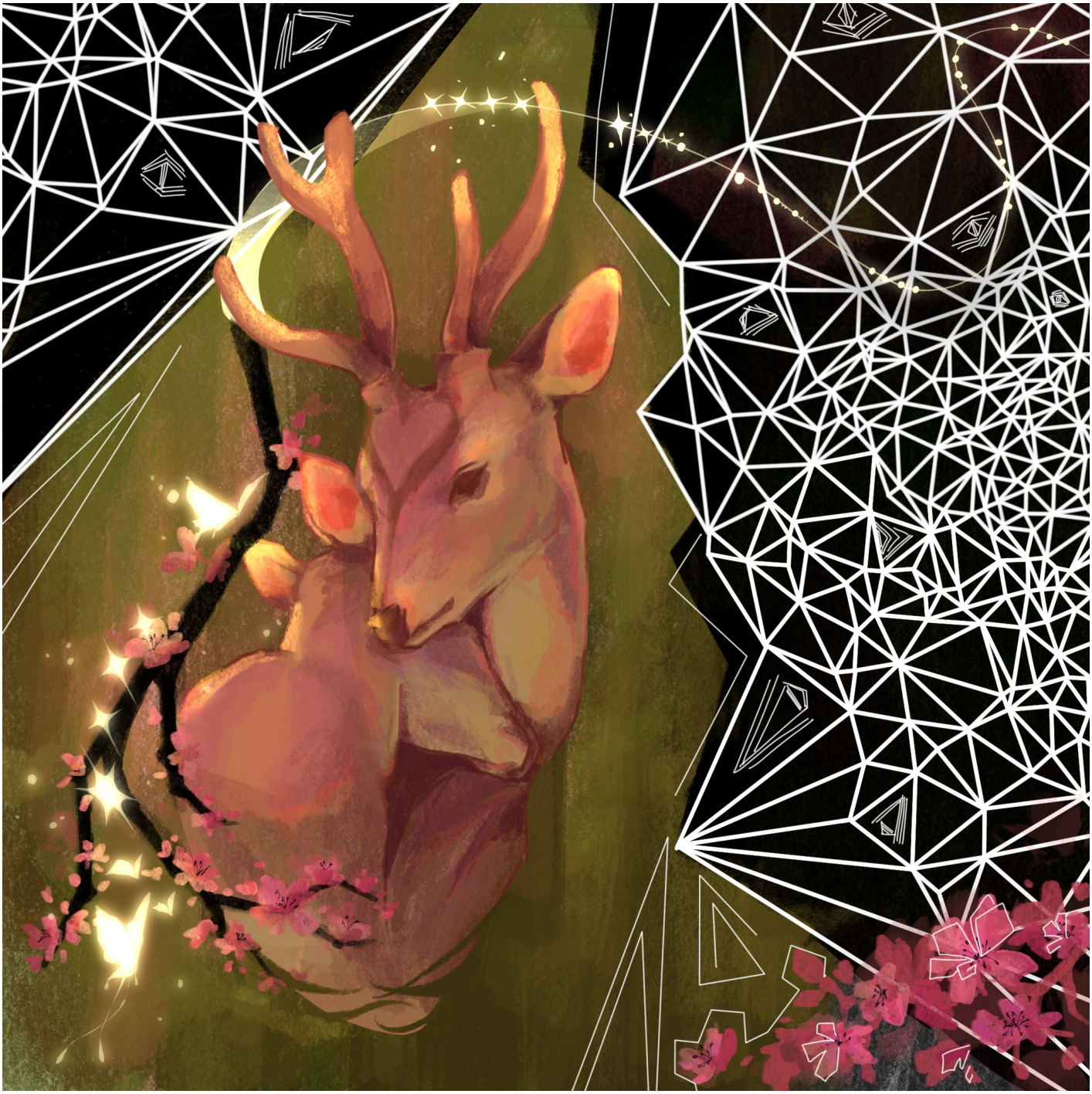
Serenade and Toccata

For Solo Piano

Holden Mui



cover art by Emily Wu

for Dr. Hagle

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Program Notes

I. Serenade

What comes before the first *I love you*?

Heartbeats. First like the flickering of a candle, weak and wavering; then faster, fluid, swaying, driven not by chance but by conviction. The heartbeats cascade over themselves; the lover ruminates, then they sing—

I love you. It is a simple melody, built from a sequence of four ascending notes. A simple melody for a simple phrase with a simple meaning. *I love you*, the lover sings again, this time with a different inflection; then *I love you* once, twice, thrice more, and each time with something else in mind; a smile, a kind act, a midnight tryst. *You*, *you*, *you* until the sounds become meaningless.

Are words not so temporary, so ineffectual? How can the lover sing them so that their love knows it not once but continuously—forever? Why even try? Time passes. The heartbeats accelerate. Twos turn into threes; threes turn into fours. Fours are dizzying; *how does my love appear so composed, so graceful, when I cannot help but—*

I love you spills out, almost involuntarily, and as the lover sings they realize the words *have* changed. The words are broader and warmer. They reverberate with the weight of shared meals and shared kisses and shared dreams. *I love you*, a simple melody for a simple phrase. *I love you* thrice more, and this time each repetition—*you*, *you*, *you*—seems more solid than the next, bringing more details into relief: the way their love brushes their hair from their eyes; the way their love tilts their head and blinks away their fatigue in the morning; the way their love squeezes the lover's hands when together, they map out their future, which seems so immense, so infinite.

Time passes. As the lover and their love go about their lives, the shops and footpaths they so often frequent take on a certain density. A coffeehouse is first for freshly-brewed coffee; then for conversation; even later for co-working, the lover's music and their love's painting or physics or poetry. Time passes. Memories accumulate. The words go unspoken, or are spoken every day and night. Does it matter? Any limp repetition captures little of reality. Flimsy as the words are, the feelings they represent only intensify. Around their love, the lover's heartbeats become almost tangible, *material*, like quakes from the footsteps of a giant—

I love you bursts from the lover's chest. The notes sweep through the once-still air and whip it into a whirlwind. *I love you*, still the same four notes, but each word somehow more substantial than ever before, deep and full and heavy with harmony. There is so much more *you* to love than when *you* were just a heartbeat and a smile. Four times more the lover sings it, *I love you*, as if trying to grasp the enormity of the sentiment; to the lover's surprise, on the fifth, the heavens echo fragments back to the pair, as if to reinforce the claim. With relief at the acknowledgment, the lover lets their song fade. The air stills.

Time passes.

I love you, whispers the lover. It has been decades, or perhaps a half-century. *I love you*—sung so many times, always with a different lilt or thought or cadence—now seems to the lover a strange phrase. After all, the memories are gone. It is just a melody they have always sung and must continue to sing to their love. And despite the lack of intent, their love understands the phrase as a simple, sweet statement of how things are. *I love you*, *I love you*, *I love you*, *I love you*, *I love you*.

Time passes. Humans forget. Words evolve. Melodies erode. But—still-familiar, still-fluid—the heart beats as it did before.

II. Toccata

Toccata is a uniquely physical experience. It interrupts itself with deep accented bass notes, which produce reverberations we can *feel*; its volatile perpetual-motion engine leaves no time for thought or meditation. Its rhythm registers as much in the body as it does in the mind. In this sense, and in many others, *Toccata* is the opposite of *Serenade*.

Toccata's main motif, a series of four descending notes in half-steps that ends in a *bang!*, proceeds at a pace that lends it a certain brutality. It is a warped, inverted version of *Serenade*'s *I love you*: percussive rather than lyrical, dissonant rather than harmonious.

Beyond the harmony of chords, *Serenade* is a story of the harmony of lovers. So *Toccata* is dissonant in more ways than one, too. In addition to its chromaticism, *Toccata*'s individual sections clash; if they were wrestled into a narrative, it would be jagged, uneven. Designed to be abstract, *Toccata* resists such easy categorization.

