John Cage: *Three Dances for Two Prepared Pianos*: Dance No. 1

CD 3 track 7

John Cage (1912–1992) was one of the most influential American composers of the 20th century: an experimental composer, inventor of the prepared piano, champion of **chance music**, and pioneer of the **happening**. His one-time teacher Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) famously described him as 'an inventor – of genius'.

Cage wrote much music for dance. He had a lifetime collaboration with the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham (1919–2009) and worked as a music director for various contemporary dance groups. In 1940 he was asked at short notice to compose music for a dance performance. A piano was available but Cage felt the instrument was inappropriate to the African character of the piece. Henry Cowell (1897–1965), one of Cage's previous teachers, wrote unusual piano music in which the piano strings were plucked, scratched and manipulated. With this in mind, Cage experimented with the inside of the piano and discovered that by placing a variety of objects between the strings the piano sounded more like a percussion ensemble. He found a set of materials that worked best, less likely to fall between the strings or leap out from them. These included screws and bolts, washers and nuts, rubber, plastic, cloth, and wood.

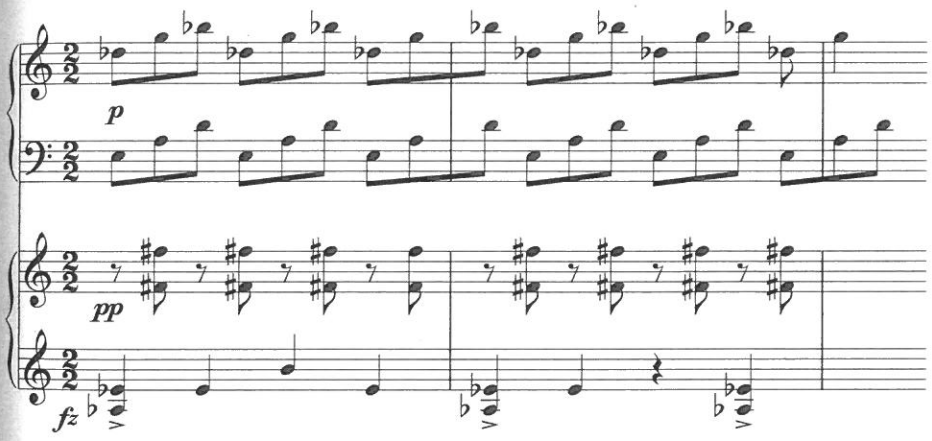
Three Dances for Two Prepared Pianos is a virtuoso work for two amplified **prepared pianos**. It was premiered in New York in 1945. The piano preparations are quite elaborate, involving around 36 notes on each piano, using a variety of materials including screws, pennies, rubber, plastic, weather stripping, and bolts and nuts. As many as six objects can alter the sound of a single note. The work was written for Arthur Gold and Robert Fitzdale. Cage wrote several pieces for the prepared piano over the 1940s and 1950s including the large-scale work *Sonatas and Interludes*.

Following the score

This is a setting of Cage's original handwritten score. Cage did not follow the usual rules of writing accidentals: they only apply to the note they precede and don't last for the rest of the bar. Piano 1 is written above Piano 2. The two pianos combine to sound like an orchestra of non-Western percussion instruments. John Cage has written at the beginning of the score 'Mutes of various materials are placed between the strings of the keys used, thus effecting transformations of the piano sounds with respect to all of their characteristics'. Two of the characteristics thus affected are the **timbre** and the pitches, so do not expect to hear the notated notes as they would normally sound. When you follow the score you should focus on the rhythms. If you lose your place, look out for bars with a sparser **texture** as landmarks.

Three Dances follows a traditional three-movement form with a slower second movement and energetic final movement. You will study Dance No. 1.

In the 1930s Cage began to experiment with the structure of his pieces. He believed that the structure should not be defined by harmony and melody; but should be determined by rhythm. This was partly influenced by his work with contemporary dancers where the choreography is guided by the number of counts. Consequently he devised an approach which linked small- and large-scale structures dependent on time itself. Dance No. 1 is 30 bars long with a rhythmic structure where each number refers to the number of bars 2 : 5 : 2 : 2 : 6 : 2 : 2 : 7 : 2. These divisions are marked in the score by boxed numbers. In this way, Cage defined a matrix dependent on time and then inserted musical fragments into the matrix. The piece contains many repetitions. The sections and phrases are differentiated by changes in timbre and by moving from one rhythm to another. Rhythmically it is very intricate as can be seen from the opening bars which are **polyrhythmic**. The time signature is $\frac{2}{2}$ – two minim beats per bar – which Piano 2 clearly falls into with four crotchet beats in the left hand and off-beat quavers in the right. Piano 1, however, uses a different metre; it is made up of groups of three quavers which go across the bar line.



The percussive sounds and fast interlocking patterns are reminiscent of the **gamelan**, an Indonesian orchestra made up mainly of tuned percussion instruments such as **metallophones** and gongs.

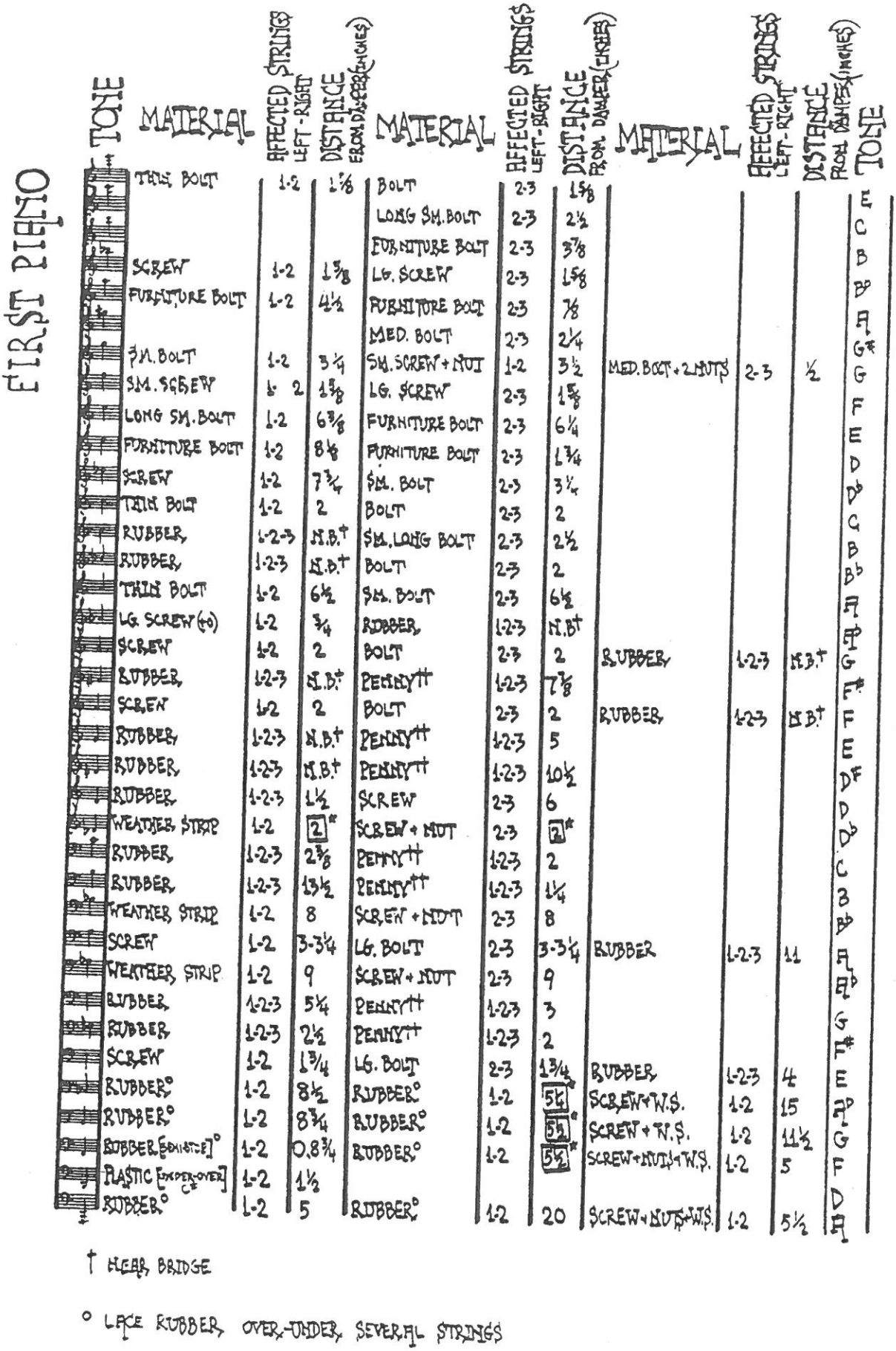
What to listen for

- Listen to Dance No. 1. Describe Cage's use of accents and dynamics.
- Analyse the role that repetition plays in the piece.
- Describe some of the different textures used.

Wider listening

Listen to further works from the 20th and 21st centuries, which created new sound worlds. In 1956 Karlheinz Stockhausen integrated electronic sounds with the human voice in his early electronic piece *Gesang der Jünglinge*. You could listen to Nos. 6–8 from *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969) by Peter Maxwell Davies, which uses **extended vocal techniques**.

