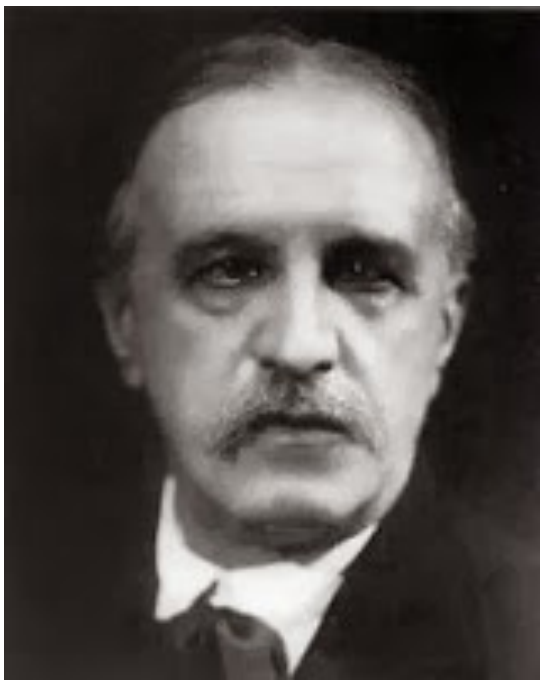
Louis Vierne

(1870 - 1937)

Organ Symphony no. 1 (1898-9)

Movements 2-4 arranged for Wind Quintet

by Toby Miller (2017)



Vierne, pictured many years later than the composition of the first symphony.

Unable to trace source or date of picture.

(Many biographical details taken from a tribute written in 1947 by Vierne's successor as Organist of Notre-Dame, Léonce de St-Martin, at http://www.musimem.com/vierne.htm)

Louis Vierne was born in 1870, the eldest of 5 children. Both sisters died young. His brother René, also a very gifted musician, died in the First World War—as did Louis' oldest son Jacques. Louis was born nearly blind thanks to congenital cataracts. An operation at the age of 7 restored some sight but not enough to lead a normal life, and between 1881 and 1890 he was educated at the national institution for blind children, which he credited with giving him an excellent preparation for life as an organist, composer and teacher. Already in 1887 his performance in his end-of-year exam had caused the external examiner, César Franck, to offer him free lessons in counterpoint once a week and take him into his organ classes at the Conservatoire as a listener. Joining the Conservatoire fully in 1890, he was already smitten with 'passionate admiration, affection for a father-figure and deep respect', so when Franck died in November from the after-effects of a road accident, Louis was devastated. Franck's successor Widor placed greater emphasis on technical facility than on improvisation, which led to stress in early lessons while he re-learnt technique, but before long Louis had warmed to his new teacher. He had some setbacks in competitions, but in 1894 achieved a first prize which entitled him to become officially Widor's deputy as Organ professor at the Conservatoire. In the same year he wrote a string quartet. In 1899 he married Arlette Taskin, daughter of a singer and ten years his junior: Widor played the organ at their wedding. It was at this happiest time of his life that Vierne composed his first Organ Symphony. In 1900 he beat 50 rivals to the job of Organist of the cathedral of Notre Dame, a post he held (with interruptions for illness) until his dramatic death in 1937 at the console, as he was about to finish a concert by improvising on a theme from the audience. The many tragedies of his life in between can be read elsewhere…

The first Symphony has 6 movements, beginning with a Prelude and Fugue in homage to Bach (and Franck his counterpoint teacher), and ending with a massive and joyful Finale which Vierne later called 'his *Marseillaise*', and which has remained one of the most popular of all organ voluntaries and concert pieces. However the Fugue (apart from its short climax) and the two following movements, a Pastorale and a Scherzo (in all but name) are much lighter in texture, and (I think) benefit from a less resonant acoustic and clearer voicing than is possible on the organ of Notre Dame. In later life Vierne was dismissive of his musical achievement in this first symphony, even saying that he only played the Finale because people liked it, but he did continue to value the Scherzo. The Fugue is somewhat academic (Vierne called it heavy), but I think it can come to life at a faster tempo (taking a cue from Vierne himself, who is said to have impressed on students that performance considerations should always determine how a piece is played). I have also suggested a faster speed for the middle section of the Pastorale. It would be nice to think that this sunny movement and the Mendelssohnian Scherzo could help to re-balance the reputation of somebody now remembered mainly for a huge show-piece and for the many sadnesses of his life. His songs and chamber music are just beginning to be discovered by non-organists—there have been a few recent recordings.

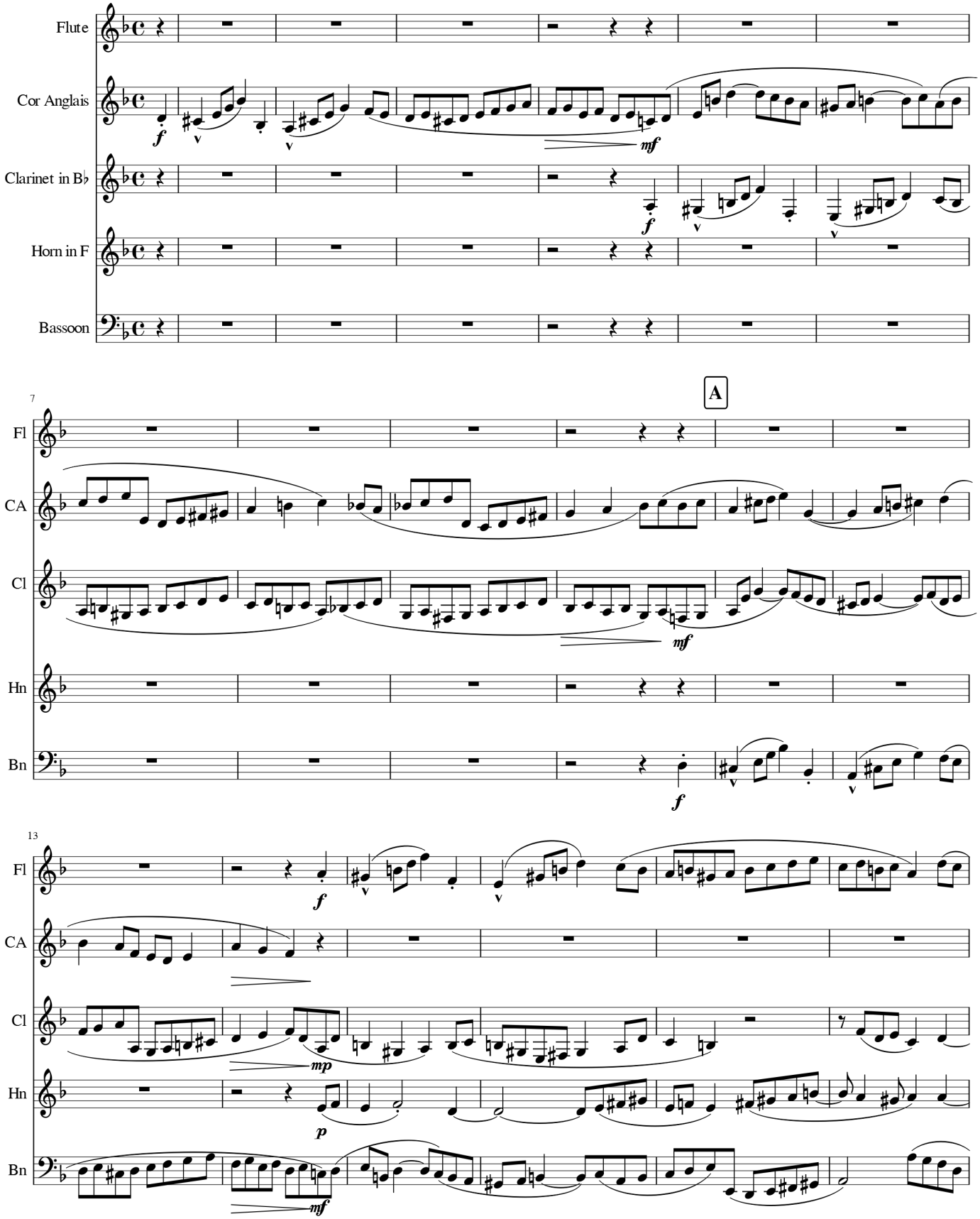
Organ Symphony no. 1 Op.14 arr. for wind quintet by Toby Miller

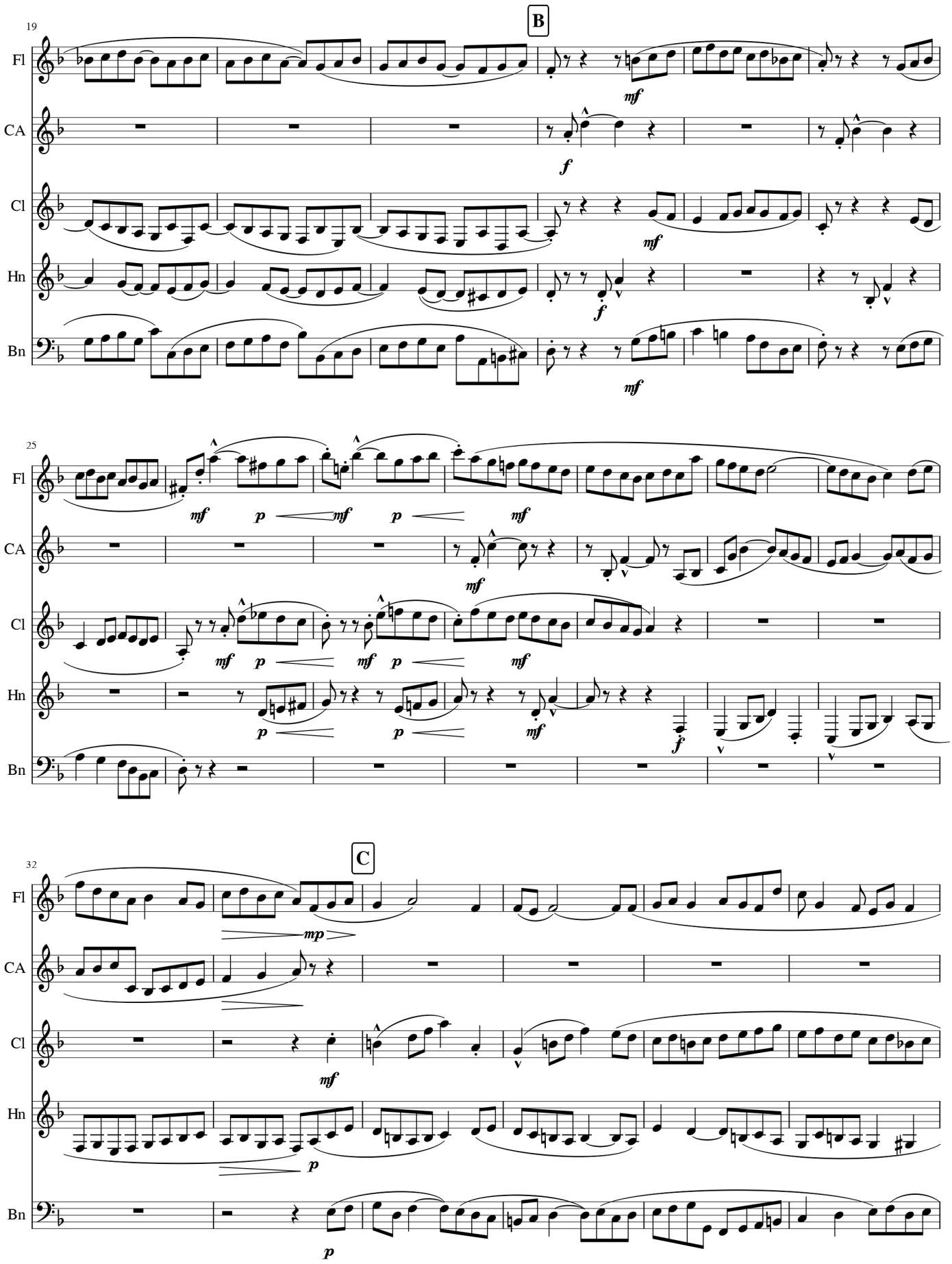
Score (concert pitch)

