Exploring the Temporalities of a Musical Idea

Three Preludes by Leah Kardos

My composition practice is heavily influenced by and intertwined with my interest in music technology and practice as a record producer. This orientation philosophically favours the recording as the primary text (Moore 2002, Shuker 2005) and views the score as the beginning and not the end of music. This preference considers the recording to be more than a mere 'document' of past events being reproduced; it is a sonic construction and musical abstraction that is "the only evidence of the music's existence, its final (and only) authority" (Dellaira 1995). The notes on the page are merely an abstract set of symbols that allow us to decode ideas from one mind to another for reproduction and realisation; music itself is transitory, existing in the vibrating air of the moment, reflected and absorbed by the matter around us. When a composition of mine that exists only as a score is performed, many contributing and collaborating factors influence the result - there is fascination for the nuances of timbre/tone, groove, space and reflection, sound position and frequency response; these aspects of a musical composition that are difficult, if not impossible, to represent precisely in staff notation, aspects that, until the moment of performing, are a mystery. Every reading is unrepeatable and unique, completely unlike the facsimile audio recording that can be replayed countless times.

An interest in exploring the spaces between these texts, the performed score and the produced recording, is what lead to the conception of my *Three Preludes* project, destined to exist as an experiment, a score and a produced recorded document. Here I wanted to consider music's shifting states; from the 'chance' of the performance scenarios to the 'total control'[1] of the finished production and beyond to the realms of sampling, remixing and technology-aided-experimentation

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[1] In *Total Control and Chance in Musics: A Philosophical Analysis (1970),* Robert Charles Clark contrasts the theories of Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage ('total control' and 'chance' respectively), illuminating the different philosophies and artistic priorities of these approaches. On a personal level I find Clark's analysis relates to my own differing priorities and approaches when it comes to score based performance experimentation and record production.

where the lines become blurred. When writing a score, especially for a specific performer, my imagination is focussing on the moment these musical ideas are transformed into sound waves, that material ‘filtering’ through an individual performer in real time, the sound being shaped in the moment by various factors: their technical ability, experience and interpretation, the build of the instrument itself, the environment. Michael Nyman alludes to these ideas when he describes “people processes” (Nyman 1974) and I am continually fascinated with the ways these ‘human filters’ can influence, alter or transform a musical idea.

Switching orientation towards the recording as being the primary text introduces new ideas to explore from here; which performance is the one destined to be the final “document” of the work? In the realisation of my score, where do my ideas end at collaborative creativities outside of myself meet? Are all played ‘versions’ of the score, no matter now casual or seemingly inconsequential actually ‘variations’ worth preserving? How could I used the collected assets taken from all of these processes and use them to fuel further musical creativity? In the case of *Three Preludes*, such thinking lead me to try and use recorded material taken from rehearsals and location recordings around the environment where the rehearsals were happening, as well as sight-reading sessions and slowed-down run-throughs of the material, capturing human errors or chance sonic occurrences as they happened. By capturing these moments as recorded audio I can utilise this ‘changed’ material for further music creation by using post-production technology. There are two seemingly opposed ideas here: the creation of scores and recordings, and playing with the differing perspectives each mode affords, and then the multiple ‘versions’ of the work in the aftermath of captured performance, which may exist as different arrangements, samples, mixes or remixes, transformed by various technology applications and interfaces, interpretations, performances in specific spaces or use with different contexts (as underscoring a narrative, as a concert performance or a triggered laptop improvisation). Not unlike the economy of Mahler as he built large structures from small

primeval cells of music, or any composer trying to optimise musical mileage with a minimum amount of materials, I enjoy the idea of creating new, vastly different works using small audio samples and offcuts or accidental sounds that occur incidentally through the creation of other recorded works.

Just as technology allows me to engage with my creative materials in different ways, different compositional processes force me to engage with musical and sonic materials in different ways. Brown identifies five specific modes of compositional engagement with computers that are used to aid music creation: the 'observer', where the technological medium is an 'artifact'; the 'director', where the medium is a 'tool'; the 'player', where the medium is the 'instrument'; the 'explorer', where the medium is the 'model'; and the 'selector', where the medium itself is the 'creator' (Brown 4-6). With a creative methodology so reliant on interaction with computers, I recognise each of the 'modes of engagement' as articulated by Brown in my own approaches to composition and they are all present in the creation of the the *Three Preludes*. It is beneficial to have an awareness of this aspect of one's creative practice, especially when shifting between different modes of engagement or consciously approaching the work from different perspectives. Often, many modes of engagement with the materials of music and sound are required to take a composition from conception to completion; these can be a mixture of process-based and intuitive approaches with each mode influencing decision-making at different stages of production.

The score was written for pianist Ben Dawson as a gift to commemorate his 30th birthday in 2012. The music represented in the scores, as well as the content of the produced EP, reflects on our burgeoning personal relationship, contrasted with the stark landscape of winter in Europe. While the first prelude is rather rhapsodic compared to the others, the overall prevailing aesthetic is close to what Kyle Gann (2001) describes as postminimalist, with a focus on repetitive gestures, additive and subtractive processes in a diatonic pitch language. Phasing cycles of theme and rhythm arise

quite frequently in my music. I use them variously to create shifting emphasis, to highlight processes and permutations of material, to enliven harmonic textures or just emancipate my grooves from the confinement of 4/4. Here, these ideas are in the foreground; discreet thematic cells that favour different pulses, metres or rhythm groupings, occurring simultaneously to form a non-linear rhythmic/thematic web.

Once written, I became interested in the various states this music might exist in and curious about the 'what ifs': what would it sound like being sight read for the first time by this individual? If he were to rehearse a challenging passage, where would he repeat and how slow or fast would he play that section? What would happen if I left some ambiguities in the score that would force him to make a creative decision in the moment? What if a 'mistake' made the music better? Finally, if I could record and collect all of this material, what could I do with it? While the idea of interpretative/creative performance resulting in a unique reading and collaborative composition is by no means new, throughout this project I sought to uphold and honour the pianist as my collaborator, to respect any mistake or accidental sound as a variation and/or resource ripe for exploitation. Consider the silences at the start and ends of takes, all of the mistakes, the unintended sounds, breaths, squeaks, knocks, hisses and hums of equipment and the distant sound of traffic outside the recording environment. The sounds heard on the journeys to and from the recording sessions - a whole diverse ecology of music and sound sprung from one source. In this way the music is more than it's score and it's recorded version - it becomes a catalogue of assets; all of the events resulting from situations, actions and incidents that occur as a direct result of the composition existing; a language all of its own.

In my pianist I had a willing accomplice and my record label backed the release of a small collection of works called "Three Preludes" as an EP in November 2013. The EP comprises the

three original pieces, recorded in their newly edited versions (informed by collaboration and early experimentation with the pianist), followed by three companion sound collages constructed electronically using sounds created and captured from the process: sight reading and rehearsal sessions, mistakes, edit offcuts, alternate recording takes and various random unintentional sounds ranging from chair squeaks to outside traffic noise and sirens. Taken as a whole, the collected works featured on the Three Preludes EP are a meditation on people and process, timelines, seasonal landscapes, the changing states of music as ideas become sounds and the happy accidents that occur throughout the process of ideas growing in collaboration.

In the following section I will discuss how the work unfolds, signposting some of the technical and compositional approaches/processes along the way.

Prelude 1 (Track 1: Draw) (Refer to accompanying score)

Pulsing crotchets playing a minor second act as the glue holding the opening theme together: initially suggested as a cold prodding minor dissonance (Em6+2, bar 2), as the harmony cycle progresses it is incorporated as part of warmer extended chords (for example Am9 in bar 5 and Cmaj7 bar 6), thus its character shifts as the music grows, a hypnotic, compulsive repetition leading the music forward. The melody dances around and obsessively returns to the same B note as the texture intensifies with a cycle of chords and widening gestures. Accompanying bass notes are offset from harmony changes by a semi-quaver, creating a delayed syncopation emancipating it from the repeating pulse. As the pianist reaches out further from the minor 2nd centre, time becomes increasingly elastic and the elements (melody, pulse, harmony, bass line) stagger with semi-quaver offsets becoming momentarily disjointed before calming back into the original groove.

At bar 22 the spell is broken and the music cascades down into a low semiquaver rumble on an E minor ninth chord. Within this busy texture, melodic fragments built on the delayed

semiquaver rhythmic motif propel the music forward and explore possibilities. At bar 54 a version of the opening melody appears above a bubbling semiquaver accompaniment. Small cells from the melody push the music toward its climax at bar 72, where from a resounding high B octave, clumsy dissonances fall a semiquaver later. The repeating B confidently guides the music through the harmony cycle once again, steadily narrowing in texture drawing the listener back in to the minor 2nd pulse from the opening, and a revisit from the themes of the opening section, albeit somewhat muted from before. The prelude ends as the minor 2nd finally breaks down into a single repeated, fading B note.

Prelude 2 (Track 2: February)

The thematic material was derived from a crude note cypher based on our names (fig 4), and structured in an additive way: each 2 bar repetition including more thematic information, thickening up the texture and leading to a climactic point (which occurs starting at bar 30).

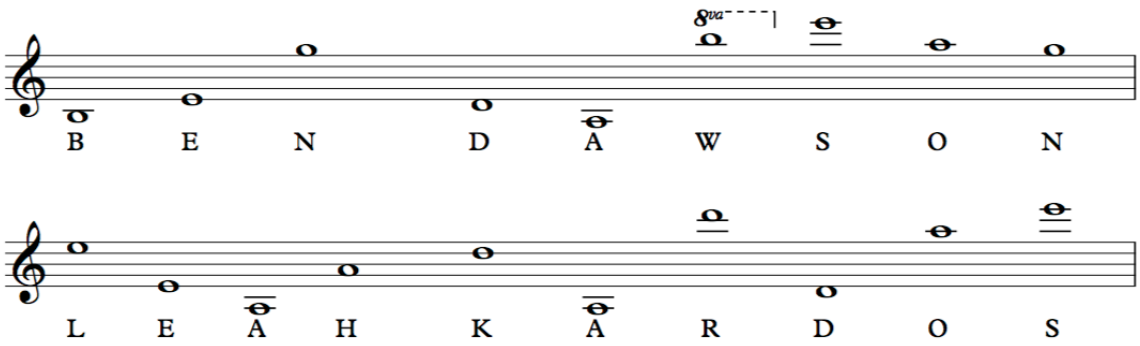

Fig. 4: The note cypher used for the melody Prelude 2. Some notes where sharpened or flattened to fit certain harmonies.