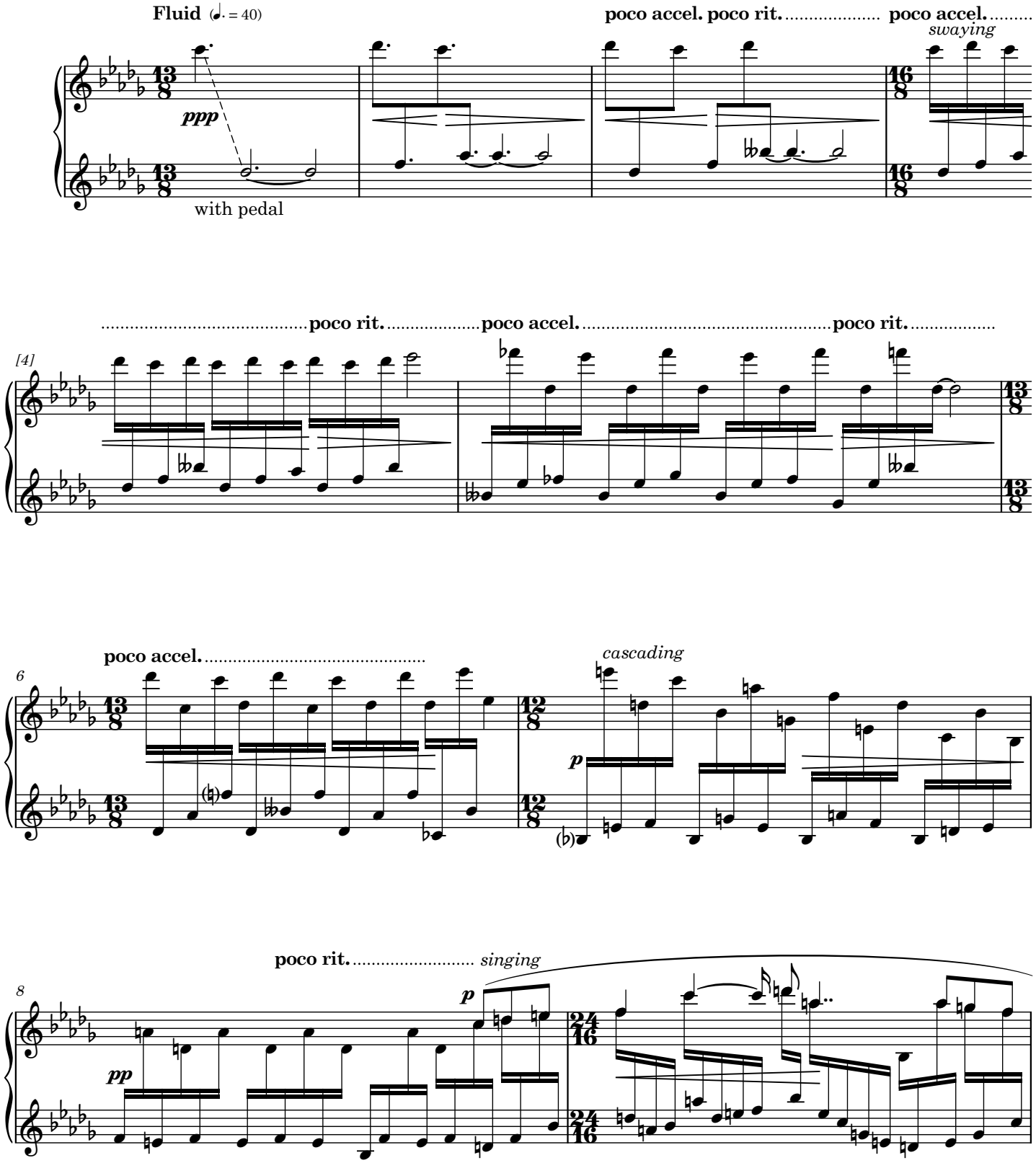
Beyond the lyricism of *Serenade*'s songlike melody, *Serenade* swells and fades much like the human voice. So *Toccata* is percussive in more ways than one, too. In addition to its deep accented bass notes and rhythmic intensity, *Toccata* features mostly short, clipped melodies, almost like vulgar utterances. In fact, the sharp cutoff of *Toccata*'s main motif's last *note* simultaneously functions as an abrupt truncation of *Serenade*'s song—from extended melody to four-note motif.

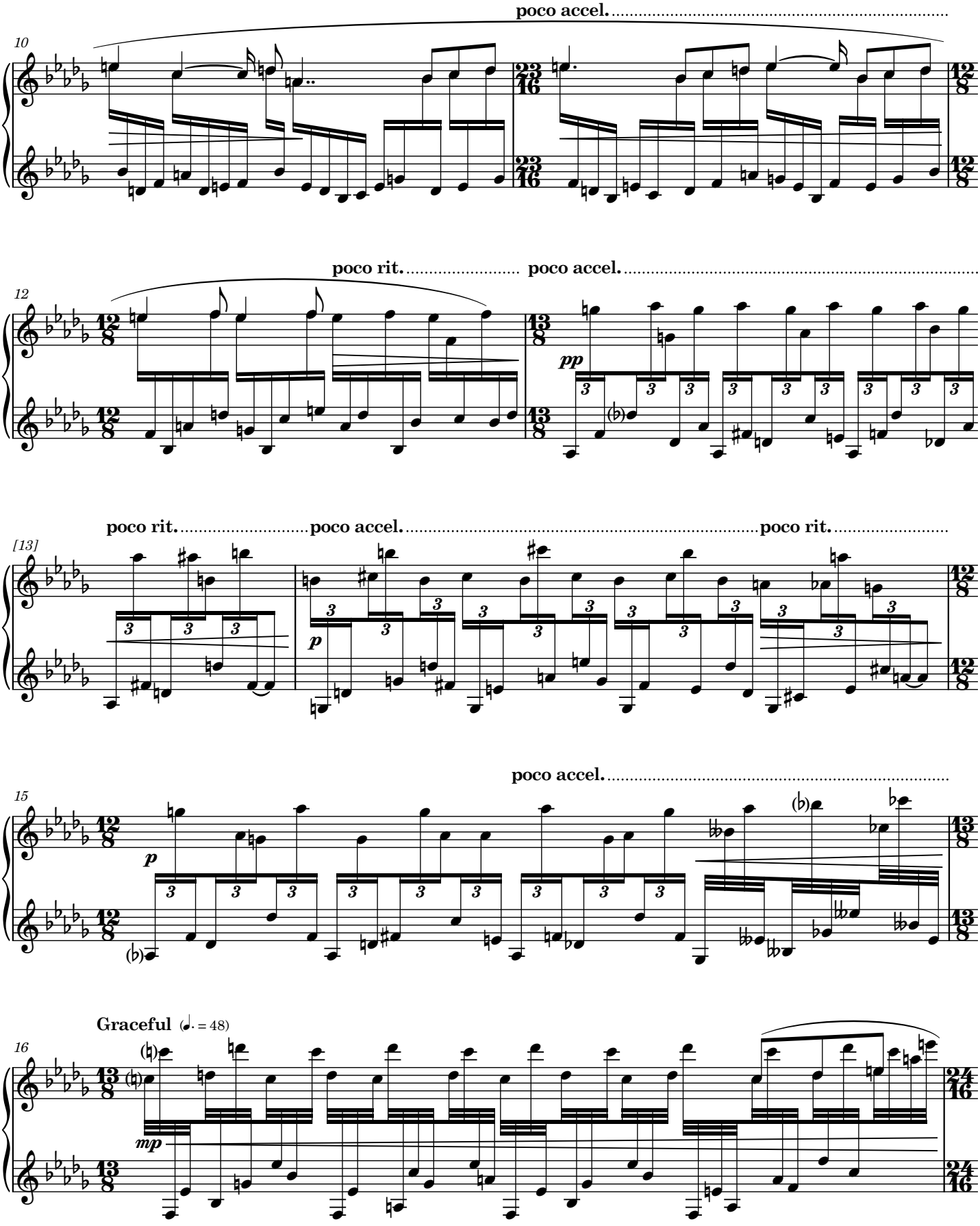
As such, the differences in their themes are a microcosm of their overall differences. So it makes sense that where *Serenade* ends gently, harmoniously, tapering the way singers do, *Toccata* ends with a dissonant, percussive, blood-and-guts coda—the last note predictably unpredictable.

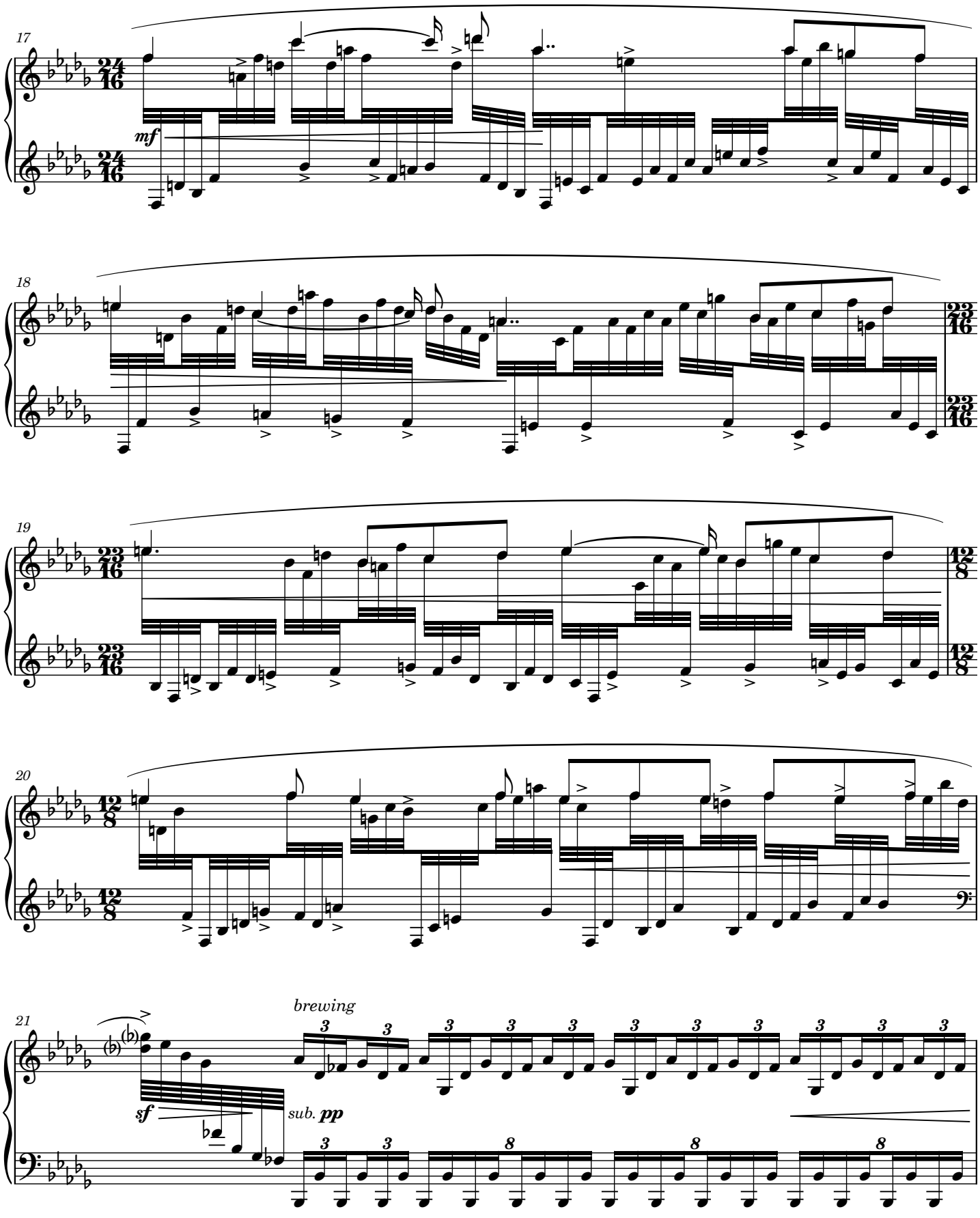
(Andrew Wu)

