Flip

for alto saxophone,
bass clarinet and piano

by Joel Matthys

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for Alto Saxophone, Bass Clarinet and Piano

I composed “Flip” in the fall of 2007 for the Thelema Trio. The piece is an attempt to represent metaphorically an abstract topological event—the rotation of a flat plane around two axes. One may imagine a piece of paper, held parallel to the ground at eye level. Although there is information inscribed on the paper, we can only see a single line: an edge. The paper slowly begins to rotate towards us, twisting upward and sideways at the same time.

The piece is in ternary form, with a slow rubato first section defined by chromatic flourishes (bars 1-30), a rhythmic second section filled with canons at various time intervals (bars 31-160), and a return to the style of the first section (bars 161-181).

In the first section, I represented the topological rotation in two ways: the tessitura of the piano progresses from the outer extremes of the piano toward middle C, and the intervals between the alto saxophone and bass clarinet increase from unison to an octave. In the first phrase, we can see the pianist playing the extreme upper and lower notes on the piano, scraping the strings with his or her fingernail. By the end of the first section, the piano chords are swarming around middle C (bar 30).

The first phrase ends with the alto saxophone and bass clarinet in unison (bar 6). The next phrase begins with the alto saxophone and bass clarinet a major second apart (bar 8). These intervals expand to a major third (bar 10), tritone (bar 13), minor sixth (17), and minor seventh (bar 21).

The idea of distortion is central to the structure of the piece. In the alto saxophone and bass clarinet, this manifests itself as serial chromaticism. The first gesture in the bass clarinet is contains nine of the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale, and the next gesture is an inversion of the same row, shortened to six notes. I wanted to compress the intervals at the end of every phrase, so I wrote a simple program in Common Music to compress intervals by slight amounts (as little as five or ten percent). I chose not to use microtonality, so a compressed interval had to be rounded to a whole number, which introduced a new level of distortion.

Examples of compressed intervals can be found in the alternation between the saxophone and clarinet in bars 14-15.

The main musical germ of the piece—the undistorted material—appears in the piano in bar 107. Incomplete statements of this theme appear in bars 39-40 and 49-50, and the internal intervallic structure (a triad consisting of a perfect fourth stacked on a tritone) permeates the piano part of the A section. The scale which constitutes the main theme is a kind of altered Mixolydian scale (D-E-F#-G-A-Bb-C-D). This scale is used to construct the canon subject on the B section (bars 31-38).

The beginning of the B section represents the moment when the topological rotation progresses far enough that the distorted information on the plane suddenly coalesces into a coherent image. This is a psychological-cognitive event, a moment of recognition. The information is comprehensible, but it is still distorted. In this section that distortion manifests itself as a series of canons which gradually get closer in onset time. The first canonic entrance begins nine eighth-notes apart (bars 41-42) and decreases by two eighth-notes upon each repetition. Similar to a mensuration canon but somewhat easier to perform, these converging canons represent the move toward minimal distortion. At bar 87, all three instruments play the canon an eighth-note apart, ushering in the climactic section which features unison writing in all three parts (bars 95-118). Now, as the rotation of the plane continues, the canons diverge again, both temporally and chromatically. The piano moves toward its lowest tessitura, and the saxophone moves towards its highest.

The return to the A section features similar processes as the first section. The piano begins at the high and low extreme registers, the bass clarinet begins in its lowest tessitura, the saxophone begins high, and all three instruments progress toward middle C. The intervals between the saxophone and bass clarinet also move from major seventh (bar 161) toward unison (bars 178-181). At the end, all three instruments have converged on middle C.

