String Quartet No. 1

"English Suite"

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Alexander Kirsch

String Quartet No. 1 "English Suite"

A preface by the composer

The emerging English Folksong movement

Many young British composers of the outgoing Victorian and the following Edwardian era sought to find liberation from the Germanic roots on which British music had firmly rested during the decades of Charles V Stanford's and Hubert Parry's[1] tenure as professors for composition at the Royal College of Music, when English music sounded very much like Brahms or Wagner[2].

Thus from the turn of the 20th century, a number of different directions were taken by a majority of upcoming British composers: first Edward Elgar, a pupil of Stanford, who - despite early influences by Richard Strauss - soon found his own voice and, in his more public pieces, became the "official" musical herald of the Edwardian Empire; then Frederic Delius - settling, after he spent some time in bohemian Paris, in the rural calm of the French countryside - who adapted a nature-inspired, yet highly individual and at the same time sensual form of impressionism[3]. Others focussed their attention on Irish and Celtic themes, such as Joseph Holbrooke or Arnold Bax, the latter also frequently writing Sibelian-like "Nordic" tone poems; yet others preferred Greek, Oriental or Indian settings, mainly Granville Bantock, Cyril Scott, John Foulds and also Gustav Holst; whereas more traditional composers like Rutland Boughton - remaining a romantic at the bottom of his heart - in contrast turned to the British model of early socialism, as represented by William Morris' Arts and Crafts movement and by the playwright George Bernard Shaw, in order to create his own festival of English opera[4].

It were, however, the achievements of two of Parry's and Standford's pupils, Ralph Vaughan Williams - who also briefly studied with Max Bruch in Berlin and Maurice Ravel in Paris - and of Gustav Holst - whose inspiration based on Indian mysticism later helped him create a rather distinctive, minimalistic style – when they, with the help of Cecil Sharp and others, travelled across the countryside where they listened to, recorded and put to paper the hitherto only orally upheld tradition of English Folksong, incorporating it into their own music and preparing its way for the concert hall[5] by moulding it into a new style of art - a new national "English" music, so to speak[6].

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[1] Almost all the composers mentioned below will have entries in the likes of *Wikipedia* or the *New Grove Dictionary*; for the sake of clarity we refrain therefore from quoting any specific details, such as dates of birth/death or titles/knighthoods etc.

[2] On the other hand, there had been keen interest in British, mainly Scottish, music by some of the great German composers, in particular Haydn, Beethoven and Mendelssohn.

[3] Delius' best known contribution to the English folk song movement is his *Brigg Fair – An English Rhapsody*, after a folk song collected by his friend and fellow composer Percy Grainger.

[4] Boughton also showed a fascination for Greek music and theatre, so in his choral drama *"Alkestis"*; see Michael Hurd, *Rutland Boughton and the Glastonbury Festivals*, Oxford University Press, 1993

[5] in a way similar to how Bela Bartok and Zoltan Kodaly had studied and adapted the genuine folk music of their native Hungary.

Despite being branded by some ill-meaning critics as "cowpat music"[7], their new "pastoral" style was as quintessentially romantic English as Thomas Hardy's novels or John Constable's paintings.

It is not necessarily the accurate quotations of actual English folk tunes which characterised the new style - these rather helped to create a special unmistakable *sound* that became well associated with the English landscape and depicted its still archaic ways of life, forming a distinction from most of the music - classical or popular - that at the same time was prevalent on the continent.

Soon a great number of young composers were influenced by this new style and readily absorbed it within their own compositions. Some later became quite well known within musical circles, amongst them Frank Bridge, Gerald Finzi, John Ireland, E.J. Moeran or Peter Warlock.

Others remain, particularly nowadays, lesser acquainted, like Edgar Bainton, York Bowen, Benjamin Dale, George Dyson, Ernest Farrar, Edward German, Cecil A Gibbs, Ivor Gurney, Julius Harrison, Herbert Howells, Gordon Jacob, John McEwen, Cyril Rotham and many others, including the Irish-born Hamilton Harty and Australian-born Percy Grainger. No doubt, George Butterworth would have majorly contributed to the style, had he survived the Great War. Later Benjamin Britten added his own distinctive touch with his sets of rather more modernistic folksong arrangements.

Still even now in the early 21st century, there are modern composers carrying on the tradition, and with some success, most notably Arthur Butterworth (no relation to George), whose works are being made available to listeners through CD recordings[8].

The adaption of English Folksong within large-scale compositions

The new style and sound, as it is both based on and inspired by the folk music of the British isles, differs - as we said - quite significantly from its continental counterparts by a number of characteristics (and indeed from the melody-building and thematic processes established by composers throughout musical history, culminating for instance in the *Lieder* by Franz Schubert[9]). It features, amongst other things: A general simplicity of the melodic line; The use of modal scales (often Dorian, Mixolydian and Aeolian) with the omission of the *Leitton*; Irregular phrasing and phrase lengths; Irregular meters, with syncopated rhythms and accents shifting in line with the lyrics[10]; And the occasional preference given to 2/4 and 6/8 dance-like meters, inspired by the traditional dances of Scotland and Ireland, like Jigs, Reels and Hornpipes.

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[6] Although known as the "English Folksong Revival" movement, it should be correctly termed as *British folk music*, since many songs of Ireland, Scotland and Wales were also collected and have found their way into concert music. For the reason of simplification, and in line with our sources, we will continue to use the terms *English* music / folk song (both spellings *folk song* and *folksong* are equally in use).

[7] first mentioned by Elizabeth Lutyens in the 1950s

[8] by the Dutton Epoch label

[9] For a detailed analysis of the construction of classical themes, see Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, Faber and Faber Limited, London 1967.

[10] "[...] the essential characteristics of the [English] folksong [are] its freshness, spontaneity, naturalness, and unconventionality [...]", Cecil J. Sharp, *One Hundred English Folksongs*, p. XIV; also see the ”Introduction” by the editors, in *The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs*, p. 7ff. and “A Note on the Presentation of the Tunes”, p. 10f.; also *Sharp*, ibid. p. XV

By not following any strict rules of melodic progression or obeying the use of intervals as implied by the great masters of the Renaissance, and often disregarding the periodicity applied by the masters of the Viennese classic, and despite - or because of - the relative plainness of the folk songs, with their free melodic flow uninterrupted by rests and the lack of chromaticism, many tunes allow themselves perfectly to be worked into elaborate contrapuntal structures, sweeping melodies and a muted, often archaic harmonisation, which all have shaped this newly emerging English style so very much.

It need not be necessary to cite any particular folk tune, or parts of it, in order to create the aforementioned effects: by composing music that emphasises on certain melodic - generally modal or diatonic - progressions and combines rhythmic straightforwardness with occasional syncopations (the Lombard rhythm in particular), and by keeping harmonic relations close together - mainly within subdominant or median regions and their parallel minors/majors[11] - one can easily emulate and evolve the desired style, despite composing large-scale pieces such as symphonies, concertos, even operas, as Vaughan Williams did, and - as was particularly popular during the time - orchestral rhapsodies[12].

The use of English Folksongs in the String Quartet No.1 "English Suite"

Nowadays, the contemporary composer faces a dilemma which was little troubling the composers of the English Folksong movement: Can he still, or can he not, simply write straight forward melodic lines underlined by traditional harmonies? After all, a large-scale piece needs basic melodic and thematic material in order to grow organically[13], like a plant germinates from a seed, otherwise the piece will probably sound incoherent, even confusing. Whilst the historic developments of atonality, dodecaphony and serialism during the 20th century surely are to be regarded as logic consequences for the post-war avant garde movement, which show the modern composer's need to evolve and to avoid repetition or, worse, plagiarism, it is the author's firm believe that a modern, i.e. a contemporary, composition should still afford some appeal to the listener, in order to avoid being little more than an intellectual statement, or a "paper exercise".

On the other hand, one should not any longer simply invent new "tunes" in a way it has been done for centuries, whether they are diatonic, chromatic or contain all twelve notes of the chromatic scale. This would simply be an anachronism and rather, in case of the former two, belong to the realm of popular music. Indeed the use of folksongs can deliver a viable solution: many songs provide sufficient motivic and thematic material to construct whole movements out of just a few tunes. They adapt very well to the use of counterpoint, variation and progressive harmony, as will be shown in the following brief analysis[14].

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[11] with often a preference given to a plagal IV-I cadence over the traditional V-I.

[12] It is in his six *"Irish Rhapsodies"*, that Charles V Stanford comes closest to the new British style and includes some folk song ("*Londonderry Air*").

[13] "A piece of music resembles in some respect a photograph album, displaying under changing circumstances the life of its basic idea - its basic motive." Schoenberg *Fundamentals*, ibid. p. 58; see also Chapter XI. “Melody and Theme”, ibid., pp. 98-104

[14] The author’s **String Quartet No. 2 "Choros"** shows a similar approach by its use of Brazilian popular music of the early 20th century.

1st movement - "Prelude"

Throughout, the musical building materials of the String Quartet No. 1 are almost completely extracted from the folk songs chosen for each of the movements - one song being allocated to each movement apart from the Rondo finale which uses three[15]. The tunes are elaborated through the traditional use of counterpoint, imitation, sequential treatment, changing harmonisation and ordinary as well as developing variation, and the resulting changes in expression and mood.

The only motivic invention attributable to the author is the four-part *ricercare* which opens and closes the 1st movement, in a way of fusion between the old Tudor style polyphony and English folk song which Ralph Vaughan Williams so keenly adapted, not least in his popular *"Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis".*

After the polyphonic opening section the song *"All Things Are Quite Silent"* appears once completely in a straight forward homophonic part-song setting, before the polyphonic segment partially returns. At the end, the opening line of the song reappears on top, in the 1st violin, just as the imitations of the lower voices are coming to an end.

2nd movement - "Fantasia"

Over an *ostinato* in viola and 'cello, the song *"The Basket of Eggs"* sets the scene for a series of seven variations. A slow, contrasting middle section (variations 3 & 4) and the cyclical nature of the first and last group of variations (variations 5 - 7) outline the overall ternary form of this rhythmical and playful movement before the music - on top of the returning *ostinato* - phases out in a short codetta of just a few bars.

3rd movement - "Canzona"

The single phrases of the song *"The Greenland Whale Fishery"*[16] are presented in different contrasting sections of either polyphonic or harmonised settings, before being elaborated[17] through developing variation. The middle section of this ternary movement derives its motivic material from a small melodic fragment as well as the underlying harmonisation of the song theme, before the tune in its original shape suddenly appears twice in viola and both violins.

The recapitulation of the opening part varies through the inversion of its first phrase, although the second phrase returns as before, leading to a final climax, before ending in a wide, plagal cadence. However, the closing phrase and cadence of the folk tune itself never appears in this movement.

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[15] The chosen folk songs are taken from the following sources:
The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs, selected & edited by R. Vaughan Williams & A.L. Lloyd, Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1959; and
One Hundred English Folksongs, edited by Cecil J. Sharp, Oliver Ditson Company, Boston, 1916.

[16] The choice of folk songs for this suite was strictly based on their musical qualities and not on their lyric contents.

[17] see *Schoenberg*, ibid. p. 151, footnote [1]

4th movement - "Rondo fugato"

As implied in its name, the 'A'-sections of this rondo are all of a contrapuntal setting, with variation given to changes of the entries of voices or inversions of the theme, taken from the song *"O Shepherd, O Shepherd"*. A second theme quoting *"Lord Bateman"* and a third, lyrically contrasting, sporting variations of *"The Banks of Green Willow"*, frame the central fugue-segment which is developing out of the main theme.

The second and third theme appear in reversed order in the *reprise*, after which *"Lord Bateman"* - now in major - marks the final coda of the movement in an apotheotic climax of the whole piece[18] before the fugato of the opening theme makes its last, frantically rushing appearance until arriving at the end.

The dedication of the **String Quartet No. 1 "English Suite"** is to the tenor Prof. *Raimund Gilvan*, who first opened up to me not only the world of English music through the symphonies of Vaughan Williams, the exuberant conducting of John Barbirolli (whose rehearsals at Manchester's Free Trade Hall the young Gilvan used to attend) and the recordings of the “Lancashire Caruso” Tom Burke (on 78 rpm shellack discs), but also - somehow unrelated – introduced me to the passionate and elegant piano playing of Samson Francois.

Alexander Kirsch,

Blackpool, in February 2019.

[18] in a way similar to which the lyric theme builds up to a grand *tutti* of orchestra and soloist during the final bars of many romantic concertos.

Movements:

1. "Prelude" • p. 1

2. "Fantasia" • p. 4

3. "Canzona" • p. 18

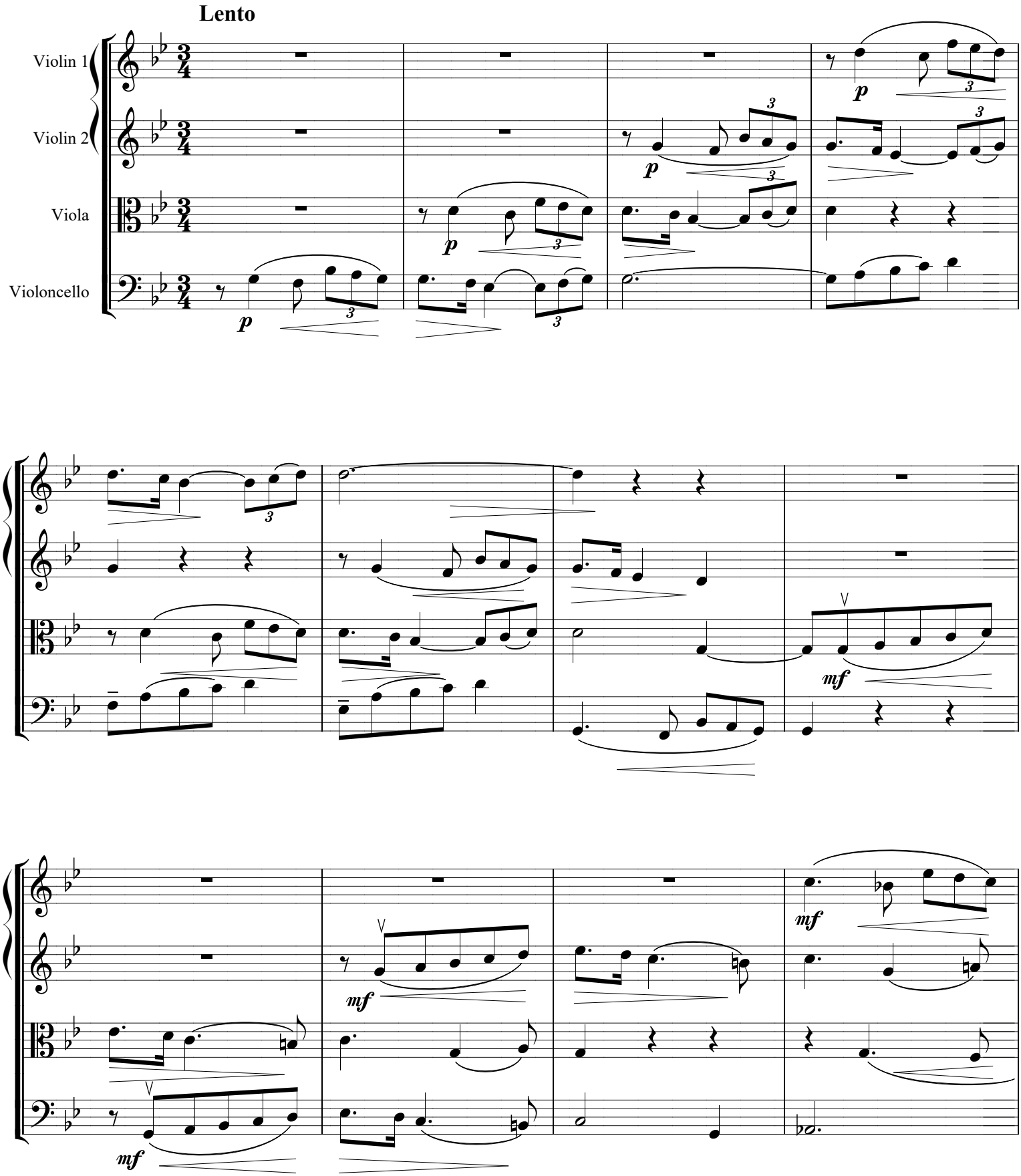
4. "Rondo fugato" • p. 31

Duration: approx. 22 minutes

To Prof. Raimund Gilvan

I. Prelude

Alexander Kirsch



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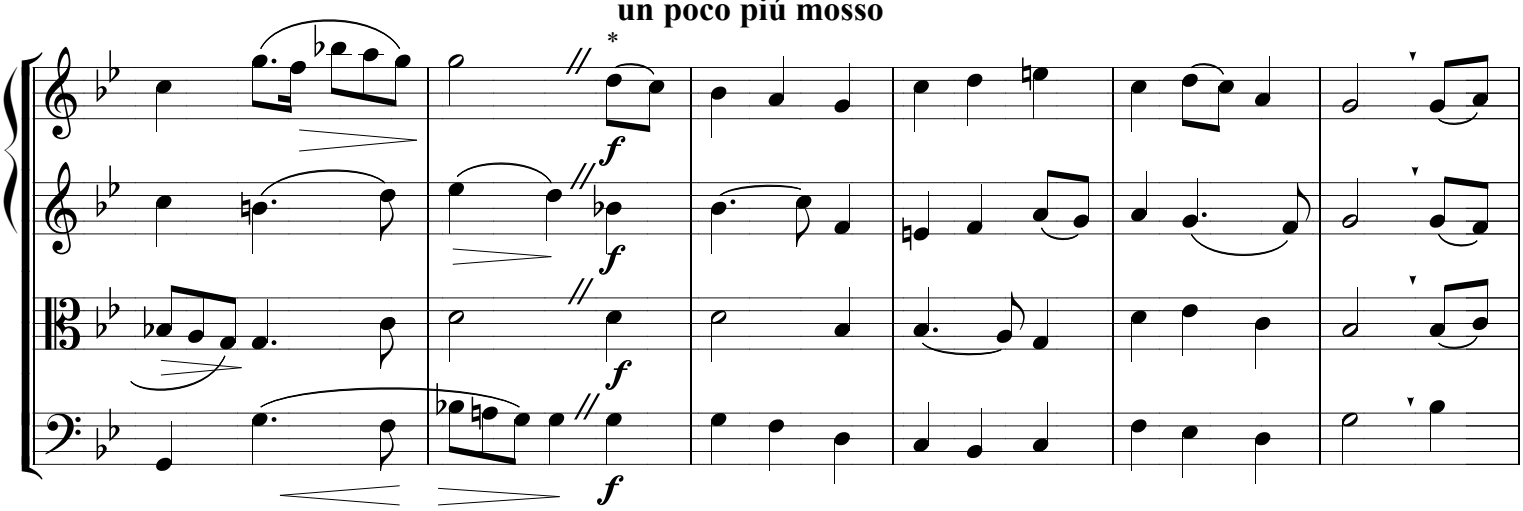
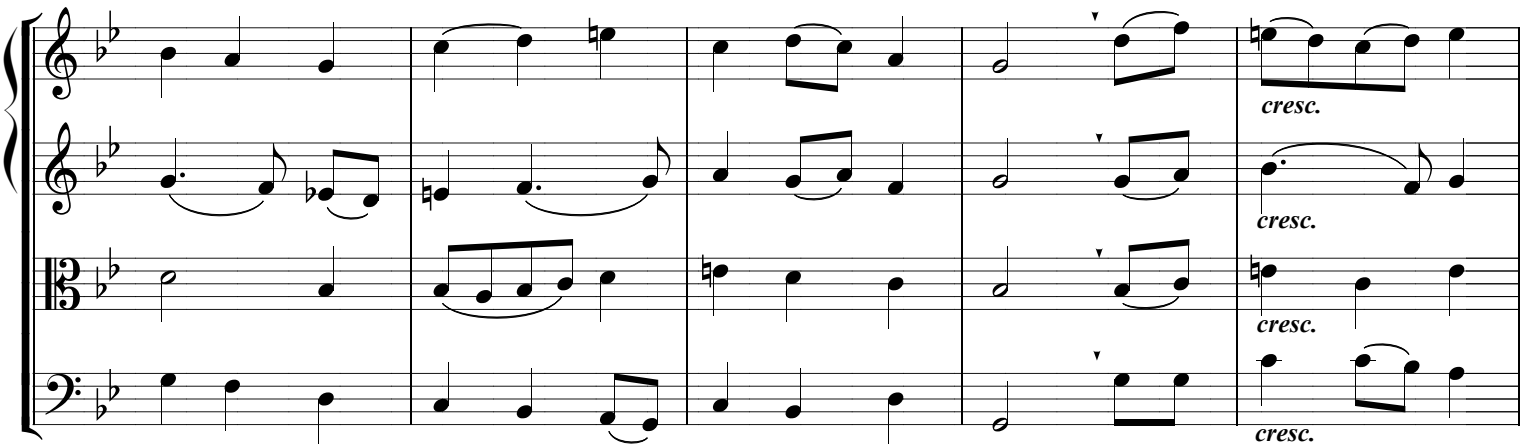
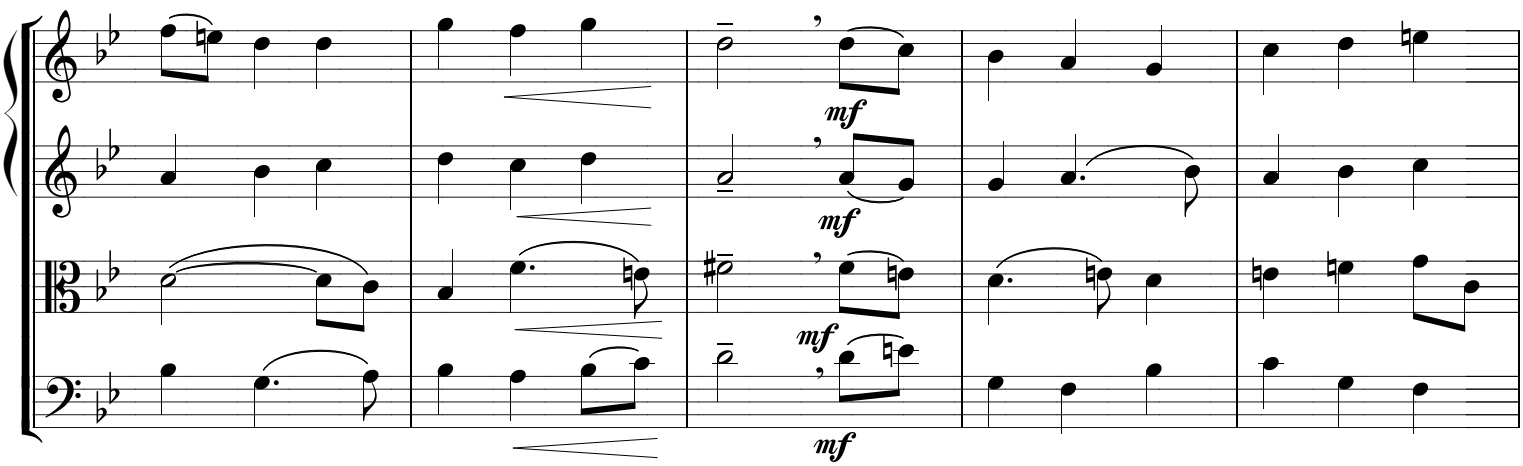
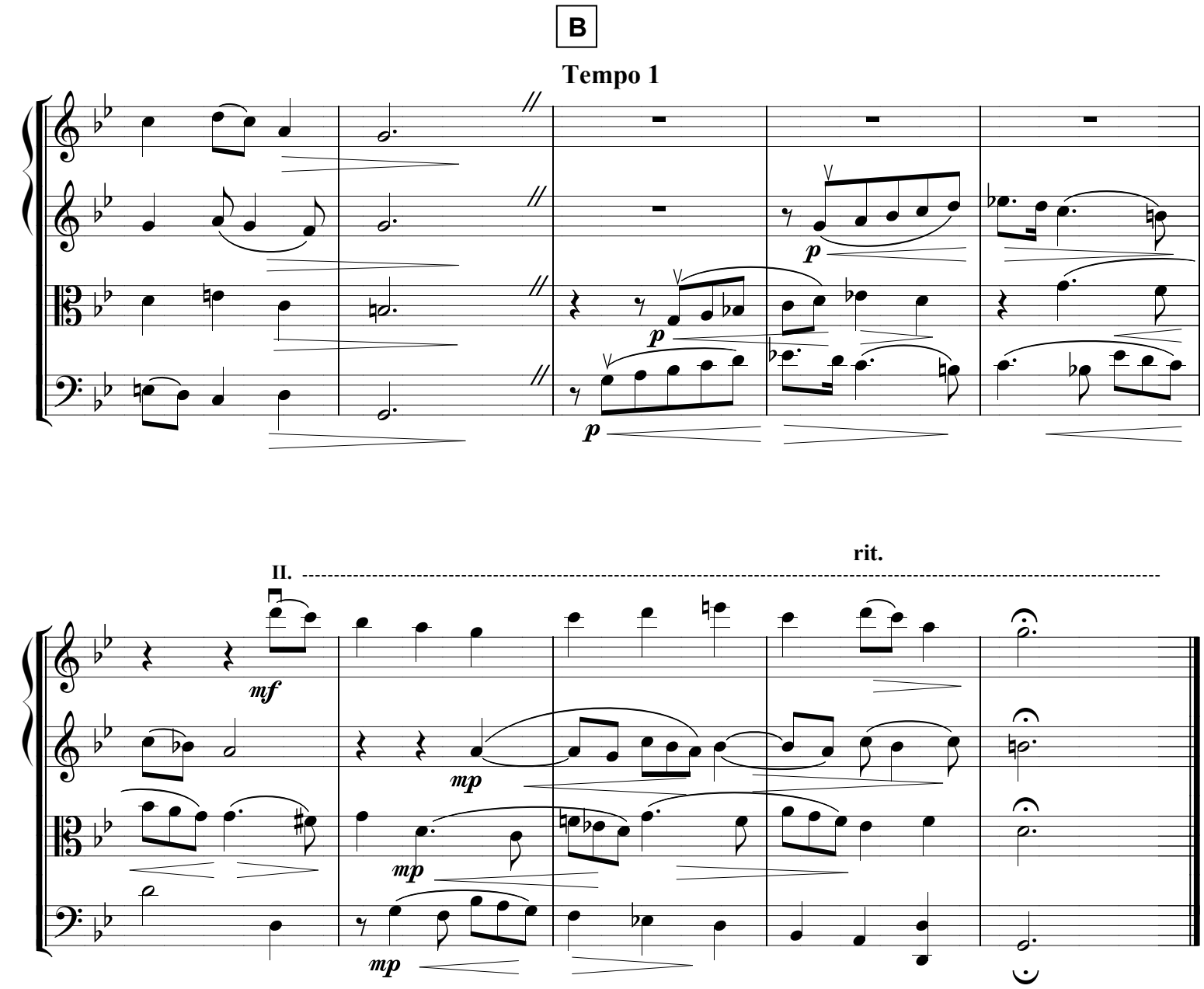






* *"All Things Are Quite Silent"*; The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs, p. 13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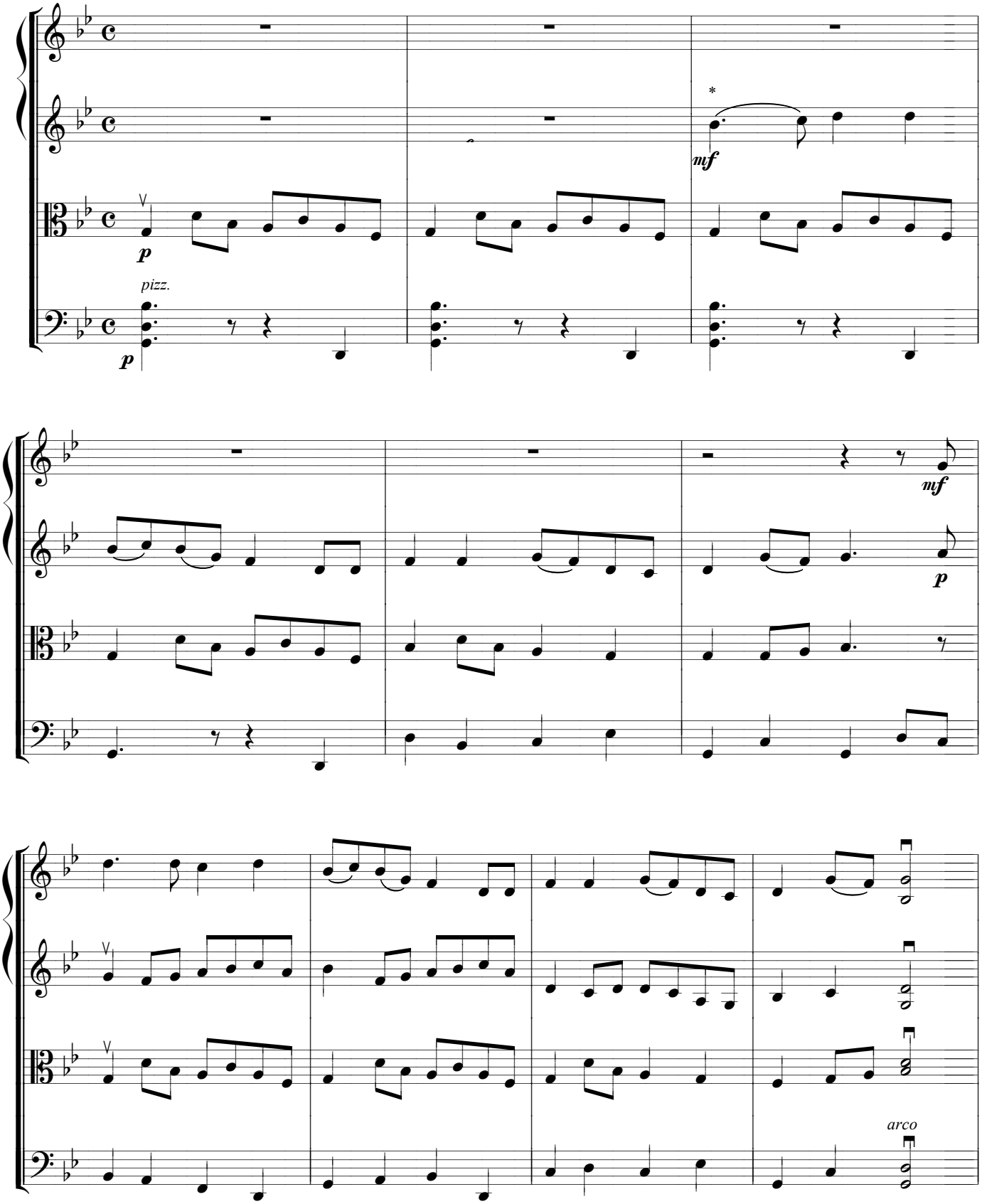
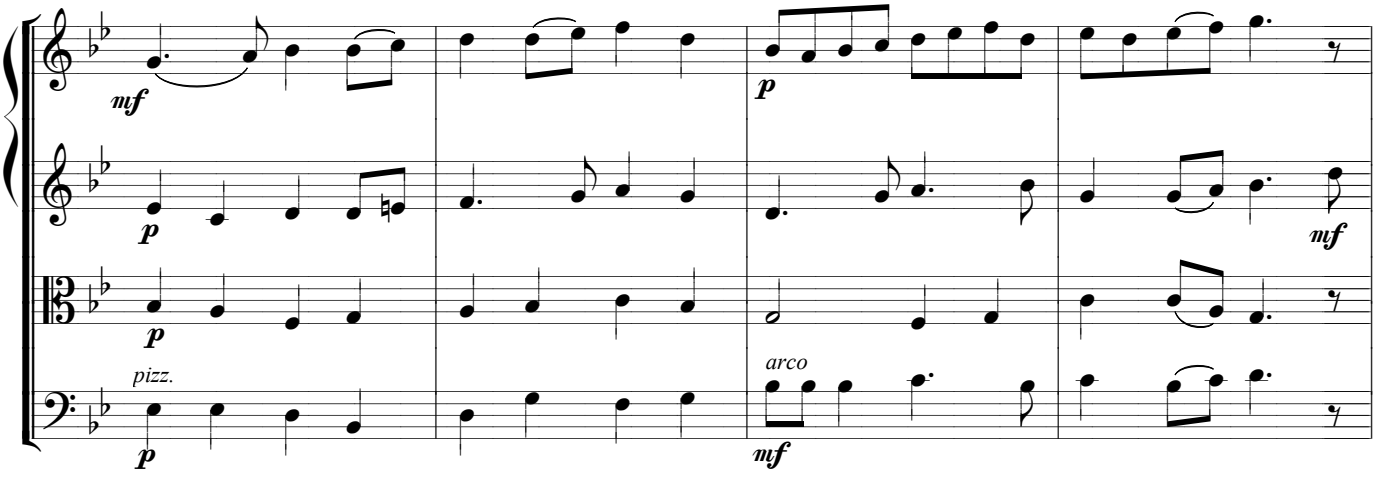


