passing bells: day

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*

I was originally going to insert a dedication to the brilliant pianists Alex Raineri, Marilyn Nonken, and Peter de Jager, who have all been connected to this piece, and also Andrew Bernard who encouraged me to complete the project, but, sadly, my mother died towards the end of writing so it is now

in memory of Audrey Dench, died 19 January 2020

approximate duration: circa 45'—Vigils 4'; day 22'; night 13'; ...nox... 6'.

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

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

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

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

...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

Performers are of course free to program this piece any way they see fit.
If asked, however, I would suggest that the work would go very well in a concert with, perhaps,
the **Three Preludes on Gregorian Melodies** of Respighi
or the **D.840 Unfinished C major Sonata / D.894 G major Sonata**
or ***Vers la Flamme***, or the ***Musica Callada***, or ***les Heures Persanes***
or Busoni's **Fantasia Contrappuntistica**—
perhaps rather evidently, I had all these works in mind as I wrote.

Program note:

Passing bells is a composite work, in a sense, linking the Middle Ages with our times. Over about 40 minutes it ostensibly covers twenty-four hours in the cyclic rhythm of mediaeval life, from midnight through to midnight. The opening section, **Vigils**, is intended to recall the quiet intensity of the Great Silence of overnight monastic Prayer Watches: the Religious earnestly attempting communion with their god. My certainty 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 following the seven Prayer Hours, or Offices, of the mediaeval day, from *Lauds* at Dawn, to *Compline* in the evening. Bells obsessively toll throughout **Day**, expressive of the permanent melancholy of coexistence with the Black Death. Whereas **Day** intersperses the bells with the frantic pursuit of the everyday, the following **Night** section presents them in a landscape of silence, the empty darkness of the overnight hours. As Barbara Tuchman reminds us, "the passing bells rang all day and all night…" The work ends with a brief 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 dark **Night** of the soul, this is the long sleep of oblivion. Like life, the work is structured as a myriad of tiny capsules of experience (well, 122), some fleeting and lightweight and others of more moment. If they cohere, it is because each belongs to just one of a set of affective threads—seven in **day** and seven in **night**.

Not irrelevantly, there are several homages 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 complementary architecture. 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; I find myself constantly saddened by our brutal, indifferent, and nihilistic times. As a composer I often feel that I flail impotently in the face of our unkind world; clearly **passing bells** is a manifestation of that flailing. But a tightly composed manifestation… The completion of the piece coincided with the appearance of the COVID-19 'plague'—an eerily apposite bookending.

The **passing bells: night** section of this work was written in 2004 for Marilyn Nonken, at the request of Daryl Buckley, artistic director of ELISION. In 2018 I decided to complete the entire arch of the **passing bells** structure, in part in response to the encouragement of my webmeister and engraver Andrew Bernard, and Alex Raineri asked that I finish it for his December 2019 Brisbane Festival closing concert—a request I was pleased to satisfy. 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.

Related texts:

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

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:

Specific instructions by page:

These instructions refer only to the music in the indicated bar.

8 **11**	Here and elsewhere—Inner voices: stress on upper of each pair of chords
15	Roll outer voices bottom to top across entire chord—strike all inner voice chords simultaneously
59	The numbered dynamics refer to the four repetitions of the section: there is a gradual *decrescendo* over the four iterations.

General instructions:

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. Do not attempt to make these ostinati more uniform.

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 capital 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.

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

LIGHT: 1

mf pp

(PEDAL FOR CHURCH-LIKE AMBIENCE)

(pp)

— PED.

2 STILL CANTABILE — LEGATO

mf

— PED.

3:2 3:2 7:8 7:8 5:4 7:8 3:2 3:2

7:8 pp 5:4 5:4 7:8 ppp p 3:2 5:4

PED.

