Fag on the Dance Floor:
De/Reterritorializing through Composing Queer Theatrical and Narrative Music

by

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A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of
The Royal Northern College of Music
And
Manchester Metropolitan University
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

School of Composition

30 September 2024

A child in the dark, gripped with fear,
comforts themselves by singing under their breath.

They walk, then halt to their own song.

Lost, they take shelter and orient themselves with this little song, as best as they can.

The song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing centre at the heart of chaos.

Perhaps the child skips as they sing; they hasten or slow their pace.

But the song itself is already a skip:

It jumps from chaos to the beginnings of order in chaos
and is in danger of breaking apart at any moment.

— Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980, p. 362)

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i. Acknowledgements

For the fags, the fruits, and the disreputable fairies.
To the dolls, the dykes, and the forlorn deviants with nothing to lose.
For the witches who transfigure trauma into triumph,
And to the parapets that protect secrets of spells and ghouls.
From the neon-flashing floor of nightclub delights,
To sordid city streets where we can run free,
This here is but a meagre gift,
From me to the divine She—

I would like to thank my mother, Melanie, my father, Christiaan, my sister, London, and the rest of my treasured family for their unwavering support. I am lucky to have pillars such as you all in my times of need. The three of you nurtured me to become the queer monster I am now, from stumbling in plastic heels as an infant to strutting the streets in stilettos today. Thank you for always believing in me, even when I lack resilience. With you and all the House of Bonelli, I know I always have a home. Thank you to my grandparents, Curt and Sharon, who took me to my first opera and instilled a love of music that I carry to this day. Thank you to my other grandparents, Chris and Susie, for helping me laugh at the follies of life and teaching me the joys of a simple early morning coffee. Thank you to my other-other grandparents, Marlon and Susie, for being guiding angels through my journey; I miss our Barbie doll dinners, but I know a great feast awaits us upon our reunion.

Thank you to my friends who have kept me (mostly) sane and (always) inspired. Lauren, Grace, and Kaitlin, I am fortunate to have found the three of you in the po-dunk barn we called high school and to be so close—even though thousands of miles apart—after these many *many* years. Megan, Chris, and Jean, Nottingham gifted me some of the finest friends imaginable, and our endless heuristics never cease to motivate me. Elena, Ollie, and James, you have championed me at my worst and celebrated me in my darkest; my time in Manchester would have been wasted if not for our frivolities which kept me sane.

Thank you to the friends who made this entire project possible: Rosie, Elliette, Jasmin, Imogen, Eva, Rachel, Annie, Lisa, Callum, Will, Sinead, Ellie, Chloe, Spencer, and Georgie. You all foolishly believed in me enough to create hours of music together, and for that I am

eternally grateful. I feel blessed by your artistry, creativity, insight, and support, but most of all, by the time we spent laughing, crying, and celebrating together. Only in my wildest dreams did I think I would be able to work with souls such as yours.

I would not be here without the help of all the fine teachers, mentors, and advisors who have pushed me to become the person I am today. Thomas and Shahida Hanson, Michelle Shepherd, Kristi Terauchi, Janet Hall, Prof. Elizabeth Kelly, Prof. Philip Goodchild, you have all inspired me to grow as a student.

My dearly departed high school math teacher, Kathleen Mezeske, there are a million things I wish I could say. Thank you for the lunches and dinners we shared, for introducing me to Rautavaara, for always knowing what to say when I felt down, for invigilating my ABRSM exams back in America so I could even start this journey in the first place. The world is a happier place because of all the joy you spread.

Prof. Adam Gorb and Prof. Emily Howard, thank you for seeing promise in me and cultivating my musicianship when I first came to the RNCM. I learned so many technical skills under your guidance and discovered my own confidence as a composer. I was listening to your music when I was a teenager in Arizona, so to think I was able to study with two of my heroes overseas still wows me! I may never know what you saw in my wide-eyed naïveté—stepping into the RNCM a scared, albeit hopeful, Masters' student—but I am glad to have had your brilliance imparted upon me through our studies and friendship.

My supervisors, Prof. David Horne, Dr. Simon Clarke, and Dr. Sam Salem, thank you for guiding me through this treacherous adventure. I have learned so much about resilience, fortitude, and determination from you all.

David, thank you for taking me on as a student. I know I am by no means an easy mentee, so I truly appreciate you pushing me to do my best. I always feel driven and supported, and your feedback has quadrupled my technique and determination. You have shown me what I can achieve when I challenge myself and how to look *fabulous* while doing so. I have heard so much new music via your tutelage and have been inspired by your musicianship, humour, and kindness. You have supported me through so many professional and personal quagmires; I appreciate you for always being there to listen and tell me what I need to hear. Your guidance has been invaluable, and I thank you for seeing more potential in me than I do for myself at times!

Simon, thank you for all the time spent discussing Deleuze, Derrida, and Butler; I gained so much philosophical insight from you. I feel as though I know too much, yet simultaneously not enough, about true contradictions, and your perceptive nature has encouraged me to explore the intricacies of Being and Becoming. Our conversations about Greek antiquity, Rocky, and Star Trek will always stay with me. From supervising my Masters' dissertation to seeing me through this project, you have been with me through my whole journey in Manchester. I am eternally grateful for the philosophical awareness, drive for innovation, and treasure-trove of knowledge that you have imparted to me.

Sam, thank you for opening the floodgates to help me connect my love for dance music to my practice as a composer. I learned a rich history of queer excellence in music from you, and I feel as though I became reunited with a long-lost family that spans from SOPHIE to Coil, Ron Hardy to Matmos, and beyond. You gave me so much advice that I carry through my days—a favourite being 'Make yourself 10% more uncomfortable with each new piece'. Whenever I feel the grips of boring familiarity invade my composing, I am reminded to continually push myself and the ways in which I conceptualize music. You have been a guiding light for me in some trying times, and I cannot state how much your encouragement and counsel means.

The three of you have all taught me more than I had ever hoped possible, and I will be ceaselessly thankful for your unending support, guidance, and reassurances. I would not have made strides in my own practice if it were not for your collective assistance and care. As mentors—but more so now as dear friends—thank you for all that you have gifted me.

Finally, I would like to thank whatever brain parasite decided that I would not rest until I fulfil the gay agenda. Her voracious hunger lingers on.

ii. Abstract

This practice-based submission contains a portfolio of three musical compositions (*Discopia, Apollo & Marsyas*, and *Queen Midas*) and a written commentary. Each piece examines how radical queerness shaped the foundations for contemporary queer life, how this frames my experiences as an individual, and why this relates to larger discussions of identity. My music explores the impact and sustained trauma of the AIDS crisis as well as the development and proliferation of queer aesthetics. I engage with these subjects through the lenses of queer relationships, trauma, fear, and hope. Deeply influenced by Gilles Deleuze's *Masochism, Difference and Repetition* and his writing with Felix Guattari in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, this commentary explores the philosophical grounding for my portfolio. It proposes a dense web of interlaced ideas where the pieces constitute an interrogation and abstraction of the history, aesthetics, and triumphs of radical queerness and how this concerns my development as an artist. My goal is to show *how* these pieces express radical queerness, *what it is* to use this as a compositional process, and *why* this process is vital to my work and the wider milieu of music.

Consequently, my research aims can be summarized in the following questions:

> *How can radical queerness be represented retold through musical drama?*
>
> *How has queer trauma impacted contemporary life, and how can this be documented?*
>
> *How have these experiences informed my work as a musician?*

iii. Attachments

i. Submission Materials

These files constitute the primary submission material for this thesis. Video recordings can be accessed as a YouTube playlist (with the benefits of chapter markers) here: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJPMyO6vHnrbPE0N2oqshS5aurv5RaXDP

Download links to of all the materials (scores, videos, etc.) via Dropbox or OneDrive is available here (I also include a QR code at the bottom of this chapter): https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/vwamijkmmau8ai909ja75/ABMPCPZUng7N9pAqnktyoMU?rlkey=fwefb0yrrsolhkjyc5xu902kf&dl=0
https://rncm-my.sharepoint.com/:f:/g/personal/devon_bonelli_student_rncm_ac_uk/EpAHkMLEn4lCvaID3t5ZTdoBP8Jtpt-Qh7vIu7GFo2PCcQ?e=VbIpiF

1. *Discopia* [01:05:00]
    a. Score
    b. Video recording of performance at CLAY Leeds
2. *Apollo & Marsyas* [00:16:00]
    a. Score
    b. Video recording of performance in RNCM's Rosamund Prize
3. *Queen Midas* [01:03:00]
    a. Score
    b. Video recording of performance at The White Hotel

ii. Appendicular Materials

These files are ancillary attachments which I reference in various chapters. While they are contextually relevant to the discussion of my portfolio, an exhaustive engagement with them is beyond the scope of this project and unnecessary for a comprehensive analysis. For instance, here I include two additional recordings of *Discopia* as evidence of its modular structure, but a full listening of either would be superfluous, as all the music is included within the primary submission.

A1. *Discopia*

   a. *Discopia II* – Studio recording with the Larisa Trio (split into separate movements)
   b. *Discopia III* – Recording with Northern School of Contemporary Dance

A2. *Apollo & Marsyas*

   a. 'Meet Apollo' Demo Recording with Visualizer

A3. *Queen Midas*

   a. Projections with backing audio used for performance

YouTube playlist

Download via RNCM OneDrive:

Download via Dropbox:

I. Overview

> *If then we must say something in general about all types of soul, it would be the first actuality of a natural body with organs. We should not then inquire whether the soul and body are one thing, any more than whether the wax and its imprint are, or in general whether the matter of each thing is one with that of which it is the matter. For although unity and being are spoken of in a number of ways, it is of the actuality that they are most properly said.*
>
> — Aristotle, *De Anima* (Book II: Ch. 1)

Queerness is embossed on individuals, much like Aristotle's theorization of the soul. Drawing on Odets' *Out of the Shadows* (2020), many gay[1] people's first experience with queerness is being called 'fag/dyke/sissy/butch' by another individual, often intended as childish torment. Most spend their young adult lives coming to terms with, dismantling stereotypes of, and finding a particular relationship to this process of othering. In doing so, this journey creates two contingent identities within queer people: the one 'tolerated' by society – a mask of expectations and prejudices – and another 'higher, truer' self, first actualized within queer territories (an individual's own home, gay clubs, etc.) which is then espoused in public. As such, an individual's queerness is determined not only by the society performing this othering, but also by whatever queer milieu an individual finds themselves in. Queer territories, the contingency of these identities that get formed, and their relationship to normative standards is of paramount importance to my work as a composer.

From this, I intend for this portfolio of compositions to be a territorial art; it is concerned with both the music and the environment which it creates. Deleuze and Guattari (hereafter referred to as D&G) describe how the 'refrain', a short melodic phrase repeated over and over, establishes a territory (such as in the first epigraph to this thesis) (1980, p. 362).[2] Just as the child sings to engender their territory in D&G's quote, queerness has a history of being propagated through dance floor halls, dimly lit leather bars, and dusky city streets by wide-eyed deviants blasting hyper-saccharine drum and bass. Jack Halberstam (2005 and 2011) describes how these queer territories are established by creating temporary, alternative spaces through stylized repetition, aligning with Judith Butler's work on gender identity (1990). Drawing on this tradition, along with work like Bersani's 'Is There a Gay Art?' (2010), I posit that queer music is not an art that reflects a particular set of experiences or identities. Instead, it is a music opposing and interrogating normative structures, preconceived notions, and hierarchical frameworks. By challenging conventional understandings of sexuality and society, queer music does not simply seek to represent queer people, it attempts to deconstruct and recodify the framework which produces their othering. Consequently, I draw largely on the philosophical work of Deleuze and Guattari, due not only to their involvement with the queer liberation movement in the 20th century, but also for their systematic restructuring of thinking, aesthetics, and ethics providing a revaluation of the philosophical canon, societal values, and hetero-normative assemblages of society.

---

[1] I use queer/gay interchangeably as umbrella terms for any individual who is not a cisgender heterosexual person.

[2] Though D&G abstract the sonic relationship between refrain and territory, it is not necessarily an aural phenomenon. This philosophical usage of 'refrain' borrows from musicology but can be substituted for any kind of repetition (an act, object, phrase) which demarcates a territory. This is deeply related to my readings of Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam's work, discussed in Ch. V 'Research Context and Compositional Methodology'.

As a trans-feminine, nonbinary queer person who grew up as a gay boy in Southwestern cowboy-coded Arizona, my own struggling relationship with queerness serves as a jumping-off point for this portfolio. Drawing on autoethnographic methodology, I seek to examine how my queerness is created, destroyed, transformed, condemned, and embraced by myself, others, and society in general. The necessary and contingent relationship between these subjects is explicated through my three portfolio pieces and examined in this commentary. In the field of autoethnography, Bochner and Ellis (2016, p. 56) describe a process of relationships between researchers and participants with a commitment to the ethical responsibilities between individual researchers and their community. Though I draw on my own experiences, this portfolio and commentary—as I see them—are tied to my identity yet abstracted from my lived reality. I remove the personal specificities, not out of shame, but to deepen the relationship between my work and the listener; I am more concerned with provocation and how others can relate to these sentiments over a biographic account of my life. My purpose is not to prescribe a meaning or moral to an audience, nor is it to retell my experiences. Rather, I invite individuals into a space where they hear, see, and *undergo* the process of queering. This music propagates queer territories by drawing on the historical codification of homosexuality. Rooted in this practice of historical reference, these works represent an accretion of queerness – numerous layers and references whose coherence depends upon their molecular relationships. Listeners are not meant to trace each individual allusion (musical or otherwise)—*why* this story or that melody line—but rather to create their own system of understanding. By drawing out an individual's own relationship with this material (or lack thereof) and the narrative, my intent is to distort the self (both mine and listener's) and call into question the framework for establishing identity. This explores the process of othering, its impact, and how queer people begin to know themselves and their community.

The central objective of this thesis becomes an amalgamation of these ideas: to make a body of work that establishes, examines, and contextualizes queer territories' relationships to a wider social framework and how to mirror these structures within my music. Through this commentary, I will explain the relevant literature informing this practice, how I adapt and use these as compositional tools, and consequently I will evaluate this portfolio's relevance to contemporary queer theory and music.

II. Research Context and Compositional Methodology

> *What got me by during that period was conceiving of the history of philosophy as a kind of ass-fuck, or what amounts to the same thing, an immaculate conception. I imagined myself approaching an author from behind and giving him a child that would indeed be his but would nonetheless be monstrous.*
>
> — Deleuze, 'I Have Nothing to Admit' *Semiotext(e),* Vol. 2, No. 3, 1977

In this chapter, I outline the framework of musical, philosophical, and aesthetic references that I situate my work within. Here, I give a contextual analysis of my research interests, their applicability to my portfolio, and why I have positioned my research amongst these sources. I emphasize the limited and circumstantial nature of this; to give a comprehensive history of queerness in music, a full description of Deleuzian philosophy, and an account of the evolution of camp aesthetics would be well beyond the scope of this project. Instead, I aim to concisely describe why these topics are of particular interest and how I utilize them within my compositions. I see my portfolio pieces as my own 'monstrous children', taking from Deleuze's quote, representing an accumulation and enaction of these elements.

My research context takes on a hybrid structure. This chapter addresses the main themes that my thesis draws on and how I use them as a composer. As I explain topics, I give a brief illustration of how they are explored in my portfolio. These short examples are expanded upon in each piece's corresponding analysis chapter. In these subsequent sections, I then focus on these subjects as they specifically relate to the discussion of a particular piece (i.e. I discuss Butler's gender performativity here and examine how *Queen Midas* relates to this in the relevant analysis chapter). Exploring the research both systematically and contextually highlights the discursive nature of this project while ensuring clarity and coherence.

