THE RED BOOK OF MONTSERRAT

for string orchestra

Kile Smith

AU.IMPRINTS

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The Red Book of Montserrat is a suite for string orchestra commissioned by a youth orchestra, the Philadelphia Sinfonia, Gary D. White, Music Director. It sets five of the ten songs from the *Llibre Vermell de Montserrat*, the 14th-century book of music and texts from the monastery in Spain. Montserrat is a holy site of pilgrimage, a shrine to the Virgin Mary; the songs praise her and appeal to her for guidance. The tunes are well-known to early-music aficionados and played often in various guises by many ensembles. I wanted to see how they might dance in a string orchestra.

One of the challenges in composing this was to maintain interest in a strings-only setting of repeated verses meant for singing. I employed a variety of string techniques to do this, by no means avant-garde: some harmonics, divisi, pizzicato, solo writing. But they were enough, I thought, to keep the players on their toes while playing archaic rhythms in a modal harmonic language.

My hopes were that they would enjoy learning a new, energetic work, and that I would have used the traditional string ensemble to full advantage.

The piece is about 20 minutes long. The Philadelphia Sinfonia premiered this 16 May 2013 at the Perelman Theatre, Kimmel Center, Philadelphia. A sneak preview of movements 2 and 3 was performed 17 Feb 2013 at St. Stephen's Church, 10th Street, Philadelphia.

Descriptions of the movements, with the original *Llibre Vermell* order of songs and titles:

1. Empress of the Joyous City of Paradise
Imperayritz de la ciutat joyosa de paradis (#9). Uses solos and half-sections to alter the color. Prominent is the hemiola rhythm, typical of early music, which splits the 6/4 bar two different ways, 3+3 and 2+2+2.

2. O Virgin, Shining Brightly
O Virgo splendens (#1). "O resplendent Virgin, here on the high mountain, glowing with miraculous wonders, where the believers from everywhere ascend. Ah, with your gentle loving eye behold those caught in the bonds of sin, to let them not suffer the blows of Hell, but let them be with the blessed by your intercession." A chant-like, rolling melody. The three-part canon is indicated in the original manuscript; I underlaid it with simple, musing bass lines.

3. Splendid Star on the Mountain
Stella splendens (#2). The repeating verses are interspersed with a chorus of the same music, heightening the need for unflagging interest in the orchestration. Solos with varying degrees of embellishment are used throughout.

4. Our Queen above All Heavens
Polorum Regina (#6). Meditative and static with simple imitation of a glowing melody, this splits some string sections into three parts over a ruminating bass.

5. We Hasten to Death
Ad mortem festinamus (#10). A sermon in the decidedly non-morbid, rollicking, Totentanz tradition: "We hasten to death, let us desist from sin. I have resolved to write about the contempt of the world, so that this degenerate age will not pass in vain. Now is the hour to rise from the evil sleep of death. Life is short, and shortly it will end; death arrives faster than anyone believes." Everyone from king to priest to rich to pauper joins hands with Death. And dances.

Commissioned by the Philadelphia Sinfonia, Gary D.White, Music Director

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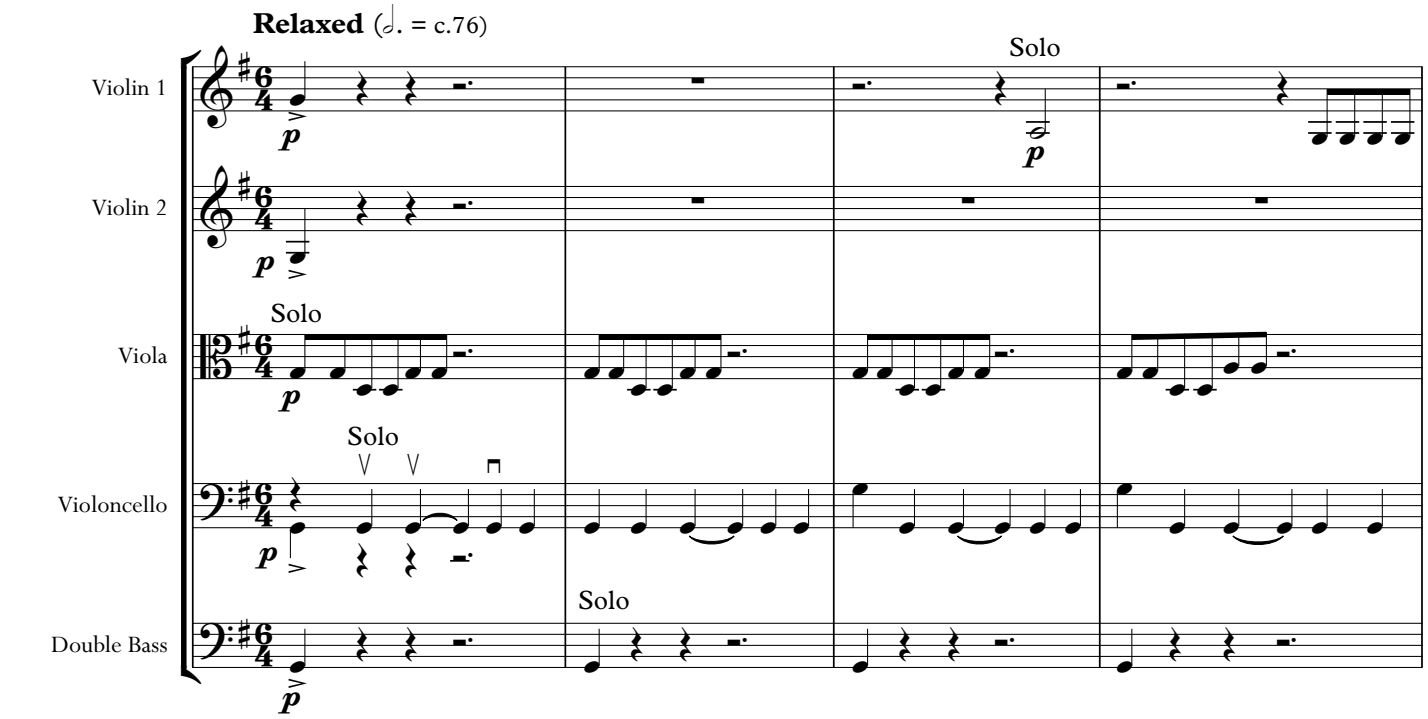
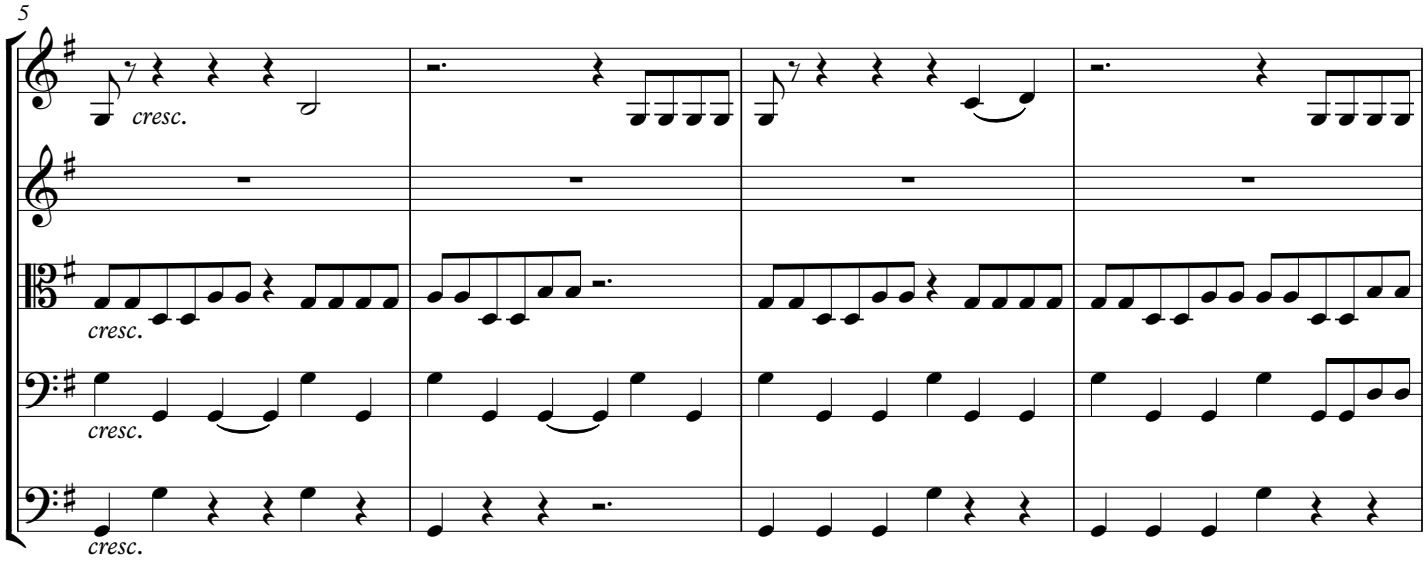
1. Empress of the Joyous City of Paradise





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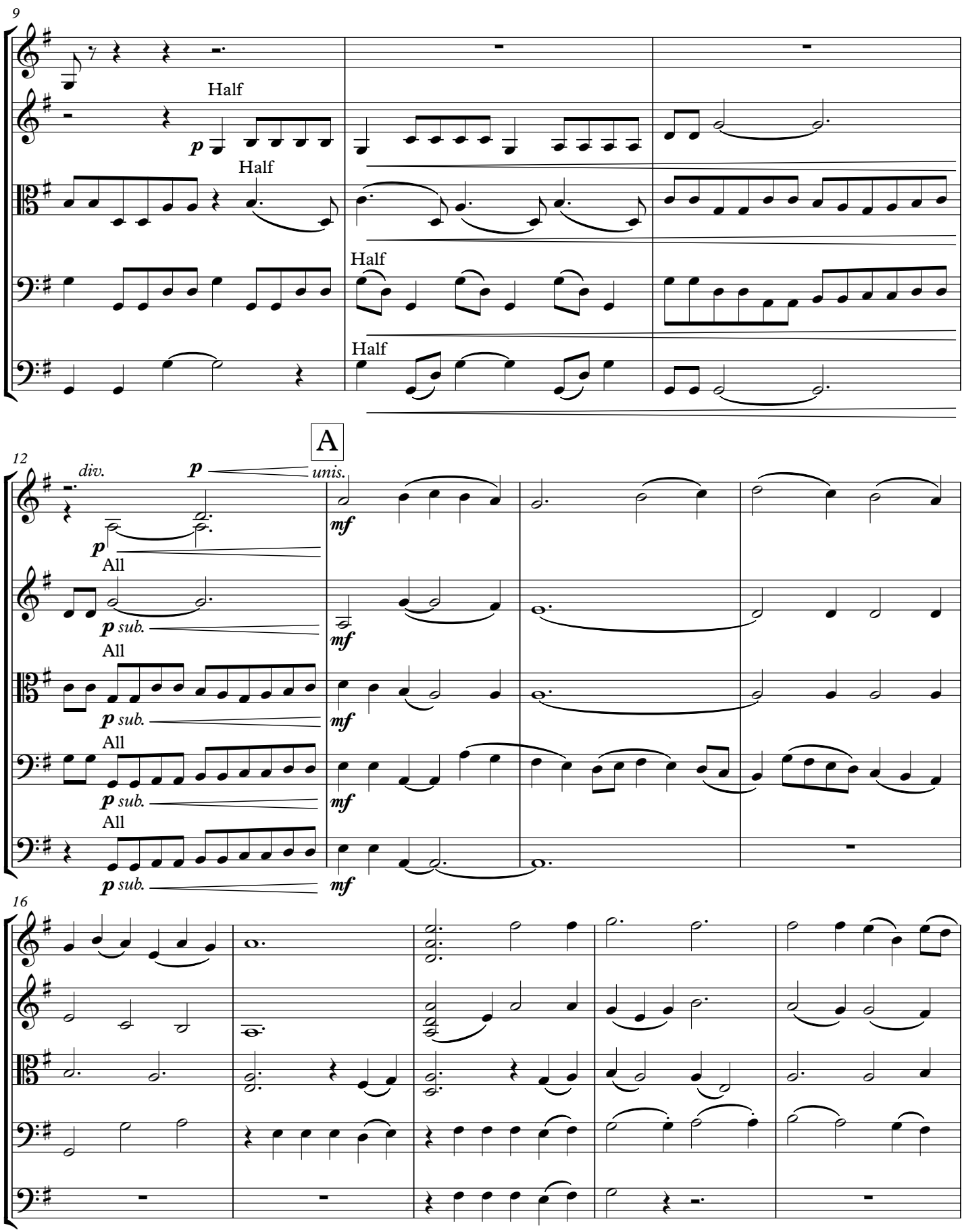
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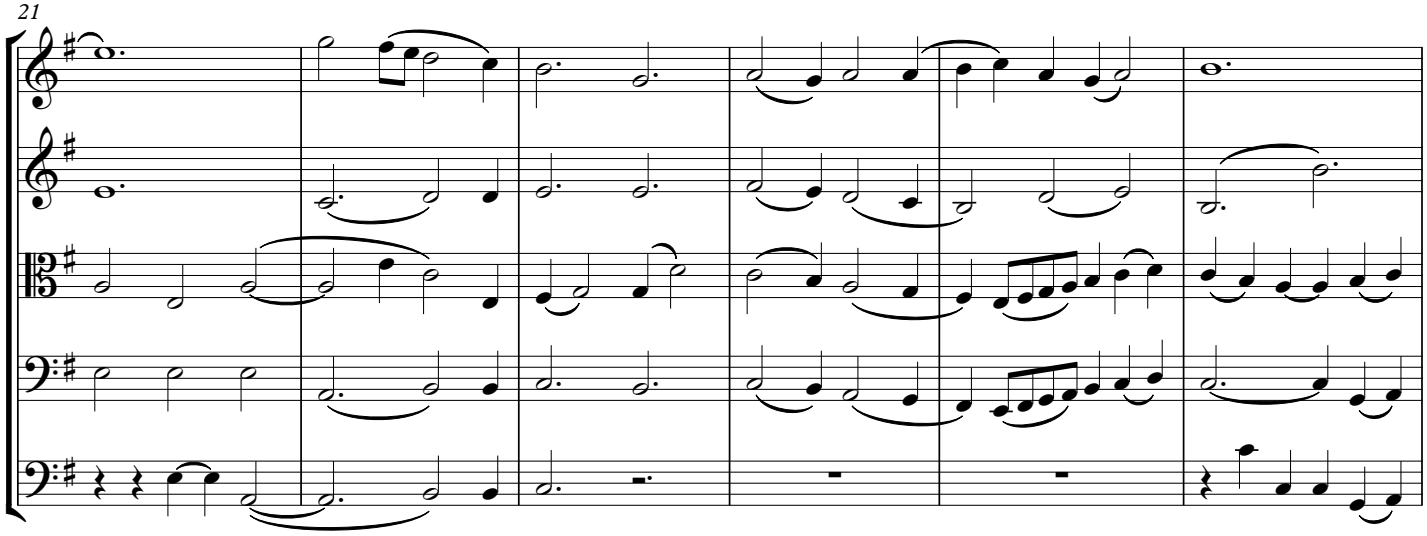
Half
p
Half
Half
Half
12
A
div.
p
unis.
mf
All
p sub.
16

21



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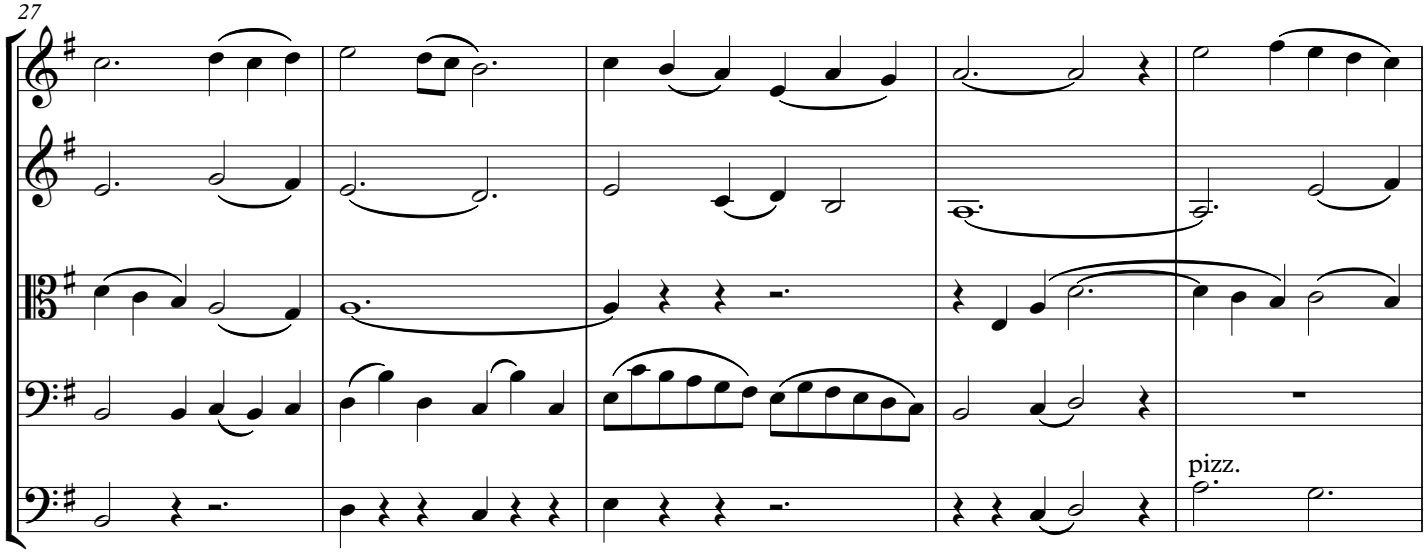

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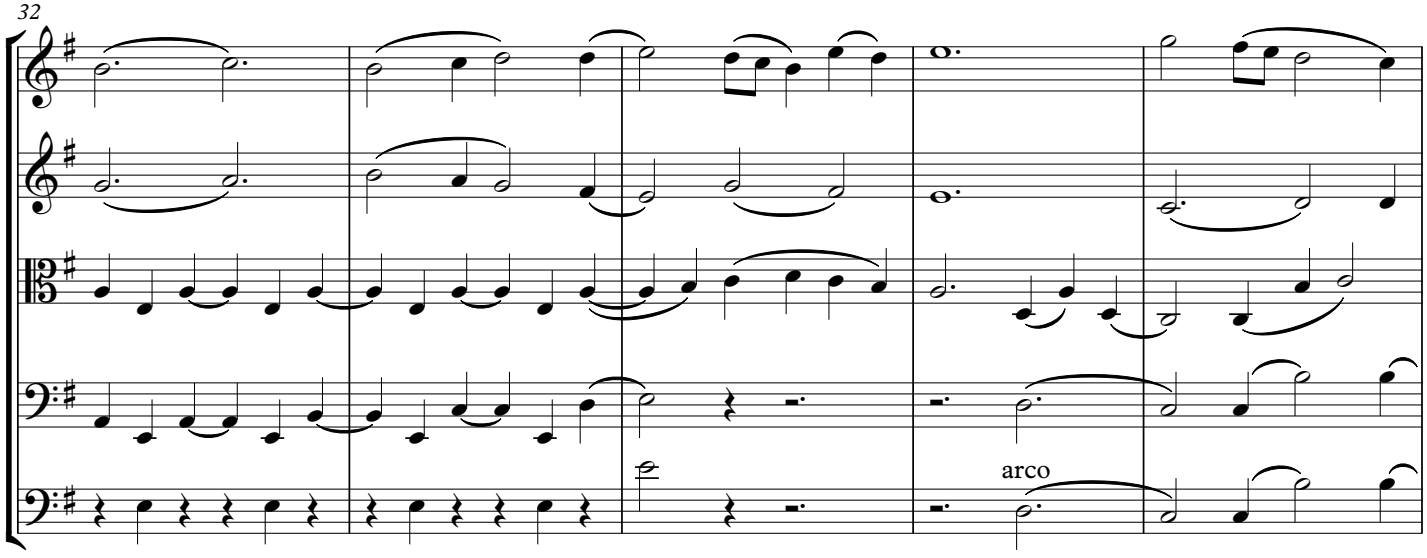

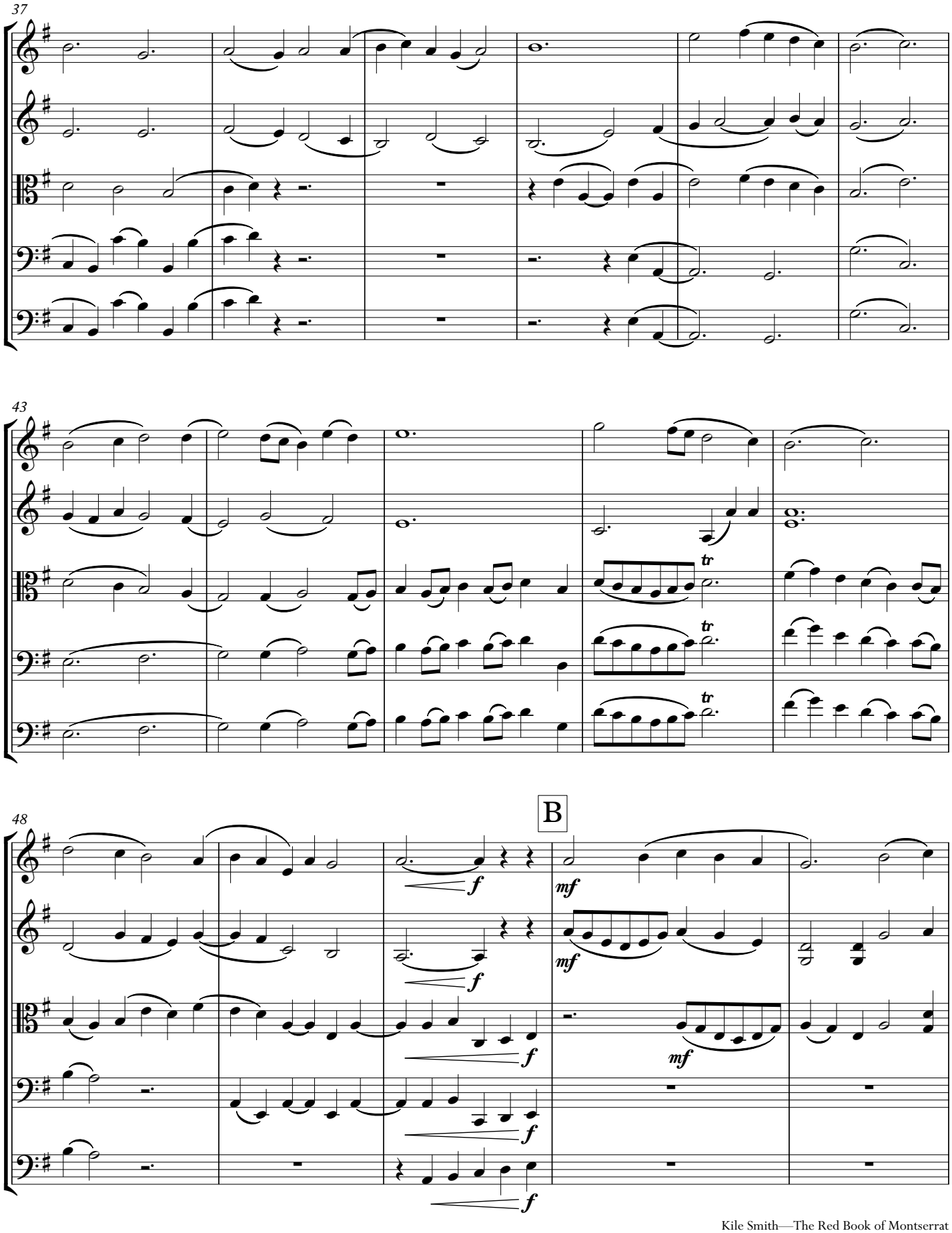
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43
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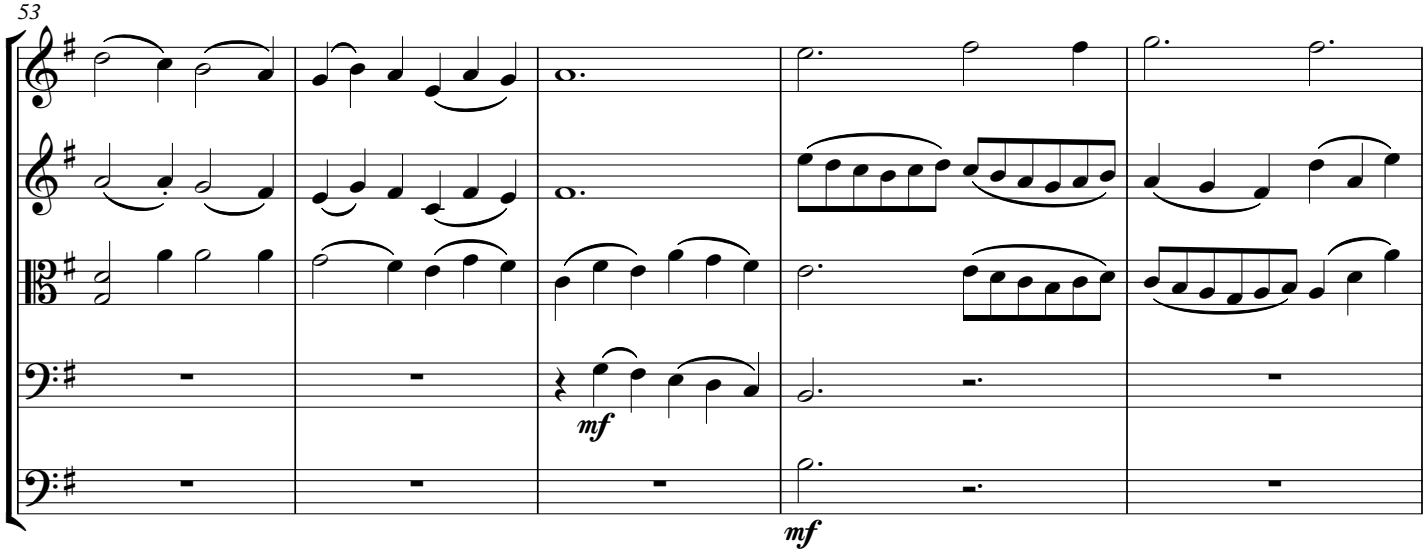
B
tr
tr
tr
f
f
f
f
f
mf
mf
mf

