Beowulf Music

For Guitar and Percussion

Nigel Morgan

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About The Piece

In 1975 Nigel Morgan was commissioned to create the score for a production of the Early English epic poem *Beowulf* at the new National Theatre on London's South Bank. It was a production with life-size puppets by Christopher Leith and a new verse translation by Larry Butler. The score involved two singers as narrators and two musicians playing harp (a copy of the Sutton Hoe instrument) and percussion. In 1978 the composer decided to reinvent the score as an instrumental fantasy: for guitar and percussion. This score was written for the composer/performers Nigel Morgan (guitar) and Patrick Brandon (percussion) and toured extensively as part of a programme featuring their music.

The music does not 'tell the story' of *Beowulf* but rather focuses on events that recur within the poem but in no particular order: the extraordinary fight scenes, the sea journeys; the formal dialogues between king and hero, the death of a hero. Three extracts from the original text are used as an underscore to introduce particular sections.

There are many modern translations of *Beowulf* in print. The composer's favourites are those in verse by Seamus Heaney and in prose (for children) by Kevin Crossley-Holland. On the Internet a good introduction to Beowulf can be found at:

www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~beowulf/main.html

Performance instructions

Performer 1: guitar

Performer 2: marimba, congas, bongos, maraca, guiro, claves.

Dynamics and performance instructions are used only sparingly. When they do appear they should be considered as a guide or starting point, no more. Performers might like to approach their parts as though actors in a drama. The guitar could be said to stand for Beowulf, the heroic male, the forces of good against evil. The percussion part is certainly the stuff of the

monsters, the avenging mother, the dark forces of malignant marsh and mere. However, in the concluding duo for guitar and marimba both instruments weave intricate sea journeys, towards forthcoming fights and a hero's homecoming.

The guitar part is not presented with the composer's fingering. It seeks to encourage performers to create their own. For those reluctant to do this an edited version is available on request. The part is notated an octave higher than it sounds.

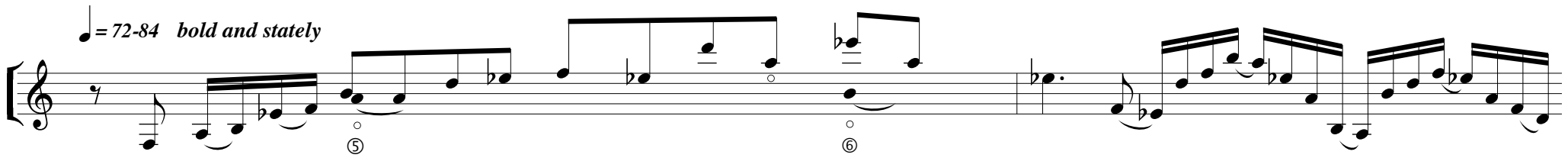
In the original performances the guitar used was an amplified Stereo Ovation classical guitar. Amplification is encouraged in this work because of the extensive use of harmonics and resonances in the guitar part, but in intimate surroundings an unamplified performance can be magical. There is certainly no reason also why a steel-string acoustic guitar could not be used, and even an electric instrument might be considered. What needs to be remembered at all times is that the music should reflect something of the hard, aggressive edge and horror of the *Beowulf* poem. It is by turns chilling, proud, tender, heroic. The performers should also attempt to conjure up something of the age-old heroic style of story-telling which in the case of Beowulf was undoubtedly sung accompanied by a small harp.

Note 1 - the player should use alternating thumb and index finger or plectrum to very slightly damp the 6th string, but unevenly to produce a kaleidoscope of harmonics. The notes should sound forced and very deliberate. In these passages, which occur several times throughout the piece, the guitarist is asked to gradually slow down the repeated phrase whilst the percussionist holds the tempo.

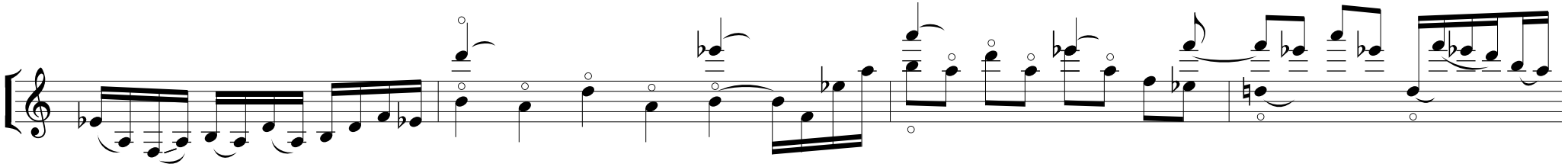
Note 2 - when tuning the 6th string to F the music played by the right hand does not stop. The player should not worry if the retuning is not wholly completed before the entry of the melodic material played on the 4th string. There are several opportunities between each melodic phrase for the bottom F to come gradually to the 'correct' pitch.

A version for harp and percussion is available.

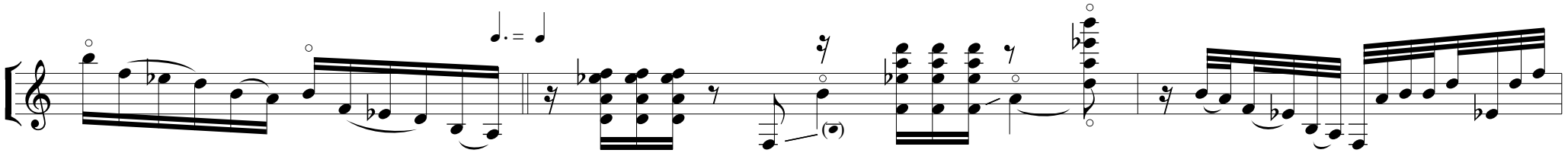
Beowulf Music



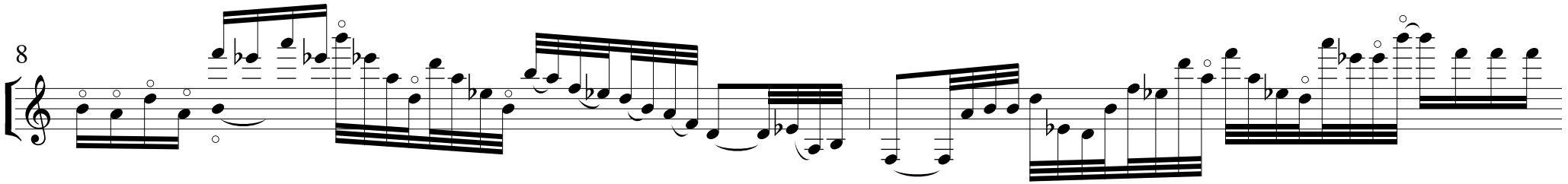
Hither have fared to thee far-come men o'er the paths of ocean, people of Geatland; and the stateliest there by his sturdy band



is Beowulf named. This boon they seek, that they, my master, may with thee have speech at will: nor spurn their prayer



to give them hearing, gracious Hrothgar! In weeds of the warrior worthy they, methinks, of our liking; their leader most surely,



a hero that hither his henchmen has led.