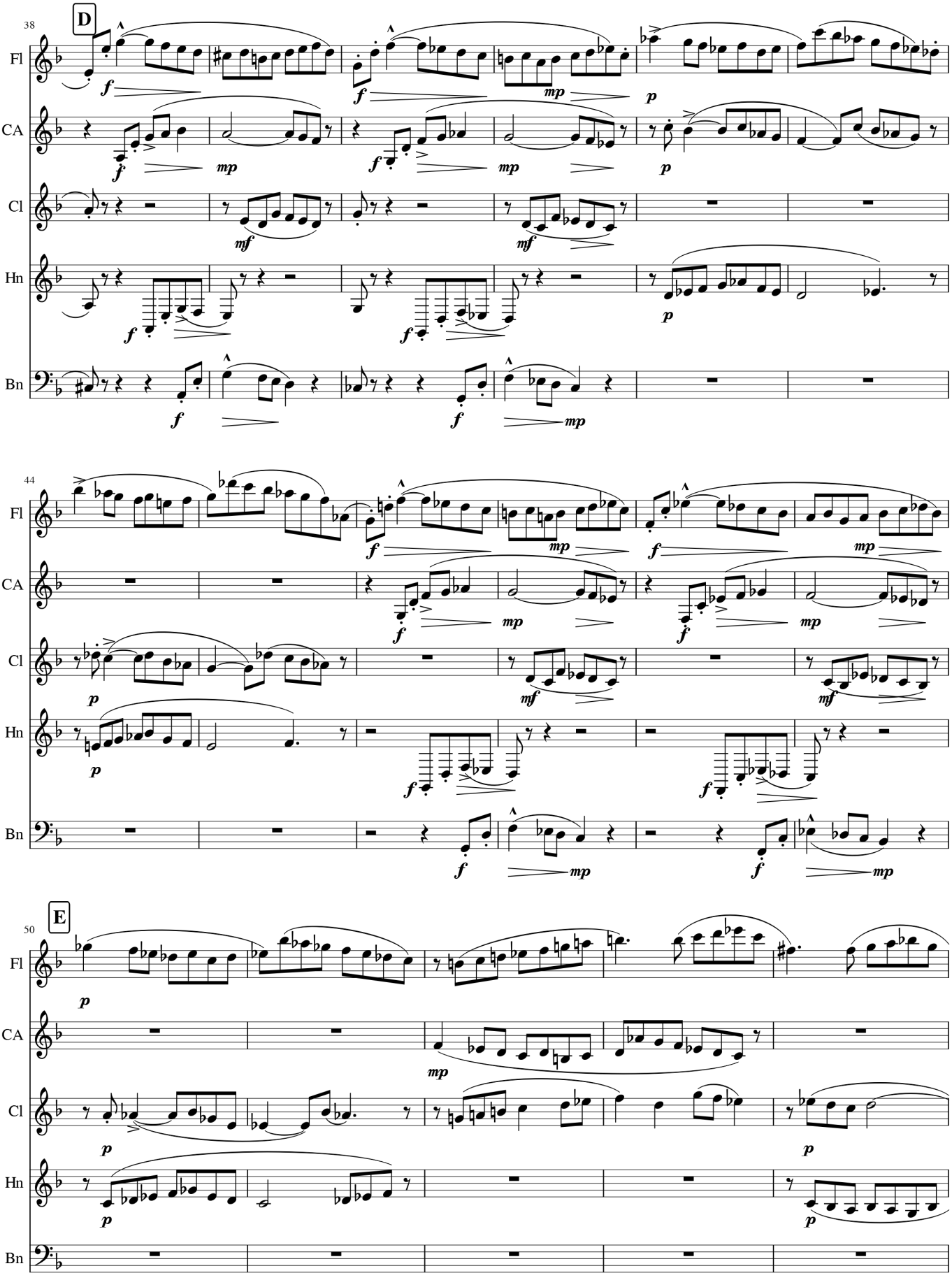
II - Fugue

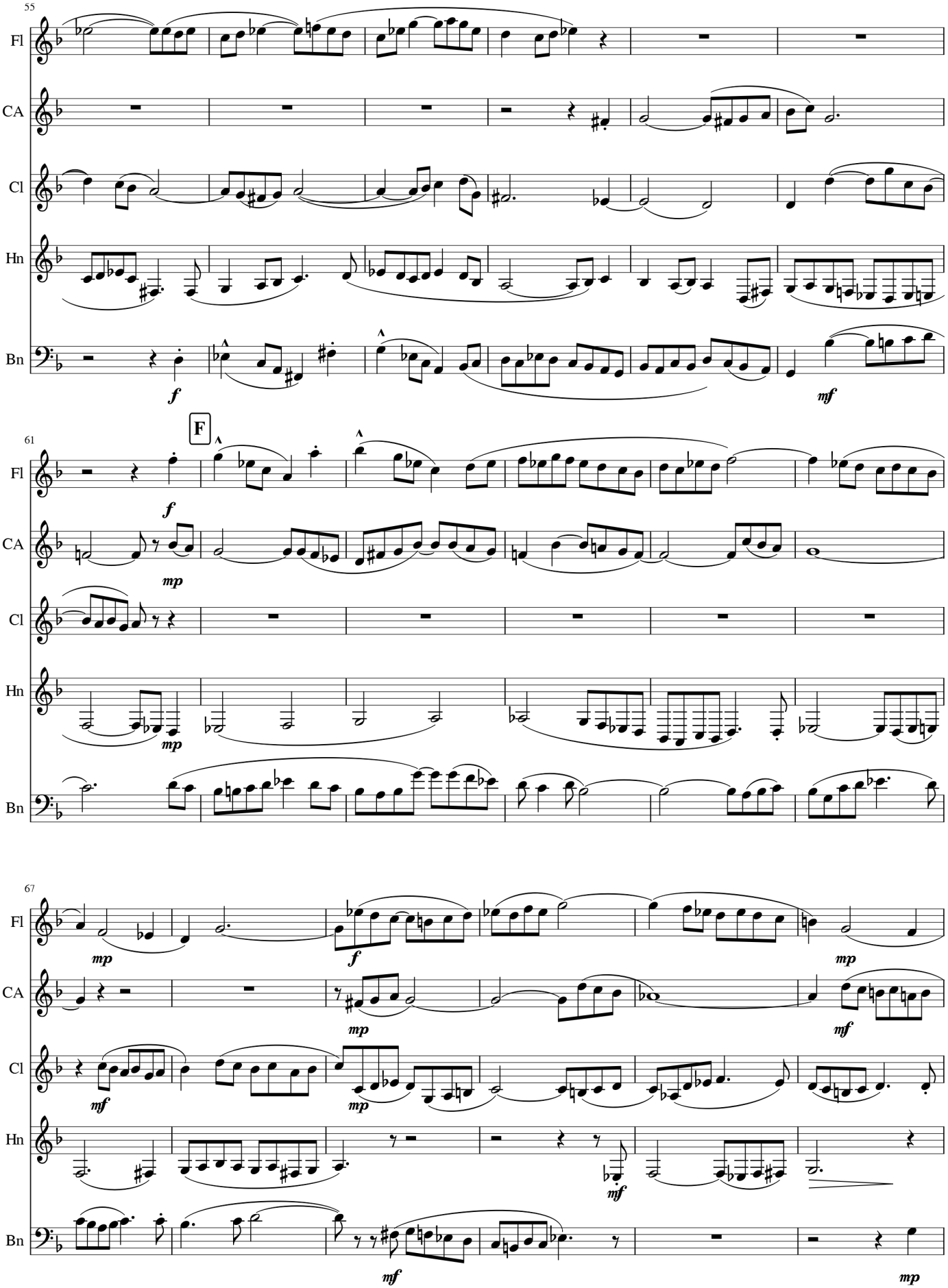
Louis Vierne

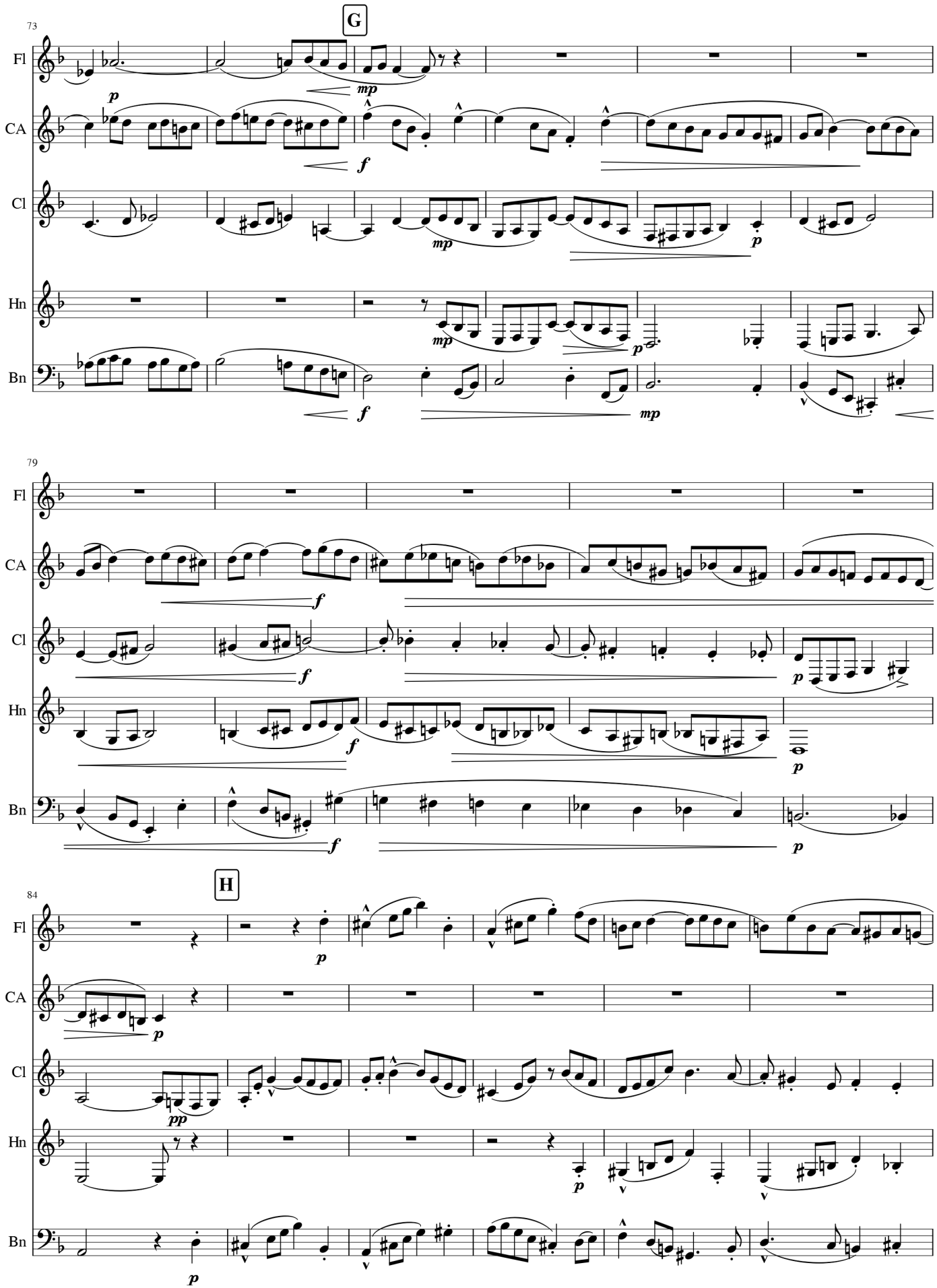
Moderato non troppo lento ♩= 112 [124]

