passing bells

for piano

Chris Dench

passing bells

for piano (2004/20)

passing bells: day

1 *Vigils*
2 *day*

passing bells: night

3 *night*
4 *...nox est perpetua una dormienda*

For Alex Raineri

and

in memory of Audrey Dench, died 19 January 2020

approximate duration: circa 50'—Vigils 4'; day 24'; night 16'; ...nox... 6'.

Note: **Vigils/day** (pages 1-37) and **night/...nox...** (pages 38-end)
may also be performed as separate pieces with the respective titles
passing bells: day (28') and **passing bells: night** (22')

Vigils

...hora noctis silentissima tertia
Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri, **VI**

in the third, most silent hour of the night
Sententiae Antiquae.com

day – night

The passing bells rang all day and all night...
Barbara Tuchman,
A Distant Mirror

The mottoes on old bells, other than those which were dictated by the reverential feeling of the Middle Ages, comprise instances of vanity, ignorance, and silliness, such as would hardly be expected in these matters. Sometimes a kind of moral aphorism is attempted, with more or less success.

One, very short, bids us to "Embrace trew musick".
Catholic World: Bell Gossip

...Nox...

nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux,
nox est perpetua una dormienda
Catullus 5

The sun may set and rise,
But we, contrariwise,
Sleep, after our short light,
One everlasting night.
Sir Walter Raleigh

In the Elizabethan Age, the bell was tolled at a person's passing, the "passing bell" ... it was usually the heaviest tenor-bell that was thus rung. Altogether, an Elizabethan city was clamorous with the ringing of bells of all kinds ... There were regular and long-standing customs in the ringing, a kind of language, to tell people who were passing ... for an hour on the tenor for a man, on the fourth [bell] for a woman, on the first [bell] for a child. Other customs: often nine strokes for a man, six for a woman, followed by the number of the dead person's age.
—adapted from Chapter VIII of ***The Elizabethan Renaissance: the life of the Society***, A.L Rowse, 1971

My job is to make meaning. To make meaning in a meaningless world. Ceremonies don't just fall from the sky, we make them all up.
—Grayson Perry

Program note:

Passing bells is a composite work, linking the Middle Ages with our times. Over about 50 minutes it ostensibly covers twenty-four hours in the cyclic rhythm of mediaeval life, from midnight through to midnight …and beyond. The opening section, **Vigils**, is intended to recall the quiet intensity of the Great Silence of overnight monastic Prayer Watches: the Religious earnestly craving communion with their god. That supernature is fictitious makes this yearning all the more pitiable—nothing was *ever* going to come of their prayer. **Vigils** leads directly into **day**, structured, with liberties, following the seven Prayer Hours, or Offices, of the mediaeval day, from *Lauds* at Dawn to *Compline* in the evening. Bells obsessively toll throughout the busy **day,** expressive of the permanent anxiety of coexistence with the Black Death. Whereas **Day** intersperses the bells with the frantic pursuit of the quotidian, the following **night** section presents them in a landscape of enfolding silence, amidst the terrible vacant *umbra* of the mediaeval overnight hours. As Barbara Tuchman reminds us, "the passing bells rang all day and all night…" The work ends with an extended postscript, named after Catullus: ***…nox est perpetua una dormienda***, which Raleigh rendered as 'The sun may set and rise,/ But we, contrariwise,/ Sleep, after our short light,/ One everlasting night'. After the encroaching dark **night** of the soul, this is the long sleep of oblivion: the music gradually descends into stygian emptiness. Not irrelevantly, there is a homage to Orwell in the score: "…the clocks were striking thirteen".

For all that imagery, the work is also an abstract mosaic of stitched-together material, and even the bell-sound provenance and Gregorian chant borrowings are subsumed into a carefully-controlled integrated architecture. The work is structured as a myriad of tiny capsules of experience (well, 122), some fleeting and lightweight and others of more moment—like life in general. If they cohere, it is because each cell belongs to just one of a set of affective threads: seven in **day** and seven in **night**. How you listen to it will depend on your preference: for narrative or for structural logic. …Or both, of course.

I started **passing bells** in 2004, when the events of 9/11 still hung heavily on us all. Since then an almost daily litany of atrocities has tended to blunt our sense of outrage; like so many of us, I am constantly saddened by our brutal, indifferent, and nihilistic times. As a composer I feel impotent in the face of our unkind world; clearly **passing bells** is an expression of that pessimism, albeit a tightly composed and hopefully resilient one. As the artist Grayson Perry once observed: "My job is to make meaning. To make meaning in a meaningless world". The final work on the piece was done in 2020 during the first lockdown under the COVID-19 'plague'—an eerily apposite bookending—and as I worked on the closing pages of the piece I heard the sad news that my mother, Audrey Dench, had died aged 96, and the work is now dedicated to her memory. Over December and January 2024-5 I fine-tuned the score for Alex Raineri to record, in the full glare of nascent Trumpism.

Historically, the **passing bells: night** section of this work was written for Marilyn Nonken to perform in 2004, at the request of Daryl Buckley, artistic director of ELISION. Alex Raineri asked that I finish **passing bells: day** for his December 2019 Brisbane Festival closing concert, a request I was pleased to satisfy, and the work is now also dedicated to him. **Passing bells: day** won the 2020 APRA/AMCOS Art Music Award for Work of the Year: Chamber Music. Subsequently, I drew together the entire arch of the **passing bells** structure and completed the score in 2020. Alex gave the première of this complete version of **passing bells** at the Brisbane Music Festival in December 2024, and will record the definitive score in January 2025. I now declare the whole project fulfilled.

Gregorian chant fragments freely adapted from **Usquequo Domine, oblivisceris me in finem /**
How long, O Lord, wilt thou forget me unto the end? Psalm 12/13

All information about the Church Vigils and Offices comes from **The Reckoning of Time** *(de temporibus liber secundus)*
by Bede, translated by Faith Wallis

Performance notes:

1 Accidentals only apply to the notes they immediately precede, excepting strings of repeated notes.

2 Metronomic tempi given in the score are, as so often in my music, rather abstract reflections of the architecture. Play these sections idiomatically rather than slavishly—effect is more important than exactitude—with interpretative tempo choices and a judicious hint of *rubato*.

3 Patterns of techniques—emphasising certain notes in groups, rolling chords upwards, etc.—are specifically indicated the first few times they occur, and afterwards are to be understood.

4 Many of the ostinati in the piece are slightly rhythmically displaced to resemble the asymmetries of change-ringing, and this irregularity should be brought out.

5 Emphases [–] are used to indicate slight stresses. Hard attacks [>] are used to indicate pitches that need to be brought out—context will govern the extent to which these pitches need to be *martellato*. Bracketed hard attacks [(>)] simply flag that the prevailing dynamic in which the attack occurs is quiet, and the attack is to be more a matter of tone-colour than volume.

6 A small R with an arrow (↑) immediately to its right over a beam indicates that the pitches under the arrow, or the extended broken line that follows, should all be rolled (arpeggiated) upwards extremely quickly—do not confuse this instruction with *8(va)*, which has no arrow.

7 The sign **3P** flags the use of the middle, sostenuto, pedal, to sustain the pitches indicated. Sometimes these sustained pitches are shown as held through by the use of ligatures, but not always. Pedaling is often indicated, but the shown pedaling is not mandatory—it is more a guide to pedal purpose, which is primarily to give the effect of ringing-on bell partials and should therefore not be too 'clean'. The first seven pages, in particular, should be quite 'washy', as they are meant to establish an ecclesiastical ambience. An old-style asterisk (⁎) is used with gradual pedal releases to indicate the point at which the release should be complete. UC indicates *Una Corda*.

In the final, **...nox...**, section, and occasionally elsewhere in the piece, a curved pedal release sign is used. This is not meant to be literal, but suggests a gradual, partial, pedal release that allows some filtered resonance to continue. The amount of clearance is indicated by a fraction: ¼ or ½ suggests a lesser to middling degree of clearance of resonance, whereas ¾ suggests somewhat more—the context should be the primary guide. But these are *suggestions*, only. The **...nox...** section needs to have a dreamlike, non-continuous, character with a constant ebb and flow of texture.

8 Pauses: there are four main types of pause used in this piece. Exact durations should be decided by the performer. In some cases an approximate duration in seconds has been suggested. There are also some local pauses that diverge from this pattern.

indicating a very brief suspension of activity;

indicating a relatively short hiatus;

or meaning a longer, or more emphatic, pause.

9 Clefs: occasionally a treble or bass clef appears with an 8 at the top (treble)/bottom (bass). This simply means to perform all material in that clef an octave higher/lower. The instruction is cancelled by a normal clef with LOCO above. 8va (higher or lower) is also followed by LOCO.

10 If lighting control is available then the following scheme could be adopted:

10 Highest light level, equivalent to normal house illumination.

↓

1 Lowest light level, equivalent to the only light being the pianists onstage score illumination.

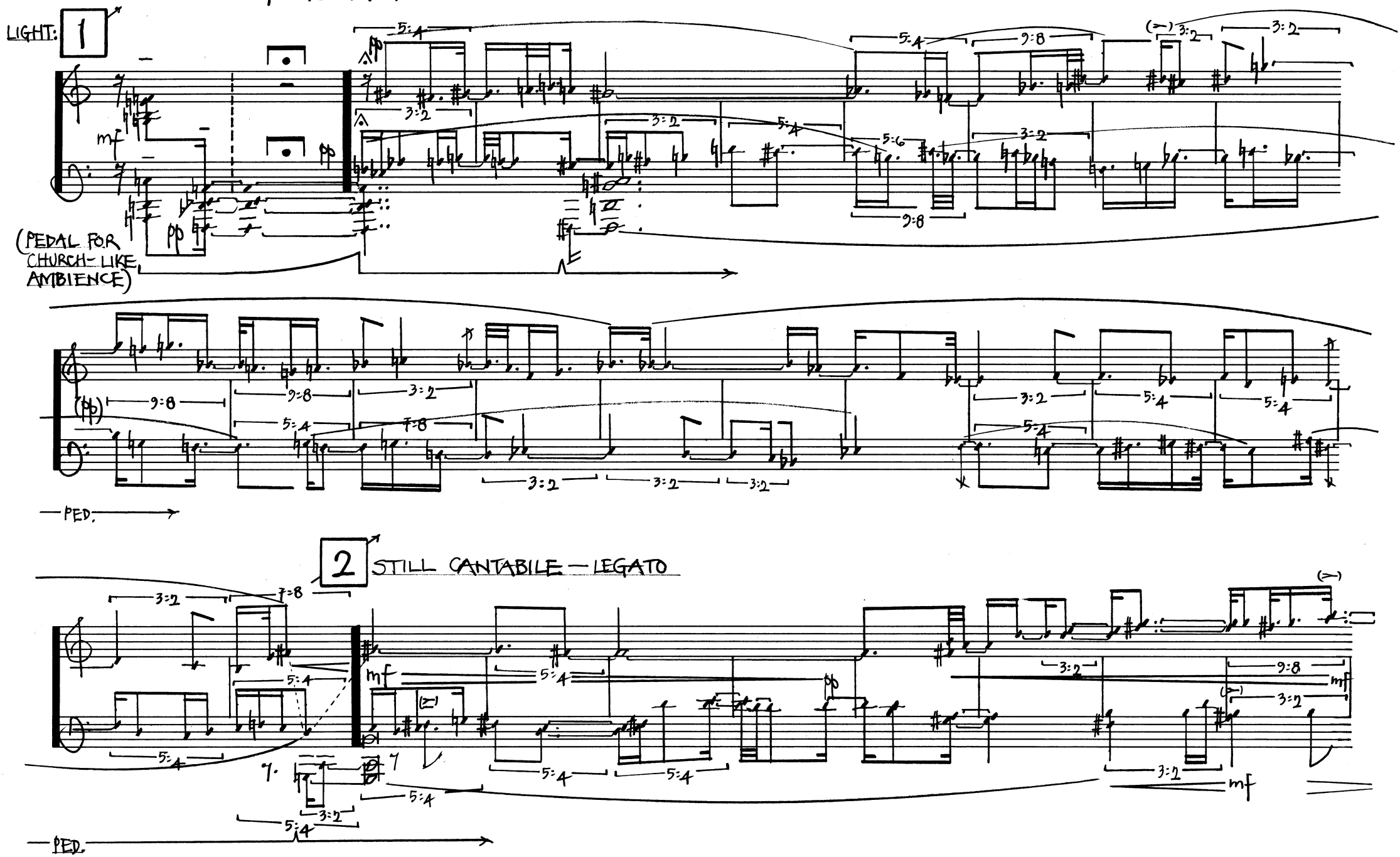
0 Lights completely off

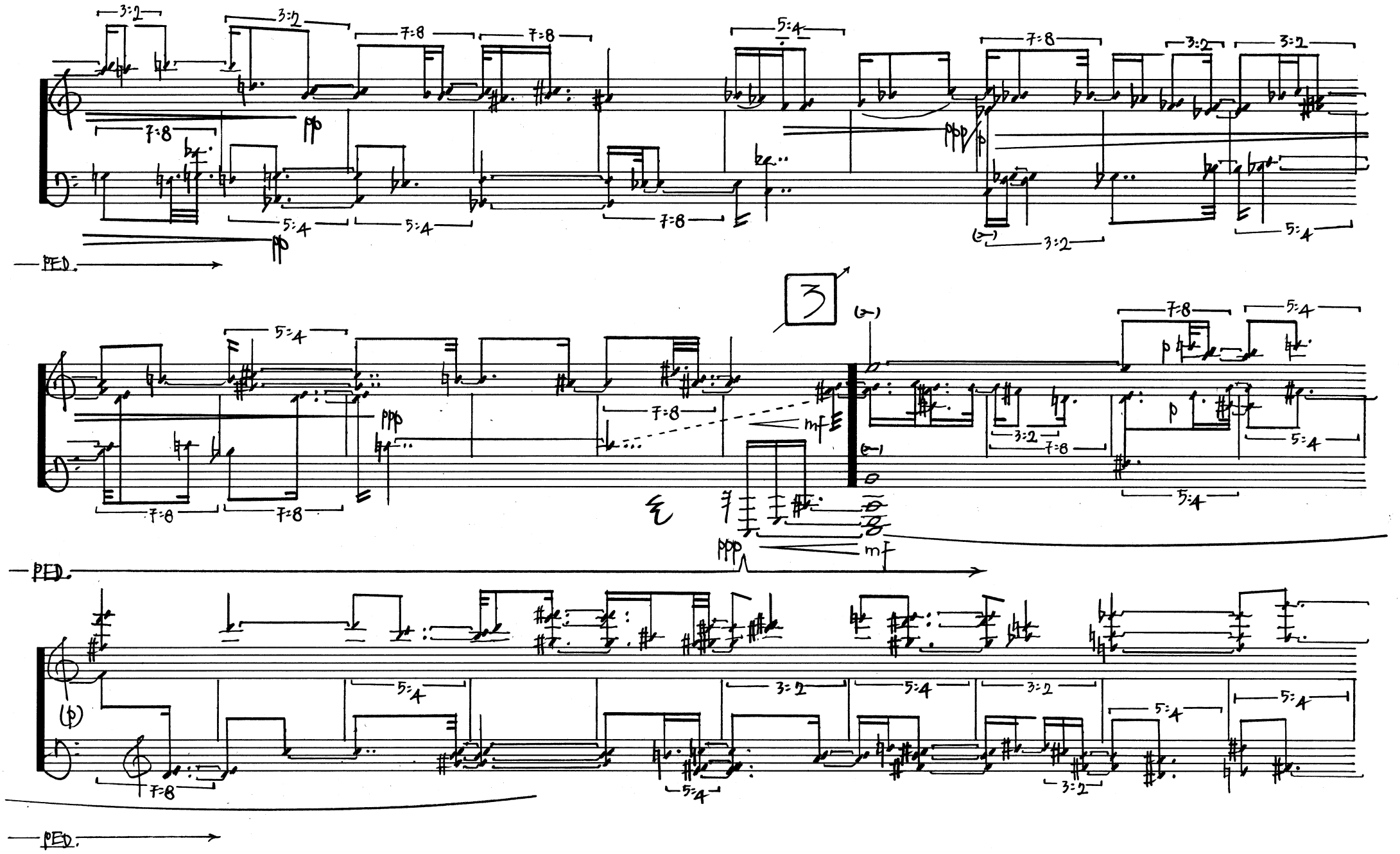
The points where the lighting levels change are marked in the score—the arrow indicates whether the illumination is increasing or decreasing, or static. The sense should be of a gradual expansion and then narrowing of horizon from and to an intimate solitude.

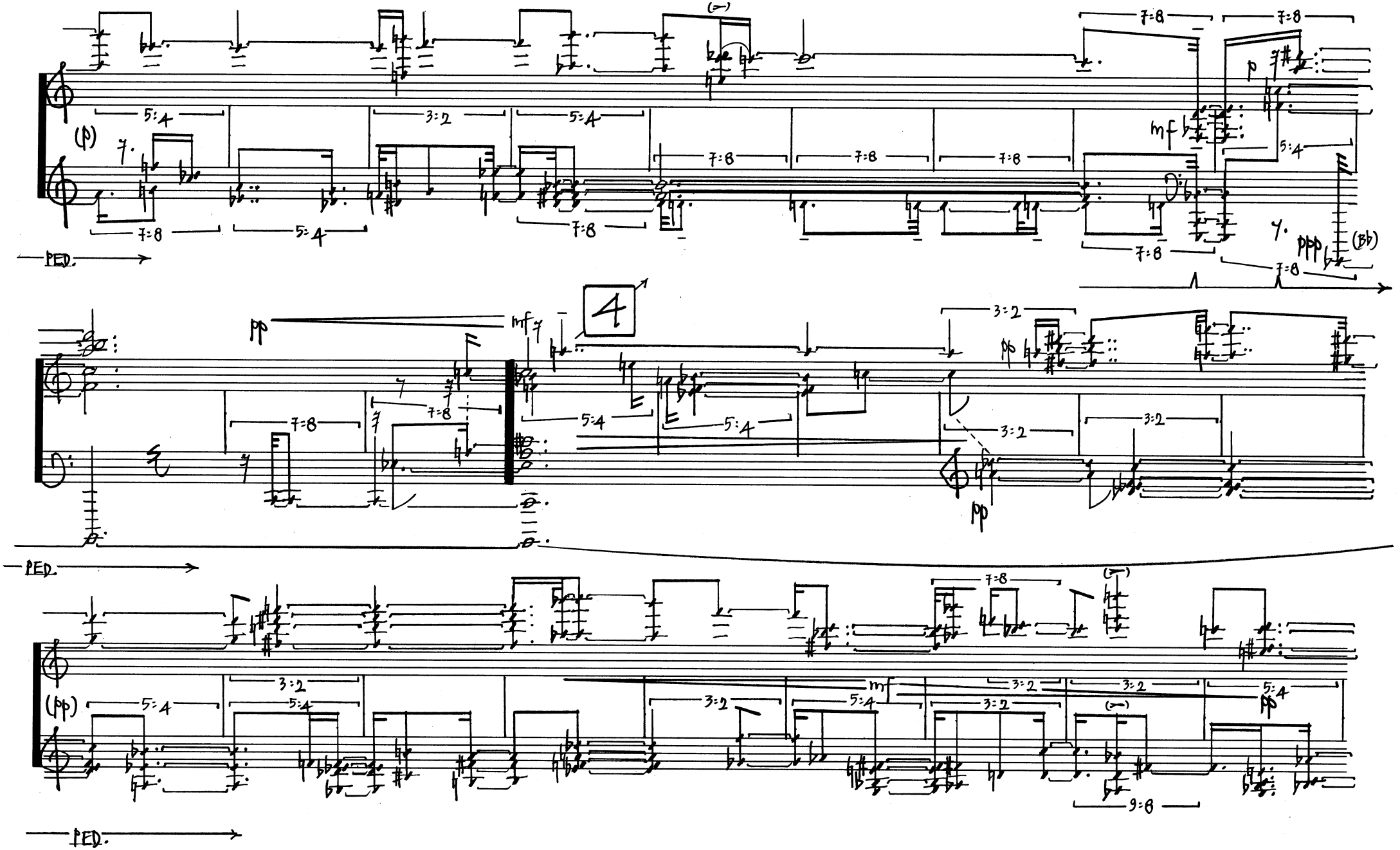
NB: for this to work, the pianist obviously must have an unobtrusive on-stage light sufficient to give adequate illumination of score and keyboard but no more. Use of a larger light is discouraged. Best would be using a tablet or iPad for the score, which would provide the minimal illumination appropriate at the darkest points.

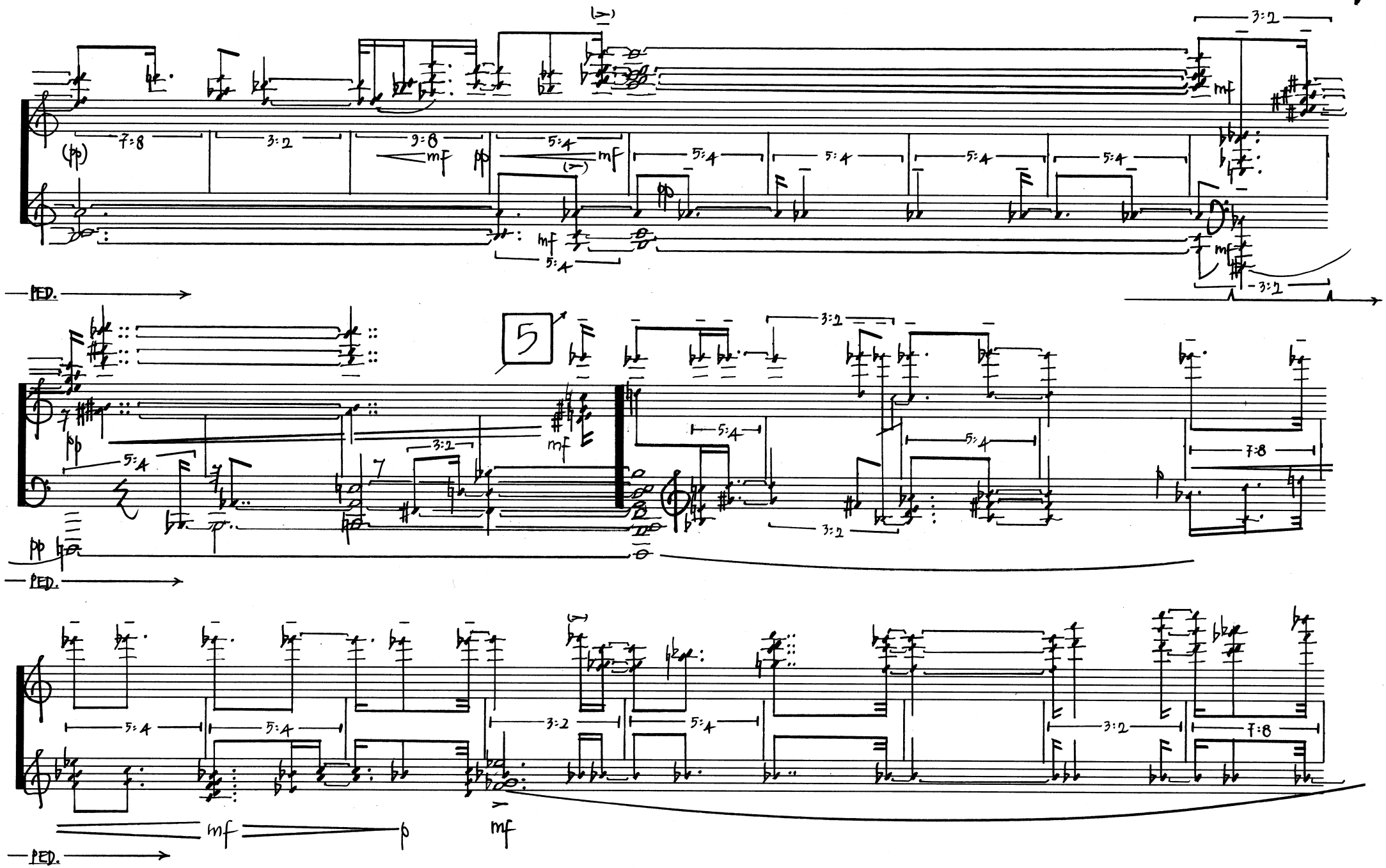
VIGILS

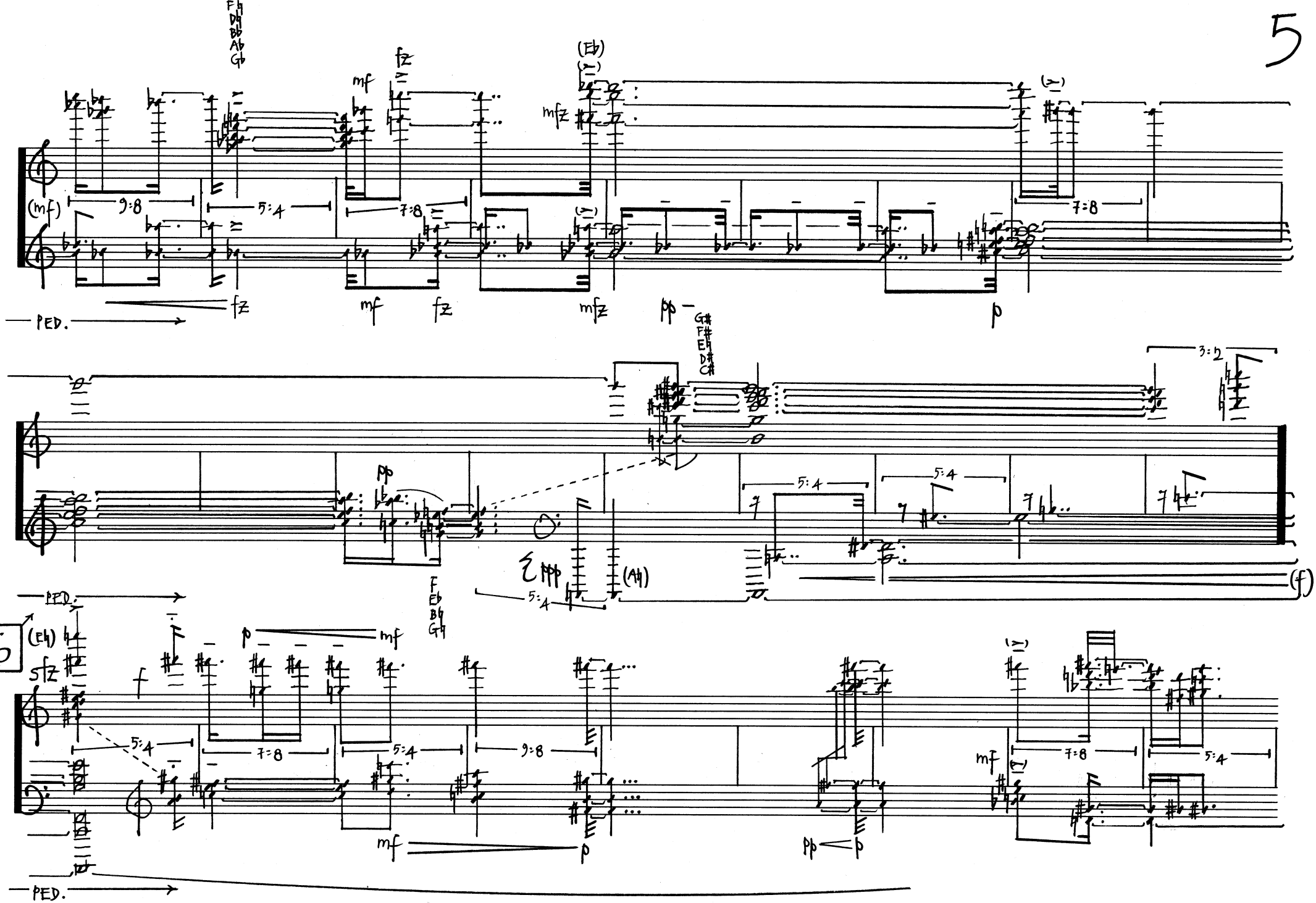
♩=46 SOMBRE, MONASTIC

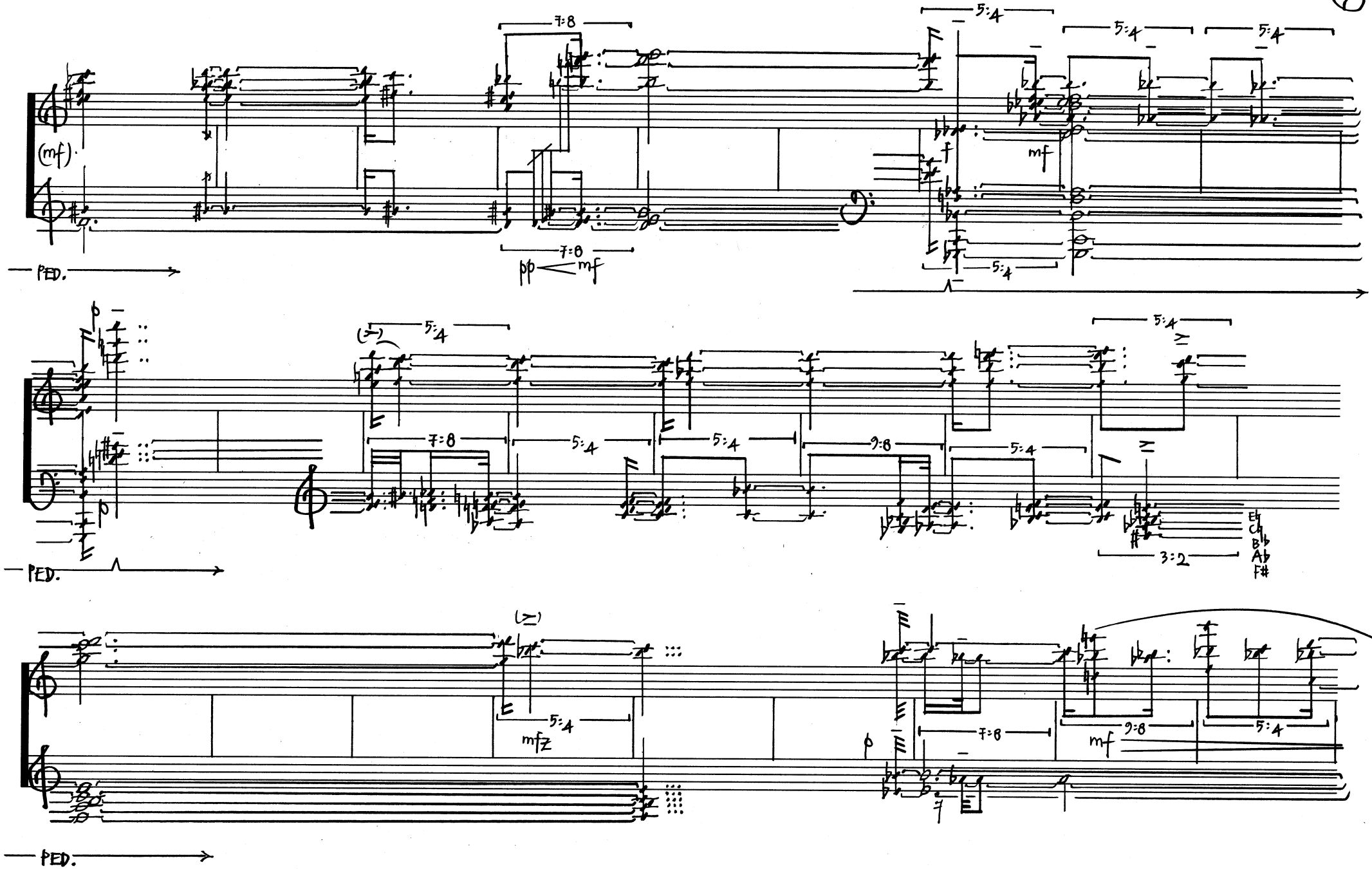



3
PED.
PED.
PED.

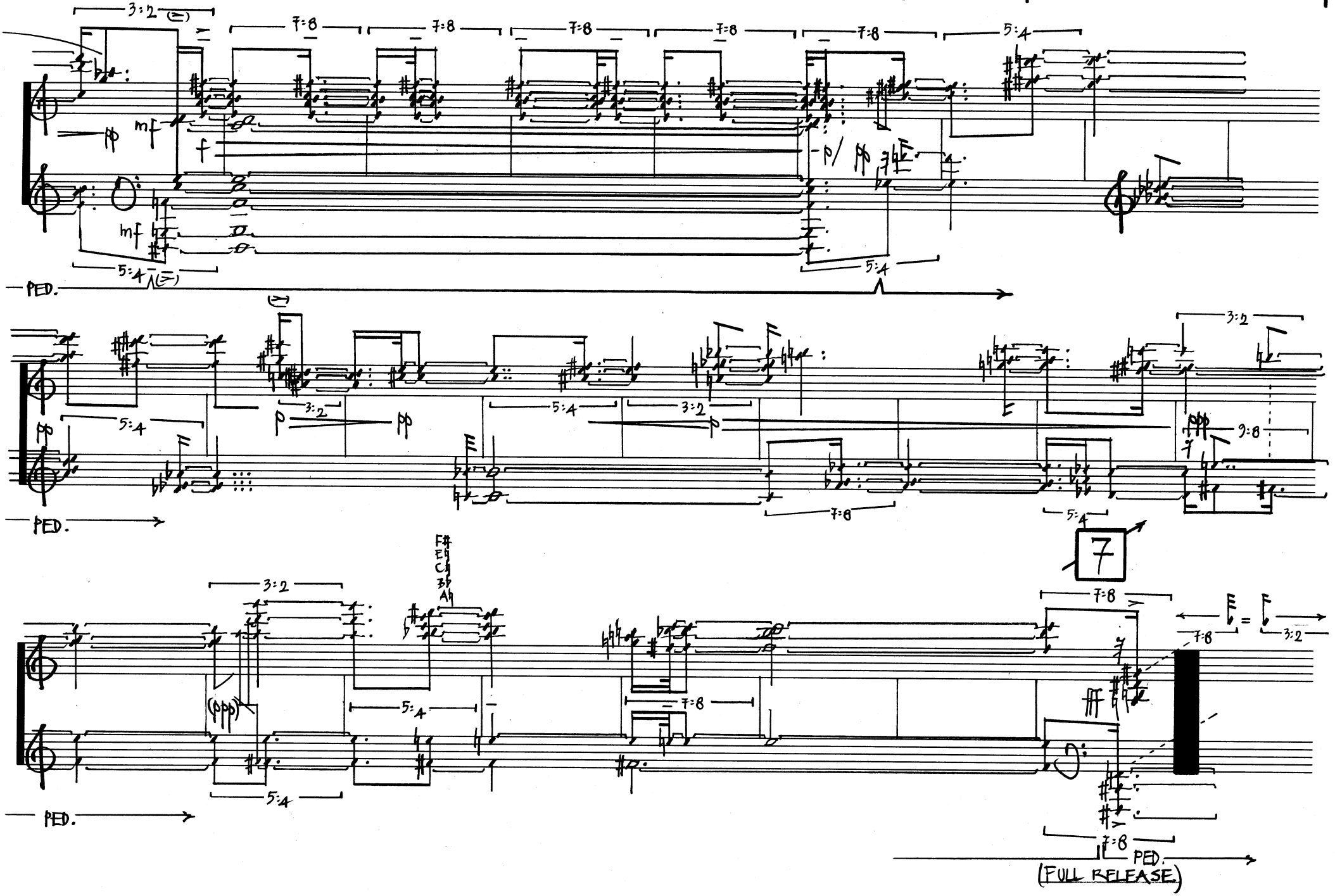

(p)
7:8
5:4
3:2
mf
p
ppp
(Bb)
PED.
pp
4
(pp)
9:8


(pp)
7:8
3:2
9:8
mf
pp
5:4
mf
5:4
5:4
5:4
5:4
3:2
mf
mf
5:4
3:2
PED.
5
3:2
pp
5:4
3:2
mf
5:4
5:4
7:8
3:2
pp
PED.
5:4
5:4
3:2
5:4
3:2
7:8
mf
p
mf
PED.


F♮ D♮ B♭ A♭ G♭
fz
mf
(E♭)
mfz
(mf)
9:8
5:4
7:8
7:8
fz
mf
fz
mfz
pp
p
PED.
G♯ F♯ E♮ D♯ C♯
3:2
pp
5:4
5:4
ppp
(A♮)
5:4
(f)
F E♭ B♮ G♮
PED.
6
(E♮)
sfz
f
p
mf
5:4
7:8
5:4
9:8
mf
p
pp
p
mf
7:8
5:4
PED.

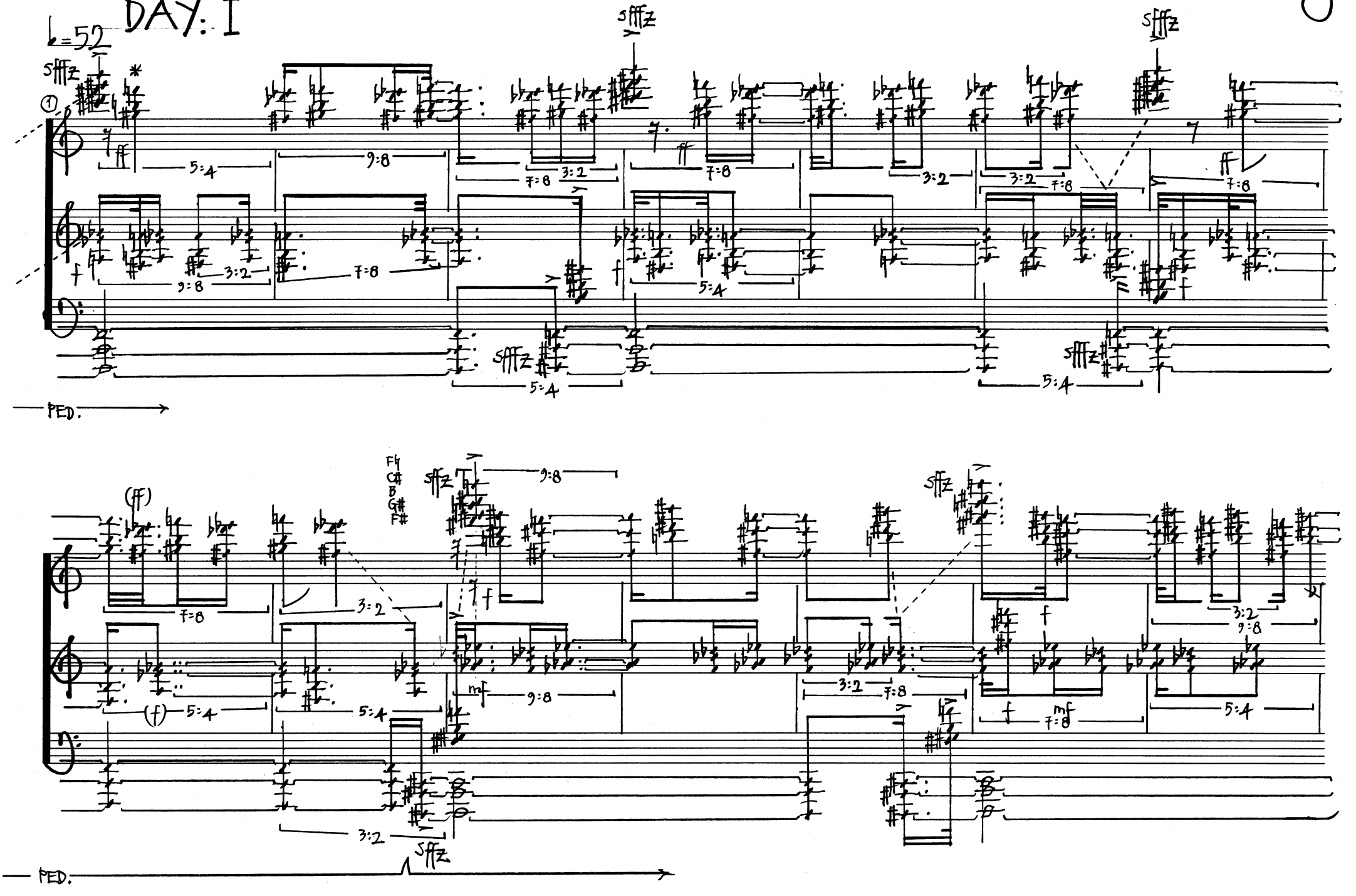

(mf)
7:8
5:4
5:4
5:4
mf
7:8
pp mf
5:4
PED.
(=)
5:4
7:8
5:4
5:4
9:8
5:4
5:4
3:2
Eb
Cb
Bb
Ab
F#
PED.
(=)
5:4
mfz
7:8
9:8
5:4
mf
PED.

