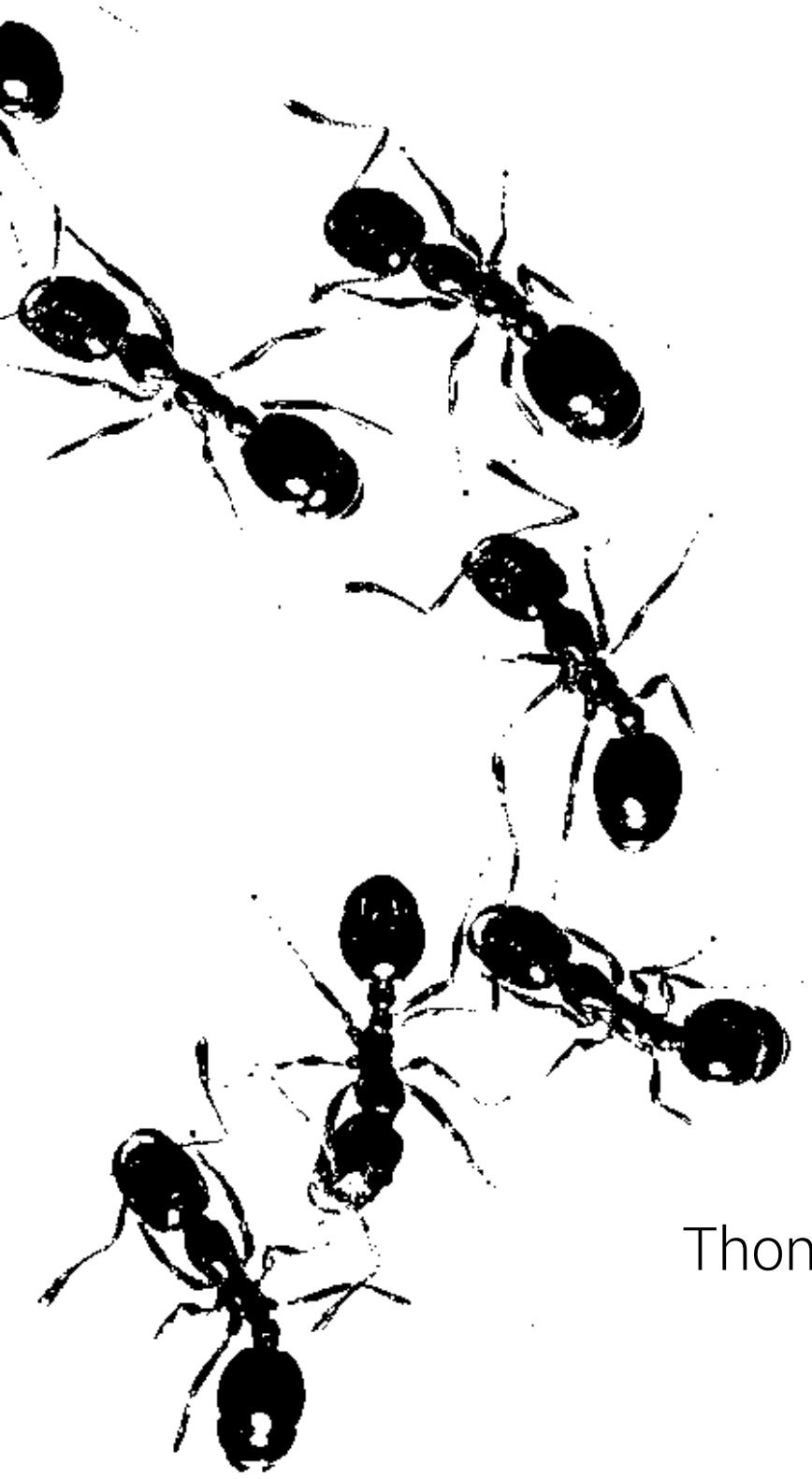


Invertebrate Counterpoint

for solo piano

Thomas J. Dempster (BMI)

Copyright © 2015 Thomas J Dempster :: All Rights Reserved

Please report all performances of this work to BMI (Broadcast Music Incorporated).

Visit the composer's website at www.thomasdempster.com

Invertebrate Counterpoint

for solo piano

Thomas J. Dempster

for Jacob Clark, bad-ass piano player

West Columbia, SC

November 2014 – January 2015

Copyright © 2015 Thomas J Dempster

Invertebrate Counterpoint (2015) – Duration: ca. 18 minutes

I.	ant	(ca 2:55)
II.	grasshopper	(ca 4:05)
III.	cockroach	(ca 1:45)
IV.	butterfly	(ca 2:05)
V.	spider	(ca 2:40)
VI.	dragonfly	(ca 4:40)

Program Notes

One day, back in 2013 or early 2014, I was talking with my friend Jacob Clark, dedicatee of this piece, about a solo piano work. Jacob suggested I write some short character pieces. Immediately, insects jumped into my head. (Quite literally, a mosquito flew into my ear.) The phrase "invertebrate counterpoint" (a play on invertible counterpoint) suddenly illuminated in fiery orange in front of me. Short pieces about various insects describing their quirks, features, or habits.

But I hate practically all insects. So this would be a challenge. Luckily, I admire spiders for their webmaking and hunting prowess (and that they're not technically insects), and I have never met a dragonfly I didn't like. And who could hate butterflies? So, one half of the piece's subject material I can tolerate. The other half? Let's say there's a spray for that.

The work is in six movements, profiling six animals, because most of them have six legs. The six idea comes back in numerous ways (intervals, phrases, iterations, and on), and each movement starts (and sometimes ends) with the first letter of each critter named. Those initial letters help create a good chunk of the basis of the work. Other little niblets – like the flit of a butterfly, the two sections of a spider – all surface and have their moments, if brief. Otherwise, the gestural or thematic ideas of the sting of an ant, the leap of a grasshopper, and on, are more figuratively wrought throughout the work.

What follows is a short biography of each movement. (These don't have to be included in program notes; I figured they'd be helpful for performers, however.)

Ant: In 1984, I was stung by a fire ant swarm over 200 times – over nearly 40% of my body – when my family and I lived in Georgia. Either because of this or in spite of it, watching the robotic parade of ants as they march on, regimented, gathering food or moving sand grains, has appealed to me. Still, these are weird creatures, with disproportionately large eyes and jaws, with a stop-and-start method of marching that sometimes looks more like an awkward middle school gym class line dance. The ants come and go, working all summer, passing each other, fending off intruders, until the weather starts to turn, driving the ants into the ground, suddenly stopped by the cold, but not before some frenzied last-minute loose ends within the colony.

Grasshopper: I have an ineffable fear of these bizarre creatures. The elegant, bristly, elongated body is capped by this expressionless dome, an alien helmet; the insect moves slowly, and when perched is less than lifeless. But the sudden leap – while I know it's coming – always sends a shudder of raw, visceral terror through me. It snaps on the same tone while in flight, and then starts walking, losing its elegance, toward a sweet spot on a leaf. In a manner that would make H R Giger blush, the grasshopper's jaws eviscerate a tender leaf. And then, stillness.

Cockroach: Even the hardiest of us hate these pointless creatures, even if releasing a silent scream. It either runs or moves one deliberate step at a time, and then it scurries unpredictably right where we don't want it to go. It's a greasy, dirty, awful thing that has this stench to it, like low tones hanging sludgily in a room. In my house, and I suspect many others, there's a ruckus and path of destruction while chasing it down. Eventually, the final crude smash with a tennis shoe takes care of everything. Or maybe it's a boot. Whatever it is, be damned sure it gets the job done. There will be more.

Butterfly: The rapid flaps, unpredictable movement, and soaring hover on a breeze awash with color: the butterfly – in my mind, the swallowtails and skippers glow in the gold of late summer, the shimmer of colors true for a few moments before the fliers land, gently, and close their wings before dusk.

Spider: Eight legs, eight fingers (two thumbs, two sections). Eight pitches for most of the movement: framed around shifting and dissolving octatonic collections, "spider" spins her web, sets her traps, pounces on prey, and otherwise stalks, intensely still, in her corners, just barely outside her nest. She flies and spins her web, circling round, and as light recedes, she backs into a hidden stretch of web, waiting for her next meal…

Dragonfly: The transparent, lacy wings that shine in the sun and the beautiful spotted or striped or segmented colors – particularly of the banded pennant (*Celithemis fasciata*) and the red-veined pennant (*Celithemis bertha*) – belie the athletic prowess and aerobatic precision of these creatures that can hover, change directions instantaneously, and have been observed to maintain tight patterns when hunting for food and when taking drinks of nectar. Through mid-summer through autumn, my yard and gardens are hosts to at least a dozen species of dragonflies, who pose no threat to humans, and will occasionally land on outstretched fingers, shake their wings a few times, and thankful for the rest, lift off…

Performance Notes:

I: ant –

In the first dozen or so measures, these right-hand marcato notes should be thought of as ant bites/stings. They should sear and soar above the *Bebung* left hand.

The arpeggiated figures in mm. 11-12 and 19-20 can be taken *ad lib.* though should strive to remain close to the pulse.

Hand distributions are merely suggestions (throughout much of the piece). Do what works best for you.

The offbeat lefthand at measure 38 should be as light as possible. Some poor little ant got off step and gets violently corrected in m. 44. Same approach from mm. 53-56, except here the Queen is setting the tone…

Mm. 69, 72, and 79-80 should be as dramatically different and as blurred as possible to simulate an insect being nearly killed by the autumn frosts

The metronome marking at m. 87 is a suggestion; go as fast as possible there, whether it's faster or slower than marked. This is the frenetic push to get all the winter supplies collection going before the last worker drone drops dead from the cold.

II: grasshopper –

Imagine the slender, bizarre grasshopper holding still and barely twitching its antennae and then leaping directly into your face. That's first 21 measures.

At m. 46, the grasshopper is walking, moving its weird legs, looking clumsy and rather inelegant. Like a possum crossing a highway, the grasshopper trying to walk is both hilarious and terrifying.

III: cockroach –

The diatonic cluster in m.4 doesn't necessarily be the one marked so long as it's all white-keys in the lowest reaches of the piano. I want the resonance and chilling reverb to ooze through the performance space.

At measure 21, the chase is on.

You can palm the last chord/cluster in the last measure. Pitches are notated for theoretically completeness only.

IV: butterfly –

On to the insects/animals I don't hate!

Distributions are suggestions. Your mileage may vary.

Lightness, crispness, and absent-minded flakiness are necessary here.

Please observe the downward (m. 28, 32, et al) and upward (m. 19, et al) arpeggiations.

There are small quotations in the movement. Find them all for a prize!

V: spider –

Pitches in the box/cells should be repeated and varied ad lib, as quickly as possible. Create a veritable web that's blurry and cloudy.

VI: dragonfly –

At m. 12, you can take this a bit more *ad lib.* than shown.

Please take your time and enjoy the colors from m. 16 to m. 19.

Imagine a banded pennant moving in slow motion here, the reverie being disrupted in m. 41 as the dragonfly moves abruptly, obliquely, and suddenly through the open sky, landing on a coneflower at m. 50.