* *"The Basket Of Eggs"*; The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs, p. 18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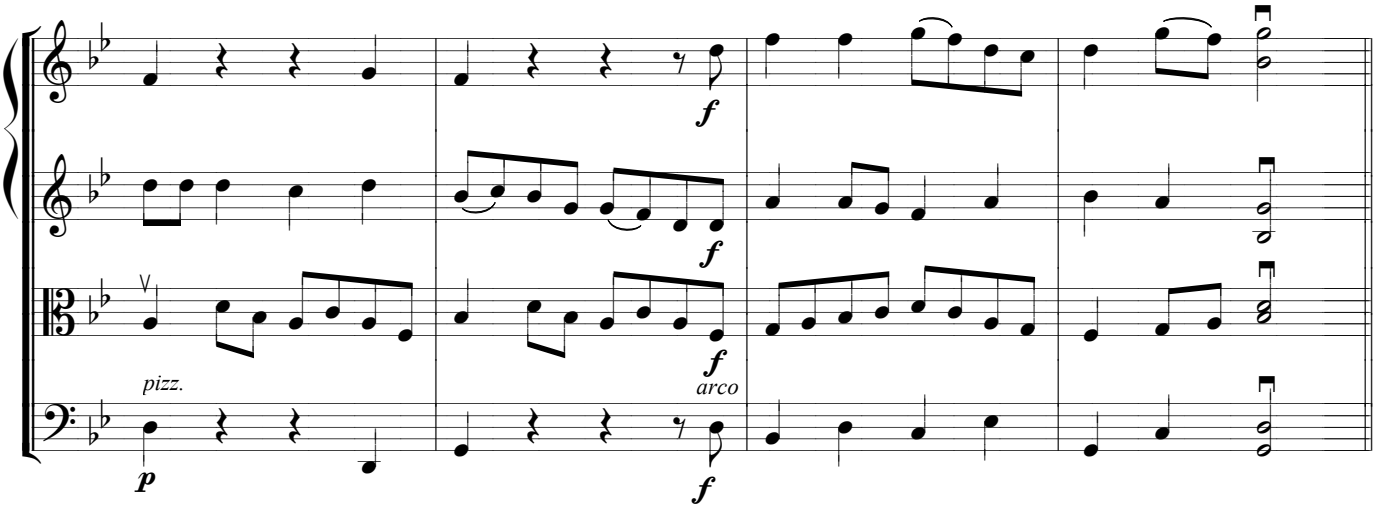
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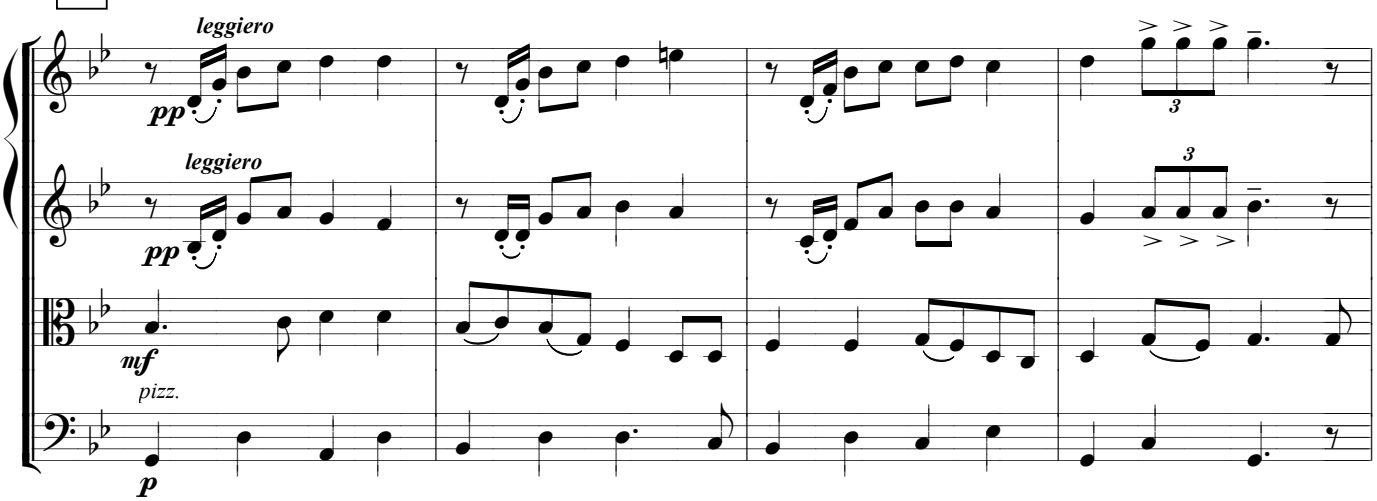
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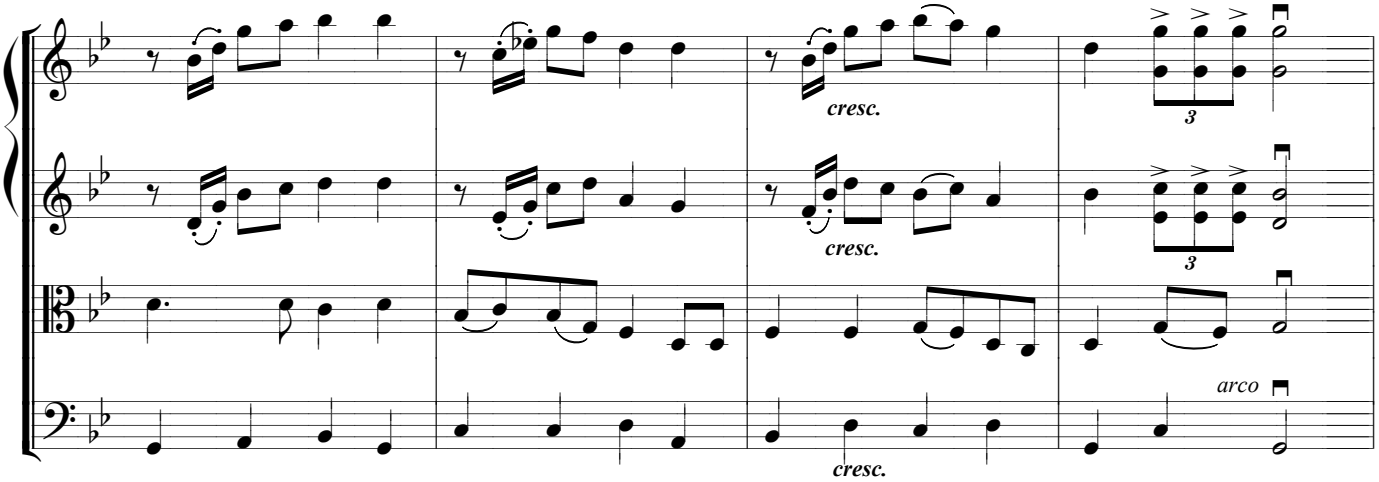
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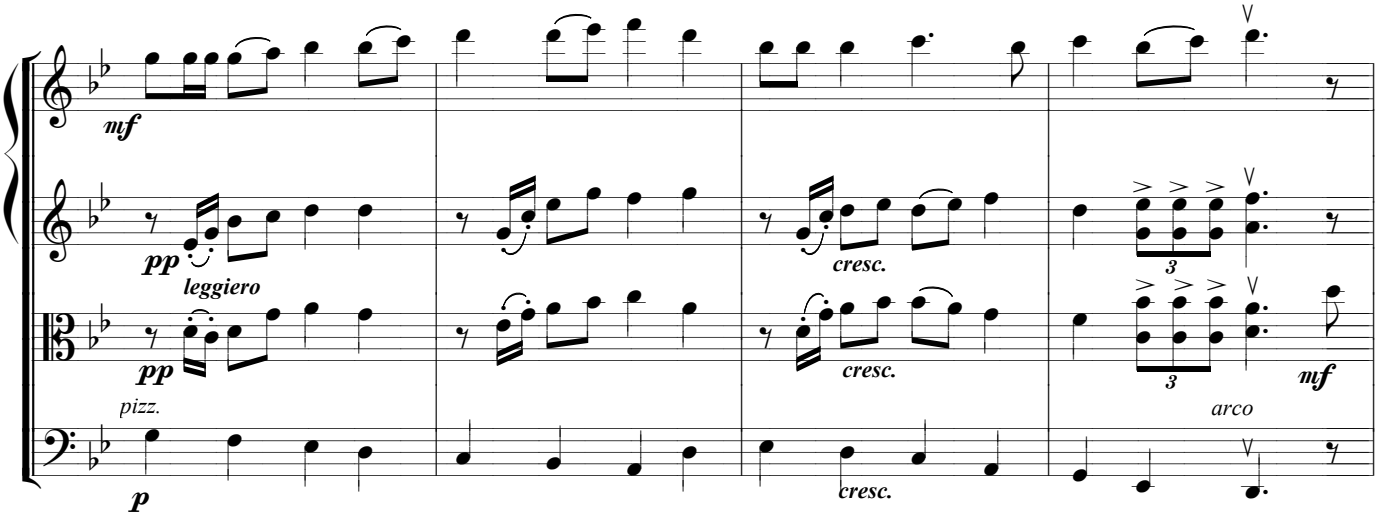
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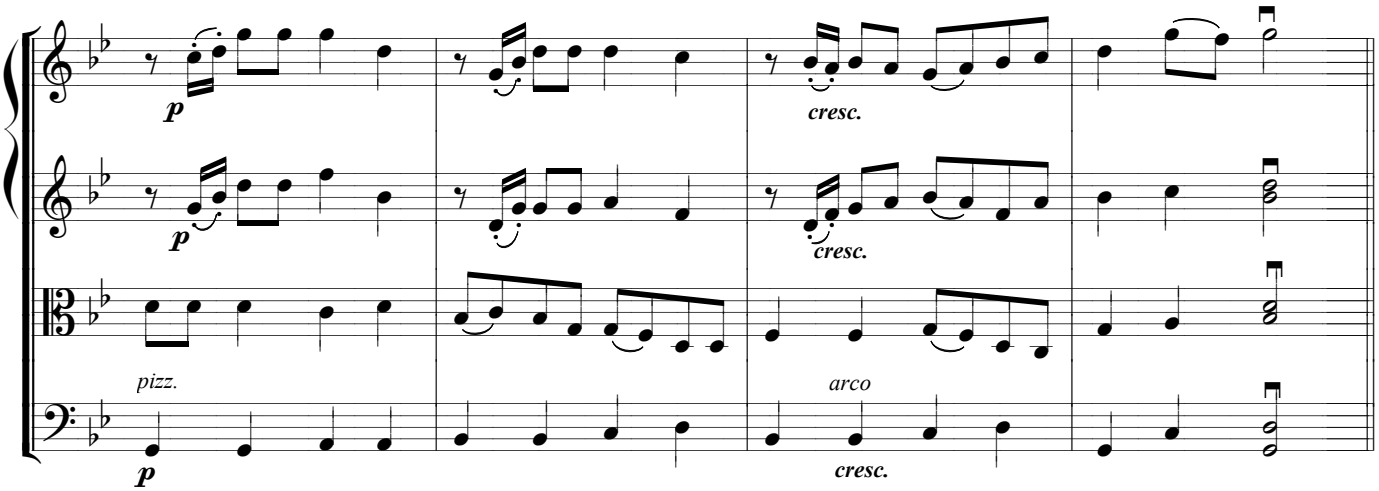
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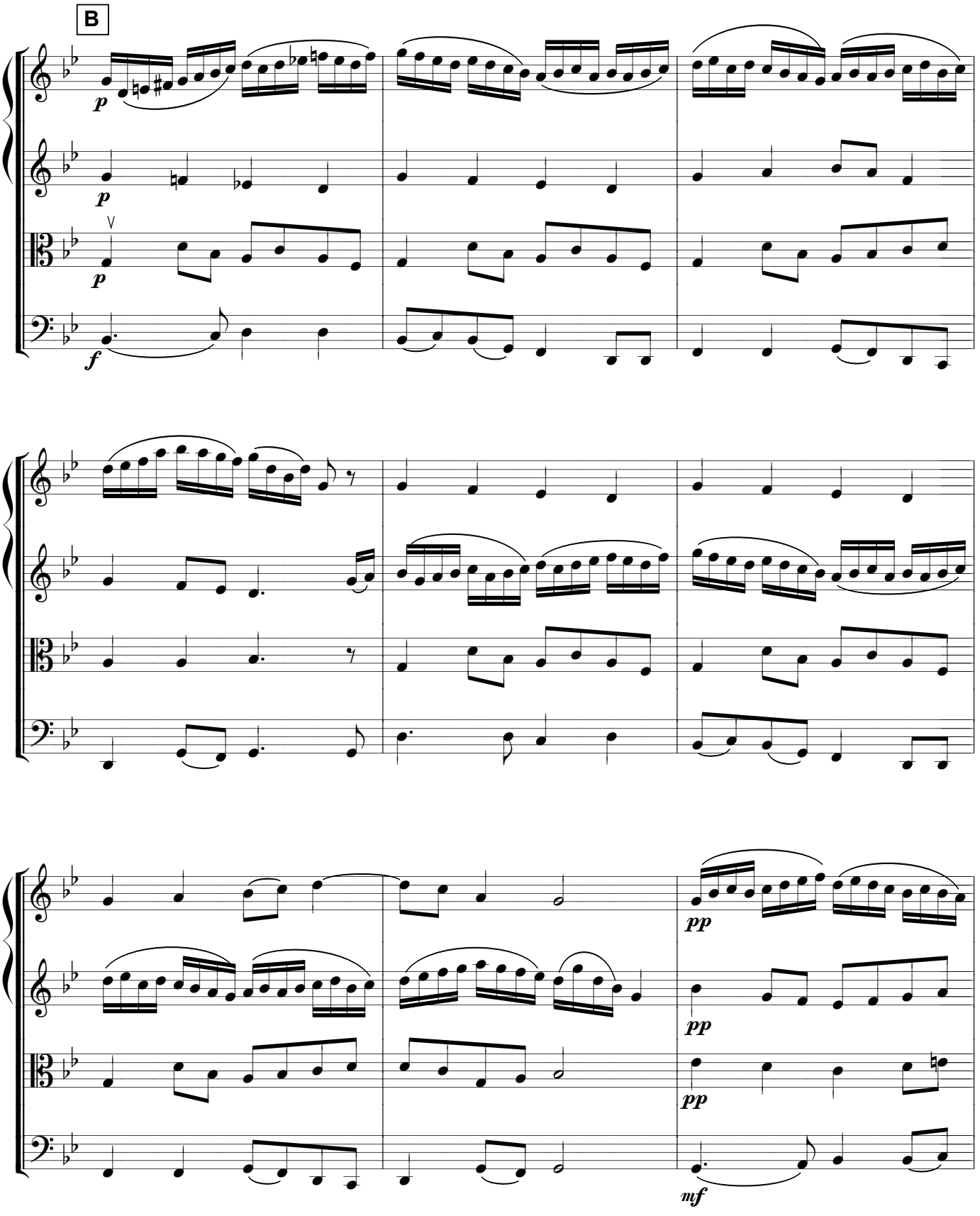
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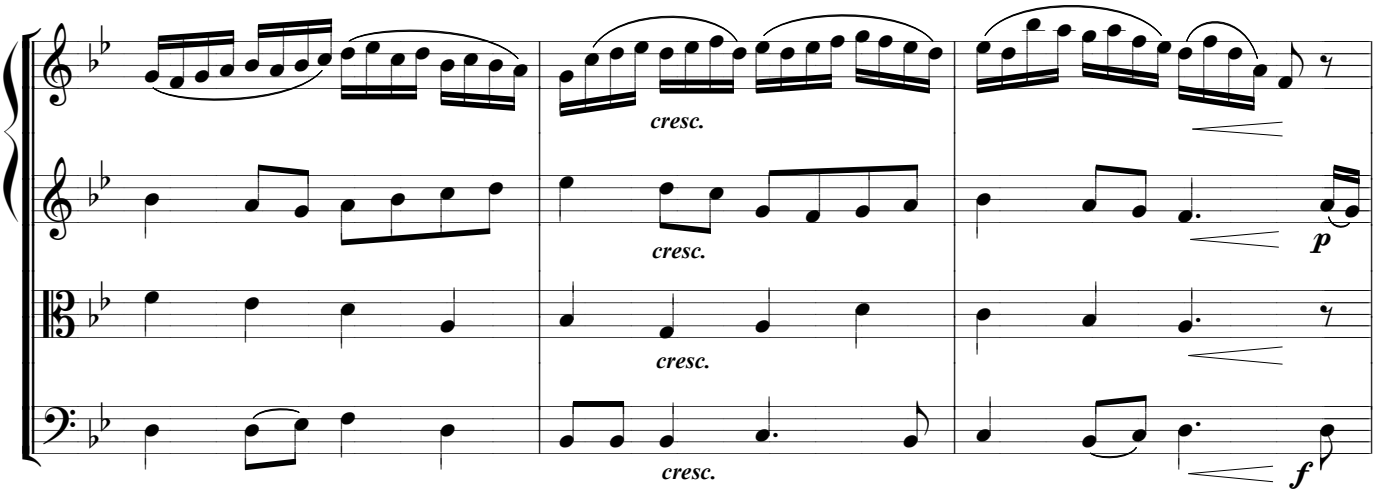
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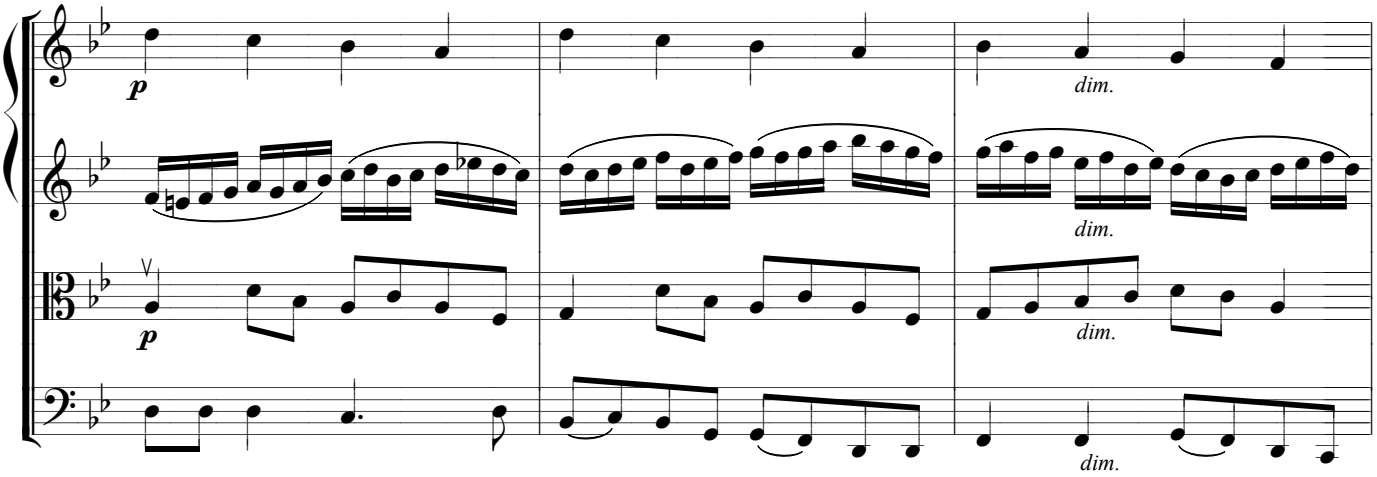
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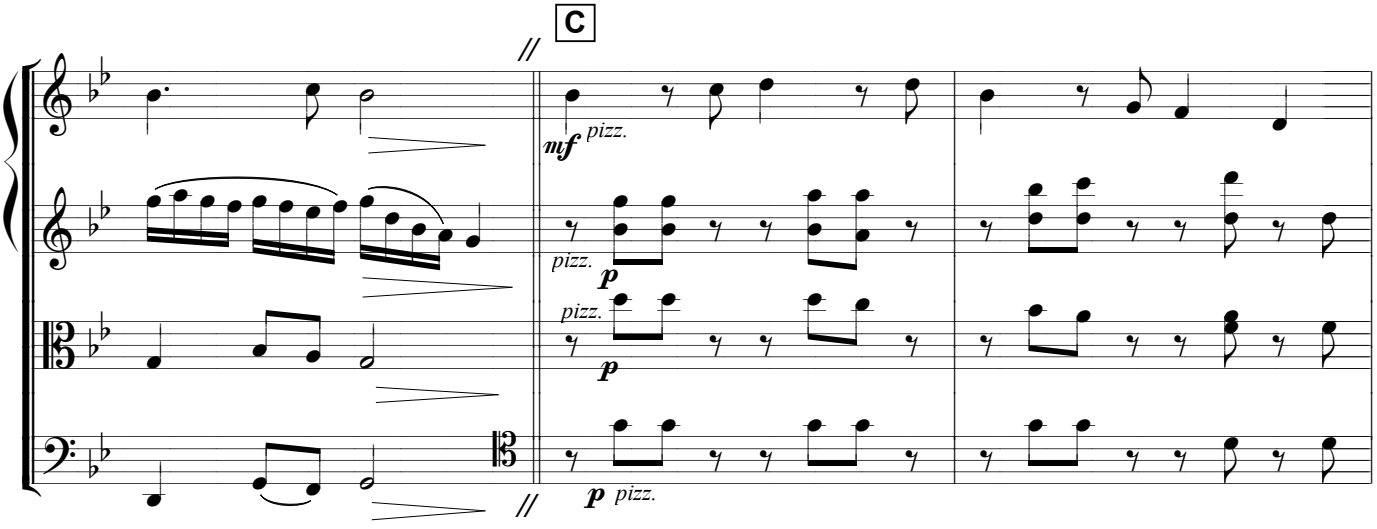
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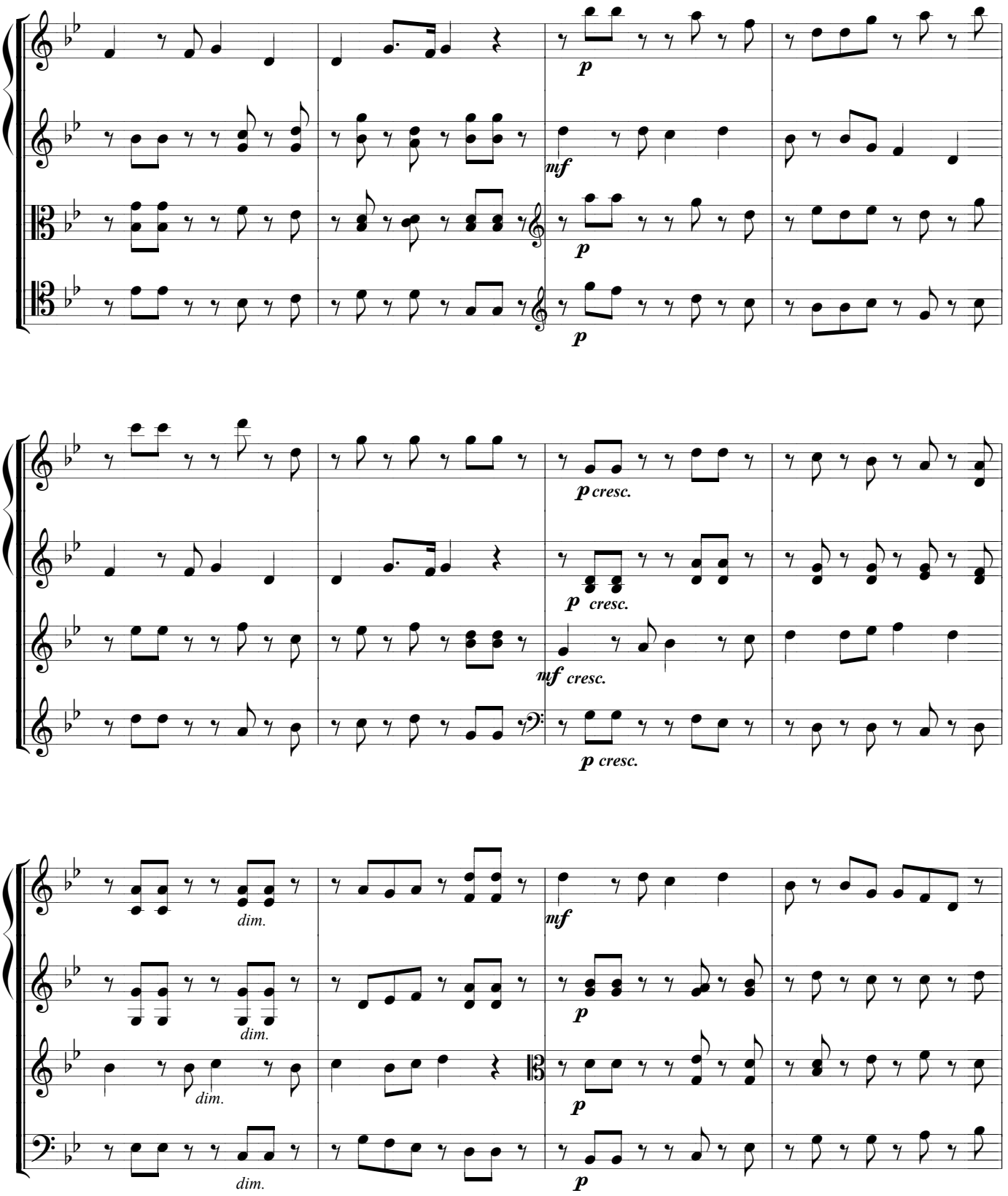
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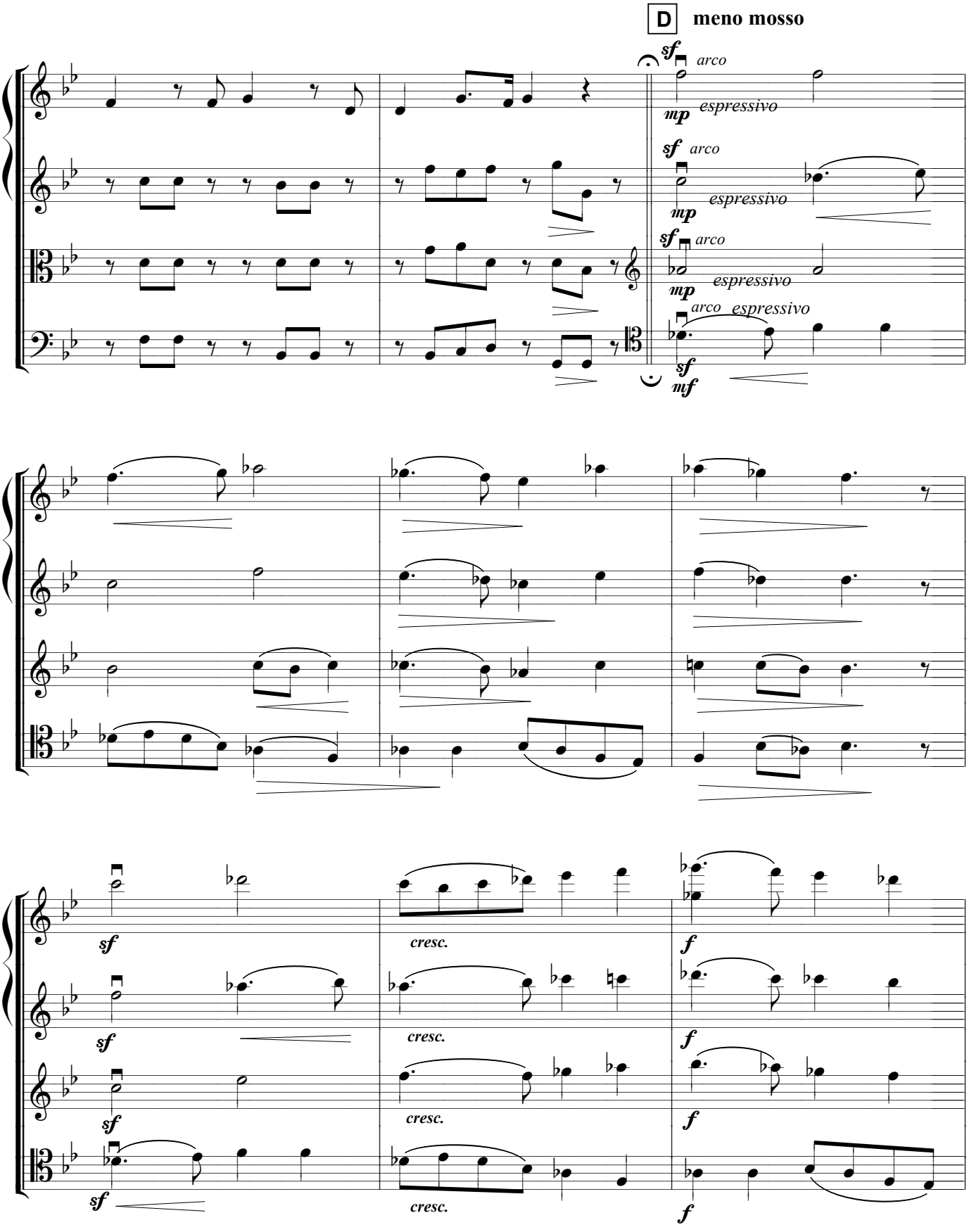
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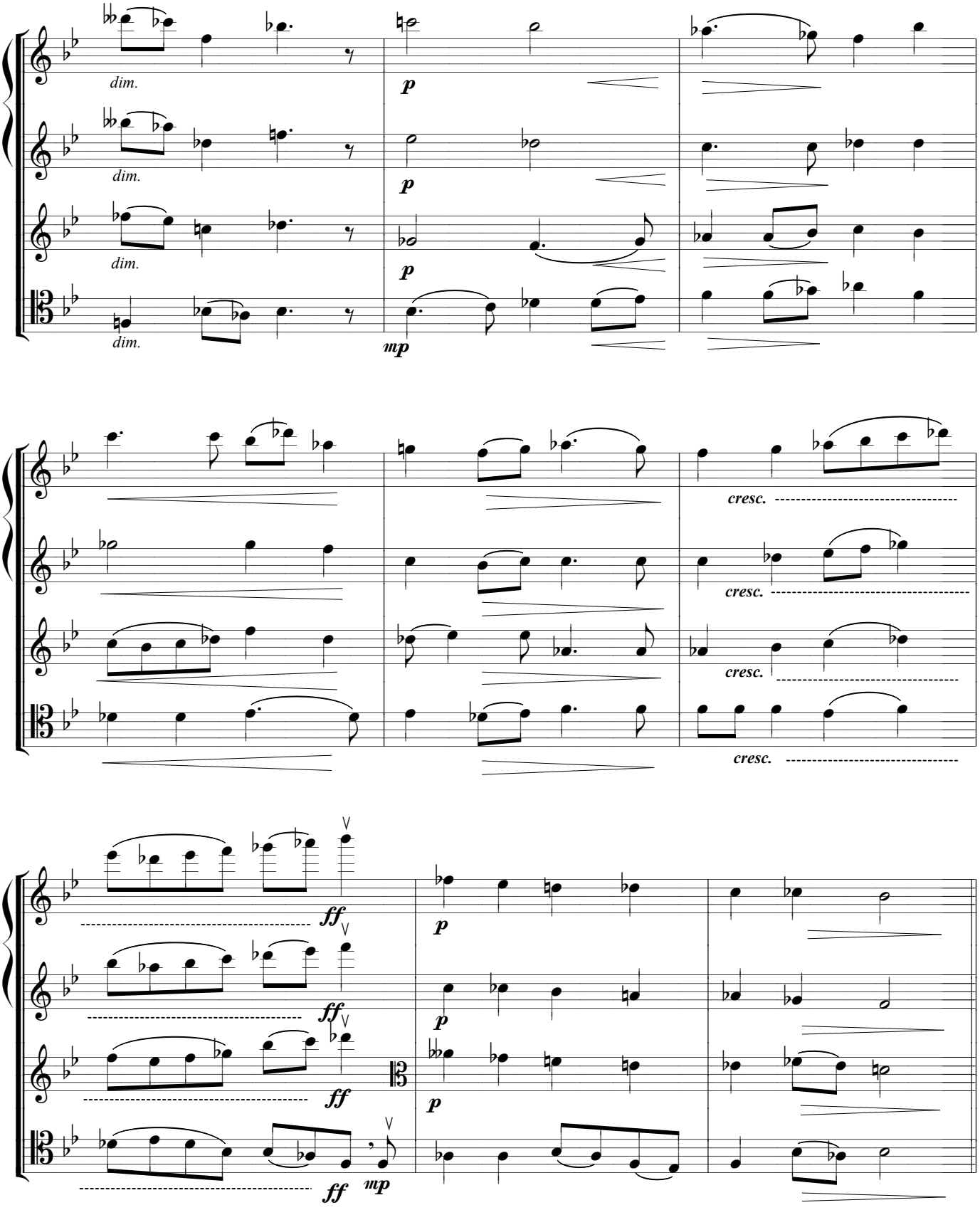
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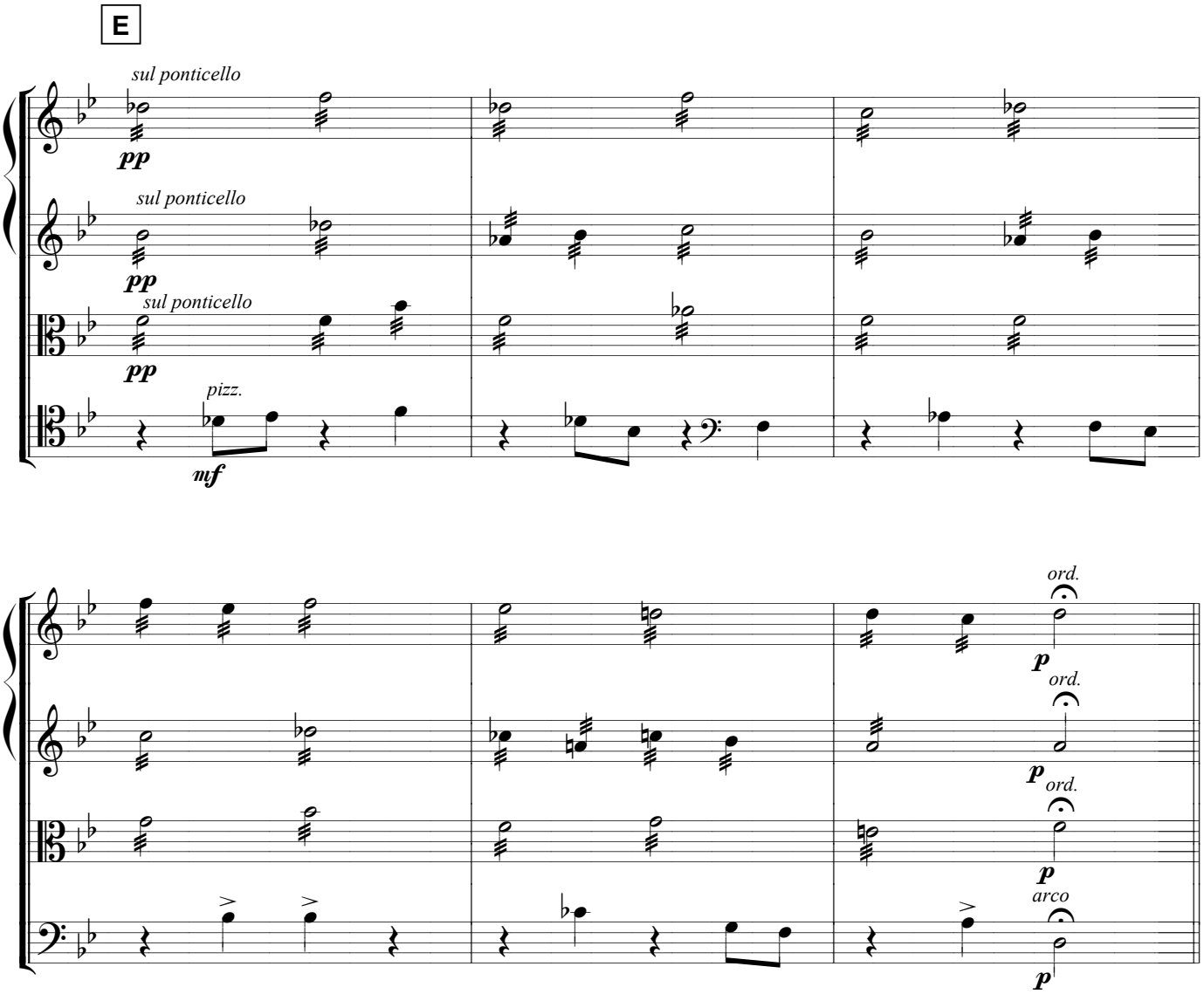
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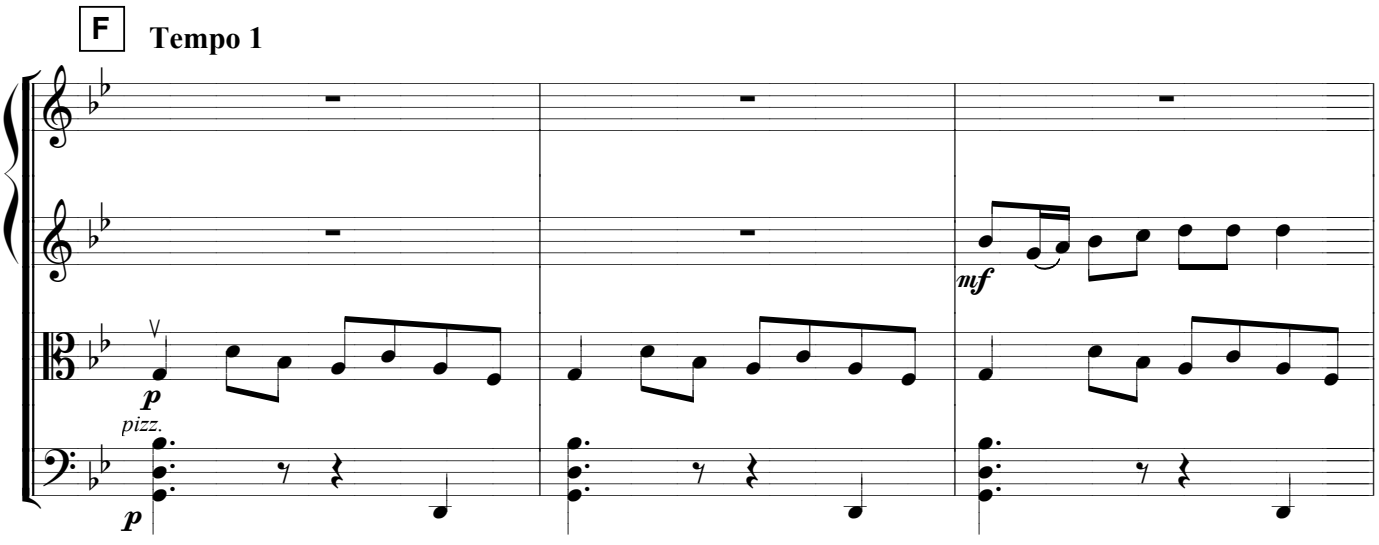
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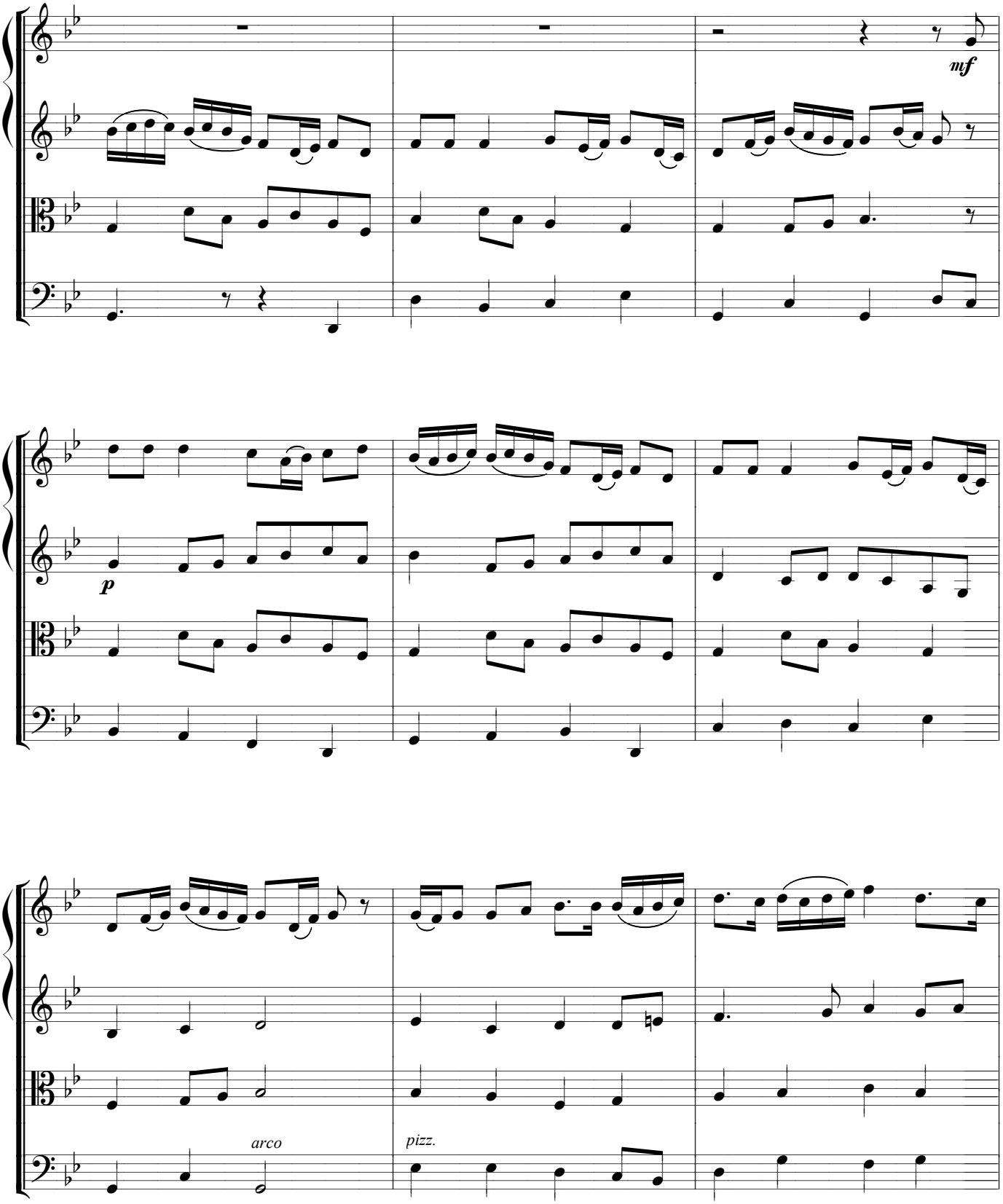
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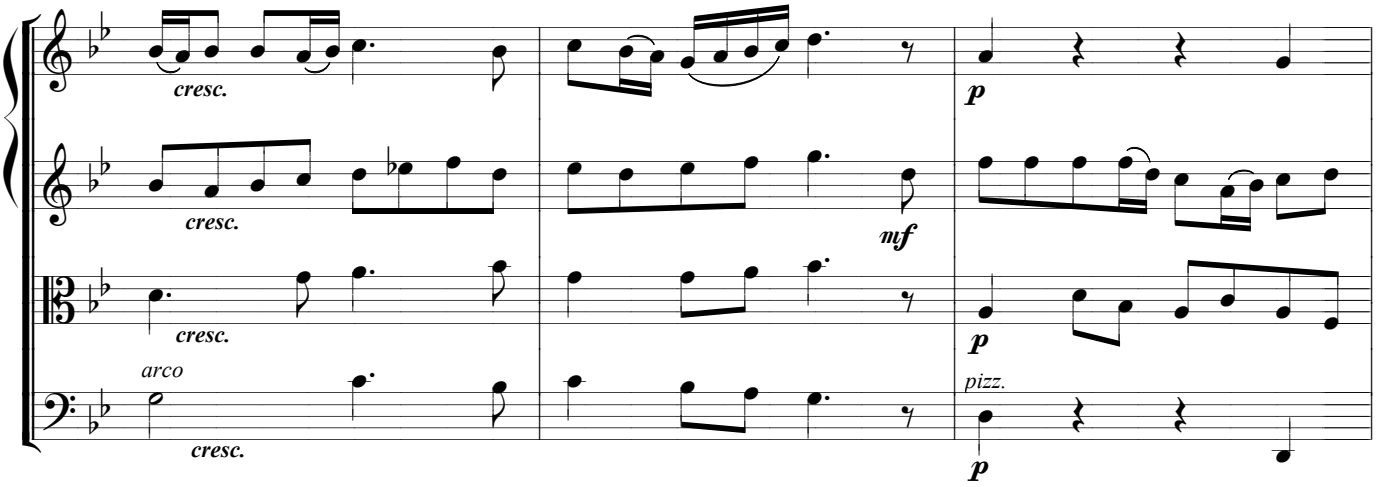
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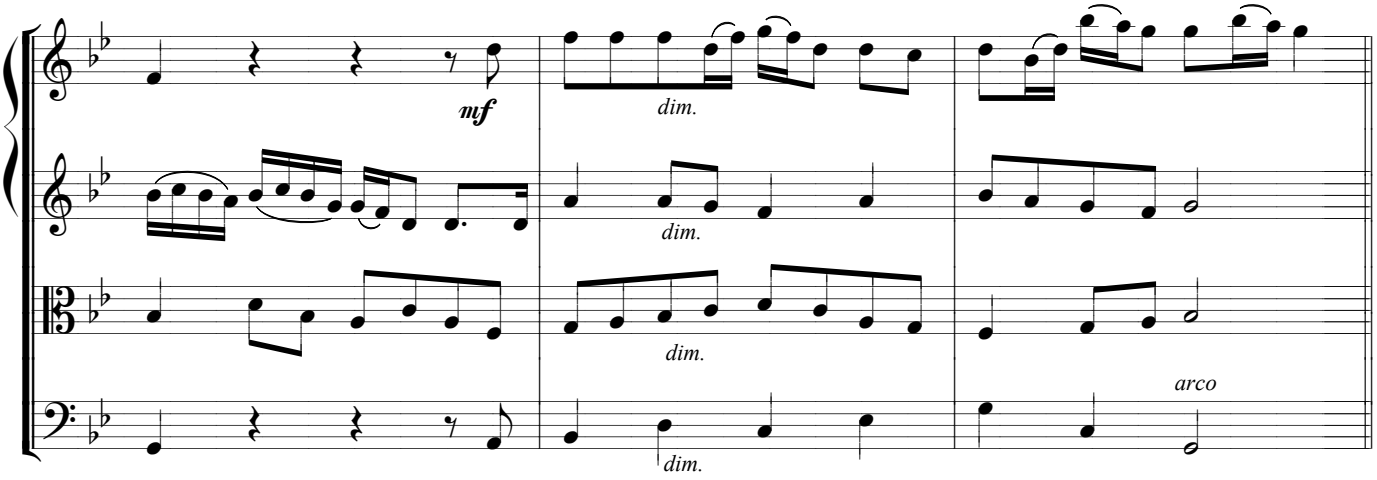
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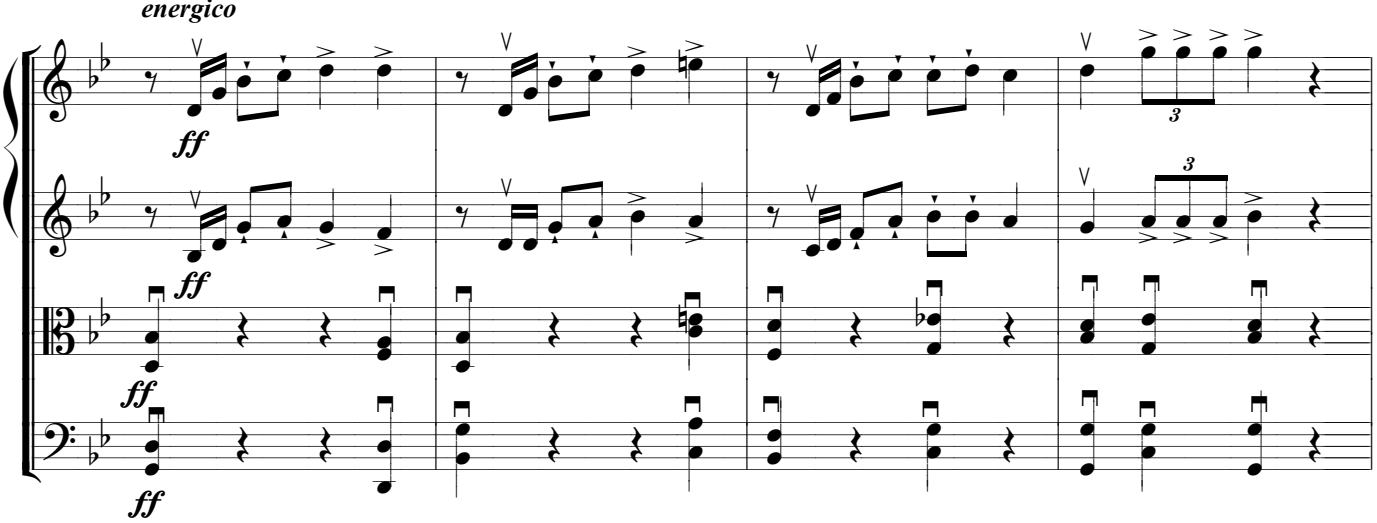
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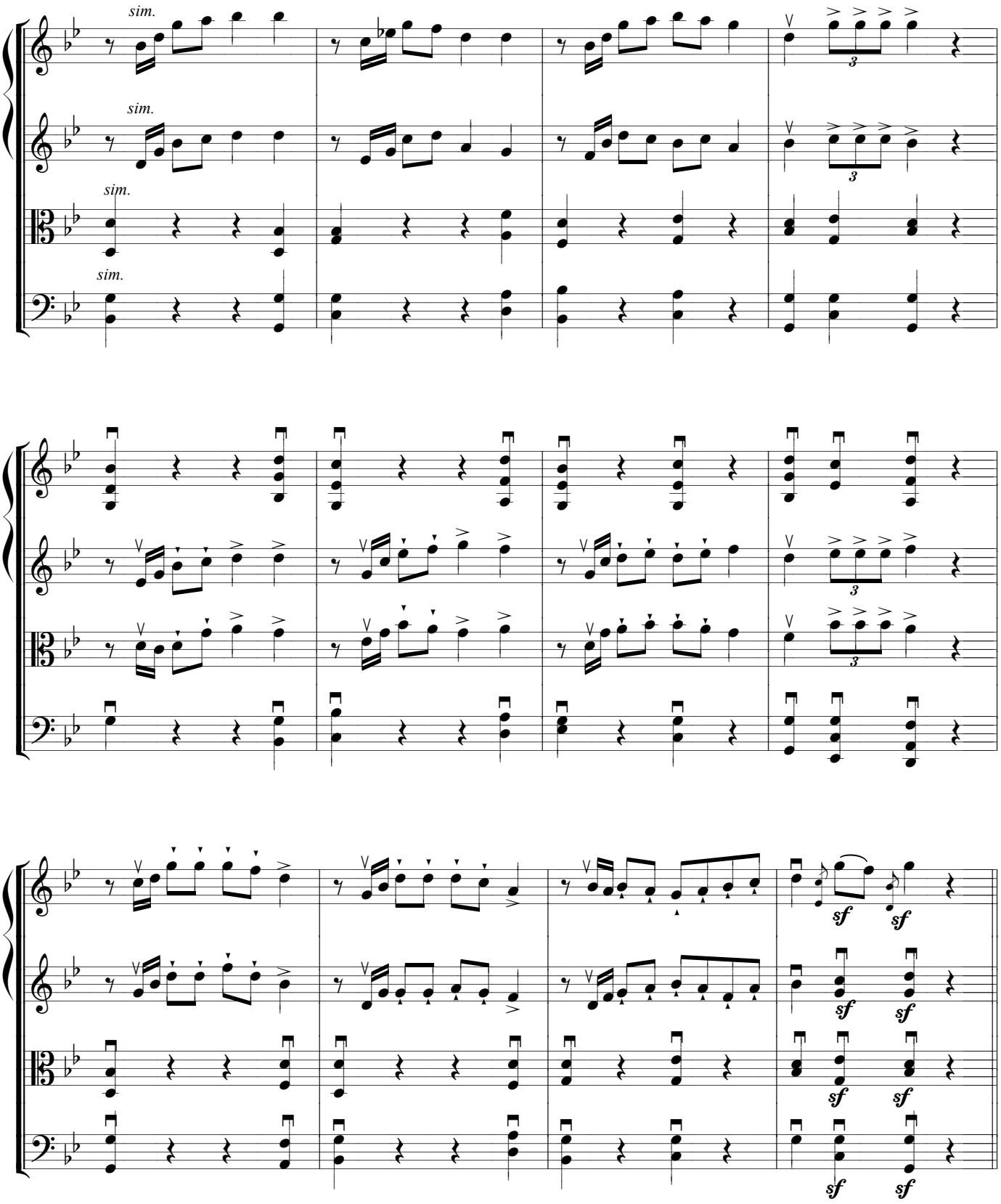
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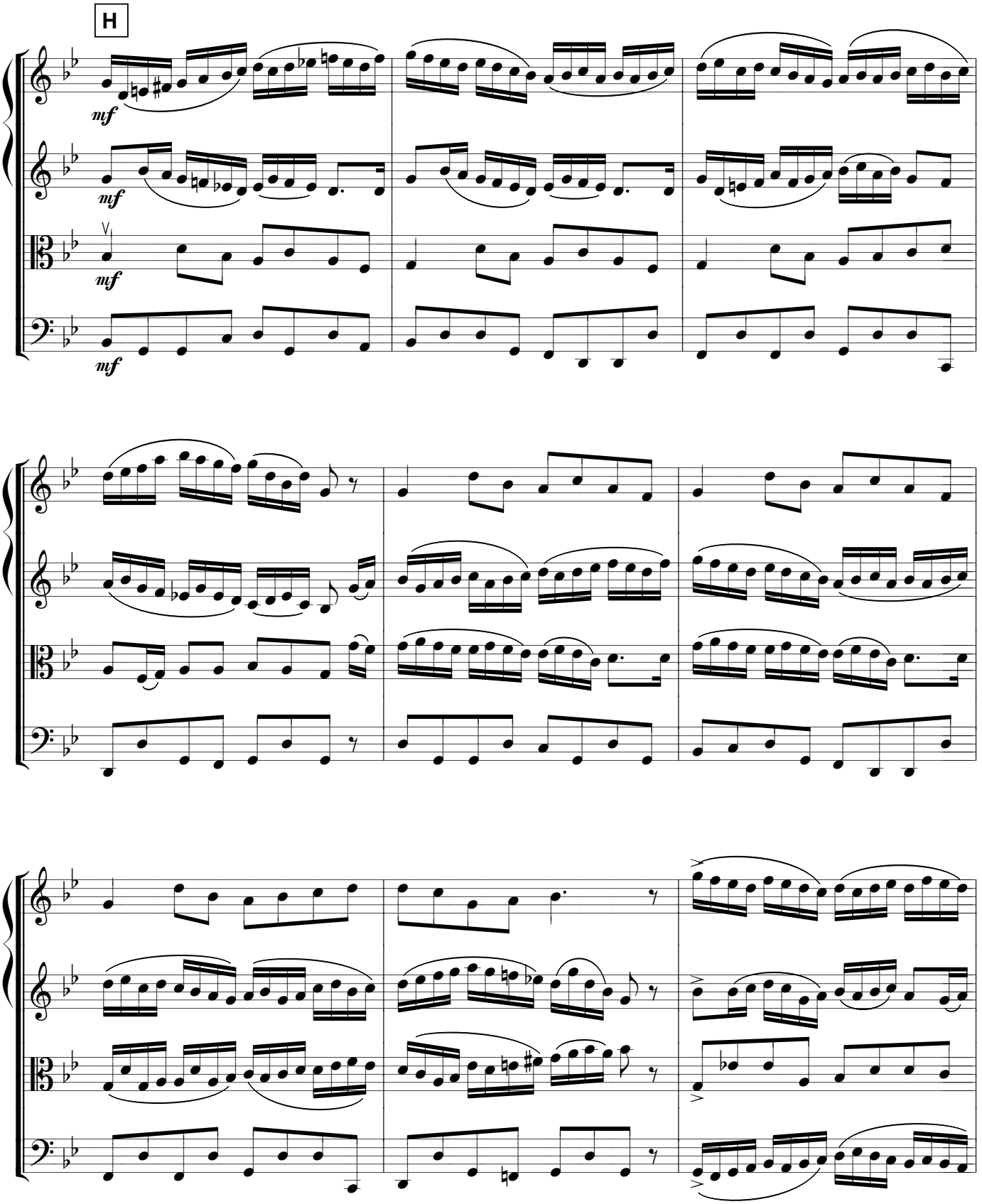
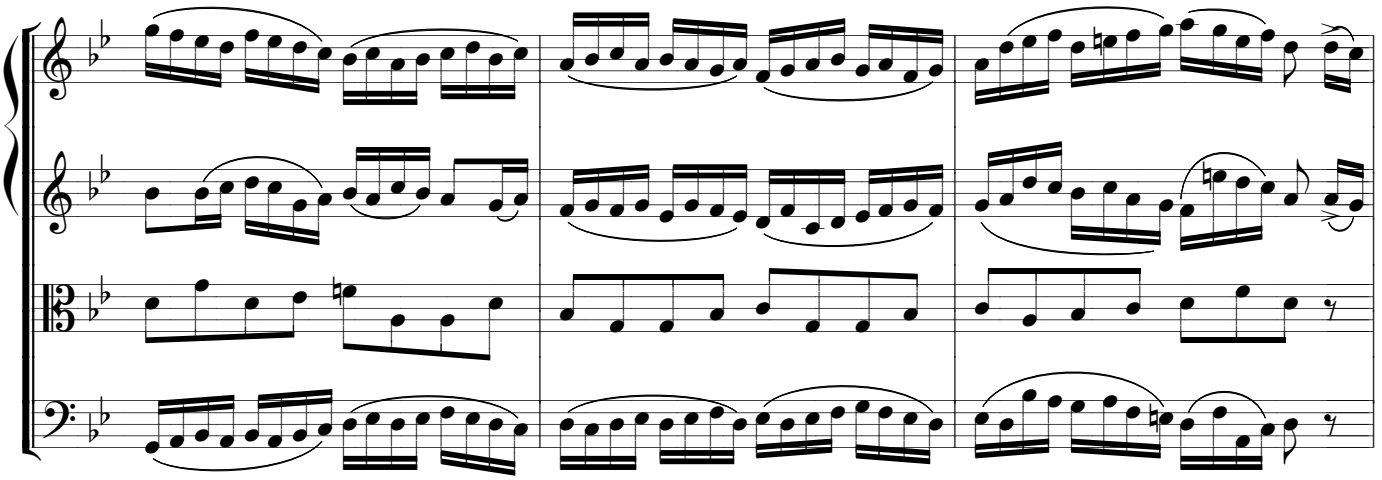
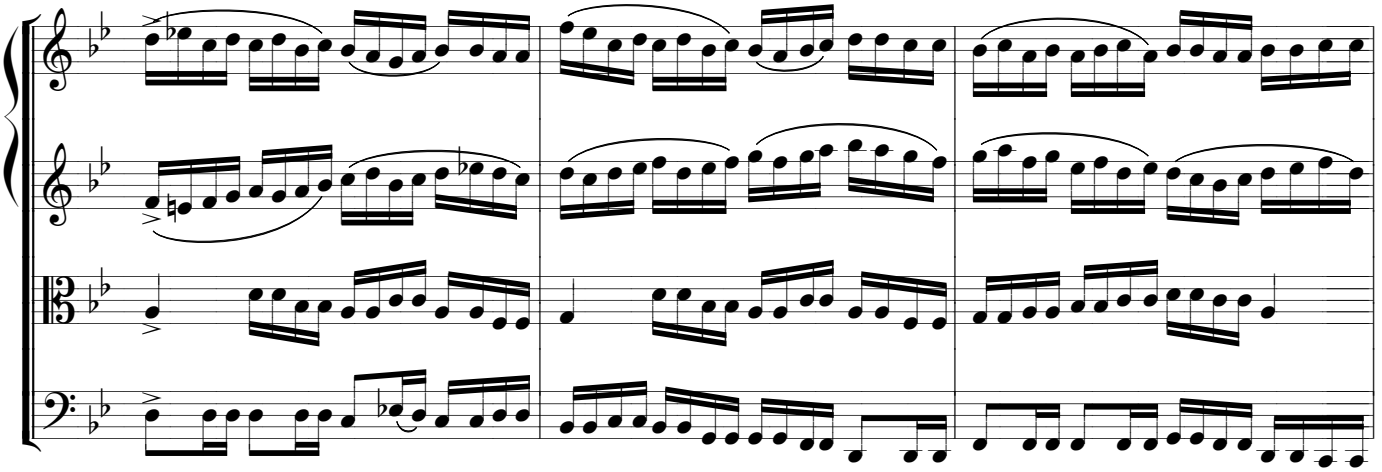
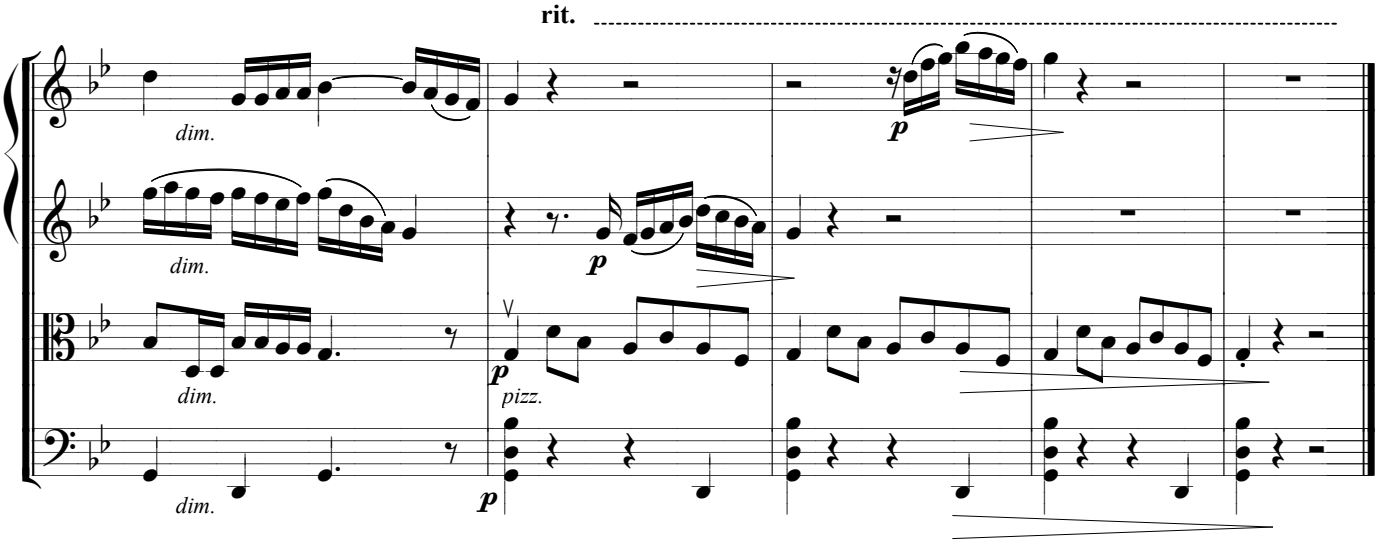
sf