On the Possibility of a Queer Genealogy

A linear account of LGBTQIA+ individuals being accepted into society seems a stable starting point for my thesis, but Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), argues against such a timeline. He challenges Sigmund Freud's conception of sexual development as a repressive force necessary for societal function; according to Foucault, Freud incorrectly posits that there exists an oppressive history of human sexuality that works as an internal mechanism for the continuation of society (i.e. homosexuality is repressed because it is a socially unproductive desire—it does not produce children). To Freud, the history of sexuality is a progression of what is acceptable, thereby modulating an individual's desires, actions, and neuroses. Foucault pushes against this idea, instead framing society's preoccupation with sexuality as an ongoing transformation of knowledge and power. The act of labelling and discussing what is 'repressed' (such as 'deviant' behaviours from 'normal' sexualities) serves to control and regulate people by turning them into subjects of power (1978 p. 83). This power doesn't function simply by denying or repressing desires but by inciting and regulating them through discourse. As such, Foucault critiques Freud's biological narrative of repression, instead suggesting that talking *about* repression is itself a way of exerting power over individuals and their desires. Foucault focuses on the pathologization of sexuality as a system (especially during the 18th and 19th centuries) that mechanizes and seeks to understand how and why individuals act as a form of exerting control over what is deemed 'repressive'.

Freud introduces the concept of sublimation and postulates the way in which repressed desires, such as those related to queerness, are redirected into socially acceptable outlets like art and intellectual pursuits. Sublimation, in this framework, acts as a means for individuals to navigate societal repression while still expressing their desires in indirect ways. Freud's model suggests that queer desires, often labelled as deviant, could be channelled into creative outputs, which have been historically significant for queer communities. However, Foucault critiques this by emphasizing how power and discourse do not simply repress desires; instead, they actively incite them and regulate how they are expressed, turning sublimation into another mechanism of control. By regulating which desires need to be sublimated, society maintains its grip on individuals' sexuality (p. 76). This interplay between repression and sublimation becomes central to queer resistance, where artistic expression serves as both a form of negotiation and rebellion against these societal norms.

Scholars have since drawn on Foucault's work to elucidate how the modern idea of queerness came to be. In *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (2002) David Halperin describes how modern homosexuality evolved from 'the cumulative effect of a long process of historical overlay and accretion' (p. 12). Halperin cites the differences in how Ancient Greek society viewed pederasty (sexual behaviours between an adult man and boy) and *kinaidos* (the passive partner in a masculine homosexual act). While pederasty was seen as acceptable within the specific cultural framework of Ancient Greece, being a *kinaidos* was not. The act of being penetrated, 'bottoming', was seen as inherently feminine, and for an adult man to be the subordinate sexual partner meant he was a 'dishonourable man' (p. 71). To call pederasty 'homosexual' or 'queer' within a modern context furthers the negative and 'vicious stereotyping of gay male eroticism' (p. 73). Similarly, to think of ancient 'topping' (being the active partner) as synonymous with modern conceptions of gay sexuality ignores the historical milieu of why a term like *kinaidos* came to be. Contrasting this, Rictor Norton argues in *Myth of the Modern Homosexual* (1997) that while language and attitudes have changed, the existence of queer individuals remains consistent throughout history. He critiques Foucault's constructivist approach, stating that this erases the lived experiences of queer people across time. To further this, Norton explores the history of 18th and 19th century English molly houses, an early subculture where men could express their sexuality and gender fluidity (p. 142). These queer territories did not just appear; rather, they came as a reaction to the societal norms of the time. Crossdressing (at the time an appropriate word, now 'drag' is preferred) was a popular occurrence in molly house subculture and came as a response to Victorian conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Though opposing in their viewpoints (however, both would claim a linear, Freudian model is incorrect), Halperin and Norton point towards a similar line of thinking: a repetitive transgression of societal norms, of what a dominant ideology claims is 'acceptable', defines queerness, not the act of sex itself. Who is 'right' or 'wrong' in their historical analysis is not of primary concern to my thesis. Rather, I focus on this appeal to the act of transgressive repetition itself being the defining characteristic of queerness; this becomes a focal point of my methodology in composing my thesis portfolio—an appeal to the process of othering itself centred on desire.

Deleuze and Guattari

This space between essentialism and constructivism is where I align my portfolio with D&G's work, two thinkers obsessed with 'the space between' and intimately concerned with transgressive desires. Preluding their work together, Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (1968) provides a framework to analyse this space, and it grounds the duo's later work together. In it, Deleuze responds to Hegelian dialectics, a method whereby history and reality are driven by a process of negation and synthesis, where contradictions (thesis and antithesis) are resolved through sublation, leading to a synthesis. This process creates a teleological progression toward absolute knowledge, where difference is ultimately reconciled into unity. For Hegel, identity is formed through the resolution of contradictions, with difference being a moment of tension that leads to synthesis and resolution (pp. xv-xix).

Hegel's dialectic, discussed extensively by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* (1968) and with Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), is foundational to this process of development, viewing contradictions as a necessary part of historical progress. According to Hegel, each stage of development in thought, history, or identity arises from the negation of the previous stage. This process pushes society toward greater integration of knowledge and self-awareness, aiming for an ultimate reconciliation of all contradictions. In this view, difference serves only as a tension to be resolved into a more unified whole.

However, Deleuze disagrees with this; difference is not a moment to be subsumed under identity or resolved through negation. Instead, he argues that difference itself is primary, autonomous, and irreducible to identity. He states that difference is positive and creative. It is not the absence of identity but the productive force that generates new identities and modes of existence. There is no 'negation' of an essence (as Hegel would have it) but rather the continuous creation of difference (pp. 37-63).

By situating Deleuze's critique of Hegel within the 'essentialism versus constructivism' debate, queer history is instead seen as an evolving process driven by desire and differentiation, not as something that must align with fixed social categories or historical progression. Instead of attempting to resolve contradictions of queerness into a unified identity, Deleuze's framework embraces the flux, multiplicity, and ongoing transformation inherent to queer lives. This challenges Hegel's teleology and provides a more dynamic approach to understanding queerness, identity, and social power. Instead of reducing identity to either a stable essence or a product of social forces, Deleuze would emphasize the mechanism that produces queer experiences. Identity, for Deleuze, is always a provisional and contingent result of complex interactions, not something fixed or wholly socially determined. While constructivists often focus on power and discourse, Deleuze foregrounds desire and differentiation as a productive force that can transcend and disrupt societal norms. Queerness, therefore, is not just a reactive identity formed in response to societal constraints but a creative, dynamic process of change and becoming that escapes easy classification. Using Deleuze, I advocate for understanding queer identity as a dynamic, fluid, and ongoing process, driven by desire and differentiation.

For Deleuze, difference (akin to queerness, according to Nigianni and Storr's *Deleuze and Queer Theory* [2009]) is ontologically necessary and prior to an object's identity. 'Simulacra', imperfect copies of a concept, create reality and the concept itself, not the other way around. In *Difference and Repetition,* Deleuze writes:

> Plato gave the establishment of difference as the supreme goal of dialectic. However, difference does not lie between things and simulacra, models, and copies. Things are simulacra themselves, simulacra are the superior forms, and the difficulty facing everything is to become its own simulacrum, to attain the status of a sign in the coherence of eternal return. Plato opposed eternal return to chaos as though chaos were a contradictory state which must be subject to order or law from outside, as it is when the Demiurge subjugates a rebellious matter. (1968, p. 85)

Deleuze's main philosophical goal can be summarized as this: to remove the subjective presupposition of thought, to be rid of a 'drive for truth', what he calls the 'dogmatic image of thought' (pp. 171-222). For him, thought itself obscures reality. Deleuze critiques Kant's idealism; he disagrees that the world is divided into phenomena (the world we have access to), and the noumena (an inaccessible world unknowable to us). Instead, Deleuze writes (drawing on Spinoza and Hume) that existence is *within* and *self-contained*, it is *immanent.* He emphasizes Becoming over Being, the 'What-is-it-to-be?'-ness of existence is in constant flux. Contradictions and binaries need not be true or false; rather, they affirm one another *through* one another. This acts as a kind of 'inversion' rather than 'contradiction', one where this context between concepts/ideas/objects is prior to their identity. For example, a leaf is a leaf insofar as one knows what it is *not.* It is not a tree, a human, the ground, etc, and one knows the system in which creates the necessity for the existence of the leaf. Difference becomes the dynamic force driving the process of becoming, emphasizing the uniqueness and multiplicity of existence (pp. 37-86). Repetition becomes not a 'recurrence of the same' but a 'vehicle for difference'; repetition is a reproduction of differences (pp. 93-170). Existence is an ongoing, continuous transformation, a 'differentiation', a 'flow'. The creation of new identities opposes the idea of a fixed being. These processes are dynamic and push and pull at one another. Deleuze sees this as an inherently masochistic process, one whereby the concept undergoes its own self-annihilation as an act of self-preservation.

Deleuze's *Masochism: On Coldness and Cruelty* (1967) was my first encounter with his writing. It explores this theme of annihilation-as-preservation and is perhaps the most applicable of his writings to my own practice as a composer. Deleuze examines Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (the namesake for the term masochism), its differences to the Marquis de Sade's work (after whom sadism is named), and how these two seeming-contradictory 'perfect matches' displace one another's desires. I found this text early in my philosophical studies when I saw a pervasive problem in ethics, including utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, and Aristotelian virtue ethics: none of which could account for the masochist, an individual who finds pleasure in their own pain. In reading Deleuze's *Masochism*, I located not only an answer, but a total reframing of my own conceptions of ethics. Deleuze recounts a joke:

> The masochist says: 'Hurt me.' The sadist replies: 'No.'
>
> This is a particularly stupid joke, not only because it is unrealistic but because it foolishly claims competence to pass judgment on the world of perversions. It is unrealistic because a genuine sadist could never tolerate a masochistic victim […] Neither would the masochist tolerate a truly sadistic torturer. […] The woman torturer of masochism cannot be sadistic precisely because she is in the masochistic situation, she is an integral part of it, a realization of the masochistic fantasy. She belongs in the masochistic world, not in the sense that she has the same tastes as her victim, but because her 'sadism' is of a kind never found in the sadist; it is, as it were, the double or the reflection of masochism. The same is true of sadism. The victim cannot be masochistic, not merely because the libertine would be irked if she were to experience pleasure, but because the victim of the sadist belongs entirely in the world of sadism and is an integral part of the sadistic situation. (pp. 41-42)

Thereby, masochism, according to Deleuze, does not merely invert this relationship but constructs its own unique 'economy of pain and pleasure' (p. 107). Masoch's pleasure is tied to his experience of pain, but this pain is ritualistic, contractual, and imbued with symbolic significance. He seeks both the sensation of pain and its emotional affects within a carefully structured scenario, one whereby Masoch *desires the flow of desire itself*. This involves a deliberate process of suspense, delay, and anticipation, where pain is eroticized and transformed into a source of pleasure. The masochist's pleasure depends on the context, the relationship with the dominant partner, and the enactment of specific fantasies, often mediated by fetishes. This fetish, a deviation from the normative, itself is desired, not simply the pain that comes as consequence (pp. 69-80).

Queer perspectives on masochism and violence are explored in my portfolio in various ways. *Discopia* assesses the latent violence inherent to society that drives environmental disaster and how queer perspectives provide a framework to analyse this. *Apollo & Marsyas* delves into the darkness of queer intrapersonal relationships and how society's masochistic tendencies are mirrored and amplified by individuals. *Queen Midas* examines how societal trauma engenders self-immolation and the feedback loop wherein the self is modulated and destroyed by these normative standards. In these works, I reflect on the link between transgressive behaviours and what is perceived as violent. Deleuze's account of masochism and his 'economy of pain and pleasure' creates a system through which I can explore my relationships to these topics with my portfolio.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) D&G take the idea of total masochism, a complete destruction of the 'self', to its extreme with their concept 'Body without Organs'. In the sixth chapter, 'How do you Make Yourself a Body without Organs?' (pp. 173-194), D&G draw on Nietzsche's eternal return, Freud's death drive, and Bergson's *élan vital* (1910) to theorize the 'Body without Organs' as a conglomeration of networks in the process of moving, interacting, developing, and differentiating. This network is called 'rhizomatic' (root-like, sprawling networks of sites desiring potential interaction), which opposes a tree-like (arborescent, hierarchical) system (pp. 1-27). This ongoing process of becoming is fuelled by the desiring machine's will towards entropy. Existence is created and mediated by this inherent drive towards a disorganization of the body/concept/idea. To D&G, being is expressed univocally (in one voice, also called the 'refrain' as in pp. 361-408), and that expression is the desire to become a Body without Organs, to 'deterritorialize' and 'reterritorialize' endlessly in a dynamic system of interplay between forces.

D&G often cite queer scholarship (Michel Foucault and Guy Hocquenghem), queer lives (as in Guattari's 'I Have Even Met Happy Drag Queens' [2009 pp. 225-227]), and queer trauma (Deleuze wrote the forward for Hocquenghem's *Gay Liberation After May '68* and speaks about how '[queer people] will be on the margins. It is the centre that makes the margins' (1974 p. 3). Deleuze's statement about immaculate conception (the epigraph for this chapter) reinforces the queering of philosophical doctrine. Differentiation and misappropriation is a queering-in-process; 'failure' itself becomes this queering of success. Further discussed by Hocquenghem, he posits:

> Homosexuals are not abnormal; rather, we have failed normalcy. […] Rather than being lovers in order to breathe, we are queer in order to escape asphyxia. Rather than pretending to be virtuous, we pretend to be dissolute. […] As long as we are not burned at the stake or locked up in asylums, we continue to flounder in the ghettoes of nightclubs, public restrooms, and sidelong glances, as if that misery had become the habit of our happiness. (Hocquenghem 1972 p. 26)

Jack Halberstam, Camp, and the Aesthetics of Queer Failure

Taking Hocquenghem's idea of 'failed normalcy' further, Jack Halberstam challenges the cultural obsession with success and productivity, especially as they relate to heteronormative values in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Queer failure, for Halberstam, is a form of liberation from societal expectations. This rejection of conventional success opens new possibilities for subversive identity formation and art. Halberstam argues that failure—whether in terms of career, gender conformity, or linear life trajectories—is not only a form of resistance but also a fertile ground for creating alternative queer spaces and times.

Though this draws on scholarship in camp aesthetics, such as Susan Sontag's seminal *Notes on Camp* (1961) and Philip Core's *Camp: The Lie that Tells the Truth* (1984), Halberstam sees a further purpose: a deliberate refusal of normative structures through aesthetics. Sontag sets an approach to aesthetics which takes camp as a serious artistic style. Though people had spoken about camp, knew what it referred to, and who the regular clientele were (homosexuals with good taste), camp had not been written about or interrogated as its own aesthetic previously. She writes:

> You can't camp about something you don't take seriously. You're not making fun of it, you're making fun out of it. You're expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance. Baroque art is basically camp about religion. The ballet is camp about love. (p. 31)

Linking to ideas of content, decorativeness is an essential part of camp. 'Clothes, furniture, all the elements of visual décor, for instance, make up a large part of Camp. For Camp art is often decorative art, *emphasizing […] style over content*,' (p. 6, my emphasis added). This idea of style over content I have a slightly different take on, perhaps a better description being the idea of *content through style*. Content is established by its exaggeration from reality. Camp is then not just something made in 'bad taste', rather it is that which establishes its own 'taste' through style. Camp is seriousness reframed as exaggeration. This playfulness with seeming opposites, a tension between the serious and the non-serious, gets displaced: 'The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. […] Camp involves a new, more complex relation to "the serious". One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious,' (p. 26).

Camp has always been linked to queerness. Sontag states how camp taste is, however, not the same as gay taste. 'Even though homosexuals have been its vanguard, Camp taste is much more than homosexual taste,' (p. 30). Sontag notes that in men, camp is an exaggeration of femininity, and the opposite is true of women, camp is an exaggeration of masculinity.

