# vagantes

for piano

Chris Dench

# v a g a n t e s

(2024)

## *elegiæ* for piano

for James Iman & Kate Sullivan

### I

water, drawn from a quiet sea

—[Cato]... uses it in his recipe for Coan wine, which begins by drawing water from a quiet sea on a day when there shall be no wind
Helen Waddell, *Mediaeval Latin Lyrics*, 296.

### II

wandering on long roads, companionless

—[of Dido] the pitiful sorrowful dreaming in Virgil's loveliest lines of herself always alone, always abandoned, wandering on long roads companionless
Helen Waddell, *the Wandering Scholars*, xxvii.

### III

a familiar ghost, at home among the olive trees

—Helen Waddell on Sidonius Apollinaris spying Petronius Arbiter in Marseilles, three centuries after his death
*Mediaeval Latin Lyrics*, 299.

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Ordo noster prohibet / matutinas plane
sunt quedam phantasmata / que vagantur mane,
per que nobis veniunt / visiones vane;
sed qui tunc surrexerit / non est mentis sane...
—*Carmina Burana* #193

A *Vagus*, or Wandering Scholar, "shall never be up in time for matins, for there are *phantasmata* abroad in the early morning, which is the reason why early risers are never quite sane".
—*The Wandering Scholars*, 197

These three movements may be performed separately (but see below)

James Iman has exclusivity on performances of this work for three years from the date of completion — 13 July 2025

**duration: ~12 + ~24 + ~12 minutes**

# Program note:

A *Vagus*, or Wandering Scholar, "shall never be up in time for matins, for there are *phantasmata* abroad in the early morning, which is the reason why early risers are never quite sane". —Helen Waddell, *The Wandering Scholars*, 197

I had wanted, for decades, to write pieces based on Helen Waddell's two books *Mediaeval Latin Lyrics* (1929) and *the Wandering Scholars* (1927). The former is one of the first books I ever properly read – I wrote a piece using an Abelard text I found in it (which I now know to be rather famous) when I was in my teens – and the latter is, simply, one of my primary comfort reads. Strictly speaking, the three brief excerpts that I have chosen to illuminate are not about the *clerici vagantes*, the Wandering Scholars or Goliards, but they do fit the theme of 'wanderings'/*vagantes*. The first piece derives from Cato the Elder (*de Agri Cultura*) who was writing in the second century BCE, and the second piece from an episode in Vergil's *Aeneid*, Book IV. The third piece refers to the ghost of the pagan Petronius Arbiter, who lived under Nero, haunting Sidonius Apollinaris, a Gallo-Roman fifth century bishop, in a Marseille garden, as mentioned in one of Sidonius' letters.

Despite my often designating the three **vagantes** sections as *pieces*, in their writing I treated them as *Chapters* from one integrated arc – however discontinuous – and although these *Chapters* may be performed alone, they work best heard contiguously.

As is appropriate for a piece about "a quiet sea", **vagantes I** does not have a strong sense of direction. The many cells that make up its architecture do not cohere very tightly, and the gentle tidal in-and-out that provides what there is of structure is intendedly meant to erode any real sense of location in the music. It is, quite deliberately, timeless, and eventually quietly forgets itself.

**Vagantes II** is also intentionally short on any sense of global structure, but achieved in a quite different fashion. Where **vagantes I** has a very tight, but impalpable, architecture, **II** eschews any kind of large-scale formal map or logic whatsoever, by allowing the player to choose the route they take through the 26 *Paragraphs*; all but the first and last are unordered. The intended effect of this structural potentiality (~6.2 x $10^{23}$ alternative routes!) is to offer a meandering comparable to the "wandering on long roads companionless" of Dido (yes, the *Dido* of Purcell). And of course the pianist is themself companionless, carrying a more than usual share of the musical proceedings.

How does one depict a ghost in sound? In **vagantes III** I have attempted to make Petronius spectral through erasure. The material that constitutes Petronius' presence in the music is slowly eroded to the point where it no longer has any definition, as if the ghost dissolves before our ears.

These three-pieces-in-one are essentially bucolic, that is, they have to do with things pastoral and archaic. They are also, by mood as much as genre, elegies. In keeping with the lines from the *Carmina Burana* above, the entire arch was written mainly overnight.

And, of course, **vagantes** is my *Gaspard* – intentionally so; it would be disingenuous to pretend otherwise …although **vagantes II** likely has more in common with *les Heures Persanes* or the *Musica Callada* than *le gibet*.

# Performance notes:

- Although this piece subdivides into three distinct Chapters, they are not to be considered as separate works, and although they may be performed individually, it should be made clear that such performances are excerpts. In a complete performance players should pause between the Chapters, but not allow the momentum to cease.

- In **II**, the material is modular; each lettered cell is a separate Paragraph consisting of one or more pages. When moving from Paragraph to Paragraph, do not pause; treat it as a normal page-turn. Begin always with **A**, and end always with **Z**—in between, the cells may be played in any order selected by the performer. Each cell *must* be played, and once only. It is suggested that the pianist choose several specific routes through the material and alternate between them for different performances, but making a new choice every time, or a single unchanging choice is just as valid. There are, after all, 24! (~6.2 x $10^{23}$) routes through Paragraphs **B** to **X**. In **II** each new Paragraph should be performed with an abrupt change of tempo, irrespective of the modifications in the previous Paragraph. Unless, of course, the two Paragraphs chosen to be contiguous have the same tempo instruction.

- Accidentals only apply to the notes they immediately precede, except in strings of repeated notes where they continue until a new pitch is introduced.

- In this score:

  **Accel**(erando), sometimes with an upward arrow, means *gradually get faster*
  **Rall**(entando), with a downward arrow, means *gradually get slower*
  **Rit**(enuto), with a horizontal arrow, or none, means *a sudden holding back of tempo*

  All only persist as long as the extension line indicates.

- **Dynamic profile**: there are **eleven** dynamic steps in this work:

  *ppppp—pppp—ppp—pp—p—mf—f—ff—fff—ffff—fffff*

  These are rendered in the score as

  *p5—p4—p3—p2—p—mf—f—f2—f3—f4—f5*

  (Note that in **vagantes I** these are sometimes given with the number first, as 2*p*, 2*f*, etc.)

There is no *mp* dynamic; *mf* is considered to be midway between *p* and *f*. The word *poco* next to a dynamic means to understate it, and + after a dynamic means to slightly overstate it.

Dynamics should be not be treated as a simple linear *soft→loud*: they function as variations in the *local* context. A dash — after a dynamic means that it continues unchanged until contradicted.

- **Emphases** – are used to indicate either slight stresses or a hint of detaché, or both; context will be the guide. 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. Parentheses around either glyph indicate that the dynamic level is low.

- **All pedal notations are bare minima**—they show primarily where the harmony, and therefore continuity, changes. I imagine the player will pedal more frequently and subtly than I have indicated. Full pedal releases are indicated by gaps in the pedal line; all other releases are partial semi-clearances, where the resonance does not entirely stop. A bracketed pedal spike at the beginning of a line is simply a reminder that the pedal was semi-cleared at the end of the previous system. A ½ indication below a pedal spike means that the semi-clear should be shallow, that more resonance should be retained: half-release. The use of the middle pedal is flagged by circled **MP**; it is used independently of the *Ped.*, so left foot is preferable. *Una corda* is indicated by UC and a broken line indicating extension.

- A bass clef with an *8* beneath indicates that all the pitches in that stave are to be played an octave lower. This is cancelled by a normal bass clef with the word loco. Similarly a treble clef with an *8* above indicates that all the pitches in that stave are to be played an octave higher, until the loco clef.

# I water, drawn from a quiet sea

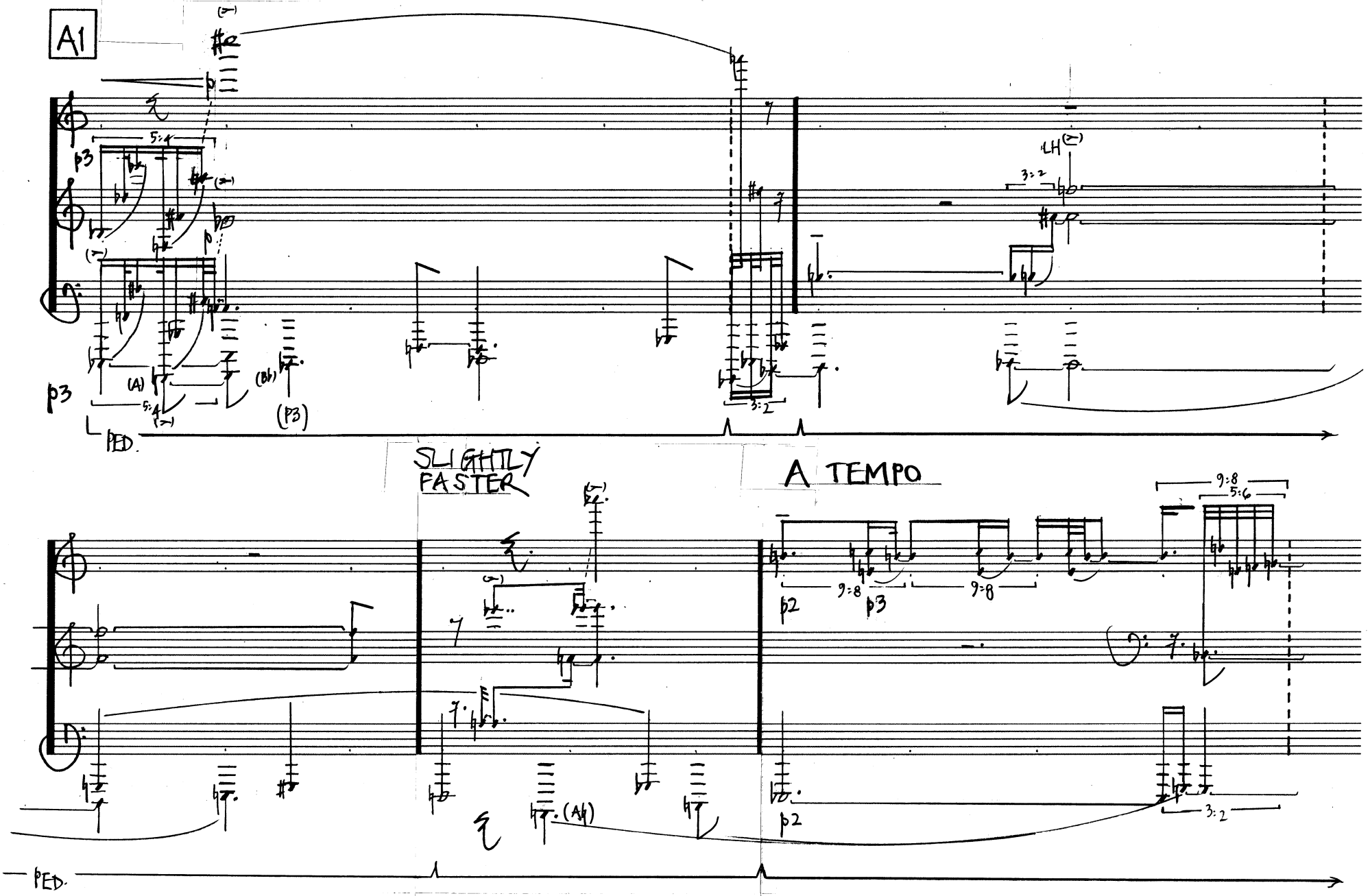
—[Cato]... uses it in his recipe for Coan wine, which begins by drawing water from a quiet sea on a day when there shall be no wind

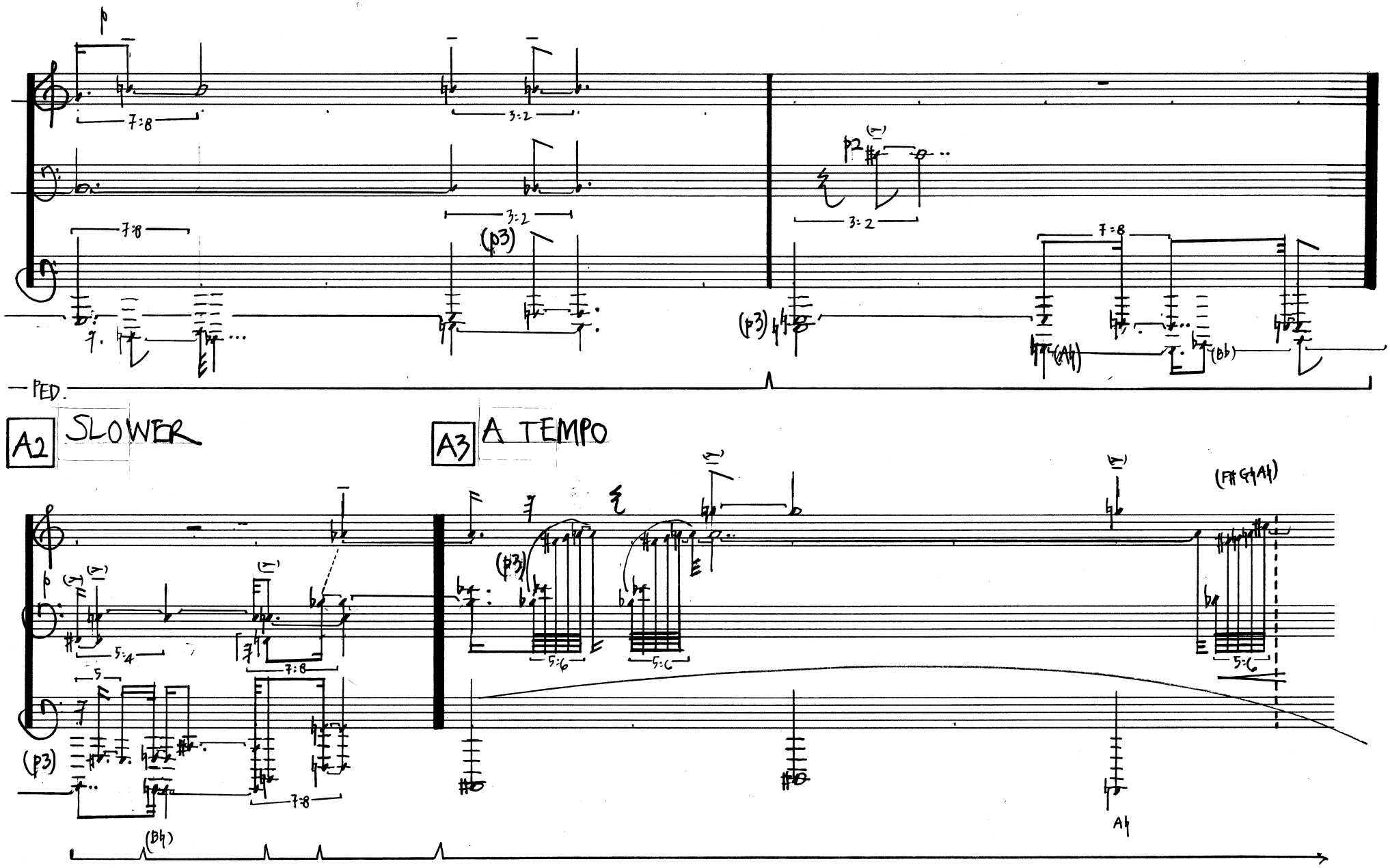
Helen Waddell, *Mediaeval Latin Lyrics*, 296.

## Pages 1-25

*in memory of Phil Lesh † 25 October 2024*

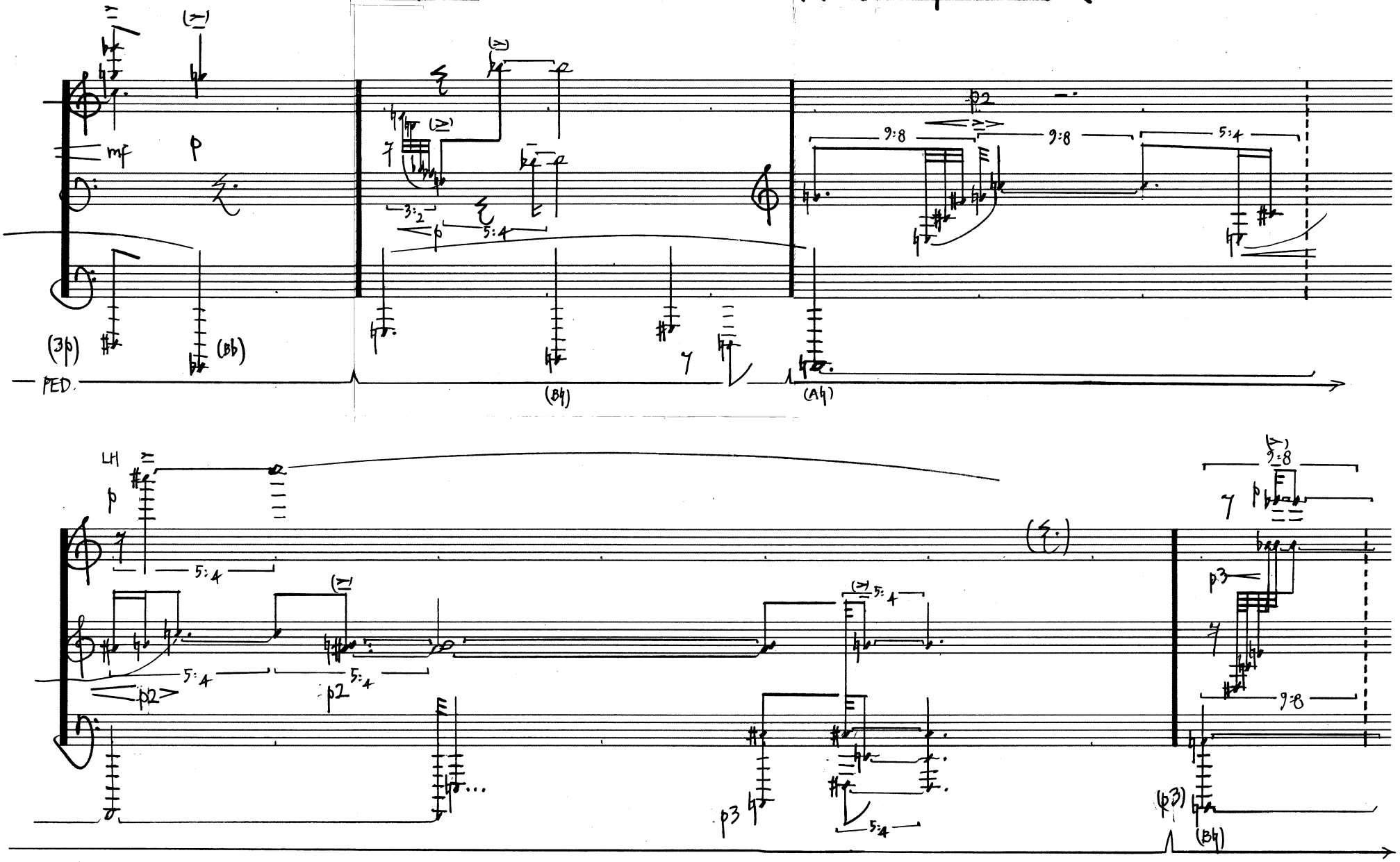
SLOWLY — WITH A CONSTANT EBB AND FLOW OF TEMPO

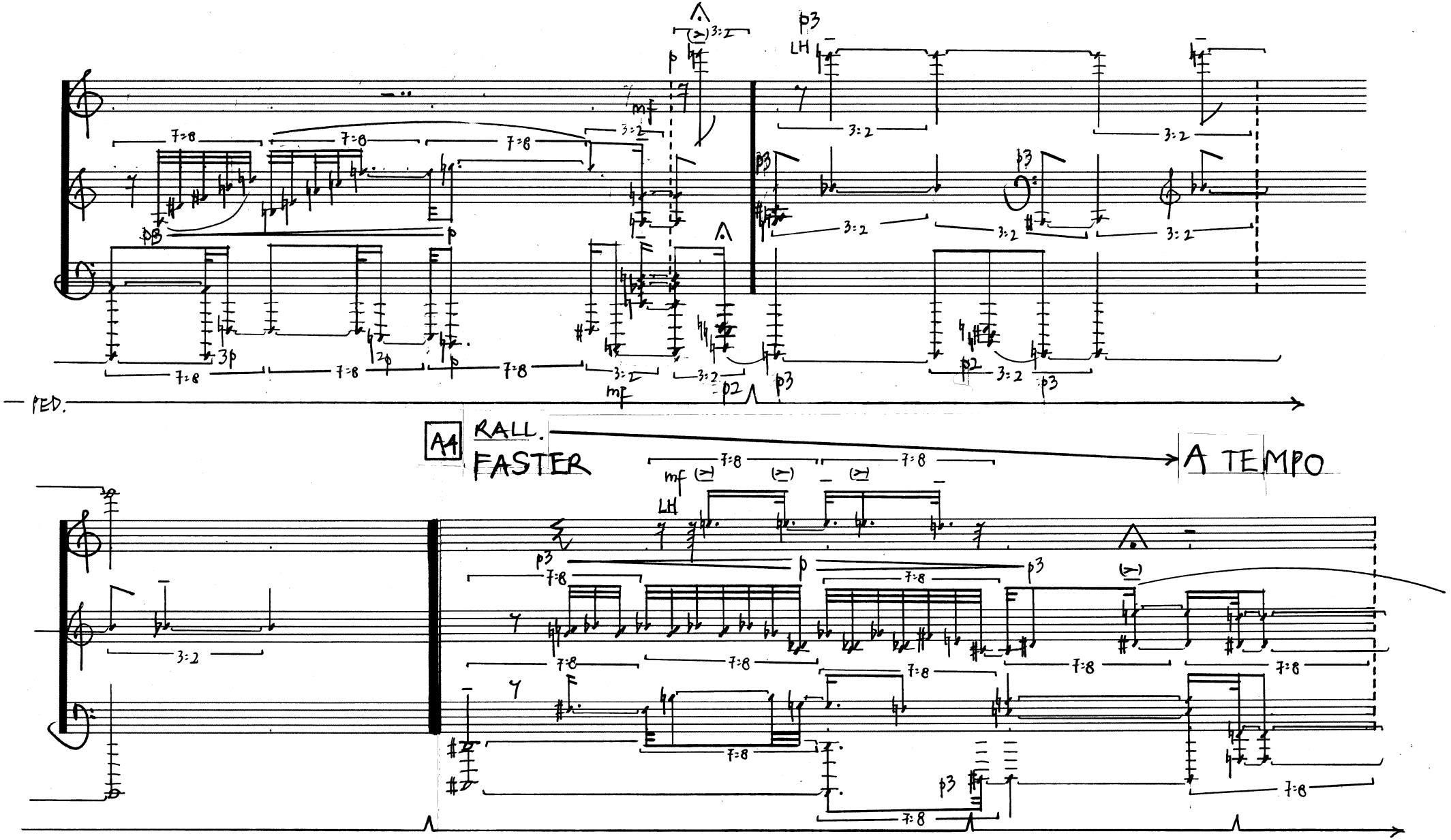



A2 SLOWER
A3 A TEMPO
PED.

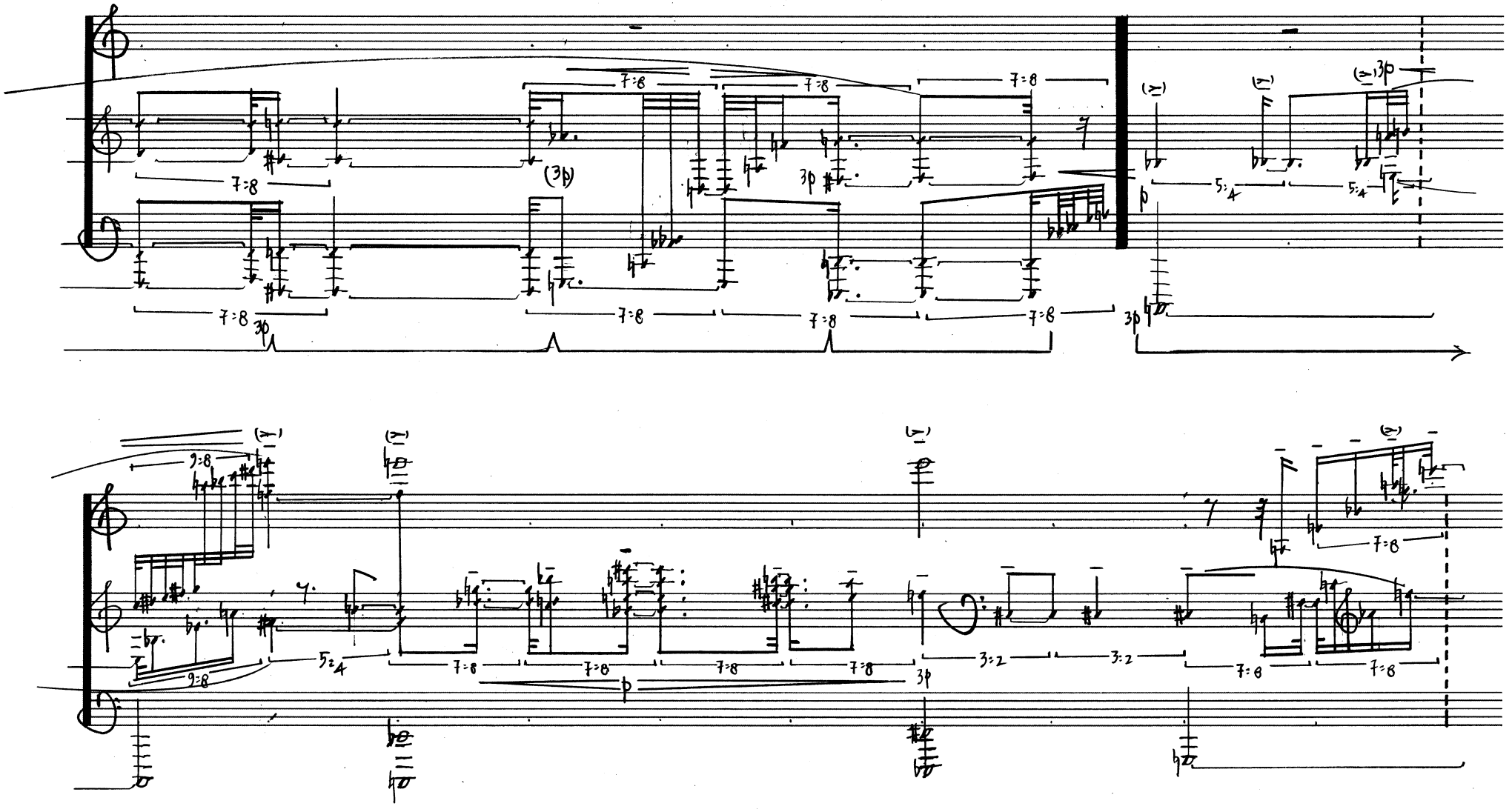
FASTER

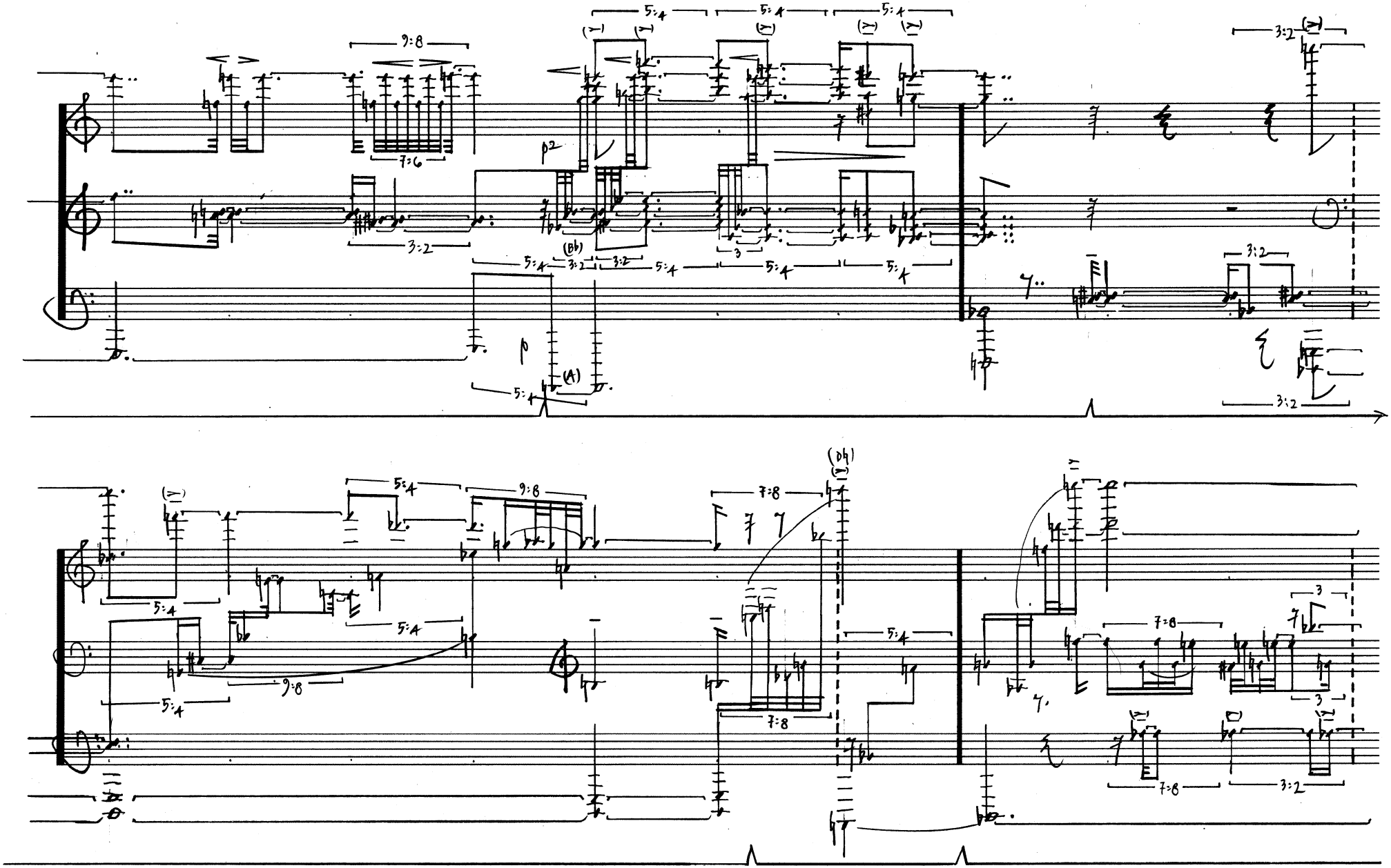
MARKEDLY SLOWER

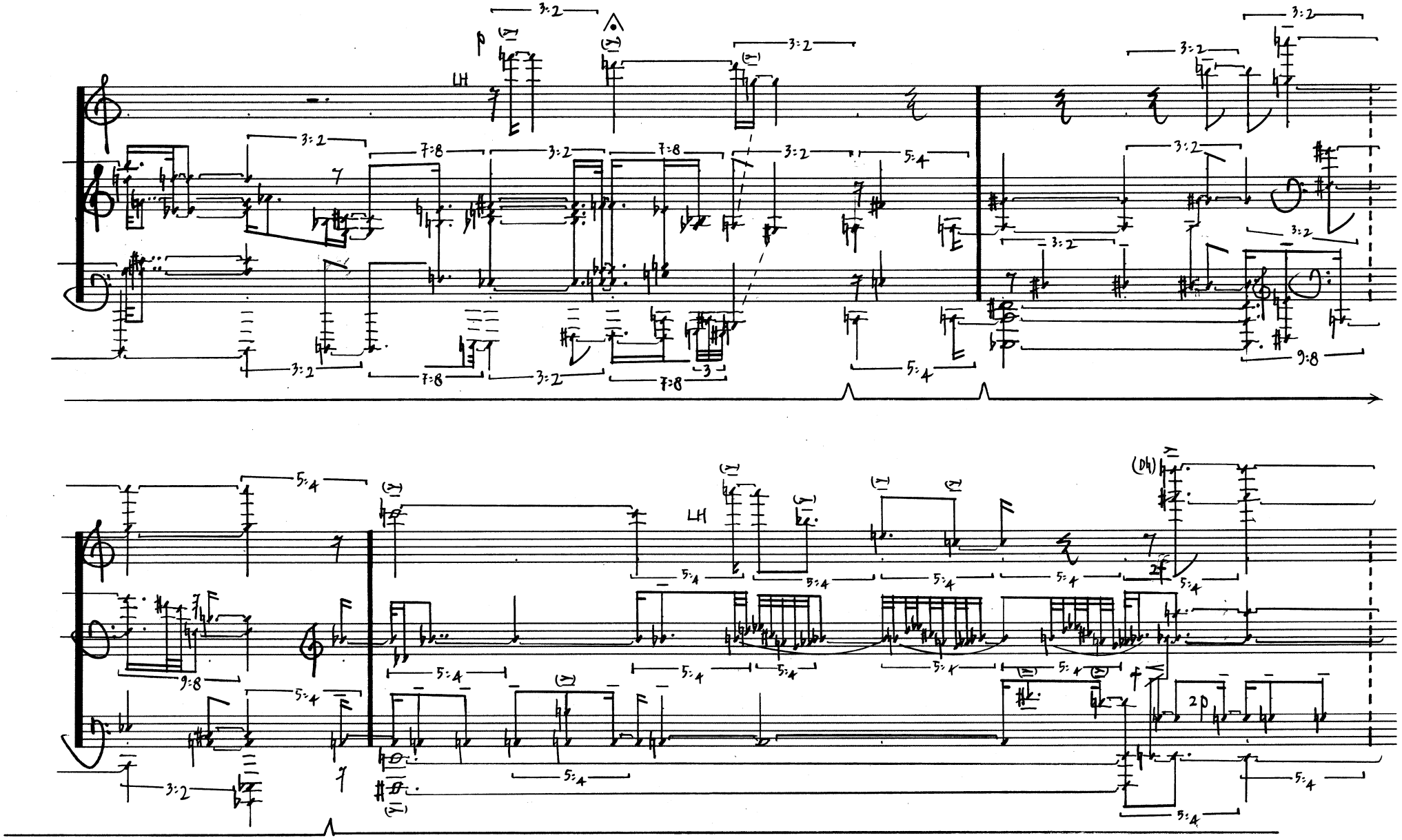



PED.
A4
RALL.
FASTER
A TEMPO

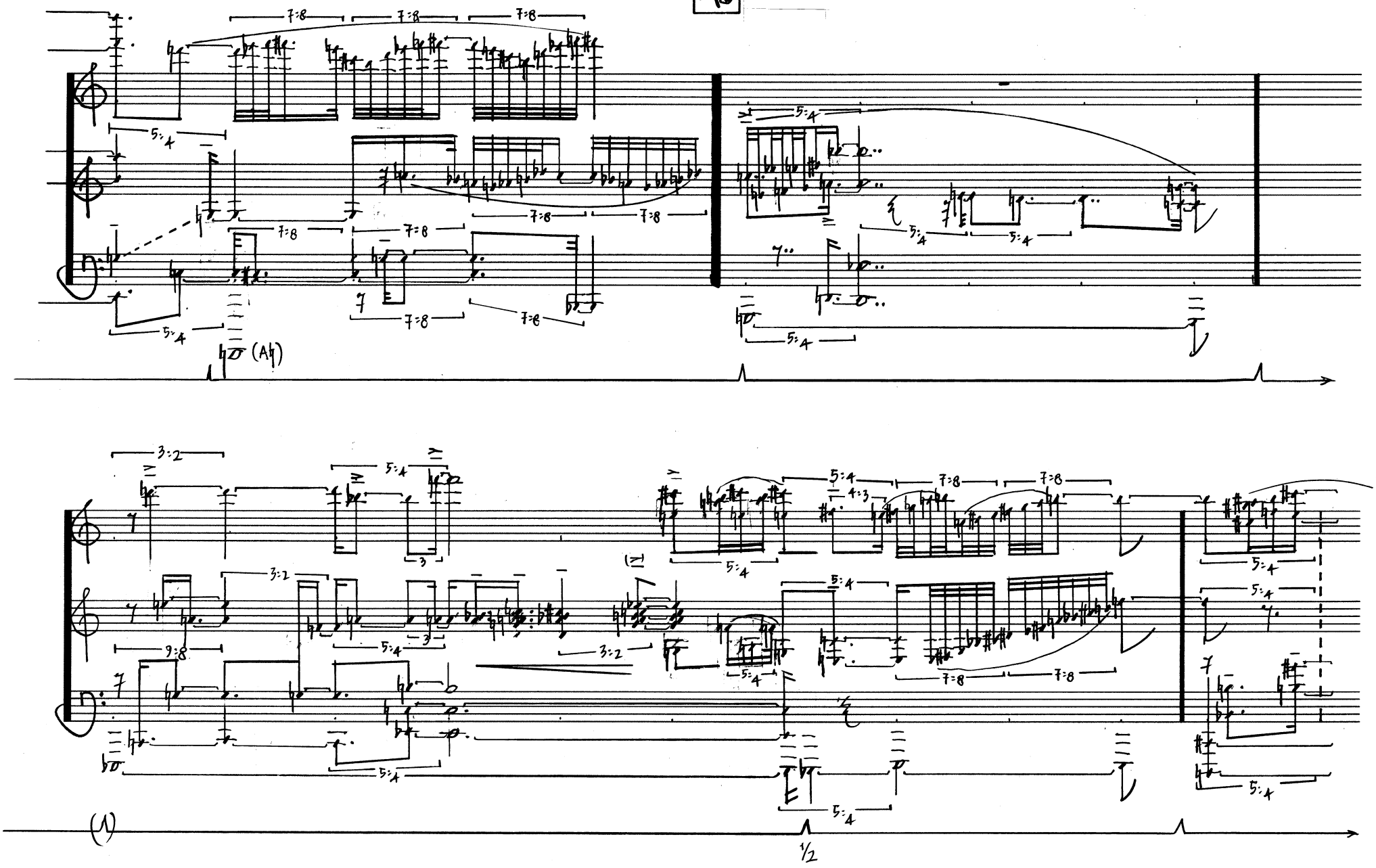
A5 DISTINCTLY FASTER



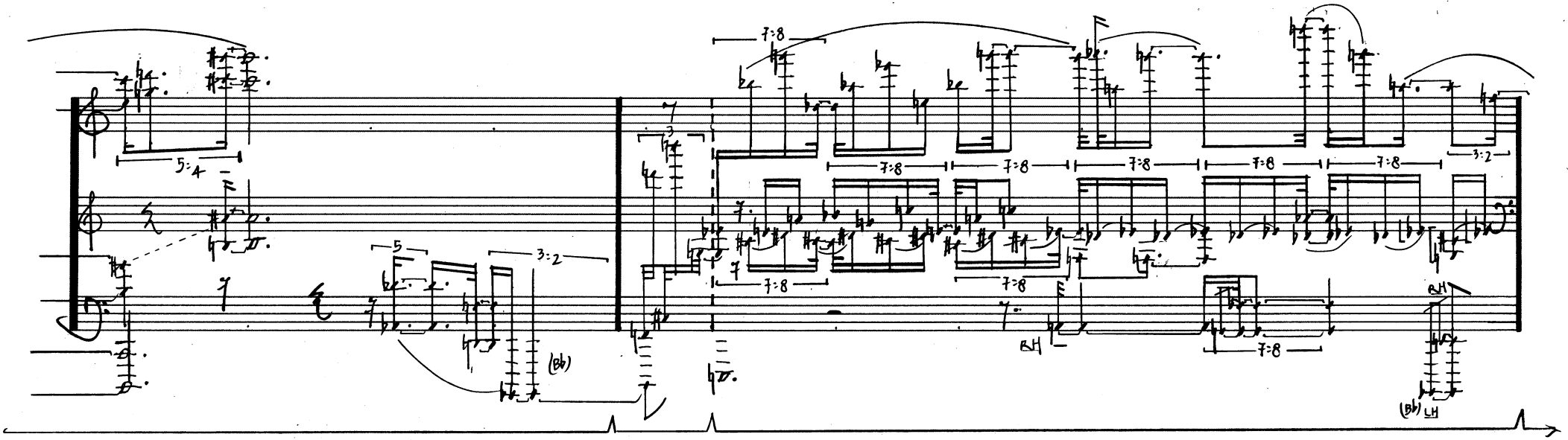

5:4
9:8
7:6
3:2
7:8
p2
(Bb)
(A)
(Ab)
3


LH
3:2
7:8
5:4
9:8
(DH)
2D

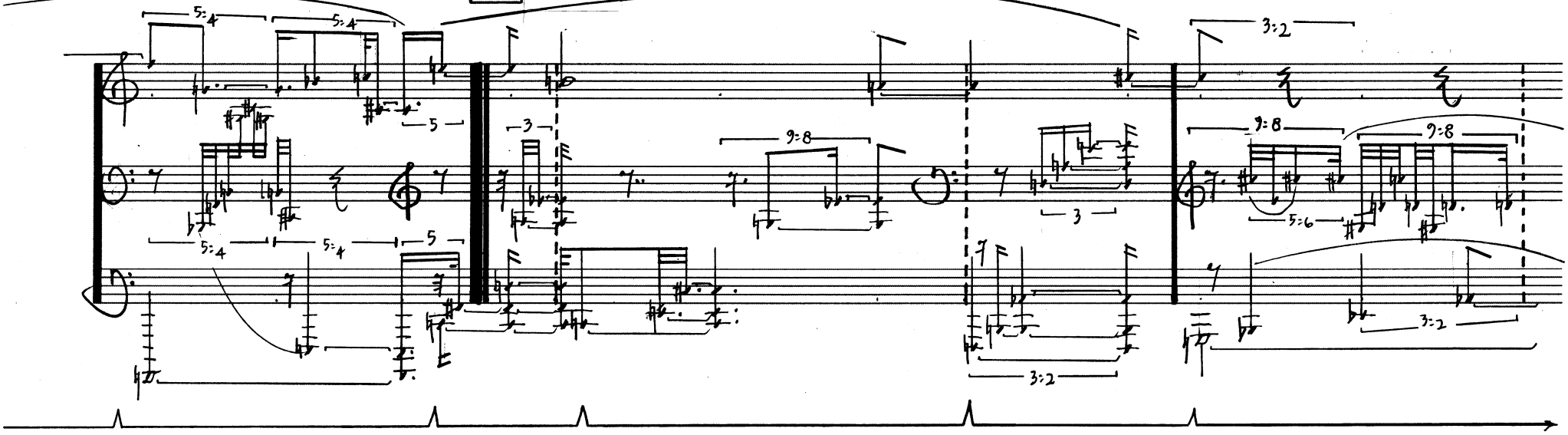
A6 SLOWER

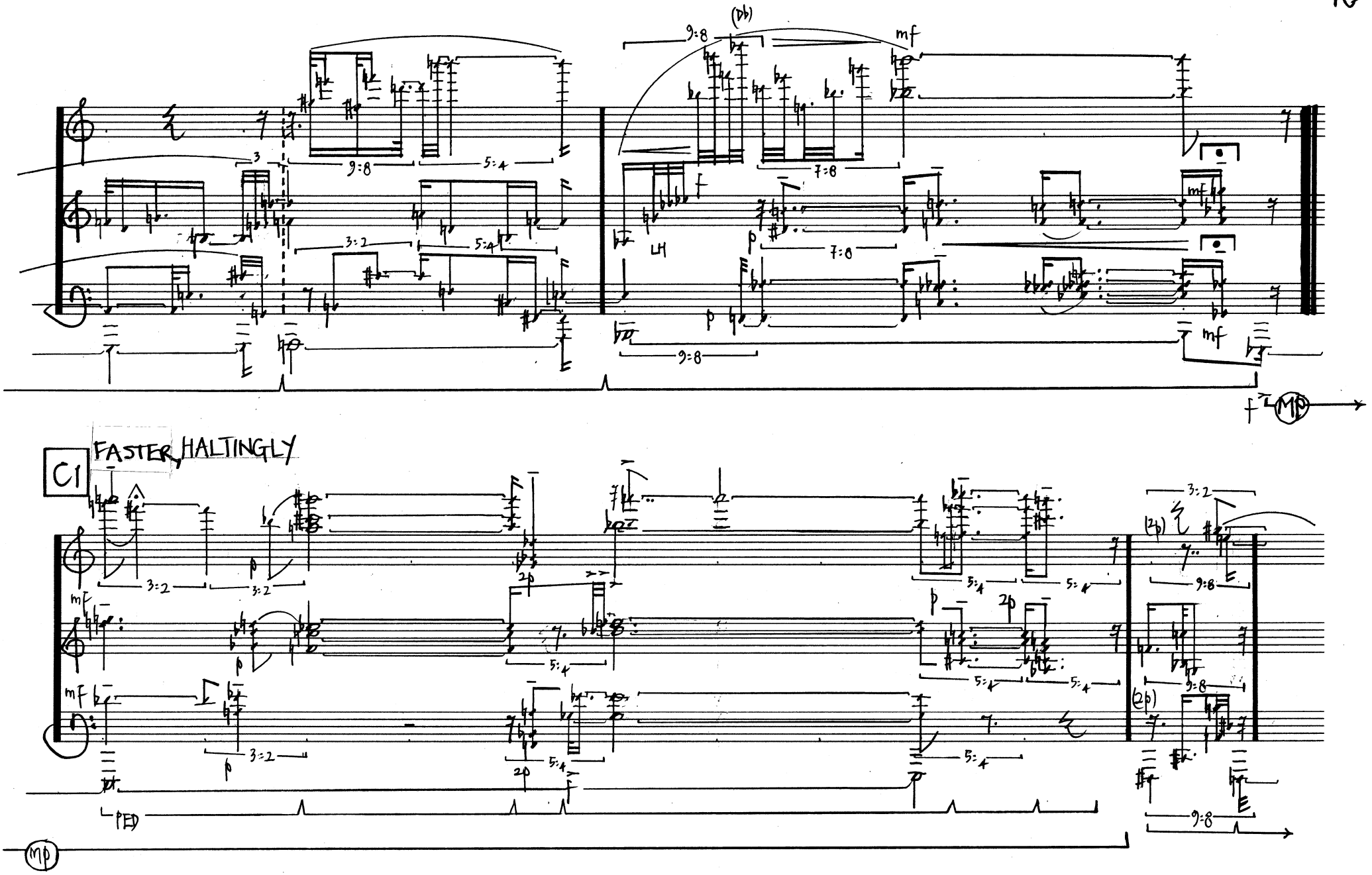


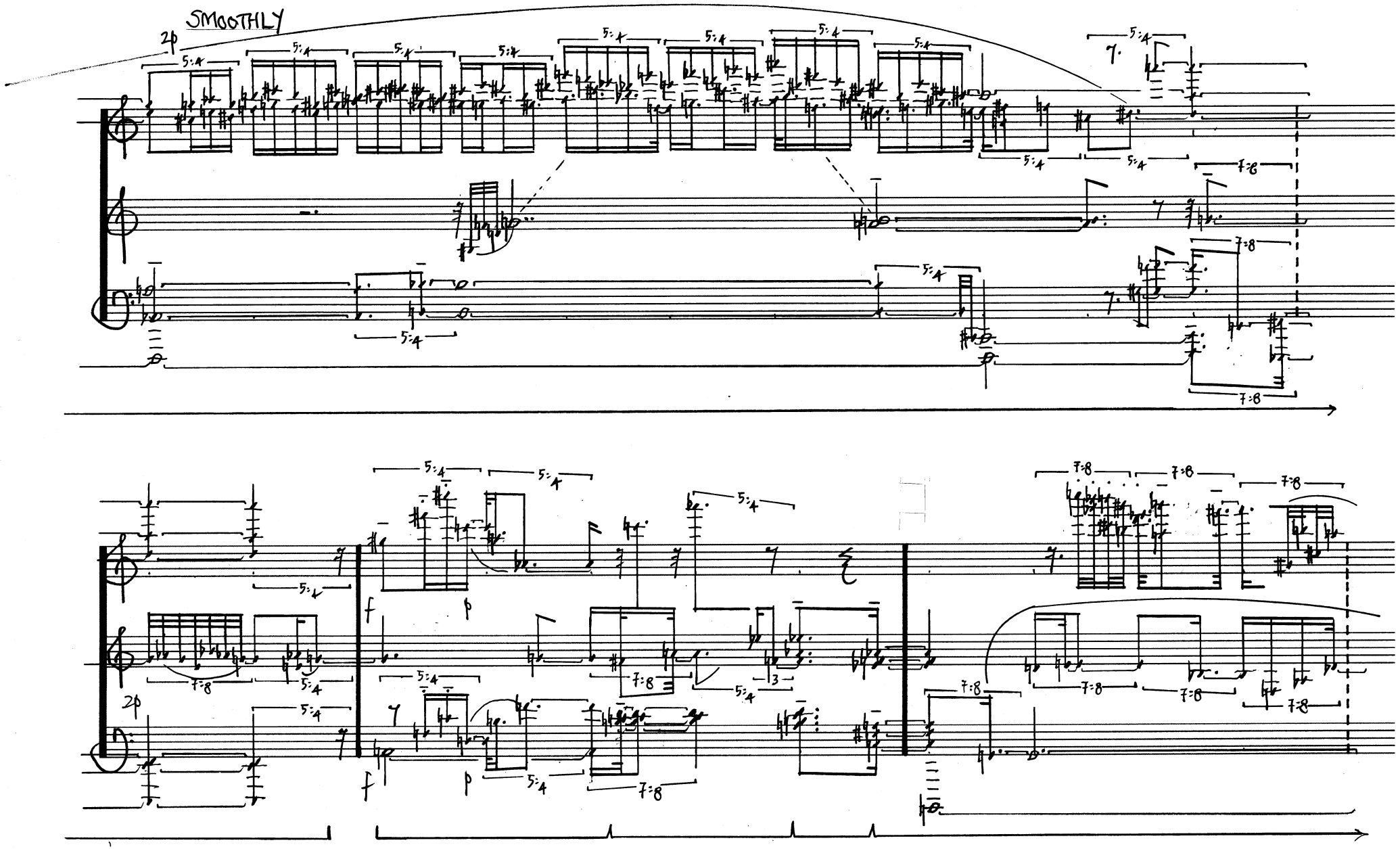
MESMERICALLY

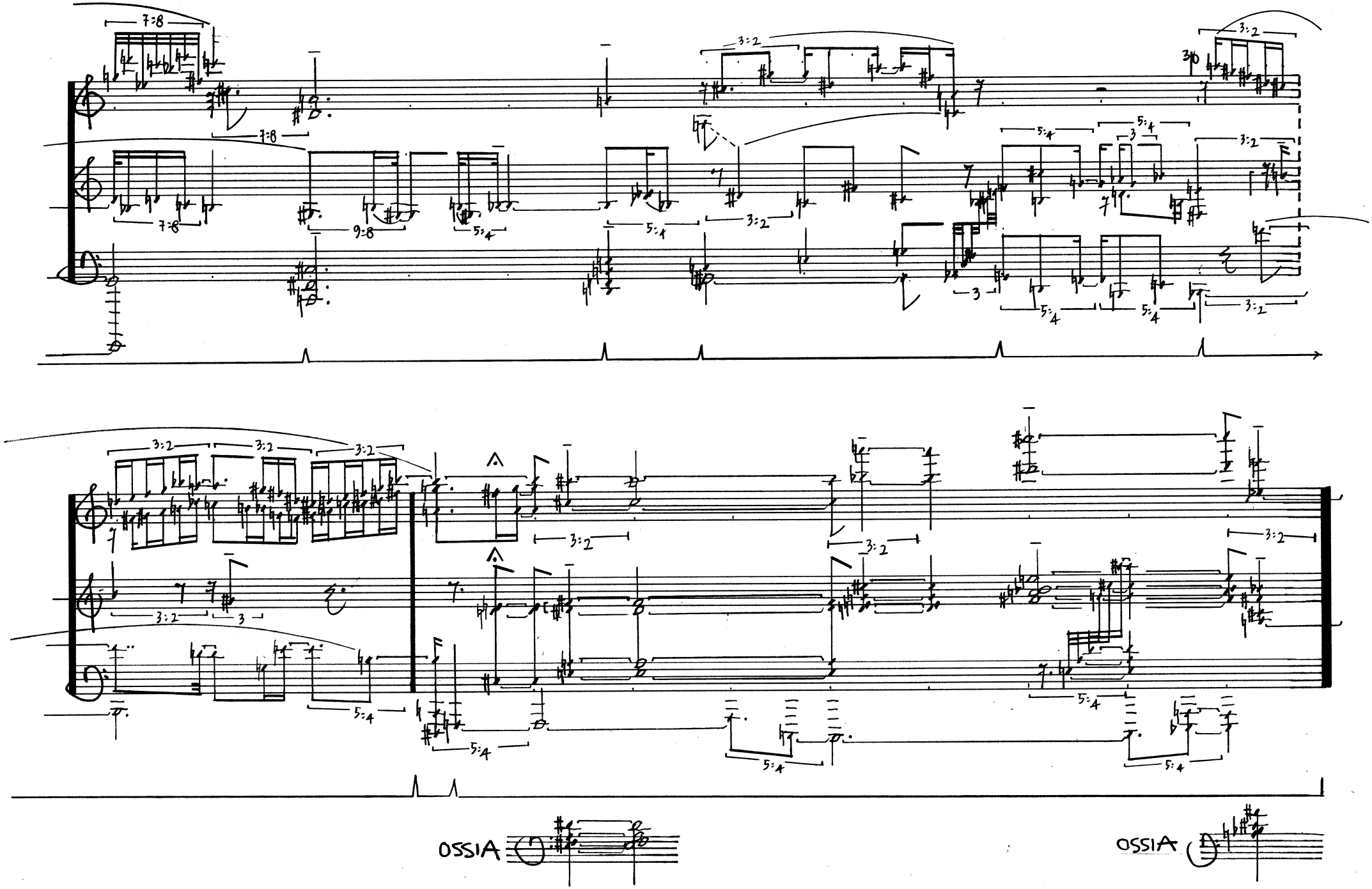



B MARKEDLY SLOWER

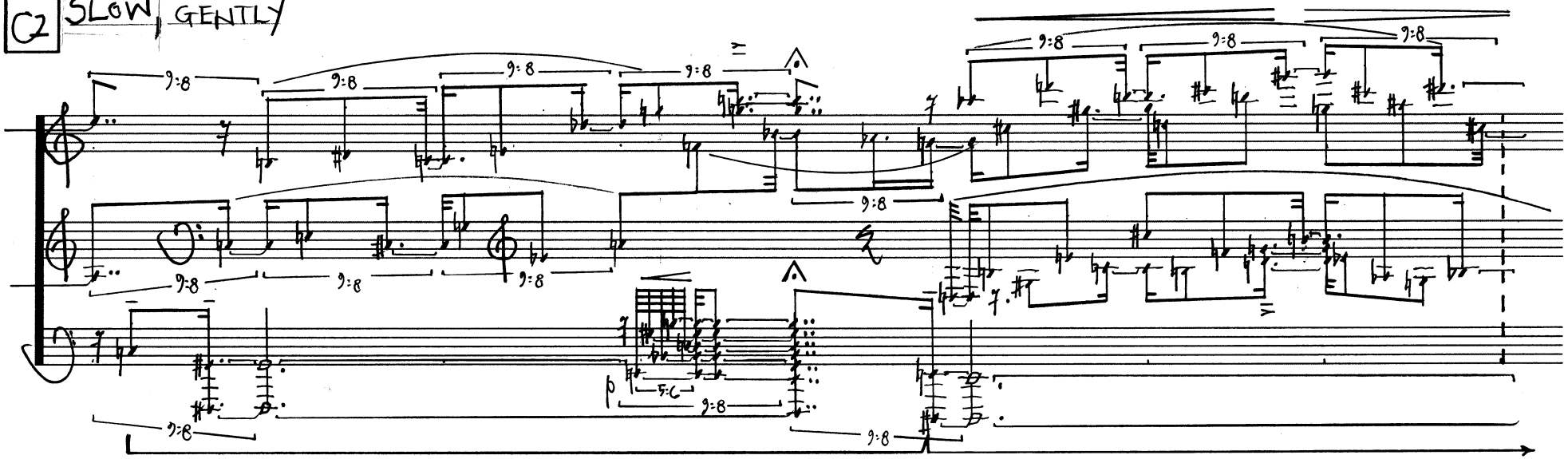



(Db)
9:8
mf
3
9:8
5:4
7:8
3:2
5:4
LH
p
7:8
mf
p
9:8
mf
f
MP
C1
FASTER, HALTINGLY
3:2
3:2
p
2p
5:4
5:4
3:2
(2p)
9:8
mf
p
5:4
p
2p
5:4
5:4
9:8
mf
3:2
p
2p
5:4
5:4
(2p)
PED
9:8
MP

