passing bells for piano

Chris Dench

passing bells

for piano (2004/20)

passing bells: day $\begin{array}{c} 1 & Vigils \\ 2 & day \end{array}$

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.

- Here and elsewhere—Inner voices: stress on upper of each pair of chords
- Roll outer voices bottom to top across entire chord—strike all inner voice chords simultaneously
- 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 (\uparrow) 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: 1/4 or 1/2 suggests a lesser to middling degree of clearance of resonance, whereas 3/4 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;
- A indicating a relatively short hiatus;
- or meaning a longer, or more emphatic, pause.

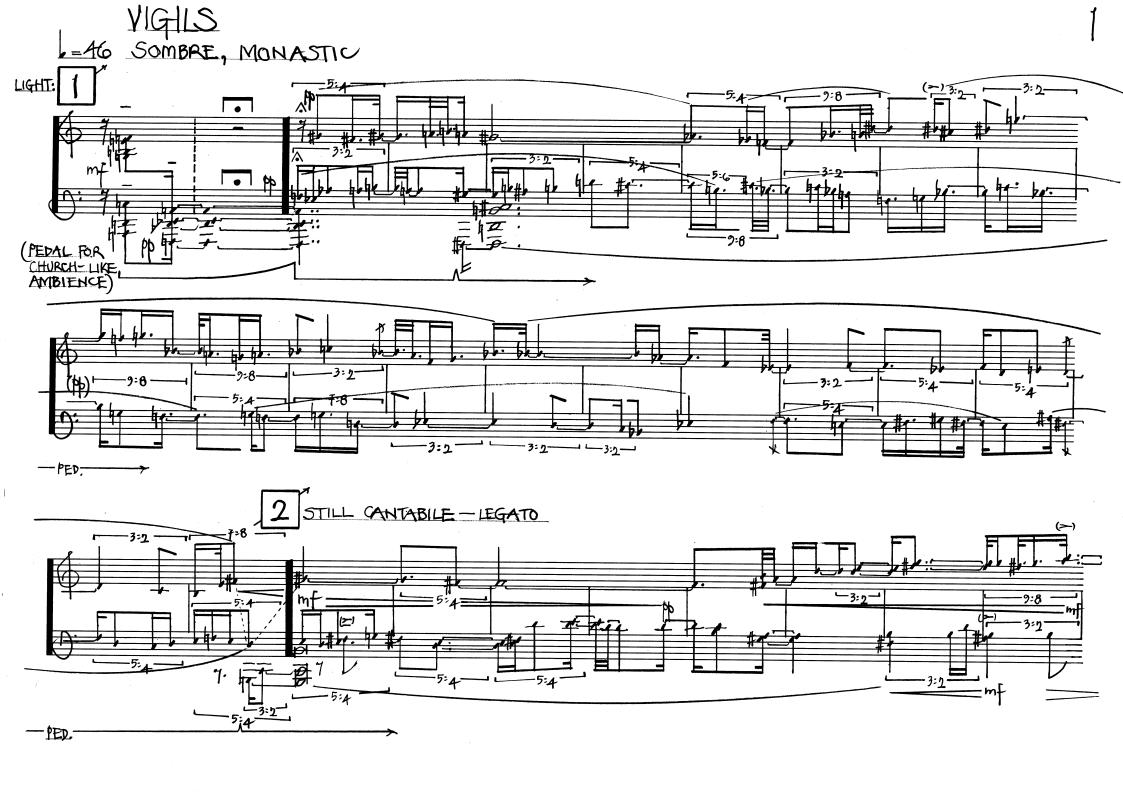
9 Clefs: occasionally a treble or bass clef appears with an 8 at the top (treble)/bottom (bass). This simply means to perform all material in that clef an octave higher/lower. The instruction is cancelled by a normal clef with LOCO above.

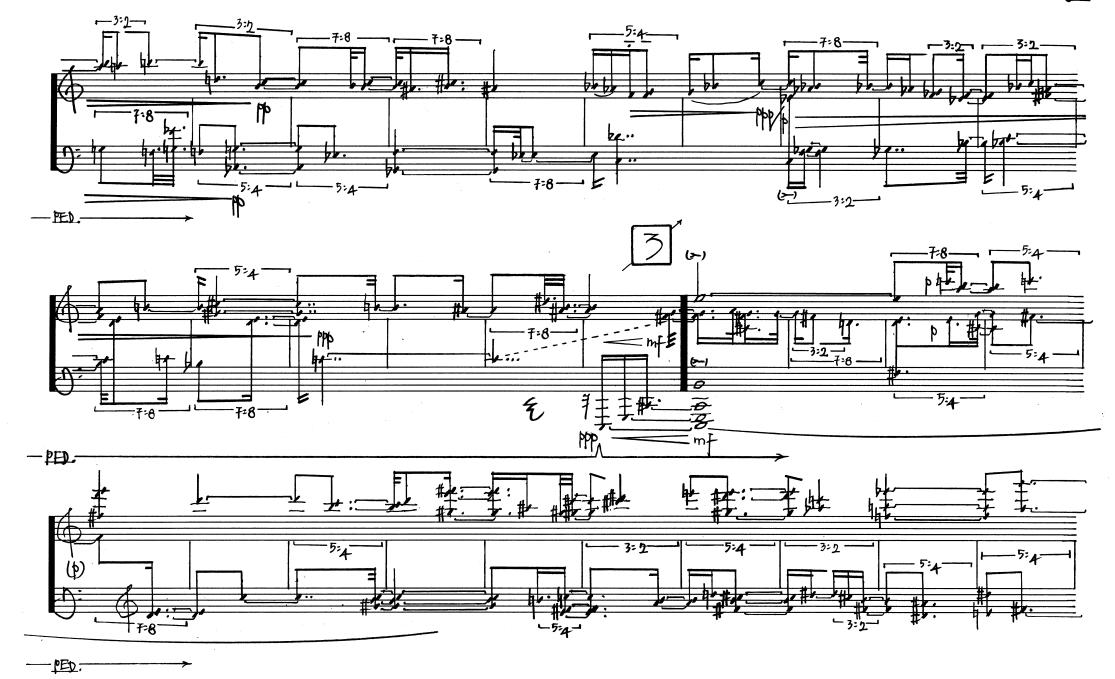
10 If lighting control is available then the following scheme could be adopted:

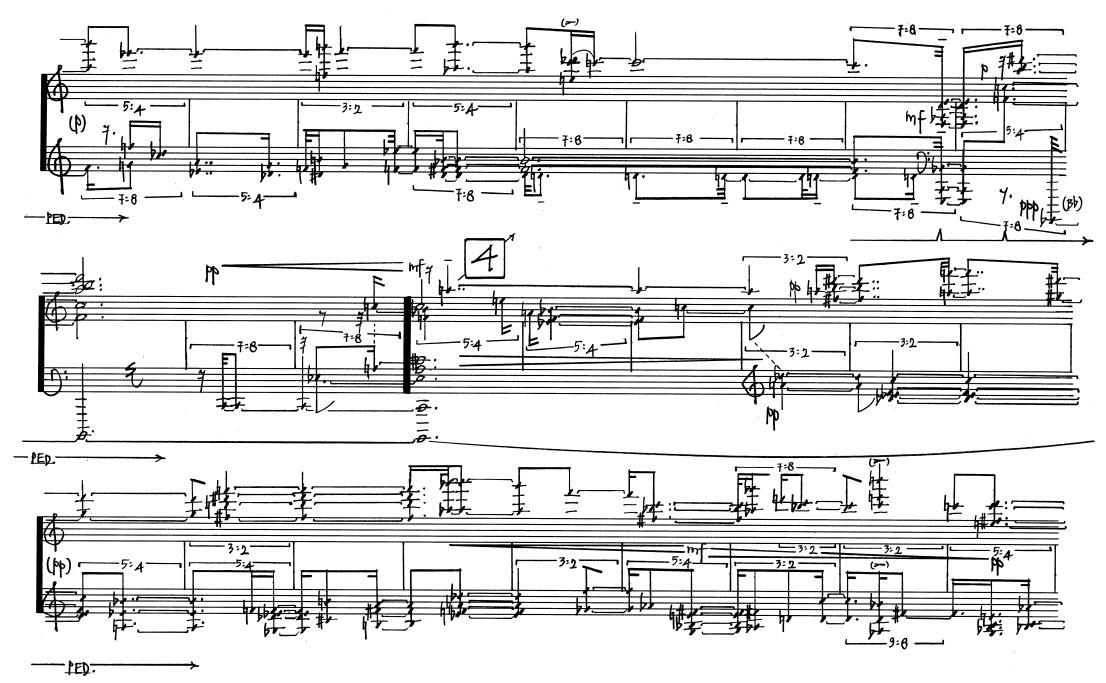
Highest light level, equivalent to normal house illumination.
 Lowest light level, equivalent to the only light being the pianists onstage score illumination.
 Lights completely off

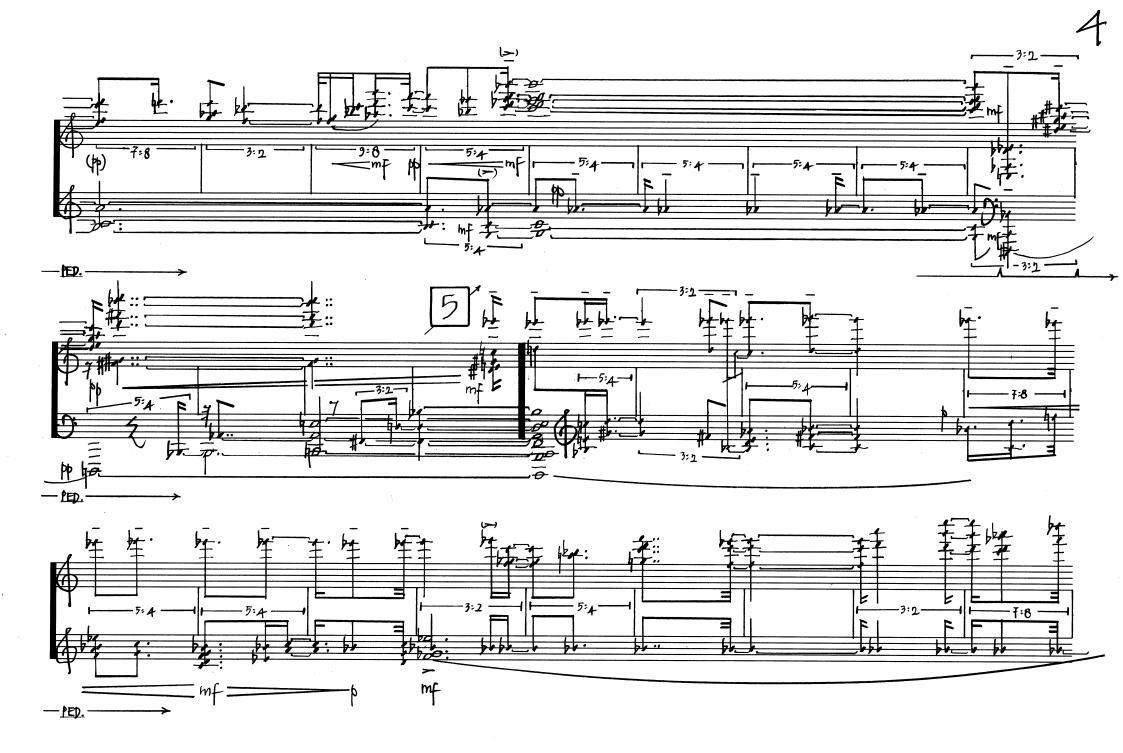
The points where the lighting levels change are marked in the score—the arrow indicates whether the illumination is increasing or decreasing, or static. The sense should be of a gradual expansion and then narrowing of horizon from and to an intimate solitude.

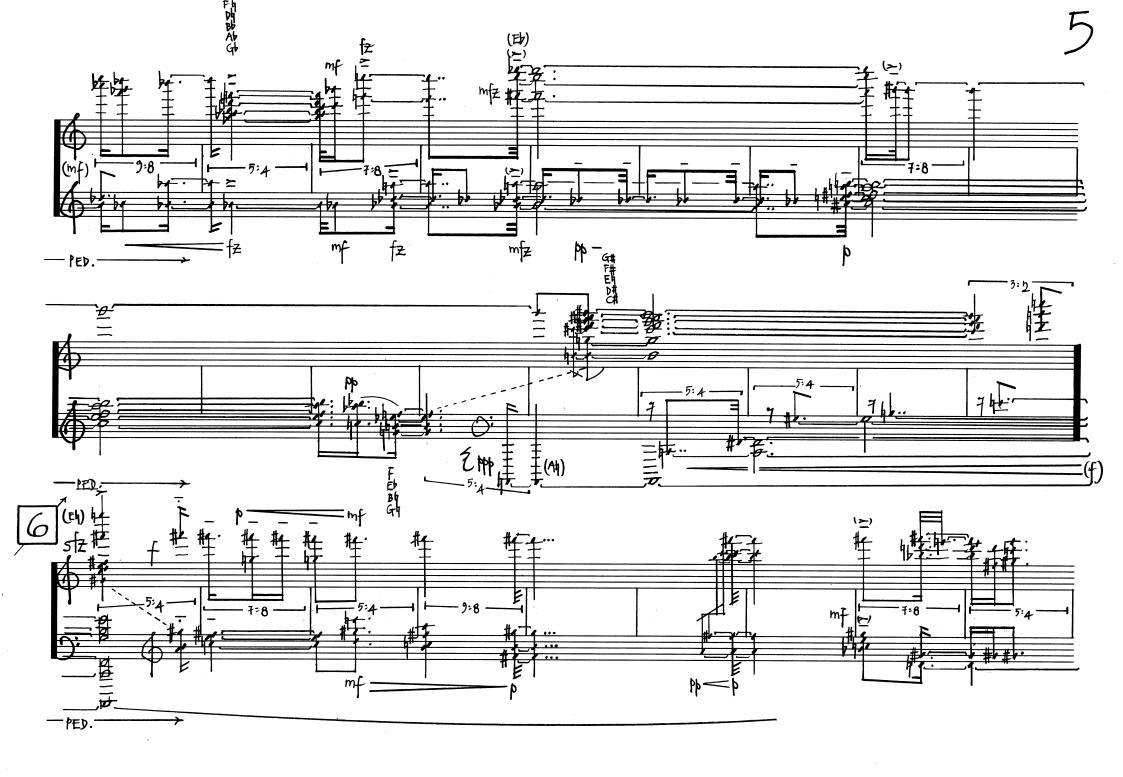
NB: for this to work, the pianist obviously must have an unobtrusive on-stage light sufficient to give adequate illumination of score and keyboard but no more. Use of a larger light is discouraged. Best would be using a tablet or iPad for the score, which would provide the minimal illumination appropriate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