53



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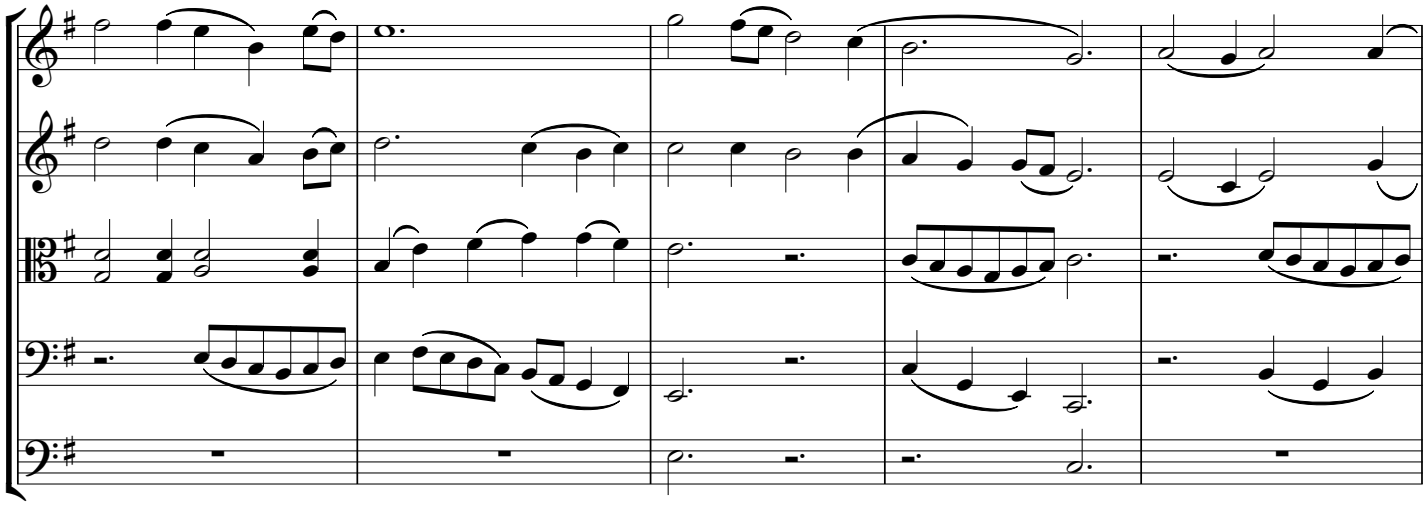

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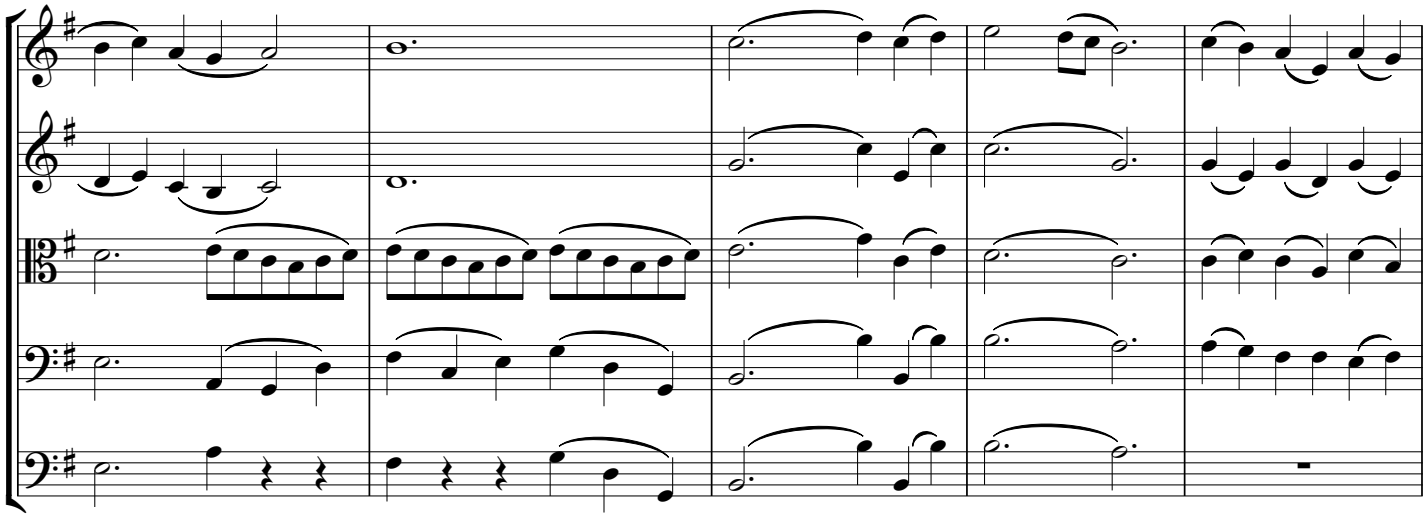

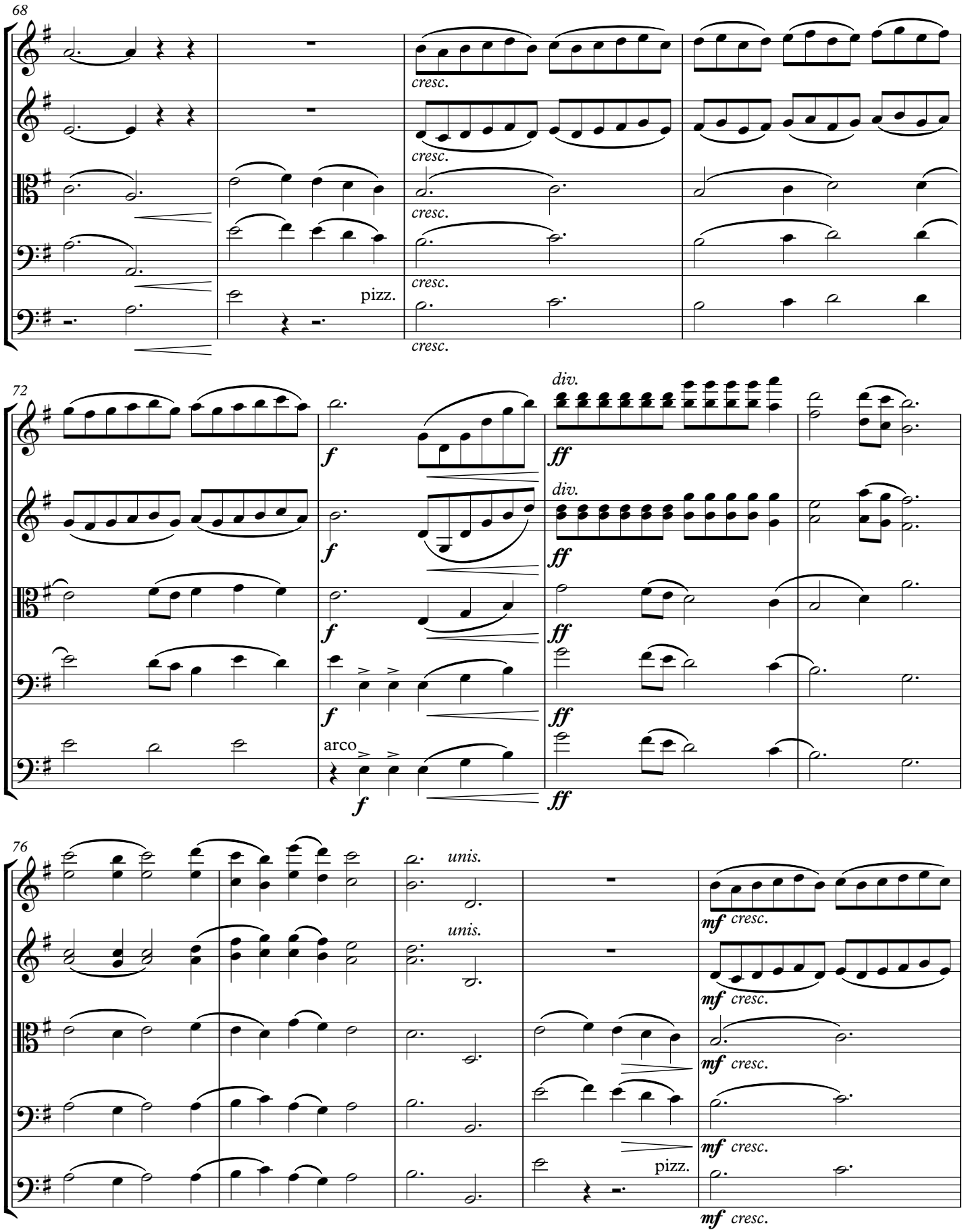
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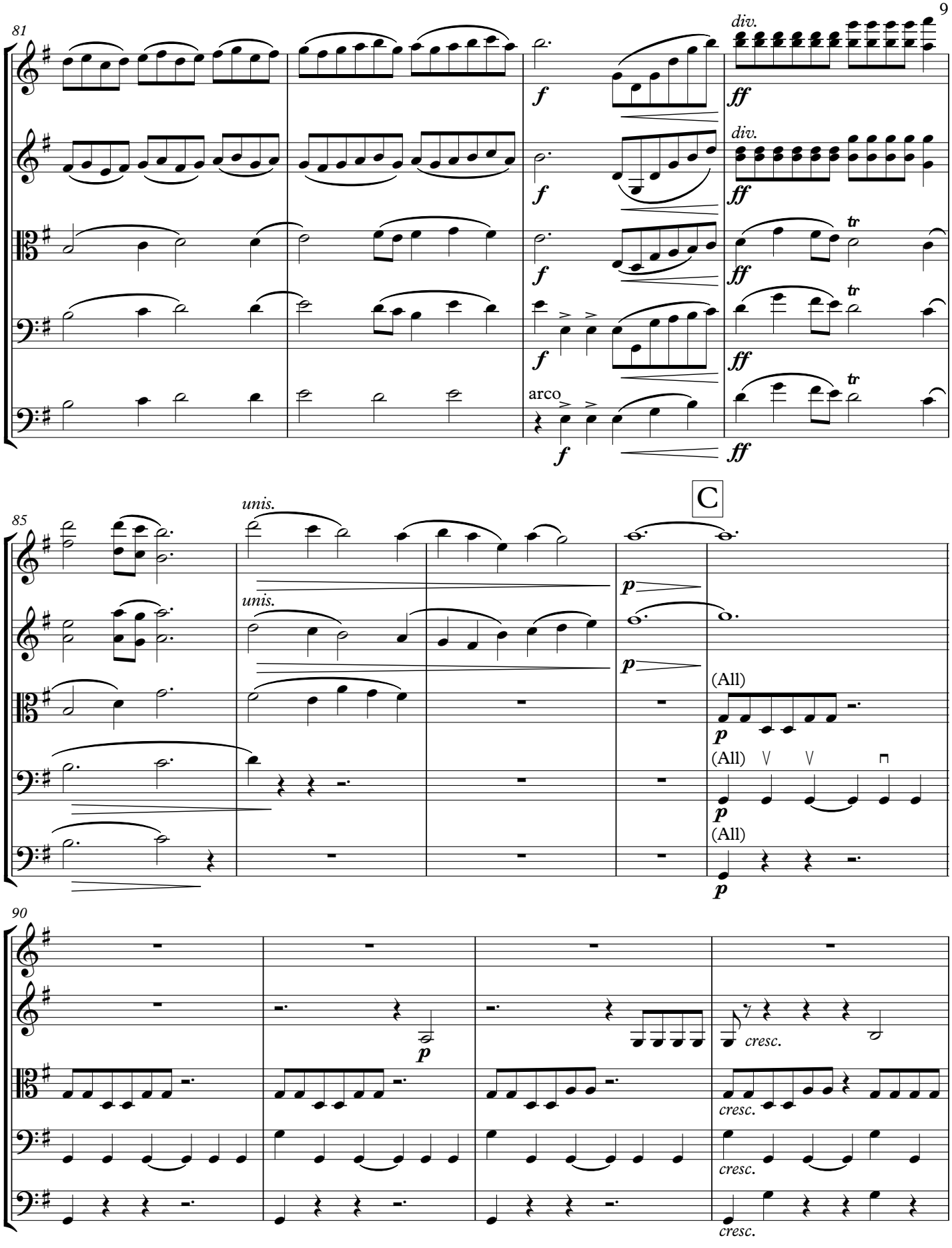
cresc.
pizz.
72
div.
f
ff
arco
76
unis.
mf cresc.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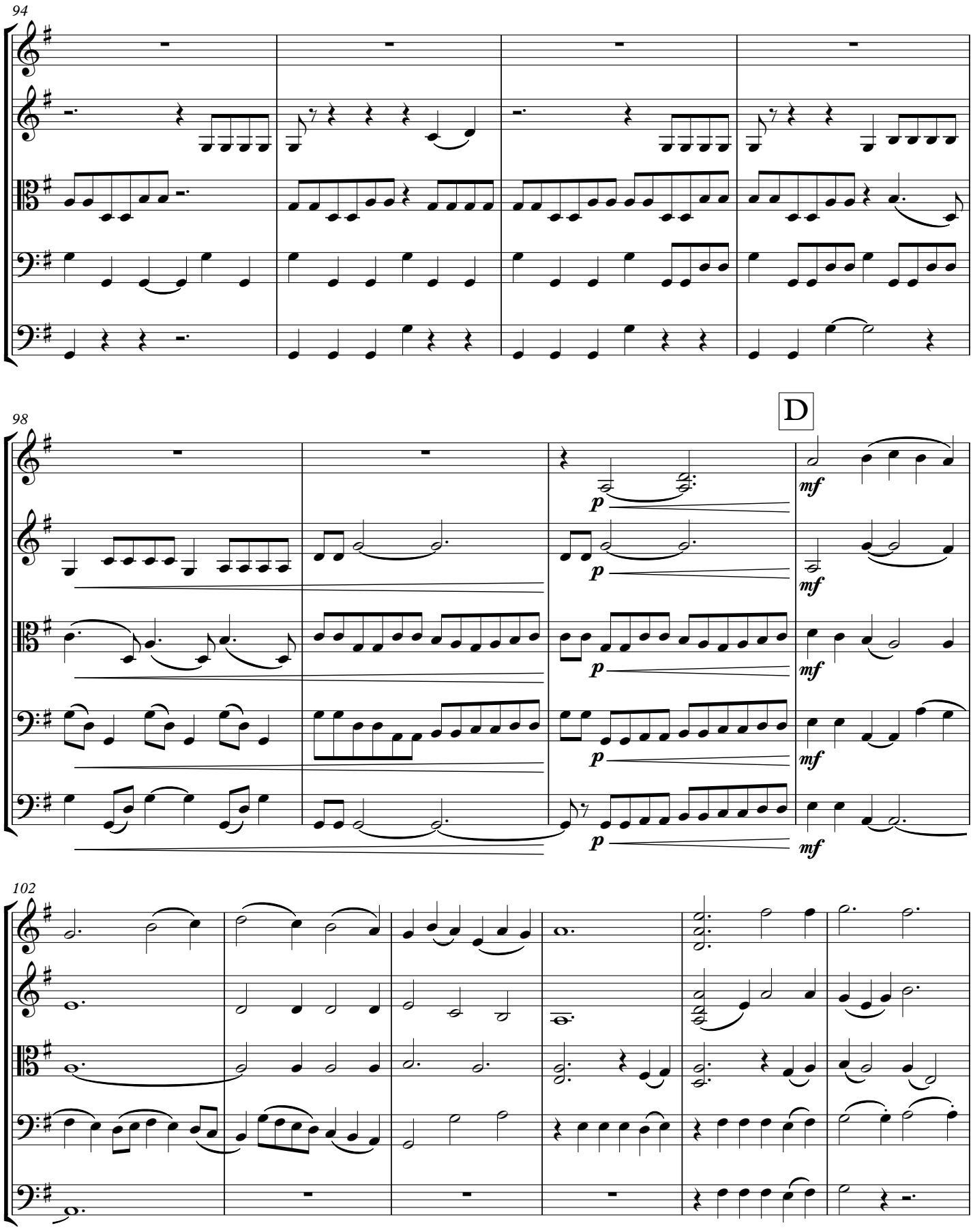
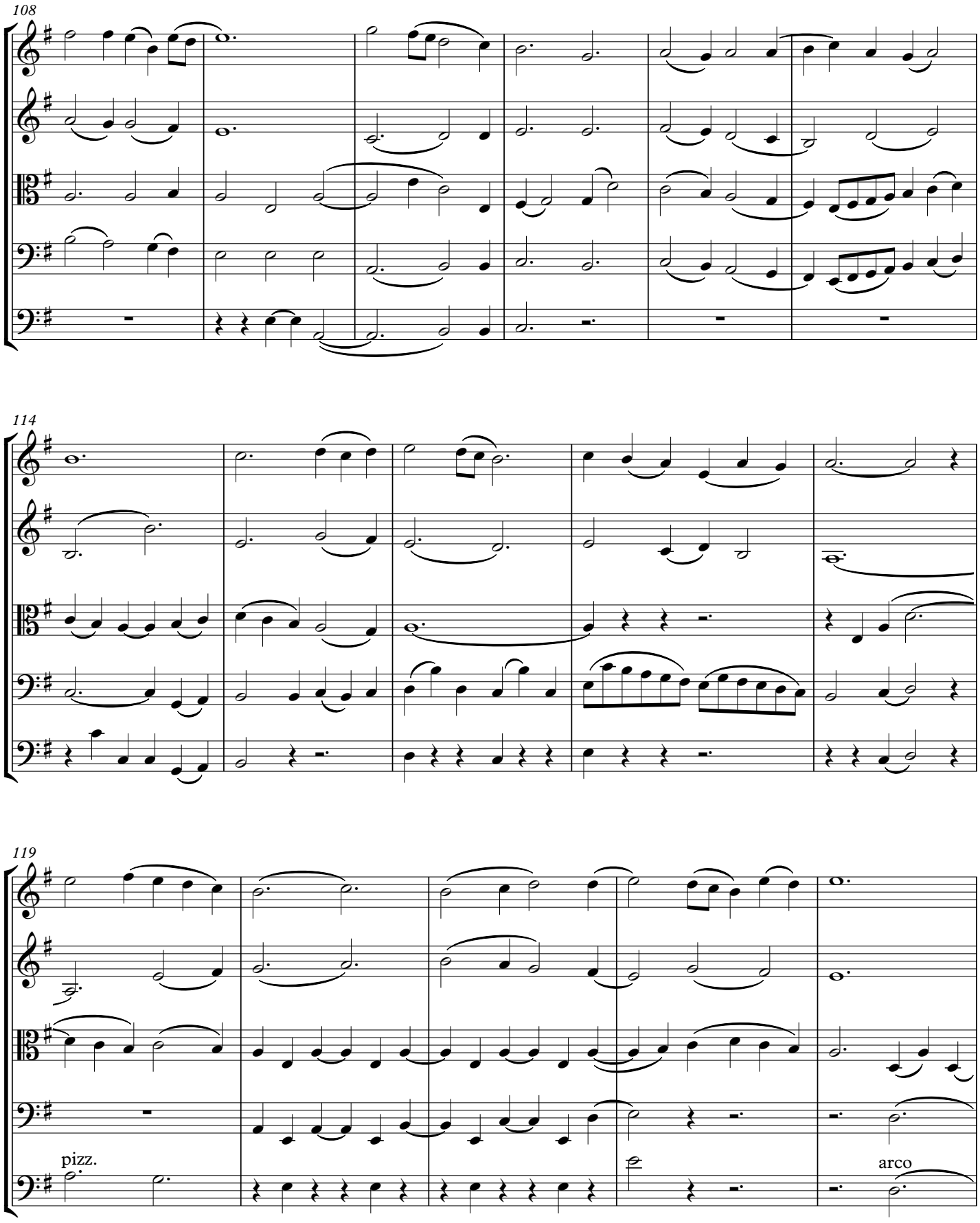
ff
f
tr
arco
85
unis.
C
p
(All)
90
cresc.


94
98
D
p
mf
102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pizz.
arco

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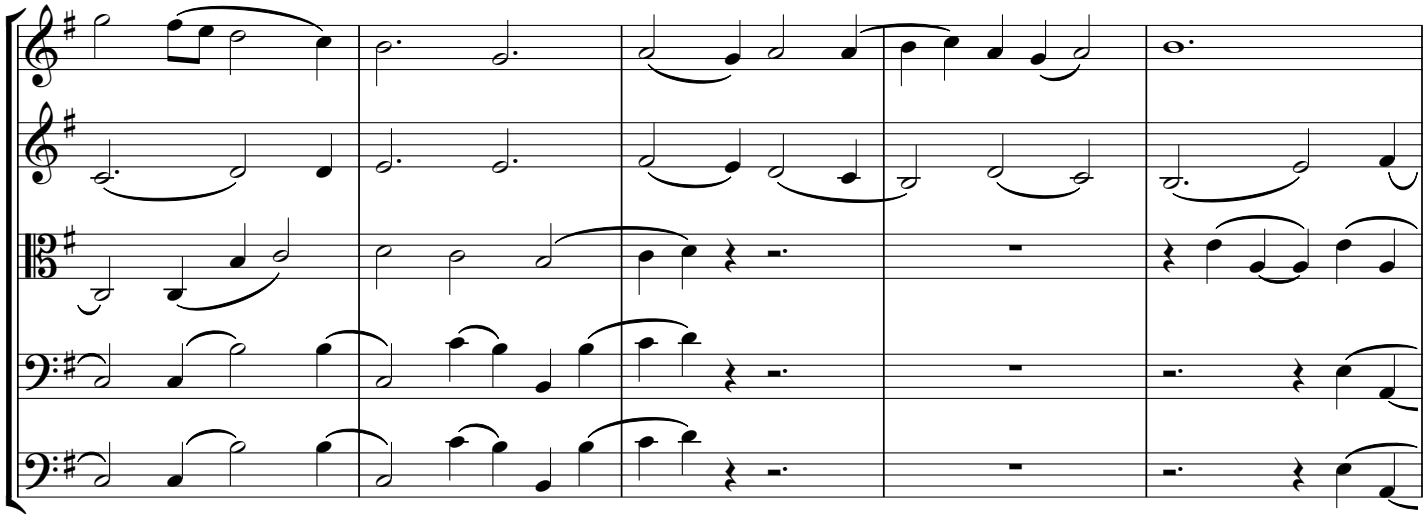

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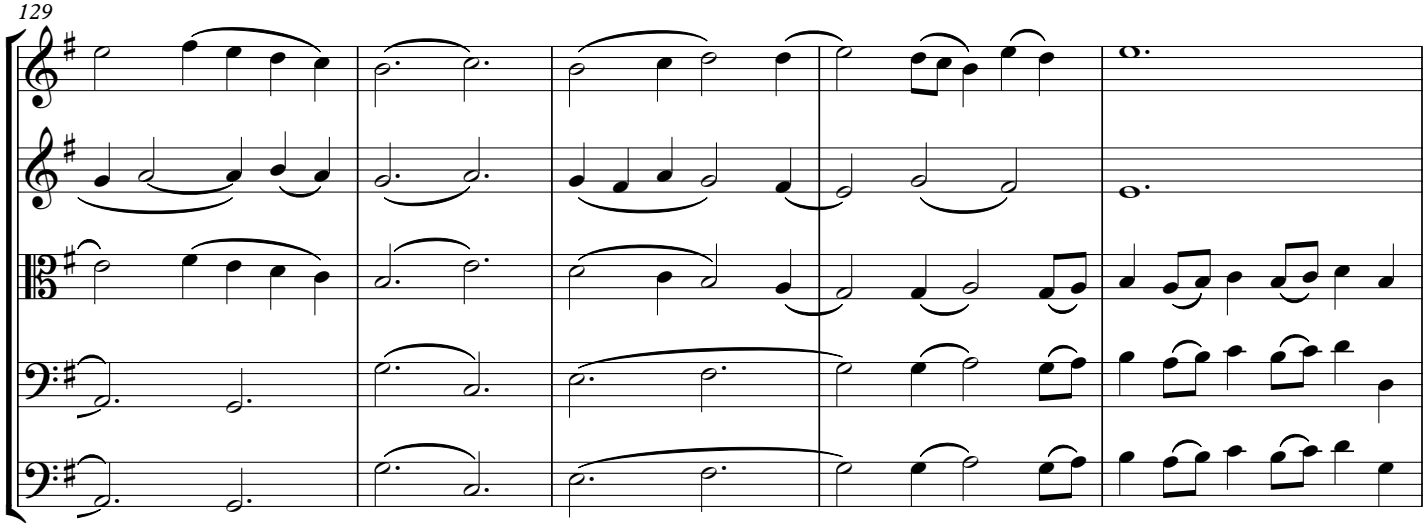

