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GERALD COHEN

Playing for our lives

for String Quartet
(2012)

Score

Gerald Cohen Music
www.geraldcohenmusic.com

Playing for our lives for string quartet
Note by composer Gerald Cohen:

Playing for our lives was composed for the Cassatt String Quartet, who gave the premiere of the piece at Symphony Space, New York City in February 2012. The Cassatts were planning a program of music of the composers who were interned in the Nazi concentration camp Terezin (Theresienstadt), and asked me to compose a piece which would be a contemporary memorial and tribute to the musical life of that place. Terezin, near Prague, was in essence a transit camp, where Jews and some other prisoners were kept until transport to the death camps such as Auschwitz. The Nazis allowed a certain amount of art and education to take place at Terezin, both as a way of occupying the prisoners, and also since it served their purpose of deceiving the world as to the nature of concentration camps in general. And there were a great number of excellent artists of all sorts in the camp, among those many excellent performers and several excellent composers—and so musical life flourished with a passion in these very strange surroundings.

In my string quartet, I have used several musical essences of the life at Terezin. One is the Yiddish folk song "Beryozkele" (Little birch tree), a poignant song that was arranged there by the composer Viktor Ullmann (I use the melody, not his arrangement). Folk songs—Czech, Hebrew and Yiddish—were important parts of the lives especially of the children at Terezin, who sang them in choirs formed in their barracks. The second is a lullaby from Hans Krasa's opera *Brundibar*, which was one of the most important musical experiences of Terezin--an opera performed entirely by children as the singers, and which was so popular there that it was performed more than 50 times. Finally, I use excerpts from Verdi's *Requiem*, a piece that was championed at Terezin by the dynamic conductor Rafael Schachter, and was also performed many times, but by three different choruses--as after each of the first two performances, virtually the entire chorus was transported to their deaths at Auschwitz.

With all of these pieces, but especially the *Requiem*, the layers of paradox and poignancy are extraordinarily powerful: for the prisoners, music was something that gave them deep joy; at the same time, the Nazis used the concerts as a propaganda tool to fool the world as to the nature of the camp. The *Requiem* spoke to people of their own deaths, but at the same time, in speaking of a *Dies Irae*—a day of wrath—was a defiant stab at the Nazis.

In my quartet, these various feelings and musical elements are woven together to create a memorial to the musical and emotional life of the camp. "Beryozkele" and its tender lament dominate the early part of the piece; the middle section is a set of variations on the lullaby from *Brundibar*, as the music attempts to bring the joy of that piece to the fore; and the final section is dominated by elements of the *Requiem*, with its passion, anger, and also quiet mourning.

The title of the piece is inspired by a quote from Paul Rabinowitsch, who at the age of 14, was the trumpet player in *Brundibar*, and was one of the few in that opera to survive the war: "When the SS was present, I always had this shadowy feeling at the back of my head. I knew I could not play wrong, and you can hear every wrong note very clearly on a trumpet. Rahm [the commandant of Terezin] would notice, I thought to myself, and be mad at me, and put me on a transport. And in those moments it was as if I were playing for my life." [1]

1. Quote from *The Girls of Room 28* by Hannelore Brenner (Schocken Books, 2009)

The composition is in three movements, played without pause:

1. Beryozkele page 3
2. Brundibar 15
3. Dies Irae 31

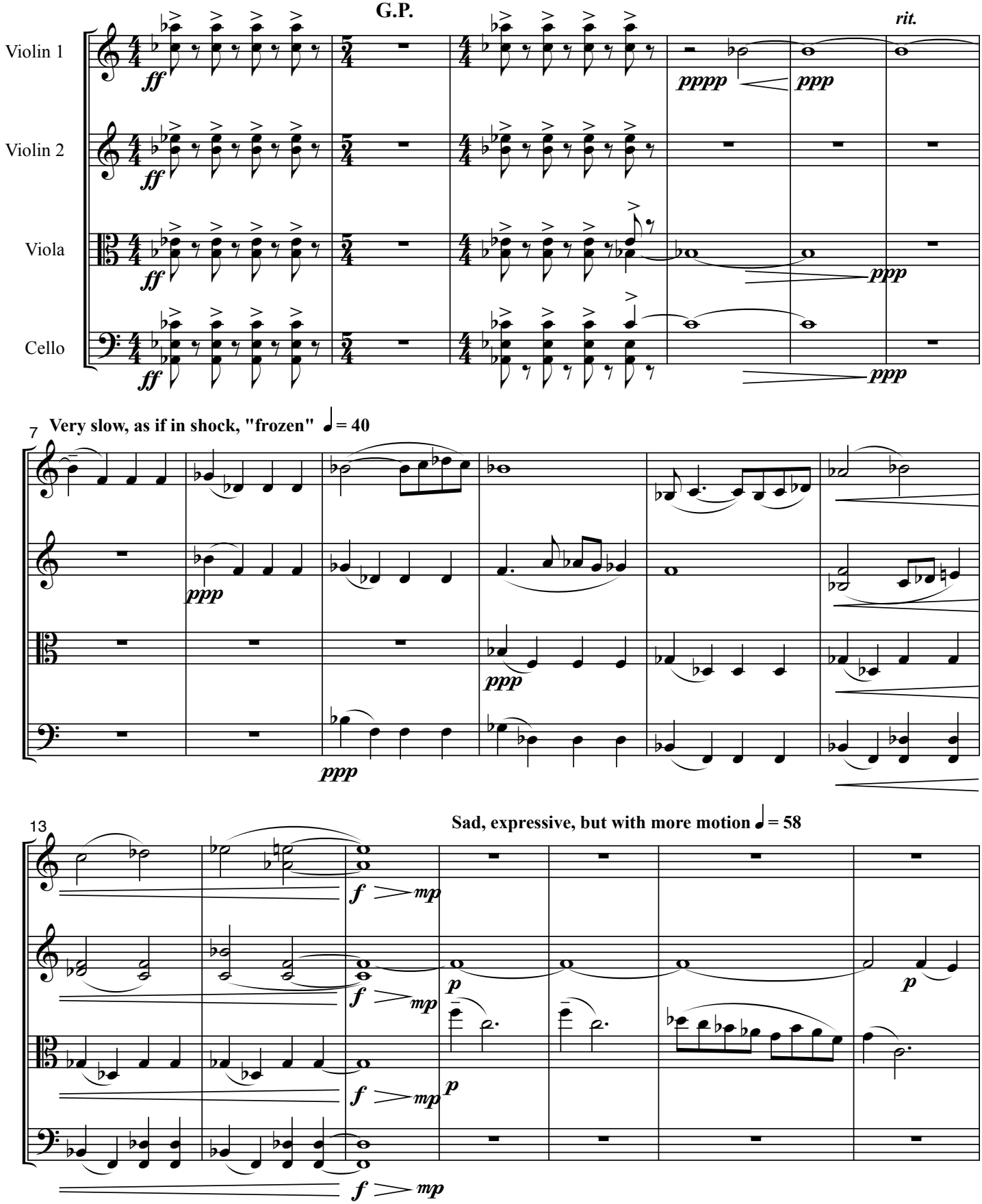
Commissioned by the Cassatt Quartet

Playing for our lives

Duration: approx. 24 mins.

1. Beryozkele

Gerald Cohen



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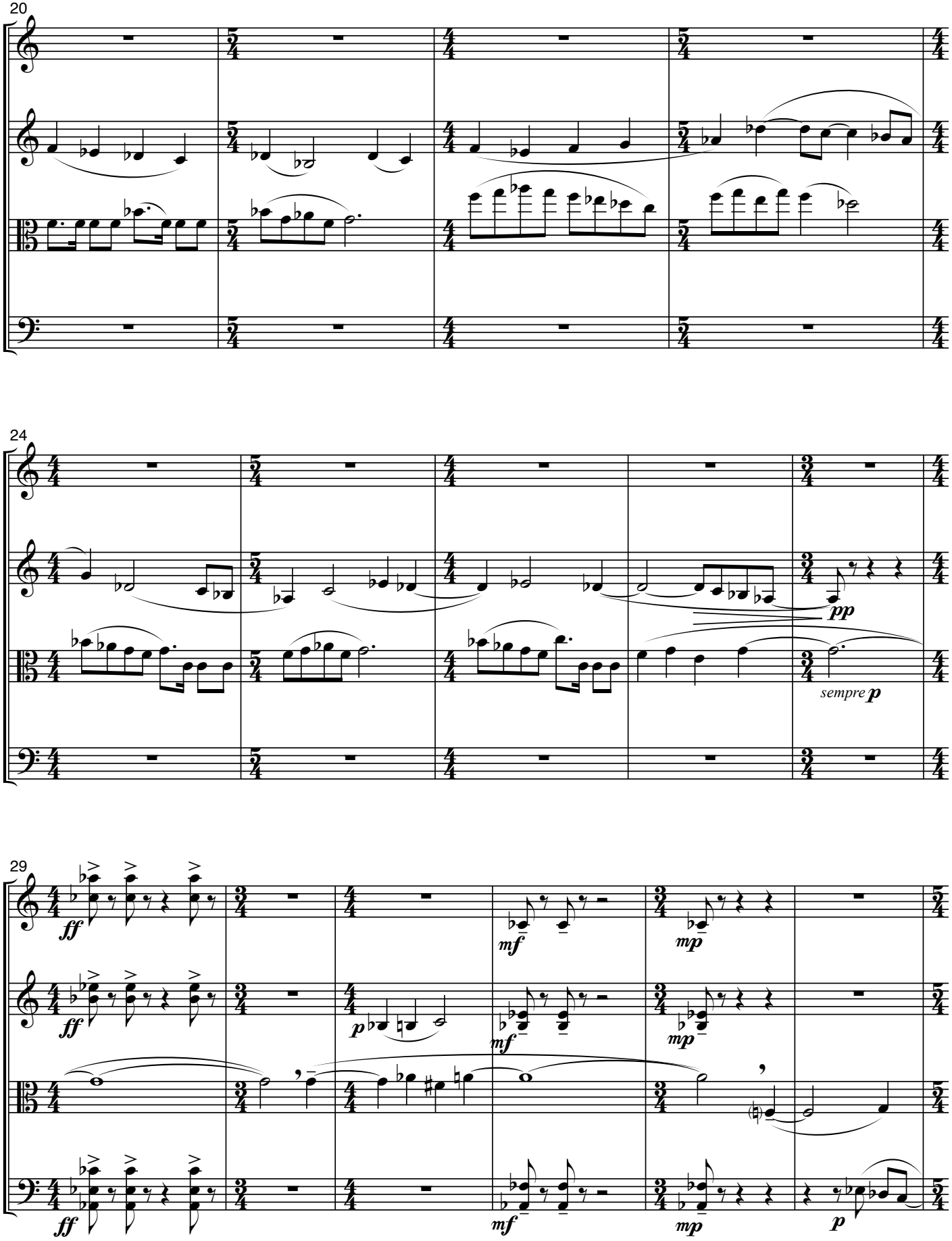
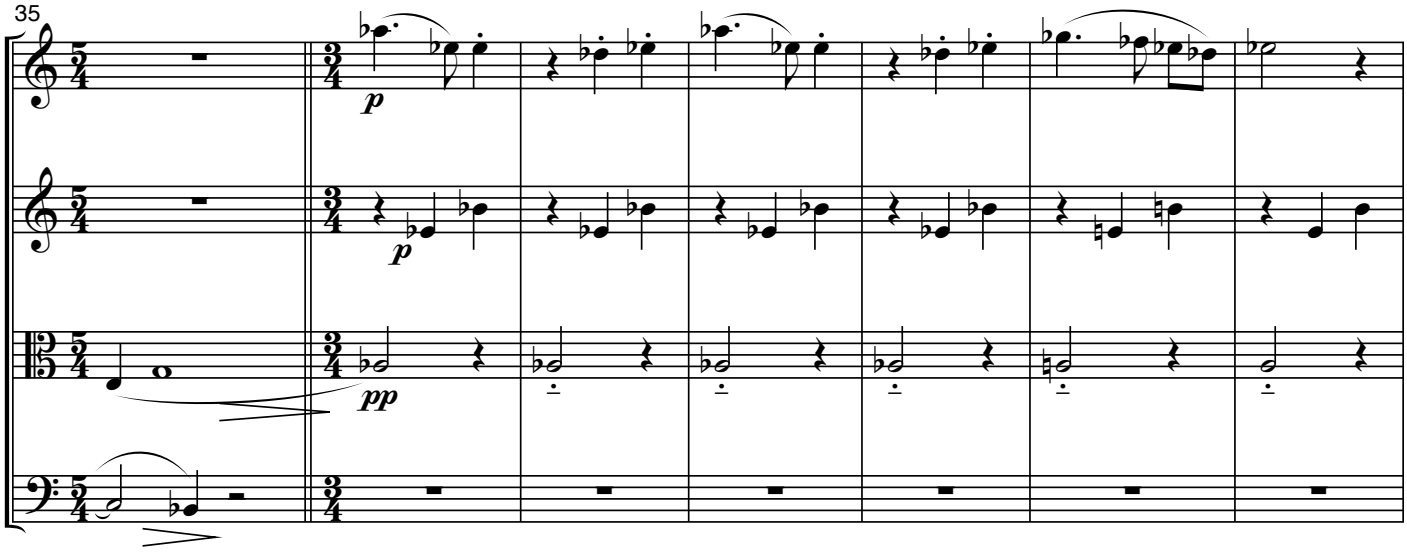

20
24
pp
sempre p
29
ff
mf
mp
p

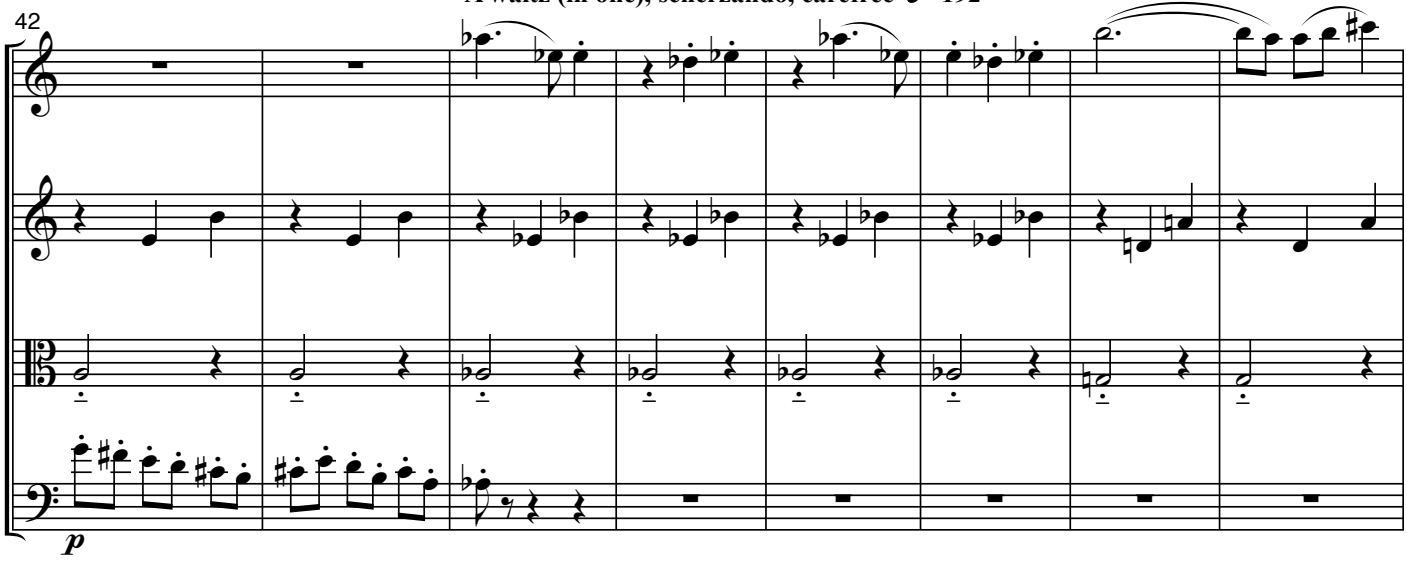
Scherzando, graceful, starting at ♩=152 and then accel. ***accel.***

35

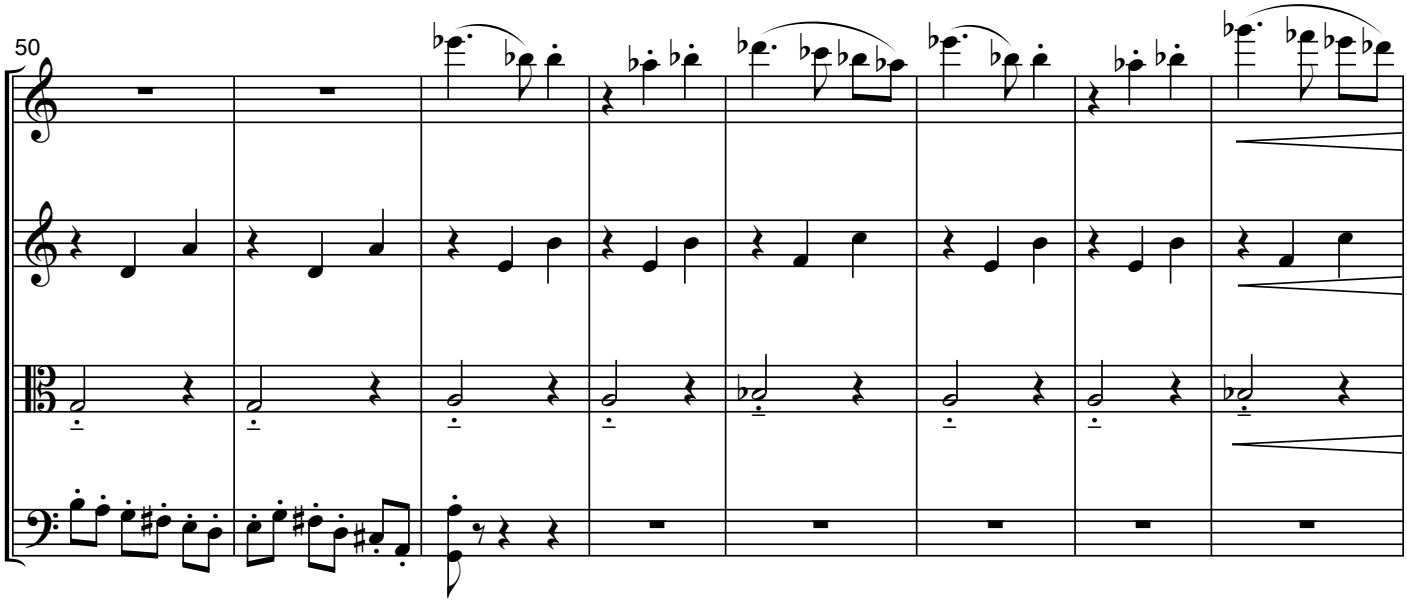


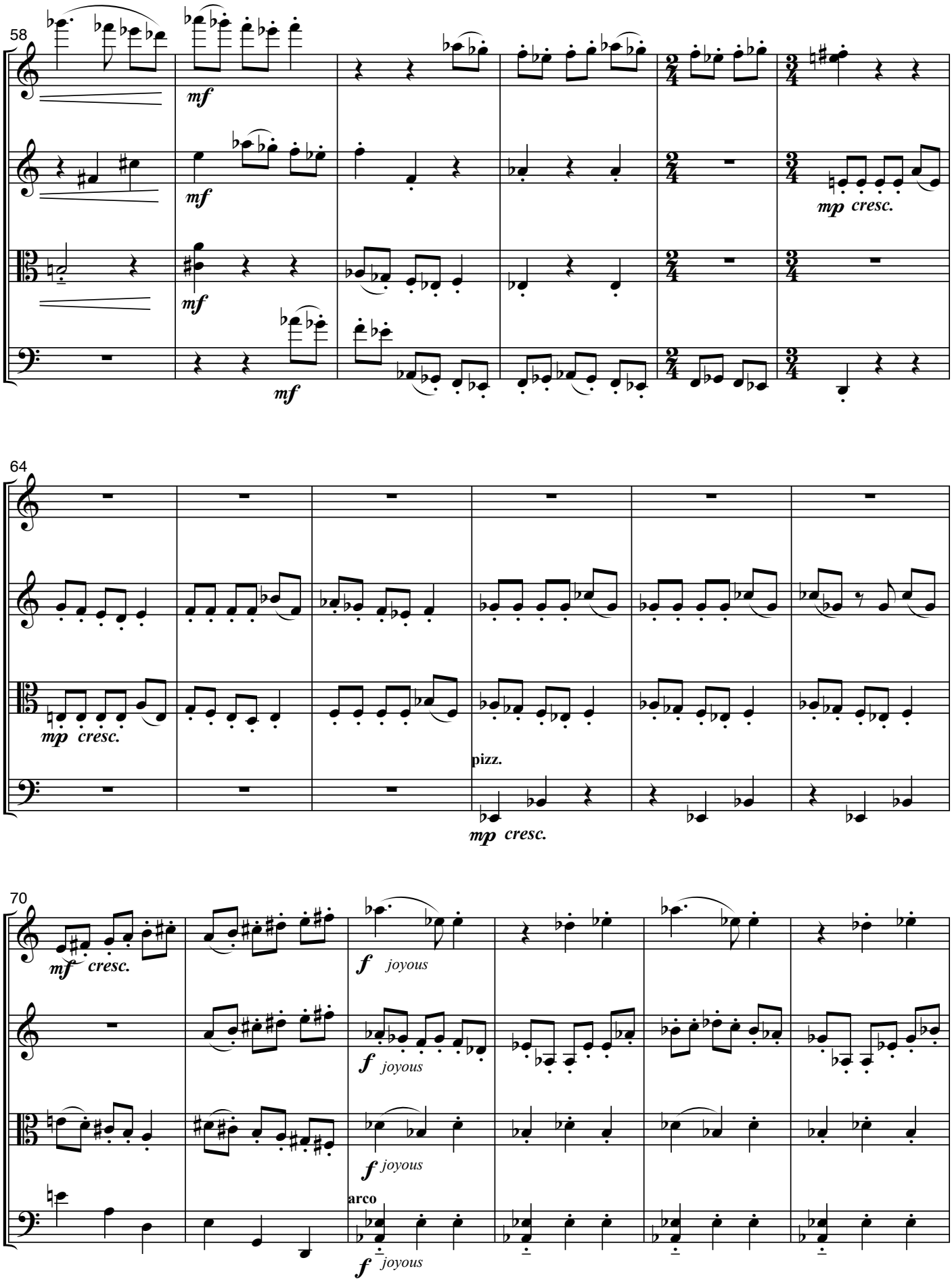
A waltz (in one), scherzando, carefree ♩=192