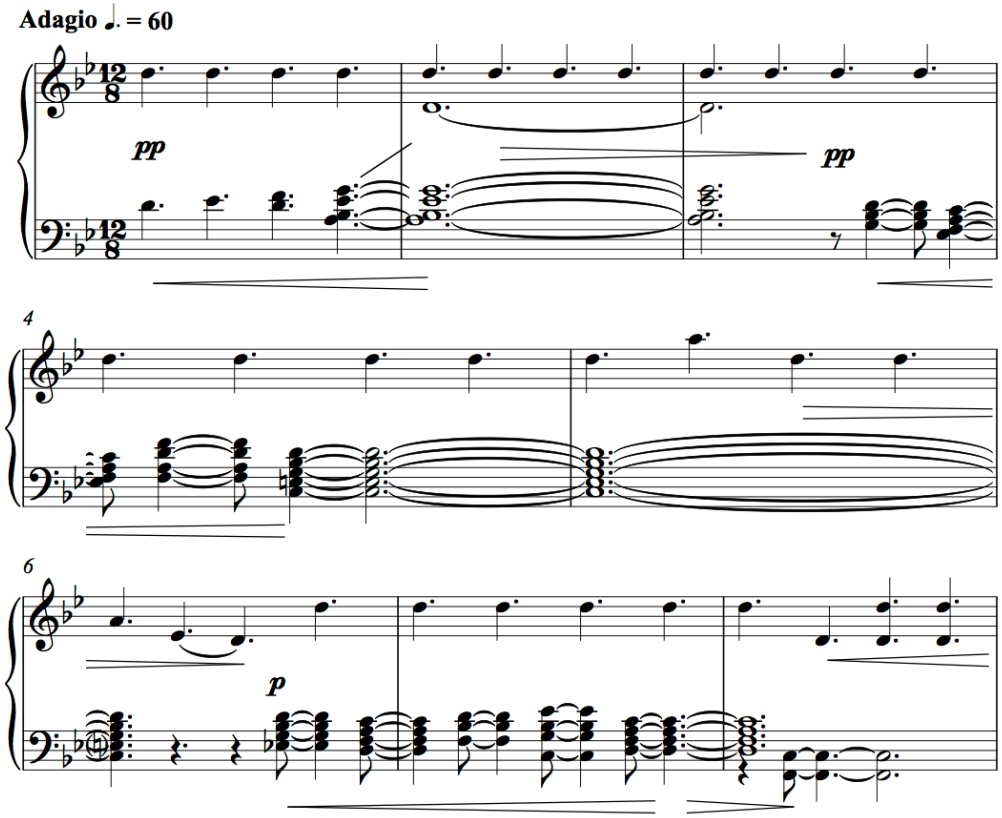

Fig. 5: Opening 8 bars of Prelude 2, showing the three different cycles of accompaniment rhythm

A distinguishing feature of this piece is the rhythm placement of the left hand harmonic accompaniment. While the right hand keeps a constant dotted crotchet pulse, the left hand harmony cycles through three rhythmic styles: together with the right hand, offset from the right hand by a quaver, and anticipating the right hand by a quaver (fig. 5). While tempo and meter remain unchanged, the left hand harmonies carry the emphasis confusing the pulse and implying the use of different time streams, or polytemporality. This rhythmic device alludes to the delayed syncopations that feature in Prelude 1.

Prelude 3 (Track 3: Hold Pattern)

Commencing with a repetitive 6/8 accompaniment figure in simple upward motions, the 'Hold Pattern' is a set cycle of harmonies (fig. 6) that repeat throughout the A section, interrupted by quick flourishes and mordents, and at the end of the cycle a moment of shifting rhythmic

emphasis that temporarily breaks away from the compound duple lilt (fig. 7). To me, the short florid interruptions to the regular pattern feel like attempts to escape and the end of cycle syncopations like a more muscular struggle away from the regularity of the theme.

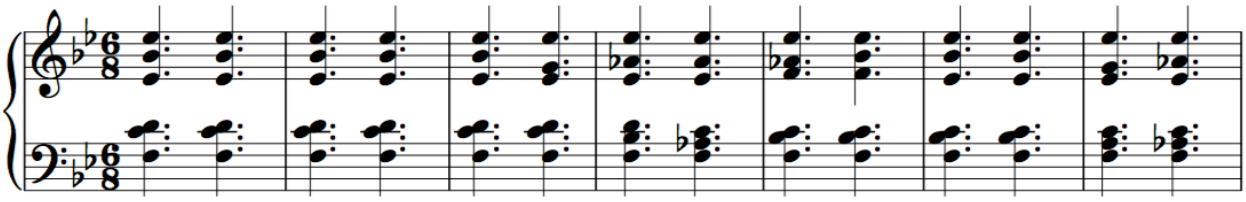

Fig. 6: The cycle of harmonies that make up the 'Hold Pattern'

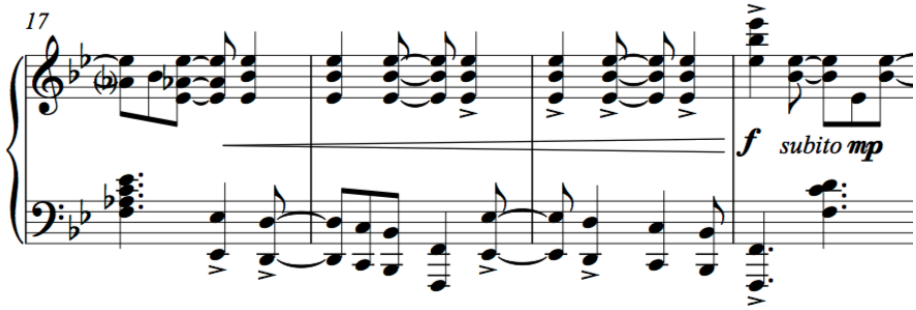

Fig. 7: (excerpt) at the end of the harmonic cycle a short section with a shift in rhythmic emphasis (from the second beat of bar 17 to the first beat of bar 20)

The B section commences from bar 42 and introduces new harmonic directions. As if trying to find a way out, the music explores and develops the motifs established in section A, travelling through light and shade, different harmonies and temporary tonal centres. From the second beat of bar 81, one last effort to escape is made leading finally to emancipation with an Eb5/F chord with the right hand Eb5 chord allowed to ring for an extended fermata.

January, Orann and Correction/E17

The three accompanying sound collage pieces on the *Three Preludes* EP utilise sound assets collected from the process of writing, rehearsing, collaborating and recording the three score-based preludes. The goal was to capitalise on the additional musical materials created from the various

recorded performance scenarios and to use post-production music technology to recycle these sounds into new works. With each piece I adopted a different approach in utilising such materials.

January is a wet and wintry soundscape made up of samples taken from the alternate recording takes, with the attack transient edited out leaving the ringing tails of sound without the note articulation. Some of these 'sound tails' were stretched out using flex algorithms in Logic Pro to become long drones and layered against each other to create a thick atmosphere. In this foggy soundscape, the opening notes of *February* (Prelude 2) sound, surrounded by the ringing tails of other sonorities, as though a multitude of tone colours are resonating in accompaniment. Percussion sounds from tapping the piano and adjusting the music stand combine with short, reverberant piano samples lift the piece from ambient melancholy to a more hopeful place.

Orann is a MIDI construction that makes use of two original sample instruments: one constructed completely out of all of the "mistakes" collected on the way, the other a virtual 'drum kit' comprising manipulated sounds sampled from a squeaky piano chair. In building my archive of usable sounds, a "mistake" would be any piano note that was played unintentionally. These were edited and assigned to a pitch on my sampler instrument - to make the composition process even more fun I made sure that the pitches of the sample were nowhere near matching the assigned pitch on the sampler. The music was then composed in the piano roll[2] of Logic Pro, with programmed MIDI notes triggering the collected samples (fig. 8). The various samples of the squeaky piano chair were variously EQ's, compressed, distorted and otherwise manipulated to render them usable for the style and context of the piece. A solitary low piano note was used to create a pitch correct "bass" sample, which was used to balance out the mix.

'Piano Roll' refers to the standard MIDI note editor in the Logic Po DAW

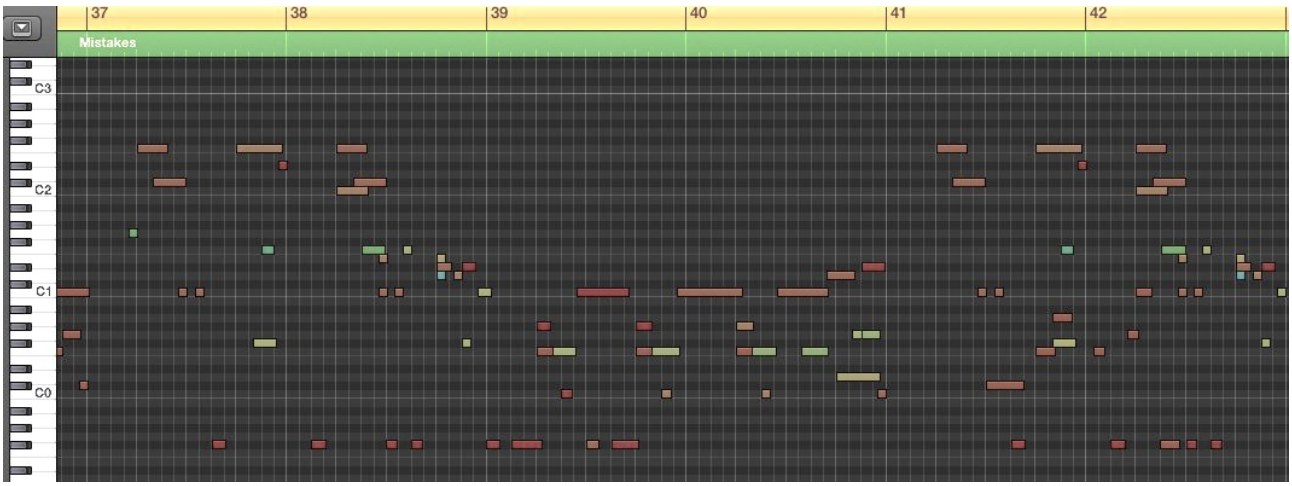

Fig. 8: a screen shot of an example of the piano roll MIDI programming for the 'Mistakes" sampler instrument in Orann

Correction/E17 focusses on a rehearsal session in a London flat (postcode E17) and features a section of *Prelude 1* in repeated slow practice (fig. 9). This snippet was slowed down even further, treated with a low pass filter, bussed to an auxiliary effects channel and sent through a spectral blurring effect, and formed into a slightly lop-sided loop resulting in an atmospheric, warm but muted ostinato. Placed on top of this looping soundscape are single notes extracted from Prelude 1, filtered to only allow the low warm frequencies through. In the closing moments we hear the actual rehearsal at full speed from a microphone in the adjoining room, complete with E17 traffic noise floating in from an open window.

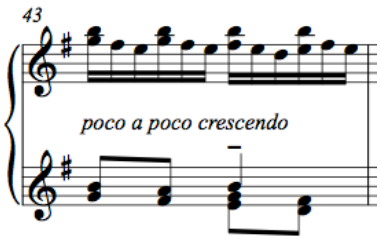

Fig. 9: the section of rehearsed music from *Prelude 1* that was looped and treated, forming the basis of *Correction/E17*.

Summary reflection

I very much enjoyed creating these score-based compositions; partly because they were a deviation from my regular studio-based creative practice, and partly because of the collaborative nature of the music's realisation and the unknowable diversity of the results. Working with pen and paper feels very different to clicking on a screen, very different again from notating and editing an improvisation, worlds away from using digital tools to cut wave forms and stretch transients. In my experience these modes of engagement (Brown 2001) with the writing process and with the materials of music and sound themselves dramatically inform the result. When working on the score I am generally not focussed on the spatial spectral qualities of the notes I'm writing; with the audio editing tools I am less concerned about the harmonic analysis or thematic tightness. I found that forcing a crossover in thinking opened up interesting creative opportunities. Similarly, a deliberate switching of the primary text from score to recording (and possibly back again when the time comes to perform these works in the future), allows for cross-pollination of ideas, priorities, approaches and processes, for the generation of a wealth of diverse and original materials from a single compositional starting point, provides an economical approach to theme, the creation of a unique sound world, and a diverse, yet finite framework within which to explore possibilities and experiment. By meditating on the shifting states of music and sound, I gained insight into how ideas grow through collaboration, the value of human filters or 'people processes' (Nyman 1999) as a creative work the score can be the starting point of a creative process, the raw materials that are activated by people, realised into a temporary physical existence, tempered by years and experience and training, talents and personal taste. Here, the final recorded production offers a version of the work and a document of this process. From working this way I have gained insight into my own evolving musicality; a new appreciation and understanding into how musical ideas can develop and

become refined through collaboration; a deep and continuing fascination with the unique ephemeral magic of music performance occurring in real time.