Table of the Preparations



† NEAR BRIDGE

° LACE RUBBER, OVER-UNDER, SEVERAL STRINGS

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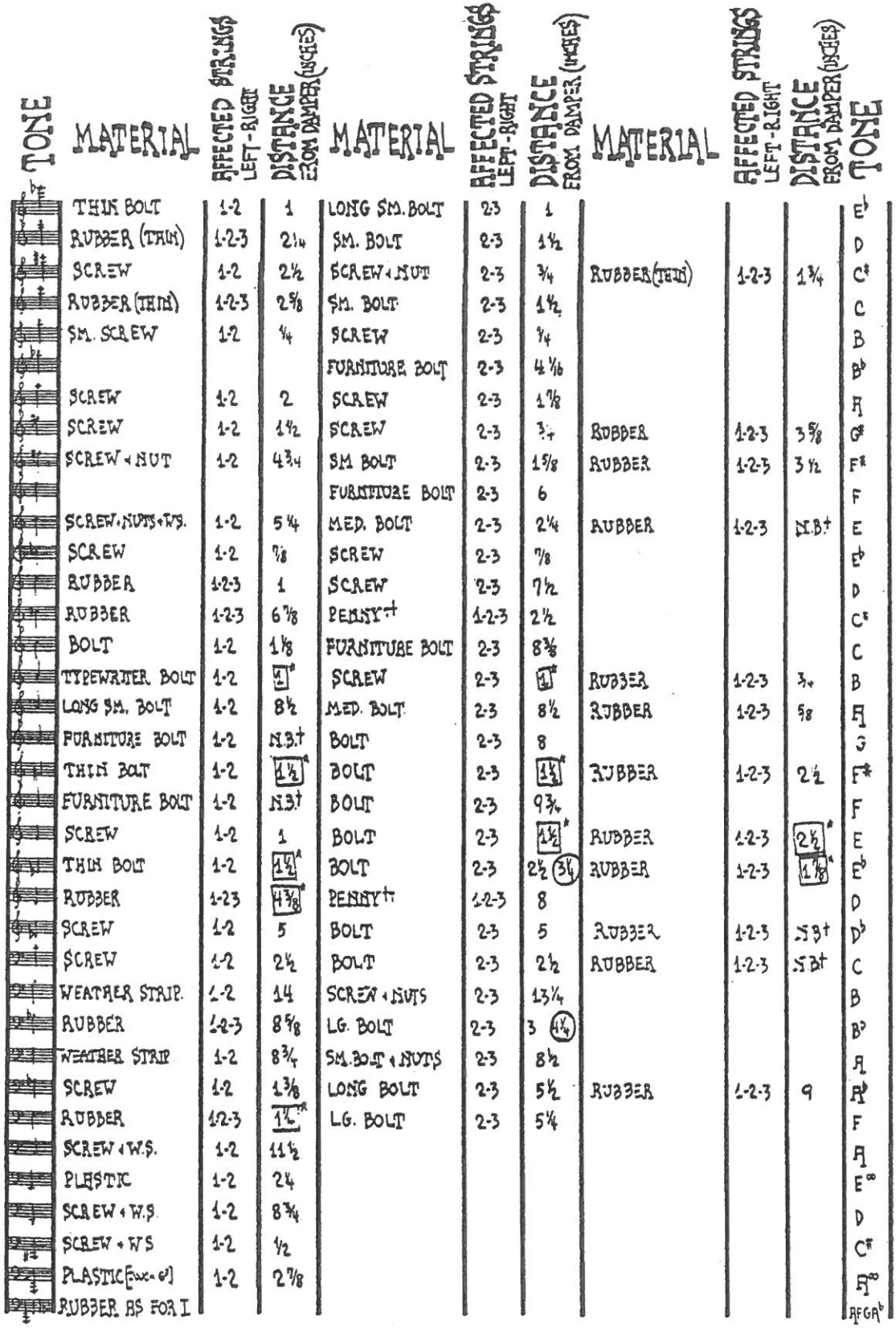


SECOND PIANO

TONE	MATERIAL	AFFECTED STRINGS LEFT-RIGHT	DISTANCE FROM DAMPER (INCHES)	MATERIAL	AFFECTED STRINGS LEFT-RIGHT	DISTANCE FROM DAMPER (INCHES)	MATERIAL	AFFECTED STRINGS LEFT-RIGHT	DISTANCE FROM DAMPER (INCHES)	TONE
	THIN BOLT	1-2	1	LONG SM. BOLT	2-3	1				E♭
	RUBBER (THIN)	1-2-3	2¼	SM. BOLT	2-3	1½				D
	SCREW	1-2	2½	SCREW + NUT	2-3	¾	RUBBER (THIN)	1-2-3	1¾	C#
	RUBBER (THIN)	1-2-3	2⅝	SM. BOLT	2-3	1½				C
	SM. SCREW	1-2	¼	SCREW	2-3	¼				B
				FURNITURE BOLT	2-3	4 1/16				B♭
	SCREW	1-2	2	SCREW	2-3	1⅞				A
	SCREW	1-2	1½	SCREW	2-3	¾	RUBBER	1-2-3	3⅝	G#
	SCREW + NUT	1-2	4¾	SM BOLT	2-3	1⅝	RUBBER	1-2-3	3½	F#
				FURNITURE BOLT	2-3	6				F
	SCREW + NUTS + W.S.	1-2	5¼	MED. BOLT	2-3	2¼	RUBBER	1-2-3	N.B.†	E
	SCREW	1-2	⅞	SCREW	2-3	⅞				E♭
	RUBBER	1-2-3	1	SCREW	2-3	7½				D
	RUBBER	1-2-3	6⅞	PENNY††	1-2-3	2½				C#
	BOLT	1-2	1⅛	FURNITURE BOLT	2-3	8⅜				C
	TYPEWRITER BOLT	1-2	$\boxed{1}$*	SCREW	2-3	$\boxed{1}$*	RUBBER	1-2-3	¾	B
	LONG SM. BOLT	1-2	8½	MED. BOLT	2-3	8½	RUBBER	1-2-3	⅝	A
	FURNITURE BOLT	1-2	N.B.†	BOLT	2-3	8				G
	THIN BOLT	1-2	$\boxed{1½}$*	BOLT	2-3	$\boxed{1½}$*	RUBBER	1-2-3	2½	F#
	FURNITURE BOLT	1-2	N.B.†	BOLT	2-3	9¾				F
	SCREW	1-2	1	BOLT	2-3	$\boxed{1½}$*	RUBBER	1-2-3	$\boxed{2½}$*	E
	THIN BOLT	1-2	$\boxed{1½}$*	BOLT	2-3	2½ (3¼)	RUBBER	1-2-3	$\boxed{1⅞}$*	E♭
	RUBBER	1-2-3	$\boxed{4⅜}$*	PENNY††	1-2-3	8				D
	SCREW	1-2	5	BOLT	2-3	5	RUBBER	1-2-3	N.B.†	D♭
	SCREW	1-2	2½	BOLT	2-3	2½	RUBBER	1-2-3	N.B.†	C
	WEATHER STRIP.	1-2	14	SCREW + NUTS	2-3	13¼				B
	RUBBER	1-2-3	8⅝	LG. BOLT	2-3	3 (4¼)				B♭
	WEATHER STRIP	1-2	8¾	SM. BOLT + NUTS	2-3	8½				A
	SCREW	1-2	1⅜	LONG BOLT	2-3	5½	RUBBER	1-2-3	9	A♭
	RUBBER	1-2-3	$\boxed{1¼}$*	LG. BOLT	2-3	5¼				F
	SCREW + W.S.	1-2	11½							A
	PLASTIC	1-2	2¼							E∞
	SCREW + W.S.	1-2	8¾							D
	SCREW + WS	1-2	½							C#
	PLASTIC [Fwx + G♭]	1-2	2⅞							A∞
	RUBBER AS FOR I									AFGA♭

†† MEASURE TO CENTER; TO EDGE OF OTHER MUTES.

O = ALTERNATE POSITION.

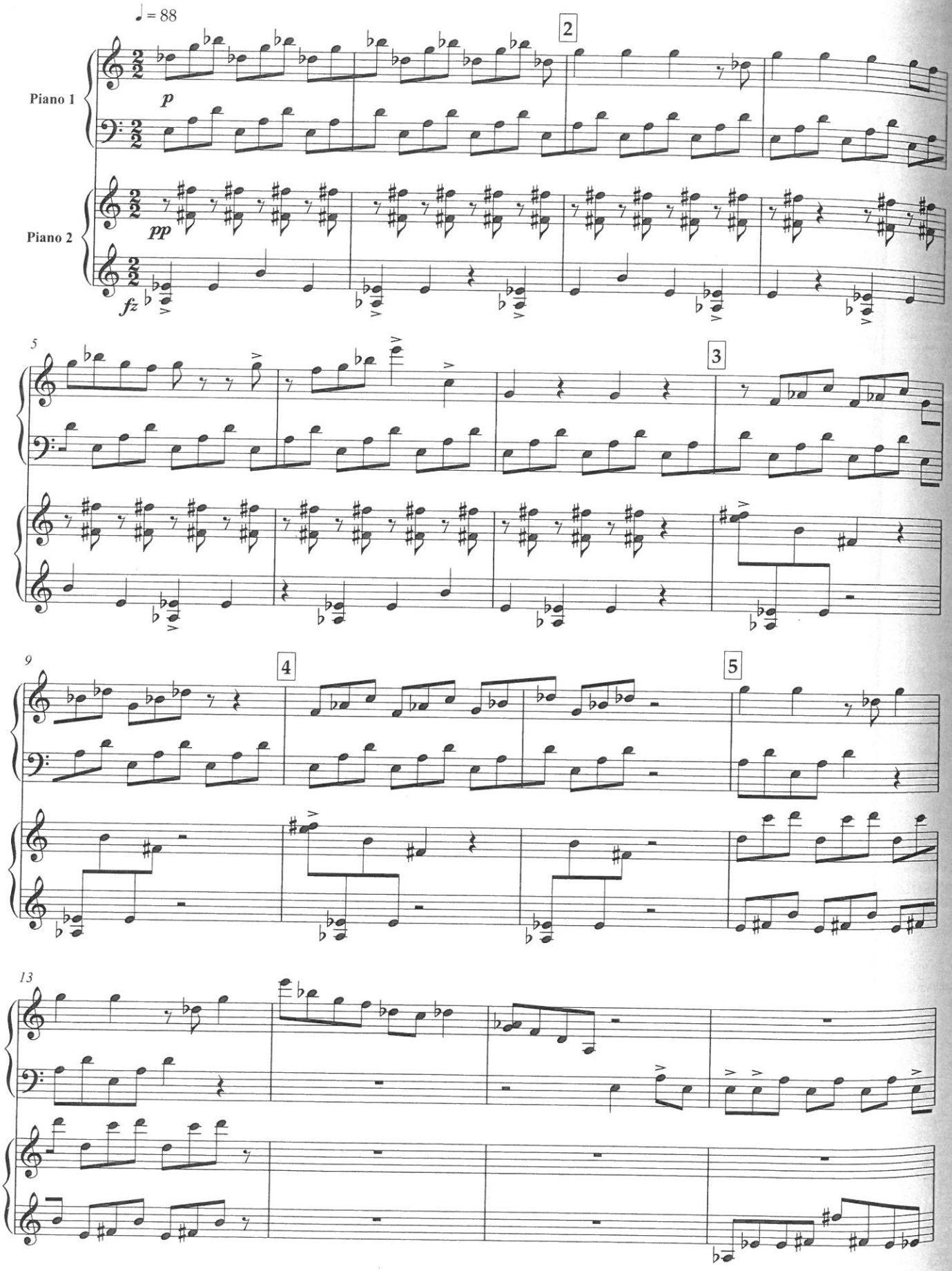
* MEASURE FROM BRIDGE.

