Vasilissa the Invincible

for Piano Quartet

Carl Schimmel

composed 2018

commissioned by the Kingston Chamber Music Festival
for first performance by the Clarosa Quartet

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Program Note

In 2016, I began to explore the possibility that the emotionality and frequent shifts of mood in my compositions derive from my interest not only in character and personality in music, but in these aspects of the literary arts, and in narrative form in particular. My early research on theories of narrative focused particularly on the structural analysis of folk tales. I recalled how, when I was a boy growing up in Rhode Island, there was a year or two in which I was keenly interested in the folk tale collections of Ruth Manning-Sanders (illustrated by Robin Jacques). Her collection *A Book of Enchantments and Curses* included her telling of *Vasilissa Most Lovely* (known also as *Vasilissa the Lovely* or *Vasilissa the Beautiful*). One of the most iconic of Russian folktales, *Vasilissa Most Lovely* resembles the classic Cinderella story in that the heroine is a good and innocent girl who, mistreated by her stepmother and stepsisters, triumphs in the end. But while some versions of *Vasilissa Most Lovely* do end with a wedding to the Tsar, the marriage functions as a kind of epilogue to the main tale, which can be summarized as follows:

Once upon a time, there was a good and beautiful young girl known as Vasilissa the Lovely. She had a happy childhood until her mother fell gravely ill. On her deathbed, Vasilissa's mother gave her a magical doll which would help Vasilissa if ever she were in need; she had only to give it a little to eat and a little to drink. Her mother soon died, and after a time, Vasilissa's father remarried. The new wife and Vasilissa's two stepsisters were very cruel to her, and when the father left town on business they devised a plan to get rid of her by sending Vasilissa to fetch a light from the witch Baba Yaga. On her way through the forest to Baba Yaga's hut, three mysterious horsemen rode past her (the first dressed in white, the second in red, and the third in black). At night, she came to a house that stood on chicken legs and was surrounded by a fence made of human bones, the posts mounted with skulls, their eye sockets aglow. At this moment, a wind arose, and Baba Yaga flew down through the woods in a mortar, whereupon Vasilissa explained that she needed a light for her family; the witch commanded her to care for her hut by performing three impossible tasks, under threat of death. With the help of the magical doll, Vasilissa succeeded, and when the witch asked her how she was able to complete the tasks, the girl answered "by my mother's blessing." Because Vasilissa had the blessing of her mother, Baba Yaga threw her out of the hut, sending her home with a skull-lantern full of burning coals as promised. Vasilissa went back through the dark wood, and again the three horsemen passed her as dawn turned to day and day turned to night, and upon her arrival, the eye-sockets of the skull-lantern blazed so fiercely that they burned the stepmother and stepsisters until nothing was left of them but a pile of ashes.

To me, there are several intriguing aspects to *Vasilissa Most Lovely*. One is that all of the main characters are female – the father is mentioned only in passing, and in fact it is his absence which initiates the action. Another is its shockingly brutal ending, a conclusion which may to some extent be satisfying but cannot be considered "happy." A third intriguing aspect is that the evil witch is in fact Vasilissa's helper, and that evil is punished by evil, while good is simply the messenger. Fourthly, and related to this plot point, Vasilissa does not do anything truly heroic, and she does nothing of her own accord – in most versions I have read she is not even described as brave, she is simply good (and beautiful). The source of her strength (and arguably the true protagonist) is the little doll which has been given to her by her mother – her mother's "blessing."

It is interesting, I think, to consider that Vasilissa's goodness and strength are gifts from her loving parent, that this grotesque and bizarre fairy tale functions also as an allegory about how a parent's love (or "blessing") can cultivate in a child the resilience and integrity needed to overcome even the most daunting obstacles. This interpretation resonated with me as a parent, and it seemed to me that to derive the new work from this unusual folk tale might be appropriate, given that the Clarosa Quartet takes its name from the children of the principal players in the ensemble. And because Vasilissa's most important character traits in the story are her strength and resilience, I did not entitle the piece *Vasilissa Most Lovely* but rather *Vasilissa the Invincible*.

The first movement captures the essence of Vasilissa and depicts the prologue of the fairy tale, the bestowal of the doll and the mother's death. The second movement depicts the remainder of the fairy tale, from the introduction of the stepmother and stepsisters to their eventual destruction. There are themes for all of the main characters of the story, including the eerie emergence and disappearance of the mysterious galloping horsemen. The work was commissioned by the Kingston Chamber Music Festival for the Clarosa Quartet, for first performance in Kingston, Rhode Island, August 2018.

Vasilissa the Invincible

for piano quartet

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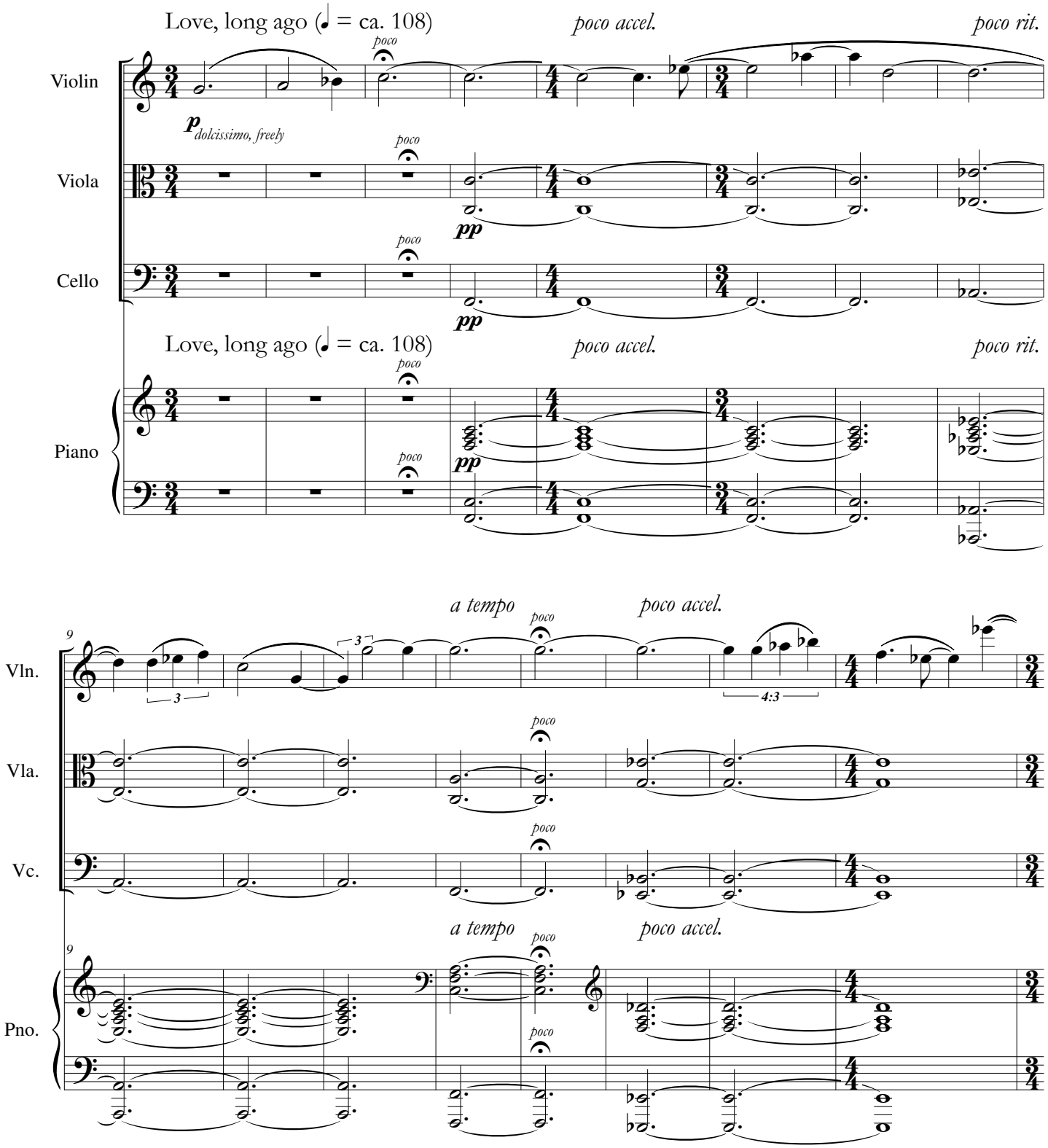
I. Vasilissa, Beloved



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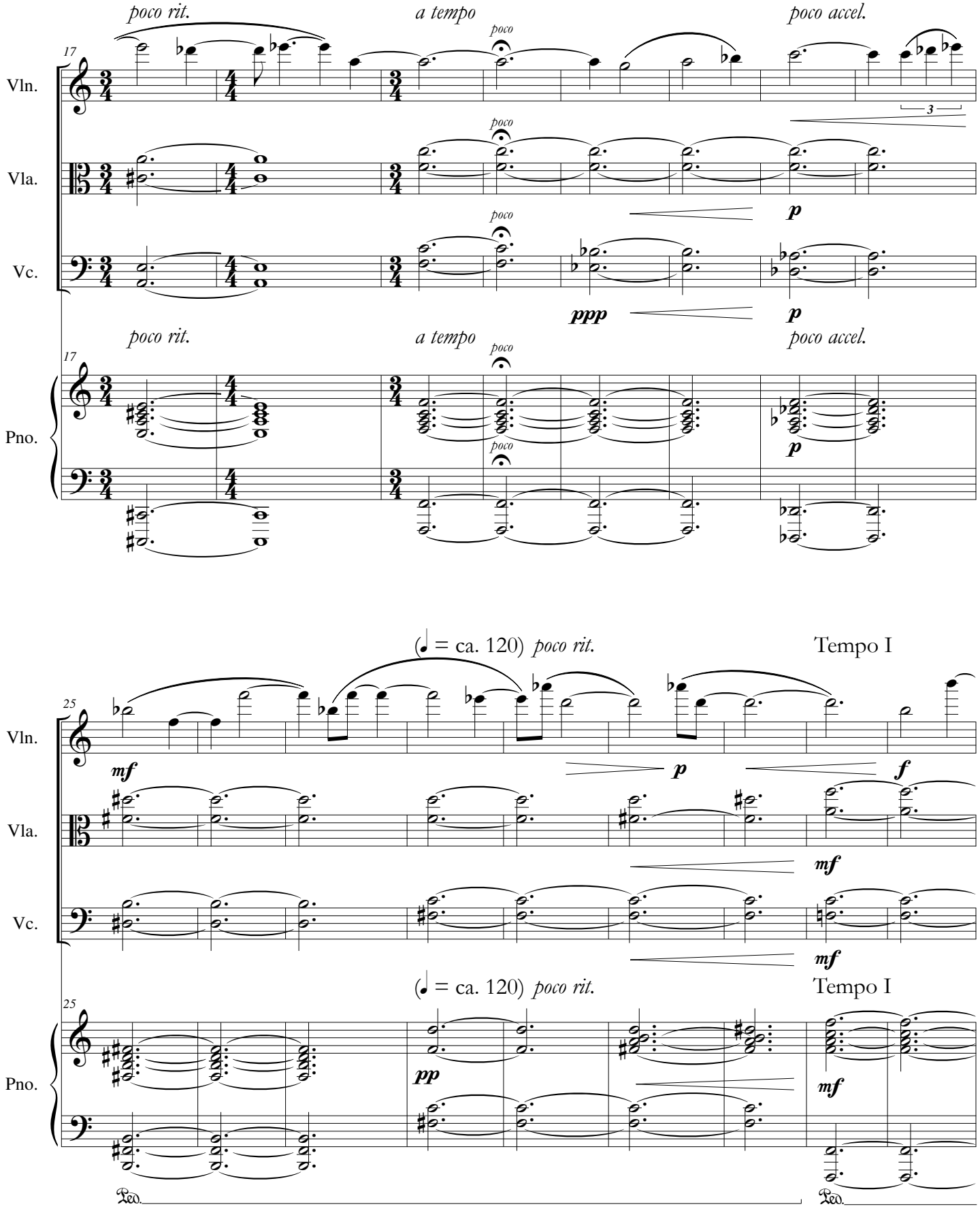
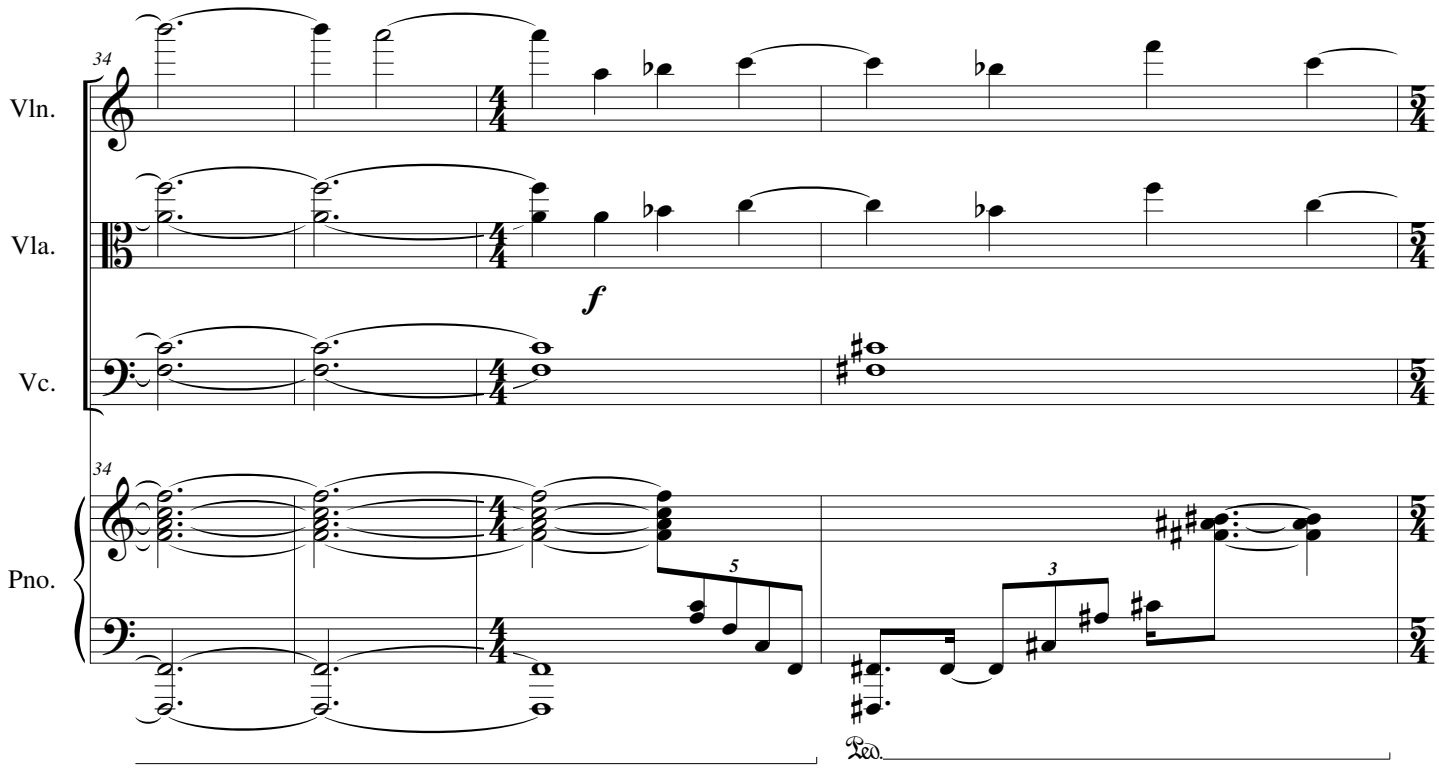
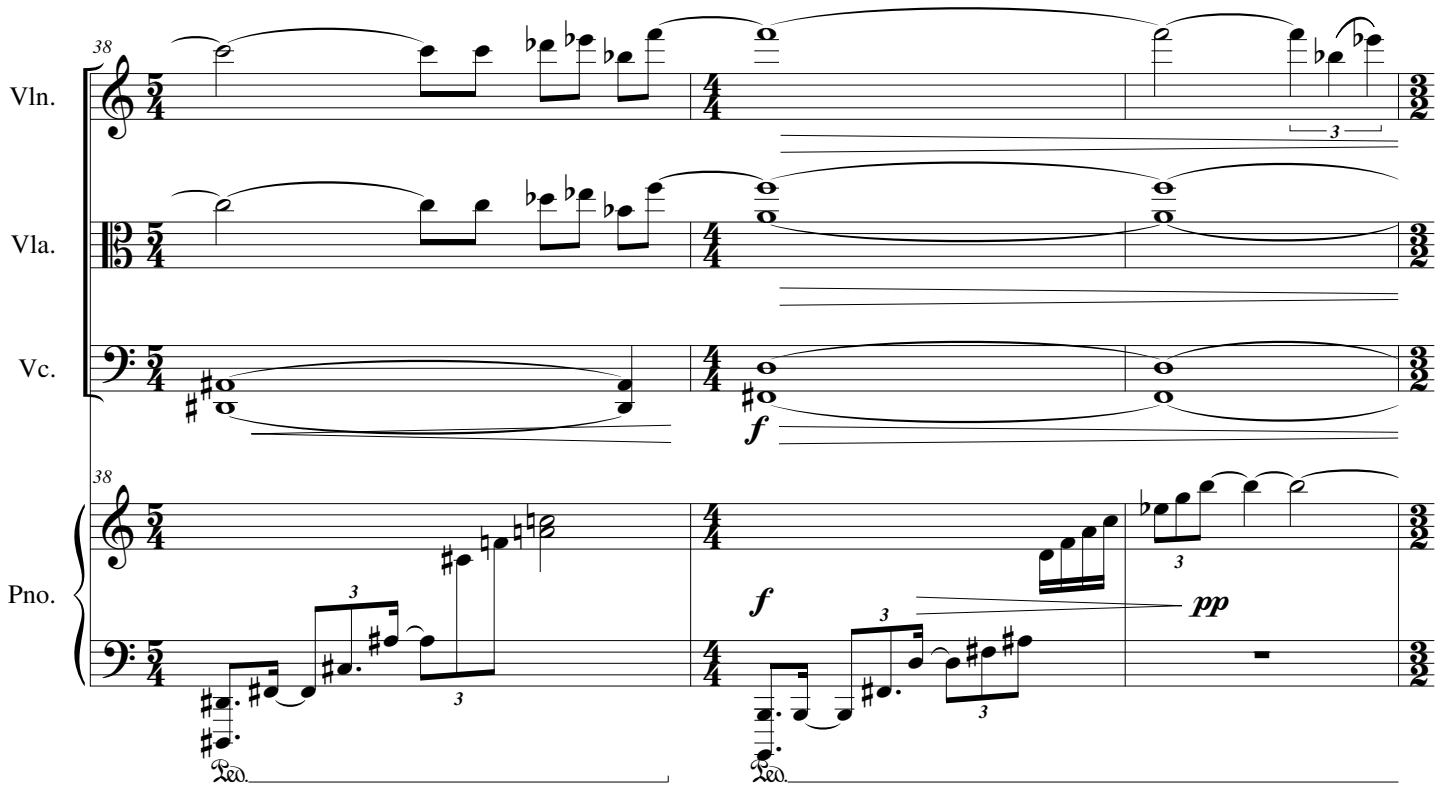
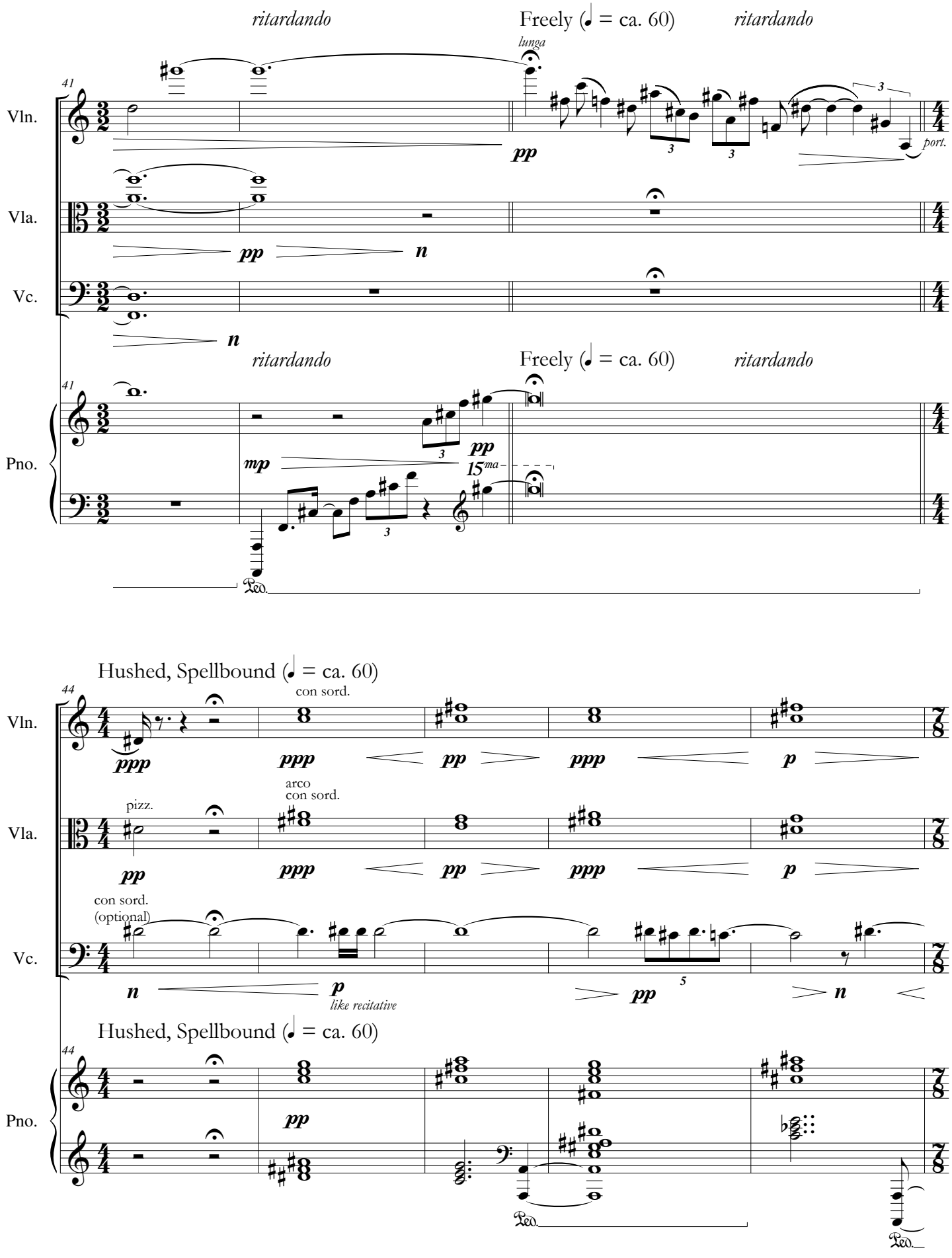
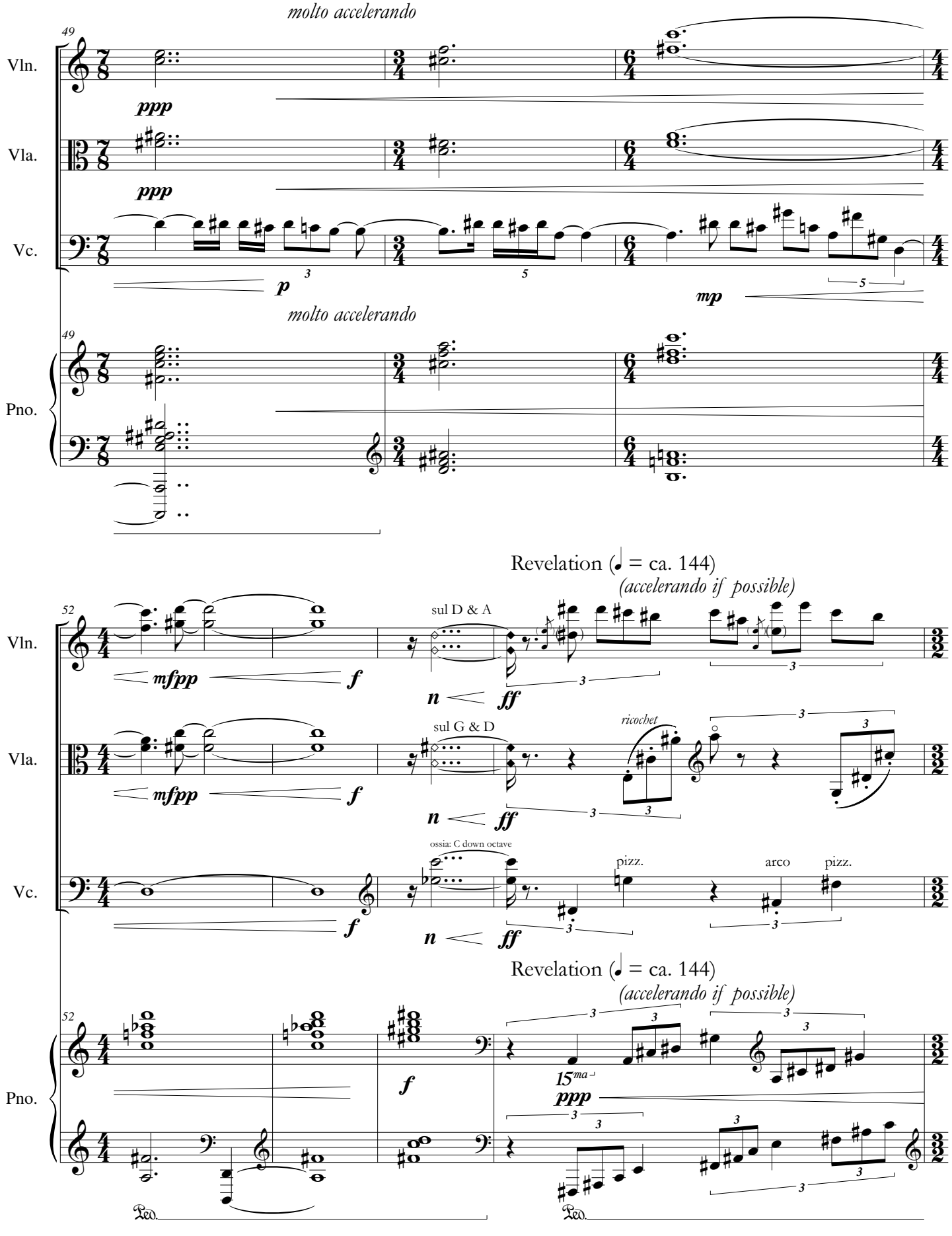
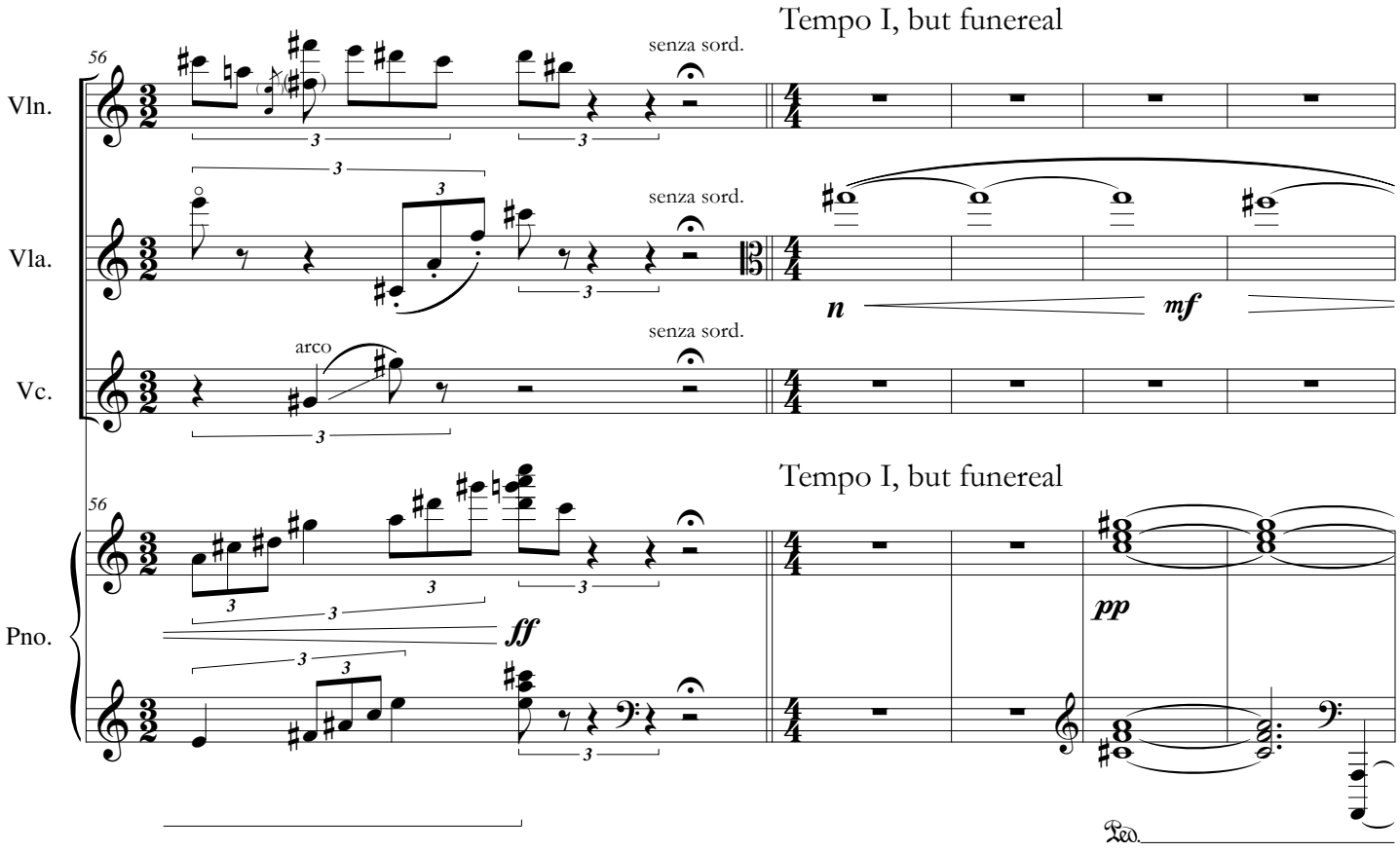