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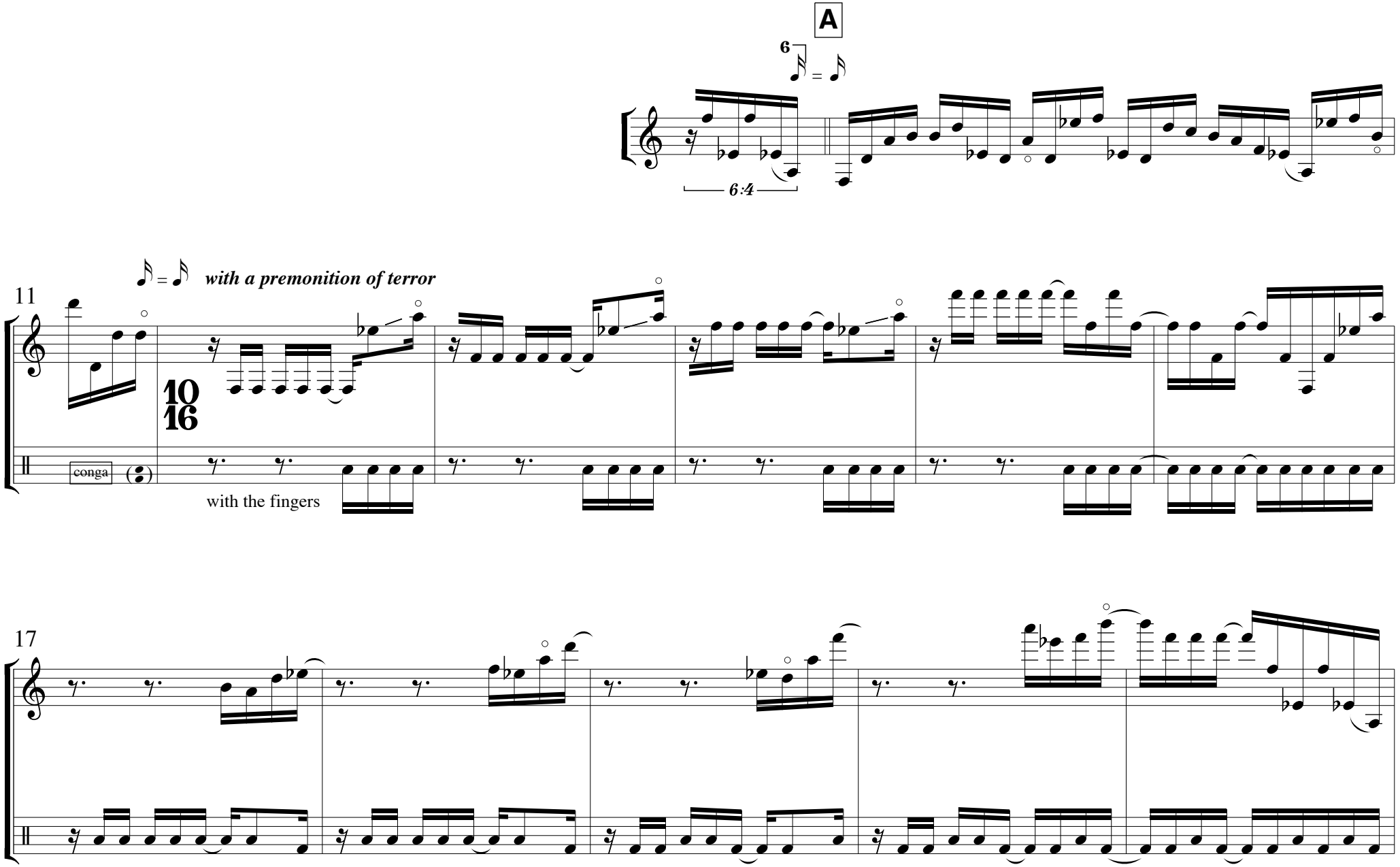
