Approaches to Critical Artistry

Humour in Music

"Humour, the laughter-bringer, such as we find in the pages of Smollett, Fielding, or Dickens, has little or no place in abstract music, because such humour and music are by their very natures for ever moving in opposite directions." (Brent-Smith 1927)

For Brent-Smith, humour comes from imperfection, and music "exists only so far as it tends towards perfection" (p. 21). In his article 'Humour and Music', his implied division between 'high' art and 'low' art becomes clear, although he himself does not use those terms – rather, by placing music on such a pedestal of perfection, any form of humour or mere 'entertainment' in music is therefore looked down upon as trivial nonsense not worth anybody's time. Brent-Smith's preferred term is 'wit', which he describes as 'an illumination cast by a bright and discerning mind upon any situation with which it may be brought in contact' (notice how 'wit' requires a 'bright and discerning mind', with the implication being that any humour that does not require such a mind is undeserving of recognition.) When he gives examples, however, it becomes clear that his idea of 'wit' is simply the creative variations and unexpected musical developments that classical composers wrote into their music.

As much as I dislike the division between 'high' and 'low' art as Brent-Smith implies, there is unfortunately no doubt that it is of utmost relevance here. Huron (2004) writes that "The interruption of a 'high brow' minuet by a 'low brow' popular tune is more likely to generate laughter than vice versa" (p. 703) This is a narrative-dependent humour trope, one seen often in any comedic movie or TV show – the uptight or high-and-mighty person is brought down to everyone else's level by a well-placed put-down or silly situation. I will be using this trope a few times in my work.

"[…] The man who would attempt to parody Beethoven's weaknesses – say his long-spun-out cadences – would be greeted not by laughter but by yawns." (Brent-Smith 1927, p. 22)

Apart from juxtaposition, the other main humour trope I will use in my piece is the idea of ridiculous prolongation/repetition. Although there is no obvious 'juxtaposition' in this technique, it plays off the same high/low incongruity – the 'high' is distorted into silliness, becoming 'low'. Unfortunately for Brent-Smith's assertion, in the early 1960s the English comedian Dudley Moore performed a successful sketch as part of the comedy revue 'Beyond the Fringe' in which he parodied exactly that 'long-spun-out cadences' aspect of Beethoven's music, while playing a clearly Beethoven-inspired piano piece. The initial humour of the sketch comes from his use of the 'Colonel Bogey March' melody in a classical

context (again: juxtaposition of 'high' and 'low'!), but this alone would not be enough to sustain the joke after it ceases to be unexpected. Moore's main comedic point of the sketch becomes clear when he prolongs his ending to the point of ridiculousness. In the video clip linked, laughter can clearly be heard, but it grows in stages. The first titter comes when Moore hints at his intentions, by repeating the exact same I-V-I-V bar four times. Had he continued that bar for another four times, and then finished the piece there, the laughter would no doubt have grown, and it would have been a satisfactory joke. However, Moore chooses to put more variation in his ending, which cuts off the slight laughter as it makes the audience unsure of whether he is definitely making a joke here or not.

The next laughter comes a full 20 seconds after he starts his prolonged ending – an ending which is to last a further minute. Laughter comes each time he appears to be definitely ending, only to continue along a slightly different cadential path. Only twice does the laughter rely on him breaking the fourth wall of the performance, and looking away towards the audience as if to say 'Is this seriously still going on?' – the laughter otherwise comes entirely from the music. Noticeably, in order to keep up the energy in the audience and prevent the yawns that Brent-Smith predicted, Moore gradually ramps up the energy of his cadences. Each 'definitive' ending is even more definitive than the last.

Interestingly, the overall effect is not to produce one massive laugh after it is finally over. Sketches, stand-up comedy routines, or even single jokes that rely on words to produce laughter can often build up tension to such an extent that the final release gives the biggest laugh of all. Music, however, cannot do this – due to its abstract nature, music can never build narrative tension the way words can. Tension, in music, will more often than not be of a discomforting nature. In fact, this is Brent-Smith's main point. However, there is one thing that music can do much more efficiently than words – and that is to build energy. Moore's sketch is a good example of this: the incredible applause at the end of his performance can be thought of as music's equivalent of a roaring laugh.

Another source of music humour is that of the Marx Brothers. An American comedy family who started out in vaudeville, and who later branched into many successful comedy films, they liked to include small musical numbers in the majority of their films: most of the time, Chico Marx (referred to here as 'Marx') would present a humorous piano piece. Some of the musical jokes present include:

- (From 'Monkey Business', 1931) Marx is accompanied by an orchestra. At one point, he speeds up so much that he reaches a cadence before they do, and he says 'Ha, I beat you that time'.
- (From 'A Day at the Races', 1937) Marx starts out with the famous opening of Liszt's 'Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2', but soon segues into a happy-sounding jazz number. He repeats this joke in 'Night in Casablanca' (1946) - the 'high'-art Liszt piece is interrupted by 'low'-art jazz.

- (From ‘Animal Crackers’, 1930) With a captive audience, Marx launches into a very dreary ‘happy’-sounding generic piano solo. He does nothing interesting with it, and it rapidly becomes clear he is merely repeating the same few bars over and over, which constantly go between the tonic and the dominant. He eventually says “I can’t think of the finish”, to which his brother Groucho replies “That’s strange, I can’t think of anything else”. Their back-and-forth continues until Marx eventually abruptly stops in the middle of a phrase.

Marx’s musical humour often comes either from the presence and the reactions of both him and the audience around him (within the narrative of the film), or from verbal quips relating to the music. However, whether these were necessary for it to work is another question – and unfortunately, the likely answer is yes. The main effect of these unmusical elements is to un-abstract the situation – in other words, to engineer a real-world narrative easier for the filmgoer to relate to. The music itself is not sufficient for this sort of humour.

Very similarly to Moore’s sketch, the jokes that Marx uses which are purely contained within the music itself consist either of high/low juxtaposition or of prolongation (a piece stretched out to ridiculousness). Note also that juxtaposition does not even need to be of two musical ideas – the joke in ‘Monkey Business’ works even though the music is not ‘high’ because the very idea of a performance can be thought of as ‘high’, which is interrupted by his ‘low’ fourth wall break and unexpected cheekiness (though this is no longer purely within the music.)

However, note that in both Moore and Marx, even the prolongation joke is supplemented by their reactions and the reactions of those around them. The most likely reason why a joke involving prolongation requires some sort of acknowledgement on the part of the performer is that the audience will be otherwise unsure if they are supposed to find it humourous. In other words, there is a real risk that the audience will treat prolongation simply as part of a badly written piece of music. This is likely what Brent-Smith was trying to say; his error was simply to neglect to consider the unmusical elements of a performance.

Of course, unmusical elements are always present in any musical performance – the humourous performer merely utilizes these in specific ways. Interestingly though, an experiment conducted by Moore and Johnson (2001), which aimed to record differences in the perception of musical humour between musicians and non-musicians, used audio-only recordings, in which these unmusical elements could not have been present – and yet the listeners still recorded humour as being present. Crucially however, it was not recorded whether or not the listeners laughed out loud. Huron (2004) does record the presence of laughter on listening to pieces written by the musical humourist Peter Schickele (a.k.a ‘PDQ Bach’), but these are examples of pieces which are presented as humourous to the audience to begin with, and so the audience presupposes that laughter is an appropriate reaction.

Disagreements on the place of humour within music can often be blamed on confusion about what 'humour' actually means – whether laughter is a requirement or not. Humour, if viewed as "the laughter-bringer" as Brent-Smith puts it, always requires some sort of narrative to function – even humour resulting from some sort of simultaneous juxtaposition of two objects depends on their connotations, and the immediate construction of a narrative (no matter how abstract) in the conscious mind. This juxtaposition and resulting narrative, though, is easy enough to achieve in Western classical music as the current image of classical music as 'high'-art is fairly ingrained, and for once this image actually has some practical use.

My work – the original intention
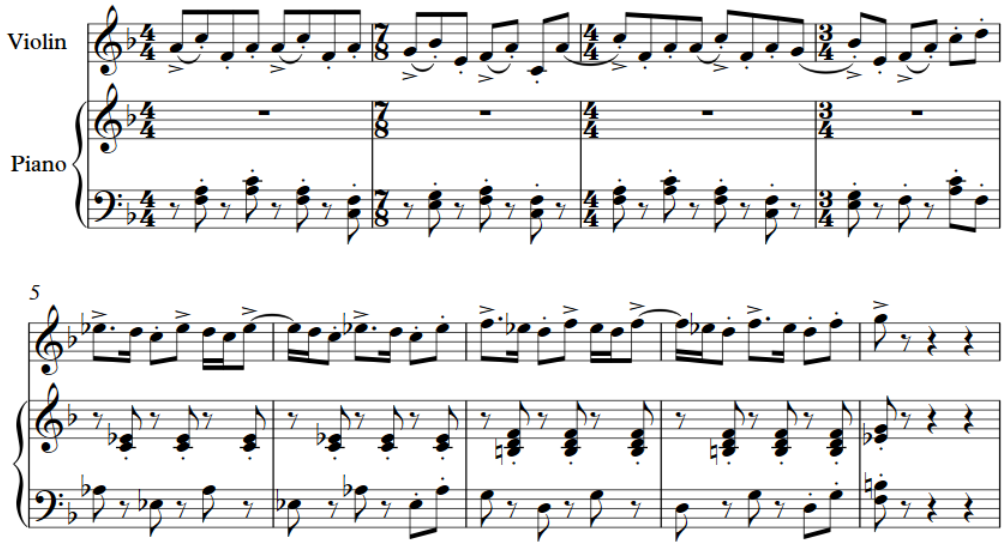


Figure 1

Just as many – but not all – of my pieces start their life, this one began as a short musical fragment in my imagination, where it stayed for a week until I finally wrote it down. Figure 1 shows the closest I can come to replicating that original idea, as it slightly reshaped itself while I wrote it out (I suspect the chords in bars 5-8 may have been different). The violin and piano parts formed in my mind simultaneously, and there was never any doubt as to the instrumentation or the key.

The playful intention can already be seen in the rhythm of the first four bars: a 7-crotchet long melody is introduced with piano on the offbeats, and is then in fact repeated almost exactly, but by 'starting' it one quaver later it has the effect of looking at something familiar in an unfamiliar way. Bars 5-8 do not immediately offer any noticeable humorous effect –

they are simply what seemed to be the natural continuation of the first four bars – but already I was experimenting in my head with extending this figure to the point of ridiculousness, which I eventually included in the piece. A very barebones structure was forming: this idea, followed by a contrasting idea, development, and then on return to this first idea I would include the ridiculous extension. A loose sonata form, in other words, but one in which the recapitulation is played for laughs. The title I had in mind for the piece was always 'Serious Music for Violin and Piano', which I hoped would put the audience in a suitably light-hearted mood – at least, once they heard the first few bars and realised that the title was being slightly ironic.
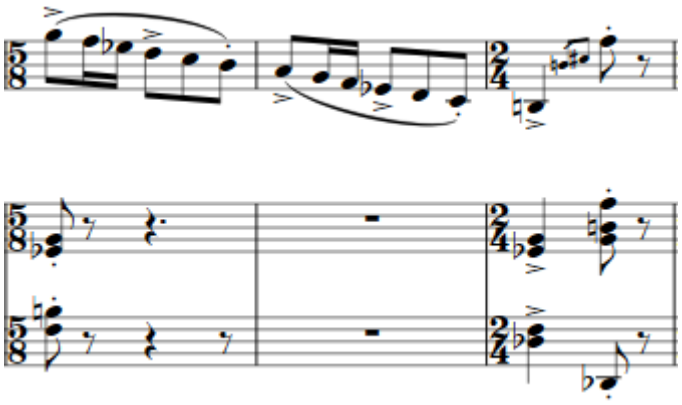


Figure 2

A second possible source of ridiculousness that occurred to me was an extension of the idea in Figure 2. I would draw out the scale for a few extra bars, then draw out the two piano chords for a few extra bars, and then throw in a particular special effect. Although I never ended up fully realizing this idea, I show a mock-up of what it could have been like in Figure 3.

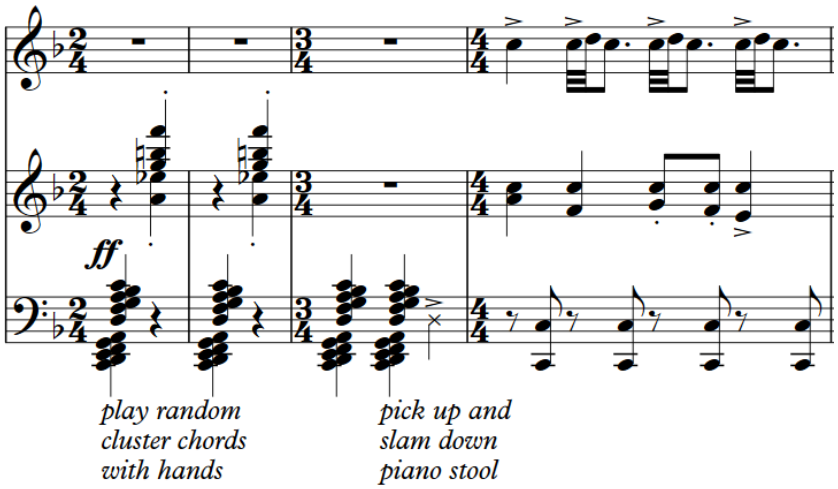


Figure 3

The intended overall effect is as if the pianist has a brief temper tantrum before returning abruptly to the music again. The joke would be the sudden break from what had previously been a more traditionally-performed piece. I very much liked the idea as it formed in my head, but ultimately I am happy that I ended up not using it. As the composition progressed, the piece wandered further away from my idea of a 'joke' piece and closer to a more musically interesting piece with light-hearted elements. My initial desire had always been to balance humour with actual music, and to prevent the piece from becoming a 'gimmicky' piece - by 'gimmicky' I mean a piece which wholly depends on some kind of crutch or tool to work effectively, and in which the failure of said crutch renders the piece worthless. There was a risk that the balance could have been upset by such an obvious joke, degenerating into mere slapstick. Again, this can be thought of in terms of the high/low asymmetry – for it to work, the piece must have sufficient appearance of being 'high'-art that the 'low'-art is a satisfying interruption.

