TRIO

from TOUCHED BY MACHINE?

for violin, clarinet and piano

Clarinet in A

Nigel Morgan

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ISMN 979-0-57043-056-7 (Vn & Cl parts)
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About the piece

Between 1988 and 1991 Nigel Morgan created a sequence of four works, DUO (bass trombone and percussion), TRIO (violin, clarinet and piano), QUARTET (string quartet) and EDGE (wind quartet). These pieces, forming a CD-length concert called *TOUCHED BY MACHINE?*[1], were part of a sustained project to explore computer-assisted composition using the tools of the MIDI studio.

MIDI systems tend to encourage interaction with real-time processes: recording, improvisation, multi-tracking, complex layering, even sequencing, ordering and editing. However, the major factor of the composition act the composer wished to explore in *TOUCHED BY MACHINE?* was this new environment's support for pre-composition: the considered creation and organization of composition material; working off-line rather than on-line. This is nowhere more intensively investigated than in the TRIO for violin, clarinet and piano.

TRIO uses as its composition environment a component of the music sequencing software KCS (Keyboard Controlled Sequencer) created by Dr Emile Tobenfeld in 1985. This component, known as PVG (Programmable Variations Generator), was probably the first menu-driven algorithmic generator and editor commercially available that did not require any specialist knowledge of computer languages. In many aspects its design enabled the composer to explore quite elaborate 'what-ifs' in a multi-part composition. Whole chains of edits, processes, and transformations were possible to execute simultaneously, taking in conventional musical devices such as transposition and inversion as well as more novel procedures such as the application of Gaussian distribution and probability curves to musical parameters.

In composing TRIO the whole mechanism of PVG was brought into play. The opening section explores the variation mechanism itself, the middle section focuses on transformation and the ending celebrates the morphing process where one musical 'state' is sequentially transformed into another. The entire composition is derived from the opening arpeggio in the piano part.

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[1] This title comes from an article by Stephen Travis Pope called *Touched by Machine? – Composition and Performance in the Digital Age*. This text presents responses from composers who were asked the following questions: How have new technologies changed the process of composition and performance? What new possibilities are aesthetically and artistically relevant? How do the new tools allow us to use musical material differently?

Computer Music Journal: vol 19. No.3. Cambridge MA. MIT Press.

Surrounding the technical aspect of TRIO there were two important elements:

The first was the composer's interest in the artist Bridget Riley, in particular her ability to engage the viewer actively in her monochrome paintings and then later her work with colour stripes. It is the viewer's position in, and movement across, the pictorial space that appears to make the image 'move' playfully. The music that makes up all the pieces in the *TOUCHED BY MACHINE?* sequence attempts something of the same, only with sound and the listener.

The second was peculiar to TRIO itself, in that the work was commissioned with funds from the Eastern Arts Association by Polly Waterfield, a violinist and educator whose professional career began in associations with the pioneers of the Early Music Movement during the 1970s. For Polly, this new work had to speak to her unique relationship with chamber music of the past where democracy of content between parts was the norm and there was plenty of interpretative space for the player to extend and enrich a composition.