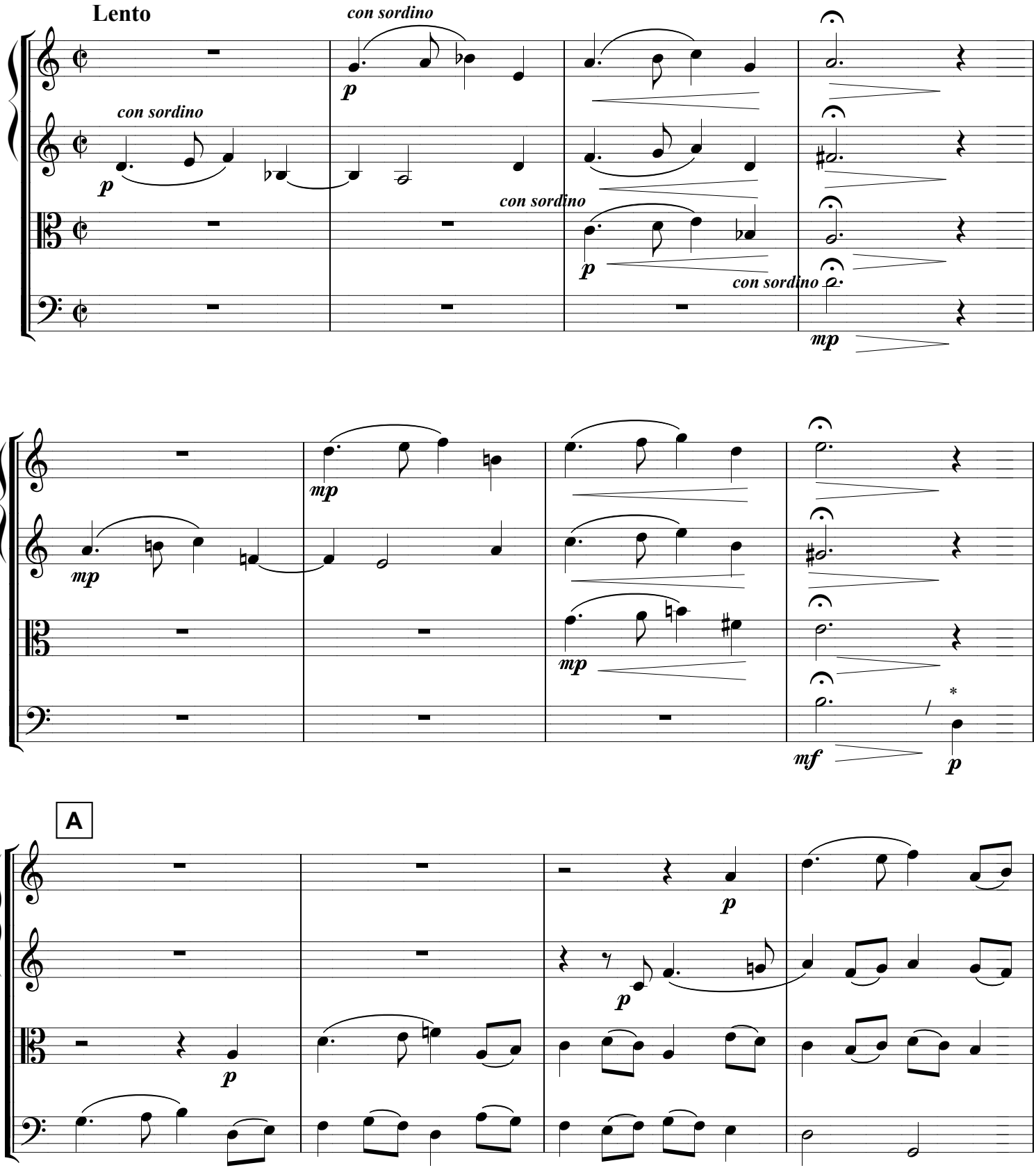

H
mf
mf
mf
mf



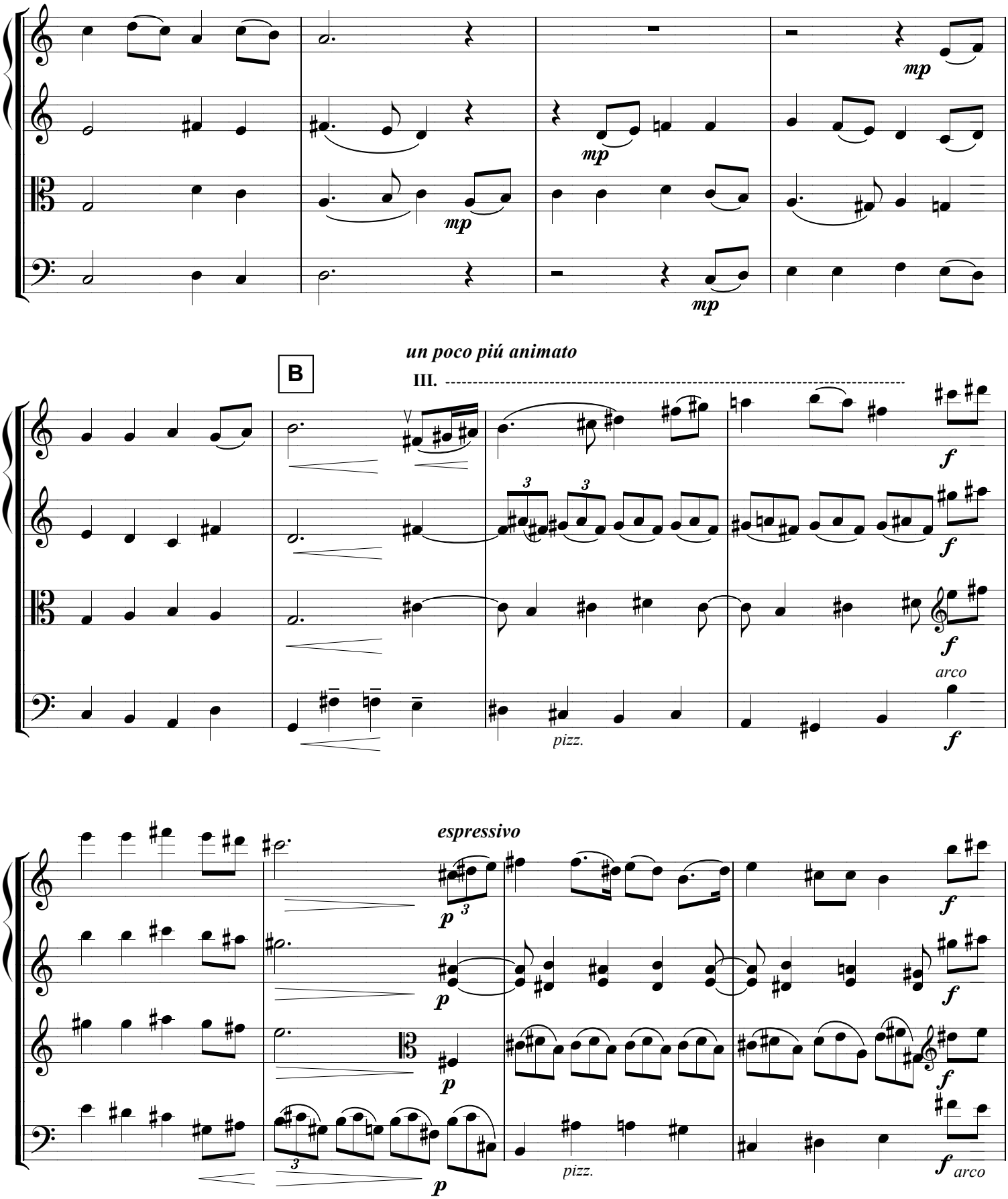


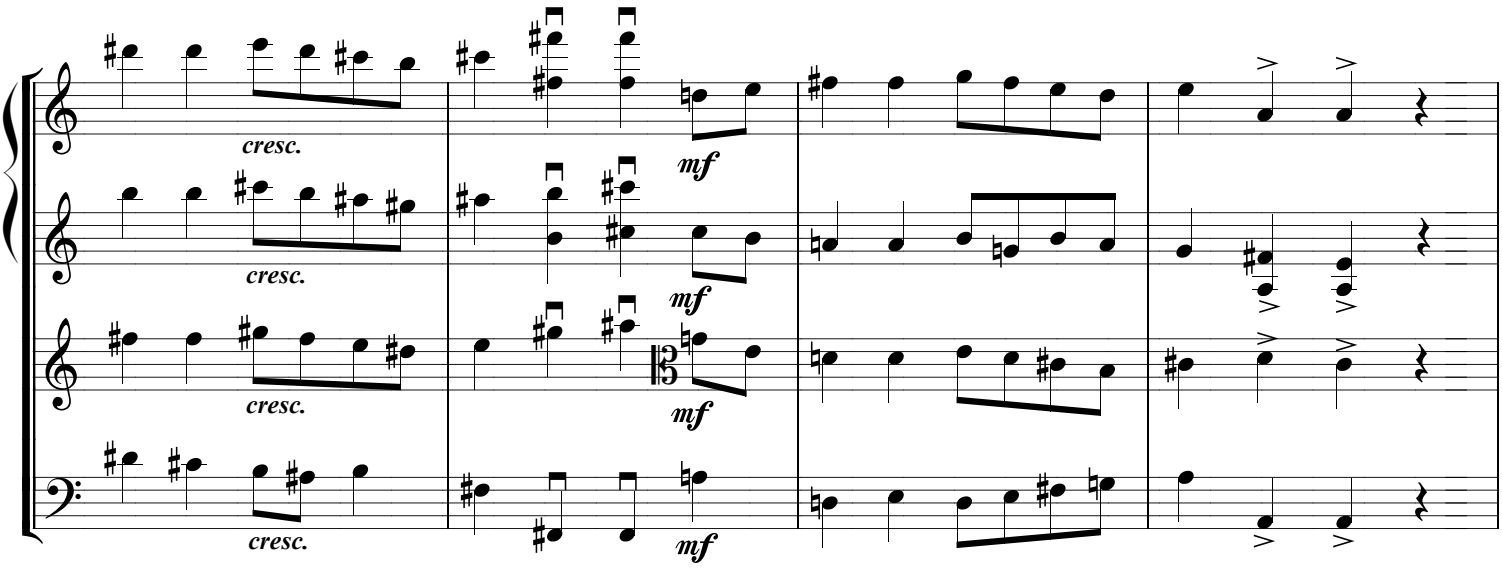

rit.
dim.
dim.
dim.
dim.
p
p
p
p
pizz.