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Moore, Allan. “Authenticity as Authentication”, *Popular Music* 21 (2002): 209–223.

Nyman, Michael. Experimental music: Cage and beyond. Vol. 9. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

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Three Preludes

for Ben Dawson on his thirtieth birthday

Leah Kardos

I.

Leah Kardos

Adagio ♩ = 60

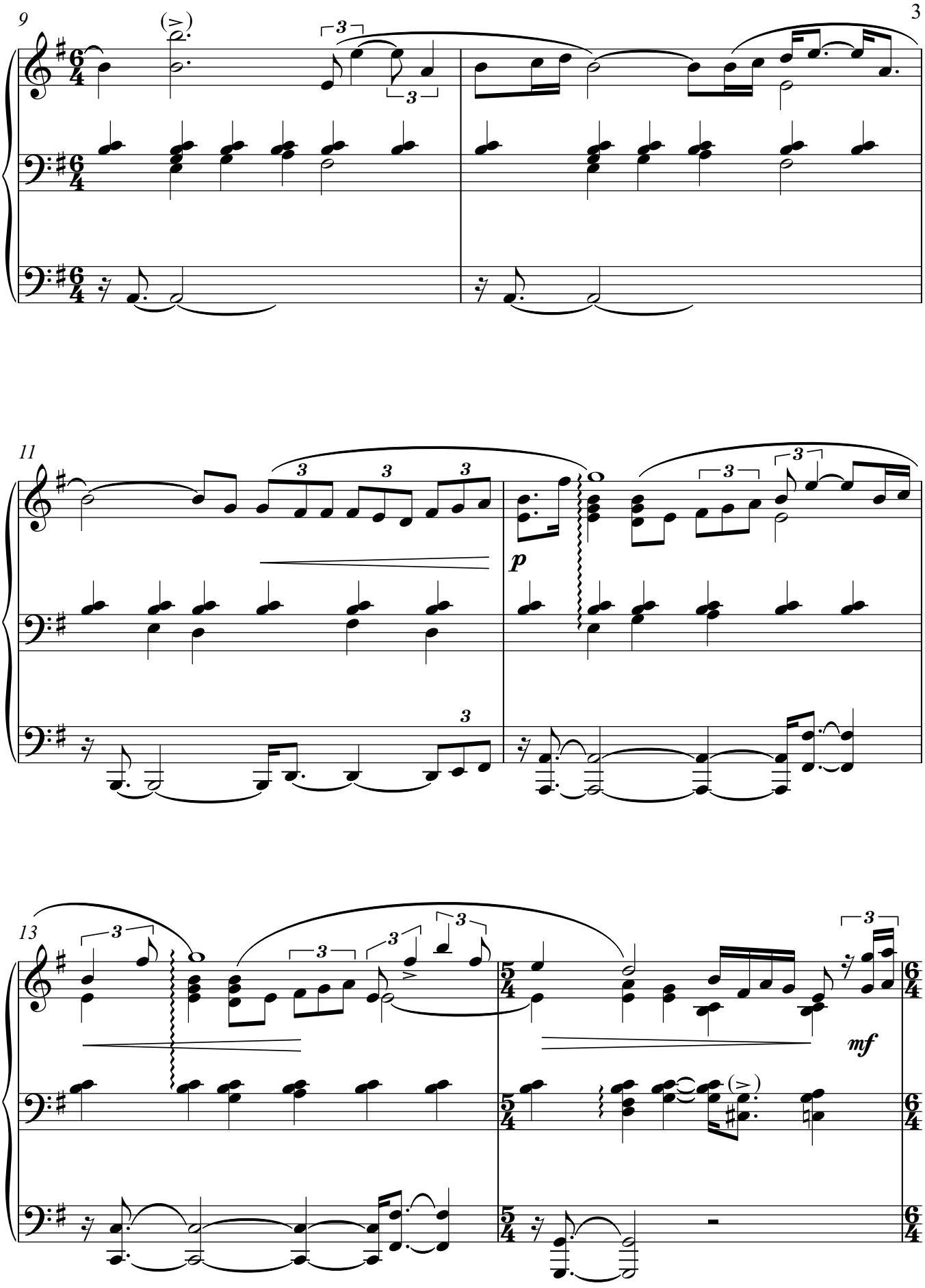
Piano

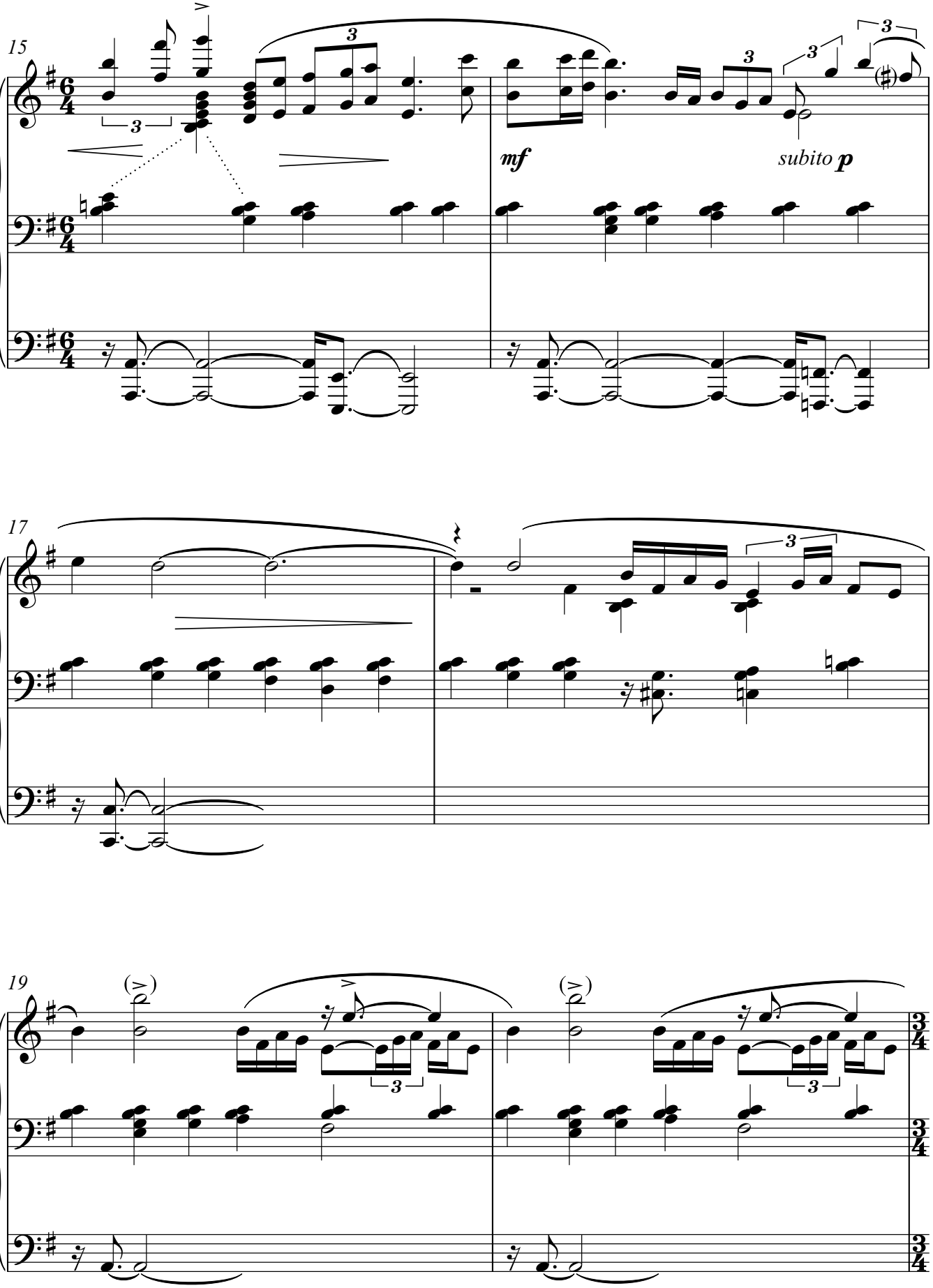
pp

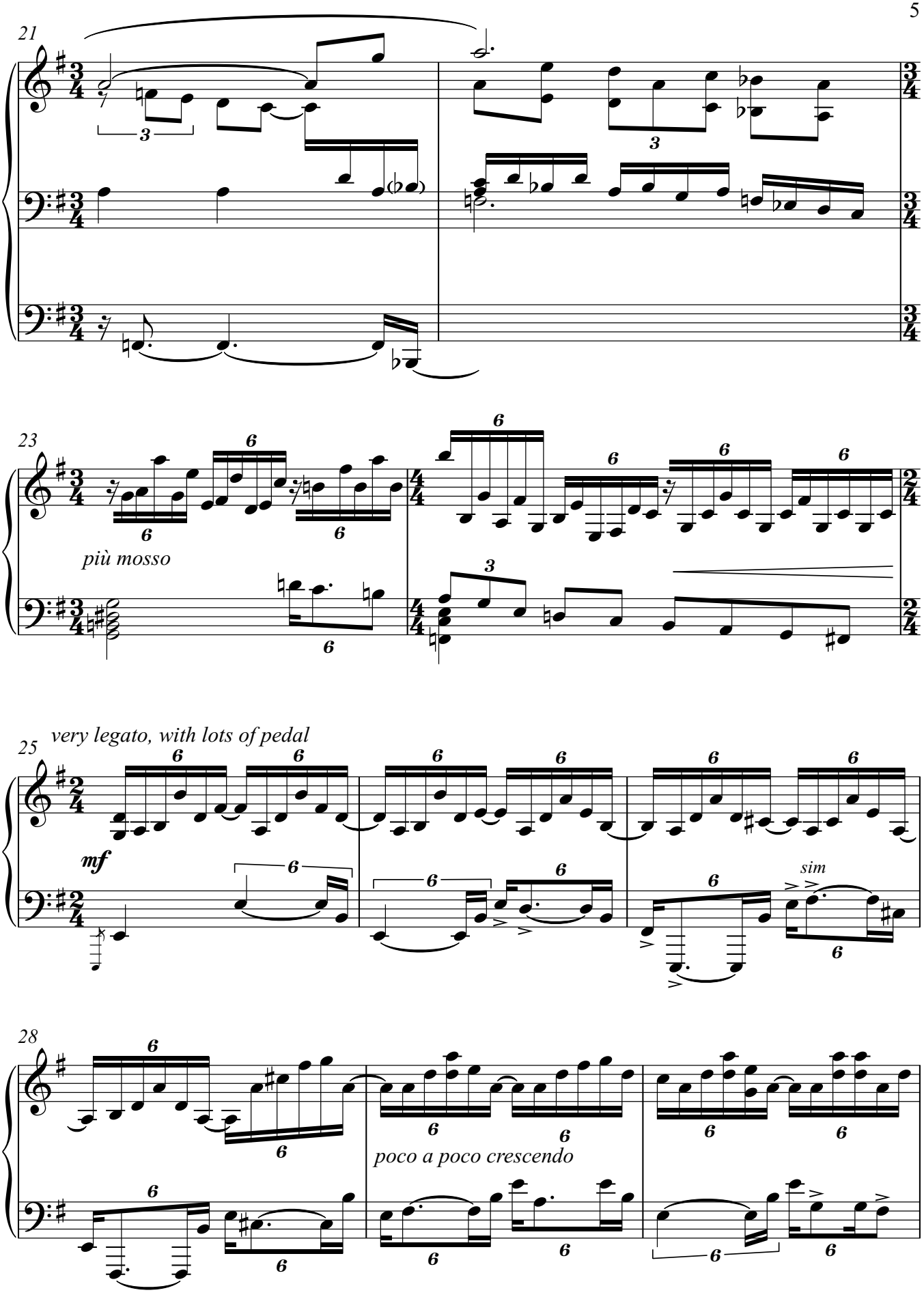
4

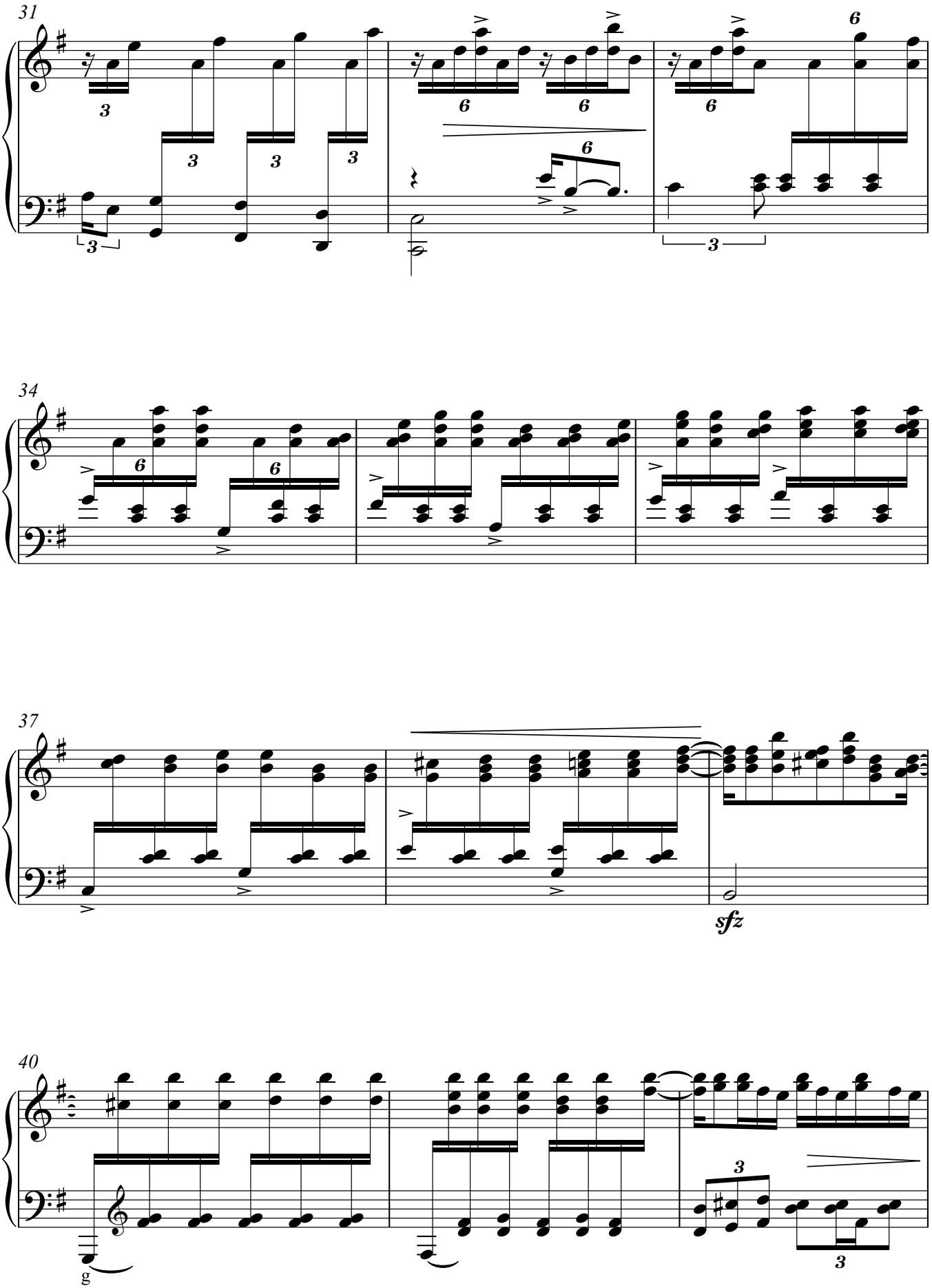
7

pp


9
11
13
p
mf


15
mf
subito p
17
19


21
23
più mosso
25
very legato, with lots of pedal
mf
sim
28