Mark Booth provides yet another approach, one that grows on Sontag's, but nevertheless has a moral and ethical implication. He writes:

> Camp is primarily a sense of self-presentation than of sensibility. If you are alone and bored at home, and in desperation you try to amuse yourself by watching an awful old film, you are not being camp. You only become so if you subsequently proclaim to others that you thought Victor Mature was divine in Samson and Delilah. China ducks on the wall are a serious matter to 'straights', but the individual who displays them in a house of otherwise modernist and modish furniture is being camp. […]
> To be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal warrants. (1983 p. 69)

Booth further argues that art, especially 'classical' and 'high' art, often embodies ideals of beauty, formality, and seriousness. Camp, however, revels in the absurd and the extravagant, challenging these conventions. Through referencing and distorting source material, camp plays with the audience's expectations and perceptions, creating a juxtaposition that is both entertaining and thought-provoking. For instance, camp might take a revered piece of classical painting or sculpture and reimagine it with kitschy, over-the-top embellishments, thereby highlighting the artificiality and subjectivity of what is considered 'high art'. Moreover, camp's referential nature then serves as a critique of elitism. By democratizing art through playful parody, camp makes it accessible and relatable, inviting viewers to question the arbitrary boundaries between high and low culture (Booth 1983 p. 76). This interplay enriches both camp and the referenced art, fostering a dynamic dialogue that underscores the fluidity of cultural value and artistic merit.

Reflecting on this, Halberstam's work, entrenched in queer theory, informed by his trans-masculinity, and drawing from poststructuralist and feminist backgrounds, presents an inquiry into the constructive potential of failure within this queer aesthetic. His exploration aligns with the Deleuzian concept of deterritorialization, accentuating the rhizomatic nature of non-normative identities that defy conventional structures (Halberstam 2011 p. 113). The embrace of failure as an aesthetic articulation resonates with D&G's notion of multiplicities, offering a transformative paradigm that challenges normative delineations.

Artifice, as a deliberate and constructed quality, plays a pivotal role here. In Halberstam's exploration of queer failure, the intentional rejection of conventional success and the celebration of non-normativity involve a conscious, artistic, and practical utilisation of the artificial. The performative aspect of failure as an aesthetic practice highlights the constructed nature of societal expectations and the potential for a radical reimagining of identity politics (Halberstam 2011 pp. 173-187).

In my own practice, I demonstrate camp sensibilities in various ways. For instance, in *Queen Midas,* I present 1980s house music within an operatic framework. In doing so, I recentre queer dance music as a narrative fixture that warrants a revaluation of what conceptually 'makes' an opera, who is historically excluded from this form, and why these exclusions necessitate intervention. Similarly, in *Discopia*, I explore the relationship between classical dance forms like ballet and contemporary experimental dance. In *Apollo & Marsyas*, I parody the structure of Ancient Greek tragedies through distorting and reinterpreting contemporary views on sexuality.

Halberstam's Queer Temporality and Spatiality

In Halberstam's 2005 book, *In a Queer Time and Place*, he introduces the concept of queer temporality—a mode of experiencing time that does not follow the normative life stages of birth, reproduction, and death. Instead, it celebrates non-linearity, loops, and fragments. He cites a concept introduced by Elizabeth Freeman in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010): temporal drag. It refers to the idea that the past can 'drag' into the present, creating a tension between different historical moments and resisting linear, progressive understandings of time. This concept challenges the normative, forward-moving trajectory of time that is often associated with heteronormativity, capitalism, and modernity. Halberstam argues that queer experiences often exist outside the typical, linear understanding of time (e.g., birth, marriage, reproduction, death). Instead of following these paths, queer individuals may live in ways that diverge from or disrupt these expectations. Temporal drag exemplifies this by suggesting that history or past events and experiences continue to exert influence on the present, thereby resisting a Kantian/Hegelian forward-moving arc of 'progress'. Halberstam describes how the past is not left behind or transcended, but rather continues to affect the present in sometimes uncomfortable or unexpected ways. This 'drag' can be literal in terms of the aesthetic (e.g., 1970s or 1980s fashion in the 2000s) or symbolic, where cultural, political, or emotional residues of the past persist in current moments (such as the trauma of the AIDS crisis and its associated symbolism). This critiques the idea that history can ever be completely overcome, and it emphasizes the ways in which the past is continually reenacted and recontextualized, particularly through bodies, gendered performances, and cultural practices.

In terms of space, Halberstam highlights that queer people often experience and create spaces that are marginal, temporary, or transitory and exist outside of the rigid structures of mainstream society. These are shaped by the experiences of non-normative bodies and are sites where new forms of identity and community are created. Queer spaces—often found in nightclubs, underground scenes, and drag performances—allow for the experimentation of identities outside of societal norms. This aligns with D&G's deterritorialization, where fixed identities and spaces are constantly being deconstructed and redefined. Halberstam also emphasizes the importance of subcultures in creating and maintaining queer spaces. These spaces are often in opposition to mainstream culture, functioning as sites of resistance and providing alternative modes of sociality. Queer spaces exist both physically (in subcultural venues) and mentally (in the queer re-imagining of normative spaces). They often exist at the margins of society but serve as centres of queer life.

In my own work, I embrace this queer sense of time by rejecting a traditional narrative arc. In *Discopia* the piece avoids a clear beginning, middle, and end, instead employing cyclical structures, loops, and repetition. Movements like 'XV. Glaciers Melting' and 'WV. Blizzard // Avalanche' return to earlier musical motifs in 'II. A City Underwater' and 'IV. Sirens // Drowning', not to resolve them, but to recontextualize them. This mirrors queer experiences of time, where identity is often shaped by non-linear journeys—constantly evolving rather than moving toward a single, fixed endpoint. In *Apollo and Marsyas*, time is collapsed between mythological and contemporary eras, creating a fluid, multi-temporal space that reflects queer lives existing both inside and outside of normative timelines. This compositional approach emerged from temporal drag, dragging the past into the present, recontextualizing history and refusing to be forgotten. This technique of layering multiple temporalities in one piece directly connects to how queer bodies and histories are always entangled with a complex, multi-layered relationship to time. In *Queen Midas*, I utilize queer spatiality by placing 1980s house music within an operatic context, blending these different territories. This integration recentres historically marginalized queer spaces, such as nightclubs, within the narrative of an elite art form, critiquing who is included and excluded in classical traditions and where this takes place.

Judith Butler's Gender Performativity

Judith Butler has significantly influenced contemporary discussions on gender, particularly through their work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Butler challenges traditional views that consider gender as a fixed and inherent aspect of identity, arguing instead that gender is performative and flexible in nature. Butler theorizes that gender is not something one inherently *is*, but rather something one *does*, and in doing so, is philosophically performative. This is more than just 'a performance'; a philosophically performative act is a technical term for an action that is done by its saying. For instance, a judge sentences a criminal; by making the statement 'You are guilty,' the judge announces a person's guiltiness, and in doing so, the judge also makes this a reality. Another example – 'performative activism' is a political praxis wherein an individual's involvement is done only through their saying so (posting on social media, fighting with in-laws at Christmas). Like these examples, Butler posits that gender identity is not a stable essence or a pre-existing reality but is constructed and enacted through repetitive performances. These performances are not isolated acts but are instead part of a continuous process that shapes and reinforces the social understanding of gender. Butler argues that gender is performative in the sense that it is not an expression of an inner self but a series of acts that produce and reproduce gender norms. These acts, whether intentional or not, contribute to the creation and stabilization of gender categories within society.

To illustrate their point, Butler discusses drag performances as a form of gender subversion. Drag challenges conventional norms by highlighting the constructed nature of gender roles. In this context, gender identity is not a fixed reality but a set of actions and behaviours that can be adopted and adapted. By revealing the performative aspect of gender, Butler opens possibilities for subverting and destabilizing established norms (Butler 1993 p. 184). Furthermore, Butler critiques the binary understanding of gender as a rigid division between male and female. They argue that this binary reinforces oppressive power structures and excludes non-normative identities. Instead, they advocate for a more fluid and expansive conception of gender, acknowledging the diversity of gender expressions beyond the binary framework.

Butler's ideas have been influential not only within feminist theory but also in queer studies and beyond. Their work has sparked debates and discussions about the social construction of gender, the implications of performativity for identity politics, and the potential for challenging oppressive norms through performative acts. By challenging traditional notions of gender as an essential and fixed identity, Butler paved the way for a more nuanced understanding and framework of how gender is constructed, performed, and ultimately subverted. Their work continues to shape discussions on identity, power, and resistance within the broader context of social and cultural theory.

It's essential, though, to note that while Butler's theories have been widely celebrated, they have also faced criticism. Julia Serrano argues that Butler’s emphasis on performativity neglects material realities and the embodied experiences of individuals in the book *Whipping Girl* (2007). This questions the practical implications of Butler’s ideas for activism and social change. My goal is not to validate or invalidate thinkers on this, but instead to show how conceptualizing the performativity of gender influences my own work.

In *Queen Midas*, I explore my own relationship with gender through performativity. I distort the audience's perception of Midas's identity by using both Georgie Malcom's voice (the singer performing as Midas) and my voice (Act IV Sc. 2 – 'Drown Me' score p. 51 [0:53:23]). This is further emphasized in the video projections; clips flip between video footage of Georgie and me, implying a discontinuity of character that is performed/latent yet still perceptible by the listener, other individuals, and society (within the narrative). Theatrical elements such as the projections in *Queen Midas* thereby become an essential part of my compositional language, furthering narrative elements within the story.

A Theatre of Interdisciplinarity

Part of my role as a researcher is to interrogate my compositional practice. Inherent to this process, I find great inspiration in fields outside of music that serve to inform my subject material. From performing to set dressing, filmmaking to costuming, I am interested not only in music, but also the world that music generates. I incorporate extramusical territories into my portfolio pieces as ways of interacting with and deepening my relationship to the musical material. These elements inform and contextualize what I write, indicating a contingent relationship. Marco Ciciliani examines the increasing prevalence of multidisciplinary approaches composers take with their work and the permeability of music as a subject in 'Music in the Expanded Field' (2019). He discusses an 'altered perception of pop culture' (p. 26) and changes in how people interact with music daily that lead to a new outlook on media consumption (p. 31).

In an interview with Ciciliani, composer Jennifer Walshe observes: 'I realize the video parts in my work myself. Primarily this is because I want them to be an integral part of the composition—I wouldn't outsource the cello part in a string quartet to someone else (unless that was the concept of the piece!) so why would I outsource the video part? [...] I want to call this music, rather than interdisciplinary, and for us to discuss it as music' (p. 24). Relating to my portfolio, the costumes, projection, and set design of my pieces are integral to the musical material. I develop these things as I compose, and they consequently have musical implications. Take *Discopia*, for instance, where the rustling sound of torn-up bin bags on stage is sampled and mirrored in the music. In another instance, I recorded and edited the video projections in *Queen Midas* act as a setting, other characters, and an abstraction of the self. Thinking of my approach as 'novel' or 'ground-breaking' would be incorrect. Incorporations of video projections (pieces like Walshe's *EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT*, Michel van der Aa's *Upload*, Sam Salem's *Shadows Pass the Morning 'Gins to Break*), costuming and staging (Picasso and Dalí's work with the Ballets Russes, Stravinsky and Nijinsky's collaboration for *Rite of Spring*), queer history and culture (John Corigliano's *Symphony No. 1*, Nico Muhly's *Two Boys*, Mark Simpson's *Pleasure*), and dance music's entanglement with the western classical canon (much of Mark Fell's work, David Horne's *Disintegrations*: three arrangements of Squarepusher, Boards of Canada, and Aphex Twin tracks) have a rich history. Originality and uniqueness are found through every composers' differing approaches. This heterogeneity constitutes the multi-faceted approaches to the creative process which sets individual artists apart from one another.

The Space Between Pop and Classical

My own compositions are bound up in my experiences as a DJ and producer. I have been performing from the age of 16, and this involvement with dance and popular music influences my concert-focused music. I do not see these two as distinct from one another, but rather as different traits or aspects that a particular piece might have. Metaphorically, this is closer to a dynamic characteristic, such as an object's colour or weight rather than a binary function. Acoustic and electronic are not opposite sides, but are instead two different scales that may or may not be in a given piece. In practice, these traits are rhizomatic in nature; they change in intensity throughout a piece's duration. For example, in *Discopia*, the macroscopic structure between movements 'IV. I saw your casket in my dreams last night' to 'V. Coda' to 'VI. Memories of birds and boats' (score pp. 17-31 [0:18:28-0:23:41]) shows a move from solo piano with no electronics to a dance section where the acoustic trio and the underlying electronics are both present, but not blended, in effect deterritorializing the ensemble. This is followed by a section for solo violin where the electronics act as an extension of the live performer, implying a change in quality to the relationship between electronic and acoustic. As such, these aspects may be homogenous or heterogeneous; 'VI. Memories of birds and boats' is more homogenous than the preceding movement. The electronics act as an extension of the violin's acoustic sound, unlike what is found in 'V. Coda'. This movement is more heterogenous, the electronics act as an added member of the ensemble.

I draw on Tim Lawrence's 'Disco and the Queering of the Dance Floor' (2011) and Christoph Cox's 'How Do You Make Music a Body without Organs?' (2006) which discuss disco and electronica's radical break from dance and musical styles of the preceding eras and how D&G's philosophy can be used to analyse this music and its cultural significance. Lawrence explores the cultural movement of disco that changed the foundations of dance; prior to the 60s, dancing was exclusively done in heterosexual pairings. With the advent of music festivals like Woodstock in the late 60s, dance went from structured pairings with recognizable movements to groups of swaying individuals. The 70s furthered this with the popularity of disco in 'a largely black, Latino, and gay underground' (Cox 2006 p. 11), where this shift allowed queer individuals to experience the dance floor at a time when same-sex dancing was illegal in America and Britain. Not only the beginning of acceptance towards queer couples, this shift in dance culture from the couple to a mass of individuals represented a social deterritorialization. Lawrence writes: 'By turning on a single spot, then, dancers could move in relation to a series of other bodies in a near-simultaneous flow and as part of an amorphous and fluid entity that evokes Deleuze and Guattari's Body without Organs,' (Lawrence 2011 pp. 233-234). As such, in its early days, 'disco music' was not a genre with a specific style of dance and music and instead referred to 'the far-reaching selection of R&B, soul, funk, gospel, salsa, and danceable rock plus African and European imports that could be heard in Manhattan's discotheques,' (p. 236). I draw on this lineage where connections between genre, dance, and narrative structure are deterritorialized on the nightclub floor.

In my compositional practice, I frequently draw connections between referencing, sampling, and appropriating. I elucidate these practices within my portfolio, highlighting the theoretical and practical frameworks that underpin my work. The intersection of these practices is pivotal, as it allows for a tapestry of sound and meaning, influenced by historical and contemporary contexts. John Leidecker's exploration of Charles Ives's music serves as a foundational point for my understanding of the evolution of sampling in music. Leidecker illustrates how Ives's innovative techniques laid the groundwork for modern practices in popular and dance music. Ives's approach to incorporating diverse musical elements demonstrates an early form of sampling, where fragments of pre-existing compositions are recontextualized to create new works. J. Peter Burkholder's comprehensive analysis of Ives's music identifies 14 distinct ways in which the composer utilizes sampling. While I do not adhere strictly to these methods, they inform my approach to incorporating source material. In my work, the relationship to the source material can be assessed through several lenses:

- *Familiarity* refers to whether the original material is known to the audience, which can impact the listener's perception and connection to the piece.
- *Authenticity* involves the closeness of my work to the source material, particularly in terms of written notes.
- *Imitability*, or pastiche-ness, pertains to the degree to which the material evokes the aesthetic or style of a particular composer or genre, even if it is not a direct reference.
- *Recognizability* is about whether the material is identifiable as the original source, which is related to, yet distinct from, authenticity.

For instance, in the final scene of *Queen Midas* Act IV Sc. 3 – 'Epilogue', I sample music I composed and recorded at age 16 (score p. 51 [0:53:23]). This sample is totally unrecognizable to the audience but engenders my personal and narrative connection to the composition. Anecdotally, an audience member remarked, 'I love the ending. I don't know why, and I feel like I might be missing something, but I enjoy it all the more for that reason.' This response, one that grasps the affectation of the music despite a listener's alienation from the material, highlights the emotional impact of what is familiar yet intangible within the music.