∞ = AFFECTS THIS TONE AND THE TWO SEMI-TONES ABOVE

Three Dances for Two Prepared Pianos: Dance No. 1

CD 3 track 7

John Cage



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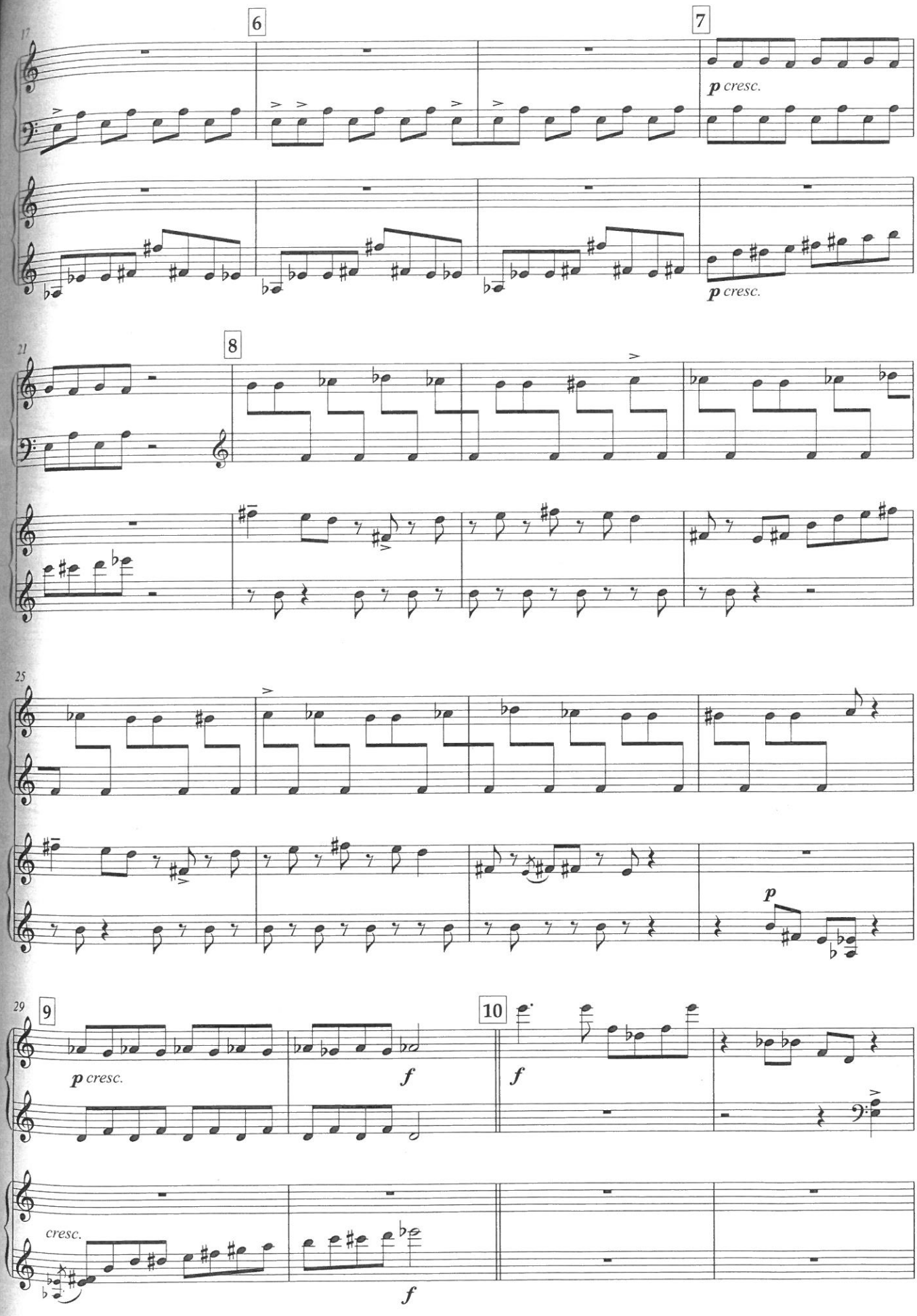
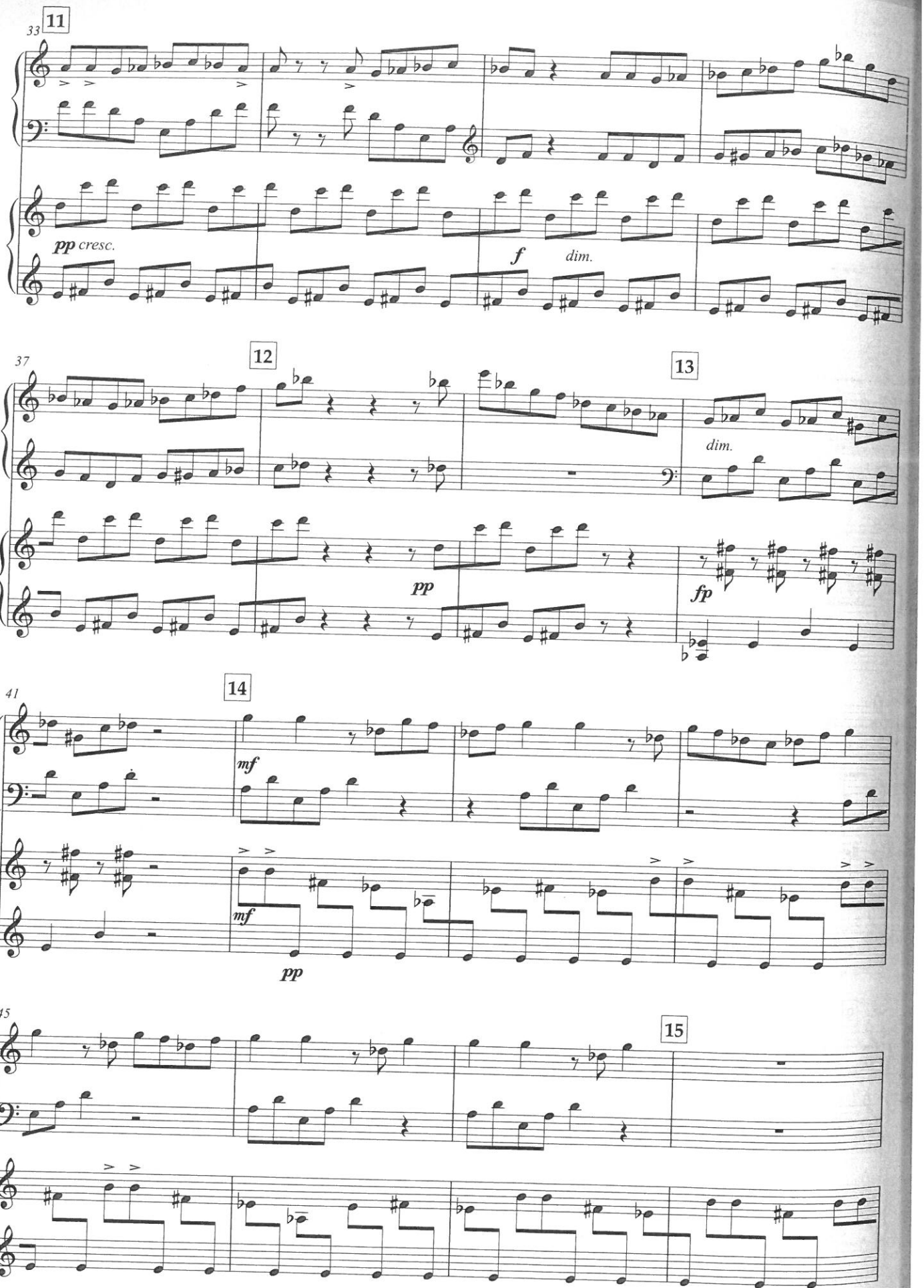