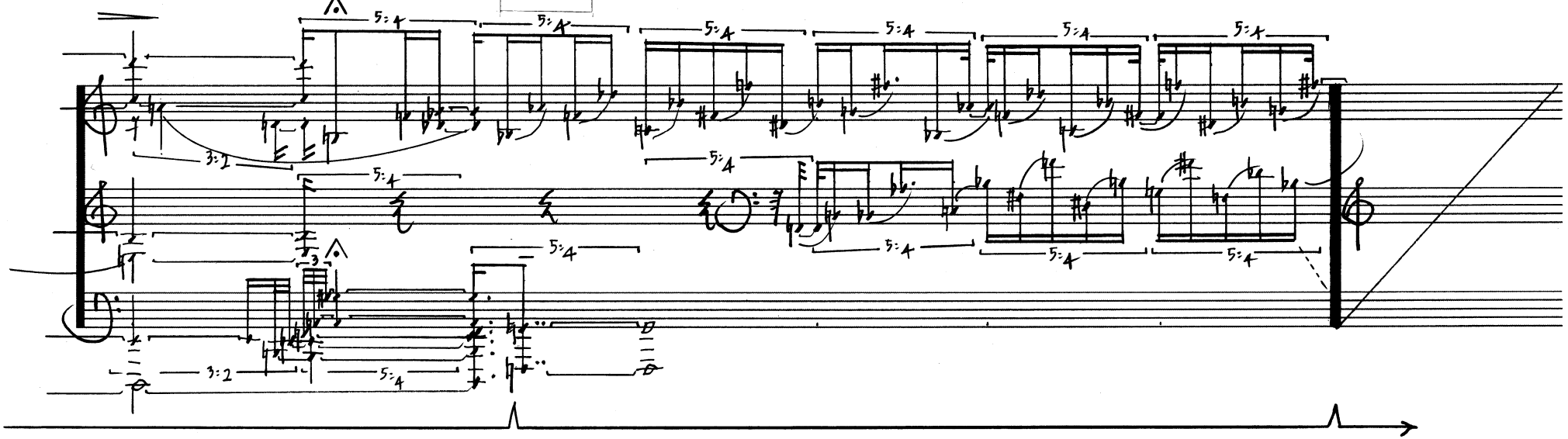

SMOOTHLY
2p
5:4
7:8
f
p

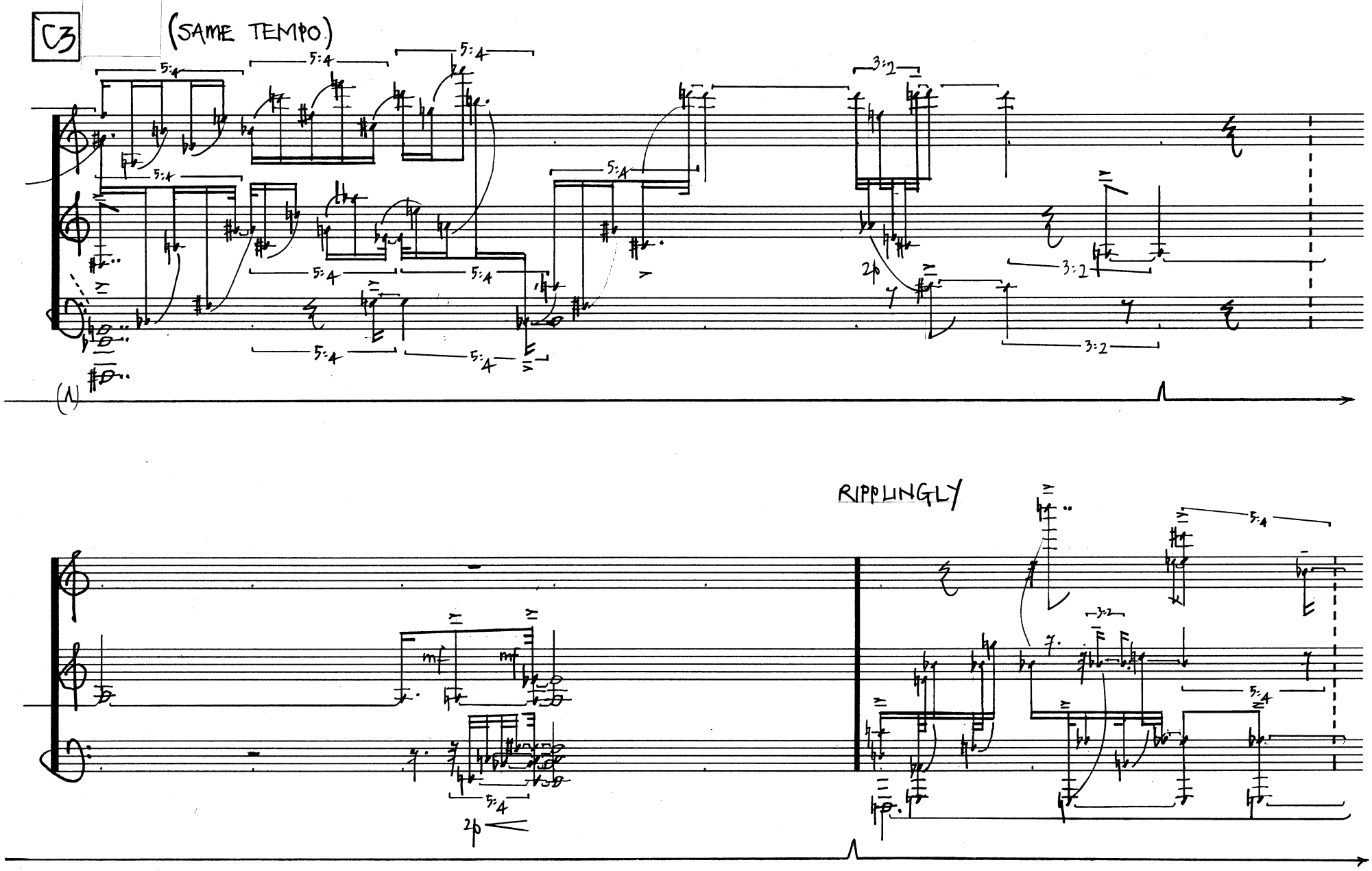

OSSIA
OSSIA

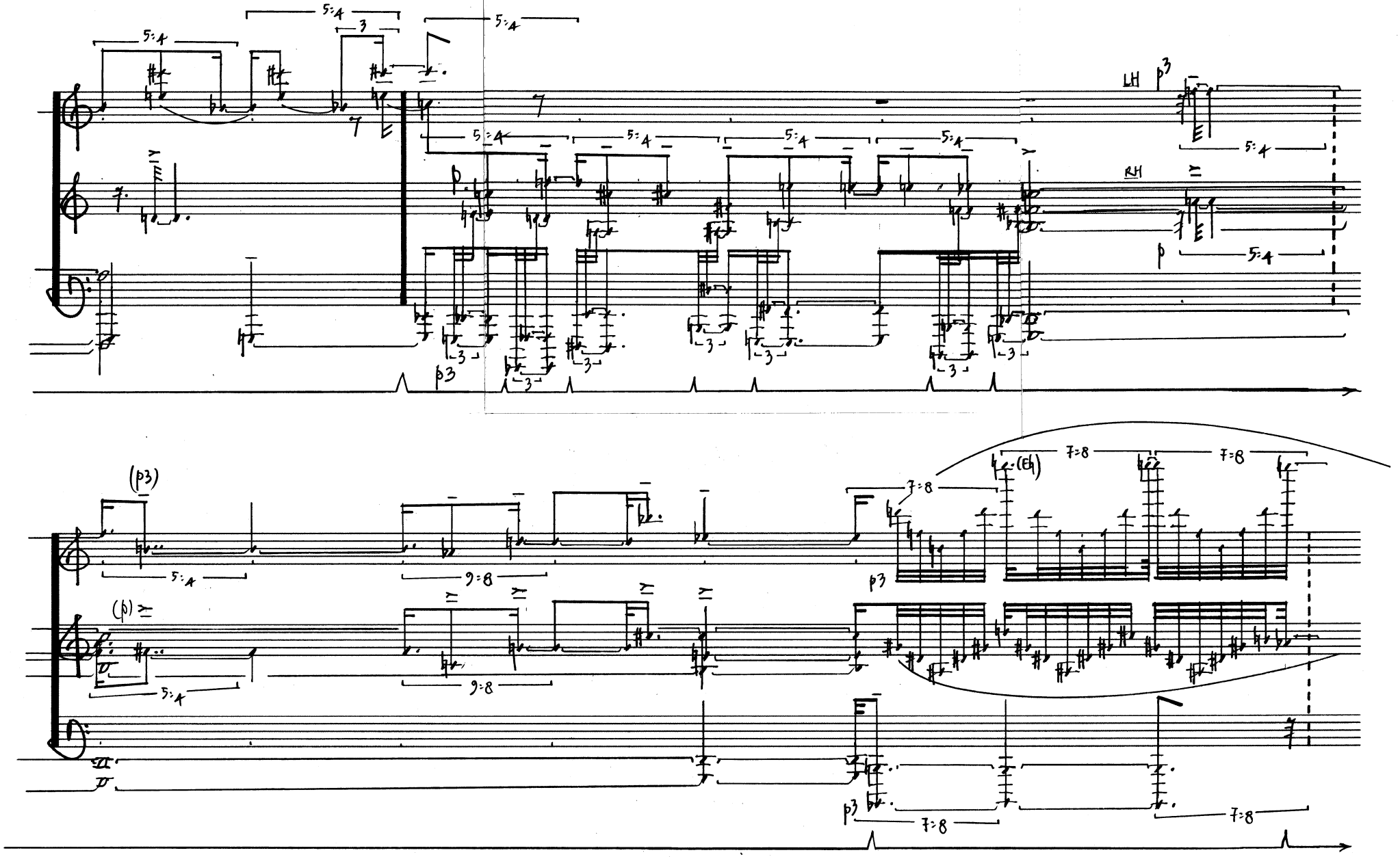
C2 SLOW, GENTLY

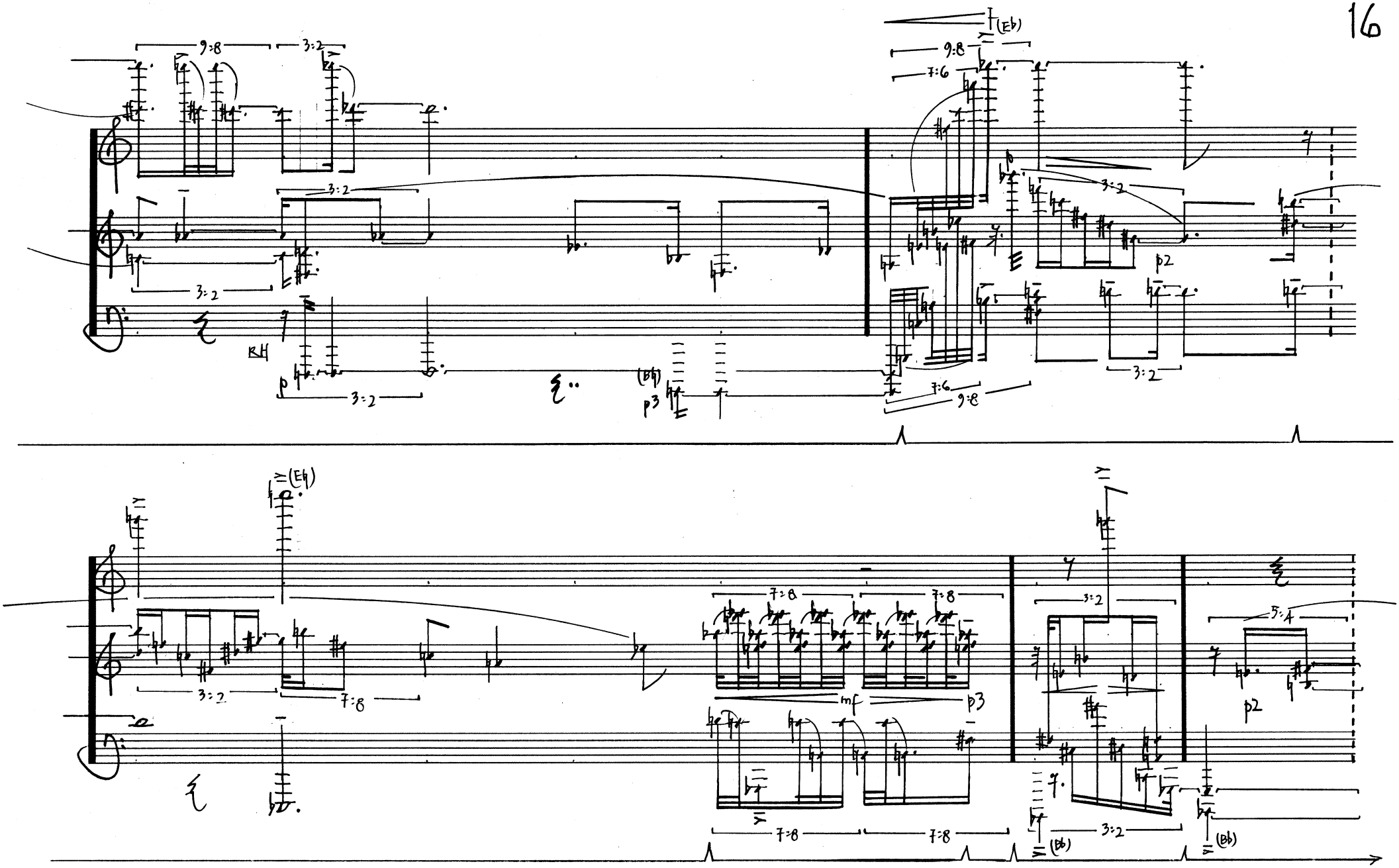


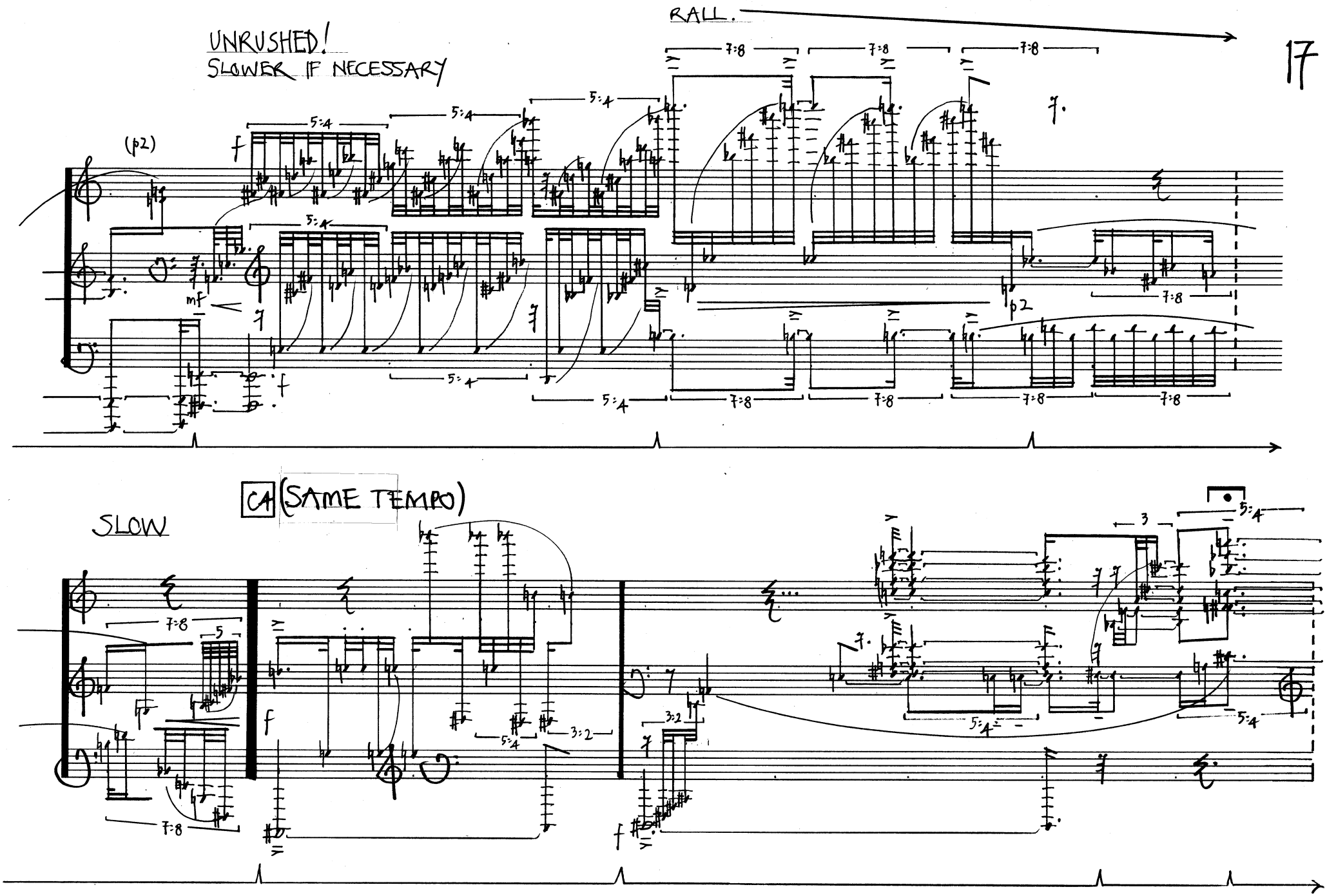

MOLTO RIT. SLOWER STILL

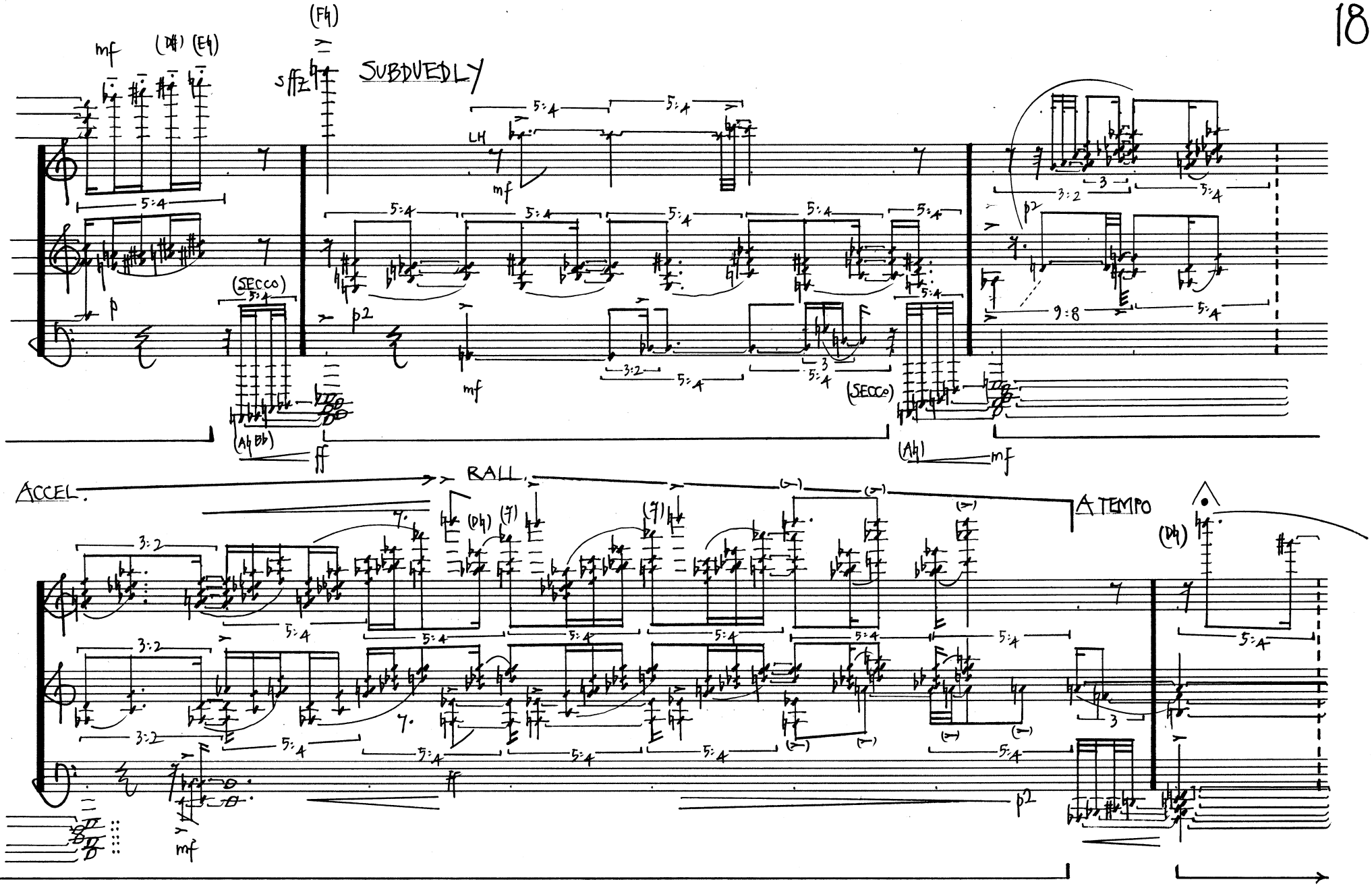



C3
(SAME TEMPO)
RIPPLINGLY

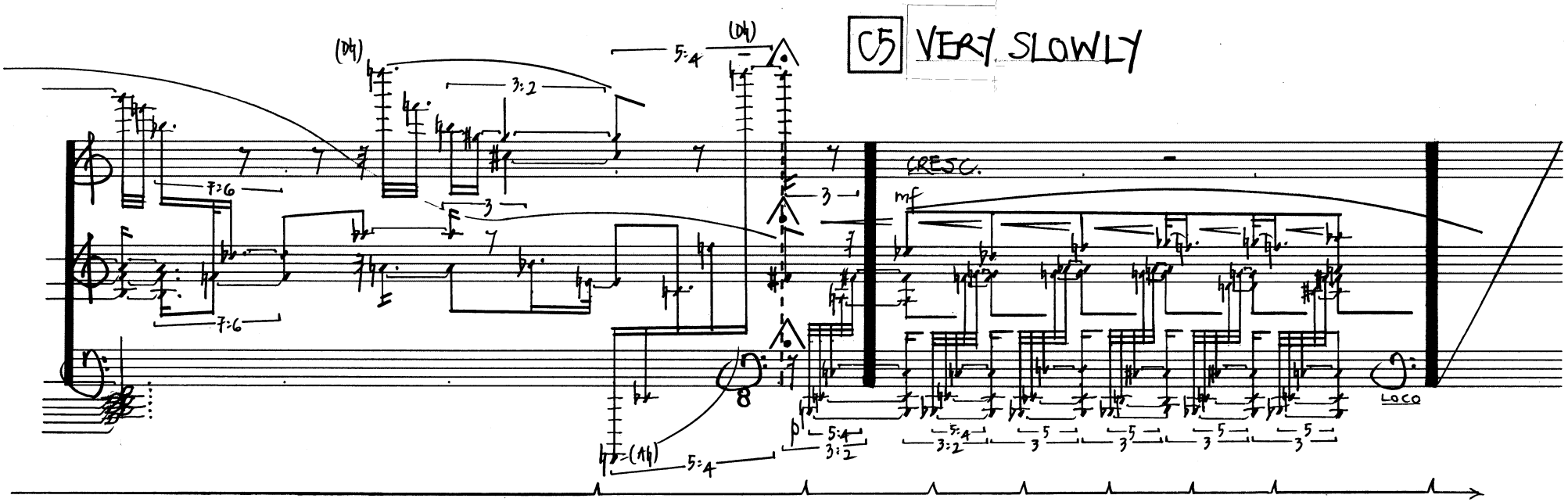

5:4
3
LH
RH
p3
p
(p3)
(p)
9:8
7:8


9:8
3:2
3:2
3:2
RH
p
3:2
(Eb)
p3
(Eb)
9:8
7:6
3:2
p2
3:2
7:6
9:8
(Eb)
3:2
7:8
7:8
mf
p3
7:8
7:8
3:2
5:4
p2
3:2
(Bb)
(Bb)

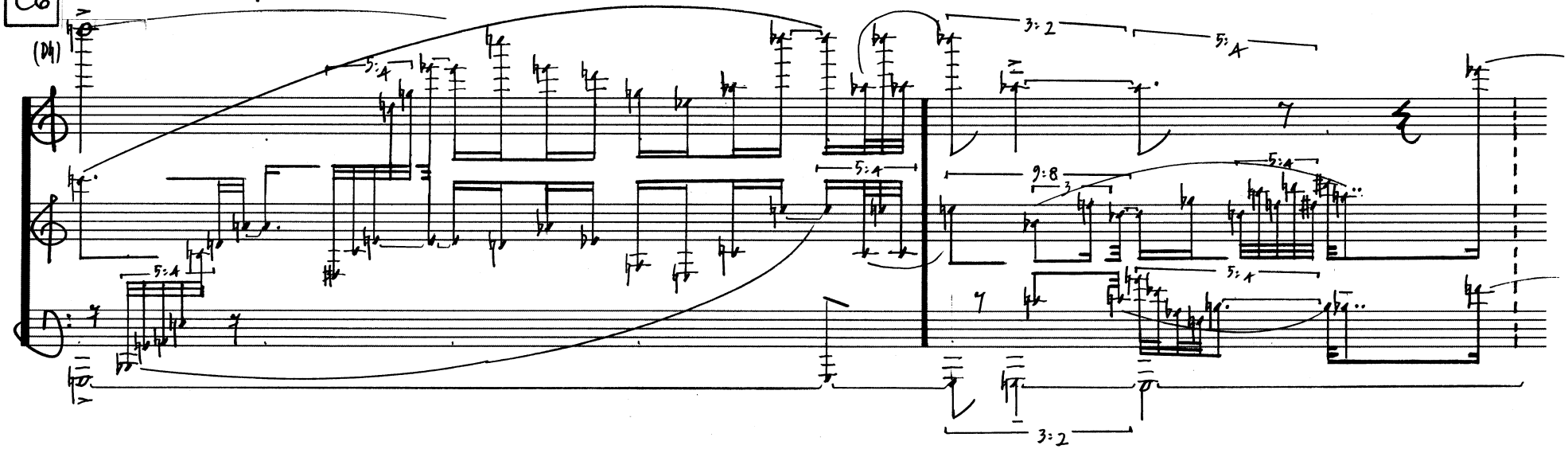

UNRUSHED!
SLOWER IF NECESSARY
RALL.
(p2)
mf
f
p2
7:8
5:4
C4 (SAME TEMPO)
SLOW
3:2
3

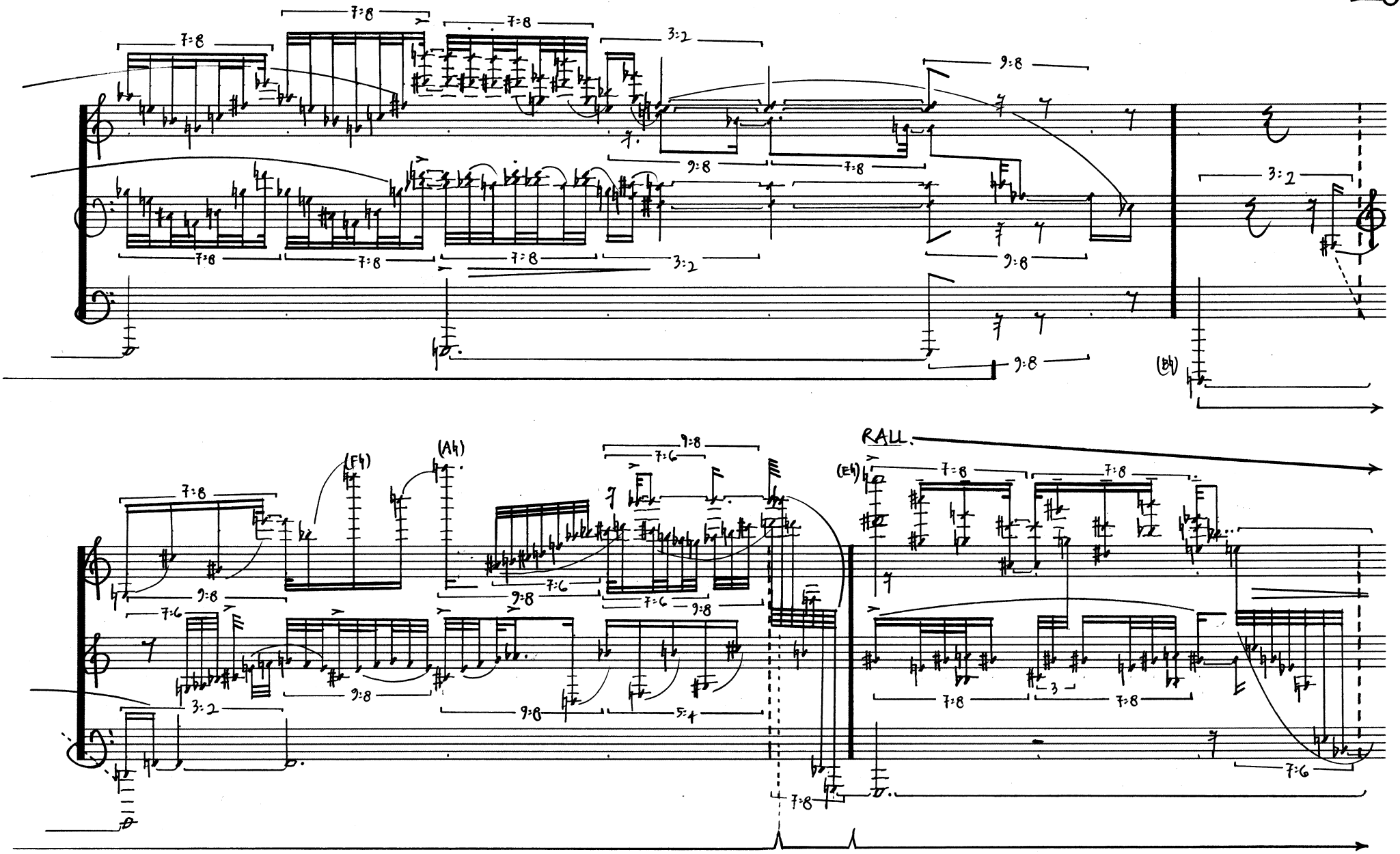

SUBDUEDLY
LH
(SECCO)
(SECCO)
ACCEL.
RALL.
A TEMPO

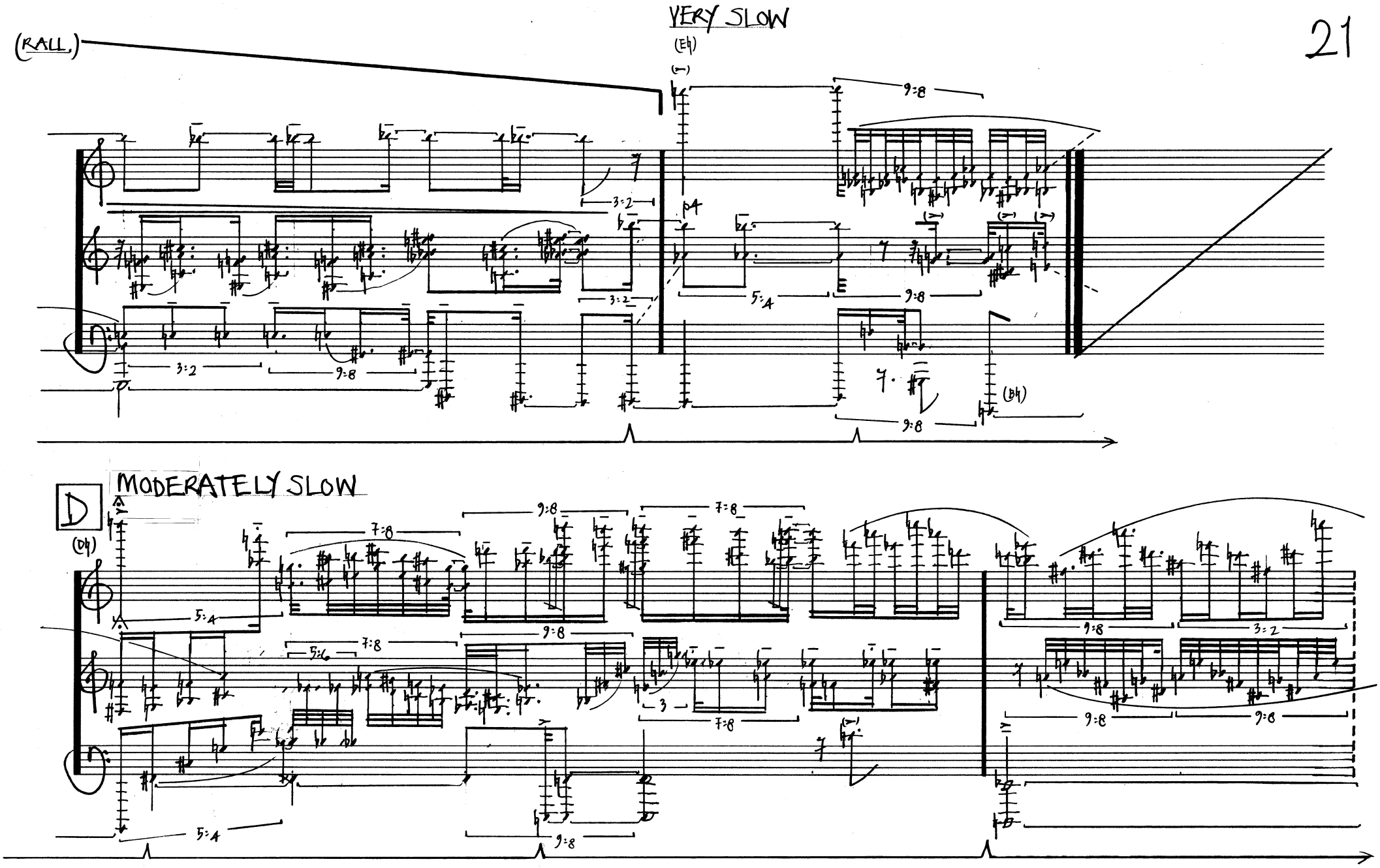
C5 VERY SLOWLY

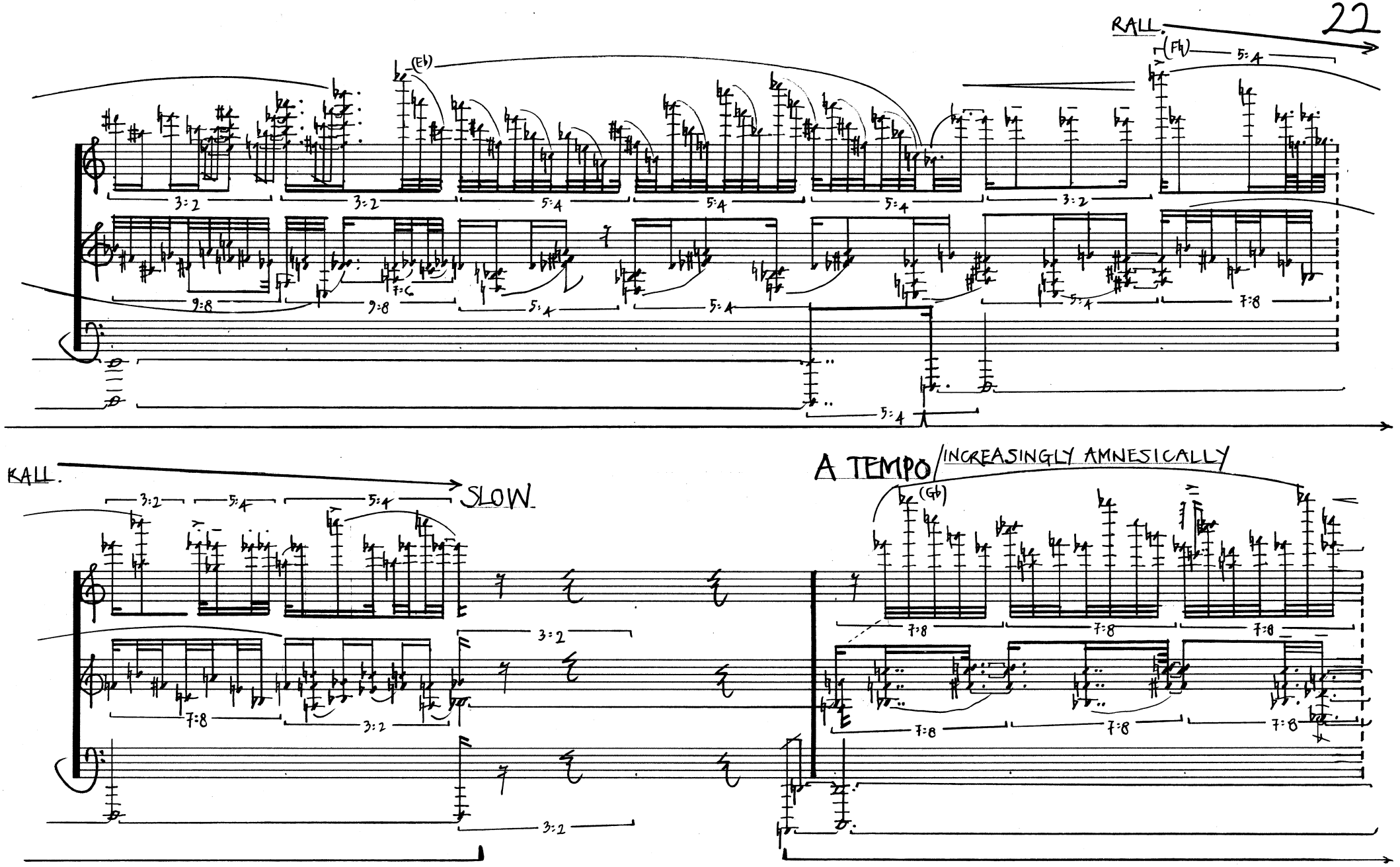



C6 MODERATELY SLOW

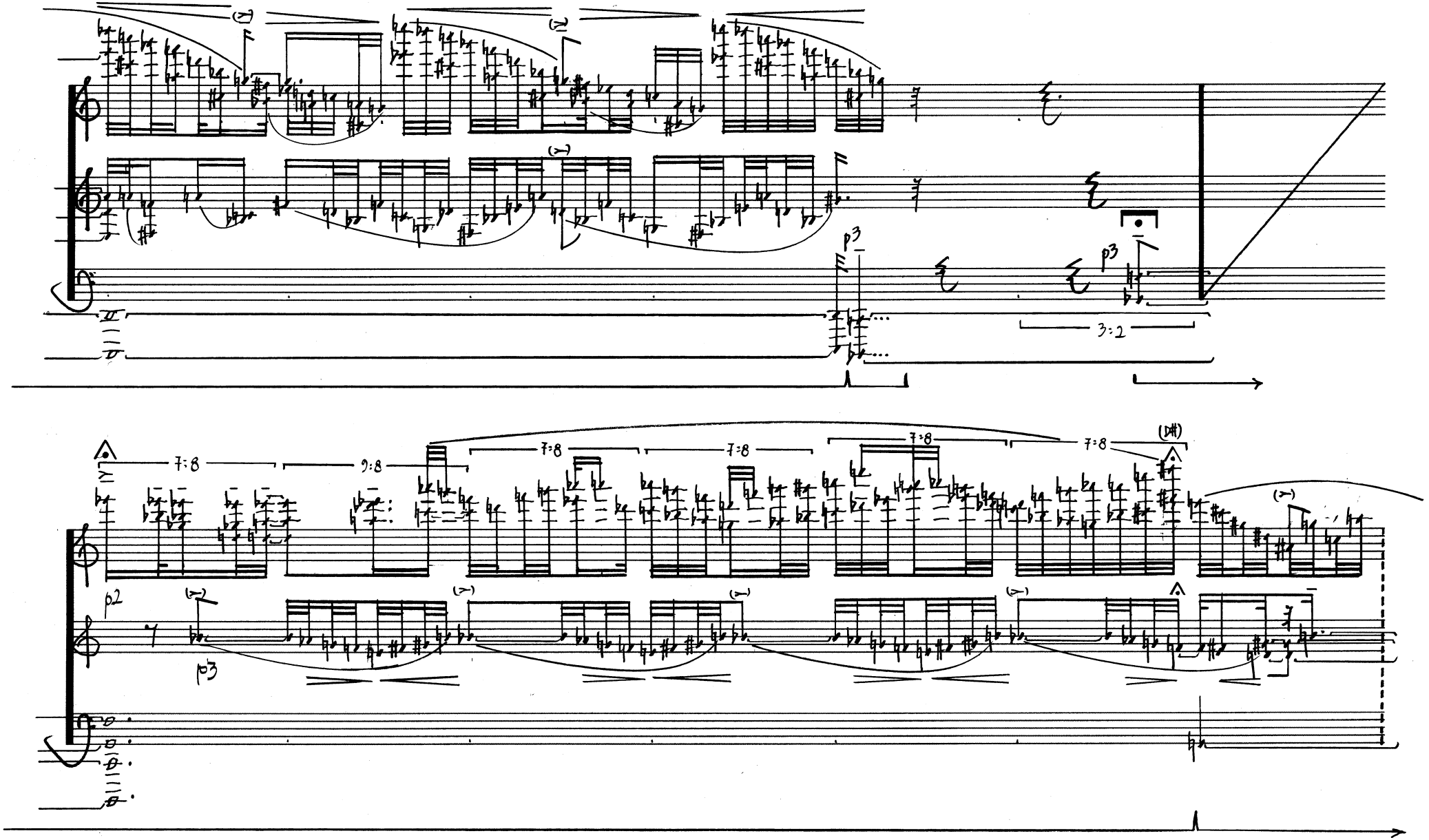


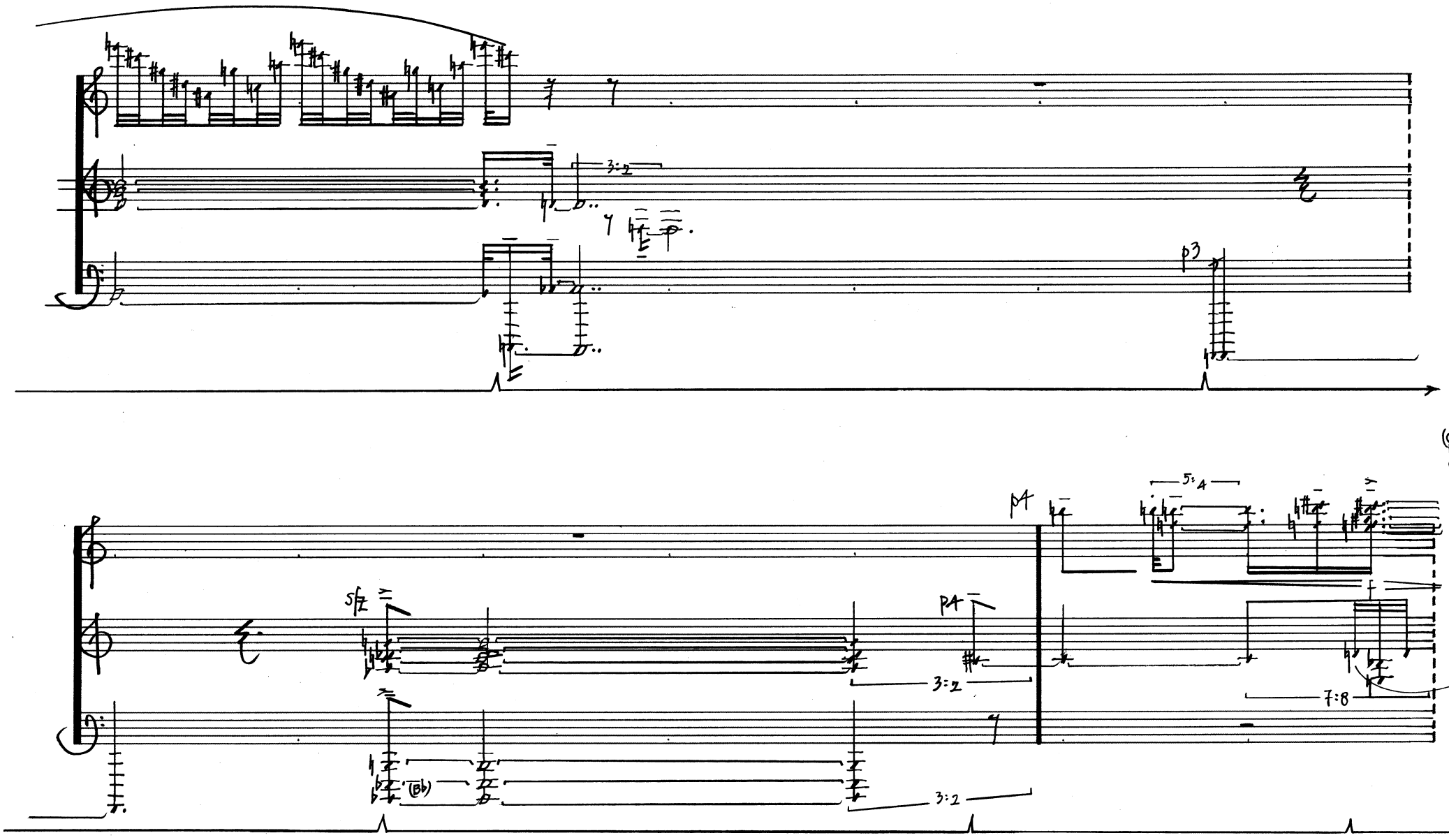

7:8
3:2
9:8
(Bb)
(Fb)
(Ab)
7:6
5:4
RALL.
(Eb)

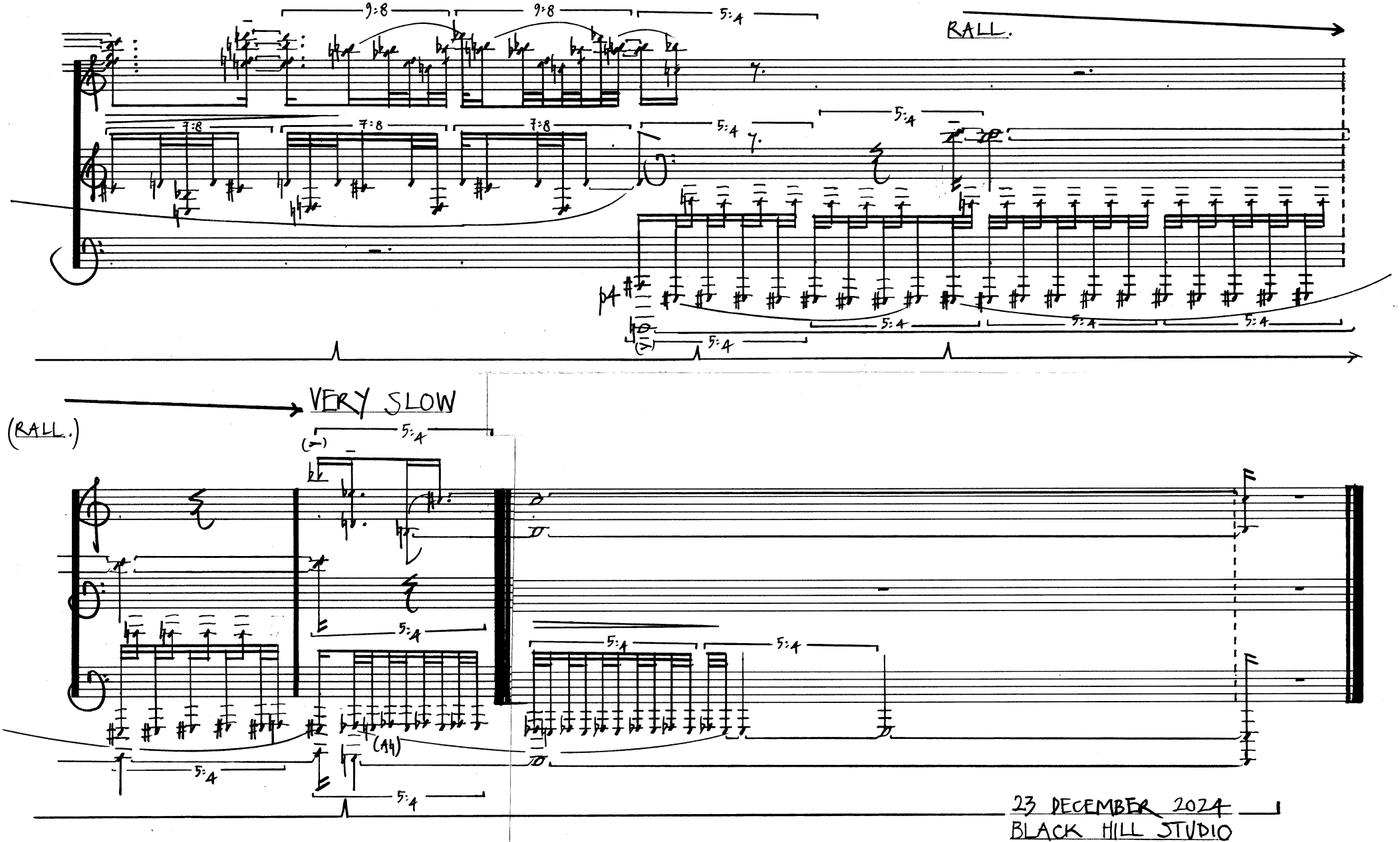

(RALL.)
VERY SLOW
(Eb)
(Bb)
MODERATELY SLOW
D
(Db)


RALL.
(Eb)
(F4)
5:4
3:2
3:2
5:4
5:4
5:4
3:2
9:8
9:8
5:4
5:4
5:4
7:8
5:4
RALL.
SLOW
3:2
5:4
5:4
7:8
3:2
3:2
3:2
A TEMPO
INCREASINGLY AMNESICALLY
(Gb)
7:8
7:8
7:8
7:8
7:8
7:8

DIMINUENDO




3:2
p3
sfz
p4
3:2
(Bb)
3:2
p4
5:4
7:8
(C# B G# F E)




23 DECEMBER 2024
BLACK HILL STUDIO

# II

## wandering on long roads, companionless

—[of Dido] the pitiful sorrowful dreaming in Virgil's loveliest lines of herself always alone, always abandoned, wandering on long roads companionless...

