Origami Letters

For Tenor Voice
and String Quartet

Part for Cello

Words and Music by

Nigel Morgan

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About the Music

In the Spring of 2009 I received a packet of letters written on sheets of coloured and patterned Origami paper. In a world where the art and practice of letter-writing seems to be diminishing an envelope of letters was a treat, a rare gift. A dear friend, now a textile artist of some distinction, was completing an academic assignment whilst staying in her childhood home. Over three days and two nights she wrote letters on the back of origami paper full of gentle observations of her home, springtime, of children, of family celebrations, and walks under the broad skies of Lincolnshire.

I returned this gift with a sequence of poems meaning to set them to music for tenor voice and string quartet. The scoring was inspired by *The Juliet Letters*, a collaborative song cycle devised by the Brodsky Quartet for Elvis Costello. My setting was completed later in 2009 for the tenor Mark Padmore and the Brodsky Quartet. But like Paul Hindemith and his *Das Marienleben* settings of Rilke I was unsatisfied by this setting and in the spring of 2014 rewrote the whole work. Instead of resetting the poems 'as is' I made quite substantial changes and cuts, not just to the text as a whole but the way I treated the flow of words, this time using repetitions and re-orderings to create emphasis and musical effects.

Musically, the score was wholly recomposed using a number of algorithmic devices to generate a unique harmonic 'world'. The work was planned in two versions: for voice and keyboard; for voice and string quartet. In the former an aesthetic concept similar to the contemplative web artefact *Fifteen Images* was adopted, designing a score particularly suited to the art of the improvising pianist who is encouraged to treat the harmonic language with considerable freedom in choice of registration, voicing and figuration.

Performance Notes

Dynamics, articulations, tempo and expressive markings should be considered as starting points, no more. The recommended mode of performance for string quartet should be one of restraint and simplicity.

I

Fold upon fold
your origami letters
map thoughts,
images and moments
of three days,
two nights.

Now to unfold
the creased trajectories,
intersecting space,
following time:
bird-like flightpaths
on the radar screen.

Each coloured sheet,
placed on this desk,
becomes a tessellated diary,
and grows beneath the hand.
So generous a gift.
So readily received.

II

Ah, that's your secret:
the power of the list;
 this, then this,
 then freedom follows,
 knowing the necessaries
 dusted and done.

  Peaceful now,
  and watching the clouds
  cross the skylight,
  Bach decorates your soul
  with his meditations
  on the possibility of everything.

  How did you guess
  I love the detail of life-
  lived, up to the hilt:
  the embellishment of dreams
  pulled from the ether
  sound and sense in tow.

III

I travelled North
in the seat opposite.
You didn't notice me
as you gazed
through your reflection,
sighting the past.

When you look at me
you rarely blink or
glance away (as people do).
Poor nature,
She hasn't a chance, has she?
Never a mote missed.

As my passenger
I shall care for your silence;
to let you loose on
unbidden thoughts
as they rise above
the scrolling hills.

IV

Before your work
you sit, so still
as in a painting
by Hammershøi
(Isa's hair,
so like your own).

Beyond the desk,
the bay window
stretches your gaze
to the fox-frequented garden,
the hedged less-leaved beech,
the un-blossomed pear.

Now, in the mind's eye,
your son, your daughter
bed-bound in a doorway:
(a tender moment witnessed)
then the silent grace,
the shared meal.

V

Night falls
and done for the day
the violins unravel.
Only on a brittle guitar,
a Prelude:
Subtle Mysteries of Sleep.

As you close your eyes
tomorrow beckons (in a list),
and thinking backwards:
the nettle soup tale;
a birthday cake adventure;
breakfast on the patio with sunshine.

Premonitions? Perhaps.
But in yesterday's paper
a shock of poetry,
plants the seeds of blank verse -
no pointers given
(save these folded words).

VI

That evening
I asked the questions,
and later you said:
'If I'd not wanted to tell you
I wouldn't have'.
I'd already guessed. I knew.

out in the garden
a sunny day
skuddering clouds
white as the blossom
left and loose
leaving lightness

That evening,
as the minutes
ticked away,
I seemed at last
to see you entire,
even your quiet hands.

VII

As you fold
and crease your words
sheet upon sheet
a running commentary
flows,
ebbs and flows:

your present reading;
that playlist of songs
to sing in solitude;
reflections on 'proper' letters
and the lost art of spelling.
Such word-gifts . . .

. . . and you ask if I mind. . .
when what you tell me
fills those empty rooms
I put aside for you:
to live undisturbed
in my imagination house.

VIII

The end in sight,
the samples stitched,
book-bound.
Show me,
and turn the pages
in your silent way,

no comment required,
none given.
The day is closing.
Time parts: for a tired child,
a birthday meal,
and now your mother's smile.

Whilst at work in her kitchen
you thought-visit
my peninsula home,
pondering a duet
of music and sea-breathing silence,
distance everywhere.

IX

White and Yellow,
the final sheet,
a sign to stop.
With the care and formality
of closure the writing
ends, with just

your name.
How else could it be?
There's no other word
embossed on
these coloured pages
I pick up, I put down.

My fingers trace the braille
of your pen's indent.
the pressure and print
of letters formed.
Your very touch now
lies beneath my own.