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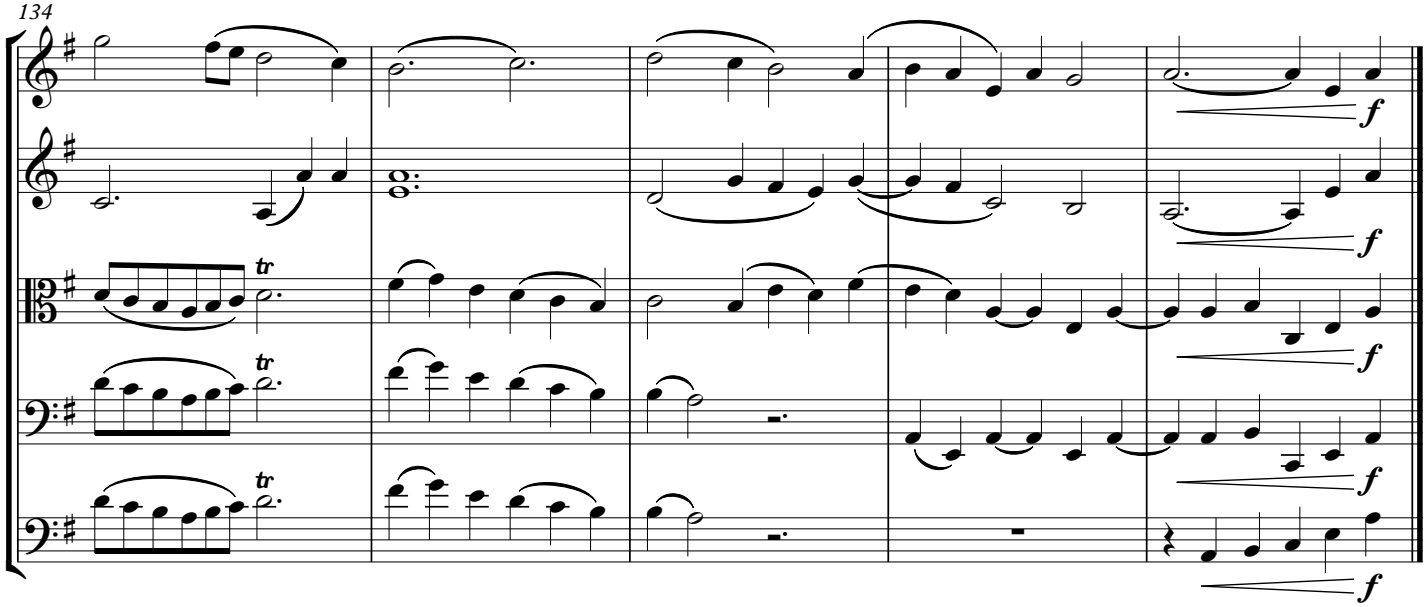
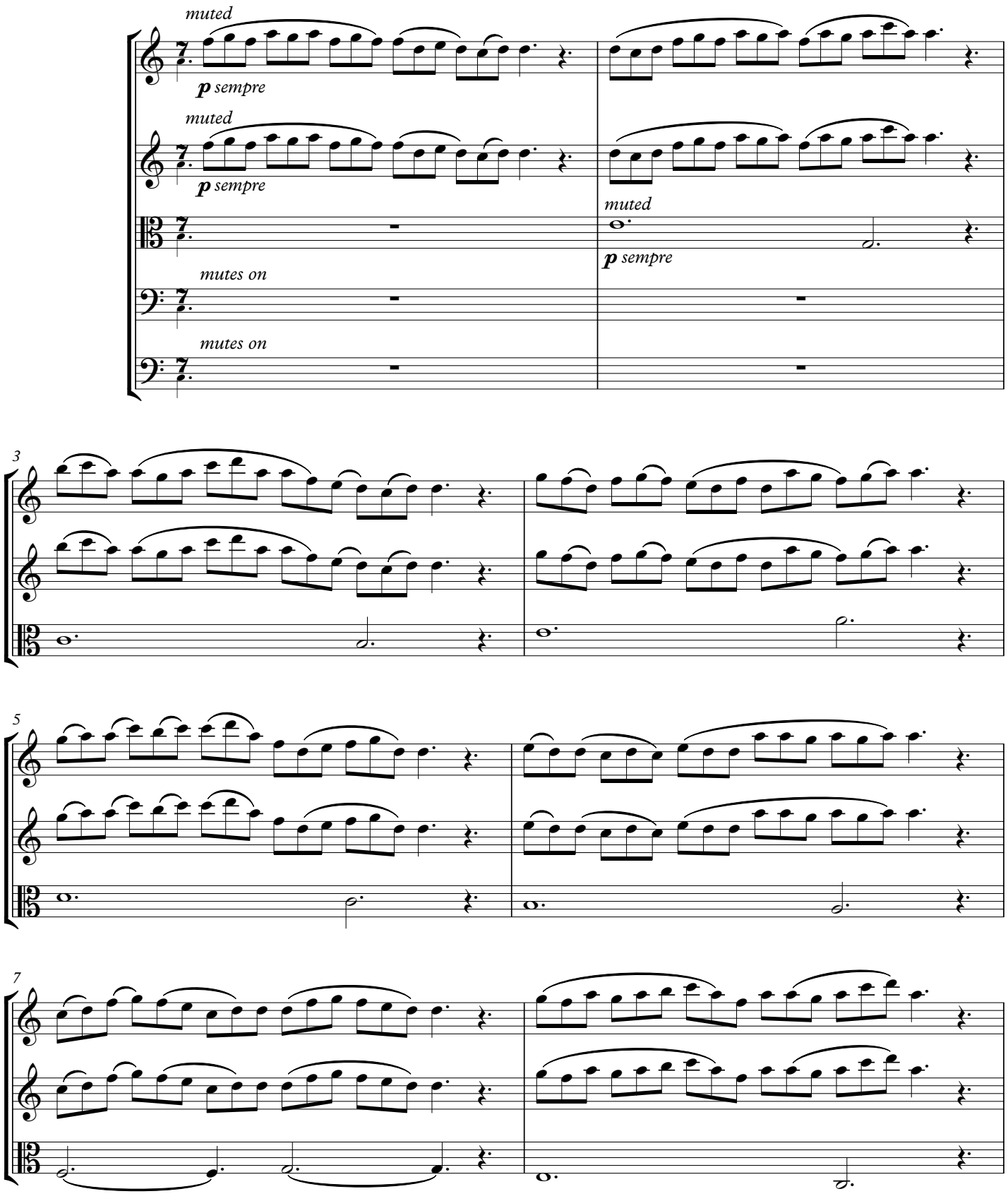
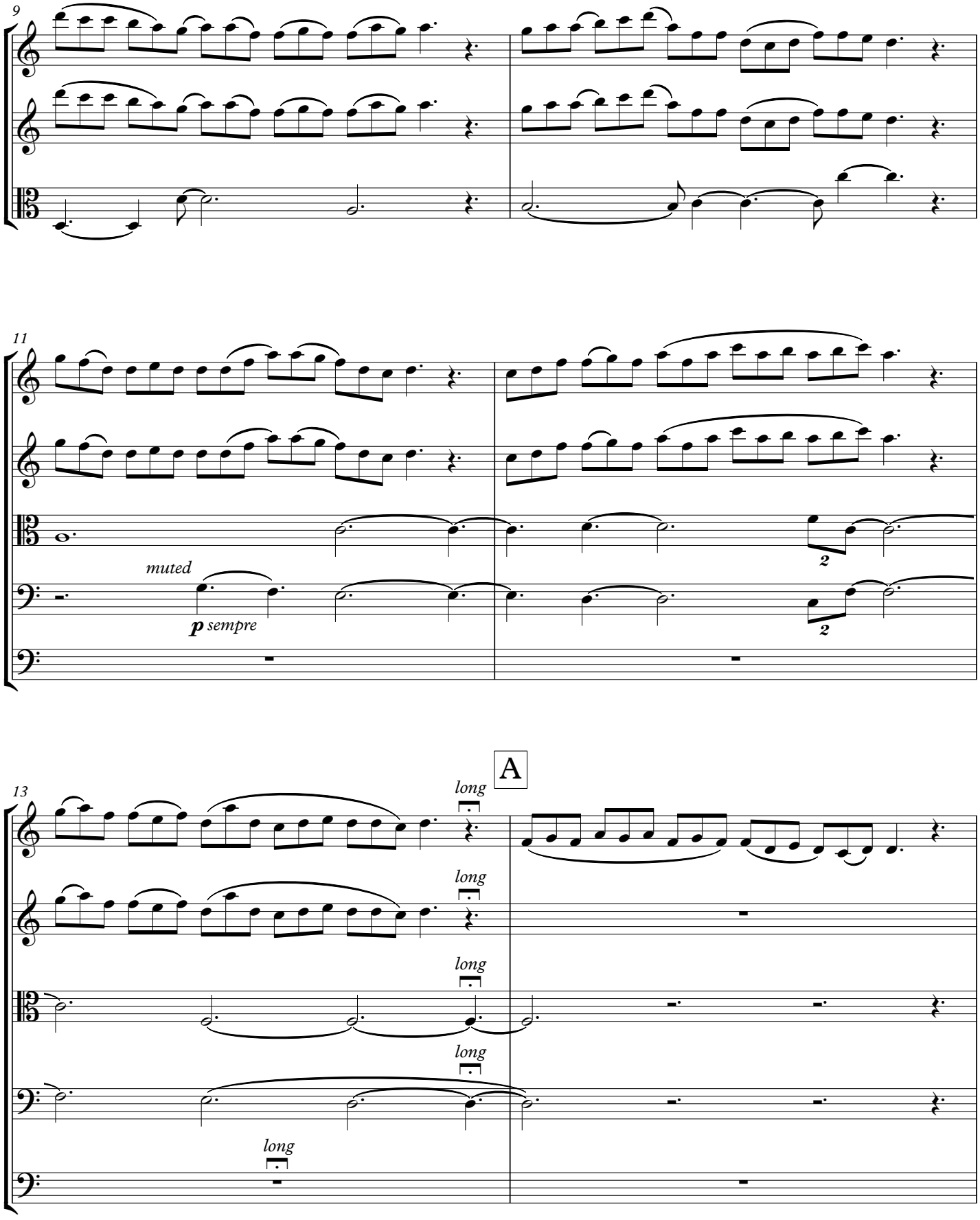


2. O Virgin, Shining Brightly

Slow (♩. = c.56)

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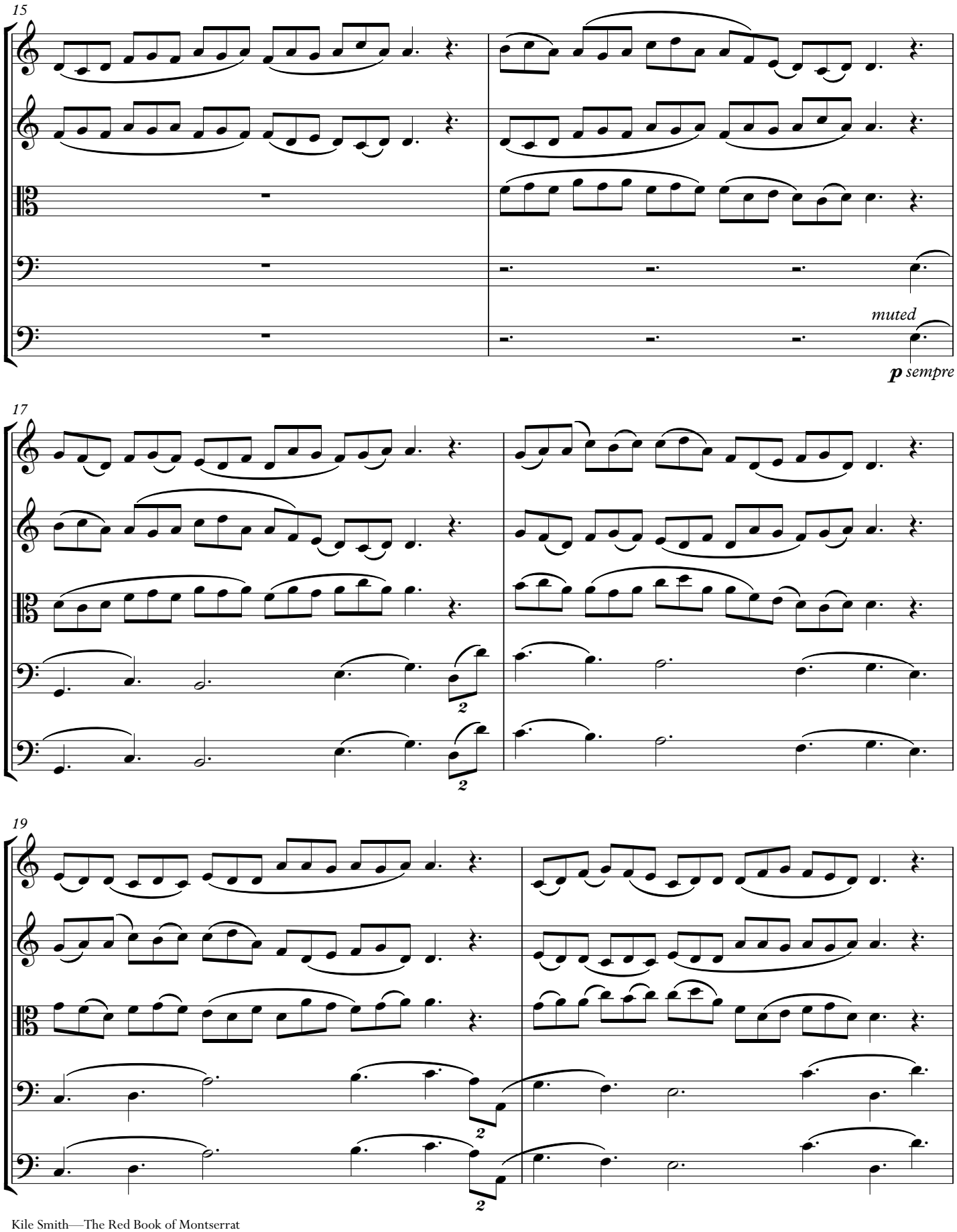
11
muted
p sempre
2
2
13
A
long
long
long
long
long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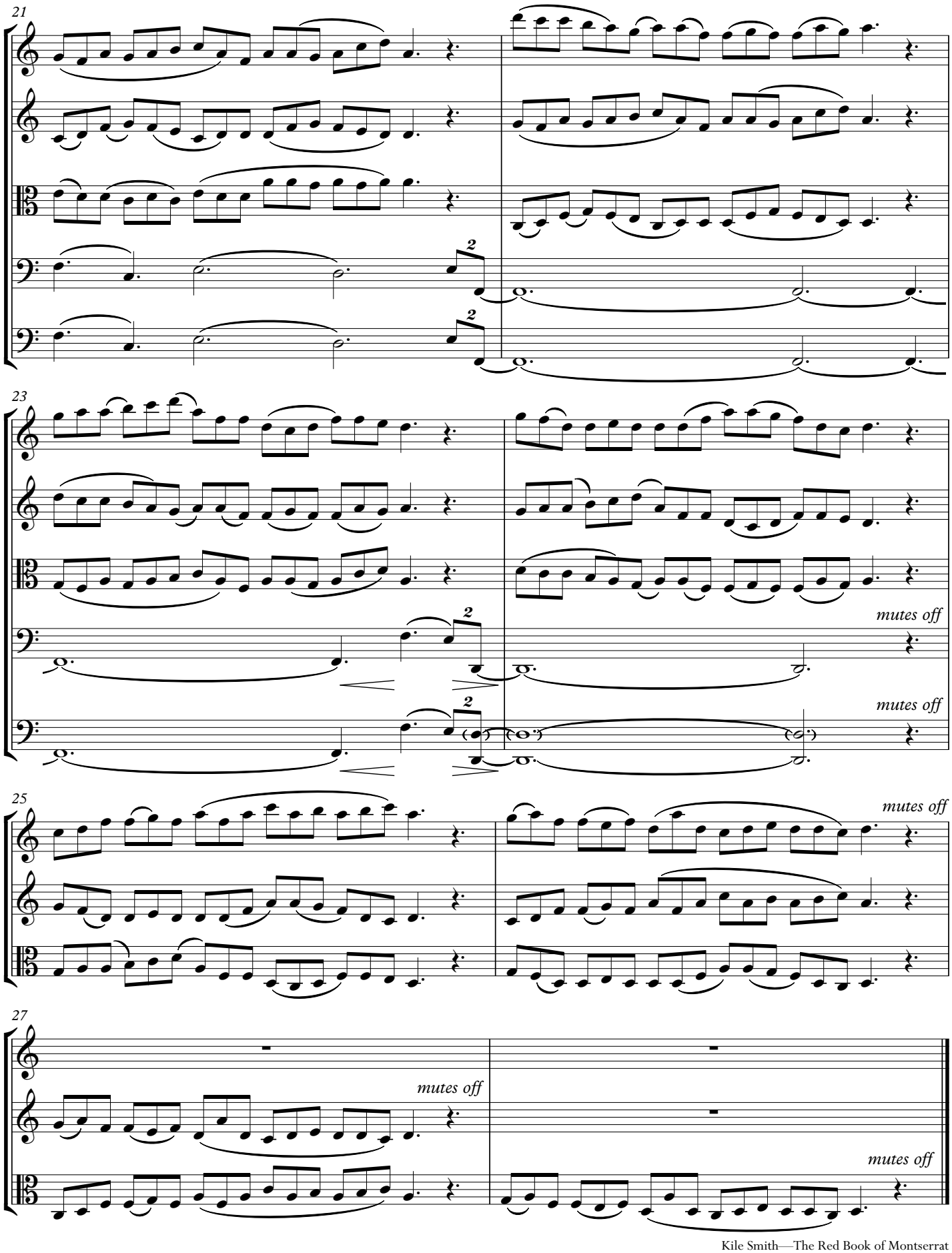
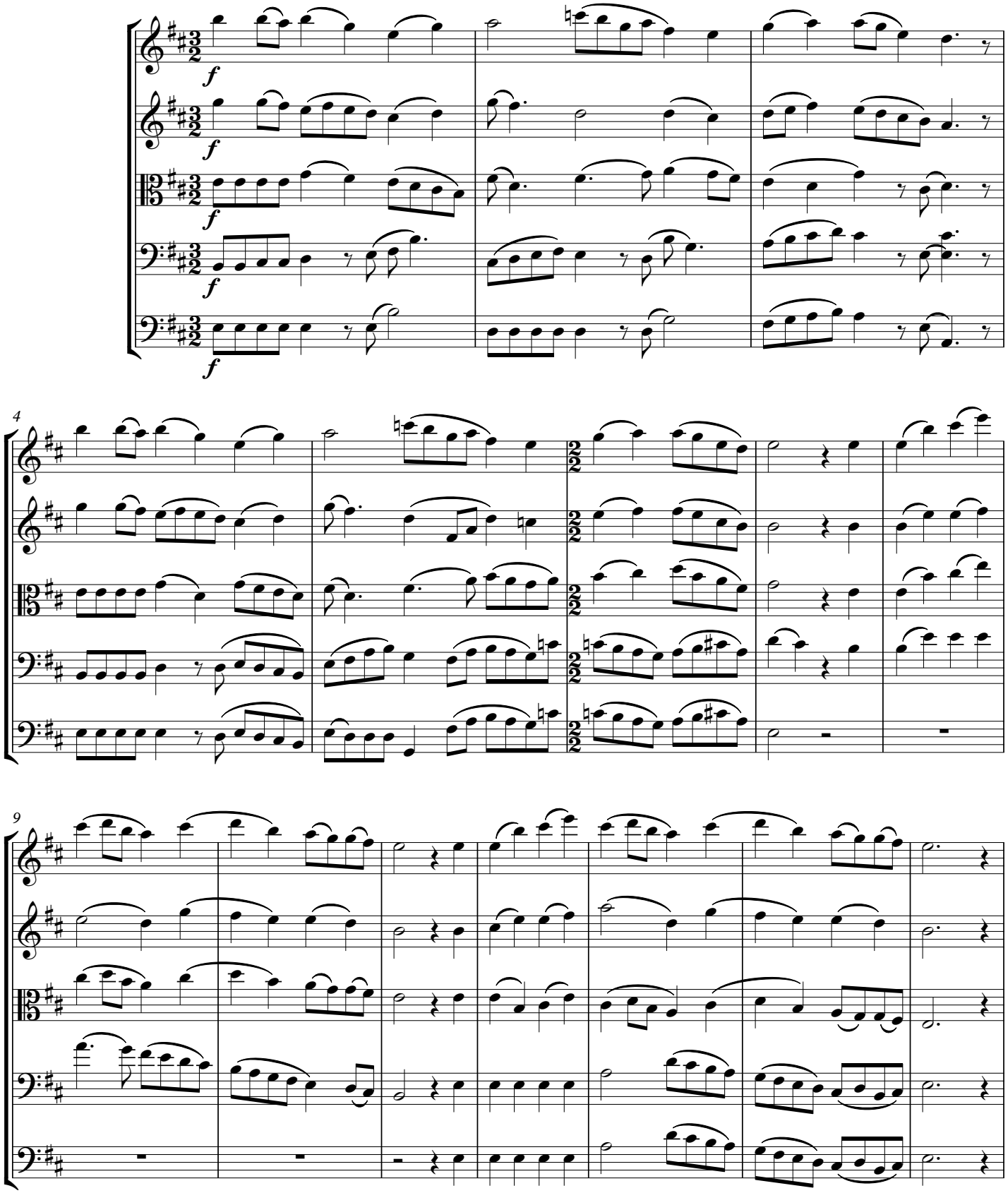
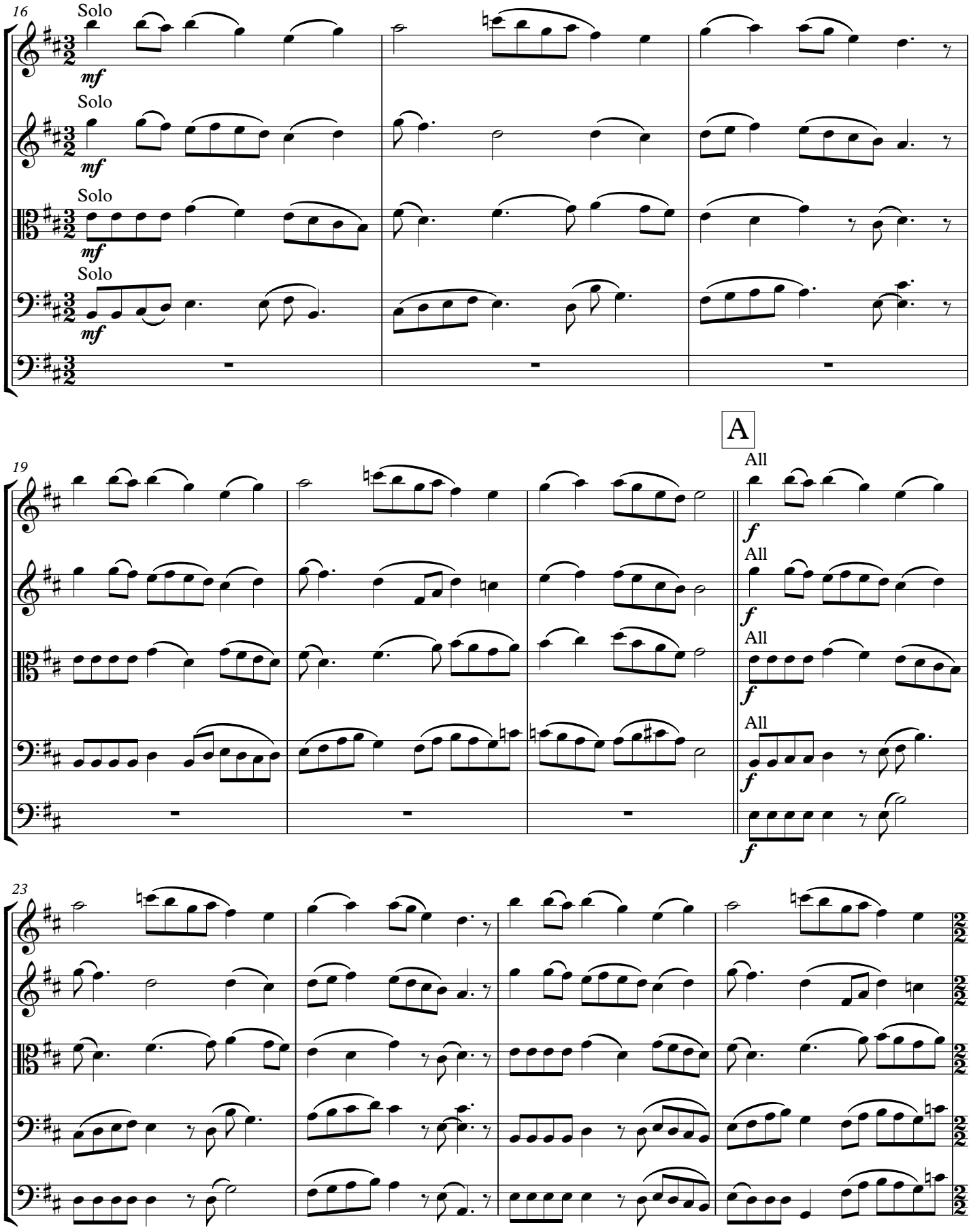
muted
p sempre
17
2
2
19
2
2