III. Portfolio Overview

Before individually analysing each piece in my portfolio, I address some common themes between these three works. Though each are distinct and do not musically rely on one another, they do examine the subject of queerness through different lenses, share structural similarities, and have an accretive relationship overall. Ricardo Sosa (2019) draws on astrophysics to apply this technical term *accretion* to ideation. Planetary accretion, Sosa explains, refers to how planets, stars, and solar systems form through the gradual accumulation of smaller particles (dust, gas, and debris) that coalesce under gravitational forces to form larger bodies like planetesimals, protoplanets, and finally fully formed planets. This process is non-linear and involves various stages of growth, collisions, and transformations. The model highlights that, just like planets are not formed from pre-existing miniature planets but from the gradual accumulation of many small particles, relationships emerge from the synthesis and evolution of numerous small, incomplete ideas. It emphasizes that the creative value of a solution does not lie in the essence of the early ideas but in how those fragments are combined and transformed over time into a cohesive final product. D&G's framework resonates with the accretion theory's rejection of essentialist views of creativity and its focus on process, becoming, and the emergent nature of ideas. I see the accumulation of idea fragments (i.e. the musical elements within each piece as well as the relationship between the three) as an assemblage; a deeper understanding of 'queerness' emerges from their interactions, rather than from an intrinsic, definable quality. Therefore, I think of these pieces as a kind of solar system, three bodies rotating around and inspecting the central 'star'—queerness.

Structural similarities between the three pieces indicate another layer to the accretion model. Each is made of similar elements, but the specific arrangement of these 'molecules' constitutes their own perspective. For instance, all three begin with a direct application of D&G's refrain, a short musical phrase used to demarcate a territory. It is in *how* they expand on this common thread that differentiates them. Likewise, they all critique a dialectical relationship between acoustic and electronic music and are occupied with demonstrating different ways which these categories can interact. Each piece is focused on a particular perspective and abstraction of homosexuality and gender variance that I wish to draw out.

Tripartite in nature, no single piece in this portfolio captures a comprehensive nature of queerness. Instead, I provide differing territories and perspectives that amalgamate into a dynamic conception of queerness. This will be discussed and evaluated further in 'Ch. X. Conclusion: Becoming-Queer' after each piece's individual analysis which now follows.

IV. *Discopia*

(2020-2023) [Duration: 01:05:00]

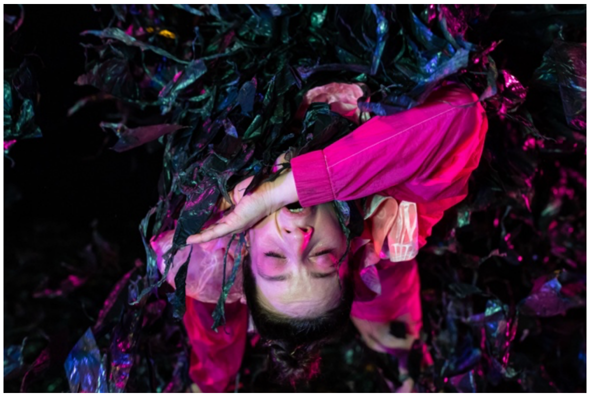

Figure 1 Photograph of dancer Eva Leemans, Photographed by Elly Welford

> *We are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain. […] We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.*
>
> — Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (2009 p. 1)

Background and Conceptual Framework

Discopia is a multi-media piece for piano trio, live electronics, projection, and contemporary dancers reflecting on xenofeminism (Hester 2018), queer futurity (Muñoz 2009), and queer temporality/spatiality (Halberstam 2005). The structure of *Discopia* draws on D&G's notion of the rhizome and provides a method of applying this concept musically. Its development began in 2020, culminating with a pilot tour in September 2023 where we performed shows in Leeds and Exeter. It is written for the Larisa Trio (pianist Jasmin Allpress, violinist Elliette Harris, and cellist Rosie Spinks) and the dance company Excessive Human Collective (choreographed by Imogen Reeve with dancing performed by Eva Leemans, Rachel Sullivan, Lisa Chearles, and Annie Kelleher). This project was funded by a Performing Rights Society Grant and an Arts Council England Grant.

The story of *Discopia* envisions a post-apocalyptic wasteland over-saturated in electric pink—a stark contrast to typical masculine stylizations such as in films like *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Dune* (2021). Within this landscape, four dancers find themselves lost among the remnants of human society. Artifacts of modernity (torn up garbage bags, motorized fans, projectors, dance music, abstracted TikTok dances[3]) intermingle with those of bygone eras[4]. This combination of polystylistic references, quotations, and allusions to old and new situates contrasting aesthetic practices thereby acting as a Deleuzian rhizome, an assemblage where listeners interrogate *how* and *why* these artifacts are connected. Rather than a narrative structure, *Discopia* explores this relationship between musical and physical material (electronic and acoustic instruments, humankind and the natural world, the virtual and the real) through a collage of tableaus depicting natural disasters, recollections of an untouched Earth, and abstracted genres of dance music. Drawing on Deleuze, these themes are figured as false dichotomies, and their relationships explored as lines of flight on a plane of immanence, in turn assessing the causal relationship between these supposed contraries.

This collaboration between the Larisa Trio, Excessive Human Collective (I will refer to them as EHC for the remainder of this text), a contemporary dance company based in Leeds and founded by choreographer Imogen Reeve, and myself began in 2020. Things such as resource depletion, the impact of climate change, and increasing wage inequity discussed by Srnicek and Williams in *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (2015) colour Imogen's research and serve as a conceptual jumping-off point. Srnicek and Williams's account of leftist-accelerationism draws heavily on the lineage of Deleuze and Guattari's work (2015). Accelerationism, coined by Nick Land, cites D&G's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* and their view that capitalism/over-consumption/class-oppression holds the potential for its own destruction within itself. D&G see the capitalist machine as the totalizing deterritorialization of civilization; it seeks to absorb and recode objects (also called partial-objects, with the assemblage as their conglomeration) within its profit-based schema (Deleuze and Guattari 1980 p. 13). Furthering this, Land's accelerationism sees capitalism's destruction through its own drive to deterritorialize. Put simply, once a big enough bubble bursts, there is no going back (2011). Though starting as a leftist movement, accelerationism was soon unfortunately coopted by the far-right and (correctly) lost academic support. This turn is detailed by Andy Beckett in an interview with Iain Hamilton Grant, a philosophy lecturer at the University of the West of England and former student of Land. Grant says: 'I try not to read [Land's] stuff. Folk [in the accelerationist movement] are embarrassed. They think he's sounding like a thug. Anyone who's an accelerationist, who's reflective, does think: "How far is too far?" But then again, even asking that question is the opposite of accelerationism,' (Beckett 2017).

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[3] See *Discopia* 'III. Cycles' (11:20)

[4] Ravel's *Une Barque Sur L'Ocean* is referenced in 'II. A City Underwater' (p. 9 [0:07:36]); record crackle turning into crunching leaves in 'I. Introduction' (p. 7 [0:00]); 'XII. To tear the earth in half' [48:03] is a reduction of Mahler's 'Der Abschied' from *Das Lied von der Erde*)

Starting in the mid-2010s, the left has attempted to reclaim accelerationism. Srnicek and Williams recentre the movement's Deleuzian roots with their account of leftist accelerationism. Drawing on a decade of collaborating, their book *Inventing the Future* (2015) figures that ongoing developments in technology, internet, and artificial intelligence will inevitably make human labour redundant. They argue this expansion of a technocratic capitalism will create the means for universal basic income, healthcare-for-all, and increasing social equality. They postulate that it is through this that capitalism finds its own end[5]. Xenofeminism, coined by the group Laboria Cuboniks in their 2014 manifesto and further written on by Helen Hester, one of its founders, in *Xenofeminism* (2018), is another movement to use themes of accelerationism while staying away from Land's and other controversial writings. Their collective sees alienation[6] itself (where the term's root *xeno-* comes from) as the fundamental driving force behind inequality while also providing the framework for social mobility and widespread change. It is through alienation and othering that Hester and xenofeminists argue equity between genders, races, sexualities, and class-backgrounds can be achieved. From Macon Holt's 'What is Xenofeminism?' (2018):

> Xenofeminism has emerged in a world where forms of alienation have proliferated and saturated the world. [It asks] 'Have we ever been otherwise?' If not, could it not be the case that some sort of alienation gives structure to whatever it is that we are? Whatever the 'we' is that is capable of reading and writing this text is already alienated from the kind of immediacy of existence experienced by creatures without language. And is it not through the alienation of system such as language and reason that we have been able to develop into a culture that at once produces further alienating

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[5] It should be noted that since its publishing, Srnicek and Williams have distanced themselves from the term 'accelerationist', mostly due to its far-right controversy.

[6] Drawing on Marx's and Engels's 'alienation of labour' (1848) where capitalism's primary mechanism (during their lifetime) was the factory apparatus. Very simply: workers create goods through a system of conveyor-belts where no individual alone makes the total product. This product is owned by the factory owner who pays wages to the workers. Xenofeminism takes this economic alienation and applies it to social assemblages and attempts to remove the moralistic foundations of 'alienation = bad' proposing that alienation is fundamental human experience.

> structures like capitalism and gender but also produces their critique? Is it not through technologies, such as antibiotics, acting upon bodies that so many of us have been able to live so long that to keep reading we need to modify our eyes with the technology of crafted lenses and lasers? Is such a creature not already alien? Maybe then some forms of alienation are not all bad. Maybe it will be further alienation that will free us from whatever unjust forms of acculturated nature have burdened us with patriarchy. If this is the case, [xenofeminism] is then bold enough to ask the follow-up question, what can we do if we were to embrace our alienation and proliferate it further? Can this be how we attain emancipation?

This intermingling of technology, gender abolitionism (the aim for gender categories to no longer operate in a dominant/subordinate relationship, *not* the 'destruction of gender'), and queer futurity and temporalities discussed by Muñoz and Halberstam is where *Discopia* is set. Not just depicting post-apocalyptic aesthetics or representations of natural disasters, this piece also posits a solution for radical change through technology, collectivism, and its namesake terms, 'disco' and 'dystopia'.

Discopia as a portmanteau of *disco*- and -*dystopia* acts as a bit of a misnomer. None of its music employs material of 70s disco music or dance per se. Instead, Imogen and I draw on Lawrence's 'Disco and the Queering of the Dance Floor' (2011) and Cox's 'How Do You Make Music a Body without Organs?' (2006) to project disco's method of codifying the dancefloor as a Body without Organs. Rather than pulling from disco as a genre, *Discopia* draws on its aesthetic sensibilities, one where the music is linked to a physical space where bodies interact and how this contingent relationship orients an assemblage of their combined magnitude. Each individual molecule of music or movement informs the others, creating a conceptual feedback loop mirroring Cox's account of electronic dance music as a site for deterritorialization. He details how the DJ and the crowd in a nightclub have this entanglement; the DJ must read the crowd, yet the crowd dances in response to the DJ's music. Drawing on my experience performing, I will roughly plan out a dance music set, but track inclusion and order are subject to change throughout an evening. A non-verbal understanding of what a group of people are enjoying in the present and how to continue or change this is necessary. On any night, a crowd might find a set enthralling one night but boring the next. This is dependent on several features, such as the time, length, genre, and relative amounts of intoxication. One must be able to make these judgements and adaptations on the spot. Simultaneously, the crowd expresses some collective response (dancing, staring, leaving) that is contingent on what I perform (such as a change in BPM). *Discopia* draws on this, as the electronics are guided by the score, but equally leaves room for improvisation and active listening. As I detail in the score **[*Discopia score page 3*]**, it *describes* how a certain performance occurred rather than *prescribing* future performance practice.

The *-dystopian* aspect of *Discopia* is elucidated by disco's untimely demise. In 1979, white, straight Americans had enough of disco's embrace of racial diversity and queerness. 'Disco Demolition Night', as it was termed by organizer DJ Steve Dahl, happened on 12 July 1979 (Cox 2006 p. 11). Thousands of violent protestors flocked to a baseball game at Chicago's Comiskey Park; crowds piled disco records, fireworks, and lighter fluid onto the field. Well-beyond the stadium's capacity, an estimated 45,000 people were part of this act of racism and homophobia (Lapointe 2009). In one evening, white-middle-America razed a symbolic musical tower to the ground. The backlash towards disco reverberated from there; the genre was pushed from the mainstream back underground. By 1980, the genre had nearly disappeared from the charts (Cox 2006 pp. 12-13). However, disco lived on in black, Latino, queer spaces. From the ashes of Disco, at a Chicago nightclub called The Warehouse (and later at The Power House and The Music Box), in the very same city where Disco Demolition Night took place, DJs Frankie Knuckles and Ron Hardy pioneered the 'house music' genre (Salkind 2018). Like disco's shortening of 'discotheque', 'house' pointed to music that was played at The Warehouse, originally being an abbreviation of the nightclub's name, rather than a genre of music. There, DJs would mix vinyl records of disco vocals with electronic basslines and drum loops, enabled by the availability of synthesizers and drum machines like Roland's TB-303 and TR-808 (Salkind 2018). Cox interprets this rhizomatic assemblage of house music, mirroring disco's territorial and radical nature while recombining its stylistic roots, as a deterritorialization, evoking the Body without Organs' simultaneous masochism and creative potential (Cox 2006 p. 12). This intersection of creation and destruction is where *Discopia* gets its namesake and acts as conceptual framework. Rather than genre-recreations, my music and Imogen's choreography borrow from disco's polystylistic roots to create a rhizome/assemblage/Body without Organs.

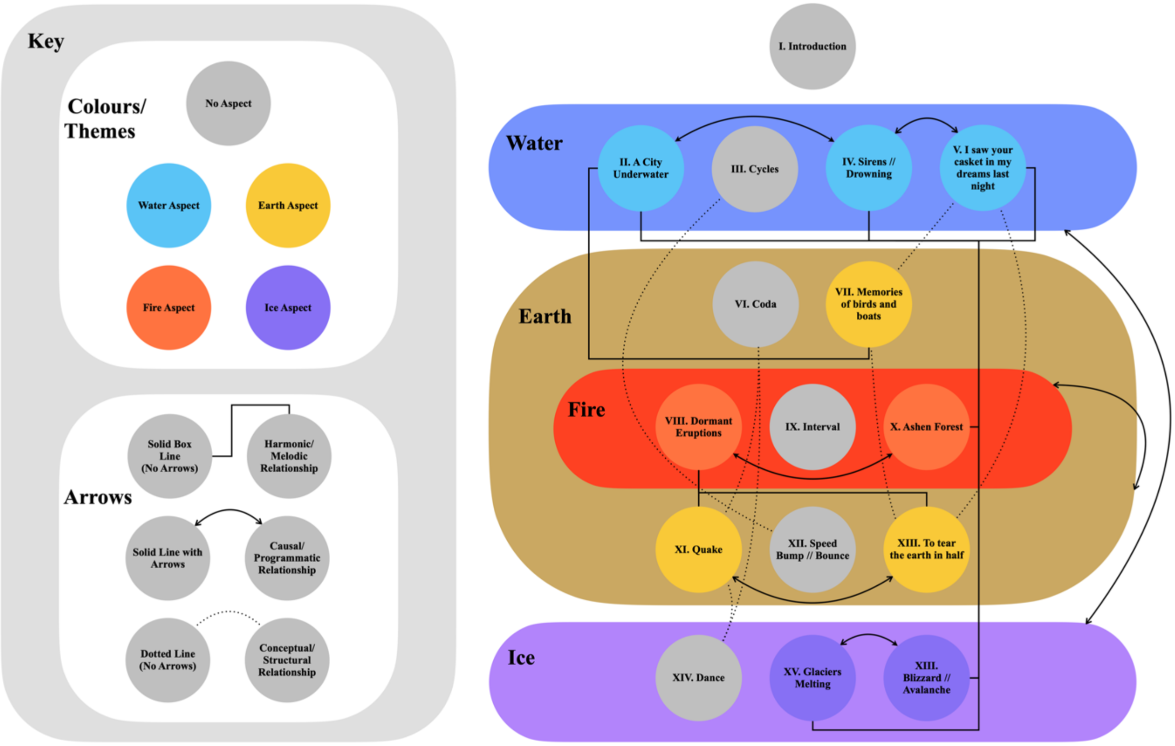
Rhizomatic structure is further practised in the modular construction of *Discopia.* Consisting of 16 movements in total, an 'authentic performance of *Discopia*' does not necessarily involve every movement in the specified order appearing in the score. Instead, by fashioning the piece to be modular, I can change the order/length of movements to suit a variety of performance needs. This fluidity of material and technique is an essential part of working with dancers. Music must be cut at some points and extended at others to facilitate cohesion with the choreography. In practise, I would add an eight-count here, take out twelve bars there, halve the length of one movement while also doubling another. Further drawing on Deleuze, this creative flow of a musical masochism is inherent to the compositional process. The material *must* be taken apart, transfigured, and ultimately reassembled to fit choreographic changes, ensemble availability, venue sizes, and available programming length.