Helen Waddell, *the Wandering Scholars*, xxvii.

## Paragraphs V.IIA-V.IIZ

Play Paragraph **A** first.
Then play Paragraphs **B** to **Y** in any order.
Play each Paragraph **once** only; do not omit any.
**No** extra pauses between Paragraphs, please!
Then close the movement by playing Paragraph **Z**.

For those who prefer not to actively choose, the work can be effectively performed in strict alphabetical order.

It is suggested that the player assemble the individual Paragraphs into the desired order *prior* to performance.

With particular thanks to Julian Barbour, whose *the End of Time* provided the model for this *Platonian passacaglia*.

# Interpretative remarks:

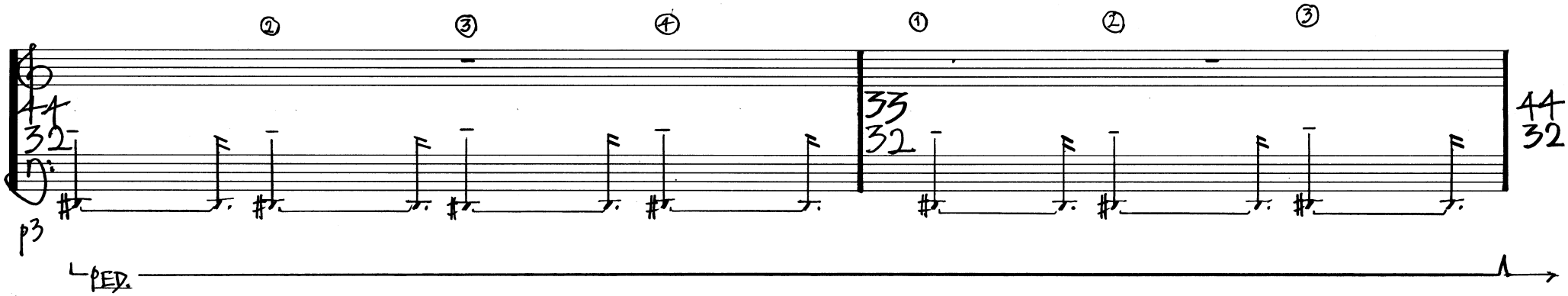
The paradox of **vagantes II** is that it is a completely static piece entirely concerned with movement ("wandering"); obviously, a work like this is not subject to the usual structural logic. A potential metaphor to consider when approaching the score is that of the 'street directory'. Although superseded by GPS nowadays, the street directories of towns possess features that correspond to those of this score: they offer a layout of the roads but no prescribed route from one location to another – that falls to the journeyer. The boundaries are clearly defined; unlike GPS, there is no provision of information beyond the edge of the map. The roads vary markedly in length. One can only "know" the place after walking all of its streets, perhaps becoming lost once or twice. And, like an ancient walled town, there is only a single entrance and exit. In the music, each Paragraph is, by analogy, a 'road' down which the player wanders; none are identical, but all are similar, particularly in that many exhibit an intensifying and then dissipation of tension.

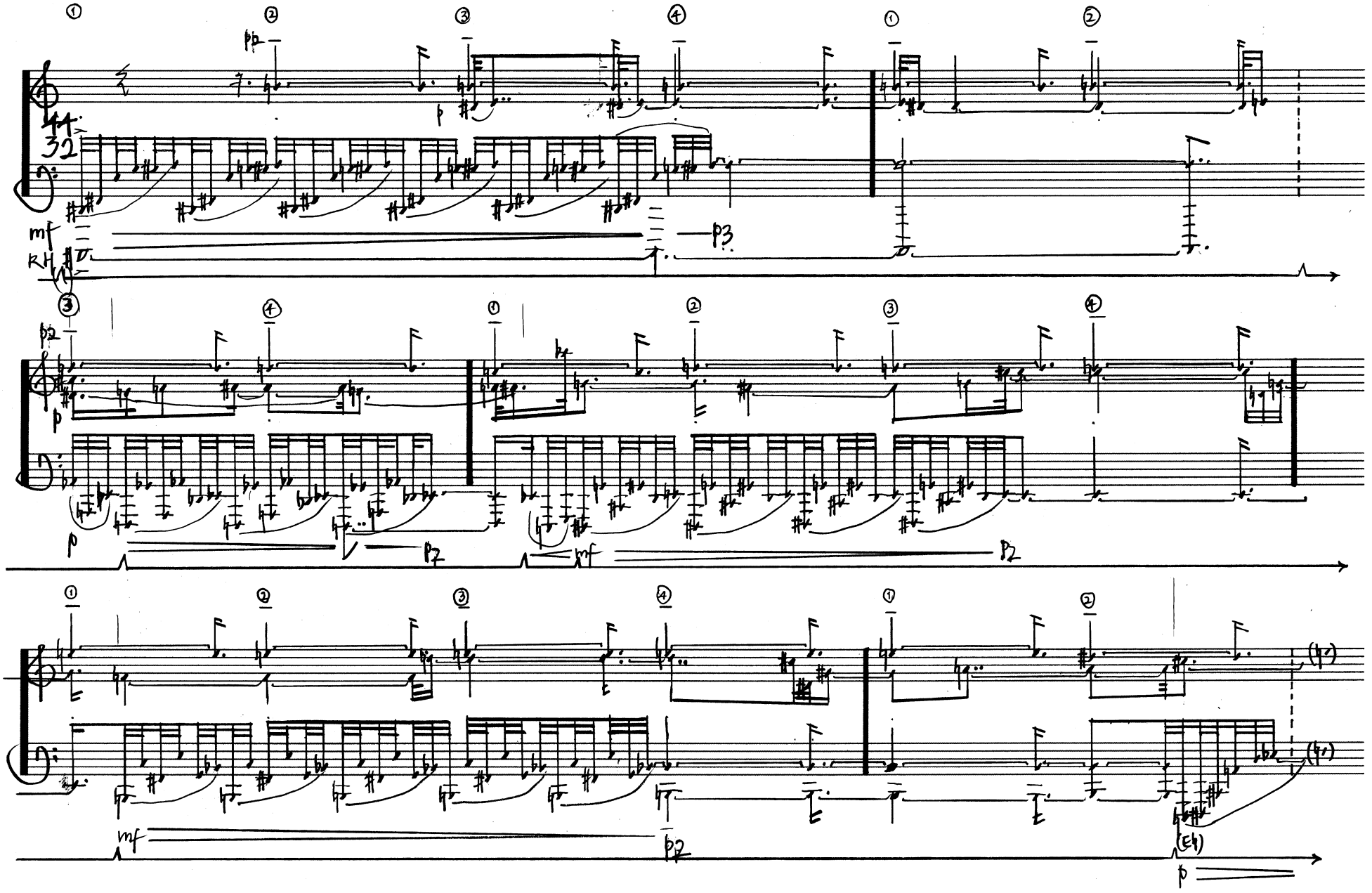
Also, it is not necessary to adopt a random or haphazard ordering, although that is an option. The two 'digest' Paragraphs, **C** and **W**, could be played consecutively and centrally, with the other material spread around. Or the Paragraphs could be ordered from fastest to slowest, or shortest to longest, or vice versa. And so on.

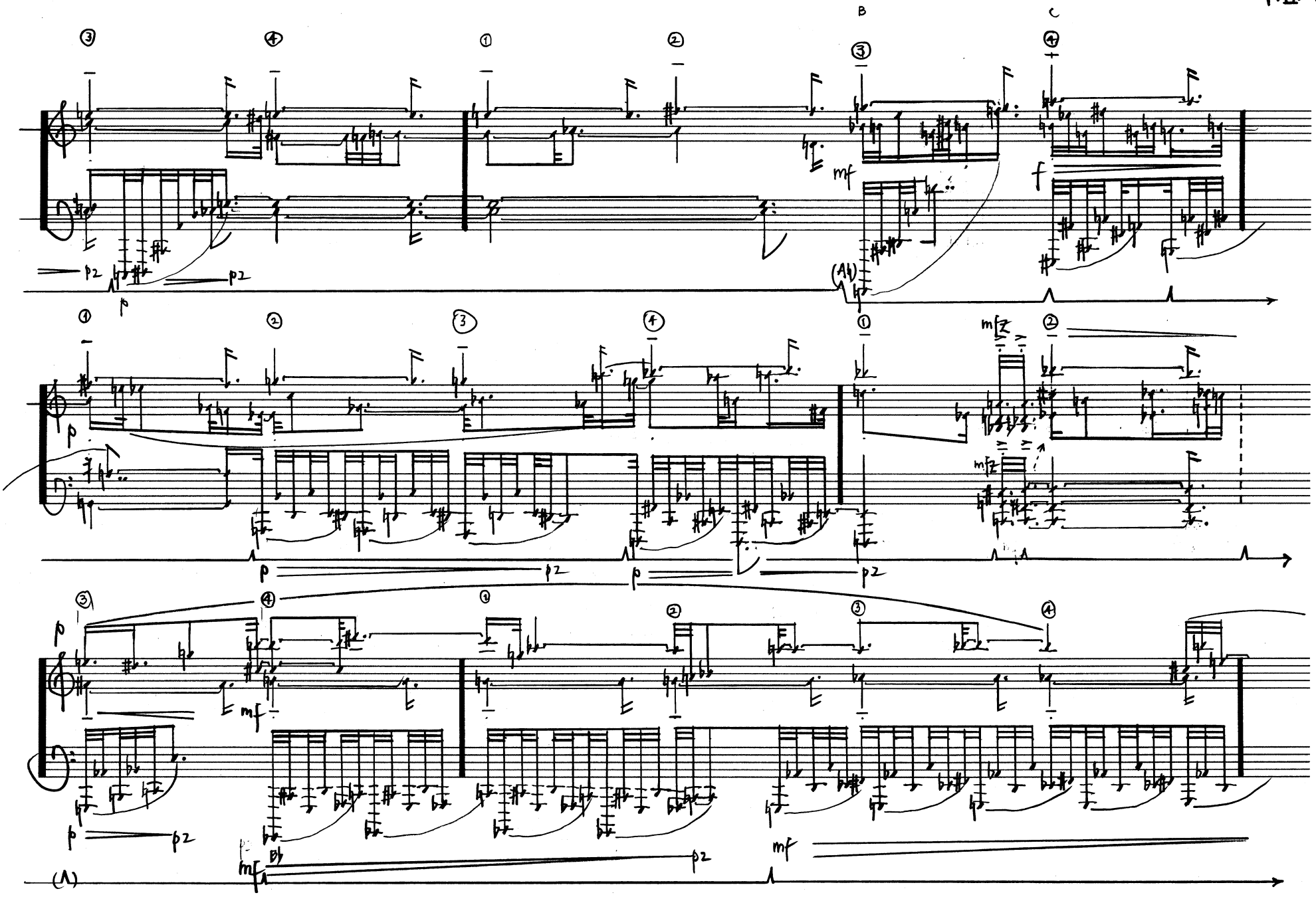
As Lévy-Strauss expressed it in *the Raw and the Cooked*, "Through the power of an ever-new internal logic … there will no longer be a difference of kind, but only of degree, between inventing music and listening to it."

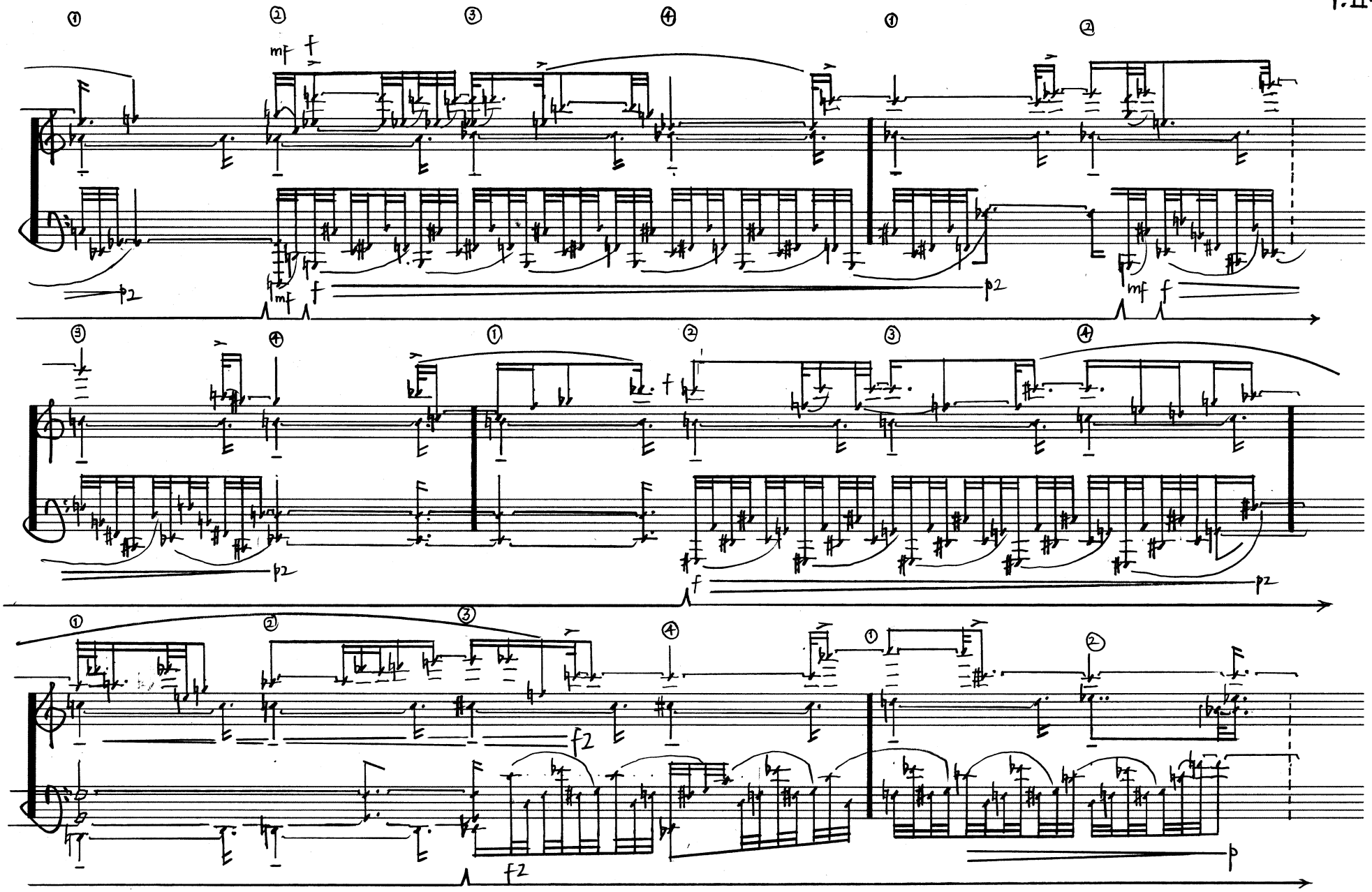
A

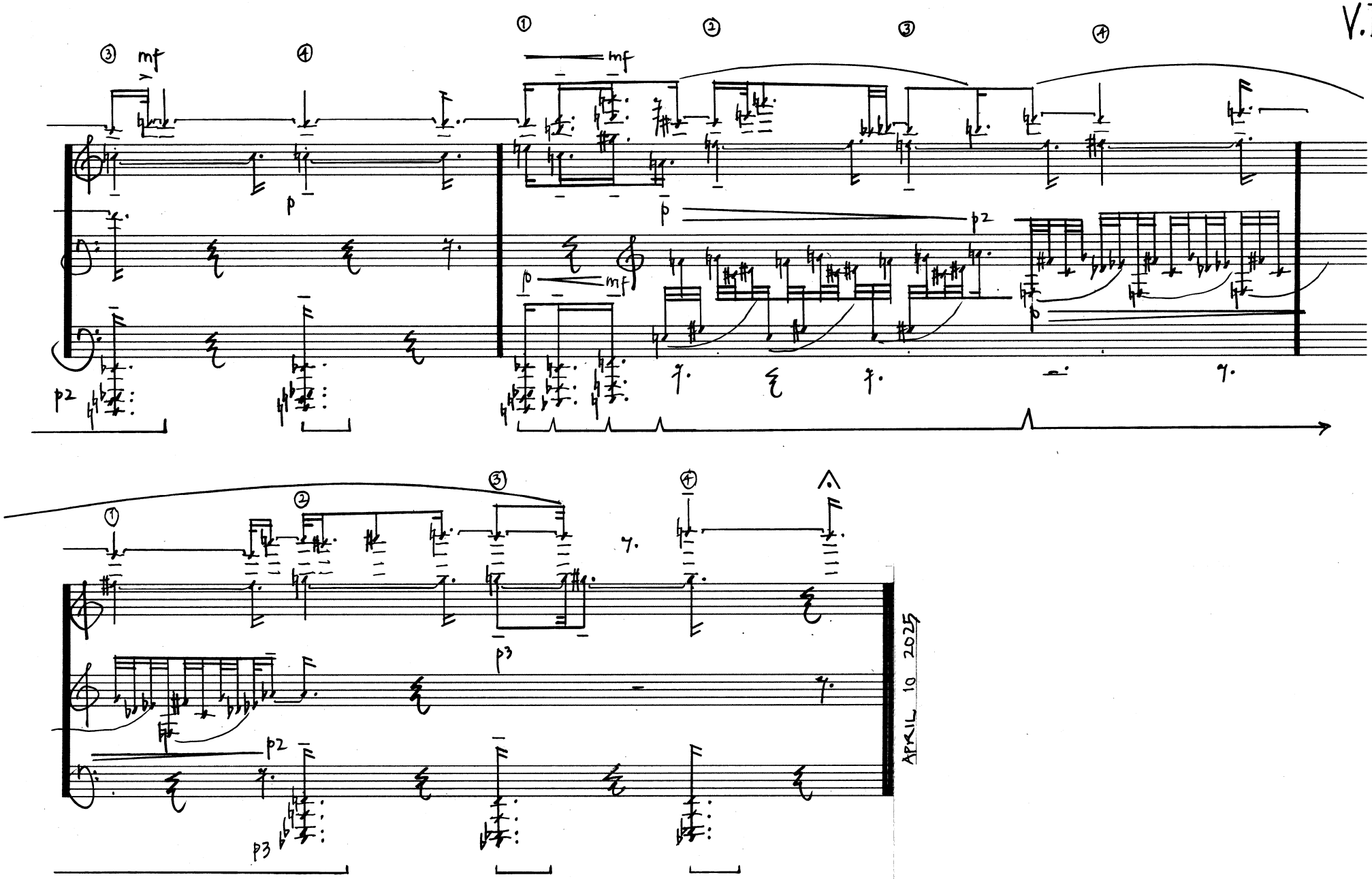
WEARILY—SLOW WALKING TEMPO




mf
RH
p3
p2
p
mf
p2
mf
p2
(E♮)
p


B
C
mf
f
(Al)
p
p2
mfz
(A)

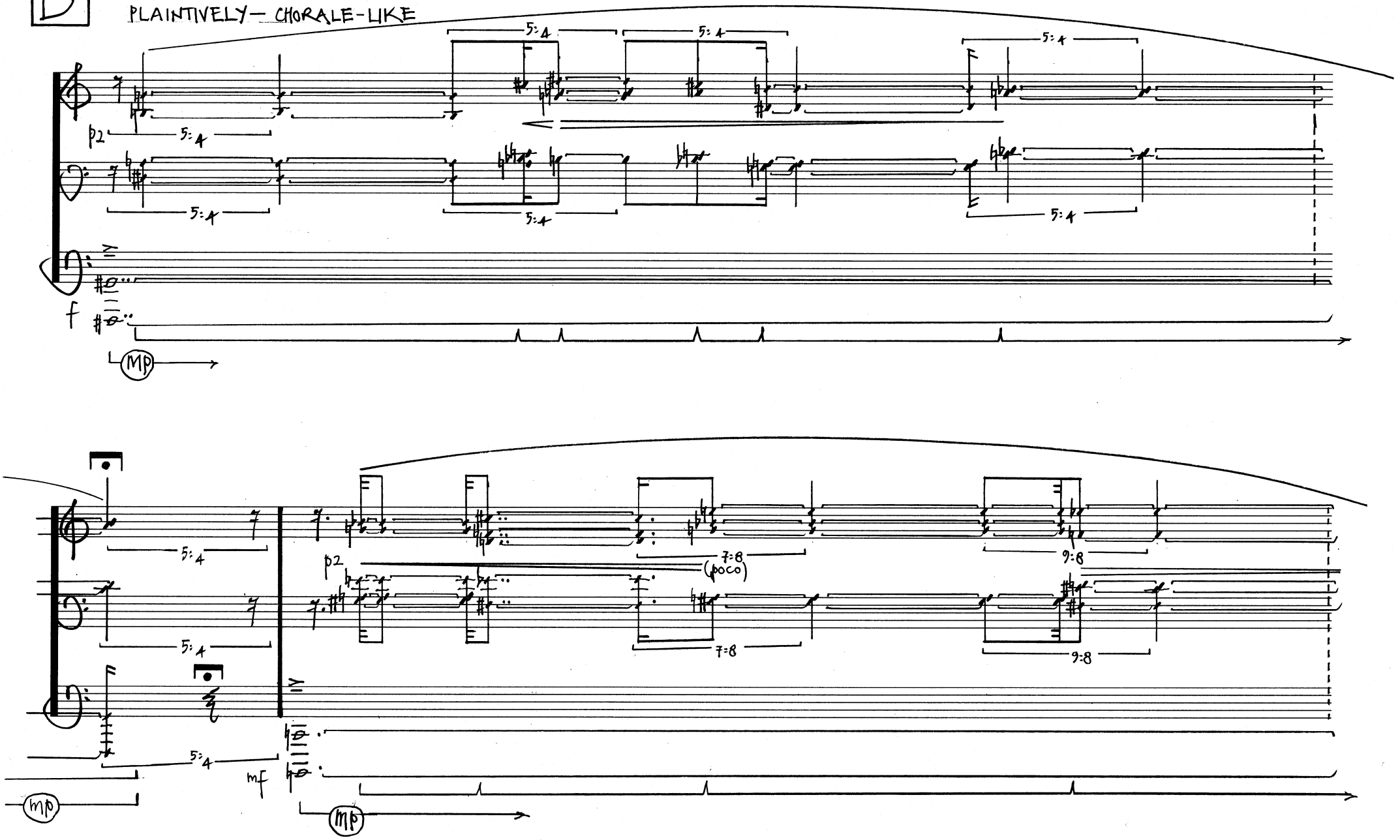

① ② ③ ④ ① ②
mf f
p2
mf f
p2
mf f
⑤ ④ ① ② ③ ④
f
p2
f
p2
① ② ③ ④ ① ②
f2
f2
p


mf
p
p2
mf
p3
APRIL 10 2025

B

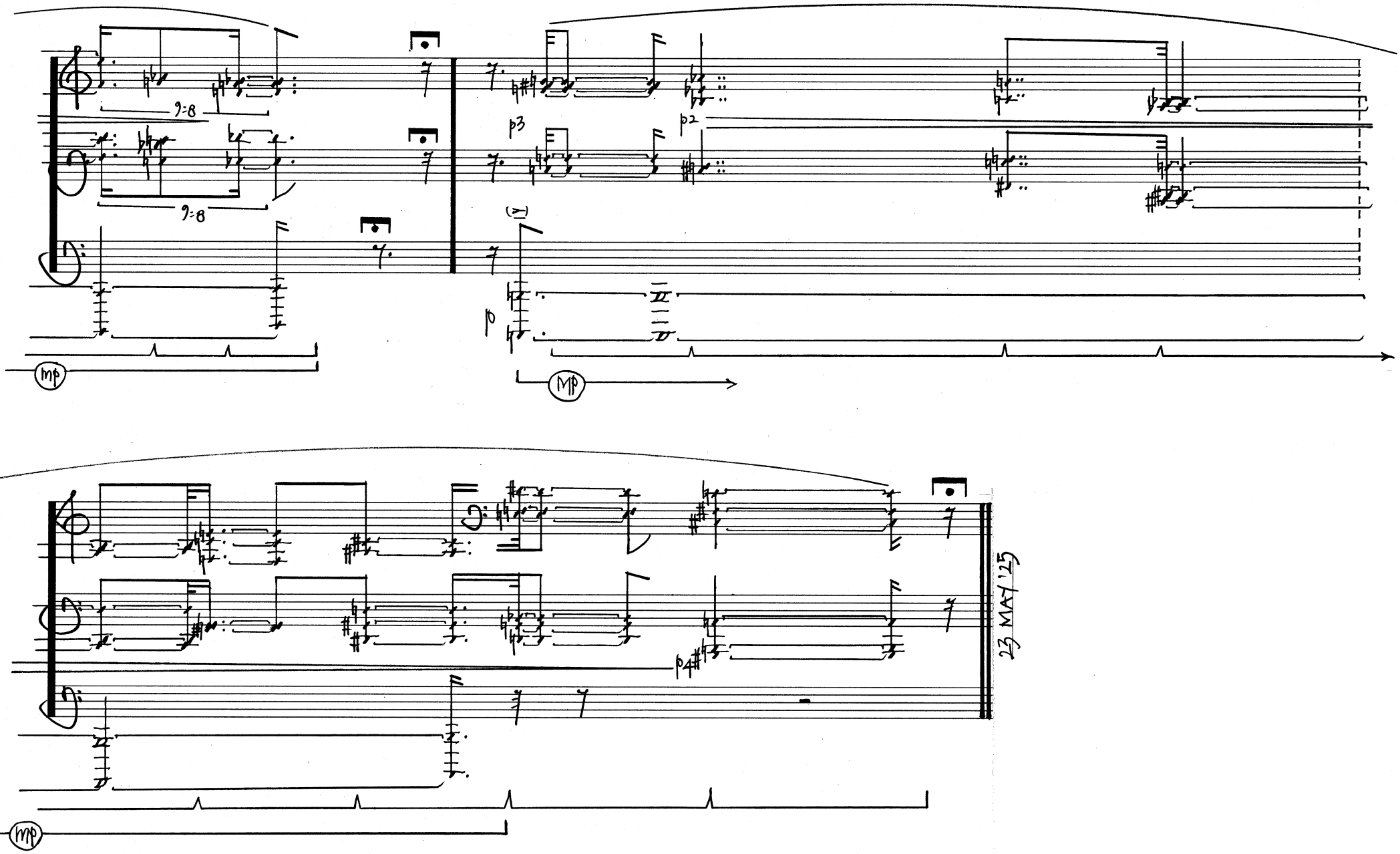
# CORTÈGE TEMPO

PLAINTIVELY — CHORALE-LIKE



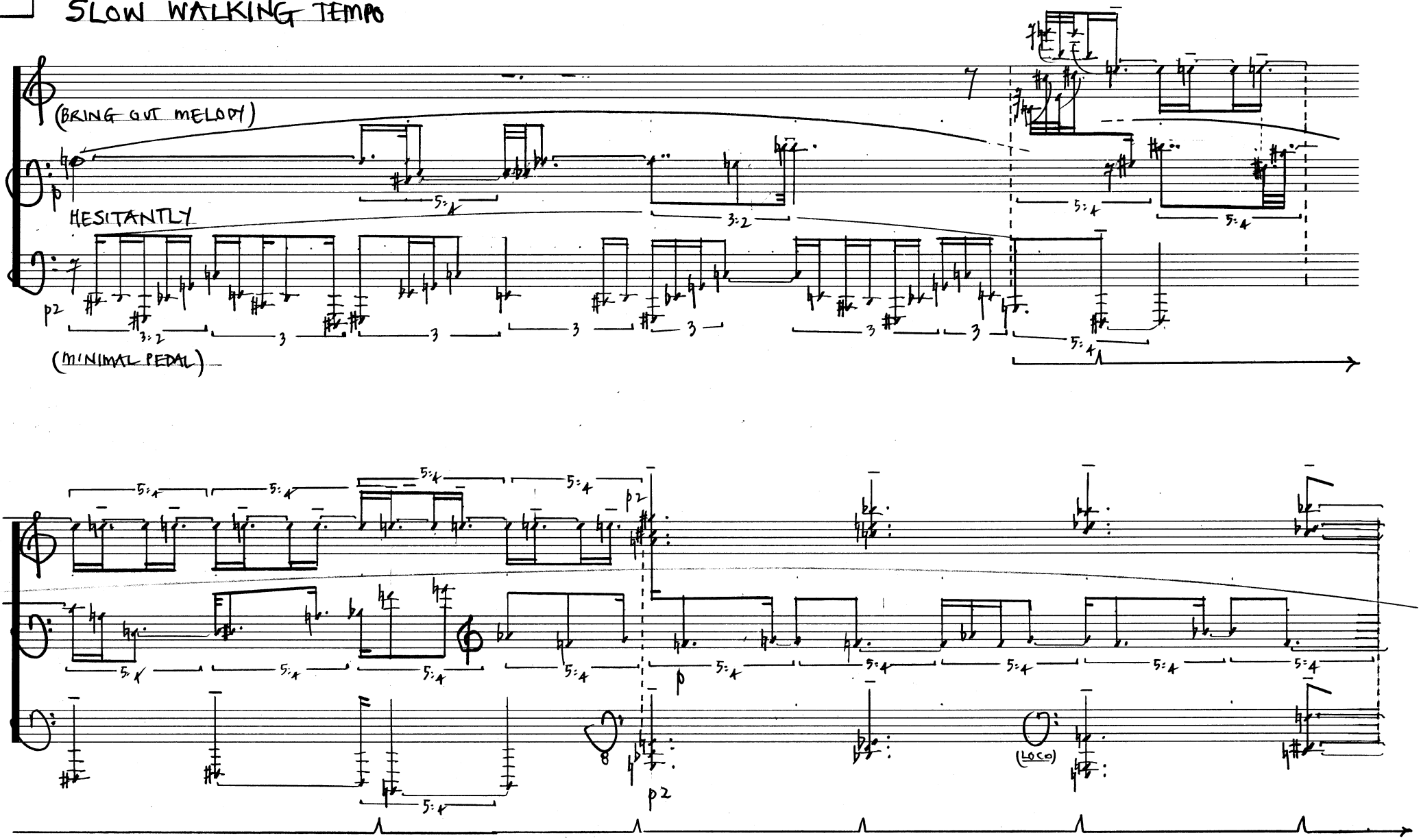
V.IIB2

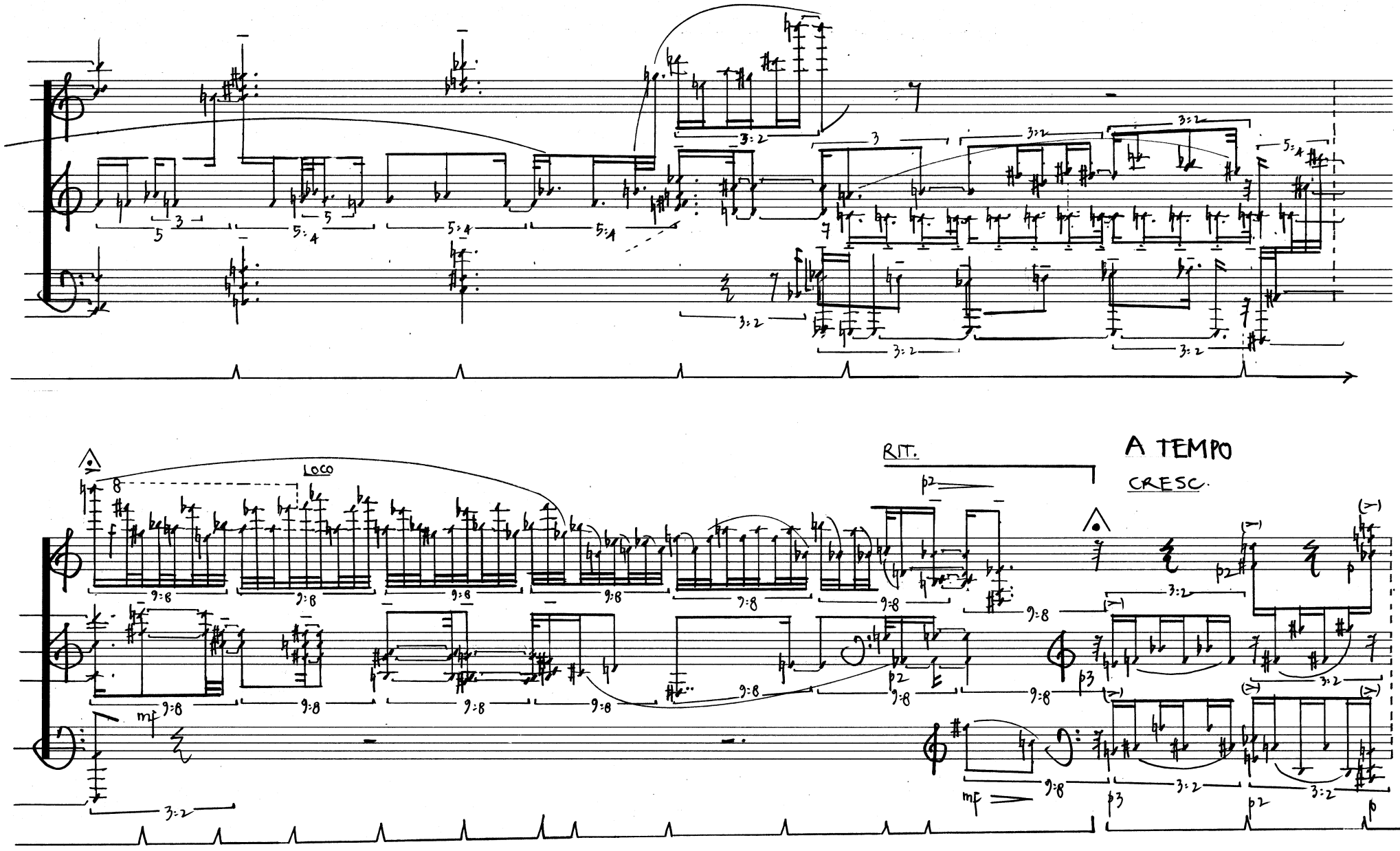
QUIETER — A LITTLE SLOWER

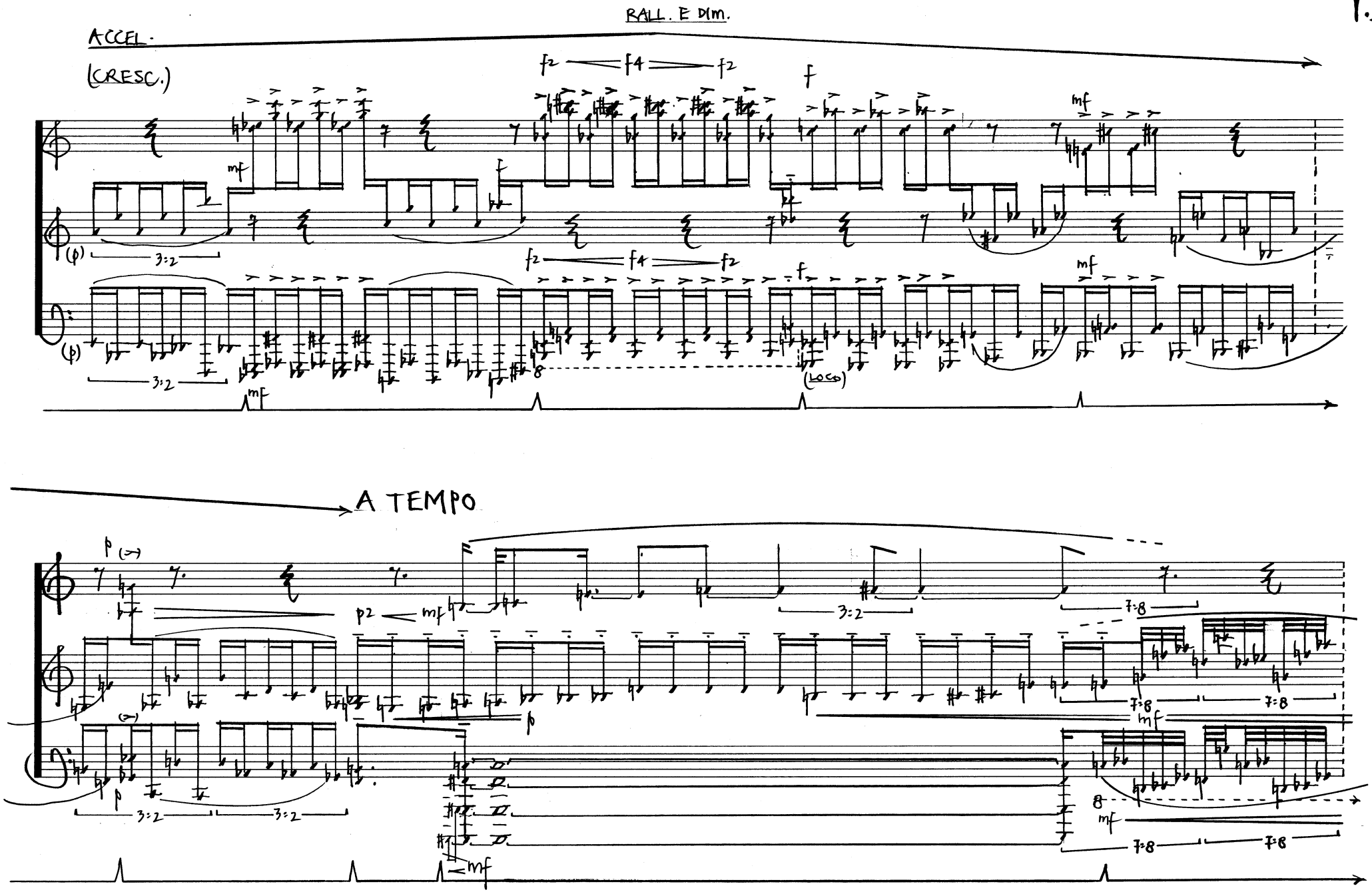


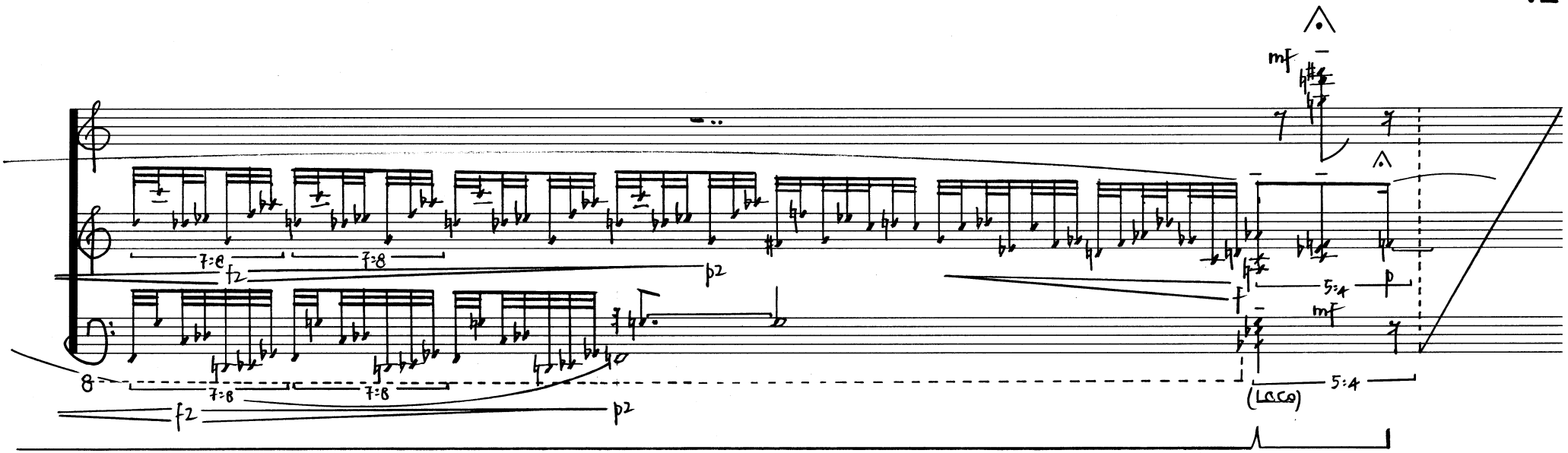
C

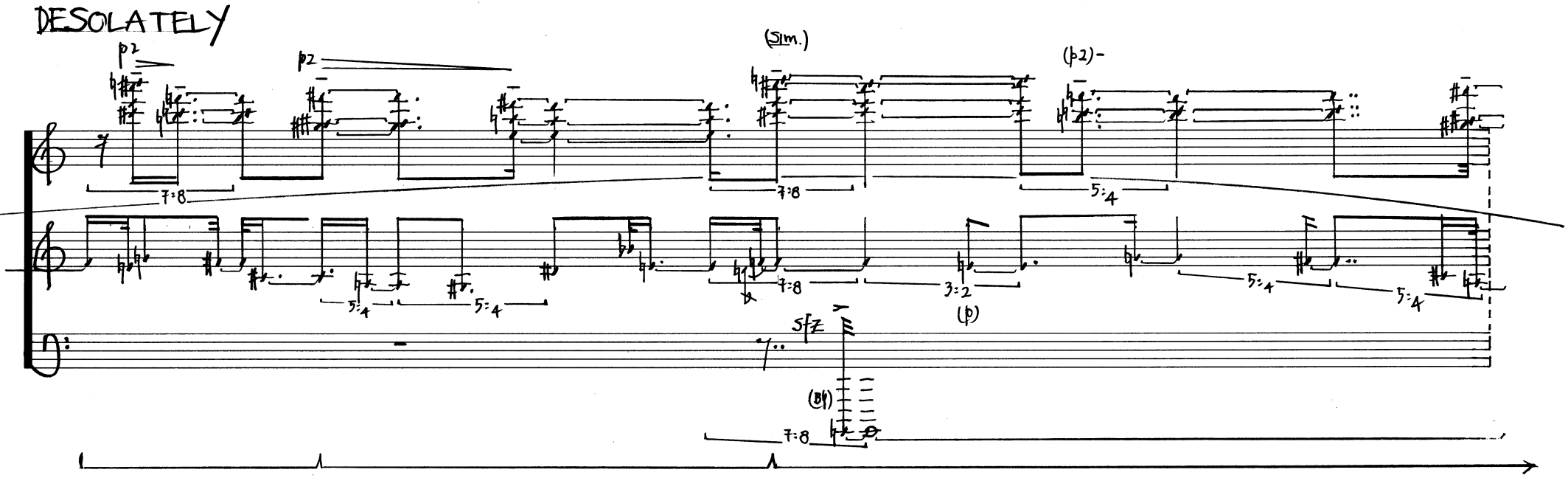
## INTENSE: EPITOMIC — A LITTLE DERANGEDLY
## SLOW WALKING TEMPO

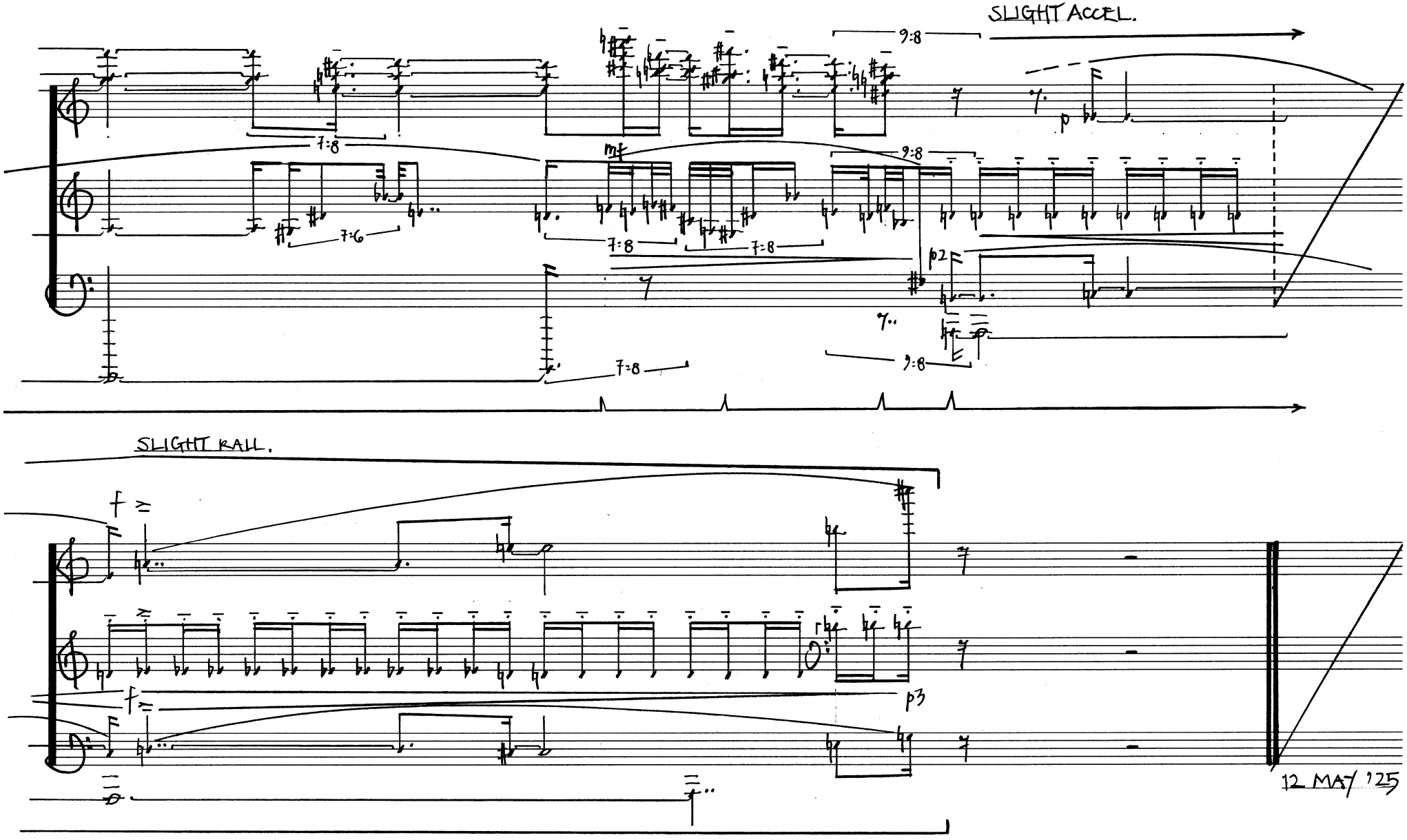



LOCO
RIT.
A TEMPO
CRESC.


