C-A Franck

(1822 - 1890)

Variations Symphoniques (1885)

for piano and orchestra

Orchestral reduction for ***Wind Sextet***

(Flute, Cor Anglais, Clarinet in A, Horn, Bassoon and Bass Clarinet) by Toby Miller (2015/2018)

The composer in his organ loft at the church of Ste Clotilde in Paris, as painted by Jeanne Rongier in 1885

César Franck's life was one of constant hard work (a standard working day during term was from 6am to 10pm, of which only a couple of hours was for his own composition). His first and biggest battle was to live up to his father's expectations. Nicolas-Joseph was a bank clerk in Liège, whose ambitions were expressed through his children right from birth: he saddled his eldest son with the name César-Auguste-Jean-Guillaume-Hubert. A name more inappropriate for this meek child is hard to imagine: Liszt, who made strenuous efforts on Franck's behalf, later wrote in a letter of introduction "he has the problem of being called César-Auguste, and besides, seems not to me to possess that fortunate social sense that opens all doors". I hazard a guess that, if born today, César would have been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome.

Once father found that sons did have musical talent, exploiting it for financial reward became his lifelong focus (think Leopold Mozart, only far worse). In 1834, aged 11, César played before the first King of the new Belgian nation (also Leopold). The family moved to Paris and took French nationality so that César could enter the Conservatoire, then moved back again in 1842 before he completed the course, possibly because study was reducing the time he could devote to concerts and teaching. Two years later this was not producing the desired results and they were back in Paris, where his father attempted to prevent him spending time with a pupil, his future wife, by emotional blackmail ('his mother would be the one to suffer' from loss of income). As soon as he was 25 and able to marry without parental consent, César left home with a note vowing to pay off every penny of his father's 11,000-franc debt.

Three successive church organist posts helped César both pay his way and avoid the limelight. Organ-playing was in an astonishing Dark Age in France. Baroque music was rarely heard, instruments and playing technique so poor that pedals were mostly unused or not available, their use even forgotten (re-demonstrated by a German organist at a Paris concert in 1844). Despite never fully mastering pedal skills himself (he bought a Pleyel pedal-board for home practice), Franck gradually became, with his friend the great organ-builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, founder of a new school of French organ-playing—including the art of improvisation, long dormant in France, where his powers astonished his contemporaries and drew many listeners.

1872 was a turning point in his life. Thanks to whom, nobody was sure either then or now, Franck was appointed organ professor at the Conservatoire. Here, despite his unsystematic teaching, his virtuosity, passion for his subject and his sincerity attracted a growing number of pupil fans, who became known as 'la bande à Franck': d'Indy (their leader), Chausson, Duparc, Vierne and others. This, and Franck's habit of teaching composition in his organ classes, aroused other professors' jealousy.

Franck heard Wagner's 'Tristan' Prelude for the first time in 1874; chromaticism and constant modulation became hallmarks of his own style. Franck also now seems for the first time to have found something personal to compose about: a real passion, apparently quite at odds with his serene and almost childlike character, suddenly emerges in his Piano Quintet. After its première in 1879, pianist and dedicatee Saint-Saëns walked out in protest at the music's naked emotion: Franck probably had his Irish pupil Augusta Holmes (who was apparently lusted after by 'everybody' at the Conservatoire) in mind. Franck's wife was also outraged. There is no evidence of any transgressions of his firm Catholic faith, but "much of Franck's behaviour, his lengthy work day, his working holidays, his unconscious use of sensual harmonies and consciously amatory creations like Psyché, speak of a man whose marriage was not fulfilling." (Chris Dench, reviewing the excellent recent biography by R J Stove). If Franck was on the autistic spectrum, perhaps he simply didn't really grow up emotionally until his fifties. That may also help explain his failure to understand the politics at the Conservatoire, and his ability to ignore the general critical and public hostility to his music.

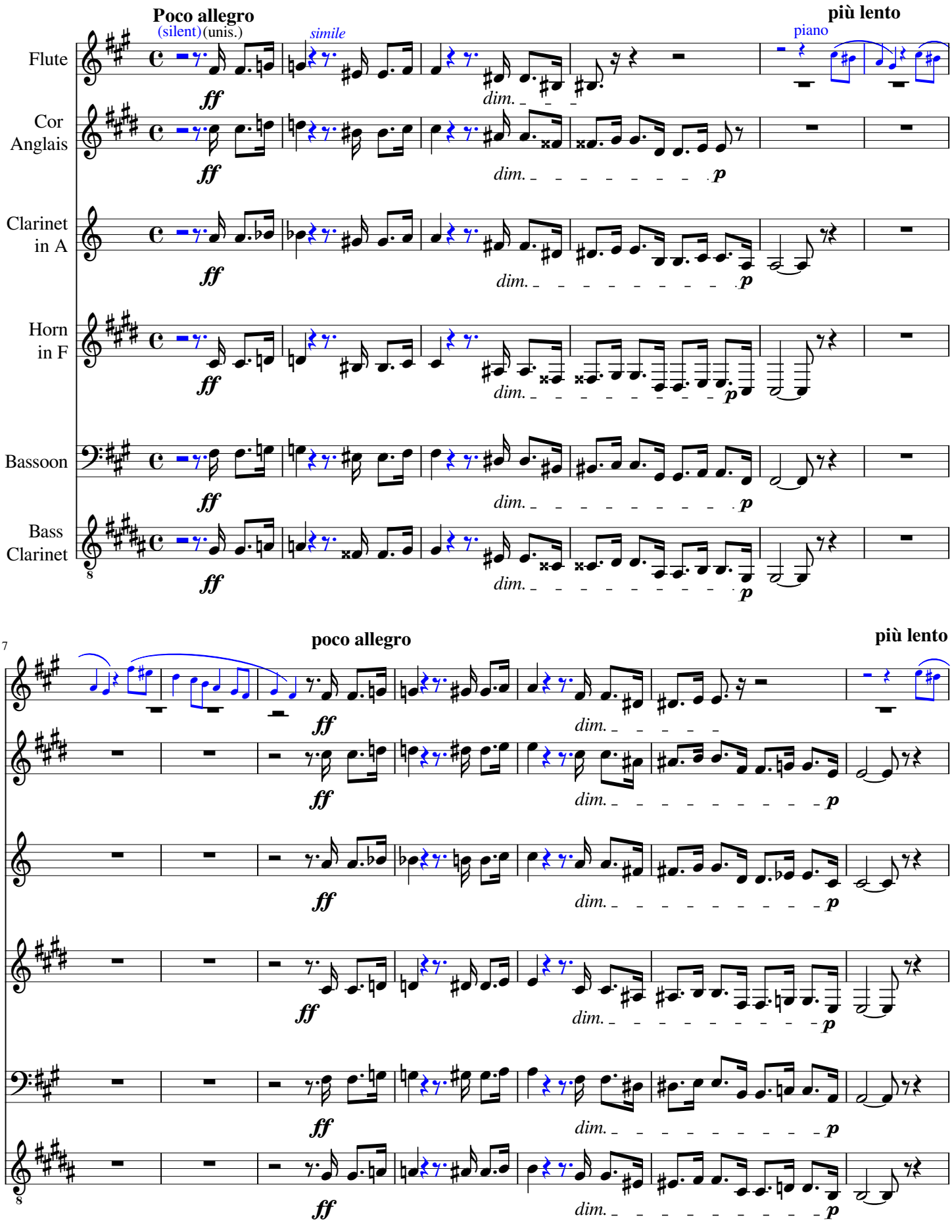
César Franck died on 8th November 1890 (from a viral infection which turned to pleurisy) following an accident in July when he suffered a head injury in a collision of horse-drawn vehicles on a Paris street. Much of his final decade was taken up with the composition of two operas which have not stood the test of time. Yet all the few masterpieces for which he is still remembered today were produced in that short period: *Prélude, Choral et Fugue* (1884) and *Prélude, Aria et Final* (1886-7) for piano, the Violin Sonata (1886), the D minor Symphony (1887-8), the String Quartet (1889) and the *3 Chorals* for organ, to which he was putting the final touches at his death. To these we can add symphonic poems *Le Chasseur Maudit*, *Psyché* (with chorus) and *Les Djinns* (with piano) - and these *Variations Symphoniques,* which arose from the success of *Les Djinns,* as a 'thank you' to the pianist Louis Diémer. The symphony is a powerful piece, but even the composer acknowledged later that he would now have orchestrated it differently. No such criticism can be made of the *Variations Symphoniques*, which feature chamber-like dialogue between soloist and accompaniment throughout: beginning as a 'dispute', as in the 2nd movement of Beethoven's 4th piano concerto (a model which can also be sensed in the opening of the Piano Quintet and last movement of the String Quartet). The piece has an unusual but very effective structure: an overall song (ABA') form, in which a despairing first theme (A) descending the harmonic minor scale is transformed at the end into a major-scale celebration (A'). These frame a second theme (B) with several variations, of which the last is a dreamy rhapsody, like a 'slow movement'.

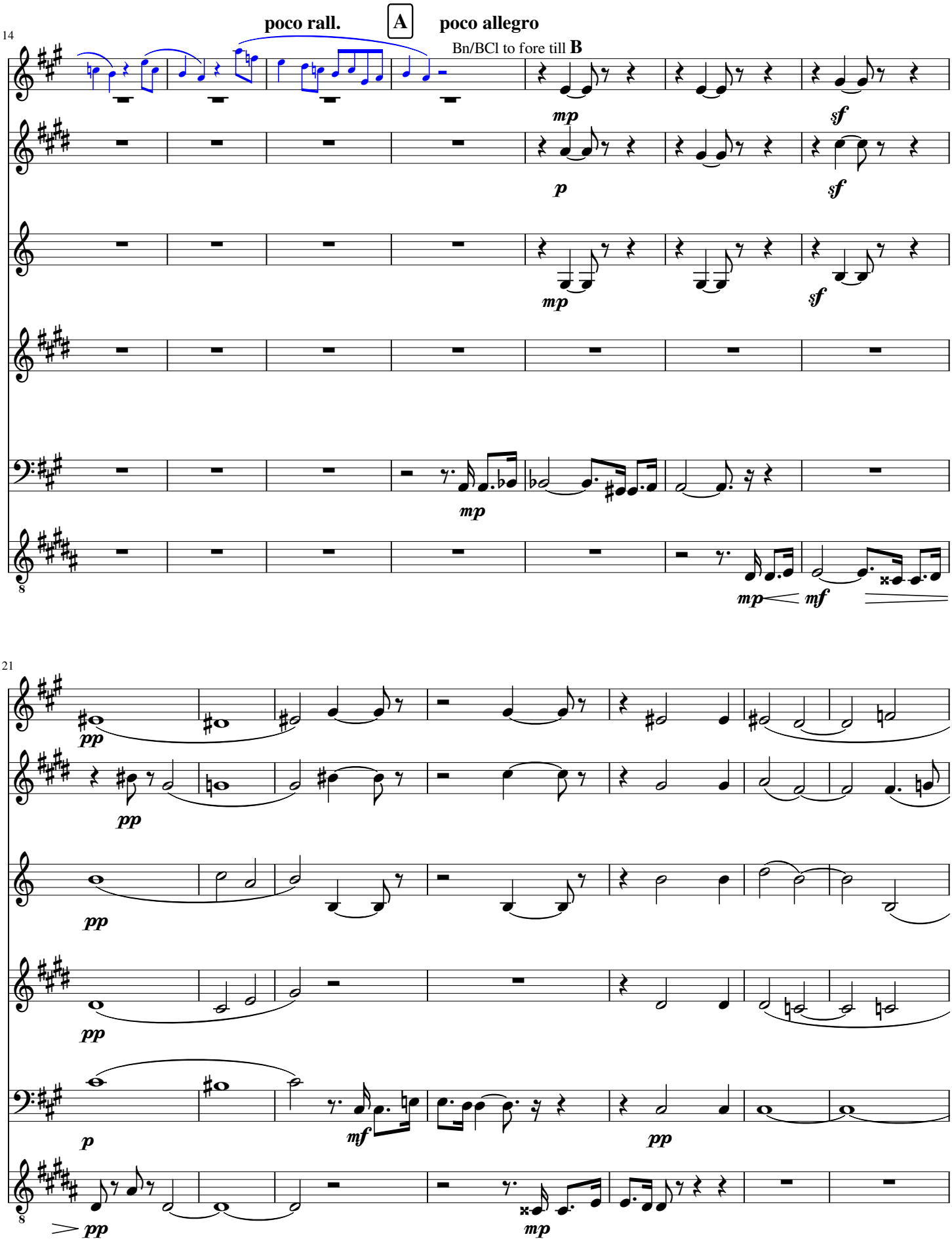
Symphonic Variations for piano and orchestra

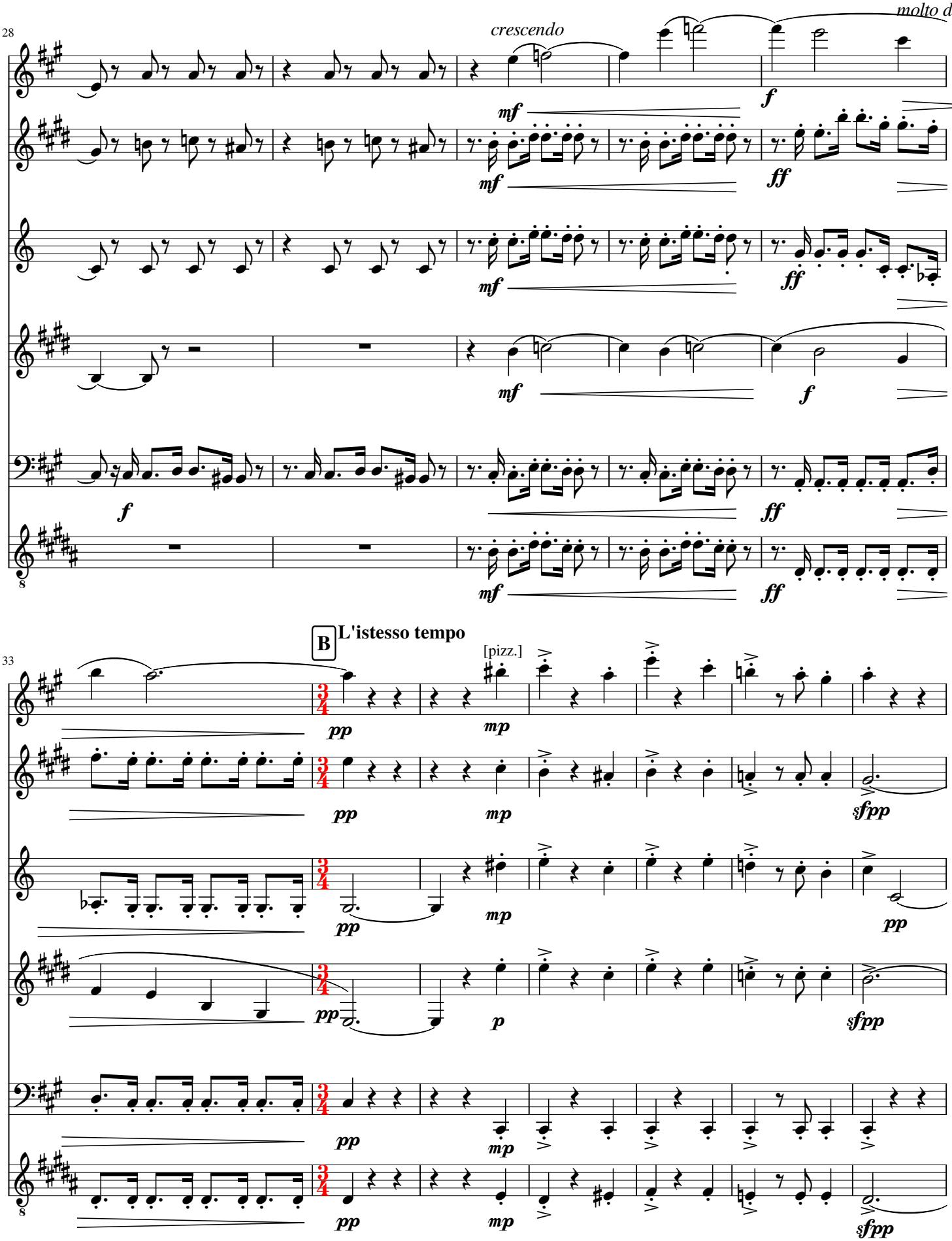
Score (accompaniment only, at instrumental pitches)