poco rit.
a tempo
poco accel.
17
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
poco
3
p
ppp
(♩ = ca. 120) poco rit.
Tempo I
25
mf
f
pp
Ped.

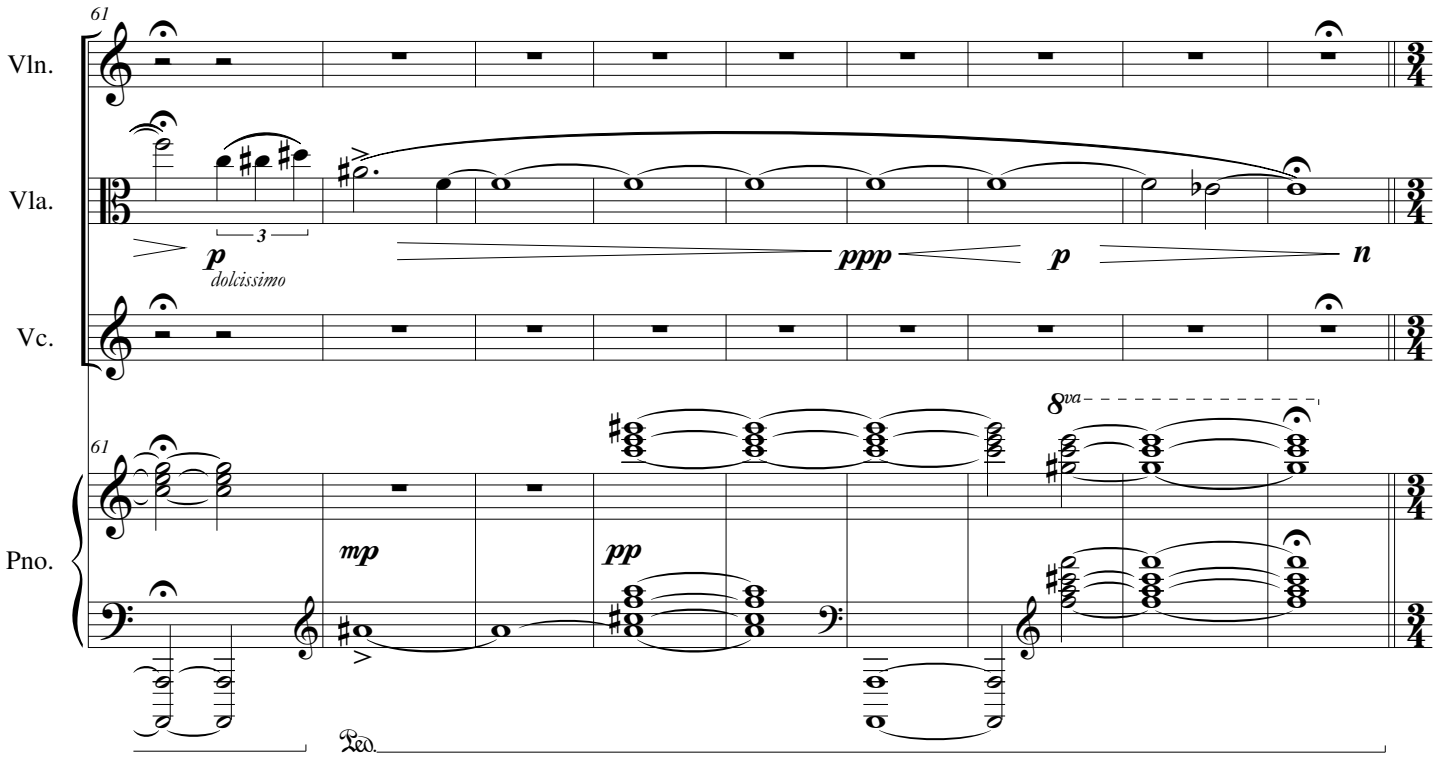

34
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
f
5
3
Ped.

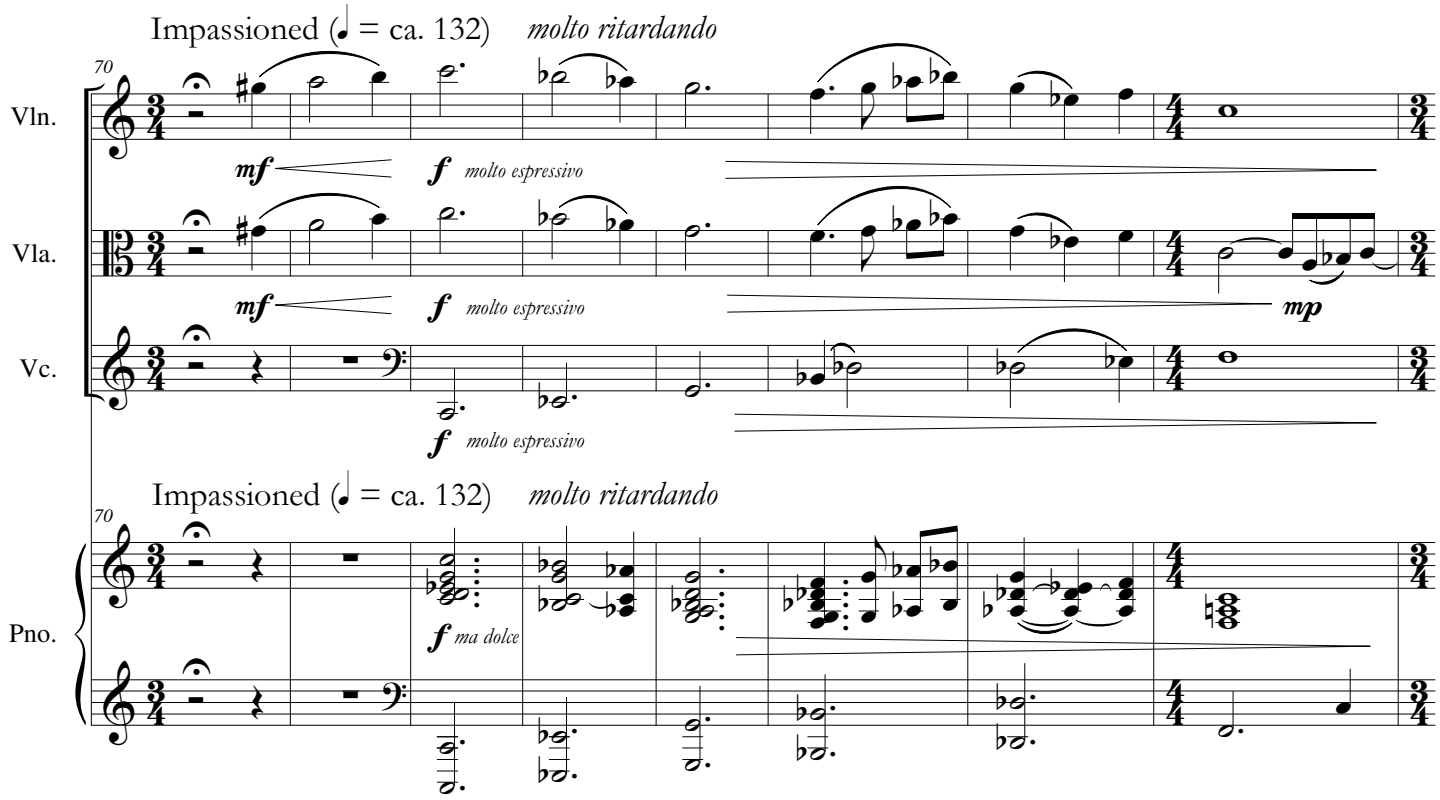

38
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
f
3
pp
Ped.

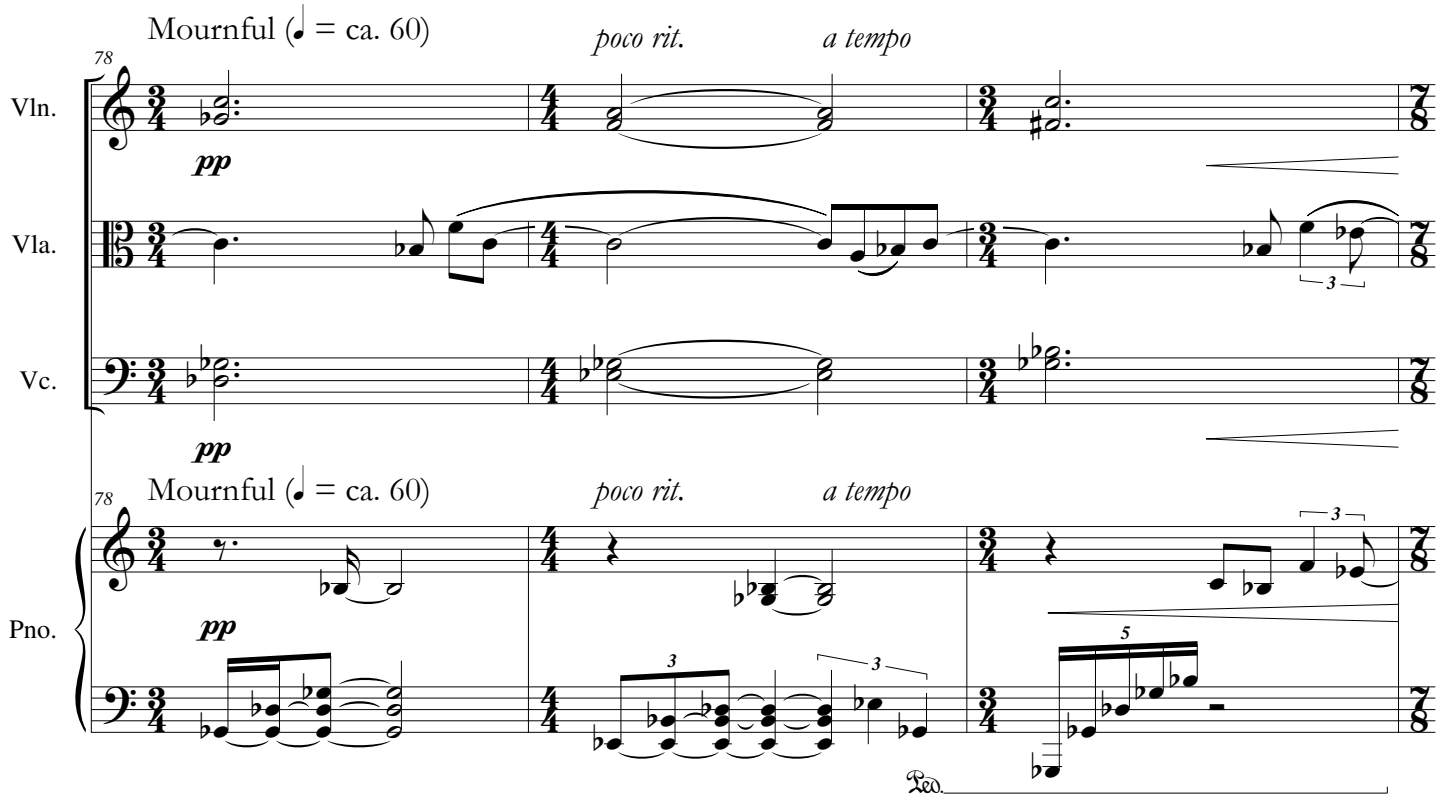

ritardando
Freely (♩ = ca. 60)
ritardando
lunga
41
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
pp
n
port.
mp
15ma
Hushed, Spellbound (♩ = ca. 60)
44
con sord.
ppp
arco
con sord.
pizz.
con sord.
(optional)
like recitative
p

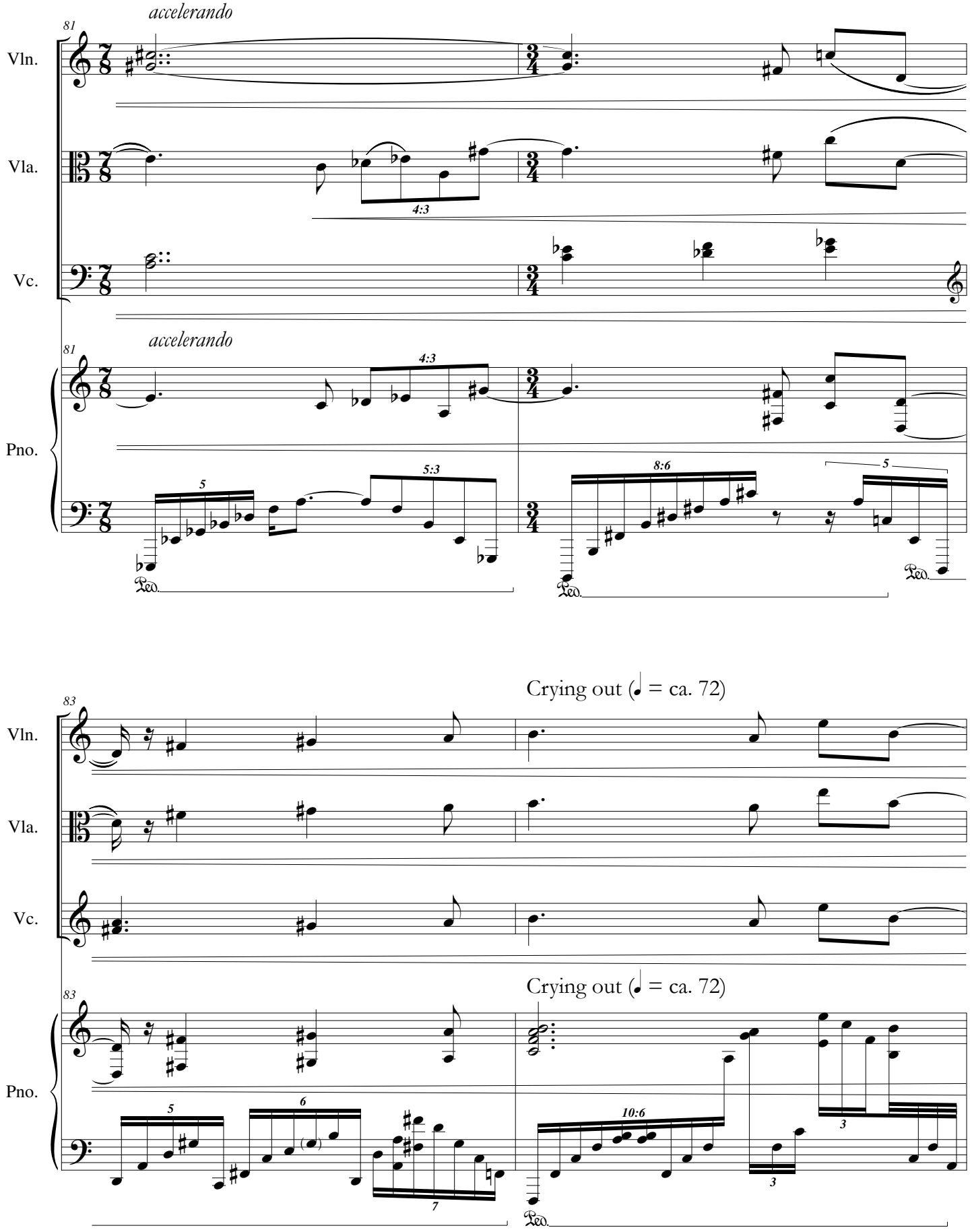

molto accelerando
49
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
ppp
ppp
p
mp
molto accelerando
49
Revelation (♩ = ca. 144)
(accelerando if possible)
52
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
sul D & A
sul G & D
ricochet
ossia: C down octave
pizz.
arco
pizz.
mfpp
f
n
ff
Revelation (♩ = ca. 144)
(accelerando if possible)
52
15ma
ppp
Ped.
Ped.