3

5:4 ppp 7:8 mf 7:8 p 5:4

7:8 7:8 3:2 7:8 p 5:4

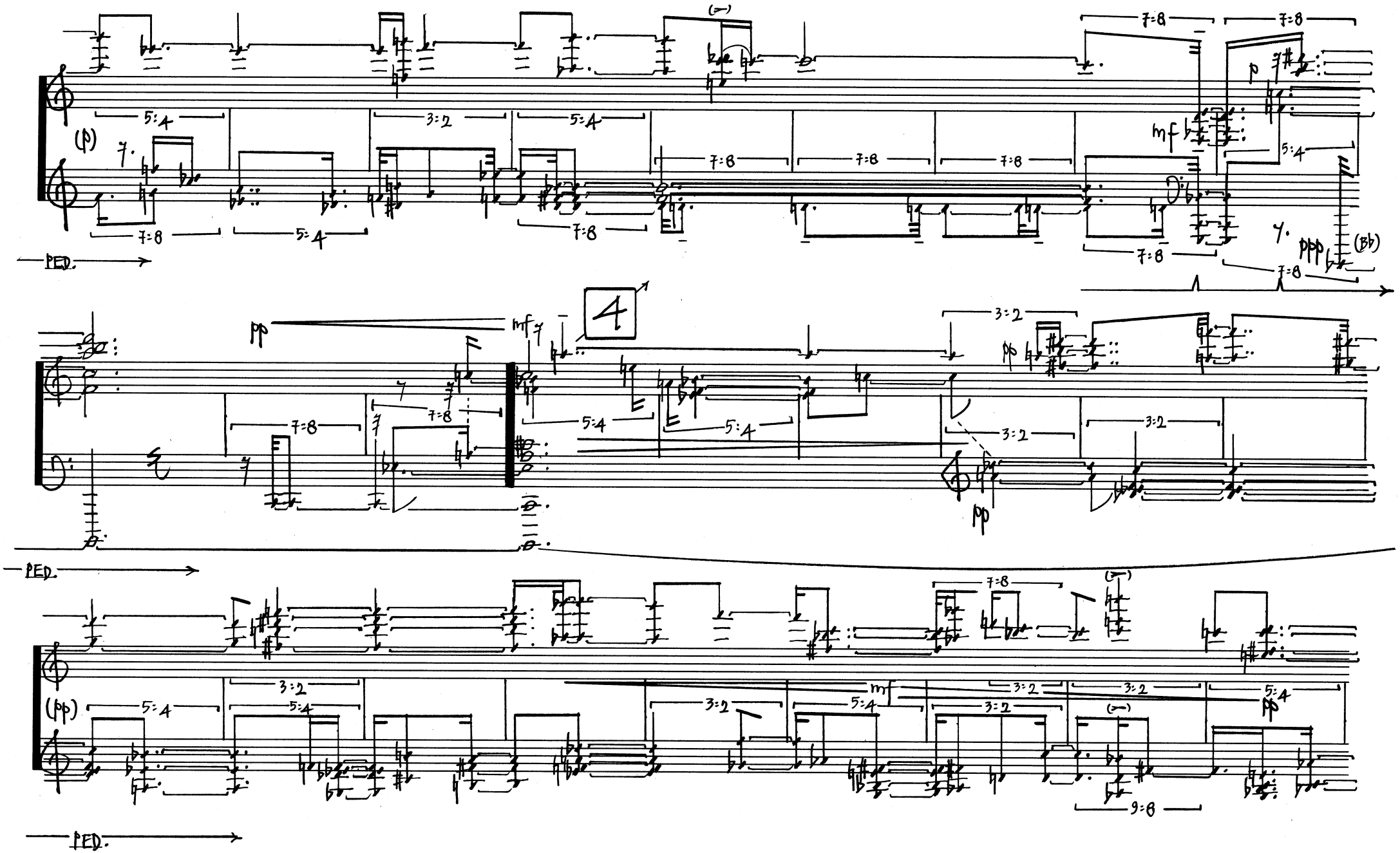
ppp mf 5:4

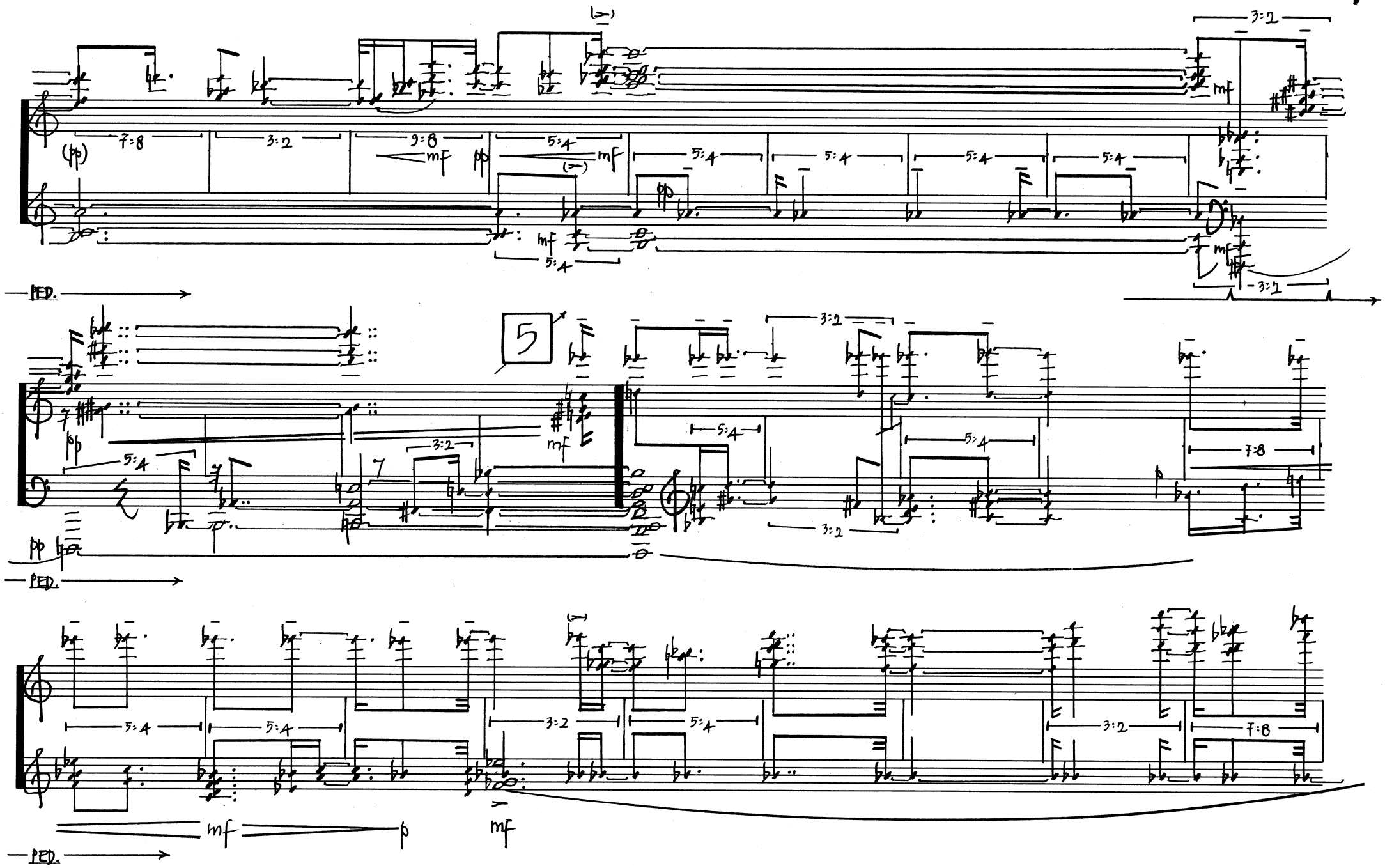
PED.

(p) 5:4 3:2 5:4 3:2 5:4 5:4

7:8 5:4 3:2

PED.


(p)
PED.
mf
p
ppp
(Bb)
pp
4
(pp)


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

F♮ D♮ B♭ A♭ G♭

(mf) 9:8 5:4 7:8 7:8 7:8

fz mf fz mfz mfz pp p

(E♭)

PED.

G♯ F♯ E♮ D♯ G♯

3:2

pp

5:4 5:4

F E♭ B♭ G♭

(A♮)

(f)

PED.

6

(E♮)

sfz f p mf

5:4 7:8 5:4 9:8 7:8 5:4

mf p pp p mf

PED.

(mf)

7:8

pp mf

5:4

mf

PED.

(>)

7:8

5:4

9:8

3:2

Eb
C
Bb
Ab
F#

mfz

PED.

QUIETENING

3:2 7:8 7:8 7:8 7:8 7:8 5:4

mf f mf

5:4 5:4

PED.

5:4 3:2 5:4 3:2 7:8 5:4 3:2 9:8

PED.

7

3:2 5:4 7:8 7:8 3:2

(ppp)

5:4 7:8 7:8

PED.

(FULL RELEASE)

DAY: I

♩=52

sffz

①

ff

5:4

9:8

7:8

3:2

f

sffz

PED.

(ff)

F♮ C♯ B G♯ F♯

(f)

mf

PED.

DYING AWAY

(f) (mf) mf sfz f mf sfz mfz

PED.

♩ = 72

mfz mf p mfz/p mfz/p mfz/p mfz mf pp f mfz

PED.

♩ = 92 MUSCULARLY

(p) mf f ff

PED.

♩= 108

(Eb) (Db)

PED.

♩= 72 SLIGHTLY INCISIVE (RUBATO)

PED. AD LIB

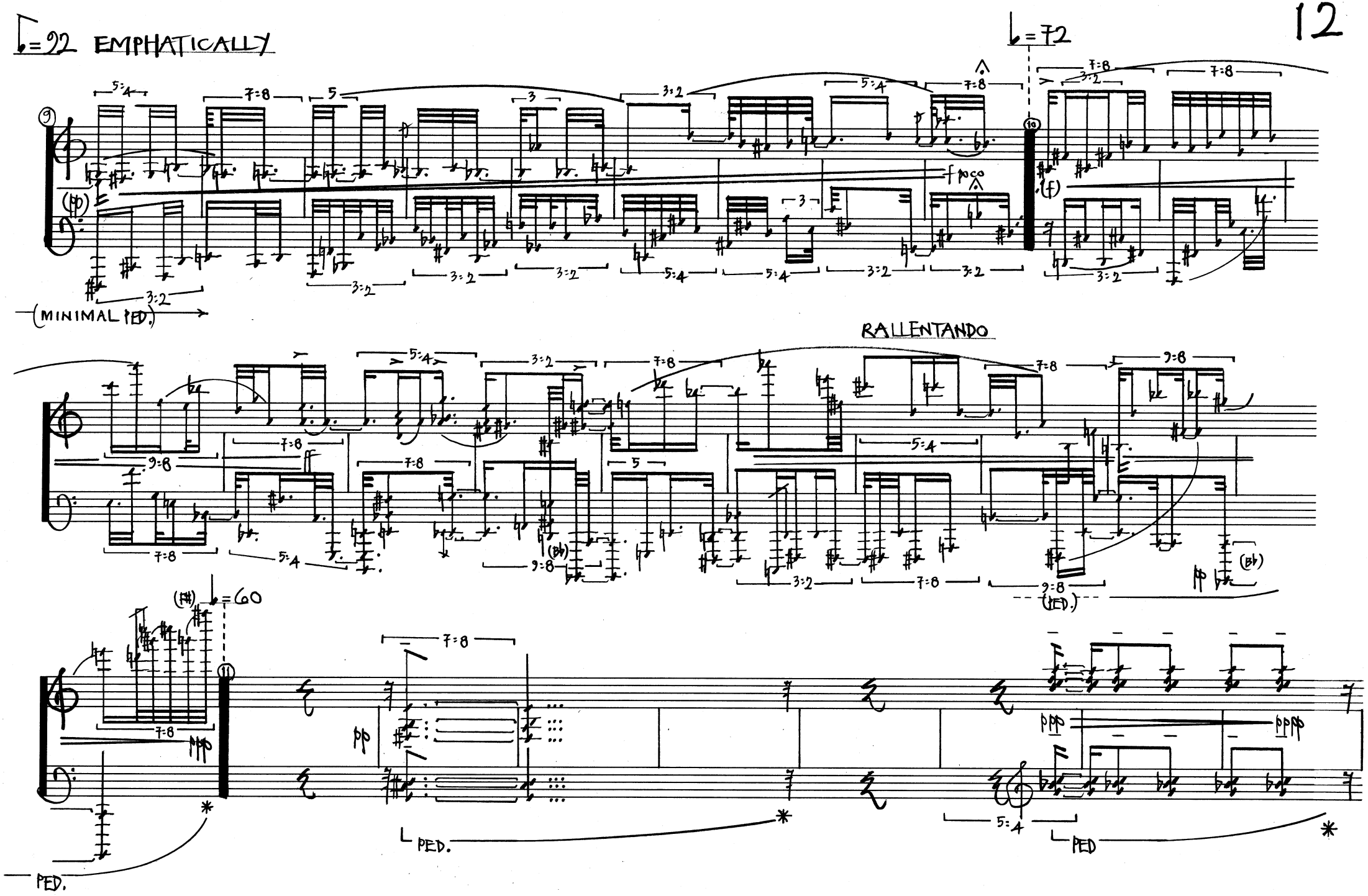
(Eb)