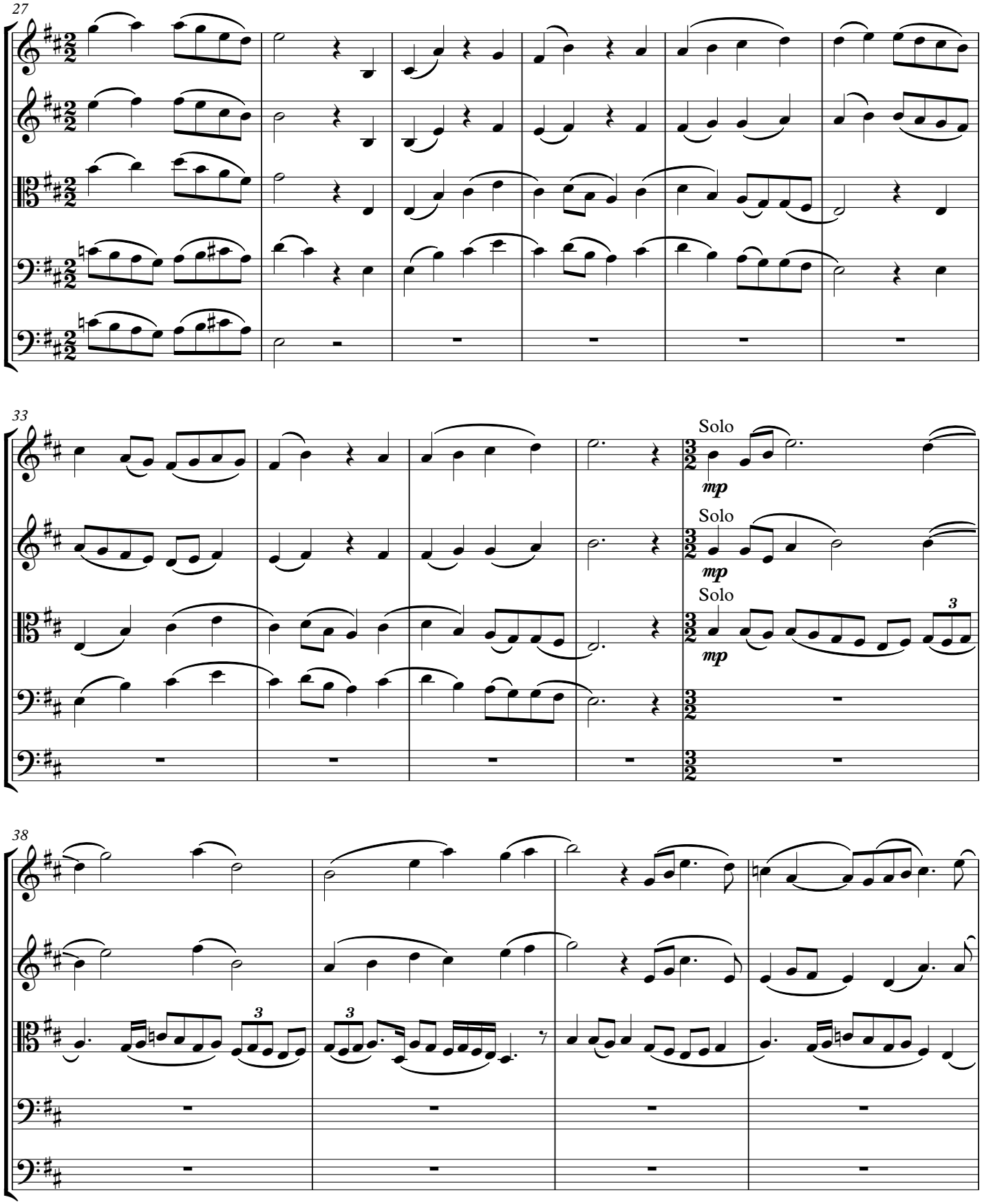

21
2
2
23
mutes off
2
mutes off
25
mutes off
27
mutes off
mutes off

3. Splendid Star on the Mountain

Moderate 𝅗𝅥 = c.72




16
Solo
mf
Solo
mf
Solo
mf
Solo
mf
A
19
All
f
All
f
All
f
All
f
23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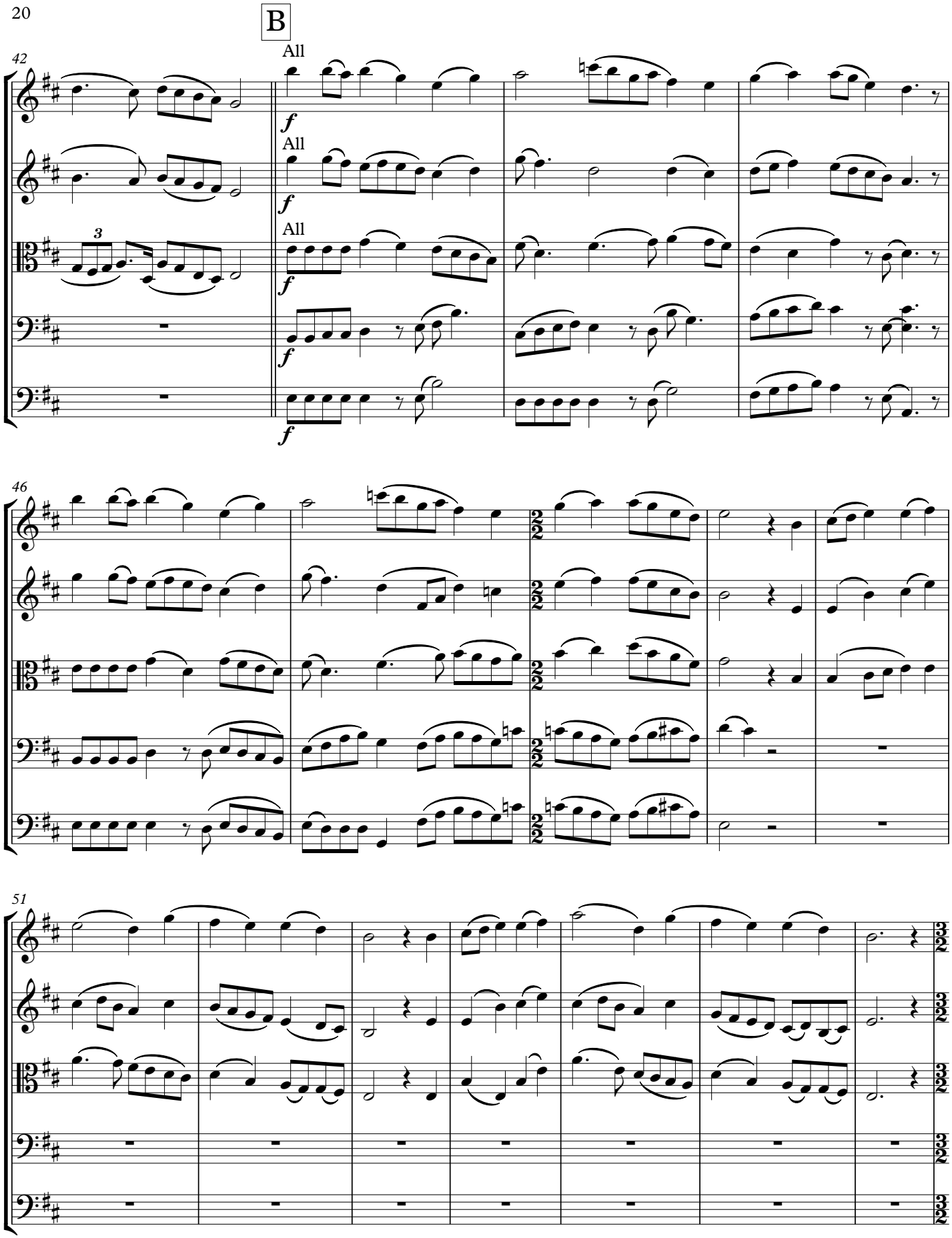
Solo
mp
Solo
mp
Solo
mp
3
38
3
3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All
All
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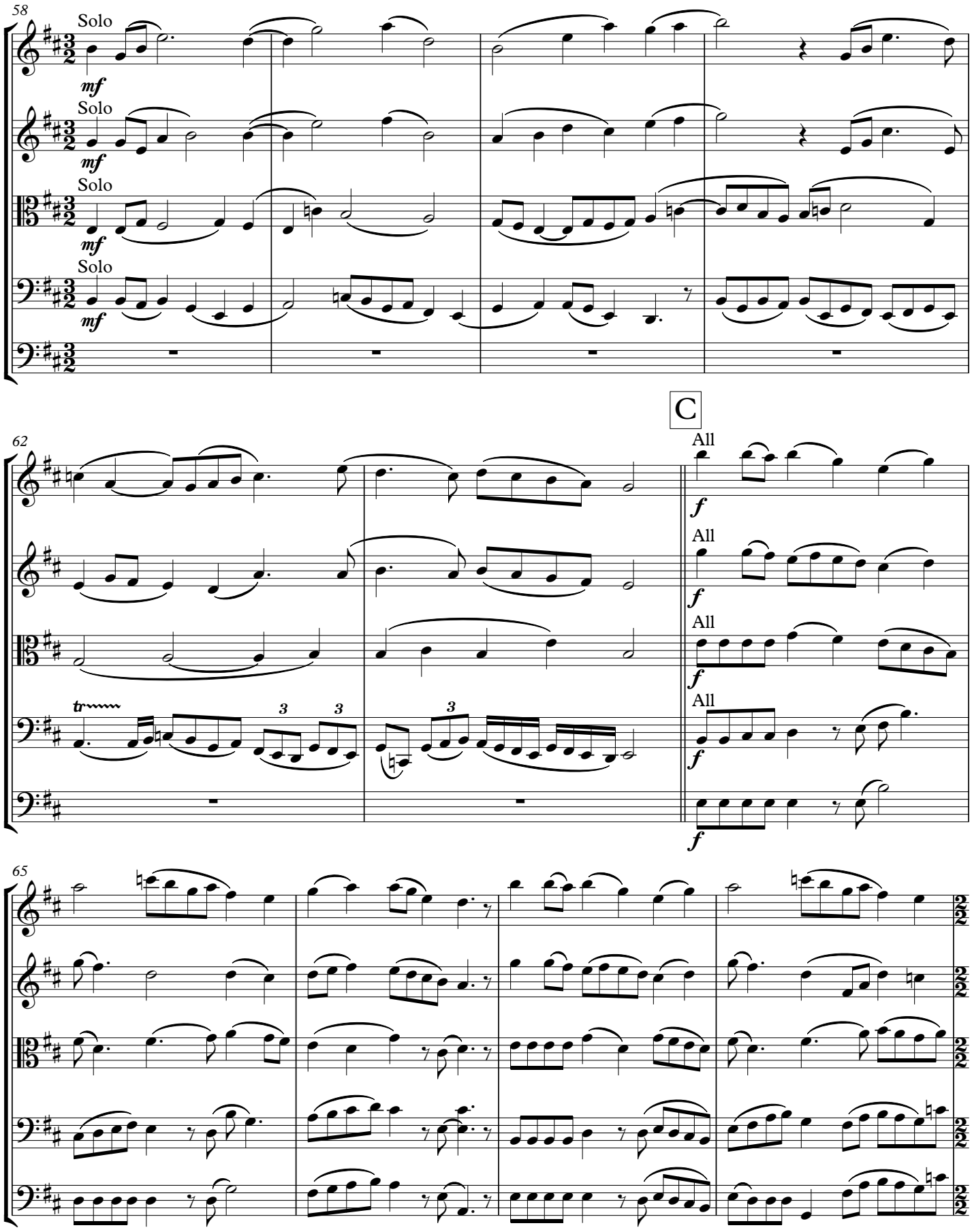
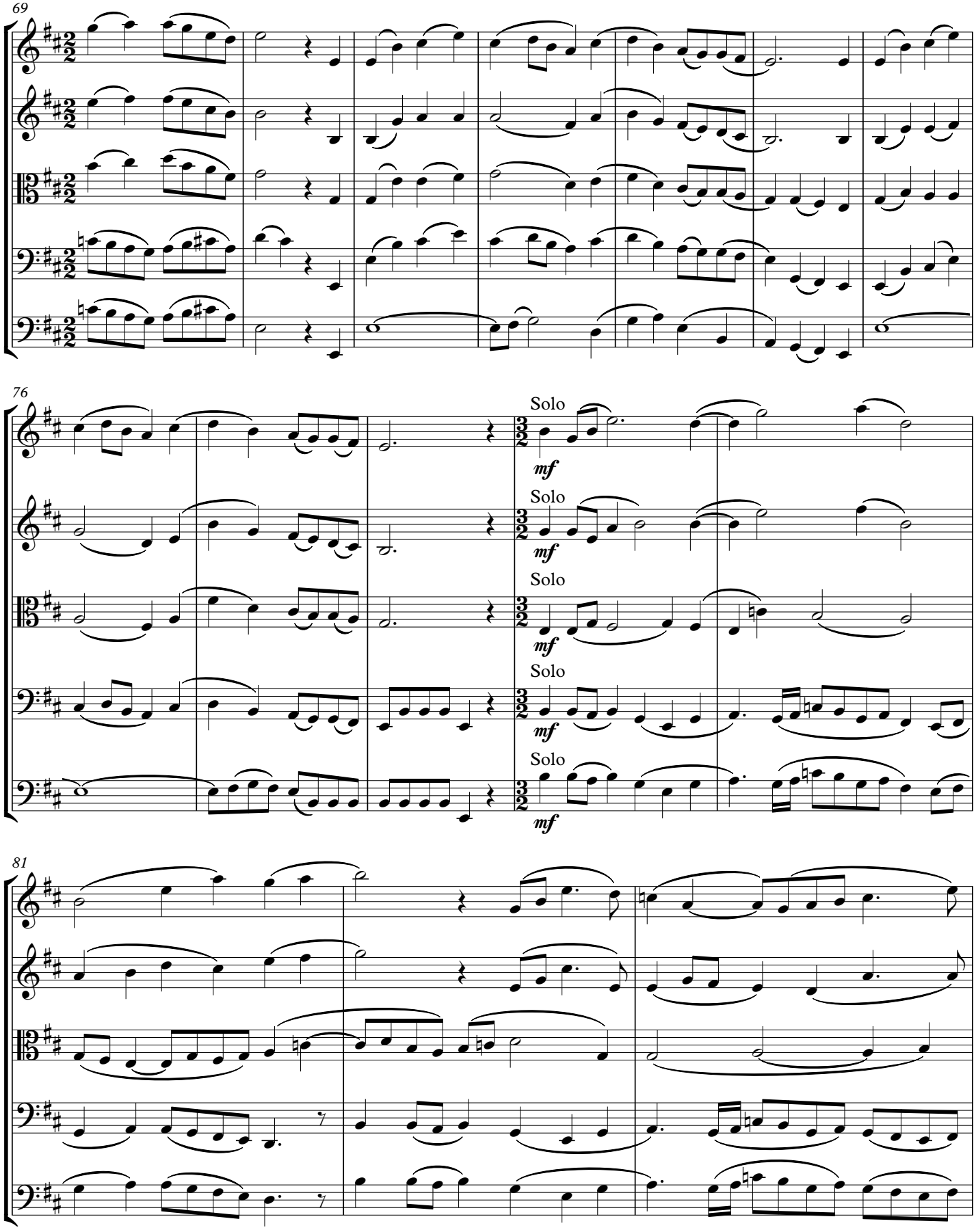

58
Solo
mf
Solo
mf
Solo
mf
Solo
mf
62
C
All
f
All
f
All
f
All
f
65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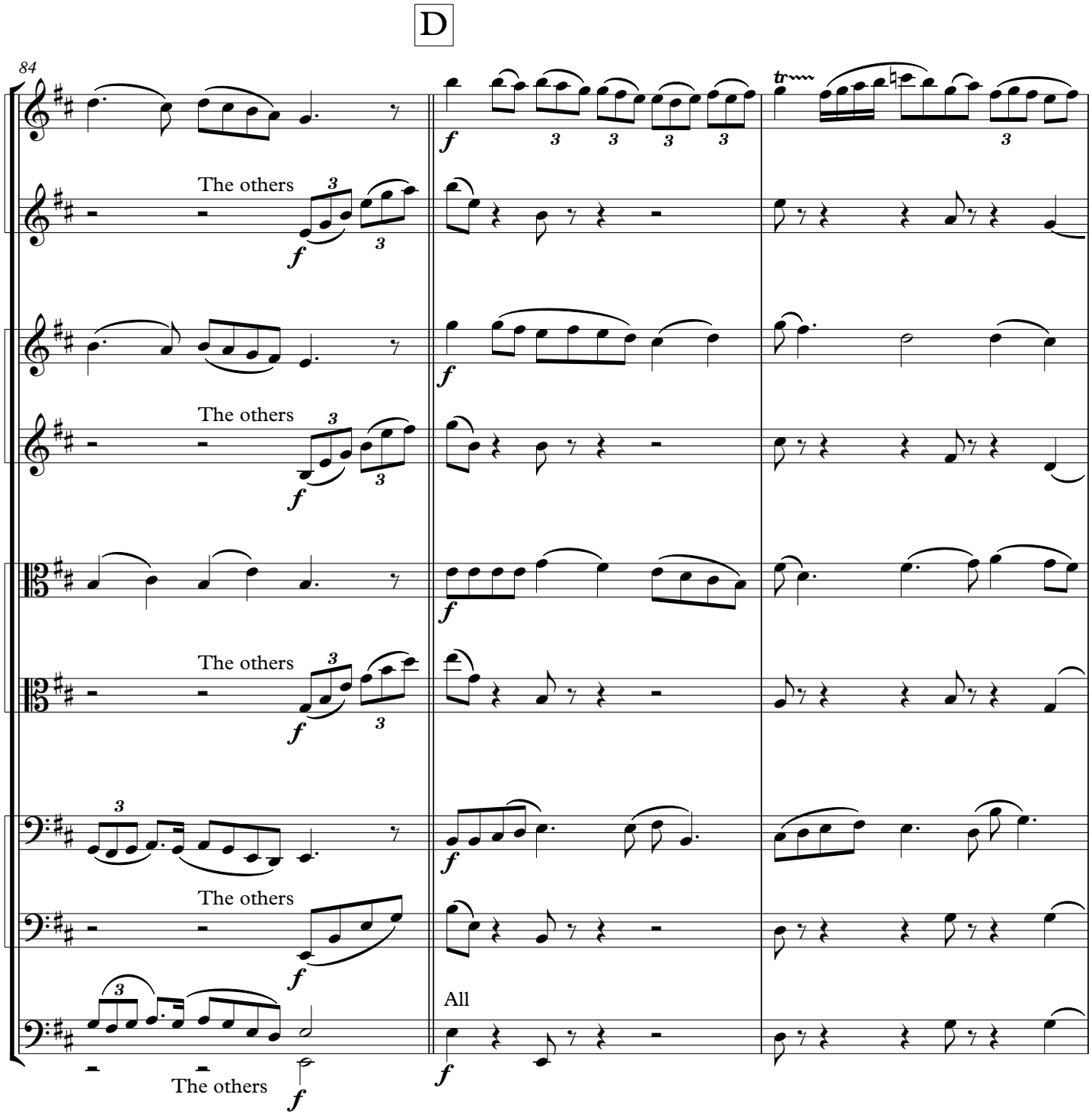
Solo
mf
Solo
mf
Solo
mf
Solo
mf
Solo
mf
81


D
84
The others
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The others
The others
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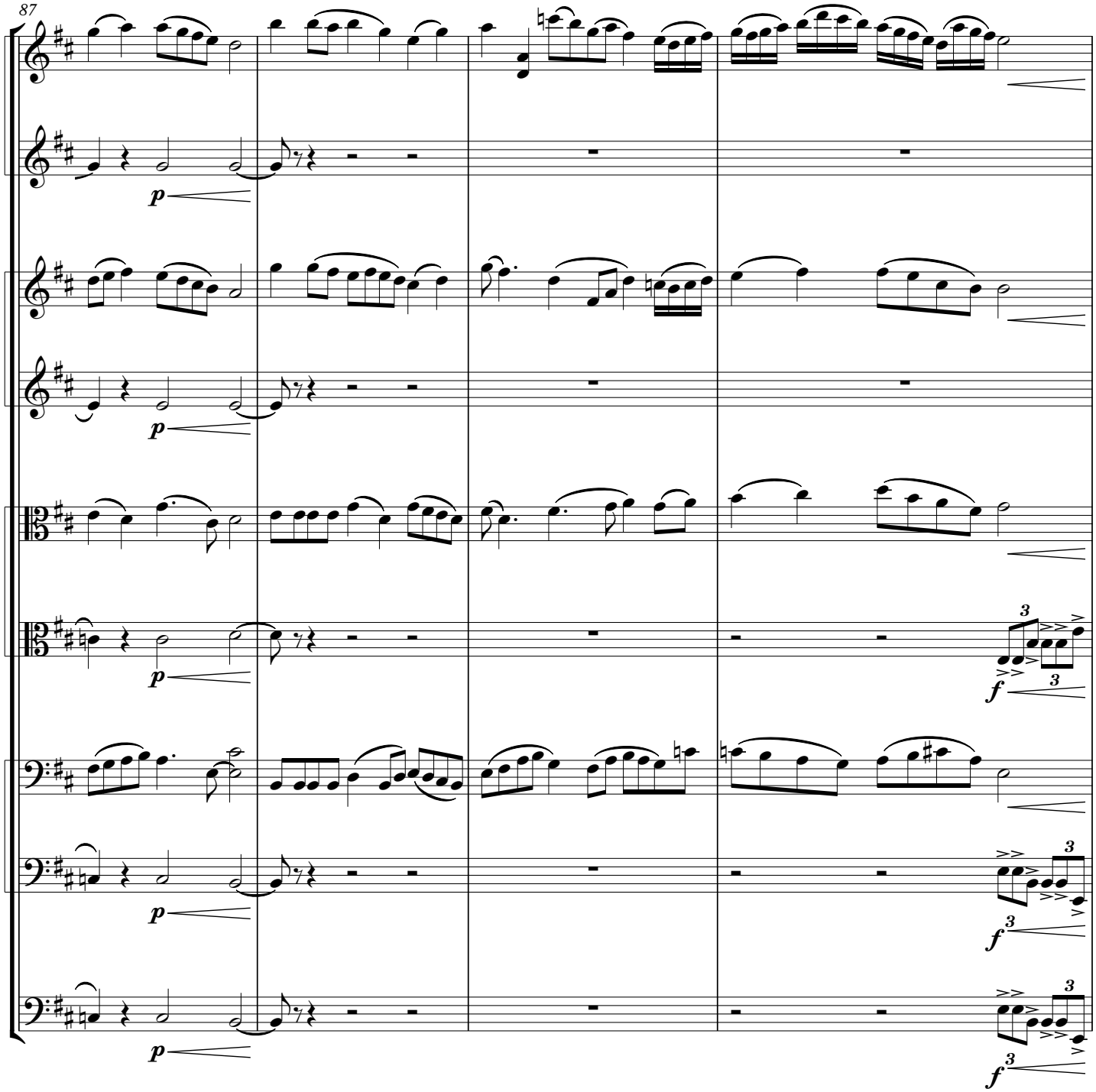
All
The others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p
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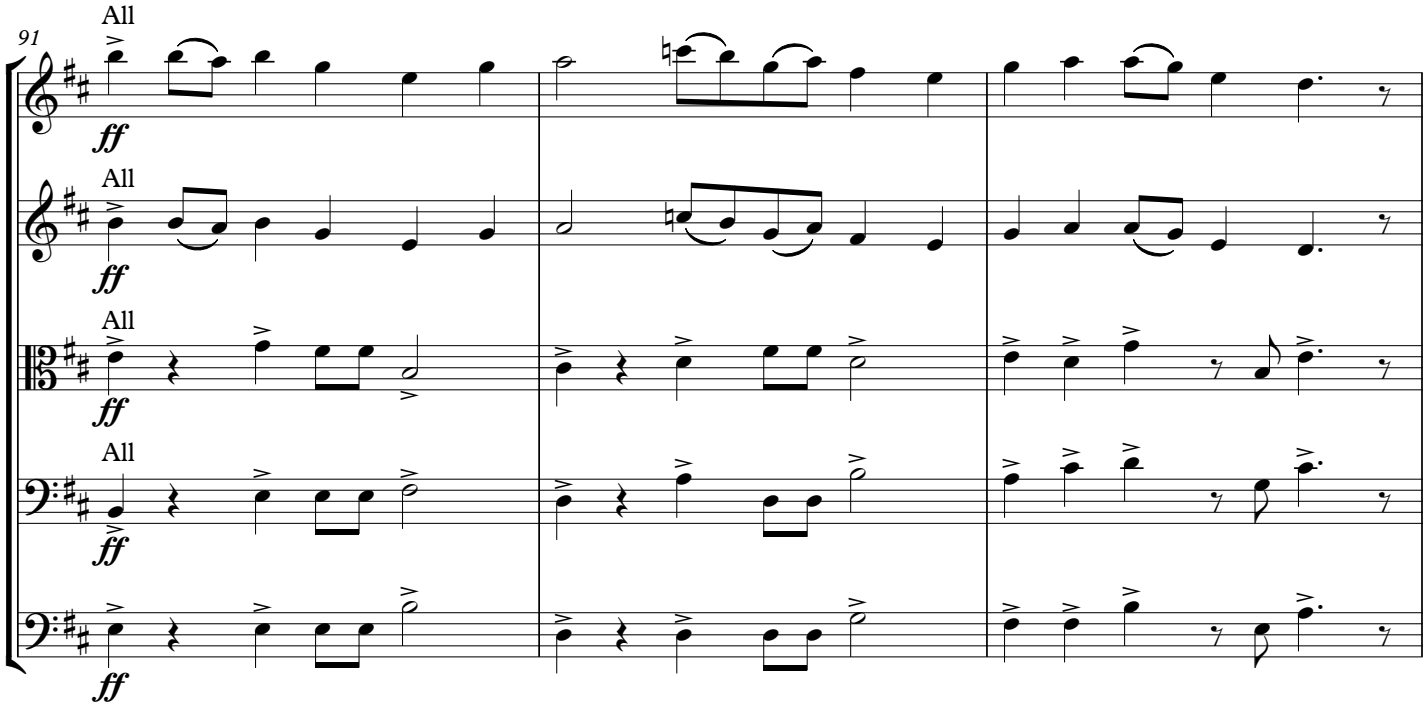
p
p
f
f
f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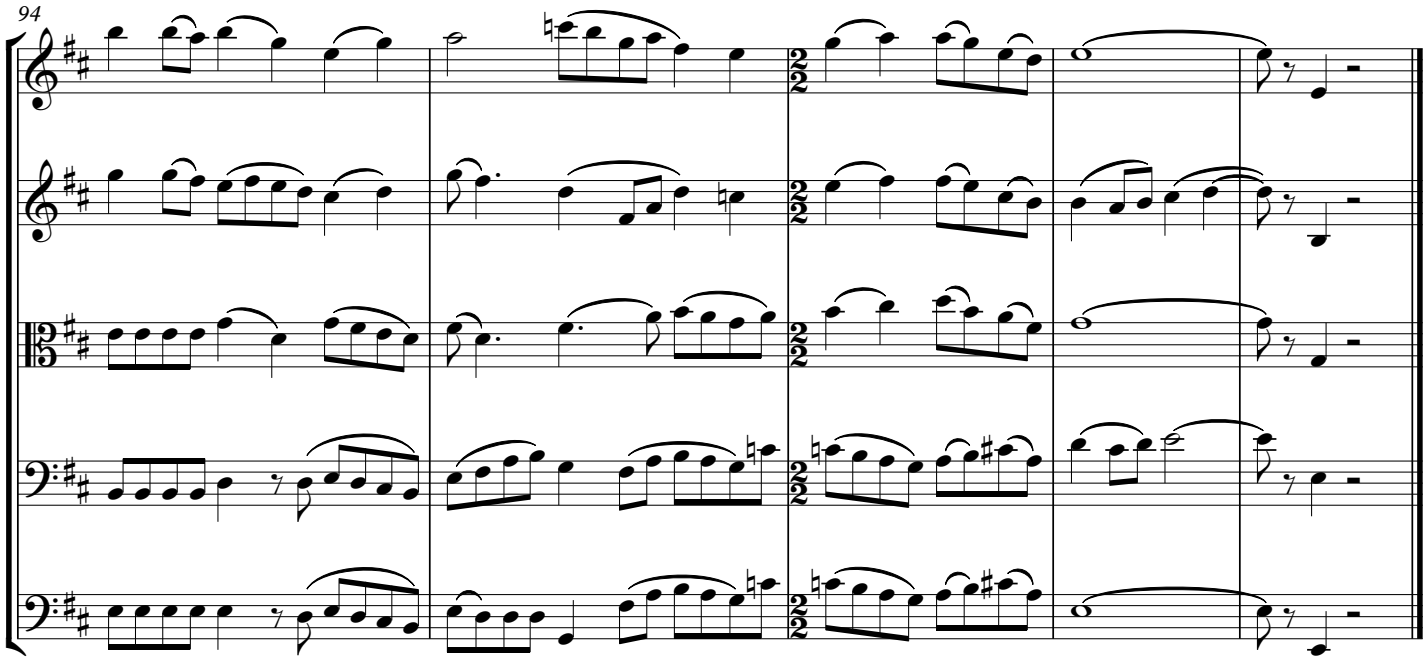
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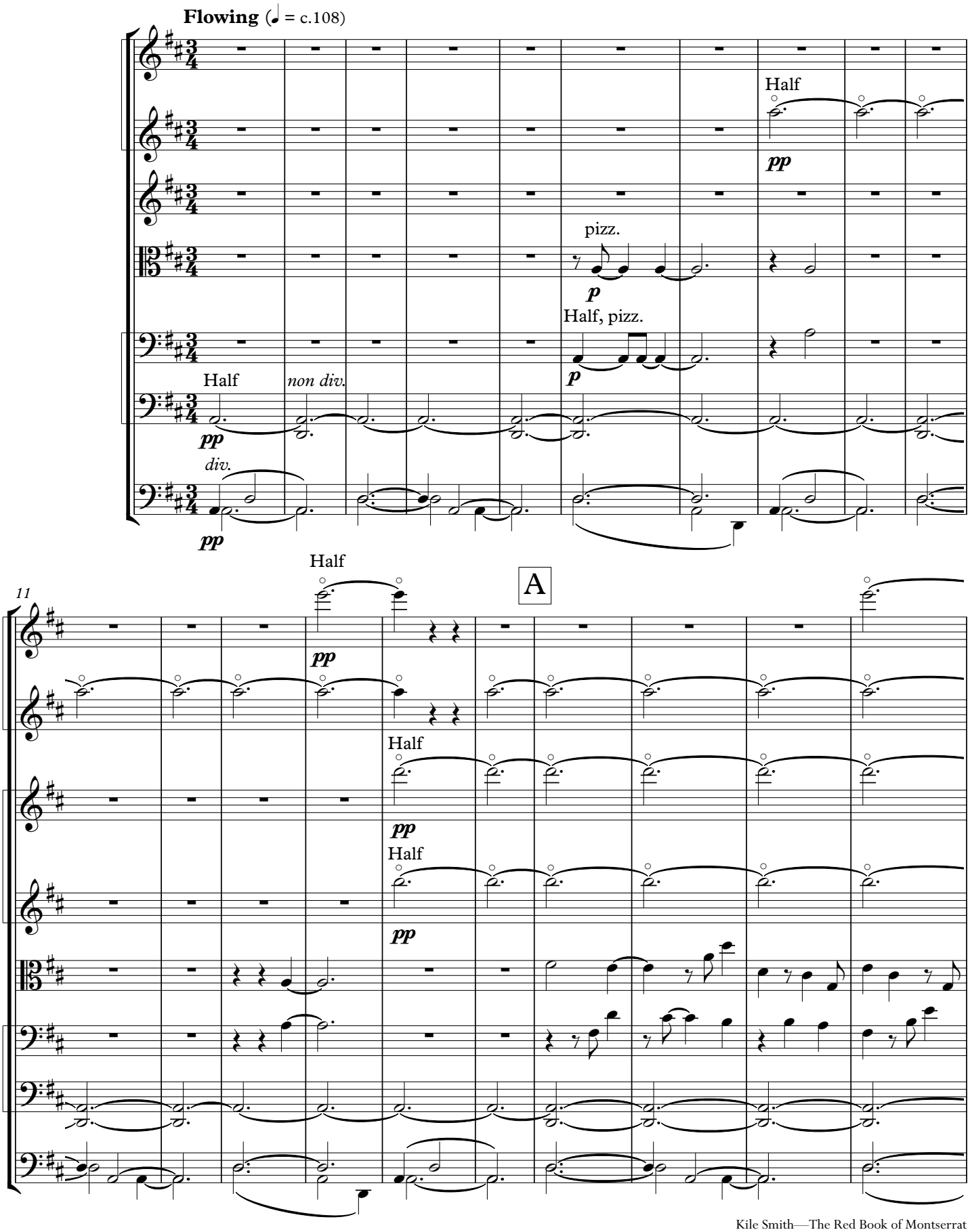