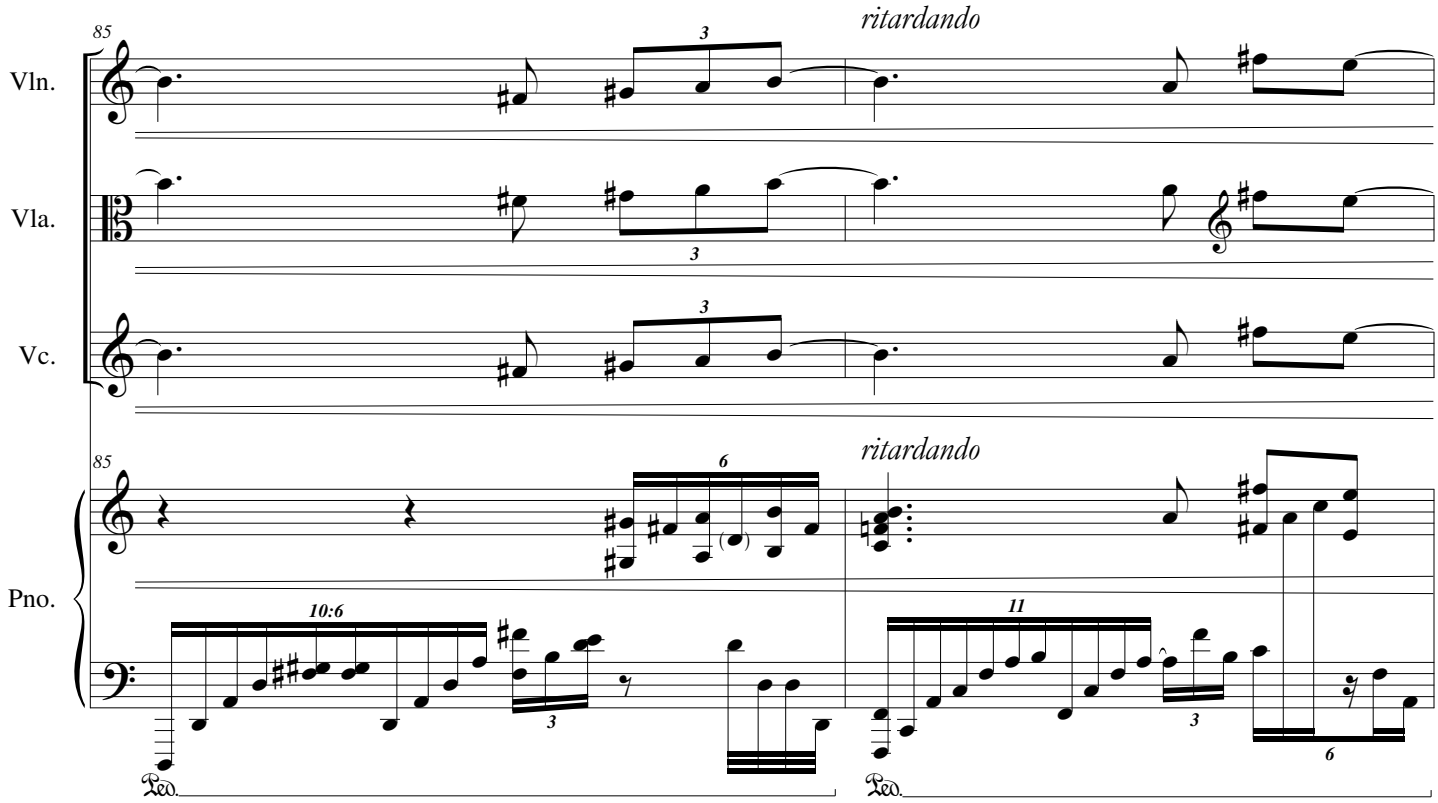

Tempo I, but funereal
56
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
senza sord.
arco
n
mf
ff
pp
Ped.

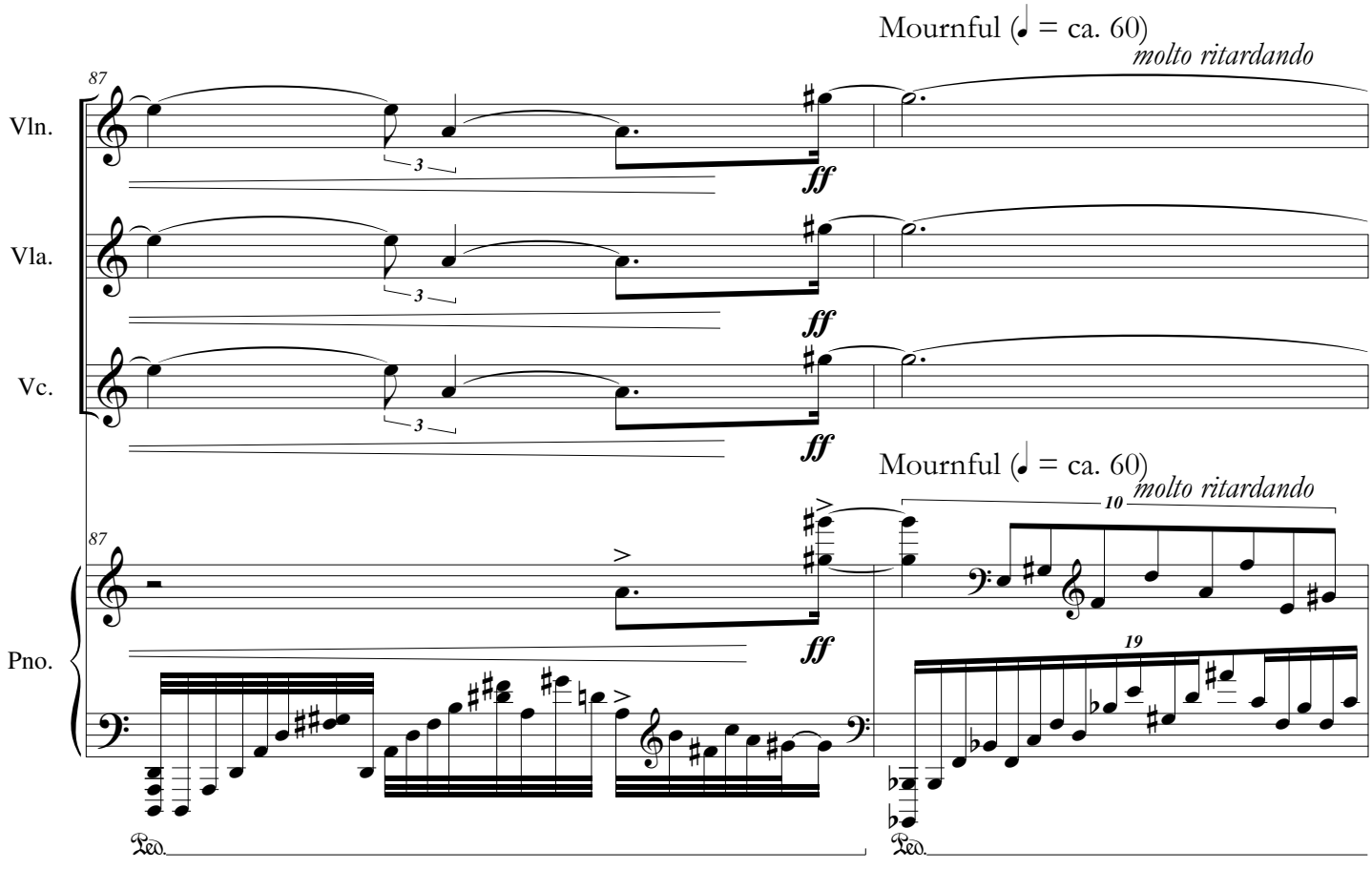

61
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
p
dolcissimo
ppp
p
n
mp
pp
8va
Ped.

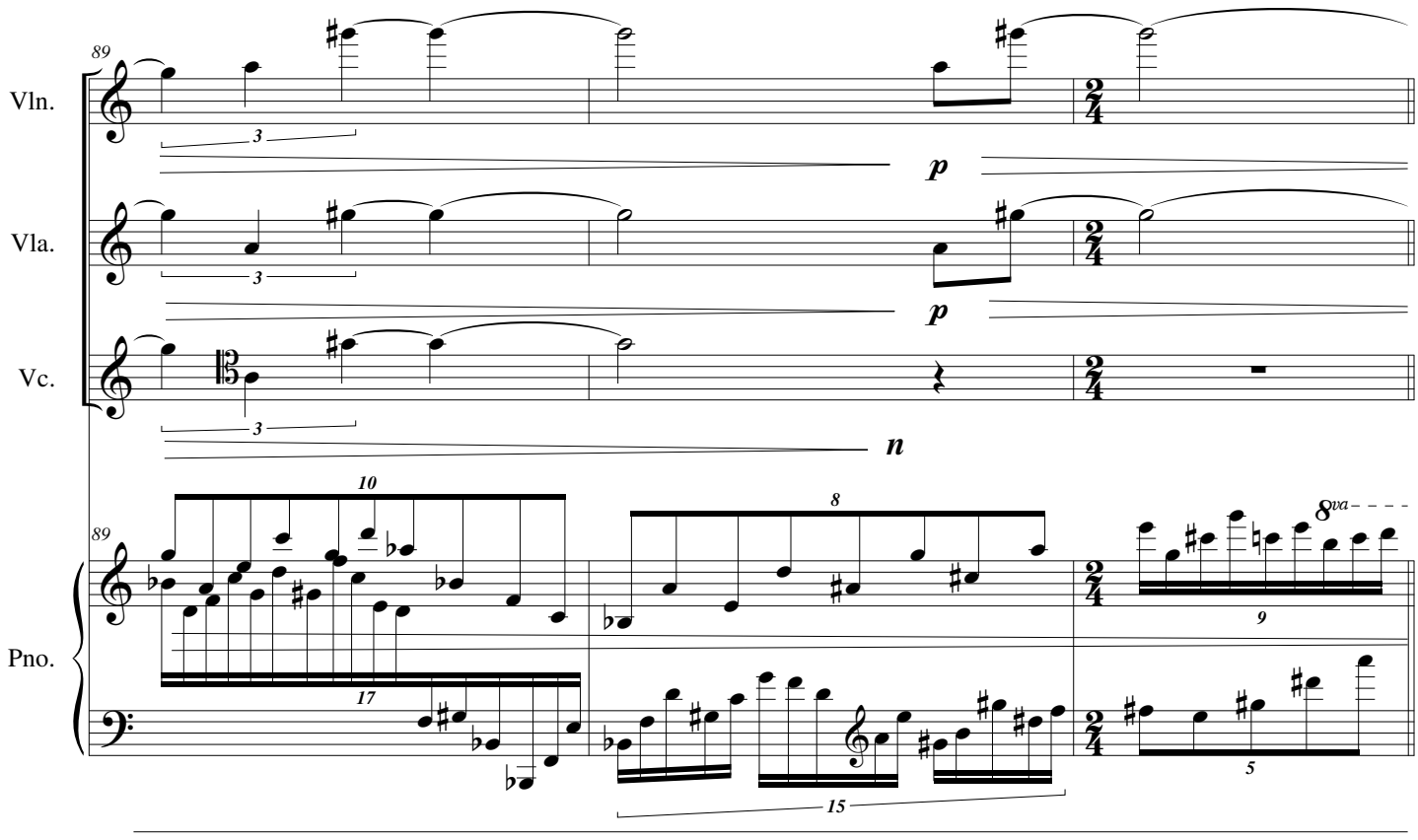

Impassioned (♩ = ca. 132)
molto ritardando
70
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
mf
f
molto espressivo
mp
ma dolce

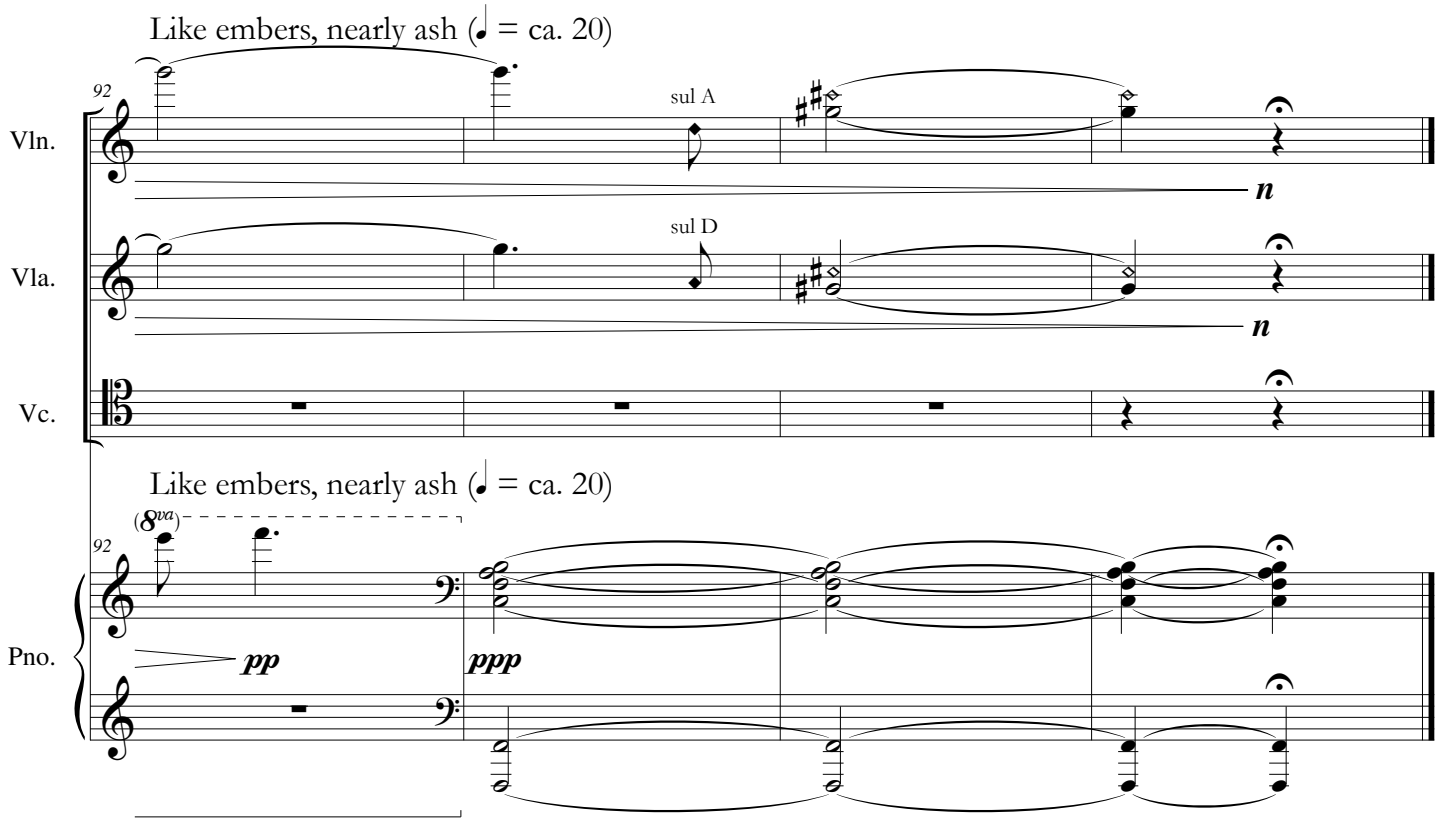

Mournful (♩ = ca. 60)
poco rit.
a tempo
78
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
pp
3
5
Ped.


accelerando
81
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
4:3
5
5:3
8:6
Ped.
Crying out (♩ = ca. 72)
83
6
7
10:6
3

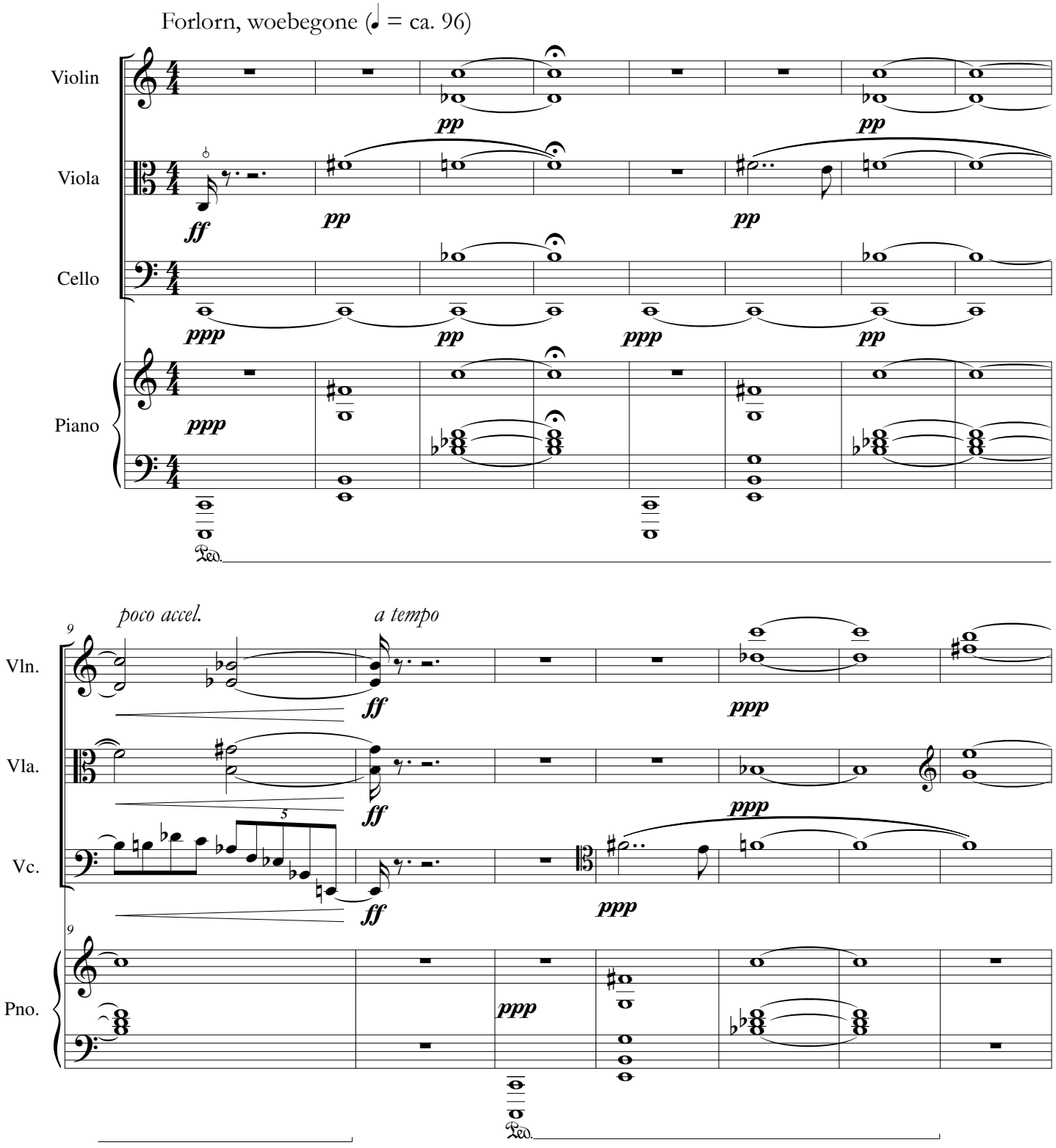

85
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
ritardando
3
6
10:6
11


Mournful (♩ = ca. 60)
molto ritardando
87
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
ff
3
10
19


89
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
3
p
n
10
8
8va
17
15
9
5


Like embers, nearly ash (♩ = ca. 20)
92
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
sul A
sul D
n
(8va)
pp
ppp
Like embers, nearly ash (♩ = ca. 20)