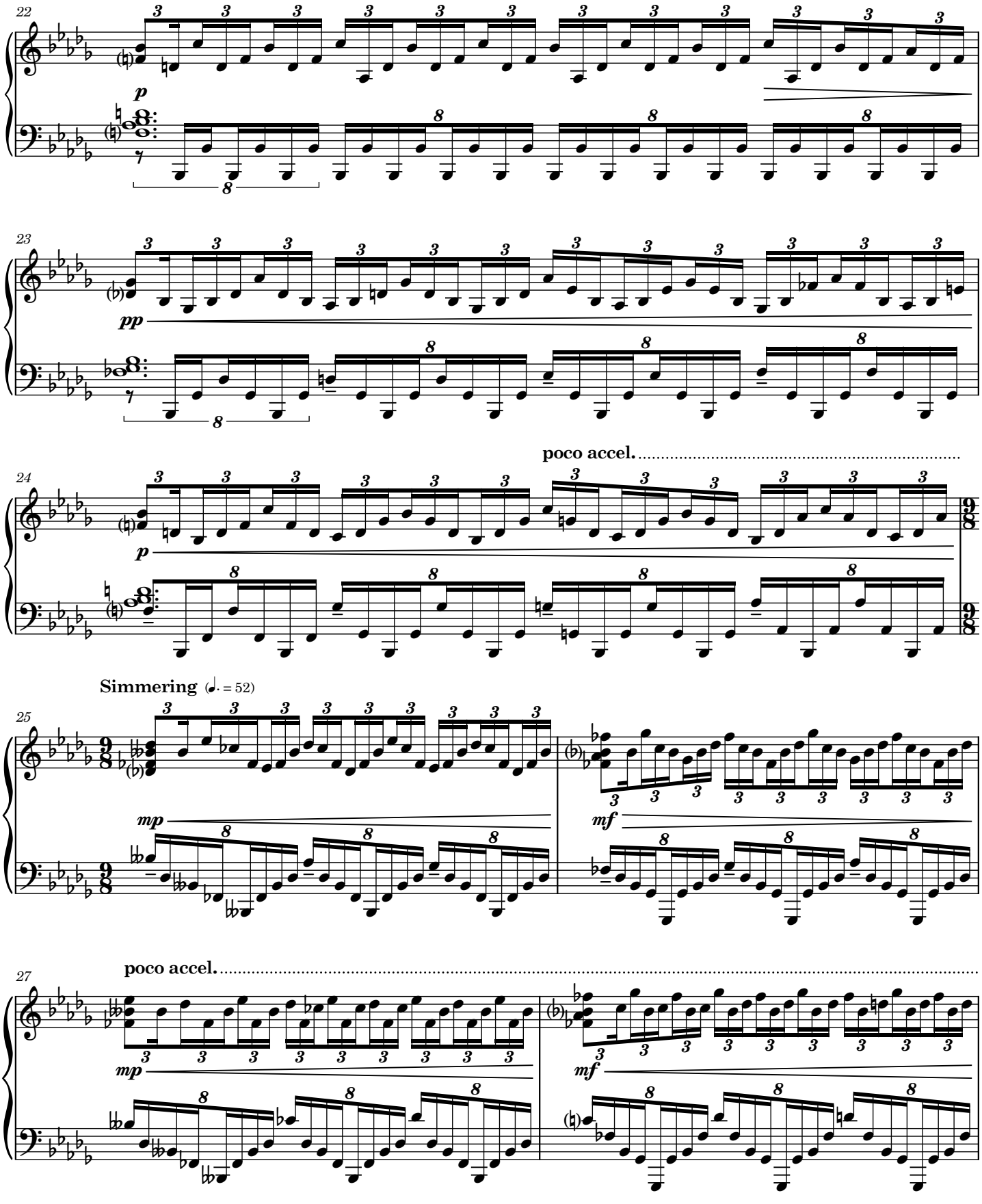
Serenade and Toccata

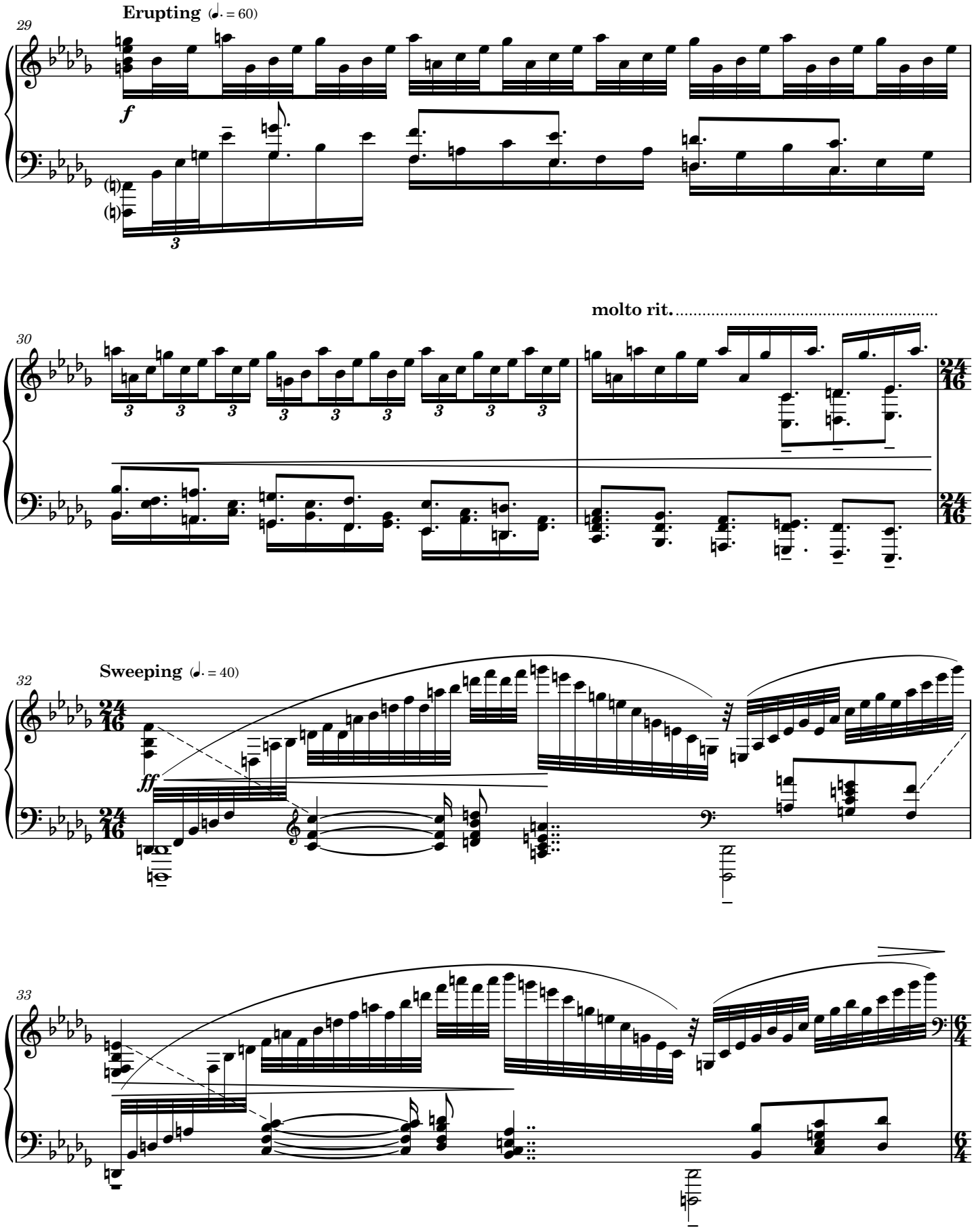
I. Serenade

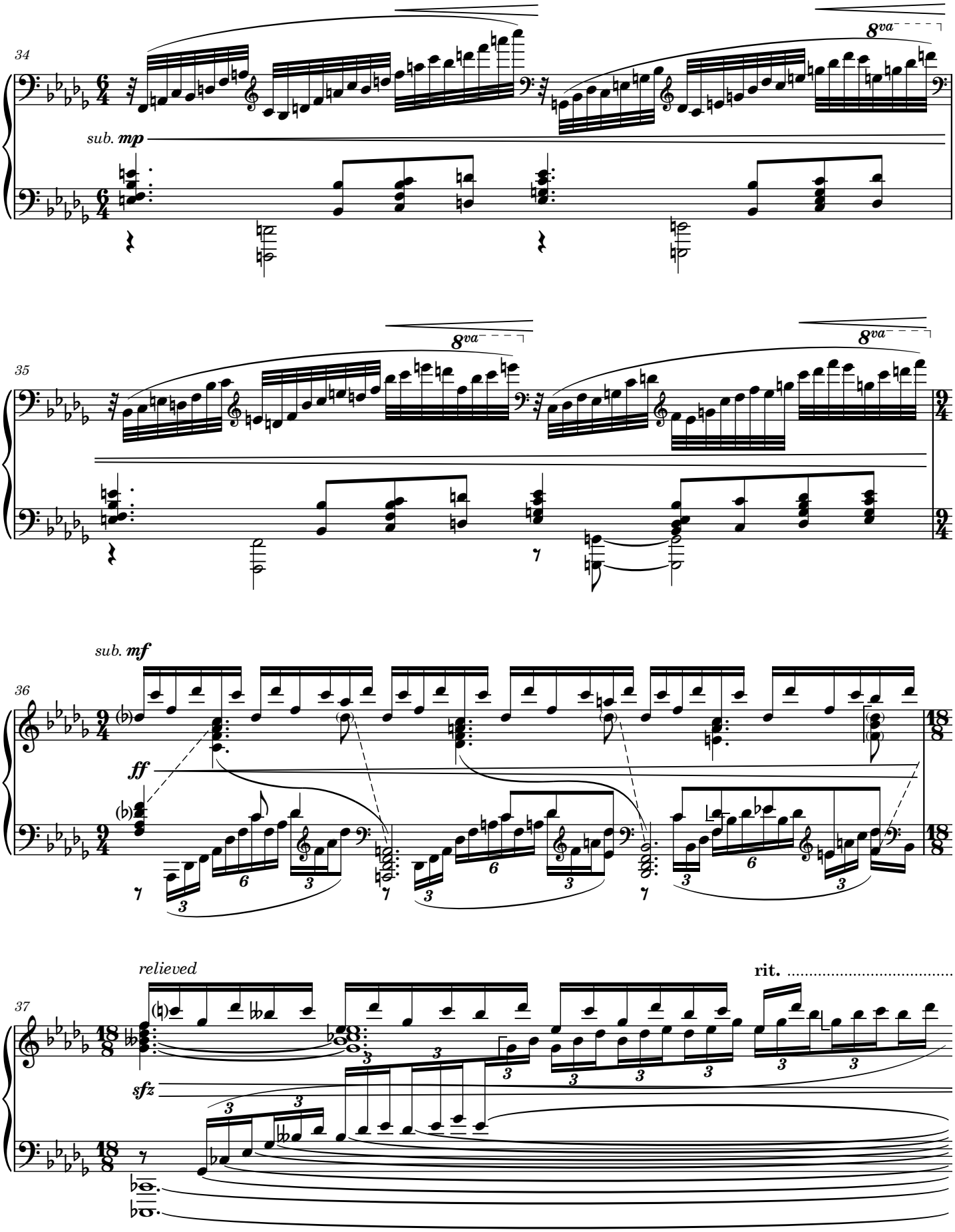



poco accel.
10
poco rit.
poco accel.
12
pp
poco rit.
poco accel.
poco rit.
[13]
p
poco accel.
15
p
Graceful (♩. = 48)
16
mp


