The Ancestral Mousetrap

(Five Poems of Russell Edson)

for singing string quartet

David Reminick

(2014)

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I. Killing the Ape
II. The Old Woman's Breakfast
III. Oh My God, I'll Never Get Home
IV. Bringing a Dead Man Back into Life
V. The Ancestral Mousetrap

Performance Notes

ST = sul tasto
SP = sul ponticello
MST = molto sul tasto (on the fingerboard)
MSP = molto sul ponticello

X ⟶ Y = smoothly transition from the first indicated technique to the second

····· = **ricochet**

= fingernail pizz

= **dampen string**

= "dead stroke" - accented, dry, poco SP, slight overpressure

= overpressure

= circular bowing

pizz.
= muted pizzicato

= scratch-tone/pitchless

= behind bridge

= behind bridge, on winding of string

= **using the wood of the bow, tap the string to produce the indicated pitch (approximate).**

= undertone

= overpressure clef - place the bow over the fingerboard where you would normally stop the string to produce the indicated pitch(es), applying overpressure. The resultant sound should be at the same pitch, but with a jagged, perforated tone.

The performers are asked to sing throughout the piece. Classical vocal training is not required, and the musicians should feel free to sing in whatever manner feels most comfortable, regardless of their level of training.

Program Note

The Ancestral Mousetrap is a setting of five prose poems by the "godfather of the American prose poem" Russell Edson. Edson is known for his short fantastical narratives about absurd, grotesque, impossible situations. His writing is tragic, hilarious, and spiritual, often all at once. It is also devoutly open-ended, offering no simple meanings, no well-worn metaphors. Throughout his catalogue, Edson confronts real yet intangible aspects of human thought and emotion, unearthing truths that are somehow at once profound and unnamable. While my settings reflect my personal understanding of Edson's poetry, I've done my best to allow his words to remain open-ended – to resist the urge to directly portray his imagery in music (is that even possible with Edson's work?). I spent a great deal of time reading and re-reading the poems, allowing Edson's writing to elicit musical images from my subconscious. The job of the musicians in this piece is especially involved, as they sing the texts (sometimes in four-part harmony) while simultaneously playing dense and rhythmic music on their instruments.

The Ancestral Mousetrap: texts

by Russell Edson (1935-2014)

I. Killing the Ape

They were killing the ape with infinite care; not too much or it runs past dying and is born again.

Too little delivers a sick old man covered with fur.

. . . Gently gently out of hell, the ape climbing out of the ape.

II. The Old Woman's Breakfast

The old woman at breakfast, she is so weary she hardly tells herself from the porridge she eats.

She can't tell if she spoons the porridge into herself, or herself into the porridge . . .

The walls melt, and her mind seems to float all over the room like a puff of dust slapped out of a pillow.

She falls into the porridge, she becomes part of it.

She is a porridge of melting walls; her bones no longer different than her flesh, her eyes no longer different than her nostrils.

. . . She begins to spill over the edge of the table . . .

III. Oh My God, I'll Never Get Home

A piece of a man had broken off in a road. He picked it up and put it in his pocket.

As he stooped to pick up another piece he came apart at the waist.

His bottom half was still standing. He walked over on his elbows and grabbed the seat of his pants and said, legs go home.

But as they were going along his head fell off. His head yelled, legs stop.

And then one of his knees came apart. But meanwhile his heart had dropped out of his trunk.

As his head screamed, legs turn around, his tongue fell out.

Oh my God, he thought, I'll never get home.

IV. Bringing a Dead Man Back into Life

The dead man is introduced back into life. They take him to a country fair, to a French restaurant, a round of late night parties . . . He's beginning to smell.

They give him a few days off in bed.

He's taken to a country fair again; a second engagement at the French restaurant; another round of late night parties . . . No response . . . They brush the maggots away . . . That terrible smell! . . . No use . . .

What's wrong with you?

. . . No use . . .

They slap his face. His cheek comes off; bone underneath, jaws and teeth . . .

Another round of late night parties . . . Dropping his fingers . . . An ear falls off . . . Loses a foot in a taxi . . . No use . . . The smell . . . Maggots everywhere!

Another round of late night parties. His head comes off, rolls on the floor. A woman stumbles on it, an eye rolls out. She screams.

No use . . . Under his jacket nothing but maggots and ribs . . . No use . . .

V. The Ancestral Mousetrap

We are left a mousetrap, baited with cheese. We must not jar it, or our ancestor's gesture and pressure are lost, as the trap springs shut.

He has relinquished his hands to what the earth makes of flesh. Still, here in this mousetrap is caught the thumb print of his pressure.

A mouse would steal this with its death, this still unspent jewel of intent.

In a jewel box it is kept, to keep it from the robber-mouse; even as memory in the skull was kept, to keep it from the robber-worm, who even now is climbing a thief in the window of his eyes.

Text from The Tunnel: Selected Poems of Russell Edson.
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commissioned by the Spektral Quartet