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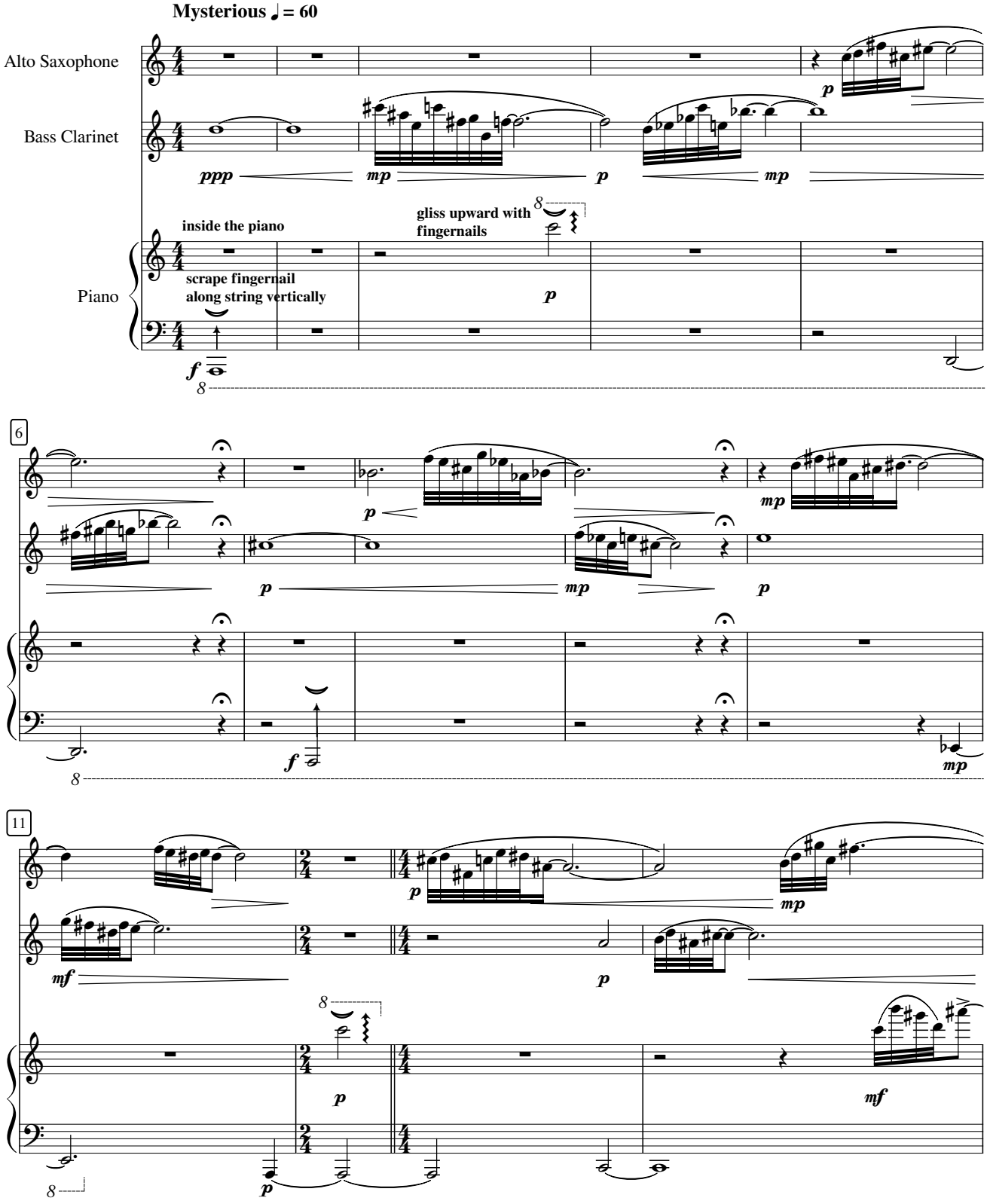
