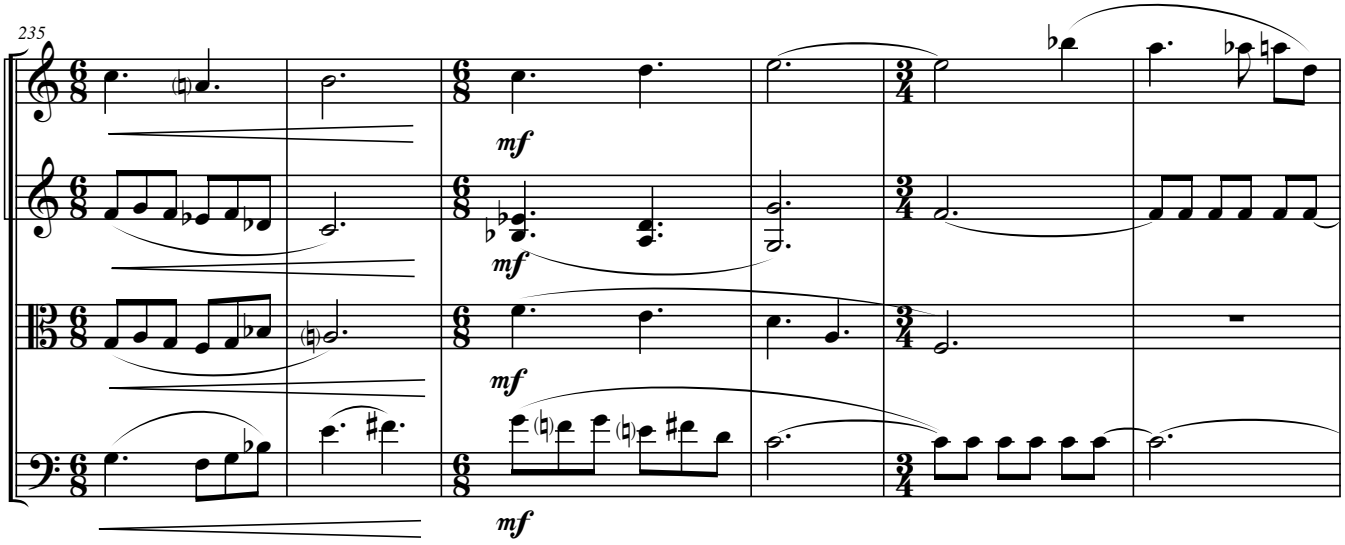
V. Desolation

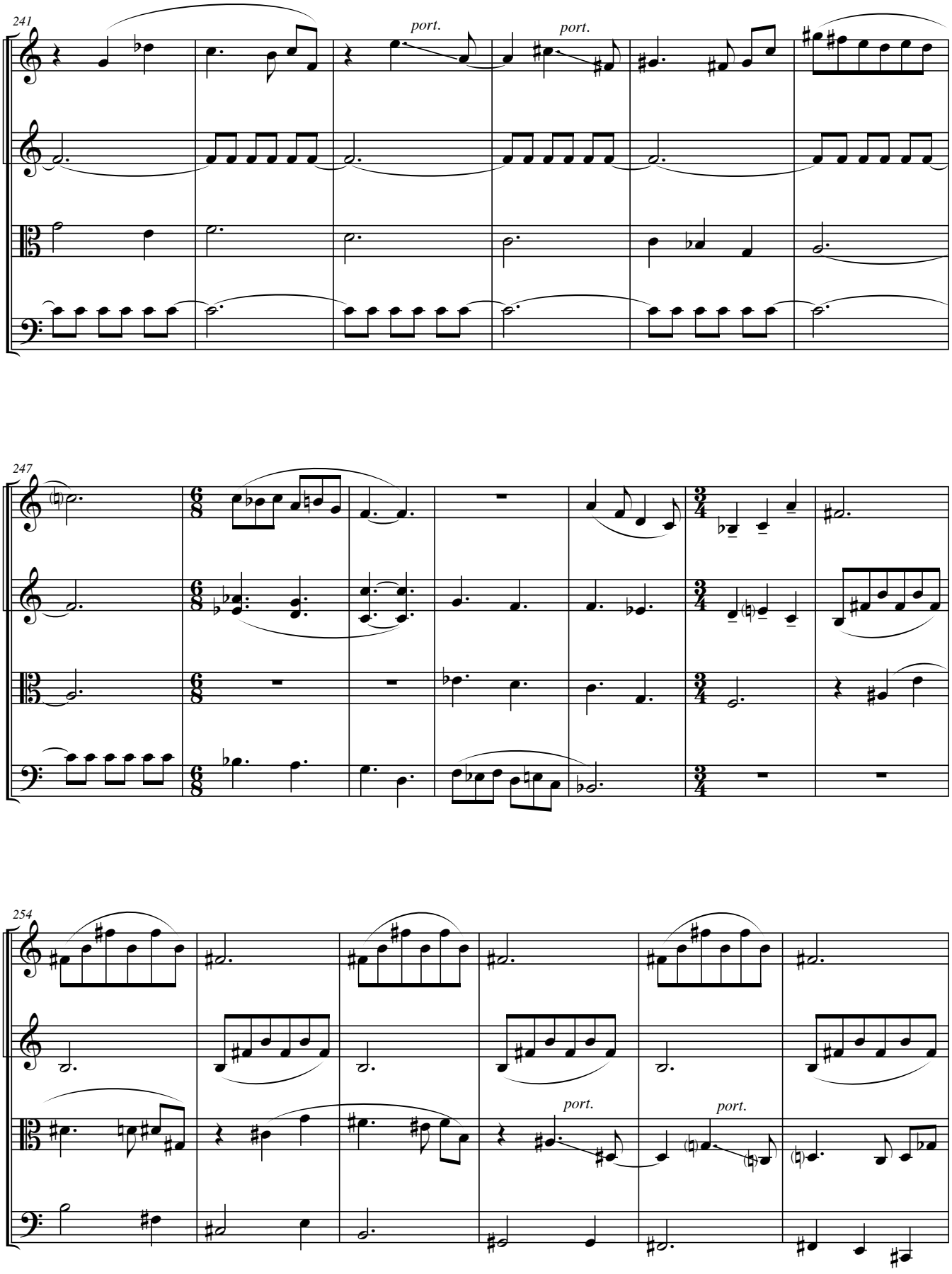
Passages marked ponticello a naturale, or naturale a ponticello, should be bowed slightly closer or further from the bridge with each note, creating a gradual shift in timbre in coordination with the rest of the group.