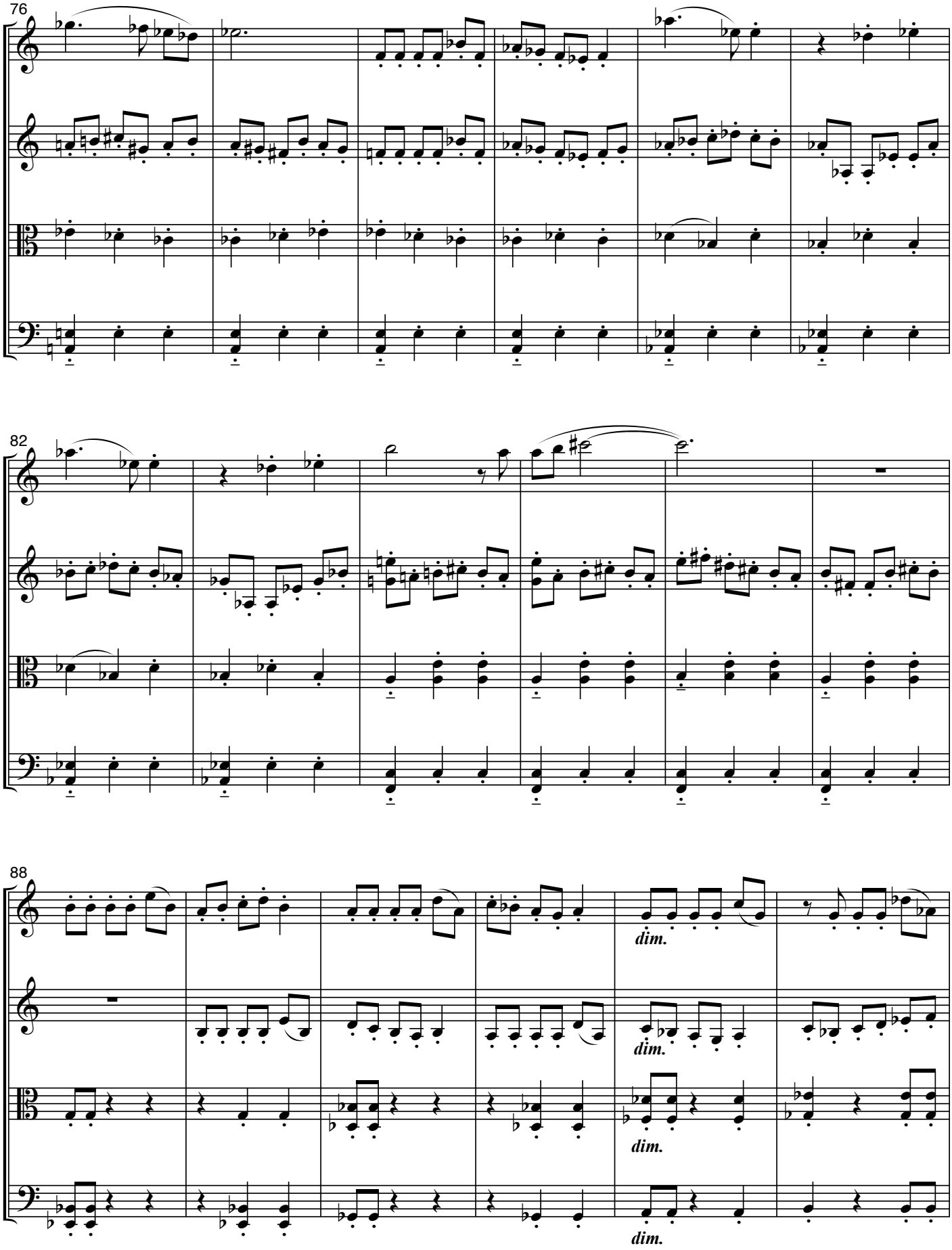
42

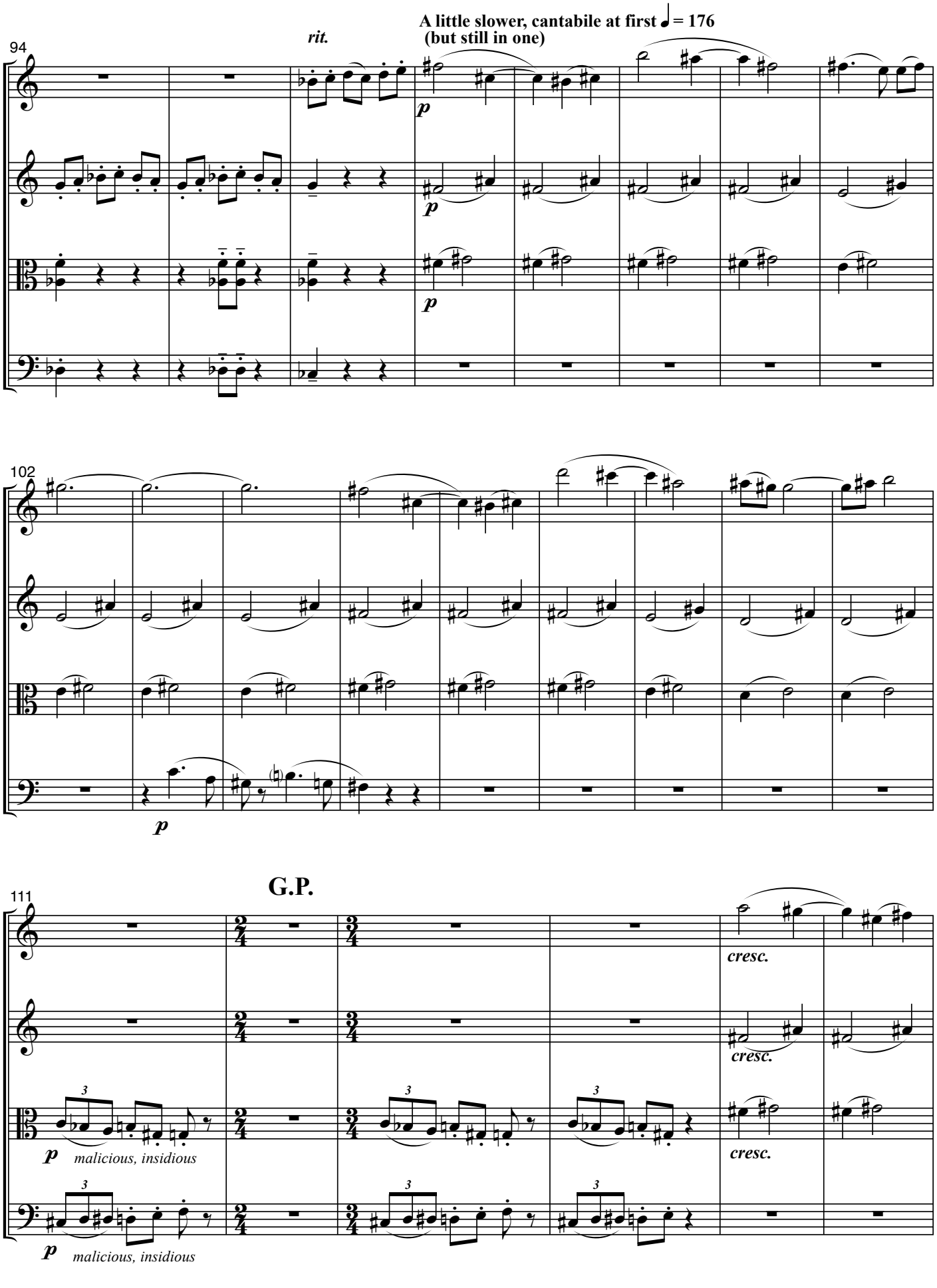


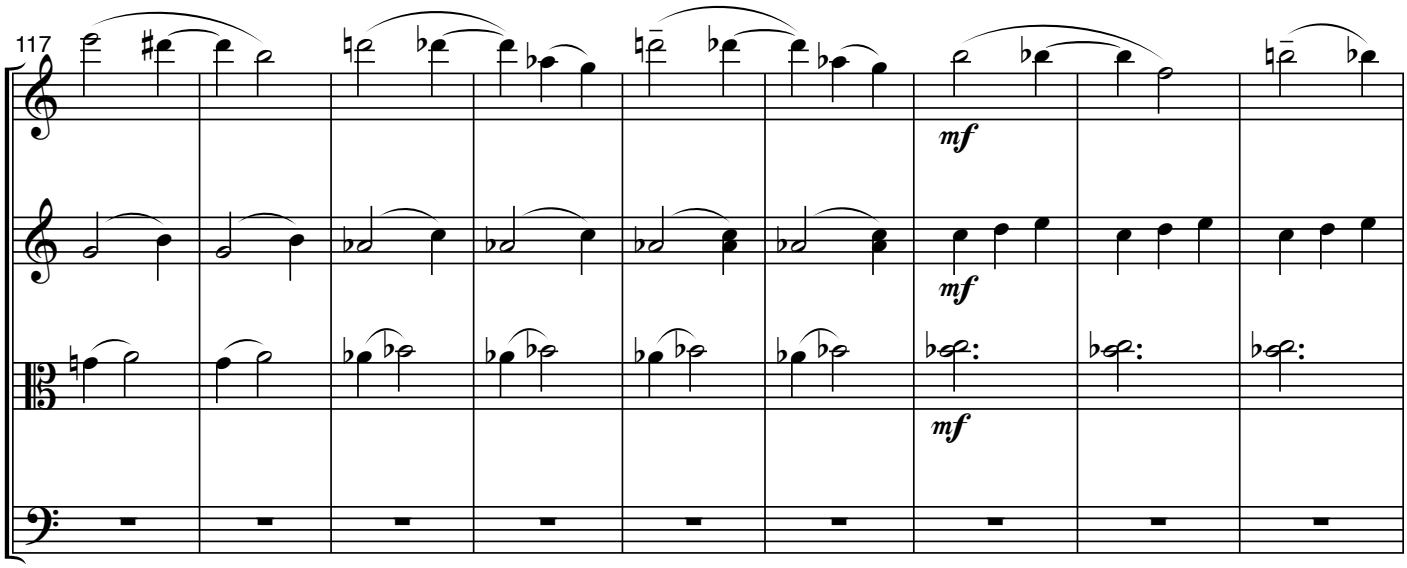
50

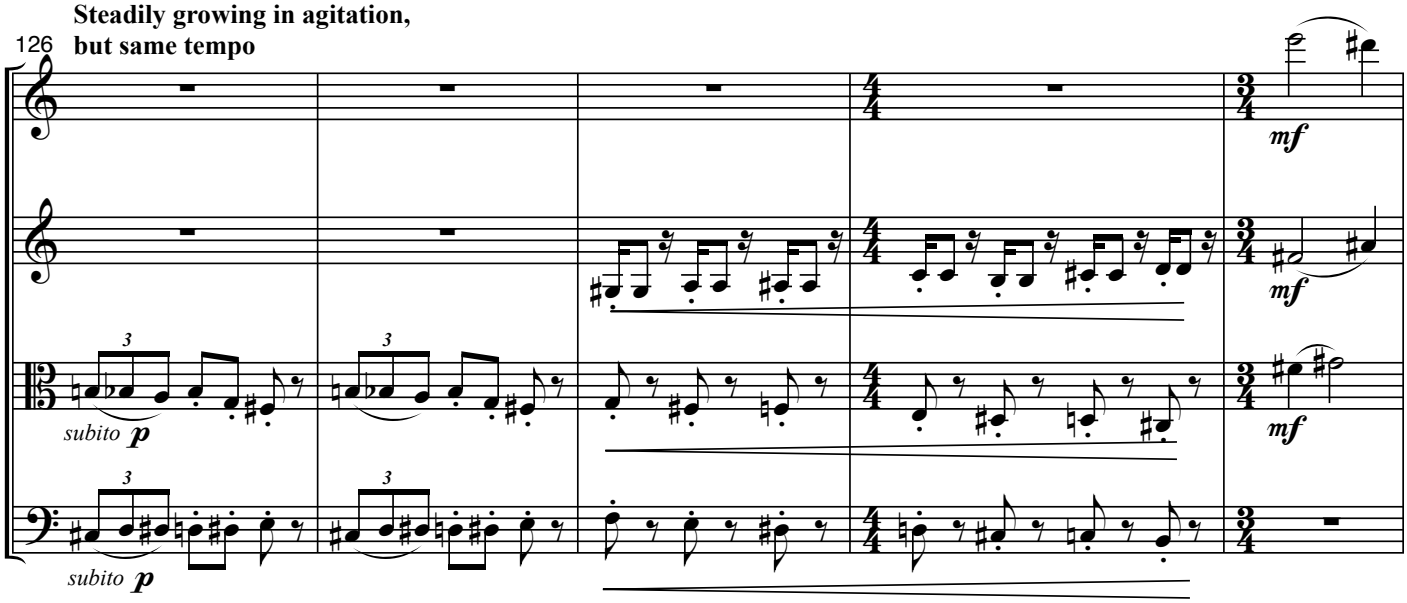


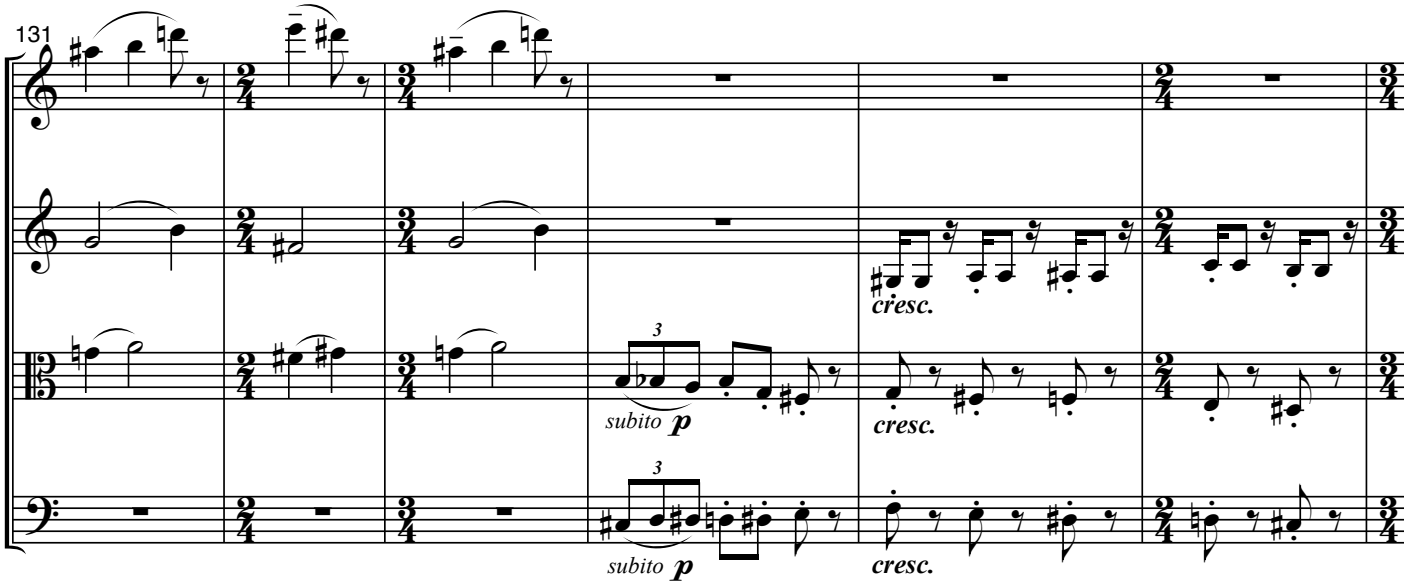

58
mf
mf
mf
mf
mp cresc.
64
mp cresc.
pizz.
mp cresc.
70
mf cresc.
f joyous
f joyous
f joyous
arco
f joyous

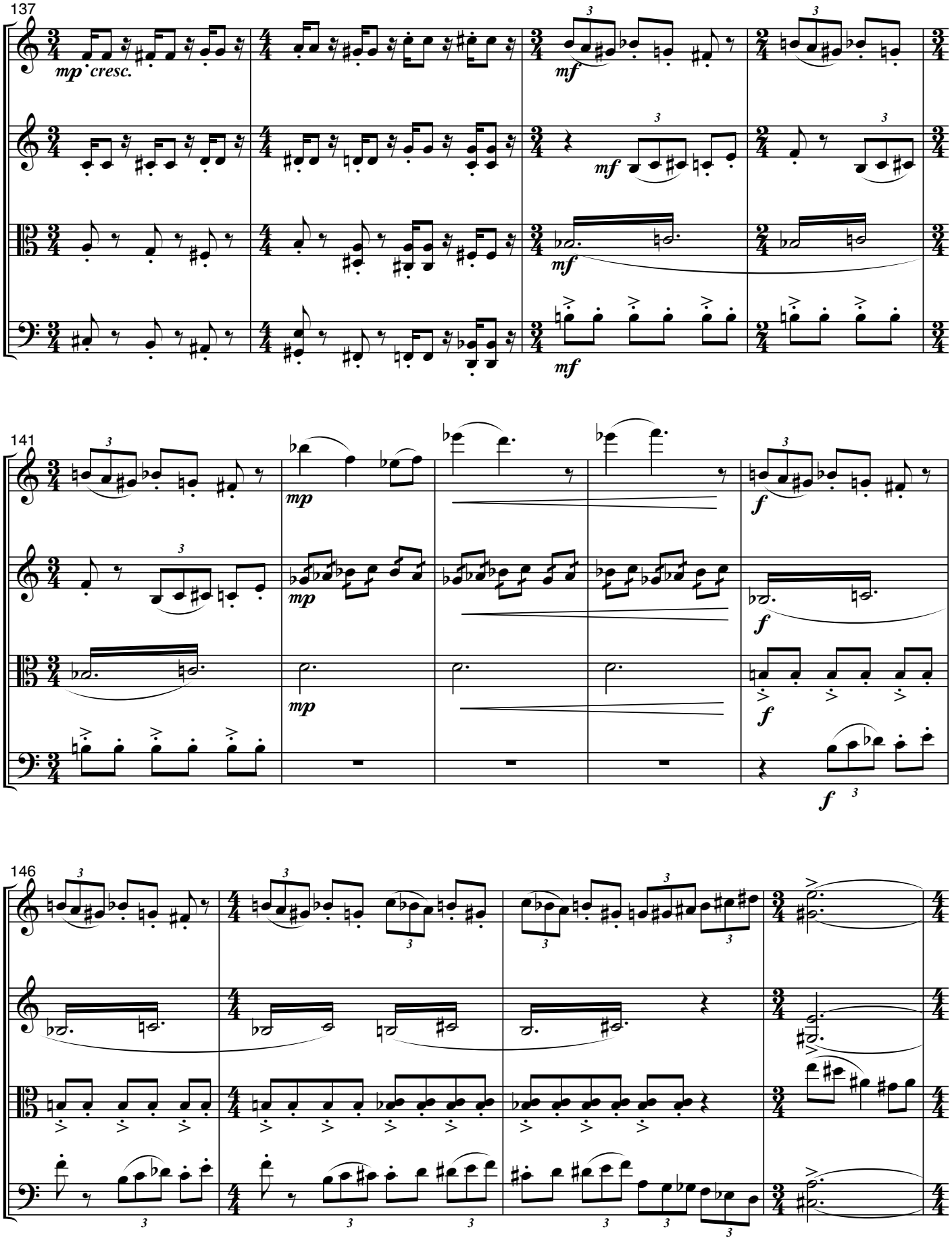

76
82
88
dim.
dim.
dim.
dim.