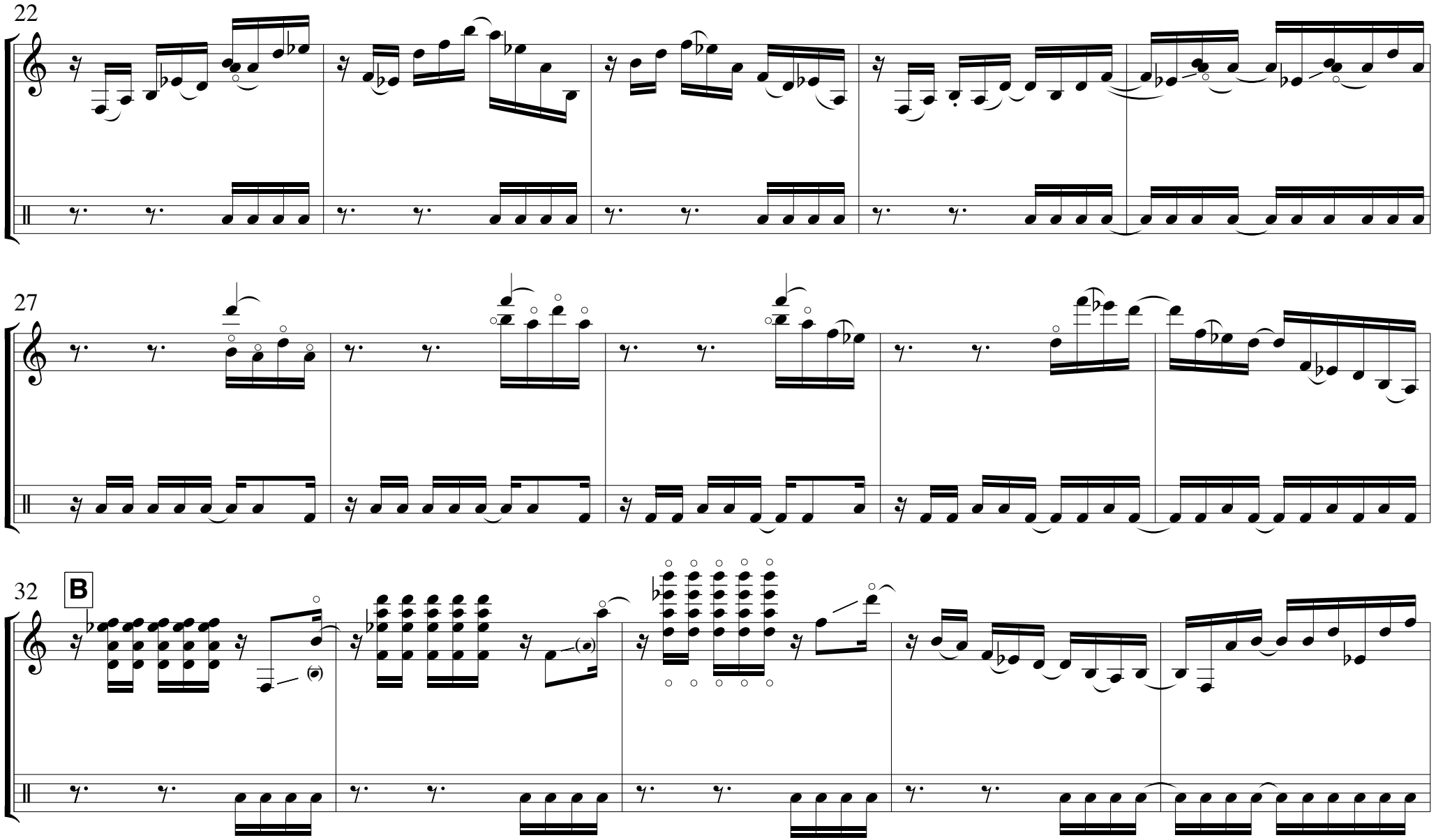
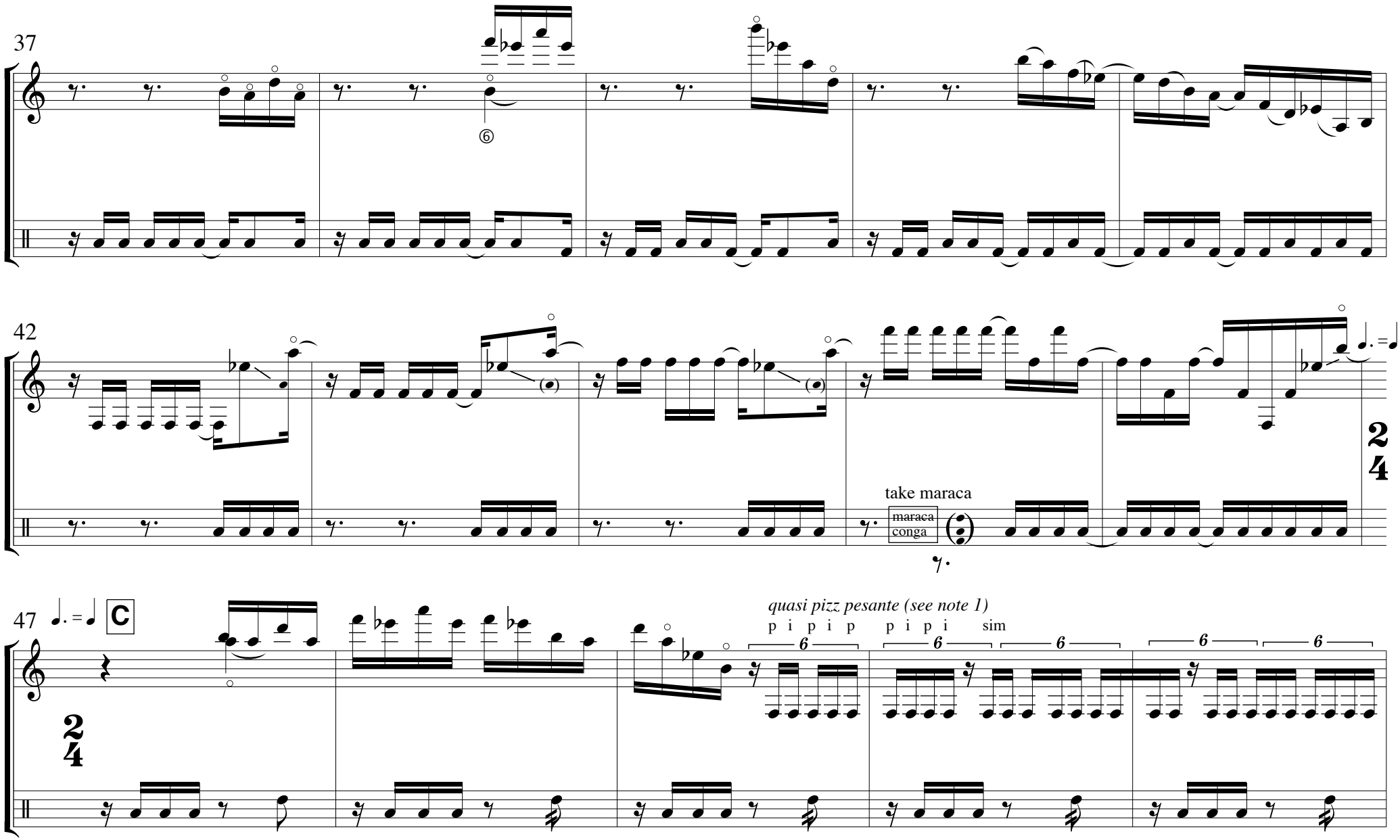