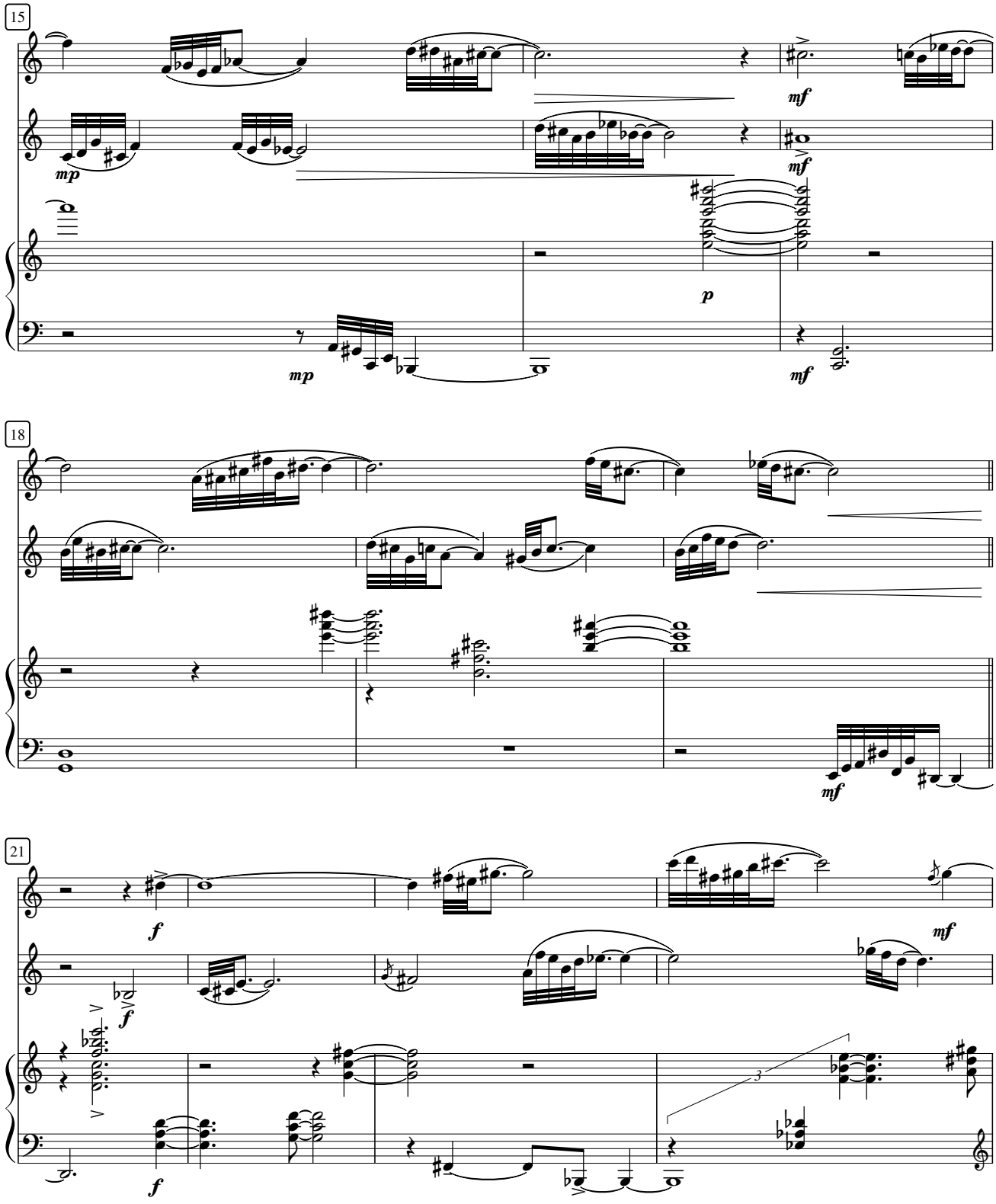
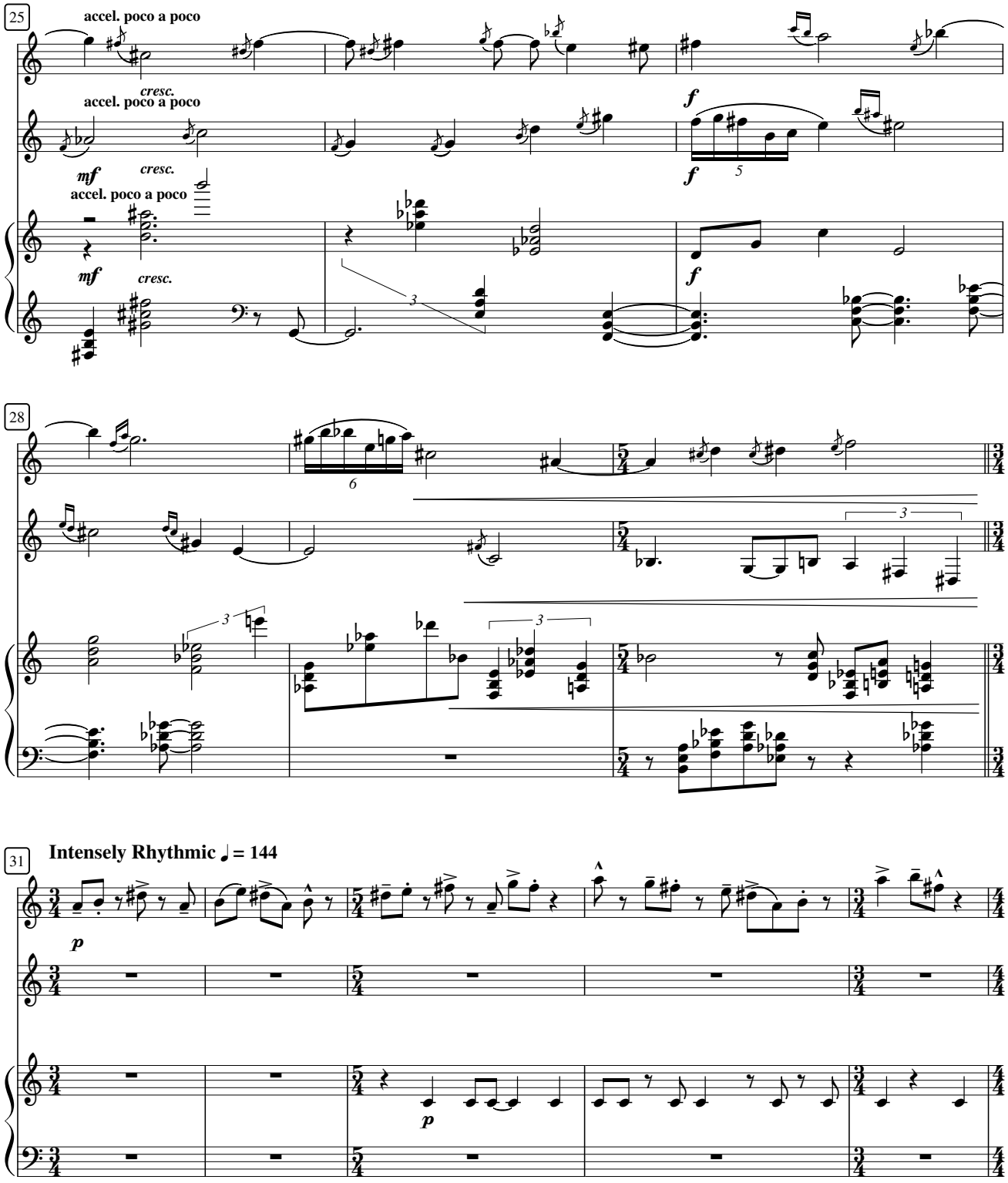
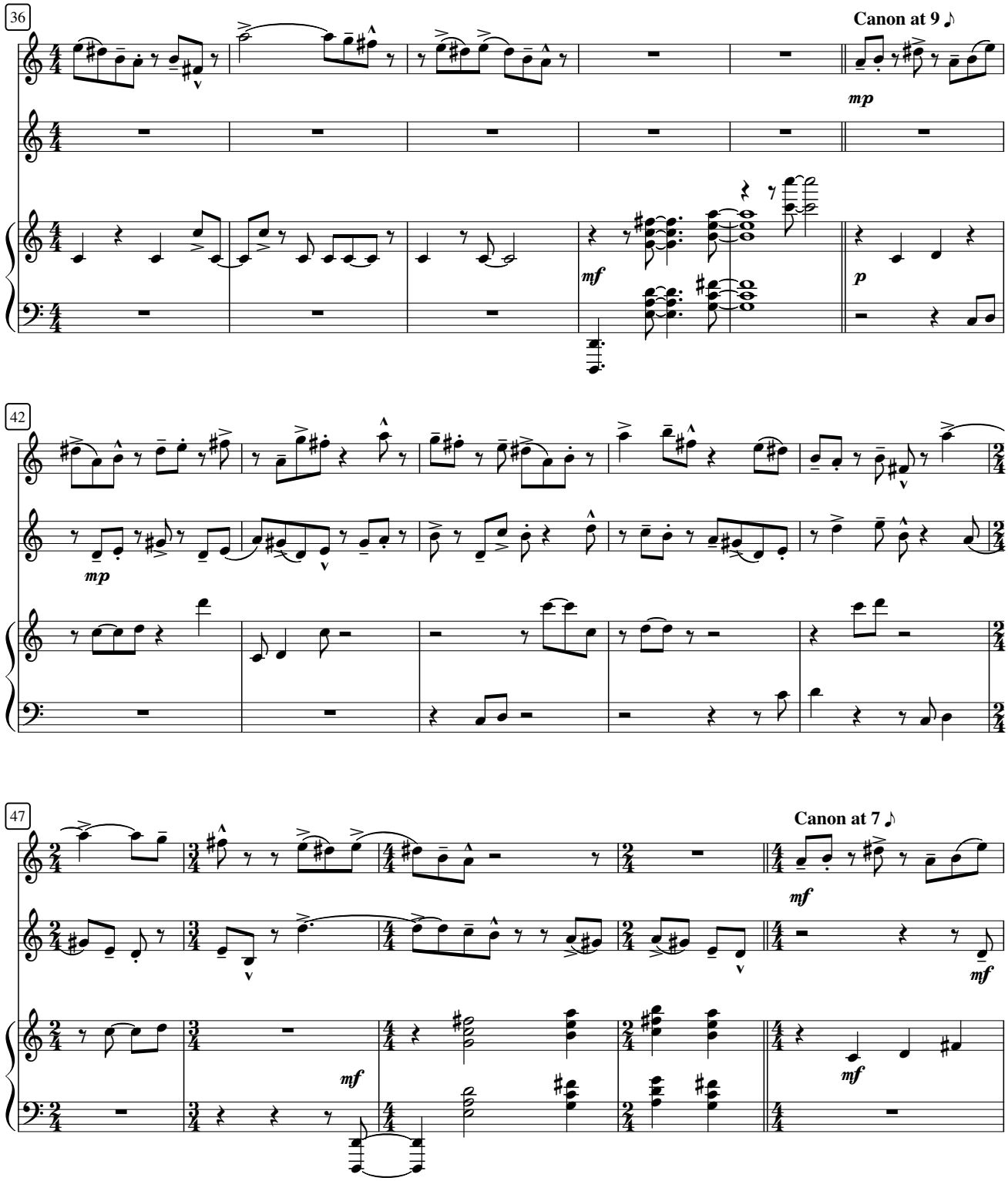