Notes for Performance

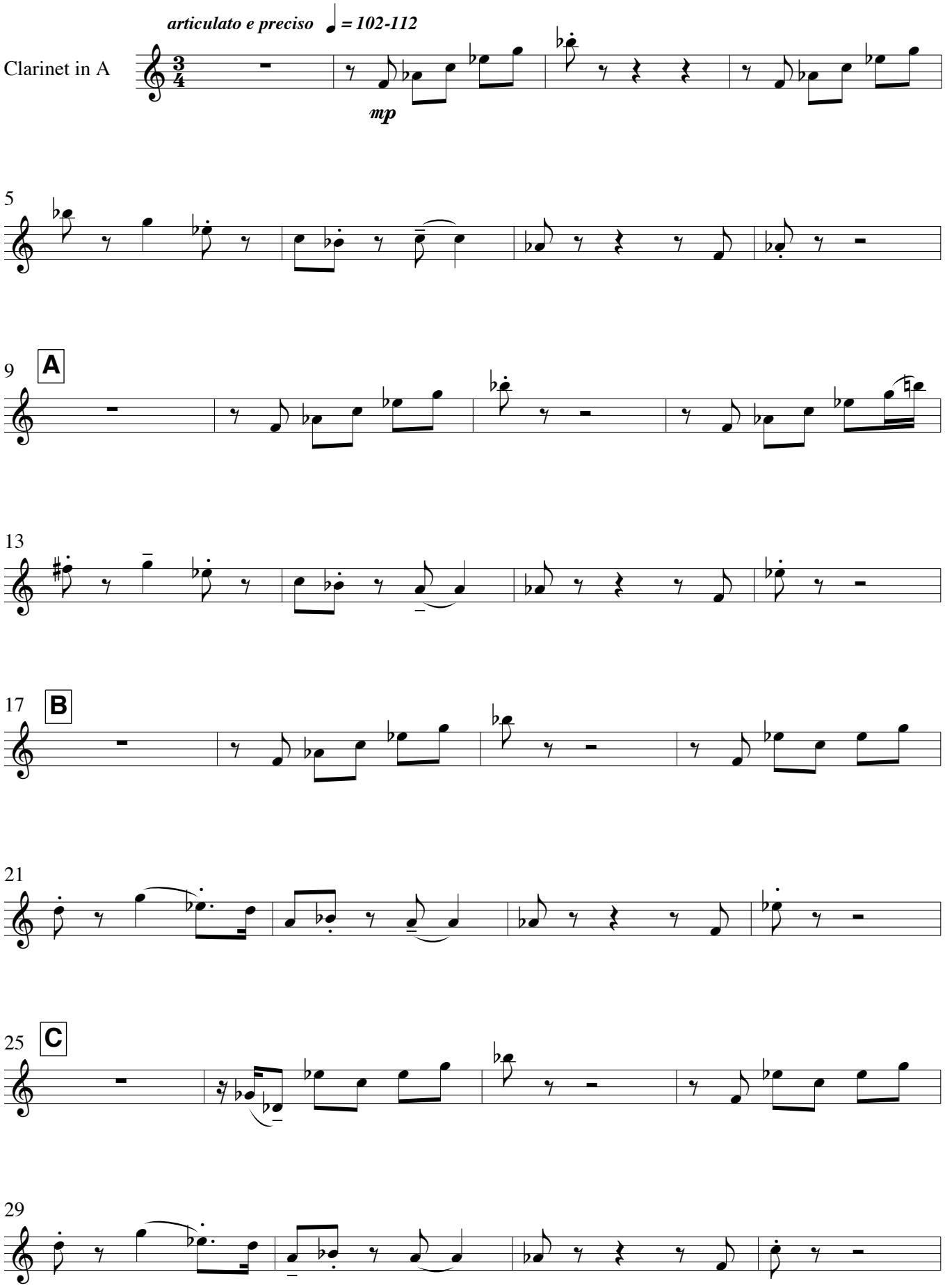
One of the prevailing ideas during the composition of this work was to create a very abstract and detached 'surface' of musical interaction between three timbrally different musical instruments. The performance articulation and sonic presentation aims to be in marked contrast to companion pieces in the repertoire for this ensemble such as Bela Bartok's *Contrasts* and Igor Stravinsky's *Soldier's Tale*. Although a simple dynamic scheme has been put in place in the score this should be regarded as a starting point for more elaborate schemes devised by the performers: the work offers many possibilities for different perspectives to be opened up by altering the balance of the ensemble in much the same way as moving around a Bridget Riley painting engenders different qualities of experience for the viewer.

The open section to letter **F** is relentlessly democratic, the piano playing only melodically with the right hand. From letter **F** to letter **L** the piano and violin trade chords, the clarinet playing arpeggio figures from within the same pitch continuum. From letter **L** it is the clarinet whose part is most intricate and contains short figures which should 'jump out of the texture'. At letter **R** it is as though a fourth instrument has joined the ensemble in the guise of the left hand of piano in the contrabass register. From here on each instrument gradually begins to occupy its own register space until at **W** these distinct registers (high violin, low clarinet, middle register right-hand piano and contrabass register left-hand piano) are rigorously maintained until **X**. From this letter until the end the instruments engage in a vigorous 'play' of hocketing and register entwining.

