Variations on a Ukrainian Theme

‘Carol of the Bells’

for organ

Martin Stacey

This piece is the result of a commission from Jan Lehtola to write a set of 'Variations on a Noël'. It should be a piece that is virtuosic and audience friendly which can be played universally at any time of year.

Christmas can be a difficult time for many people, so I chose this theme because it is known the world over, is not specifically religious and can be played at any time of year given its general references to 'good will and happiness' among people. The original composition has enough material to work into something substantial without being overbearing and it has the modern listener in mind, intending to be as much fun to play as to hear.

The introduction and statement of the theme is followed by a brief reflection, after which four contrasting variations adapt elements of the melodies and ostinato, bringing the finale to a festive and jubilant end.

Martin Stacey 2025

Variations on a Ukrainian theme

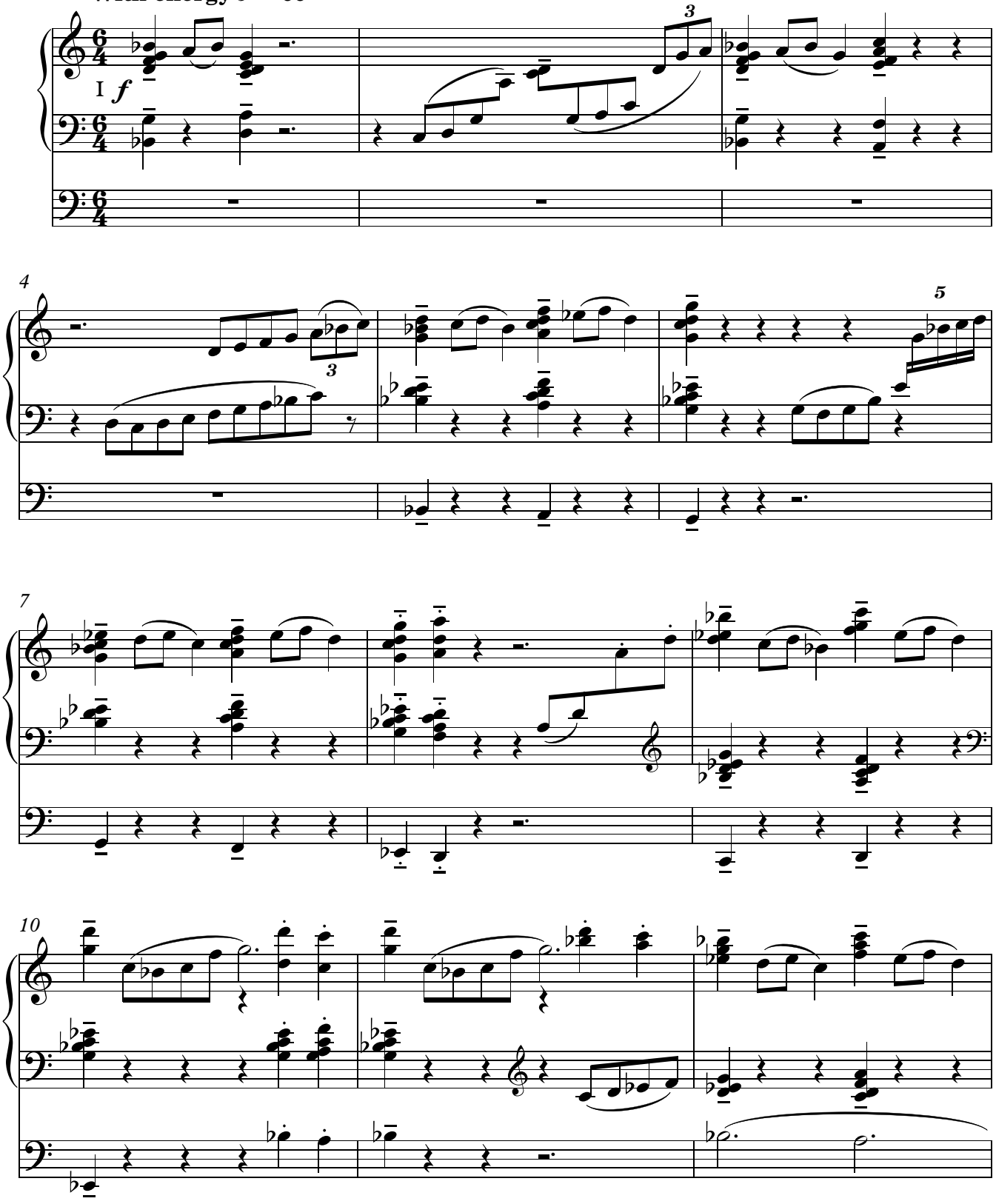
'Carol of the Bells'

Original melody by Mykola Leontovych

I. 8' to mixture (II, III to I)
II. 8' to mixture (III to II)
III 8' to mixture + reeds
Ped 16' 8" (to manuals)

Martin Stacey (b.1975)

