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five phases

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five phases

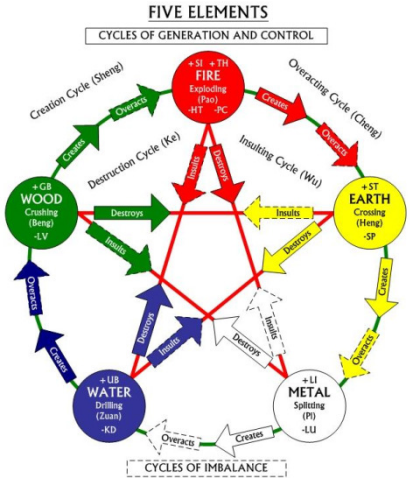
for piano (9")

James Welland

Written for the Cambridge University Music Society as Composer-in-Residence

Commentary

This piano piece is based on the Chinese, chiefly mnemonic device, known as the *Wu Xing*. In this concept, there are five elements which interact in various ways:



Whilst the overall cycle moves linearly from Earth to Metal to Water to Wood and finally to Fire, other internal processes mean that elements "cross" and interact in a non-linear fashion as well. In this piece, I hoped to capture both the differing characters of each element (described as "splitting, drilling, crossing, crushing and exploding" in the diagram above) as well as the various ways the elements interact with each other, creating a polyphony of musical ideas.

As Earth is the "crossing" element, I used a 5-note cell to represent it, which permeates the harmony and melody of the whole piece. By making transpositions of this cell via an expanding interval series, as well as using common techniques such as retrograde inversion, I was able to come up with a harmonic/melodic grid from which I drew most of my musical ideas, reciprocating Earth element's affinity for "crossing" over. The 5 notes consist of a diminished seventh with an added major 2nd: A-C-Eb-F#-G#. The obvious symmetry of the first four notes is a hark back to the symmetrical Chinese pentatonic scale upon which the five elements are often assigned to, with the G# being an altered, dissident note. When using these notes in harmonies, I often tried to arrange them into quartal configurations. These notes also appear in a long-term scheme. In this way, they are presented as recurring low-register notes that define each characteristic element in the structure. The only exception to this is the final section ("Fire"), where all the notes are presented, along with their transpositions, in complete transparency. Moreover, these recurring low notes are also varied via different techniques in analogy to their characteristic element. For instance, Metal uses a metal paper clip dragged along a low C, and Water uses an inside-piano glissando between two low Ebs. These schema allowed more freedom regarding the other components of the music.

The piece is structured linearly according to the *Wu Xing* cycle, beginning with Earth. However, constant interactions (represented by the different musical flavours of each element intercepting the "pure" material of a given element) take place, the most prominent of which are marked in the score e.g. "Metal destroys Wood". In this instance, Wood's characteristic acciaccaturas and displaced rhythms are interpolated with Metal's major 7^{th} pre-occupation and its additive rhythms. Only the "destroying" interactions are marked in the score. For instance, in bar 187, the 2-part counterpoint reminiscent of Earth's character invades Wood's acciaccaturas, creating a dynamism and forced unity between elements. As the *Wu Xing* is a cycle, the piece ends with a direct quote of the beginning, though suddenly interrupted by a dynamic change and fermata, signalling the end of the piece, but not that of the cycle.

The shorter remark attached to each element is also explored, giving each a characteristic sound. For instance, Earth's is "crossing". As well as being the element that most frequently crosses over and mixes with the others, this "crossing" becomes analogous to counterpoint, the rules of which are based on the harmonic/melodic grid. Earth also implies stability, and so the material written is mostly in a "stable" tessitura, in the middle register of the piano. Elements also share characteristics: for instance, Water and Metal both intervallically centre around the major 7^{th}.

Due to the number and strikingly different nature of these elements, I also aimed to keep the material fairly fragmentary. Often one element is suddenly interrupted by another, or adversely is gradually immersed in the characteristic of another element. For instance, at b.217, the Wood element, slowly being immersed in Metal, gives way, and a direct quote from the Metal section emerges, before giving way to the next element in the cycle. This "polyphony" of musical material and extra-musical ideas sets out the main technical and aesthetic aims of the piece. Organicity and wholeness come from the shared melodic/harmonic world and the macrostructure determined by the *Wu Xing*.

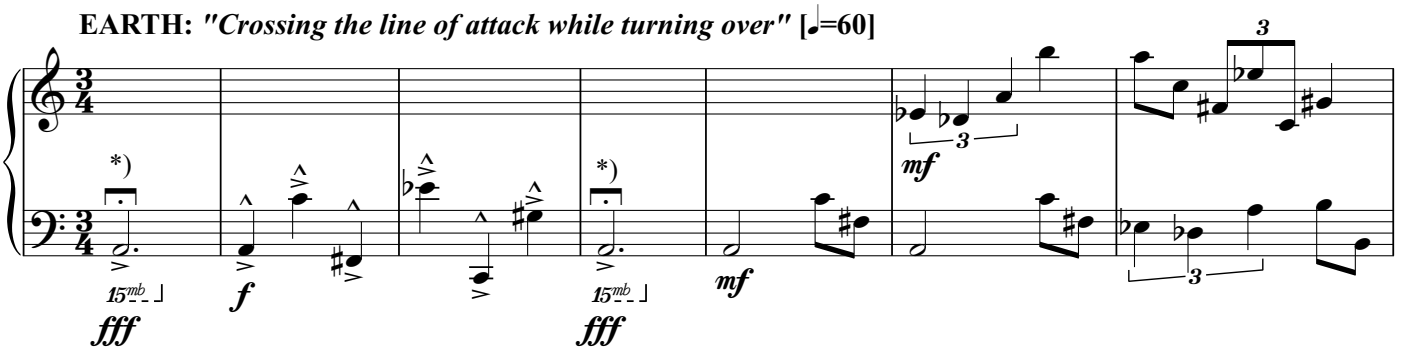
Performance Notes

1. Accidentals last throughout the bar, though they are re-iterated in more eventful passages for ease of reading.
2. Bar divisions are indicated by beaming.
3. Articulation is mostly left to discretion, however, certain notes have mandatory articulation, such as the staccato semiquavers at b.66.
4. Feathered beams sloping upwards (<) indicate a temporary accelerando, whereas feathered beams sloping downwards (>) indicate a temporary ritenuto.
5. All metronomic indications are approximate.
6. *five phases* requires the following special techniques inside the piano which are also described in the score with asterisks:
    a. Dampening the string with your finger gradually, eliminating the fundamental, leaving the higher partials audible.
    b. Dragging a metal paper clip, bent so that one length of metal touches the string, up and down the resonating string whilst holding the note in question.
    c. Sliding a plectrum up and down the string in question.
    d. Glissandoing between two notes using the fleshy part of one's finger. For ease of execution, it is helpful to mark the two strings with bits of tape. If the piano in question's inside means that the player cannot play the glissando in one fell swoop, then it is acceptable to break up the glissando into two or three sections.
    e. Muting the string by dampening it with the finger. The place on the string does not have to be exact, so long as the resulting sound is "wooden" and muted. When playing acciaccaturas, only the muted string in question is to be dampened, not the precursory acciaccatura note.
7. Pedalling in the piece is left up to the discretion of the player, however there are a few places where mandatory pedalling has been inscribed. The following symbols are used to indicate the pedals used:
    a. **P I –** right (damper) pedal.
    b. **P II –** middle (sostenuto) pedal.
8. **’** = a slight pause or "breath", usually coming after a low-register note.
9. Many of the effects produced inside the piano will have to be "overplayed" in order to sound as indicated in the score. If possible, amplification and digital compression might be used. The microphone should be suspended over the bass strings of the piano.