RALL. E DIM.
ACCEL.
(CRESC.)
A TEMPO
(LOCO)


mf
7:8
7:8
fz
pz
5:4
p
mf
8
7:8
7:8
fz
pz
5:4
(Loco)

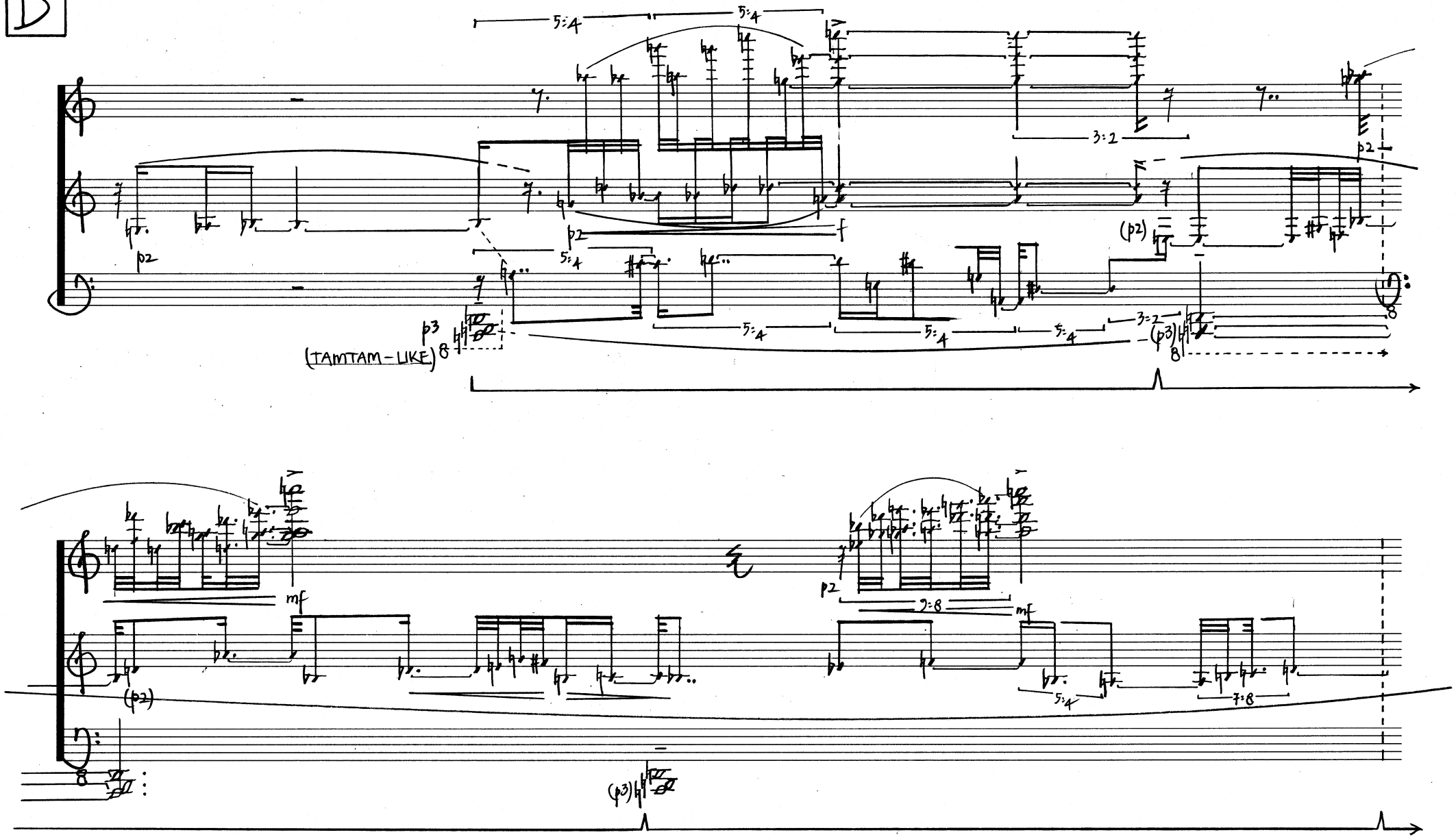

DESOLATELY
pz
pz
(Sim.)
(pz)-
7:8
7:8
5:4
5:4
5:4
7:8
3:2
5:4
5:4
(p)
sfz
(Bl)
7:8


SLIGHT ACCEL.
9:8
7:8
7:6
mf
p
p2
SLIGHT RALL.
f
p3
12 MAY '25

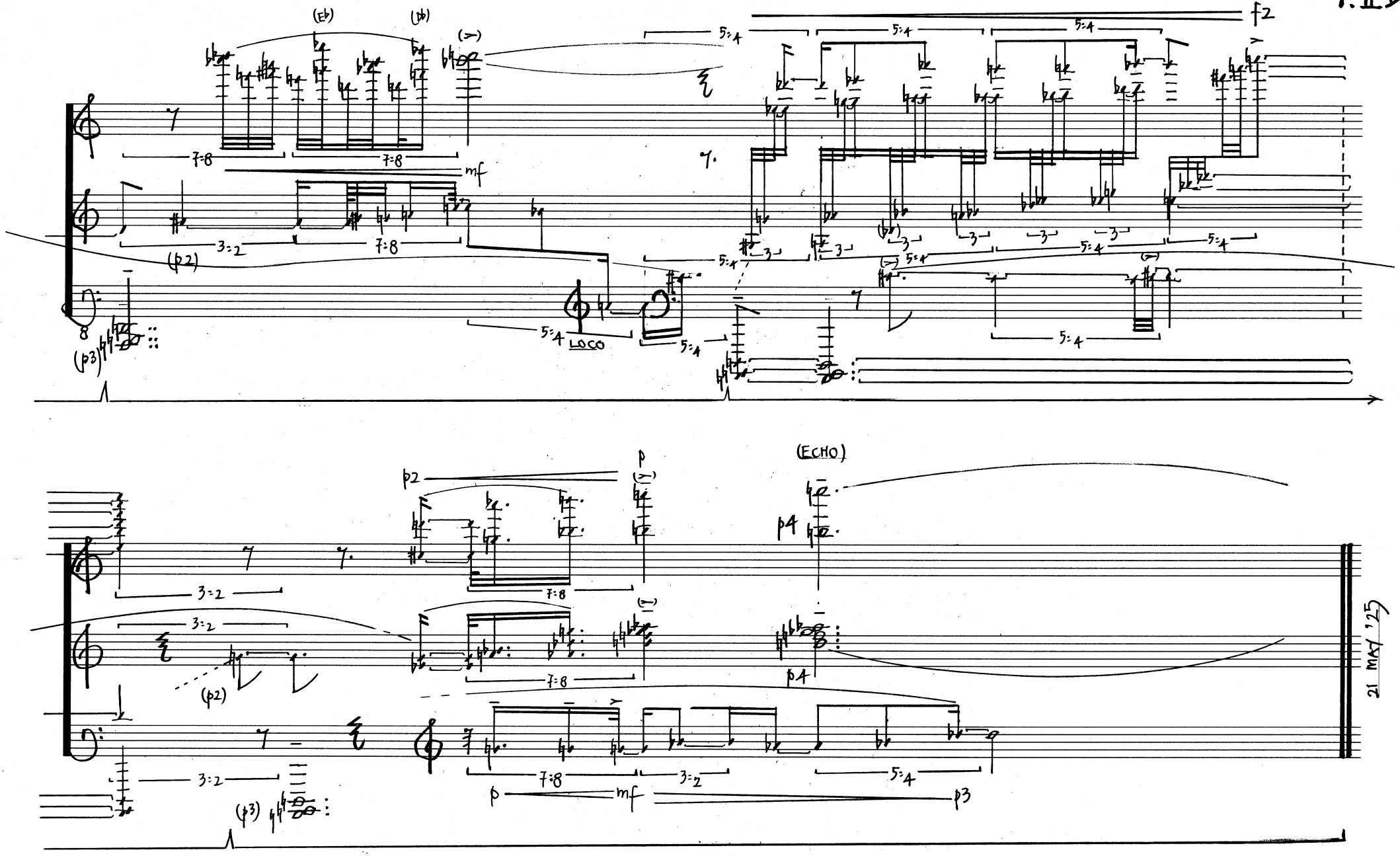
D

# CORTÈGE TEMPO

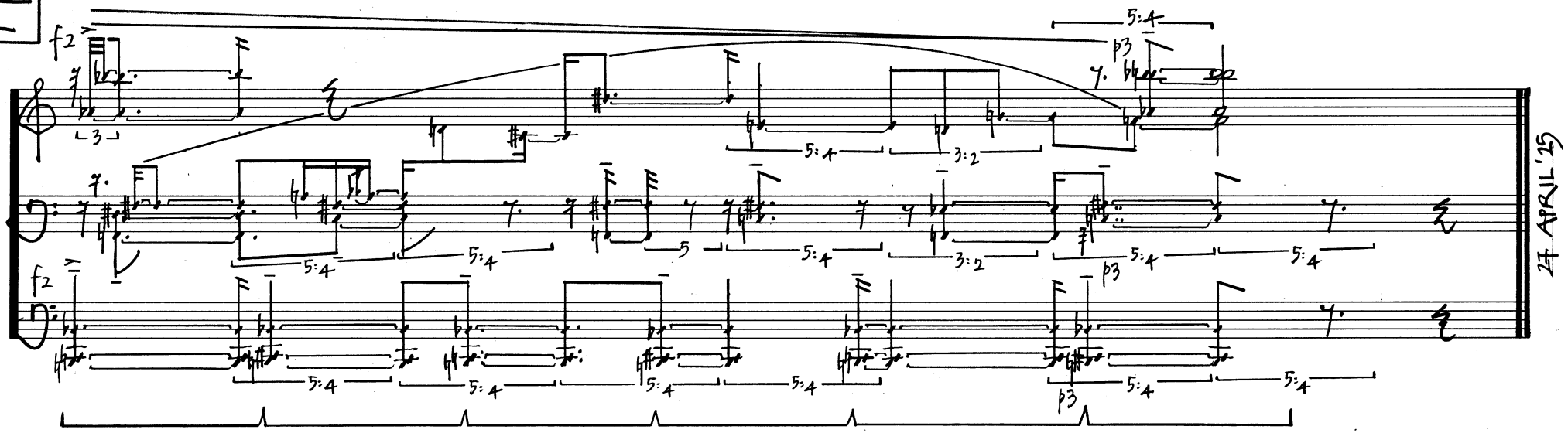




V.IID2



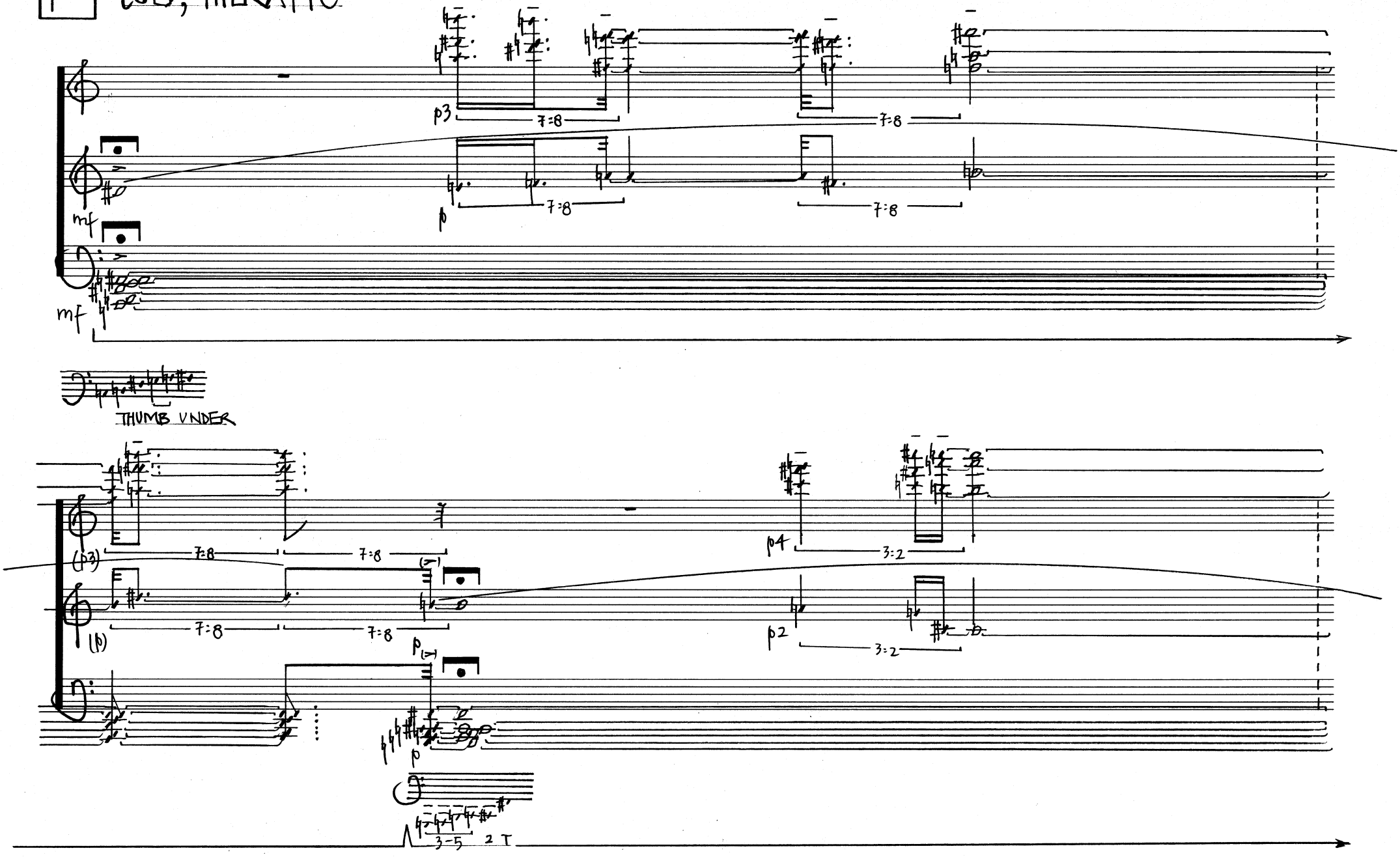
E SLOW WALKING TEMPO



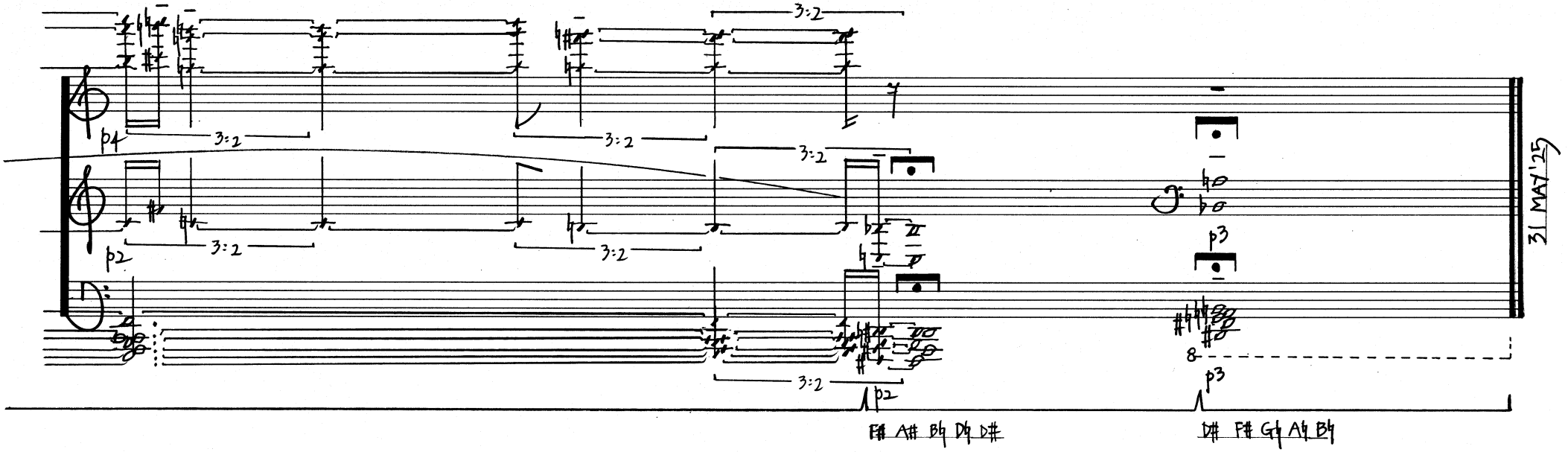
F

# CORTÈGE TEMPO

COLD, HIERATIC

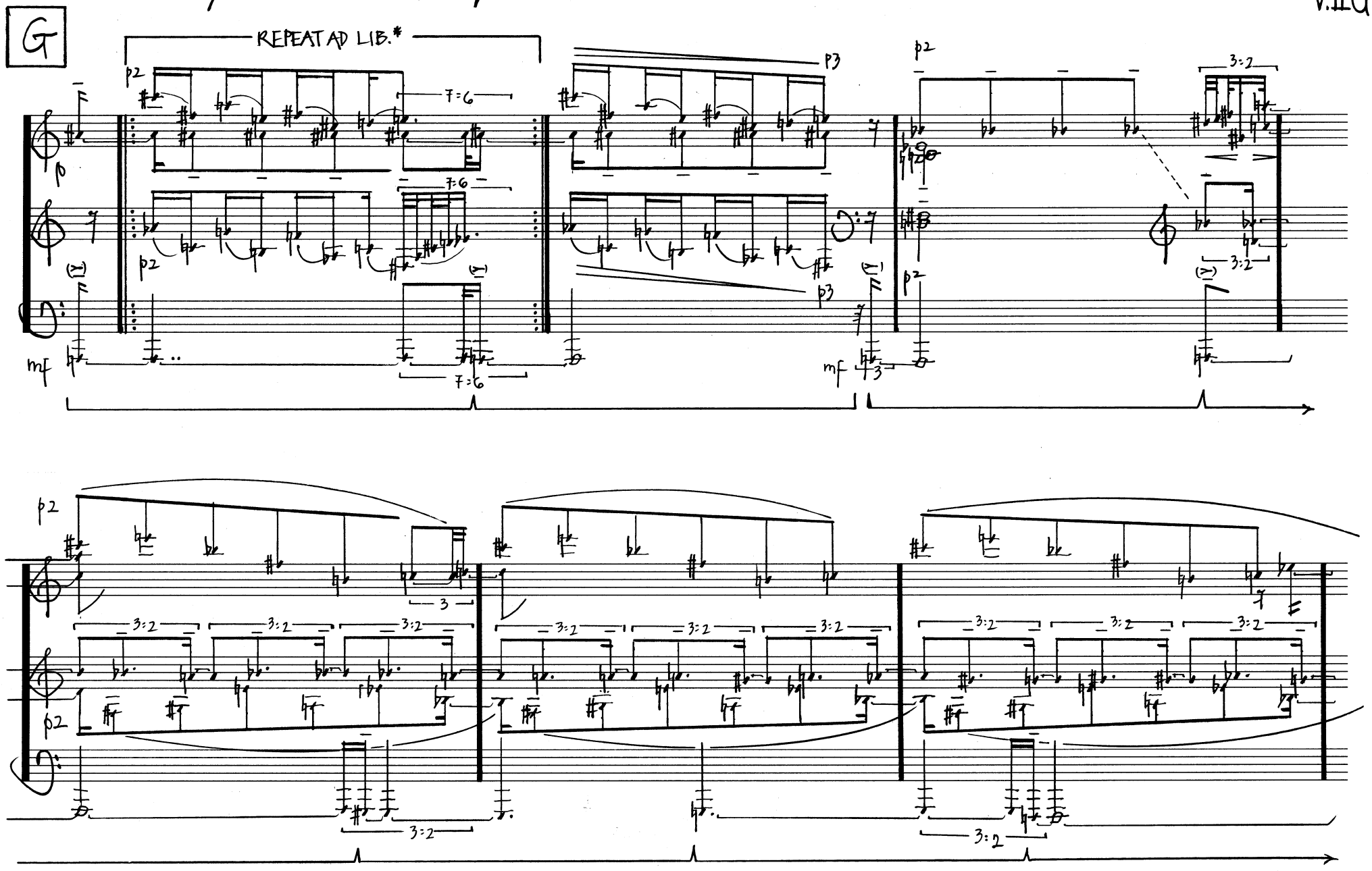


V.II F2

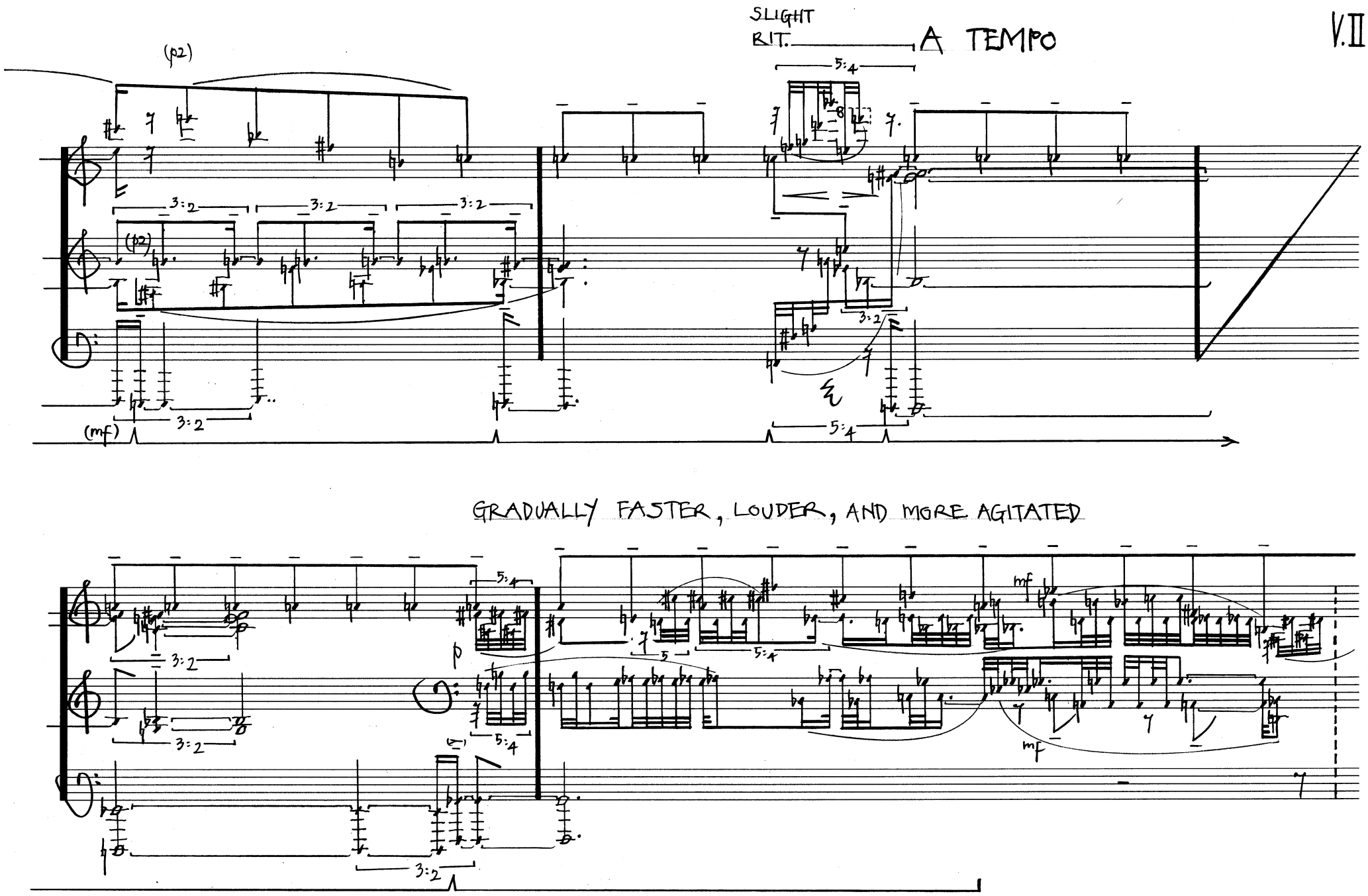


# DREAMILY—IMPROVISATORY

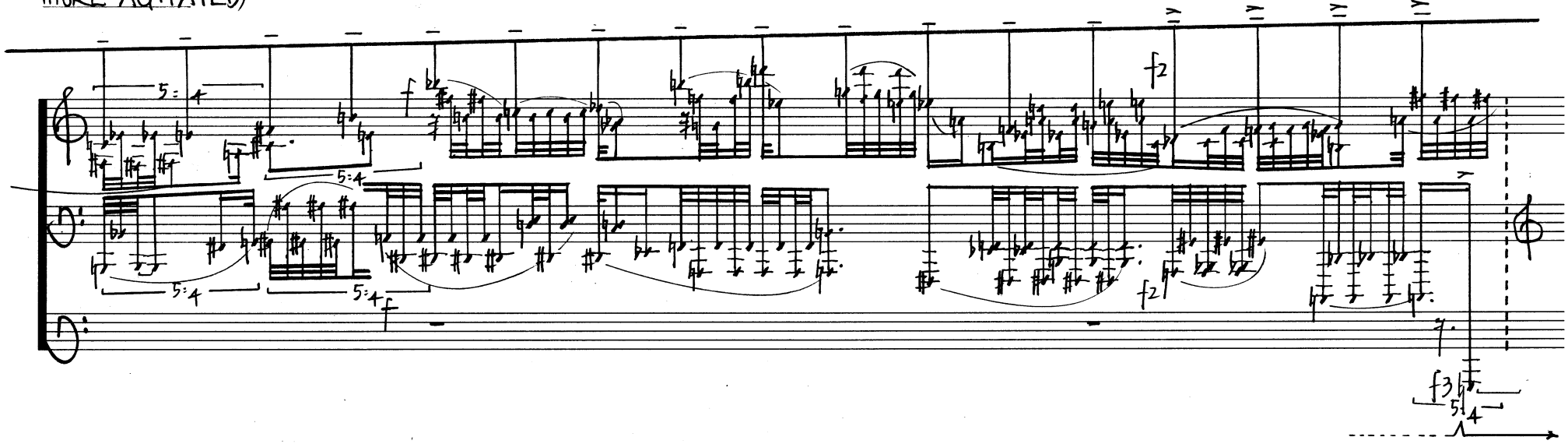
G




* PERHAPS DO REPEATS ON PAGES G3-4 THE SAME NUMBER OF TIMES.


SLIGHT
RIT.
A TEMPO
(p2)
(mf)
GRADUALLY FASTER, LOUDER, AND MORE AGITATED

(ACCEL/CRESC.
MORE AGITATED)

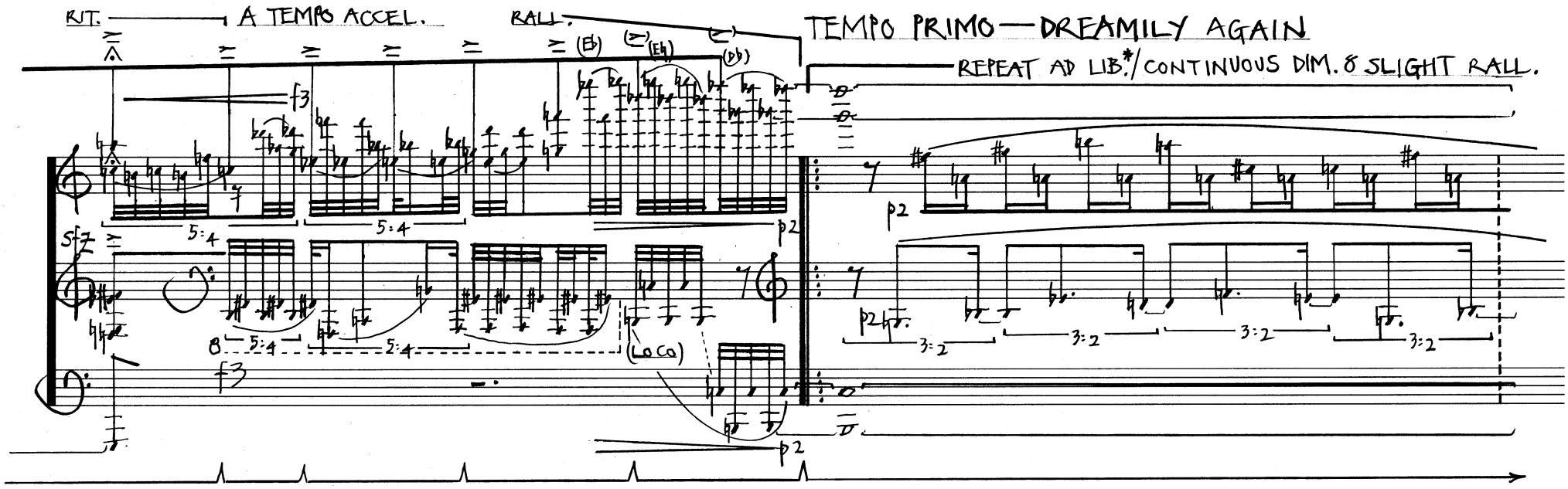



RIT. A TEMPO ACCEL.

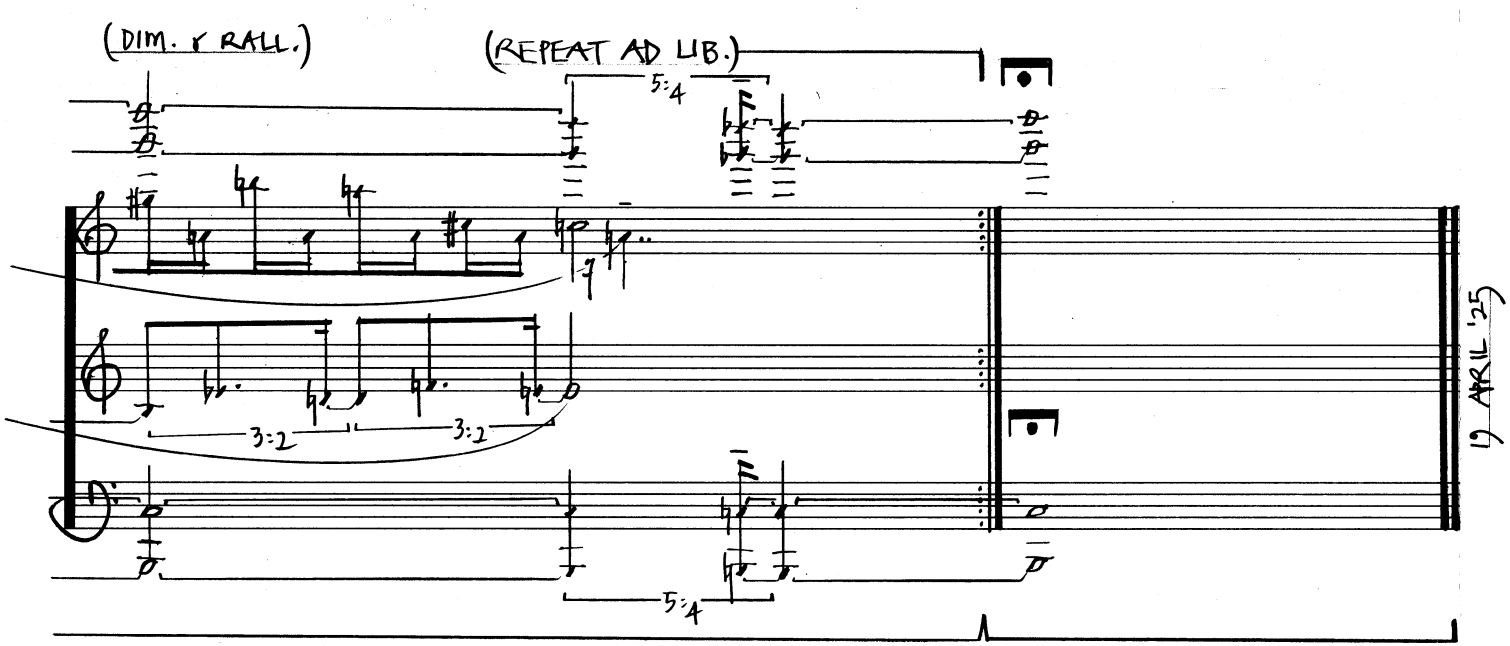
RALL.

TEMPO PRIMO — DREAMILY AGAIN

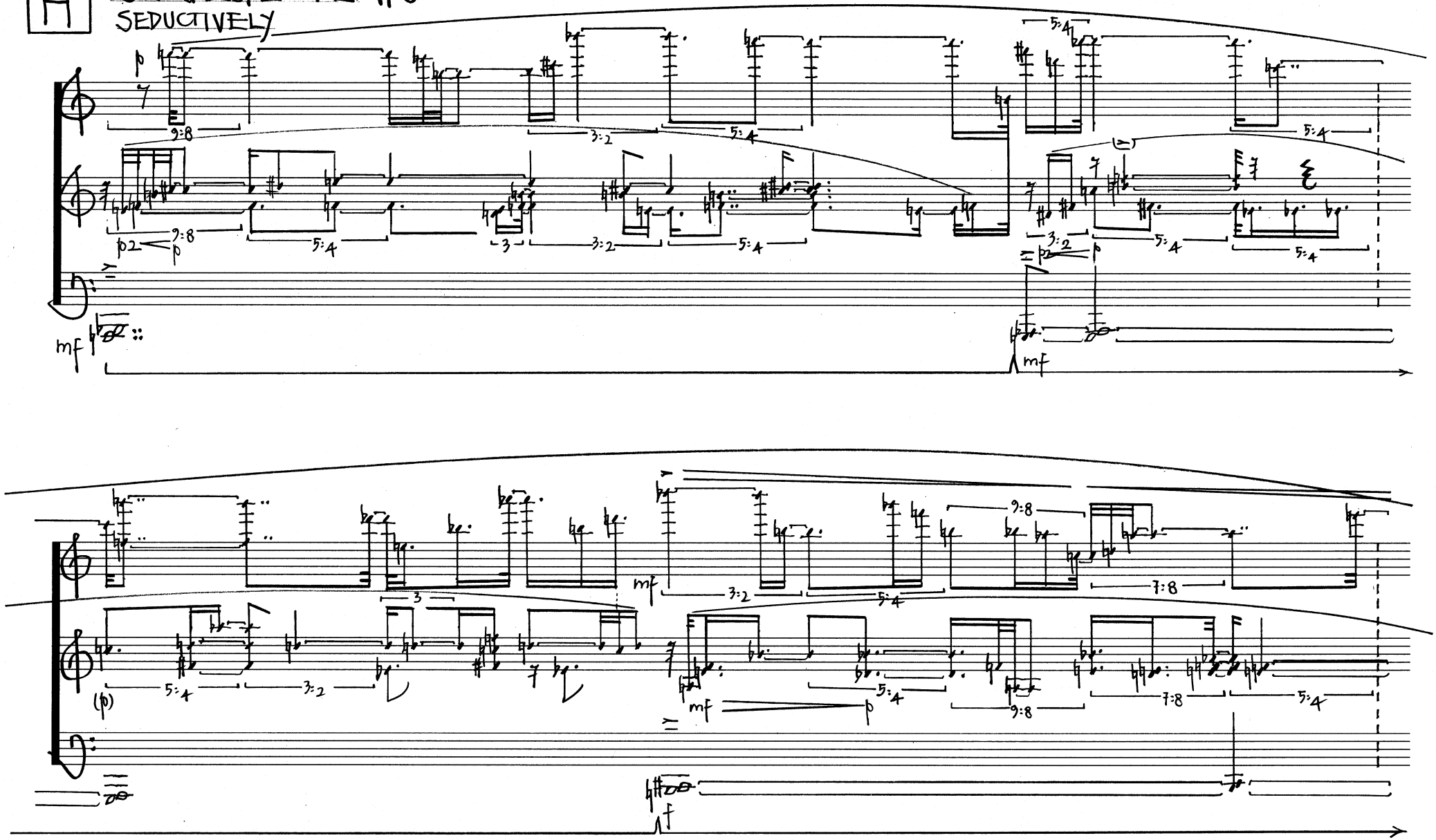
REPEAT AD LIB.*/ CONTINUOUS DIM. & SLIGHT RALL.

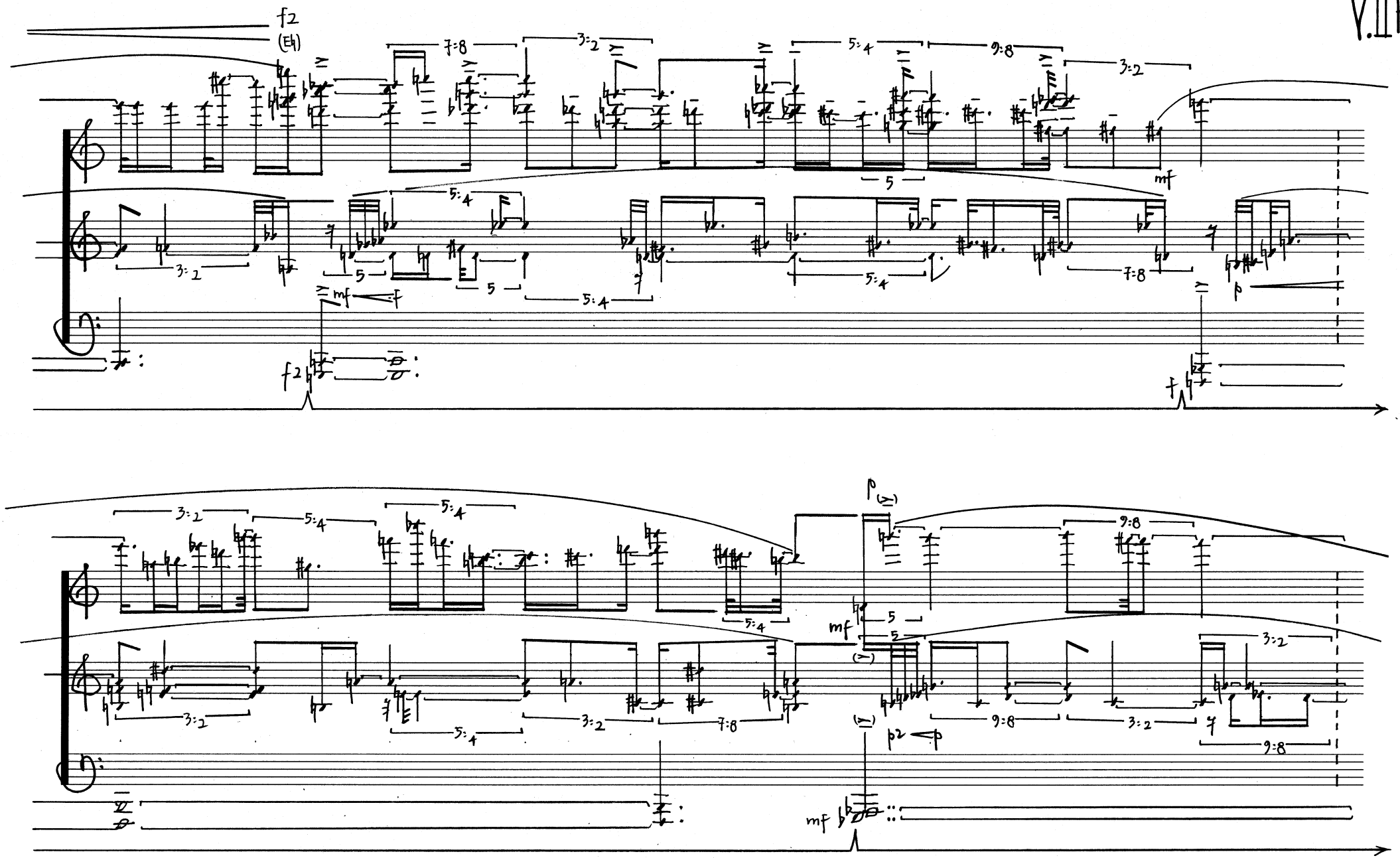



*PERHAPS THE SAME NUMBER OF REPEATS AS OPENING

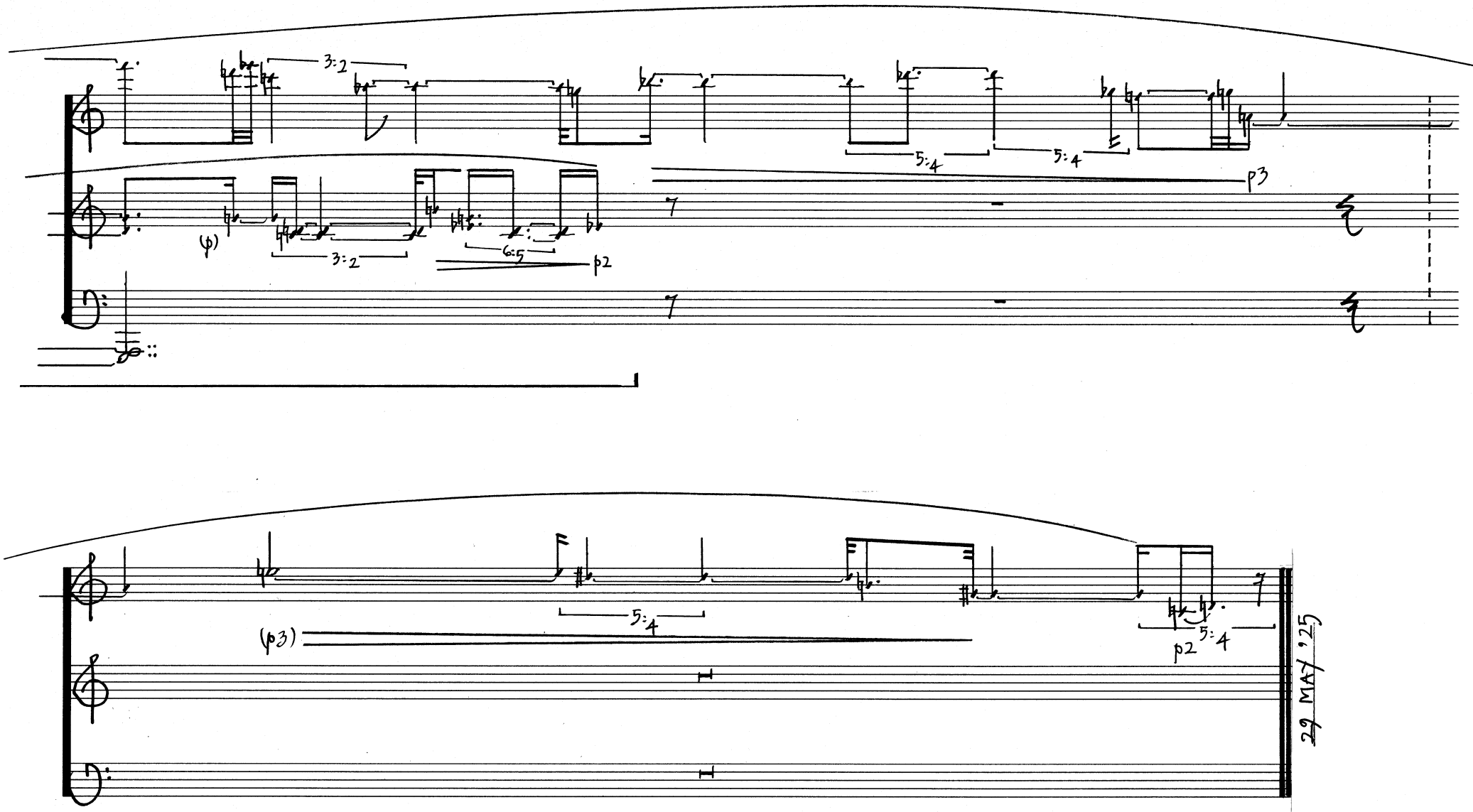

(DIM. & RALL.)
(REPEAT AD LIB.)
5:4
3:2
3:2
5:4
19 APRIL '25

H CORTÈGE TEMPO
SEDUCTIVELY

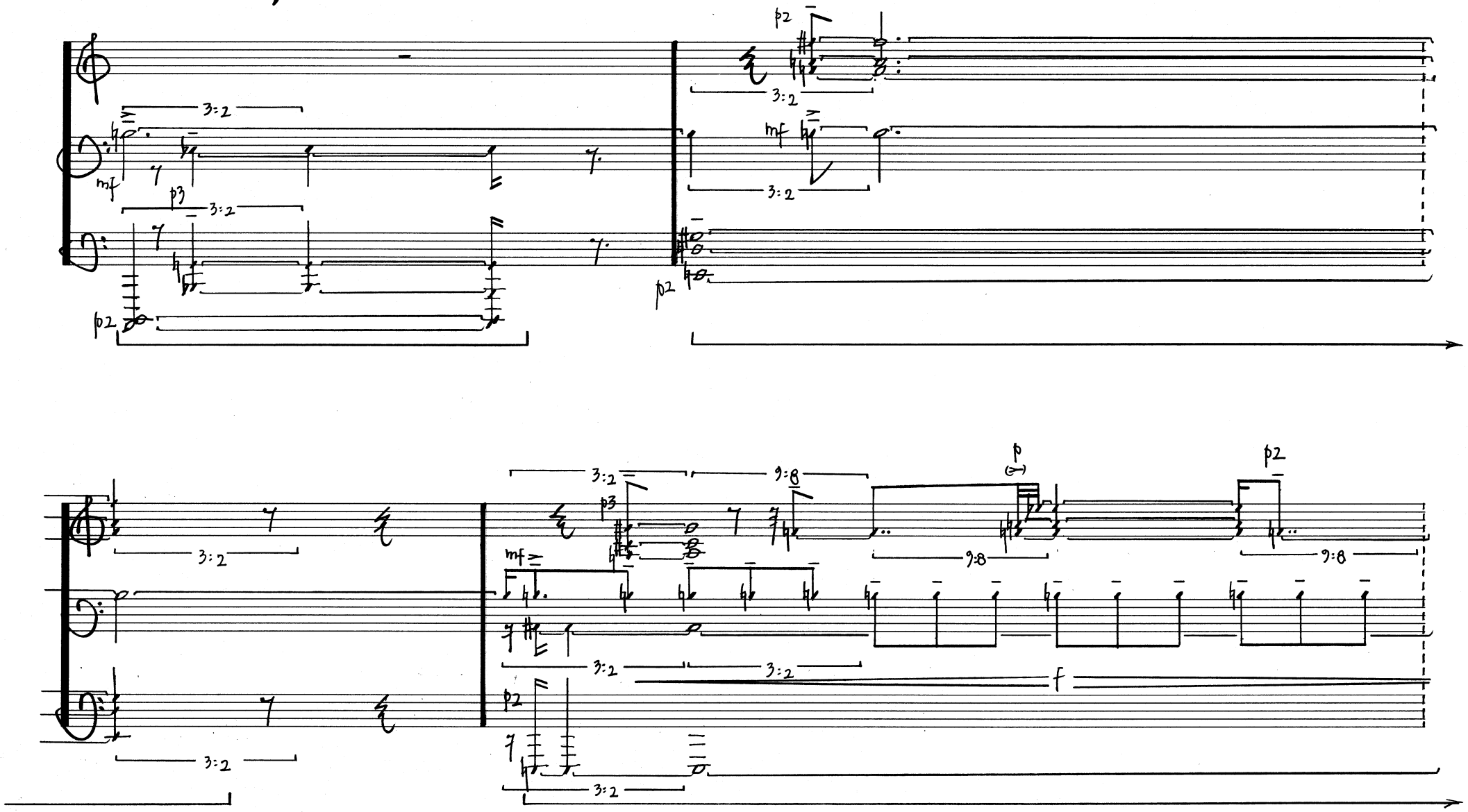


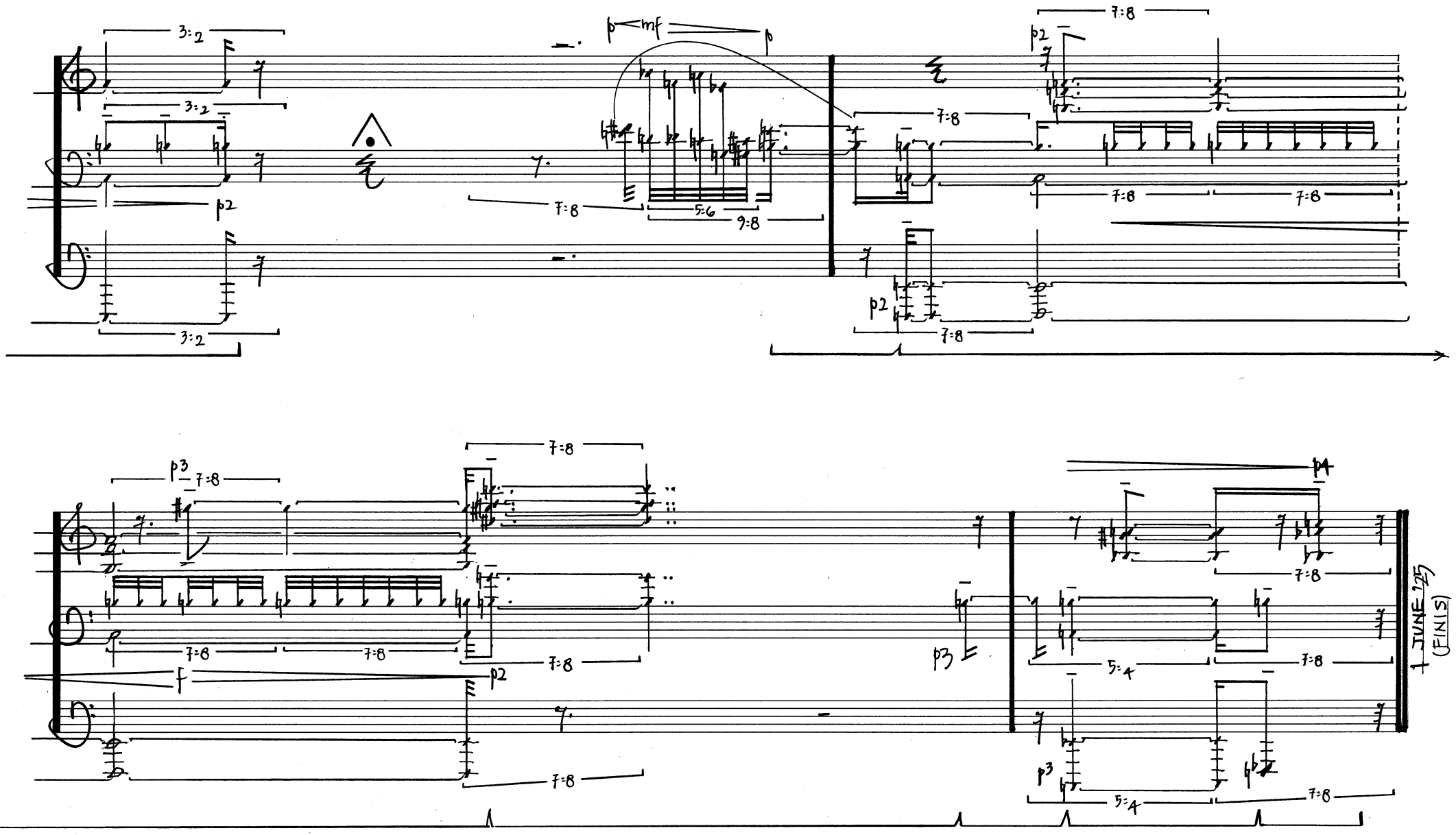

f2
(E♮)
7:8
3:2
5:4
9:8
3:2
5
mf
5:4
3:2
5
5
5:4
5:4
7:8
mf
f
p
f2
f
3:2
5:4
5:4
p
9:8
5:4
mf
5
5
3:2
3:2
5:4
3:2
7:8
p2
p
9:8
3:2
9:8
mf