QUIETENING

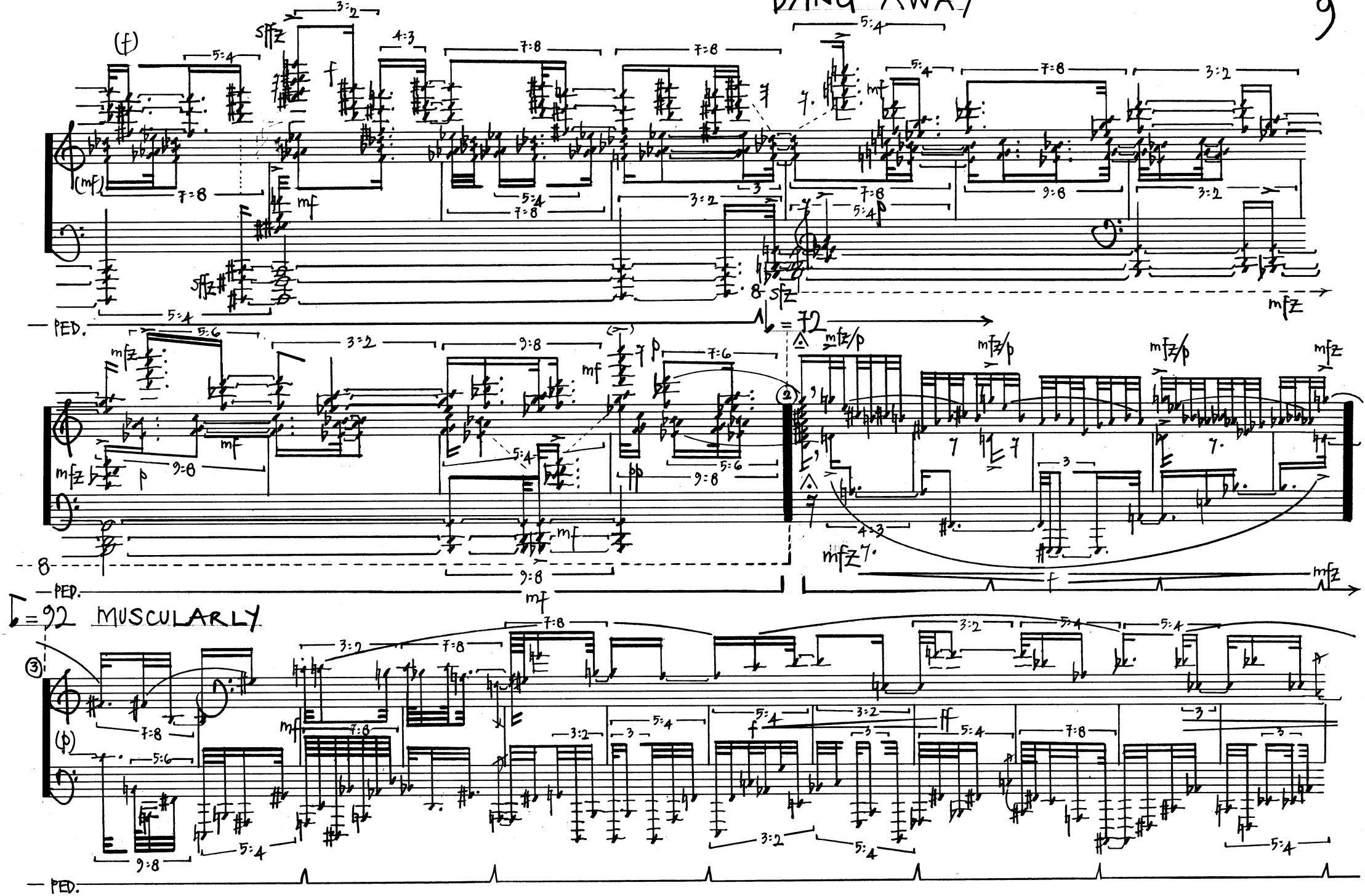


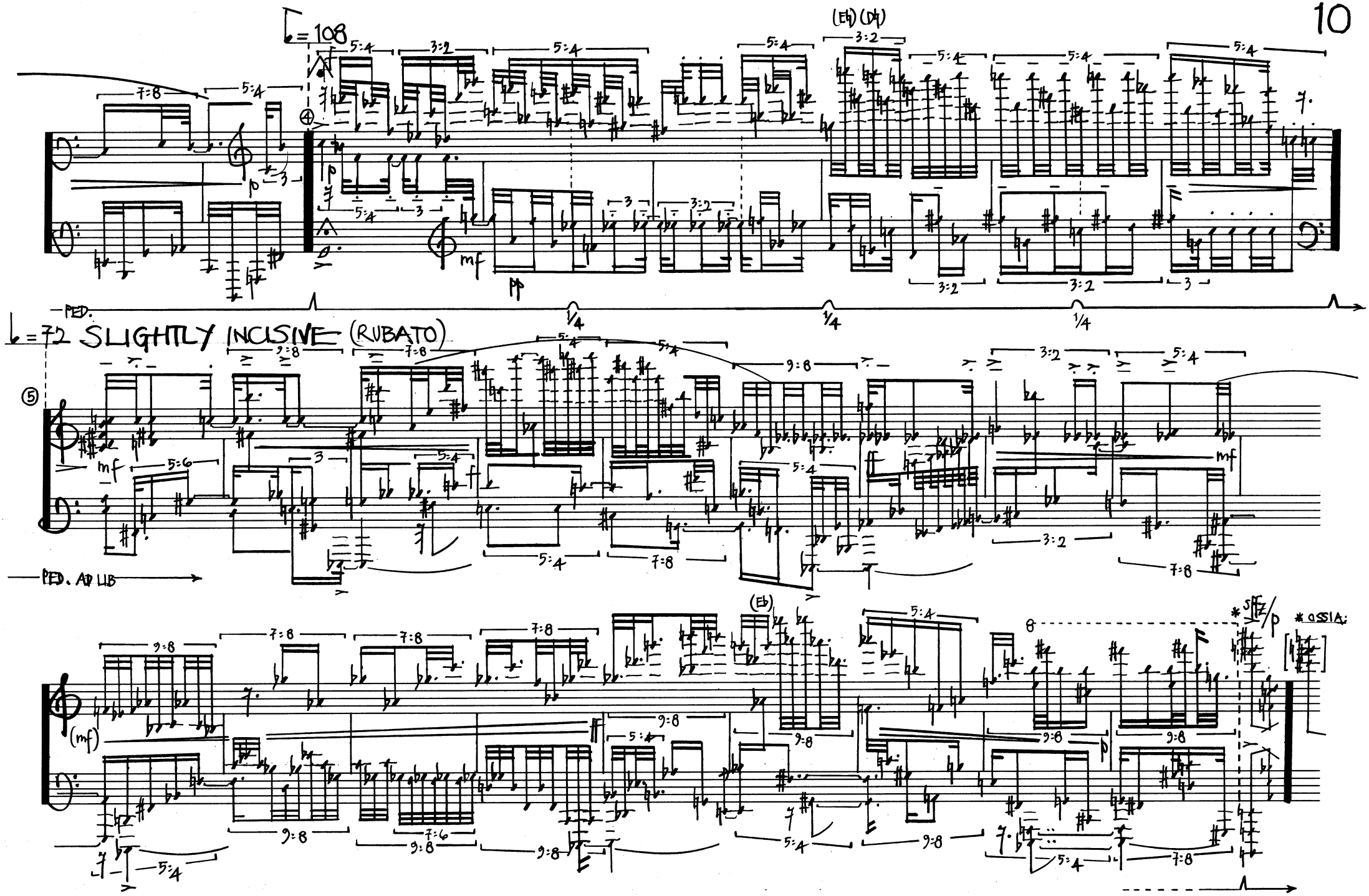
DAY: I

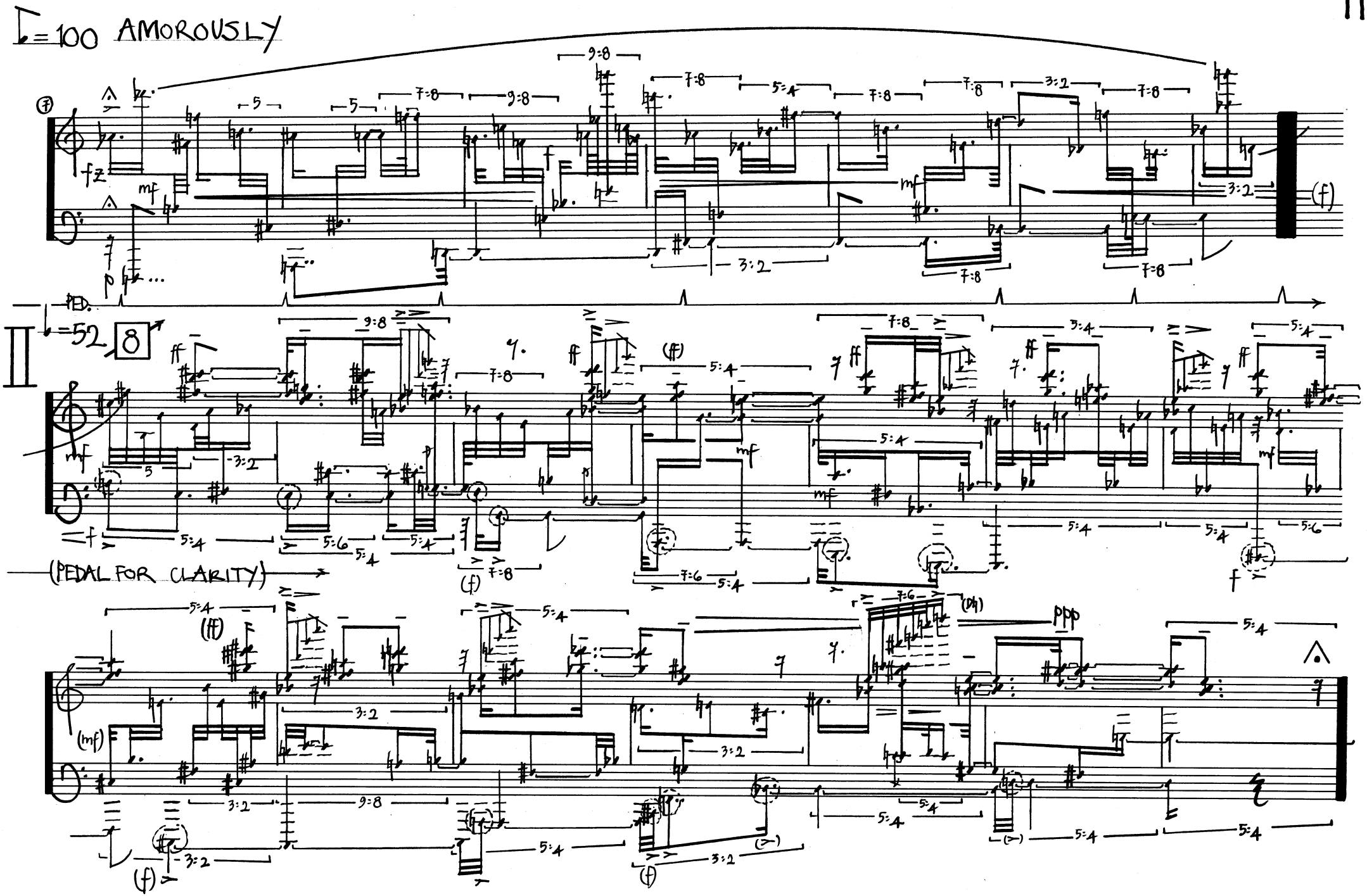
♩=52



DYING AWAY

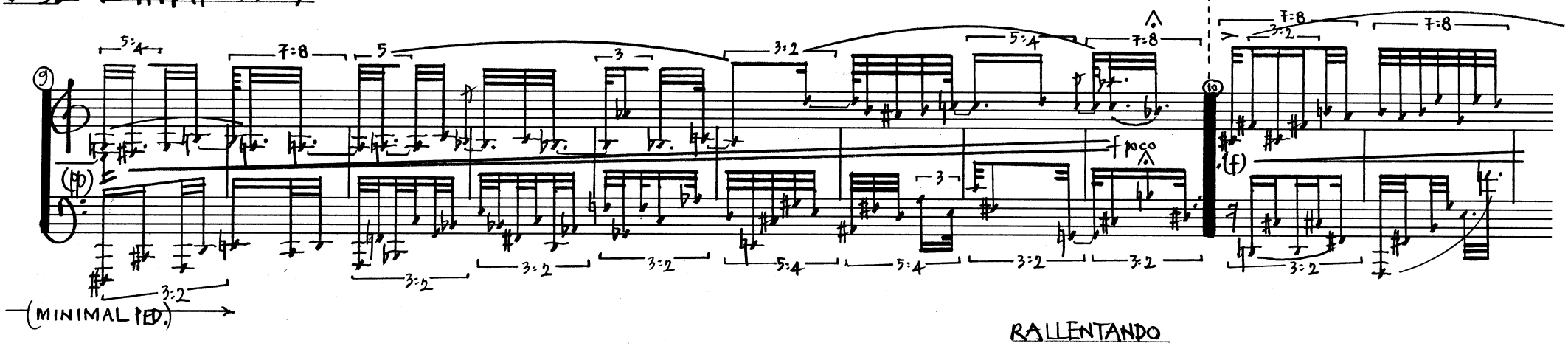



♩= 108
(Eb) (Db)
PED.
♩= 72 SLIGHTLY INCISIVE (RUBATO)
PED. AD LIB
(Eb)
*ossia:

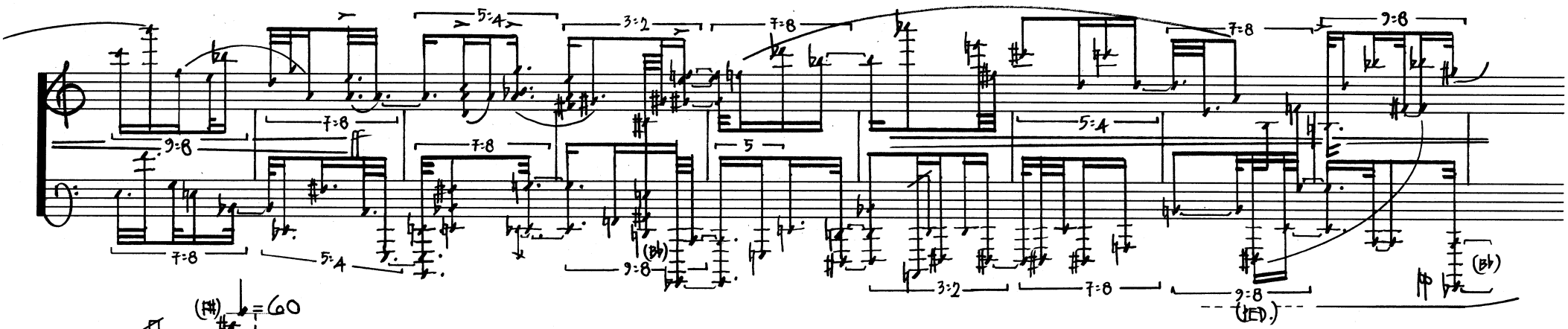

♩=100 AMOROUSLY
II
♩=52
(PEDAL FOR CLARITY)

♩=92 EMPHATICALLY

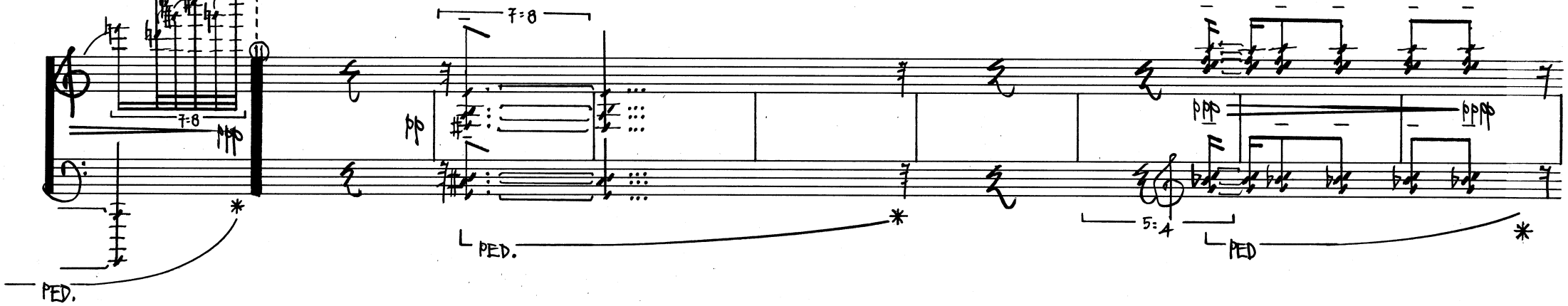
♩=72

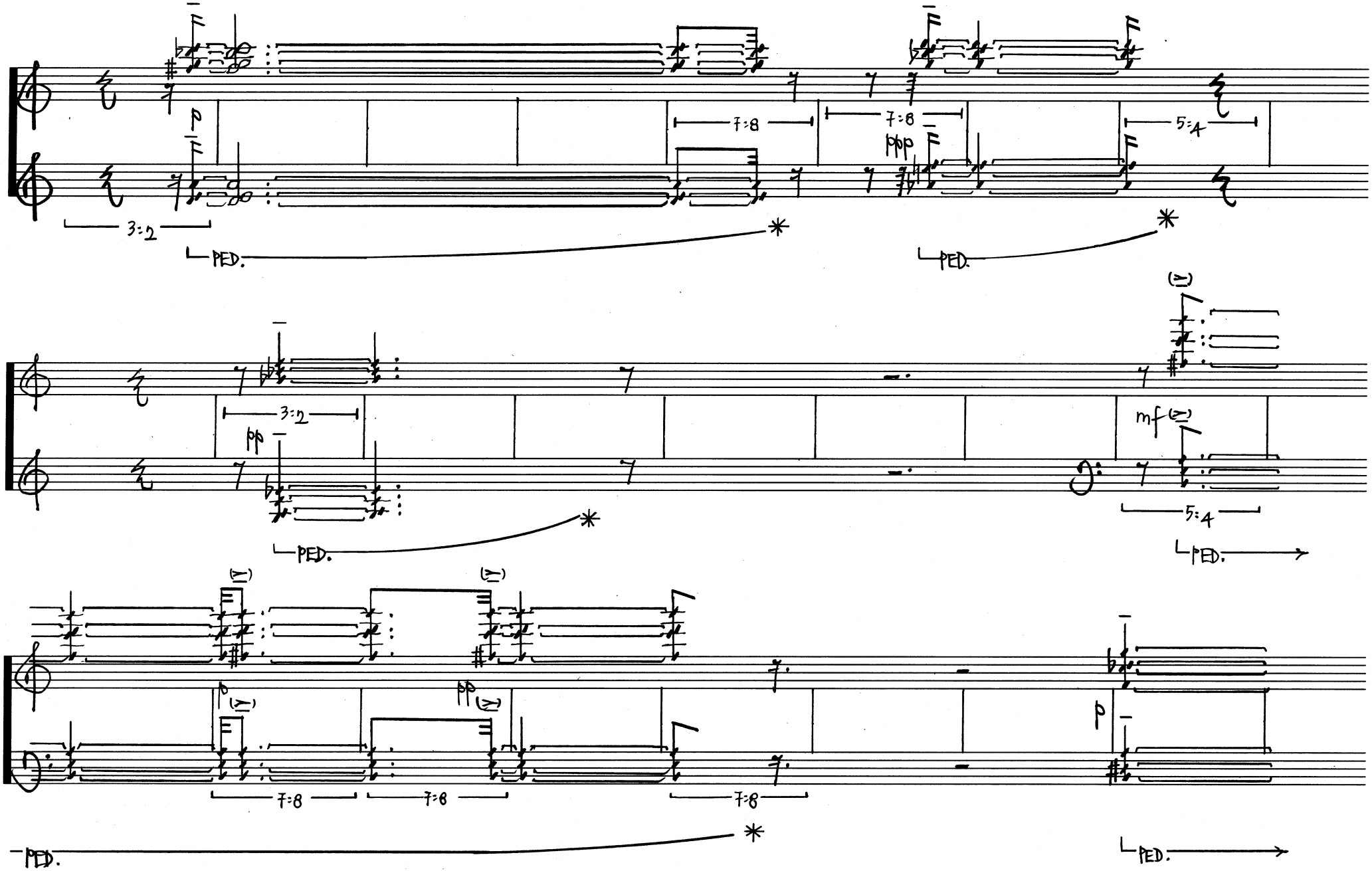


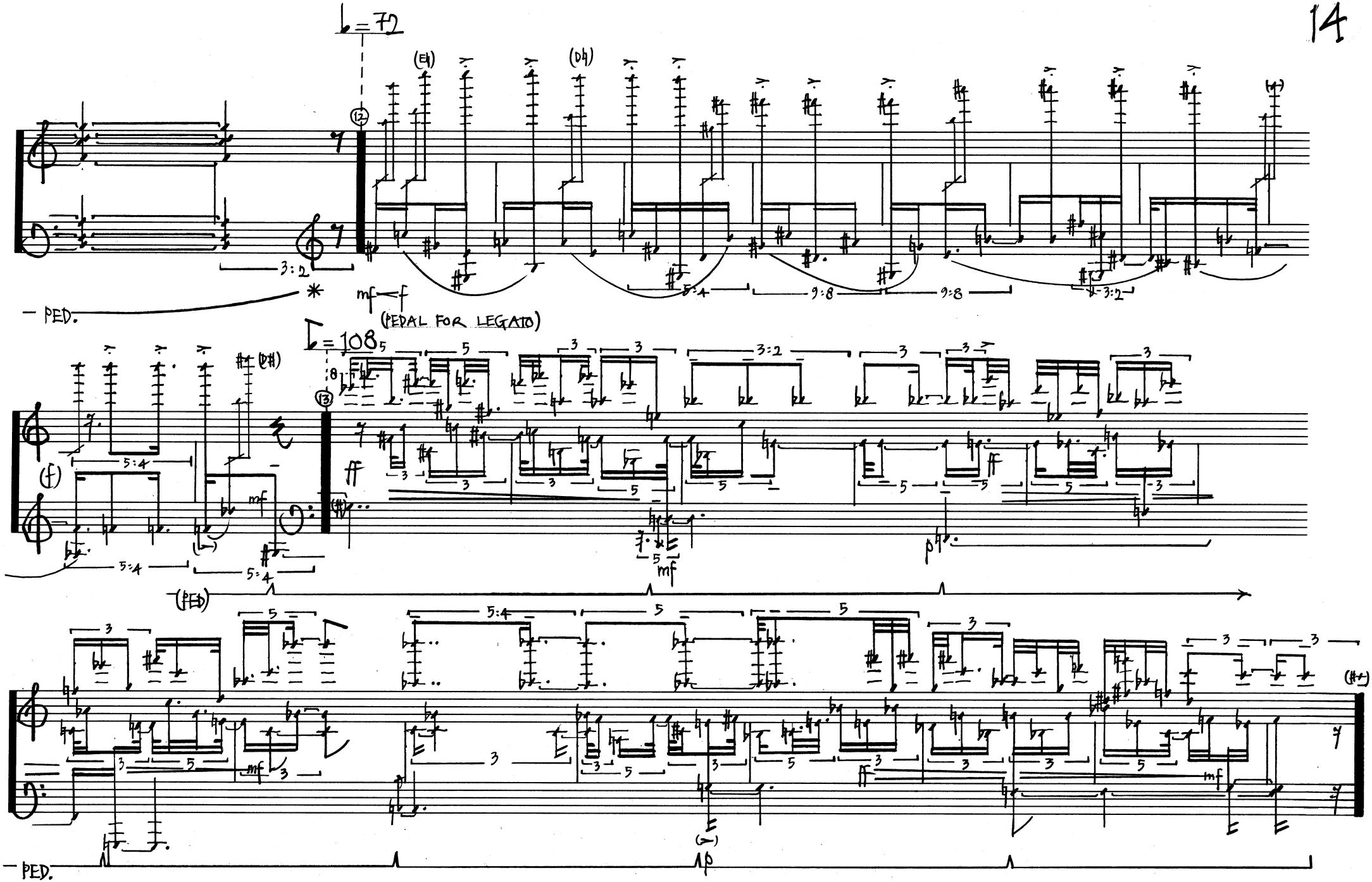
RALLENTANDO

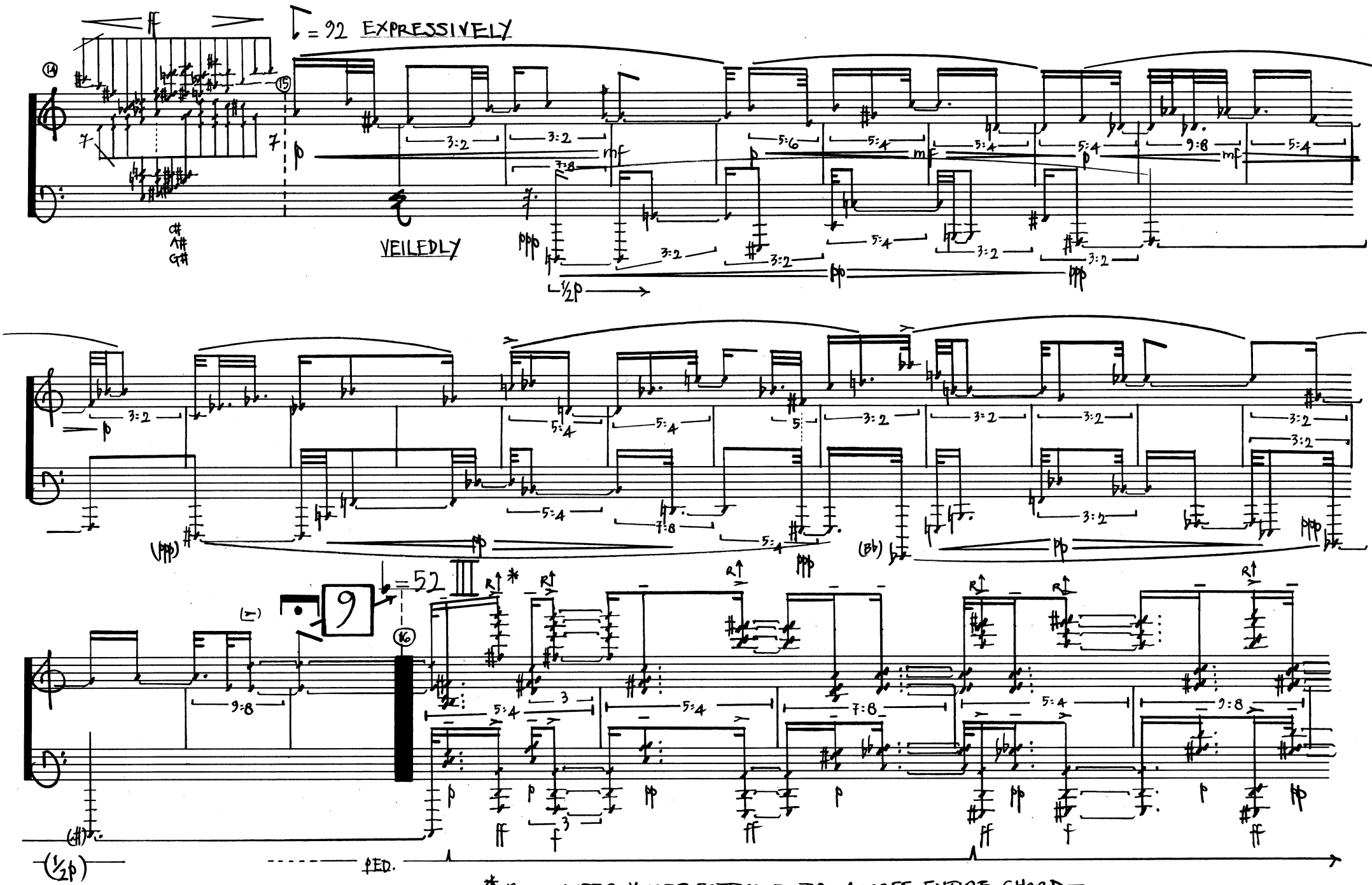


(𝅗𝅥)=60

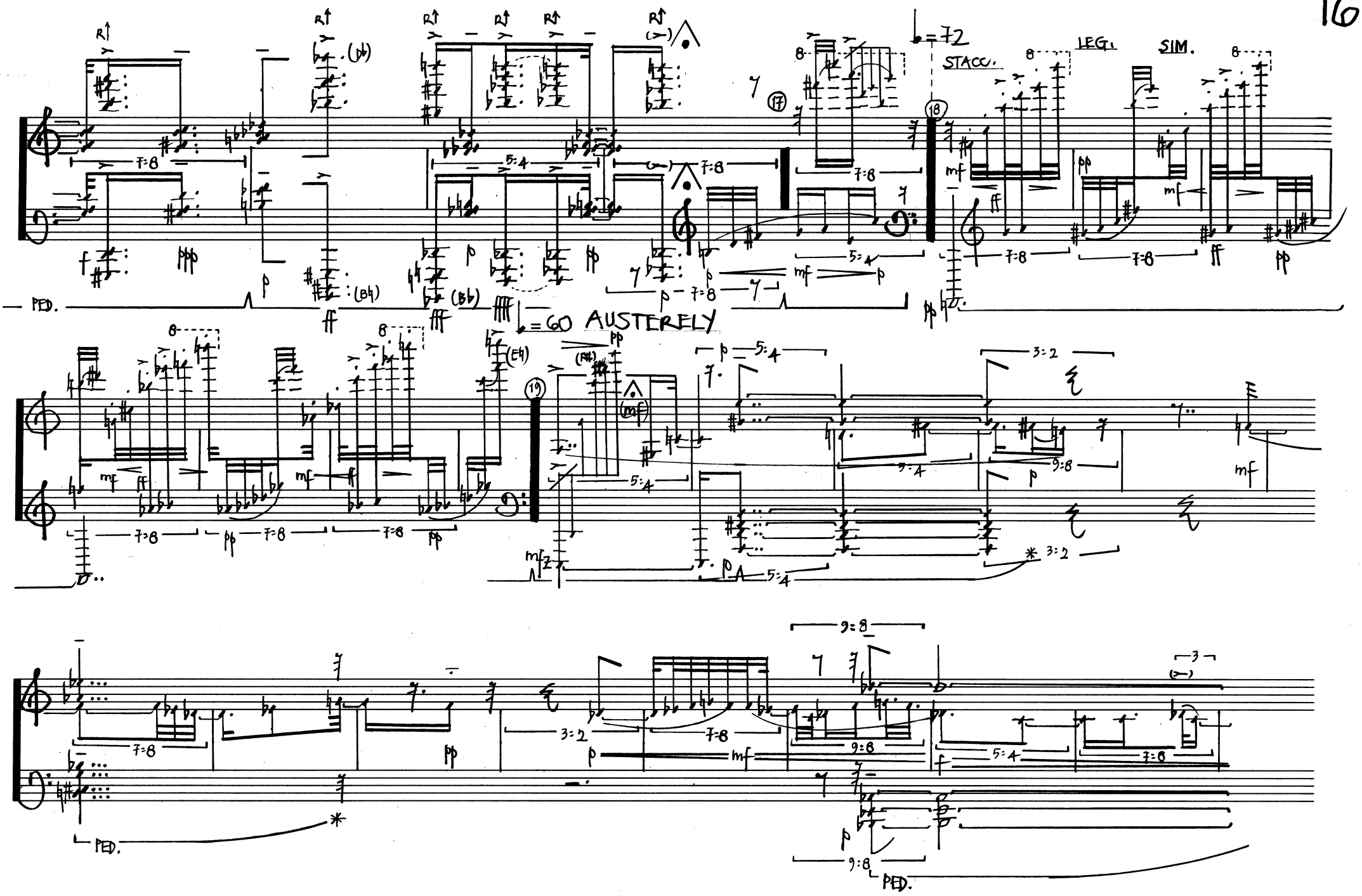


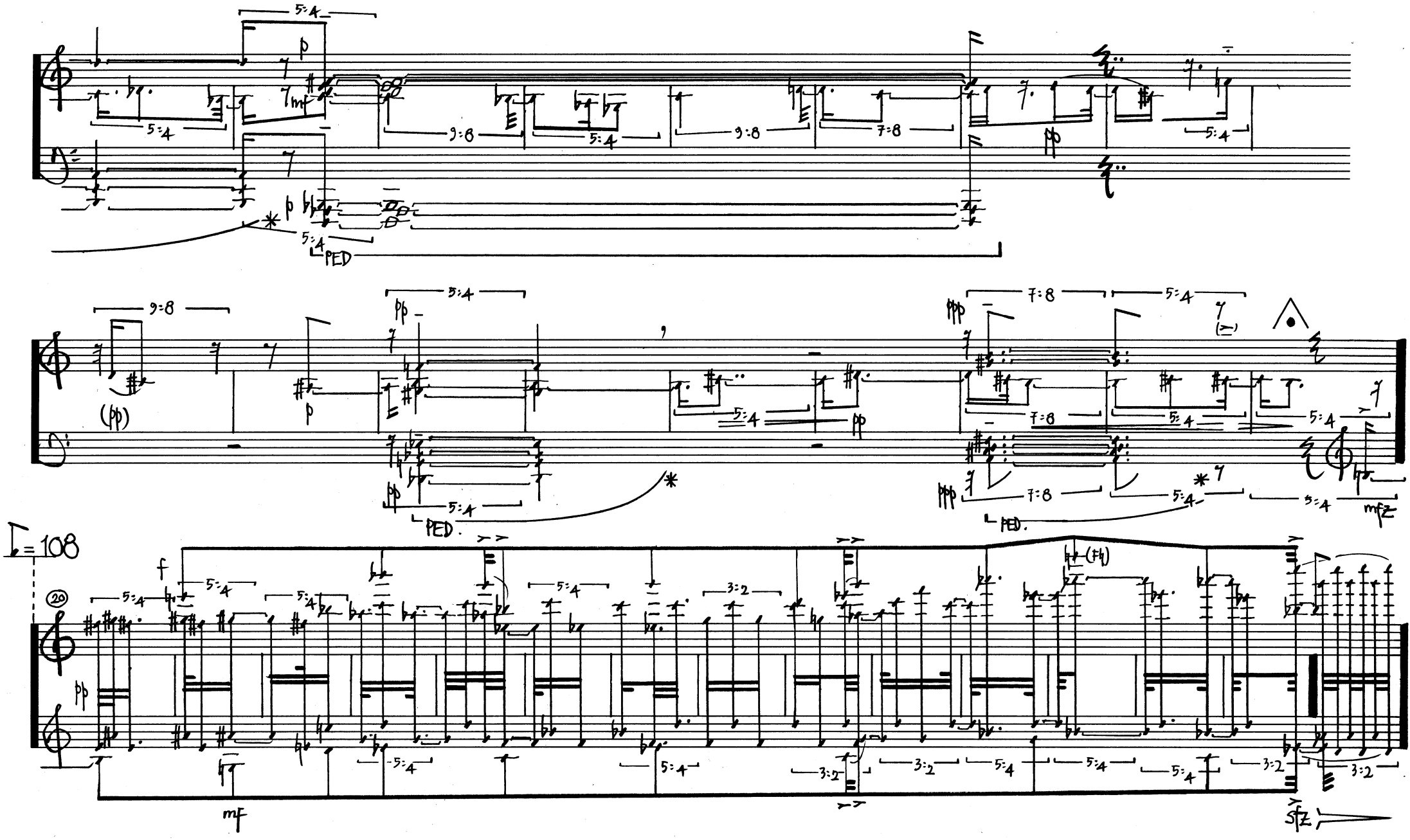

7:8
7:8
5:4
ppp
3:2
PED.
PED.
3:2
pp
PED.
mf
5:4
PED.
pp
7:8
7:8
7:8
p
PED.
PED.


♭ = 72
(E♮)
(D♮)
3:2
5:4
9:8
9:8
3:2
mf
f
(PEDAL FOR LEGATO)
PED.
♭ = 108
(D♯)
(f)
5:4
5:4
5:4
mf
ff
mf
p
(PED)
5:4
5:4
mf
ff
mf
p
PED.

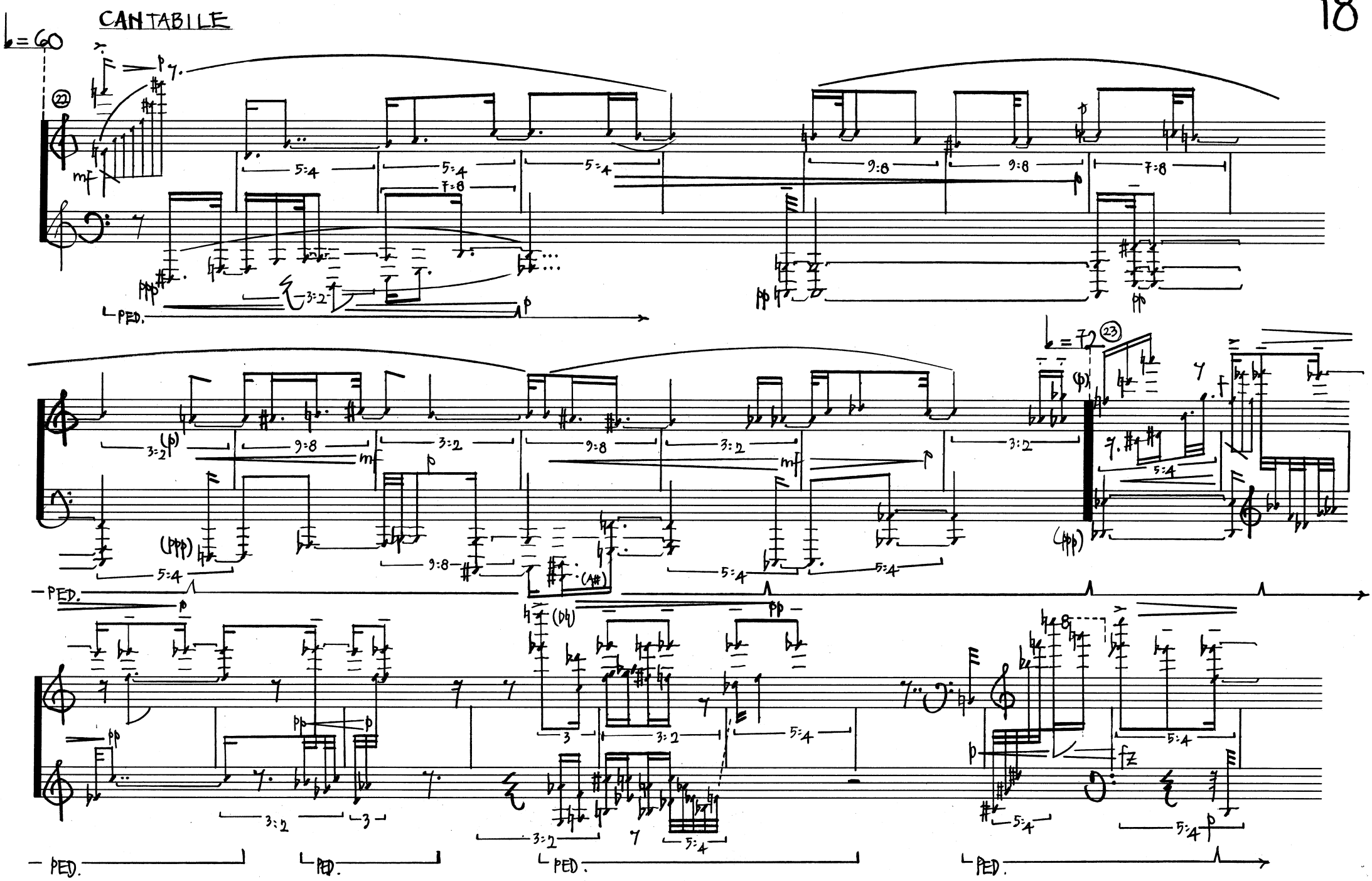


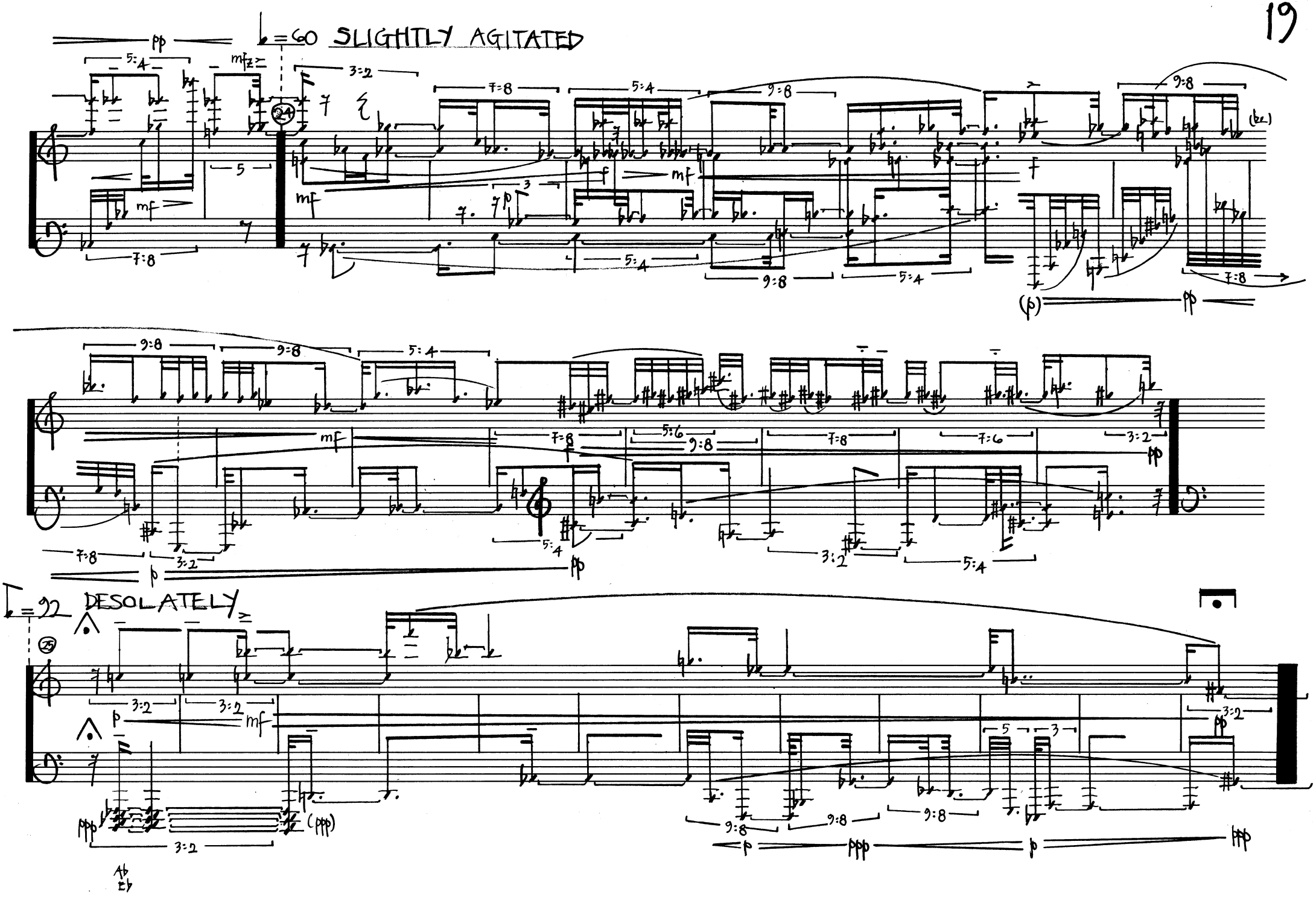
* ROLL OUTER VOICES BOTTOM TO TOP ACROSS ENTIRE CHORD — INNER VOICES STRIKE SIMULTANEOUSLY


STACC.
LEG.
SIM.
PED.
♩= 60 AUSTERELY
PED.
PED.