invertebrate counterpoint

I: ant

Thomas J. Dempster

Marching. A little wayward. ♩ = 112-116

Piano

p *distribute hands ad lib.*

4

f *f* *p* *p*

7

f *p*

10

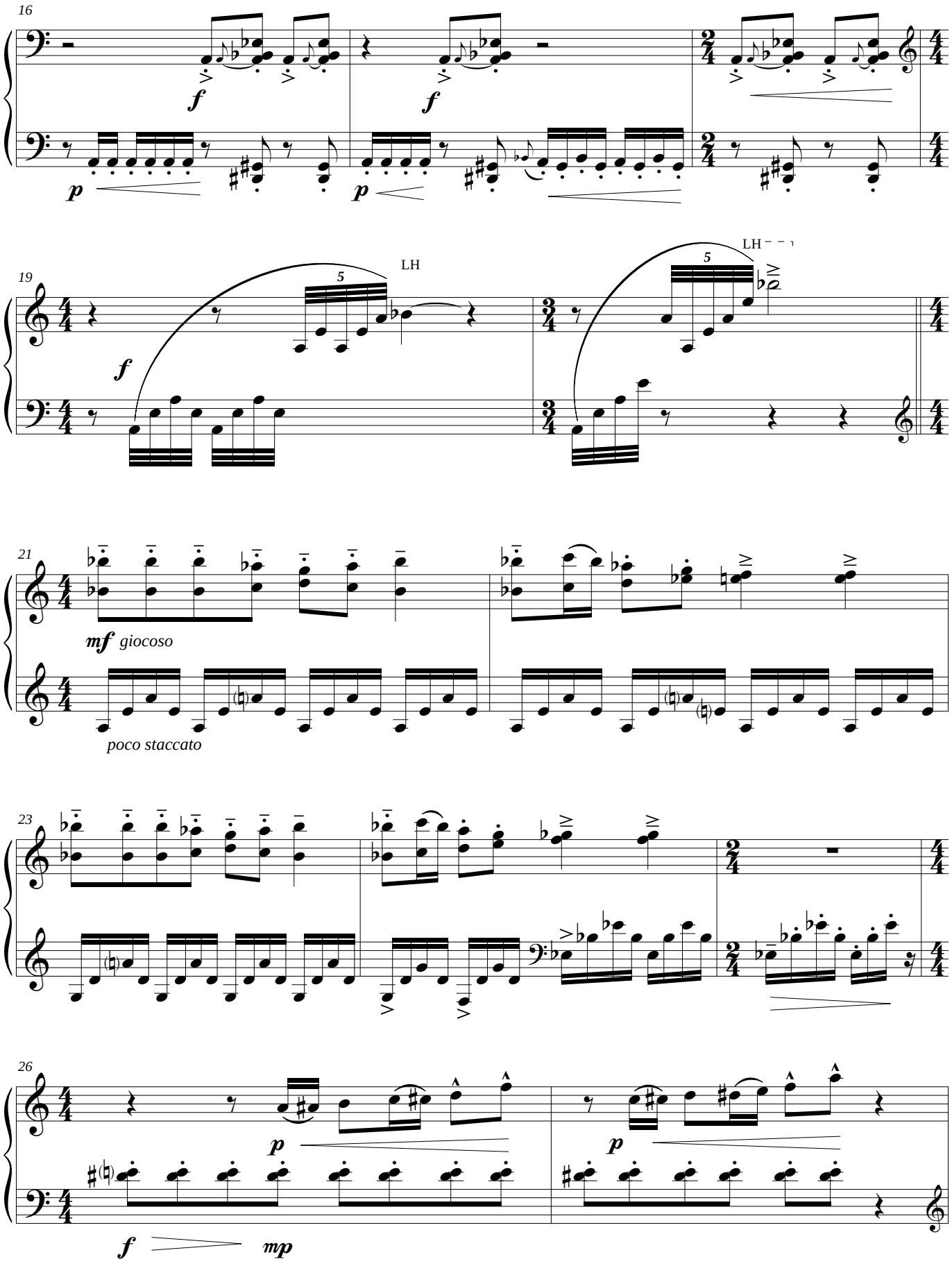
LH RH

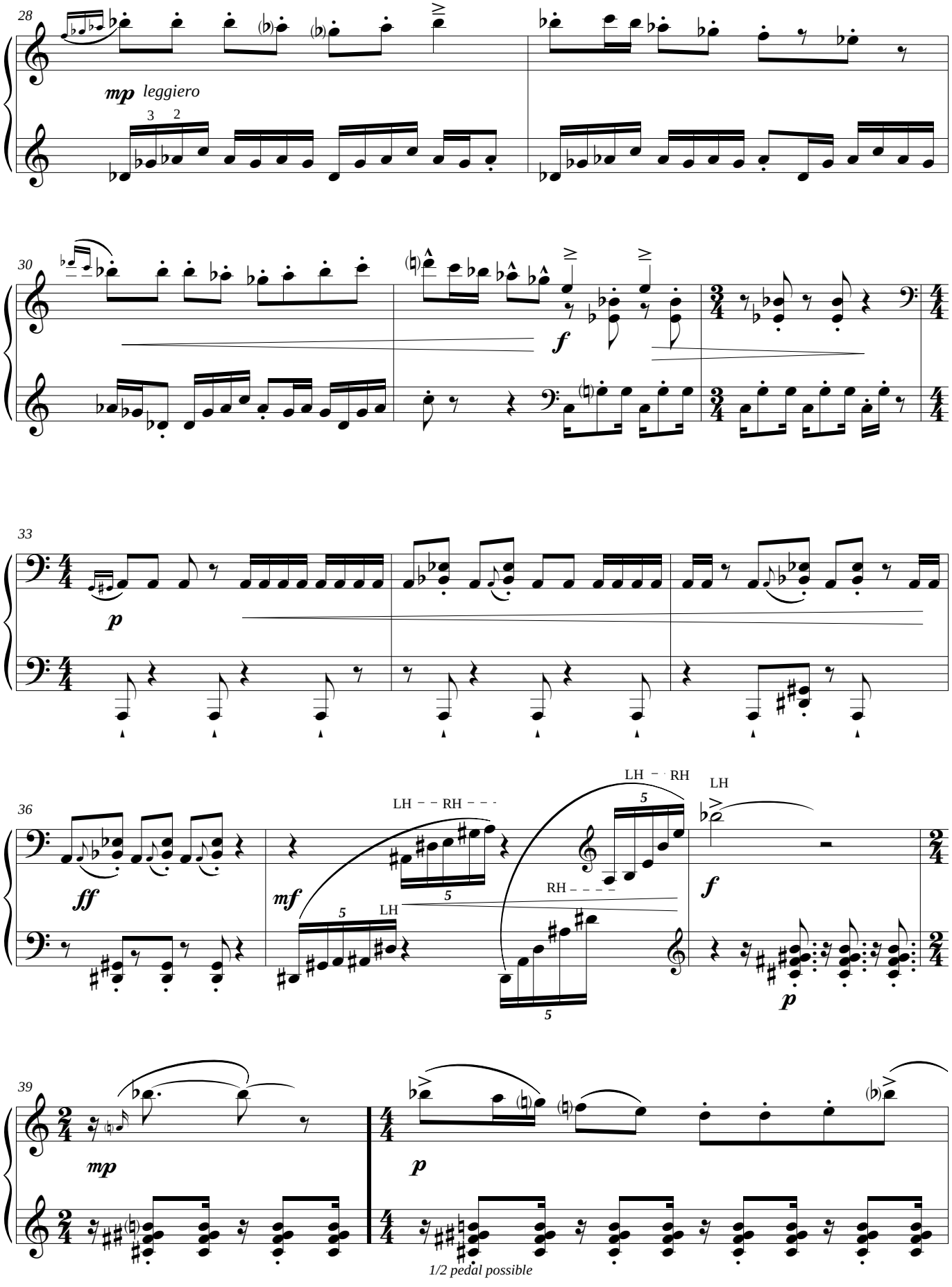
ff

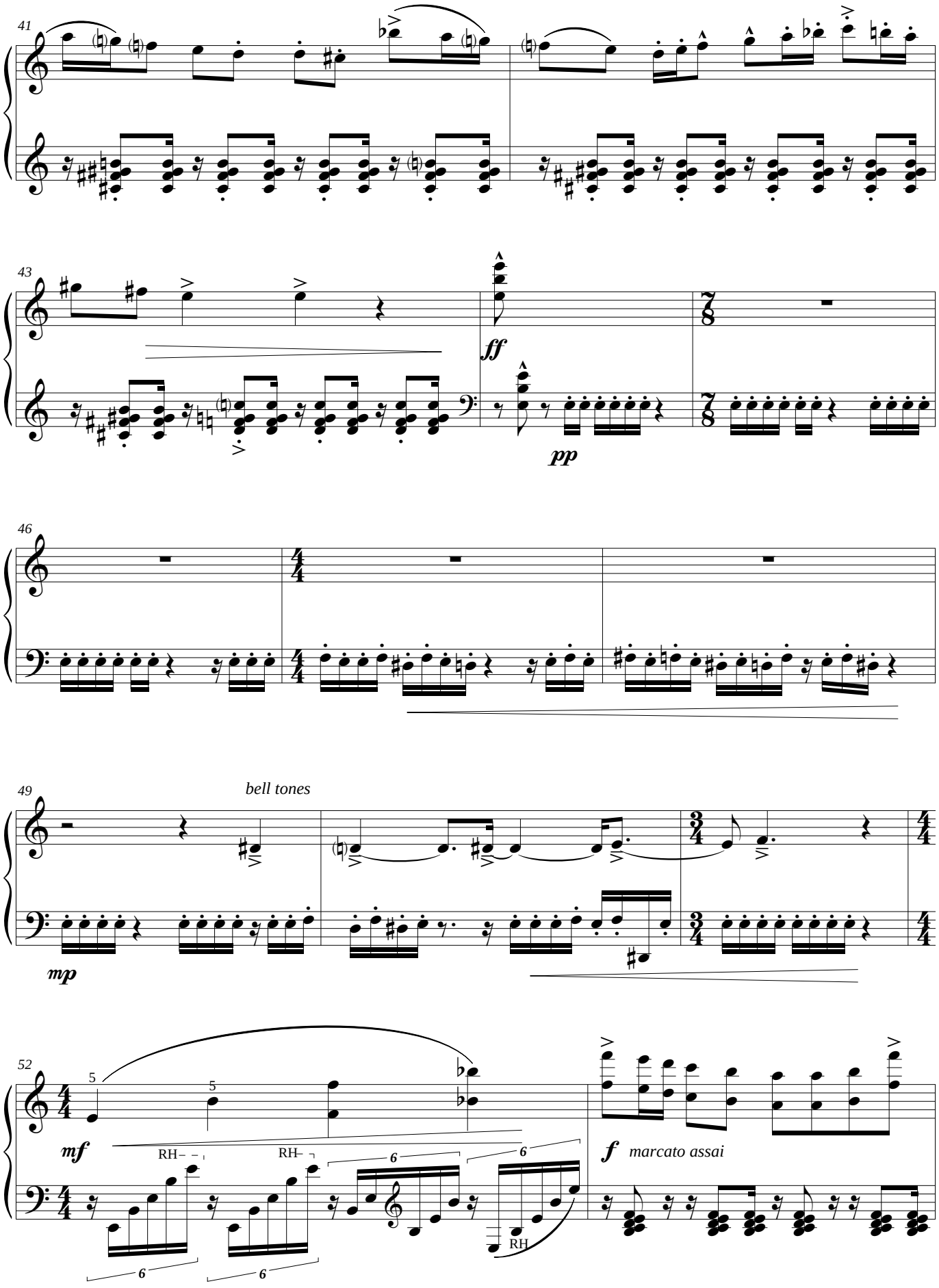
13

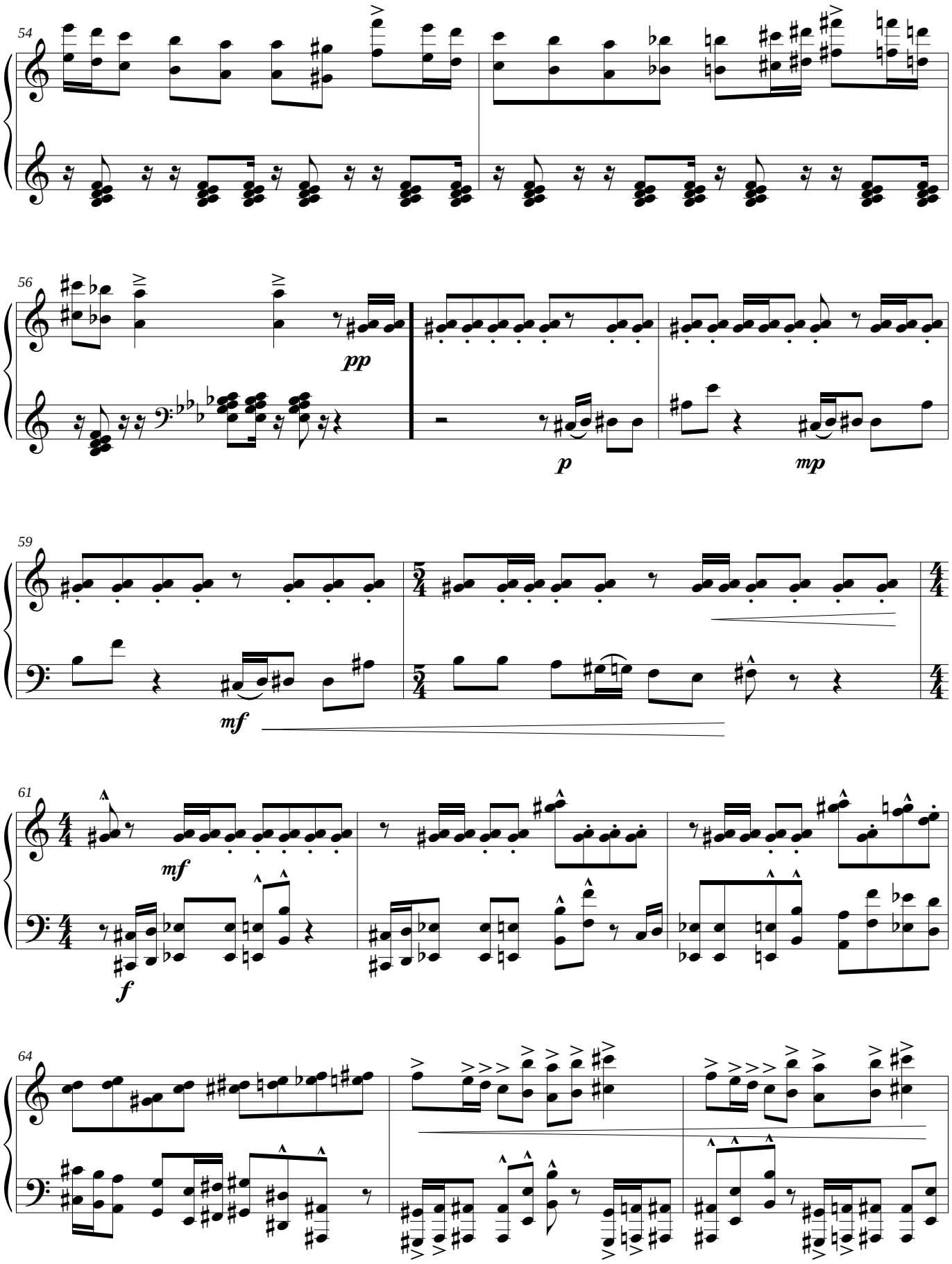
p *pp* *p*

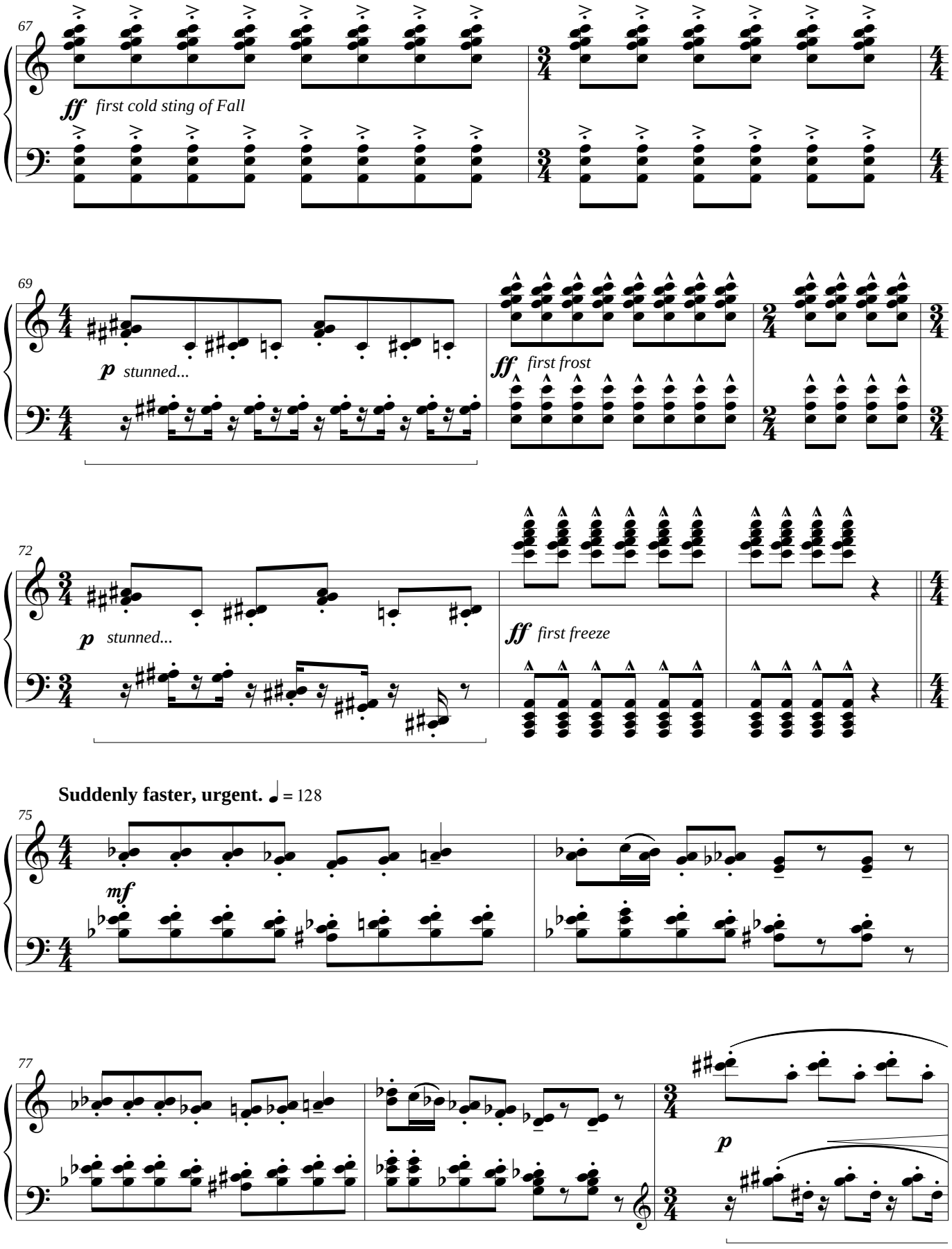
Copyright © 2015 Thomas J. Dempster

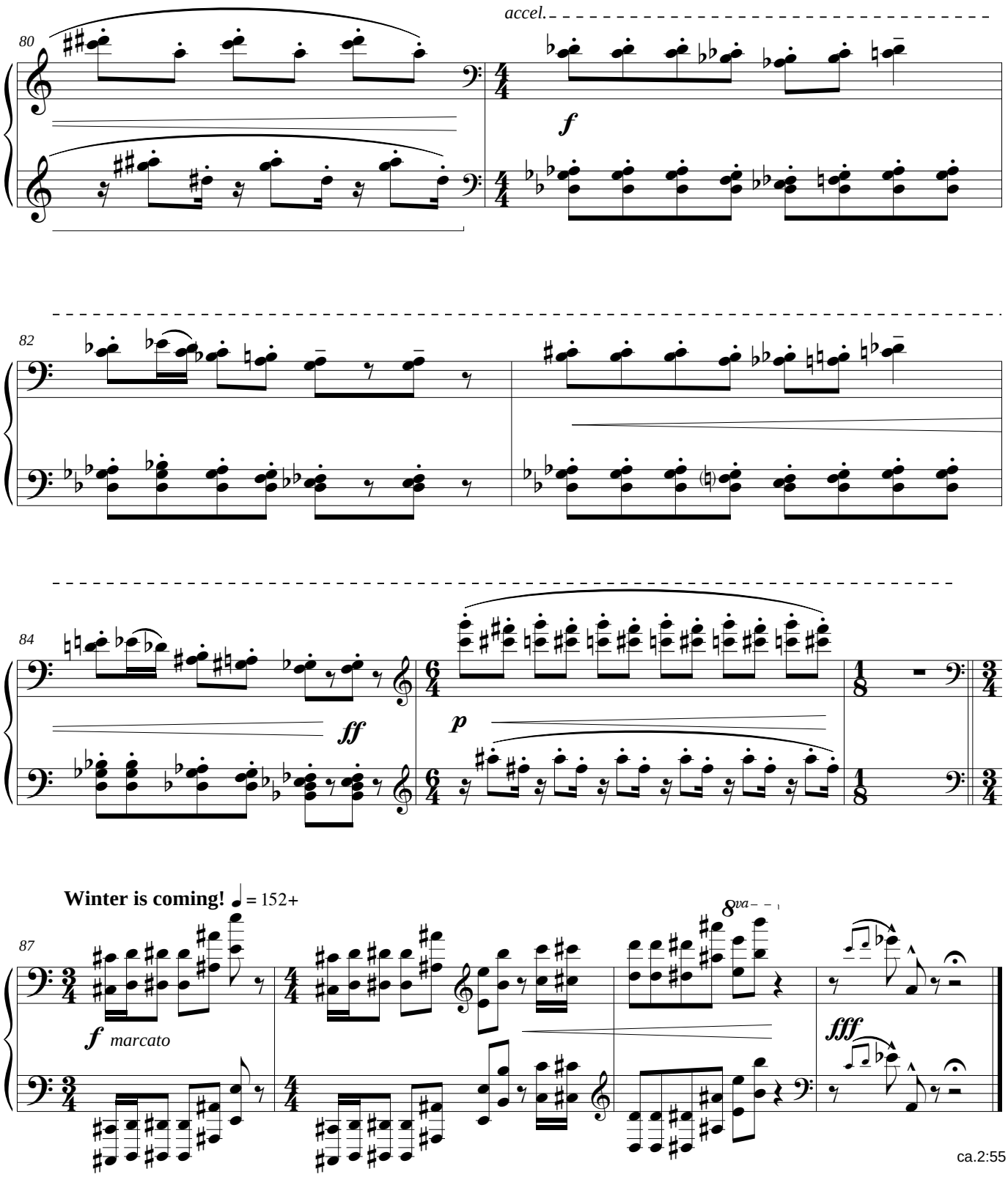

16
f
p
19
LH
5
21
mf giocoso
poco staccato
23
26
mp


28
mp leggiero
30
f
33
p
36
ff
mf
LH
RH
LH
RH
f
p
39
mp
p
1/2 pedal possible

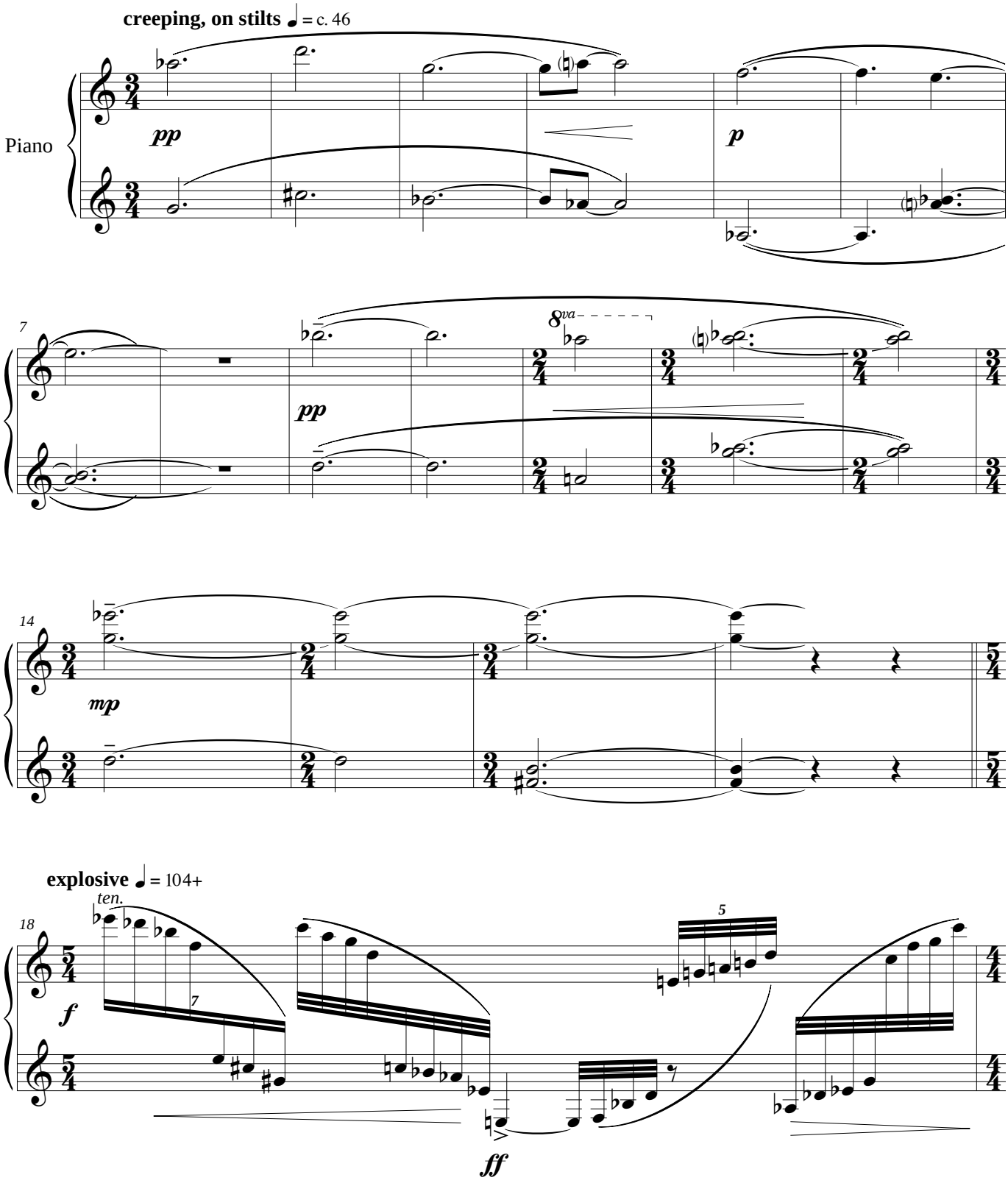

41
43
ff
pp
46