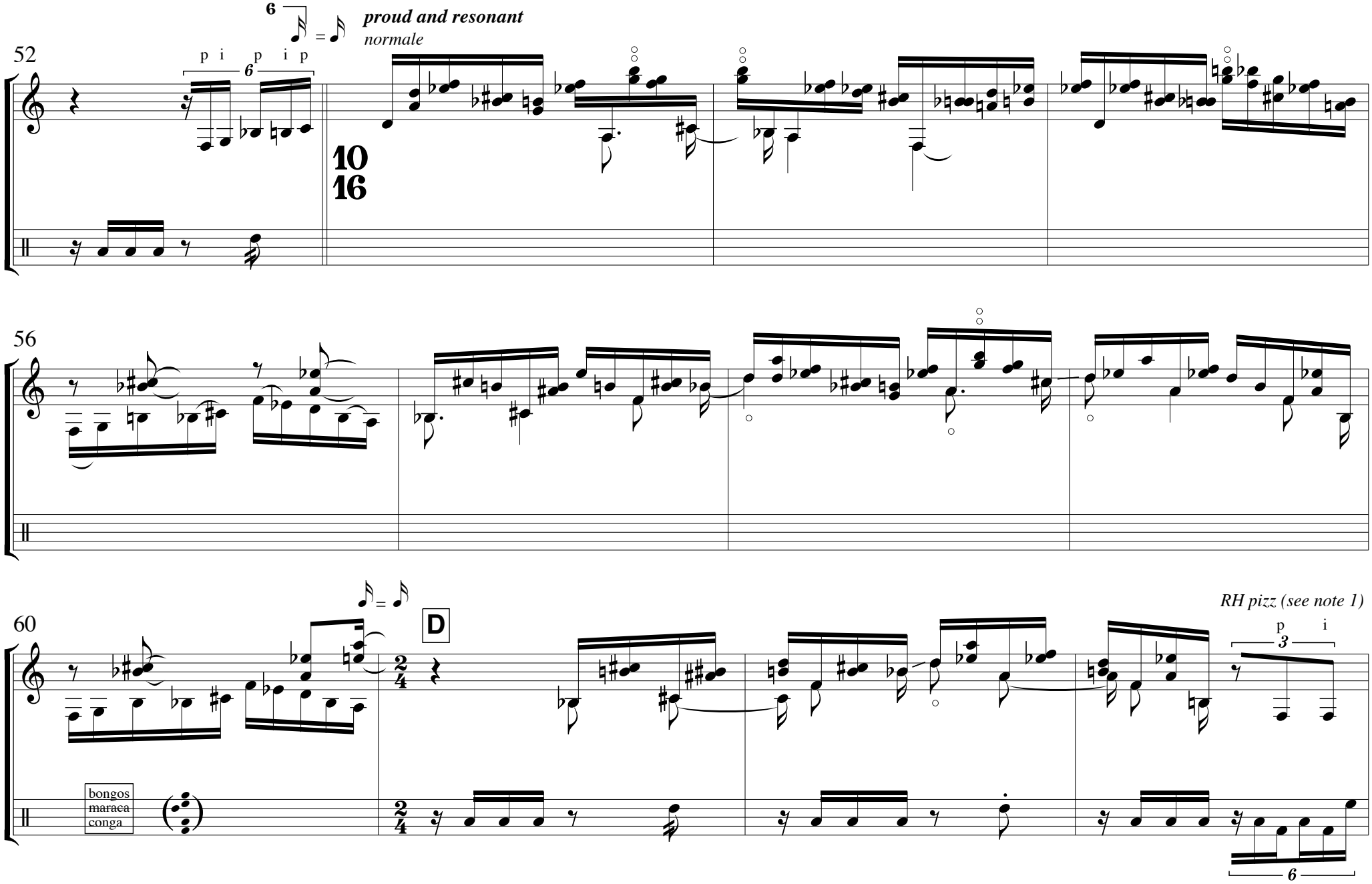
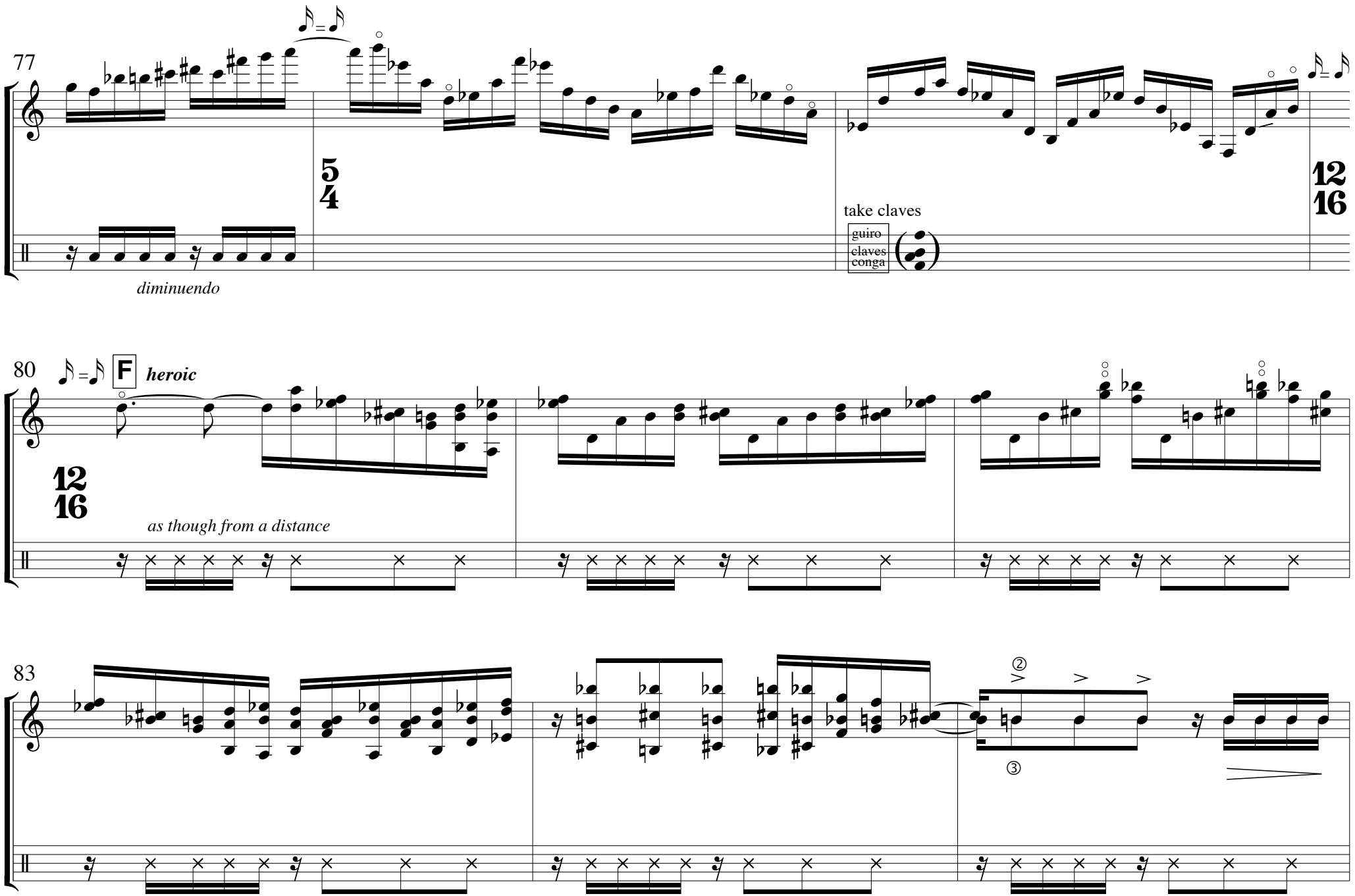