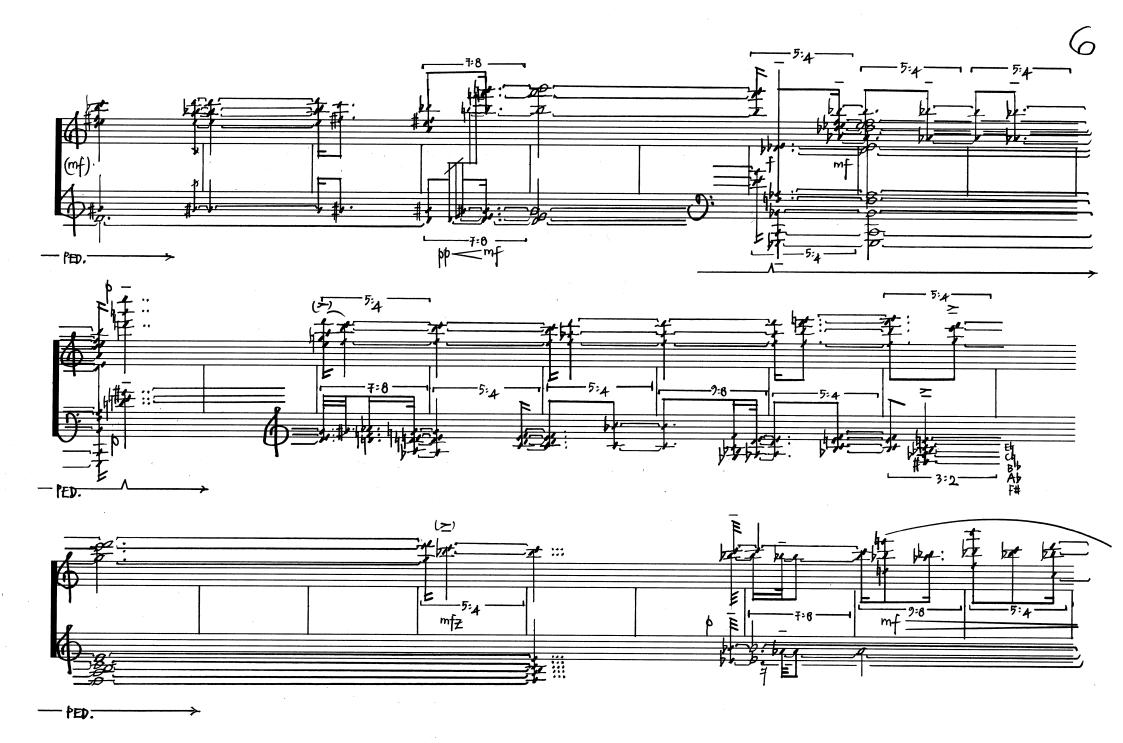


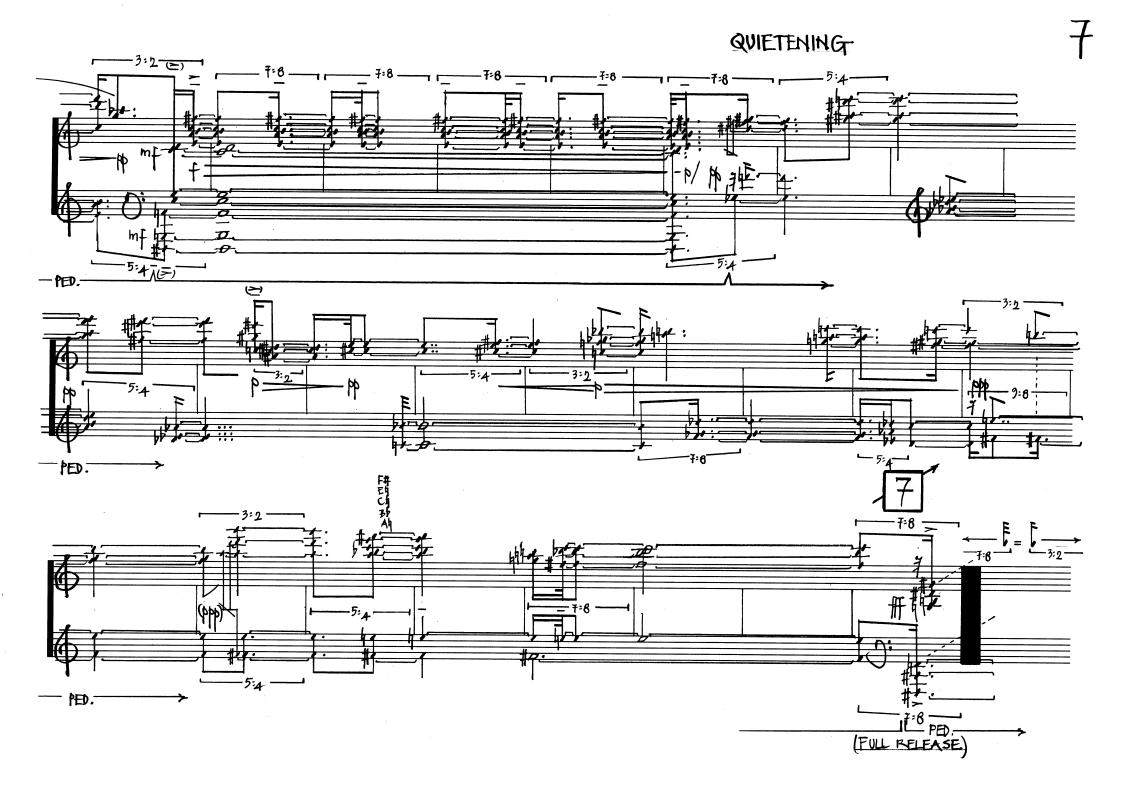


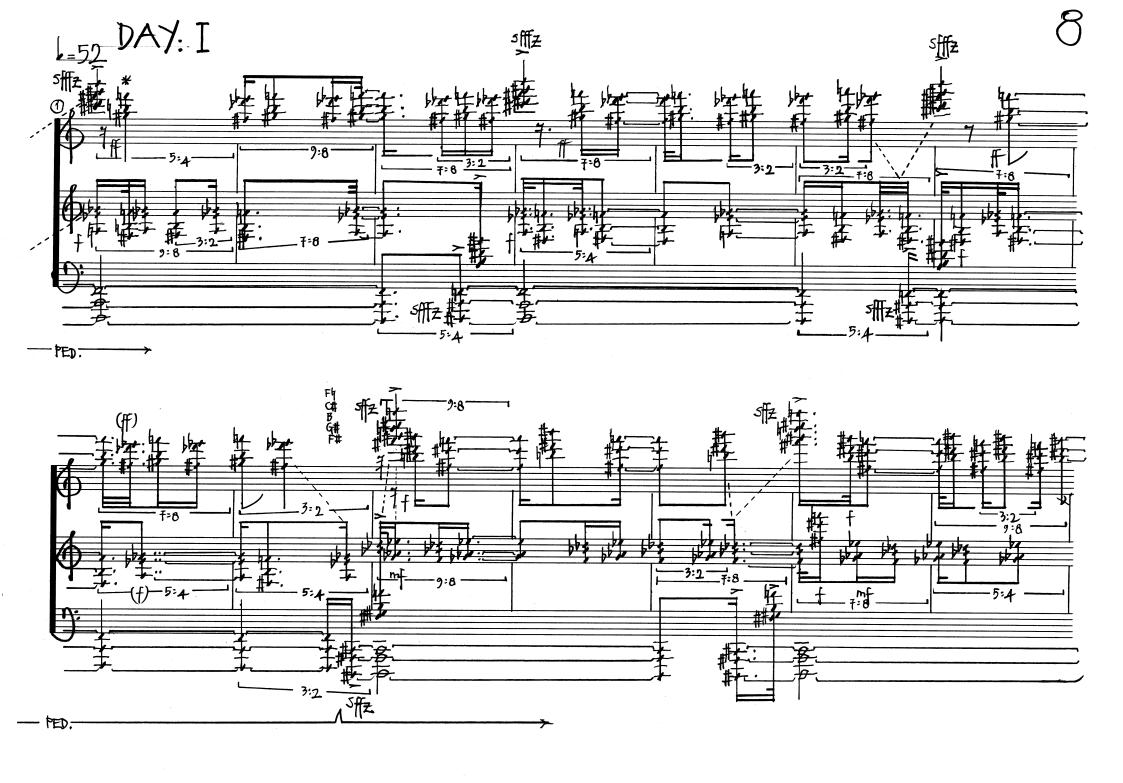


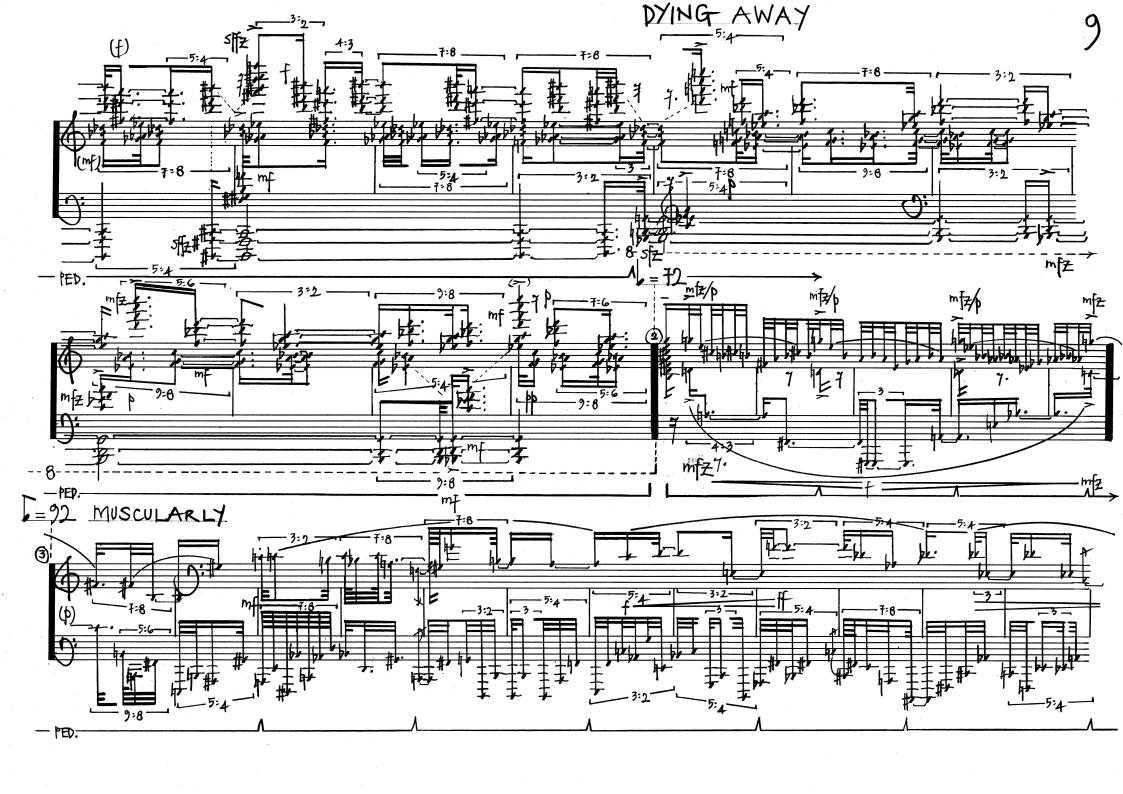


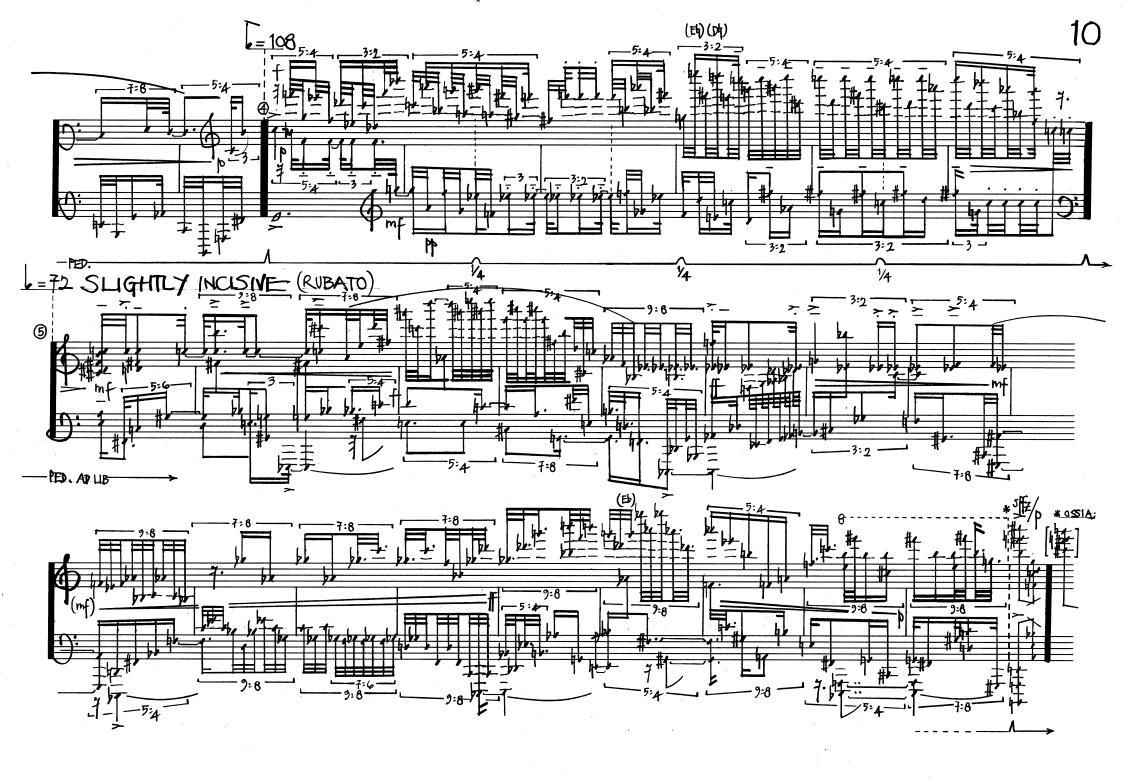


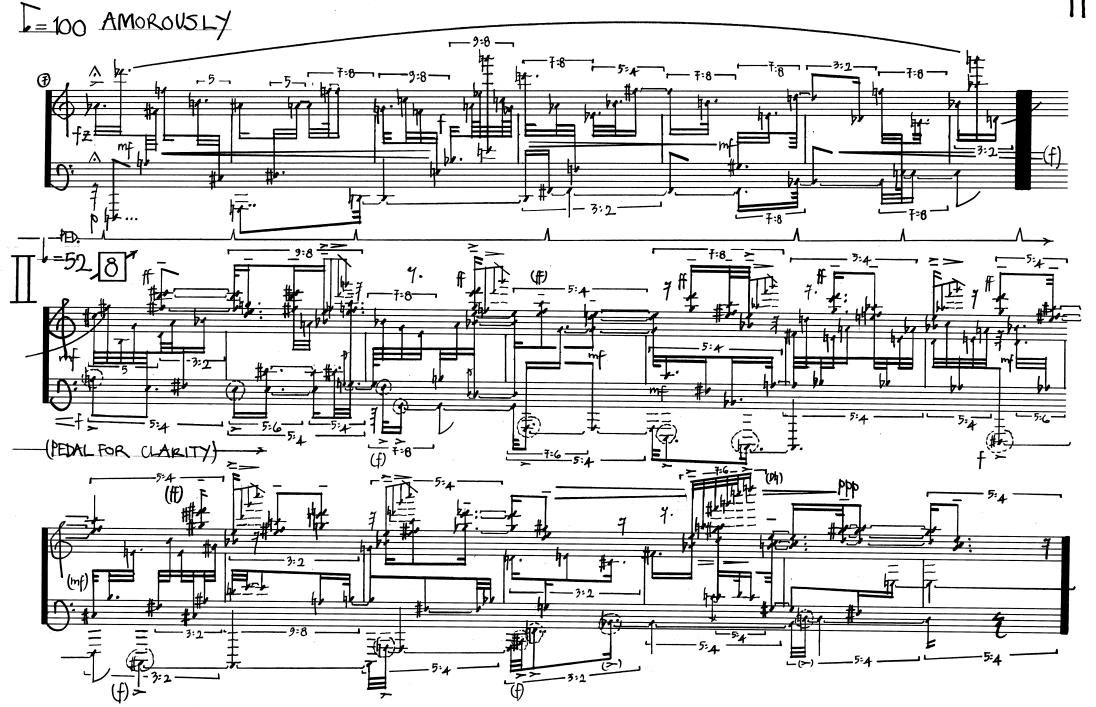


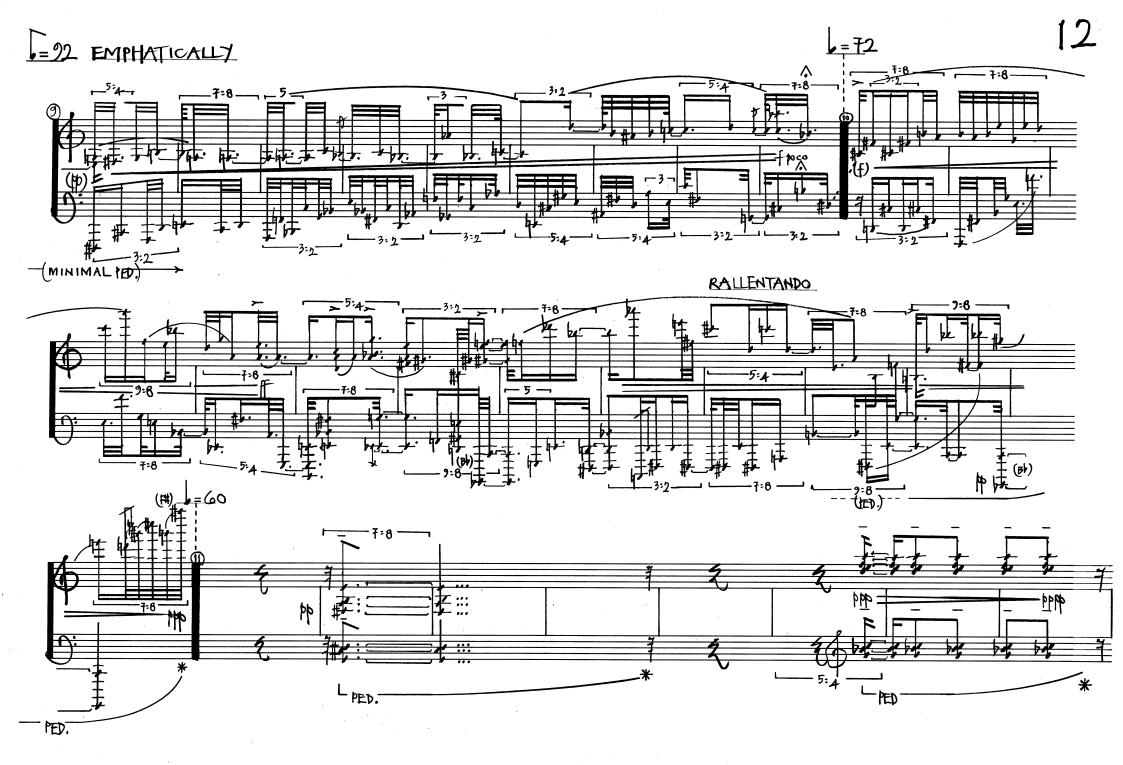


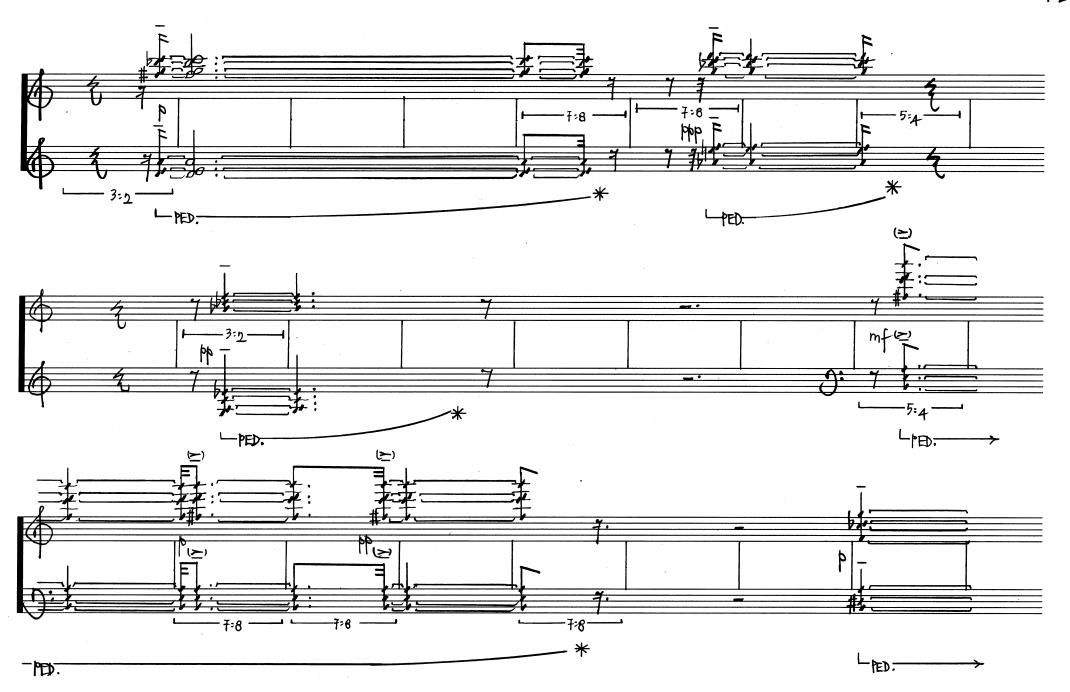


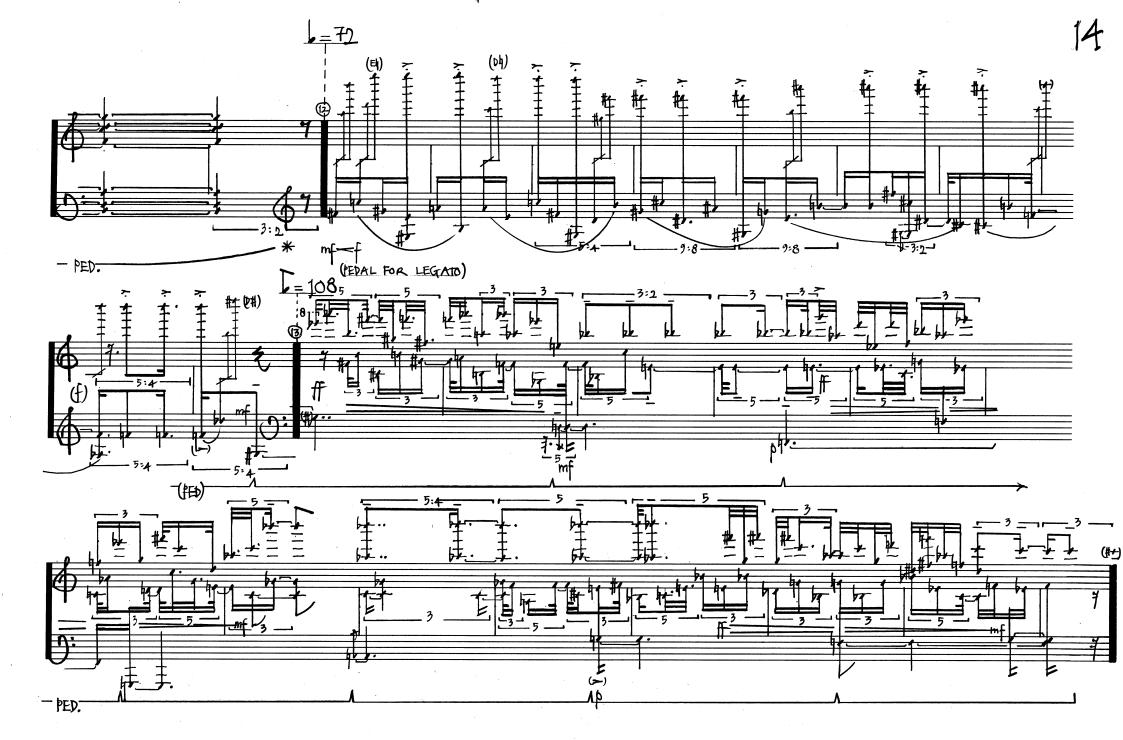


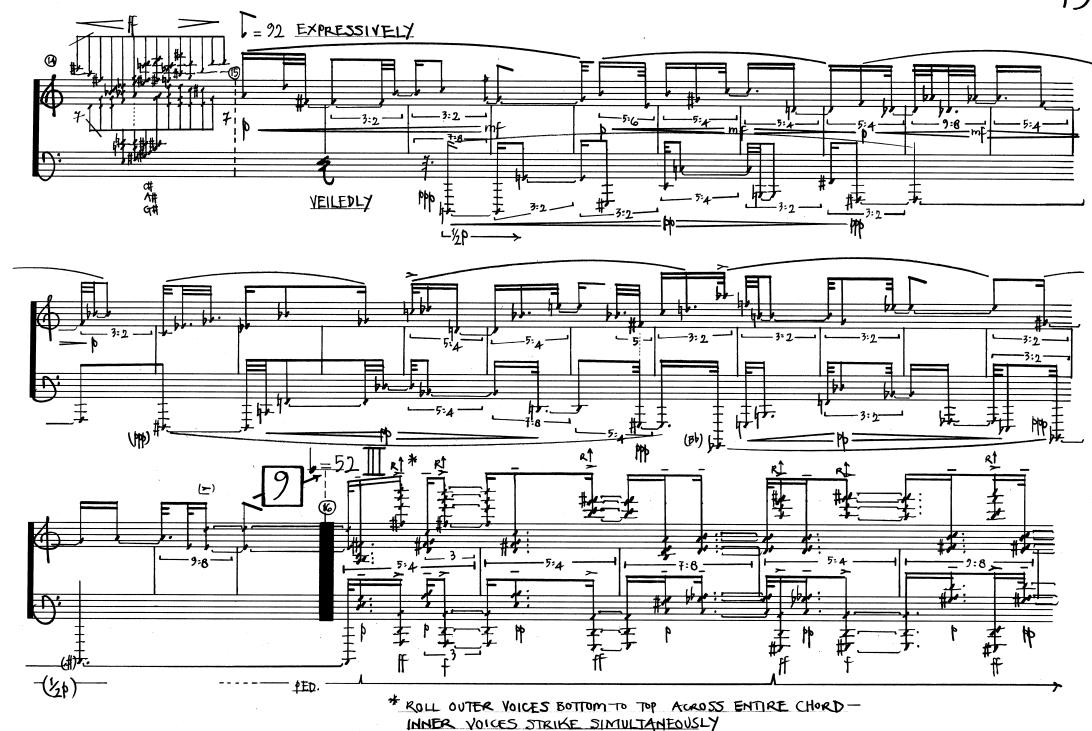


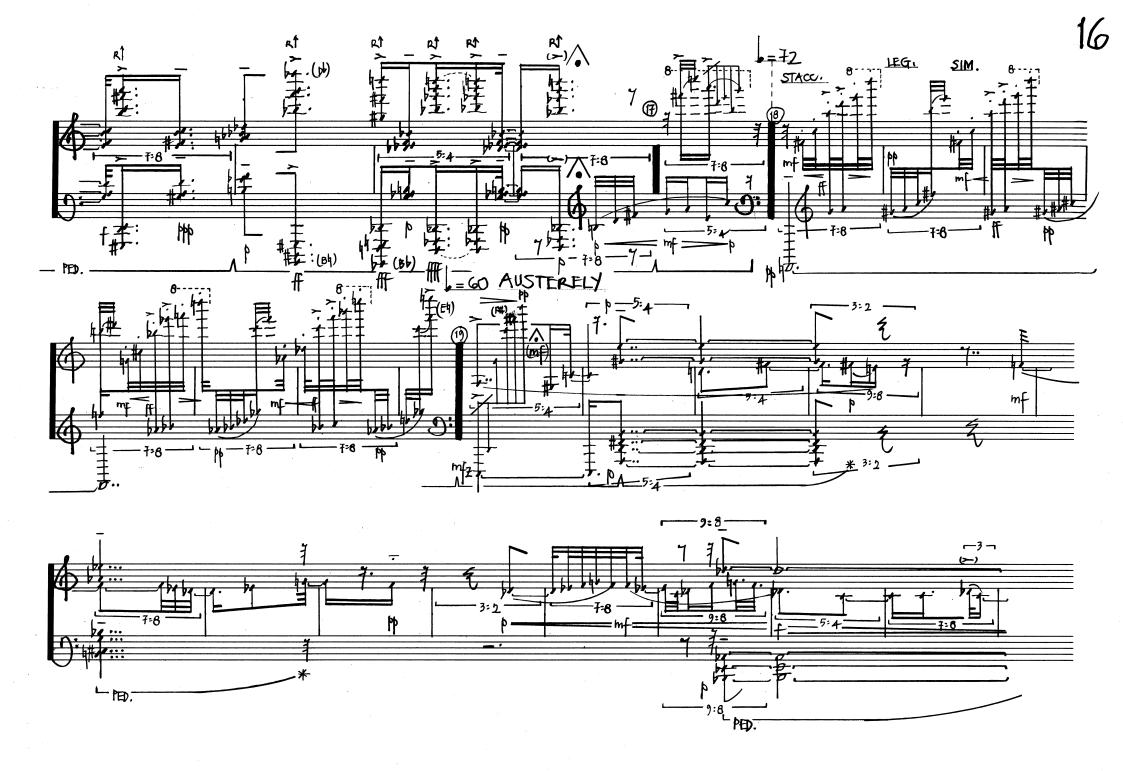


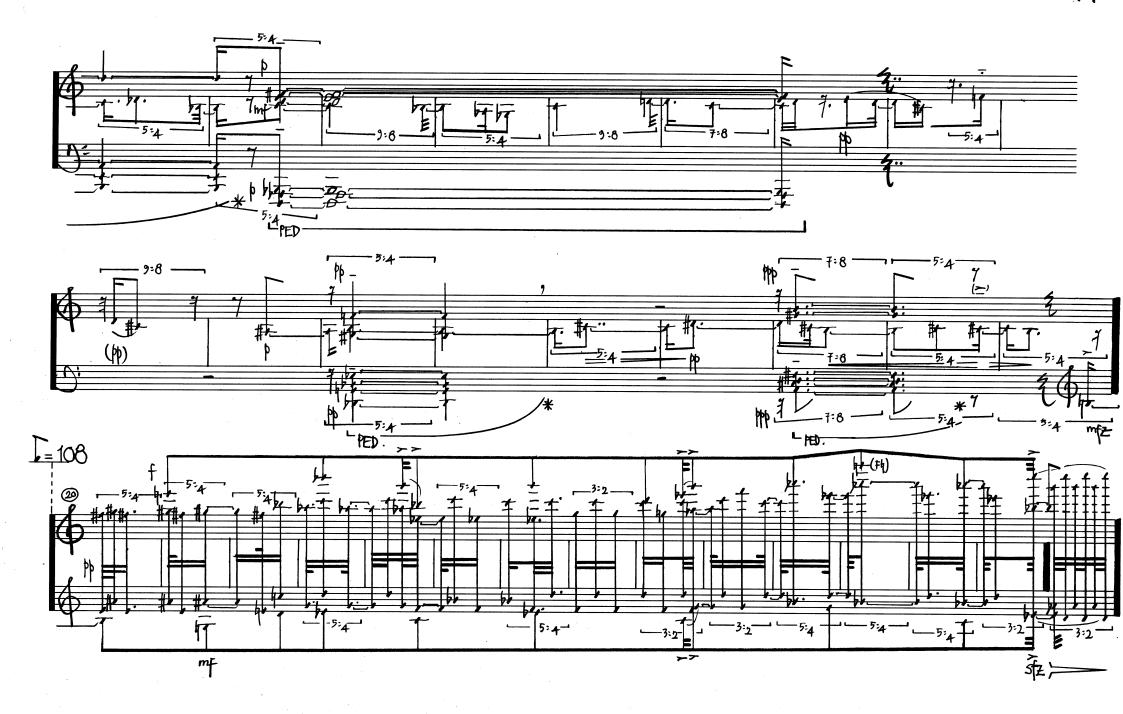


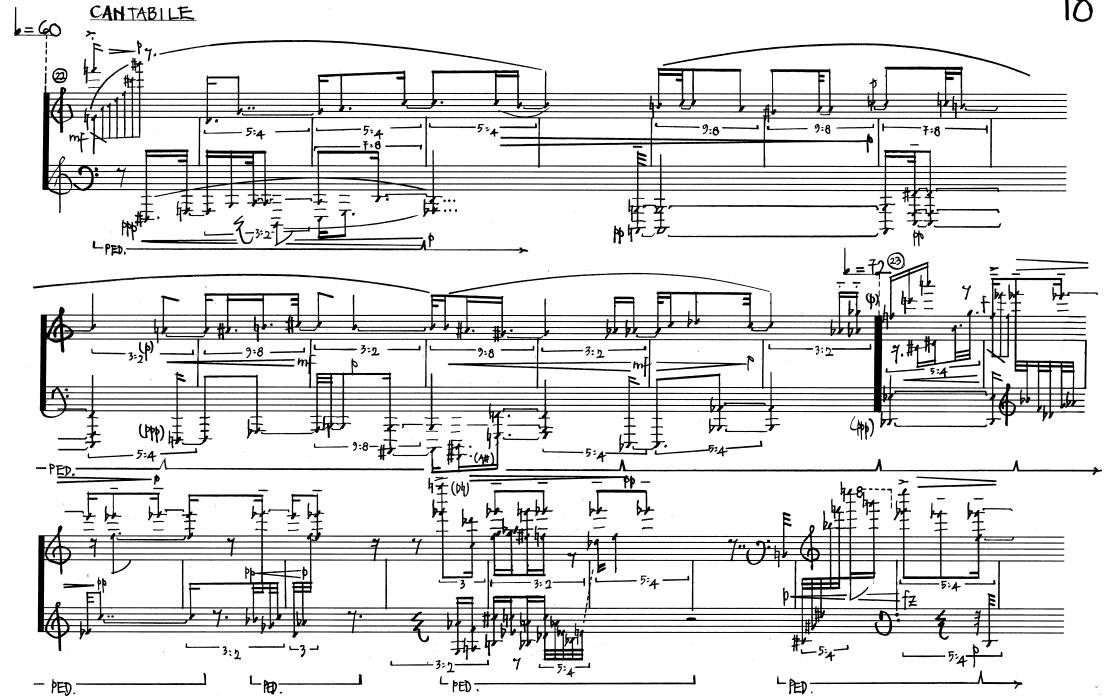