49
bell tones
mp
52
mf
RH
RH
RH
f
marcato assai

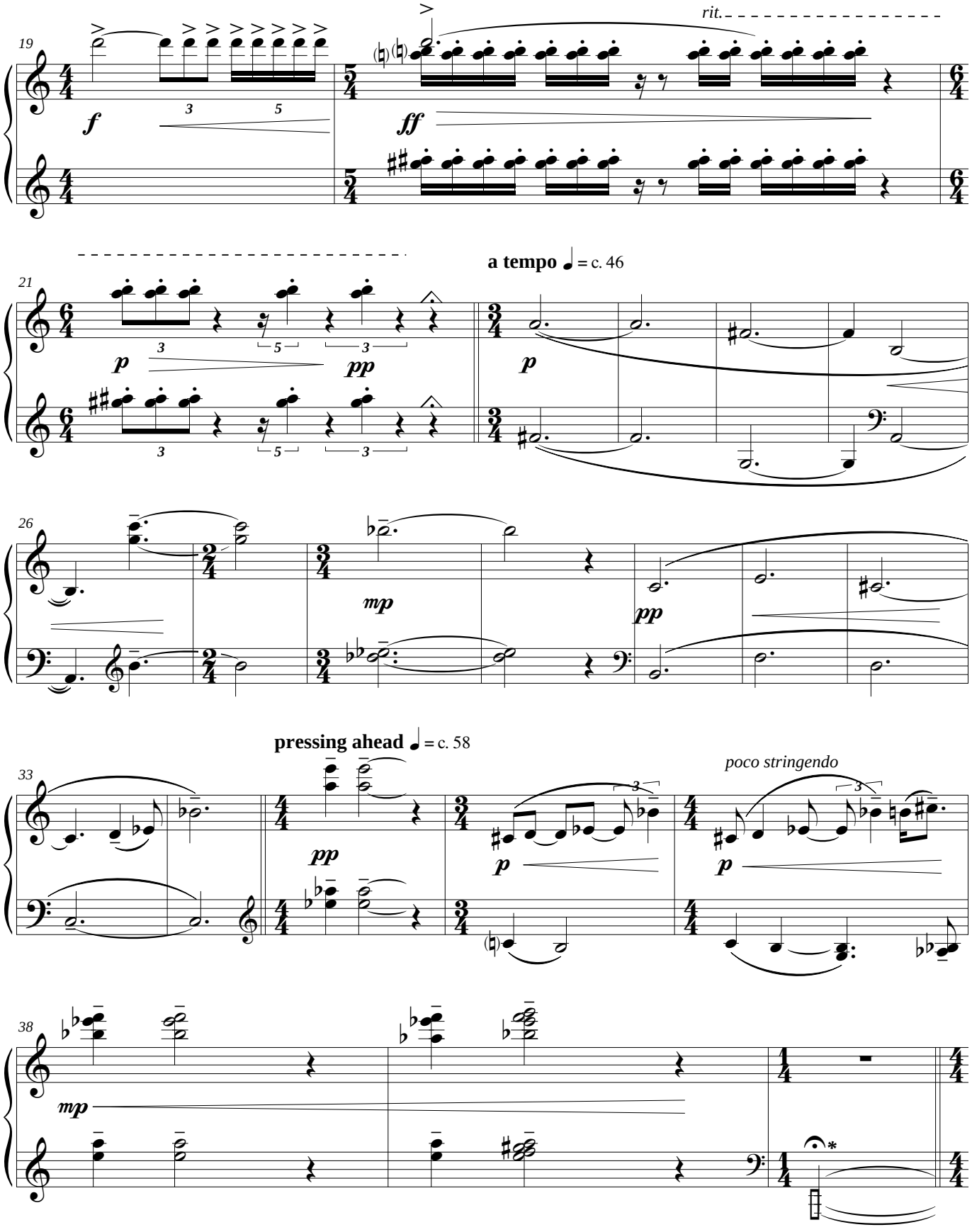

54
56
pp
p
mp
59
mf
61
mf
f
64

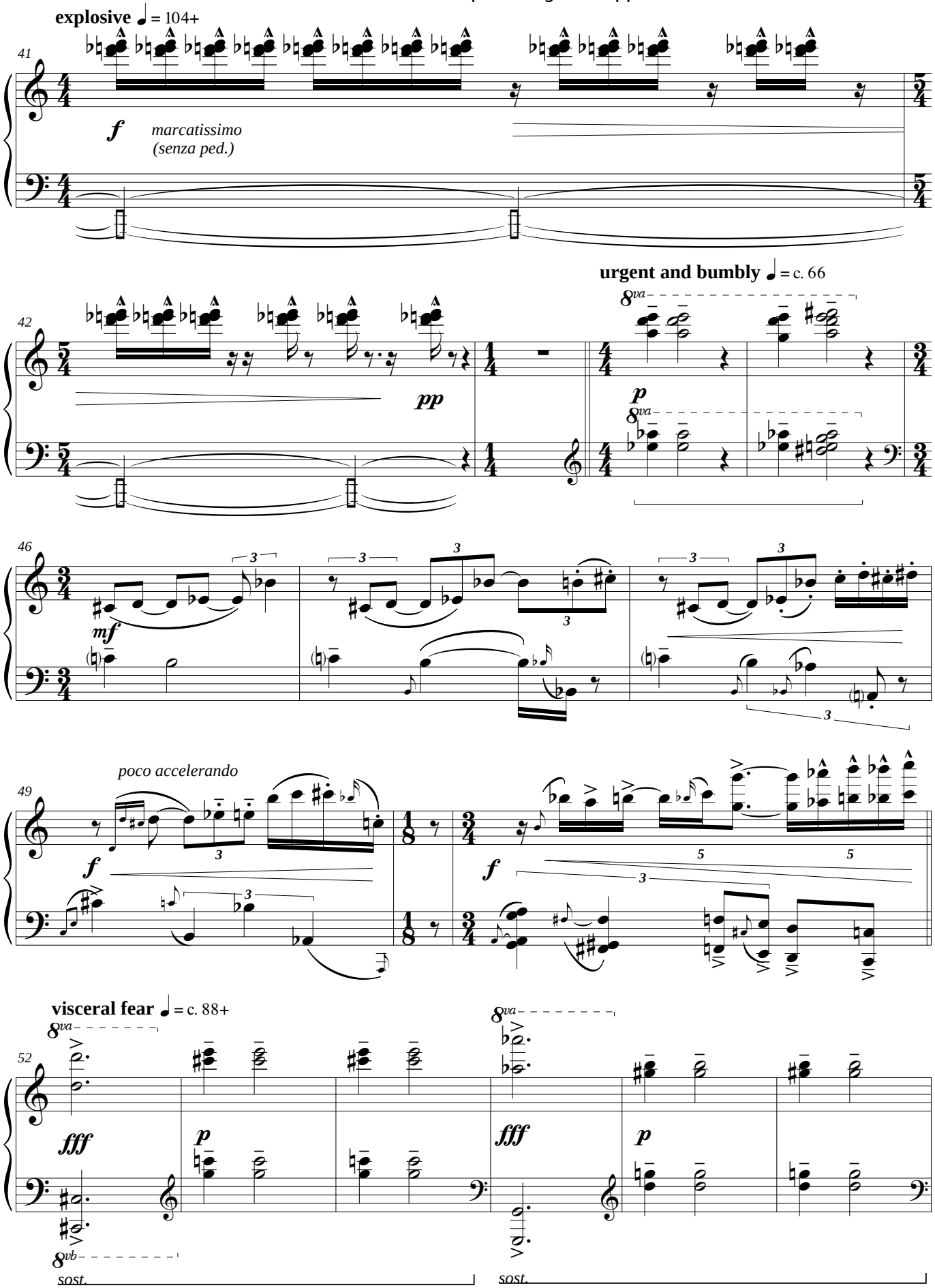

67
ff first cold sting of Fall
69
p stunned...
ff first frost
72
p stunned...
ff first freeze
Suddenly faster, urgent. ♩ = 128
75
mf
77
p

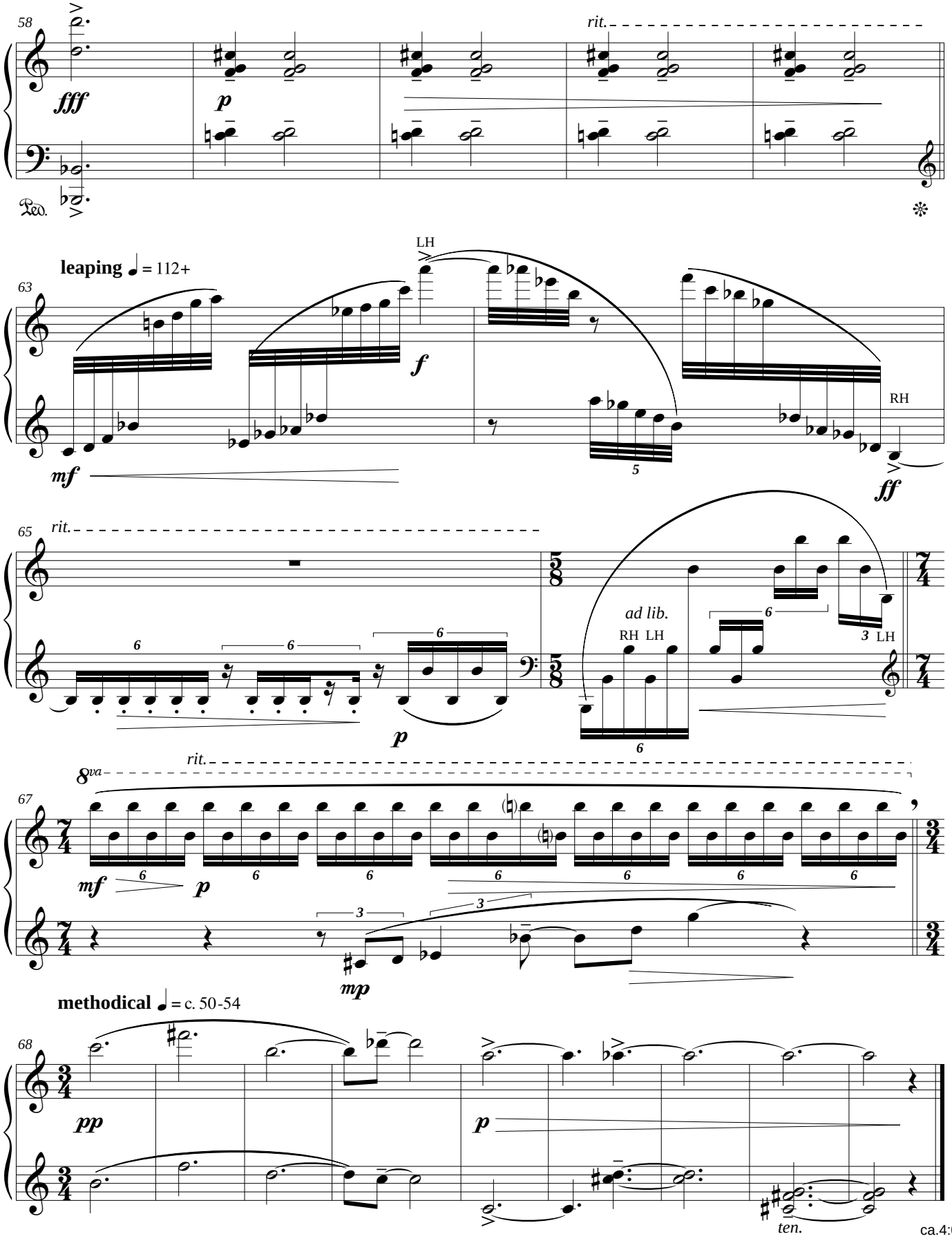

accel.
80
f
82
84
ff
p
Winter is coming! ♩ = 152+
87
8va
f marcato
fff
ca.2:55

II: grasshopper

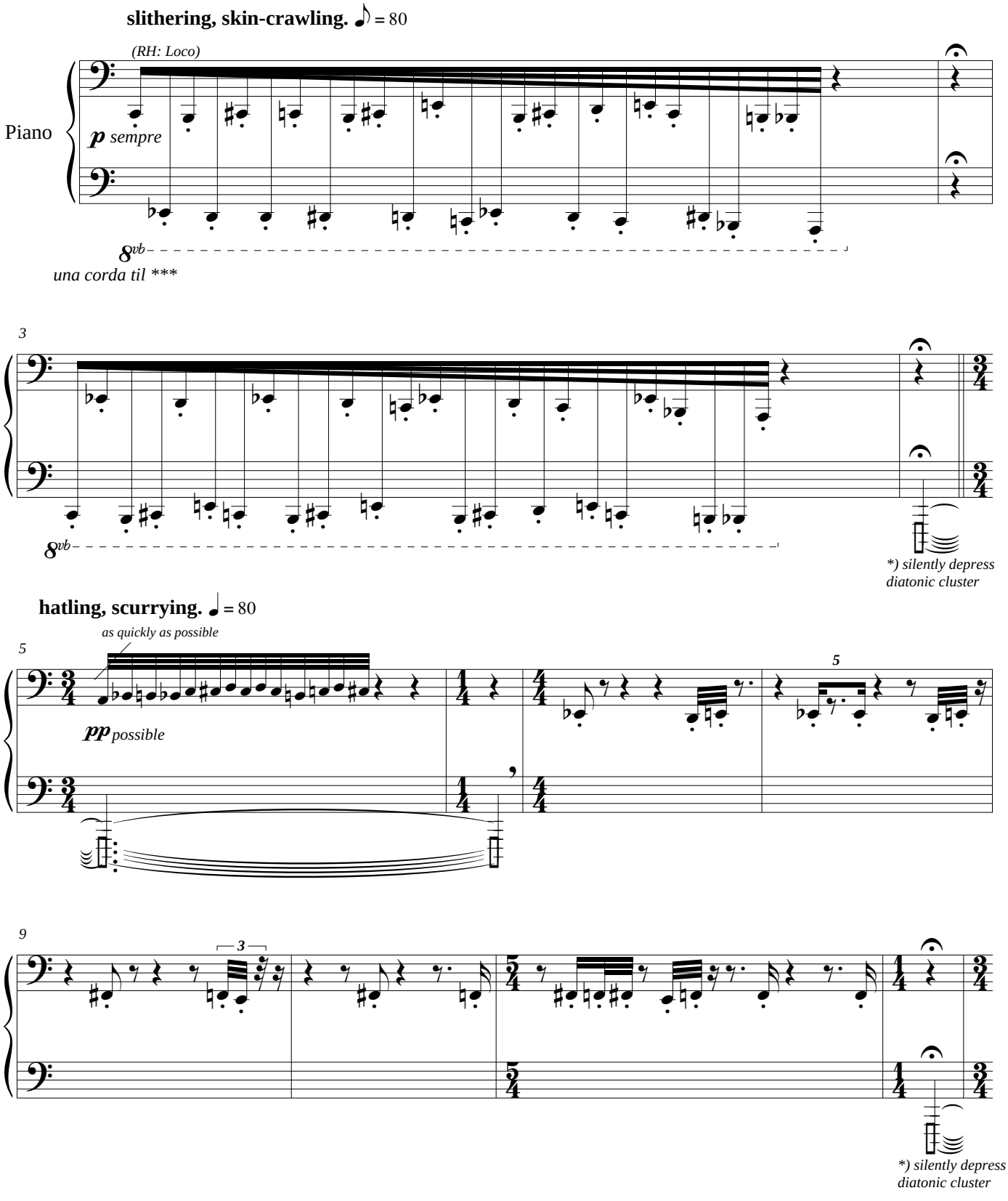


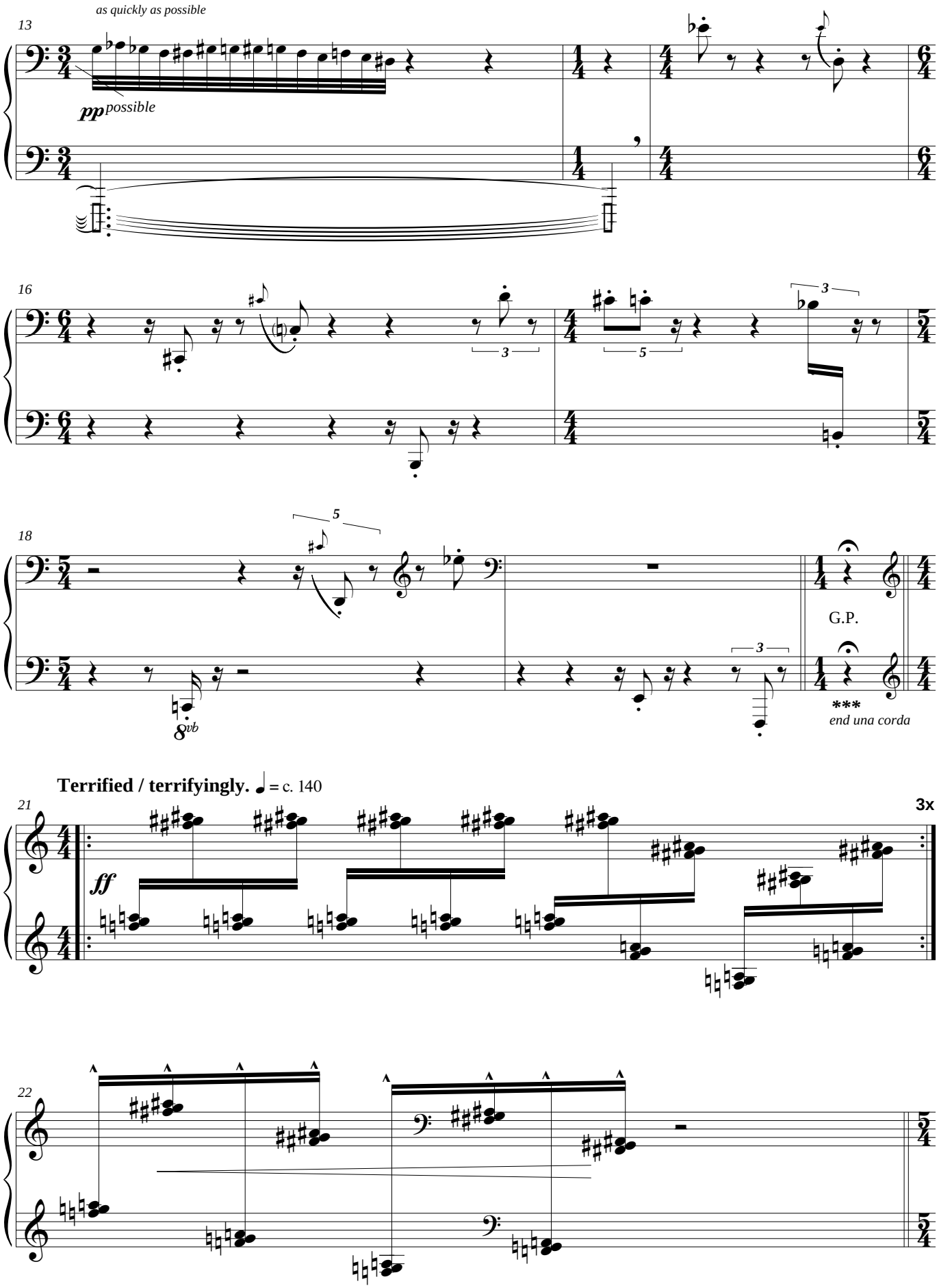

19
rit.
f
ff
21
a tempo ♩ = c. 46
p
pp
26
mp
33
pressing ahead ♩ = c. 58
poco stringendo
38
*) silently depress diatonic cluster shown