The Ancestral Mousetrap

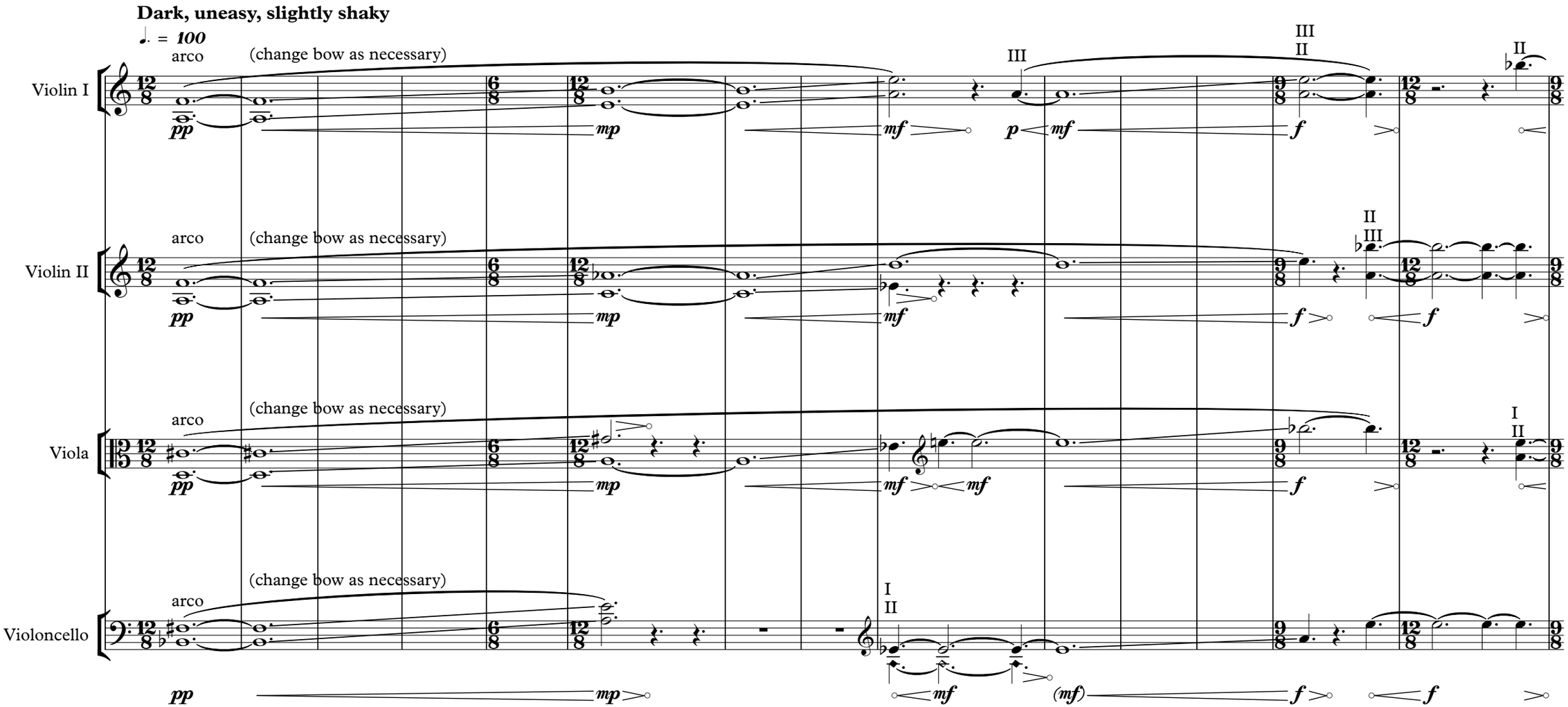
(Five Poems of Russell Edson)