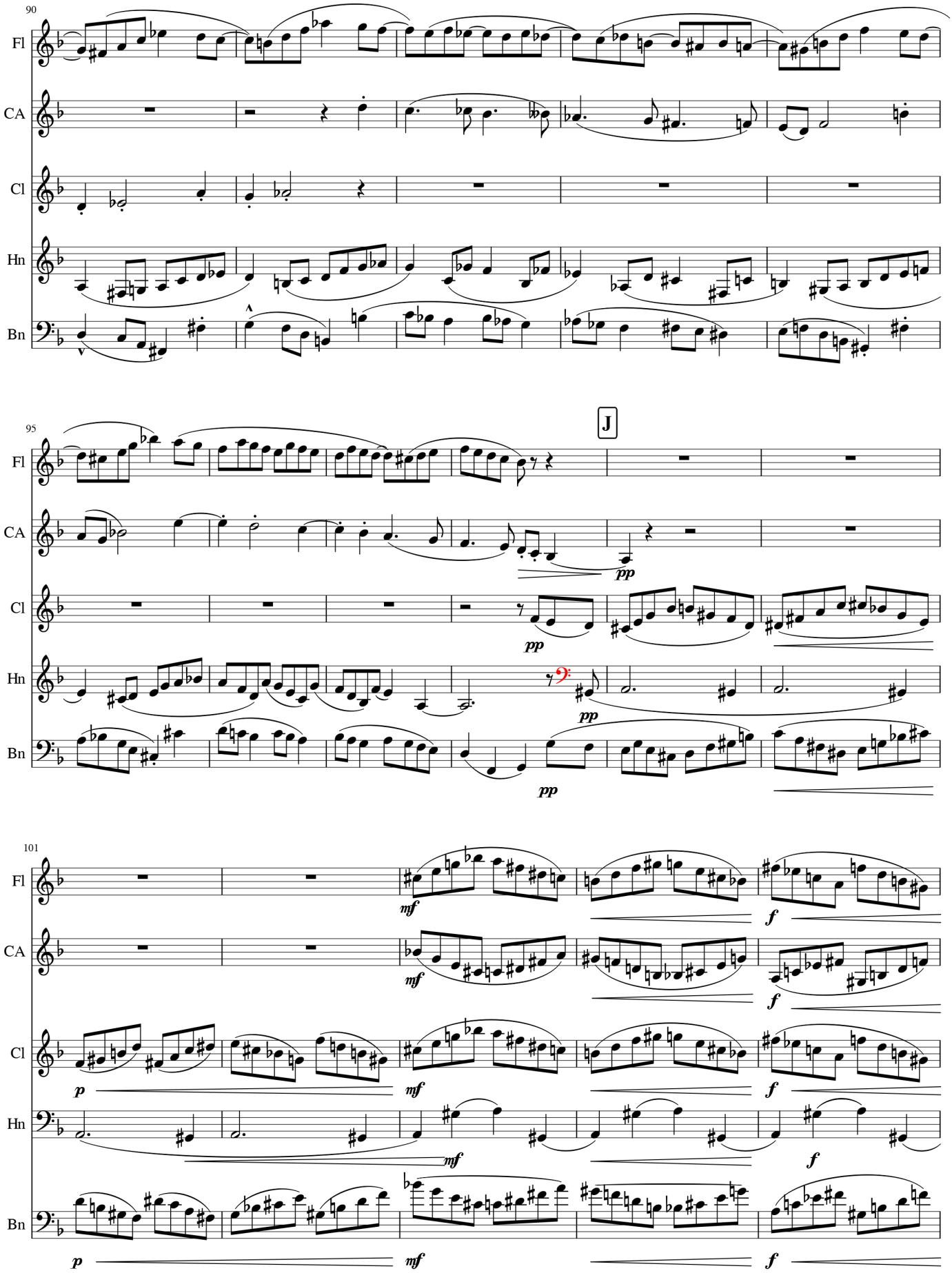


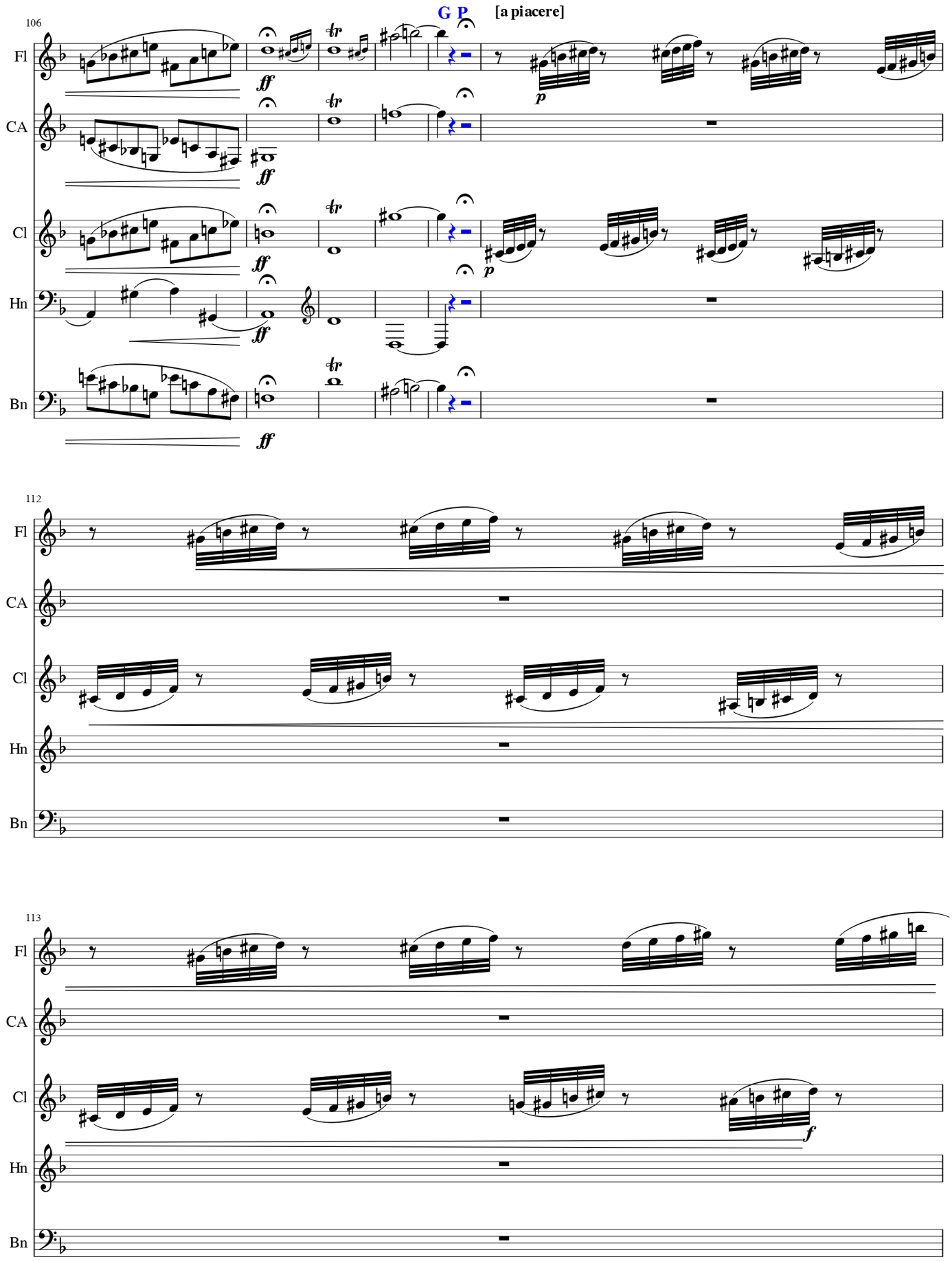

19
B
Fl
CA
Cl
Hn
Bn
mf
f
25
mf
p
mf
p
mf
mf
p
mf
p
mf
p
p
mf
f
32
C
mp
mf
p
p

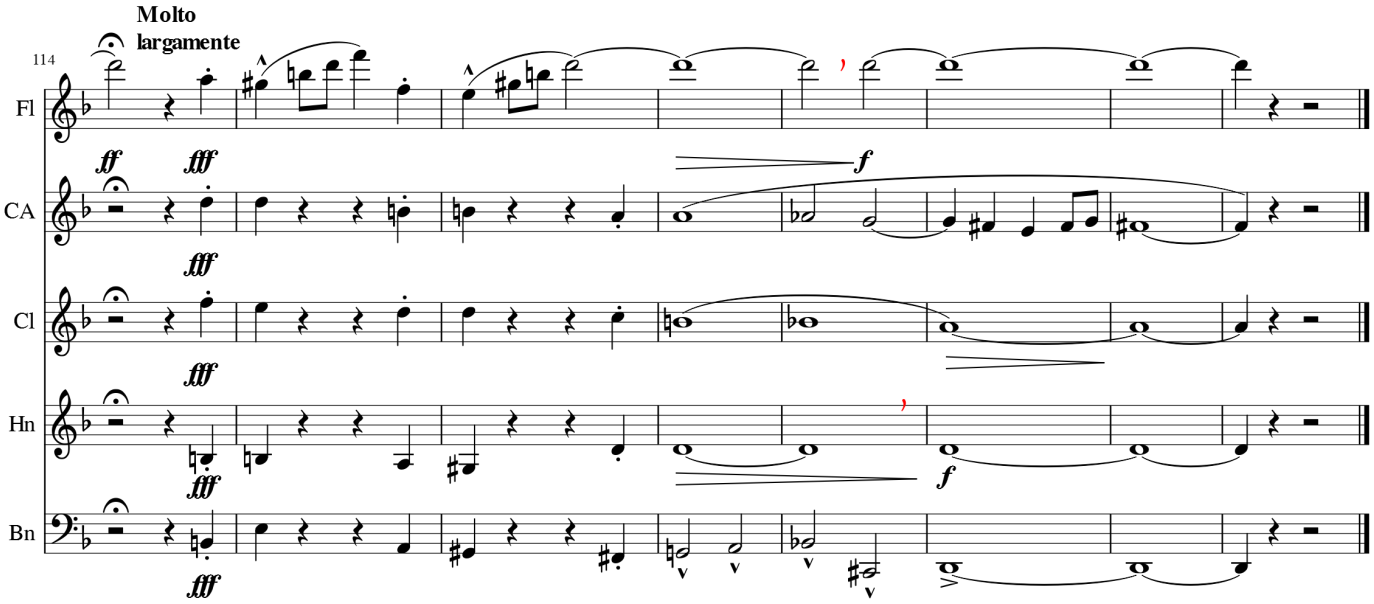

38
D
Fl
CA
Cl
Hn
Bn
44
50
E


55
Fl
CA
Cl
Hn
Bn
f
mf
61
F
f
mp
mp
67
mp
f
mp
mp
mf
mp
mf
mf
mp


73
G
Fl
CA
Cl
Hn
Bn
79
84
H


90
Fl
CA
Cl
Hn
Bn
95
J
pp
101
mf
f
p


106
G P
[a piacere]
Fl
CA
Cl
Hn
Bn
ff
p
112
113
f


Molto
largamente
114
Fl
CA
Cl
Hn
Bn
ff
fff
f

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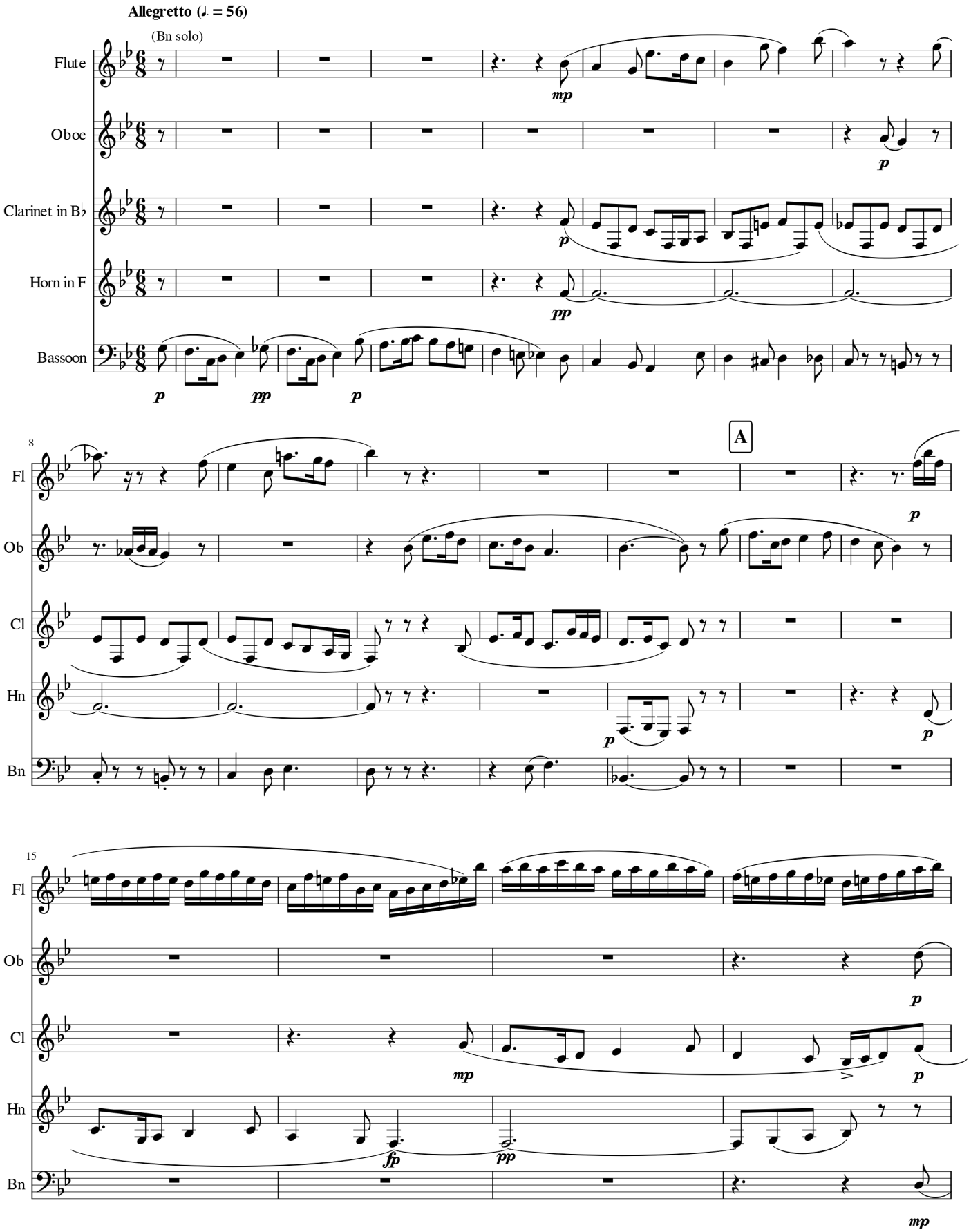
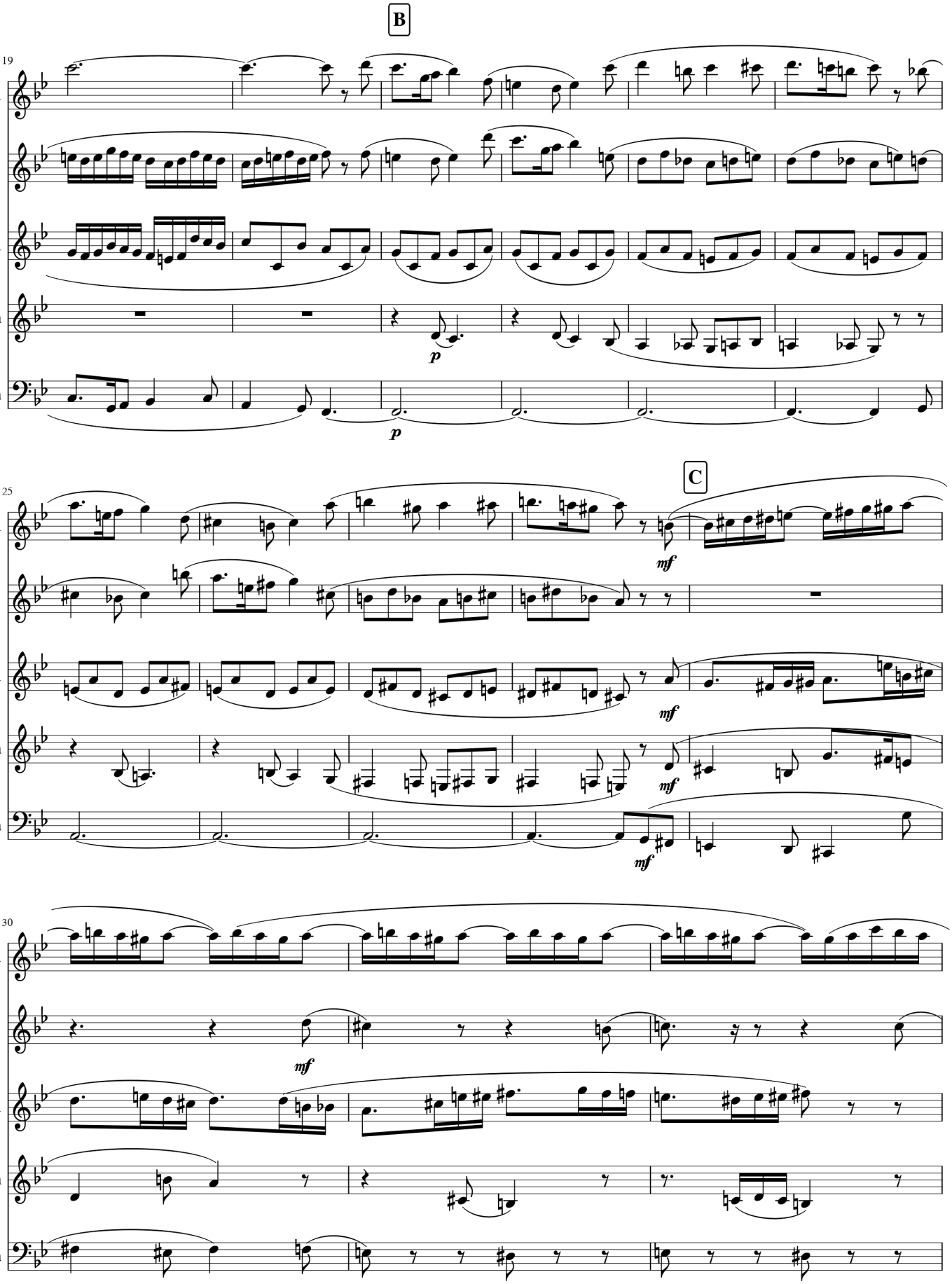
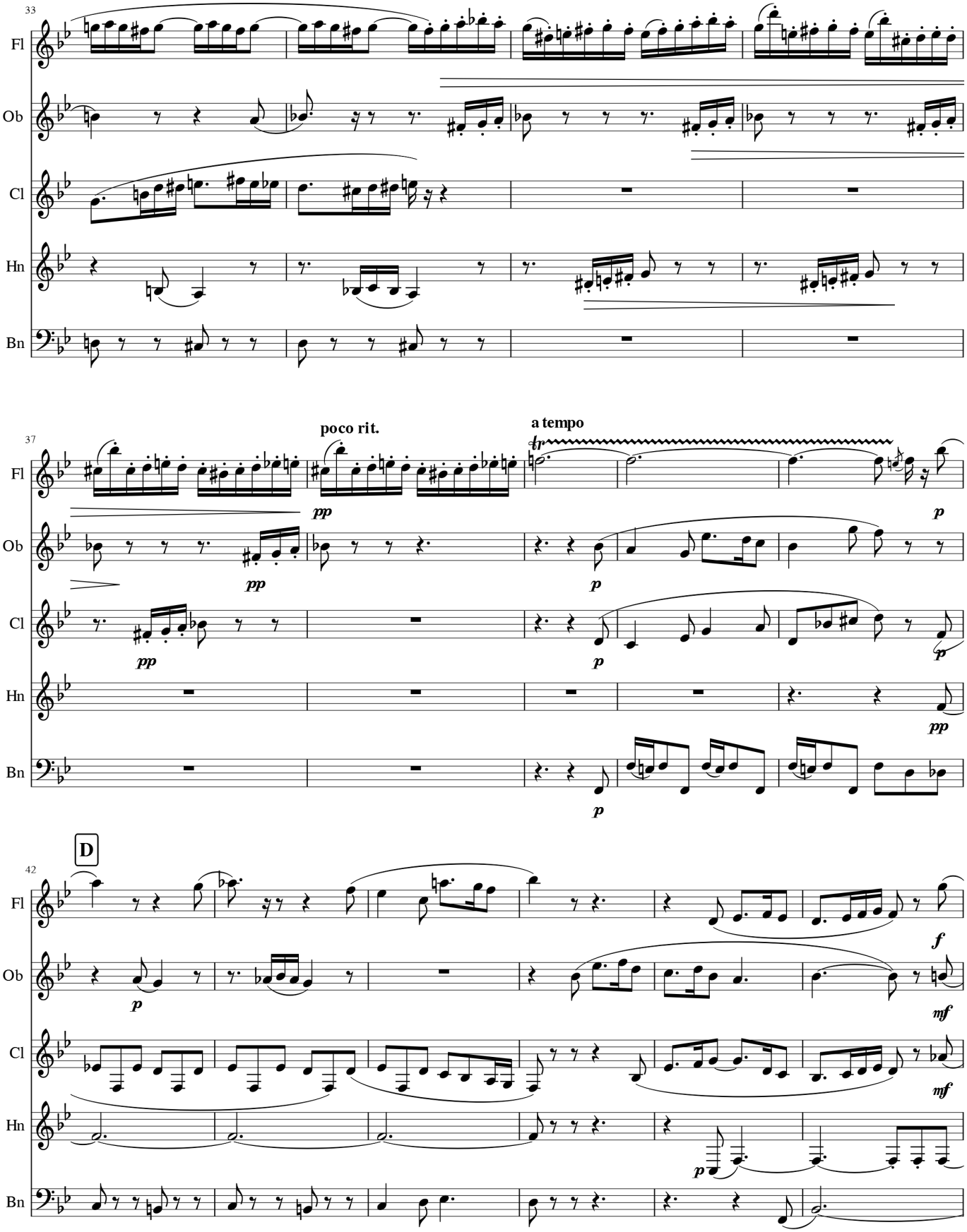
Score (concert pitch)