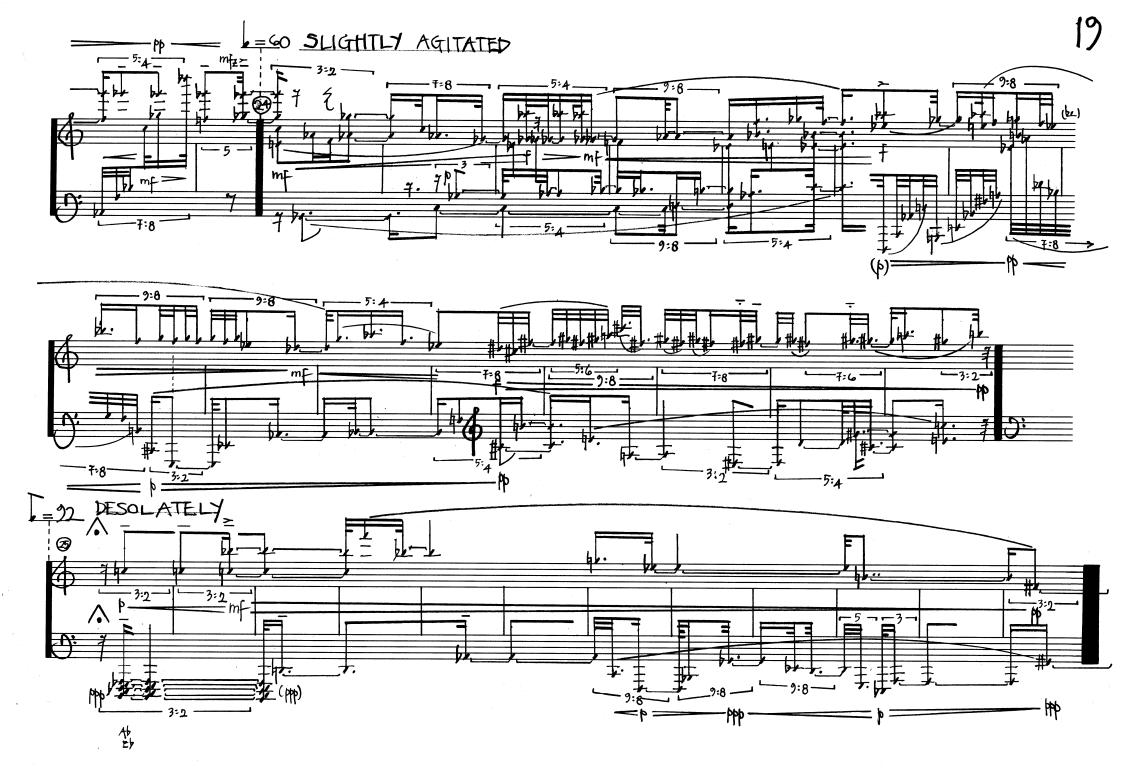


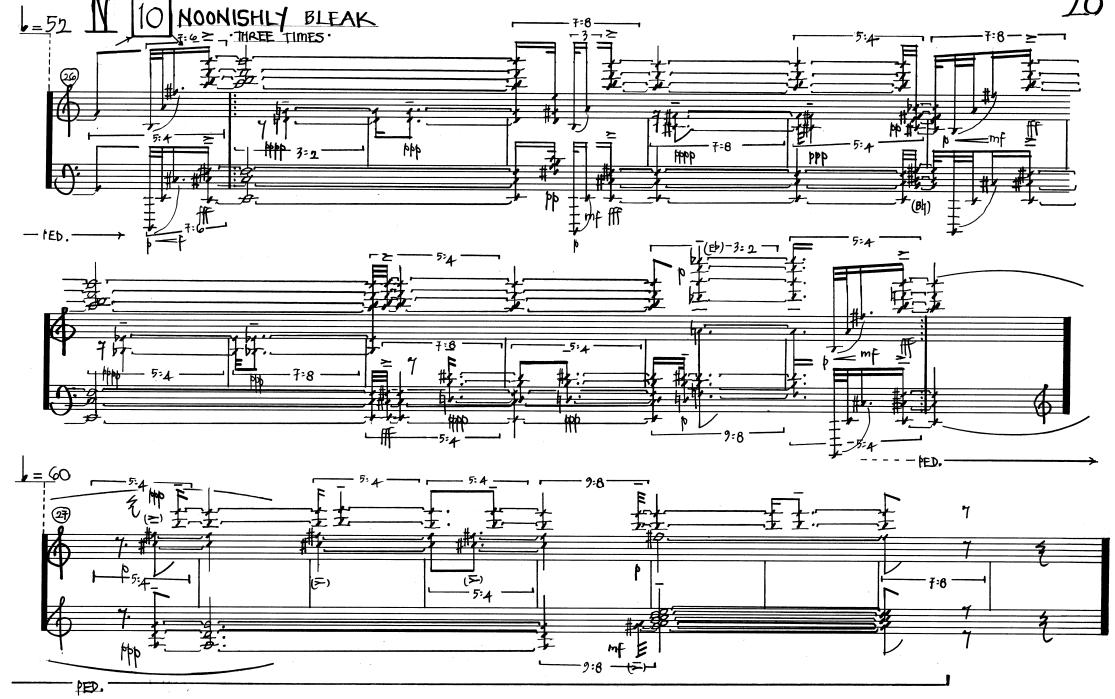


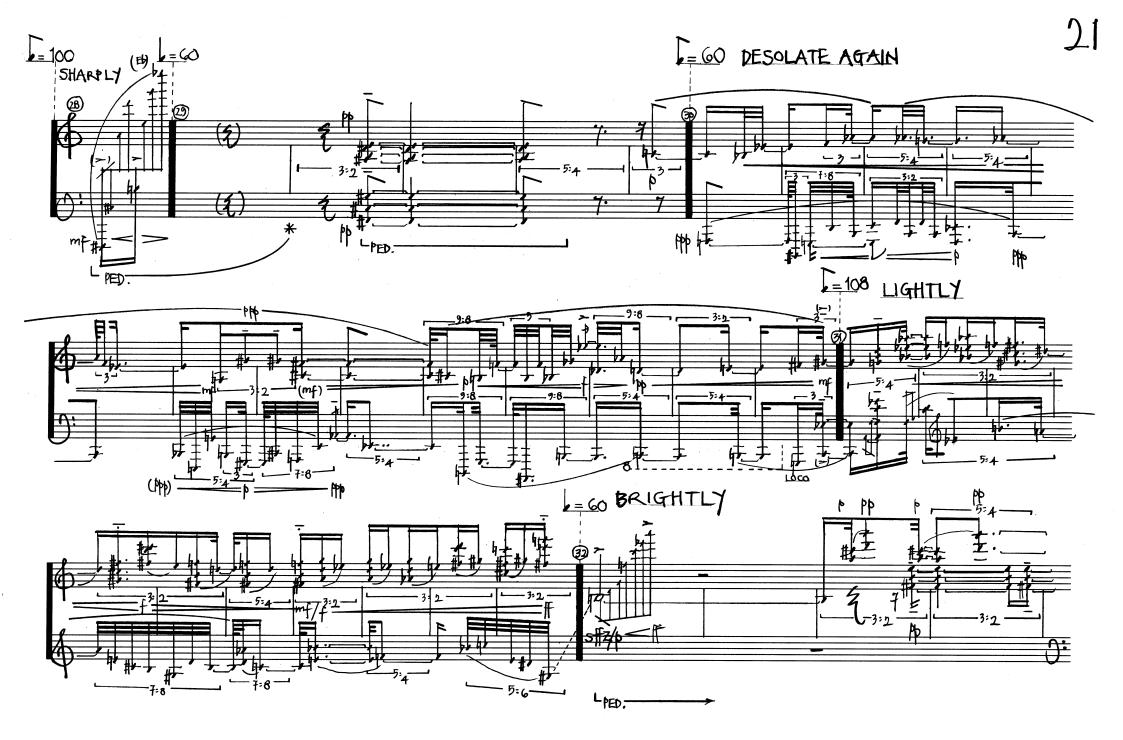


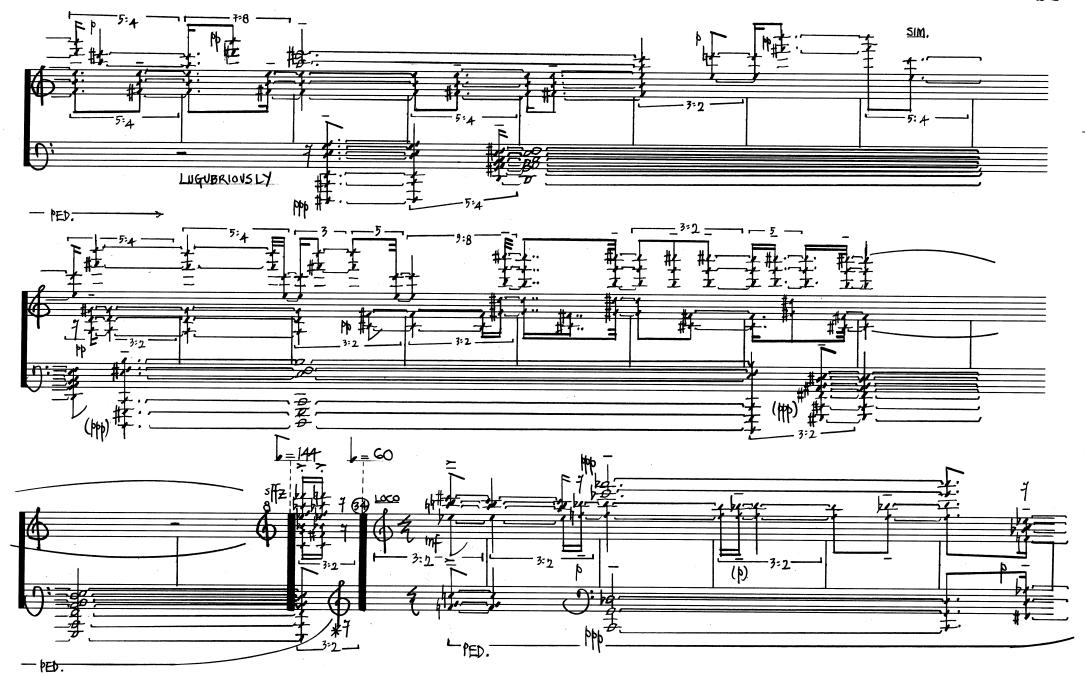


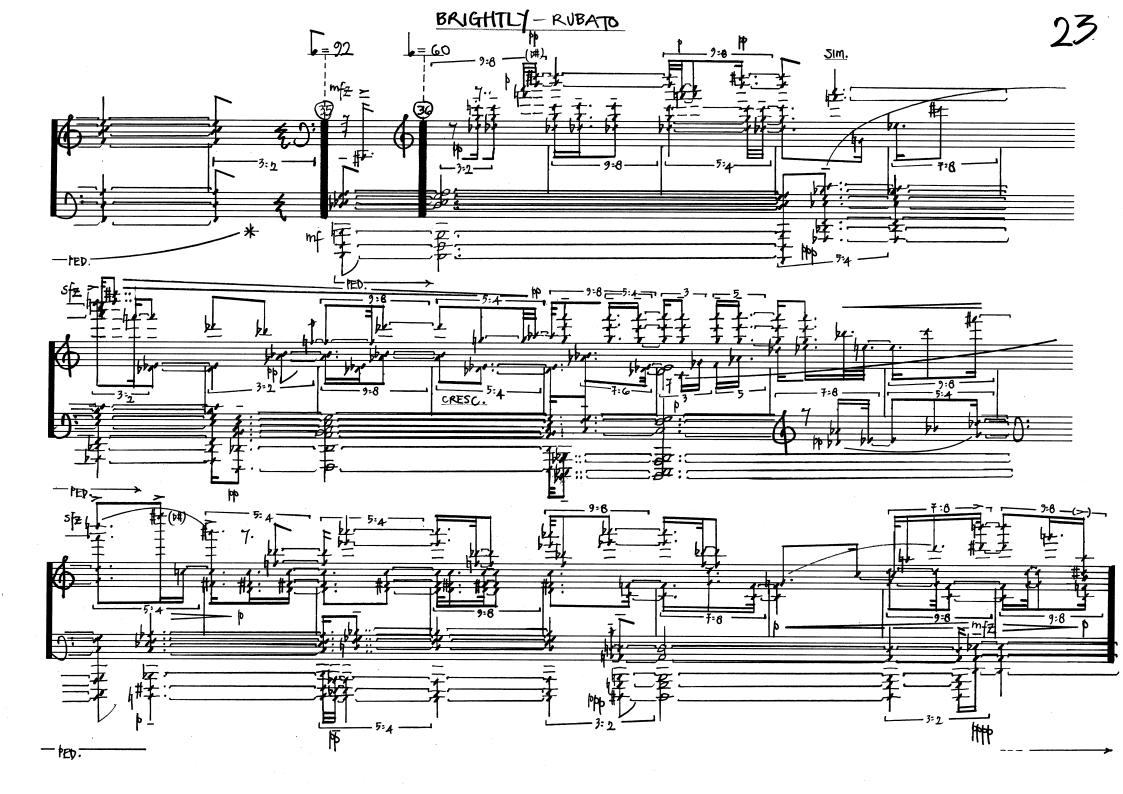


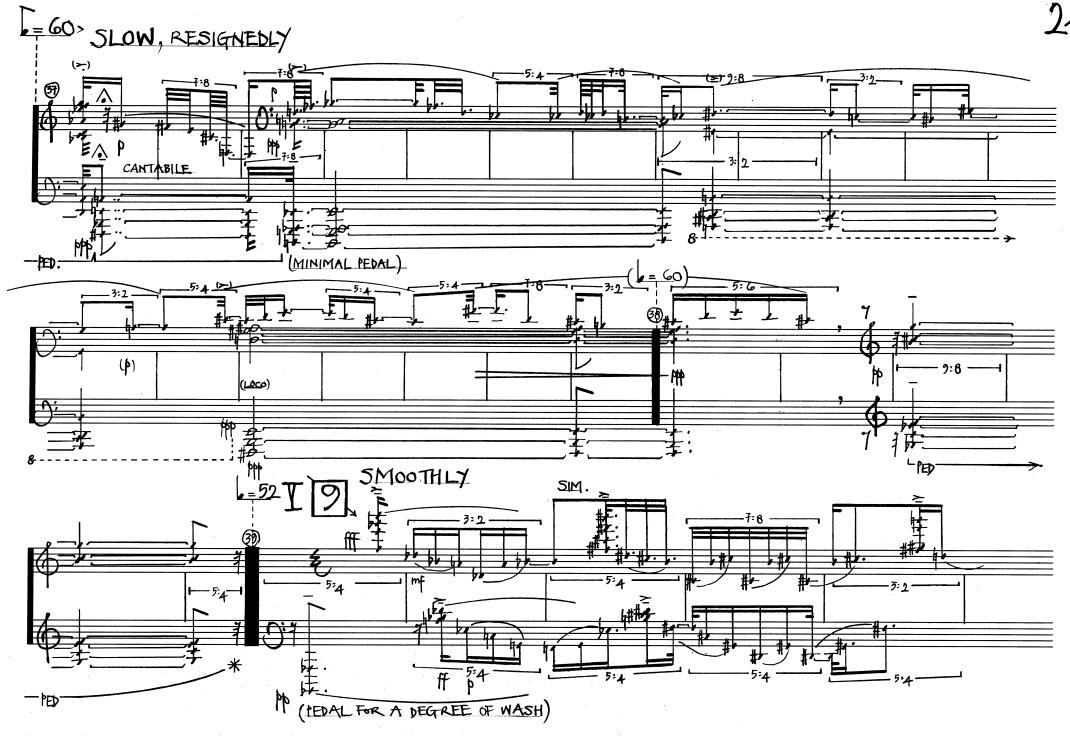


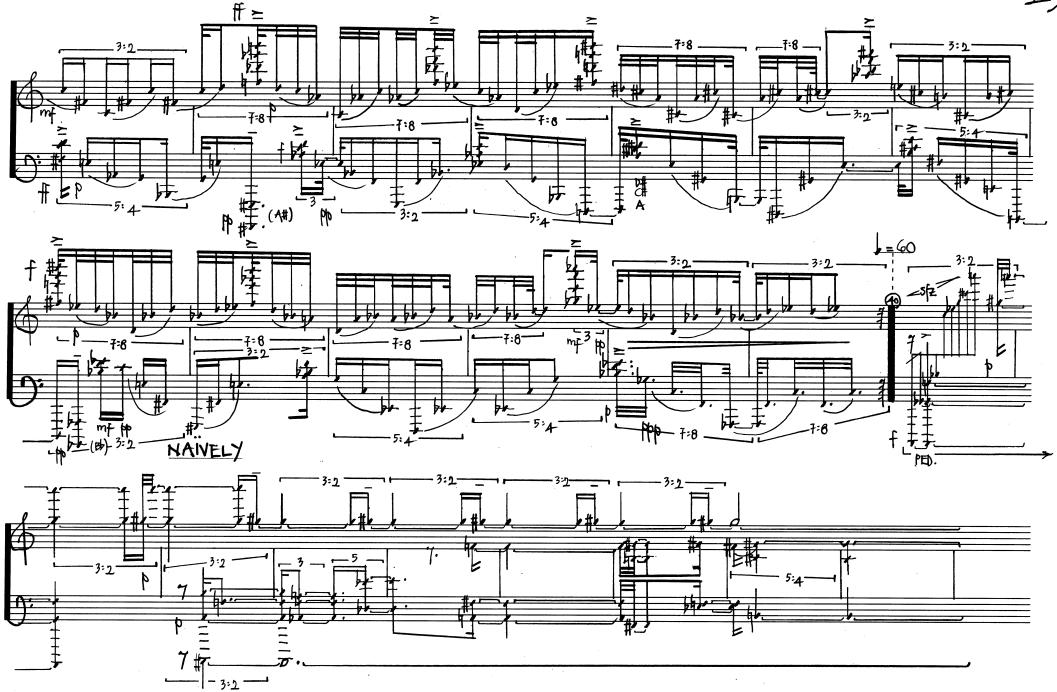


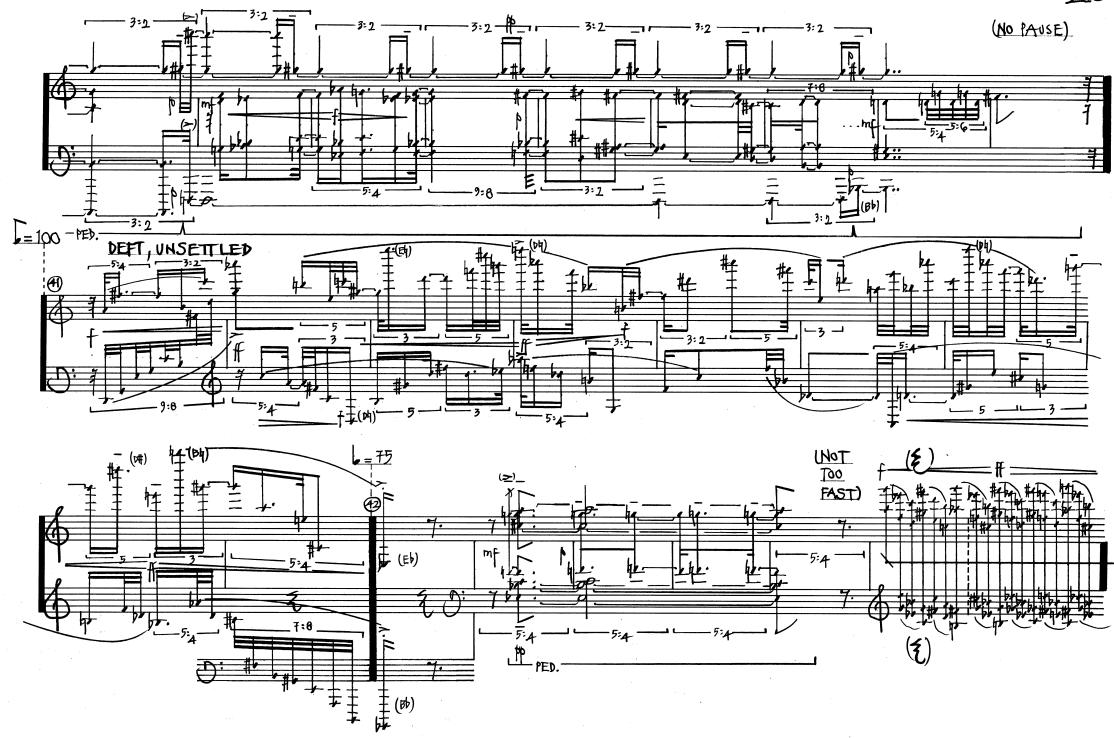


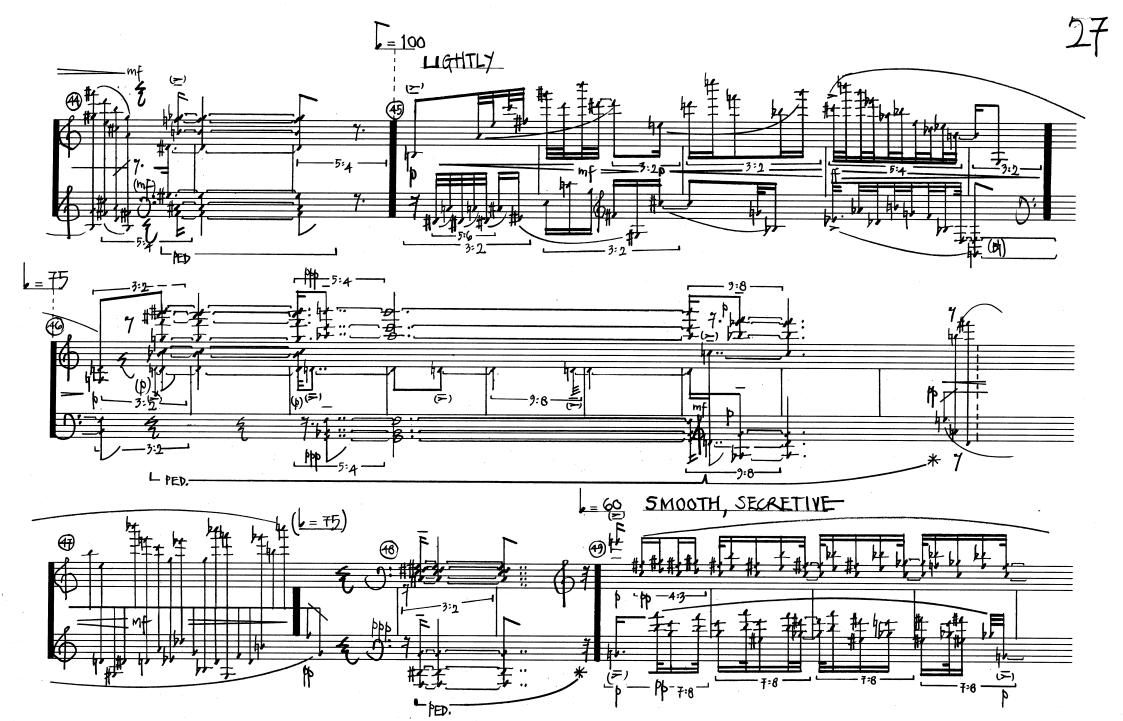


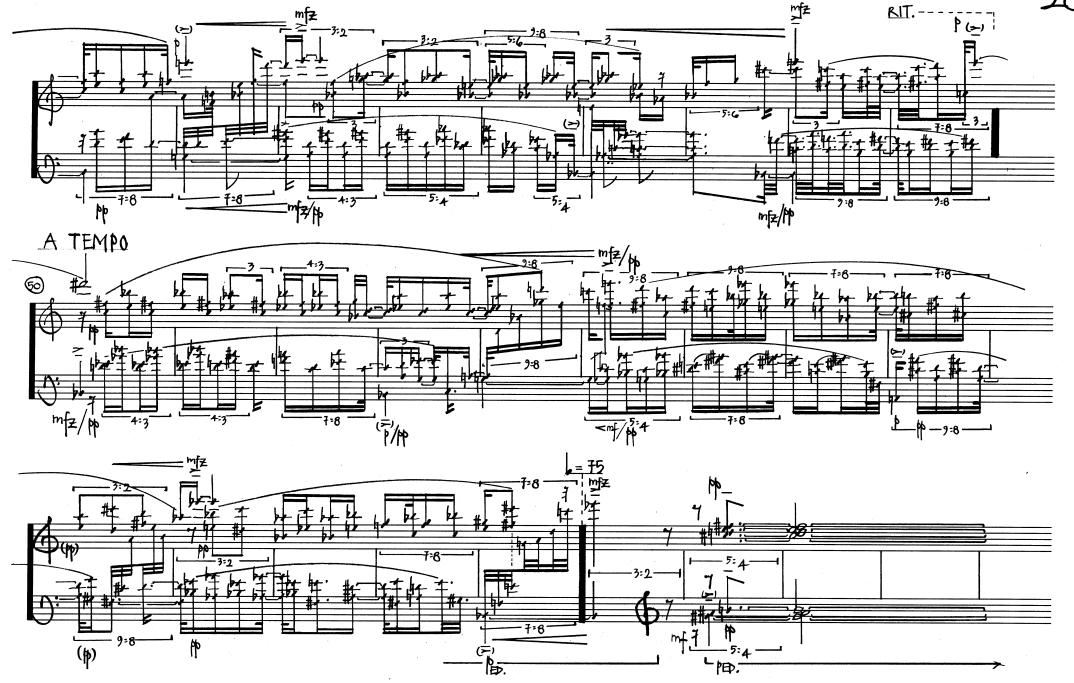




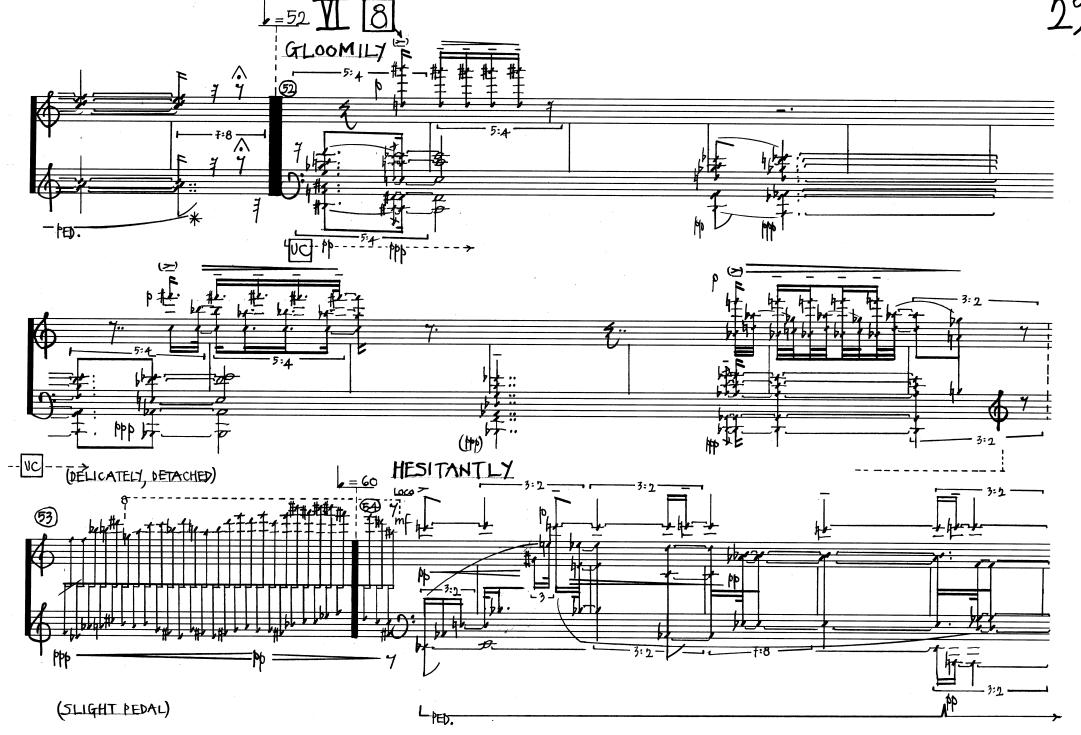


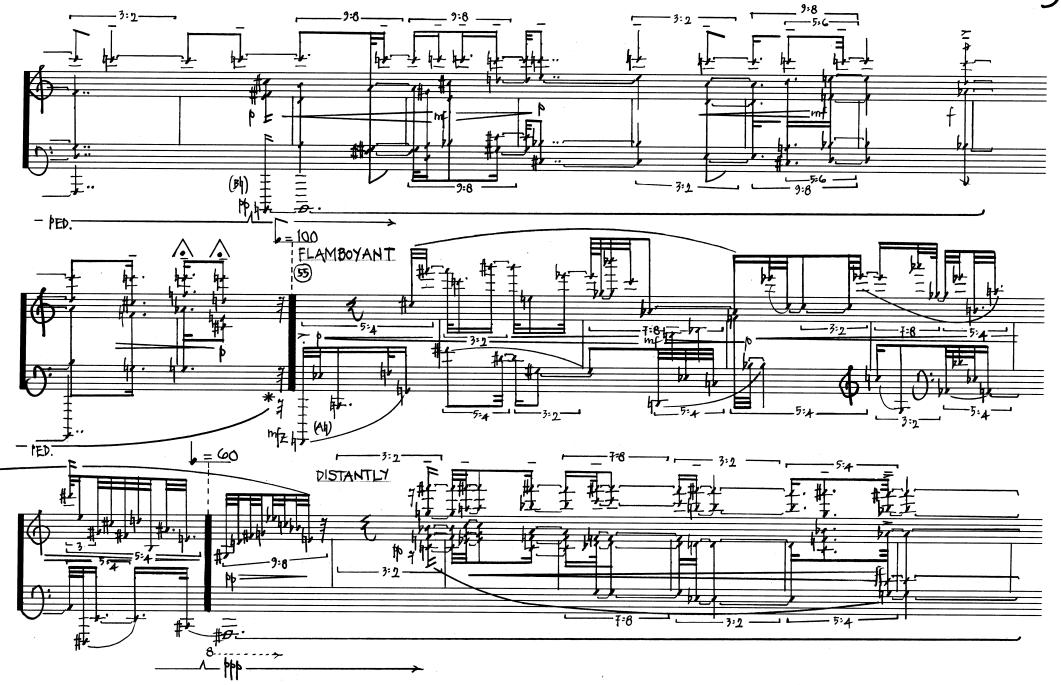


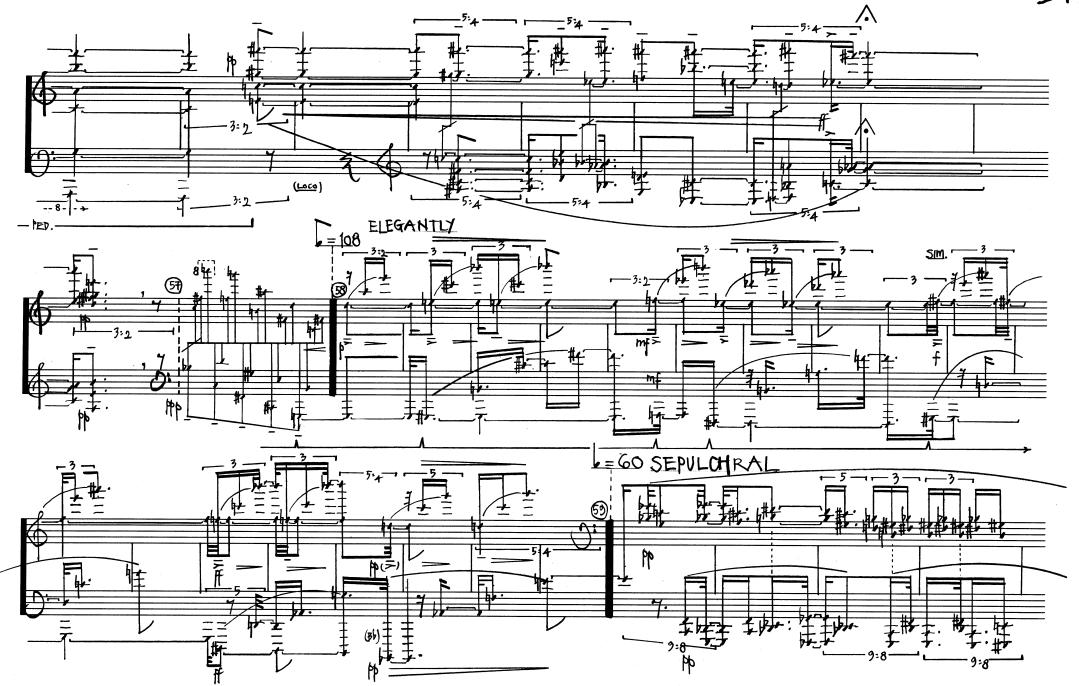