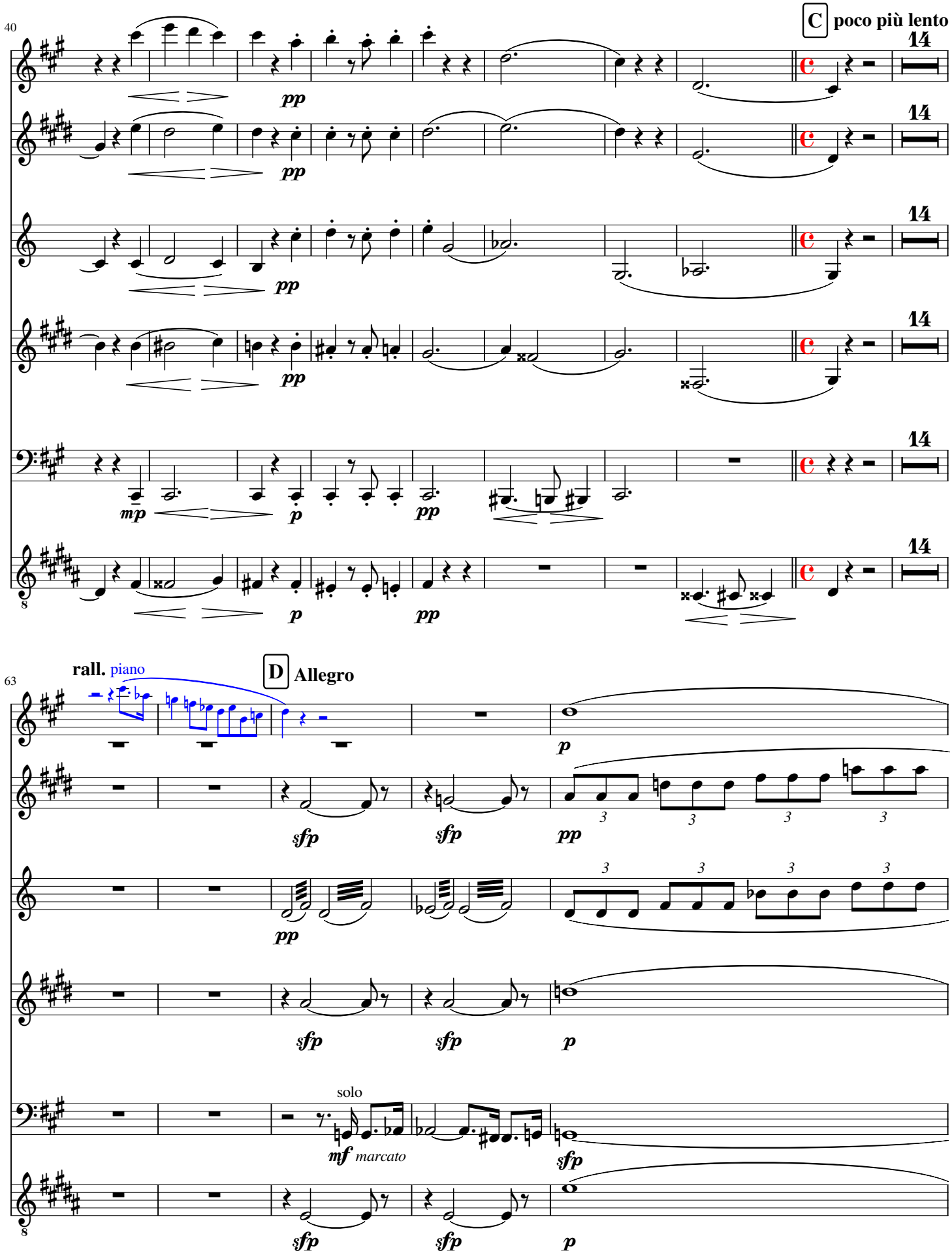
Orchestral reduction for Wind Sextet by Toby Miller

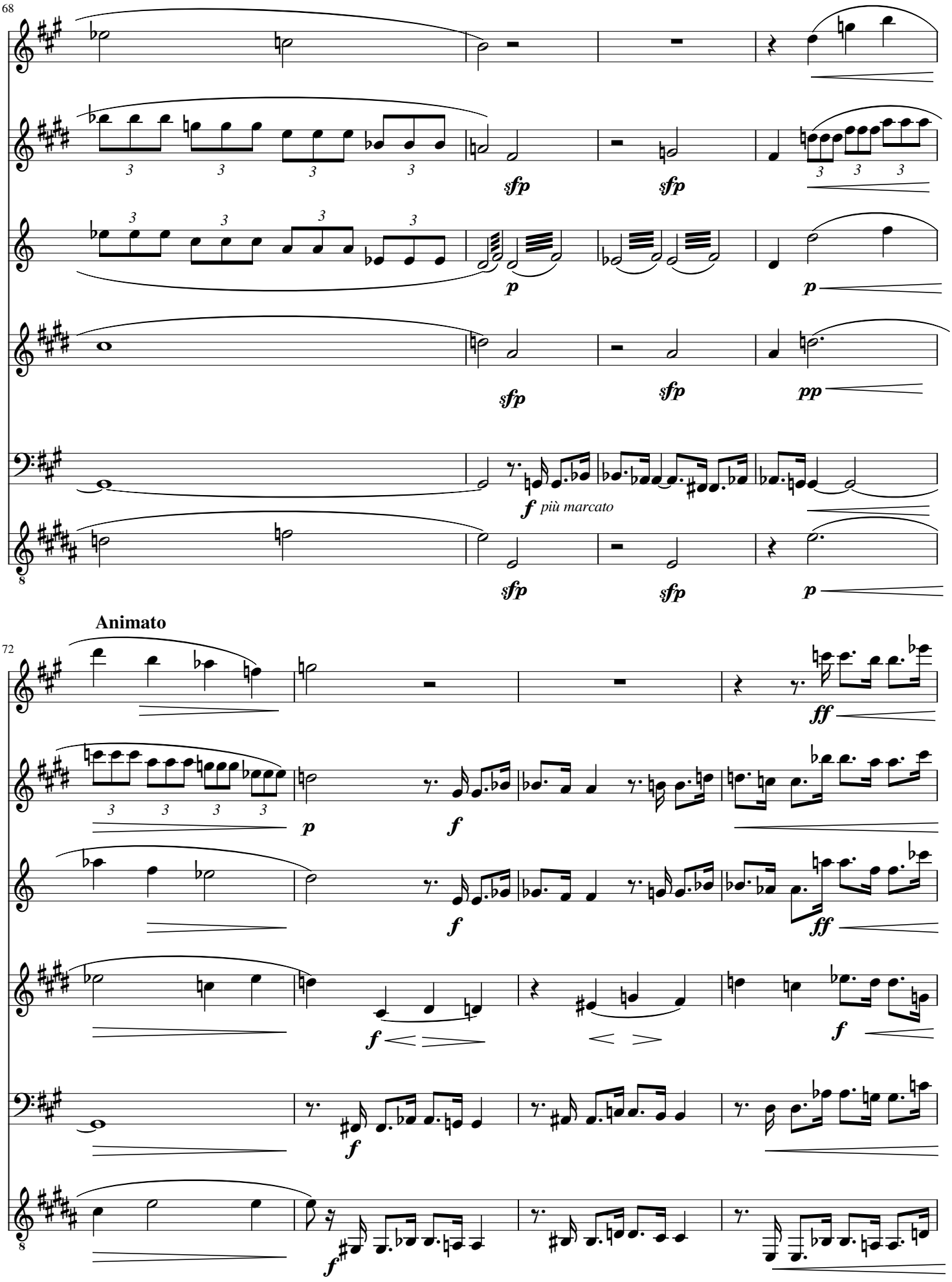
Franck

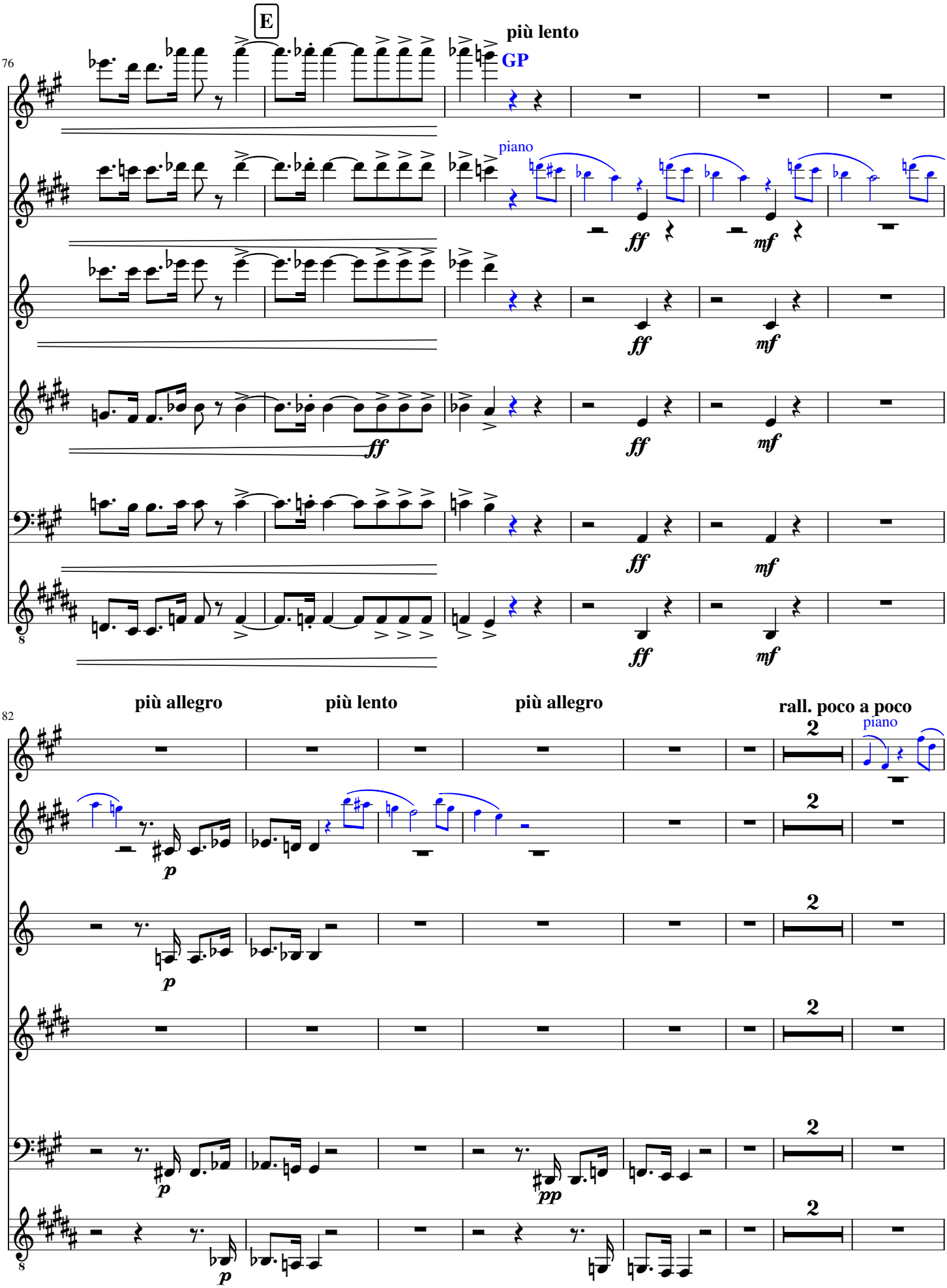


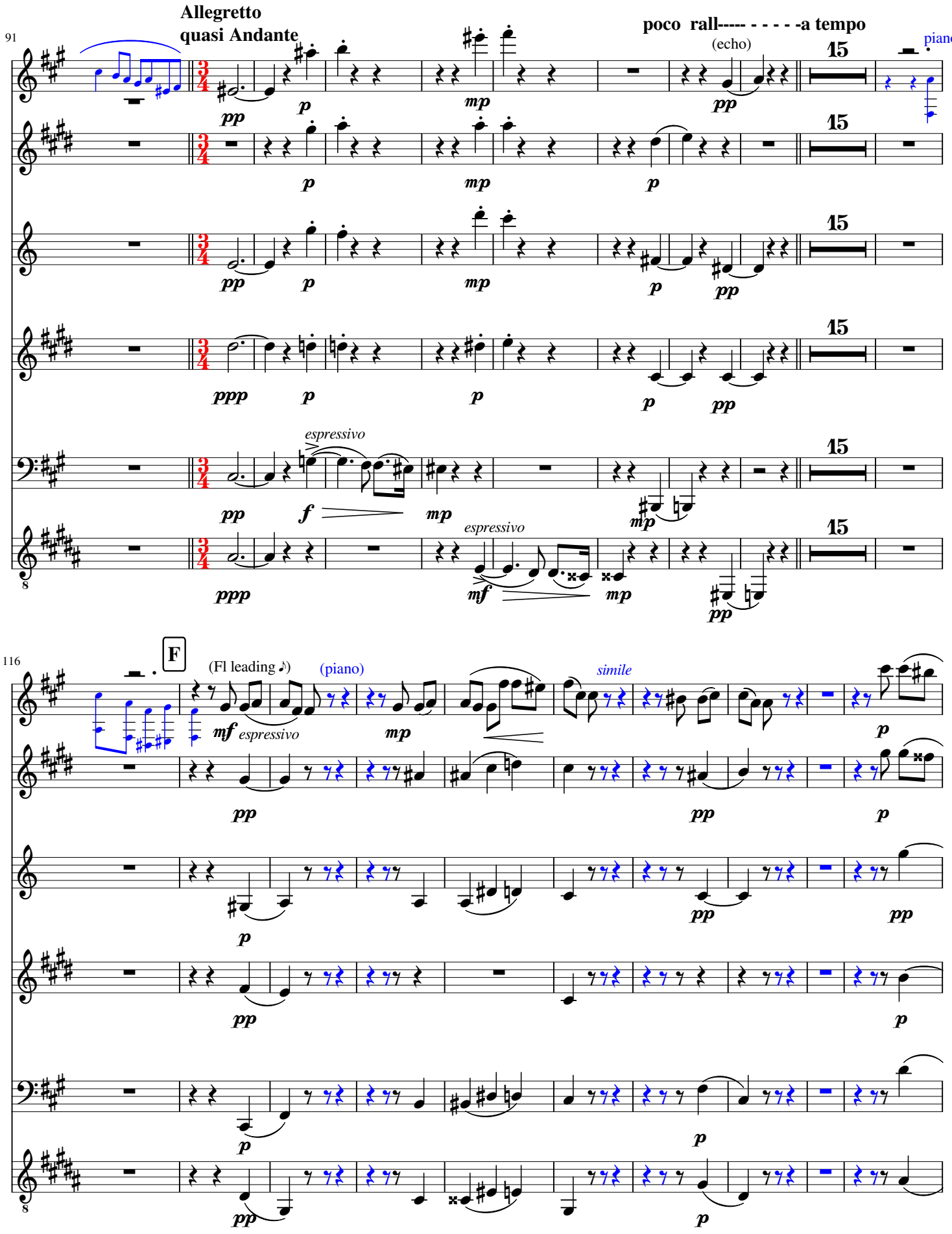

14
poco rall.
A
poco allegro
Bn/BCl to fore till B
mp
sf
p
sf
mp
sf
mp
mp
mf
21
pp
pp
pp
pp
p
mf
pp
pp
mp