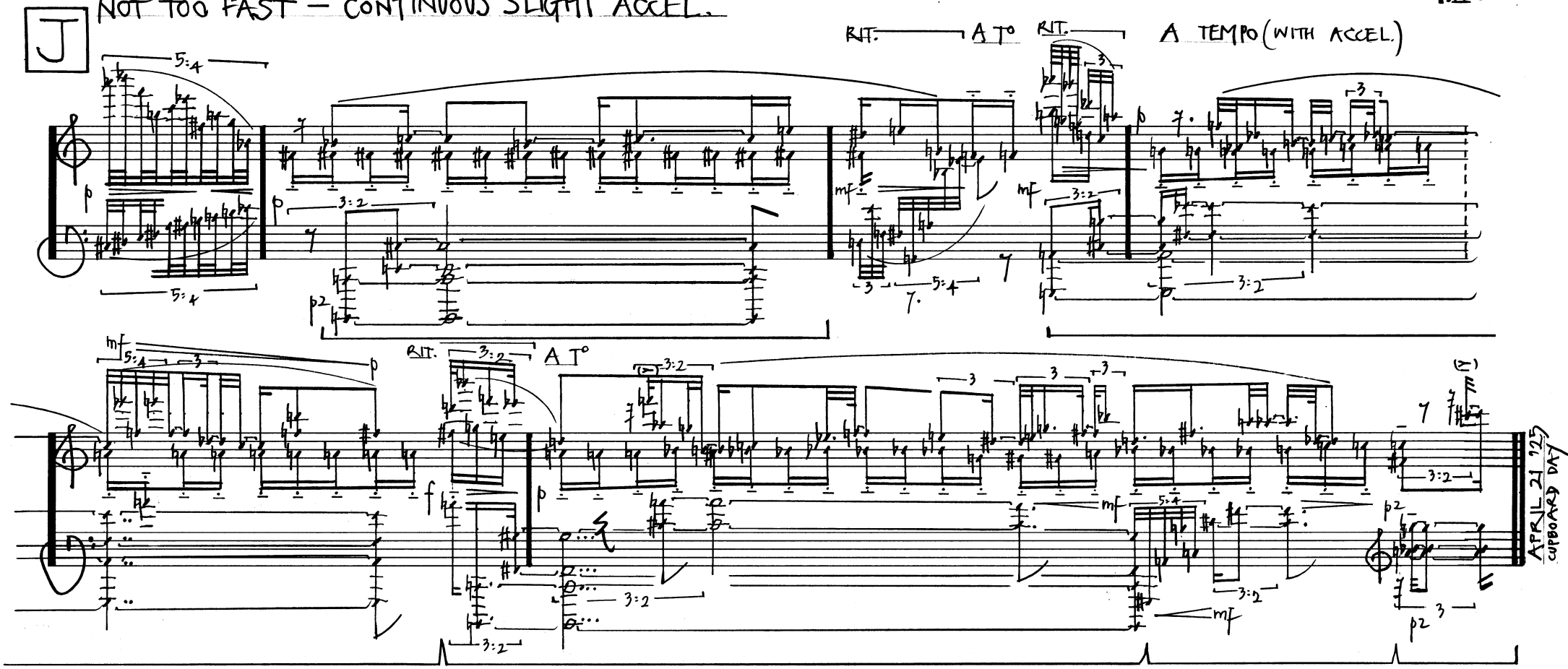
V.II H3



# I SLOW WALKING TEMPO
MUTEDLY

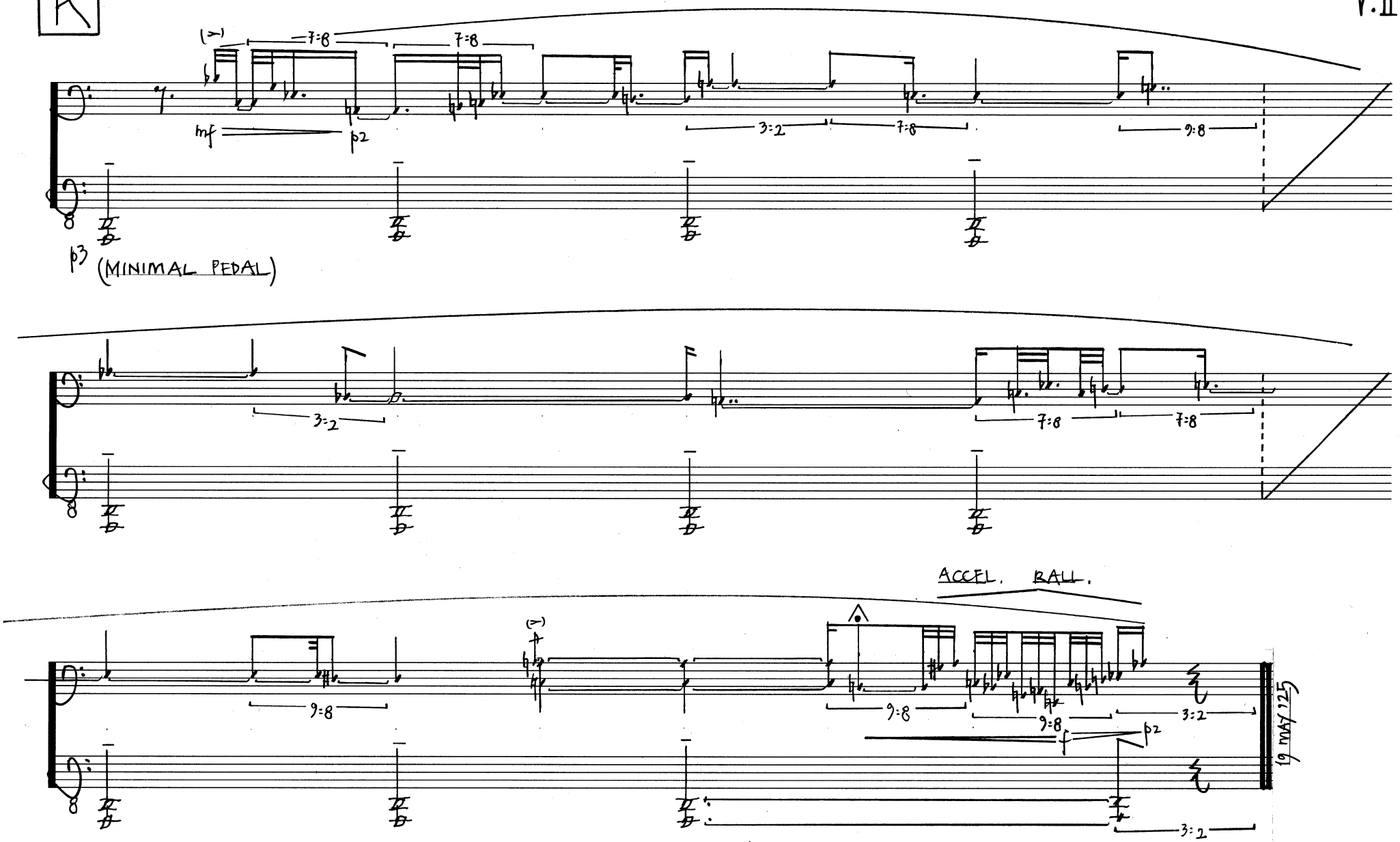



3:2
3:2
p2
3:2
p<mf
p
7:8
5:6
9:8
7:8
p2
7:8
7:8
7:8
p2
7:8
p3
7:8
7:8
7:8
7:8
f
p2
7:8
p3
p4
7:8
5:4
7:8
p3
5:4
7:8
JUNE '25
(FINIS)

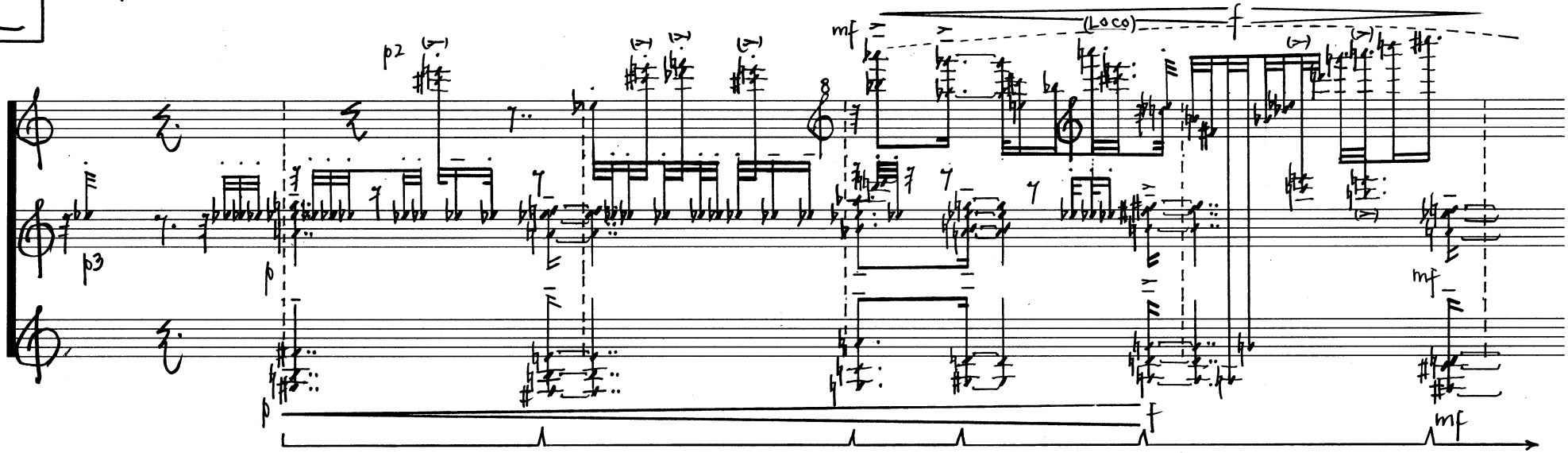

J
NOT TOO FAST — CONTINUOUS SLIGHT ACCEL.
RIT.
A TO
RIT.
A TEMPO (WITH ACCEL.)
RIT.
A TO
APRIL 21 '25
CUPBOARD DAY

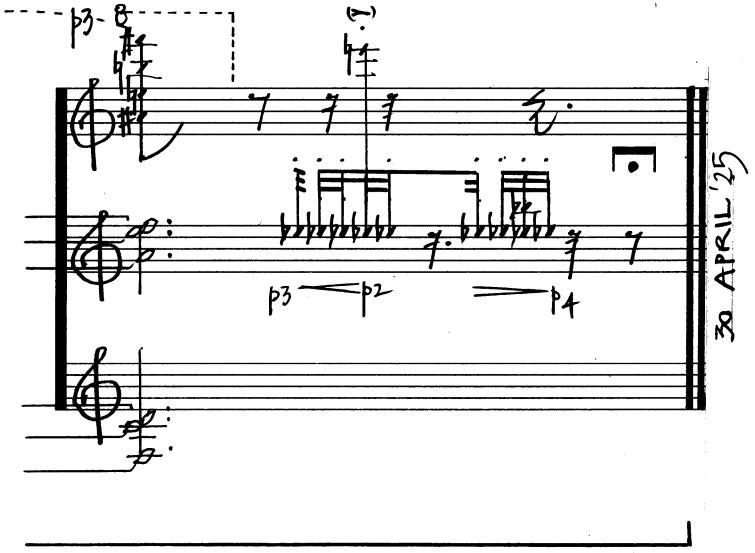
K

# CORTÈGE TEMPO

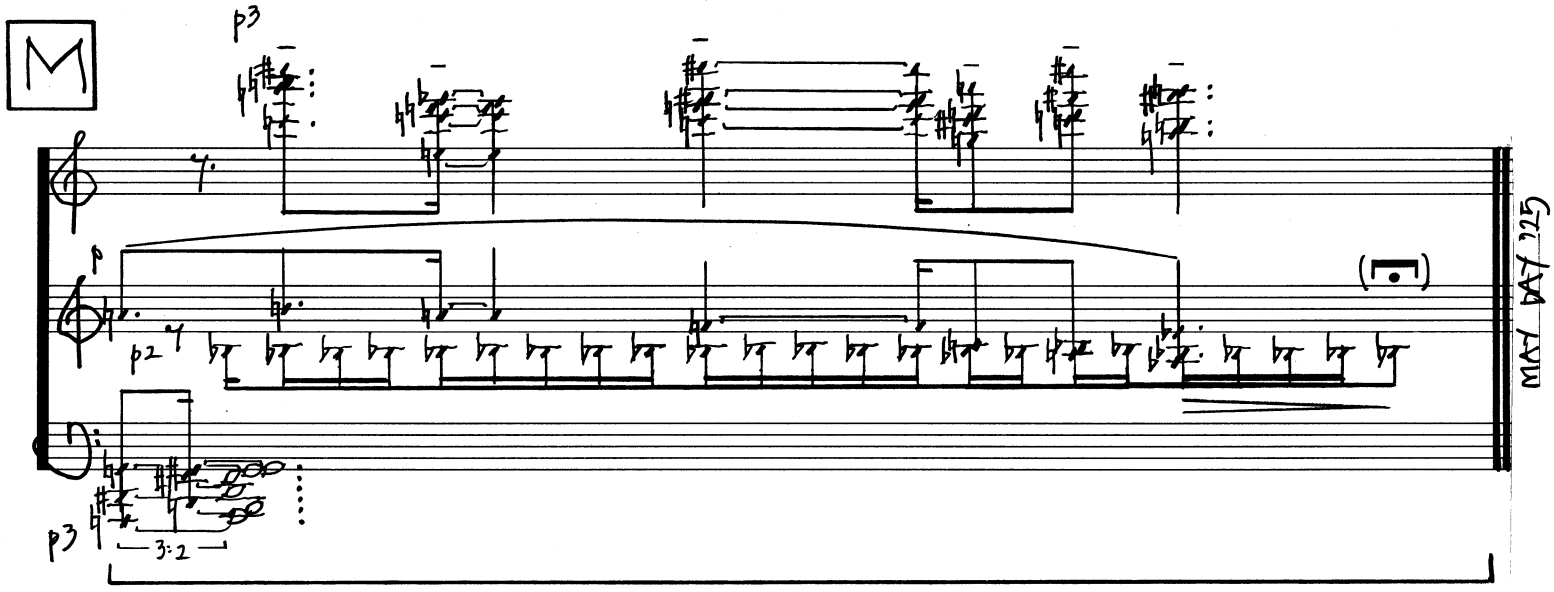


L AGITATED & DEFT



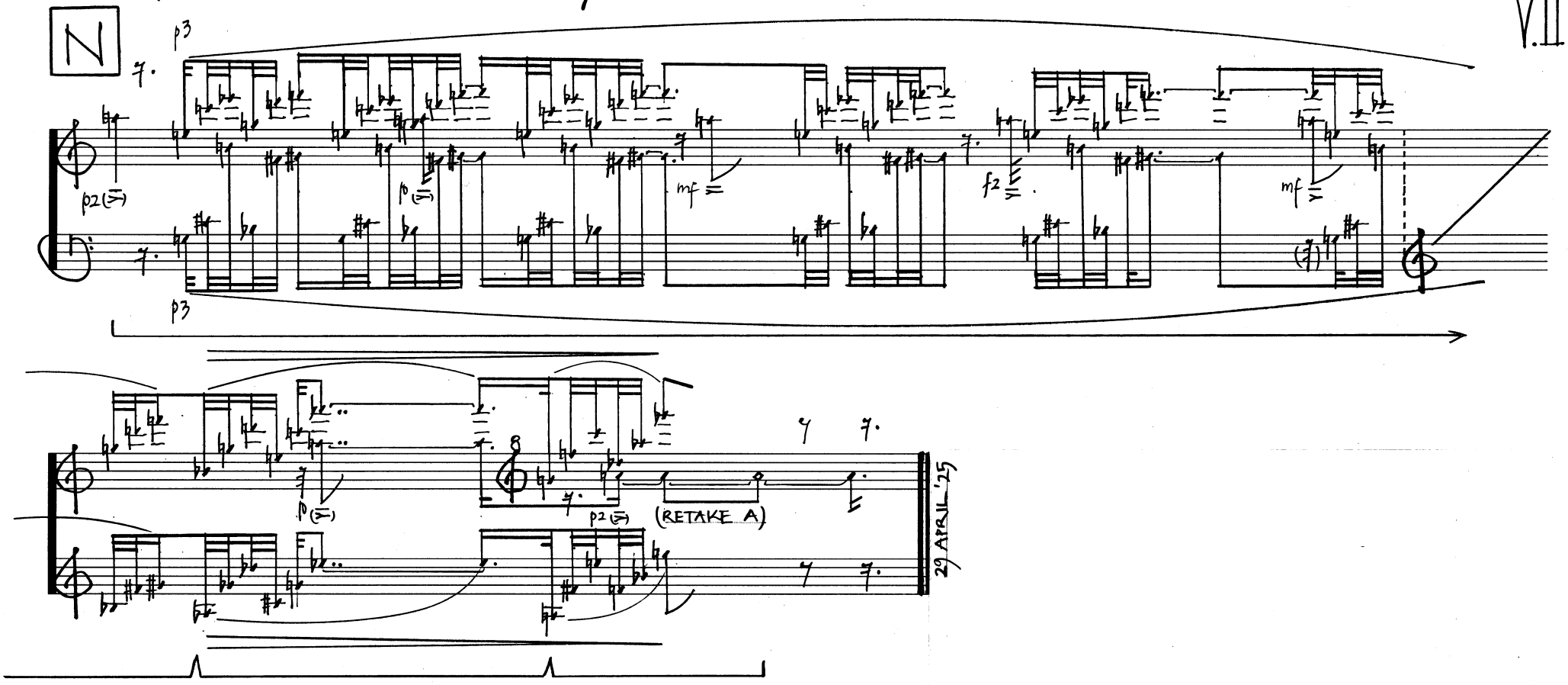



# WALKING PACE — EERILY



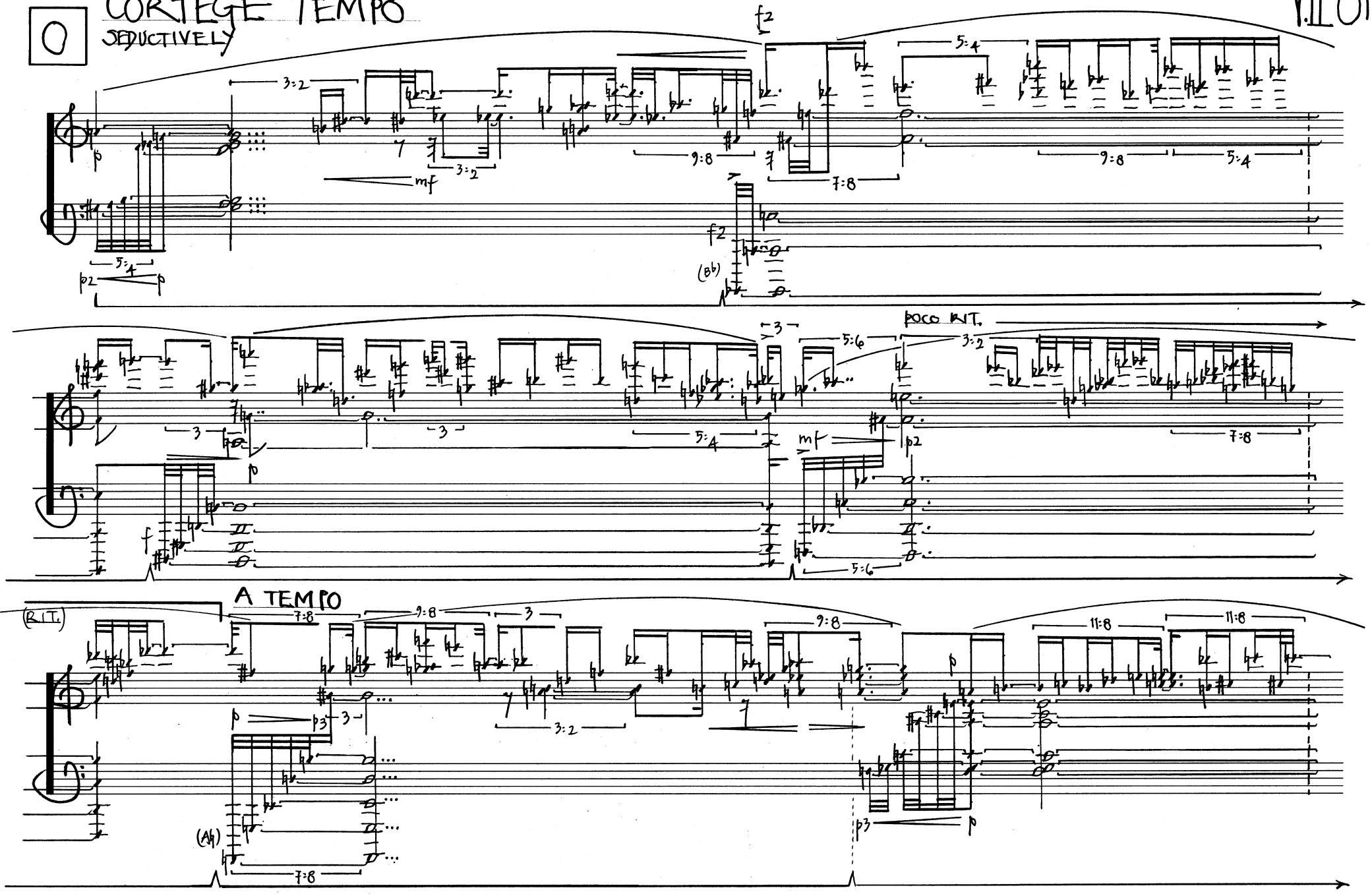
N

NOT TOO FAST — DREAMILY

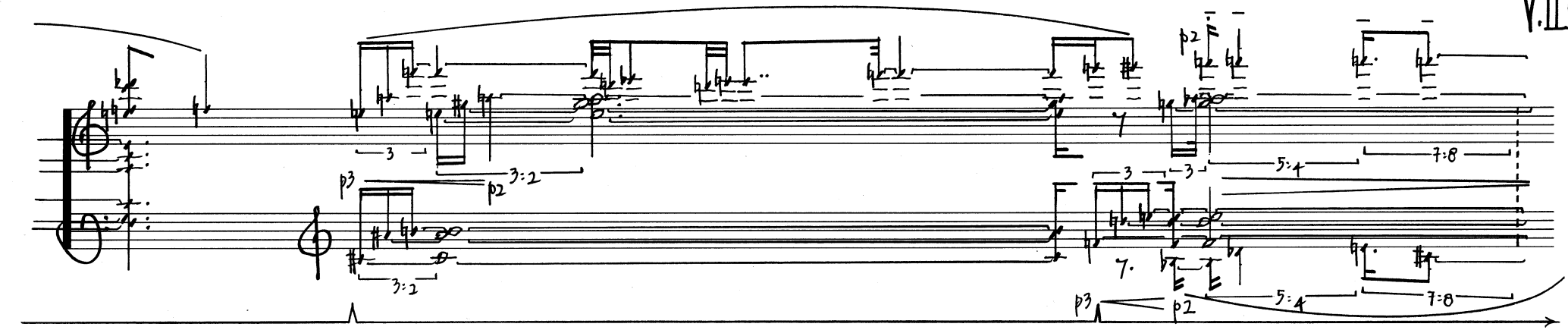


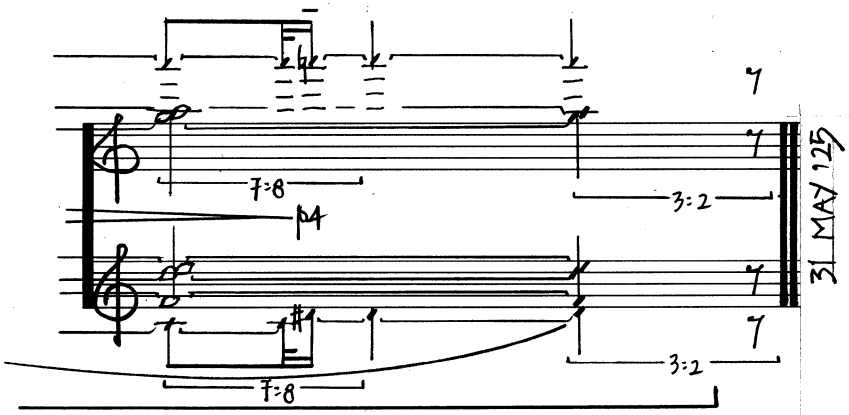
# CORTÈGE TEMPO

SEDUCTIVELY

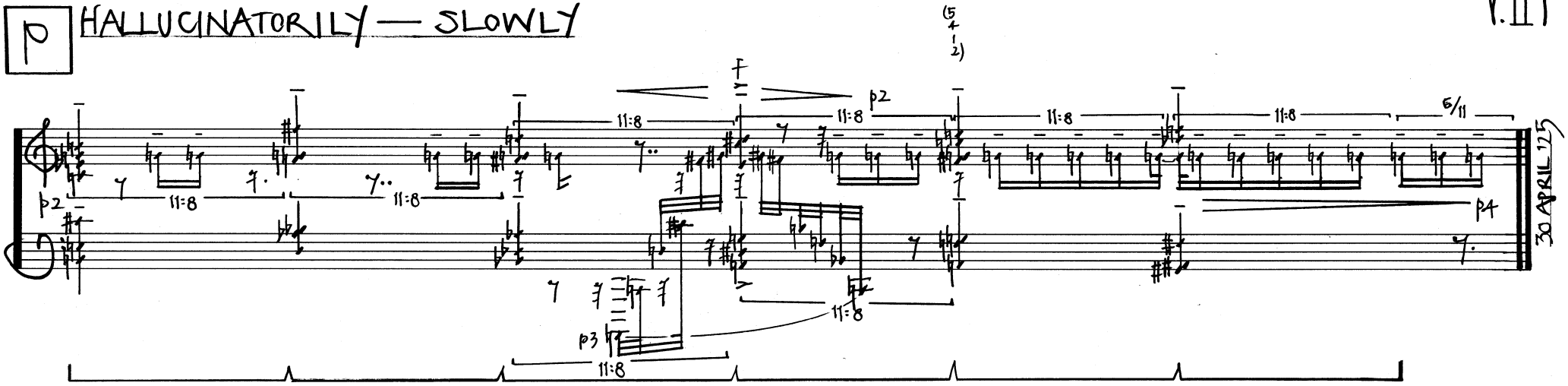


V.II 02



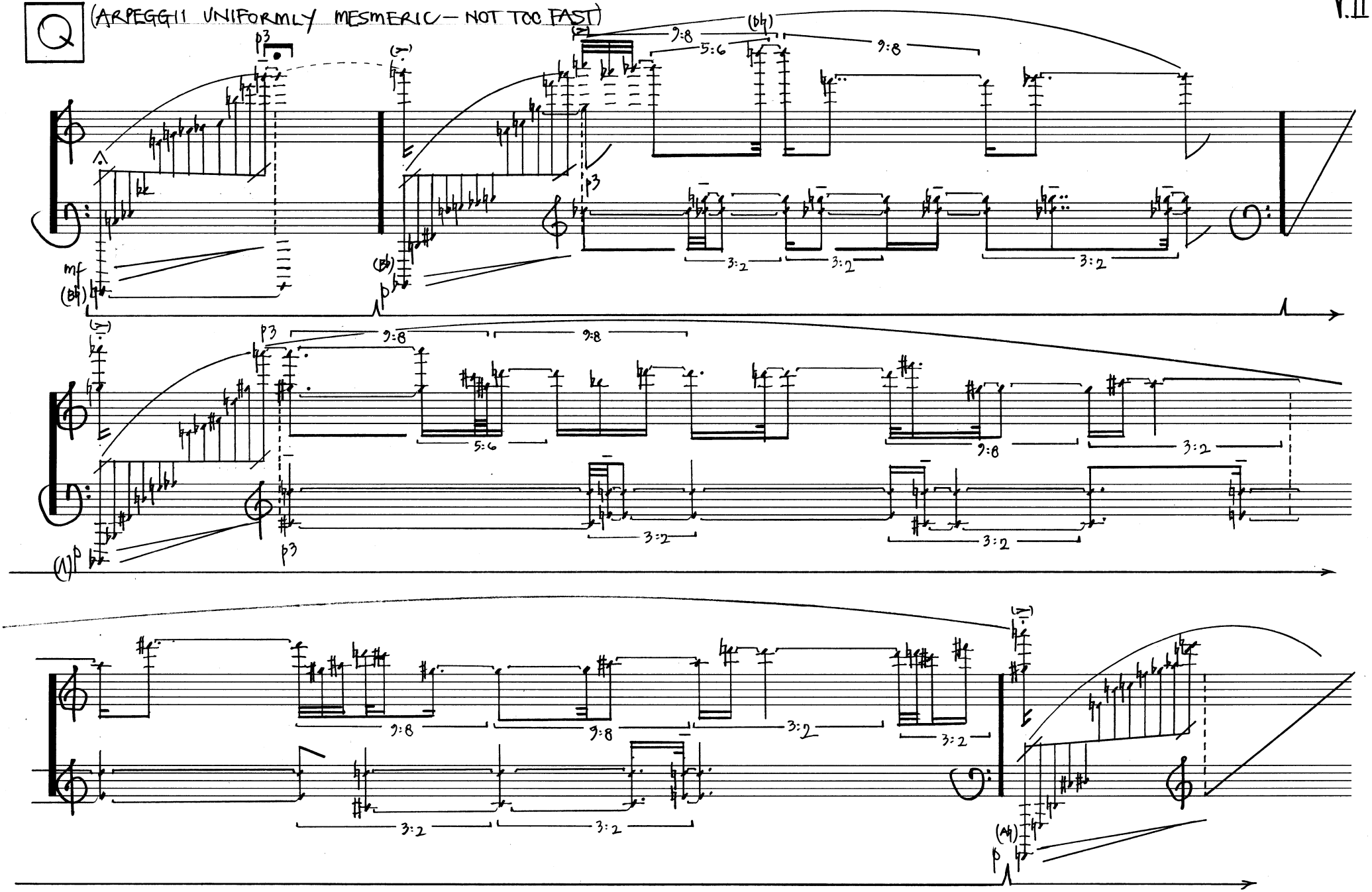
P HALLUCINATORILY — SLOWLY



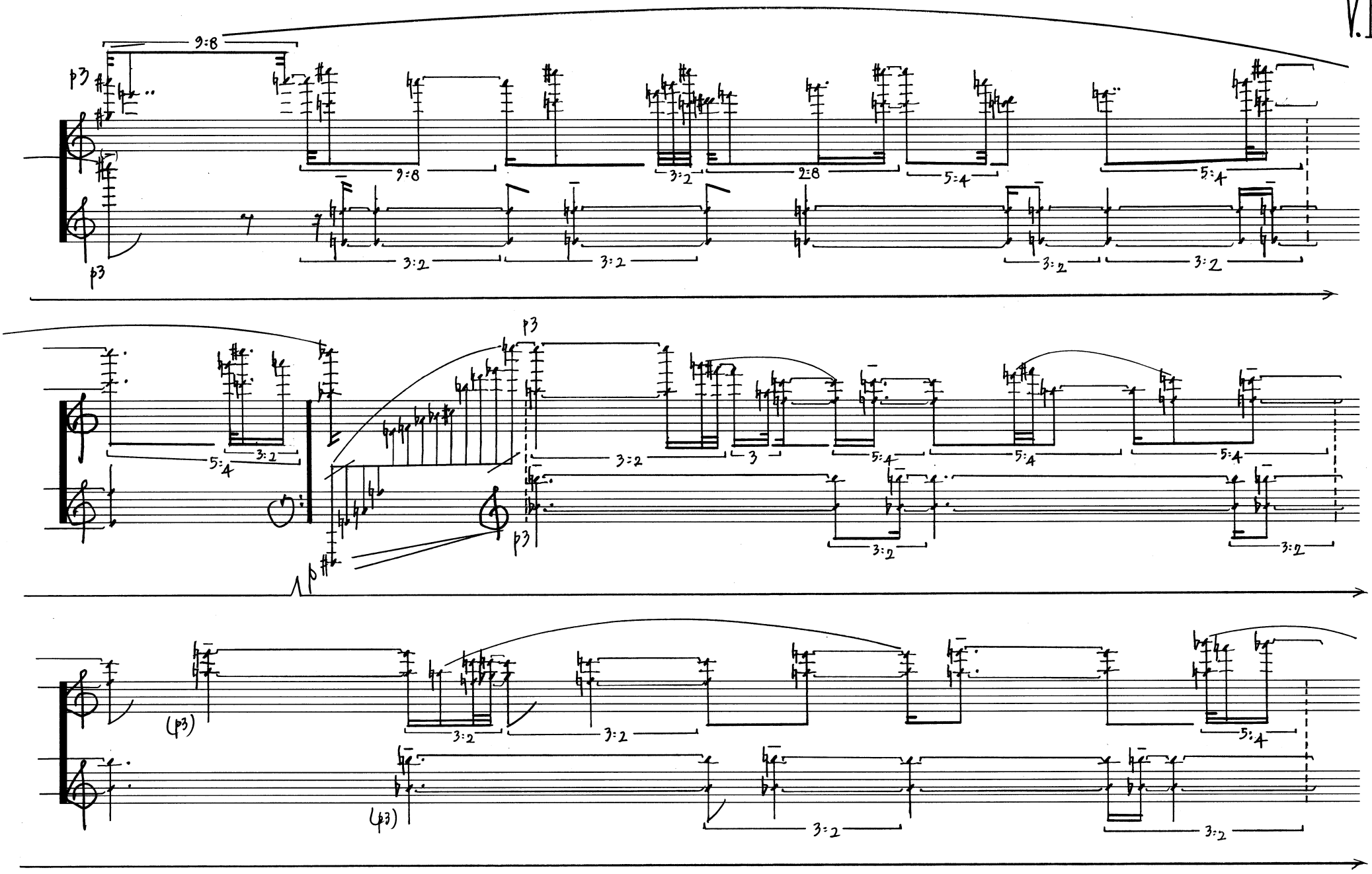
# VERY SLOW WALKING TEMPO — BLEAKLY

Q

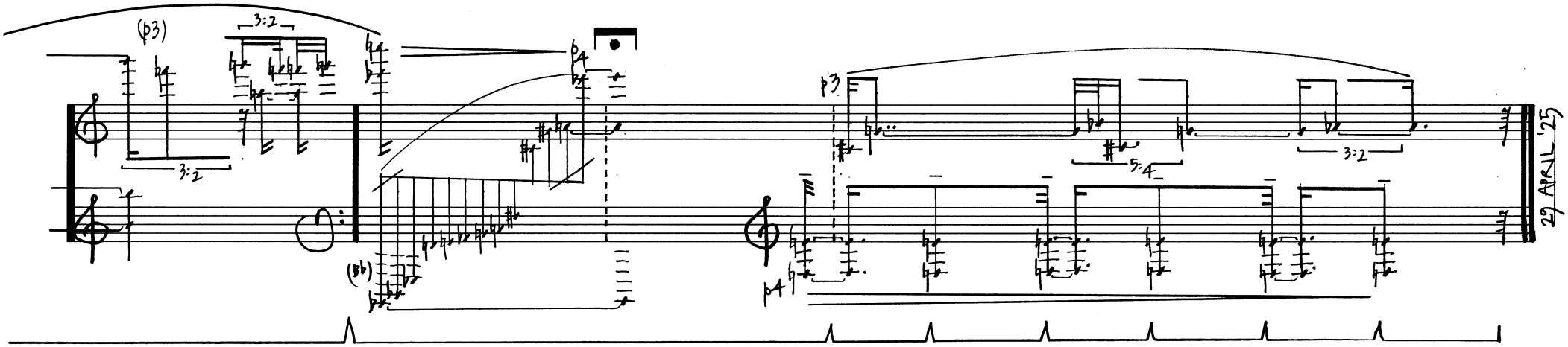
(ARPEGGII UNIFORMLY MESMERIC — NOT TOO FAST)