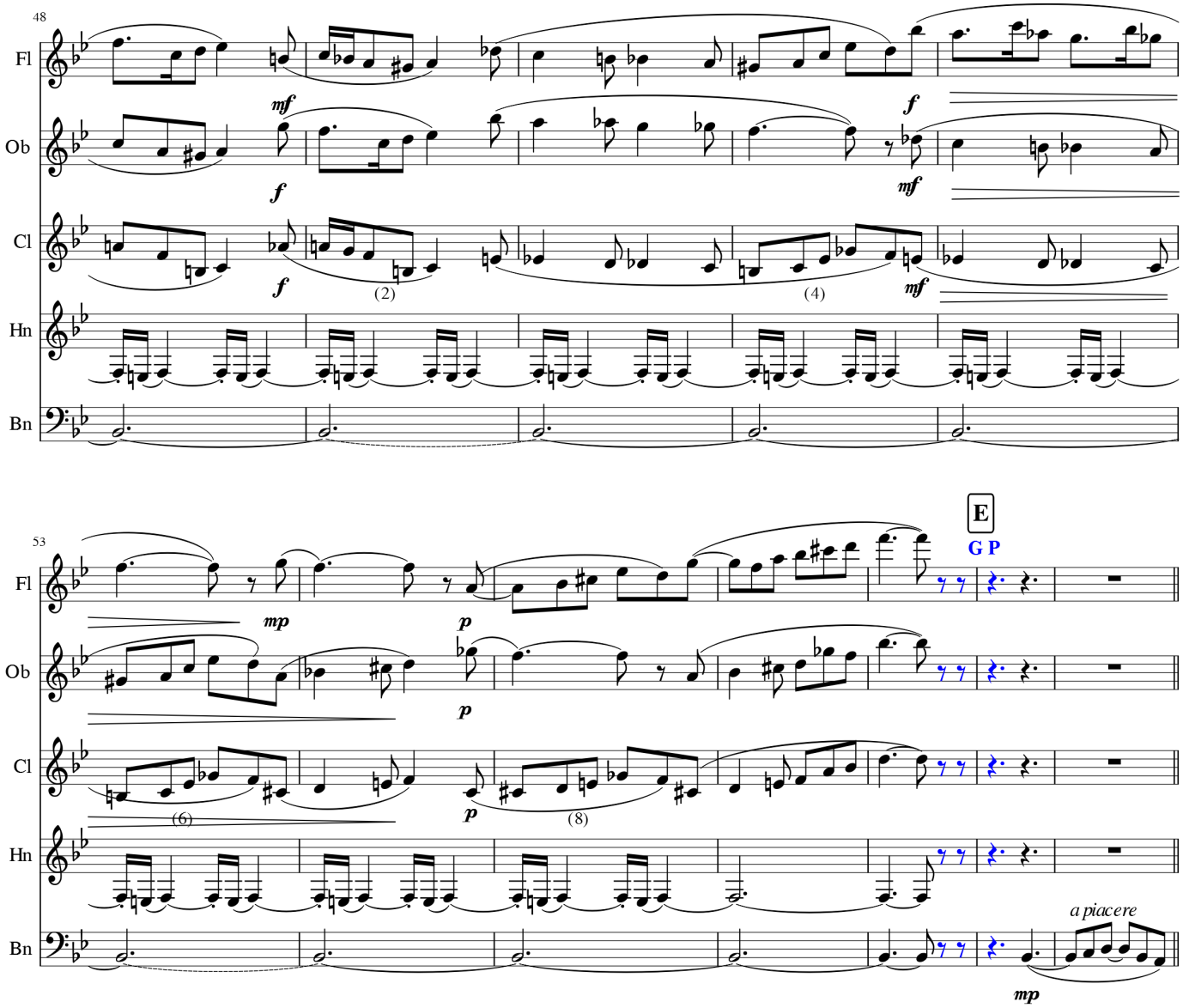
III - Pastorale

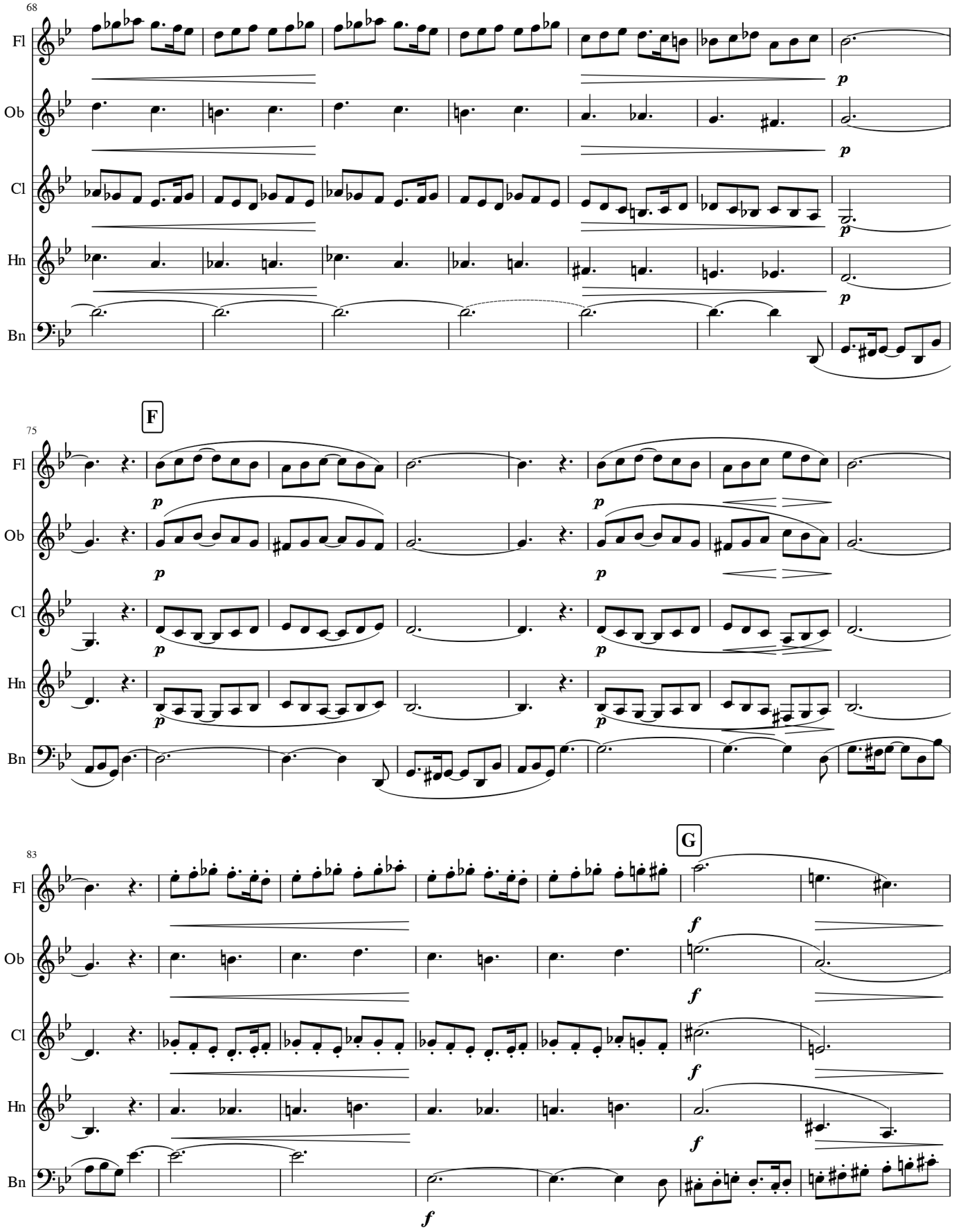
Louis Vierne

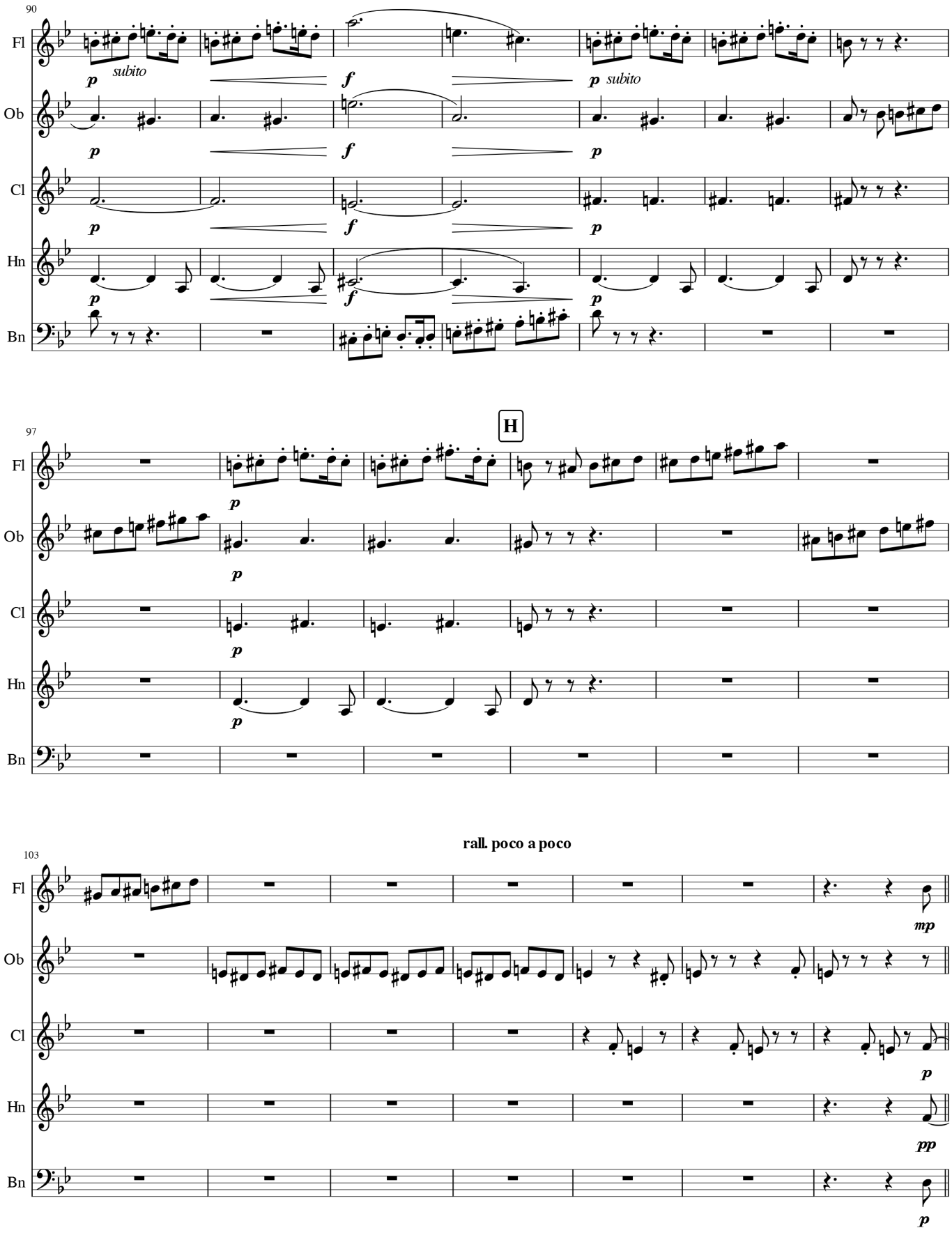


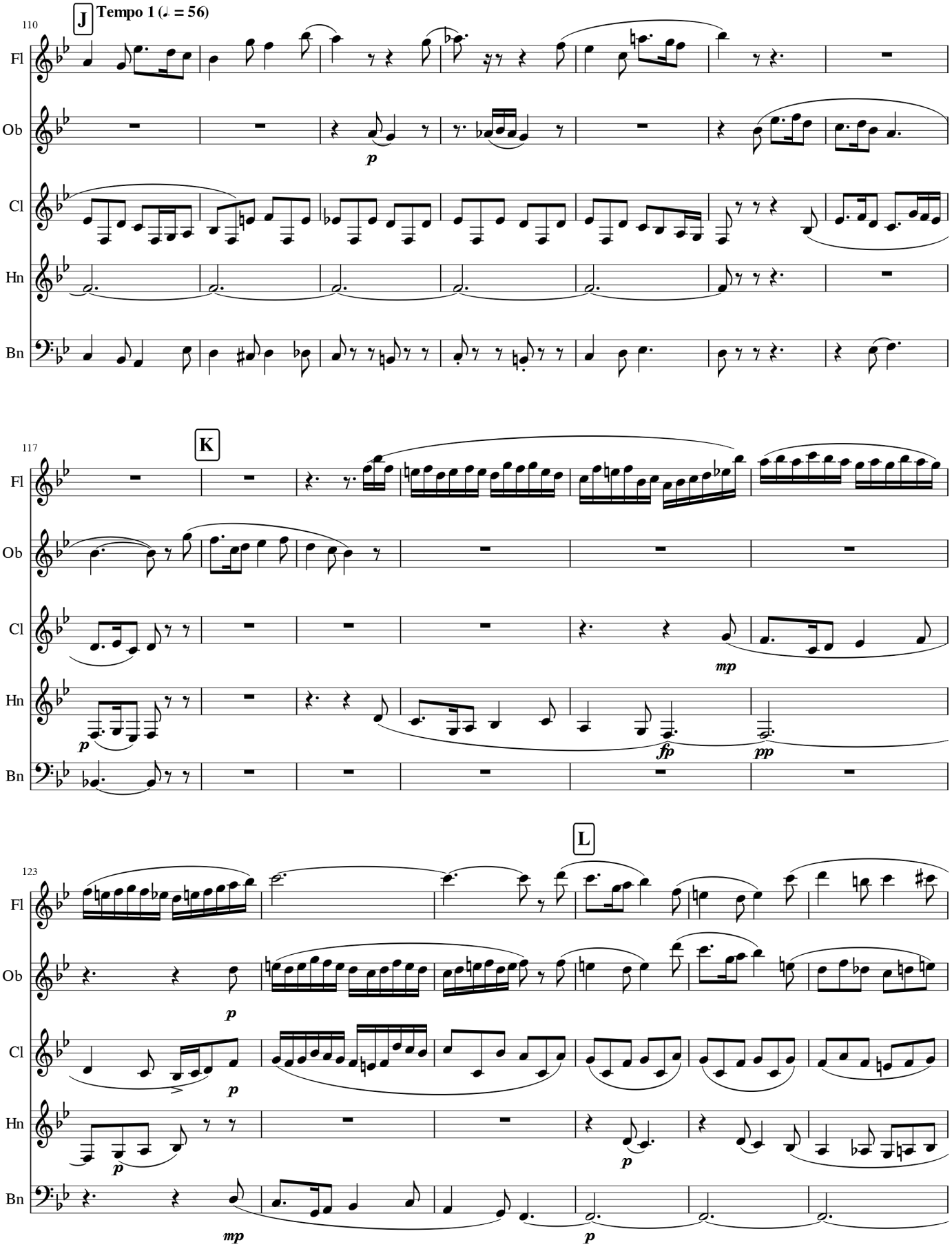

B
19
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
p
p
C
25
mf
mf
mf
mf
30
mf