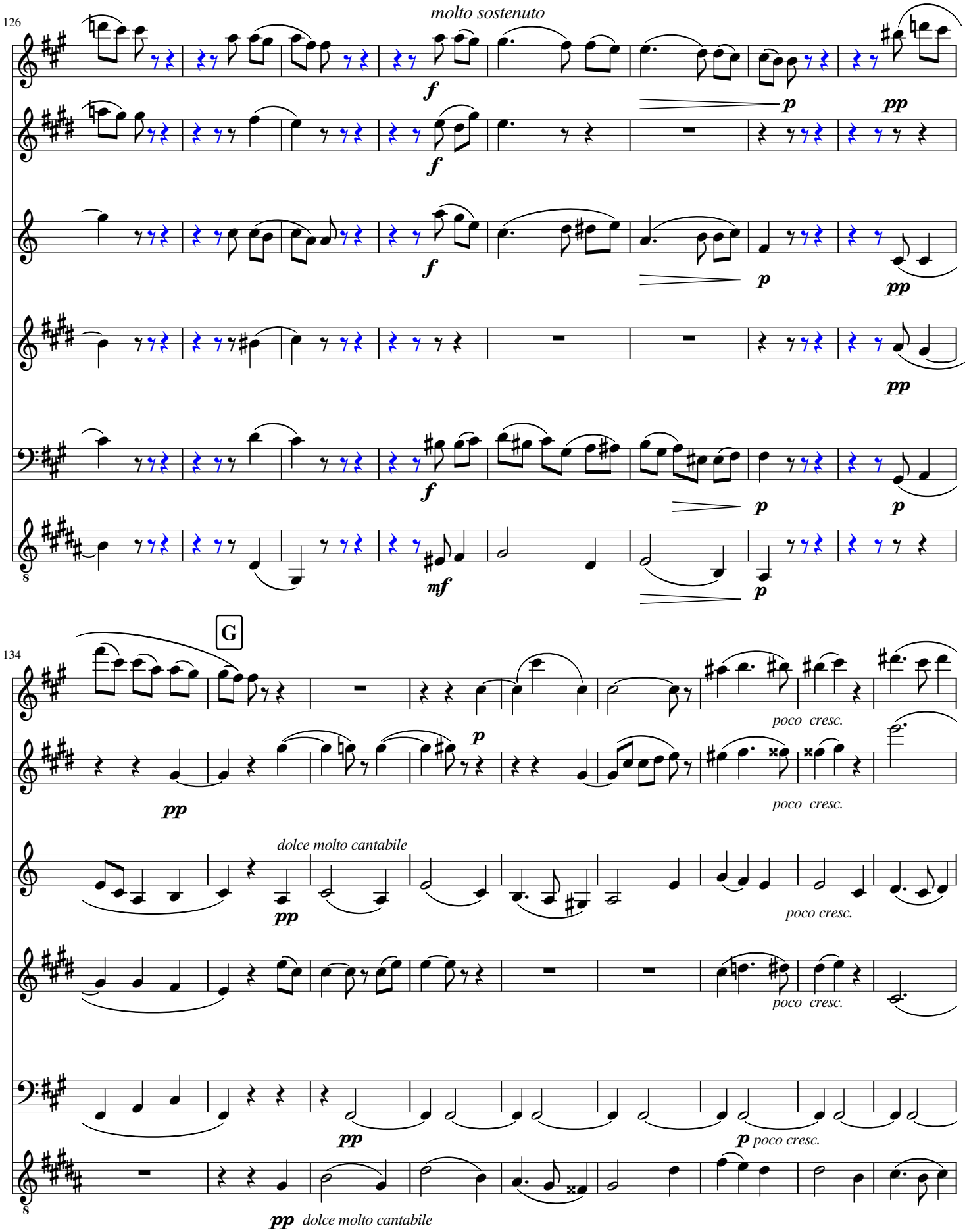

28
crescendo
molto dim.
mf
f
ff
33
B
L'istesso tempo
[pizz.]
pp
mp
p
sfpp

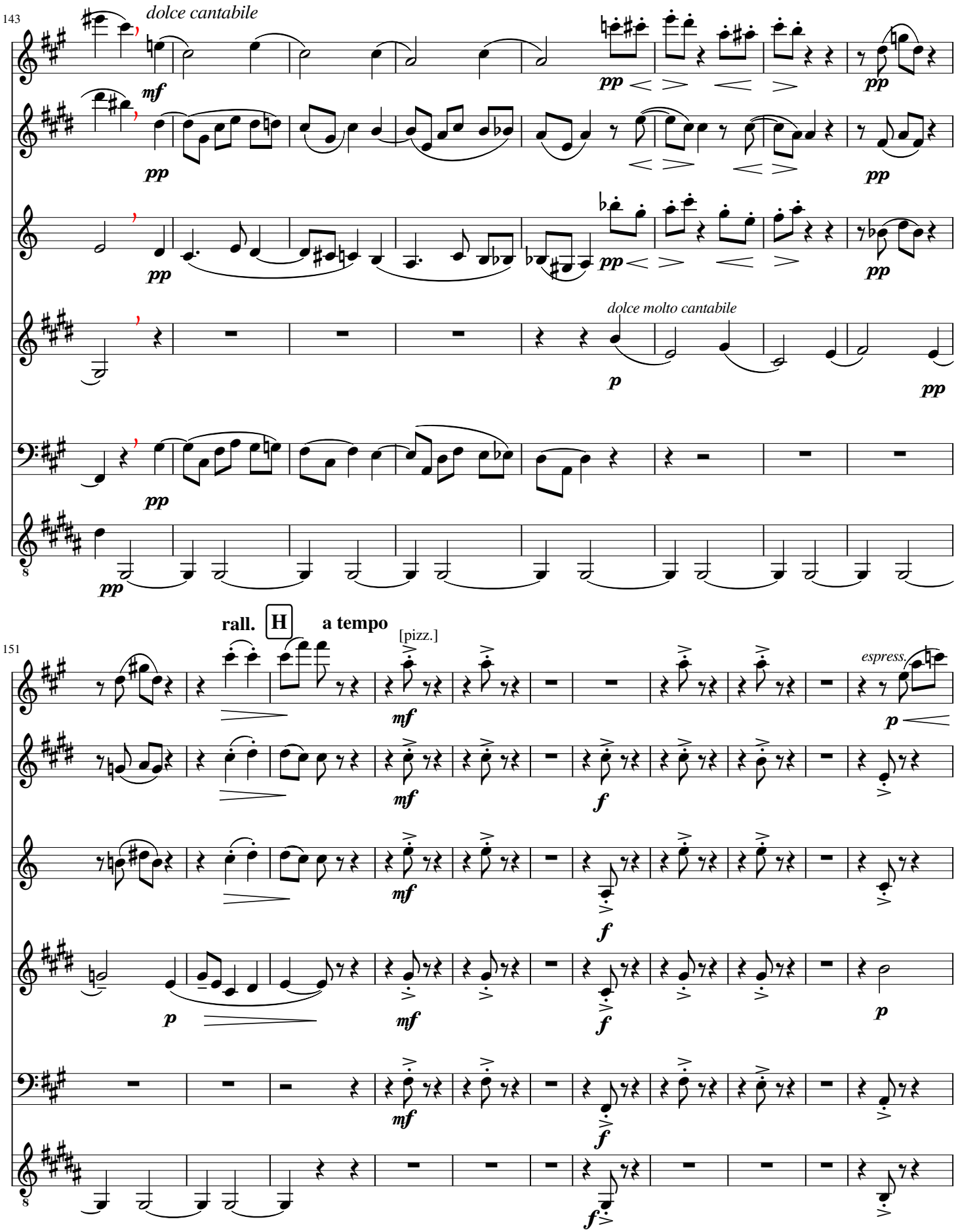

40
C poco più lento
14
pp
mp
p
63
rall. piano
D Allegro
sfp
3
solo
mf marcato

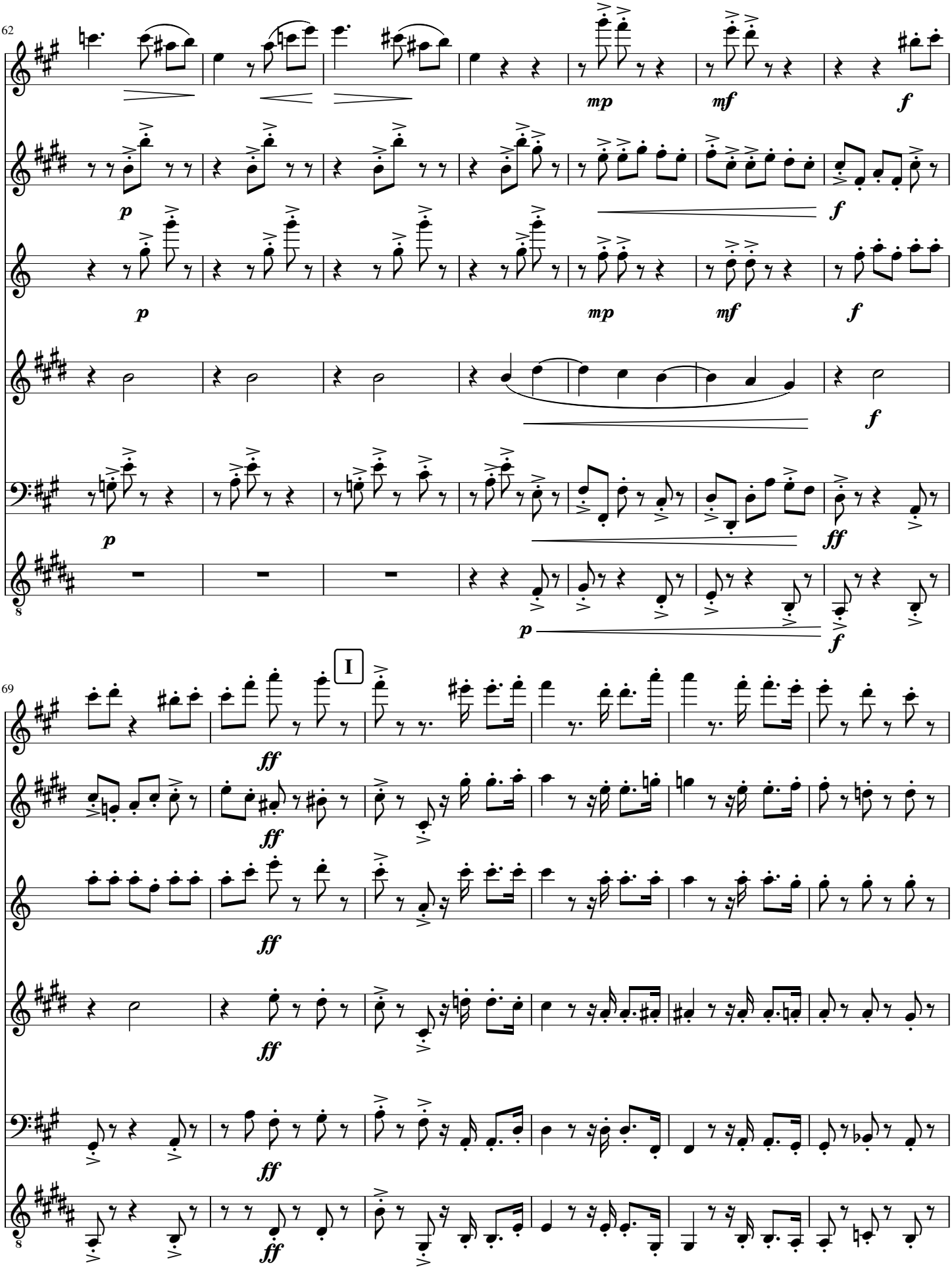

68
sfp
sfp
p
p
sfp
sfp
pp
f più marcato
sfp
sfp
p
Animato
72
ff
p
f
f
ff
f
f
f
f

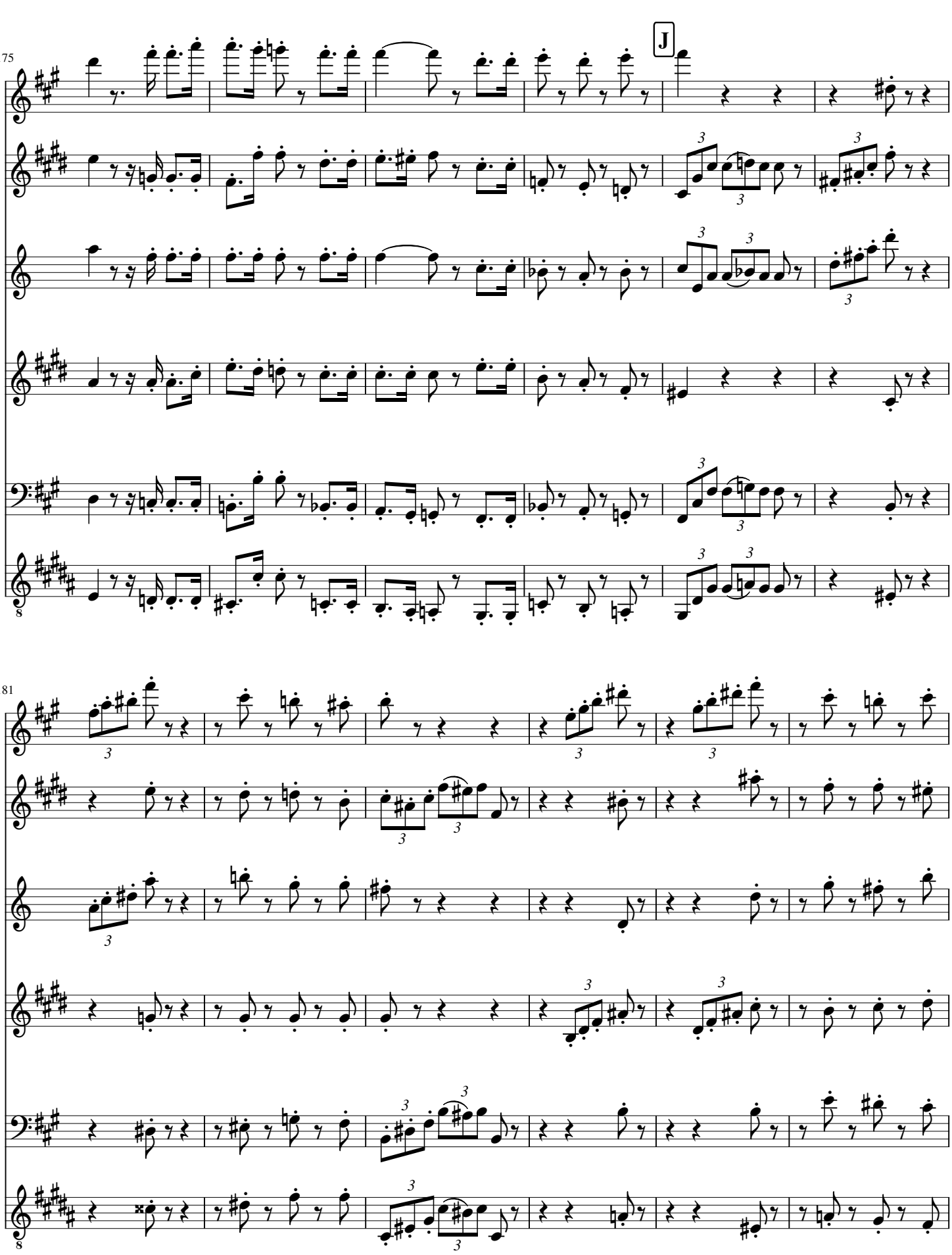

76
E
più lento
GP
piano
ff
mf
8
82
più allegro
più lento
più allegro
rall. poco a poco
piano
2
p
pp

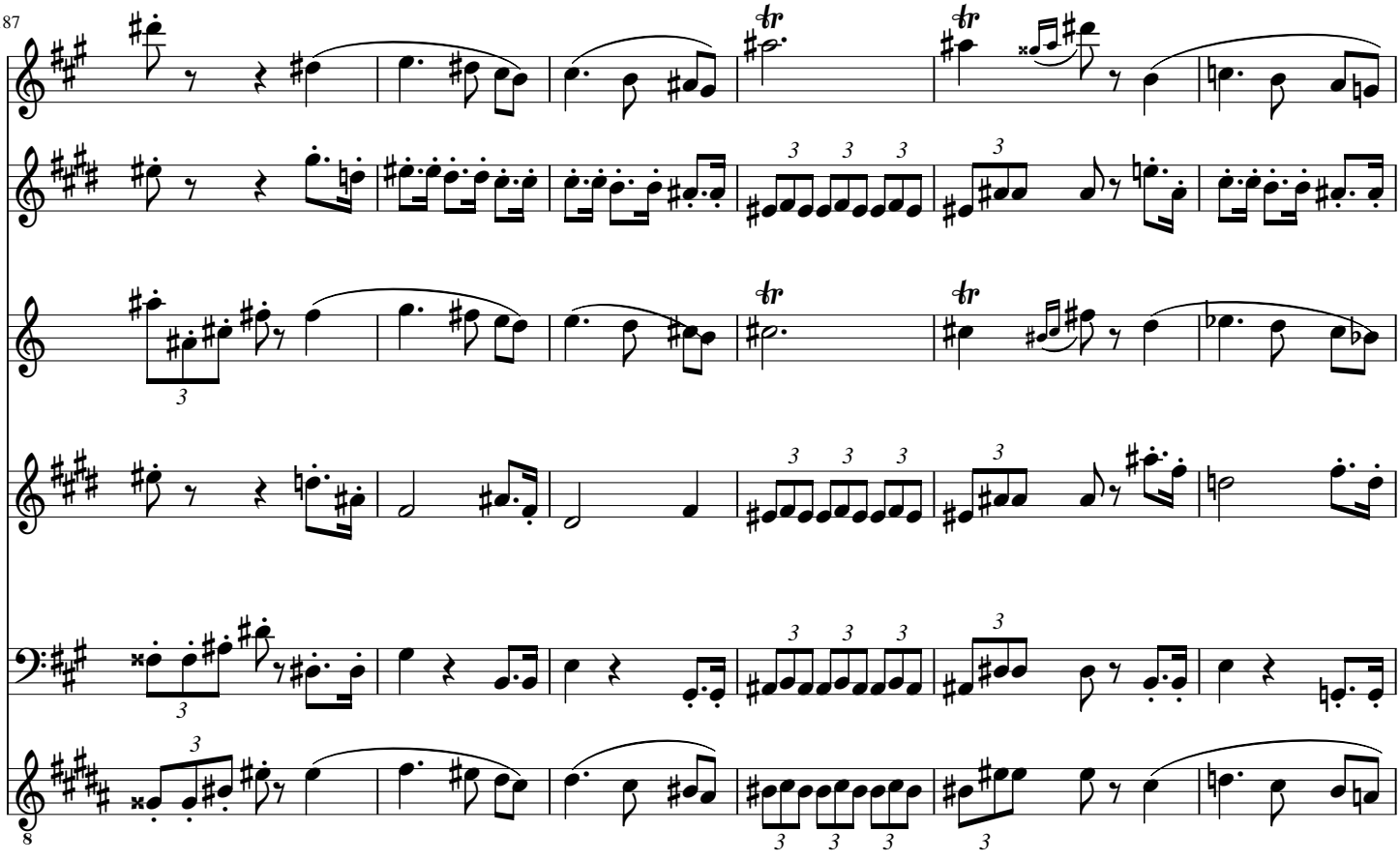

91
Allegretto
quasi Andante
poco rall----- - - - - -a tempo
(echo)
piano
15
espressivo
116
F
(Fl leading ♪)
(piano)
simile