17
6
7
p cresc.
p cresc.
21
8
25
p
29
9
p cresc.
f
10
f
cresc.
f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11
pp cresc.
f
dim.
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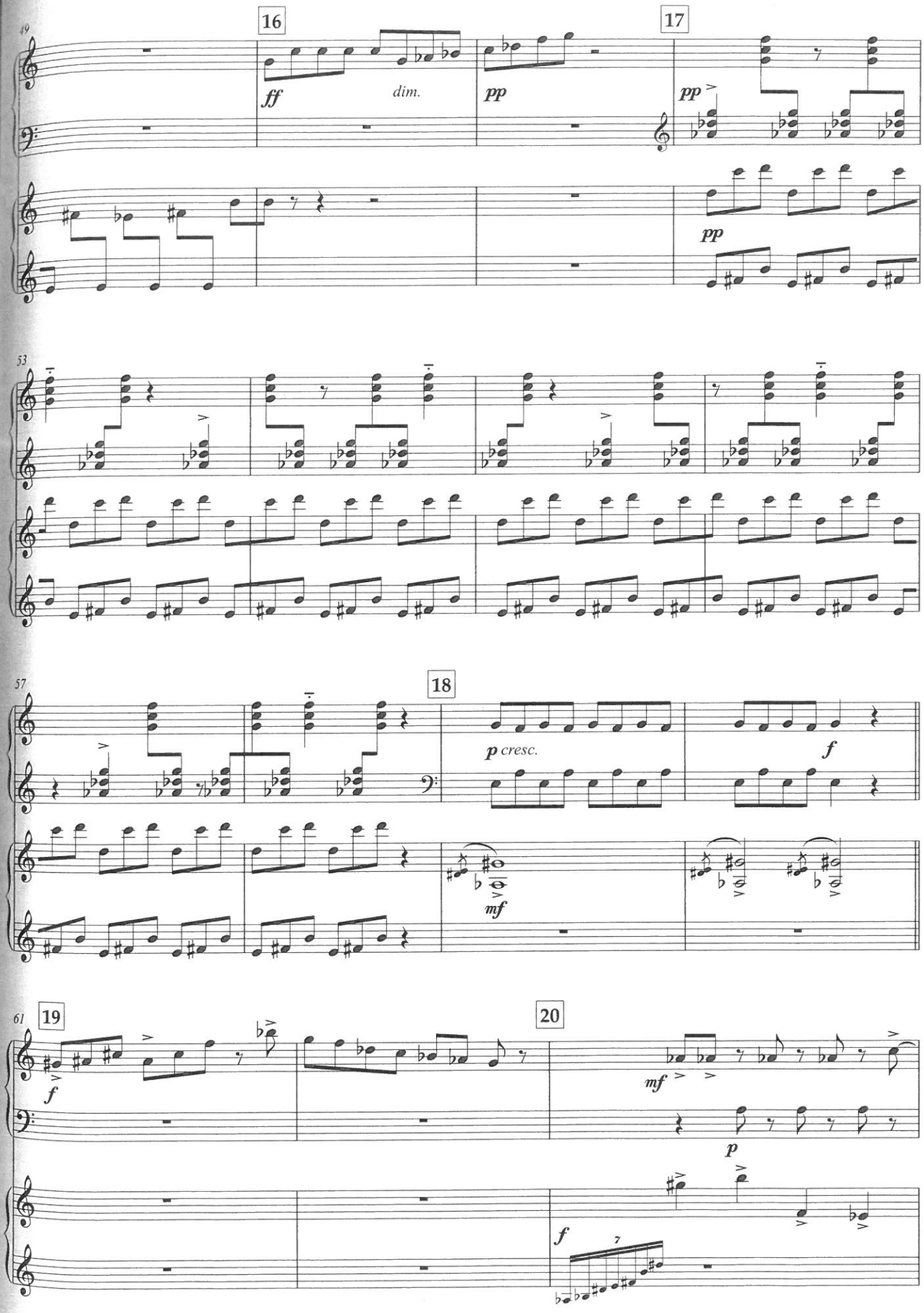
12
13
dim.
pp
fp
41
14
mf
mf
pp
45
15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16
17
ff
dim.
pp
pp
pp
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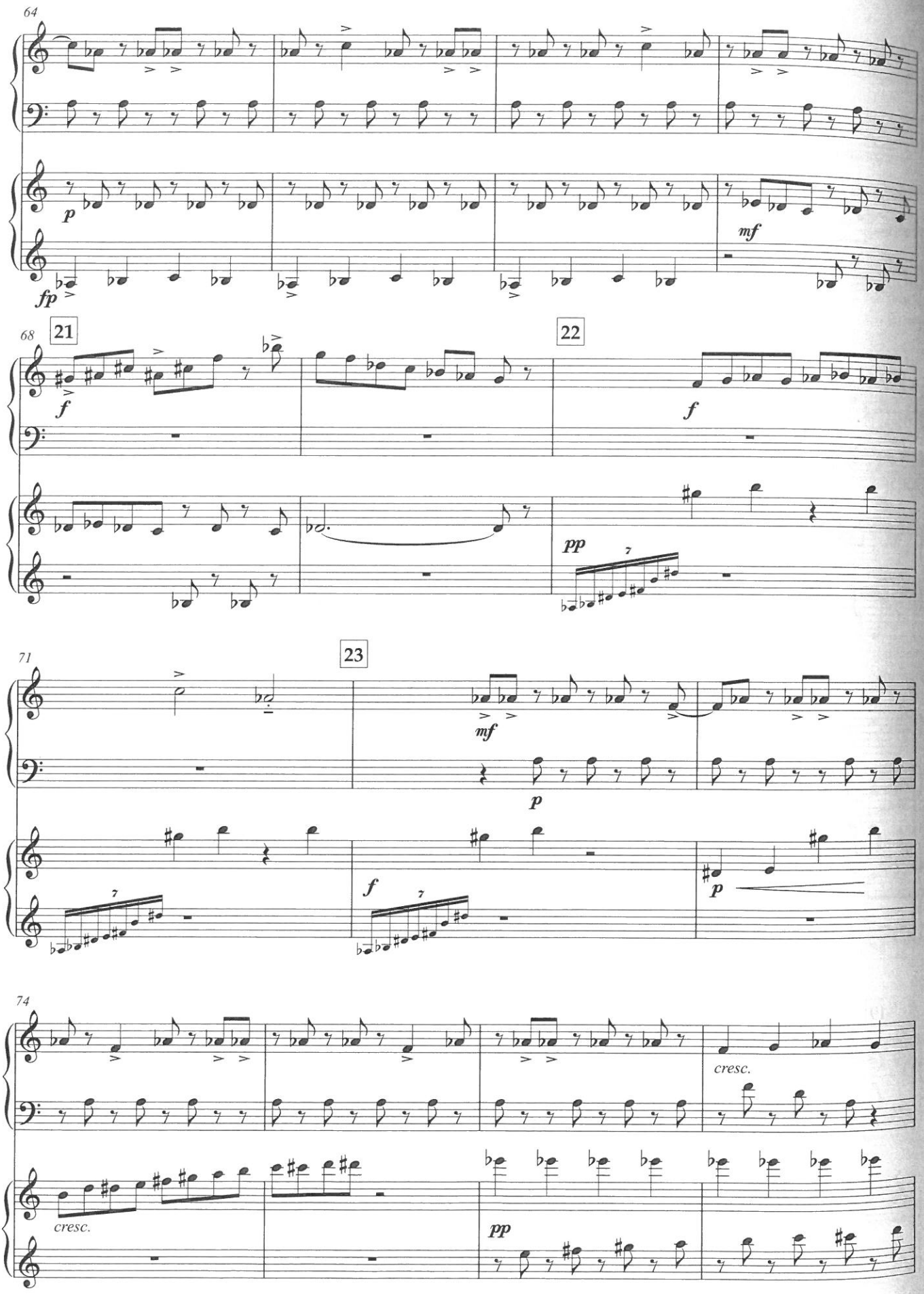
18
p cresc.
f
mf
61
19
20
f
mf
p
f
7


64
fp
p
mf
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f
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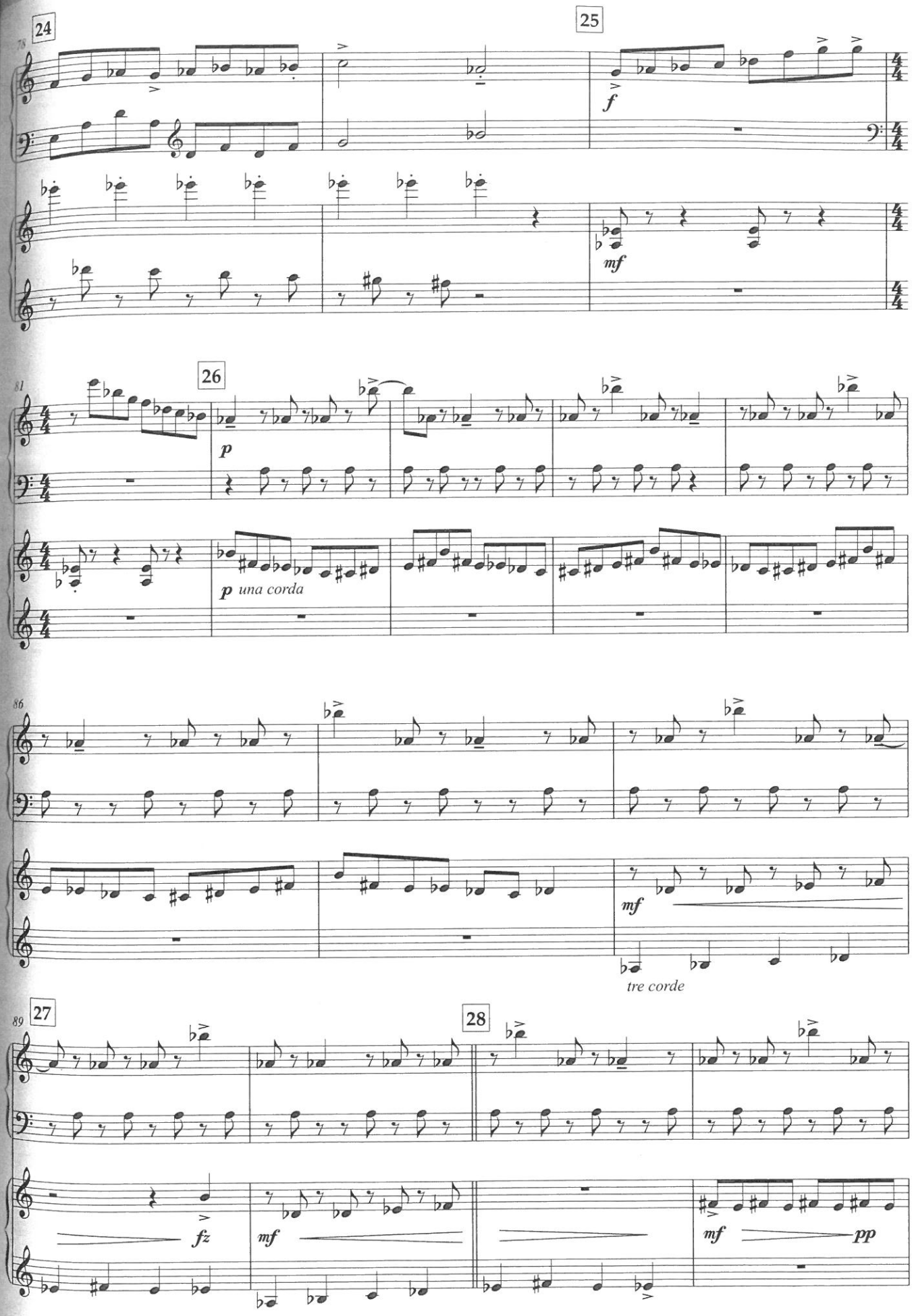
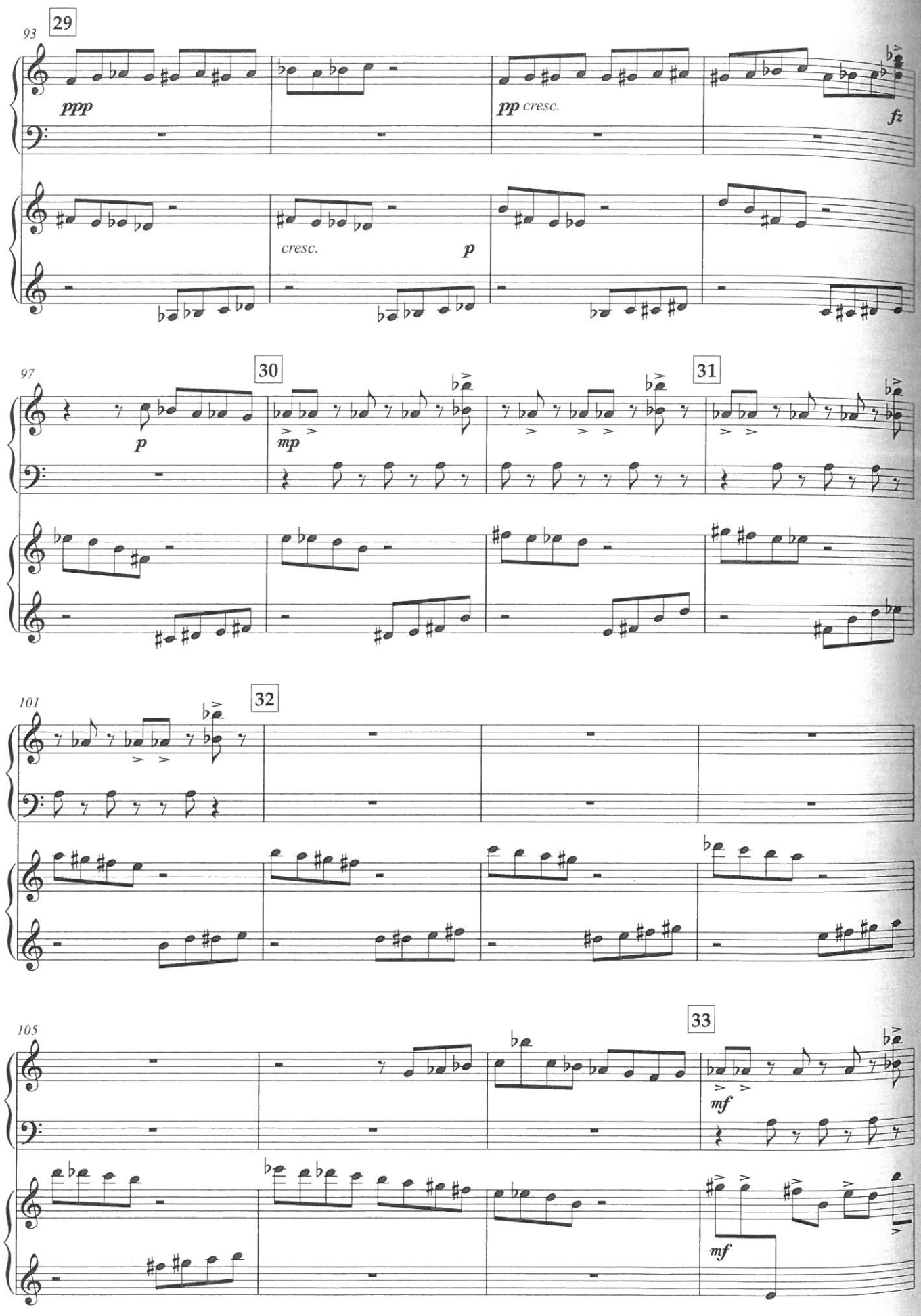
mf
p
f
p
74
cresc.
cresc.
pp