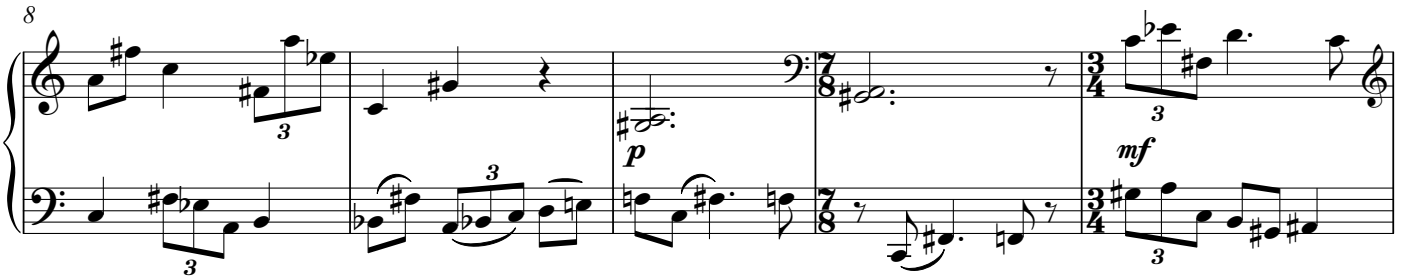
five phases

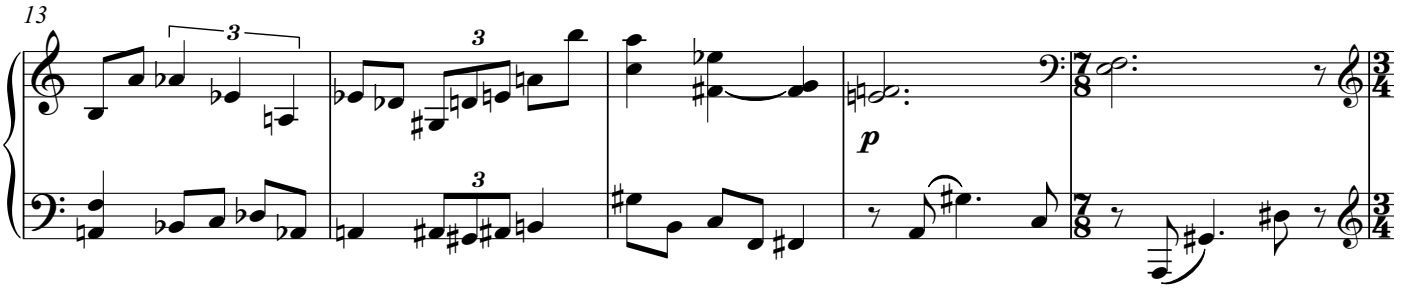
James Welland

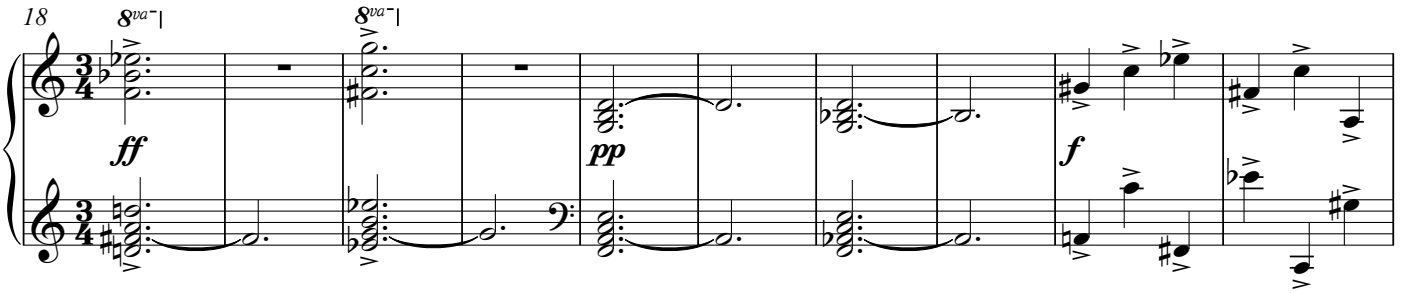
EARTH: ***"Crossing the line of attack while turning over"*** **[♩=60]**



**): Dampen the string with your finger gradually, eliminating the fundamental and making high partials audible.*







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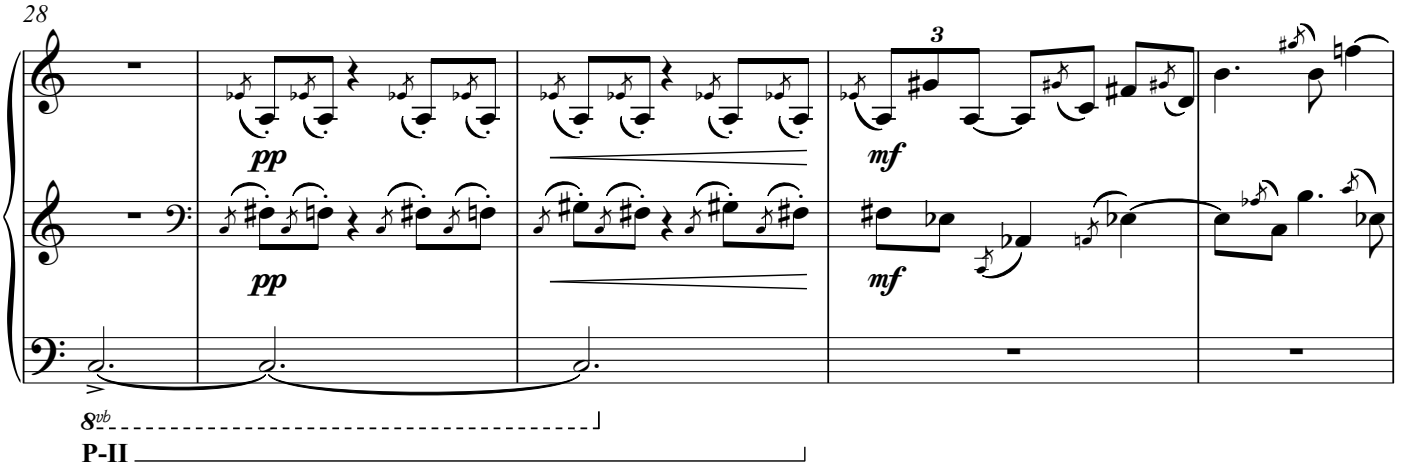
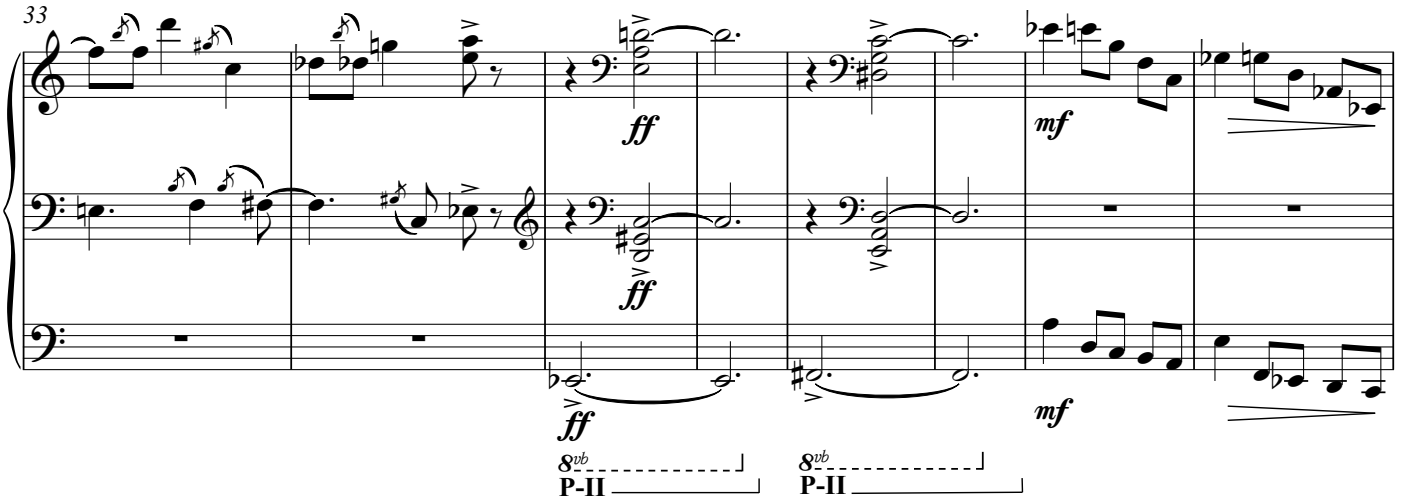
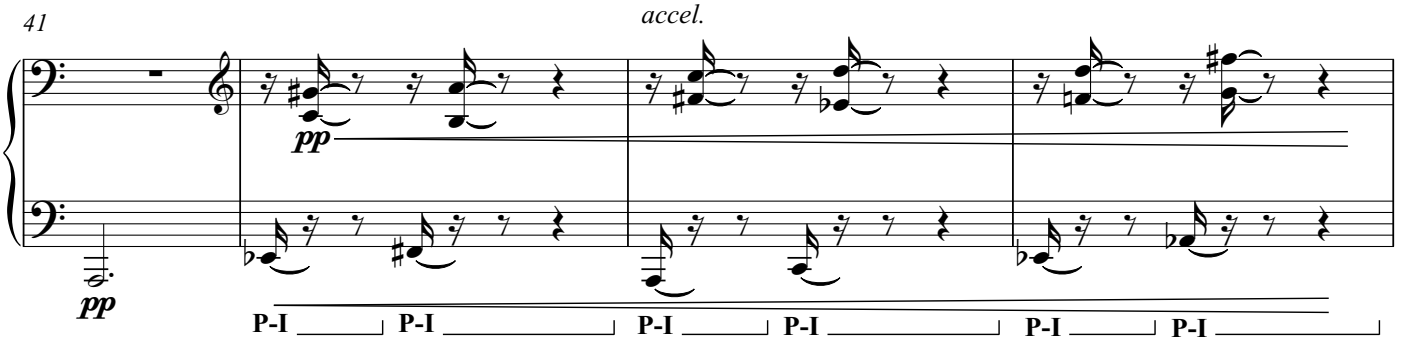
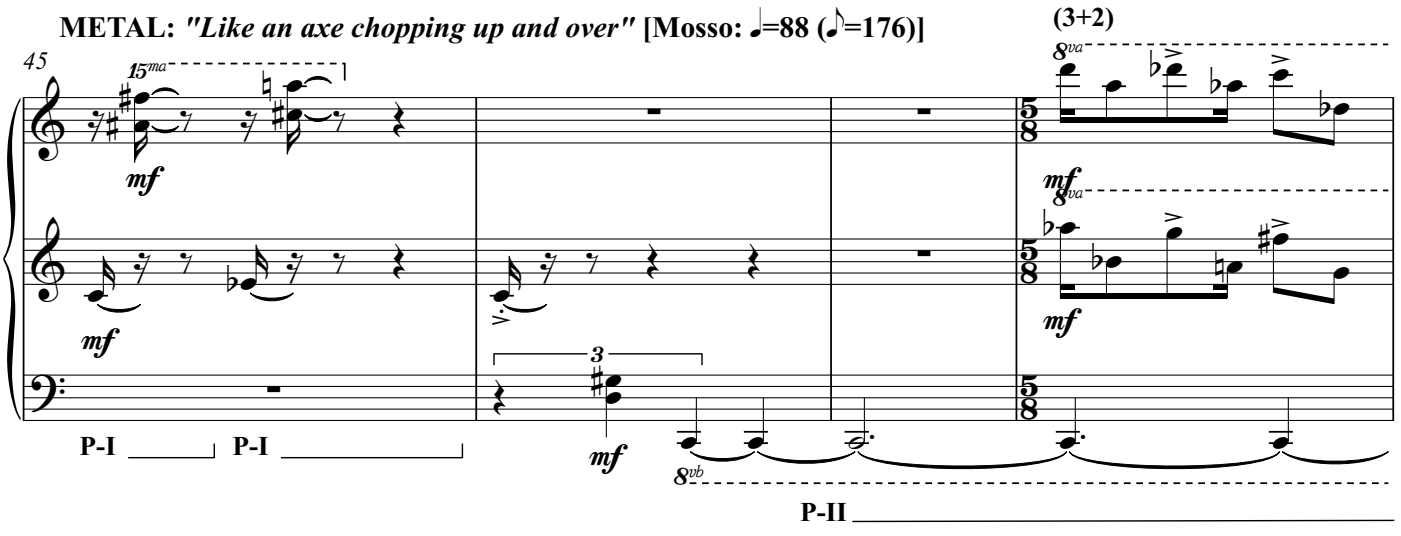