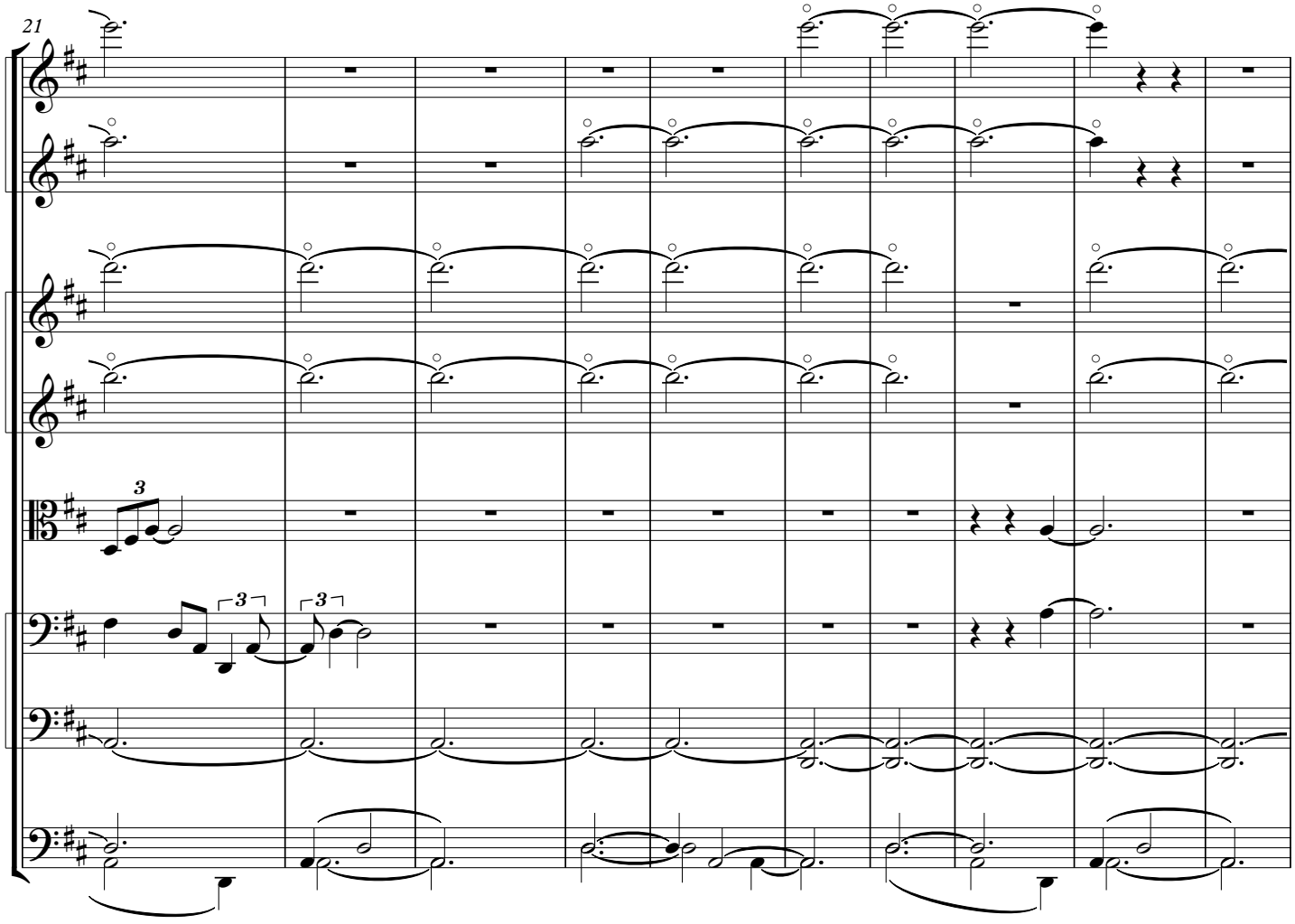
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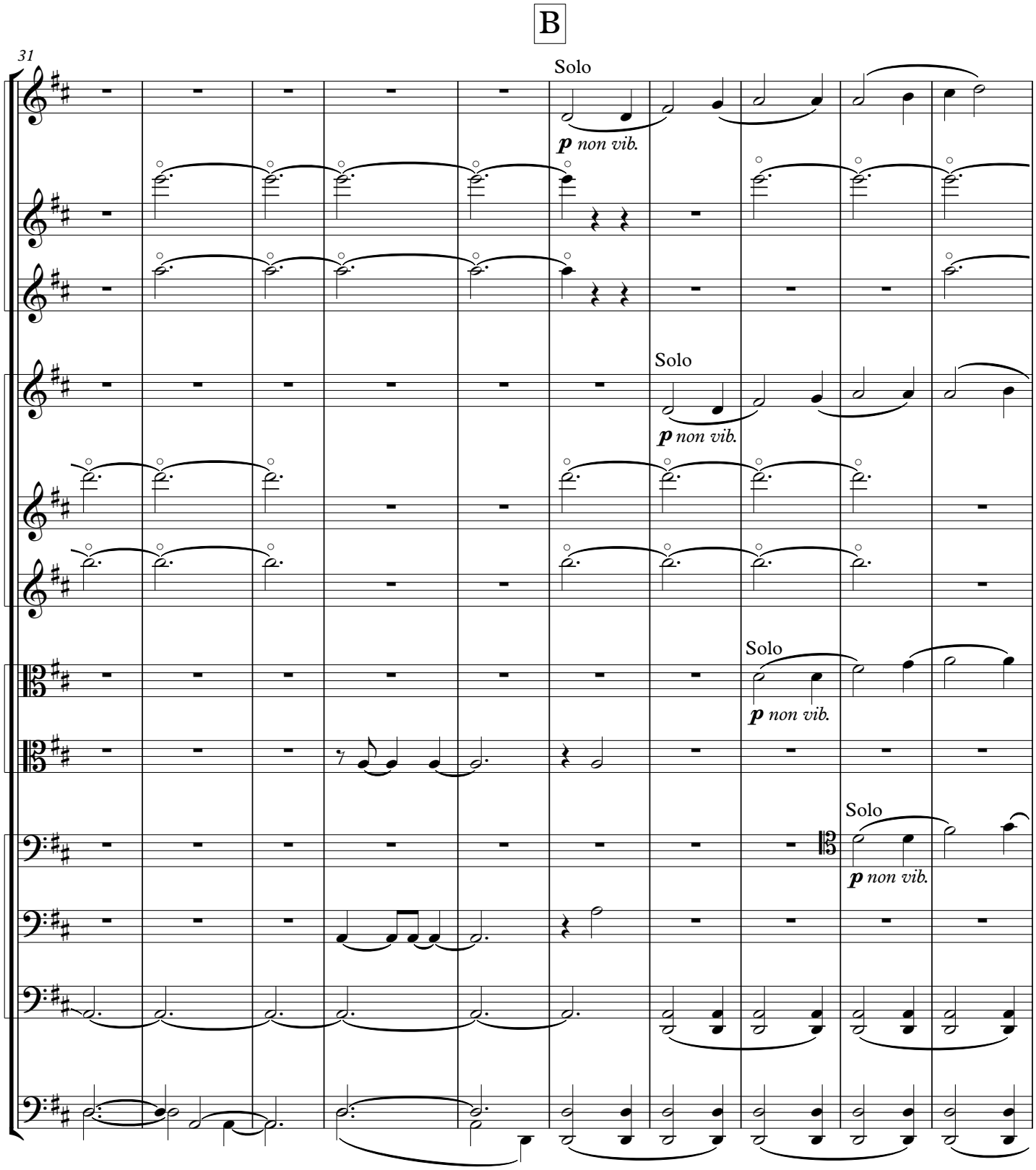
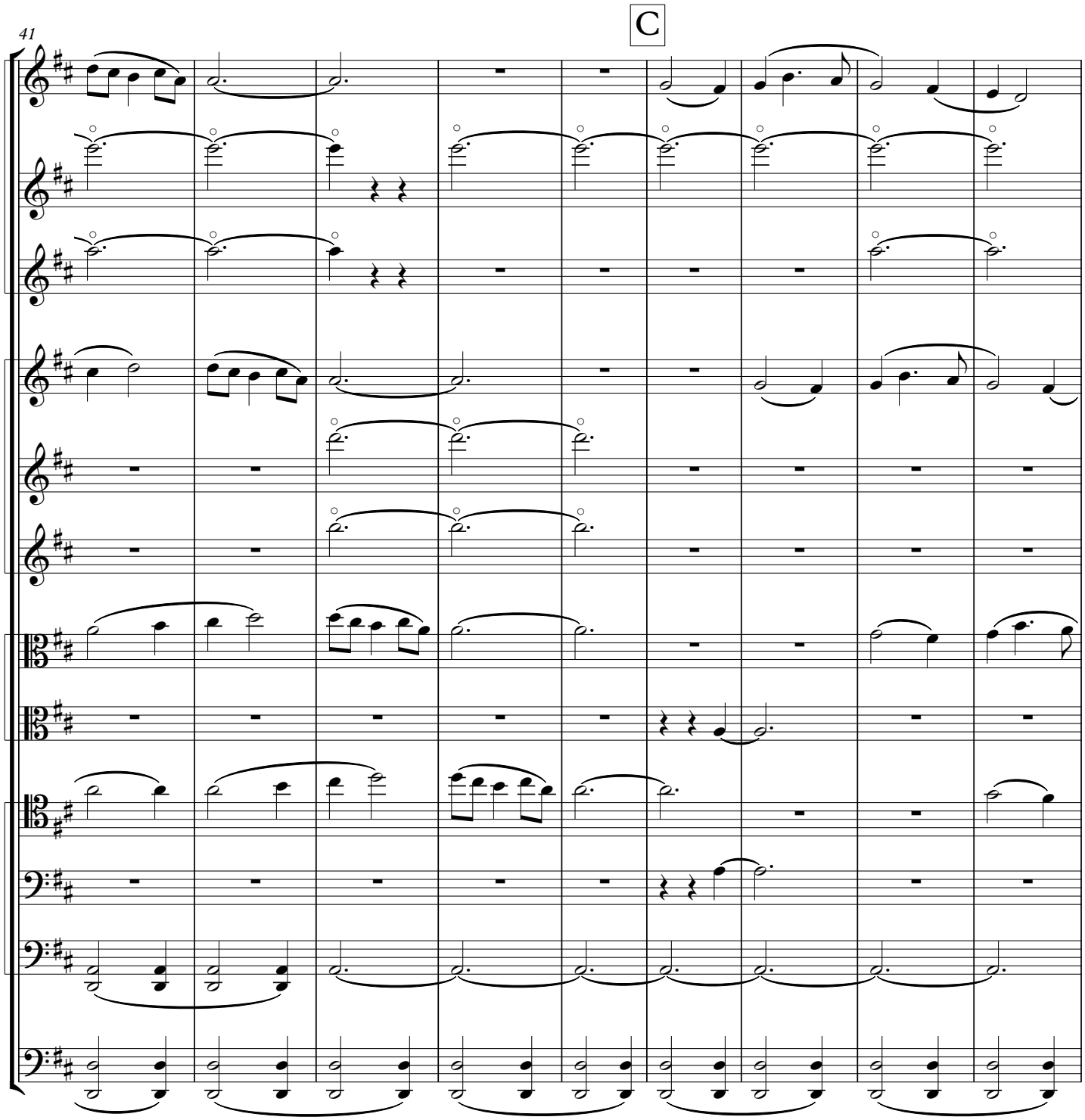
3
3
3


B
31
Solo
p non vib.
Solo
p non vib.
Solo
p non vib.
Solo
p non vib.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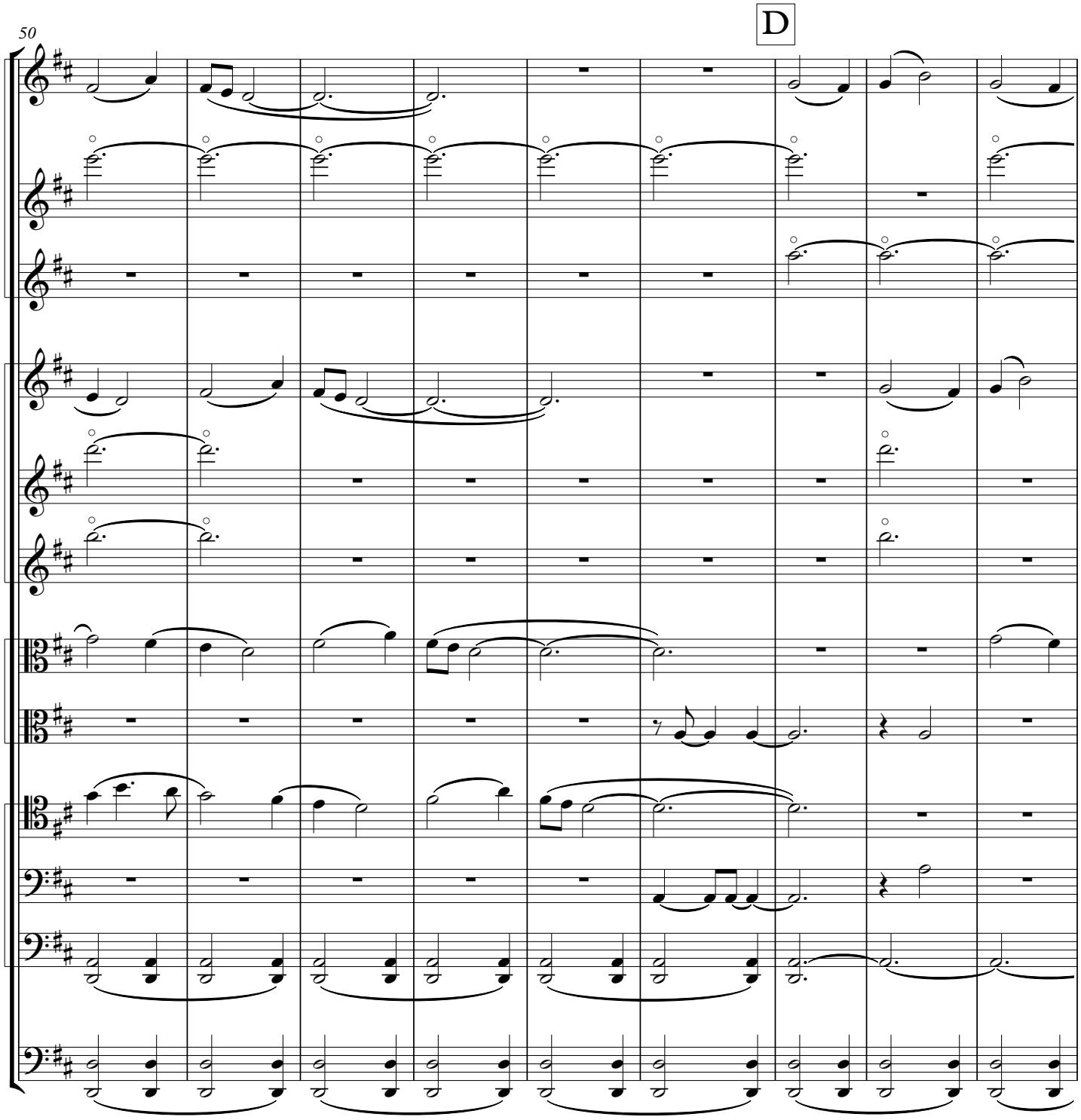
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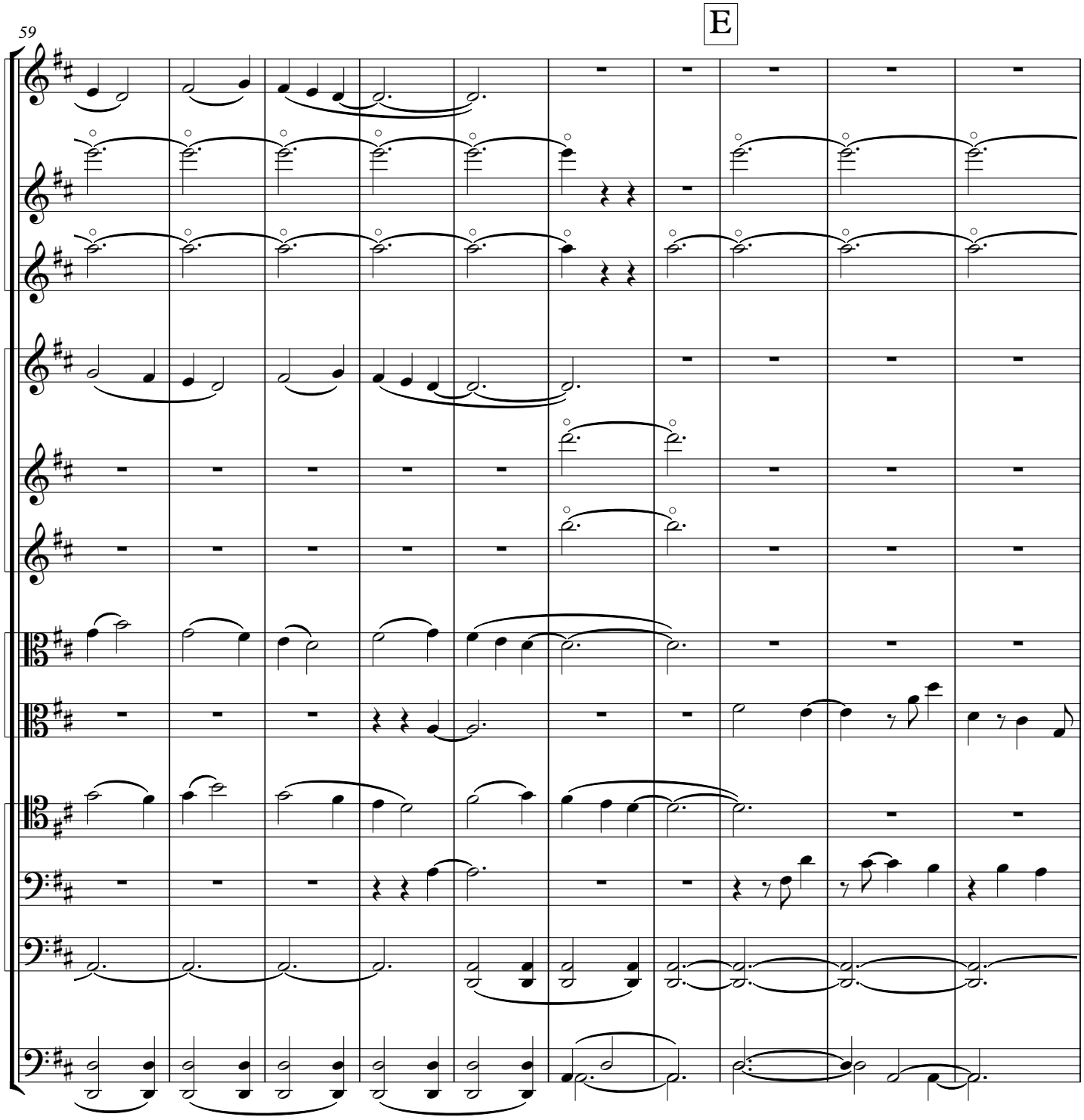
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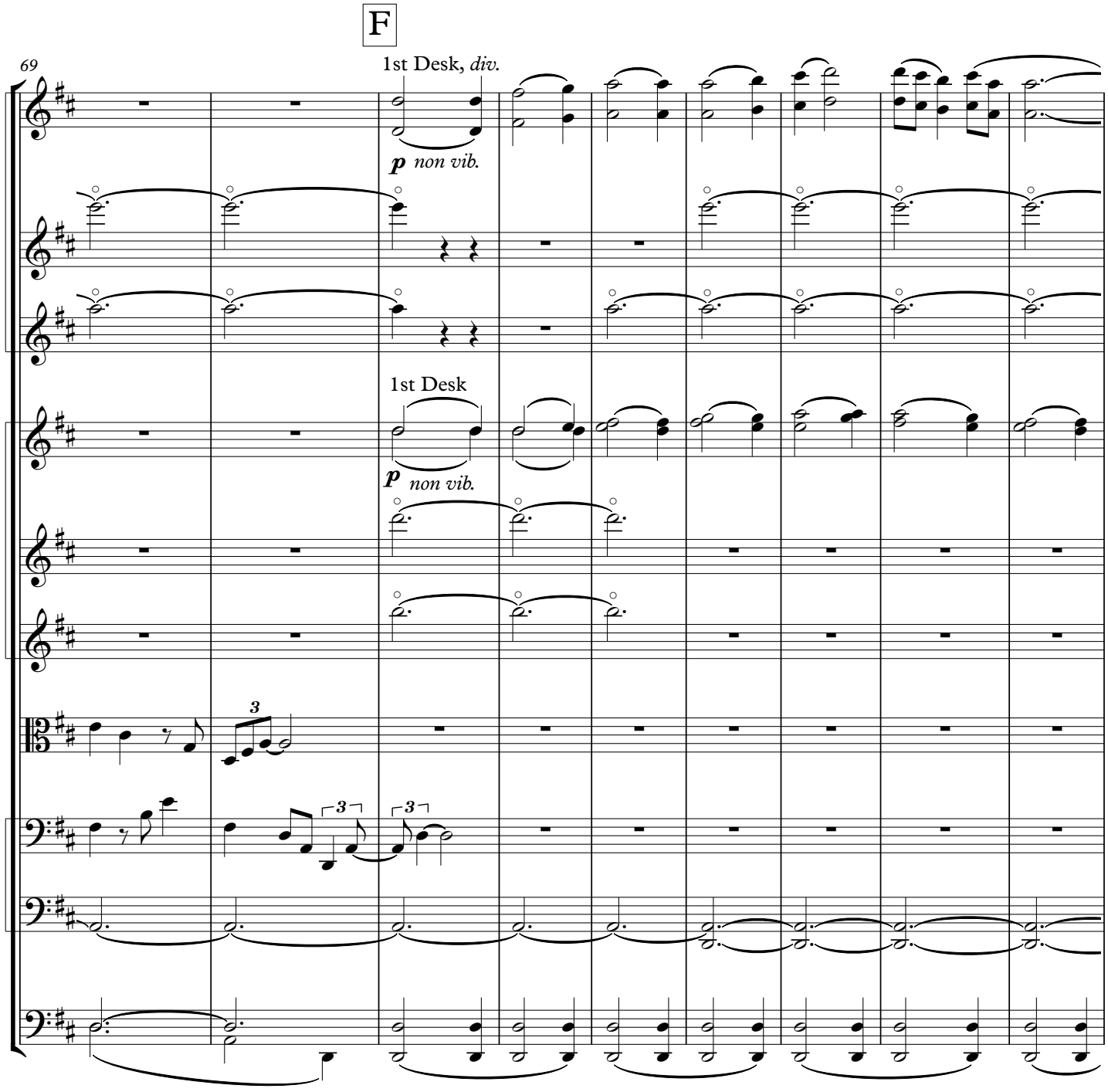
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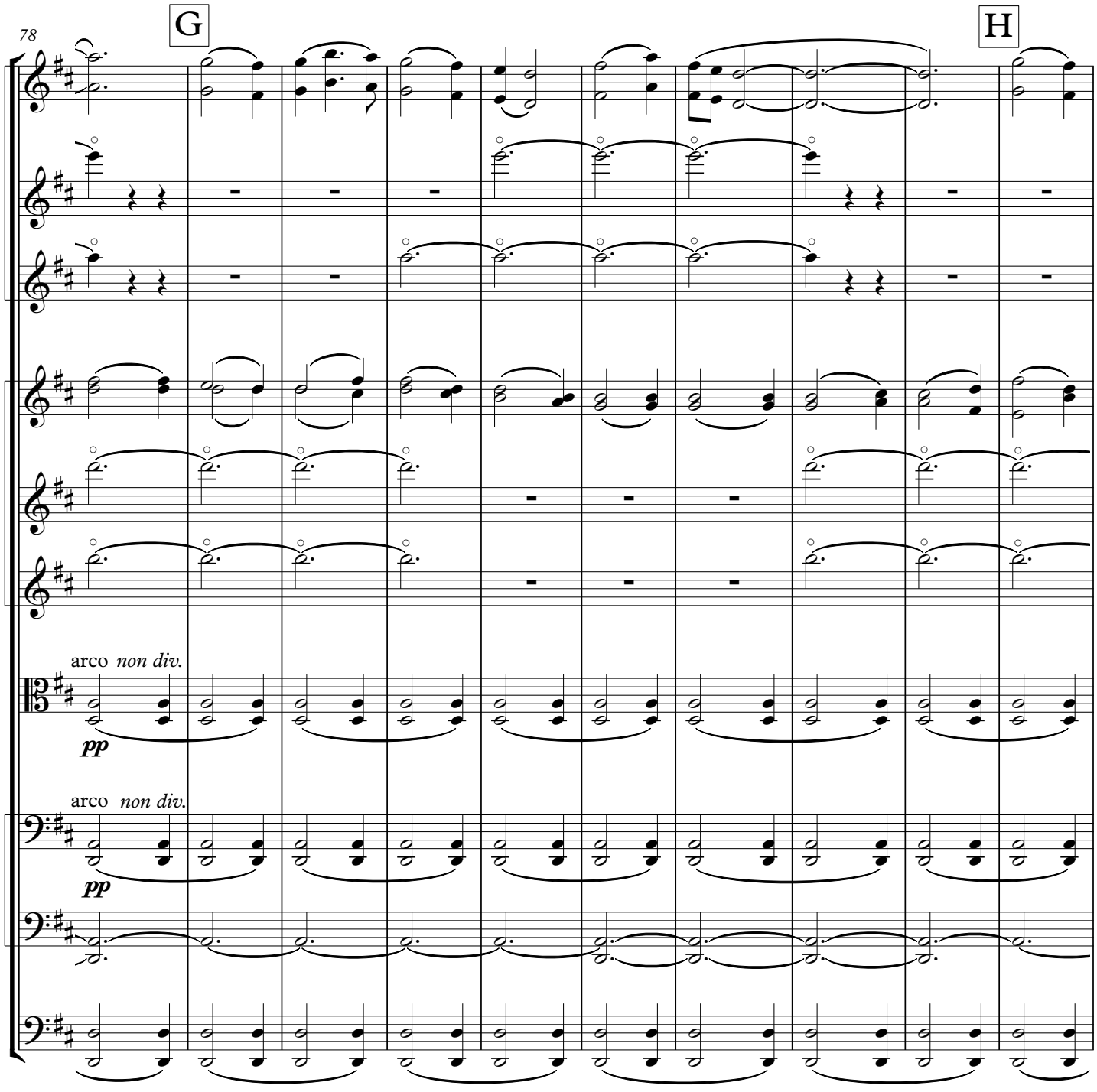
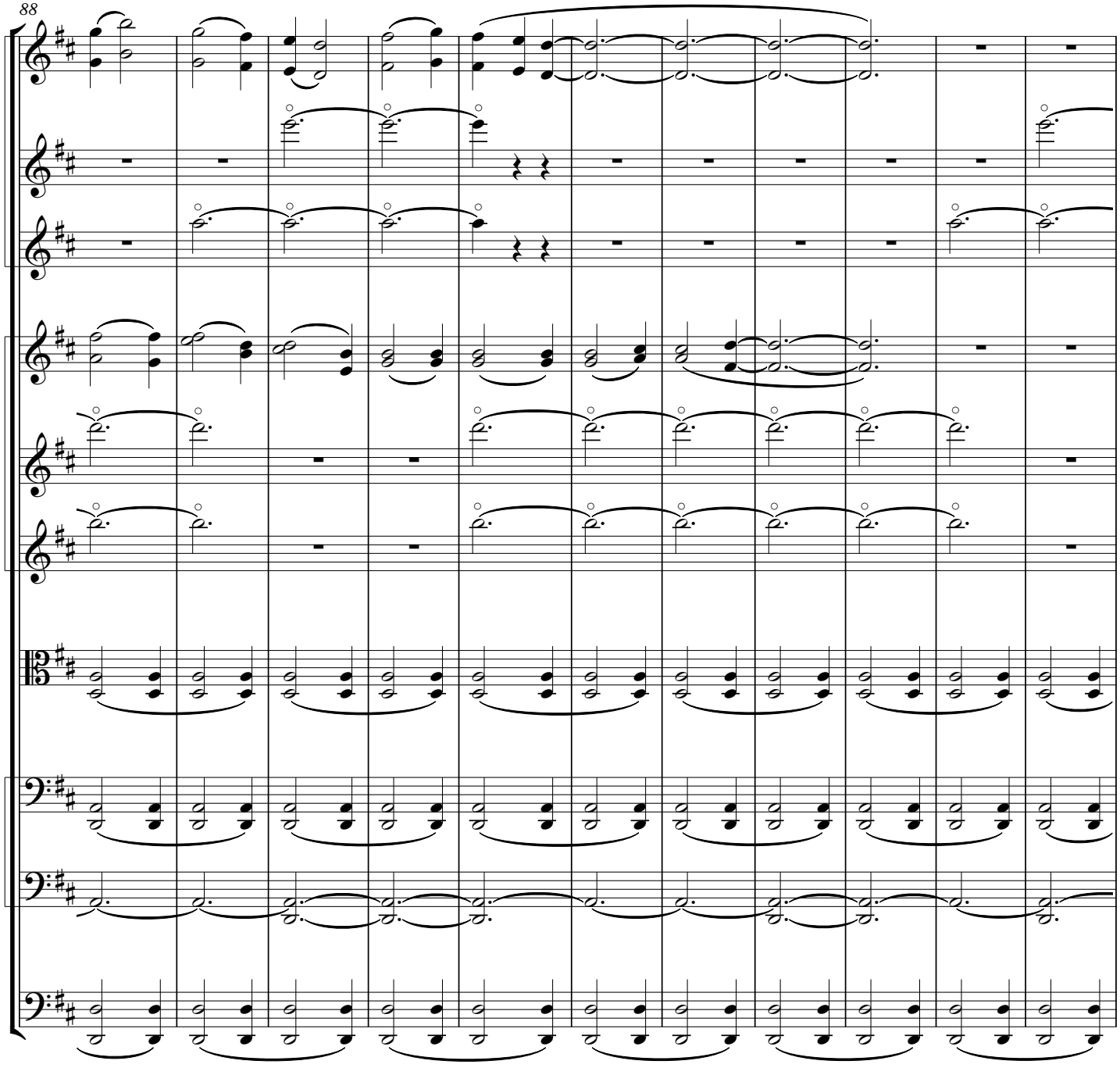
p non vib.
1st Desk
p non vib.
3
3
3