With energy 𝅗𝅥. **= 66**



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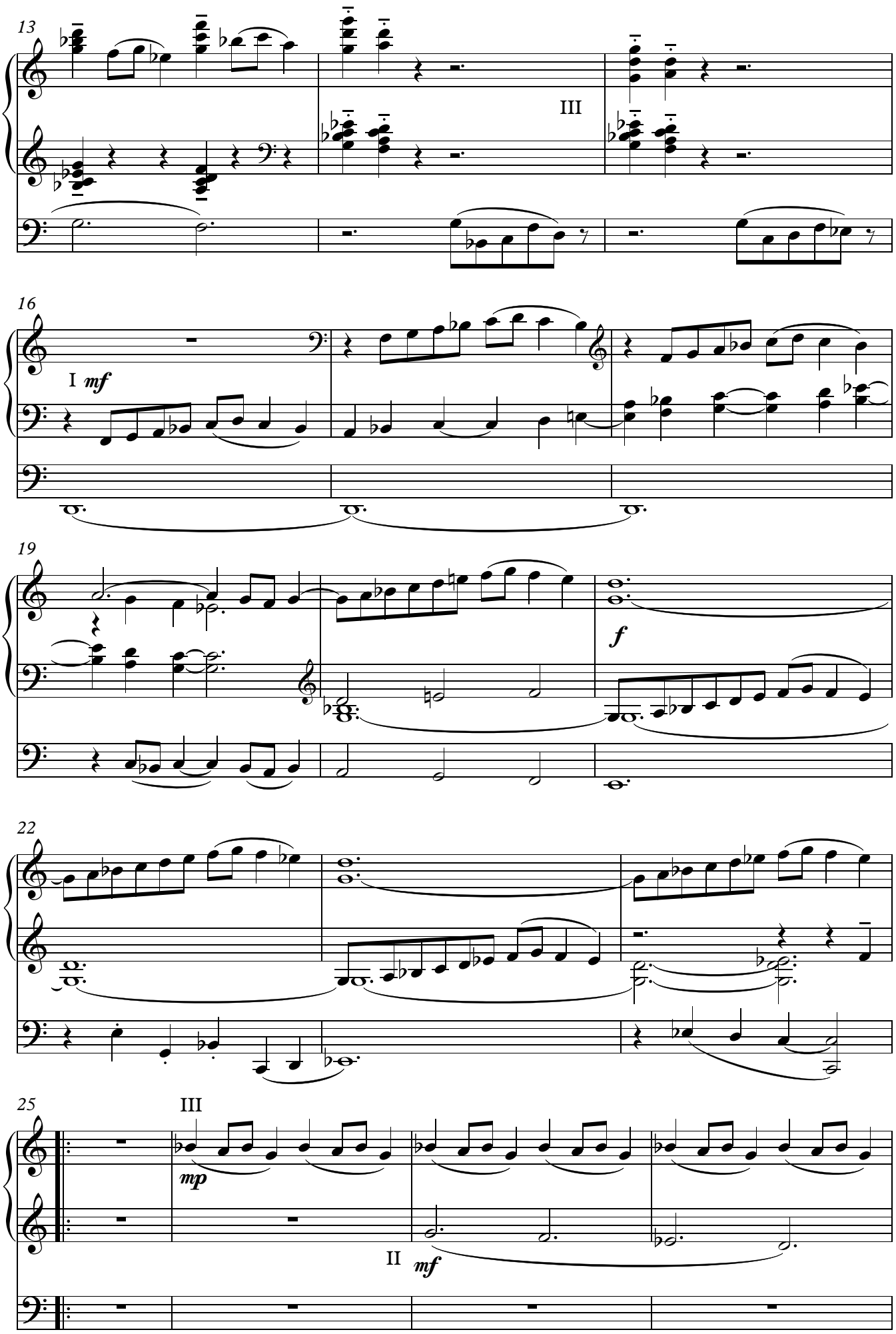
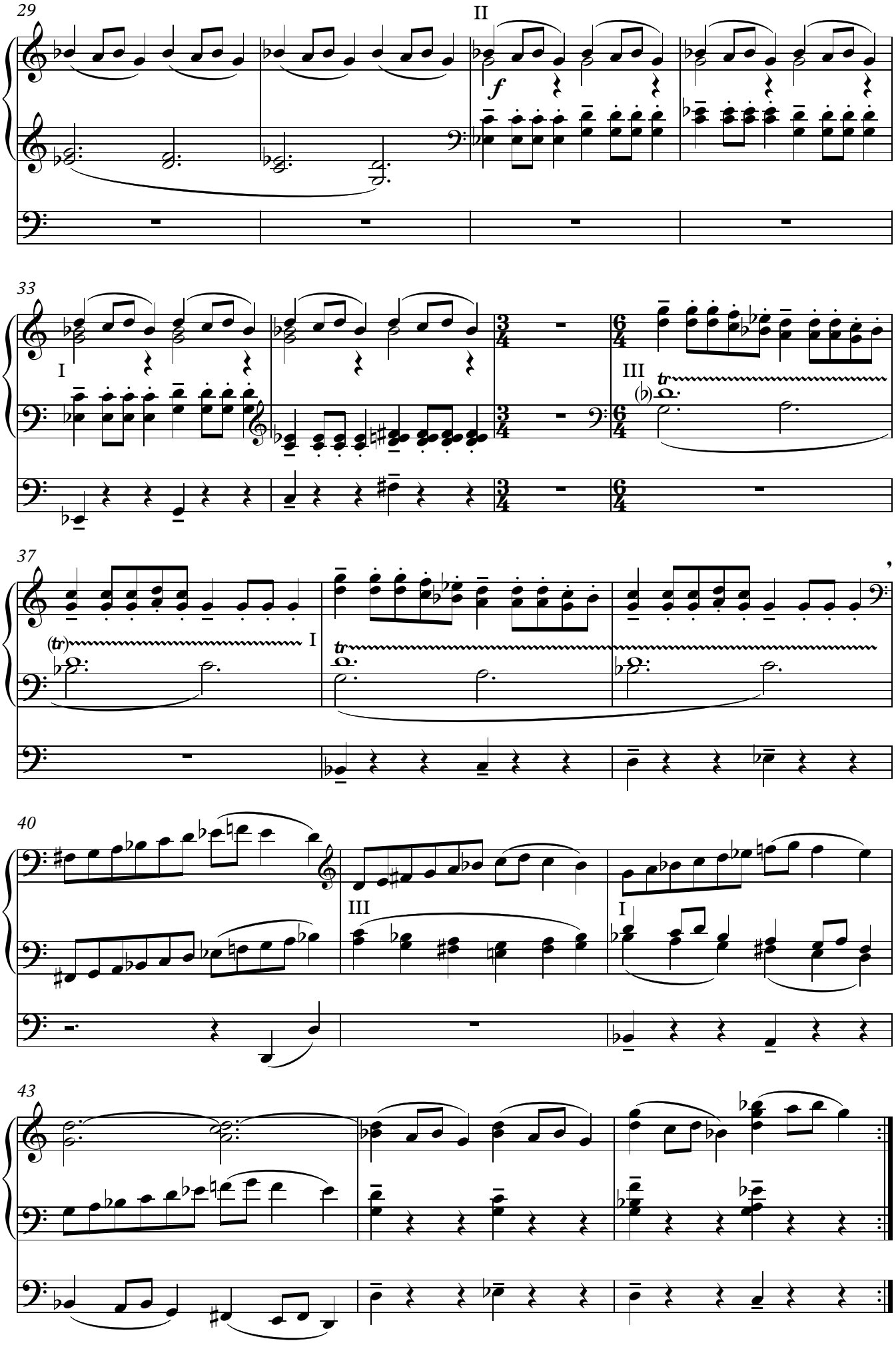
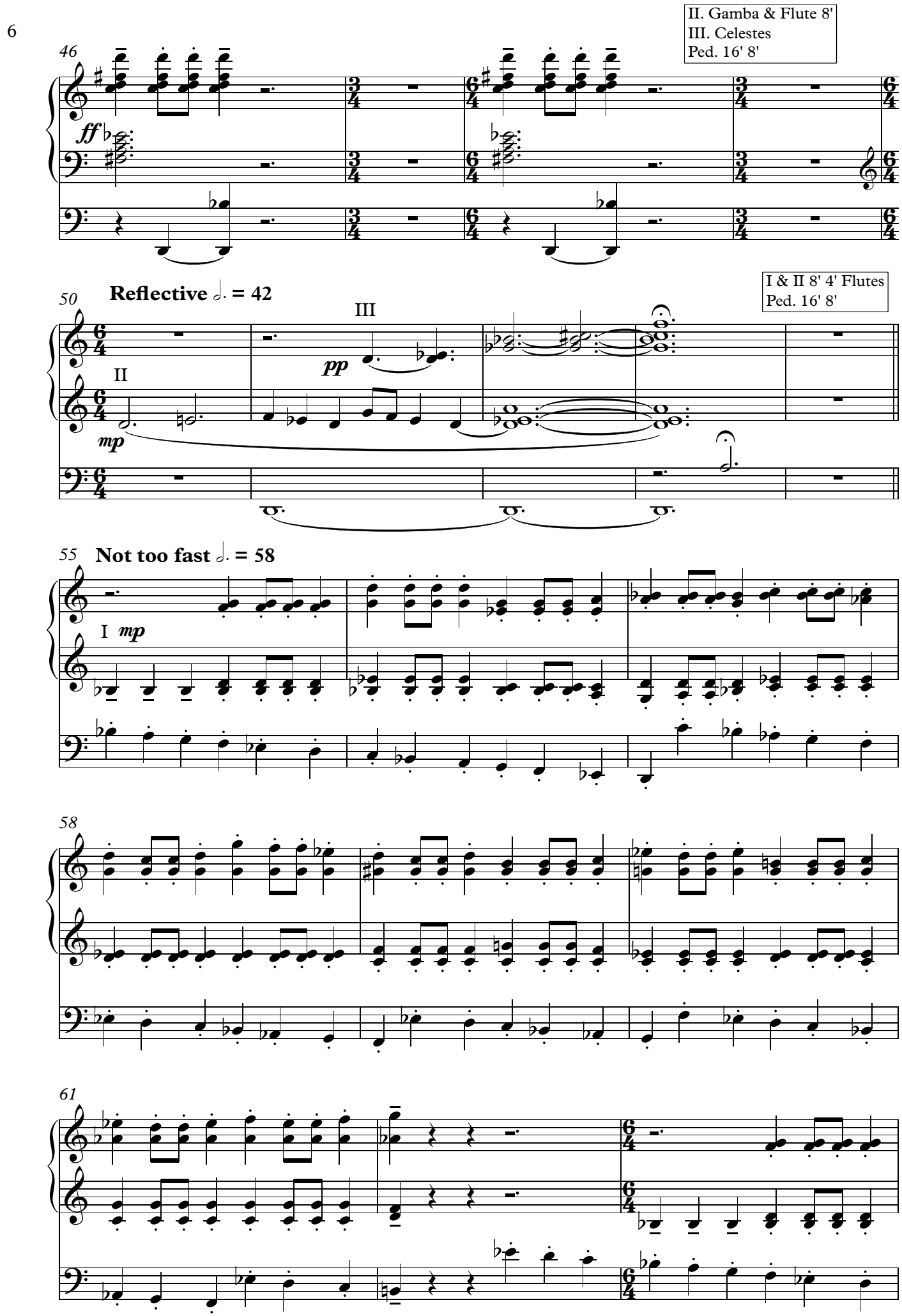
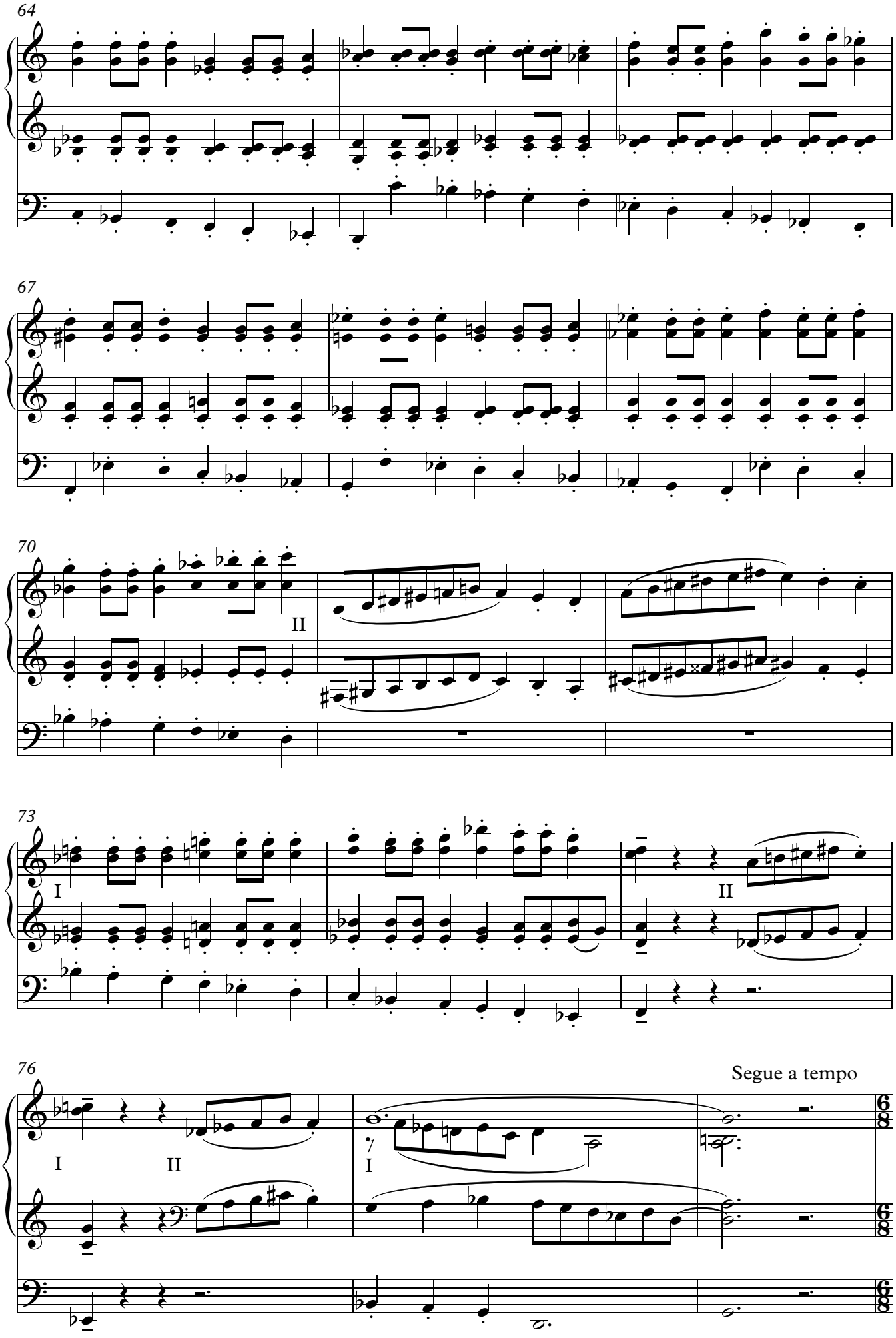