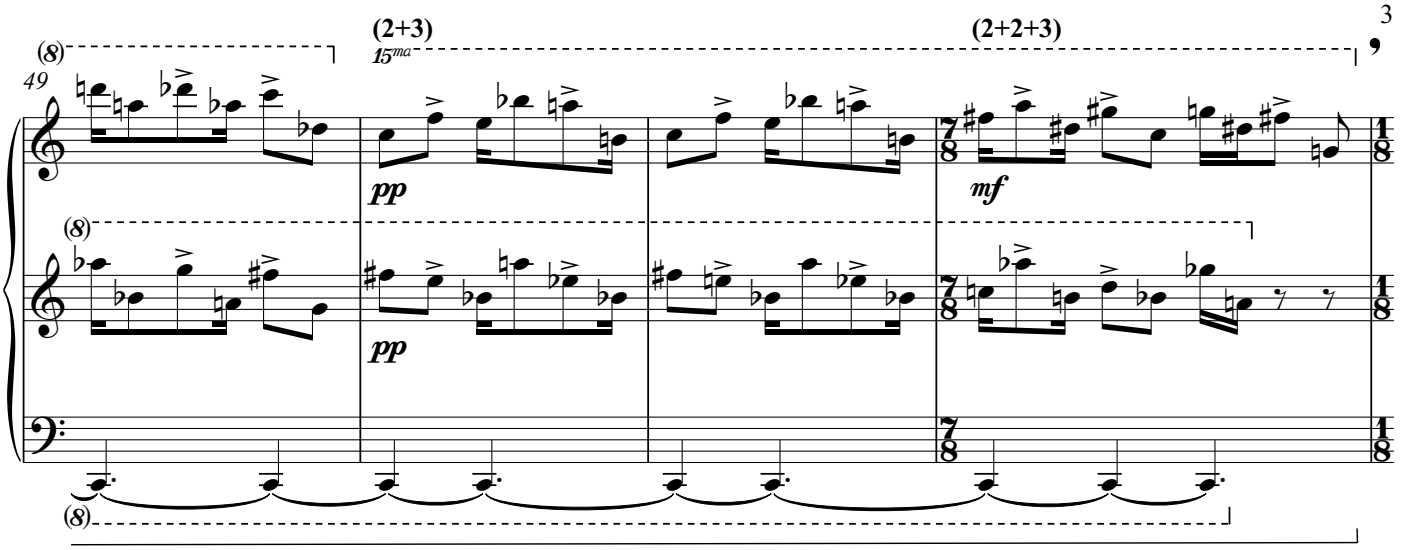
"Crossing" [Piu mosso: ♩=72]

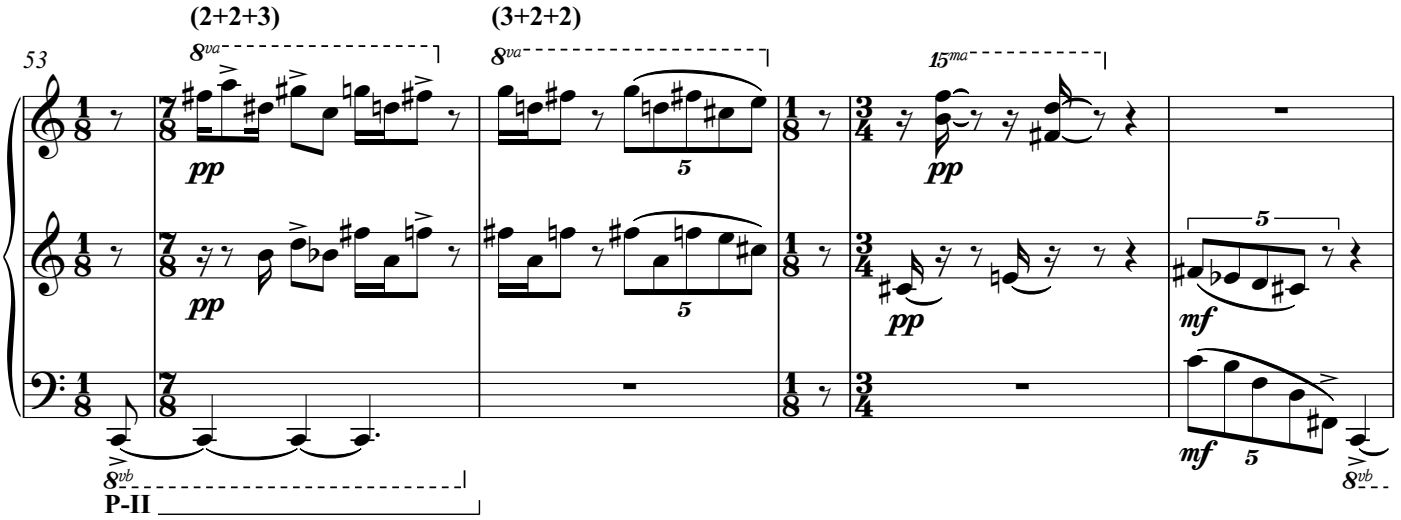


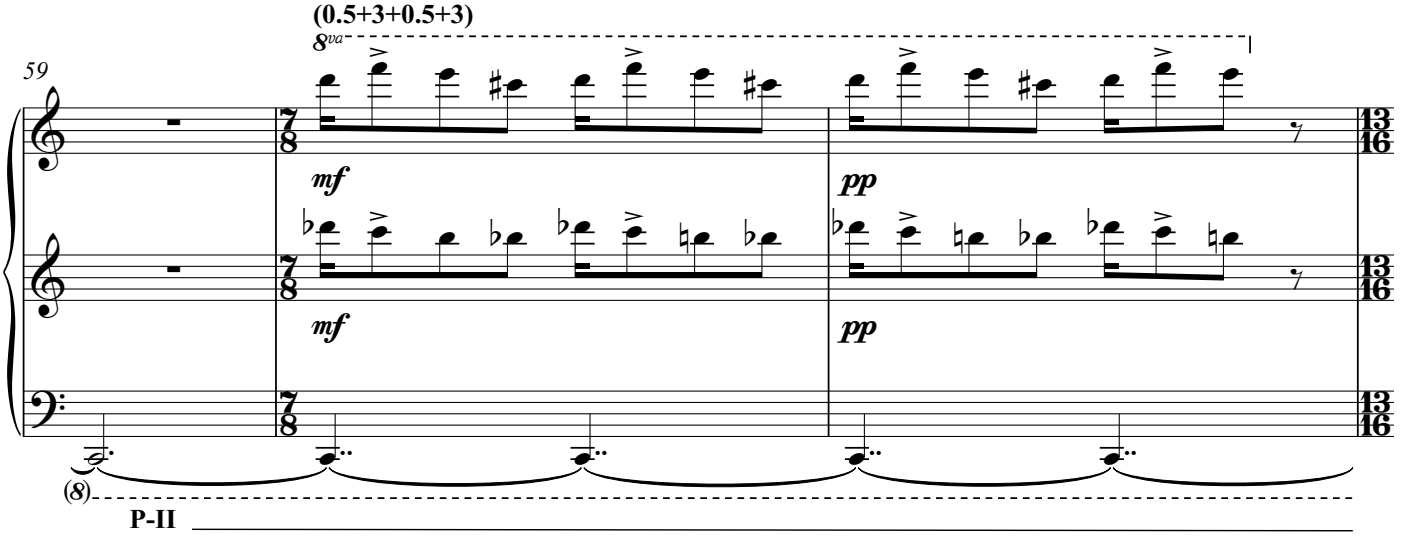


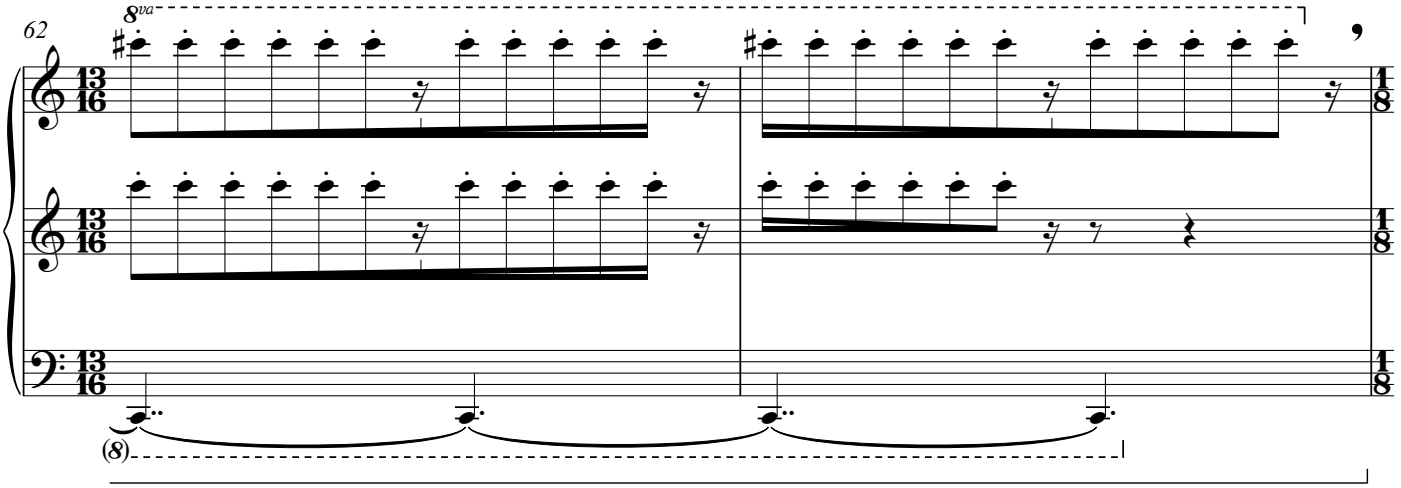
METAL: *"Like an axe chopping up and over"* [Mosso: ♩=88 (♪=176)]