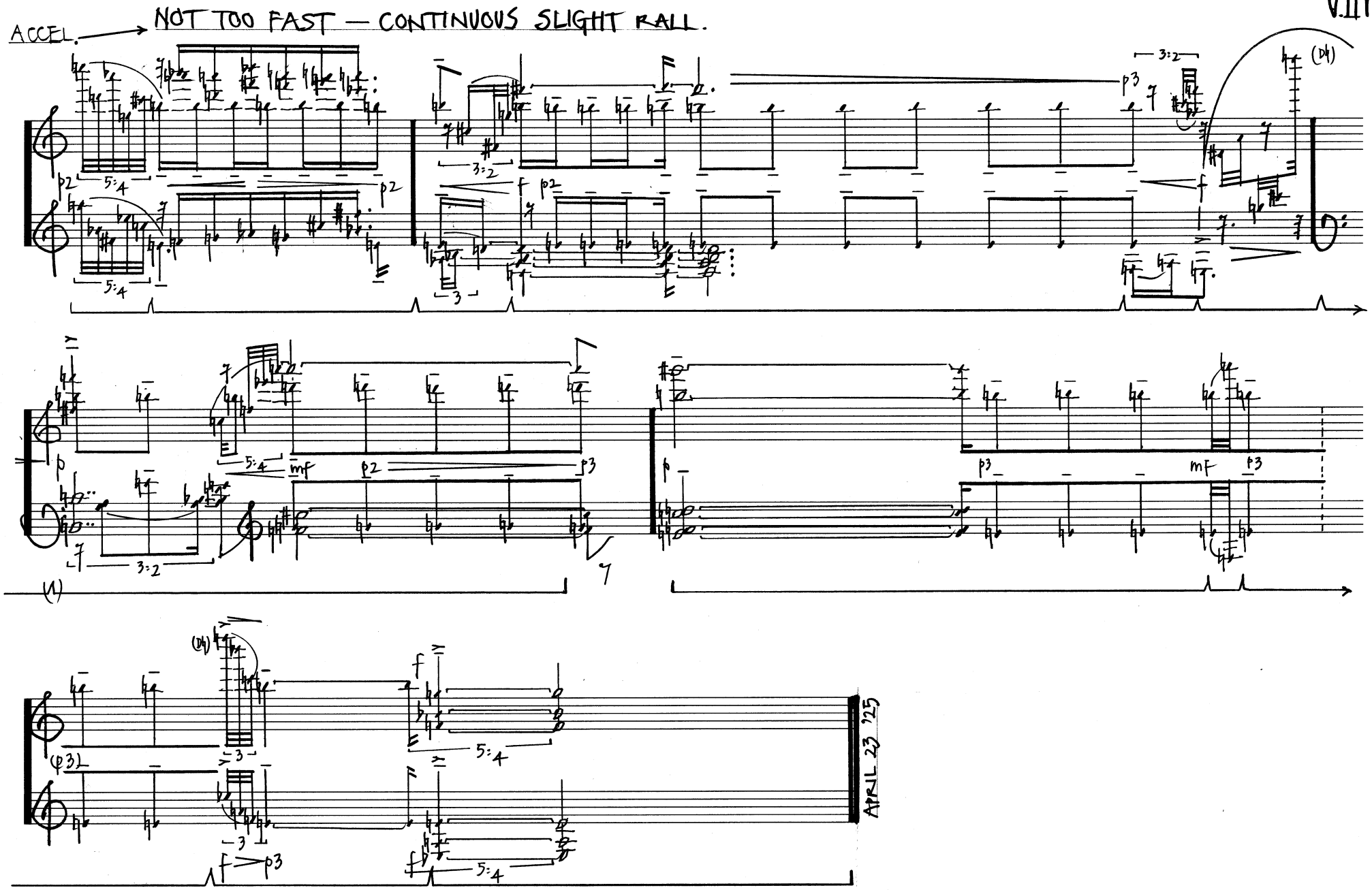


V.II Q2



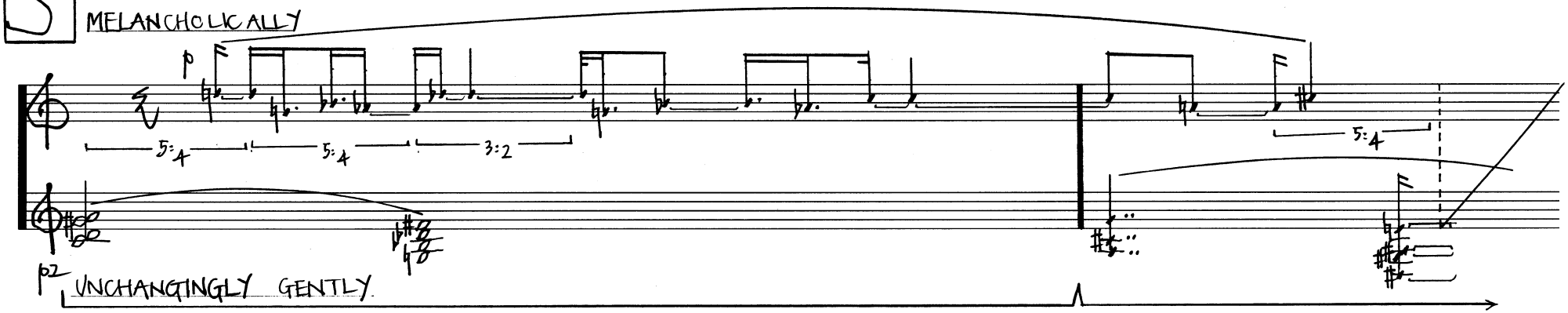
V.IIQ3

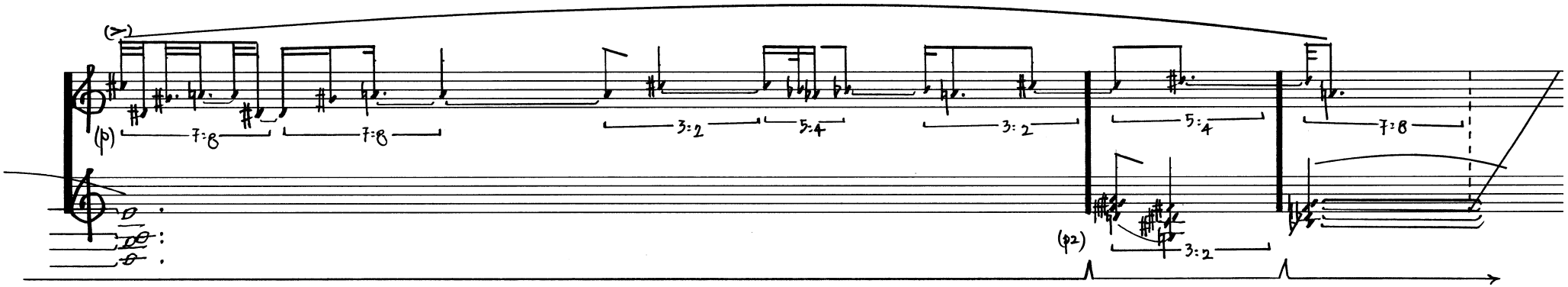



ACCEL.
NOT TOO FAST — CONTINUOUS SLIGHT RALL.
APRIL 23 '25

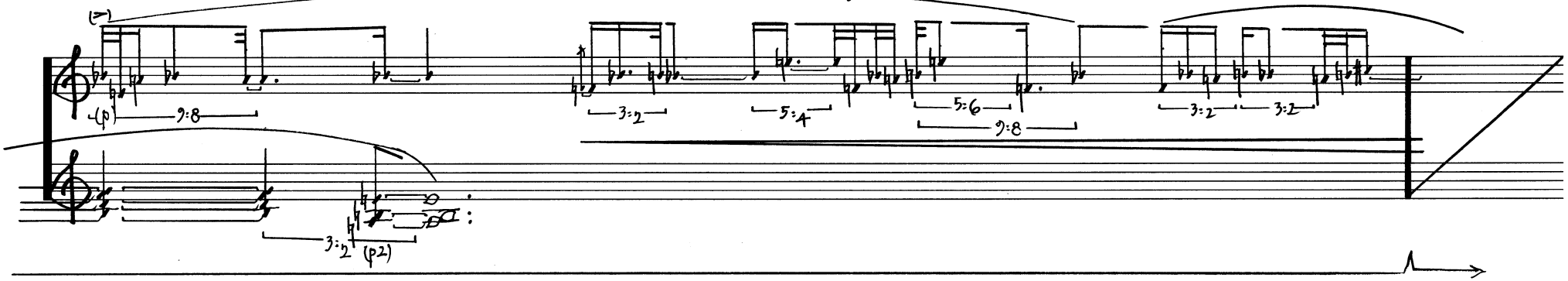
S SLOW WALKING TEMPO

MELANCHOLICALLY



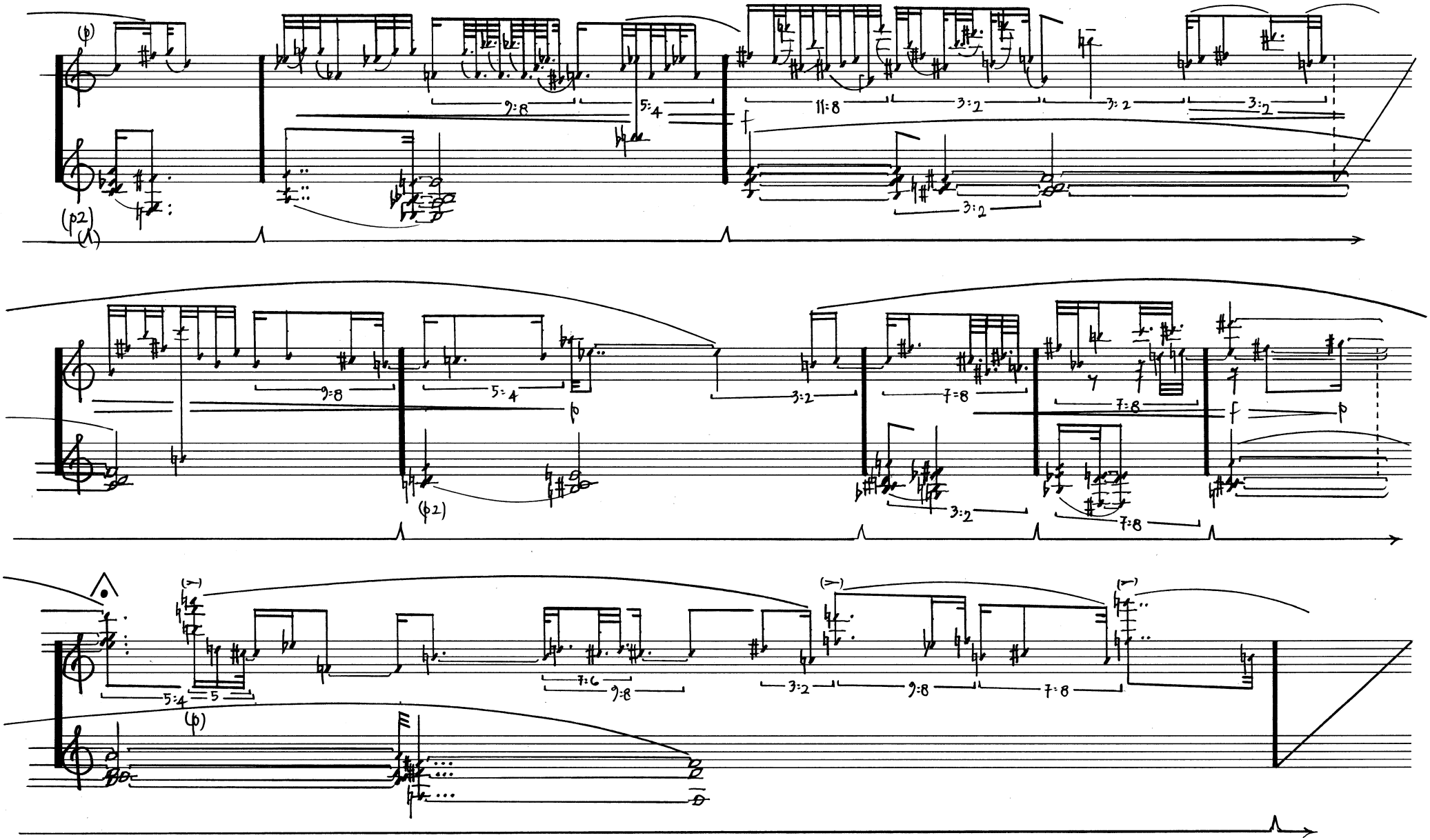



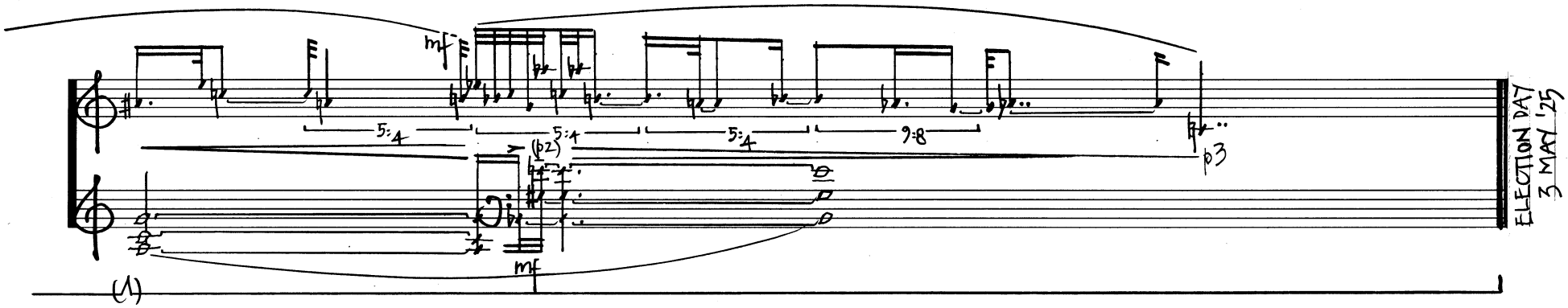

BECOMING AGITATED



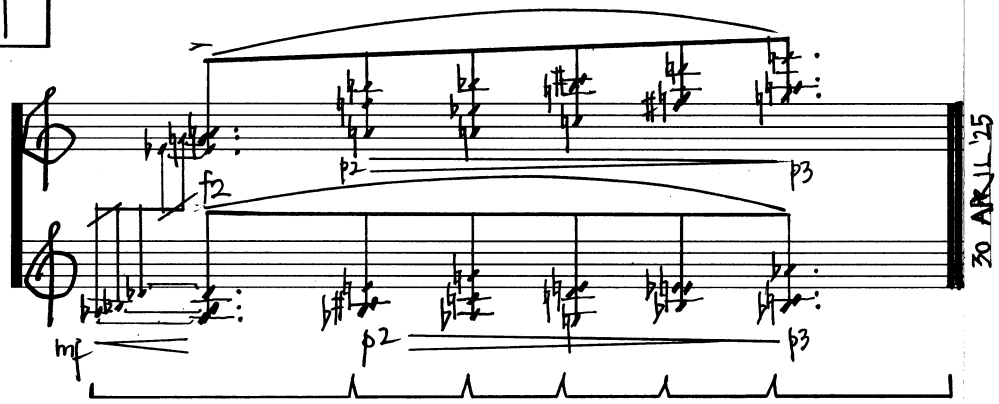
UNEASY—RUBATO

SETTLING



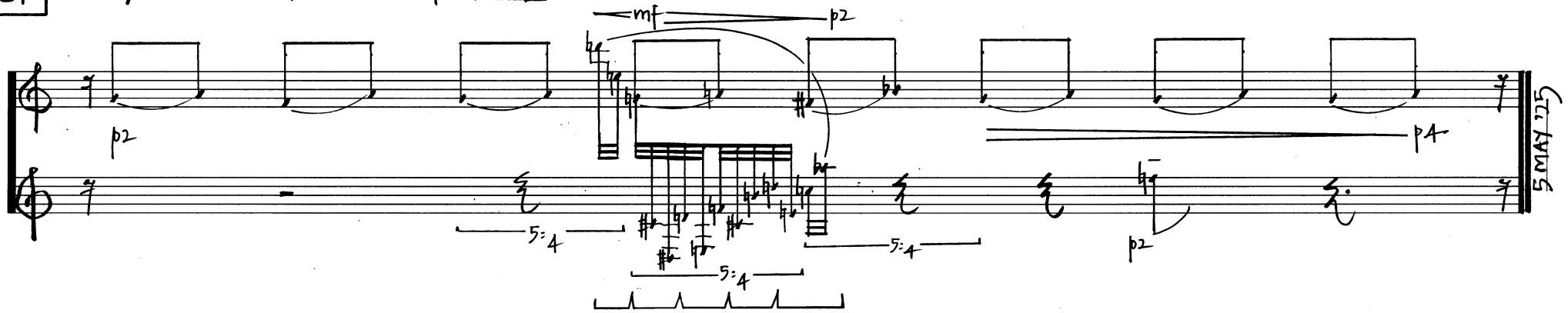

mf
5:4
5:4
5:4
9:8
(pz)
p3
mf
(1)
ELECTION DAY
3 MAY '25

T SPACIOUSLY



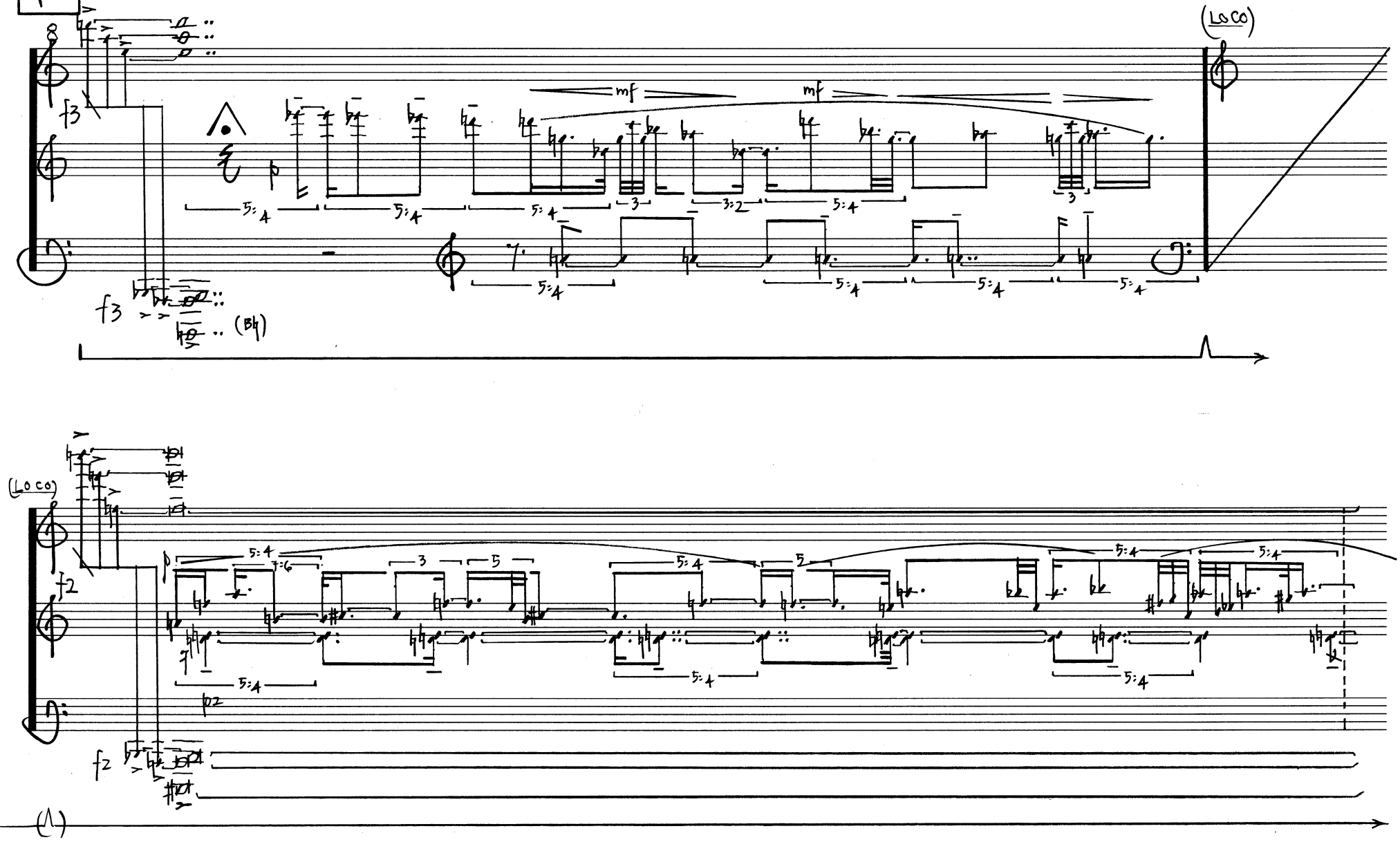

V.II T

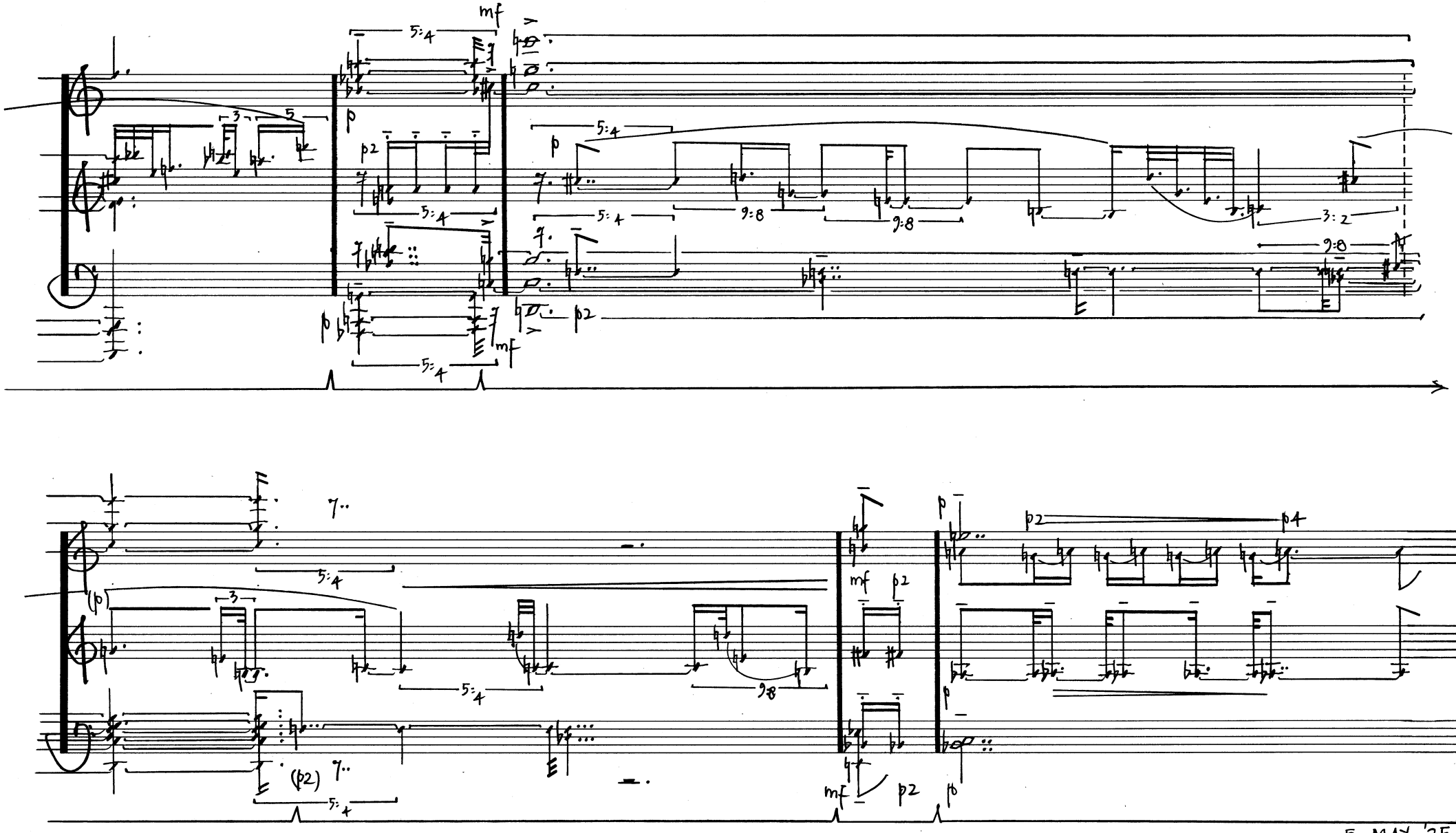
U VERY SLOW WALKING PACE



# CORTÈGE TEMPO

V

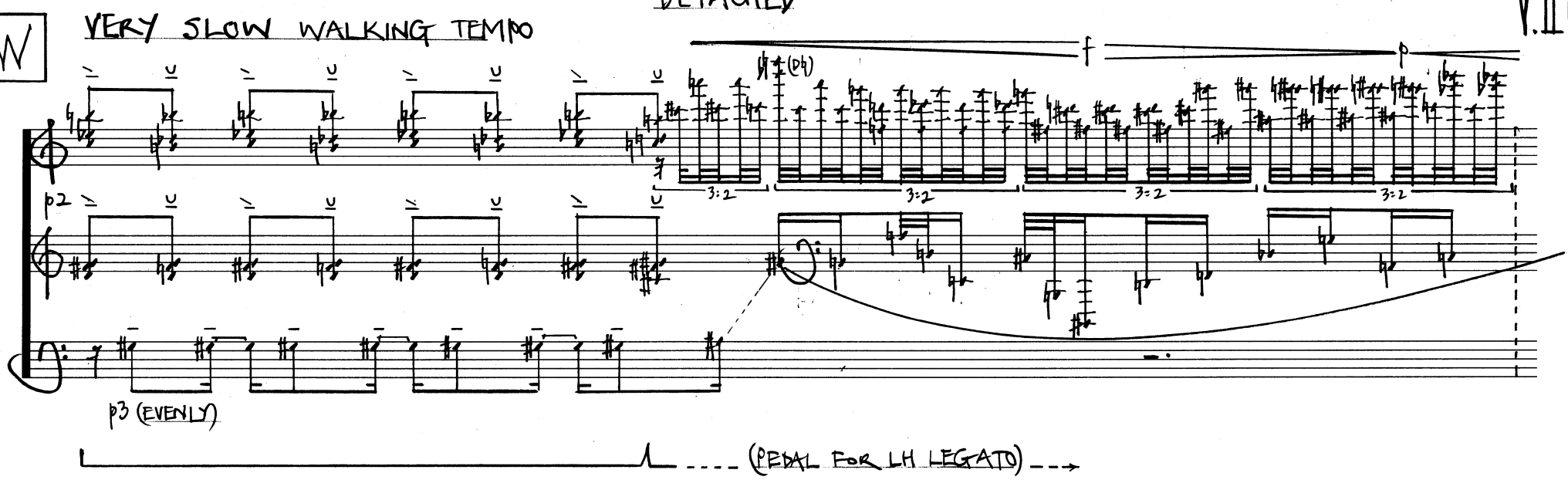



mf
5:4
p
p2
3
5
9:8
3:2
(p)
(p2)
p4
5 MAY '25

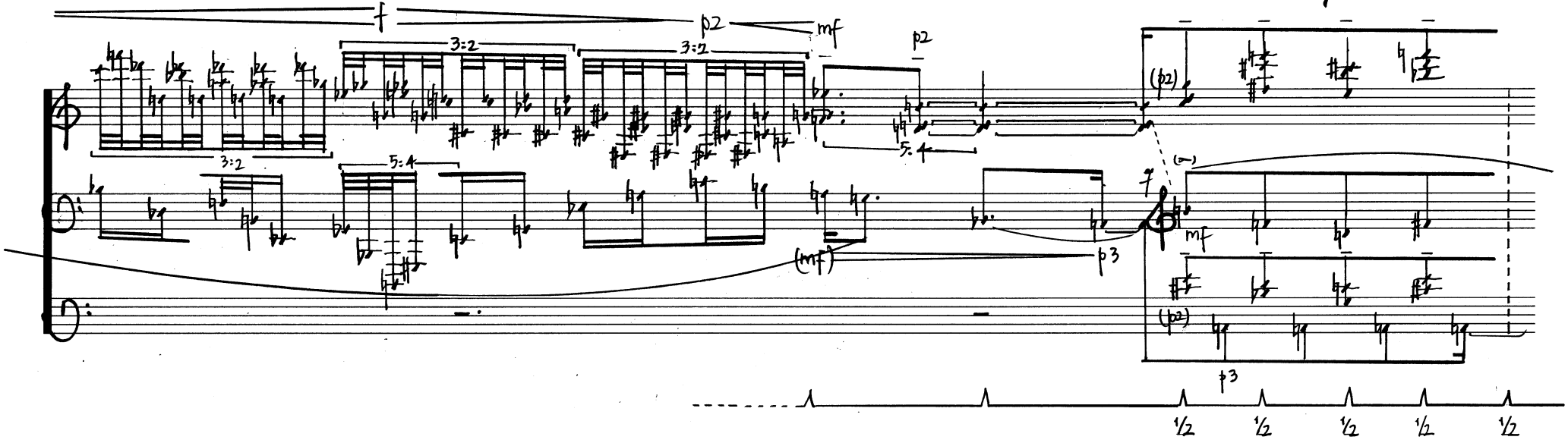
W

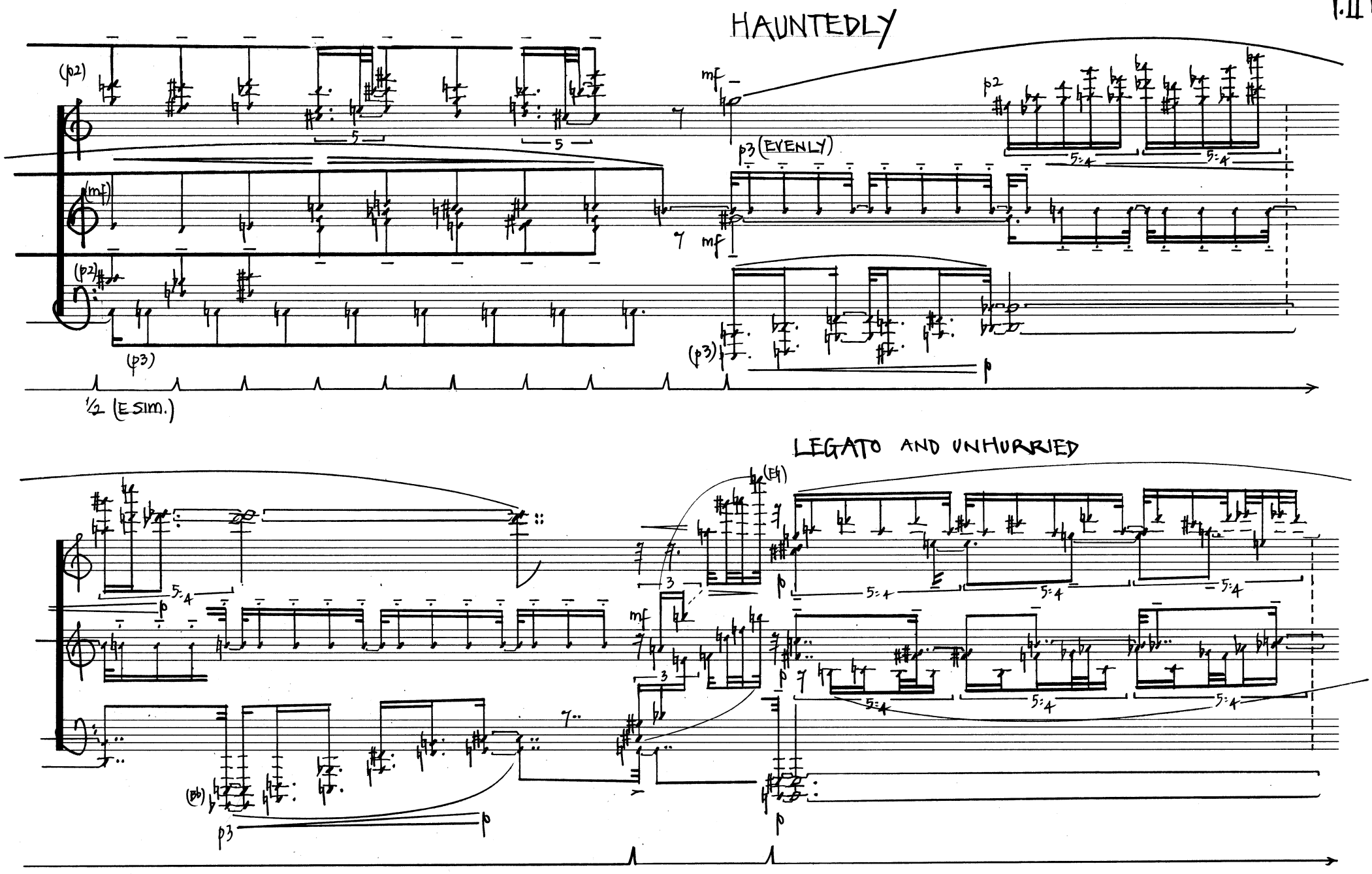
VERY SLOW WALKING TEMPO

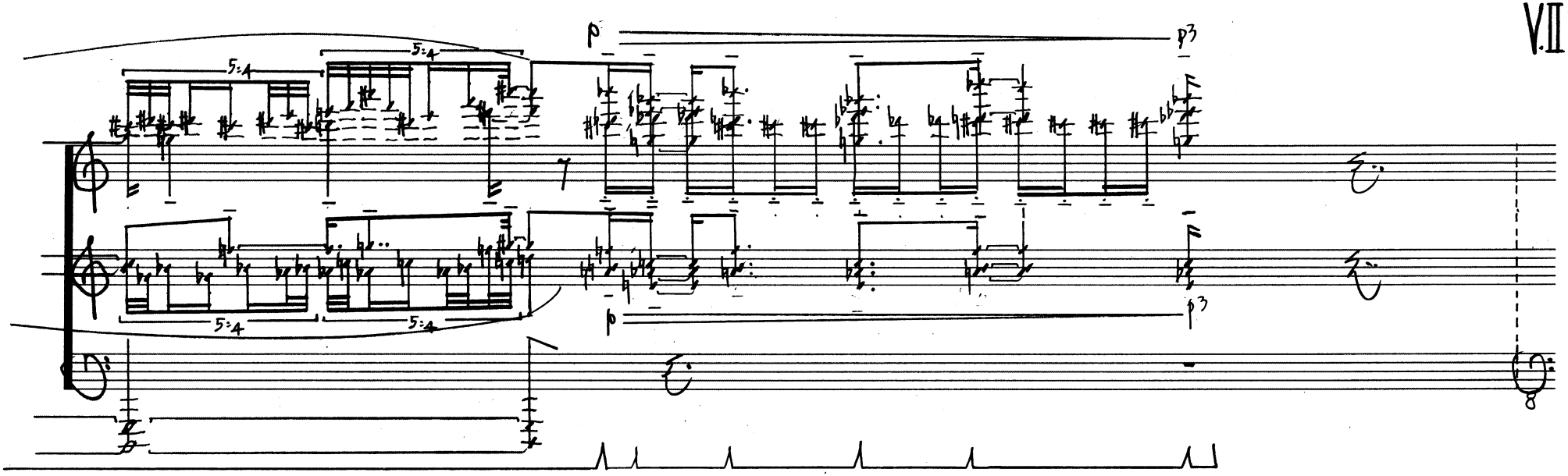
DELICATE, DETACHED

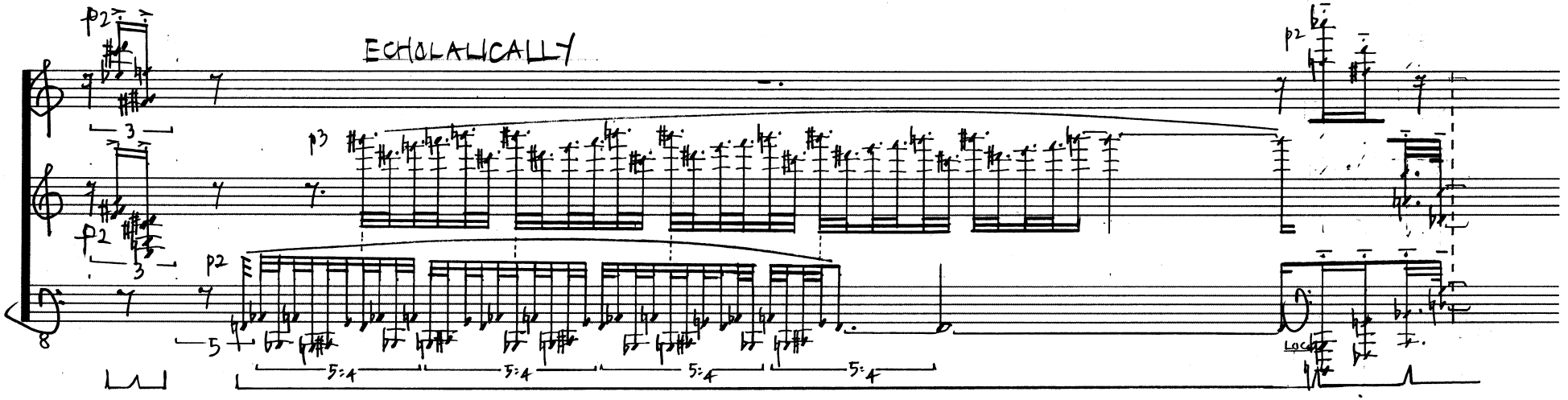


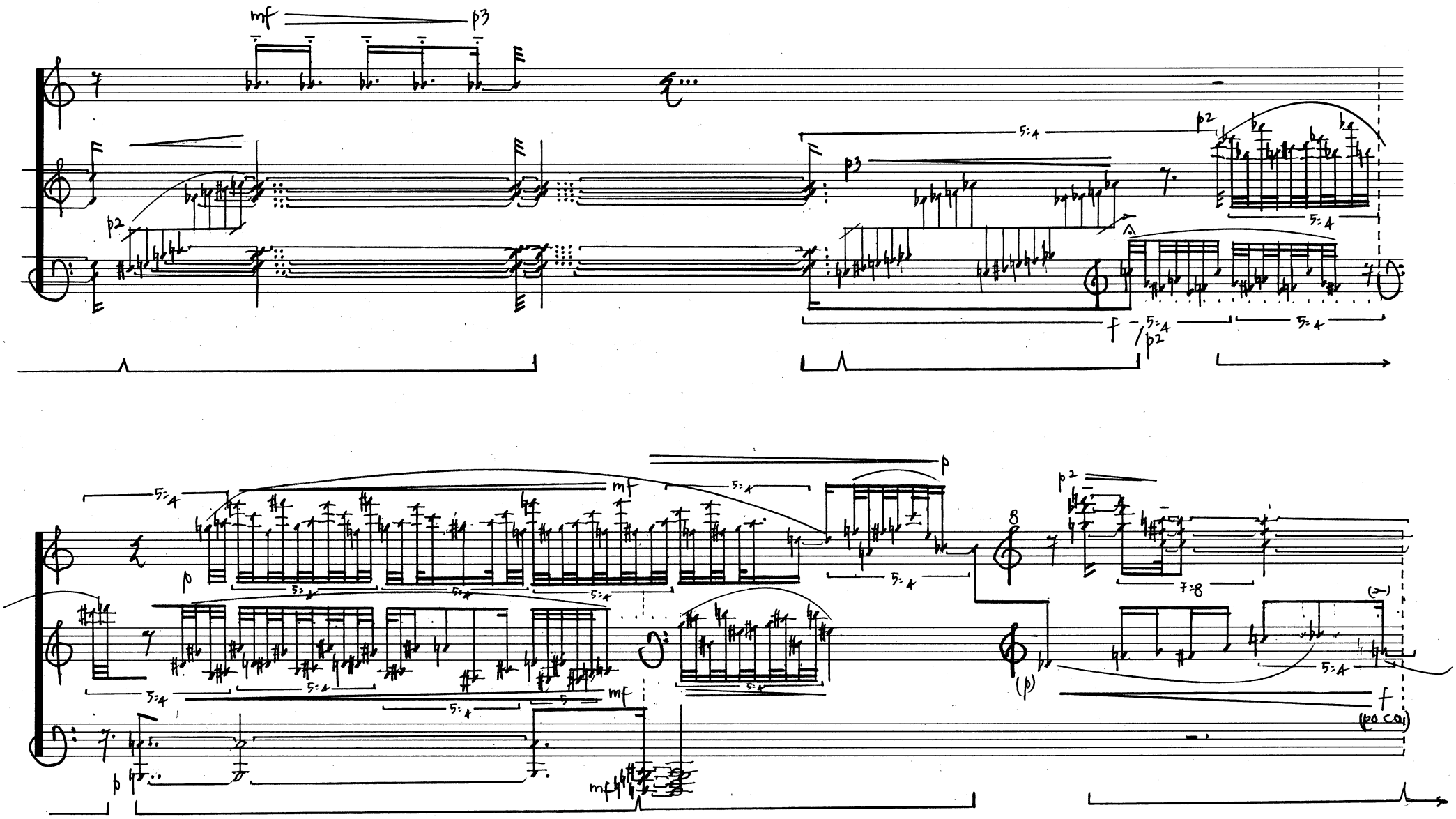

DREAMILY

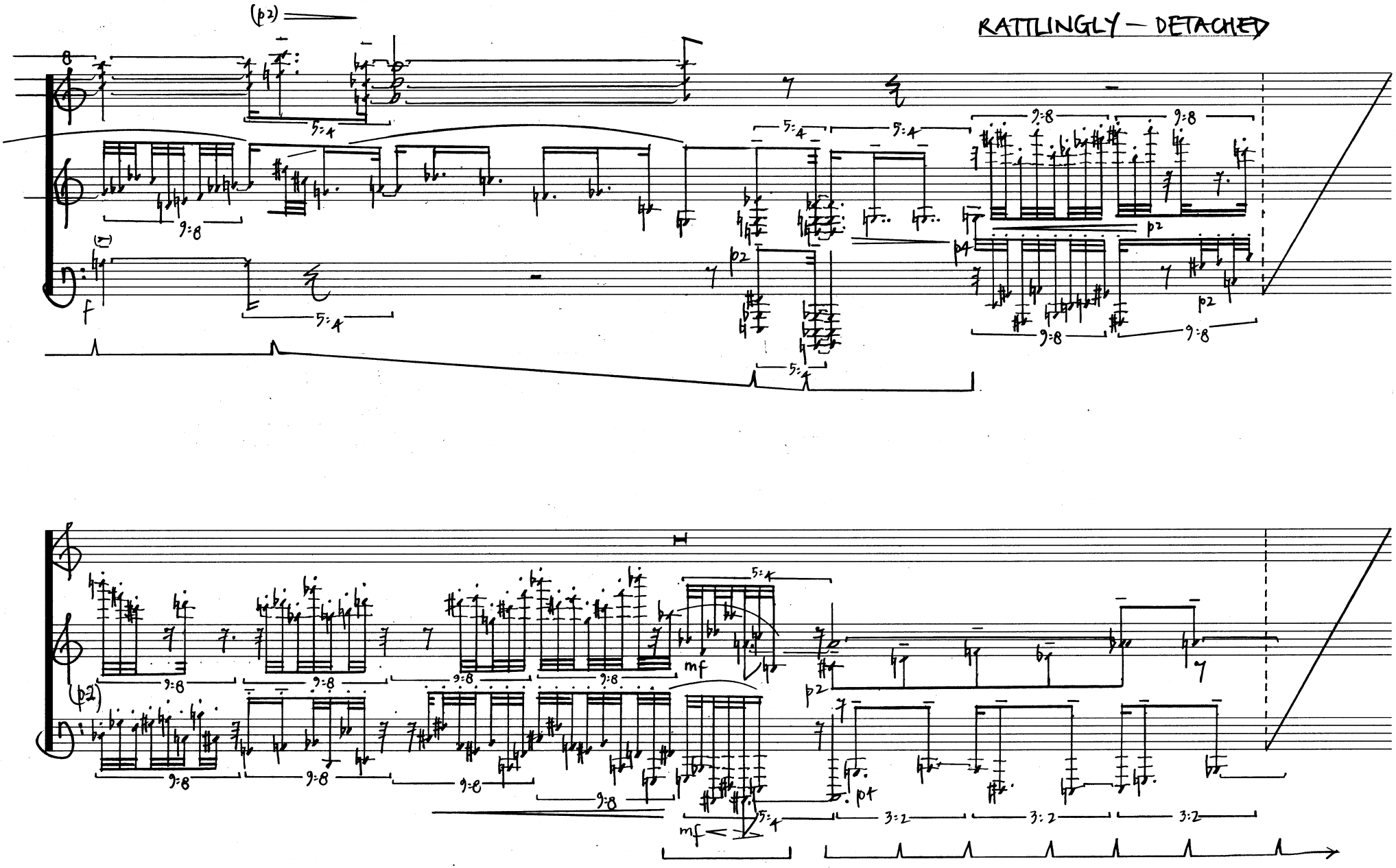


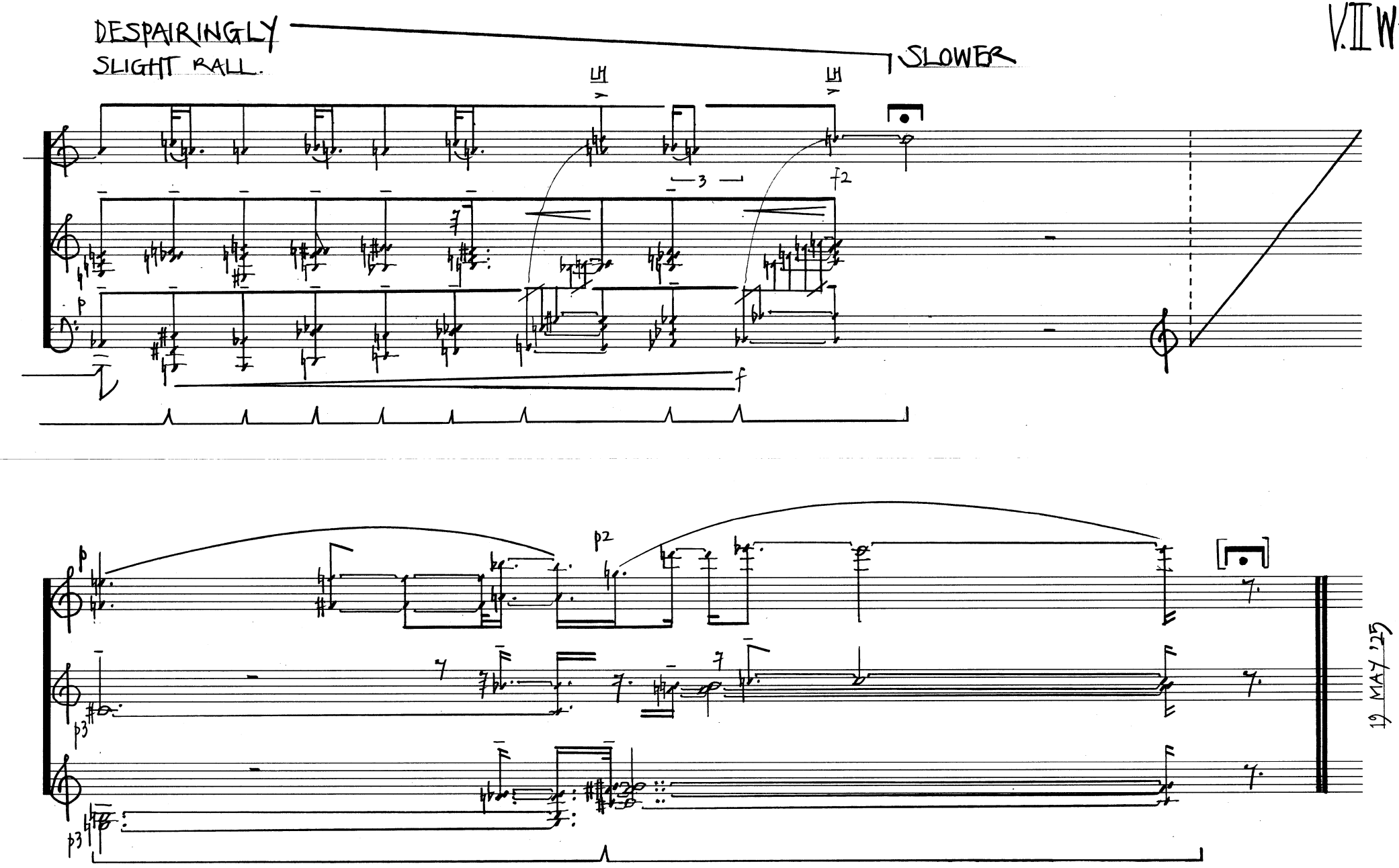

HAUNTEDLY
(p2)
(mf)
(p2)
(p3)
mf
p3 (EVENLY)
mf
p2
(p3)
p
1/2 (E SIM.)
LEGATO AND UNHURRIED
(Eb)
mf
(Bb)
p3
p
p


p
p3
5:4
5:4
5:4
5:4
p
p3

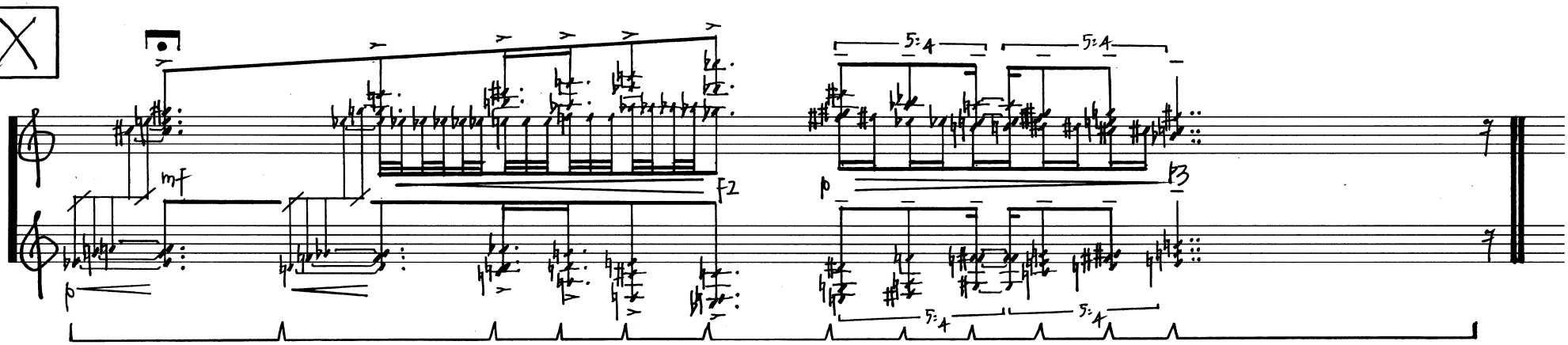

ECHOLALICALLY
p2
3
p2
3
p3
p2
5
5:4
5:4
5:4
5:4
p2
Loco

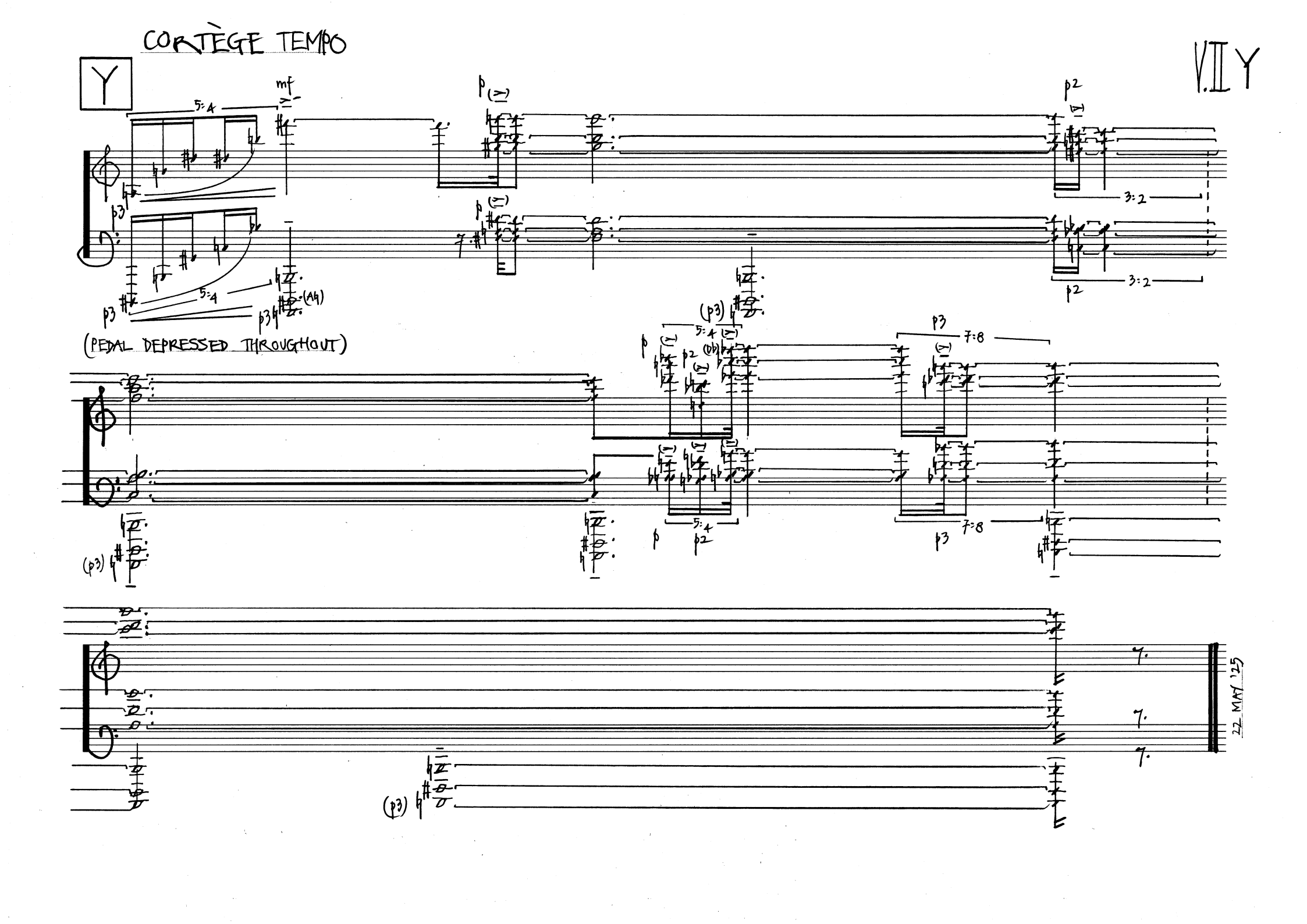

mf
p3
p2
5:4
f
mf
p
7:8
(p)
(poco)


RATTLINGLY — DETACHED
(p2)
8
f
5:4
9:8
p2
p4
mf
3:2


DESPAIRINGLY
SLIGHT RALL.
SLOWER
LH
LH
3
f2
p
f
p
p2
p3
p3
19 MAY '25

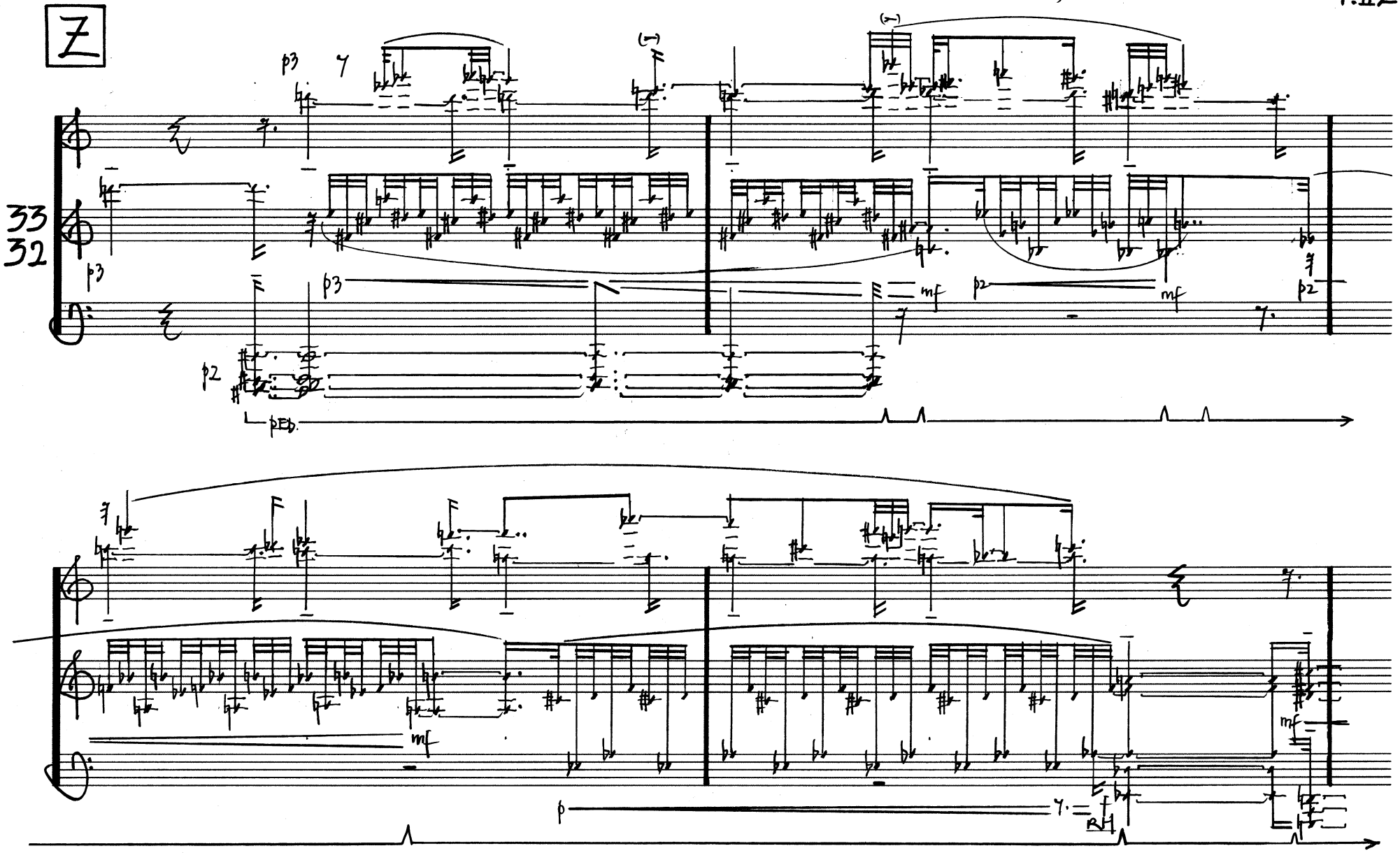
X

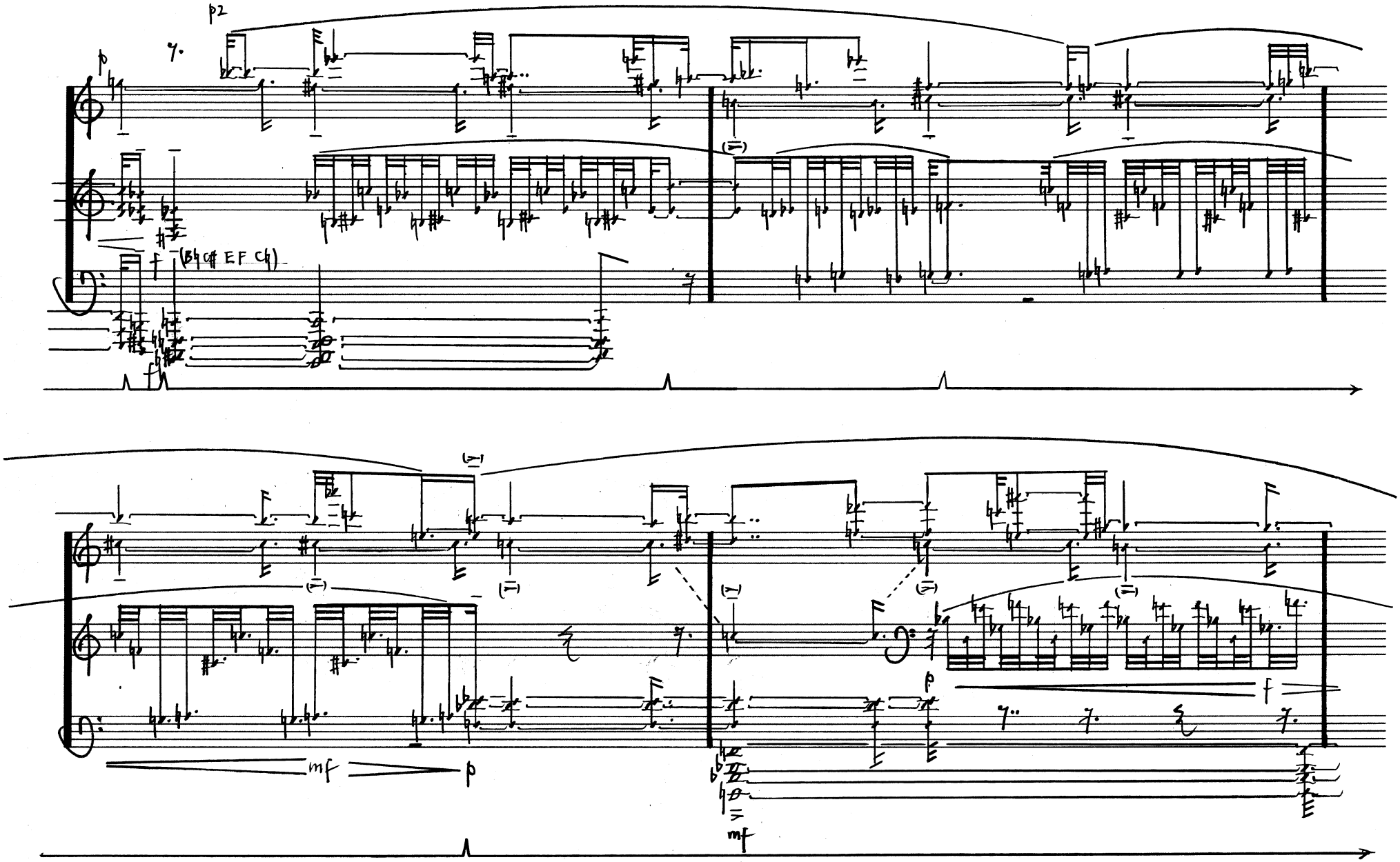


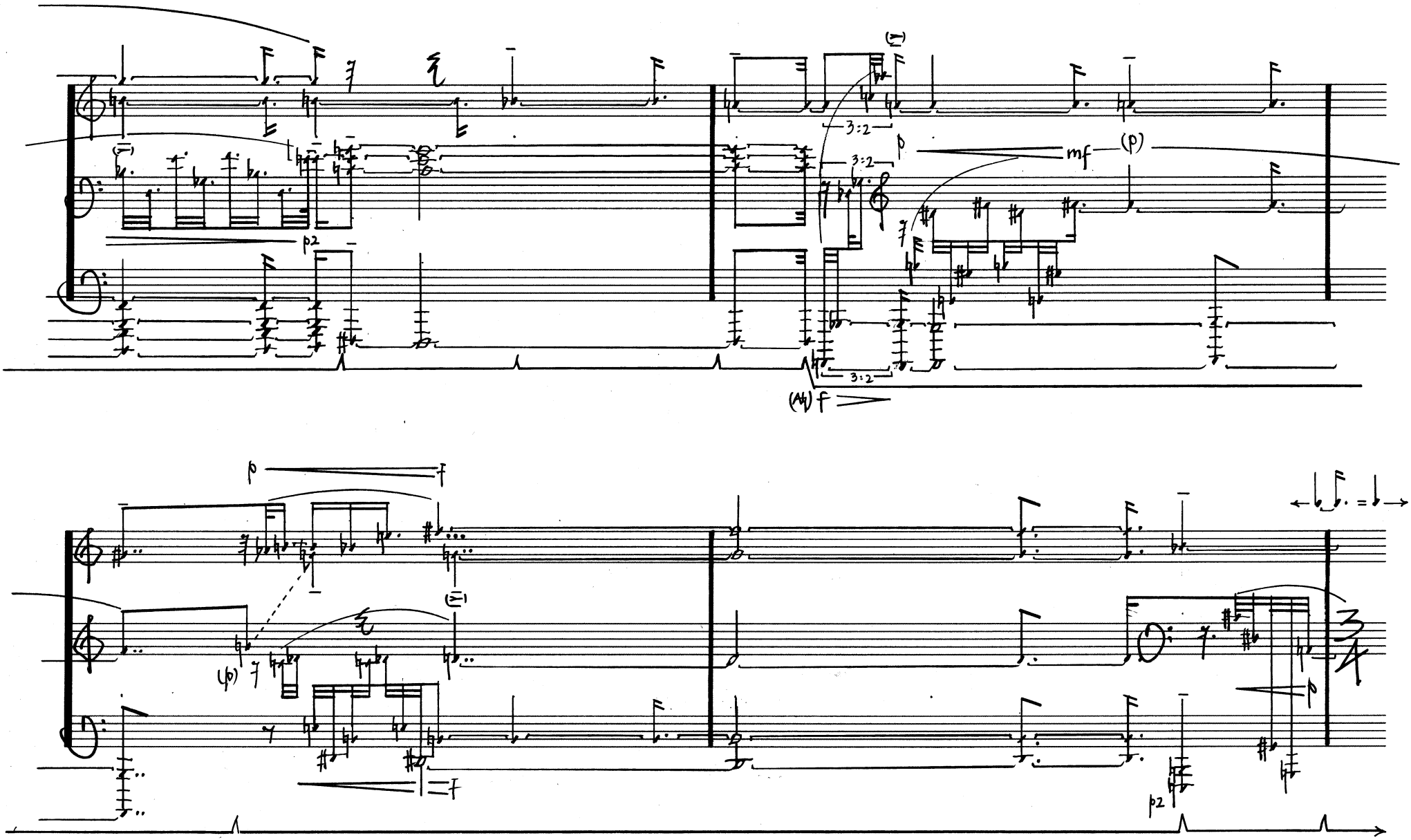

CORTÈGE TEMPO
Y
V.II Y
mf
5:4
p3
(PEDAL DEPRESSED THROUGHOUT)
p
p2
3:2
(p3)
7:8
22 MAY '25

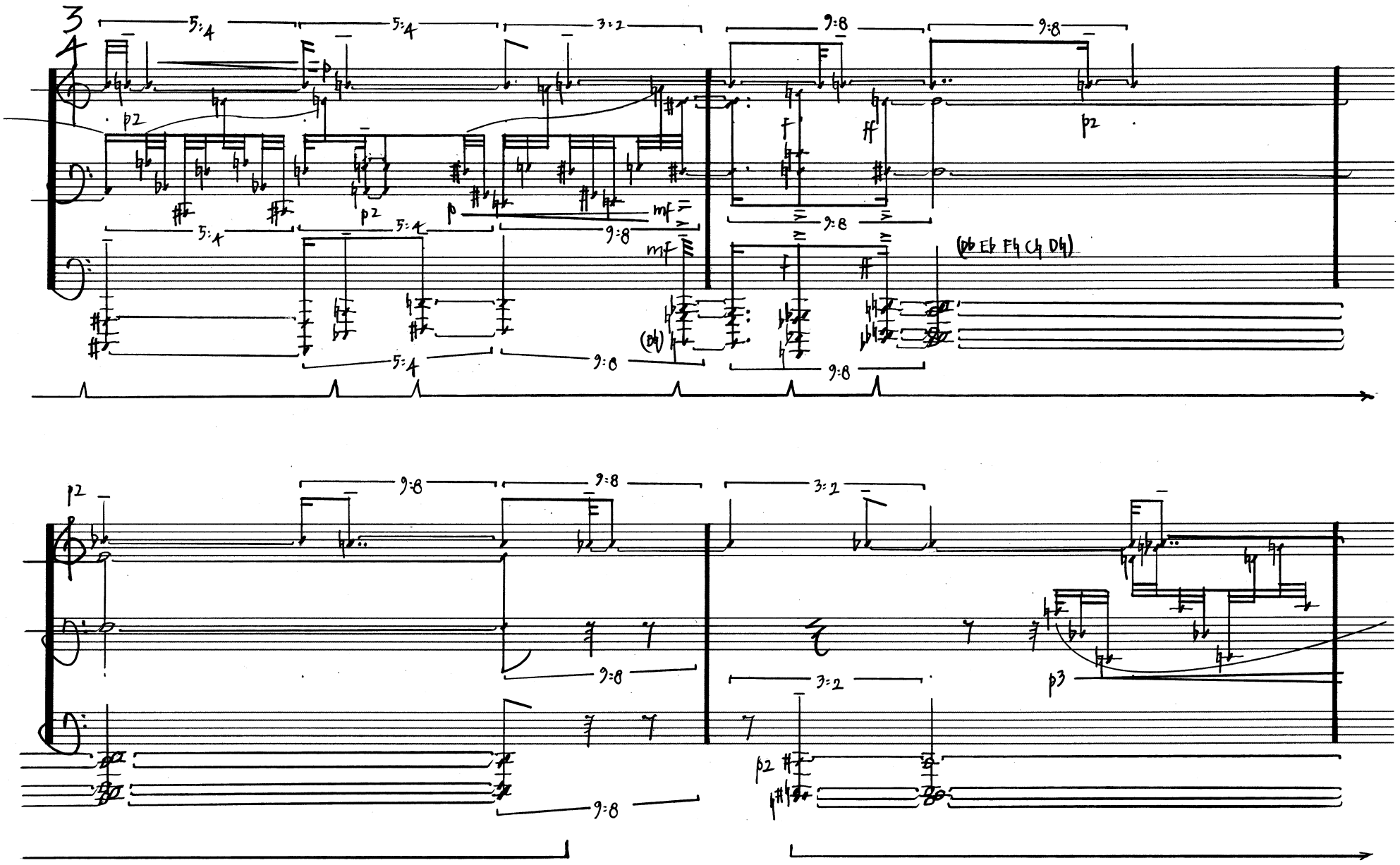
BLEAKLY — VERY SLOW WALKING TEMPO (SLOWER THAN A)