The compositional development of the piece

It would be exhausting and tedious to list the reasons behind every musical decision in the piece, so I will include only the more important transitions, a few areas where my composition tutor had a significant impact, and some other select moments.

In the first draft I submitted to my tutor, after presenting the initial motif in Figure 1 the piece continued to develop and reached an initial 'conclusion' within 45 seconds, after which I moved on to the second major motif in a different key (to keep with the loose sonata form I was still trying to follow), found in Figure 4. The idea behind this motif was the presentation of the same melody in both a 3/4 and a 4/4 meter. Like the first motif, the immediate repetition of the melody in a different context is meant to keep the audience guessing, and to reassure them that despite the apparent mellowness of the melody, it will still be treated in a playful way.
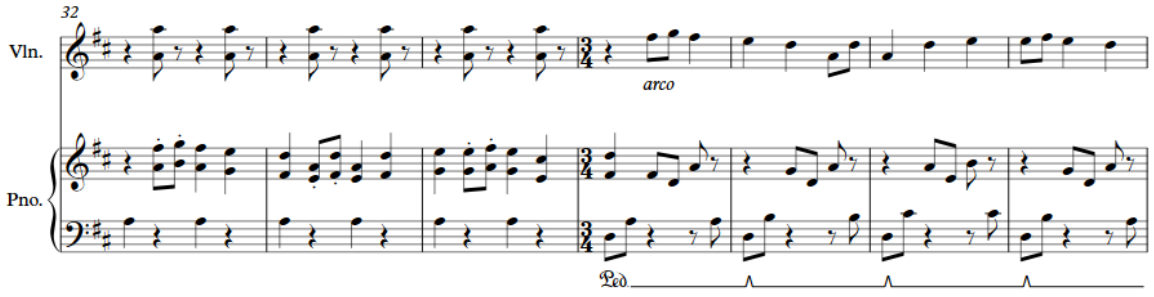


Figure 4

The first feedback I received from my composition tutor on this draft was that I had not spent long enough on the first idea (the initial four bars of the piece). This had not occurred to me, likely because the first idea had been rattling around in my head for a week (and so seemed very familiar). I agreed with my tutor, and extended the opening. The other main feedback I received at this point was regarding my use of slurs – having never written for strings before, I had no idea that slurs had a different function than they did for winds or piano. On winds, slurs mostly indicate legato playing, but with strings, slurs are used entirely for bowing. As a general rule, a 'slur' indicates that all notes under it are to be played within one single movement of the bow, whereas notes without slurs are to be played with moving the bow back and forth for each one. This meant that I had to actually think about the physicality of playing everything I wrote for the violin, and work out exactly what I wanted the bow to do.

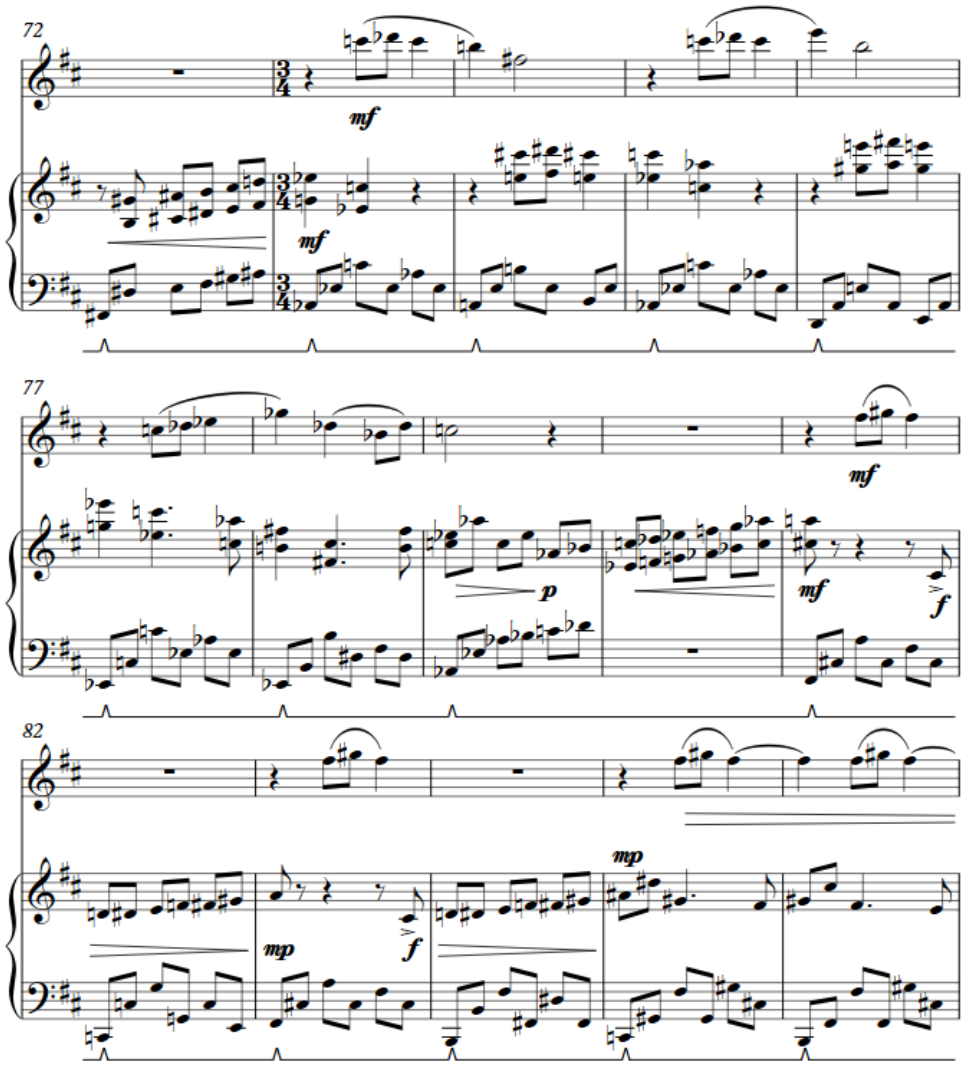


Figure 5

The first major tonal shift occurs in Figure 5, at Bar 73, 1'40" into the piece. The main reason I entered into this sort of section is that I was a little bored with the relatively conventional chord progressions I had been using so far. Unusual chord progressions are what I most love to experiment with, and what give me a big sense of 'play' – and after all, if I didn't have a sense of play while writing the piece, how could the audience have a sense of play listening to it?

The chords themselves were chosen almost entirely through intuition and voice leading. The chords in the bars leading up to 72 were D7-G-Em, with bar 72 apparently formed around F#7 which leads logically to B major. However, I chose to go a different route. The sixths led to the G-Eb interval, which I decided to put under an Ab chord in the bass. The chord in bar 74 – a sort of A major chord with added 6ths and 9ths – came when I decided to take the theme in the violin somewhere different. Instead of dropping by a tone from the C in bar 73, I dropped by a semitone, and then raised the bass by a semitone to balance it.

This is a technique I love using to get creative chords: start with a more conventional chord, move the highest and lowest notes in opposite directions by similar amounts, and then form a chord around those new notes. Semitone movement of chords can be very helpful too, as conventional harmony almost never includes semitone movement in this way (except perhaps in the resolution of augmented 6th chords). If done well, this kind of chordal movement can lead to an almost surreal experience – it is so close to conventional, while being different enough to make the listener uncertain of where they are.

The chord at bar 81 followed the same logic as bar 73. I saw where the line was logically leading, and chose to lead it somewhere else instead – and then moved the bassline in the opposite direction. Bar 85 was a similar process. It is these sorts of "unexpected distortions" that Brent-Smith (p. 23) holds in such high regard as forms of musical wit – and having composed them, I can understand the analogy.

So far, my writing has been very intuitive, and I haven't had to rework any bars after writing them. This is fairly consistent with my writing for the piece overall, with a few exceptions. I will detail one such exception, where I went back to an existing bar to change what was there, which is in Figure 6.
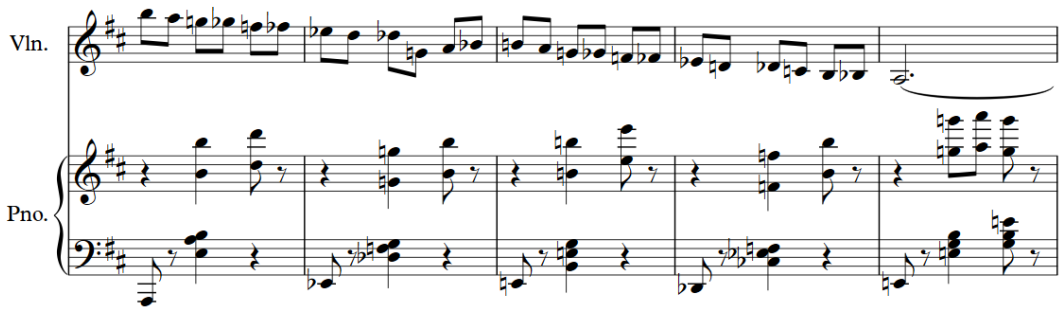


Figure 6
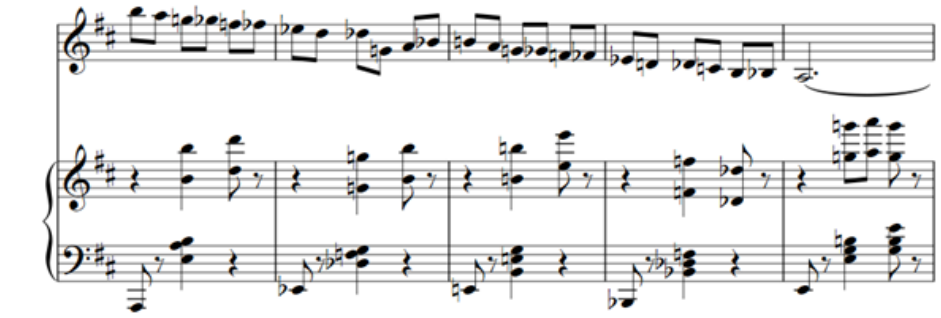


Figure 7

This is a four-bar phrase leading into the first bar of a separate phrase. The fourth bar of Figure 6 is an example of harmony which sounded acceptable at first writing, and even when listening back to the section; however, returning to it after a break of an hour, the piano part sounded very clunky and unnatural. The tritone leap in particular felt out of character.

To modify it effectively, I first analysed my original intention: to have the piano keep to the wholetone scale already found in the second bar. Keeping some sort of subtle harmonic pattern or repetition, even while the chords change seemingly arbitrarily, can ensure the phrase sounds complete and in character. To improve this part, I therefore had to try to think of another chord or voicing which still kept some different pattern. I experimented with changing the right hand while leaving the left hand intact, but soon realised that there was another pattern I could choose to align to instead: the tritone leap between the bass notes in bars 1 and 2 (A to Eb) could be repeated in bars 3 and 4 (E to Bb instead of Db). This would unfortunately rule out sticking to the wholetone scale, but a logical bass line would actually be more noticeable in any case. Figure 7 shows my final harmonic choices for these bars.

