The Black Path

for string quartet

Cameron McArthur

2021

Programme Note

The ‘Black Path’ is a track that follows the southern bank of the river Tees. It is ancient: in the late 5th century it formed the boundary between the Anglian Kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia. Later, when York was under Viking rule, the path marked the north-eastern corner of Eric Bloodaxe’s kingdom. For the last few decades, it has been a barren route through the abolished heart of industrial Teesside. Once used by sailors and steelworkers on their daily commute, it carves a scar between blast furnaces, cranes, and heavy pipelines, working steadily out from the town to the mouth of the Tees and Coatham marshes. Grimy steel slag, a by-product of the (now abandoned) steel works along the route was used for the foundations for the path. This slag, combined with the accumulation of industrial cinders underfoot, helped give the path its modern name. It’s an arresting and unique landscape, and I am regularly struck by its semi-wildness, as I drive above it on one of my own weekly commutes. An evocative image, it was the inspiration for this, my second string quartet.

The work is split into two movements. The first establishes a traditional score-as-absolute approach, where the performers adhere to a precisely notated, traditionally designed score. The sense of momentum is largely controlled by pitch relationships, texture, and by shapes, gestures, and phrases. The performers’ role is simply to convey what they encounter; they are expressive, but always serving the music (and thereby, my intentions). In the second movement, the performers are given increasing amounts of control over the sense of musical energy, making decisions about tempo, metre, pitch, and the general flow of the music. Sometimes one performer takes charge; sometimes all four musicians carve their own path. Eventually, all four players return to follow the precise notation in the score - but the musical momentum is different. The energy has changed, and it cannot be reset.

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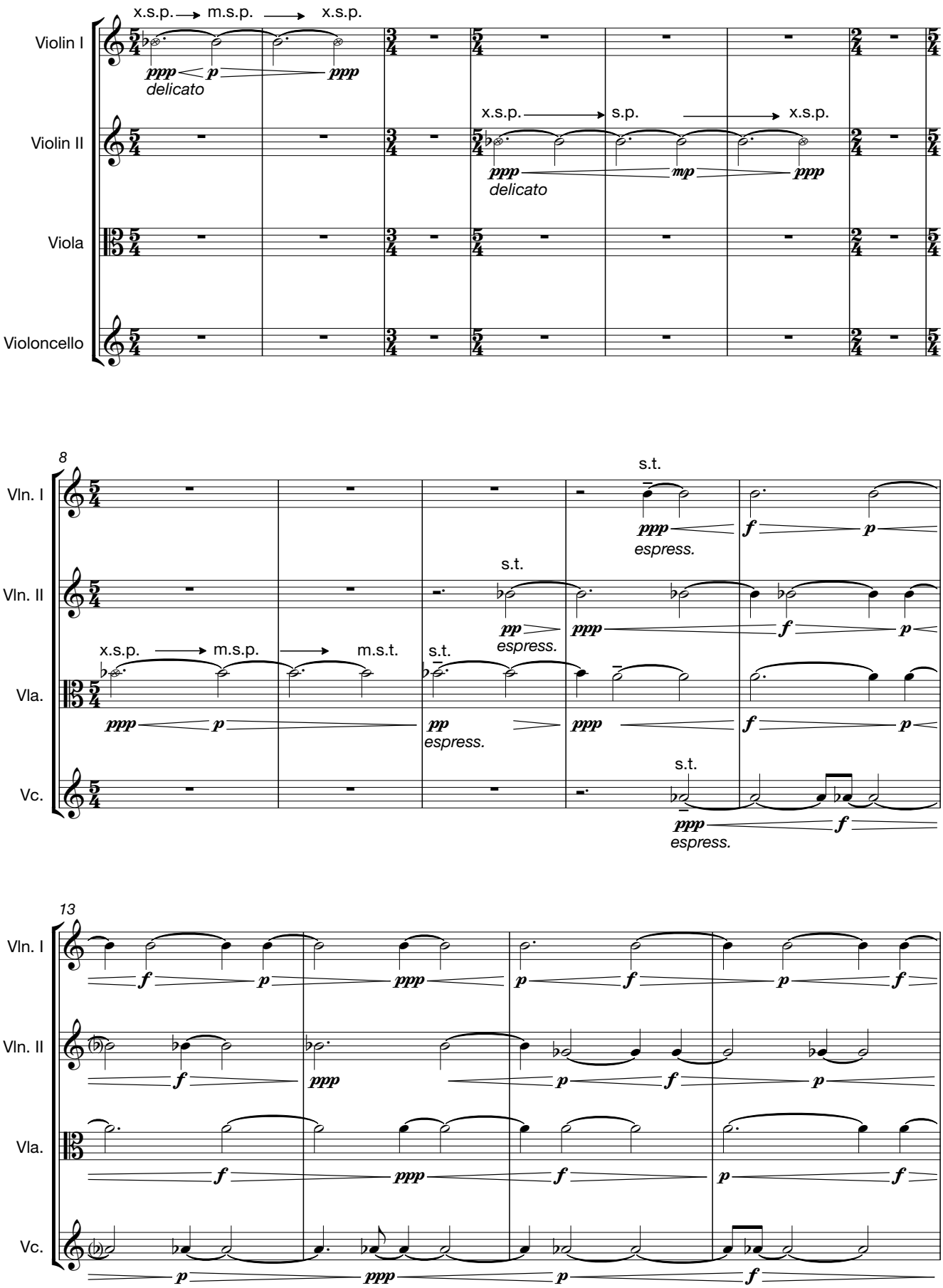
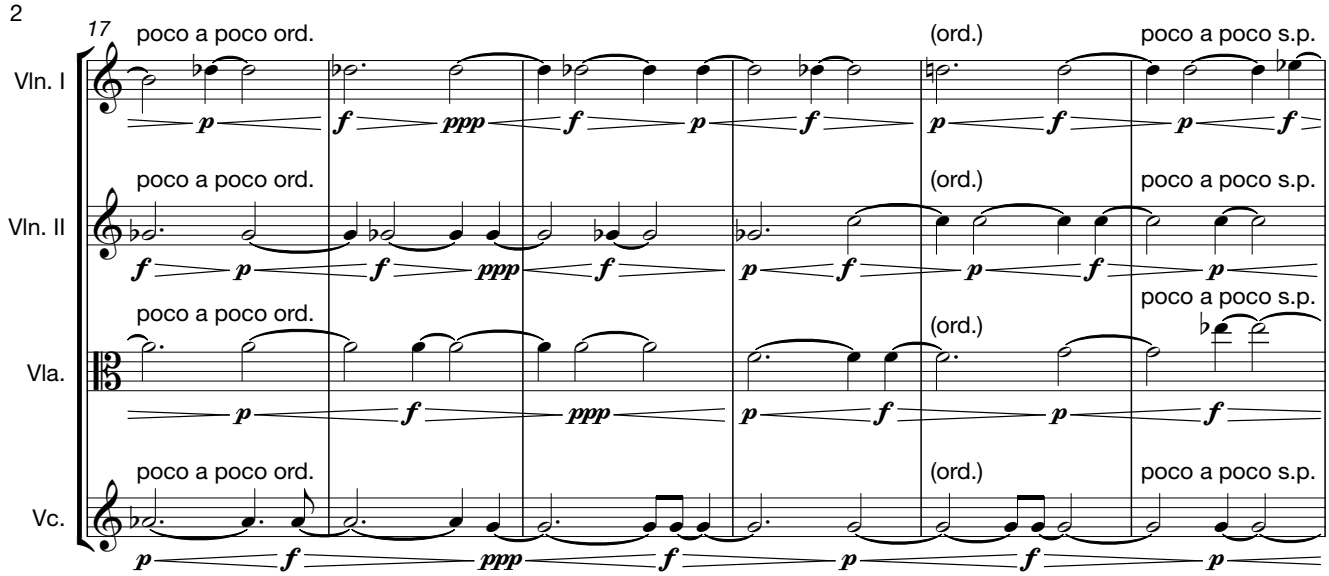
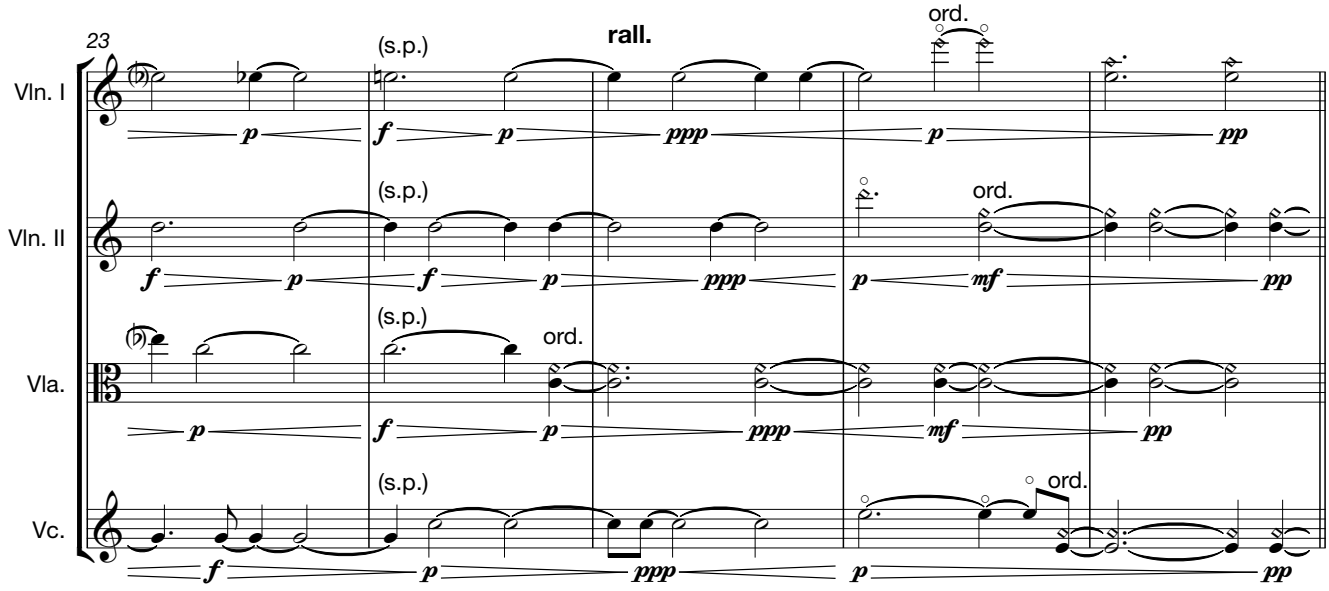
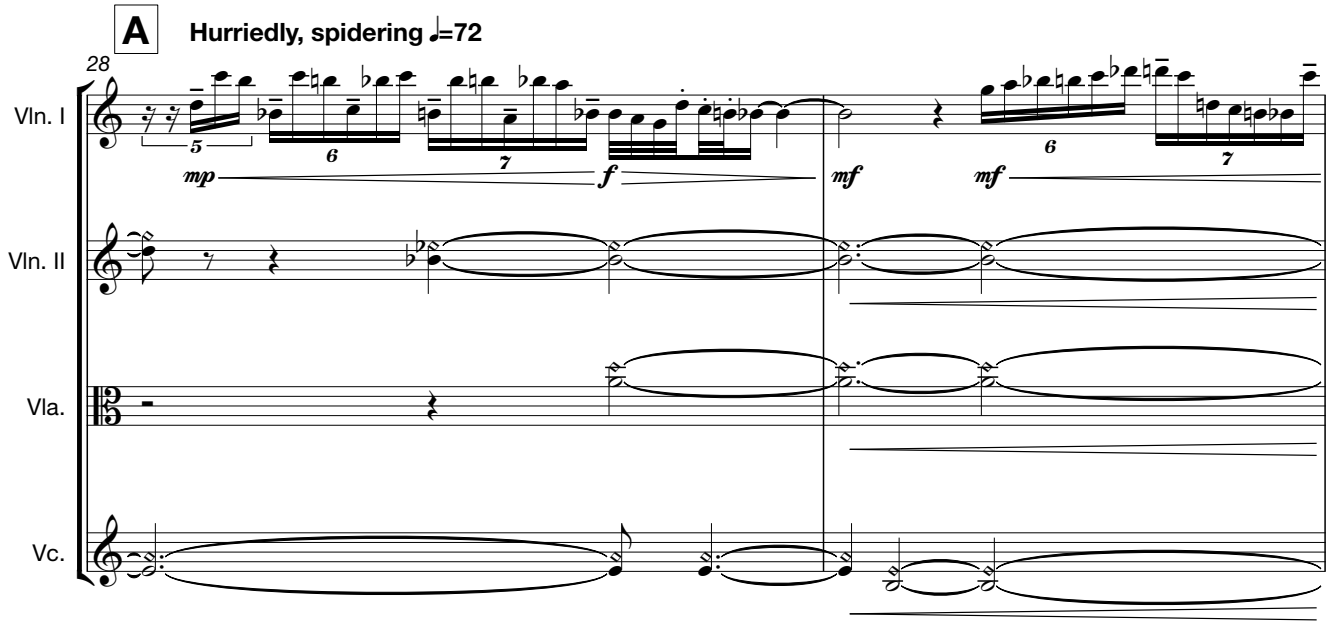
I