A
6
6:4
11
with a premonition of terror
10
16
conga
with the fingers
17

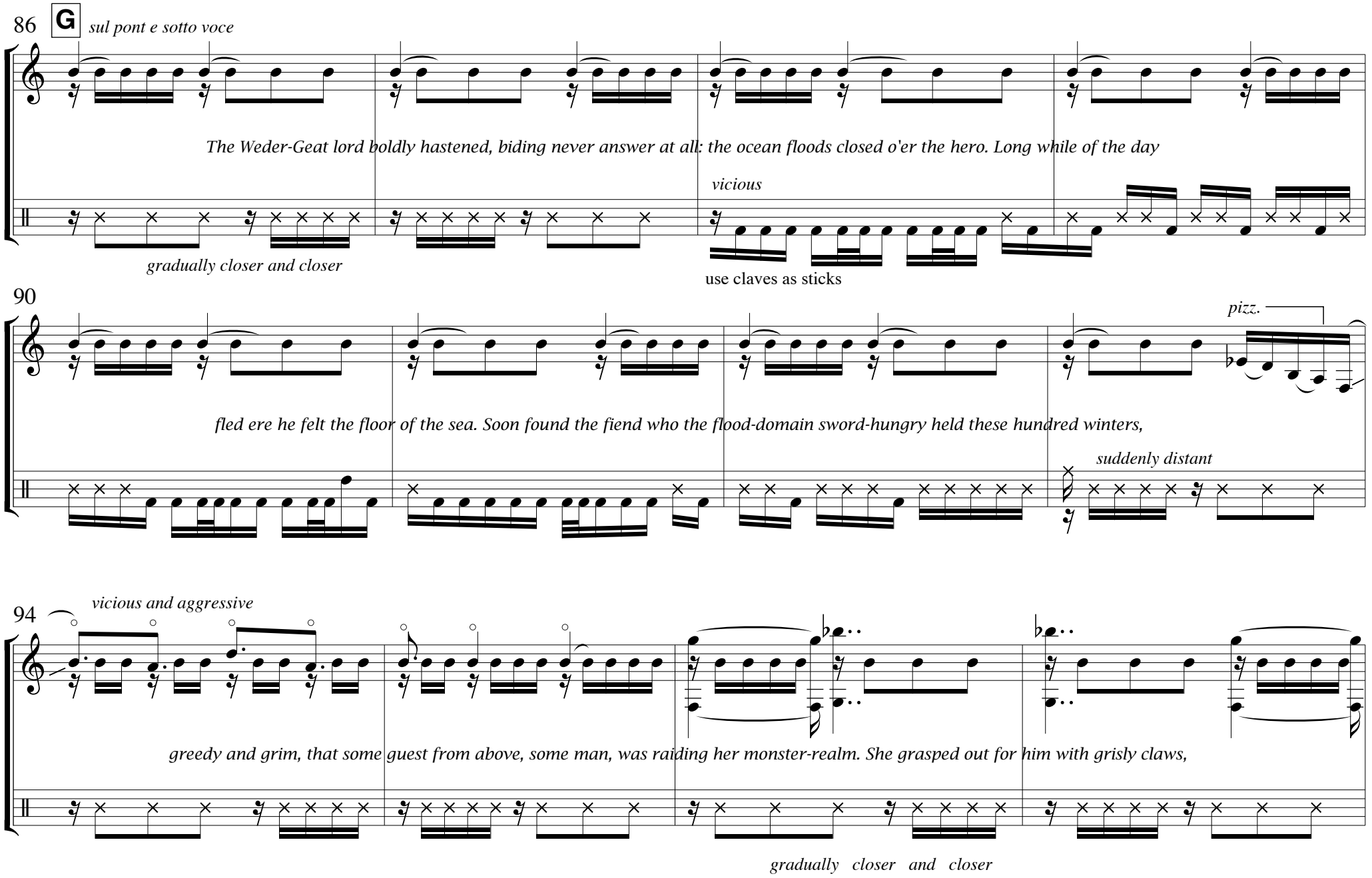

22
27
32
B

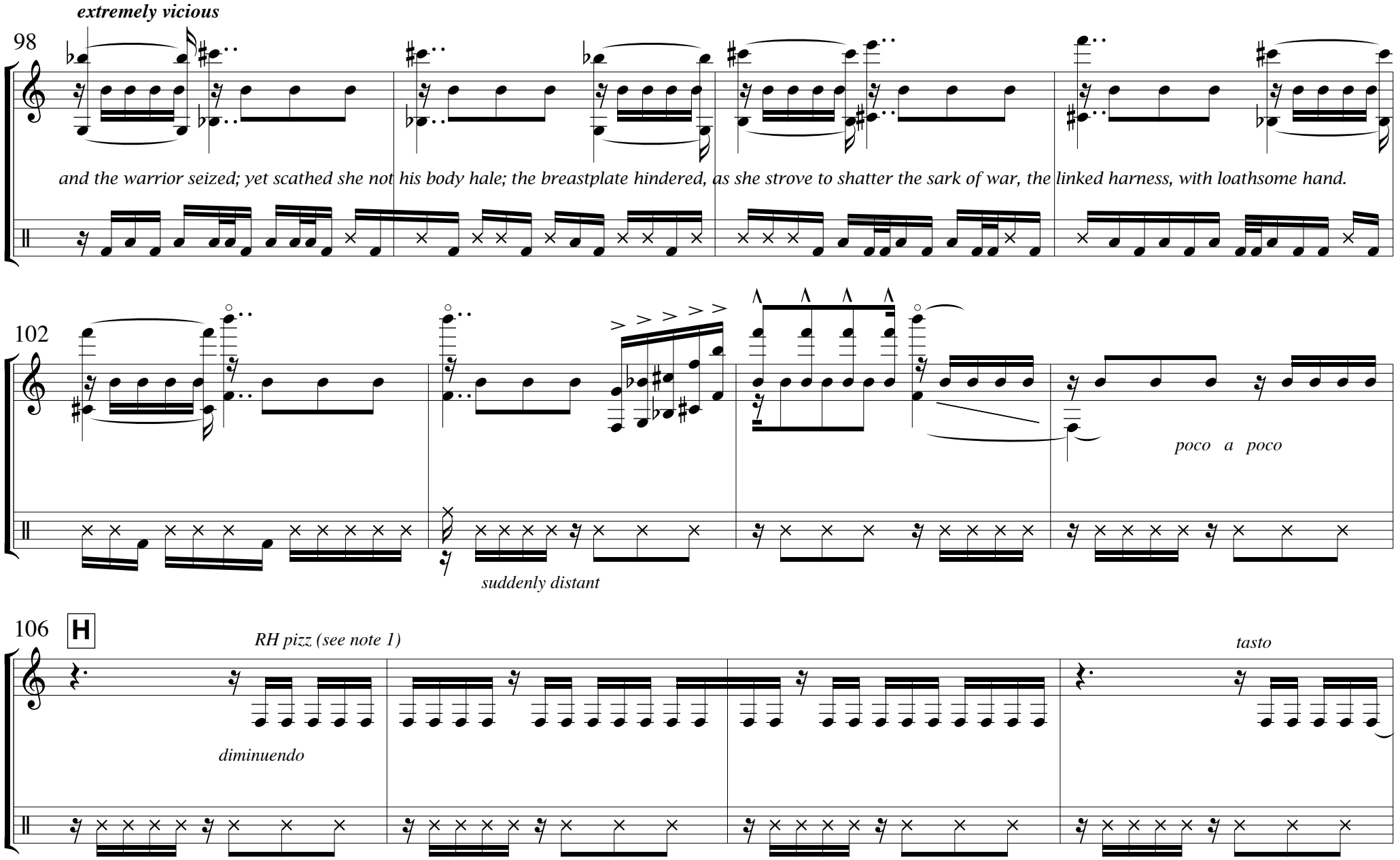

37
42
take maraca
maraca
conga
47
C
quasi pizz pesante (see note 1)
p i p i p p i p i sim