Because of this, there are numerous versions of this piece, three of which are referenced in this thesis: an hour-long piece for four dancers, piano trio, and live electronics (this is the video version recorded at CLAY Leeds and is included as the primary submission); another performance lasting an hour for these same dancers with prerecorded music (no live instrumentalists) [see Appendix *Discopia II Soundtrack*]; and a 25-minute account for a large dance ensemble with a prerecorded track [See Appendix *Discopia III*]. I see these different iterations not as derivative of *Discopia*, but instead as offering different perspectives on a similar subject. I have included the version with live piano trio, electronics, and four dancers as the primary submission. The other editions are referenced in the Appendix. When discussing *Discopia*, I will generally be referring to the primary version, but when the later two are referenced, I will make their contributions clear.

Musical Vocabulary

Discopia consists of 16 discrete movements. Harmonic and melodic ideas are introduced, abandoned, and recontextualized over various sections, often borrowing material from several reference sources (see *Figure 10* below for visualization of these larger structures). The appropriation and reuse of material evokes a particular piece and the accumulation of cultural baggage that such a piece carries, taking direct influence from Halberstam and Freeman's temporal drag (e.g. how Ravel's music conjures the sound of water). For all movements I will discuss each's conceptual reasoning, scored music, sound design aspects, musical references, and how they link and interrelate between one another.

Figure 2 Discopia structure visualized, showing the rhizomatic relationships


Key
Colours/ Themes
No Aspect
Water Aspect
Earth Aspect
Fire Aspect
Ice Aspect
Arrows
Solid Box Line (No Arrows)
Harmonic/ Melodic Relationship
Solid Line with Arrows
Causal/ Programmatic Relationship
Dotted Line (No Arrows)
Conceptual/ Structural Relationship
I. Introduction
Water
II. A City Underwater
III. Cycles
IV. Sirens // Drowning
V. I saw your casket in my dreams last night
Earth
VI. Coda
VII. Memories of birds and boats
Fire
VIII. Dormant Eruptions
IX. Interval
X. Ashen Forest
XI. Quake
XII. Speed Bump // Bounce
XIII. To tear the earth in half
Ice
XIV. Dance
XV. Glaciers Melting
XIII. Blizzard // Avalanche

i. Introduction (Score: p. 7, Recording [0:00:00])

Discopia opens with the first instance of the ‘record crackle’ sample. This emulates the sound of the torn-up garbage bags strewn across the ground, distorting the sound-image from the outset. From the remnants of garbage, the lights slowly rise, and the dancers emerge. This movement lays out the environment and setting for the piece, drawing on Deleuze’s concept of the ‘refrain’. Taking the term quite literally here, where a repetitive pattern of music creates a territory, the trio play a simple pattern of four notes thus engendering the landscape. The dancers drive the trio’s performance: each instrumentalist is instructed to map their musical speed and dynamic intensity onto a different dancer’s movements. Not only an instance of simulacra (representational copies of copies) it shows the causal link between the dancers (figured as the humans within the story) and musicians (figured as the environment that the dancers inhabit). The modular section ends as the piano introduces a stable rhythm. The violin and cello play crescendos a microtone higher, giving the effect of the piano’s reverb and resonances rising in pitch. This illustrates a deterritorialized space where sound and movement influence one another. Throughout this movement, the crackling record/rusting bin bags slowly transform into watery bubbles and sparkling textures. Through compression, grain delay, and chorusing effects, the ongoing transformation of familiar sounds continues throughout *Discopia*; this process of affecting an object and how it responds to the environment is one of the modes Imogen uses to inform her choreographic language.

ii. A City Underwater (Score: p. 9, Recording [0:07:35])

The sounds of passing cars metamorphose into crashing waves through grain delay and EQ modulation, creating a fluid landscape moving between a bustling city and underwater ruins. The trio distorts fragments of Ravel's 'Une Barque sur l'Océan' (1906), as seen below in *Fig. 3 & 4,* intensifying the sonic texture with amplified grain delay. The musicians act as a living loopers, cycling through harmonic material at separate rates (violin loops every 2.5 bars, cello every 2, and piano every 3). This pushing and pulling of Ravel's harmonic material is also mirrored in the dance, as each of the four dancers push against one another, drawing on the symbolic representations within the music. This transformation highlights the fluidity of urban and natural sounds, aligning with themes of queer temporality and space where boundaries blur and identities flow—there is a state of flux between these supposed contraries.

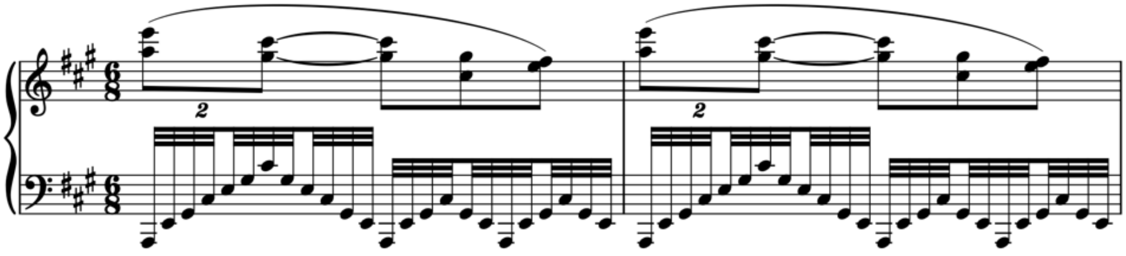


Figure 3 Excerpt from Ravel's Miroirs 'Une Barque sur l'Océan' (1906) mm.1-2 (p. 14)

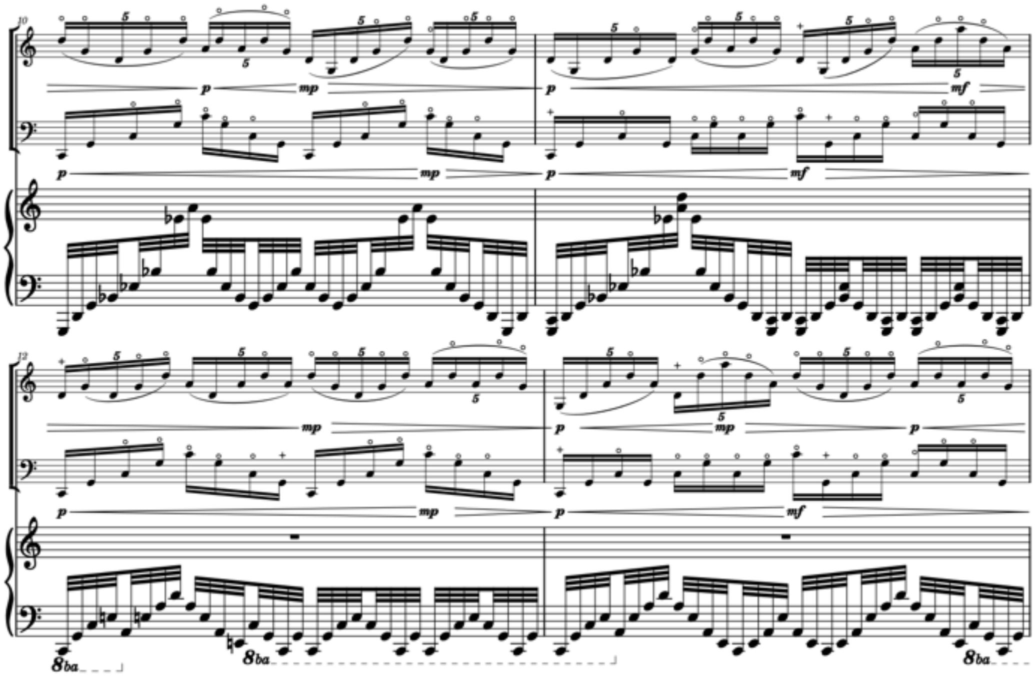


Figure 4 My interpolation in II. 'A City Underwater' mm. 10-13 (p. 5)

iii. Cycles (Score: p. 16, Recording [0:11:20])

Furthering the idea of pushing at disco's creative potential and radical restructuring of music and dance, this movement envisions a 'disco of the future'. Imogen guided the composition of this section, asking 'What would a disco in a dystopia future sound like?' I draw on by hyperpop artists like Charli xcx, A.G. Cook, umru, and (of course) SOPHIE. She says in an interview:

> I think all pop music should be about who can make the loudest, brightest thing. That, to me, is an interesting challenge, musically and artistically. And I think it's a very valid challenge – just as valid as who can be the most raw emotionally. I don't know why that is prioritized by a lot of people as something that's more valuable. The challenge I'm interested in being part of is who can use current technology, current images and people, to make the brightest, most intense, engaging thing. (Vozick-Levinson 2015)

The use of hyper-pop elements in this section adds a layer of complexity and modernity to the piece, highlighting the potential for innovation and transformation. The movement's interplay of rhythmic elements creates a dynamic soundscape that recalls previous movements' sound design recontextualized in a new framework. Utilizing short, high-feedback delays, ring modulation, and resonators, this movement 'metalizes' watery samples used earlier. The cyclical structure of the music and dance in this movement mirrors the speculative future of the disco genre, where repetitive patterns and futuristic sounds converge in a Deleuzian exploration of time and space. Their recurrent nature is referenced in both the naming of this track and the dancers' repeated movements.

iv. Sirens // Drowning (Score: p. 17, Recording [0:14:20])

This section delves into more of the harmonic material first addressed in 'II. A City Underwater'. It features microtonal inflections, glissandi, and harmonic trills as slow, sinking musical apparatus. These elements evoke a sense of instability, akin to the unpredictable nature of water. This movement underscores the fluidity and malleability of the harmonic structures throughout the work. Though this section does not directly quote Ravel, its harmonic structure is an obvious stylistic allusion to the French impressionist's numerous pieces representing water. As the movement draws to a close, re-pitched and slowed police sirens filter in, recalling the underwater city in a previous movement while also playing off the two meanings of siren: a literal alarm as well as the water-dwelling mythological creature who drags sailors to their death.

v. I saw your casket in my dreams last night (Score: p. 20, Recording [0:18:28])

Notwithstanding that this is the first solo movement for a member of the trio, this section is also notable as it is the *only* entirely acoustic movement in *Discopia*. Drawing from Chopin's Funeral March (the 3rd movement in his *Piano Sonata No. 2*) and Ravel's 'Le Gibet' from *Gaspard de la Nuit*, it combines sombre, funereal themes with the quartal harmonies of mvmt. IV. and the rhythmic speed of mvmt. II. The stark contrast of this movement against the otherwise electronically enhanced soundscape provides a poignant, reflective moment within *Discopia*, emphasizing the ever-ongoing deterritorialization of any given environment (and therefore the musicians). Musically, 'I saw your casket in my dreams last night' starts out slow and mournful but develops a drastic and abrupt jaunt at mm. 21. This characters in this section attempts to modulate their outlook by flipping between highly contrasting emotional states. The solo piano's interplay of a slow melody and placid harmonies to fast rhythmic jabs imply that no matter how hard an individual tries, they cannot be freed from the inevitability of destruction.

vi. Coda (Score: p. 23, Recording [0:21:48])

In a structural twist, 'Coda' (typically reserved for a flashy finale) appears mid-piece, featuring the trio accompanied by a drum machine. This 'misplaced ending' mirrors a Deleuzian structural inversion, implying circularity like in 'III. Cycles'. The mid-piece placement of the coda subverts expectations, highlighting the fluid, non-linear progression of *Discopia* and emphasizing the perpetual evolution of musical ideas.

Until this movement, electronic elements primarily functioned as modulators for the acoustic trio, enhancing and transforming the trio's sound. This modulation served to blur the lines between the acoustic and electronic, creating a cohesive yet multifaceted soundscape that explored the fluidity of identity and space. The drum machine's role as an independent musician challenges the hierarchical relationship between the acoustic instruments and the electronic effects. This shift suggests that electronic and acoustic elements are fundamentally interwoven, each contributing equally to the overall sonic landscape. By positioning the drum machine as a new member of the ensemble, the movement reflects on the broader integration of technology in contemporary society. This change underscores the themes of transformation and integration central to the composition, demonstrating the continuous evolution of musical genres and identities.

vii. Memories of birds and boats (Score: p. 31, Recording [0:23:41]])

A movement for solo violin, 'Memories of Birds and Boats' gradually introduces electronic elements that colour the acoustic sound. The movement transcribes the right-hand melody of Ravel's 'Une Barque sur l'Océan' for violin, blending past musical material with new interpretations (only the left-hand accompaniment was referenced in 'II. A City Underwtaer'). This revisitation and transformation of past themes emphasize memory and reinterpretation, creating a dynamic soundscape that explores the fluidity of time and identity, especially as it relates to the previous sections.

viii. Dormant Eruptions (Score: p. 32, Recording [0:27:09])[7]

This section revisits the vinyl crackle from 'I. Introduction' and 'II. A City Underwater'. The electronics are now transformed to evoke the sound of a bubbling volcano. This alteration in the vinyl sample's texture is mirrored by the brewing tension within the ensemble. Conflict escalates between the violin and cello lines and is accentuated by the piano's imitation of volcanic rumbling, creating a tense soundscape. What was once the totalized whole of the ensemble (and programmatically the environment) is now at odds with itself. The violin and cello engage in contrapuntal dialogue, where their dissonant interactions symbolize the friction and eventual eruption of Earth's latent energy. The piano's rumbling, percussive undertones provide a foundation that suggests Earth's instability and the inevitable burst of pent-up forces. This movement encapsulates the natural processes of change and eruption, reflecting the dynamic and volatile nature of the musical narrative. The material draws on Mahler's *3rd* and *5th Symphonies*, evoking Mahler's philosophical contemplations on nature's power and its impact on human life. Unlike in previous sections where the musical references are obvious, in 'Dormant Eruptions', the appropriated melodies are changed to such an extent that only brief flickers of the original peak through the 'volcanic crust'. For example, in measure 42, the violin imitates the opening gesture of Mahler's *5th Symphony* (1st movement) before transforming into entirely different material. Measure 66 onwards of the piano part uses inversions of the harp chords from the 'Adagietto' (4th movement), but in no way *sounds* like Mahler's 'Adagietto'. By incorporating these musical and programmatic elements, 'Dormant Eruptions' creates a battle that underscores an atomized drive towards change and acts as the climax of the first half of *Discopia*.

ix. Interval (Score: p. 46, Recording [0:33:24])

Furthering the concept of queering spaces and temporalities, *Discopia* has music to be played specifically during the interval. Normally a break from the performance, we instead saw an opportunity to expand the musical territory. In this section, I run a generative patch that randomly selects multiple movements of *Discopia*, pitch-shifts them down, time-stretches them, and overlays the resulting audio. As the previous section comes to an end, I filter this sound through the bar's PA[8]. The stage lights stay down until the audience has left (hopefully to investigate the sounds emanating from the bar), and after a couple of minutes, I turn the volume down. This movement's approach serves to highlight the fluid boundaries of Halberstam's queer spatiality. By incorporating elements of chance and randomness, it invites the listener to engage with the music in a more interactive and participatory manner. Suturing different sections together and playing with their tempos not only disrupts the linear progression of the piece but also creates a sense of spatial and temporal dislocation. This encroachment of the music into territories reinforces these central queer themes of space and time as mediated by outside phenomena. To bring the audience back into the theatre, the generative patch's volume is increased over the course of several minutes, and I begin the next section's electronics as the audience enters, providing a seamless break in musical experience.