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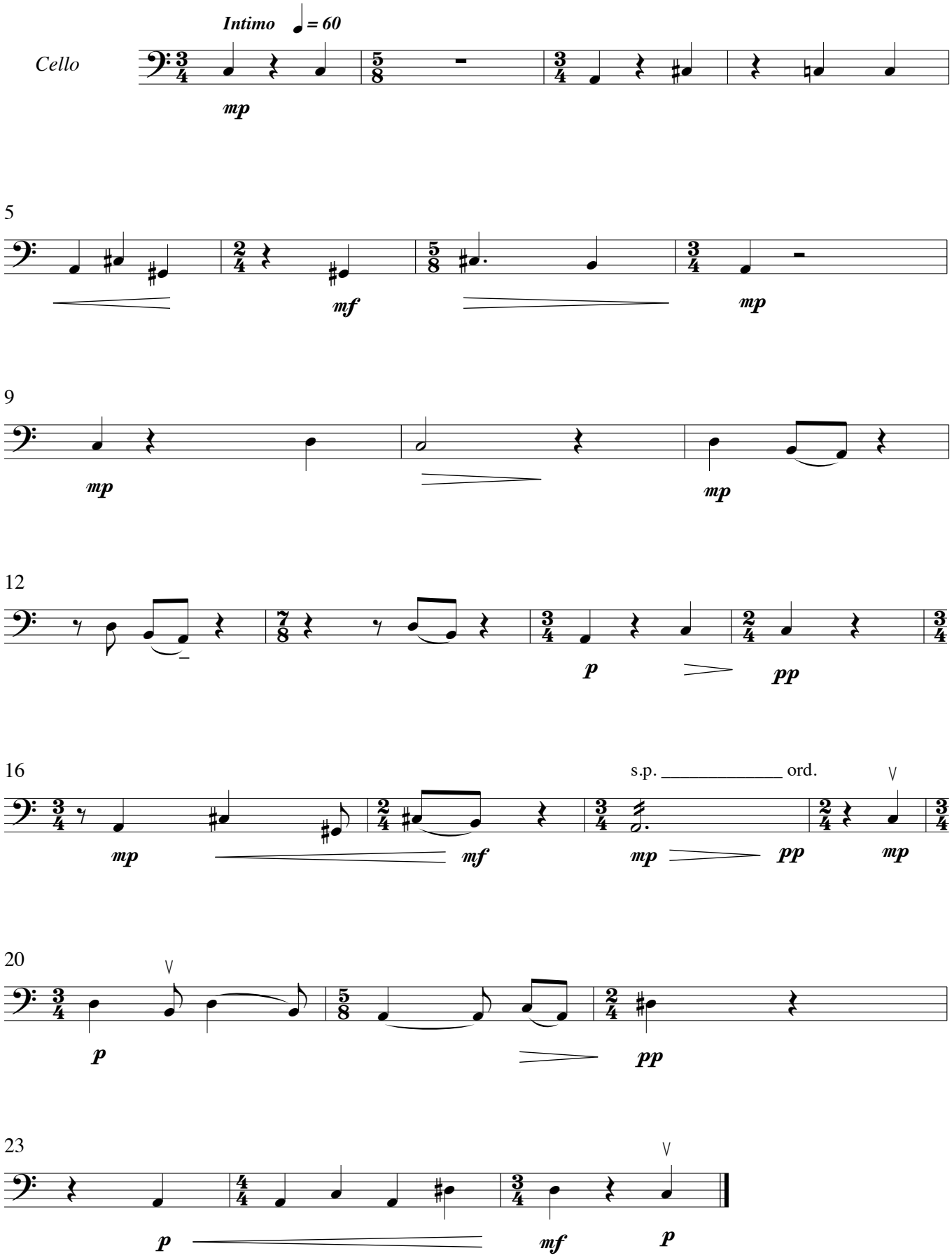
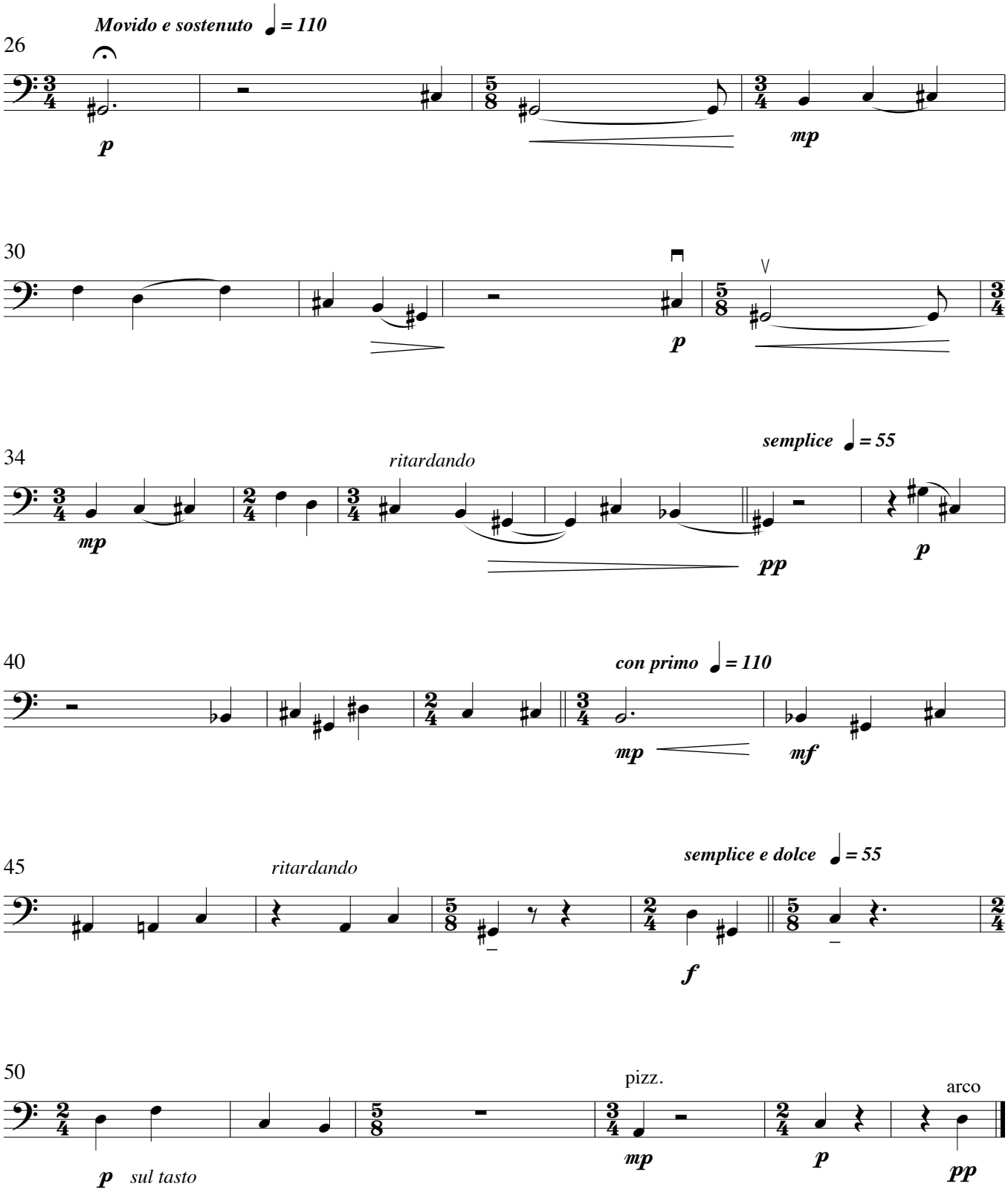
Origami Letters I