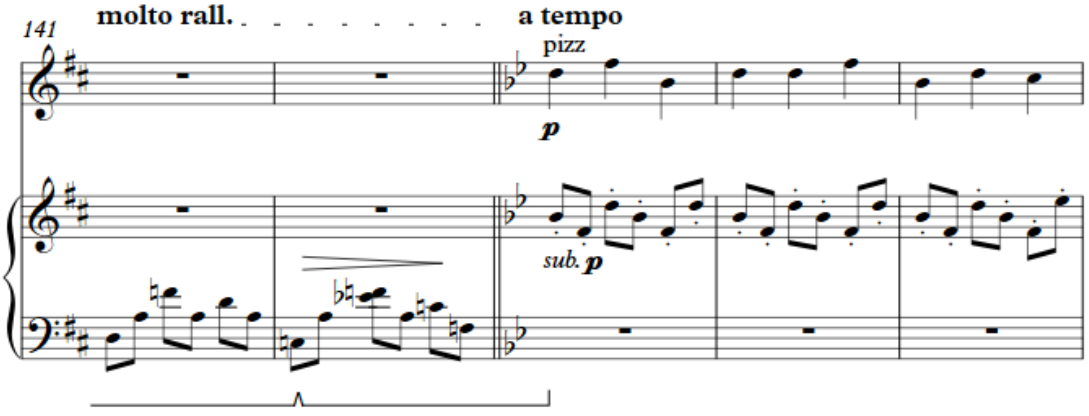


Figure 8

Figure 8 is the next major shift in colour of the piece. The unexpected jump from the sombre to the upbeat, though not extreme enough to warrant the label of ‘joke’, is nevertheless a very light-hearted technique which relates to the juxtaposition that both Marx and Moore used. In their cases, however, they used well-known tunes, which came with their own contexts and narratives. My piece

has no such luxury, and so the most I can hope for is to pique the audience's interest and raise their spirits. By revisiting the original opening material in a new and unique way, I also help keep the piece coherent even throughout its various moods.
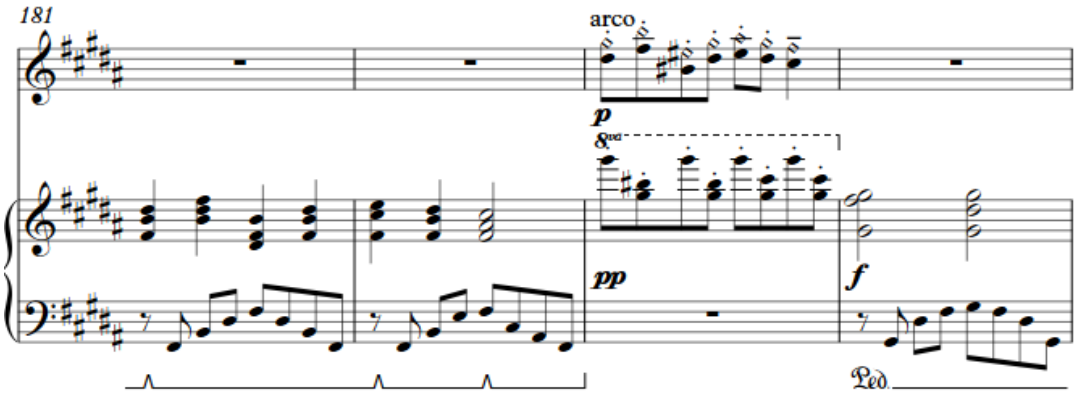


Figure 9

I reuse this idea of juxtaposition slightly later in the piece, in Figure 9. The pianist has been directed to play 'schmaltzily' for the 10 bars leading up to this moment, which contrasts sharply with the slightly cheeky upbeat nature of bar 183. This was another point where my tutor had useful feedback – originally, bar 183 was an octave lower in both parts and did not use harmonics, as I was not aware of them yet. My tutor told me that putting it higher, resulting in a slightly squeakier sound, would make the joke much more obvious.

Now that a piece of material from the first theme has resurfaced, I eventually find a way to bring it back to F major, where I can return to the theme properly. It is here that I can finally realize one of my first ideas for the piece – prolonging a part of the melody. Figure 10 shows it to its full extent – it is shrunk to fit here, but a glance should be enough to get the general impression. It is definitely my intention to get at least a chuckle here. Unlike what Moore and Marx did, I don't think that asking the performers to call attention to the prolongation is the right thing to do here. As I have stated before, the overall piece is not intended as a 'joke' as such, and any breaking of the fourth wall runs the risk of reducing the piece's intrinsic musical worth. The other reason that I would not write in a fourth wall break is that unlike Moore and Marx, I will not be the sole performer of my music. Whatever goes into the score will be what performers will work off, and I would prefer to leave fourth wall breaks to their own intuition.
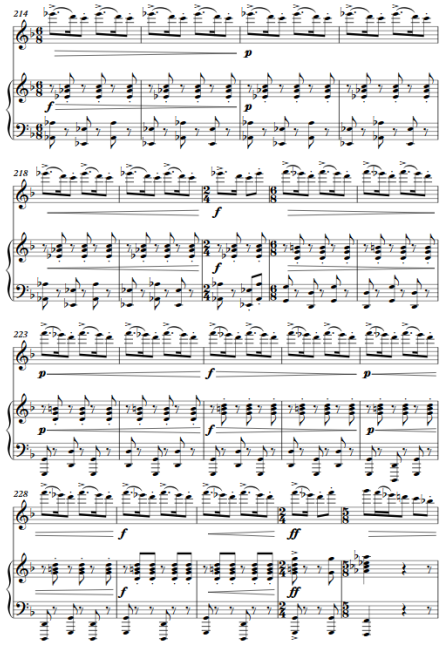


Figure 10

What my intuition told me to follow this moment with was a rendition of the slower theme, but this time in the initial key - my desire for loose sonata form is thus brought to fruition. This not only keeps the piece coherent, but also reinforces the notion that it is still meant to be thought of as a semi-serious piece of music rather than as just a joke. Further, since this is usually the point in conventional sonata form where the piece starts to wrap up, this signals to the audience to prepare for an ending.

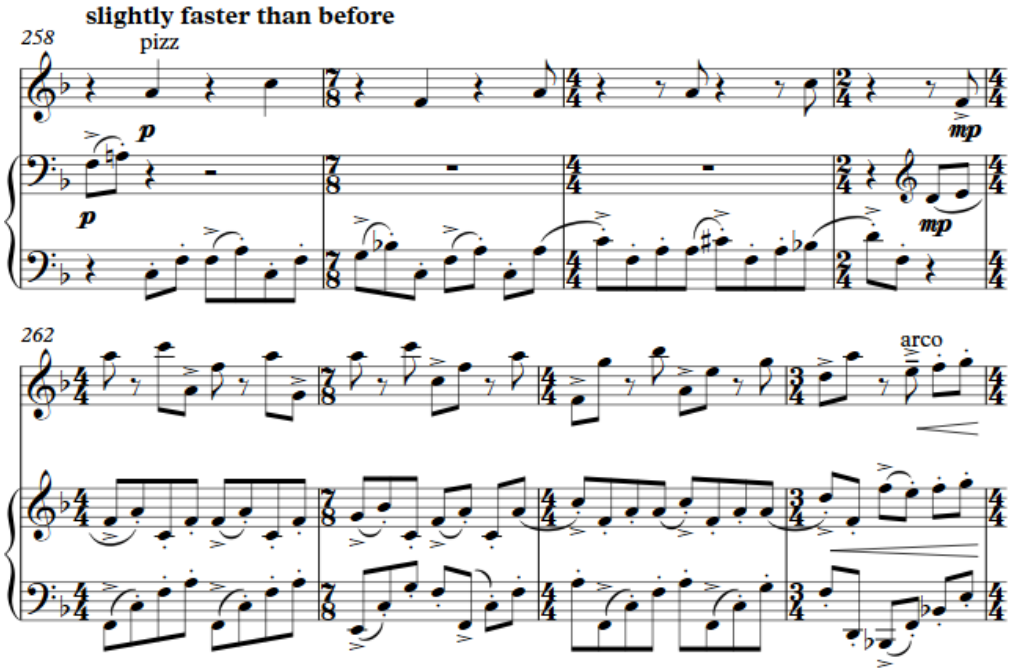


Figure 11

What I decided I wanted to do for the coda was to take an idea that had been the backbone for a lot of the musical material – that of rhythmic uncertainty – and take it in a different direction (Figure 11). I had not yet tried to overlay the opening theme with itself, and I felt that the resulting complexity would build energy nicely towards the final cadence – much like Dudley Moore did in his piece. Bars such as 264 presented me with a bit of a dilemma, because to stay true to the material despite the different timings meant a few harmonic clashes. Ultimately I decided that it was a sacrifice worth making.
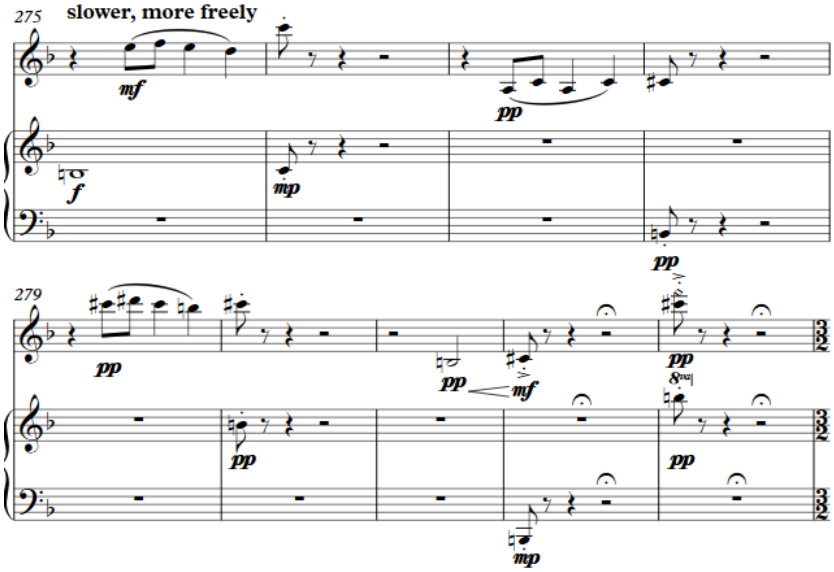


Figure 12

Figure 12 shows the first of two 'jokes' that I include just before the end. The energy that was built up in Figure 11 has been left hanging unsatisfactorily, and I switch to a slower, emptier texture, to delay the final cadence. So far this is not too unusual, but having created the dissonance in the fourth bar of Figure 12, I decide to delay even the resolution of that. I was inspired mostly by the example of Peter Schickele, who in one piece decided to hold a dissonant appoggiatura for several bars longer than anyone ever ought to (Huron 2004). For every bar that I held this dissonance, I made a conscious decision to not resolve it.



Figure 13

Figure 13 shows how I finally resolved it. At this point I am still teasing the audience, because the energy from Figure 11 will still be in their heads and they will be waiting for the return of that energy to finish the piece. My hope is that bar 286 will seem like the actual 'ending', as if the joke is that the built-up energy is never truly released – at which point, all the energy will suddenly be released at once in bar 287. I feel as though I could not have lengthened these last four bars in any way, lest the energy dissipates – much like Dudley Moore had to end his piece as soon as his energy had reached its height. The last two bars of Figure 13 are actually how I had intended to finish my piece all along, even as far back as when the idea was just in my head. Knowing that any energy I built up was eventually going to be released was what allowed me to tease out this resolution for so long.

Conclusion

Although the perception of classical music as 'high' art is undeniably a problematic one, and writers who hold opinions similar to Brent-Smith do not help, it clearly has its uses. The abstract can only generate humour through connotations and expectations, and a piece of classical music has expectations right off the bat merely by way of being seen as being a 'high' or intellectual form of art. Through my piece 'Serious Music for Violin and Piano' I have aimed to turn this to my advantage, as have many composers and musicians in the past. I interrupt the serious with the silly, keep the listeners on their toes with uncertainty, and build energy to reach a final – if slightly delayed – climax at the ending. At the same time, I have aimed to write a piece which works musically on its own even if no audience member laughs at any of it. Indeed, if the audience is merely kept interested and entertained by the work, if not actually amused, I will still consider the piece to have been a success.

A rough electronic recording of the piece can be found at https://soundcloud.com/fotytoo/serious-music-for-violin-and-piano/s-Howou, and the full score is attached at the end of this document.

