On Sorrow

for bass clarinet and string quartet

JONATHAN RUSSELL

On Sorrow

On March 31st, 2017, my 37-year-old wife was diagnosed with what turned out to be Stage III Breast Cancer, and our life was turned upside down. We made the decision to leave London, where we had lived for the past four years, and move in with her parents in Weymouth, Massachusetts for the duration of her treatment. All told, it was about a year from initial diagnosis to my wife starting to feel like herself again. For now, she is considered "cancer-free", but the very real possibility of a more serious recurrence will always haunt us.

Fear, worry, anxiety and exhaustion – not "sorrow" – were the sensations that dominated the year. But as I contemplated the very real possibility of losing my life partner much sooner than anticipated, I became far more conscious of sorrow's inevitability in all of our lives, of the weight of loss that everyone ultimately carries. For no matter how lucky a life we live, the simple fact remains that the longer we are here the more loss we will experience.

The piece is in five continuous movements that flow together without pause:
I. Prelude – Loss
II. Withdrawal
III. Rage
IV. Consolation (O Vos Omnes)
V. Renewal – Postlude

The piece opens with wispy string chords in a stuttering rhythm, with the bass clarinet floating above, evoking the eternal, endless river of time, the neutral backdrop to the cares and concerns of living. This figure also takes on a quality of "fate," appearing again, suddenly loud and forceful, at the climaxes of the first, third, and fifth movements. After a few minutes of this material, the main "sorrow" theme of the piece enters: a circular, chromatic figure in five. This material begins slowly and lugubriously, but gradually starts to become more flowing and buoyant. Before it can go too far in this direction, however, it is interrupted by a hammering version of the "fate" motive. This is followed by two intense statements of the "sorrow" theme, and then a high, wispy version that melts into the second movement.

Movement 2 ("Withdrawal") evokes the sense of turning inward and separating from the world that is often our initial way of coping with the shock of a calamitous event. The bass clarinet plays fragmentary melodies over quiet, repeating chords in the strings that begin high and ethereal, and gradually drift down and down and down. At the end, there is a low, subdued statement of the "sorrow" theme – which then triggers the third movement's sudden outburst.

Movement 3 ("Rage") is aggressive, dissonant, and driving. There are several new themes, and the "sorrow" theme is also sucked into the vortex. Its narrow chromatic pitches are played in close canon to create buzzing, insect-like swirls of dissonance. The music churns to a climax, and the bass clarinet is left alone on one of its lowest pitches. The strings hammer out the "fate" motive repeatedly as the bass clarinet ascends four octaves, almost its entire range, and is left hanging alone on a searing high note.

When the bass clarinet stops, a lone, gentle sustained cello note emerges, leading into the fourth movement, “Consolation (O Vos Omnes).” This movement consists entirely of fragments from Tomás Luis de Victoria’s choral work “O Vos Omnes,” composed in the vicinity of 1572. It is a beautiful, contemplative work, setting a text from Lamentations 1:12, which translates as: “O you that pass by, behold, and see: if there be any sorrow like my sorrow. Pay attention, all people, and see my sorrow: if there be any sorrow like my sorrow.” I knew early on that Victoria’s composition would inform my own, both because it is such a potent musical evocation of sorrow, and, more personally, because it has itself been a source of consolation for me in difficult times. As my piece developed, it became clear to me that directly quoting Victoria’s work would be the most compelling way to provide the “consolation” music I was seeking. It is deeply inspiring and humbling to me that a piece of music composed 450 years ago can still speak to us so directly and immediately today. It is a testament to the power of music itself to console, as well as to the power of spirituality and our common humanity, even across many generations and centuries.

As the fourth movement ends, Victoria’s final cadence morphs into a statement of the “sorrow” theme. The bass clarinet begins movement 5 (“Renewal”) with tentative fragments of this theme, which are then picked up by the first violin. The other instruments gradually join in, with the theme gathering in strength and confidence, finally culminating in a vigorous tango, a swirling, churning dance of life. Sorrow is not denied or defeated, but instead becomes the very basis for renewal and hope. As in the first movement, the dance is cut short by a hammering return of the “fate” motive. This time, however, the harmonies build and finally resolve to a triumphant D major chord. The chord melts away and we are left once again with three iterations of the slow, contemplative version of the “sorrow” theme, rising higher each time, finally leaving the bass clarinet suspended gently in the air. The quiet, wispy version of the opening “fate” motive enters in the strings, and the piece ends as it began, with the bass clarinet suspended over a gently pulsating ocean of time.

The piece, like sorrow itself, has fractal and cyclical qualities. The process it evokes can happen on many time scales, successively or simultaneously. The sequence of emotions could be happening in real time over the course of the 30-minute work; or it could happen over the course of an instant, a year, a lifetime. The ending of the piece could lead directly back to the beginning: even as we overcome one sorrow, the next one may be just on the horizon, or already underway. And even the sorrows we think we have overcome will continue to be with us, carrying us again through their gauntlet of emotions when we least expect it.

As long as humans are mortal, sorrow will be a central part of existence. And as long as humans are human, we will seek out ways to process, console, heal, and renew. My hope is that this composition can be one small contribution to that endless and eternal human project.

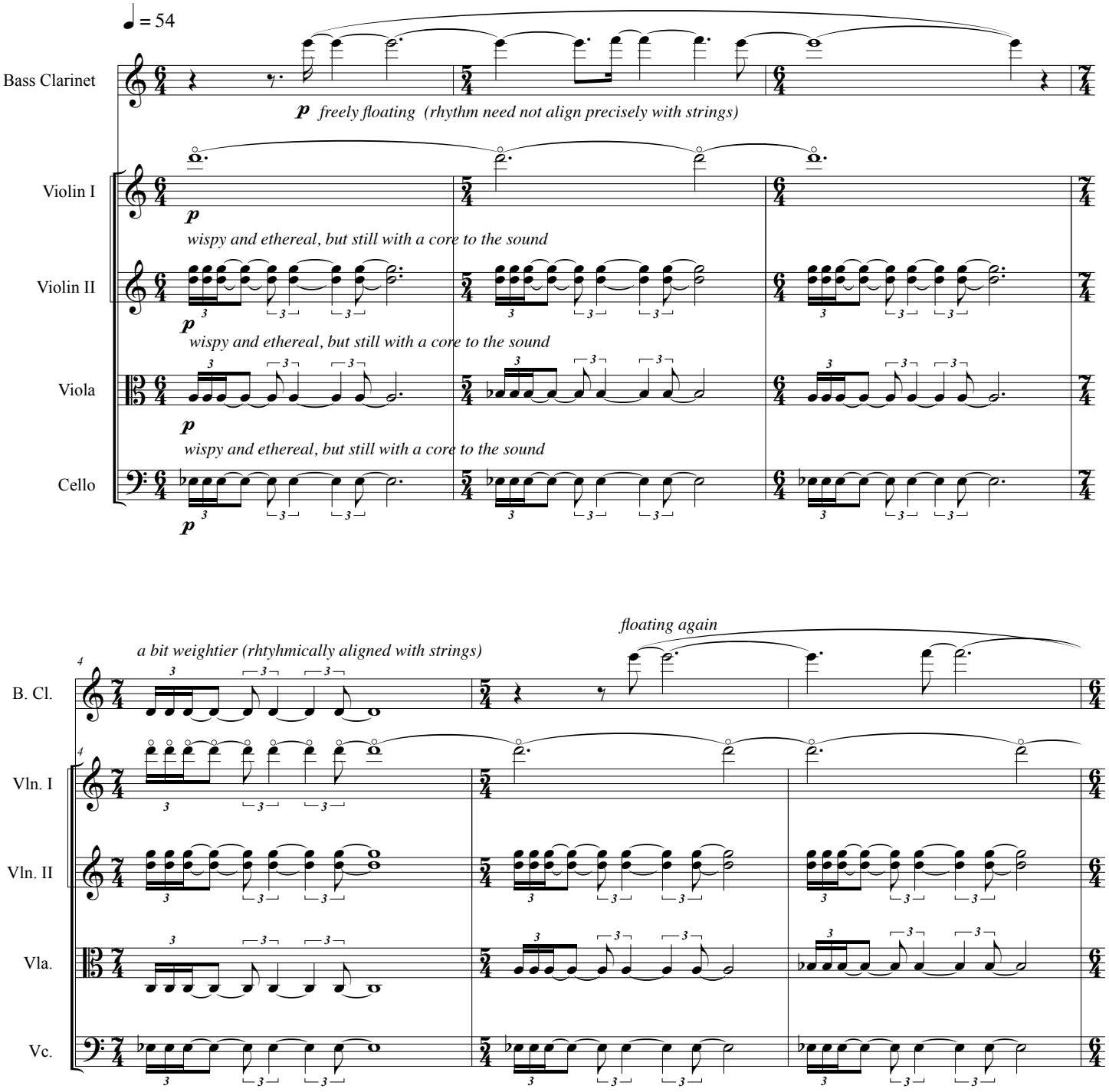
Transposed Score

On Sorrow

commissioned by Bruce Belton

Jonathan Russell

I. Prelude — Loss



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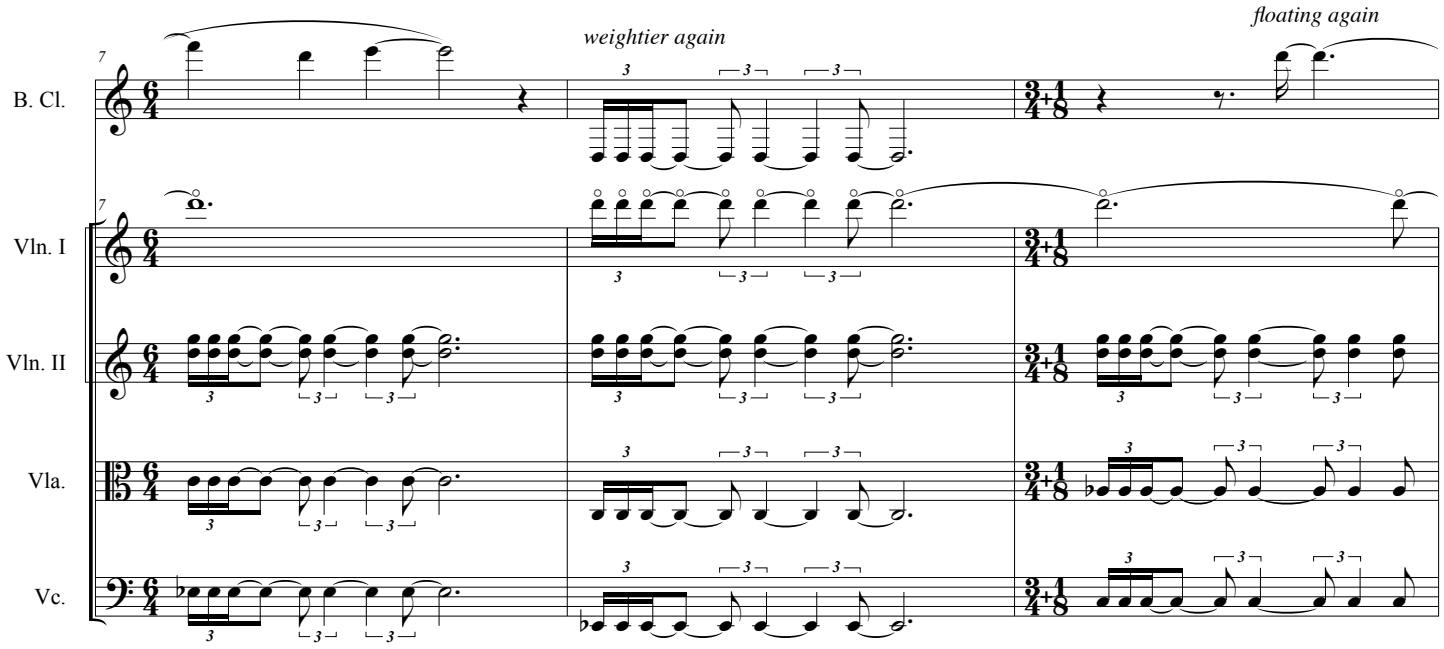
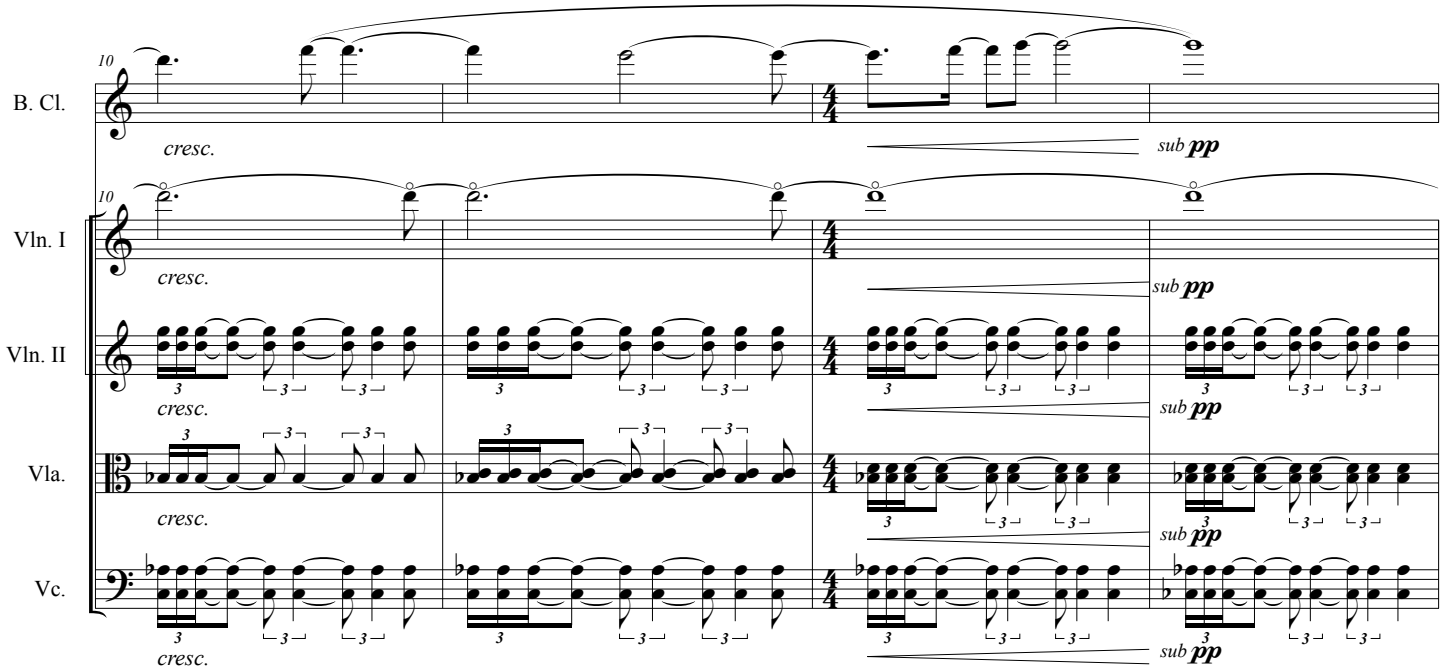
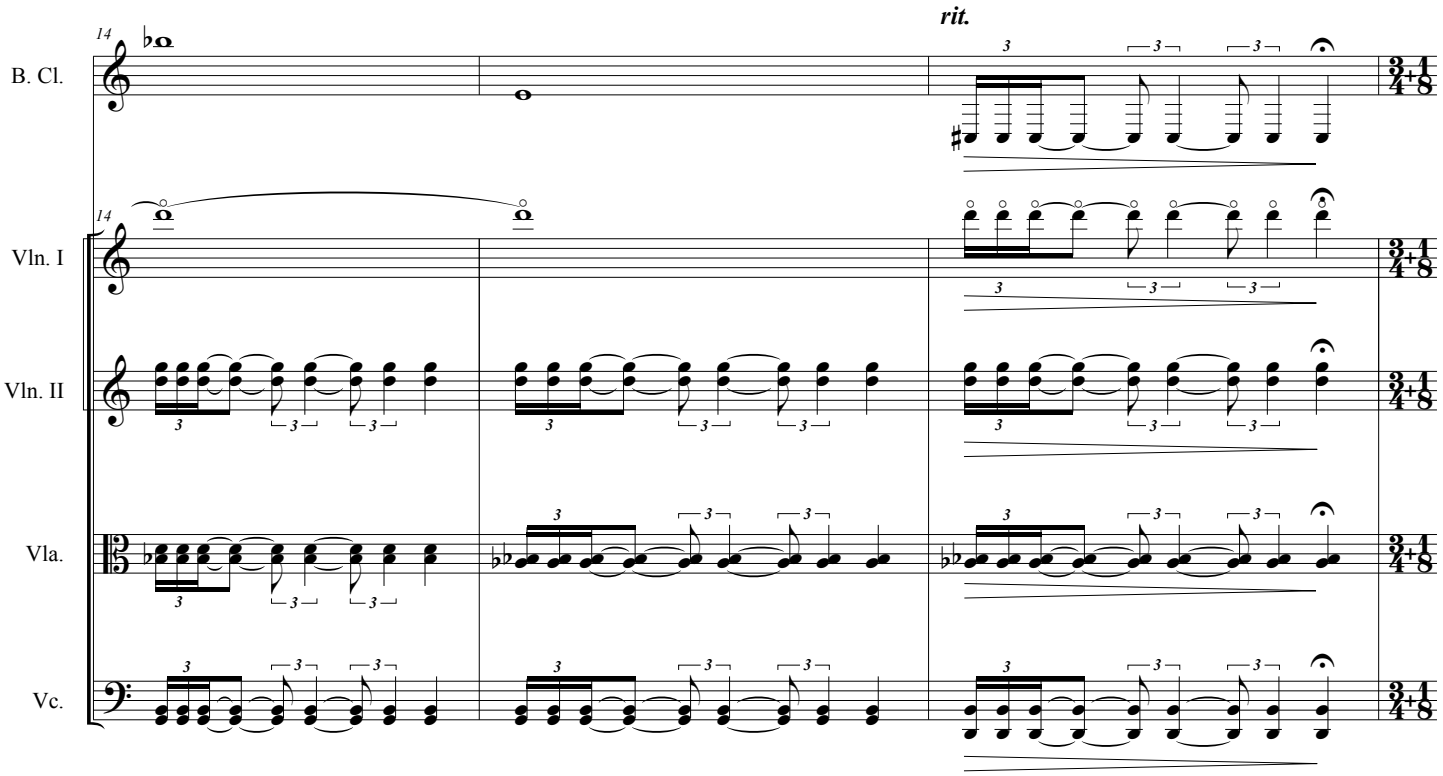
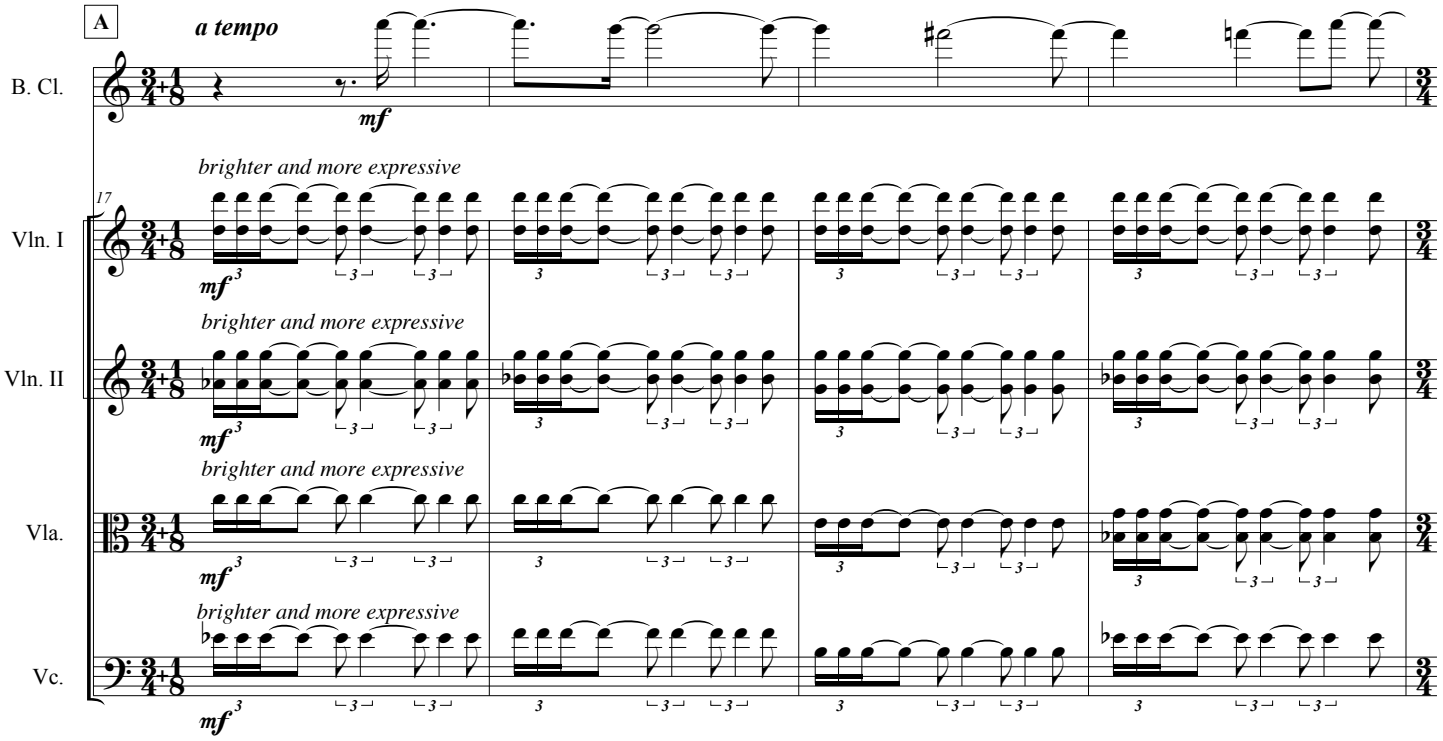
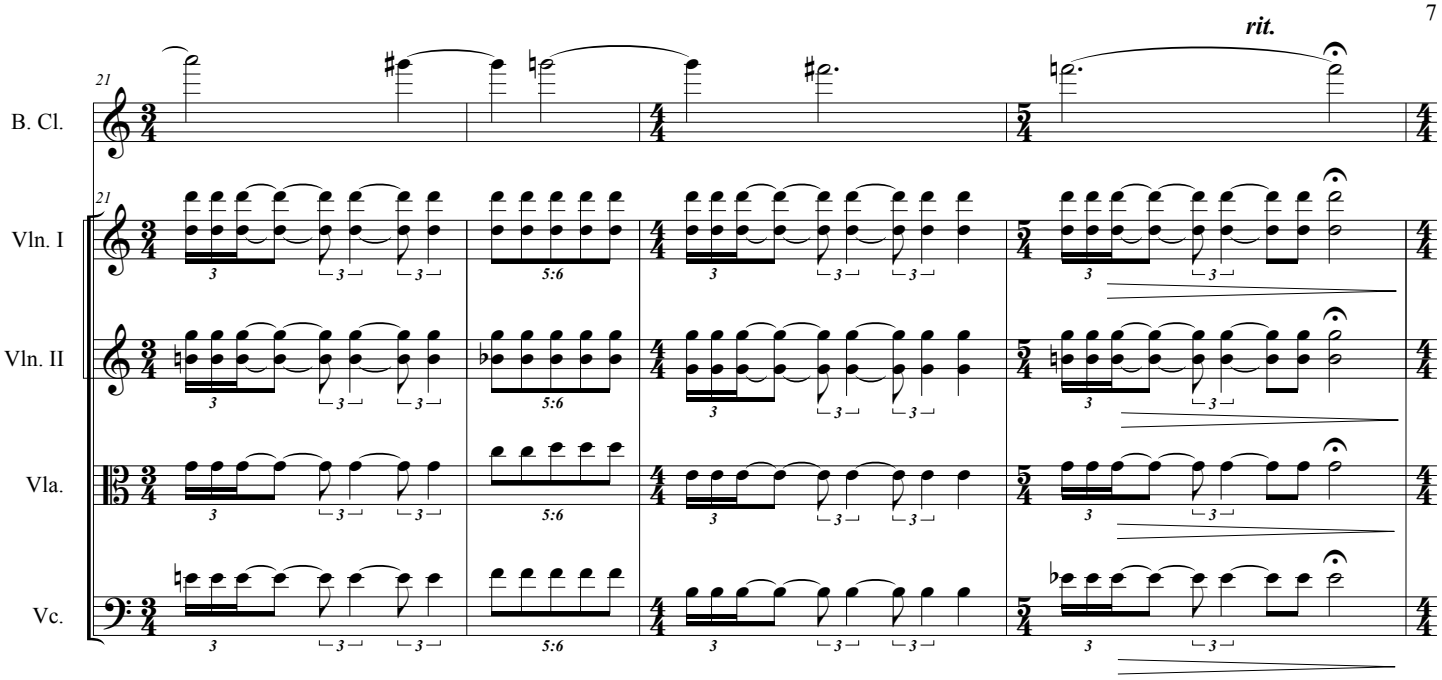
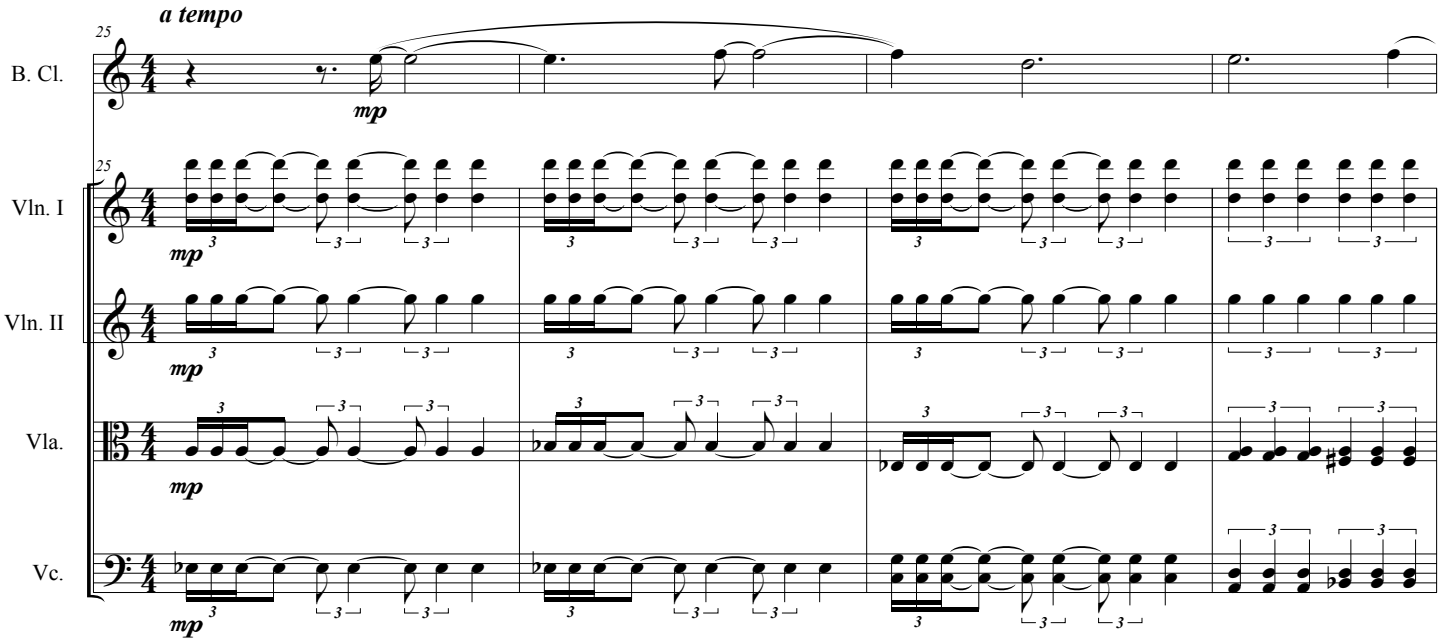

7
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
weightier again
floating again

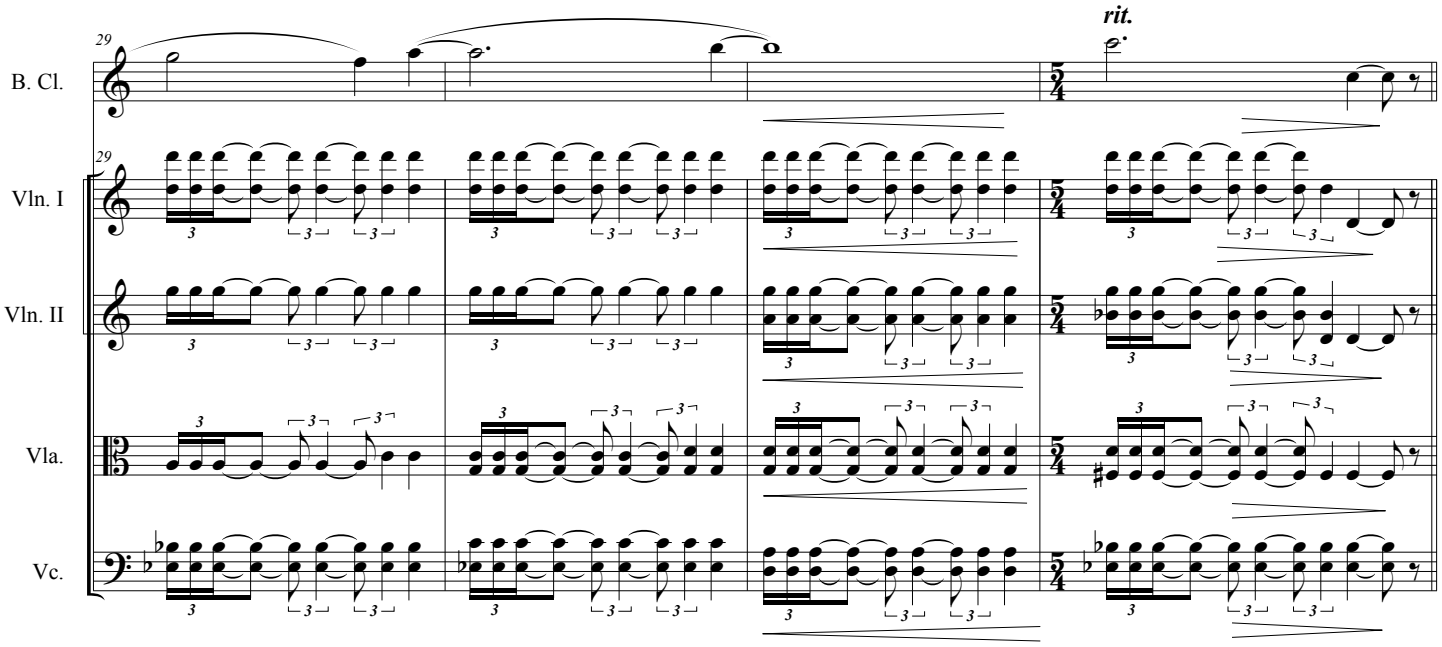

10
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
cresc.
sub pp

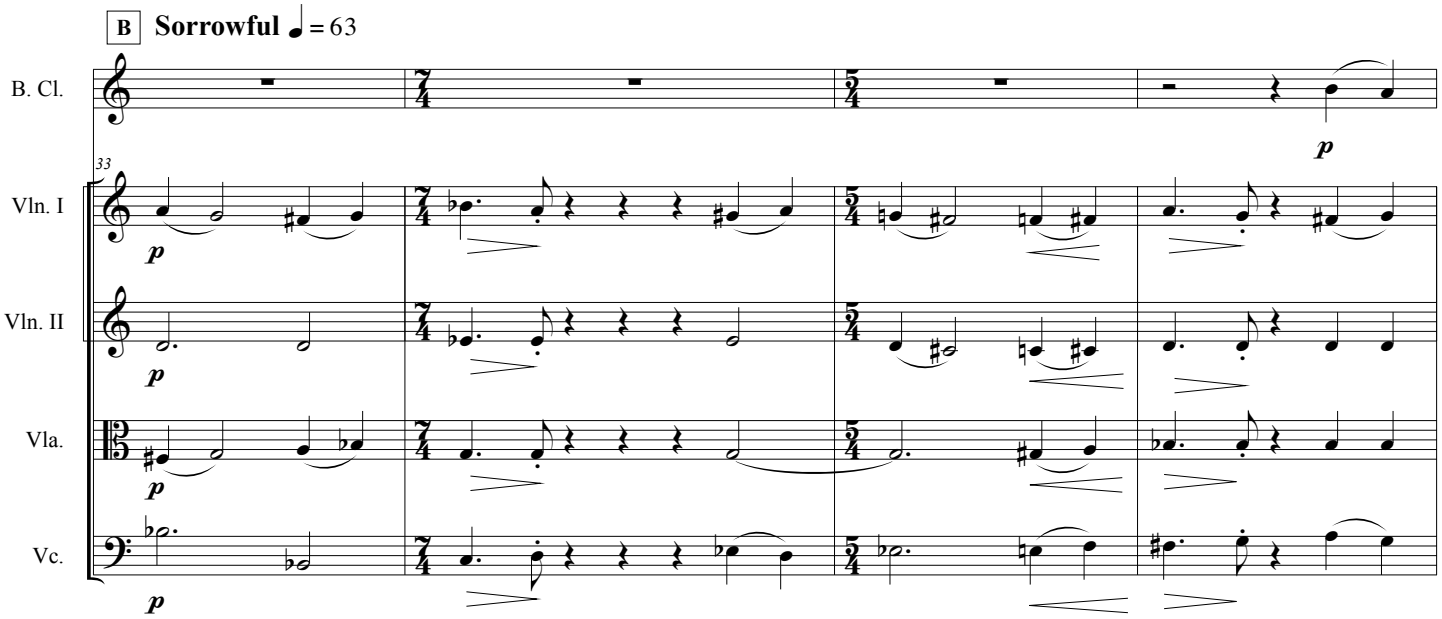

14
rit.
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

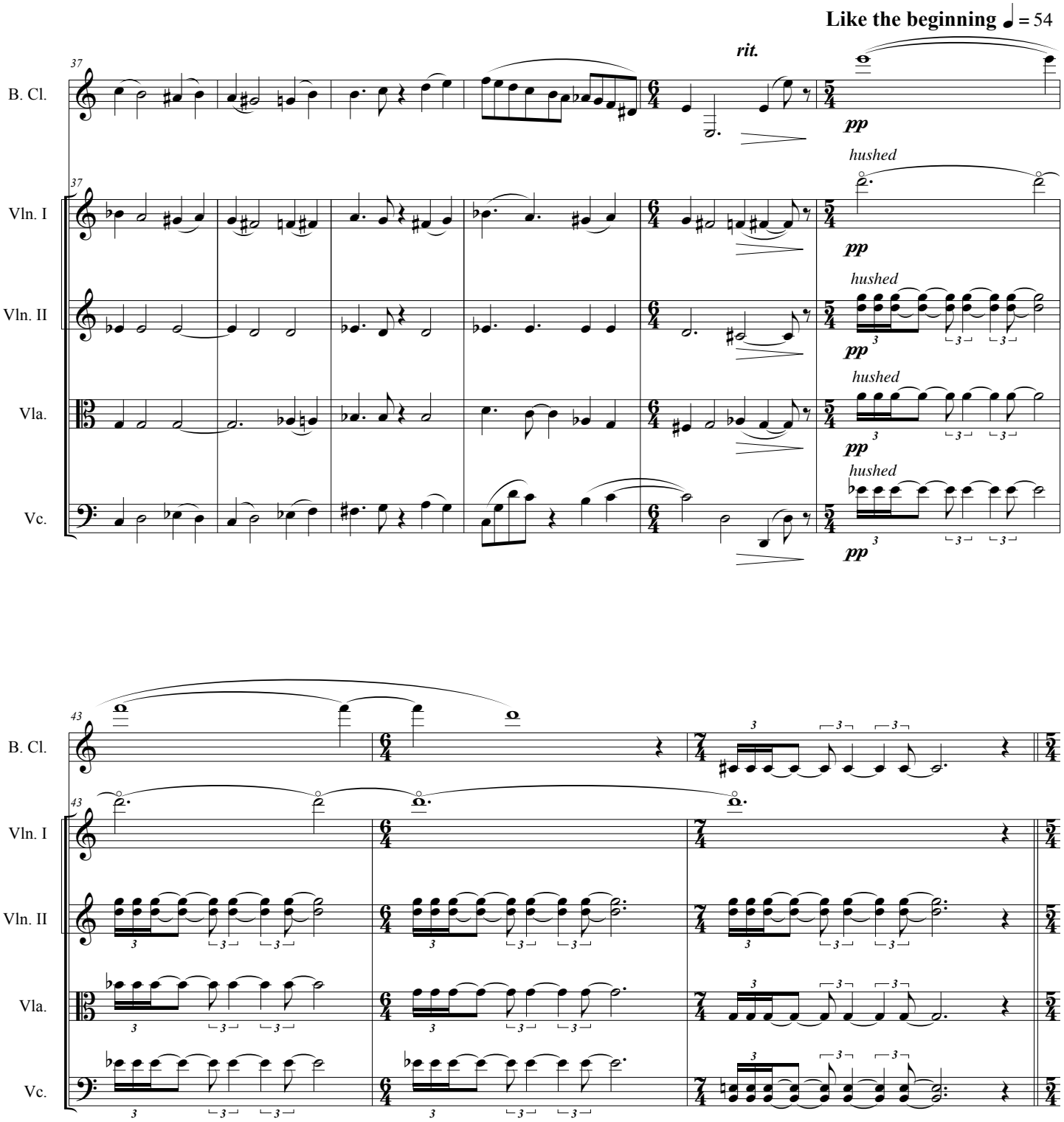

A
a tempo
mf
17
brighter and more expressive
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