for Alice, always

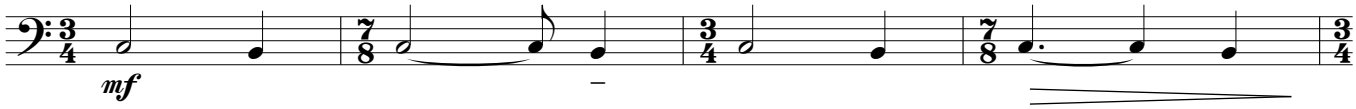


Origami Letters II



Origami Letters III

56 *guistamente e poco pesante* ♩ = 90



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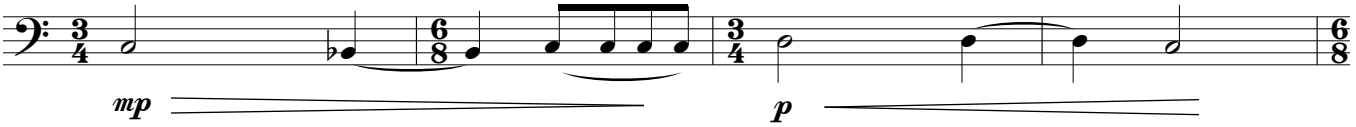

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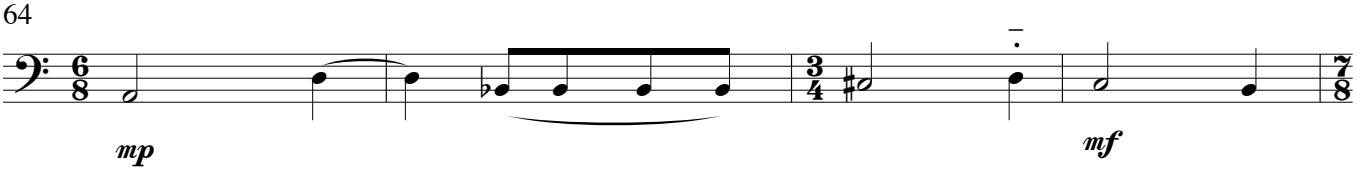

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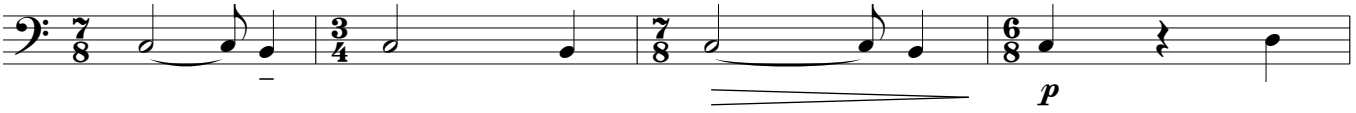