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Convenient youtube clips:
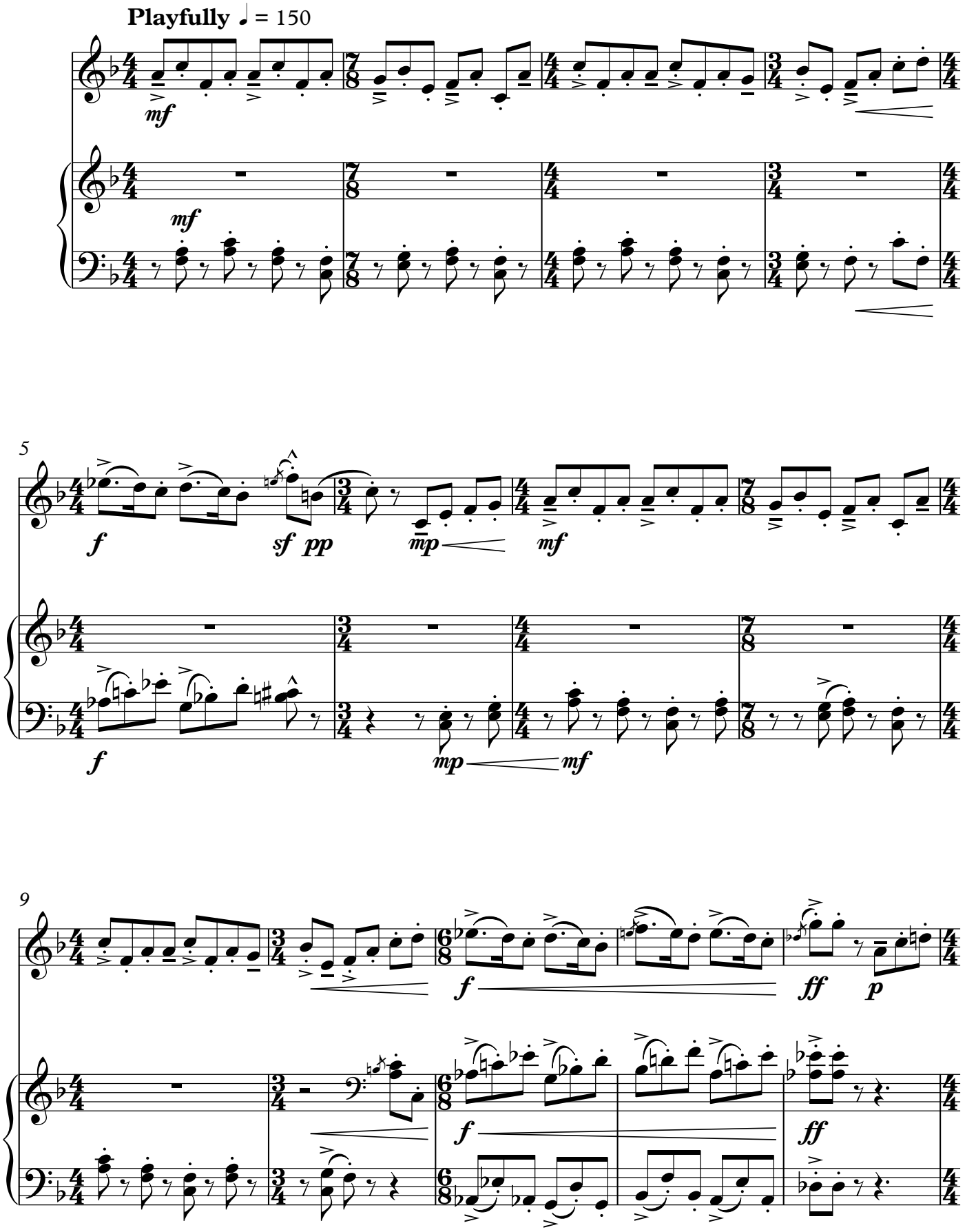
Dudley Moore's Beethoven parody: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GazlqD4mLvw (accessed 13 February 2018)
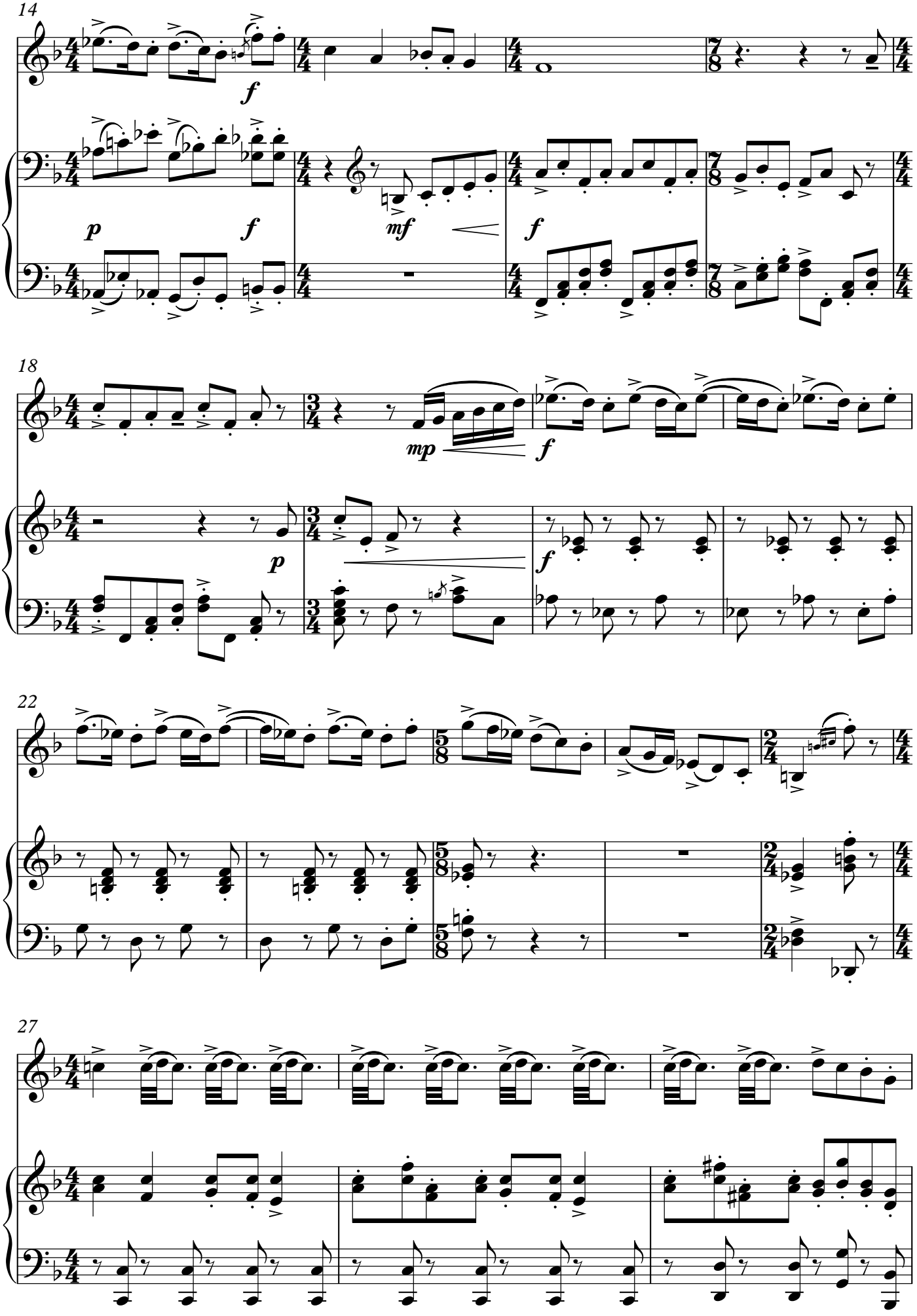
A collection of musical clips from the Marx Brothers' films: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=amQ63EZfUMA (accessed 20 February 2018)