78
G
H
arco non div.
pp
arco non div.
pp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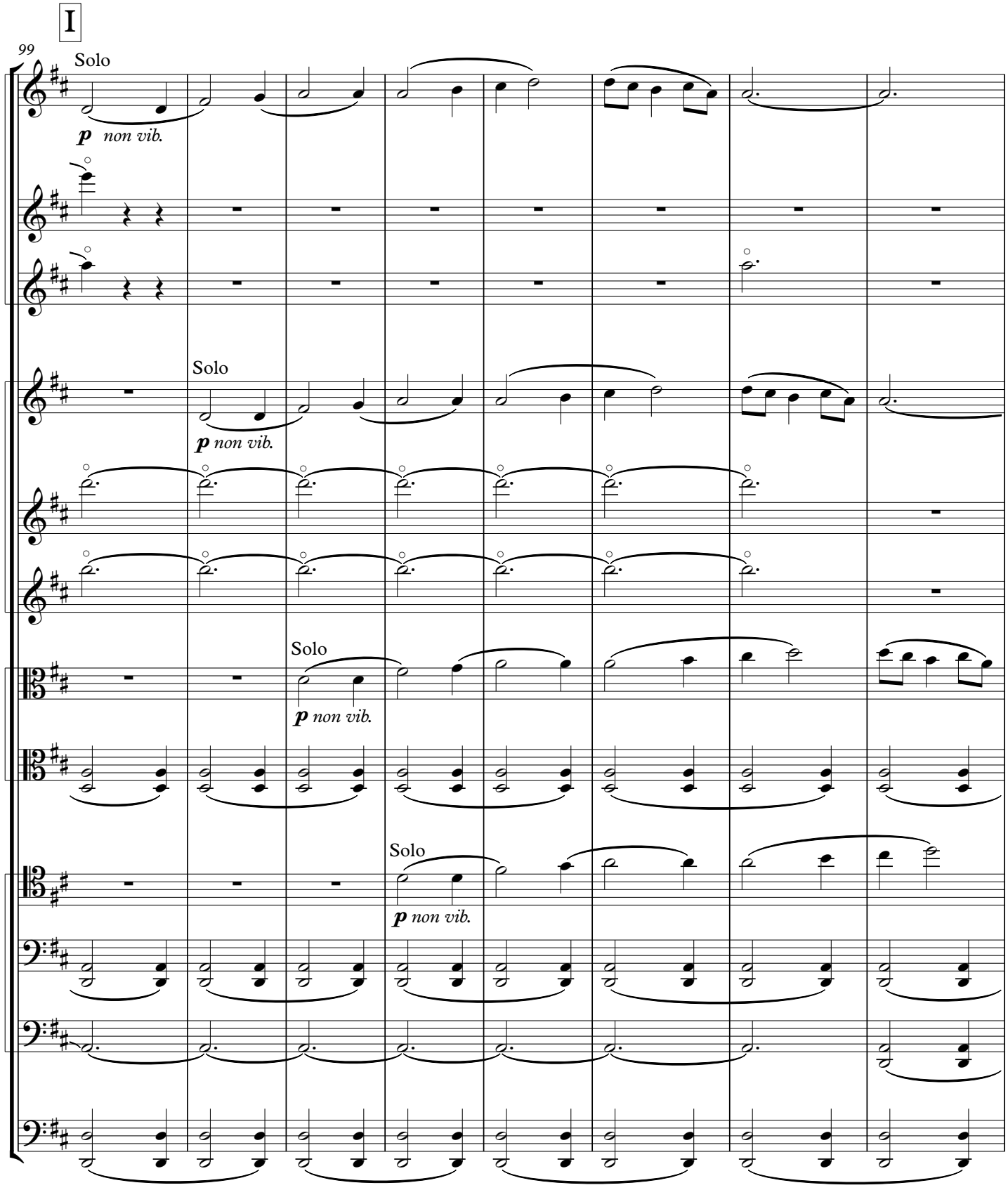
I
99
Solo
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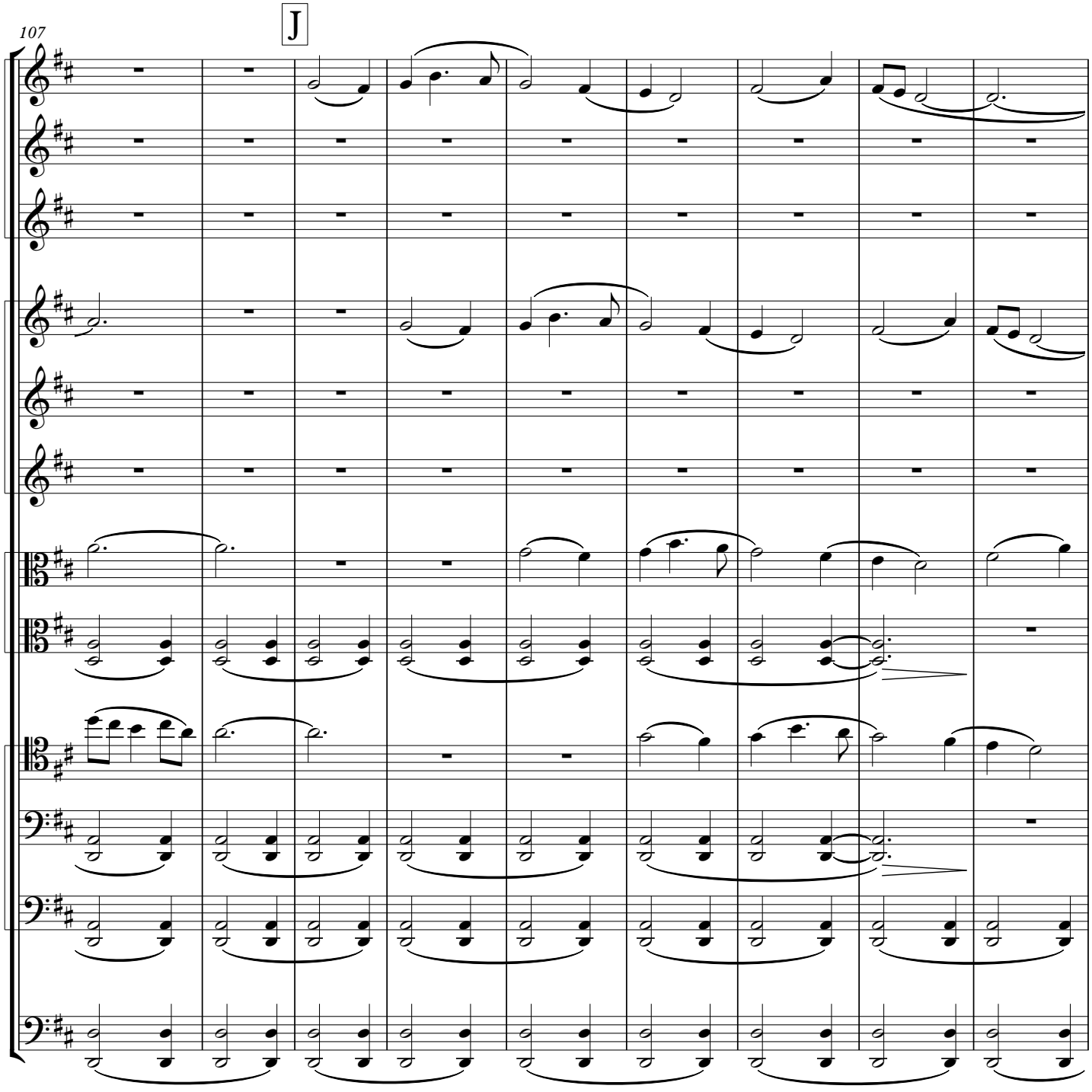
Solo
p non vib.
Solo
p non vib.
Solo
p non vib.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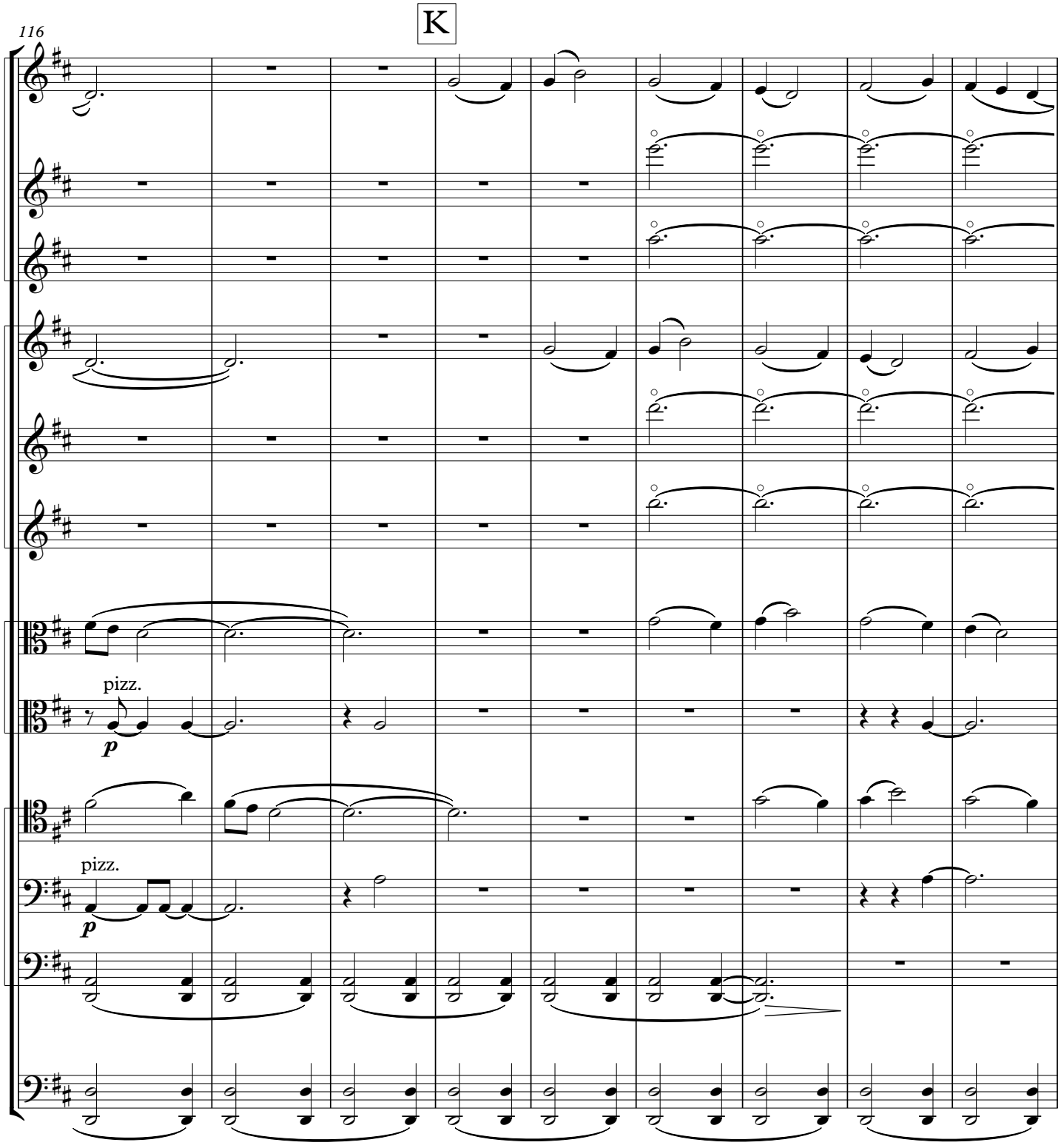
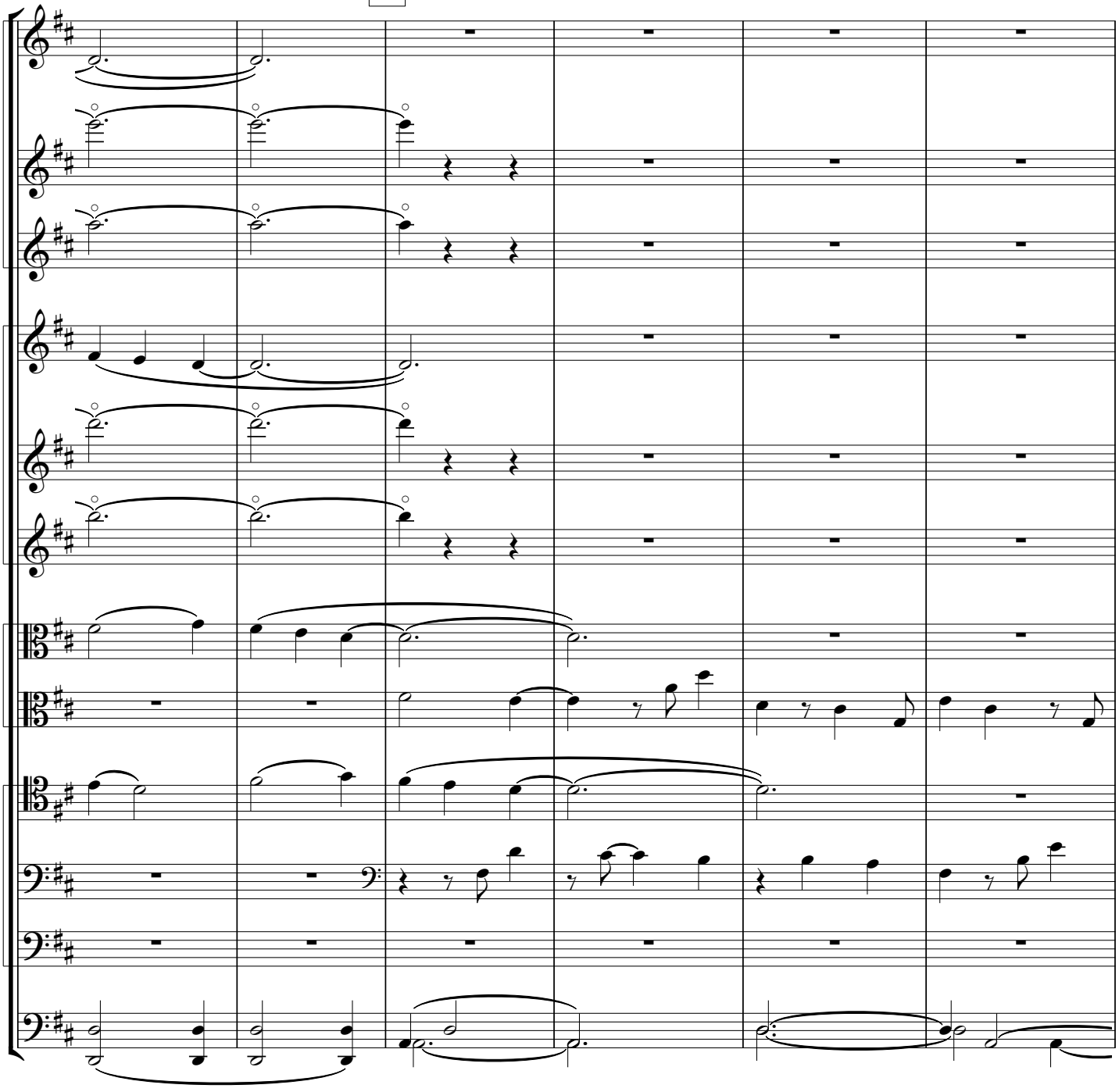