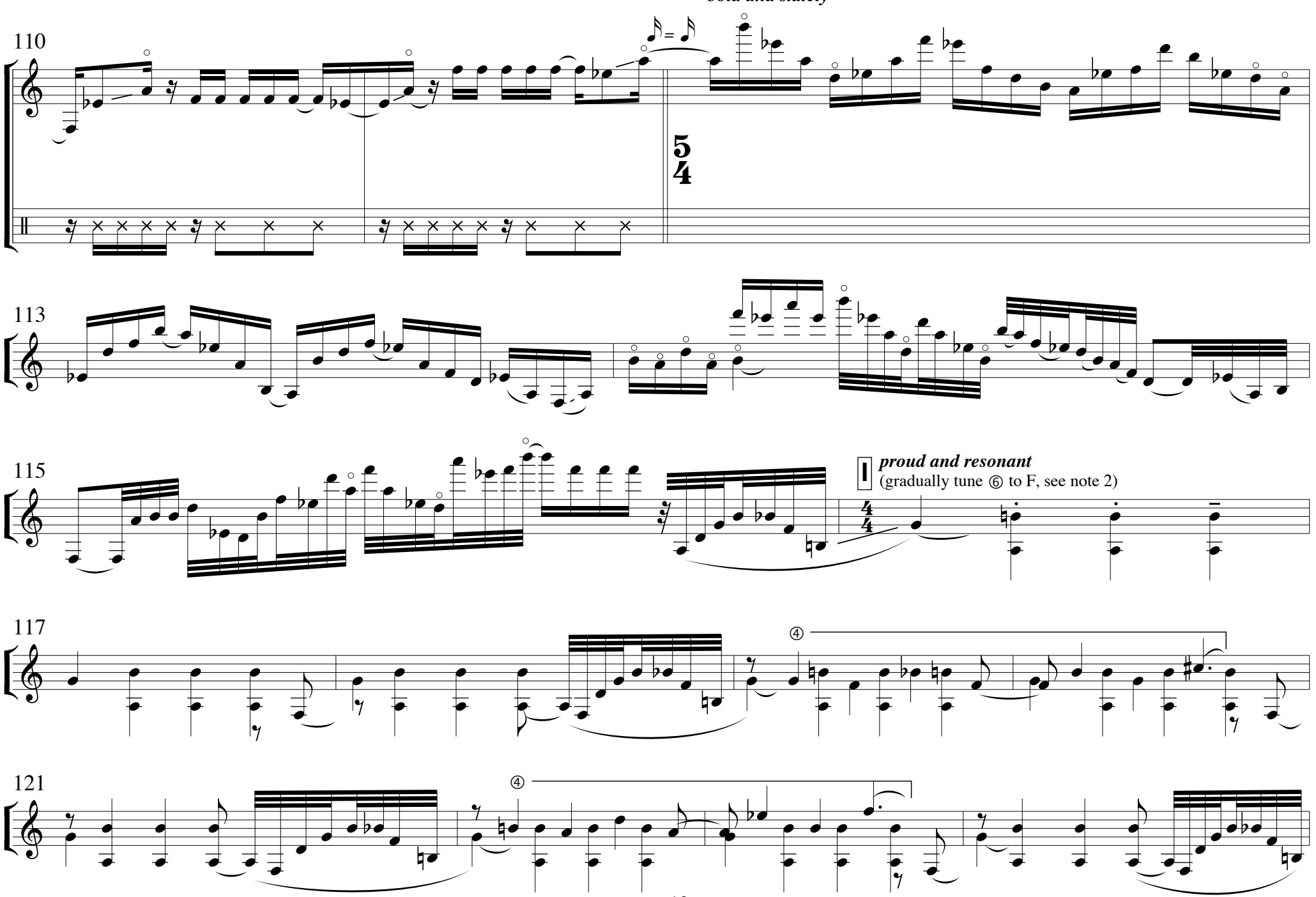

6
=
proud and resonant
normale
52
p i p i p
6
10
16
56
60
D
2
4
bongos
maraca
conga
RH pizz (see note 1)
p i
3
6

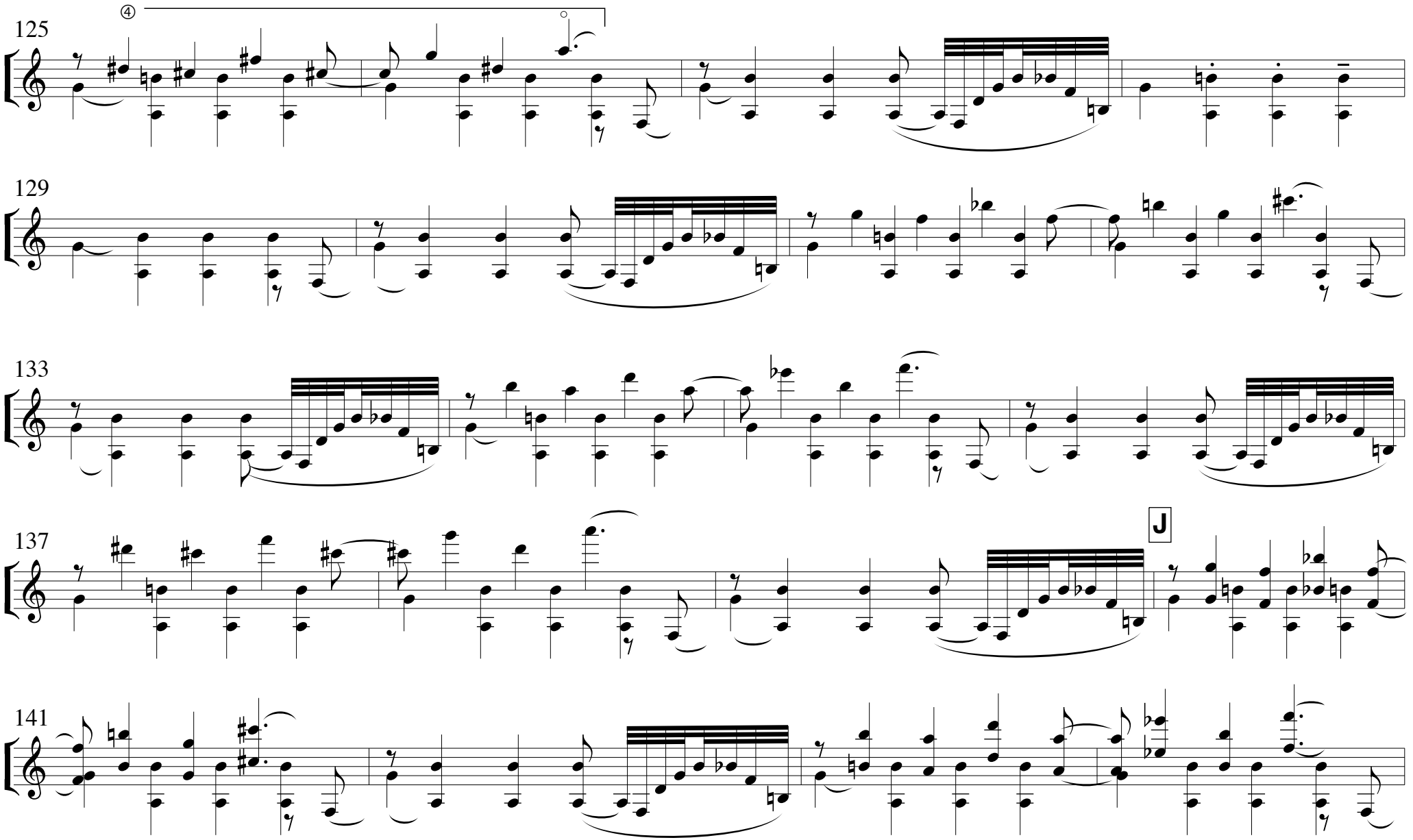
64
take medium to hard beaters
69
in anger
72
E
pressing forward
on the rim
poco a poco