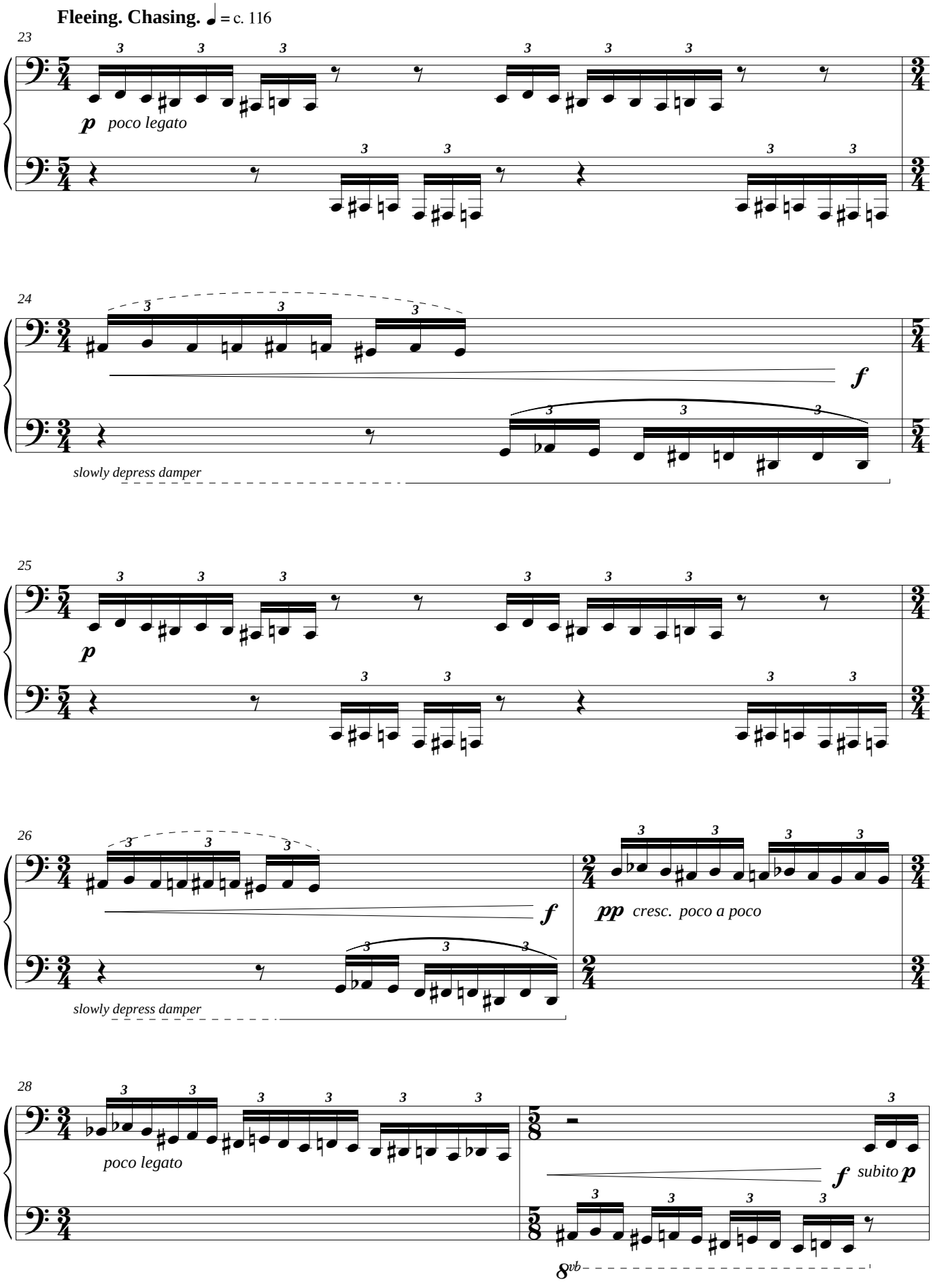

explosive ♩ = 104+
41
f
marcatissimo
(senza ped.)
urgent and bumbly ♩ = c. 66
42
pp
8va
p
46
mf
poco accelerando
49
f
visceral fear ♩ = c. 88+
52
fff
p
8vb
sost.

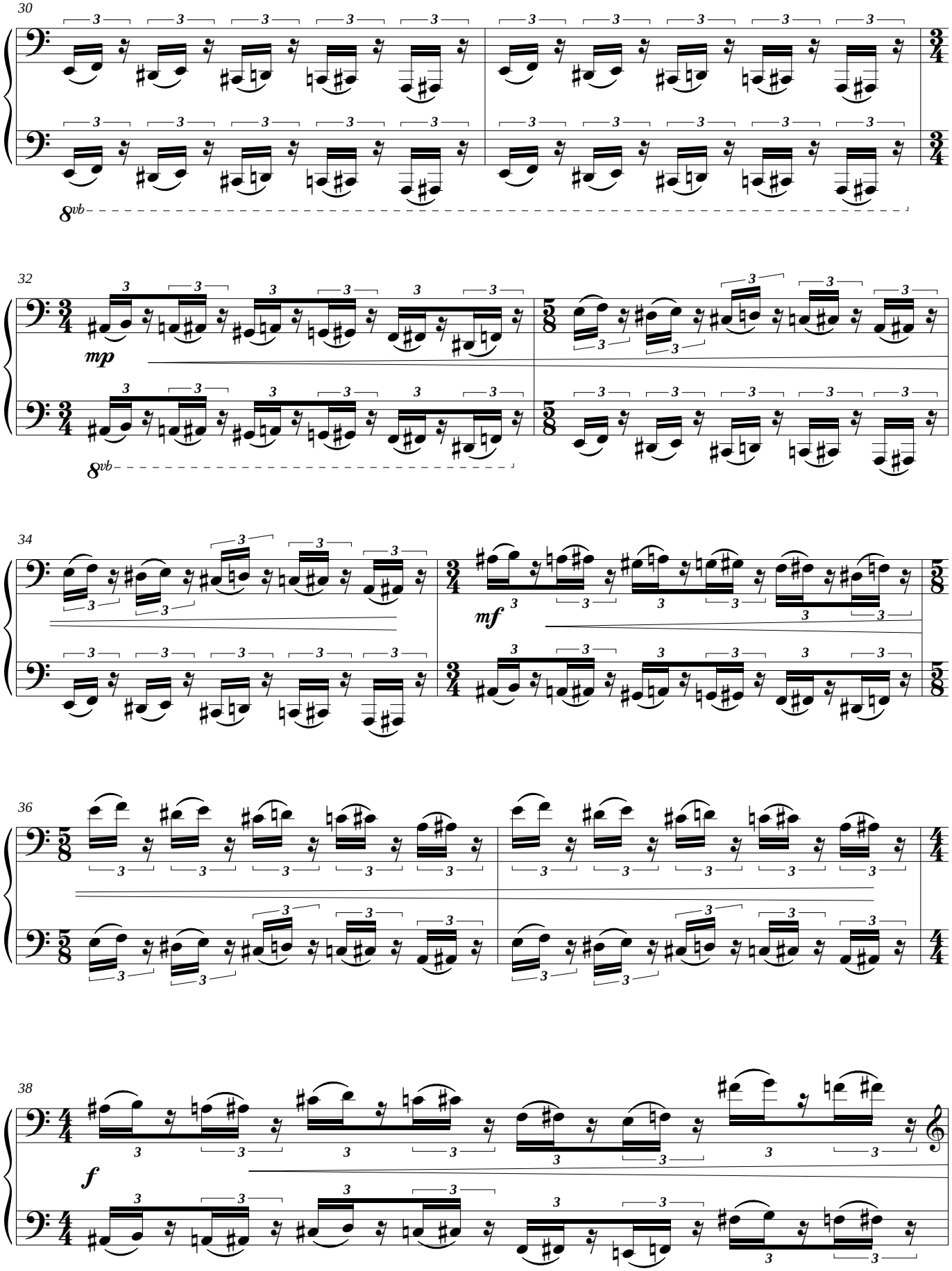

58
fff
p
rit.
Ped.
leaping ♩ = 112+
63
LH
f
mf
RH
ff
65
rit.
ad lib.
RH LH
LH
p
8va
rit.
67
mf
p
mp
methodical ♩ = c. 50-54
68
pp
p
ten.
ca.4:05

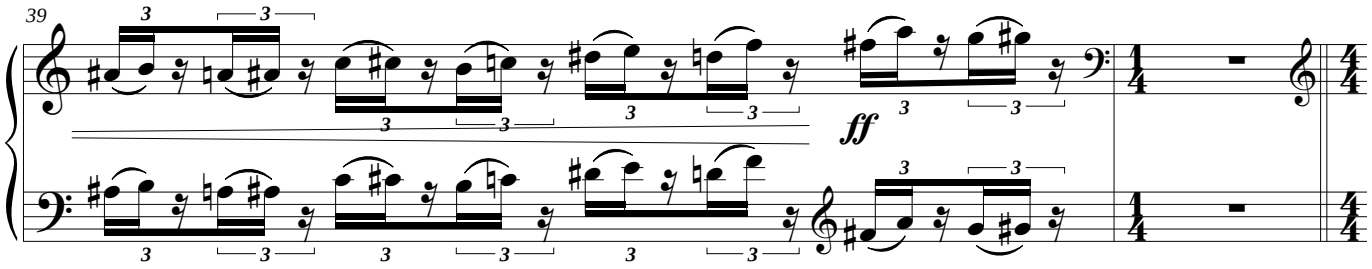
III: cockroach

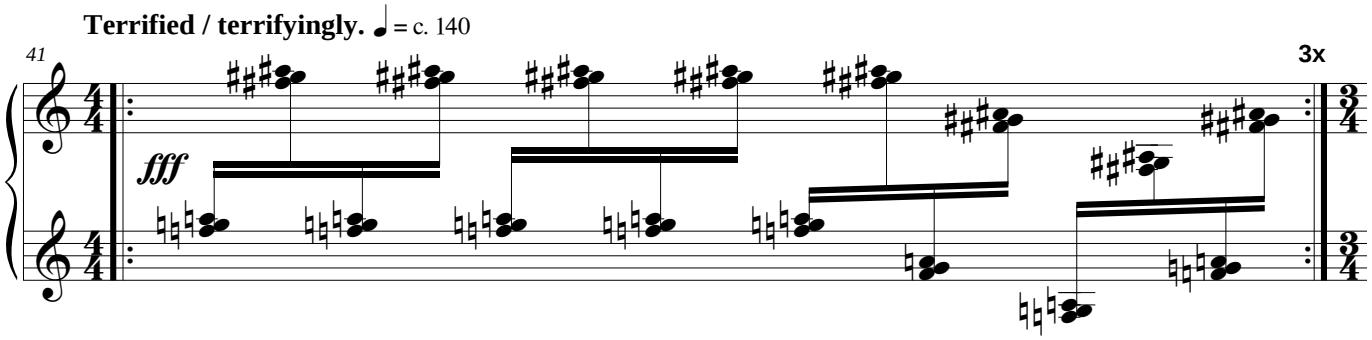


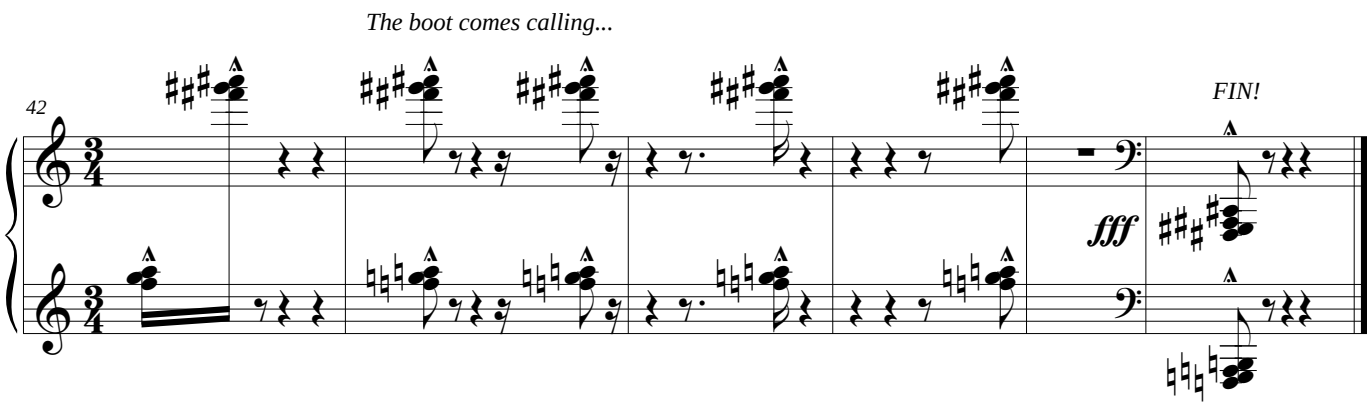

as quickly as possible
13
pp possible
16
3
5
3
18
5
3
8vb
G.P.
***
end una corda
Terrified / terrifyingly. ♩ = c. 140
21
ff
3x
22


Fleeing. Chasing. ♩ = c. 116
23
p poco legato
24
f
slowly depress damper
25
p
26
f
pp cresc. poco a poco
slowly depress damper
28
poco legato
f subito p
8vb