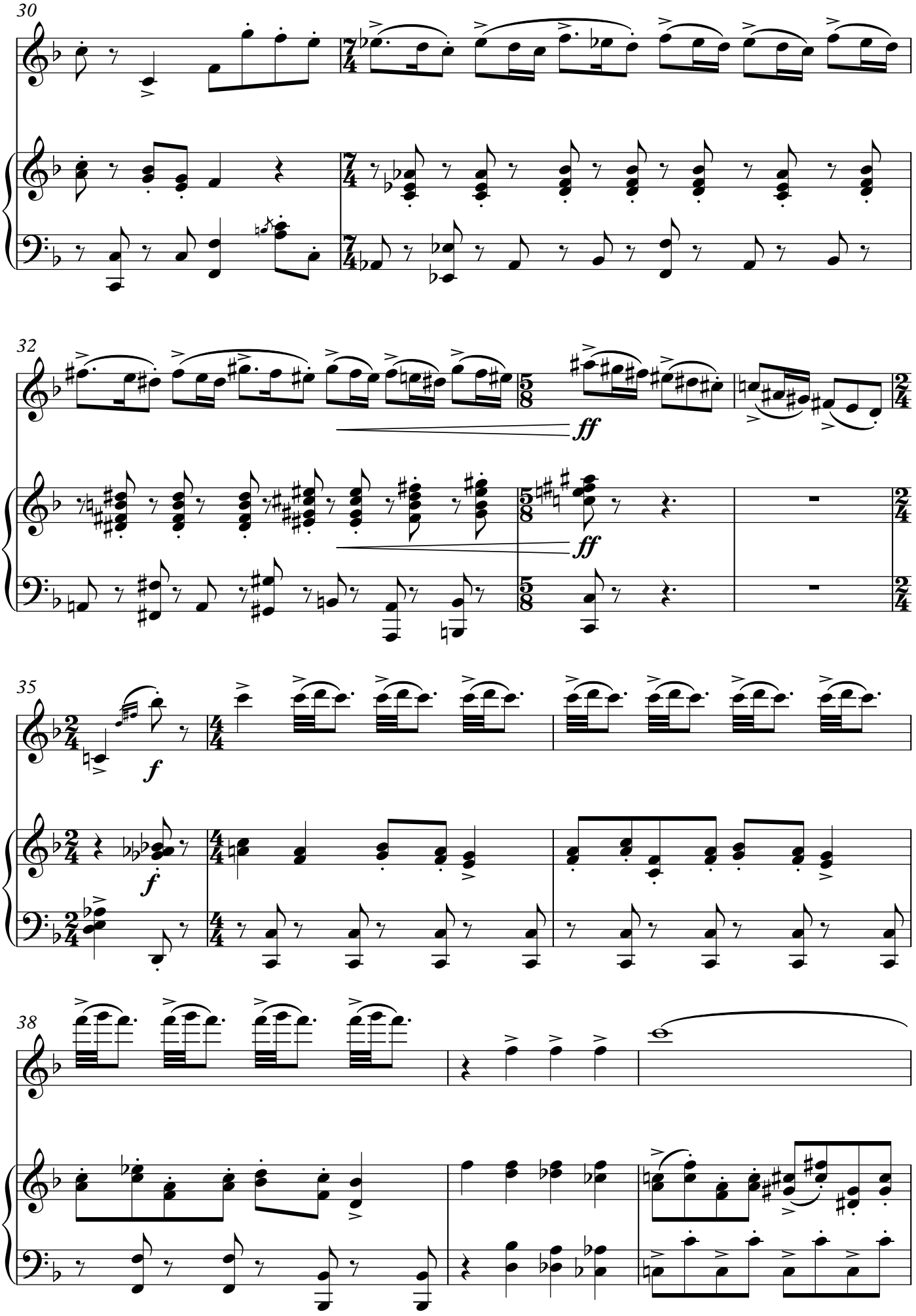
The specific clip from Animal Crackers: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuoP0SXSHow (accessed 20 February 2018)
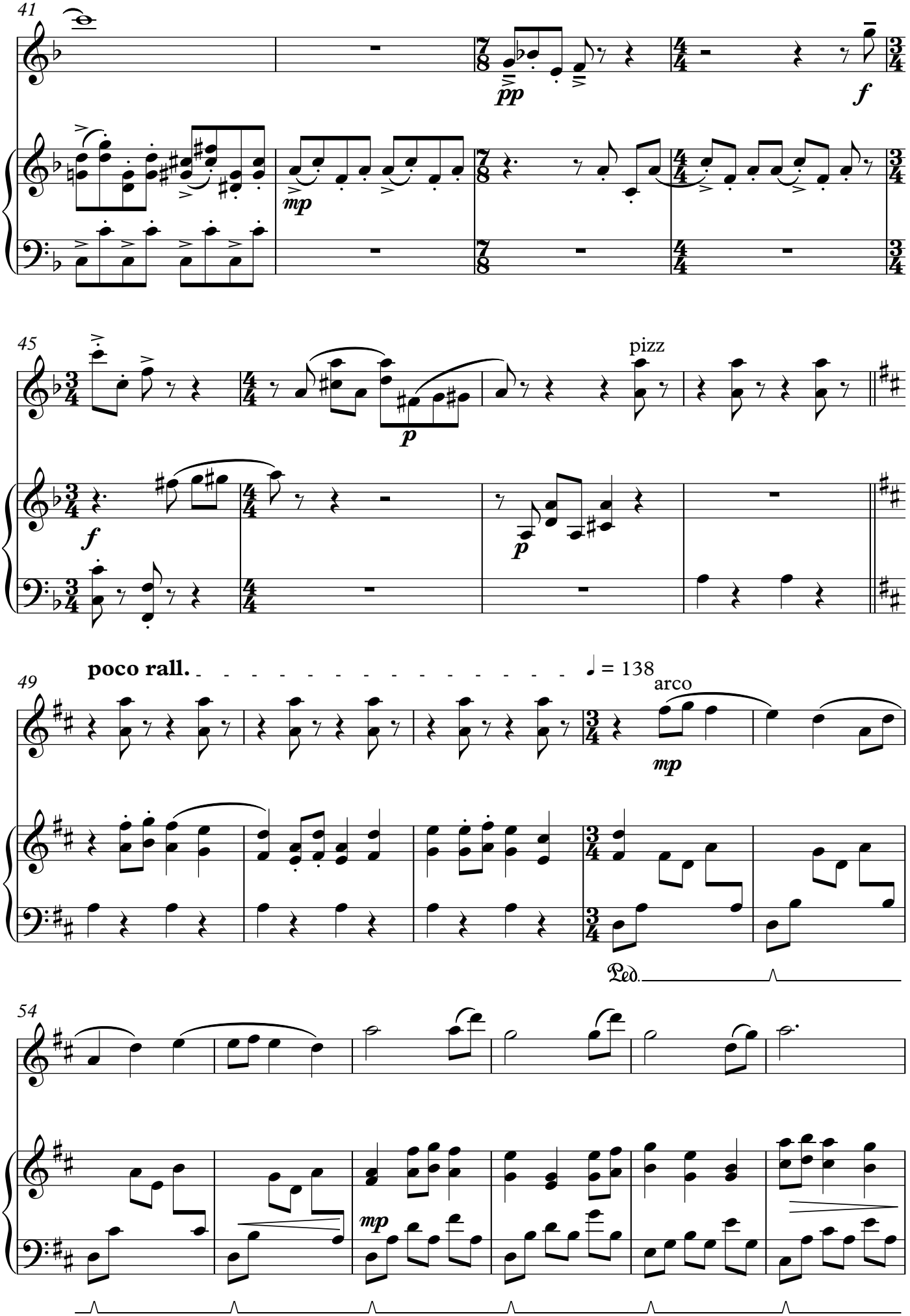
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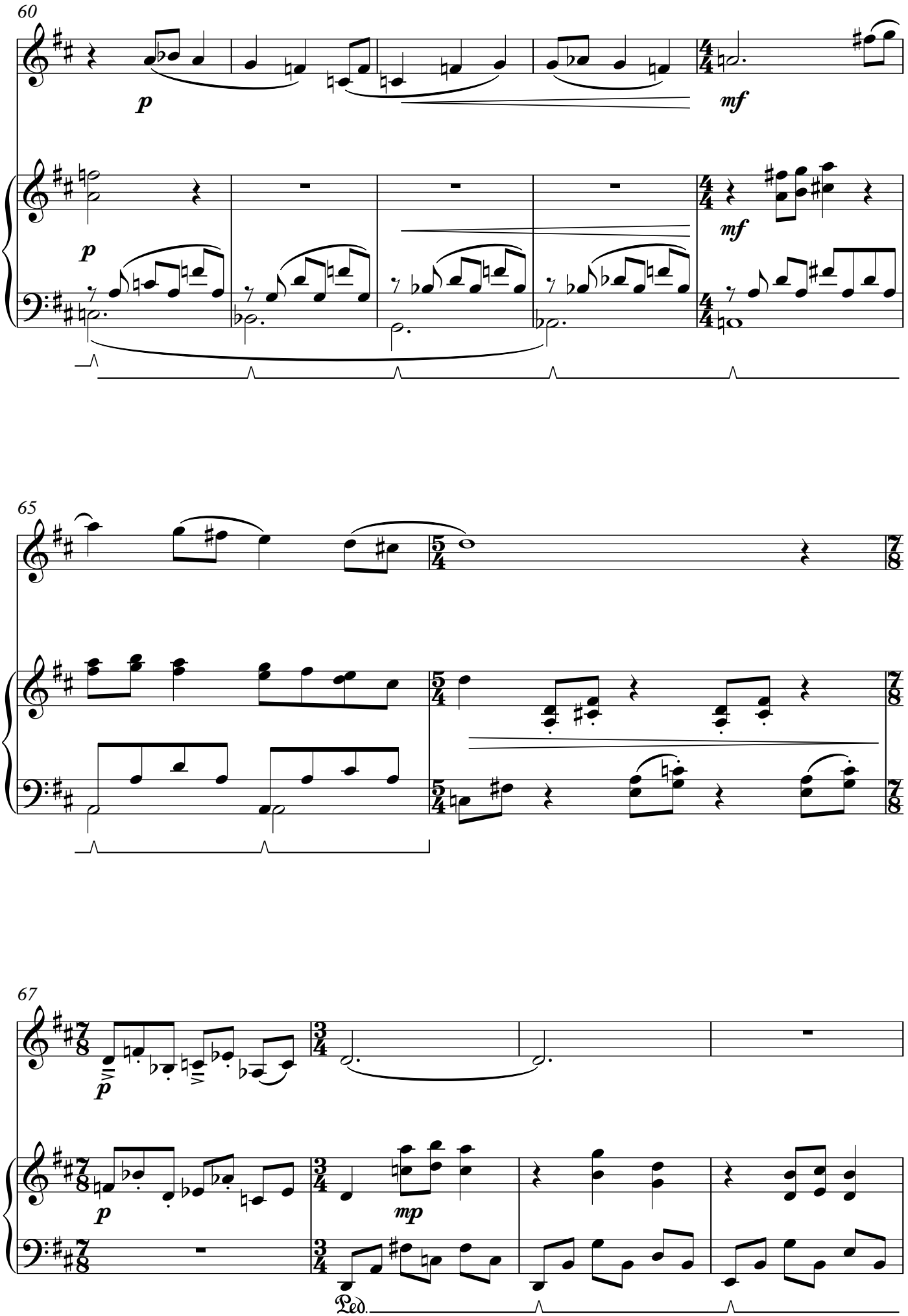
Stuart Rynn
2018
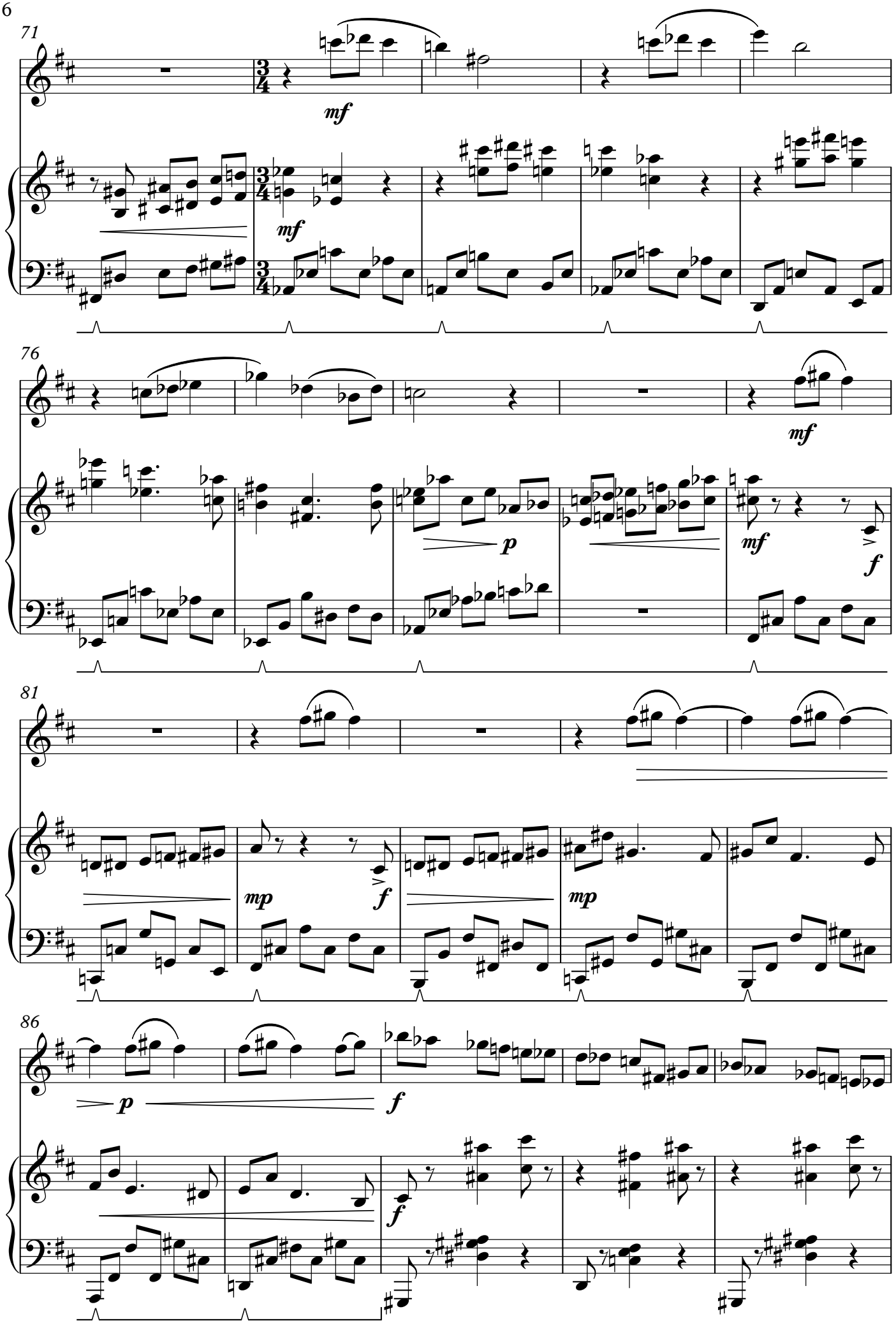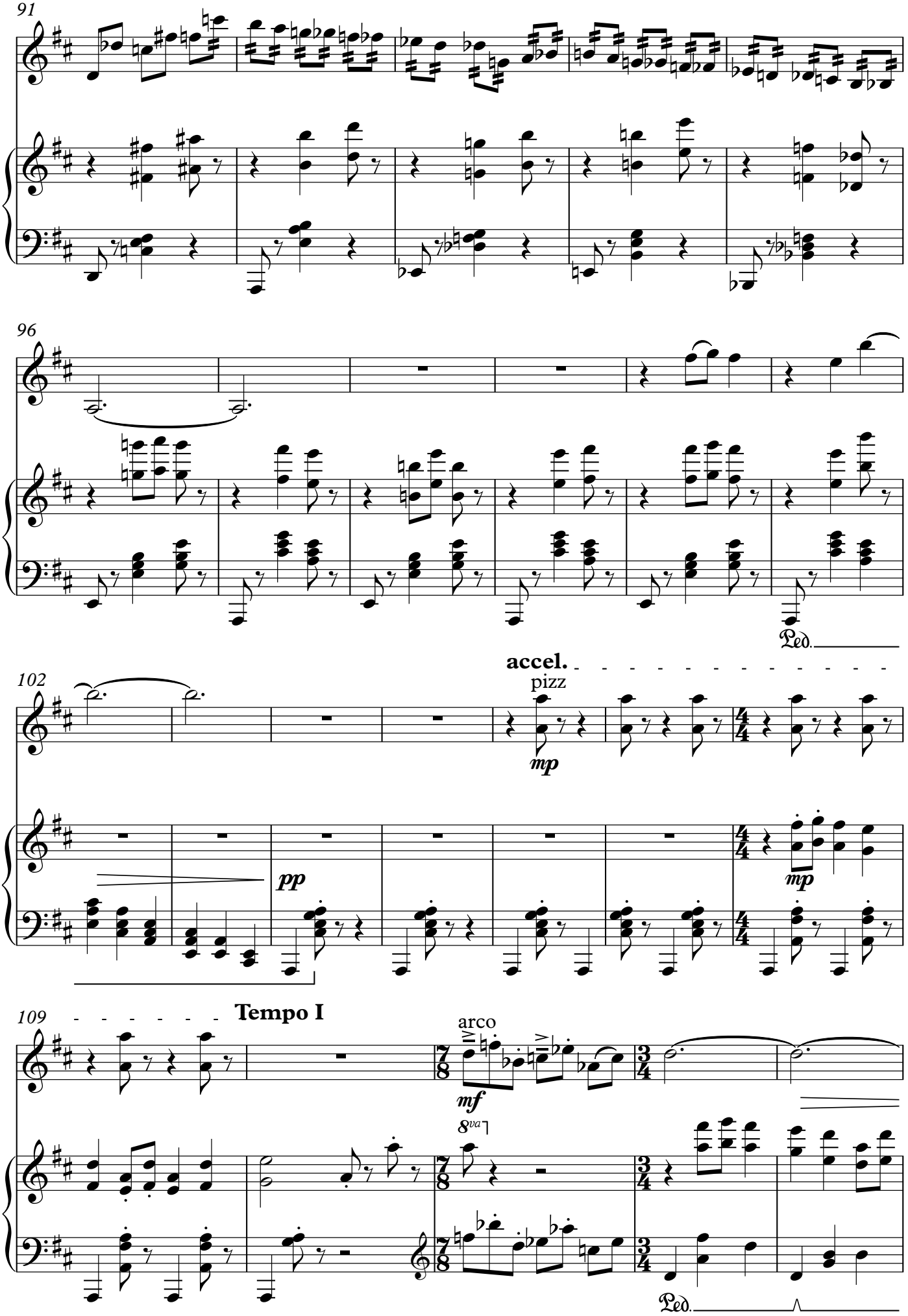