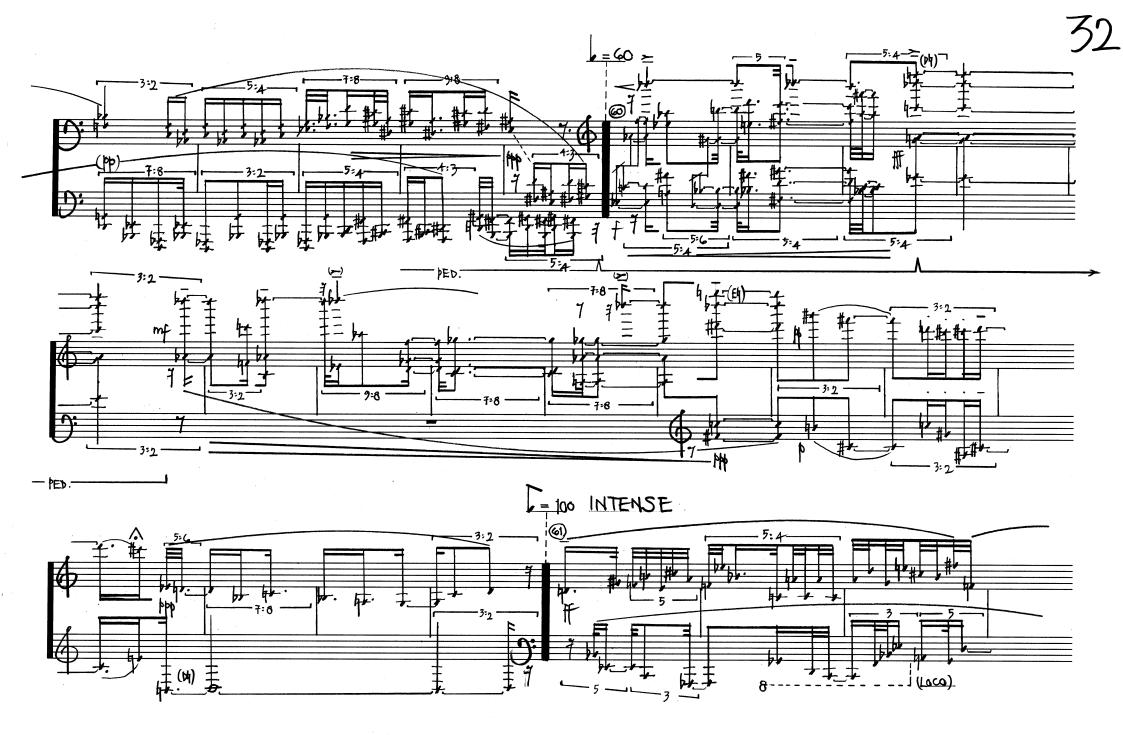


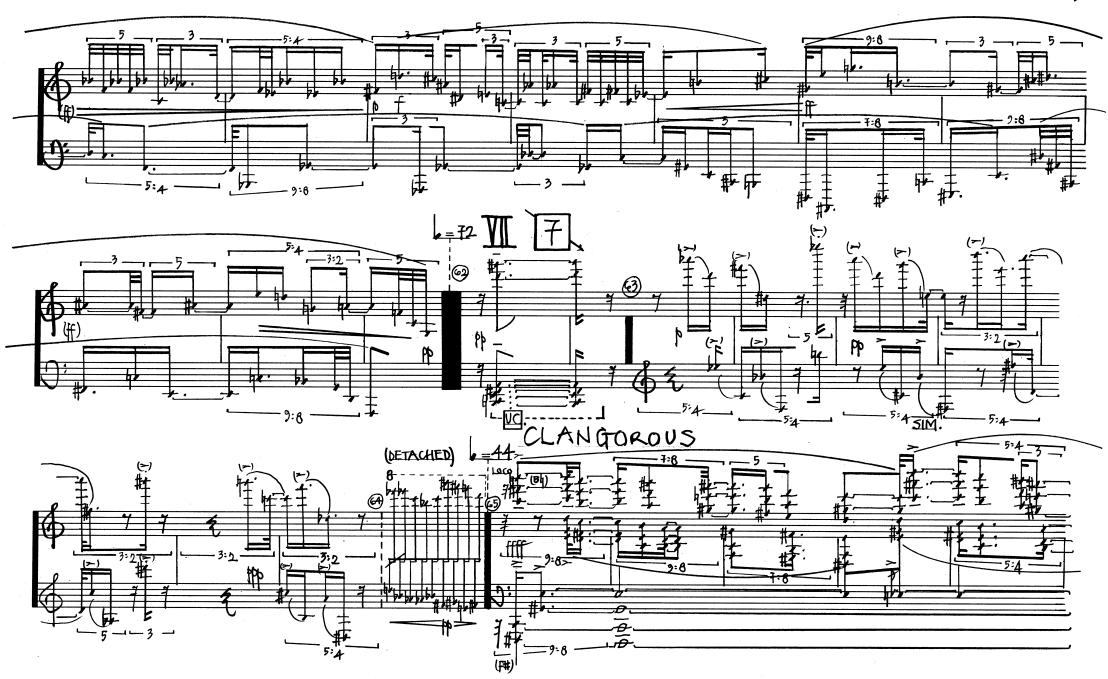


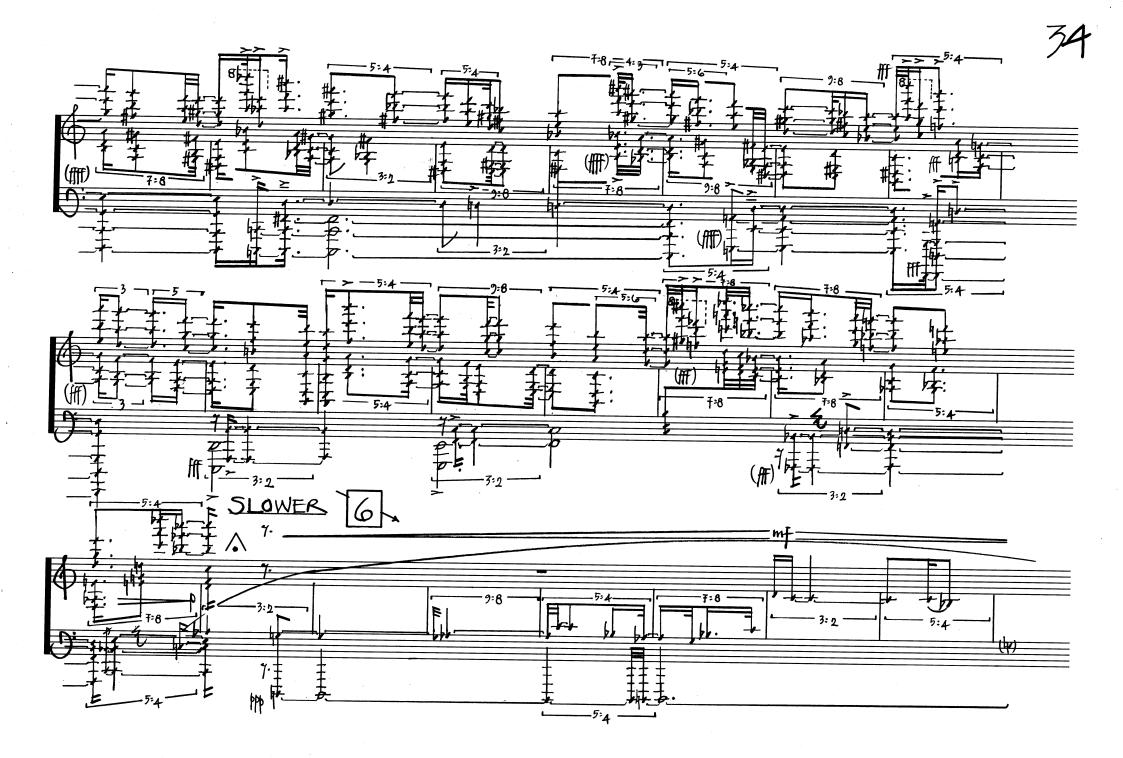


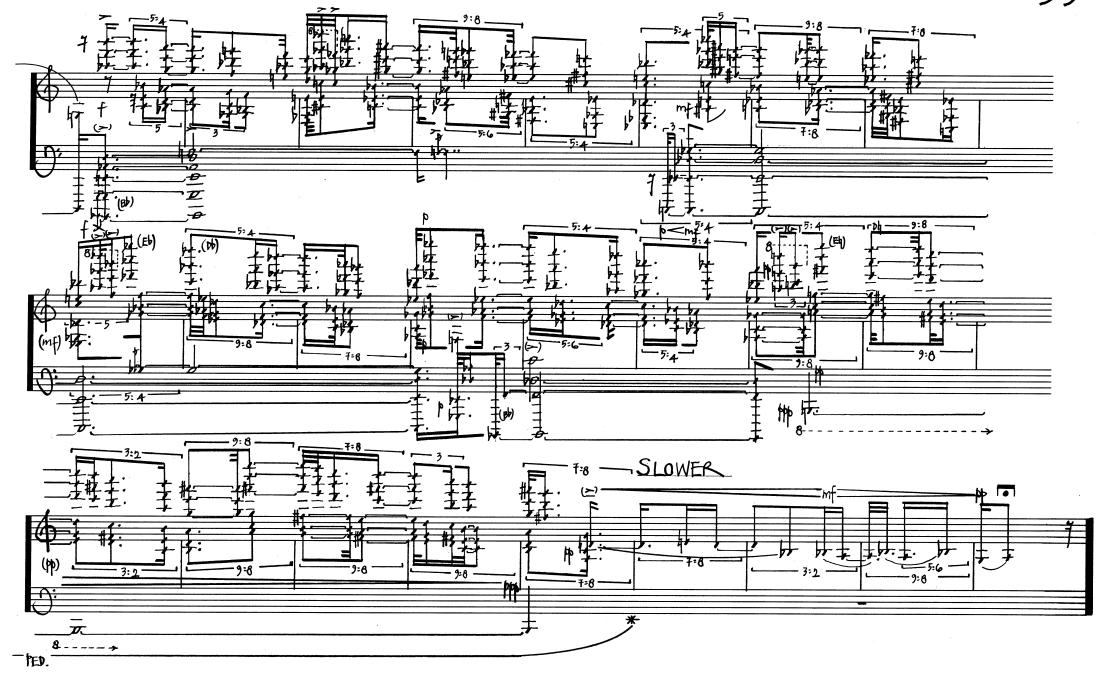


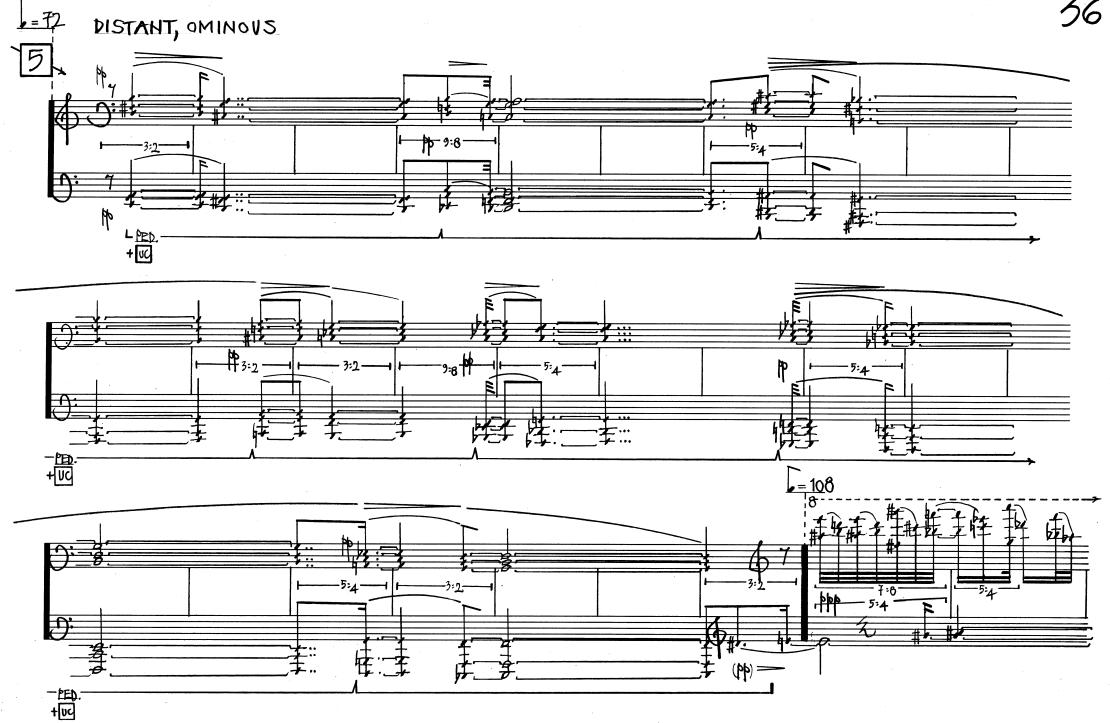


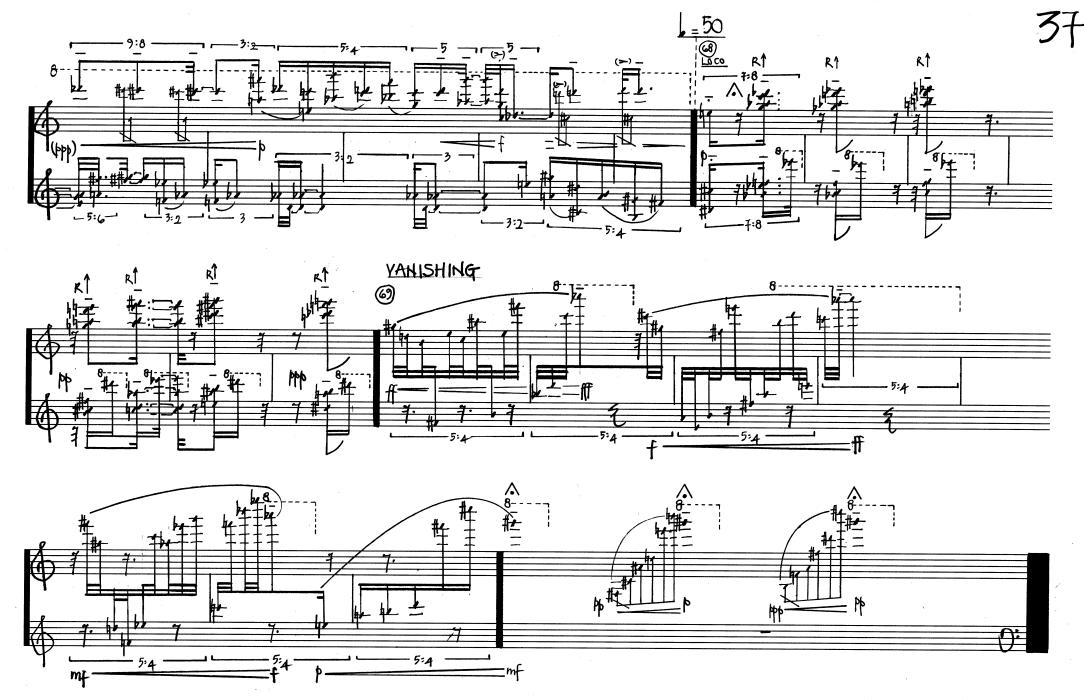




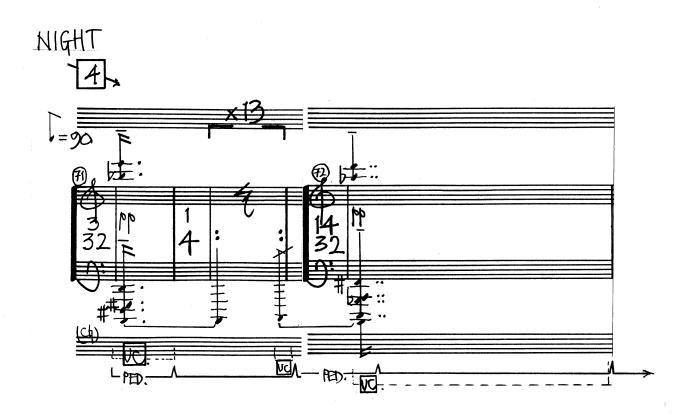


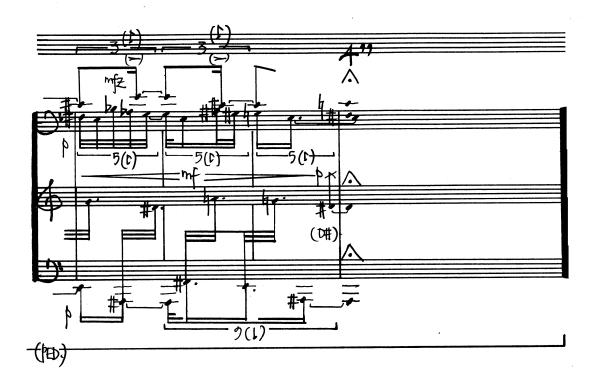


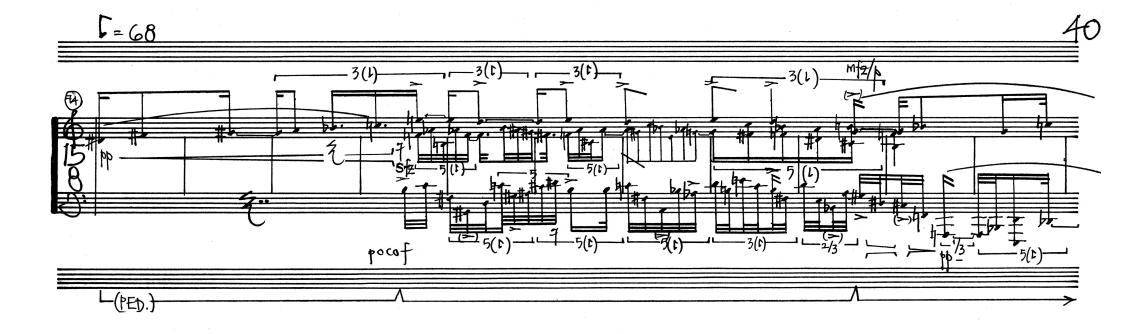


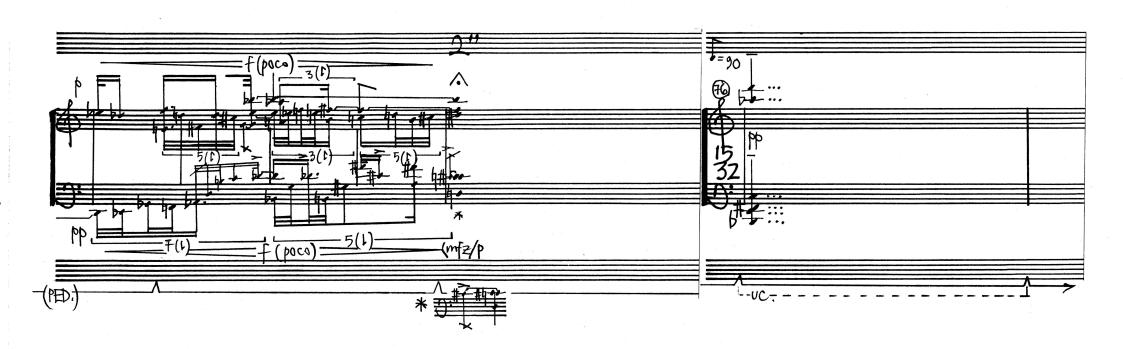


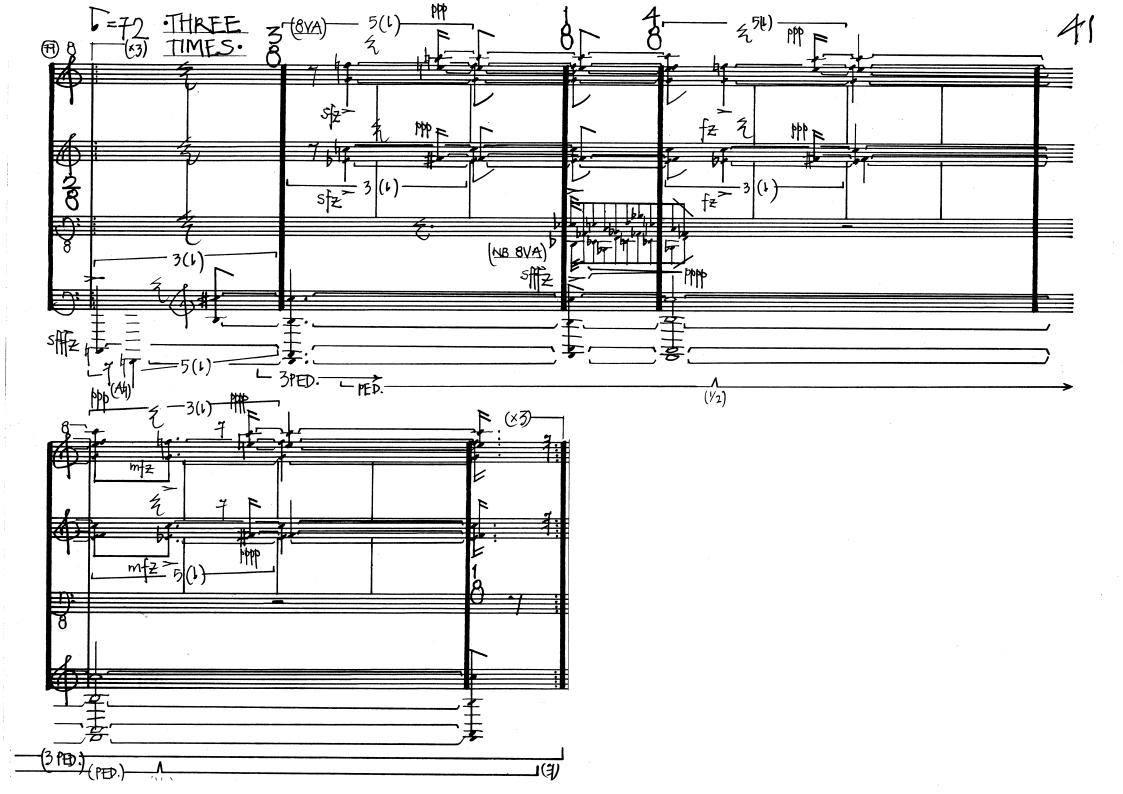
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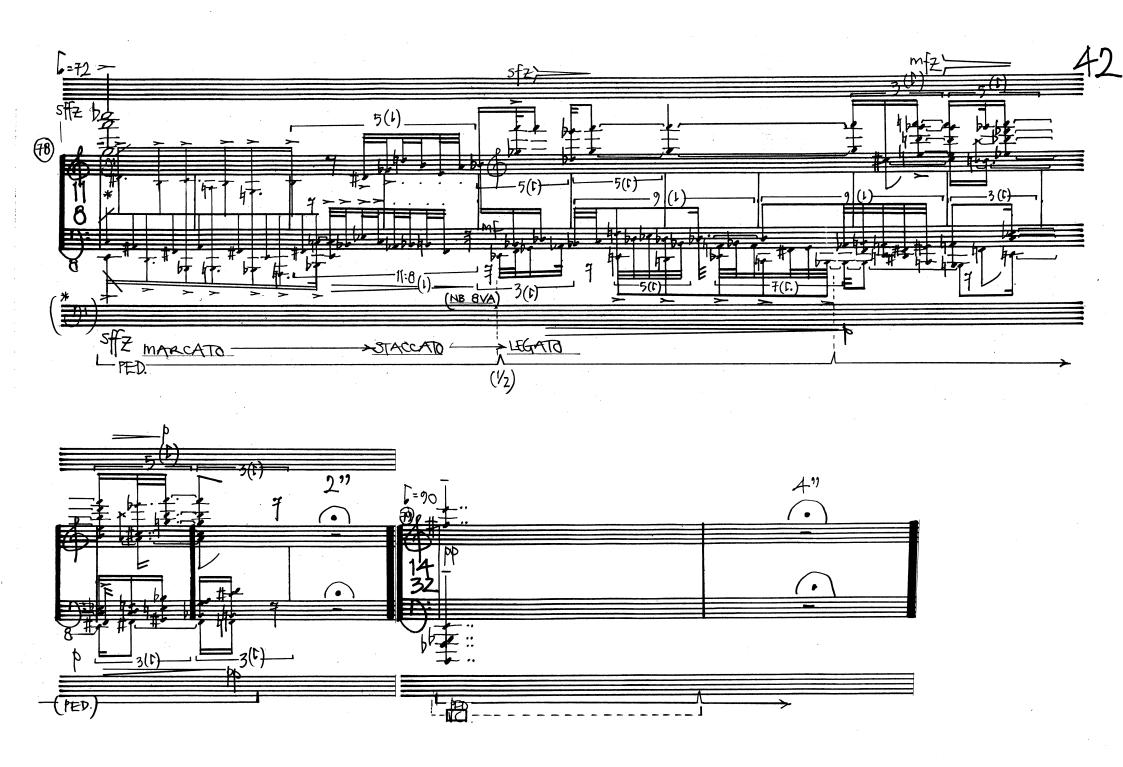