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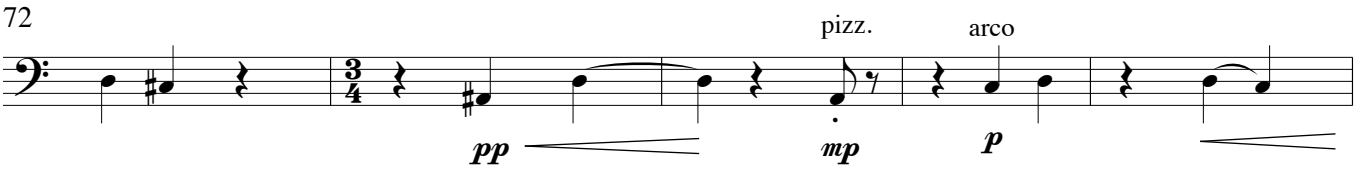

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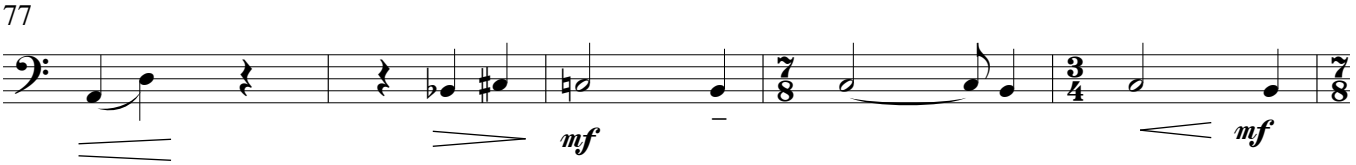

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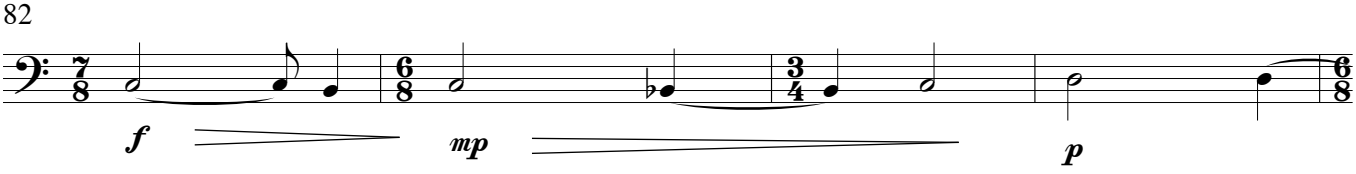

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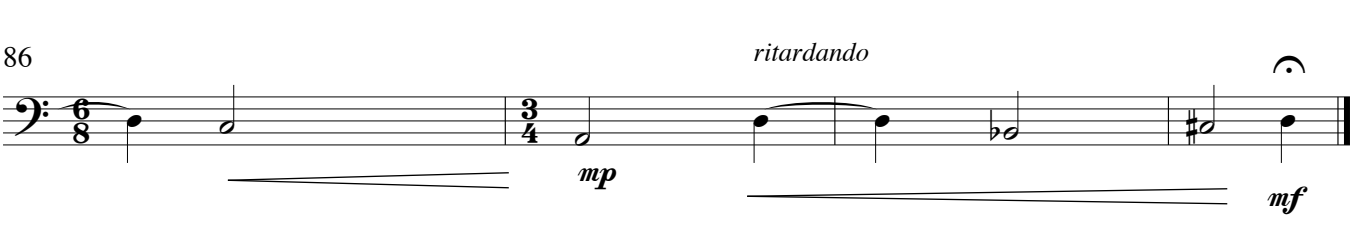

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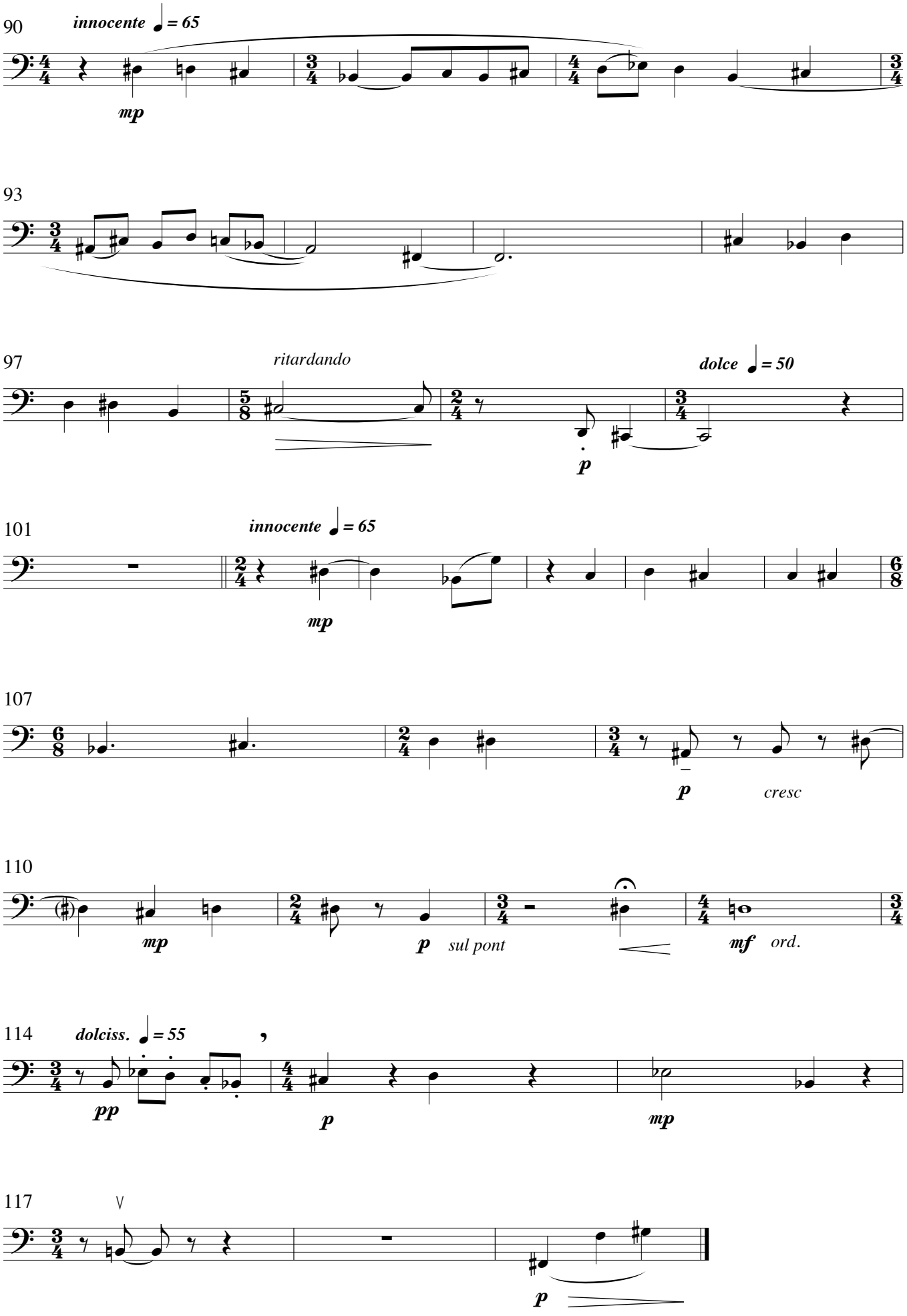