17
mf
18
19
20
21
brewing
sf
sub. pp


22
p
23
pp
poco accel.
24
p
Simmering (♩. = 52)
25
mp
mf
poco accel.
27
mp
mf


Erupting (♩. = 60)
29
f
molto rit.
30
24/16
Sweeping (♩. = 40)
32
ff
33
6/4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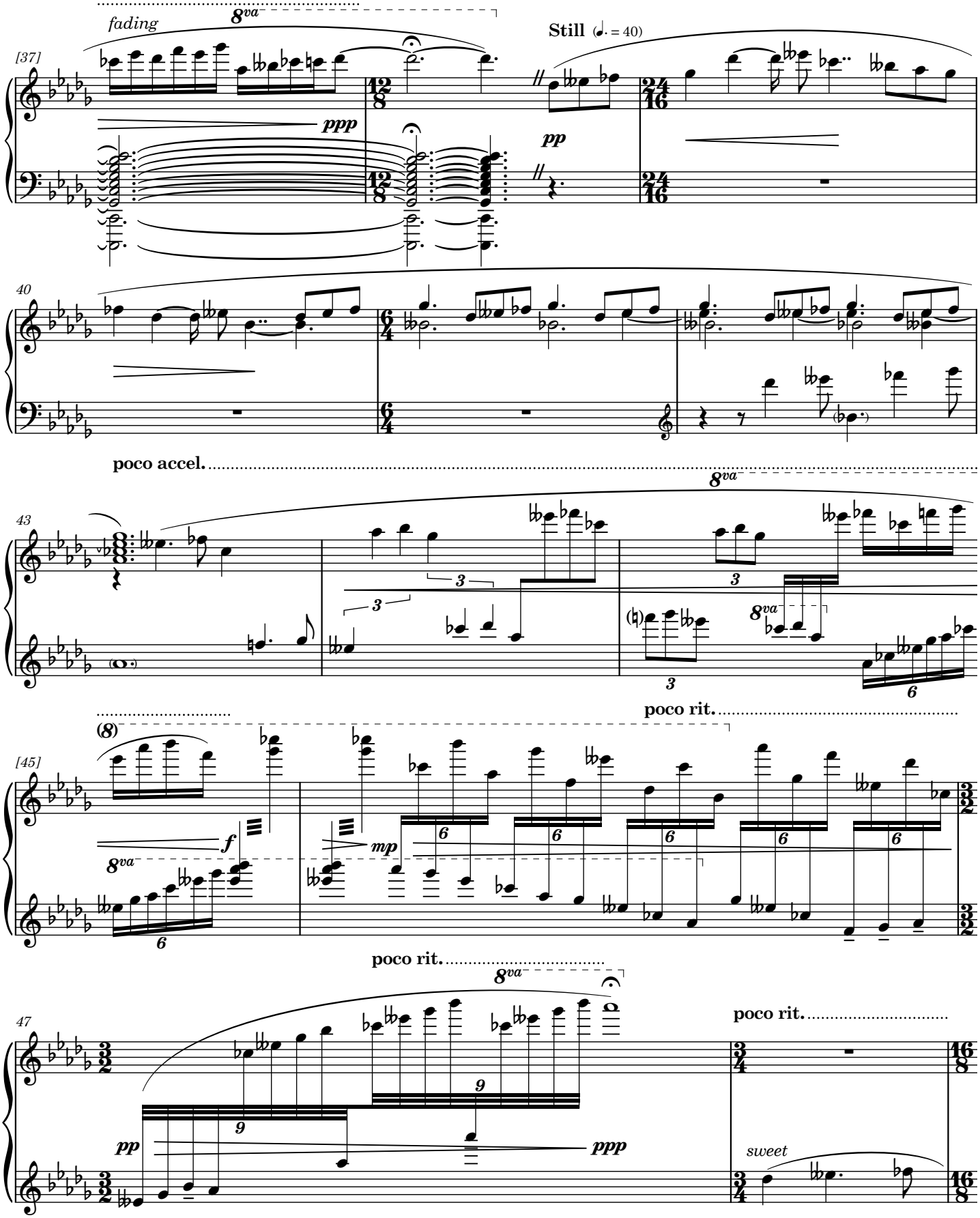
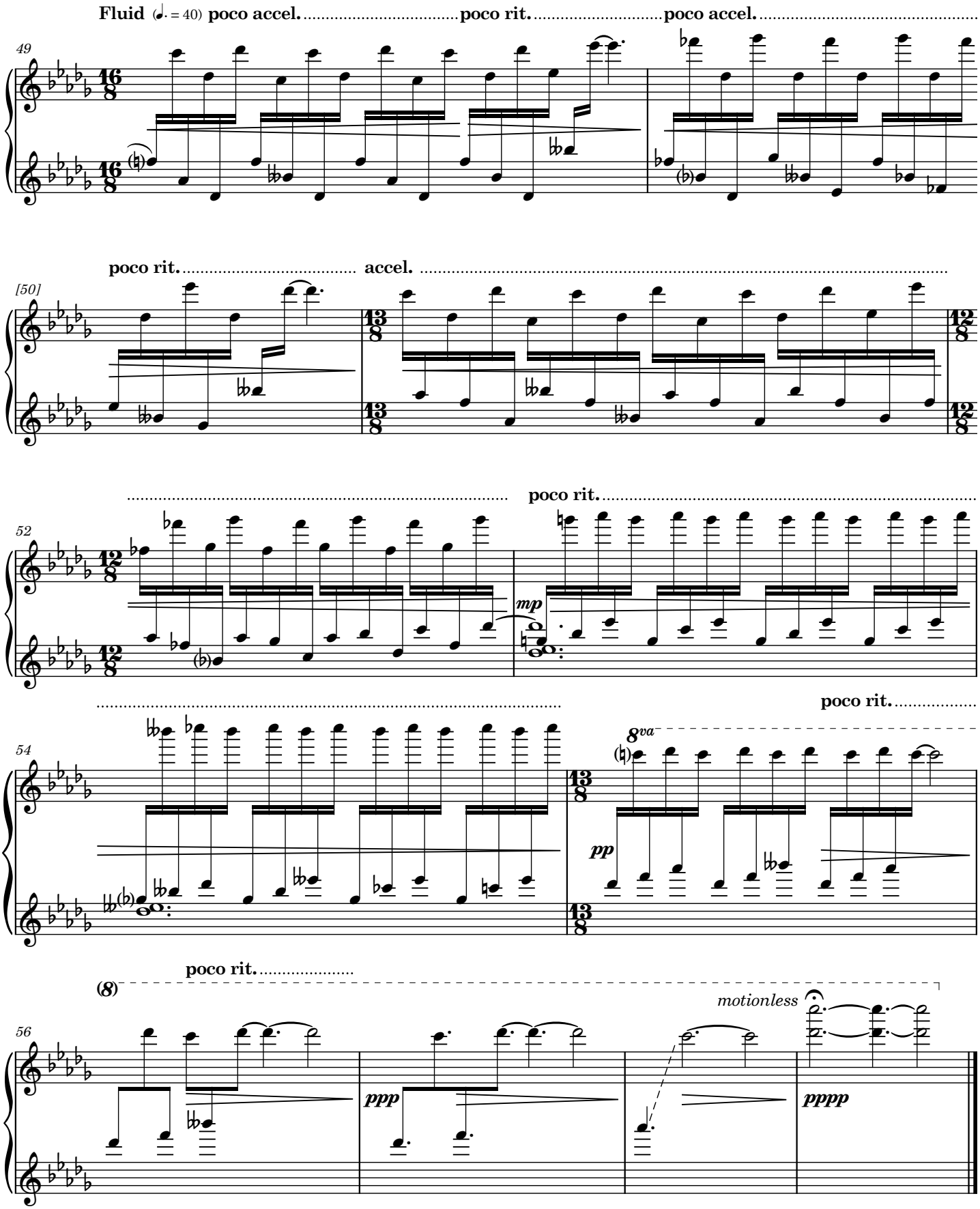
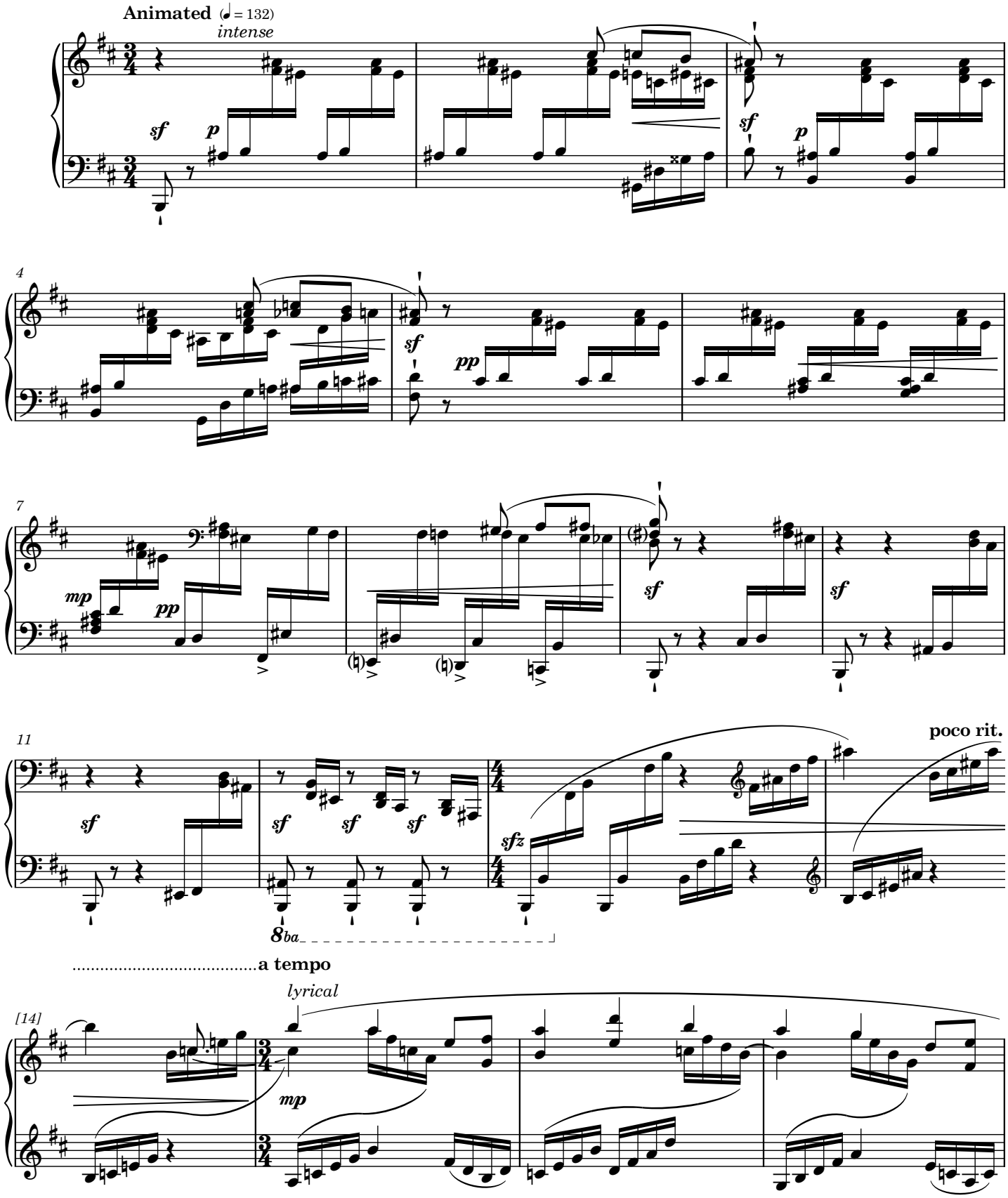
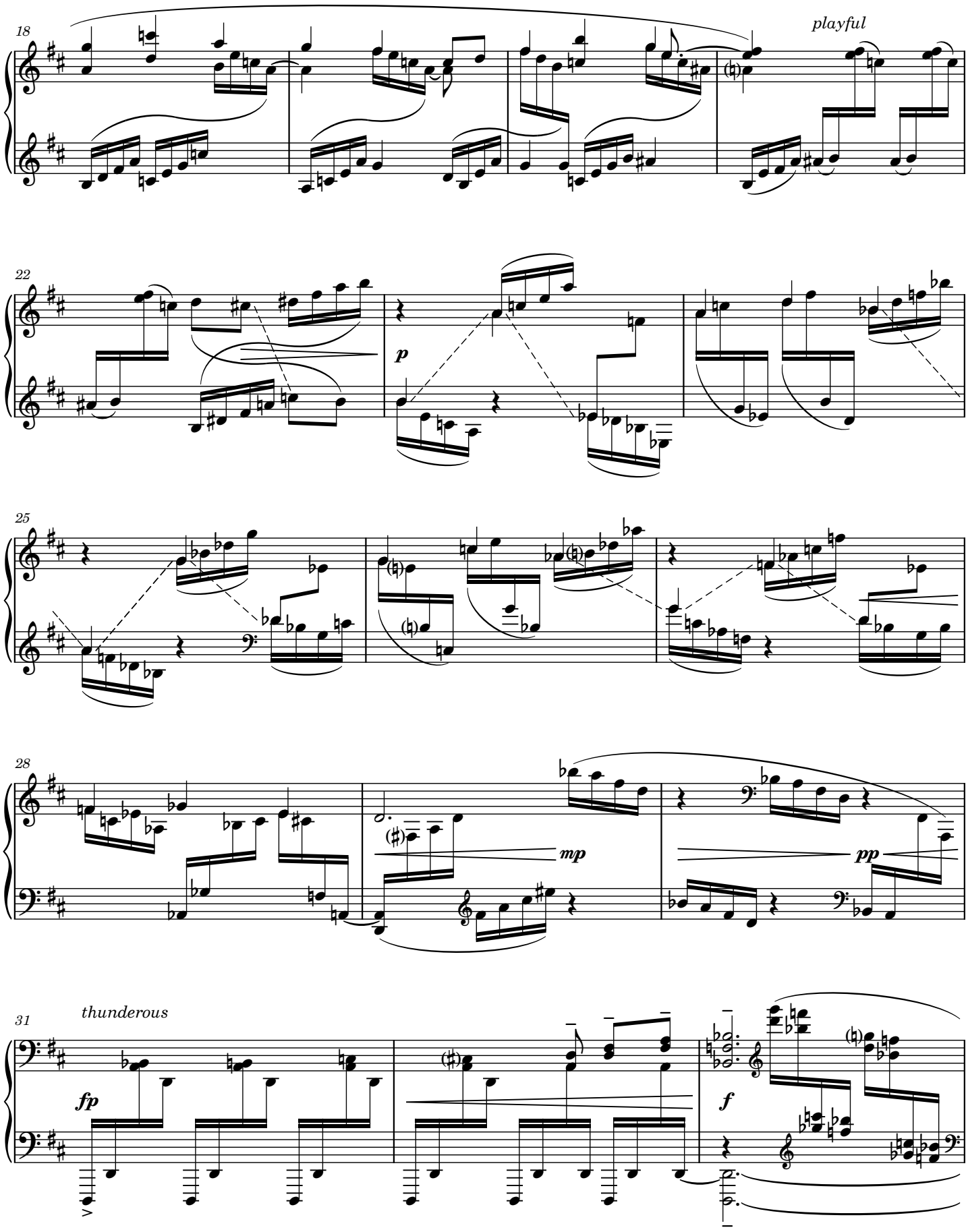
sub. mp
8va
35
8va
8va
sub. mf
36
ff
relieved
37
sfz
rit.