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[7] An earlier arrangement of 'Dormant Eruptions' was part of my Masters Portfolio submission, and therefore cannot be marked for this PhD thesis. I still include my analysis here as later movements build on, develop, and borrow from it.

x. Ashen Forest (Score: p. 47, Recording [0:35:09])

'Ashen Forest' reintroduces the vinyl crackle, now darker and symbolizing the burned remnants left from the volcano's destruction. Harmonically, I invert the chords from 'IV. Sirens // Drowning' (see figures below). This inversion represents the transformation and recontextualization of musical elements, with fire serving as a thematic counterpart to water. The vinyl crackle's darker tone evokes a sense of loss and destruction, while the harmonic inversions suggest the potential for renewal and recreation. The movement's exploration of fire and ash highlights the duality within the composition, emphasizing the cyclical nature of destruction and creation. By recontextualizing familiar elements within a darker framework, 'Ashen Forest' challenges the listener to reconsider their perceptions of beauty and decay, highlighting the complex interplay between loss and regeneration. This movement's exploration of fire as a destructive yet purifying force underscores the composition's overarching theme of duality and transformation.

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[8] In our performances, I was able to access a direct input to the bar's PA. If this were not possible, I had a Bluetooth speaker that could be placed offstage to route the audio through.

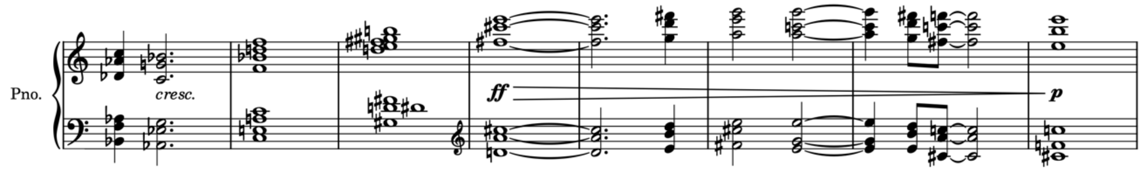

Figure 5 'IV. Sirens // Drowning' mm 50-57 (p. 18)

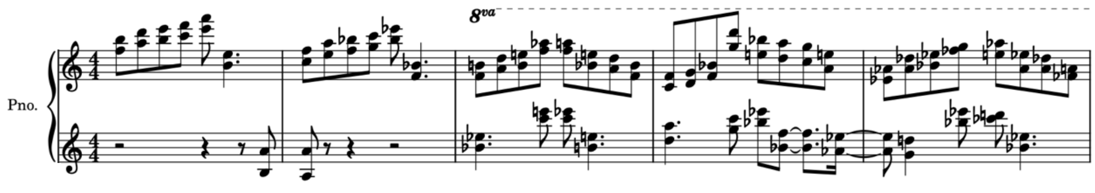

Figure 6 'X. Ashen Forest' mm 15-29 (p. 49)

xi. Quake (Score: p. 50, Recording [0:41:22])

'Quake' features the trio and drum machine, recalling material from 'VIII. Dormant Eruptions' but presenting it within the rhythmic and metric framework of 'VI. Coda'. Utilizing a triple meter (the only movement other than the first to do so) and further distancing my simulacra of Mahler's material from its original, this movement emphasizes the recursive nature of musical material. For example, in measure 34, the violin part plays the same pattern as in measure 39 in 'VIII. Dormant Eruptions'. The drum machine's rhythmic precision contrasts with the trio's more fluid interplay, creating a tension that highlights the constant evolution and transformation of themes.

xii. Speed Bump // Bounce (Score: p. 58, Recording [0:41:22])

This movement for solo electronics draws on the genre bounce music, such as Big Freedia and Mykki Blanco. I employ syncopation, micro-rhythms, and sharp/clicky-transient-sounds as genre-tropes to create a dance-focused-soundscape contrasting the other solo-electronic movements 'III. Cycles' and 'IX. Interval'. The ongoing fragmentation of the relationships between the four dancers onstage is heightened through use of these rhythmic elements, showcasing the inherent complexities and nuances of both music and individuals. The movement's exploration of fragmented rhythms and atomized beats challenges traditional notions of musical temporality, once again evoking Halberstam's work. This movement's emphasis on rhythmic innovation and complexity underscores the broader themes of transformation and duality in *Discopia* illustrating the continuous interplay between stasis and enacting change.

xiii. To tear the earth in half (Score: p. 59, Recording [00:48:03])

The final solo movement, this section references Mahler's 'Der Abschied' from *Das Lied von der Erde*. Amplified cello plays overpressure glissando trills, creating an aural 'tearing' effect that reflects a visceral and violent connection to the earth. The movement's exploration of physicality and embodiment in performance highlights the primal and elemental nature of the musical material. The cello's distortion creates a sounds world that reflects the themes of destruction and renewal that appear throughout *Discopia*.

My version opens with the same resonant low C as Mahler's, plucked and bowed simultaneously to add a percussive transient and to dull out the overtones (stopping the string with a left-hand pizzicato while bowing dampens the resonant frequencies of an open string). It is decorated by a similar ornamented figure starting mm. 7 onwards with added overpressure, lending to the 'tearing the earth' imagery. From mm. 20, the solo cello does a variation on the melody that Mahler begins in the third system on p. 66 and develops through pp. 67 and 68. In 'To tear the earth in half', this reaching melody is interrupted by overpressure glissando trills that increase in speed and dynamic intensity. These pull from p. 69 (Figure 7) of the Mahler, but with the guitar distortion and granular delay increasing in intensity, I imply a motion where the musical material folds back upon itself[9].

xiv. Dance (Score: p. 60, Recording [0:51:50])

As the final and longest 'quartet' consisting of trio + electronic drum track, 'Dance' serves as the climax of *Discopia*. Intensifying harmonic ideas from previous movements, this section increases rhythmic and harmonic speed, culminating in an energetic race to the end. The crystallization of earlier harmonic themes in this movement echoes Deleuze's concept of 'crystals of time,' bringing the composition to a dynamic and cohesive conclusion.

xv. Glaciers Melting (Score: p. 76, Recording [0:55:35])

'Glaciers Melting,' the longest movement, features layered tempos and pitch-shifted samples, creating a vast, glacial soundscape. It opens with the final transformation of the 'record crackling' sample; it becomes a shiny cacophony of bells, evoking wintertime. This sonically and structurally pulls from Julius Eastman's *Femenine* (1974) which also starts with ringing bells.

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[9] Se rabat sur – Deleuze 'to fall back upon', something similar used in John Adams's *Shaker Loops* 'III. Loops and Verses' (1982).

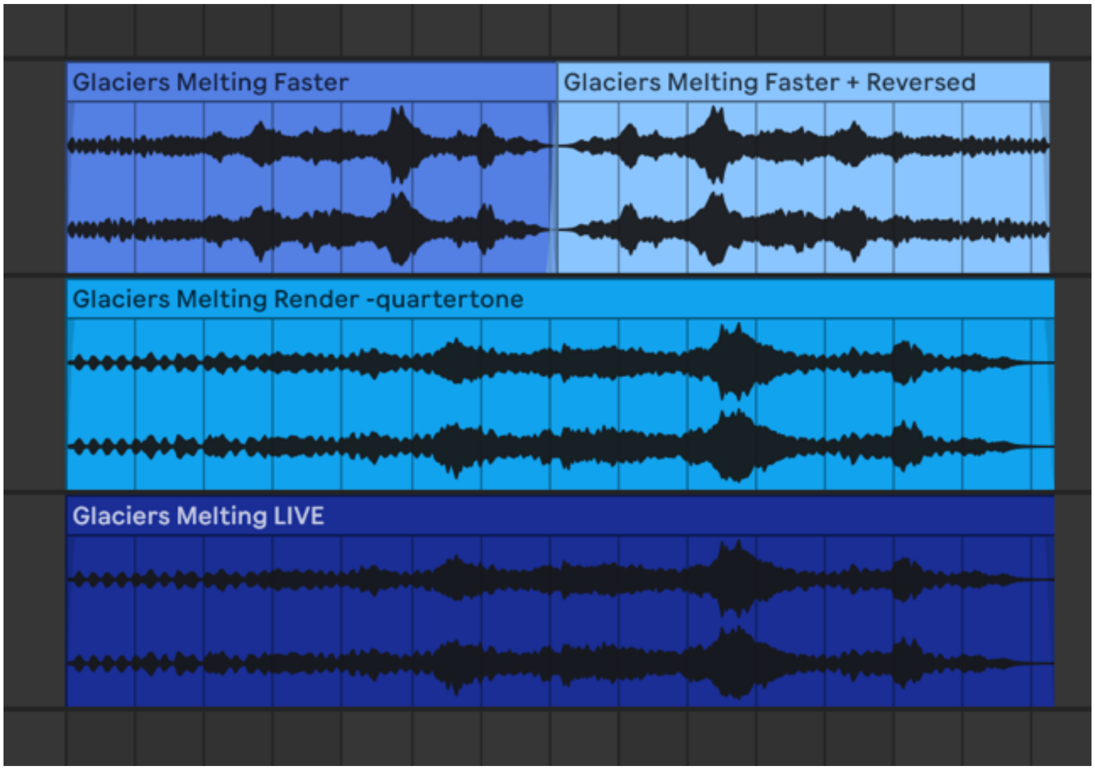

Glaciers Melting Faster
Glaciers Melting Faster + Reversed
Glaciers Melting Render -quartertone
Glaciers Melting LIVE

Figure 7 'XV. Glaciers Melting' layers visualized

By combining live and pre-recorded tracks at different tempos, this movement reflects the slow, inevitable process of transformation and decay of the polar ice caps. The interplay of temporal layers underscores *Discopia's* exploration of time and change, highlighting inherent queerness of the overall piece. The movement's use of layered tempos and pitch-shifted samples creates a thick icy wall of sound wherein the live acoustic instruments are 'lost in the snow,' so to speak; they've become indistinguishable from their electronic counterparts. The material in this movement takes the harmonic motion of 'IV. Sirens Drowning' and the circulating tetrachords from 'I. Introduction' and imagines them as these frozen musical glaciers. Separating itself from the violin and piano, the cello part acts as these cracks of ice breaking off the glacier (mm. 18-33, piano joins and supports mm. 34-35). This creates an icy, cascading soundscape reference D&G's 'se rabat sur' literally meaning: 'to fall back upon'

(1972 pp. 11-12, 19-21). The movement finishes with spread inversions of the microtonal tetrachords that began the piece in 'I. Introduction'

xvi. Blizzard // Avalanche (Score: p. 80, Recording [0:59:45])

This movement concludes *Discopia*, encapsulating the themes of transformation, chaos, and renewal that permeate the composition. This movement intensifies the sliding chords from 'IV. Sirens // Drowning', using overpressure trills and an accelerating harmonic motion to evoke the violent nature of a blizzard and avalanche and reflecting the cyclical relationship between ice and water.

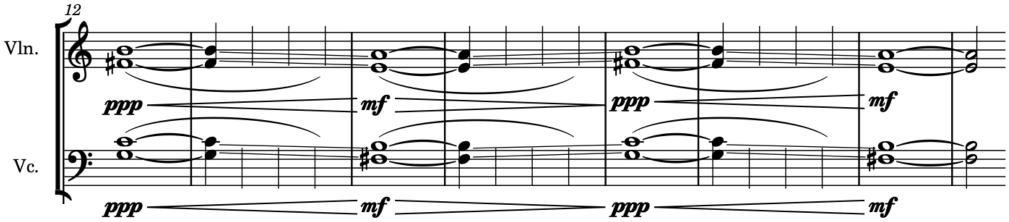


Figure 8 Sliding harmony in 'IV. Sirens // Drowning' mm. 12-19 (p. 17)

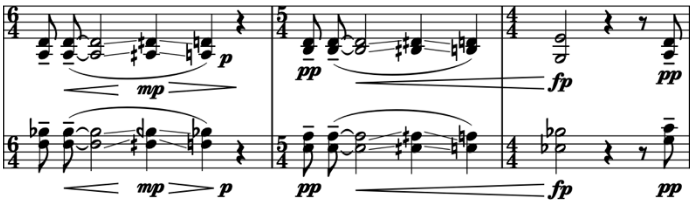


Figure 9 Sliding harmony in 'XVI. Blizzard // Avalanche' mm. 3 (p 80)

The electronic elements in 'Blizzard // Avalanche' play a crucial role in enhancing its thematic depth. By manipulating levels of distortion, the electronics create an evolving soundscape that mirrors the unpredictable nature of a blizzard, adding fuzz and white noise to the sound. This interplay between live instruments and electronic modulation emphasizes the fluidity and interconnectedness of the composition, blurring the lines between the natural and the artificial.

As the movement reaches its peak, the music begins to fragment and dissolve, much like an avalanche dissipating as it descends. This gradual fading out serves as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of life and the continuous processes of destruction and renewal. The return to the opening themes of *Discopia* in the final moments of the movement reinforces this idea, suggesting that even in the face of chaos and transformation, there is always a return to the beginning, a rebirth.

Choreography

Imogen's repetitive and deconstructed movement language—where group sections later transform into distorted solos—directly inform and mirror the compositional structure of *Discopia*. Dance grows alongside the music's evolution, where themes are introduced later broken down and recontextualized. This queer spatiality engendered by the music is reinforced with the choreography. The transformations from group to solo dance mimic the fluid, non-normative spaces where queer identities resist containment. The choreography's progression from cohesive group movements to fragmented, distorted solos reflect the way estranged bodies navigate both shared and isolated spaces, oscillating between moments of connection and alienation.

Furthermore, this very relationship itself is questioned in 'I. Introduction' and each of the instrumental solo movements (V., VII., and XIII.), where the music is led by the dancers' movements. This inverted relationship exemplifies queer spatiality, whereby the territory (i.e. music and dancefloor) gains its identity (i.e. tempo, dynamic intensity) from the individuals within (i.e. the dancers). Throughout the piece, Imogen uses a similar approach to generate choreographic material. In 'III. Cycles', she had a dancer watch a series of viral TikTok dances and asked her to describe the feelings the dance evokes. This list of feelings was then handed to a different dancer who watched the same set of videos in a different order. This second dancer then layered the previous' list of feelings over the new order of TikTok dances, creating movement that plays with this differential web between interpretations. This process was duplicated numerous times and allowed each dancer to form their own relationship to the choreographic material and have agency in its creation.

Imogen's choreography also parallels the environmental themes of *Discopia* by embodying the slow processes of change and decay, seen in her use of repetition to extend and evolve the material over time. This reflects the slow violence of environmental degradation, where gradual shifts in movement and sound create a space for contemplation rather than resolution. Together, the music and choreography form a rhizomatic assemblage where sound, movement, and space interact to reflect the fluid, cyclic, and evolving nature of both queer identity and environmental systems.

Reflections

Discopia proved to be an ambitious project, both conceptually and in its realization as an interdisciplinary performance. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic ontology (1987), *Discopia's* modular structure allowed for a fluidity of construction, but in practice, this flexibility presented some challenges. While the nonlinear, reconfigurable structure successfully embodied queer temporality (Halberstam, 2005) and allowed for its adaptation to several forms (such as *Discopia III*, see the included 'Appendicular Materials A.1.a.'), its realization was logistically demanding. The challenge of rehearsing a piece that could shift in form between performances meant that achieving cohesion between the ensemble (dancers and musicians) and electronic elements required extensive preparation and real-time adaptability, both as performer and composer. At times, this ambition led to moments of disorientation that, while conceptually valid, did not always achieve the level of clarity I had hoped for in live performance. Future iterations could refine how modularity is communicated to performers to ensure both spontaneity and structural integrity.