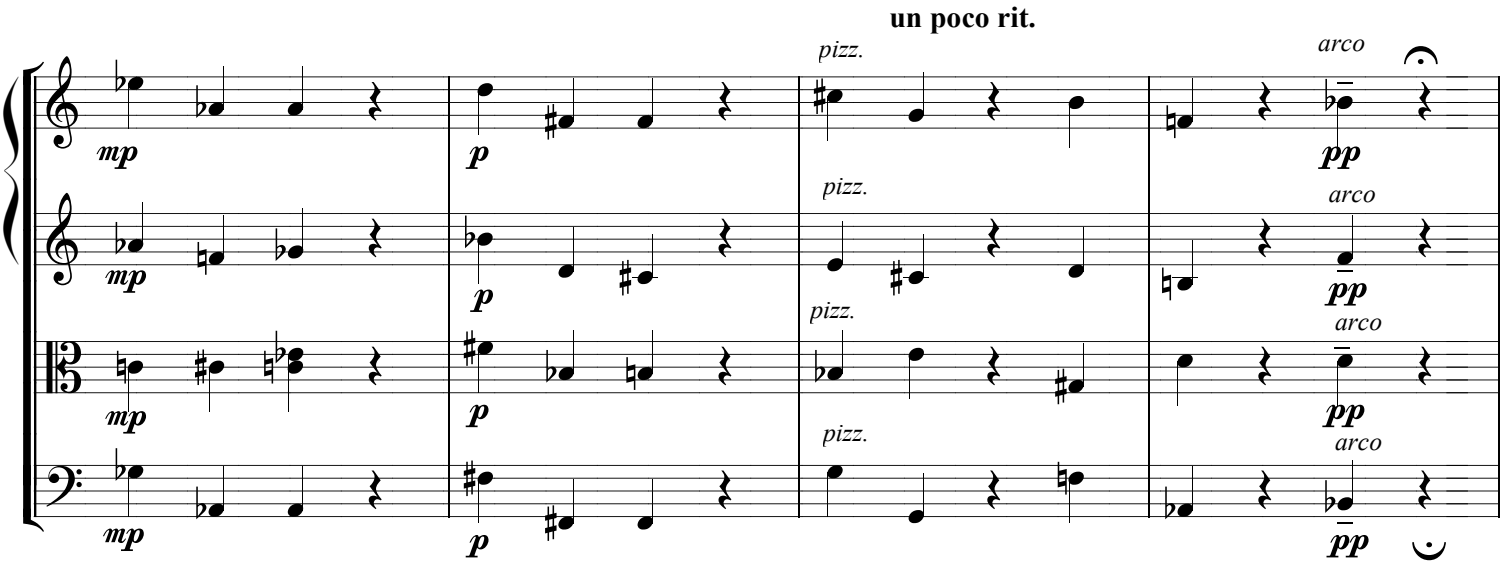
III. Canzona

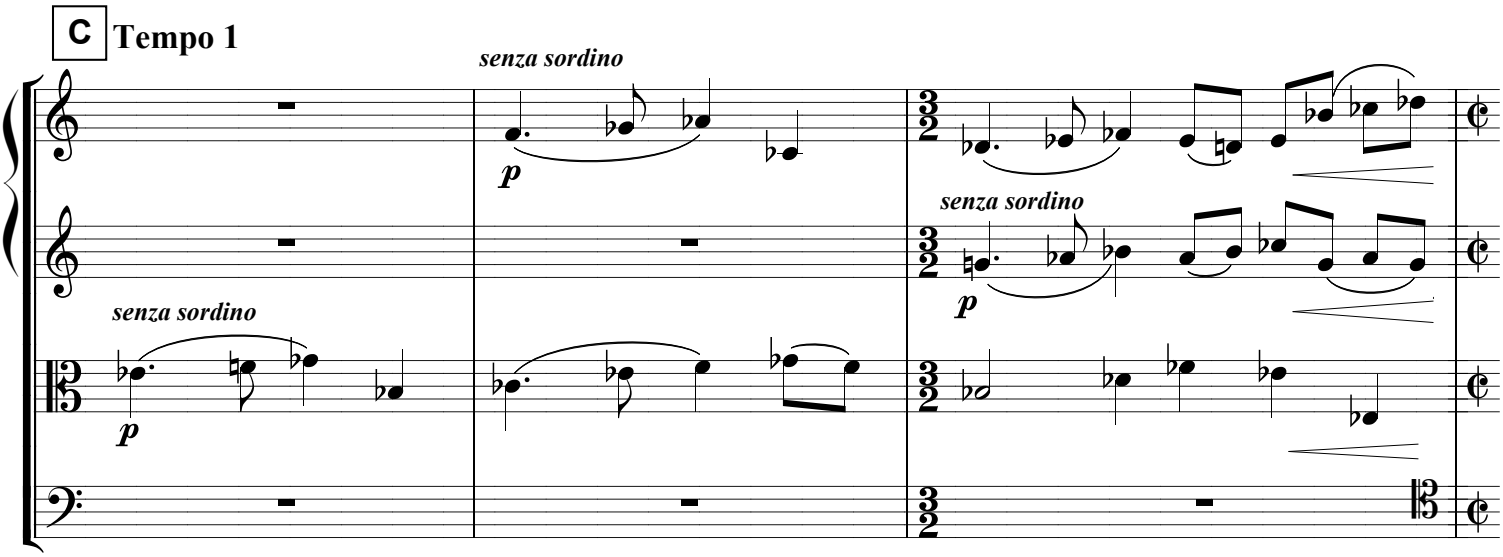


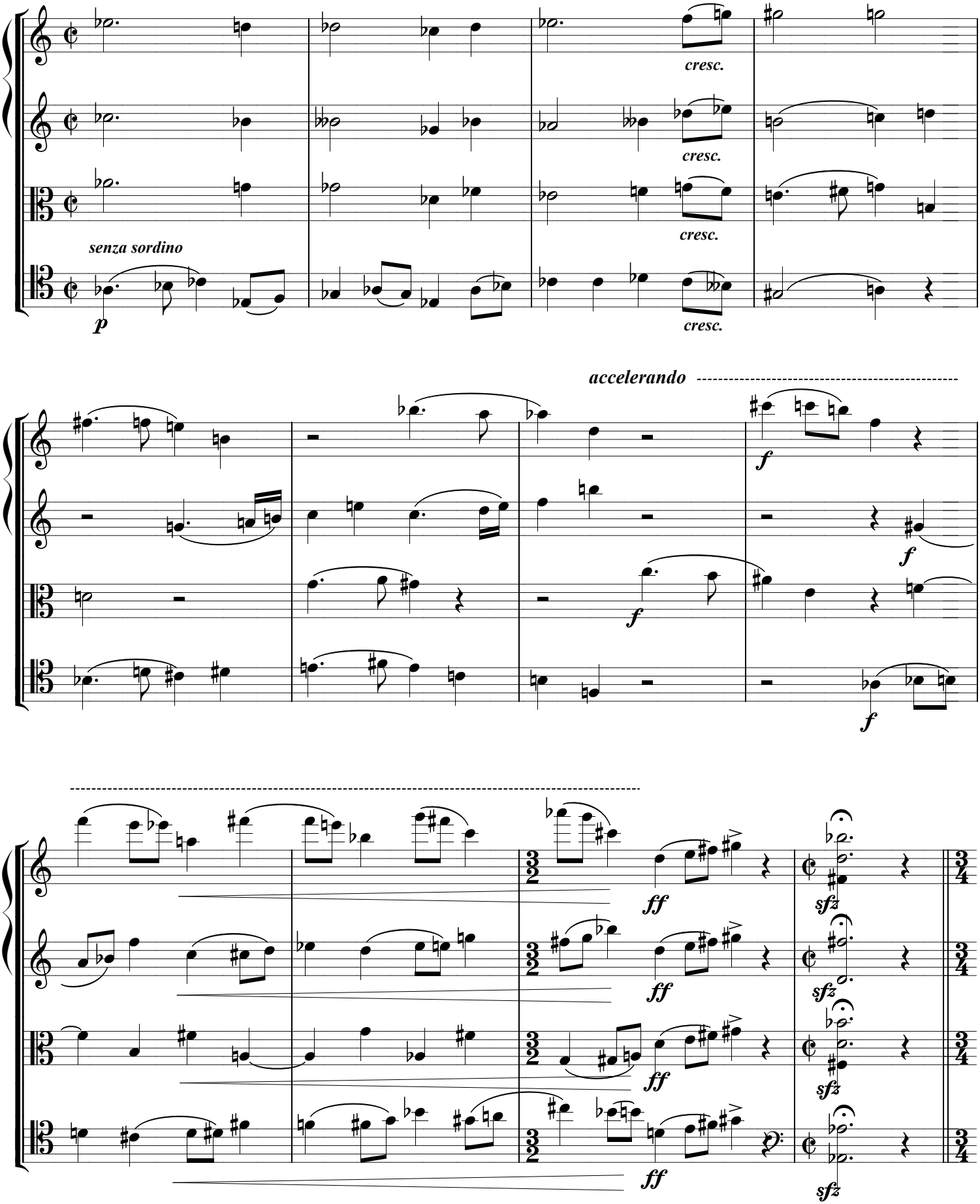
* *"The Greenland Whale Fishery"*; The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs, p. 50

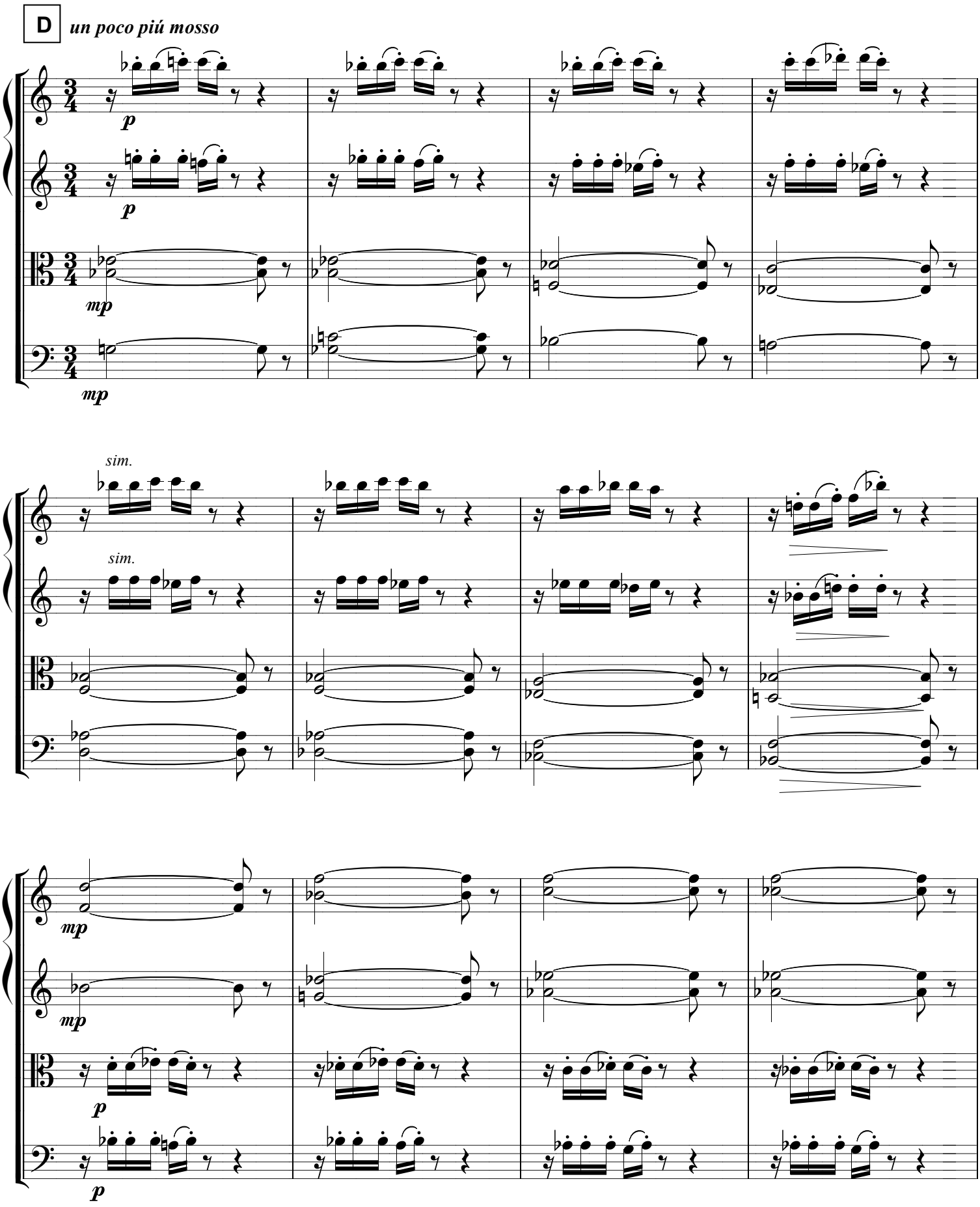

mp
mp
mp
mp
B
un poco piú animato
III.
f
f
f
arco
pizz.
f
espressivo
p
p
p
p
f
f
f
f
pizz.
f arco

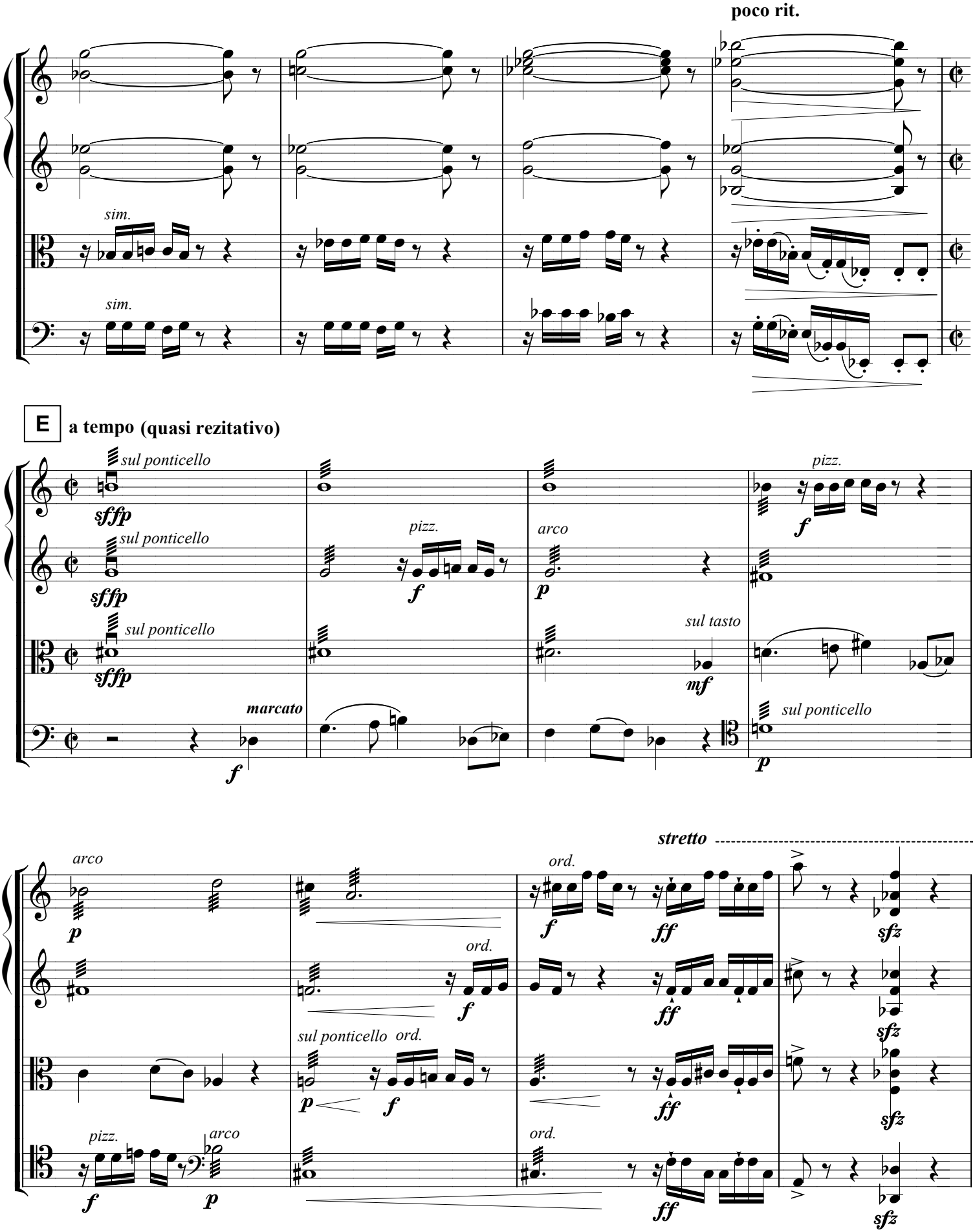

cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
mf
mf
mf
mf

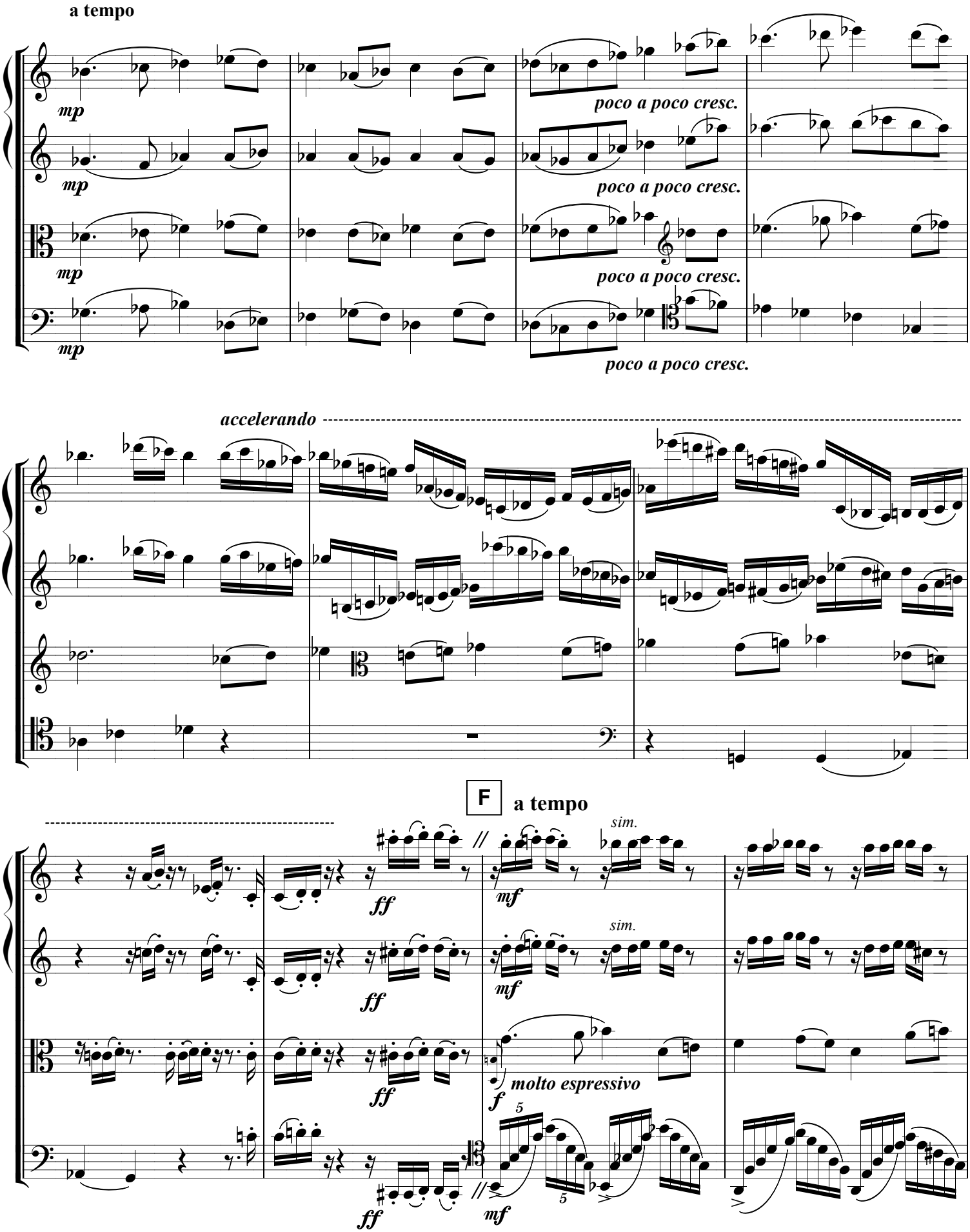

un poco rit.
mp
mp
mp
mp
p
p
p
p
pizz.
pizz.
pizz.
pizz.
arco
arco
arco
arco
pp
pp
pp
pp

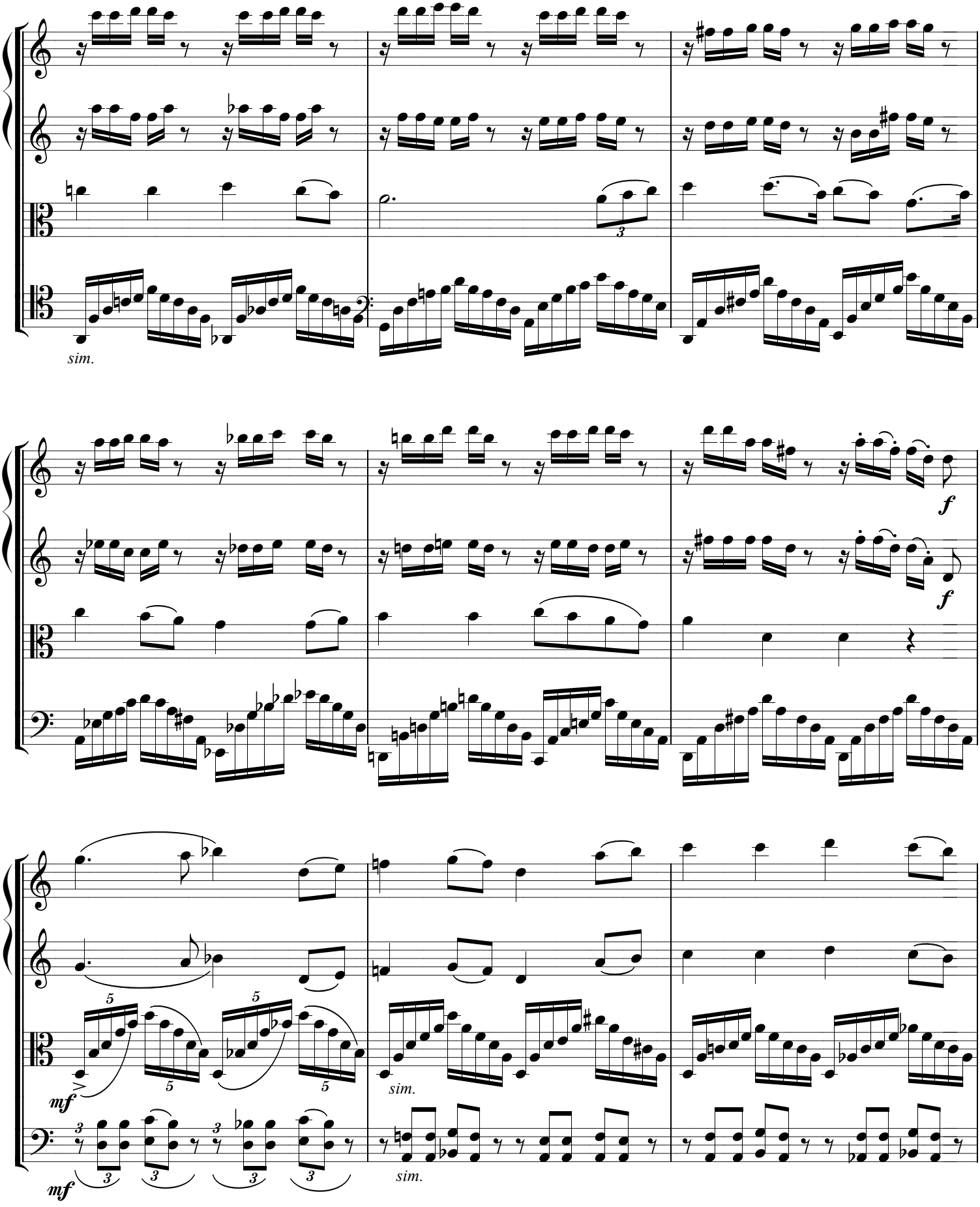

C
Tempo 1
senza sordino
senza sordino
senza sordino
p
p
p

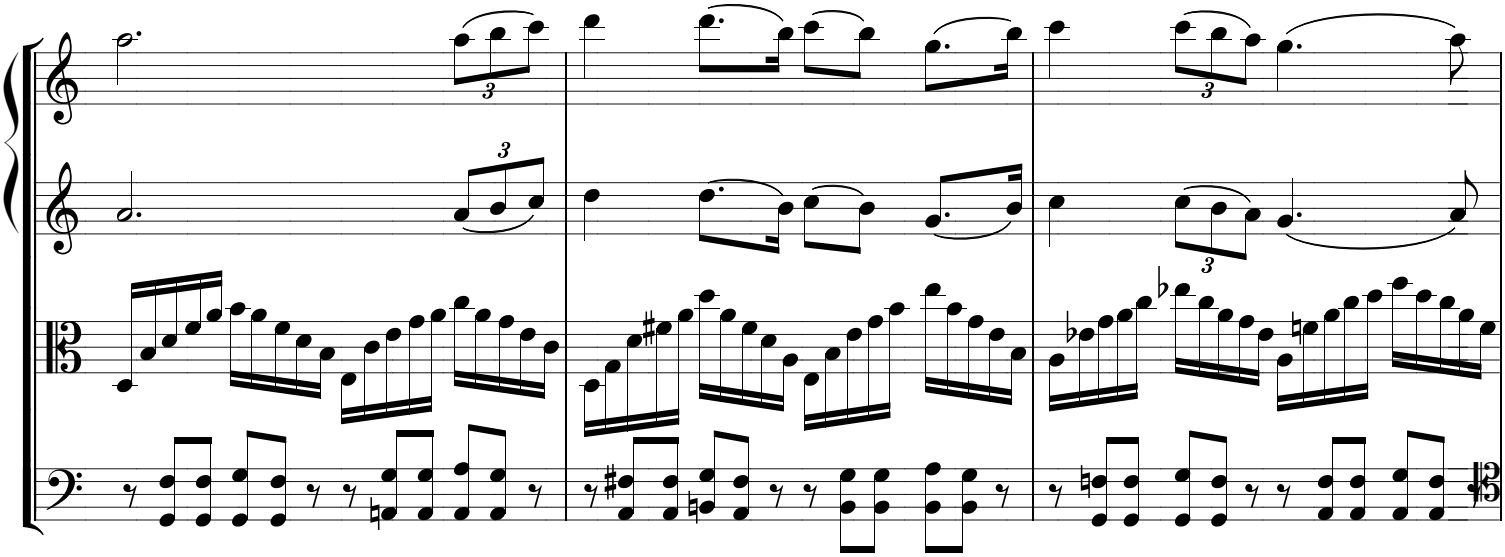

cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
senza sordino
p
accelerando
f
f
f
f
ff
ff
ff
ff
sfz
sfz
sfz
sfz

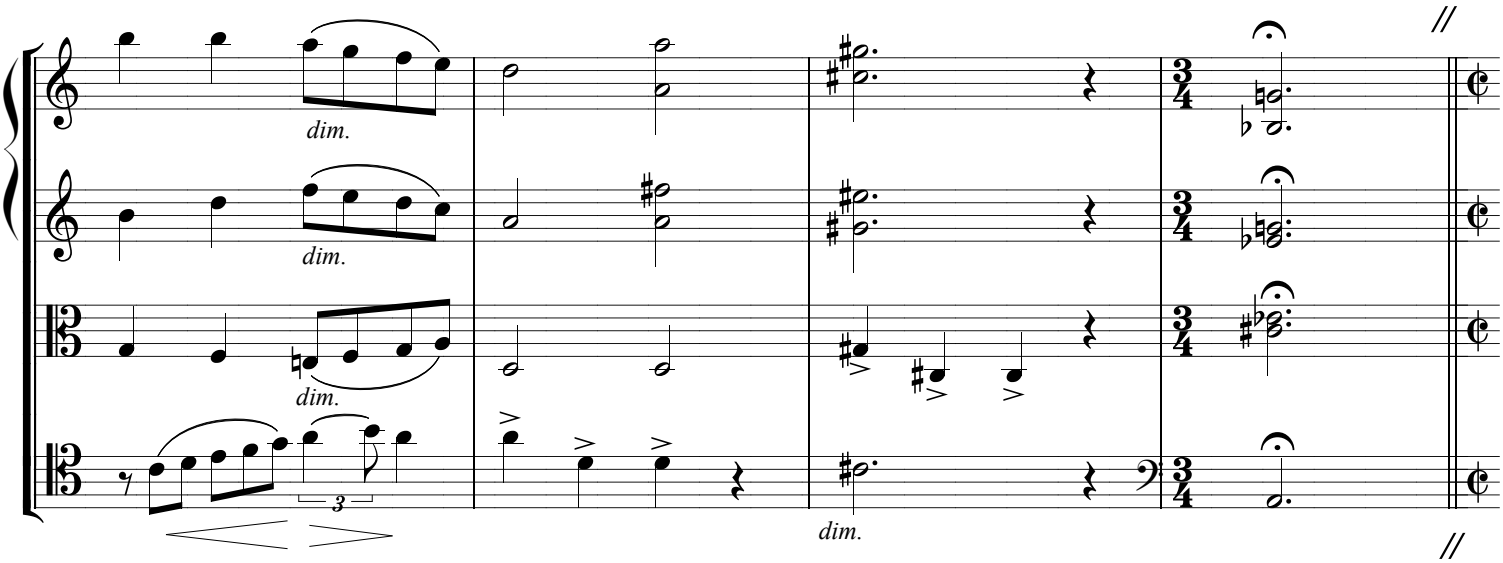

D
un poco piú mosso
p
p
mp
mp
sim.
sim.
mp
mp
p
p


poco rit.
sim.
sim.
E
a tempo (quasi rezitativo)
sul ponticello
sffp
sul ponticello
sffp
sul ponticello
sffp
marcato
f
pizz.
f
arco
p
pizz.
f
sul tasto
mf
sul ponticello
p
stretto
arco
p
ord.
f
ord.
f
sul ponticello
p
ord.
f
pizz.
f
arco
p
ord.
f
ff
ff
ff
ff
sfz
sfz
sfz
sfz

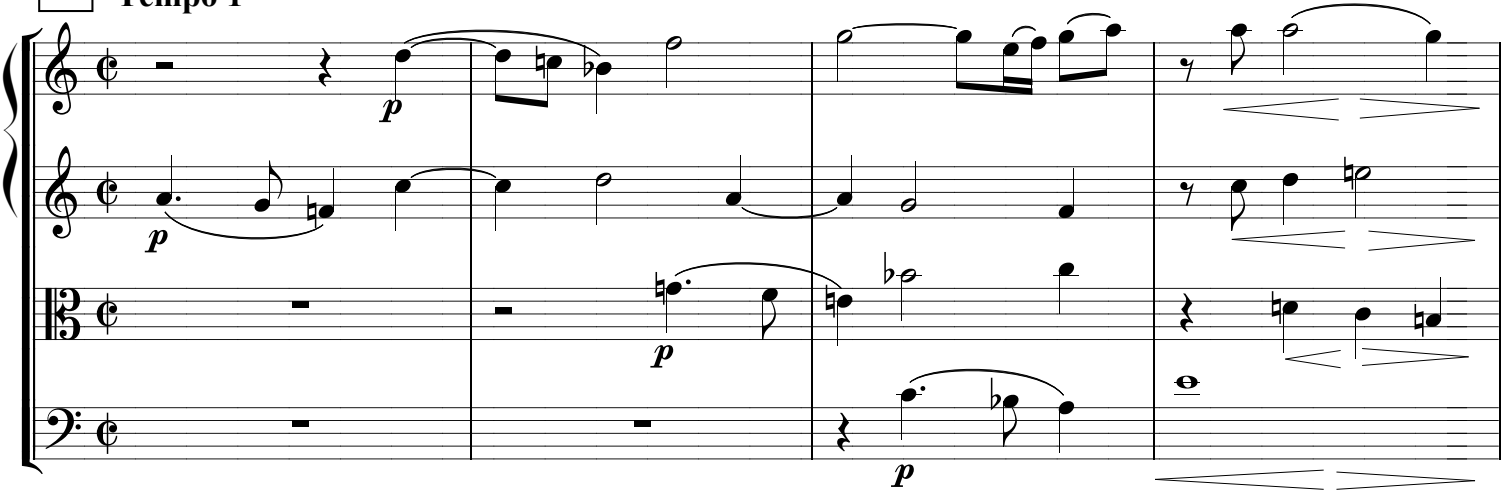

a tempo
mp
poco a poco cresc.
accelerando
F
a tempo
sim.
ff
mf
molto espressivo

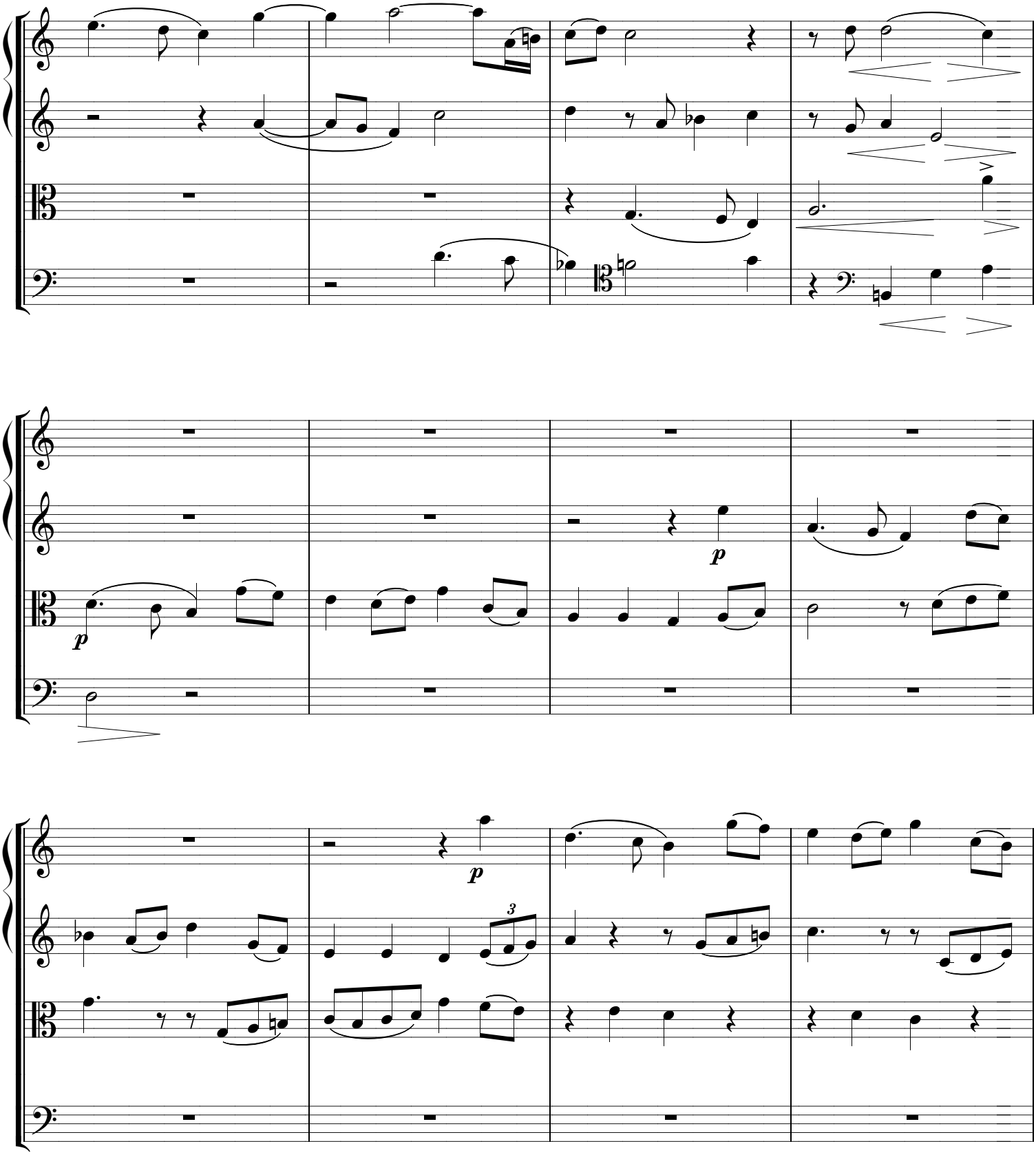

sim.
f
f
mf
mf
sim.
sim.