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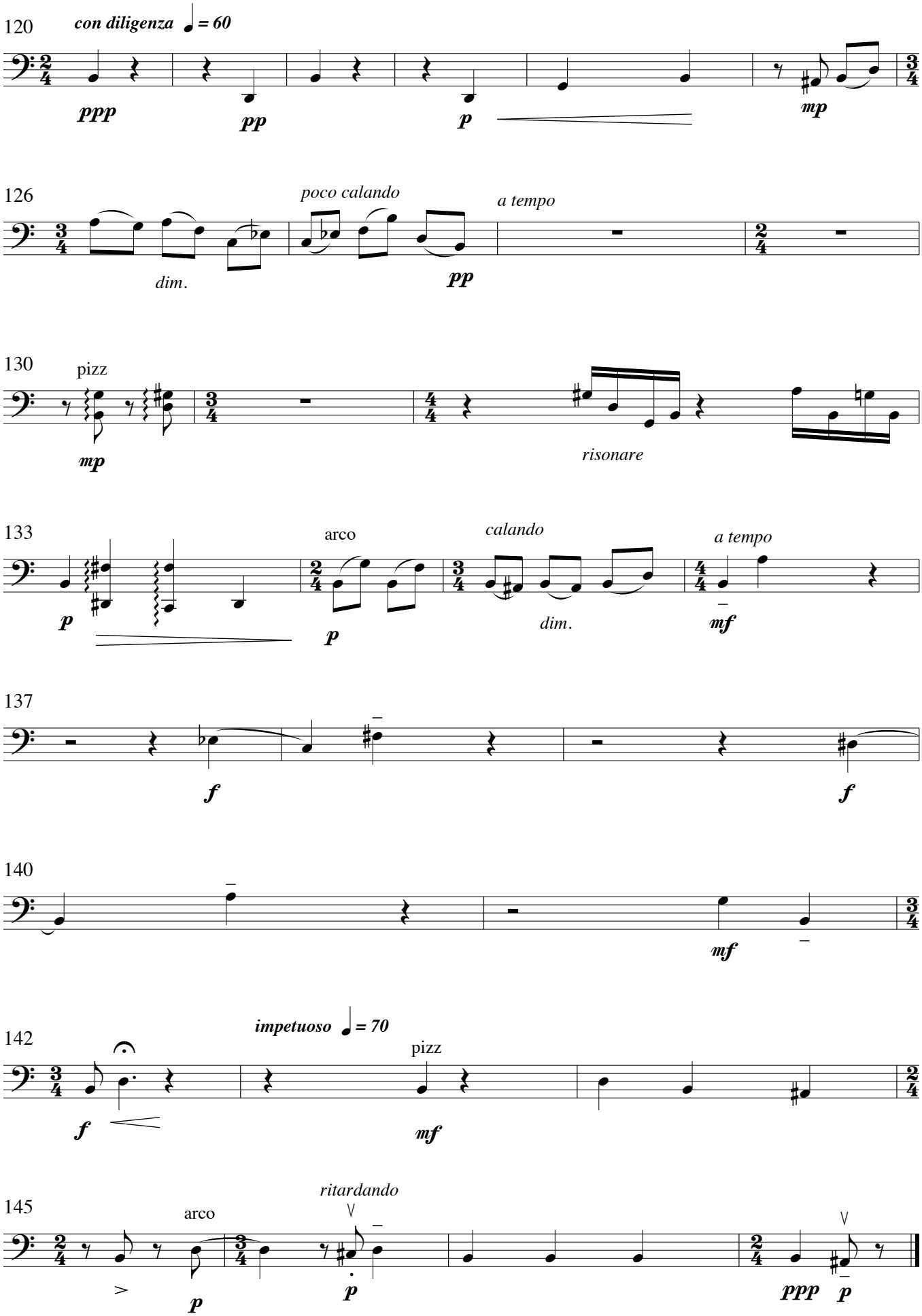