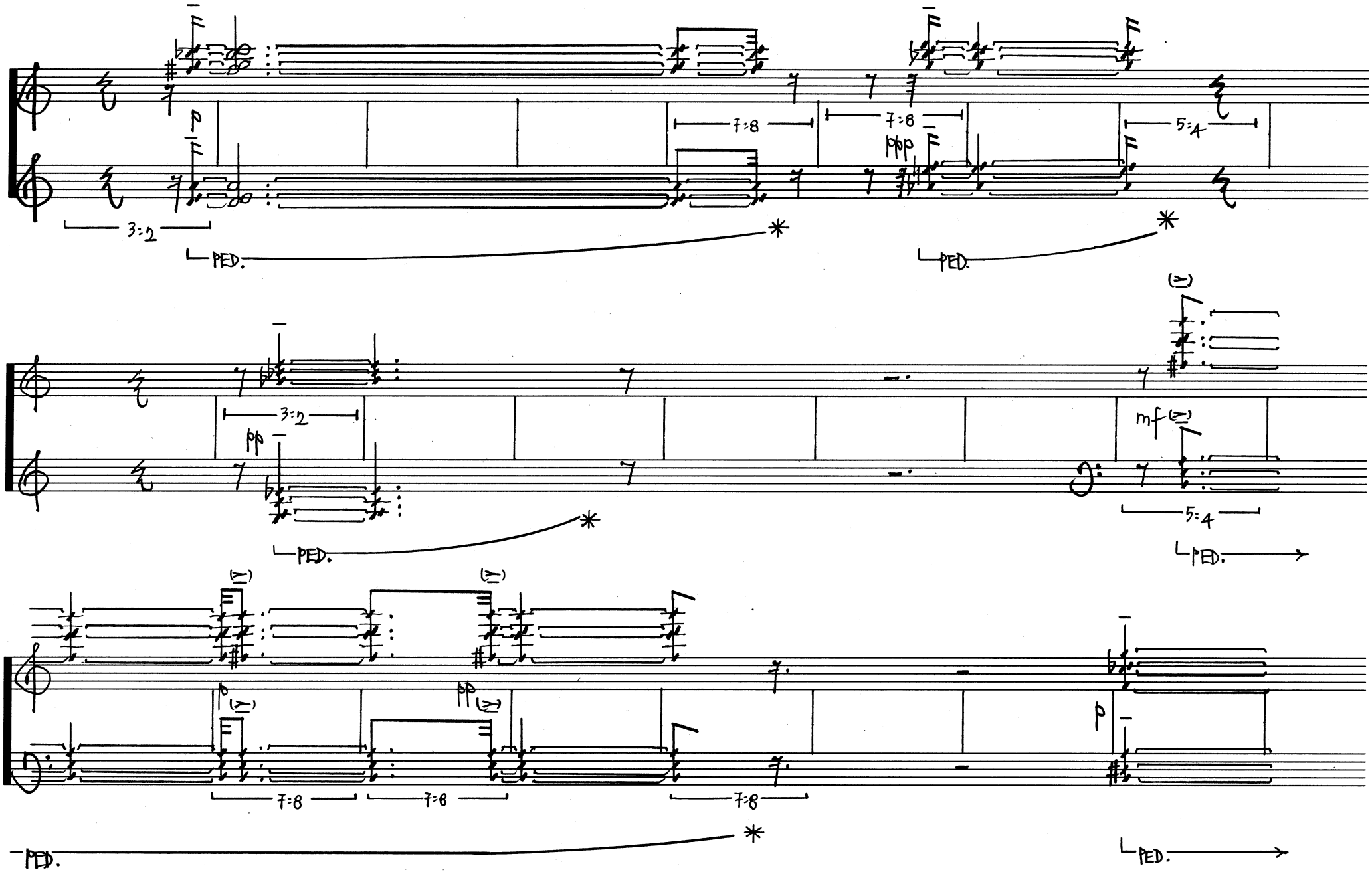
*ossia:

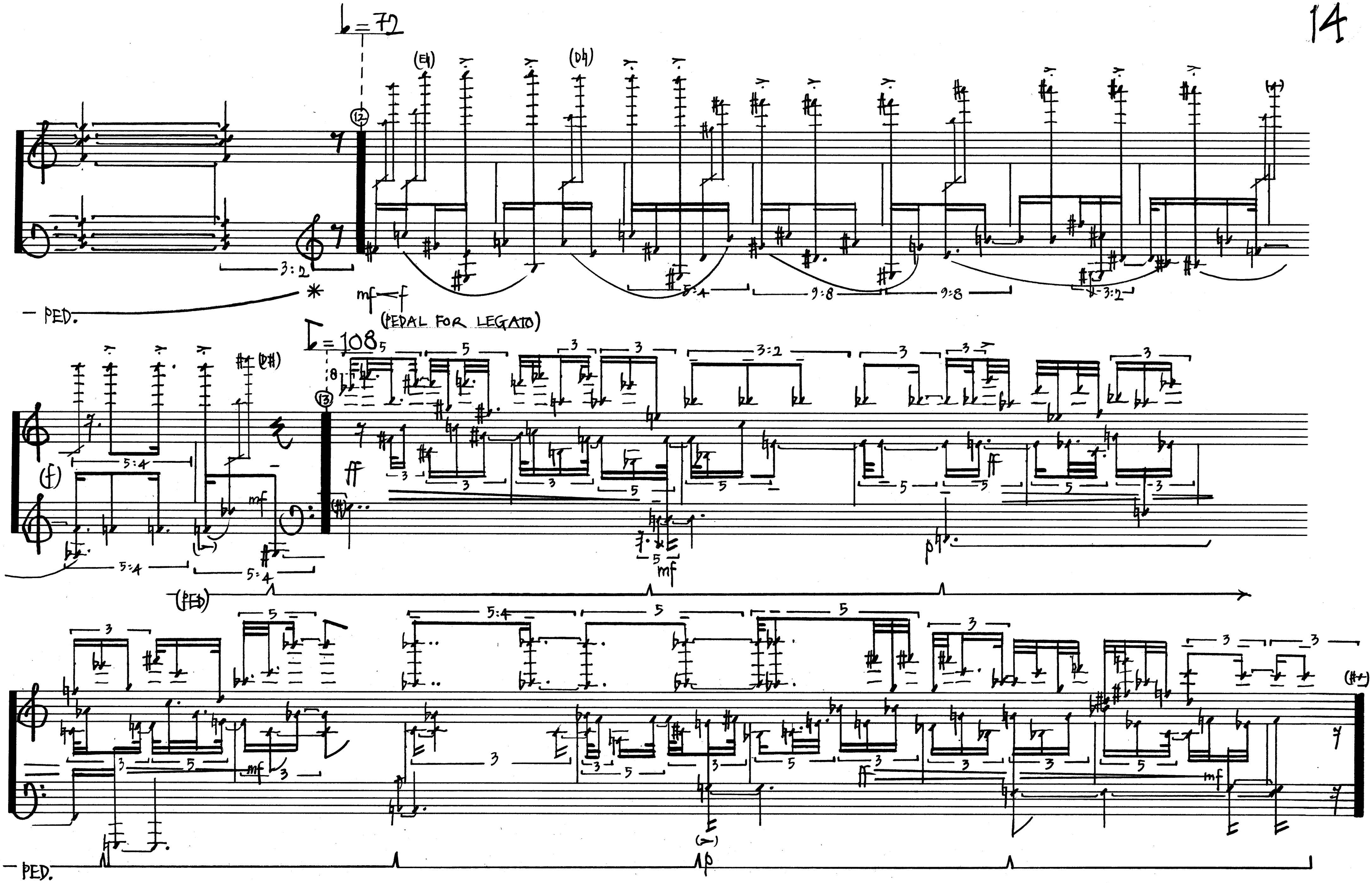
♩=100 AMOROUSLY

II ♩=52 8

(PEDAL FOR CLARITY)


♩=92 EMPHATICALLY
♩=72
(pp)
poco
(f)
(MINIMAL PED.)
RALLENTANDO
(PED.)
(pp)
(pp)
♩=60
(PED.)
(PED.)
(PED.)


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


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

♩ = 92 EXPRESSIVELY

VEILEDLY

(ppp)

(Bb)