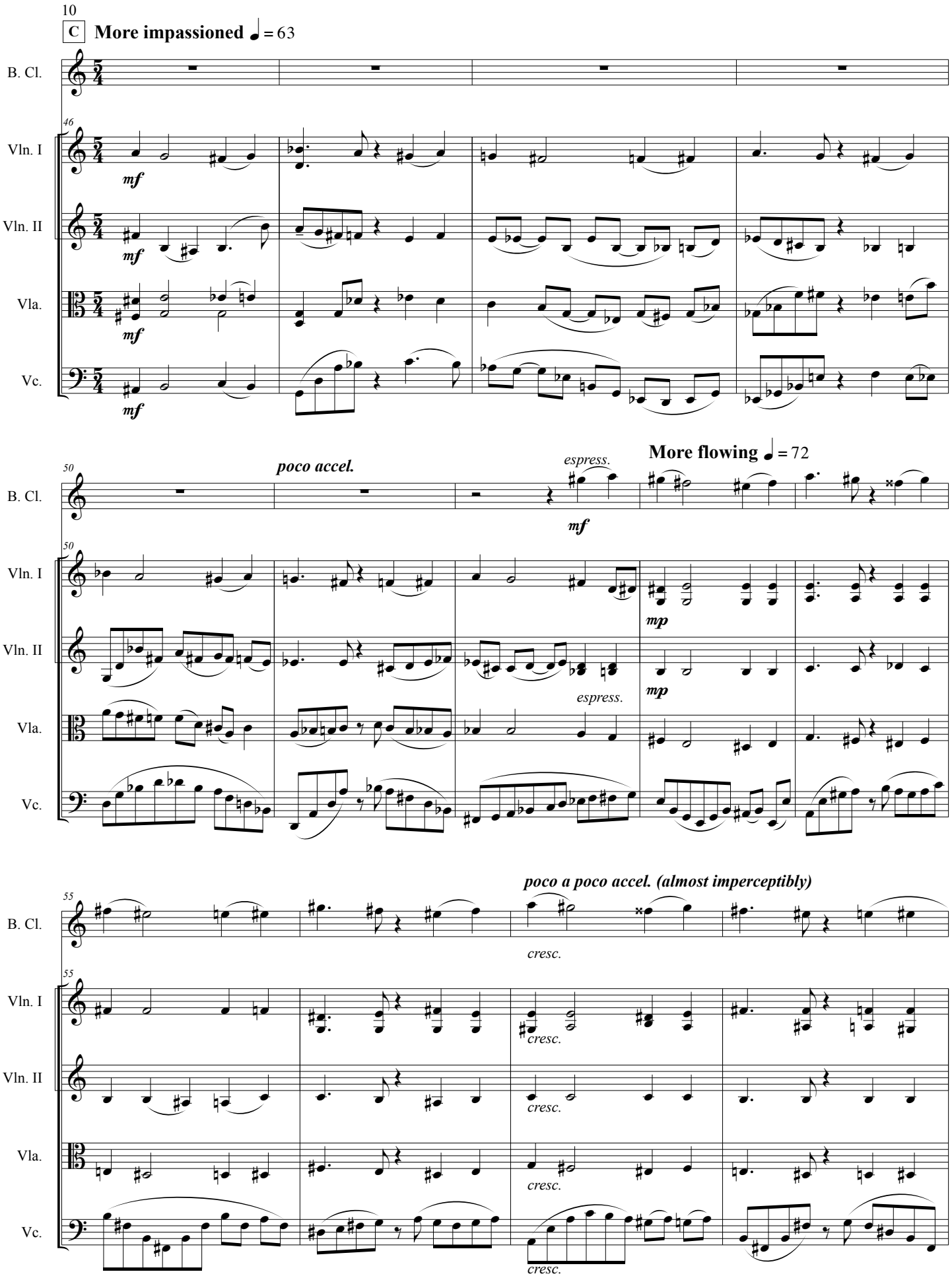

rit.
21
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
5:6

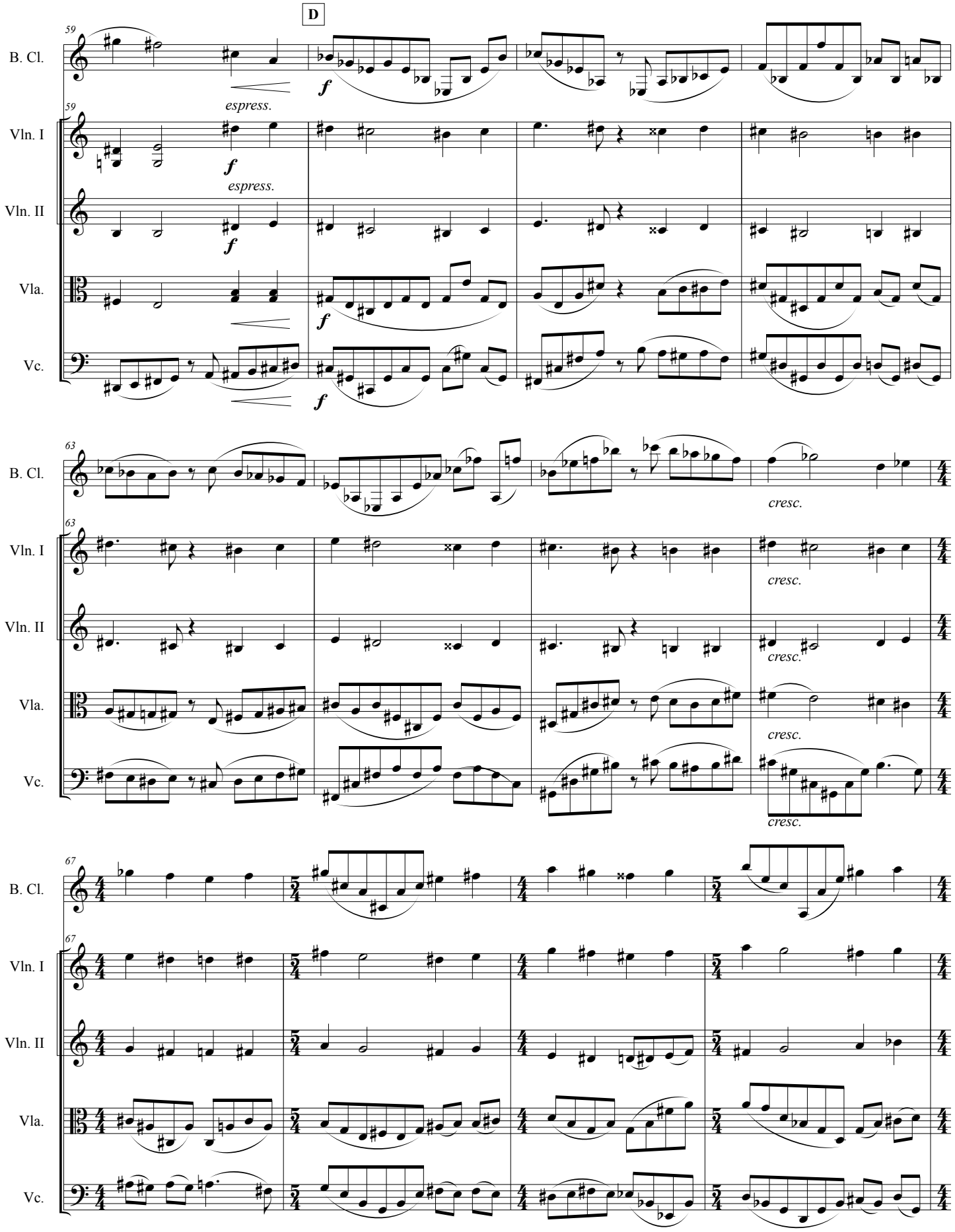

a tempo
25
B. Cl.
mp
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

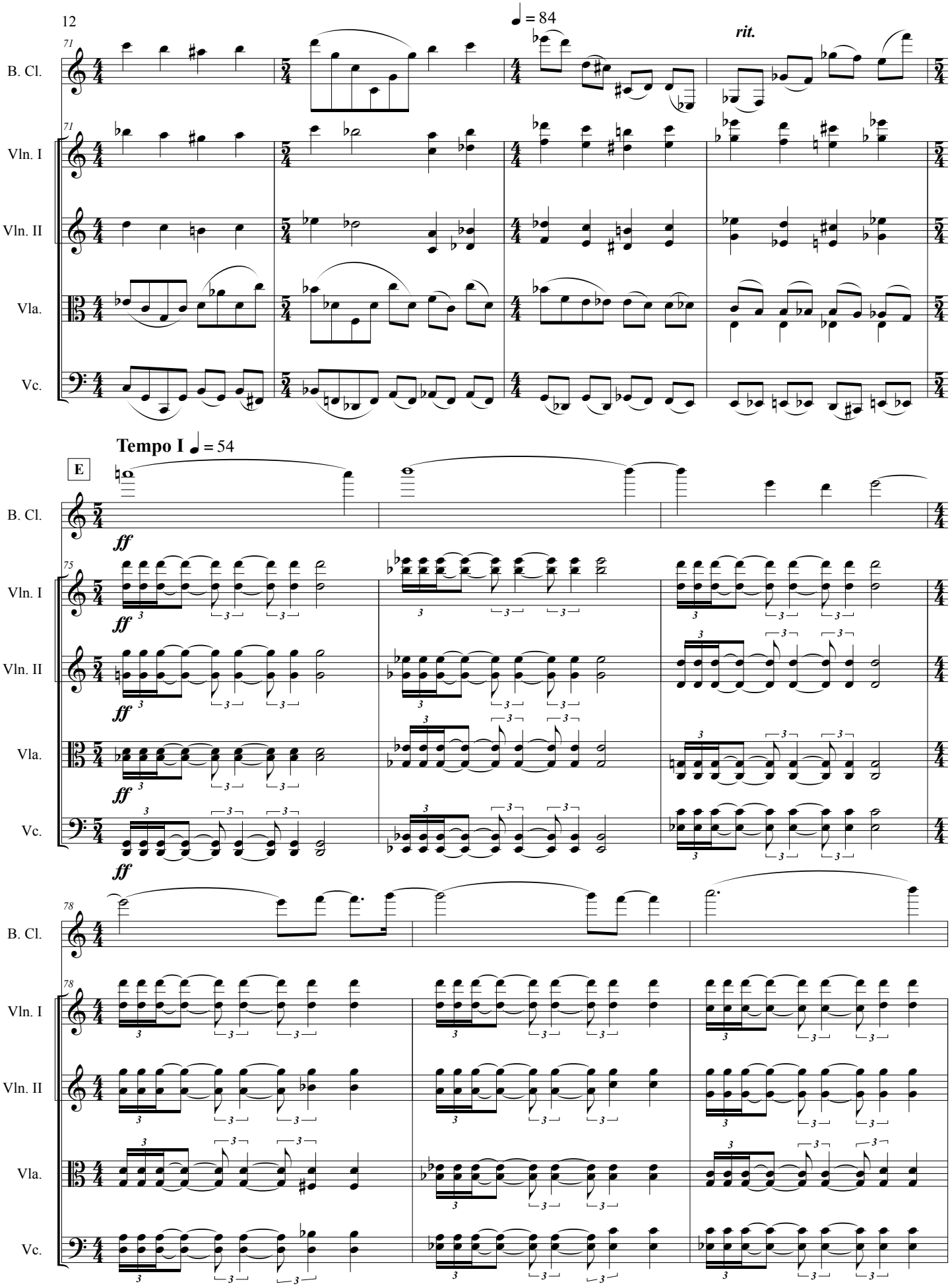

29
rit.
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

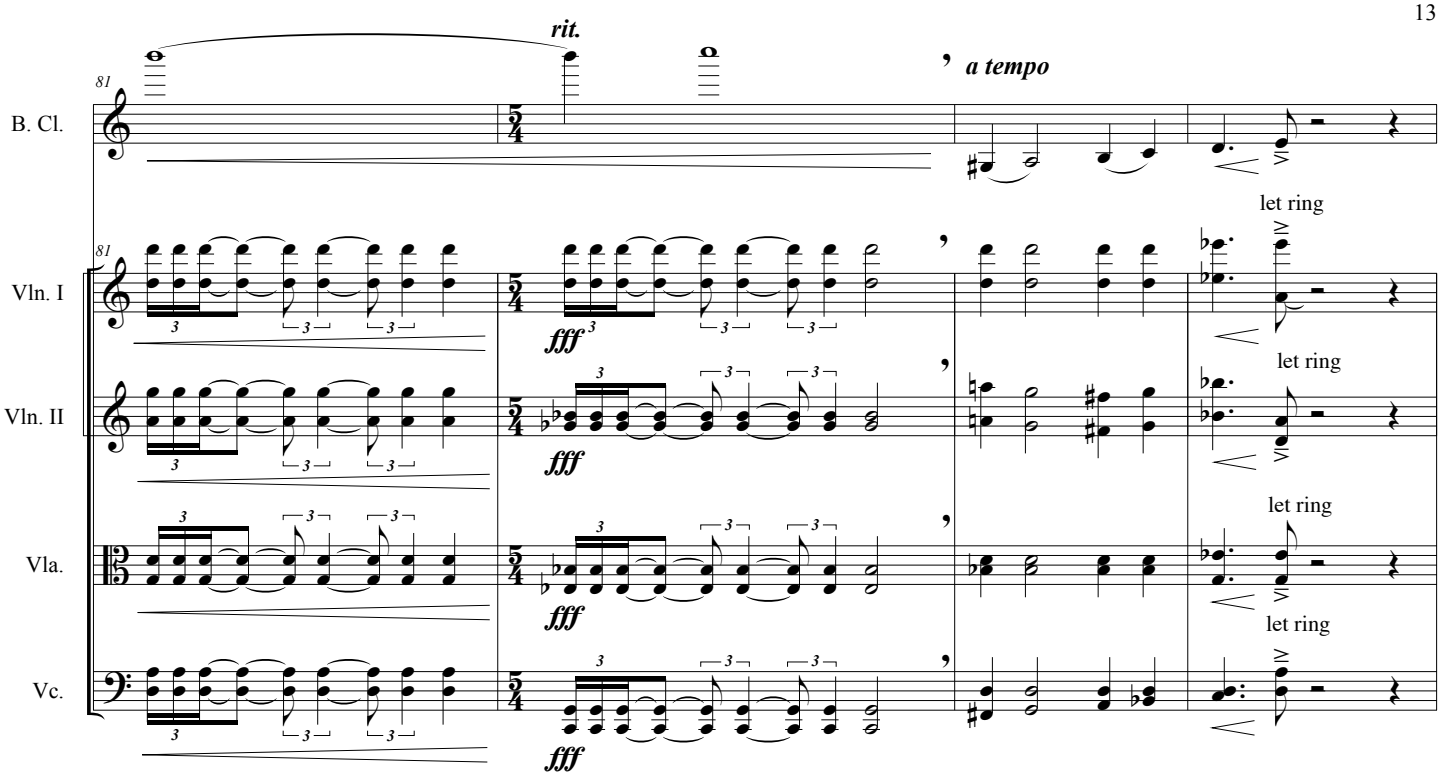

B
Sorrowful ♩ = 63
33
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
p

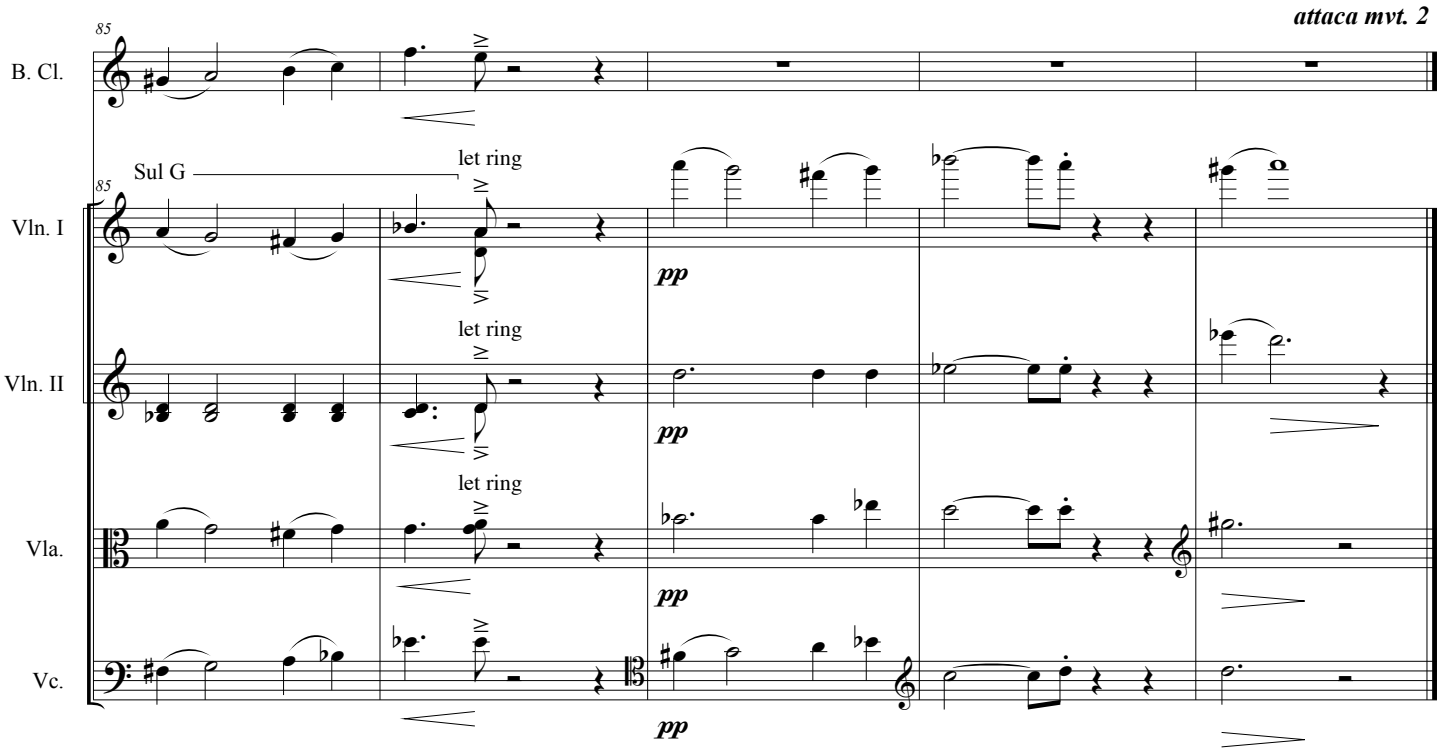

Like the beginning ♩ = 54
rit.
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
pp
hushed
37
43


C
More impassioned ♩ = 63
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
mf
poco accel.
espress.
More flowing ♩ = 72
mp
poco a poco accel. (almost imperceptibly)
cresc.


D
59
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
espress.
f
63
cresc.
67

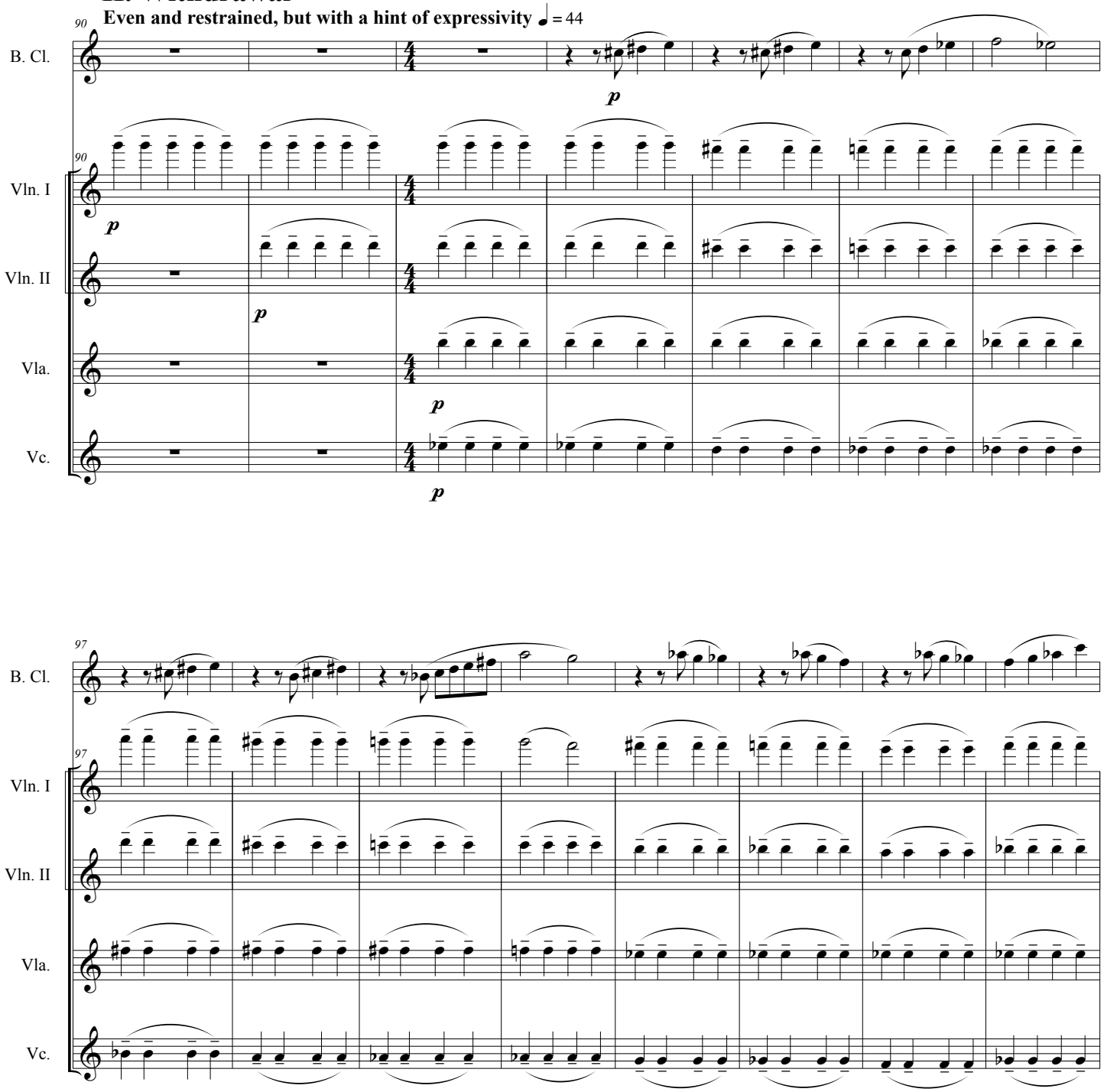

71
♩ = 84
rit.
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
Tempo I ♩ = 54
E
ff
75
78

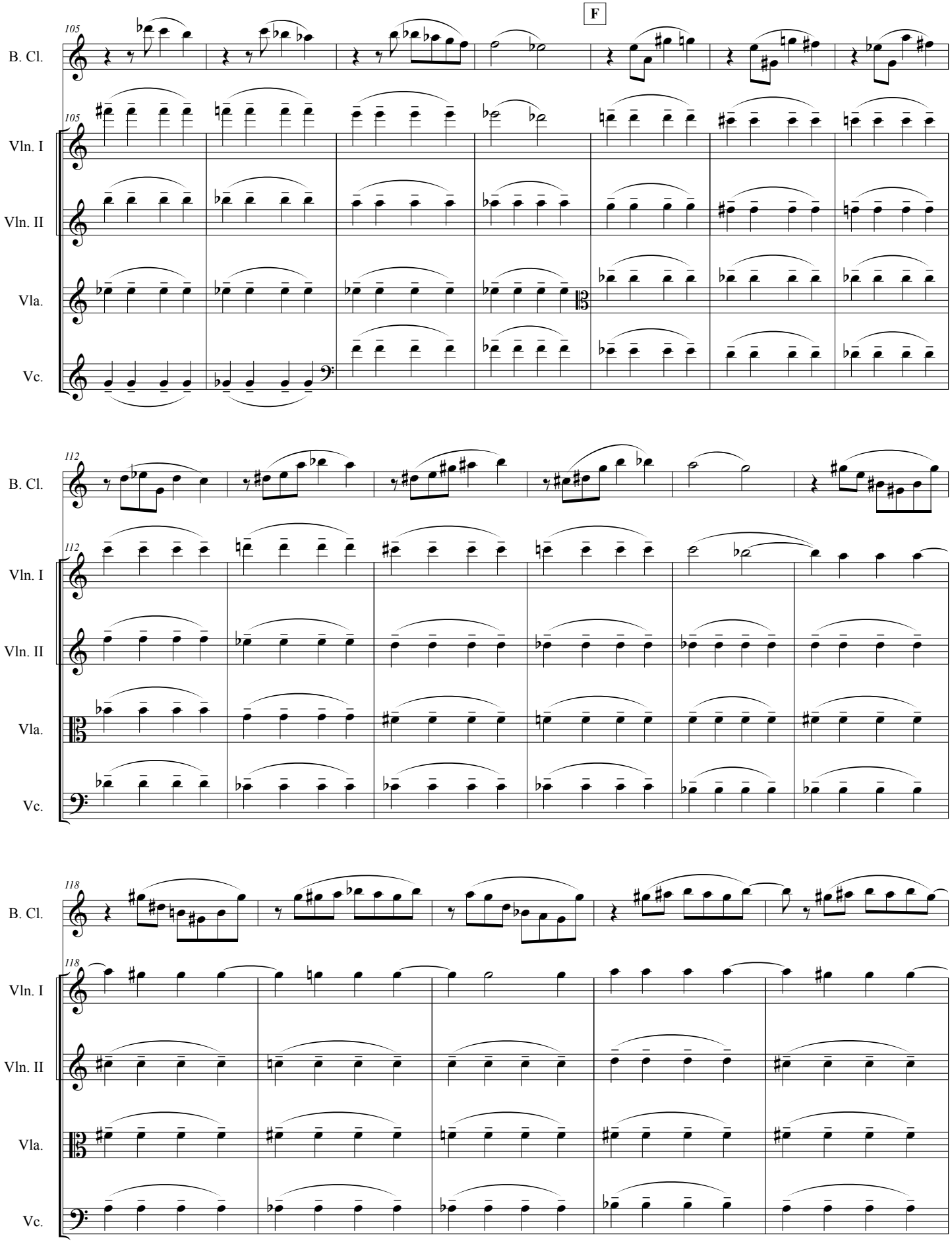

rit.
a tempo
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
let ring
fff

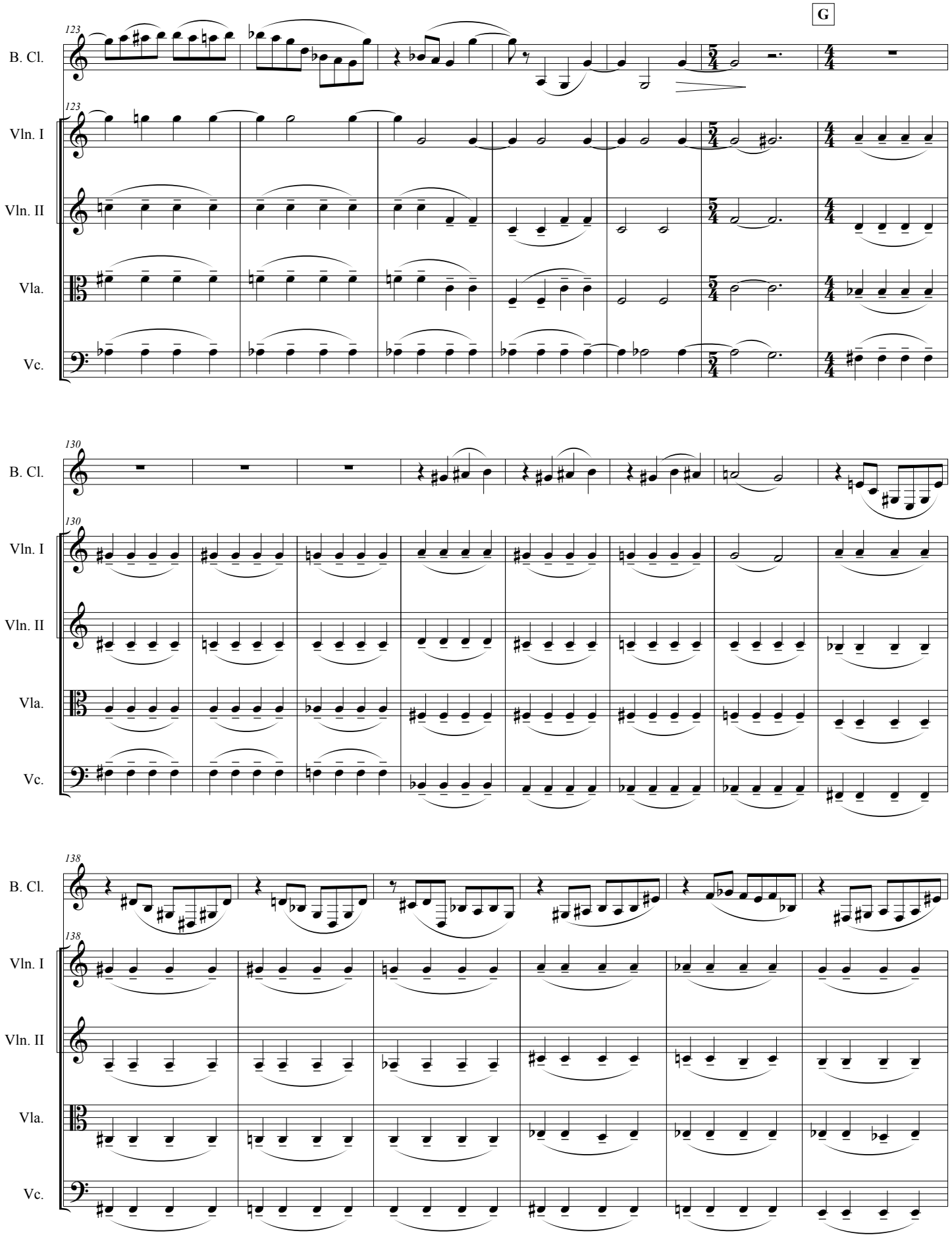

attaca mvt. 2
B. Cl.
Sul G
let ring
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
pp

