Toccata

For Solo Piano

Nigel Morgan

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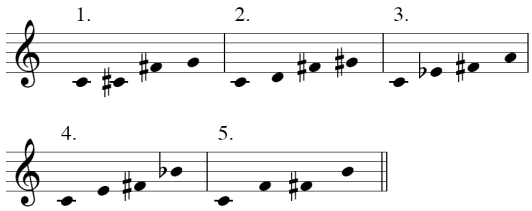
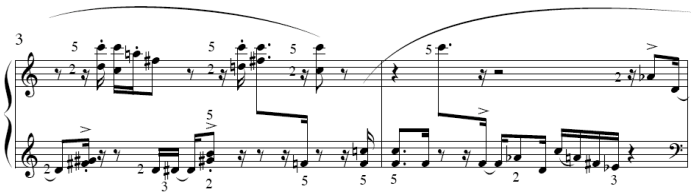
About the Music

The toccata as a musical concept has become an important feature of my musical development since 1996 when this short piece was written. The idea of music that was 'touched' but not sustained is something that continues to appeal to my thoughts about how musical performance might deliver particular kinds of musical content. Originally the word *toccata* denoted a style of keyboard composition popular in 15 and 16C Italy. Such keyboard toccatas were improvisatory preludes often played between items of vocal music. It is this kind of toccata that I have sought to reinvent for our time rather than the complex multi-sectioned compositions found in Bach's keyboard toccatas BWV 910-916.

The music of my toccata is based entirely on the patterns 1-5 found Nicholas Slonimsky's celebrated *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns*. Since it appeared in the 1950s the Thesaurus has become an indispensable resource for both jazz improvisers and composers. John Coltrane is said to have played these patterns daily. John Adams created a whole orchestral work out of the patterns in his *Slonimsky's Earbox*. Pattern 1-5 are found in the section titled Tritone Progression: Equal Division of One Octave into Two Part s: Interpolation of One Note.



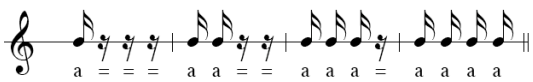
Patterns from Slonimsky's Thesaurus.



Example distribution of patterns in Toccata.

The patterns are selected, juxtaposed and reassembled into scales, chords and hybrid arpeggio figures using a computer algorithm. This algorithm pours the 'new' material into rhythmic patterns that are assembled from libraries of 4-bit and 8-bit binary rhythmic patterns. For example, a 4-bit rhythmic pattern is expressed and stored as a sequence of text: a = = =, a a = = , a a a =, a a a a and all other 4-bit

combinations of *a* and =, rather than musical symbols. This means that the patterns are essentially templates that can be filled with different rhythmic values:

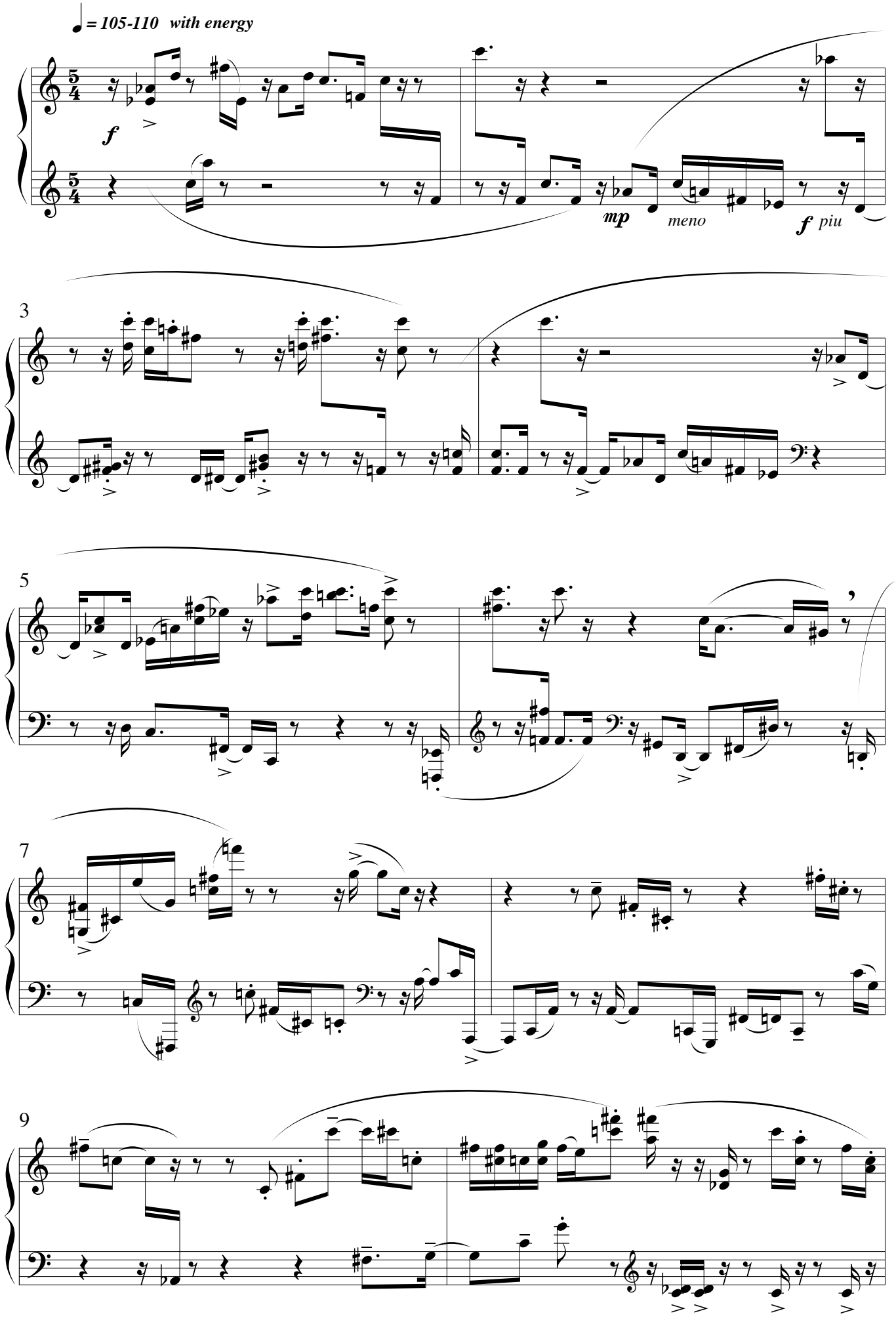


4-bit rhythmic patterns in 1/16 notes.

The toccata concept has subsequently reappeared in my music as the predominant musical form in *Schizophonia*, a large-scale choral and instrumental work written in 2001. This work has two toccata-like movements lasting some fifteen minutes each. Again, this music is derived from algorithmic computation, only in these movements the rhythmic material is based on a sung and spoken text.

Toccata was written for the pianist Joanna MacGregor during her period as artist-in-residence at Liverpool Hope University College.