fading
8va
[37]
ppp
Still (♩. = 40)
pp
40
poco accel.
8va
43
3
3
3
8va
6
poco rit.
(8)
[45]
f
8va
6
mp
6
6
6
6
6
poco rit.
8va
47
9
9
pp
ppp
poco rit.
sweet


Fluid (♩. = 40) poco accel. poco rit. poco accel.
49
poco rit. accel.
[50]
52
poco rit.
mp
54
poco rit.
8va
pp
(8)
poco rit.
56
motionless
ppp
pppp

II. Toccata


Animated (♩ = 132)
intense
sf
p
4
sf
pp
7
mp
pp
sf
sf
11
sf
sf
sf
sf
sfz
poco rit.
8ba
a tempo
lyrical
[14]
mp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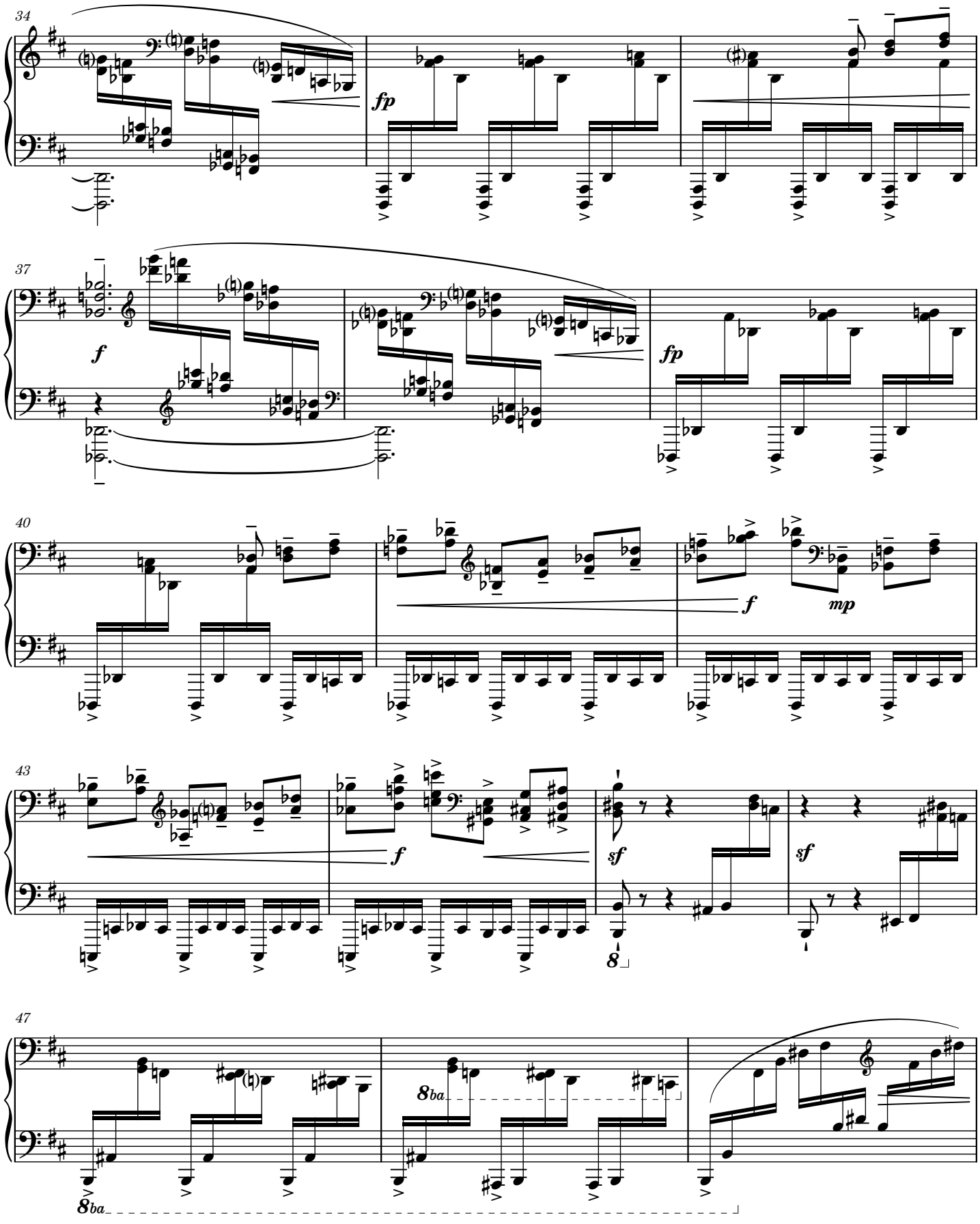
playful
22
p
25
28
mp
pp
31
thunderous
fp
f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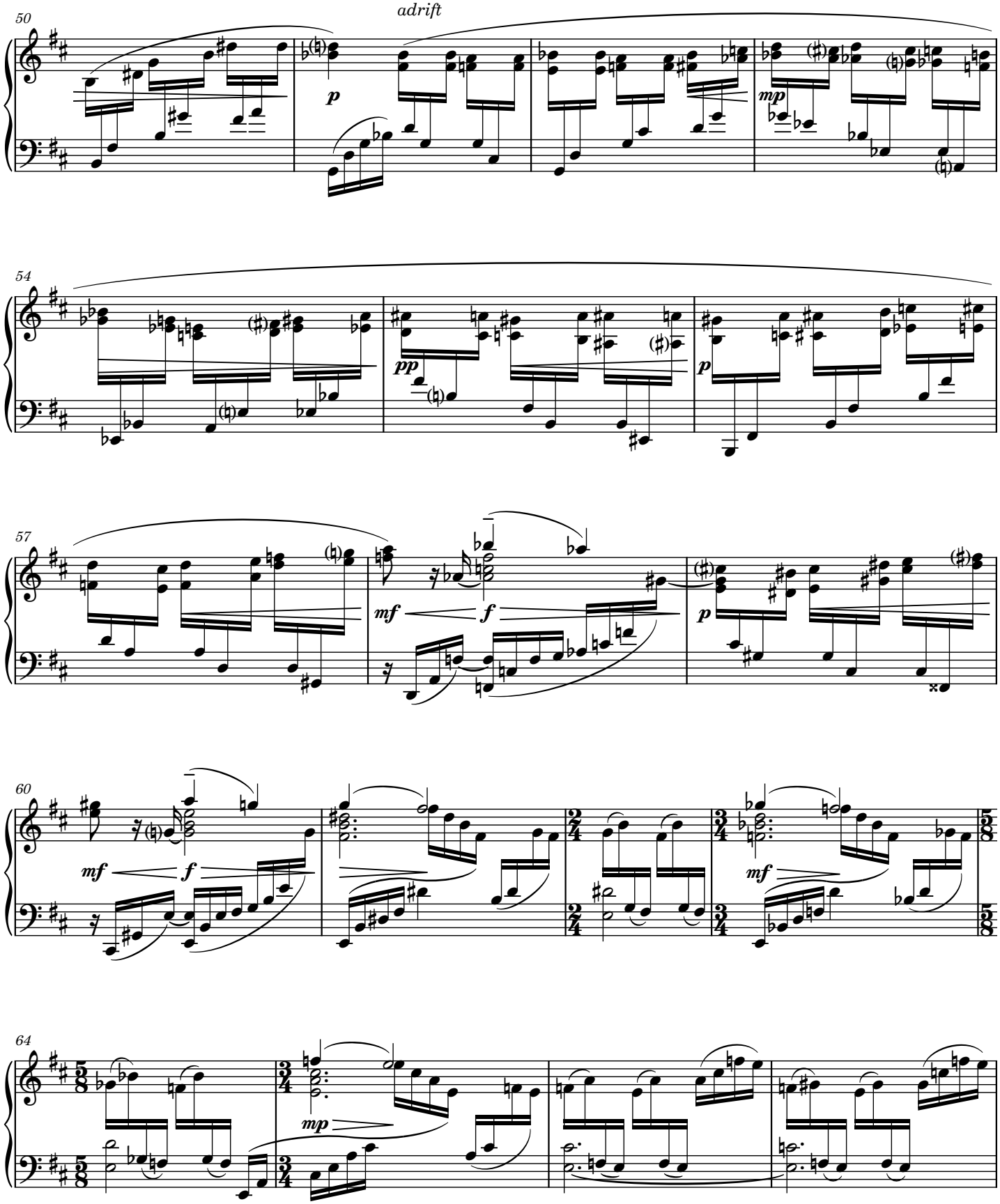
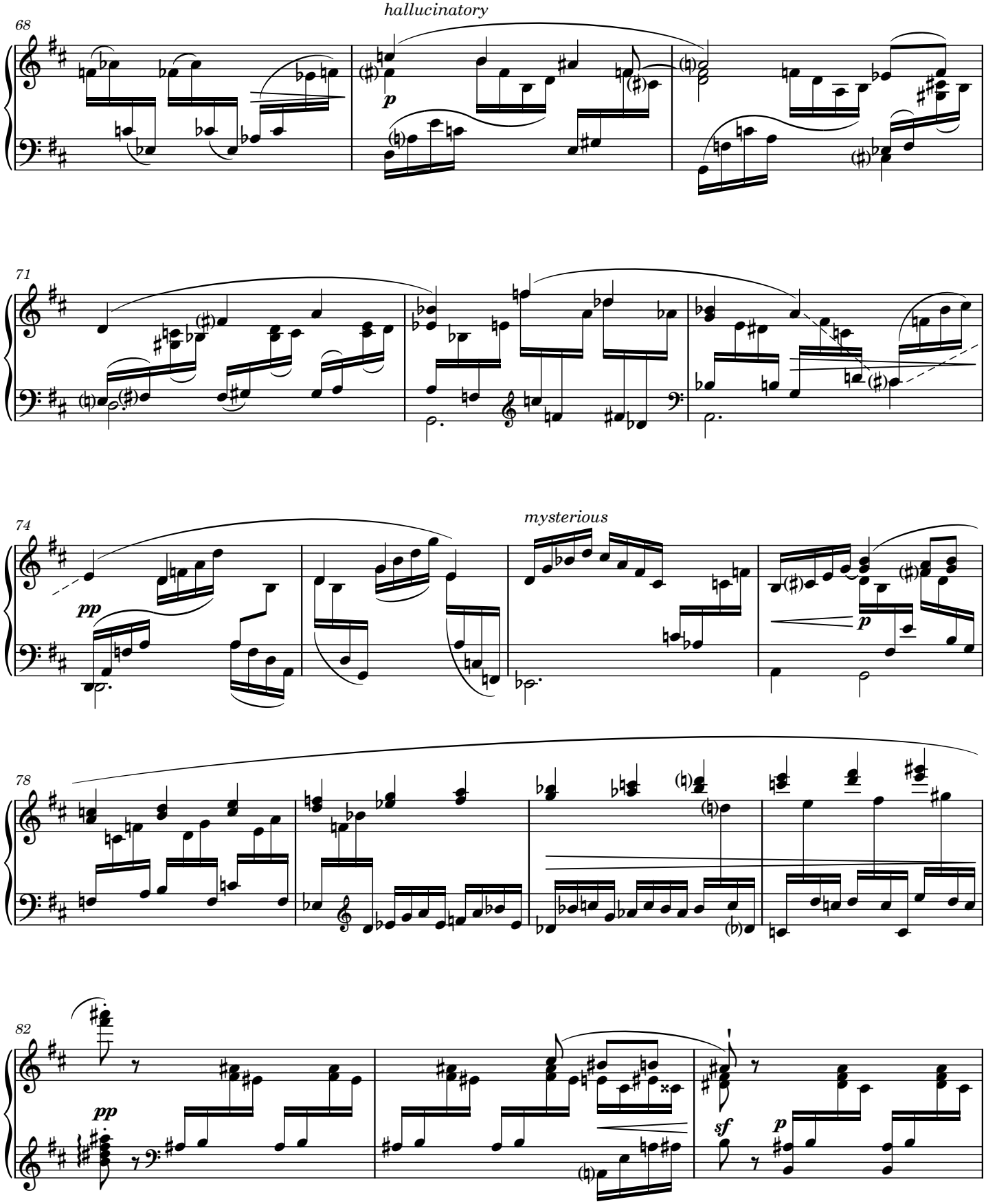
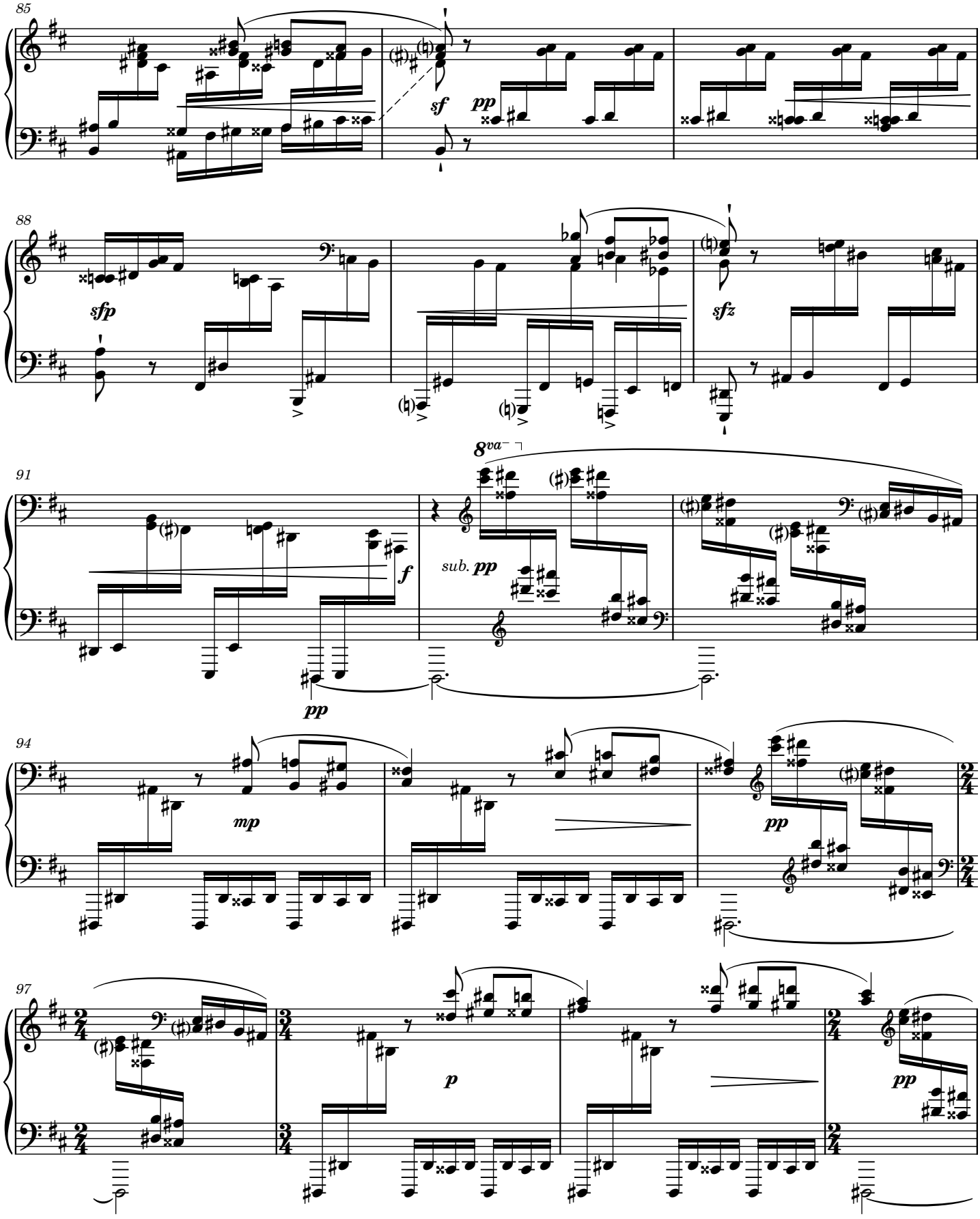
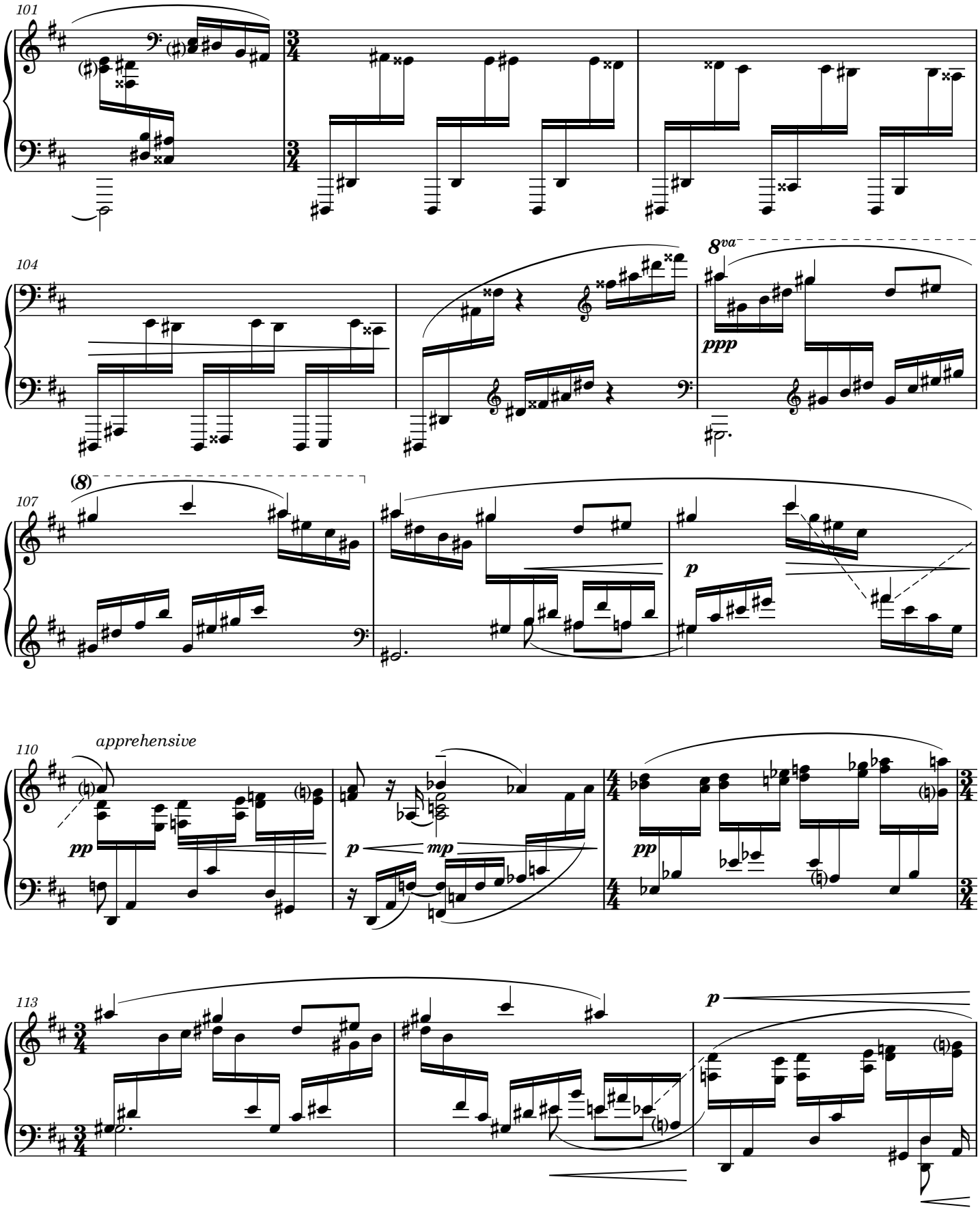
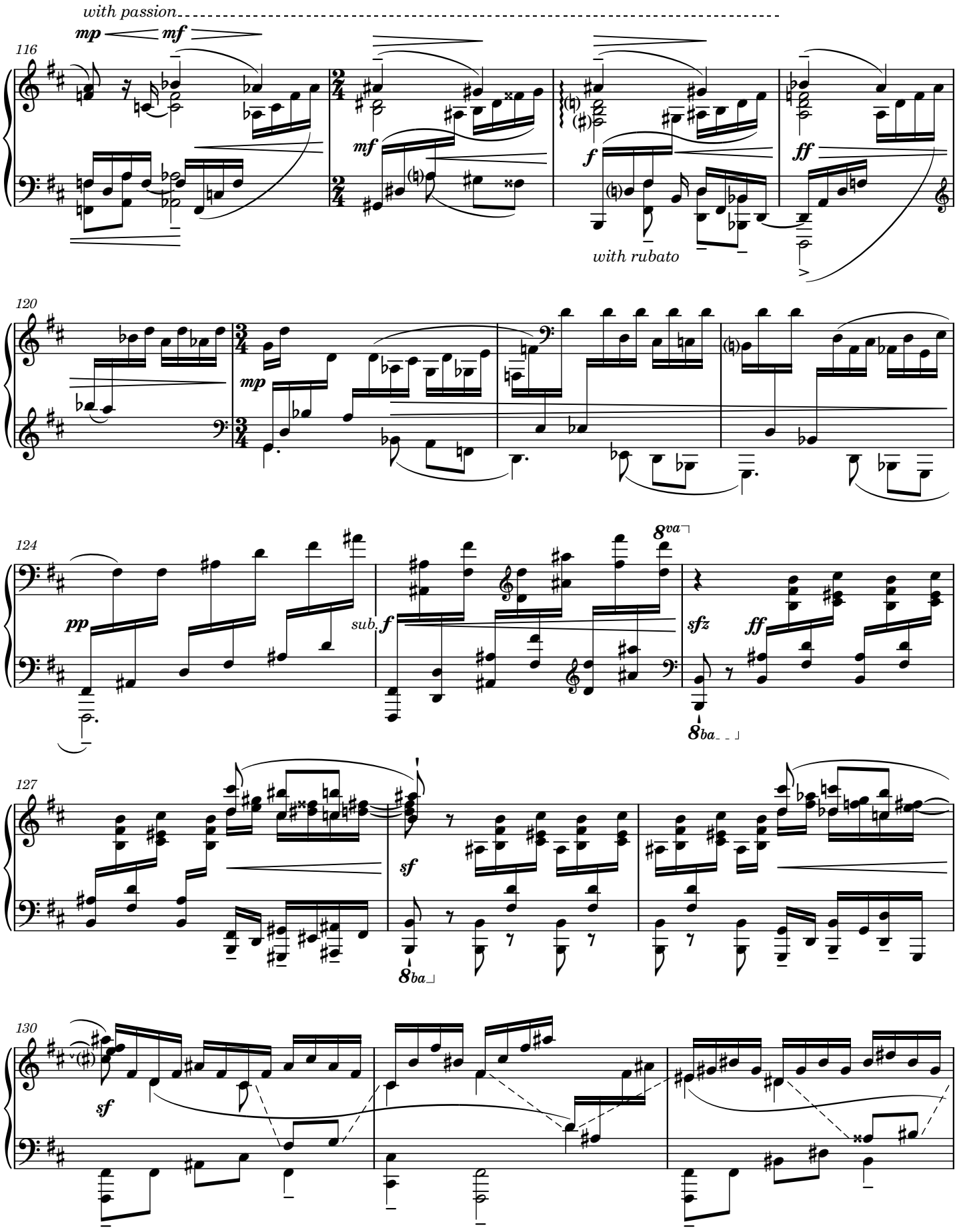
fp
37
f
fp
40
f
mp
43
f
sf
sf
8
47
8ba
8ba