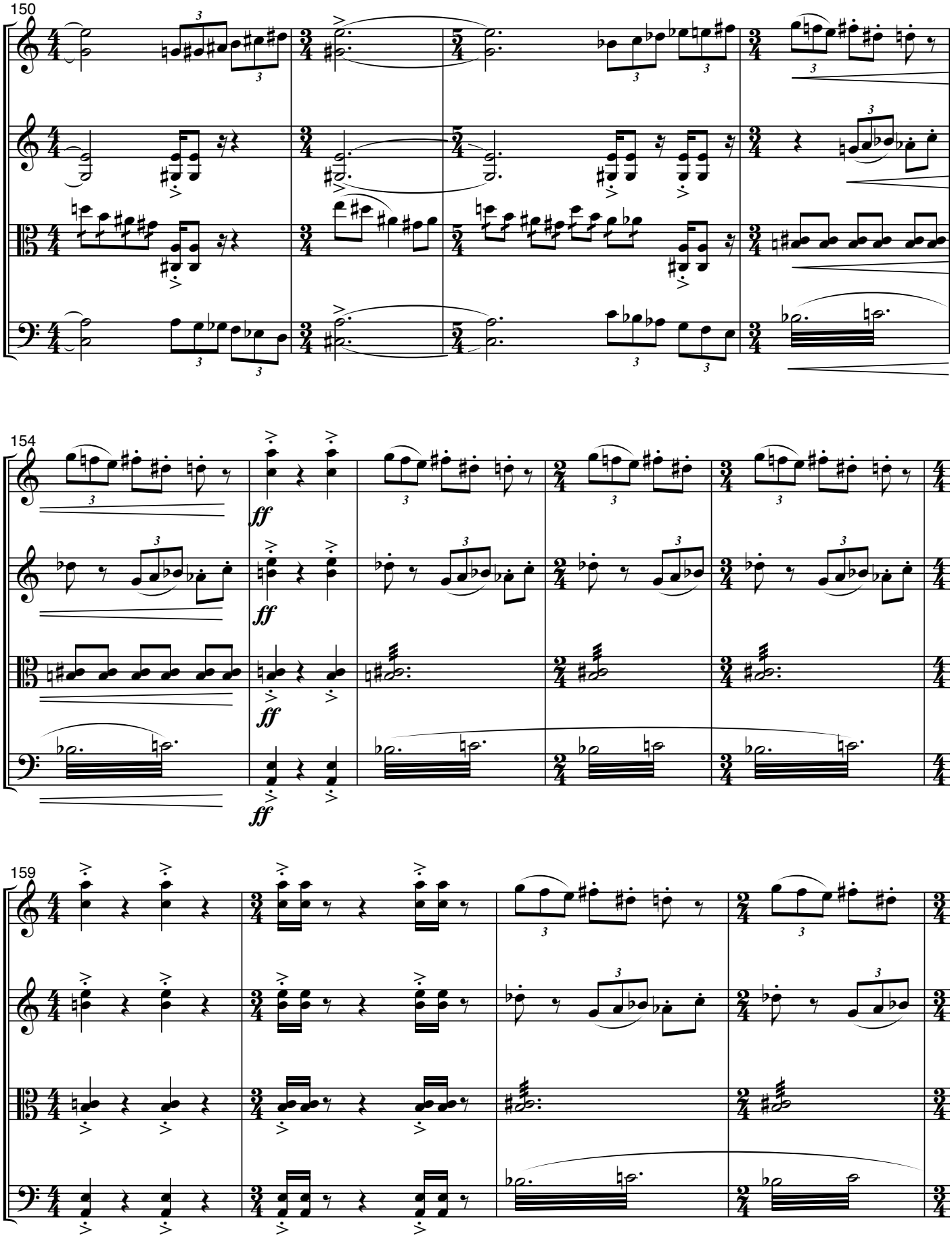

94
rit.
A little slower, cantabile at first ♩ = 176
(but still in one)
p
p
p
102
p
111
G.P.
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
p
malicious, insidious
p
malicious, insidious

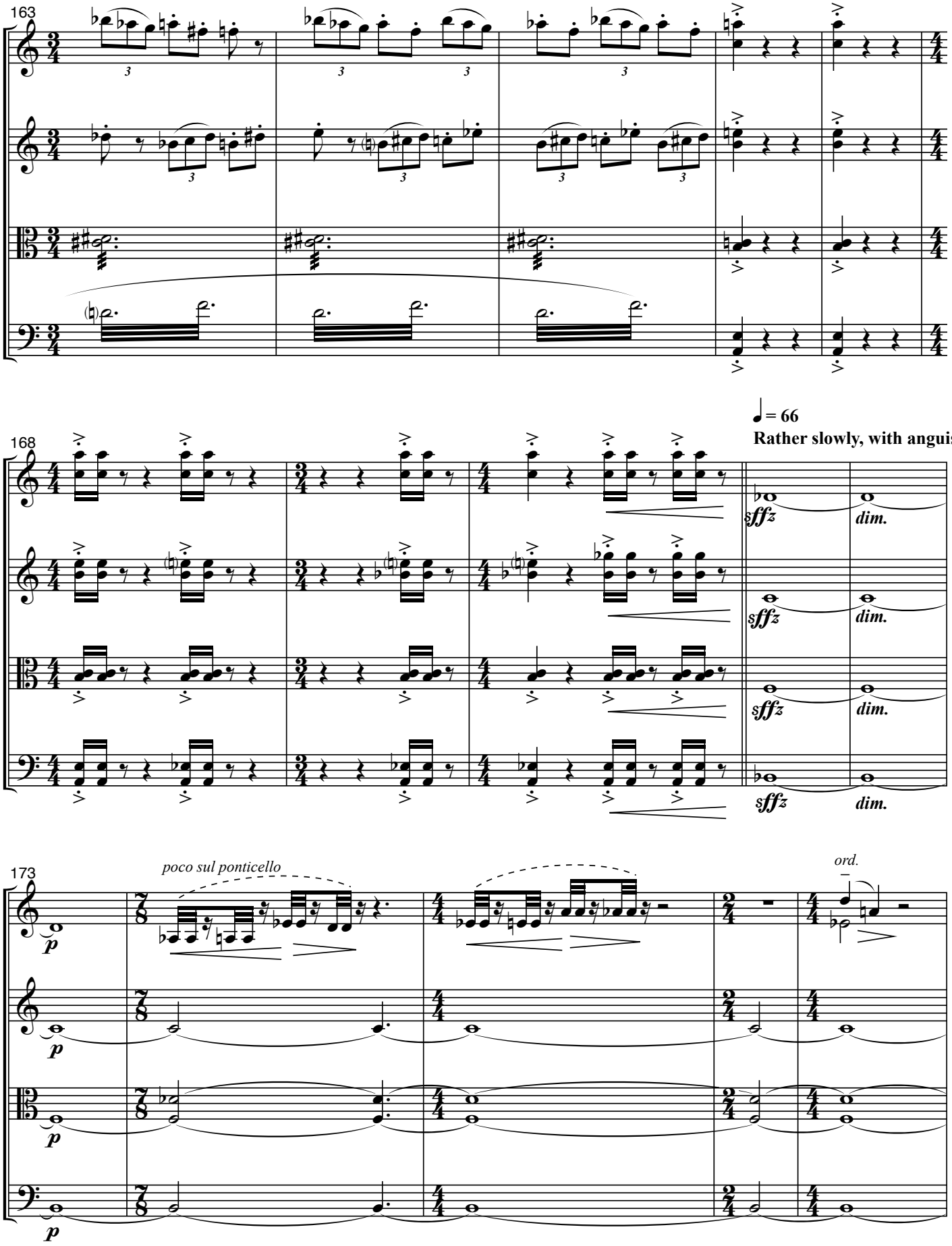

117
mf
mf
mf

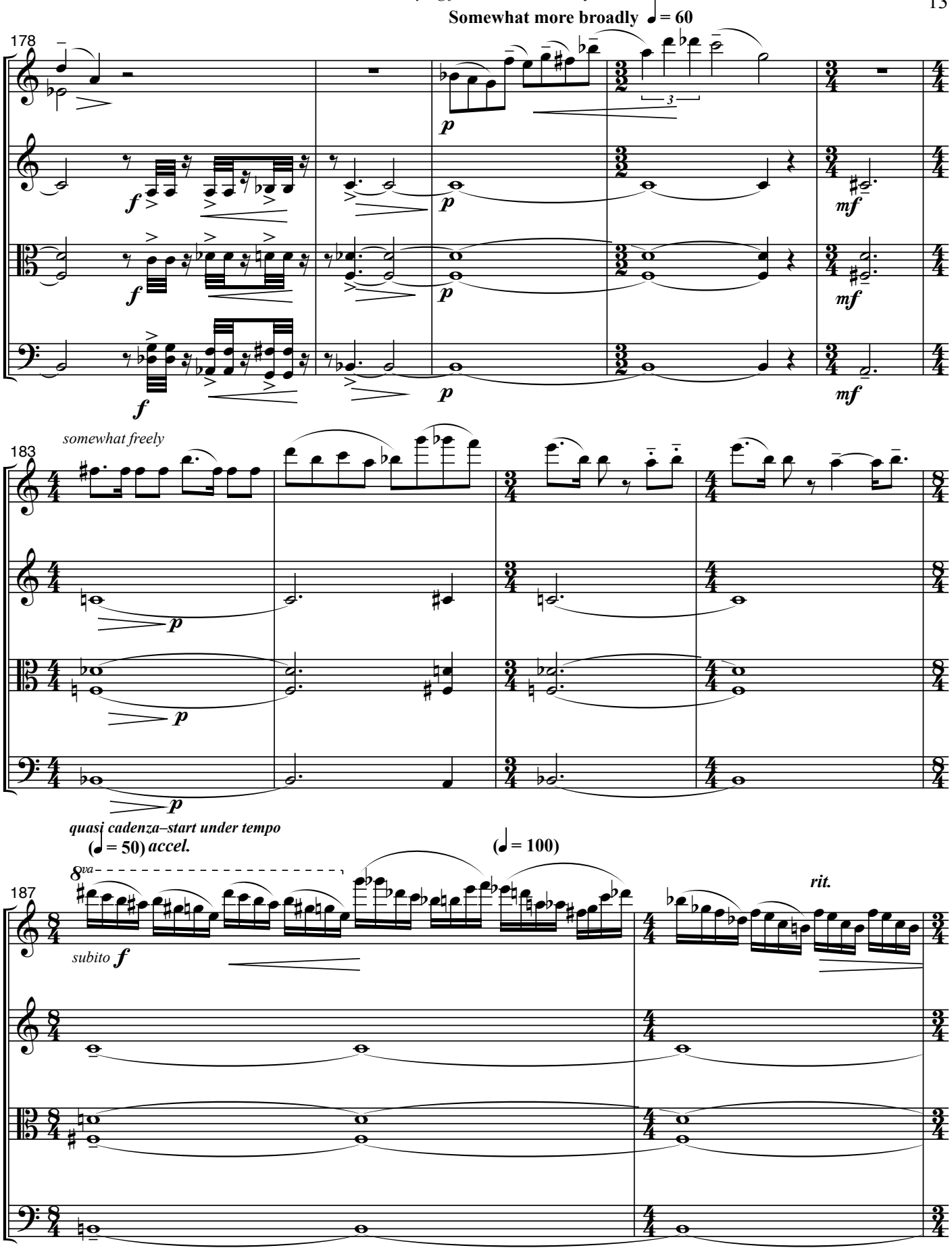

Steadily growing in agitation,
but same tempo
126
mf
mf
mf
subito p
subito p

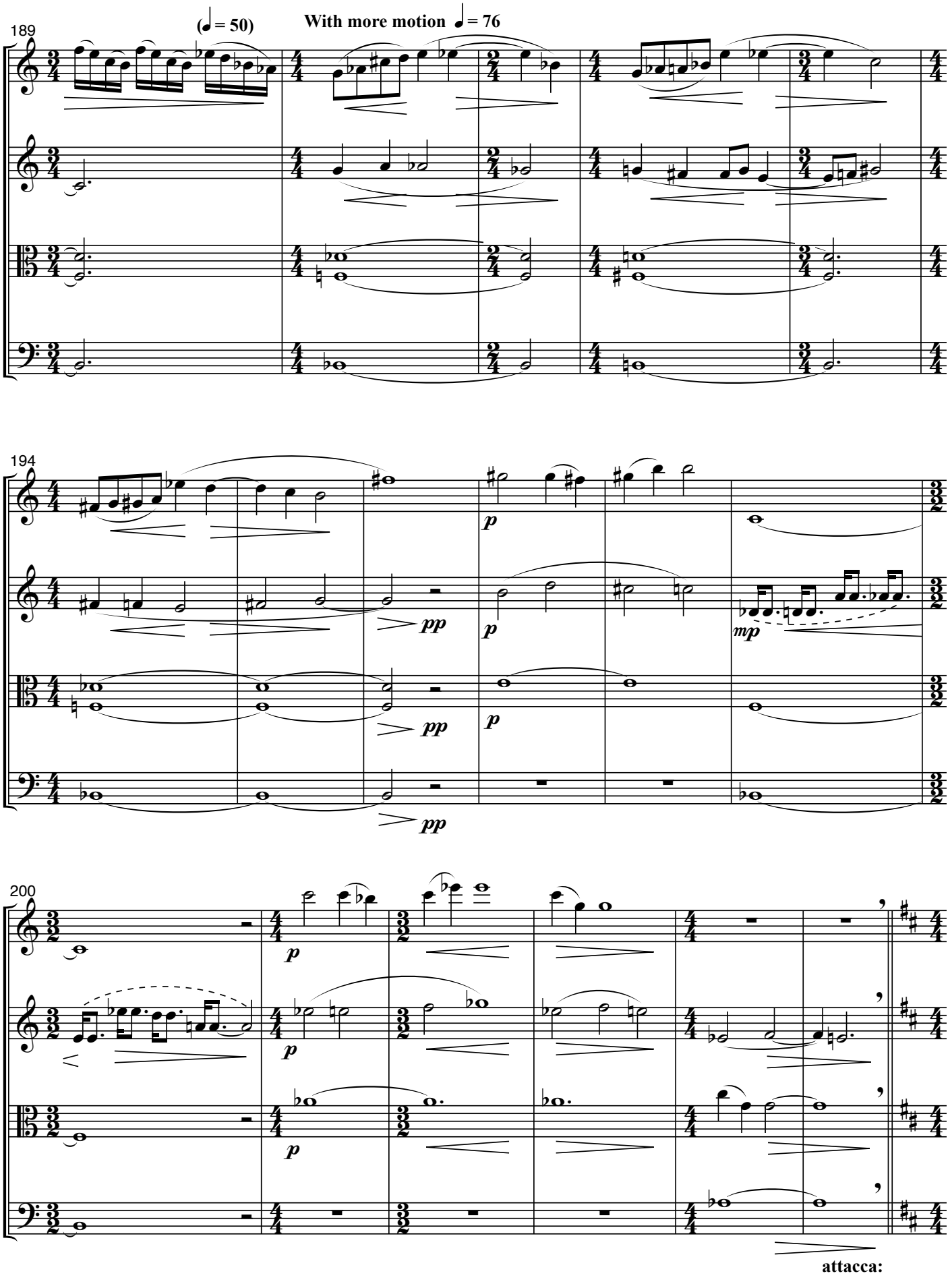

131
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
subito p
subito p


137
mp cresc.
mf
141
mp
f
146


150
154
ff
159


163
168
♩ = 66
Rather slowly, with anguish
sffz
dim.
173
poco sul ponticello
ord.
p

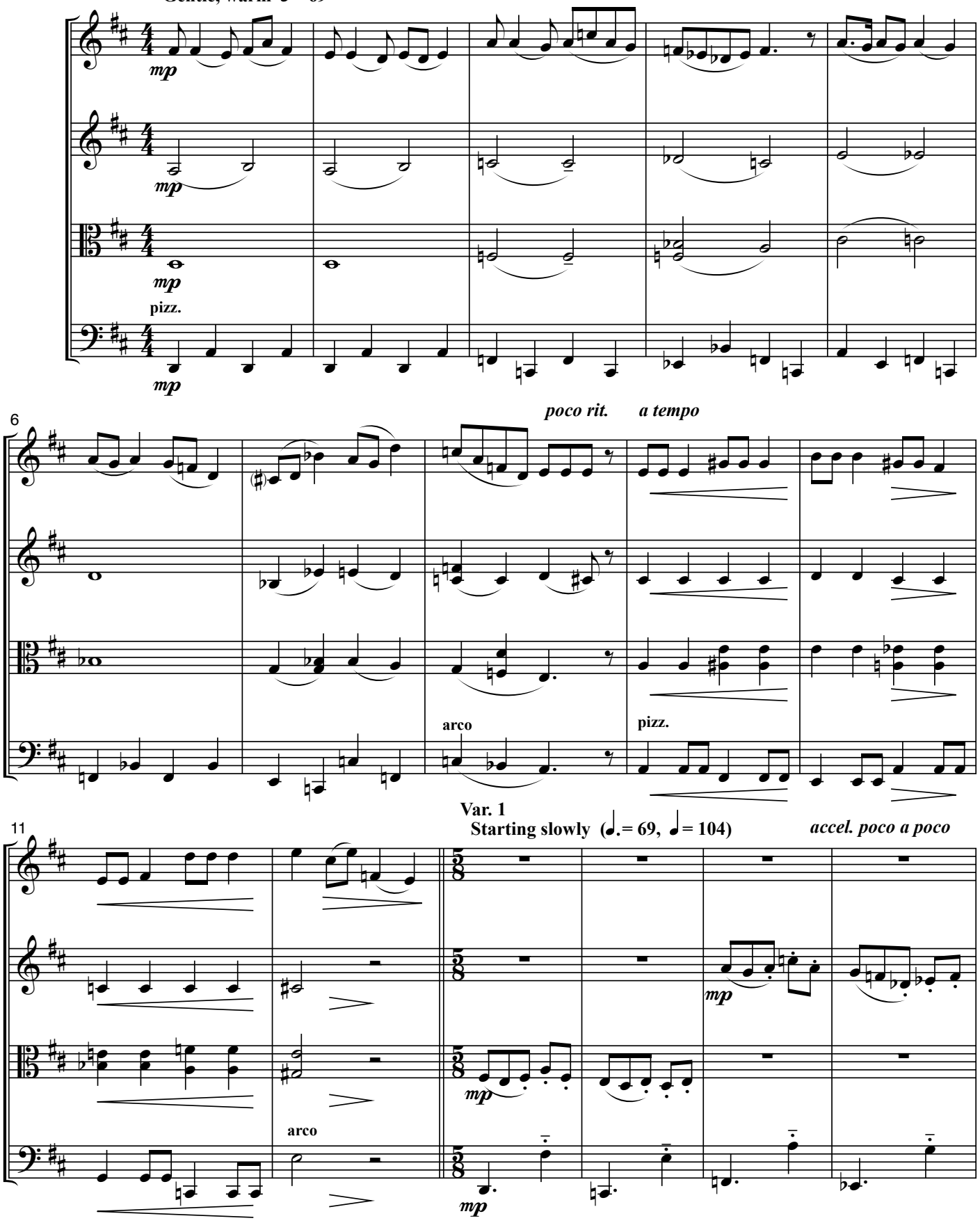

Somewhat more broadly ♩= 60
178
somewhat freely
183
quasi cadenza–start under tempo
(♩= 50) accel.
(♩= 100)
187
8va
subito f
rit.


189
(♩ = 50)
With more motion ♩ = 76
194
pp
p
mp
200
attacca:

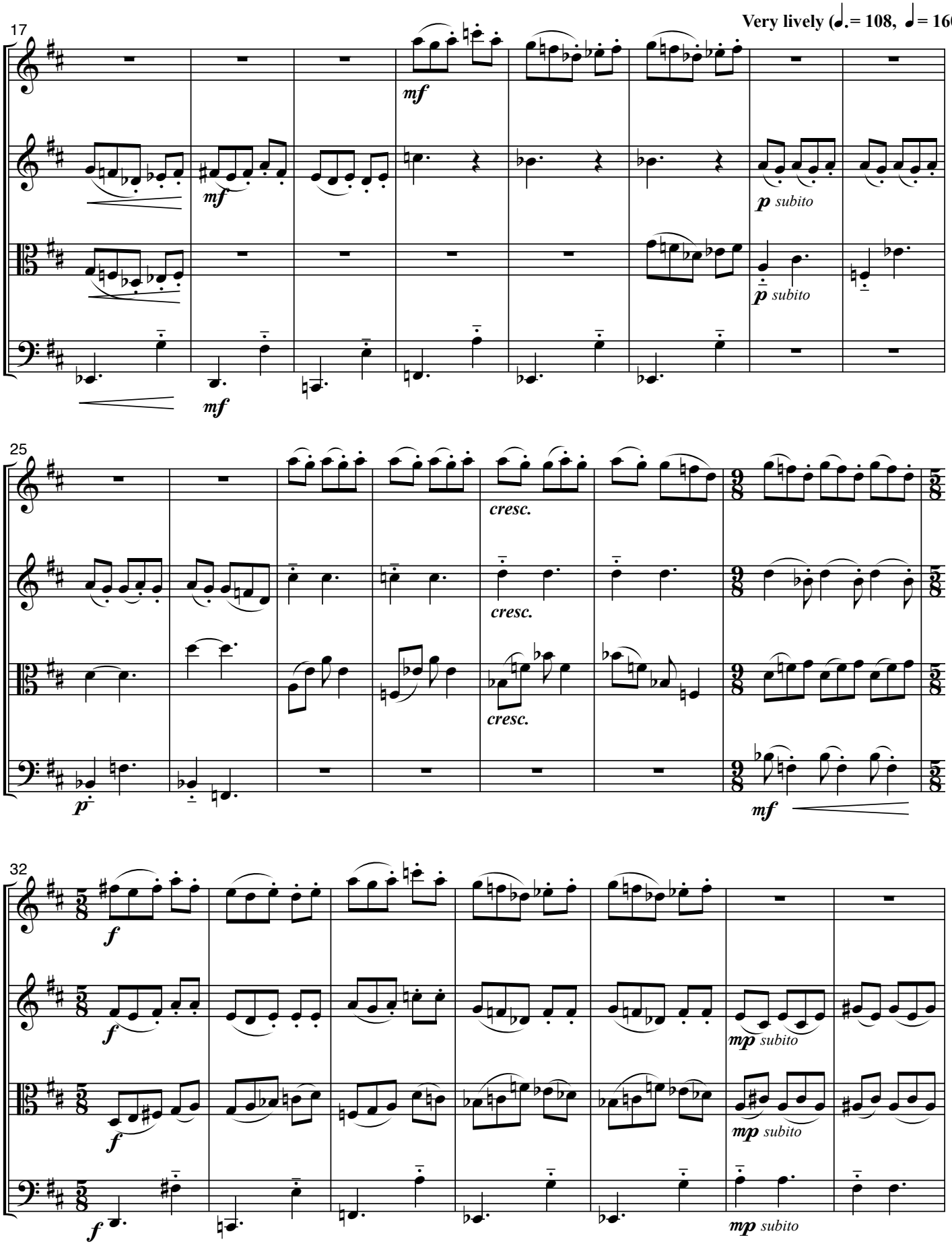
2. Brundibar

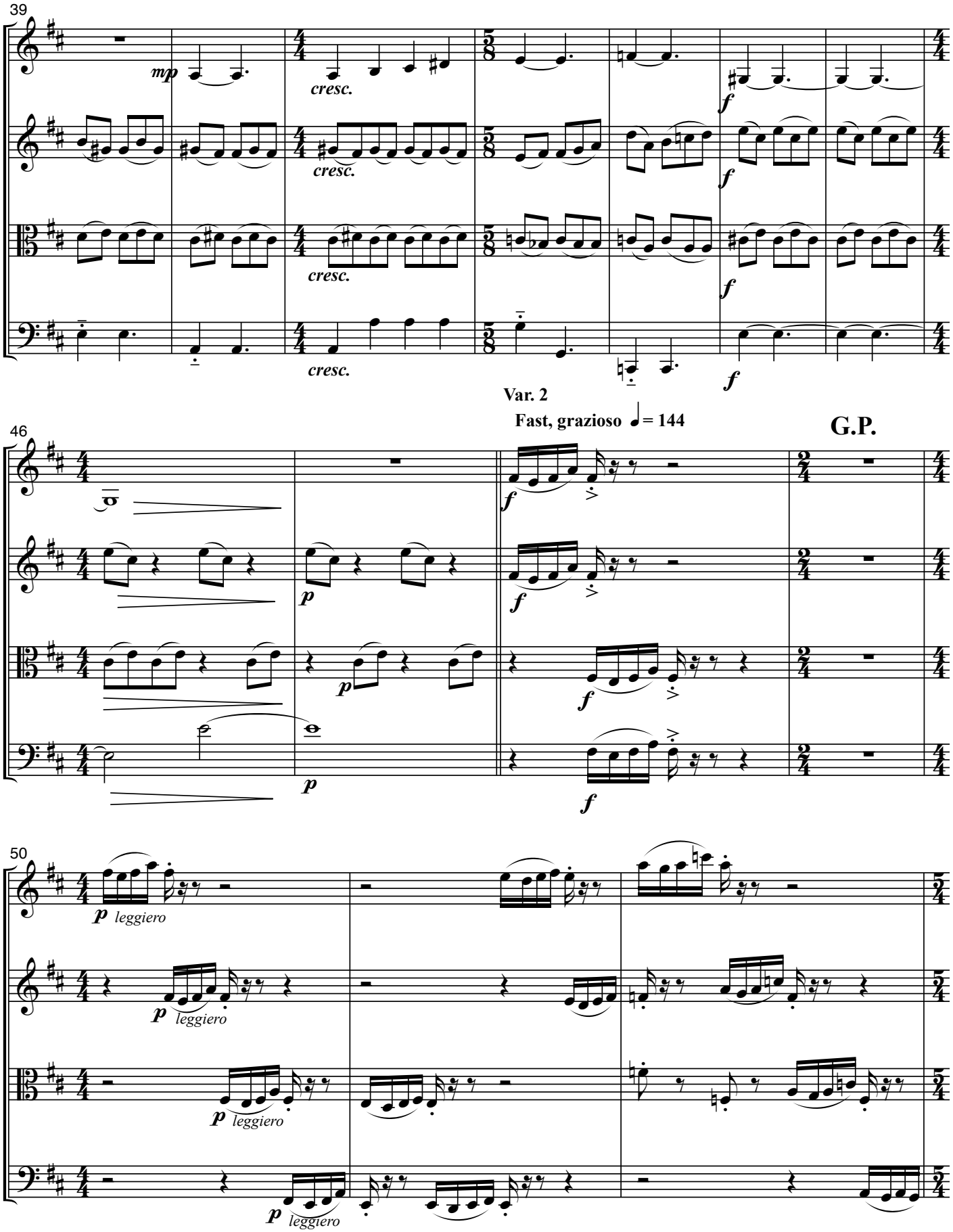
THEME: Lullaby from *Brundibar*

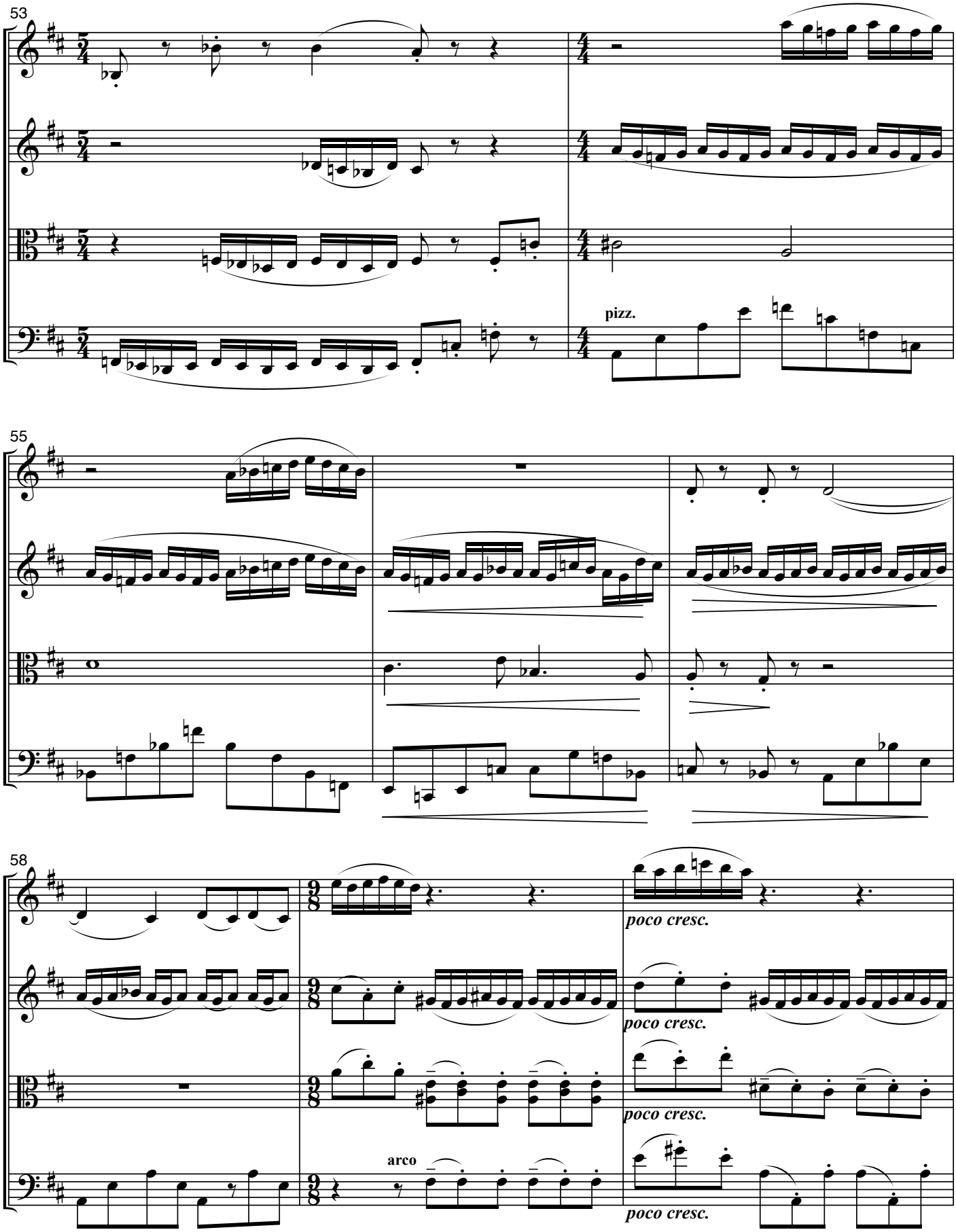
Gentle, warm ♩= 69

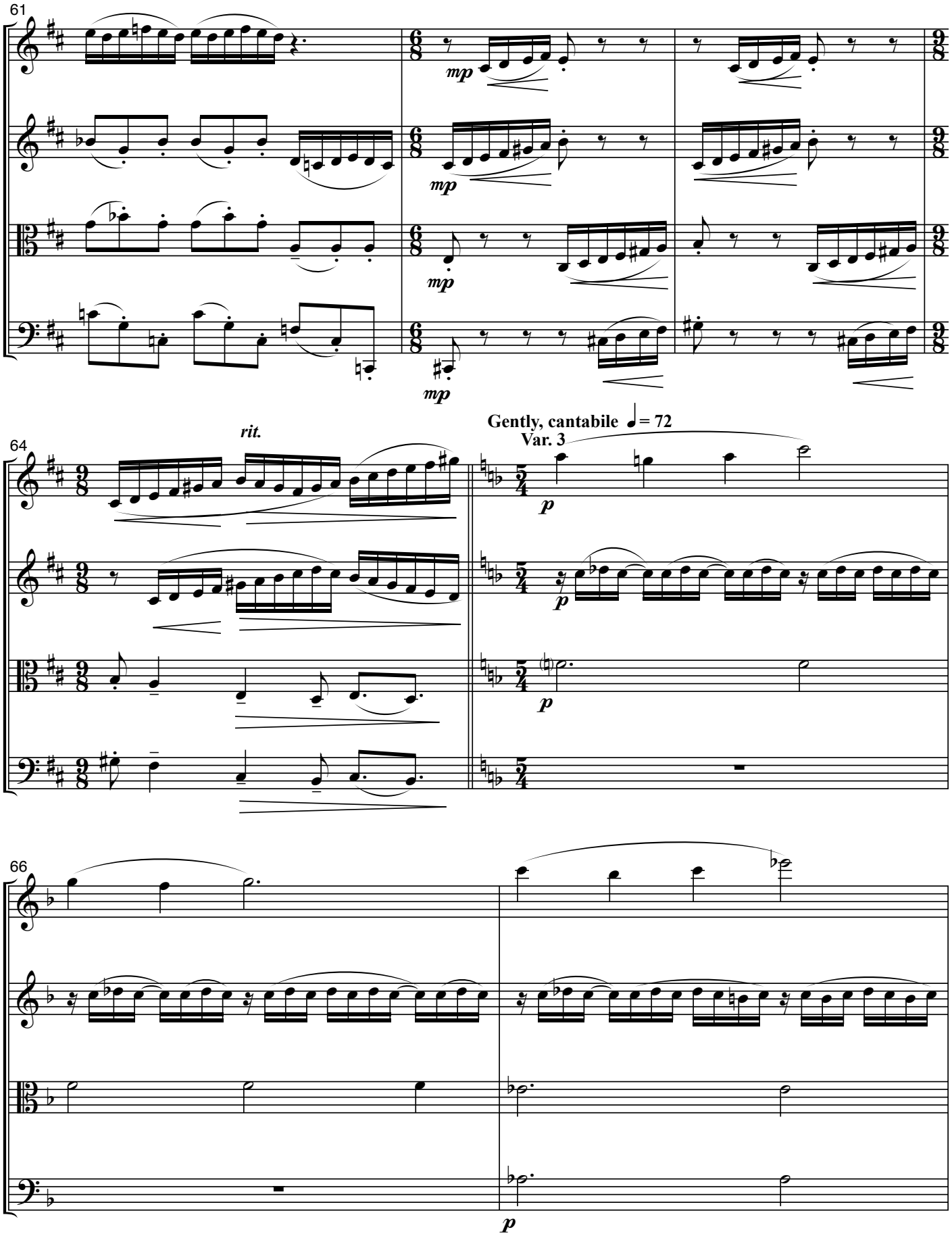


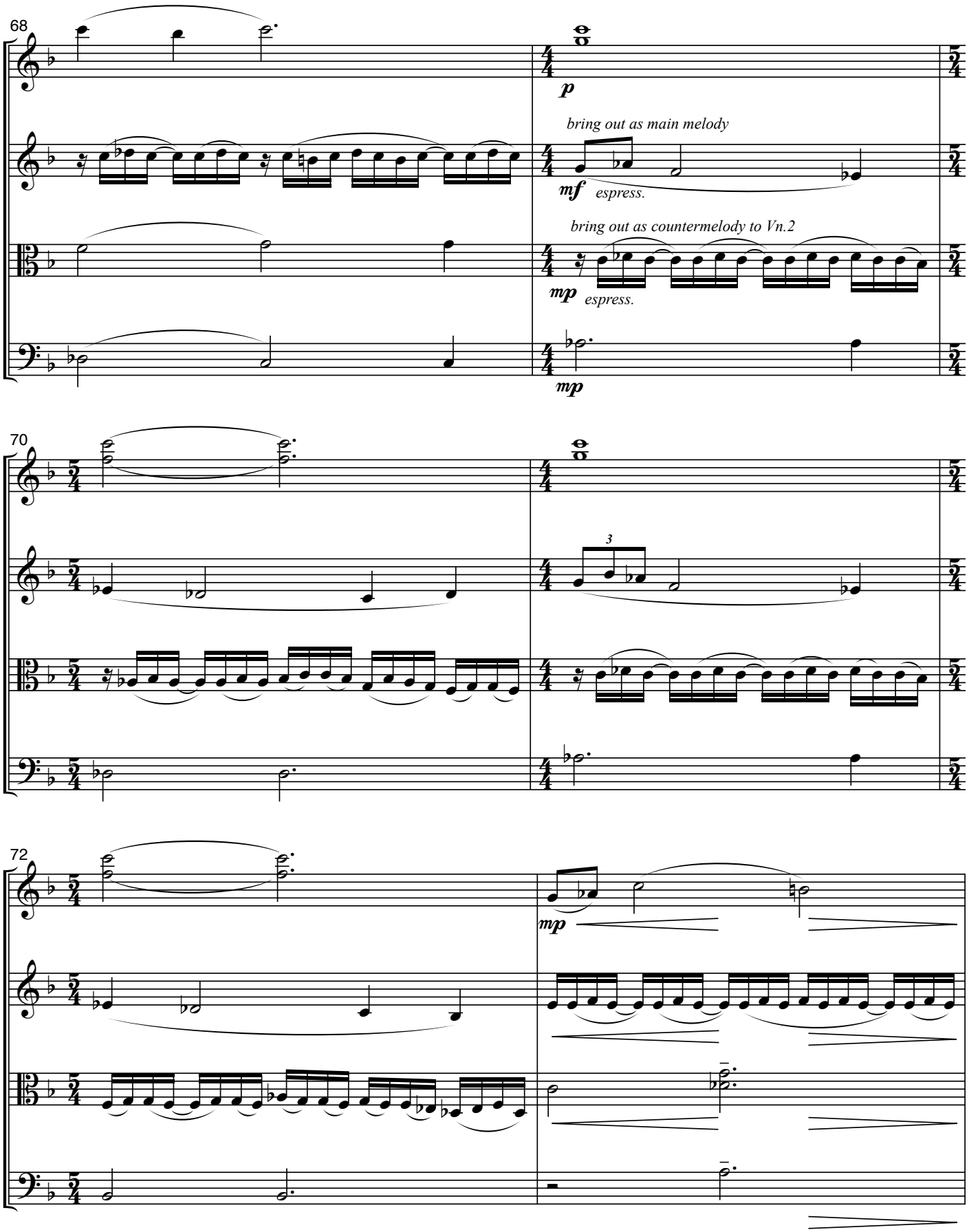
This movement uses portions of the "Lullaby" from *Brundibár,* a children's opera by Hans Krása and Adolf Hoffmeister.

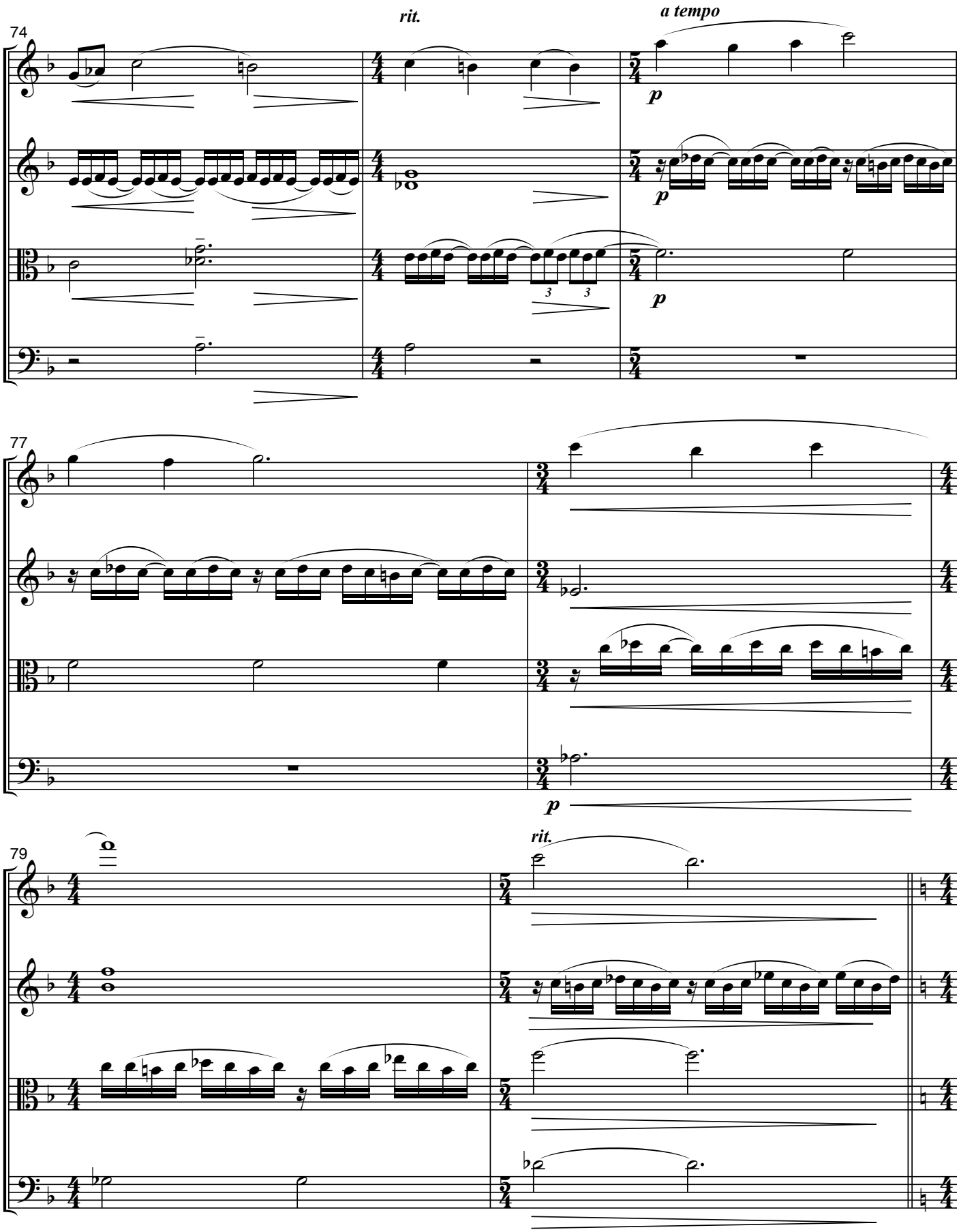

Very lively (♩.= 108, ♩= 160)
17
mf
mf
p subito
p subito
mf
25
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
p
mf
32
f
f
f
f
mp subito
mp subito
mp subito


39
mp
cresc.
f
46
Var. 2
Fast, grazioso ♩= 144
G.P.
50
leggiero


53
pizz.
55
58
poco cresc.
poco cresc.
poco cresc.
arco
poco cresc.


61
mp
mp
mp
mp
64
rit.
Gently, cantabile ♩= 72
Var. 3
p
p
p
66
p

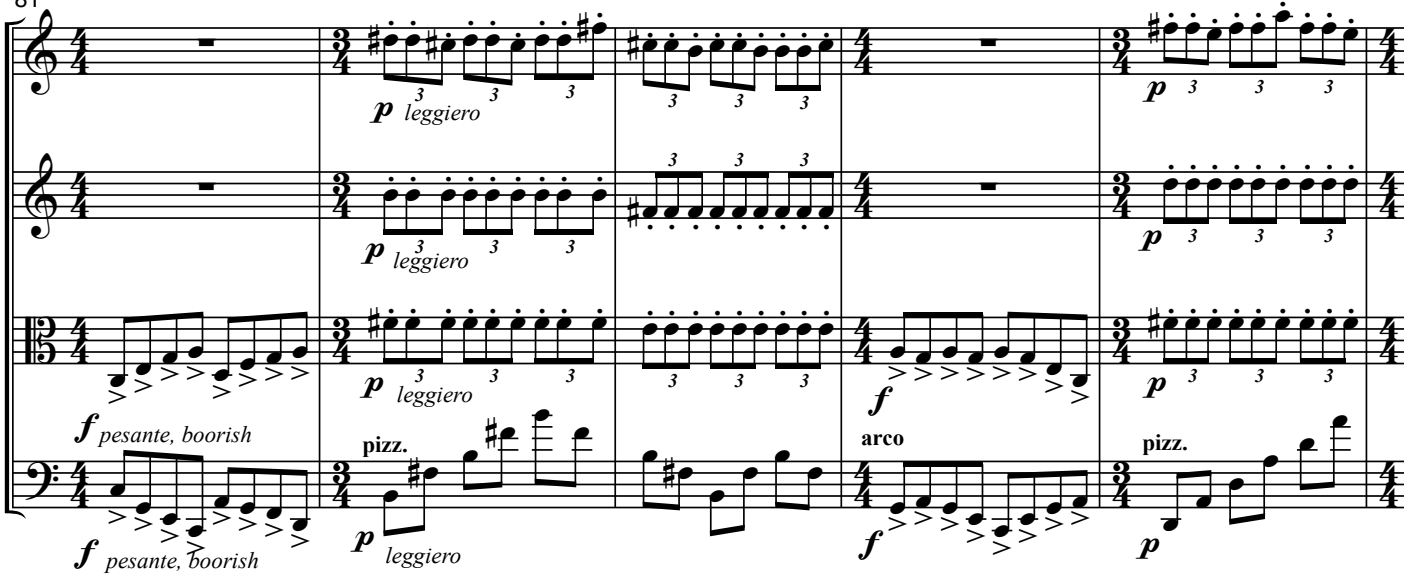

68
p
bring out as main melody
mf espress.
bring out as countermelody to Vn.2
mp espress.
mp
70
3
72
mp


74
rit.
a tempo
p
p
p
77
p
79
rit.