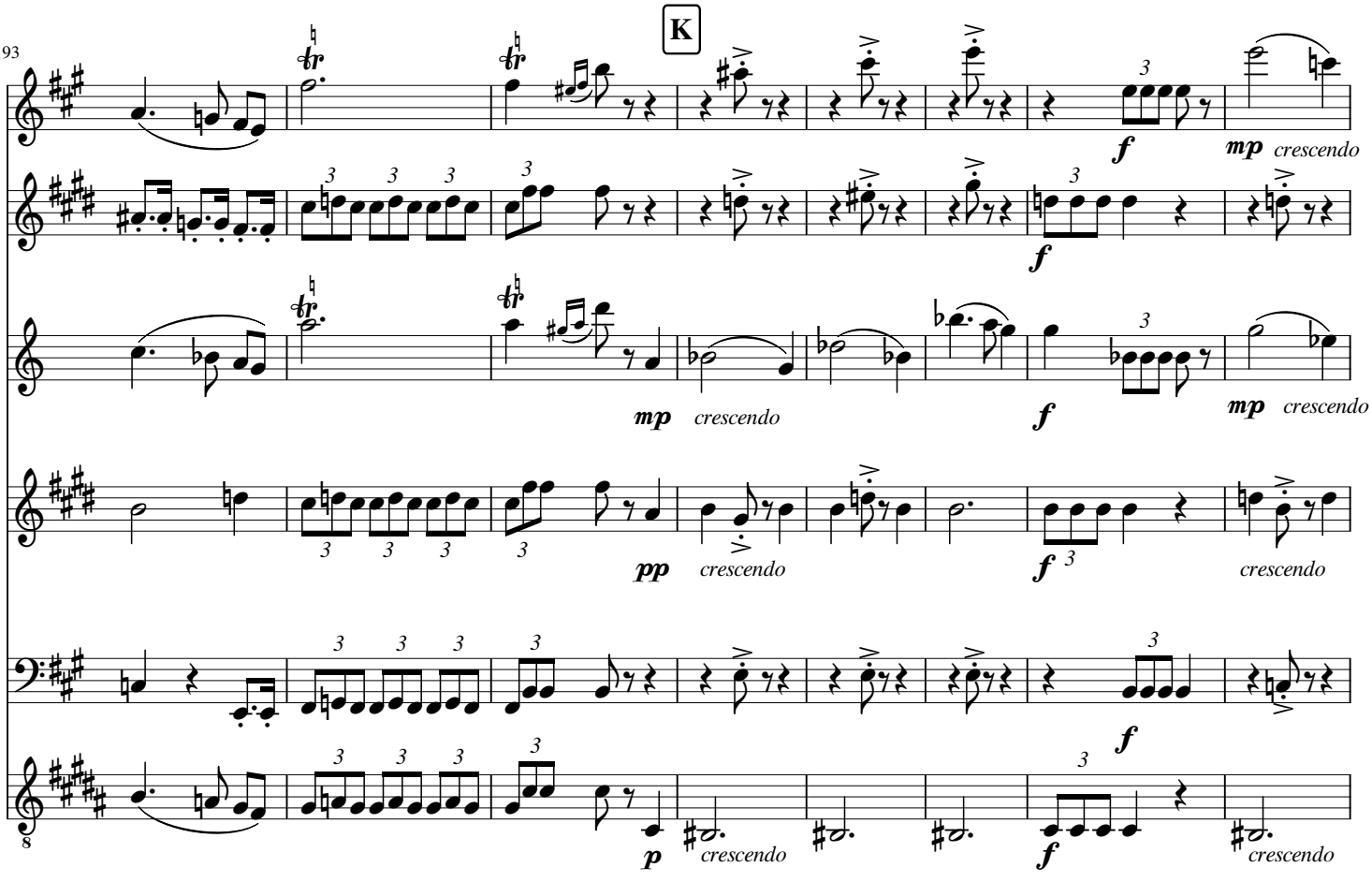

126
molto sostenuto
f
p
pp
f
f
p
pp
f
p
pp
mf
p
134
G
poco cresc.
pp
p
poco cresc.
dolce molto cantabile
pp
poco cresc.
poco cresc.
pp
p poco cresc.
pp dolce molto cantabile

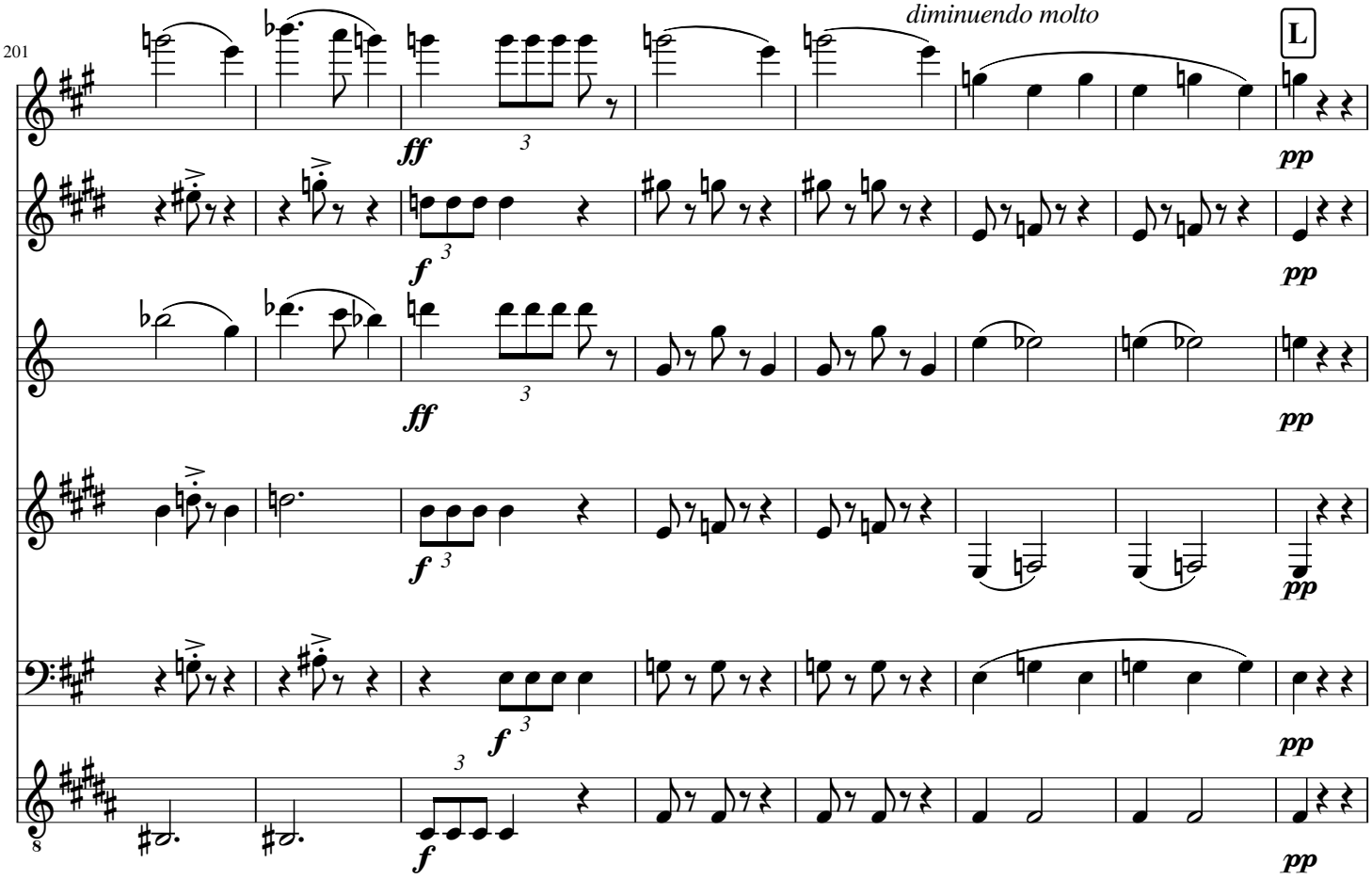

143
dolce cantabile
mf
pp
dolce molto cantabile
p
151
rall.
H
a tempo
[pizz.]
espress.
f