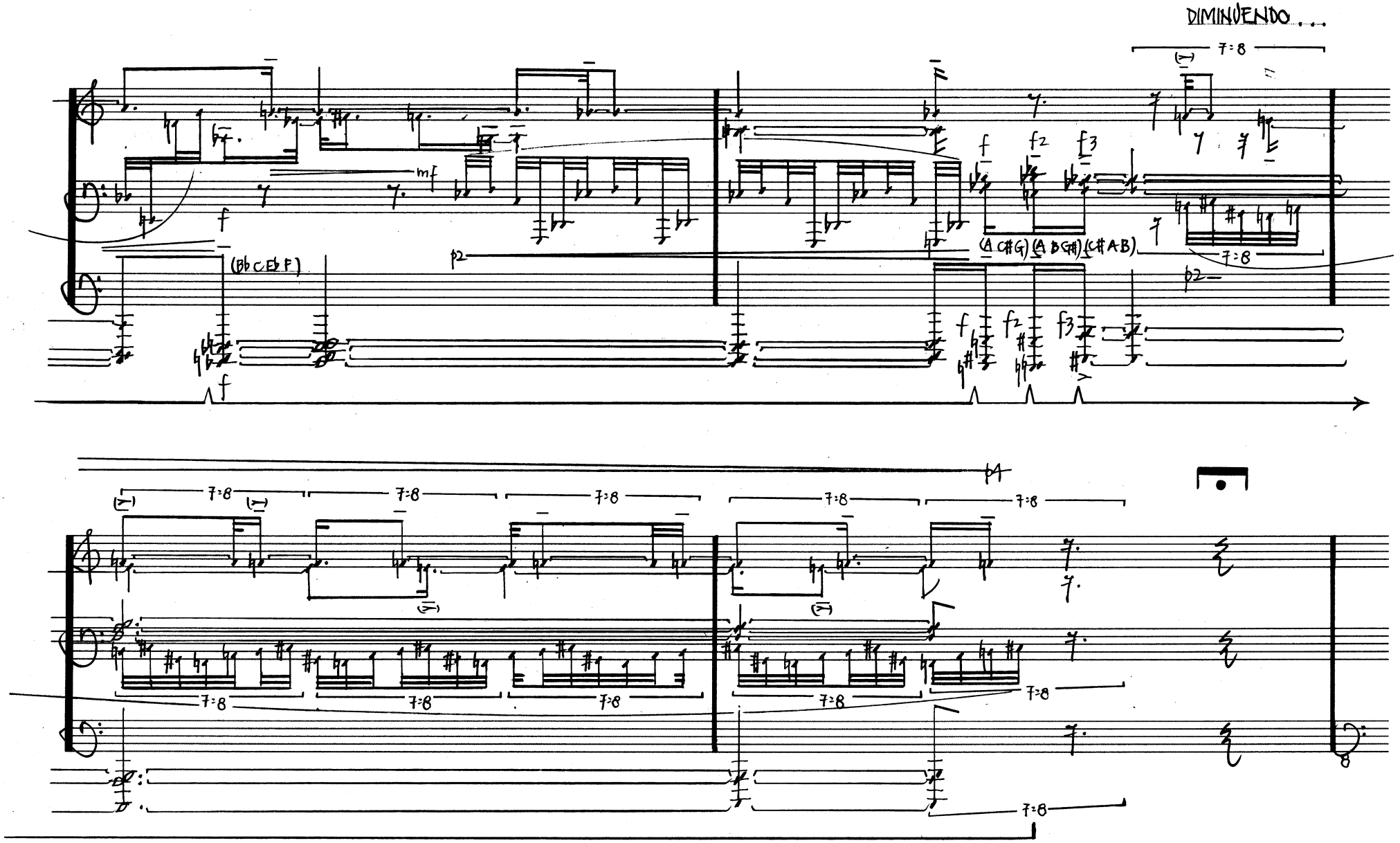
Z

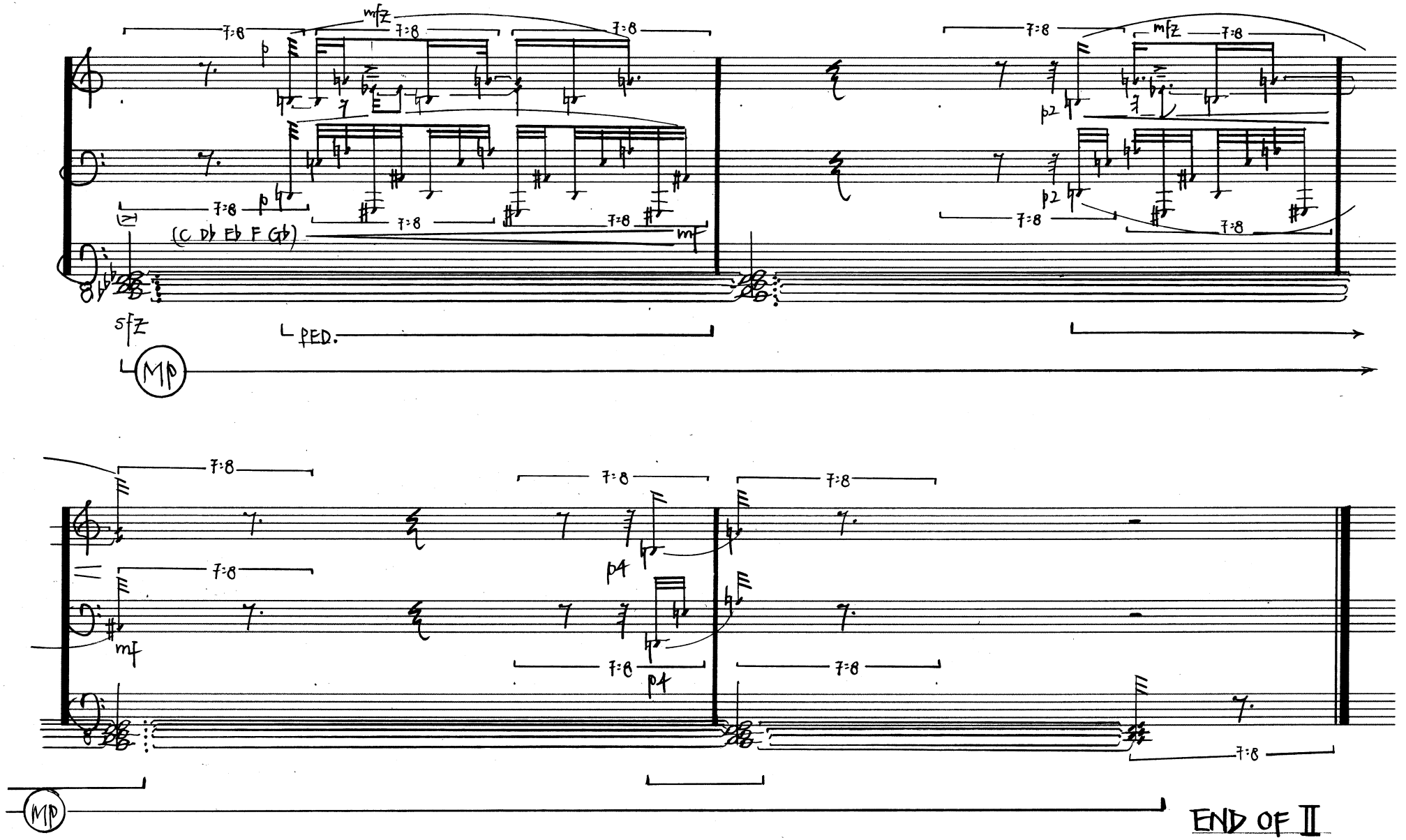



p2
p
(B♭ C♯ E F C♮)
mf
p
f
mf


p2
3:2
3:2
p
mf
(p)
3:2
(Ah) f
p
f
(p)
f
p2
p


3/4
5:4
3:2
9:8
p2
p
mf
f
ff
(Bb Eb Fb Cb Db)
(Db)
p3


DIMINUENDO...
7:8
mf
f
f2
f3
(Bb C Eb F)
p2
(A C#G) (A B G#) (C# A B)
p4




END OF II

13 APRIL 2025
BLACK HILL STUDIO

# II wandering on long roads, companionless

## Afterword — Paragraphs: structural allegiances

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Slow walking tempo—long/6 | | | | | |
| A | E | I | N | S | W |
| Entrance/6 | Fragment/1 | Short/3 | Fragment/2 | Mid/4 | Long/5 |
| J Fast—short/1 | | | | | |
| Cortège tempo—half-medium/3 | | | | | |
| B | F | K | O | T | X |
| Short/3 | Mid/4 | Long/6 | Long/5 | Fragment/1 | Fragment/2 |
| R Fast—short/2 | | | | | |
| Cortège tempo—medium/4 | | | | | |
| D | H | M | Q | V | Y |
| Mid/4 | Long/5 | Fragment/1 | Long/6 | Fragment/2 | Short/3 |
| Very slow walking tempo—long/5 | | | | | |
| C | G | L | P | U | Z |
| Long/5 | Long/6 | Fragment/2 | Fragment/1 | Short/3 | Exit/4 |

The overall structure of this movement consists of 26 Paragraphs, which are ordered similarly at two different levels, global and local. Both the global and local proportions emerge from a 6 by 6 matrix, each line of which permutates values, and ordering, from 1 to 6. The basic matrix values are:

6 – 1 – 3 – 2 – 4 – 5

These numbers and orderings are not used thoroughgoingly, however, in keeping with the 'wanderingness' of the movement.

As is shown above, performing the movement in alphabetical order offers maximised variety—but this is only one of very many options. The dates of completion have been added at the end of each Paragraph, and the work could even be performed in order of composition.

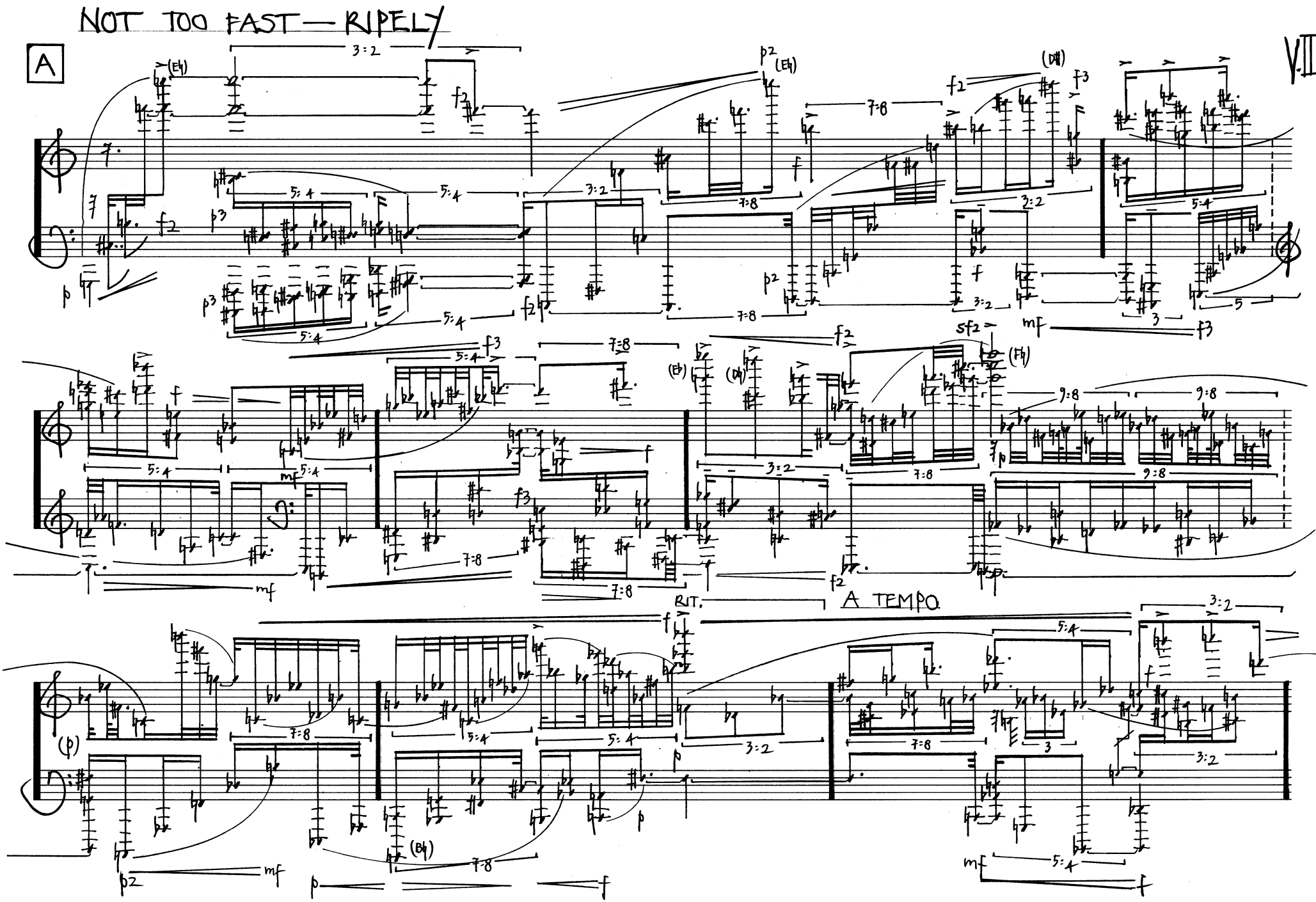
# III a familiar ghost, at home among the olive trees

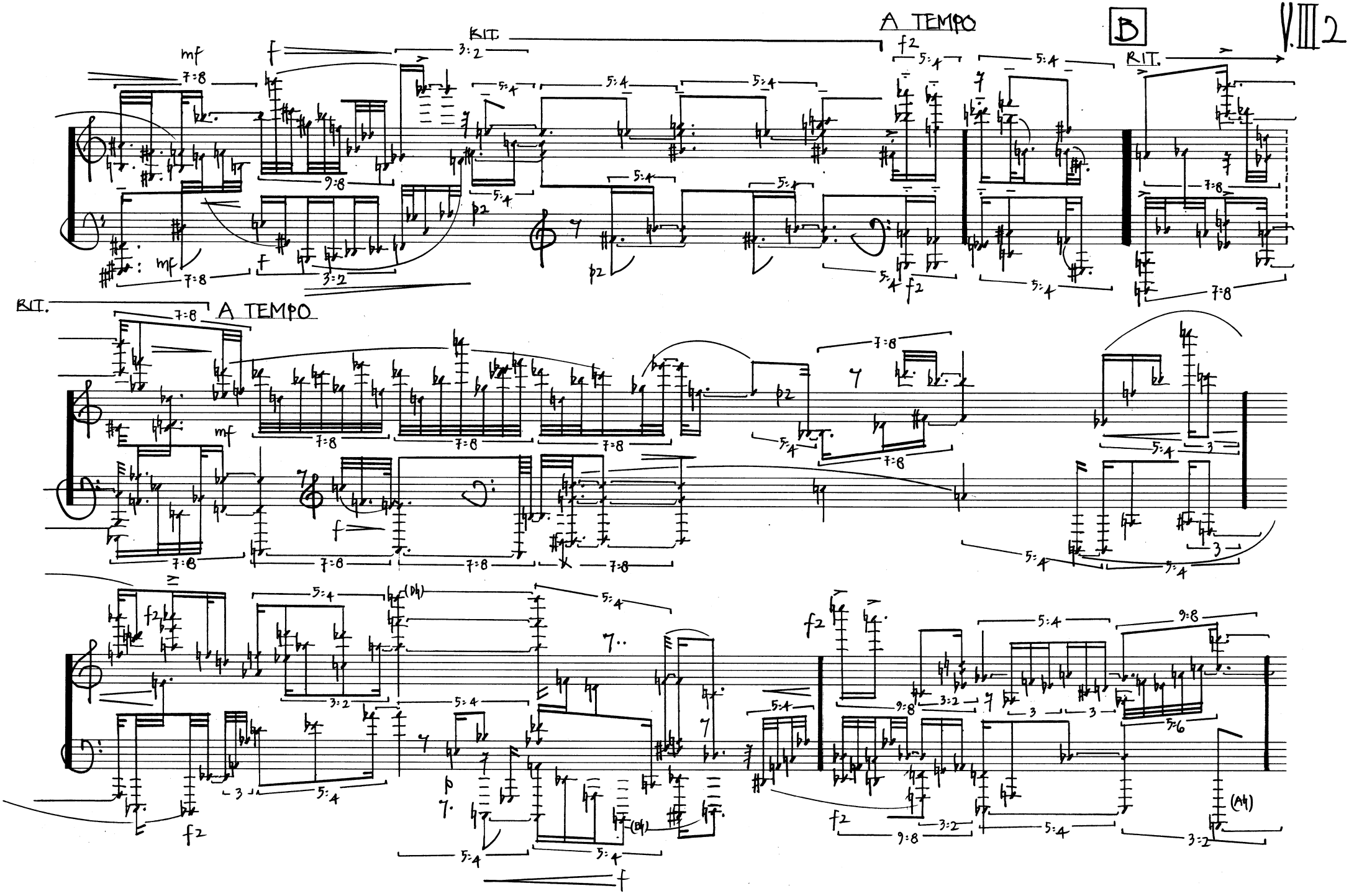
—Helen Waddell on Sidonius Apollinaris spying Petronius Arbiter in Marseilles, three centuries after his death: *Mediaeval Latin Lyrics*, 299.

## Pages V.III 1–23

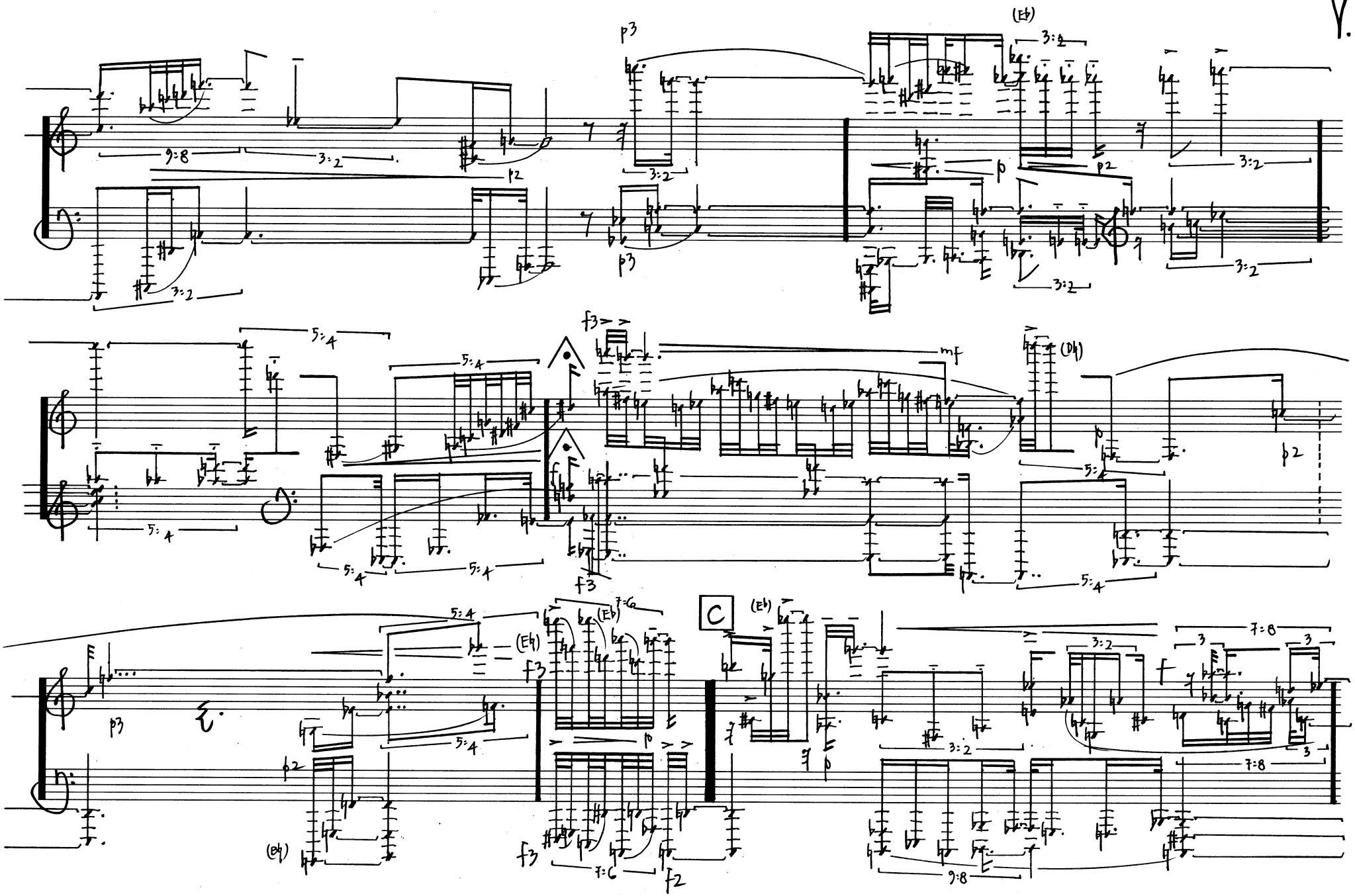
Note that throughout this movement, the emphasis arrow (**>**) over a pitch indicates that it is melodic and should be clearly audible; these notes should be slightly dominant but not necessarily strongly emphasised. They should, essentially, *sing*. There are brackets around an arrow when the prevailing dynamic is quiet.

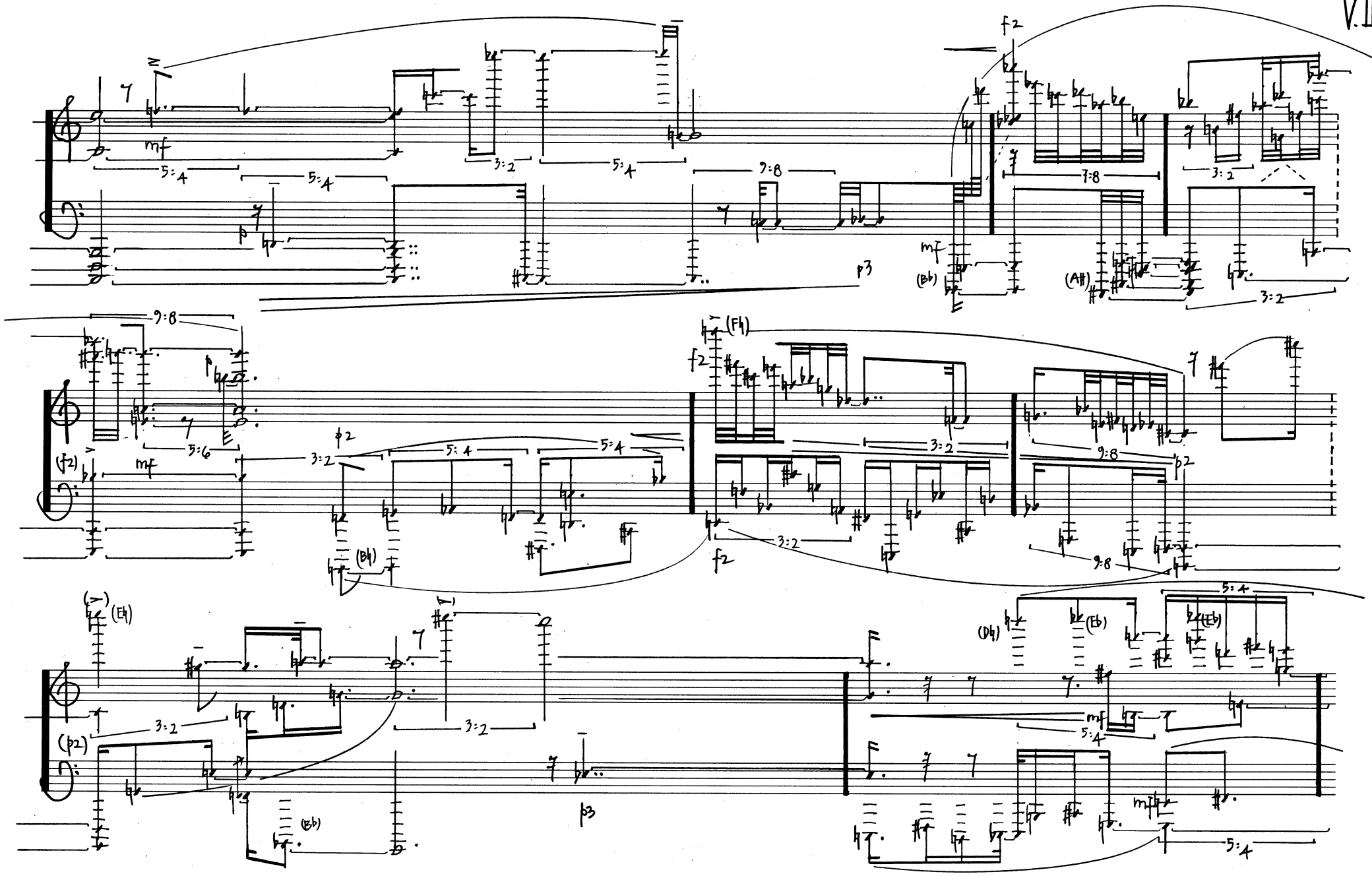
For most of this movement pedal is not specified, as the pedalling is generally mandated by the notated durations. This lack of pedal markings does not mean pedal should be avoided, it simply leaves the details to the player. Occasionally both ***Ped*** and ***Una Corda*** are indicated, pedal by a continuous line with spikes for retakes, and ***UC*** by a broken line.

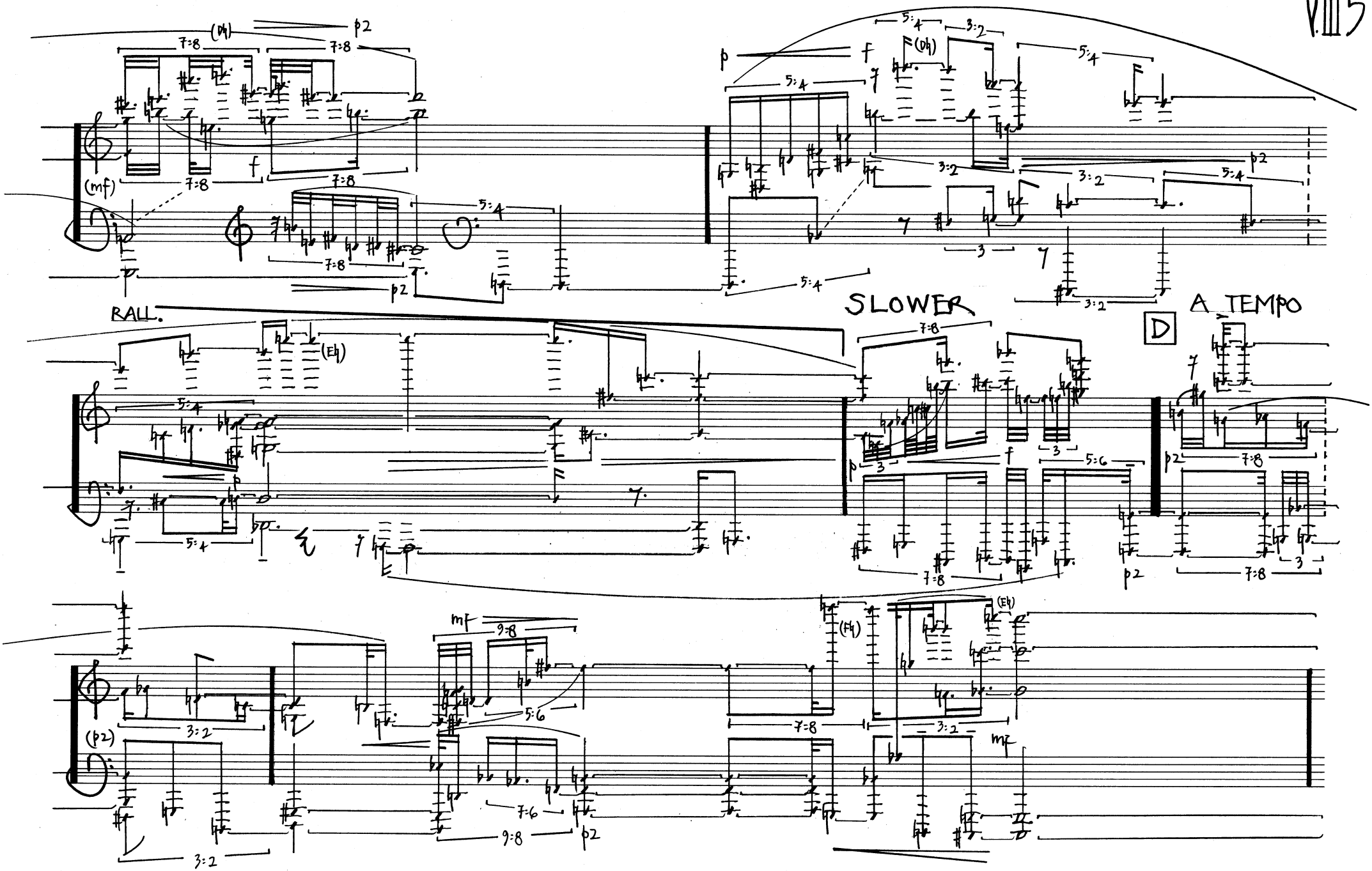

NOT TOO FAST — RIPELY
A
VIII 1
RIT.
A TEMPO

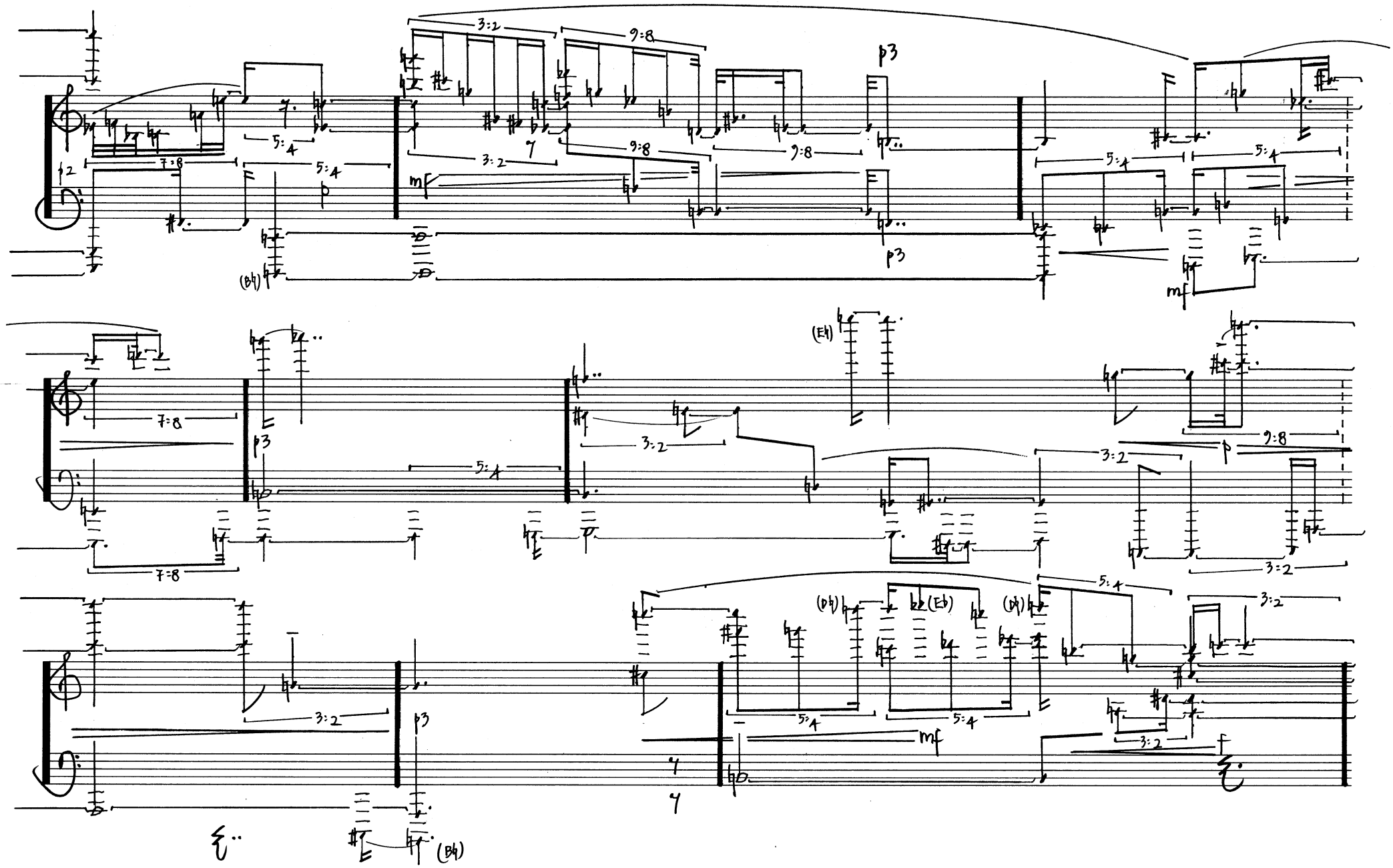


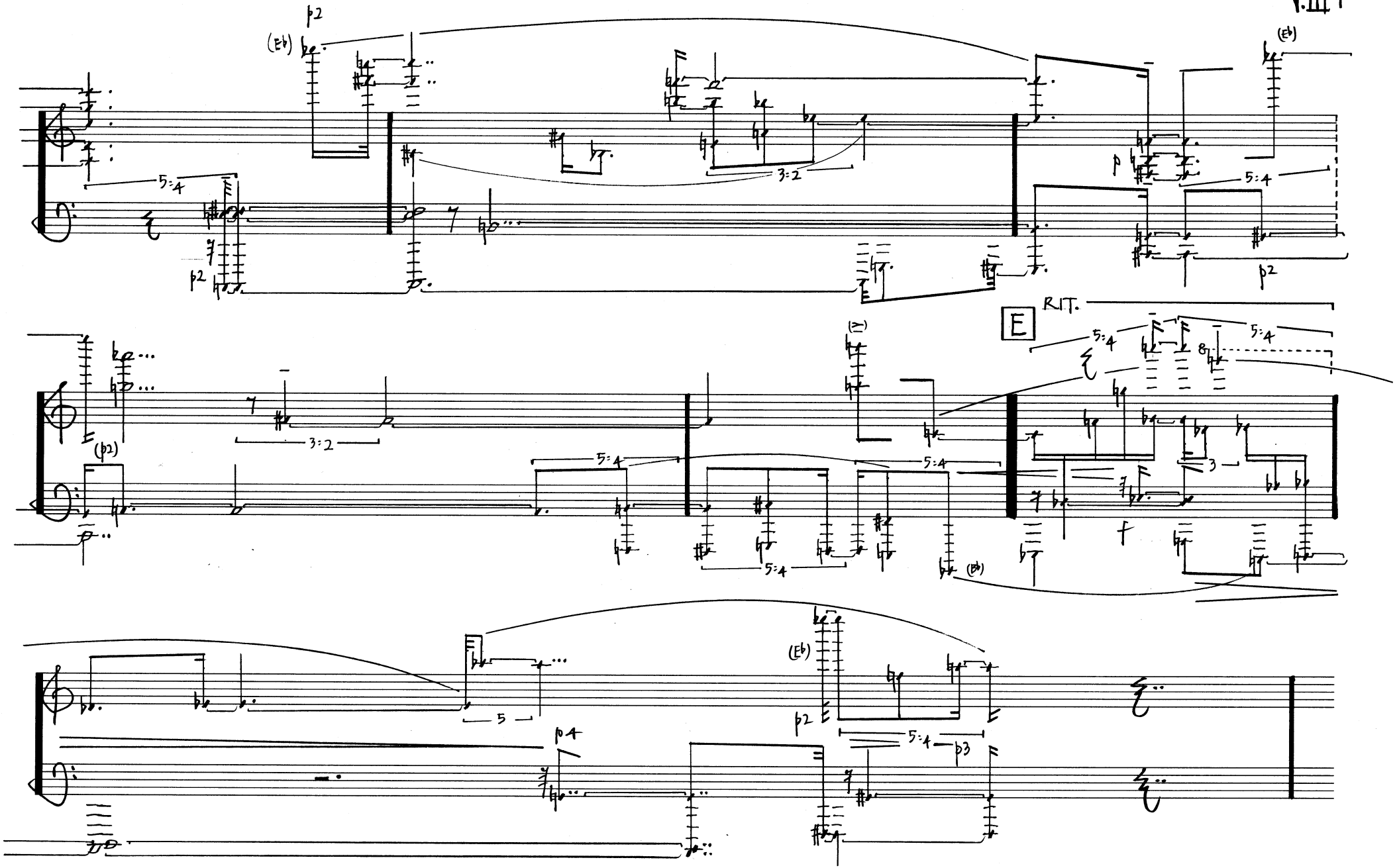
A TEMPO
B
V.III 2
RIT.
A TEMPO
RIT.

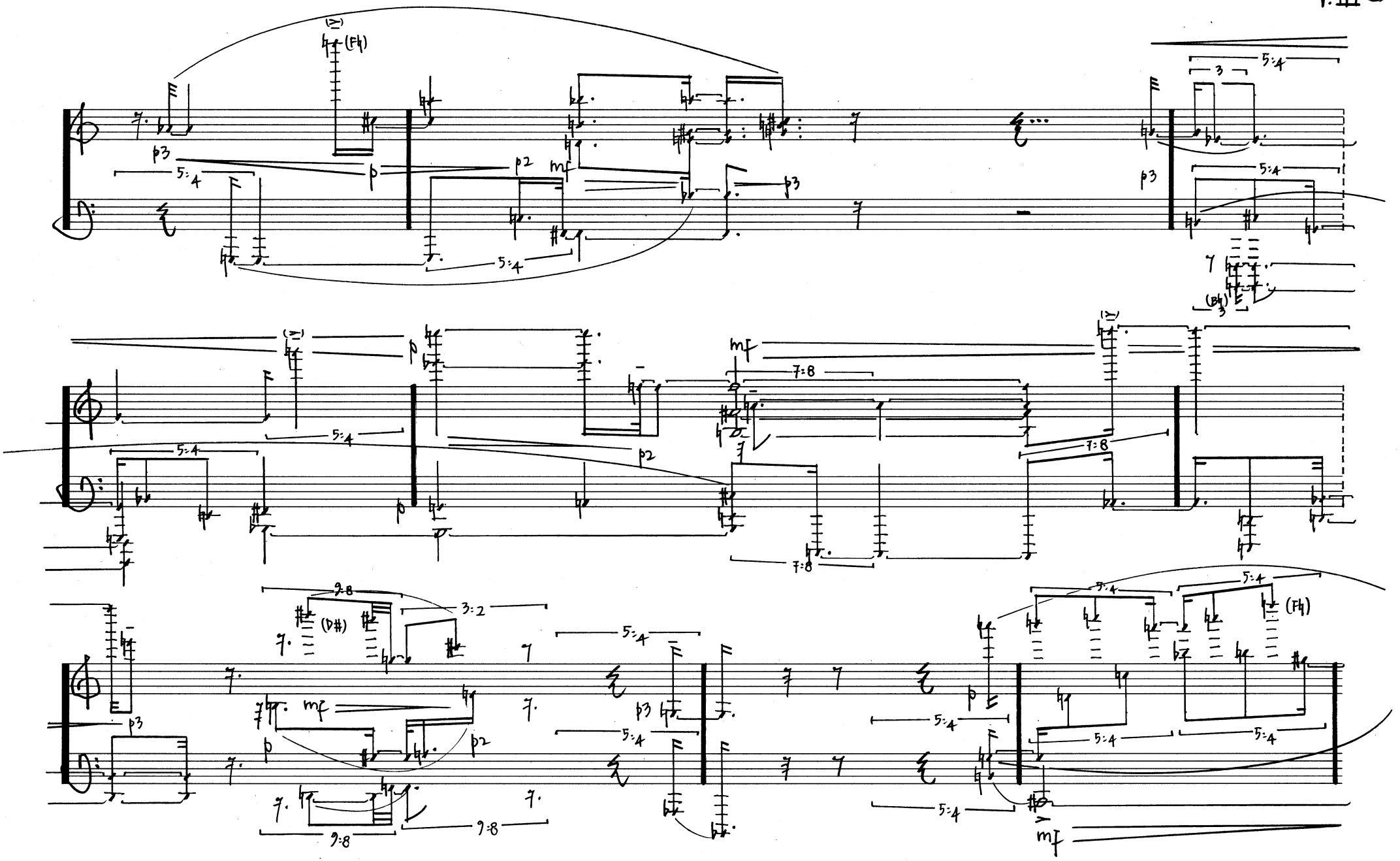

p3
(E♭)
3:2
9:8
p2
p
5:4
f3
mf
(D♮)
C
7:6
7:8
f2
f

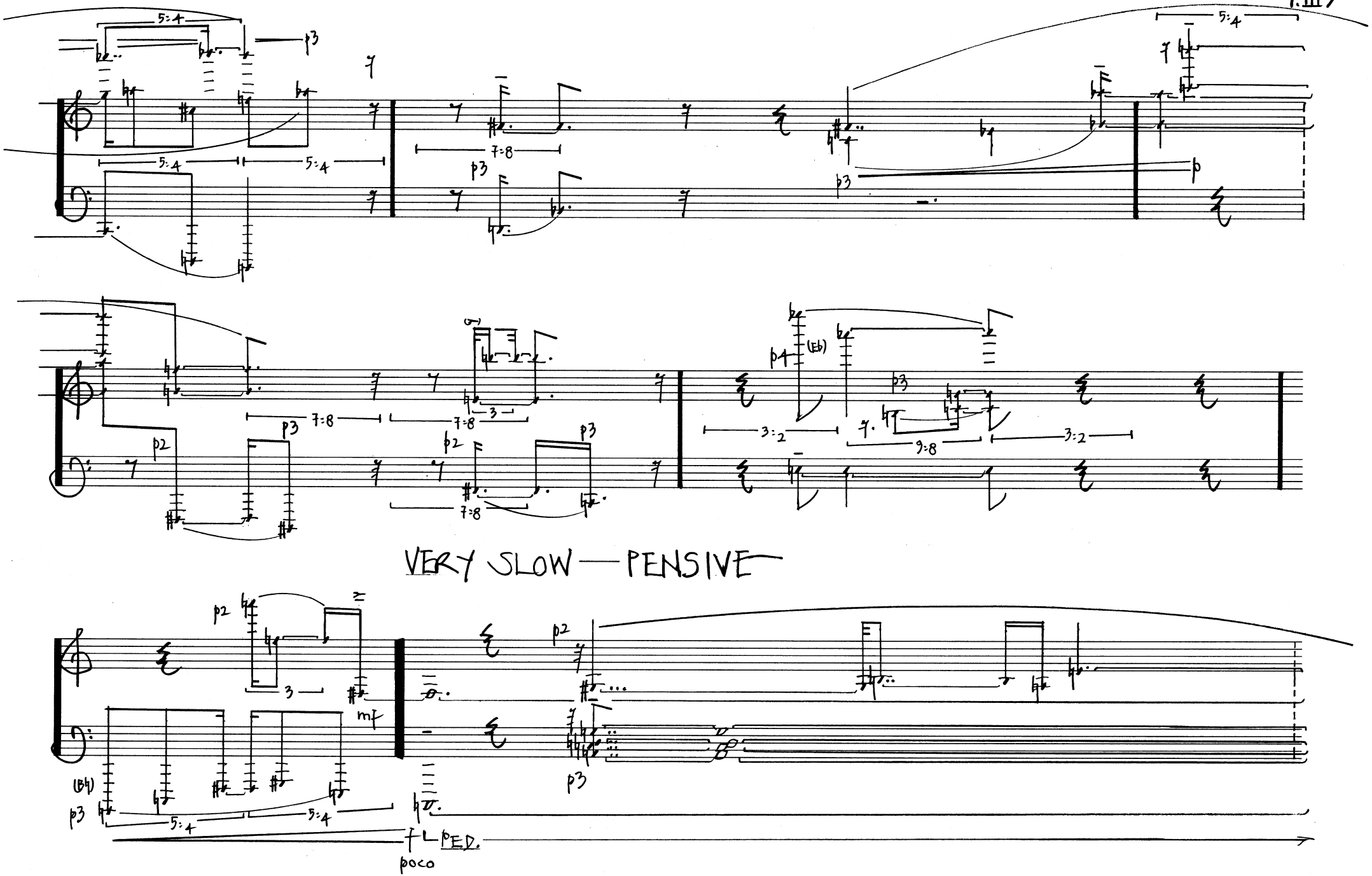

mf
5:4
3:2
9:8
7:8
p3
(B♭)
(A♯)
(F♮)
f2
5:6
(f2)
p2
(B♮)
(E♮)
(p2)
(D♮)
(E♭)

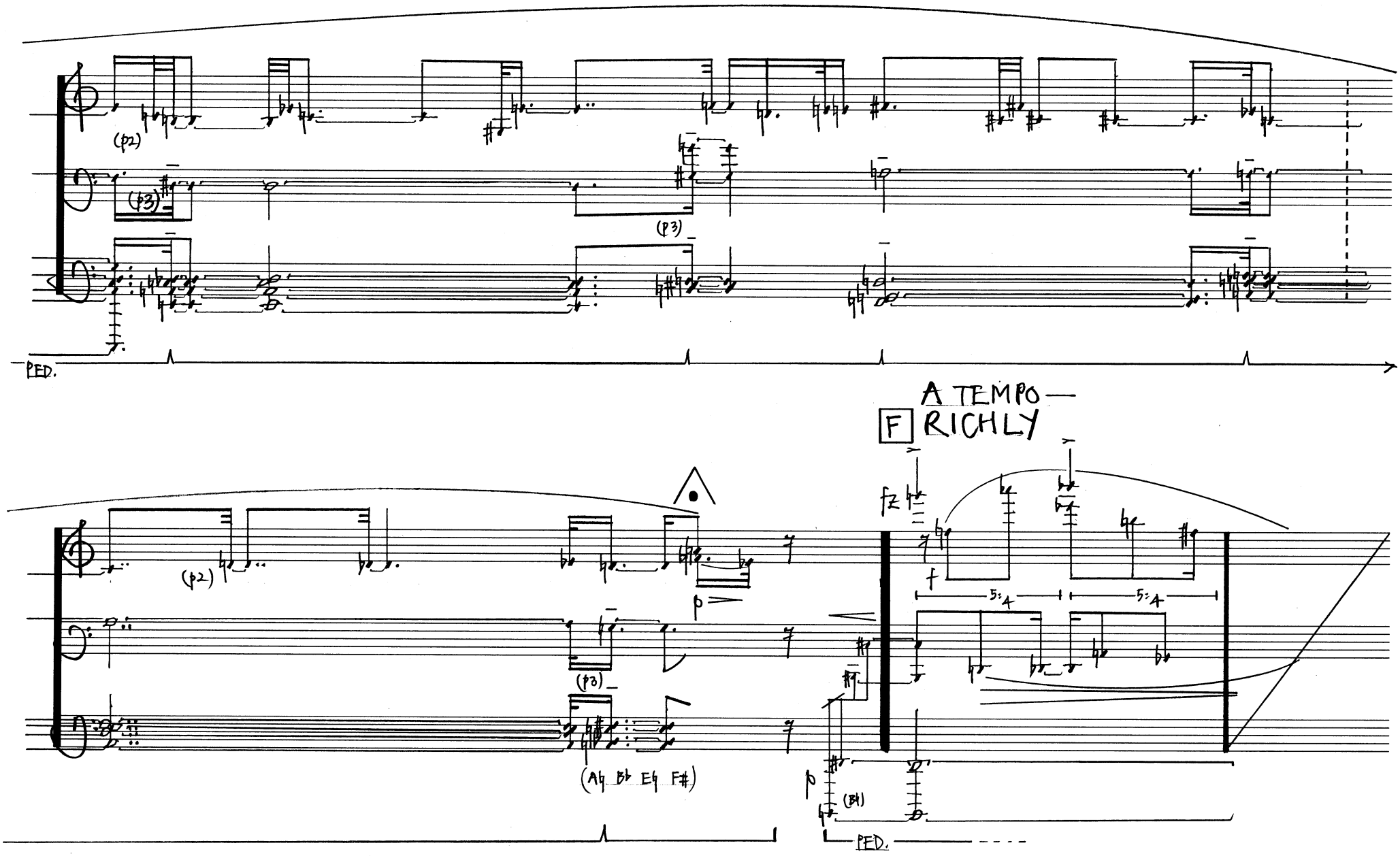

RALL.
SLOWER
A TEMPO
D

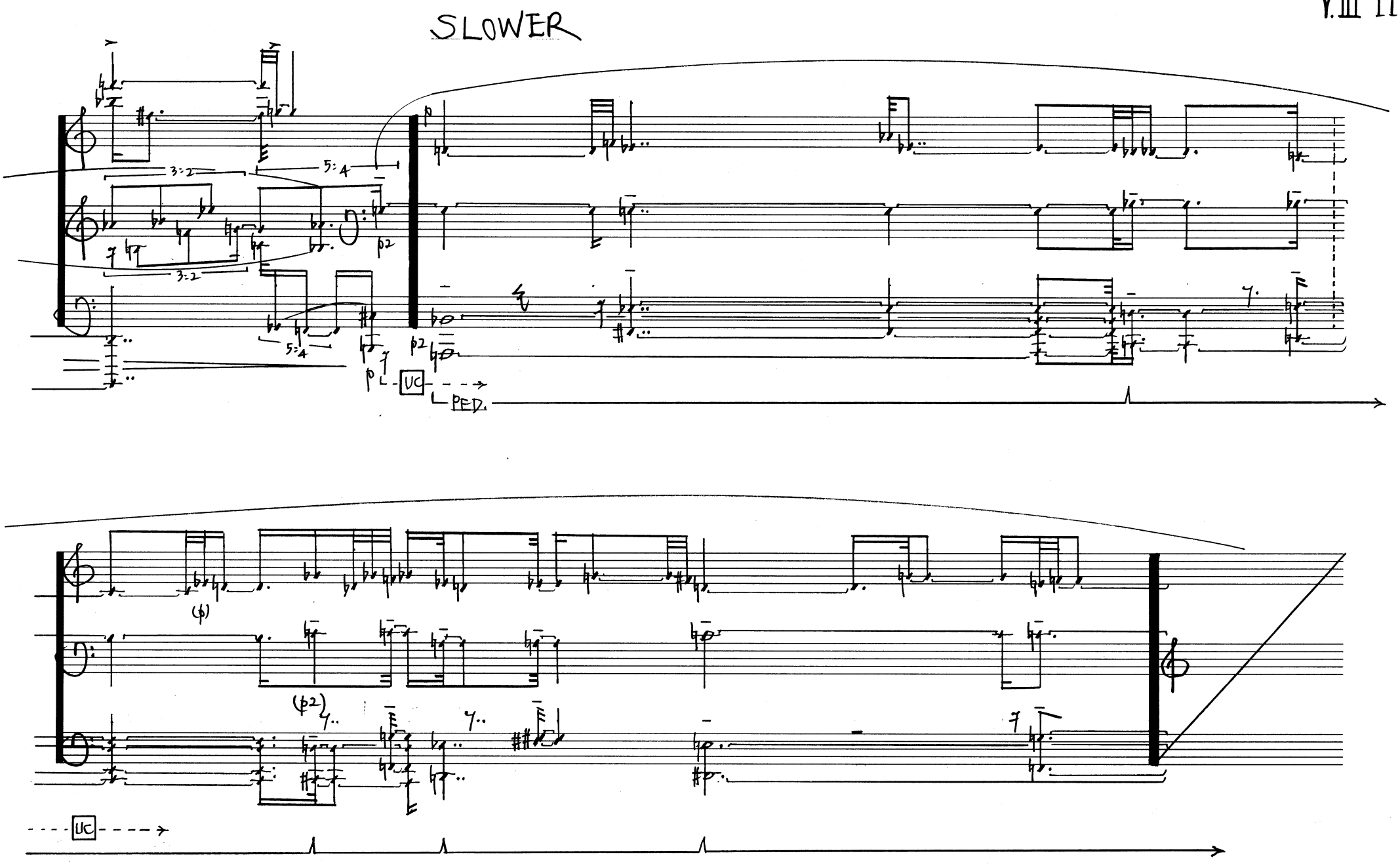

3:2
9:8
p3
7:8
5:4
p2
mf
(B♮)
(E♮)
(D♮)
(E♭)
f


p2
(E♭)
5:4
3:2
p
(p2)
E
RIT.
8
3
f
5
p4
p3

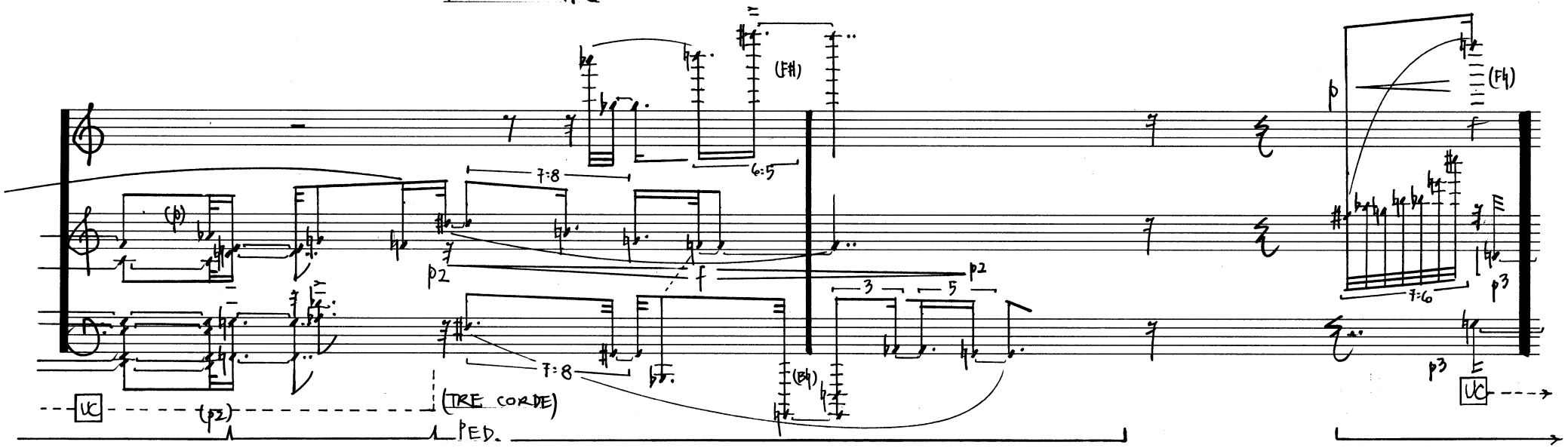

(F♮)
p3
5:4
p
p2
mf
3
(B♮)
7:8
9:8
3:2
(D#)


VERY SLOW — PENSIVE
poco
PED.