13
III
16
I
mf
19
f
22
25
III
mp
II
mf


29
II
f
33
I
III
37
I
40
III
I
43


II. Gamba & Flute 8'
III. Celestes
Ped. 16' 8'
46
ff
50
Reflective ♩. = 42
I & II 8' 4' Flutes
Ped. 16' 8'
III
pp
II
mp
55
Not too fast ♩. = 58
I mp
58
61


64
67
70
II
73
I
II
76
Segue a tempo
I
II
I

I. Gamba 8' & Flute 8': II. Reed or solo 8': III Flutes 8' 2': Ped. 16' 8'

79

III

I

mf

82

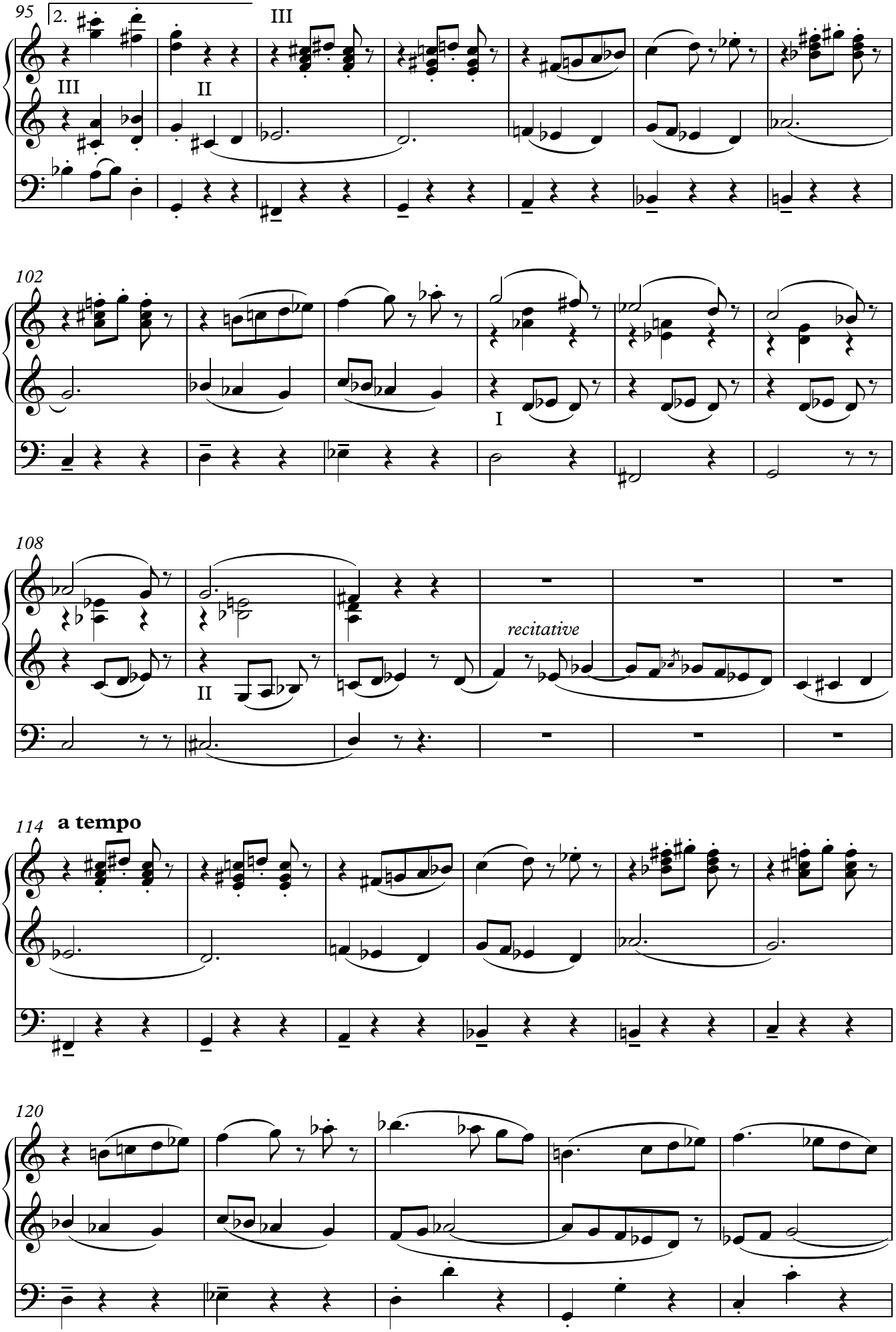
85

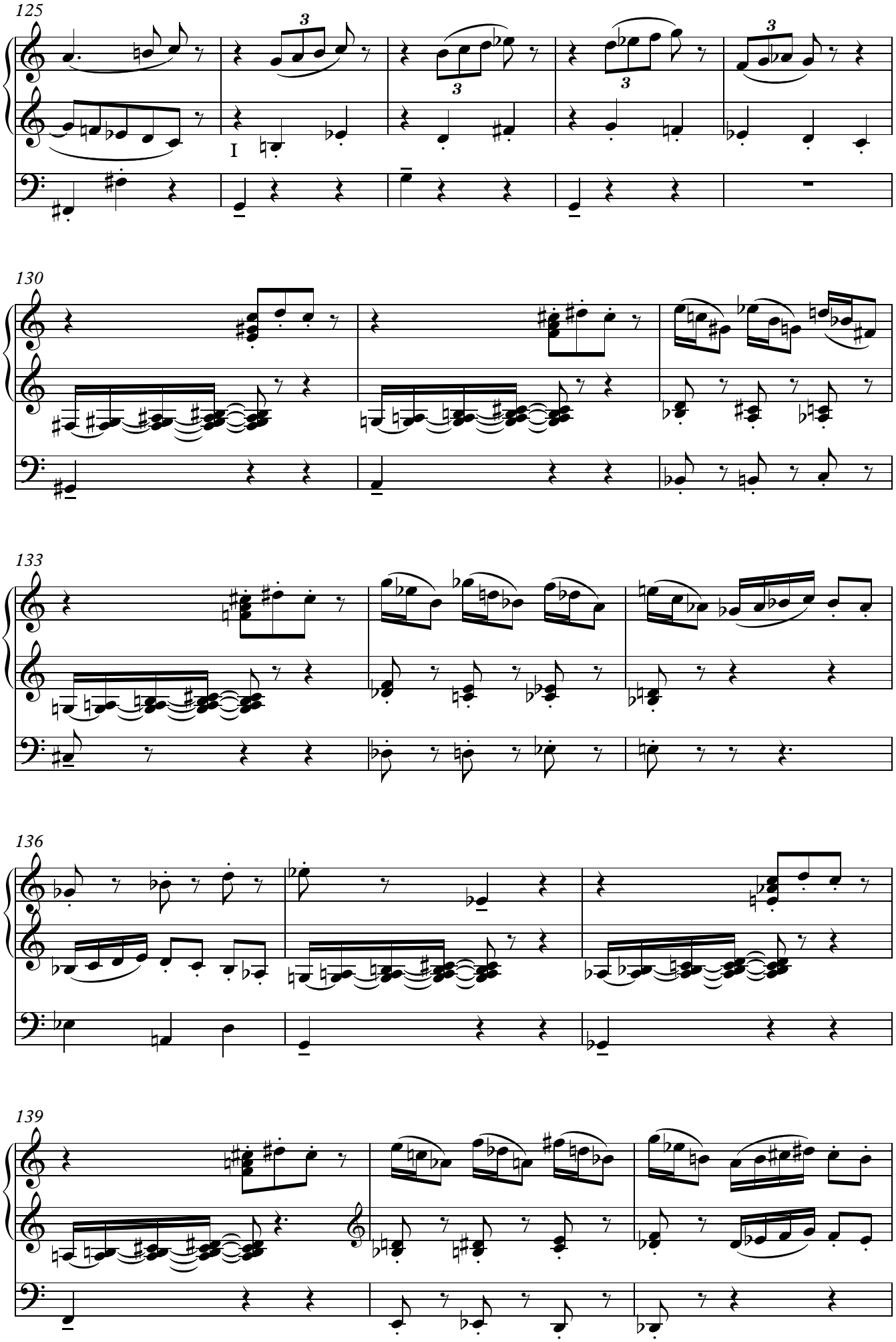
88

91

1.