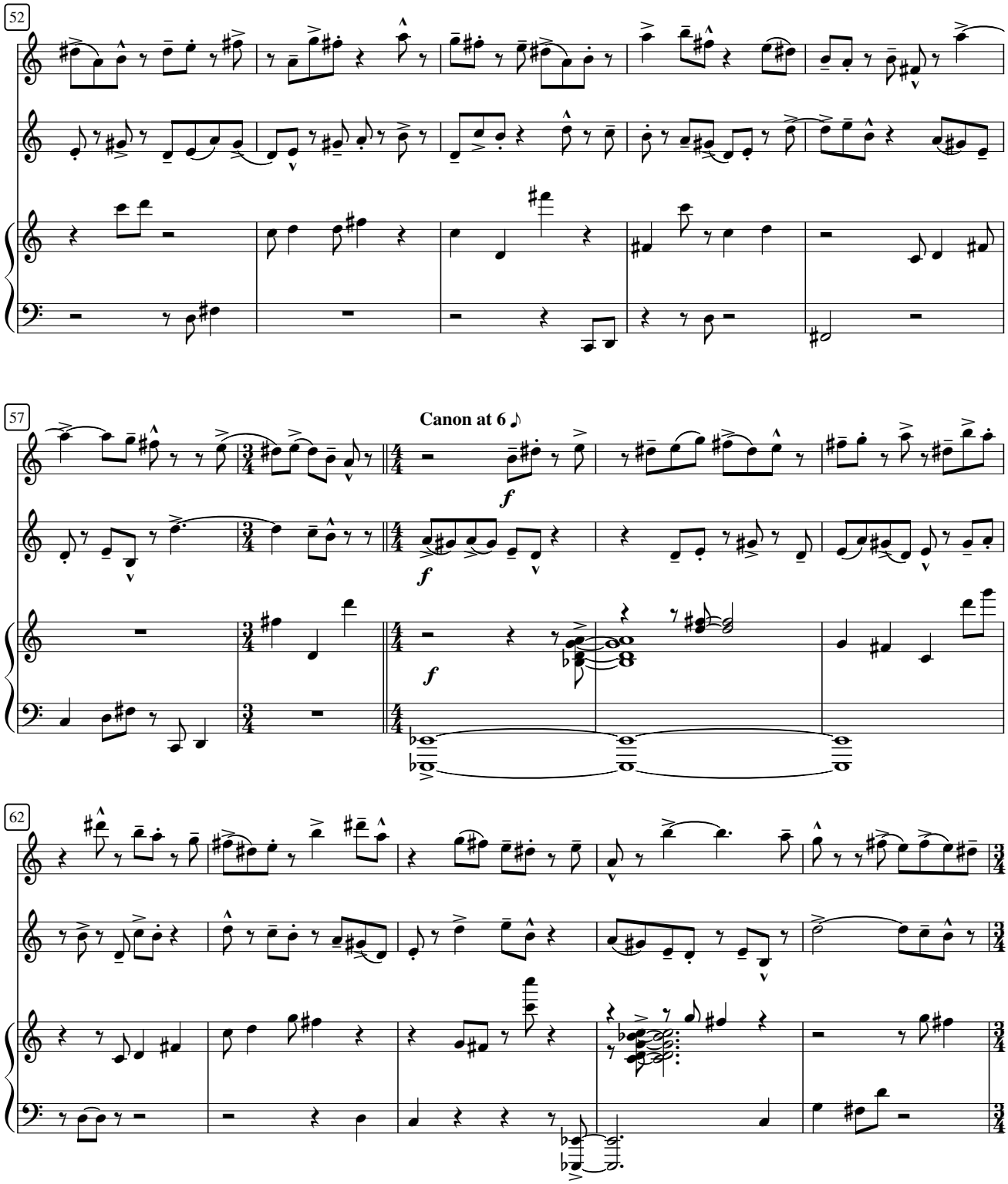
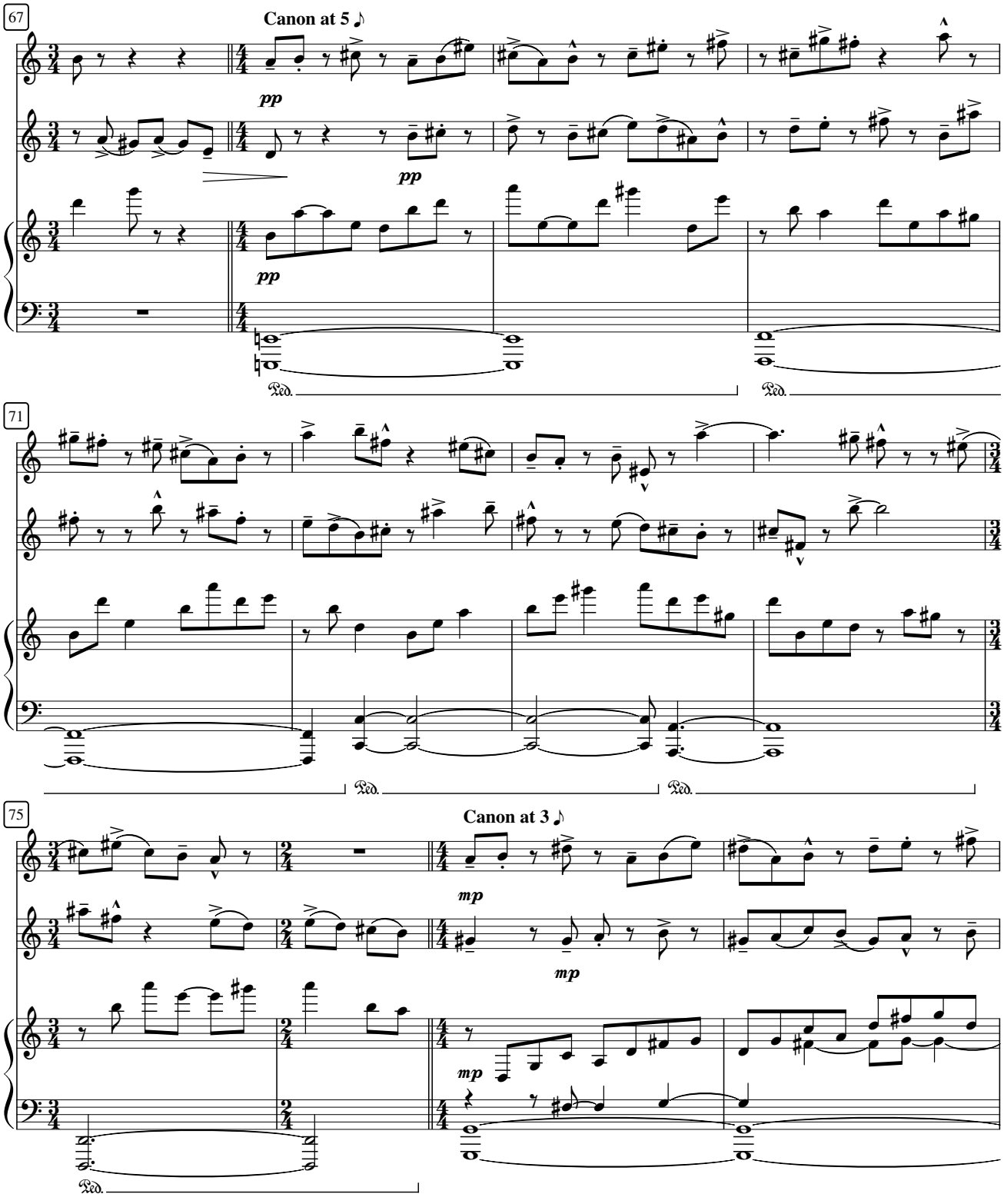