poco a poco crescendo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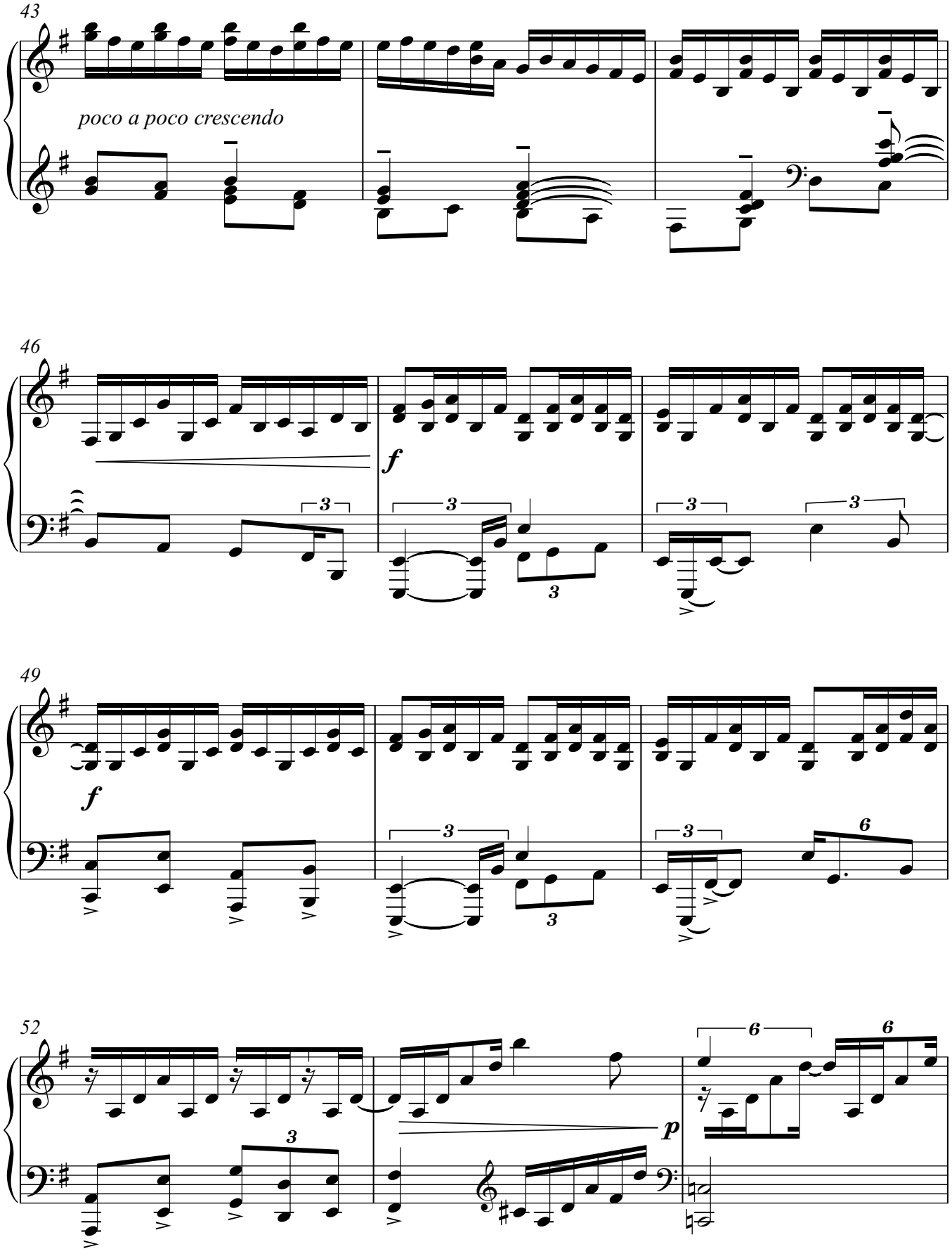
34
37
sfz
40
g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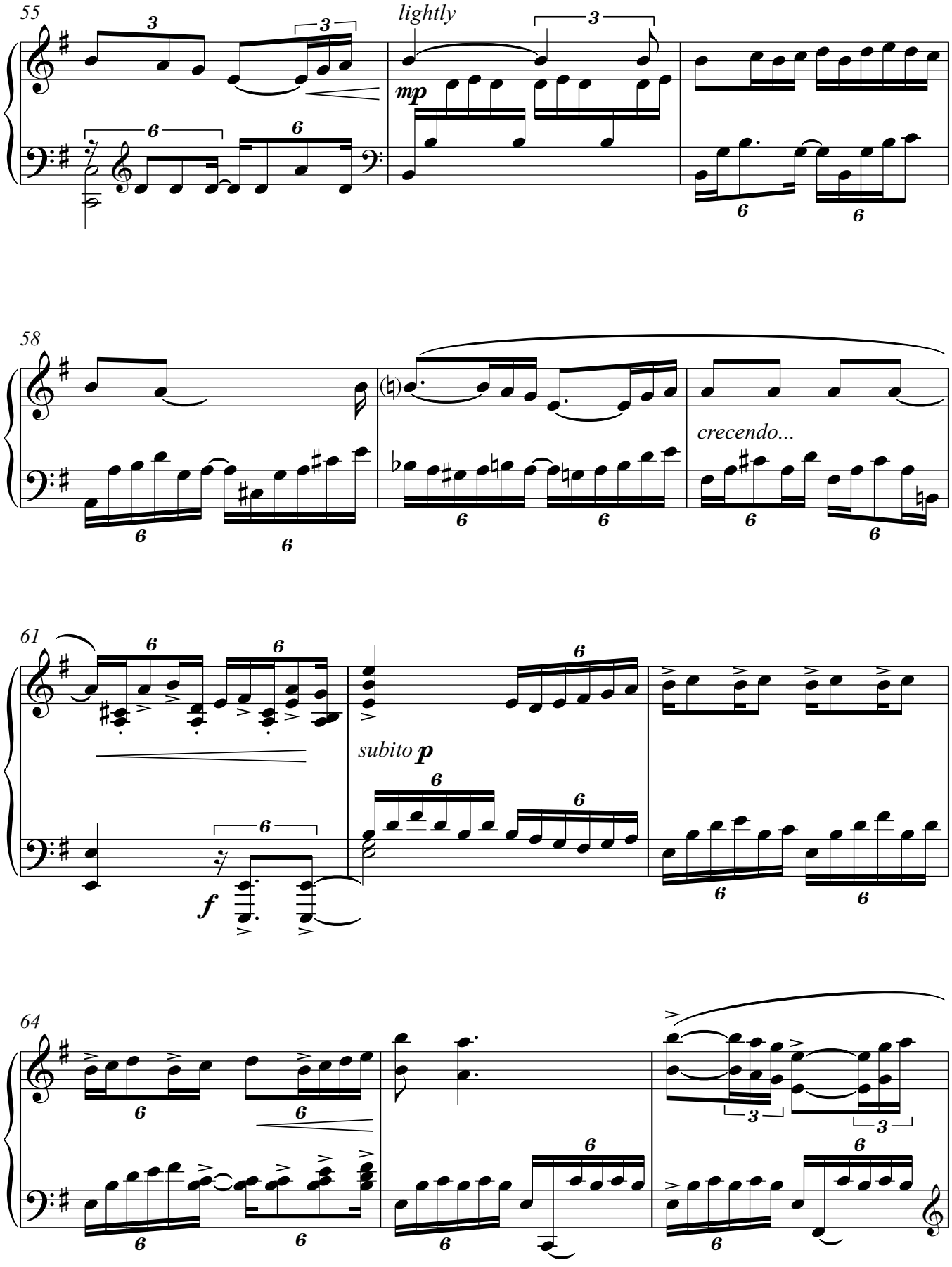
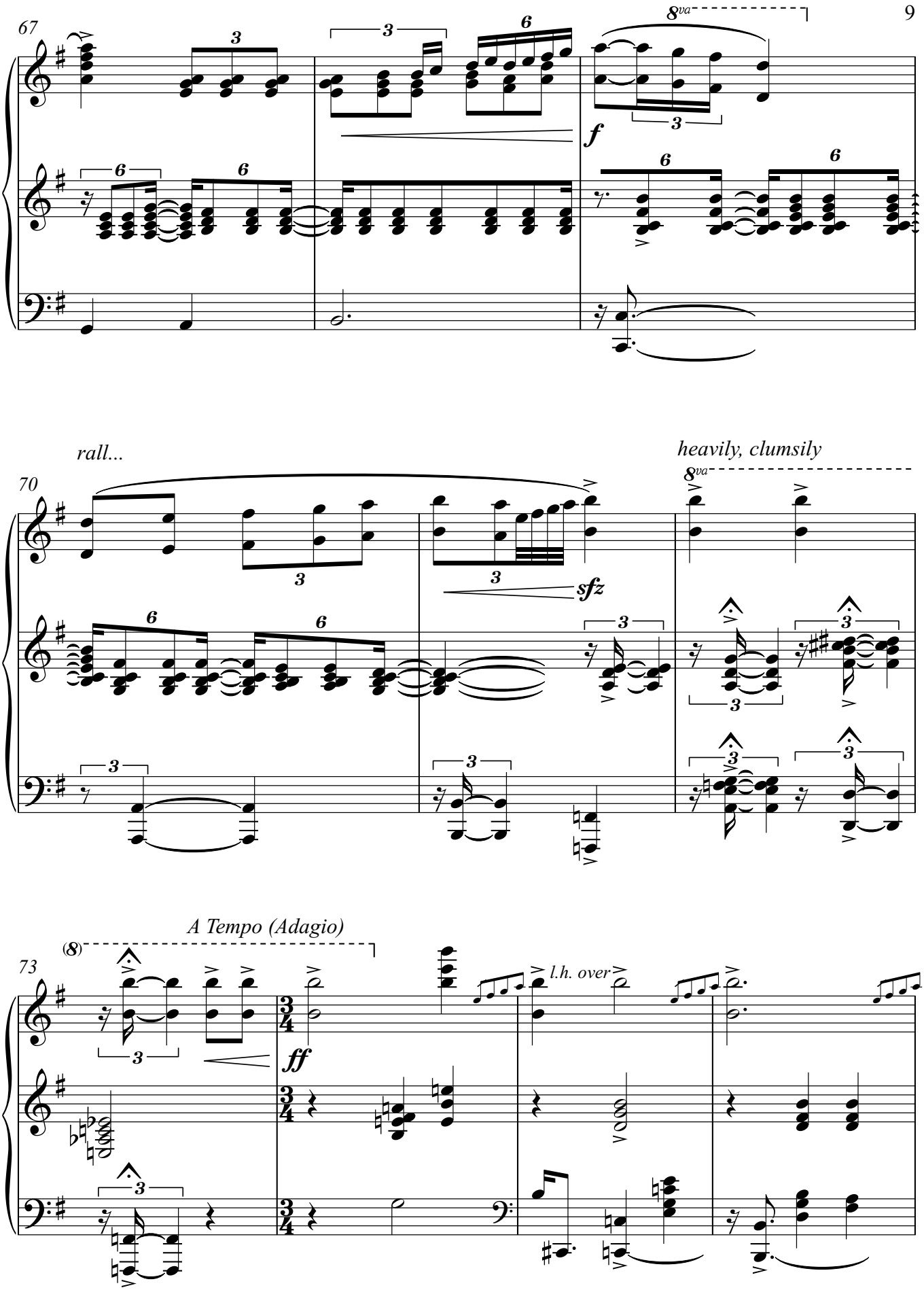
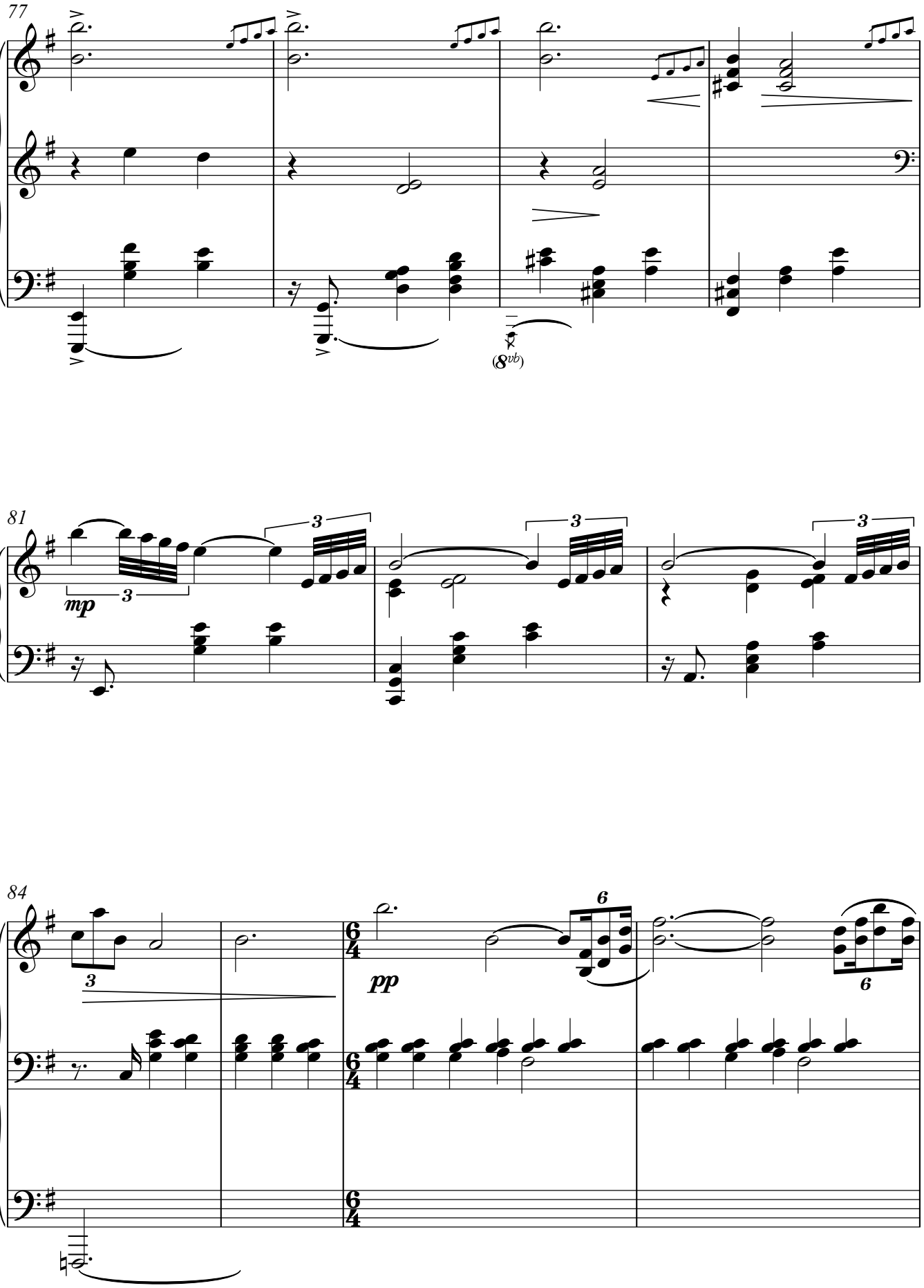
poco a poco crescendo
46
f
3
49
f
3
6
52
p
6