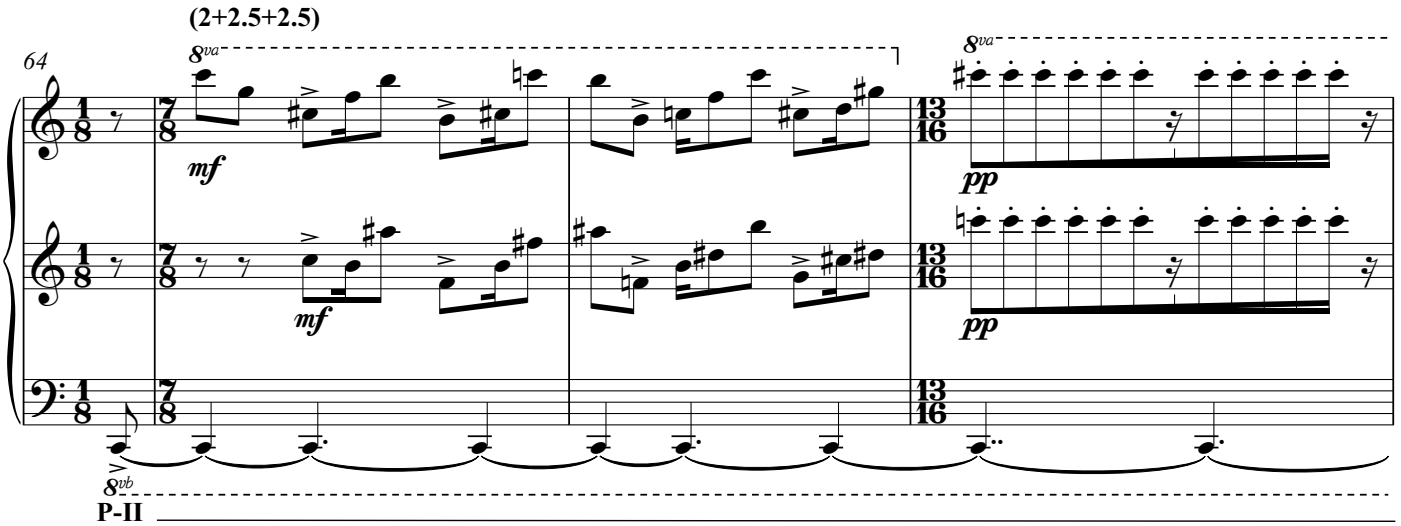


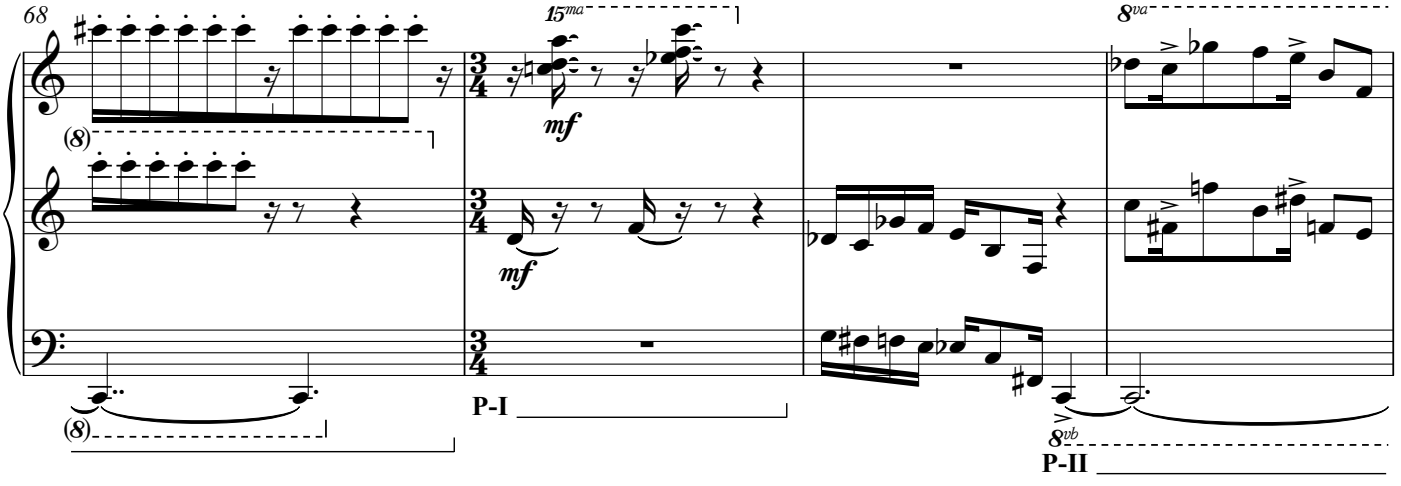

(2+3)
(2+2+3)
49
15ma
pp
mf
(8)

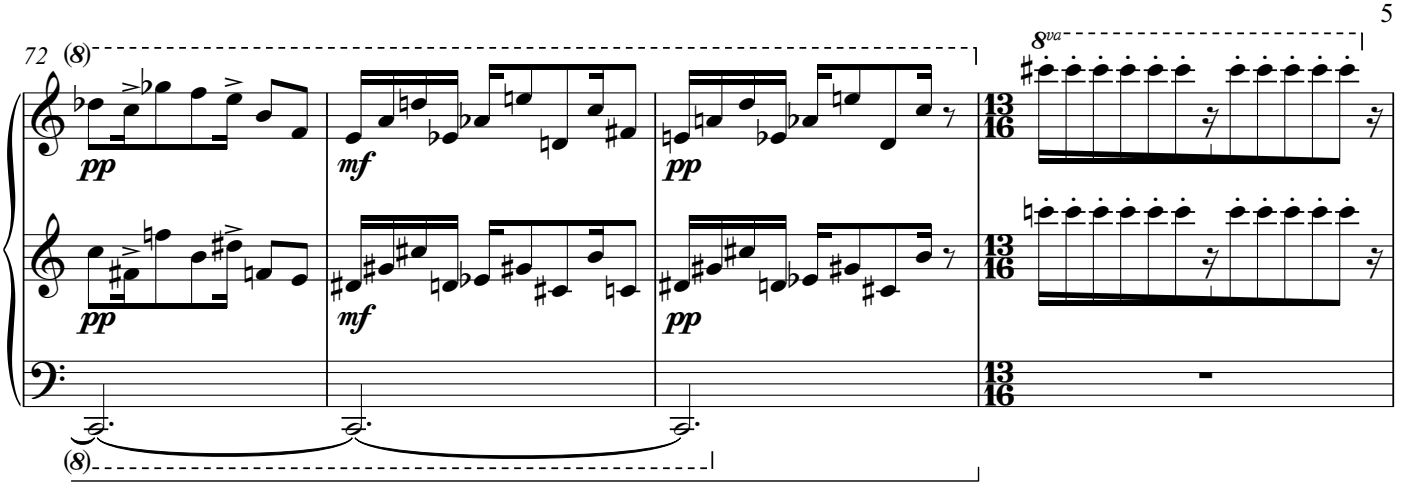

(2+2+3)
(3+2+2)
53
8va
15ma
pp
mf
5
8vb
P-II


(0.5+3+0.5+3)
59
8va
mf
pp
(8)
P-II

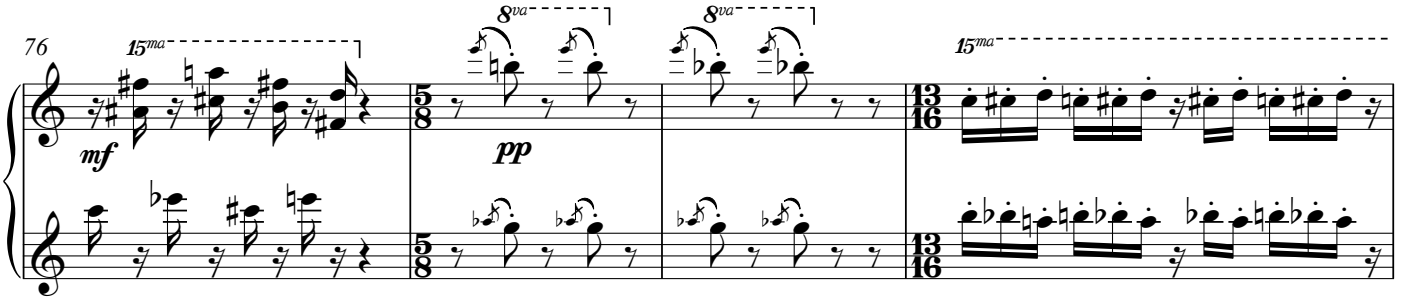

62
8va
(8)