Performers are strongly encouraged to experiment with creating different sonic perspectives by using muting, movement within the performance area, gestures and extremes of articulation and tone.

To develop the potential of the work further three sections of the work may be repeated with instrumental parts swapping around if required and timbral devices such as tremolo being brought into play. These sections are from the beginning to **F**, from **F** to **L**, from **L** to **R**.

TRIO



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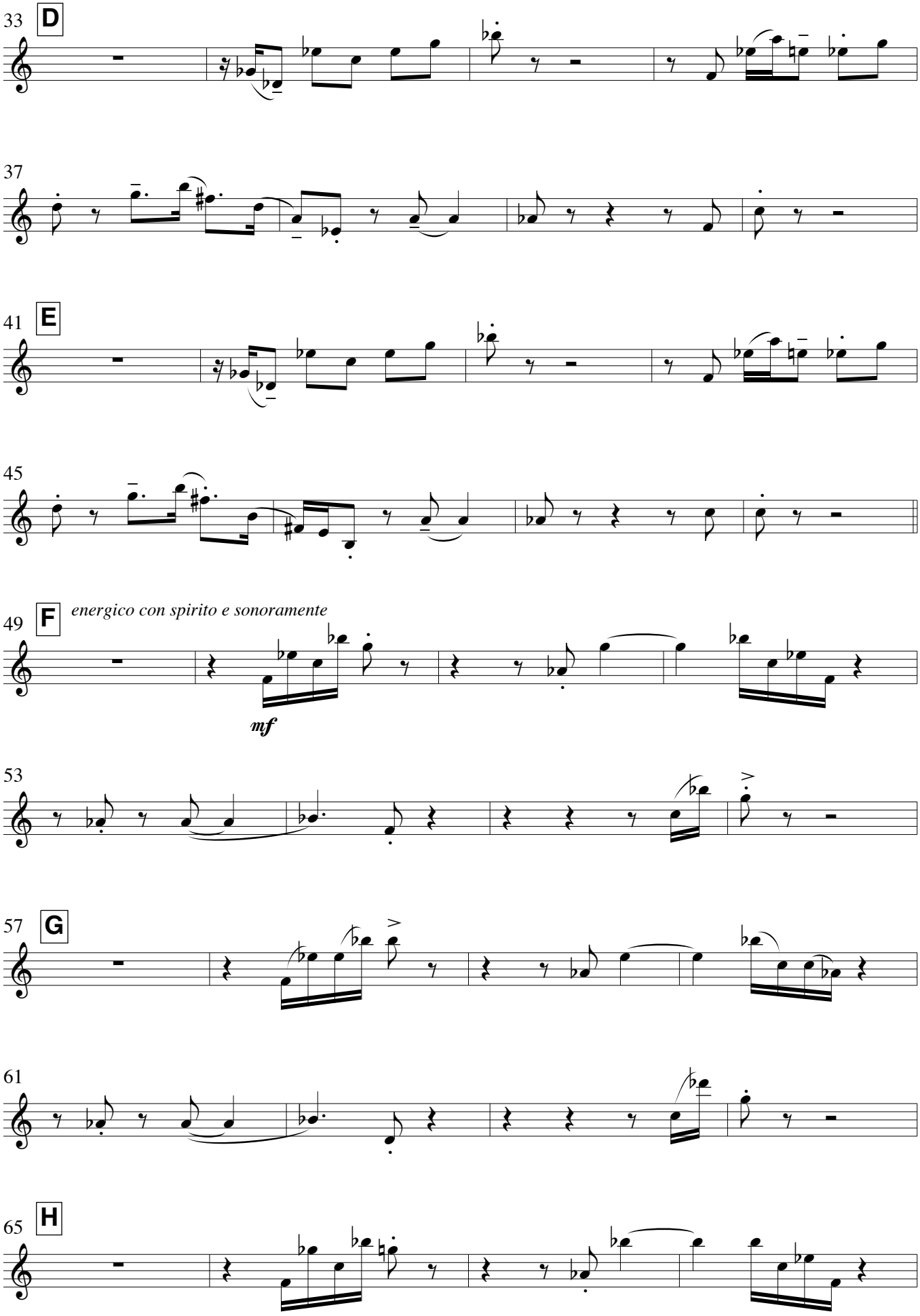
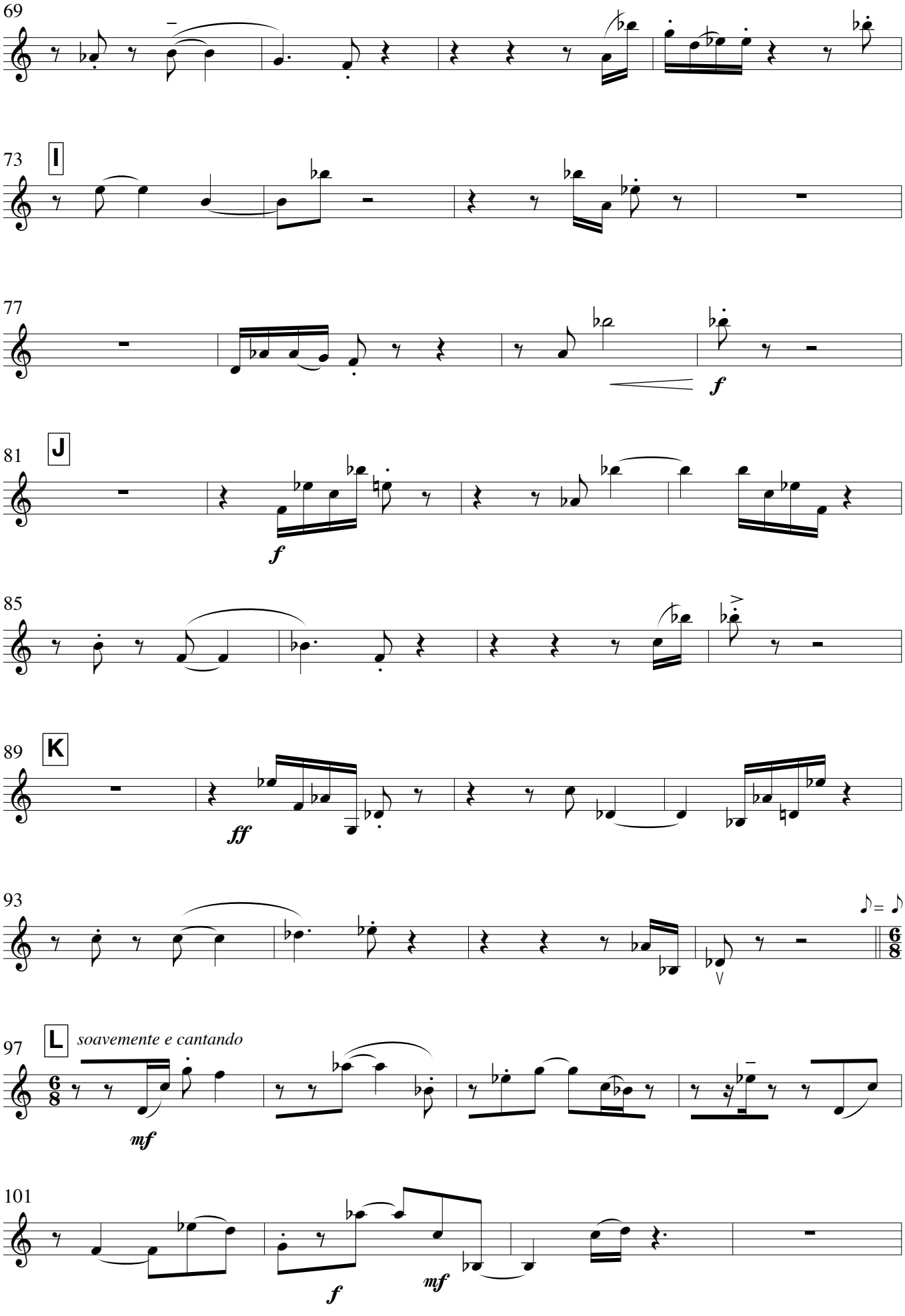
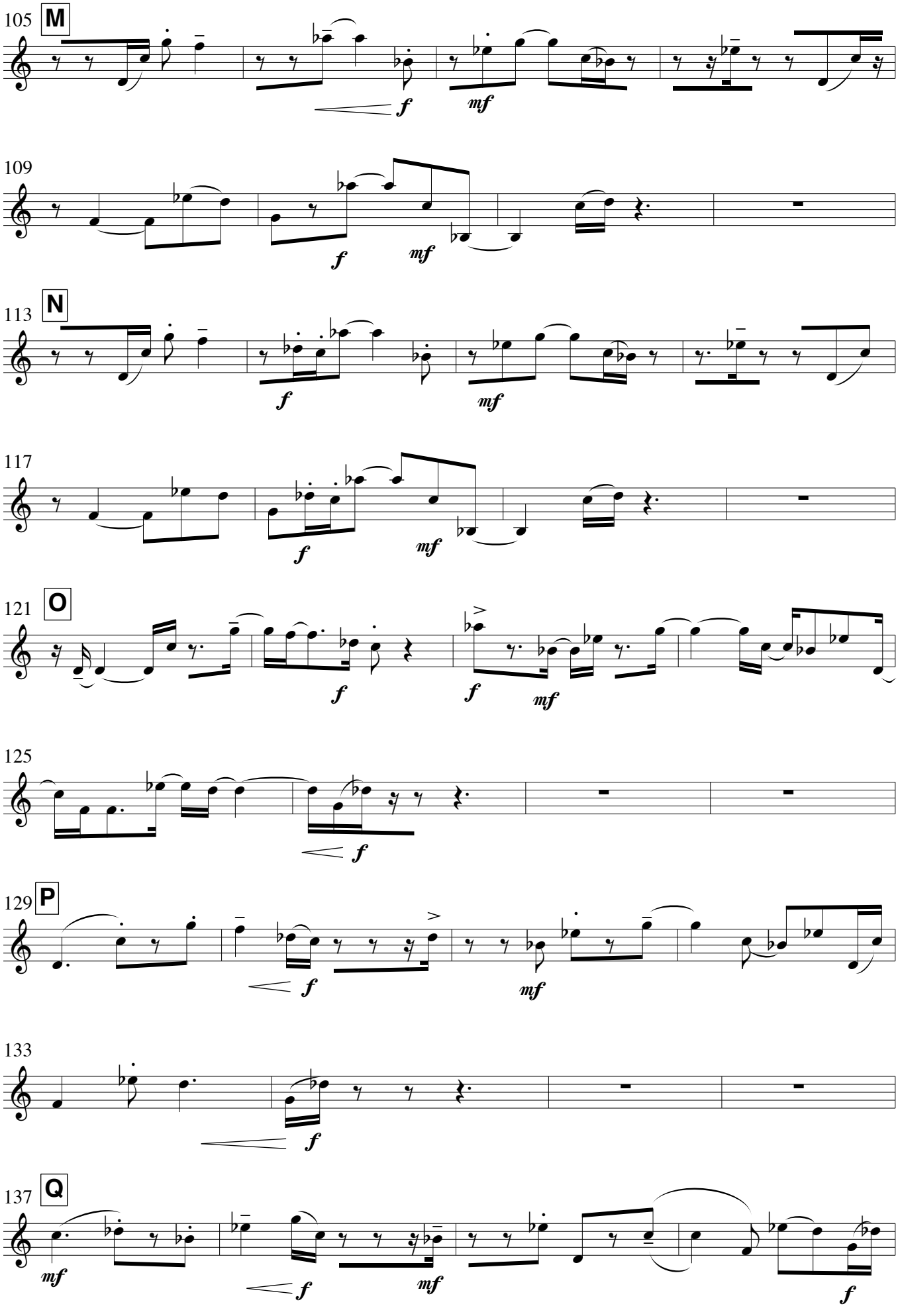