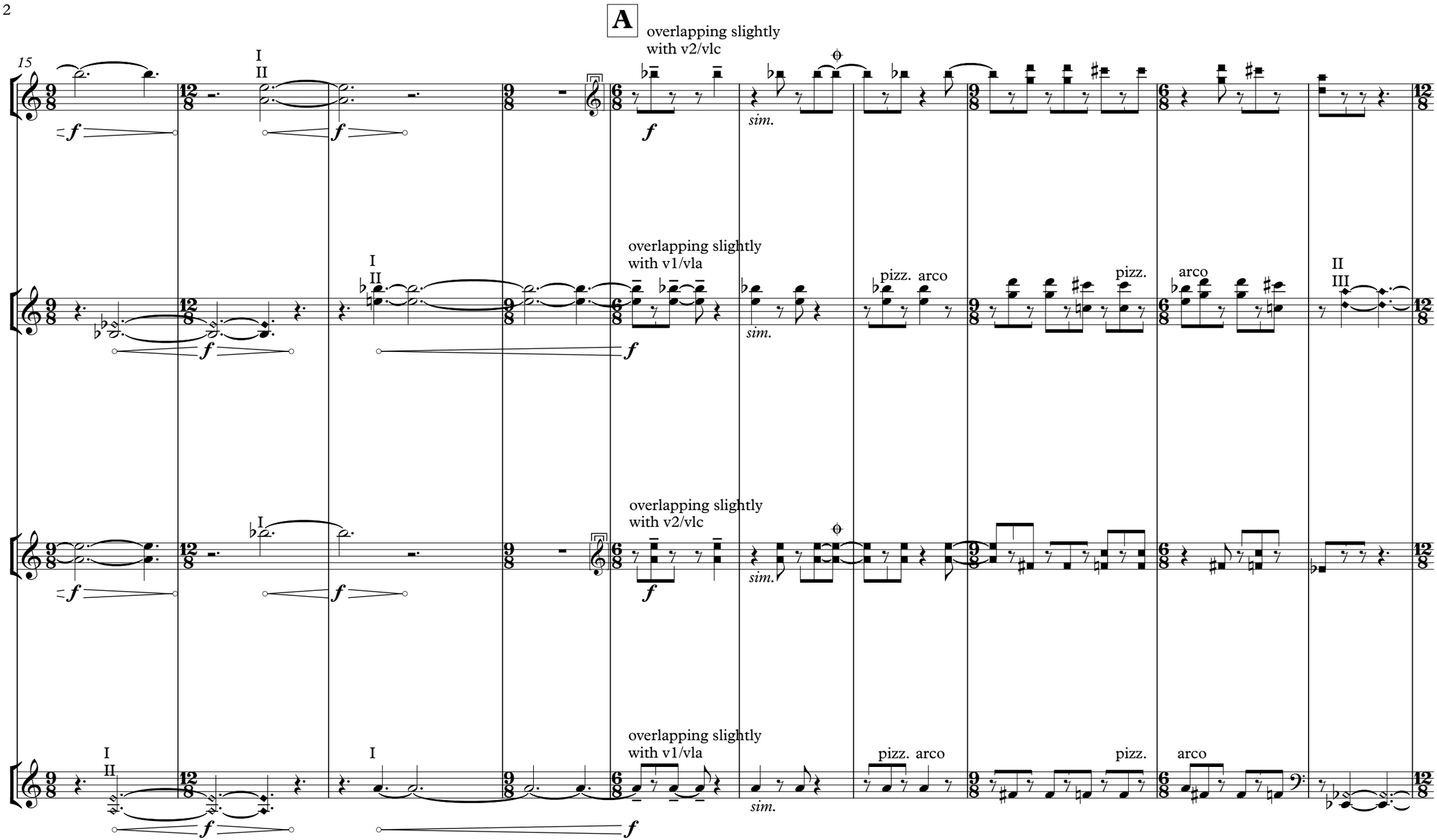
Text by Russell Edson

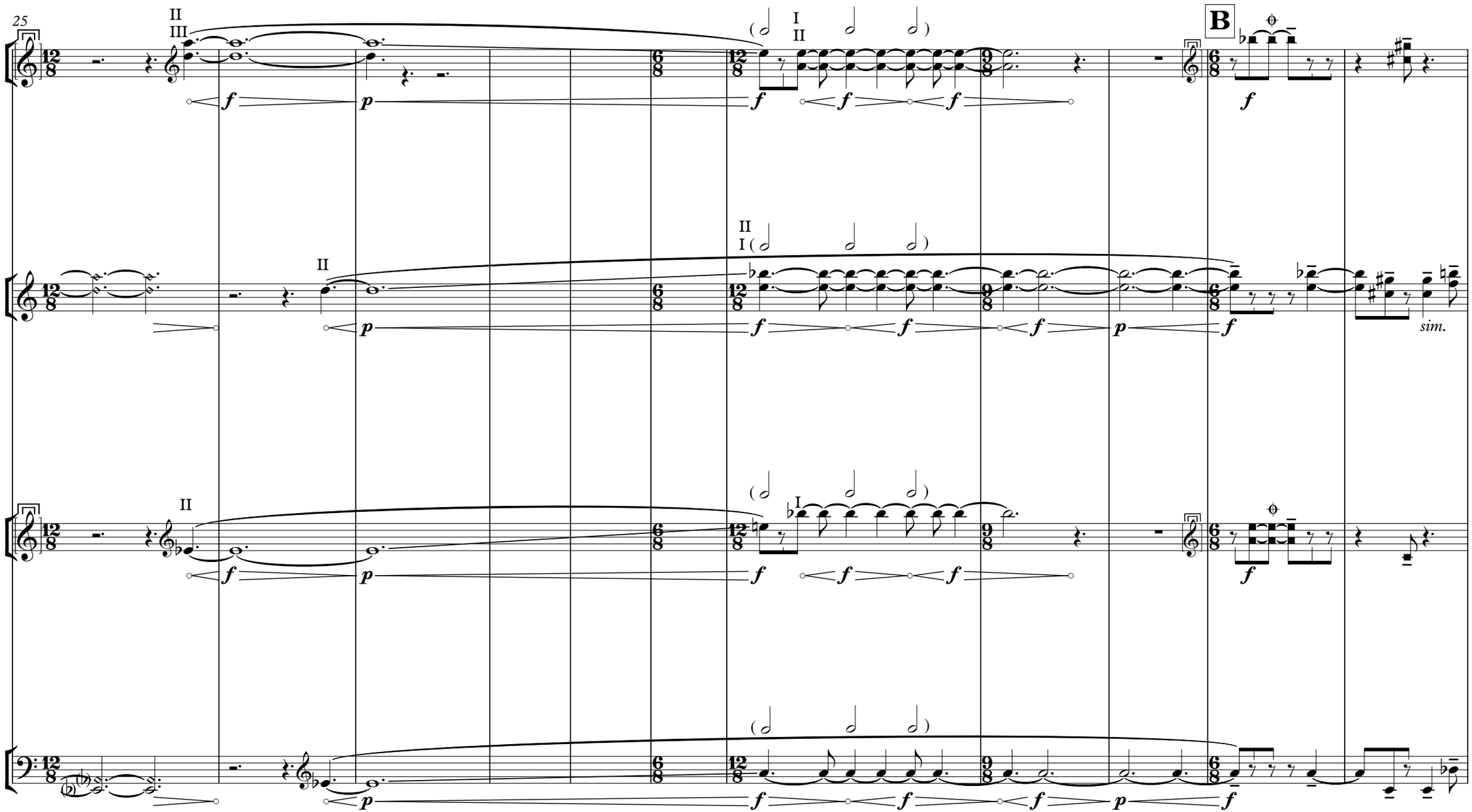
I.