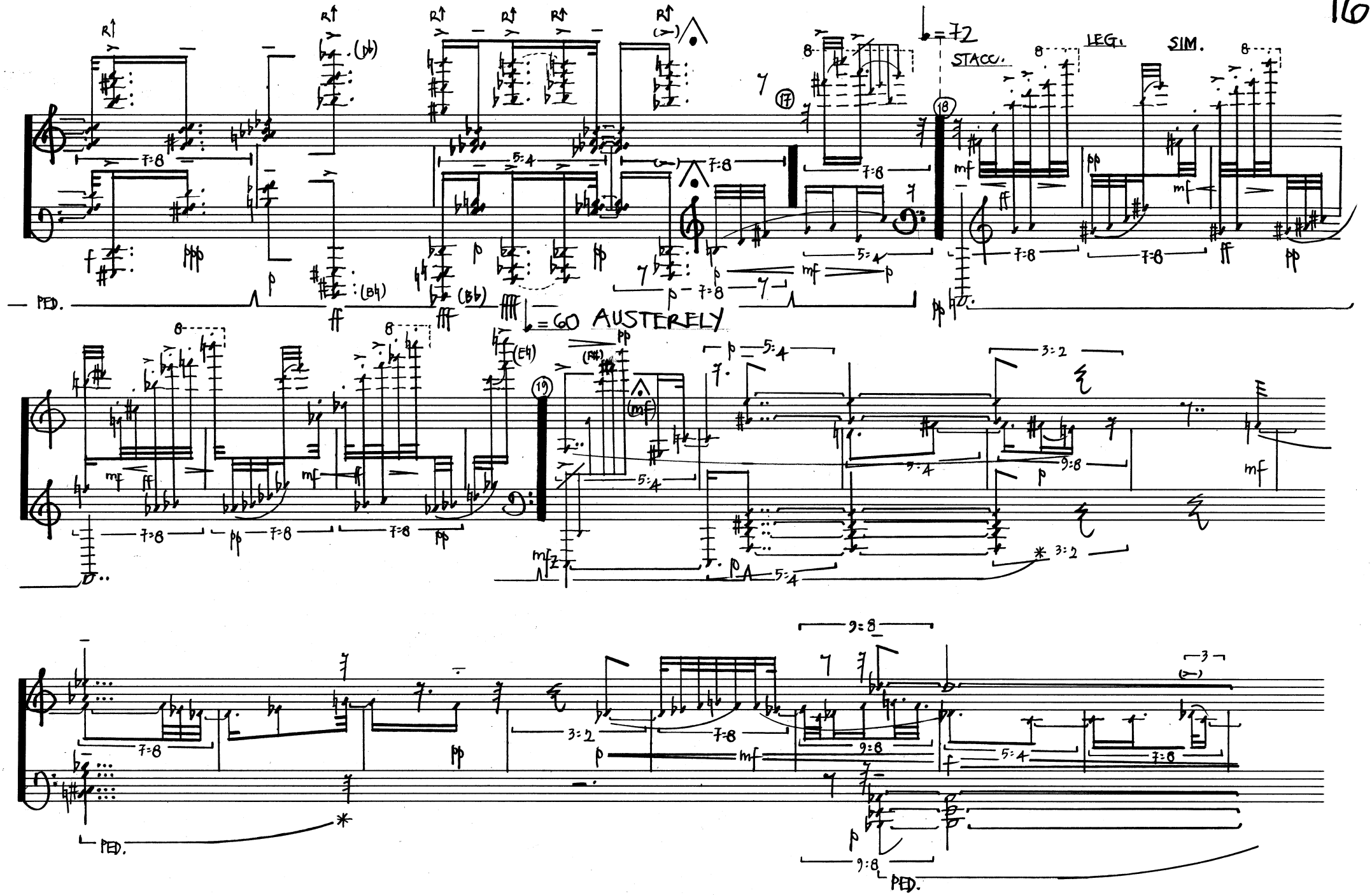
♩ = 52

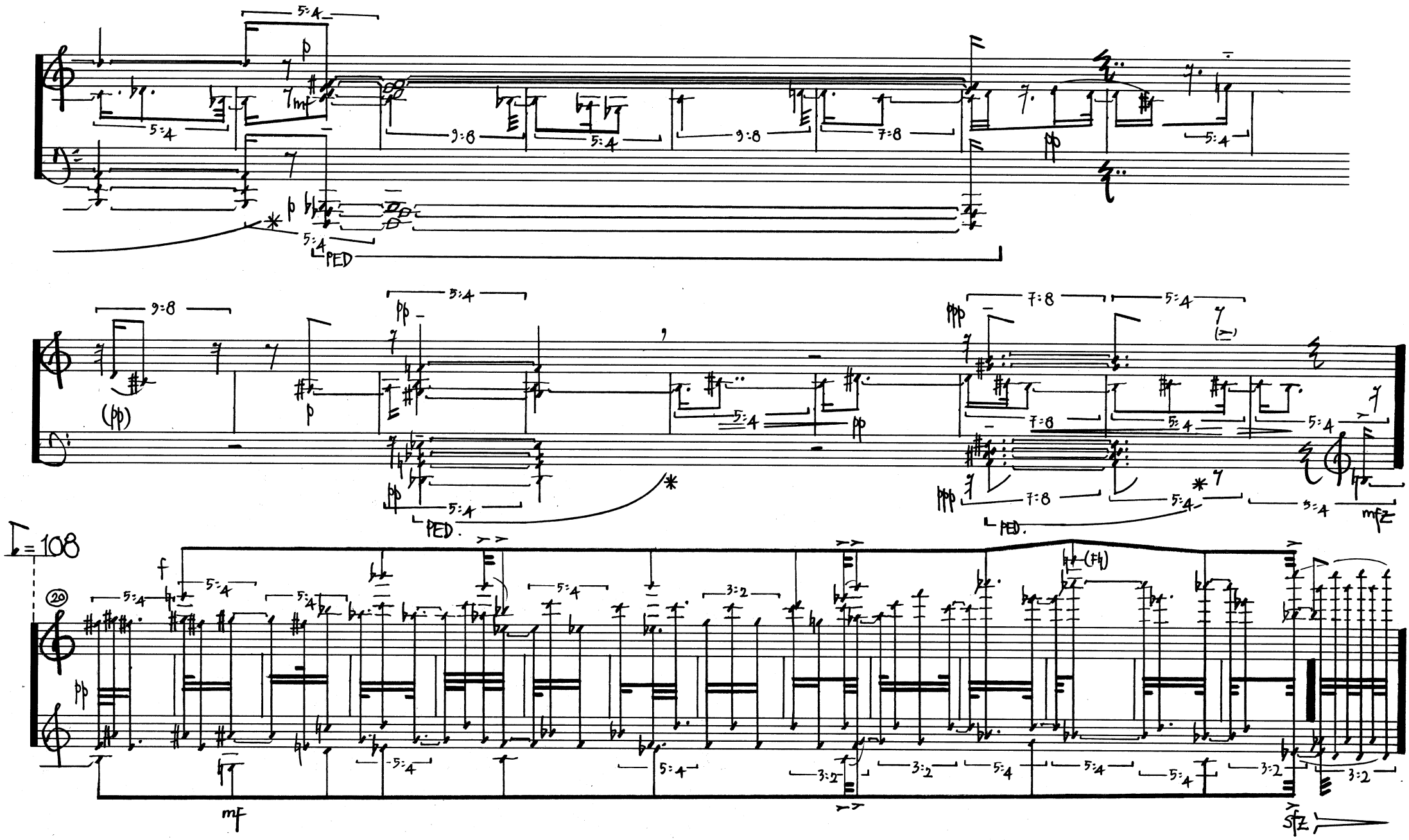
(ff)

(½p)

PED.

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


STACC.
LEG.
SIM.
PED.
= 60 AUSTERELY


5:4
p
mf
9:8
7:8
pp
PED
(pp)
♩= 108
20
f
3:2
mf
sfz

CANTABILE

♩=60

㉒

mf

5:4 5:4 5:4 7:8 9:8 9:8 7:8

3:2 p

PED.

pp

3:2 (p) 9:8 3:2 9:8 3:2 3:2

mf p mf p

(ppp) 5:4 9:8 (♯) 5:4 5:4

PED.

p

(♭) pp

pp p

3:2 3 3:2 5:4

3:2 3 3:2 5:4 5:4 5:4

PED. PED. PED. PED.

♩=72 ㉓

(p)

5:4

(ppp)

pp

♩=60 SLIGHTLY AGITATED

24

mf

mf

f

mf

(pp)

mf

p

pp

♩=92 DESOLATELY

25

p

mf

pp

(ppp)

p

ppp

p

ppp

♩=52 IV 10 NOONISHLY BLEAK

·THREE TIMES·

26

PED.

(Eb)

(Bb)

PED.

♩=60

27

PED.

♩= 100 SHARPLY

(EB) ♩= 60

28 29

mf

PED.

pp

PED.

♩= 60 DESOLATE AGAIN

30

ppp

p

ppp

♩= 108 LIGHTLY

31

(ppp)

p

ppp

mf

(mf)