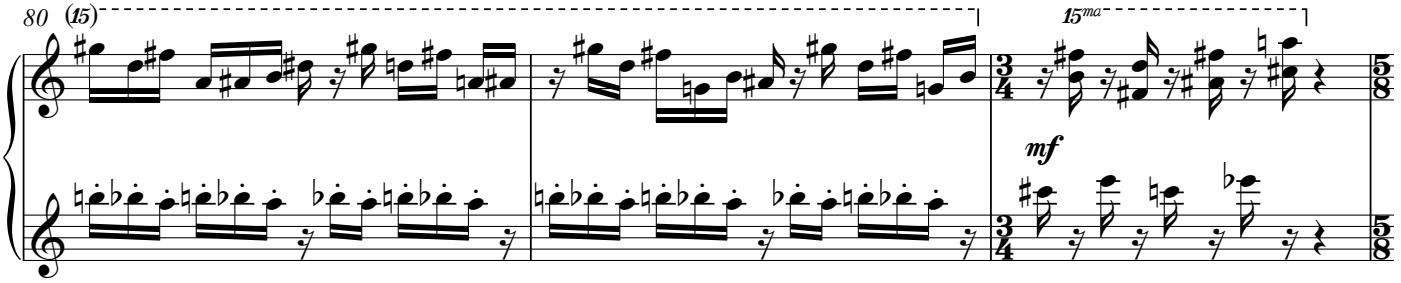

(2+2.5+2.5)
64
8va
mf
mf
8va
pp
pp
8vb
P-II

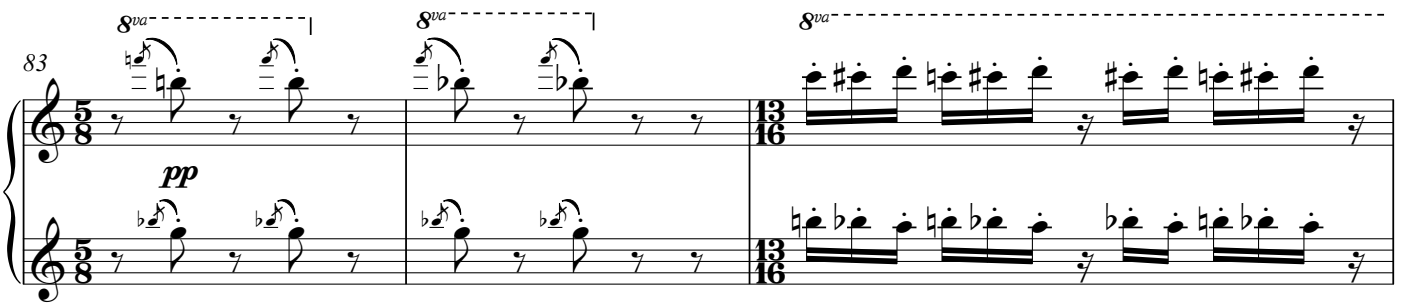

68
(8)
15ma
mf
mf
8va
(8)
P-I
8vb
P-II



"Fire melts Metal"







86

(8)

88

**)

**)

mf

p

ff

**) Drag a metal paper clip up and down the resonating string whilst holding the note, creating a metallic sound.

94

(2.5+2.5)

mf

p

mf

99

(3+2)

accel.

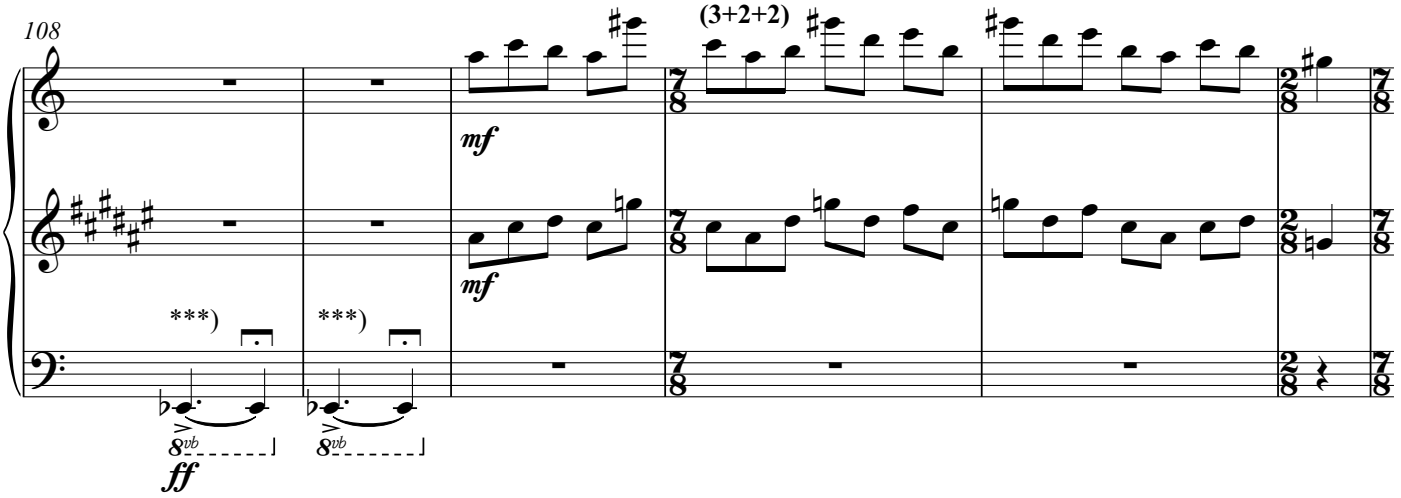
p

WATER: *"Drilling forward horizontally like a geyser"* [♩=100 (♪=200)]