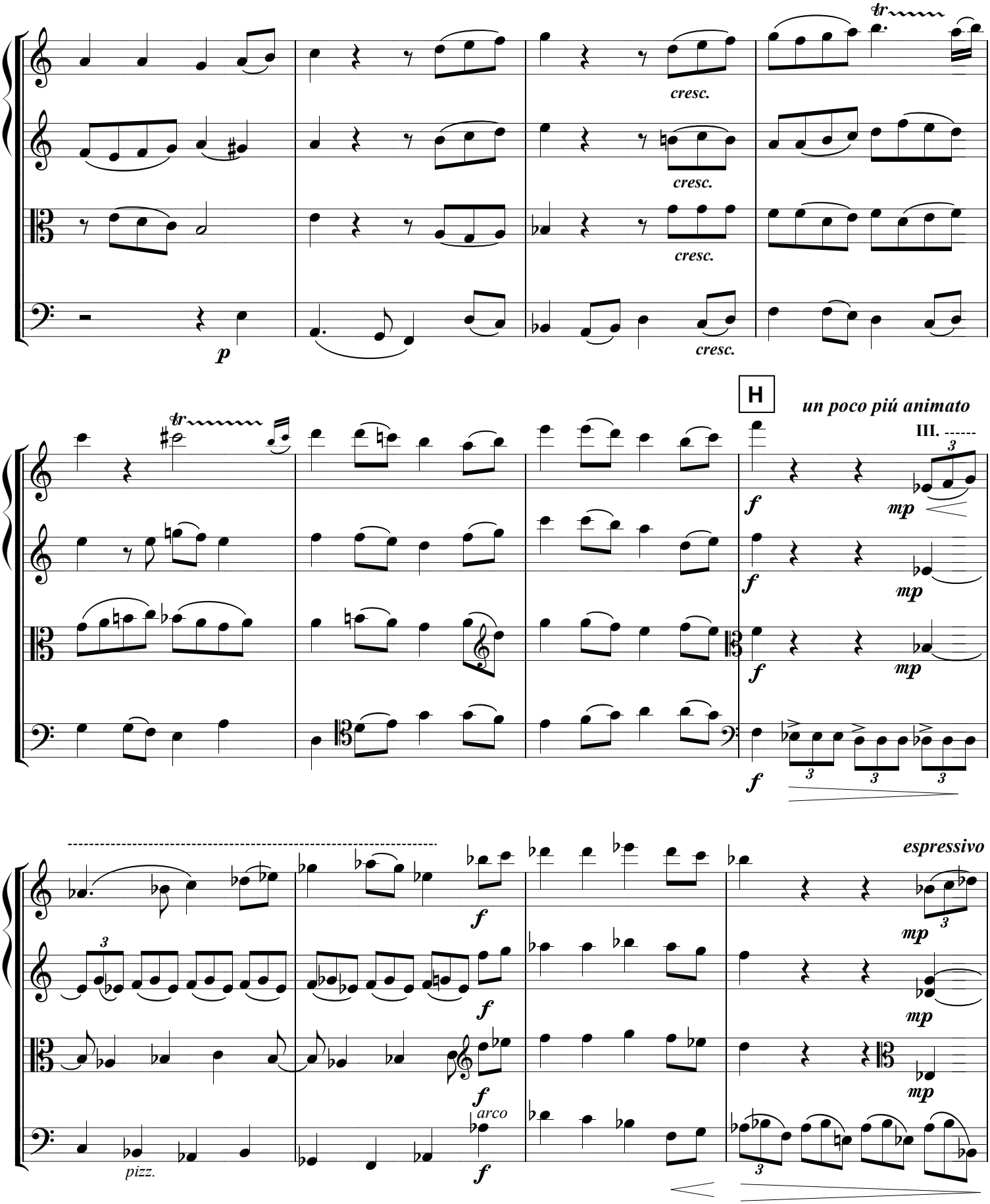


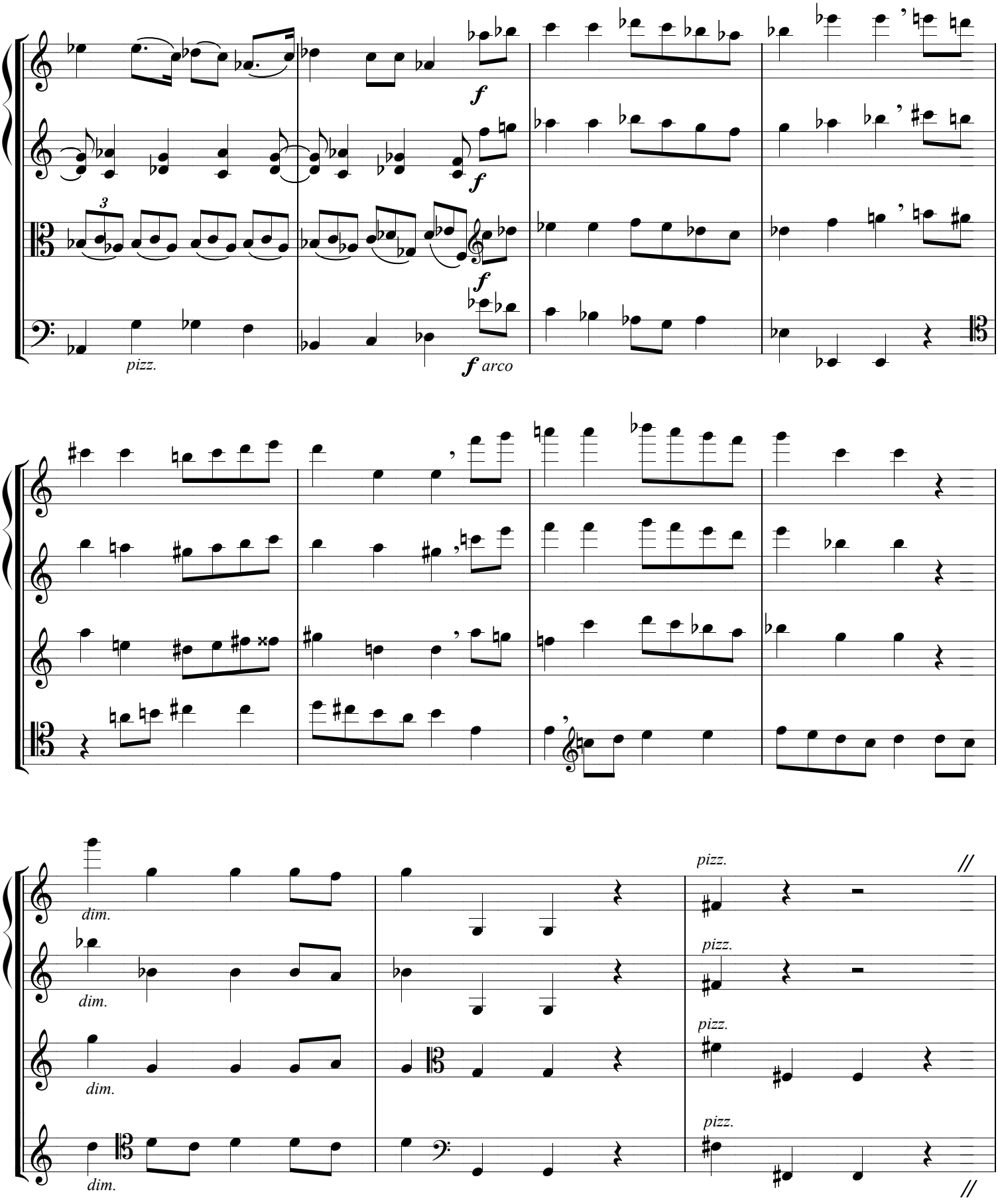


G **Tempo 1**

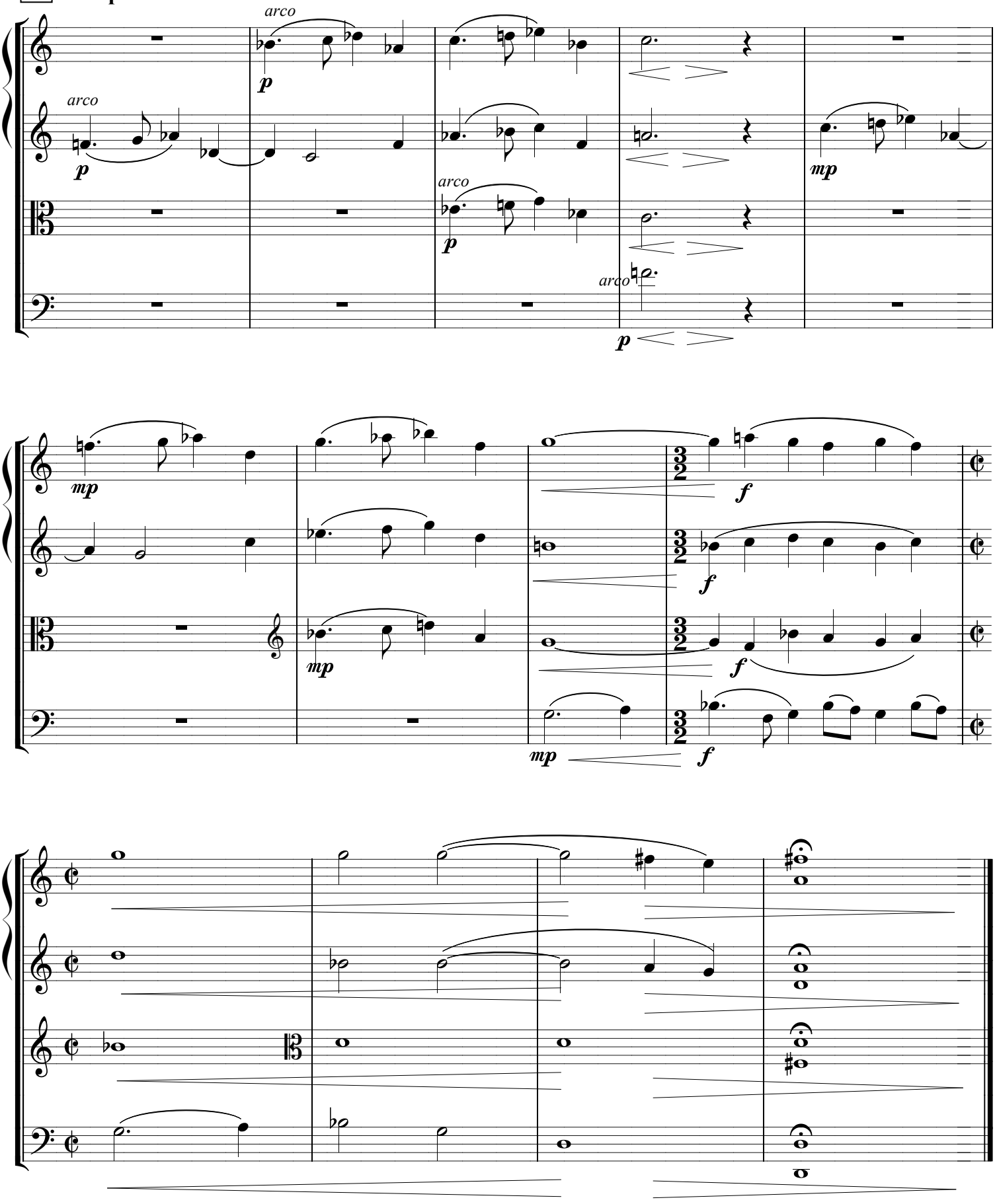



p
p
p
3


tr
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
p
H
un poco piú animato
III.
tr
f
mp
pizz.
arco
espressivo

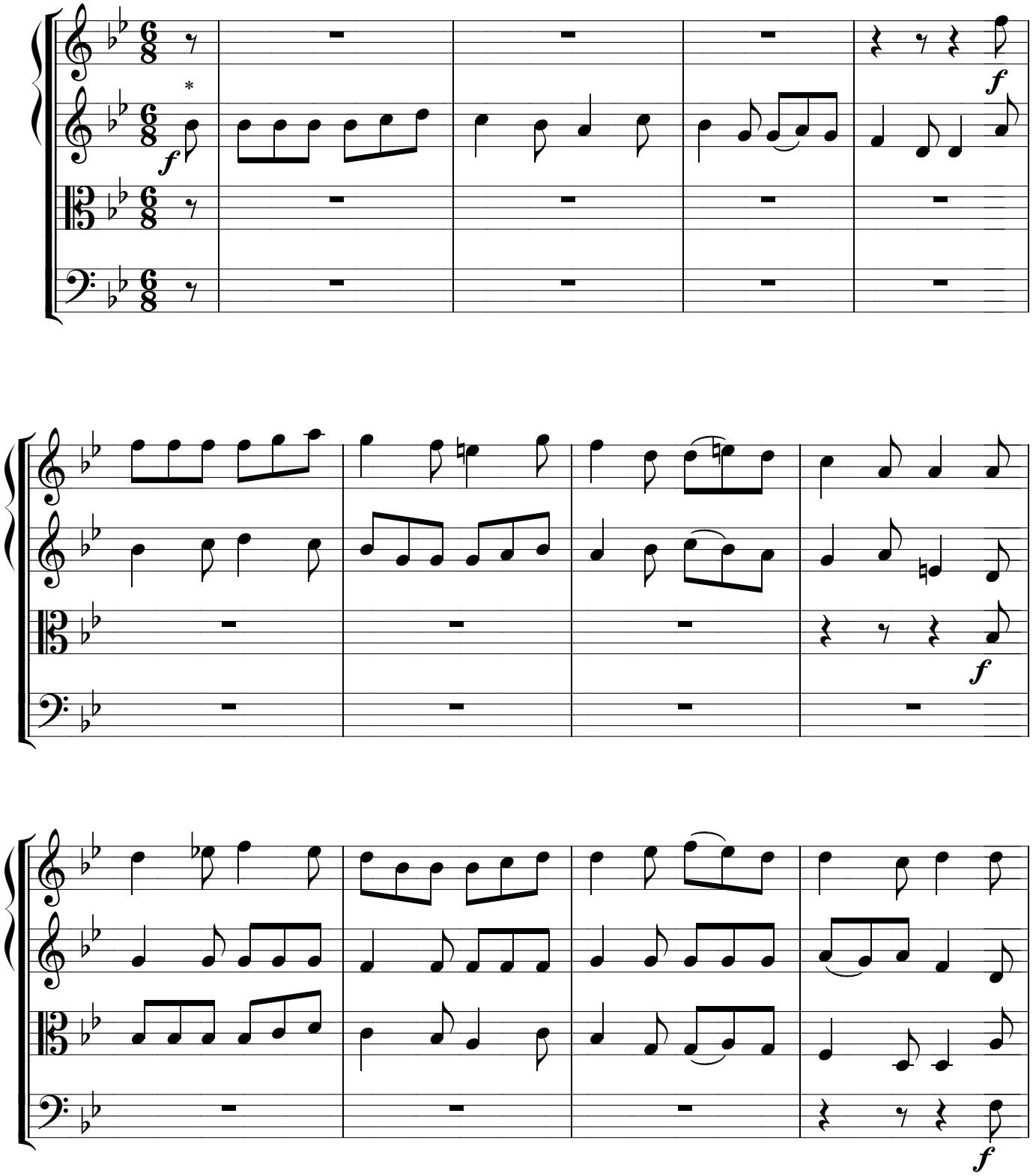

f
pizz.
f arco
dim.
pizz.

I **Tempo 1**

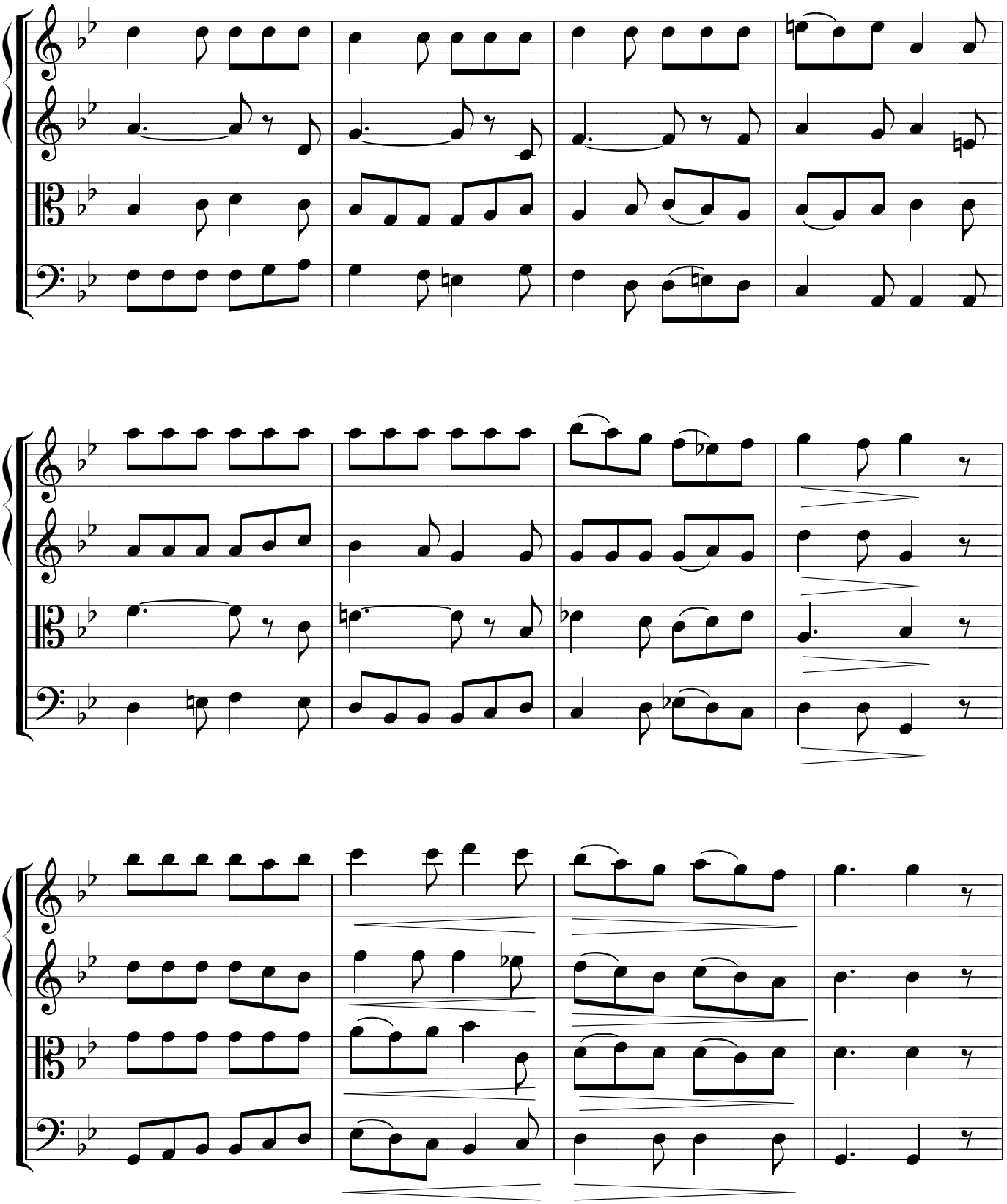


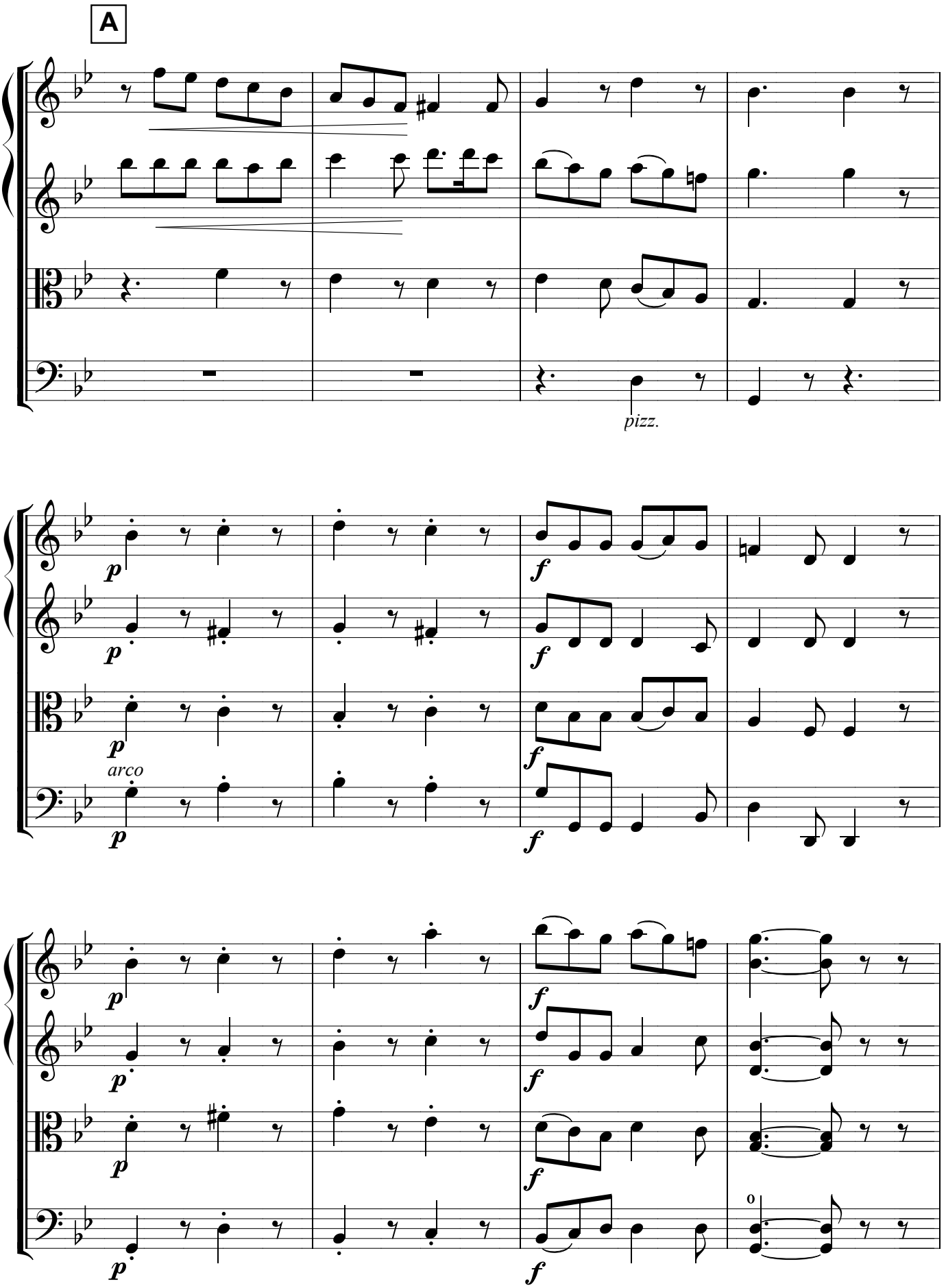
IV. Rondo Fugato

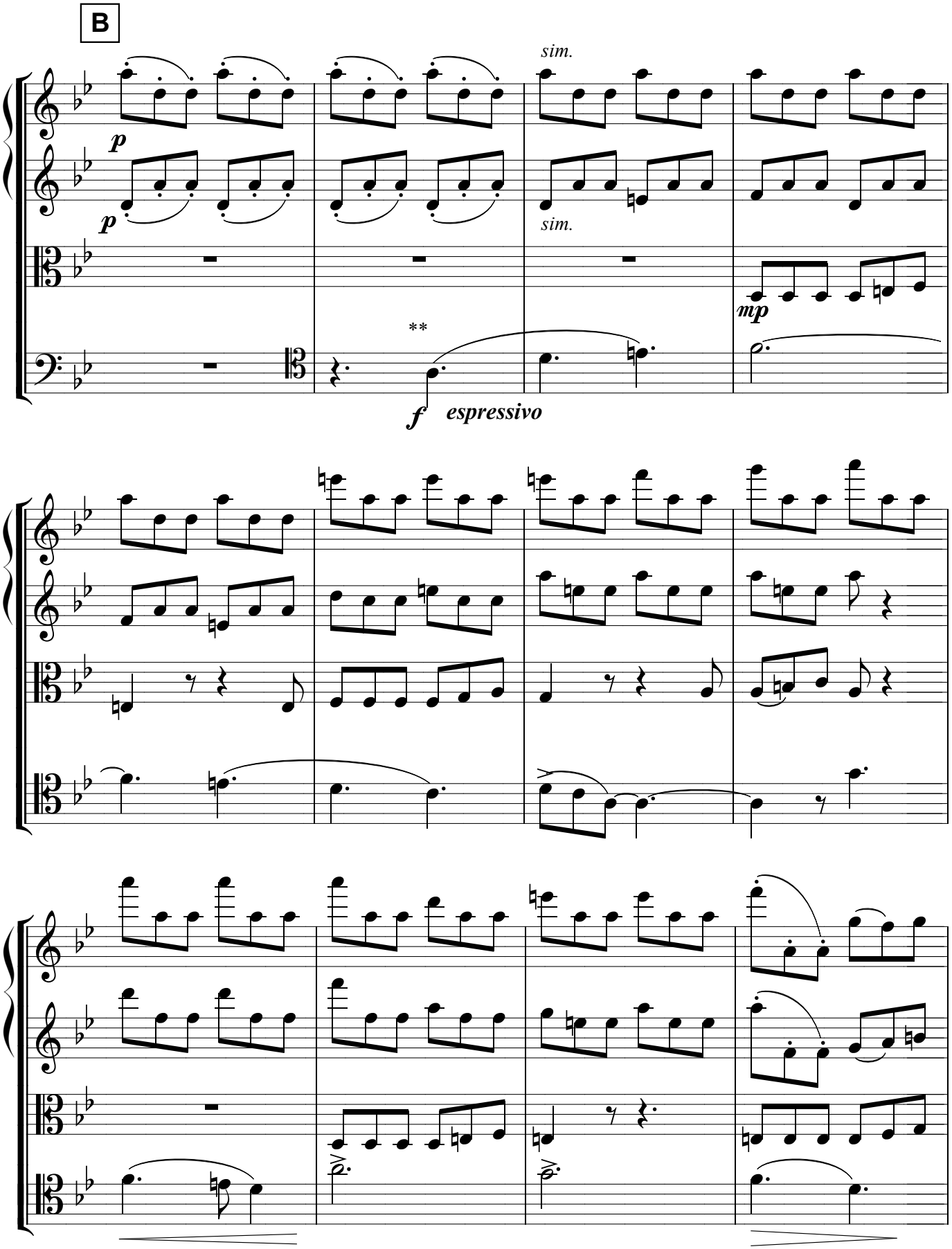
Allegro vivace



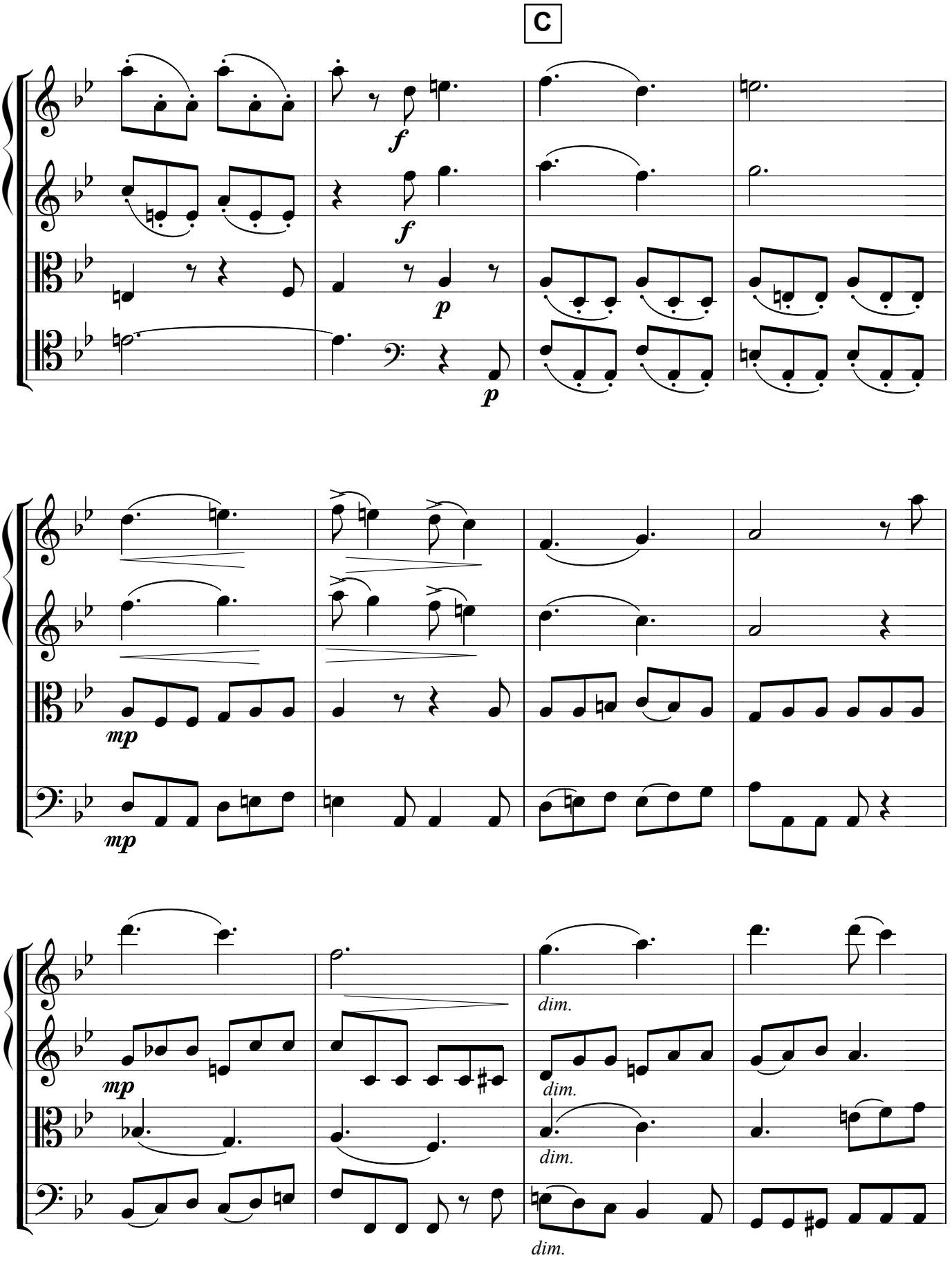
* *"O Shepherd, O Shepherd"*; The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs, p. 74

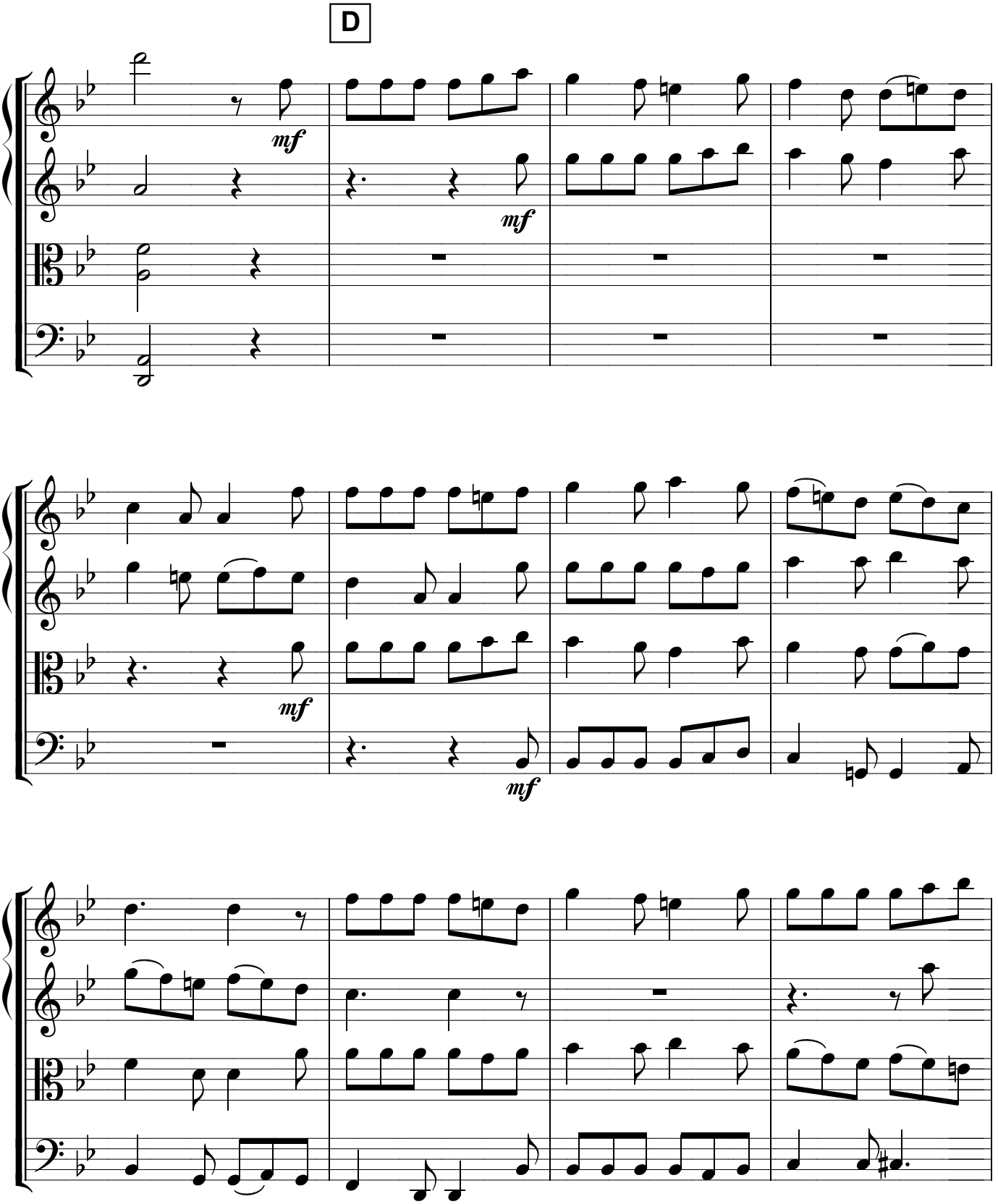


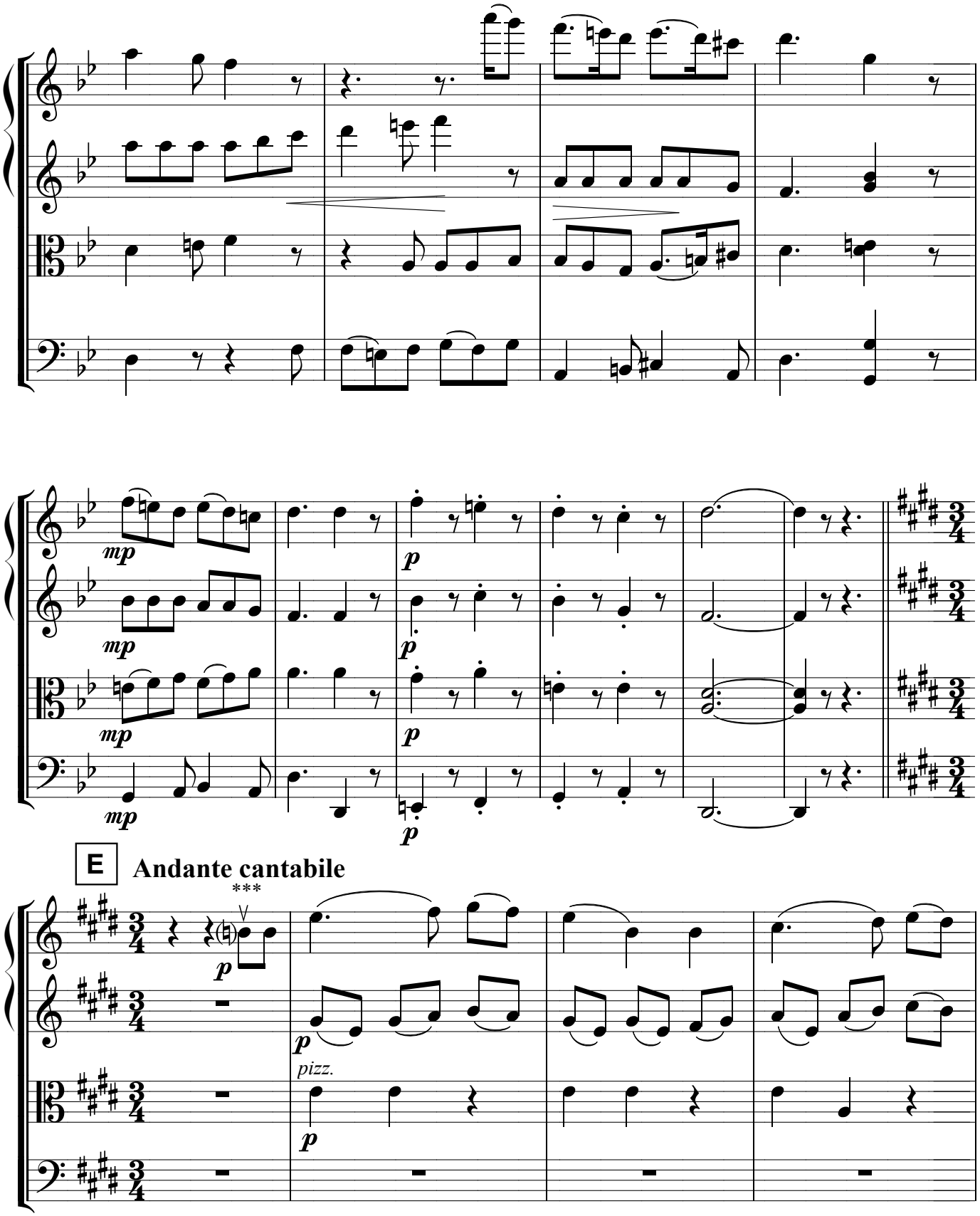

A
pizz.
arco



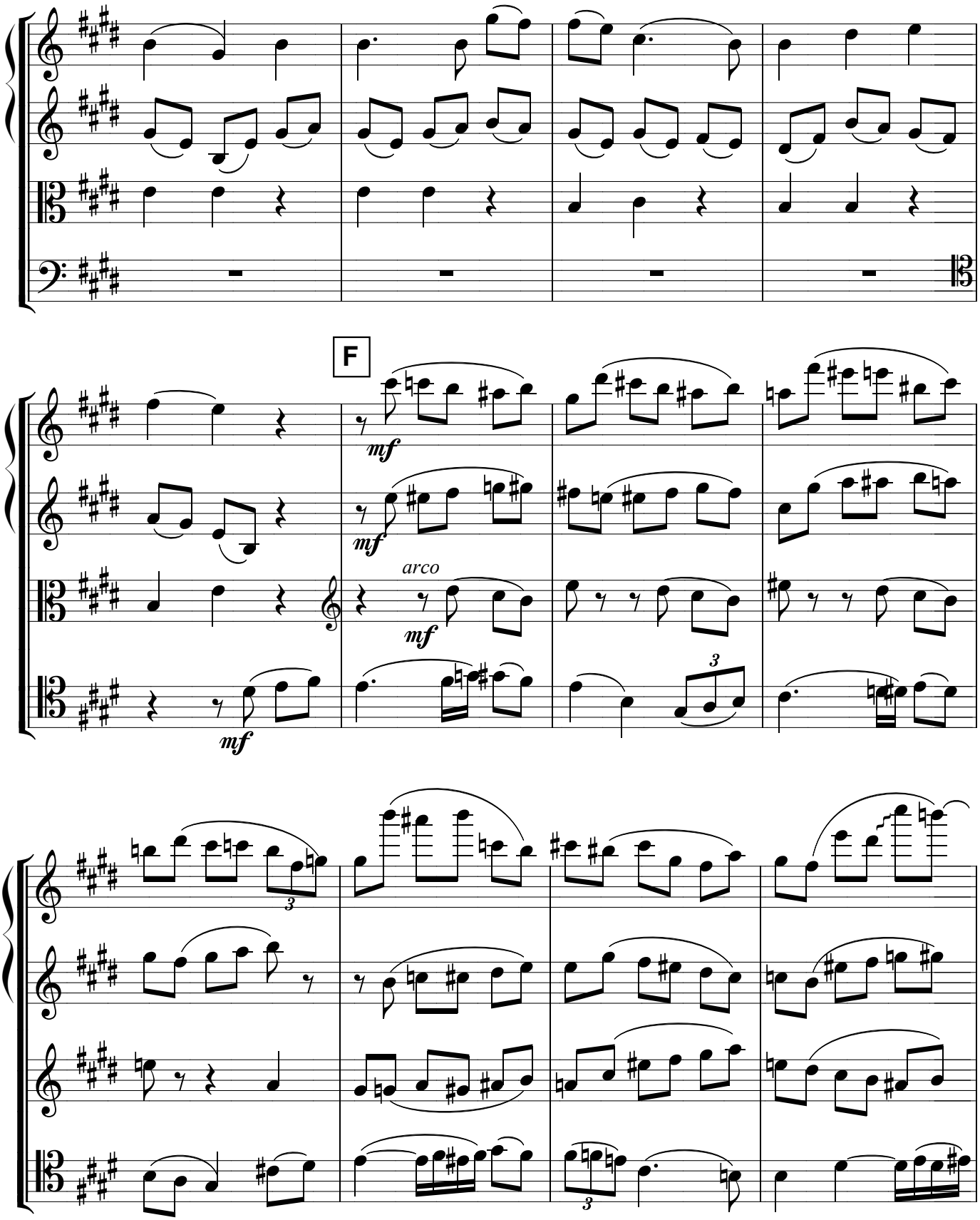
** *"Lord Bateman"*; One Hundred English Folksongs, pp. 17ff.