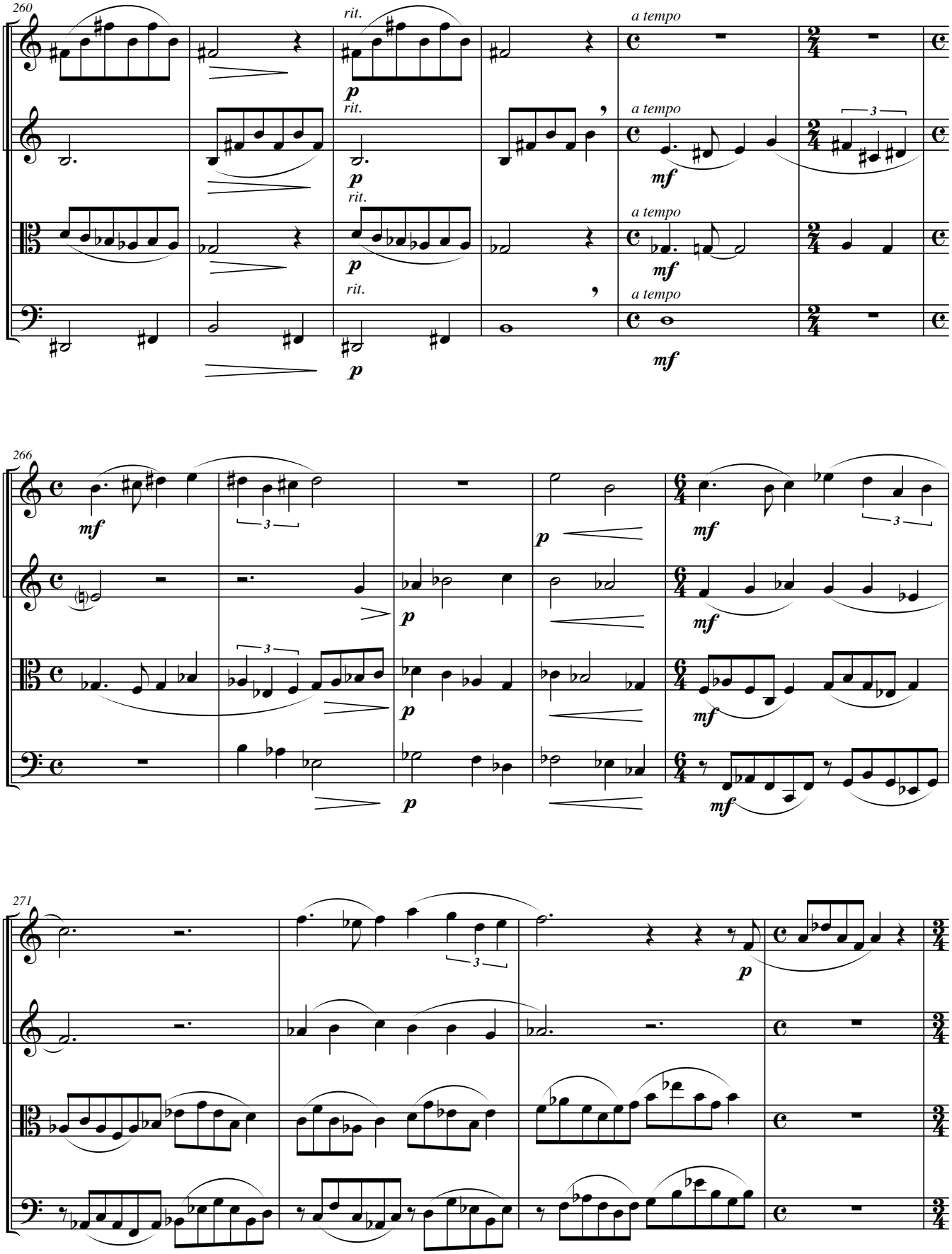


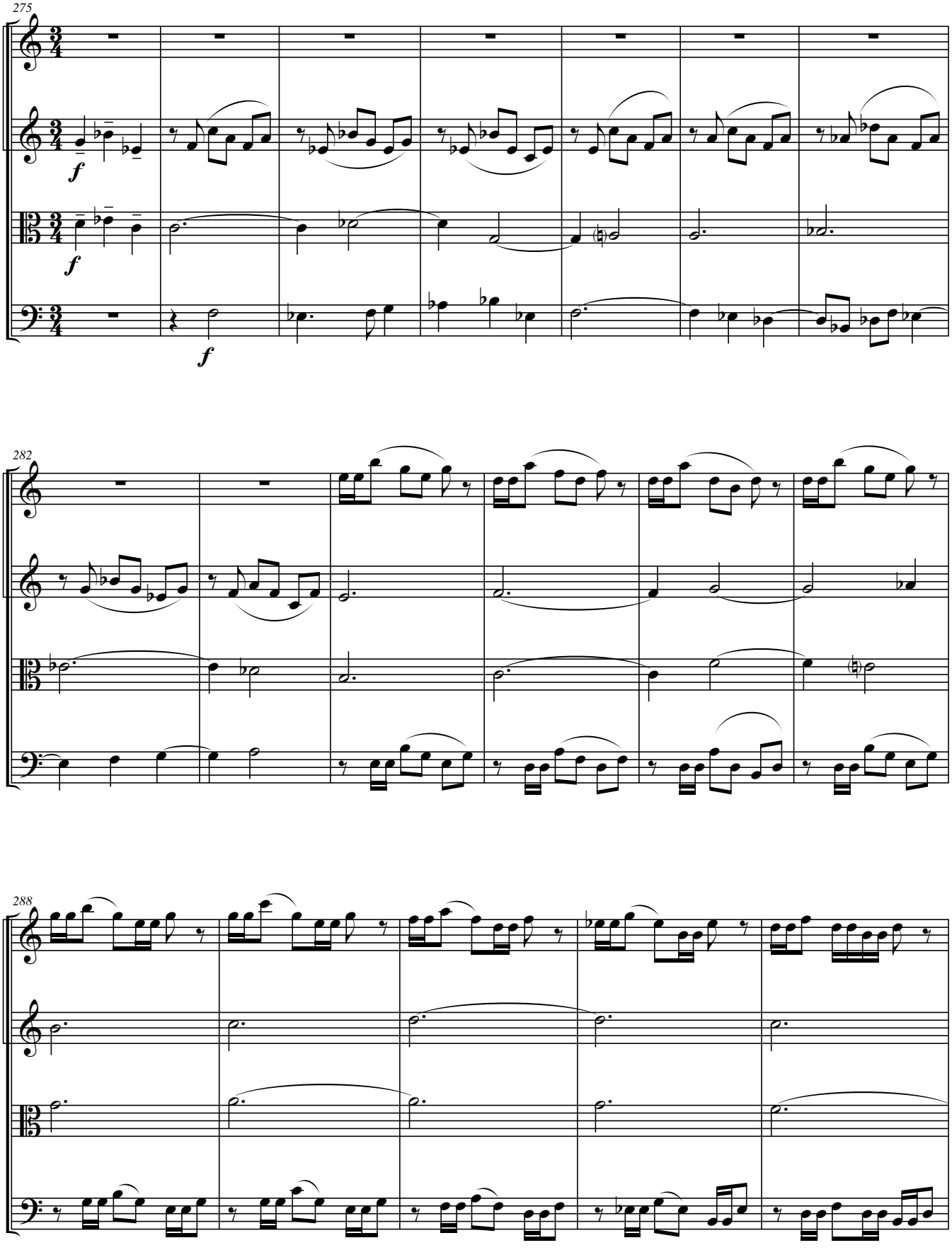

224
naturale
naturale
naturale
naturale
pp
mp