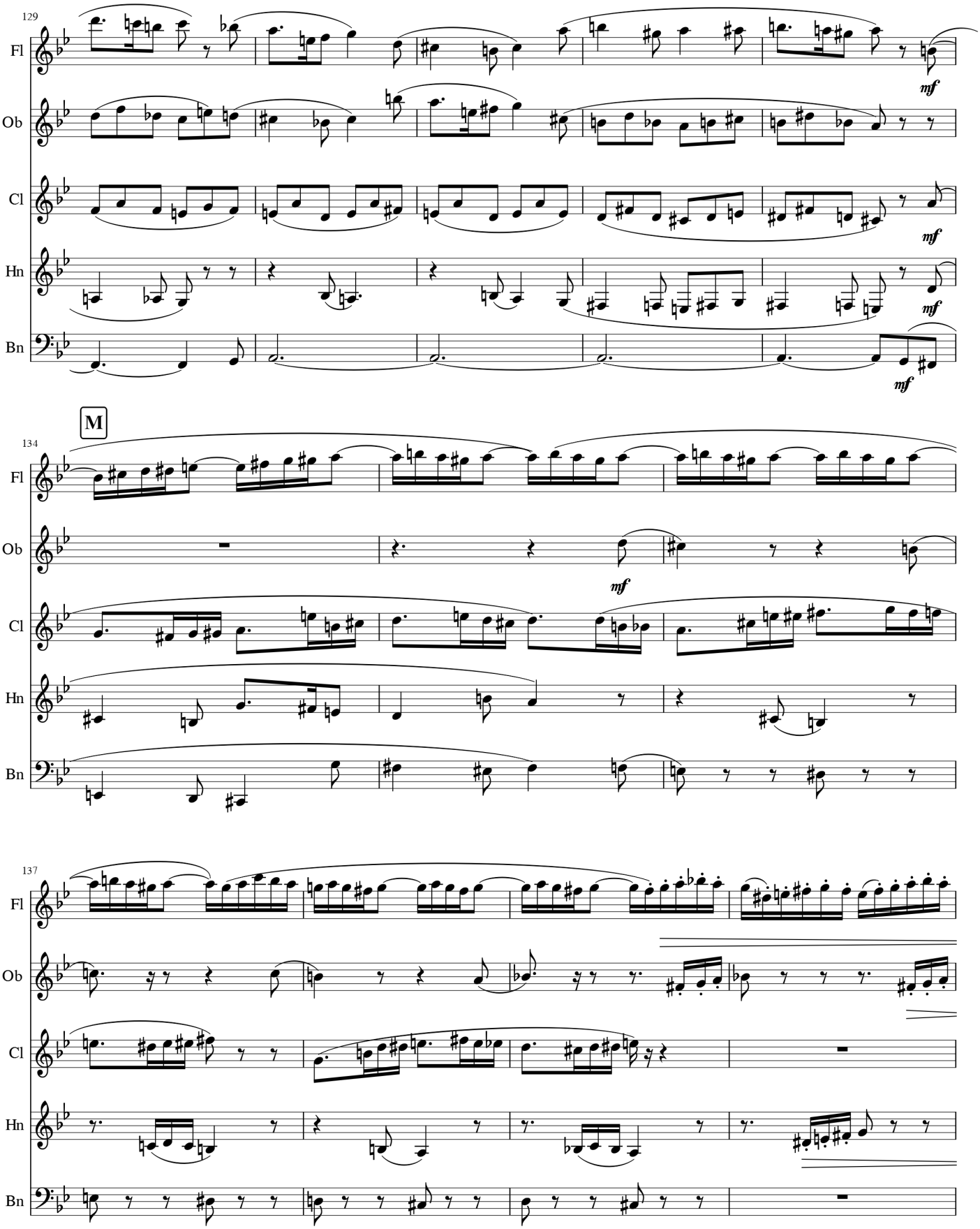

33
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
37
poco rit.
a tempo
tr
pp
p
D
42
f
mf

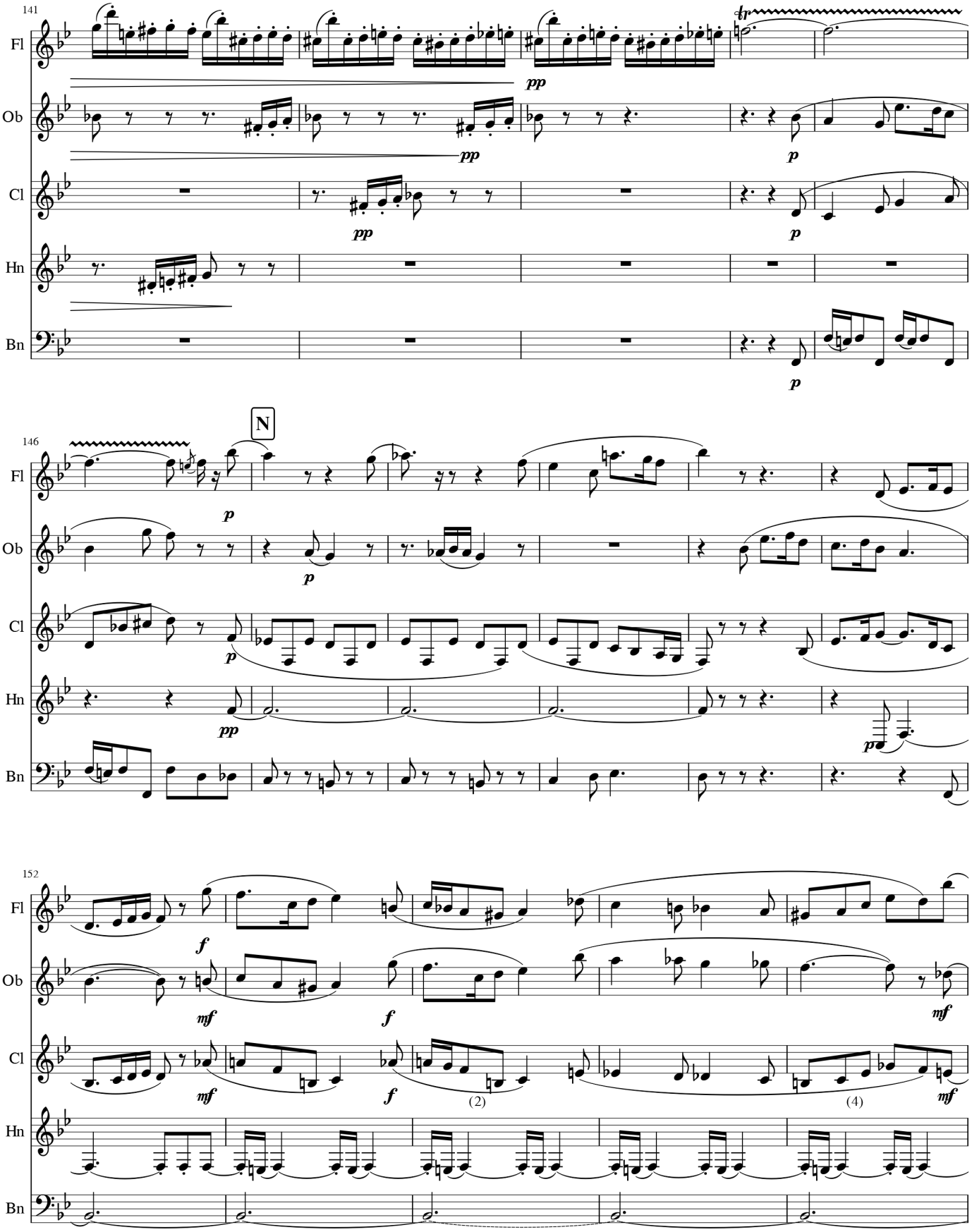

48
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
mf
f
(2)
(4)
53
E
G P
mp
p
(6)
(8)
a piacere
60
Poco più vivo (♩. = 72) [84]