55
lightly
mp
58
crecendo...
61
subito p
f
64


67
8va
f
rall...
70
heavily, clumsily
8va
sfz
A Tempo (Adagio)
73
(8)
ff
l.h. over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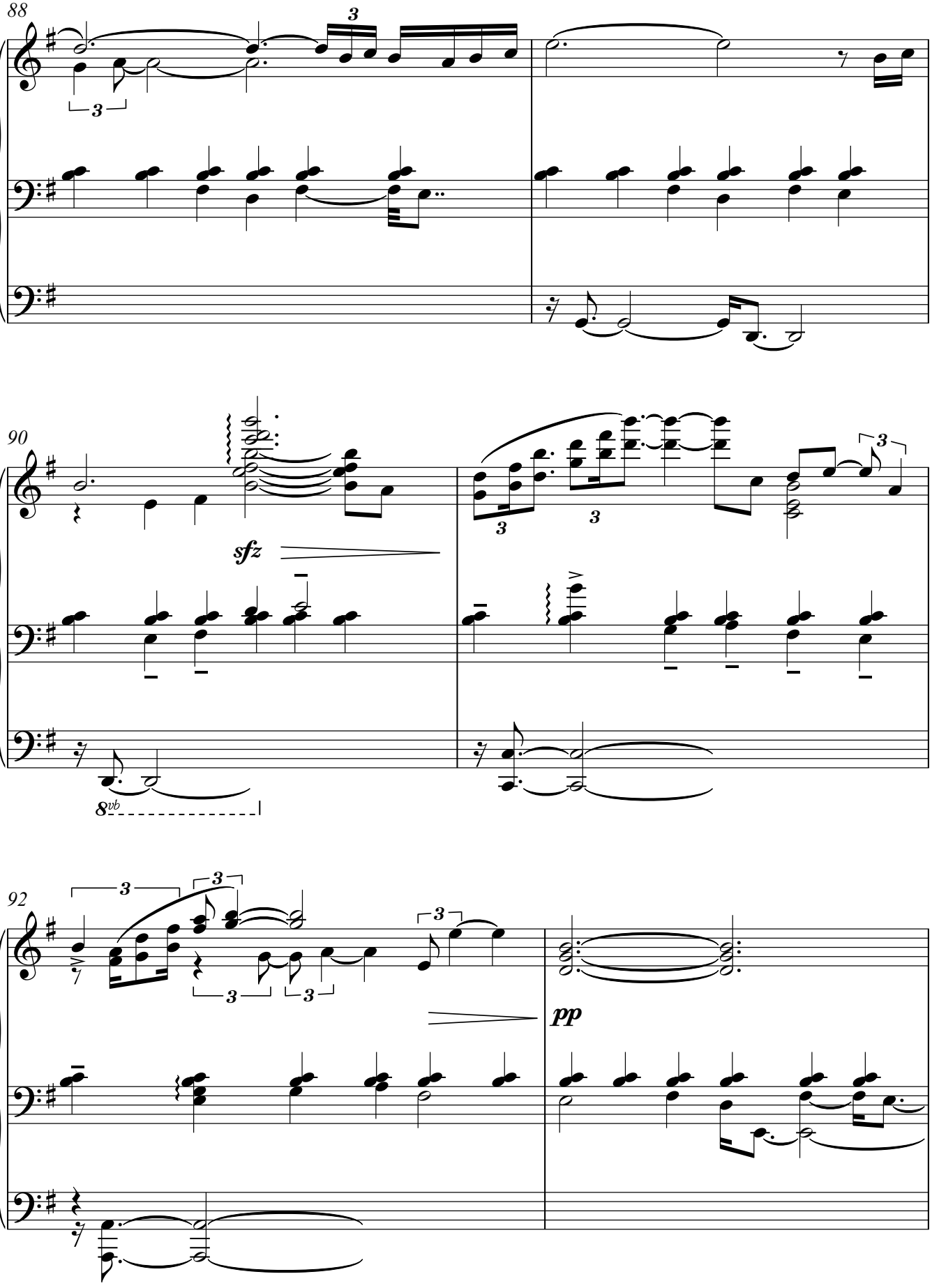
(8vb)
81
mp
3
84
pp
6
6/4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3
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8vb
92
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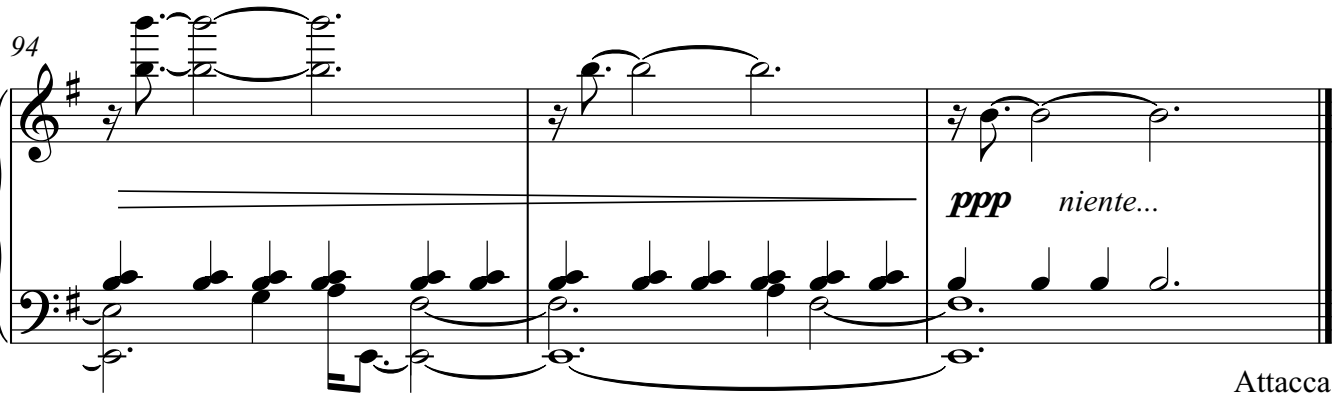


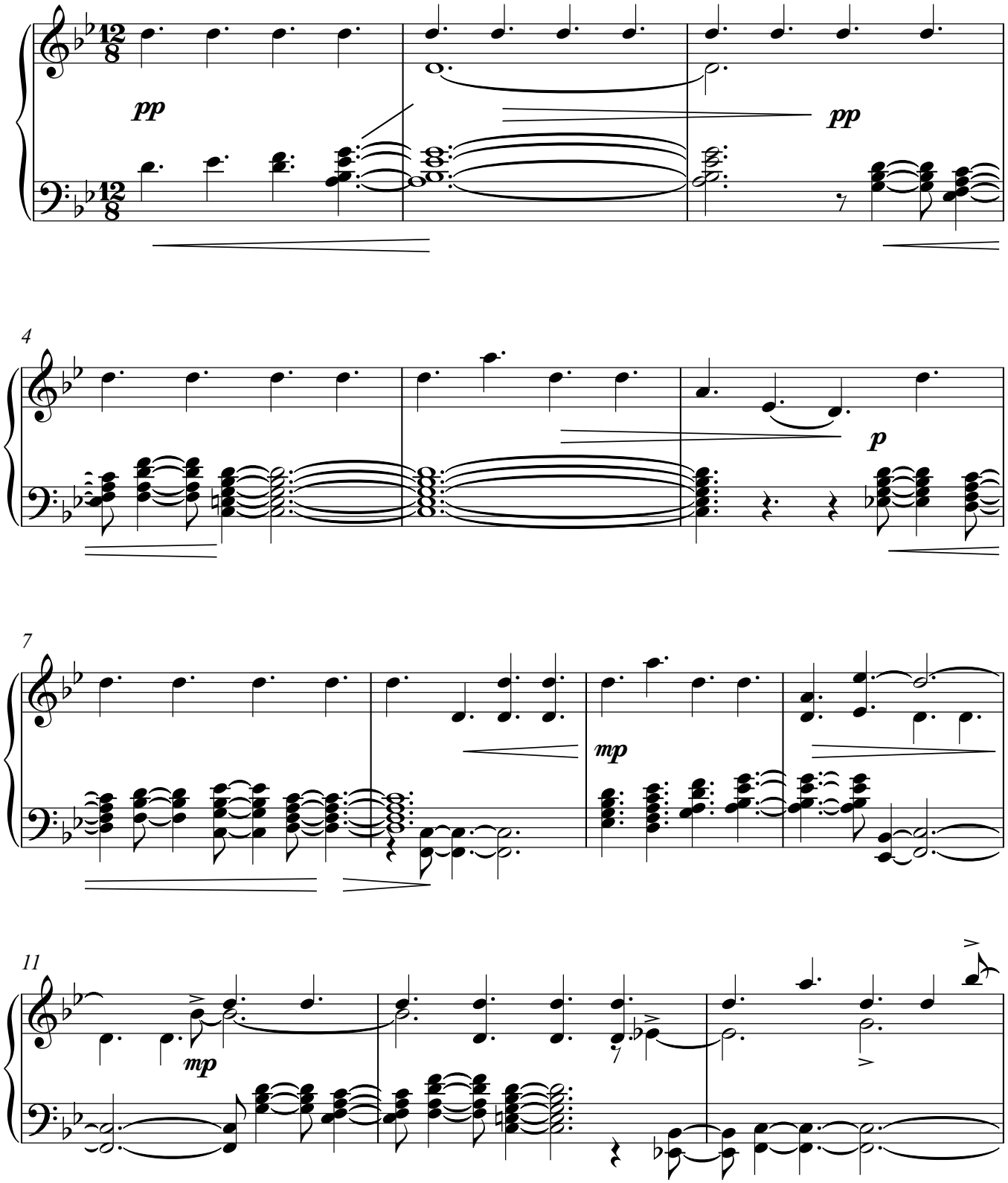
Attacca

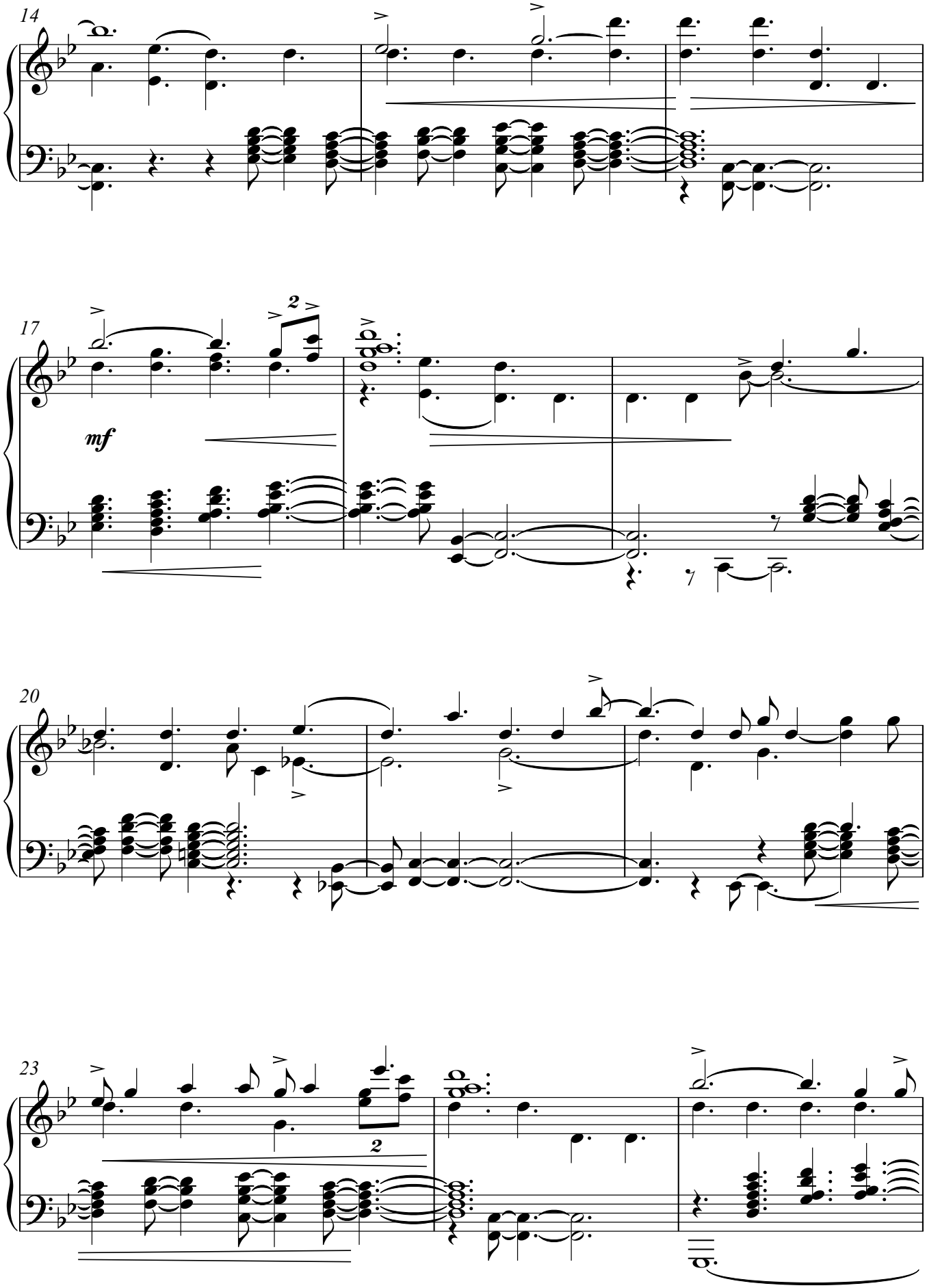
II.

Continue with same pulse. RH like a ticking clock or dripping tap; LH like breathing.