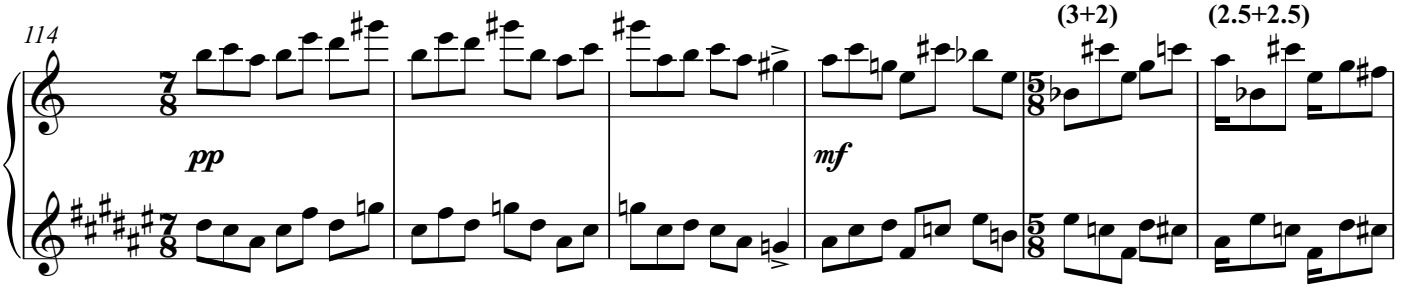
104

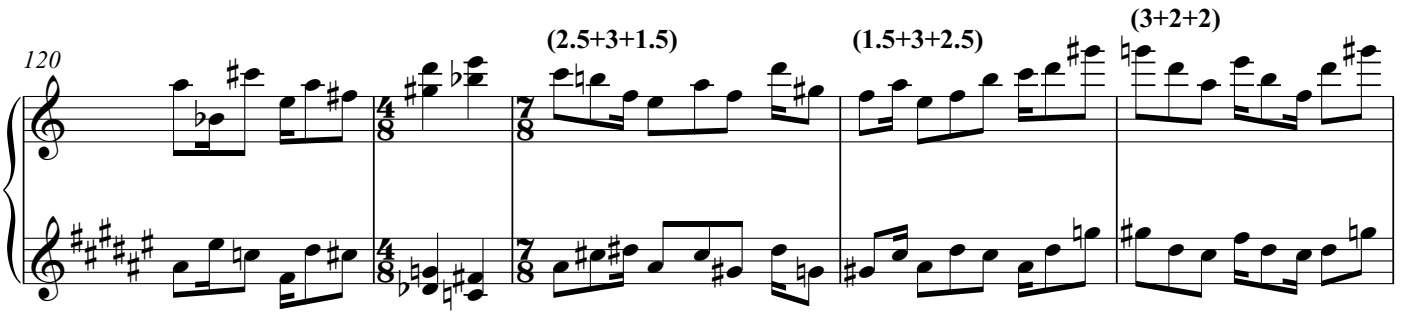
mf

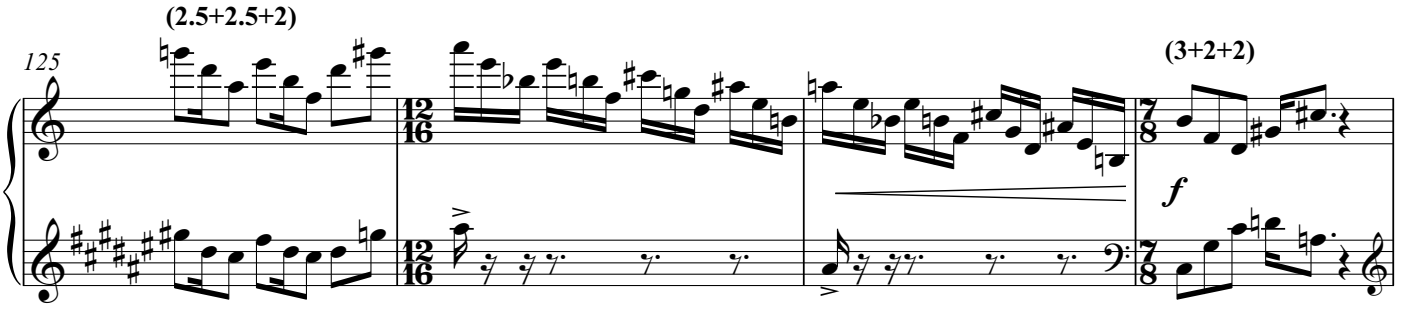
pp

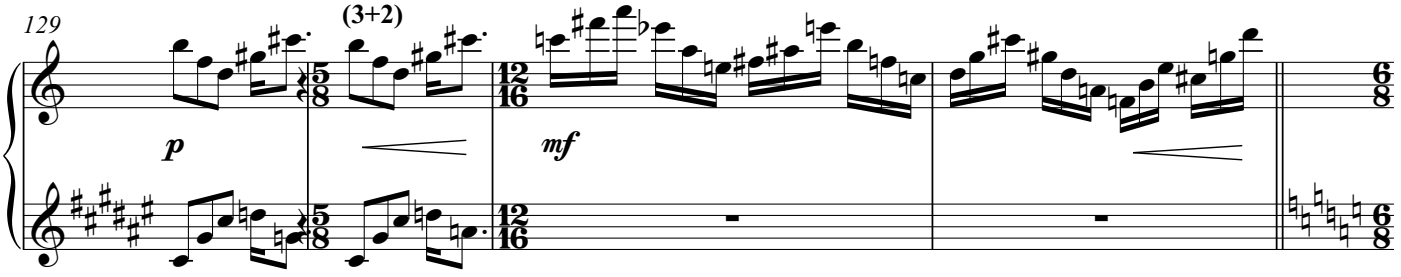


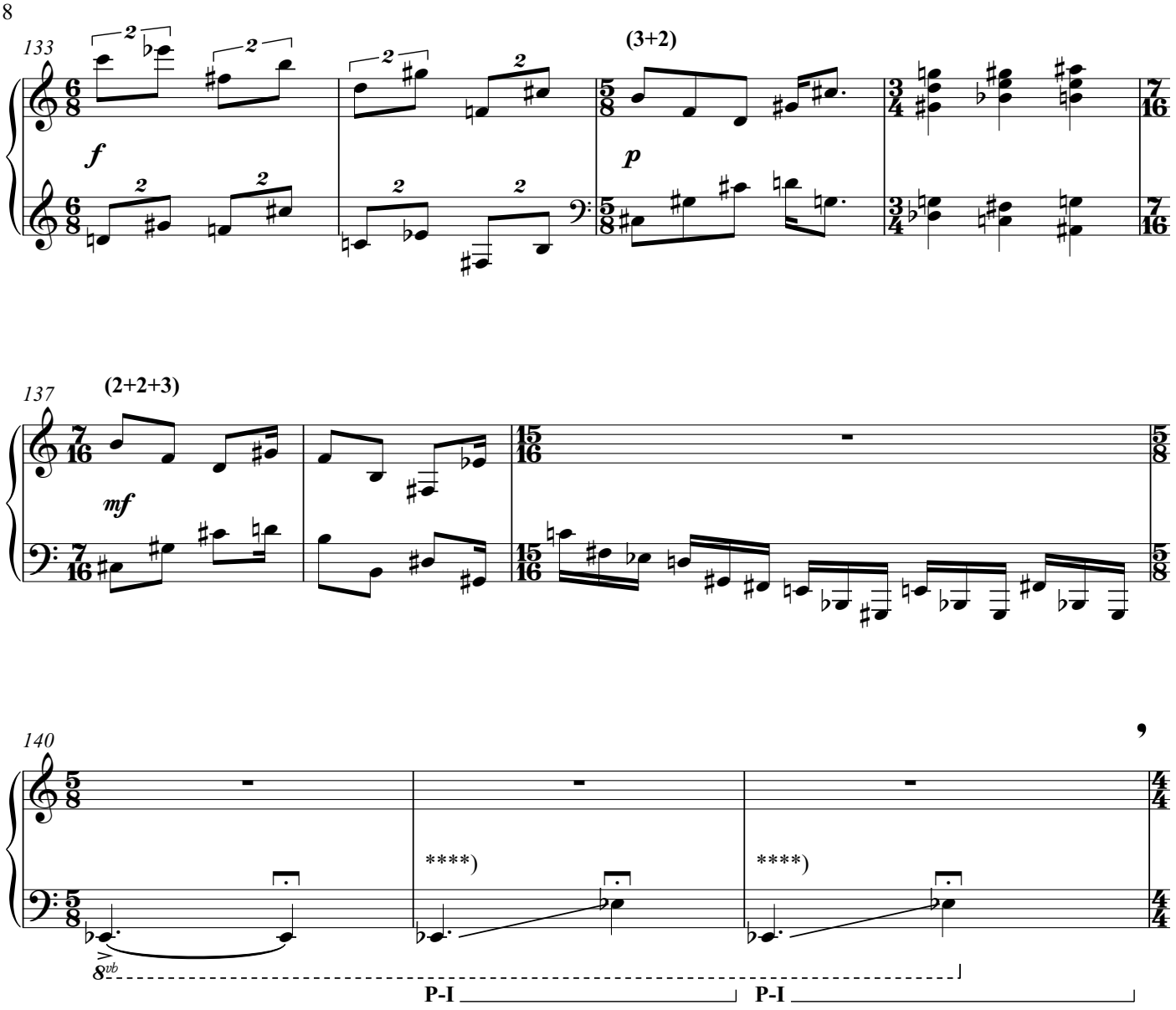
***) Slide a plectrum up and down the string, creating noise.





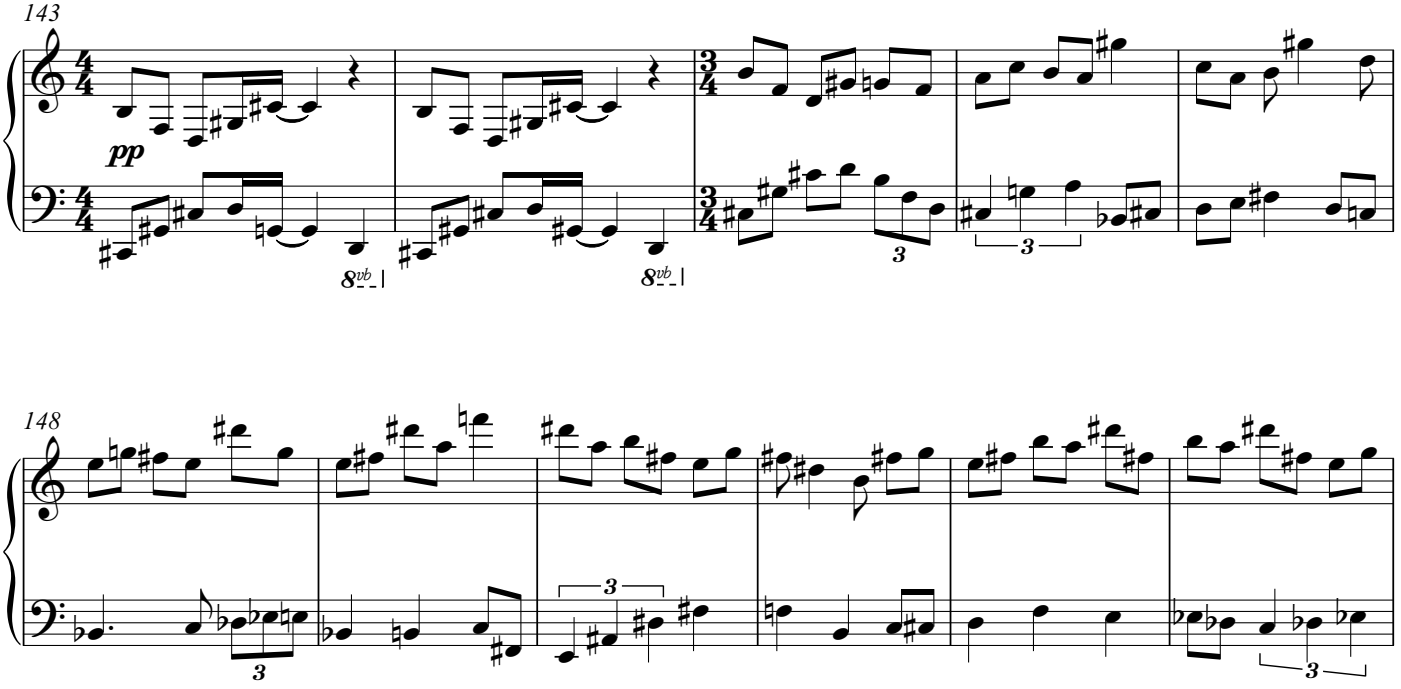






*****) Glissando using the flesh of your finger approximately between these two notes; timing is free, but the technique and movement must be fluid. Depress the pedal slowly.*

"Water absorbed by earth" [♩=88 (♪=176)]