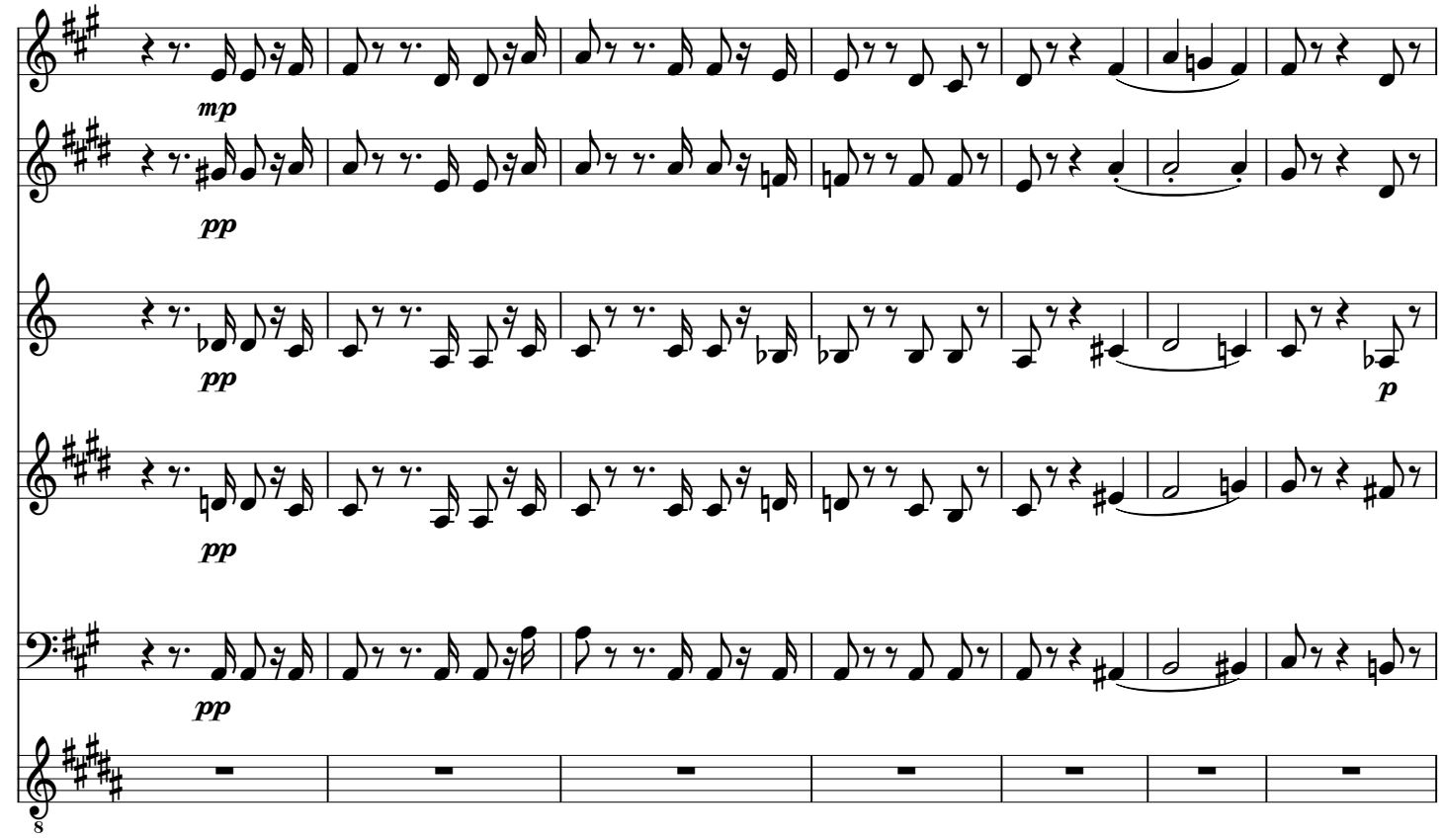

162
mp
mf
f
p
mp
mf
f
p
f
p
ff
p
f
169
I
ff
ff
ff
ff
ff

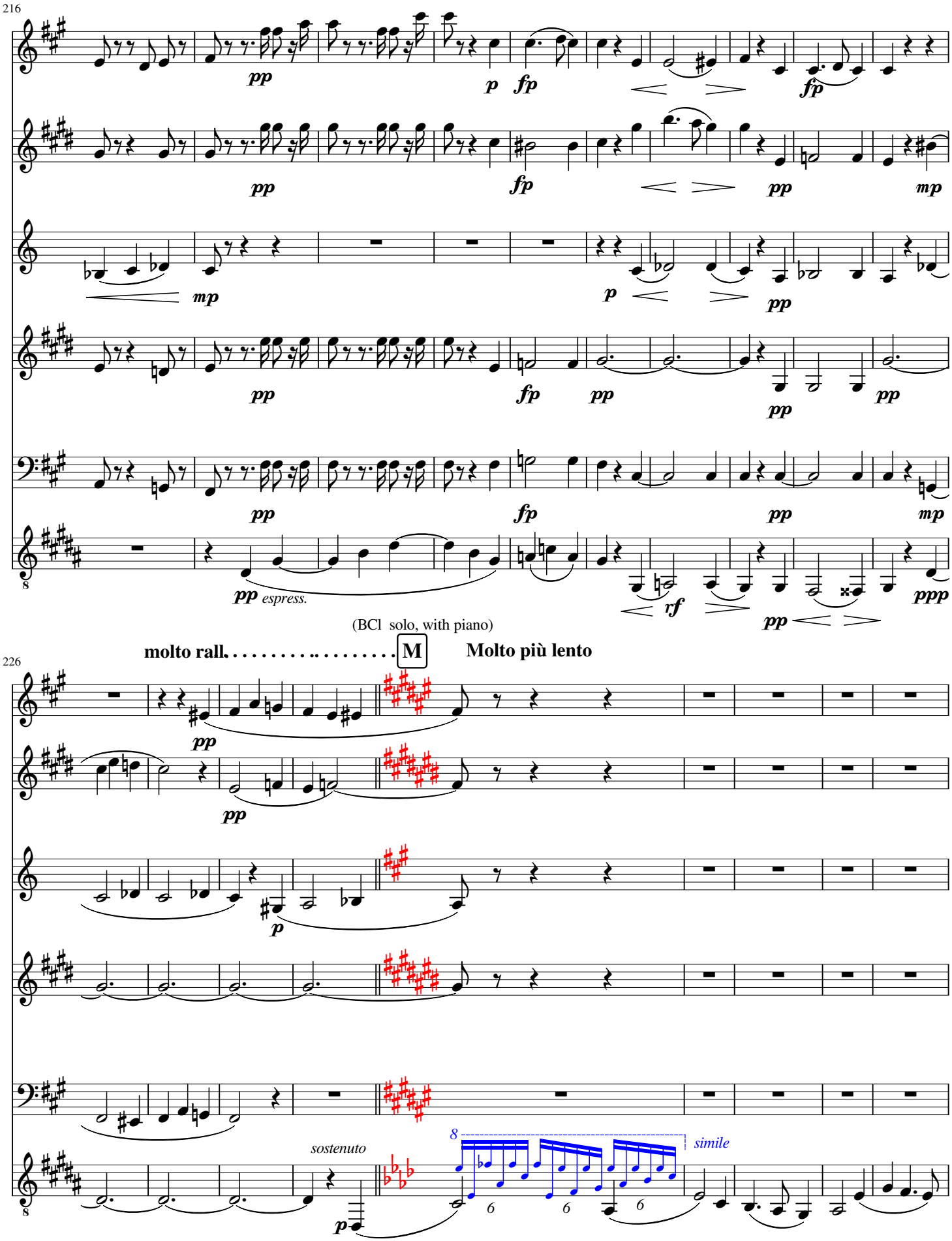

175
J
181

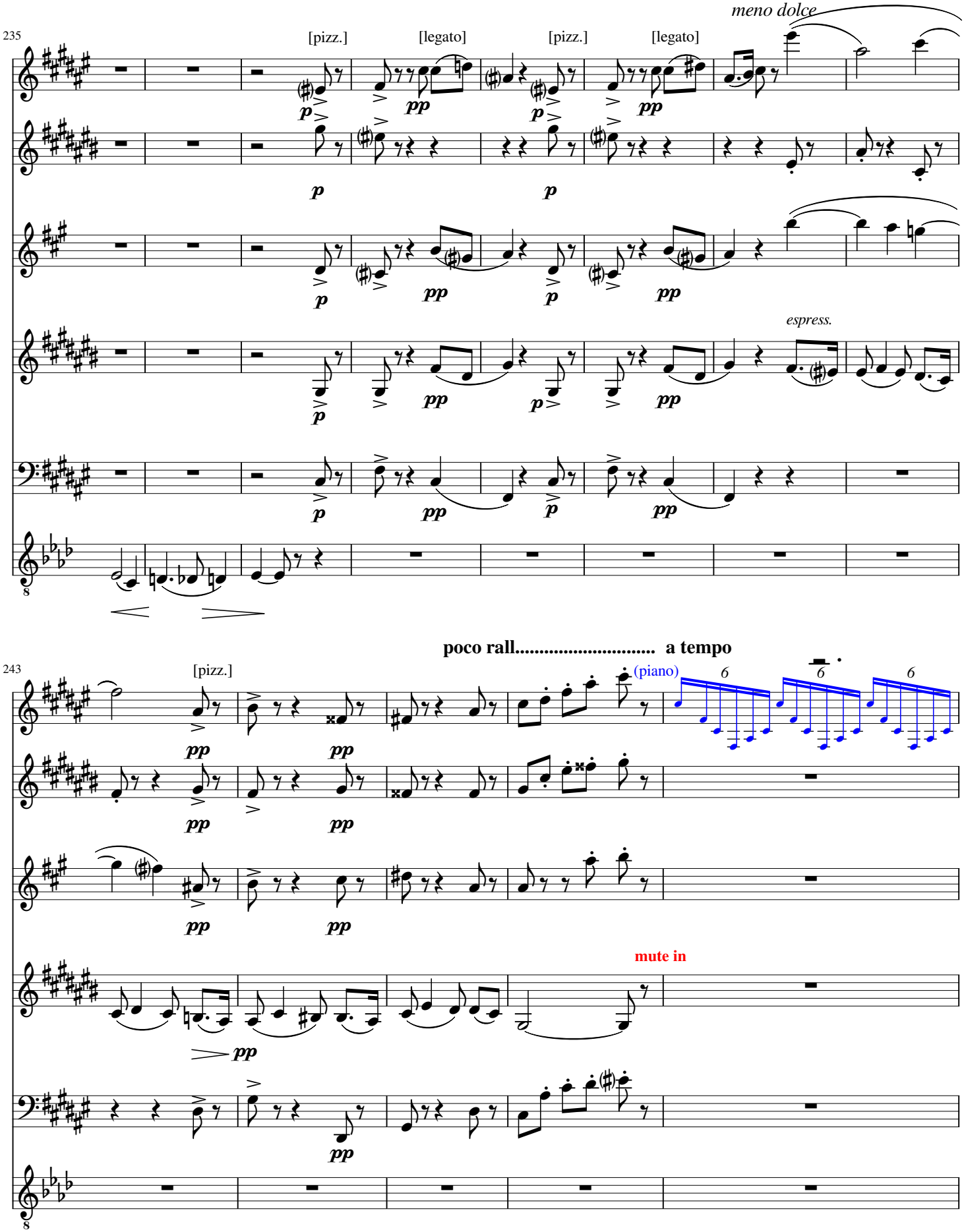

187

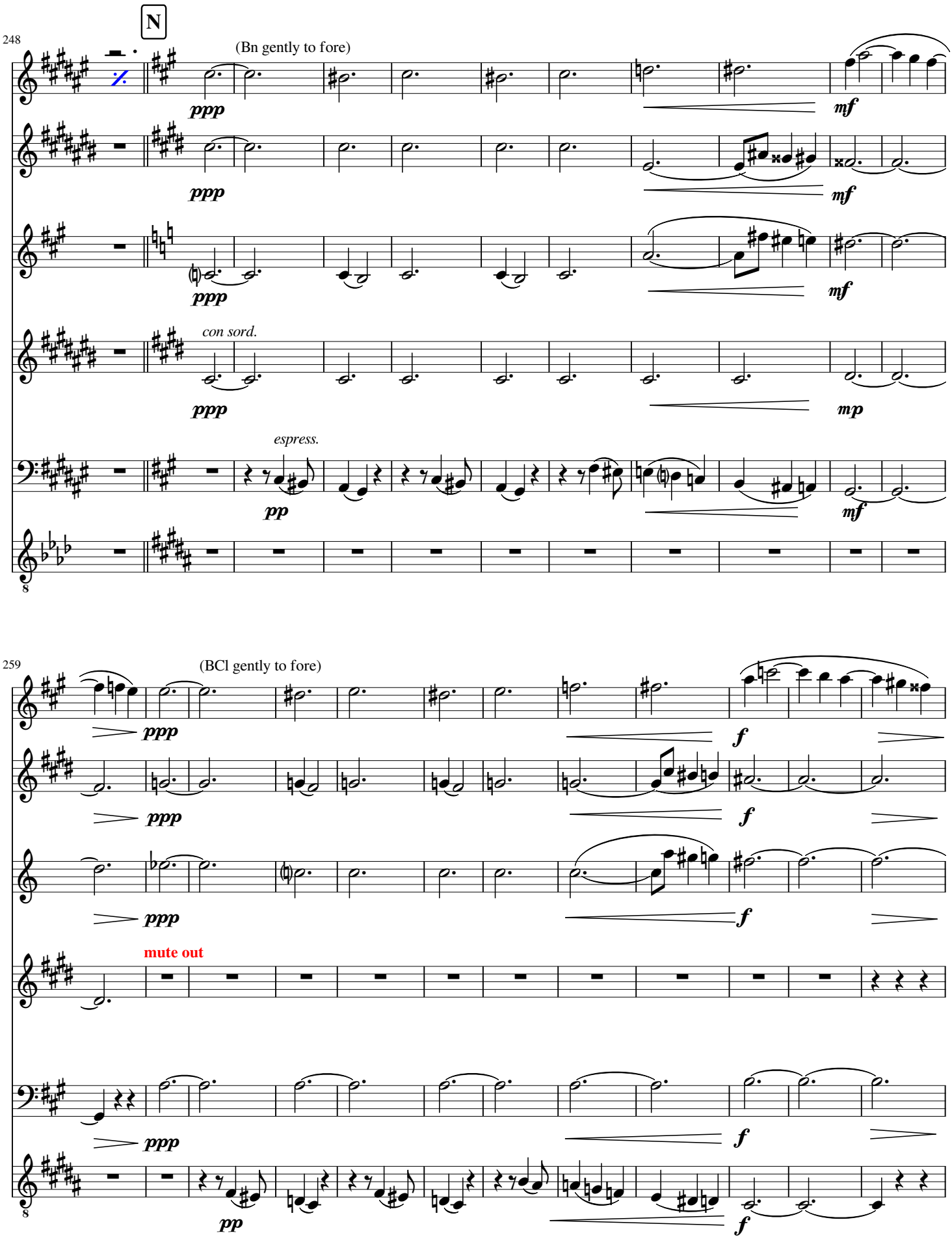

193
K
f
mp
crescendo
f
mp
crescendo
pp
crescendo
f
crescendo
f
p
crescendo
f
crescendo

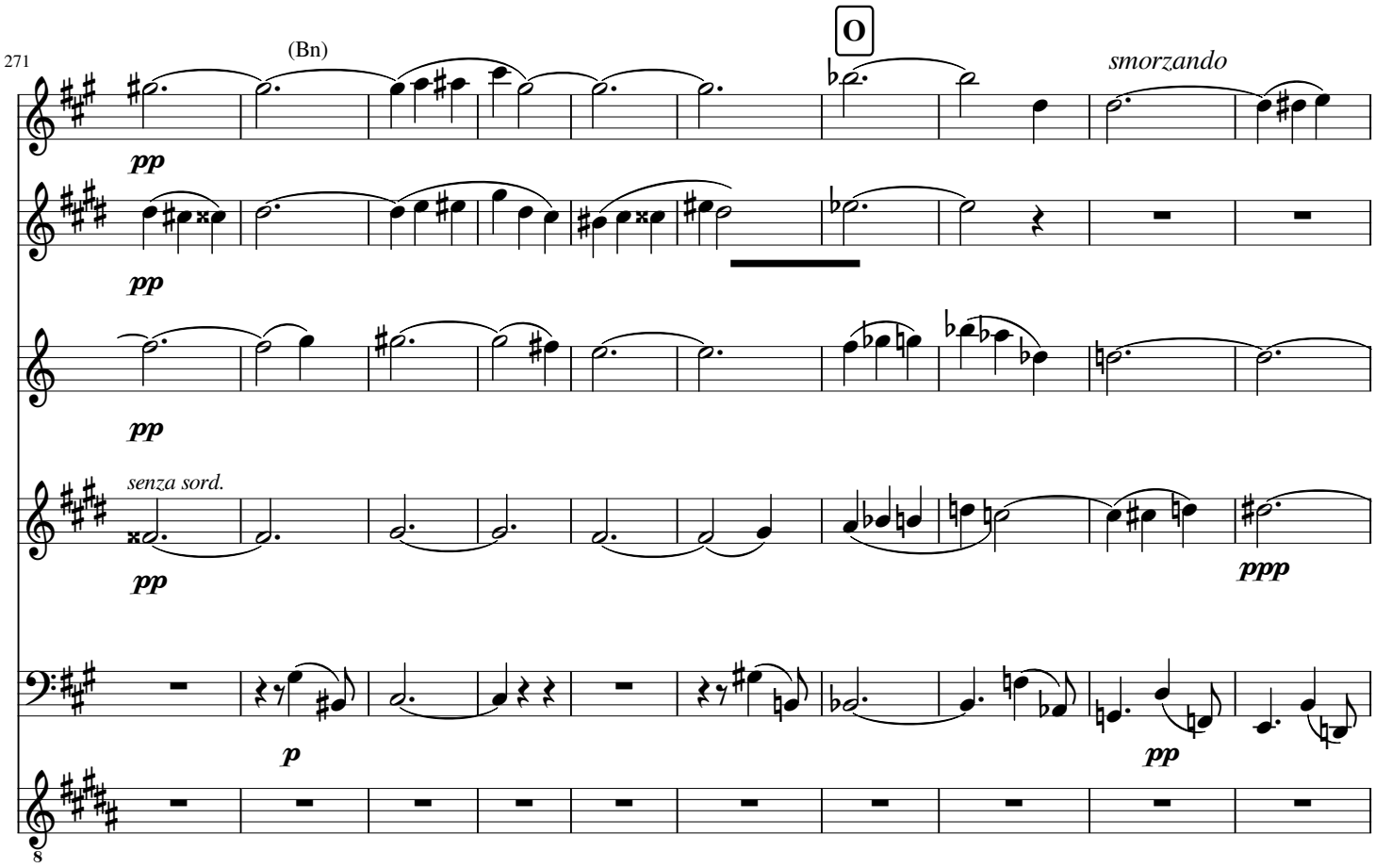

201
diminuendo molto
L
ff
f
pp

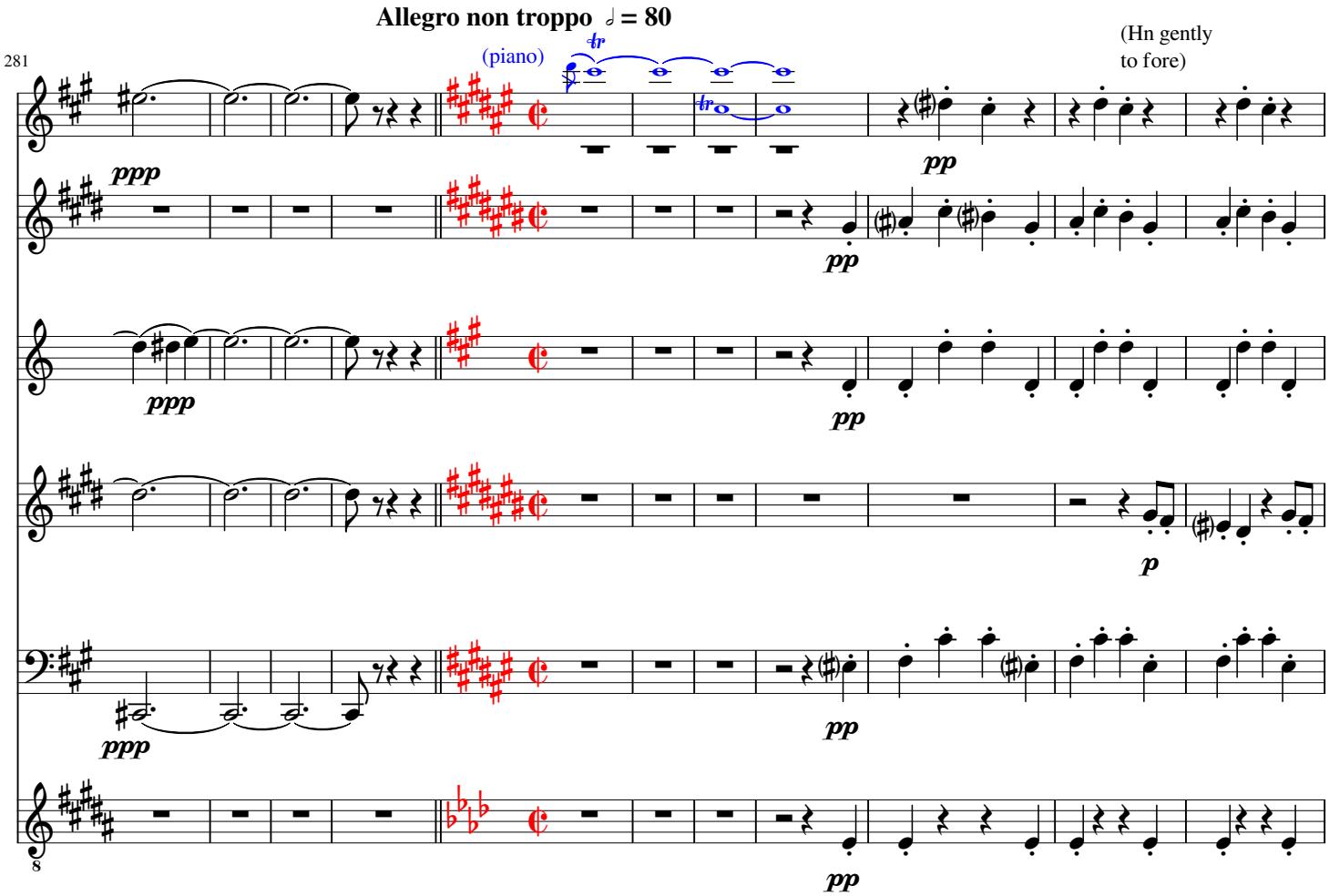

209
mp
pp
p

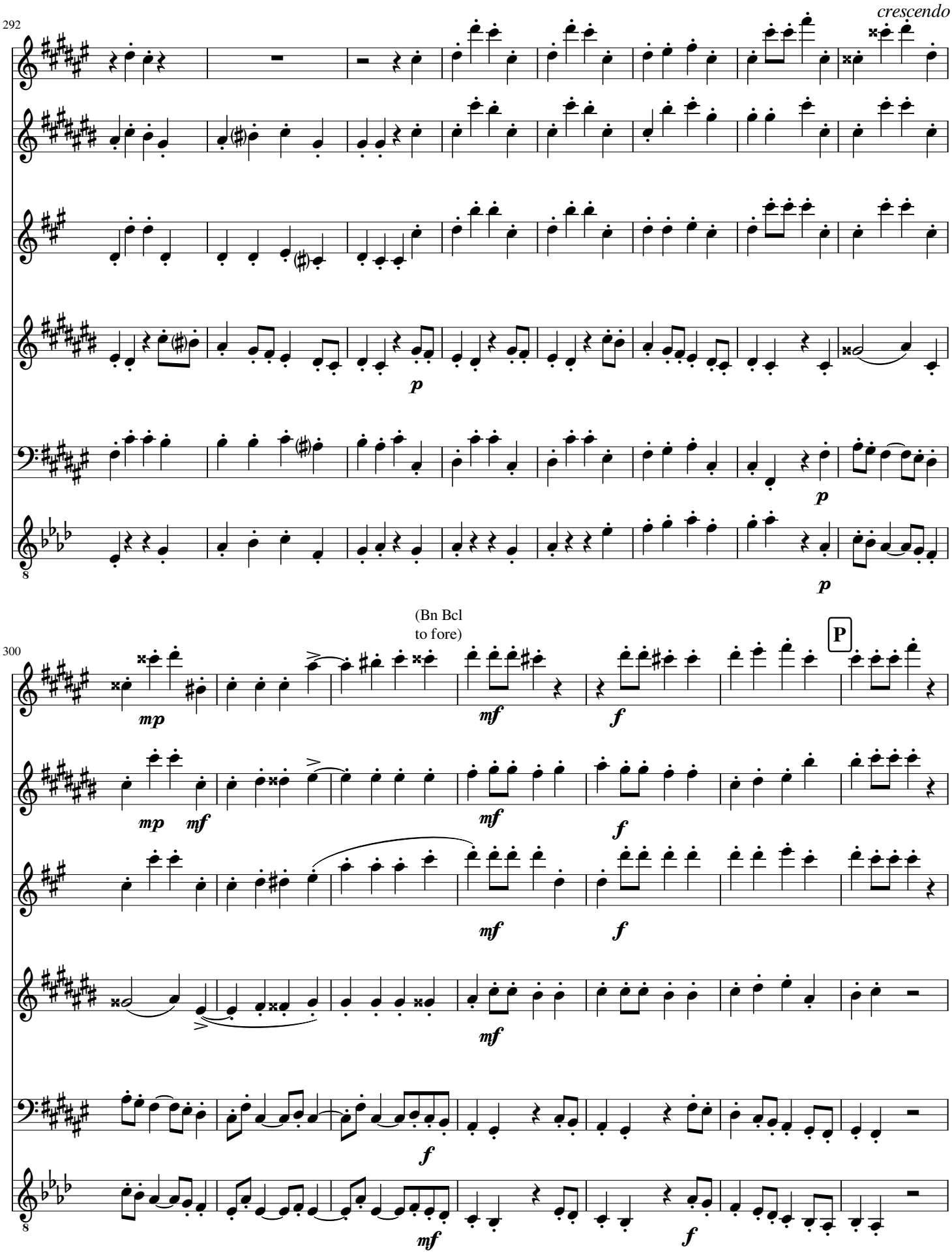

216
pp
p
fp
mp
espress.
rf
ppp
(BCl solo, with piano)
molto rall. . . . . .
M
Molto più lento
226
sostenuto
8
simile

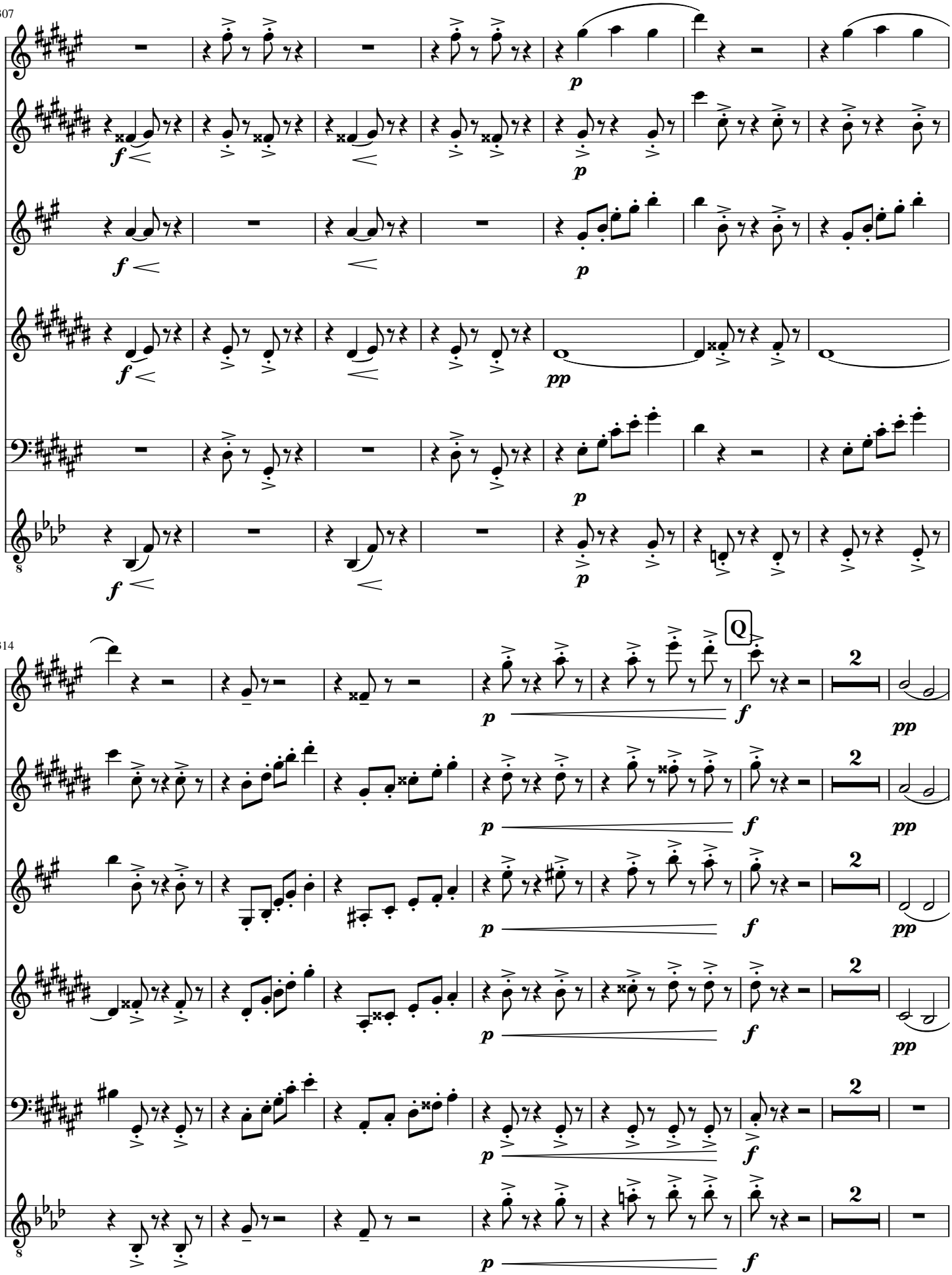

meno dolce
235
[pizz.]
[legato]
[pizz.]
[legato]
espress.
poco rall..... a tempo
243
[pizz.]
(piano)
mute in