K
116
pizz.
p
pizz.
p

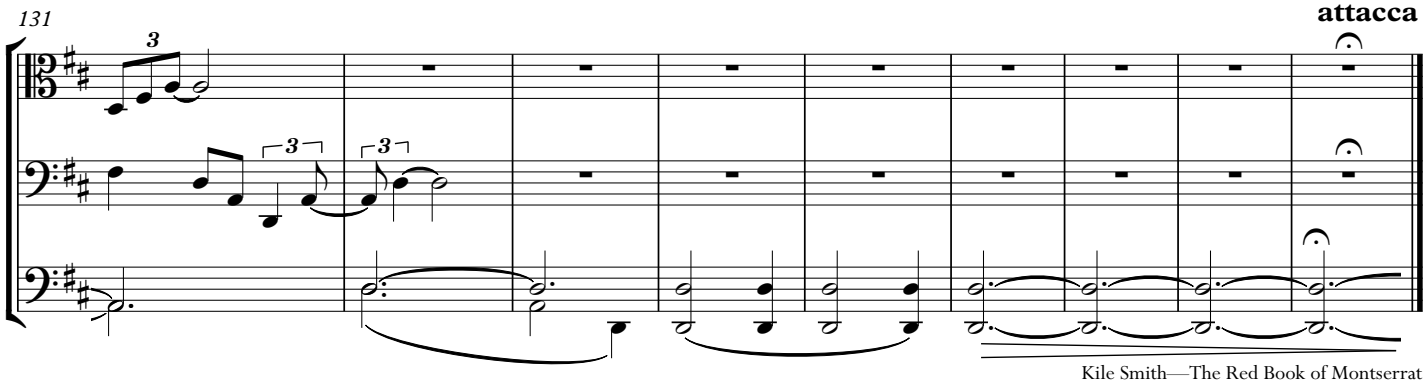
125

L



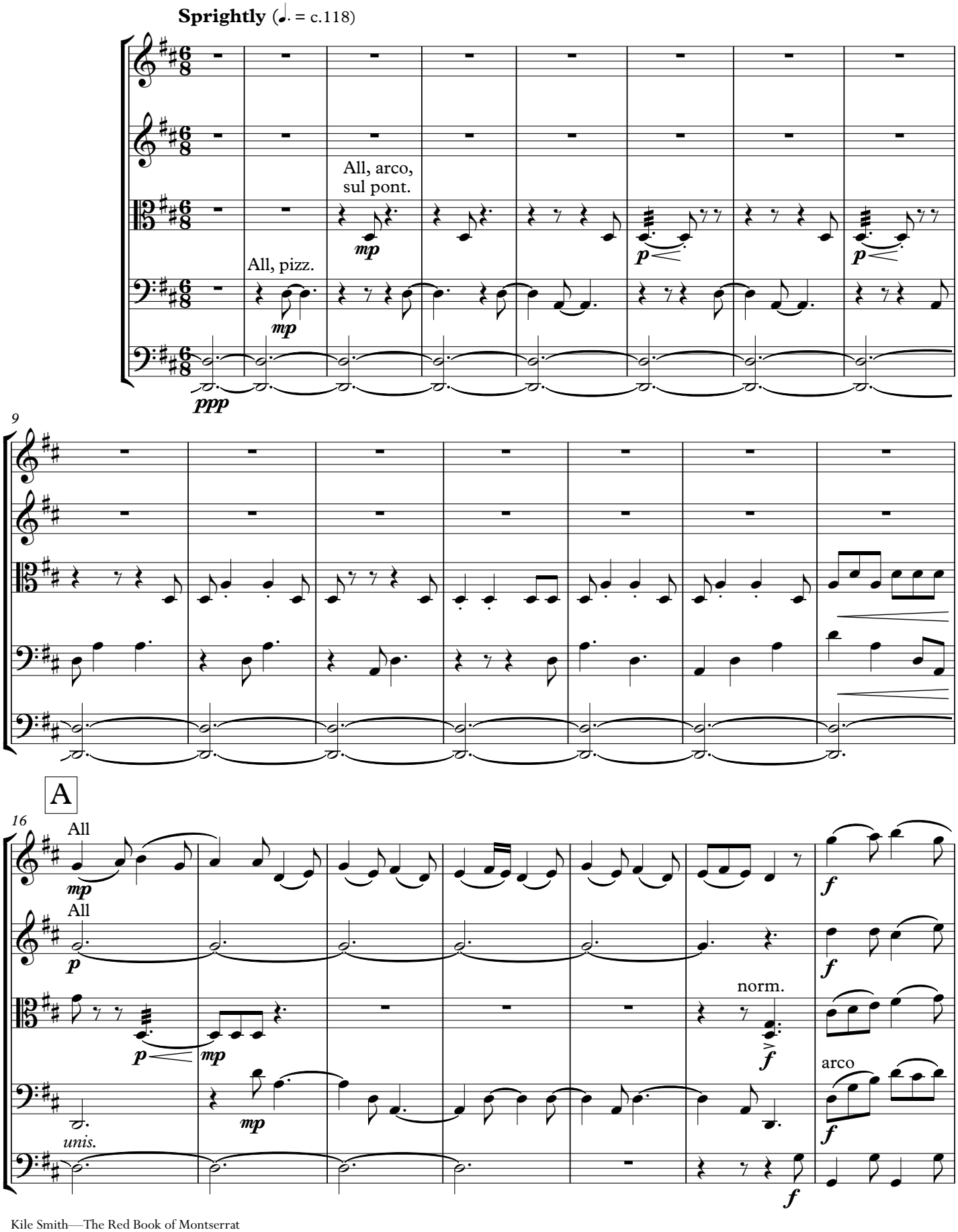
131

attacca



5. We Hurry to Death

Sprightly (♩. = c.118)



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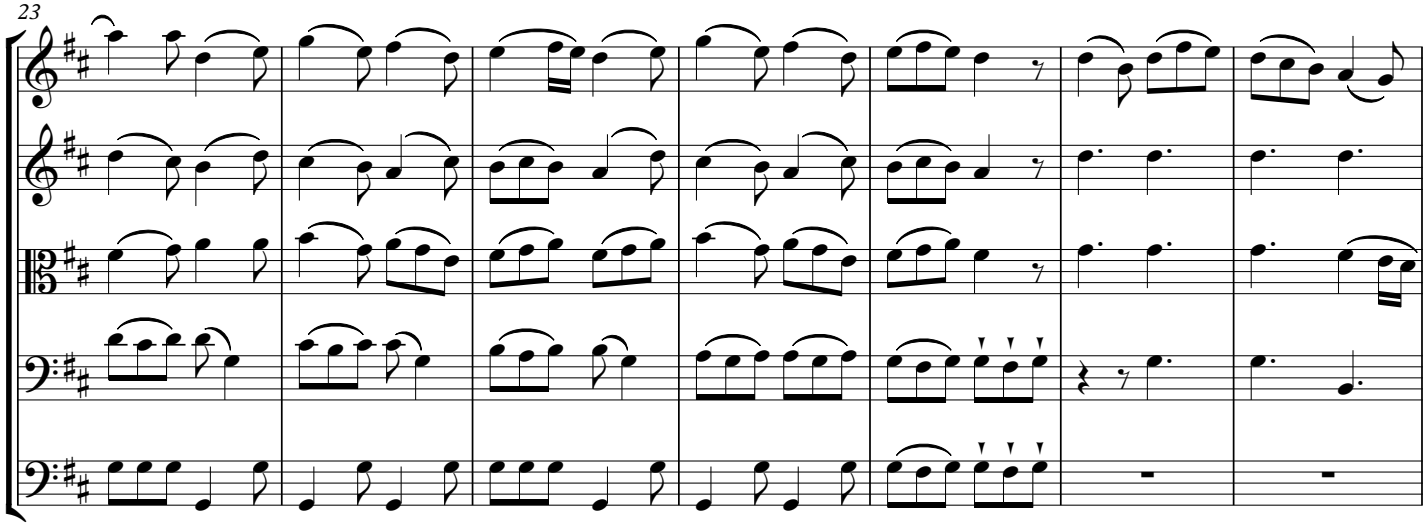

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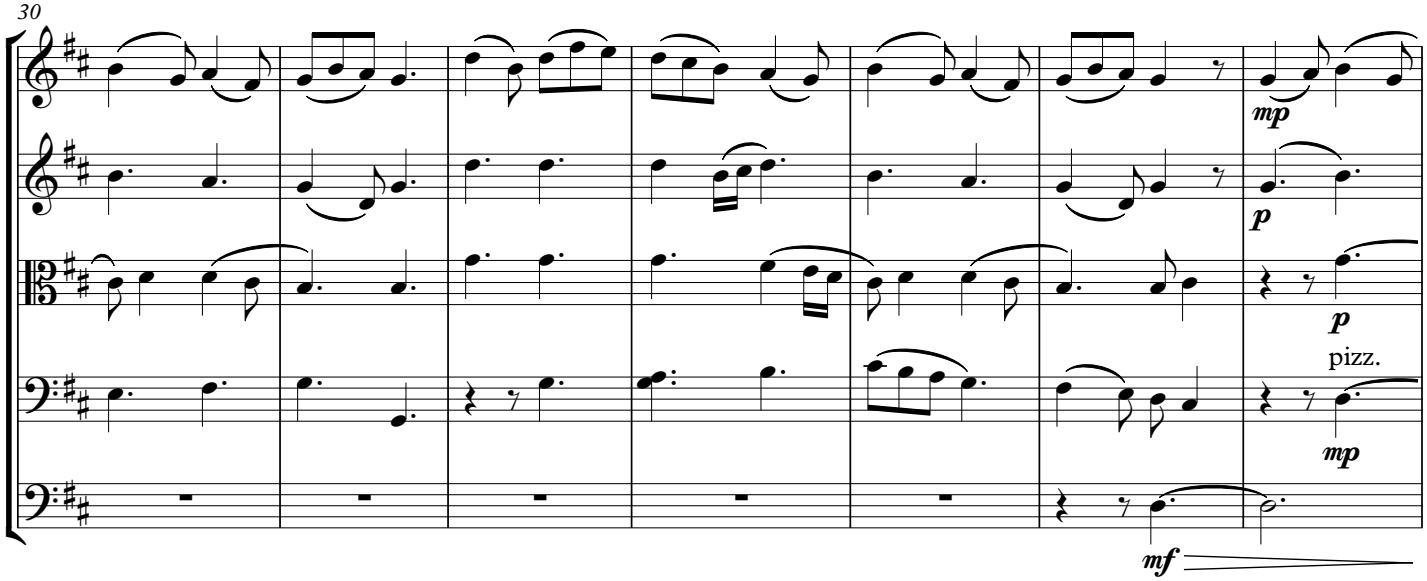

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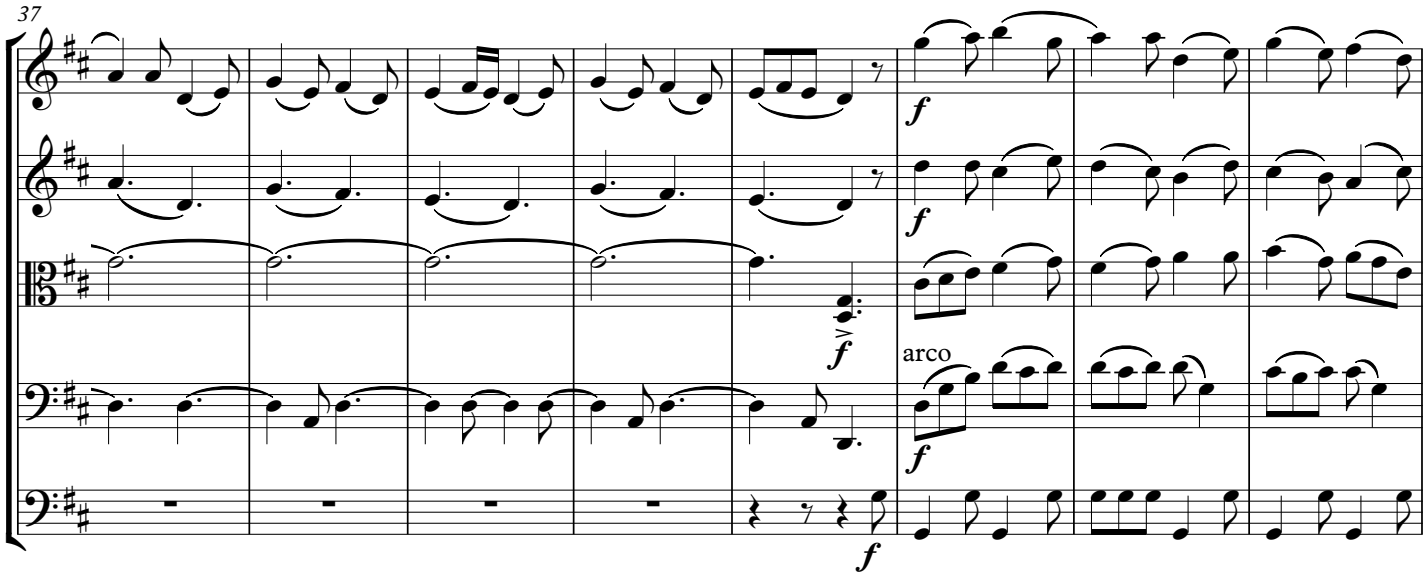
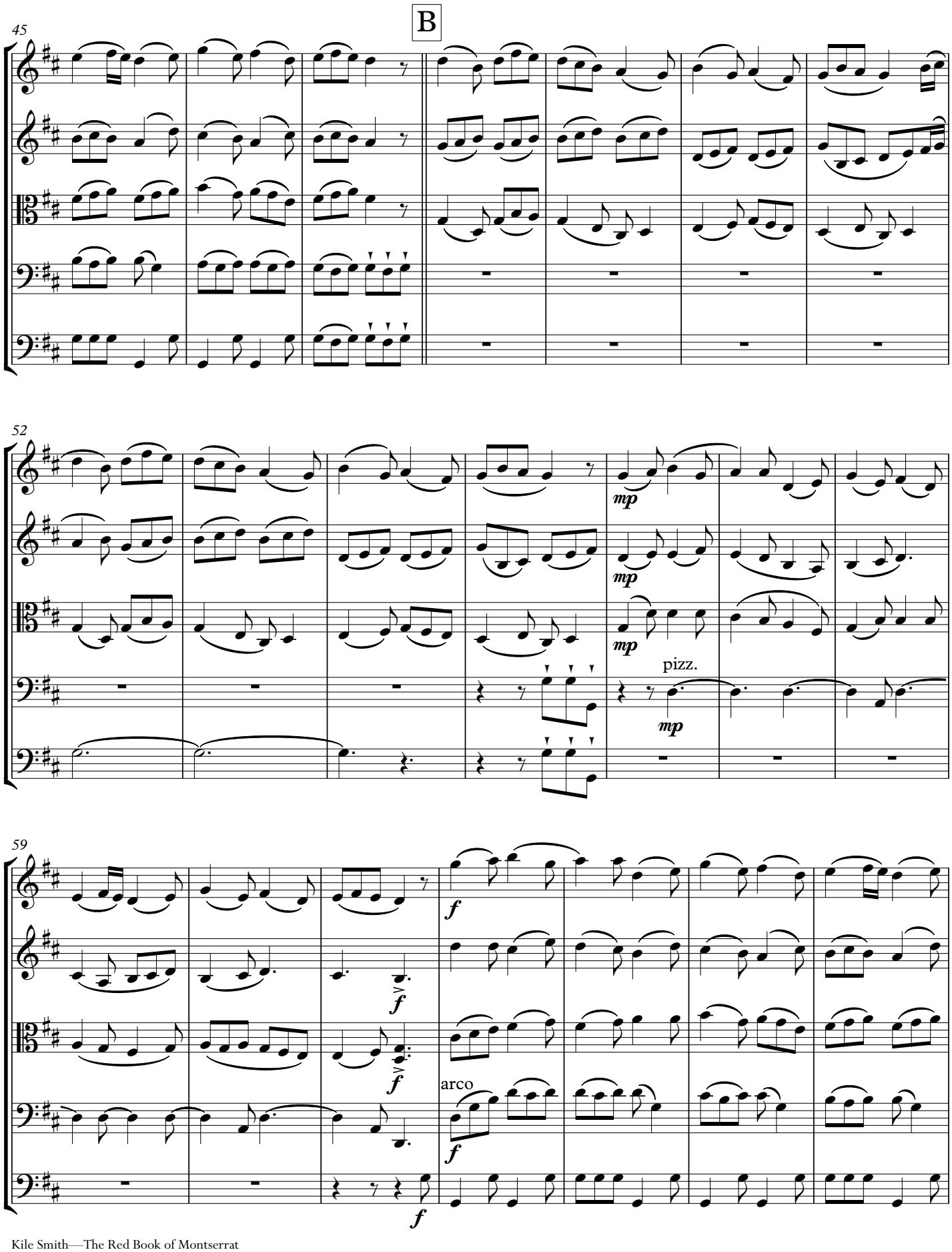
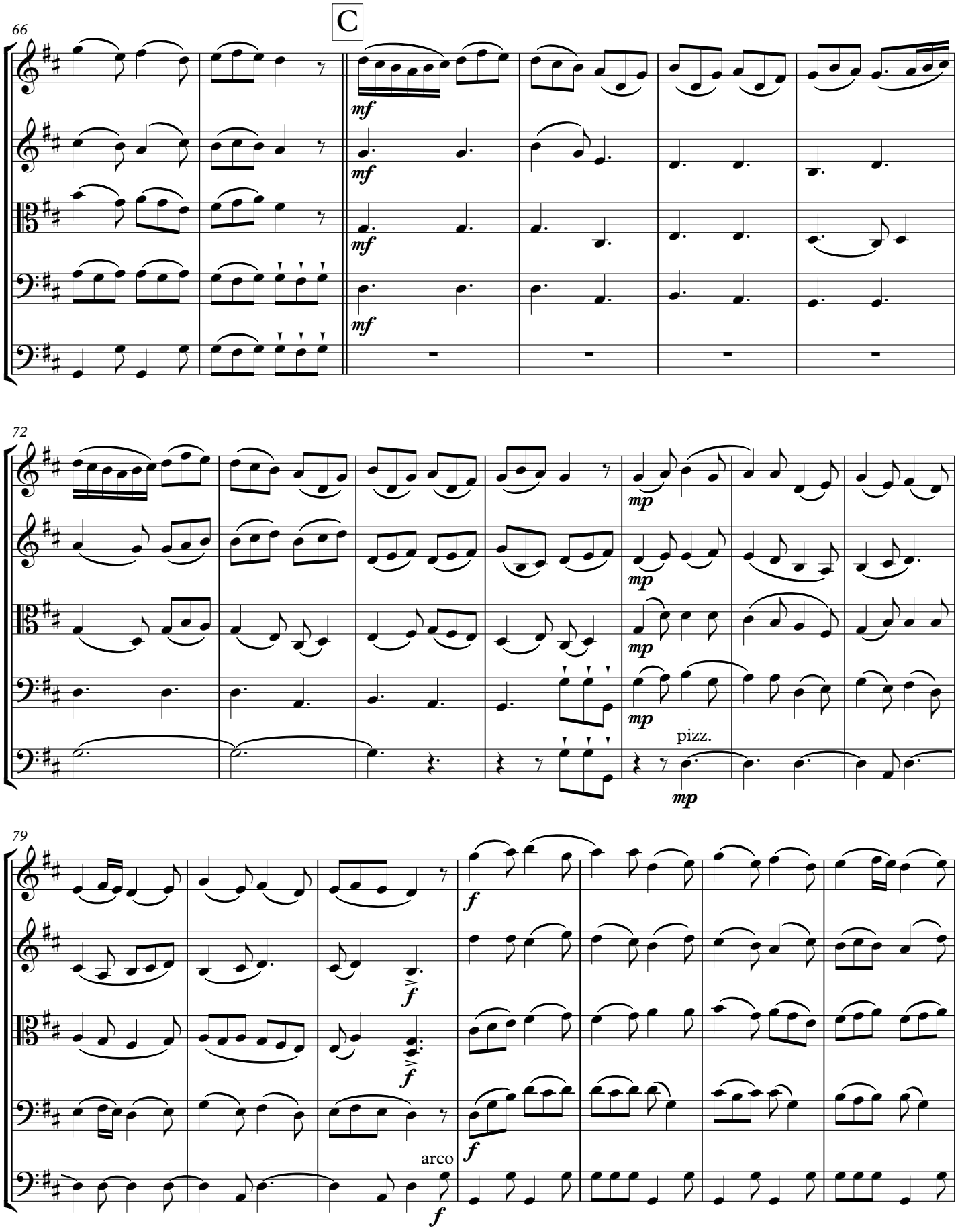



B
45
52
mp
mp
mp
pizz.
mp
59
f
f
f
arco
f
f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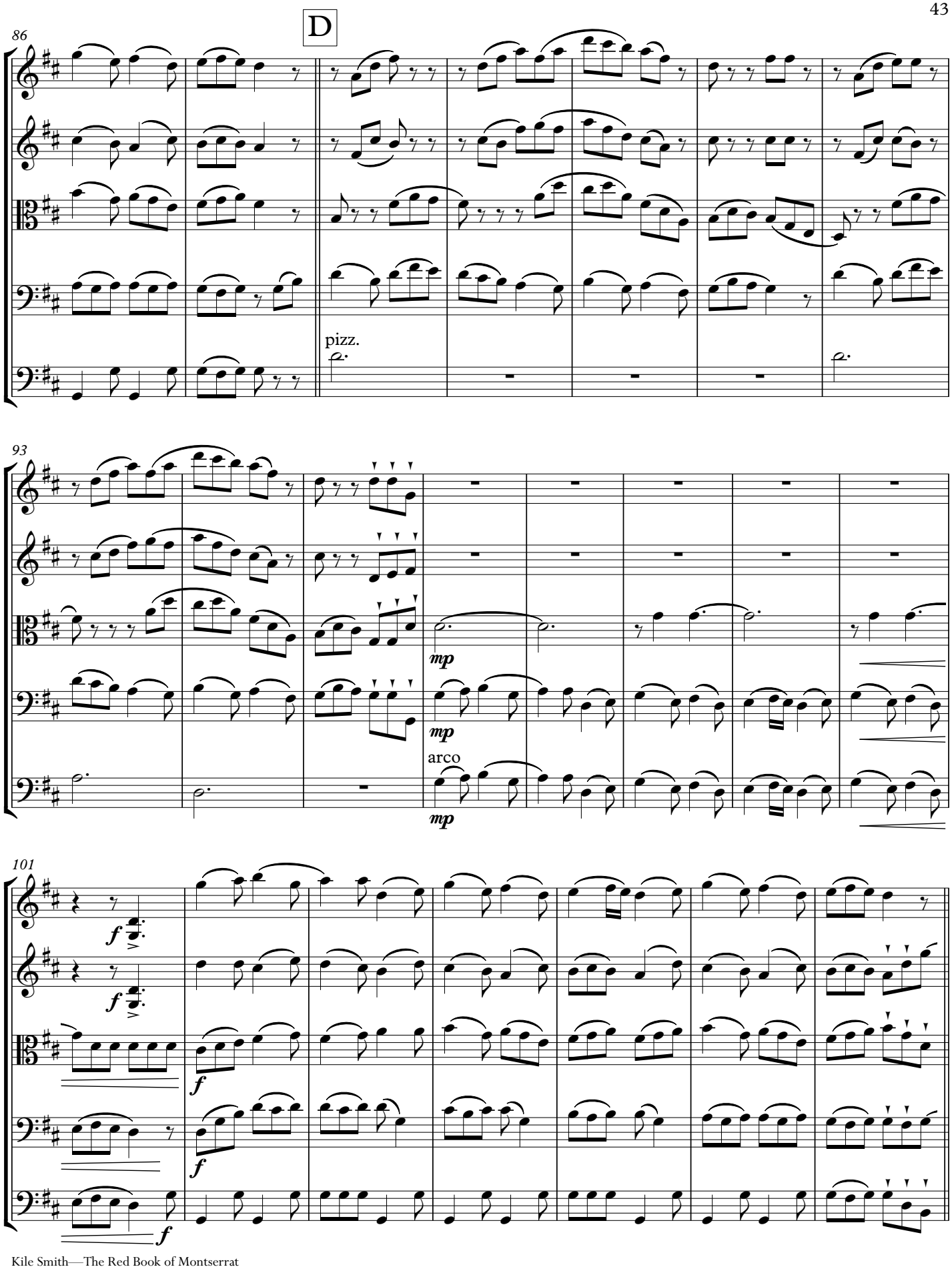
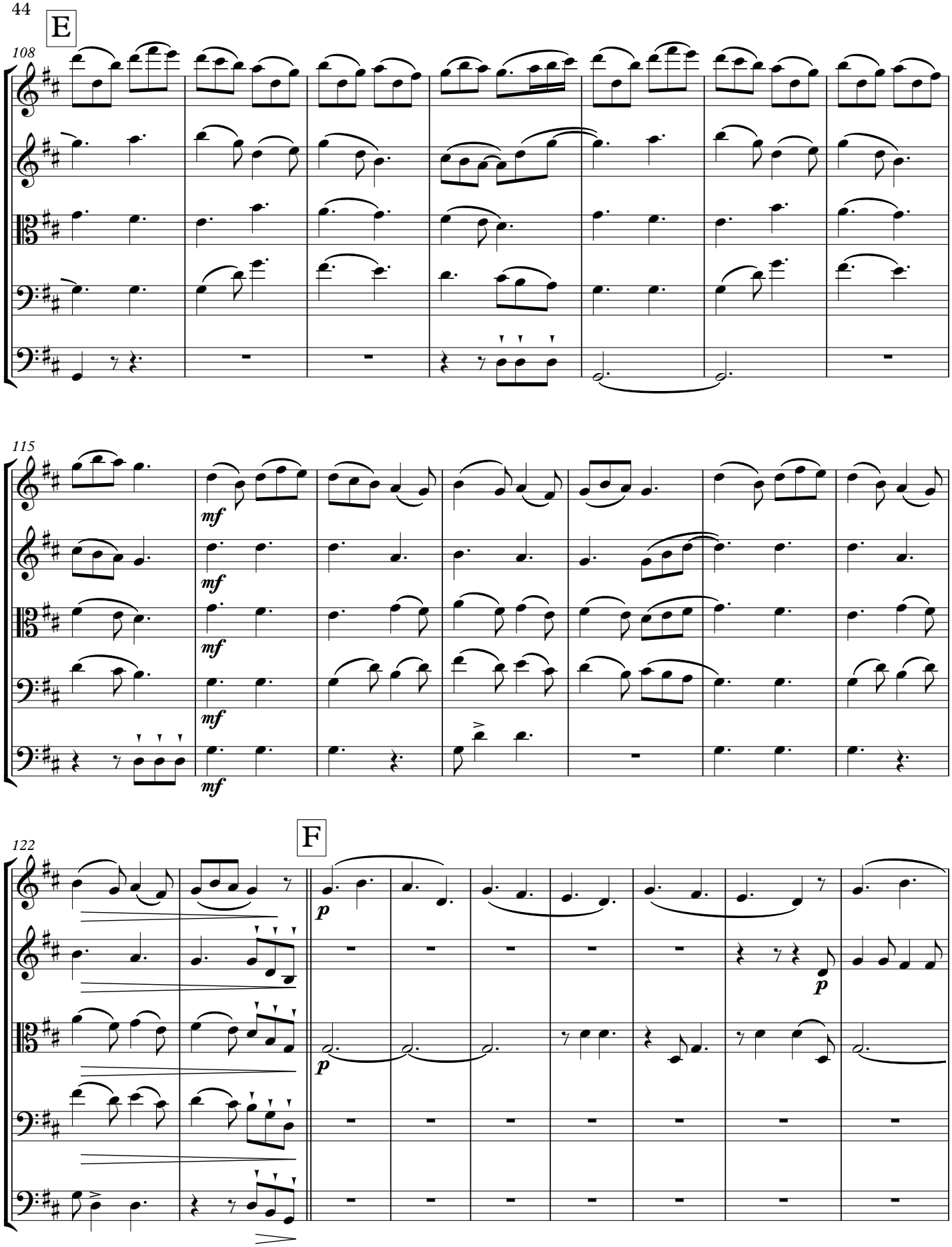
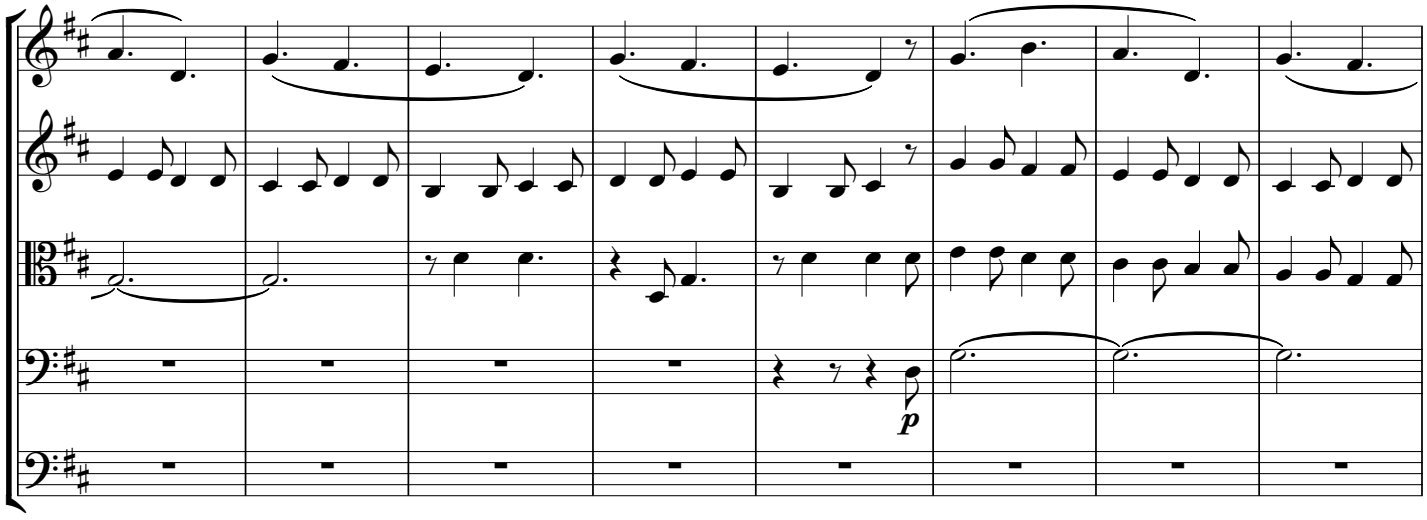
mf
72
mp
pizz.
79
f
arco