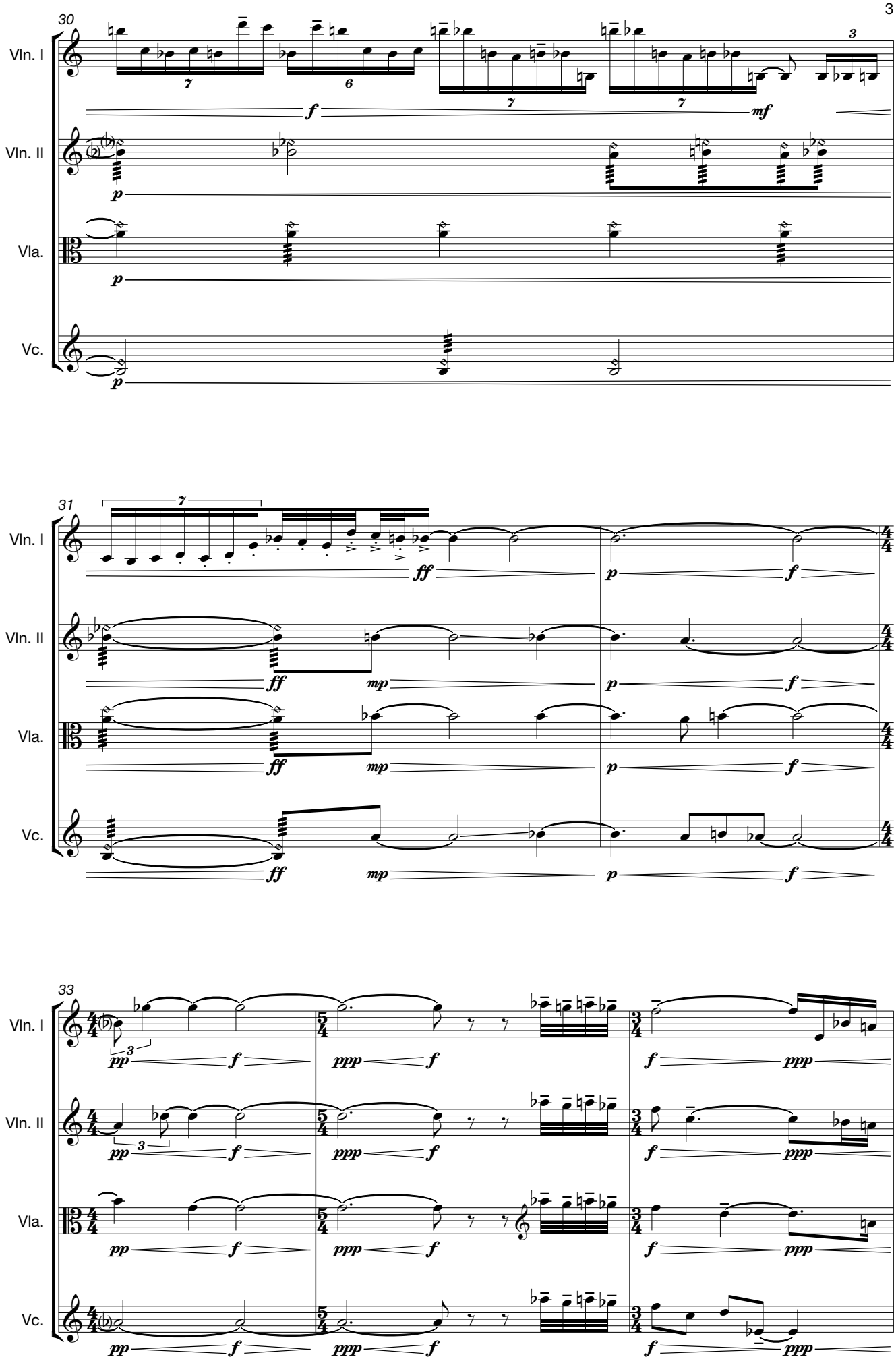
Glistening ♩=96

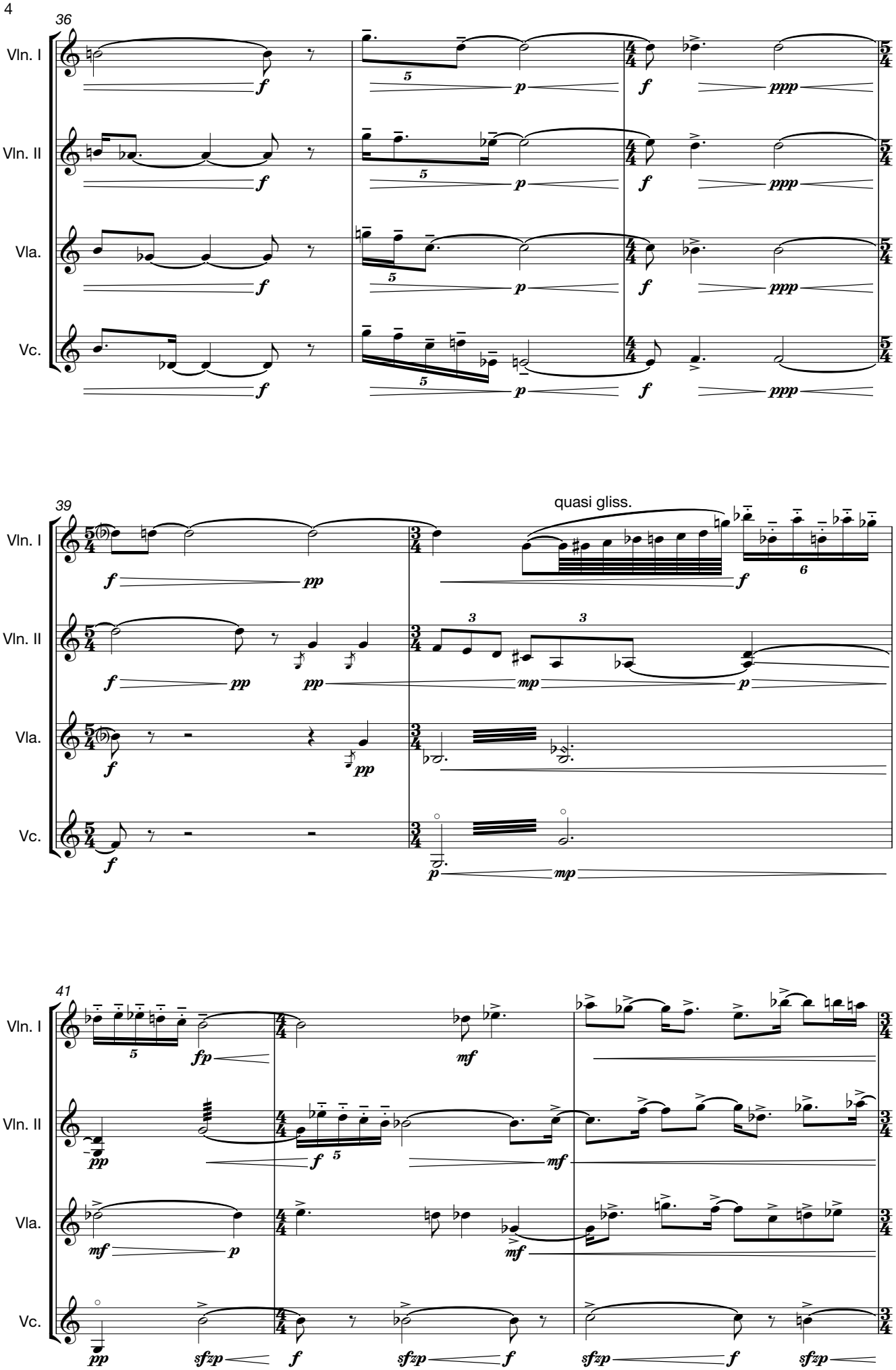


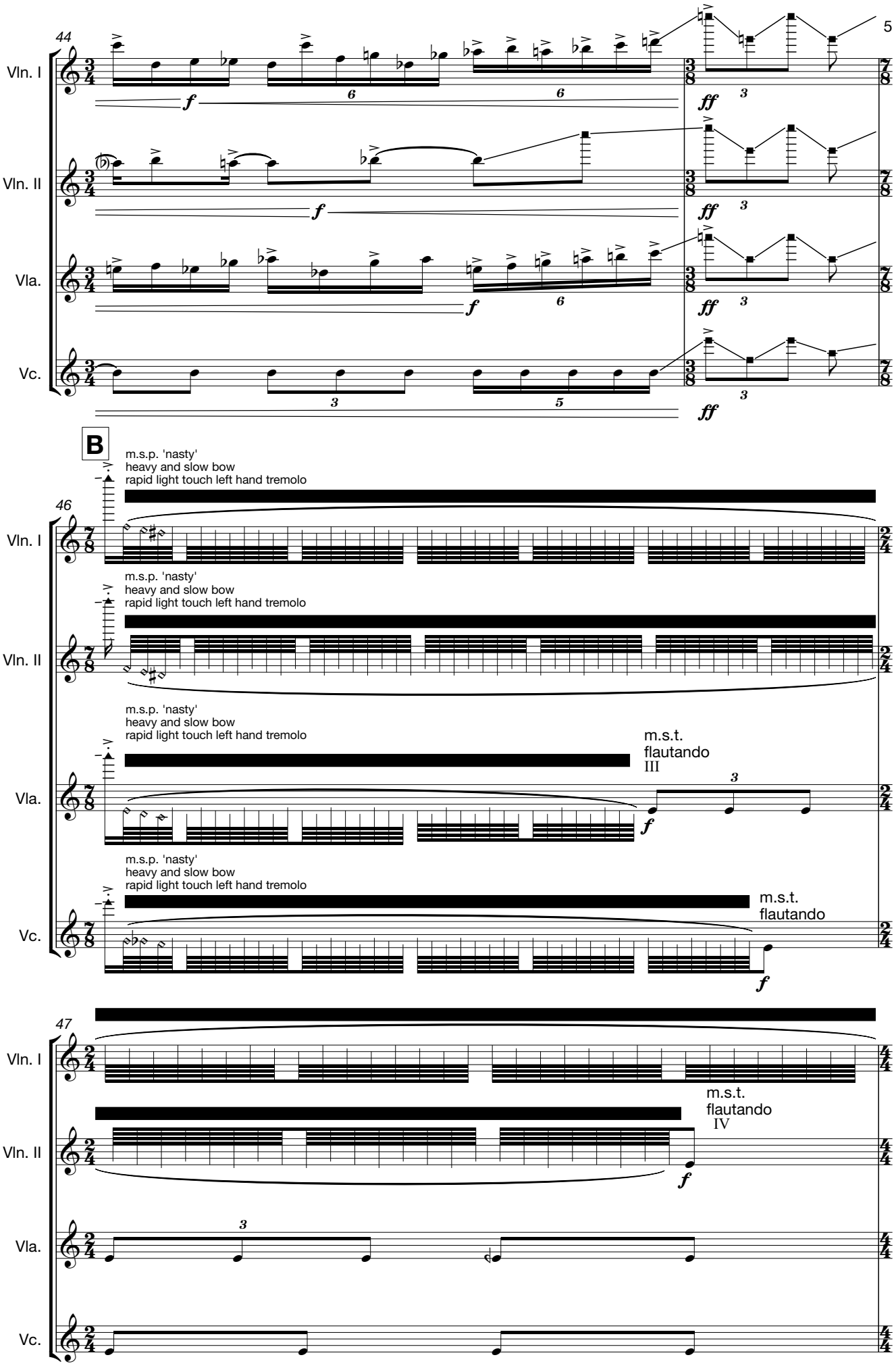

17
poco a poco ord.
(ord.)
poco a poco s.p.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

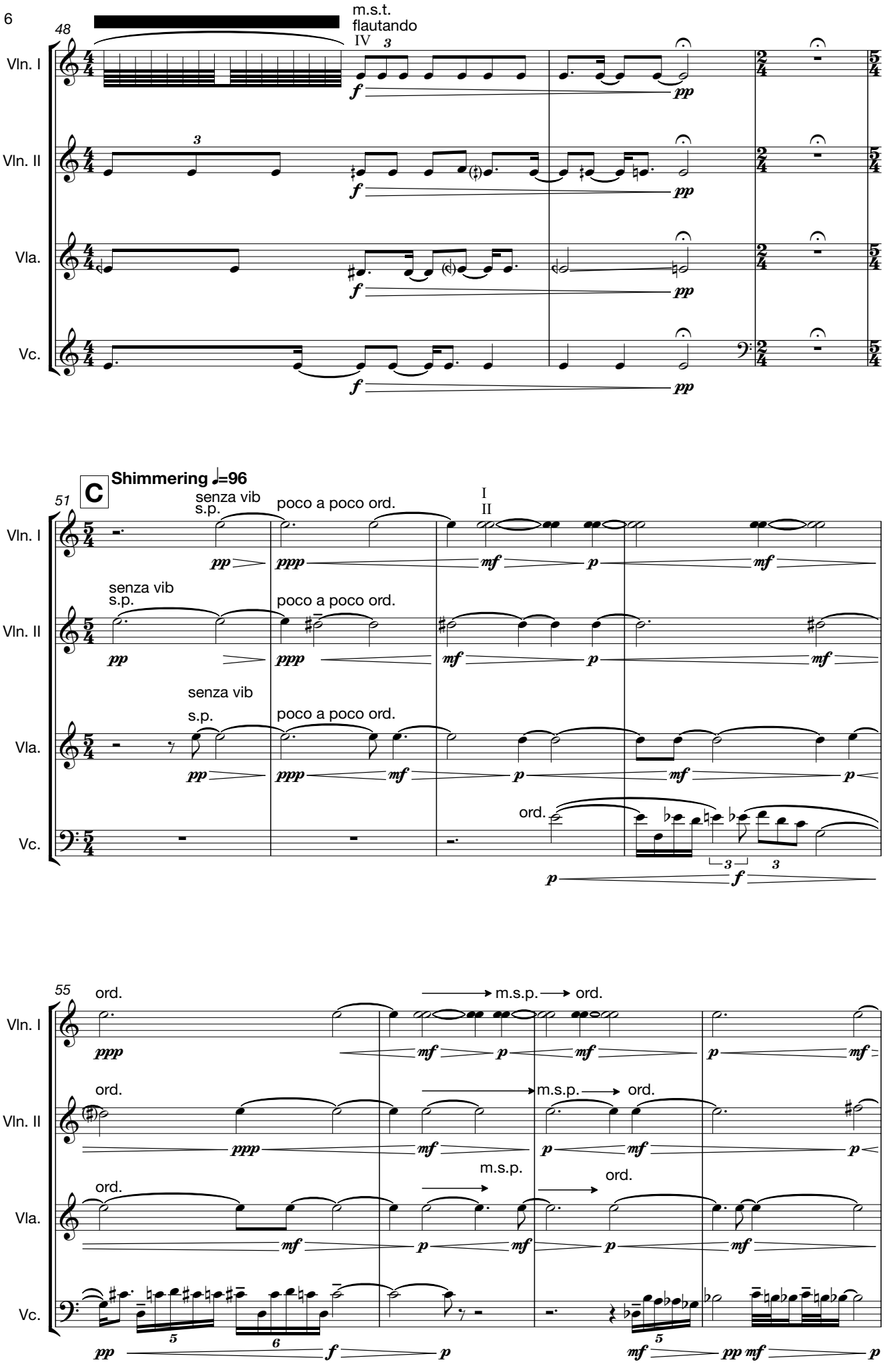

23
rall.
(s.p.)
ord.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

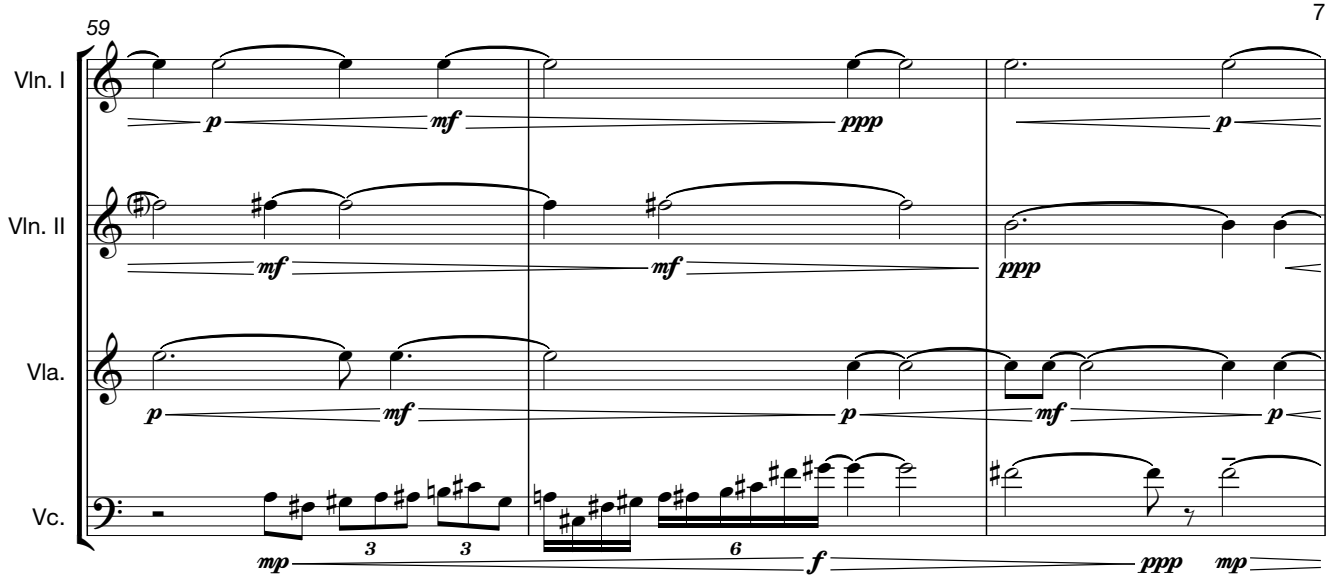

A
Hurriedly, spidering ♩=72
28
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