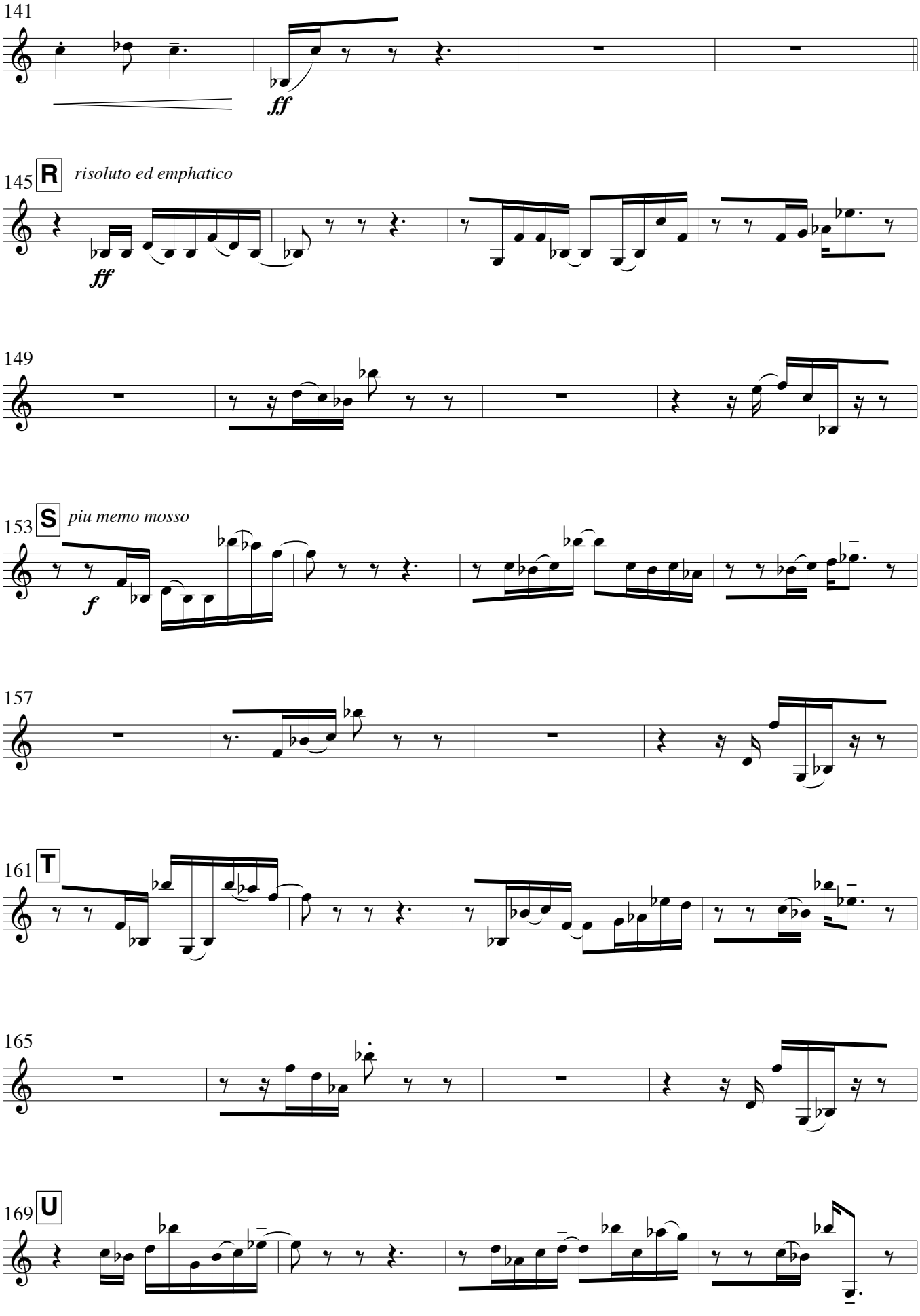
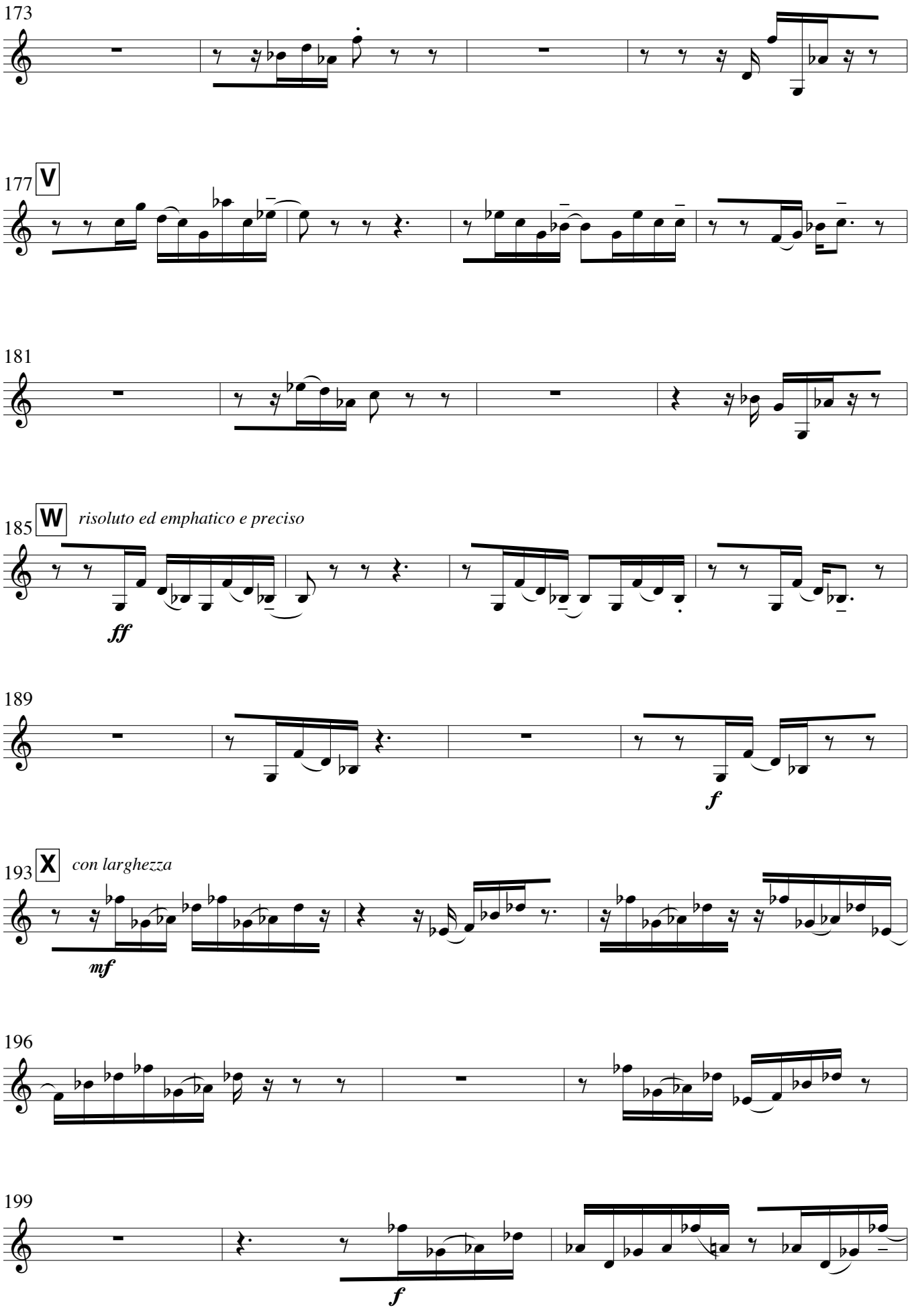
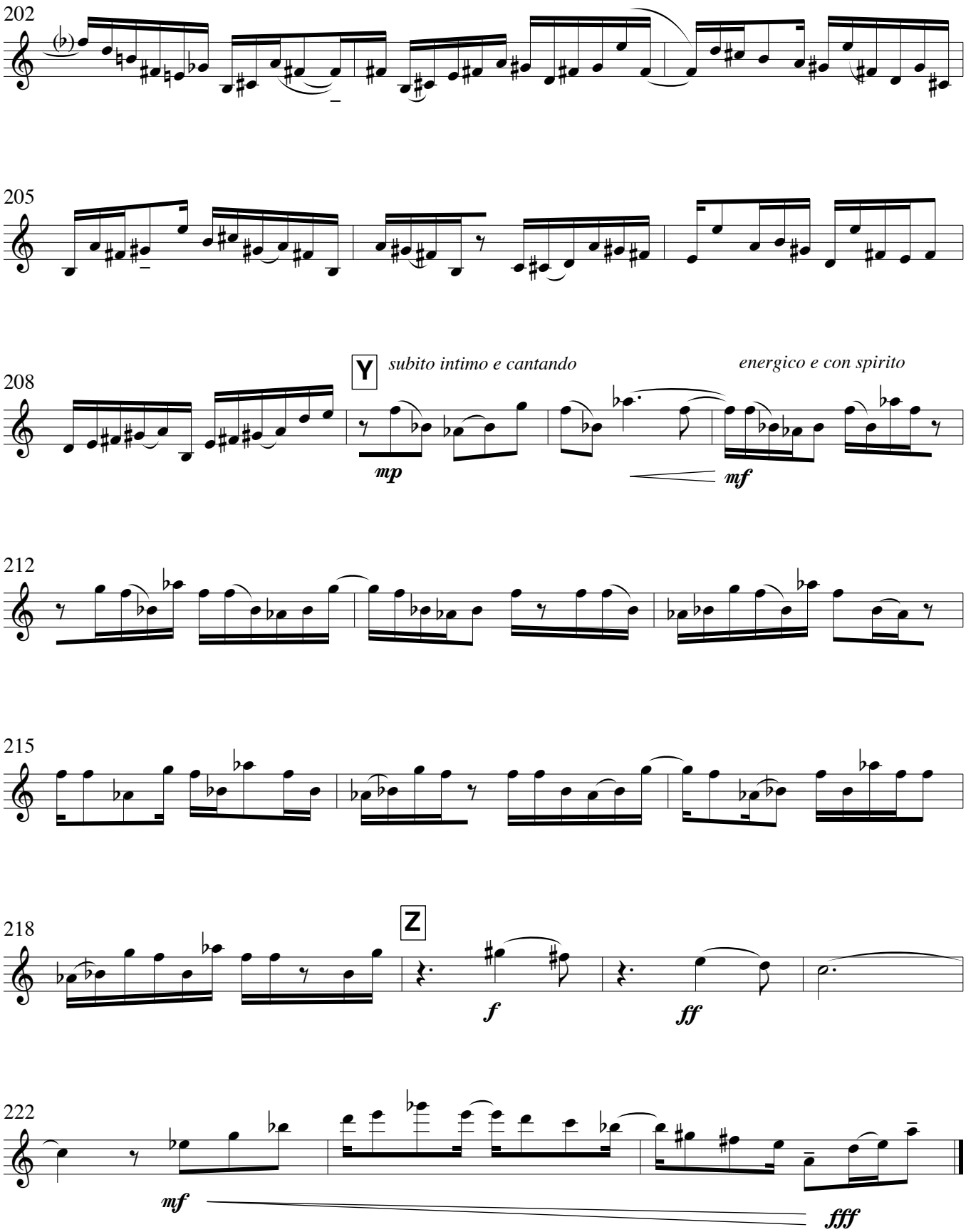

33
D
37
41
E
45
49
F
energico con spirito e sonoramente
mf
53
57
G
61
65
H


69
73
I
77
f
81
J
f
85
89
K
ff
93
97
L
soavemente e cantando
mf
101
f
mf


105
M
f
mf
109
f
mf
113
N
f
mf
117
f
mf
121
O
f
f
mf
125
f
129
P
f
mf
133
f
137
Q
mf
f
mf
f


141
ff
145
R
risoluto ed emphatico
ff
149
153
S
piu memo mosso
f
157
161
T
165
169
U


173
177
V
181
185
W
risoluto ed emphatico e preciso
ff
189
f
193
X
con larghezza
mf
196
199
f


202
205
208
Y
subito intimo e cantando
energico e con spirito
mp
mf
212
215
218
Z
f
ff
222
mf
fff