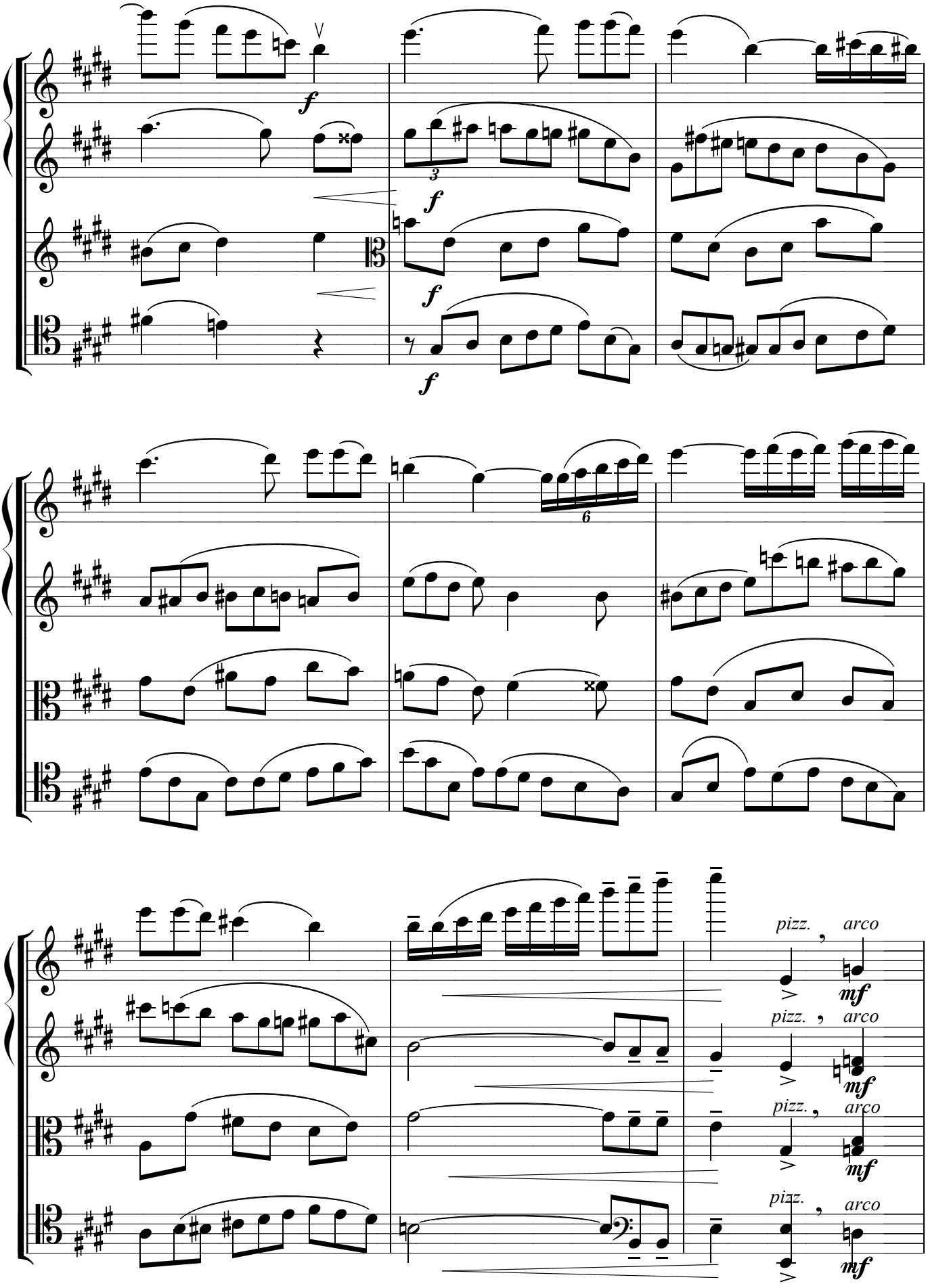

C
f
f
p
p
mp
mp
dim.
dim.
dim.
dim.

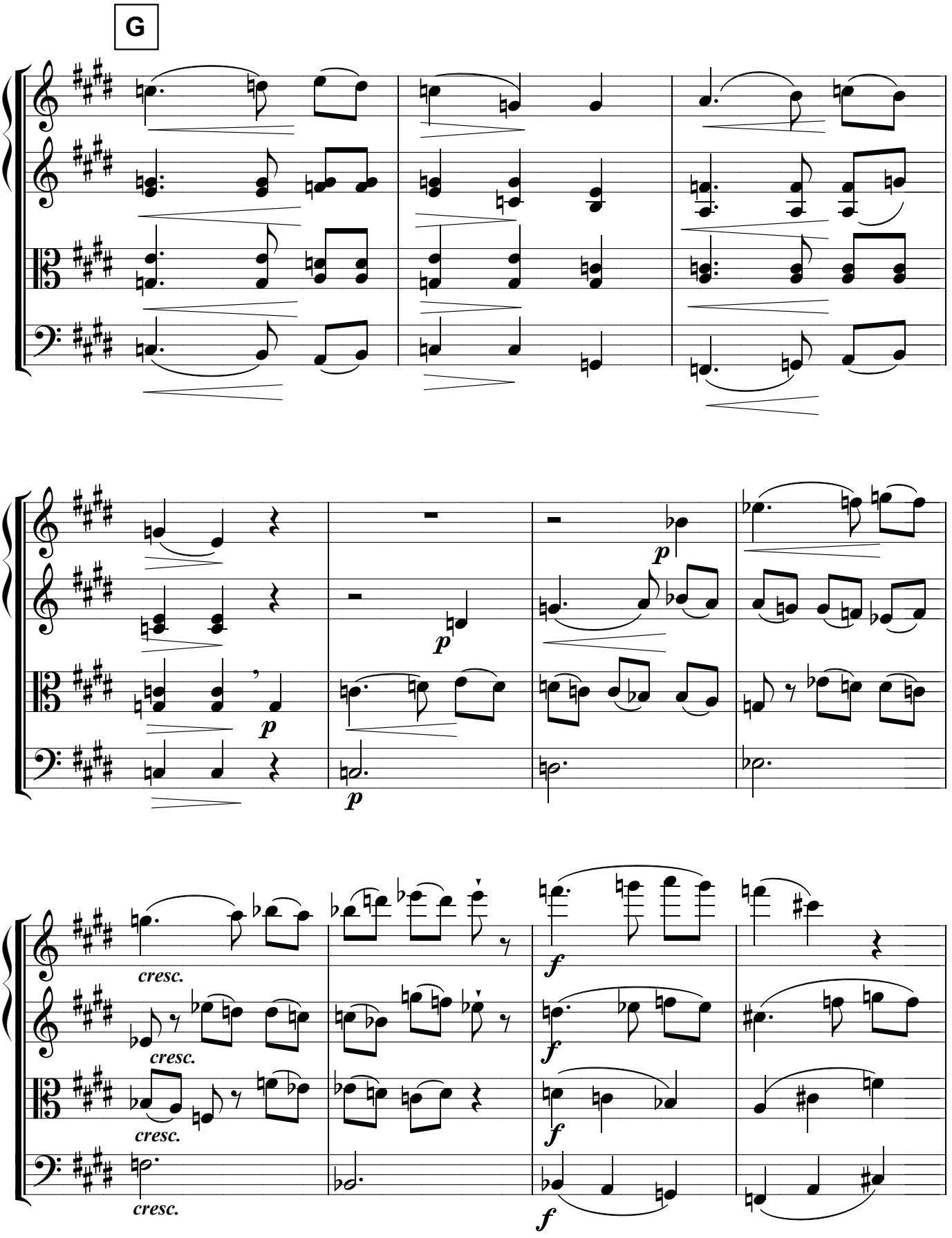

D
mf
mf
mf
mf

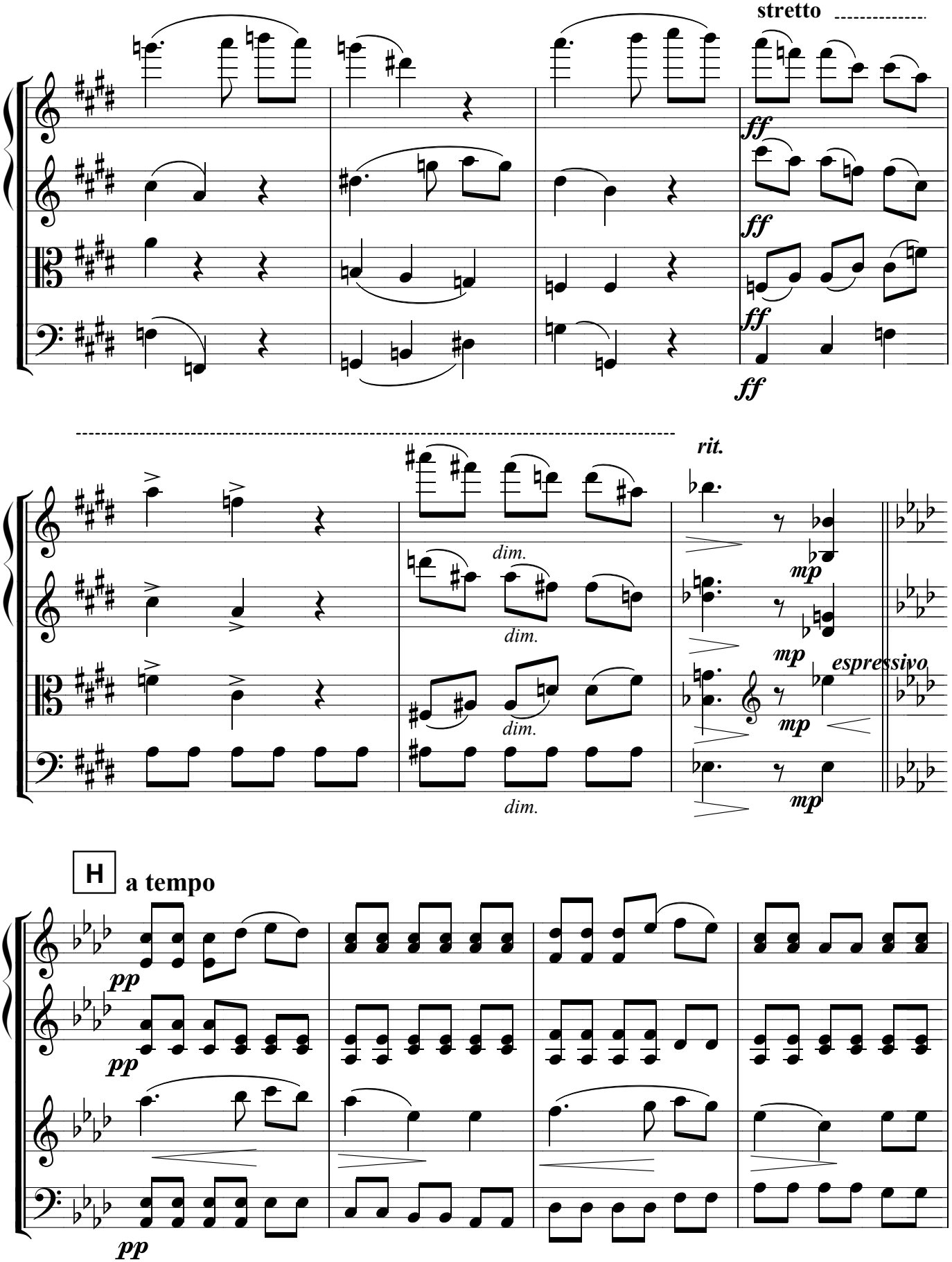


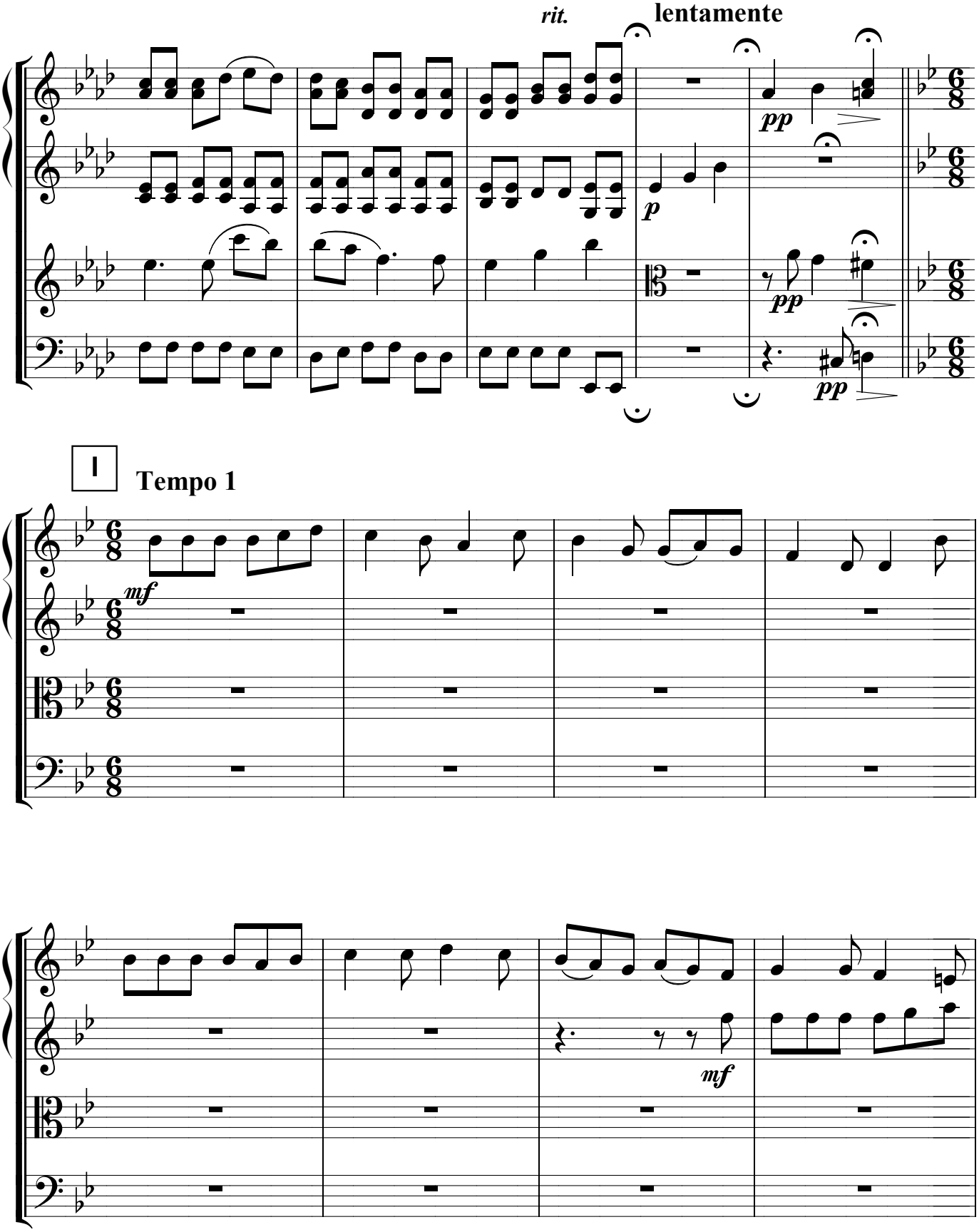
*** *"The Banks of Green Willow"*; The Penguin Book Of English Folk Songs, p. 15

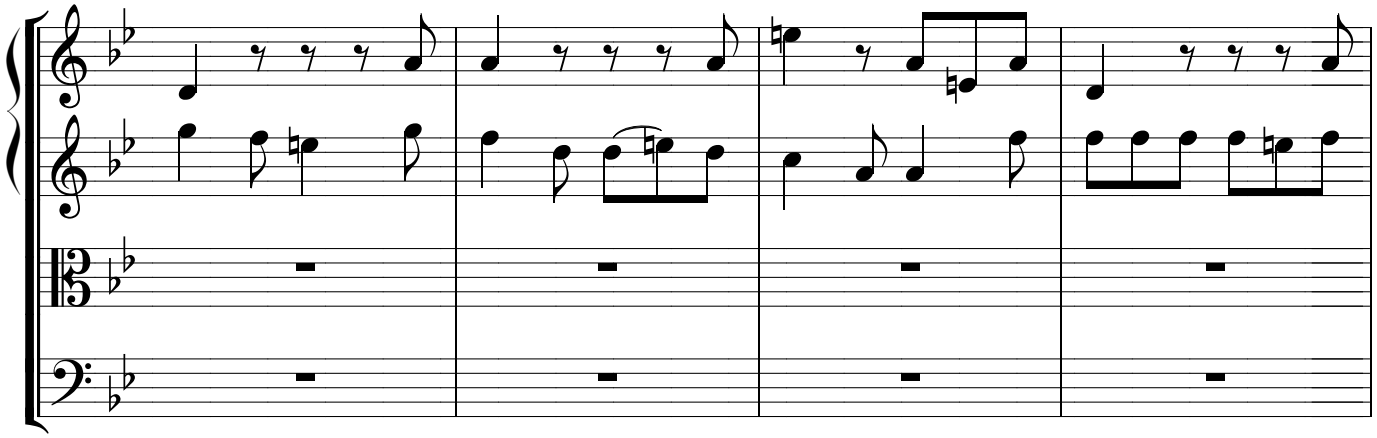

F
mf
mf
arco
mf
mf
3
3
3

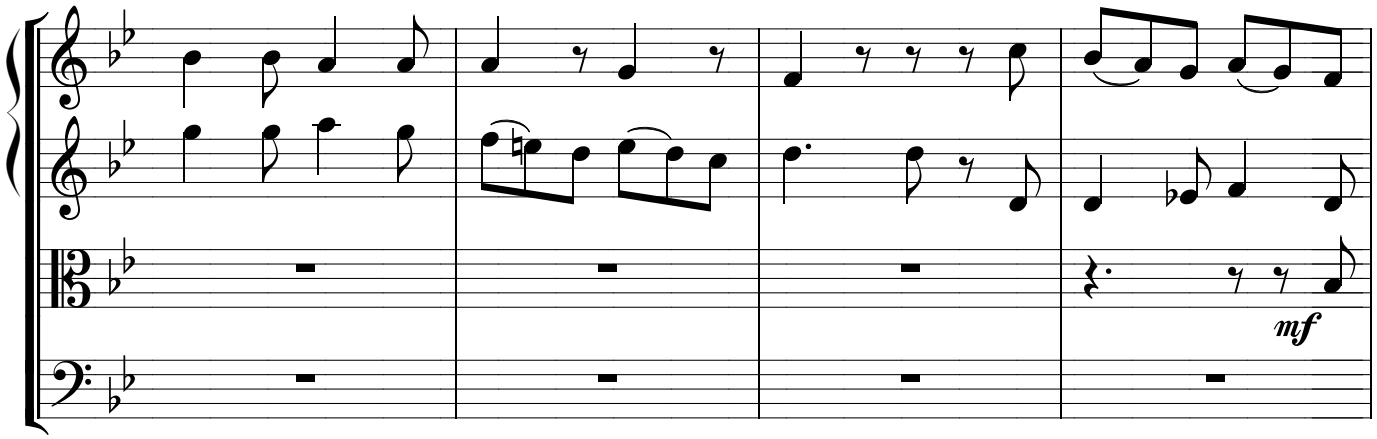

f
3
f
f
f
6
pizz.
arco
mf
pizz.
arco
mf
pizz.
arco
mf
pizz.
arco
mf

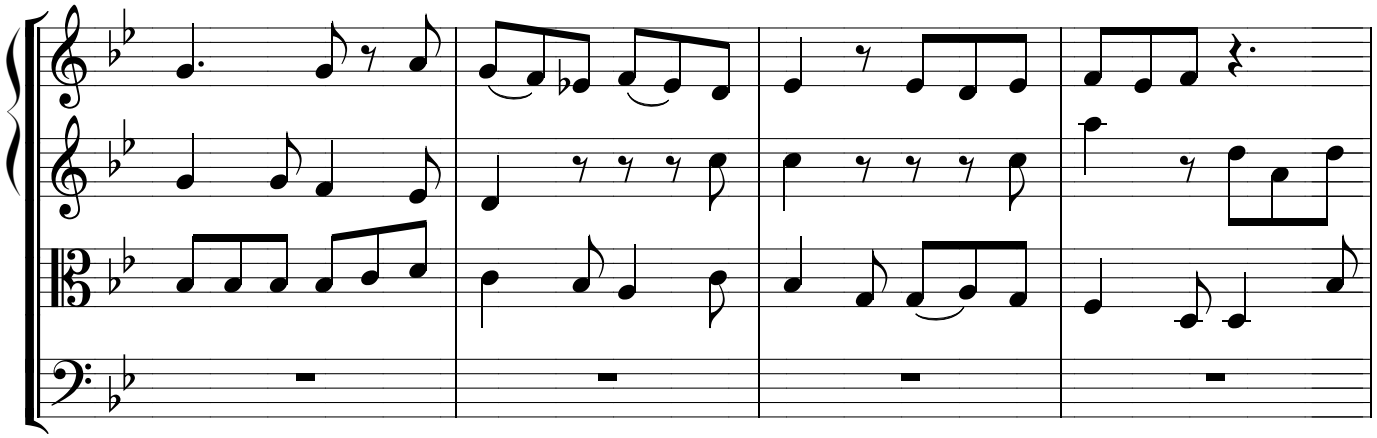

G
p
p
p
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
f
f
f
f

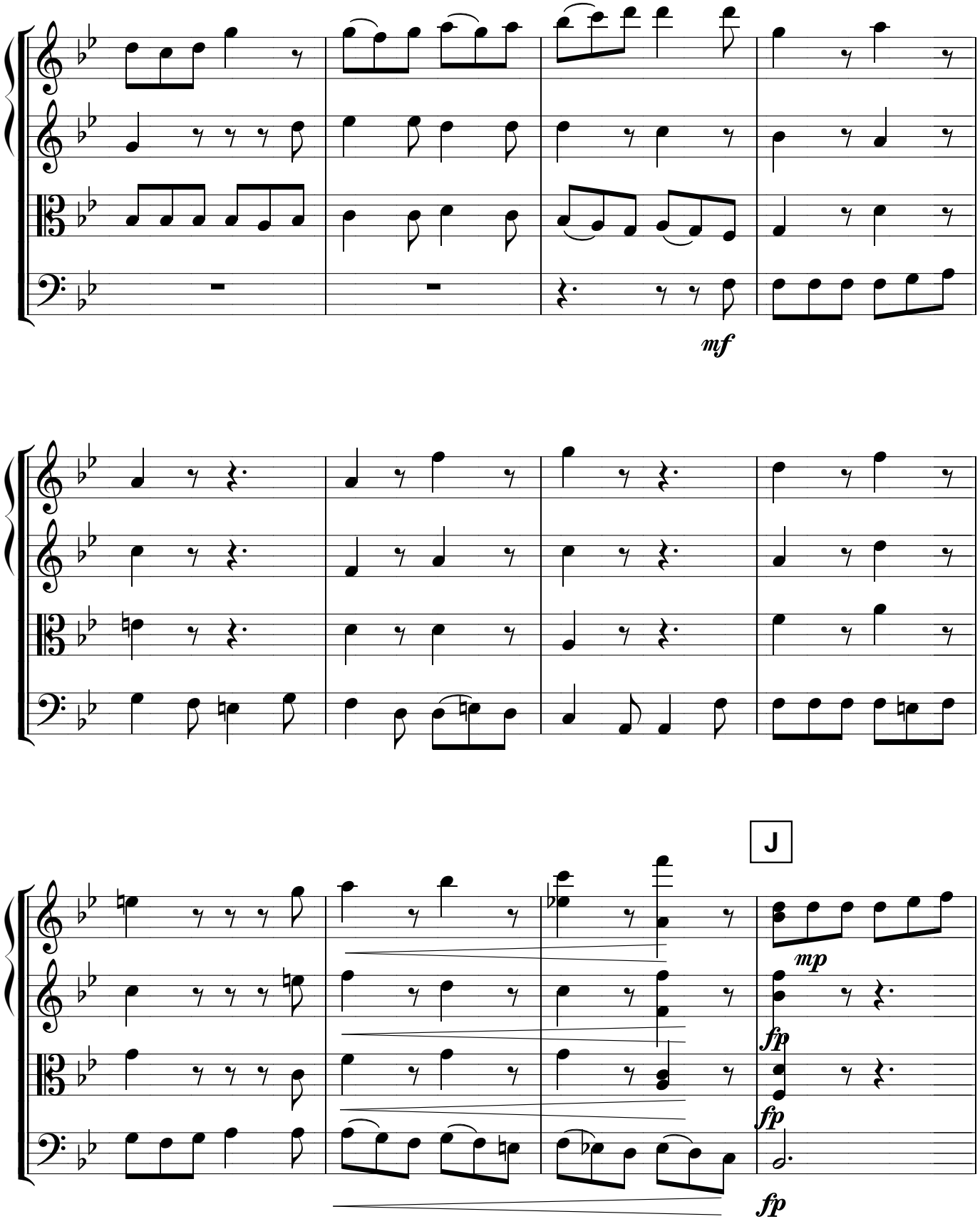

stretto
ff
ff
ff
ff
rit.
dim.
dim.
dim.
dim.
mp
mp
mp
mp
espressivo
H
a tempo
pp
pp
pp

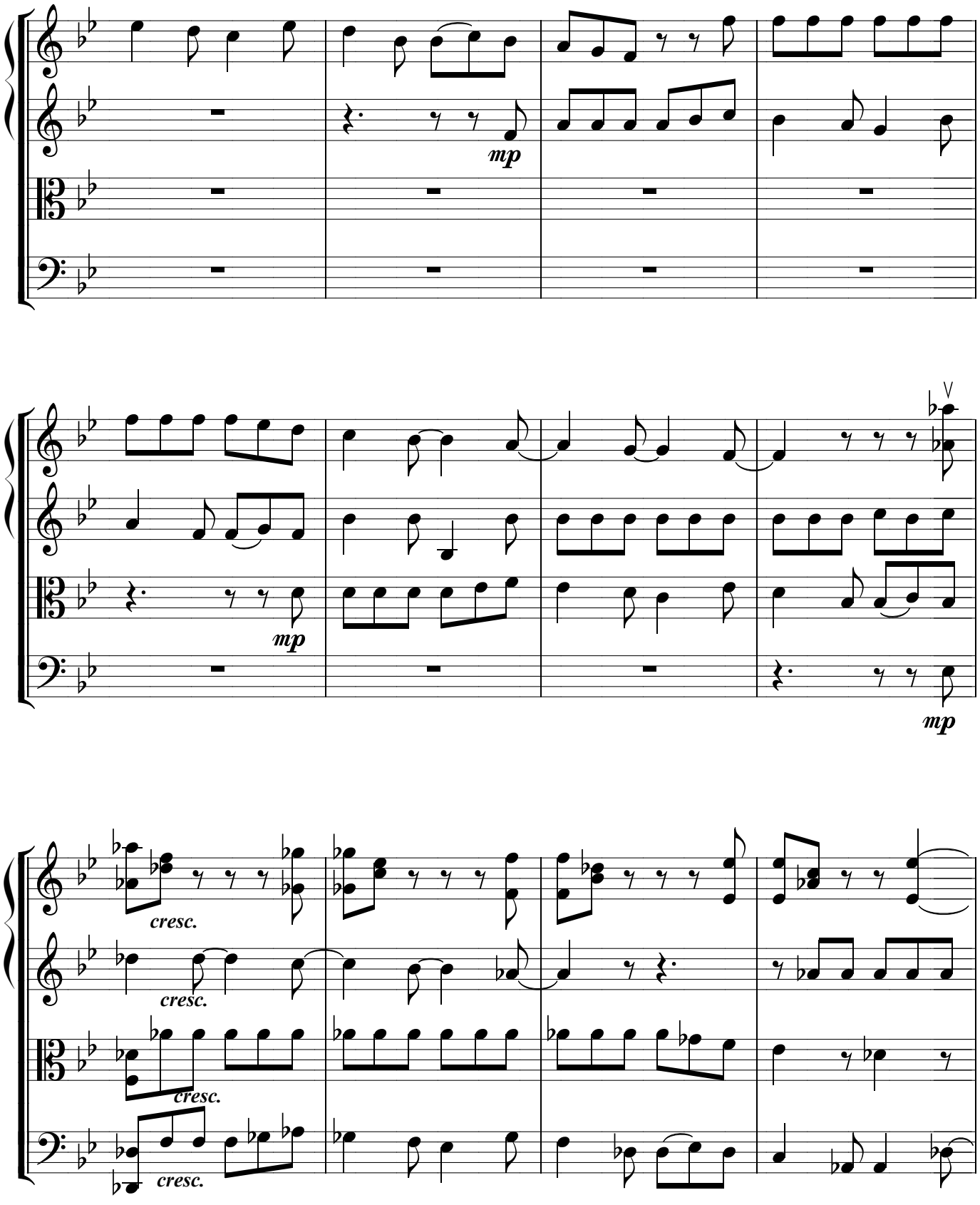

rit.
lentamente
pp
p
pp
pp
I
Tempo 1
mf
mf

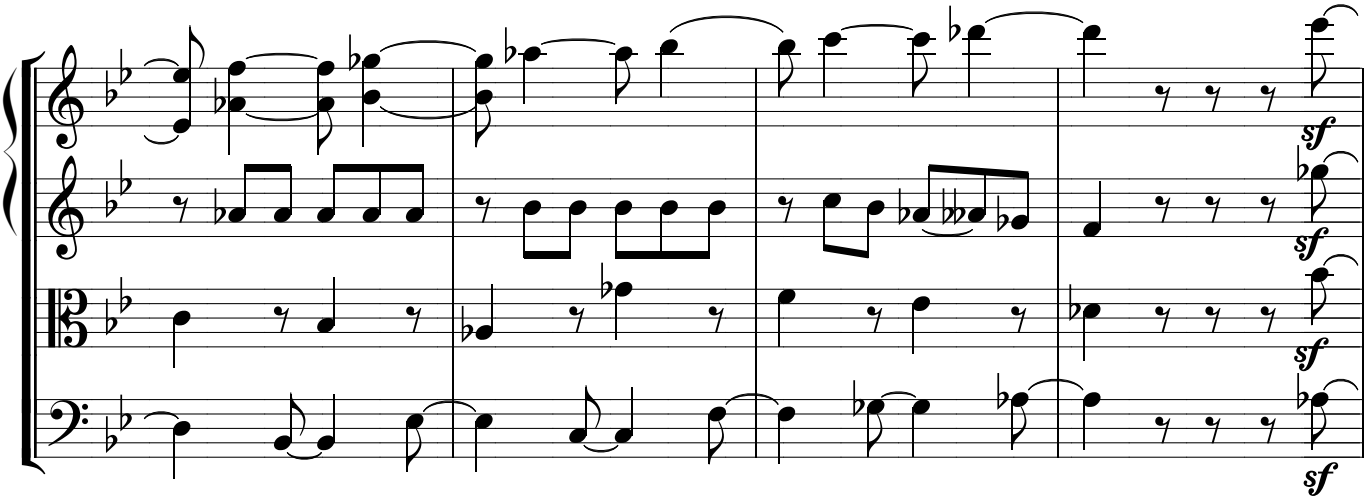


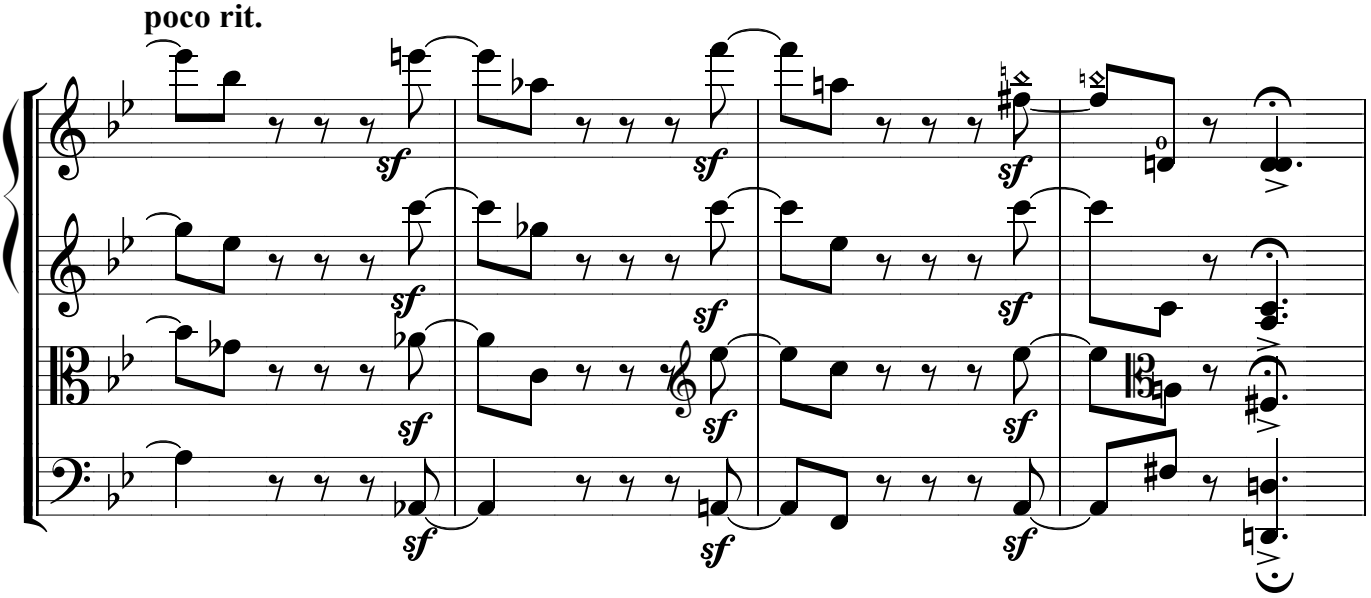

mf

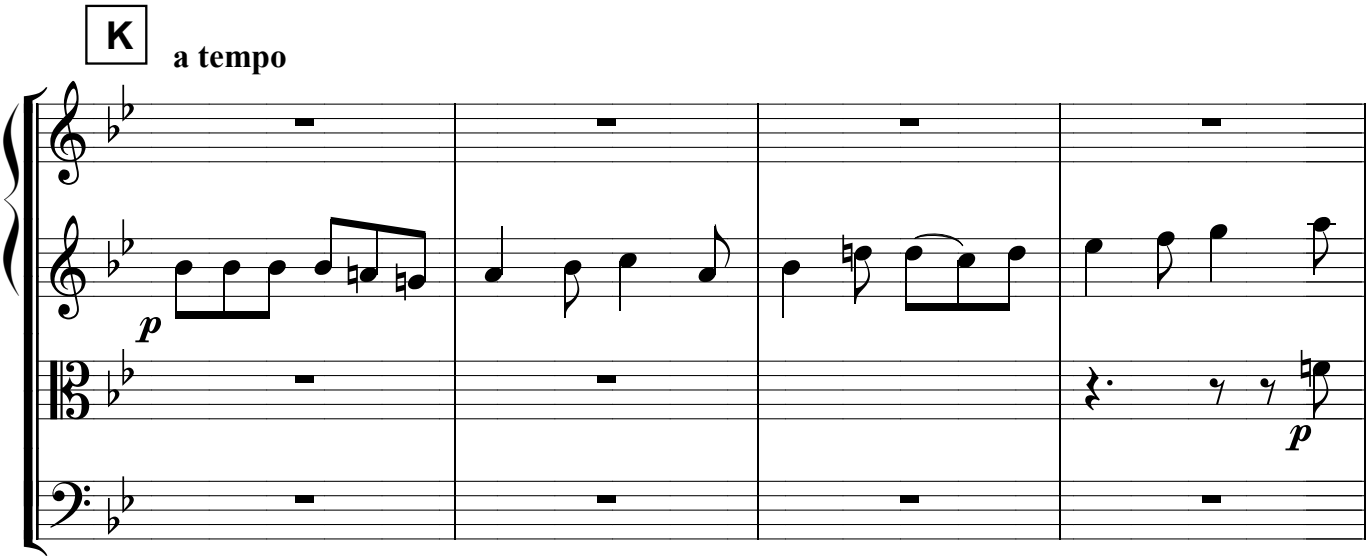


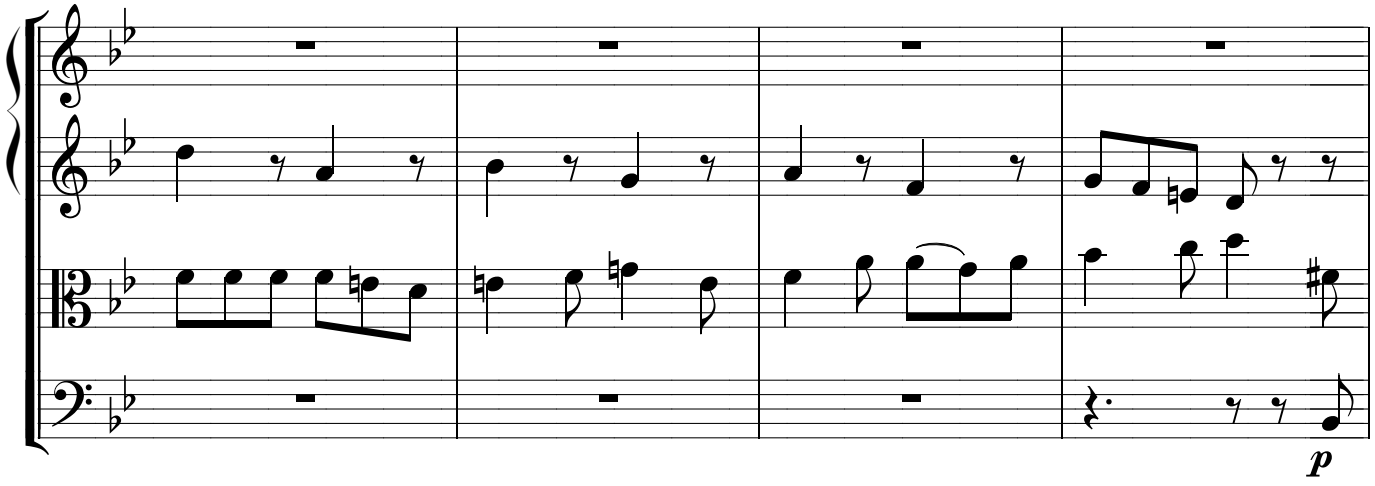

mf
J
mp
fp
fp
fp

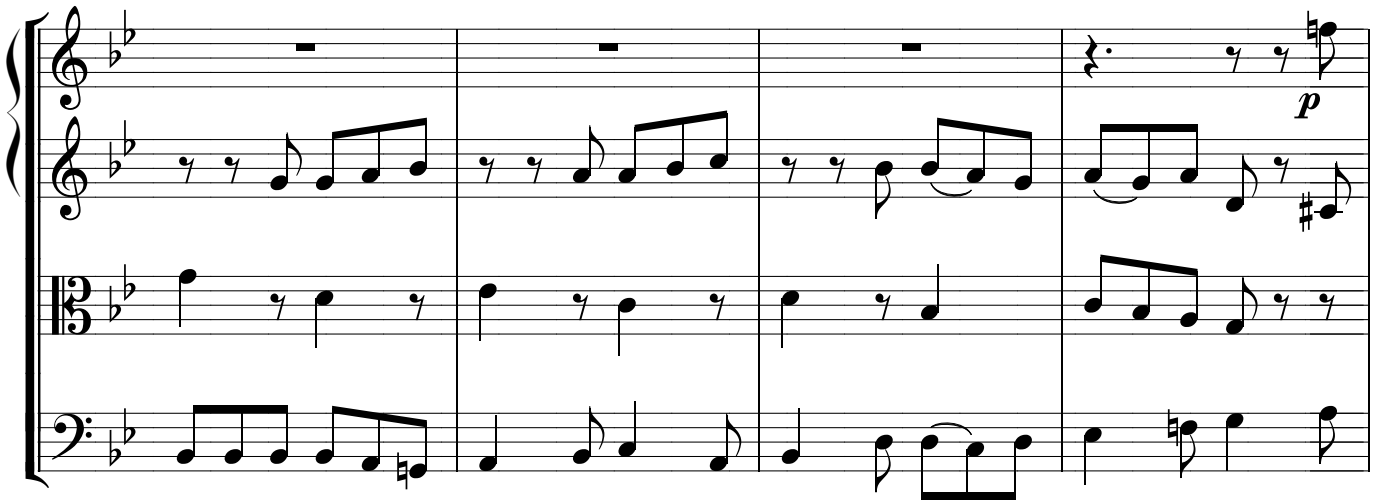

mp
mp
mp
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.