Toccata for Solo Piano



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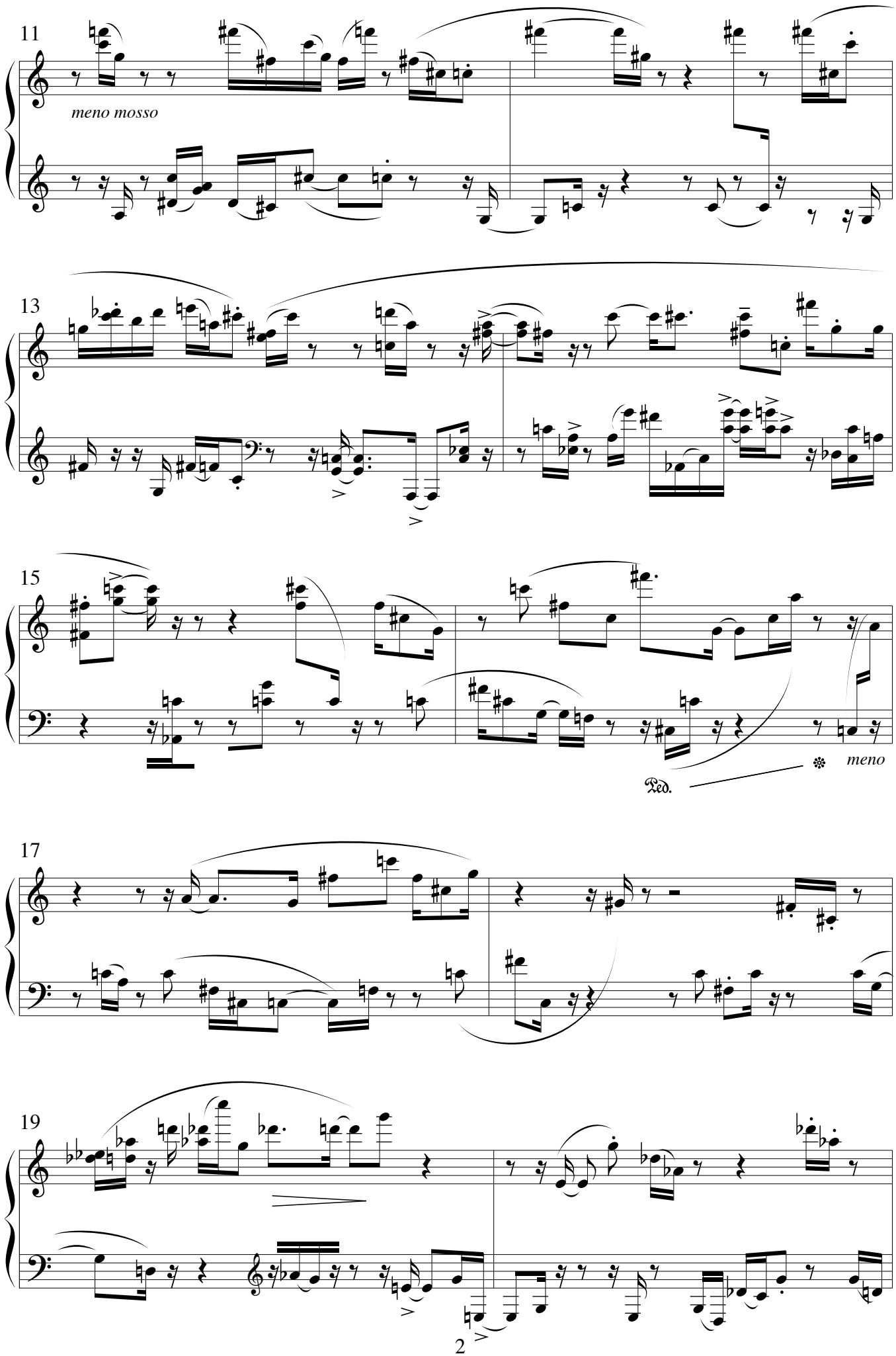
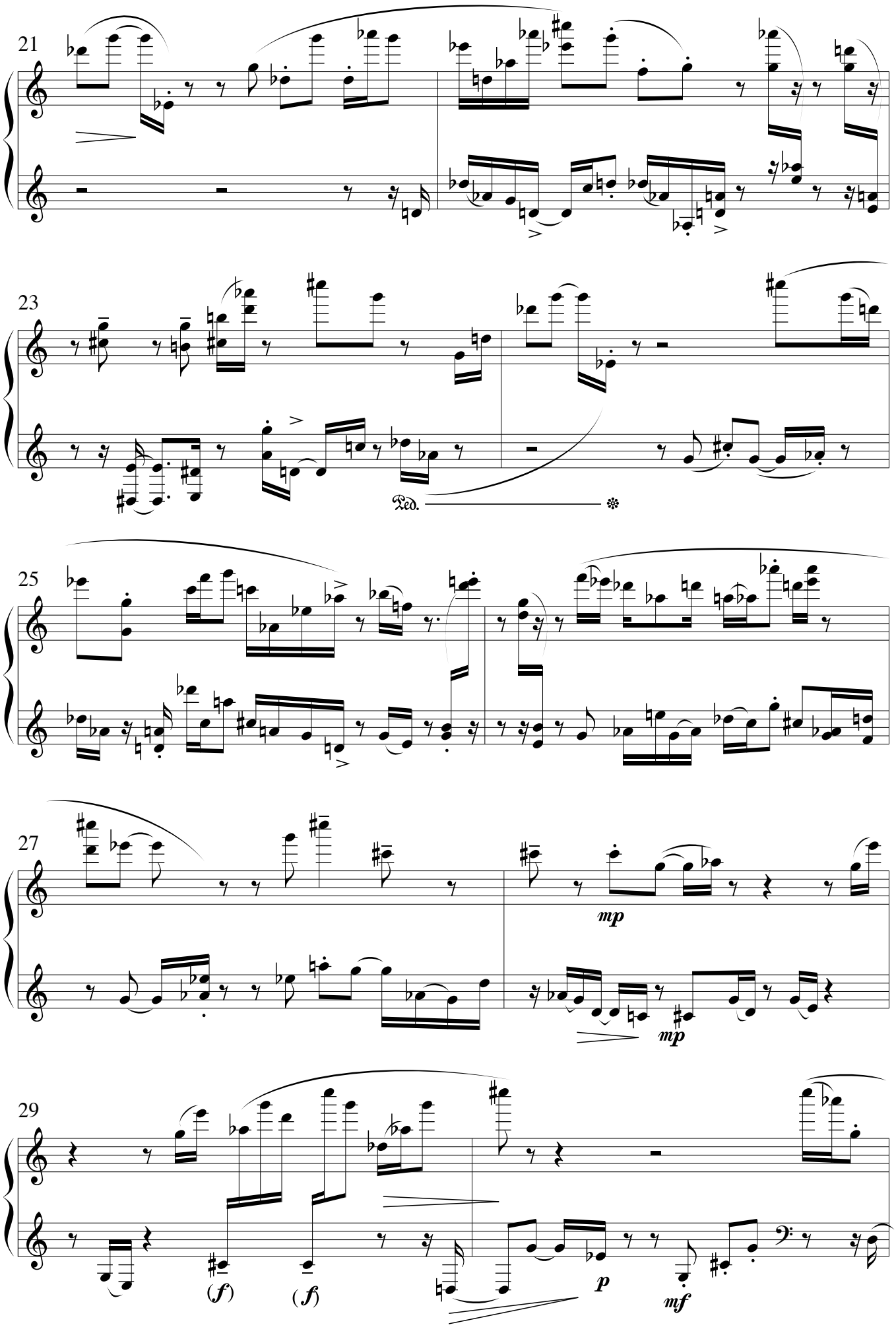