24
25
26
27
28
f
mf
p
p una corda
mf
tre corde
fz
mf
mf
pp


93
29
ppp
pp cresc.
fz
cresc.
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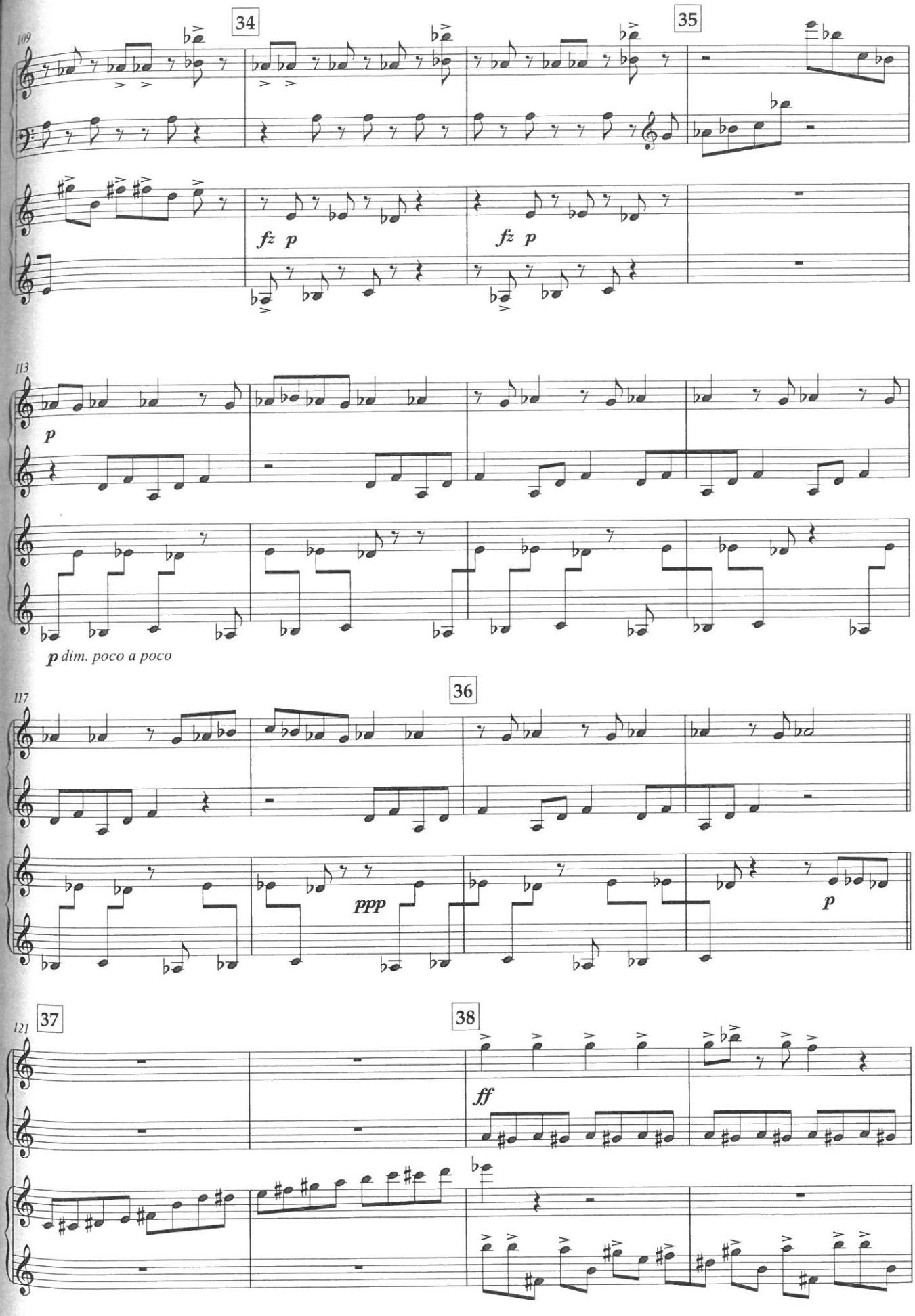
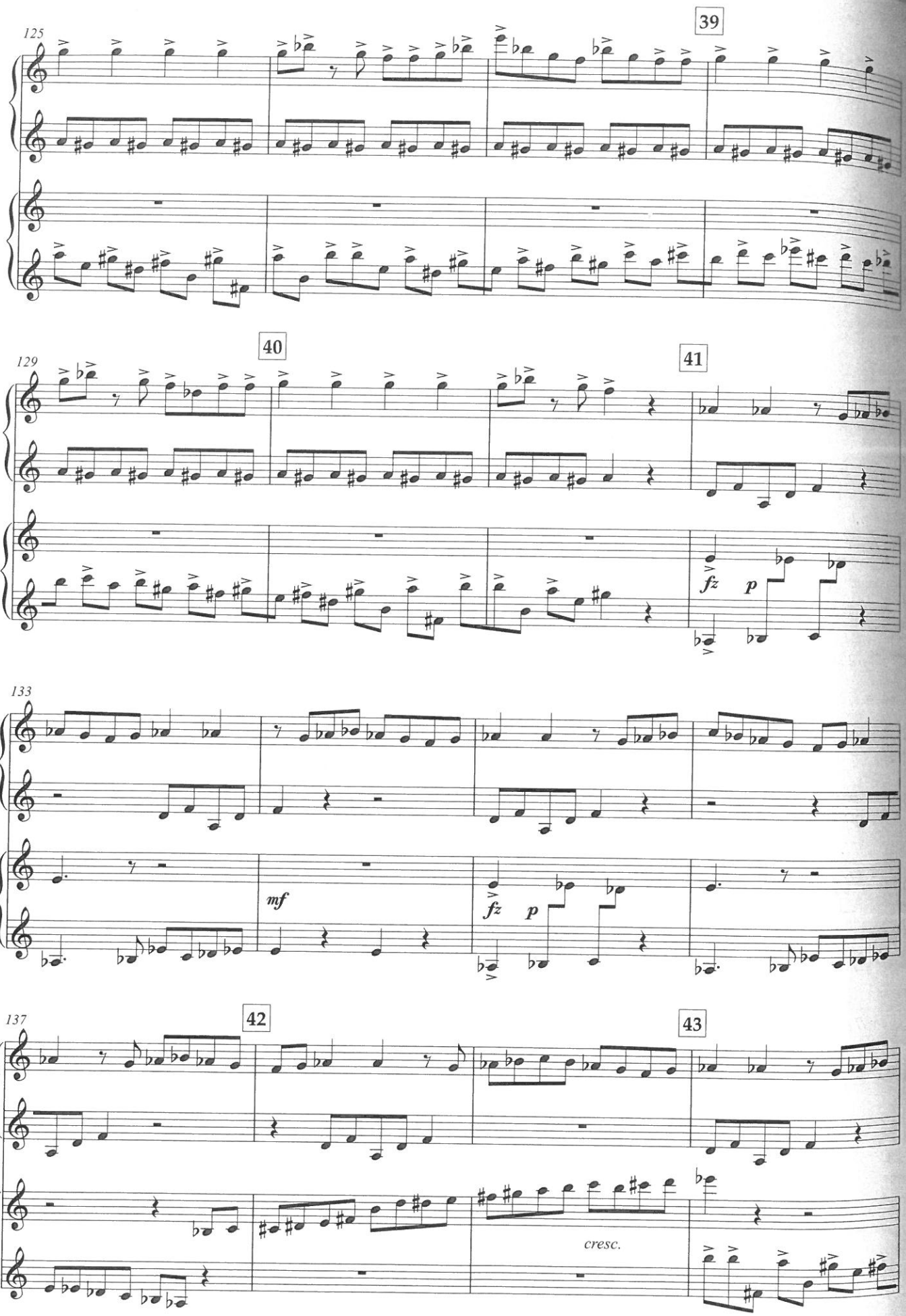
p
mp
101
32
105
33
mf
mf