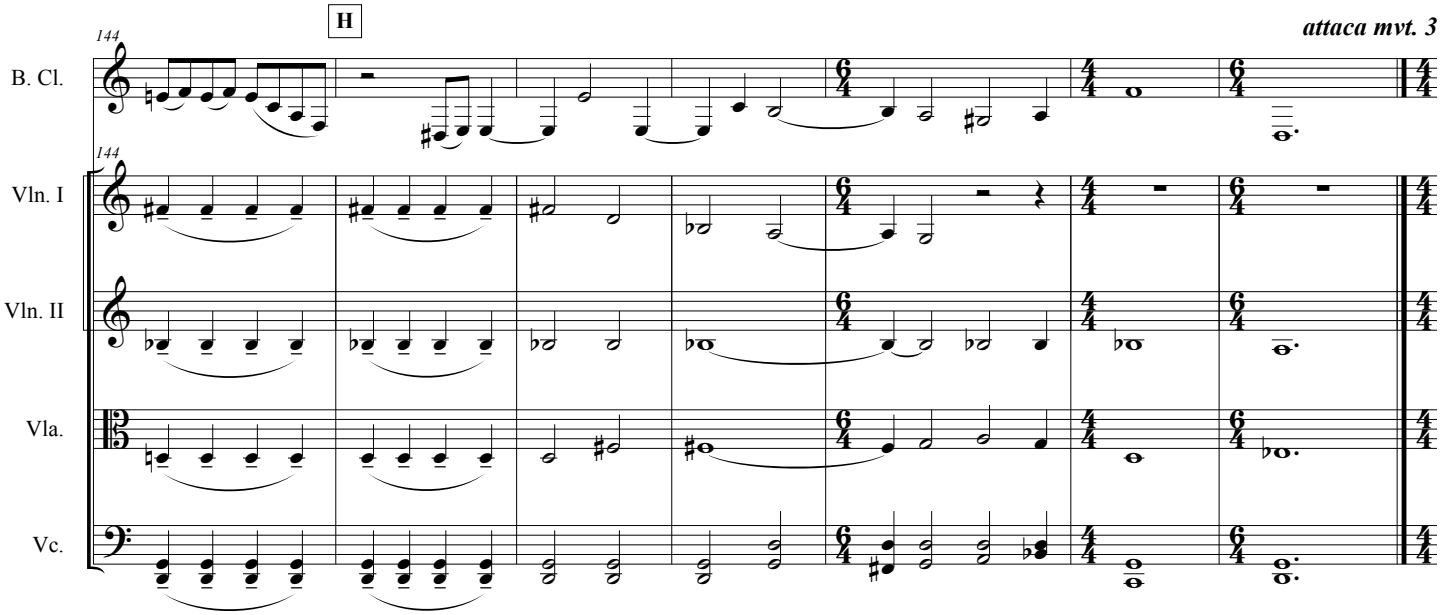
II. Withdrawal

Even and restrained, but with a hint of expressivity ♩ = 44



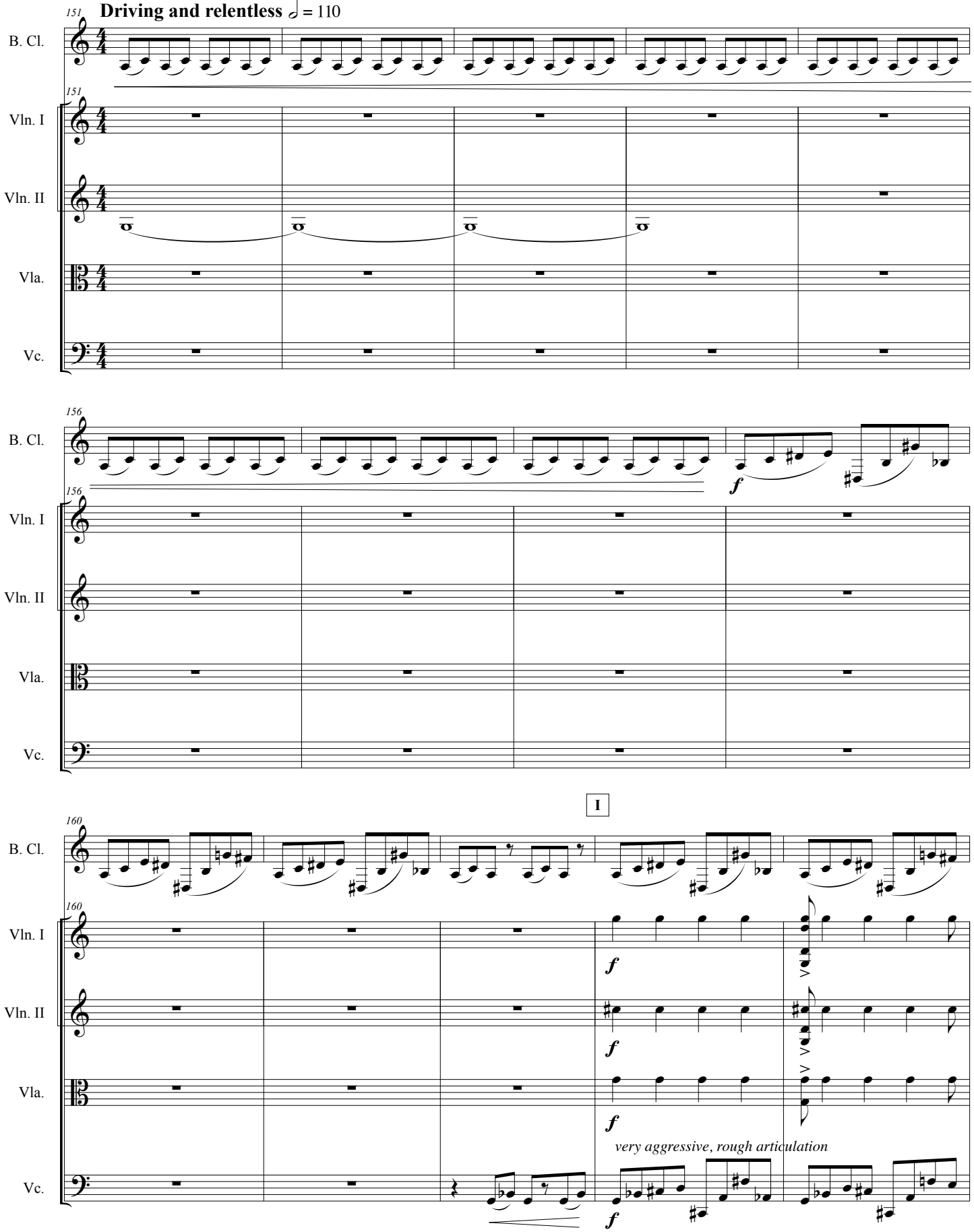

F
105
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
112
118

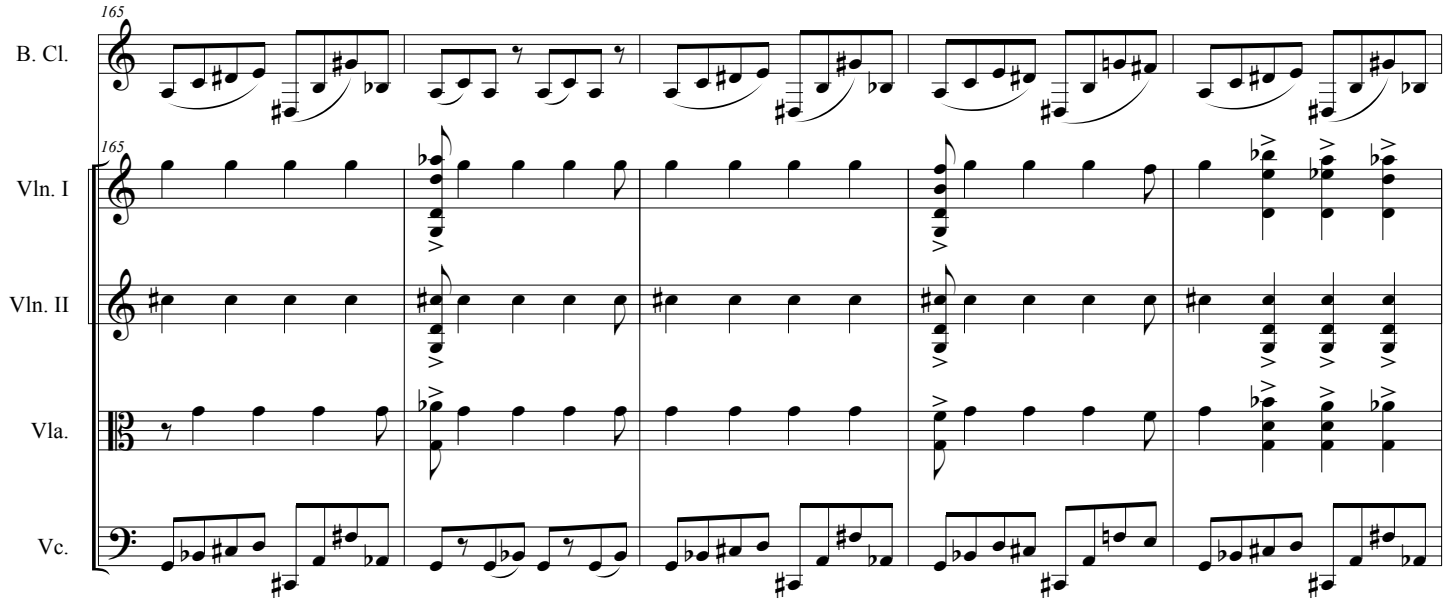

G
123
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
130
138

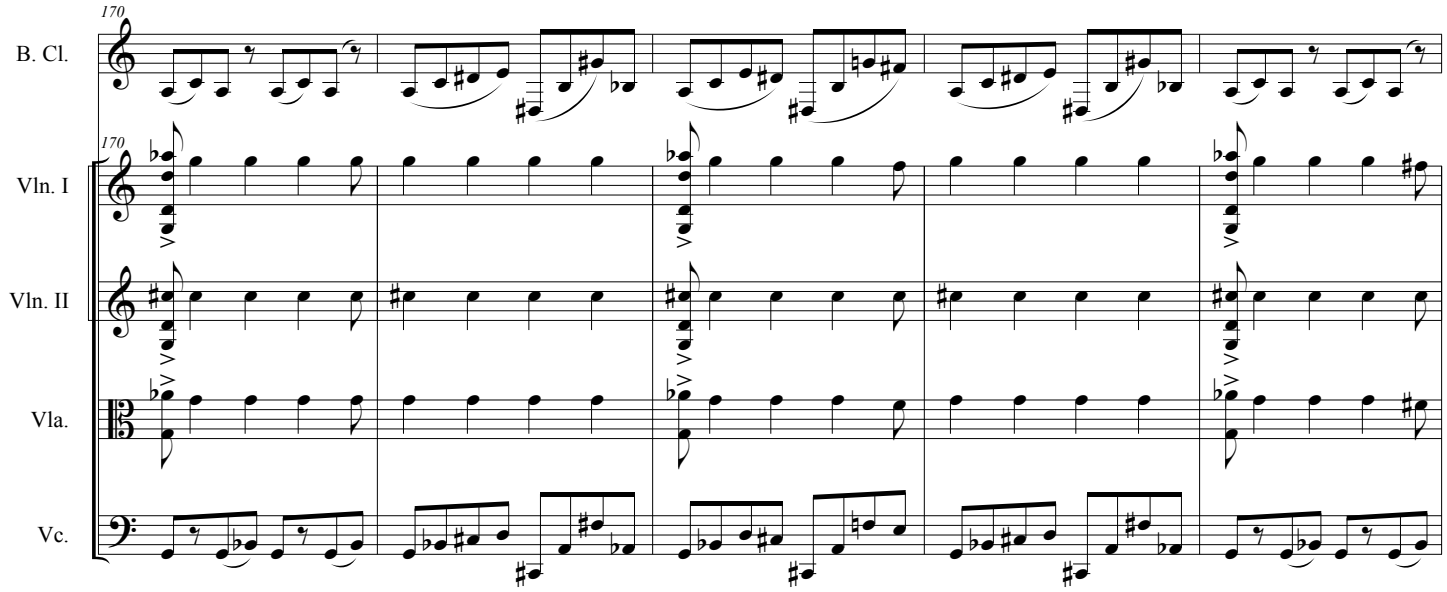

H
attaca mvt. 3
144
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

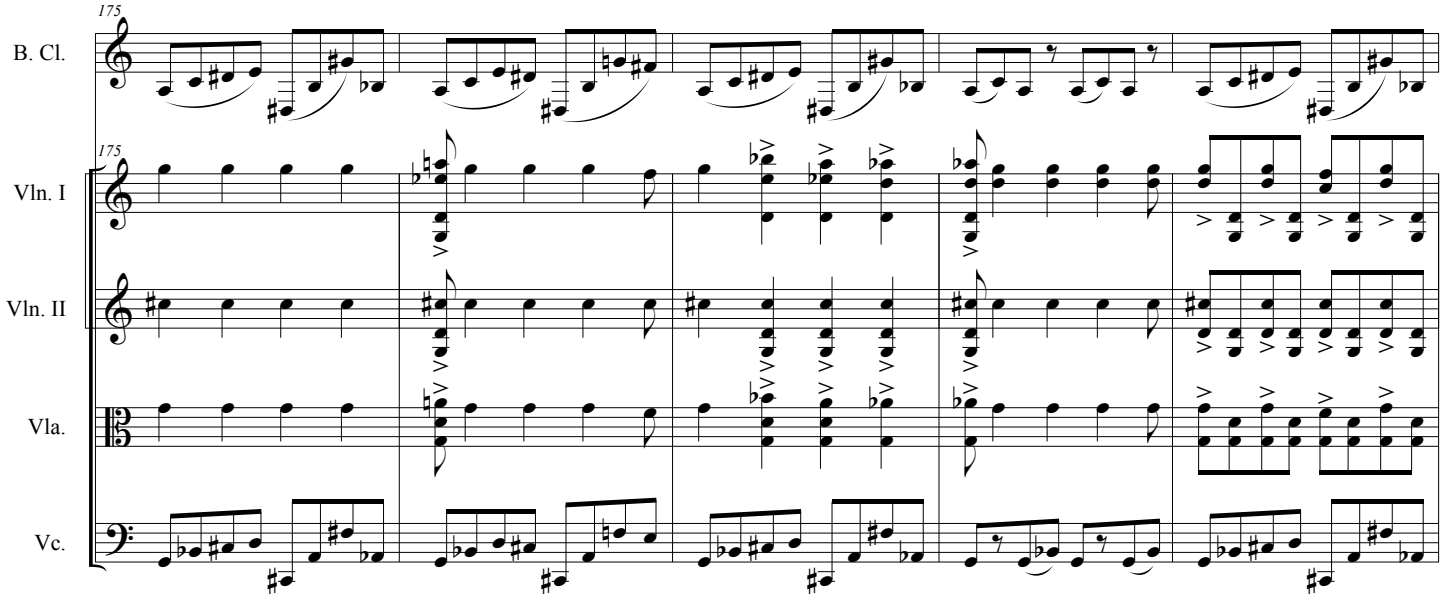
III. Rage

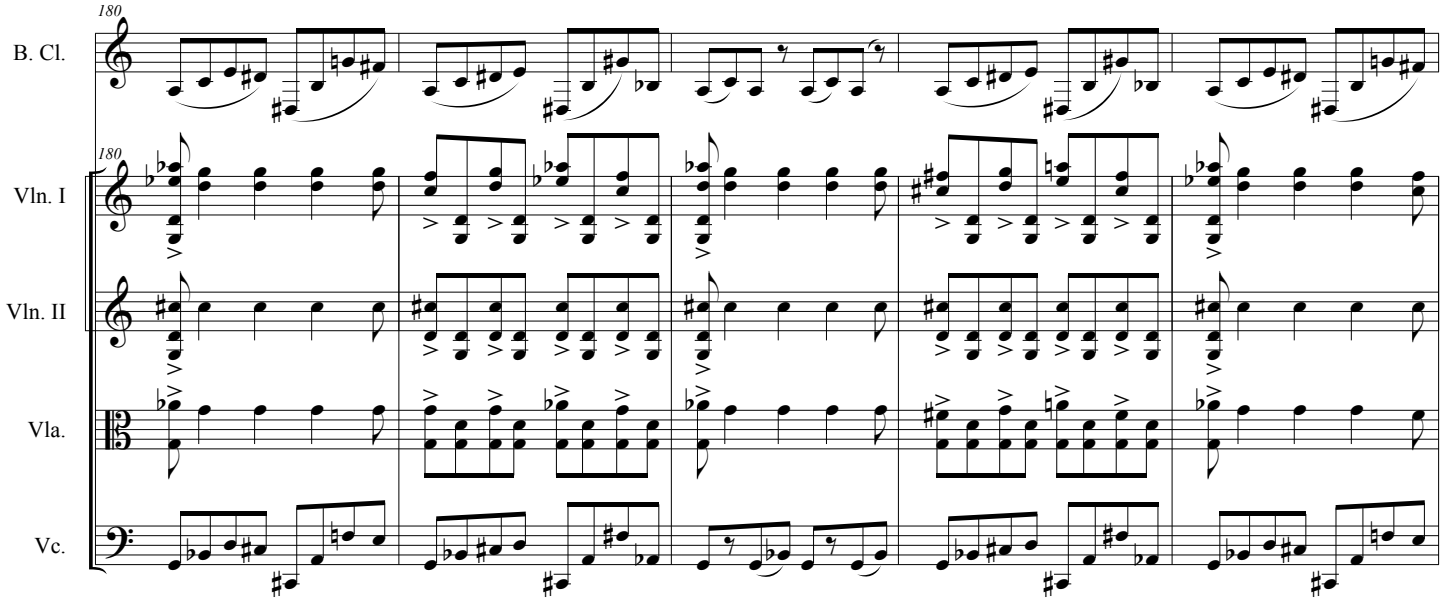
Driving and relentless 𝅗𝅥 = 110

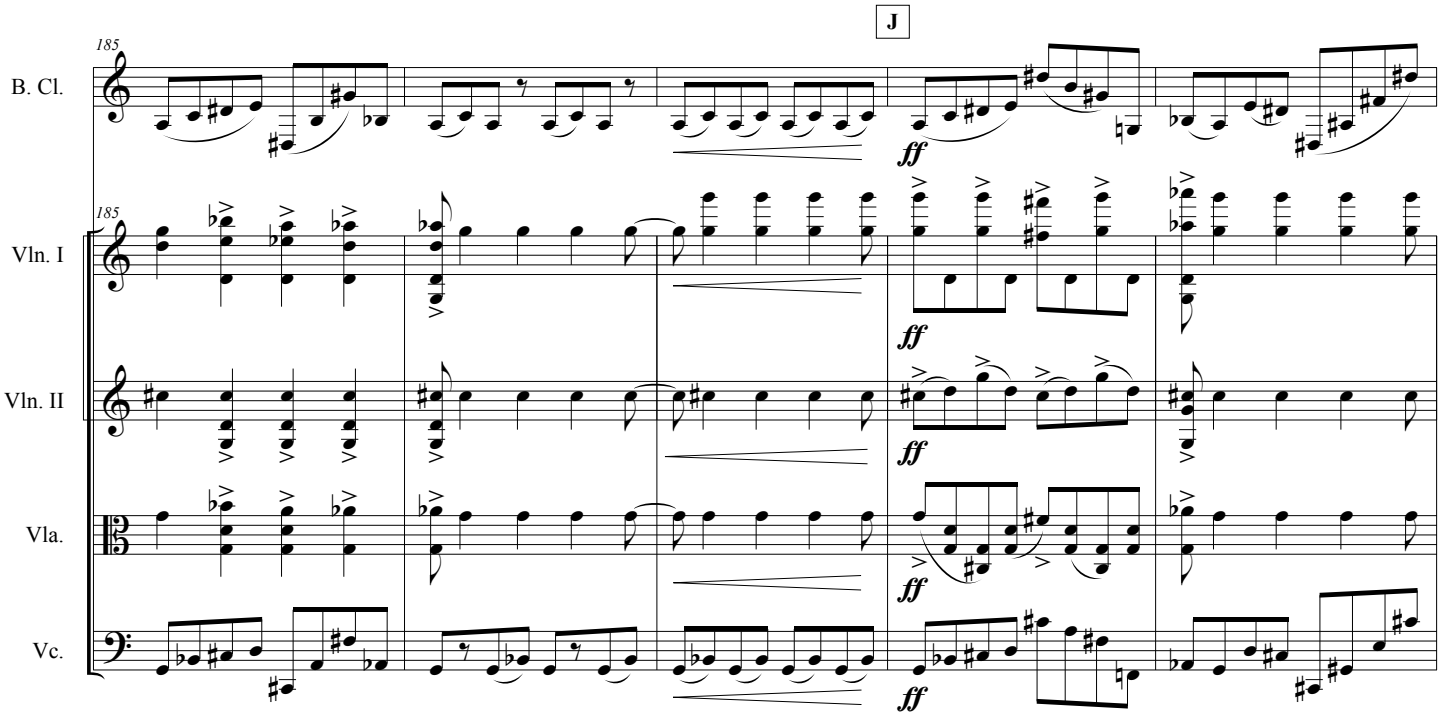


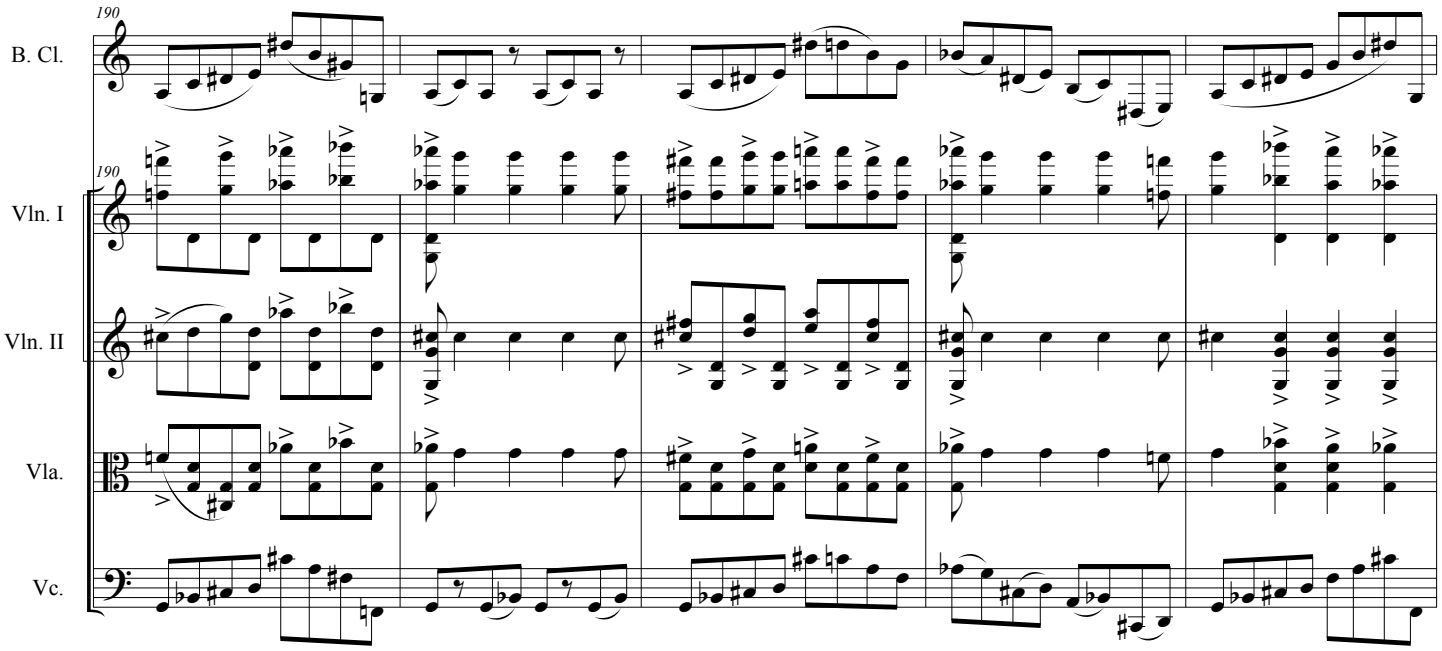

165
B. Cl.
165
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

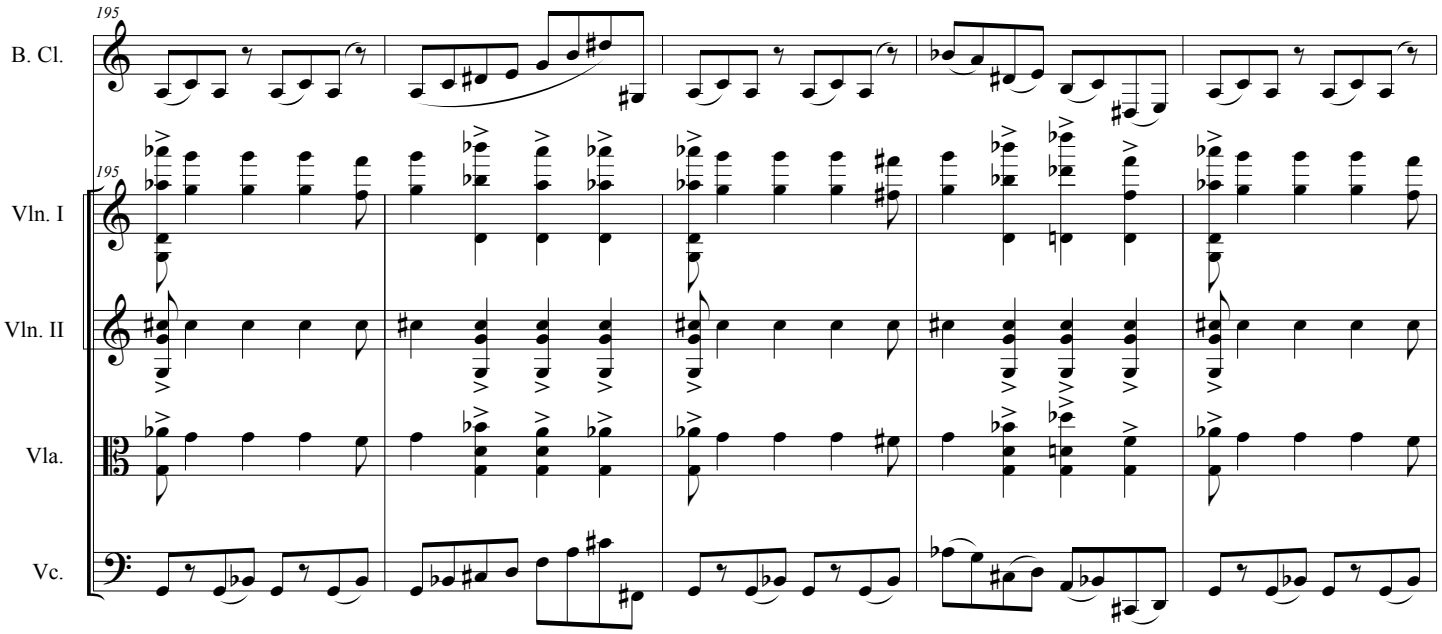

170
B. Cl.
170
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

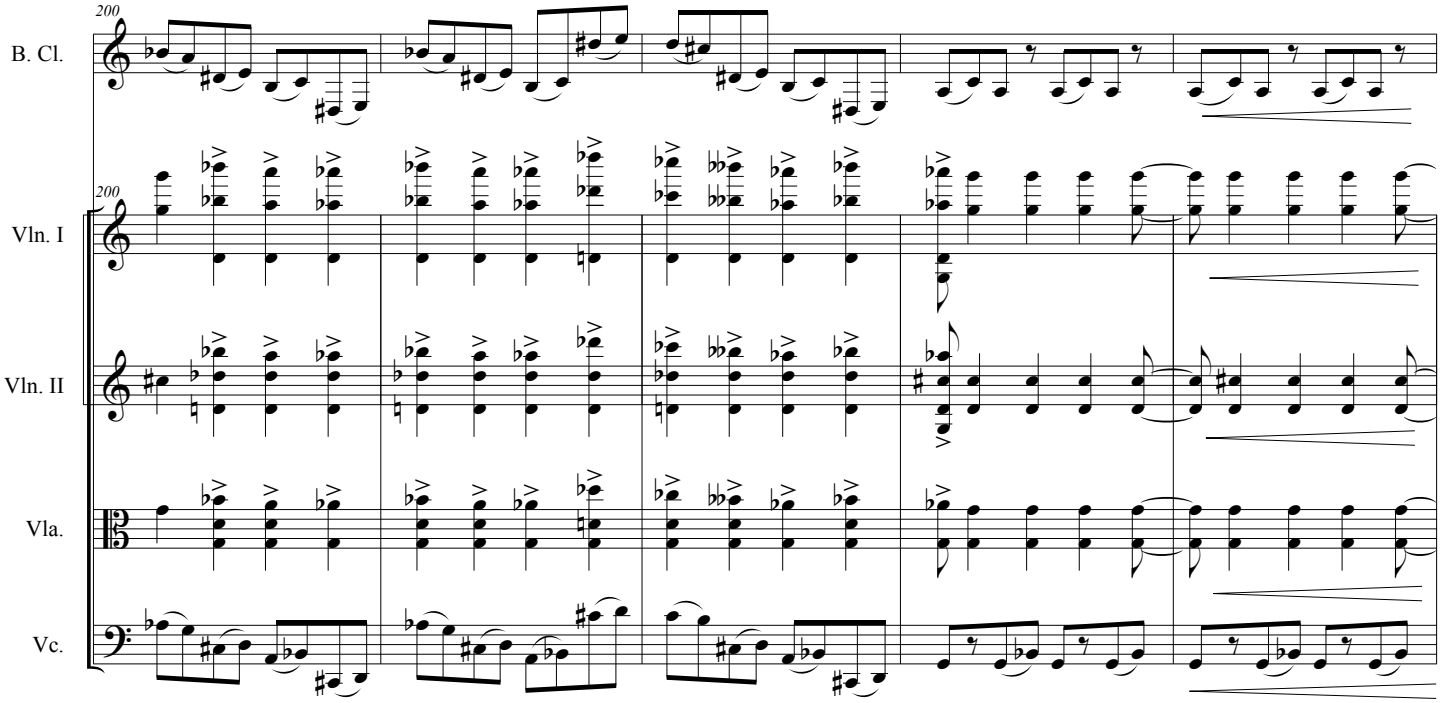

175
B. Cl.
175
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

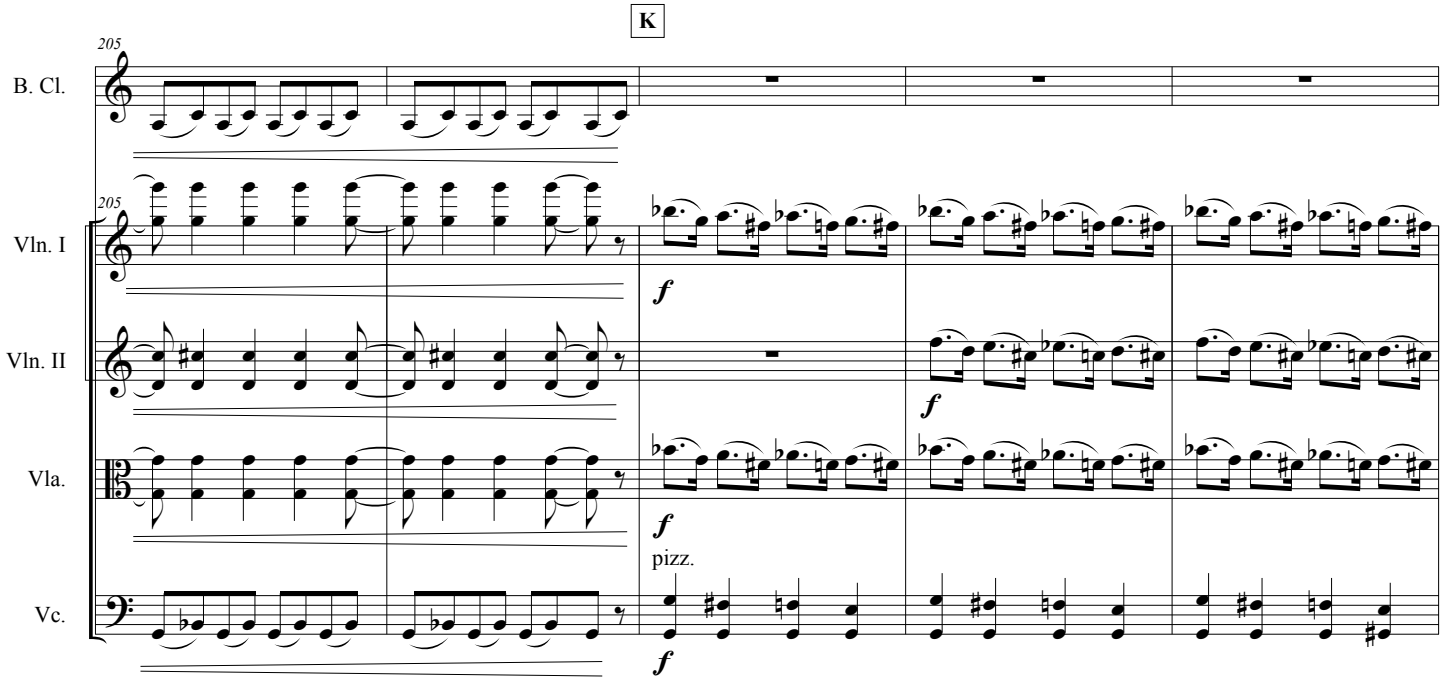

180
B. Cl.
180
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

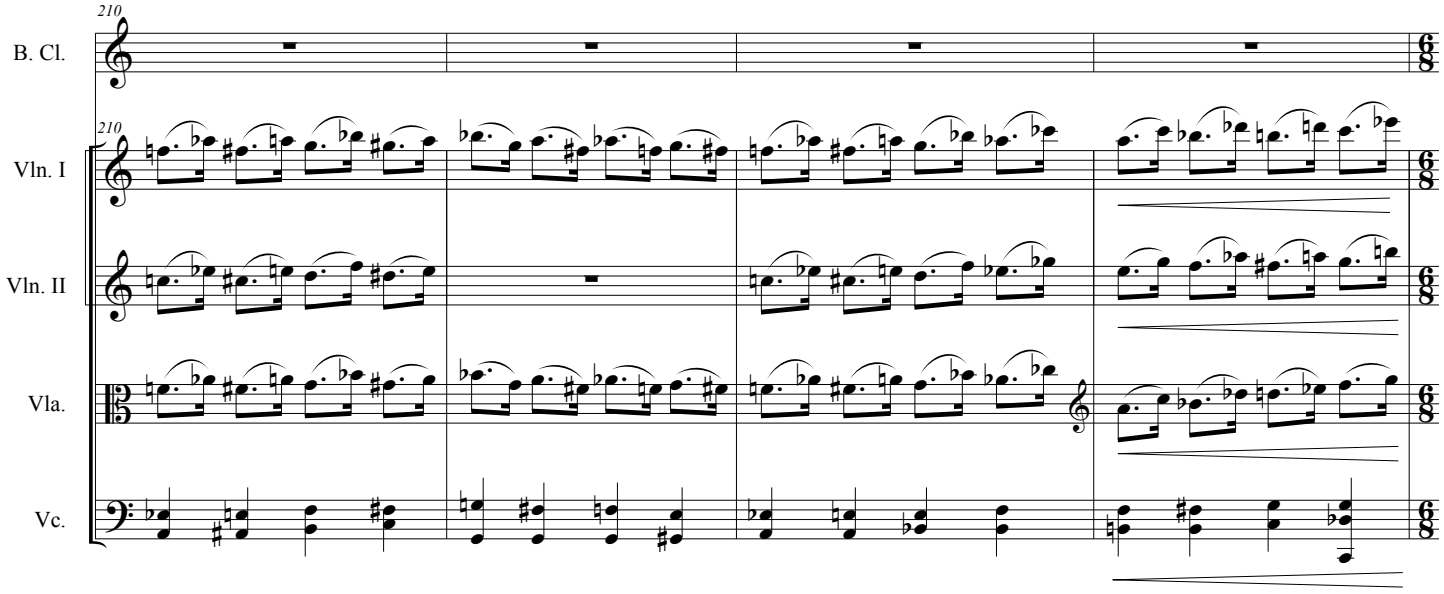

J
185
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
ff

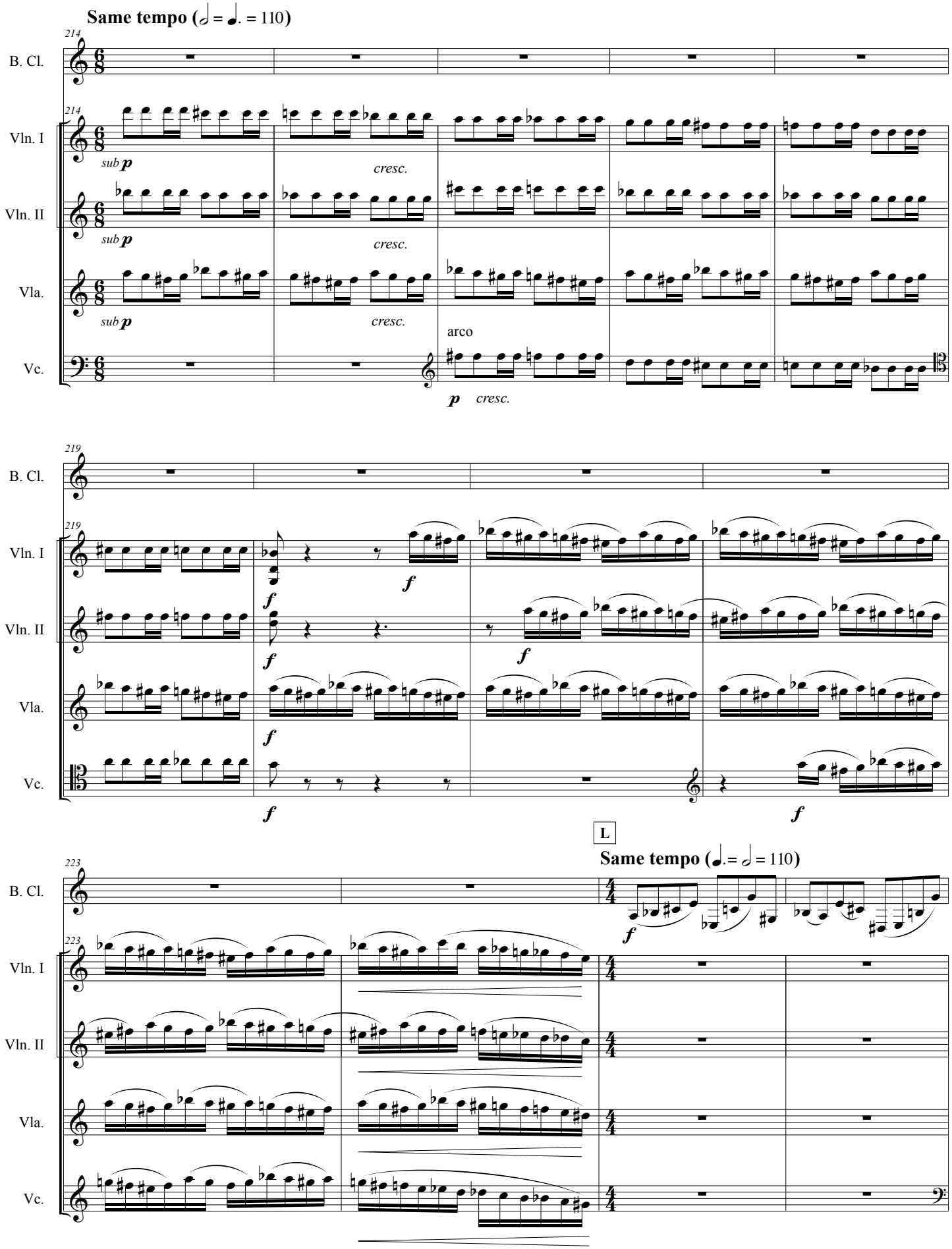