II. Vasilissa, Avenged



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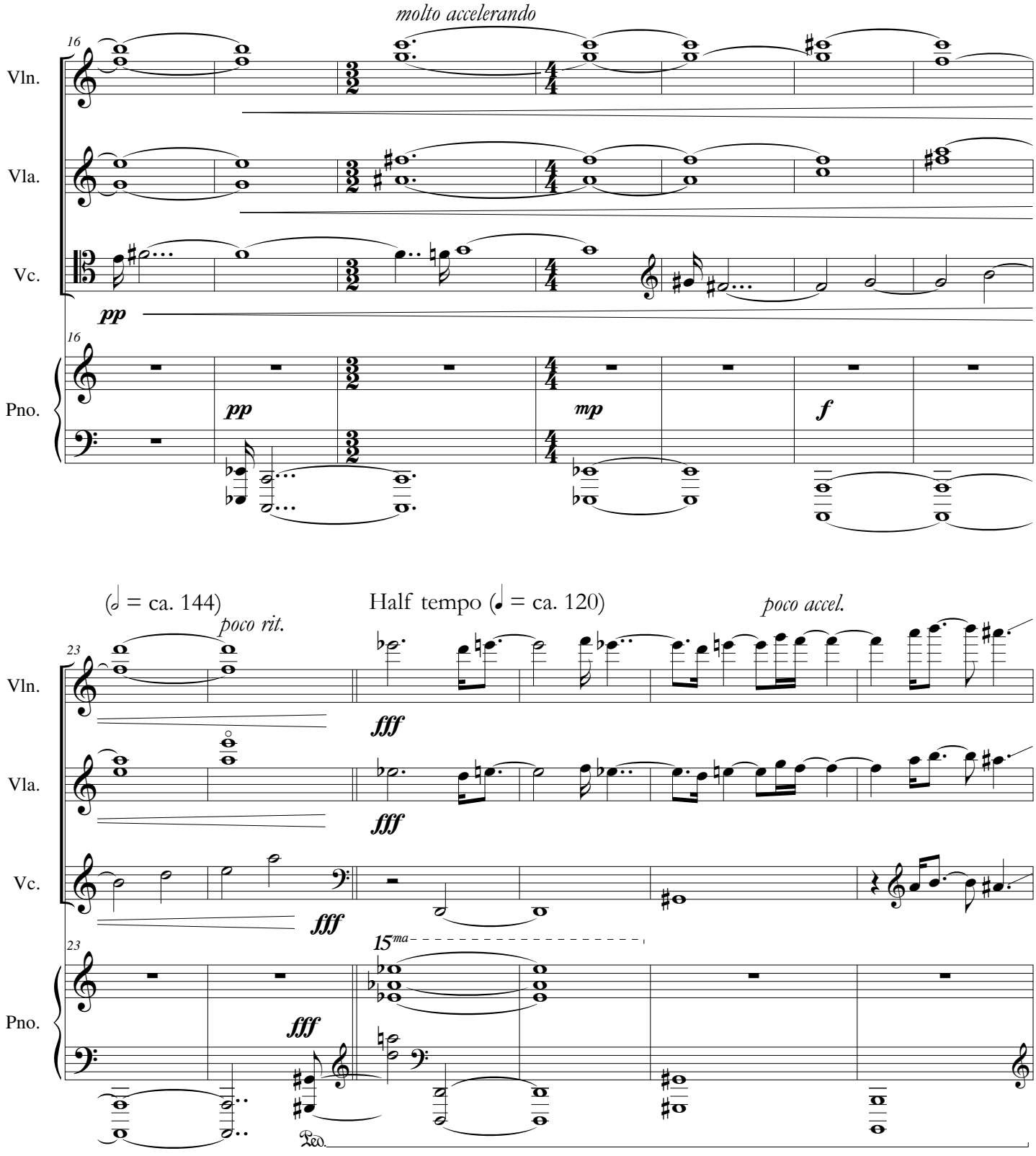
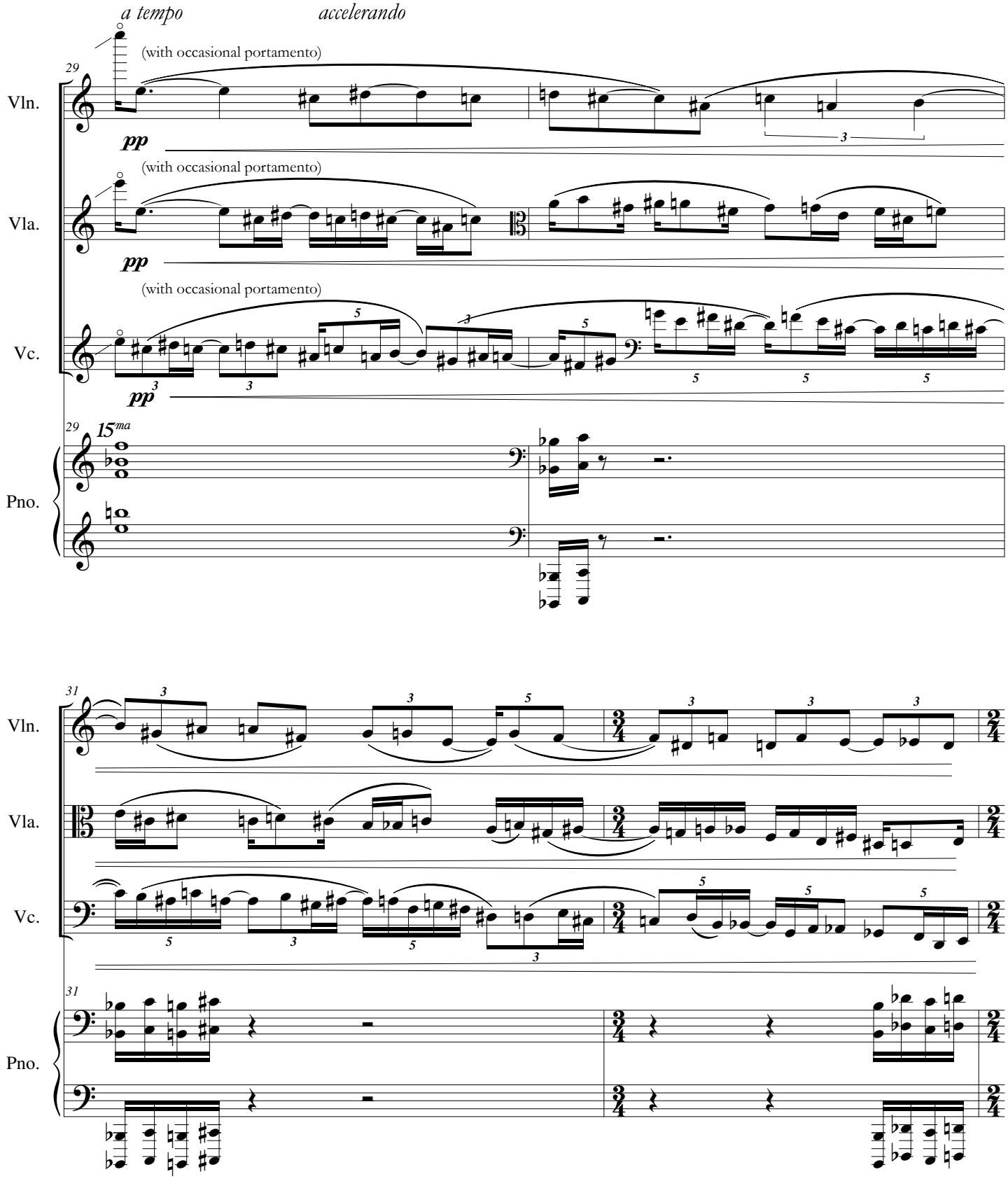
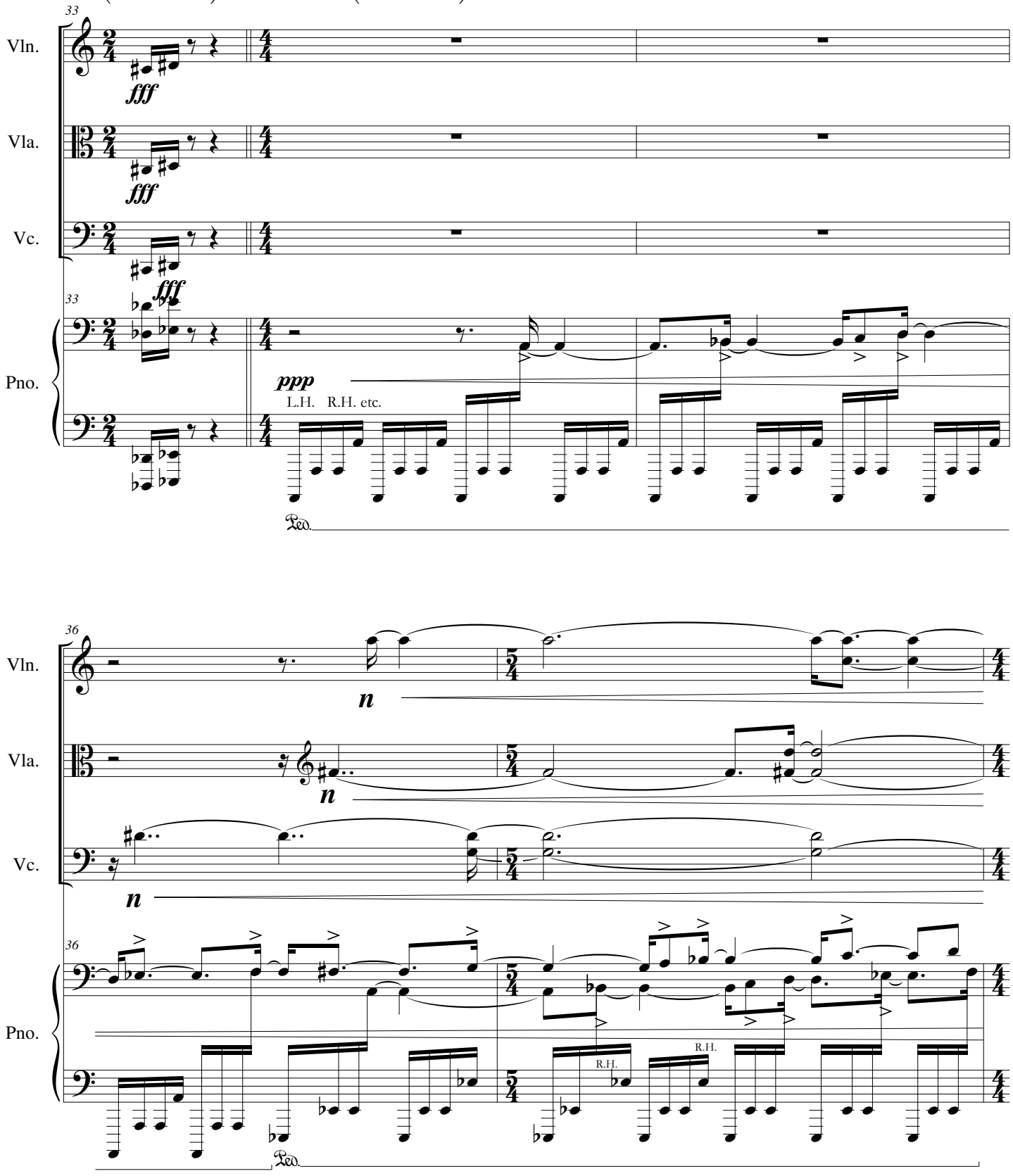
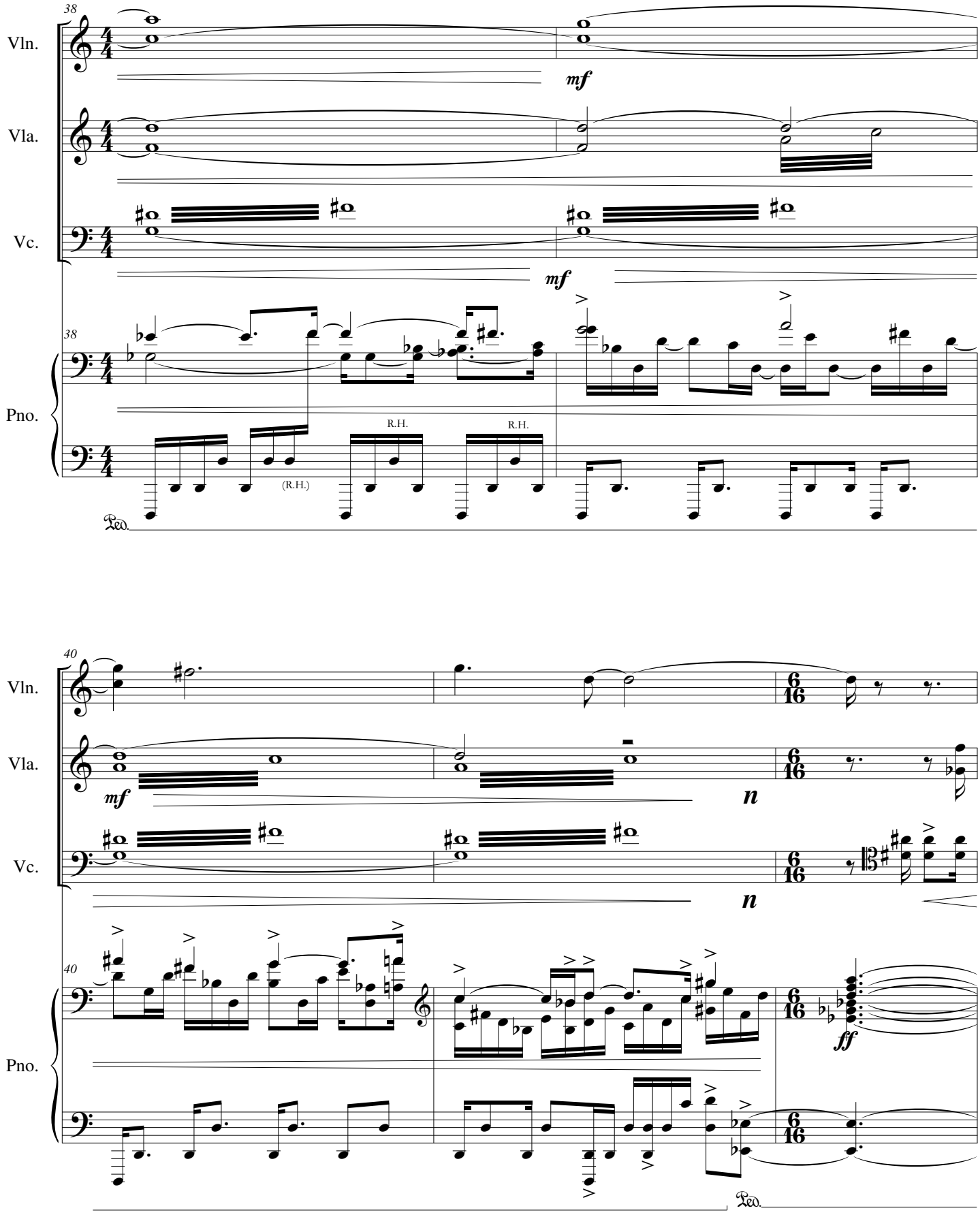
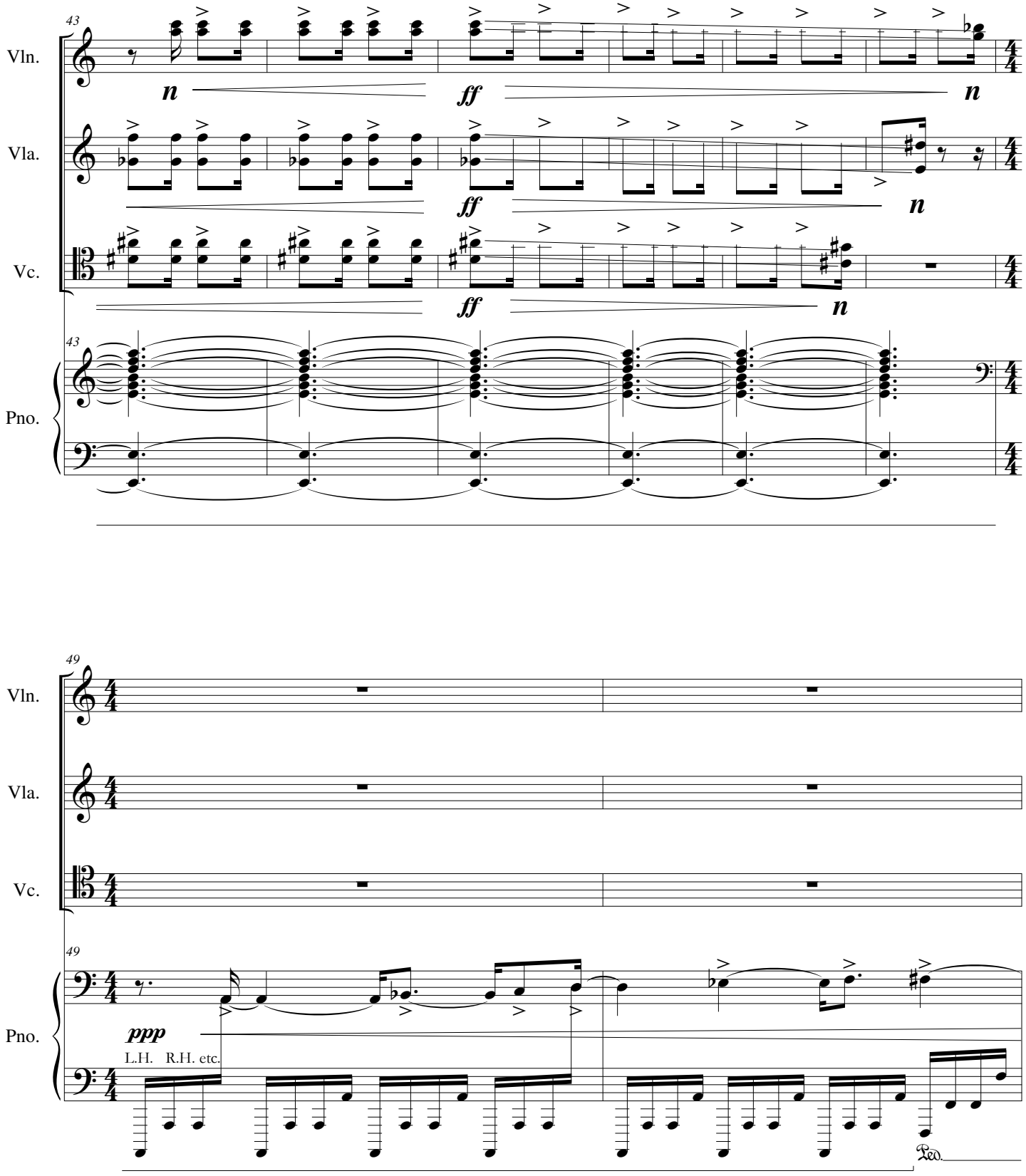

molto accelerando
16
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
pp
16
Pno.
pp
mp
f
(𝅗𝅥 = ca. 144)
poco rit.
Half tempo (♩ = ca. 120)
poco accel.
23
Vln.
fff
Vla.
fff
Vc.
fff
23
15ma
Pno.
fff
Ped.

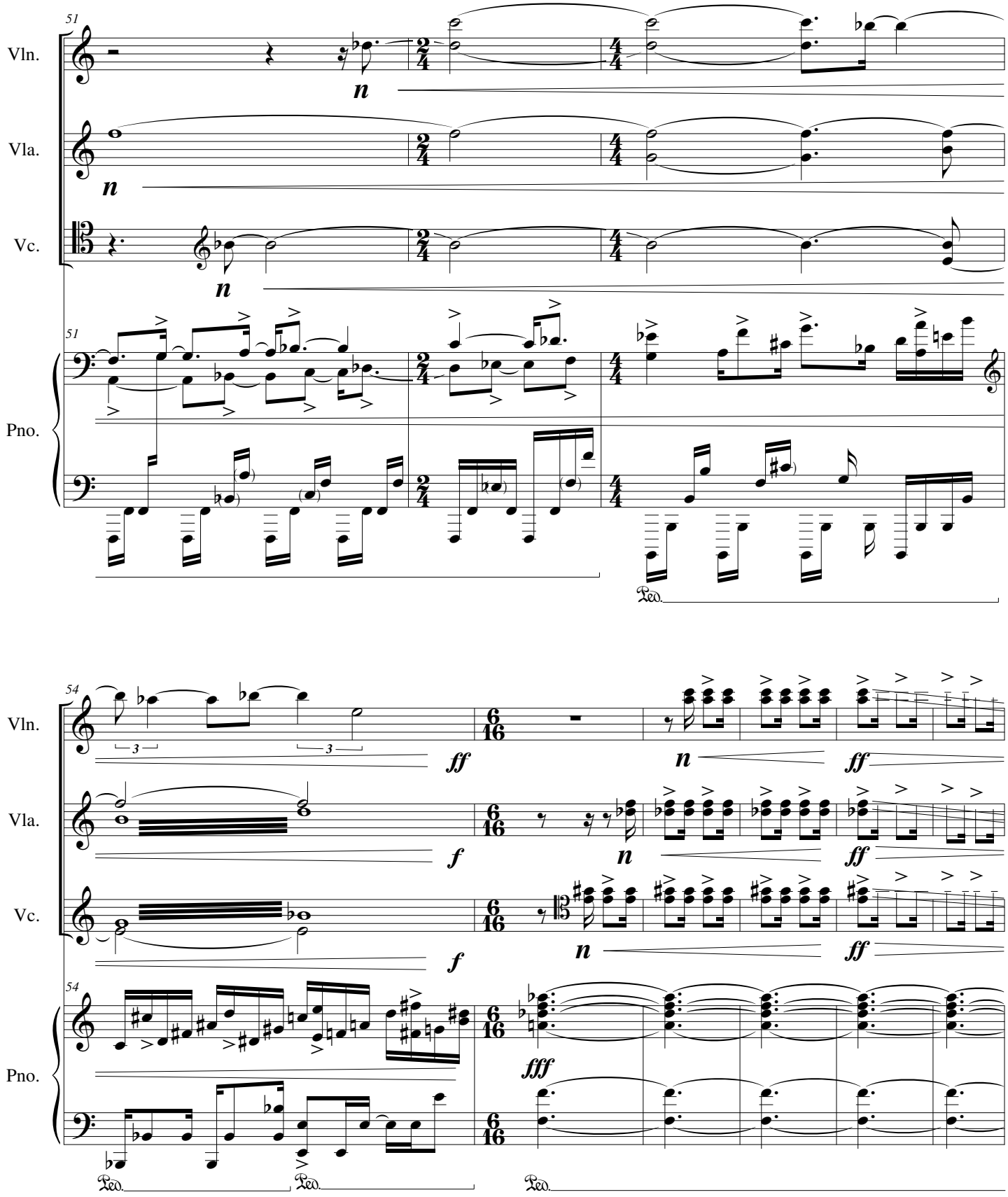

a tempo
accelerando
29
Vln.
(with occasional portamento)
pp
Vla.
(with occasional portamento)
pp
Vc.
(with occasional portamento)
pp
Pno.
15ma
31
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.

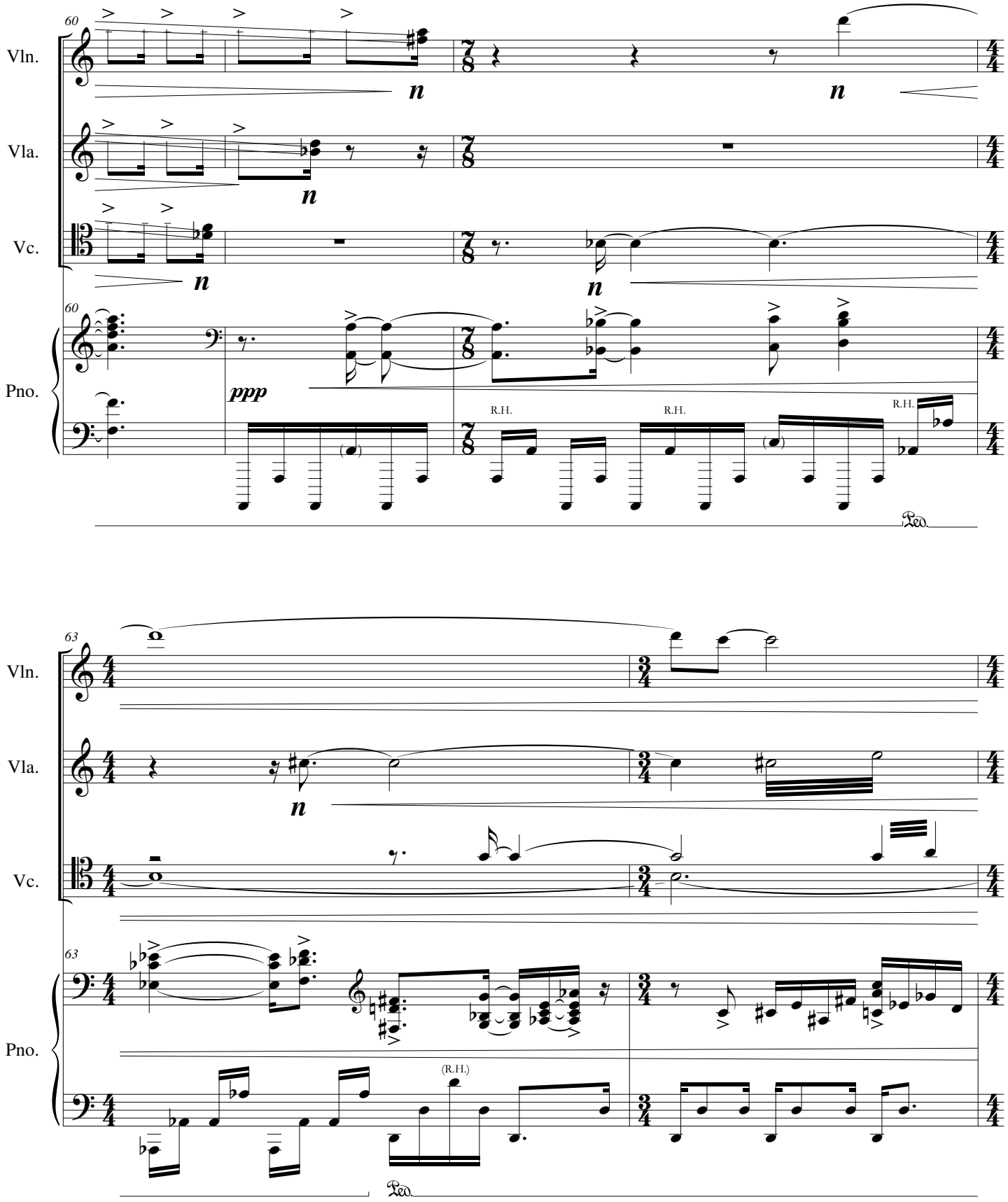
(♩ = ca. 144) Unsettled (♩ = ca. 132)