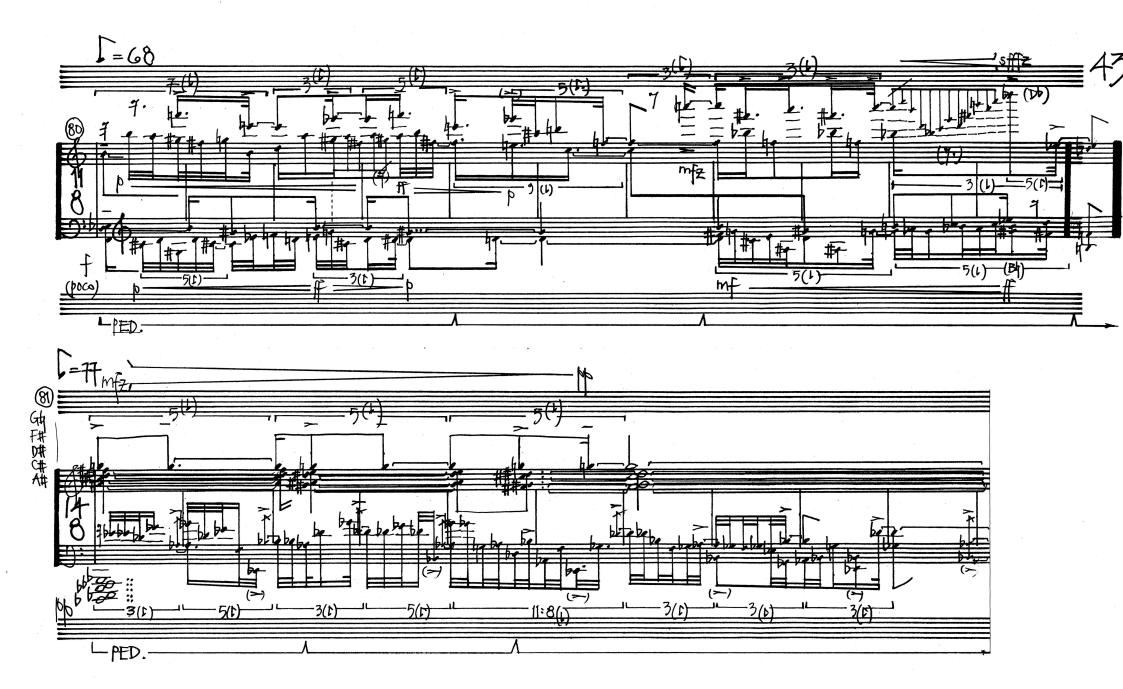


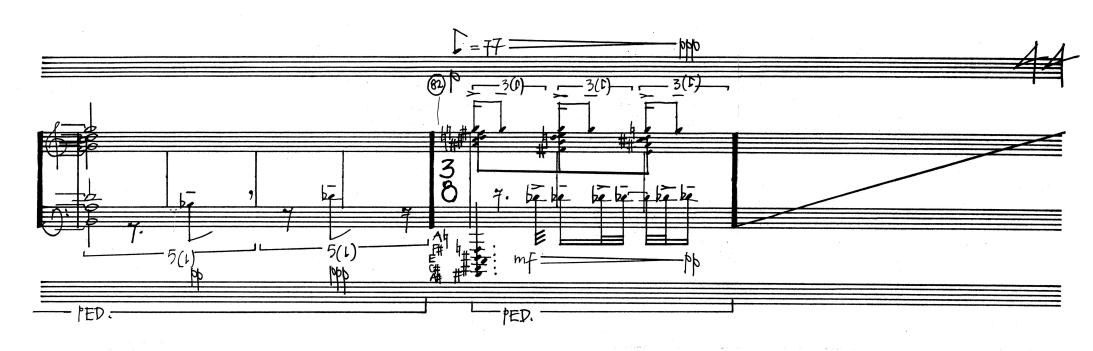


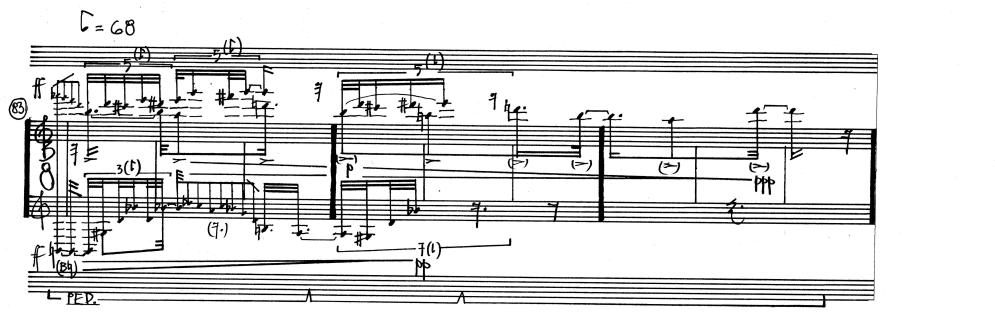




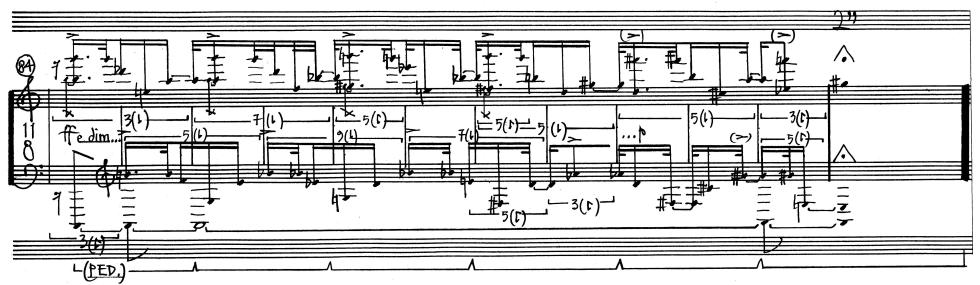


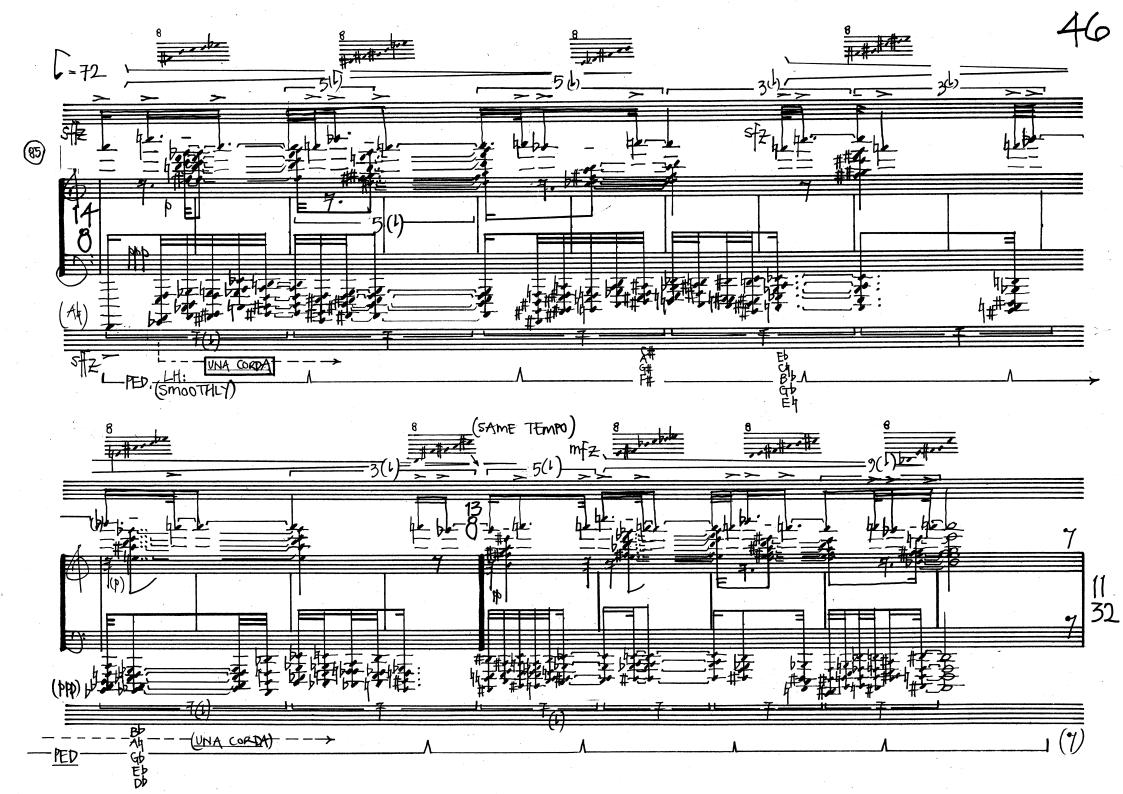


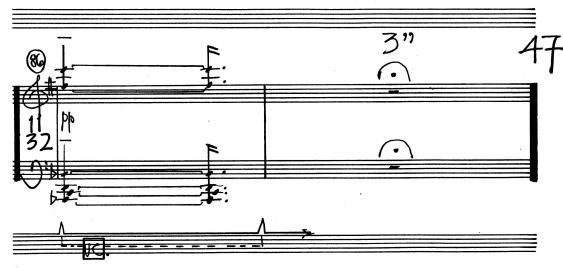


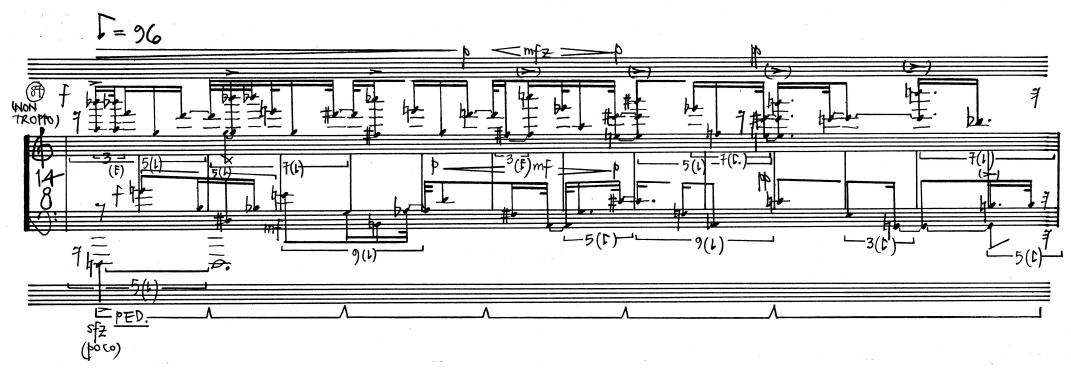


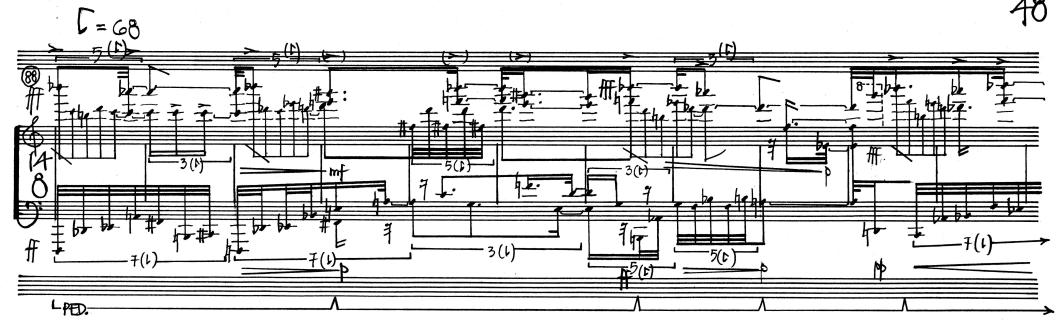
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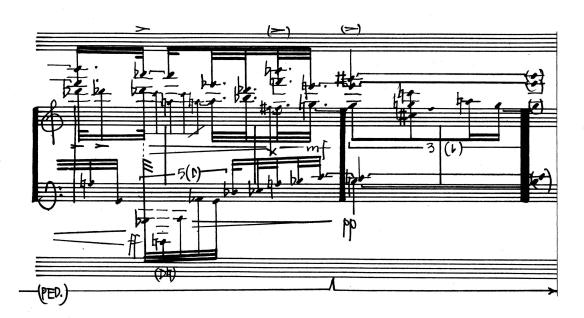


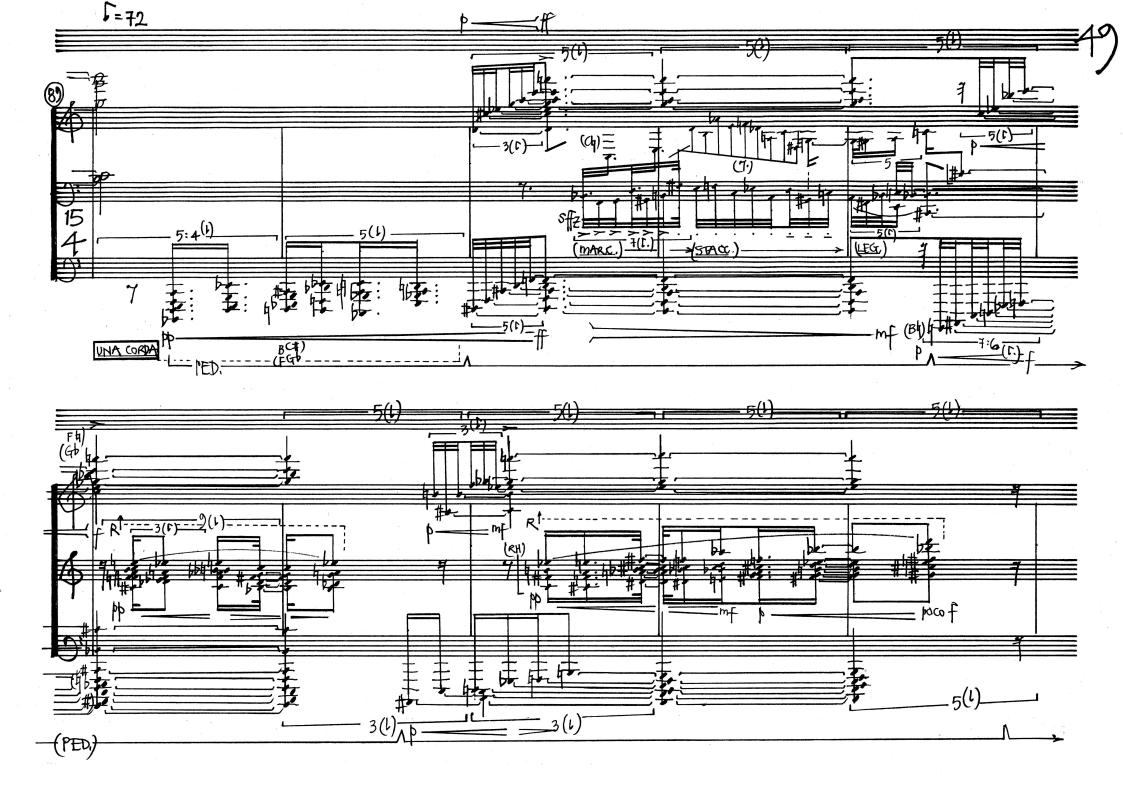


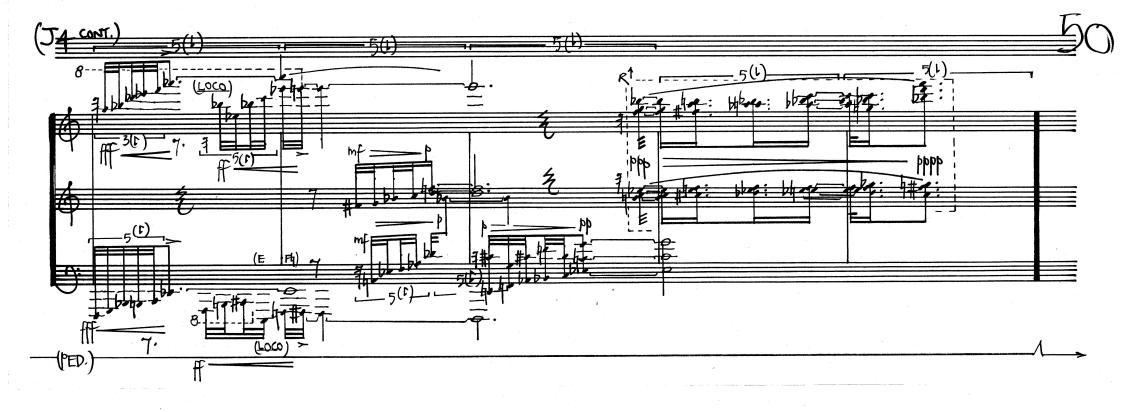


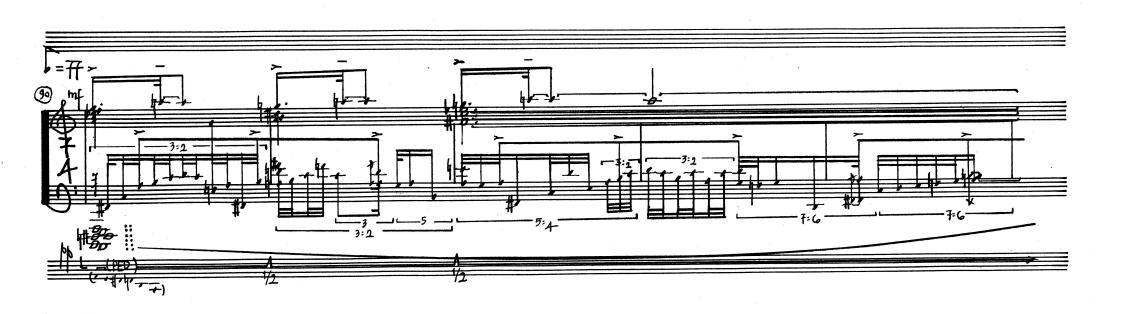


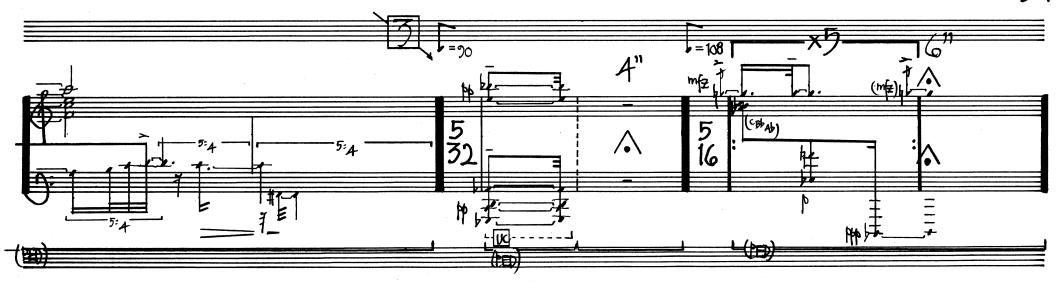


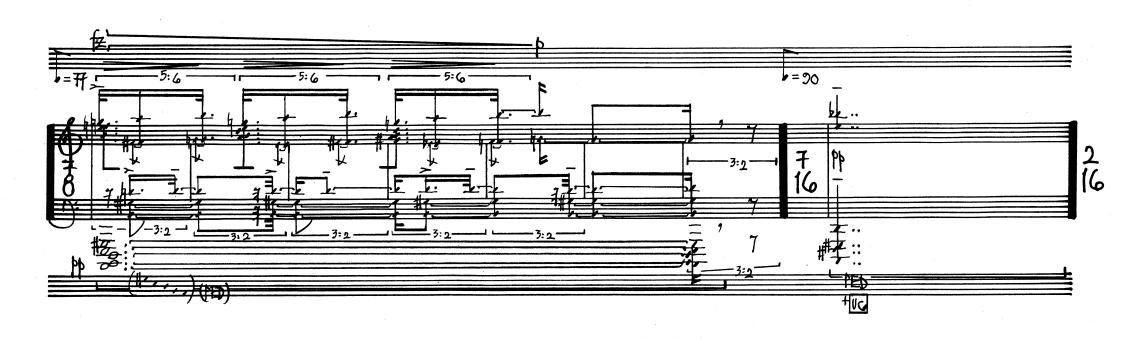


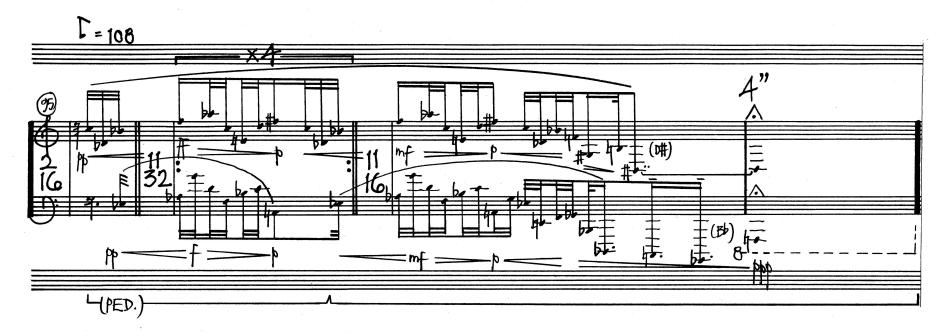






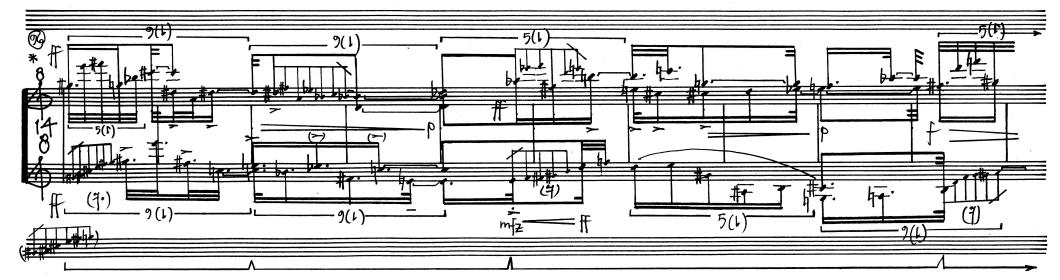


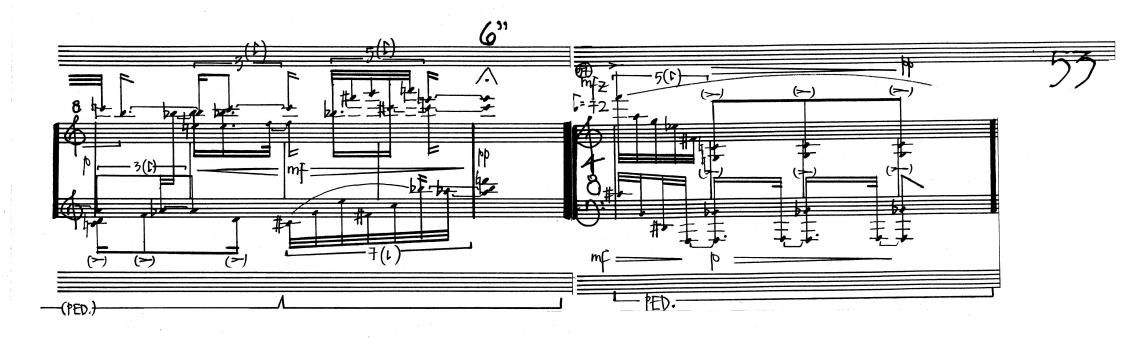


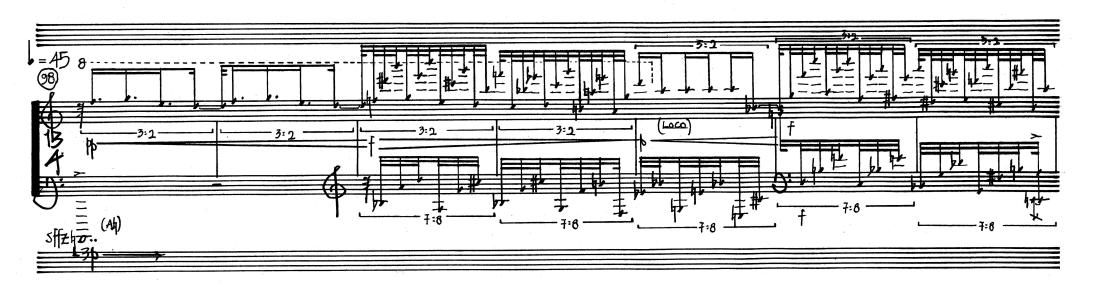


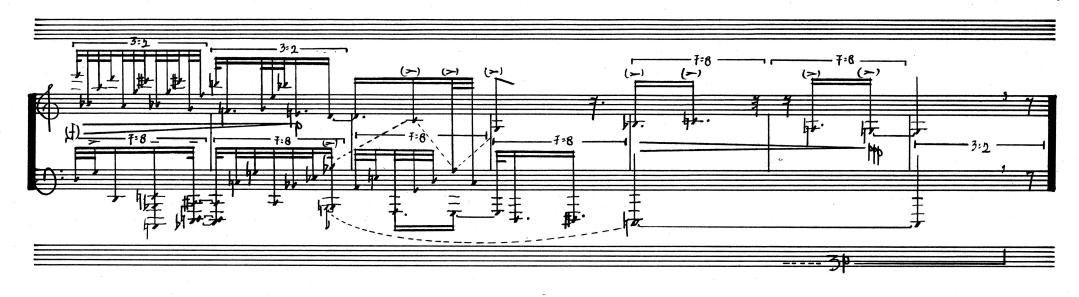
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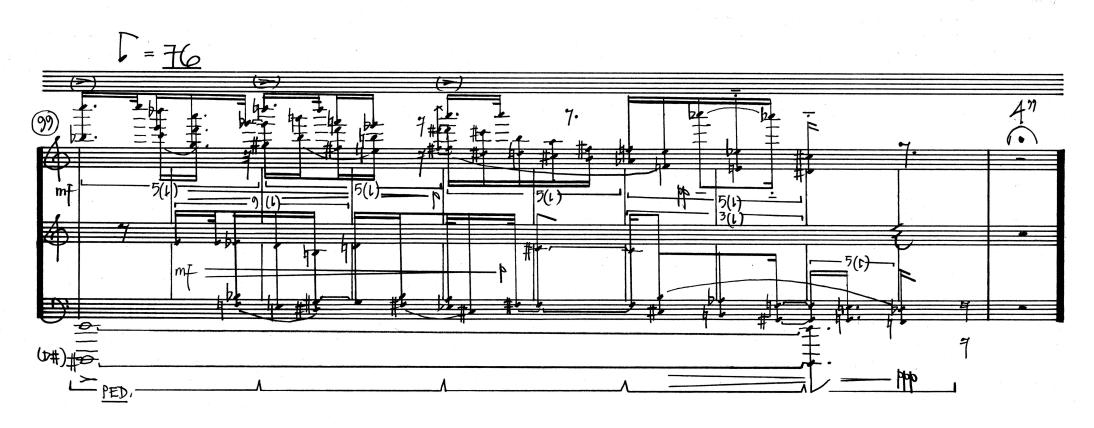
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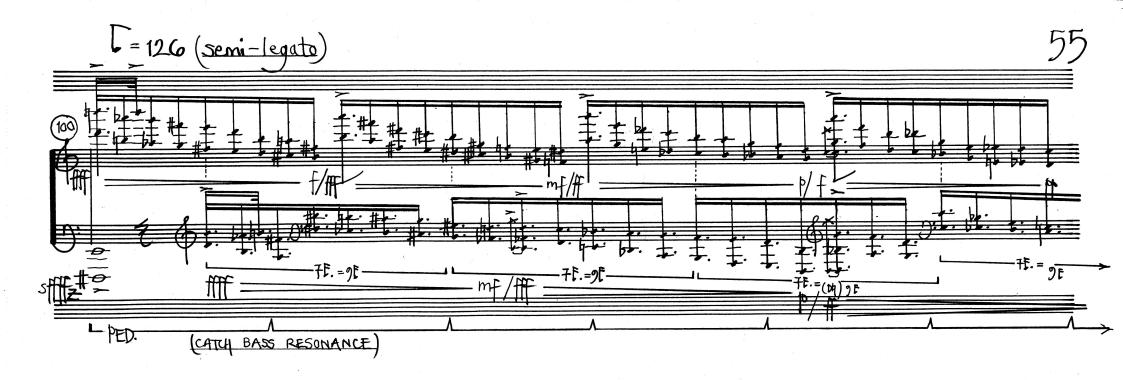