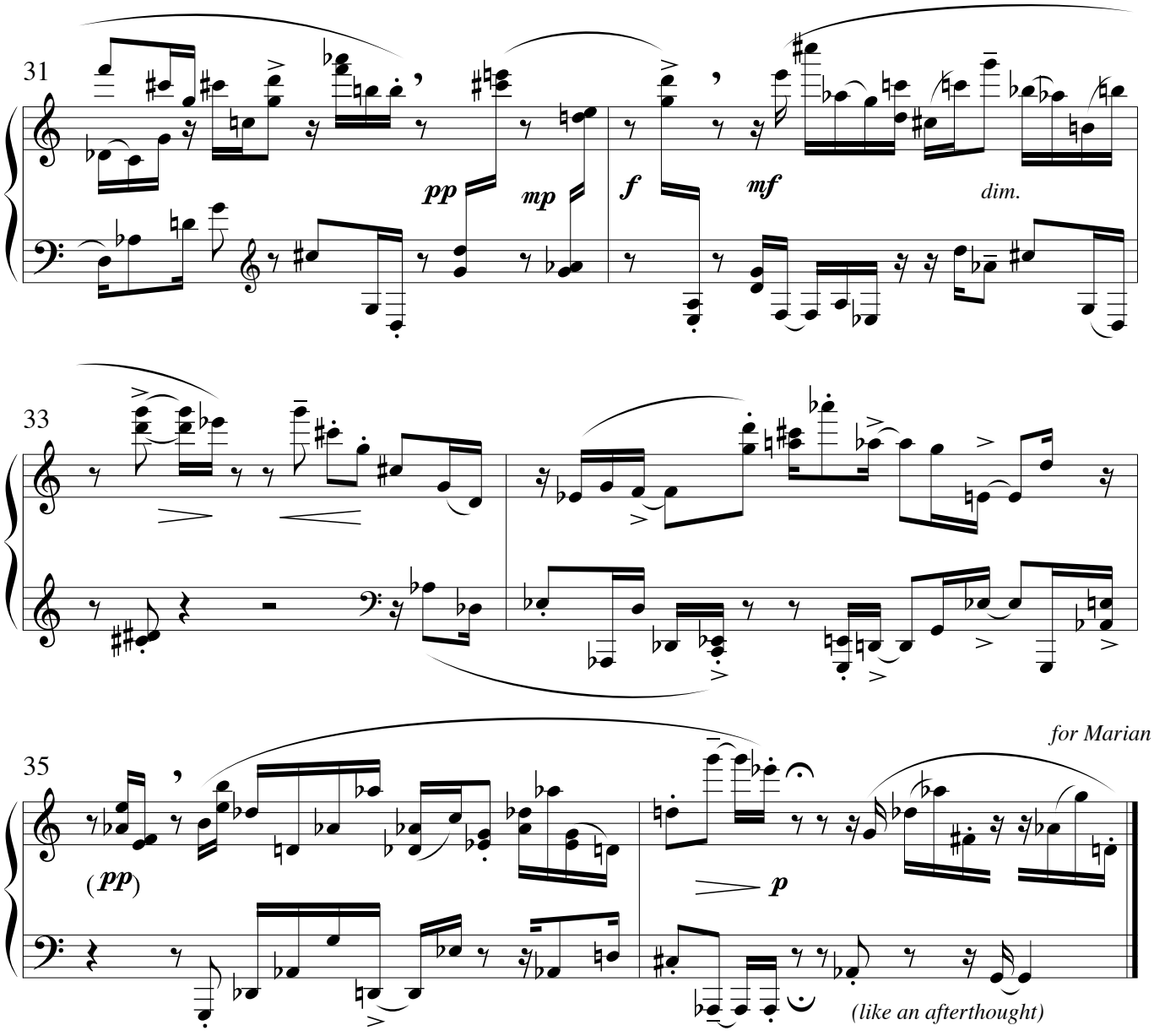

11
meno mosso
13
15
meno
Ped.
17
19


21
23
Ped.
25
27
mp
mp
29
(f)
(f)
p
mf


31
pp
mp
f
mf
dim.
33
for Marian
35
(pp)
p
(like an afterthought)