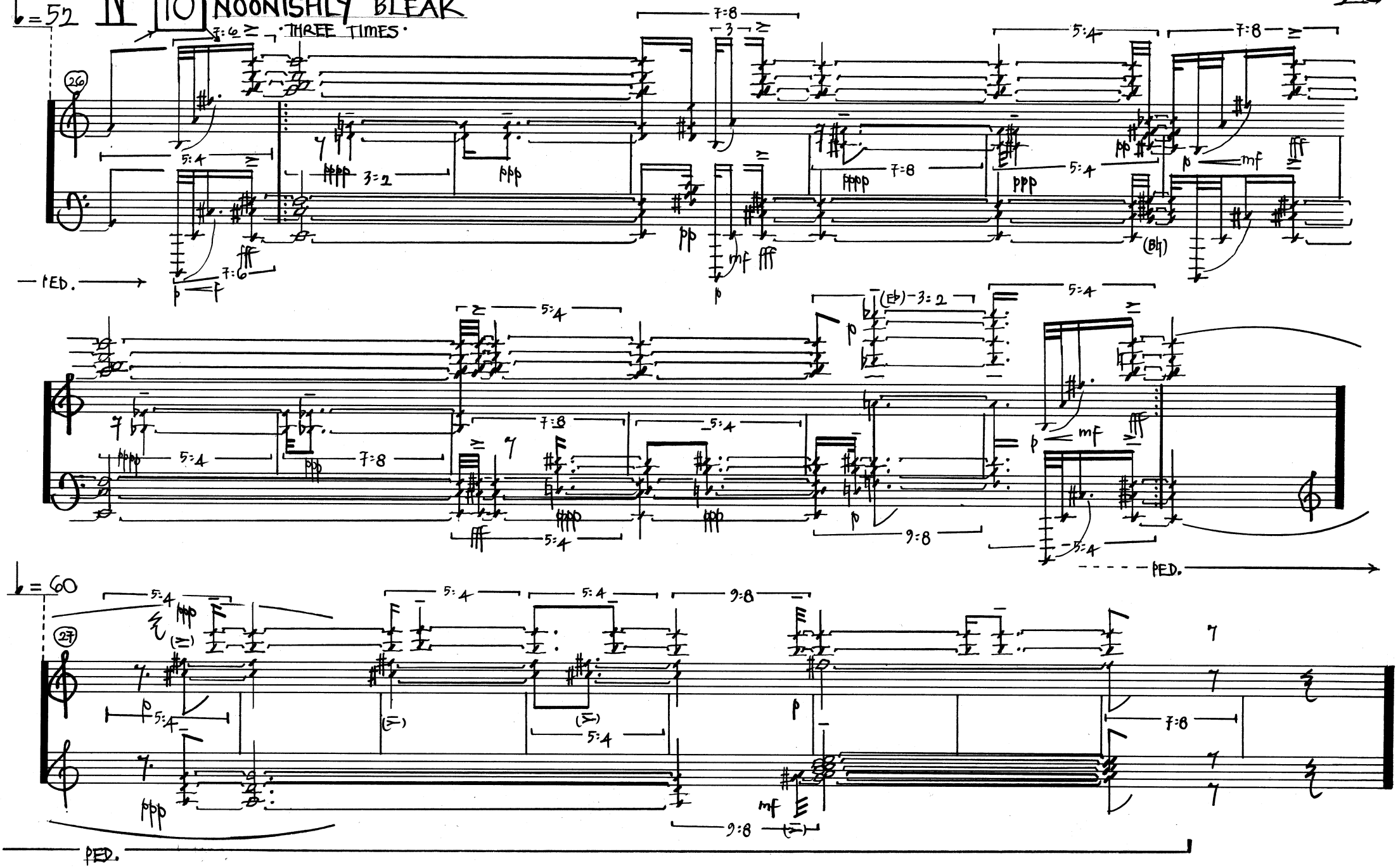

5:4
p
mf
9:8
7:8
pp
PED
(pp)
ppp
mfz
♪ = 108
f
3:2
(Fh)
sfz

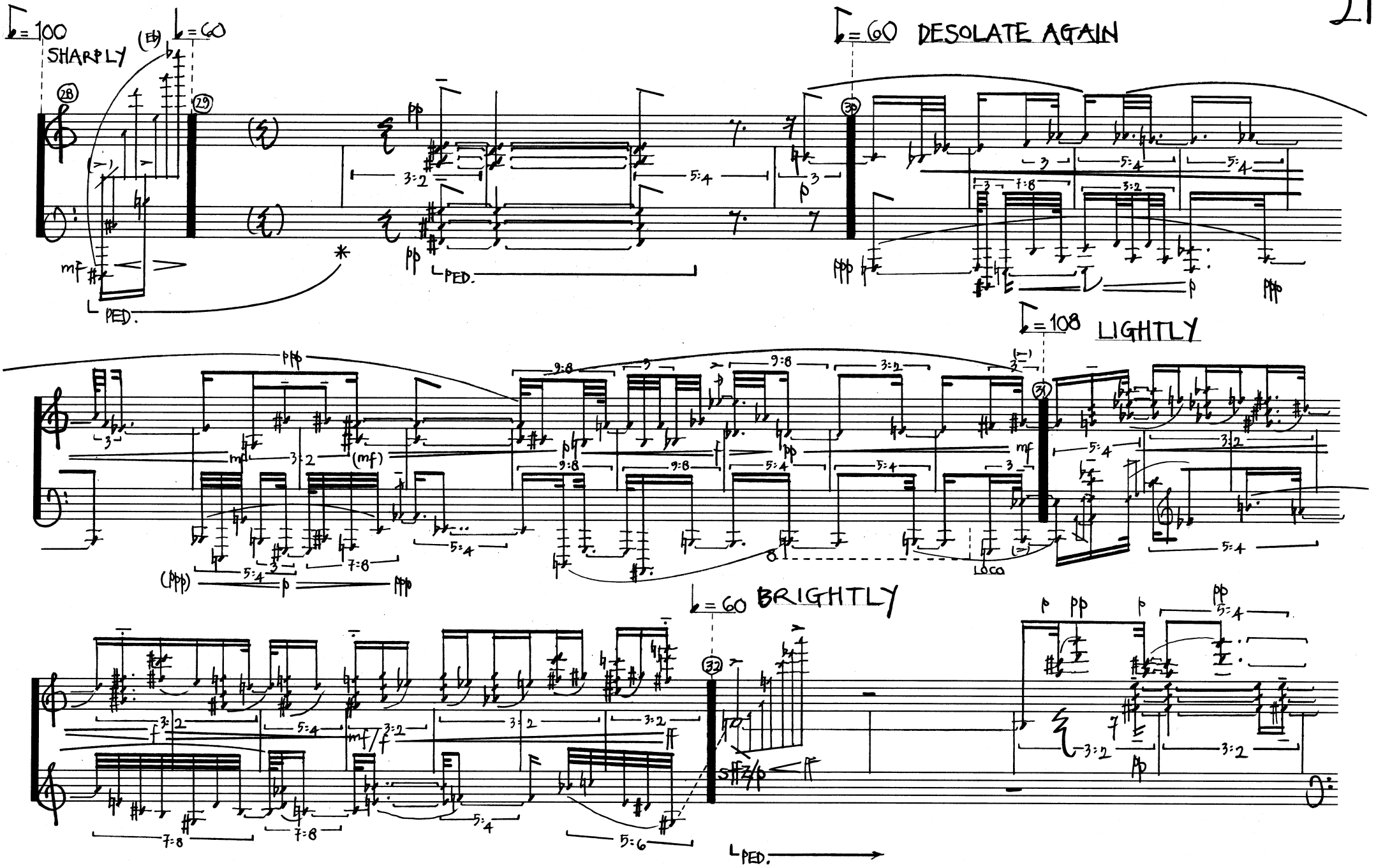
CANTABILE

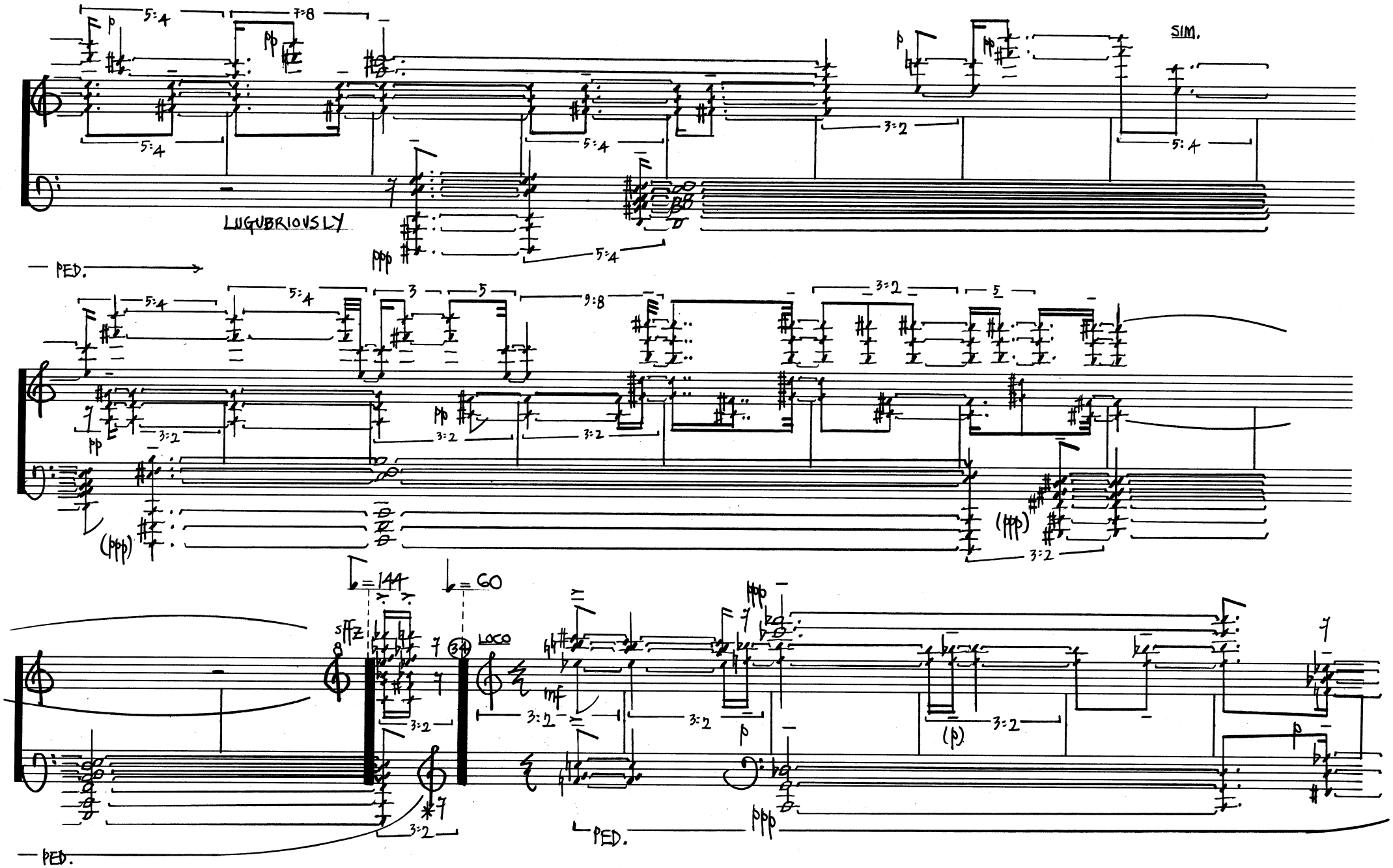



♩=60 SLIGHTLY AGITATED
♩=92 DESOLATELY

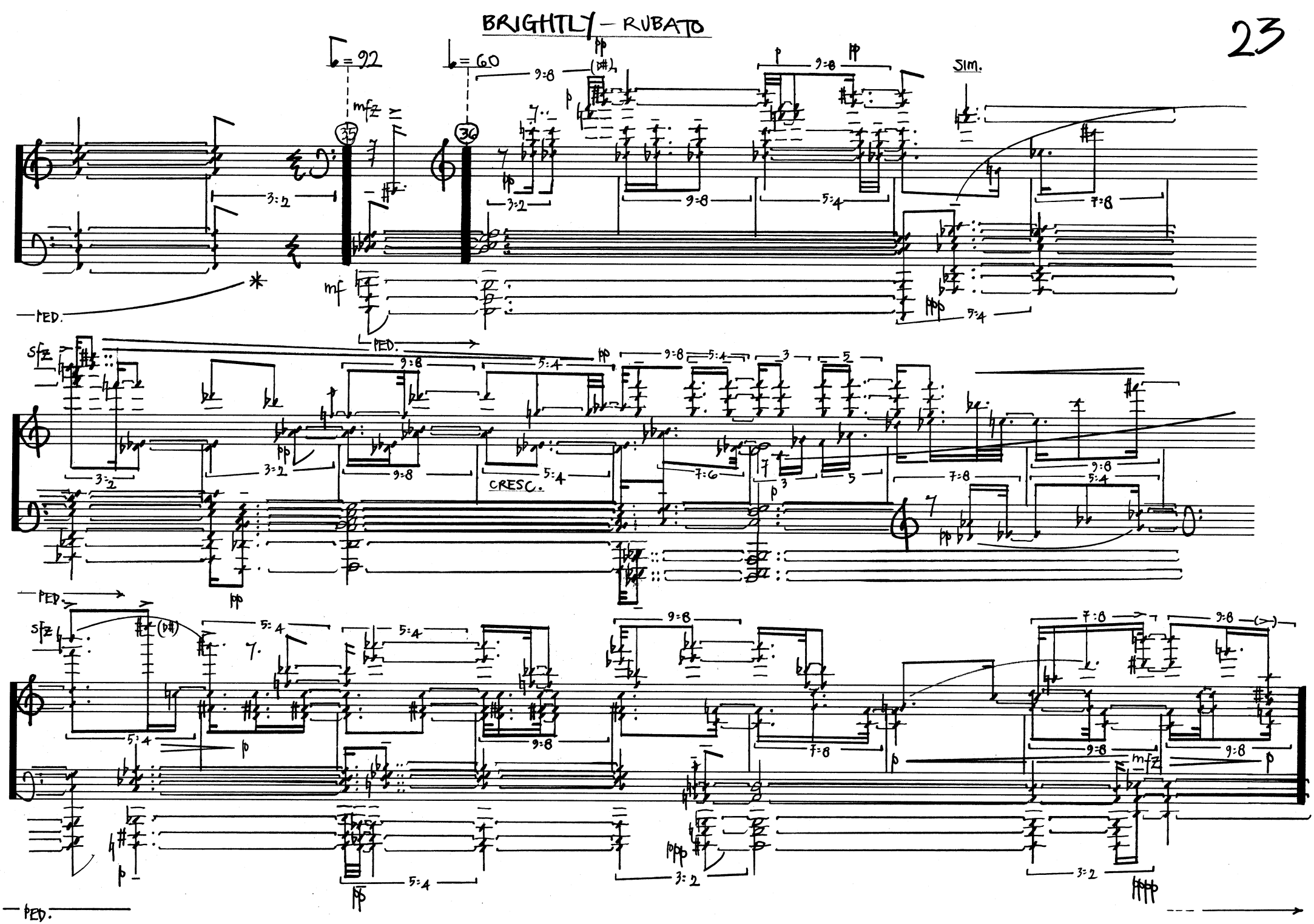
♩=52 IV 10 NOONISHLY BLEAK

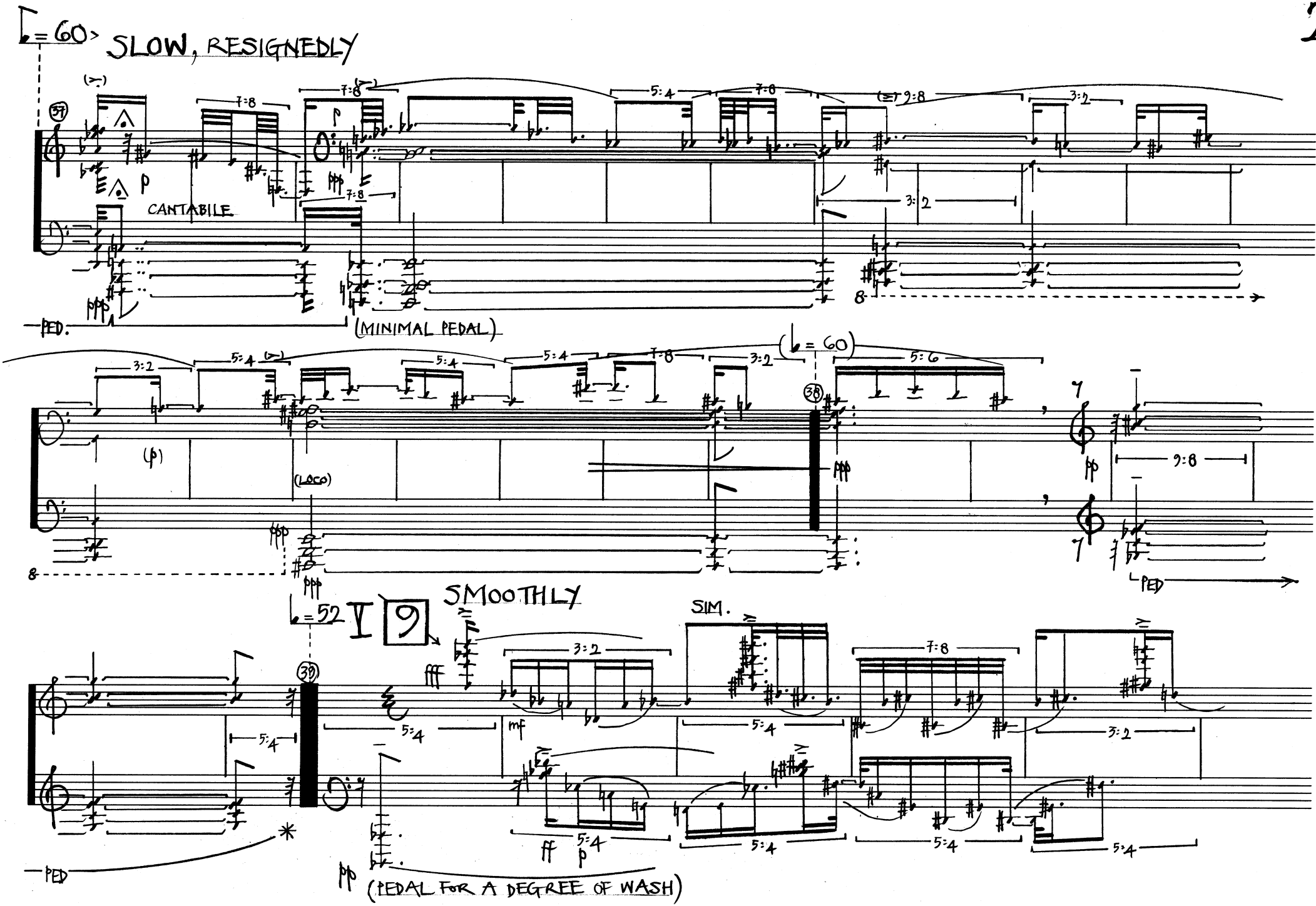


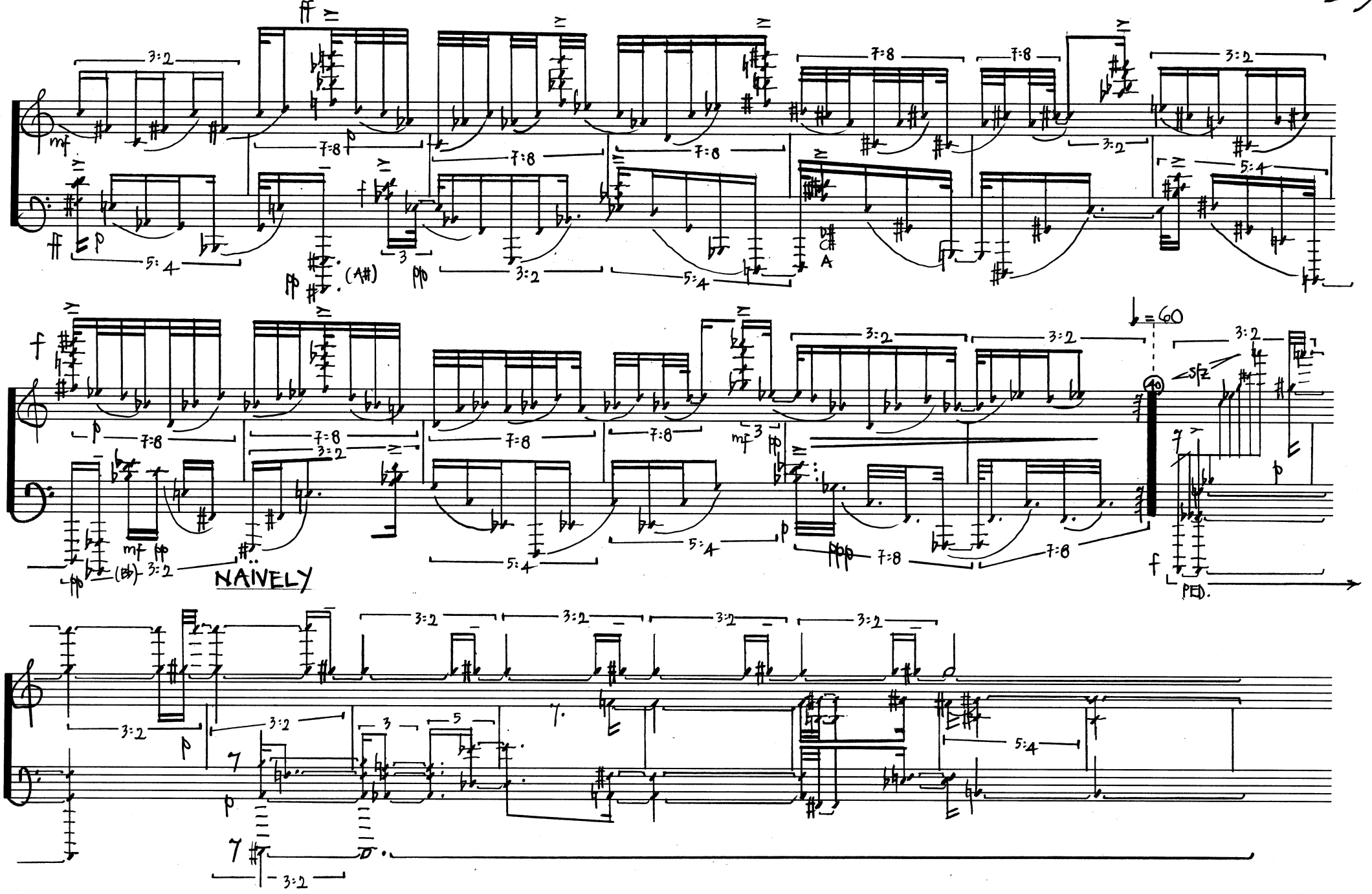

♩= 100
SHARPLY
(Eb)
♩= 60
28
29
mf
PED.
pp
3:2
5:4
3
p
PED.
♩= 60 DESOLATE AGAIN
30
ppp
3
5:4
7:8
3:2
p
ppp
♩= 108 LIGHTLY
31
ppp
9:8
3
3:2
(mf)
mf
5:4
(ppp)
7:8
LOCO
♩= 60 BRIGHTLY
32
f
mf/f
ff
sffz/p
7:8
5:6
PED.
pp
3:2

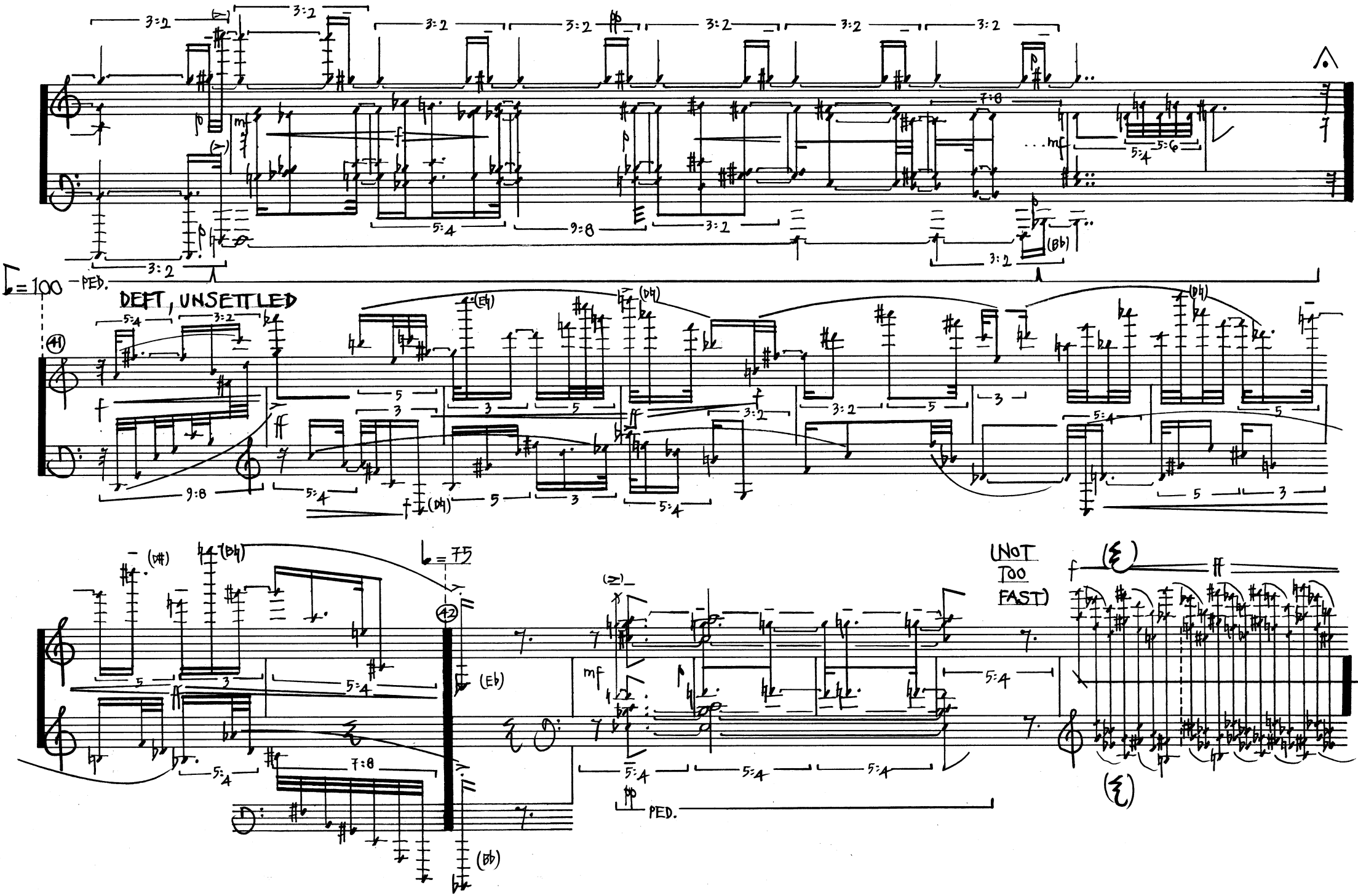

SIM.
LUGUBRIOUSLY
PED.
LOCO
PED.
PED.

BRIGHTLY – RUBATO

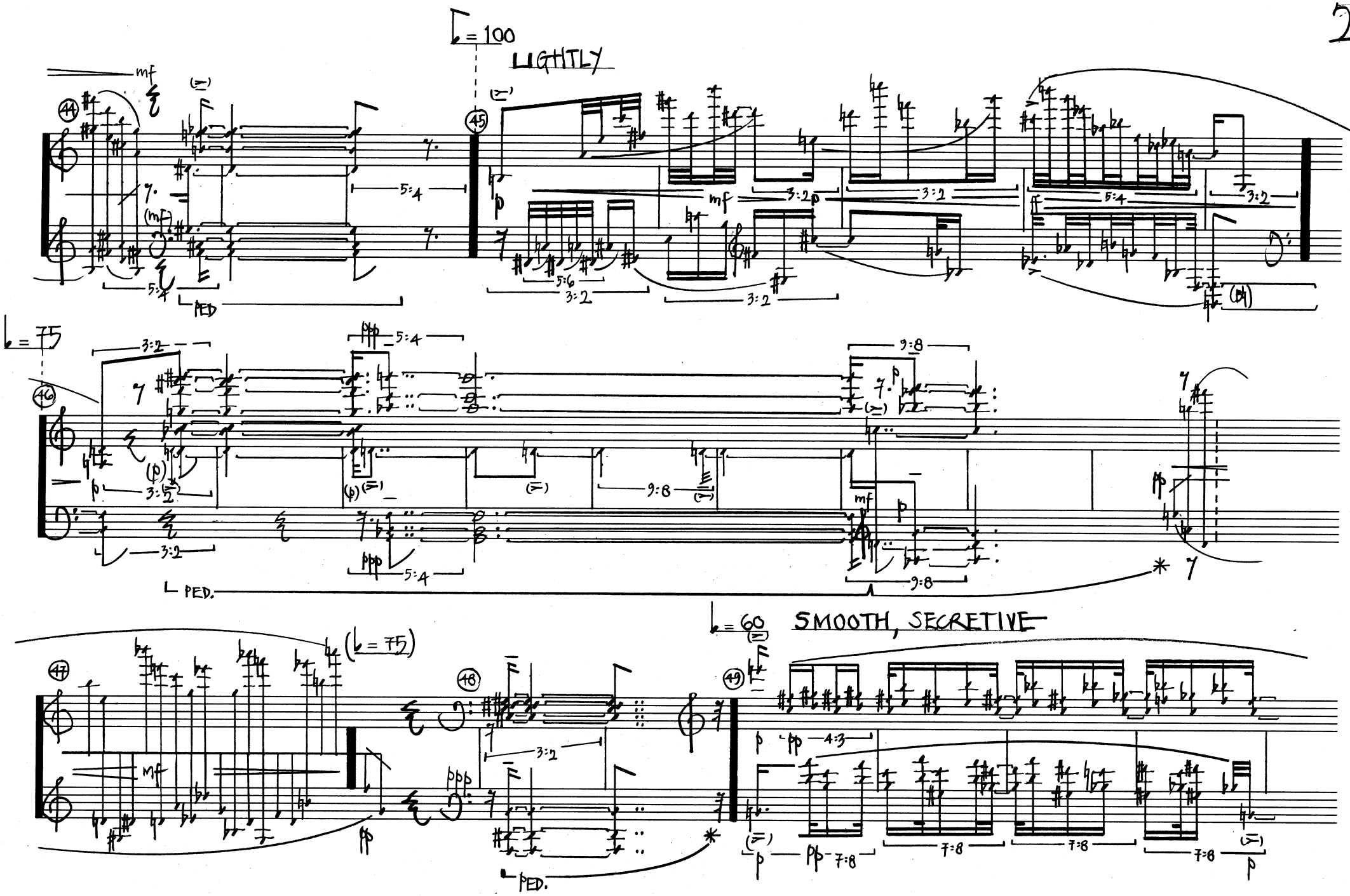


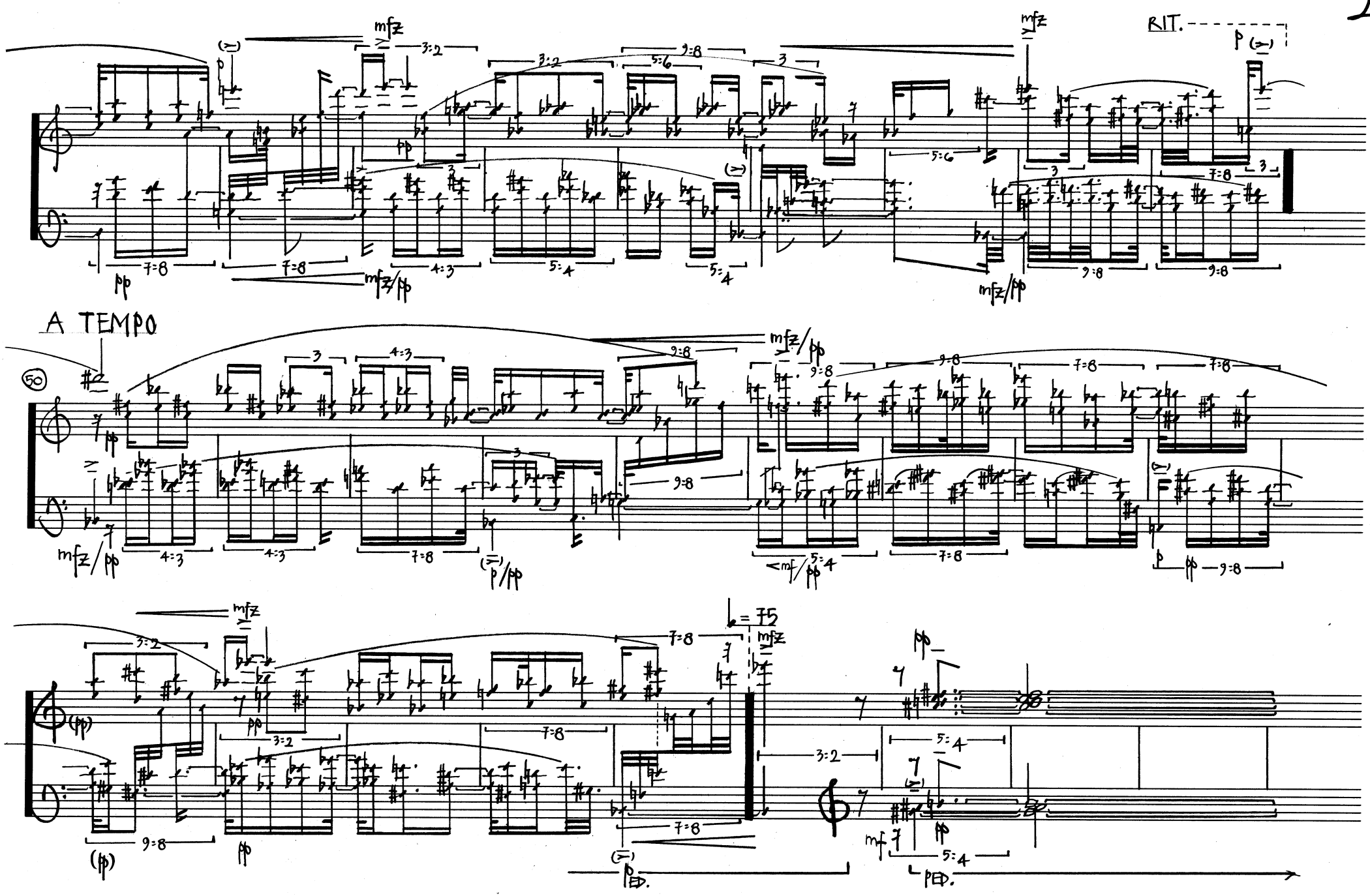

♩= 60
SLOW, RESIGNEDLY
CANTABILE
PED.
(MINIMAL PEDAL)
(LOCO)
(♩= 60)
PED
♩= 52
SMOOTHLY
SIM.
PED
(PEDAL FOR A DEGREE OF WASH)

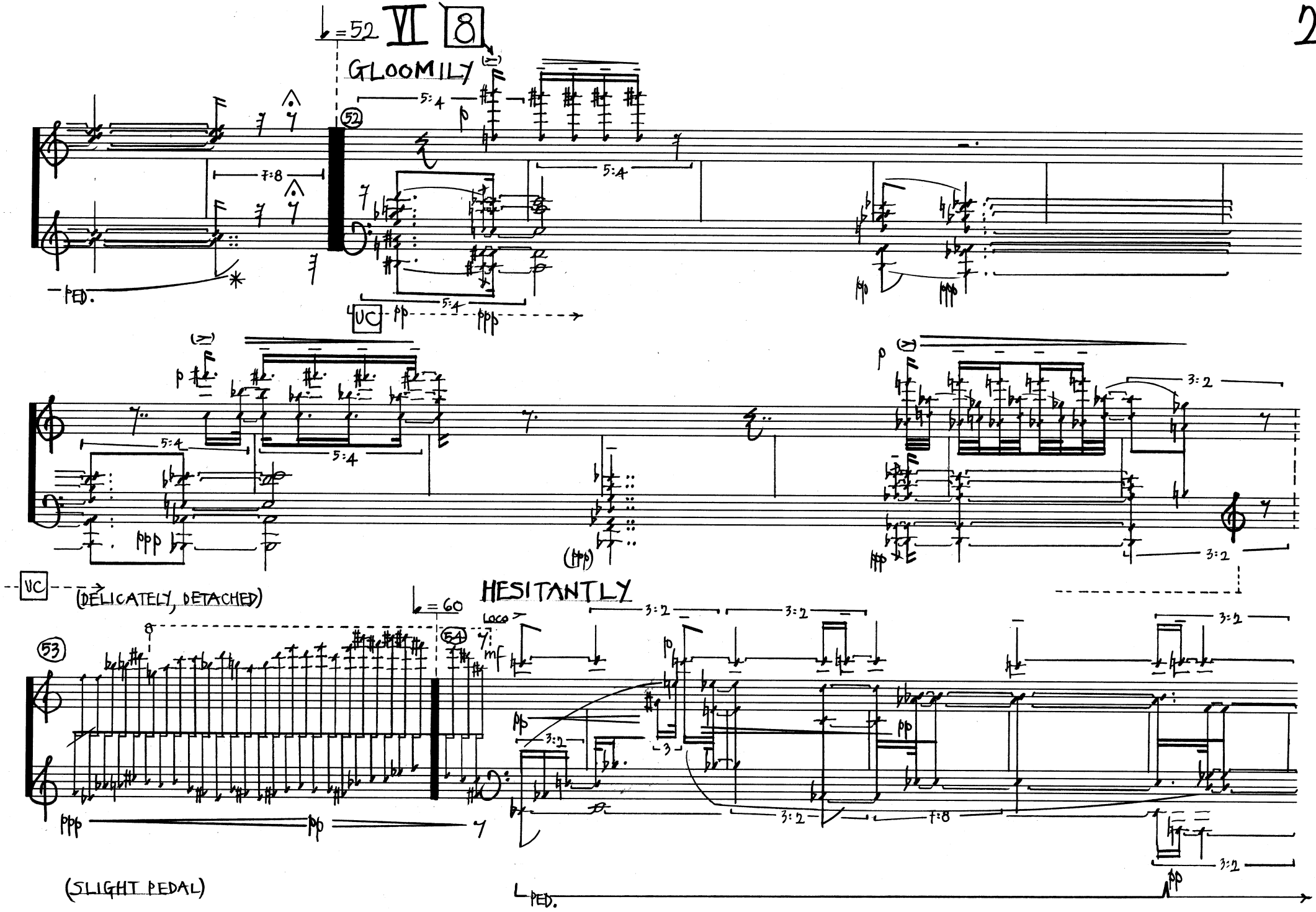

NAIVELY
PED.

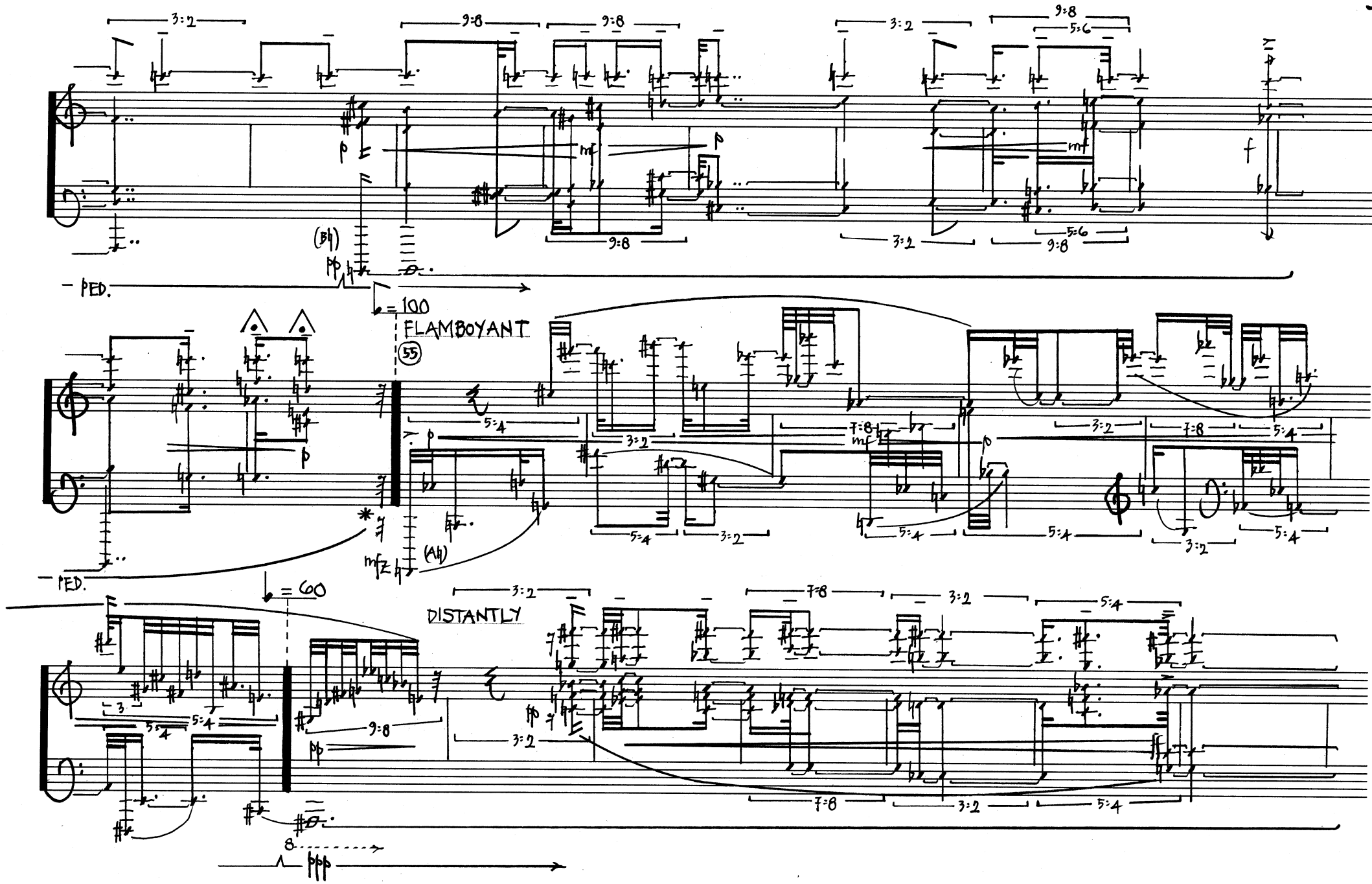


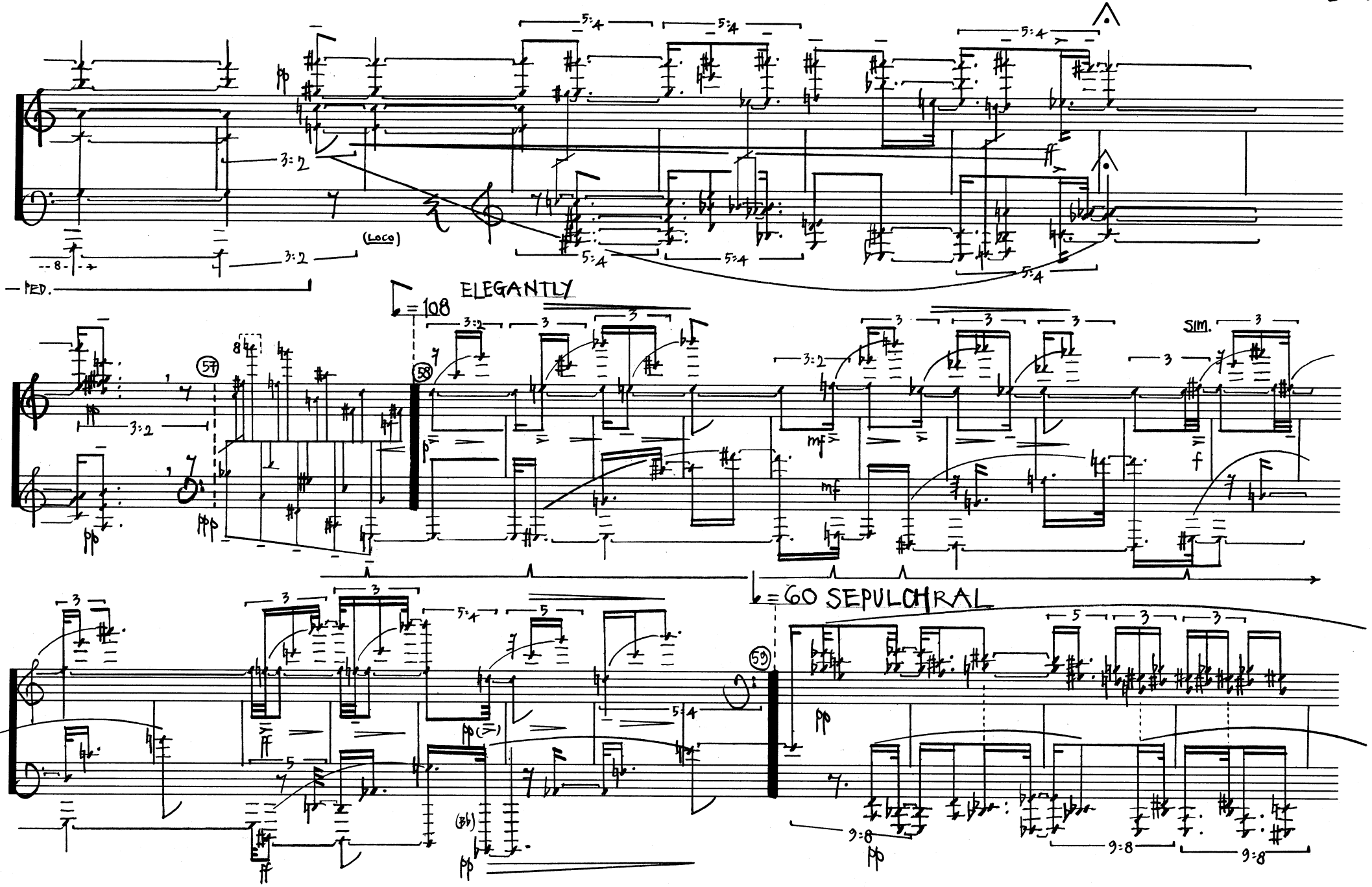
3:2
7:8
5:4
5:6
9:8
(B♭)
♩= 100
PED.
DEFT, UNSETTLED
41
(E♮)
(D♮)
5
3
(D#)
(B♮)
♩= 75
42
(E♭)
(B♭)
mf
pp
PED.
(NOT TOO FAST)

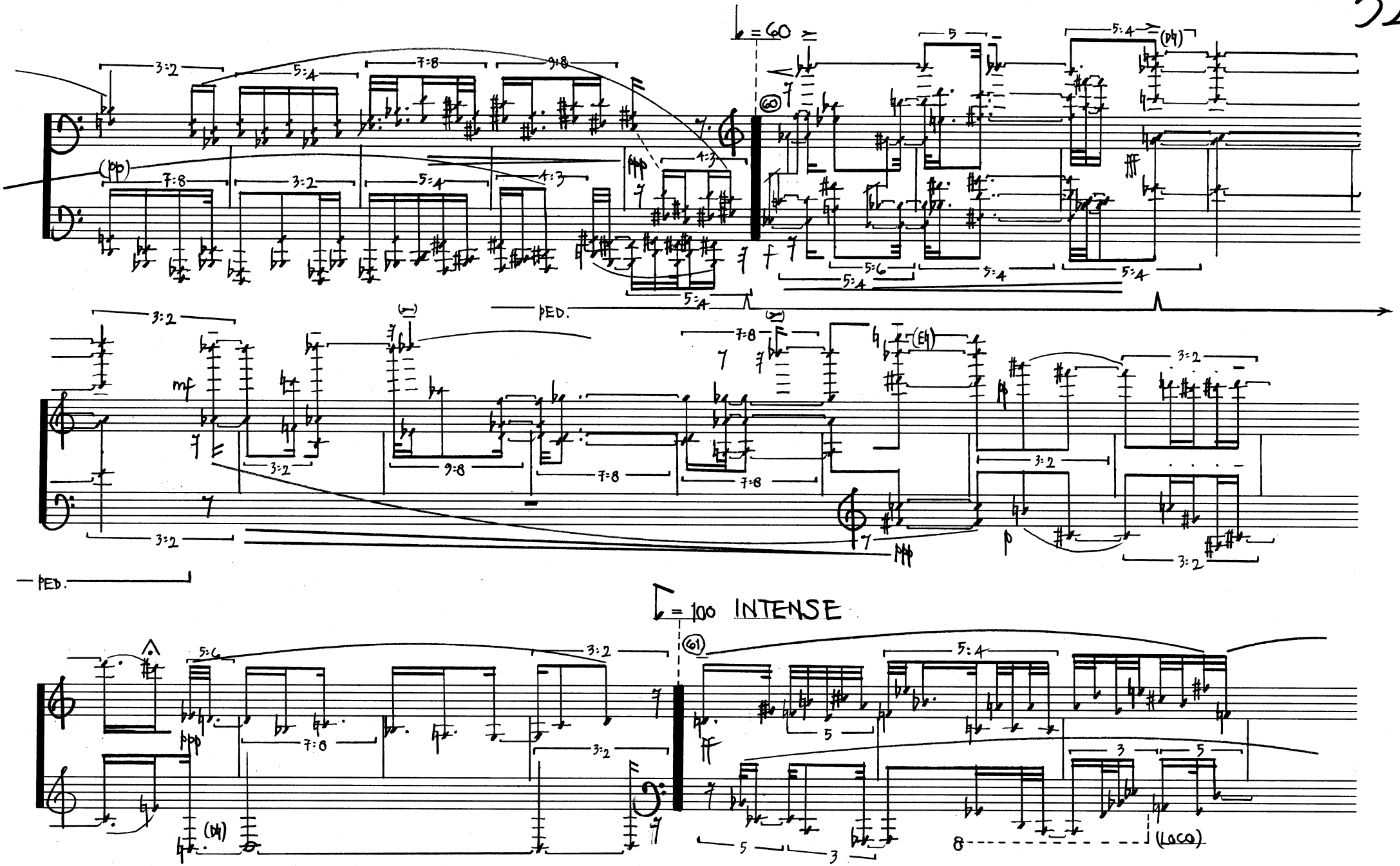

♭ = 100
LIGHTLY
mf
(mf)
5:4
PED
p
mf
3:2
5:6
3:2
3:2
5:4
3:2
♭ = 75
3:2
ppp
5:4
9:8
(p)
3:2
9:8
mf
p
3:2
ppp
5:4
9:8
PED.
(♭ = 75)
mf
pp
3:2
ppp
PED.
♭ = 60
SMOOTH, SECRETIVE
p
pp
4:3
pp
7:8
7:8
7:8
7:8
p

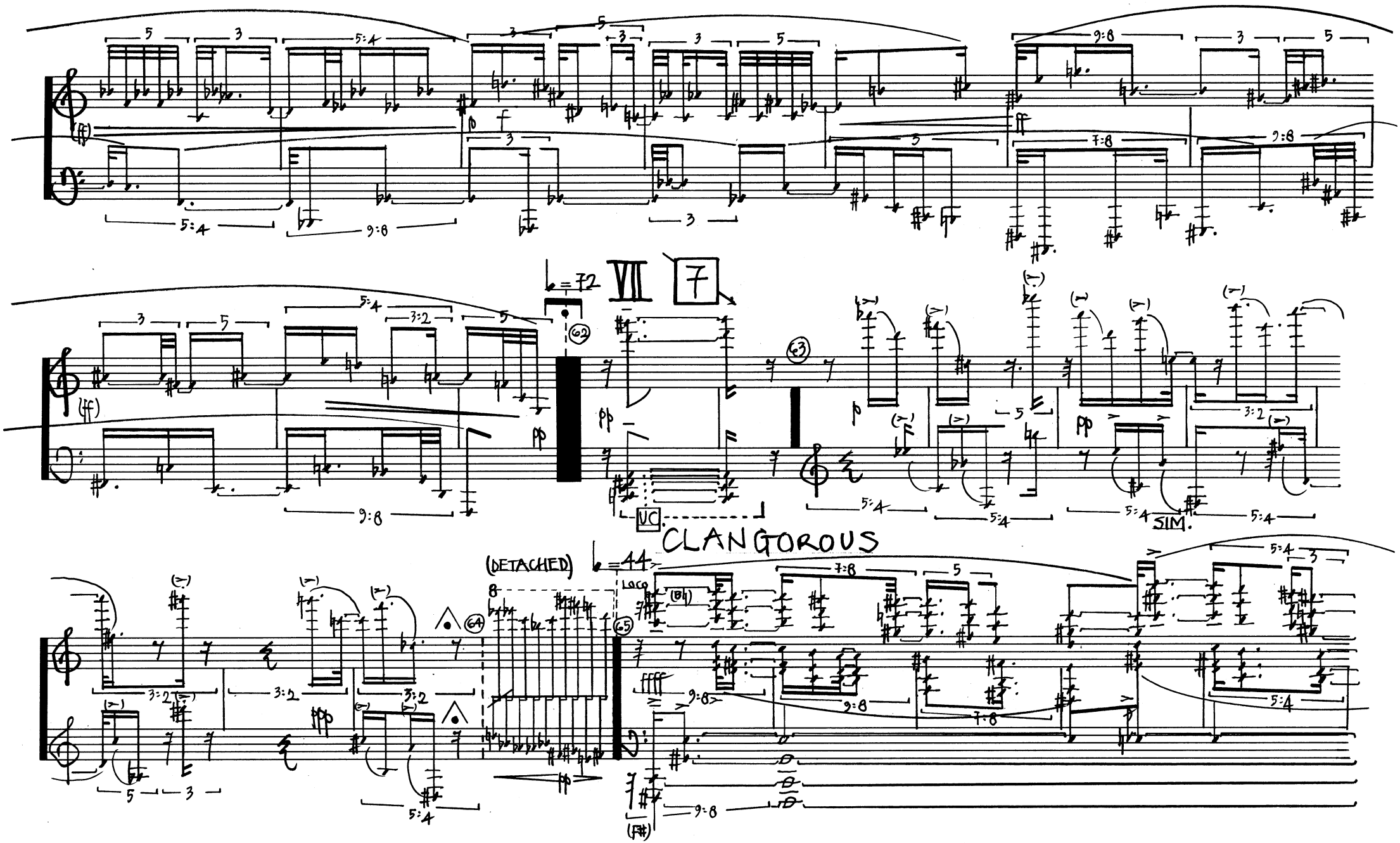

RIT.
A TEMPO
50
mfz
mfz/pp
pp
p
mf
PED.