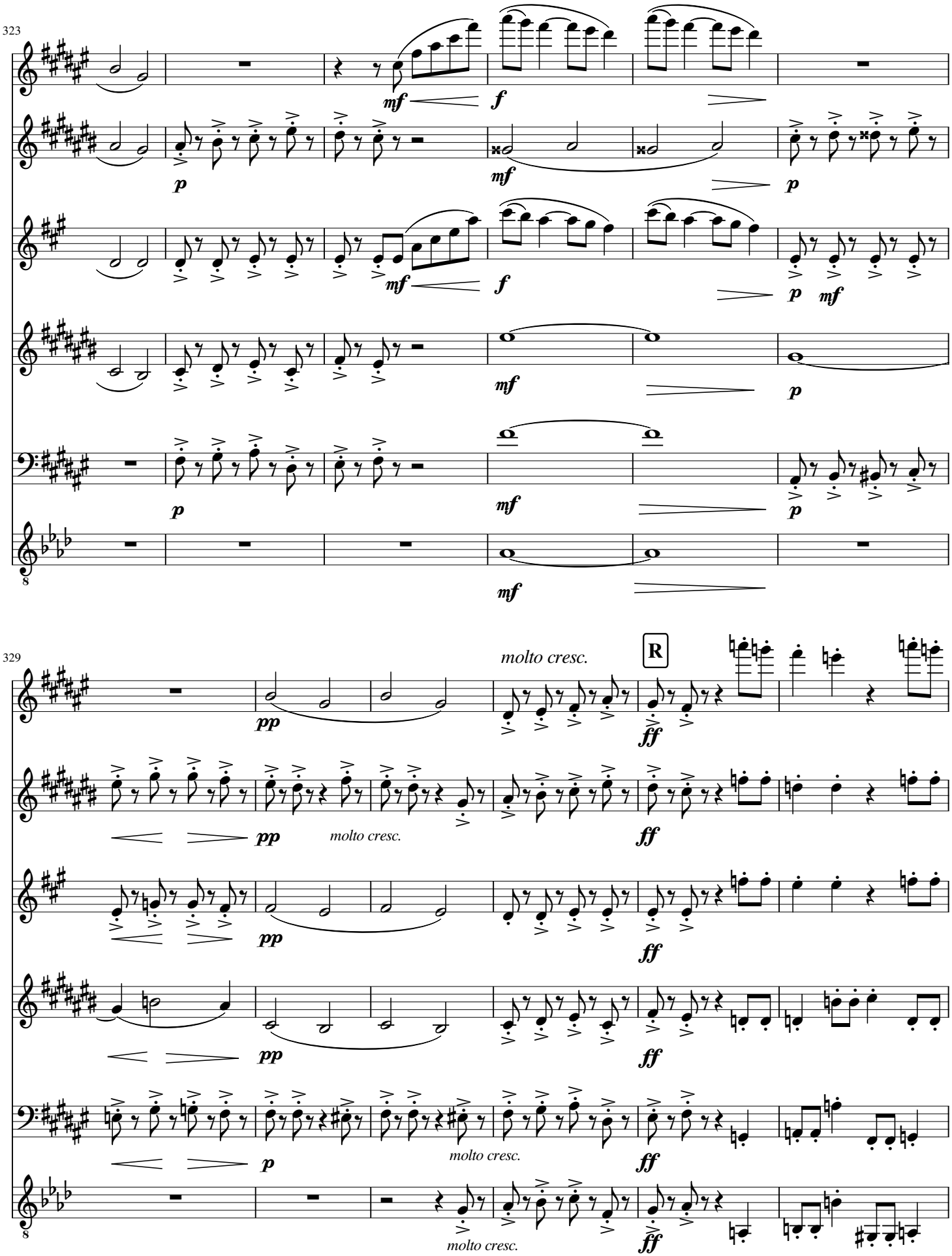

N
248
(Bn gently to fore)
ppp
mf
con sord.
mp
espress.
pp
259
(BCl gently to fore)
f
mute out

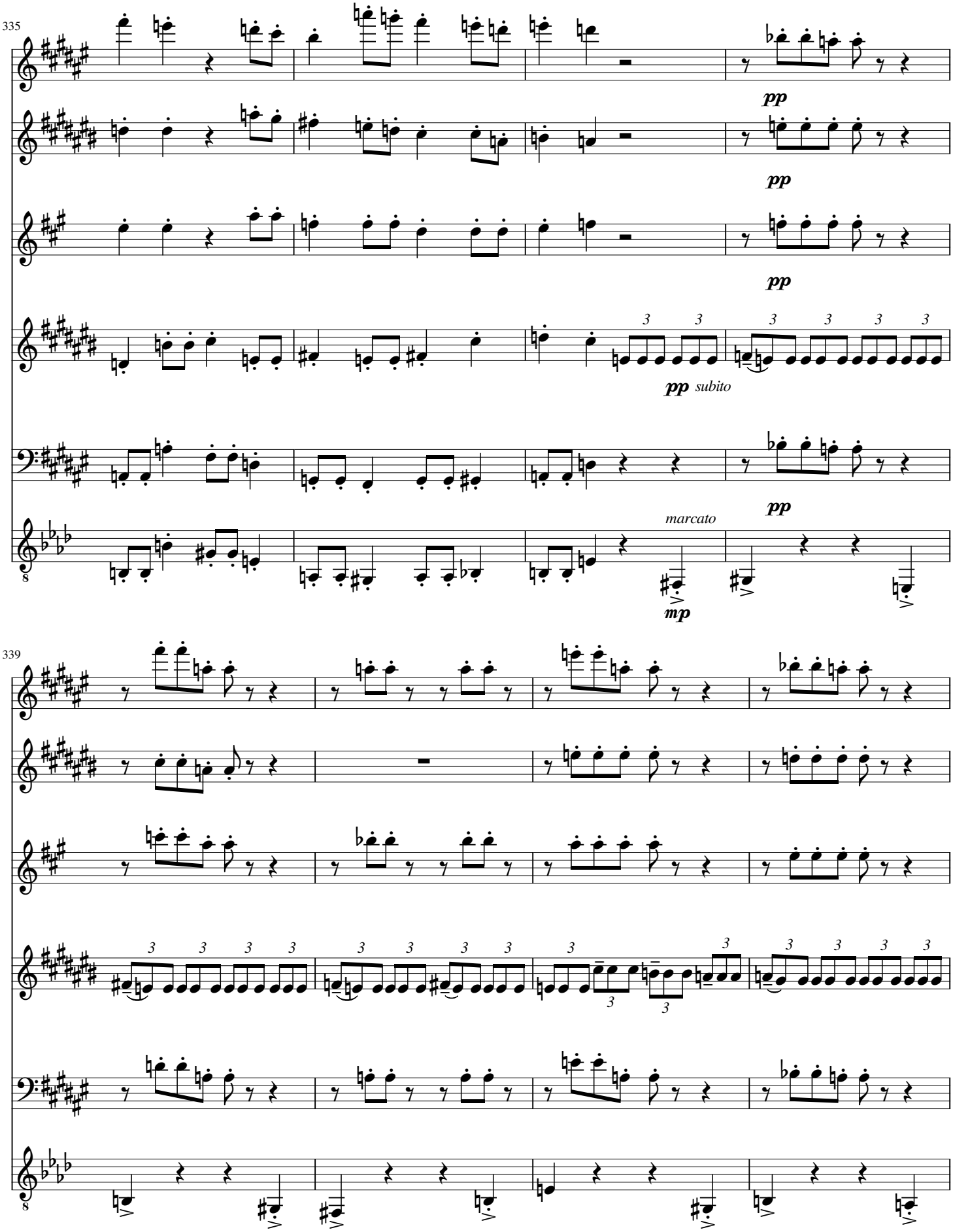

271
(Bn)
O
smorzando
pp
pp
pp
senza sord.
pp
ppp
p
pp

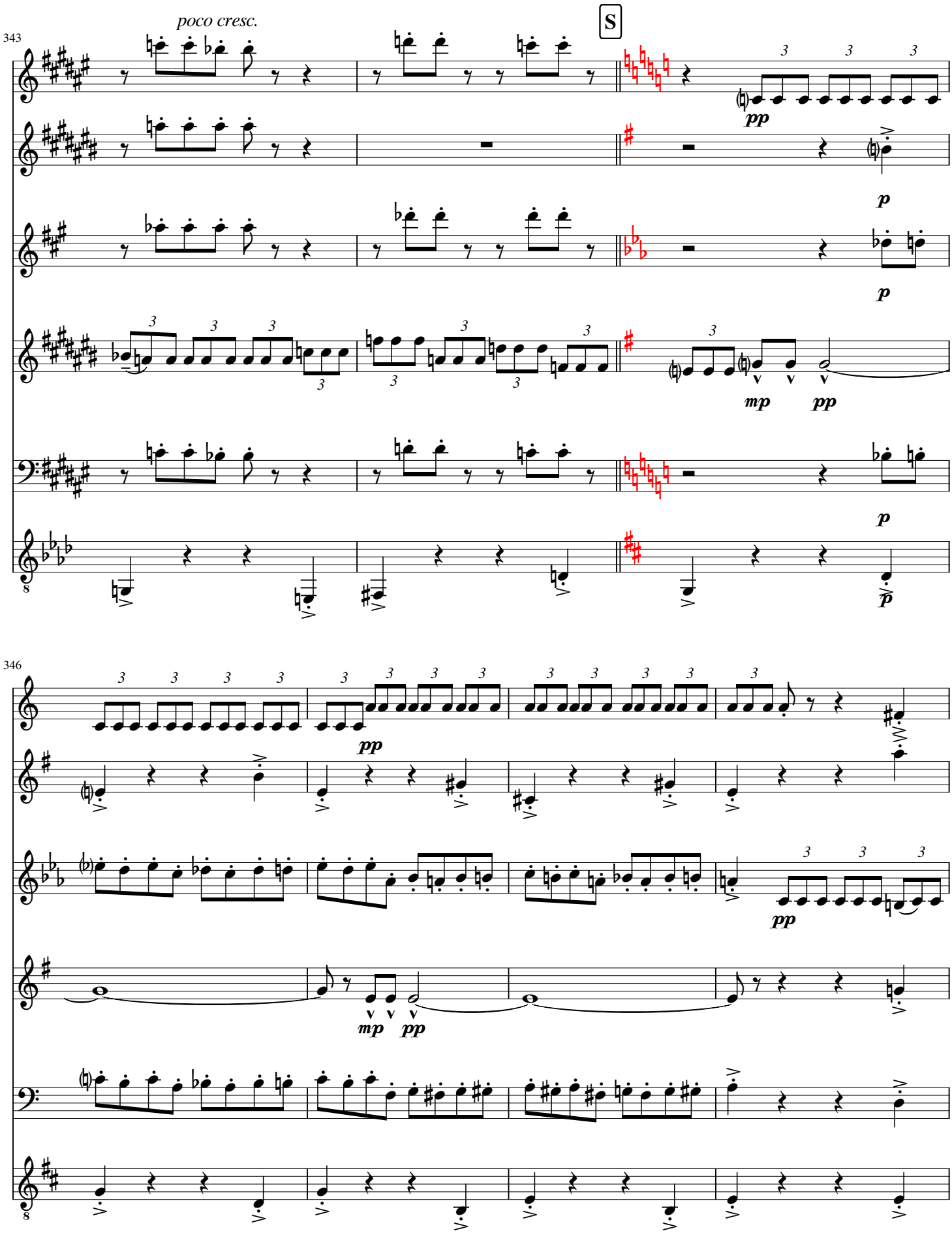

Allegro non troppo ♩ = 80
281
(piano)
tr
tr
(Hn gently
to fore)
ppp
pp
ppp
pp
p
ppp
pp
pp