pp

mf

Loco

♩= 60 BRIGHTLY

32

f

mf/f

sff/p

ff

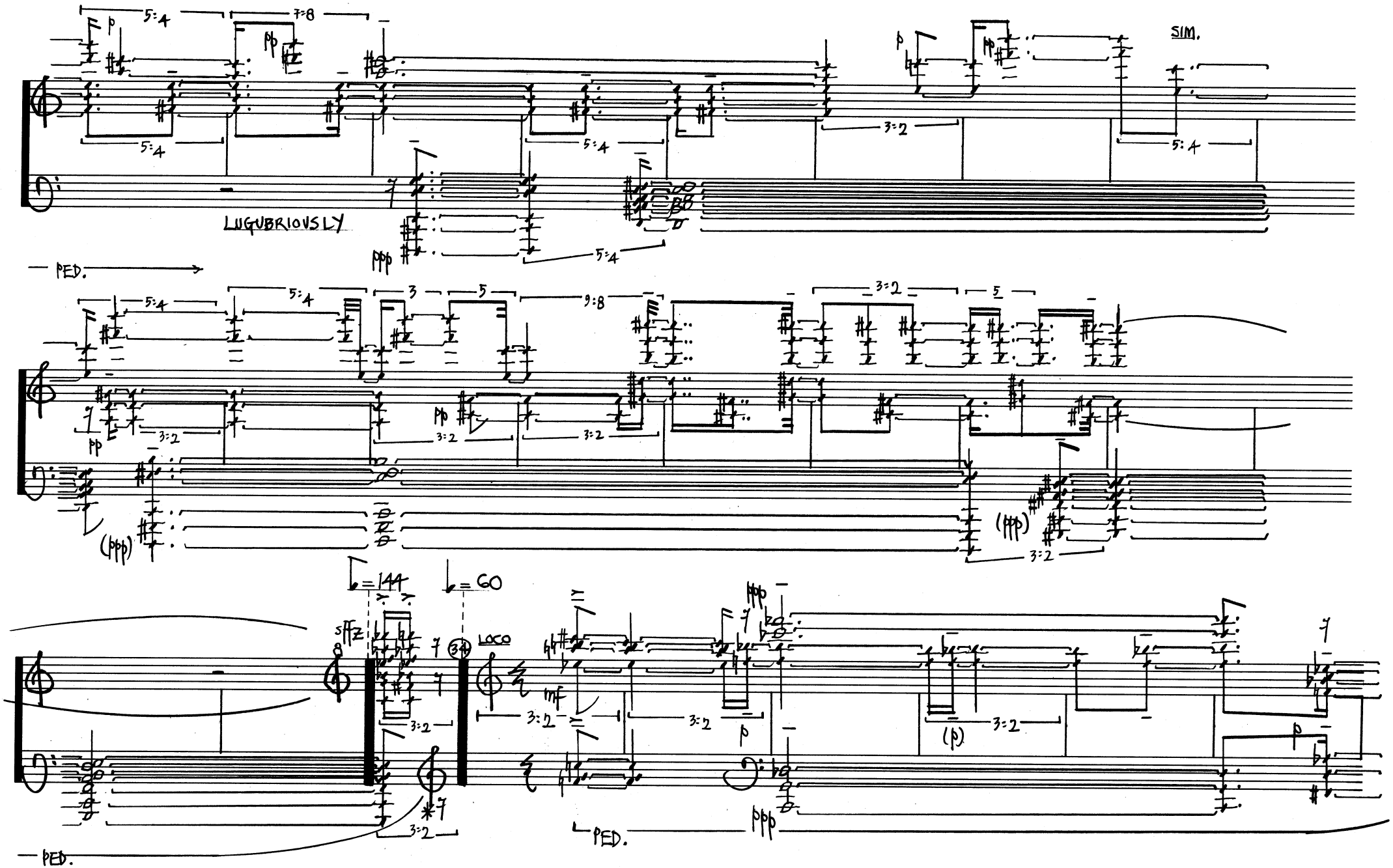
p

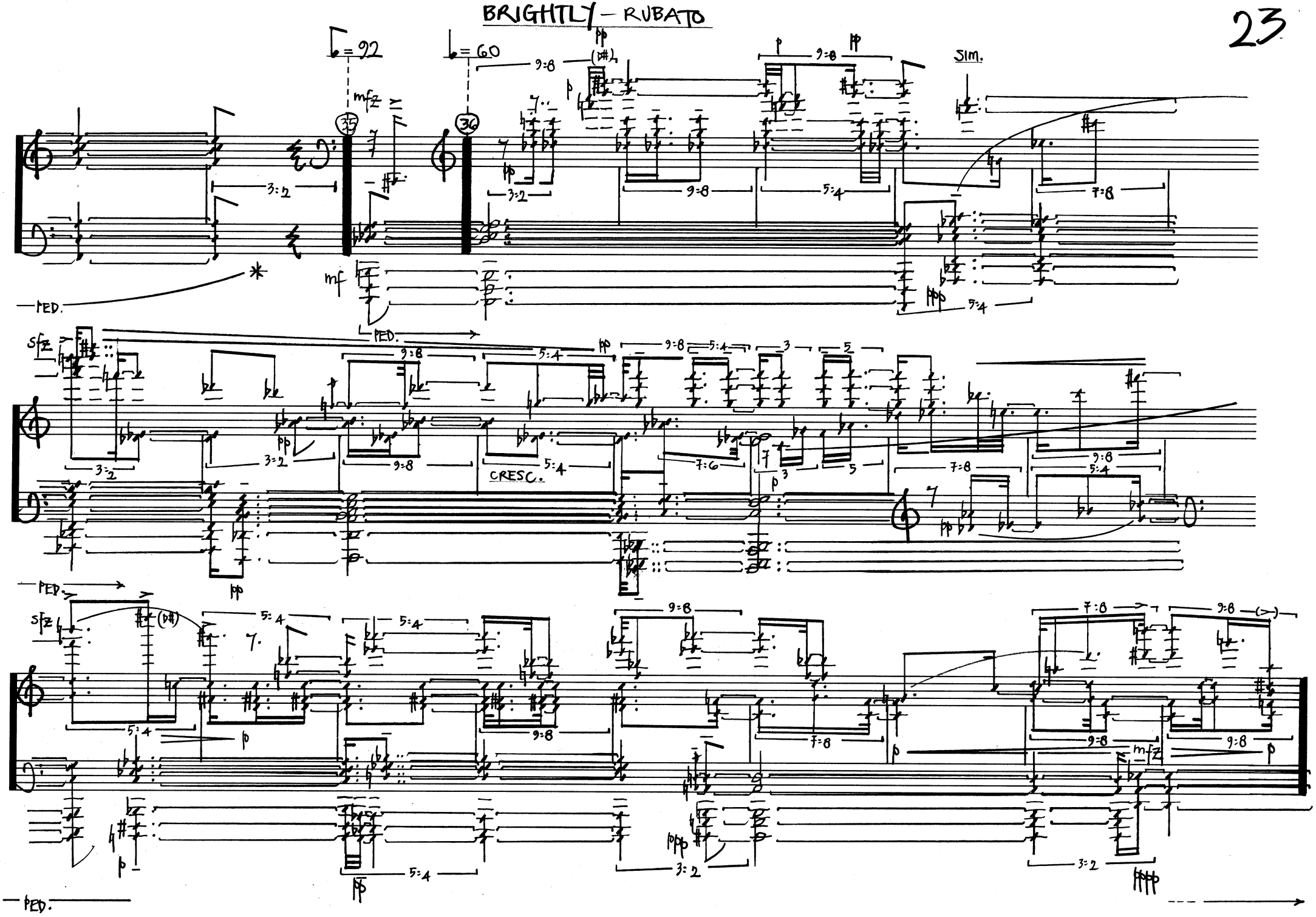
pp

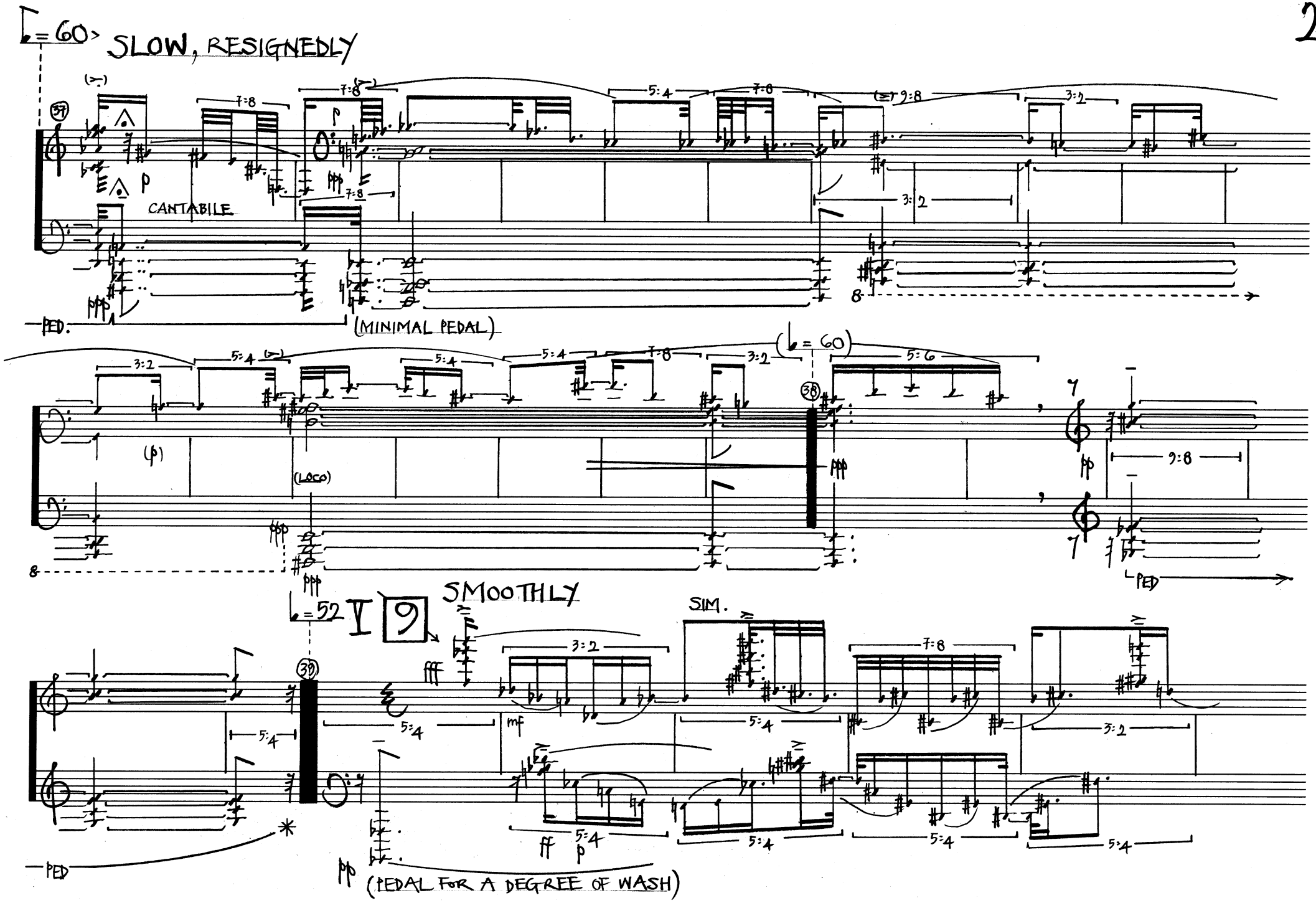
p

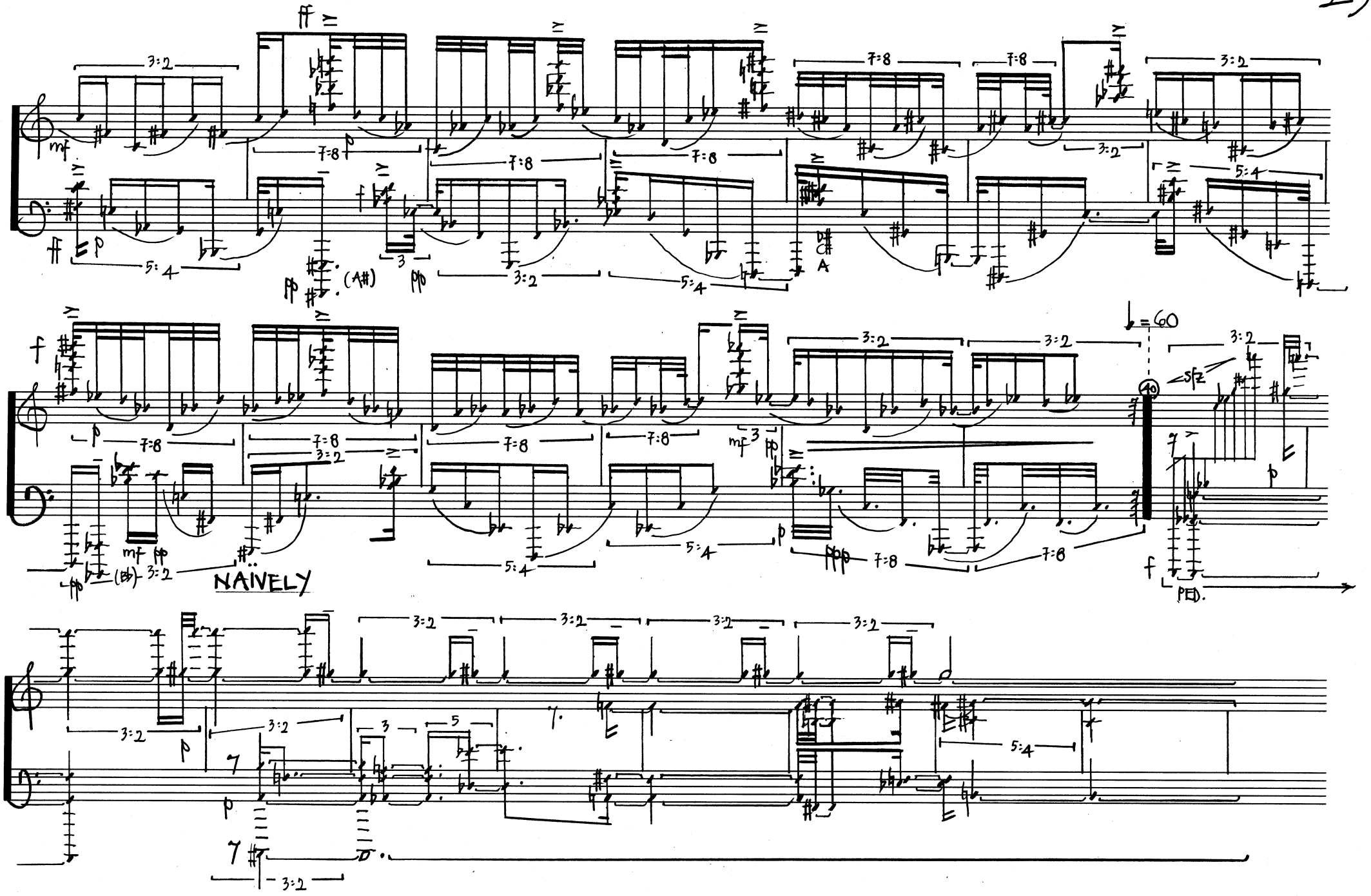
pp

PED.


SIM.
LUGUBRIOUSLY
PED.
♩=144
♩=60
sffz
LOCO
mf
(p)
(ppp)
(ppp)
PED.
PED.


BRIGHTLY – RUBATO
♩= 92
♩= 60
35
36
mfz
mf
pp
p
SIM.
PED.
sfz
CRESC.
ppp
mfz


♩= 60
SLOW, RESIGNEDLY
37
CANTABILE
PED.
(MINIMAL PEDAL)
(♩= 60)
38
(LOCO)
PED
♩= 52
39
9
SMOOTHLY
SIM.
PED
(PEDAL FOR A DEGREE OF WASH)


NAIVELY
PED.

(NO PAUSE)

♩=100

PED.

DEFT, UNSETTLED

41

42

♩=75

(NOT TOO FAST)

PED.

♩= 100

LIGHTLY

44 45 46 47 48 49

mf (mf) p mf p (p) pp ppp

5:4 5:6 3:2 9:8 4:3 7:8

PED. PED.

♩= 75 (♩= 75)

♩= 60

SMOOTH, SECRETIVE

mfz

RIT.

A TEMPO

50

mfz/pp

♩= 75

mfz

Ped.

Ped.

♩=52 VI 8

GLOOMILY

52

7:8

5:4

PED.

UC

pp

ppp

(ppp)

3:2

UC

(DELICATELY, DETACHED)