Leah Kardos

Adagio ♩. **= 60**

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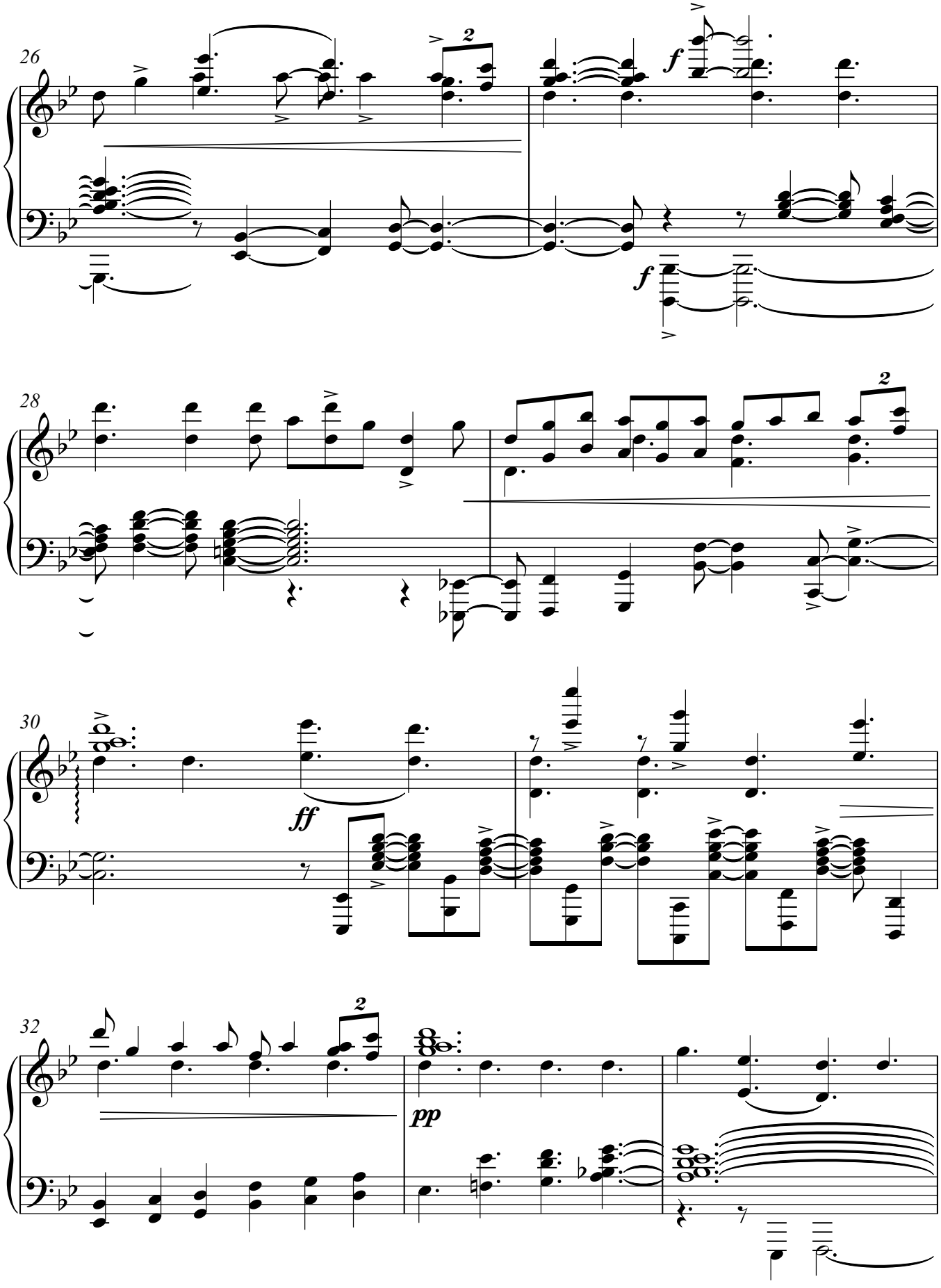
17
mf
2
20
23
2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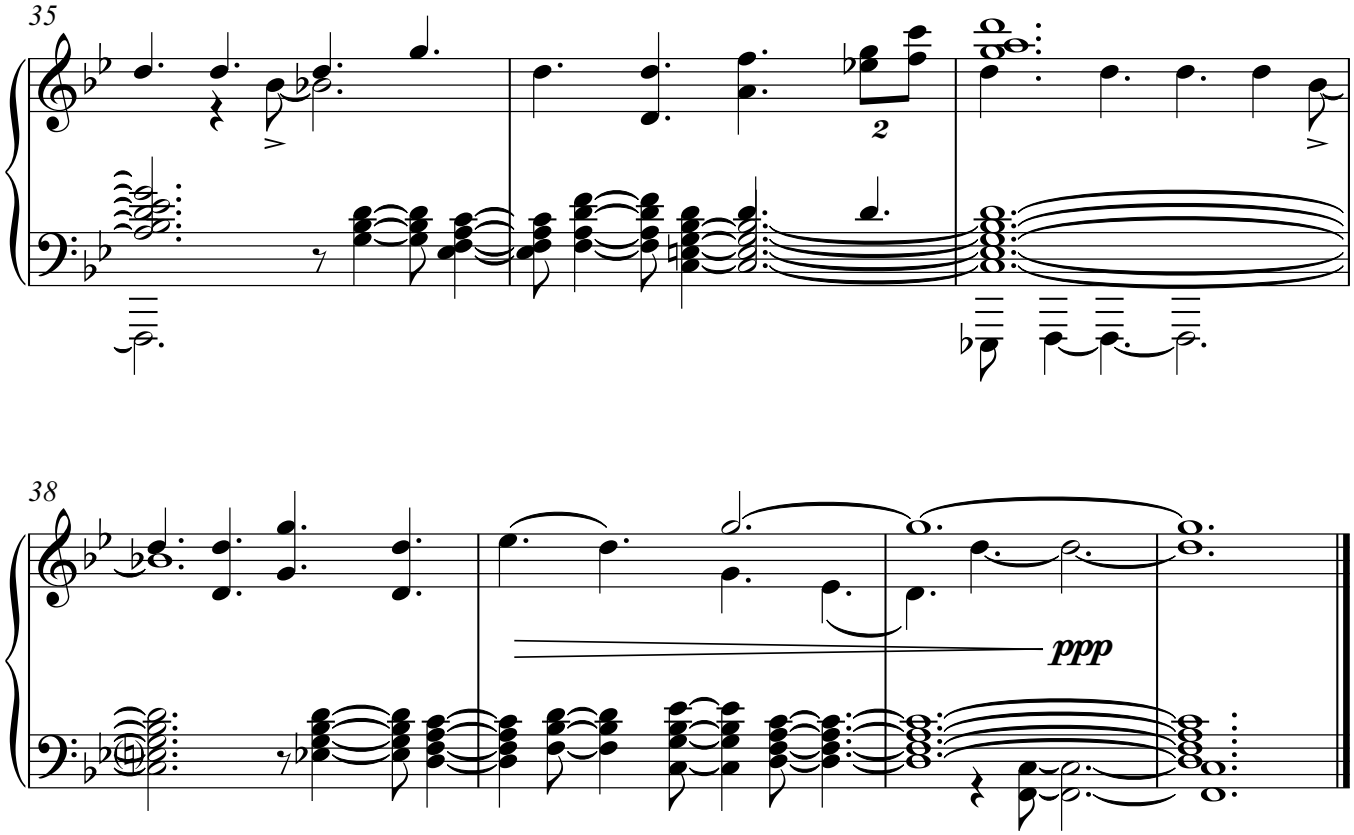
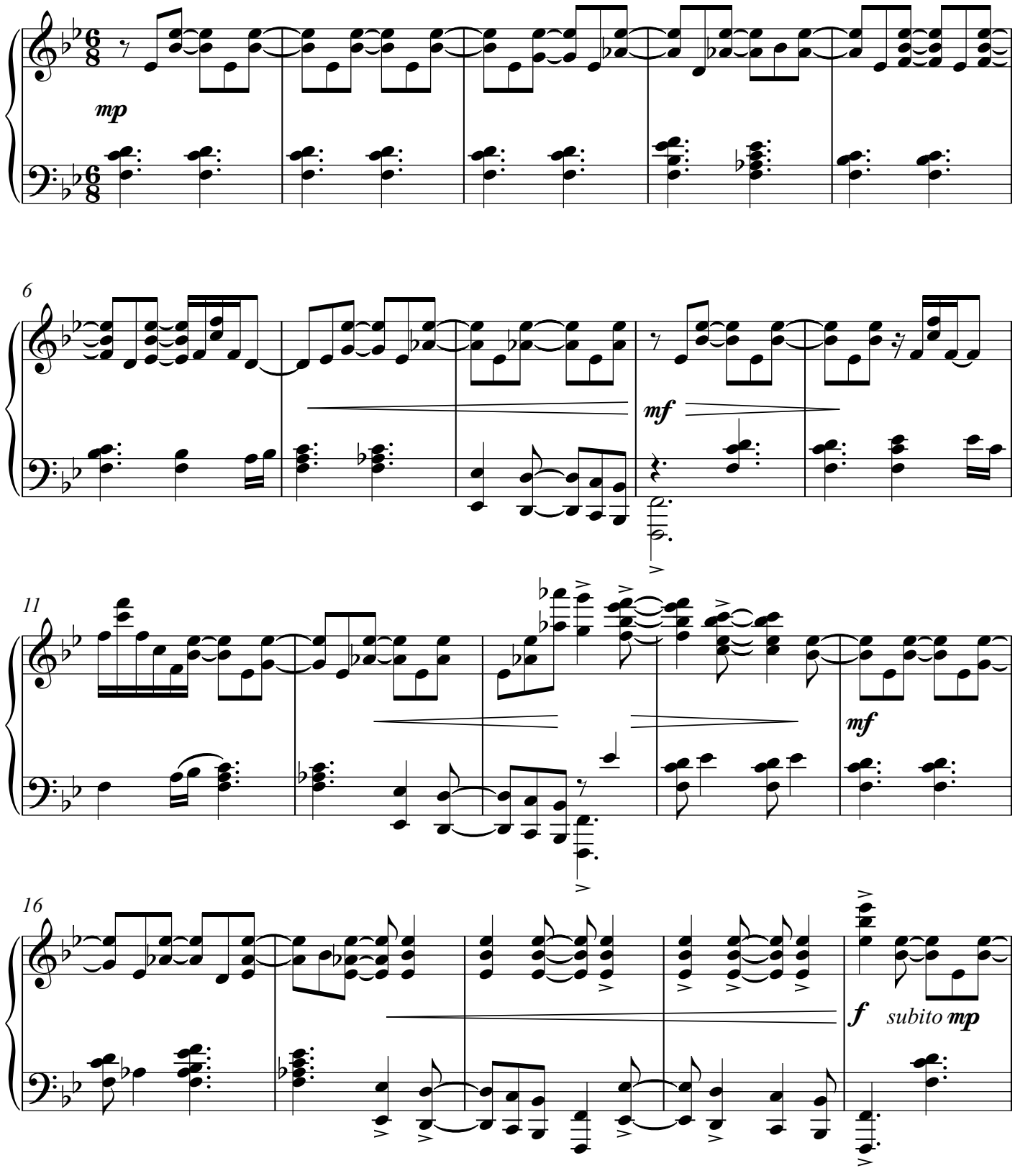
f
f
28
2
30
ff
32
2
pp