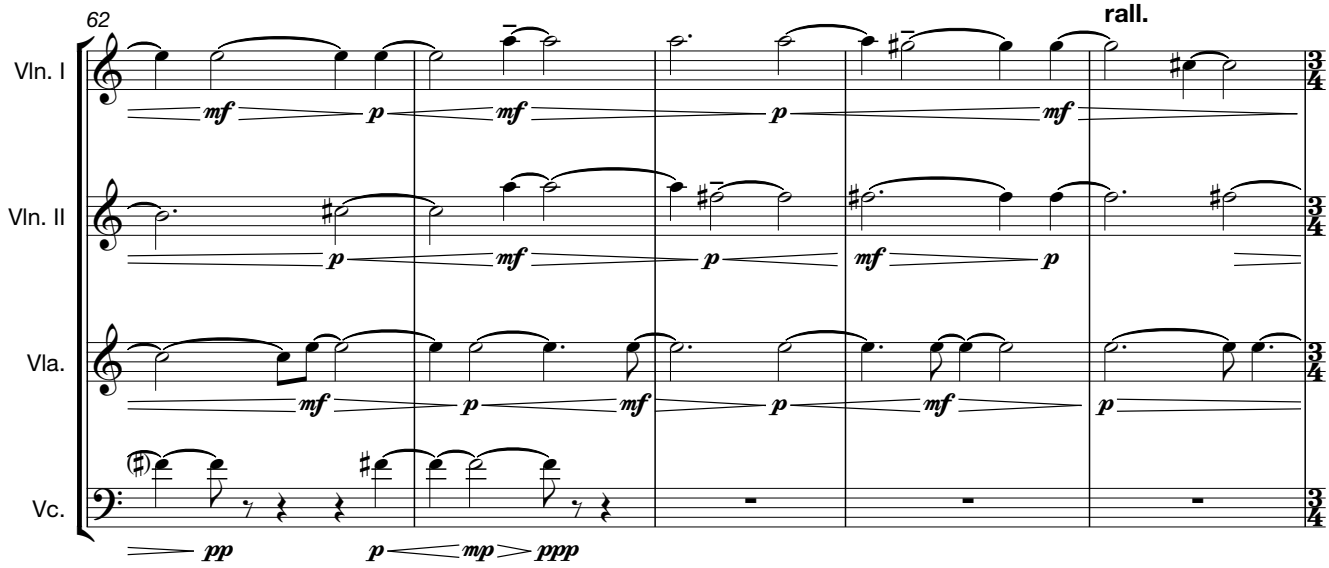

30
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
31
33

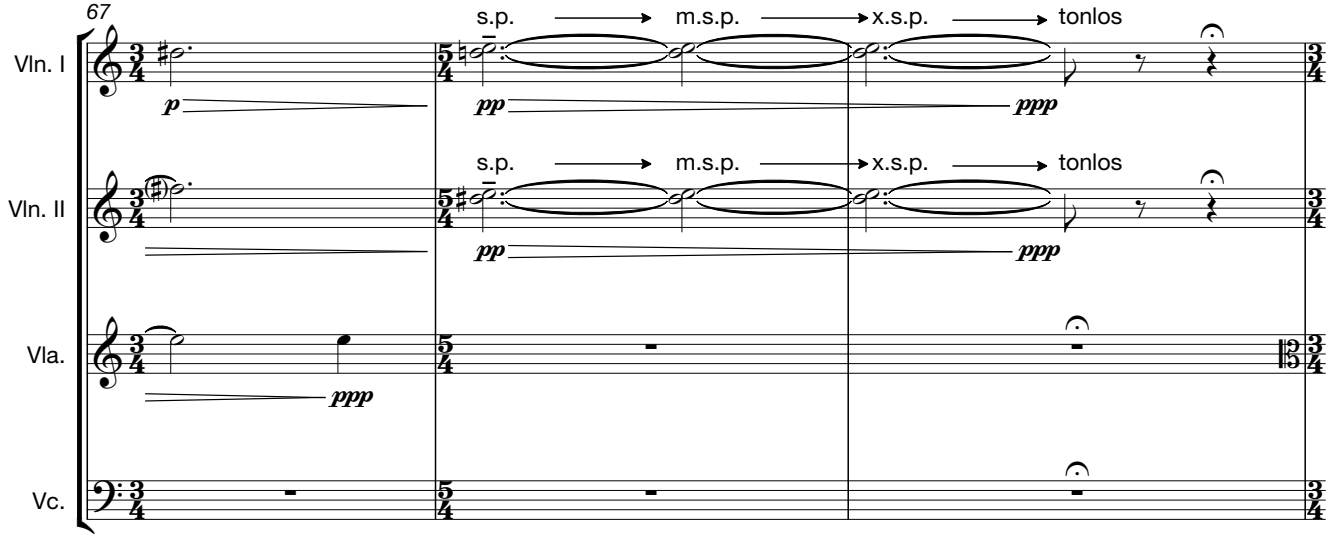

36
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
39
quasi gliss.
41


44
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
f
ff
B
m.s.p. 'nasty'
heavy and slow bow
rapid light touch left hand tremolo
46
m.s.t.
flautando
III
m.s.t.
flautando
47
m.s.t.
flautando
IV


48
m.s.t.
flautando
IV
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
f
pp
51
C
Shimmering ♩=96
senza vib
s.p.
poco a poco ord.
I
II
pp
ppp
mf
p
ord.
55
m.s.p.
ord.


59
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
p
mf
ppp
p
mf
mf
ppp
p
mf
p
mf
p
mp
3
3
6
f
ppp
mp


62
rall.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
mf
p
mf
p
mf
p
mf
p
mf
p
mf
p
mf
p
pp
p
mp
ppp


67
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
s.p.
m.s.p.
x.s.p.
tonlos
p
pp
ppp
s.p.
m.s.p.
x.s.p.
tonlos
pp
ppp
ppp

D **Dark, heavy, and rich ♩=120**

70

Vln. I — ord.

Vln. II — (ord.)

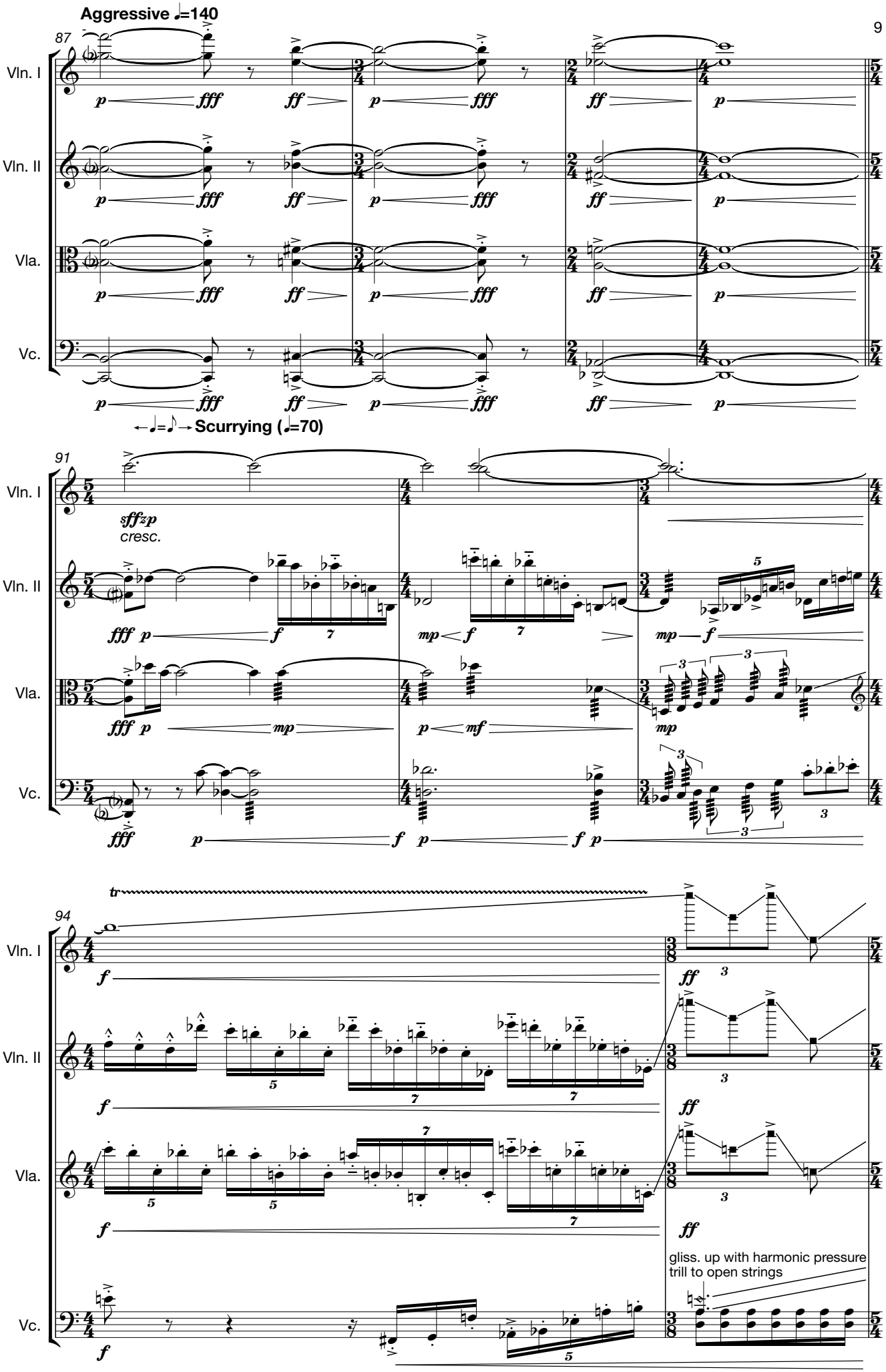
Vla. — (ord.)

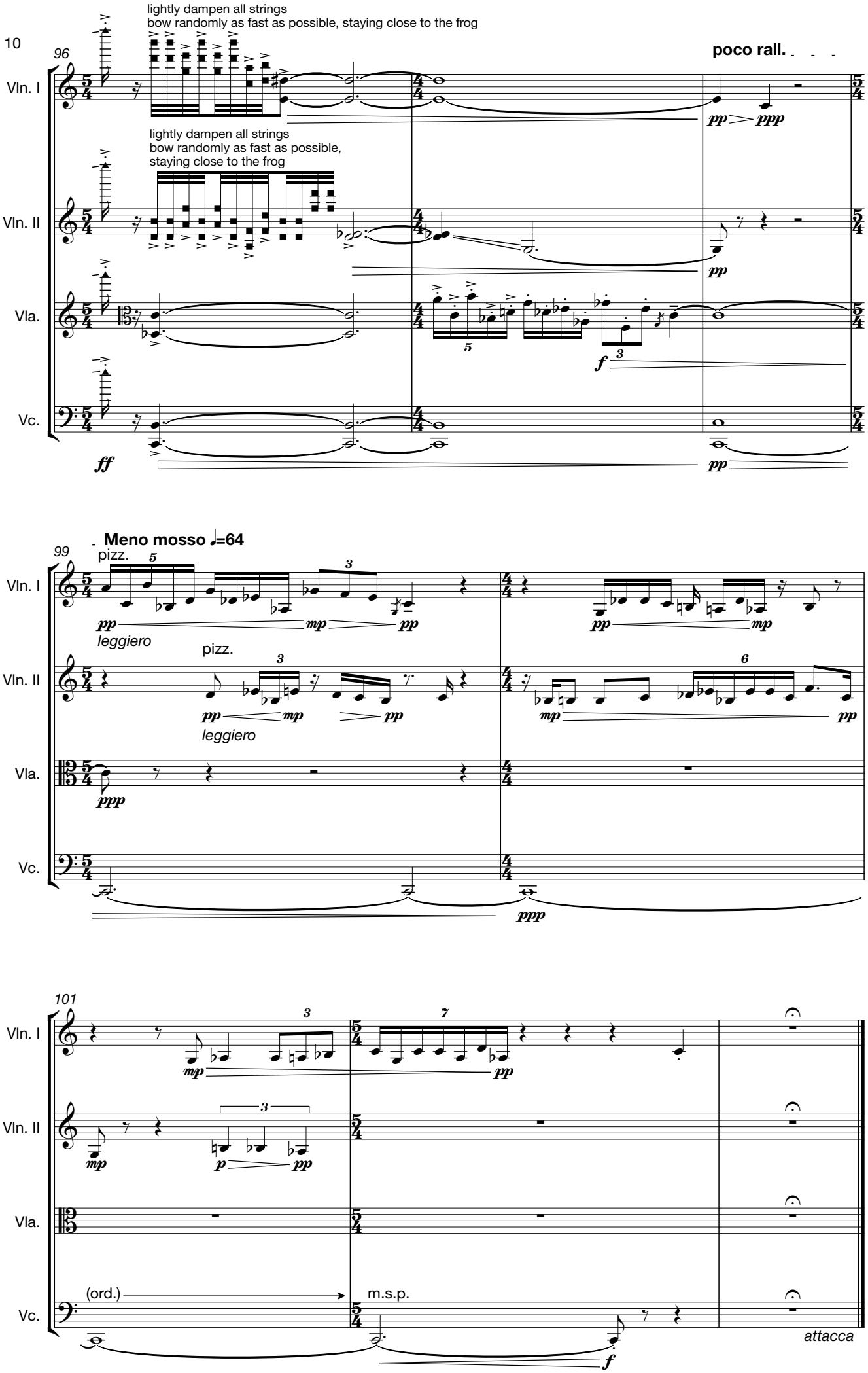
Vc. — ord.