109
34
35
fz p
fz p
113
p
p dim. poco a poco
117
36
ppp
p
121
37
38
ff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41
fz
p
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mf
fz
p
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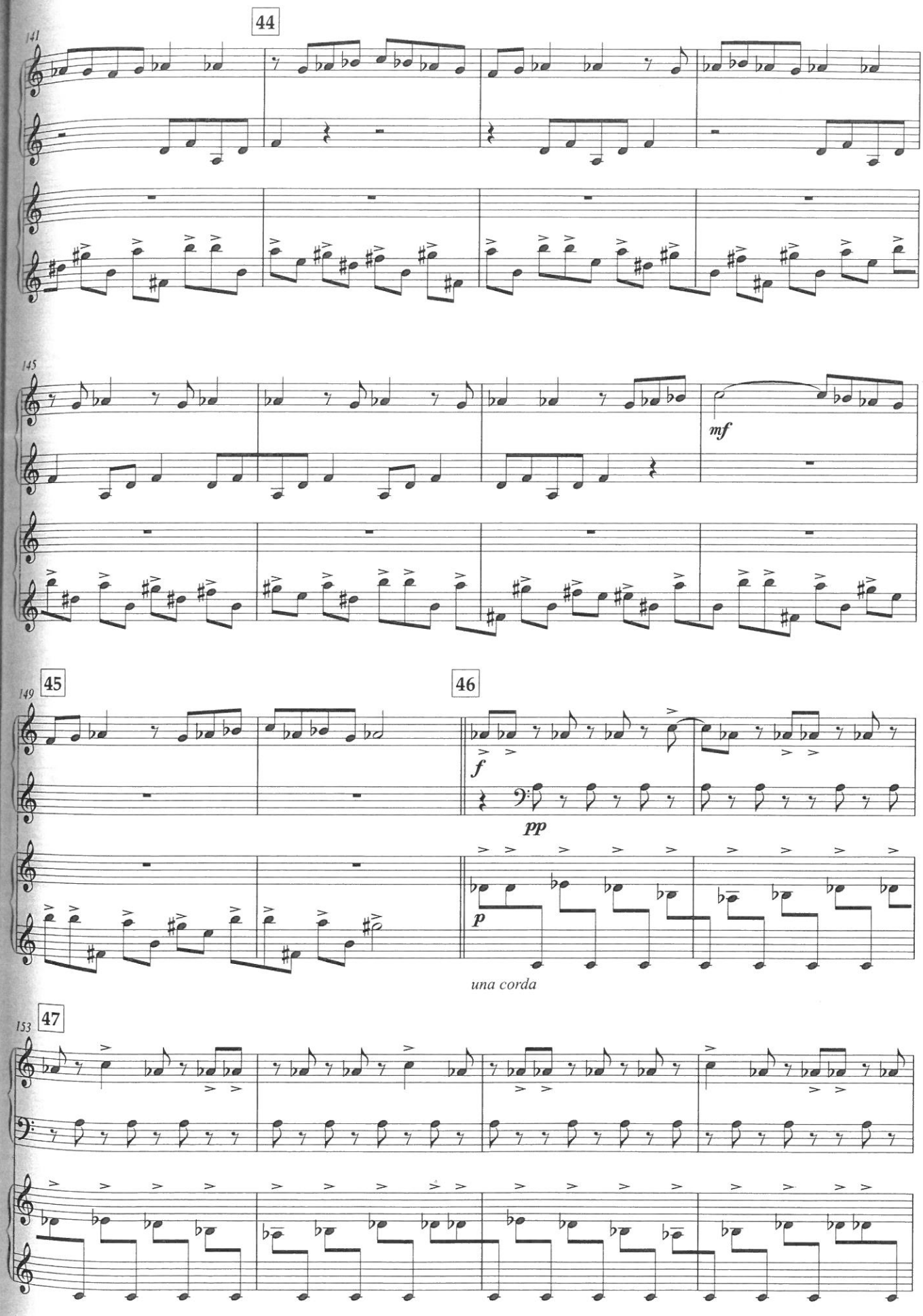
42
43
cresc.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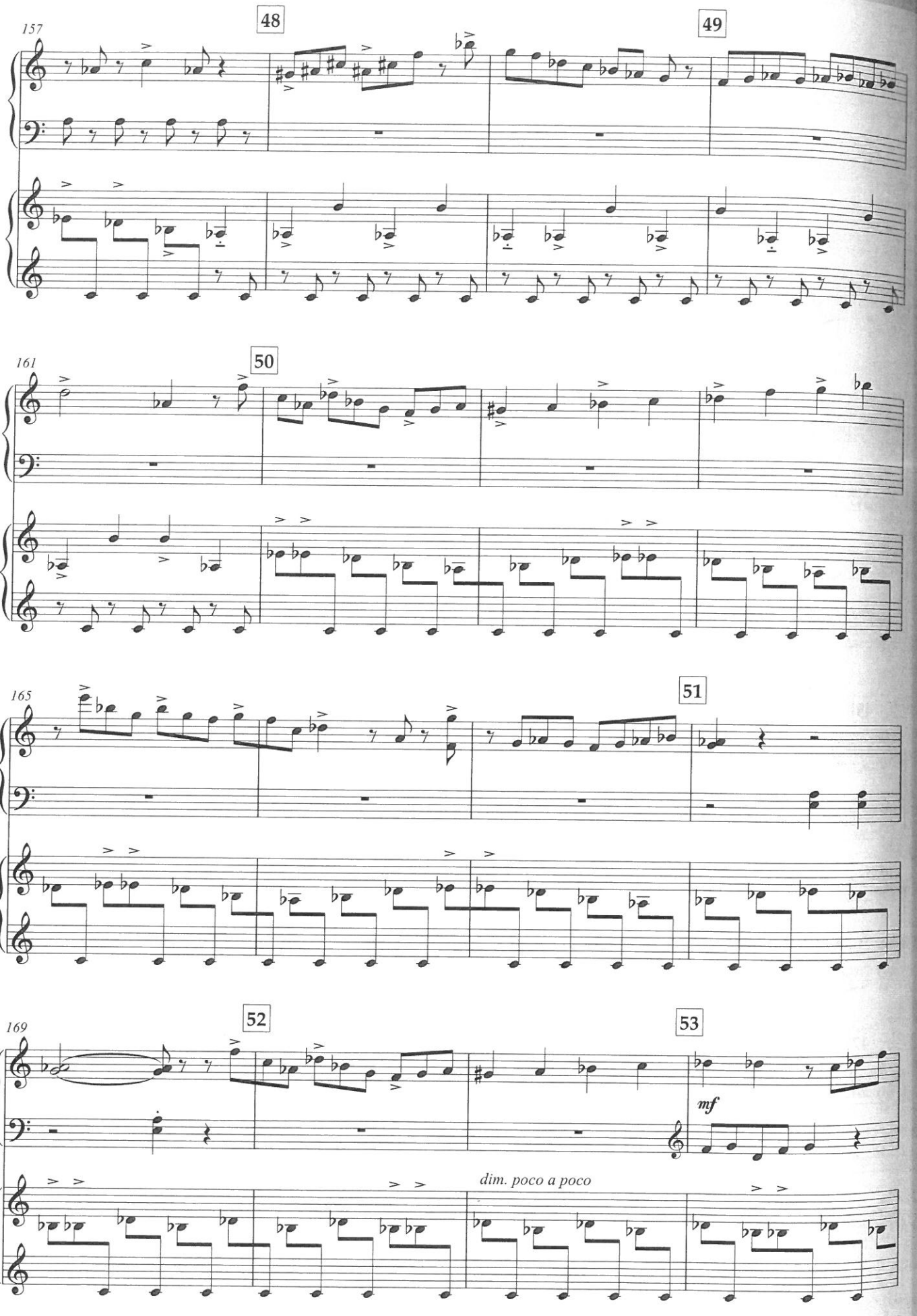
f
pp
p
una corda
47
153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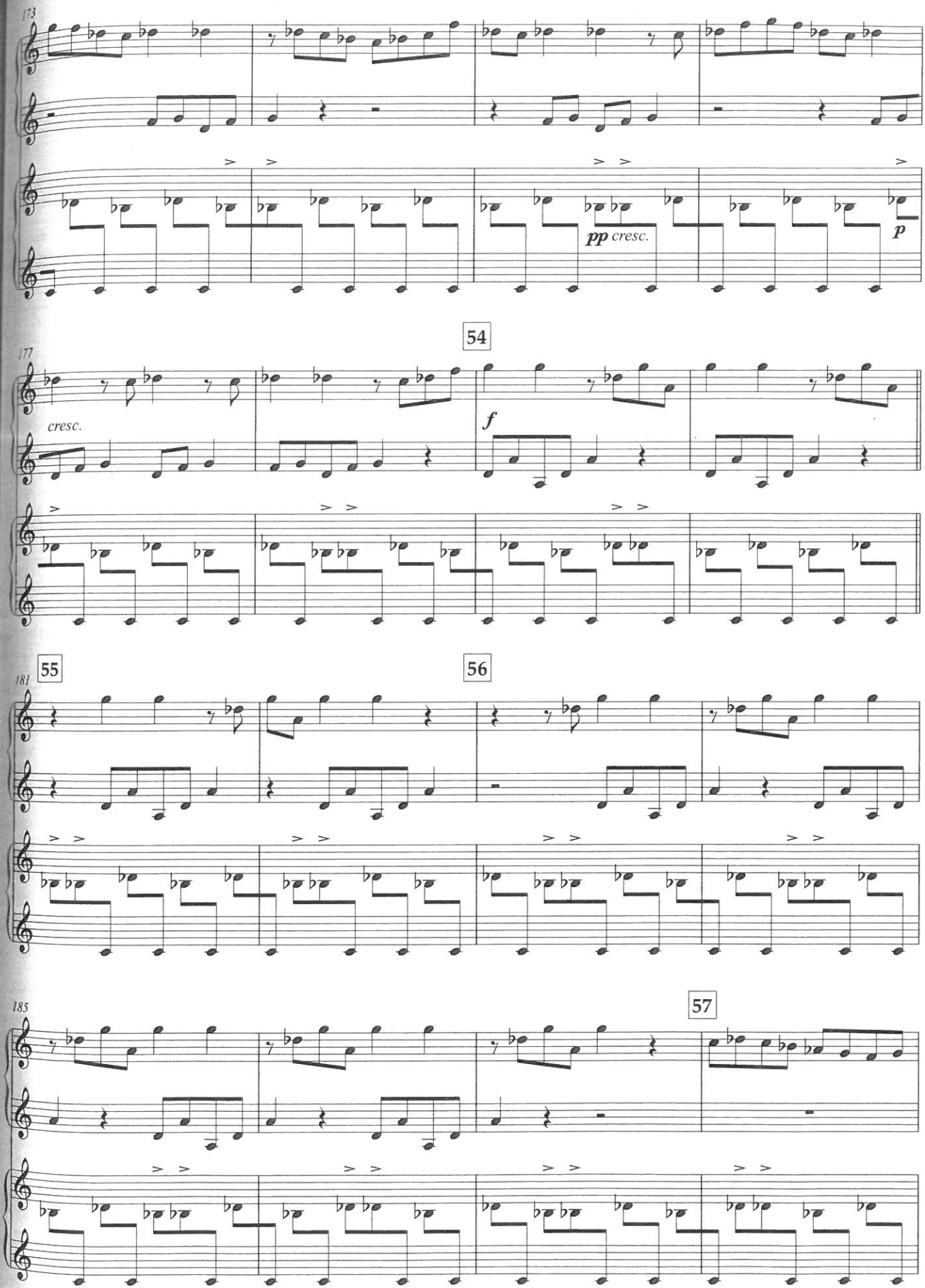
48
49
161
50
165
51
169
52
53
mf