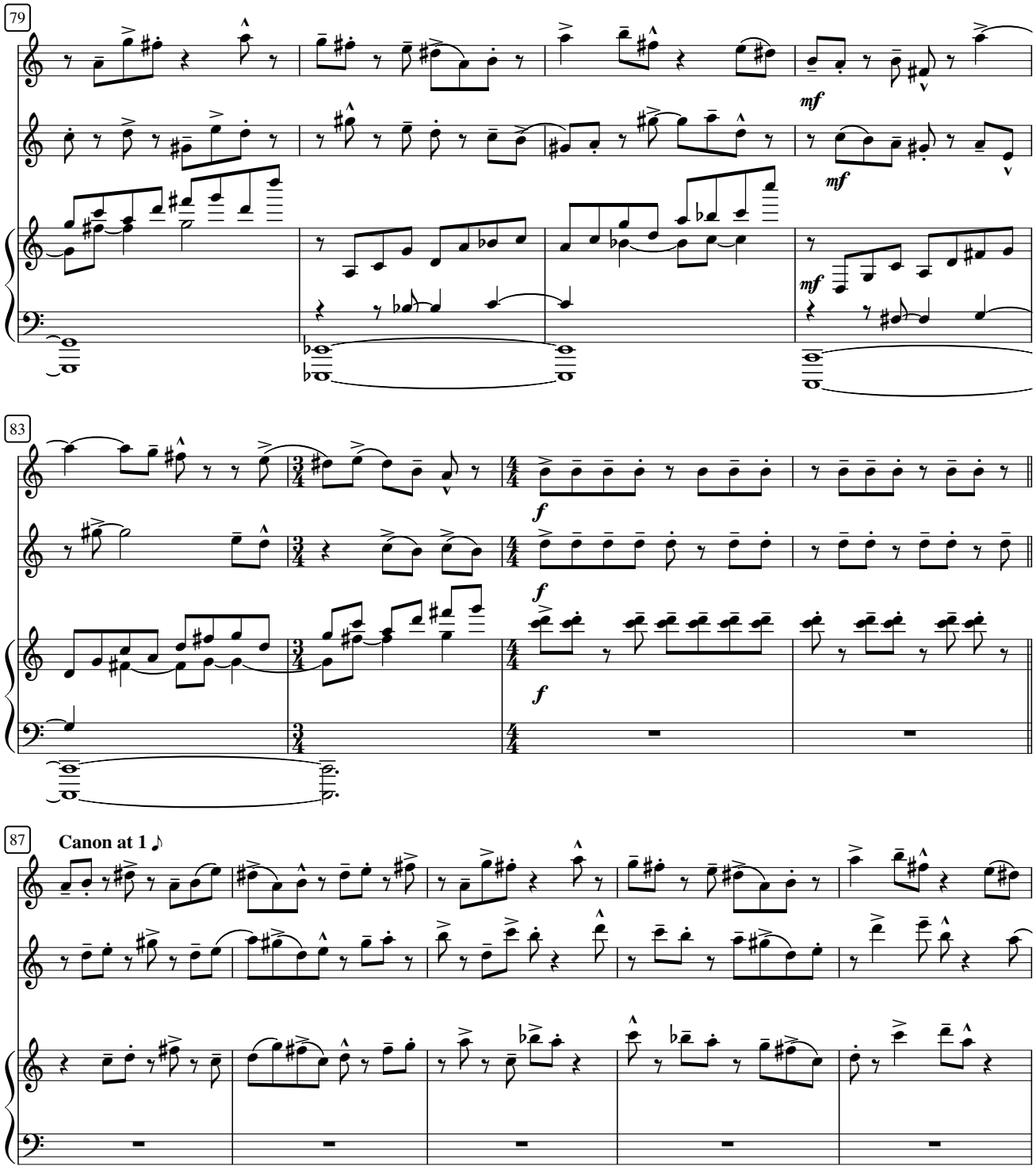

15
mp
mf
mf
p
mp
mf
18
mf
21
f
mf
f
f
3

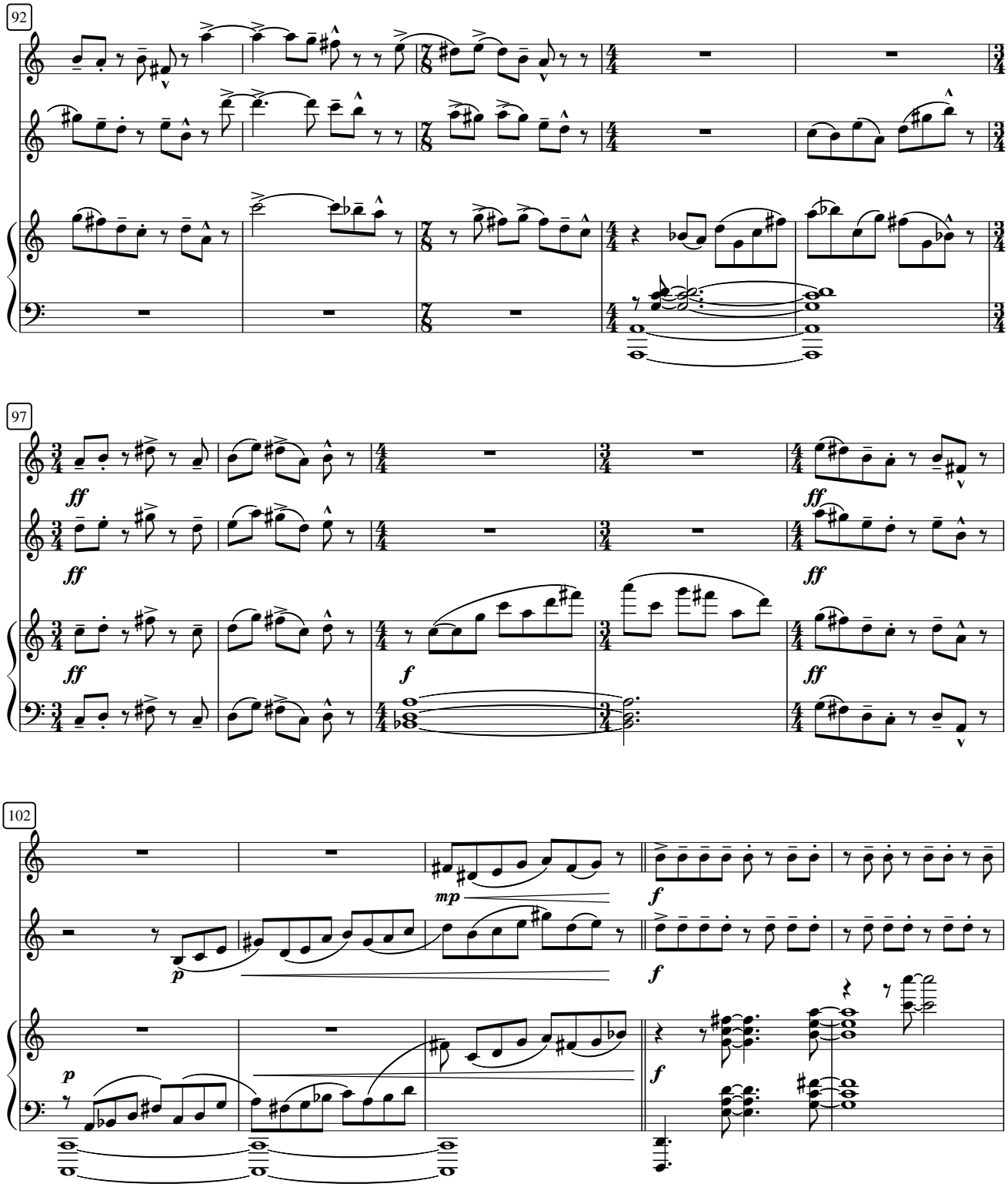

25
accel. poco a poco
cresc.
accel. poco a poco
mf
cresc.
accel. poco a poco
mf
cresc.
f
f
5
f
3
28
6
3
3
3
31
Intensely Rhythmic ♩ = 144
p
p