III


95
2.
III
III
II
102
I
108
II
recitative
114
a tempo
120


125
I
130
133
136
139

142

Segue a tempo

III

146

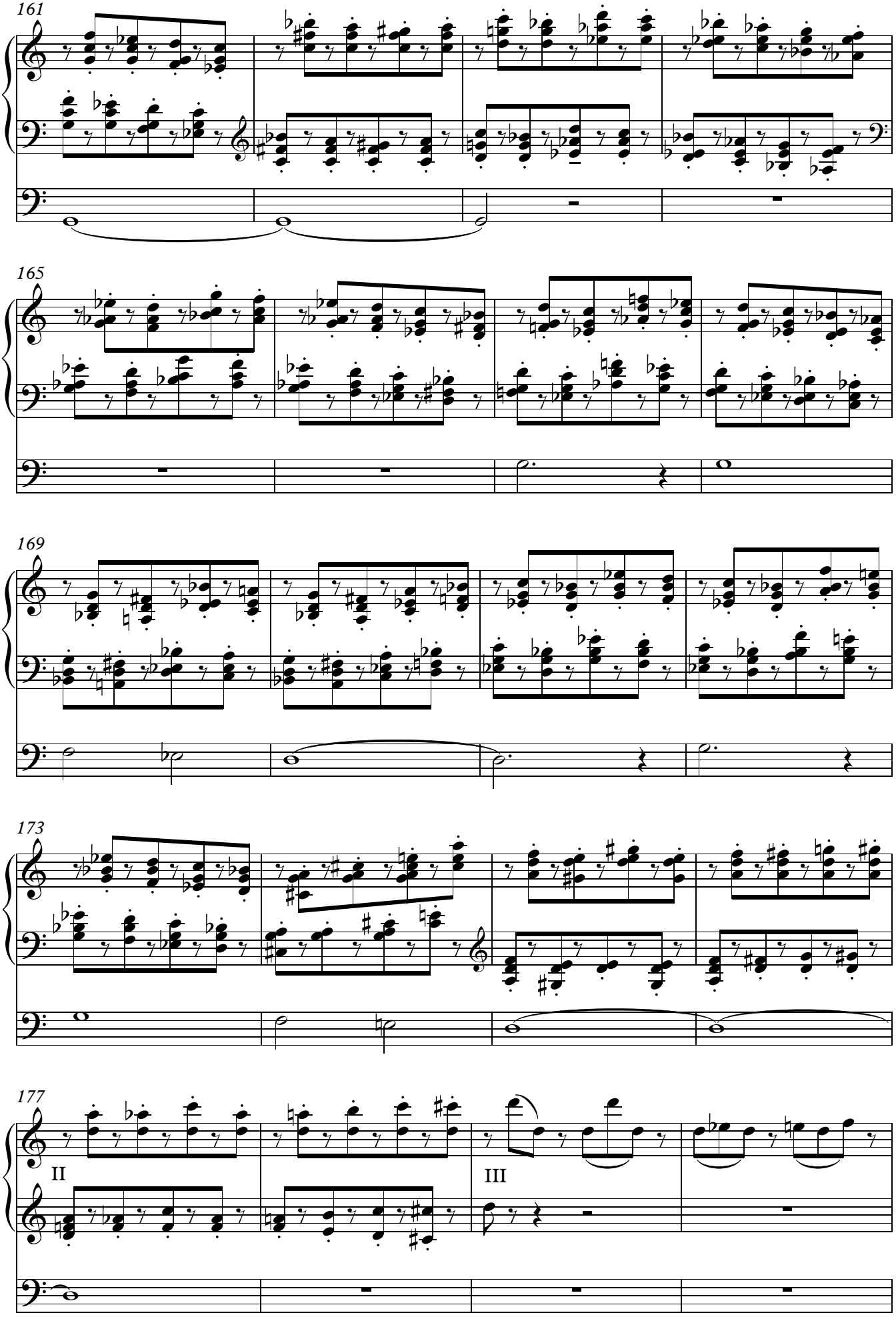
I. 8 to Mixture: II. 8' 4' 2': III 8 to mixtrue: Ped. 8' reed & 4' principal: manuals coupled

I *f*

150

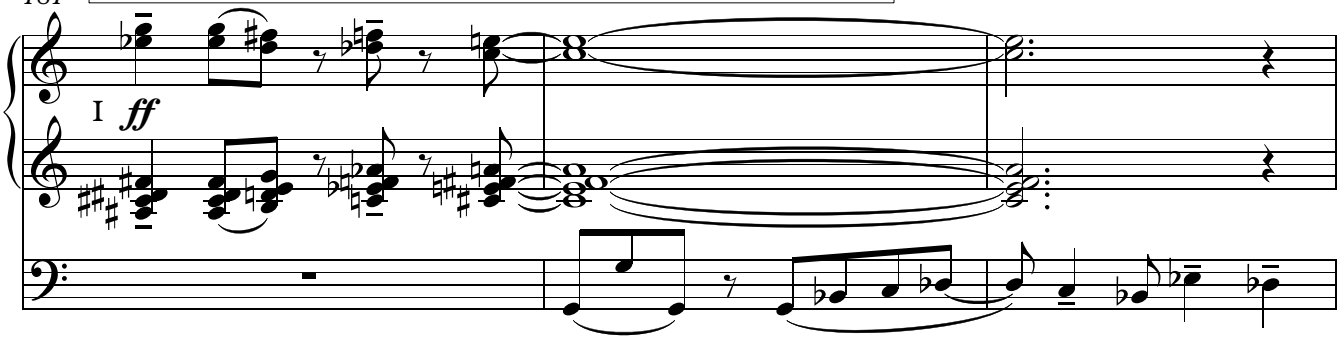
154

158


161
165
169
173
177
II
III

181 I. + trumpet: III + reeds: Ped. + open & reeds 16' 8' (coupled to manuals)

I *ff*



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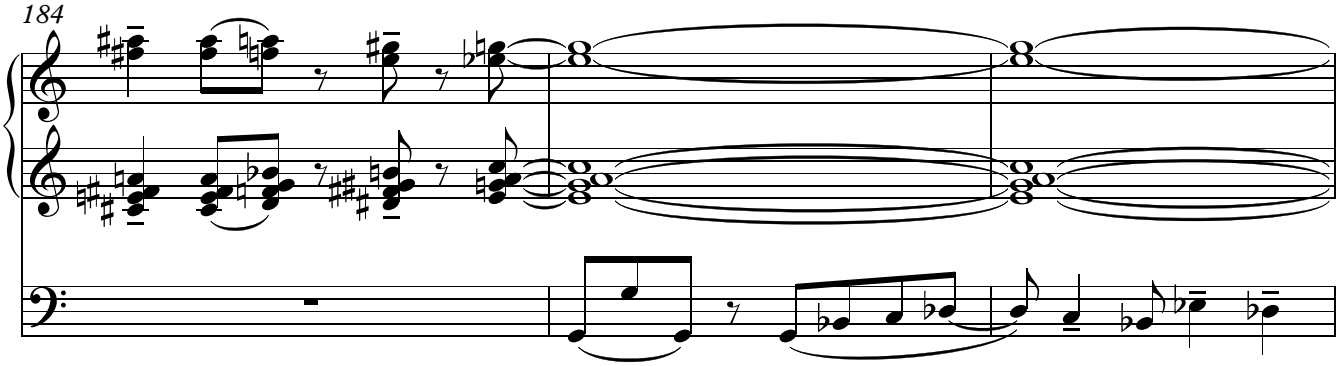

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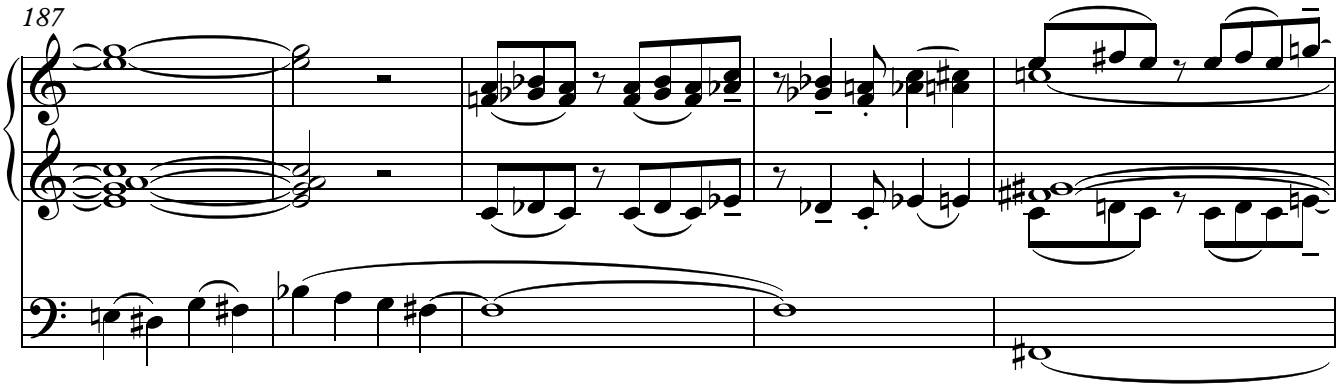