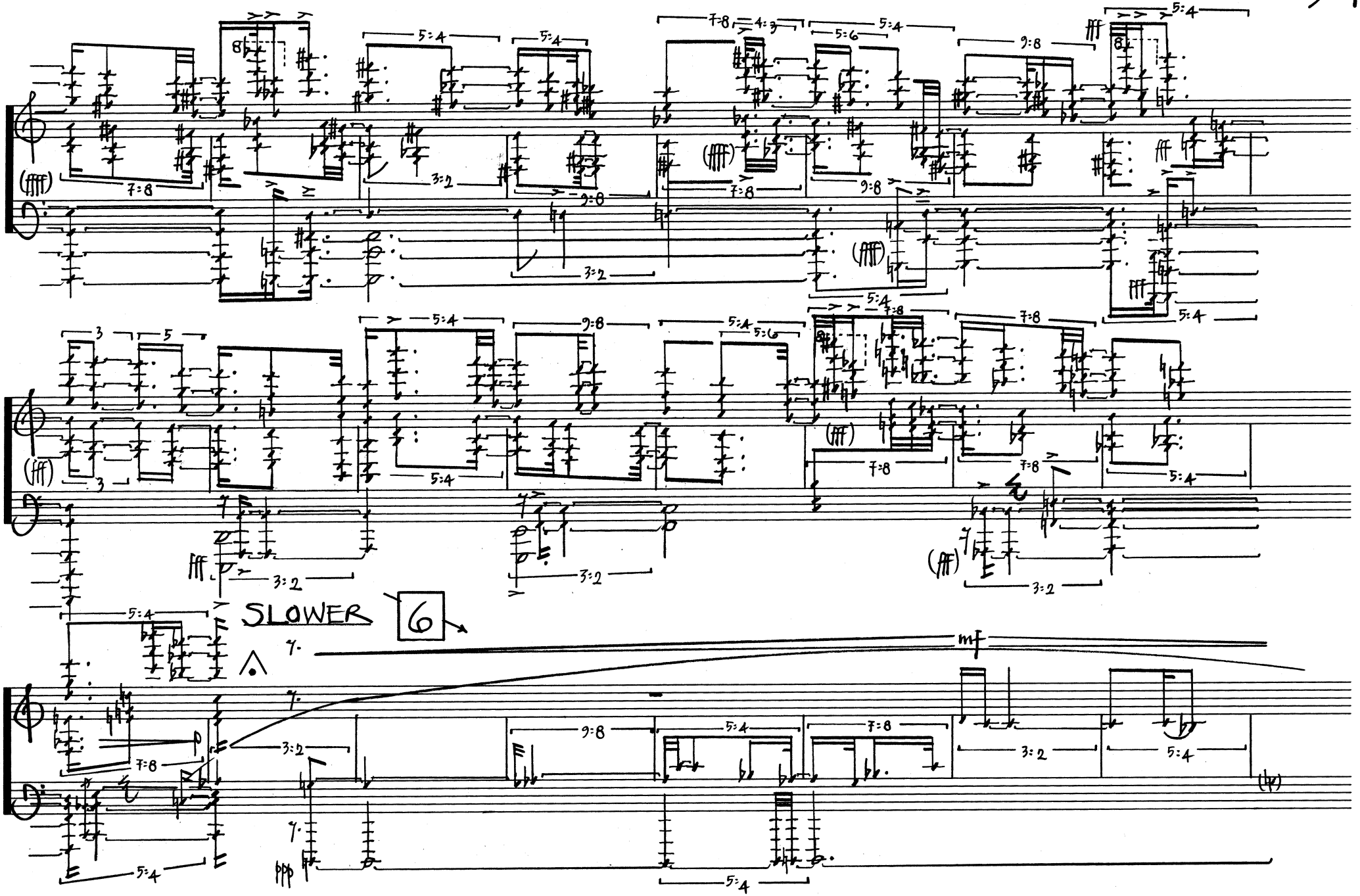

♩=52
VI
8
GLOOMILY
52
5:4
7:8
PED.
VC
pp
ppp
ppp
(ppp)
3:2
VC
(DELICATELY, DETACHED)
♩=60
HESITANTLY
53
54
loco
mf
pp
3:2
3
7:8
(SLIGHT PEDAL)
PED.

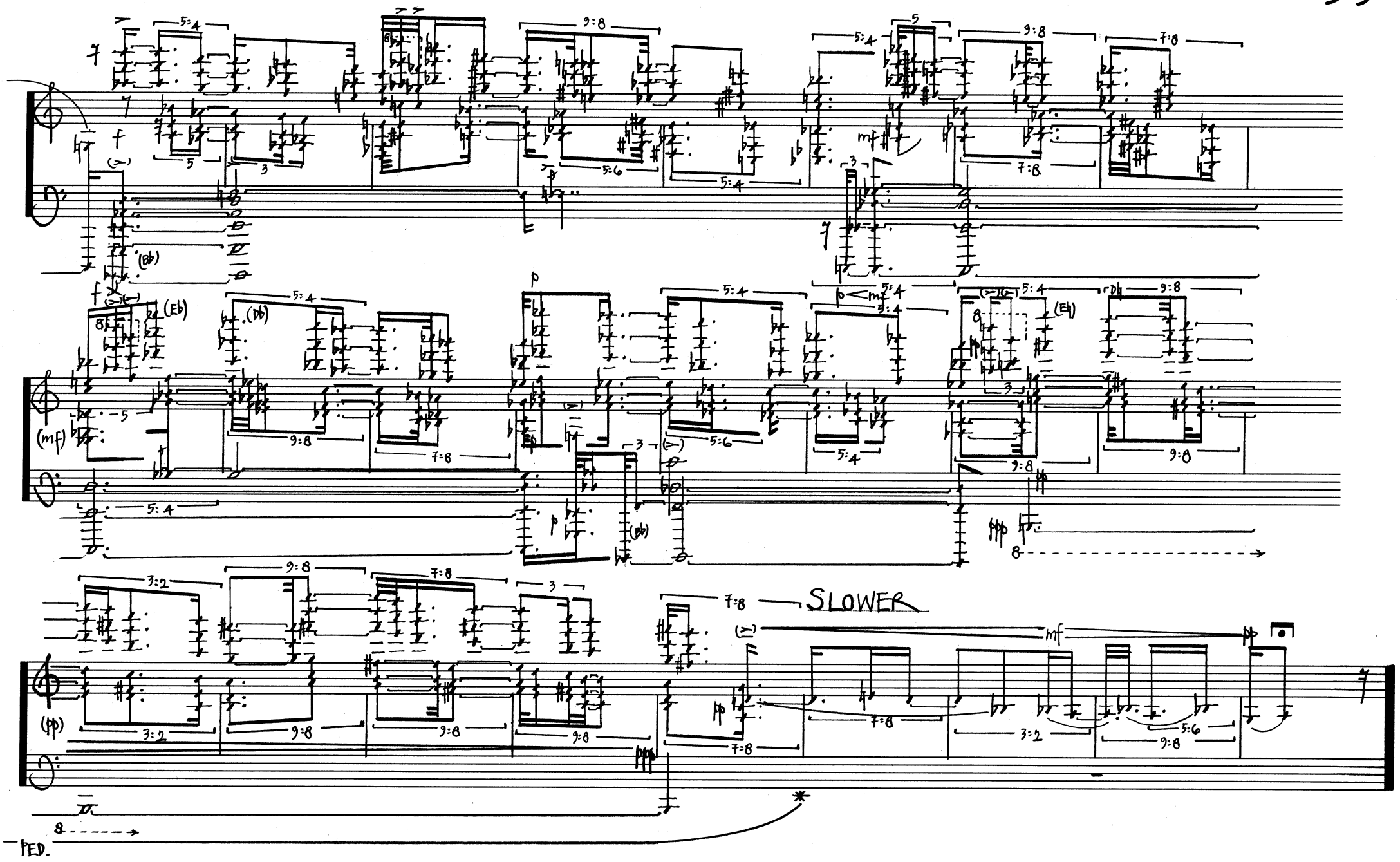

PED.
♩= 100
FLAMBOYANT
55
PED.
♩= 60
DISTANTLY


(LOCO)
PED.
ELEGANTLY
♩= 108
SIM.
♩= 60 SEPULCHRAL

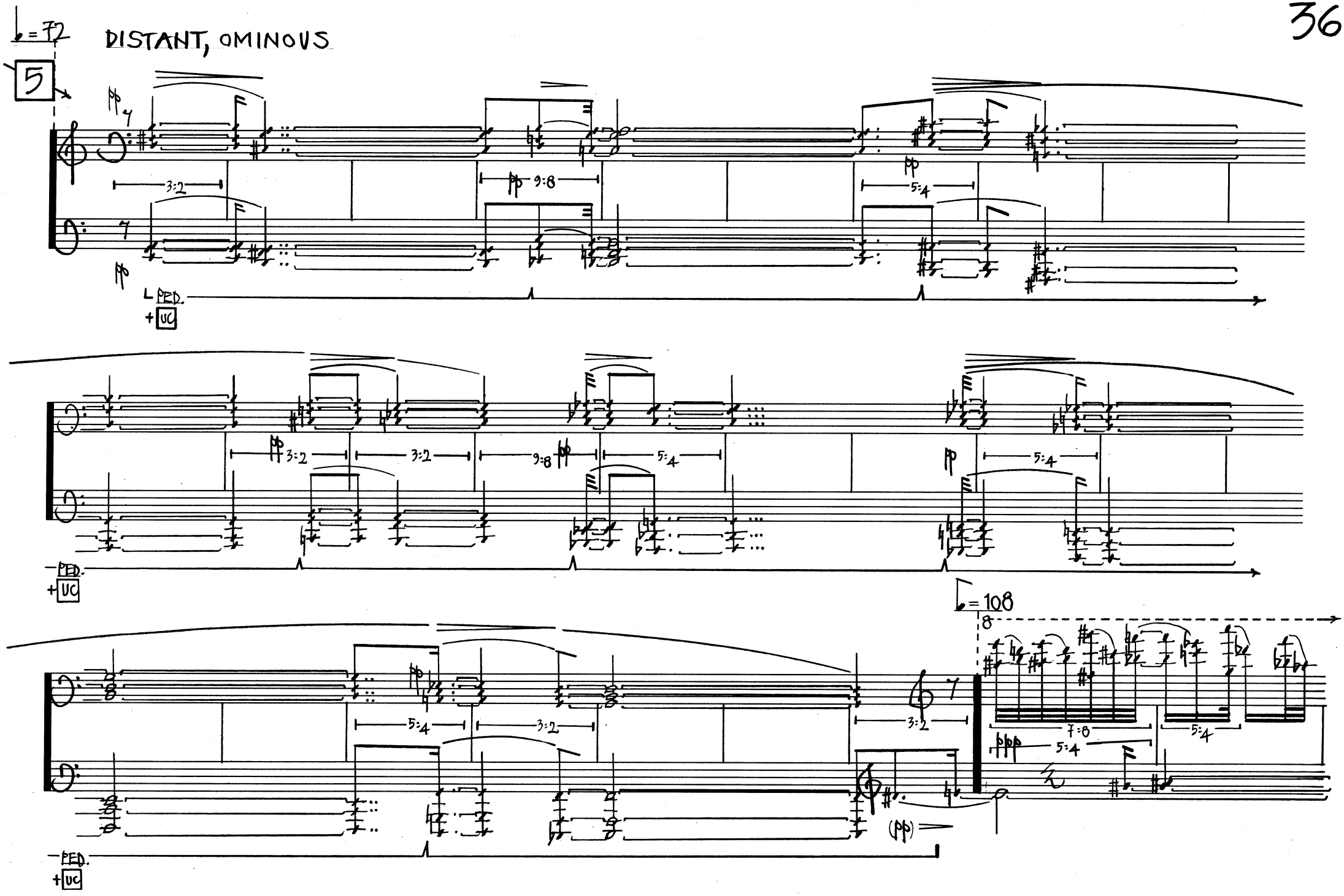

= 60
(pp)
PED.
mf
(Eq)
= 100 INTENSE
(Dq)
(LOCO)

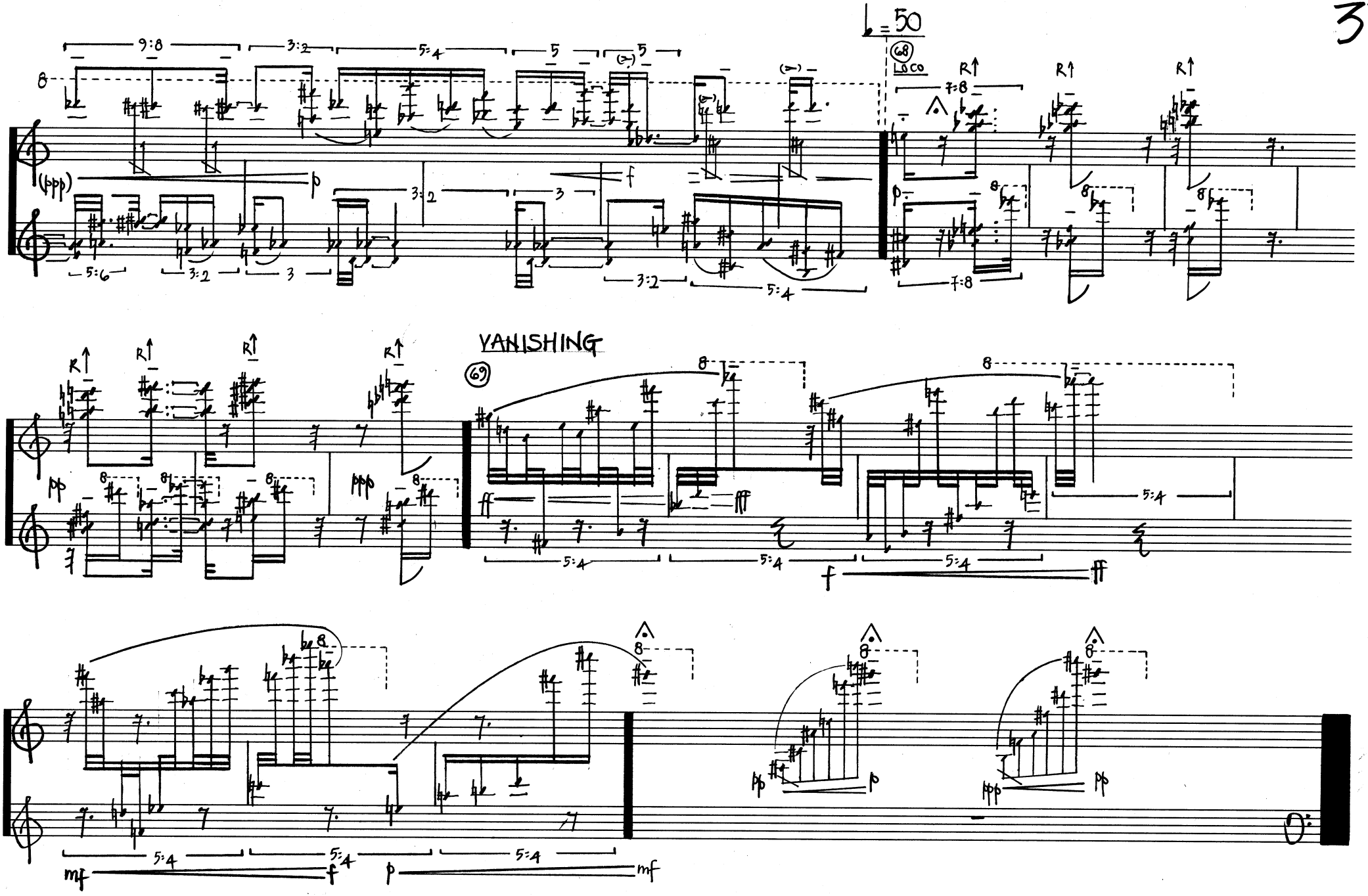

VII
7
♩= 72
UC
SIM.
CLANGOROUS
(DETACHED)
♩= 44
LOCO


SLOWER
6


SLOWER
PED.

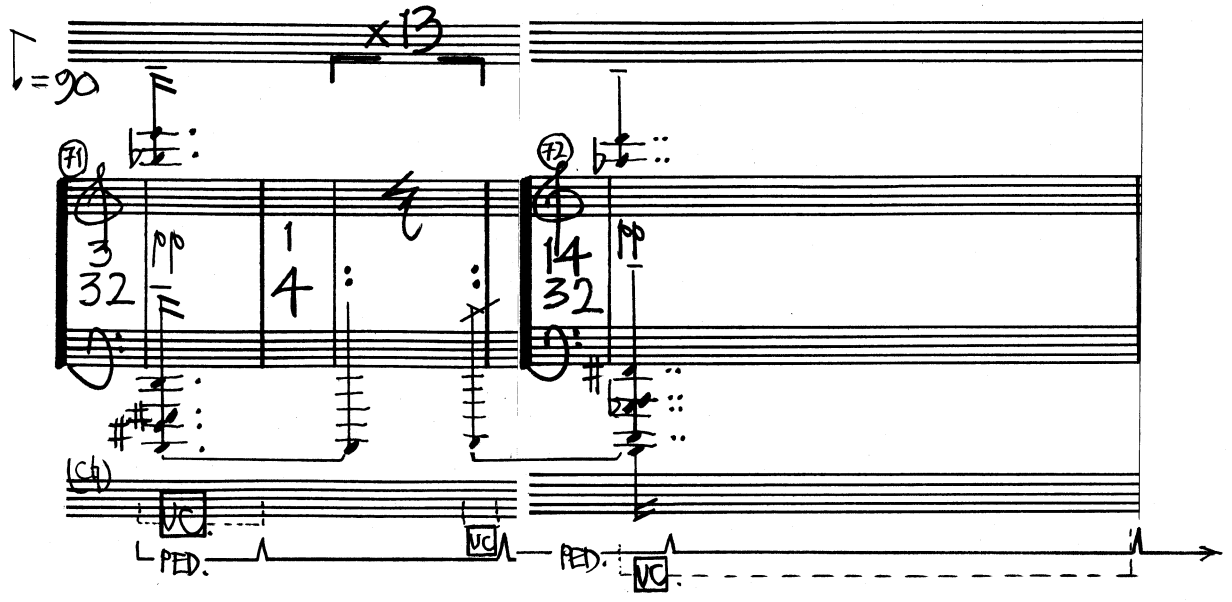
♩= 72 DISTANT, OMINOUS



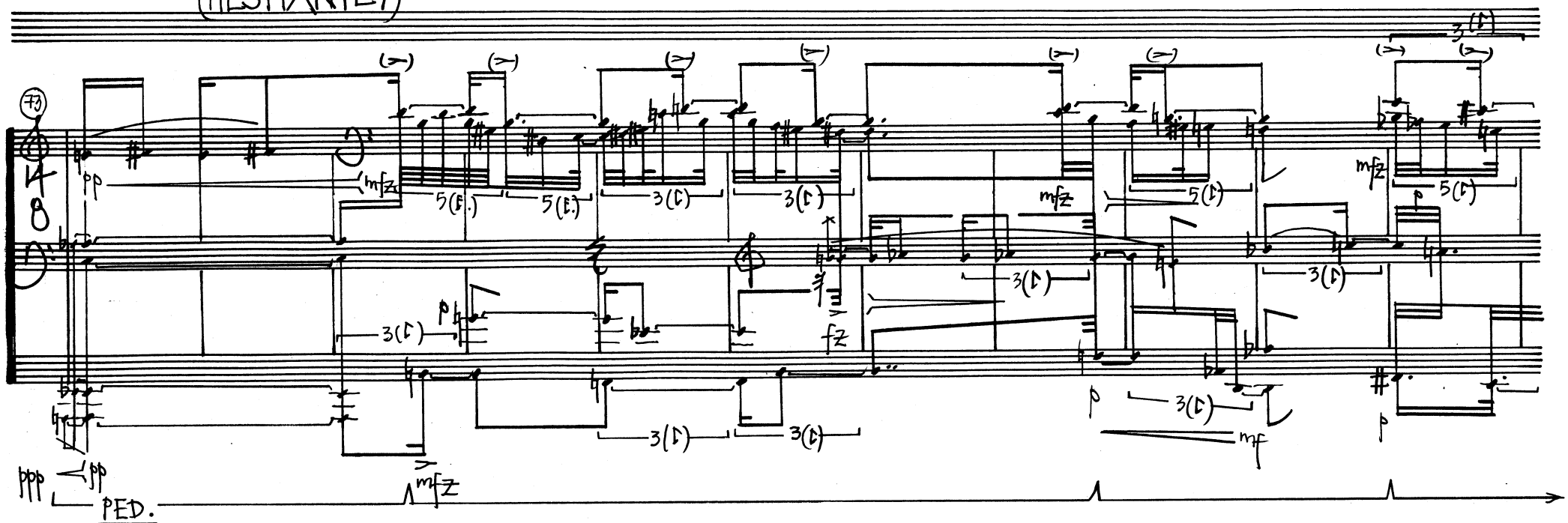

♩ = 50
68
LOCO
69
YANISHING
ATTACCA: NIGHT

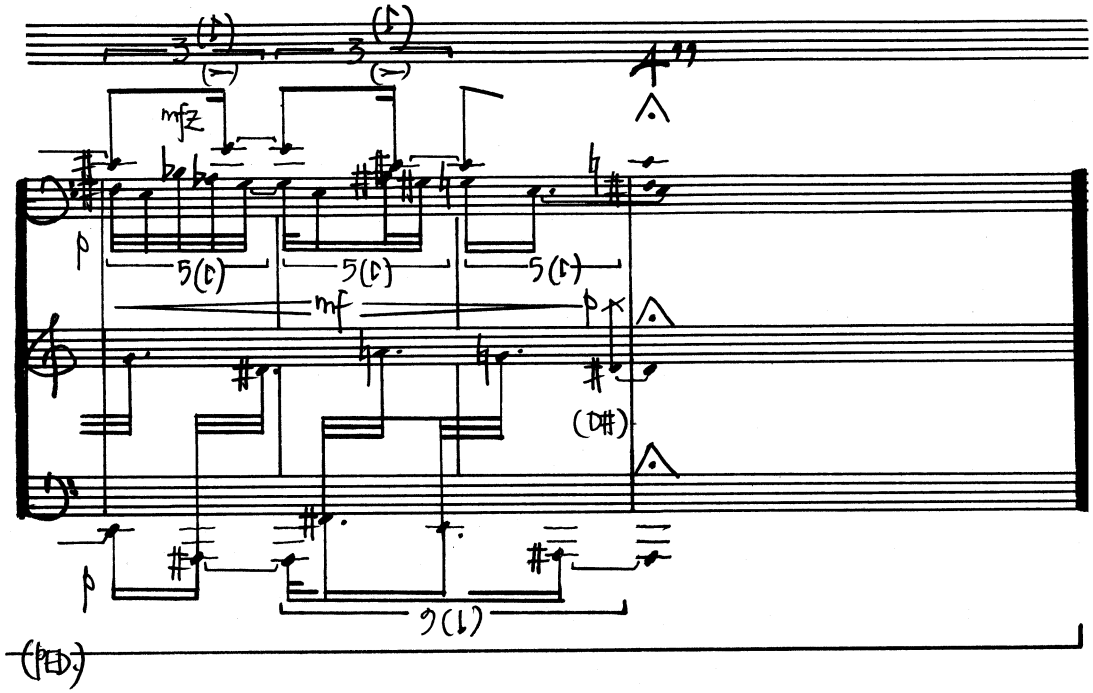
NIGHT

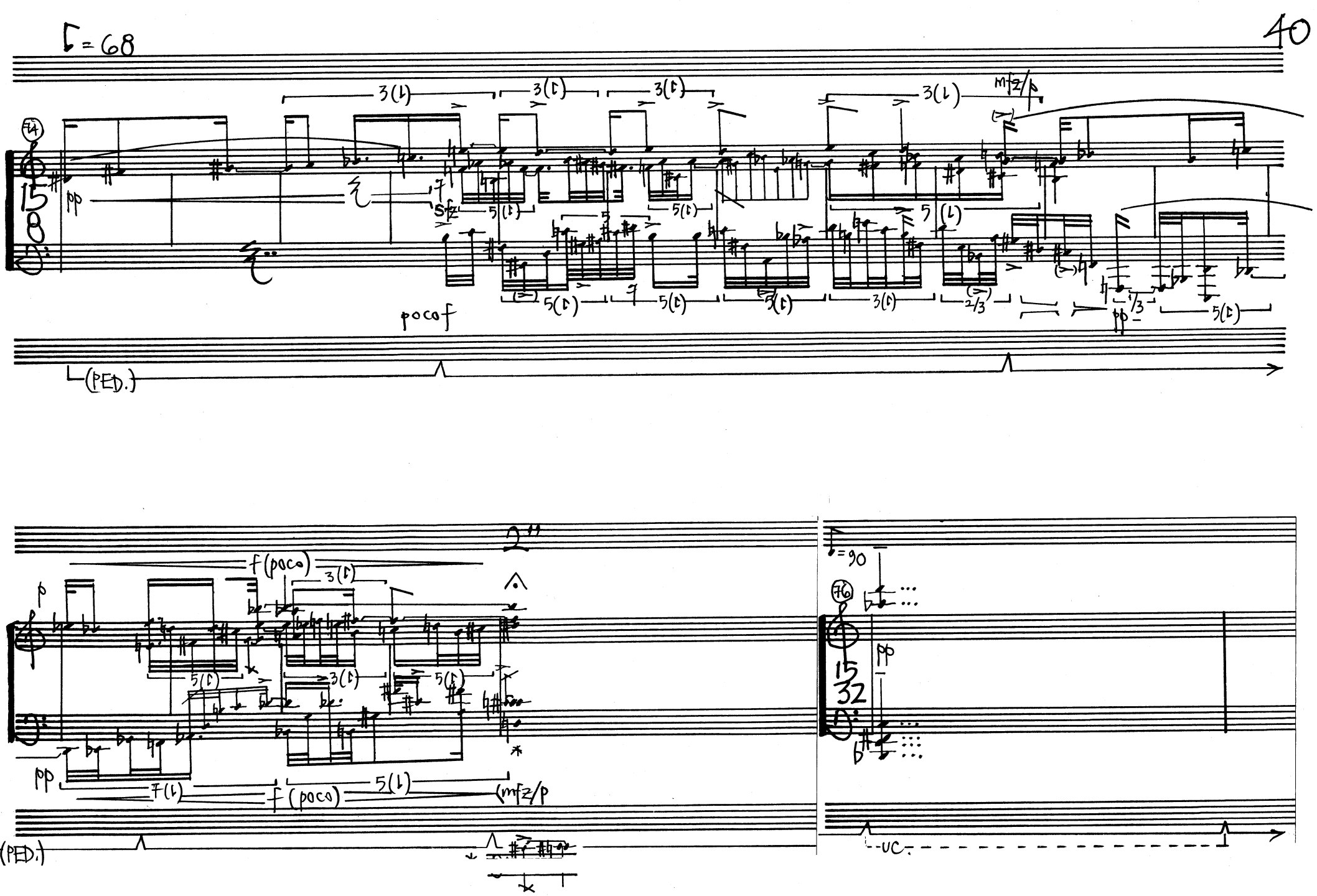
4

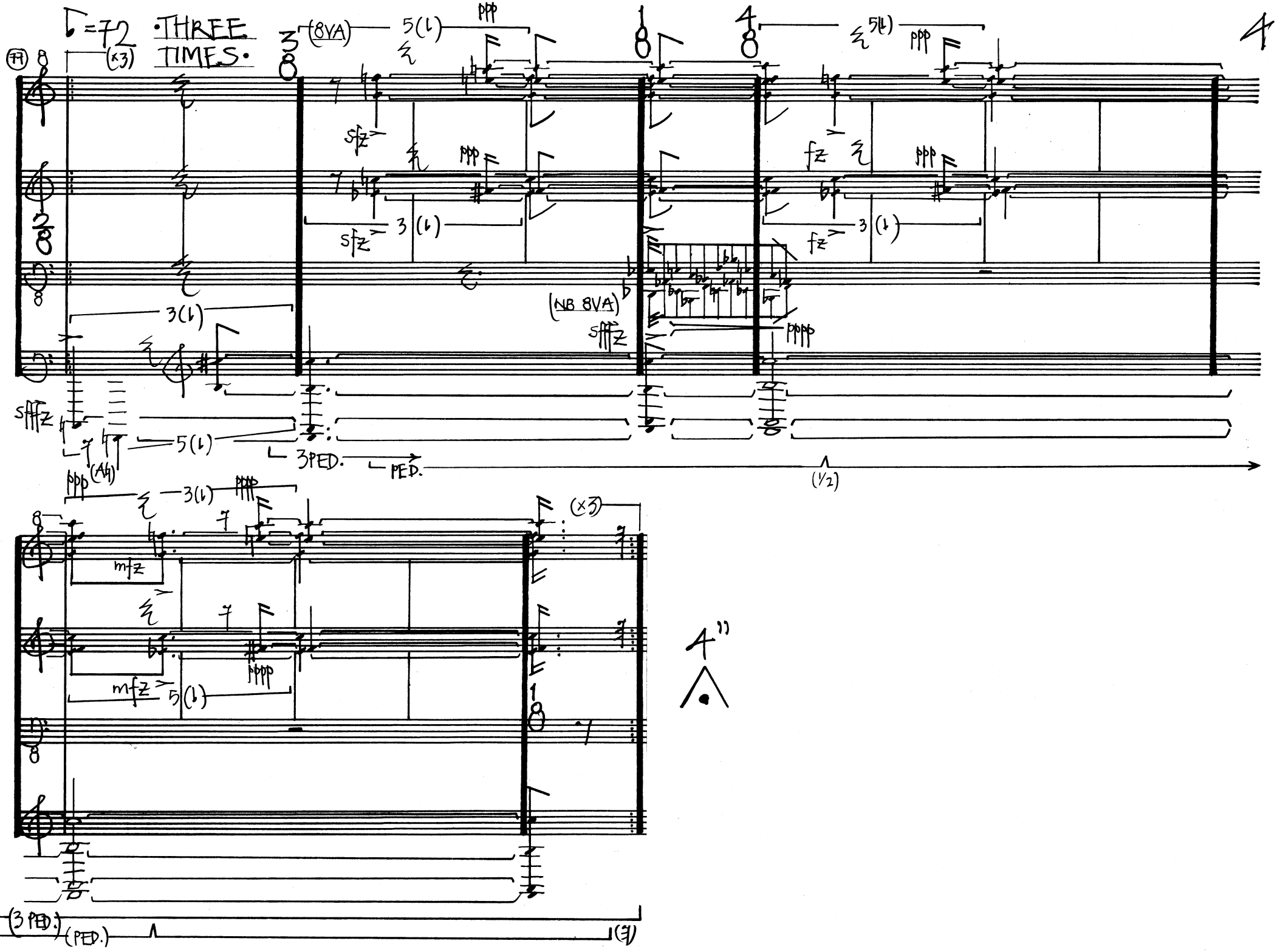


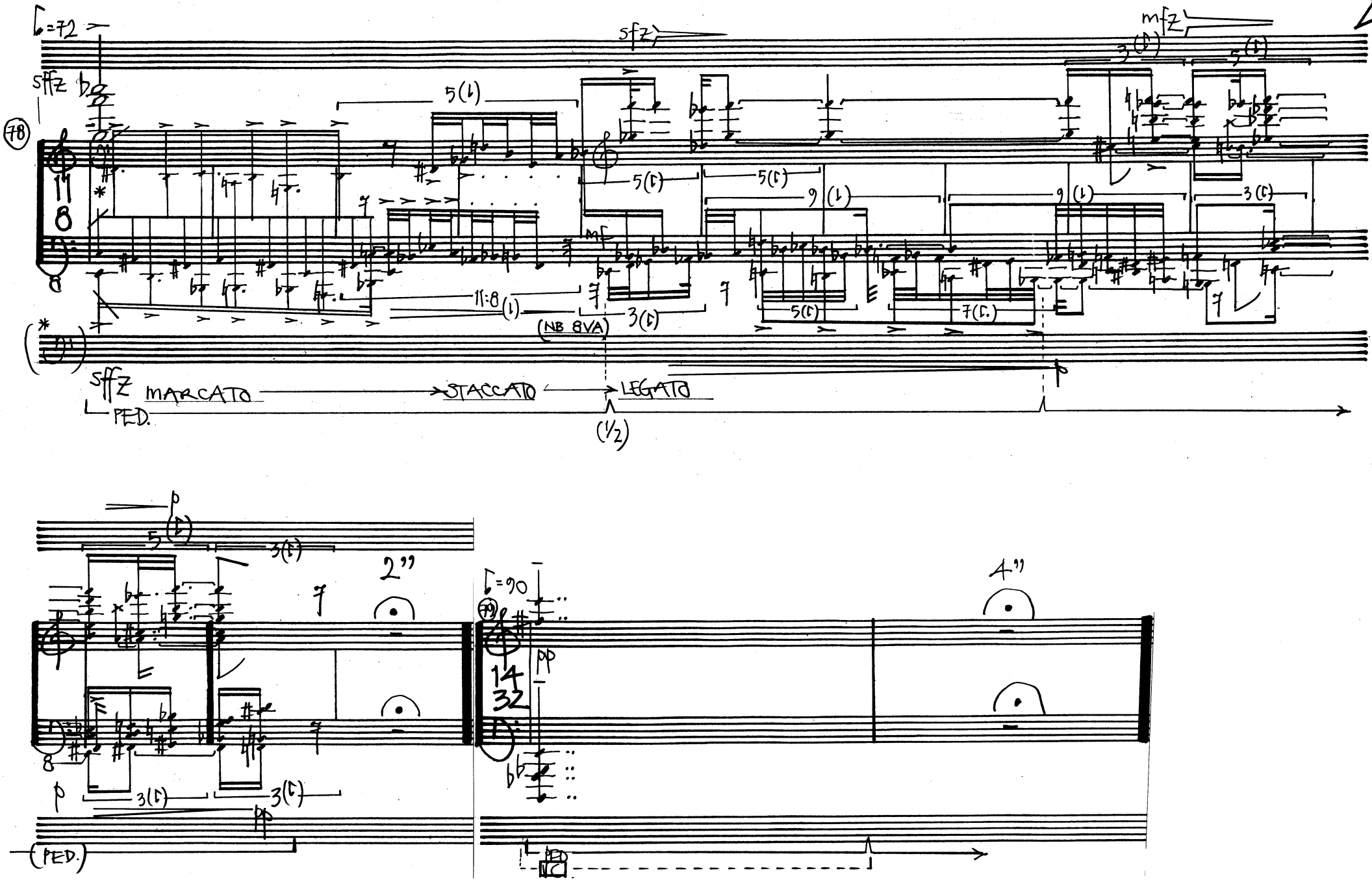
♩= 68 (HESITANTLY)

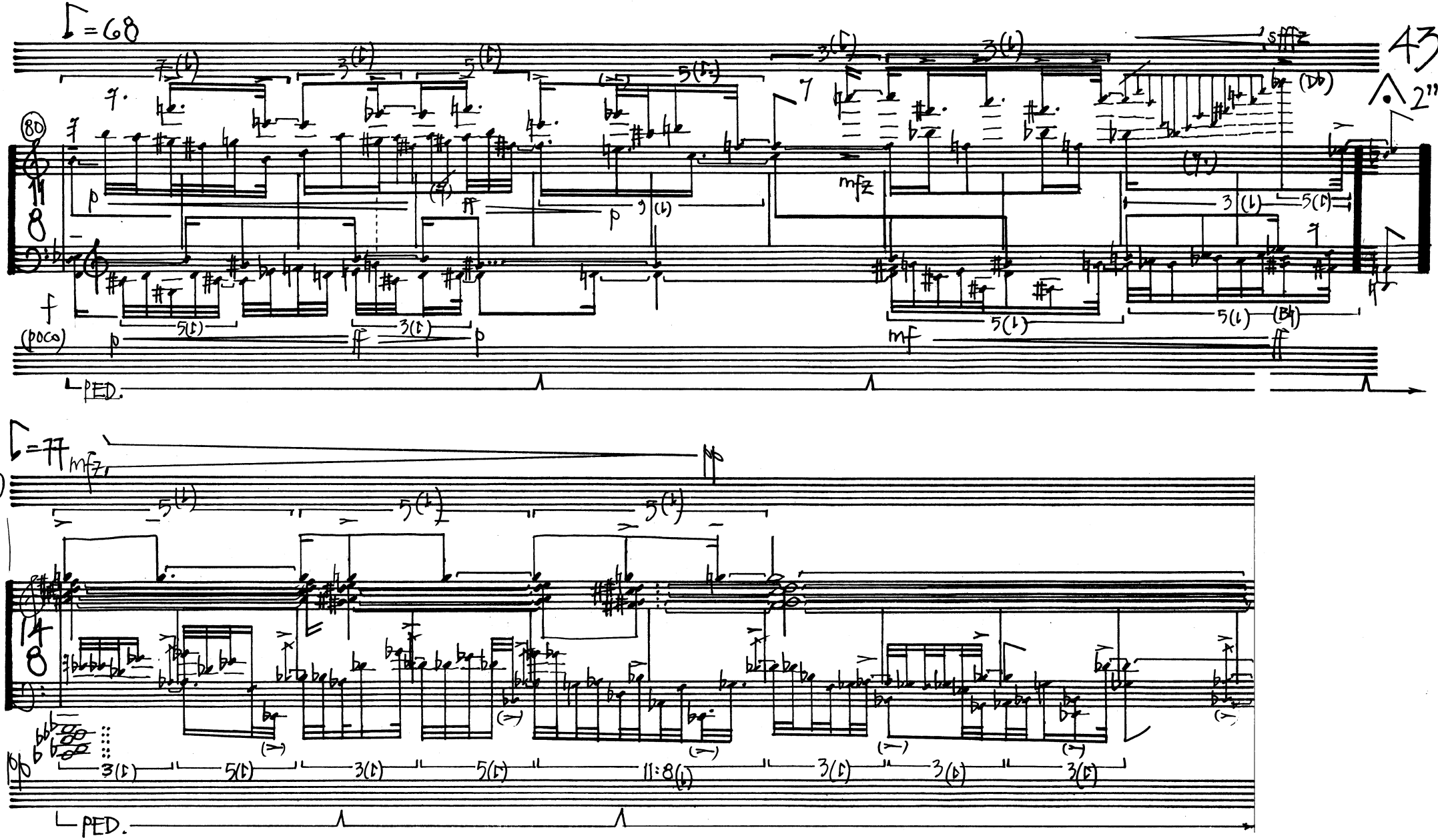


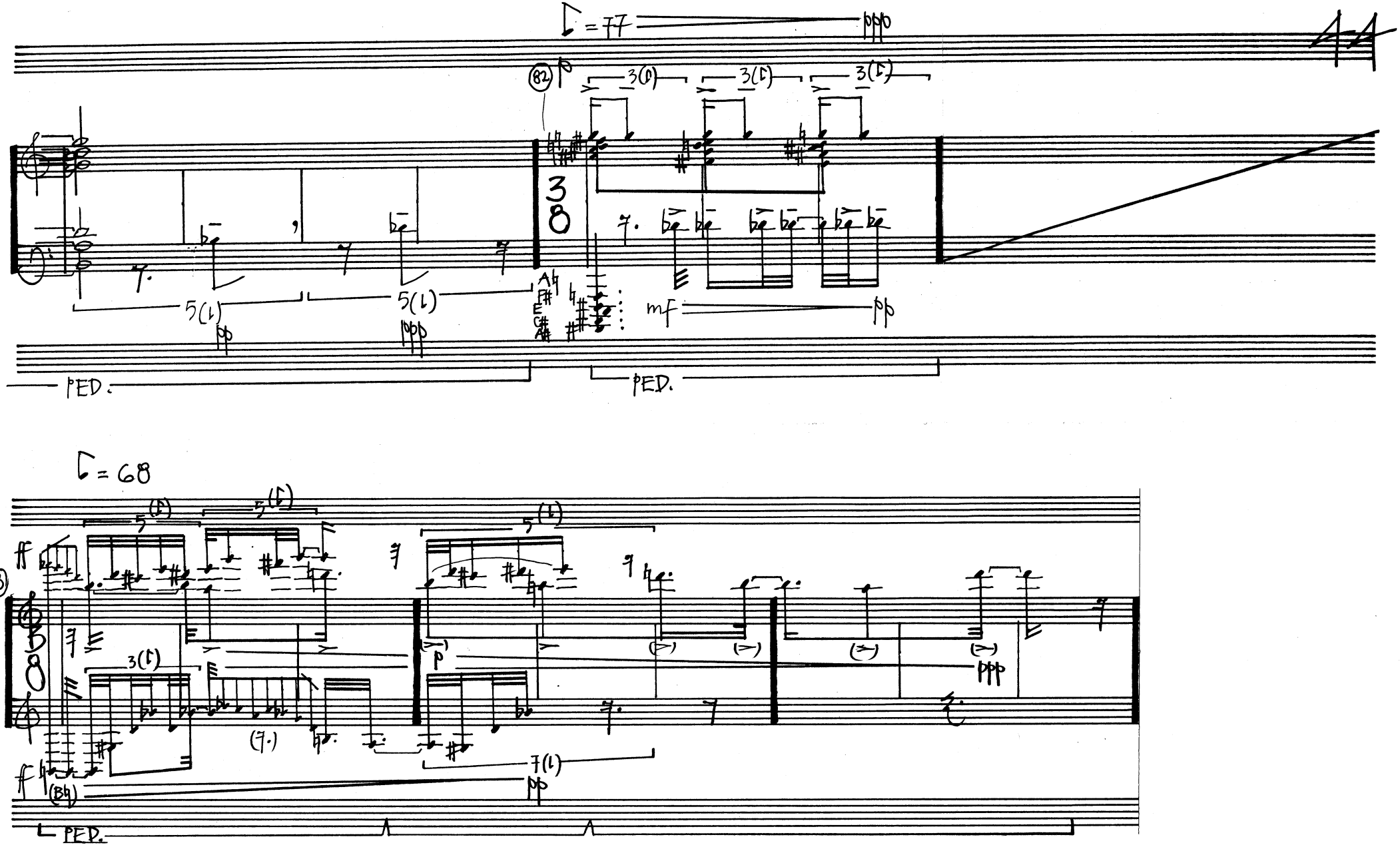



♩= 68
74
15
8
pp
sfz
poco f
mfz/p
(PED.)
2"
f (poco)
p
pp
mfz/p
(PED.)
♩= 90
76
15
32
pp
UC

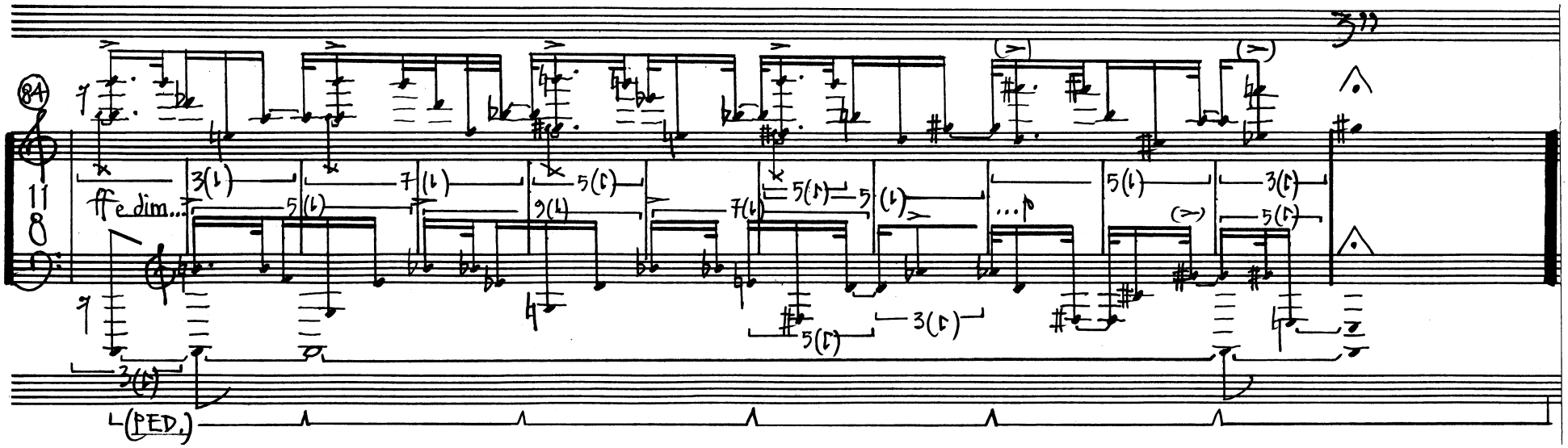

♪=72
THREE TIMES
(×3)
(8VA)
5(♭)
ppp
sfz
3(♭)
fz
(NB 8VA)
sfffz
pppp
3PED.
PED.
(1/2)
(A♮)
mfz
(×3)
4"
(3 PED.)
(PED.)