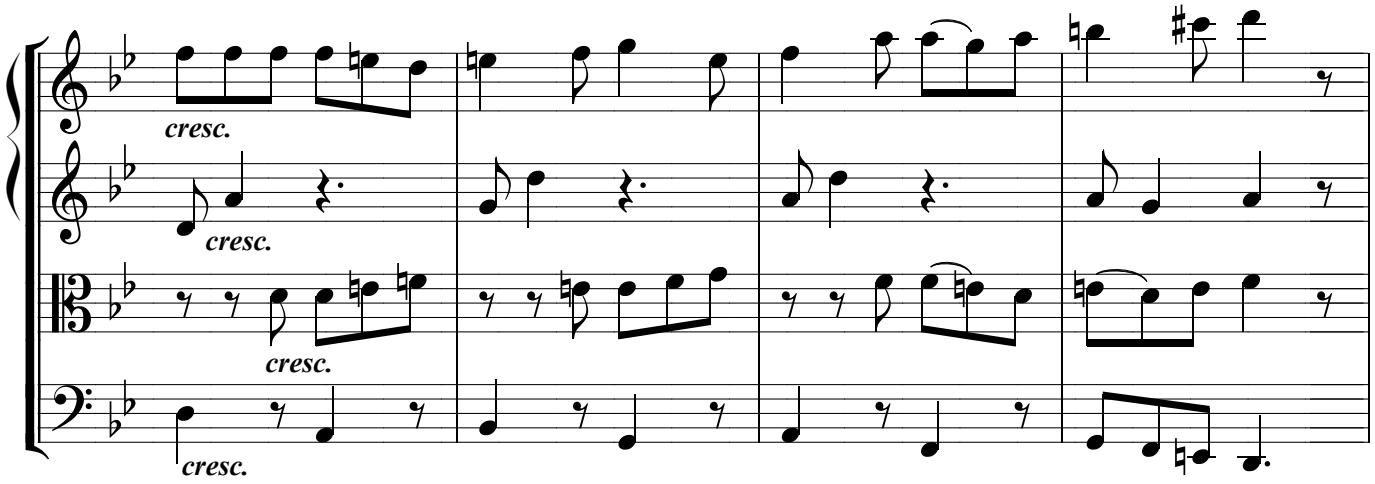


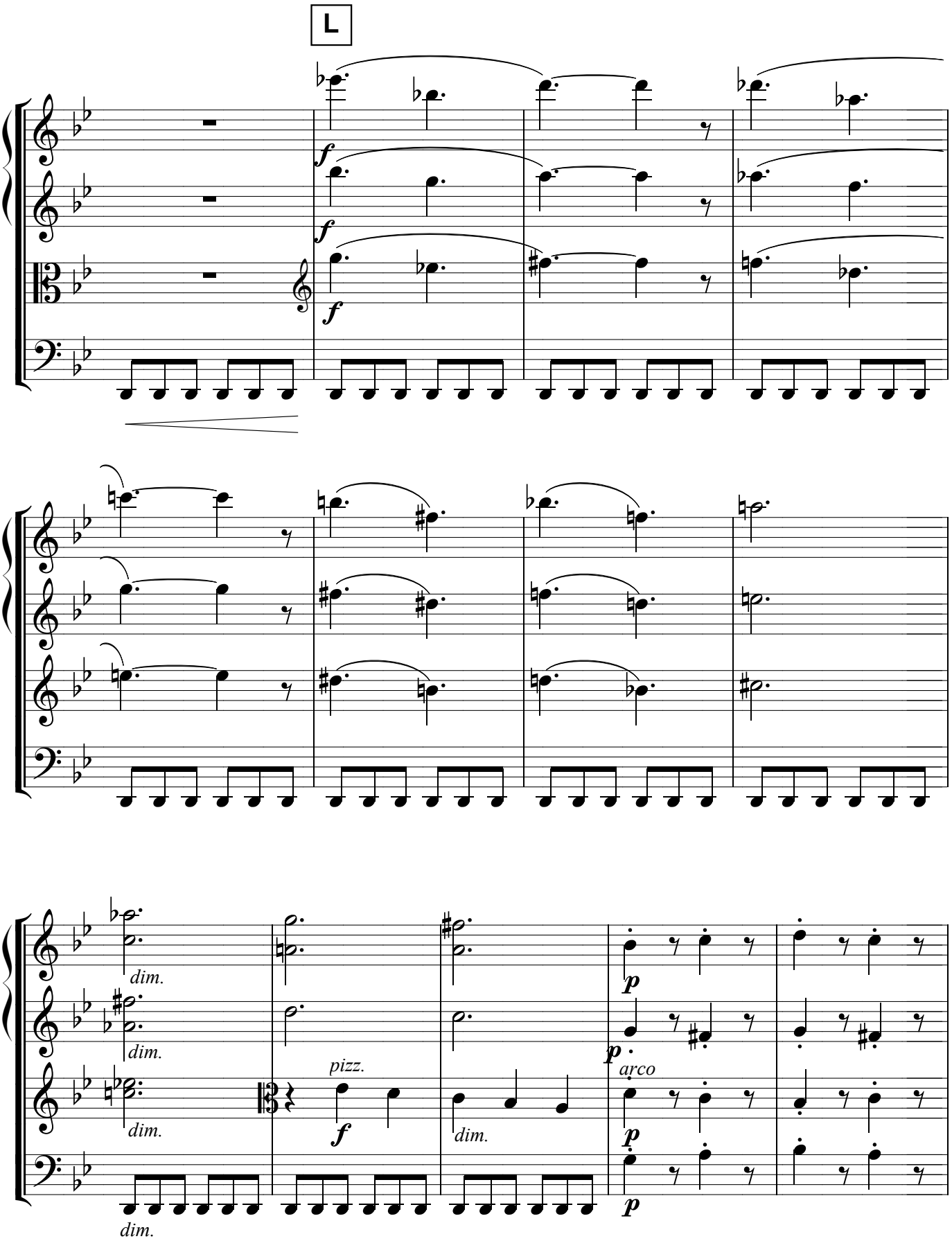

poco rit.

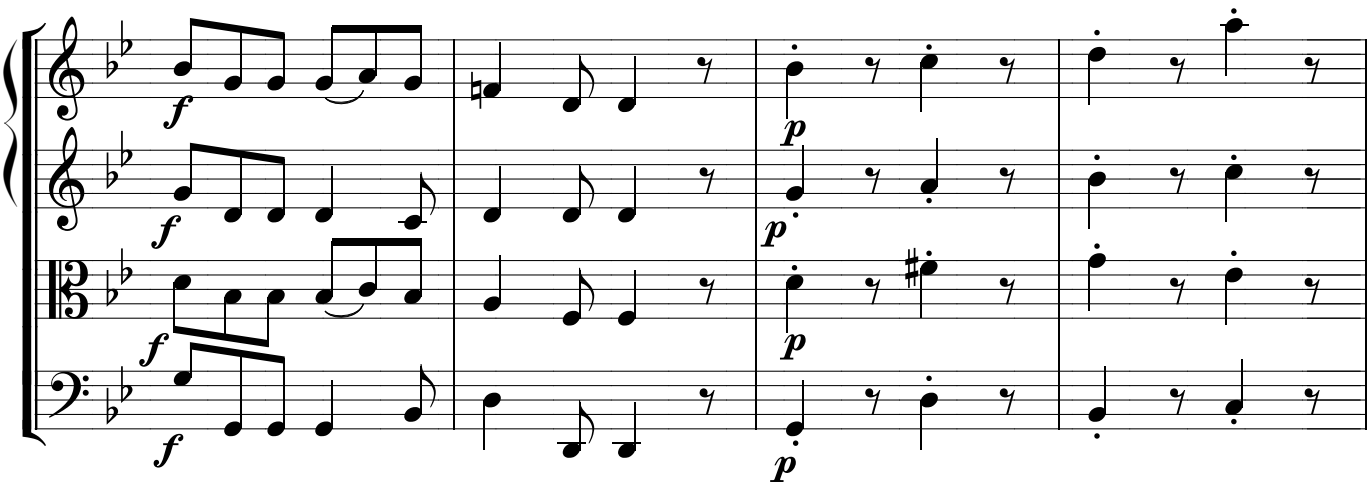

K
a tempo

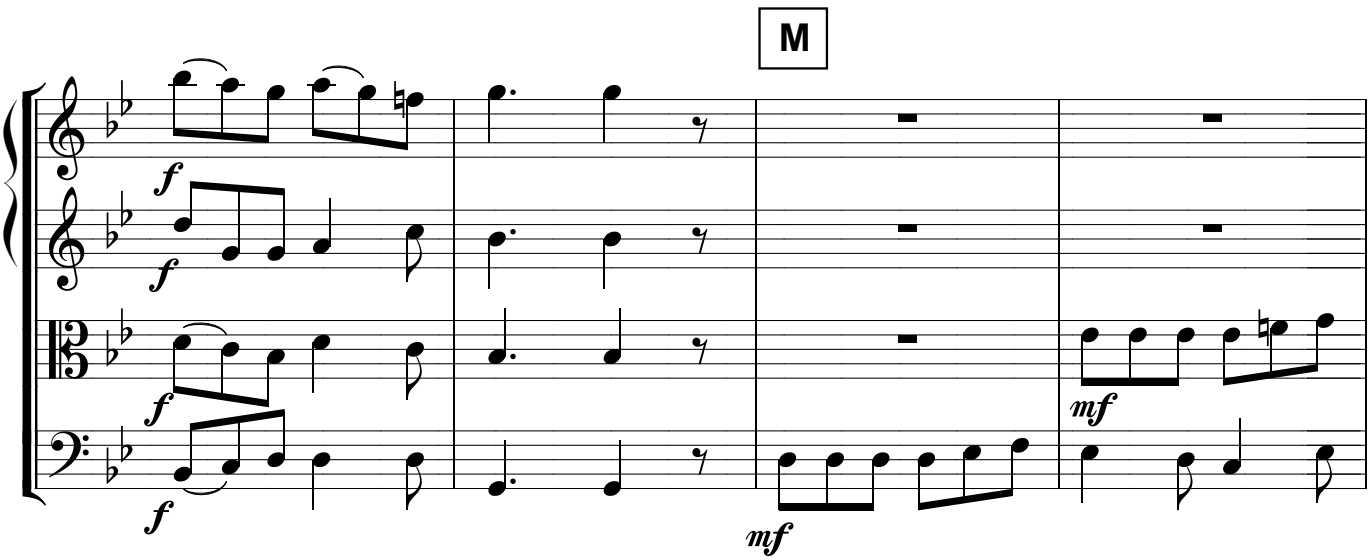

p

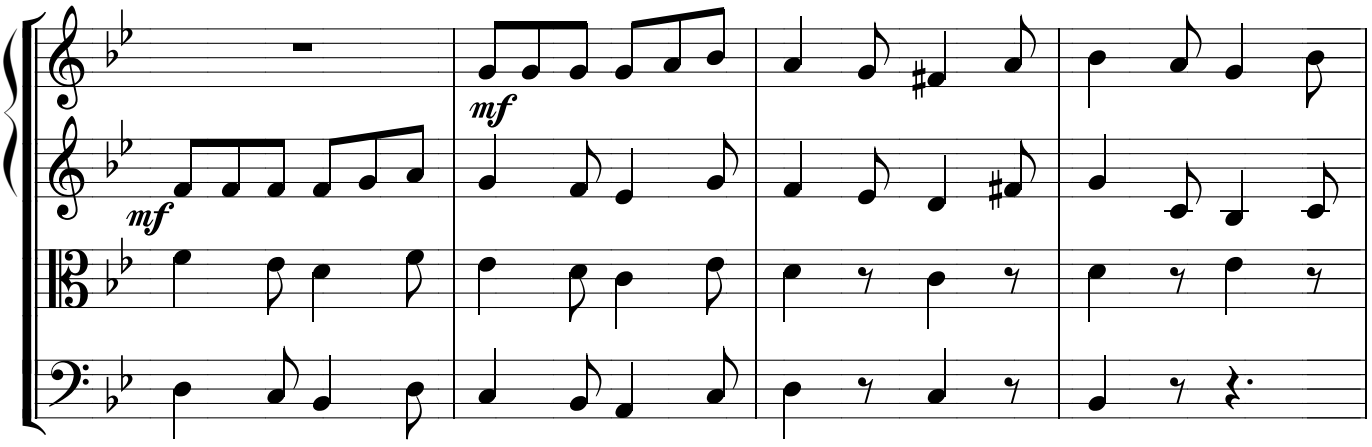

p

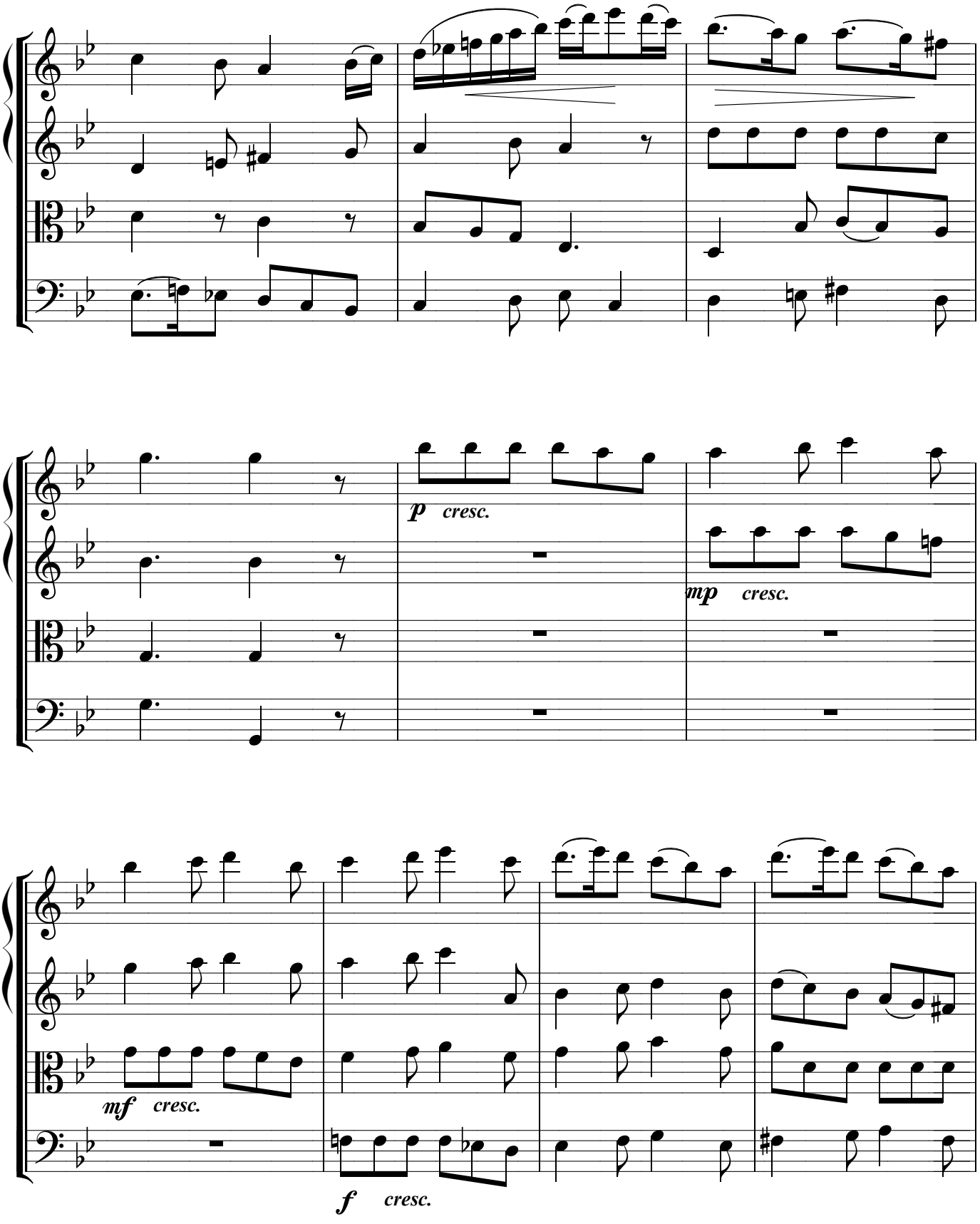

cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.


L
f
f
f
dim.
dim.
dim.
dim.
pizz.
f
dim.
p
p
arco
p
p


f
f
f
f
p
p
p


M
f
f
f
f
mf
mf


mf
mf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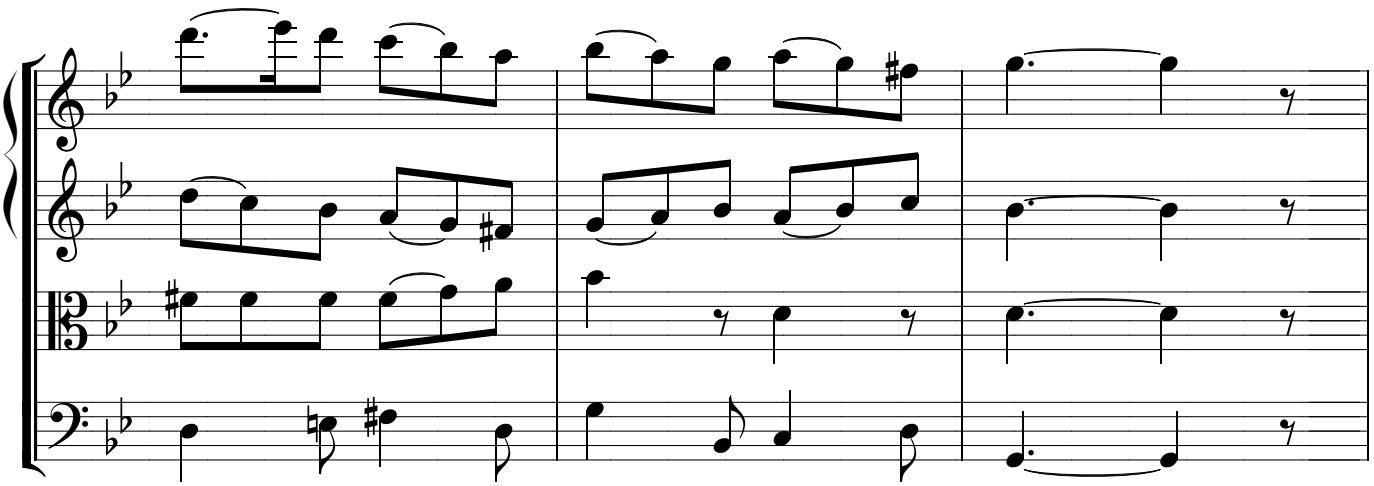

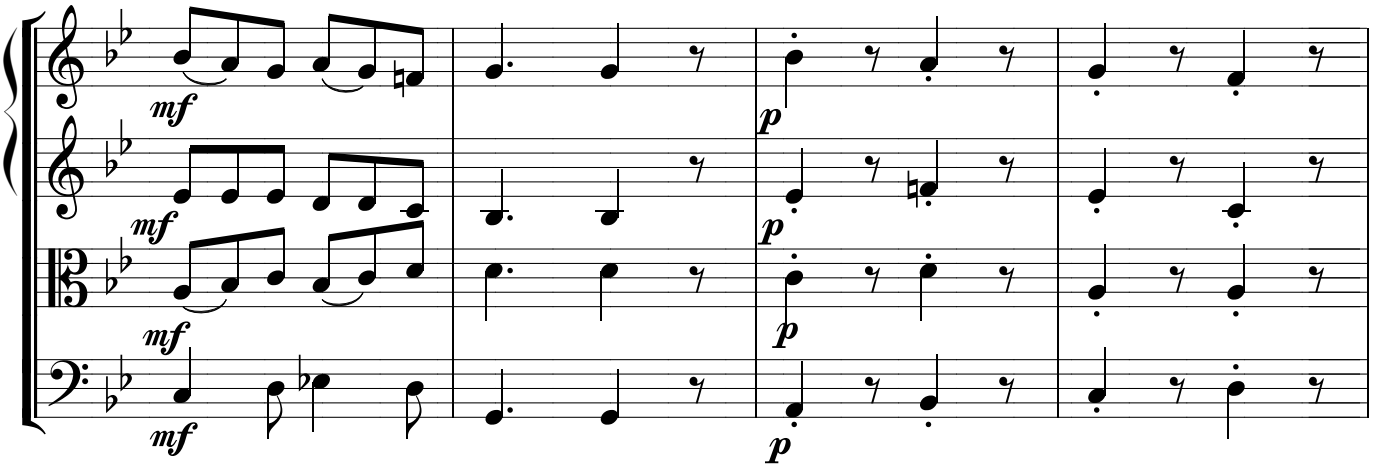

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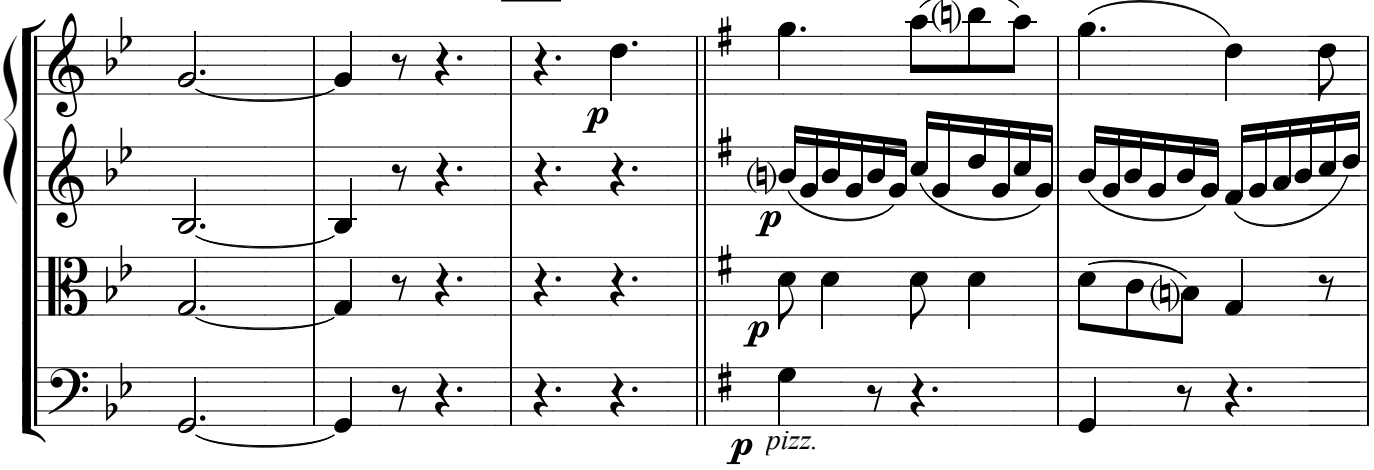