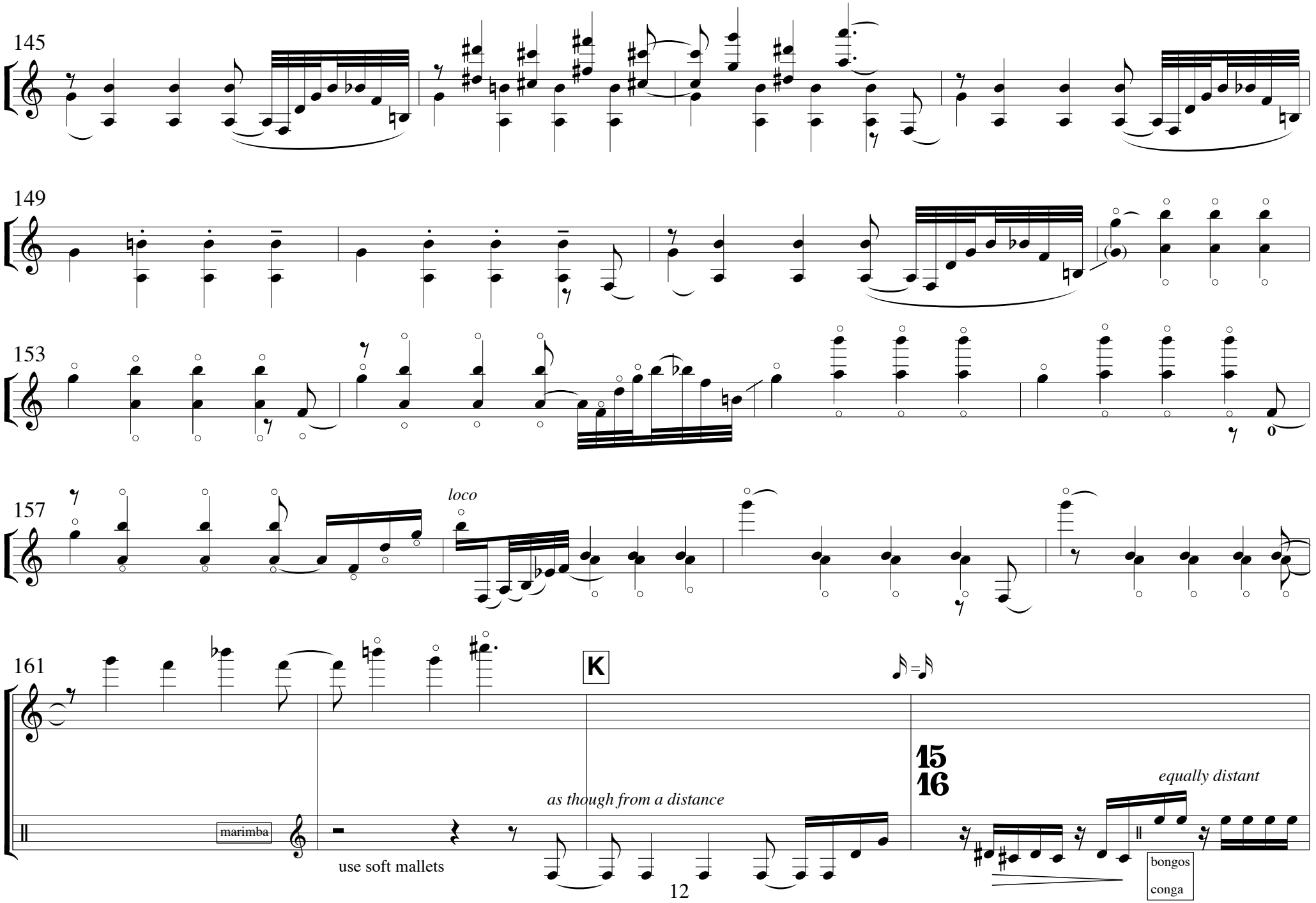

77
5
4
take claves
guiro
claves
conga
12
16
diminuendo
80
F
heroic
12
16
as though from a distance
83
②
③

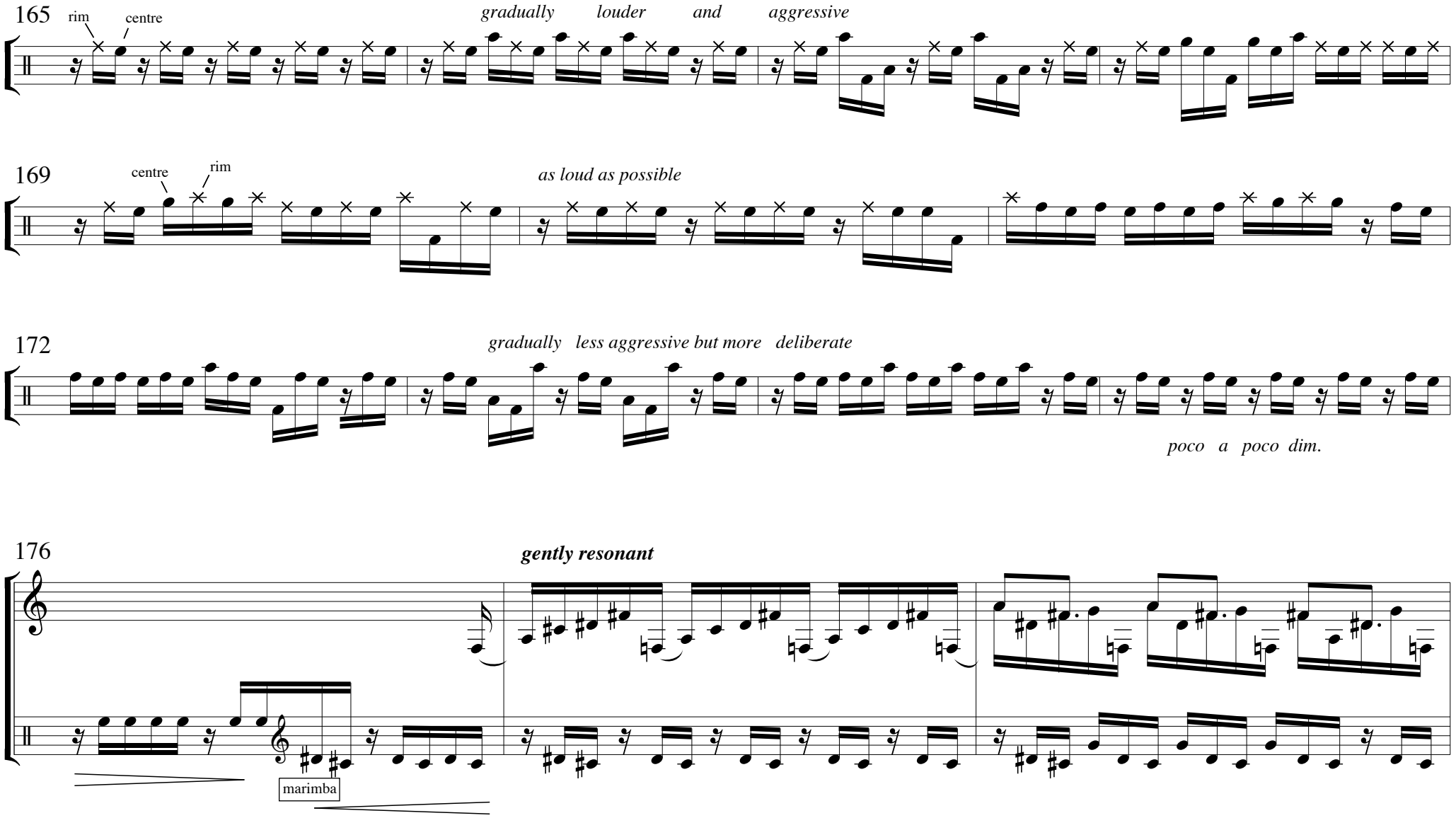

86
G
sul pont e sotto voce
The Weder-Geat lord boldly hastened, biding never answer at all: the ocean floods closed o'er the hero. Long while of the day
vicious
gradually closer and closer
use claves as sticks
90
pizz.
fled ere he felt the floor of the sea. Soon found the fiend who the flood-domain sword-hungry held these hundred winters,
suddenly distant
94
vicious and aggressive
greedy and grim, that some guest from above, some man, was raiding her monster-realm. She grasped out for him with grisly claws,
gradually closer and closer


extremely vicious
98
and the warrior seized; yet scathed she not his body hale; the breastplate hindered, as she strove to shatter the sark of war, the linked harness, with loathsome hand.
102
poco a poco
suddenly distant
106
H
RH pizz (see note 1)
diminuendo
tasto


bold and stately
110
5
4
113
115
I
proud and resonant
(gradually tune ⑥ to F, see note 2)
4
4
117
④
121
④


125
④
129
133
137
J
141


145
149
153
157
loco
161
K
15
16
as though from a distance
equally distant
marimba
use soft mallets
bongos
conga