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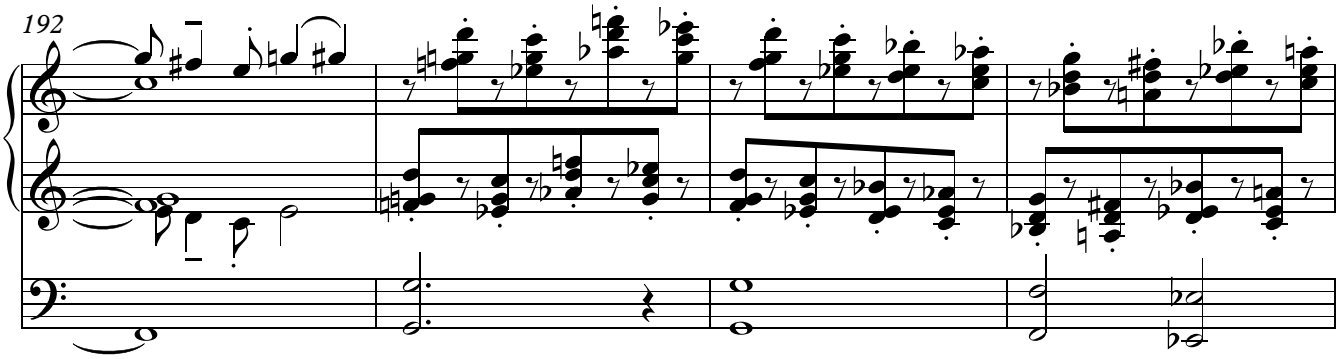