154

f

WOOD: ***"Arrows constantly exploding forward"*** **[♩=112 (♪=224)]**

161

mf

*****)

8vb

*****) Mute the F# string by dampening it with your fingers.
(from 171-174)

168

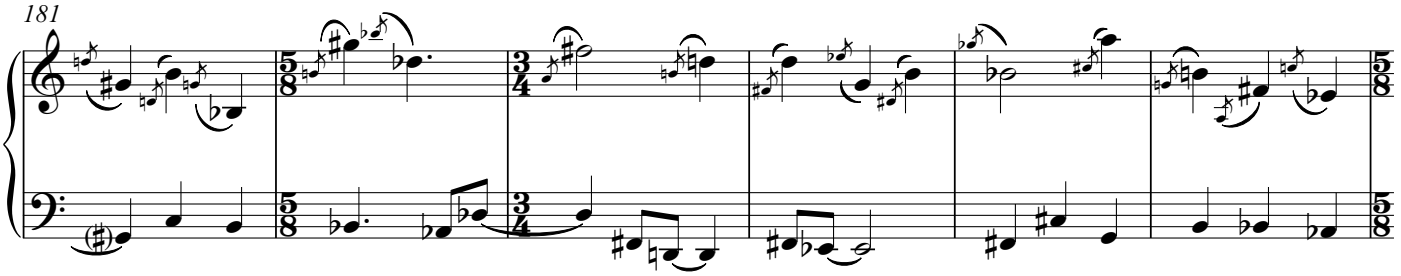
174

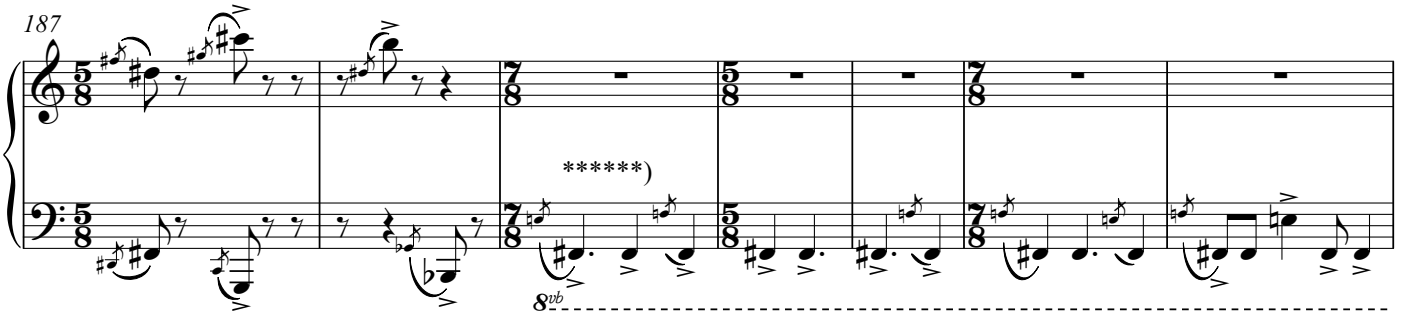
mf

******)

8vb

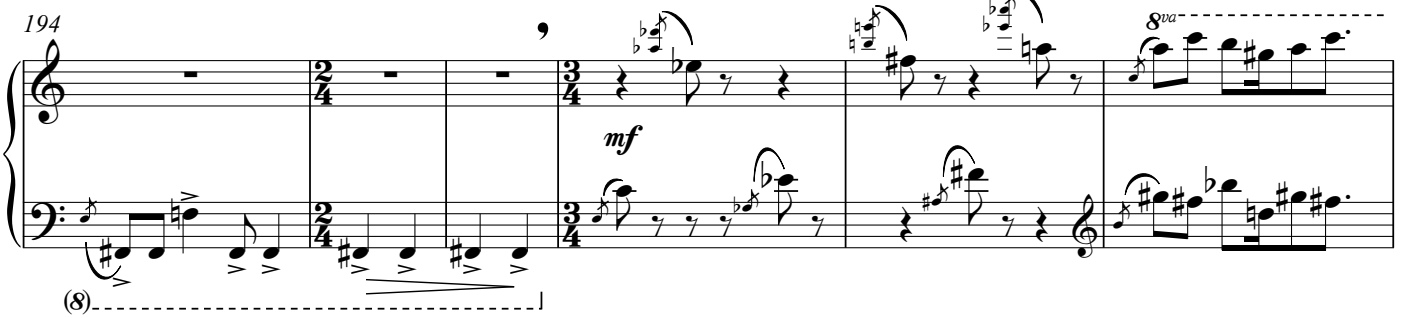
******) Mute the F# string by dampening it with your fingers.
(from 183-186)

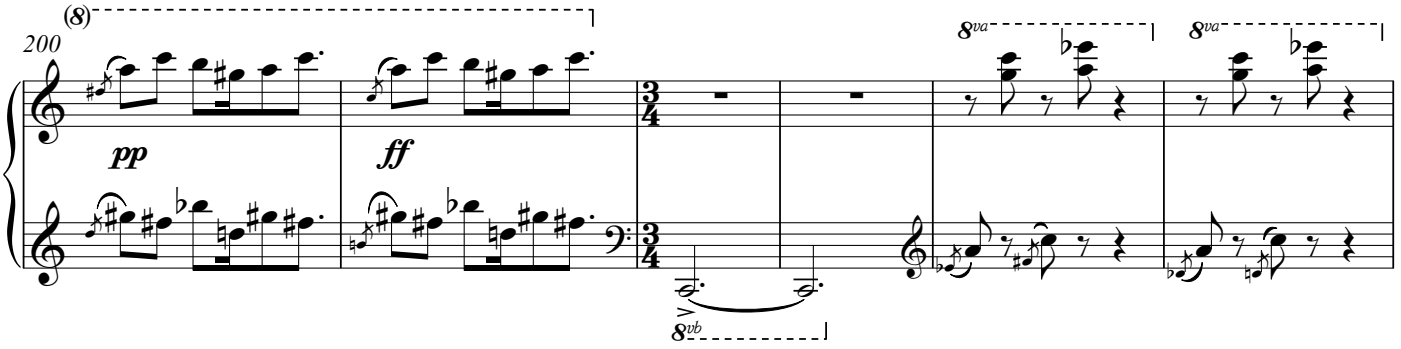


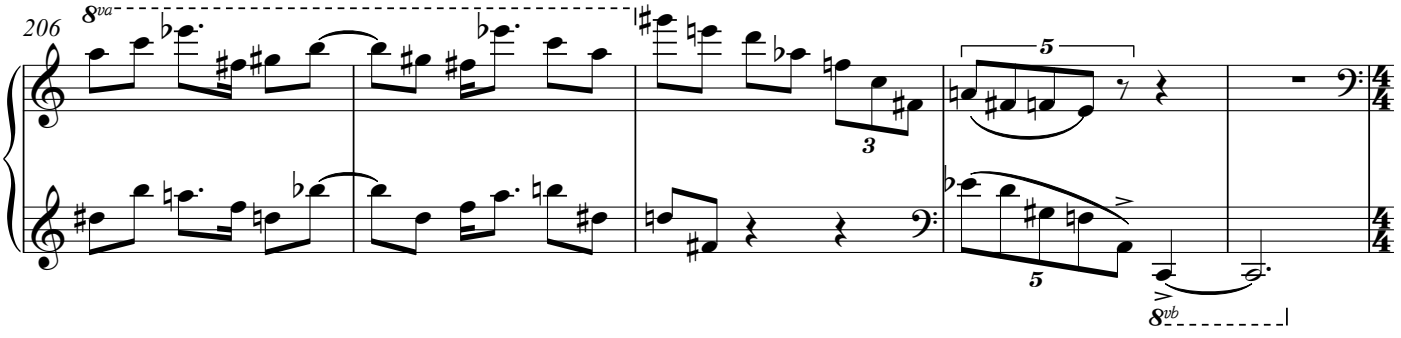


******) *Mute the F# string by dampening it with your fingers.*
(from 197-204)

"Metal destroys wood"

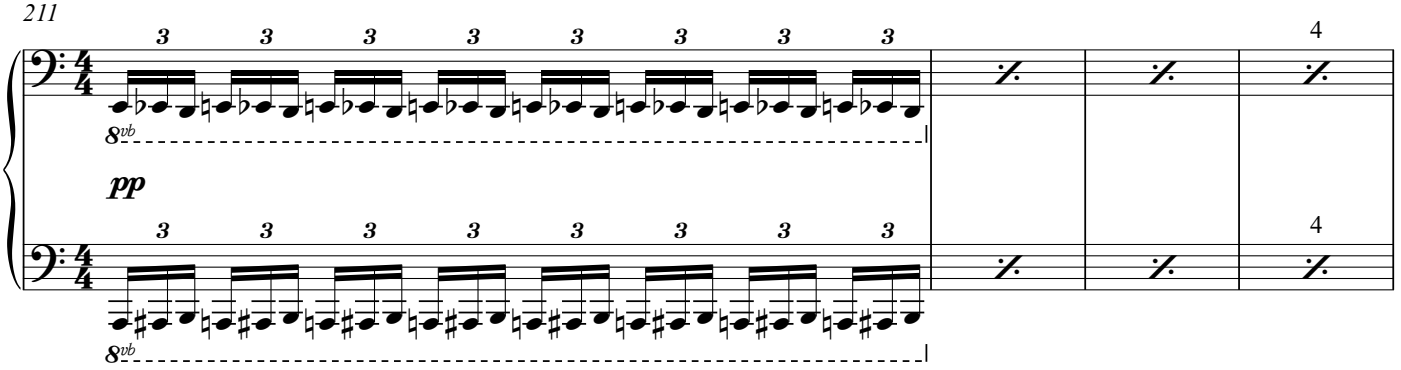






FIRE: ***"Exploding outward like a cannon while blocking"*** **[♩=100 (♪=200)]**

211



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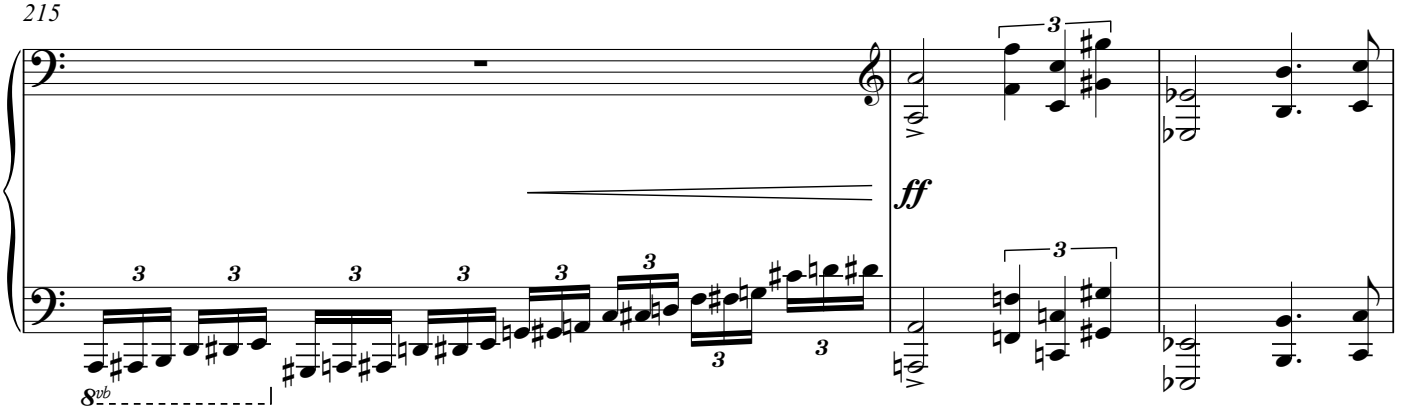