78

poco accel.

83

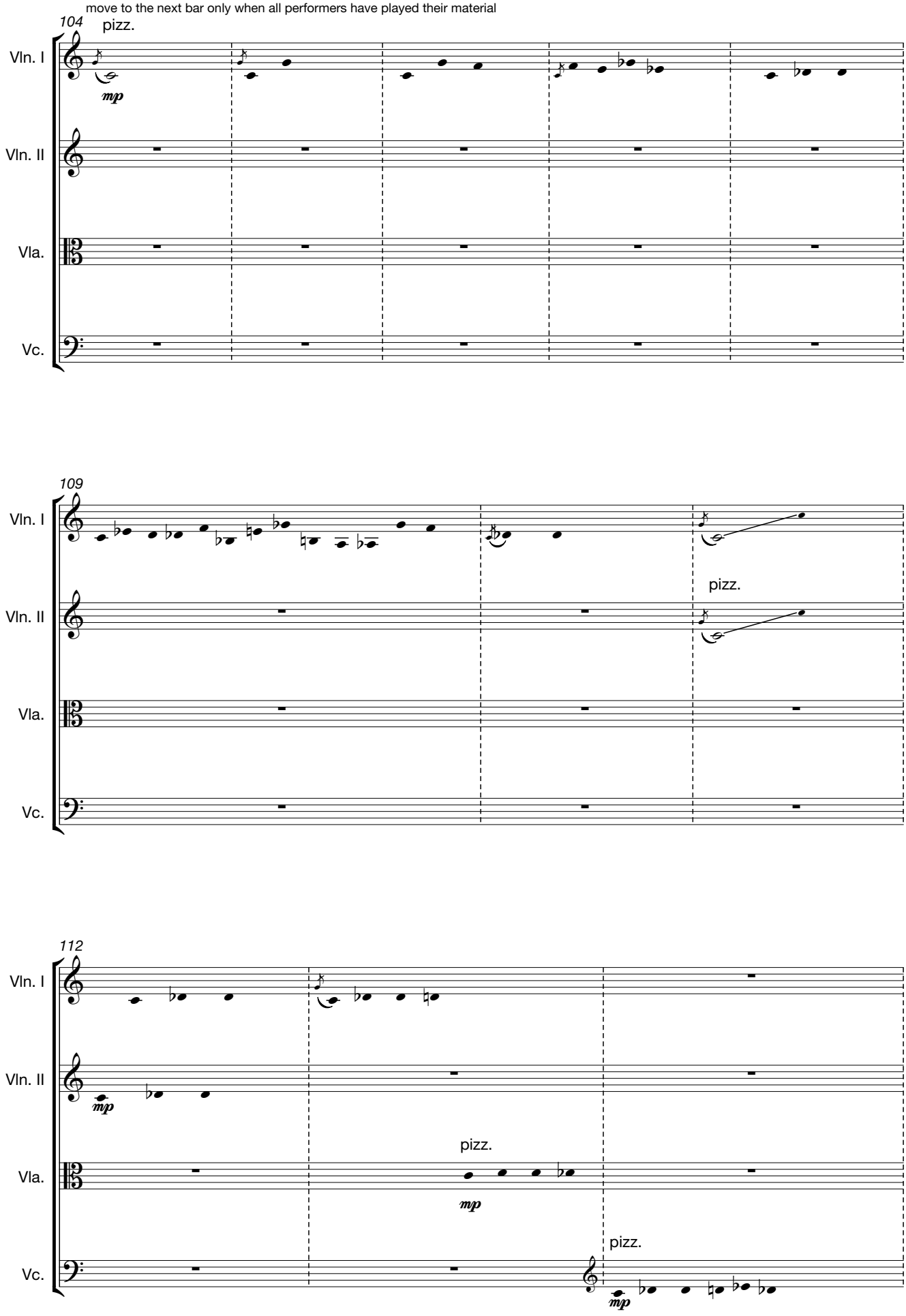

Aggressive ♩=140
87
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
←♩=♪→ Scurrying (♩=70)
91
sffzp
cresc.
94
tr
gliss. up with harmonic pressure
trill to open strings

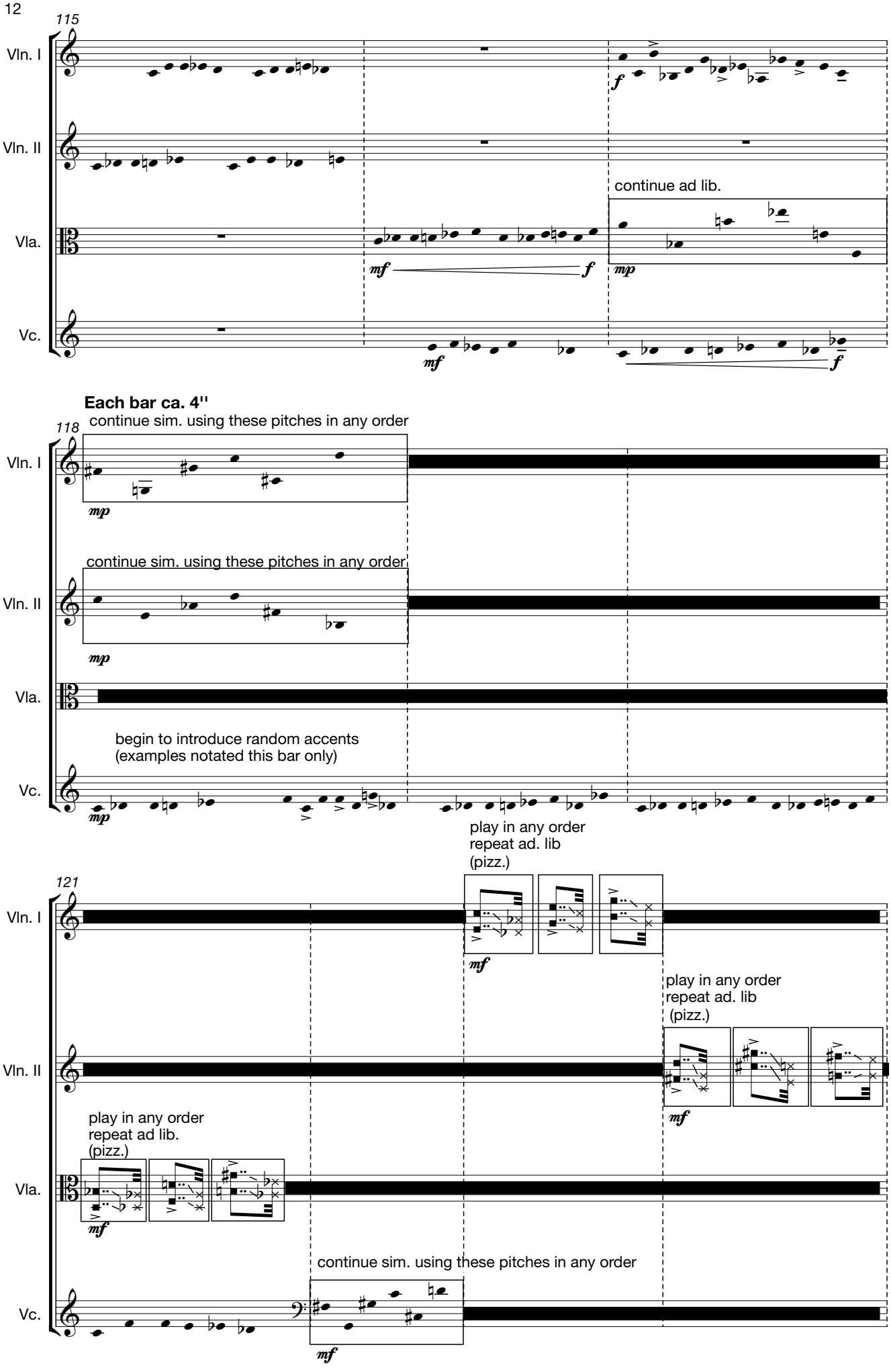

96
lightly dampen all strings
bow randomly as fast as possible, staying close to the frog
poco rall.
Vln. I
lightly dampen all strings
bow randomly as fast as possible,
staying close to the frog
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
ff
pp
ppp
f
99
Meno mosso ♩=64
pizz.
leggiero
mp
ppp
101
(ord.)
m.s.p.
attacca

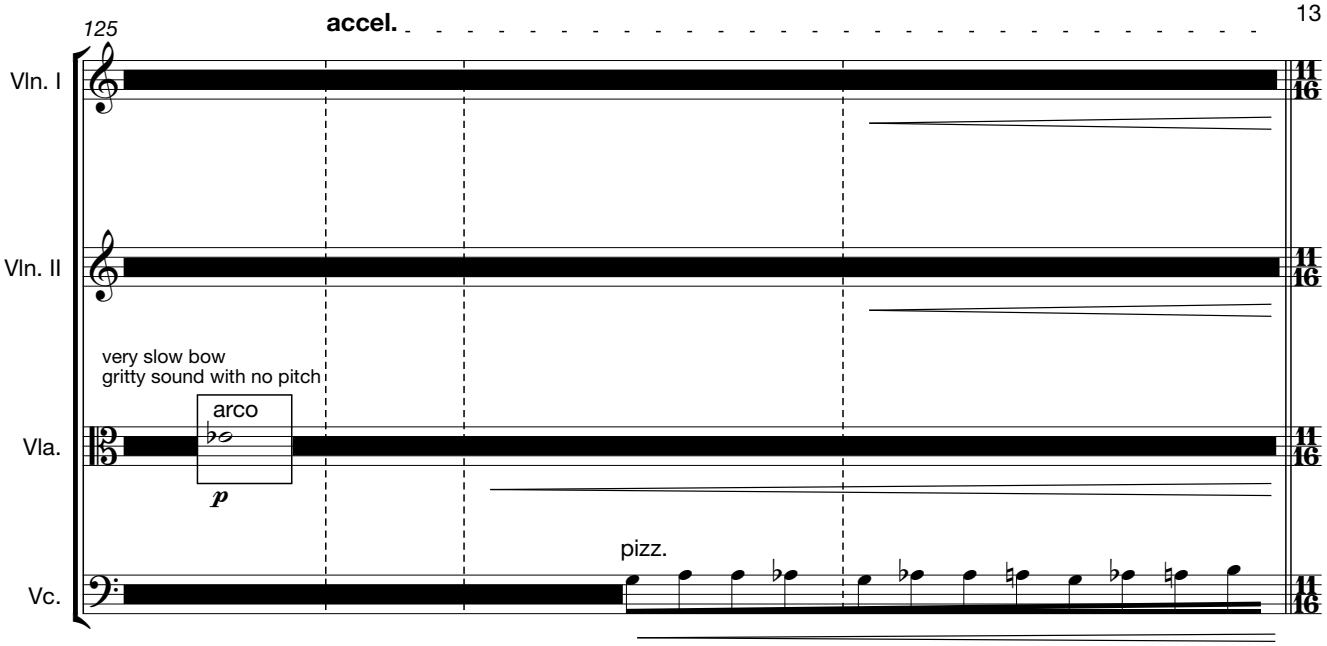
II

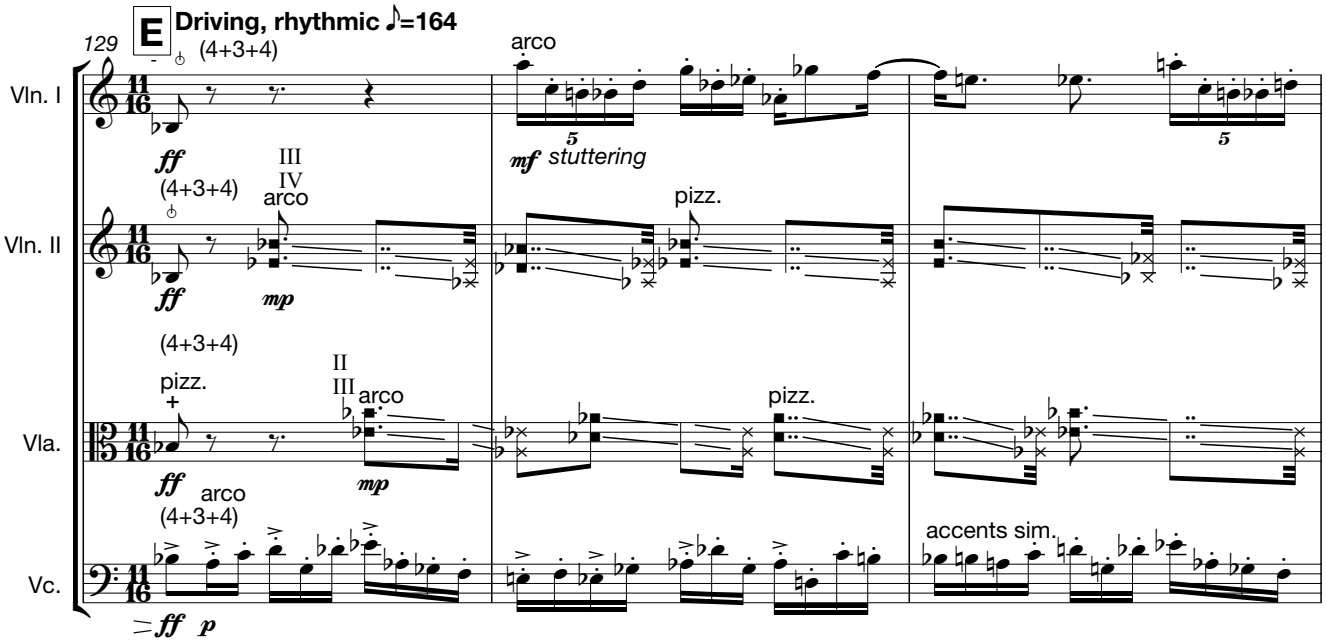
Free Time - open and spacious

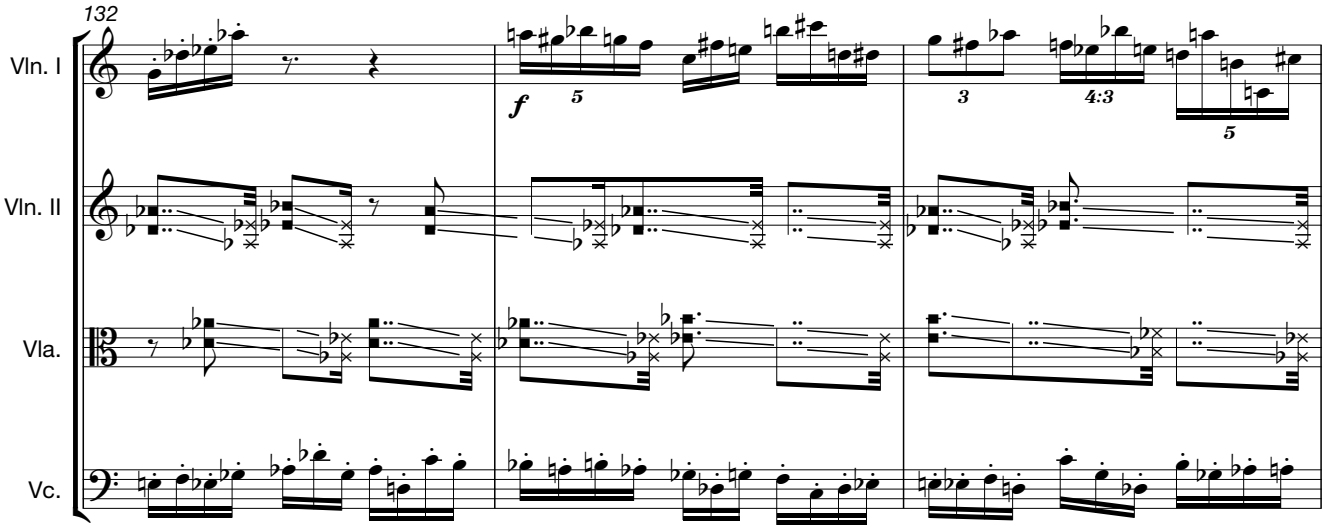
N.B. durations are at performers' discretion, unless otherwise indicated
move to the next bar only when all performers have played their material