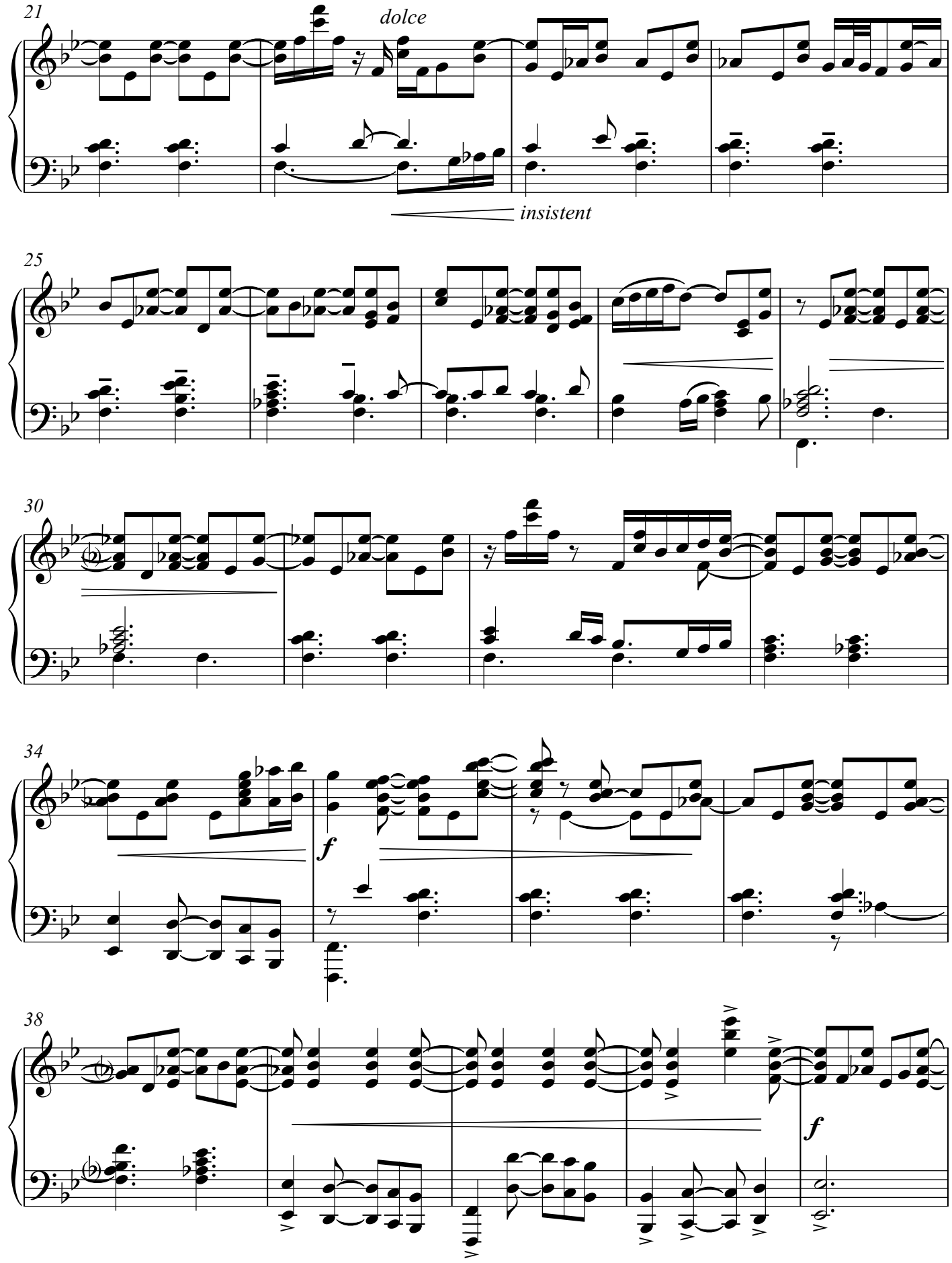

35
2
38
ppp

III.

Leah Kardos

Easy, gentle ♩. = 70

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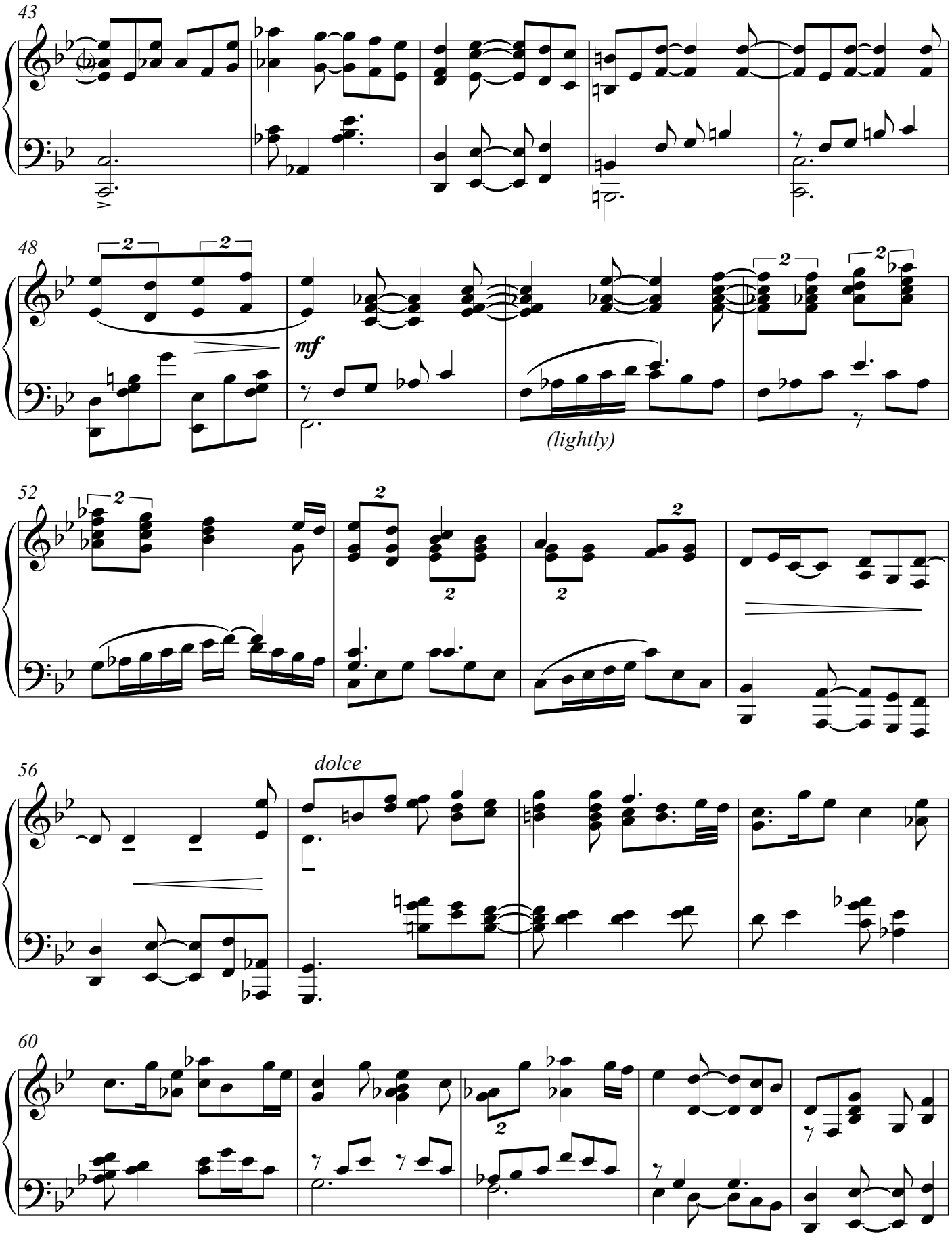
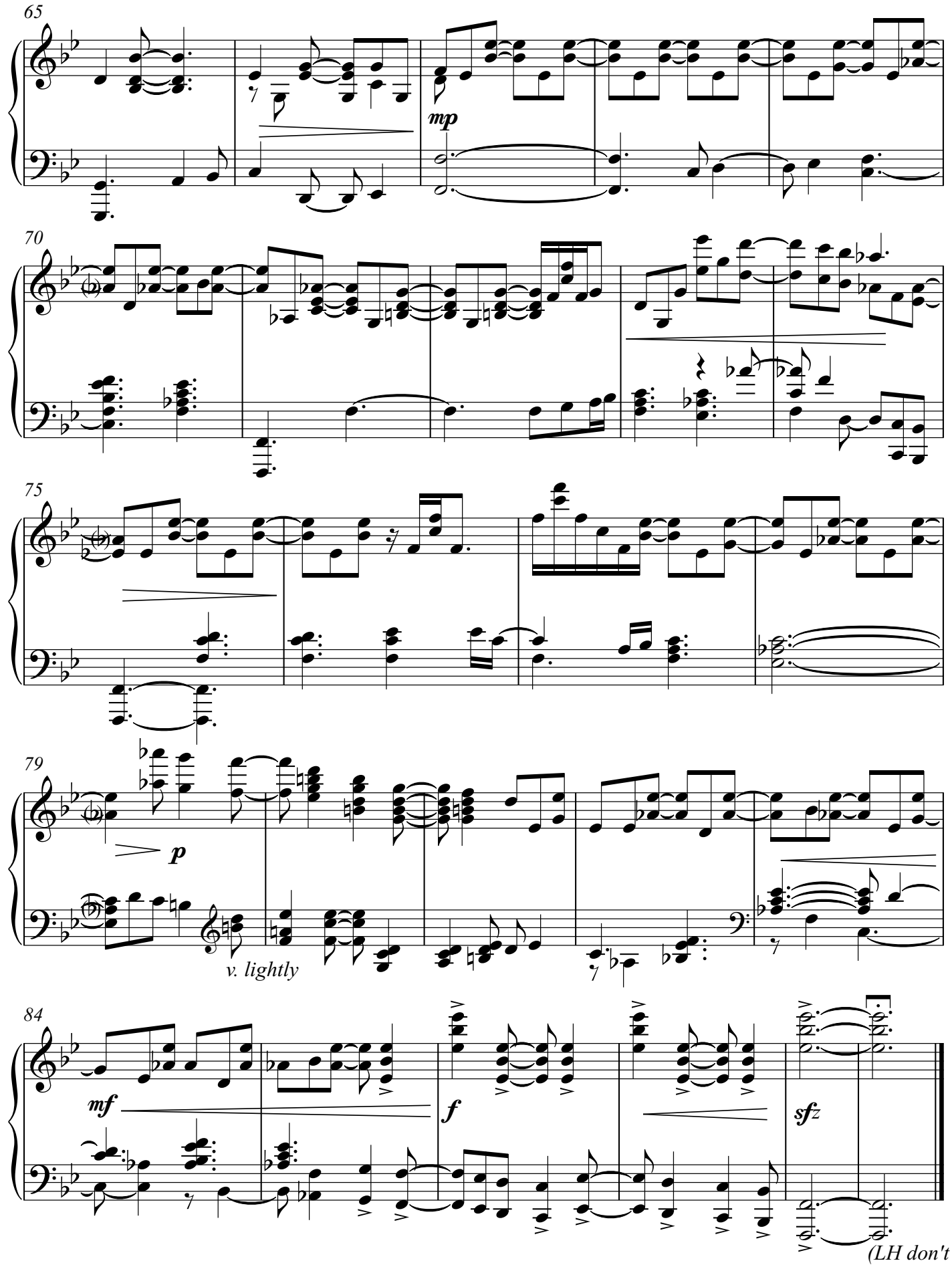
dolce
insistent
25
30
34
f
38
f


43
48
mf
(lightly)
52
56
dolce
60


65
mp
70
75
79
p
v. lightly
84
mf
f
sfz
(LH don't hold)