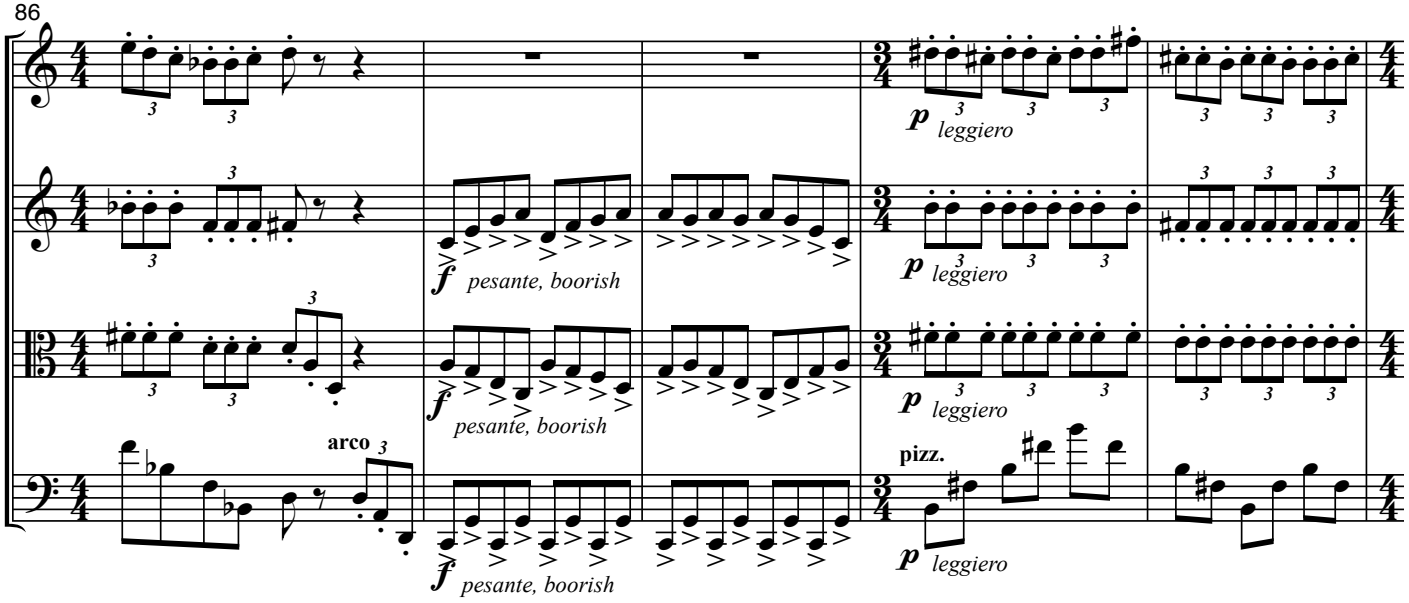
Var. 4

Fast, vigorous ♩ = 152

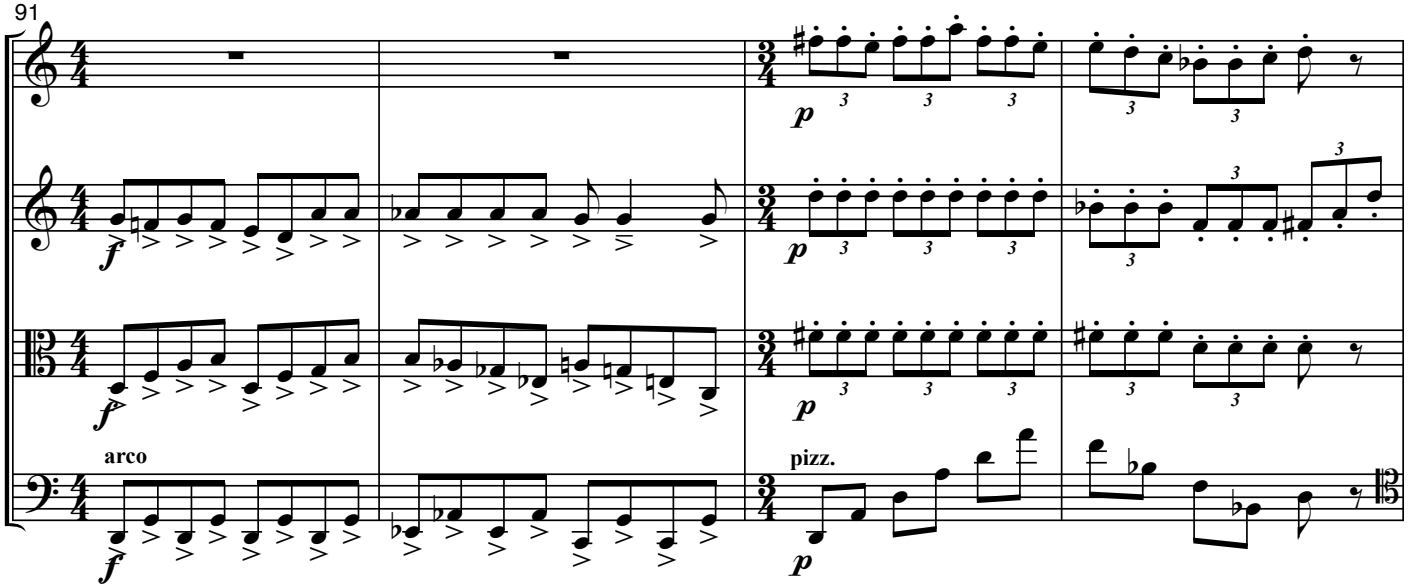
81

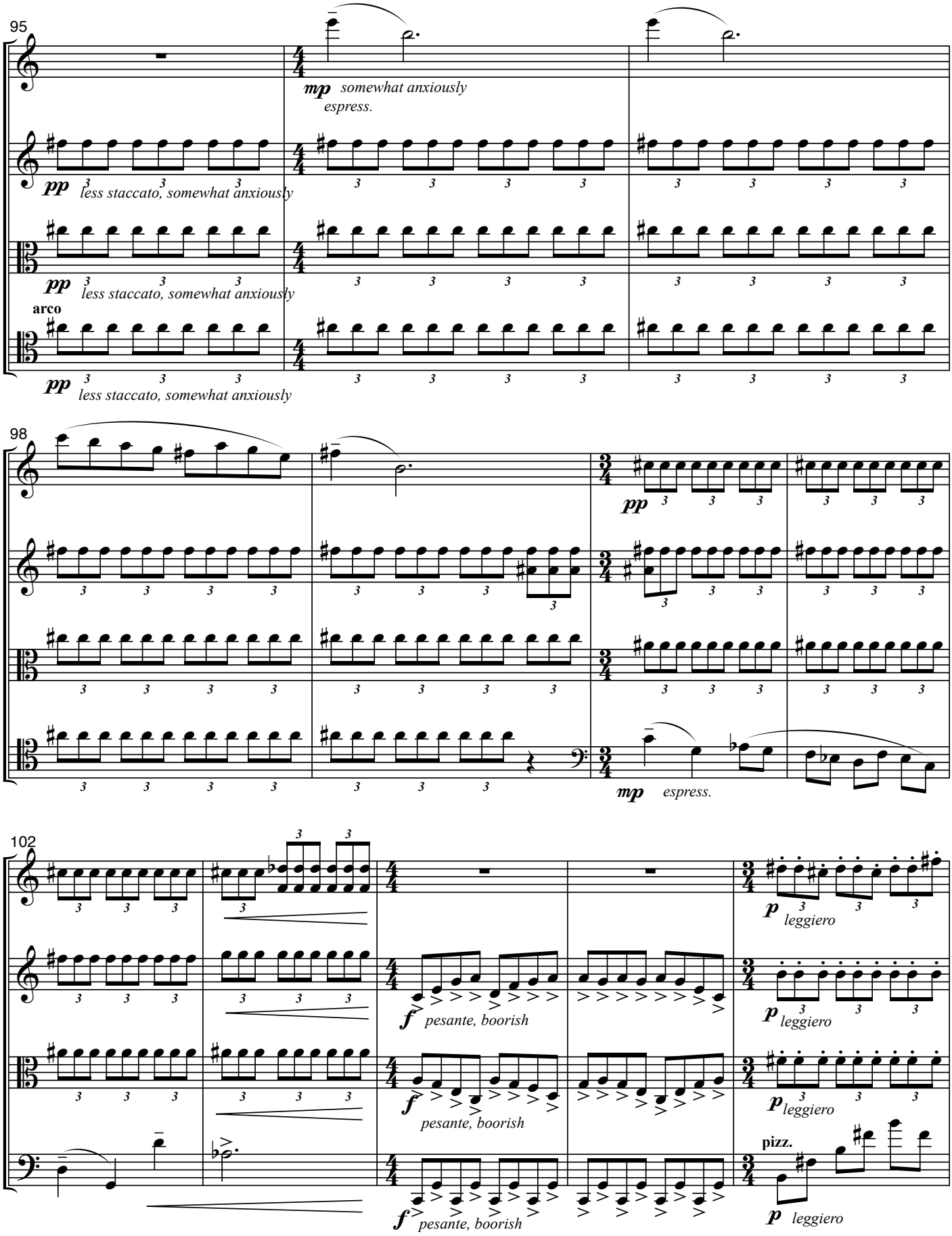


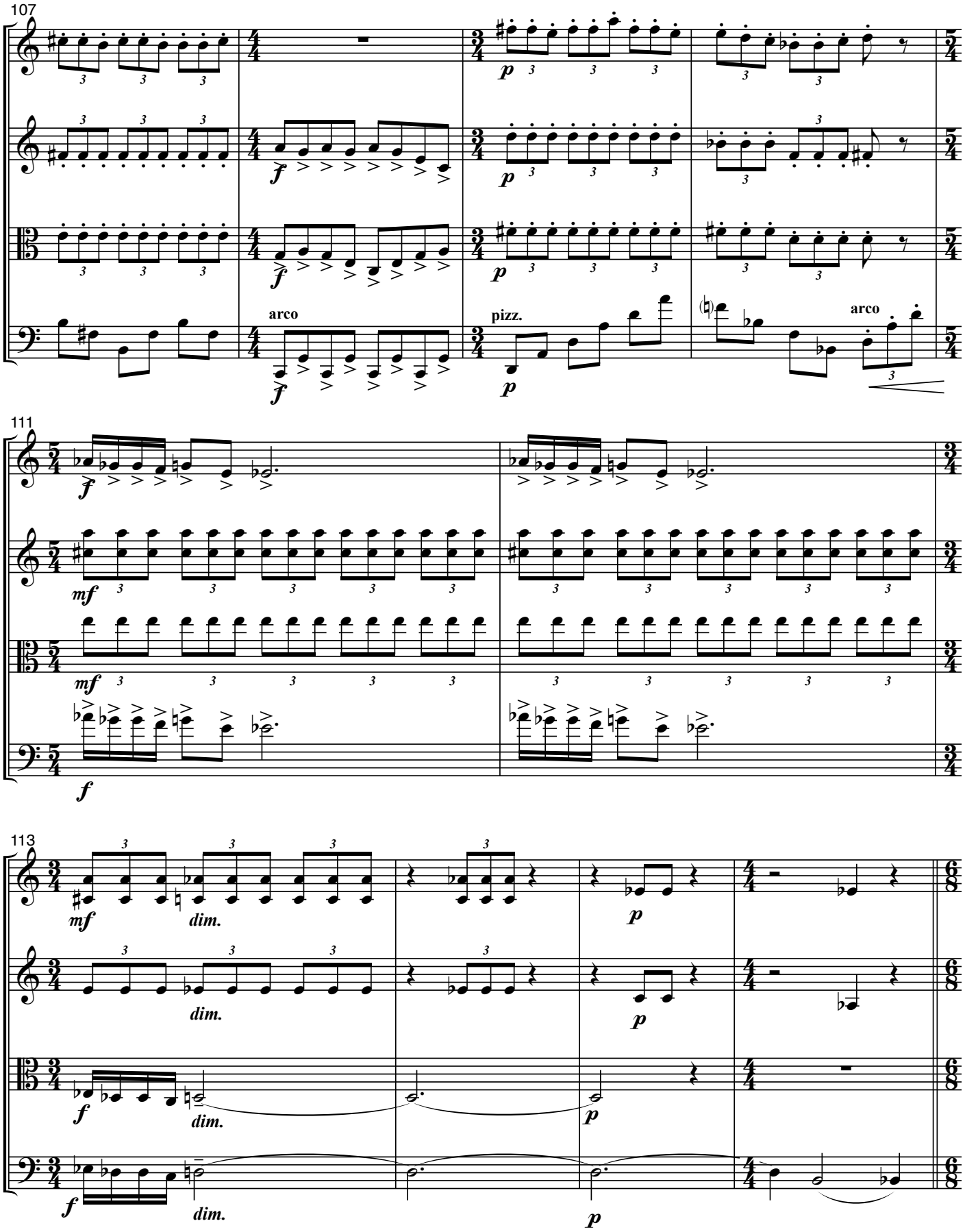
86

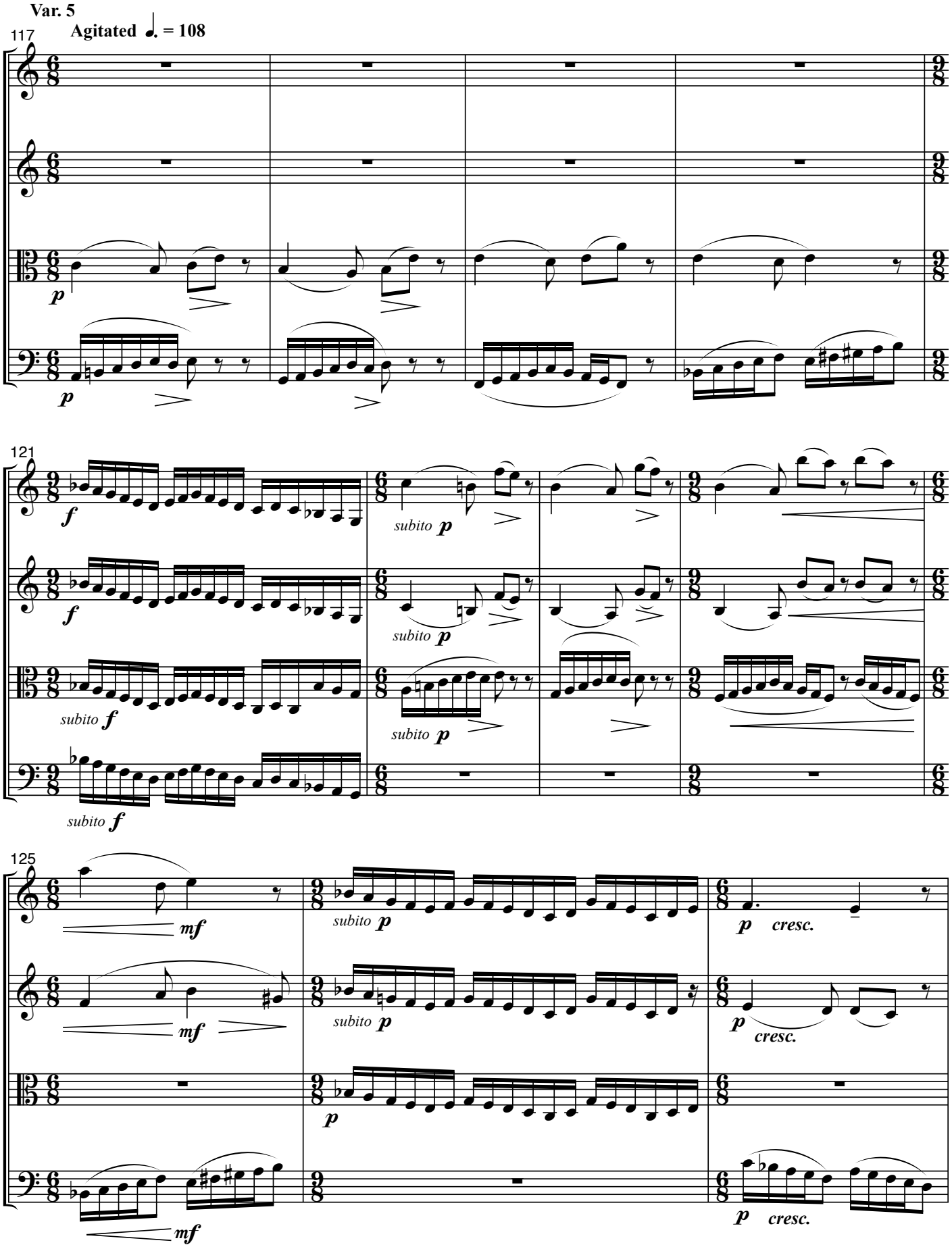


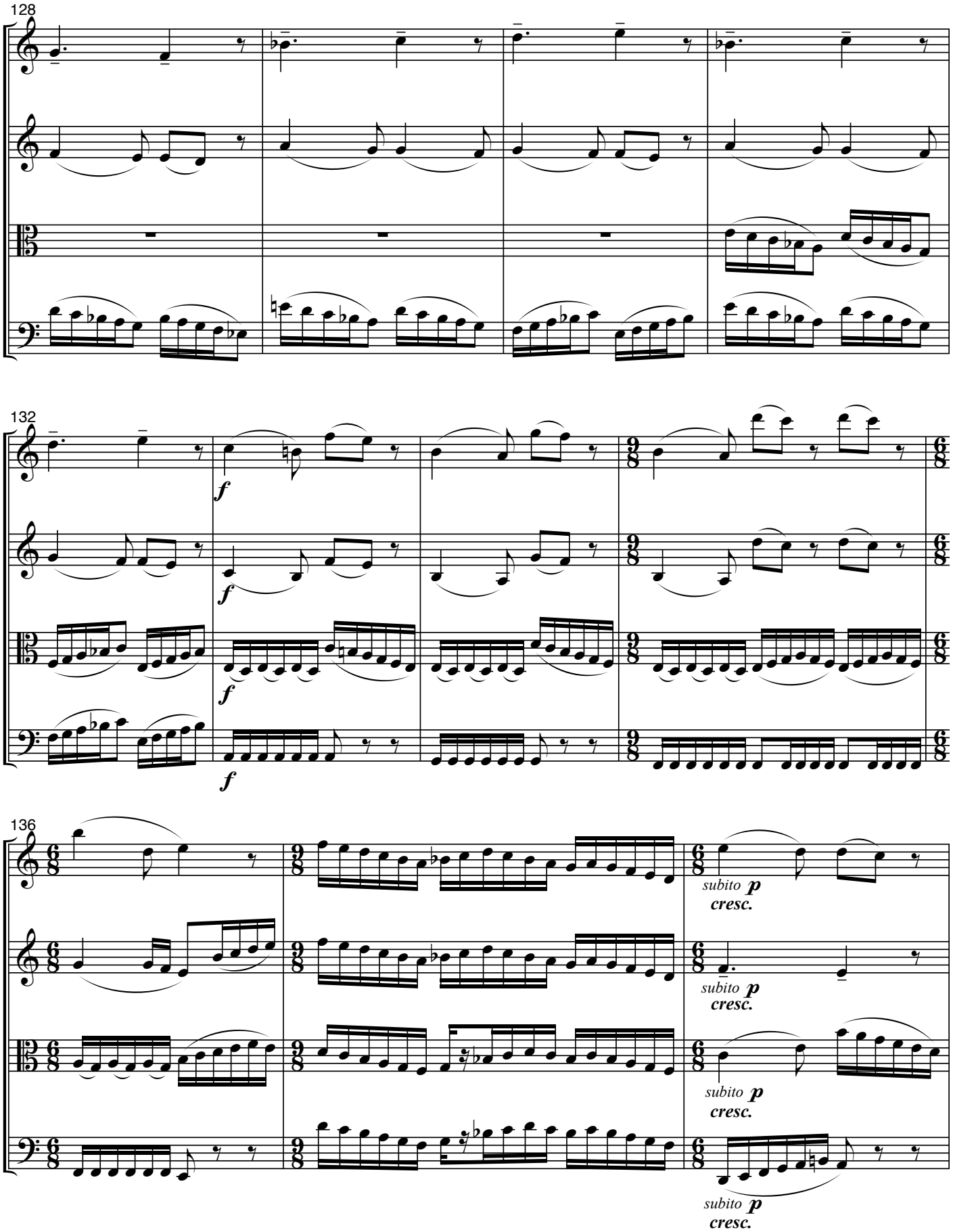
91

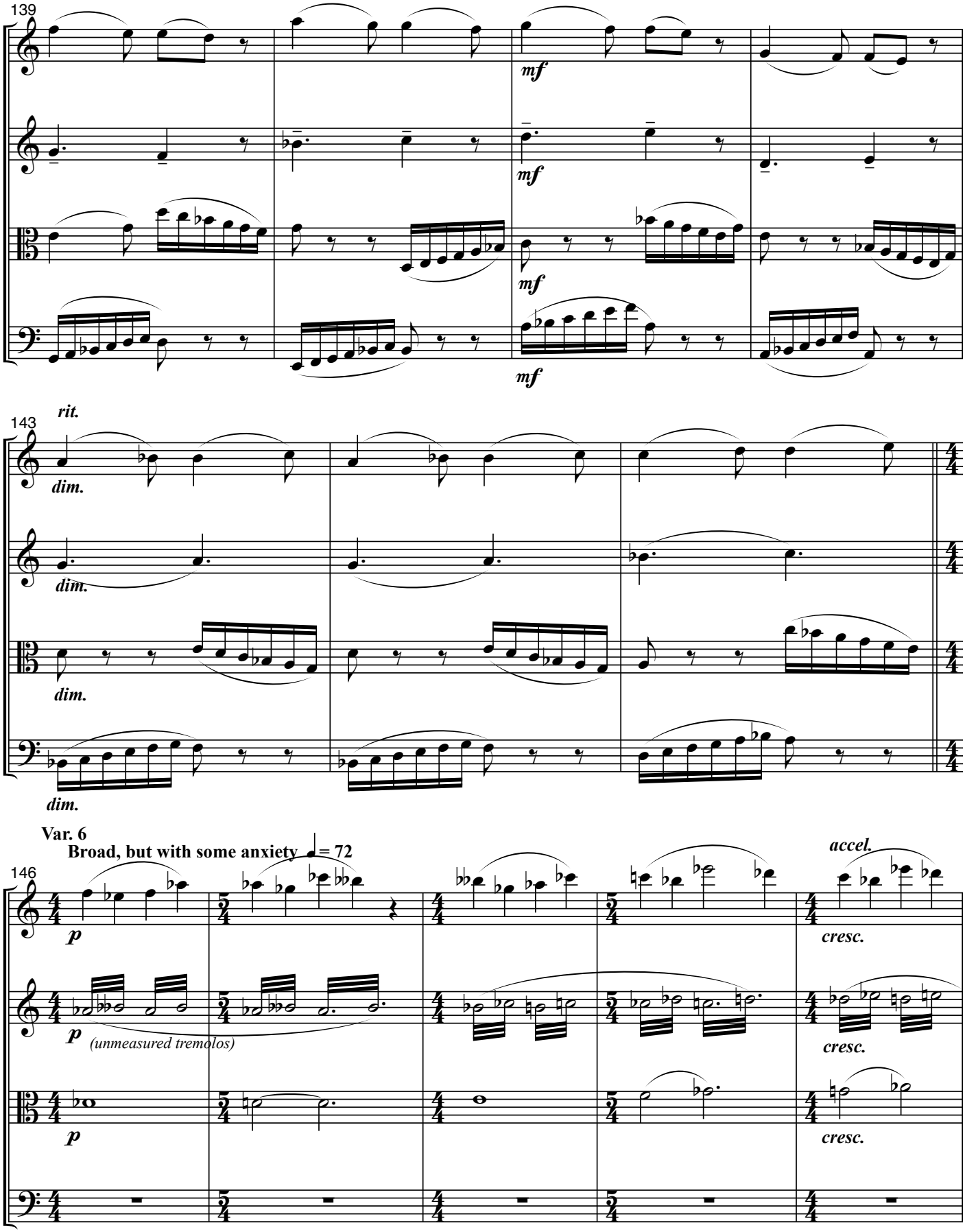


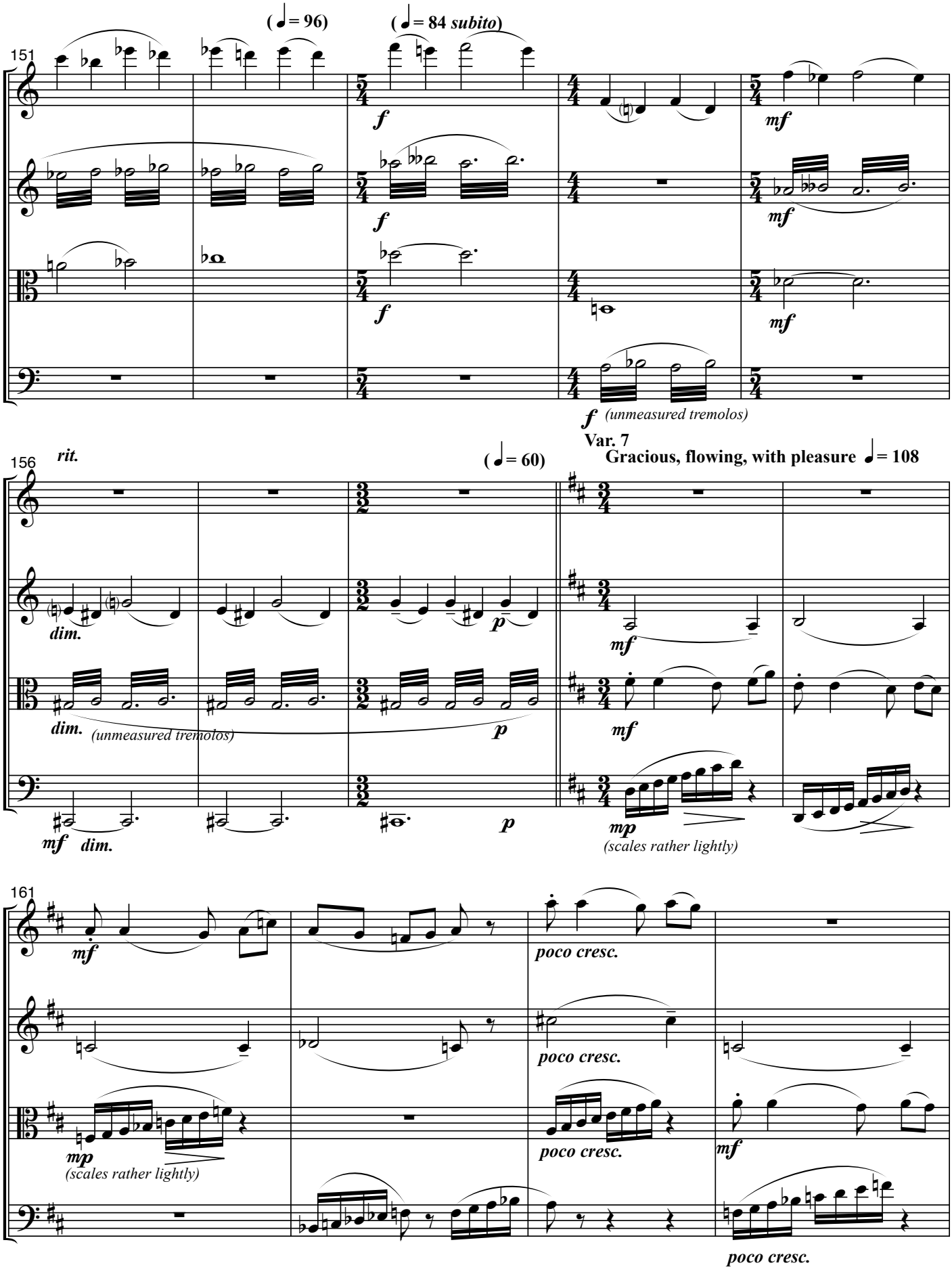

95
mp somewhat anxiously
espress.
pp less staccato, somewhat anxiously
pp less staccato, somewhat anxiously
arco
pp less staccato, somewhat anxiously
98
pp
mp espress.
102
p leggiero
f pesante, boorish
p leggiero
f pesante, boorish
p leggiero
pizz.
f pesante, boorish
p leggiero

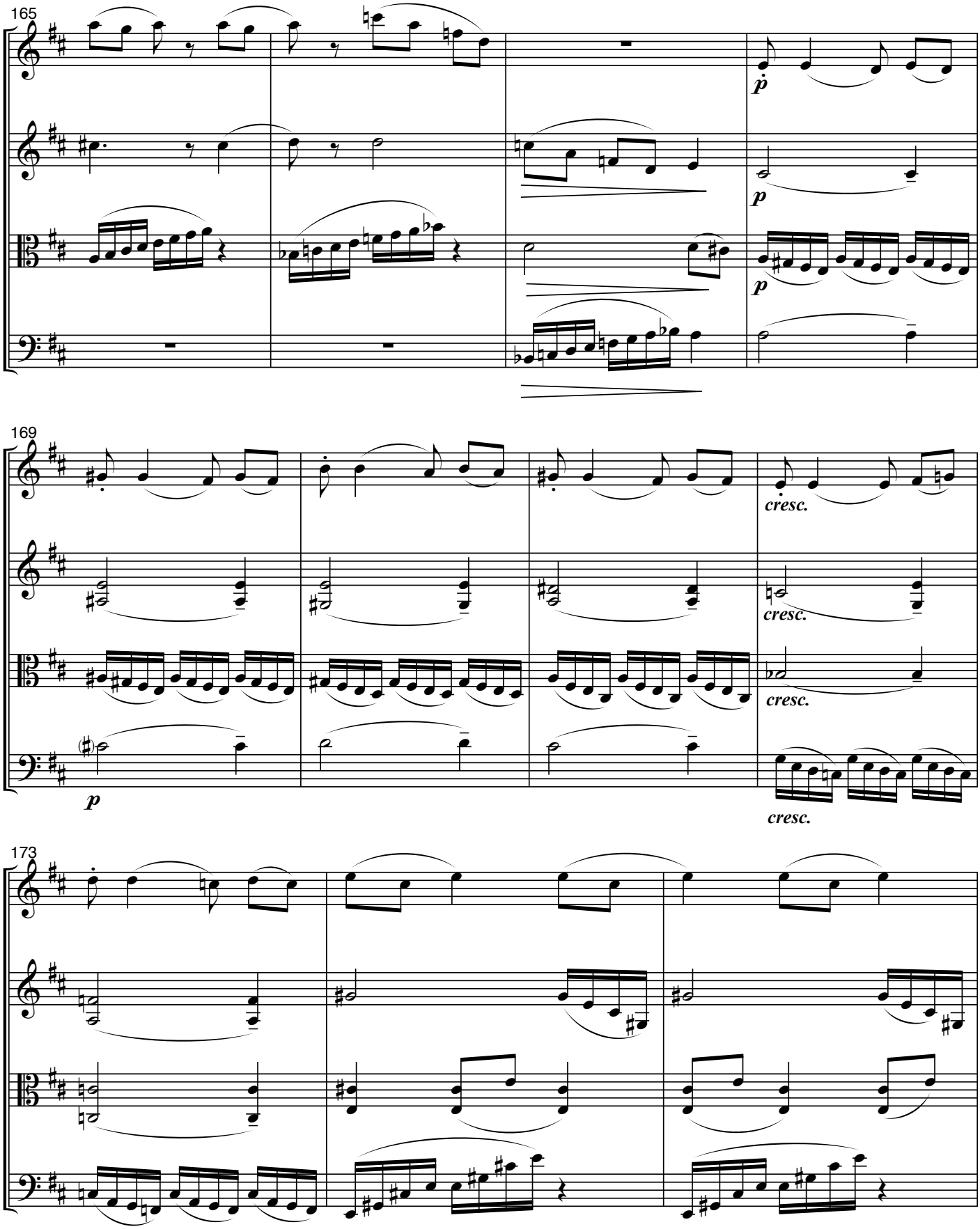