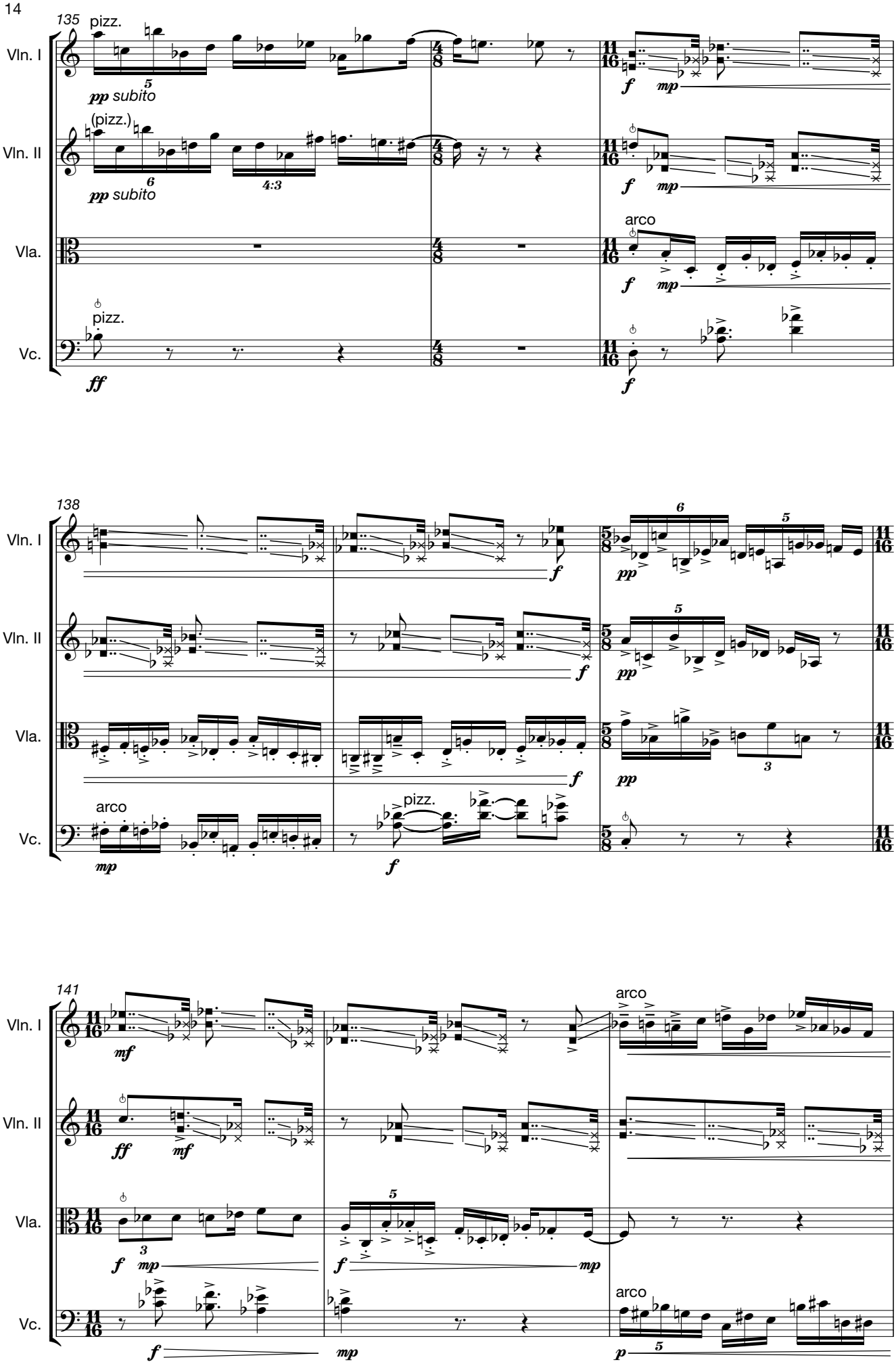


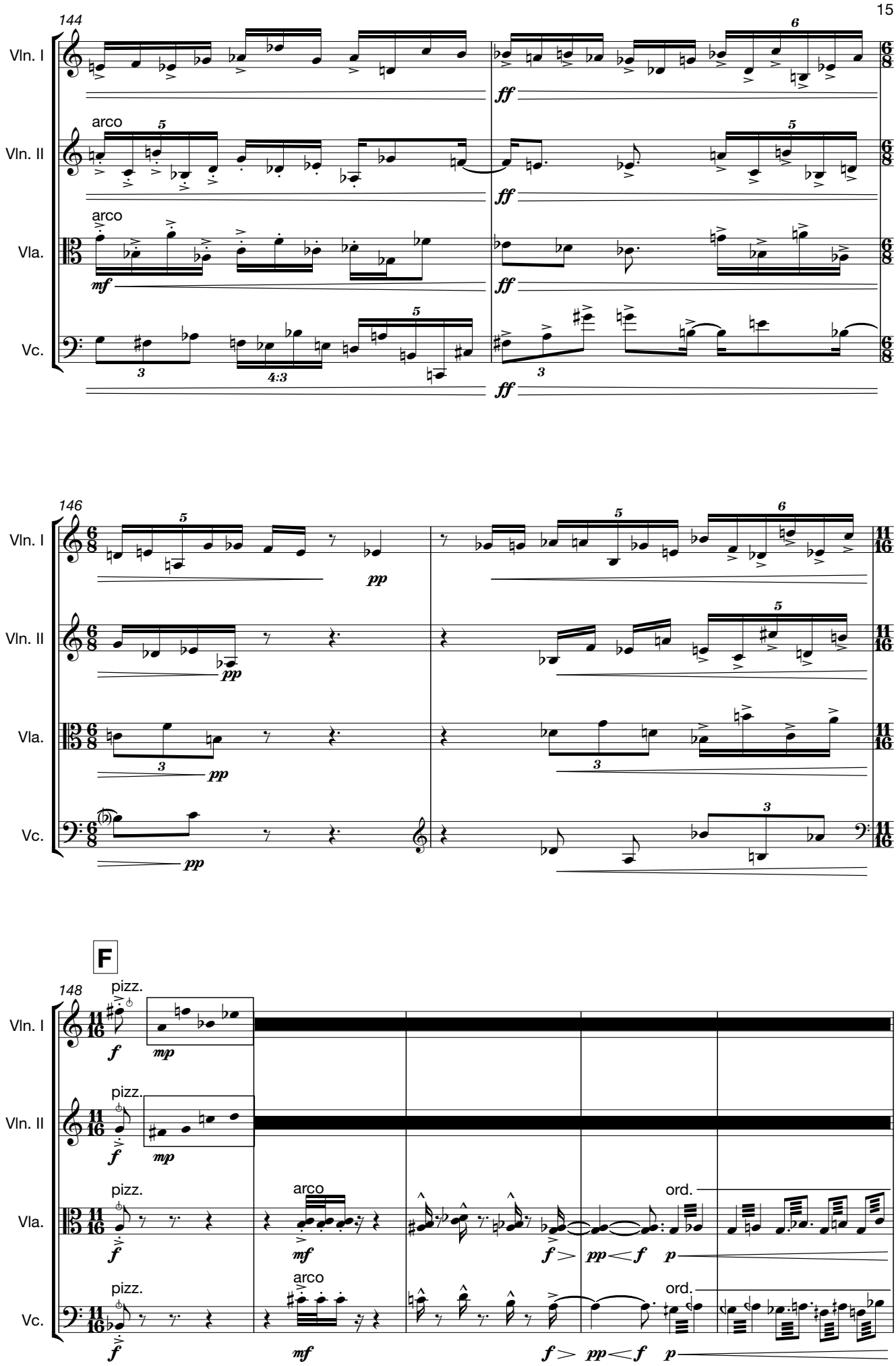

115
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
continue ad lib.
Each bar ca. 4''
118
continue sim. using these pitches in any order
continue sim. using these pitches in any order
begin to introduce random accents
(examples notated this bar only)
play in any order
repeat ad. lib
(pizz.)
121
play in any order
repeat ad. lib
(pizz.)
play in any order
repeat ad lib.
(pizz.)
continue sim. using these pitches in any order

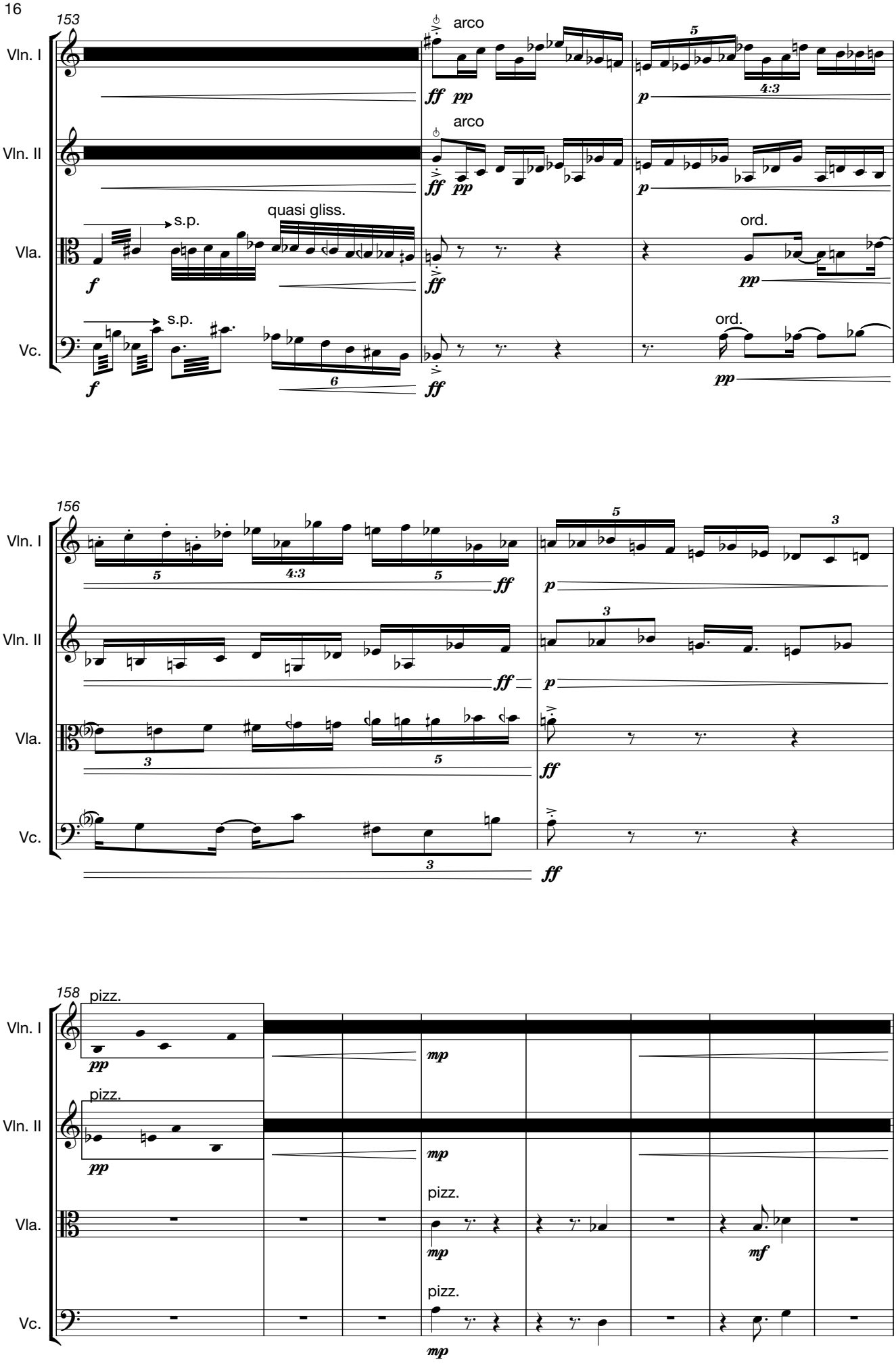

125
accel.
Vln. I
Vln. II
very slow bow
gritty sound with no pitch
arco
Vla.
p
pizz.
Vc.