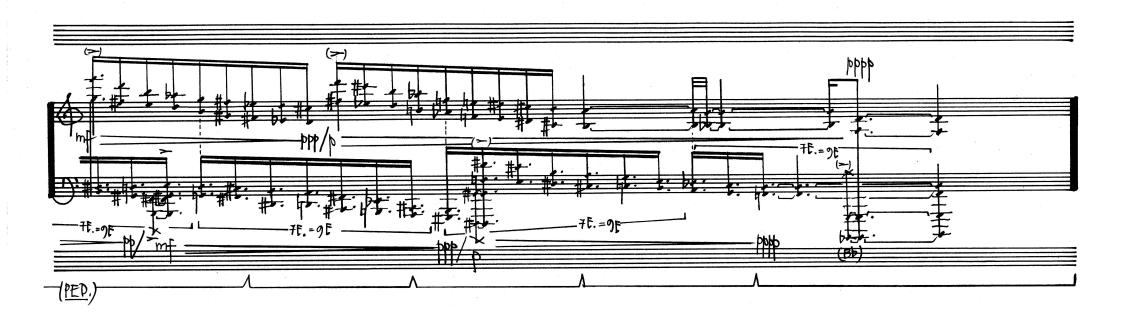




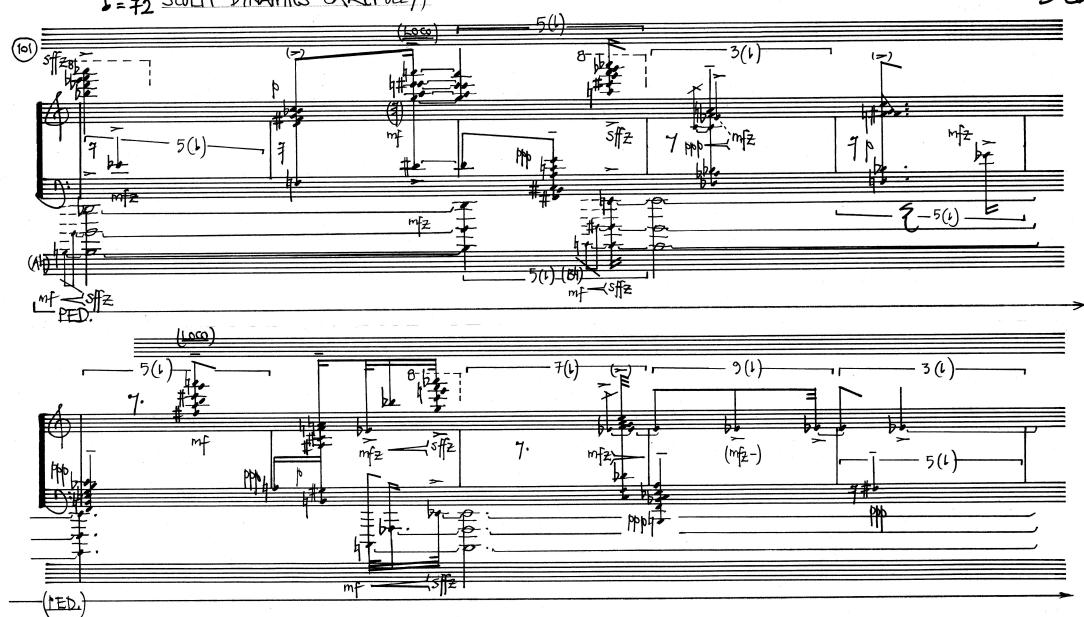


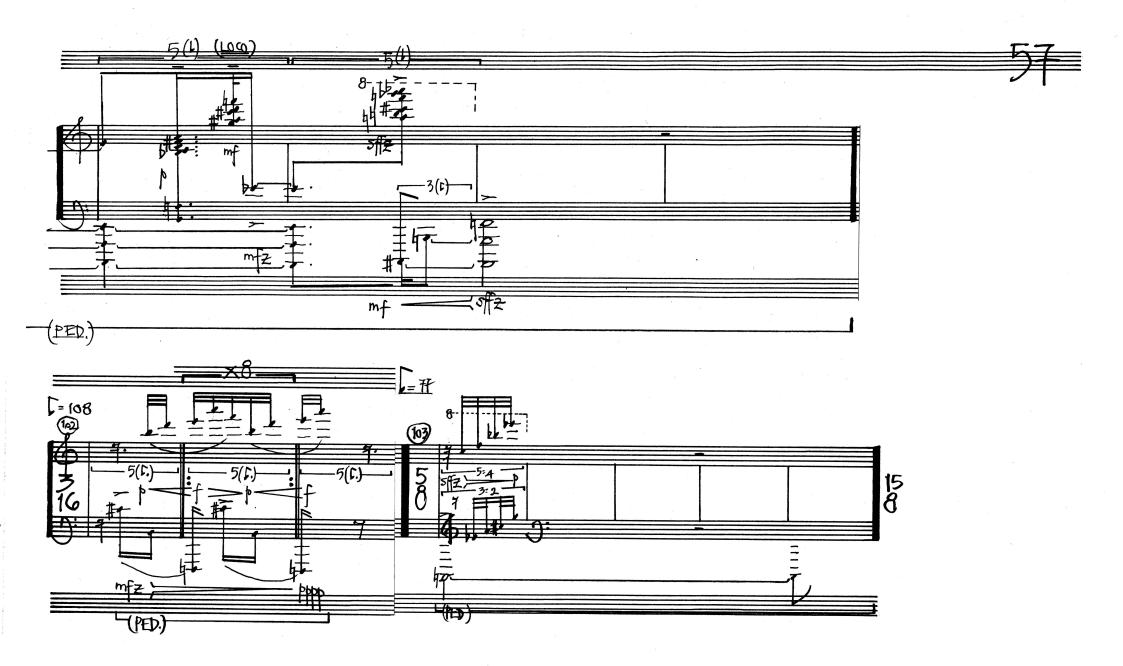


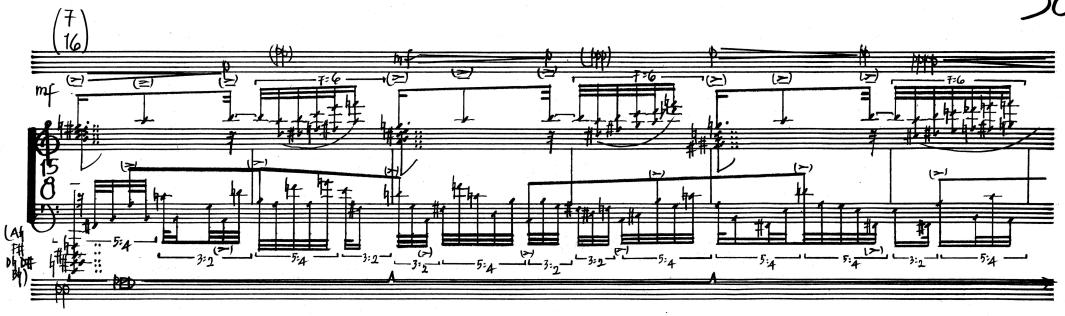


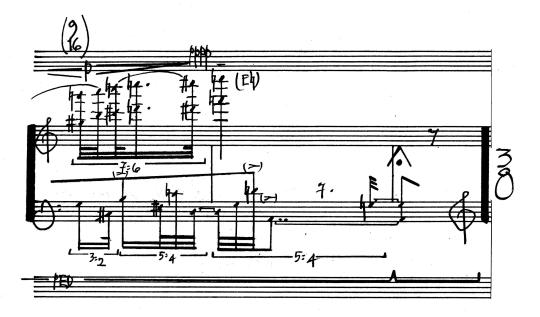


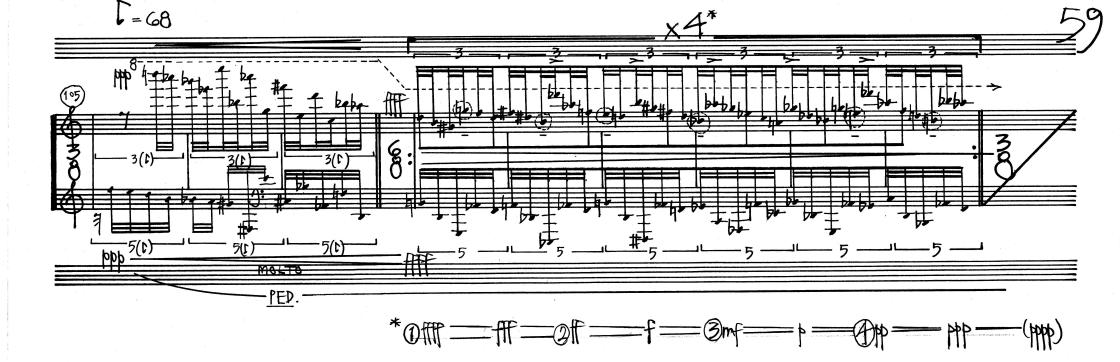
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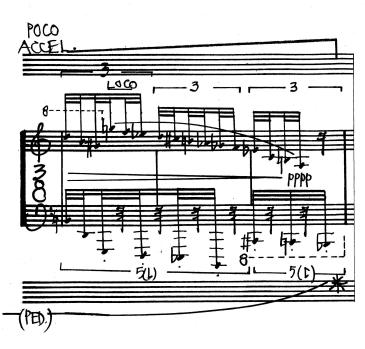