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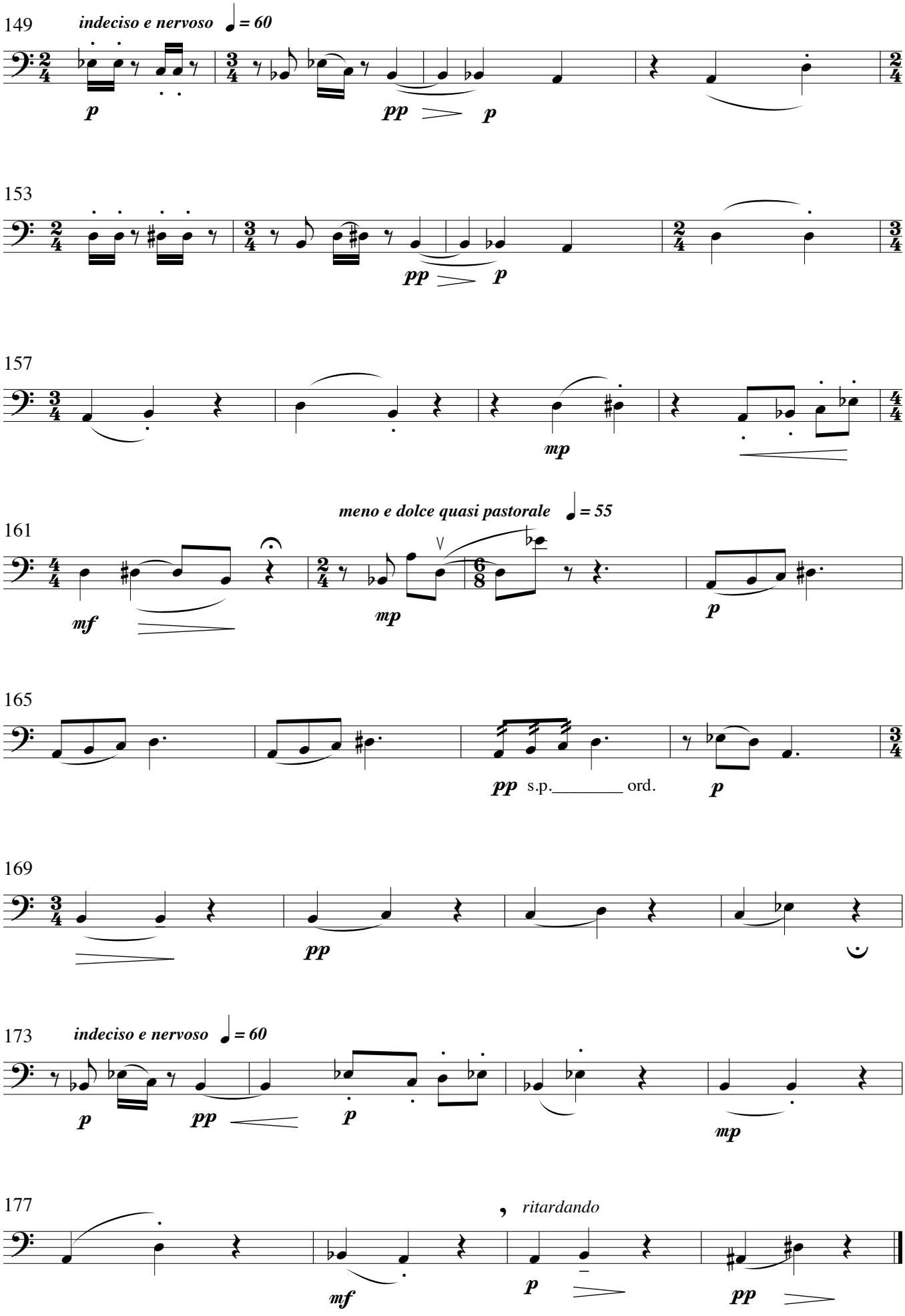
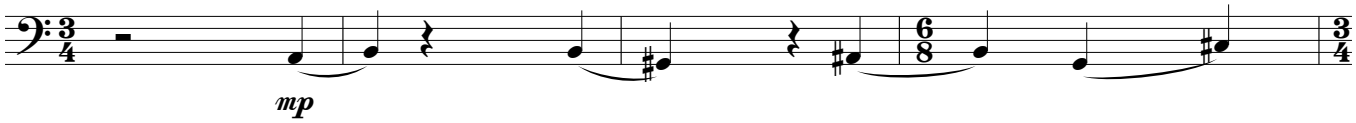


Origami Letters VII

181 *intimissimo* ♩ = 70



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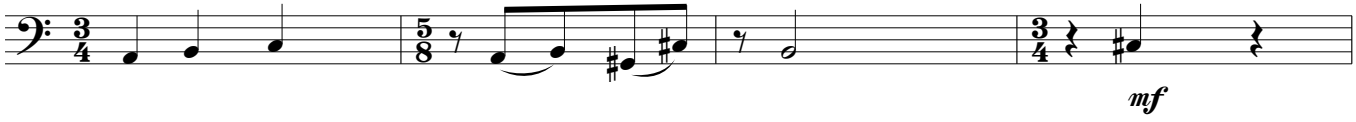