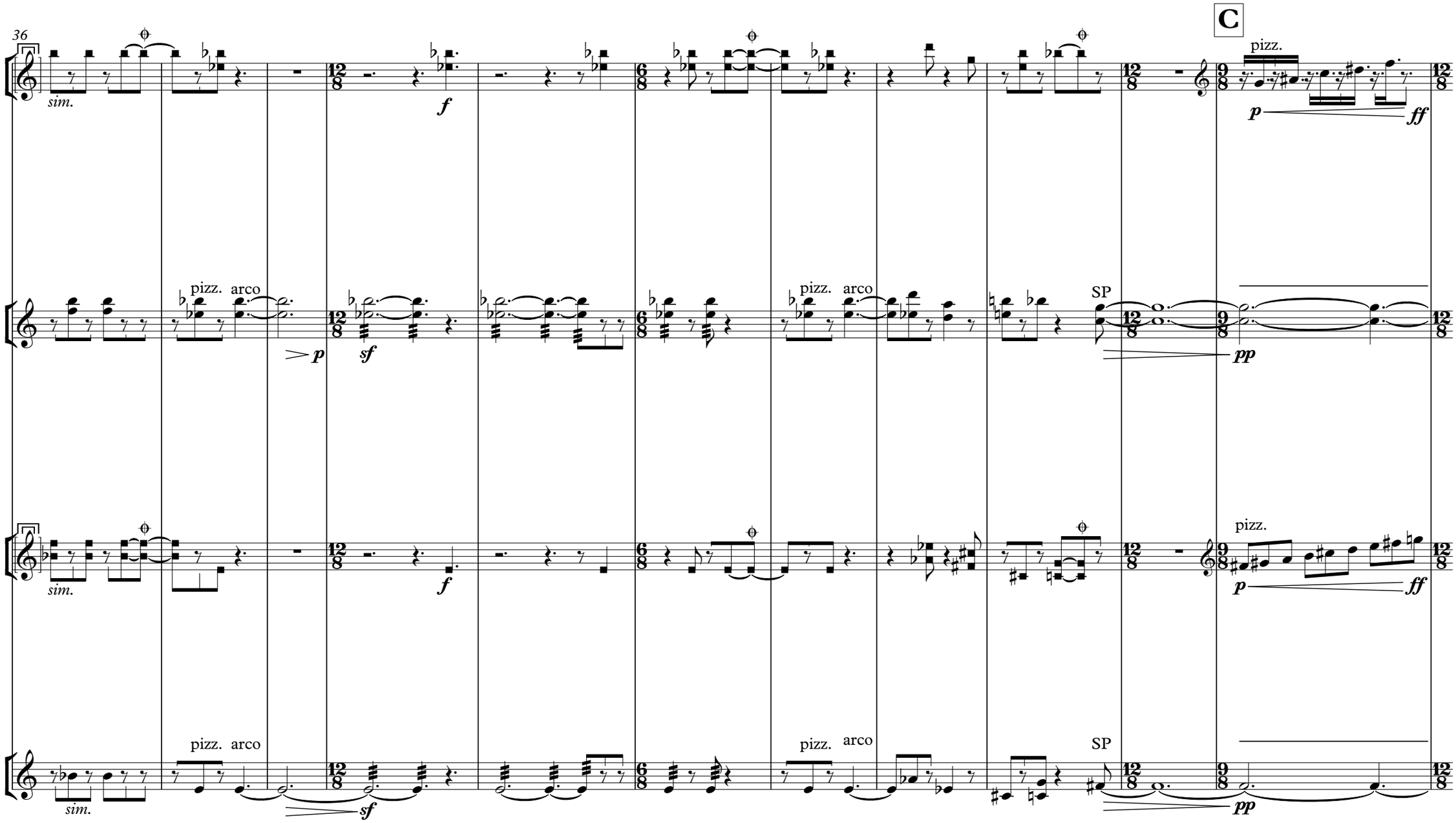
Killing the Ape

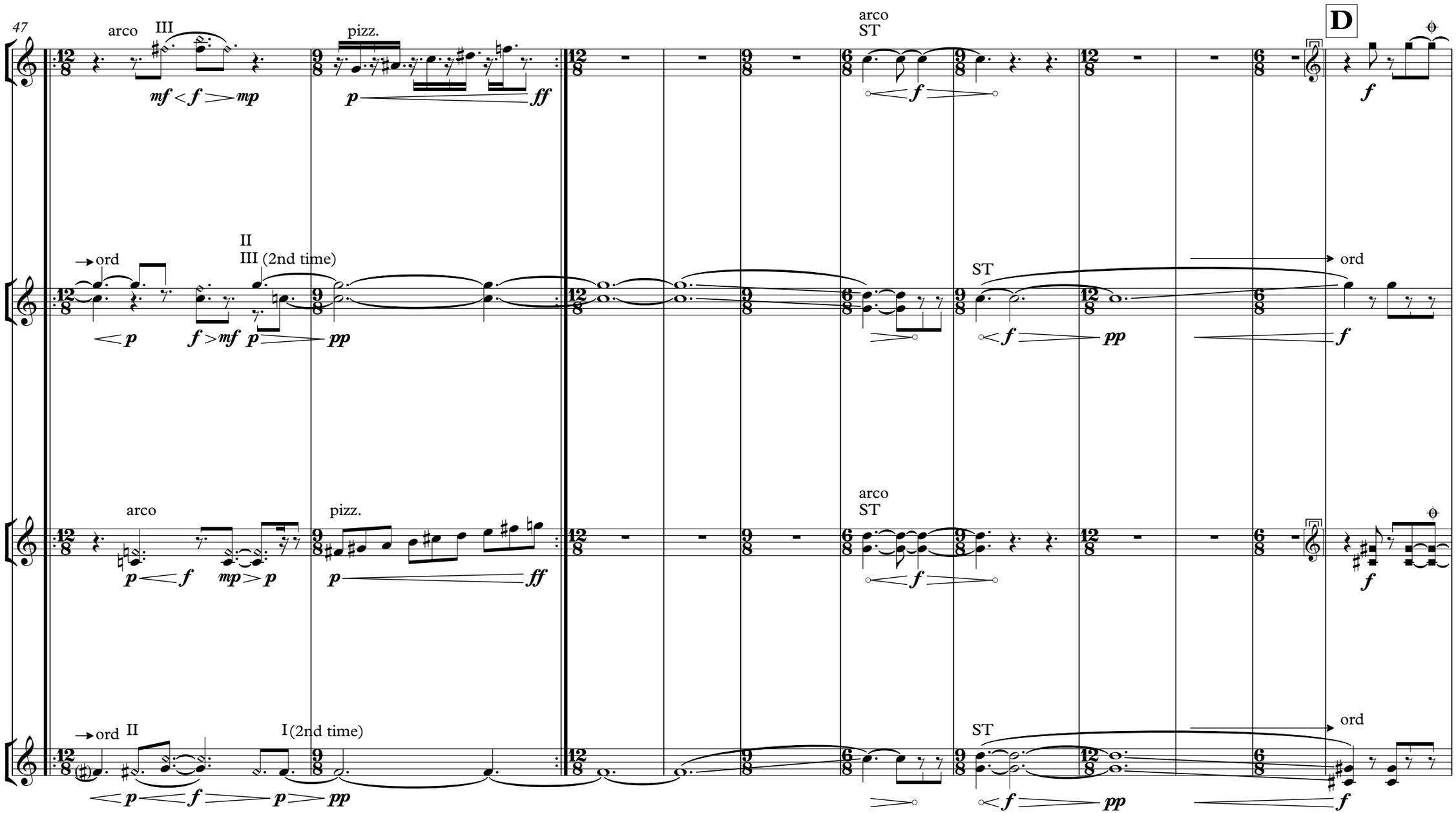
David Reminick

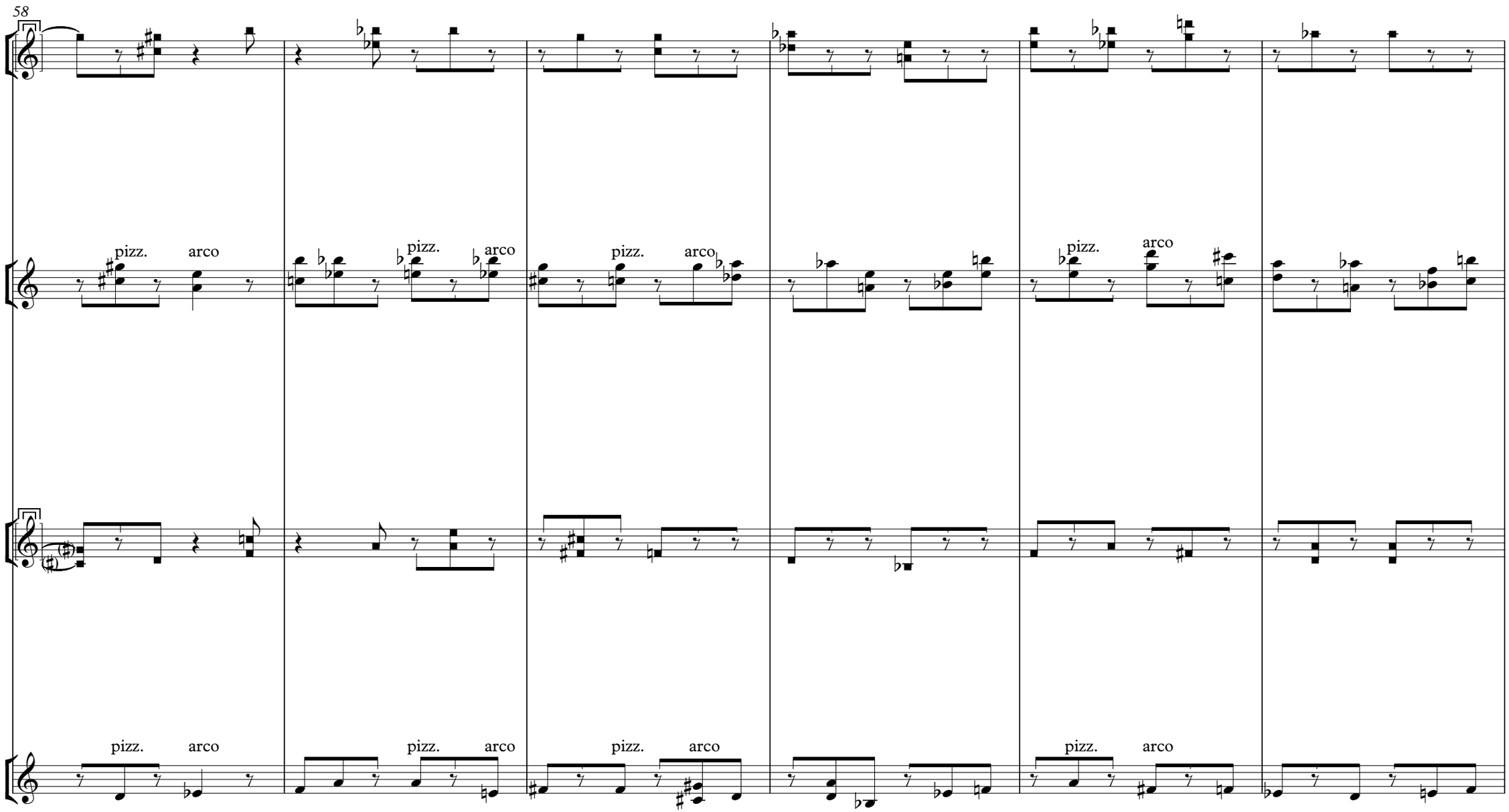


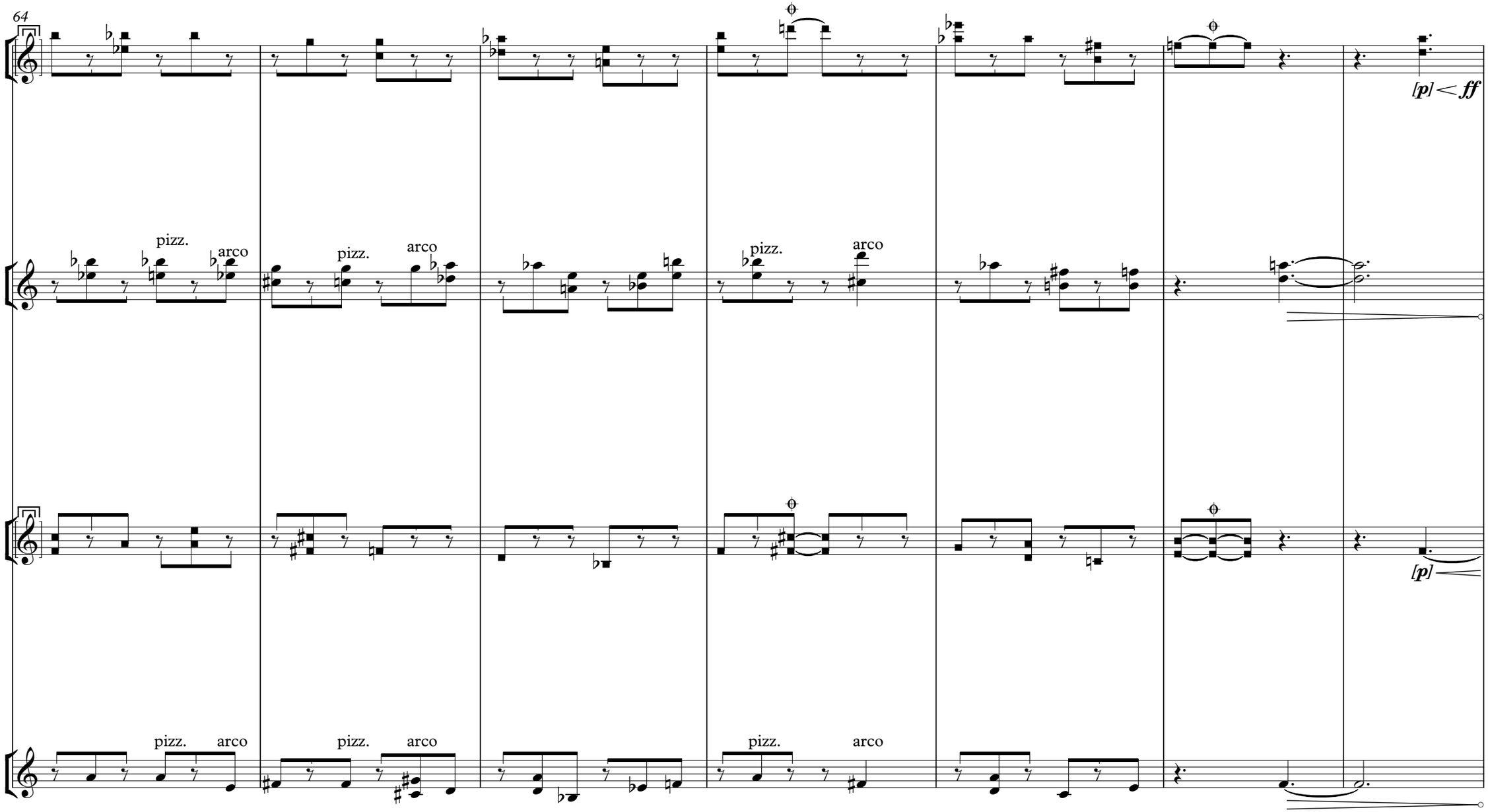

A
15