♩=60

HESITANTLY

53

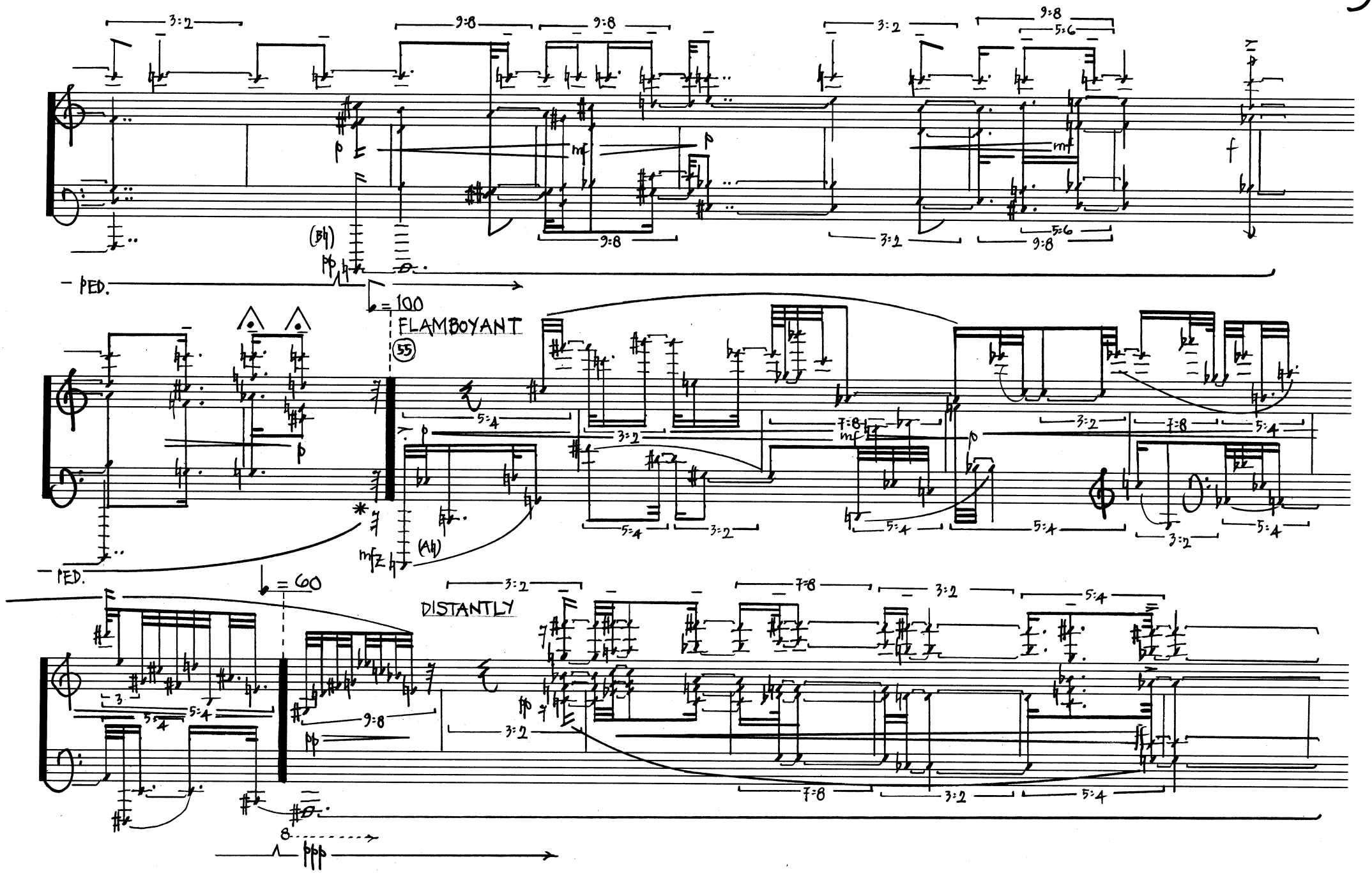
54

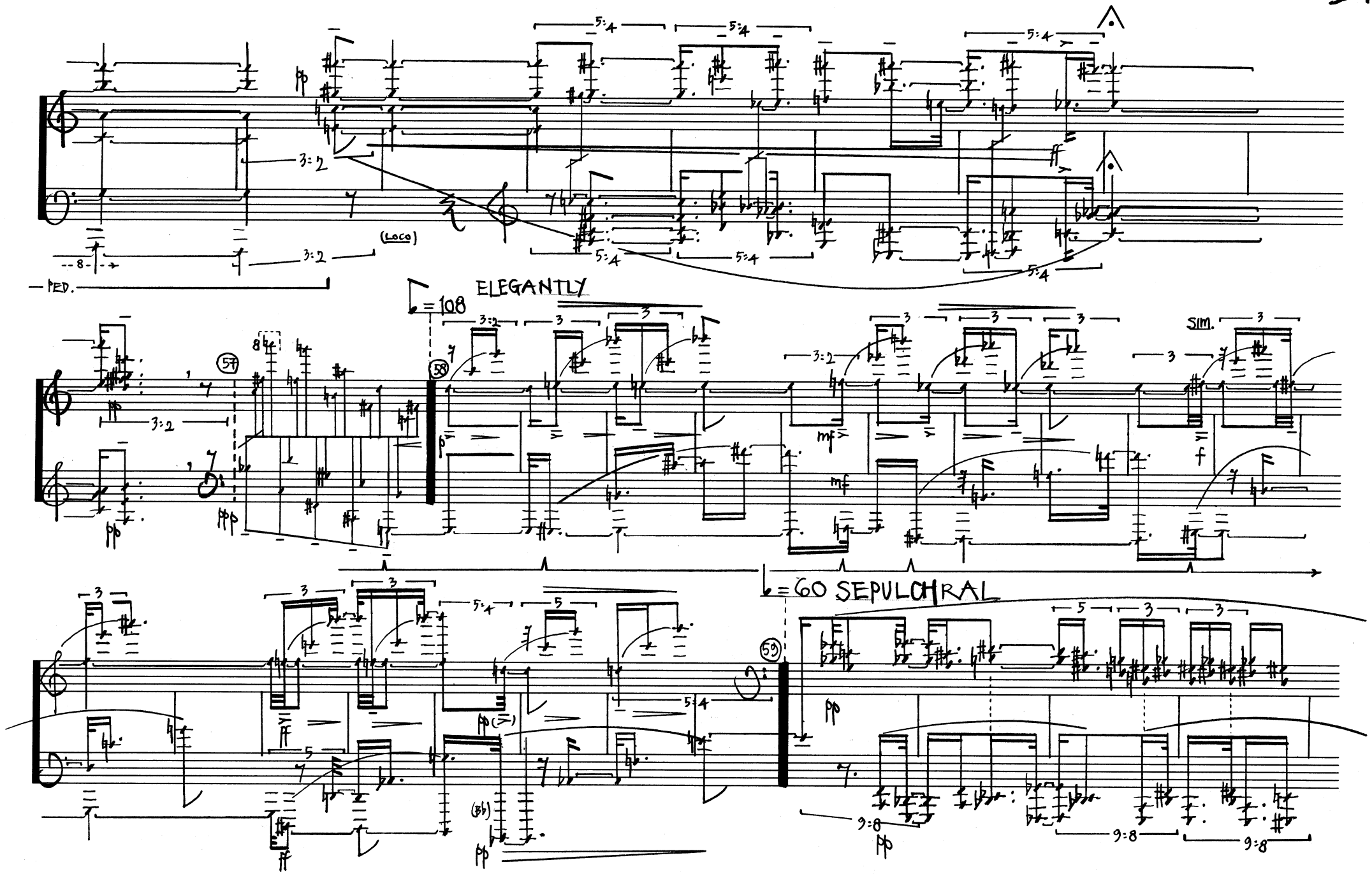
loco

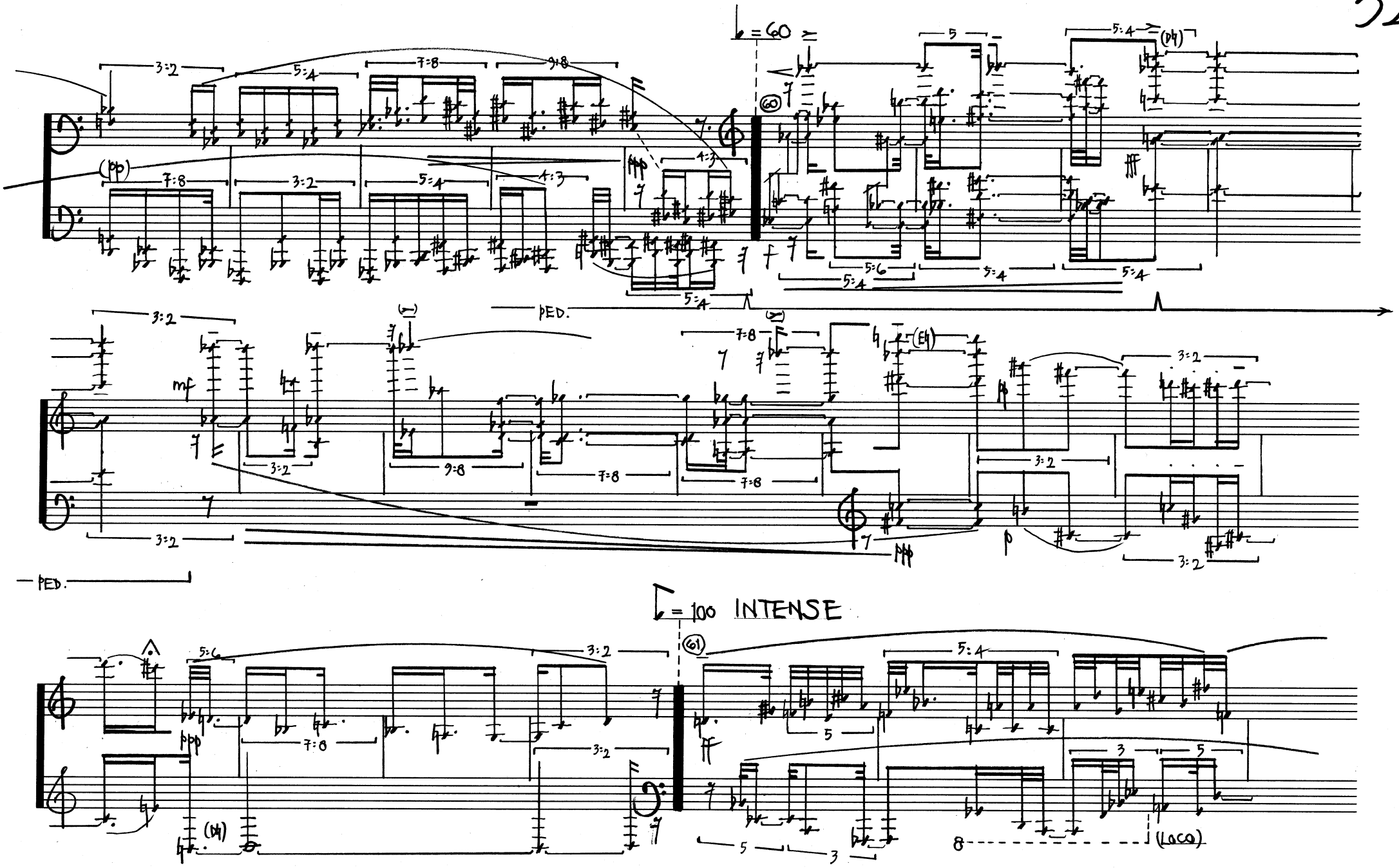
mf

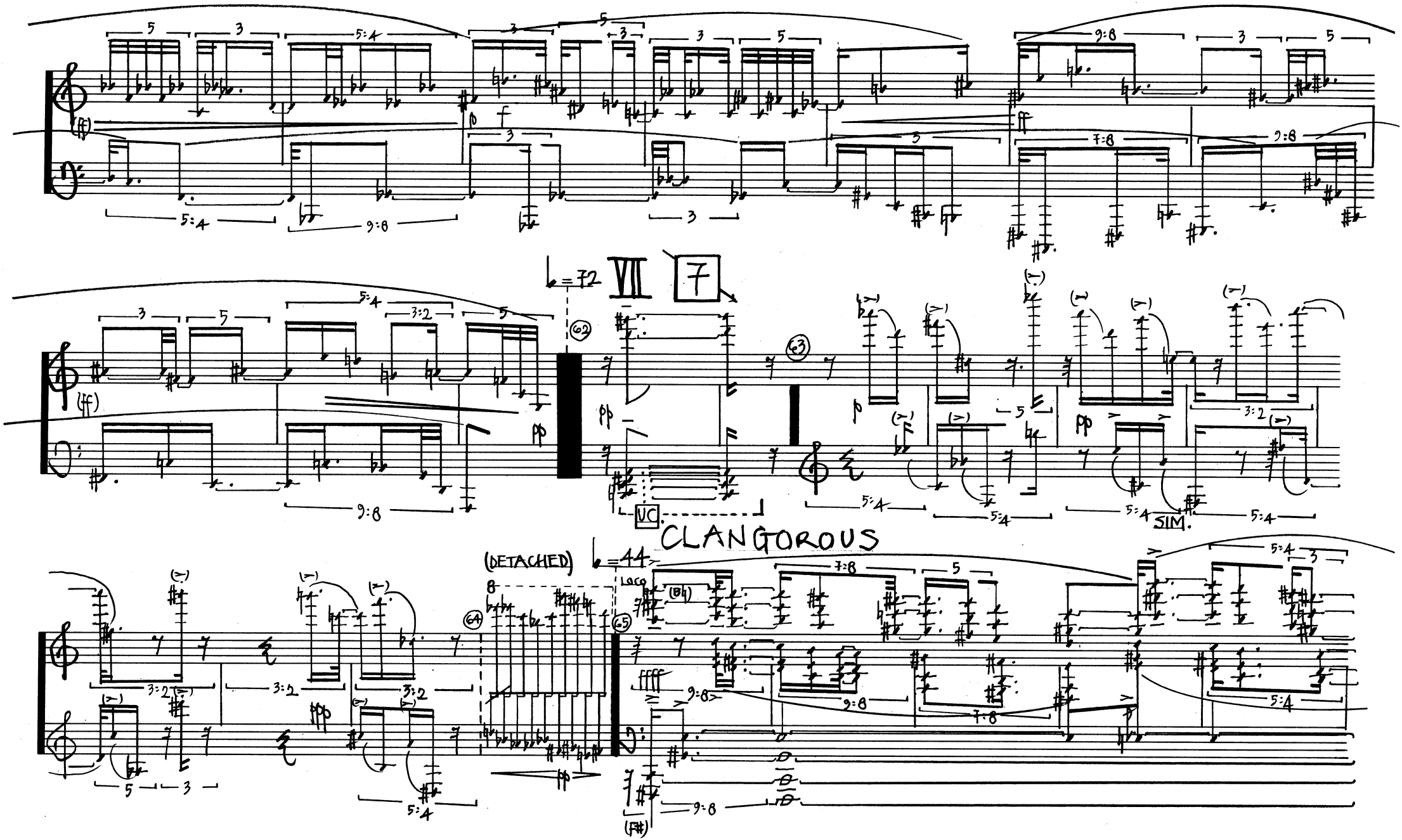
(SLIGHT PEDAL)

PED.