30
8vb
32
mp
8vb
34
mf
36
38
f


39
ff

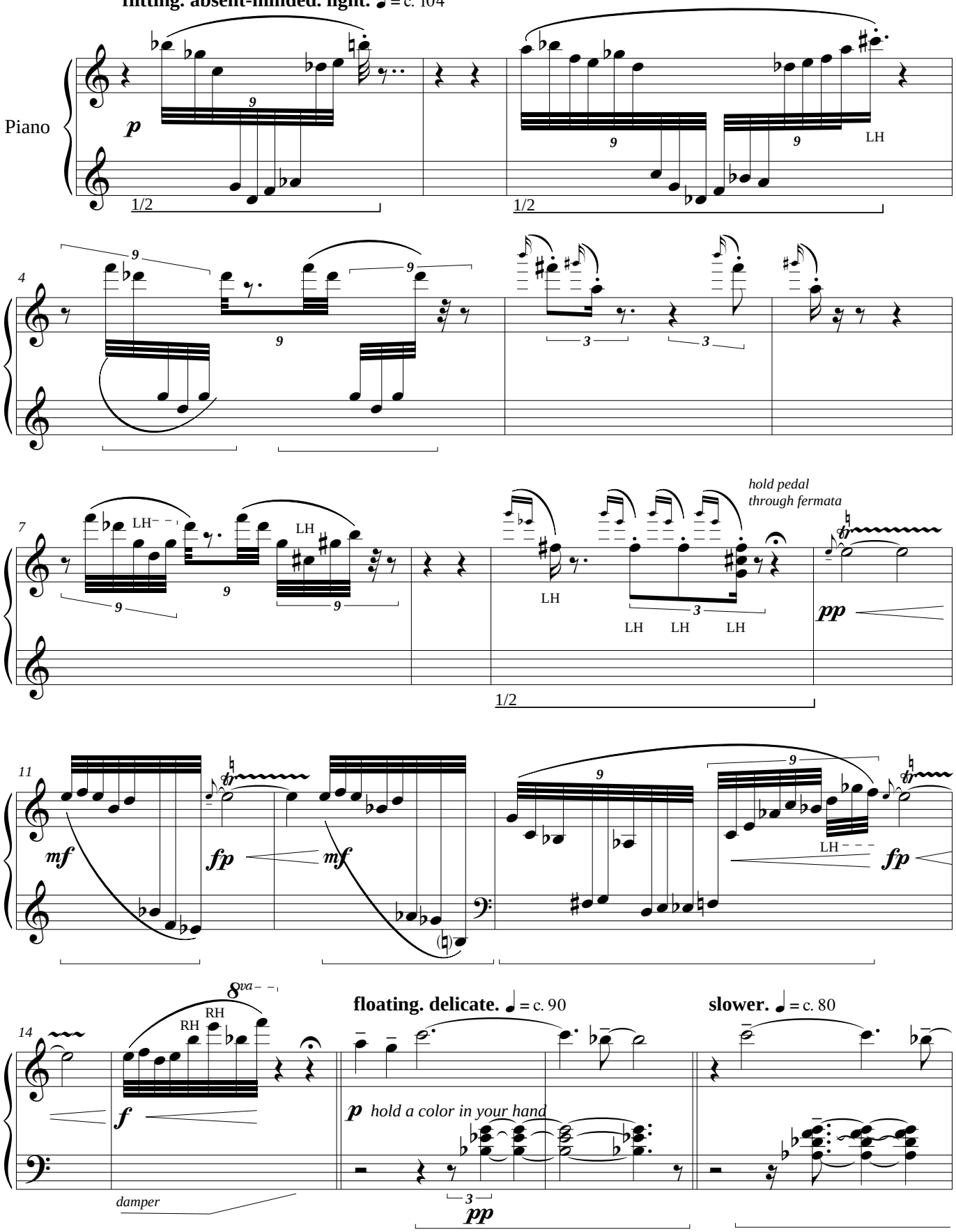

Terrified / terrifyingly. = c. 140
41
fff
3x

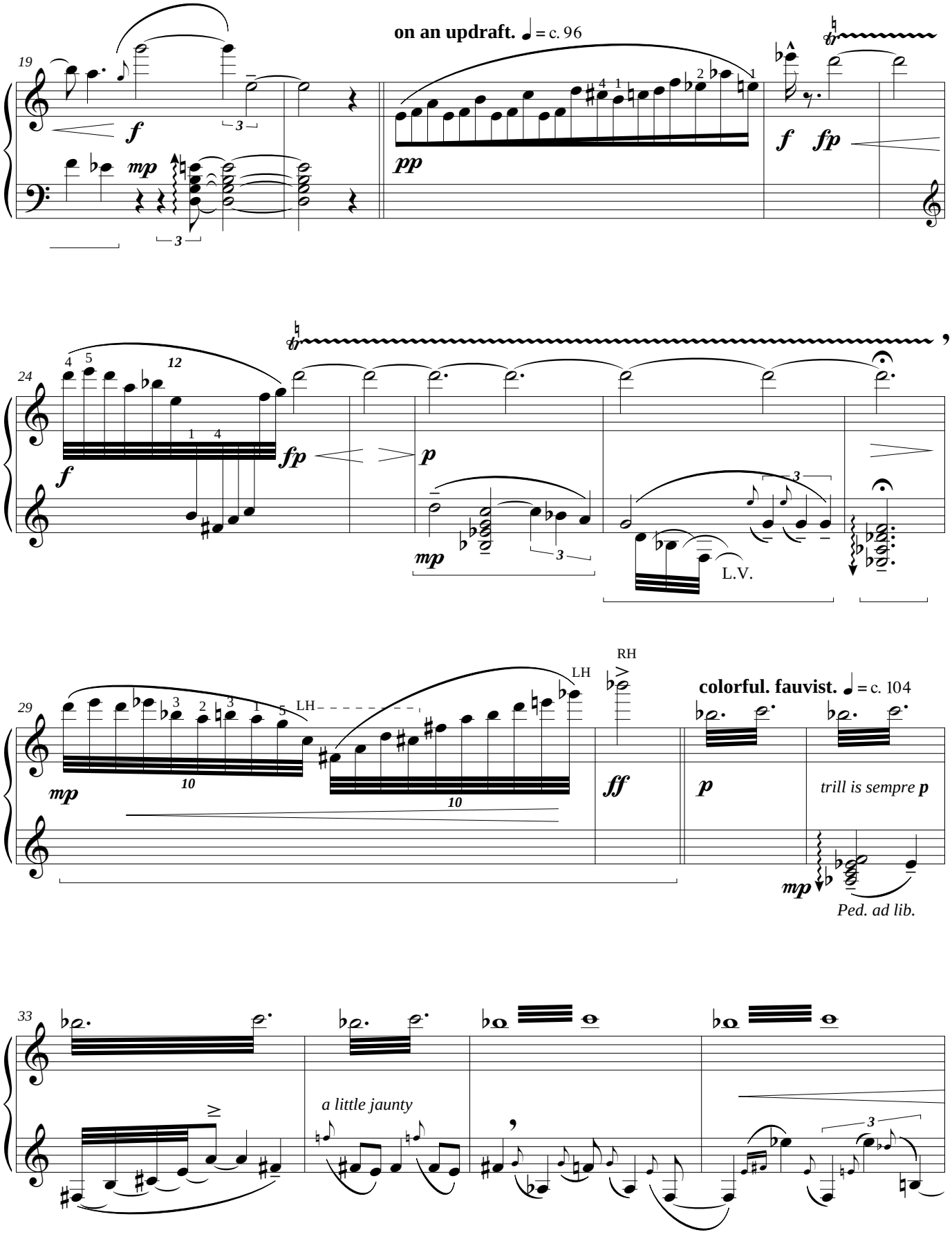

The boot comes calling...
42
FIN!
fff

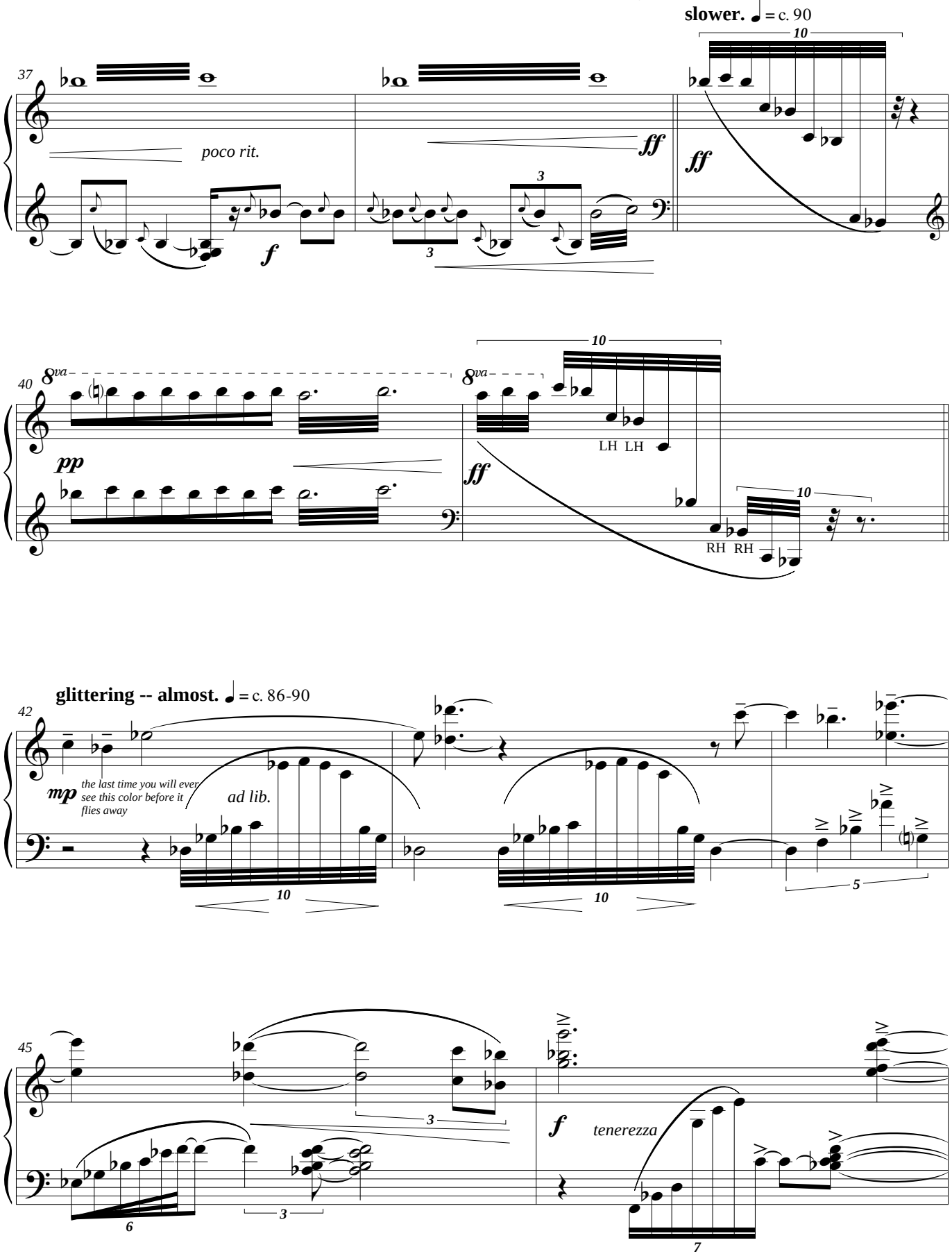
ca.1:45

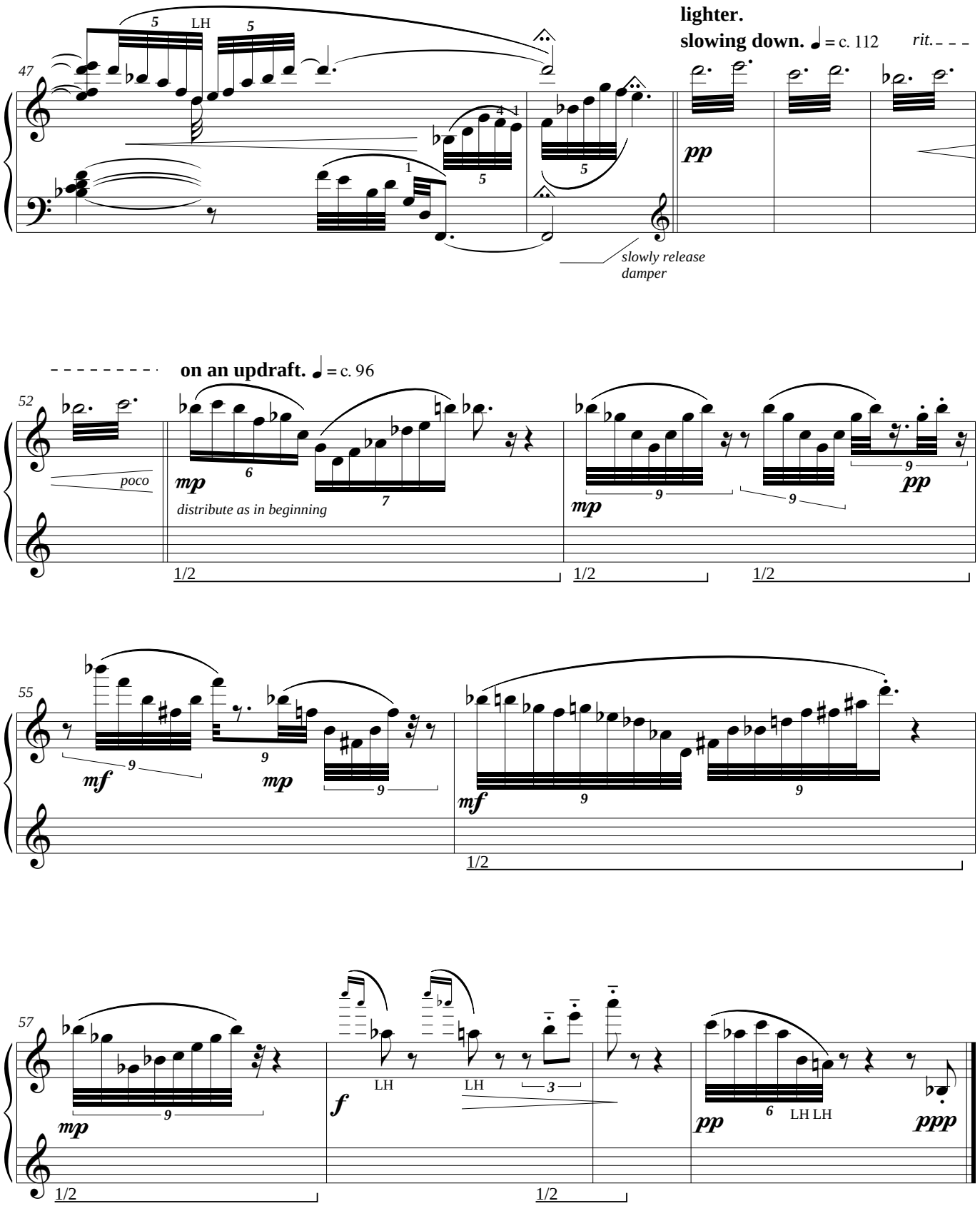
IV: butterfly

flitting. absent-minded. light. ♩ = c. 104

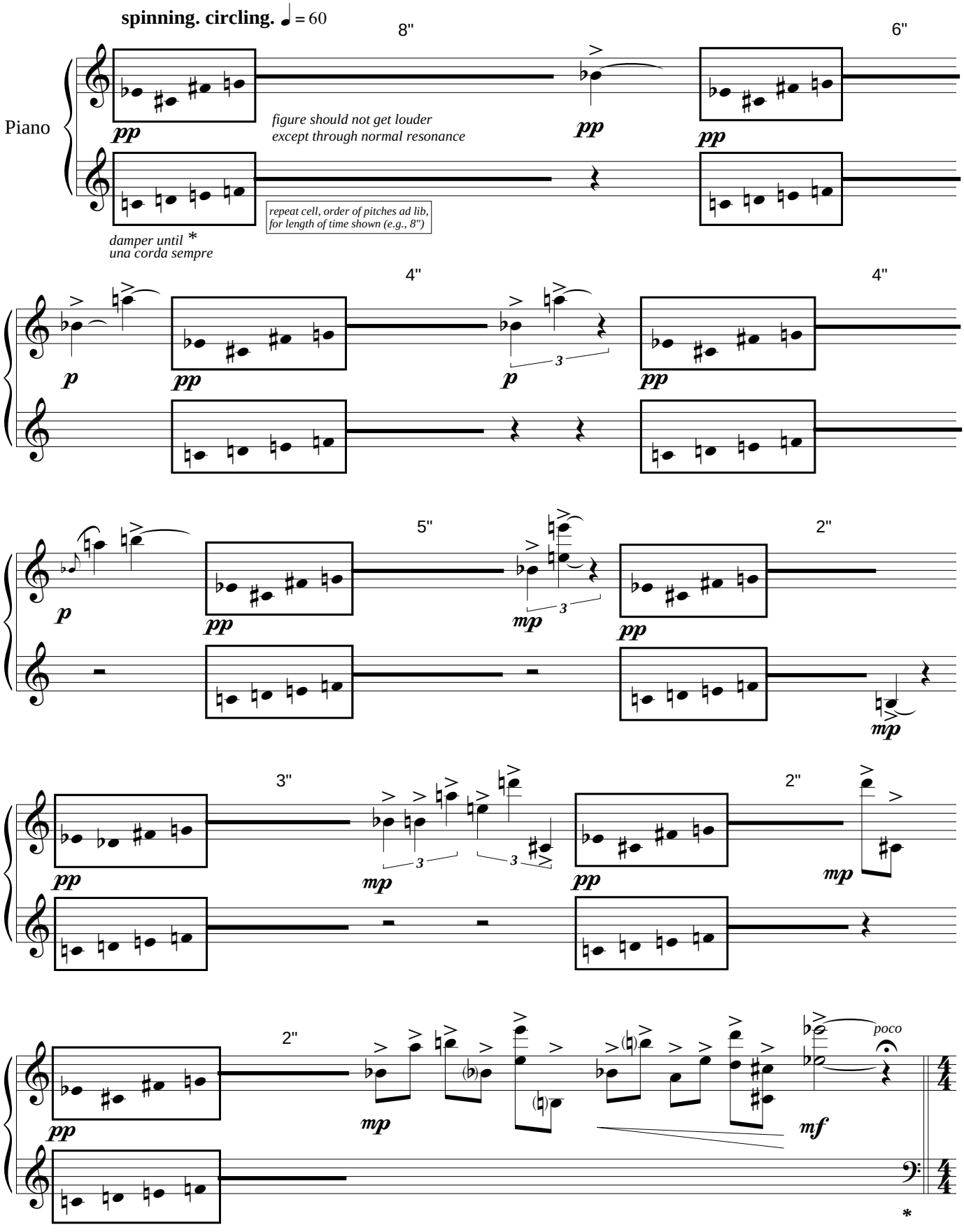



on an updraft. ♩ = c. 96
19
f
mp
pp
f fp
24
f
fp
p
mp
L.V.
29
mp
LH
RH
ff
colorful. fauvist. ♩ = c. 104
p
trill is sempre p
mp
Ped. ad lib.
33
a little jaunty

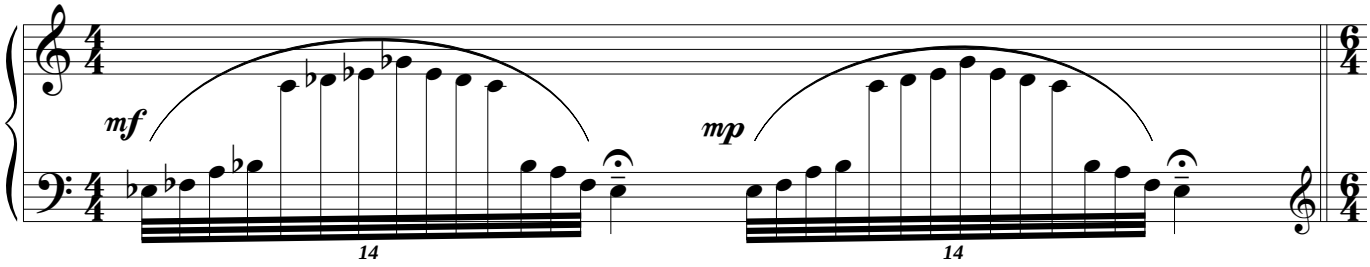

slower. ♩ = c. 90
37
poco rit.
f
ff
ff
10
3
3
40
8va
8va
pp
ff
LH LH
RH RH
10
10
glittering -- almost. ♩ = c. 86-90
42
mp
the last time you will ever see this color before it flies away
ad lib.
10
10
5
45
3
3
6
f
tenerezza
7


47
LH
lighter.
slowing down. = c. 112
rit.
pp
slowly release damper
on an updraft. = c. 96
52
poco
mp
distribute as in beginning
pp
1/2
55
mf
mp
mf
57
mp
f
LH
LH
pp
LH LH
ppp
ca.2:05

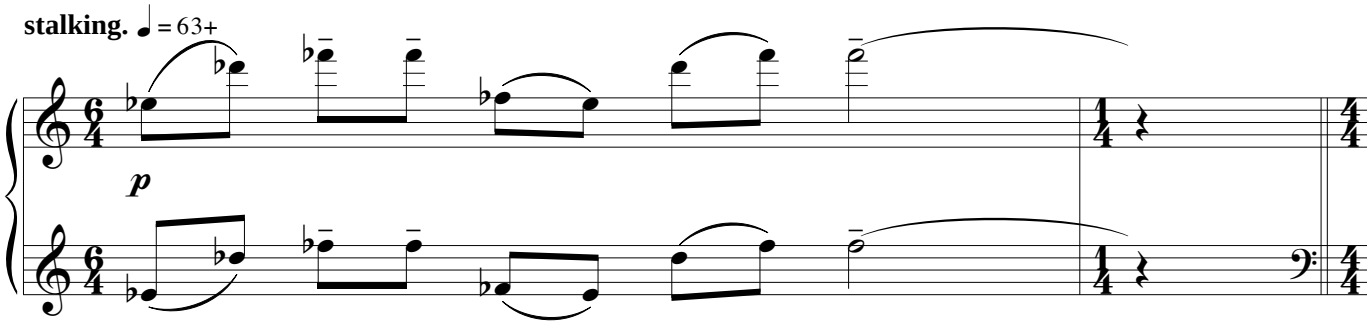
V: spider


spinning. circling. ♩ = 60
Piano
8"
6"
pp
figure should not get louder
except through normal resonance
repeat cell, order of pitches ad lib,
for length of time shown (e.g., 8")
damper until *
una corda sempre
4"
4"
p
5"
2"
mp
3"
2"
mf
poco
*