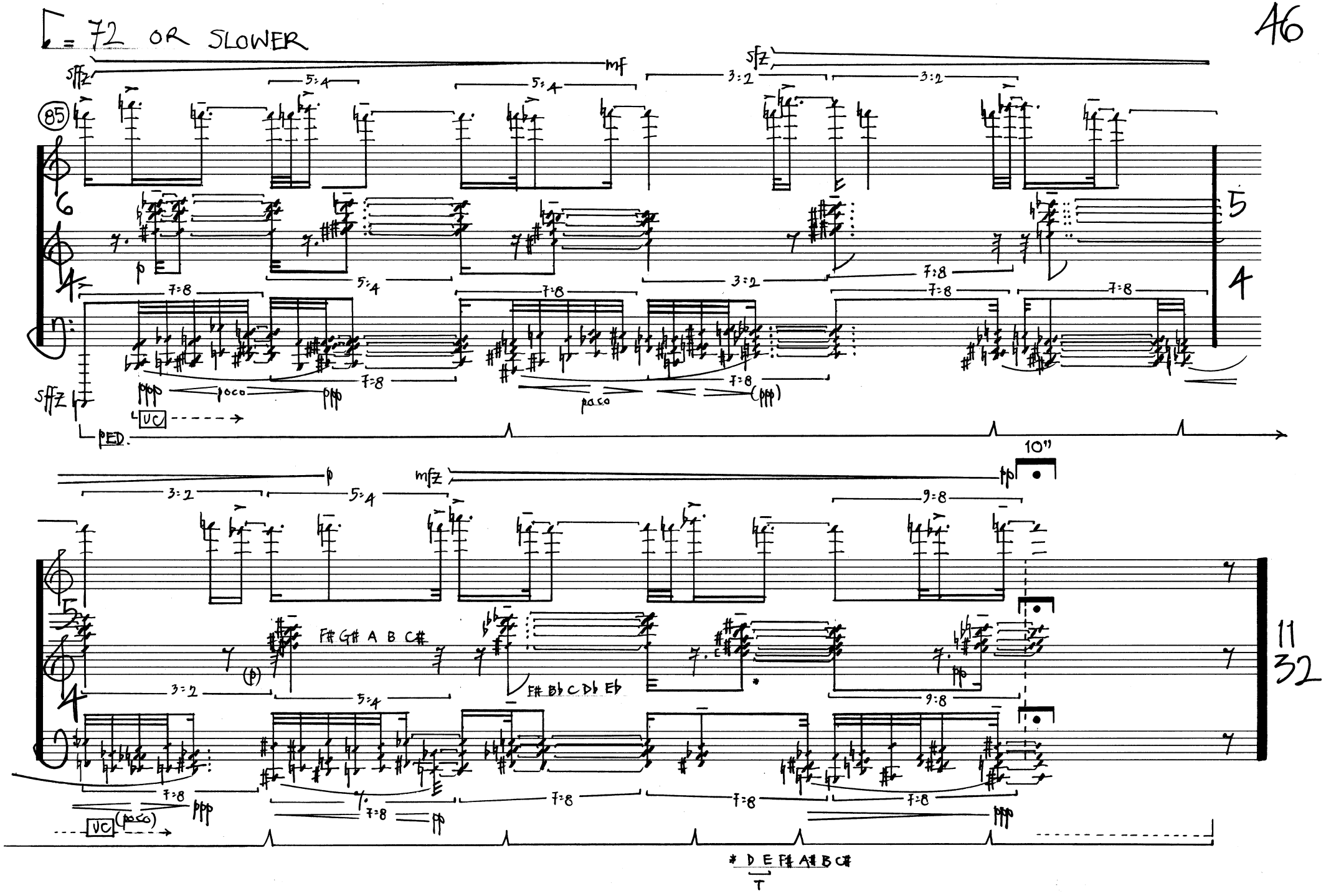

♩=72
sffz
sfz
mfz
78
11
8
5(♩)
5(♩)
5(♩)
9(♩)
9(♩)
3(♩)
3(♩)
5(♩)
11:8(♩)
3(♩)
5(♩)
7(♩.)
(NB 8VA)
sffz
MARCATO
STACCATO
LEGATO
PED.
(1/2)
p
5(♩)
3(♩)
2"
♩=90
79
14
32
pp
4"
p
3(♩)
3(♩)
pp
(PED.)
PED

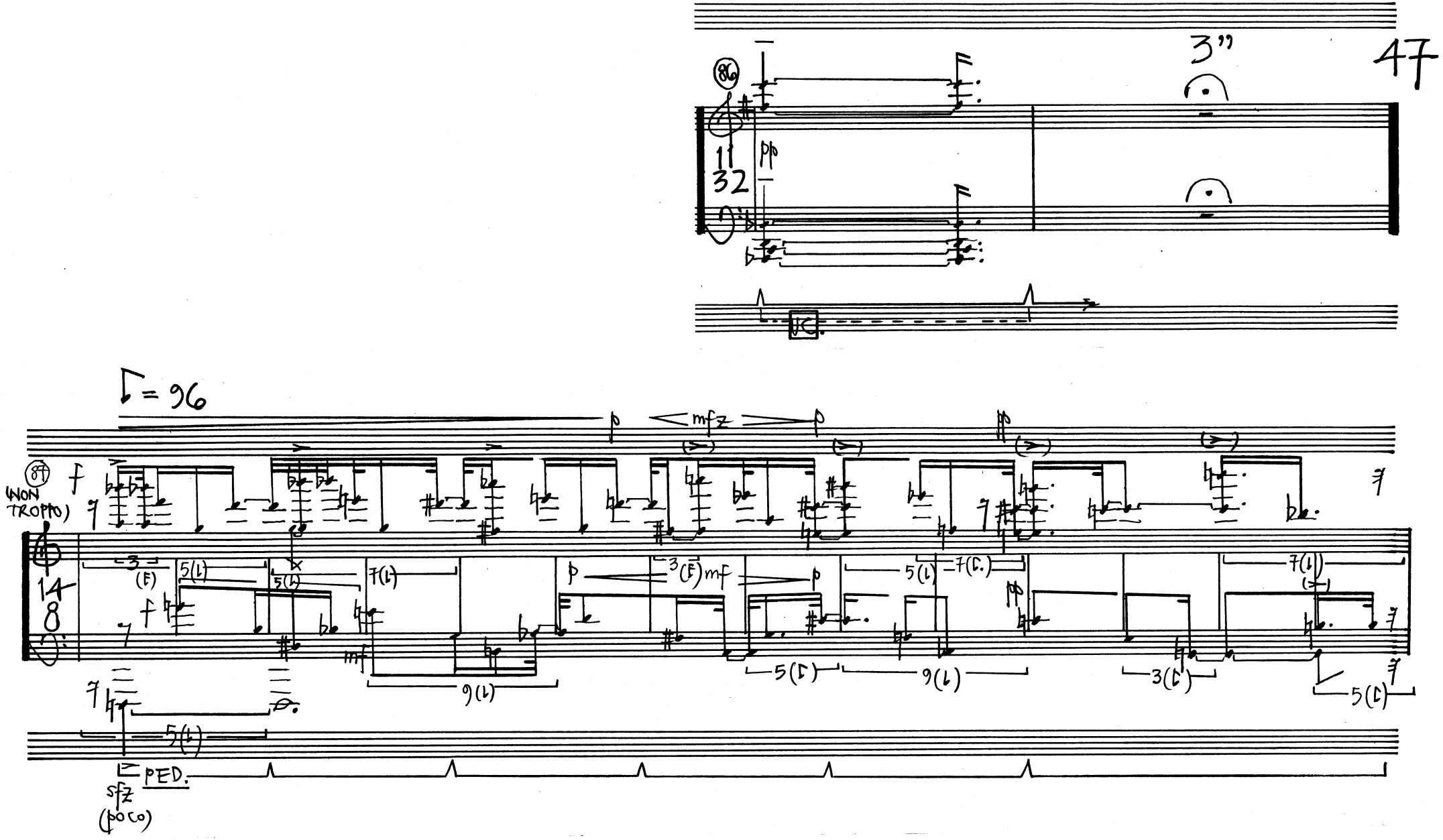

♩=68
80
81
Gb
F#
D#
C#
A#
PED.
PED.

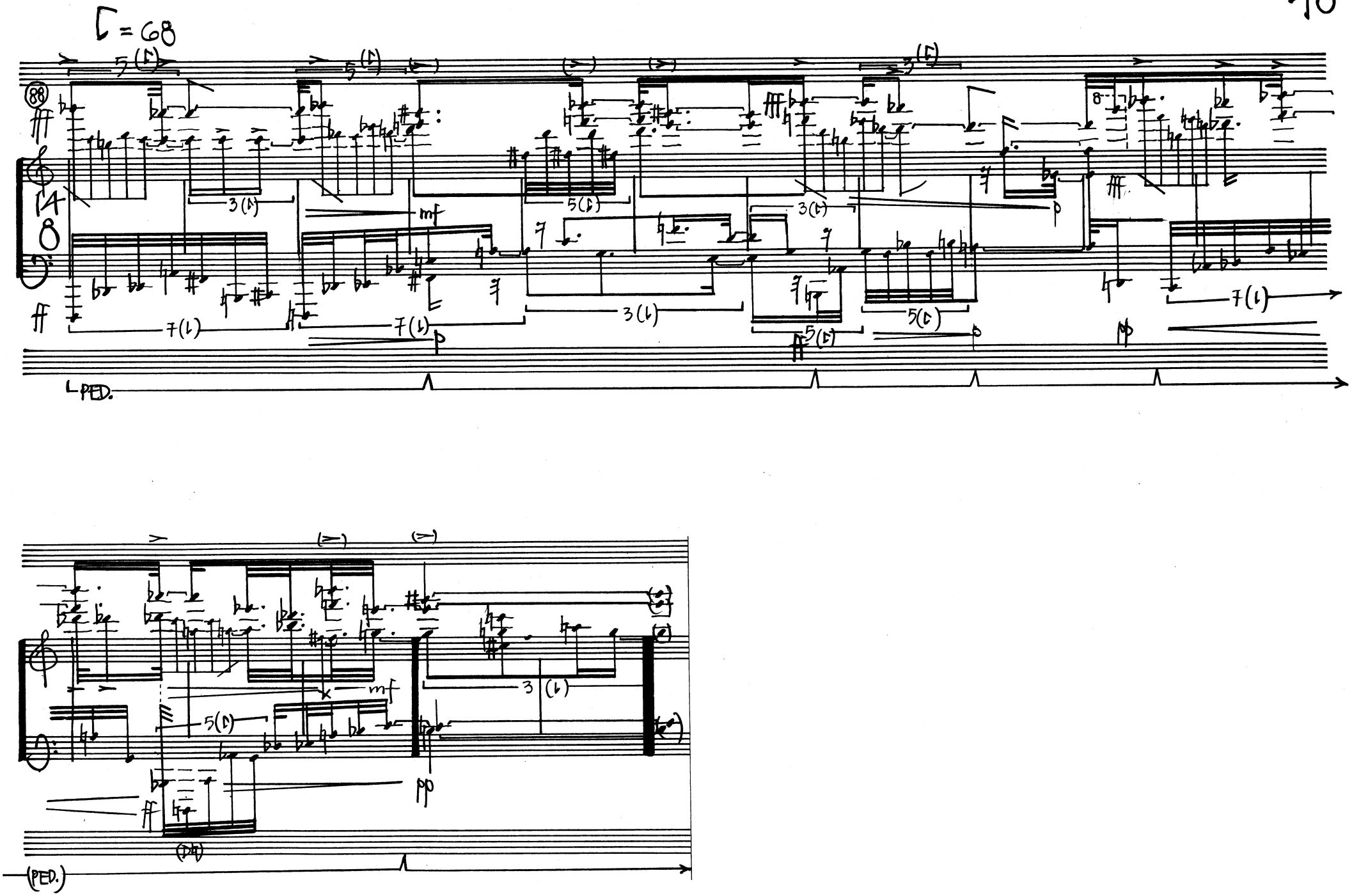

♩=77
82
3(𝅗𝅥)
3(𝅗𝅥)
3(𝅗𝅥)
5(𝅗𝅥)
5(𝅗𝅥)
mf
pp
PED.
PED.
♩=68
83
5(𝅗𝅥)
5(𝅗𝅥)
5(𝅗𝅥)
ff
3(𝅗𝅥)
(9.)
7(𝅗𝅥)
p
ppp
ff
(Bb)
pp
PED.

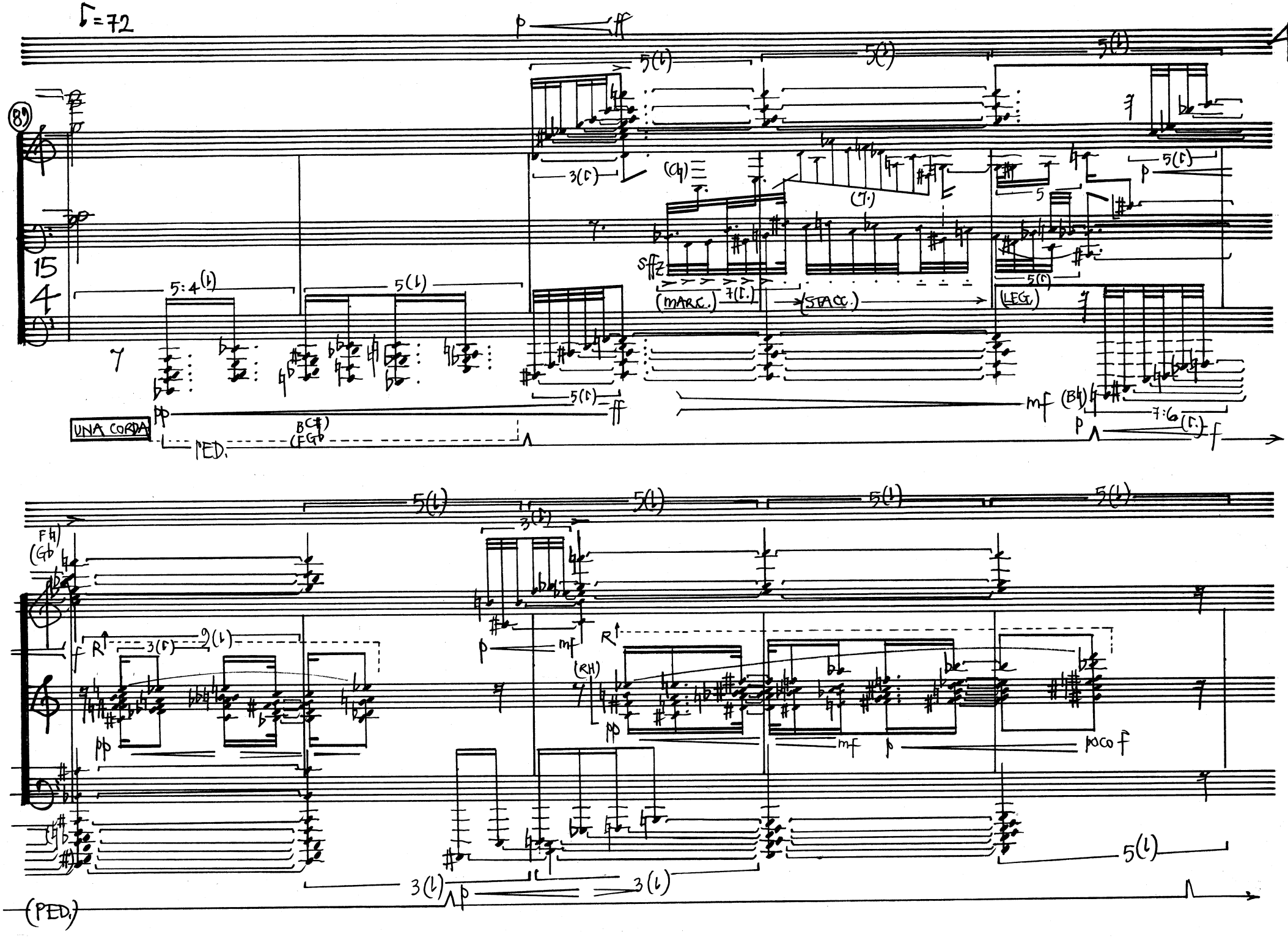
♩ = 96

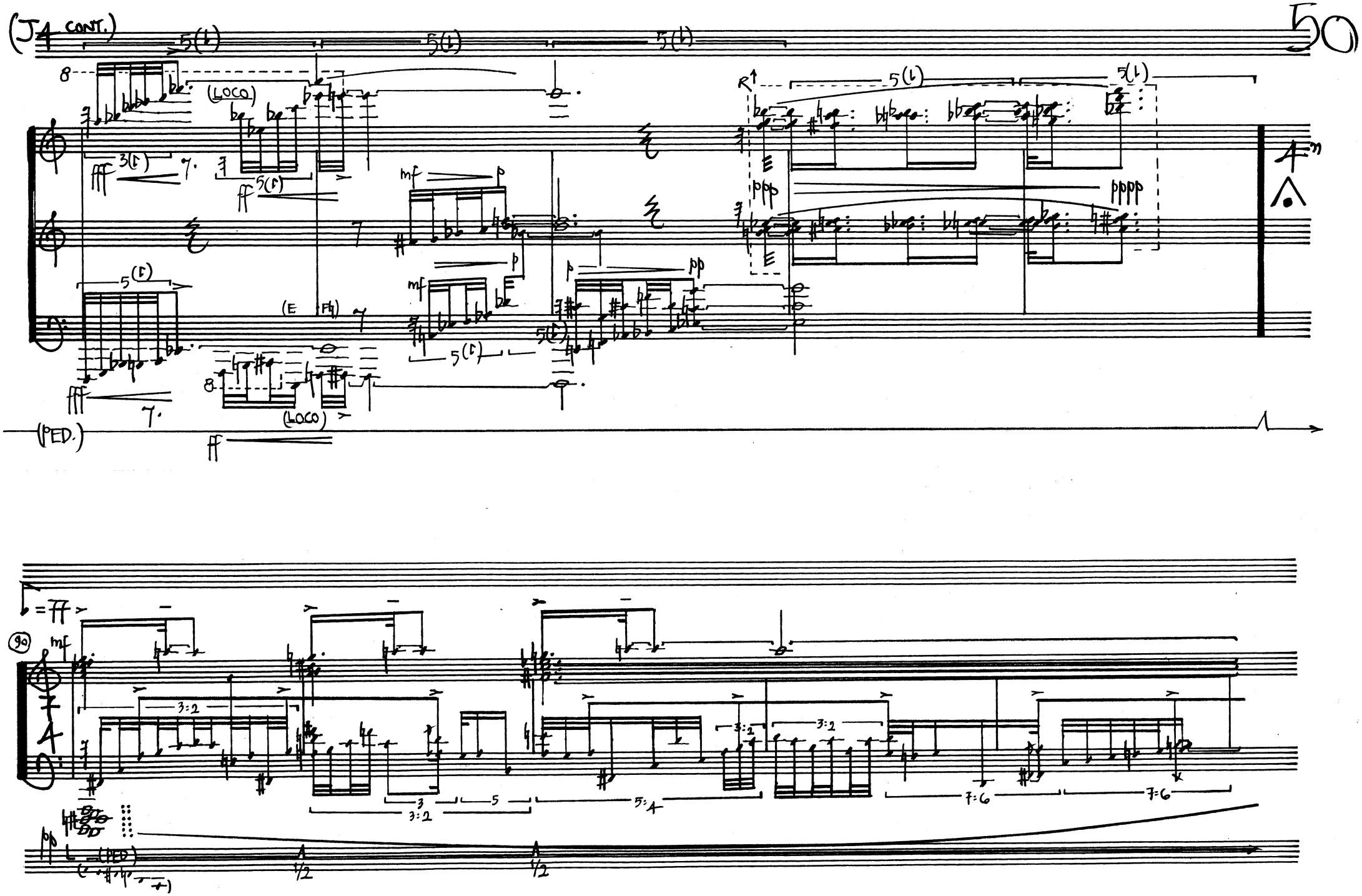


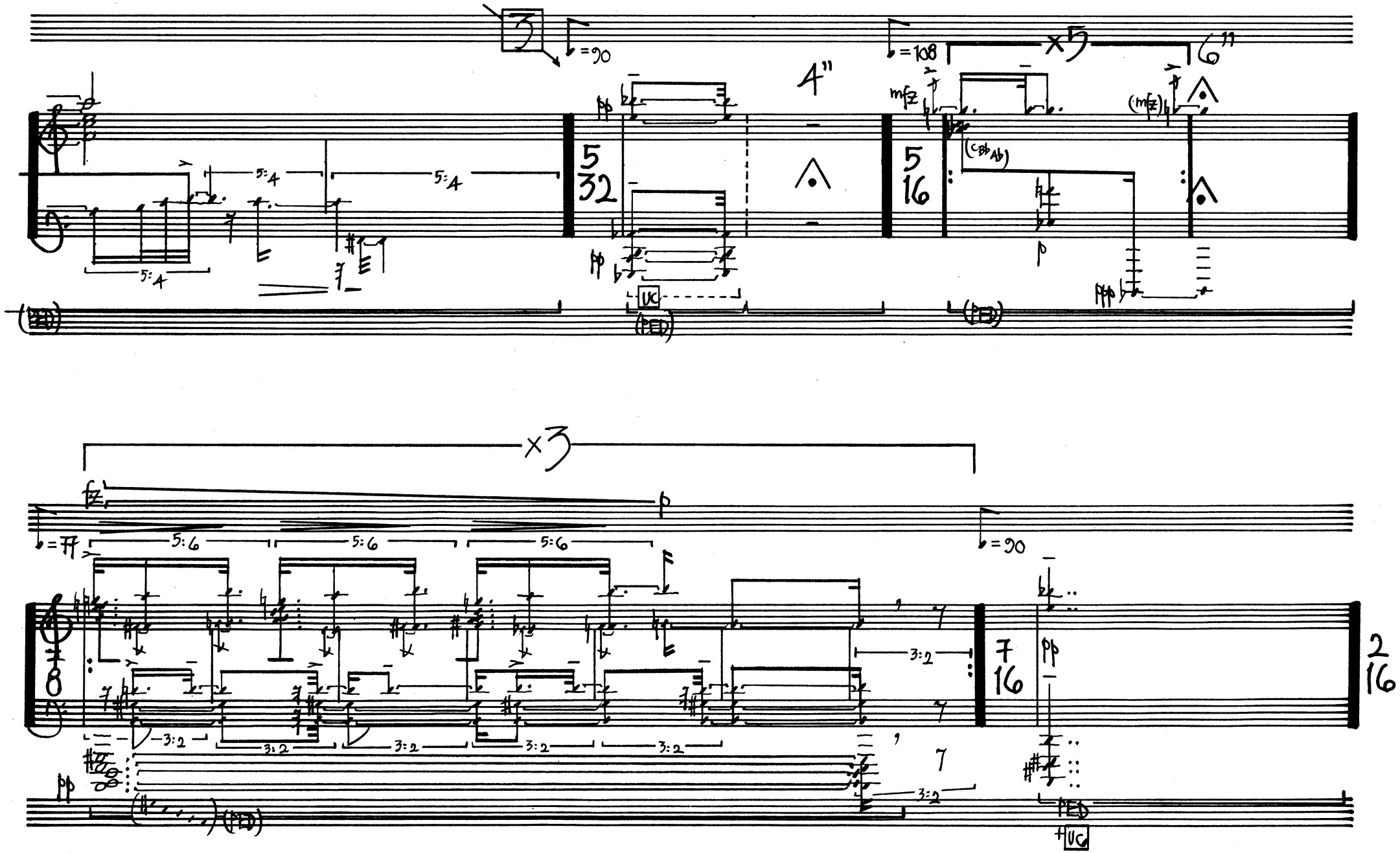

♩= 72 OR SLOWER
85
sffz
mf
sfz
5:4
3:2
7:8
p
ppp
poco
(ppp)
VC
PED.
10"
mfz
pp
9:8
F# G# A B C#
F# B♭ C D♭ E♭
(p)
(poco)
* D E F# A# B C#
T

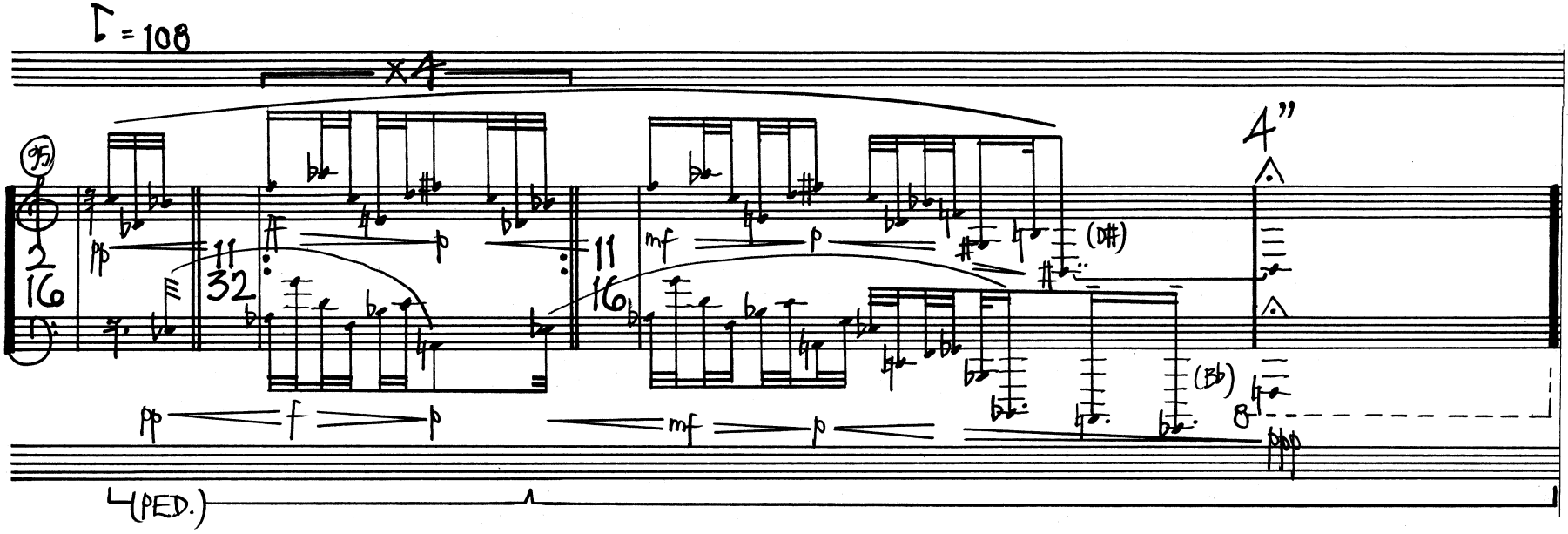

86
11
32
pp
3"
UC
= 96
87
(NON TROPPO)
14
8
f
mfz
mf
PED.
sfz
(poco)

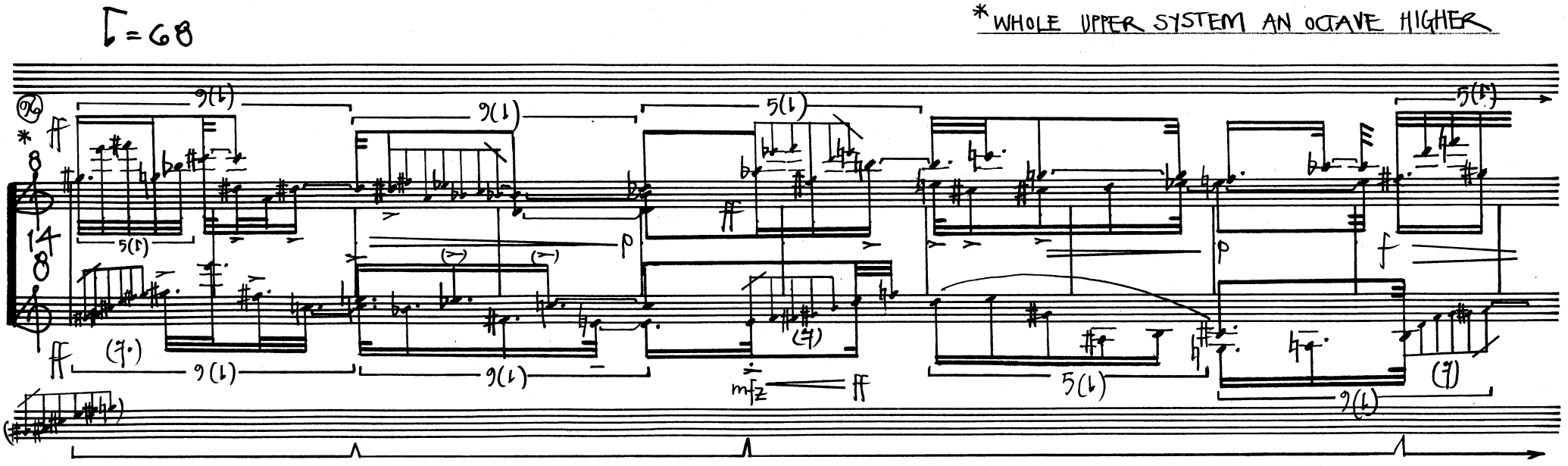

♩ = 68
88
14
8
mf
pp
PED.
(PED.)


♩=72
89
15
4
UNA CORDA
PED.
(MARC.)
(STACC.)
(LEGG.)
(RH)
poco f
(PED.)

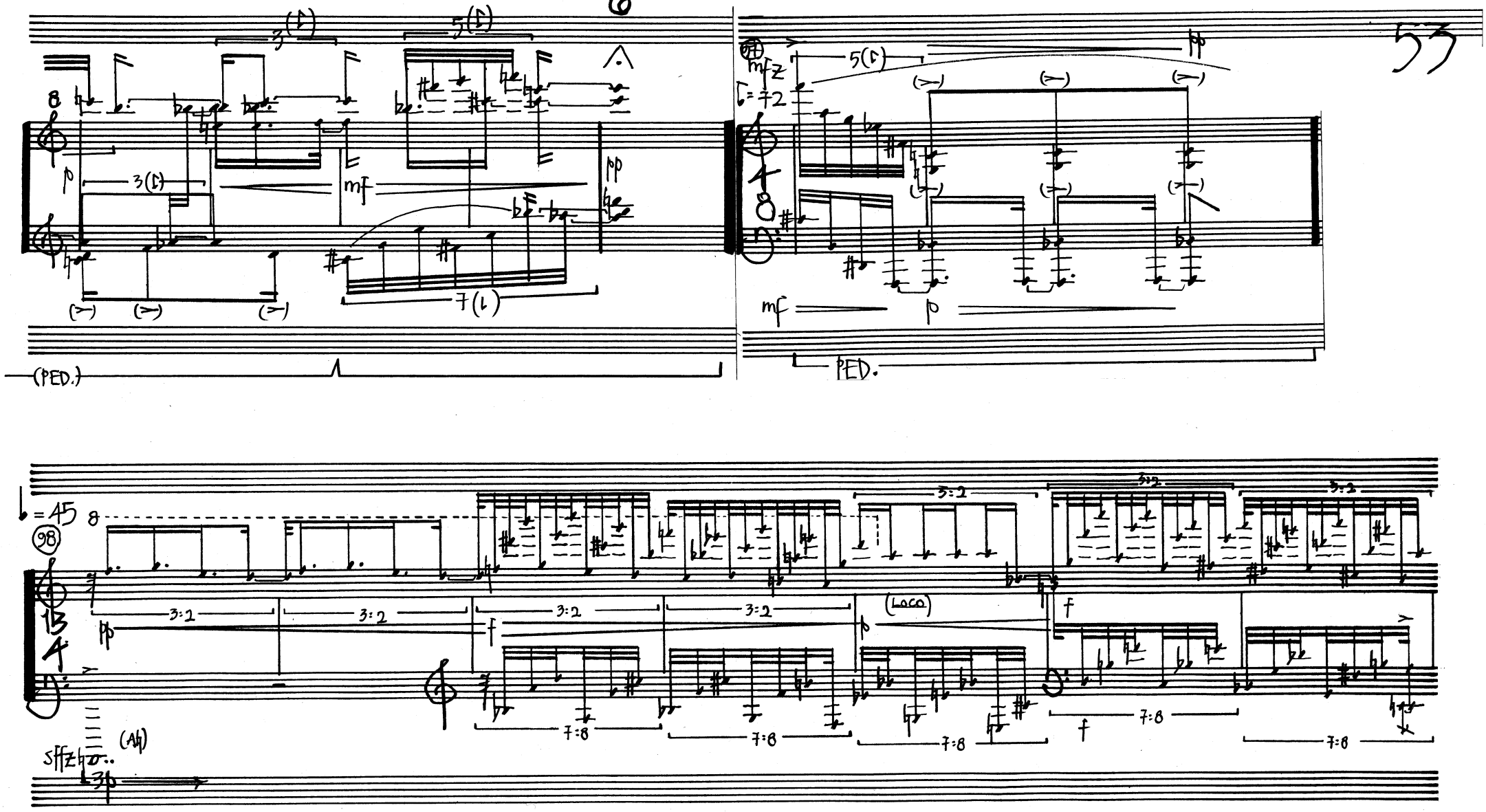

(J4 CONT.)
(LOCO)
(PED.)
(E F♮)
(LOCO)
(PED)

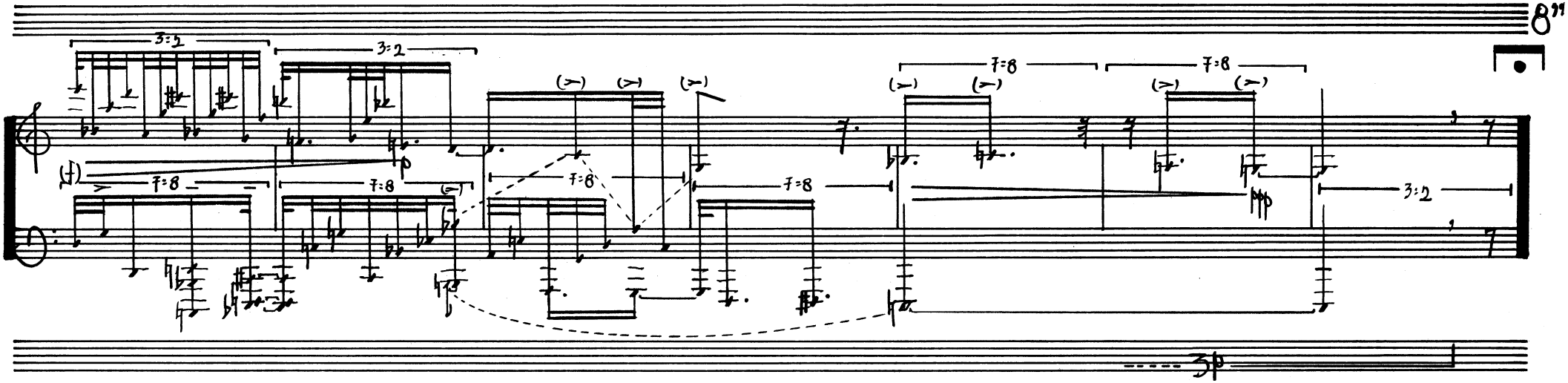

3
=90
=108
x5
6"
4"
mfz
(mfz)
5:4
5:4
5:4
5
32
5
16
pp
pp
p
ppp
UC
(PED)
(PED)
(PED)
x3
fz
p
=77
5:6
5:6
5:6
=90
7
8
7
16
2
16
3:2
3:2
3:2
3:2
3:2
3:2
pp
pp
(PED)
PED
UC


♩= 108
4"
(PED.)

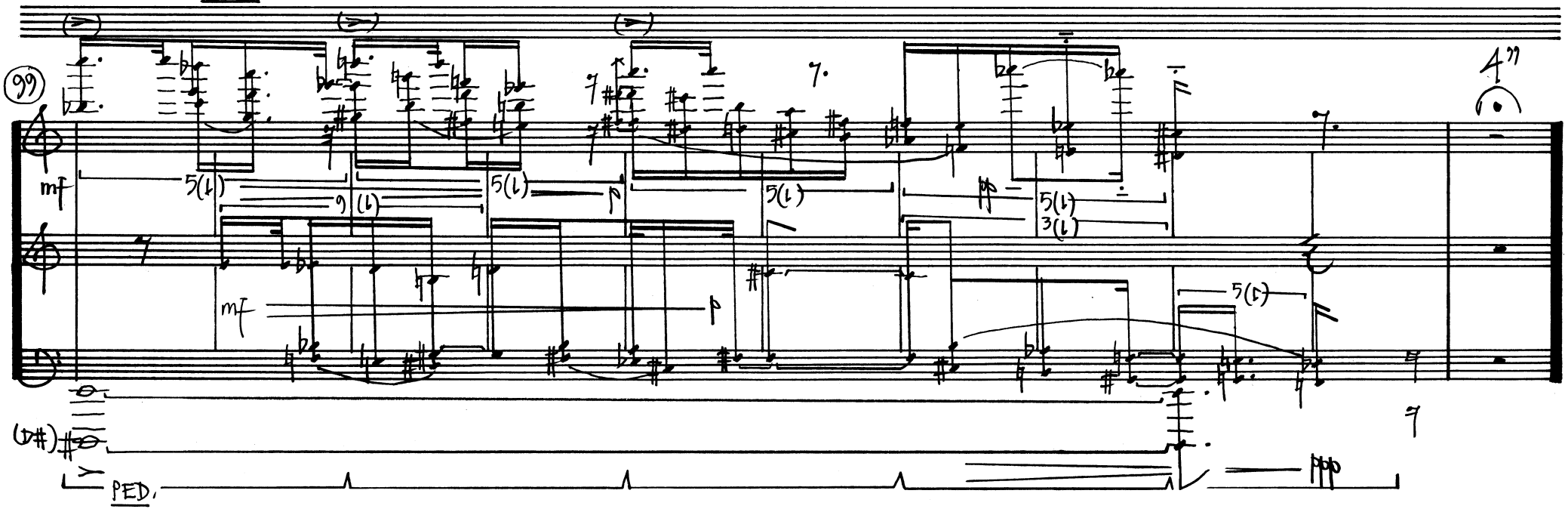

♩= 68
* WHOLE UPPER SYSTEM AN OCTAVE HIGHER

6"

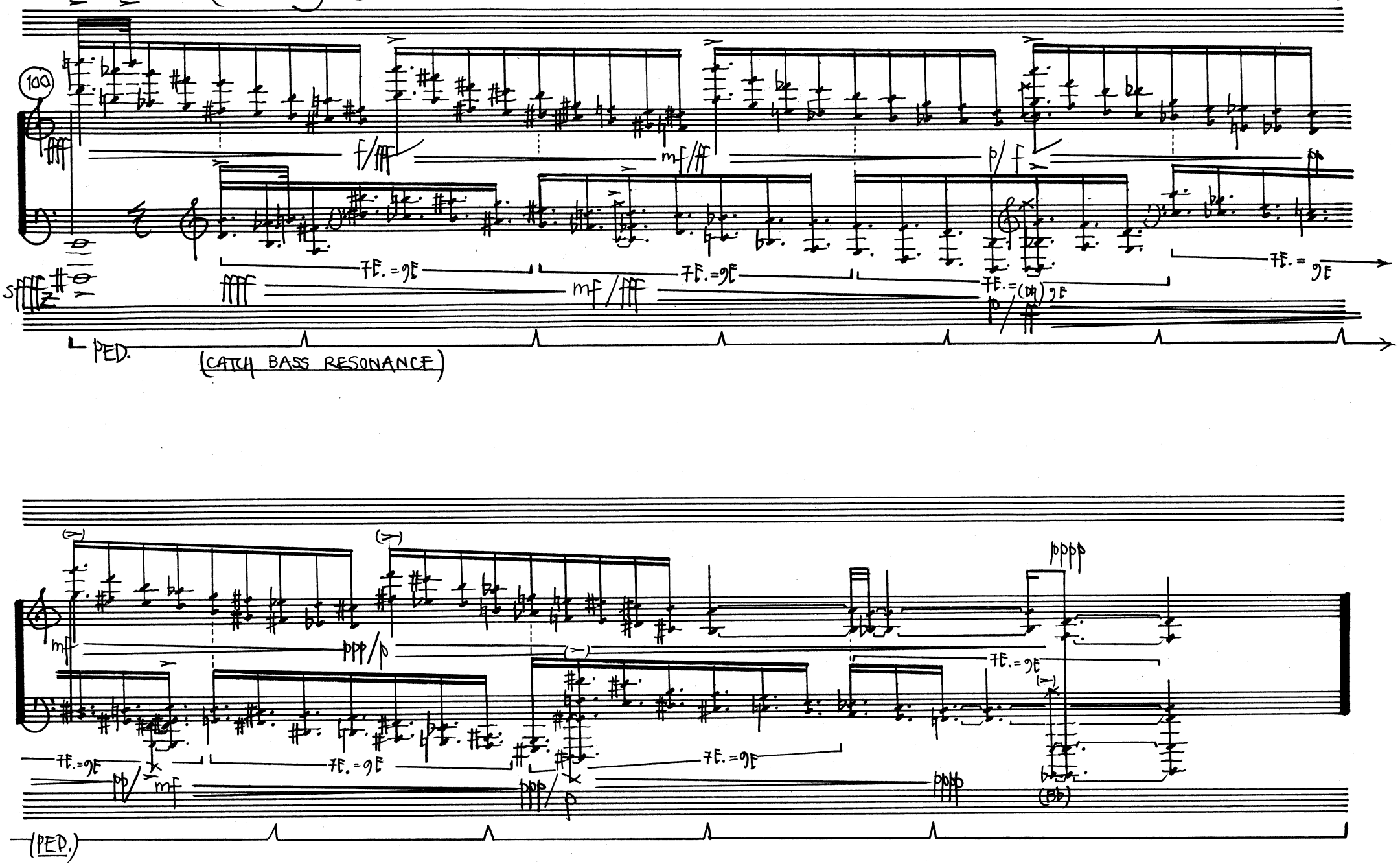




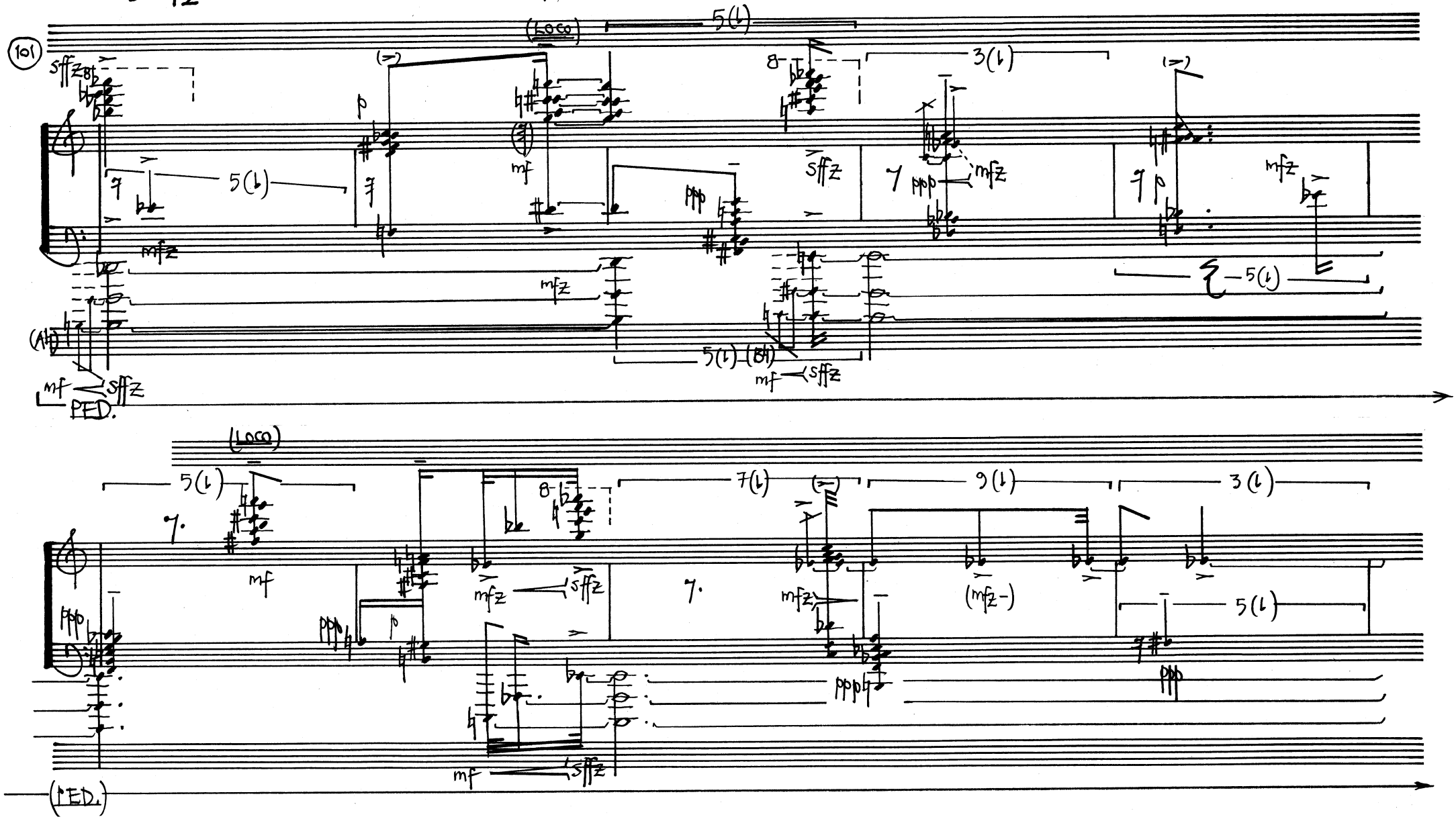
♩ = 76

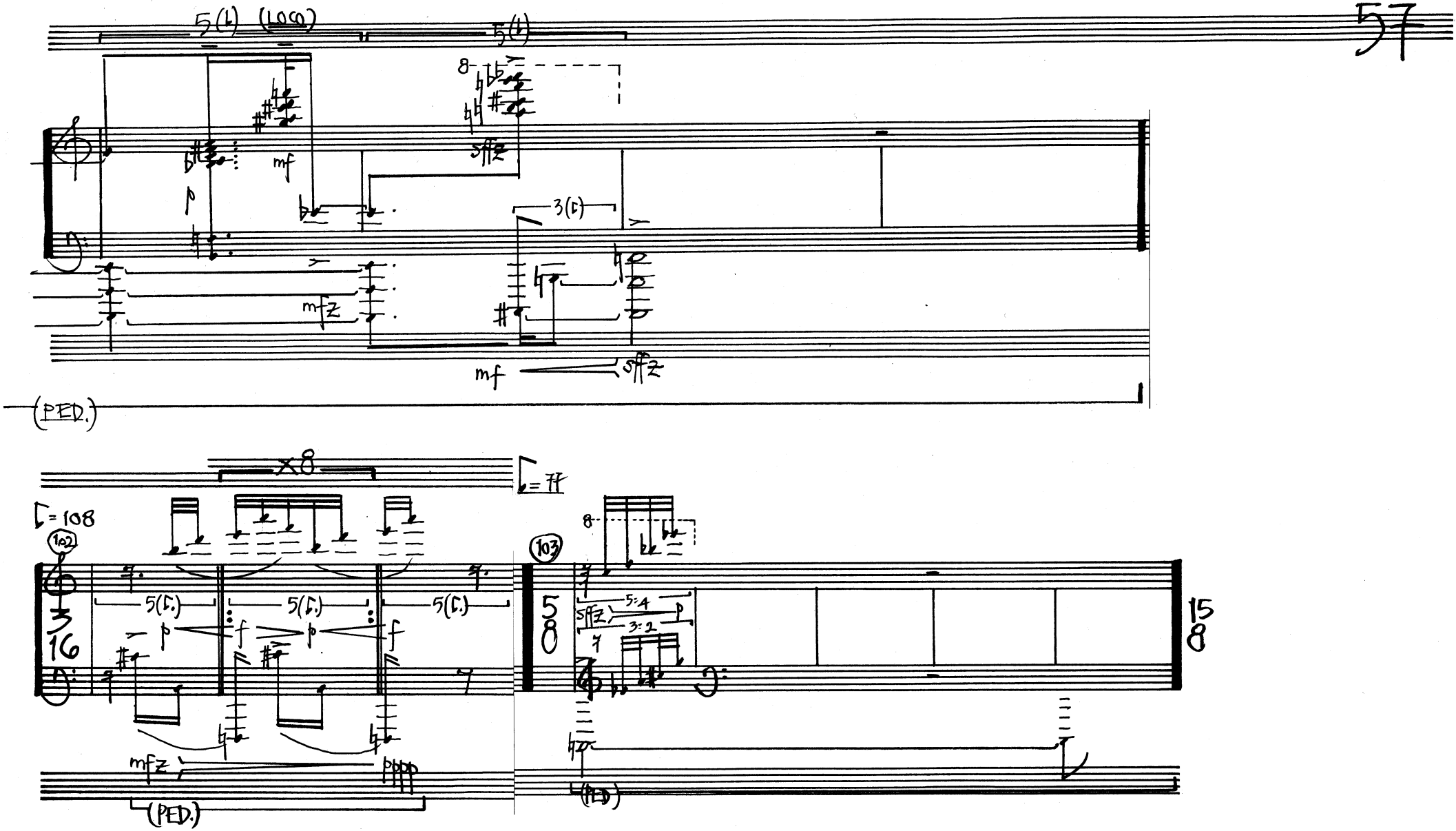


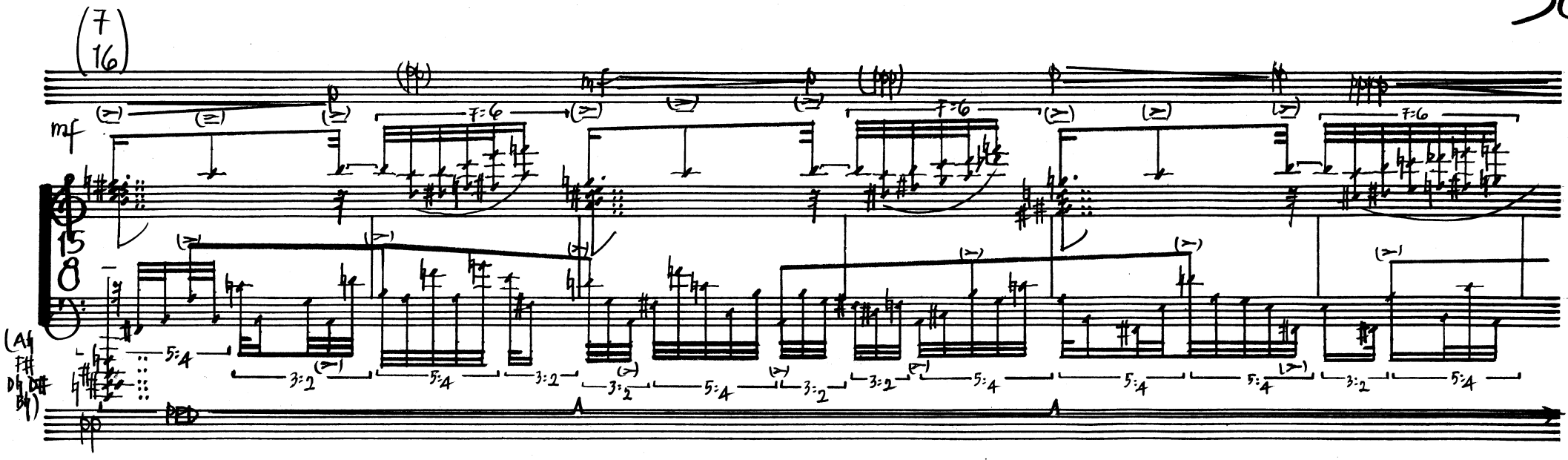
♩ = 126 (semi-legato)