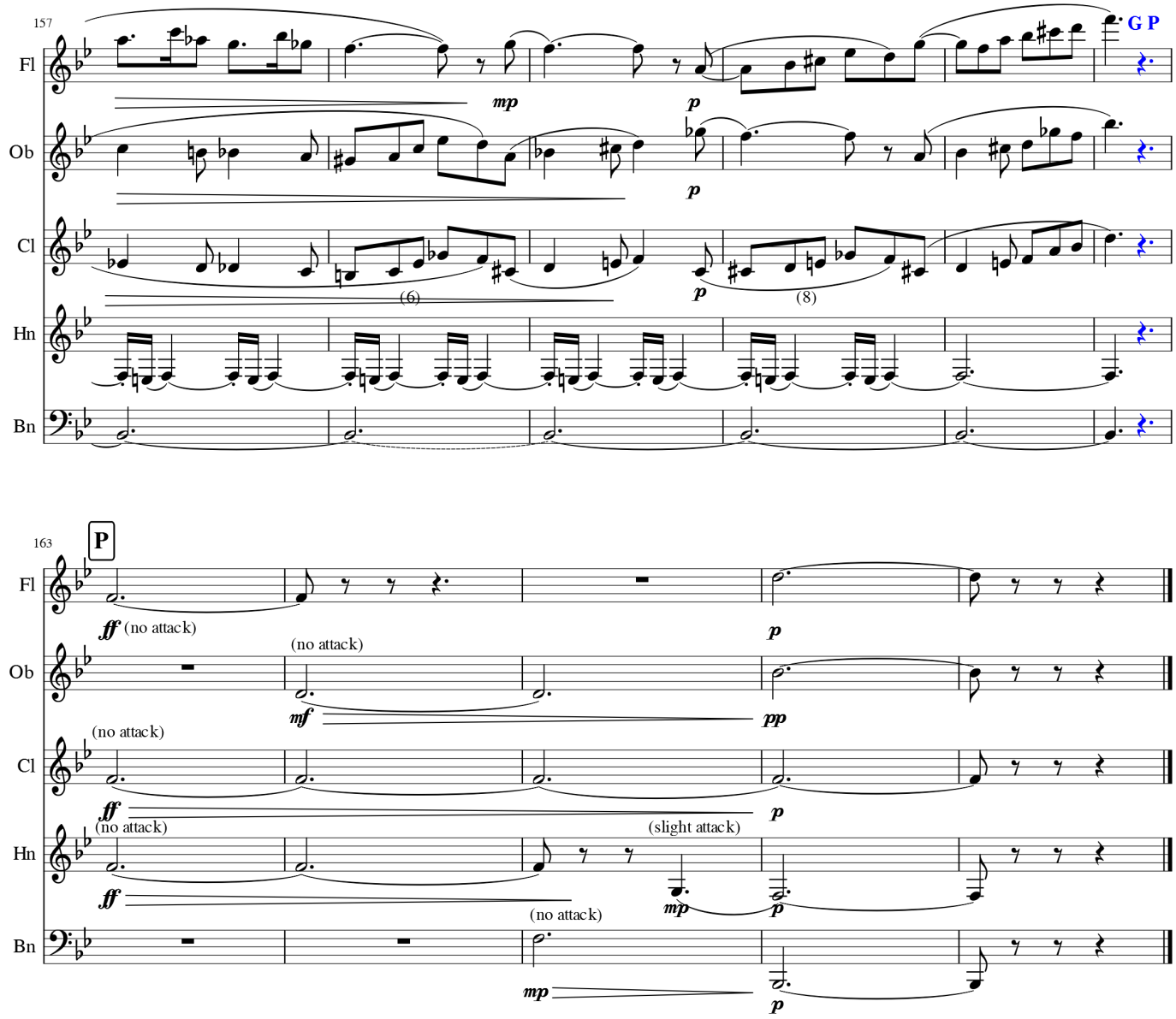

68
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
p
F
75
G
83
f


90
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
p
subito
f
p
subito
p
f
p
p
f
p
97
H
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
p
p
p
p
103
rall. poco a poco
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
mp
p
pp
p


J
Tempo 1 (♩ = 56)
110
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
p
K
117
mp
fp
pp
L
123
mp
p


129
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
mf
M
134
137


141
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
tr
pp
p
146
N
152
f
mf
(2)
(4)


157
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
mp
p
p
p
(6)
(8)
G P
163
P
ff (no attack)
(no attack)
mf
p
pp
(no attack)
ff
p
(no attack)
ff
(slight attack)
mp
p
(no attack)
mp
p

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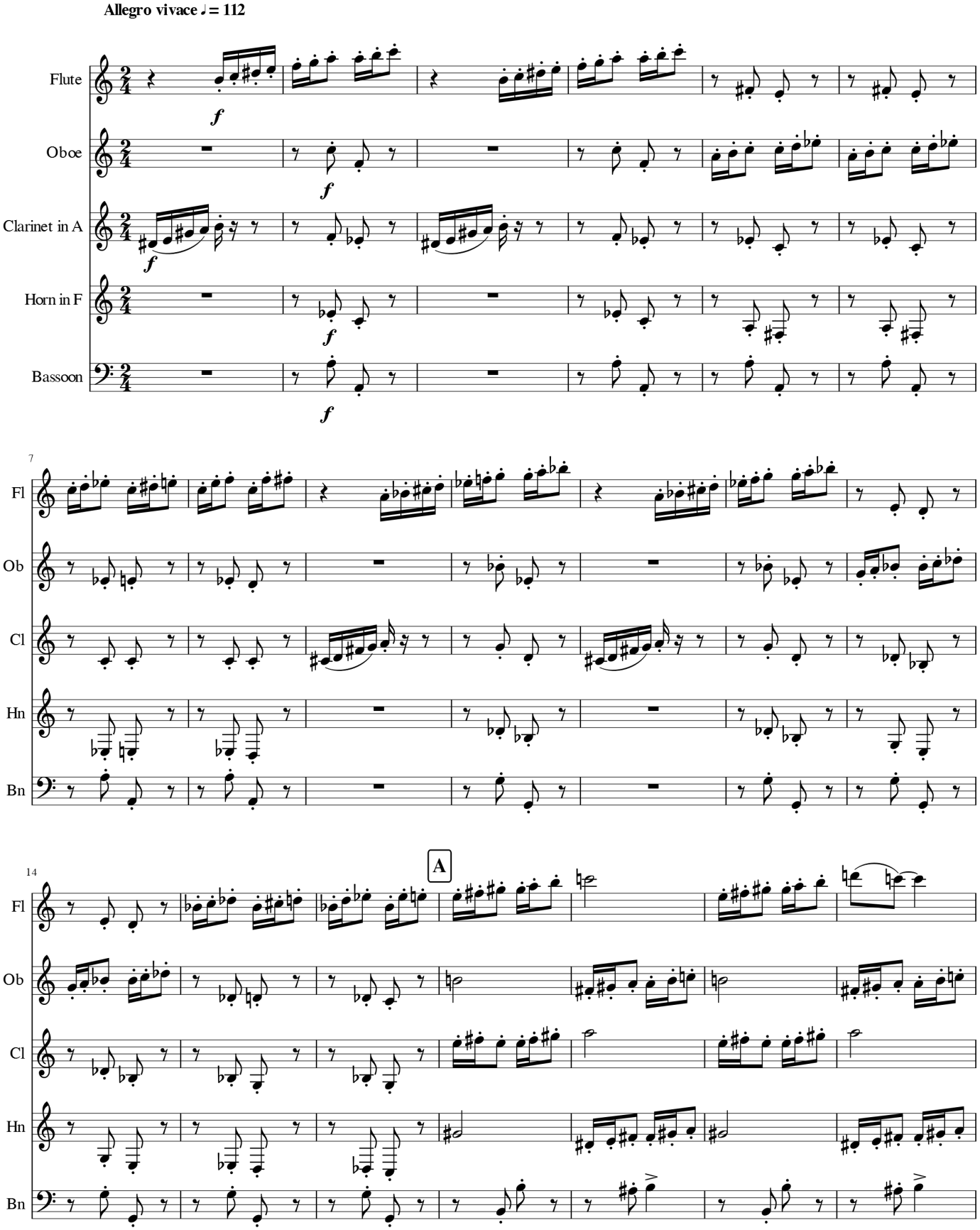
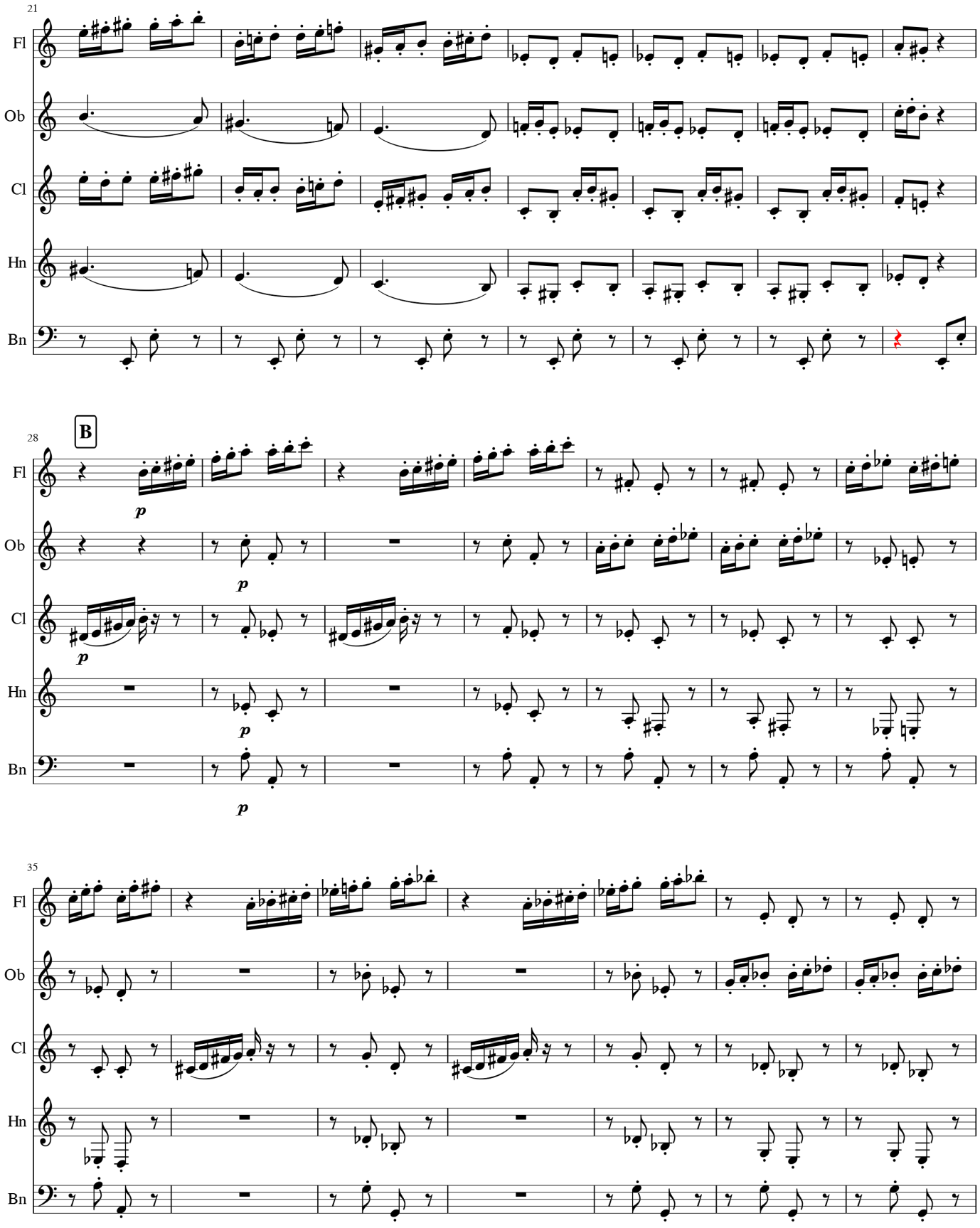
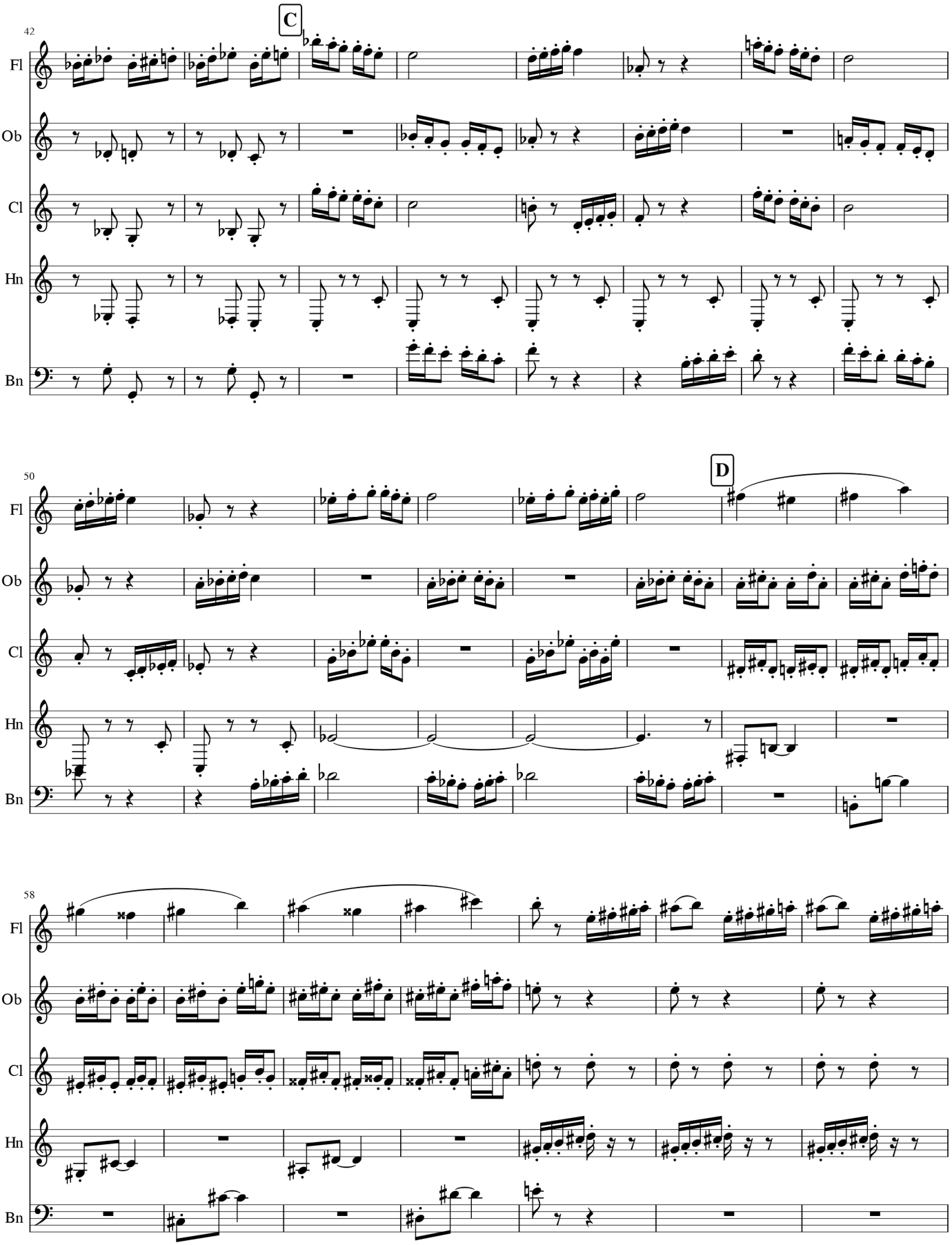
Score (concert pitch)