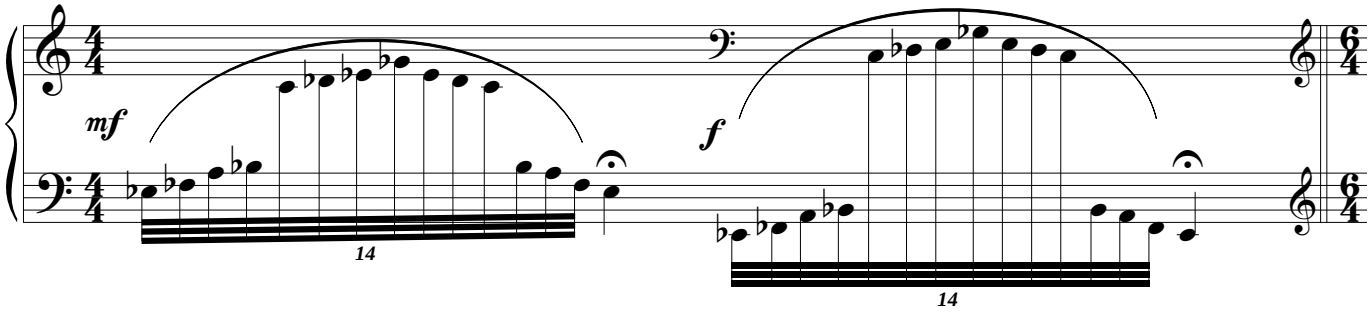
slower. ♩ = c. 50



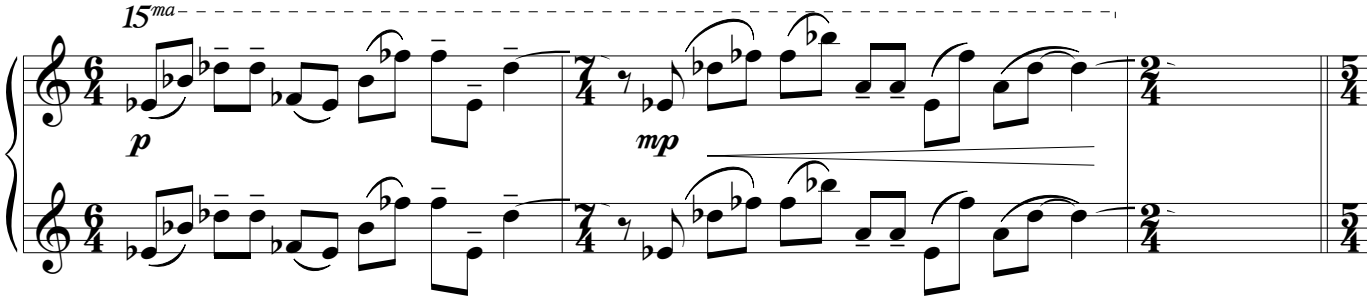
stalking. ♩ = 63+



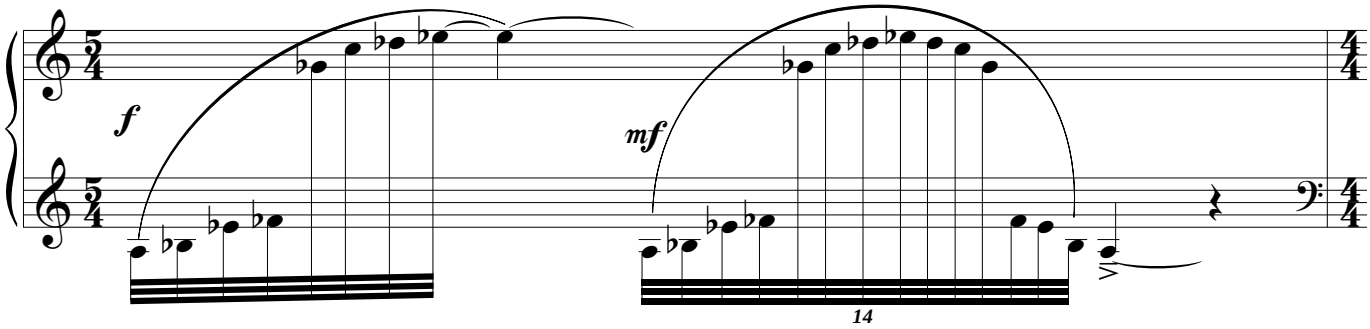
slower. ♩ = c. 50

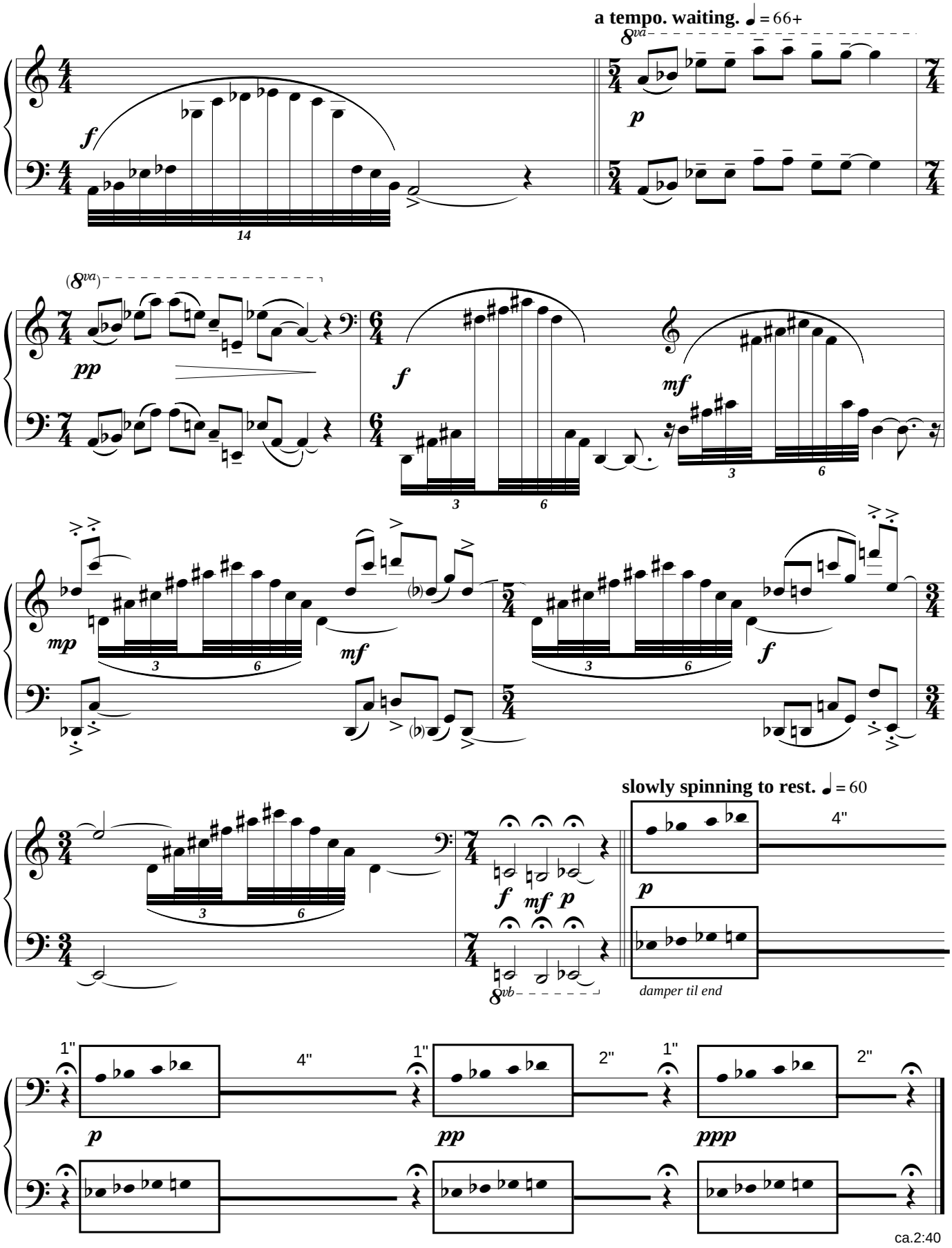


stalking. ♩ = 63+

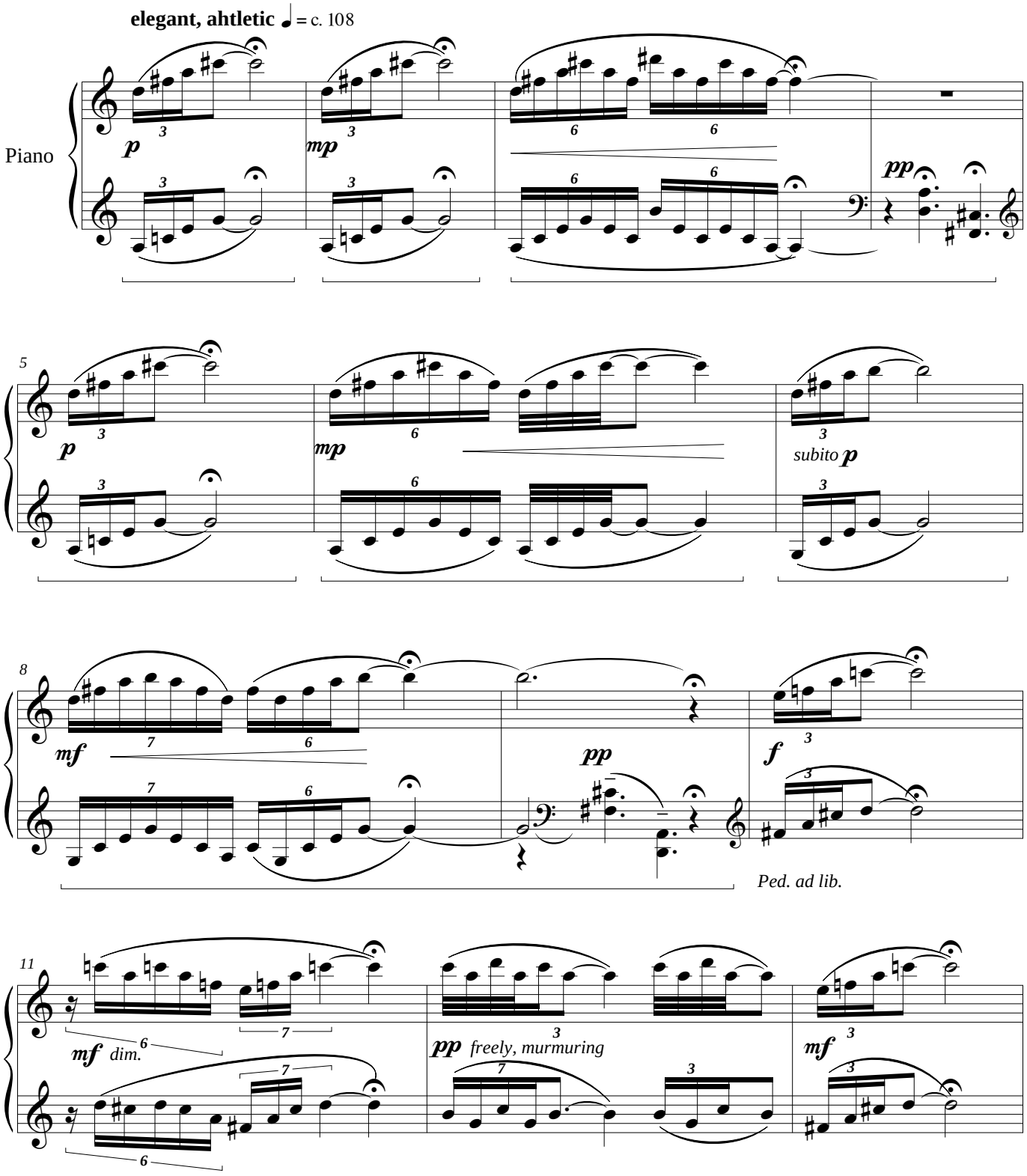


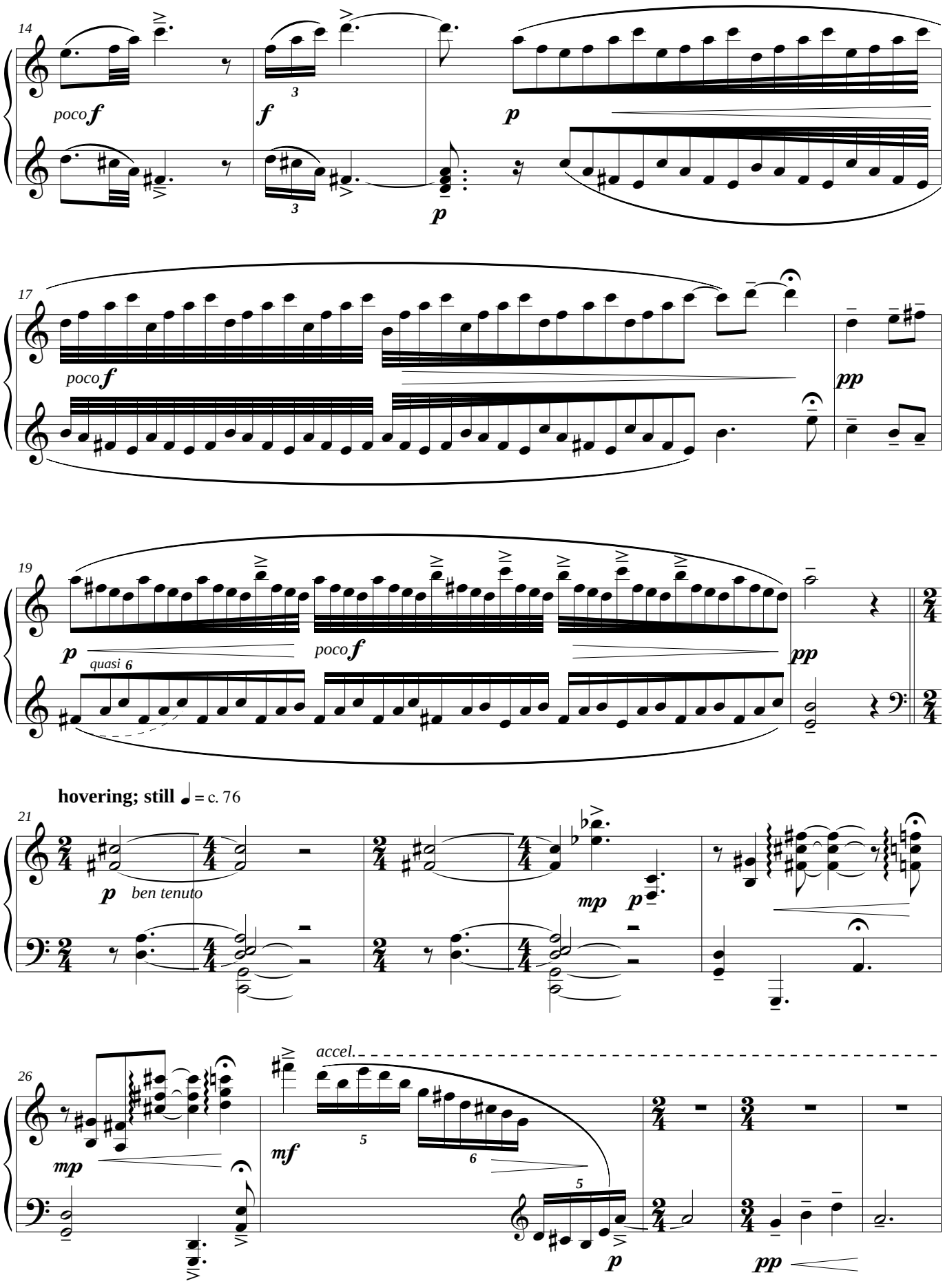
dizzying. slowing down. ♩ = 66+

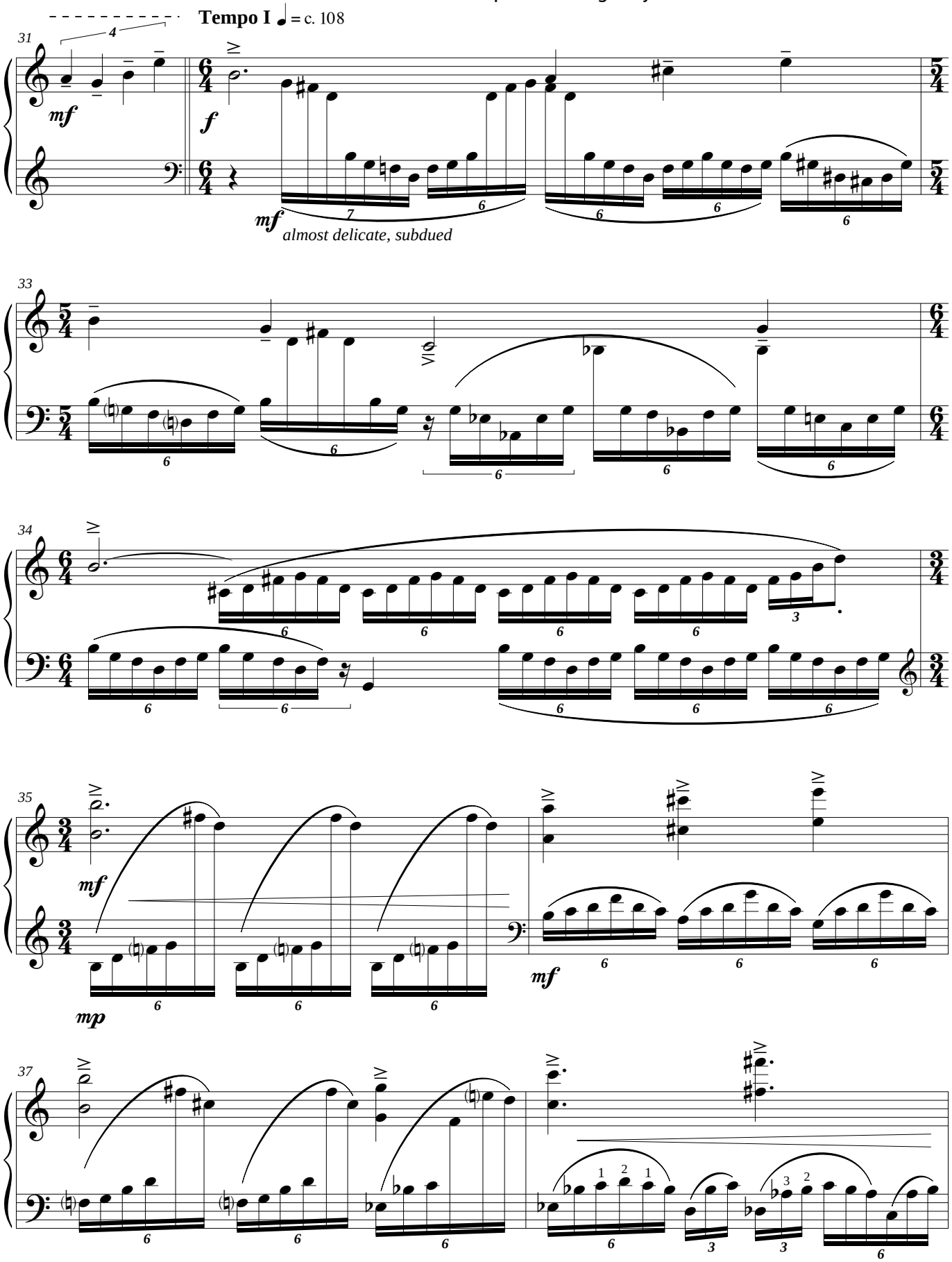


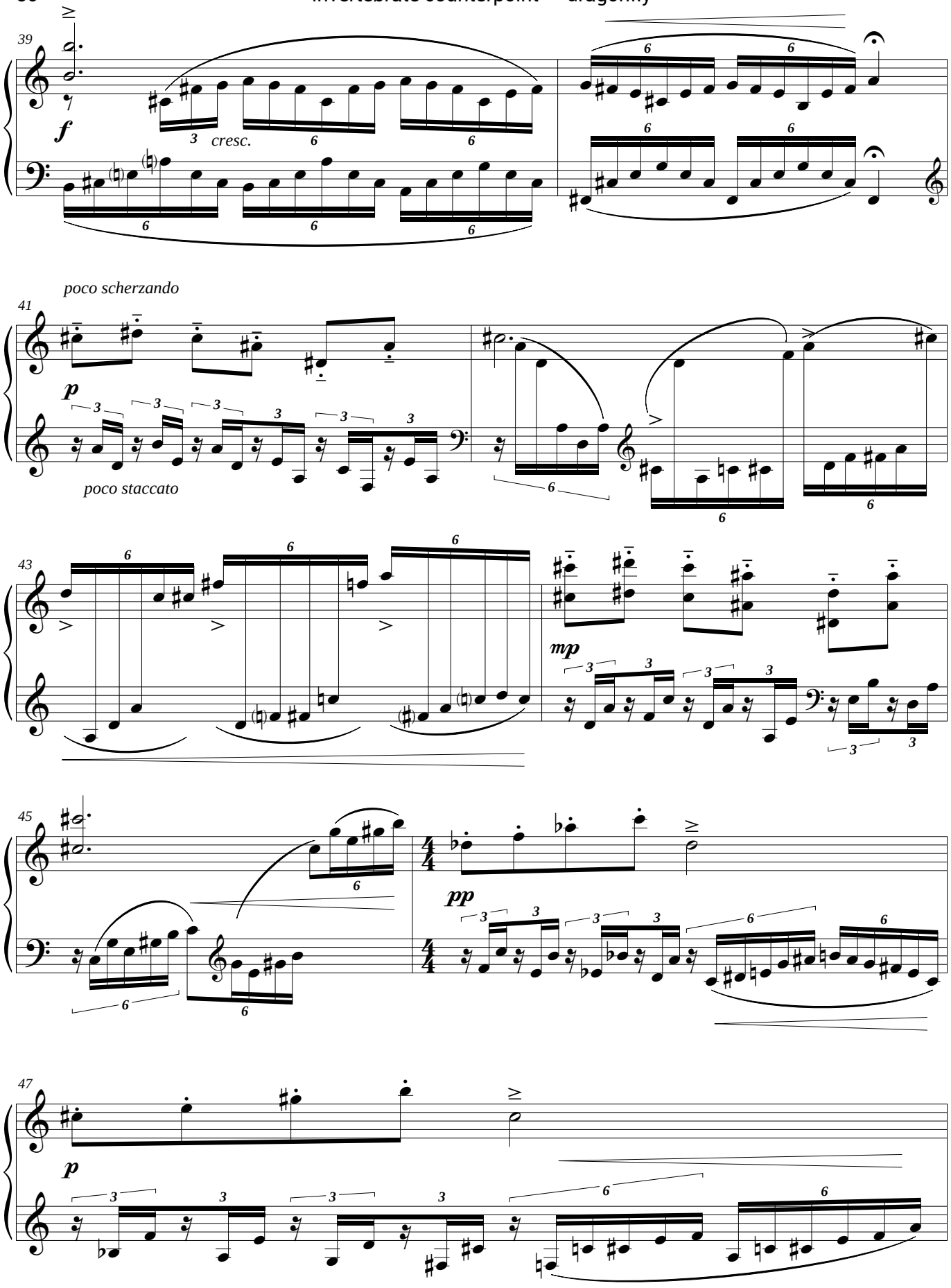