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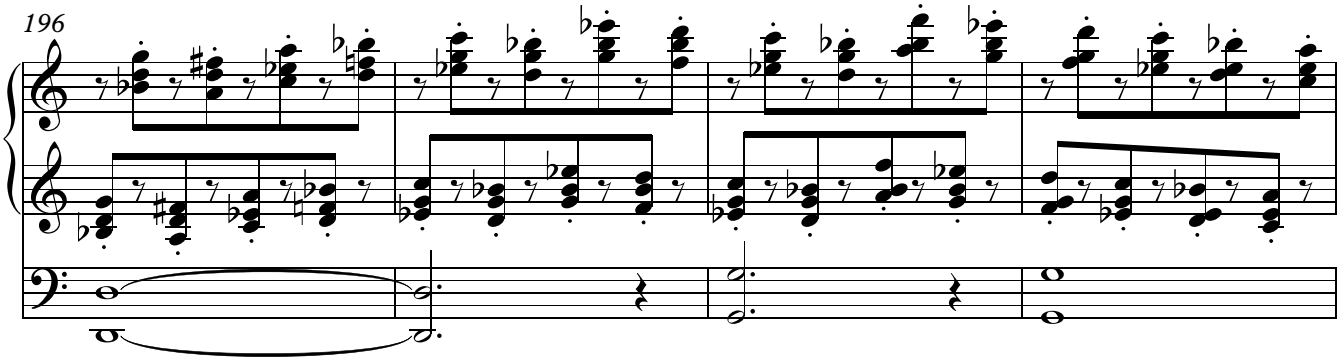
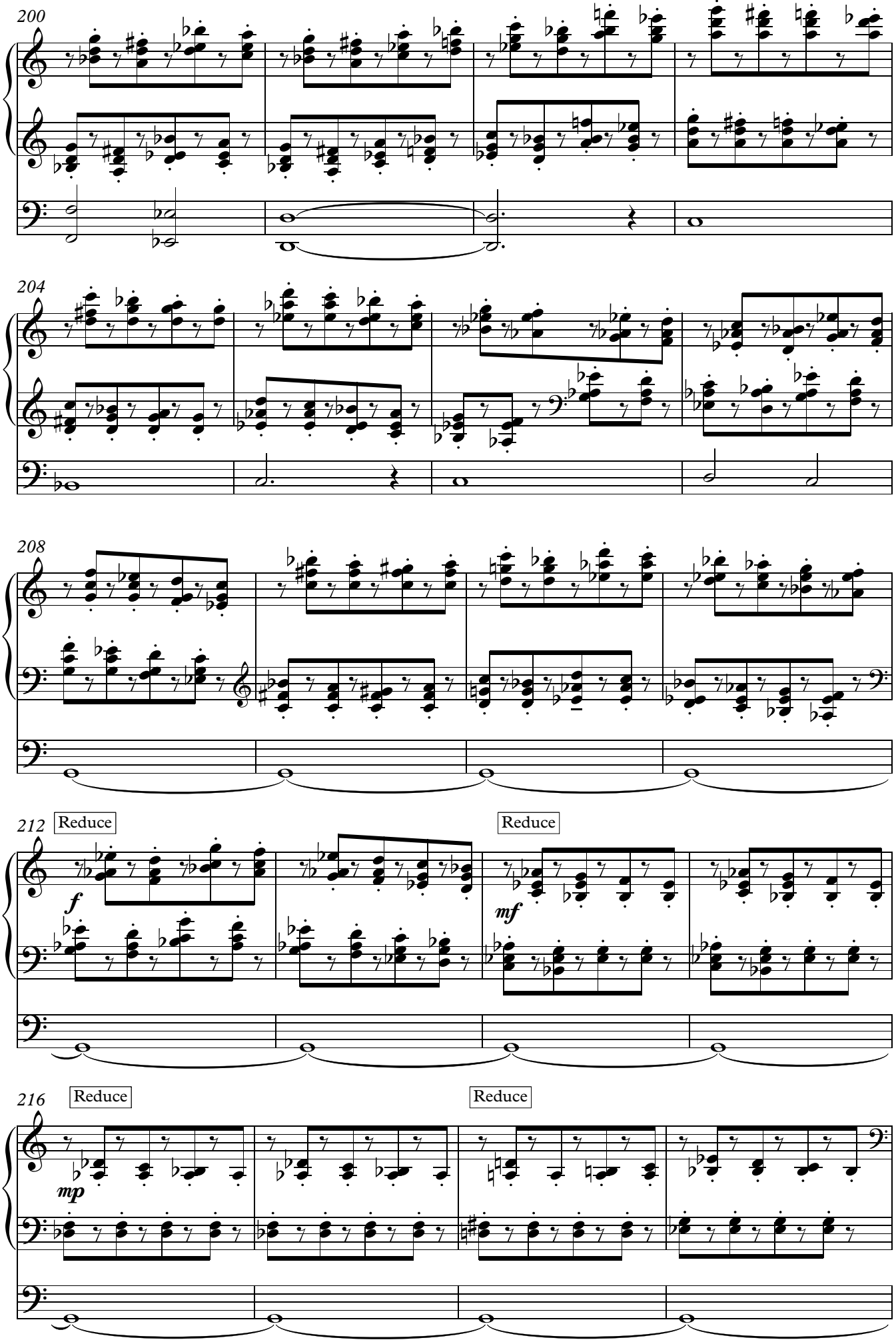
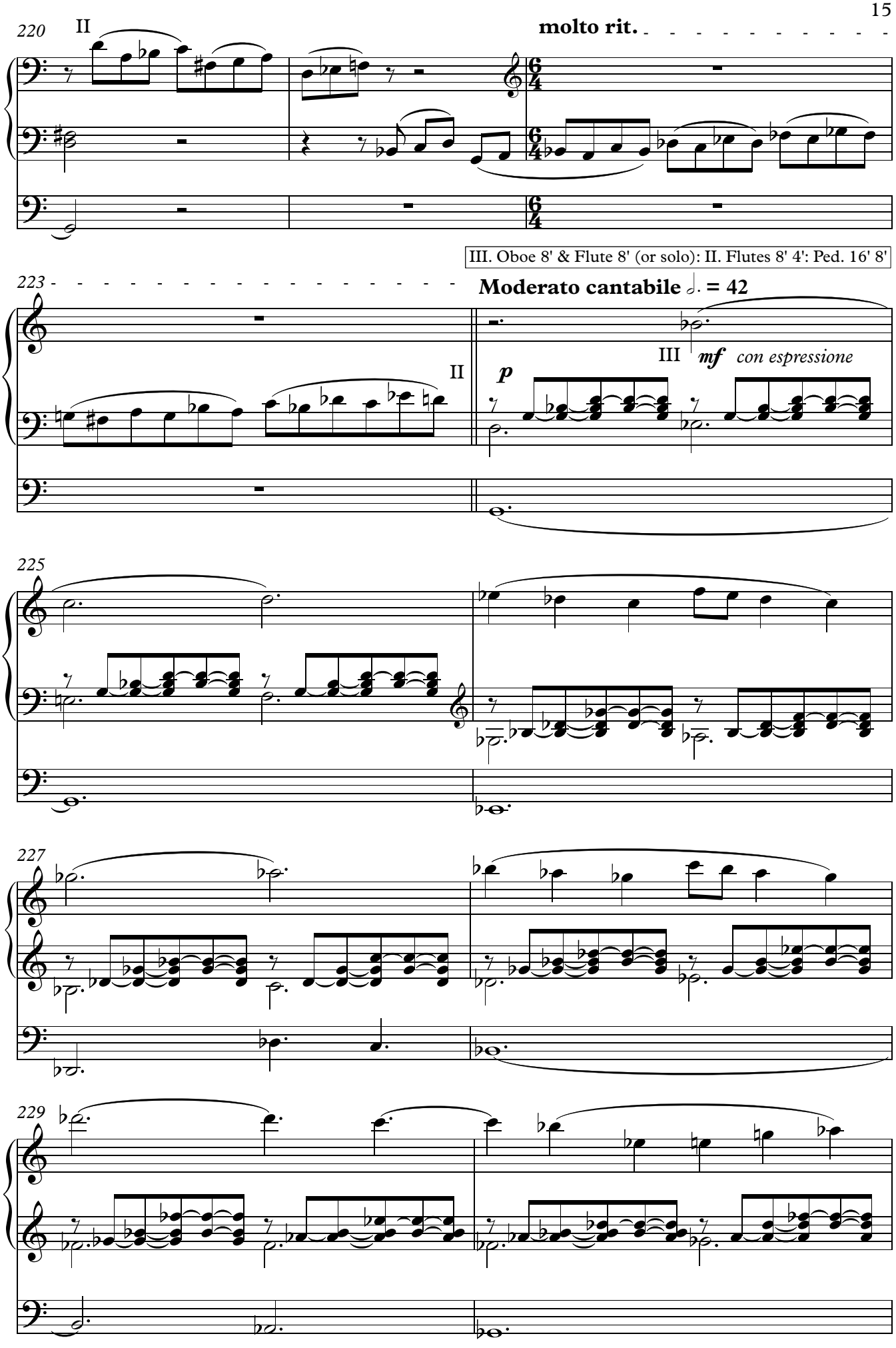
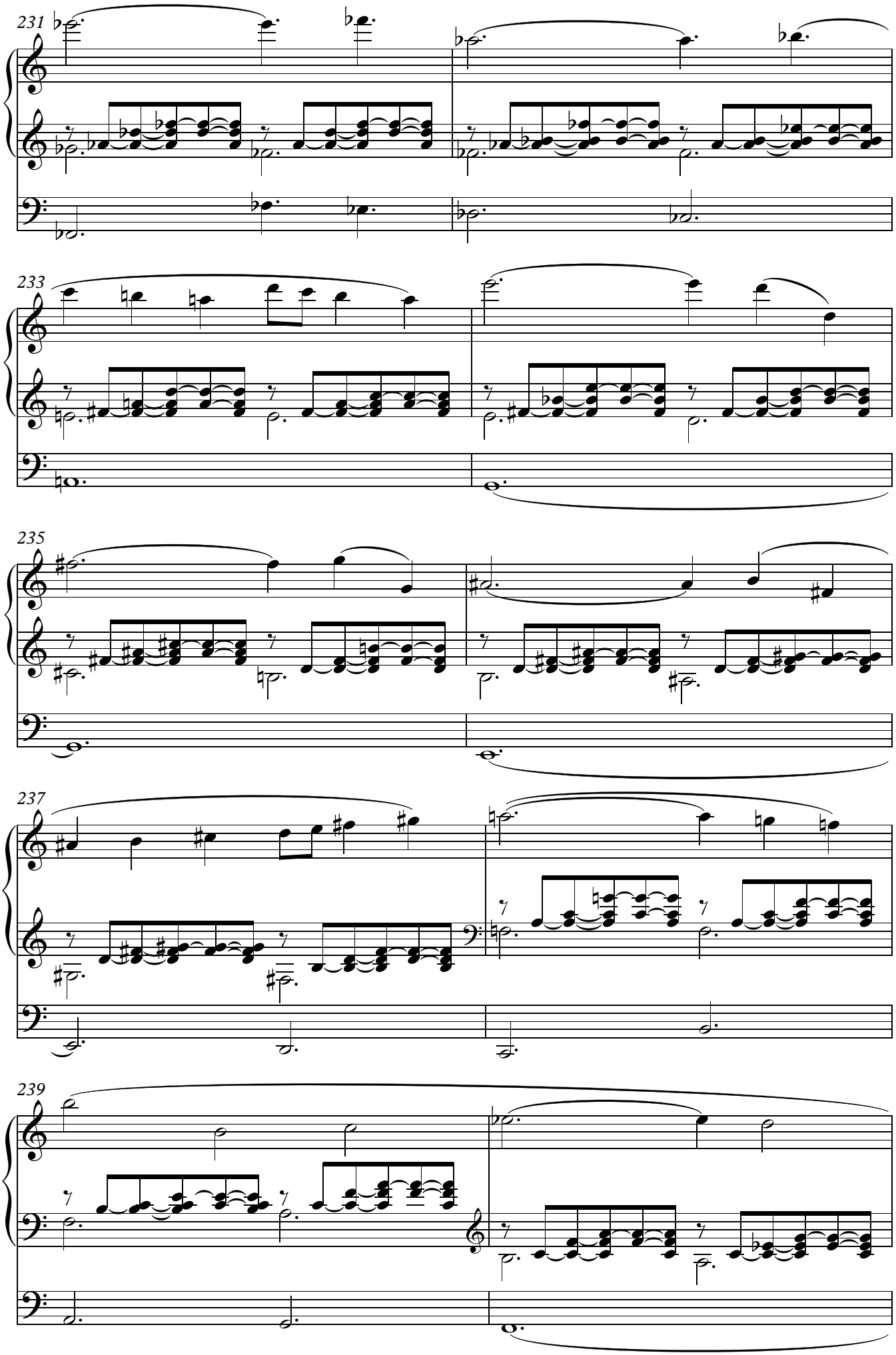
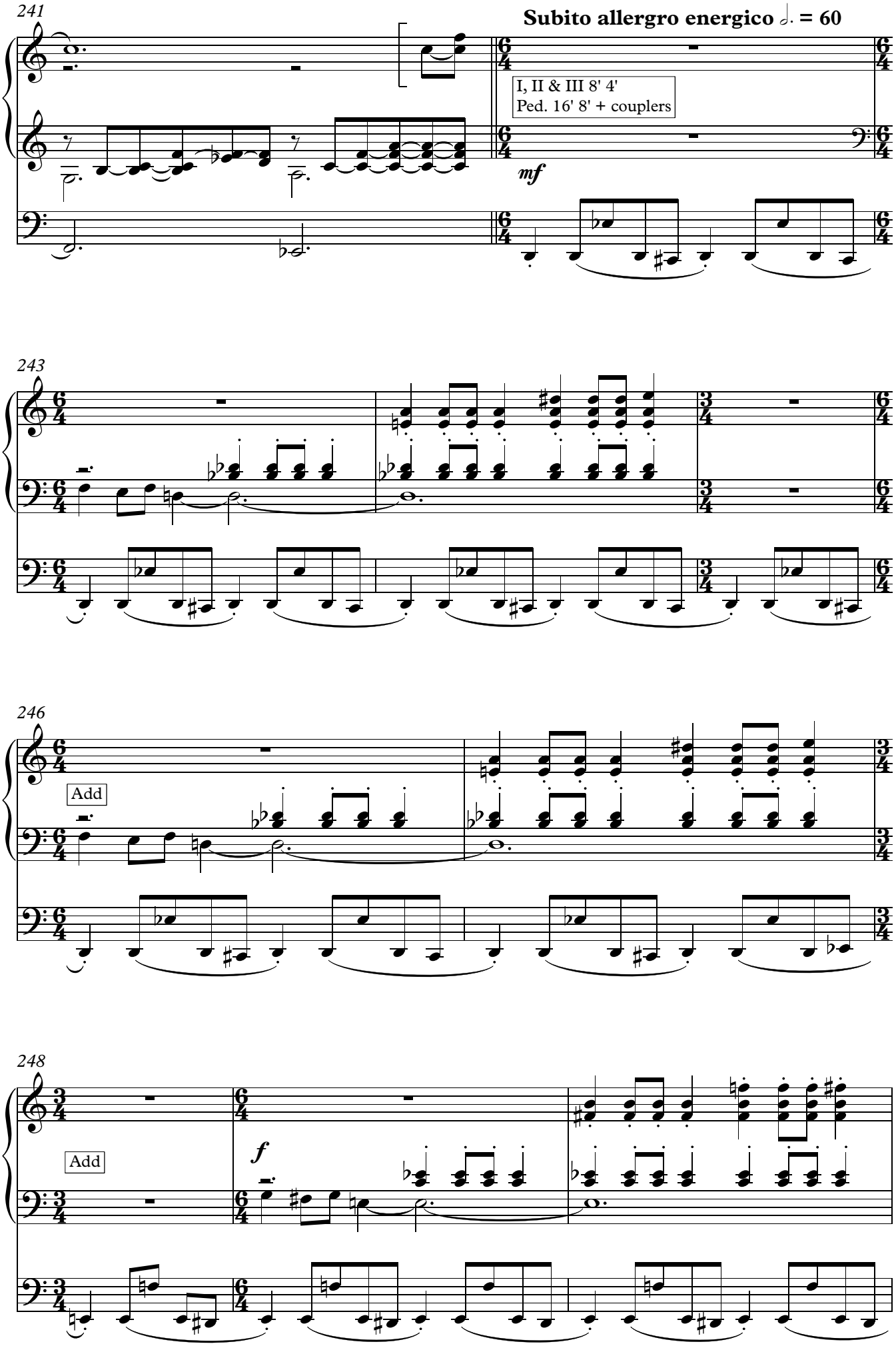
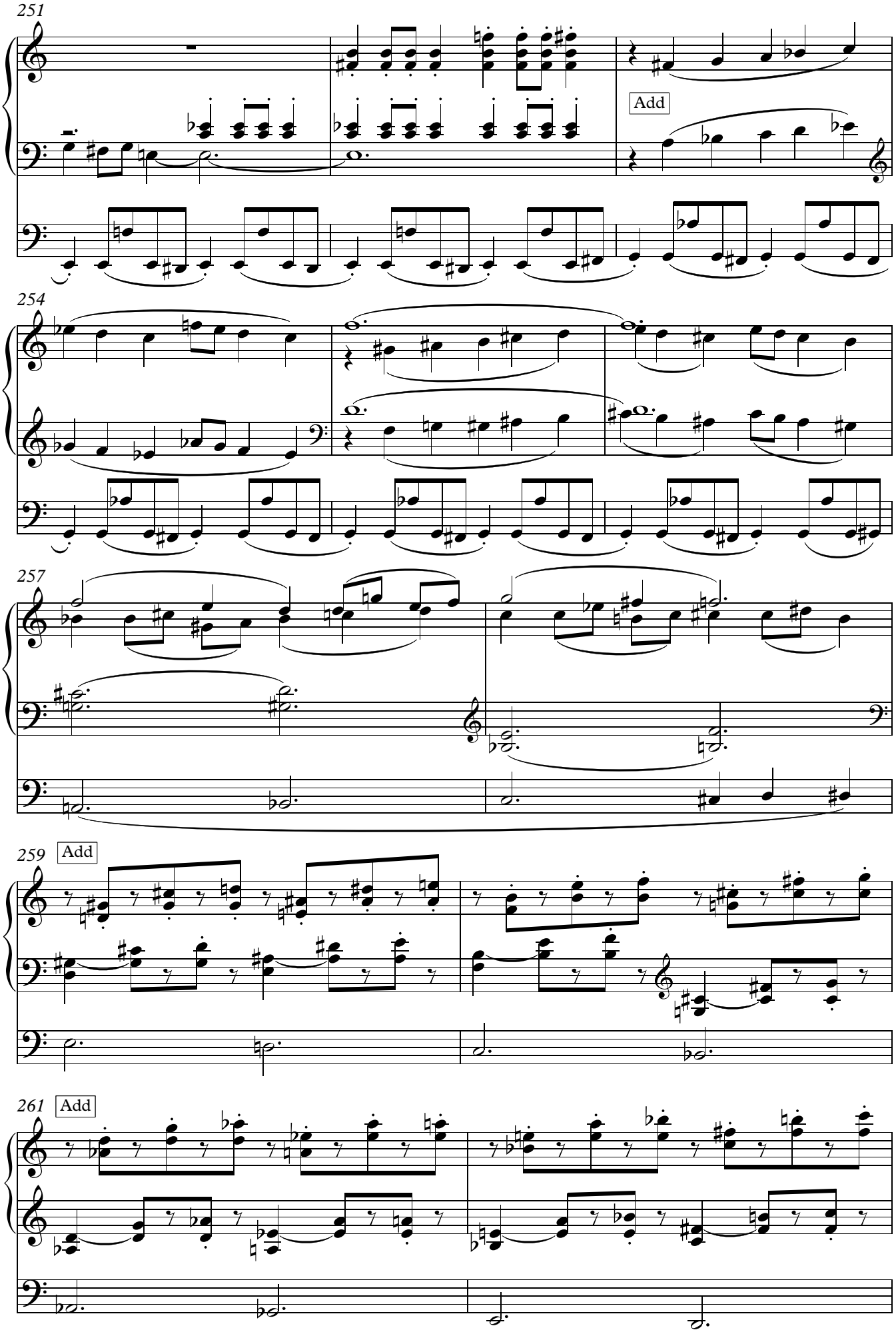