190
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

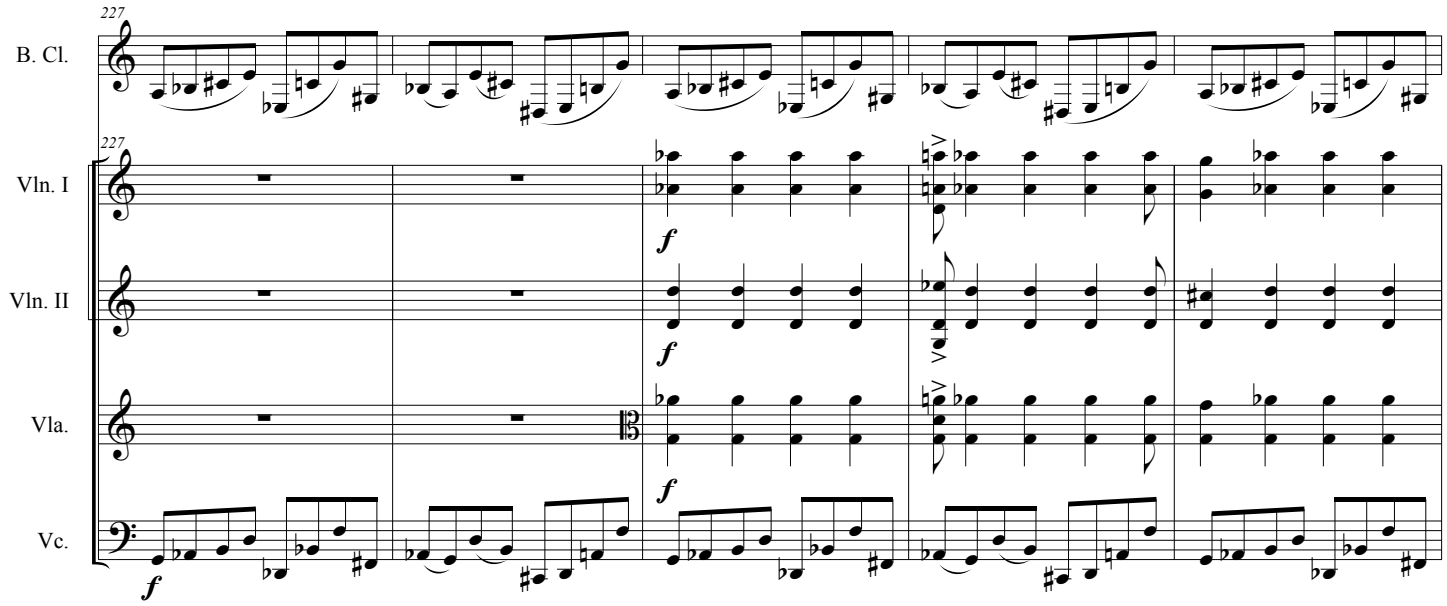

195
B. Cl.
195
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

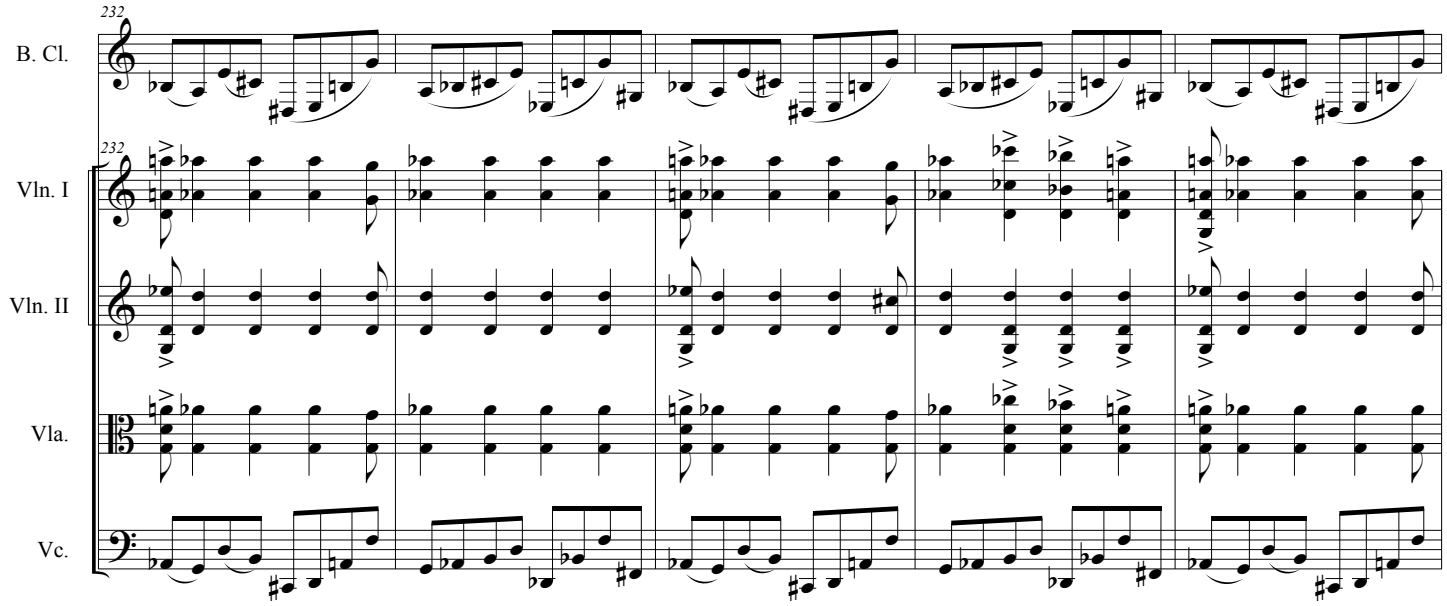

200
B. Cl.
200
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

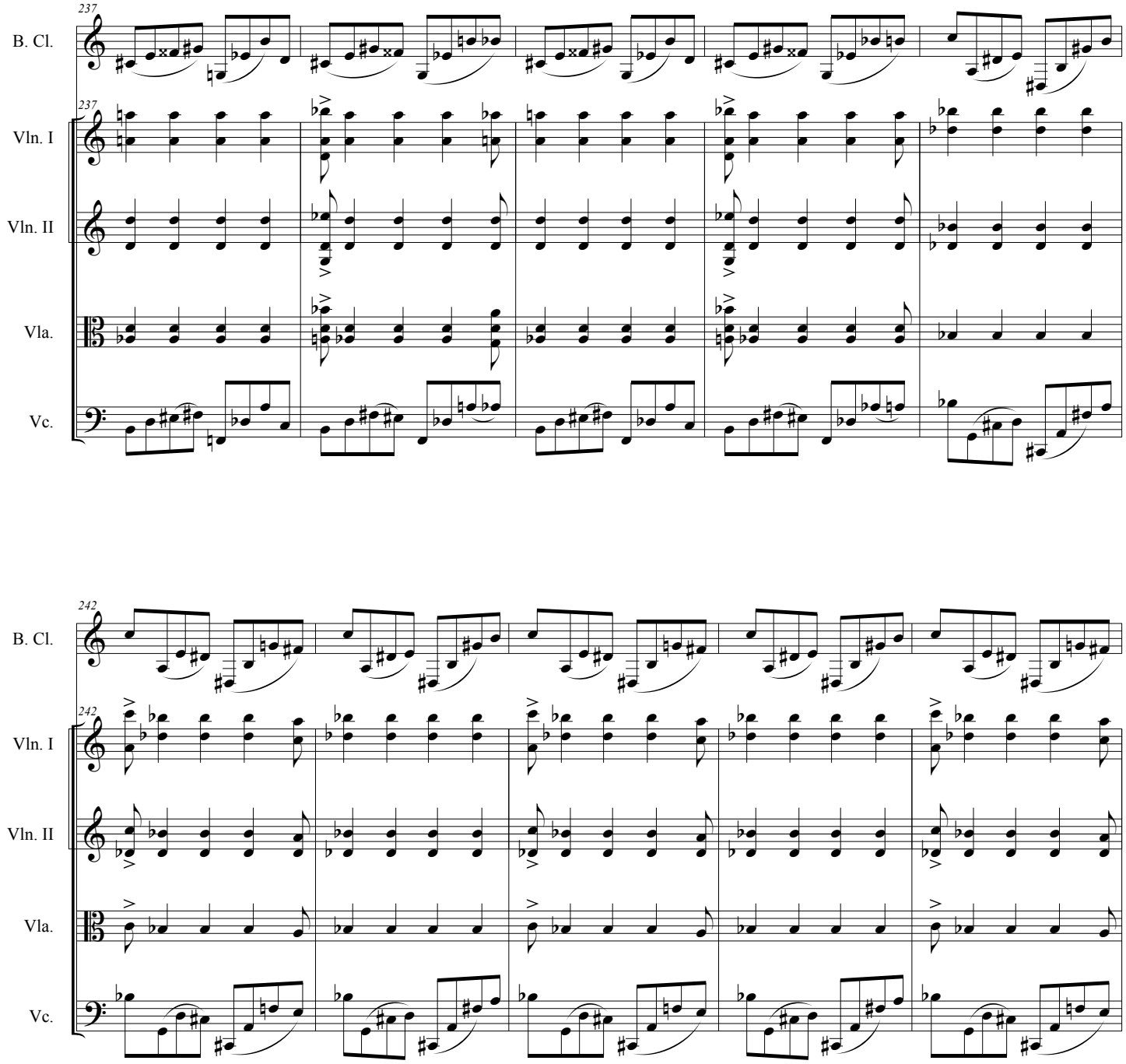

K
205
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
f
pizz.

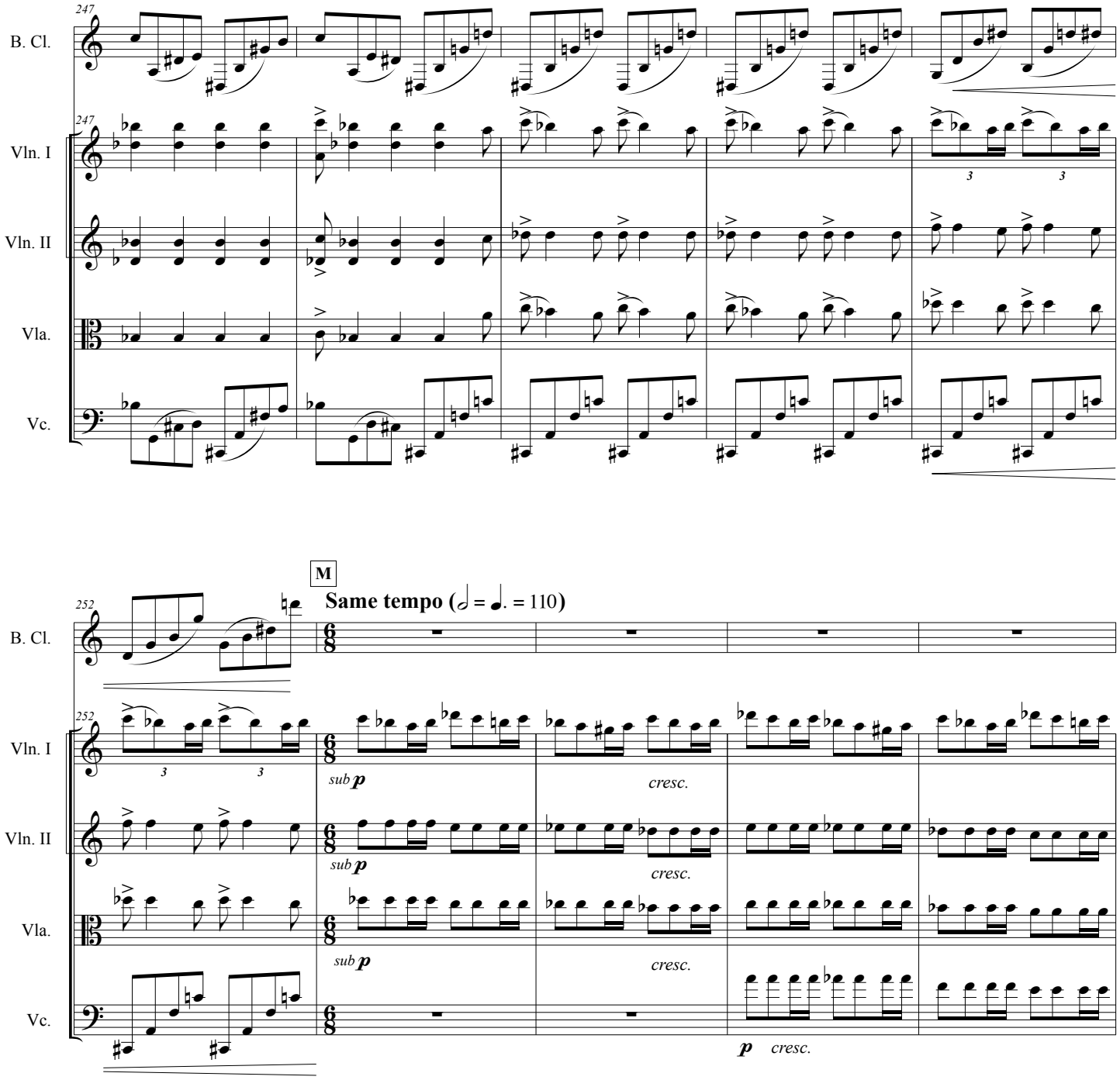

210
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

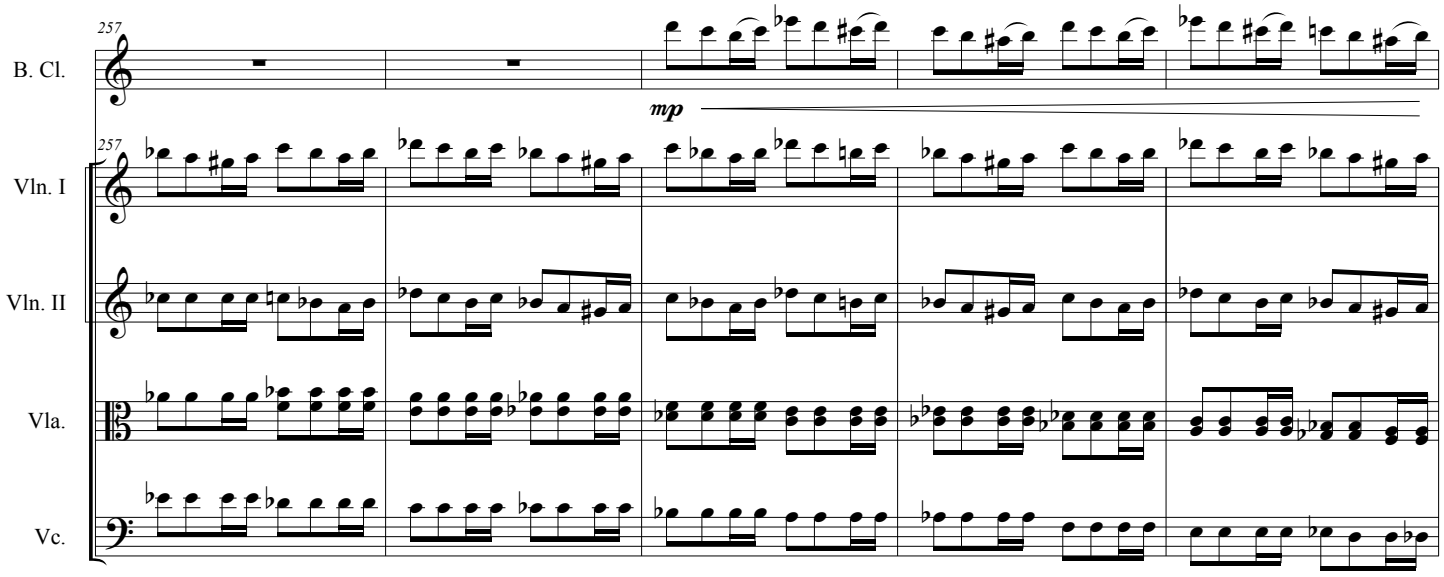

Same tempo (𝅗𝅥 = ♩. = 110)
214
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
sub p
cresc.
arco
p
219
f
L
Same tempo (♩. = 𝅗𝅥 = 110)
223

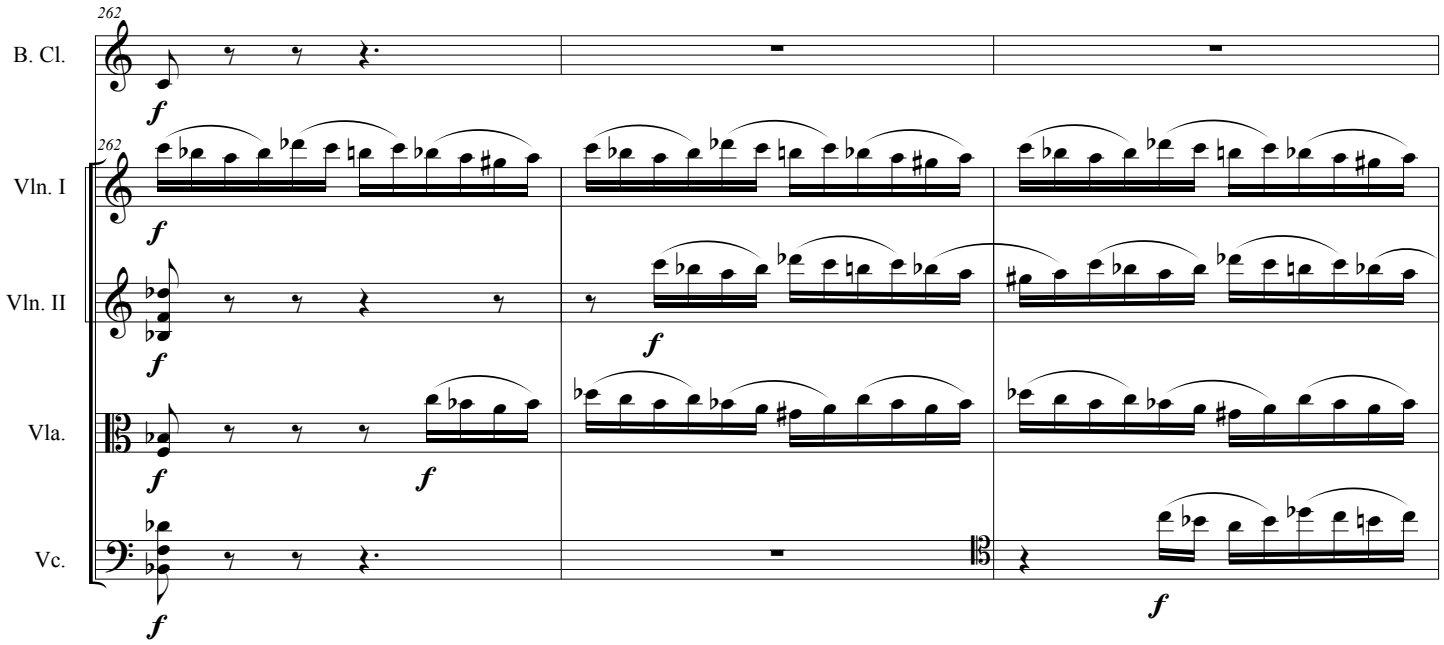

227
B. Cl.
227
Vln. I
f
Vln. II
f
Vla.
f
Vc.
f

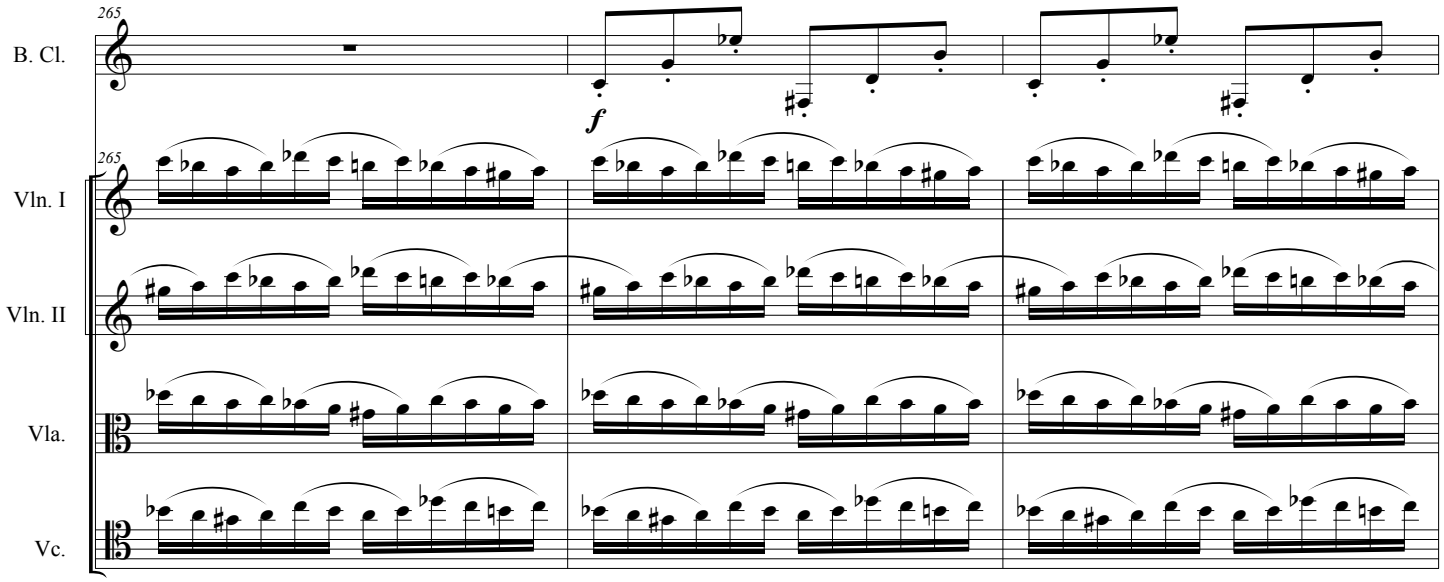

232
B. Cl.
232
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

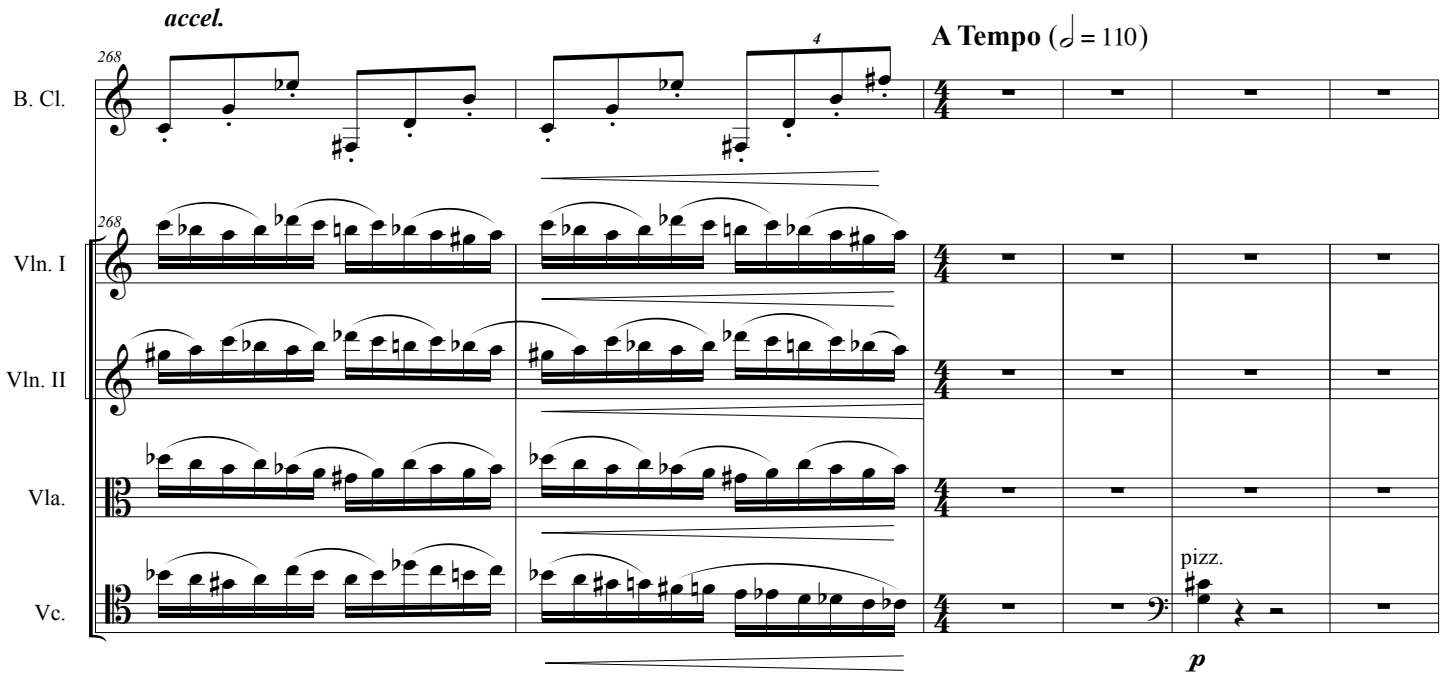

237
B. Cl.
237
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
242
B. Cl.
242
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

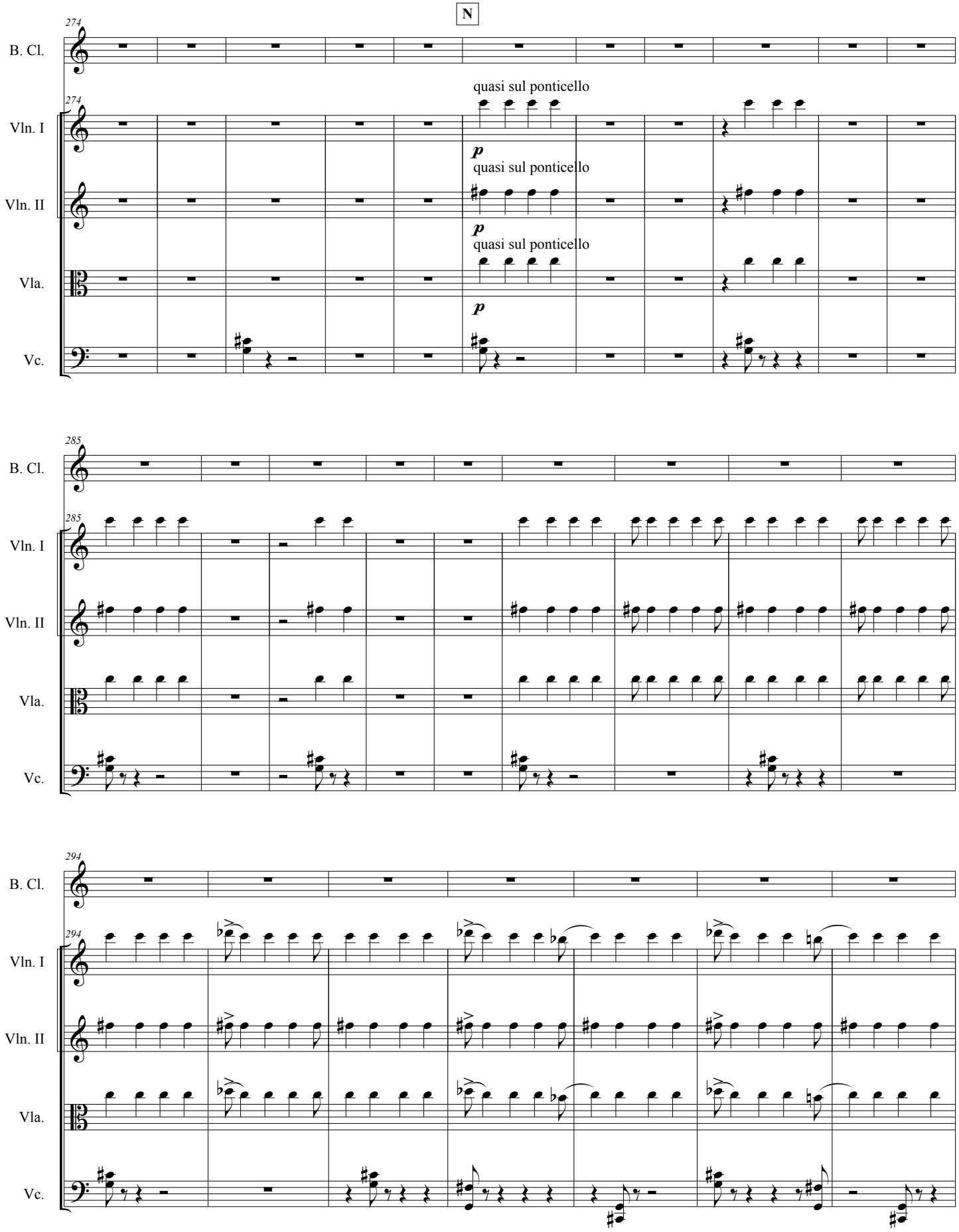

247
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
252
M
Same tempo (𝅗𝅥 = ♩. = 110)
sub p
cresc.
p cresc.