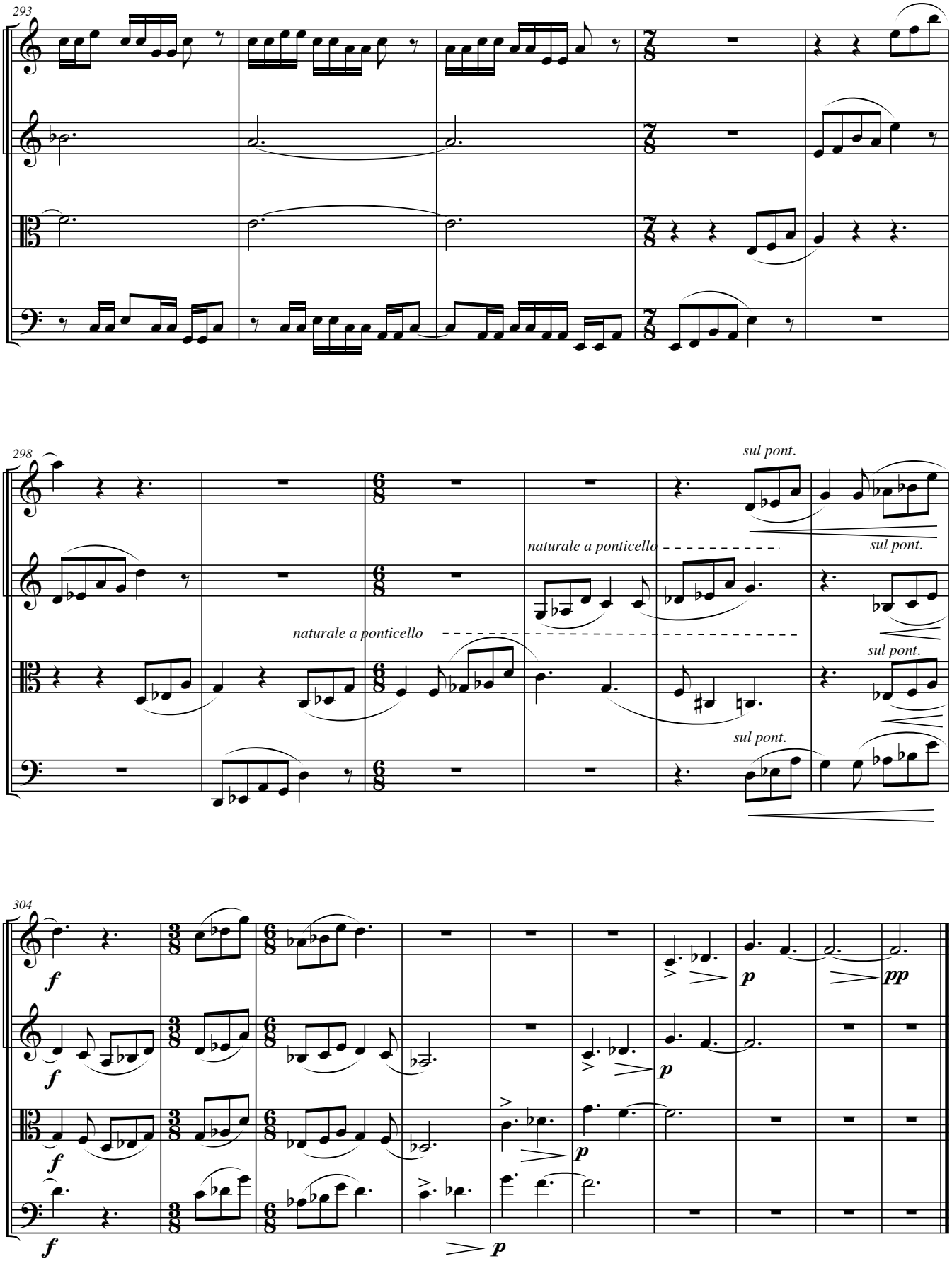

230
p
port.
port.


235
mf
mf
mf
mf


241
port.
port.
247
254
port.
port.


260
rit.
a tempo
p
mf
266
271


275
f
f
f
282
288


293
298
sul pont.
naturale a ponticello
sul pont.
naturale a ponticello
sul pont.
sul pont.
304
f
p
pp