The collaborative nature of *Discopia* was one of its greatest strengths yet also posed some specific compositional challenges. Working with choreographer Imogen Reeve meant negotiating the balance between musical and physical storytelling. Our aesthetic priorities often aligned conceptually, particularly in relation to queer spatiality and movement, but at times, we had to navigate differing approaches to narrative. Imogen was interested in a fractured, temporally fluid dramaturgy, whereas I sought greater coherence in the staging. While our compromise resulted in a richly textured work, I recognize that in future projects, earlier conversations around dramaturgical clarity could help bridge these aesthetic perspectives more effectively.

Additionally, I had to maintain a 'kill your darlings' mindset to the score. Some sections ended up being too long ('IV. Sirens // Drowning' and 'XV. Glaciers Melting' were both originally twice as long as they appear now in the score), while others needed to be extended on-the-fly (for instance, both 'II. Cycles' and 'XII. Speed Bump // Bounce' had to be doubled in length by the end of a single four-hour rehearsal). Ultimately, this semi-fraught relationship with the music, whereby mindful conscientiousness of the group's input was necessitated by the practicalities of the score and performance schedule itself, I found a uniquely rewarding enterprise. The times I sat rehearsal with my drum machine reconfiguring a section of music while under the pressure of dancers needing on-the-spot revisions for material pushed my own expectations of myself. Growing from this piece, I have continued working with Imogen and Excessive Human Collective, writing music for additional dance projects such as *We are the World* (2024) and *This is Now* (2024). While these pieces are beyond the scope of this portfolio (and therefore not included), our collaboration in *Discopia* built a solid foundation for the two of us to explore future creative endeavours. I owe a great deal of the compositional skillset and adaptability I gained through this process to Imogen, the dancers of Excessive Human Collective, and the Larisa Trio.

In terms of the critical and philosophical ambitions of the project, *Discopia* largely achieved its goal of engaging with Hester's xenofeminist theory (2018), Halberstam's queer temporality/spatiality (2005), and D&G's deterritorialization (1987) through a double-edged resistance and playful usurpation of traditional genre and form classification. Its tableau-based structure directly mirrors D&G's *A Thousand Plateaus*; each chapter of their book develops their core concepts from different perspectives. Similarly, I chose to develop shared musical themes, textures, and sonic environments in such a way that figured points of reference (such as Ravel and Mahler) into artifacts themselves that transform through the duration of the piece. This conceptualization reinforces my focus on Halberstam's temporal drag, where iterations of musical material gain symbolic meaning through their repetition in time, both through history and the piece itself. Furthermore, this blurring of acoustic and electronic materials effectively destabilized traditional binaries of nature/technology and organic/artificial, mirroring D&G's pluralistic framework. However, while the piece succeeded in creating a sonic landscape of deconstructed genre, sections could have pushed the connection between movement and sound further, particularly in how dancers interact with the musicians. A section like 'VII. Memories of Birds and Boats' (where Elliette played her solo violin section surrounded by the dancers) proved effective *because* of its integration between the performers. Moving forward, this approach could be utilised in future stagings of this work and is something that Imogen and I are keenly interested in exploring.

As part of my doctoral journey, *Discopia* was a significant turning point in my understanding of form and audience perception. It made me more aware of how queerness in performance operates at the level of structure and disruption, rather than just representation. The next works, *Apollo & Marsyas* and *Queen Midas*, took this learning forward by tightening dramaturgical clarity while maintaining the destabilizing strategies developed in *Discopia*. This project ultimately reaffirmed my commitment to radical queer aesthetics, while also highlighting the need for a balance between conceptual openness and performative precision.

V. *Apollo & Marsyas*

(2023) [Duration: 00:16:00]

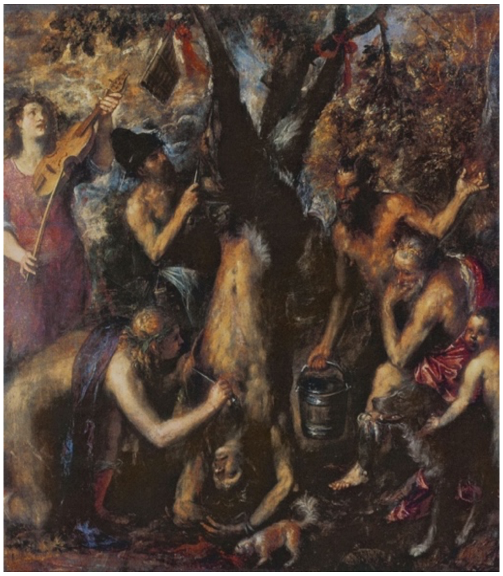


Figure 10 'Flaying of Marsyas' by Titian (c. 1570)

I used to write in the cafe sometimes:
Poems on menus, read all over town
Or talked out before ever written down.
One day a girl brought in his latest book.
I opened it-stiff rhythms, gorgeous rhymes-
And made a face. Then crash! my cup upset.
Of twenty upward looks mine only met
His, that gold archaic lion's look
Wherein I saw my wiry person skinned
Of every skill it laboured to acquire
And heard the plucked nerve's elemental twang.
They found me dangling where his golden wind
Inflicted so much music on the lyre
That no one could have told you what he sang.

— James Merrill, *Marsyas* (1958 p. 186)

Background and Conceptual Framework

Apollo & Marsyas is a collaborative piece with poet Spencer Mason. This sixteen-minute musical drama was performed with RNCM musicians Callum McCandless (playing Apollo), Will Jowett (playing Marsyas), Sinead Walsh (flute), and Ellie Wood (harp), (along with Spencer narrating and myself playing live electronics) on 25 April 2023. Written for two singers, flute (played by Marsyas in the tale), harp (Apollo's instrument of choice), narrator, and live electronics, this 16-minute work explores themes of competition, societal pressure, shame, and isolation within the queer community. Drawing on *The Velvet Rage* (Downs 2005) and *Out of the Shadows* (Odets 2019), *Apollo & Marsyas* examines how society, represented by the Greek chorus, plays a critical role in shaping and policing queer love. The Greek chorus functions as an omnipresent societal force, echoing collective judgment and expectations, pushing queer individuals toward internalized shame and self-repression. Both Marsyas and Apollo, though figures from myth, represent modern queer individuals grappling with the burden of societal pressures and the guilt of failing to meet its expectations. The chorus's voice condemns them, reinforcing the constant evaluation queer individuals face, resulting in a form of internalized isolation and shame.

The use of and unamplified instruments and live electronics juxtaposes the mythological setting with modern queerness, creating a space where myth and reality intersect. In this context, *Apollo & Marsyas* critiques the enduring power dynamics and stigmatization surrounding queer identities, exploring how societal expectations continue to shape, limit, and oppress authentic queer expression today.

Spencer's work, which delves into their nonbinary identity, sexuality, and mental health, contrasts urban and rural settings. Their words and musical versatility immediately captivated me, and after sharing demos back and forth, we decided to collaborate. They were particularly drawn to *Queen Midas*—which I was writing at the time—and sparked conversations of our mutual interest in Greek mythology. (After a few weeks of working on *Apollo & Marsyas*, I asked Spencer to assist me in writing and completing the libretto for *Queen Midas*. This will be further discussed in the following Chapter.)

After a cursory look through some of the many gay love stories in ancient Greek myth, we settled with the story of Apollo and Marsyas. Music is itself a driving feature of this story, both characters are instrumentalists, and their love is mediated by their playing together. This gives the score a diegetic impetus, creating various implications for the libretto: How do the characters interact with this music? Is what the audience hears somehow different from what the characters hear? How does speaking something differ from singing something? How does this differ if there is no music around the voices?

These questions, along with numerous others, floated in our heads as we researched more of Apollo and Marsyas's story and its different retellings. We began with Ovid's transcription of the tale, appearing in his *Metamorphoses* (circa 8 CE, Book 6, Chapter II, Lines 382-400) and Diodorus Siculus's and Hyginus's versions, both dating around the 1st Century BCE. These detail how Athena carelessly discards her aulos (an early Greek wind instrument). Marsyas, a satyr, finds the instrument and becomes proficient in playing it. In a drunken stupor and egged on by an angry Athena, Marsyas challenges Apollo, who played an Ancient Greek harp called the lyre, to a musical duel to be judged by the Muses. The nine Muses were part of the Greek pantheon (sisters and daughters of Zeus) and additionally described as Apollo's lovers in several myths (I am certain they judged this battle fairly). At the battle's climax, Apollo sings while playing the lyre, an impossible task for Marsyas on the aulos. Unsurprisingly, Marsyas loses to the literal God of Music and is nailed to a tree. Marsyas's skin is ceremoniously flayed off by Apollo, a punishment for the satyr's arrogance in challenging a god.

Our research for *Apollo & Marsyas* included these Greek classics as well as contemporary retellings, notably James Merrill's poem (the epigraph of this chapter), and Stephen Fry's *The Mythos Suite* (Fry and Wiseman, 2020). Both of us were taken by Fry's storybook-like approach, calling to mind other pieces for narrator and voice written for children's audiences such as Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* and Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestr*a. Contrasting the gruesome nature of the story, Fry's retelling explores how thematic violence can take on many forms.

We decided to write an inversion of these pieces; we would create something clearly placed in the modern era, yet still retaining these recollections and phantoms of Greek antiquity. This works as a tie-in to Halberstam's queer temporality; modernity and history are compressed into one story, exemplifying temporal drag, where past and present interact in a dynamic flow. This again invokes an accretive model, where each of these elements is continually reordered.

Musical Vocabulary

Due to *Apollo & Marsyas's* comparatively short length and musical simplicity (juxtaposed with *Discopia* and *Queen Midas*), I discuss the overall trajectory and narrative progression of the piece rather than an individual analysis of each scene.

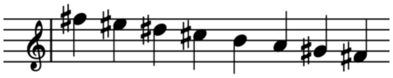


Figure 11 Scale for Apollo and Marsyas

This work opens with the harp playing a descending F♯ melodic minor scale, this Deleuzian 'refrain' acting as musical germination for the piece. Typically, the sixth and seventh scale degrees are only raised (D♯ and E♯) in an ascending pattern, while the descending has their natural counterparts (D♮ and E♮) in a melodic minor scale. The reversal of using the raised sixth and seventh degrees while descending captures a familiarity while obscuring a directional relationship between the V chord and the I. The entire piece revolves around this initial line, expanding its trajectory through the first scene. The flute joins this line as Artemis and the Muses (performed by Spencer) give a preamble to the story: 'In a town of cannibal nights and warmonger mollusks' (see Ch. XIII. Appendix—*Apollo & Marsyas* Libretto). The electronics enter, replicating the harp and flute lines. In *Discopia*, I mostly used electronics to modulate the live trio; however here, the electronics are distinct from the acoustic instruments and are utilized to draw attention to this discrepancy between an ancient fable told in a modern setting, as well as an appeal to Deleuze's virtuality, where the virtual is not opposed to the *real* but to the *actual*.

He writes, in *Bergsonism* (1988):

> The virtual is not opposed to the real; it possesses a full reality by itself. The actual, by contrast, is what takes place in space and time. The virtual is not lacking reality, but it is a different type of reality, one that gives rise to actualization in different ways depending on how it is brought into existence. (p. 96)

This elaboration emphasizes that the virtual is not merely hypothetical or unreal, but rather, it exists as a field of potential that can be actualized. The virtual is a key concept in Deleuze's philosophy of becoming, suggesting that reality is always in the process of unfolding through both the virtual and actual. This interaction between the two, similar to the tension between queer identity and prejudice, is what informs the very nature of their own individual identities.

DEMO I. Meet Apollo

Figure 12 Demo of 'Meet Apollo' with no acoustic instruments is available via Appendix Materials A2a.

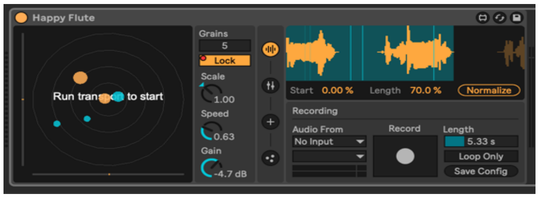

Happy Flute
Run transport to start
Grains
5
Lock
Scale
1.00
Speed
0.63
Gain
-4.7 dB
Start 0.00 %
Length 70.0 %
Normalize
Recording
Audio From
No Input
Record
Length
5.33 s
Loop Only
Save Config

Figure 13 Flute samples re-pitched

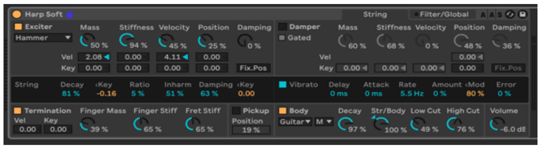

Harp Soft
String
Filter/Global
Exciter
Hammer
Mass
50 %
Stiffness
94 %
Velocity
45 %
Position
25 %
Damping
0 %
Vel
2.08
0.00
4.11
0.00
Key
0.00
0.00
0.00
0.00
Fix.Pos
Damper
Gated
Mass
60 %
Stiffness
68 %
Velocity
0 %
Position
48 %
Damping
36 %
Vel
0.00
Key
0.00
0.00
0.00
0.00
Fix.Pos
String
Decay
81 %
‹Key
-0.16
Ratio
5 %
Inharm
51 %
Damping
63 %
‹Key
0.00
Vibrato
Delay
0 ms
Attack
0 ms
Rate
5.5 Hz
Amount
0 %
‹Mod
80 %
Error
0 %
Termination
Vel
0.00
Key
0.00
Finger Mass
39 %
Finger Stiff
65 %
Fret Stiff
65 %
Pickup
Position
19 %
Body
Guitar
M
Decay
97 %
Str/Body
100 %
Low Cut
49 %
High Cut
76 %
Volume
-6.0 dB

Figure 14 Harp physical modelling synth

Figure 15 Bass created by sampling Spencer's voice

The electronics, as shown above, use a combination of sampling and physical modelling synthesis, figuring them as uncanny reflections of their acoustic counterparts. This too connects with themes of musical appropriation (as discussed in Ch. V. Research Context and Compositional Methodology—The Space Between Pop and Classical), as well as the 'seizure of identity' that becomes the central feature of this work. As the first minute draws to a close, the combined acoustic and electronic forces reach a climax, foreshadowing the story's tragic ending. Out of this turmoil, all that remains is the lone harp and a final line from Artemis: 'Meet Apollo'.

The next two movements are expositional, introducing the characters of Apollo and Marsyas. Spencer's libretto compresses two timelines into one, hopping from an 'acropolis' of Greek antiquity to the 'Gorbals' of Glasgow. This juxtaposition in both language and symbolic content heightens the duality of Apollo and Marsyas: one representing godly ideals of the past and another associated with an industrialized world. Setting the story in motion, Artemis details how Marsyas found her discarded flute while echoes of the electronic harp juxtapose the acoustic's tremolo passages. Artemis reveals how she colluded with the Muses to convince a drunken Marsyas to challenge the god of music, Apollo, to an instrumental battle.

Our retelling portrays Apollo and Marsyas as unwilling antagonists, manipulated by Artemis and the Muses into a near-impossible musical challenge. Neither Apollo nor Marsyas wanted to harm the other. It's only with the Muses' intervention, tricking Marsyas and asking him to do the near-impossible: to sing while playing the flute (significantly more difficult to do than Apollo's comfortable task of singing while playing the harp), that leads to the lovers' downfall.