107
arco
pizz.
arco
111
113
dim.
dim.
dim.
dim.

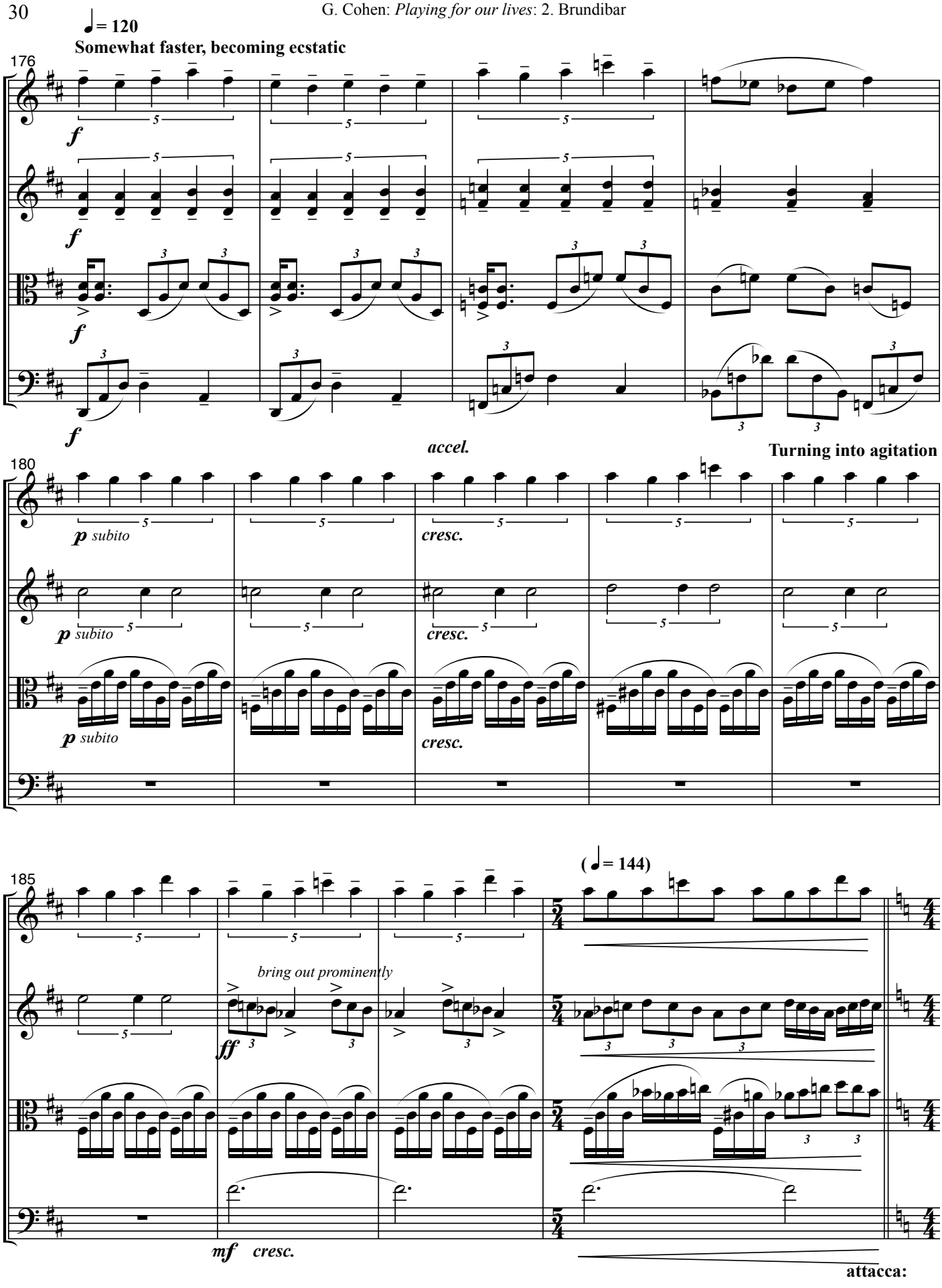

Var. 5
Agitated ♩. = 108
117
p
p
121
f
subito p
f
subito p
subito f
subito p
subito f
125
mf
subito p
p cresc.
mf
subito p
p cresc.
p
mf
p cresc.


128
132
f
136
subito p
cresc.

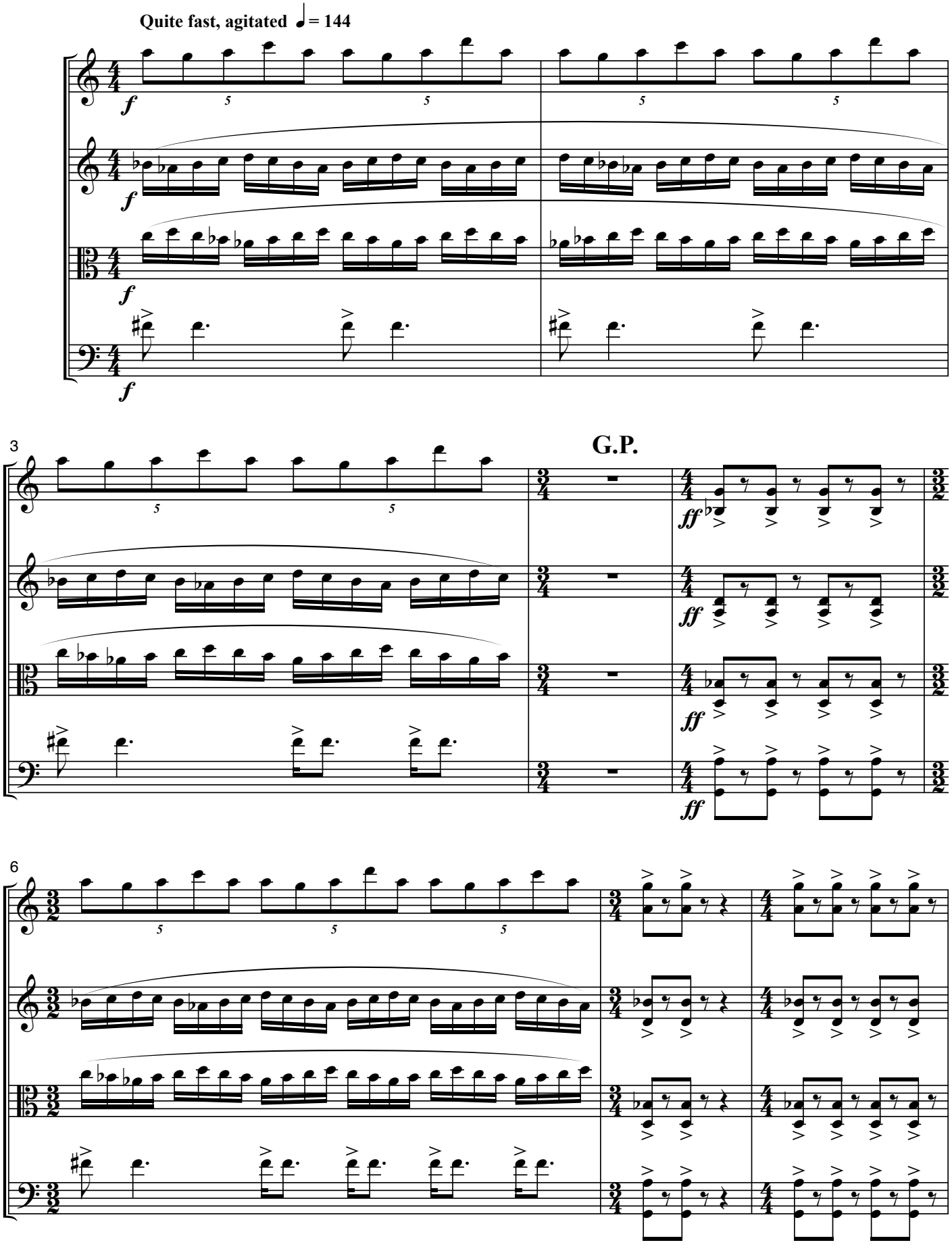

139
mf
mf
mf
mf
143
rit.
dim.
dim.
dim.
dim.
Var. 6
Broad, but with some anxiety ♩= 72
146
p
p
(unmeasured tremolos)
p
accel.
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.

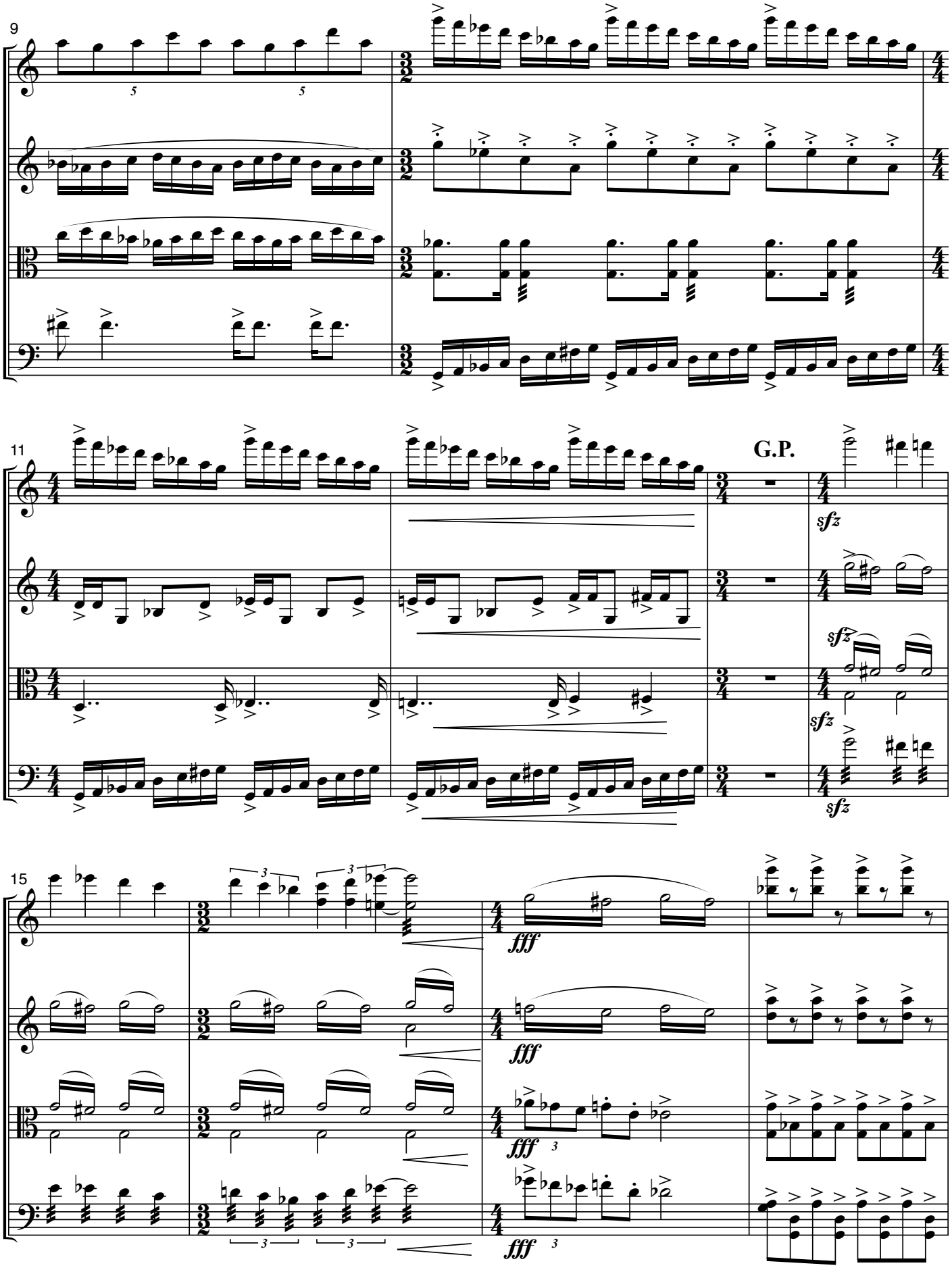

151
(♩= 96)
(♩= 84 subito)
f
mf
(unmeasured tremolos)
Var. 7
Gracious, flowing, with pleasure ♩= 108
156
rit.
(♩= 60)
dim.
p
mp
(scales rather lightly)
161
poco cresc.