a tempo. waiting. ♩ = 66+
8va
f
14
p
(8va)
pp
f
mf
3
6
mp
mf
f
slowly spinning to rest. ♩ = 60
4"
p
f mf p
8vb
damper til end
1"
4"
2"
pp
ppp
ca.2:40

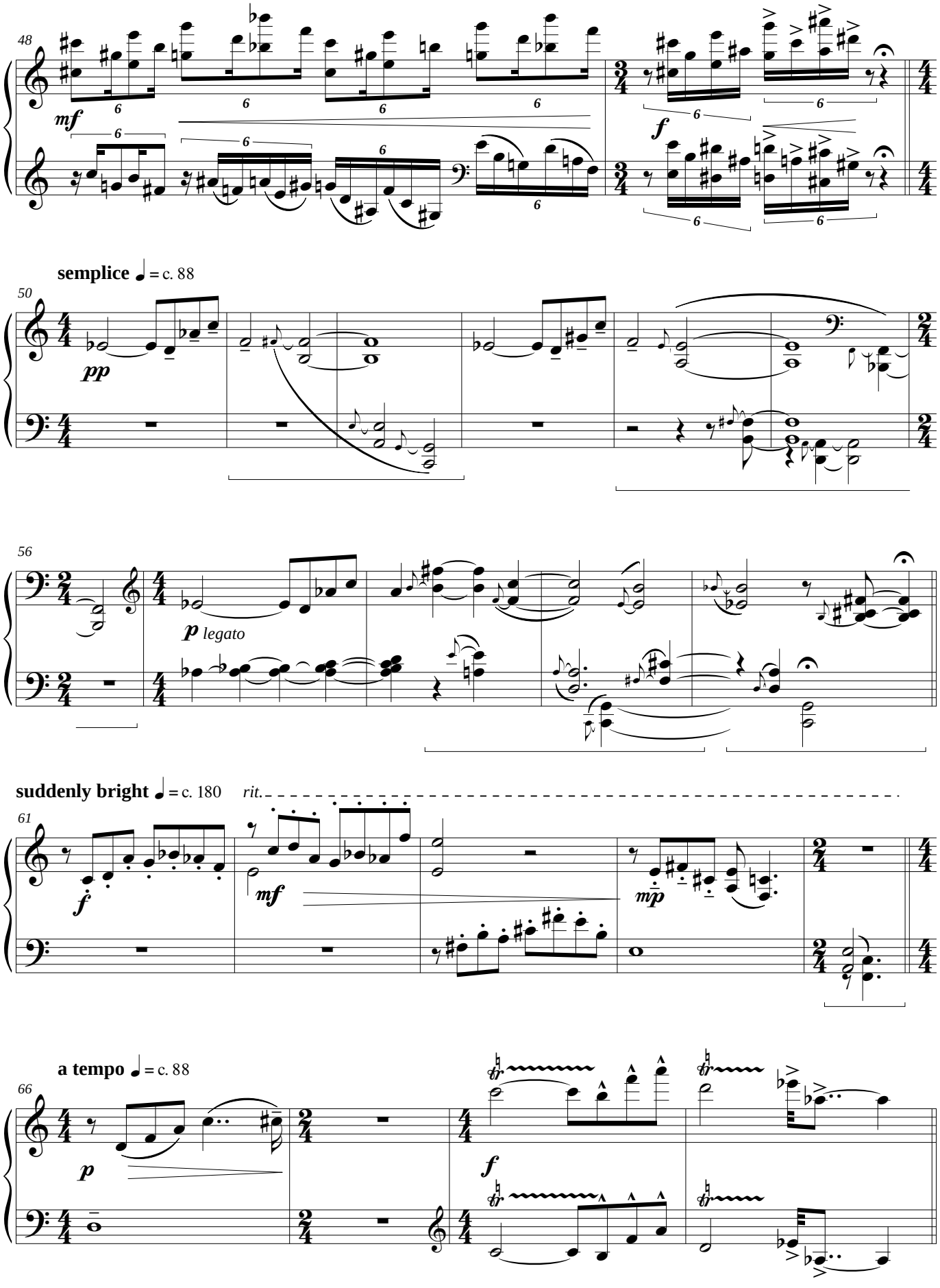
VI: dragonfly

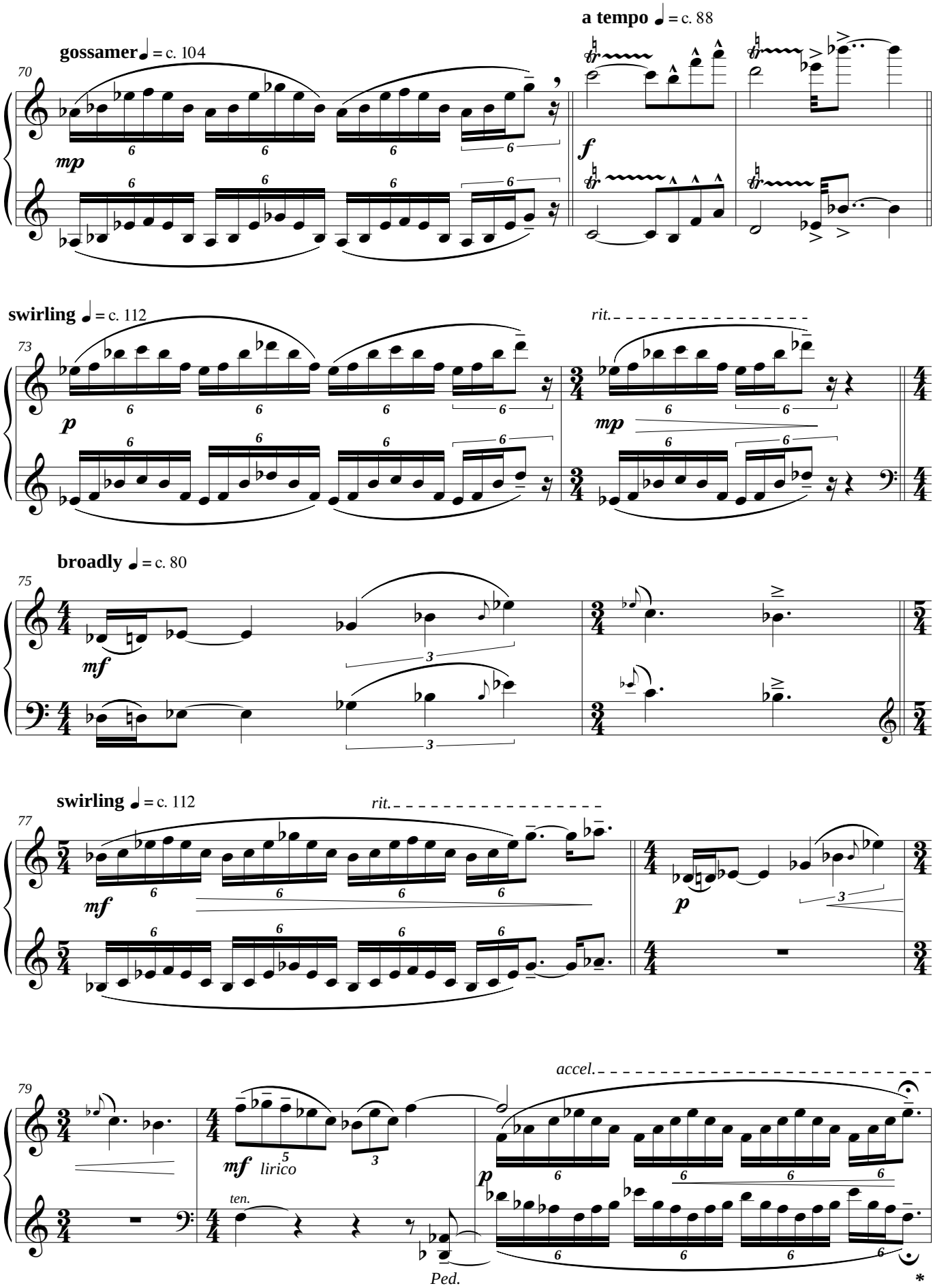


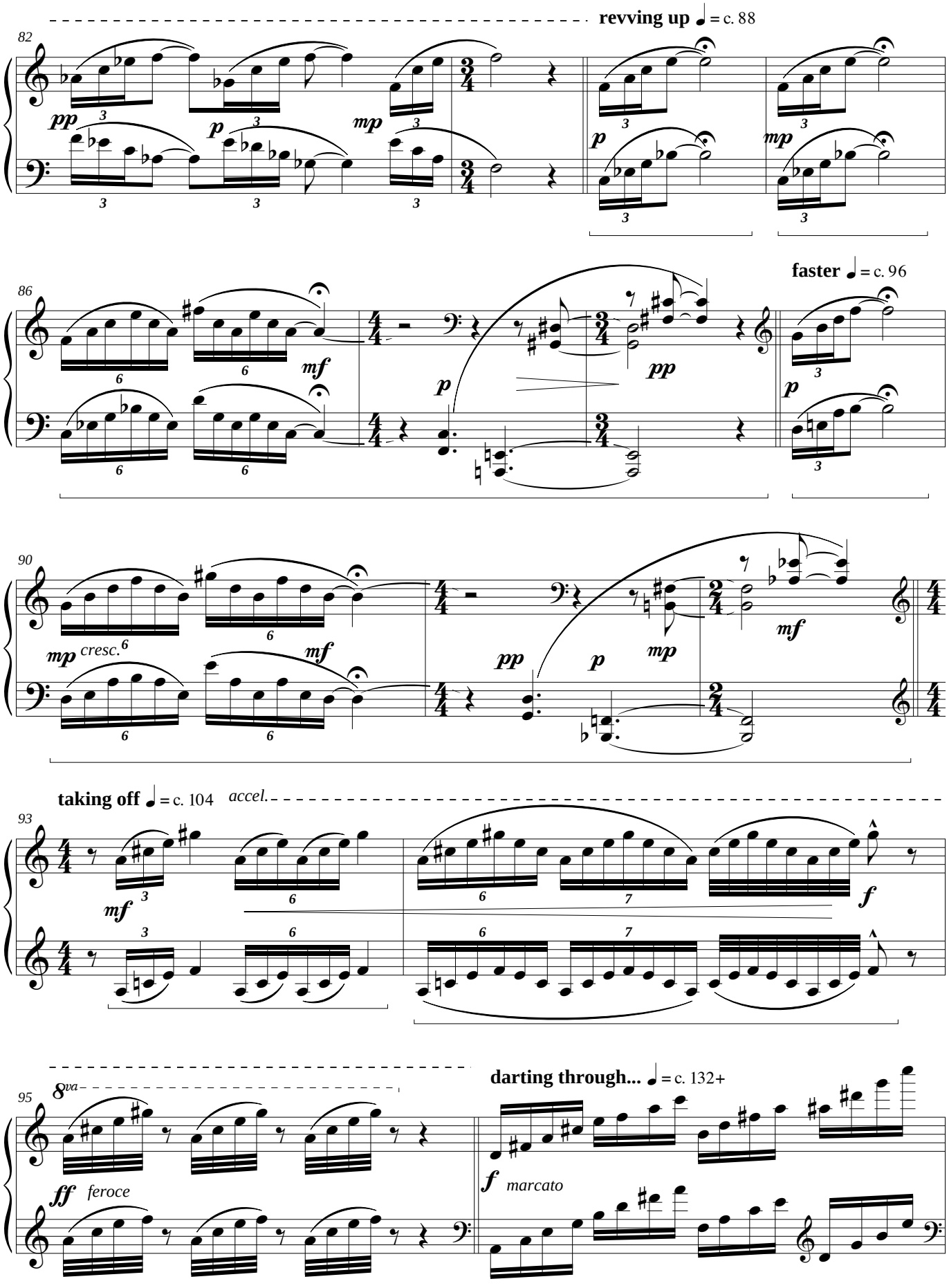

14
poco f
f
p
p
17
poco f
pp
19
p
quasi 6
poco f
pp
hovering; still ♩ = c. 76
21
p
ben tenuto
mp
p
26
mp
mf
accel.
p
pp