dim. poco a poco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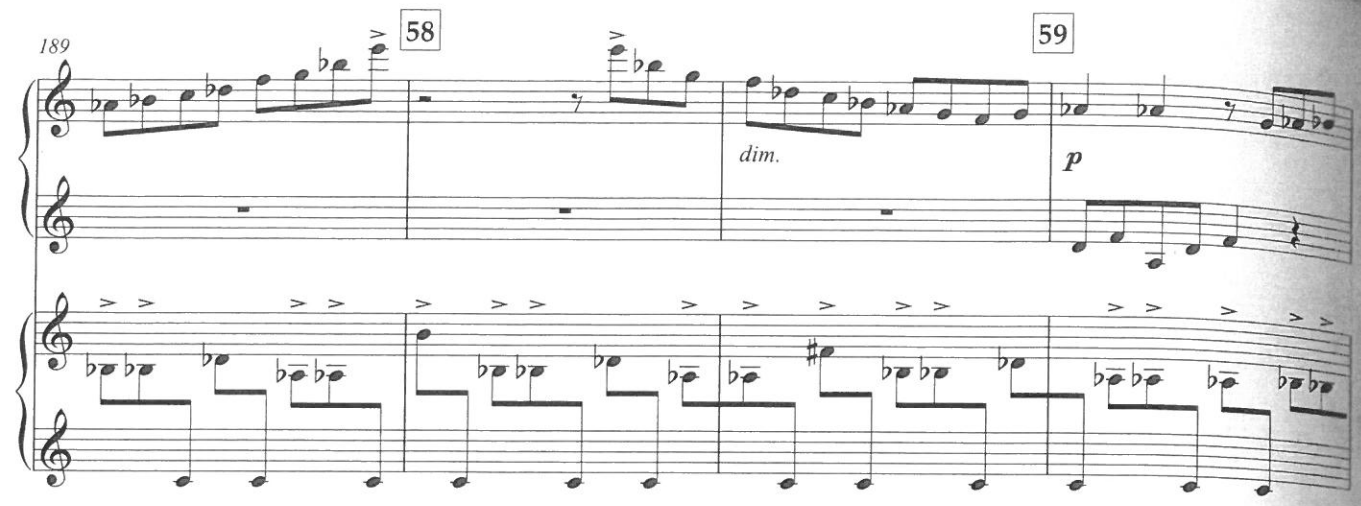
pp cresc.
p
54
177
cresc.
f
55
56
181
57
185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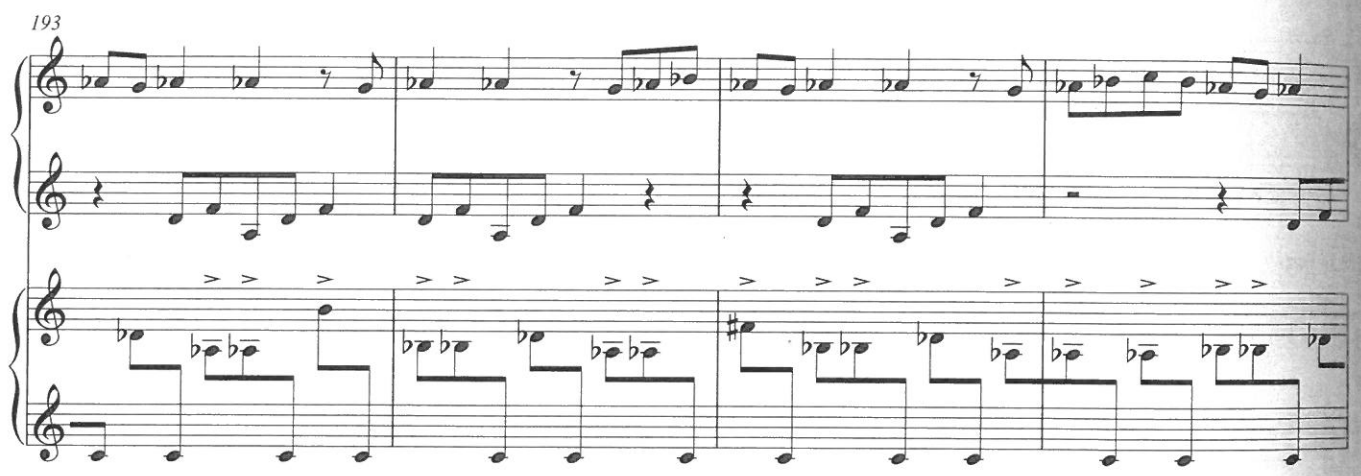
59
dim.
p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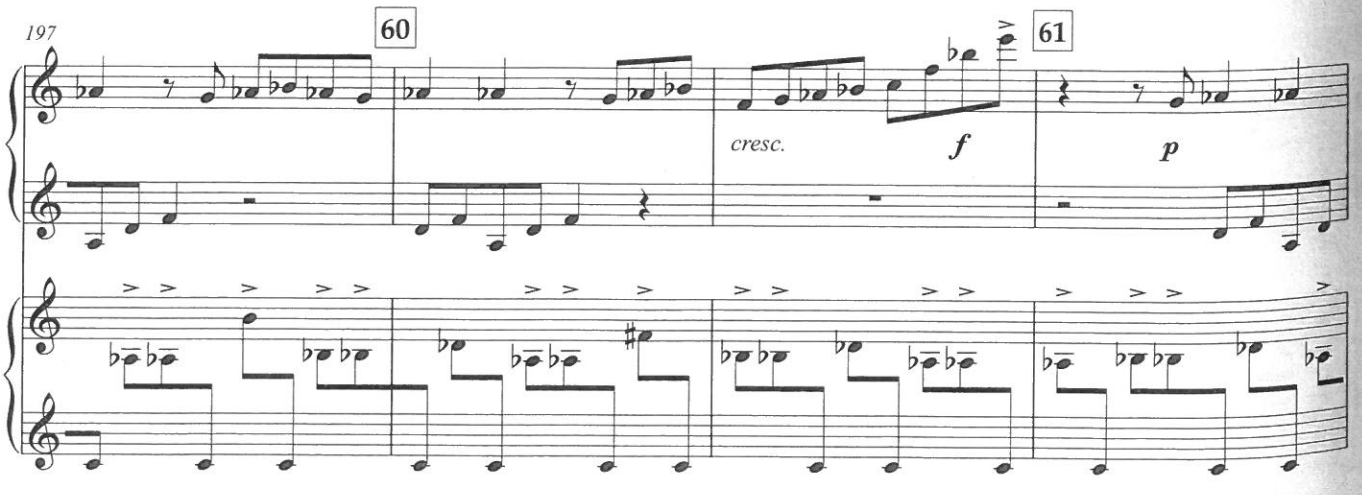
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f
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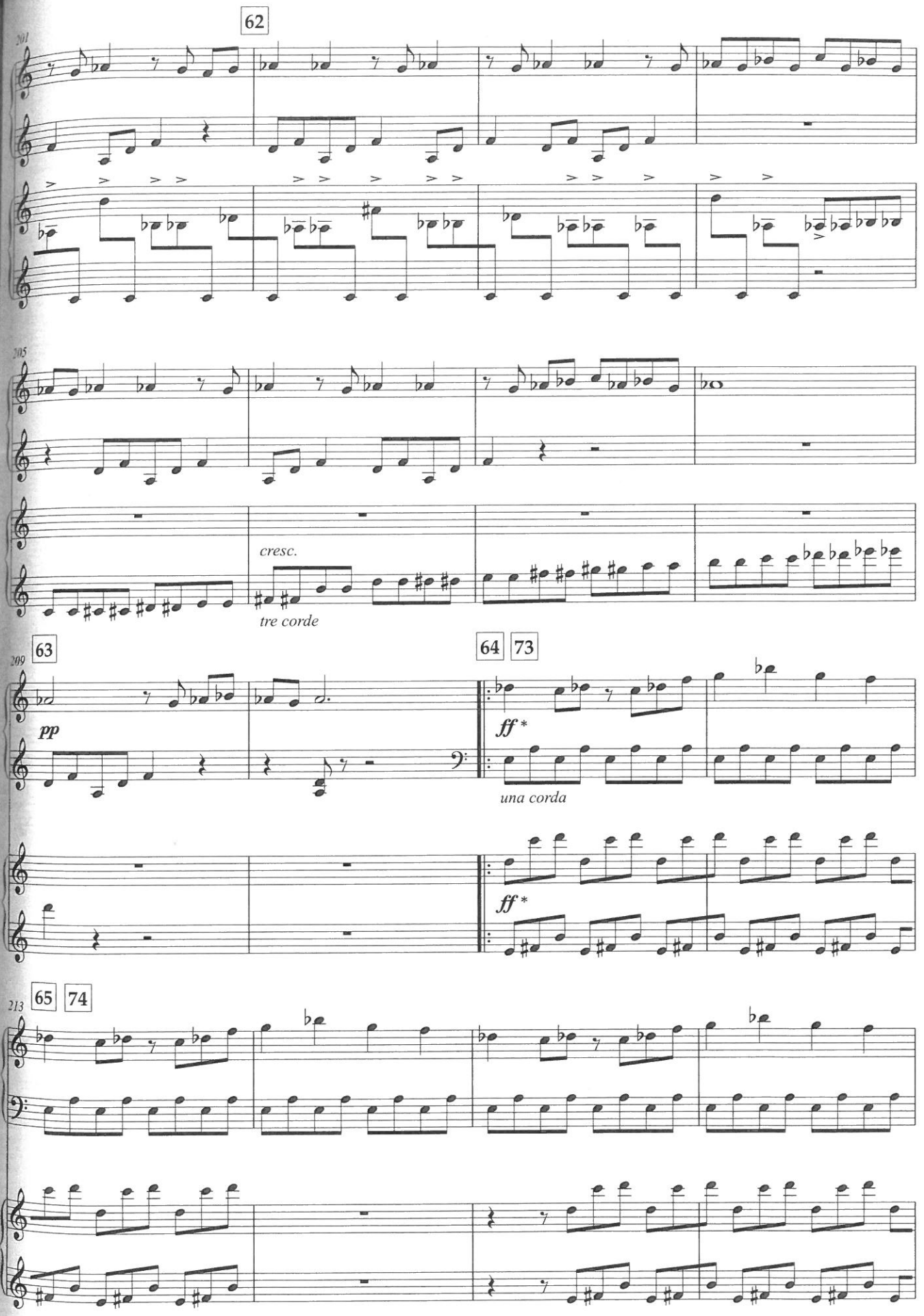
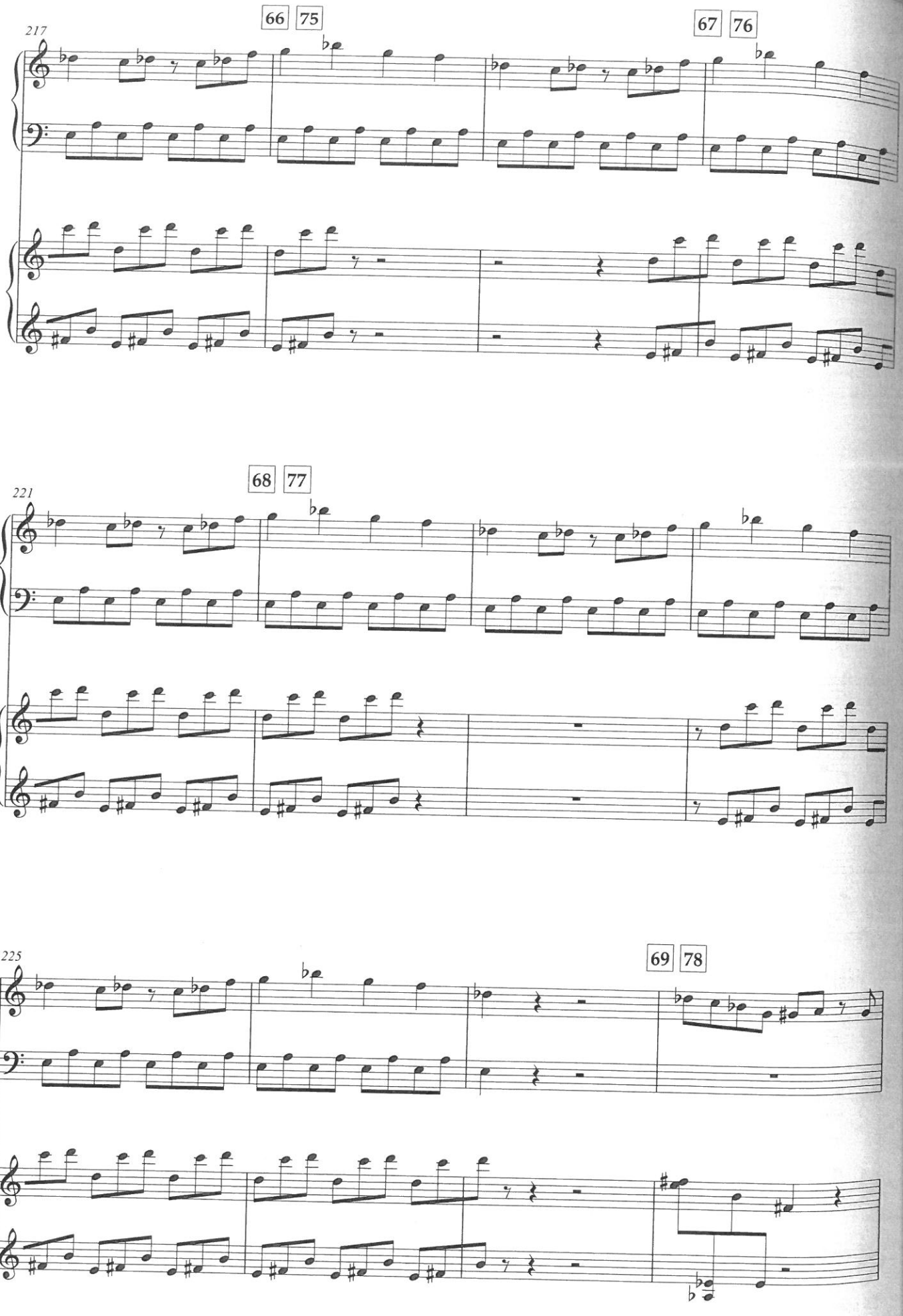