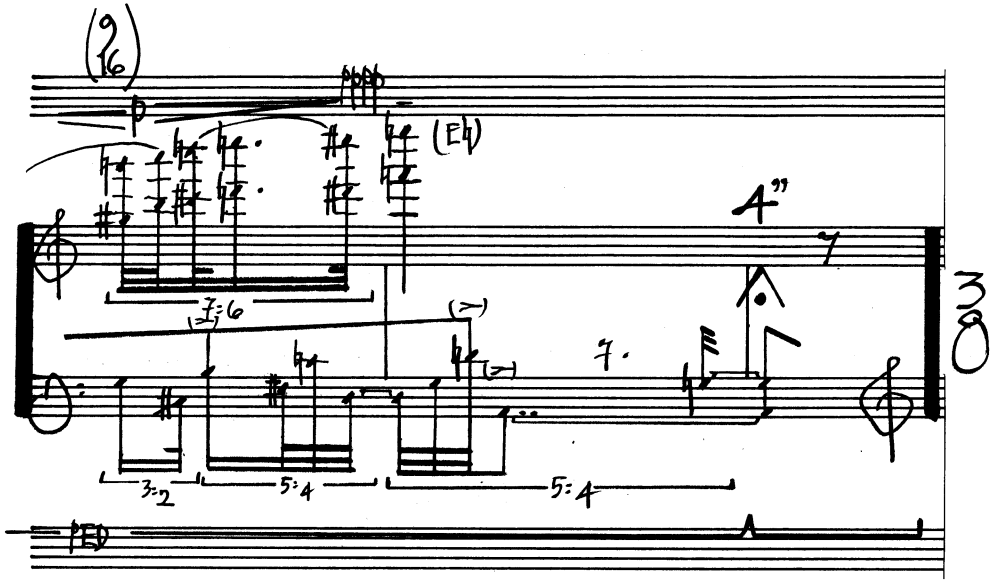


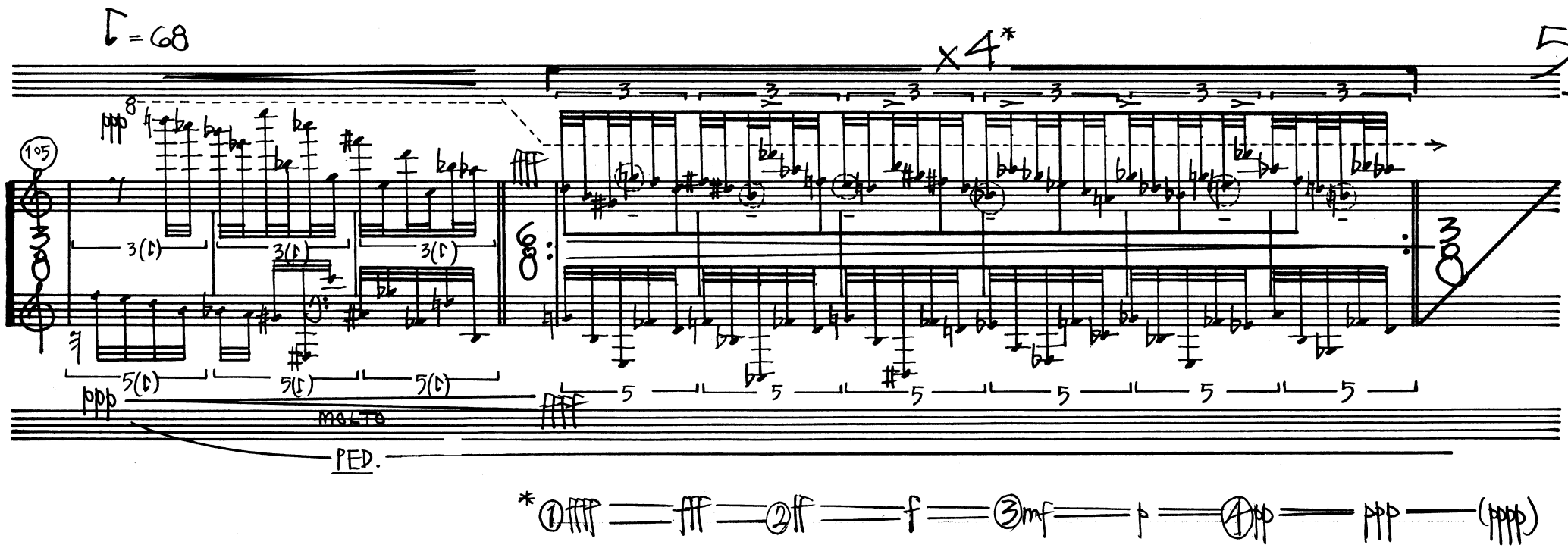
(ALLOW ALL ATTACKS TO RING TO SILENCE —
♩= 72 SCULPT DYNAMICS CAREFULLY)



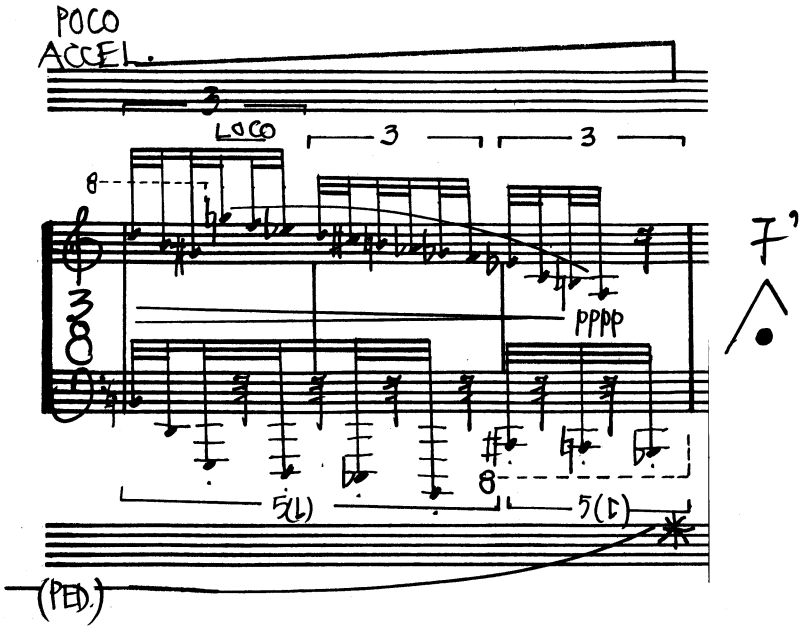

5(♭) (LOCO)
5(♭)
8
sffz
mf
p
3(♭)
mfz
mf
sffz
(PED.)
×8
♩= 77
♩= 108
102
3
16
5(♭.)
5(♭.)
5(♭.)
p
f
p
f
mfz
pppp
(PED.)
103
8
5
8
sffz
5:4
3:2
p
15
8
(PED)

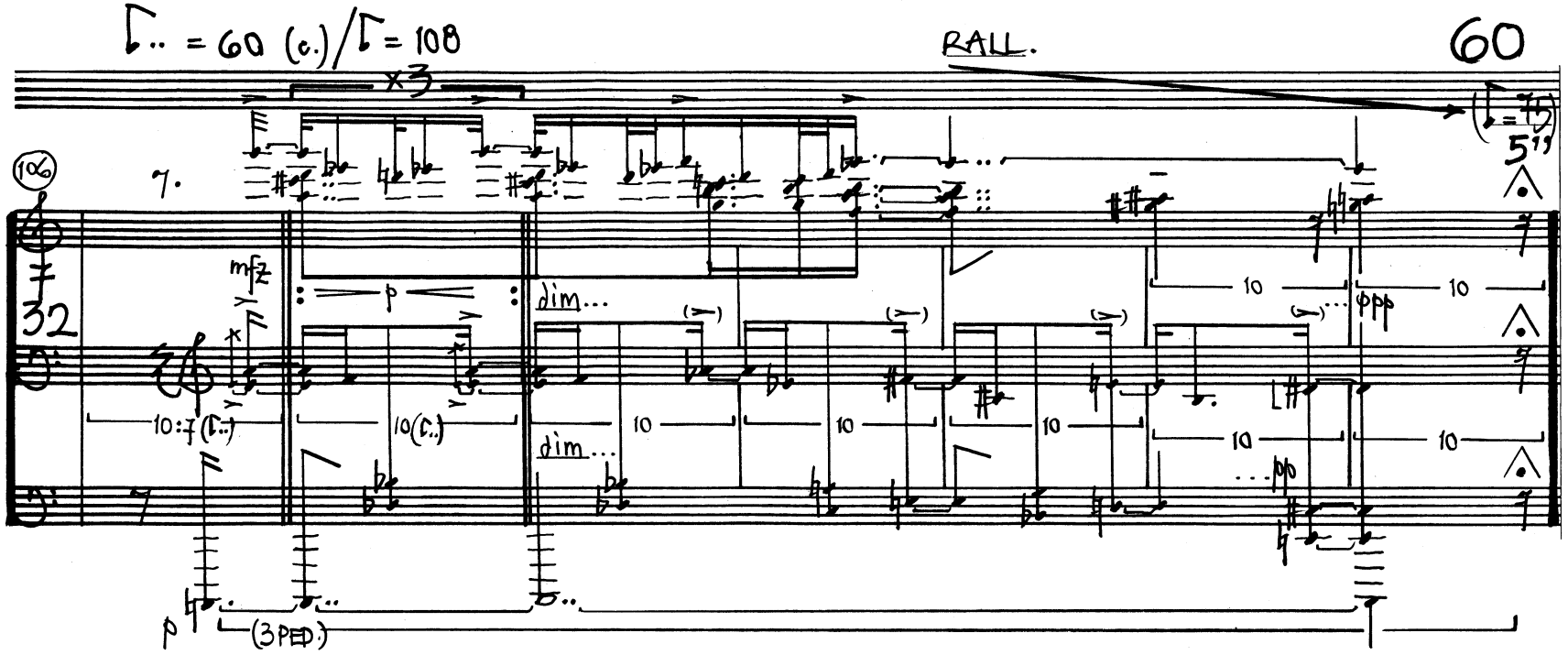

(7/16)
mf
7:6
5:4
3:2


(9/16)
(Eb)
4"
7:6
3:2
5:4

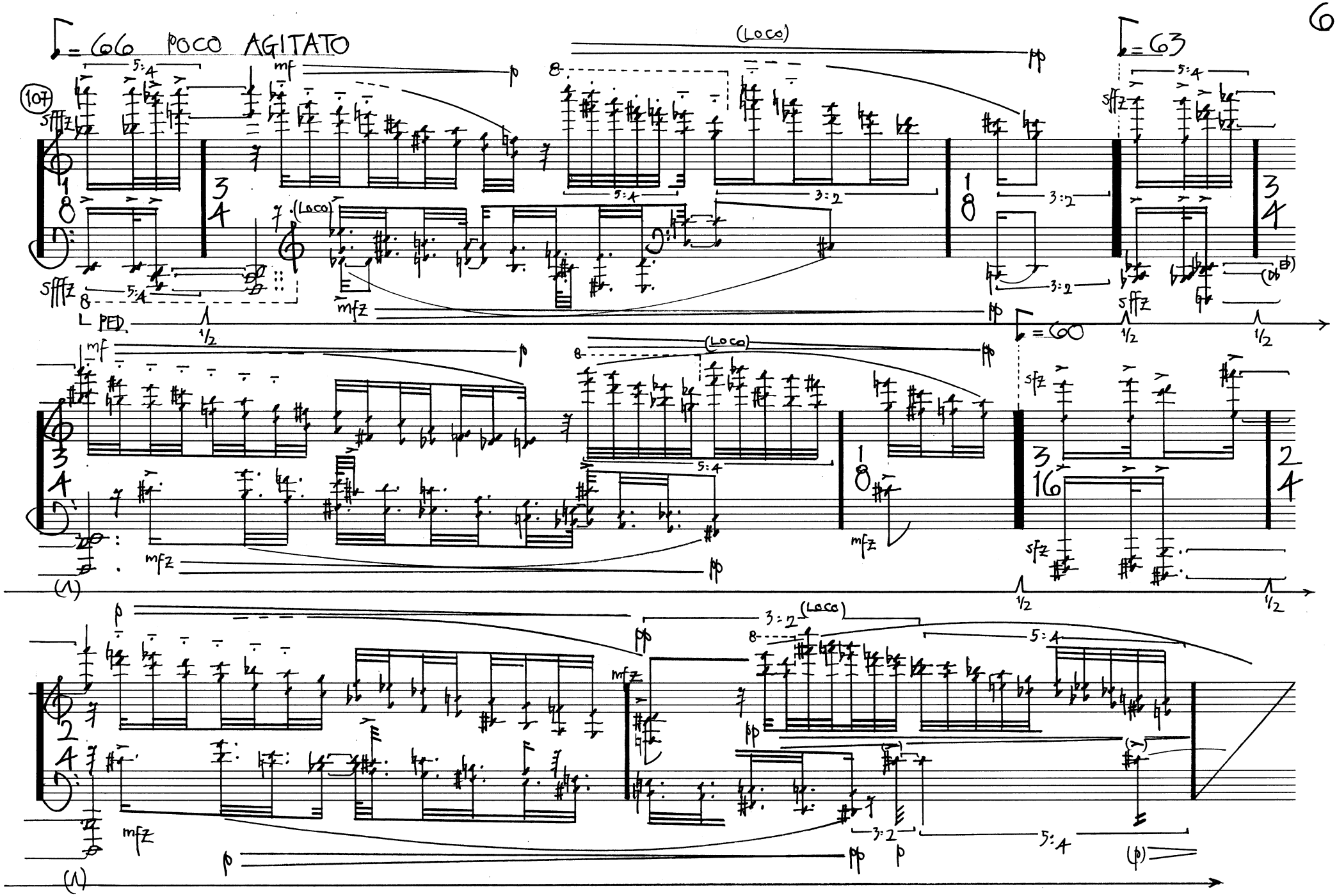


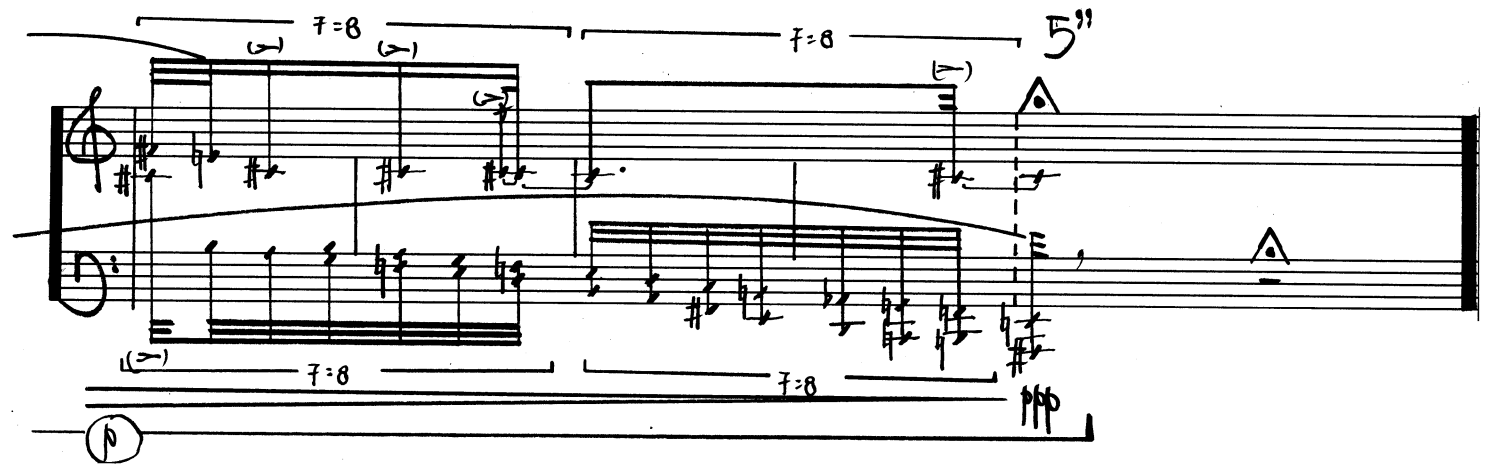
*①fffff ═ fff ═ ②ff ═ f ═ ③mf ═ p ═ ④pp ═ ppp ═ (ppppp)



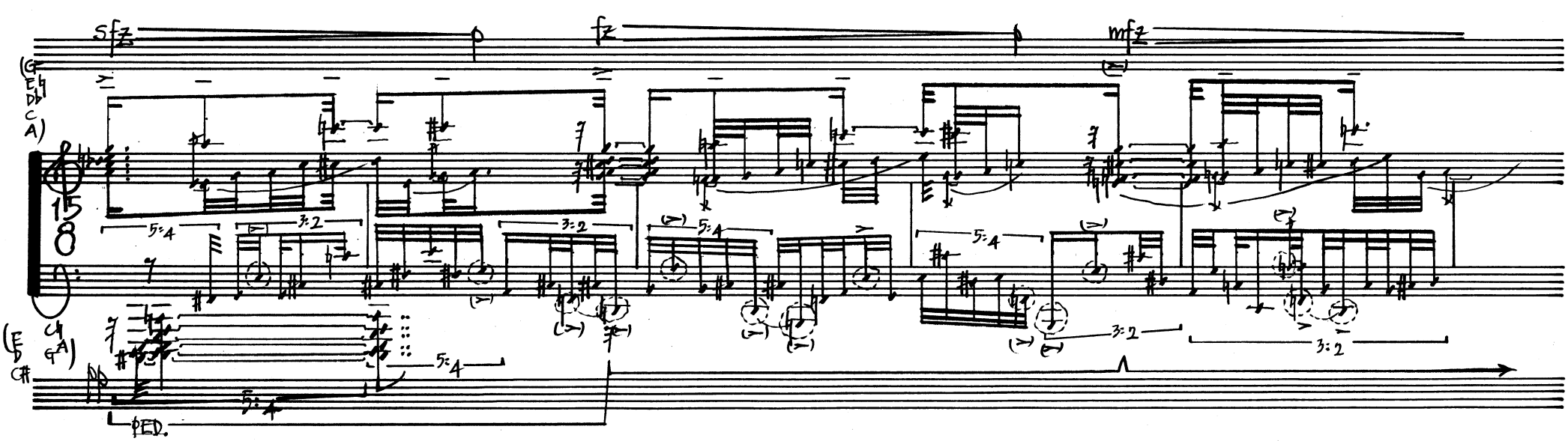


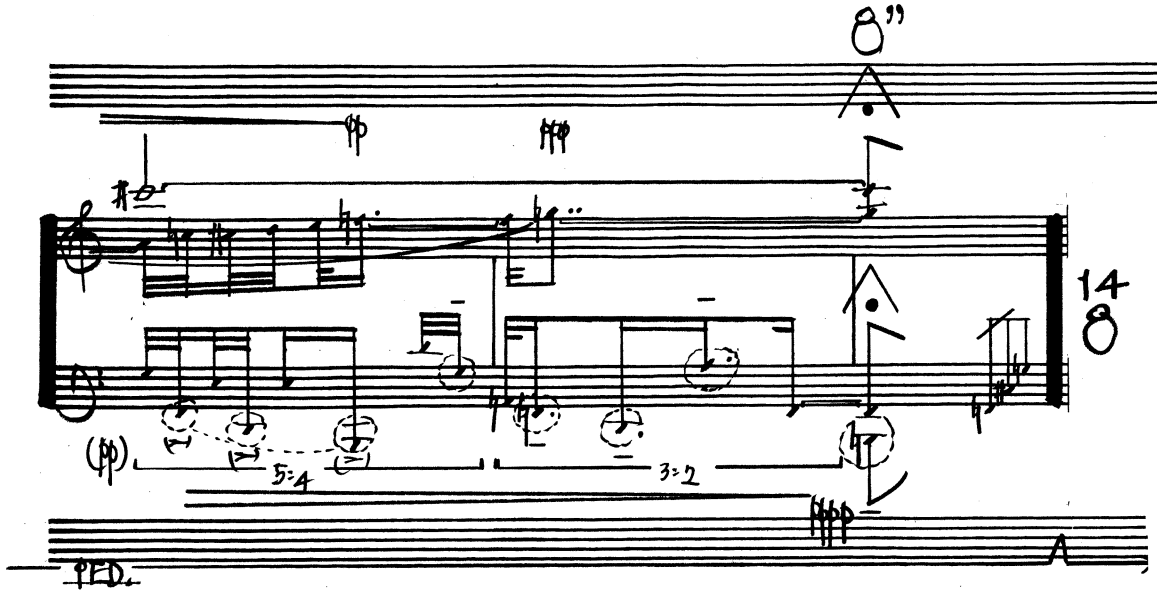
= 60 (c.) / = 108
RALL.
60
x3
106
7.
32
mfz
p
dim...
10:7 (...)
10 (...)
10
ppp
pp
(3 PED.)

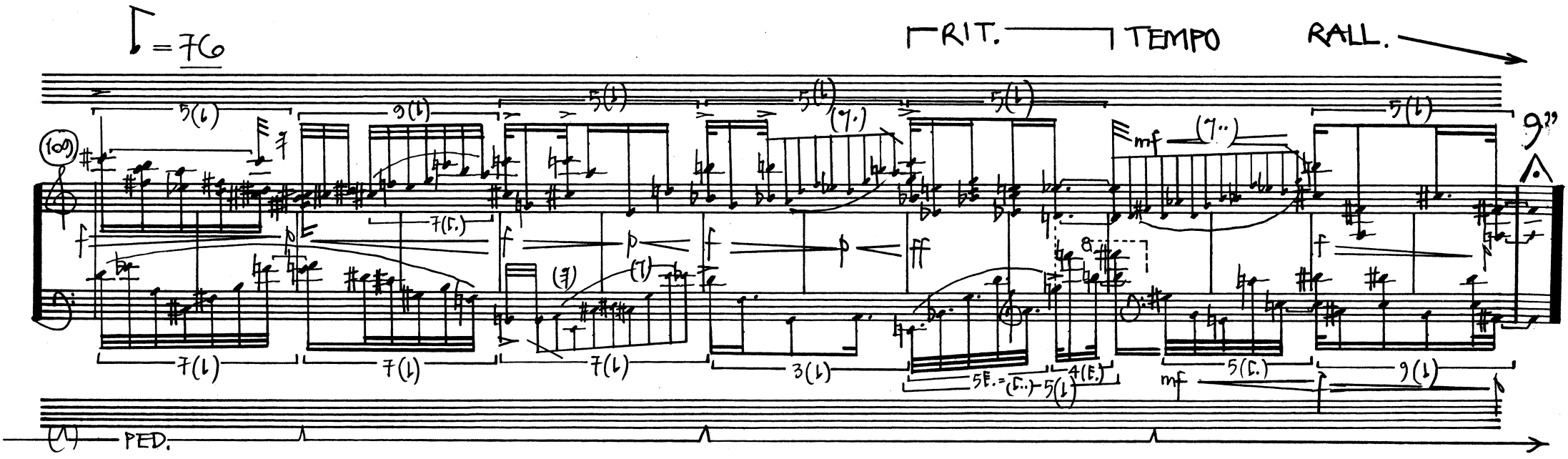

= 66 POCO AGITATO
107
(LOCO)
= 63
= 60
PED.
(Db)
(1)



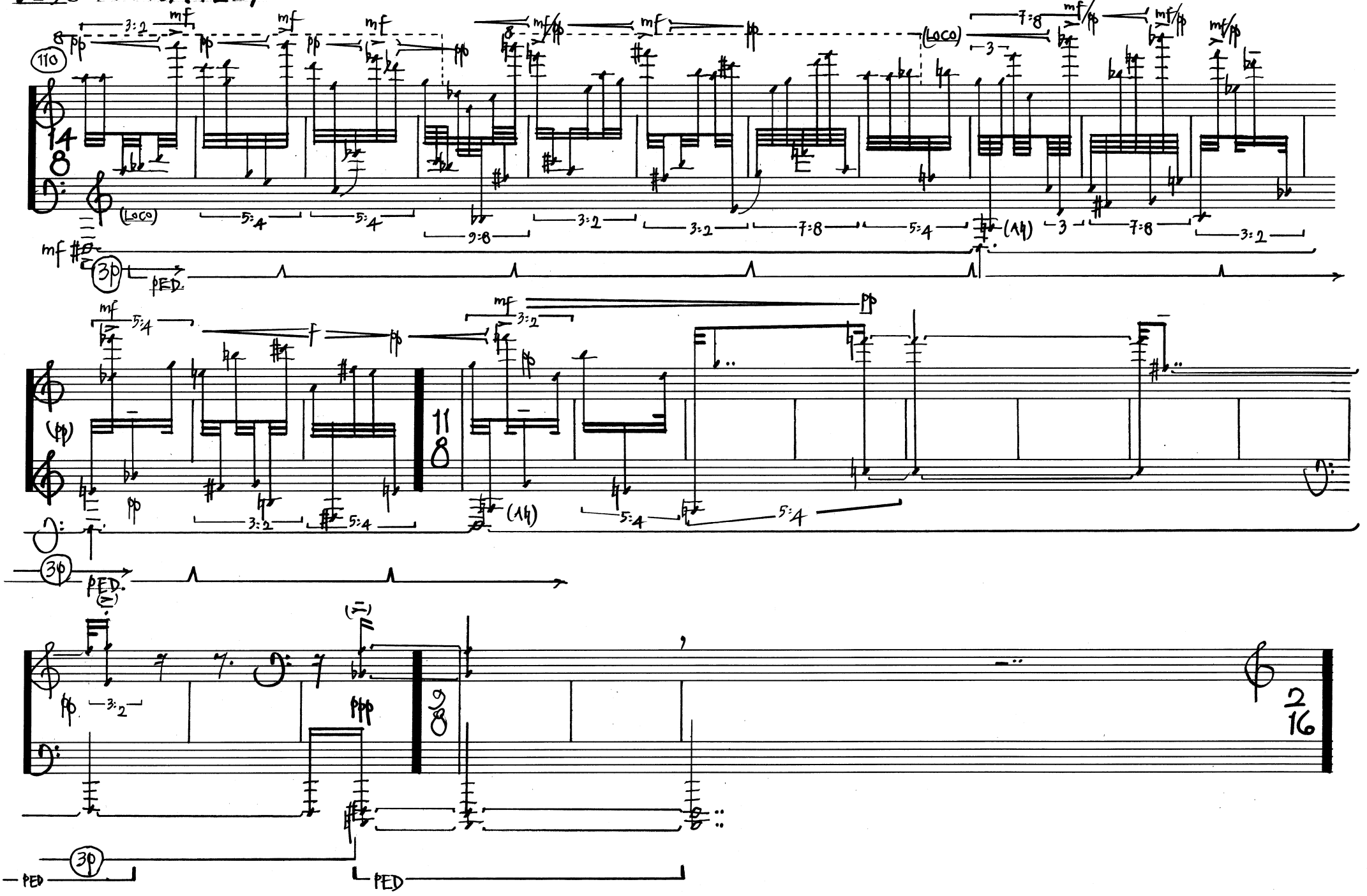
2



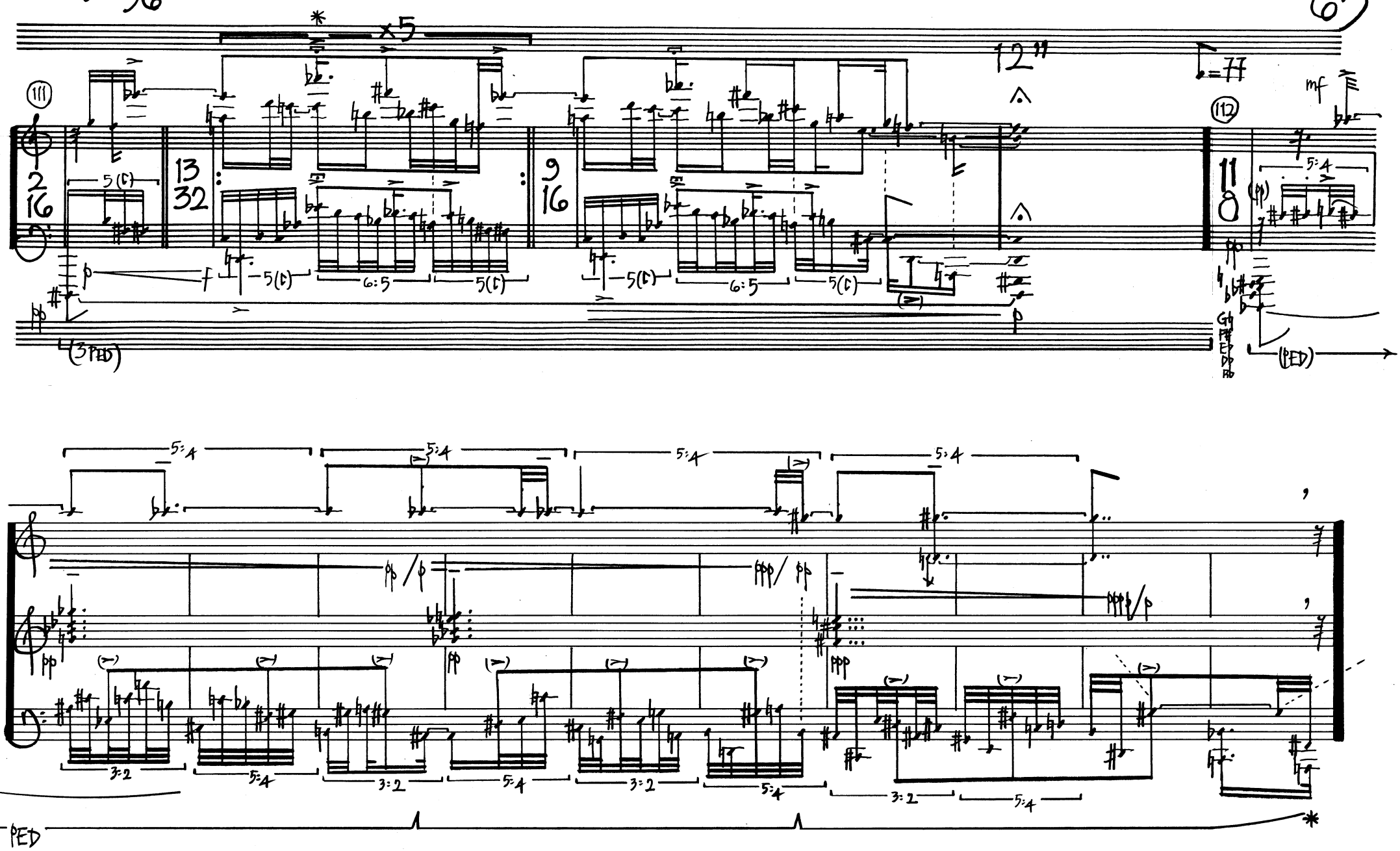

8"
14
8
(pp)
5:4
3:2
PED.

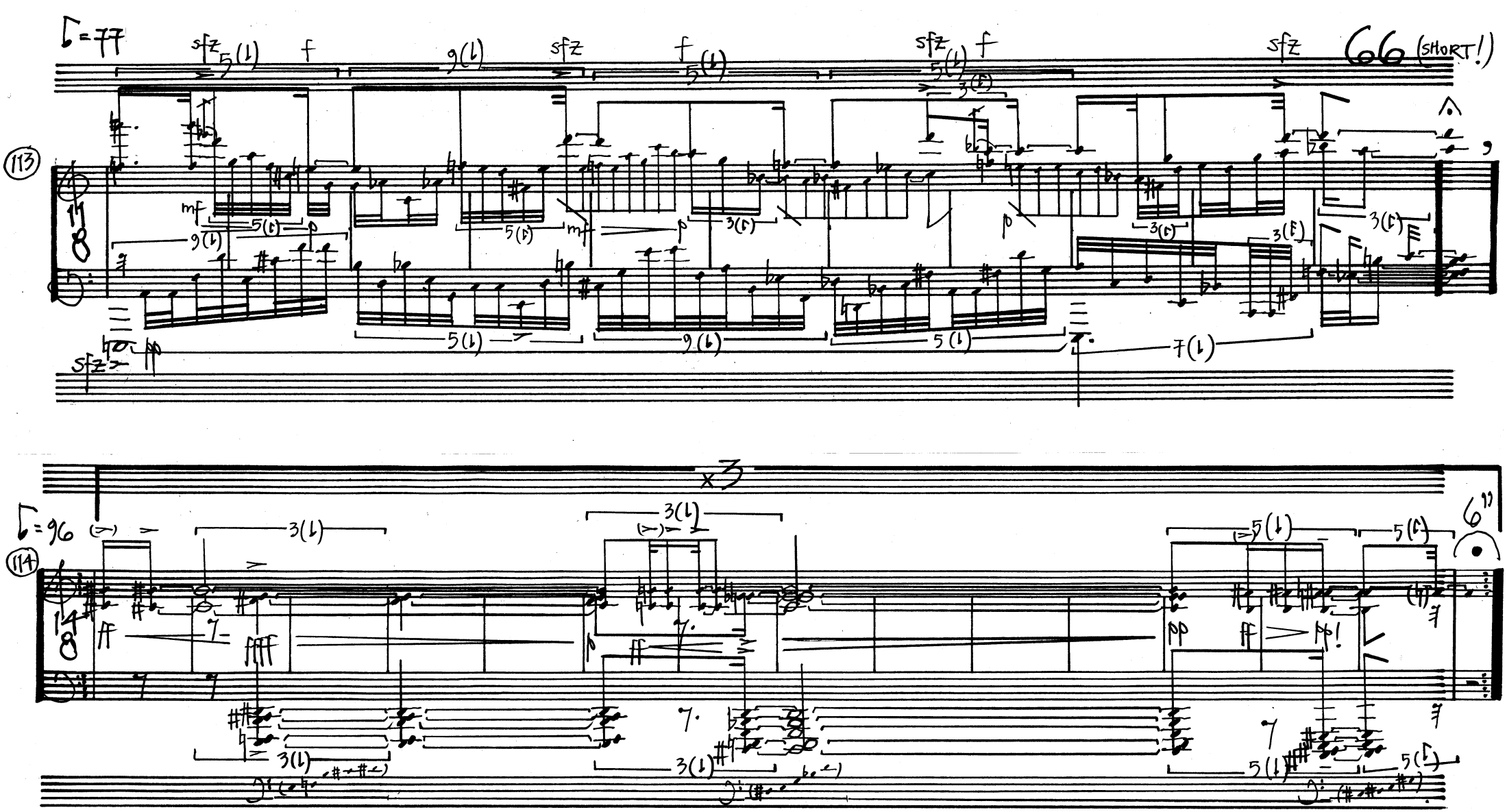

♩=76
RIT.
TEMPO
RALL.
9"
(100)
PED.

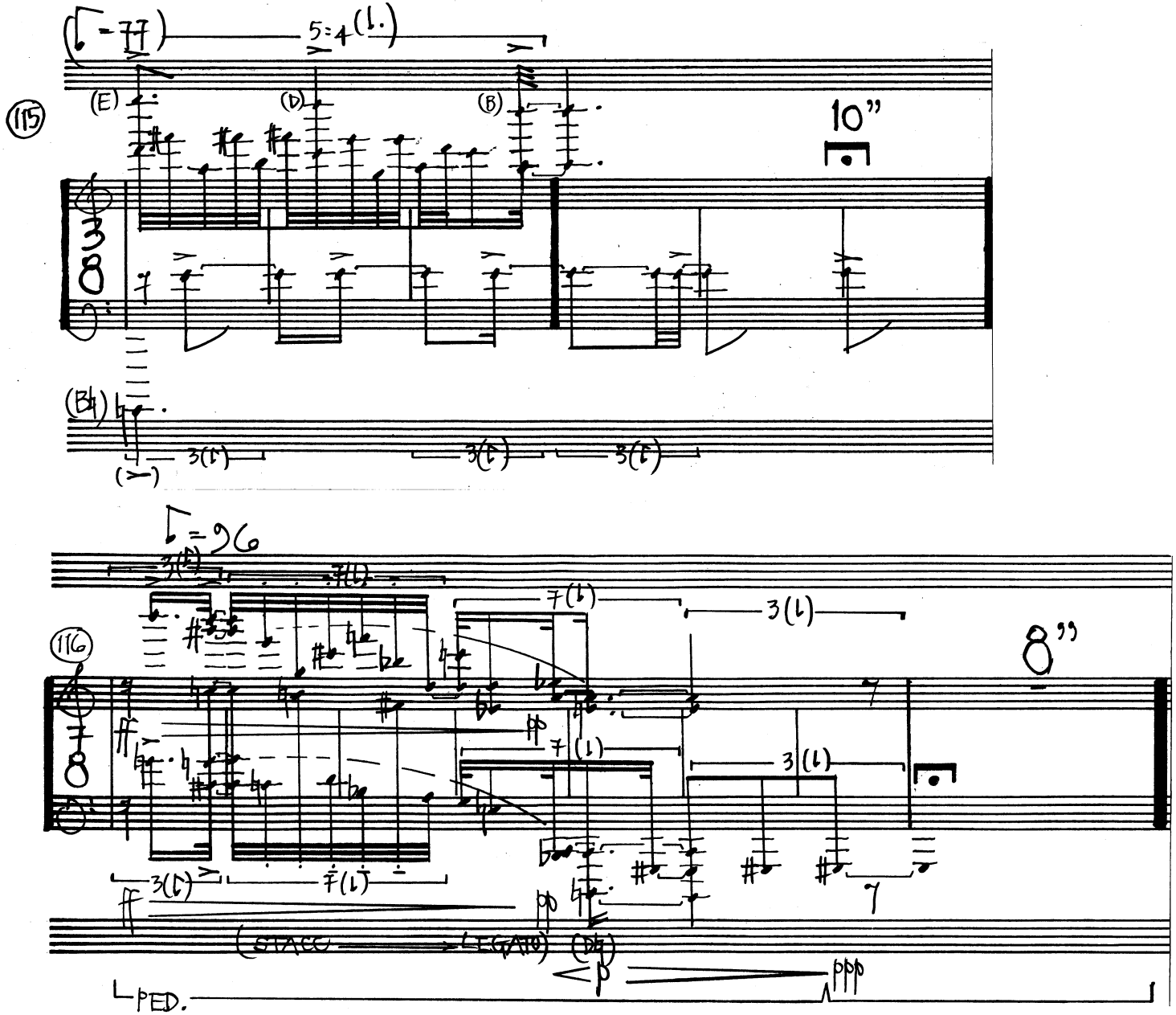
♩=90 DELICATELY

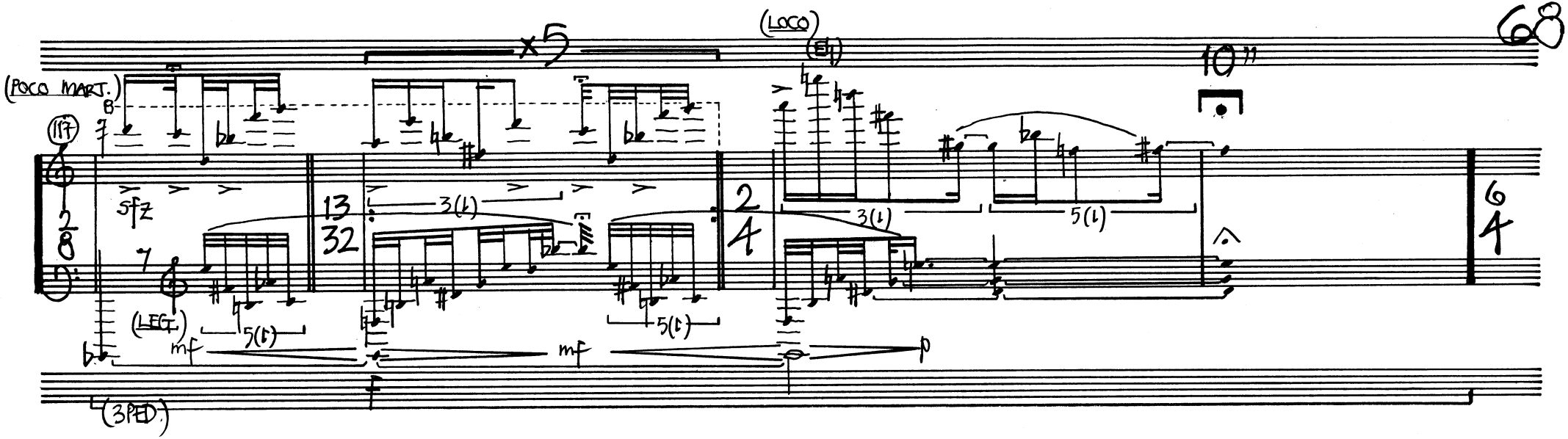


[* ⁓ = VERY SLIGHT ELONGATION]

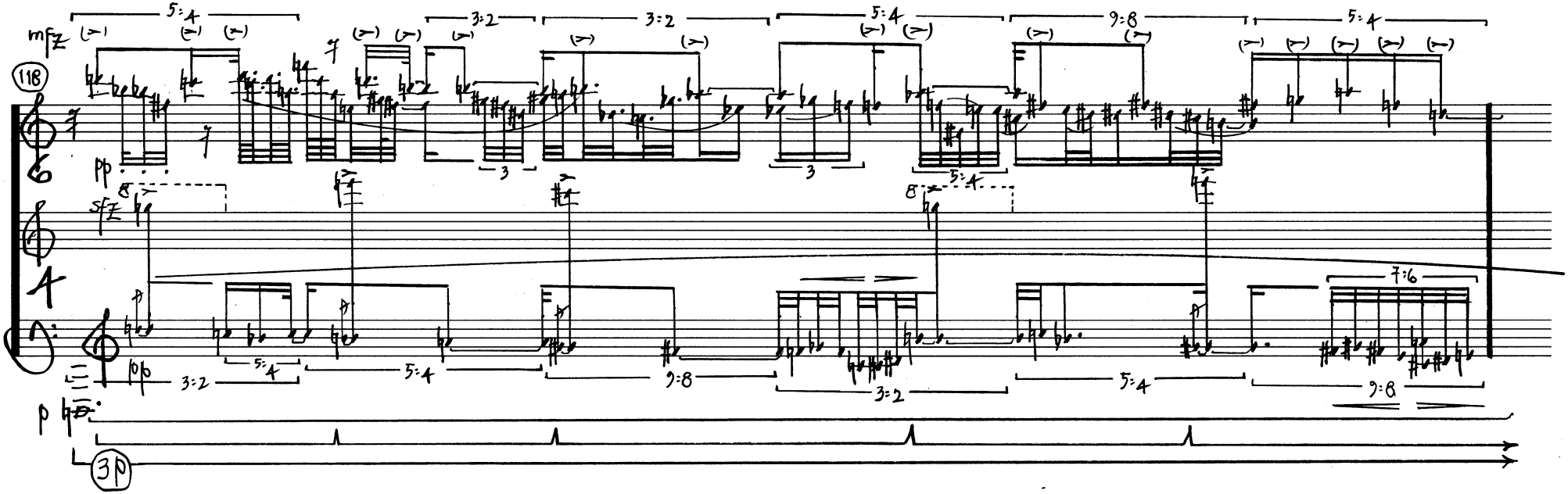


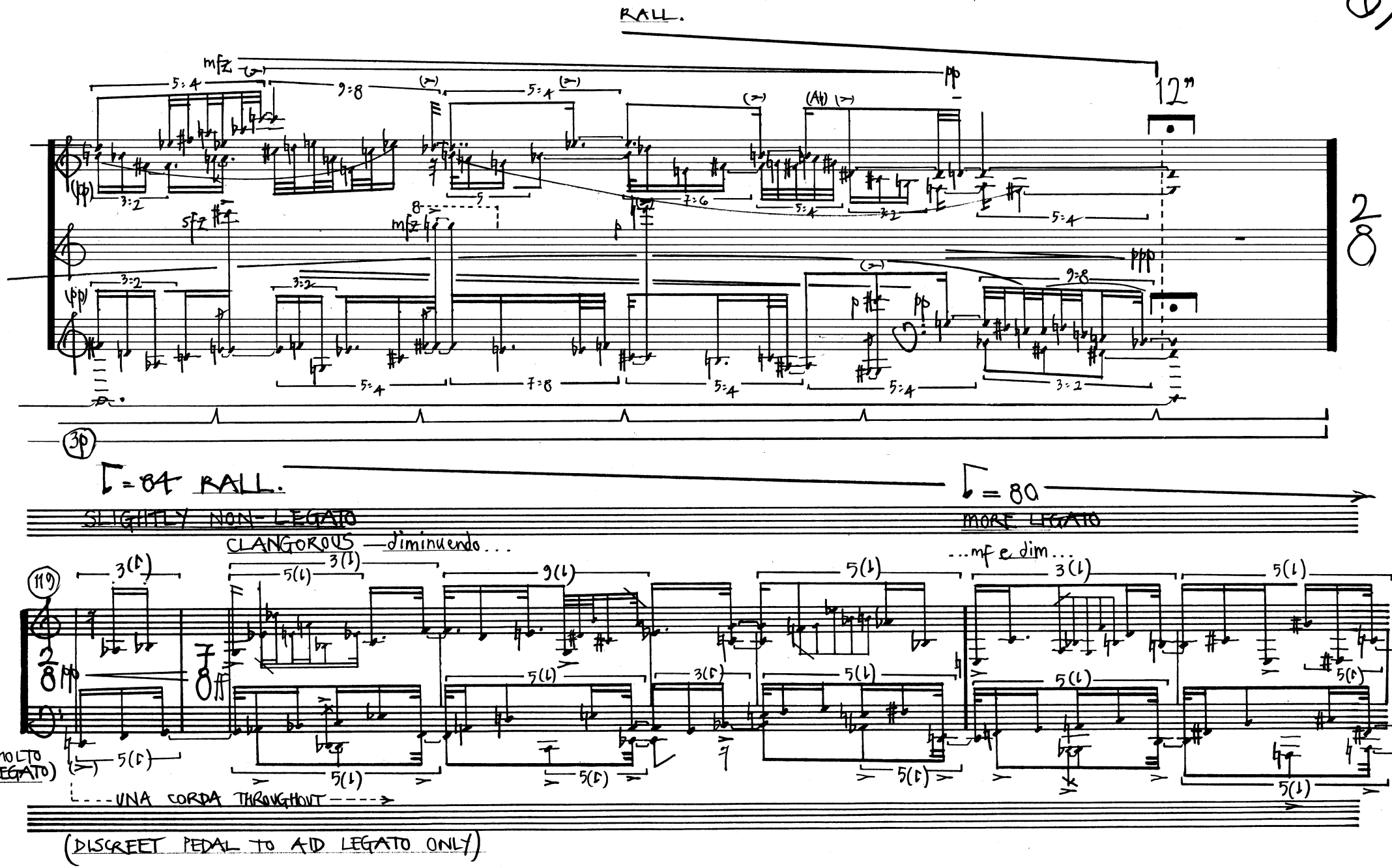

♩=77
66 (SHORT!)
113
sfz
f
mf
p
pp
x3
♩=96
114
6"
ff
ffff
pp!