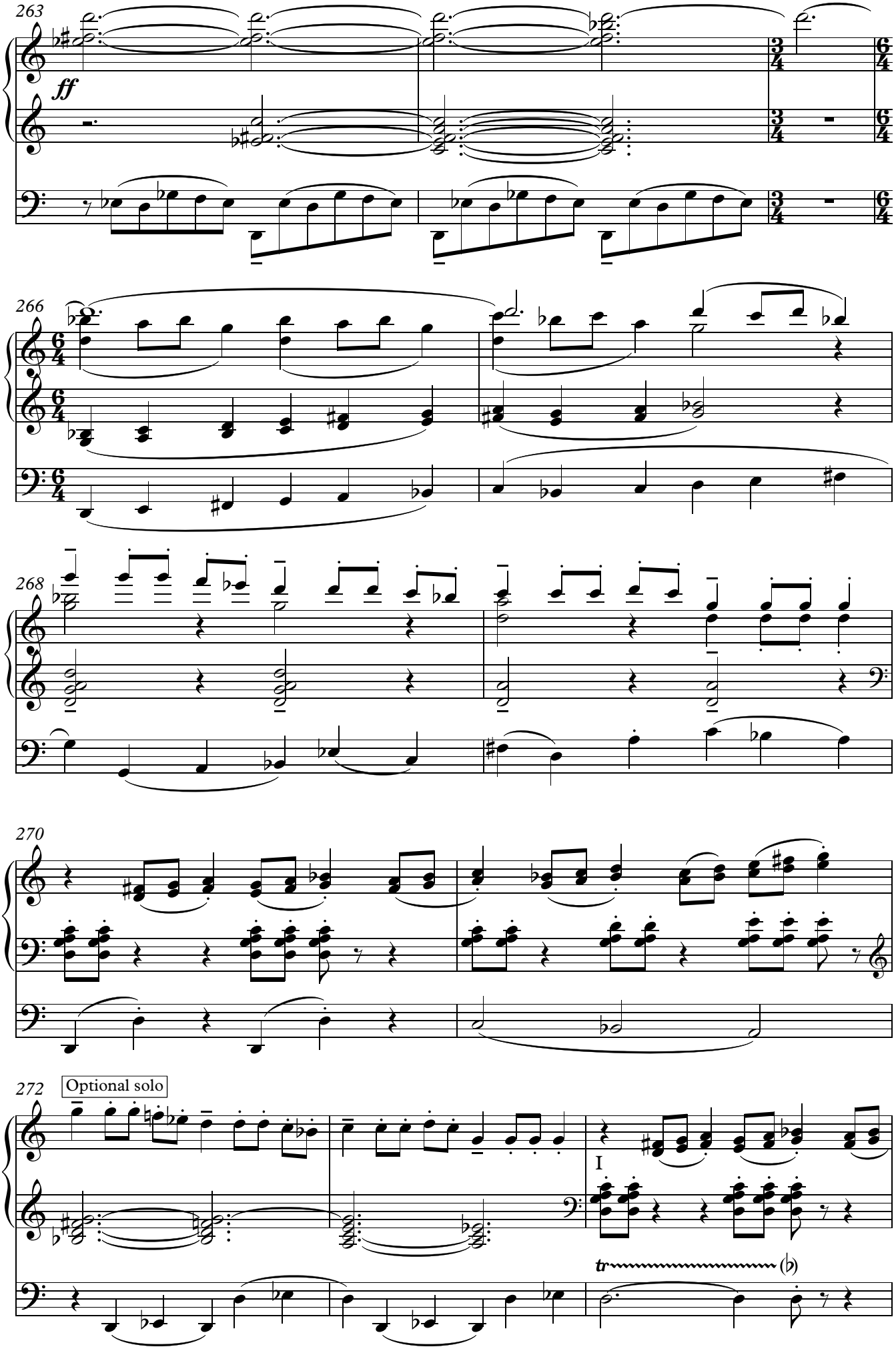

200
204
208
212
Reduce
Reduce
f
mf
216
Reduce
Reduce
mp

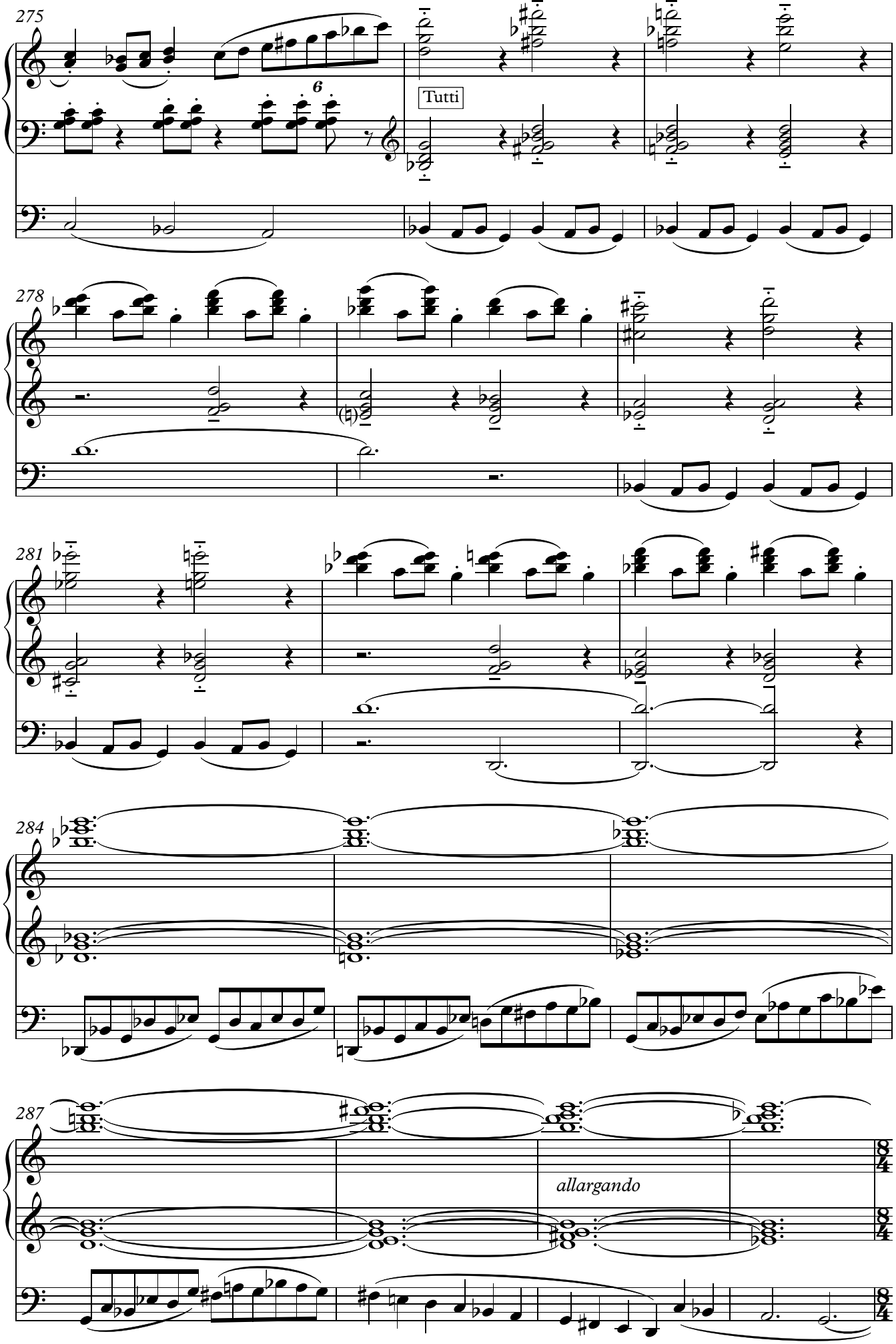

220
II
molto rit.
III. Oboe 8' & Flute 8' (or solo): II. Flutes 8' 4': Ped. 16' 8'
223
Moderato cantabile ♩. = 42
II
p
III
mf
con espressione
225
227
229