14
f
p
f
mf
f
18
mp
f
p
f
22
27
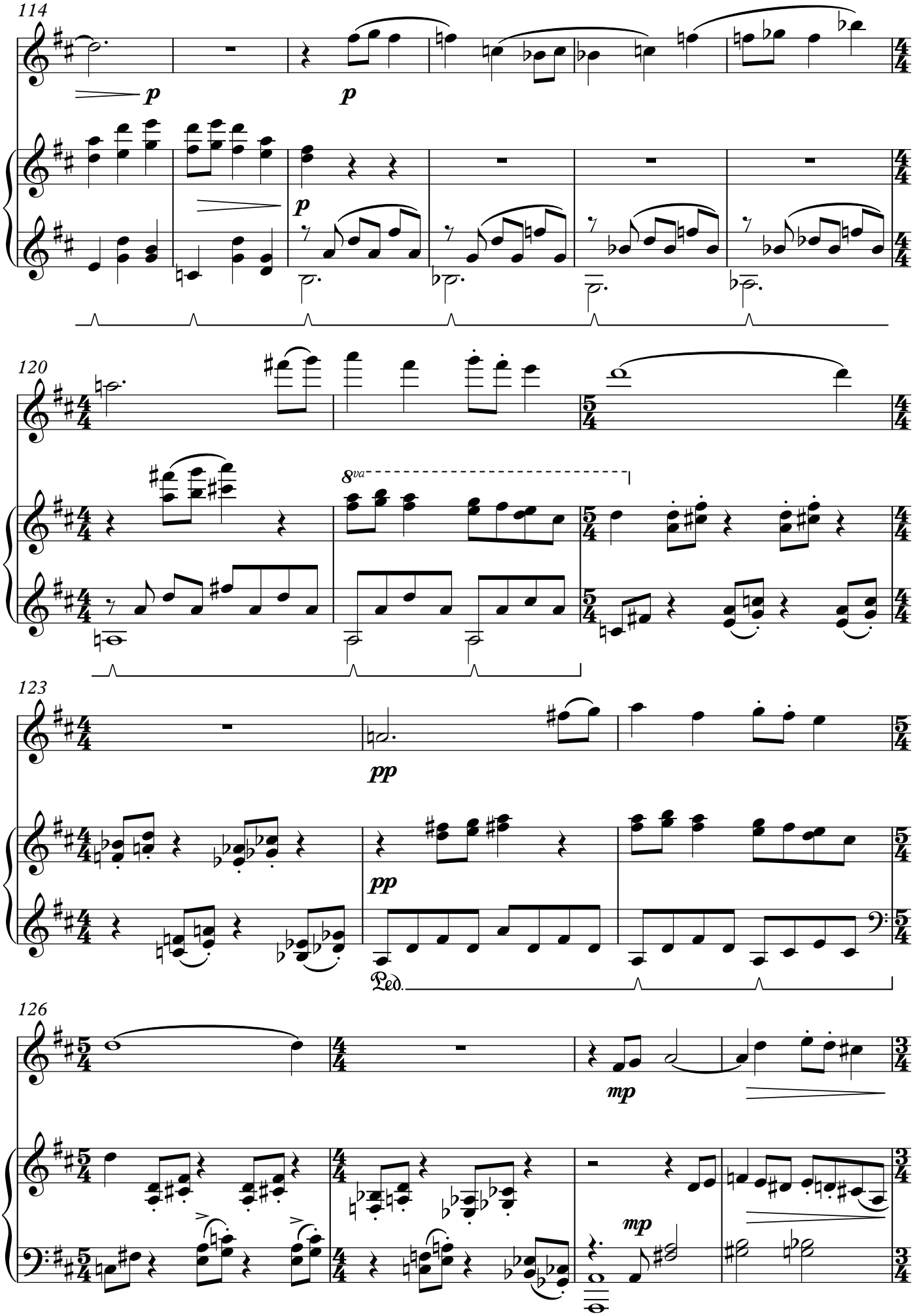

30
32
ff
ff
35
f
f
38
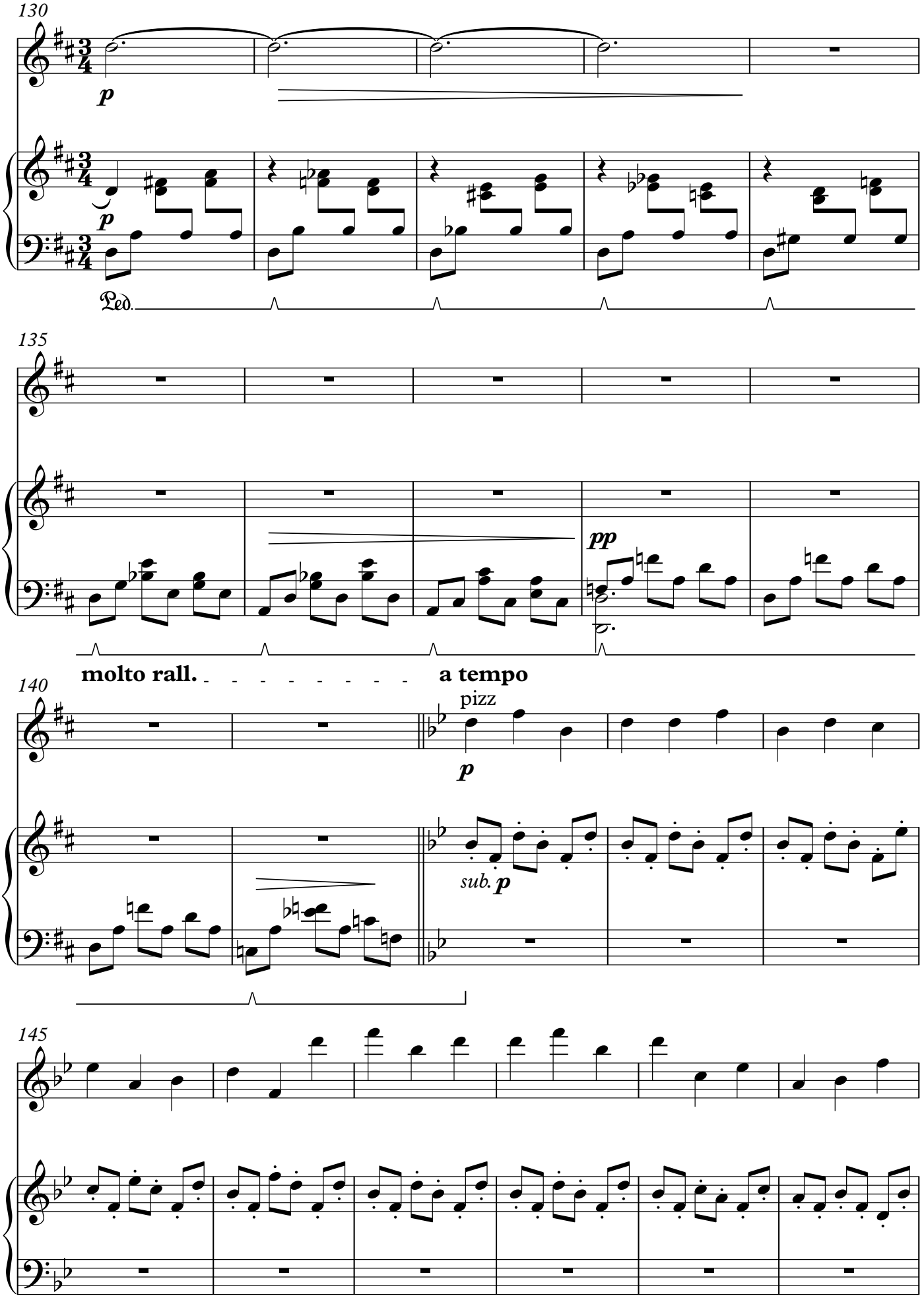

41
pp
mp
f
45
f
p
pizz
p
49
poco rall.
♩ = 138
arco
mp
Ped.
54
mp
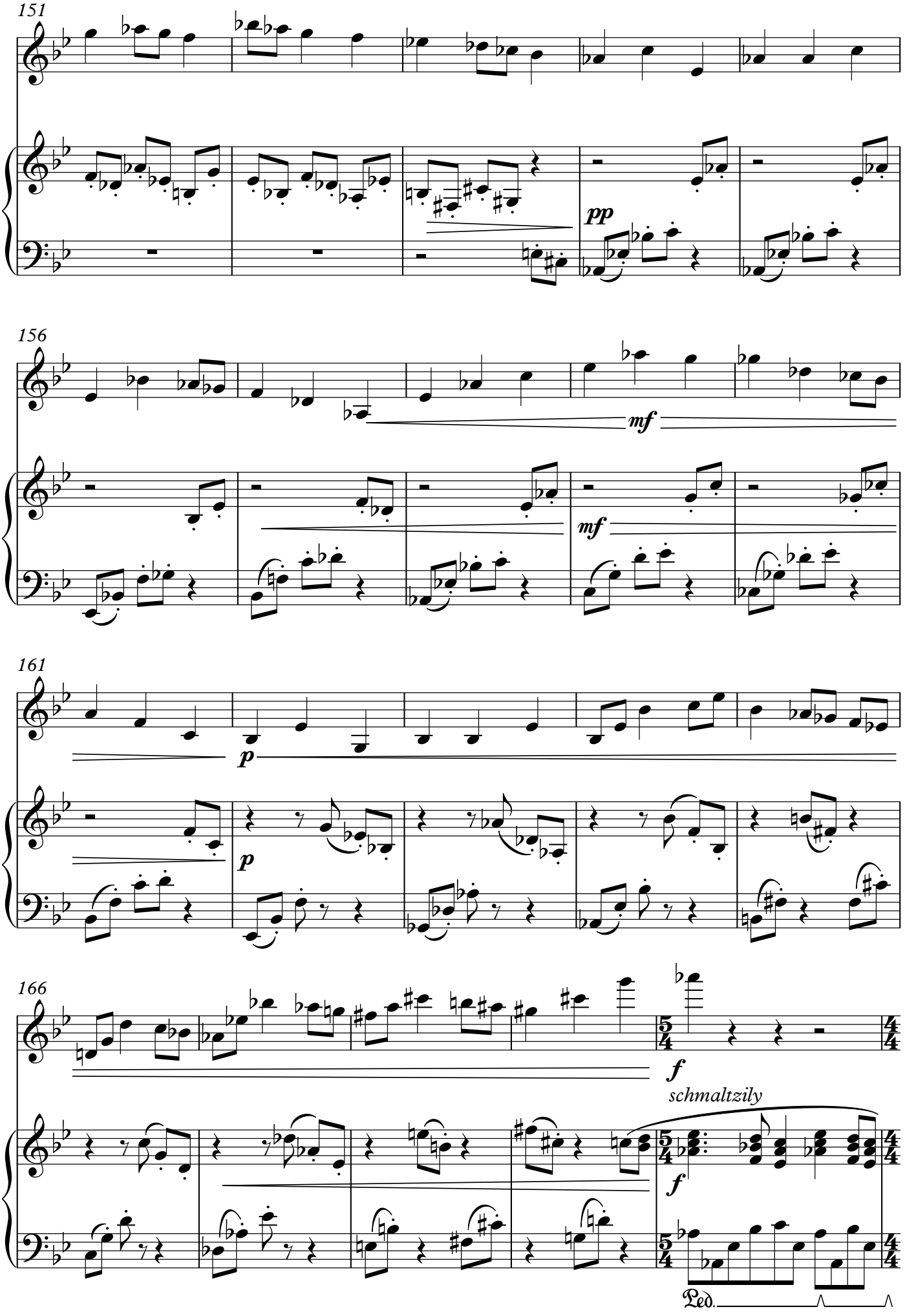