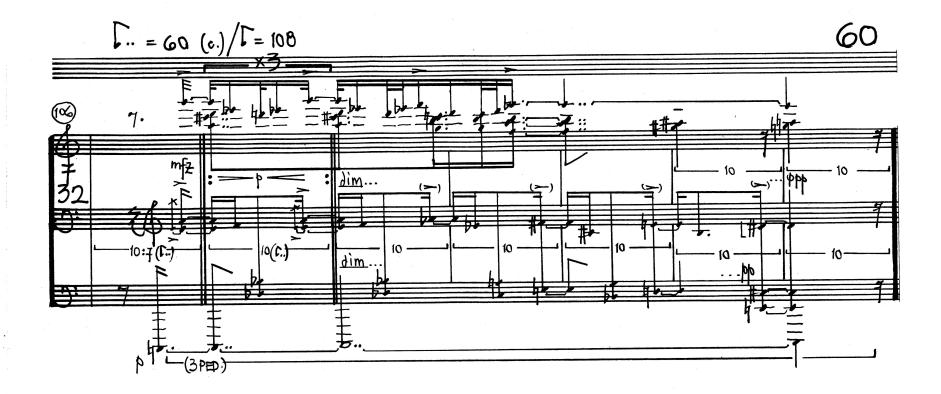


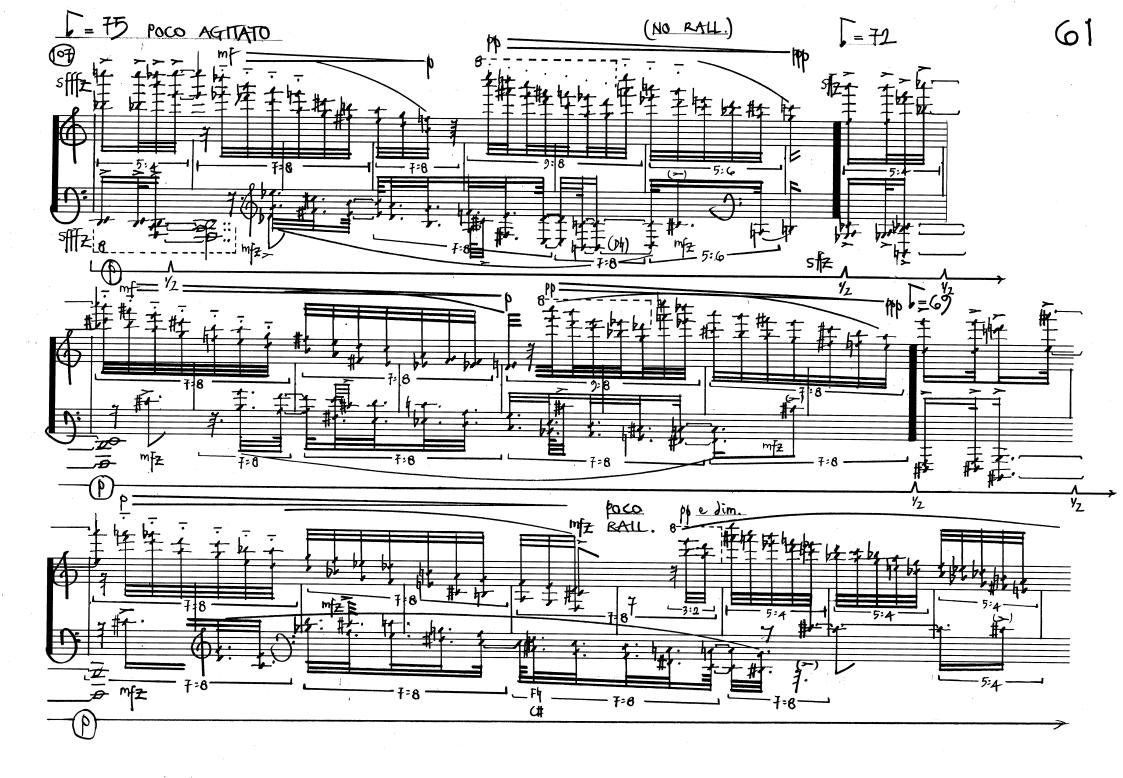


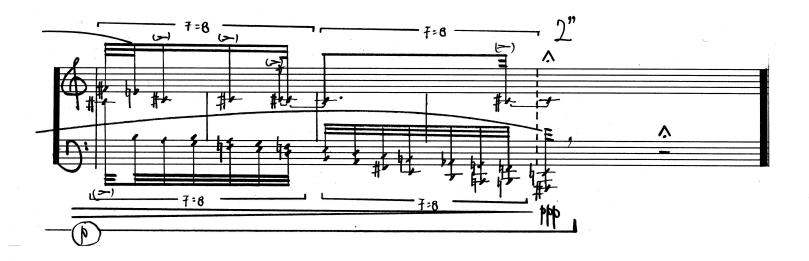


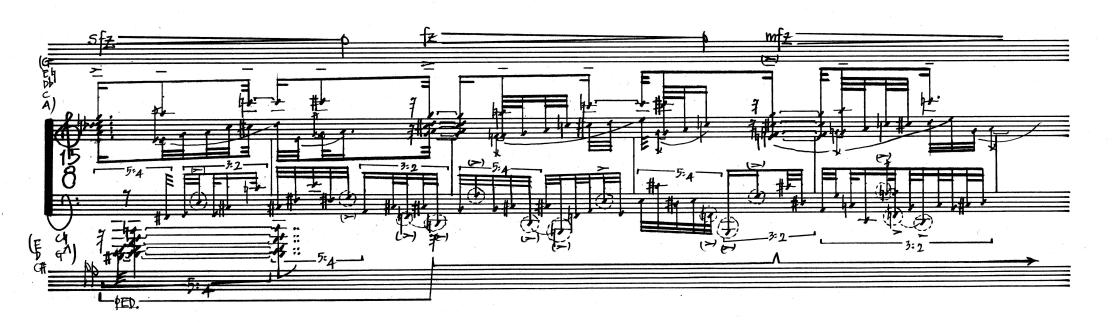




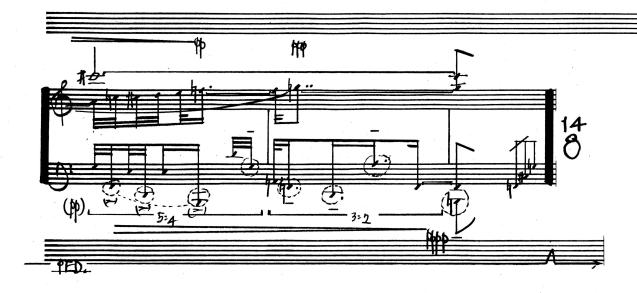


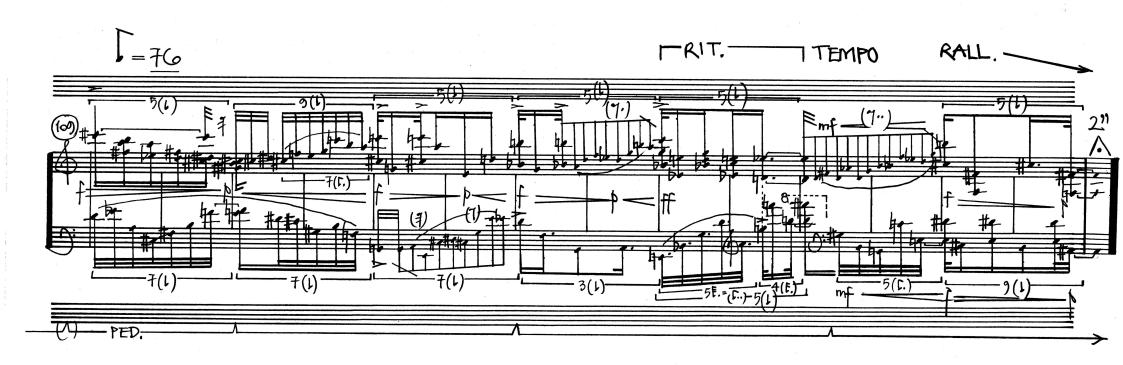


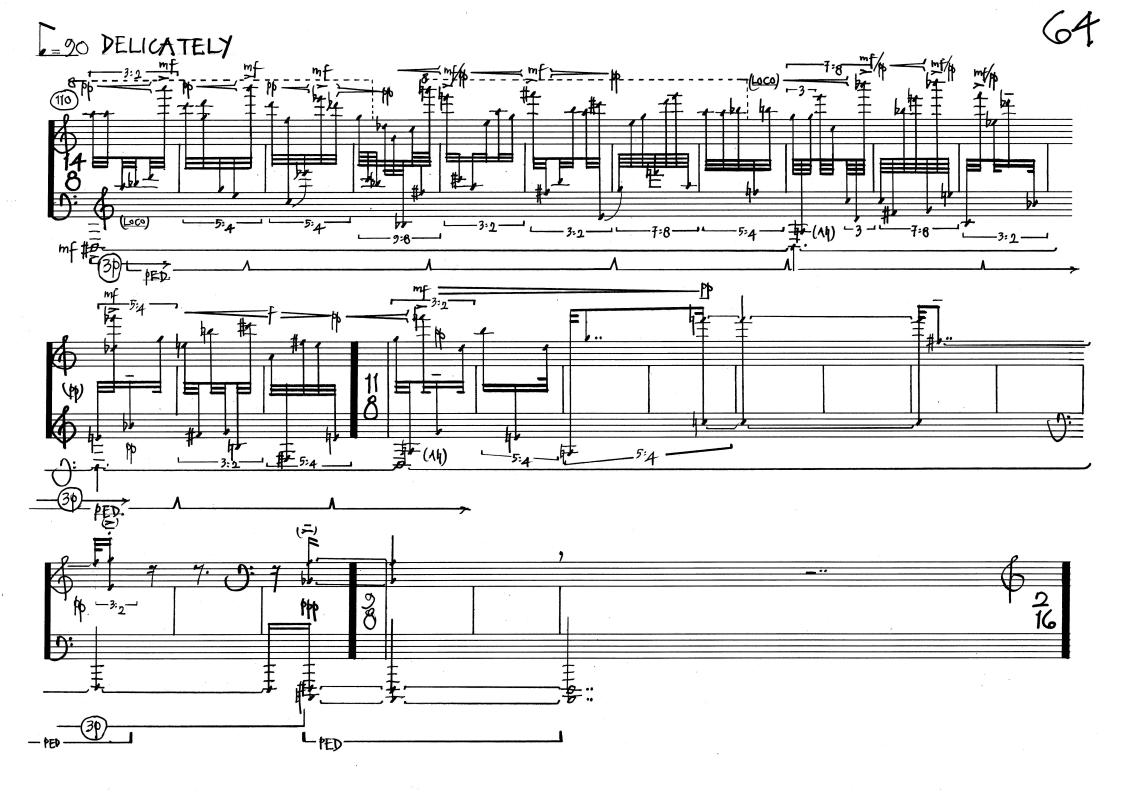


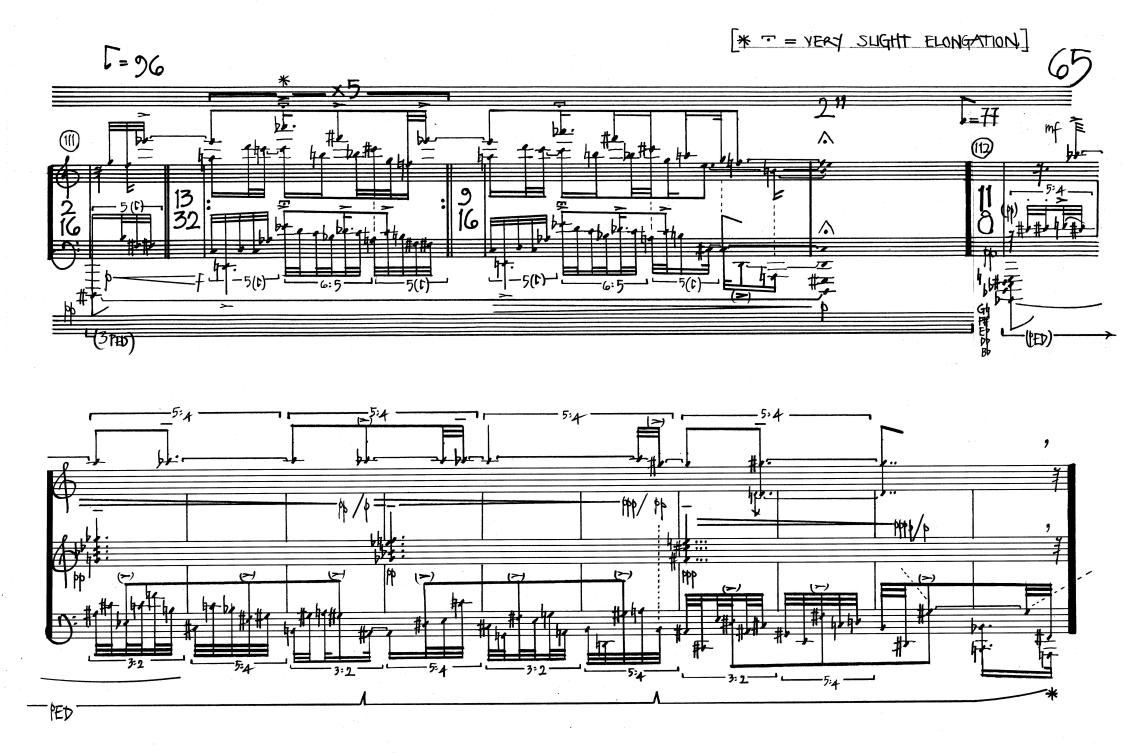


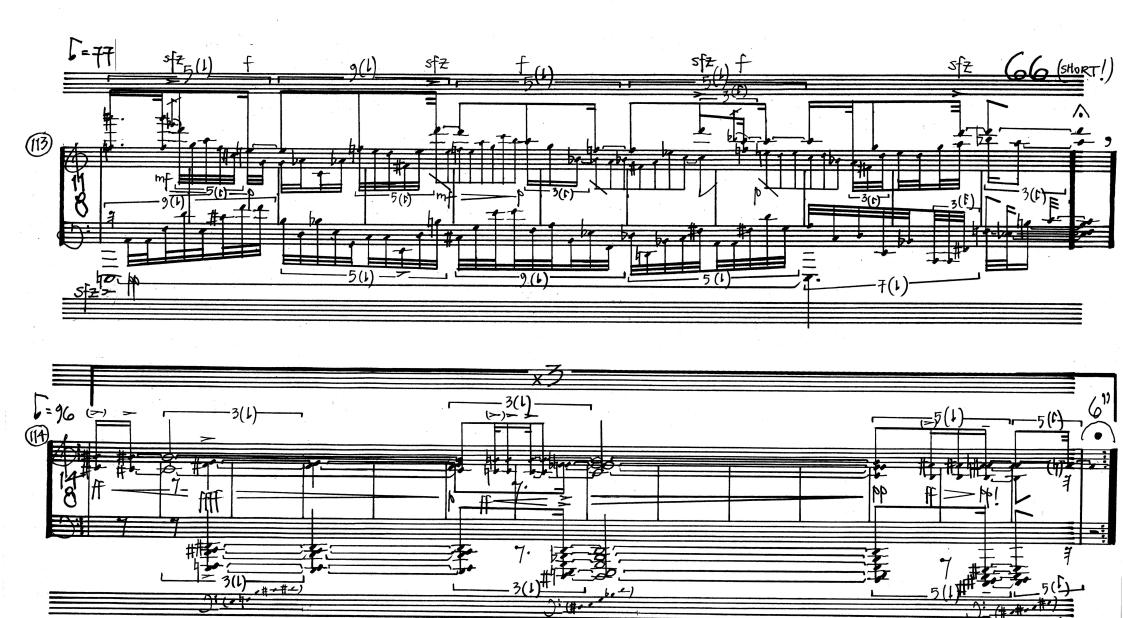


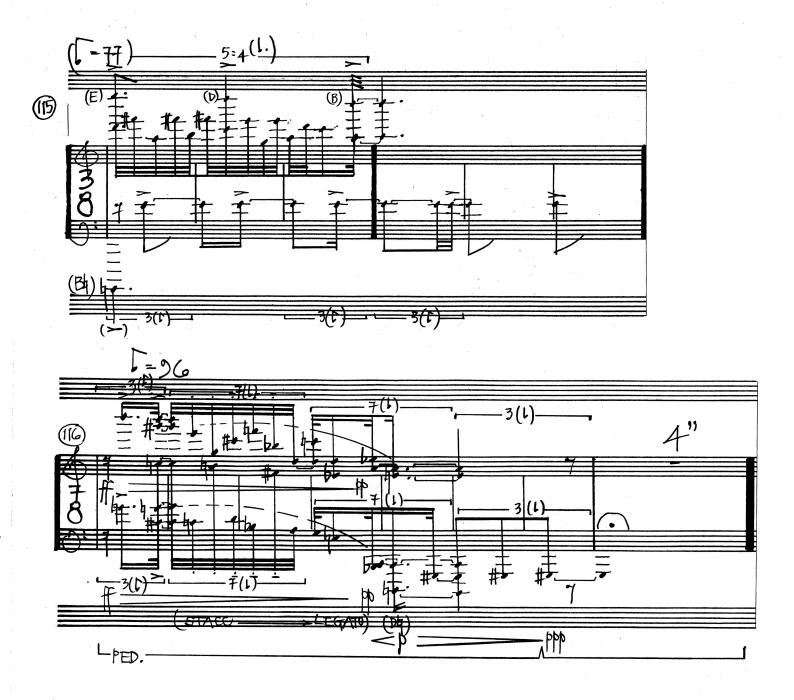


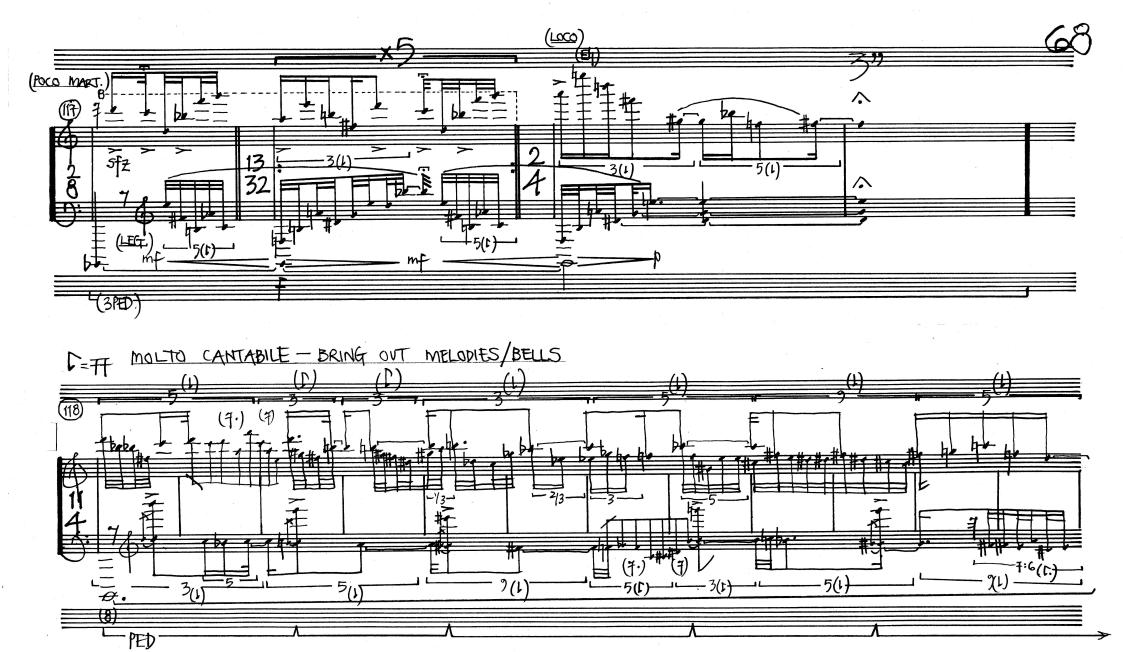


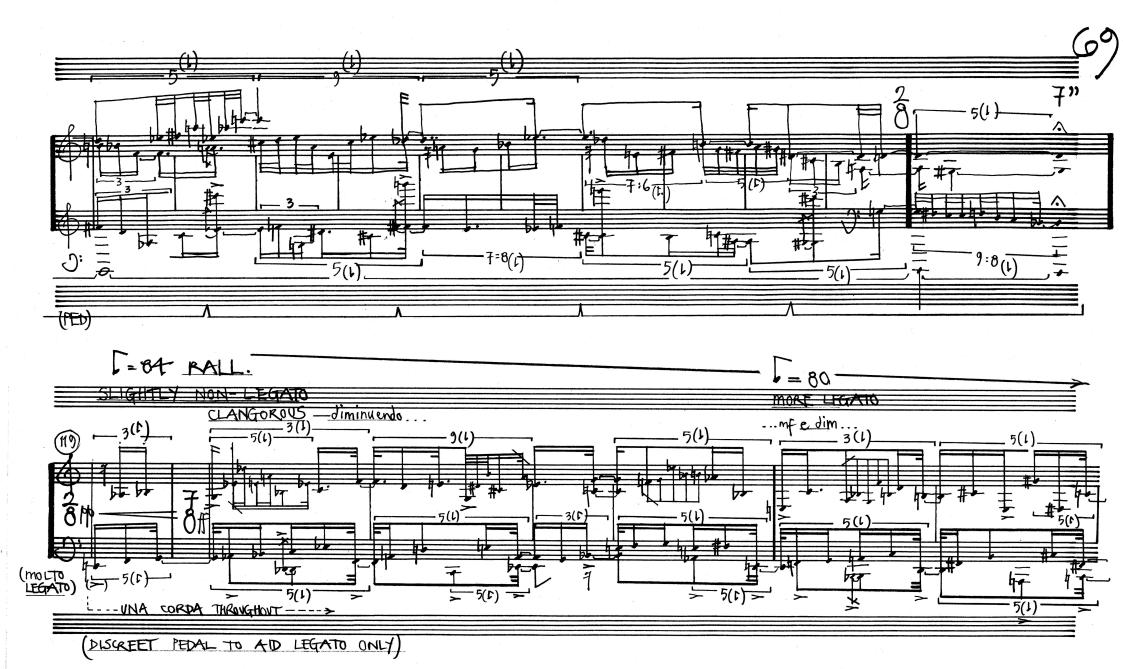


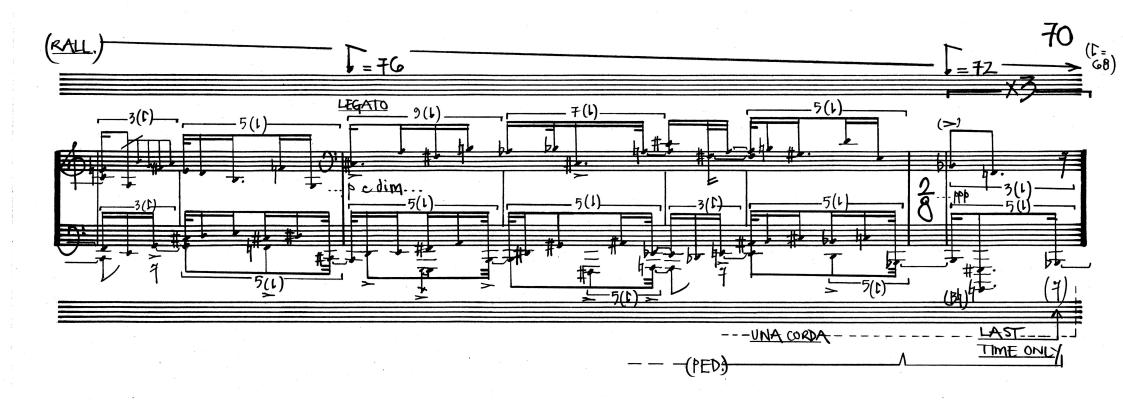


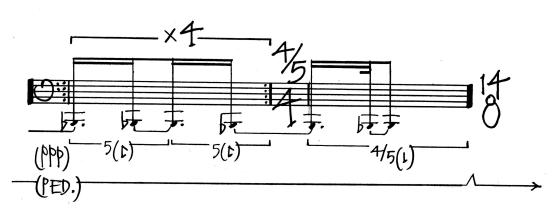


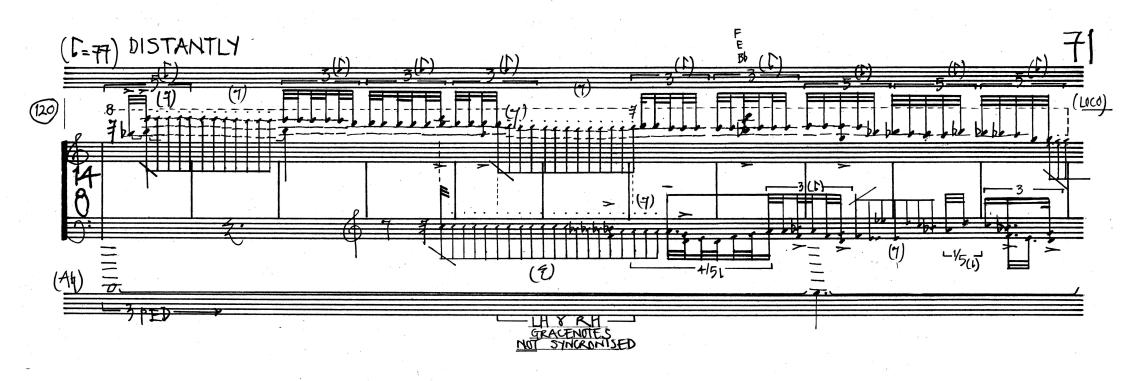


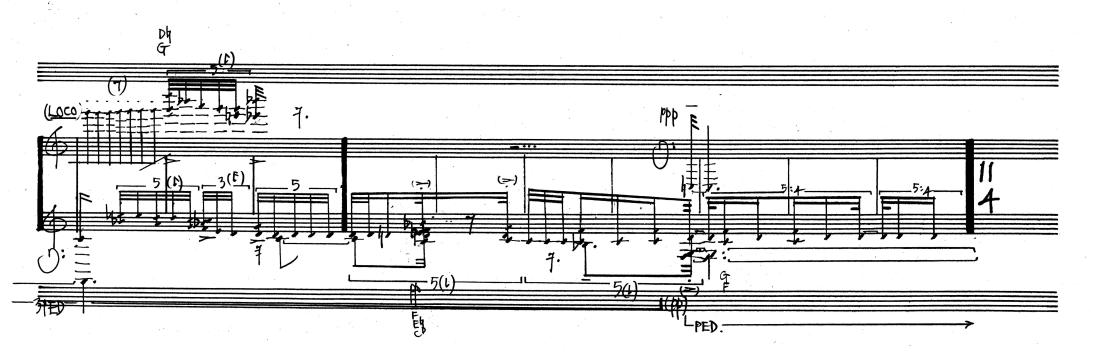


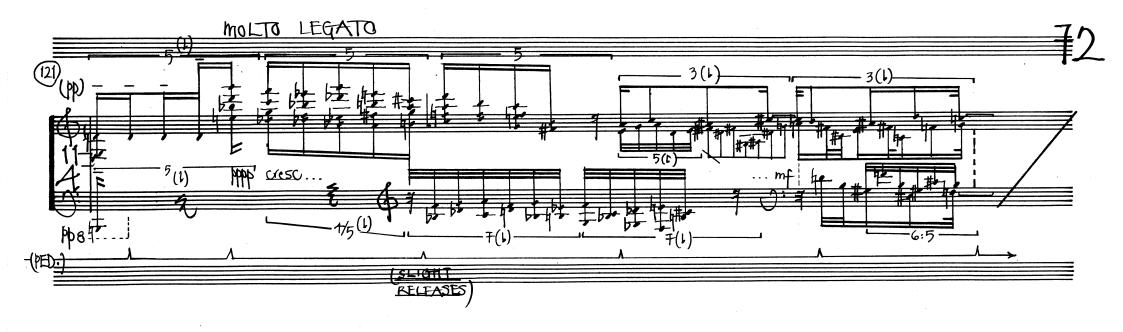


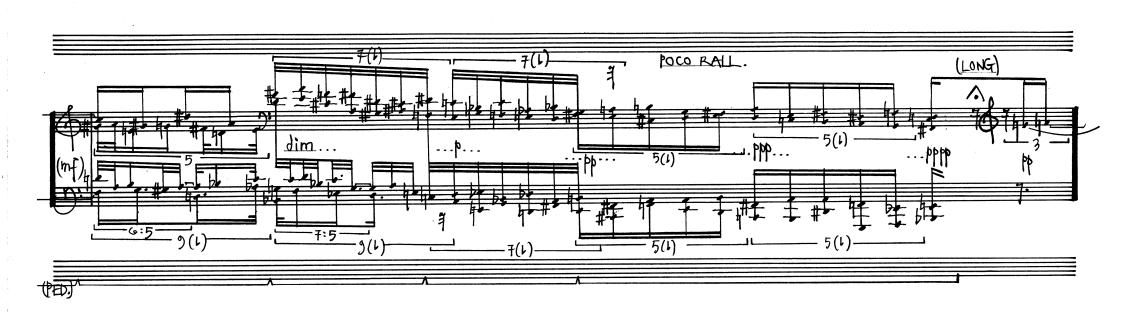


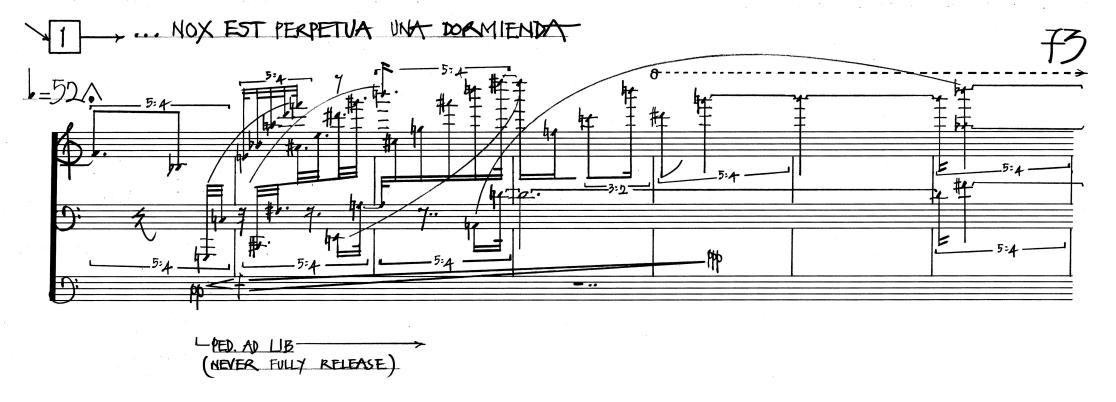


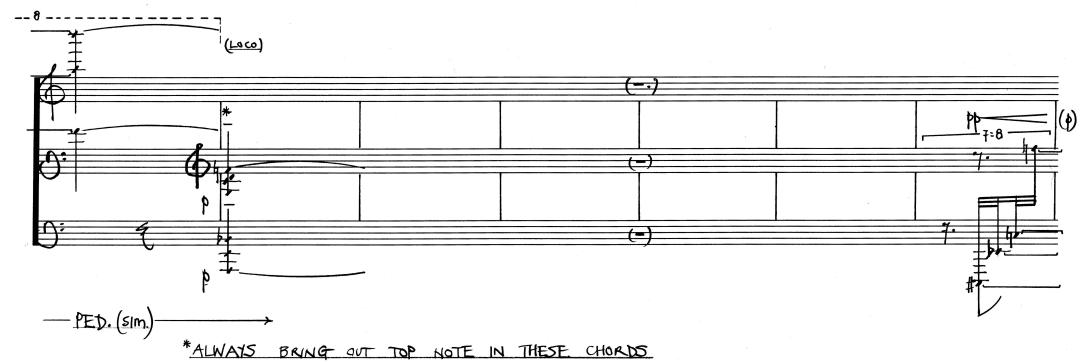






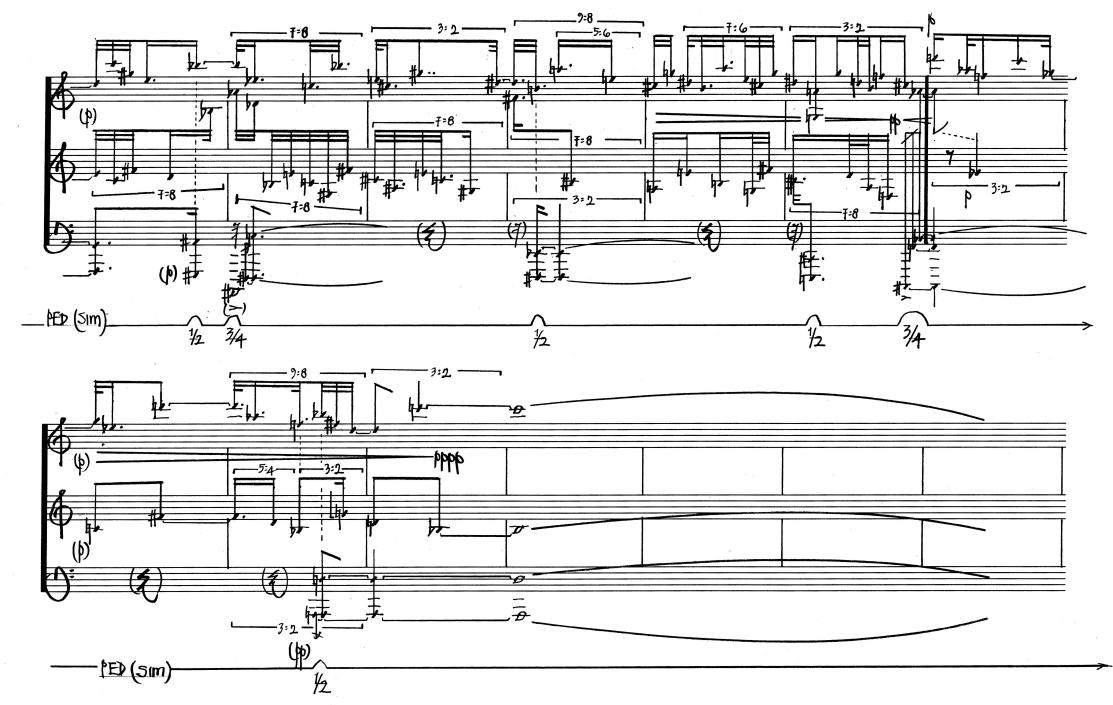


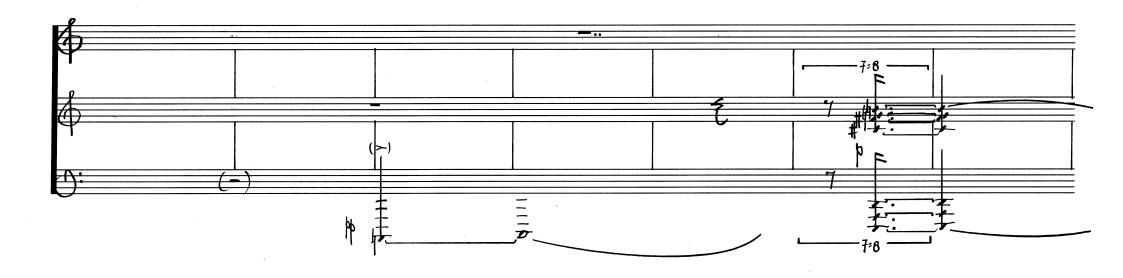


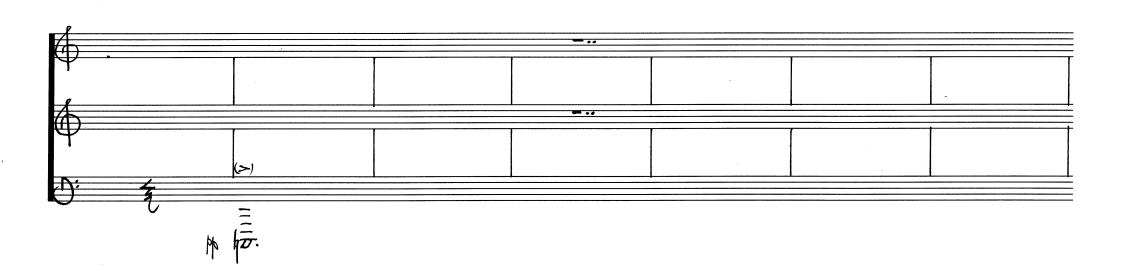


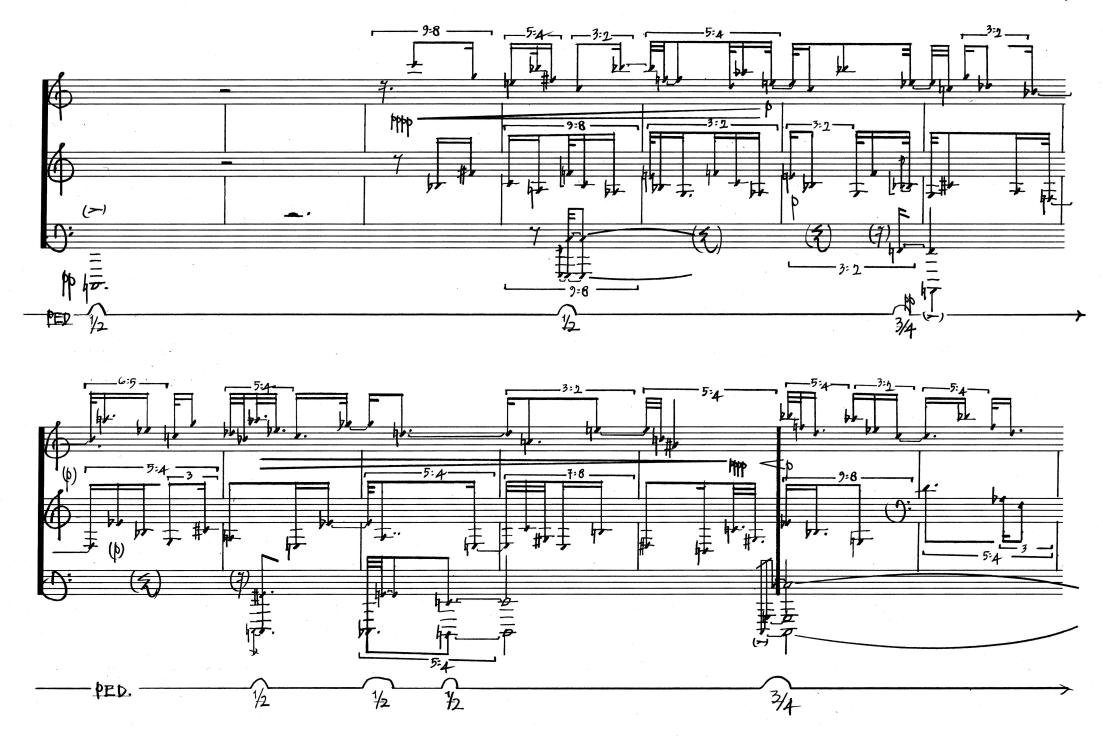
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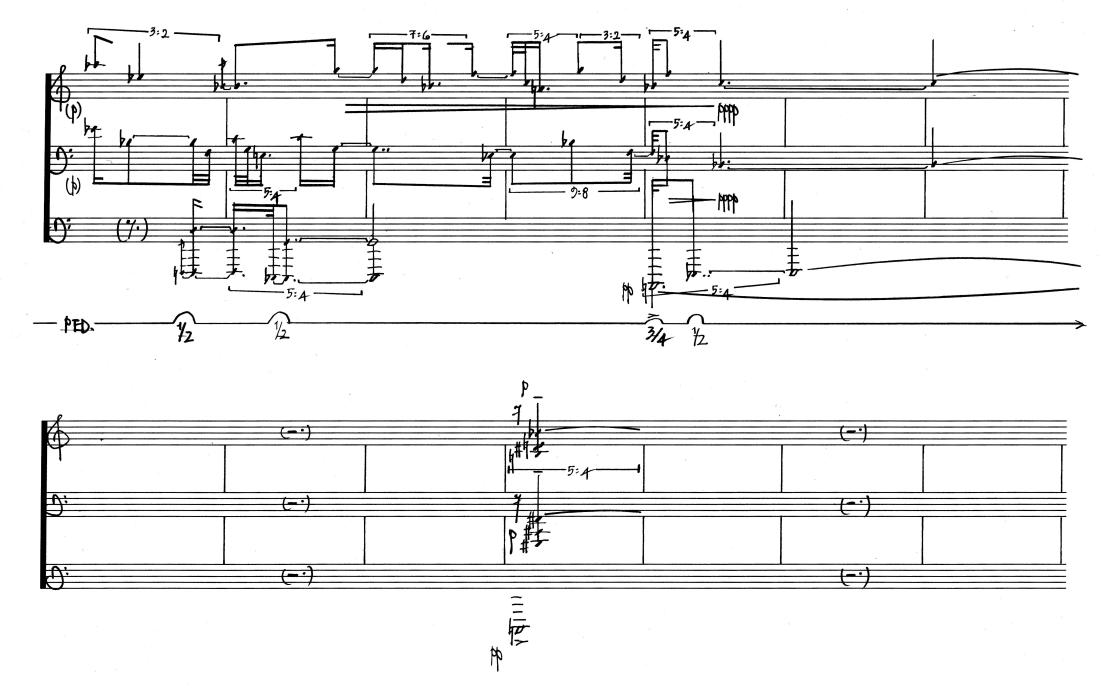
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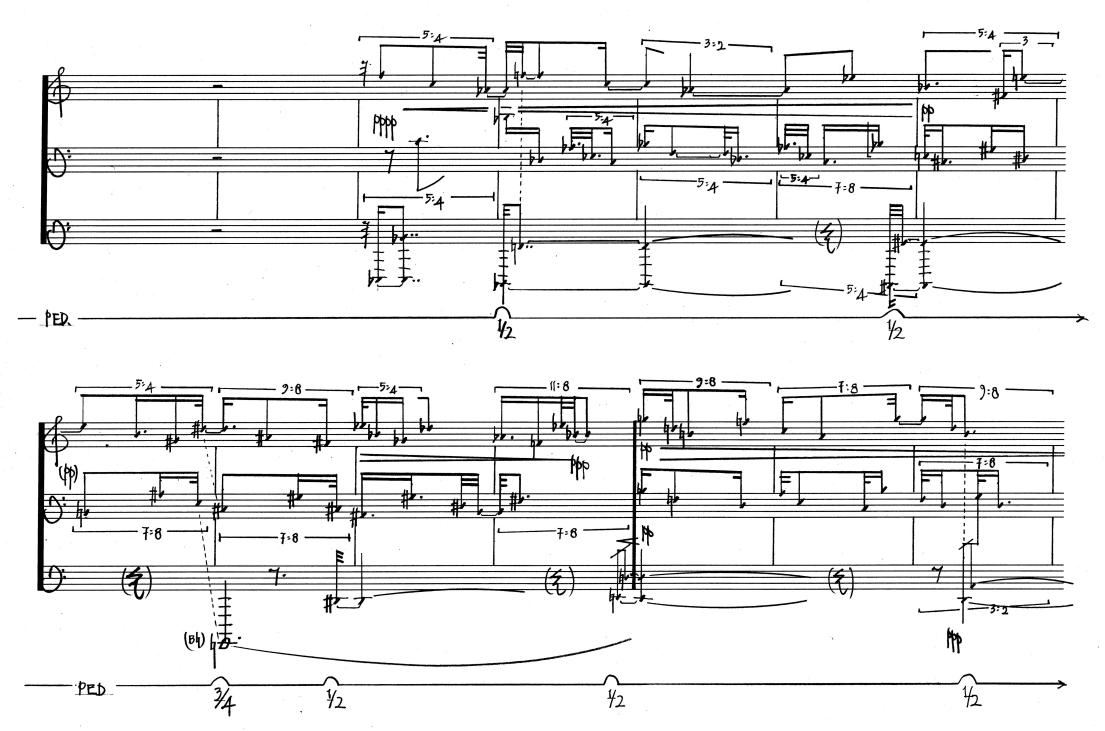