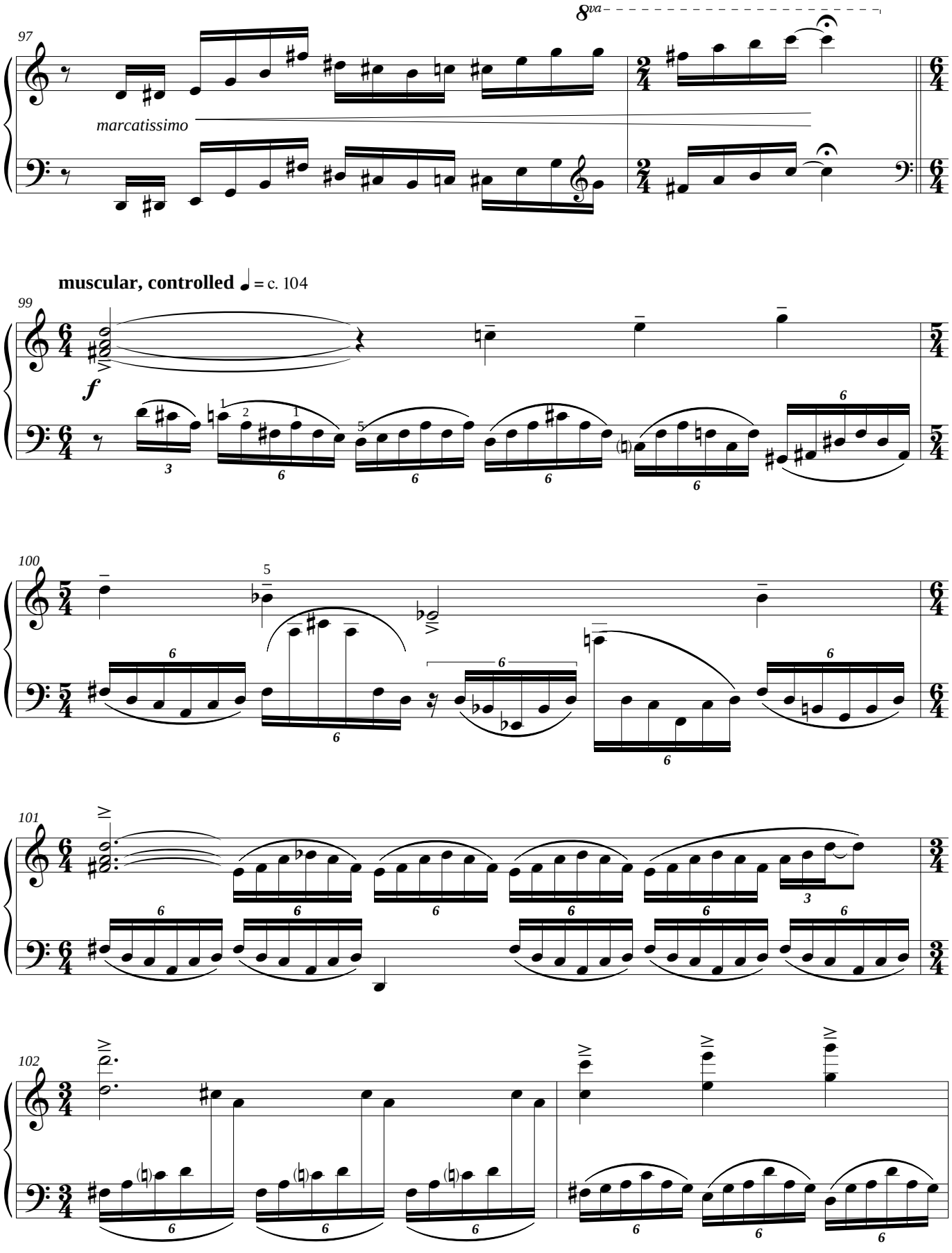

Tempo I = c. 108
31
mf
f
mf
almost delicate, subdued
33
34
35
mf
mf
mp
37

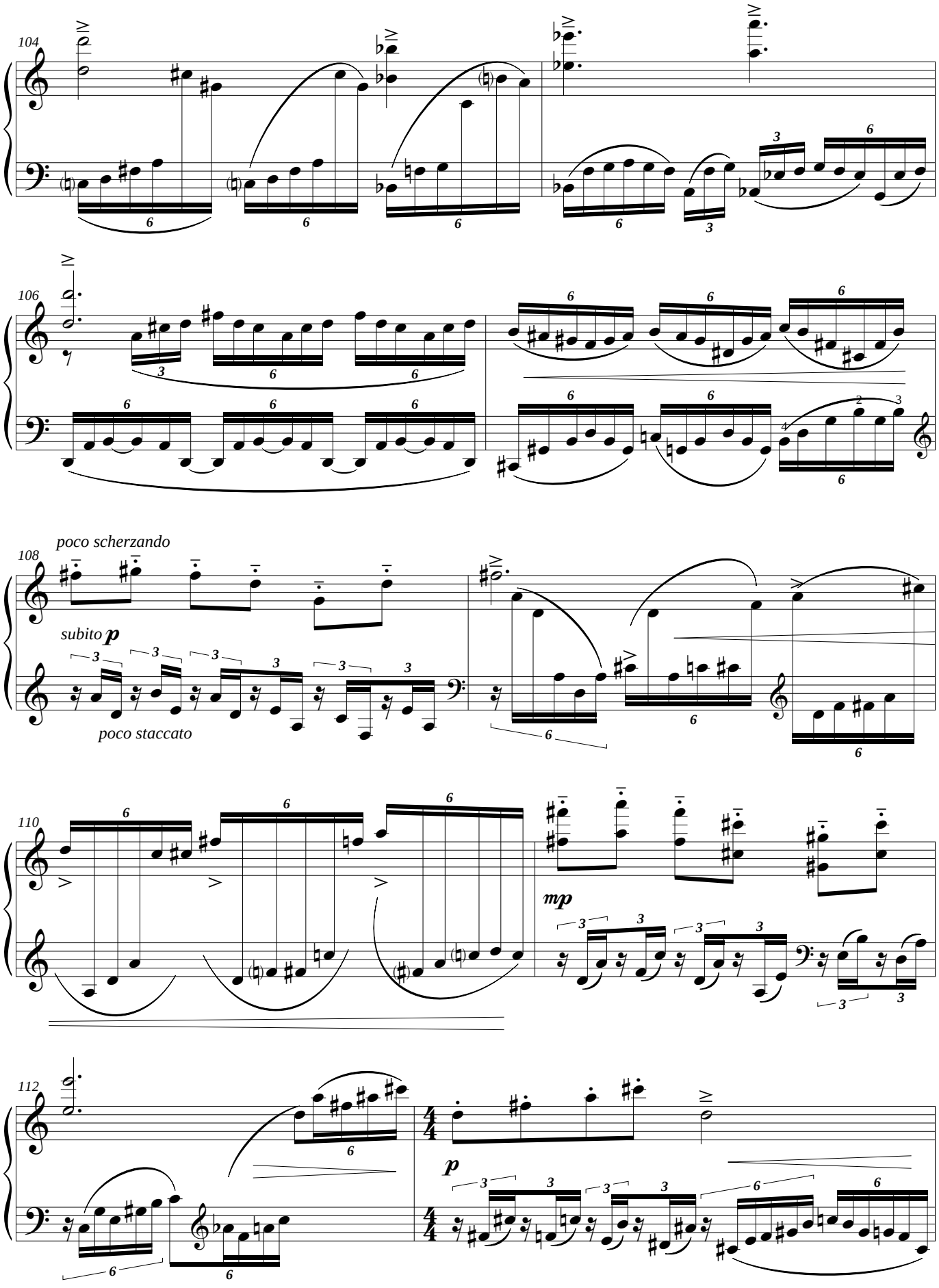

39
f
cresc.
poco scherzando
41
p
poco staccato
43
mp
45
pp
47
p

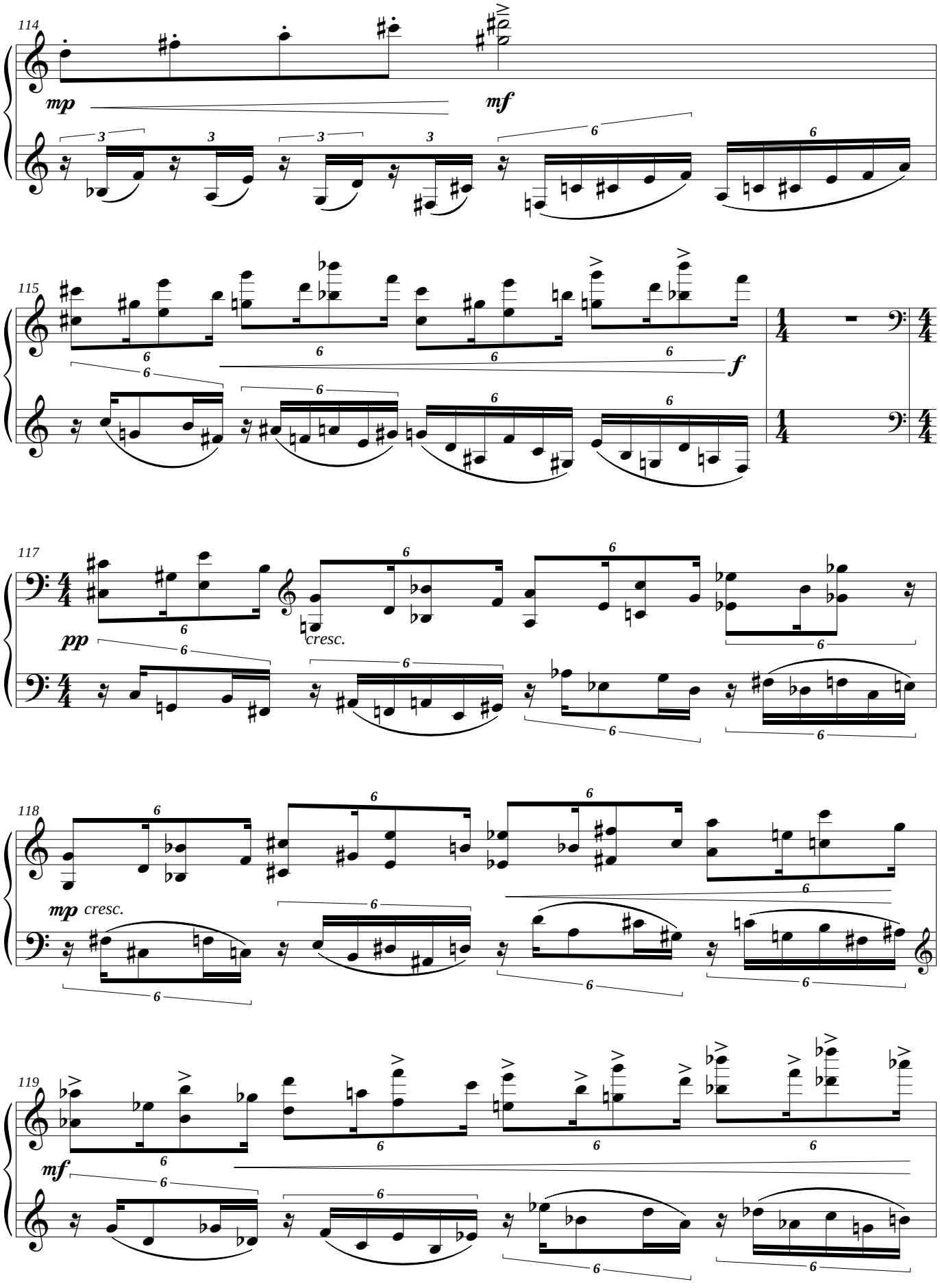

48
mf
f
semplice ♩ = c. 88
50
pp
56
p legato
suddenly bright ♩ = c. 180
rit.
61
f
mf
mp
a tempo ♩ = c. 88
66
p
f

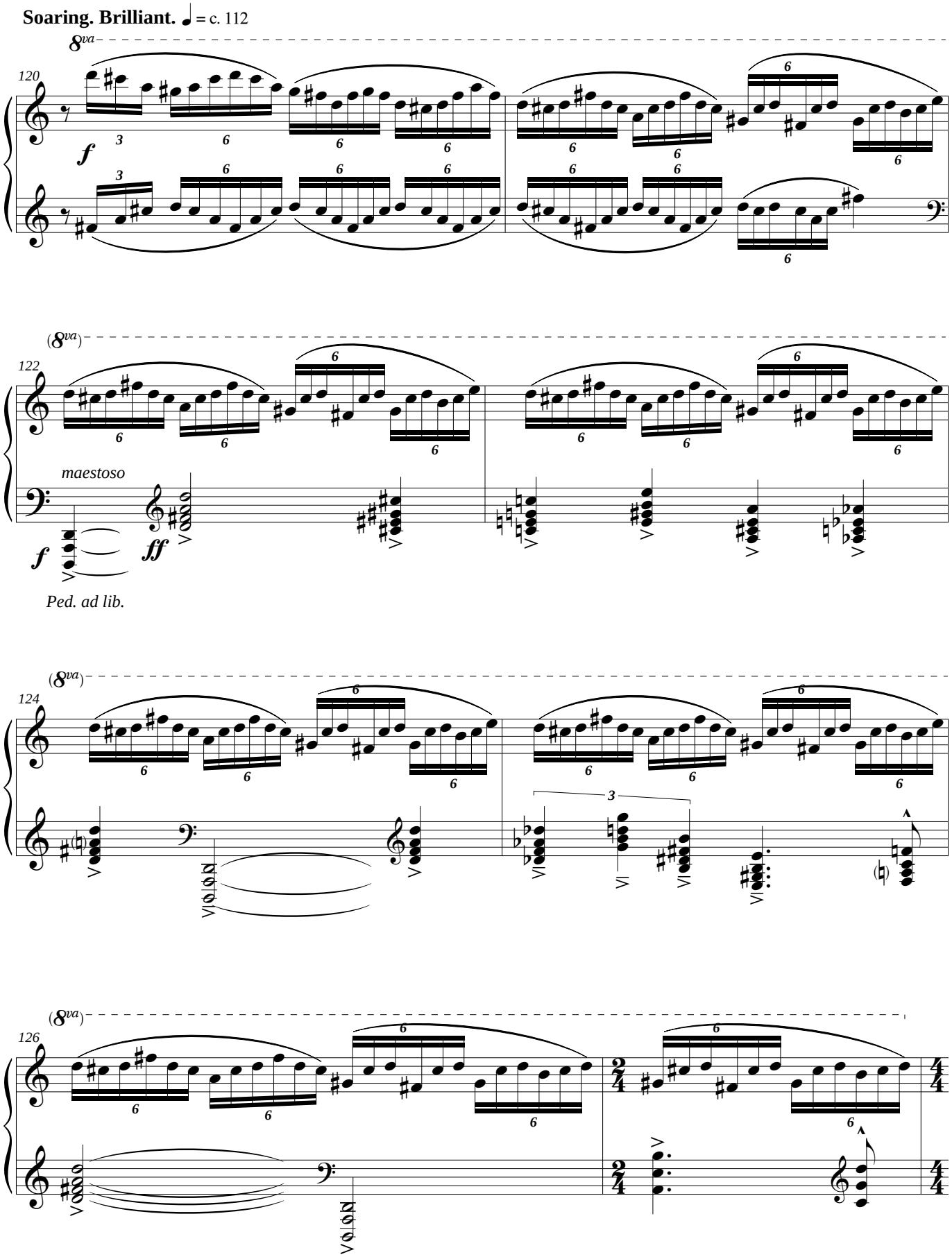

gossamer ♩ = c. 104
70
mp
a tempo ♩ = c. 88
f
swirling ♩ = c. 112
73
p
rit.
mp
broadly ♩ = c. 80
75
mf
swirling ♩ = c. 112
77
mf
rit.
p
79
mf lirico
ten.
accel.
p
Ped.
*

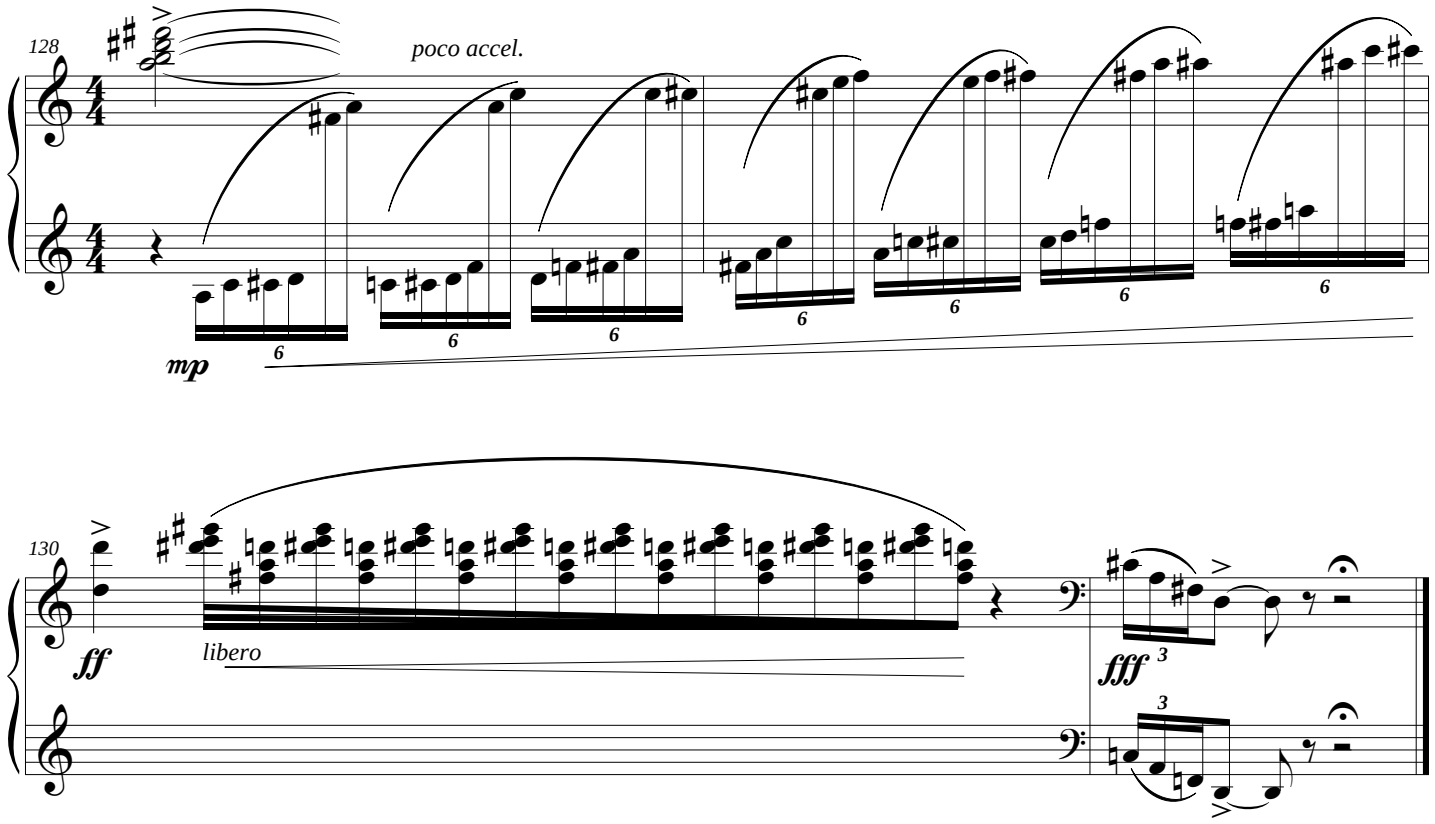

revving up ♩ = c. 88
82
faster ♩ = c. 96
86
90
taking off ♩ = c. 104
accel.
93
8va
darting through... ♩ = c. 132+
95
ff feroce
f marcato


97
8va
marcatissimo
muscular, controlled ♩ = c. 104
99
f
100
101
102


104
106
108
poco scherzando
subito p
poco staccato
110
mp
112
4/4
p


114
mp
mf
115
f
117
pp
cresc.
118
mp cresc.
119
mf


Soaring. Brilliant. ♩ = c. 112
8va
120
f
(8va)
122
maestoso
f
ff
Ped. ad lib.
(8va)
124
(8va)
126



ca.4:40

Nov. 2014 - Jan. 2015
West Columbia, SC