overlapping slightly
with v2/vlc
overlapping slightly
with v1/vla
overlapping slightly
with v2/vlc
overlapping slightly
with v1/vla
pizz.
arco
sim.

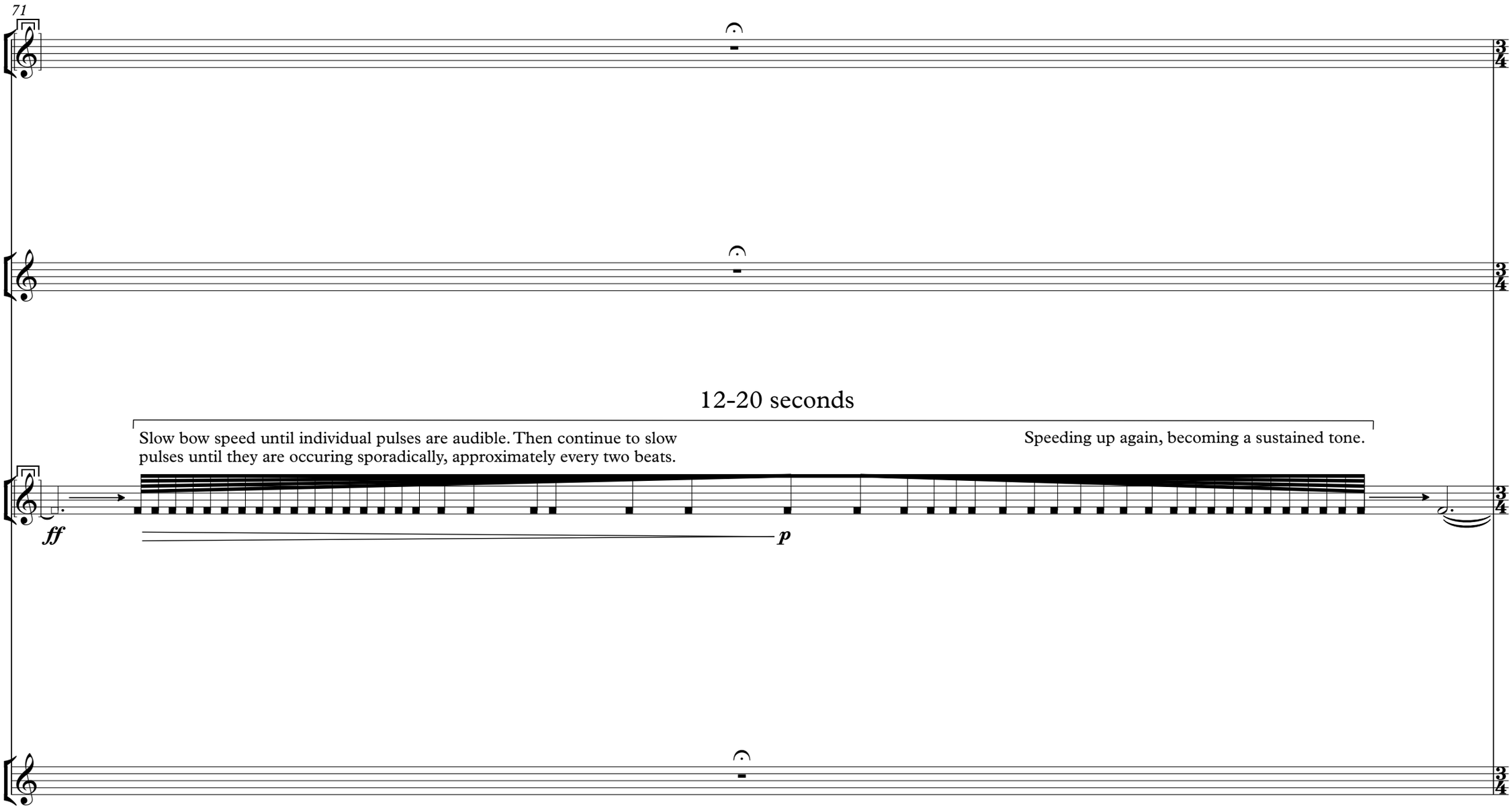

25
B
sim.


36
C
sim.
pizz.
arco
SP
f
sf
p
pp
ff


47
arco
III
mf < f > mp
pizz.
p ff
arco
ST
f
D
f
→ ord
II
III (2nd time)
p
f > mf
p pp
ST
f pp
→ ord
f
arco
p < f
mp > p
pizz.
p ff
arco
ST
f
f
→ ord
II
I (2nd time)
p < f > p pp
ST
f pp
→ ord
f