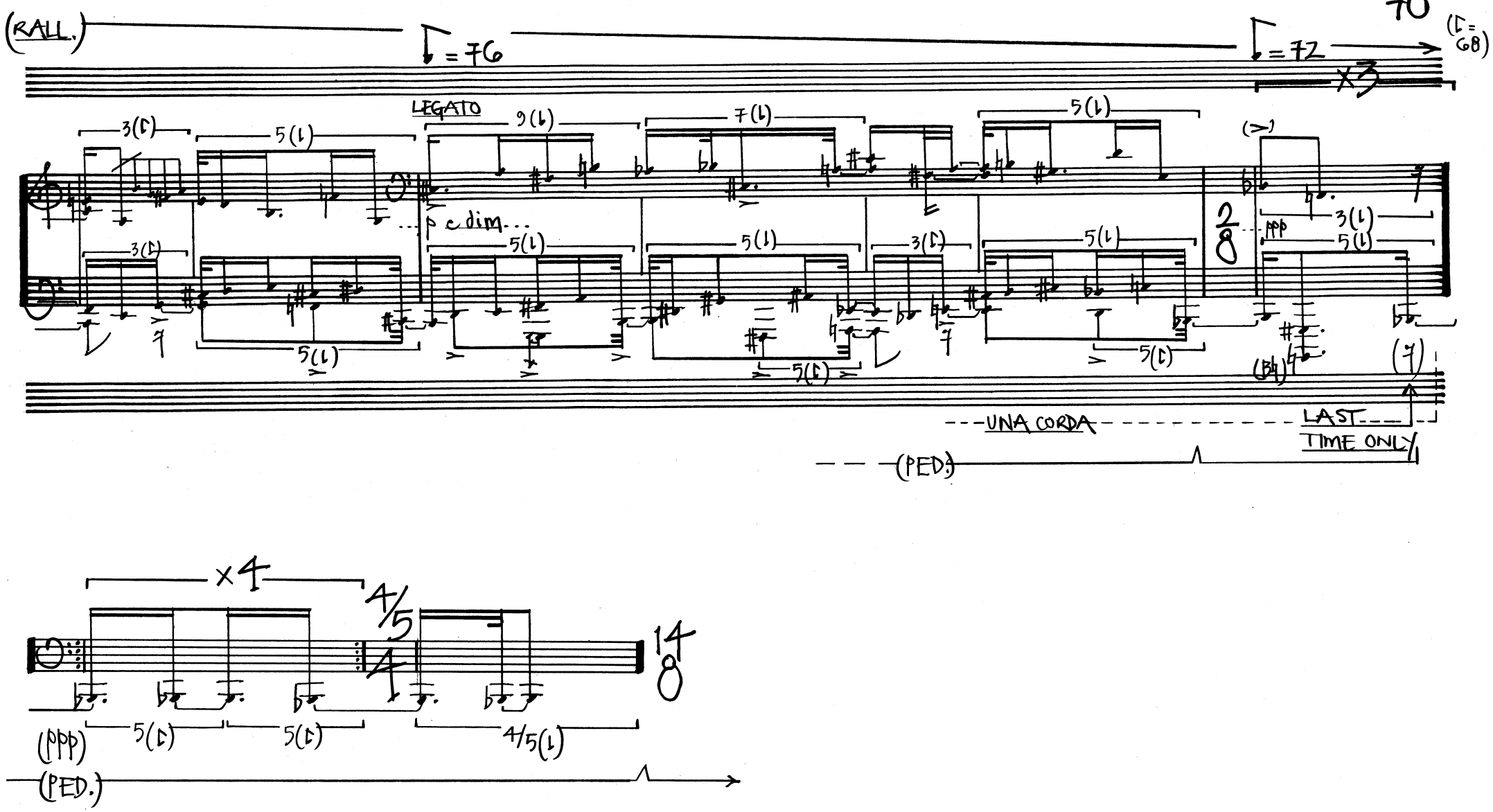

115
(E)
(D)
(B)
10"
(B♮)
3(♭)
3(♭)
3(♭)
116
8"
7(♭)
3(♭)
7(♭)
3(♭)
3(♭)
7(♭)
(STACC → LEGATO)
(D♮)
PED.



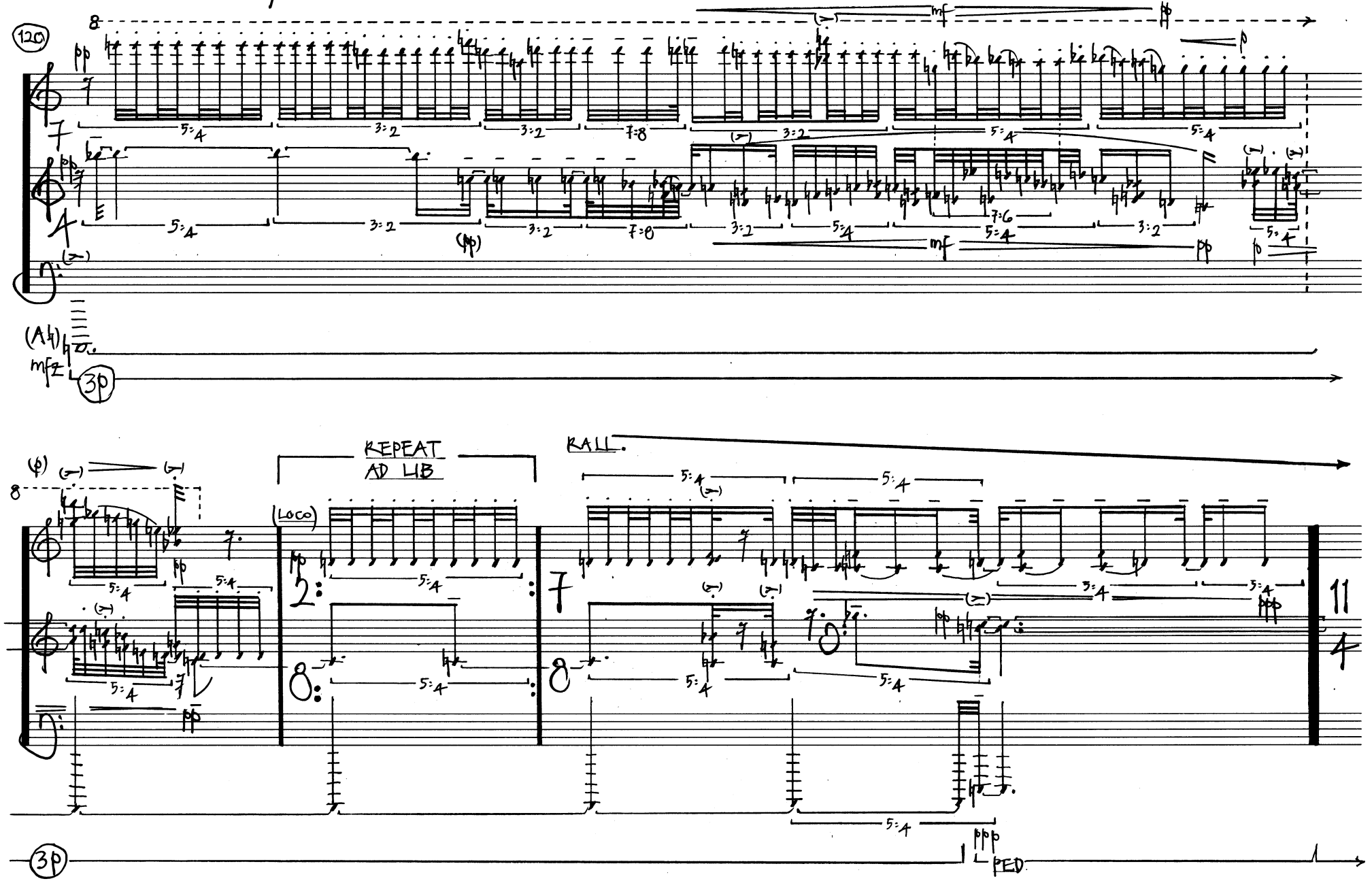
♩ = 76 MOLTO CANTABILE — BRING OUT MARCATI

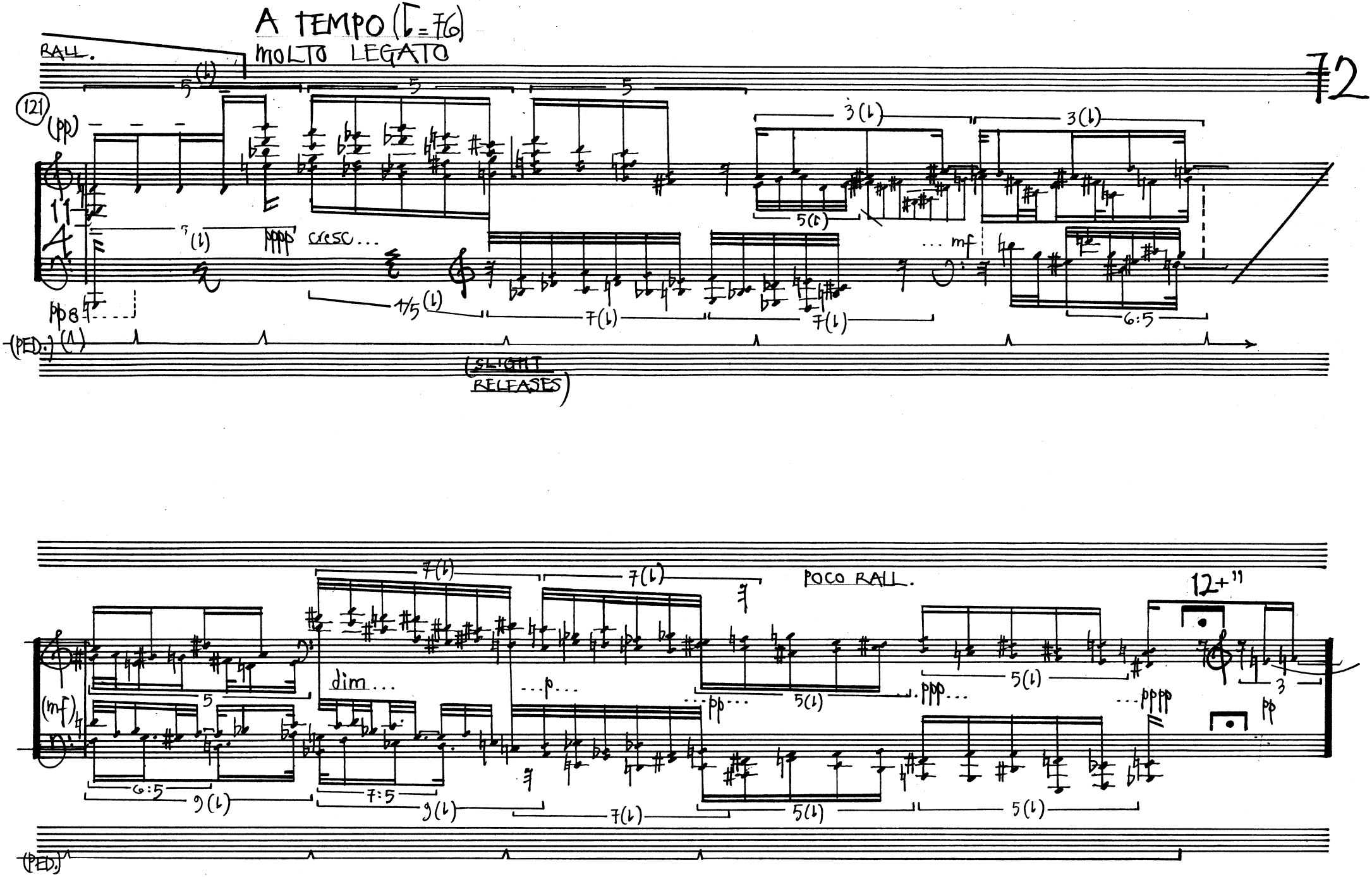



RALL.
mfz
pp
12"
(pp)
sfz
mfz
ppp
3p
= 84 RALL.
= 80
SLIGHTLY NON-LEGATO
MORE LEGATO
CLANGOROUS — diminuendo...
...mf e dim...
(MOLTO LEGATO)
UNA CORDA THROUGHOUT
(DISCREET PEDAL TO AID LEGATO ONLY)

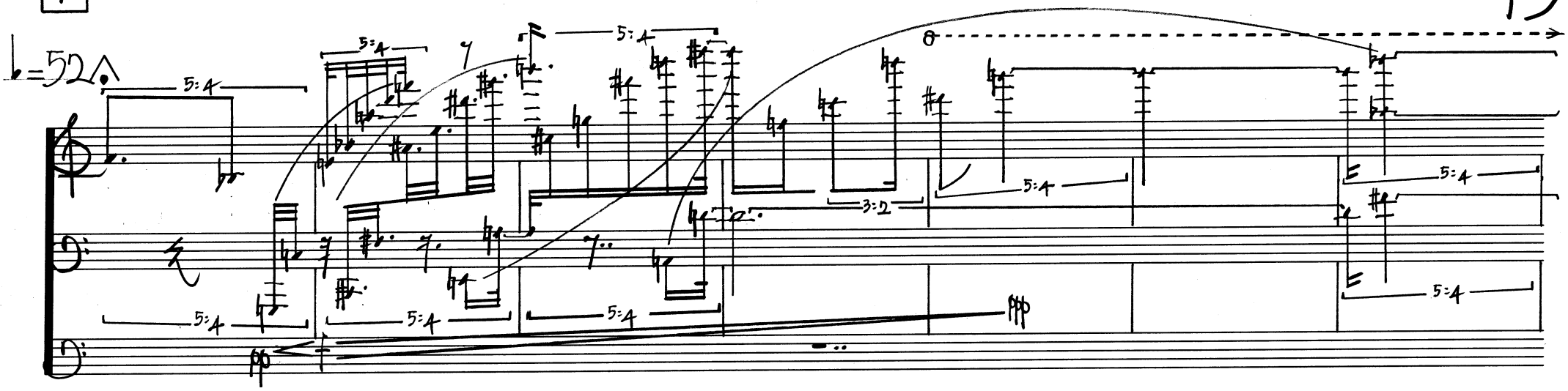

(RALL.)
= 76
= 72
(= 68)
x3
LEGATO
3(♭)
5(♭)
9(♭)
7(♭)
5(♭)
p e dim.
3(♭)
5(♭)
5(♭)
3(♭)
5(♭)
5(♭)
5(♭)
2/8
ppp
3(♭)
5(♭)
(B♮)
(7)
UNA CORDA
LAST TIME ONLY
(PED.)
x4
4/5
14/8
(ppp)
5(♭)
5(♭)
4/5(♭)
(PED.)

♩ = 76 DISTANTLY — NOT TOO FAST

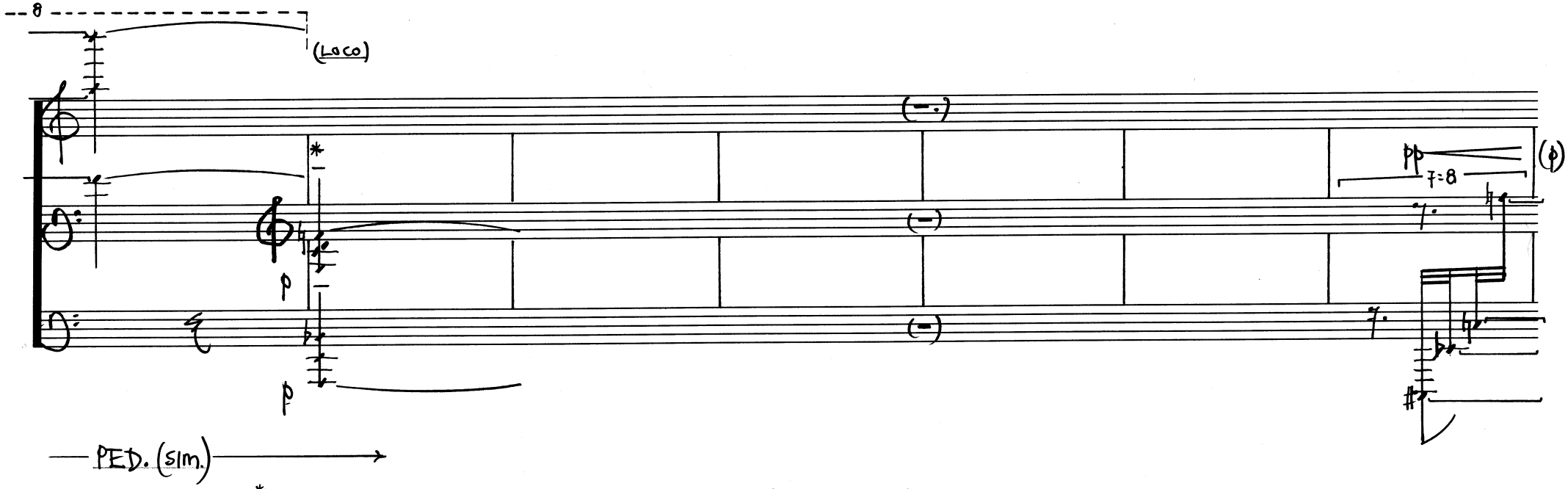



A TEMPO (♩.=76)
MOLTO LEGATO
RALL.
(pp)
cresc...
... mf
(SLIGHT RELEASES)
(PED.)
POCO RALL.
12+"
dim...
...p...
...pp...
...ppp...
...pppp
pp
(mf)
(PED.)

1 → ... NOX EST PERPETUA UNA DORMIENDA



PED. AD LIB →
(NEVER FULLY RELEASE)

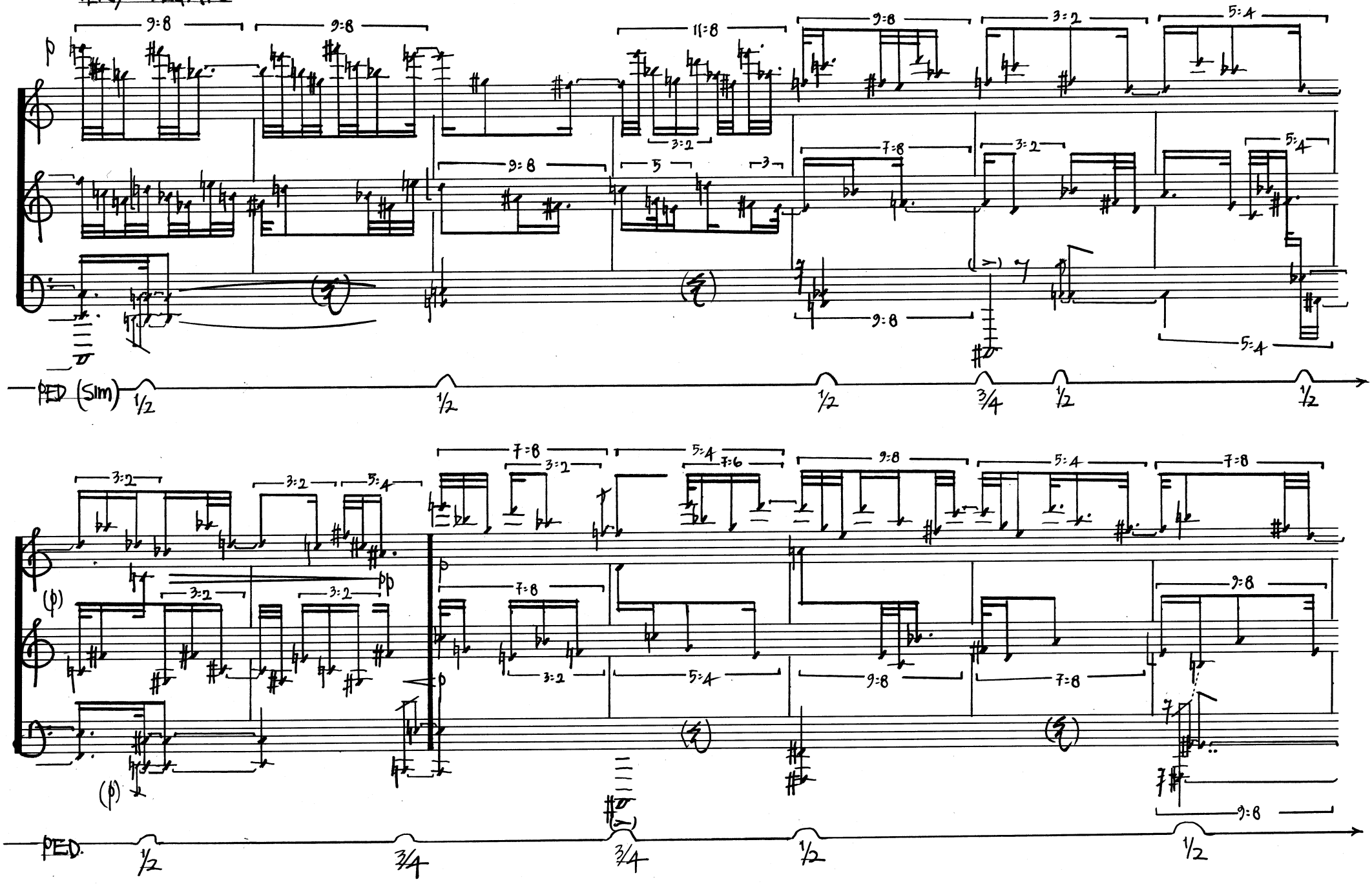


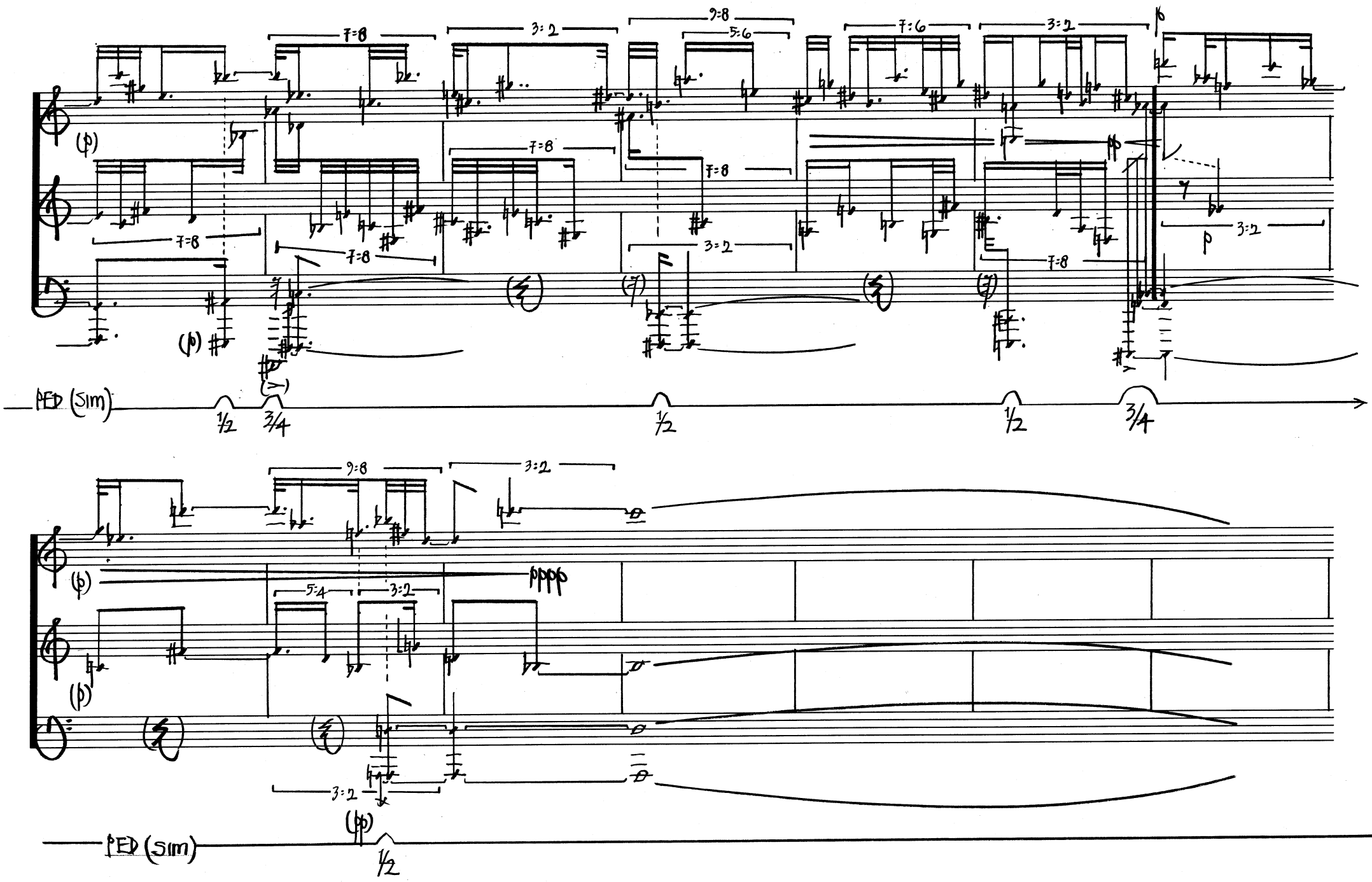
PED. (sim.) →

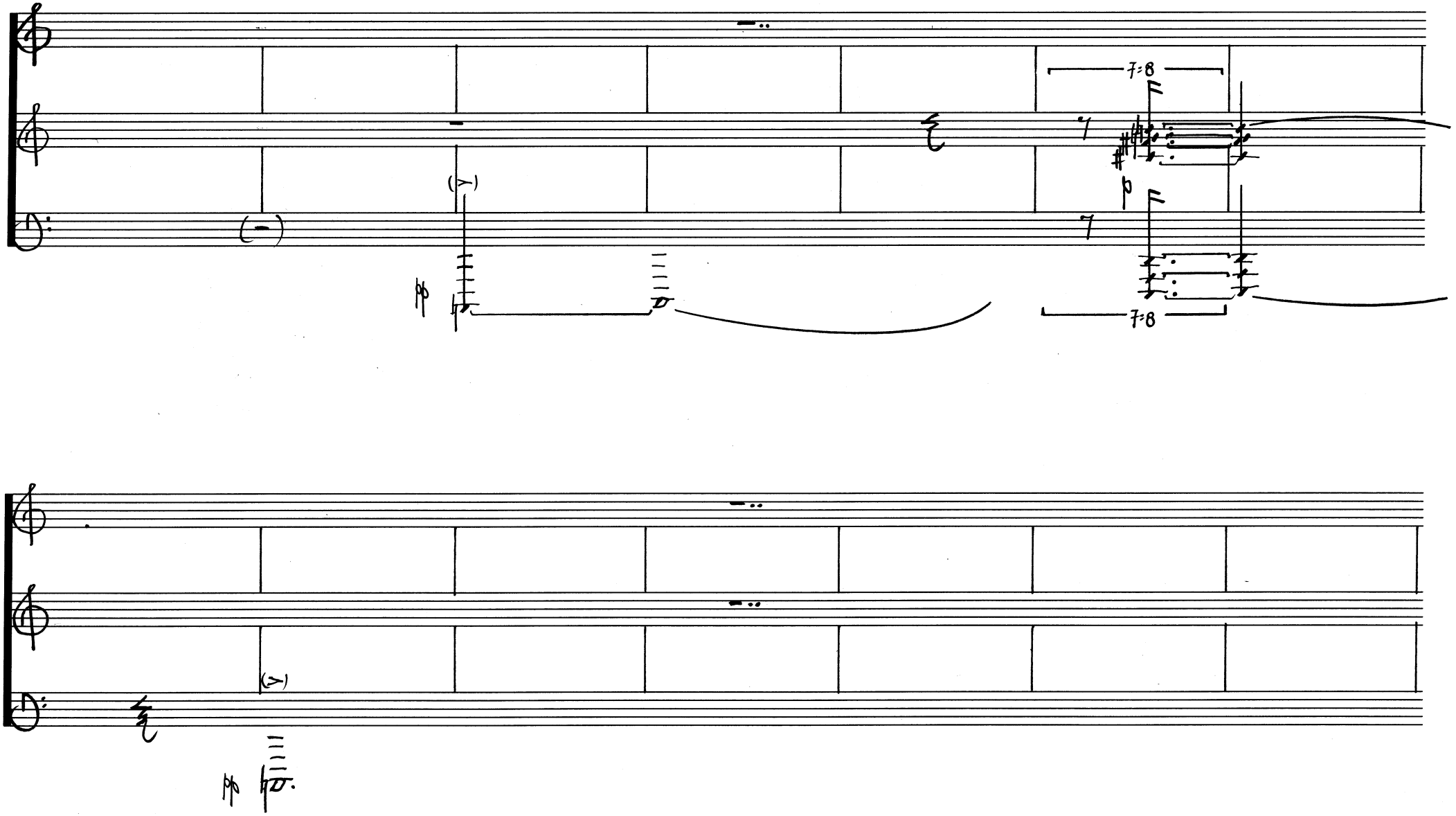
*ALWAYS BRING OUT TOP NOTE IN THESE CHORDS

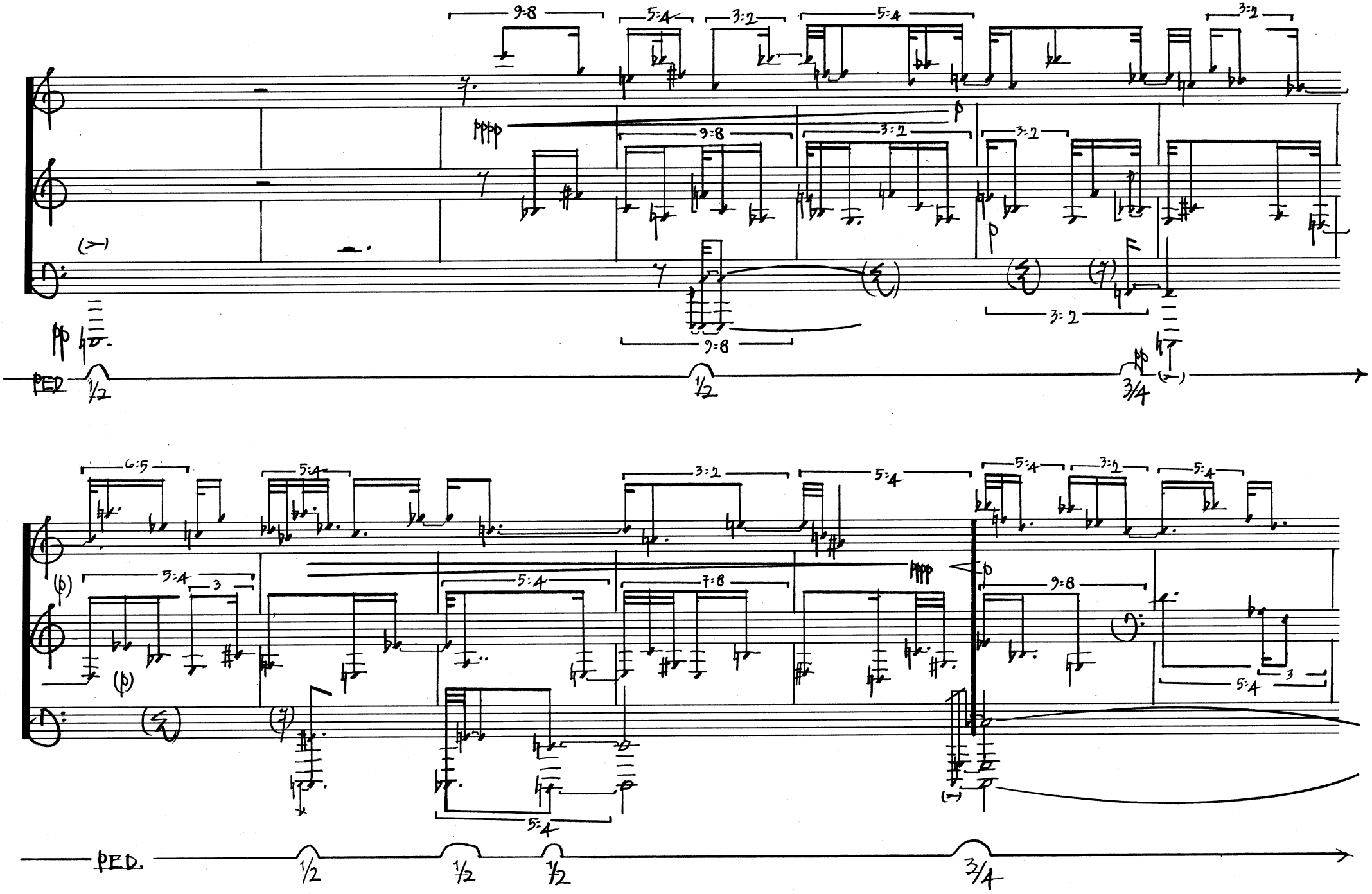
EERIE AND HOLLOW — RUBATO

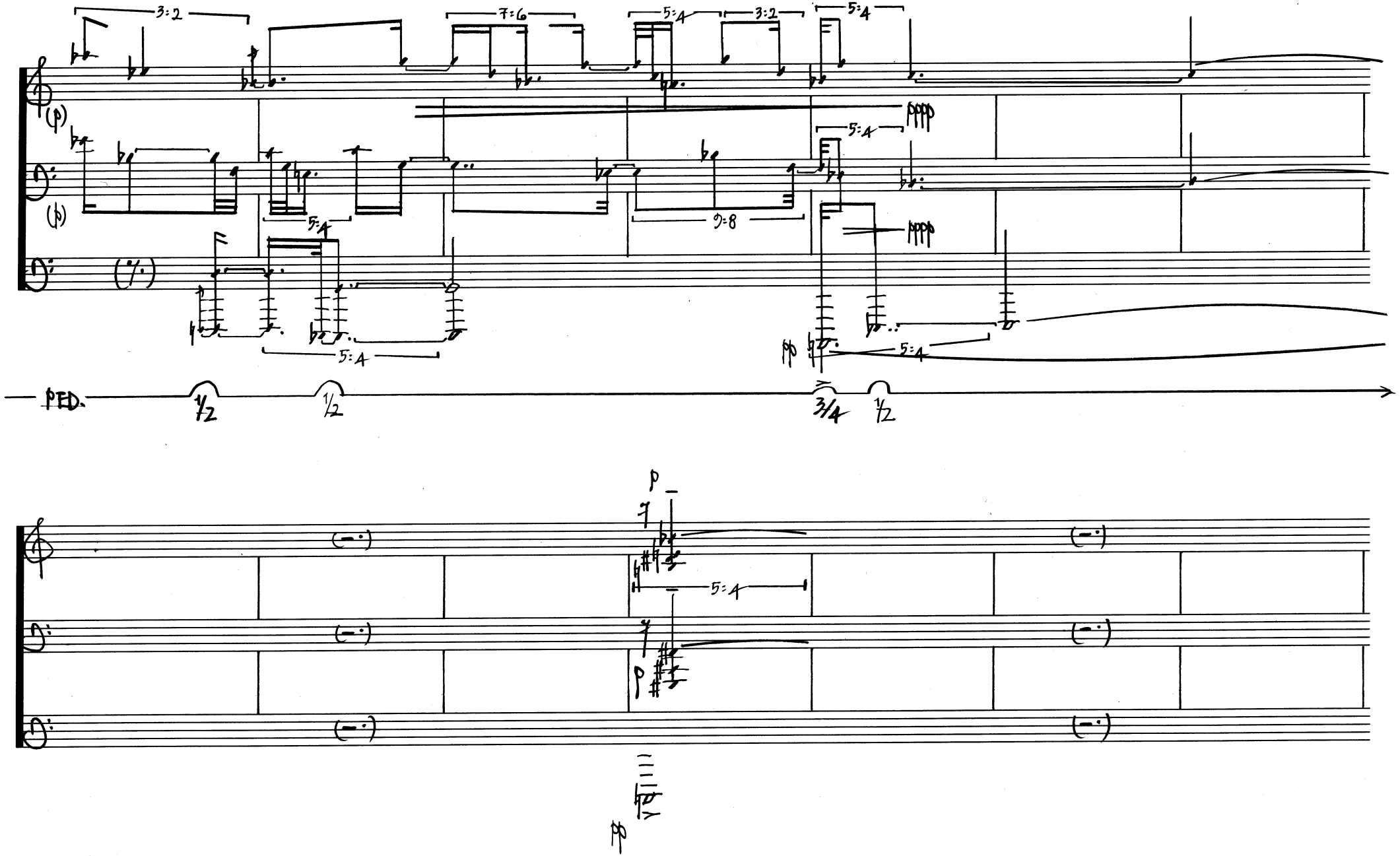
VERY LEGATO

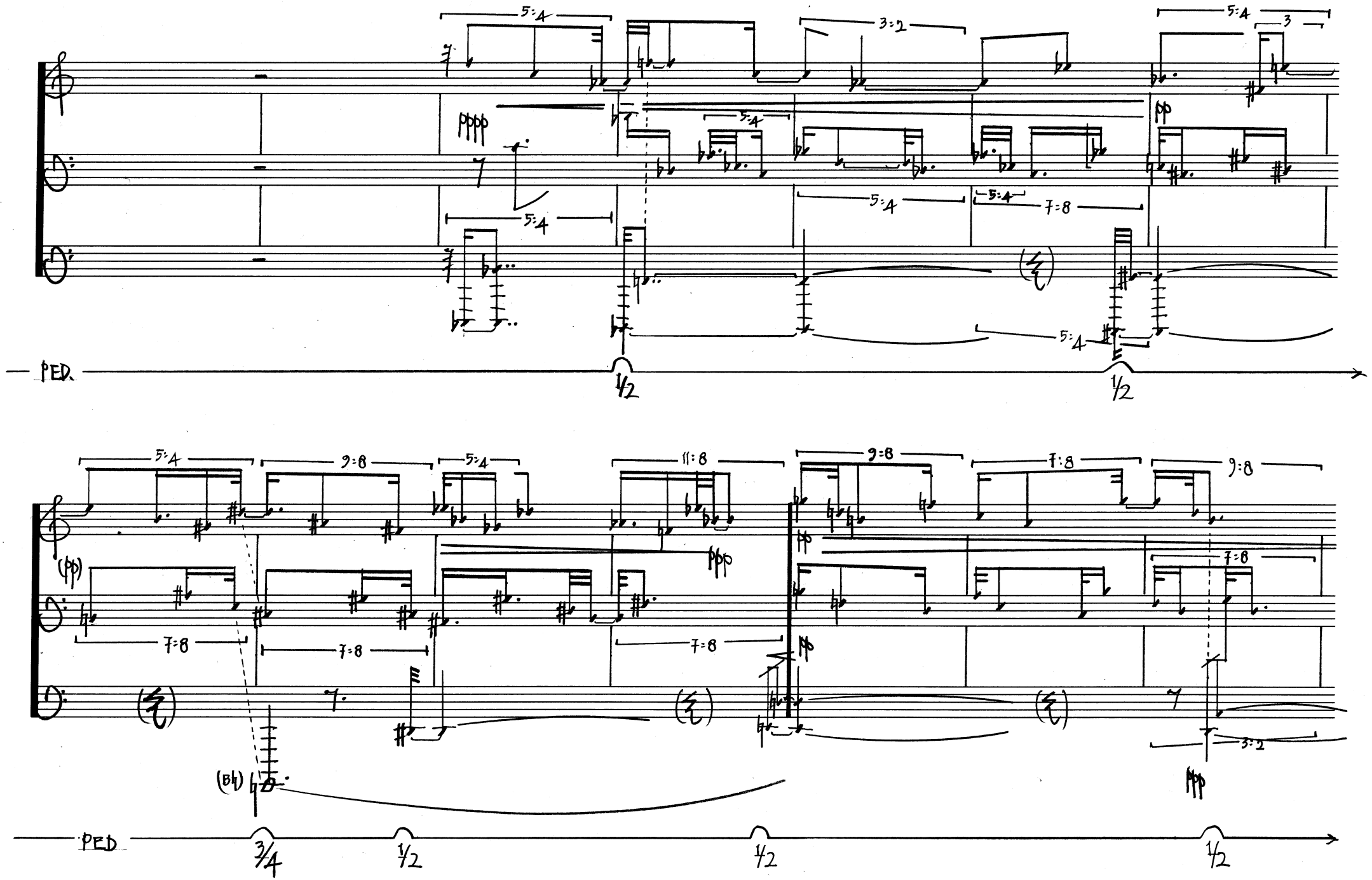


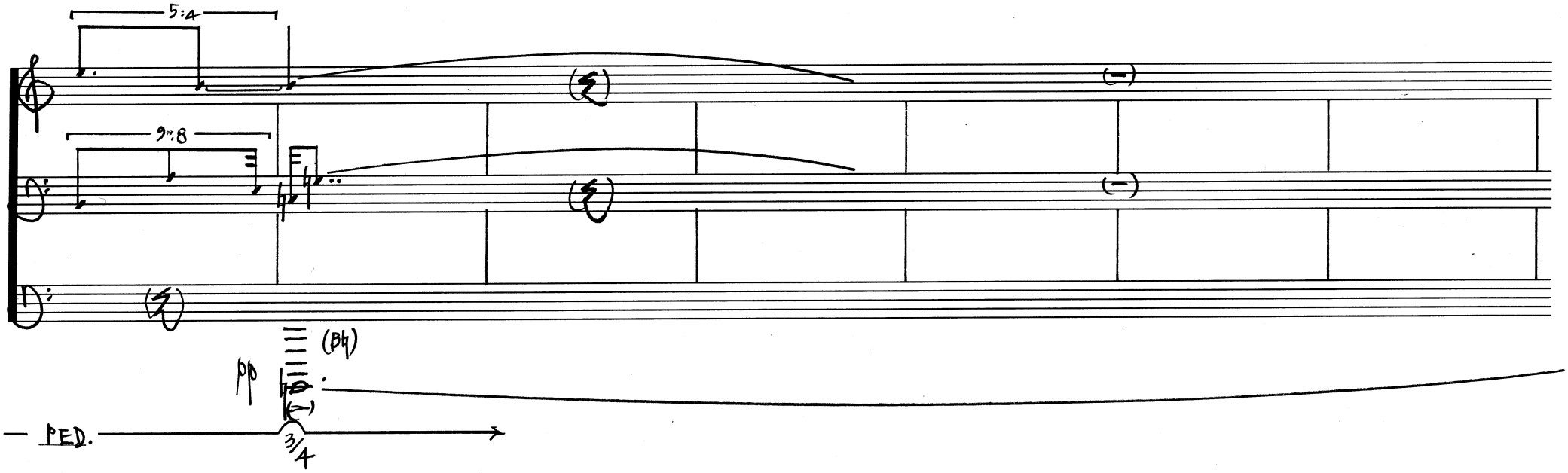

7:8
3:2
9:8
5:6
7:6
3:2
(p)
7:8
7:8
7:8
3:2
7:8
3:2
p
(p)
PED (sim)
1/2
3/4
1/2
1/2
3/4
9:8
3:2
pppp
5:4
3:2
(p)
(pp)
3:2
PED (sim)
1/2