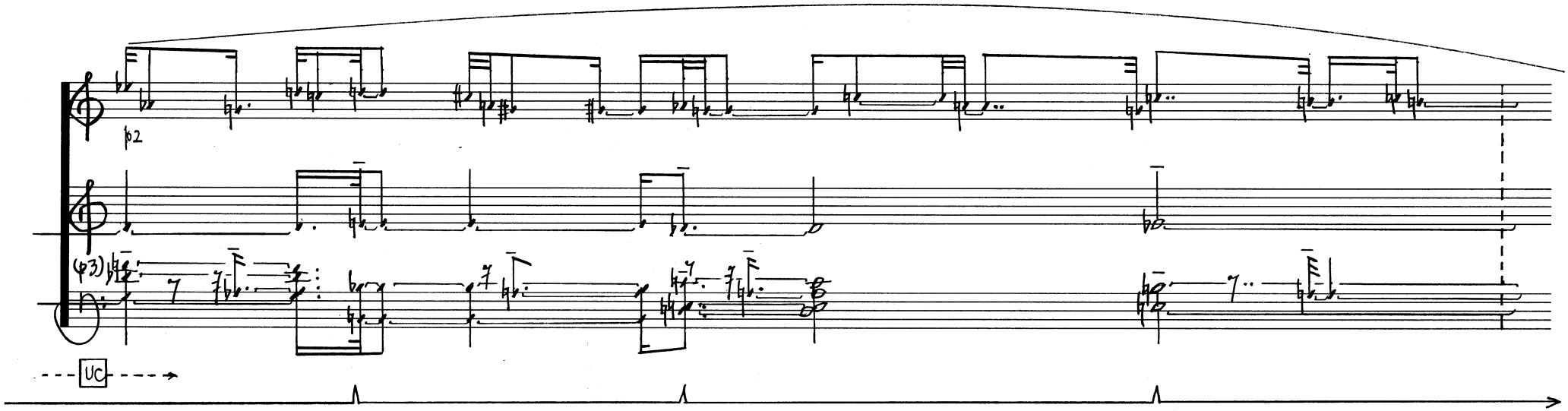

(p2)
(p3)
(p3)
PED.
A TEMPO—
F RICHLY
fz
f
5:4
5:4
(p2)
p
(p3)
(Ab Bb Eb F#)
p
(Bb)
PED.


SLOWER
3:2
5:4
3:2
5:4
p
p2
p2
p
UC
PED.
(p)
(p2)
UC

A TEMPO

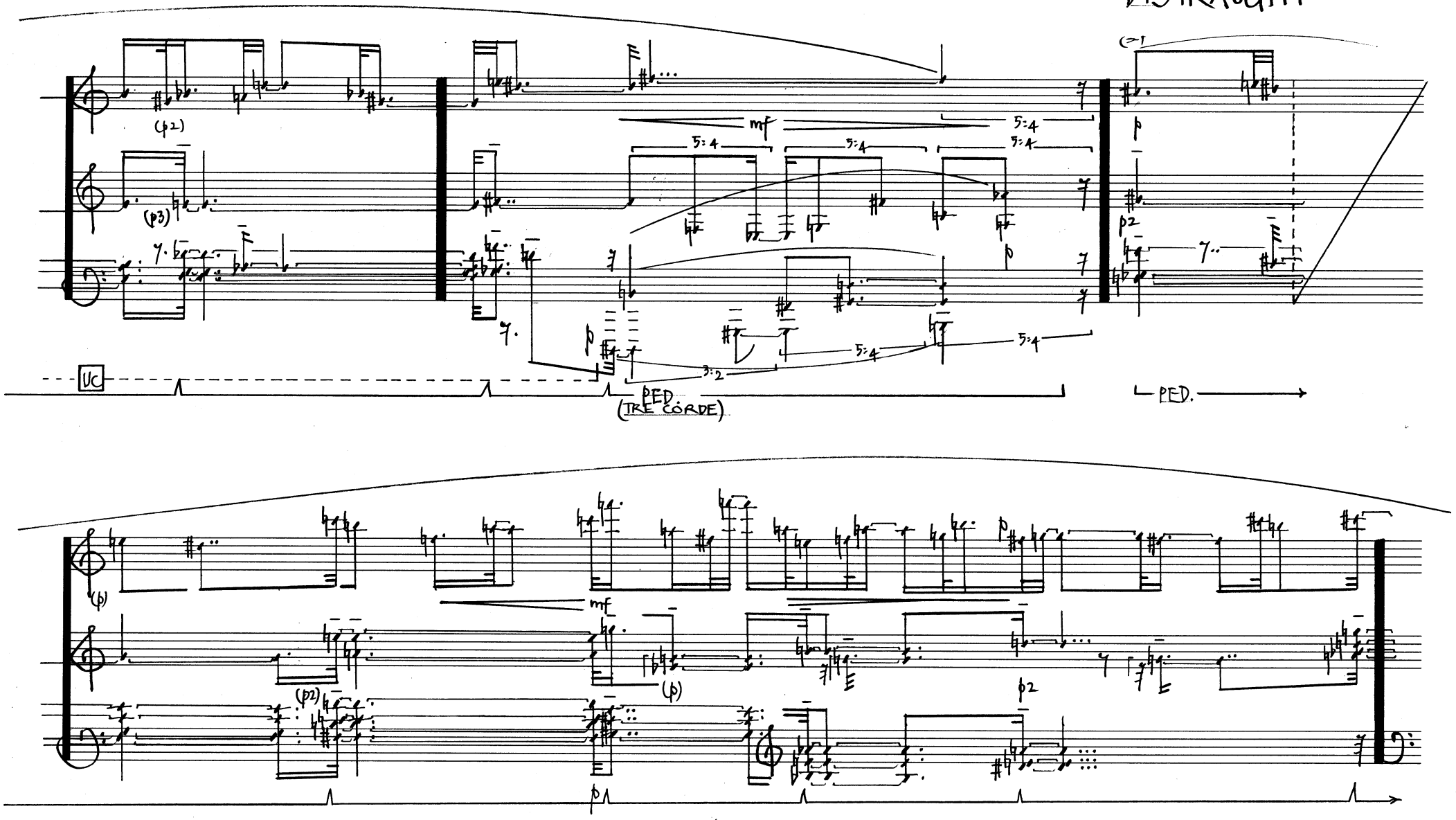


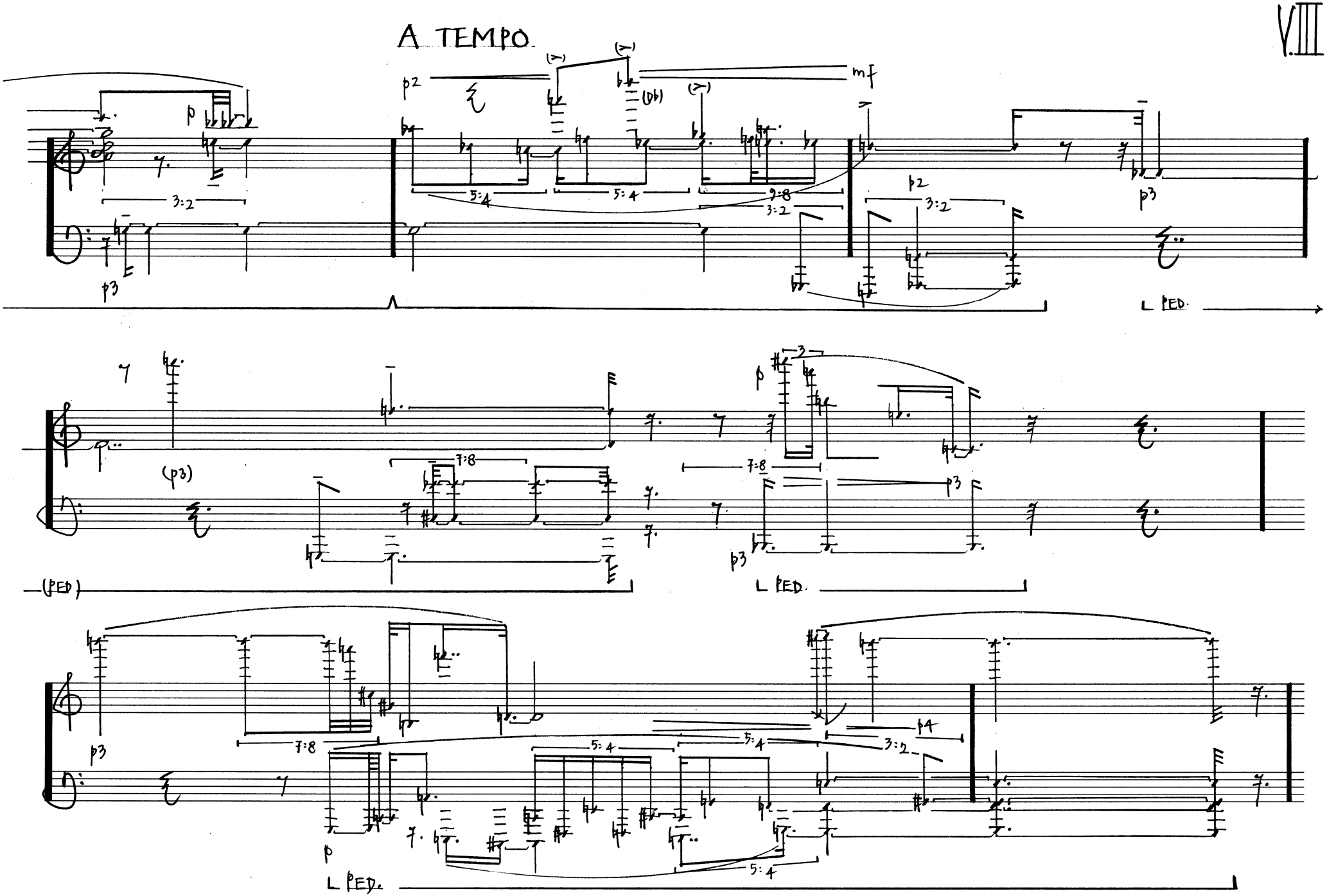

SLOWER

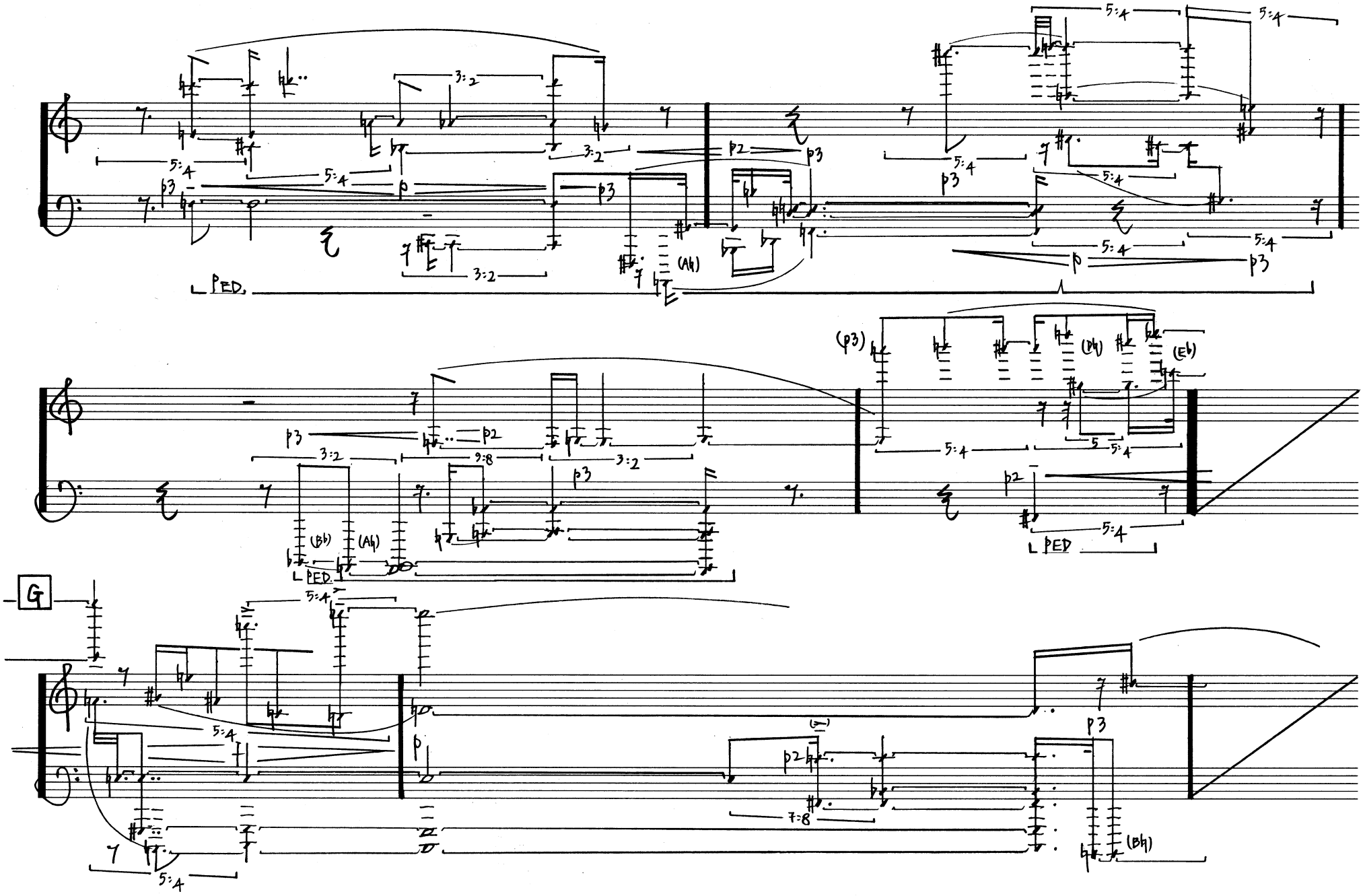


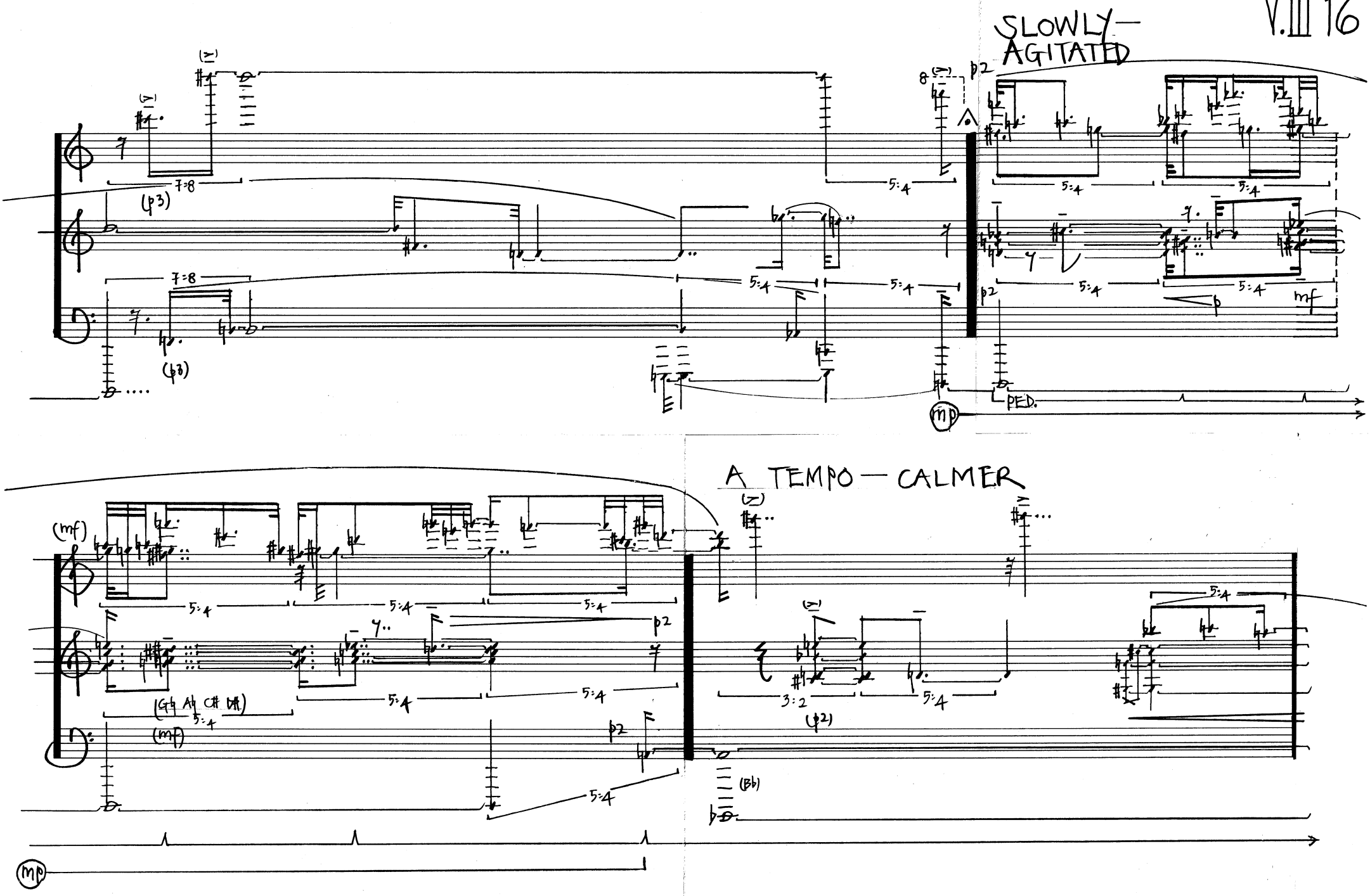
SLOWER—
SLIGHTLY
DISTRAUGHT

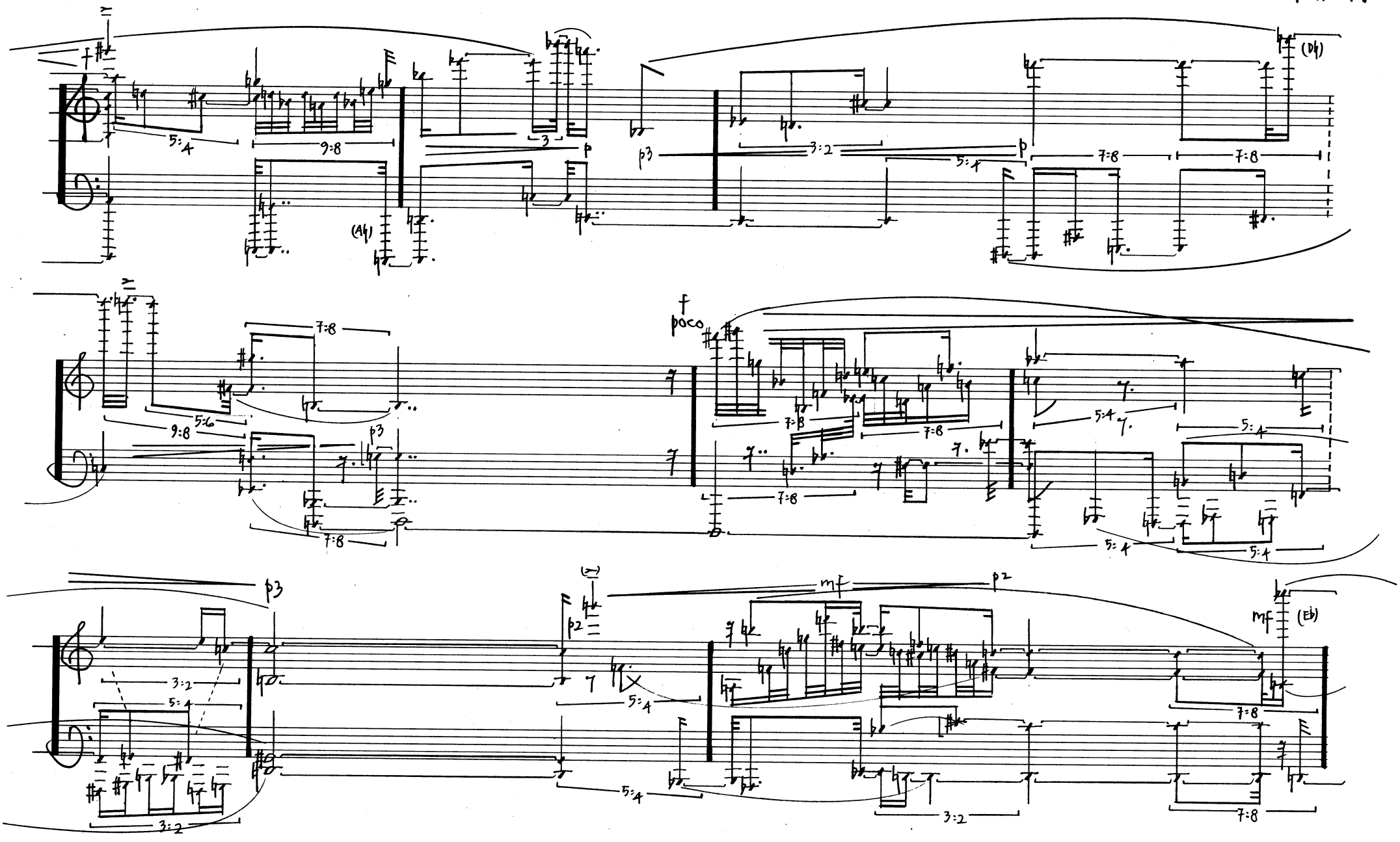
A TEMPO

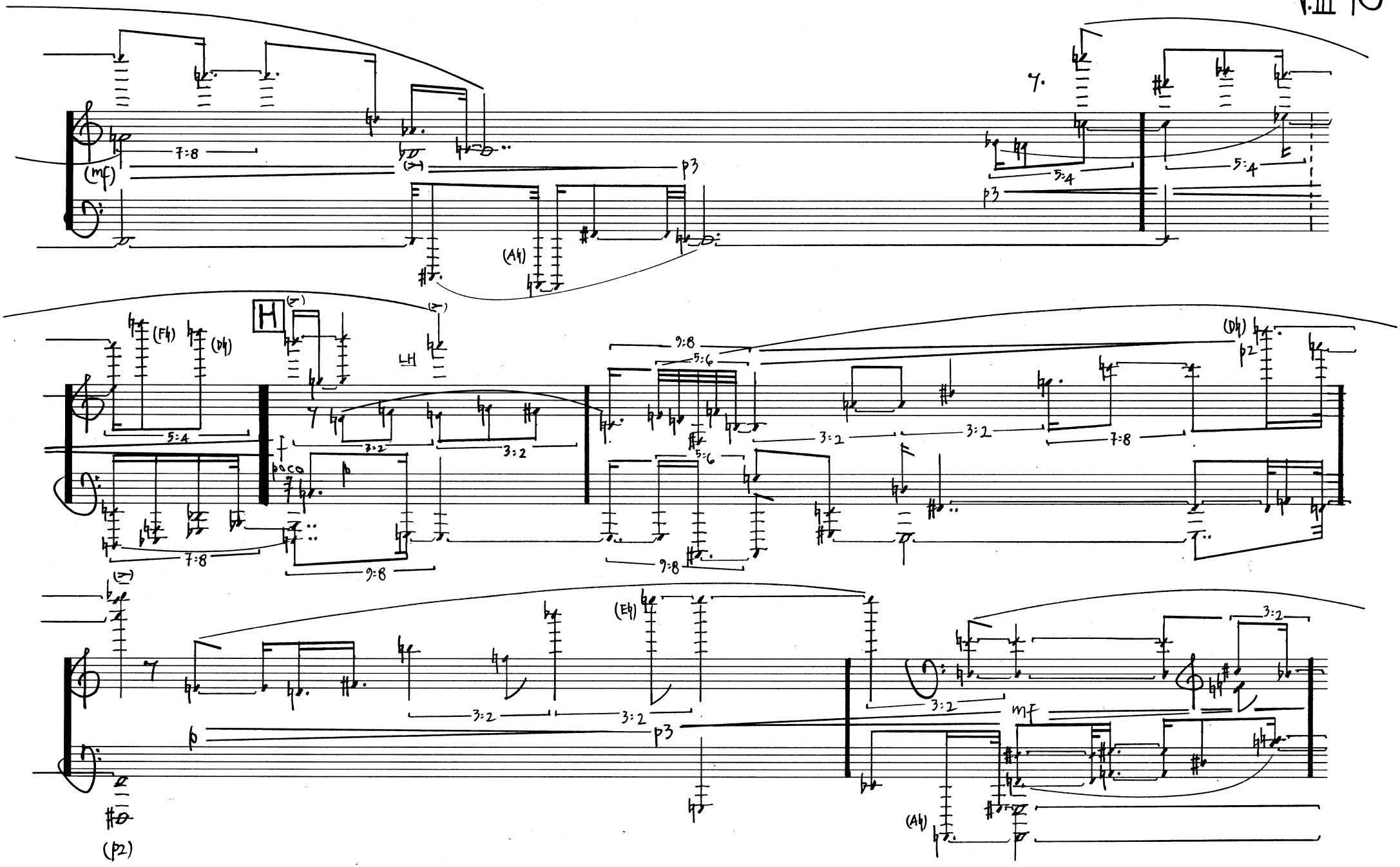


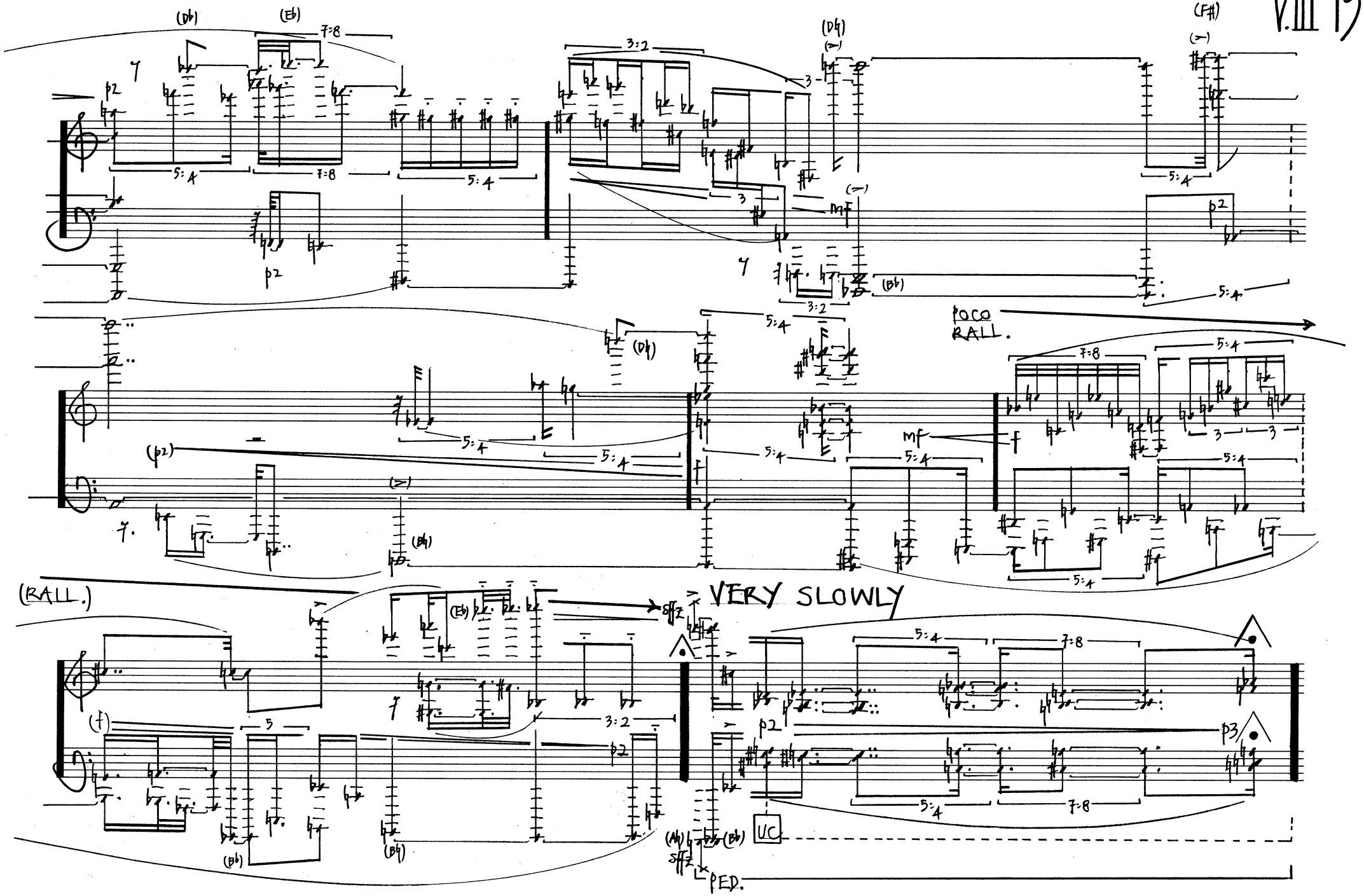

A TEMPO
mf
L PED.
(PED)
L PED.
L PED.


PED.
(Ab)
(Bb)
(Ab)
PED.
(p3)
(Db)
(Eb)
PED
G
(Db)

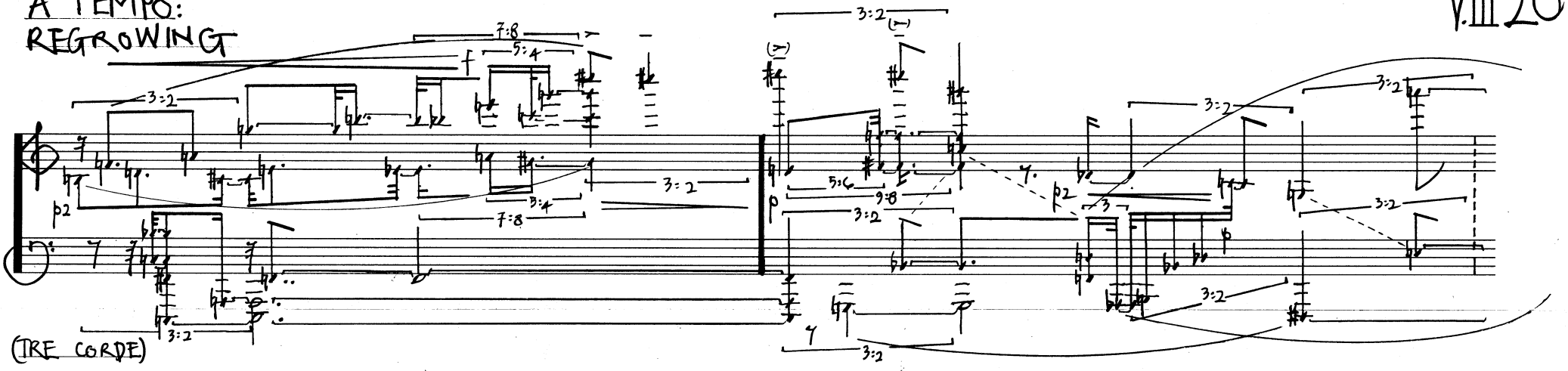

SLOWLY—
AGITATED
A TEMPO—CALMER
PED.

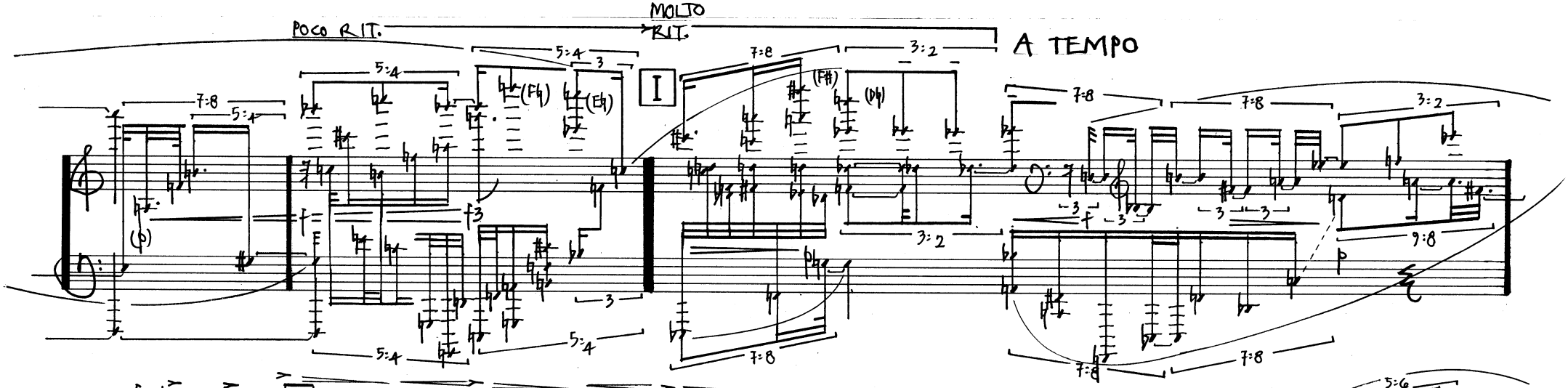

5:4
9:8
3
p
(Ab)
p3
3:2
5:4
(Db)
7:8
7:8
7:8
9:8
5:6
p3
7:8
f
poco
7:8
7:8
7:8
5:4
5:4
5:4
5:4
p3
3:2
5:4
3:2
p2
5:4
mf
p2
(Eb)
7:8
3:2
7:8

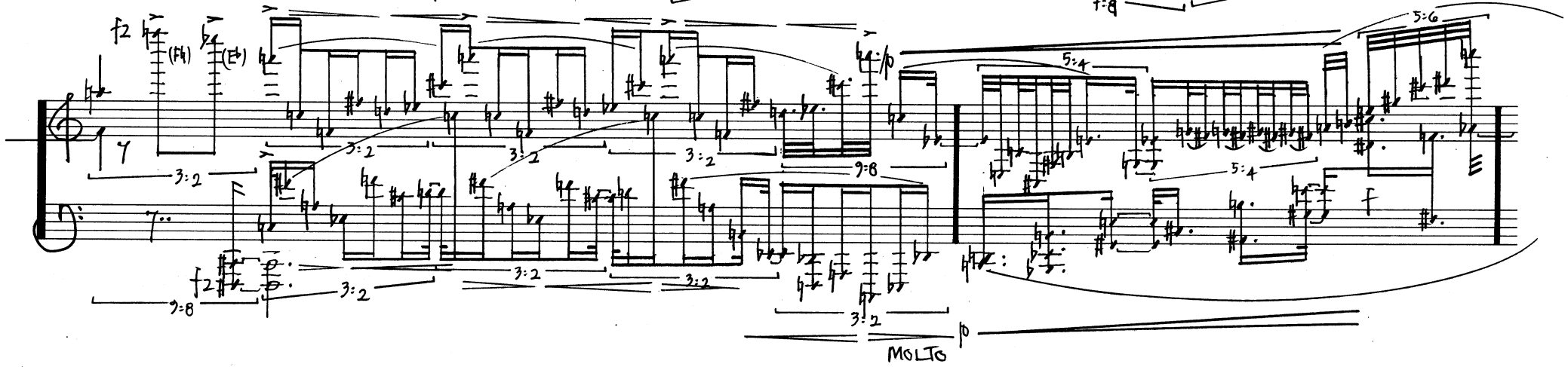

(mf)
7:8
p3
(A♮)
5:4
5:4
p3
(F♮)
(D♮)
H
LH
5:4
poco
3:2
3:2
7:8
9:8
9:8
5:6
5:6
3:2
3:2
7:8
(D♮)
p2
(E♮)
3:2
3:2
p3
3:2
mf
(A♮)
(p2)

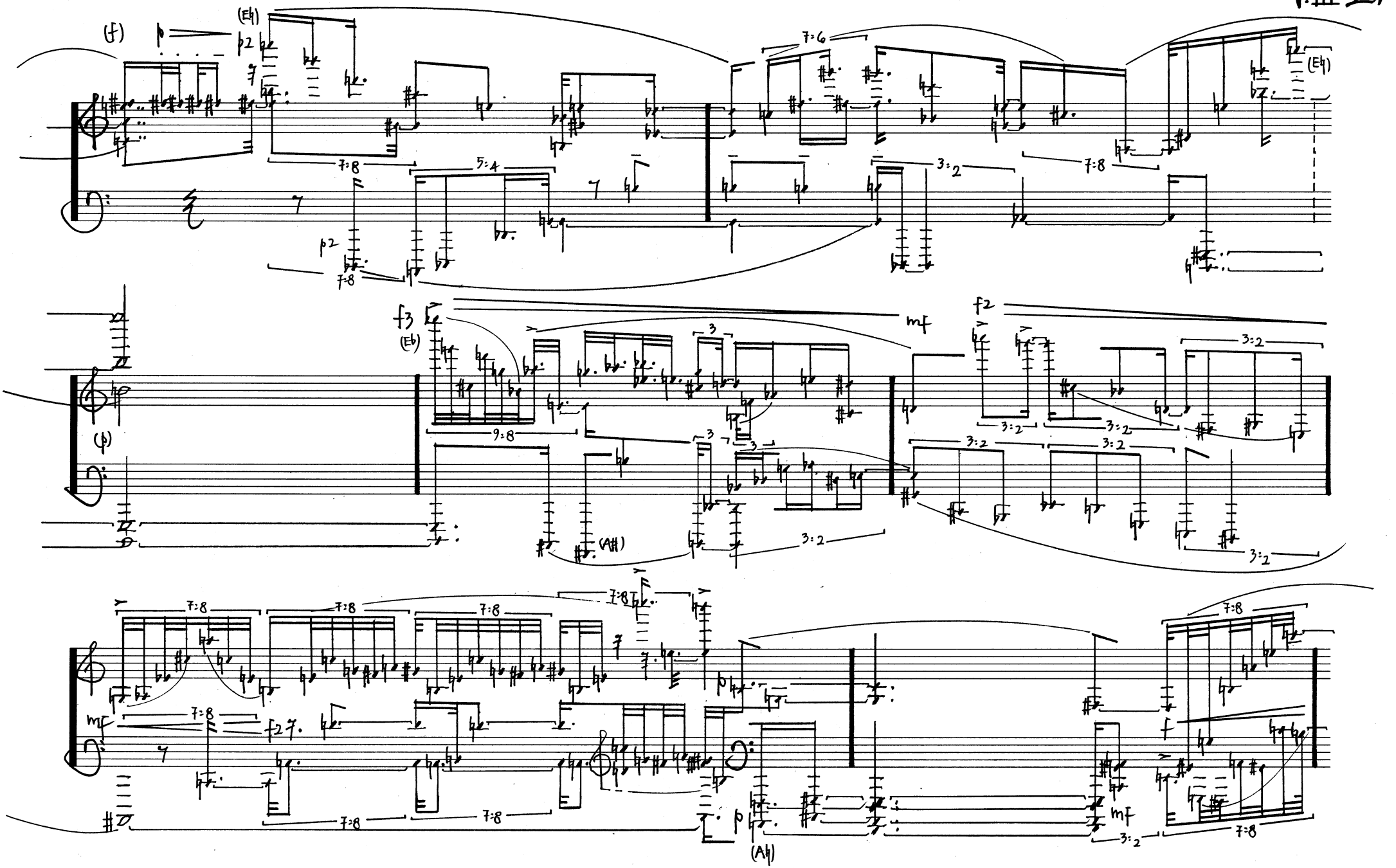

(Db)
(Eb)
7:8
5:4
3:2
(Db)
(=)
(F#)
(=)
mf
(=)
(Bb)
3:2
5:4
poco
RALL.
(Db)
(p2)
(=)
(Bb)
mf
(RALL.)
(Eb)
sffz
VERY SLOWLY
(+)
p2
(Bb)
(Bb)
p3
(Ab)
(Bb)
sffz
UC
PED.

A TEMPO:
REGROWING

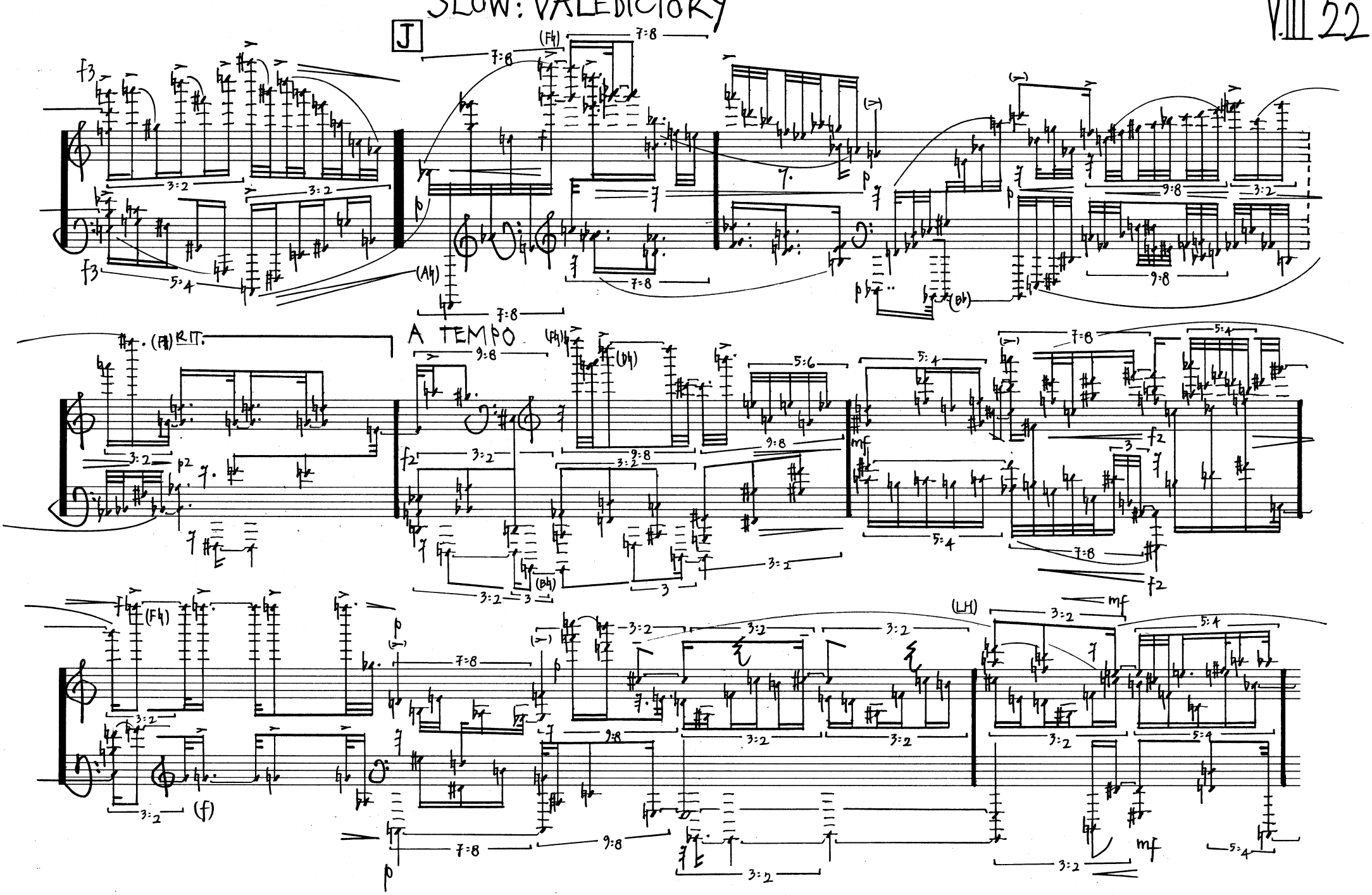


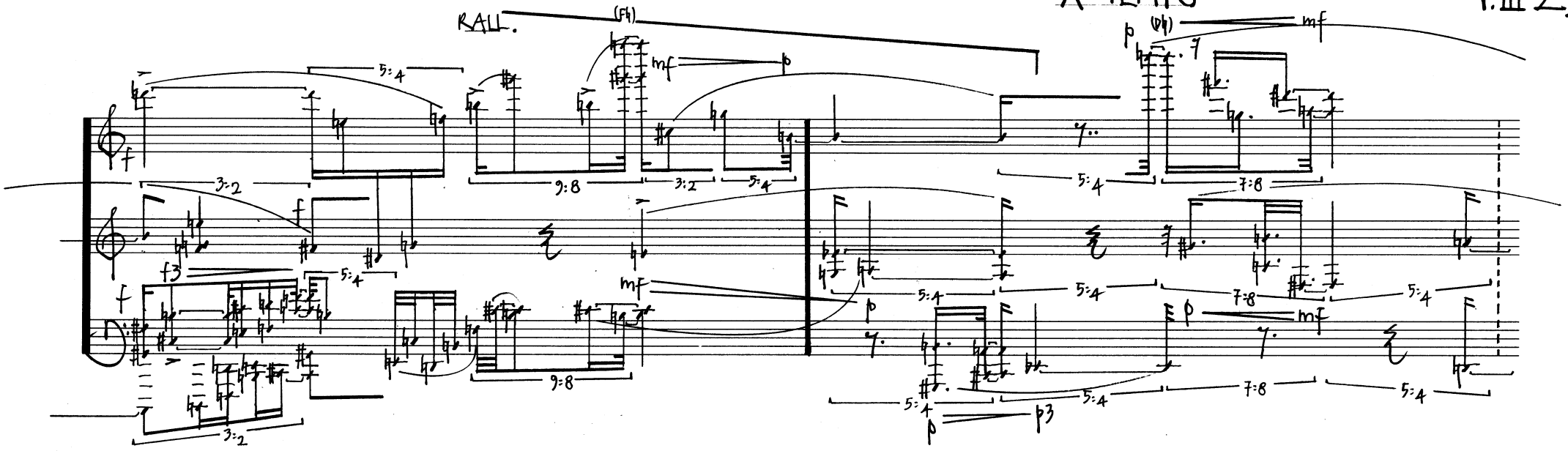



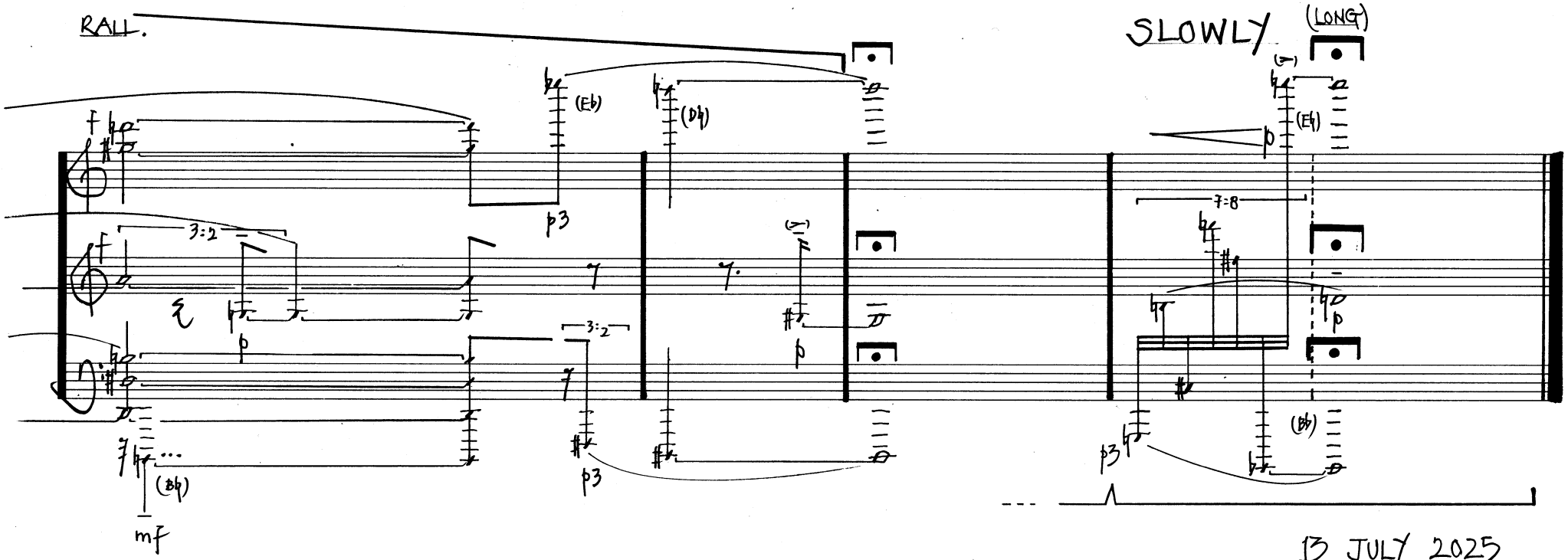




(f)
p
(E♮)
p2
7:8
5:4
7:6
3:2
(E♮)
p2
7:8
f3
(E♭)
mf
f2
3
9:8
3:2
(p)
(A♯)
3:2
7:8
mf
f2
p
(A♮)
mf
f
3:2

# SLOW: VALEDICTORY



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BLACK HILL STUDIO

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