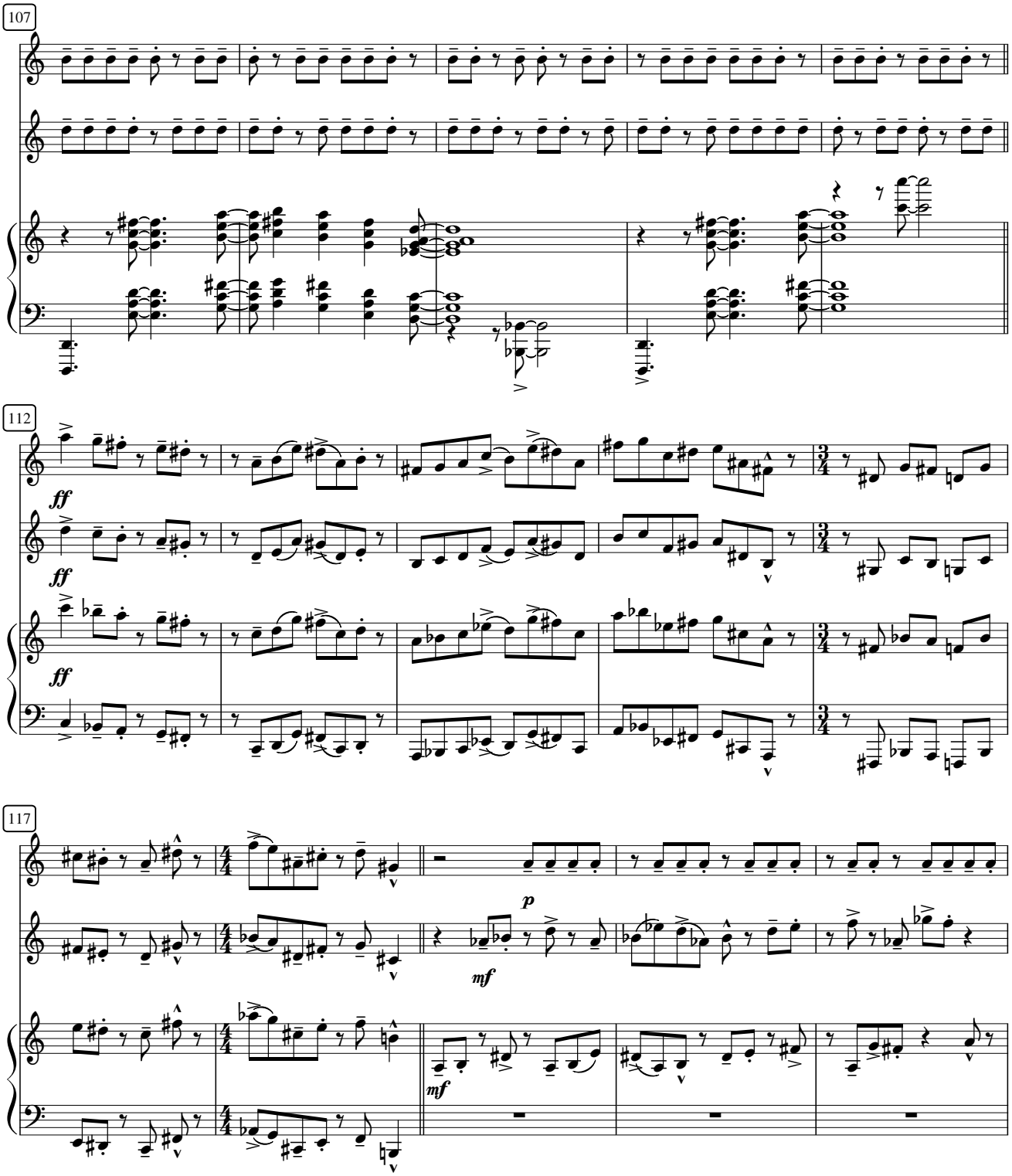

36
Canon at 9
mp
mf
p
42
mp
47
Canon at 7
mf
mf
mf
mf

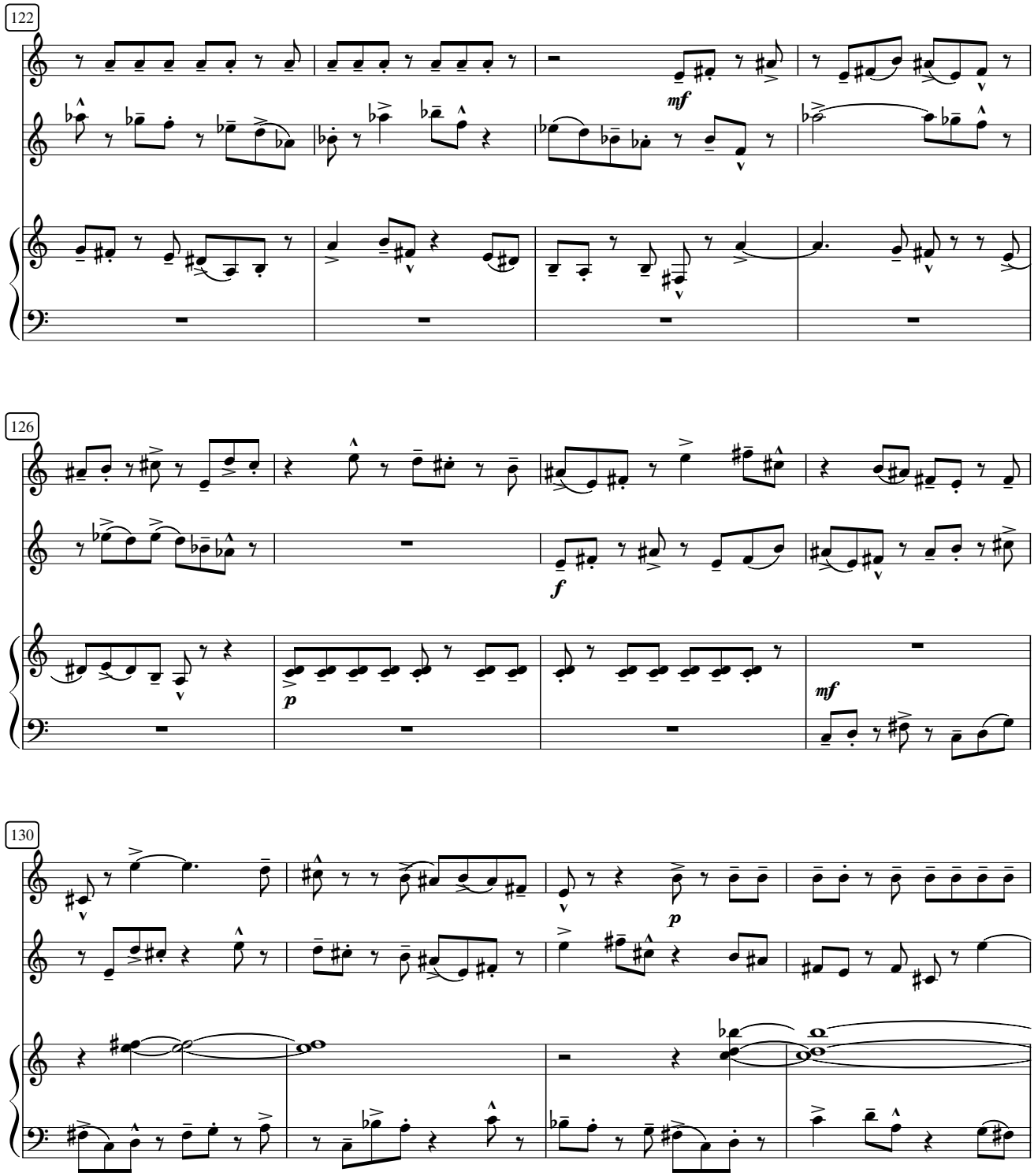

52
57
Canon at 6
f
f
f
62

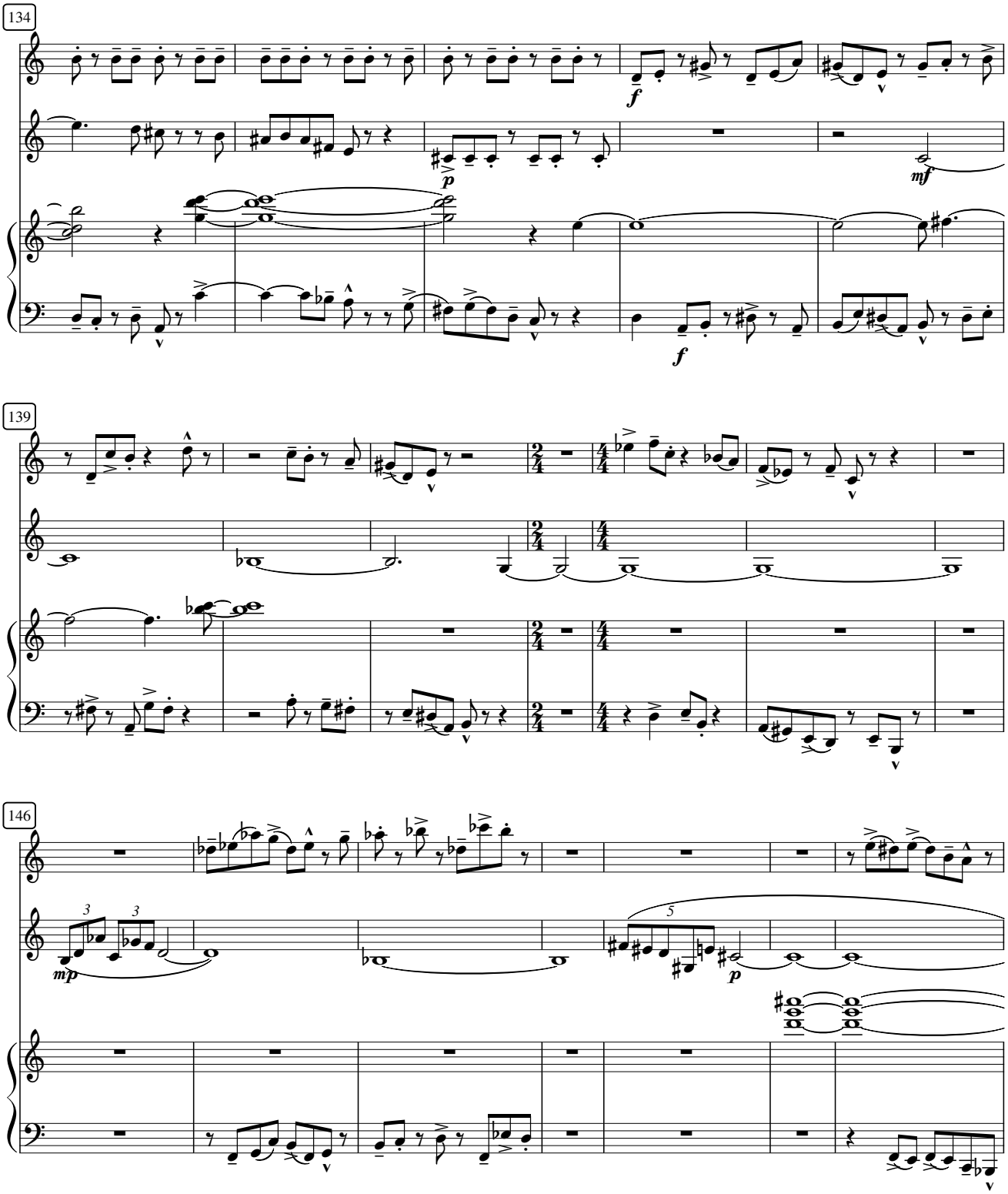