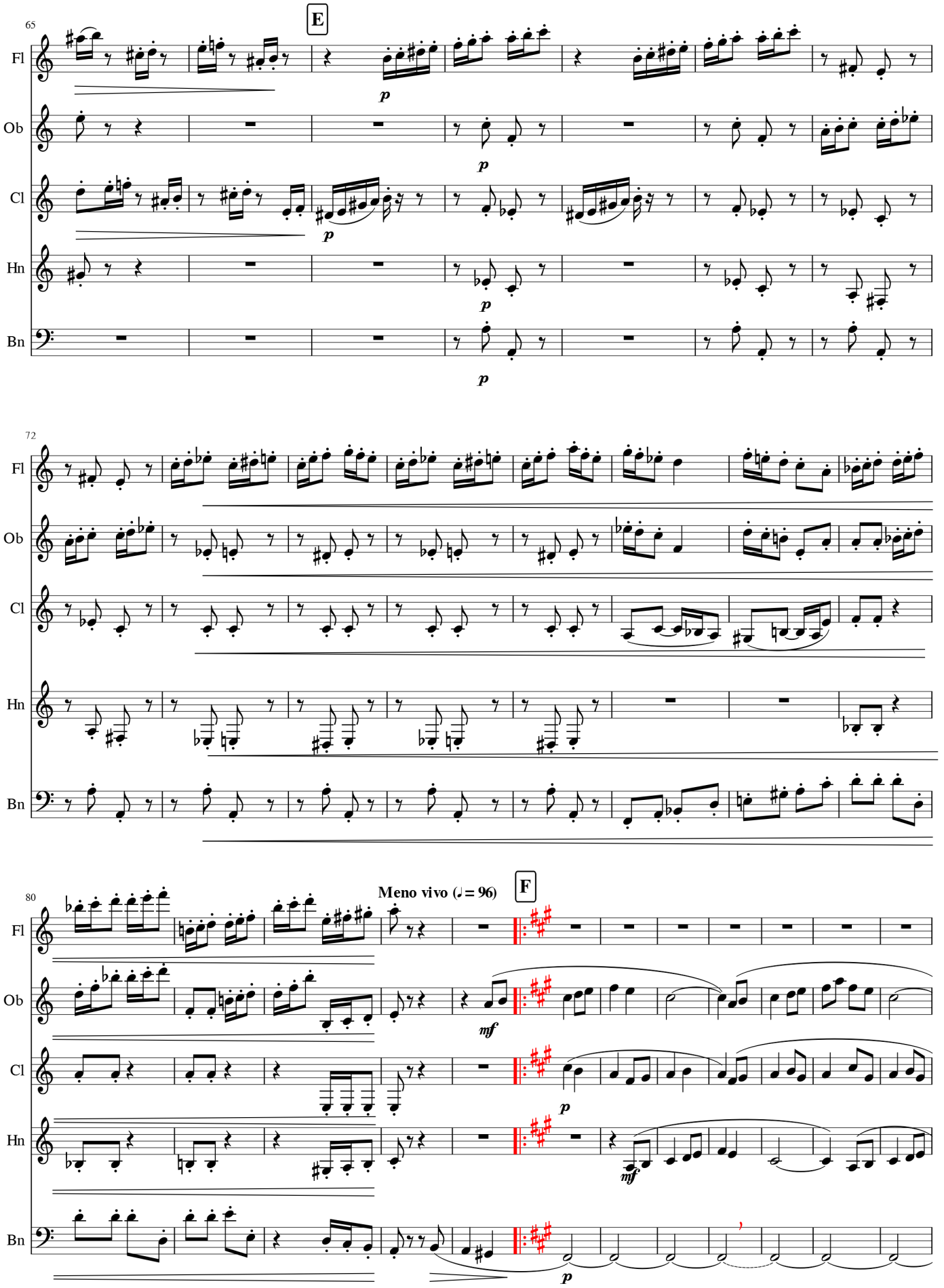
IV - Allegro vivace

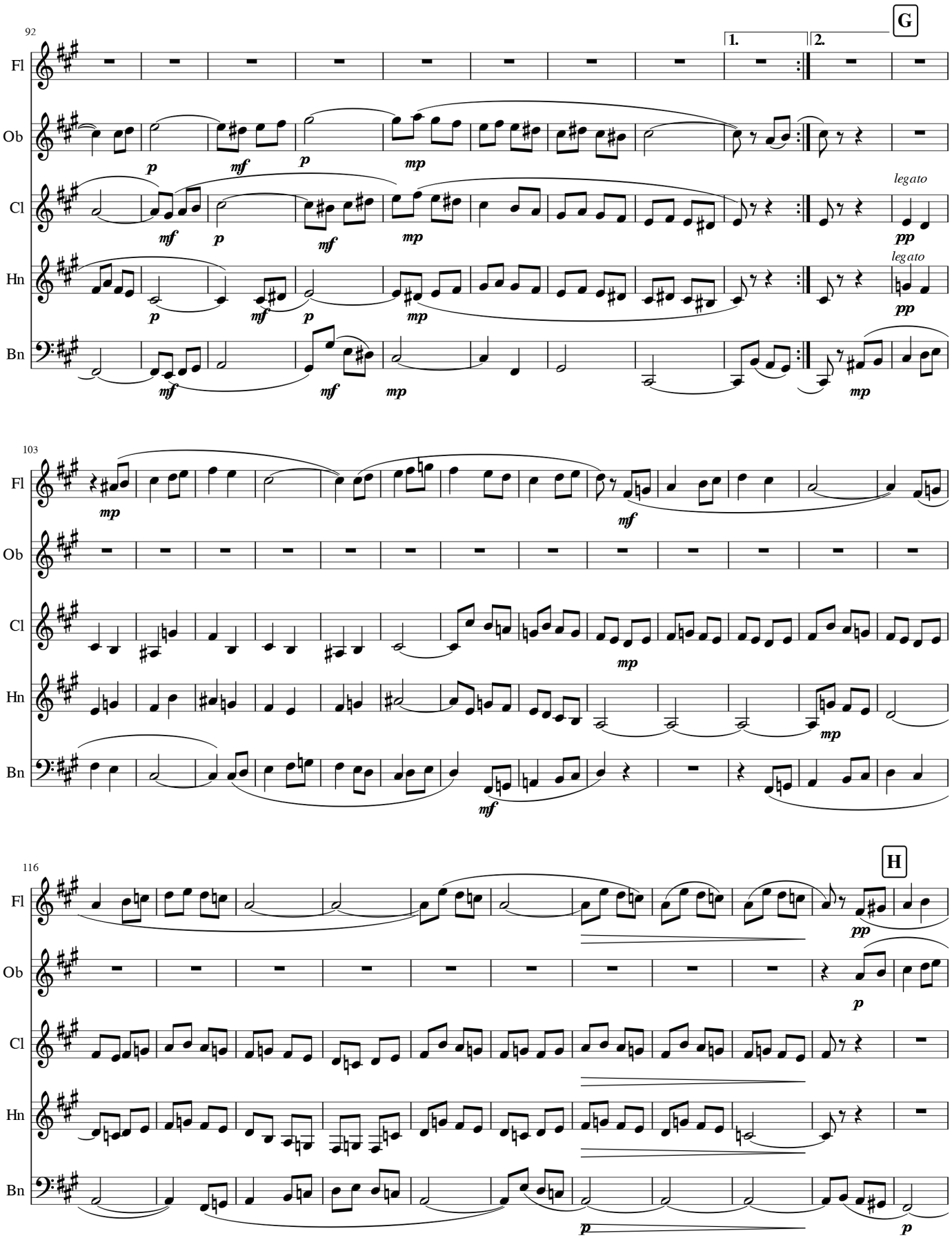
Louis Vierne

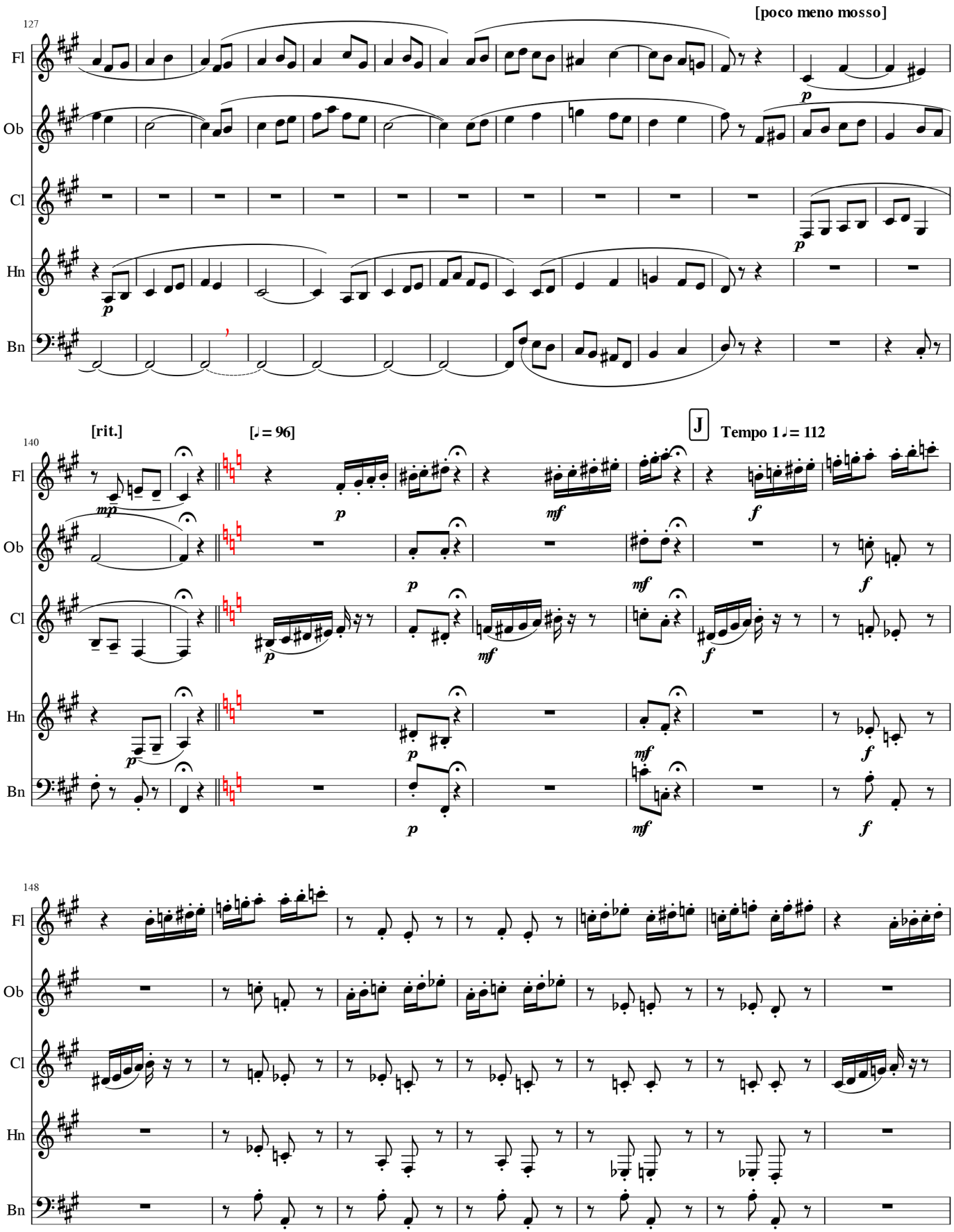


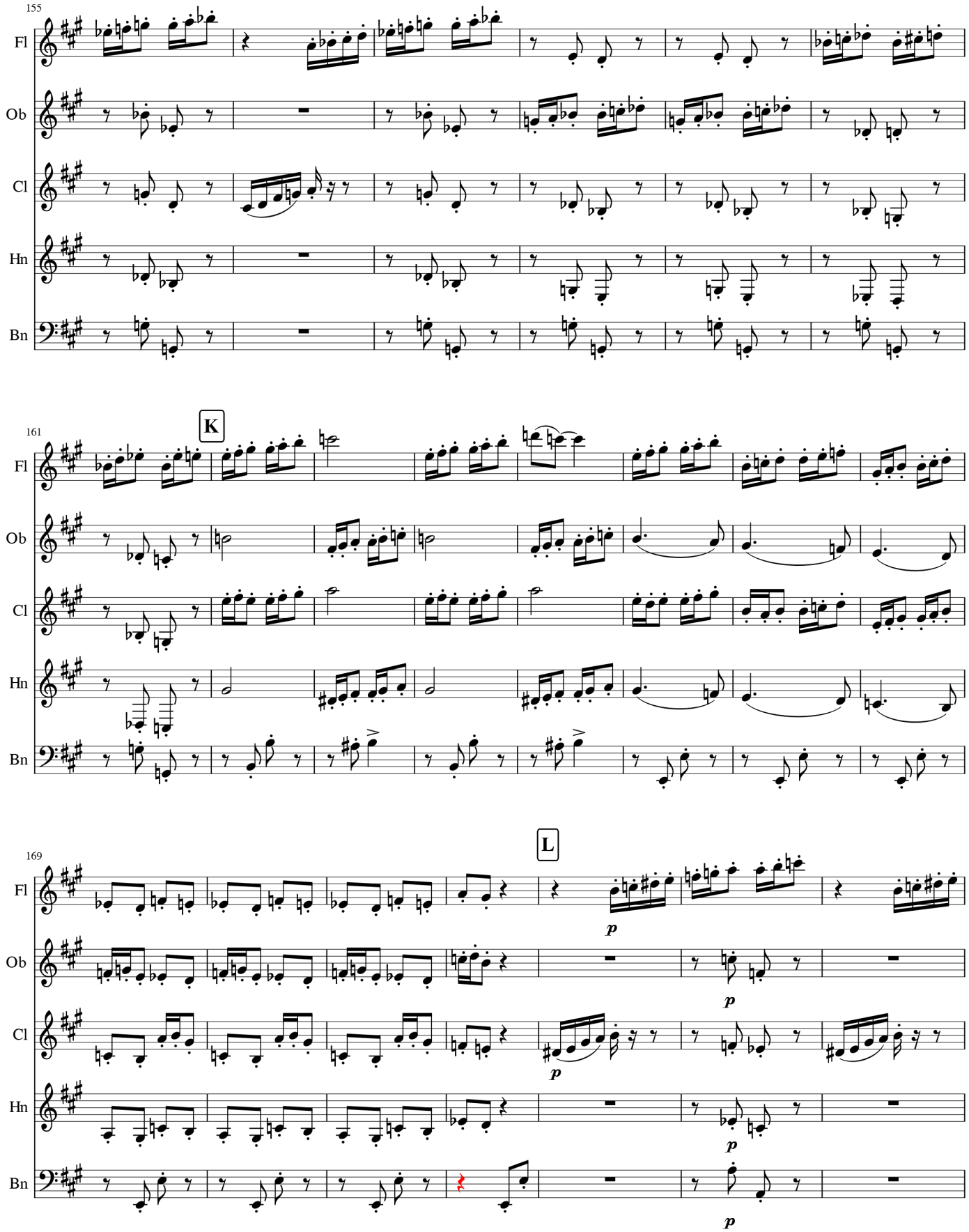

21
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
28
B
p
35

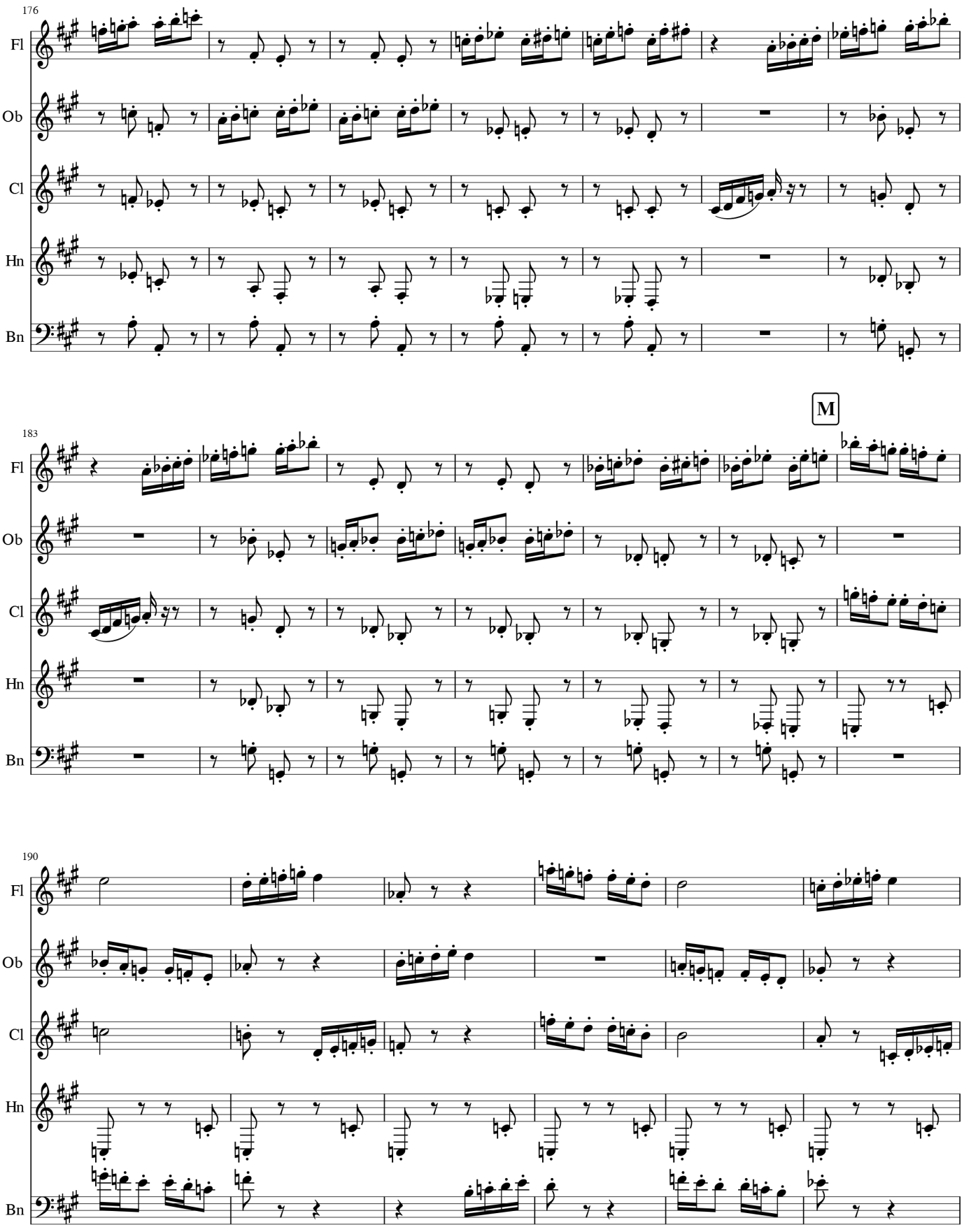

42
C
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
50
D
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
58
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn

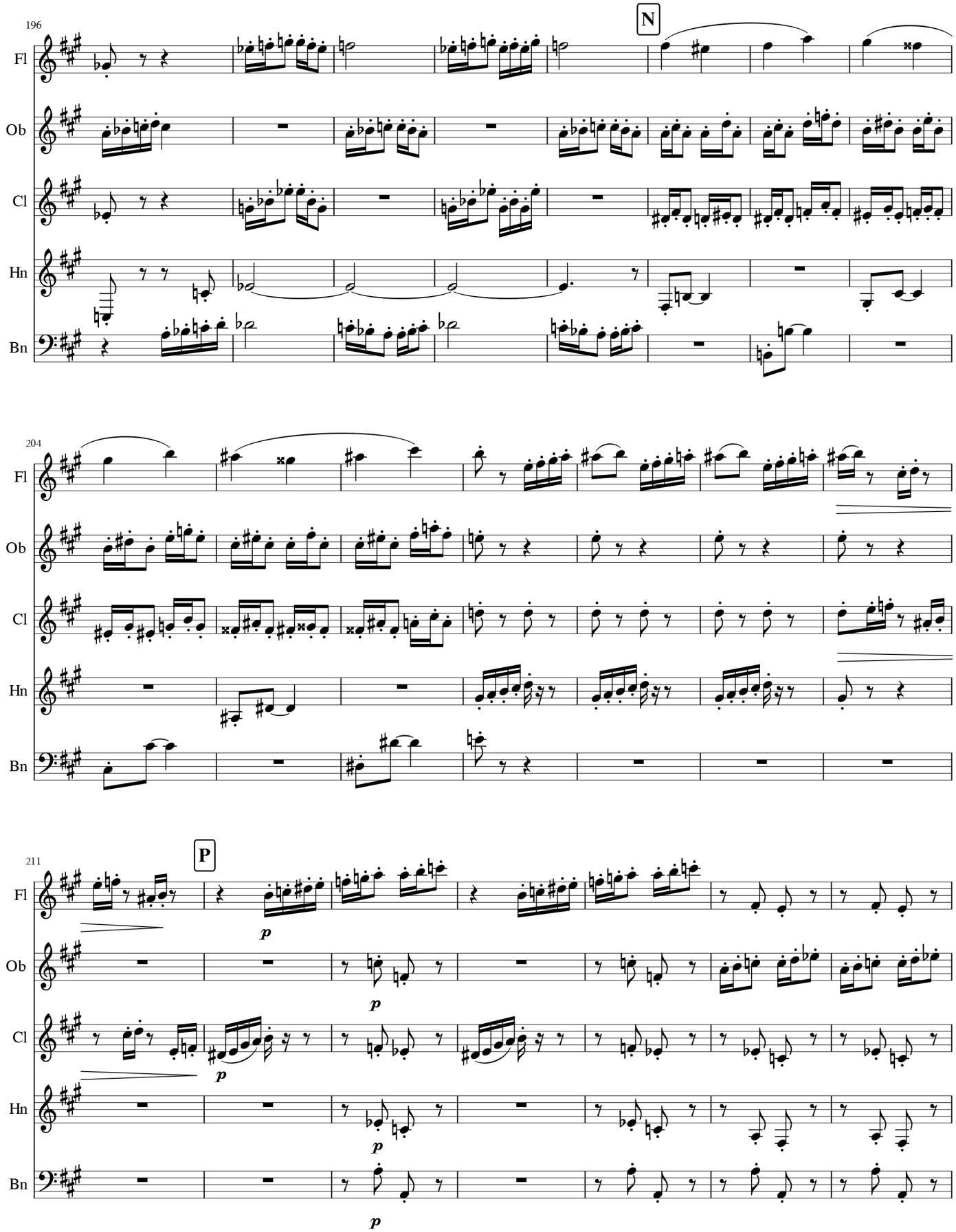

65
E
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