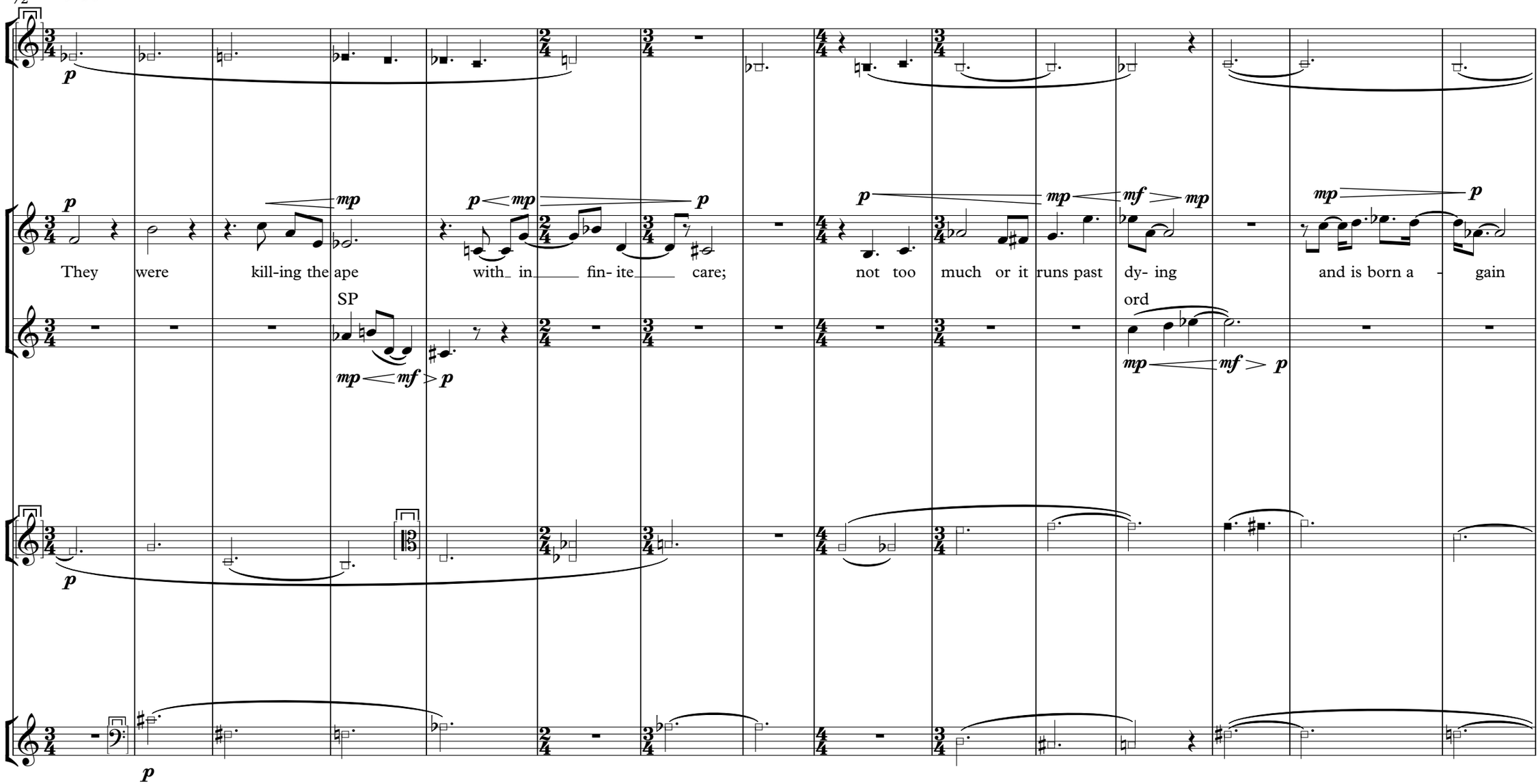

58
pizz.
arco
pizz.
arco
pizz.
arco
pizz.
arco
pizz.
arco
pizz.
arco
pizz.
arco
pizz.
arco