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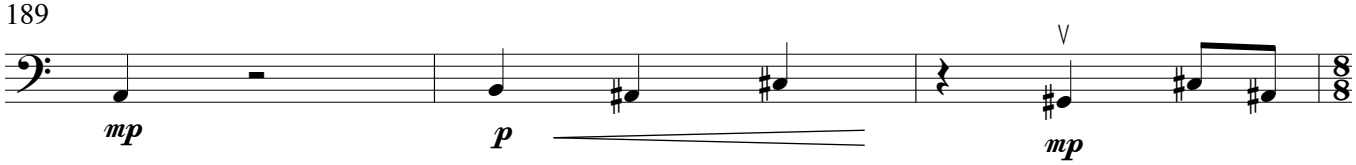

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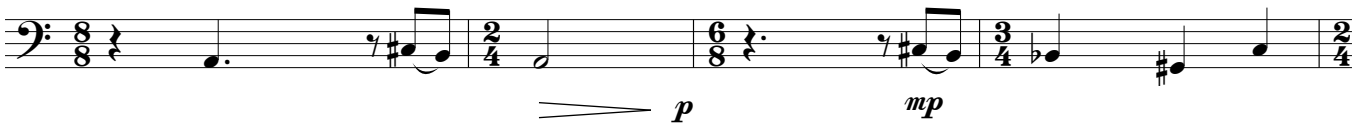

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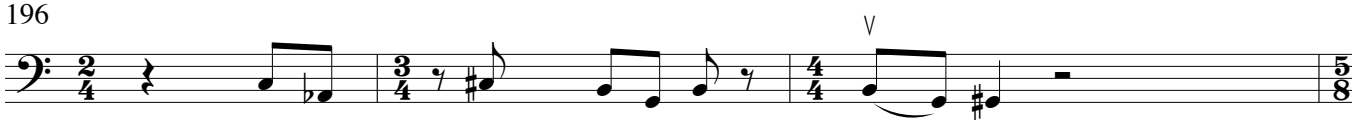

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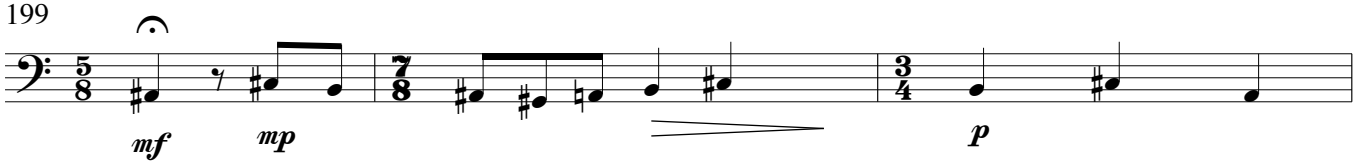

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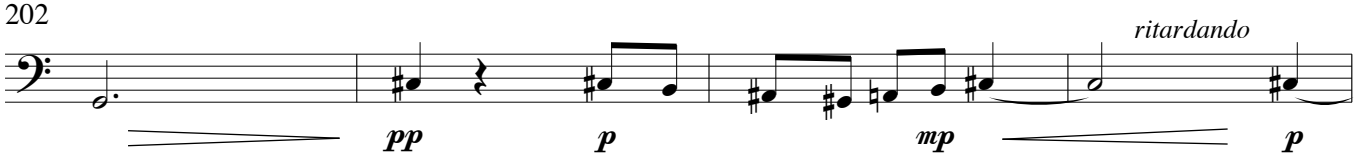

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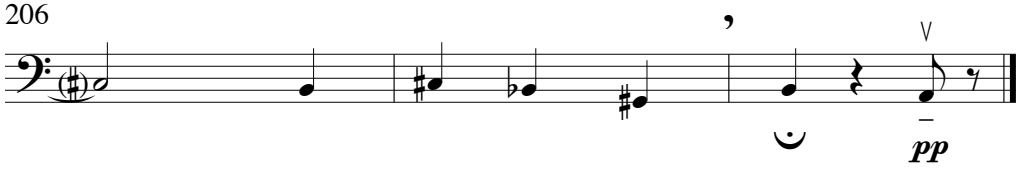
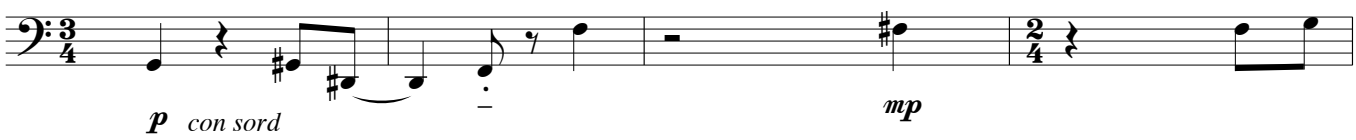