* *A gradual diminuendo throughout the repeat to the end.*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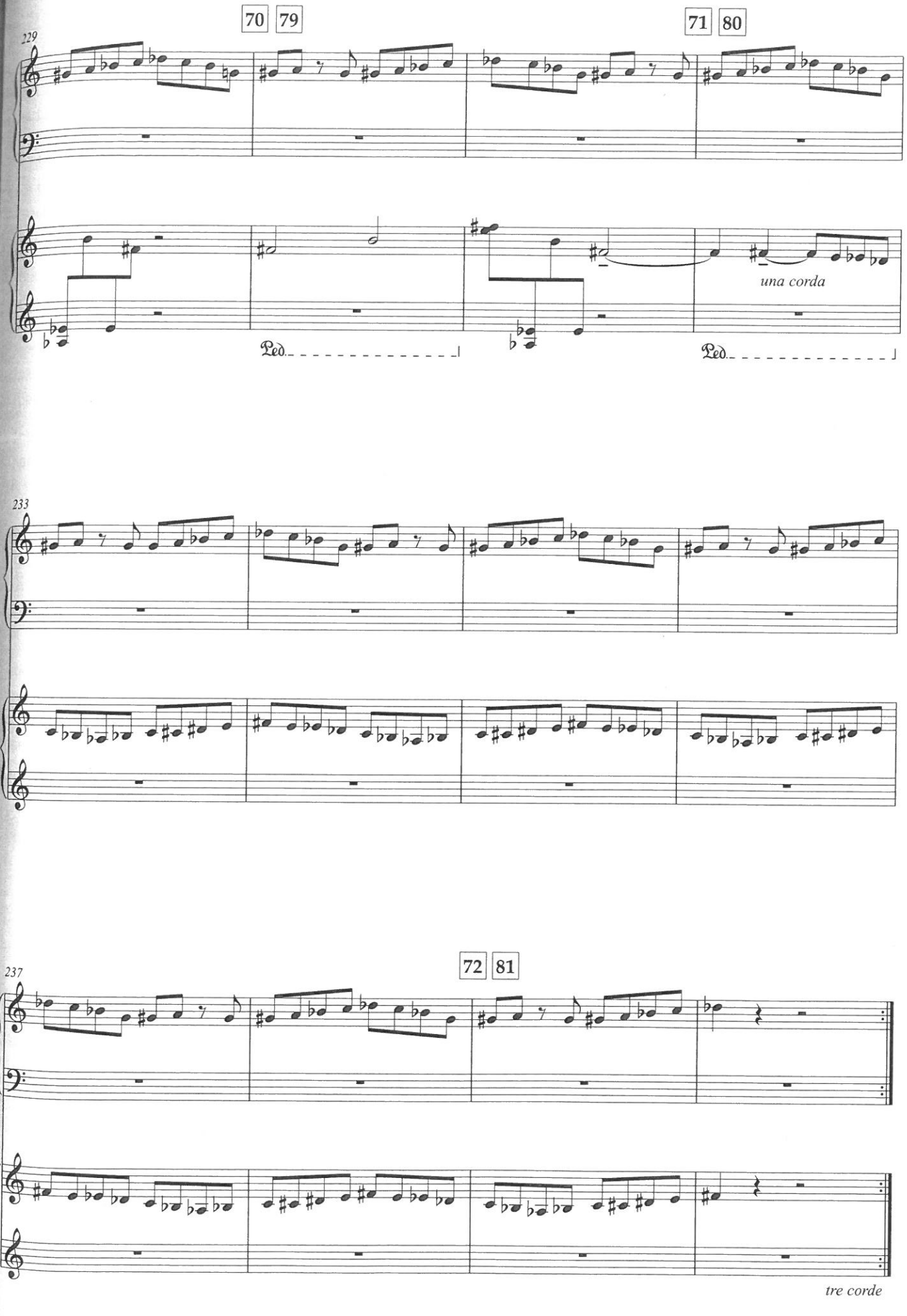
70 79
71 80
229
una corda
Ped.
Ped.
233
72 81
237
tre corde