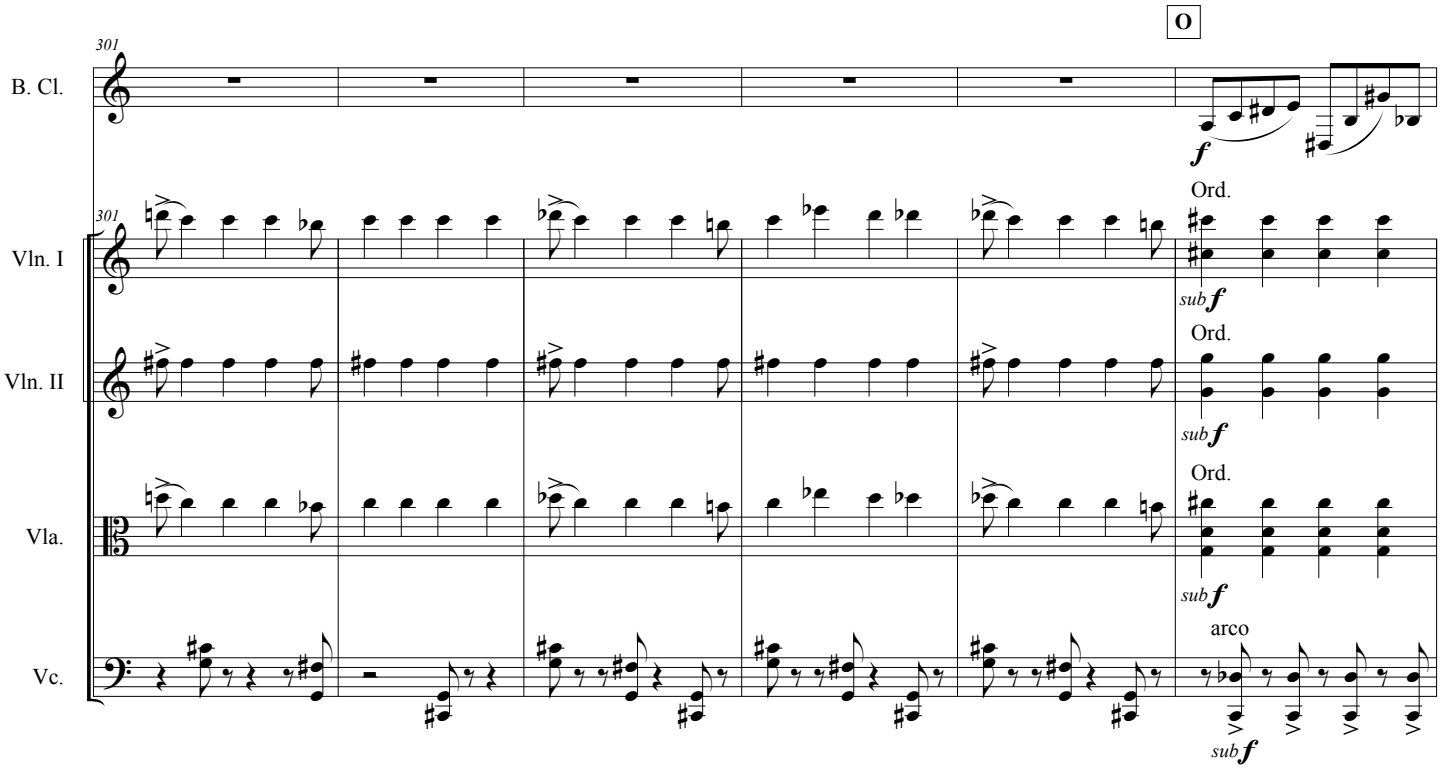

257
B. Cl.
mp
257
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

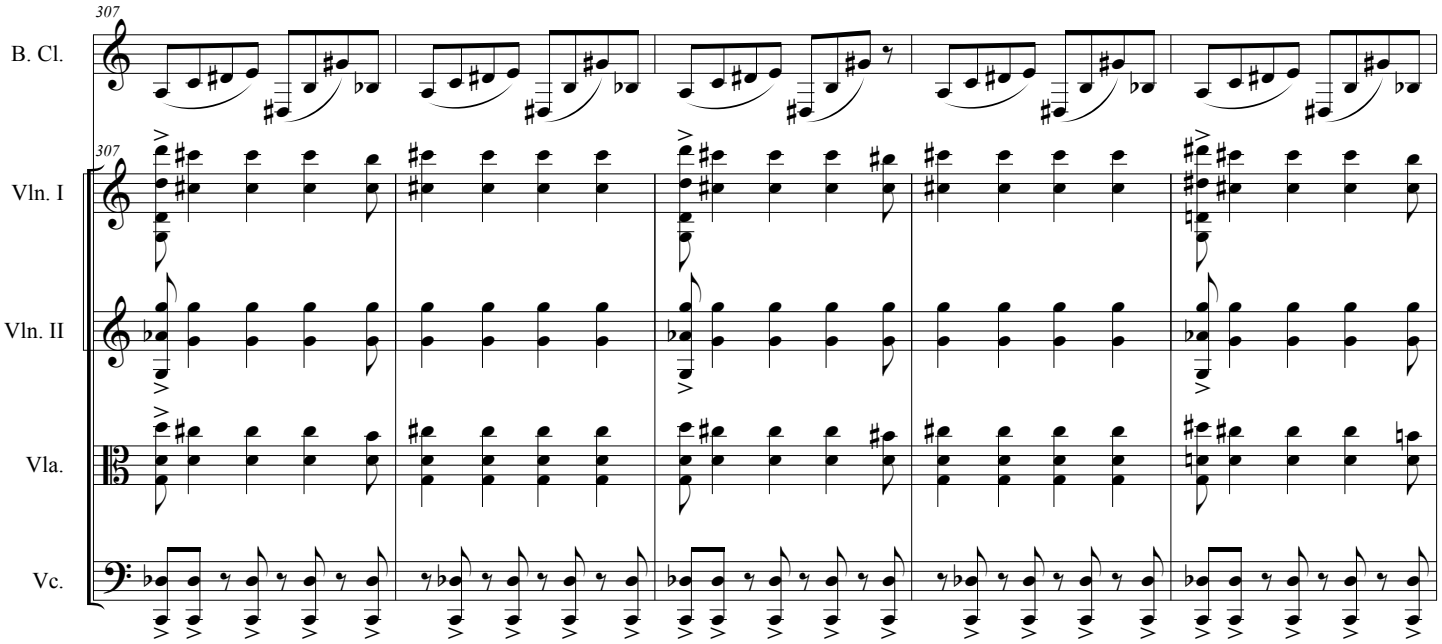

262
B. Cl.
f
262
Vln. I
f
Vln. II
f
f
Vla.
f
f
Vc.
f
f

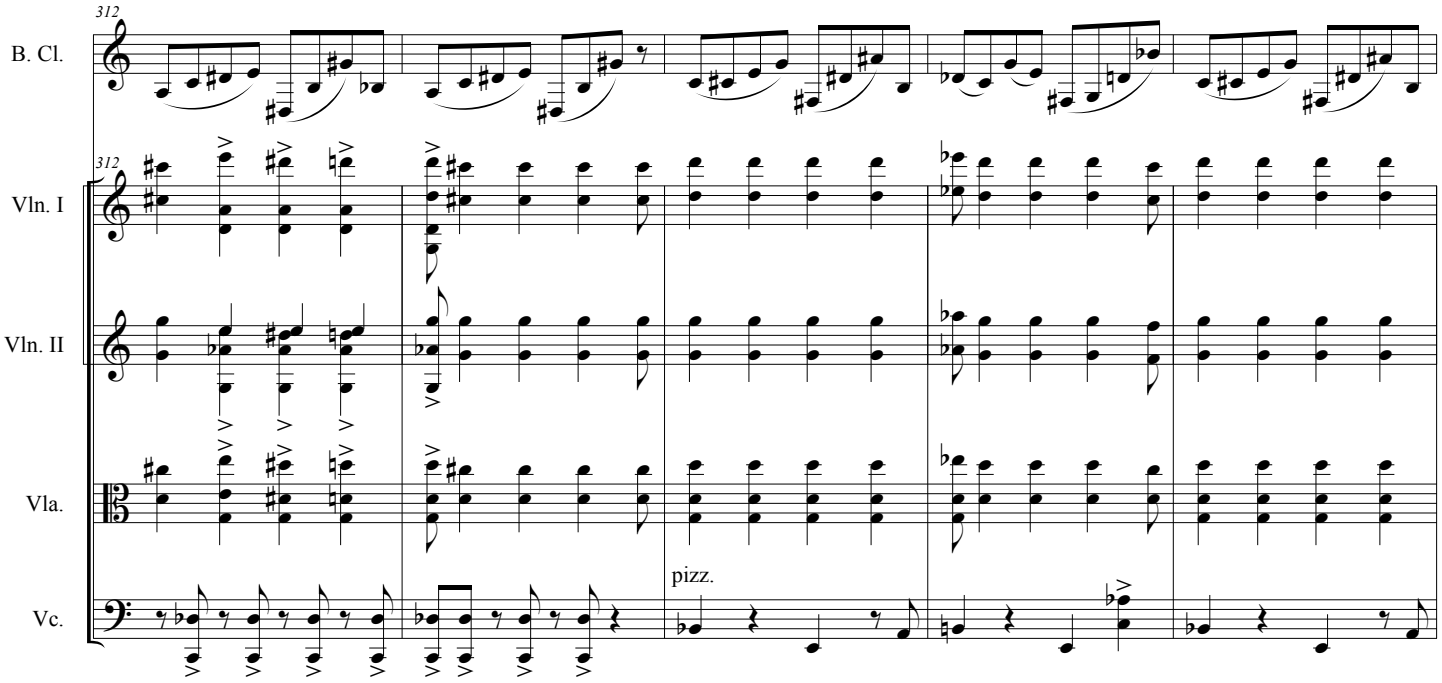

265
B. Cl.
f
265
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

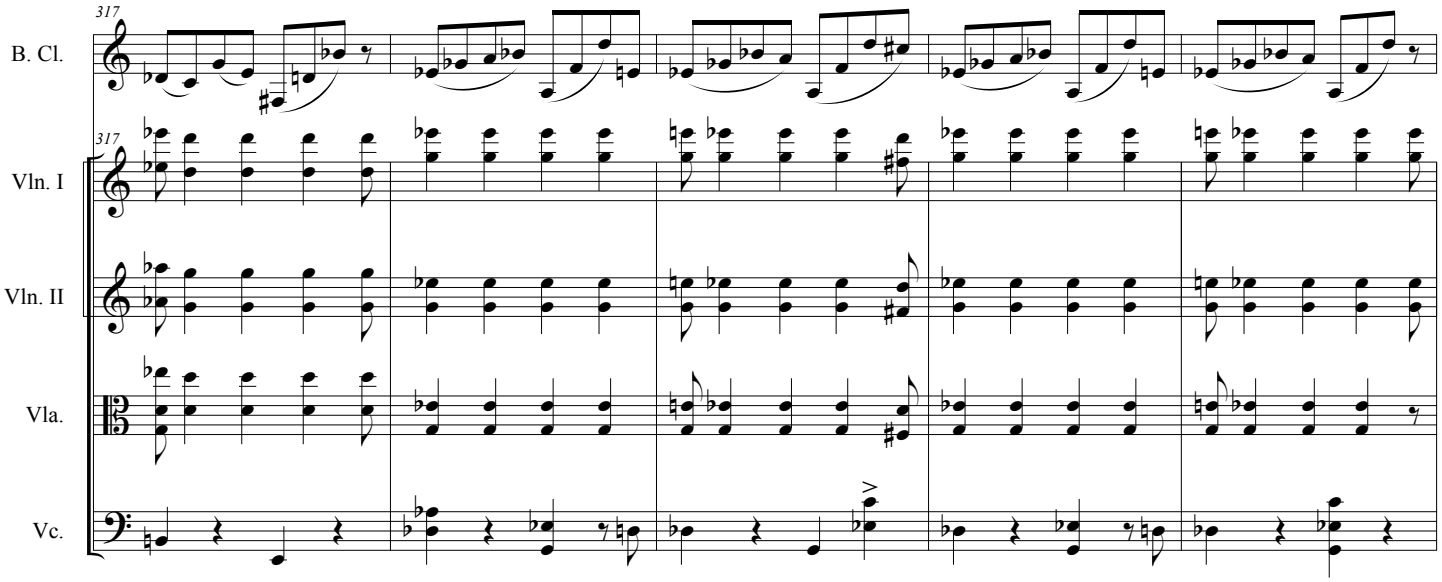

accel.
268
B. Cl.
4
A Tempo (𝅗𝅥 = 110)
268
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
pizz.
p

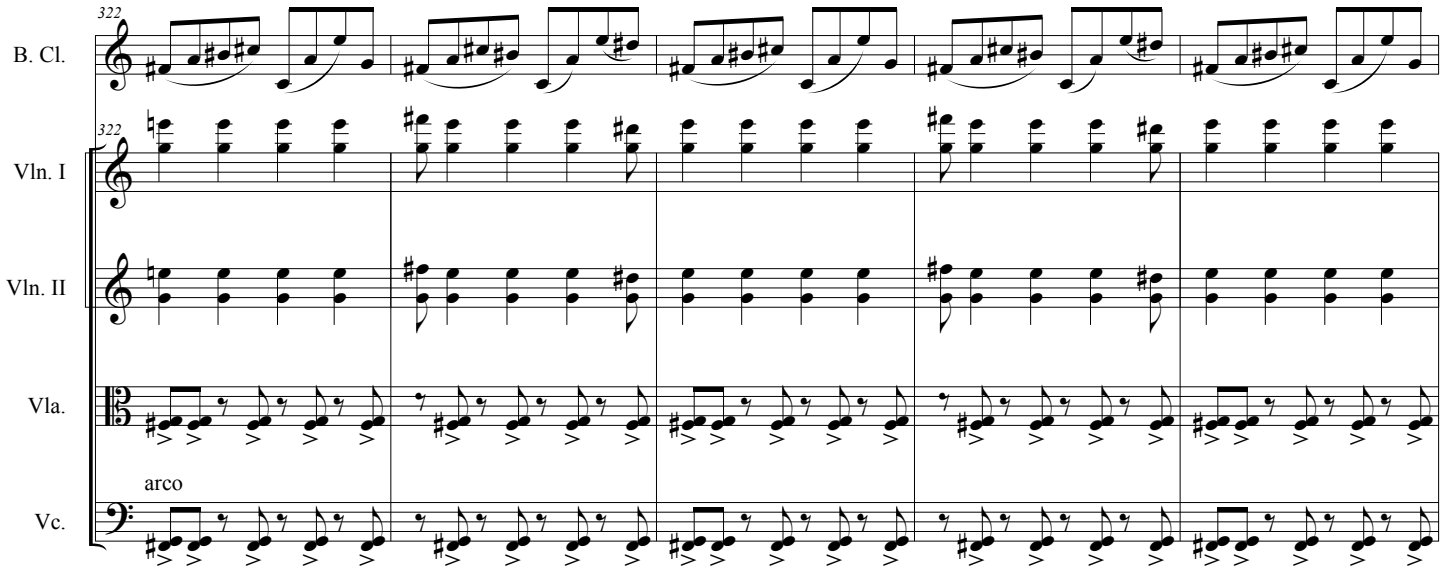

N
274
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
quasi sul ponticello
p
quasi sul ponticello
p
quasi sul ponticello
p
285
294

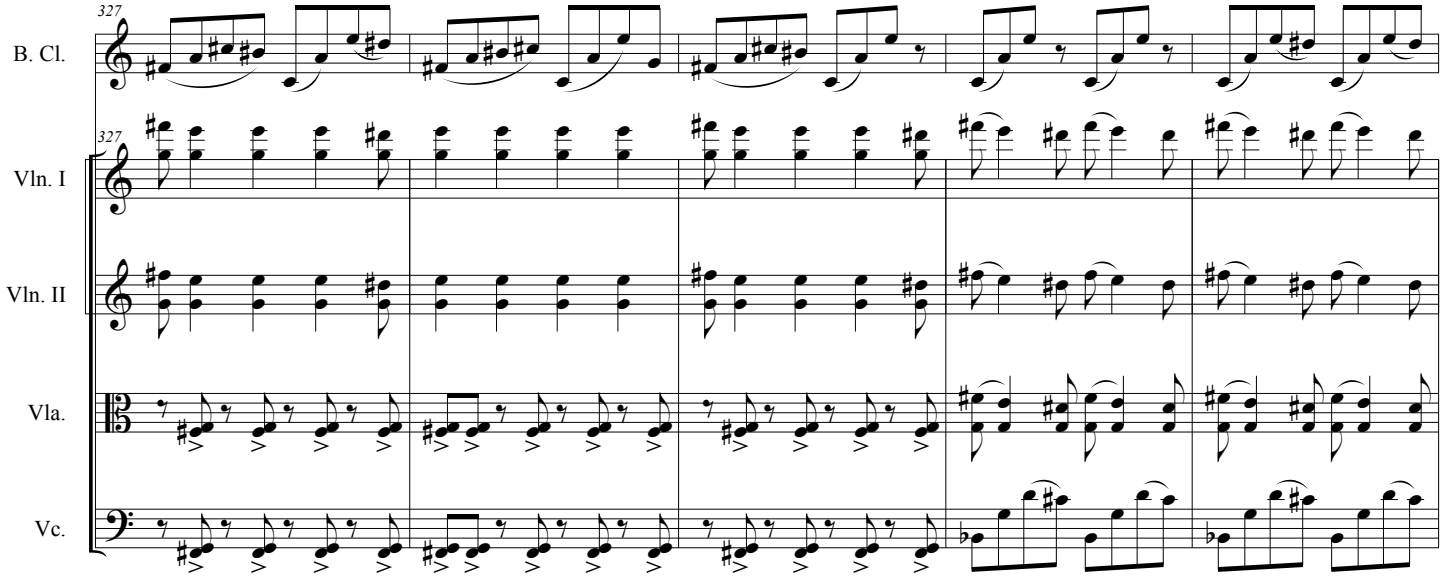

O
301
B. Cl.
f
Vln. I
Ord.
sub f
Vln. II
Ord.
sub f
Vla.
Ord.
sub f
Vc.
arco
sub f

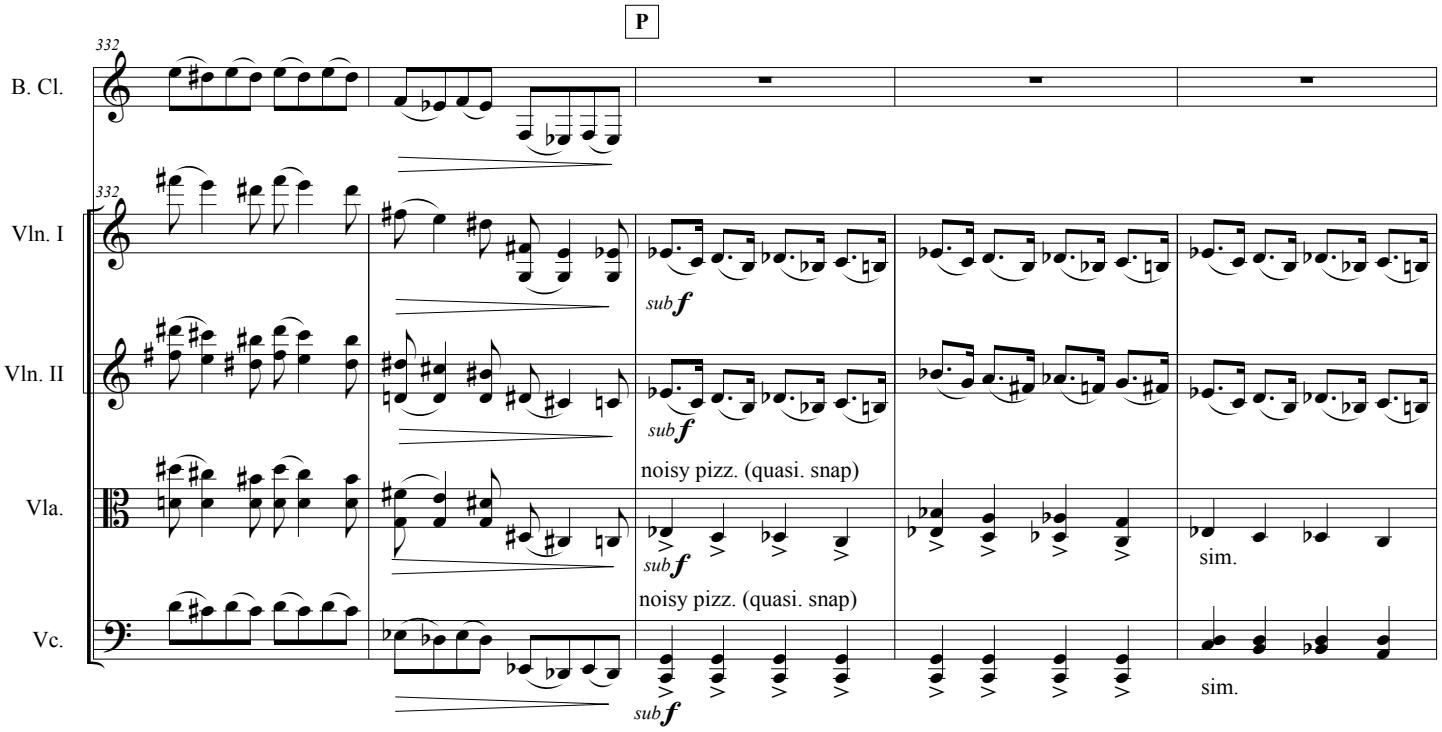

307
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

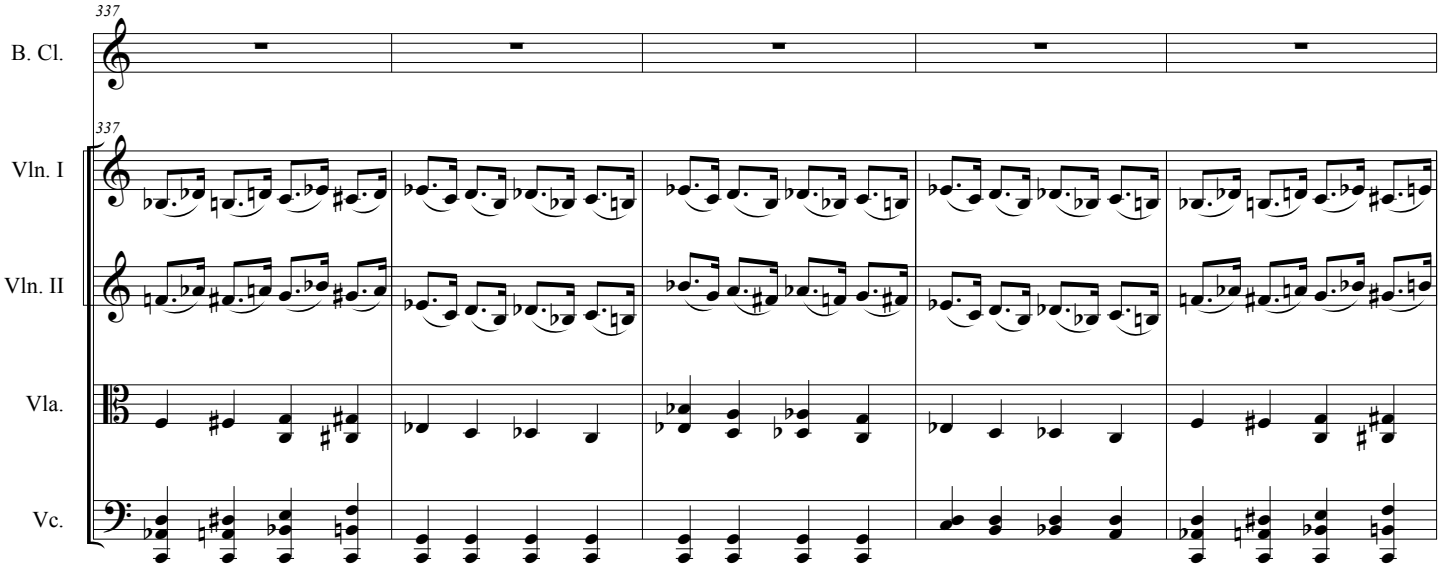

312
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
pizz.


317
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.


322
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
arco
Vc.


327
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.


P
332
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
sub f
noisy pizz. (quasi. snap)
sim.


337
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

342

B. Cl.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

cresc.

arco

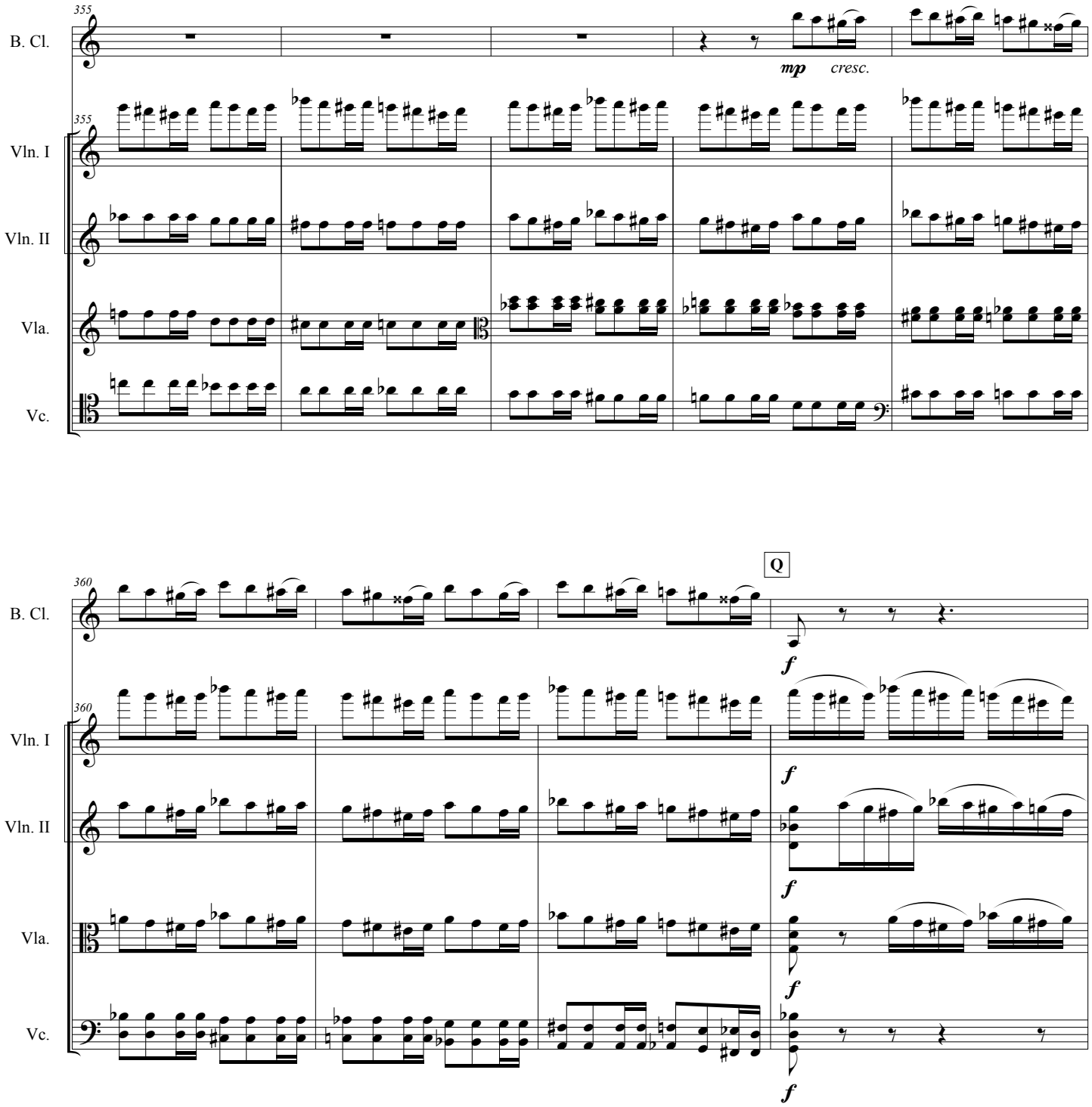
346

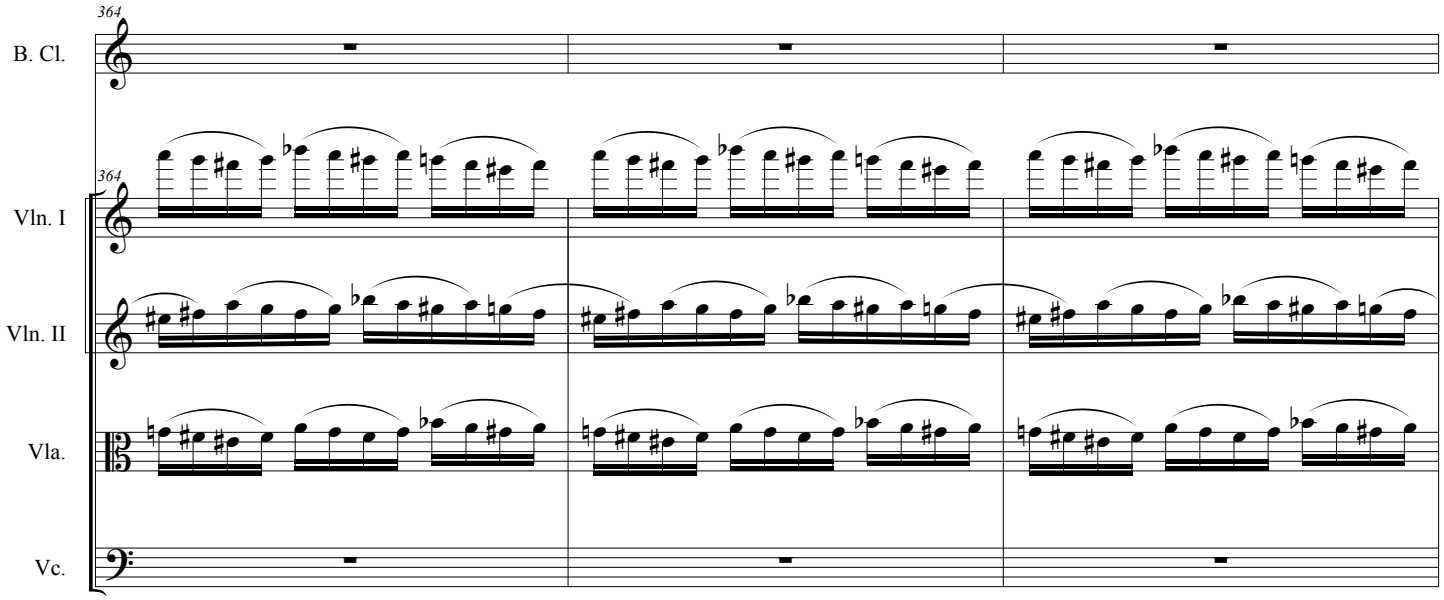
Same tempo (𝅗𝅥 = ♩. = 110)