60
p
mf
p
mf
65
67
p
mp
Ped.
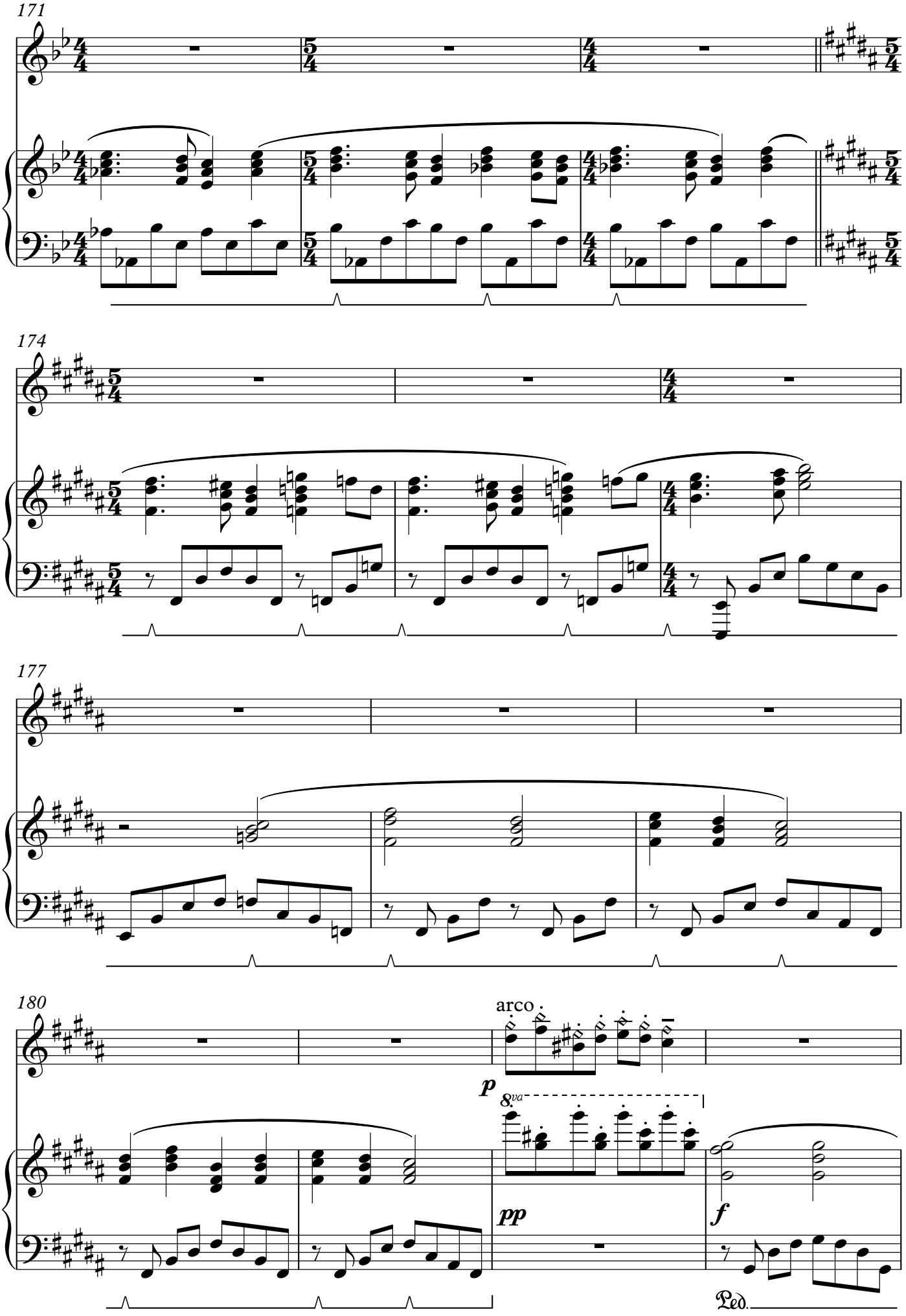

71
mf
mf
76
mf
p
mf
f
81
mp
f
mp
86
p
f
f
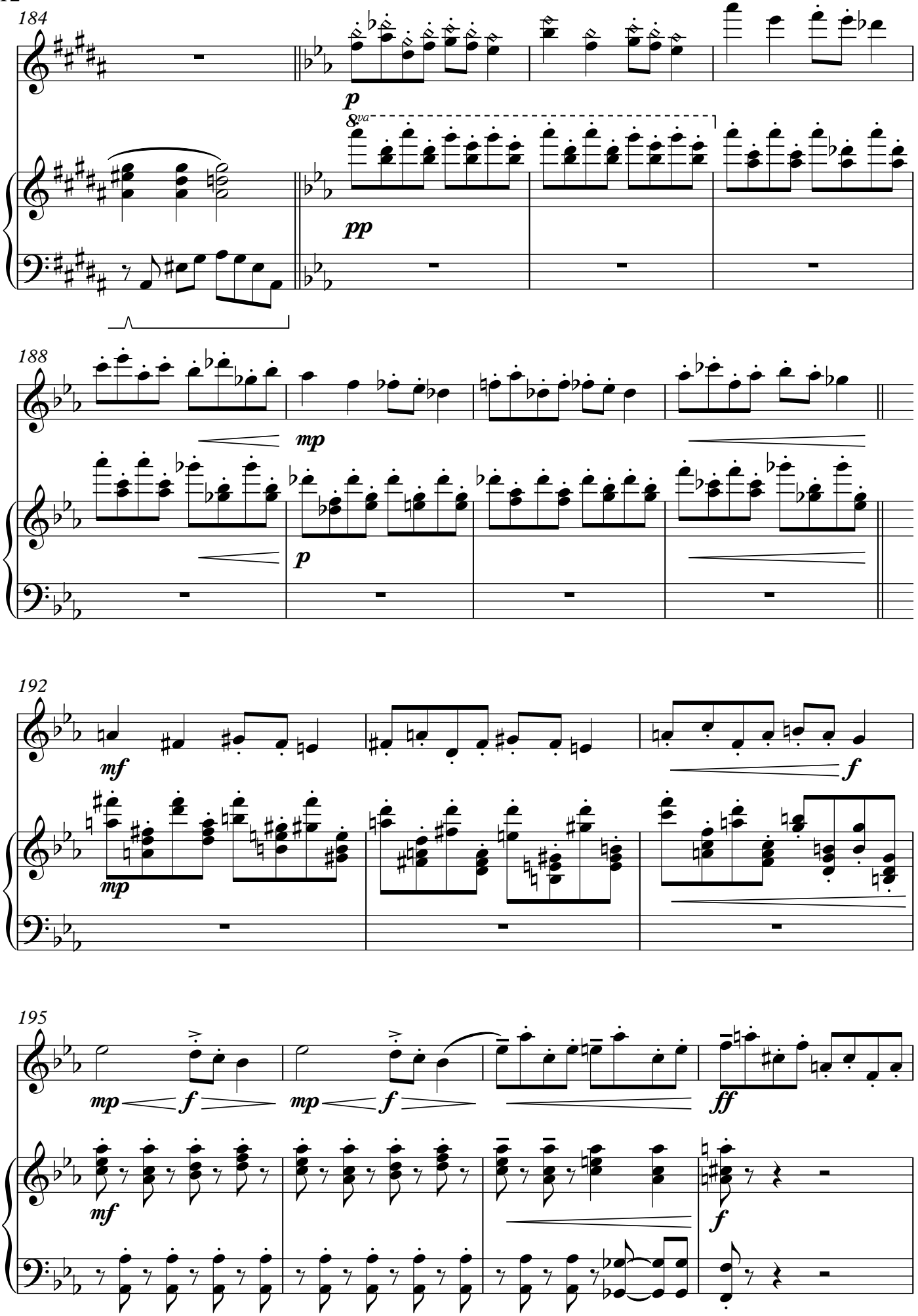

91
96
Ped.
accel.
102
pizz
mp
pp
mp
Tempo I
109
arco
mf
8va
Ped.
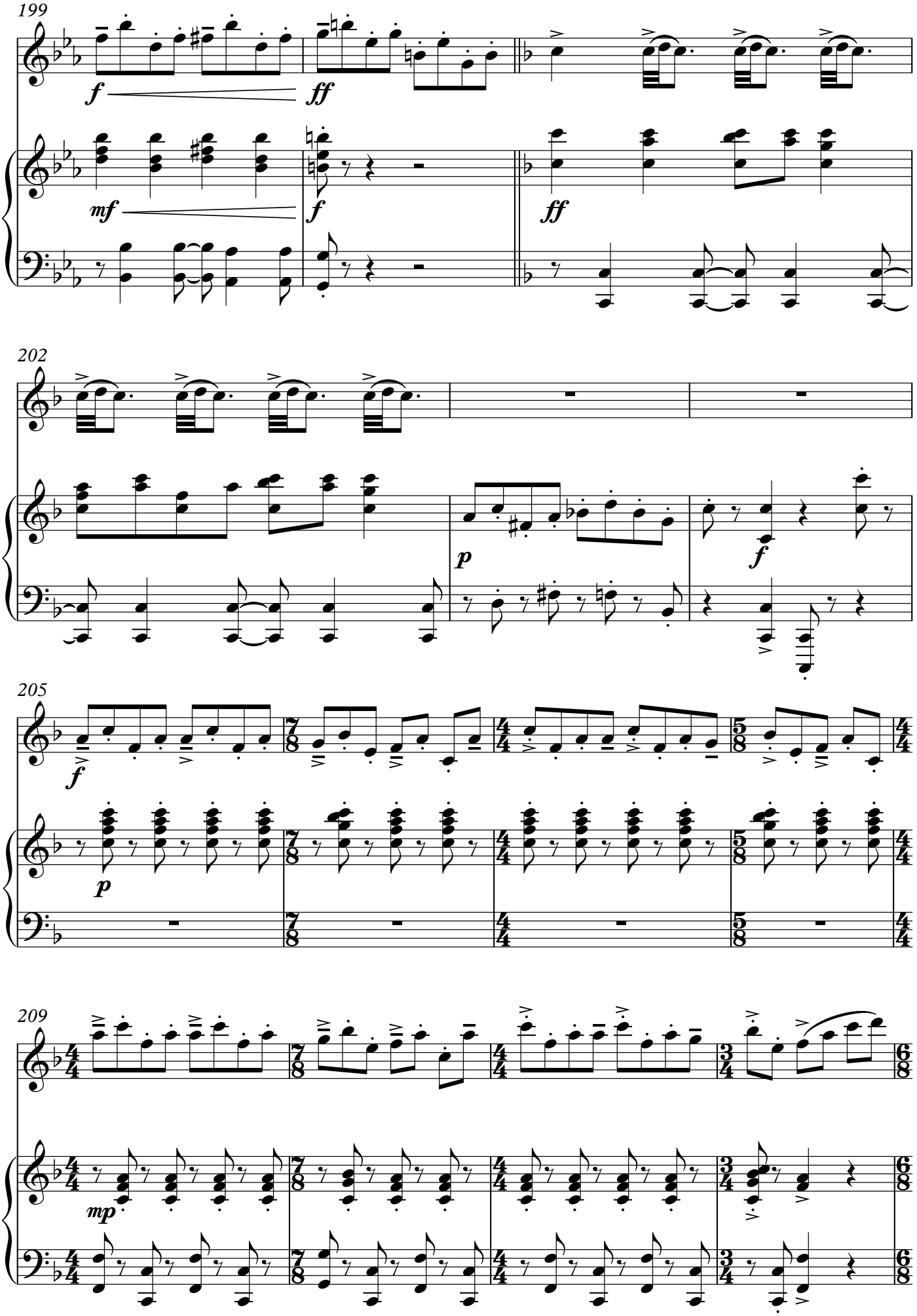

114
p
p
p
120
8va
123
pp
pp
Ped.
126
mp
mp
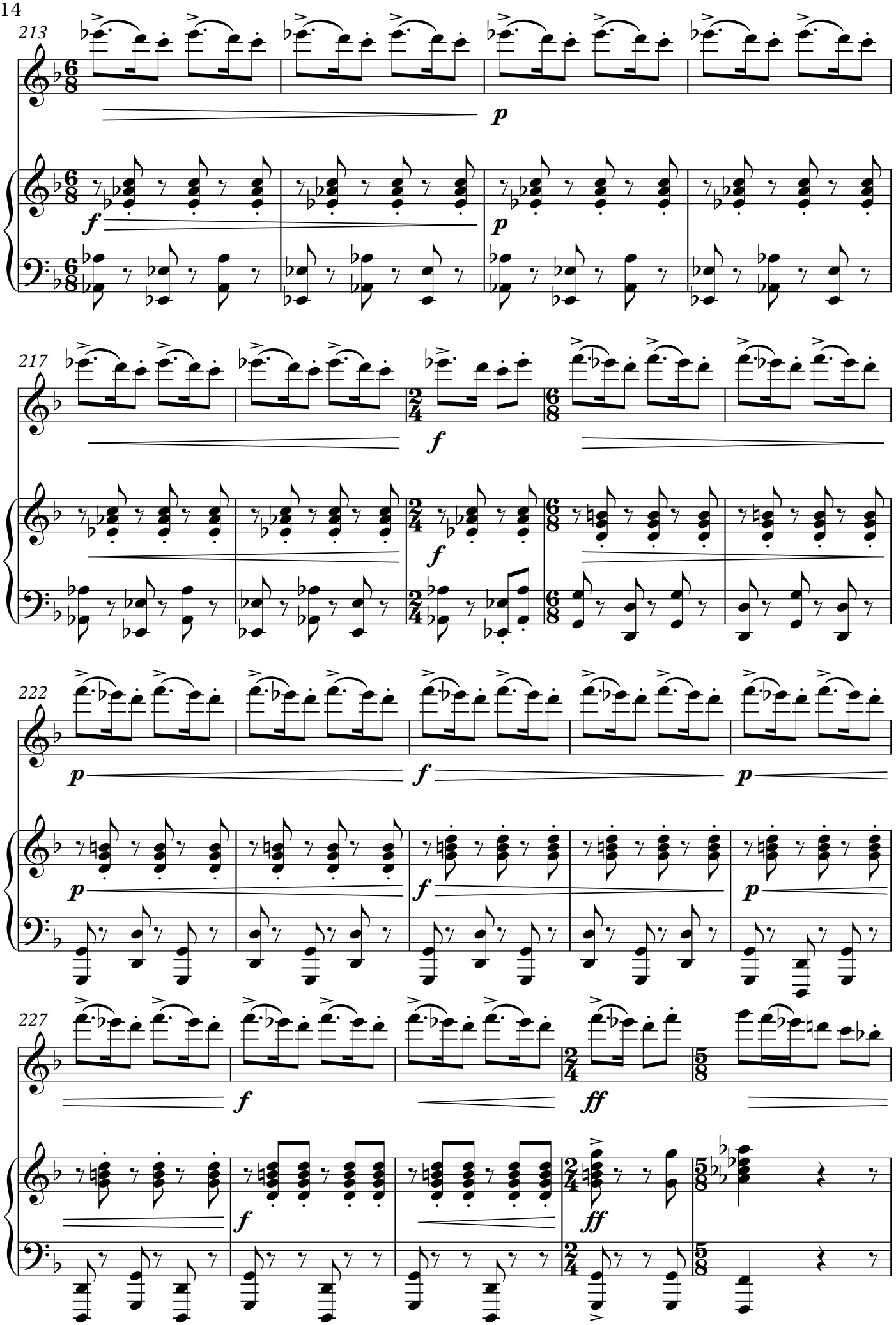

130
p
p
Ped.
135
pp
molto rall.
a tempo
140
pizz
p
sub. p
145
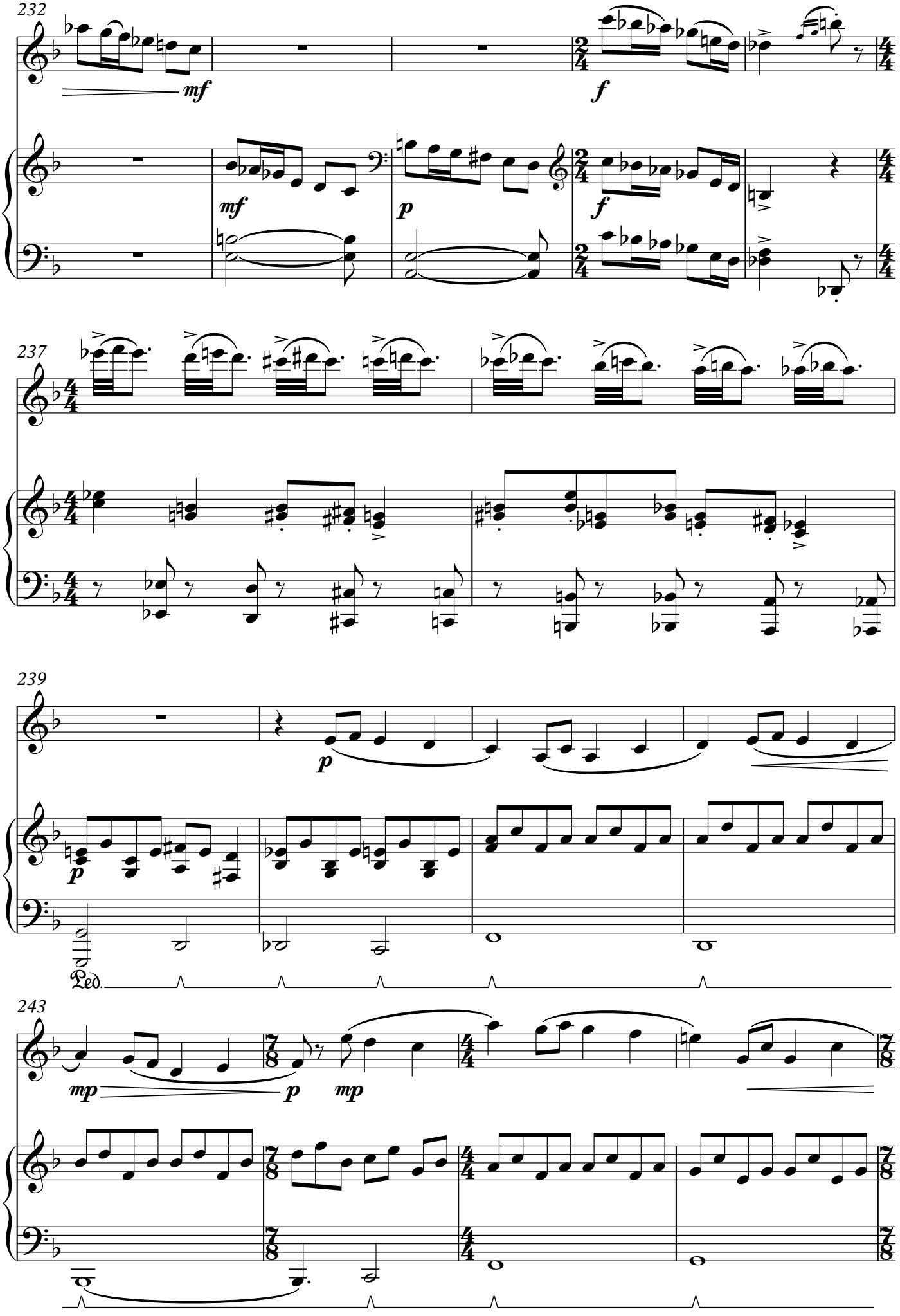