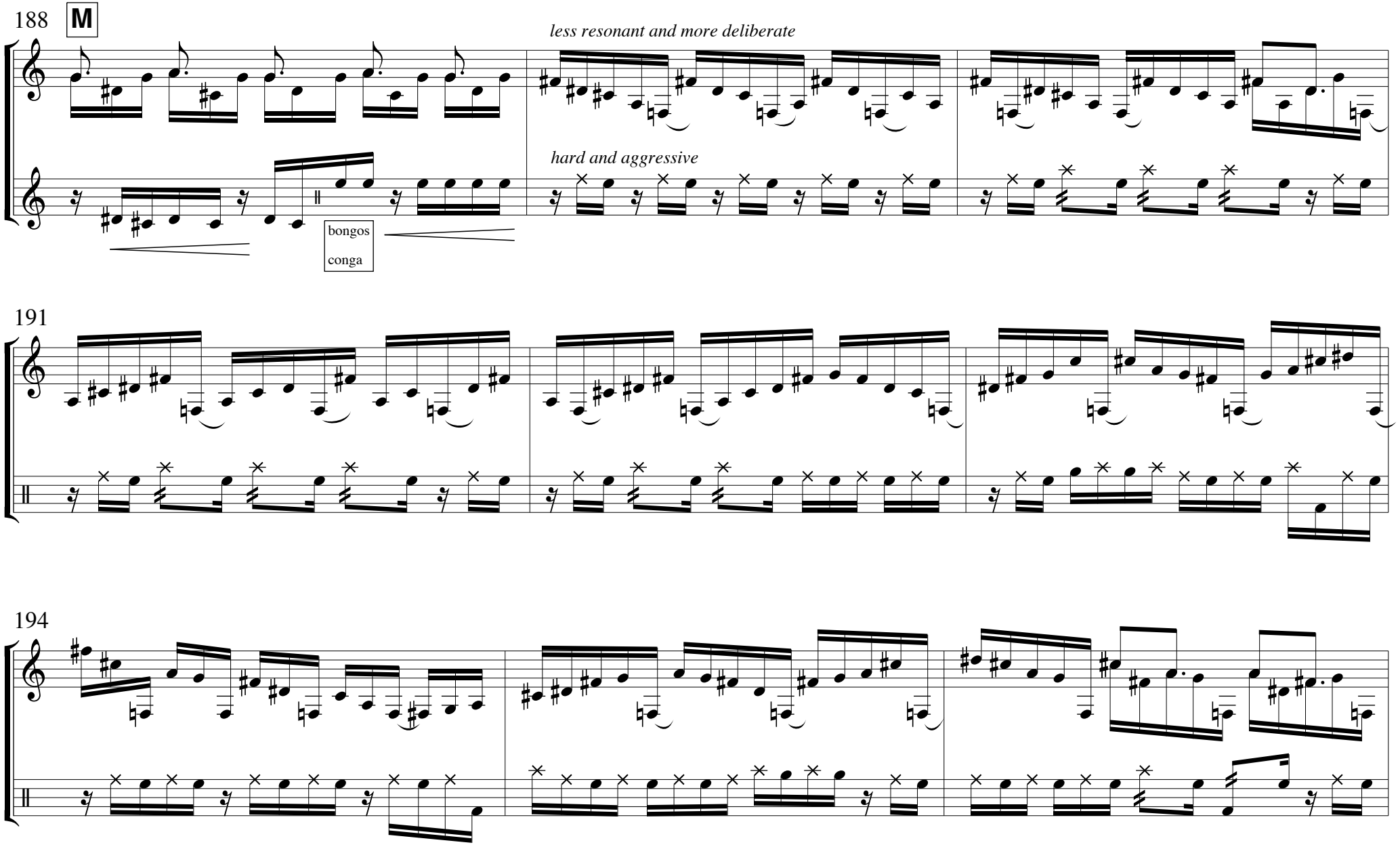

165
rim
centre
gradually louder and aggressive
169
centre
rim
as loud as possible
172
gradually less aggressive but more deliberate
poco a poco dim.
176
gently resonant
marimba

179

Tis time that I fare from you. Father Almighty in grace and mercy guard you well, safe in your seekings. Seaward I go, 'gainst hostile warriors hold my watch.

182

185


188
M
less resonant and more deliberate
hard and aggressive
bongos
conga
191
194

197

200 **N** *gently resonant*

flowing

marimba

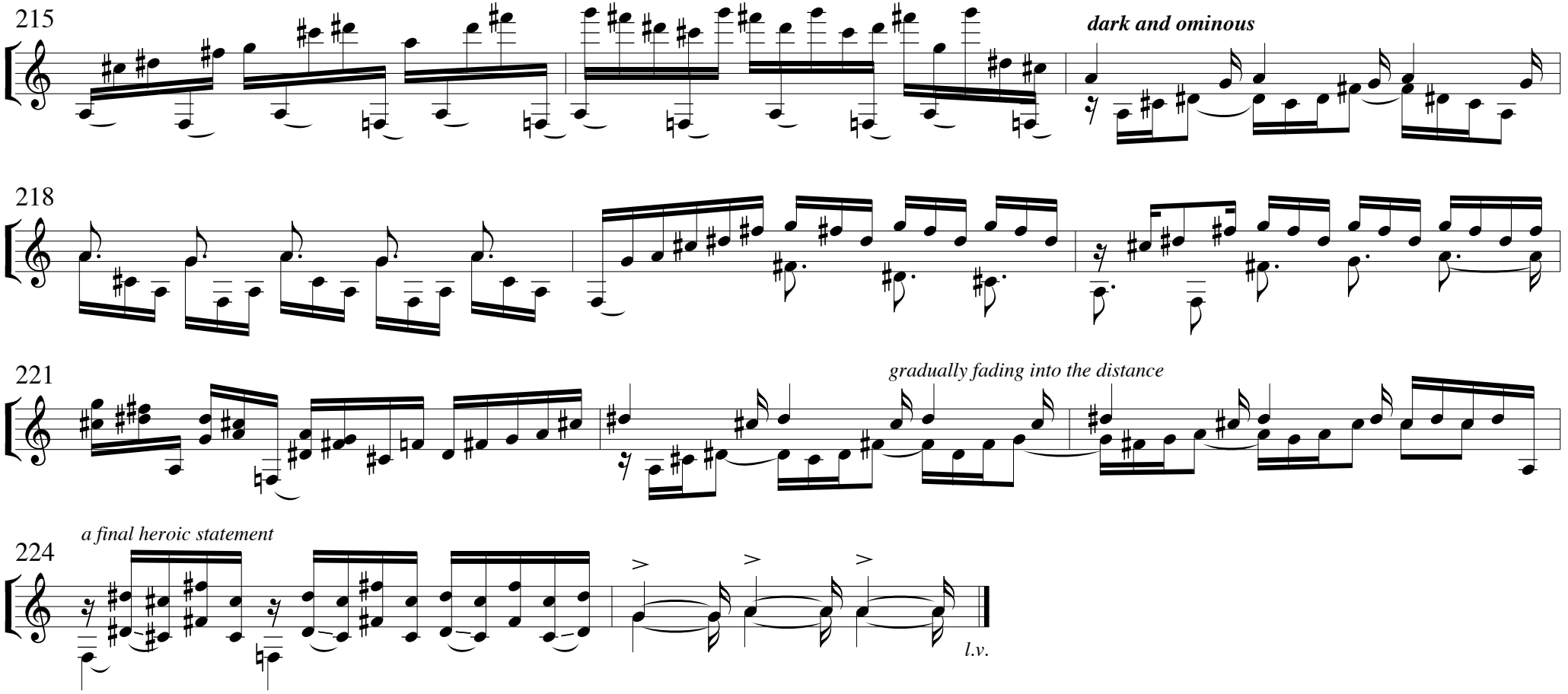
203

206

209

212

O *bold but resigned*



... he was the mildest, the most loved, the most kind to his own, and most worthy of praise.