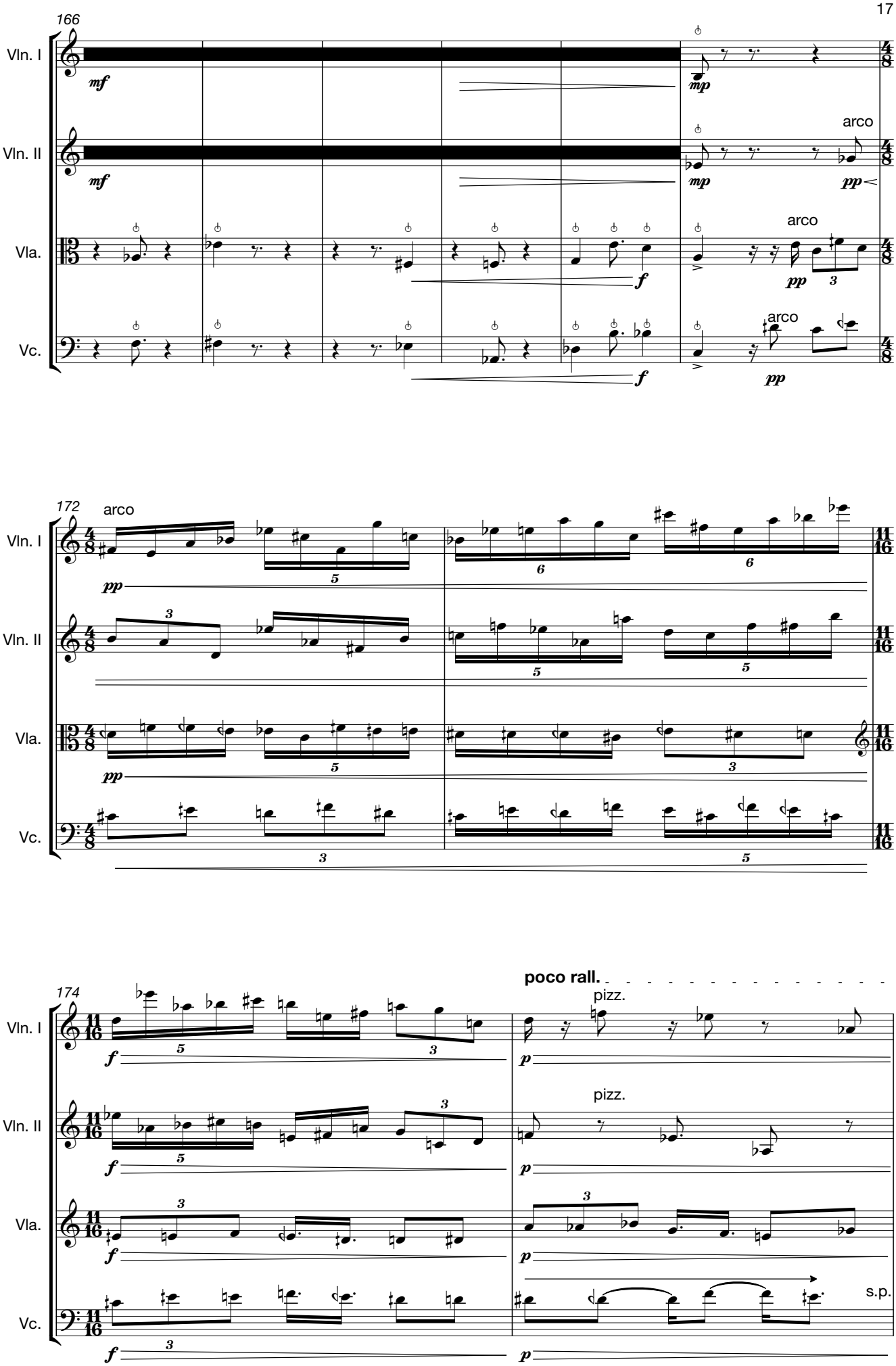

E
Driving, rhythmic ♪=164
129
(4+3+4)
arco
Vln. I
ff
mf stuttering
III
IV
(4+3+4)
arco
pizz.
Vln. II
ff
mp
(4+3+4)
pizz.
II
III
arco
pizz.
Vla.
ff
mp
arco
(4+3+4)
accents sim.
Vc.
ff
p

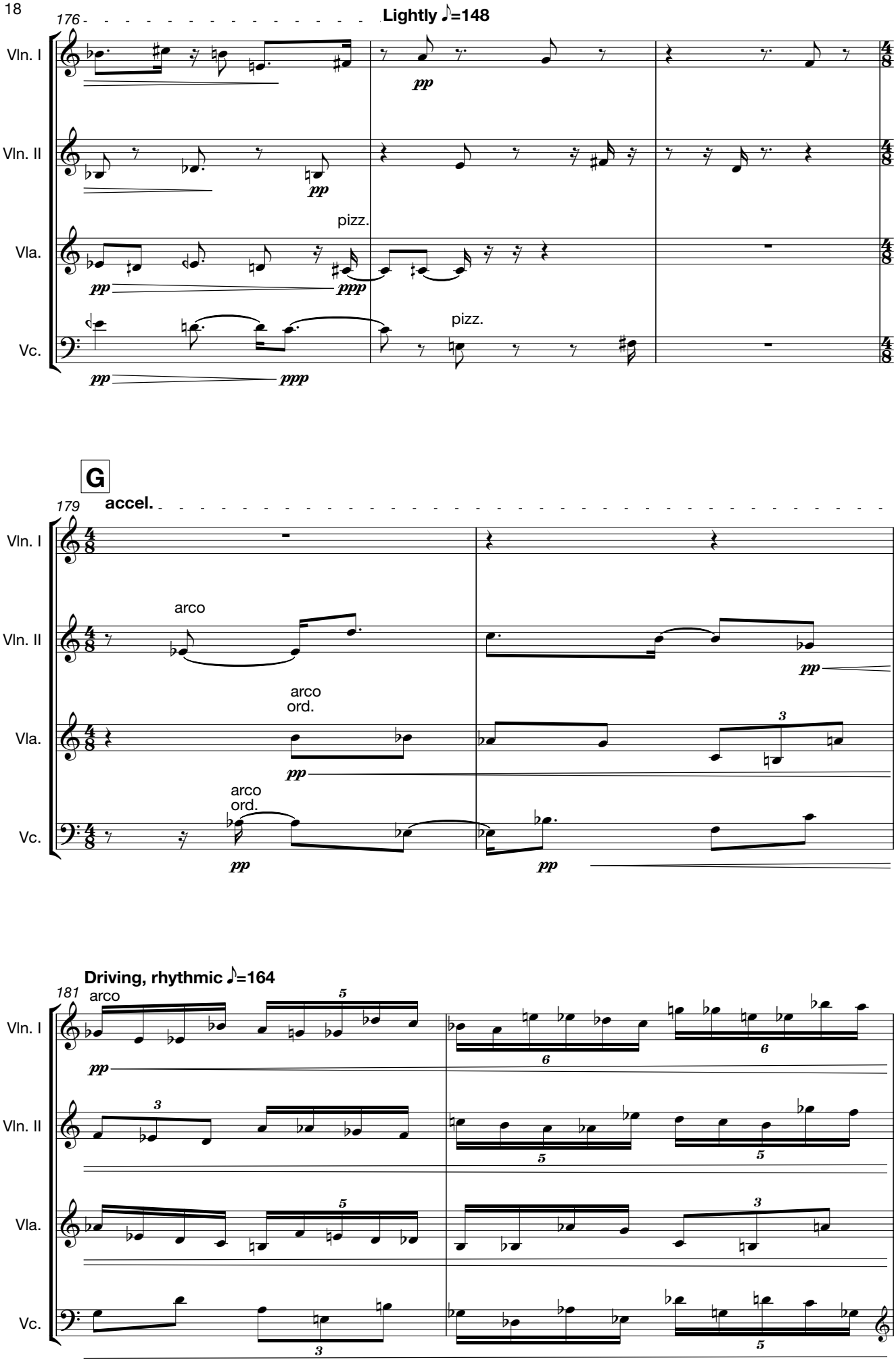

132
Vln. I
f
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

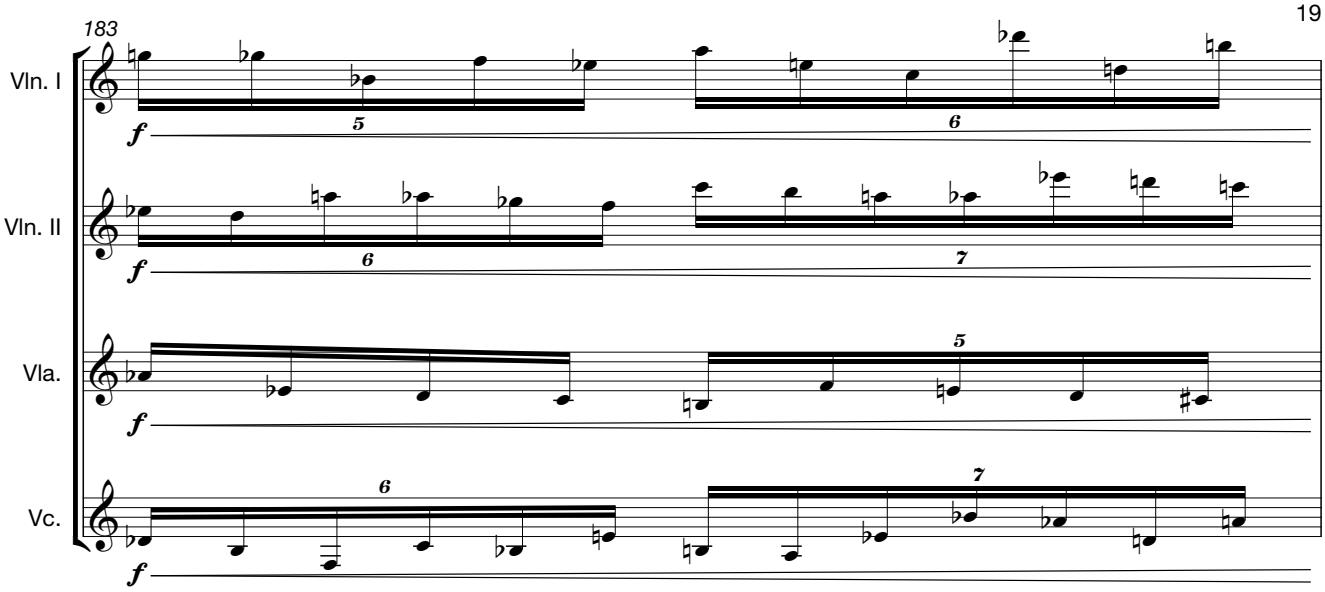

135
pizz.
Vln. I
pp subito
(pizz.)
Vln. II
pp subito
Vla.
arco
pizz.
Vc.
ff
f
mp
138
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
arco
Vc.
pizz.
mp
f
pp
141
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
mf
ff
arco
p

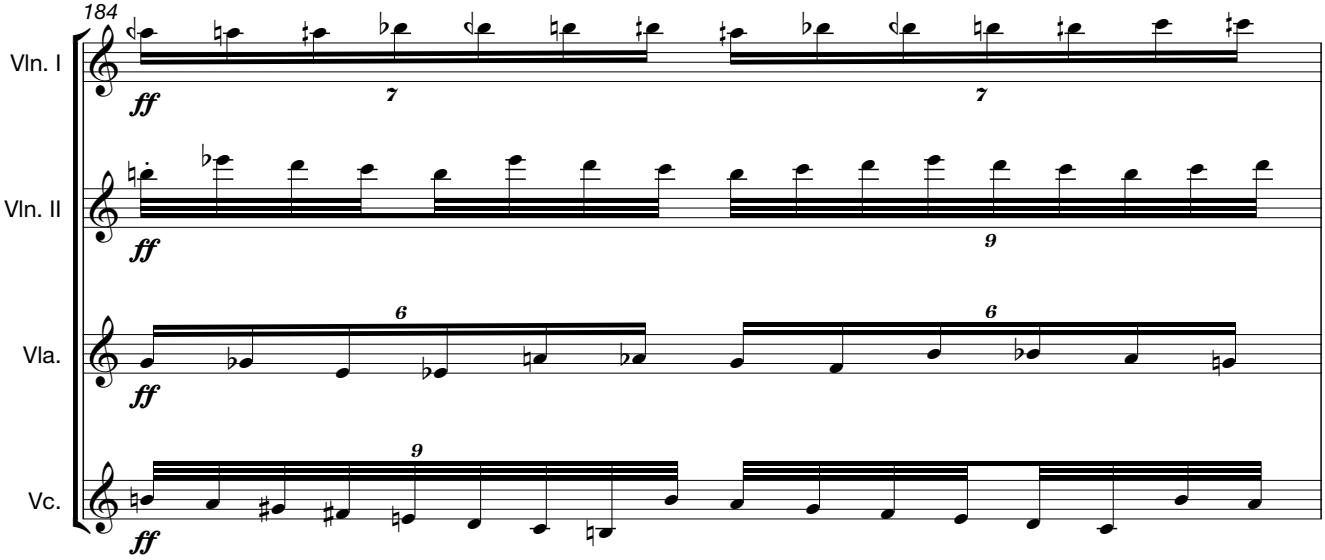

144
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
arco
arco
ff
mf
146
pp
F
148
pizz.
arco
ord.
f
mp
mf
p

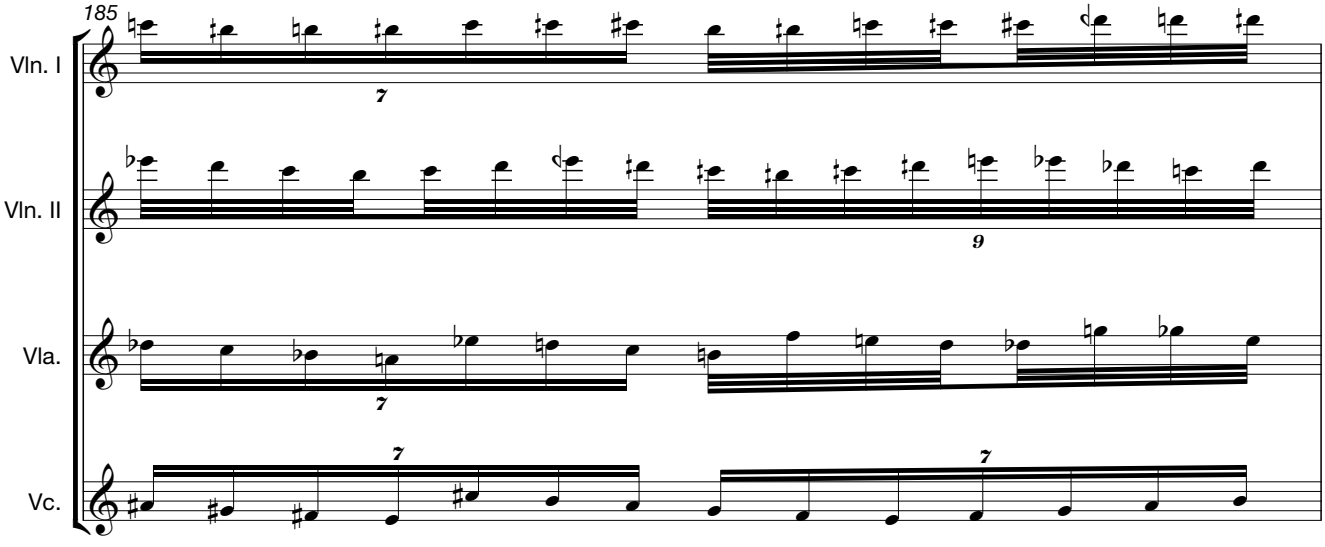

153
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
arco
arco
s.p.
quasi gliss.
s.p.
ord.
ord.
156
158
pizz.
pizz.
pizz.
pizz.