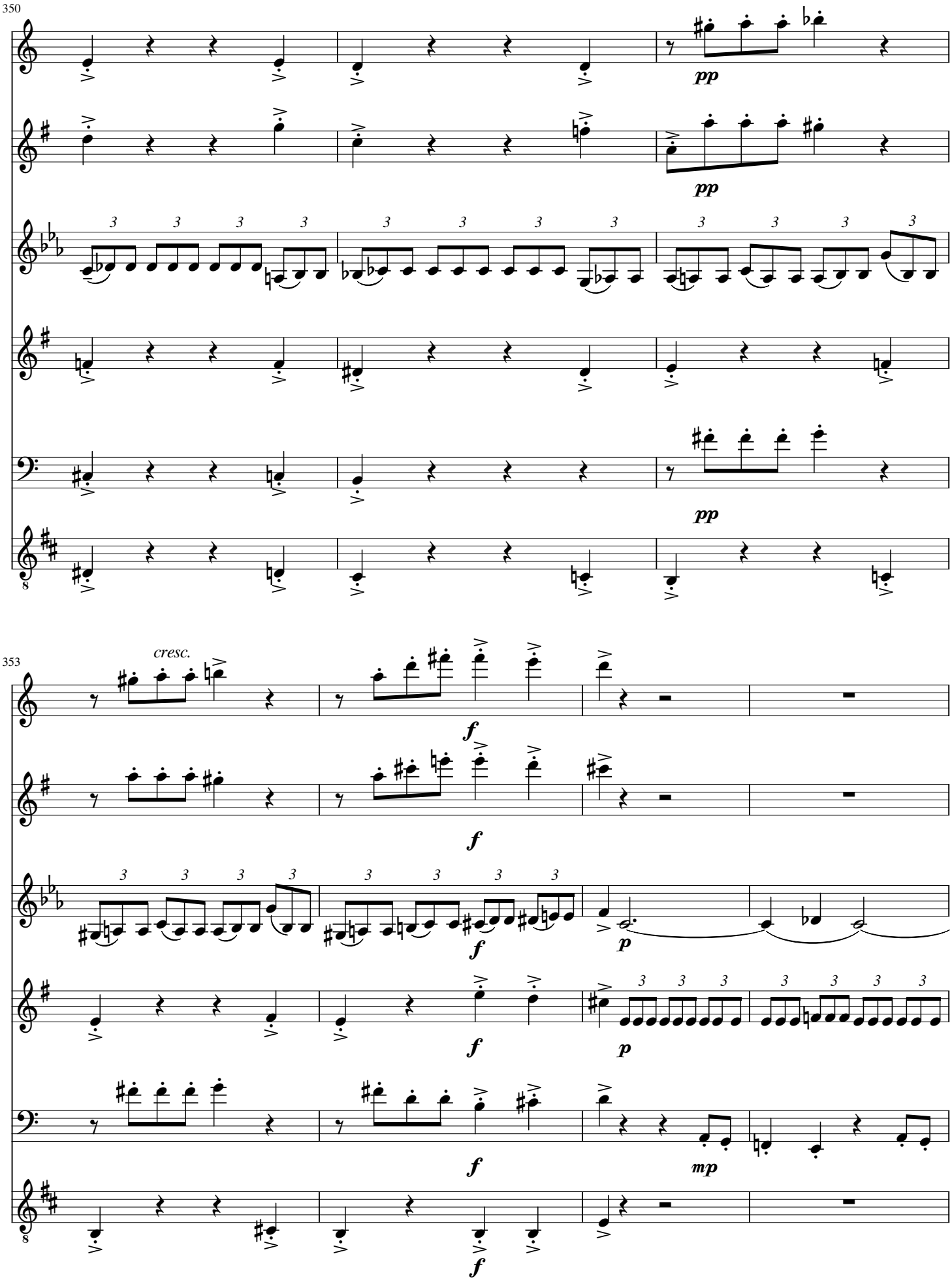

crescendo
292
p
p
p
(Bn Bcl
to fore)
300
mp
mf
f
P
mp
mf
mf
f
mf
f
mf
f
mf
f

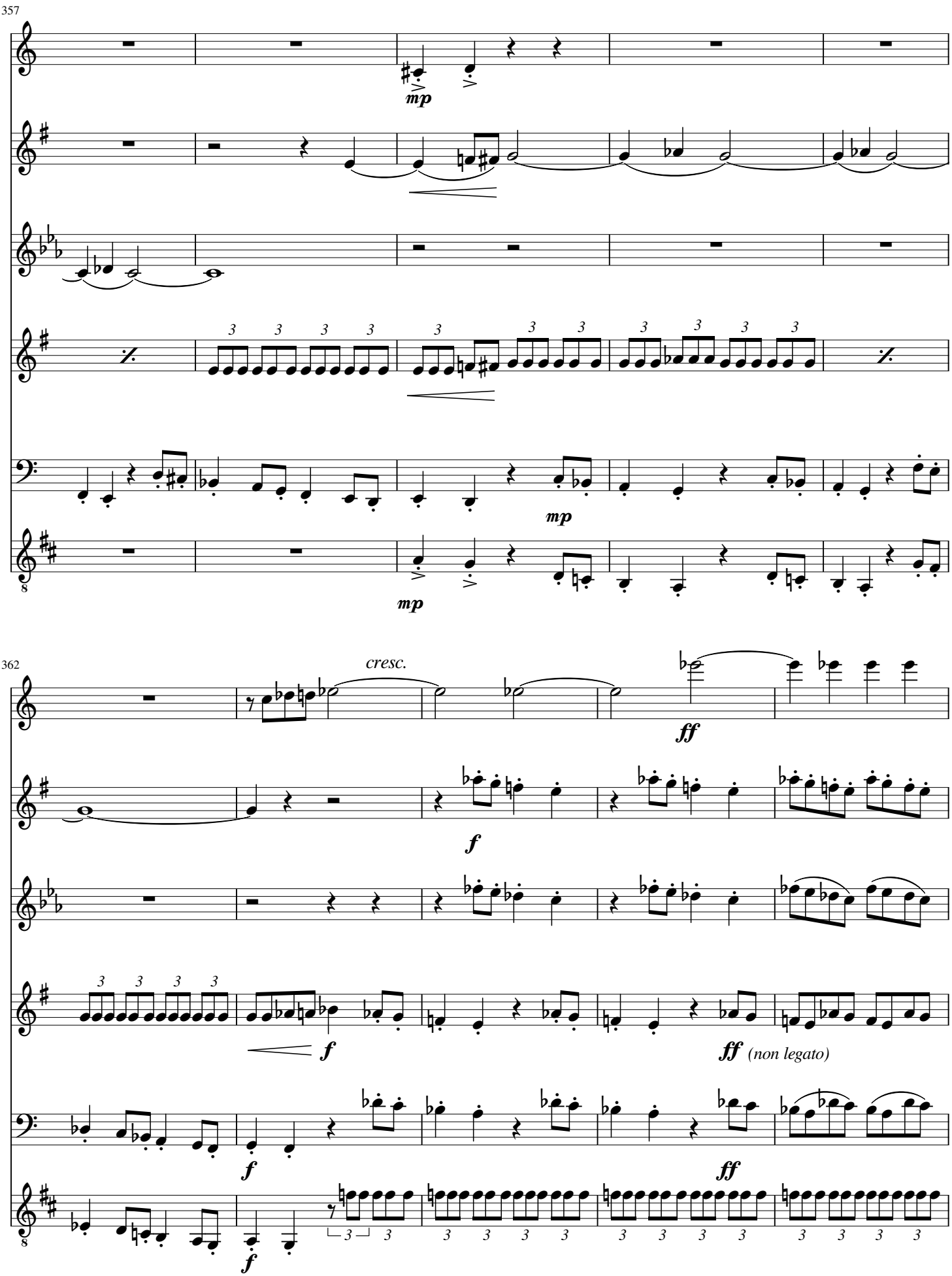

307
314
Q
2
p
f
pp

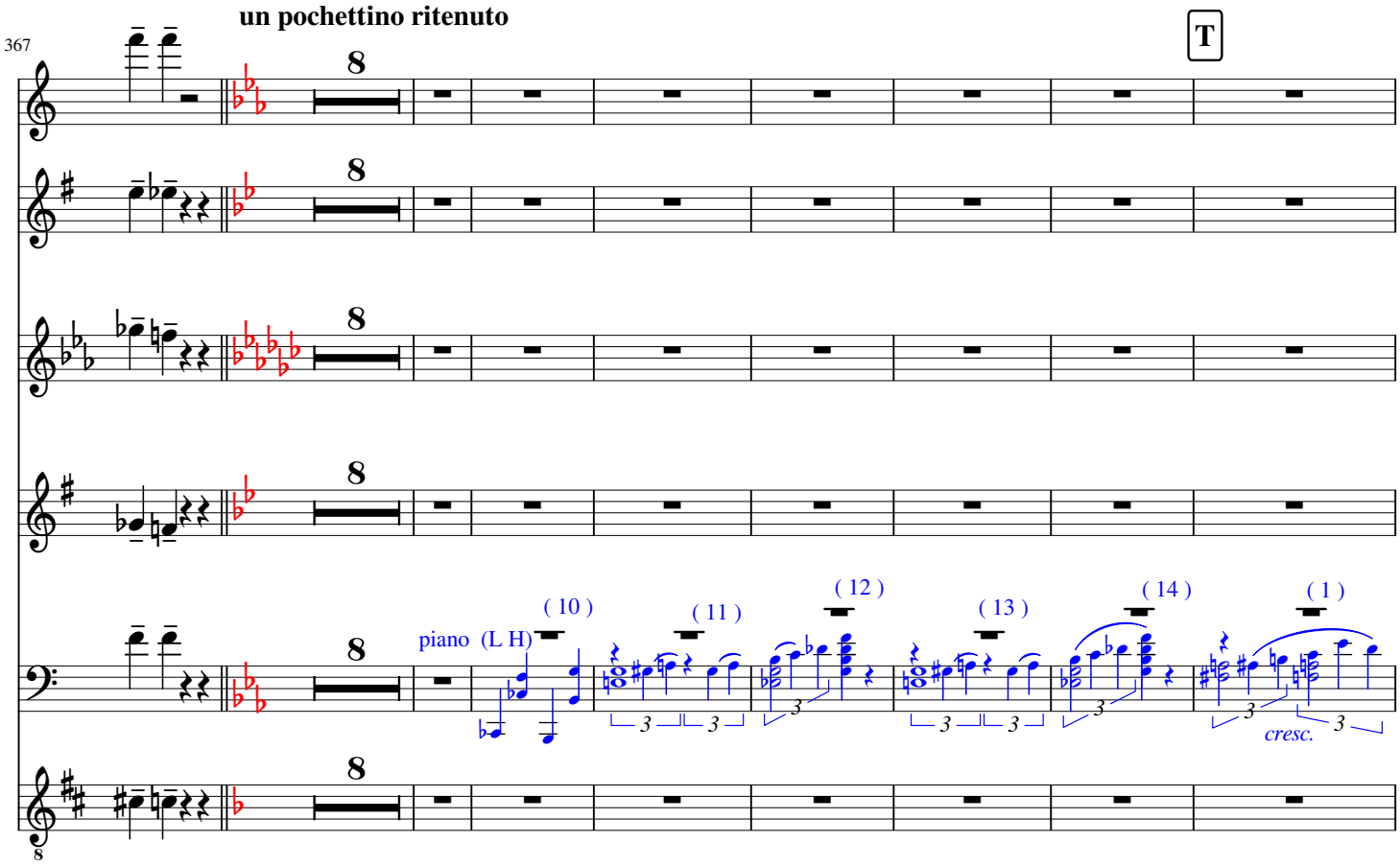

323
mf
f
p
mf
f
p
mf
p
mf
p
mf
mf
329
molto cresc.
R
pp
ff
pp
molto cresc.
ff
pp
ff
pp
ff
p
molto cresc.
ff
molto cresc.
ff