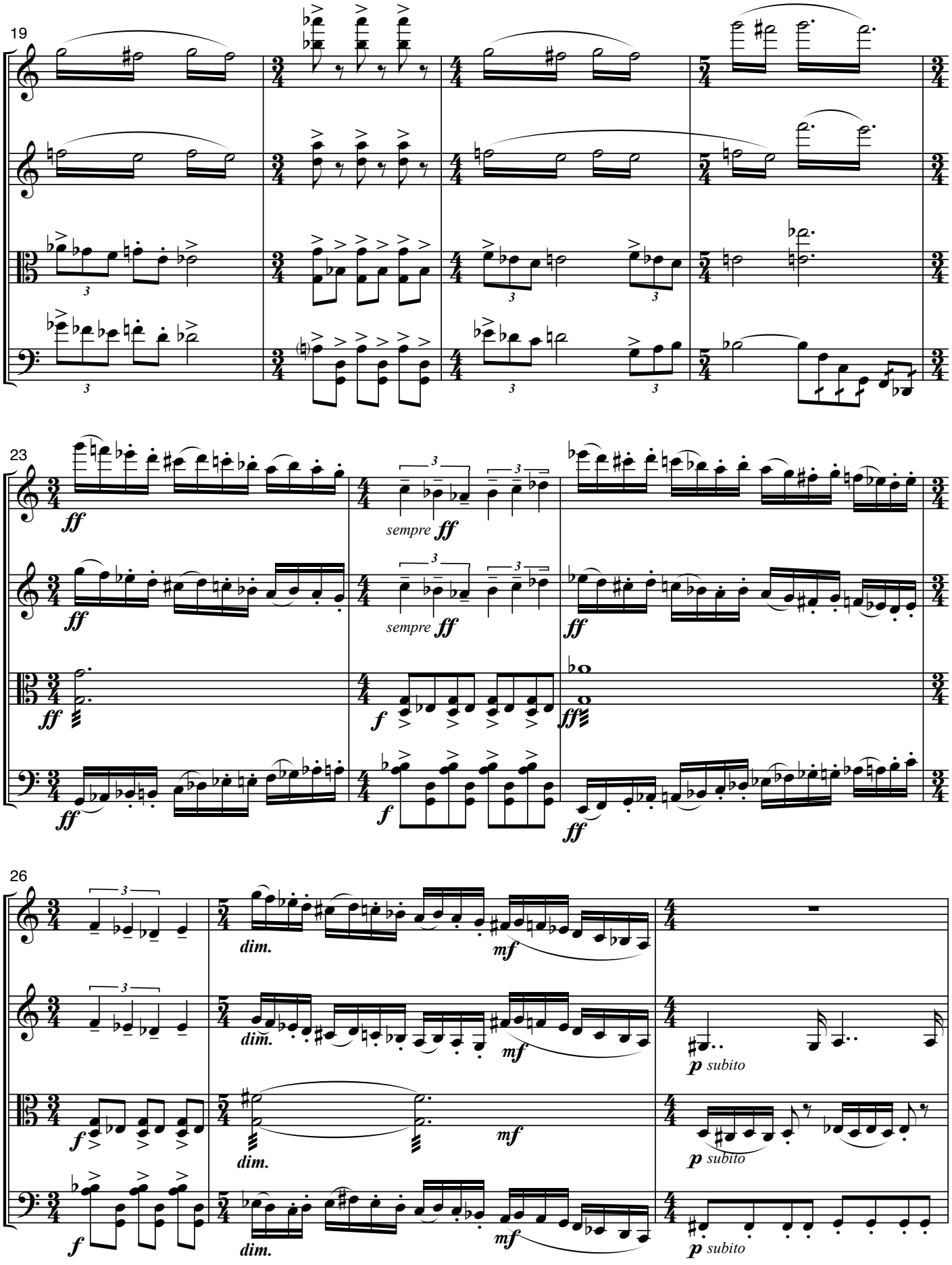

165
p
p
p
169
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
p
cresc.
173

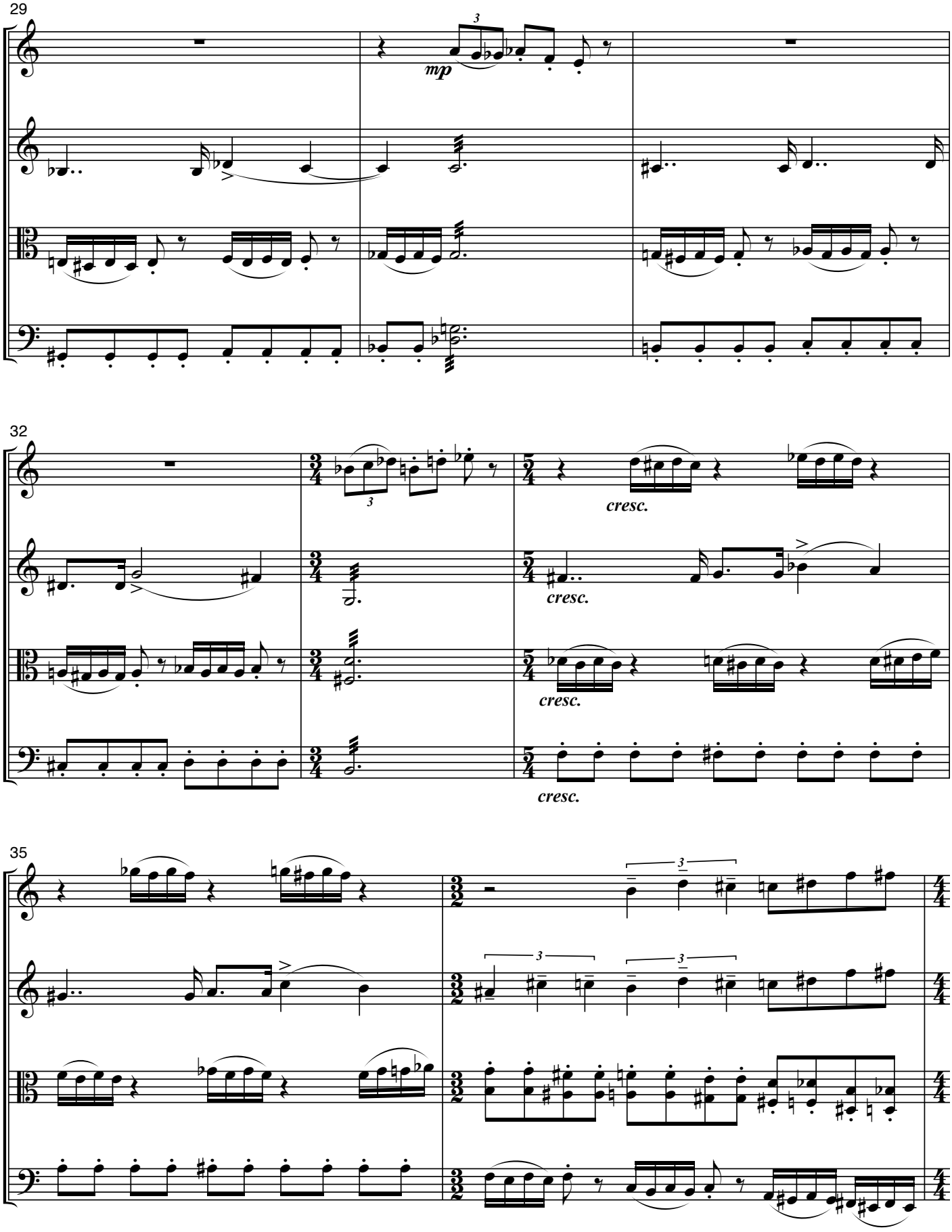

♩= 120
Somewhat faster, becoming ecstatic
176
f
accel.
Turning into agitation
180
p subito
cresc.
185
bring out prominently
ff
(♩= 144)
mf cresc.
attacca:

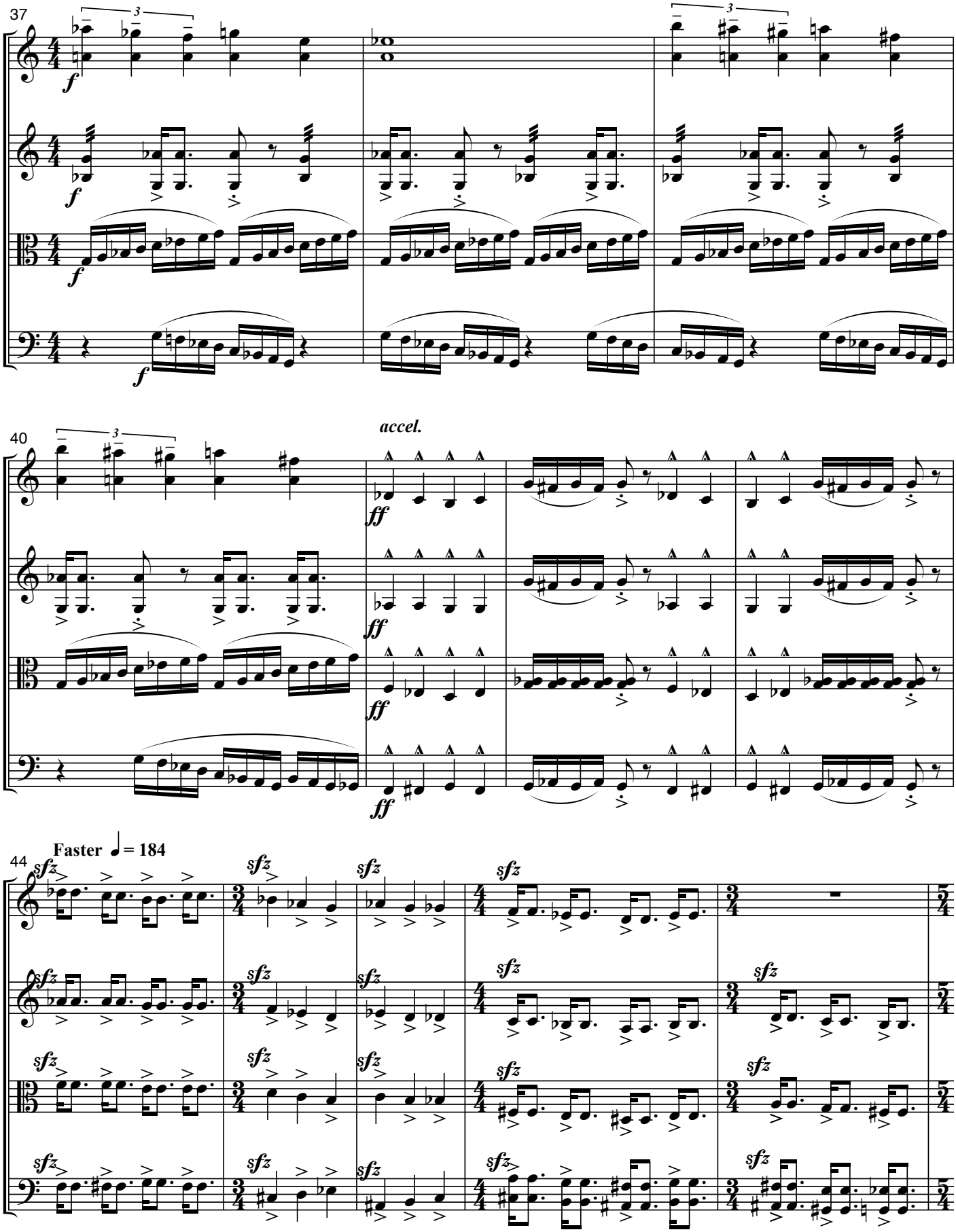
3. Dies Irae

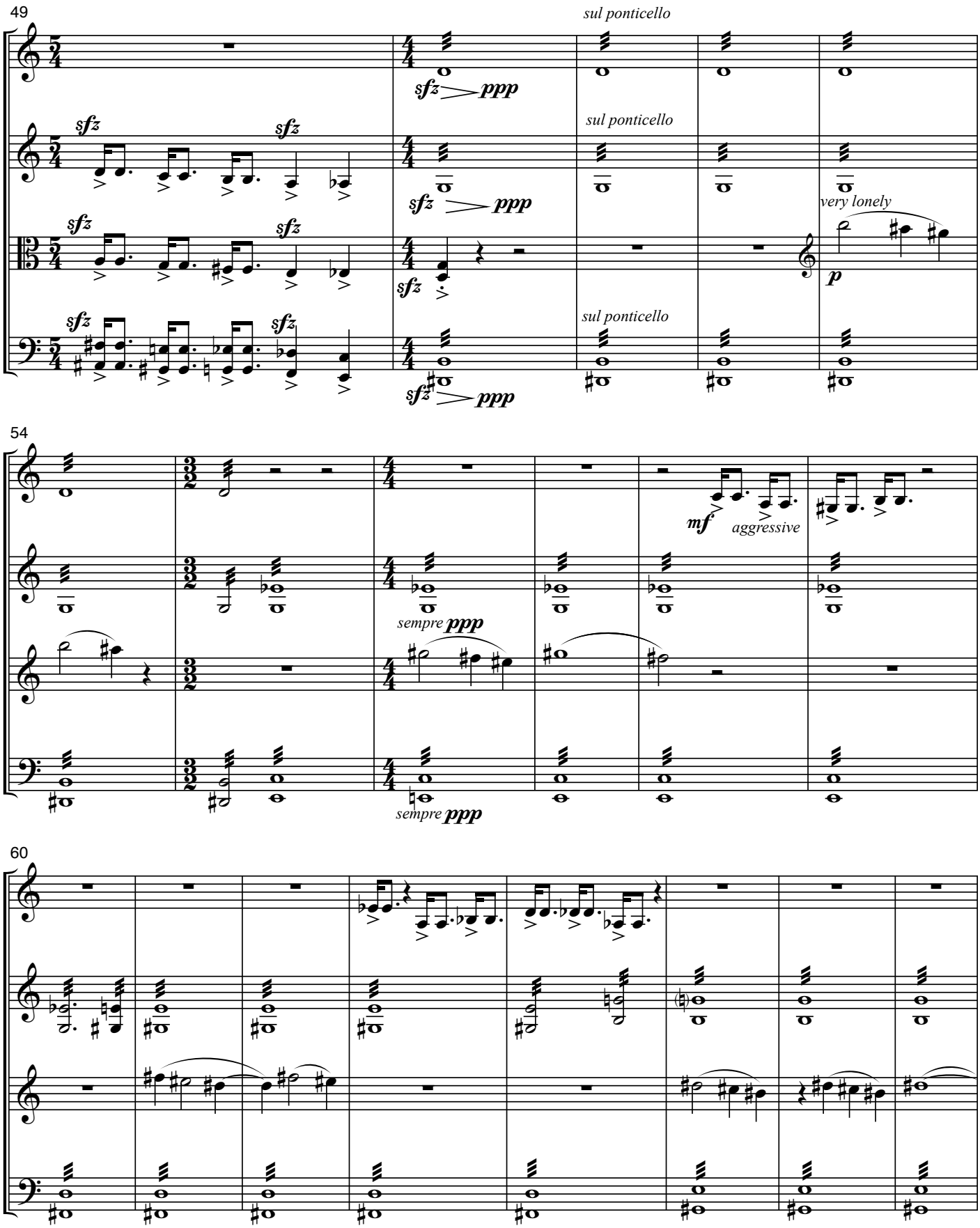


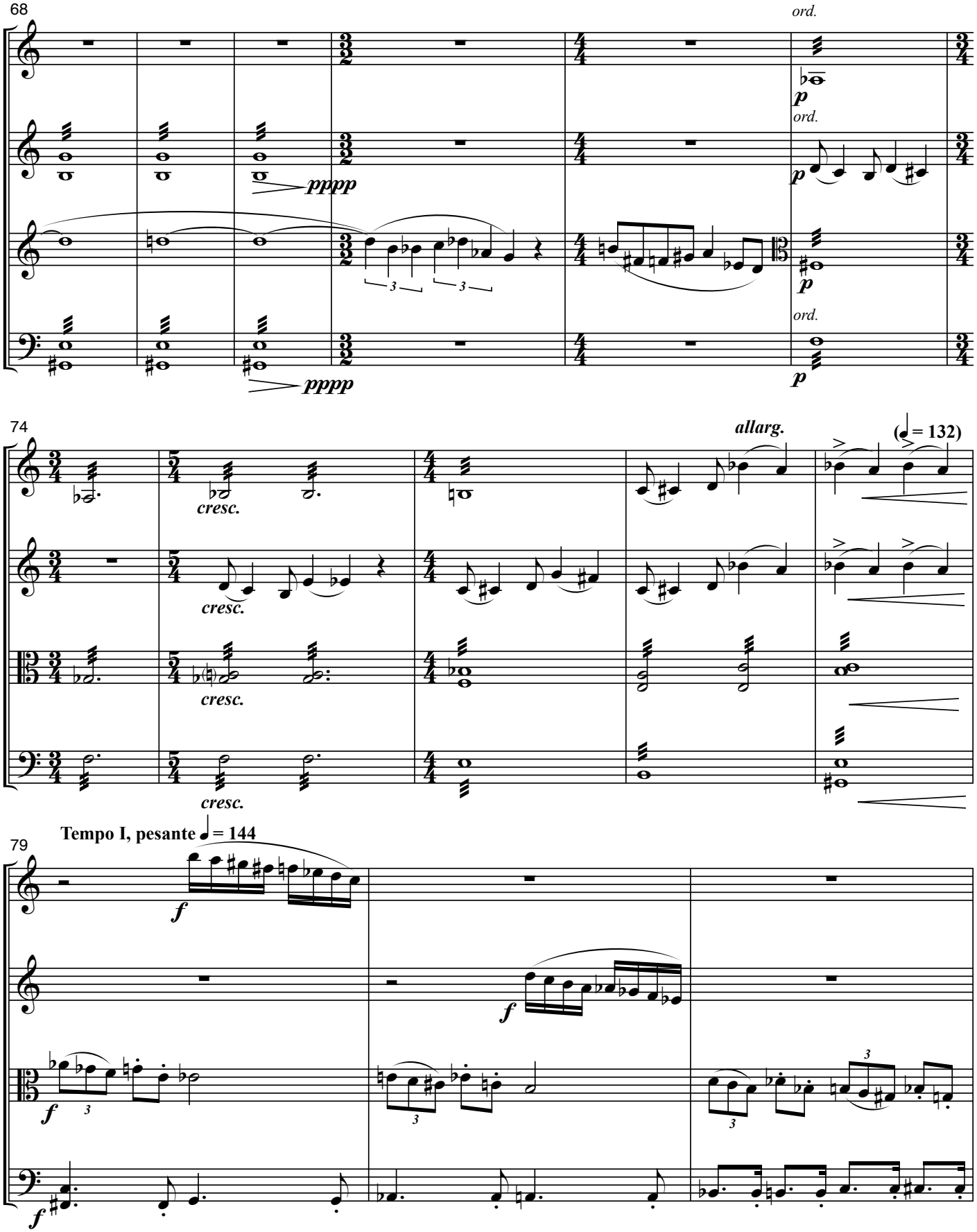

9
11
G.P.
sfz
15
fff

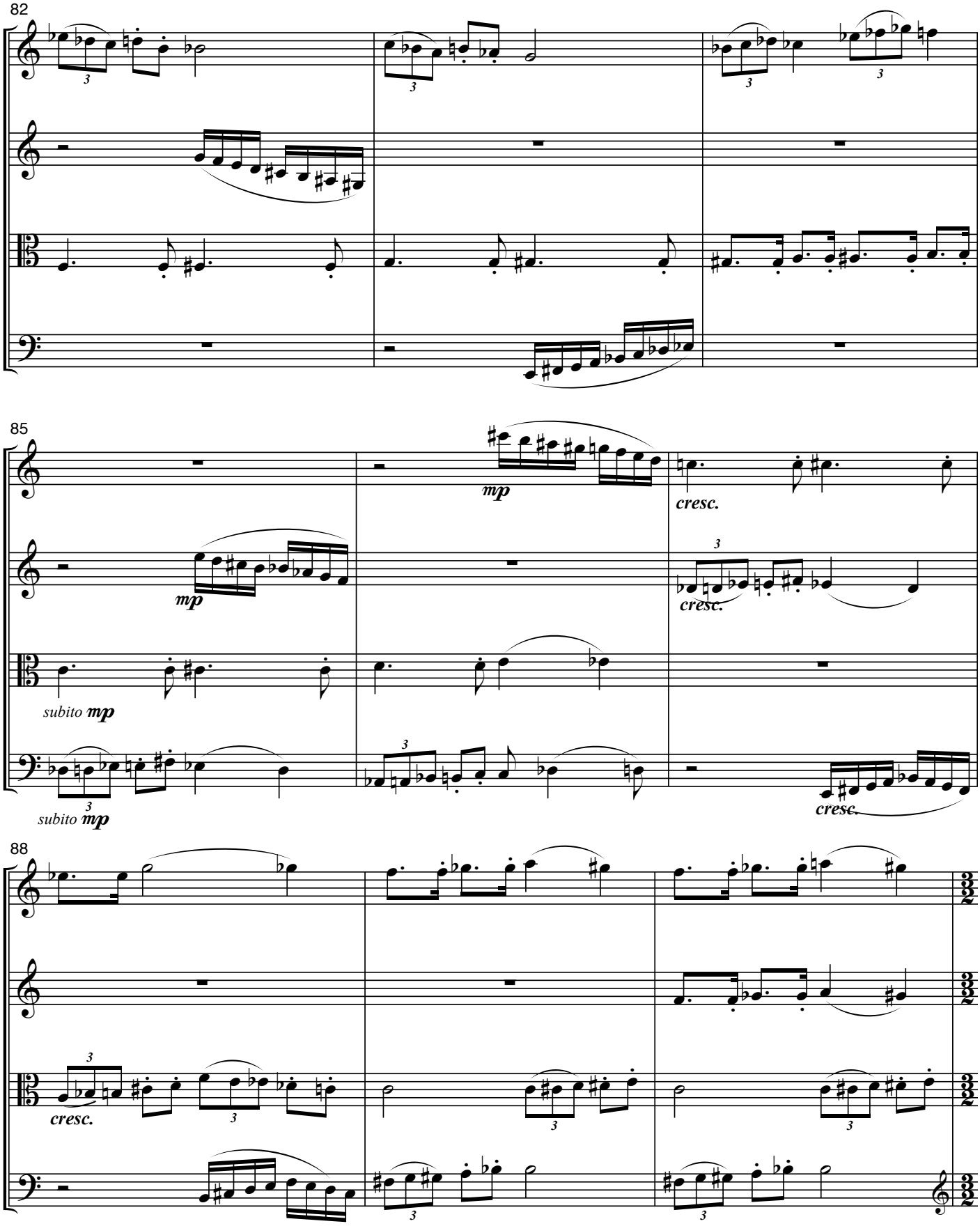

19
23
sempre ff
sempre ff
26
dim.
mf
p subito

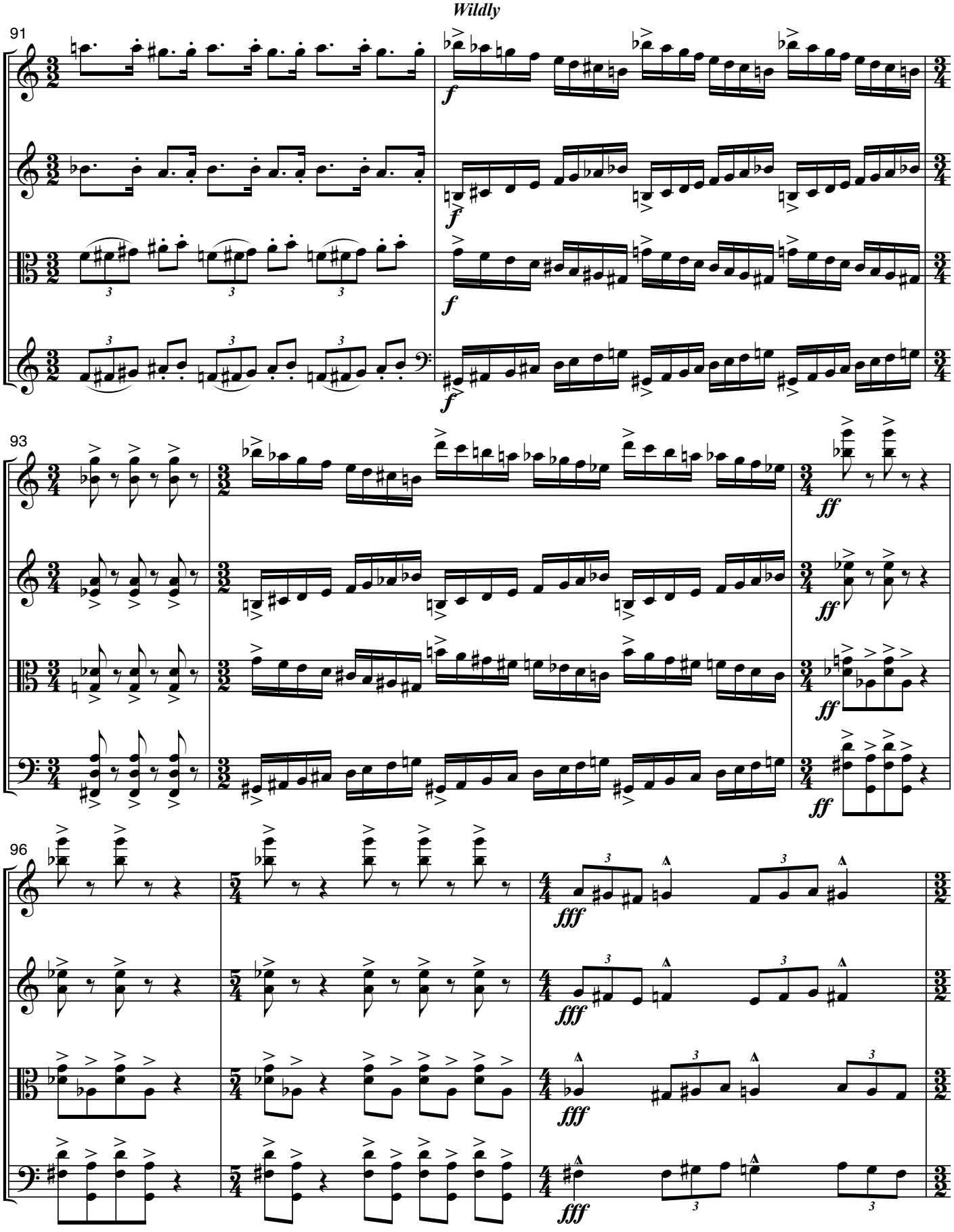

29
mp
32
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
35

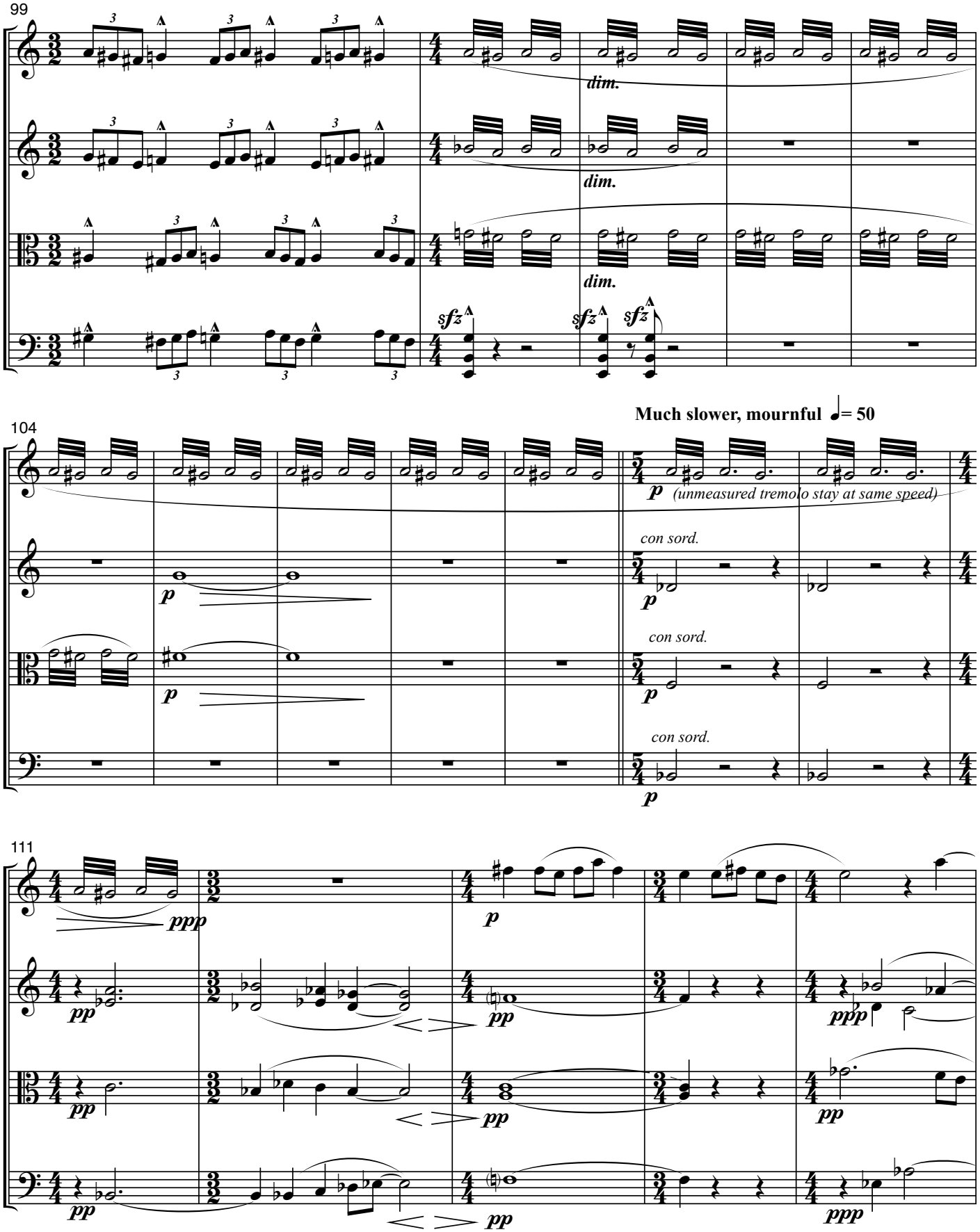

37
40
accel.
44
Faster ♩ = 184

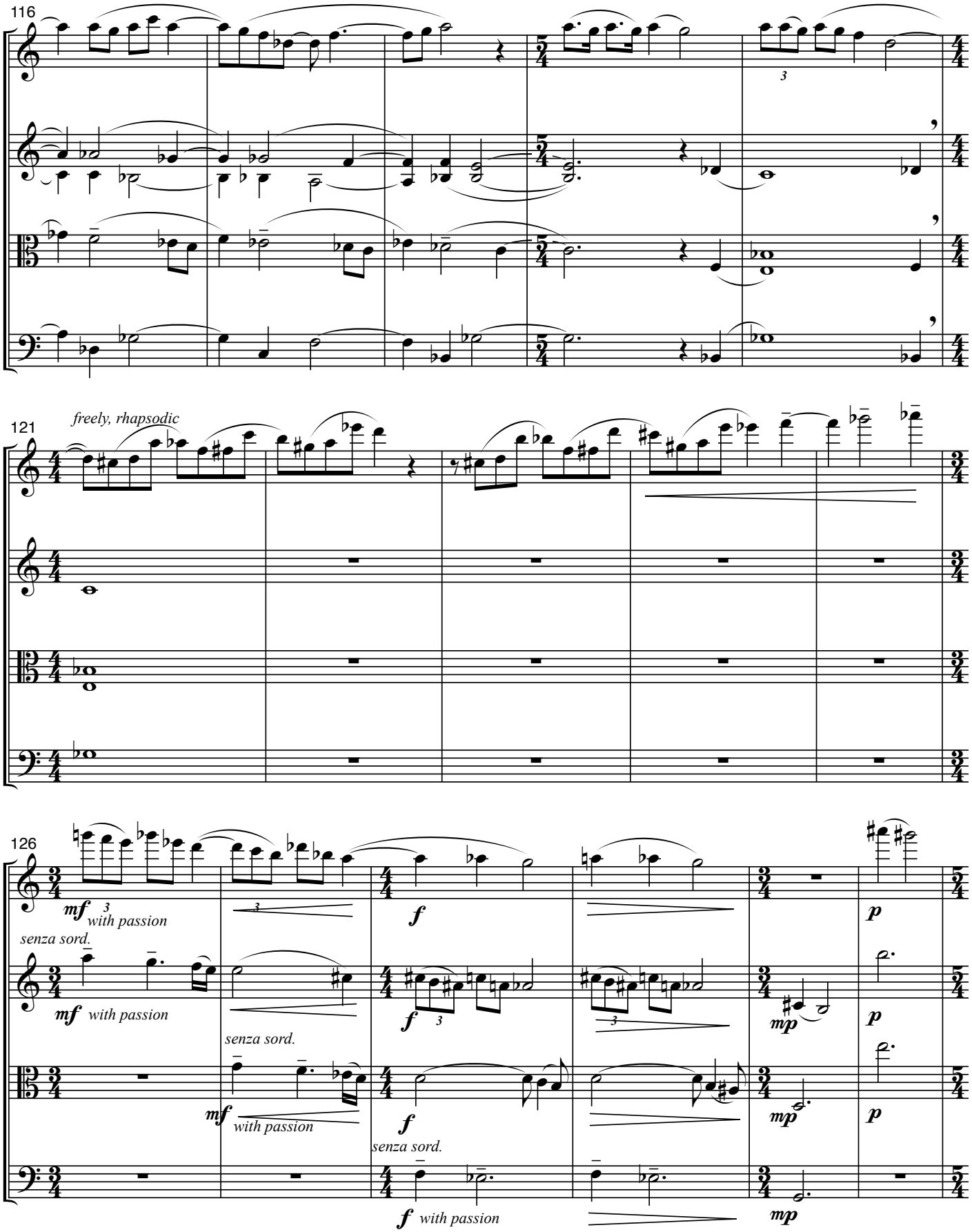

49
sul ponticello
sfz
ppp
very lonely
p
54
mf
aggressive
sempre ppp
60

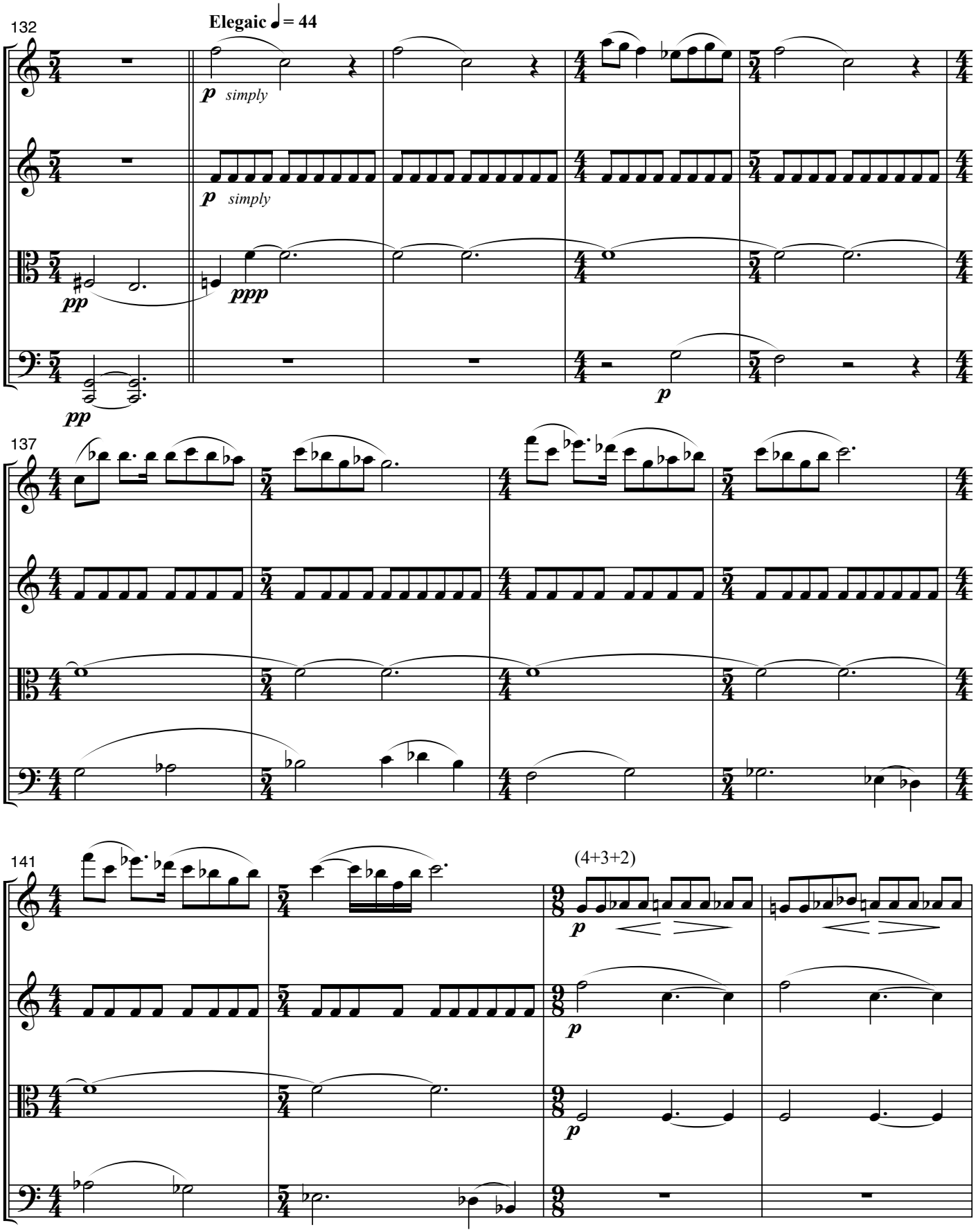

68
ord.
pppp
74
allarg.
(♩ = 132)
cresc.
79
Tempo I, pesante ♩ = 144

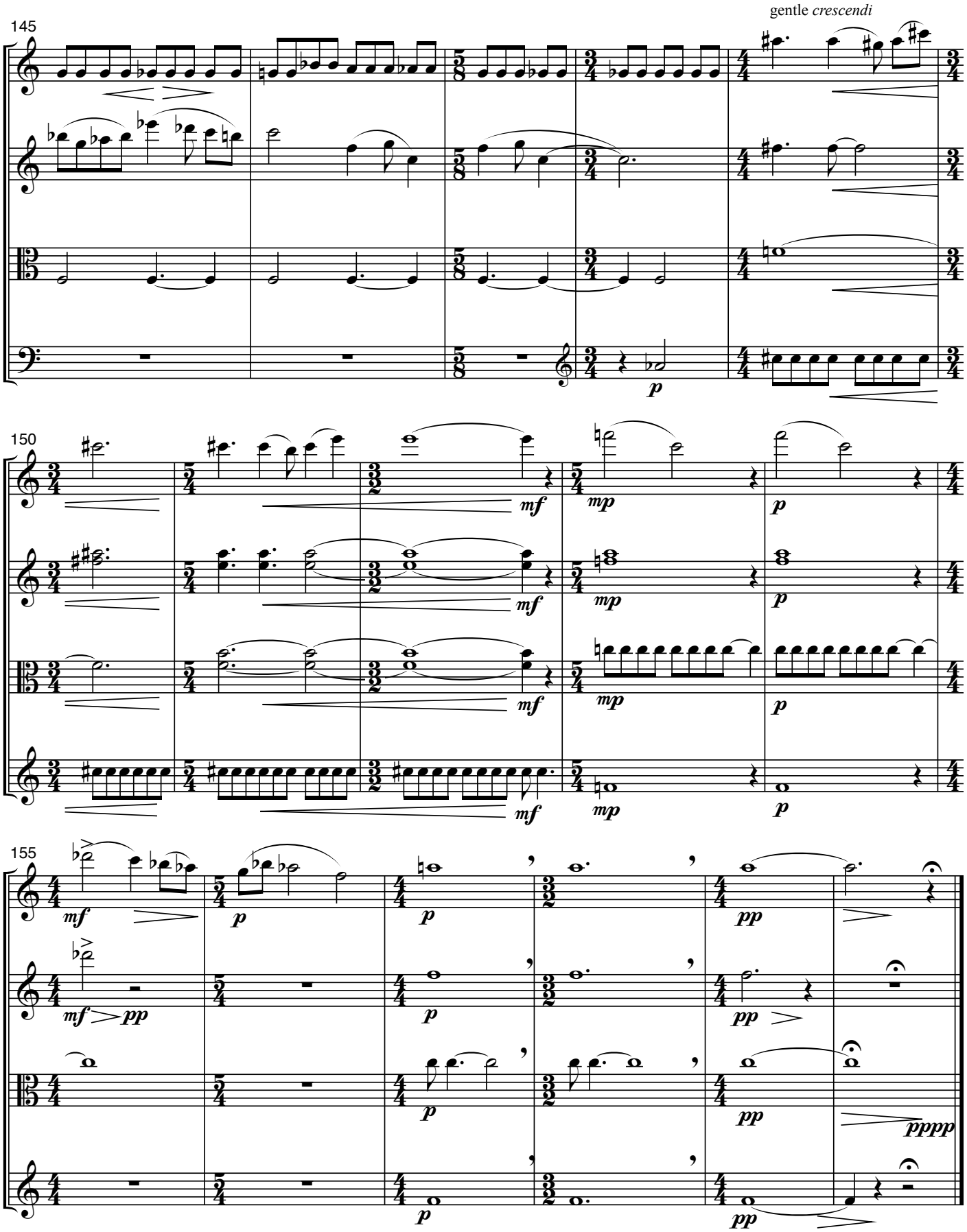

82
85
mp
cresc.
subito mp
88
cresc.


Wildly
91
93
96


99
dim.
dim.
dim.
sfz
sfz
sfz
Much slower, mournful ♩= 50
104
p
(unmeasured tremolo stay at same speed)
con sord.
con sord.
con sord.
111
ppp
pp
pp
pp
pp
pp
pp
ppp
ppp


116
121
freely, rhapsodic
126
mf with passion
senza sord.
f
p
mp


132
Elegaic ♩= 44
p simply
p simply
pp
ppp
pp
p
137
141
(4+3+2)
p
p
p


gentle *crescendi*
145
150
155
p
mf
mp
pp
ppppp