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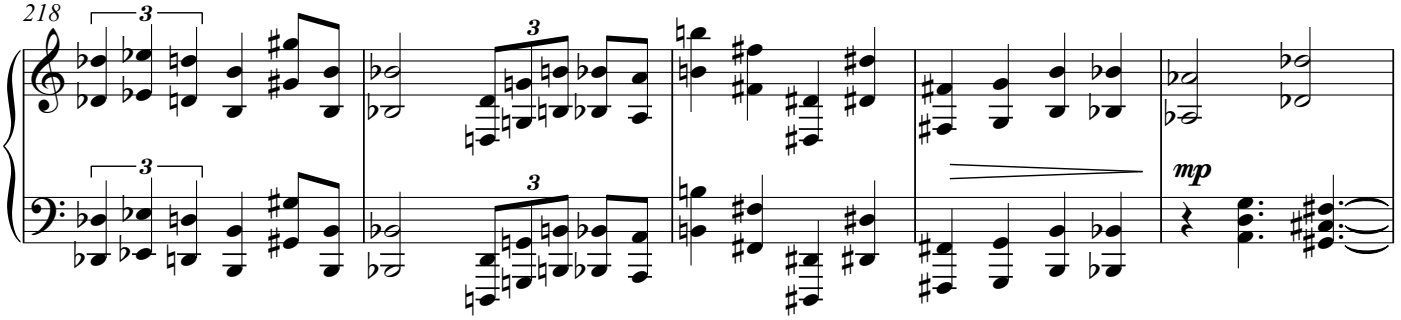

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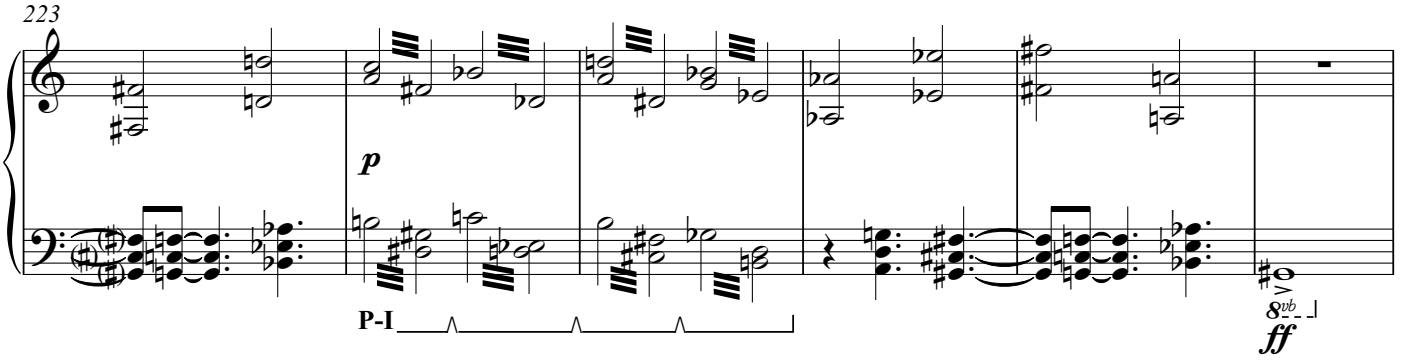

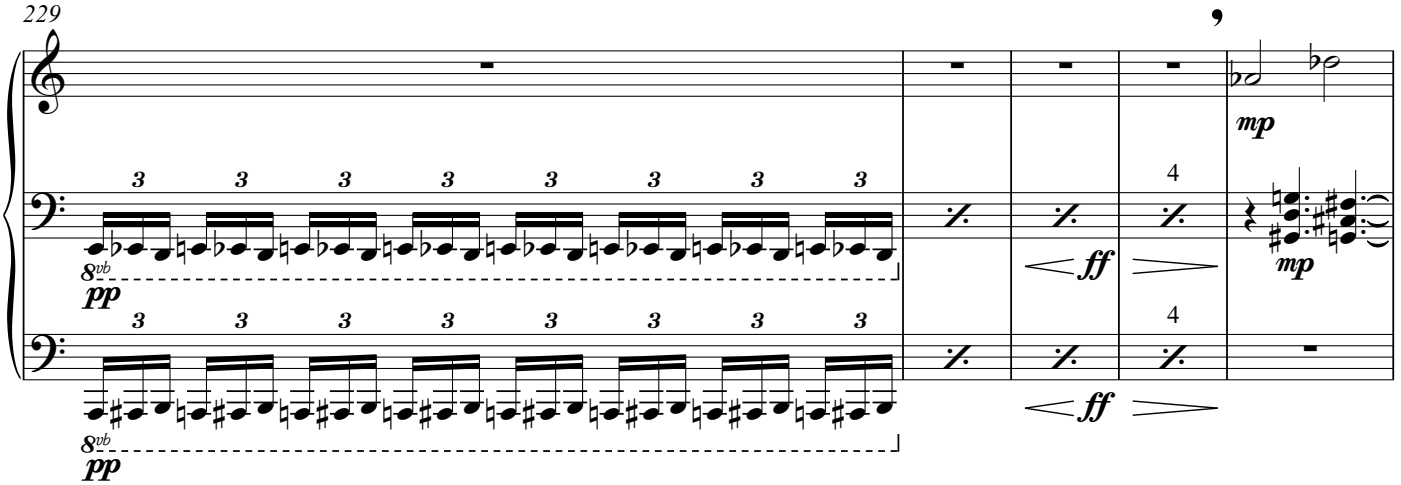

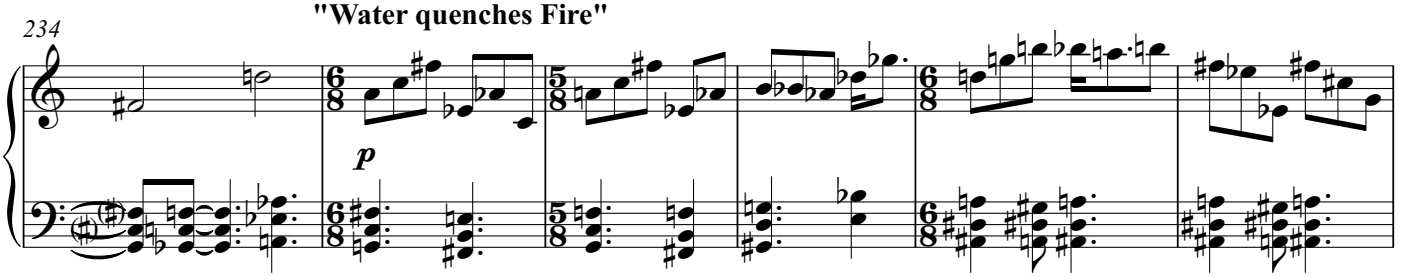

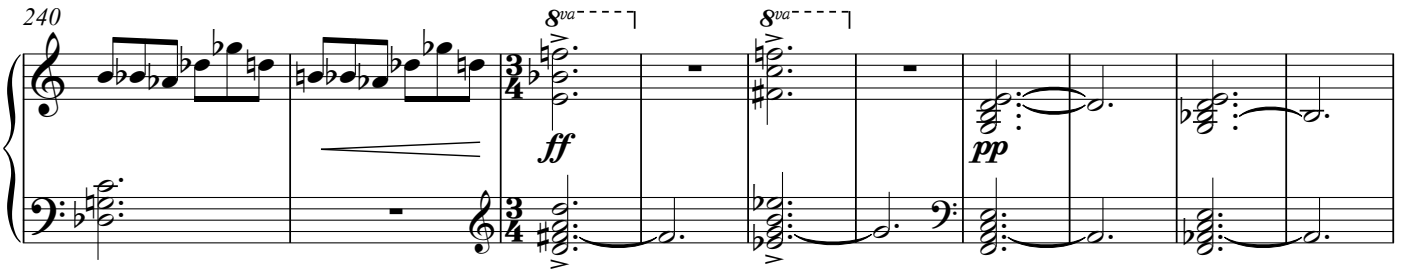
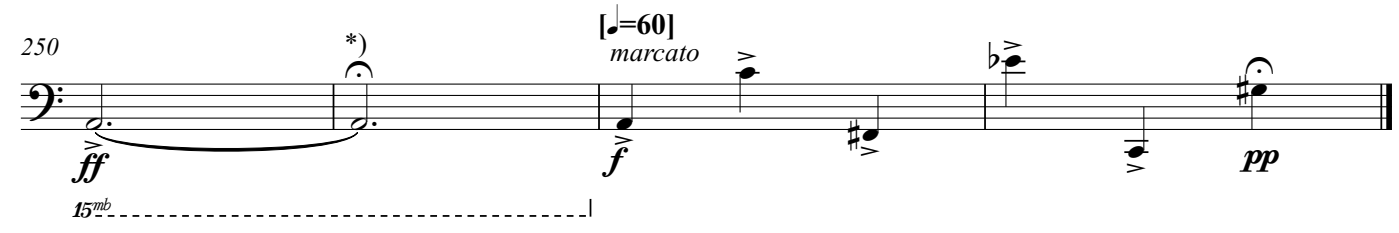
*): Dampen the string with your finger gradually, eliminating the fundamental and making high partials audible.