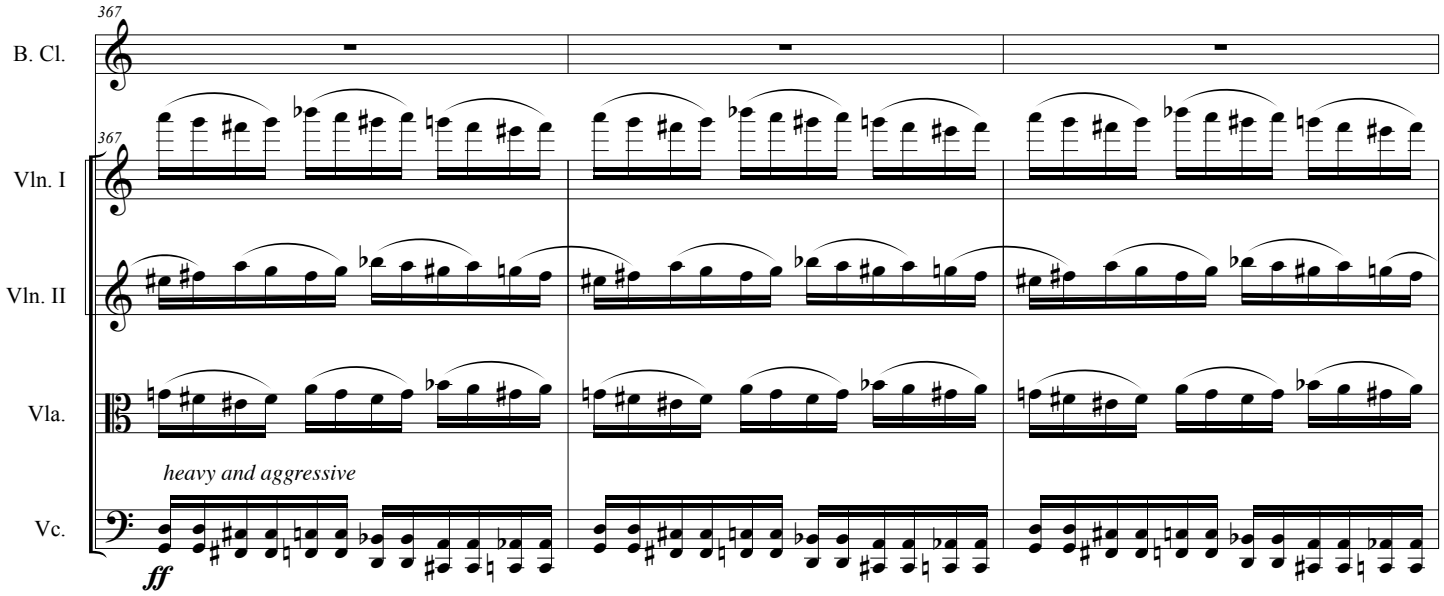
350

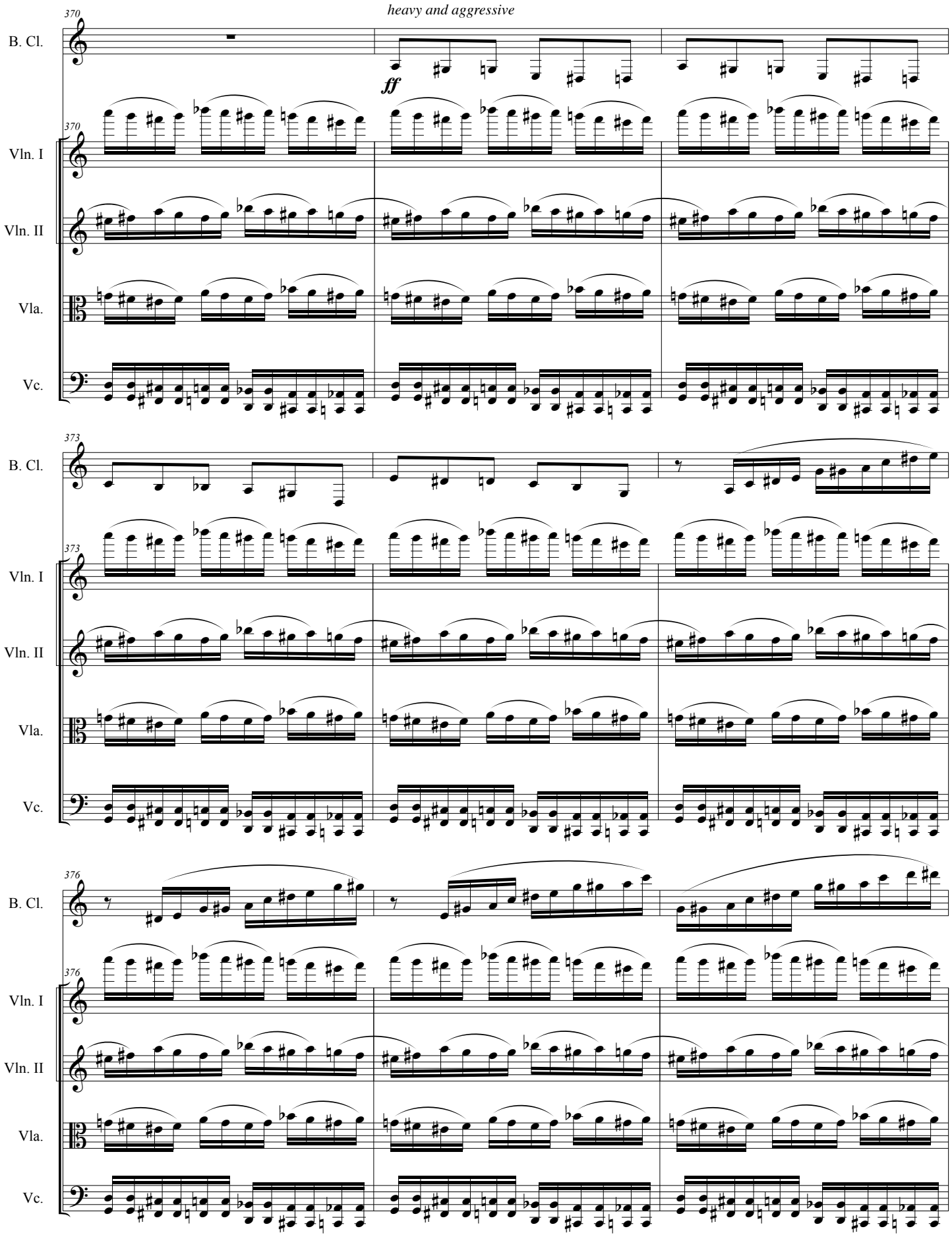
sub ***p***

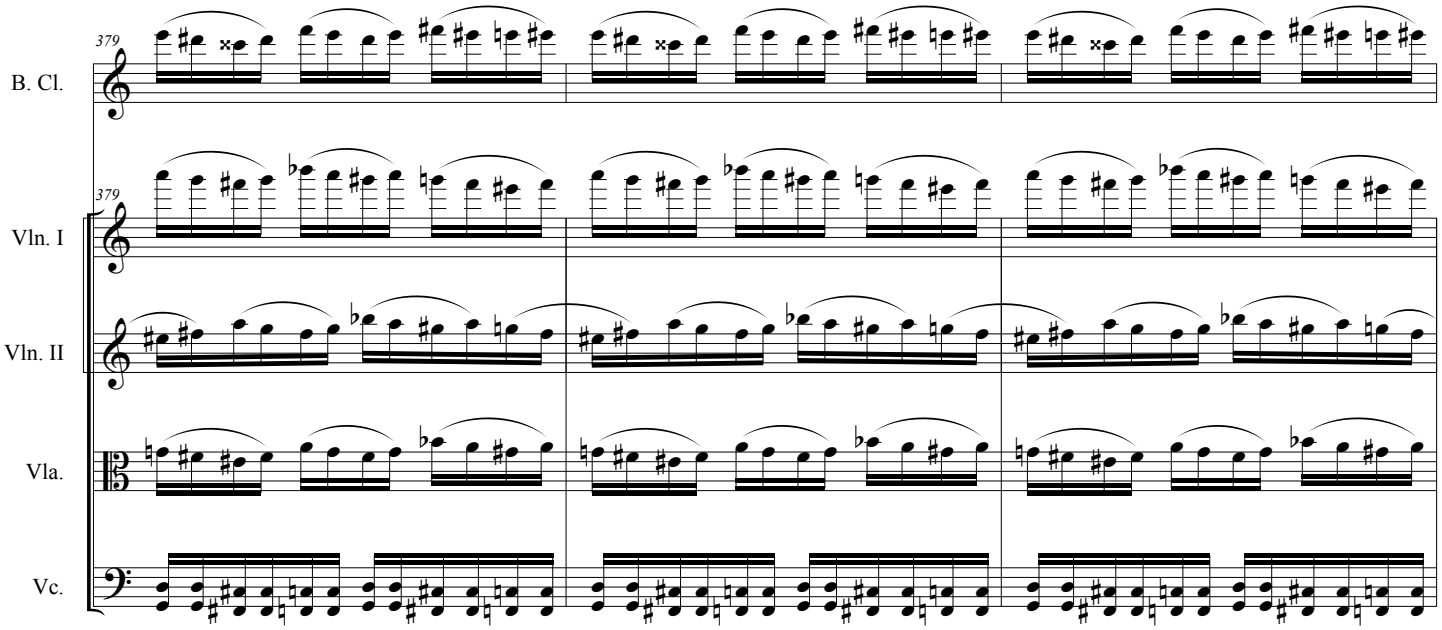
p *cresc.*

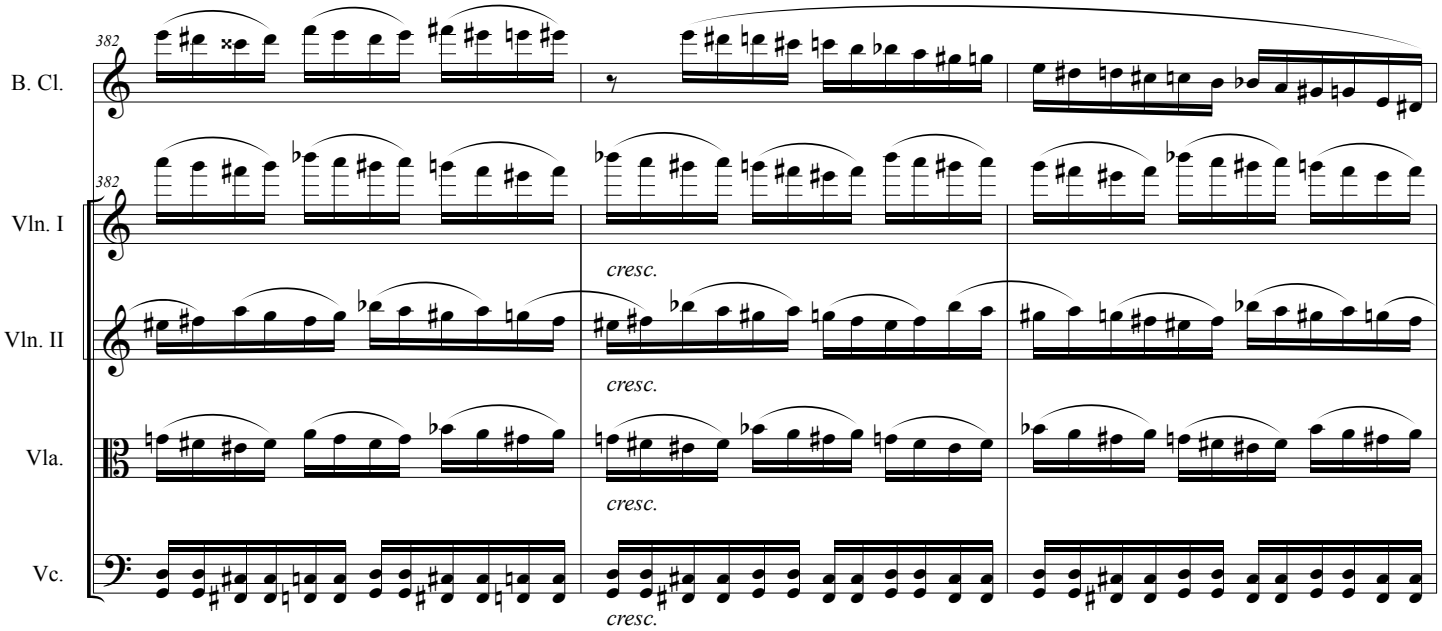

355
B. Cl.
mp
cresc.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
360
Q
f

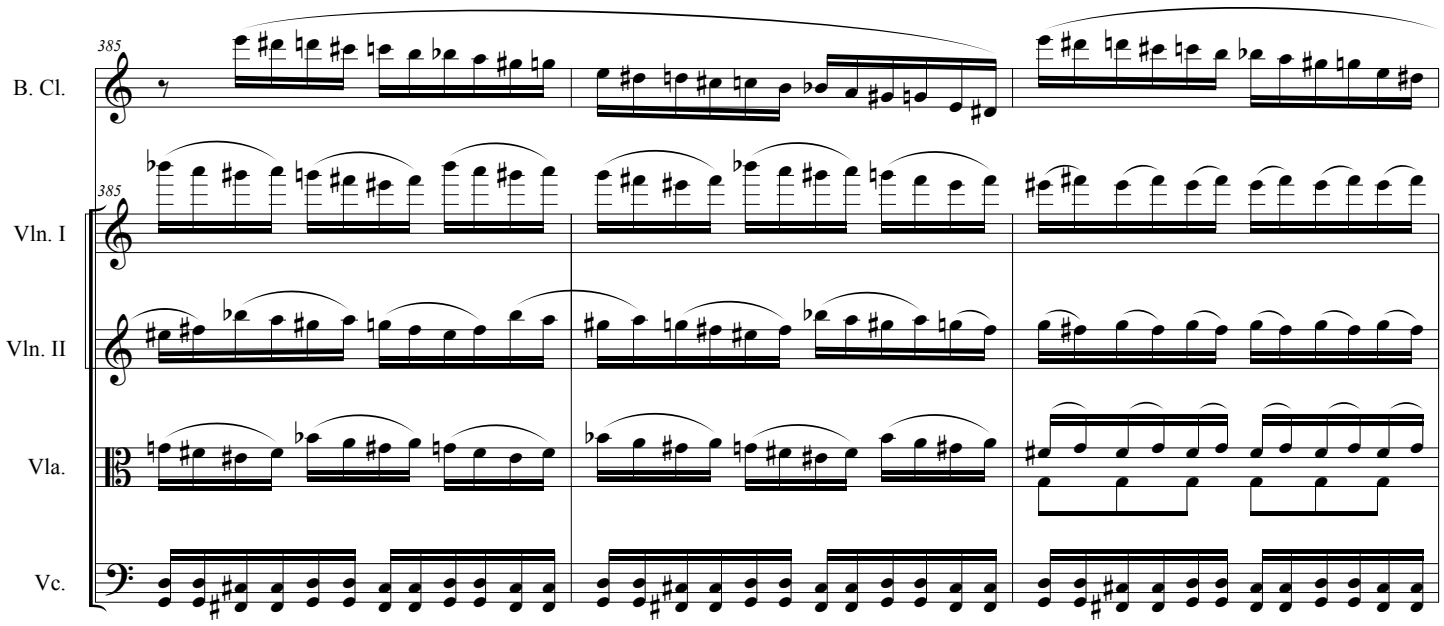

364
B. Cl.
364
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

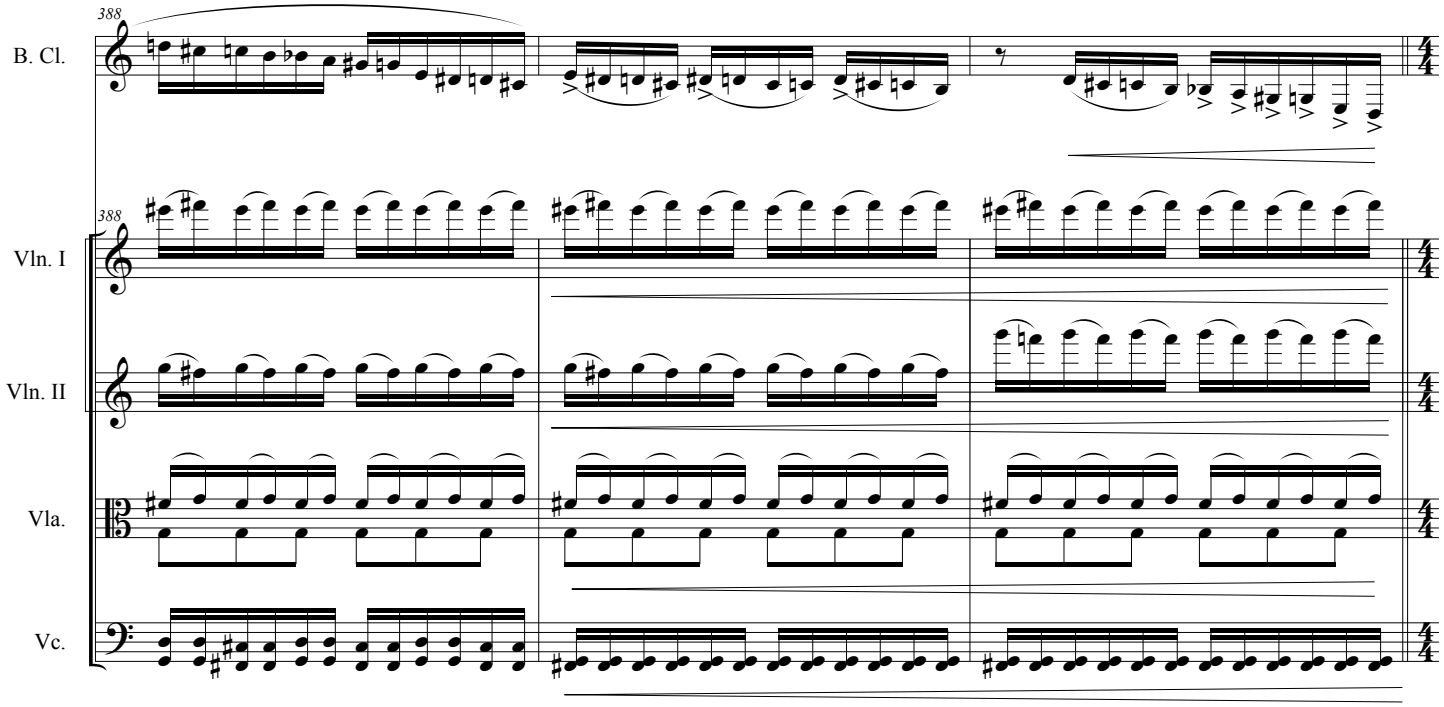

367
B. Cl.
367
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
heavy and aggressive
Vc.
ff

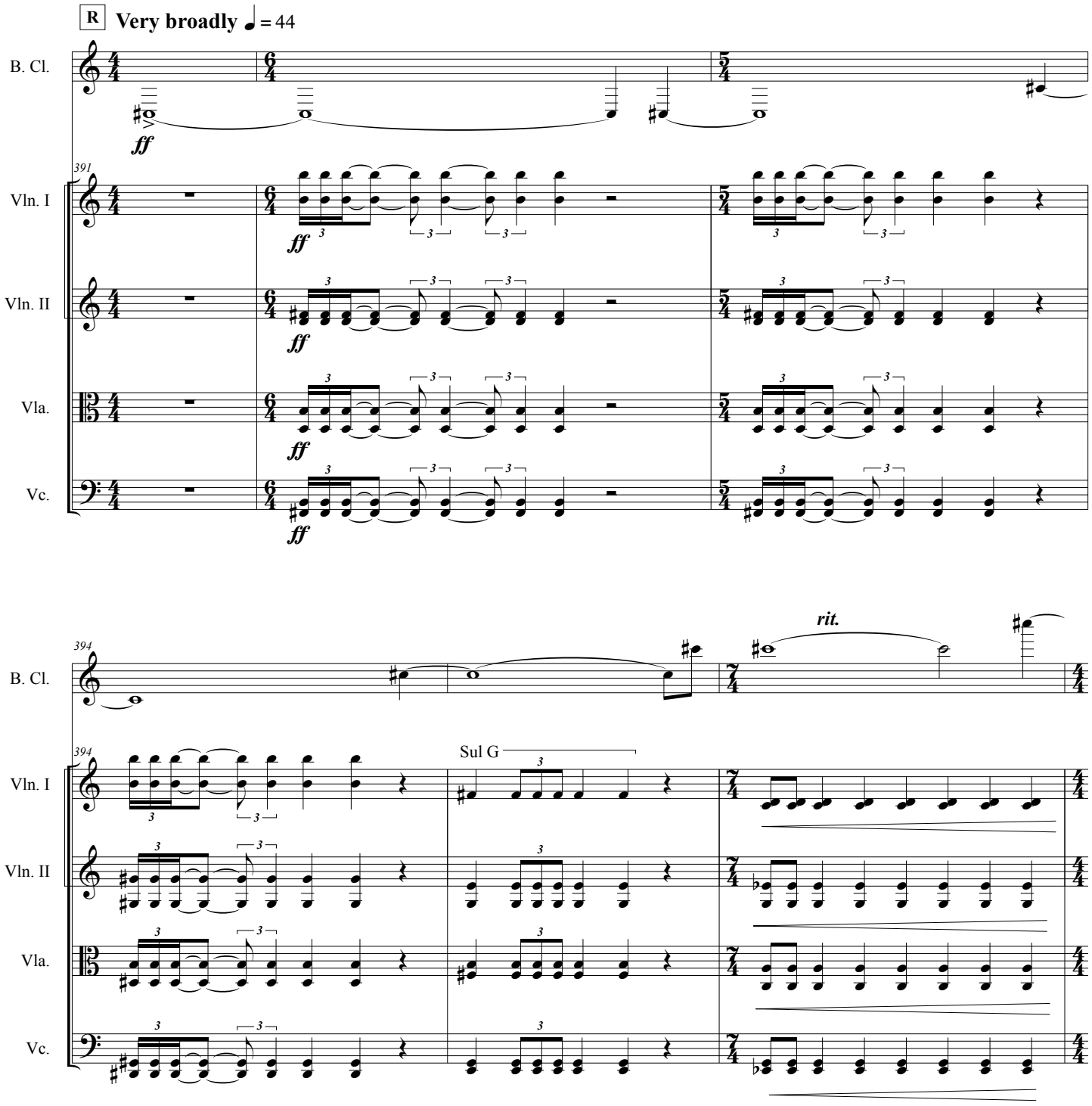

370
heavy and aggressive
B. Cl.
ff
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
373
376

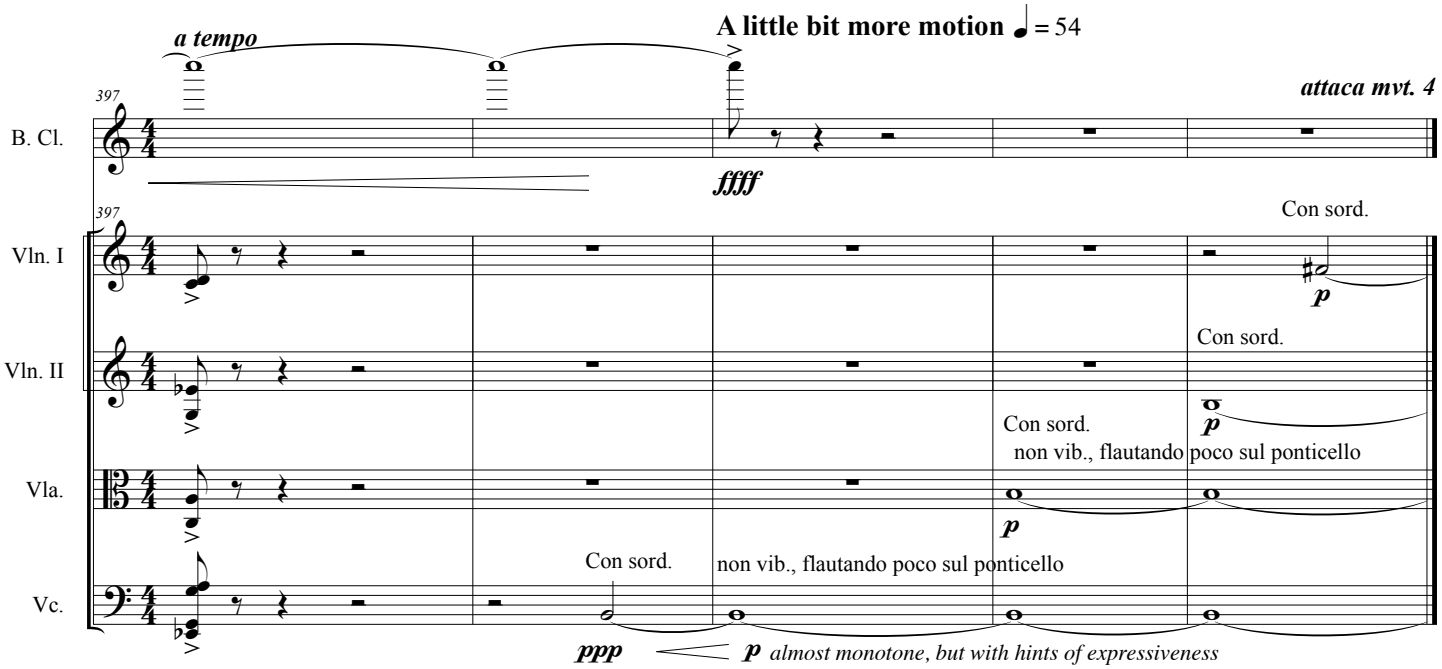

379
B. Cl.
379
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.


382
B. Cl.
382
Vln. I
cresc.
Vln. II
cresc.
Vla.
cresc.
Vc.
cresc.

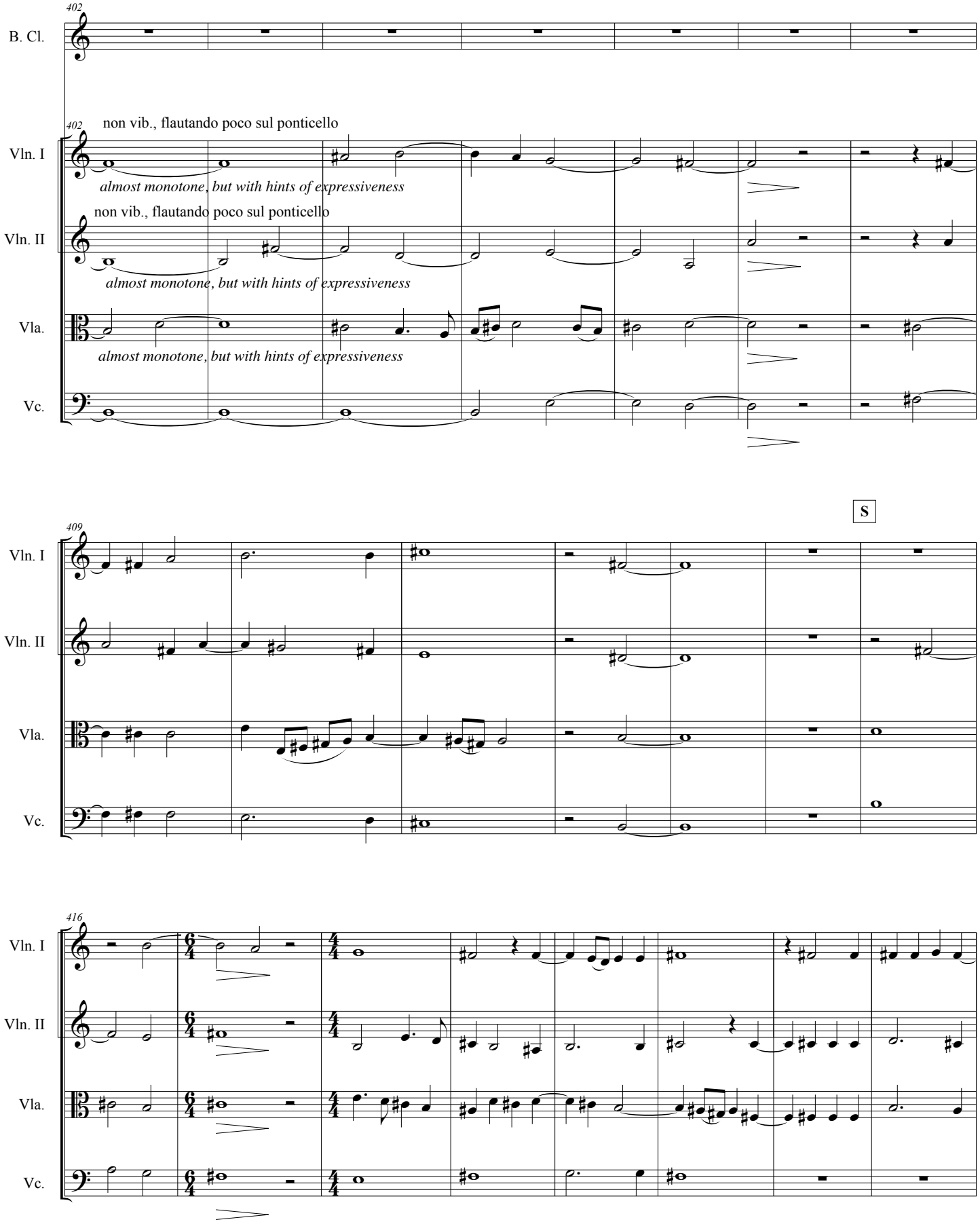

385
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

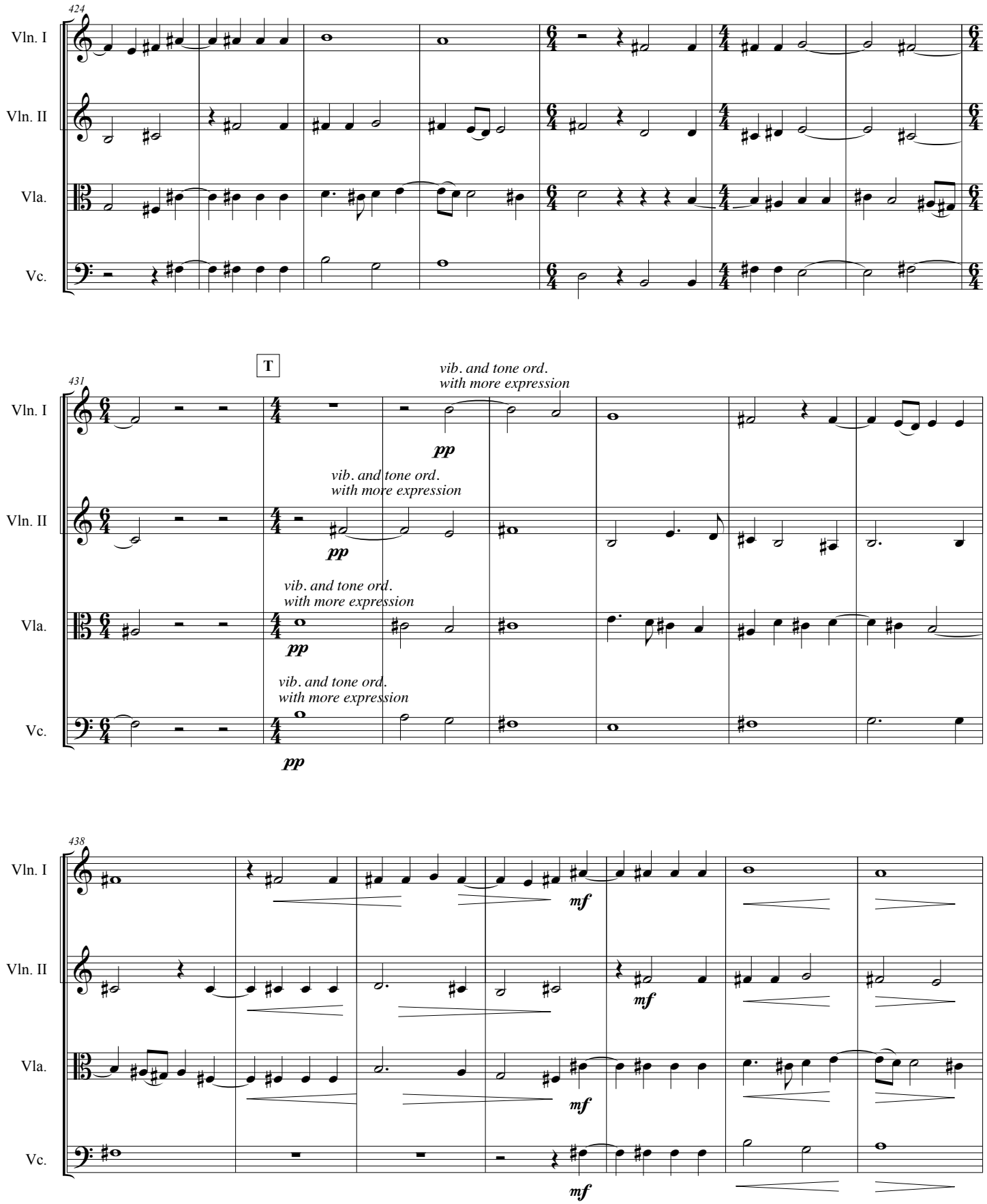

388
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

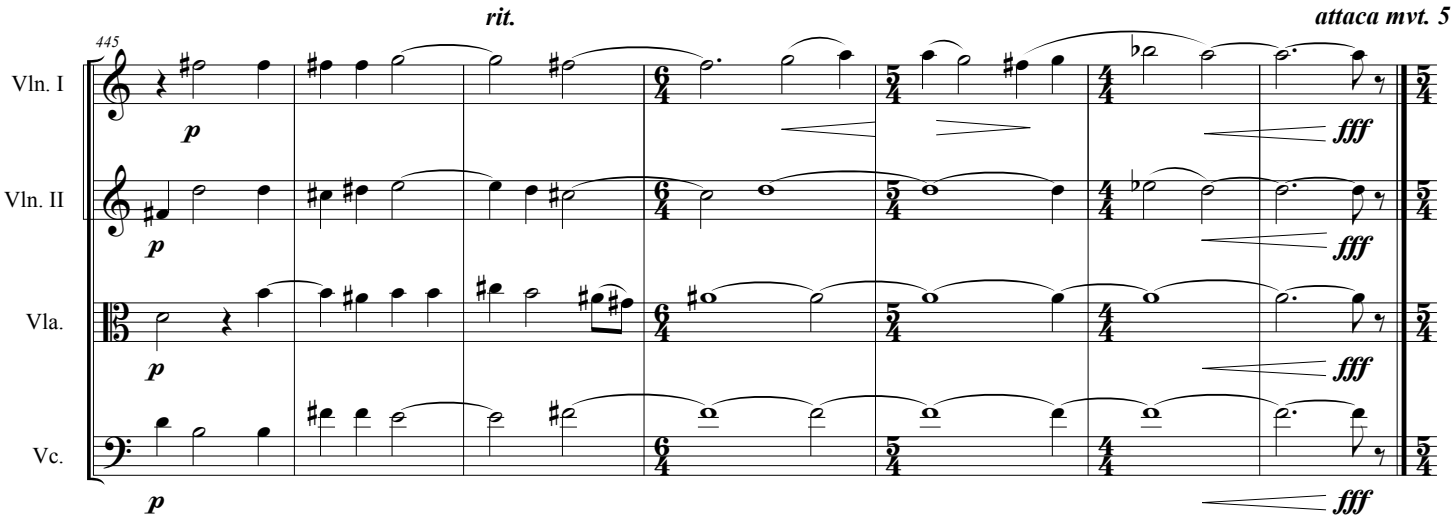

R
Very broadly ♩ = 44
B. Cl.
ff
391
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
394
rit.
Sul G


a tempo
A little bit more motion ♩ = 54
attaca mvt. 4
397
B. Cl.
ffff
Vln. I
Con sord.
p
Vln. II
Con sord.
p
Vla.
Con sord.
non vib., flautando poco sul ponticello
p
Vc.
Con sord.
non vib., flautando poco sul ponticello
ppp
p almost monotone, but with hints of expressiveness

IV. Consolation (O Vos Omnes)




424
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
431
T
vib. and tone ord.
with more expression
pp
vib. and tone ord.
with more expression
pp
vib. and tone ord.
with more expression
pp
vib. and tone ord.
with more expression
pp
438
mf
mf
mf
mf


445
rit.
attaca mvt. 5
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
p
fff

V. Renewal — Postlude

A Tempo ♩ = 54

452

tentative and distant

restrained, yet expressive

B. Cl.

pp

p

Senza sord.

restrained, yet expressive

Vln. I

p

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

U

B. Cl.

457

Vln. I

Senza sord.