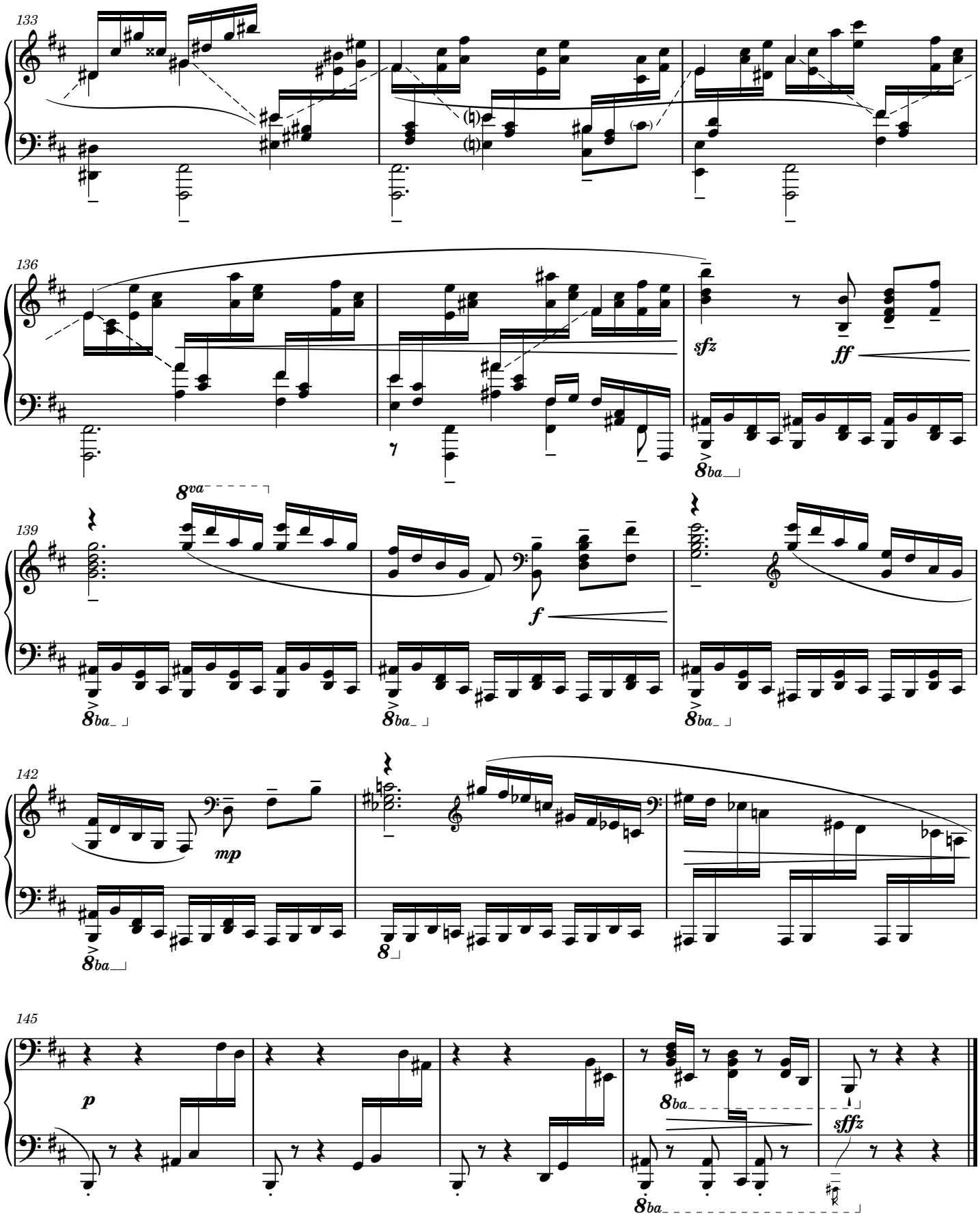

adrift
50
54
57
60
64


hallucinatory
68
p
71
mysterious
74
pp
p
78
82
pp
sf
p


85
sf
pp
88
sfp
sfz
91
8va
sub. pp
f
pp
94
mp
pp
97
p
pp


101
104
8va
ppp
(8)
107
p
apprehensive
110
pp
p
mp
pp
113
p


with passion
mp
mf
116
mf
f
with rubato
ff
120
mp
124
pp
sub.
f
8va
sfz
ff
8ba
127
sf
8ba
130
sf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136
sfz
ff
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139
f
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mp
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