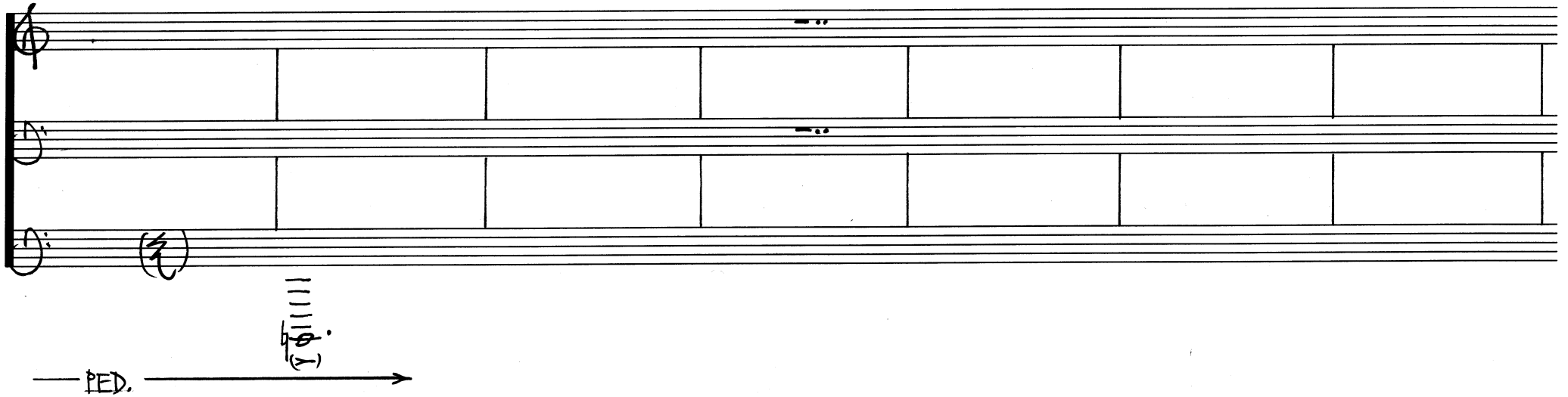

7:8
7:8

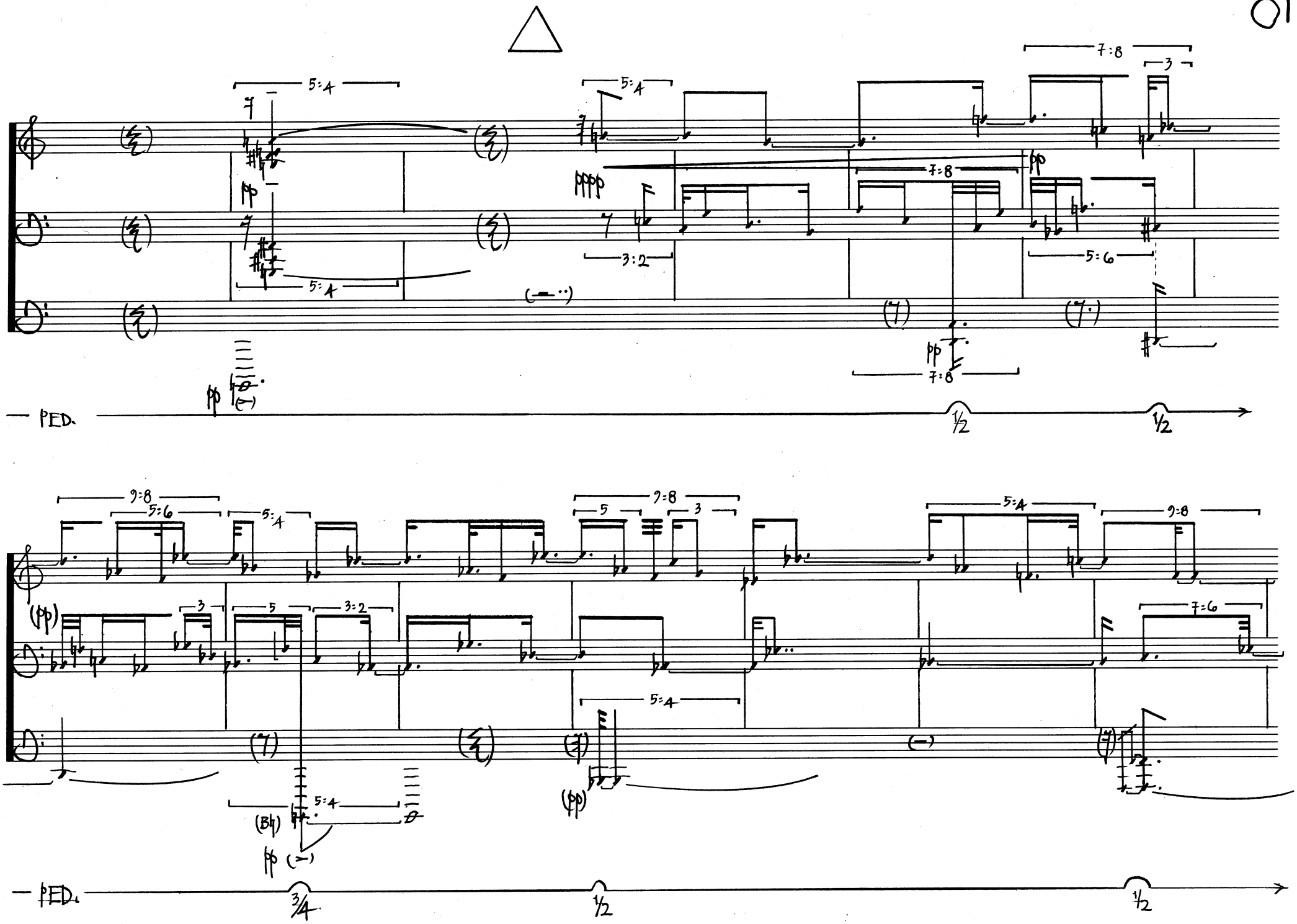

9:8
5:4
3:2
5:4
3:2
pppp
p
9:8
3:2
3:2
p
3:2
9:8
pp
PED
1/2
1/2
3/4
6:5
5:4
3:2
5:4
5:4
3:2
5:4
(p)
5:4
3
5:4
7:8
pppp
p
9:8
(p)
5:4
3
5:4
PED.
1/2
1/2
1/2
3/4

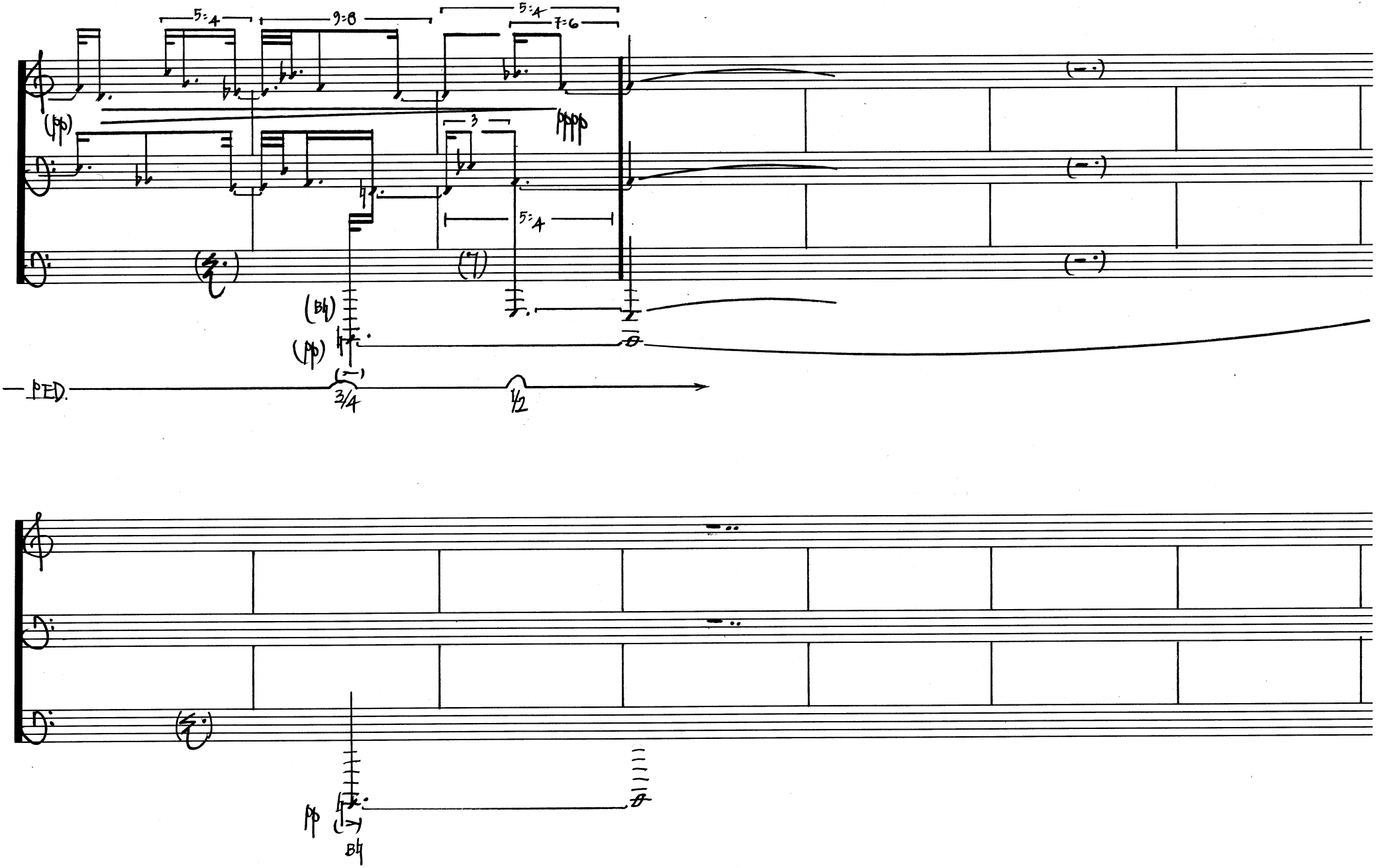

3:2
7:6
5:4
3:2
5:4
(p)
(p)
5:4
9:8
5:4
5:4
5:4
PED.
1/2
1/2
3/4
1/2
p
5:4
p

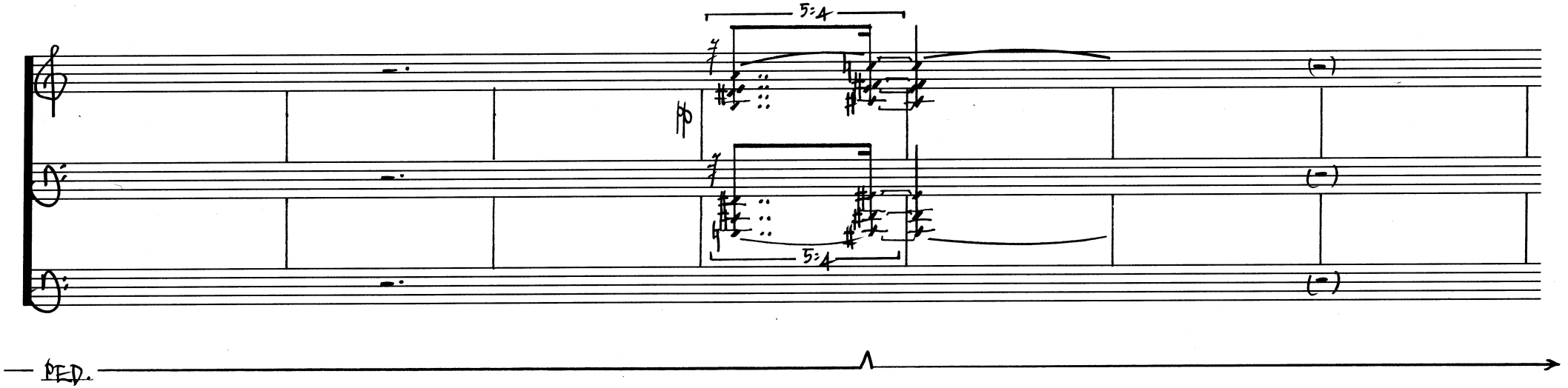

5:4
3:2
5:4
3
5:4
5:4
5:4
7:8
5:4
PED.
1/2
1/2
5:4
9:8
5:4
11:8
9:8
7:8
9:8
7:8
7:8
7:8
7:8
7:8
3:2
(pp)
(B4)
PED
3/4
1/2
1/2
1/2

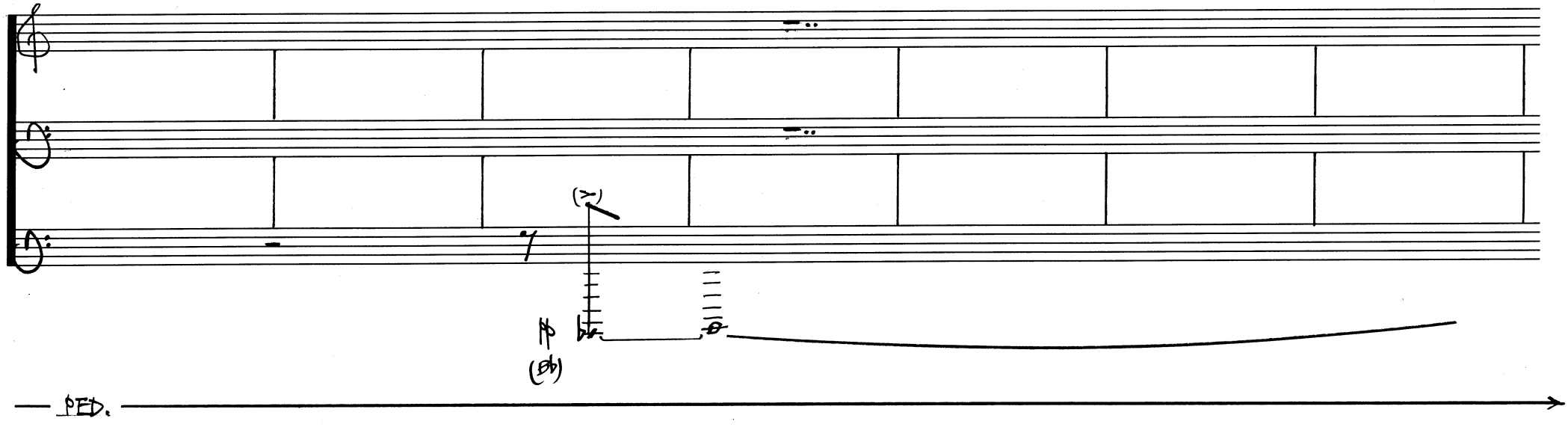

5:4
9:8
(B♮)
pp
PED.
3/4

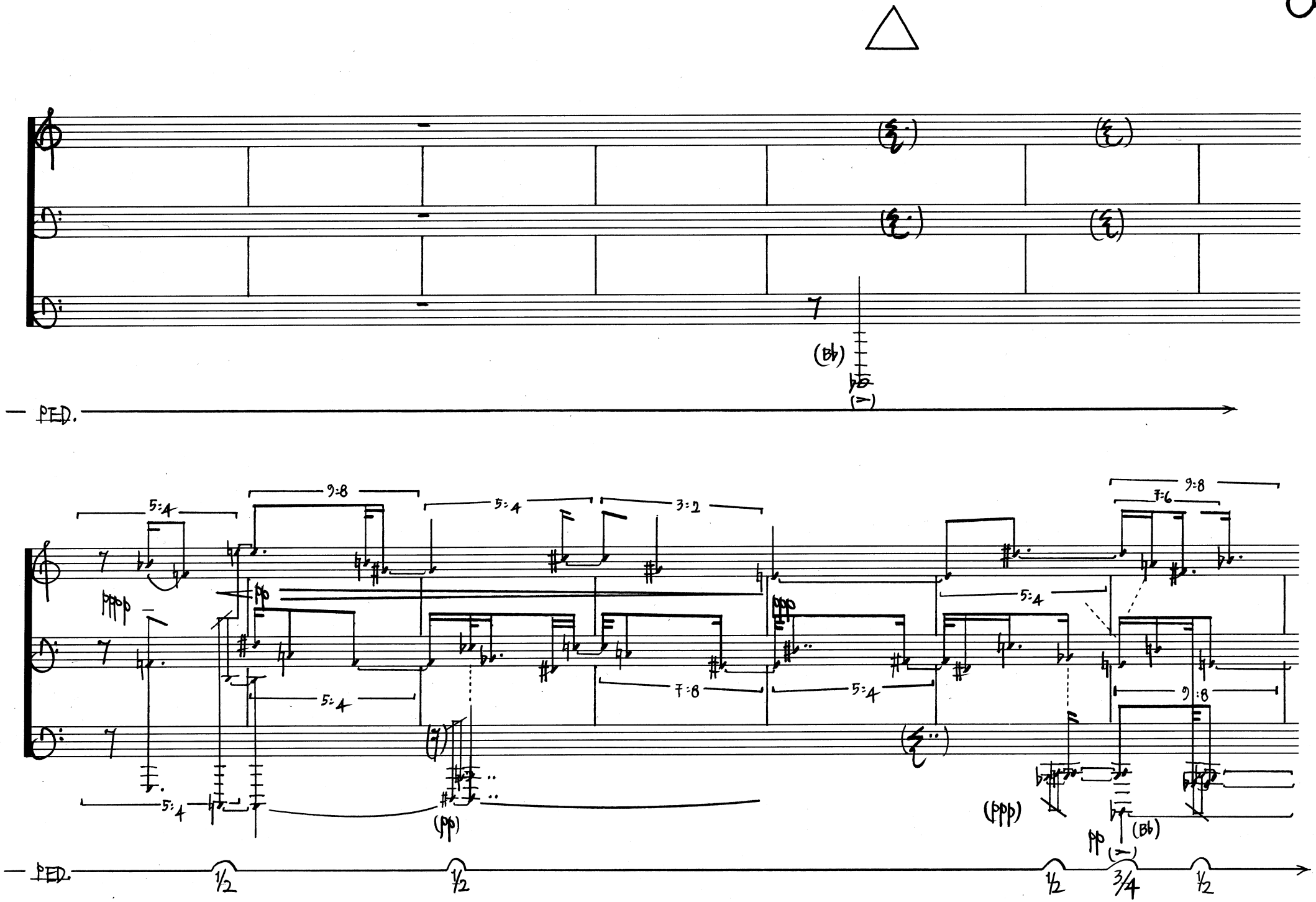

PED.

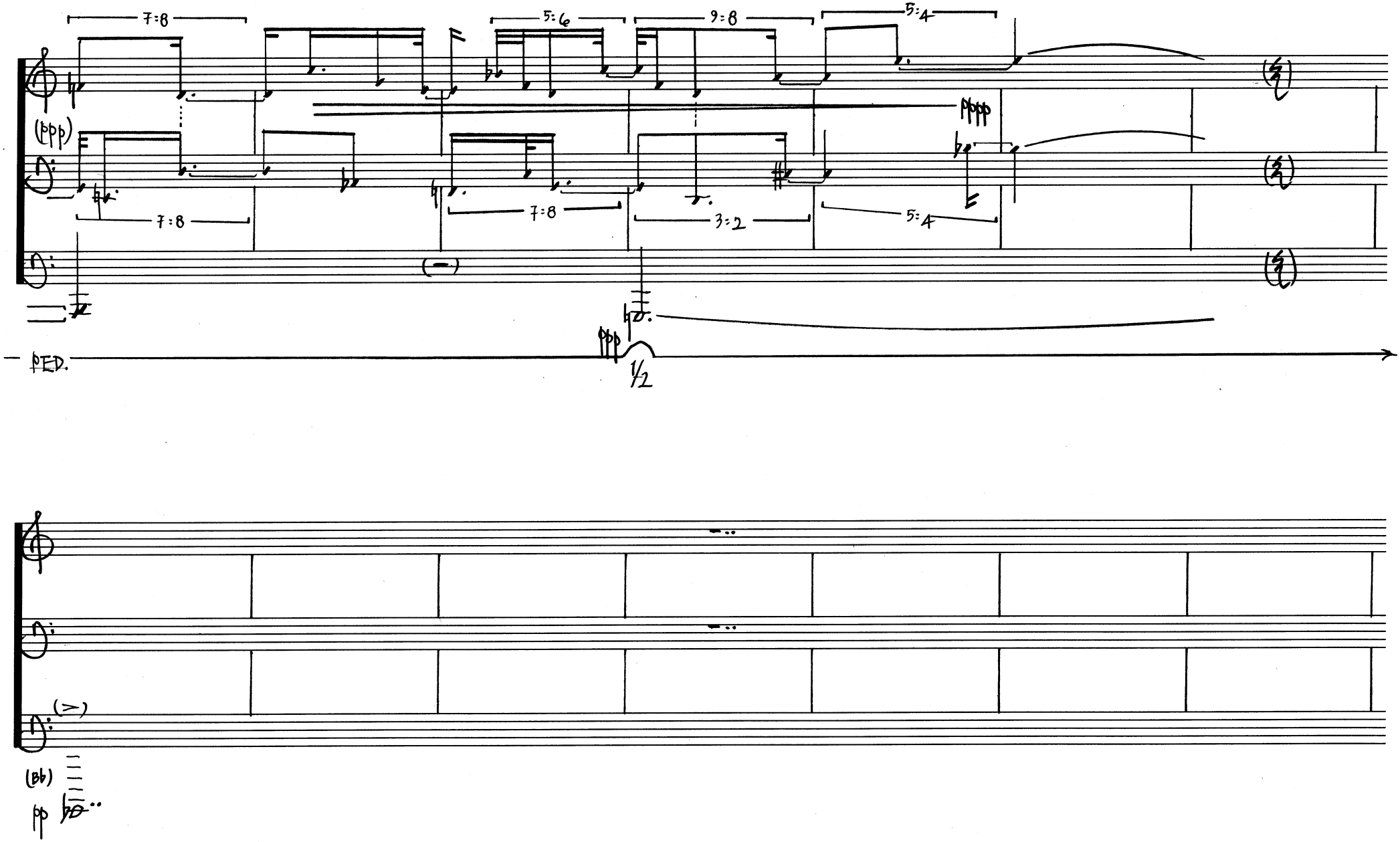

PED.
PED.

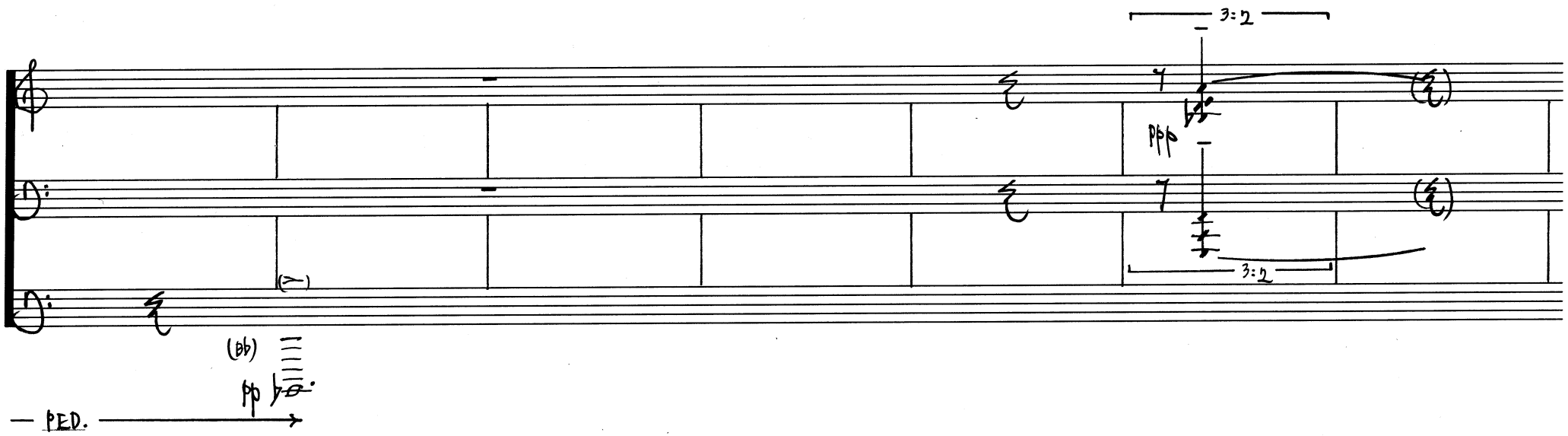

5:4
9:8
5:4
7:6
(pp)
ppppp
3
5:4
(Bb)
(pp)
PED.
3/4
1/2
pp
(Bb)
PED.

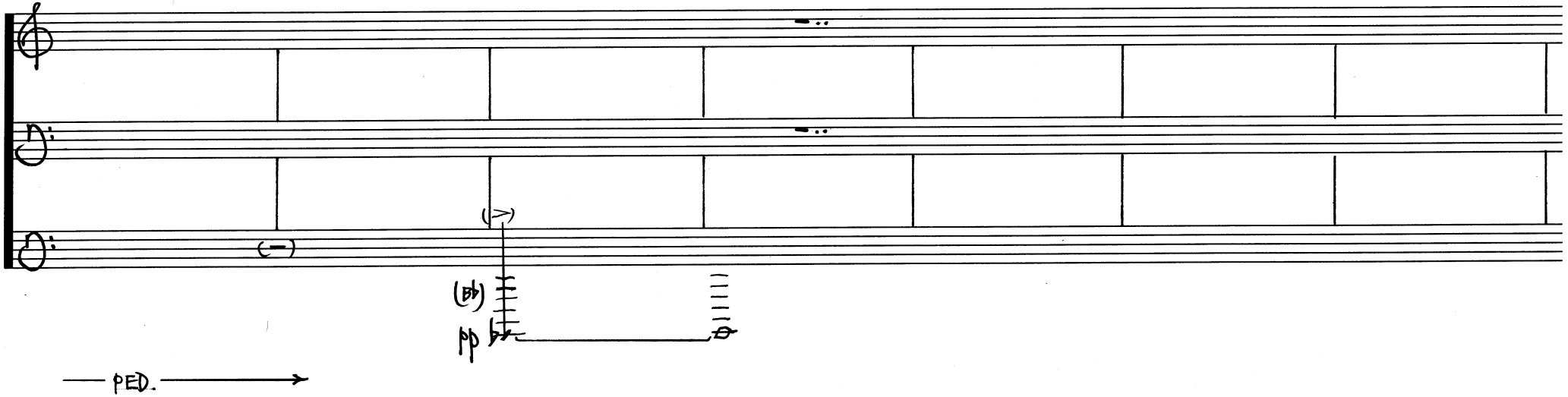

5:4
5:4
PED.

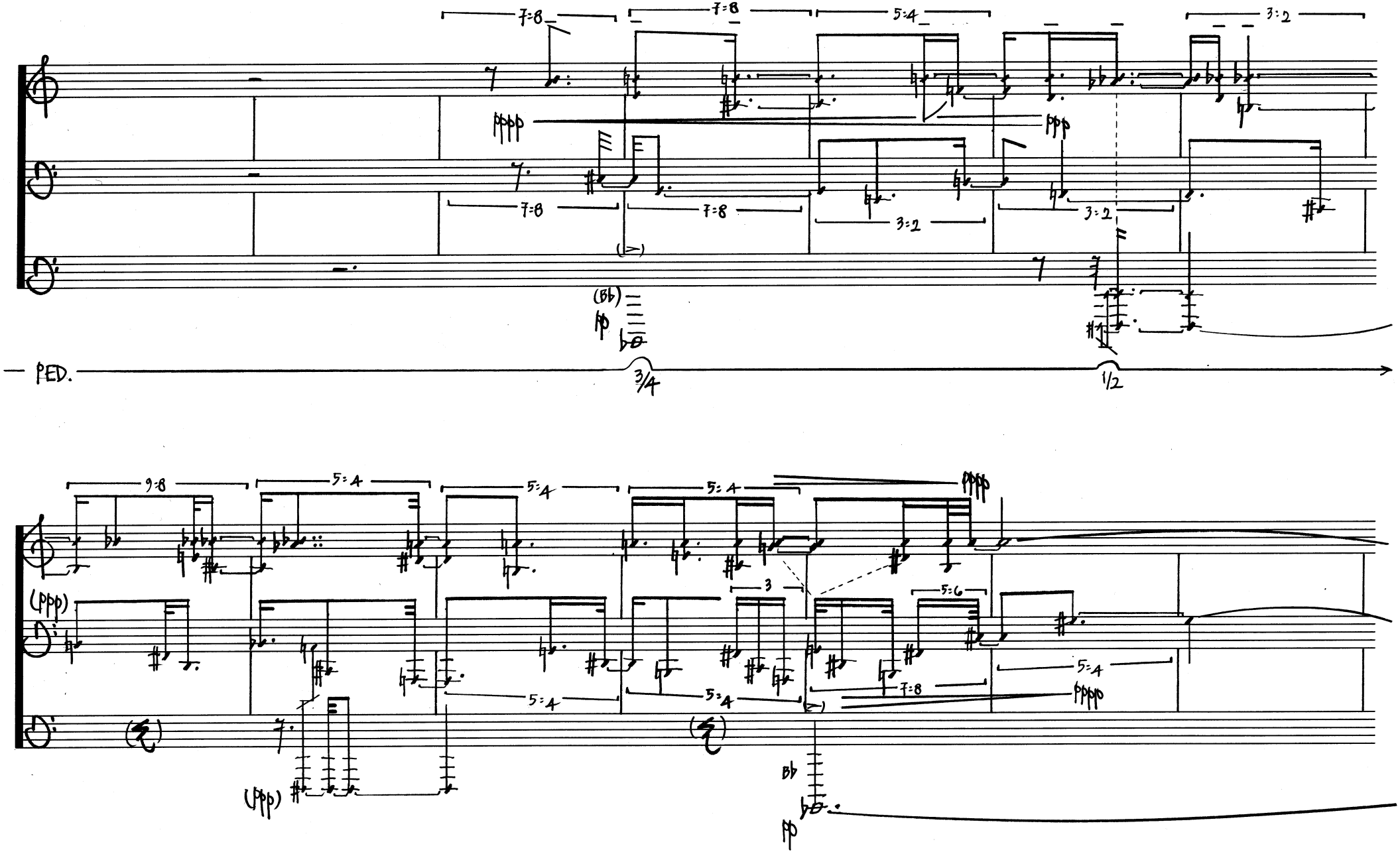

PED.

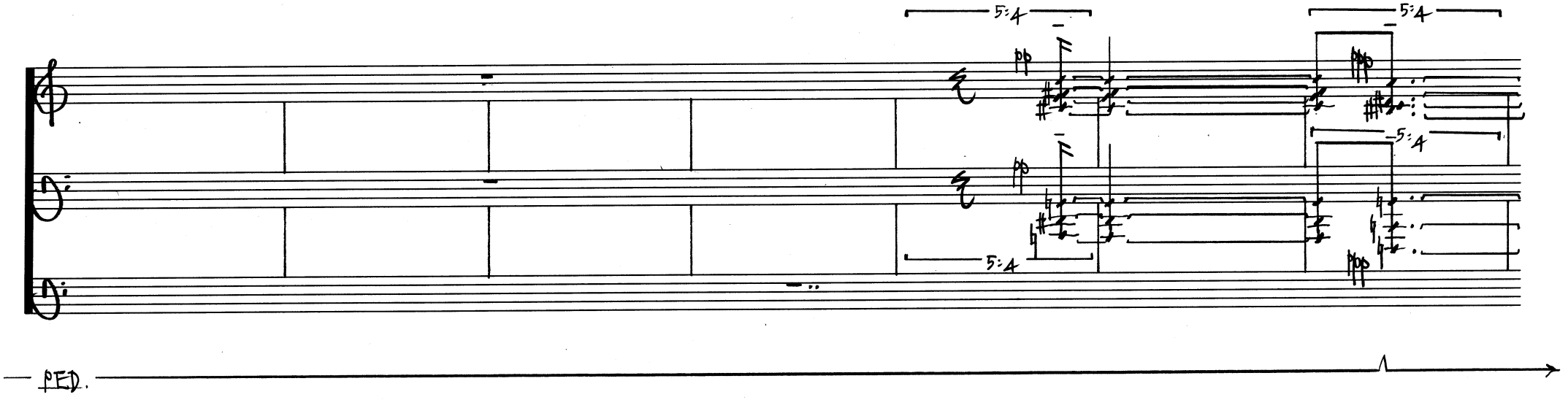

(B♭)
PED.
5:4
9:8
5:4
3:2
7:6
9:8
pppp
pp
ppp
5:4
7:8
5:4
9:8
5:4
(pp)
(ppp)
pp
(B♭)
PED.
1/2
1/2
1/2
3/4
1/2

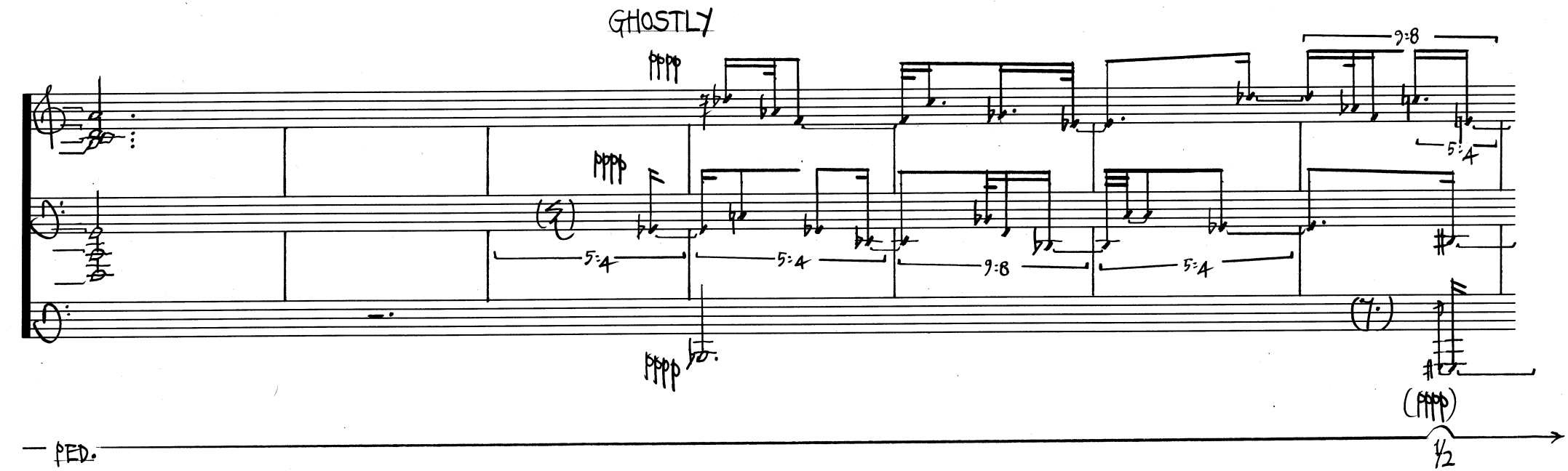

7:8
5:6
9:8
5:4
(ppp)
ppp
7:8
7:8
3:2
5:4
PED.
1/2
(pp)
pp

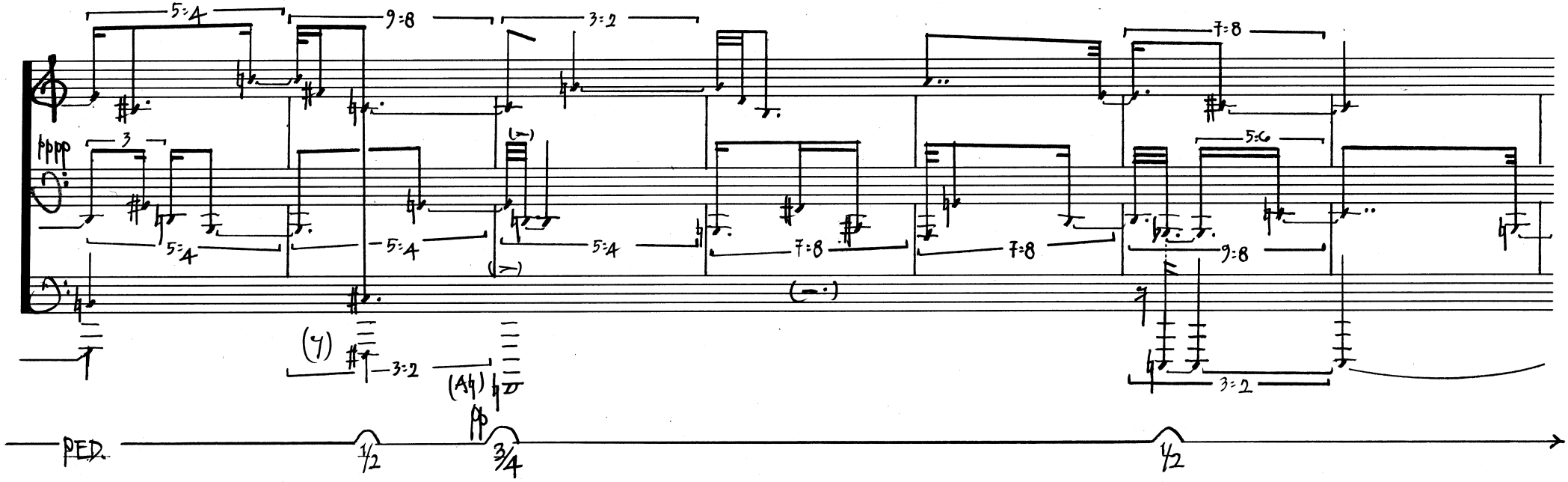

3:2
ppp
3:2
(bb)
pp
— PED.

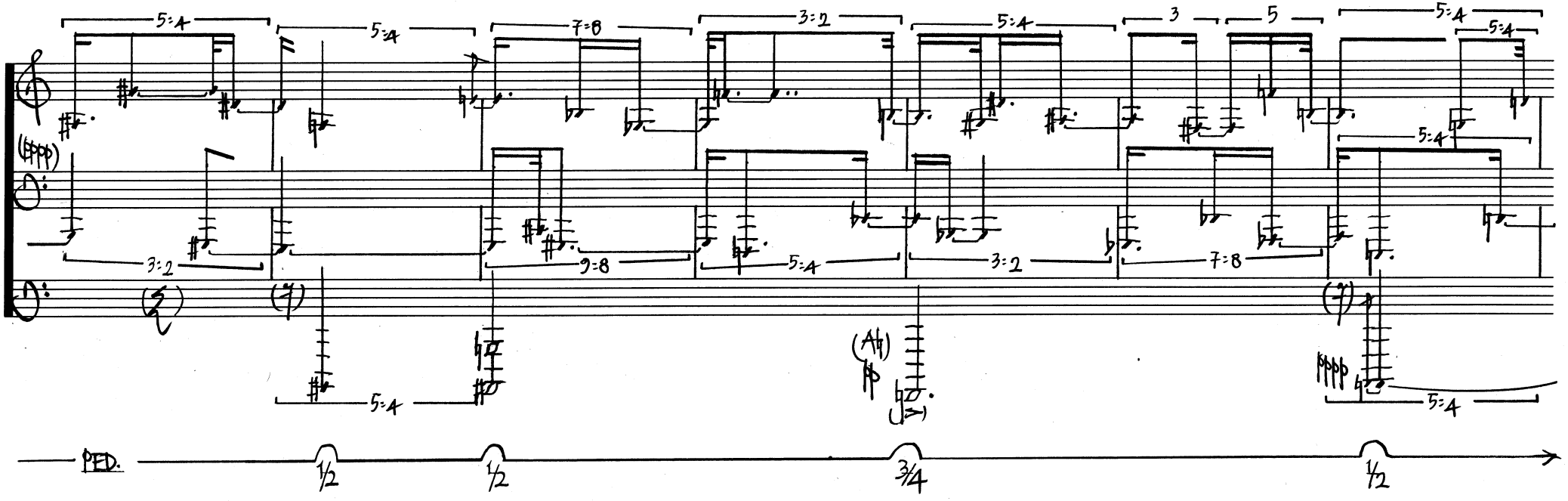

(bb)
pp
— PED.

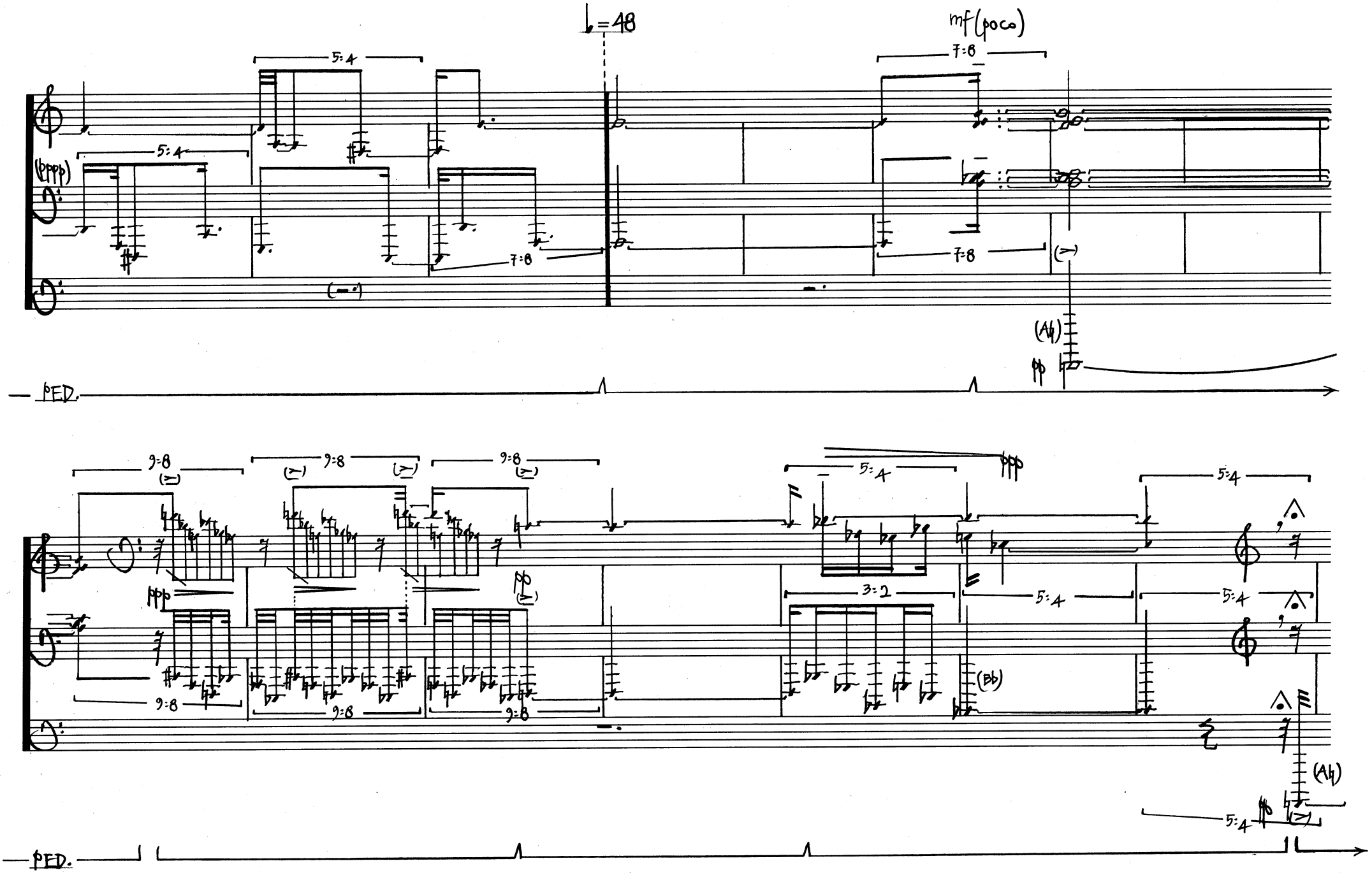

7:8
7:8
5:4
3:2
7:8
7:8
3:2
3:2
(Bb)
PED.
3/4
1/2
9:8
5:4
5:4
5:4
3
5:6
5:4
5:4
7:8
5:4
(ppp)
(ppp)
Bb

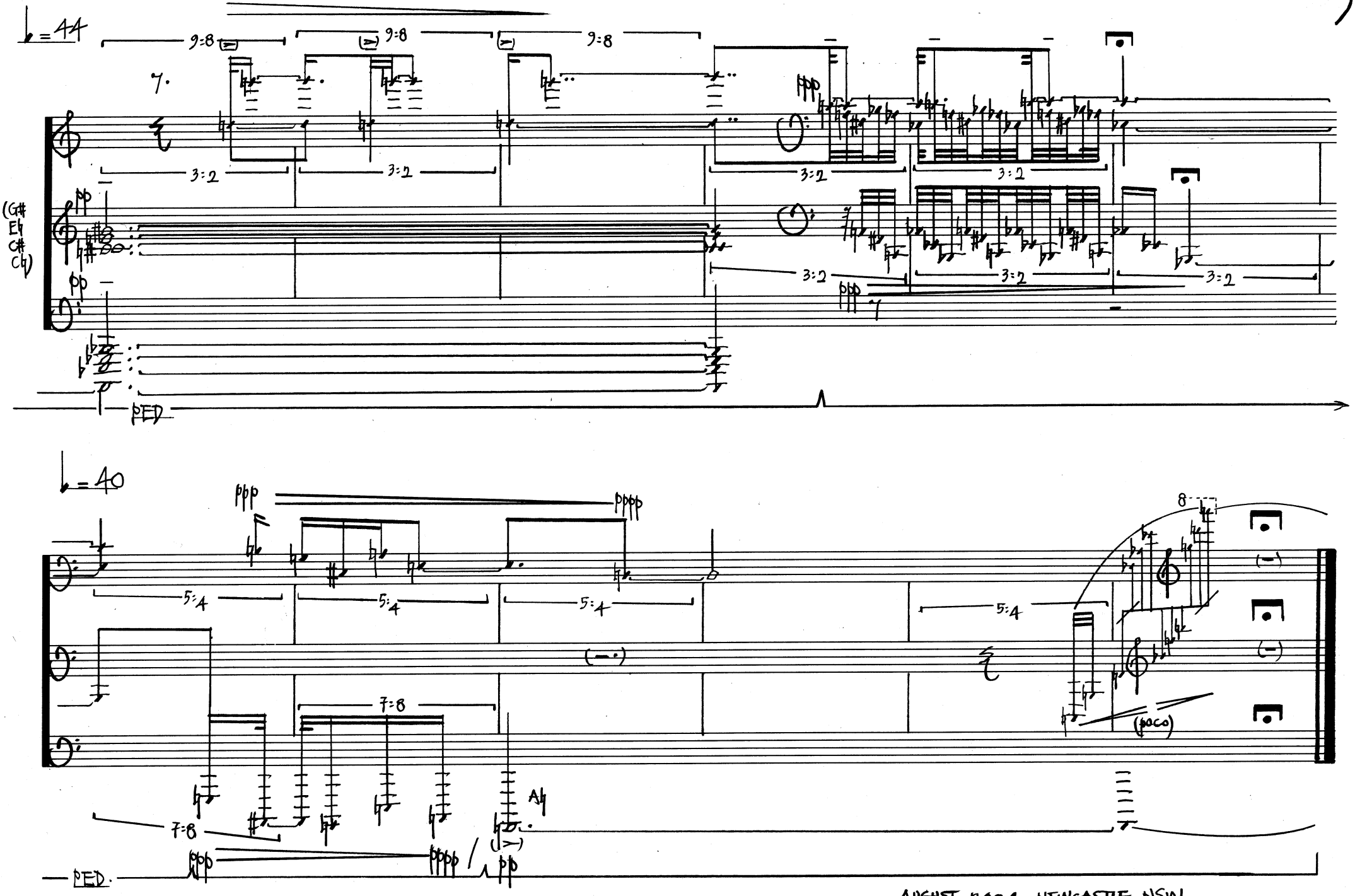

5:4
5:4
5:4
5:4
PED.


GHOSTLY
9:8
5:4
5:4
9:8
5:4
(PPPP)
PED.
1/2


5:4
9:8
3:2
7:8
5:6
3
PED.
1/2
3/4
1/2


5:4
7:8
3:2
3
5
9:8
PED.
1/2
1/2
3/4
1/2


♩=48
mf (poco)
(pppp)
5:4
7:8
(Ah)
PED.
9:8
3:2
(Bb)
PED.



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