67
Canon at 5
pp
pp
pp
Ped.
Ped.
71
Ped.
Ped.
75
Canon at 3
mp
mp
mp
Ped.

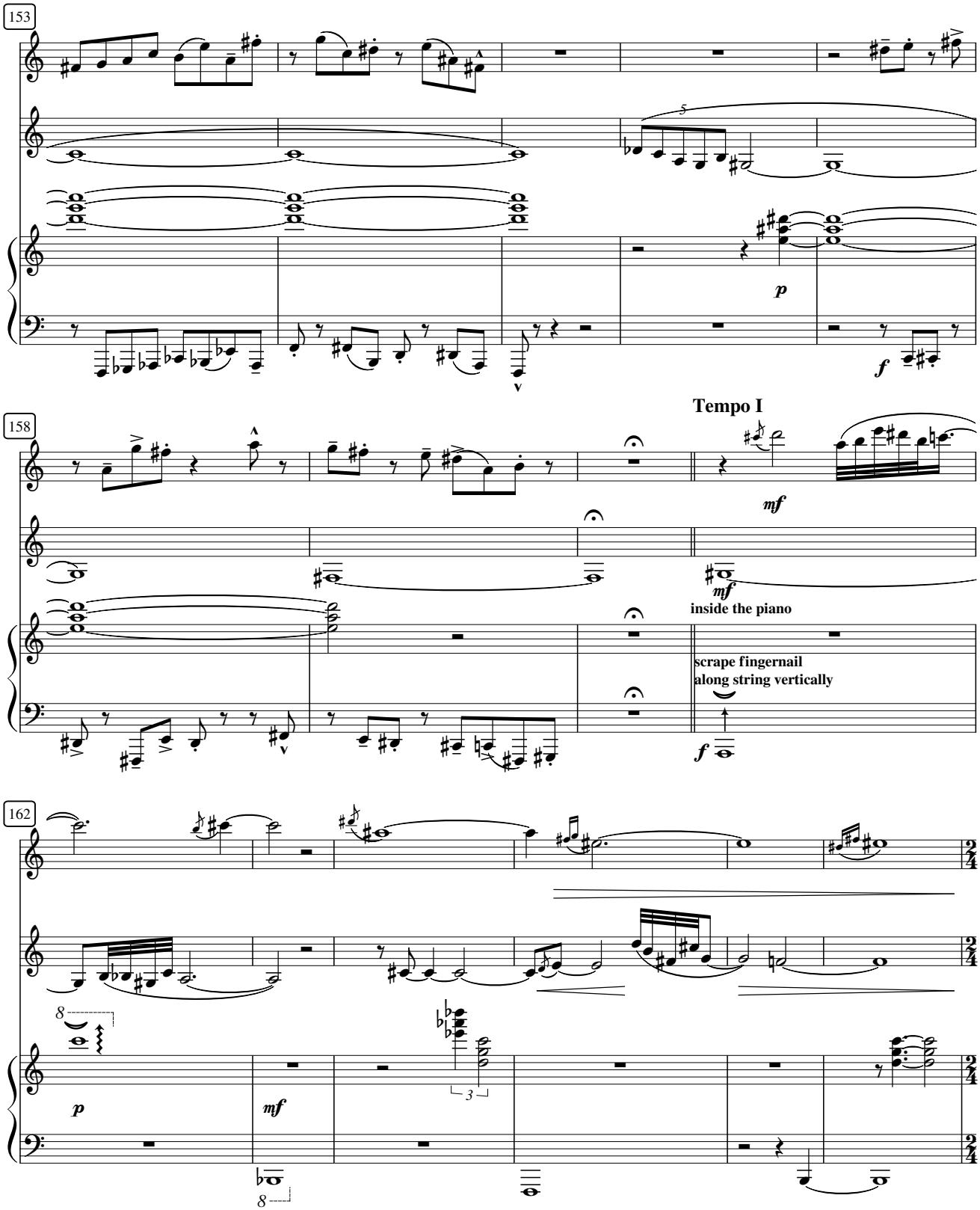

79
mf
mf
mf
83
f
f
f
87
Canon at 1

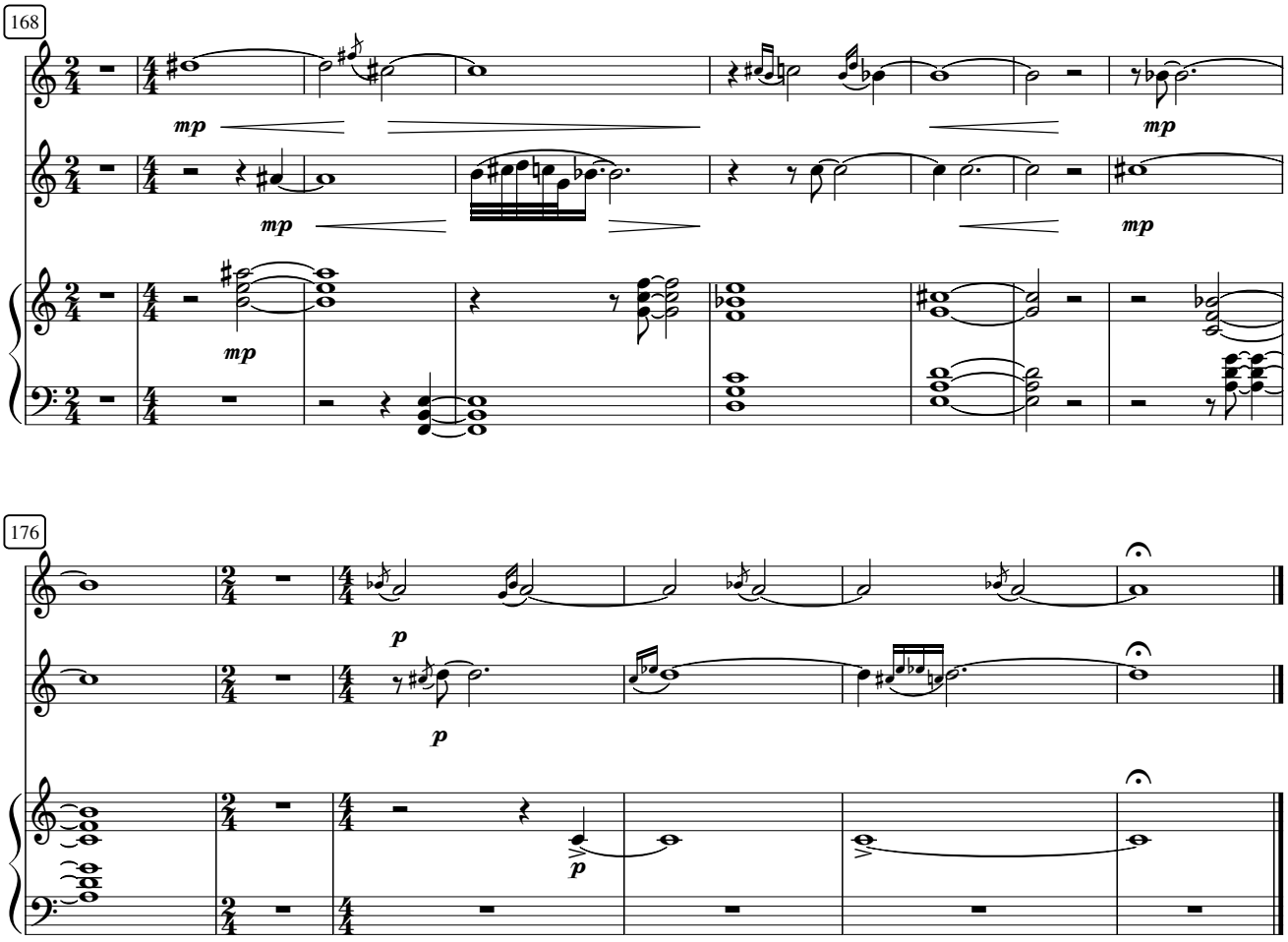

92
97
ff
f
mp
p
102


107
112
ff
ff
ff
117
p
mf
mf


122
mf
126
f
p
mf
130
p


134
f
p
mf
f
139
146
mp
p


153
158
Tempo I
inside the piano
scrape fingernail
along string vertically
162


168
mp
mp
mp
mp
mp

176
p
p
p