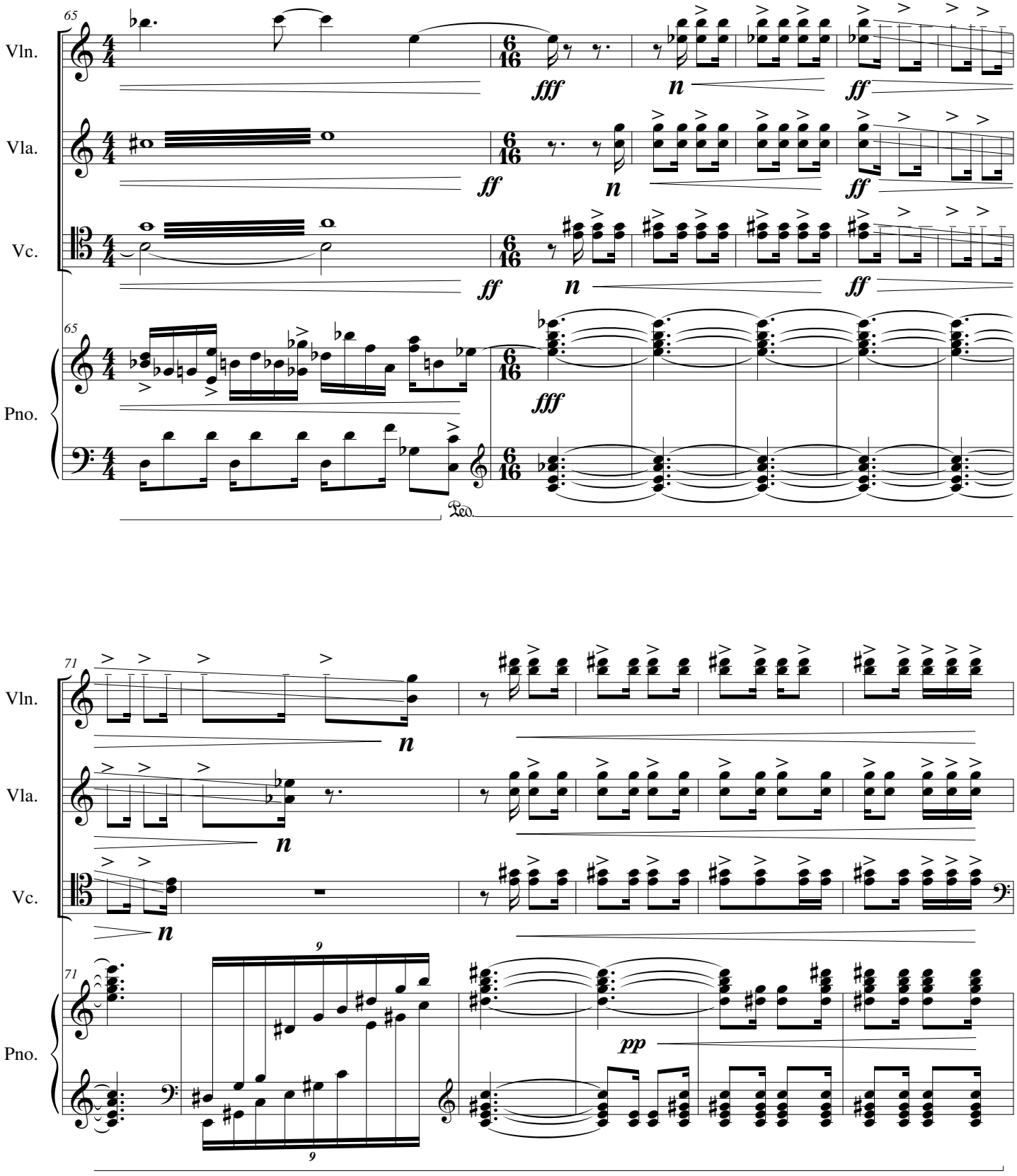


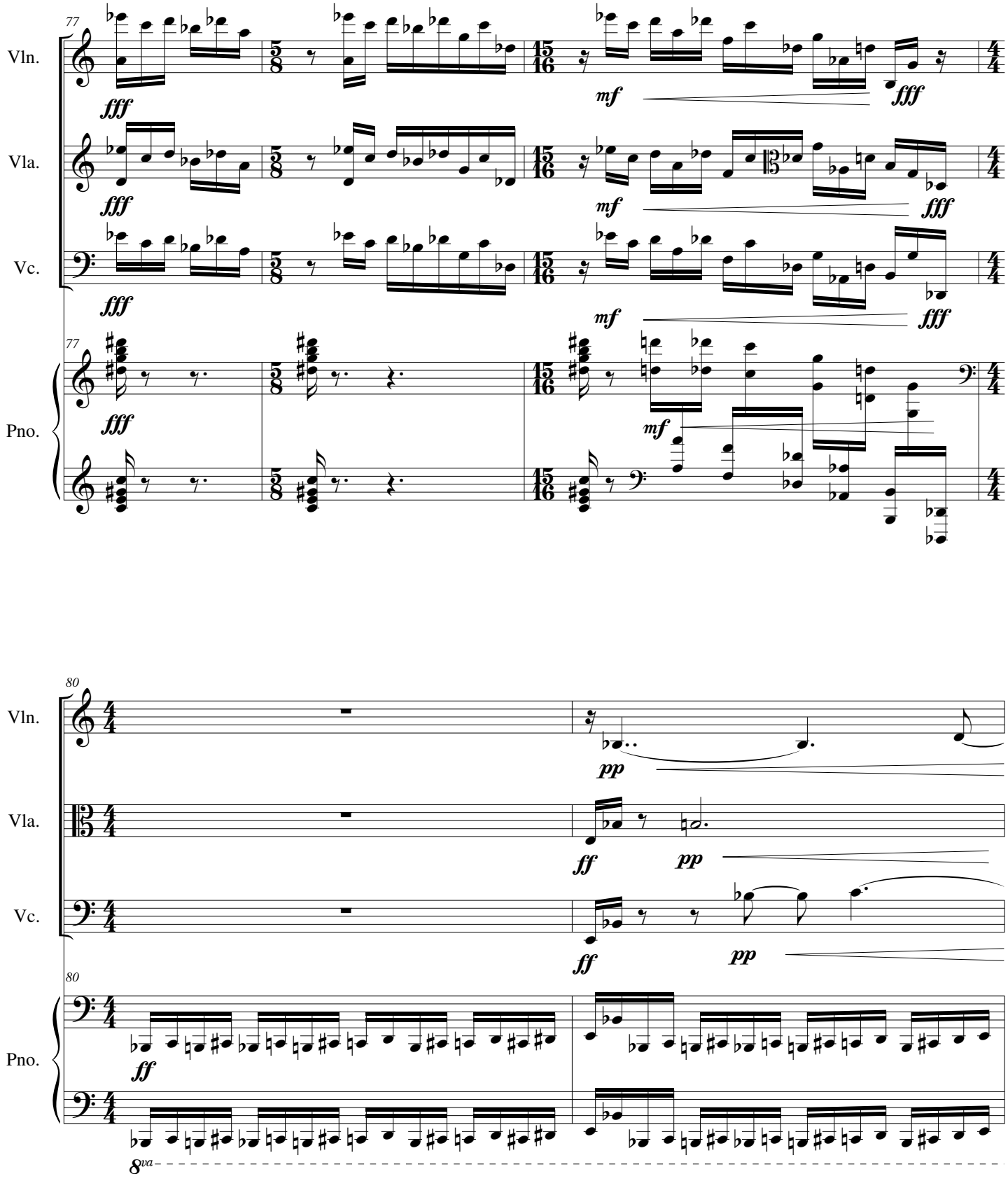

38
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
mf
mf
38
Pno.
R.H.
R.H.
(R.H.)
Ped.
40
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
mf
n
n
40
Pno.
ff
Ped.

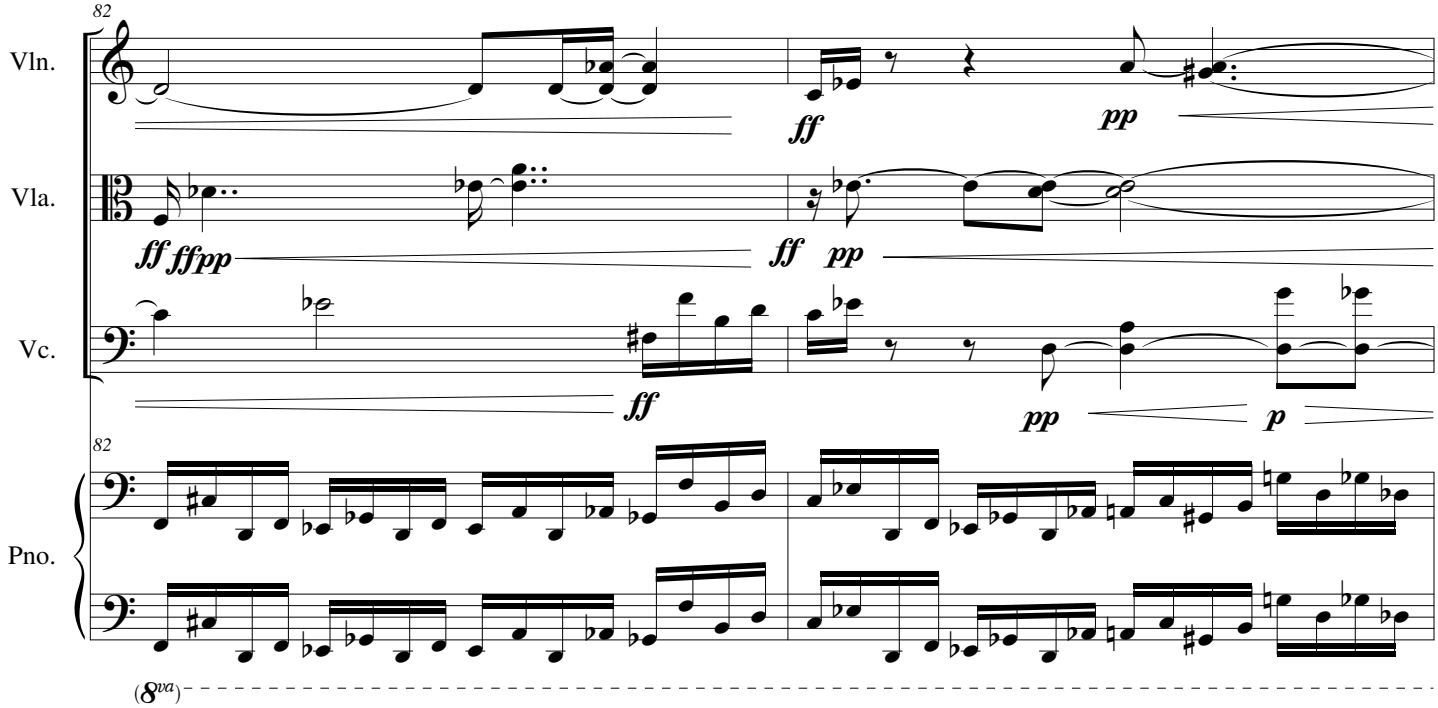

43
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
n
ff
49
ppp
L.H. R.H. etc.
Ped.

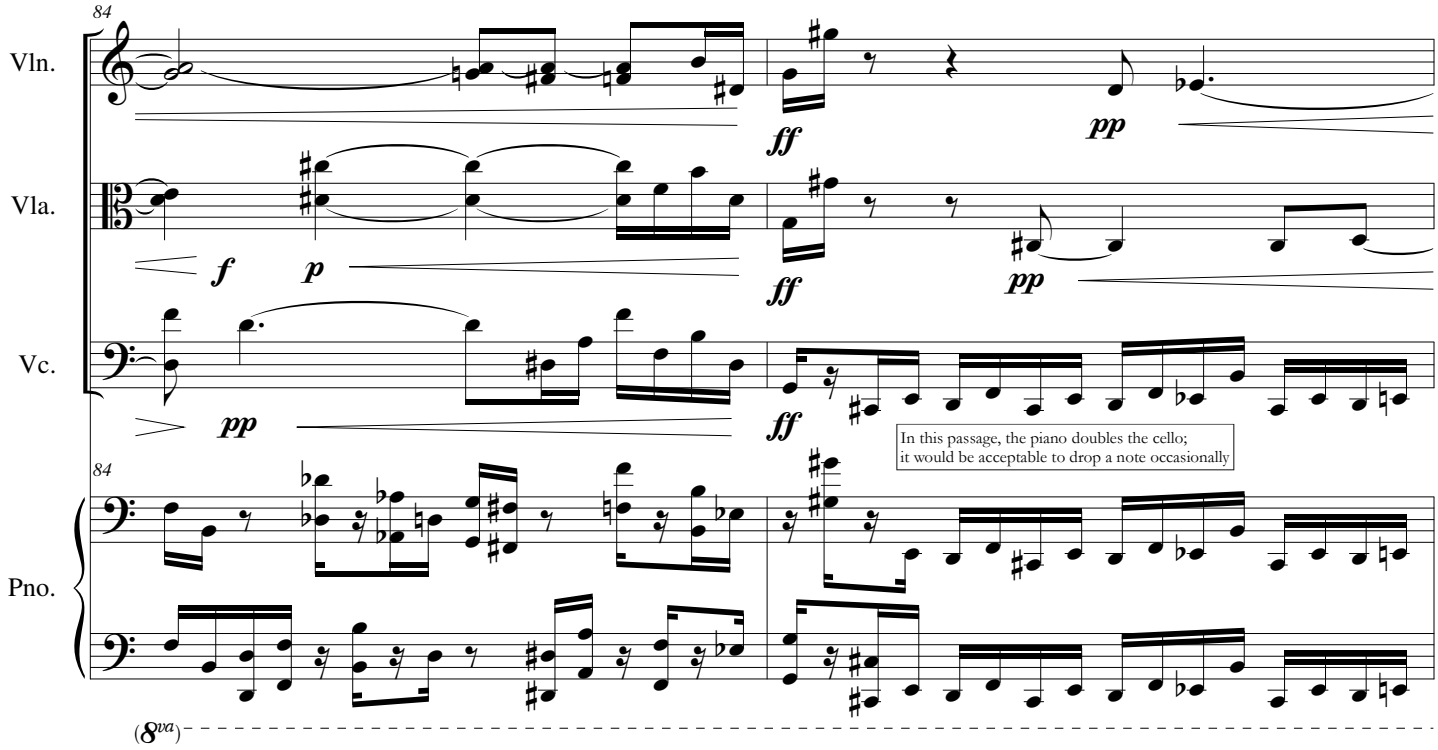

51
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
n
54
ff
f
fff
Ped.

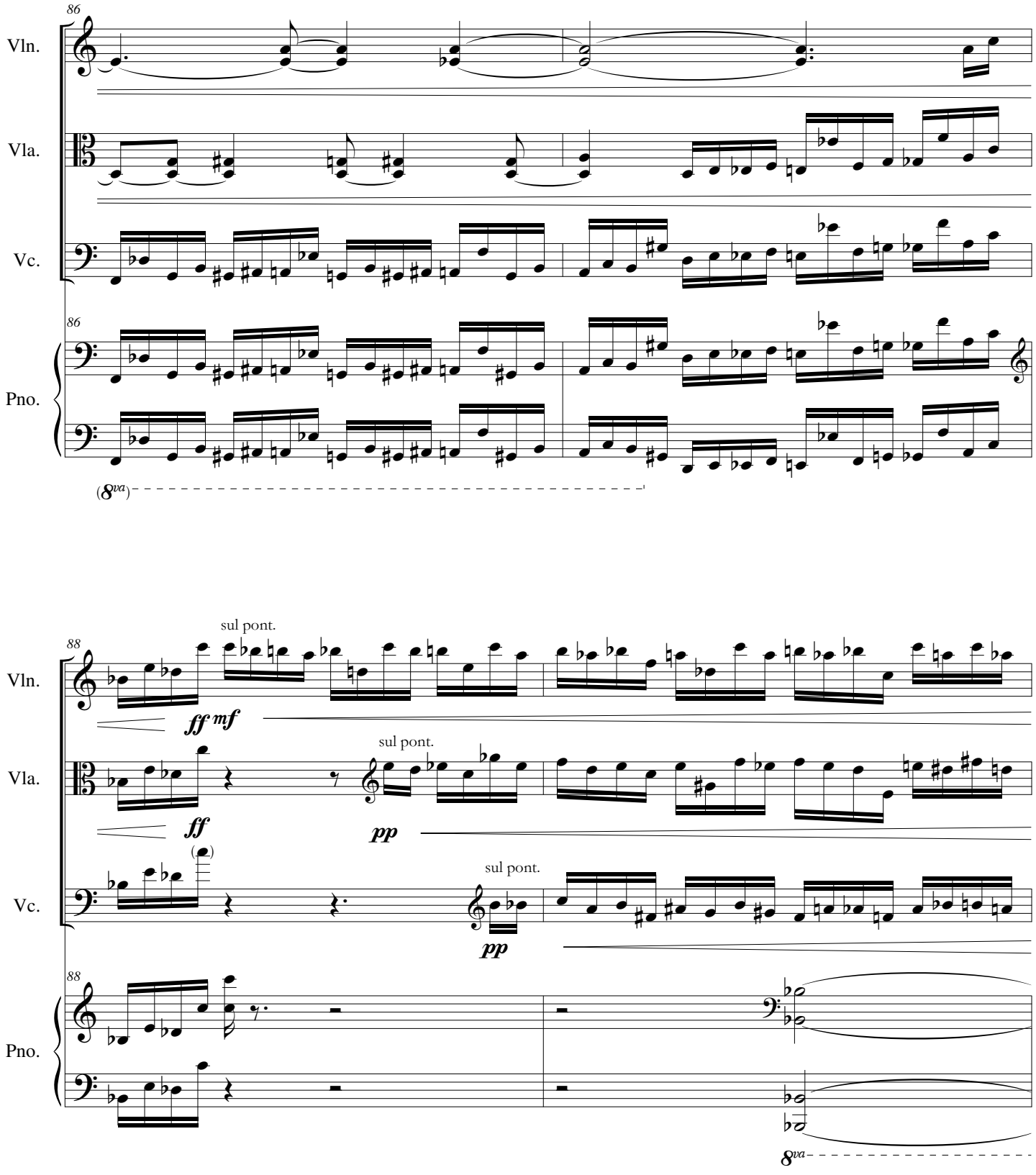

60
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
ppp
R.H.
R.H.
R.H.
Ped.
63
(R.H.)
Ped.

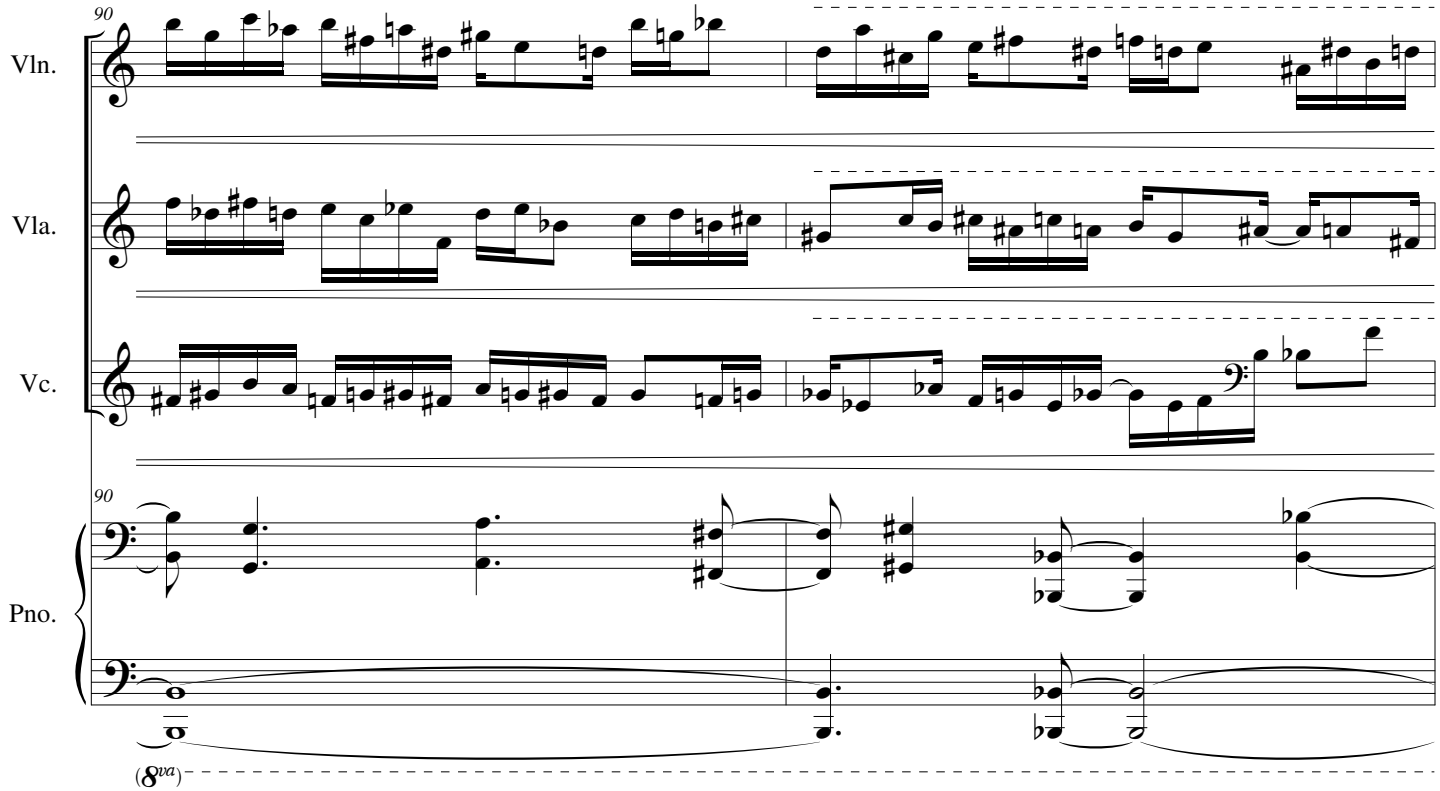

65
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
fff
ff
n
Ped.
71
pp
9


77
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
fff
mf
fff
80
pp
ff
pp
8va