D
86
pizz.
93
mp
mp
arco
mp
101
f
f
f
f


E
108
115
mf
mf
mf
mf
122
F
p
p
p

131



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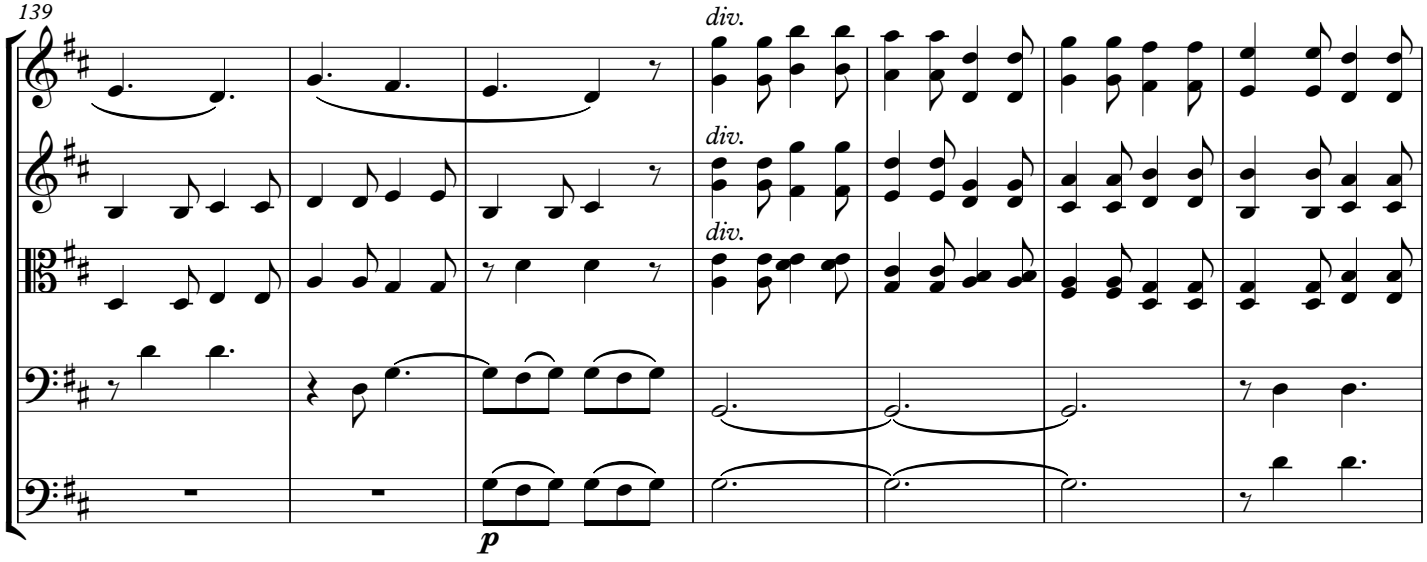

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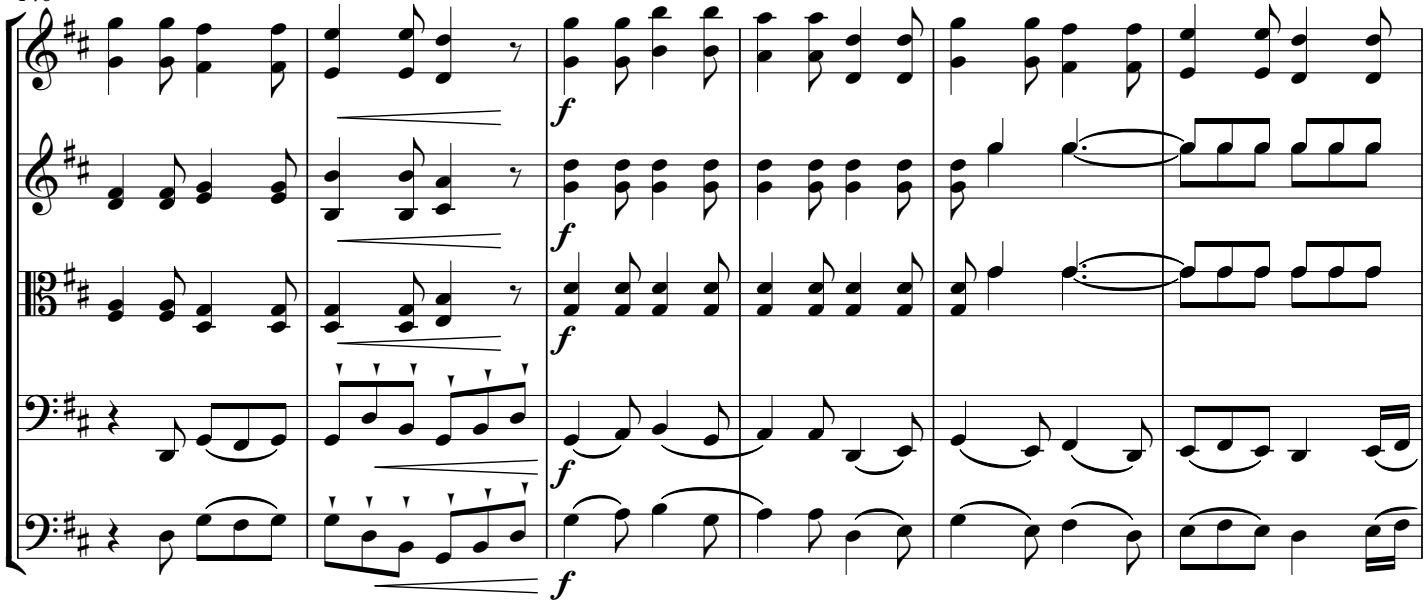


G

152

unis.

unis.

unis.

159

166

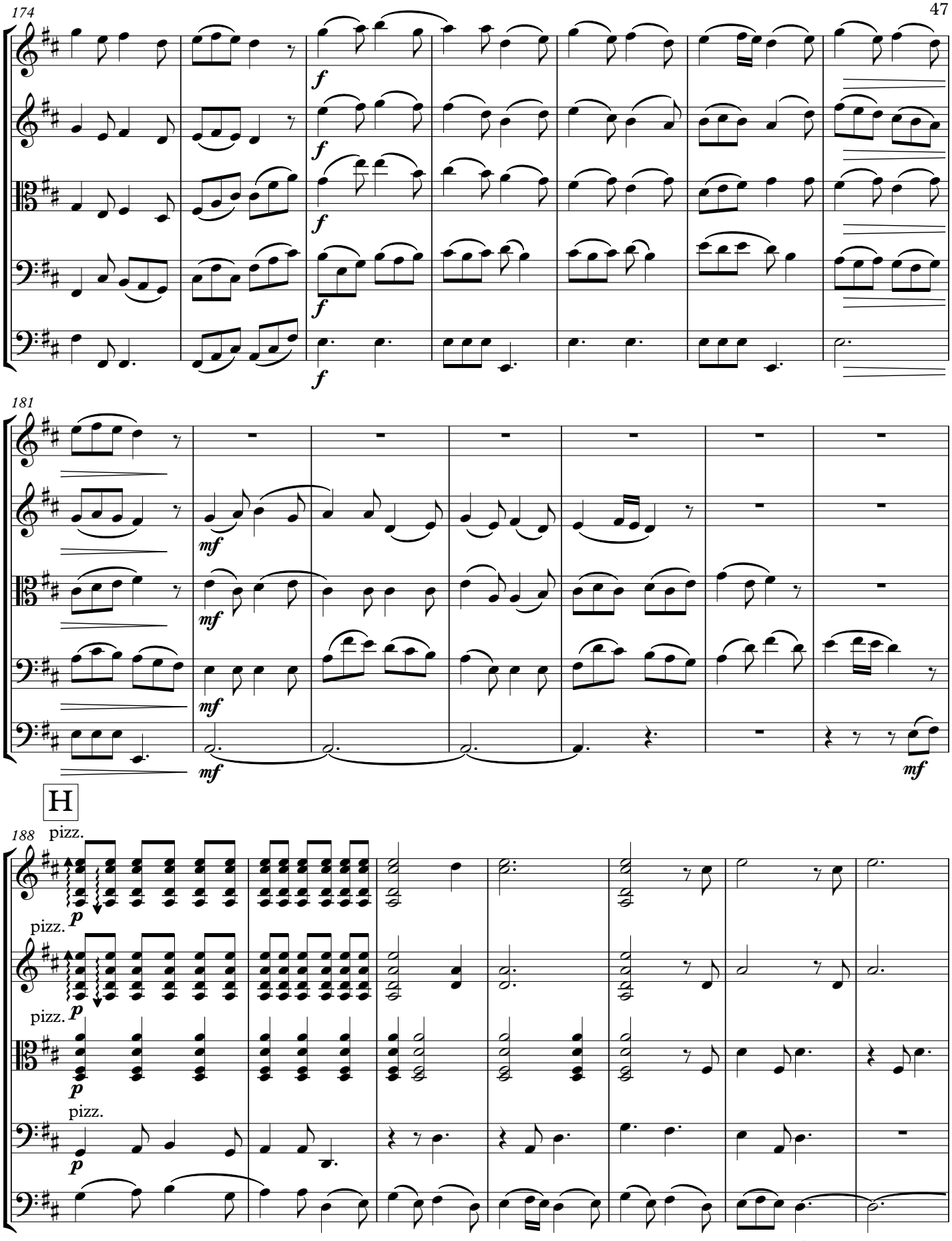
ff

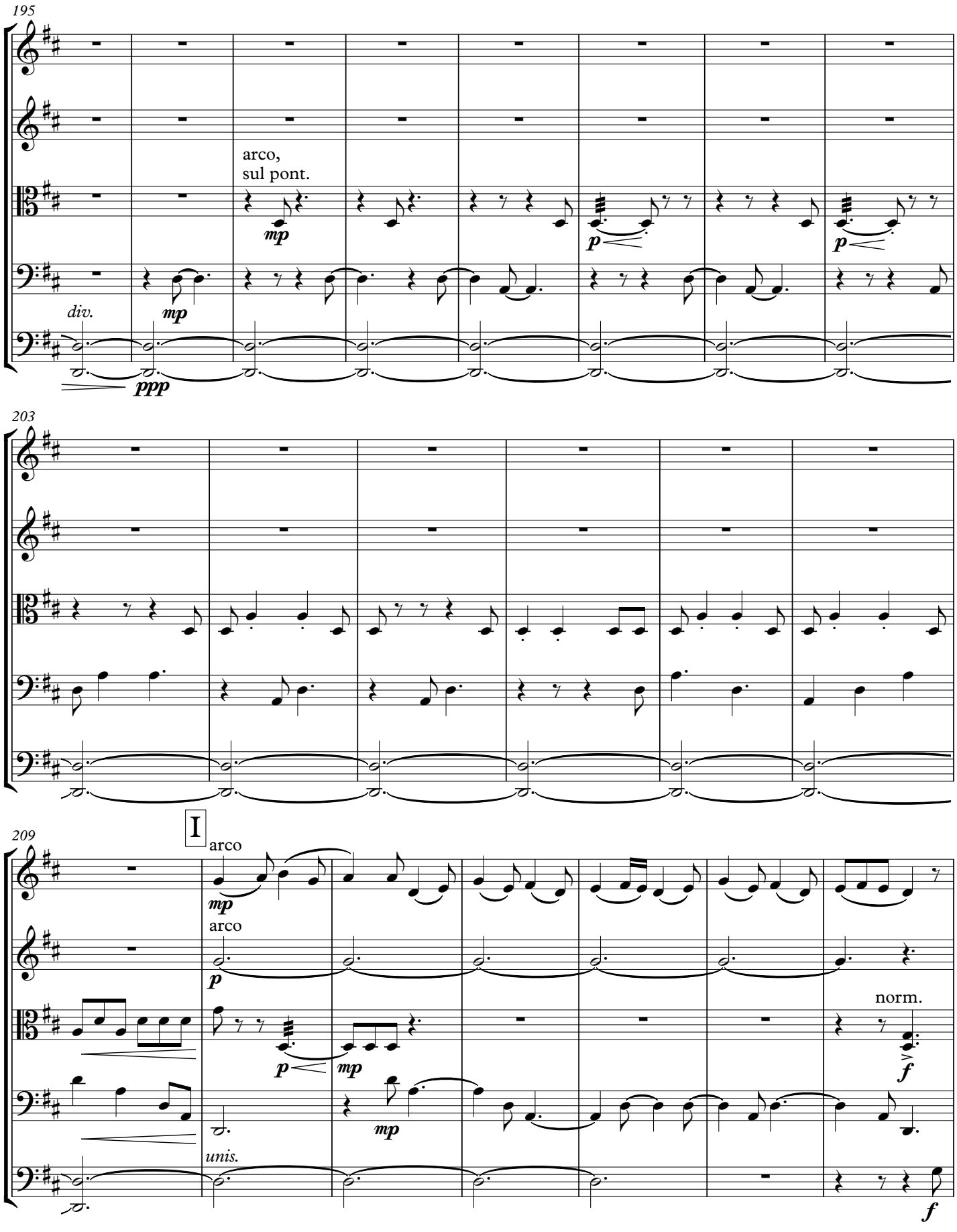
ff

ff

ff

ff


174
f
181
mf
H
188
pizz.
p


195
arco,
sul pont.
mp
p
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ppp
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209
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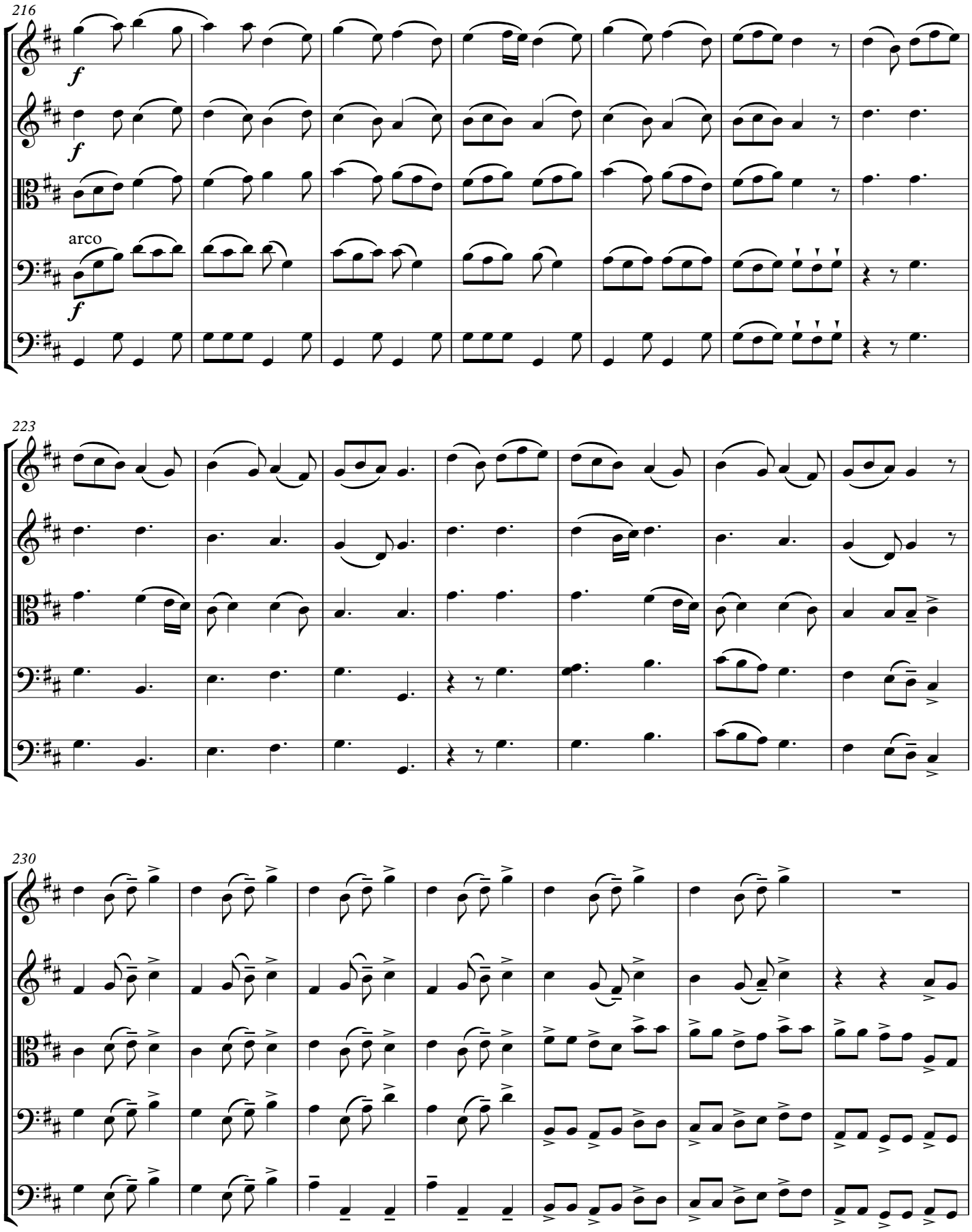
arco
mp
arco
p
p
mp
mp
norm.
f
unis.
f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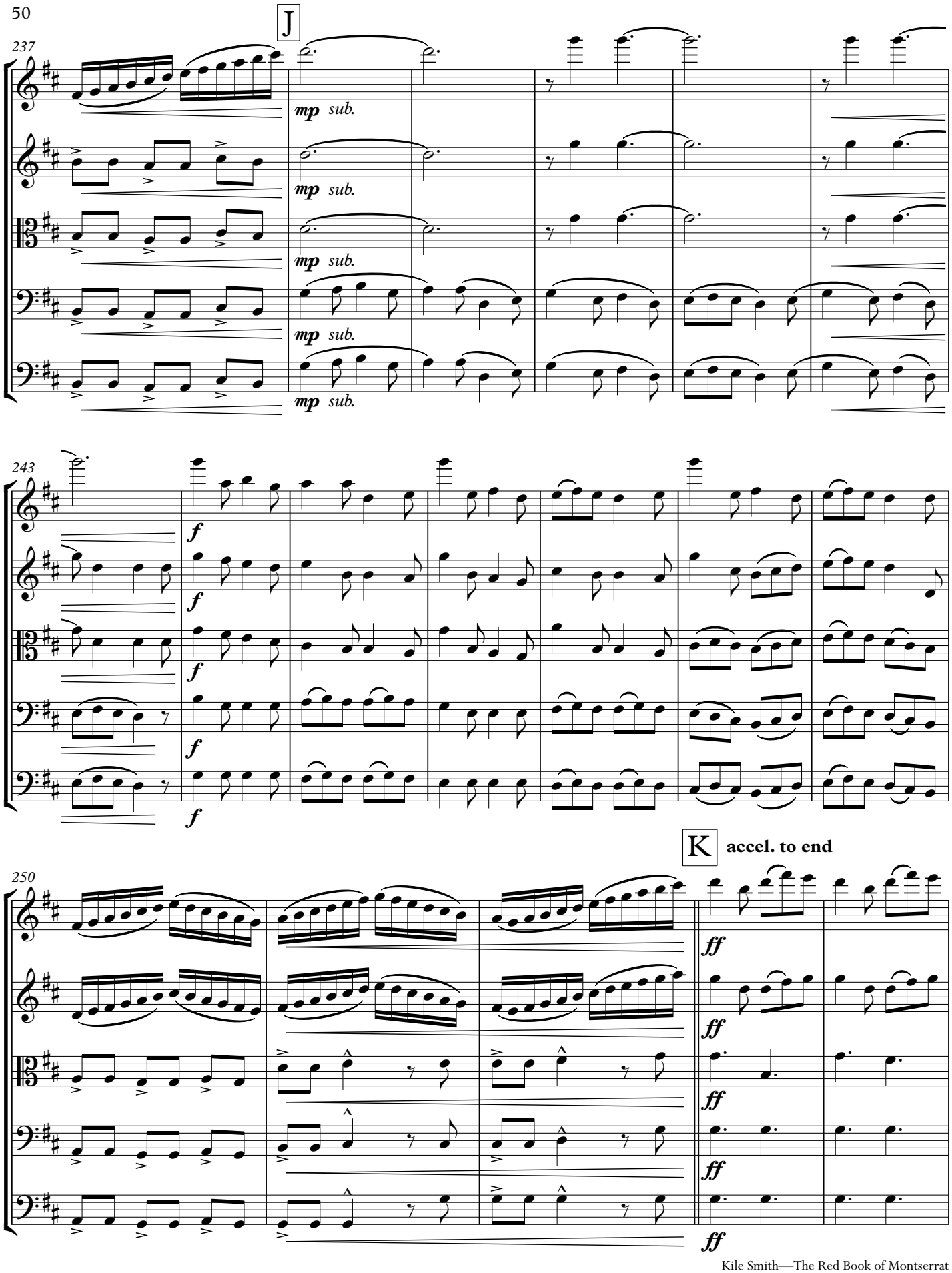
arco
f
223
230


J
237
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mp sub.
mp sub.
mp sub.
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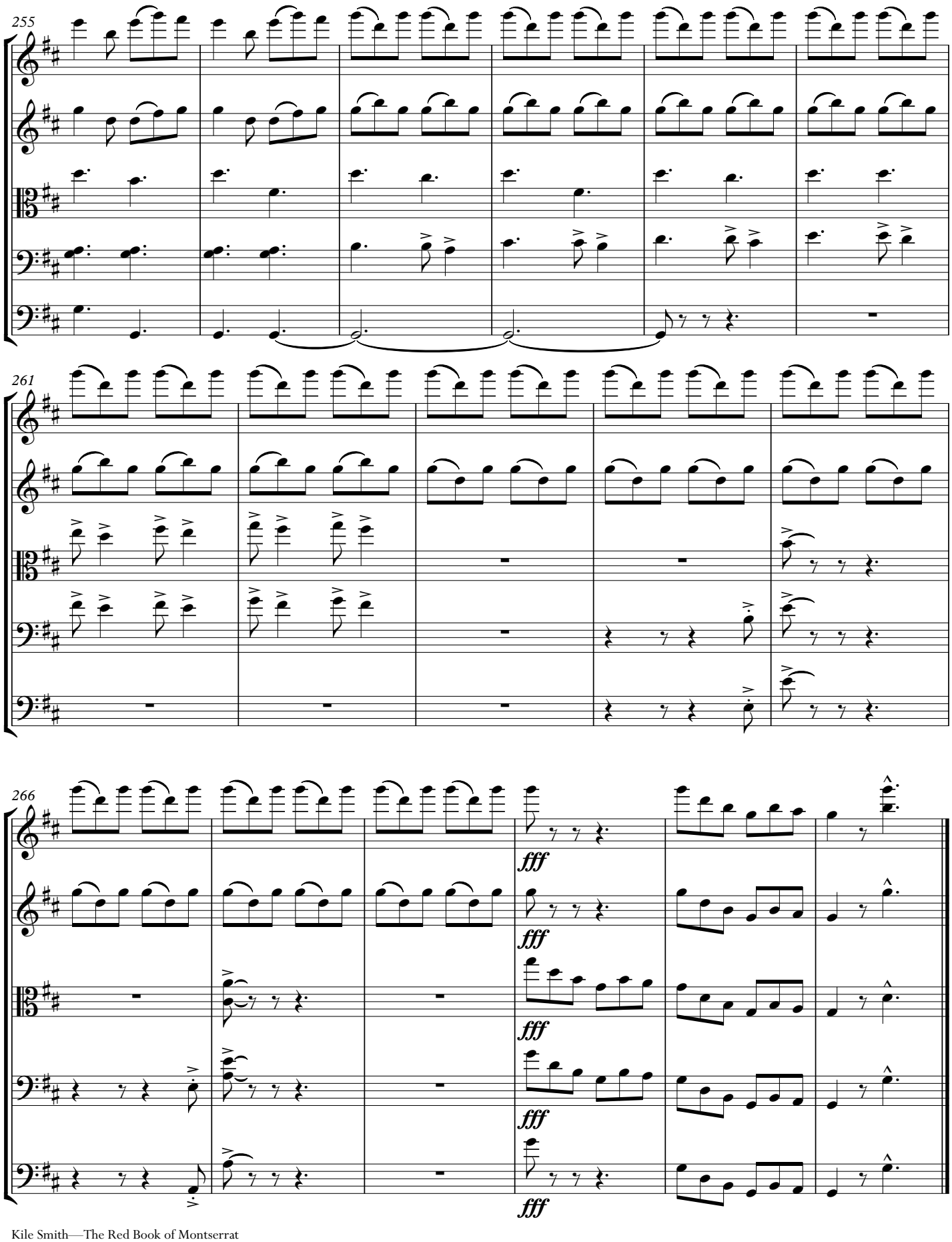
f
f
f
K
accel. to end
250
ff
ff
ff
ff
ff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261
266
fff
fff
fff
fff