Vln. II

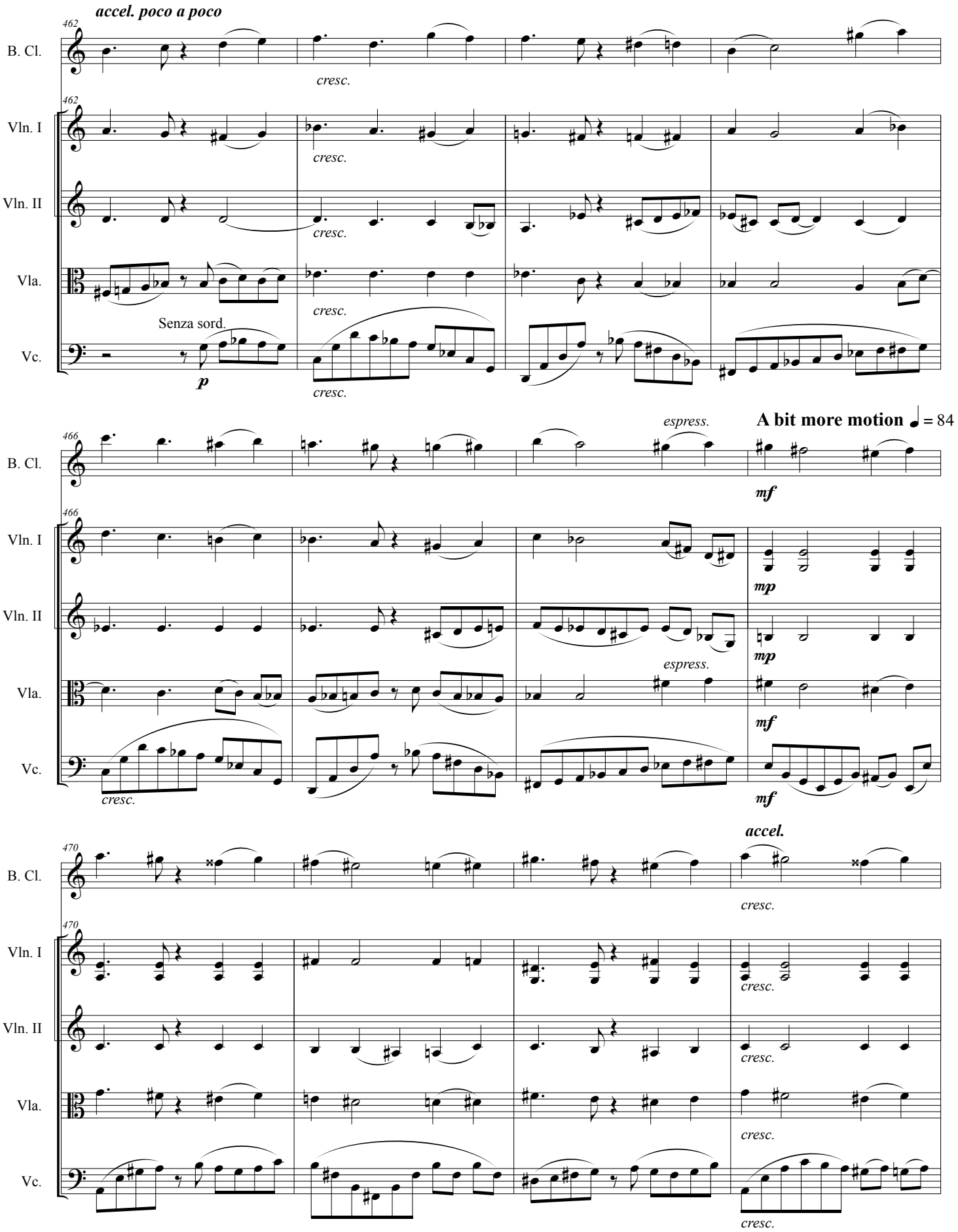
p

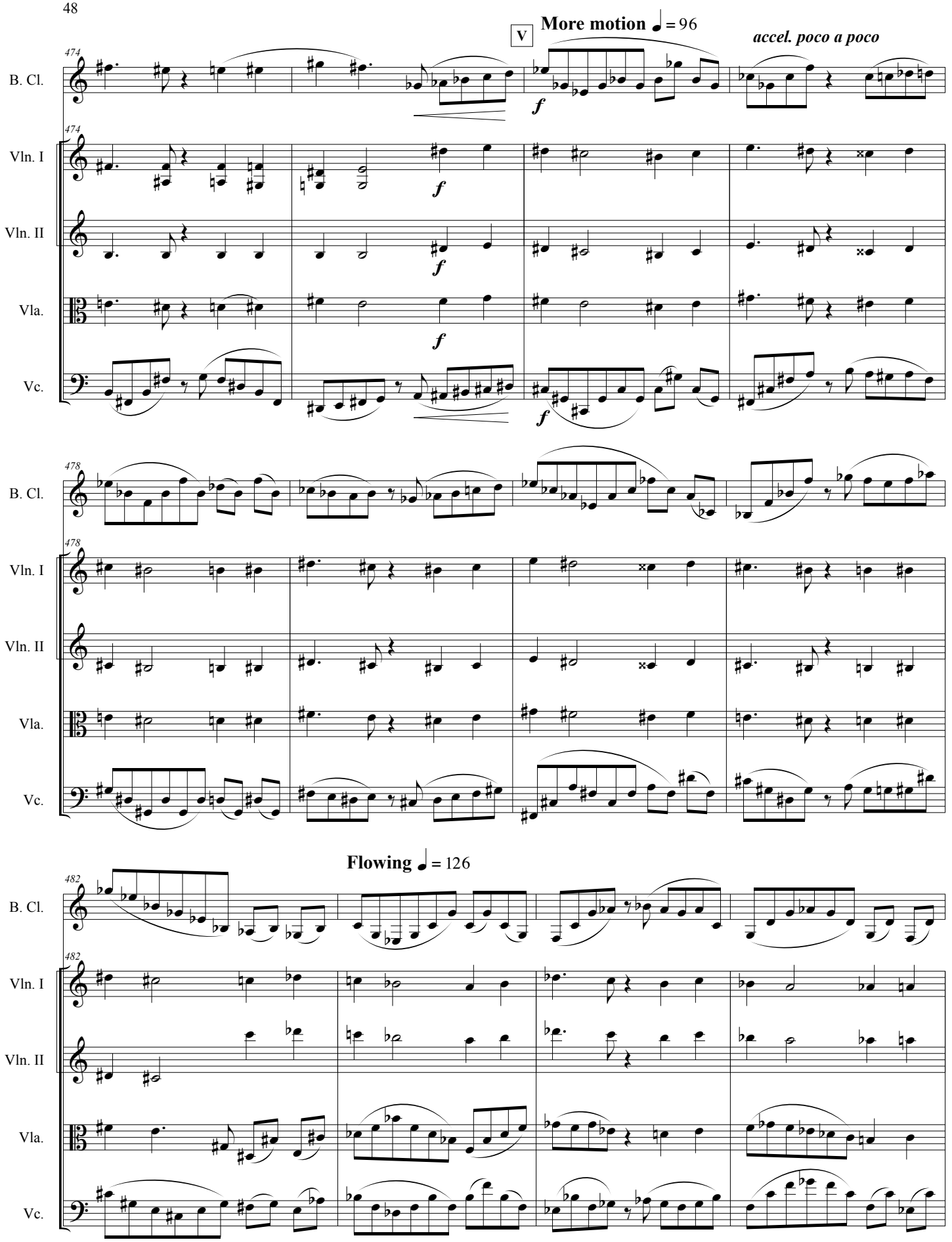
Senza sord.

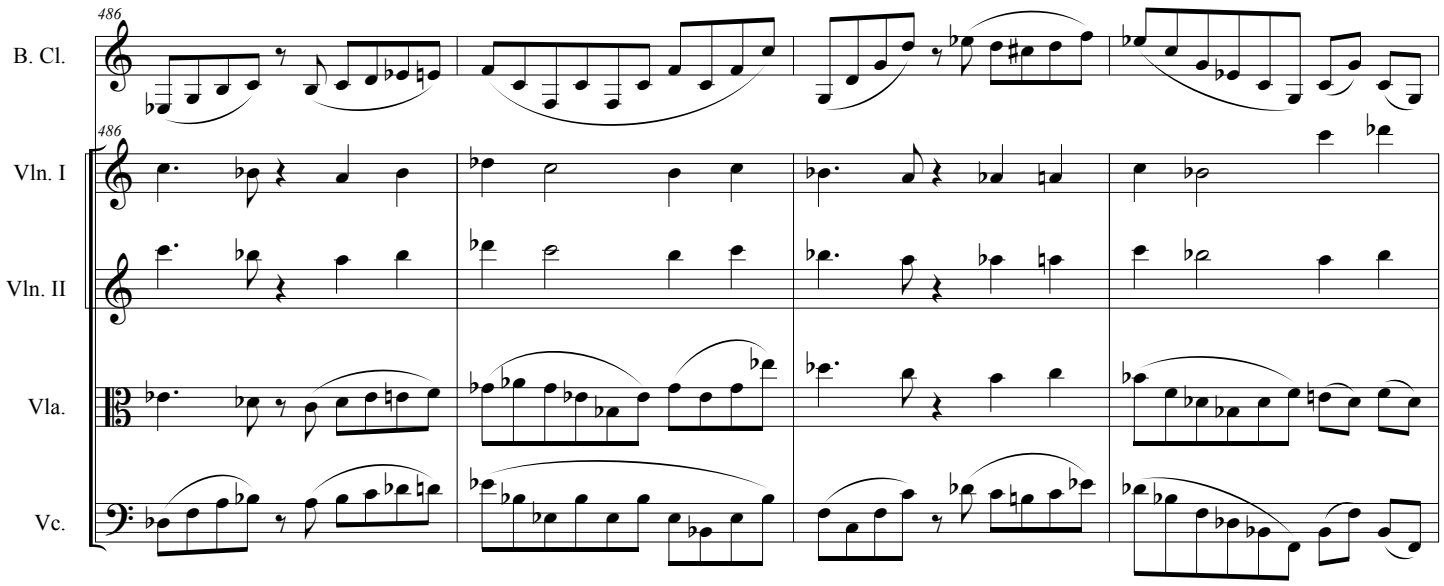
Vla.

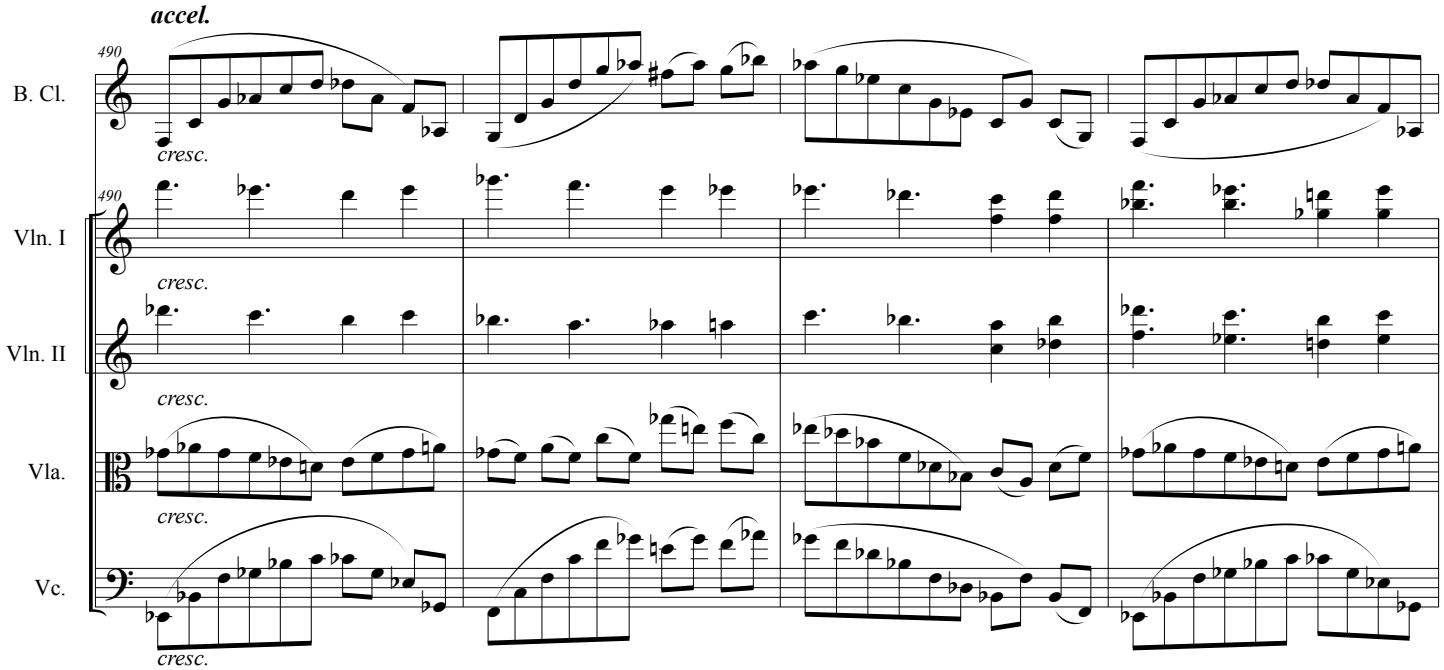
p

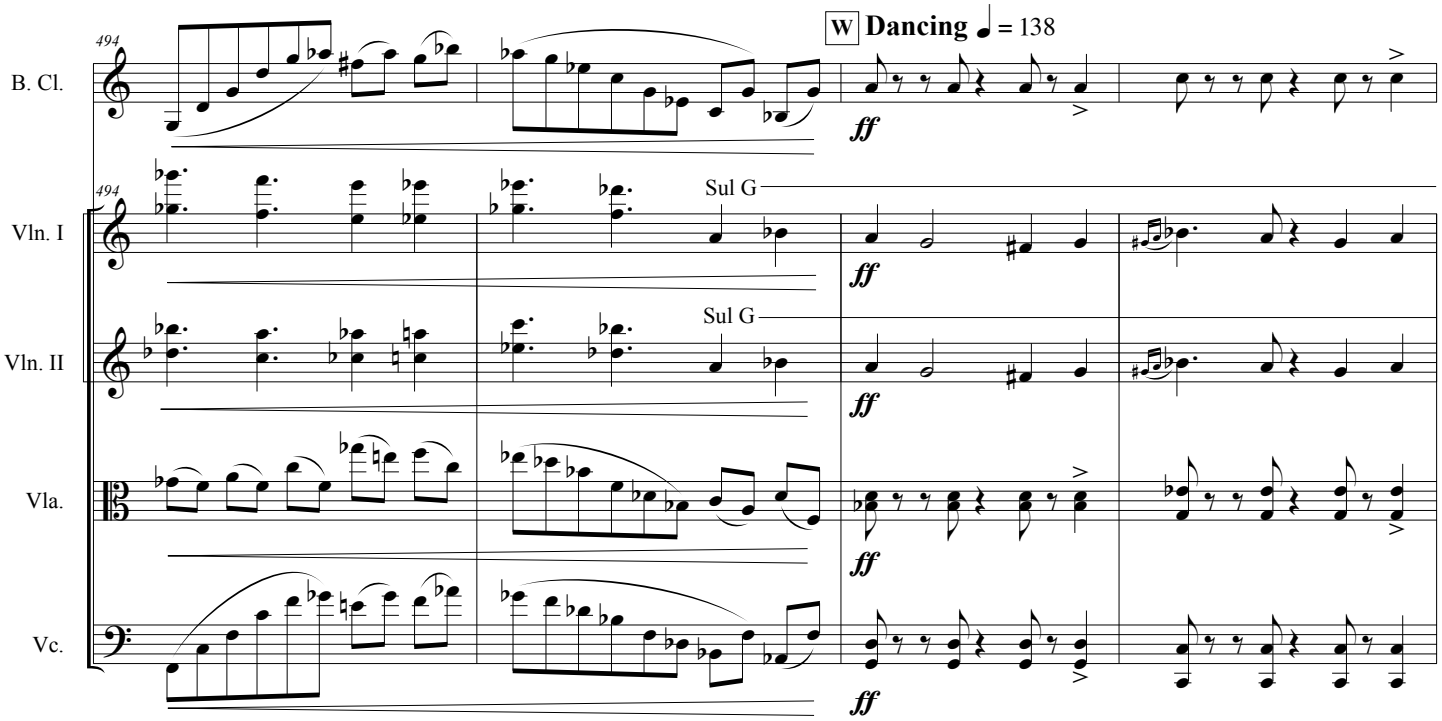
Vc.

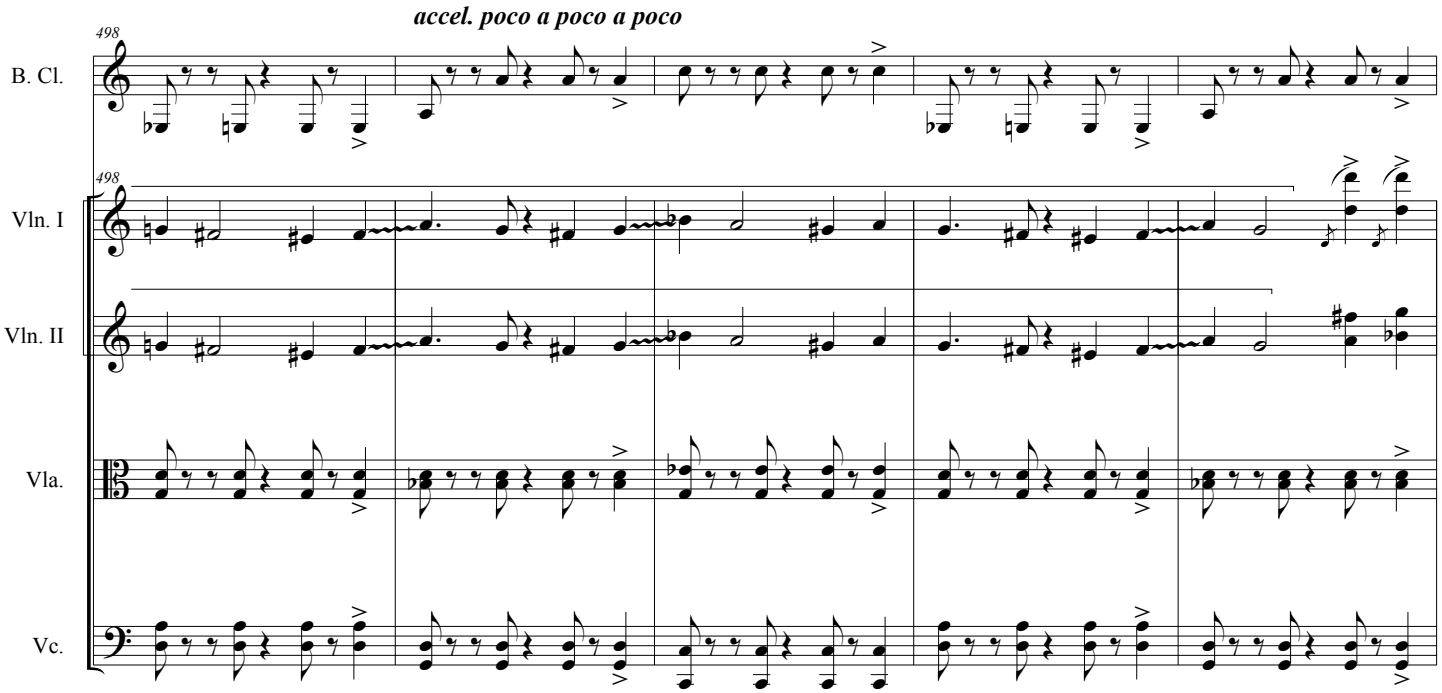

accel. poco a poco
462
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
cresc.
Senza sord.
p
466
espress.
A bit more motion ♩ = 84
mf
mp
470
accel.

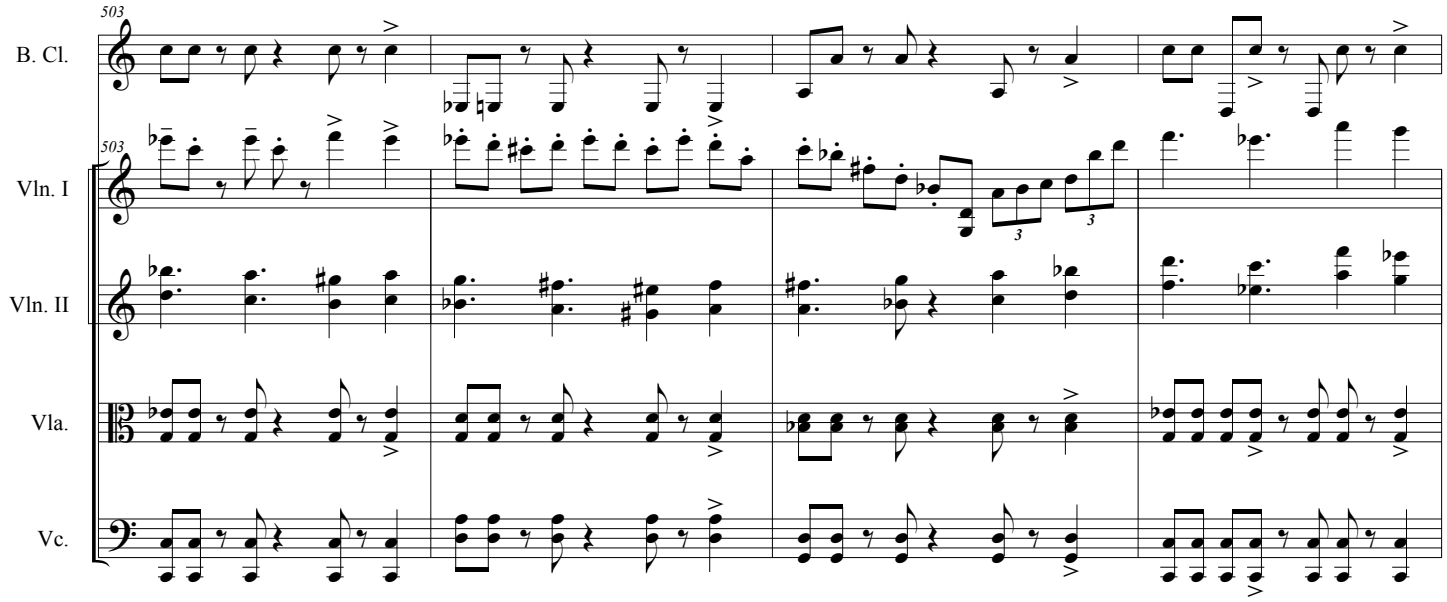

V
More motion ♩ = 96
accel. poco a poco
474
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
f
478
Flowing ♩ = 126
482

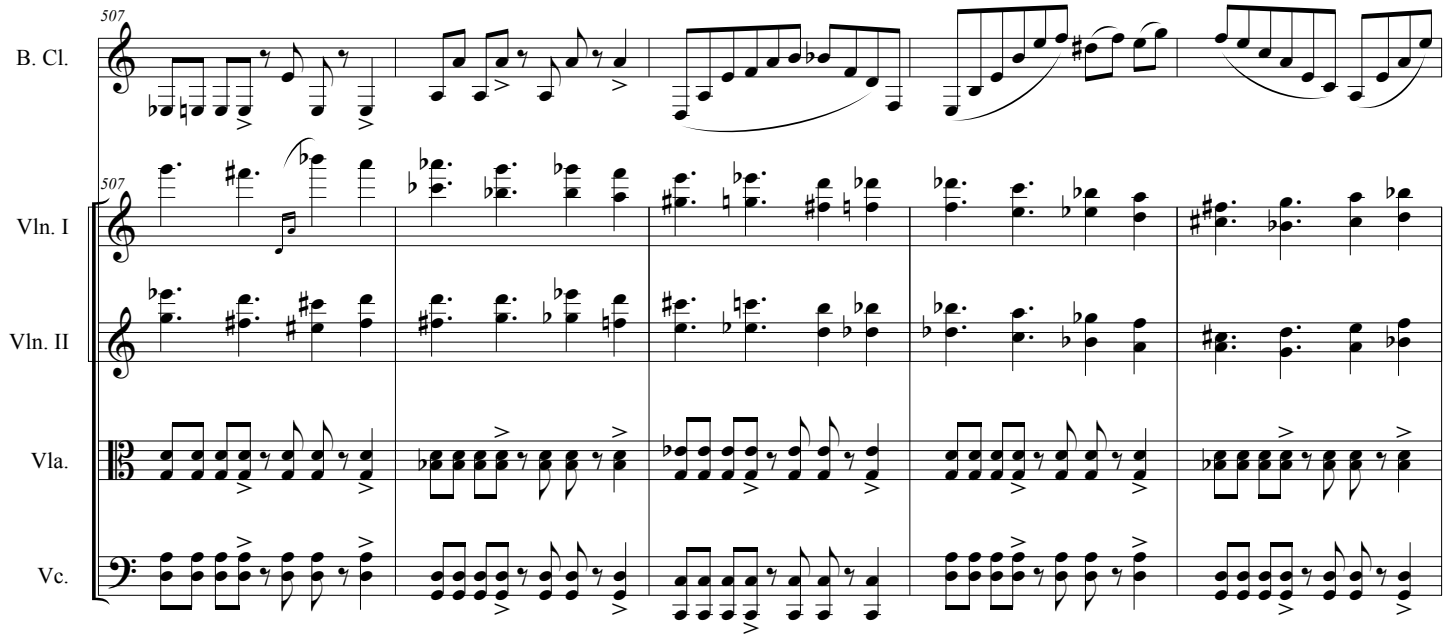

486
B. Cl.
486
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

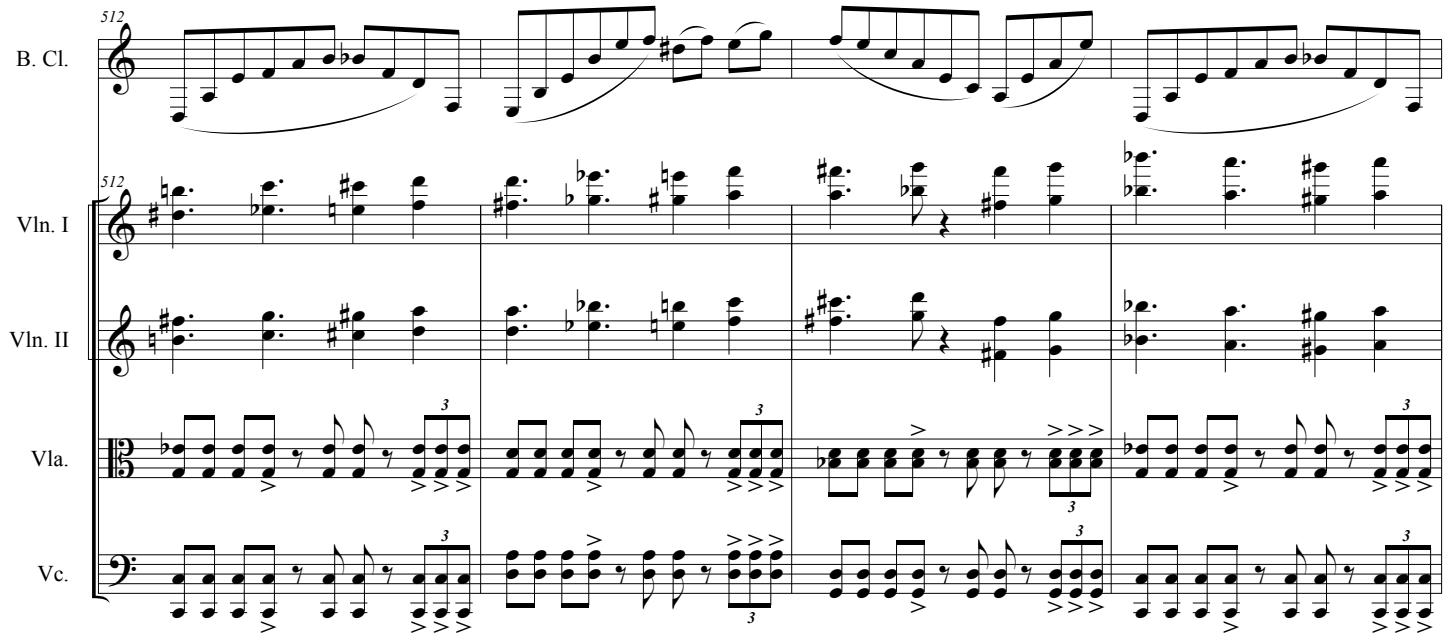

accel.
490
B. Cl.
cresc.
490
Vln. I
cresc.
Vln. II
cresc.
Vla.
cresc.
Vc.
cresc.