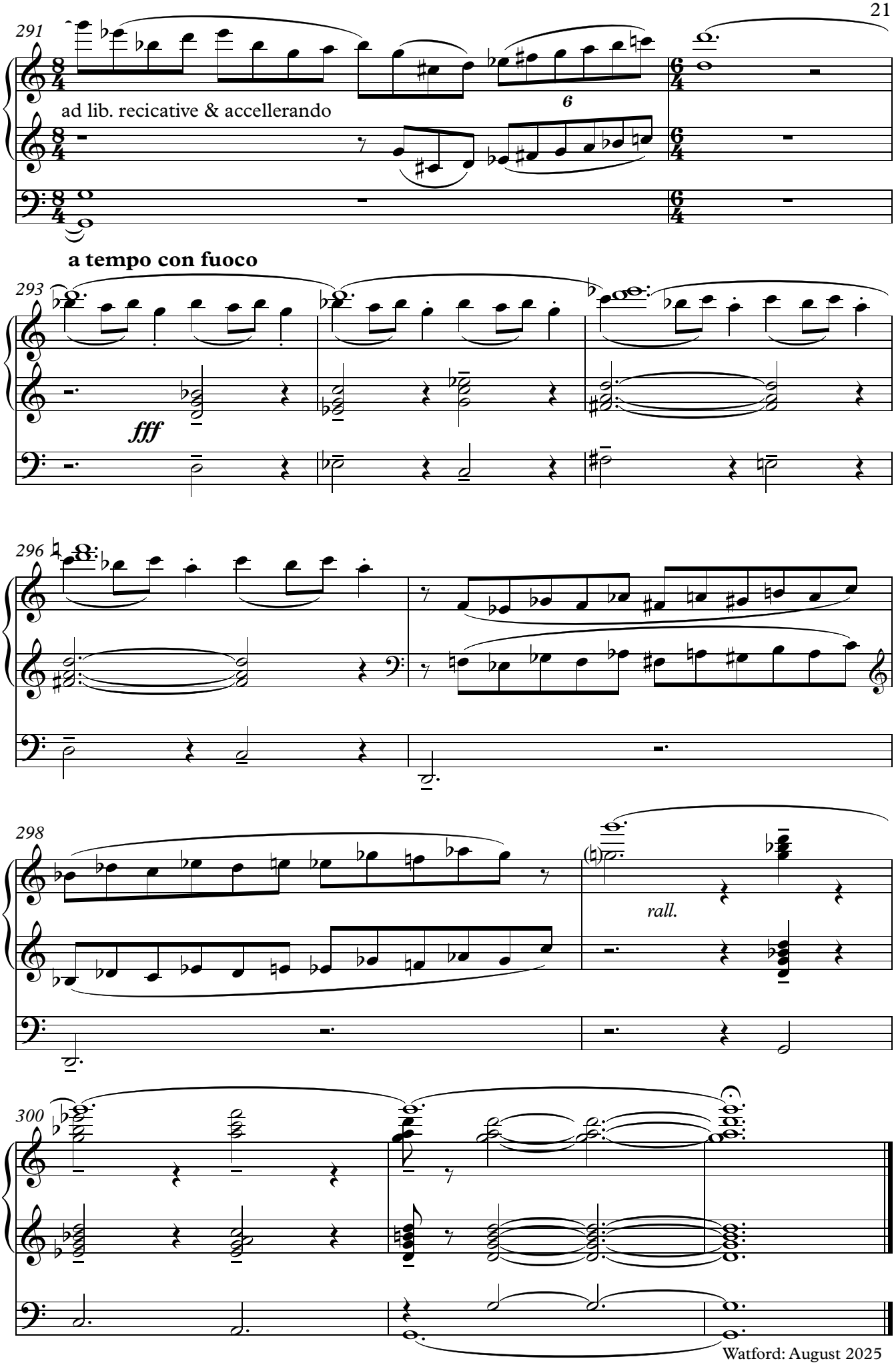

231
233
235
237
239


241
Subito allergro energico ♩. = 60
I, II & III 8' 4'
Ped. 16' 8' + couplers
mf
243
246
Add
248
Add
f


251
Add
254
257
259
Add
261
Add


263
ff
266
268
270
272
Optional solo
I
tr


275
6
Tutti
278
281
284
287
allargando



Watford: August 2025

Carol of the Bells as we know it today was converted into a popular Christmas carol popularised by NBC Radio in 1922 but began its life as a Ukrainian folk tune. Remarkably, Ukrainians were actually involved all along the way in its journey from folk song to a Christmas radio staple.

Around 1916, Oleksander Koshyts, the conductor of a major Ukrainian choir, commissioned Mykola Leontovych to produce a choral work based on traditional Ukrainian folksong. The song Leontovych chose, '*Shchedryk*', was connected to the arrival of the New Year. Traditionally celebrated in April with the coming of Spring, New Year's celebrations were eventually transplanted from April to January when Ukraine became Christianised and began celebrating the Julian New Year - the night of January 13 and 14 in the modern calendar. The songs for this occasion are known as *Shchedrivky* (the plural of *Shchedryk*).

Teenage girls in Ukrainian villages typically went from door to door singing these well-wishing tunes and villagers showed their appreciation by rewarding the Carollers with baked goods or other treats.

Written in 1916, Leontovych's '*Shchedryk*' tells the story of a happy spring omen. A swallow flies into the house to herald a prosperous new year for the family including a healthy livestock, money, and a beautiful wife. In Ukrainian, the word *Shchedryk* is derived from '*Shchedryj*' (meaning *bountiful*). Leontovych borrowed just four notes from the original folk melody - the motive that became the opening melody of the piece. He then expands on this motive, harmonising and developing it over the course of the piece.

During this time, Ukraine was in the midst of great political and social unrest as it was dragged into World War I. Ukrainian soldiers were initially divided, some fighting for Austria-Hungary and the Central Powers, while most served under the Russian Imperial Army. When Imperial Russia collapsed as a result of the Russian Revolution in 1917, the focus of the conflict shifted to the Ukrainian War of Independence, culminating in the brief formation of an independent Ukrainian government.

By 1919, Koshyts, the conductor who commissioned *Shchedryk*, began taking the piece on tour around the world with the Ukrainian National Chorus, promoting Ukrainian music and culture. The group performed over 1,000 concerts across Europe, North America, and South America.

On 5th October 1921, the Ukrainian National Chorus performed it before a sold-out audience at Carnegie Hall. Peter Wilhousky, an American composer, music educator and choral conductor of Ukrainian descent, attended the Carnegie Hall concert and wrote the English version of the lyrics, passing it along to NBC Radio in 1922.

Wilhousky continued to produce choral arrangements throughout his career, creating translations and arrangements of music from the Slavonic liturgy and a popular arrangement of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, all of which are still in use today.

Lyrics in translation:

Hark! how the bells
Sweet silver bells
All seem to say
'throw cares away.'
Christmas is here
Bringing good cheer
To young and old
Meek and the bold.

Ding, dong, ding, dong
That is their song
With joyful ring
All carolling
One seems to hear
Words of good cheer
From ev'rywhere
Filling the air.

Oh, how they pound
Raising the sound
O'er hill and dale
Telling their tale
Gaily they ring
While people sing
Songs of good cheer
Christmas is here.

Merry, merry, merry,
Merry Christmas!
Merry, merry, merry,
Merry Christmas!

On, on they send
On without end
Their joyful tone
To ev'ry home.

Martin Stacey grew up in Somerset (in the south west of England) and studied at the Royal Academy of Music under Nicholas Danby and Naji Hakim among others, winning all the major prizes for organ and early-music. He furthered his studies with Nicolas Kynaston and Dame Gillian Weir, and his regular concert appearances in the UK, Europe and Scandinavia have established a reputation amongst the foremost exponents of his generation of organists. He collaborated with Jennifer Bate in two world-premiere recordings of organ duets by Mendelssohn and his own compositions have received considerable attention worldwide. *Totentanz* (a work commissioned by Choir & Organ magazine) was a set-work on the syllabus for the FRCO examination for twelve years and he is frequently commissioned to write new music. In 2006 Martin founded AFNOM (the Annual Festival of New Organ Music) which promoted the work of contemporary composers of organ music for ten years featuring exhibitions, concerts and lectures in London and Helsinki. In addition to performing, he has lectured at Trinity College of Music and the Sibelius Academy, taught in various north London schools and has been Director of Music at St. Dominic's Priory (The Rosary Shrine) in London since the year 2000 where he continues to play regular recitals.