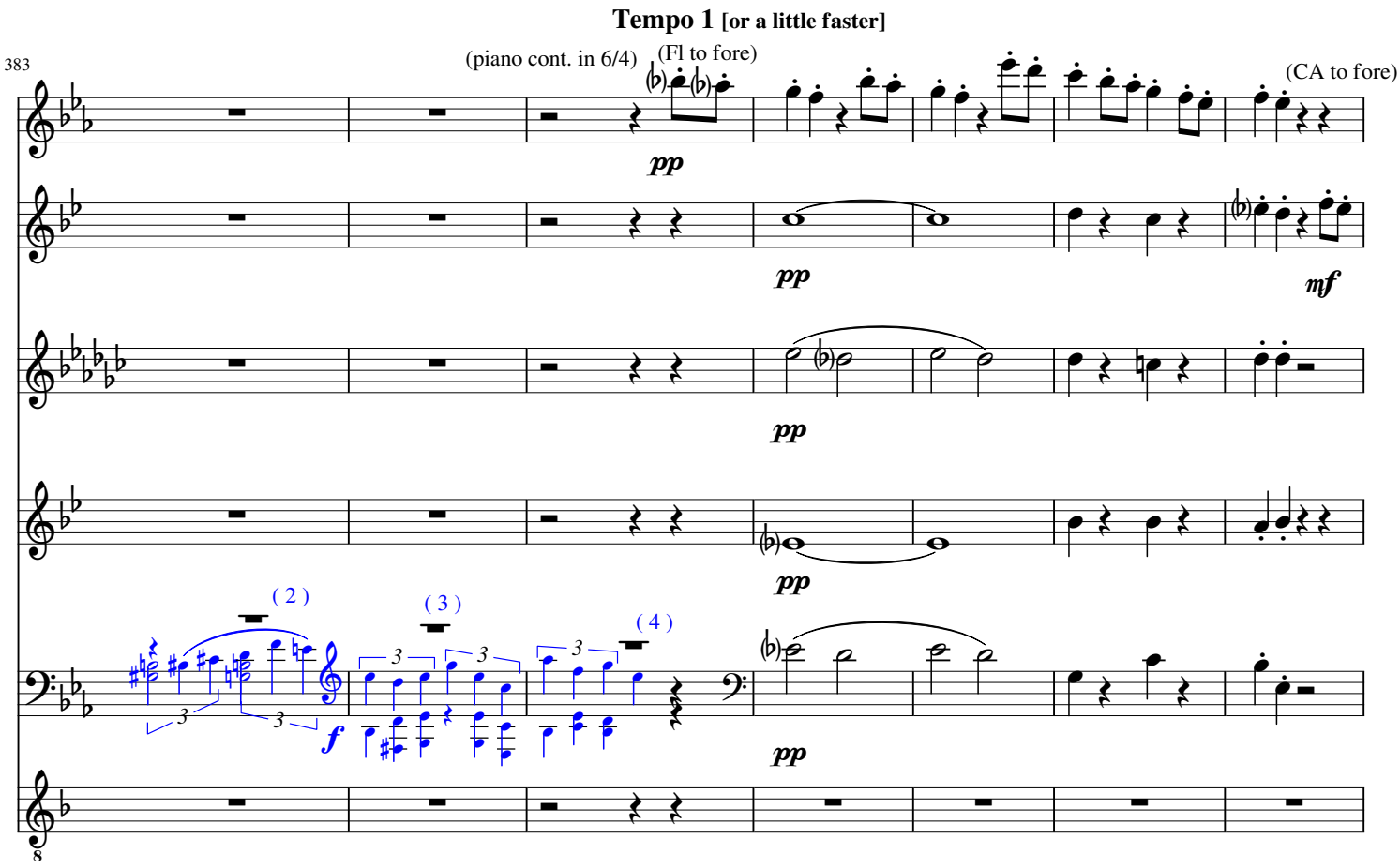

335
pp
pp
pp
pp subito
pp
marcato
mp
339

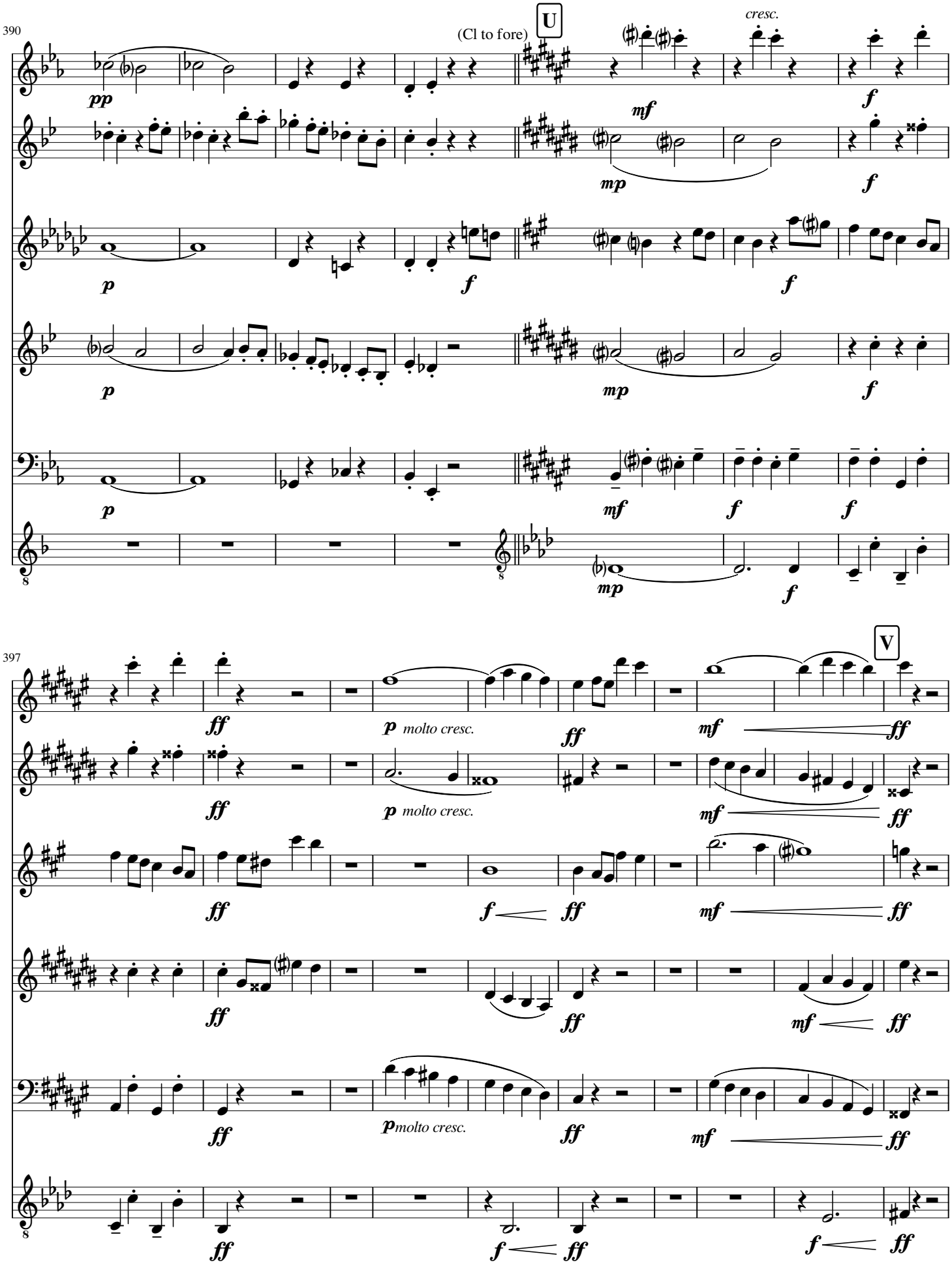

poco cresc.
S
343
346
pp
p
mp
pp

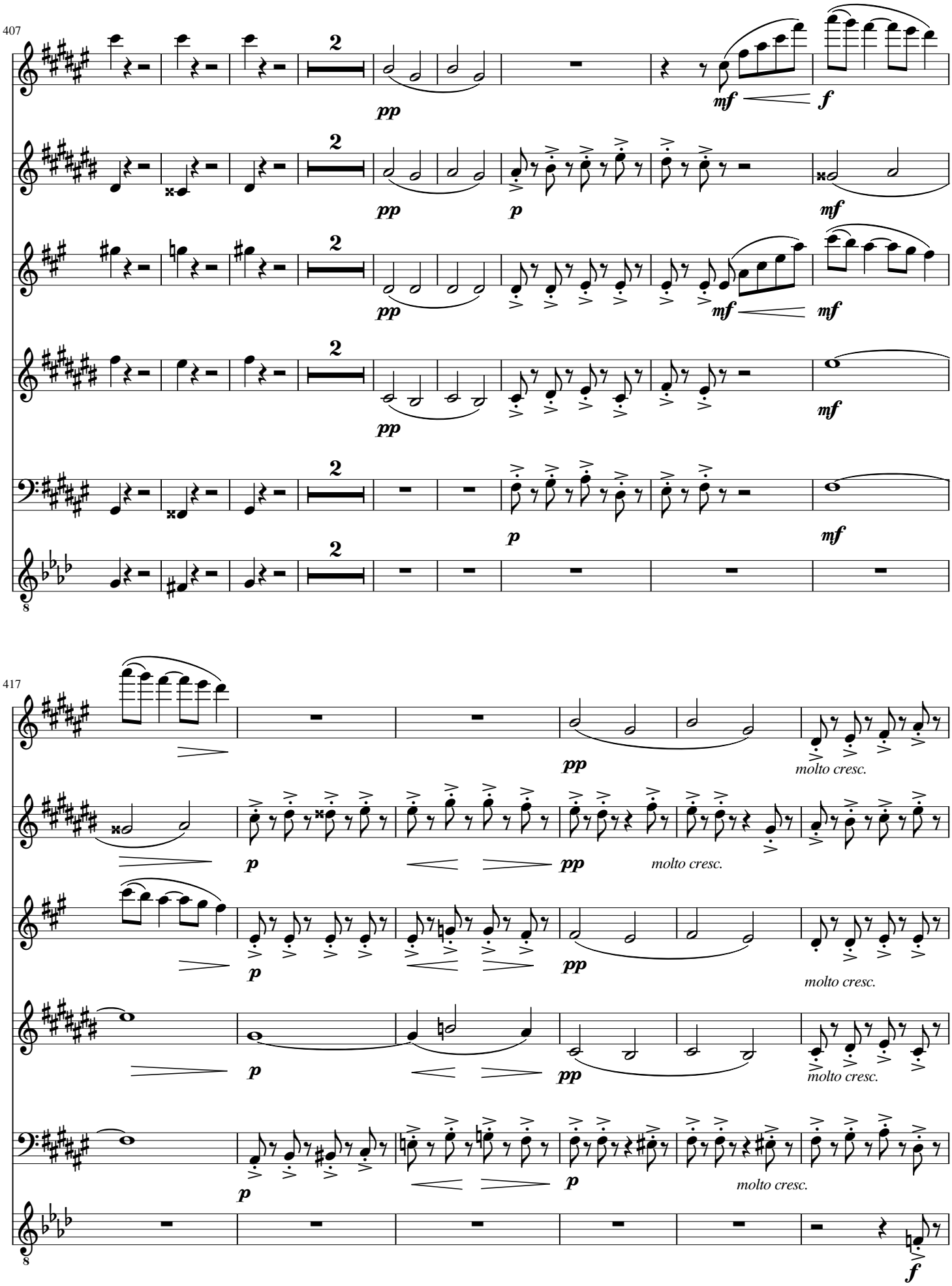

350
pp
pp
pp
353
cresc.
f
f
f
p
f
p
f
mp
f

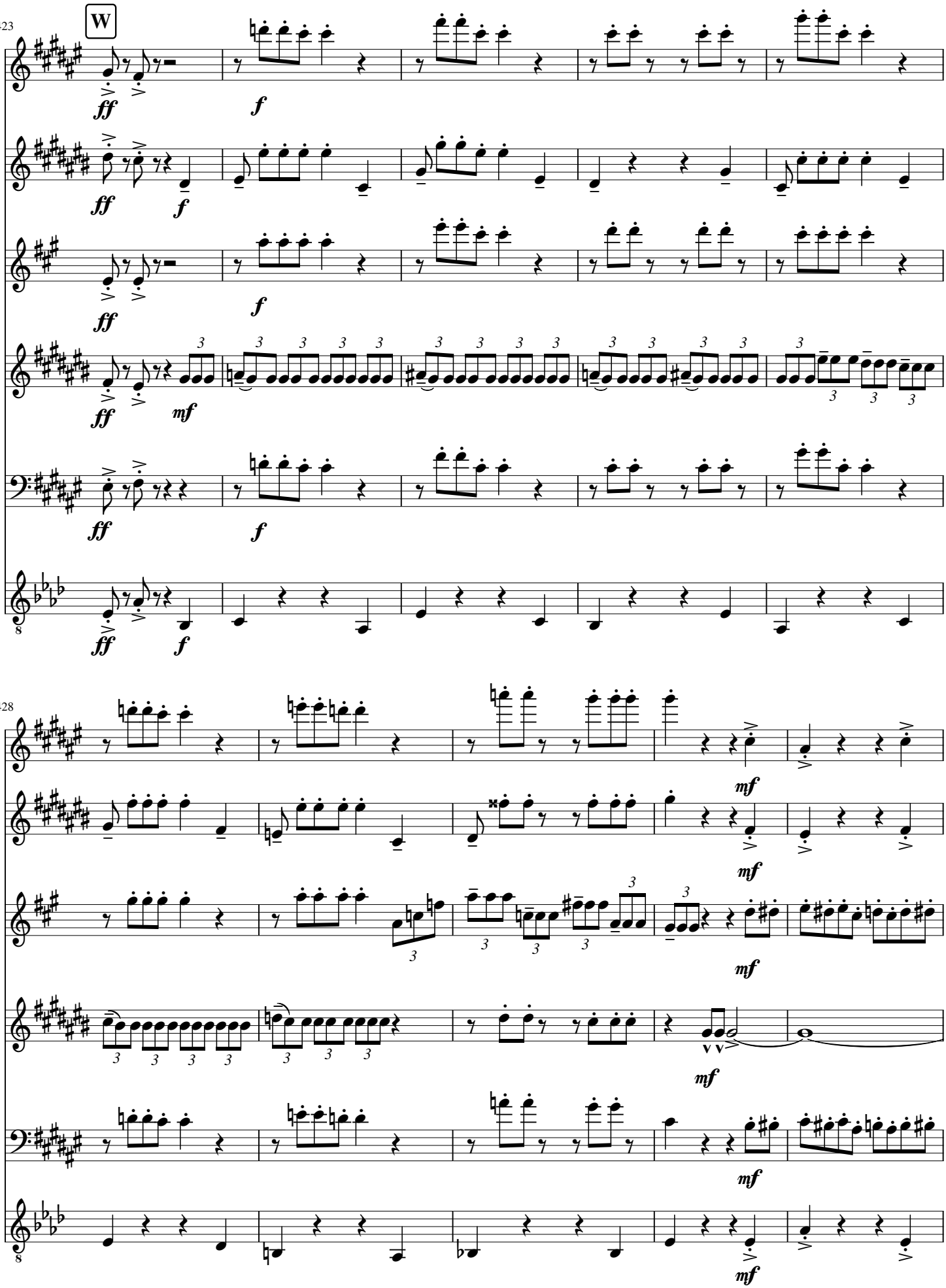

357
mp
mp
mp
362
cresc.
ff
f
f
ff (non legato)
f
ff
f

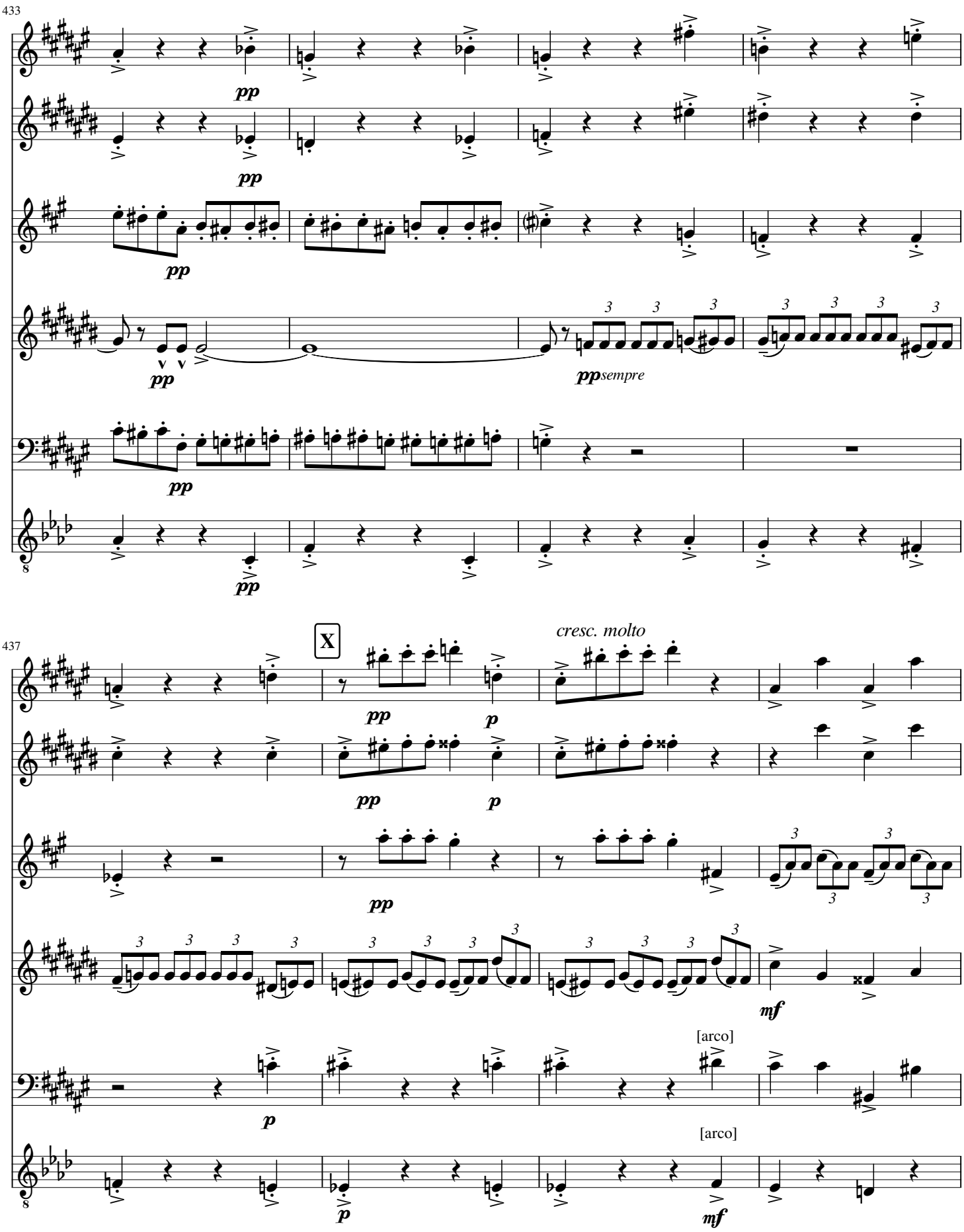

un pochettino ritenuto
367
T
8
piano (L H)
(10)
(11)
(12)
(13)
(14)
(1)
cresc.

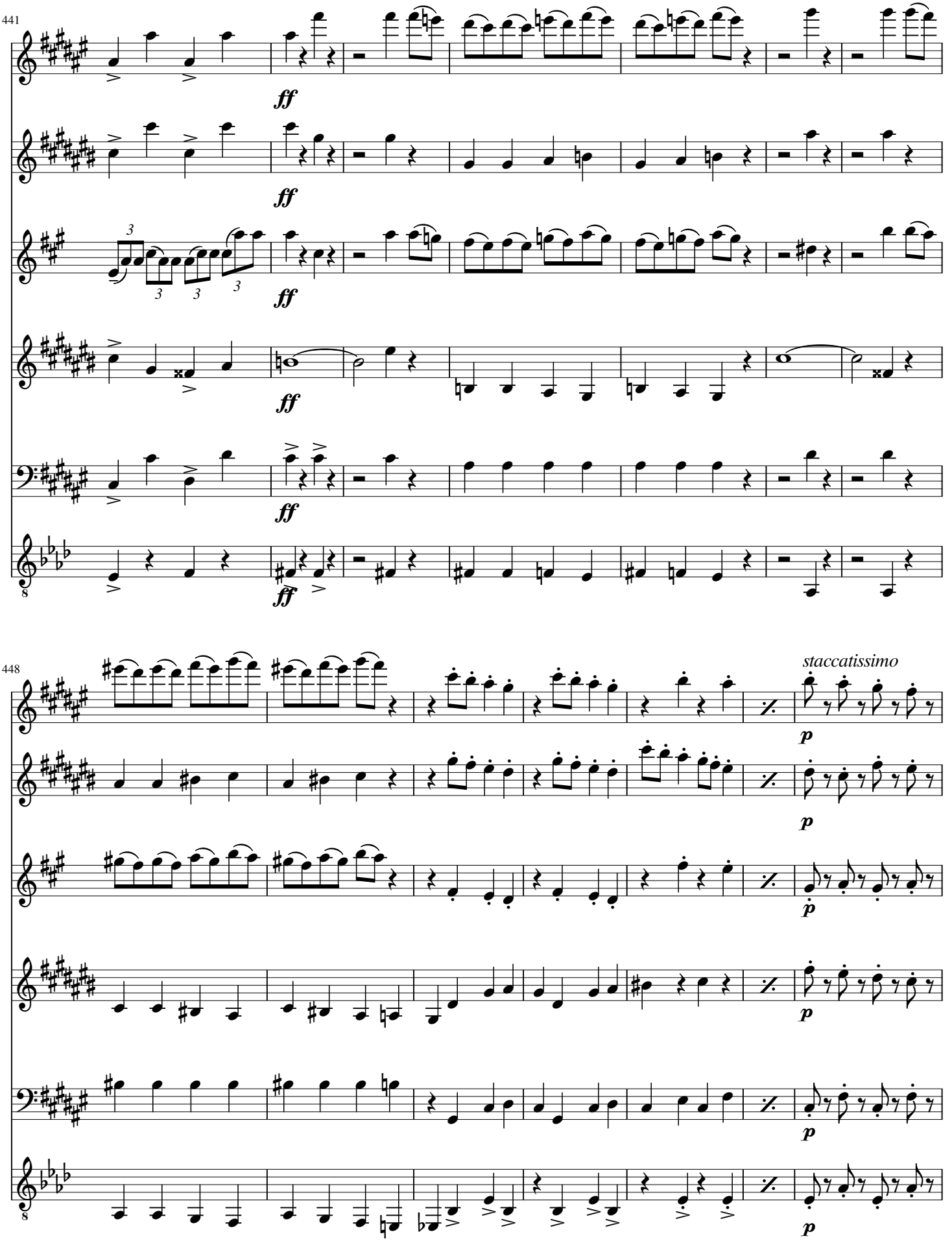

Tempo 1 [or a little faster]
383
(piano cont. in 6/4)
(Fl to fore)
(CA to fore)
pp
mf
(2)
(3)
(4)
f

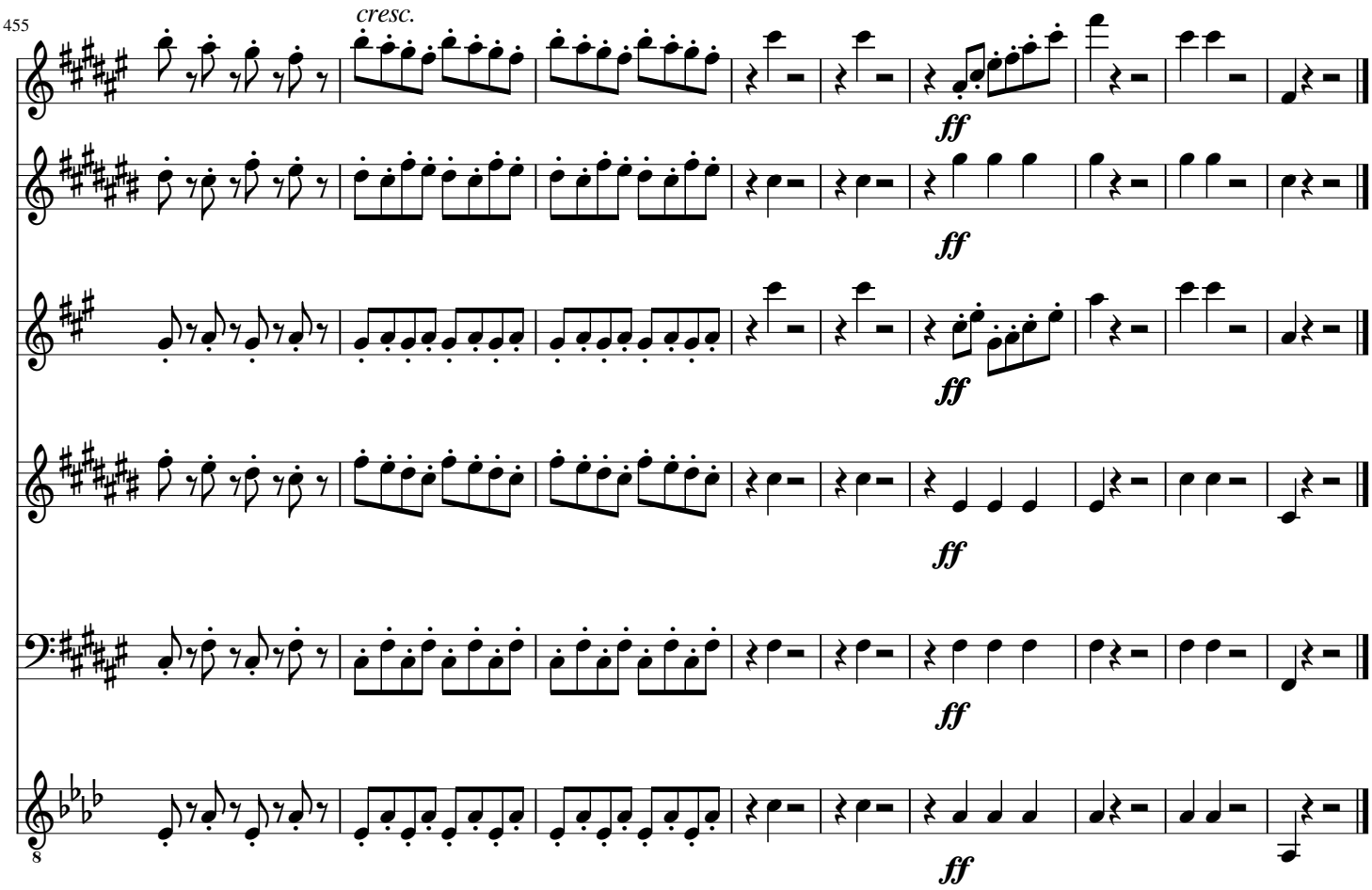

390
(Cl to fore)
U
cresc.
397
V
molto cresc.


407
2
pp
mf
f
p
417
molto cresc.


423
W
ff
f
mf
428
mf


433
pp
pp
pp
pp
pp
pp sempre
437
X
cresc. molto
pp
p
pp
p
pp
mf
[arco]
p
[arco]
p
mf


441
ff
448
staccatissimo
p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