3:2
9:8
5:6
(Bb)
PED.
= 100
FLAMBOYANT
55
5:4
7:8
(Ab)
= 60
DISTANTLY
3
8


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


♩= 60
(pp)
ppp
ff
(pH)
mf
p
PED.
♩= 100 INTENSE
(loco)


VII
7
UC
CLANGOROUS
(DETACHED)
SIM.

(fff)

(fff)

(fff)

(fff)

(fff)

(fff)

(fff)

(fff)

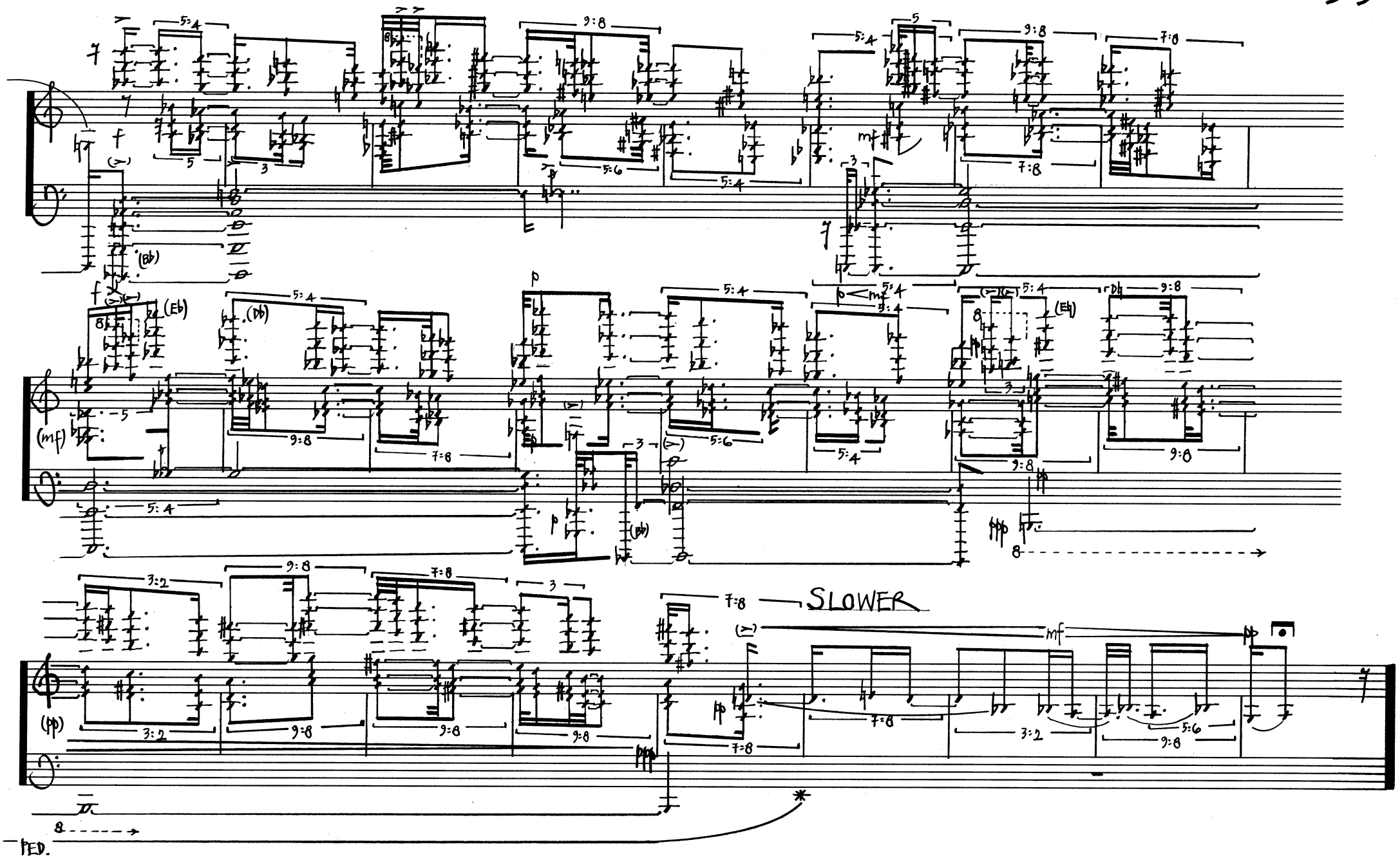
SLOWER

6

mf

ppp

(ff)


SLOWER
PED.

♩= 72

DISTANT, OMINOUS

5

pp

3:2

pp 9:8

pp

5:4

L PED.
+ UC

3:2

3:2

9:8 pp

5:4

pp

5:4

PED.
+ UC

5:4

3:2

3:2

(pp)

♩= 108

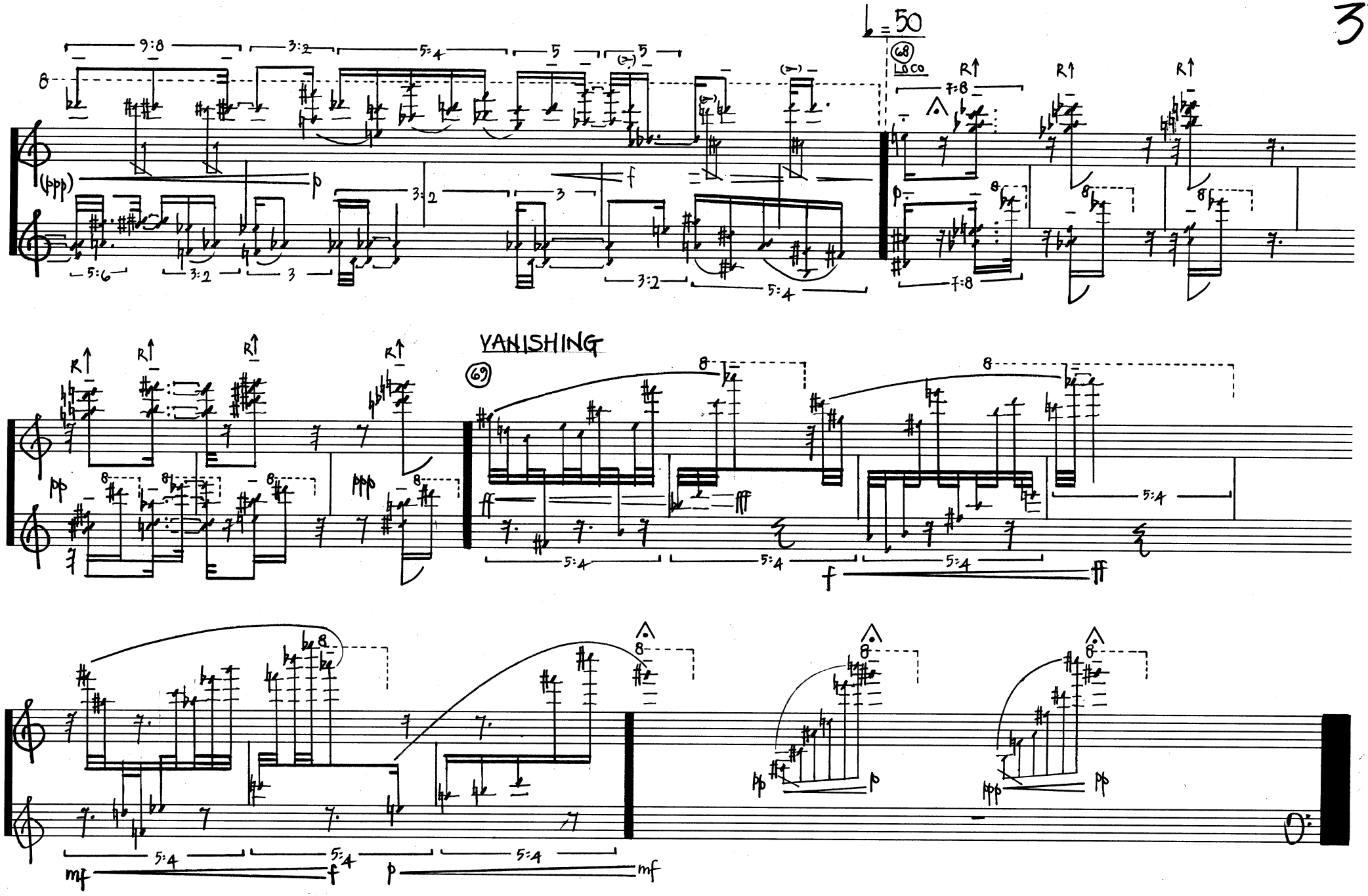
8

7:8

5:4

ppp 5:4

PED.
+ UC



ATTACCA: NIGHT

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