p
72
80
Meno vivo (♩= 96)
F
mf

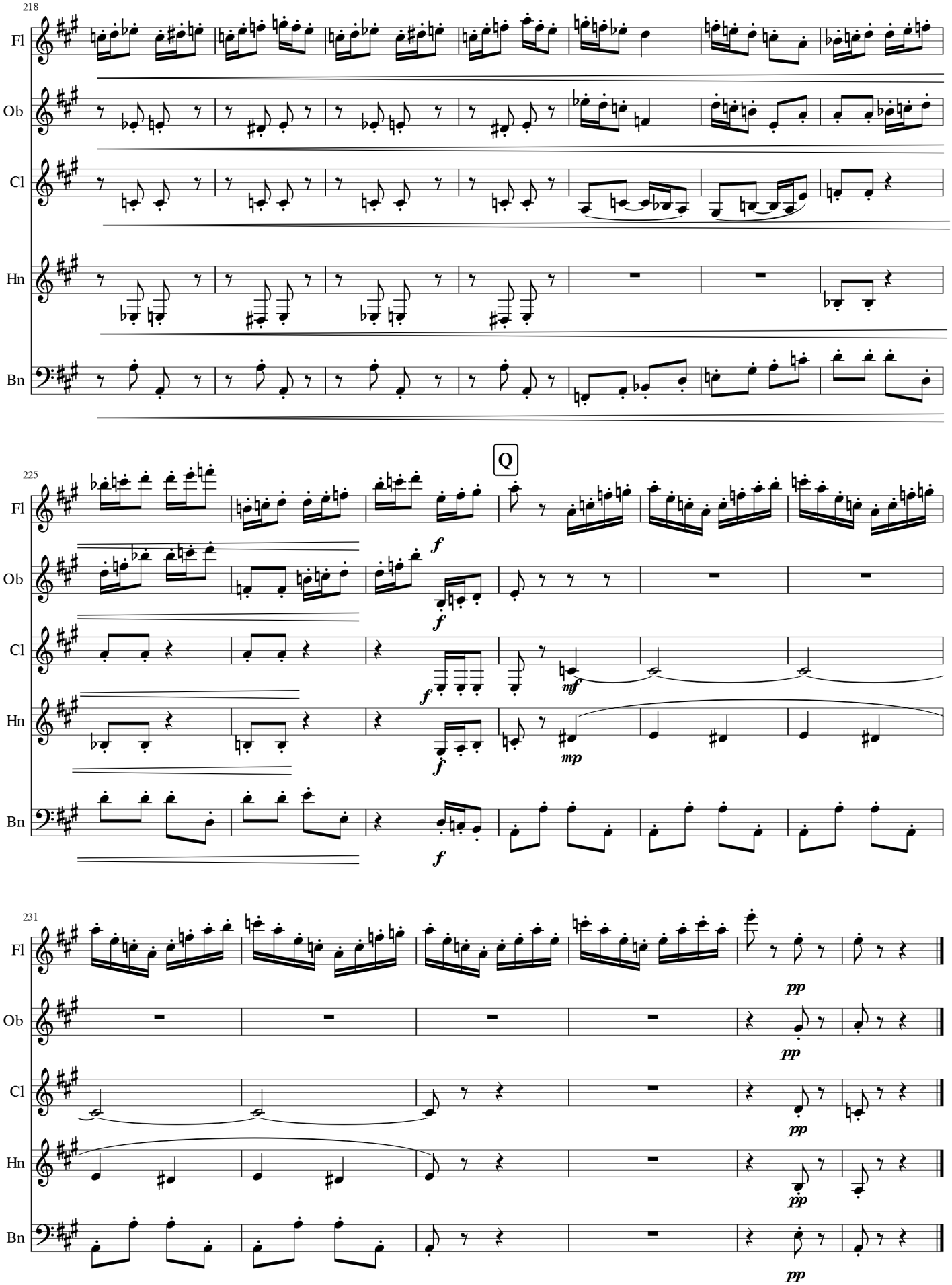

92
G
1.
2.
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
legato
legato
103
116
H


127
[poco meno mosso]
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
p
140
[rit.]
[♩= 96]
J
Tempo 1 ♩= 112
mp
mf
f
148


155
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
161
K
169
L
p
p
p
p


176
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
183
M
190


196
N
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
204
211
P
p
p
p
p


218
Fl
Ob
Cl
Hn
Bn
225
Q
f
mf
mp
231
pp