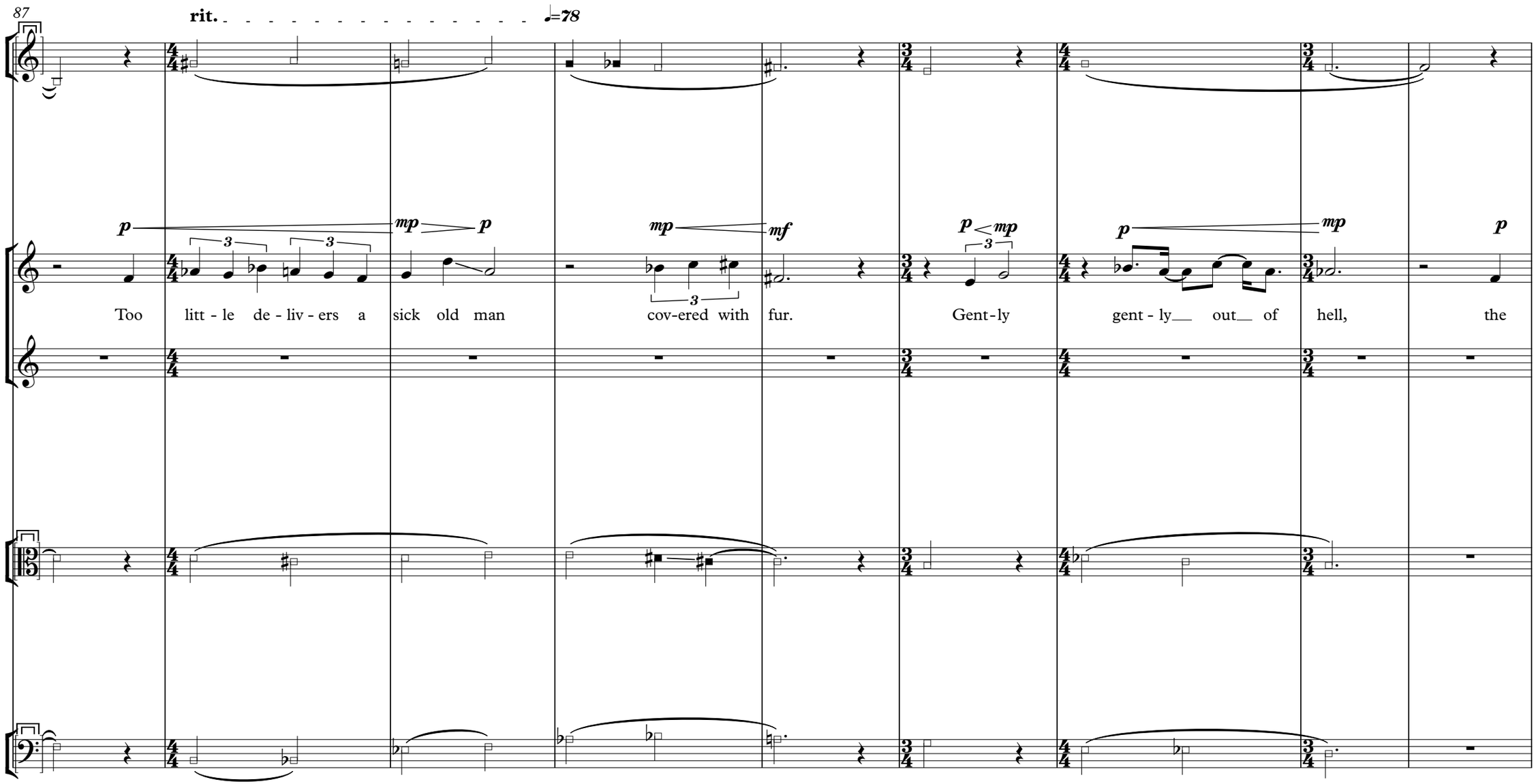

64
pizz.
arco
pizz.
arco
pizz.
arco
pizz.
arco
pizz.
arco
pizz.
arco
[p] < ff
[p]

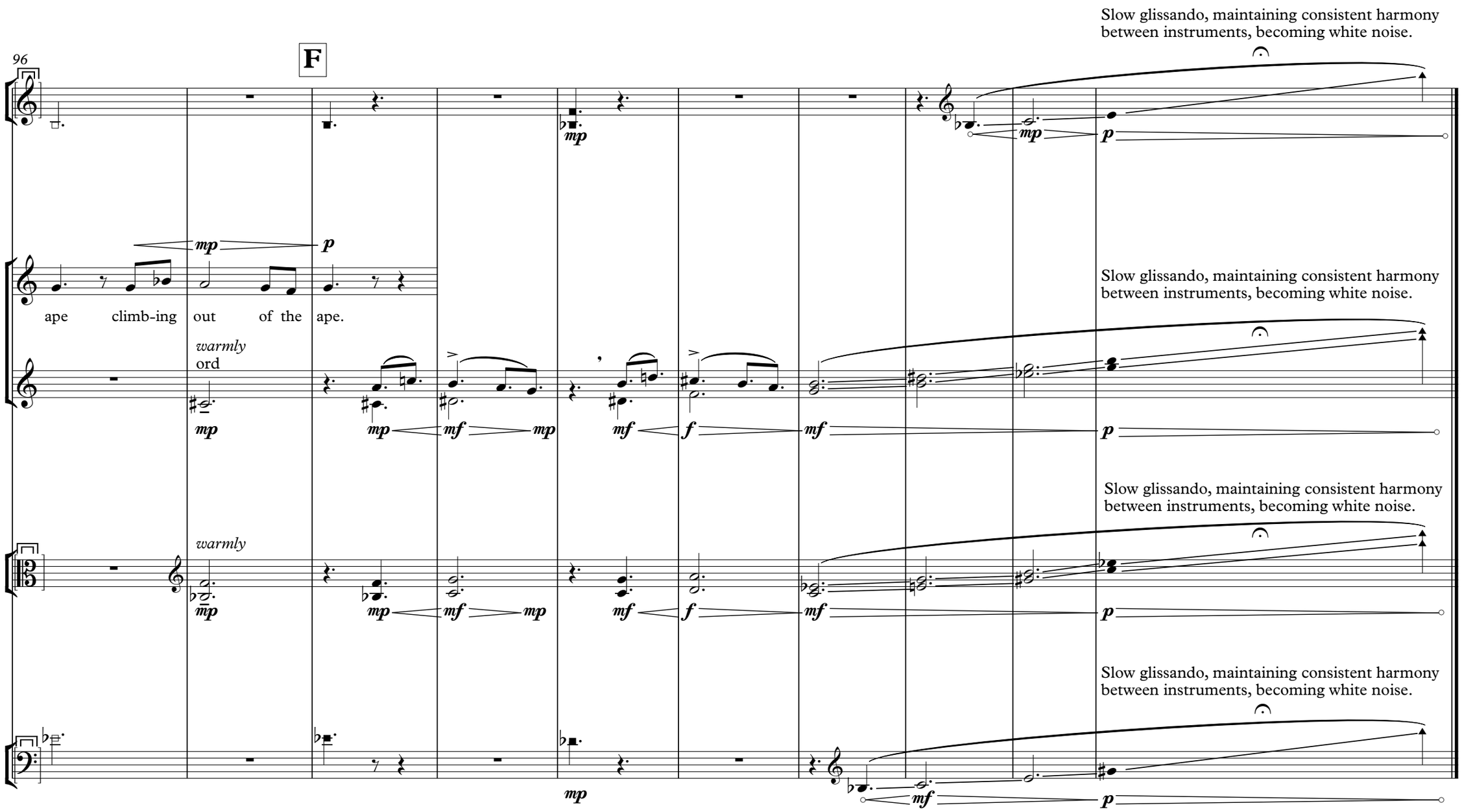

71
12-20 seconds
Slow bow speed until individual pulses are audible. Then continue to slow pulses until they are occuring sporadically, approximately every two beats.
Speeding up again, becoming a sustained tone.
ff
p

E **Calm, grotesque**

72 ♩=90




87
rit.
♩=78
p
mp
p
mp
mf
p
mp
p
mp
p
Too litt - le de - liv - ers a sick old man cov-ered with fur. Gent-ly gent - ly out of hell, the


96
F
Slow glissando, maintaining consistent harmony between instruments, becoming white noise.
ape climb-ing out of the ape.
warmly
ord
Slow glissando, maintaining consistent harmony between instruments, becoming white noise.
warmly
Slow glissando, maintaining consistent harmony between instruments, becoming white noise.
Slow glissando, maintaining consistent harmony between instruments, becoming white noise.