151
pp
156
mf
mf
161
p
p
166
f
schmaltzily
f
Ped.
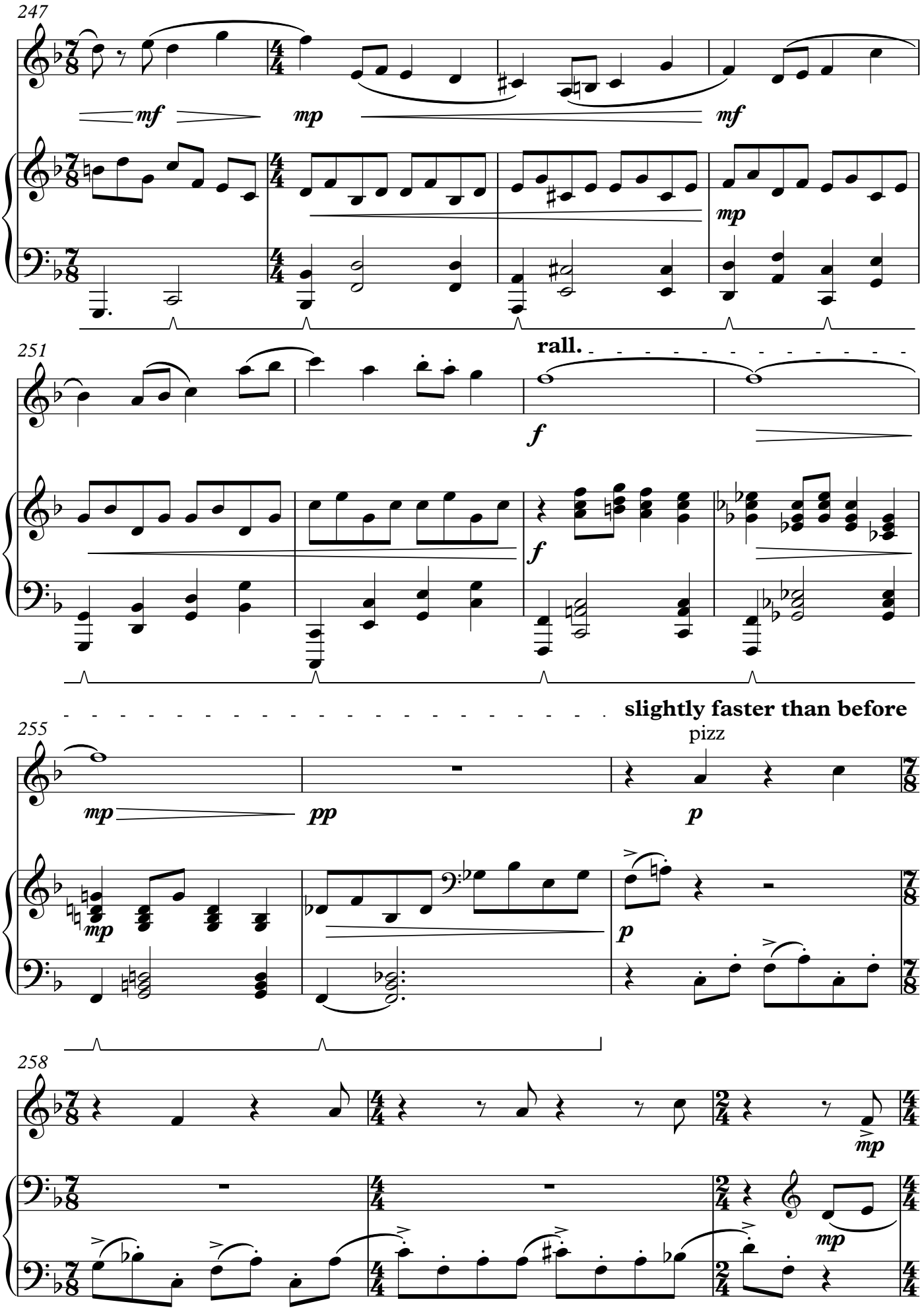

171
174
177
180
arco
p
8va
pp
f
Ped.
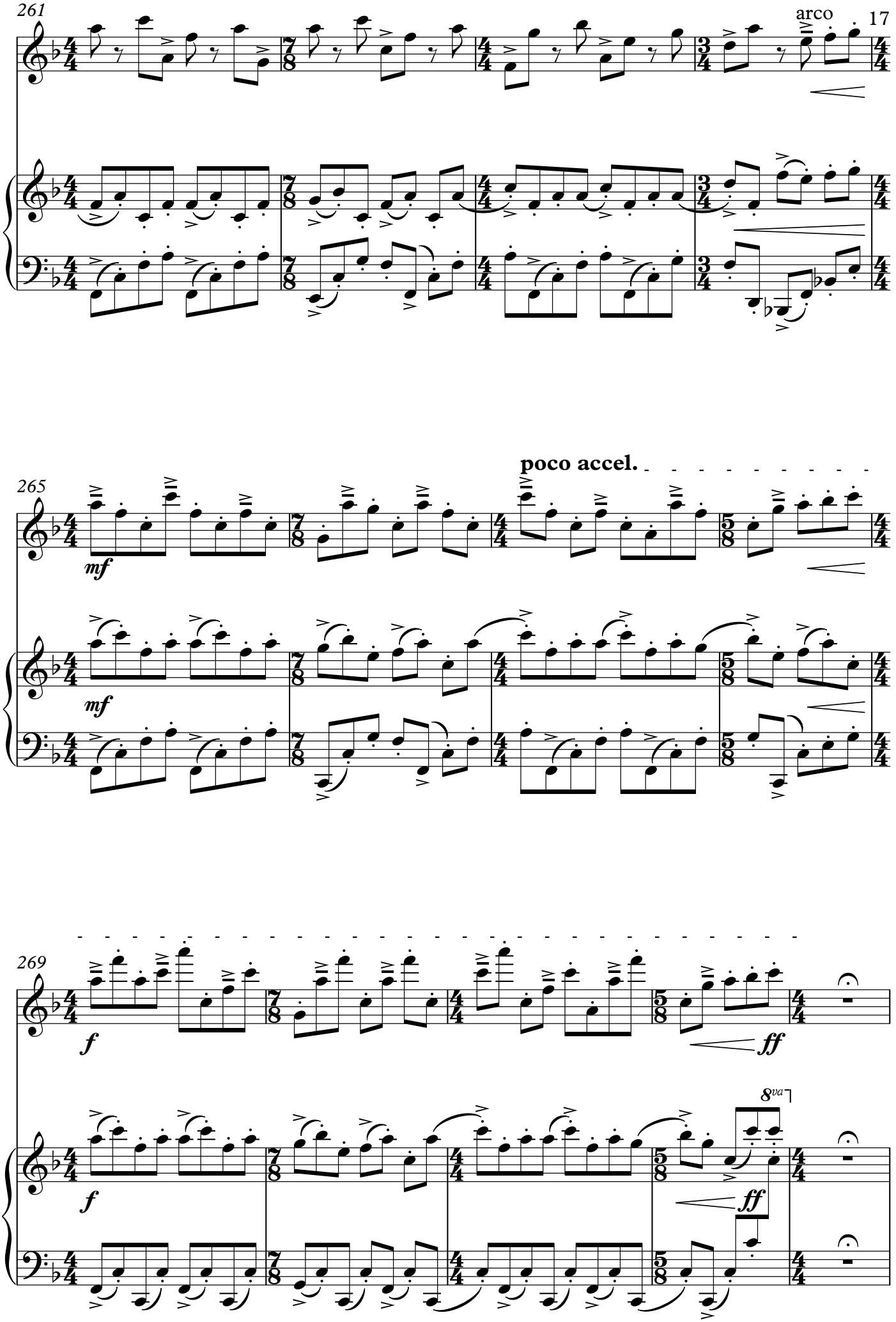

184
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pp
188
mp
p
192
mf
f
mp
195
mp
f
mp
f
ff
mf
f
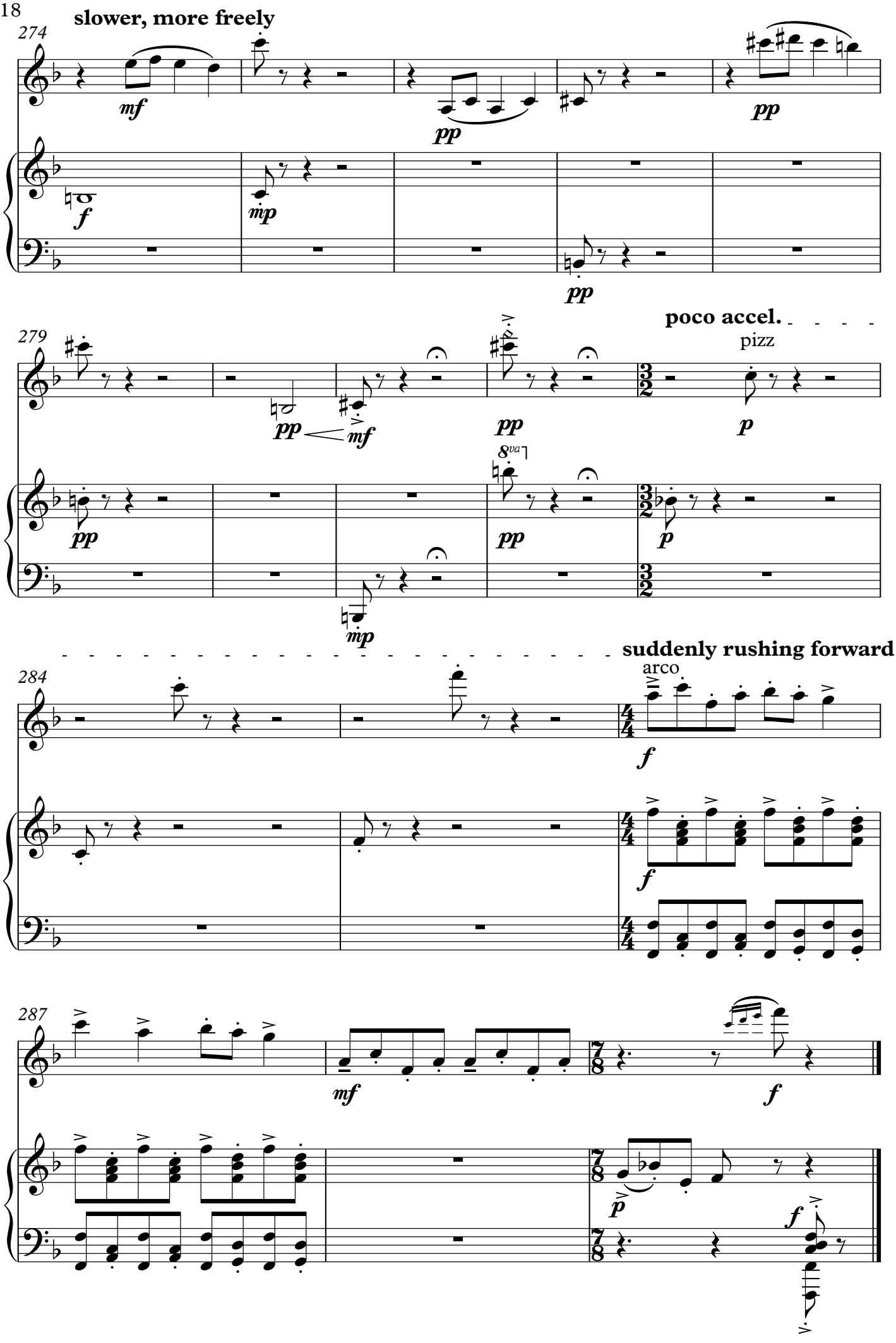

199
202
205
209


213
p
f
p
217
f
f
222
p
f
p
p
f
p
227
f
f
ff
ff


232
mf
f
mf
p
f
237
239
p
p
Ped.
243
mp
p
mp


247
mf
mp
mf
mp
251
rall.
f
f
255
mp
pp
pizz
p
mp
p
258
mp
mp


261
arco
265
poco accel.
mf
mf
269
f
ff
f
8va
ff


slower, more freely
274
mf
pp
pp
f
mp
pp
279
poco accel.
pizz
pp
pp
mf
pp
p
8va
pp
pp
p
mp
suddenly rushing forward
284
arco
f
f
287
mf
f
p
f