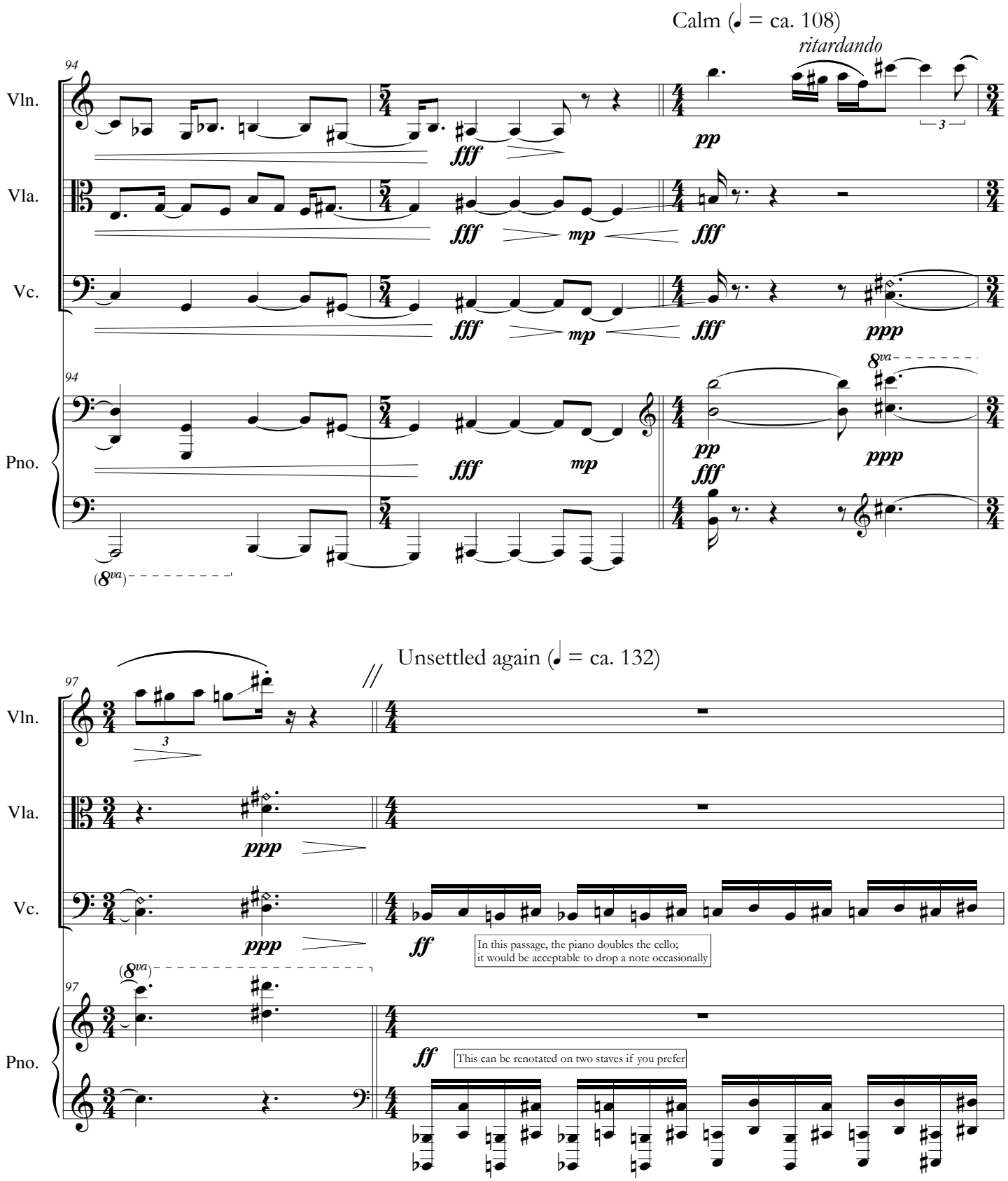

82
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
ff
pp
ff ffpp
ff pp
ff
pp
p
82
(8va)

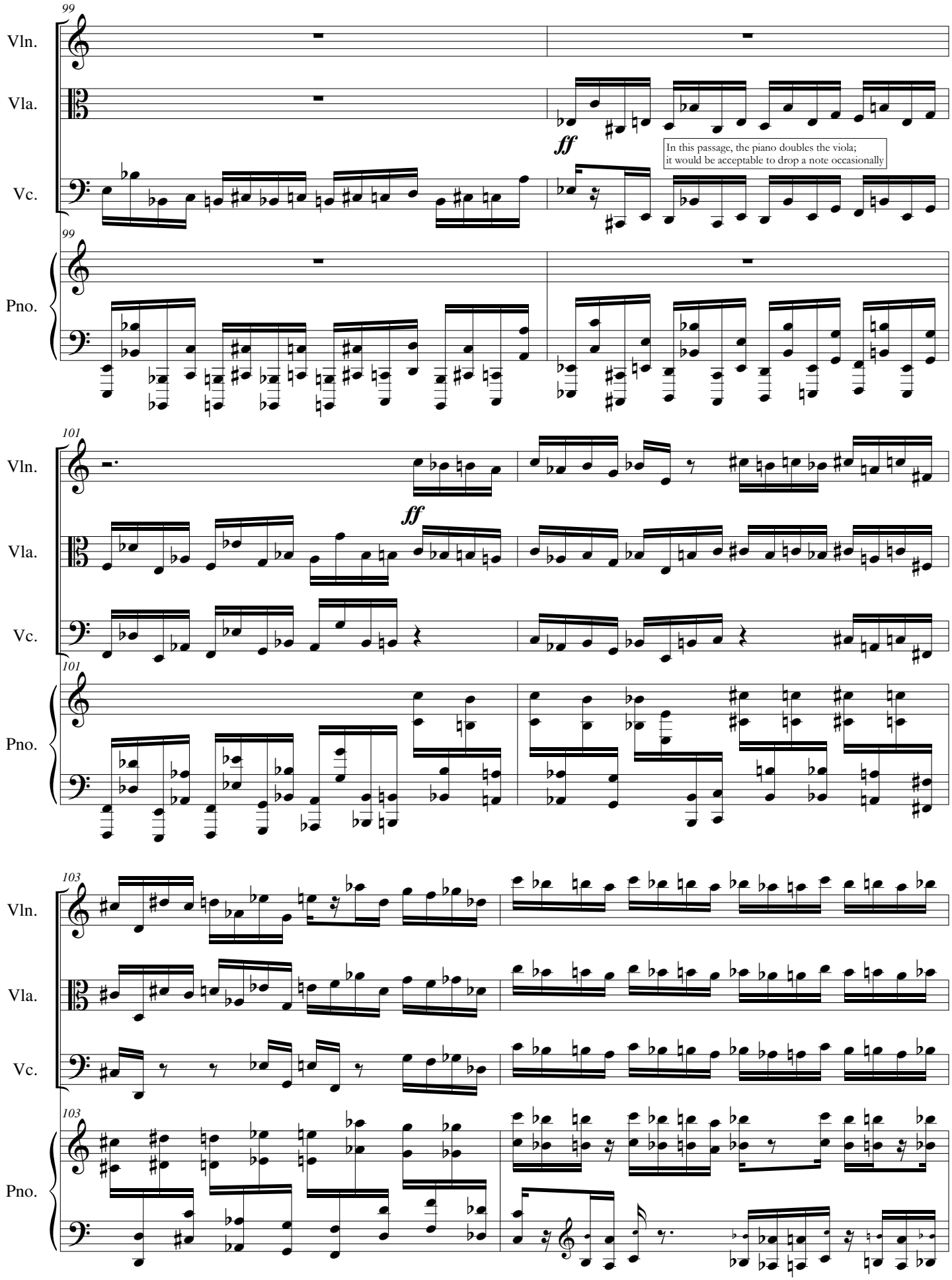

84
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
ff
pp
f
p
ff
pp
pp
ff
In this passage, the piano doubles the cello;
it would be acceptable to drop a note occasionally
84
(8va)

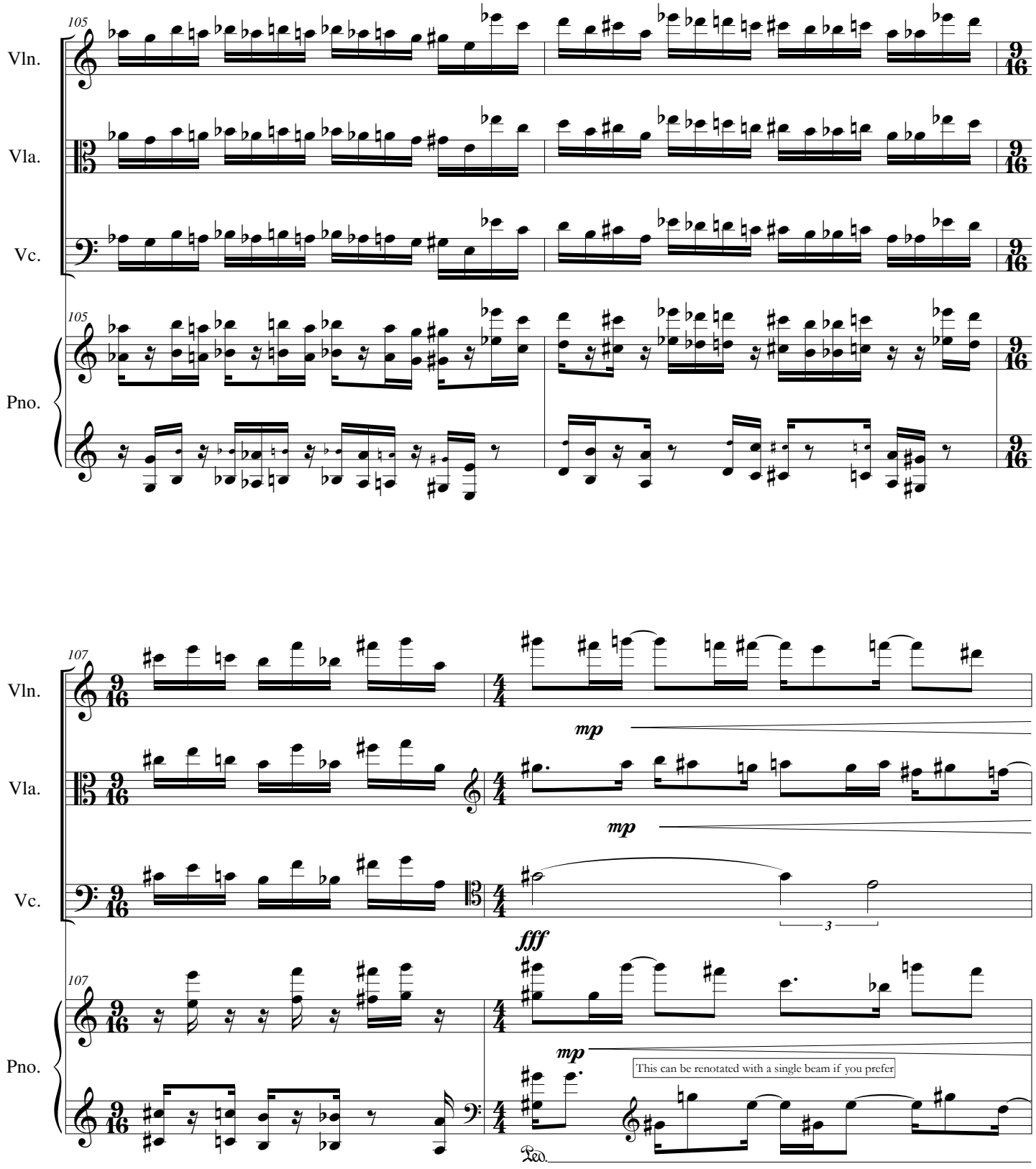

86
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
86
Pno.
(8va)
88
sul pont.
Vln.
ff mf
sul pont.
Vla.
ff
pp
(8)
sul pont.
Vc.
pp
88
Pno.
8va

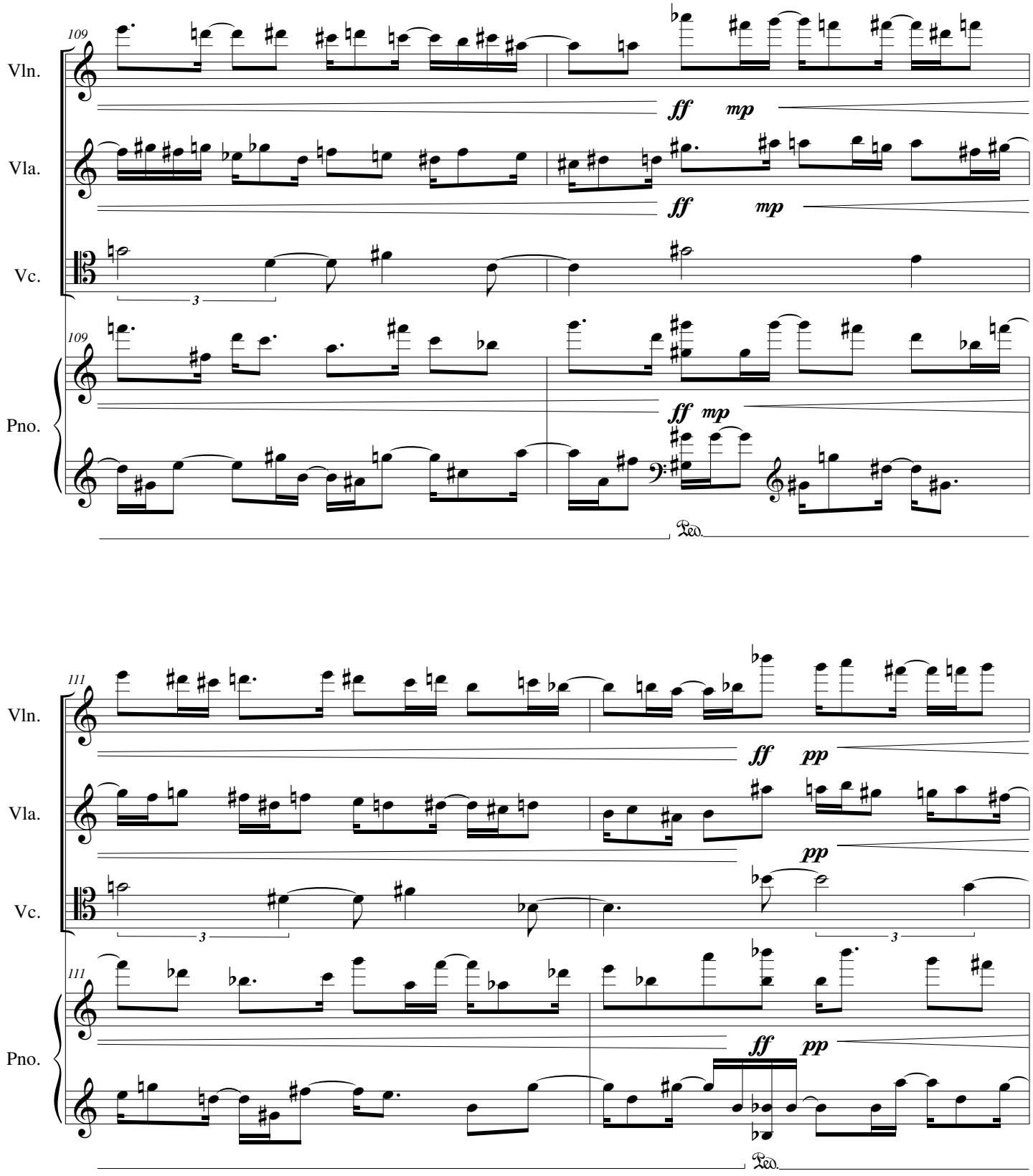

90
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
90
Pno.
(8va)

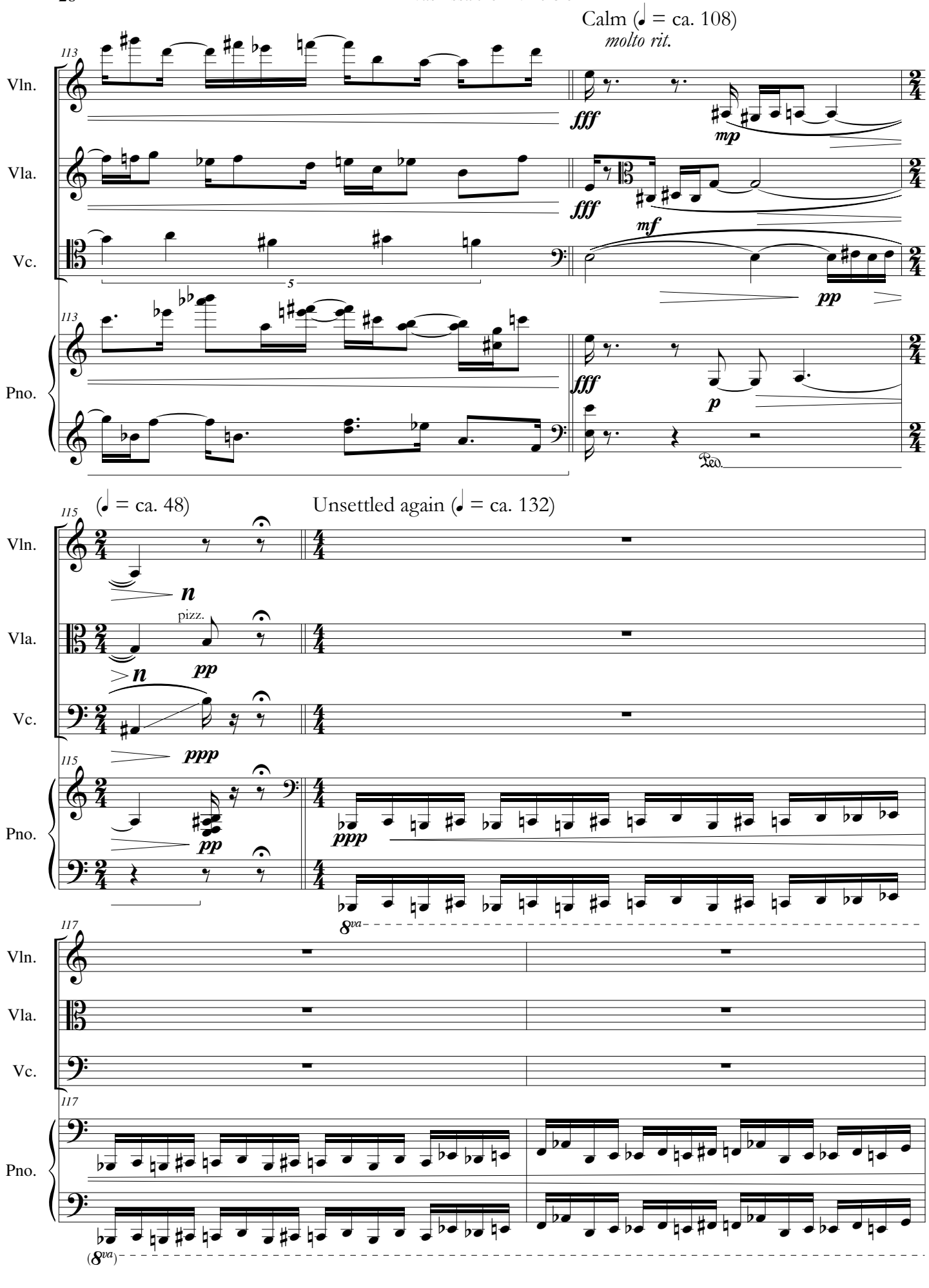
92
ord.
Vln.
ord.
Vla.
ord.
Vc.
92
Pno.
(8va)

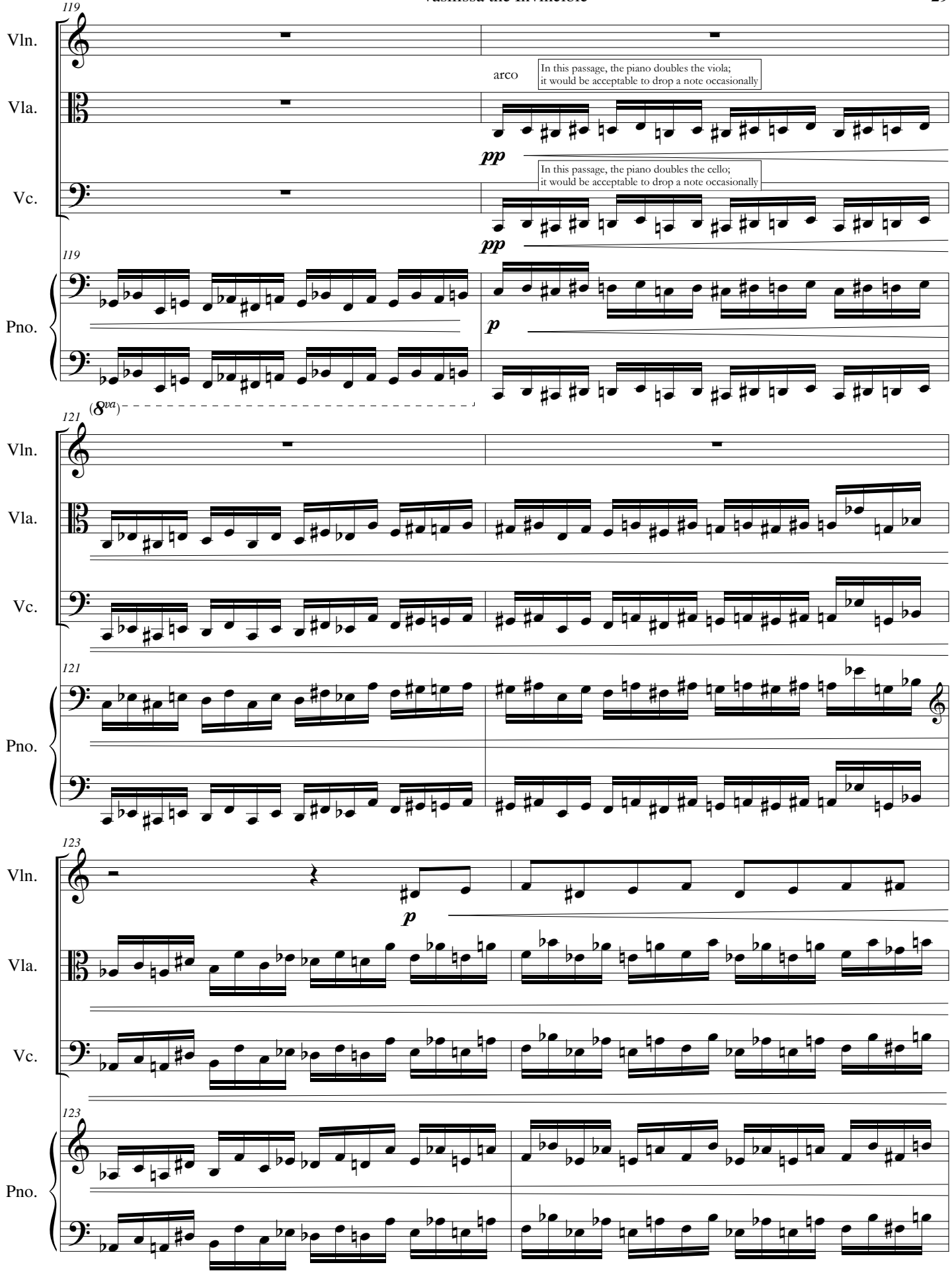

Calm (♩ = ca. 108)
ritardando
94
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
fff
mp
pp
ppp
8va
(8va)
Unsettled again (♩ = ca. 132)
97
ff
In this passage, the piano doubles the cello;
it would be acceptable to drop a note occasionally
This can be renotated on two staves if you prefer


99
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
ff
In this passage, the piano doubles the viola;
it would be acceptable to drop a note occasionally
101
103


105
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
9/16
107
4/4
mp
3
fff
This can be renotated with a single beam if you prefer
Ped.


109
Vln.
ff
mp
Vla.
ff
mp
Vc.
3
109
Pno.
ff
mp
Ped.
111
Vln.
ff
pp
Vla.
pp
Vc.
3
3
111
Pno.
ff
pp
Ped.


Calm (♩ = ca. 108)
molto rit.
113
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
fff
mp
fff
mf
pp
fff
p
Ped.
115
(♩ = ca. 48)
Unsettled again (♩ = ca. 132)
n
pizz.
n
pp
ppp
pp
ppp
8va
117
(8va)


119
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
arco
In this passage, the piano doubles the viola;
it would be acceptable to drop a note occasionally
pp
In this passage, the piano doubles the cello;
it would be acceptable to drop a note occasionally
pp
p
(8va)
121
123

125

Vln.

Vla.

Vc.

125

Pno.

126

Vln.

Vla.

Vc.

126

Pno.

ff

ff

ff

127

Vln.