Origami Letters VIII

209 ***espressivo*** ♩ = 90



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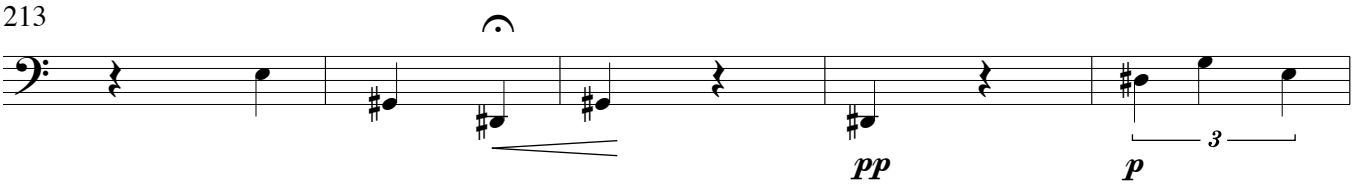

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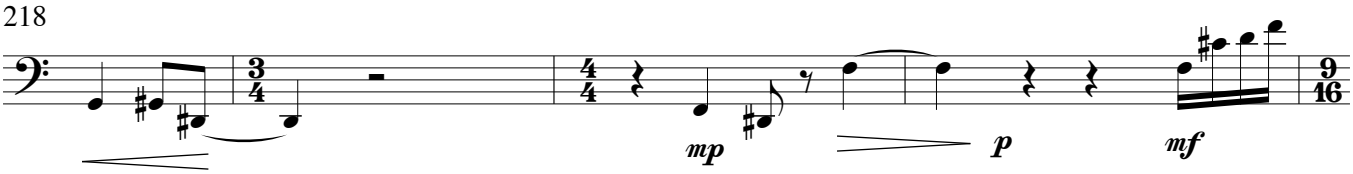

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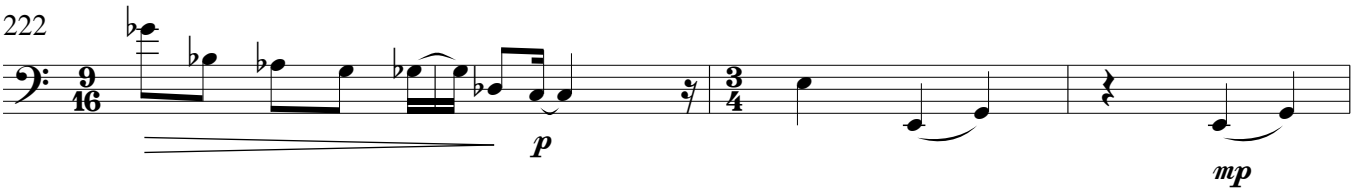

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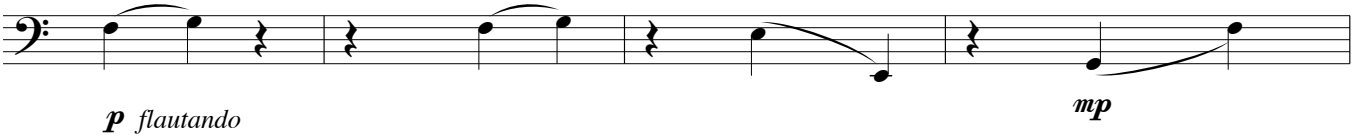

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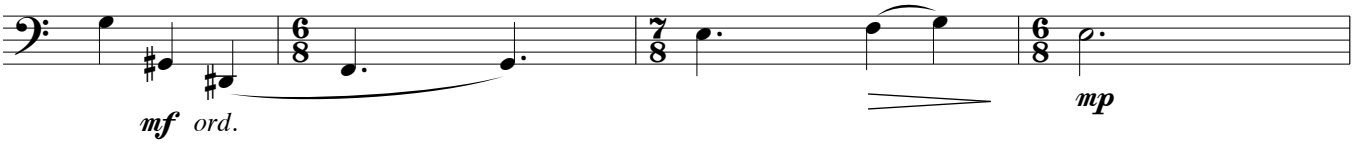

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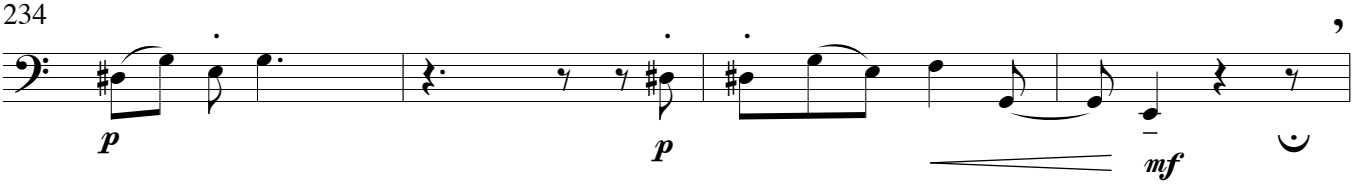
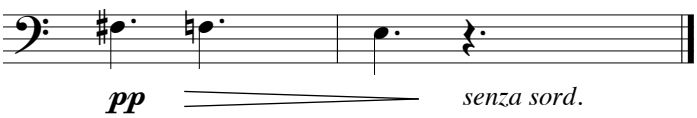


238 *calando*



Origami Letters IX

240 *enfatico* ♩ = 95

mf

243

p

sotto voce

247 *ritardando*

mf ord. *f* *mf*

innocente ♩ = 75

p

251

254

257 *enfatico* ♩ = 95

mf

260

mp

mf poco pesante

264 *ritardando*

pp *p* *pp*