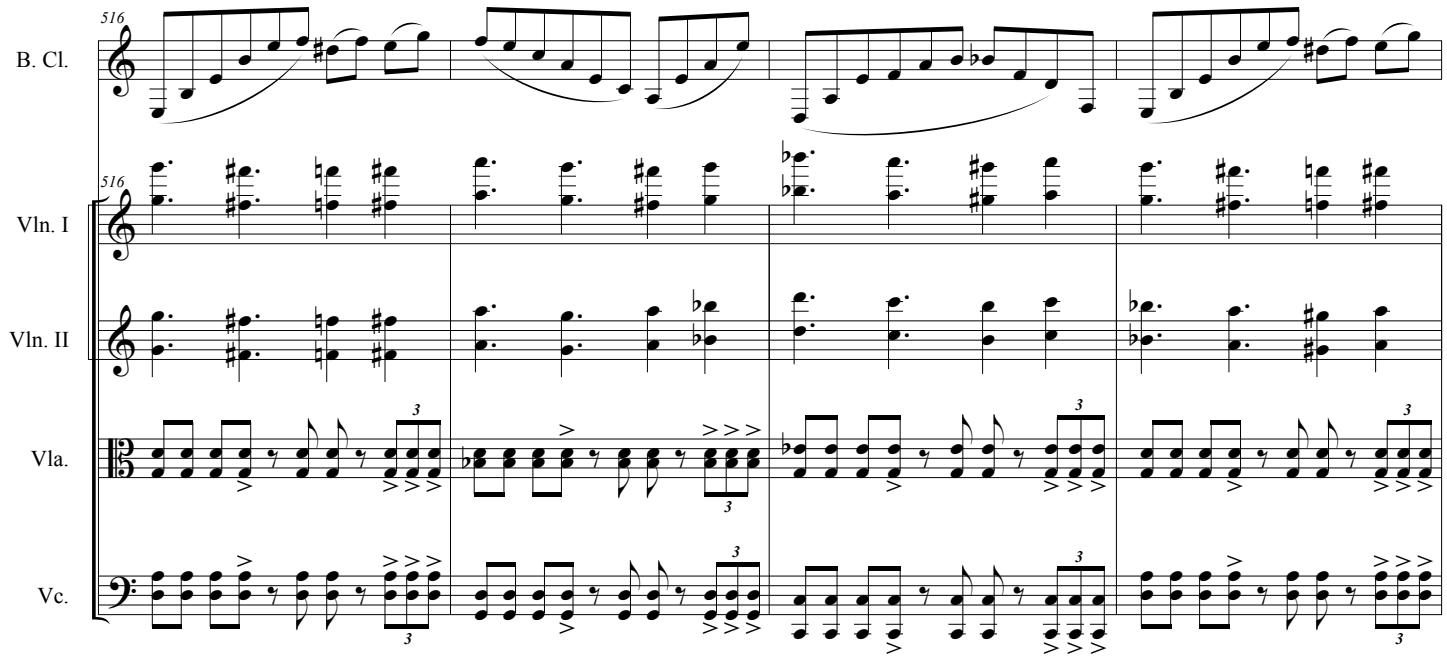

494
W Dancing ♩ = 138
B. Cl.
ff
Vln. I
Sul G
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

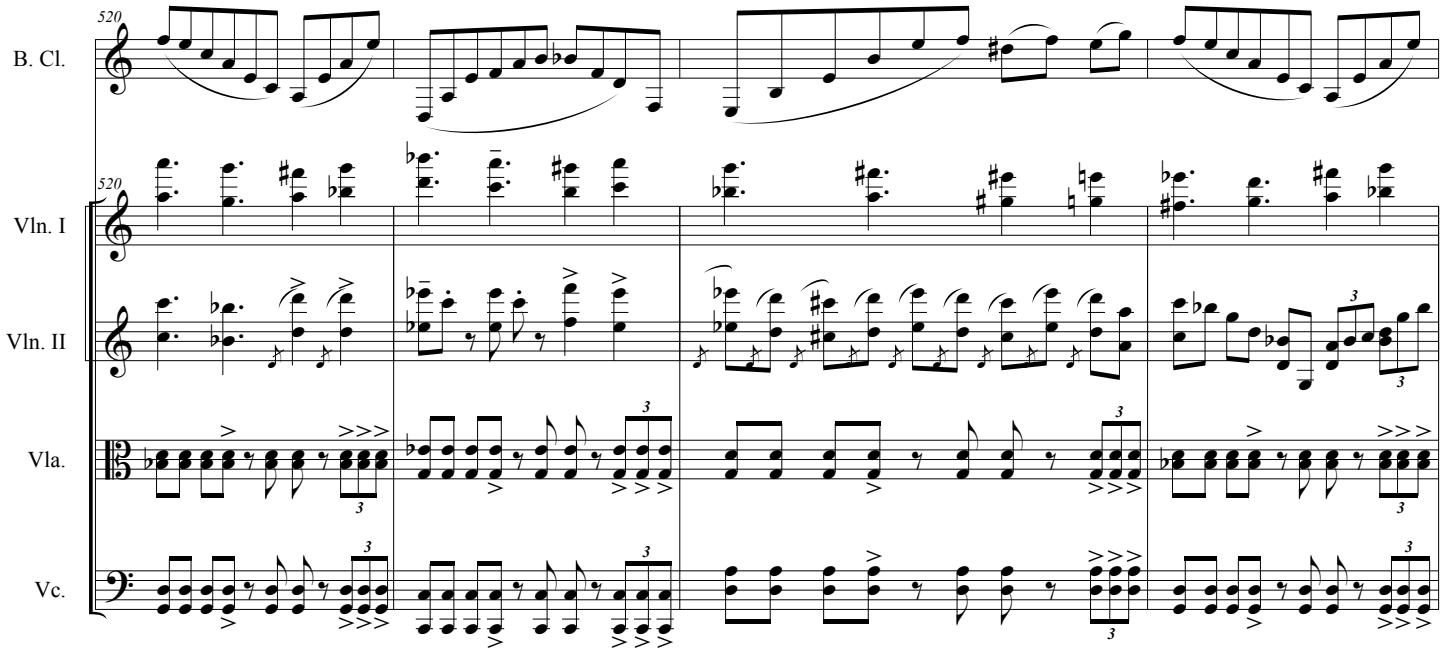

accel. poco a poco a poco
498
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

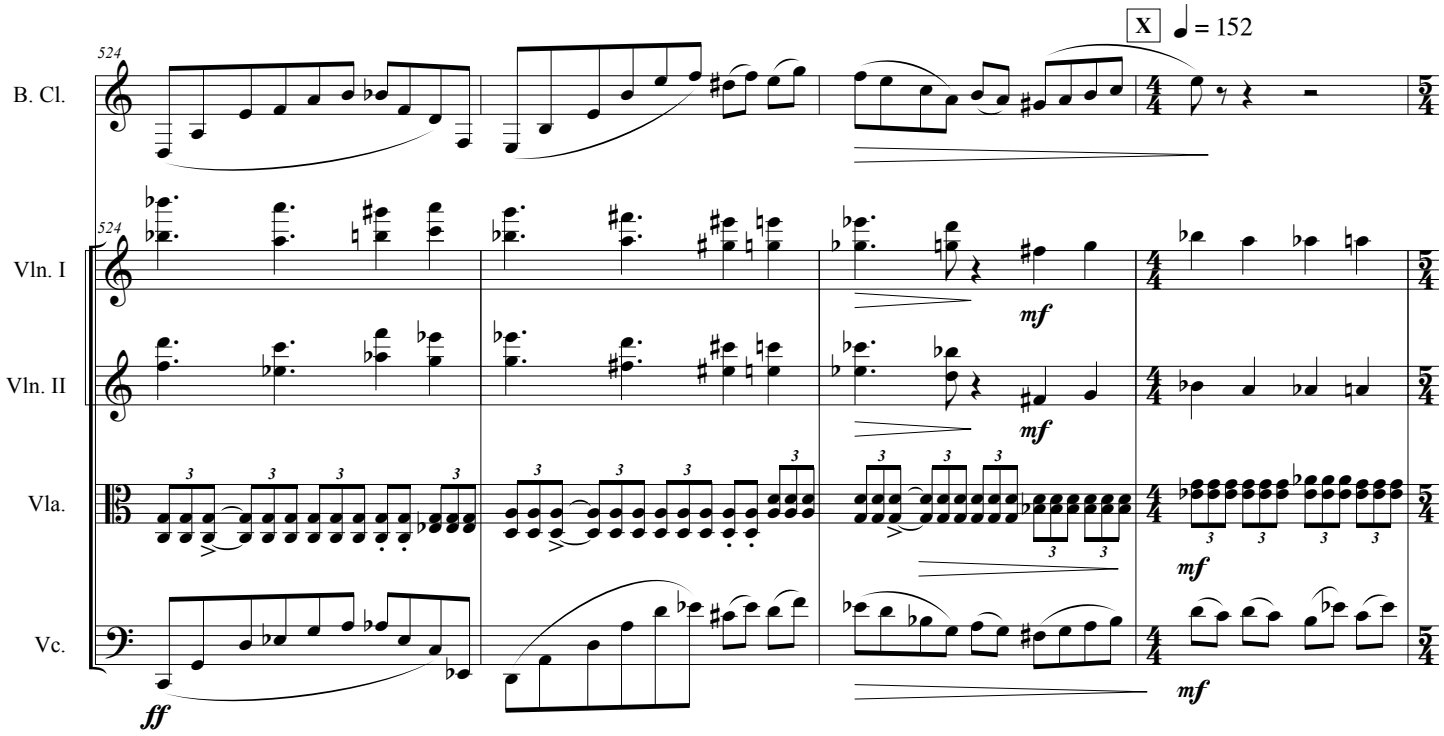

503
B. Cl.
503
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

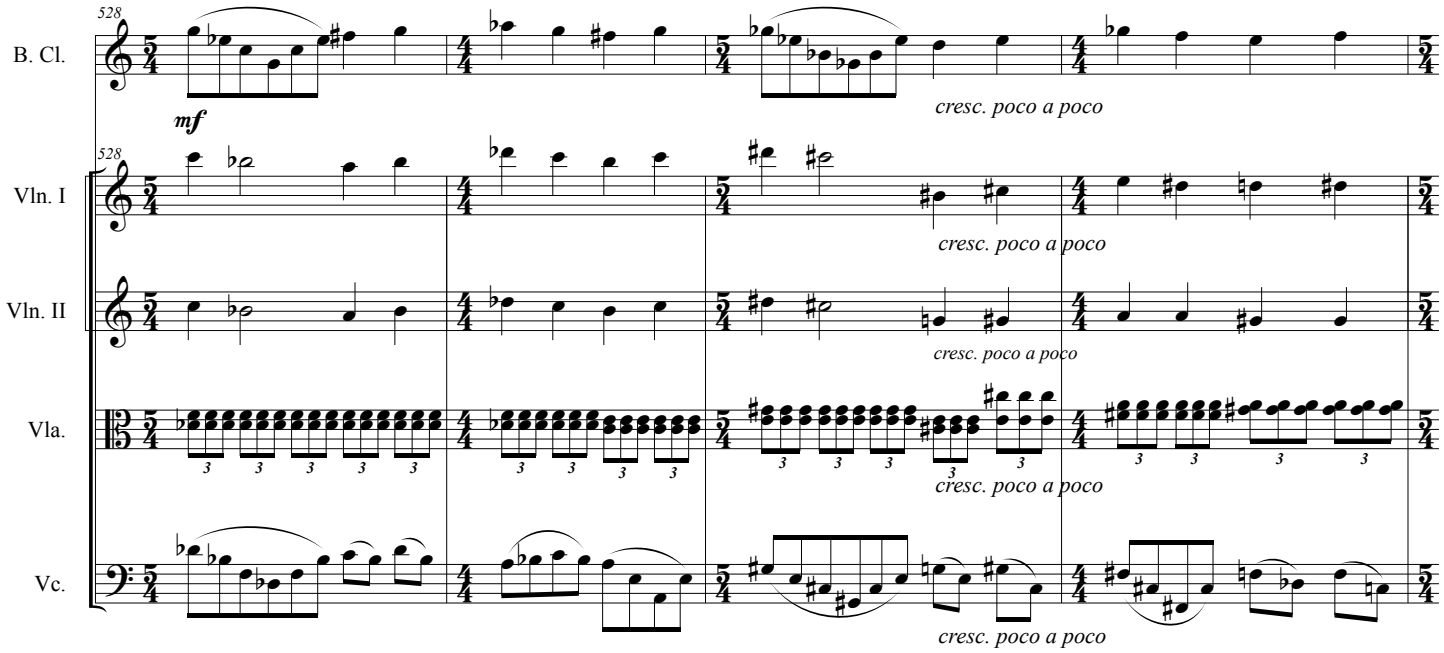

507
B. Cl.
507
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

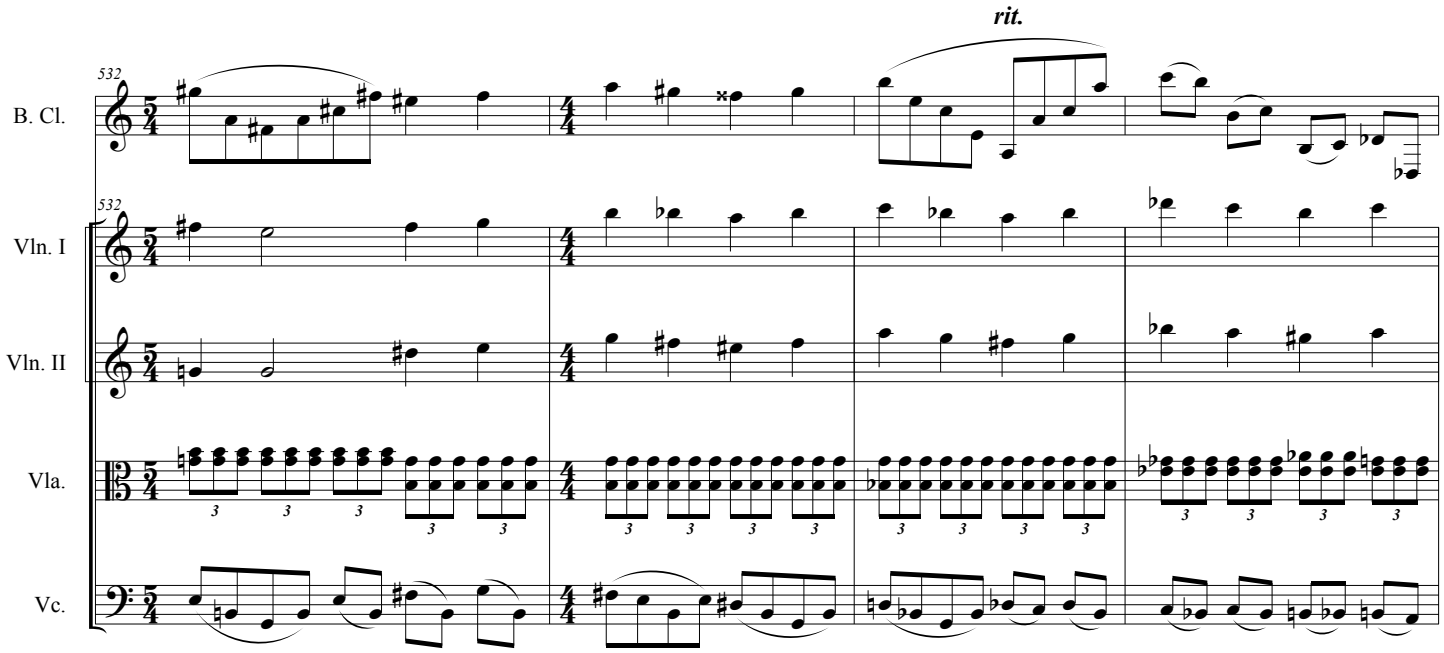

512
B. Cl.
512
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

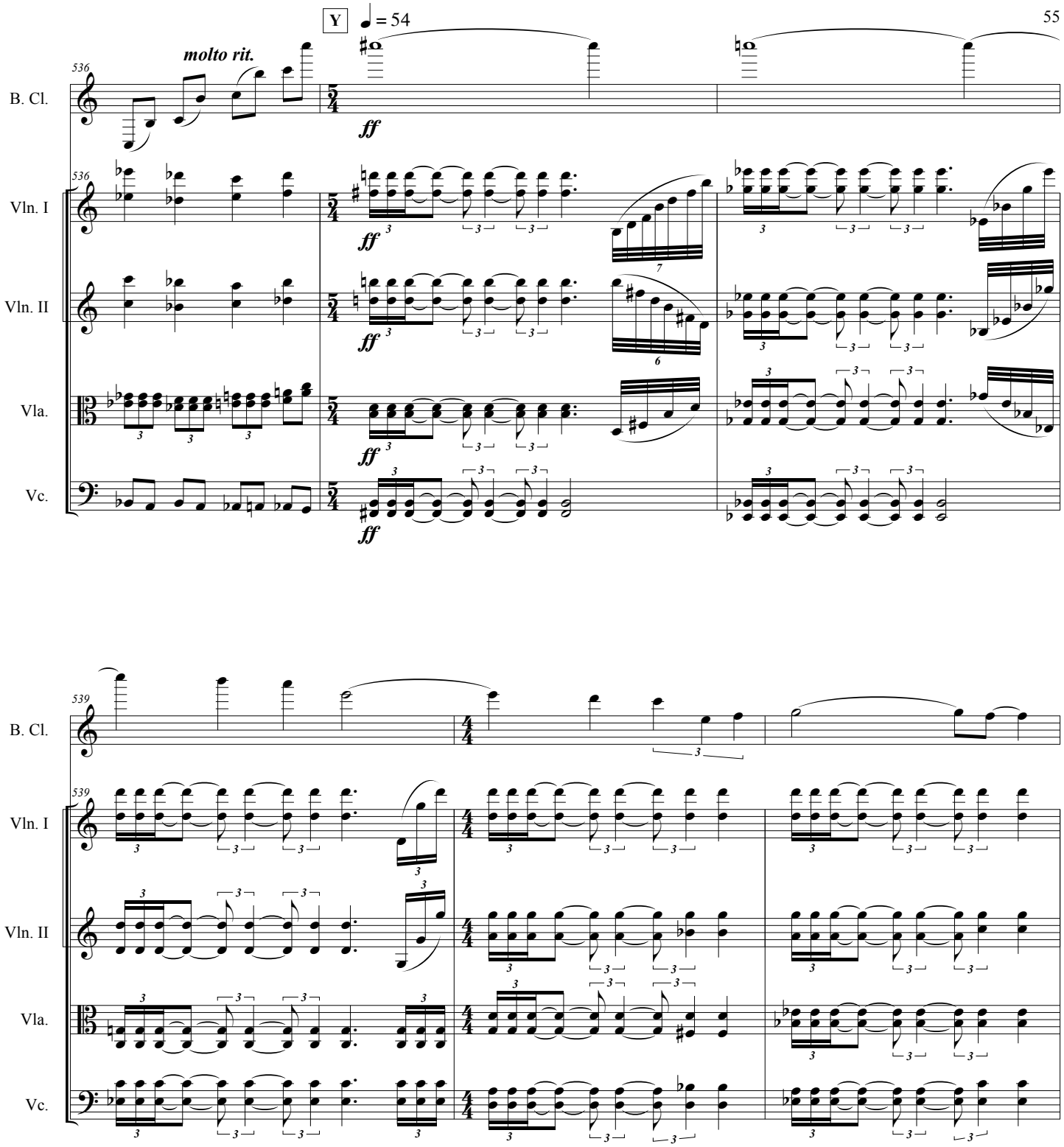

516
B. Cl.
516
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

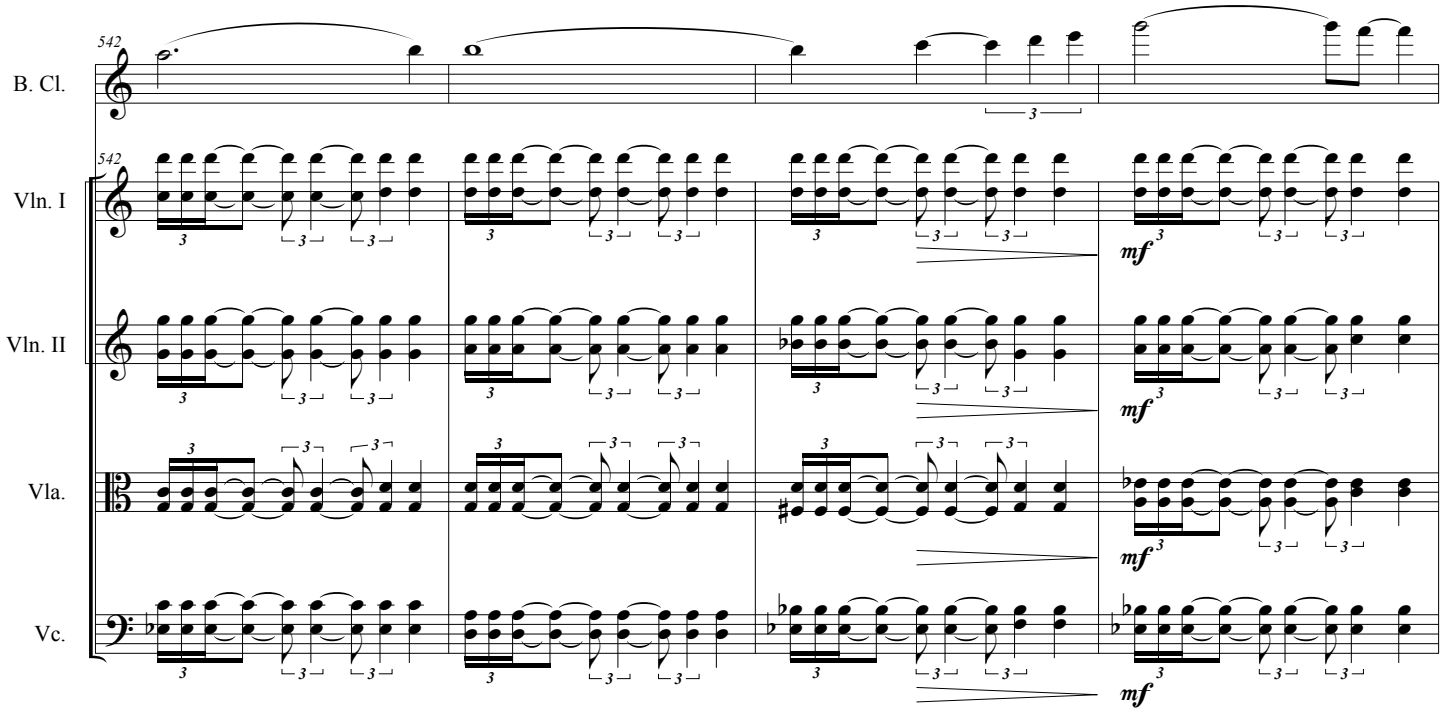

520
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.

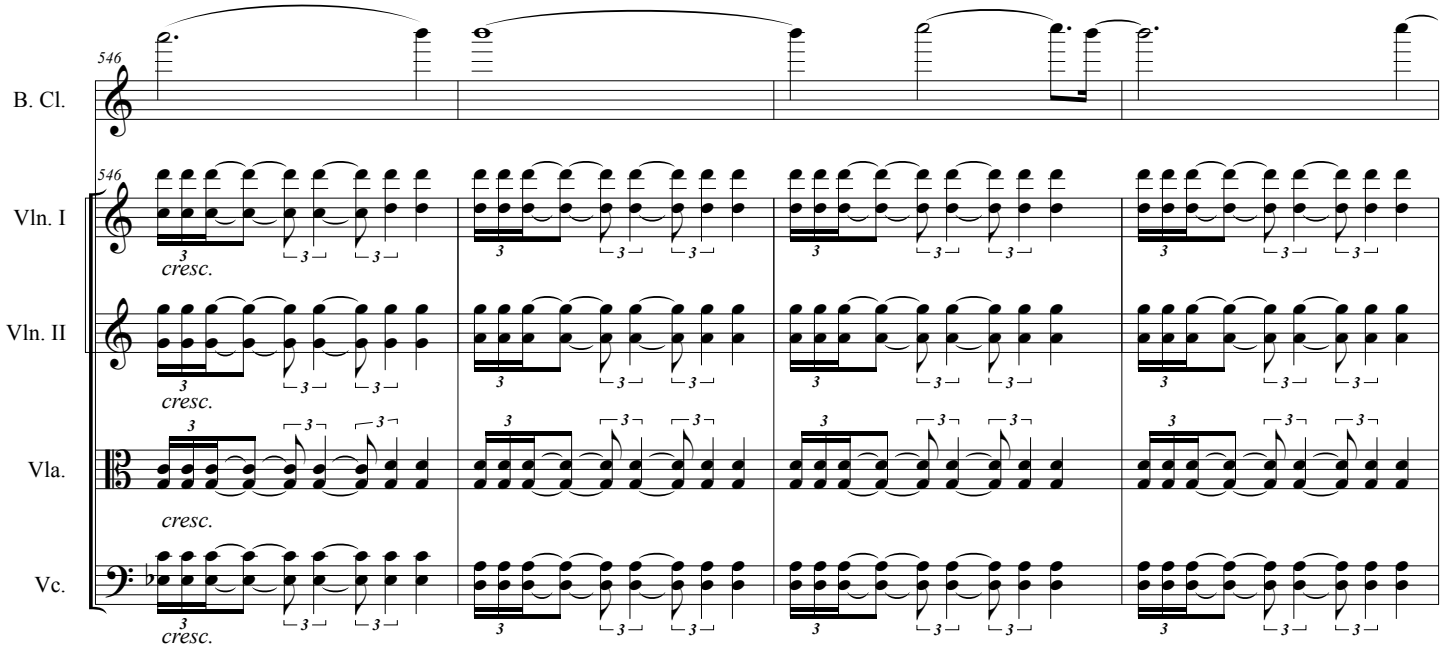

524
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
X
= 152
ff
mf


528
B. Cl.
mf
cresc. poco a poco
Vln. I
cresc. poco a poco
Vln. II
cresc. poco a poco
Vla.
cresc. poco a poco
Vc.
cresc. poco a poco


rit.
532
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.


Y
♩ = 54
molto rit.
536
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
ff
539


542
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
mf


546
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
cresc.

550

B. Cl.

rit.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

fff

dim.

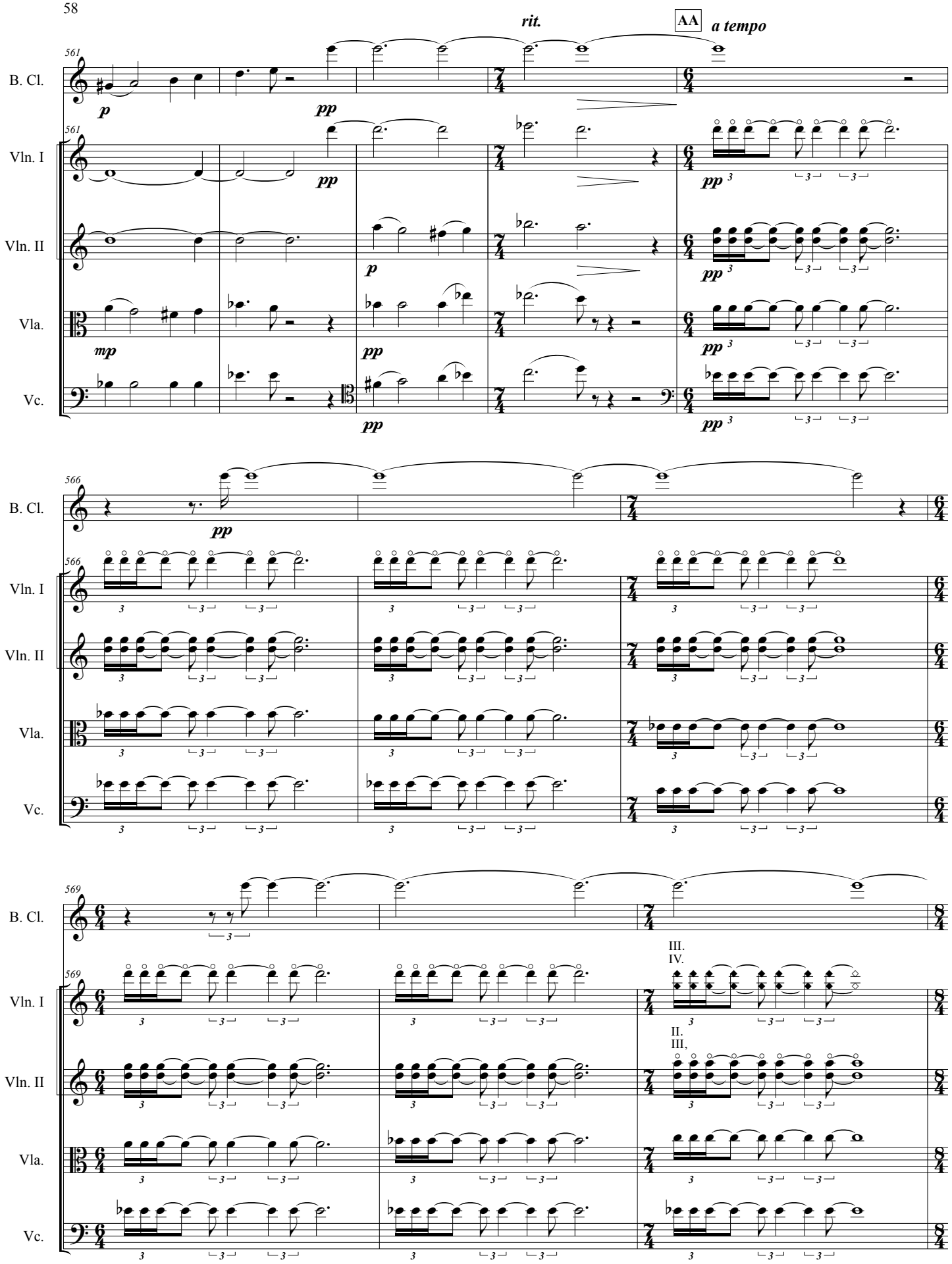
554

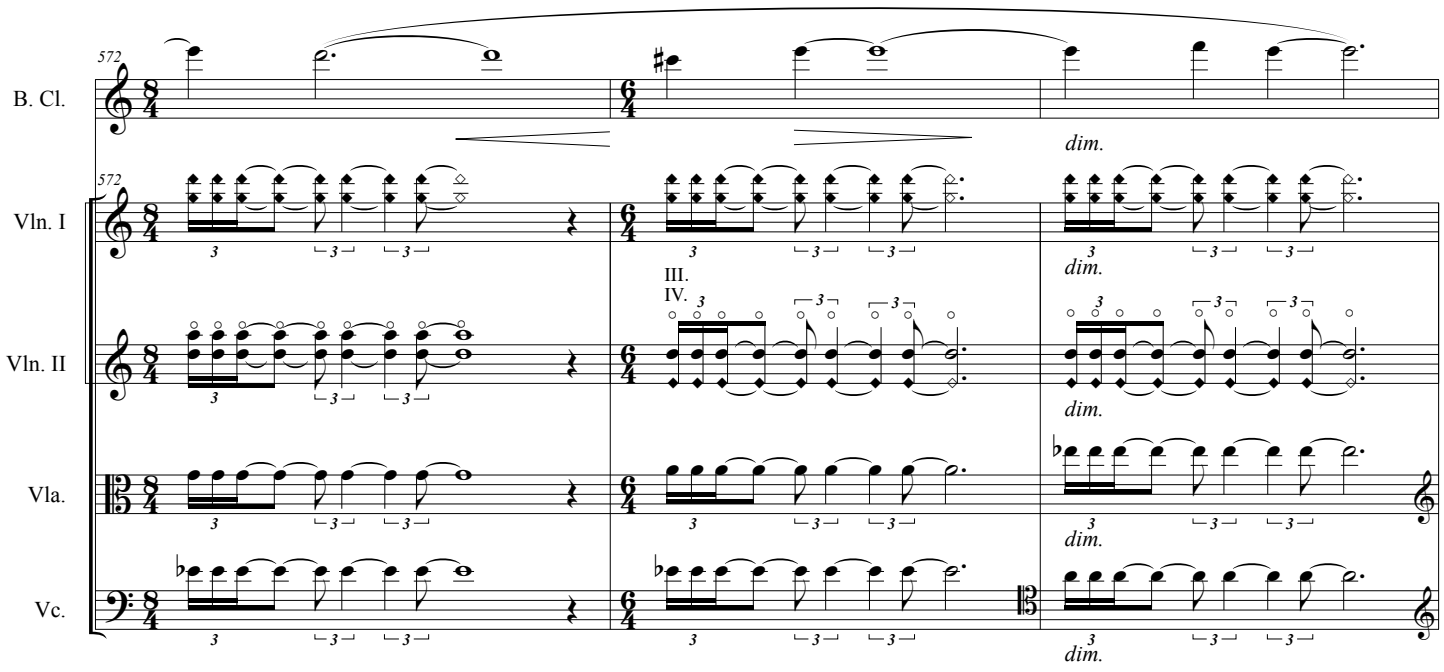
Z a tempo

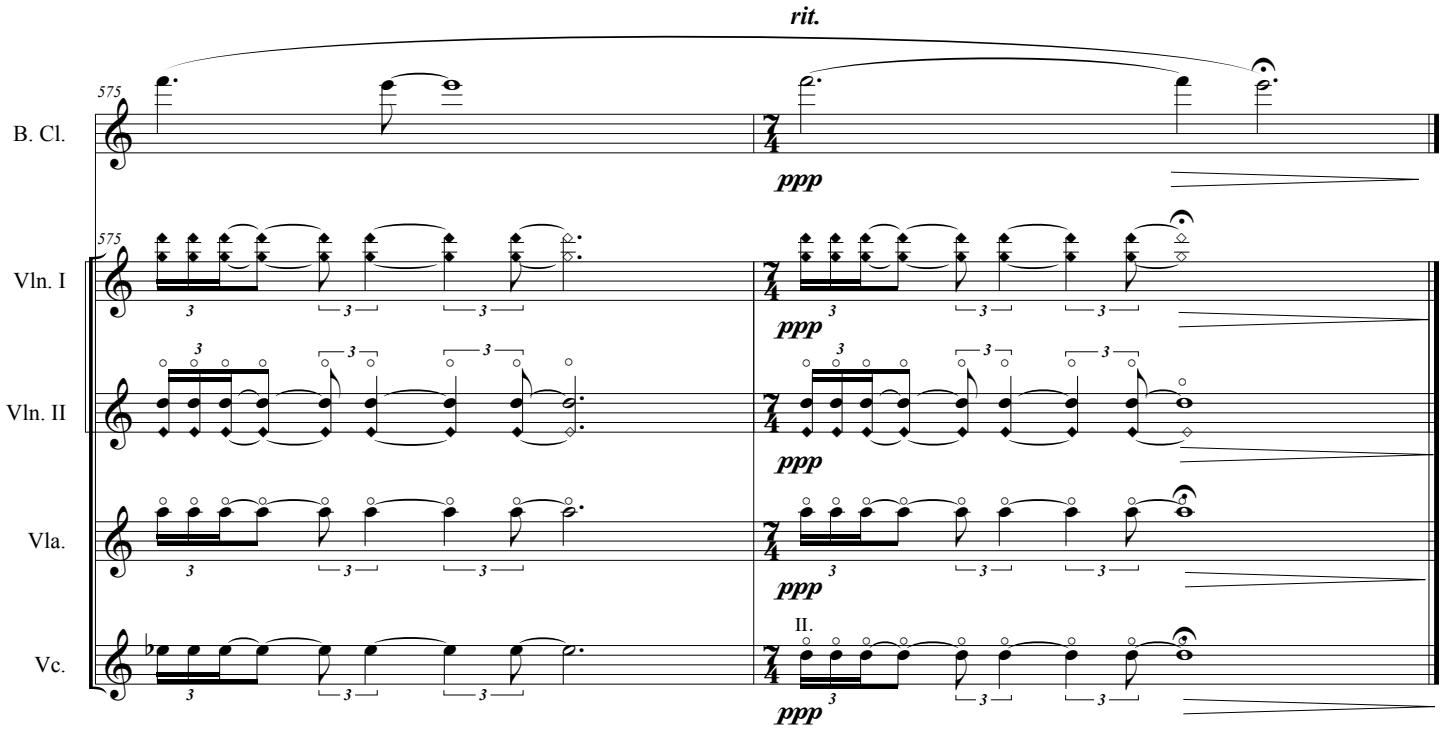
pp

mp

p


rit.
AA
a tempo
561
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
p
pp
mp
566
569
III.
IV.
II.
III,


572
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
III.
IV.
dim.


rit.
575
B. Cl.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
ppp
II.