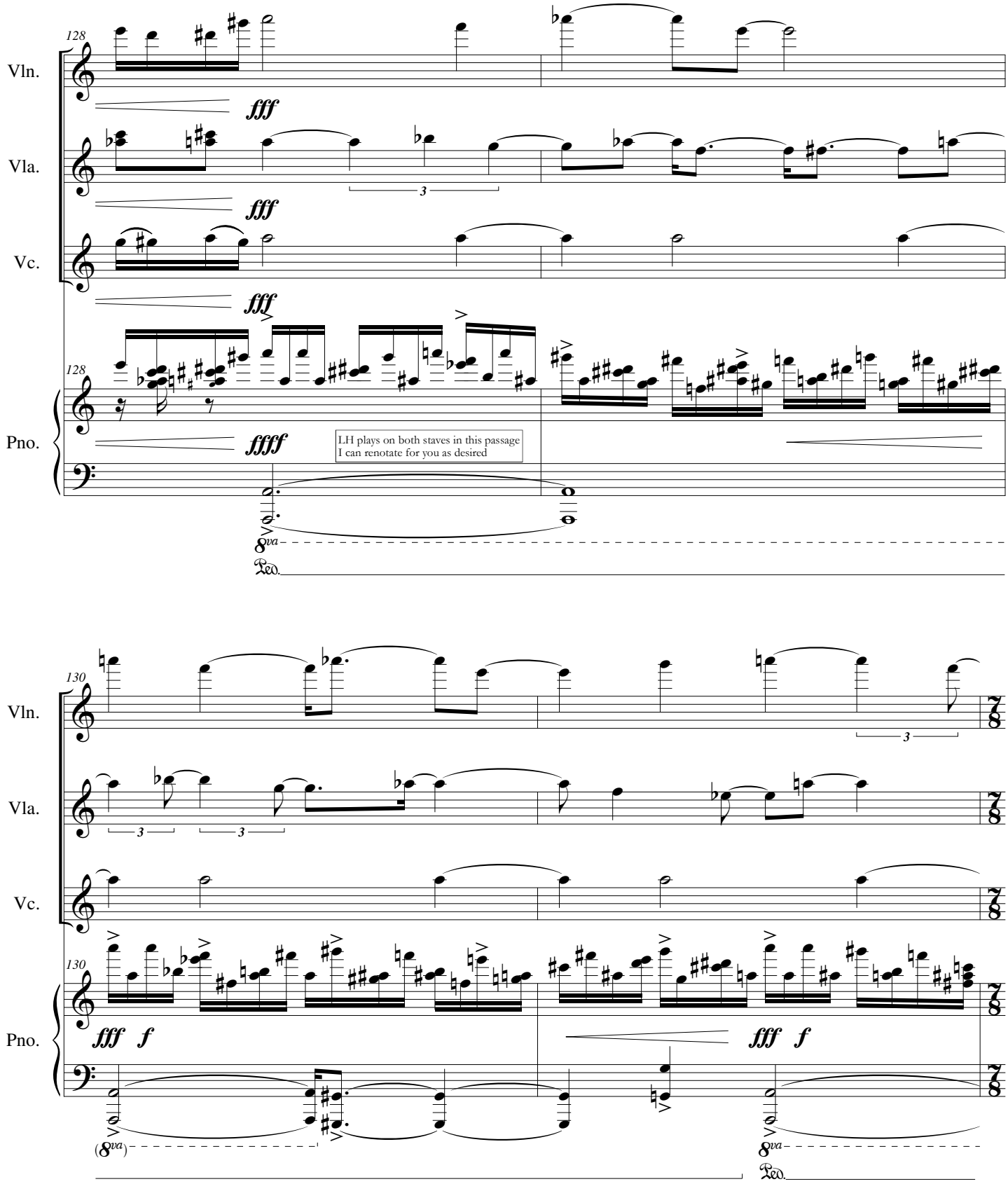
Vla.

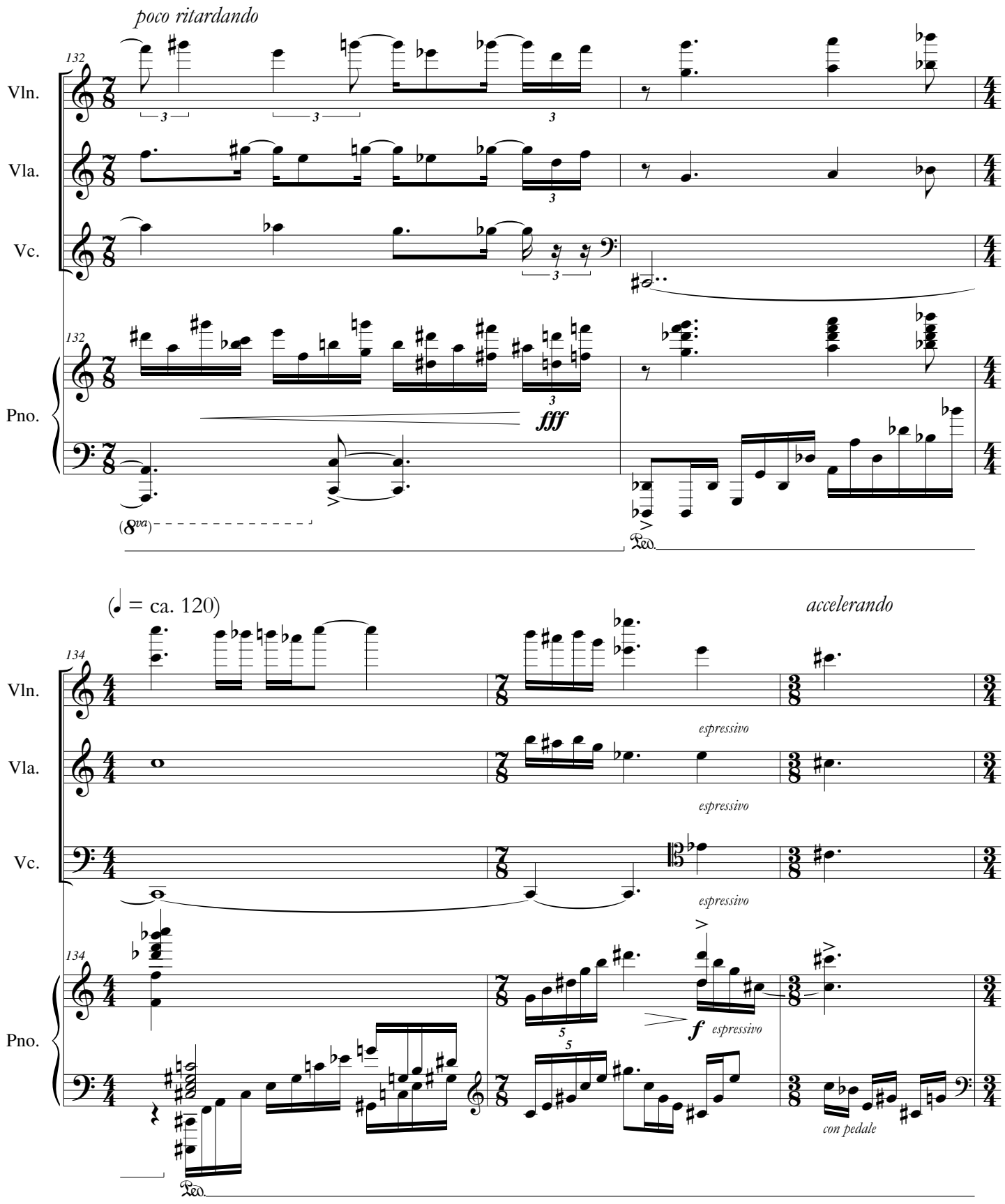
Vc.

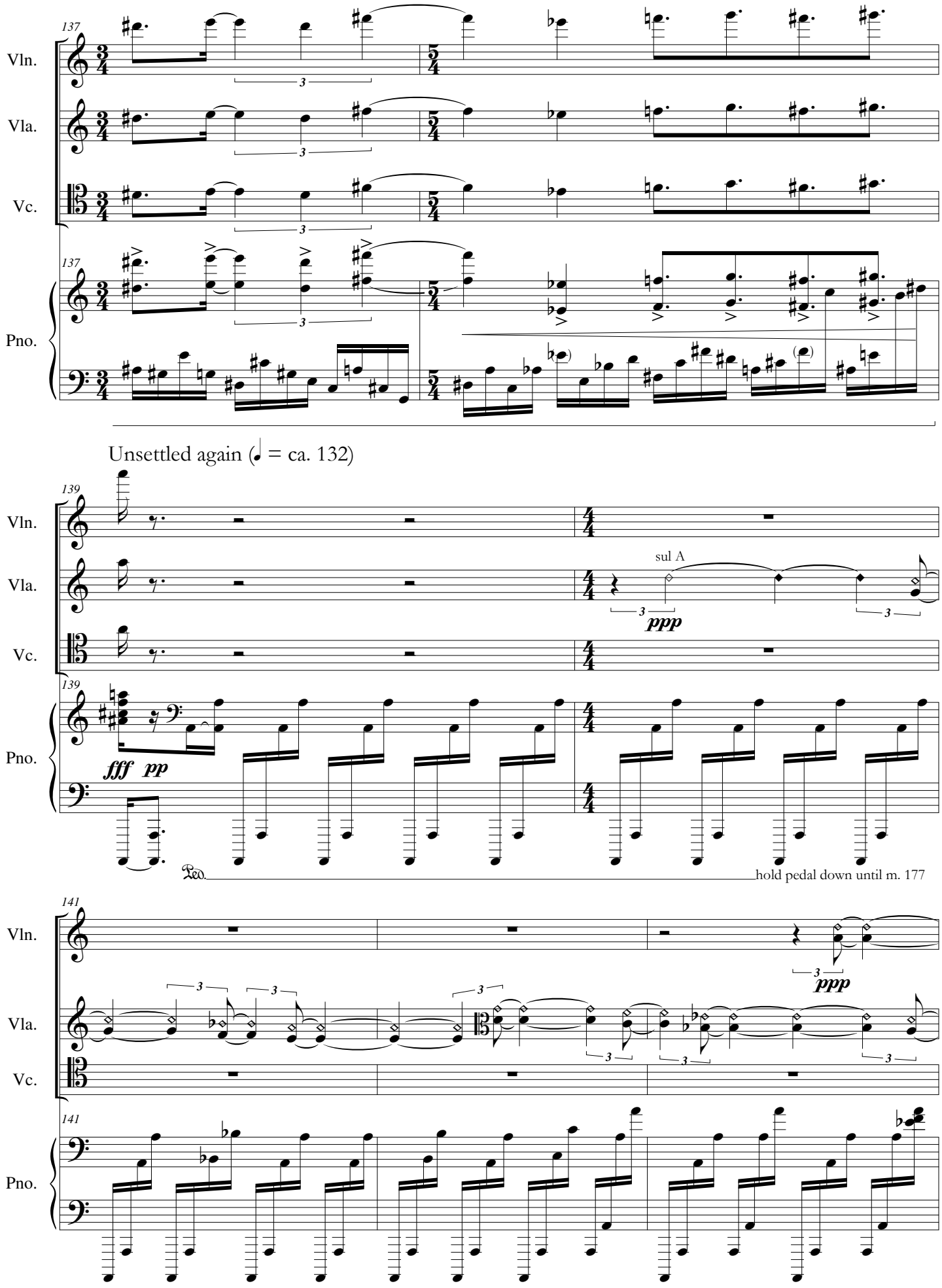
127

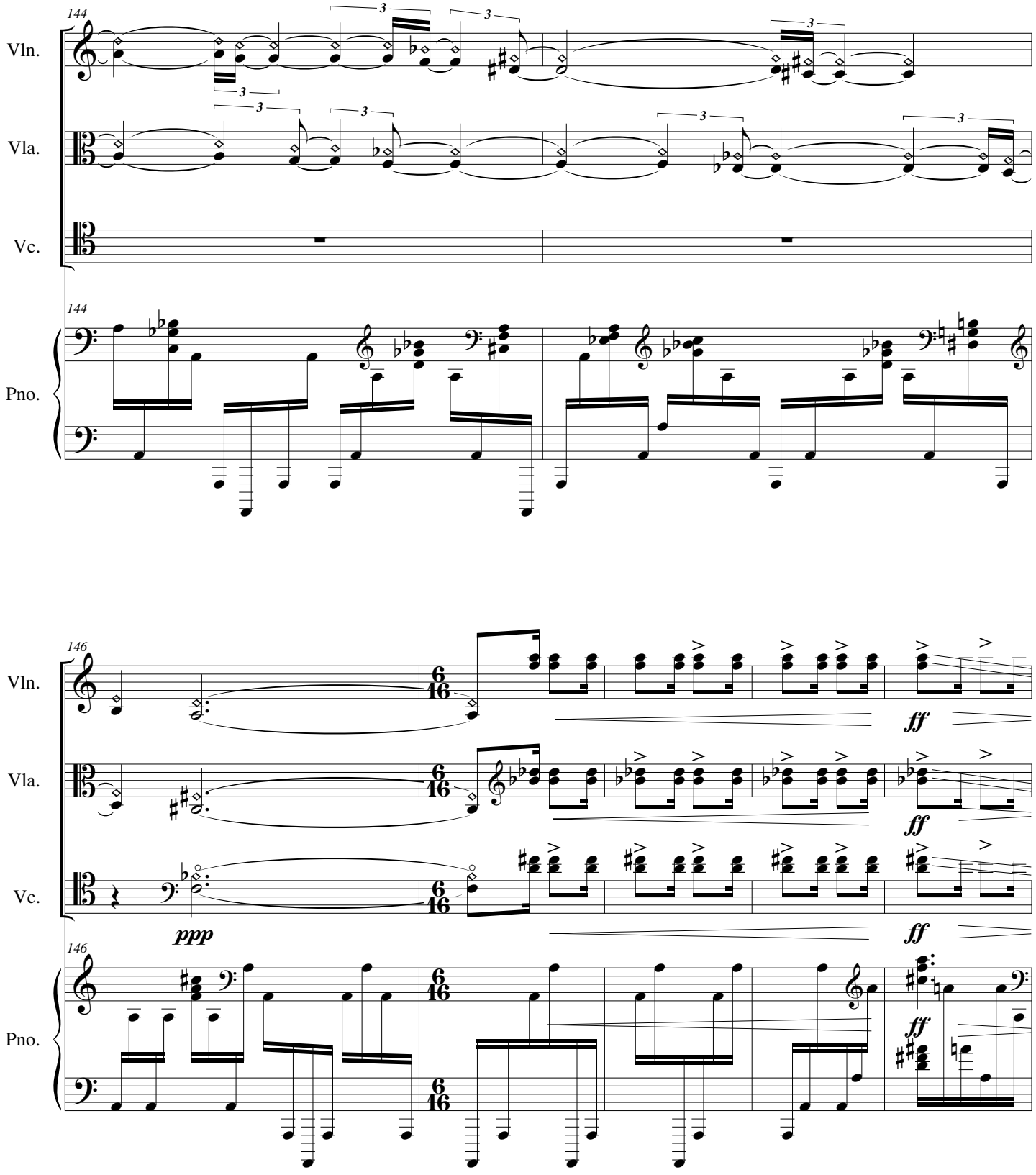
Pno.

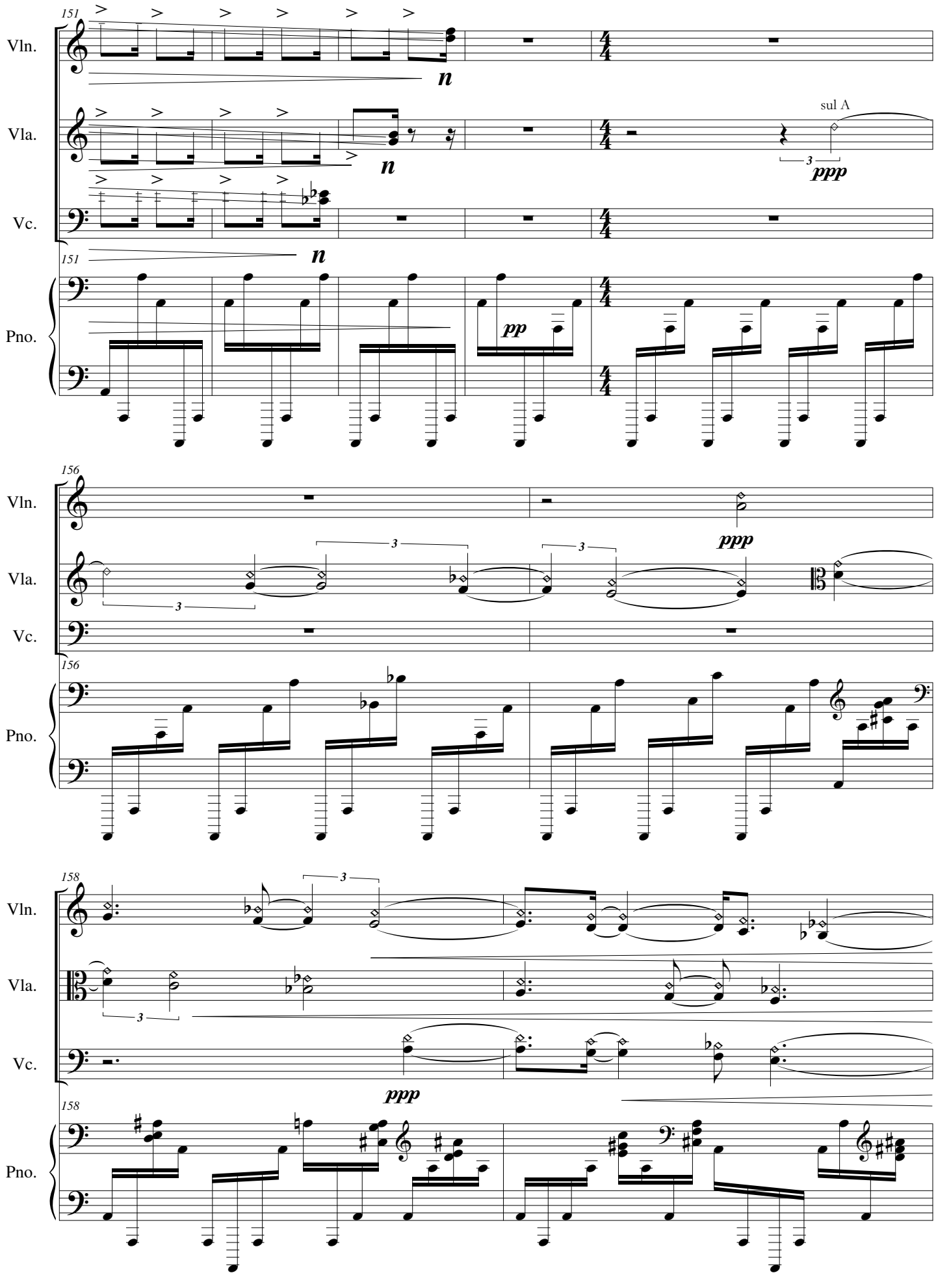
If necessary, it would be possible to remove a few notes in some of the chords in this measure

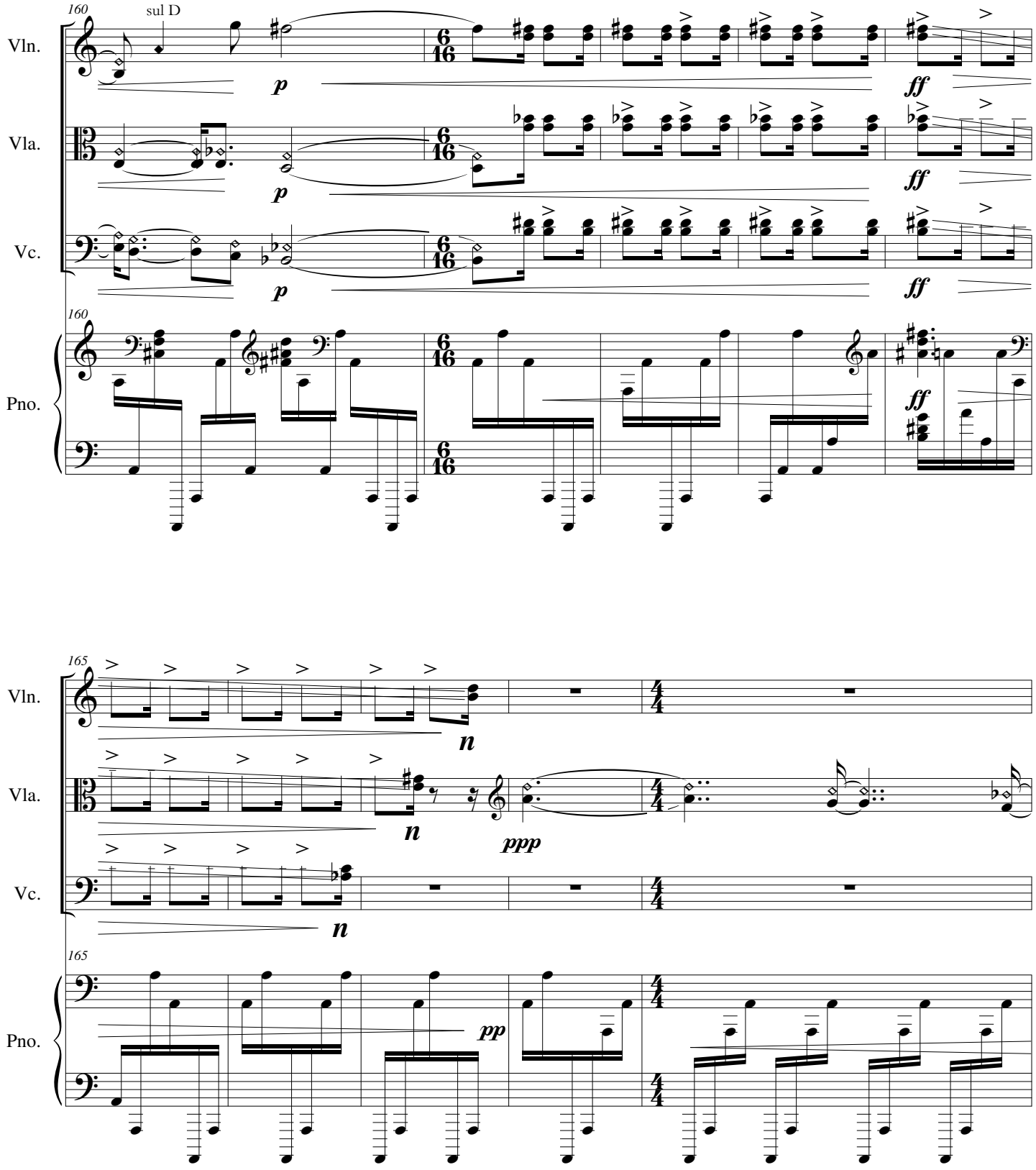

128
Vln.
fff
Vla.
3
fff
Vc.
fff
128
Pno.
fffff
LH plays on both staves in this passage
I can renotate for you as desired
8va
Ped.
130
Vln.
3
Vla.
3
3
Vc.
130
Pno.
fff f
fff f
(8va)
8va
Ped.