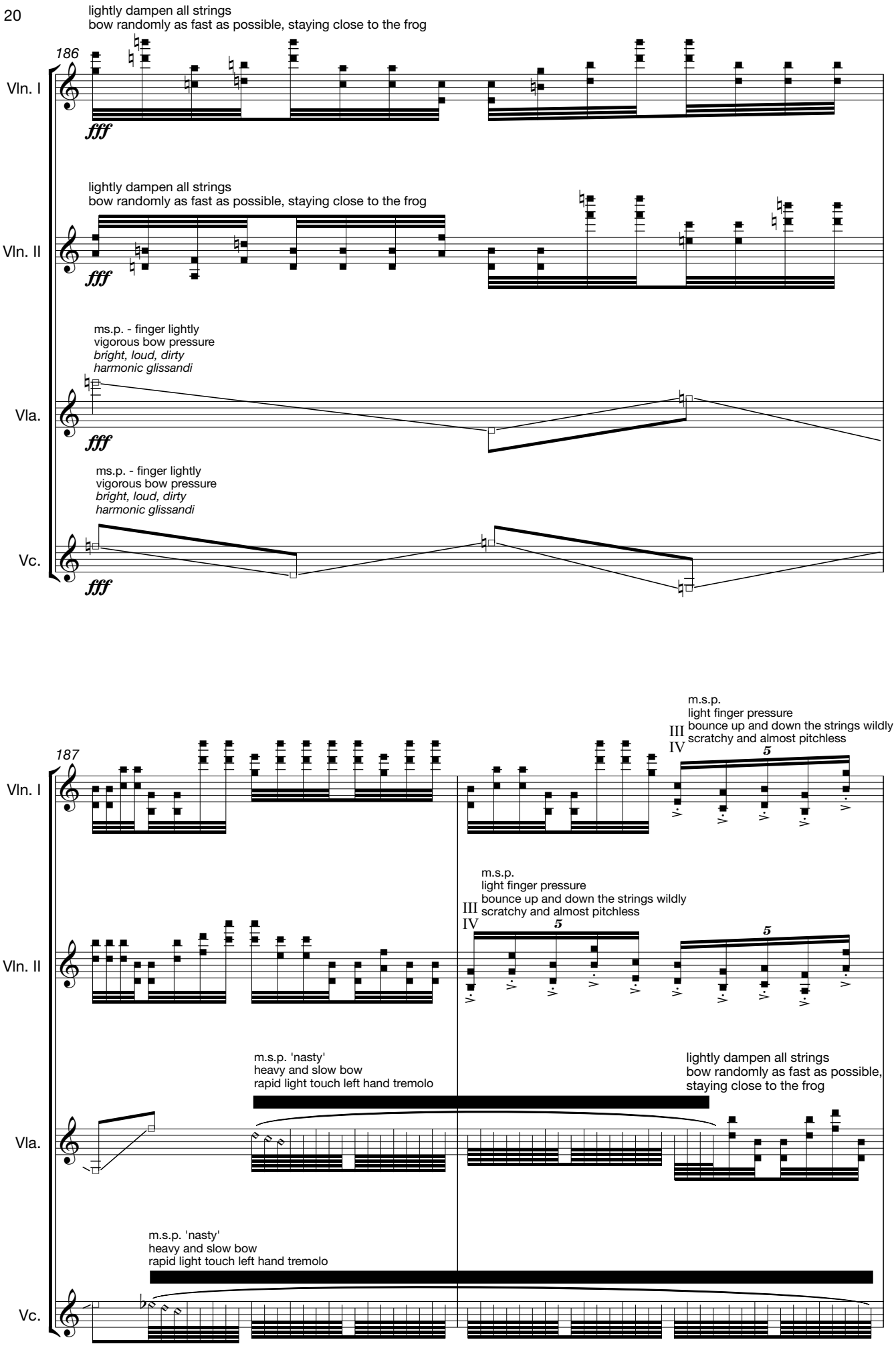

166
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
mf
mp
pp
f
arco
172
174
poco rall.
pizz.
s.p.

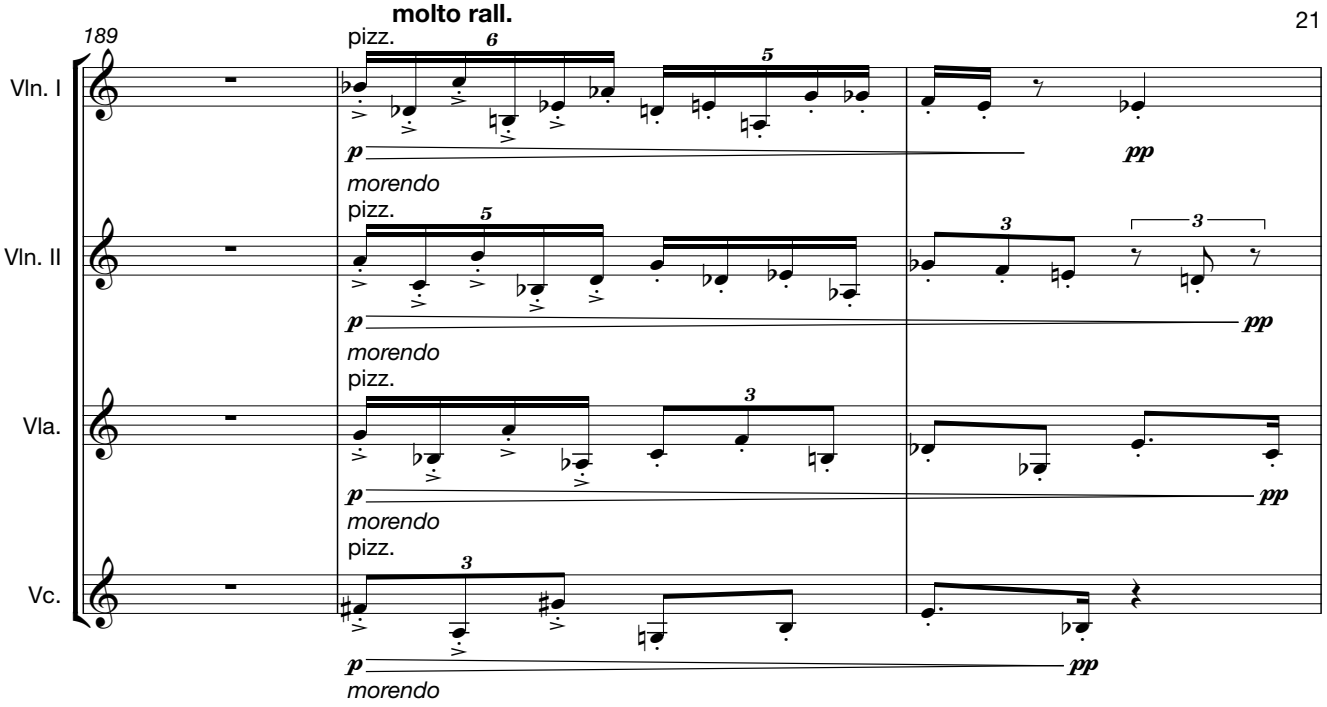

176
Lightly ♪=148
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
pizz.
pizz.
G
179
accel.
arco
arco ord.
arco ord.
Driving, rhythmic ♪=164
181
arco