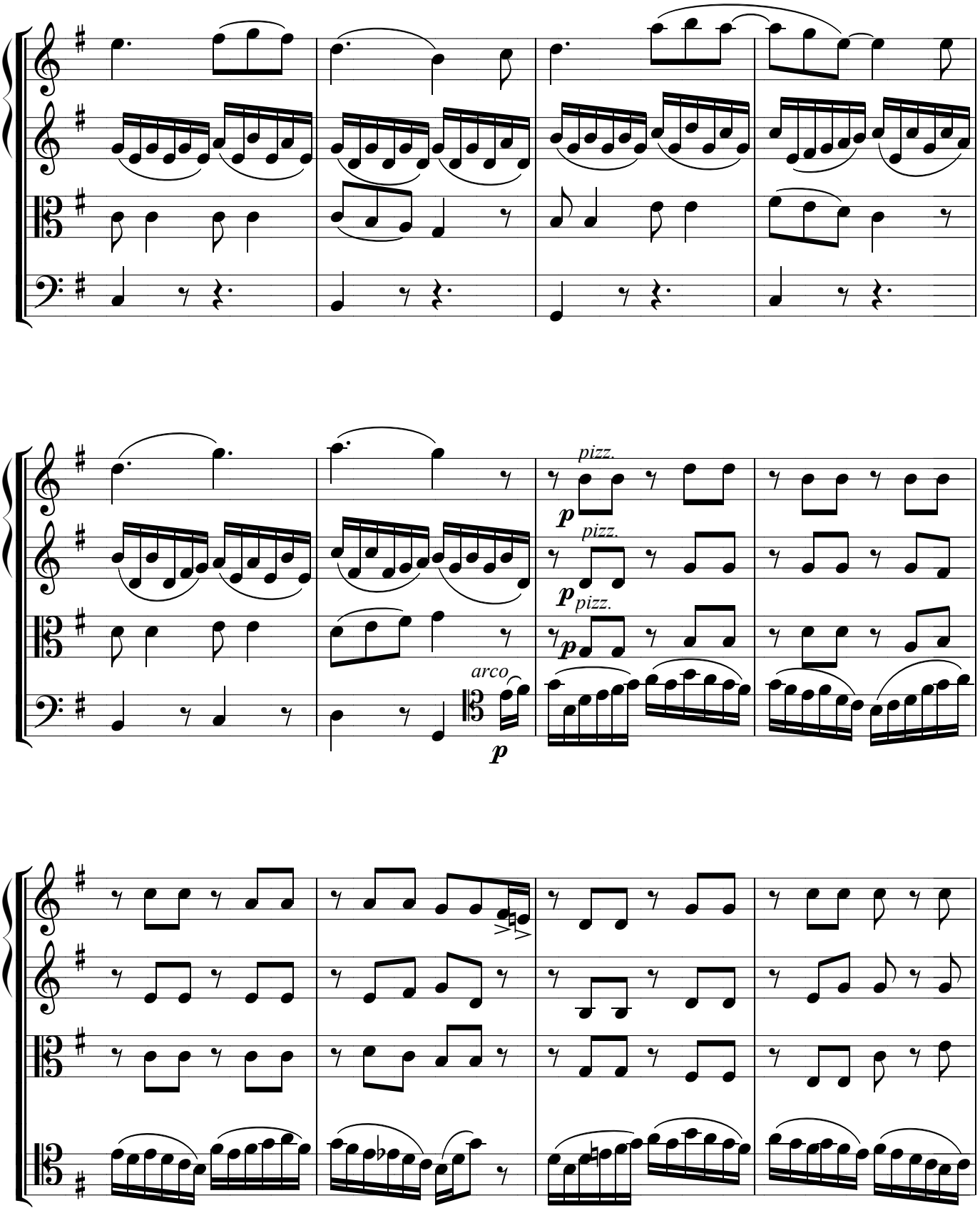
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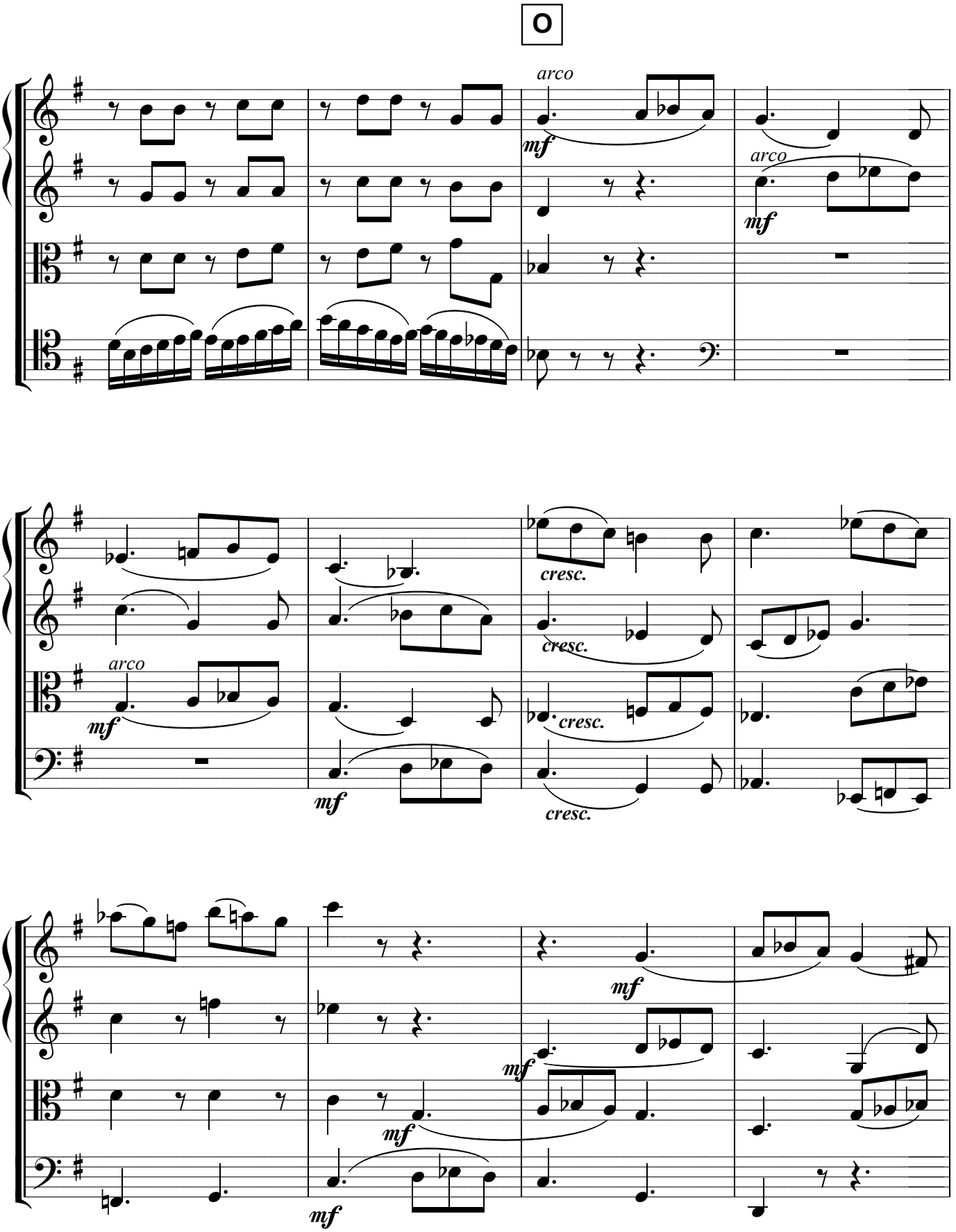
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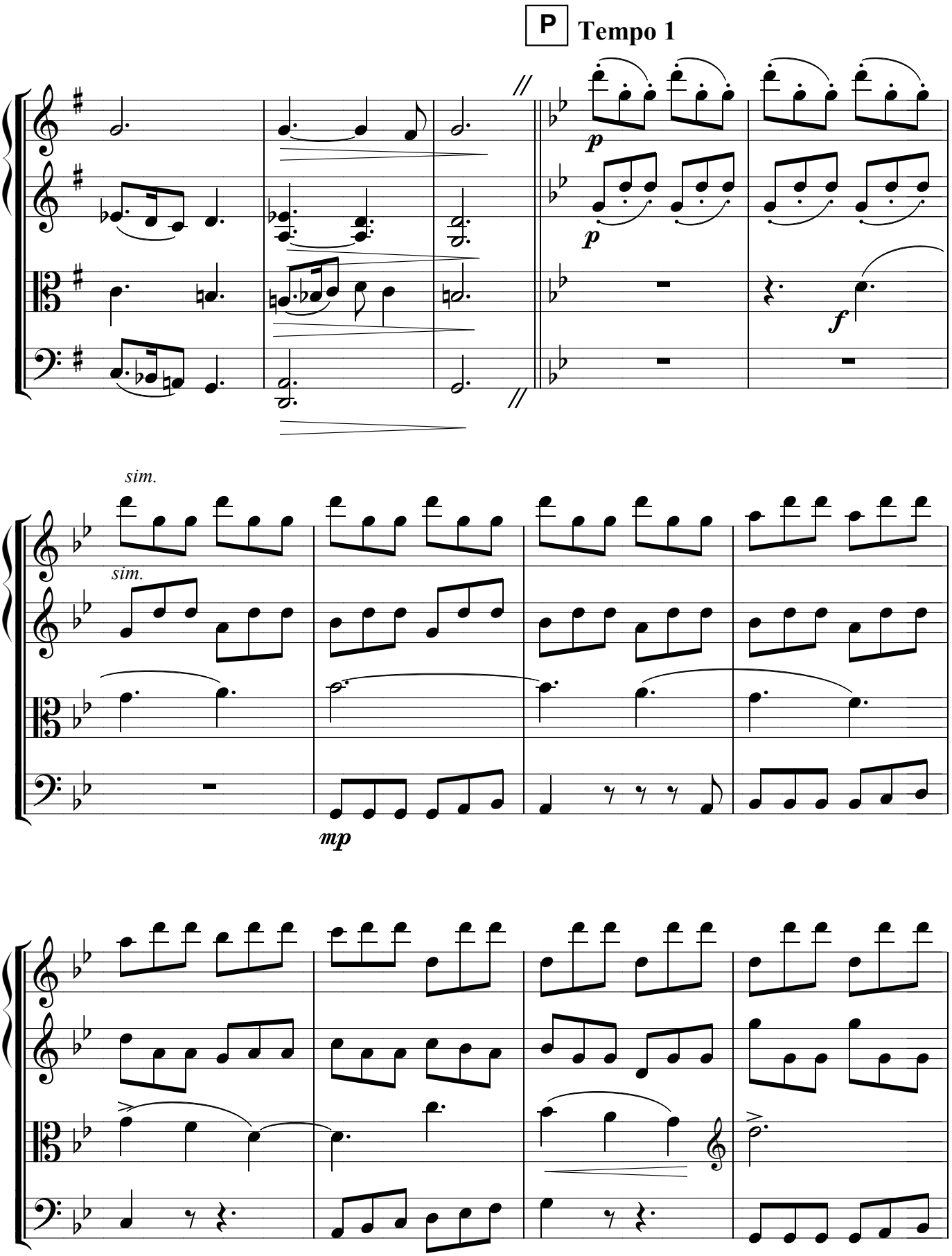
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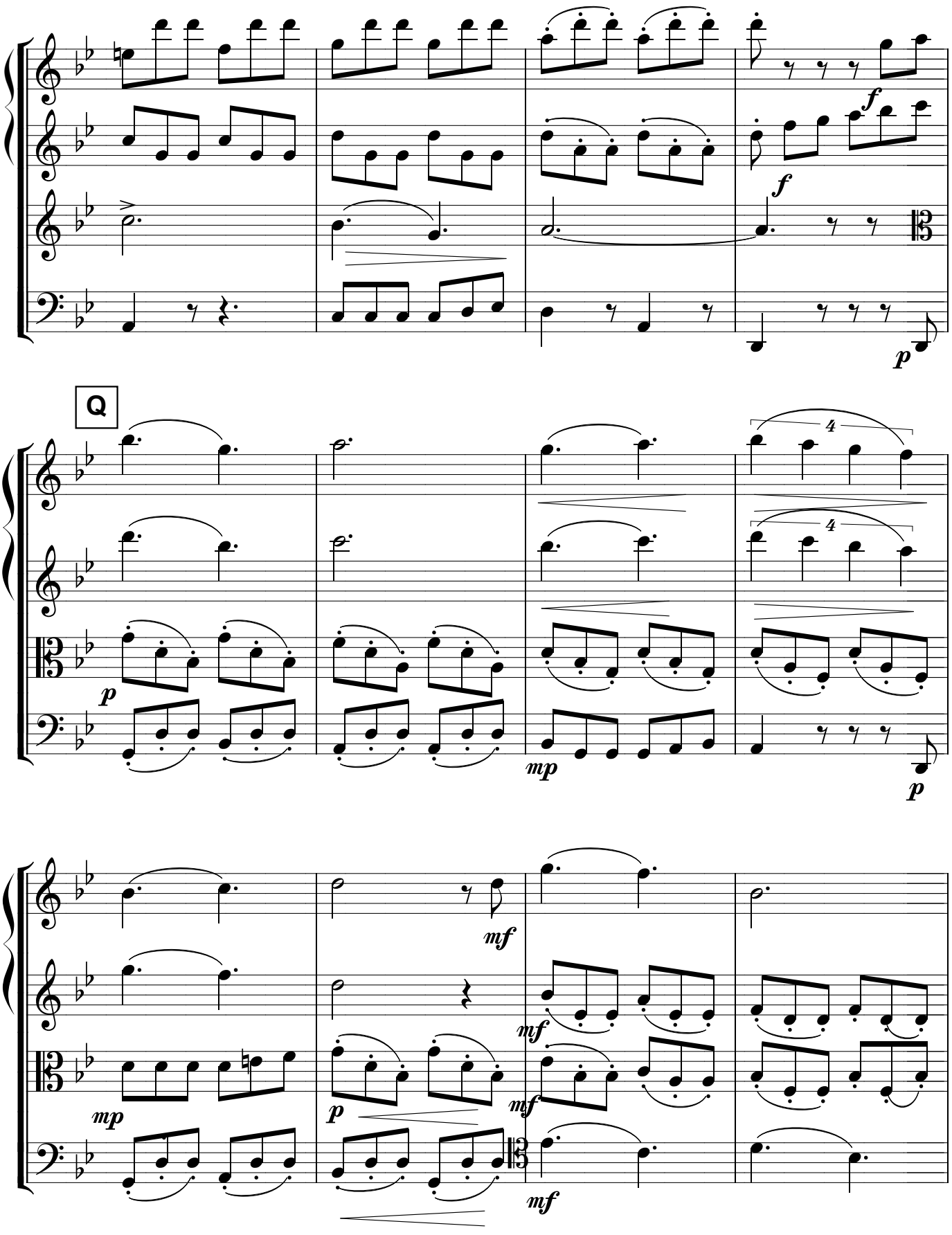
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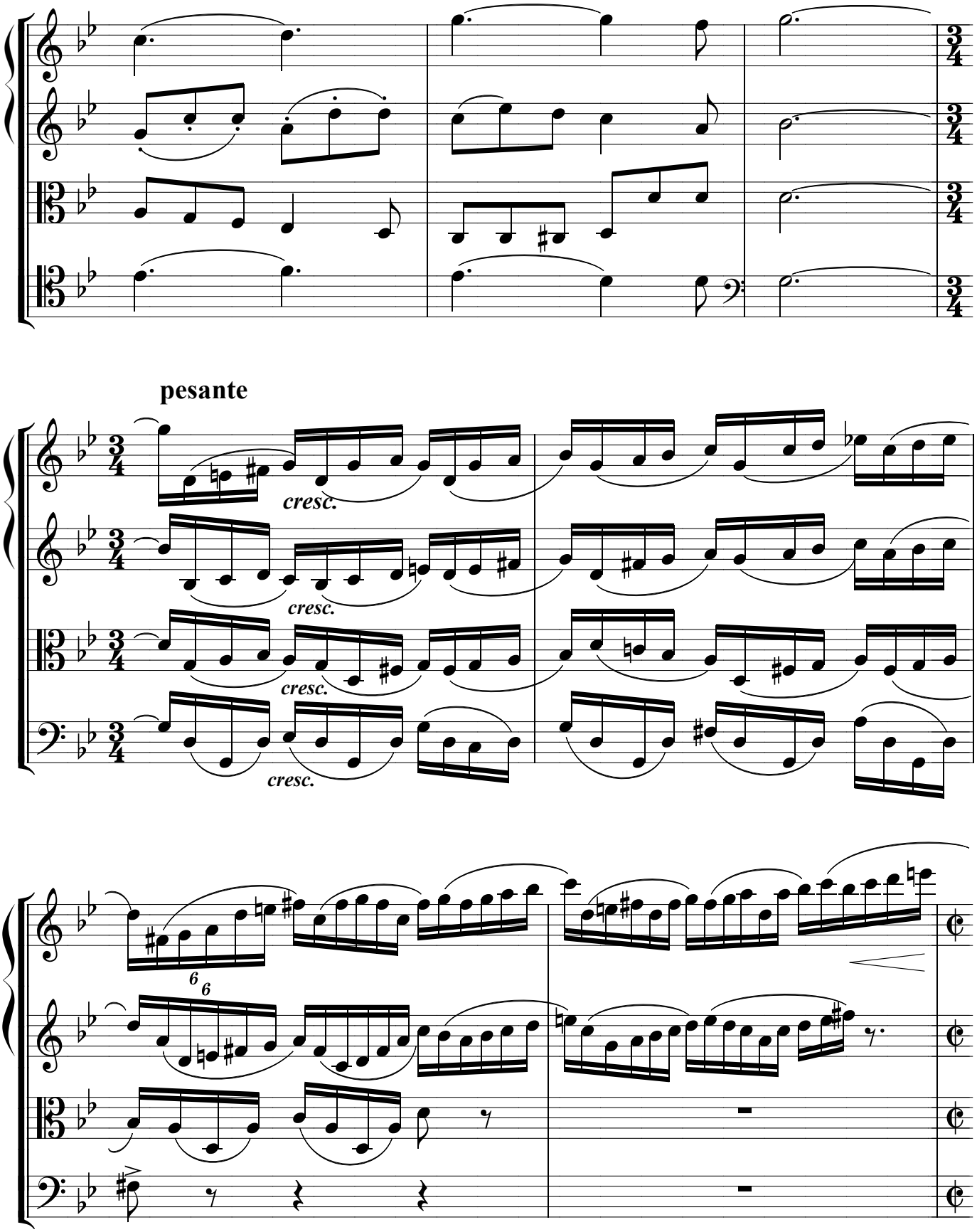
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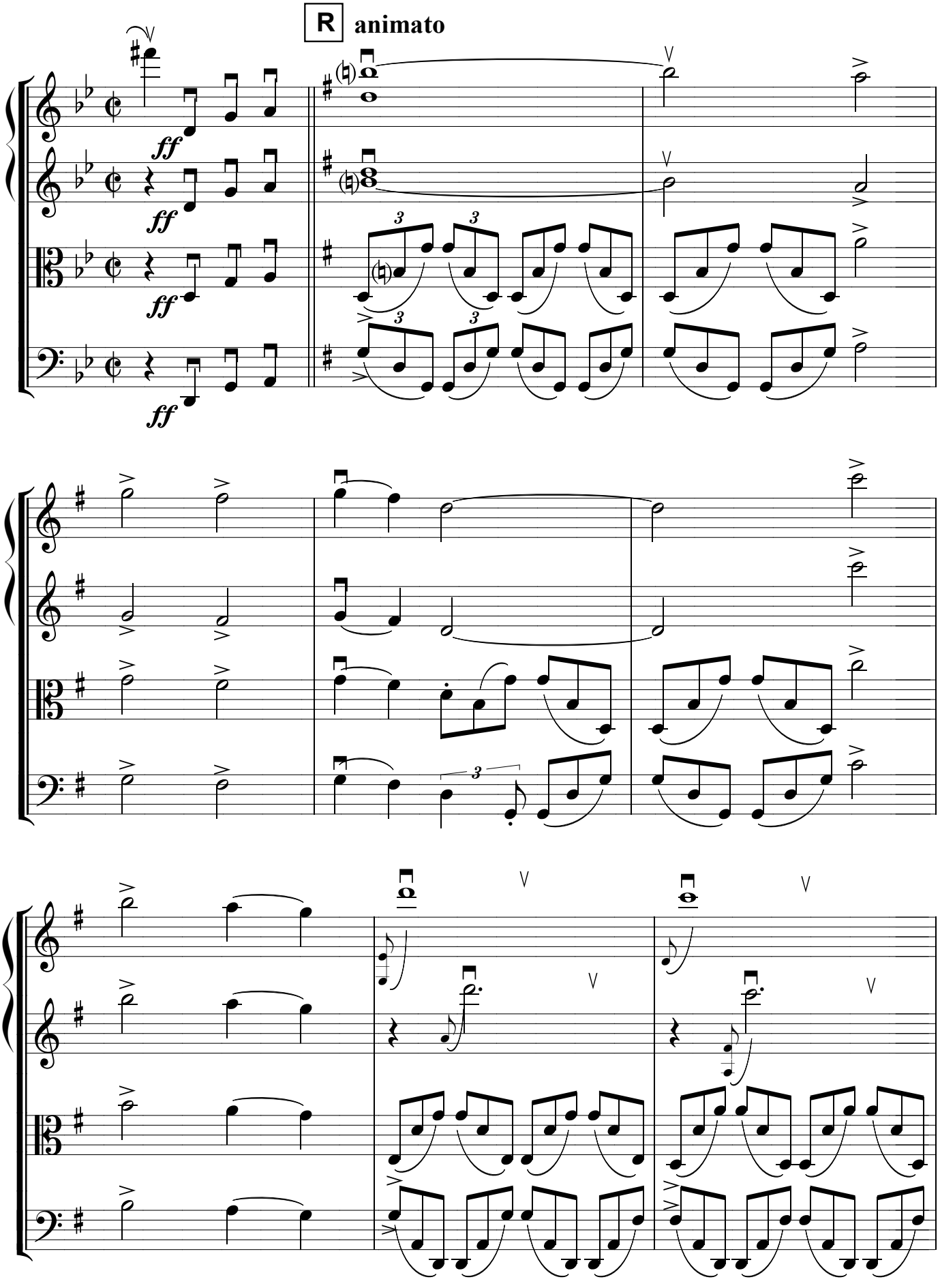
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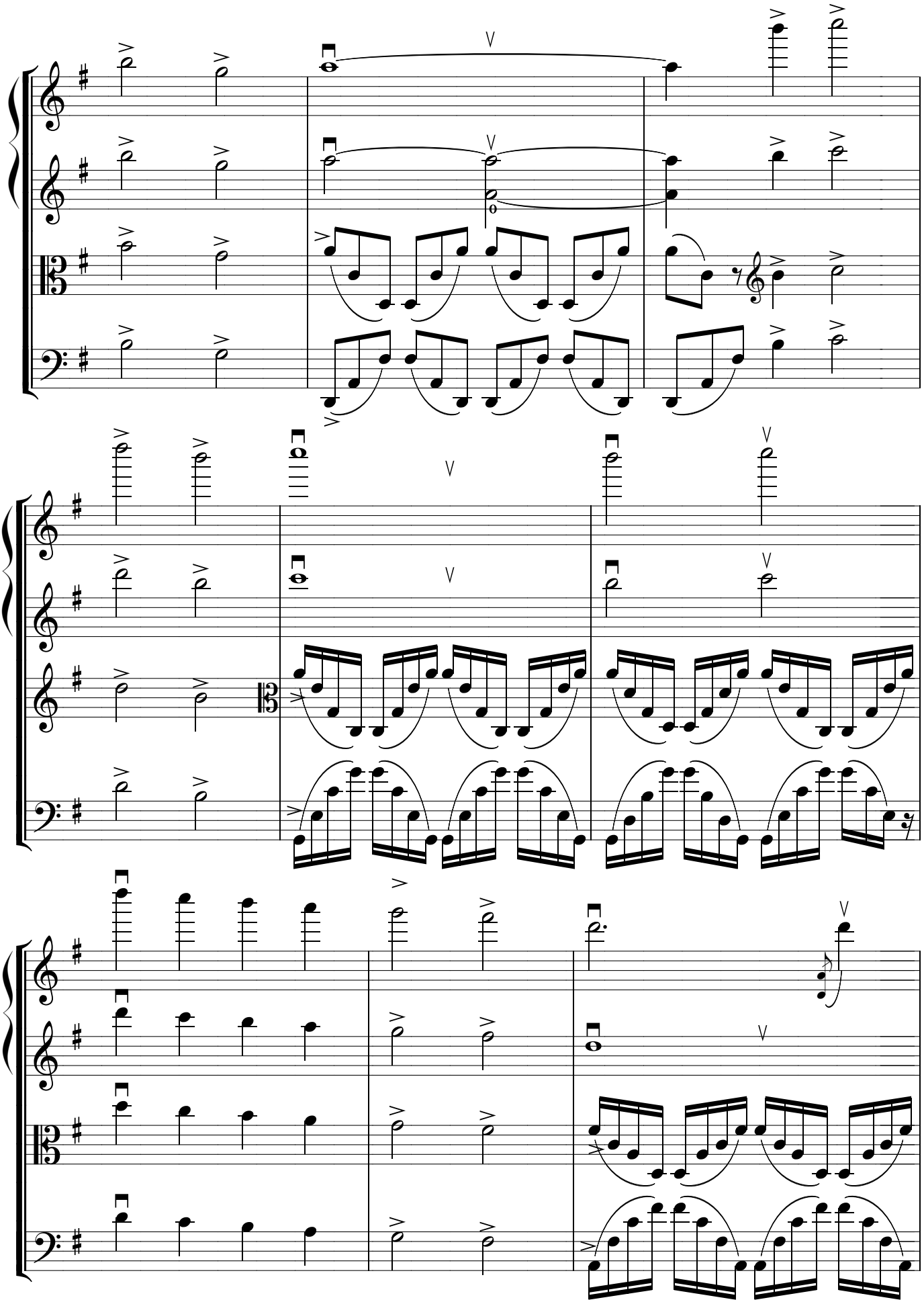

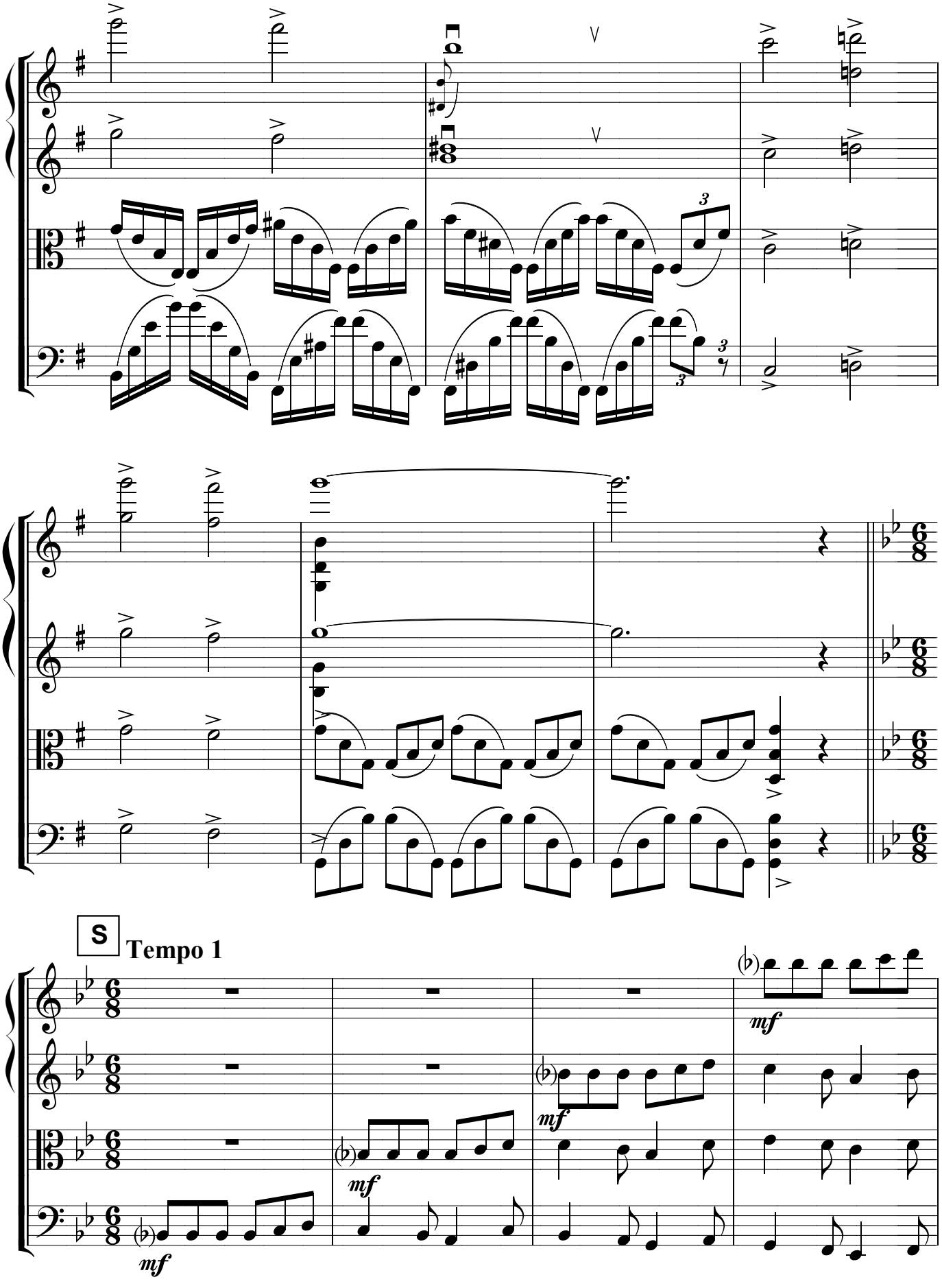
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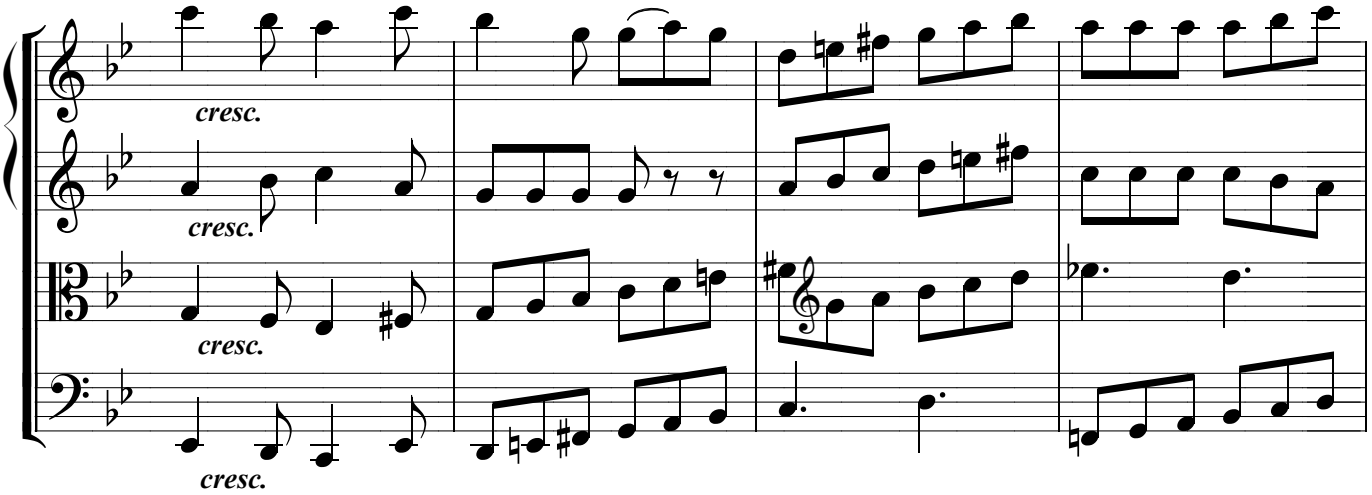
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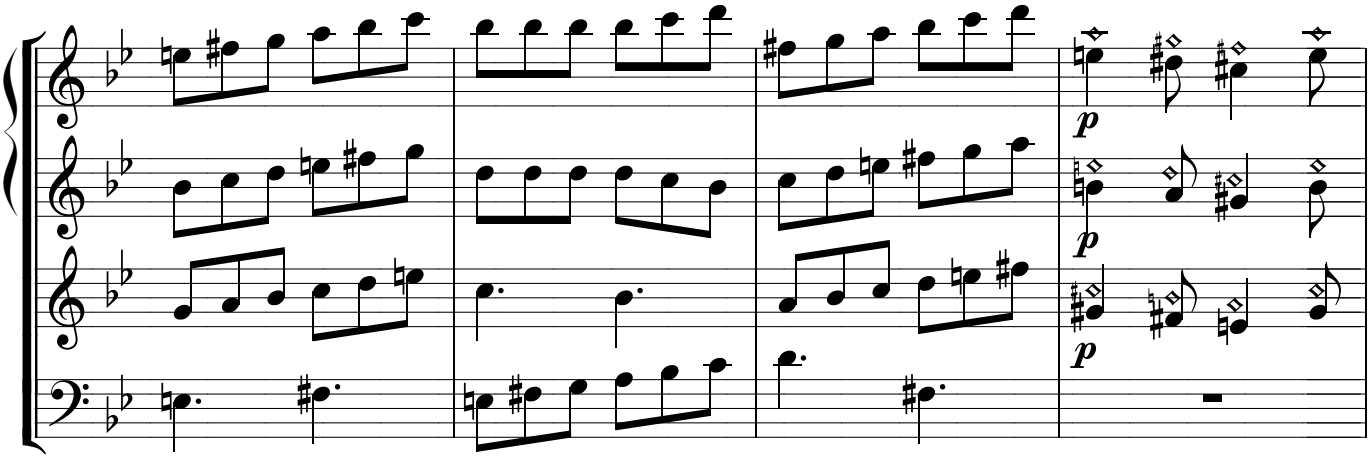
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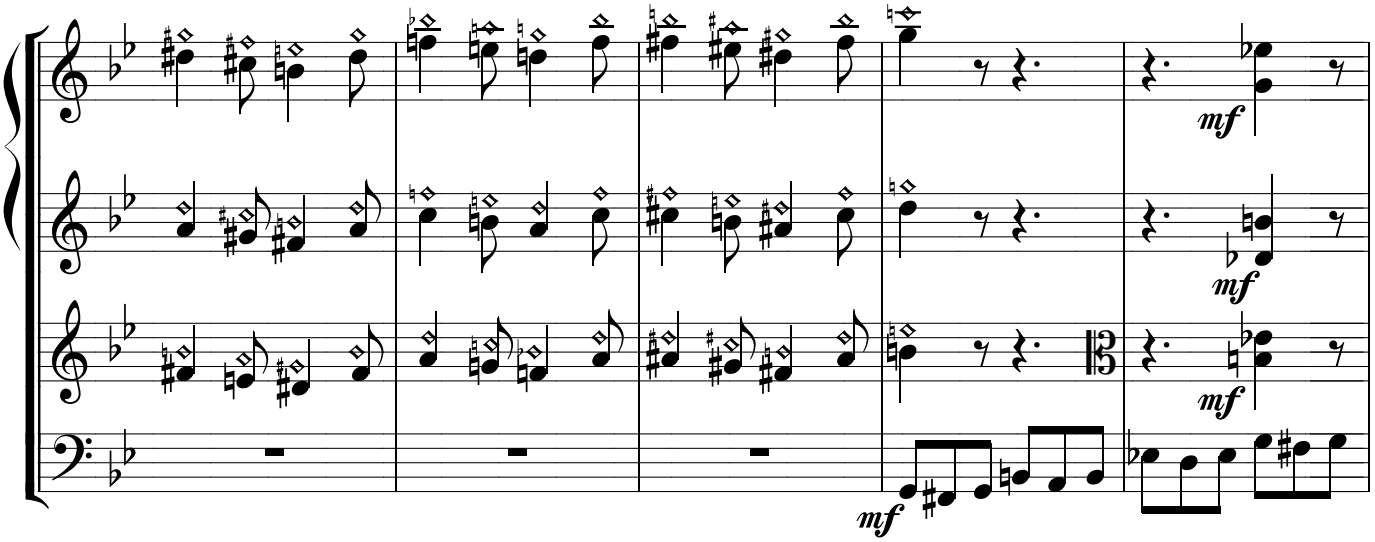
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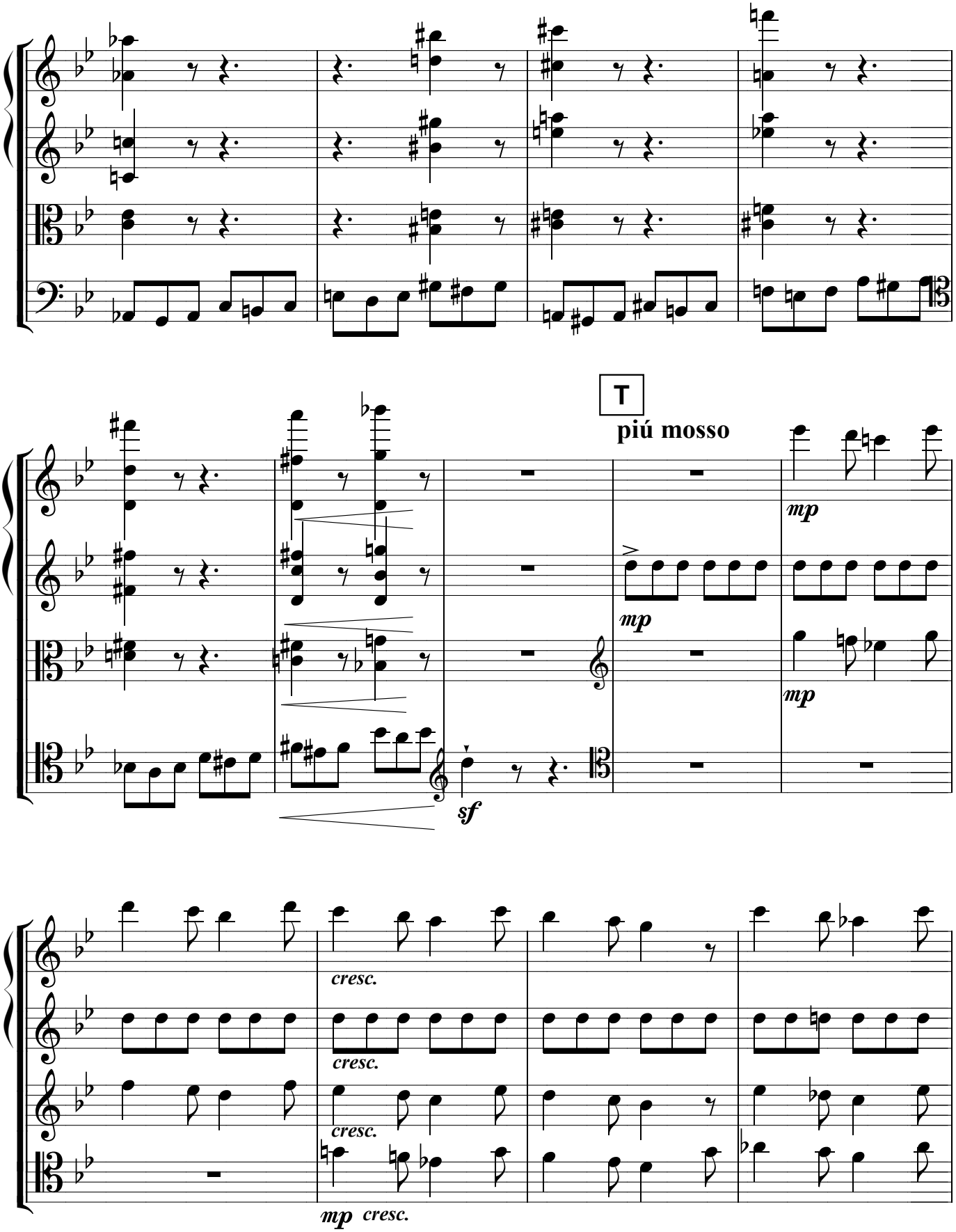
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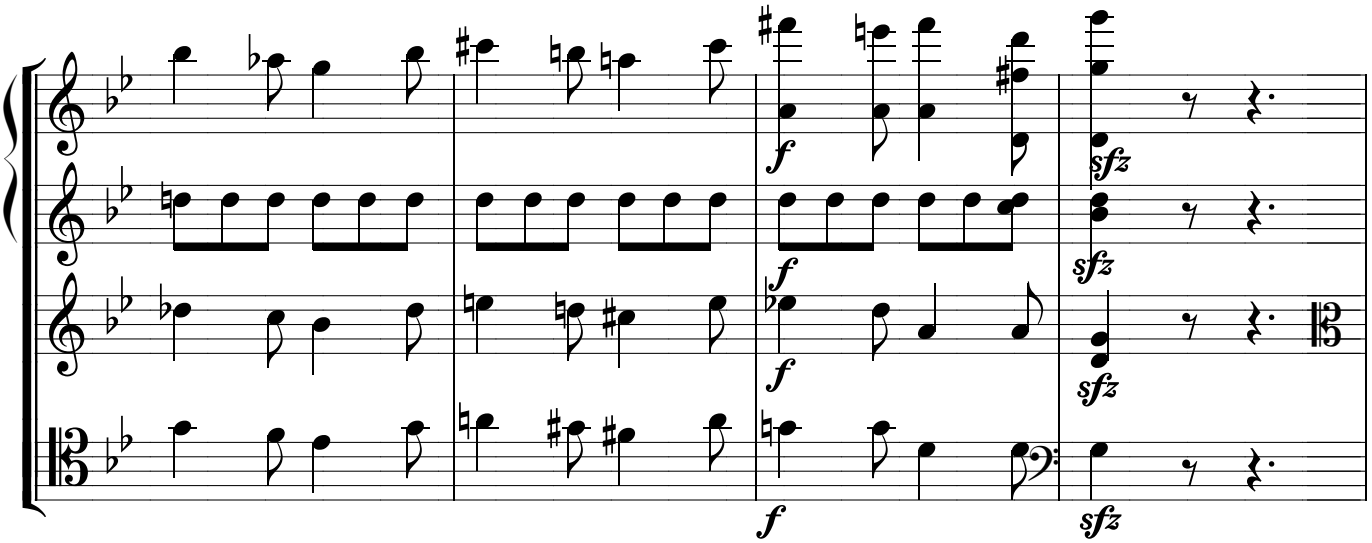
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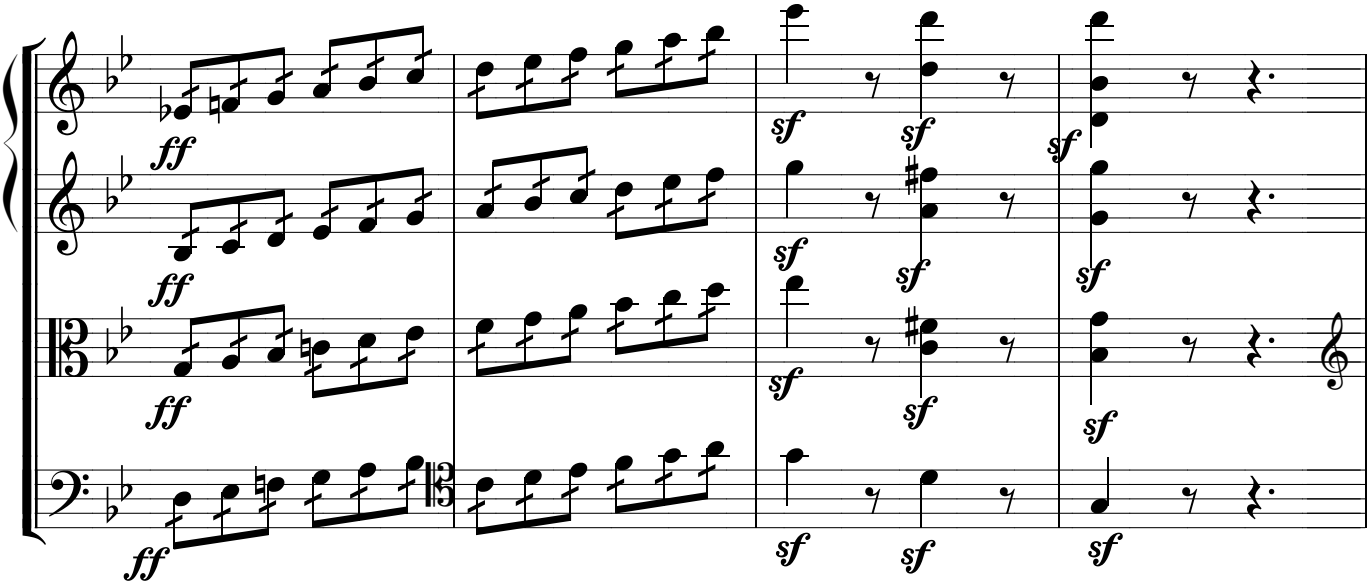
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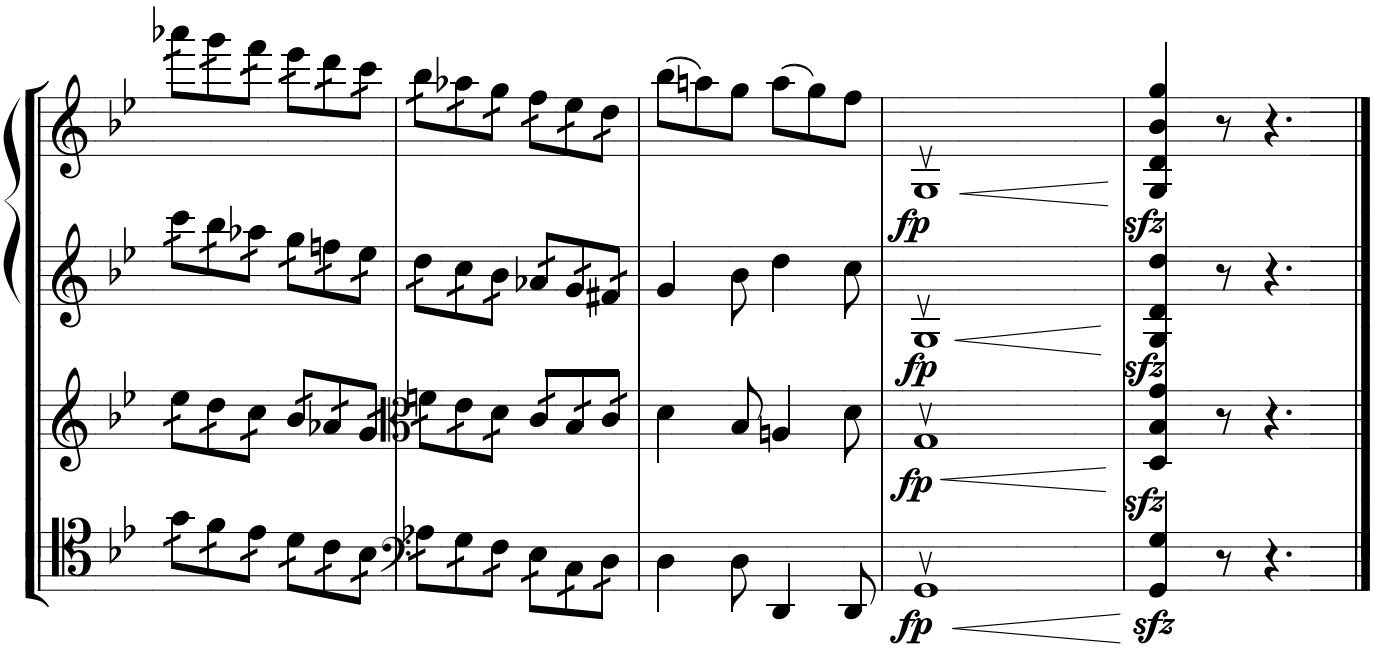
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