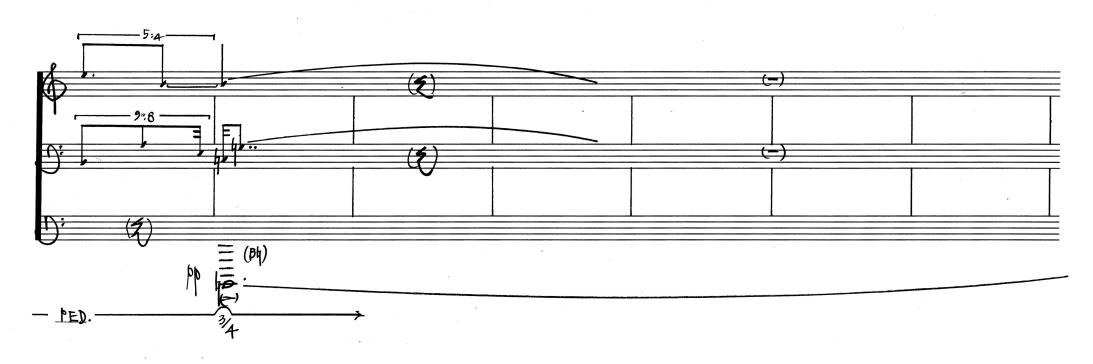


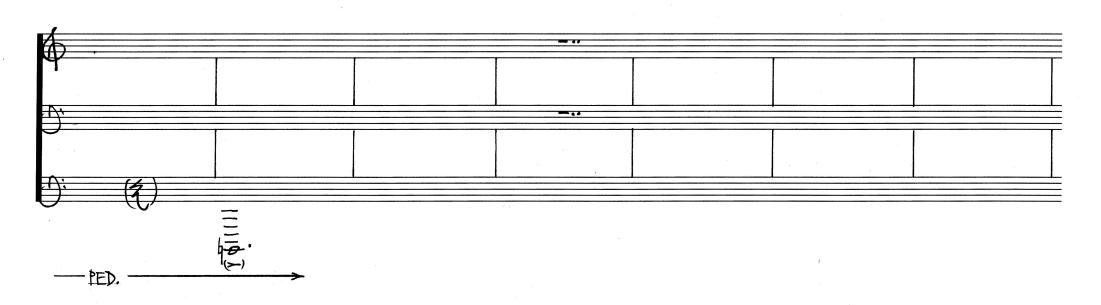


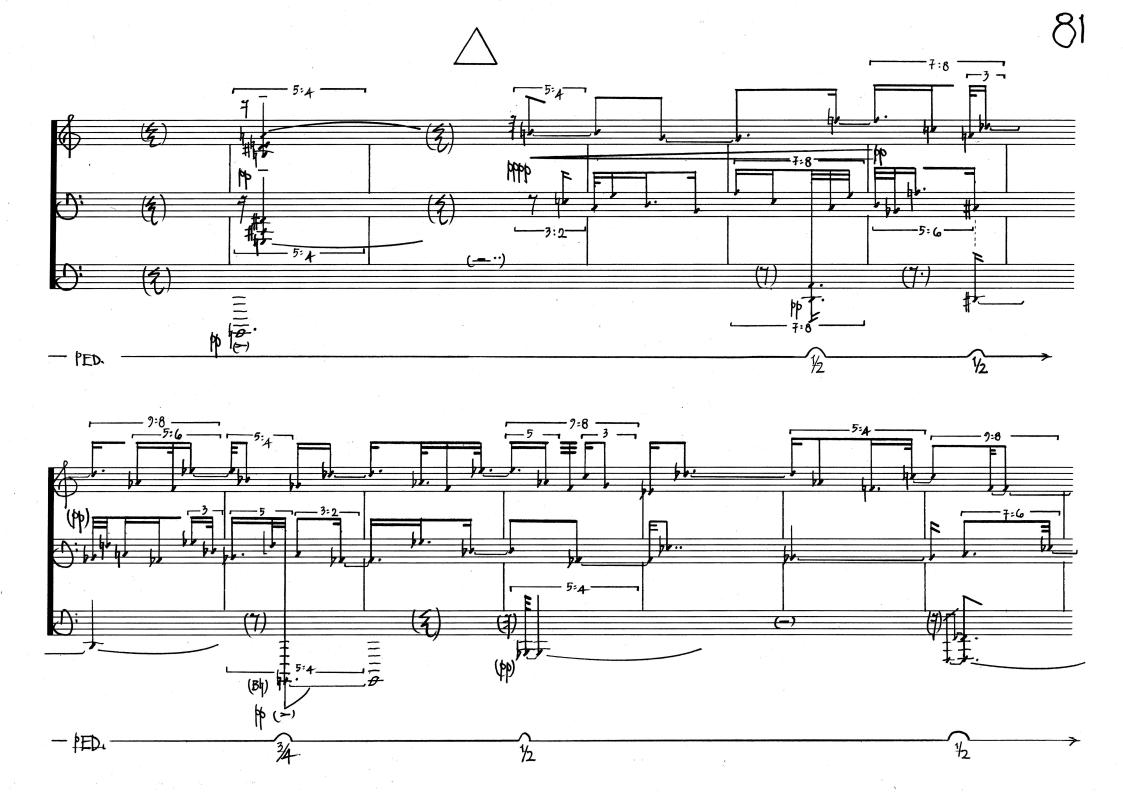


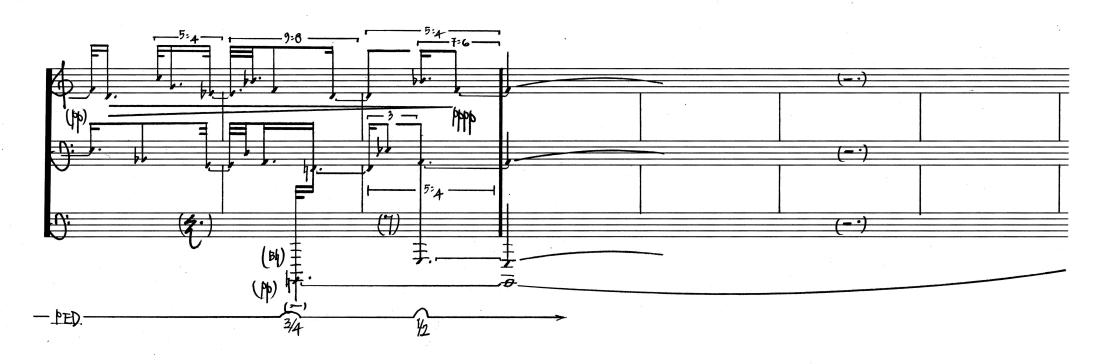


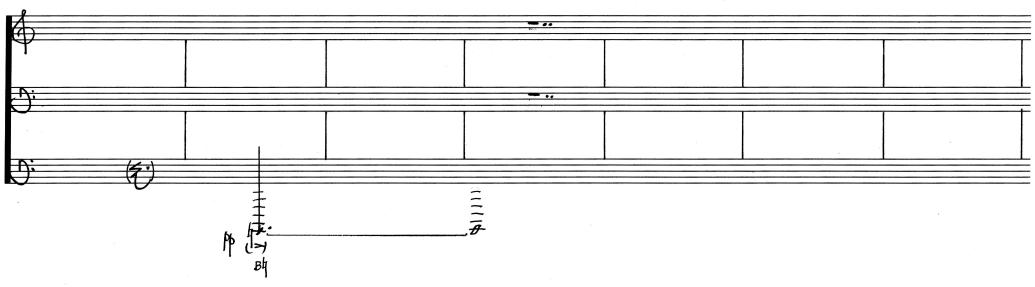




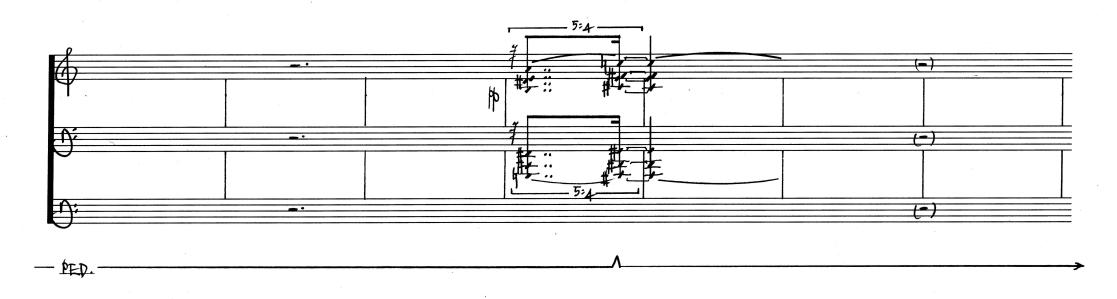


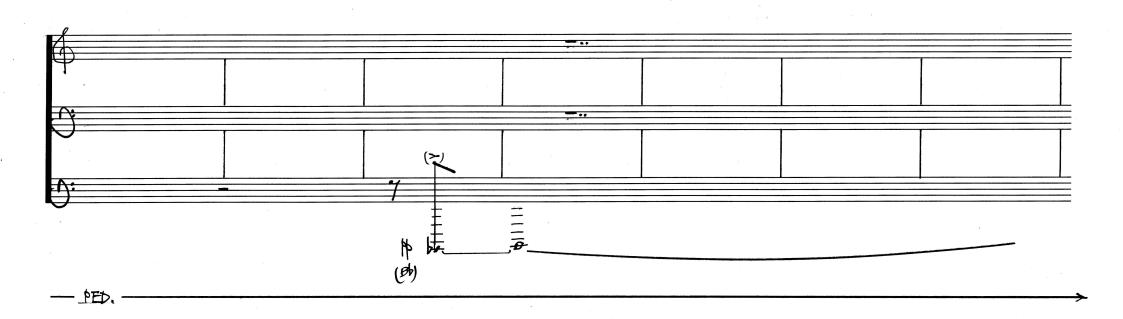




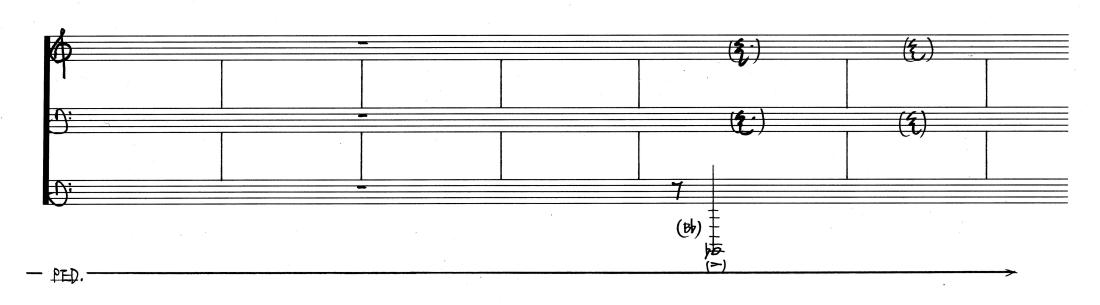


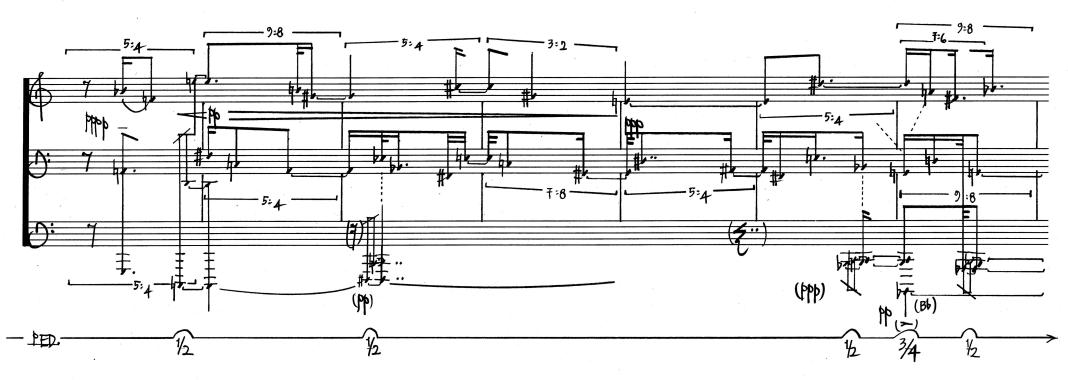


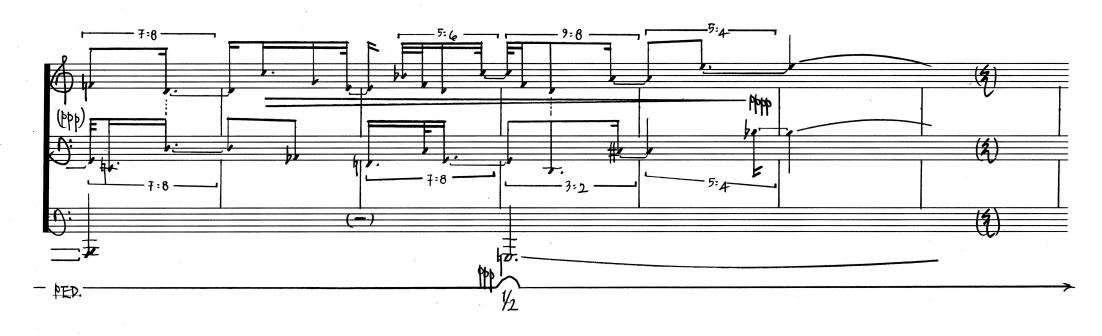


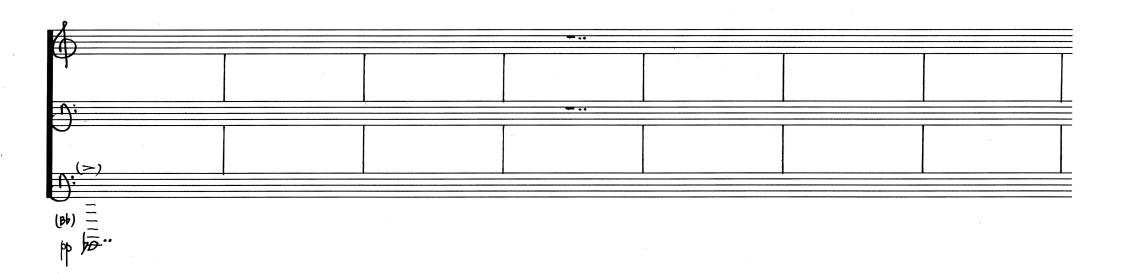


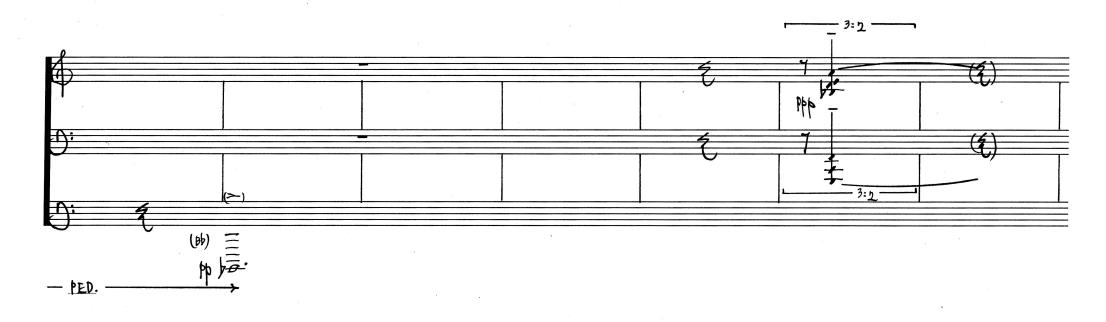


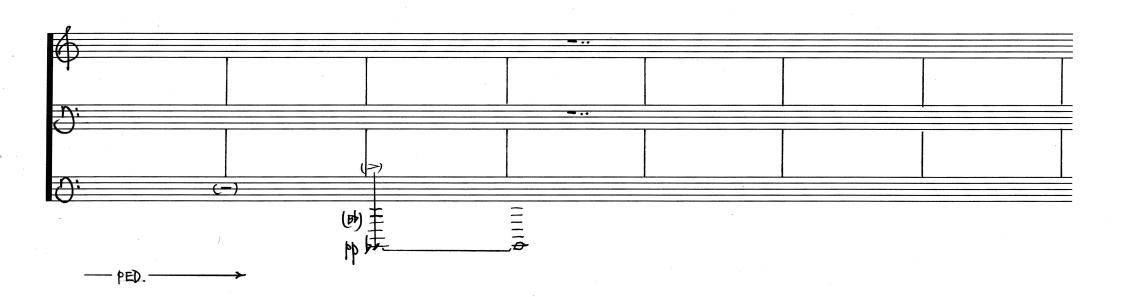


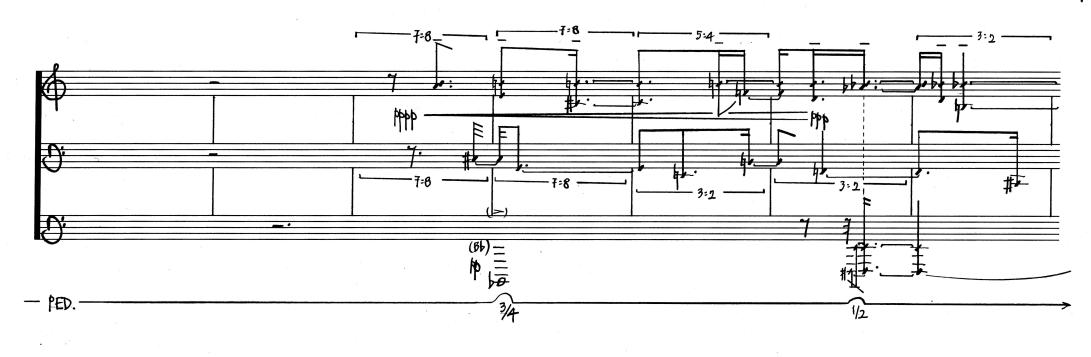


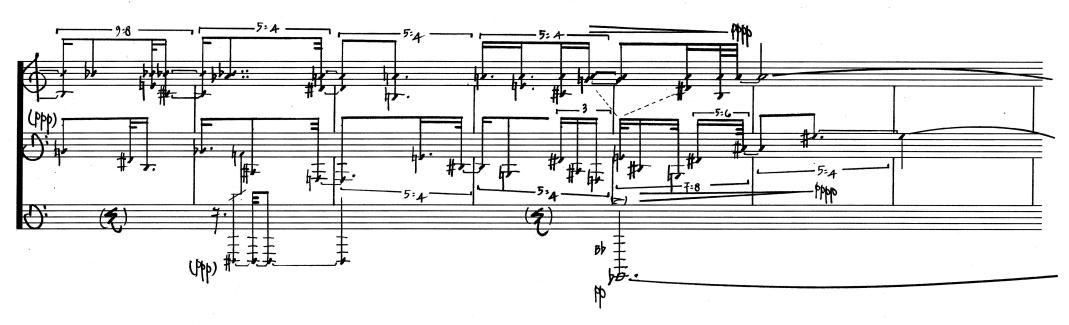


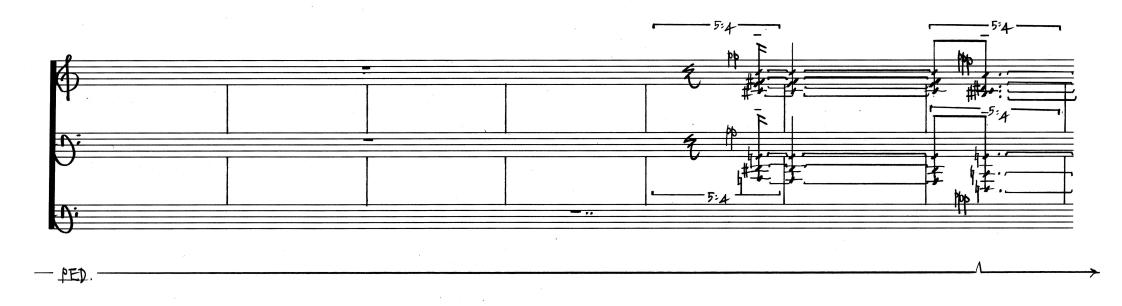


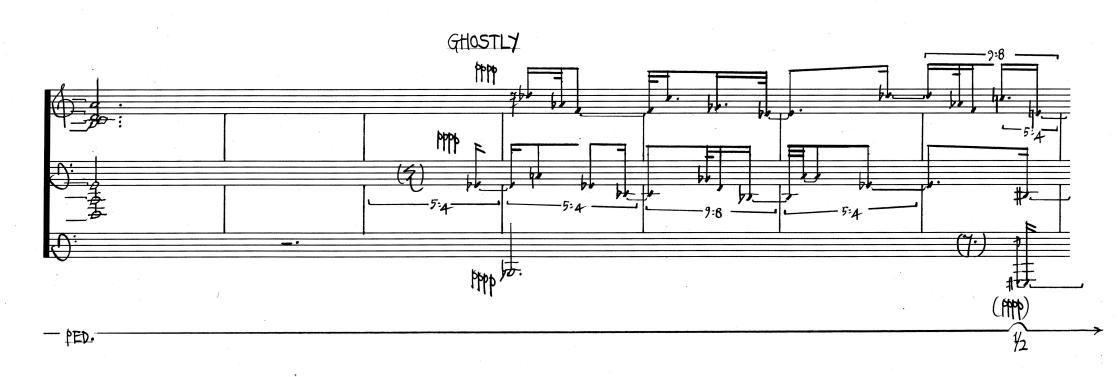


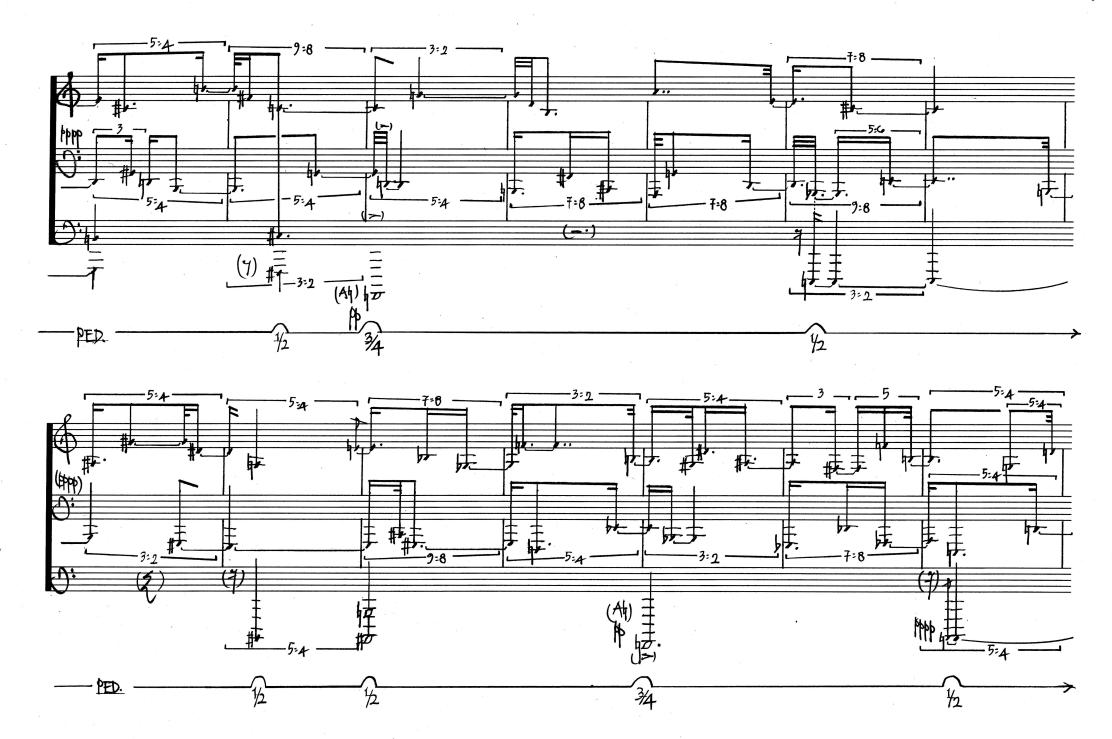


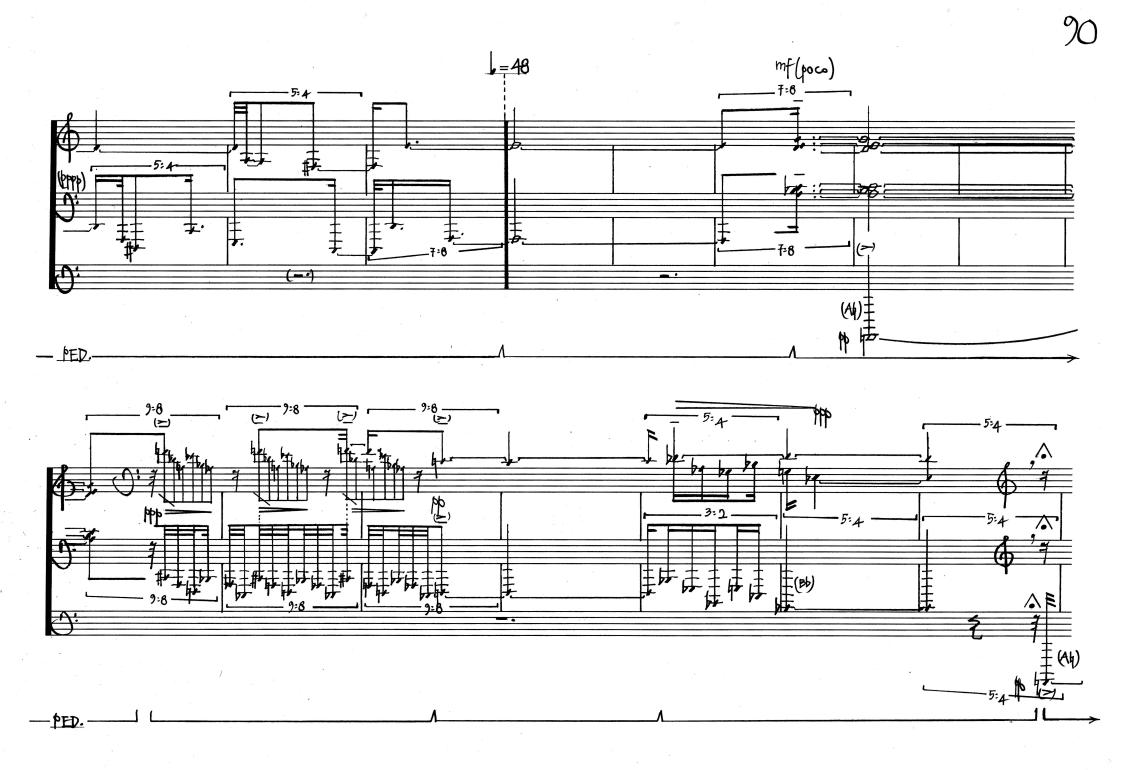


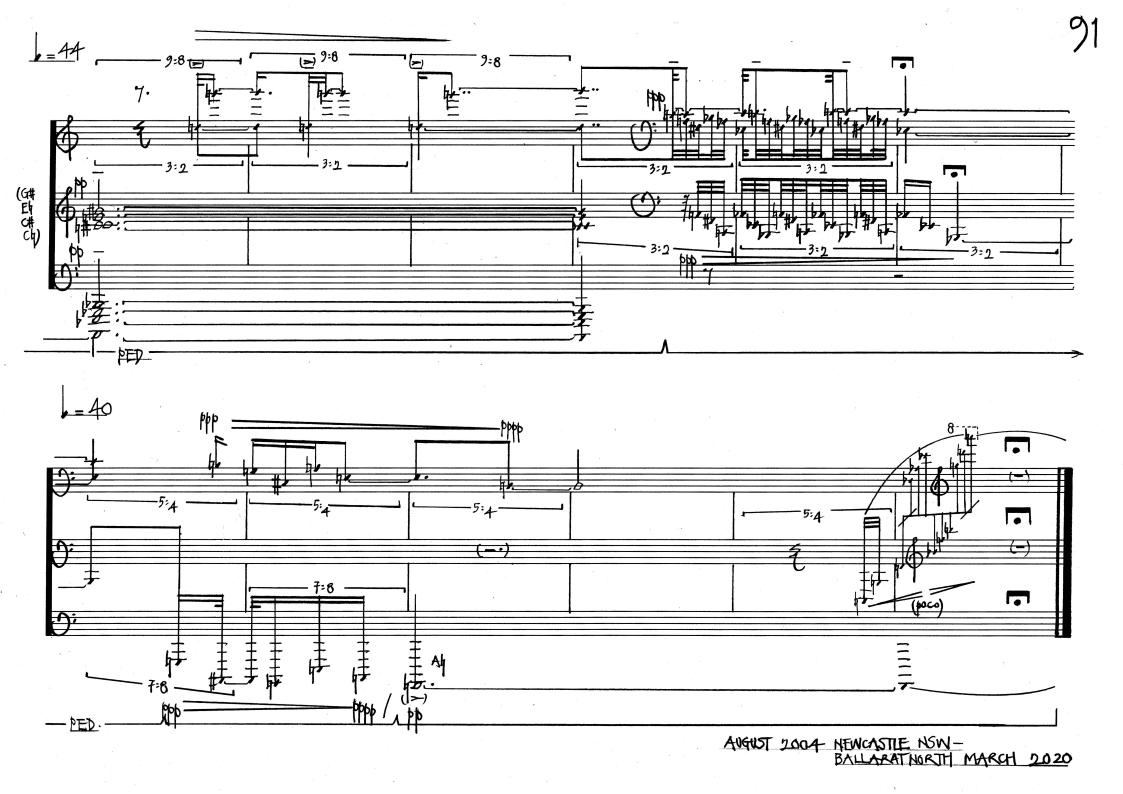












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