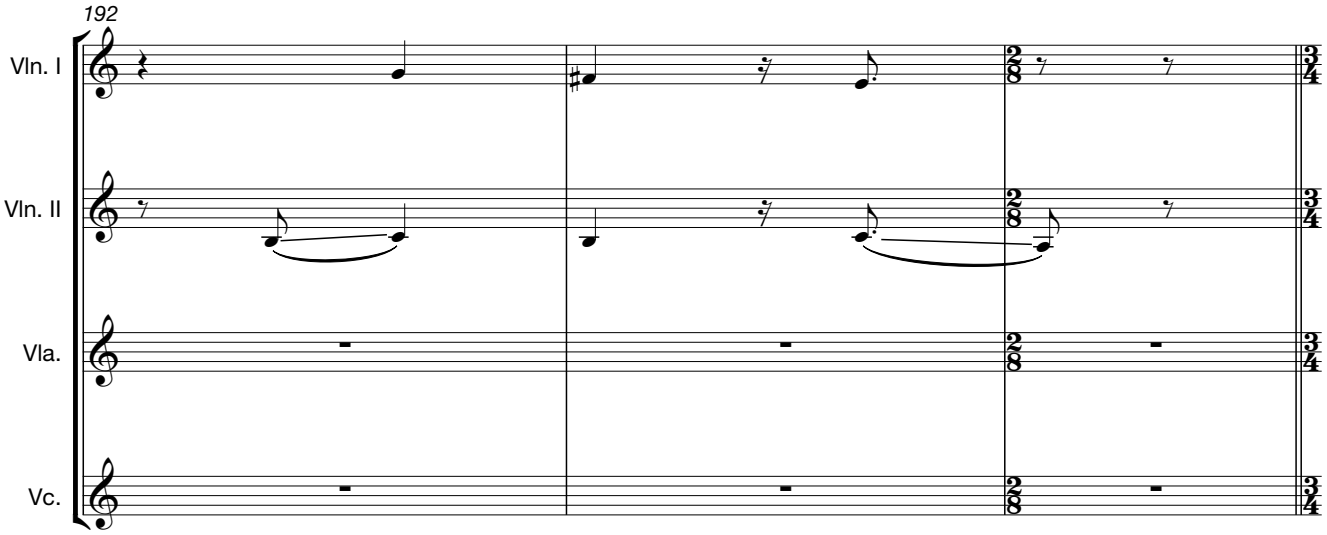

183
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
f

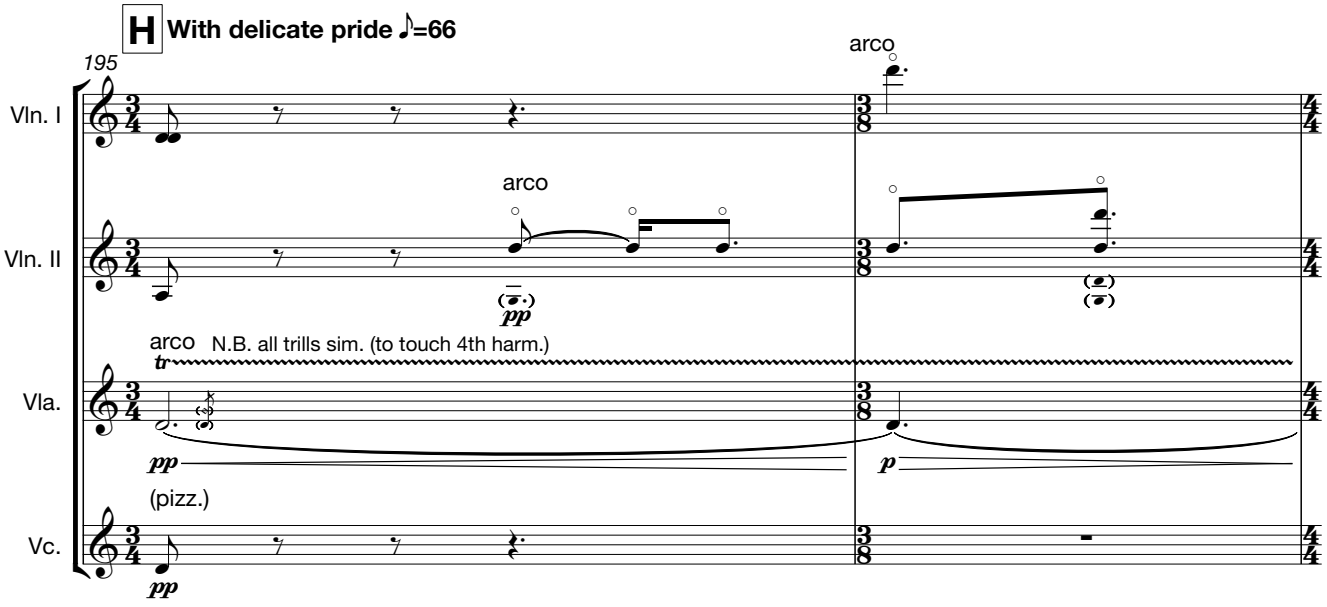

184
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
ff

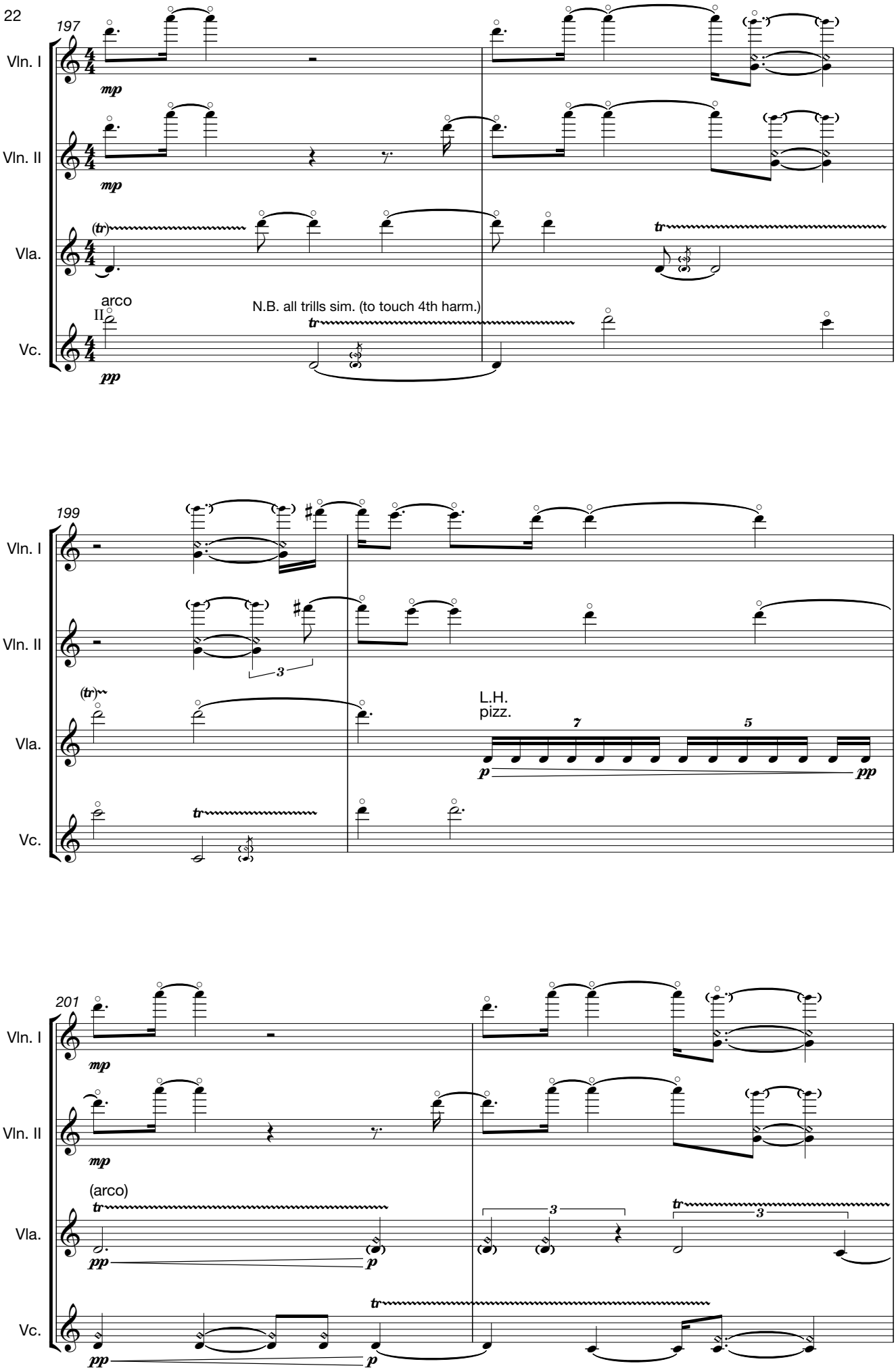

185
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

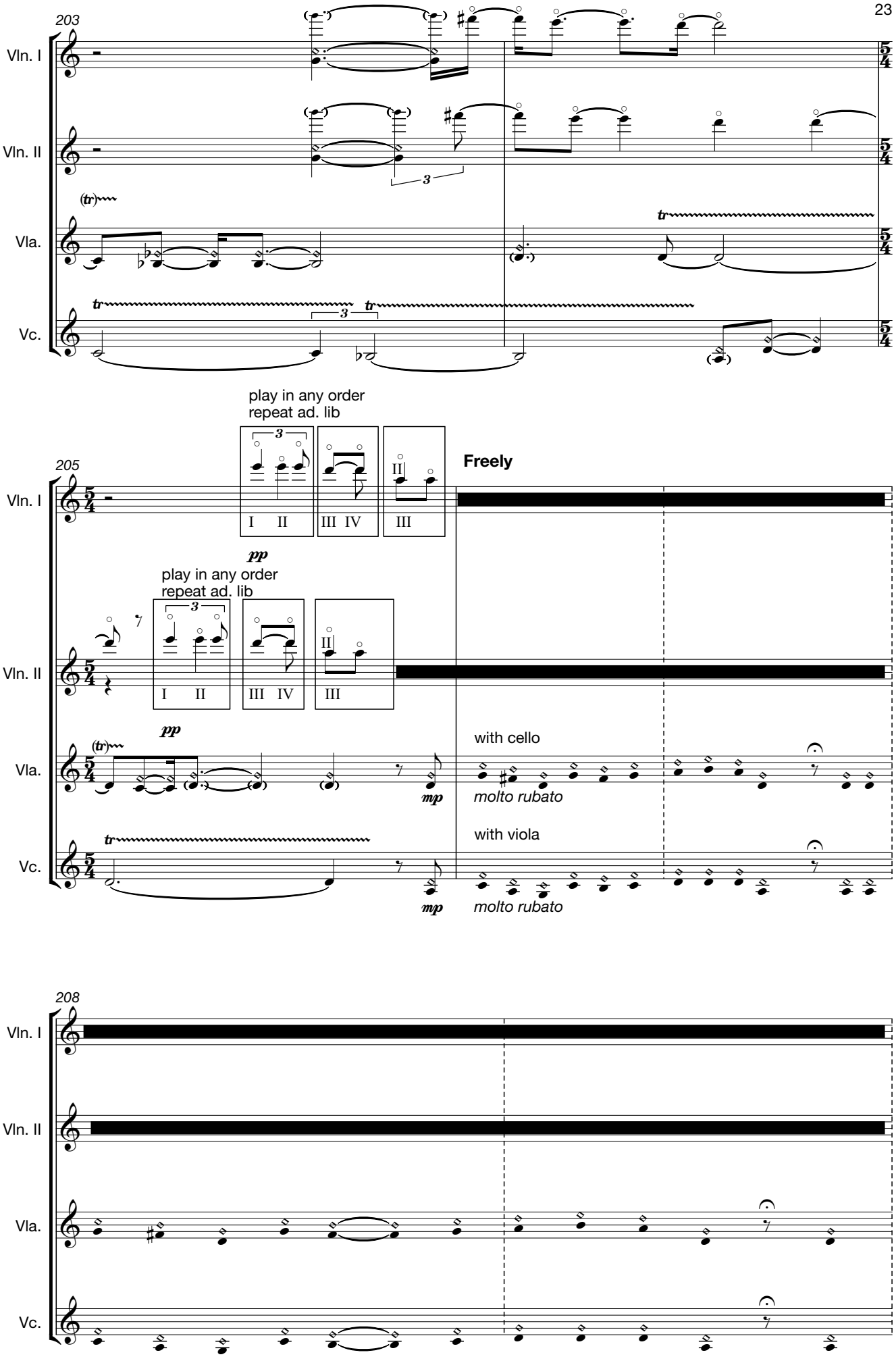

186
lightly dampen all strings
bow randomly as fast as possible, staying close to the frog
Vln. I
fff
lightly dampen all strings
bow randomly as fast as possible, staying close to the frog
Vln. II
fff
ms.p. - finger lightly
vigorous bow pressure
bright, loud, dirty
harmonic glissandi
Vla.
fff
ms.p. - finger lightly
vigorous bow pressure
bright, loud, dirty
harmonic glissandi
Vc.
fff
187
m.s.p.
light finger pressure
III bounce up and down the strings wildly
IV scratchy and almost pitchless
5
Vln. I
m.s.p.
light finger pressure
III bounce up and down the strings wildly
IV scratchy and almost pitchless
5
5
Vln. II
m.s.p. 'nasty'
heavy and slow bow
rapid light touch left hand tremolo
lightly dampen all strings
bow randomly as fast as possible,
staying close to the frog
Vla.
m.s.p. 'nasty'
heavy and slow bow
rapid light touch left hand tremolo
Vc.

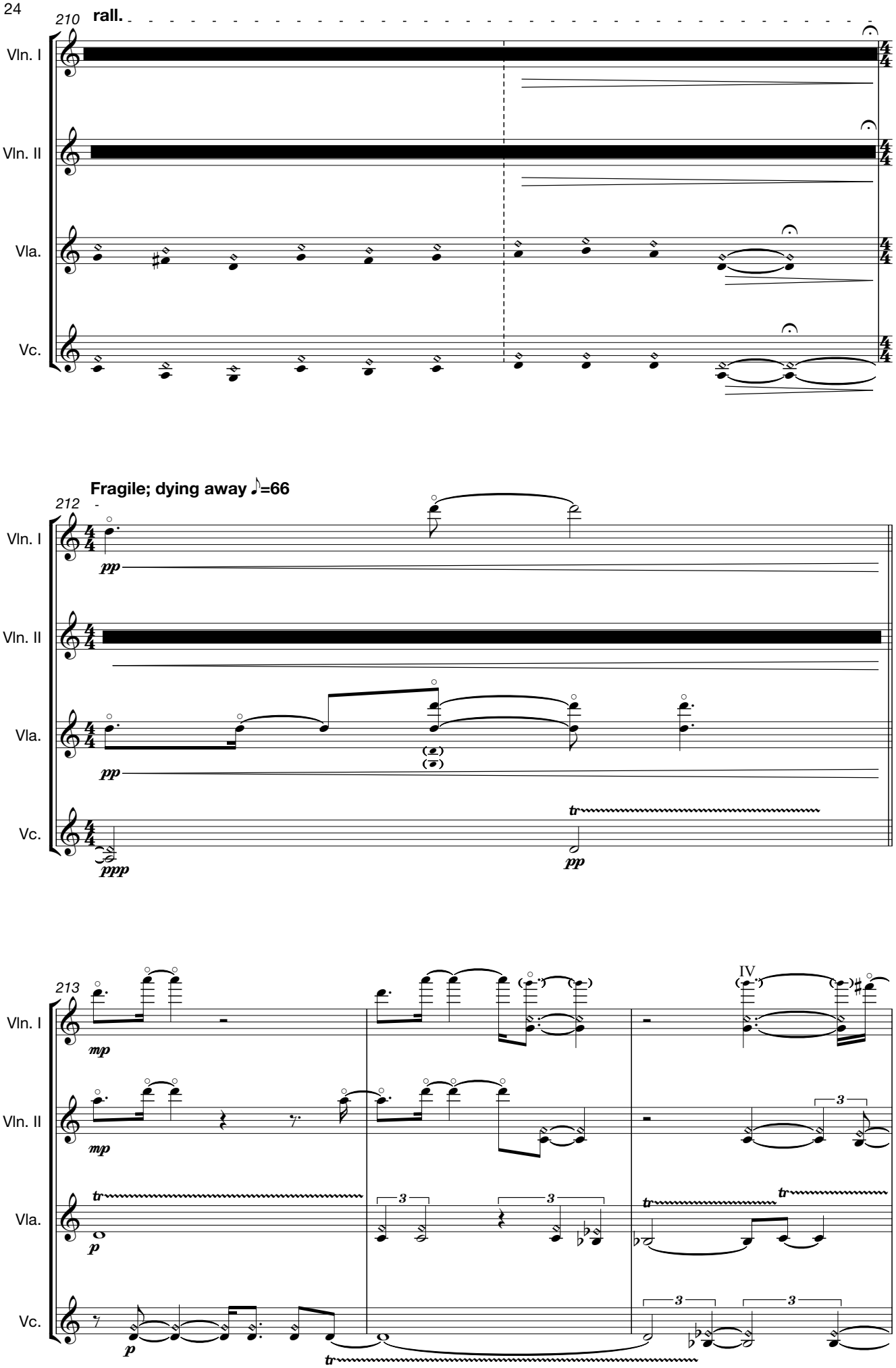

molto rall.
189
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
pizz.
morendo
p
pp

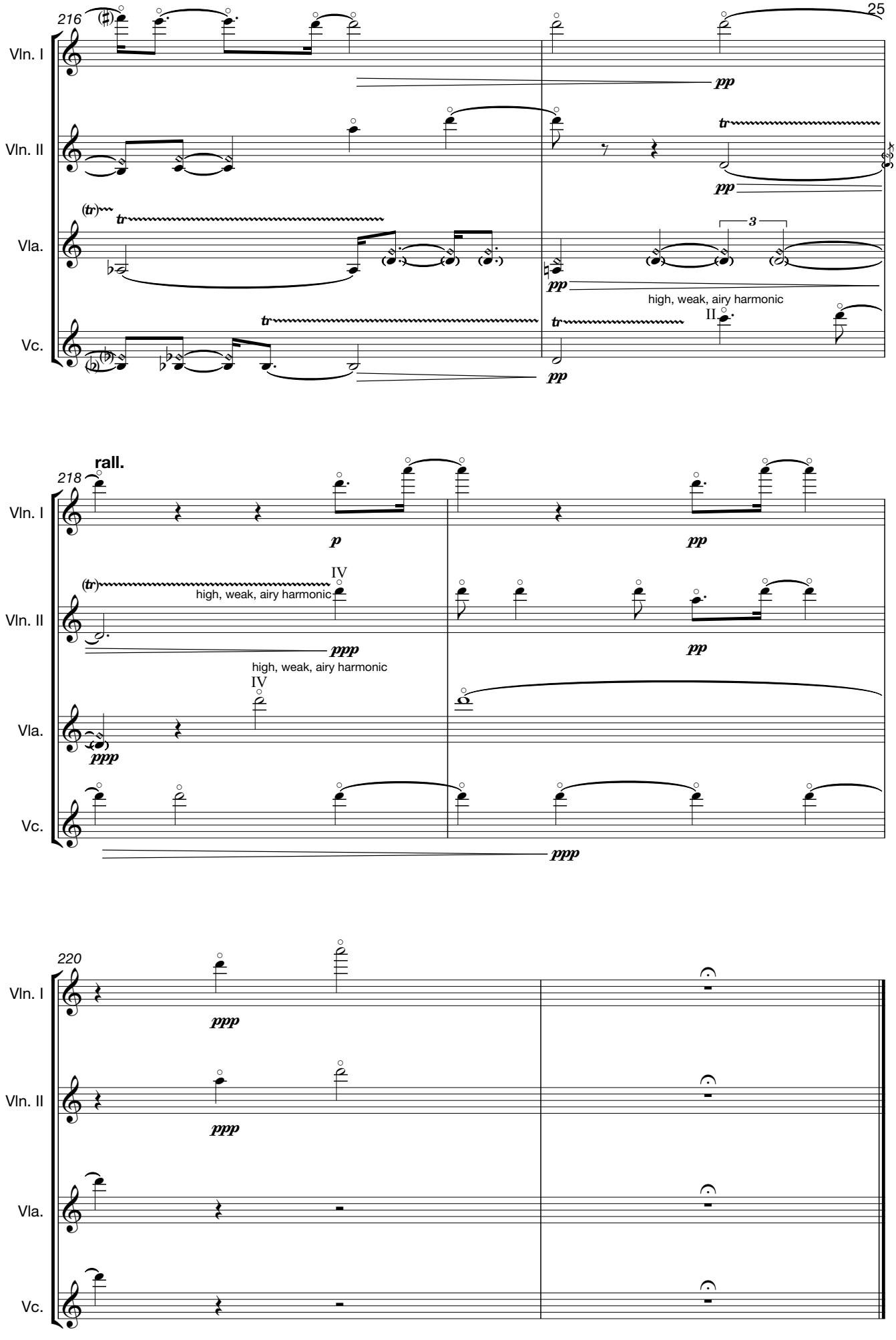

192
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.


H With delicate pride ♪=66
195
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
arco
N.B. all trills sim. (to touch 4th harm.)
(pizz.)
pp
p


197
Vln. I
mp
Vln. II
mp
(tr)
tr
Vla.
arco
II
N.B. all trills sim. (to touch 4th harm.)
tr
Vc.
pp
199
Vln. I
Vln. II
3
(tr)
L.H.
pizz.
7
5
p
pp
Vla.
tr
Vc.
201
Vln. I
mp
Vln. II
mp
(arco)
tr
pp
p
3
3
tr
Vla.
tr
Vc.
pp
p


203
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
(tr)
tr
3
play in any order
repeat ad. lib
I II III IV III
205
Freely
pp
mp
with cello
molto rubato
with viola
208


210
rall.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
Fragile; dying away ♪=66
212
pp
ppp
tr
213
mp
p
IV
3


216
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
pp
tr
3
high, weak, airy harmonic
II
rall.
218
p
IV
ppp
220