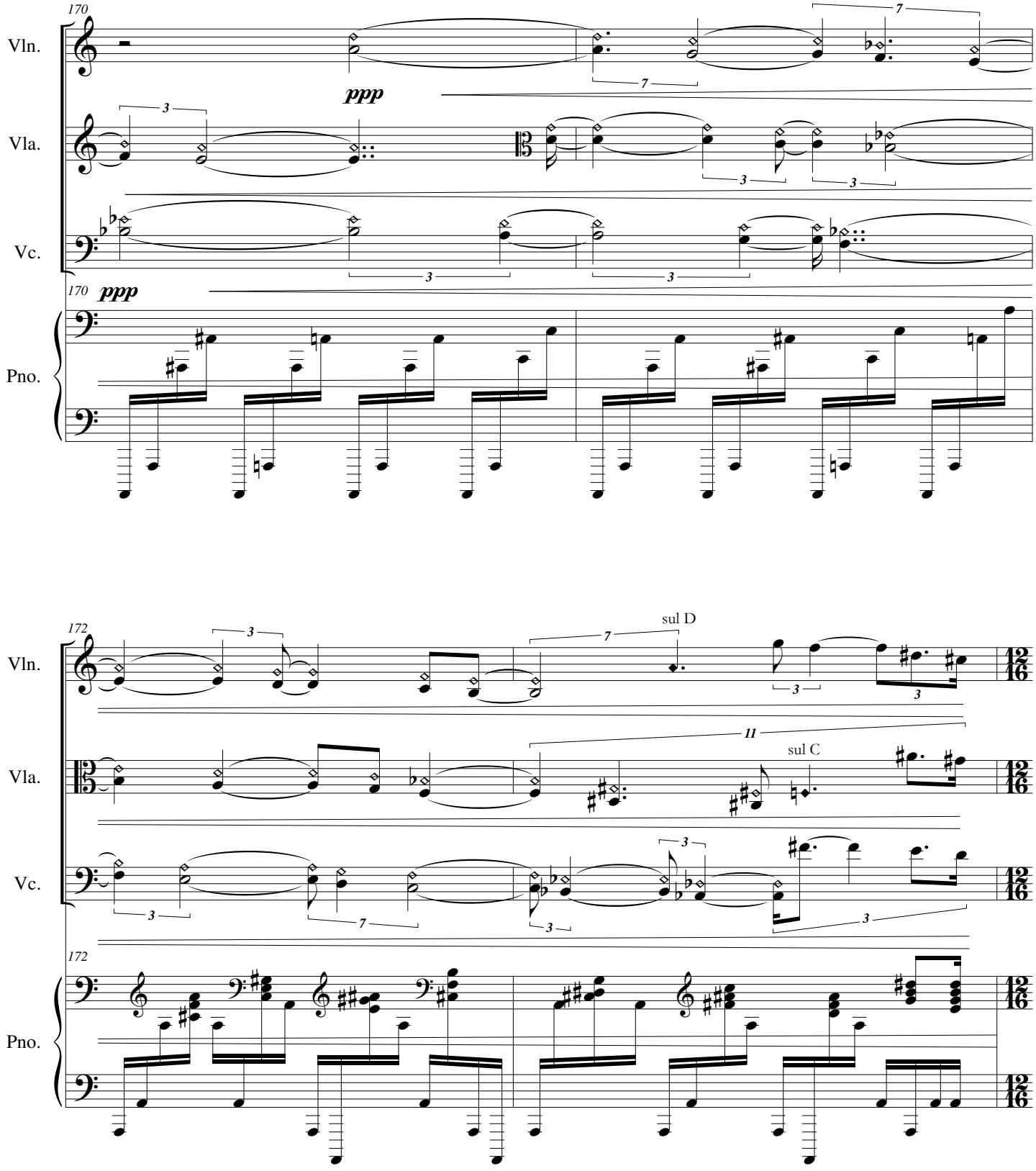

poco ritardando
132
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
fff
(8va)
Ped.
(♩ = ca. 120)
accelerando
134
espressivo
f espressivo
con pedale

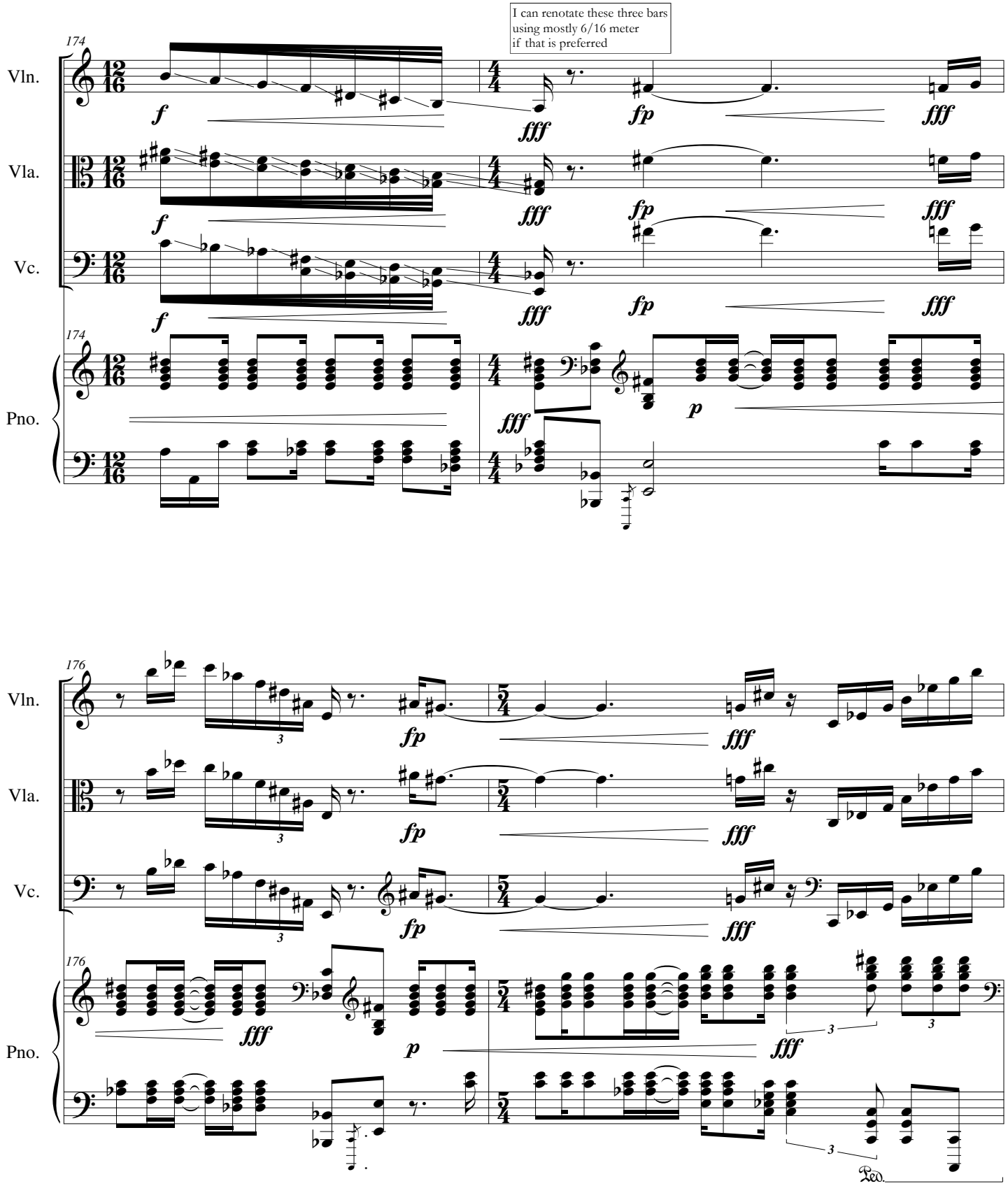

137
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
Unsettled again (♩ = ca. 132)
139
sul A
ppp
fff pp
Ped.
hold pedal down until m. 177
141
ppp

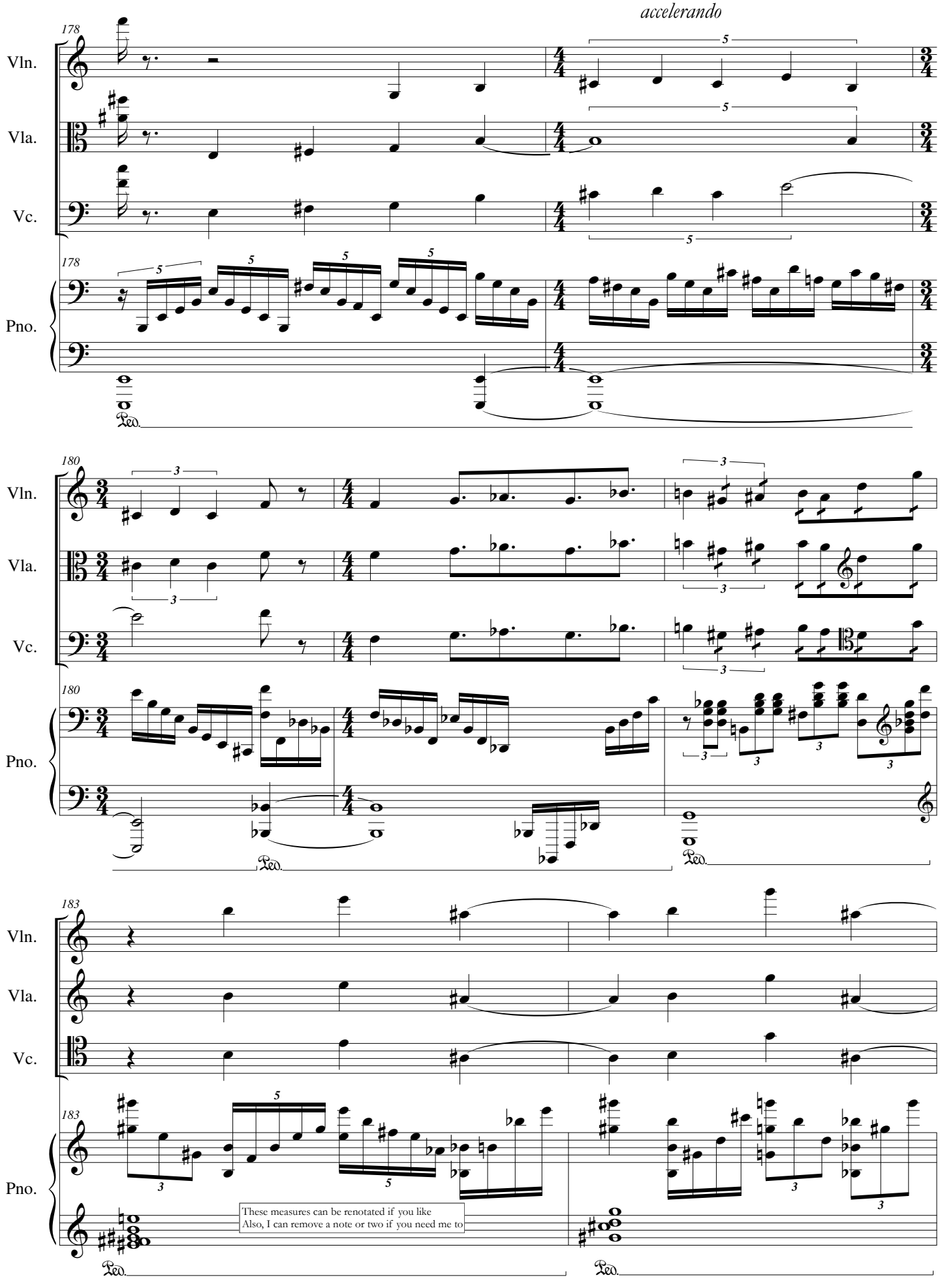

144
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
144
Pno.
146
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
ppp
ff
ff
ff
146
Pno.
ff

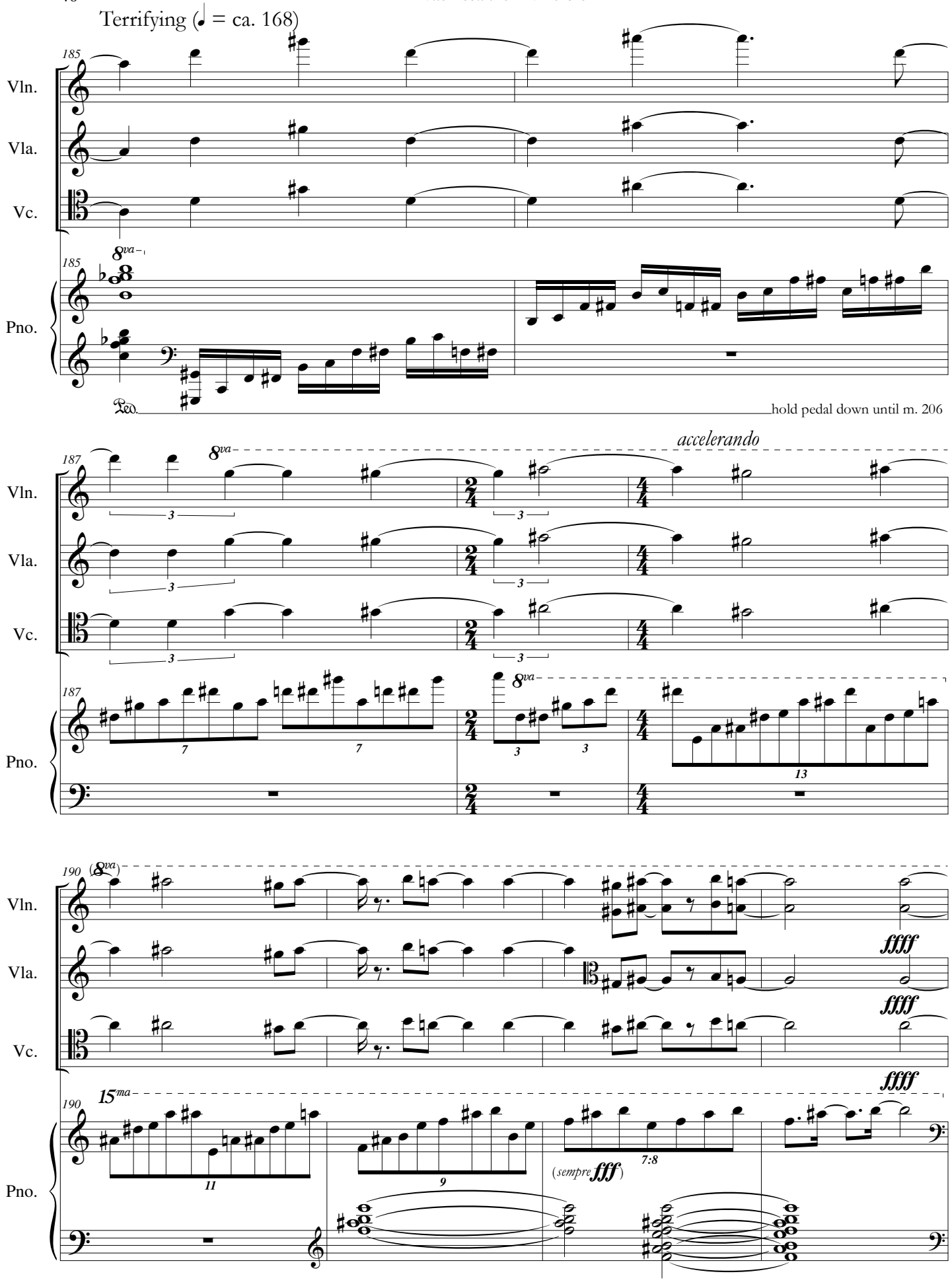

151
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
n
sul A
3
ppp
pp
156
158

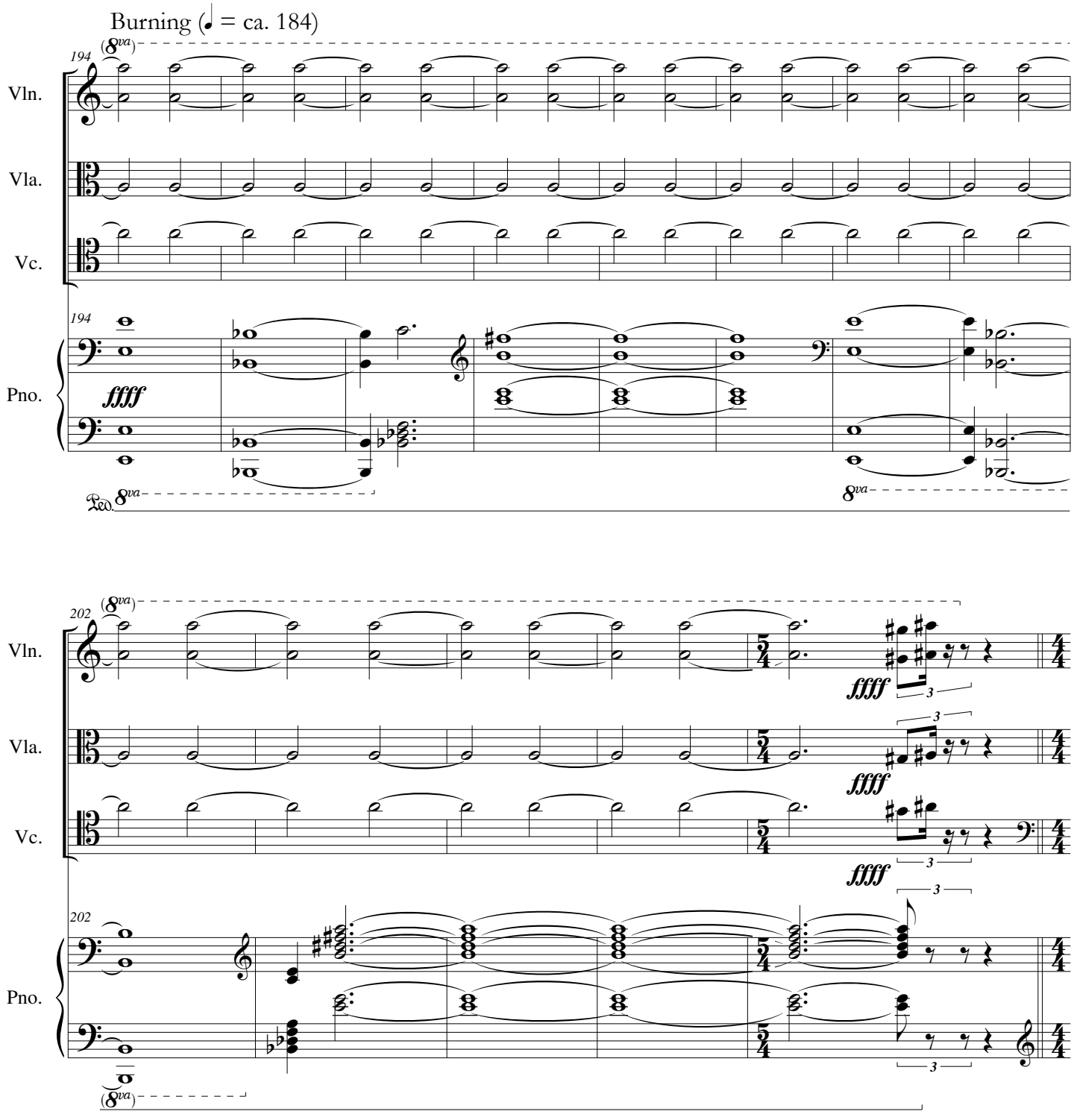

160
sul D
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
p
ff
6/16
165
n
ppp
pp
4/4

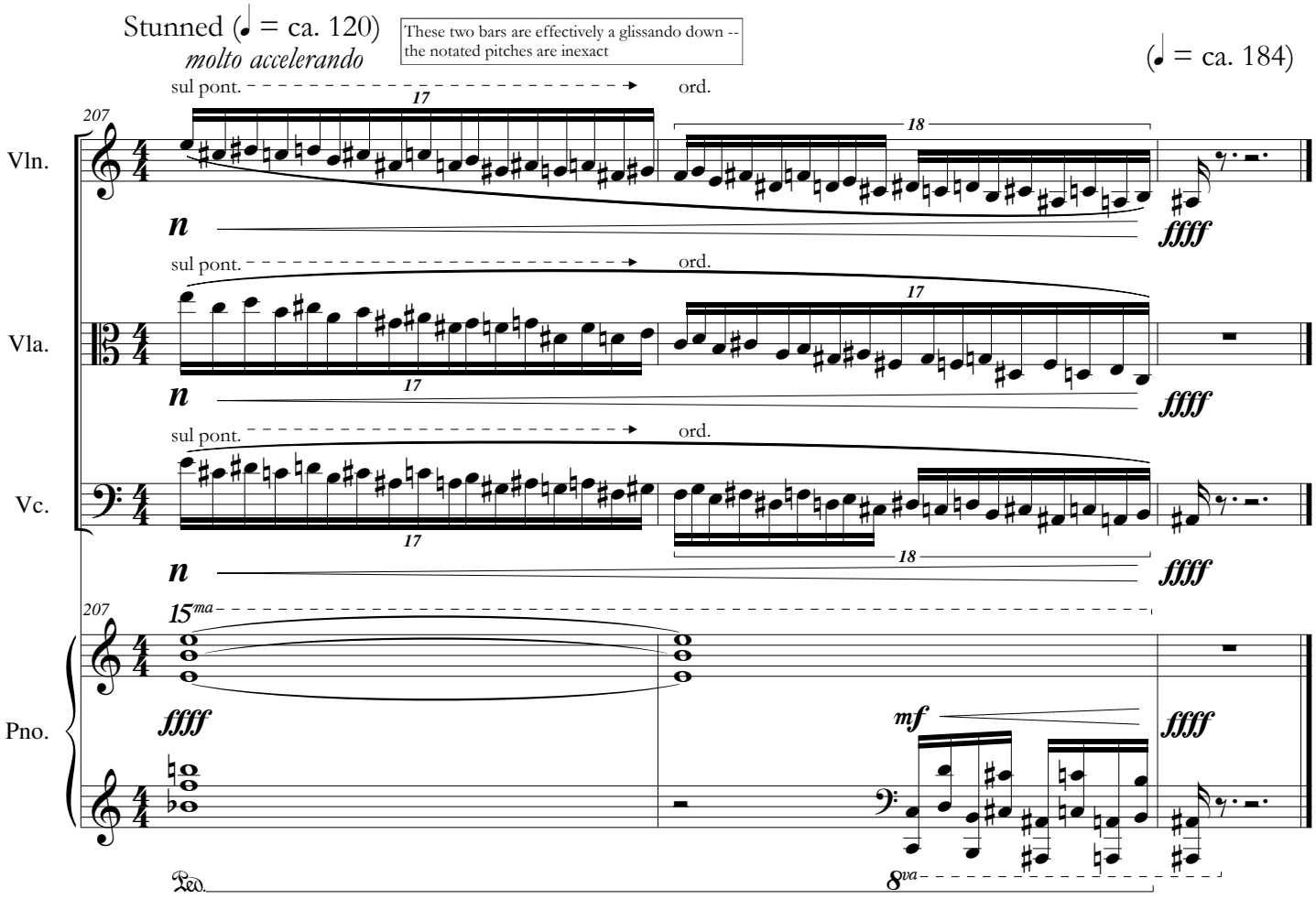

170
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
ppp
172
sul D
sul C


I can renotate these three bars
using mostly 6/16 meter
if that is preferred
174
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
f
fff
fp
p
176
3
Ped.


accelerando
178
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
180
183
These measures can be renotated if you like
Also, I can remove a note or two if you need me to


Terrifying (♩ = ca. 168)
185
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
8va
Ped.
hold pedal down until m. 206
187
accelerando
190
(8va)
15ma
ffff
(sempre fff)
7:8


Burning (♩ = ca. 184)
194
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
ffff
Ped.
8va
202
5/4
4/4
3


Stunned (♩ = ca. 120)
molto accelerando
These two bars are effectively a glissando down -- the notated pitches are inexact
(♩ = ca. 184)
Vln.
Vla.
Vc.
Pno.
sul pont.
ord.
17
18
n
ffff
207
15ma
mf
8va
Ped.