The fourth movement represents a calm before the storm as Marsyas confronts his feelings of ineptitude, competition, and desire, now using the opening figuration as a dramatic, yet sombre, climb towards the next section. In the fifth movement, electronics take over the sonic palette as the imposing bassline from the introduction gets matched with a driving drum machine pattern. Their musical battle ensues, each attempting to best the other, until the Muses present the final task: 'To play and sing as one'. Apollo accomplishes this with great ease, whereas Marsyas finds himself tricked, unable to perform the impossible task of playing flute and singing at the same time.

Remorsefully, Apollo must act against Marsyas for his hubris in challenging a god. Apollo, in horror, is made to flay the skin off his lover, Marsyas, by Artemis and the Muses. In a final act of heartbreak, Apollo dons Marsyas's skin, while the satyr sings his dying line: 'No skin to bubble against the cold of hell'. Artemis concludes the tale with the final remark: 'And brought to this glow of gold a crimson flood, Pores drinking every drop they could, Of this mortal better's blood.'

This dark, unsettling take on the story reflects elements of Downs's *The Velvet Rage* (2005) and Odets's *Out of the Shadows* (2019). Downs describes how shame and rejection lead to emotional turmoil and a deep sense of inadequacy in many gay men. This idea is echoed in Marsyas's character, who, despite his talent and desire, cannot escape the feelings of inferiority that society (represented by the Muses) imposes on him. His failure in the musical duel symbolizes the emotional and psychological struggle queer individuals experience when they are forced to conform to impossible standards of perfection and masculinity, as Downs writes (pp. 63-71). Apollo, too, becomes complicit in this system of shame, embodying the external pressures that queer individuals internalize.

Odets explores how queer individuals cope with trauma, depression, and loss, emphasizing the impact of societal rejection and the process of othering. In *Apollo & Marsyas*, this sense of societal manipulation and betrayal is reflected in how Marsyas becomes tricked into a competition he cannot win, much like how queer individuals are often set up for failure by societal norms that demand conformity while punishing difference. The psychological toll on both characters examines the emotional violence that Odets highlights many queer men are faced with (p. 106), with Marsyas's ultimate flaying symbolizing the destruction of his identity by external forces and its appropriation by Apollo. This bifurcation, one where queer individuals' identity relies upon their capacity to adopt to society's negative expectations—a society that still labels them as 'other' irrespective of their conformity—shows how this constant flux sets the stage for something like Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Failing to appease standards then becomes a radical form of resistance, with the LGBTQIA+

community proposing a revaluation of this system of 'box-checking to satisfy'. These texts emphasize the need for self-acceptance and healing in queer lives, which ties back to the core of *Apollo & Marsyas*. This work not only critiques the pressures placed on queer individuals but also reflects the tragic outcomes of internalizing these expectations, as embodied in the mythic violence and betrayal at the heart of the story.

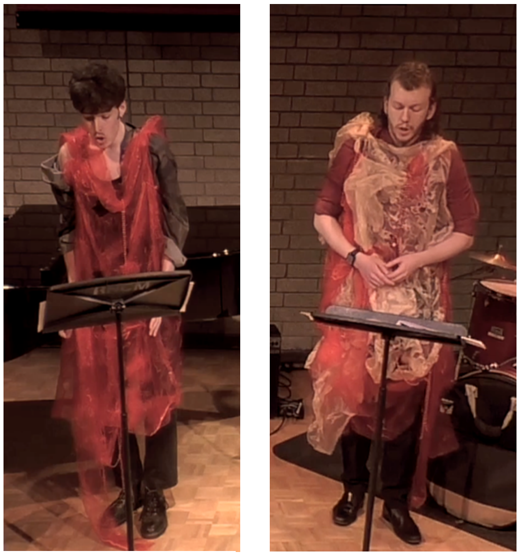


Figure 16 Will Jowett (Marsyas) in the 'Bloodsuit', Callum McCandless (Apollo) in the 'Skinsuit'

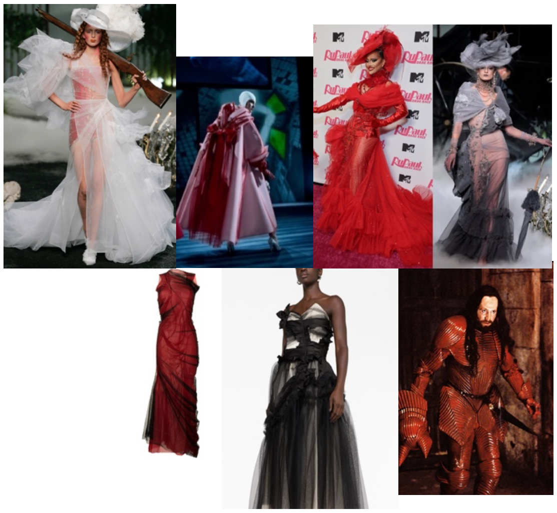


Figure 17 Reference Images, Galliano (top row), Margiela (bottom left and centre), and Ishioka (bottom right)

Costumes

In *Apollo and Marsyas*, the use of costuming plays a crucial narrative and symbolic role, particularly through the creation of the 'Skinsuit' and 'Bloodsuit'. These costumes serve as aesthetic and narrative focal points that reflect themes of transformation, identity, and appropriation. The 'Skinsuit', worn by Apollo after flaying Marsyas, is not depicted as a moment of pure violence but rather one of melancholic beauty and metamorphosis. Drawing inspiration from John Galliano's work at Dior (*Fall/Winter 2005 Collection*) and Martin Margiela's deconstructed aesthetics (*Spring/Summer 1999*), I dyed, shredded, and burned rolls of lace, then hot glued red beads to imitate campy drops of blood. Wearing Marsyas's skin becomes a physical act of appropriating the 'other', symbolizing Apollo's desire to consume and integrate the foreign, the external—Marsyas's very essence—into his own identity. The mesh-like quality of the costume allows Apollo's self to be visible through the 'skin' of another, reinforcing themes of identity, visibility, and the tension between the self and the external. The ‘Bloodsuit’, by contrast, symbolizes the visceral, raw aftermath of this act. Its deep red color and burned fabric evoke a sense of the body’s internal transformation made external. It references Eiko Ishioka’s costume designs for Coppola’s *Dracula* (1992), which also aestheticize bodily transformation. This challenges the conventional ‘grotesque’ by imbuing Apollo’s actions with a disturbing beauty, where the body becomes both a canvas and a material. These costumes explore the interplay between beauty, violence, and identity in *Apollo & Marsyas*, adding a layer that deepens the opera’s engagement with themes of appropriation and queerness—Apollo literally wears the skin of another, subsuming his identity. The costuming aligns with the piece’s narrative bound up in Deleuze’s account of masochism, turning the act of Marsyas’s flaying into a exploration of identity formation, appropriation, and grotesque beauty.

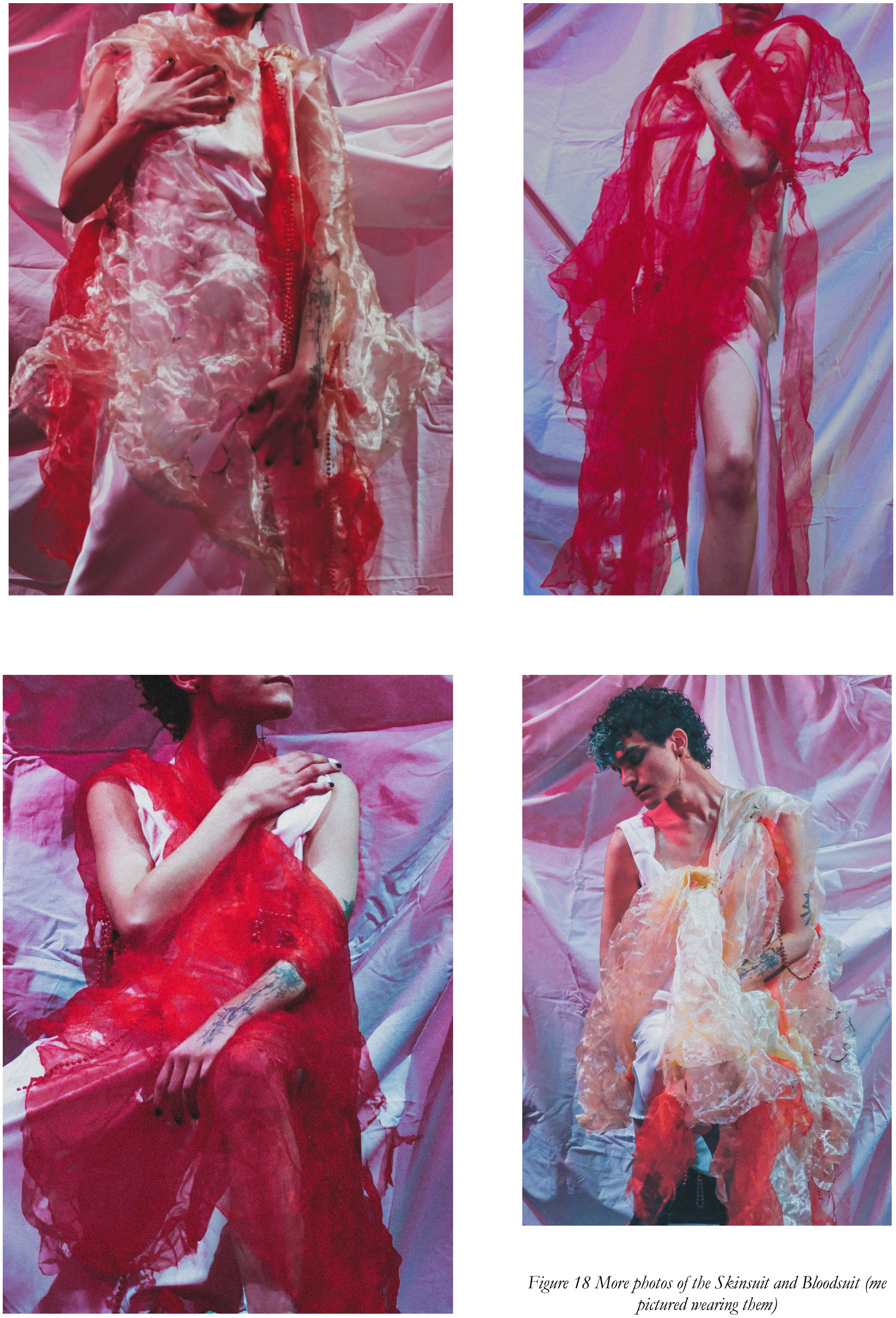
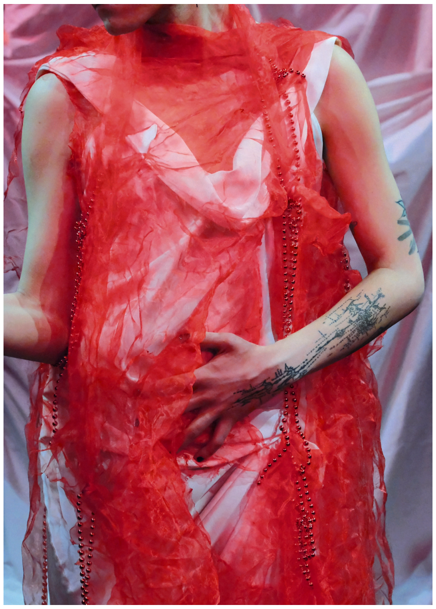
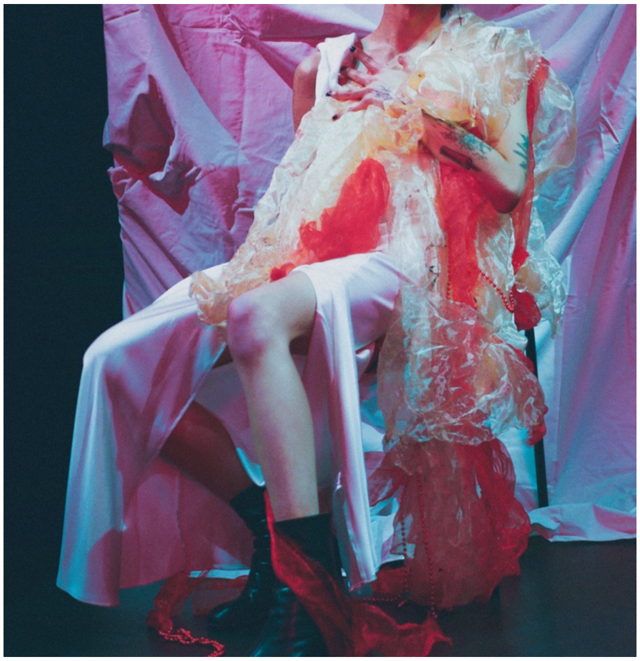
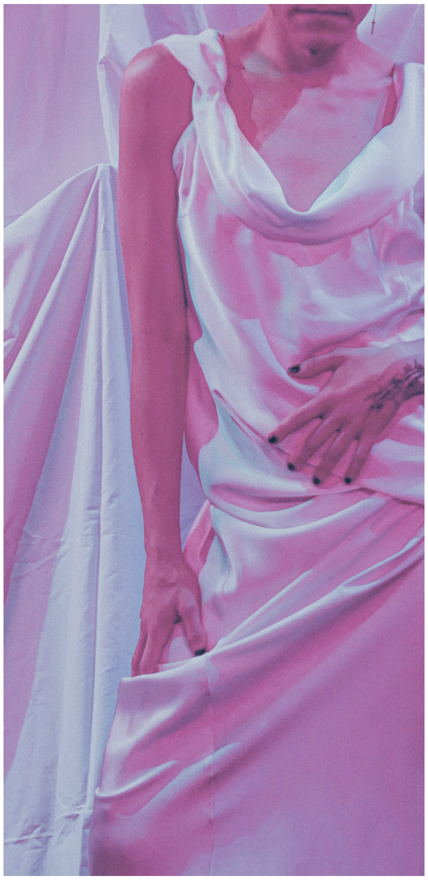
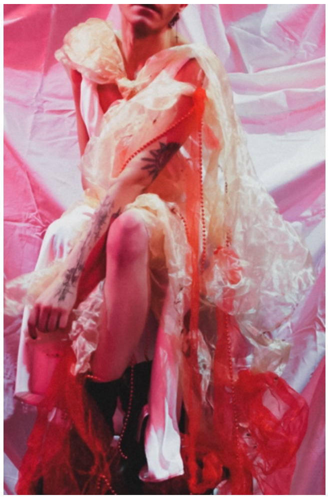


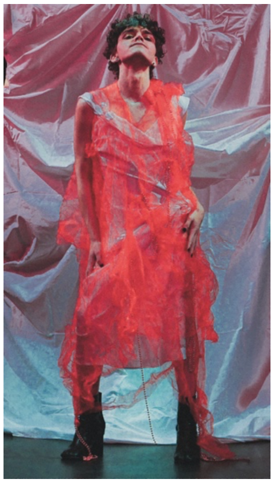
Figure 18 More photos of the Skinsuit and Bloodsuit (me pictured wearing them)











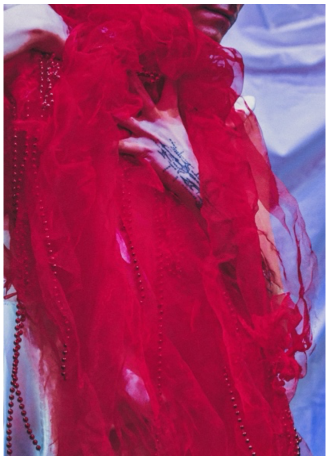


Figure 18 cont. More photos of Skinsuit and Bloodsuit,
Bottom left photo shows the underdress sans suits

A more detailed view of the costumes is also available within the 'Meet Apollo' Demo Recording with Visualizer included within the Appendix Materials downloads and YouTube link. This video contains a demo recording of the first movement created with Spencer's voice and electronics. I used the development of the video, as well as the costumes, to further my own relationship with the musical material. Something like the sound of beads clattering to the floor from yet another broken string of red 'blood' from constructing the costumes informed the musical decision to have these interlocking downward scales, such as in the fourth movement.

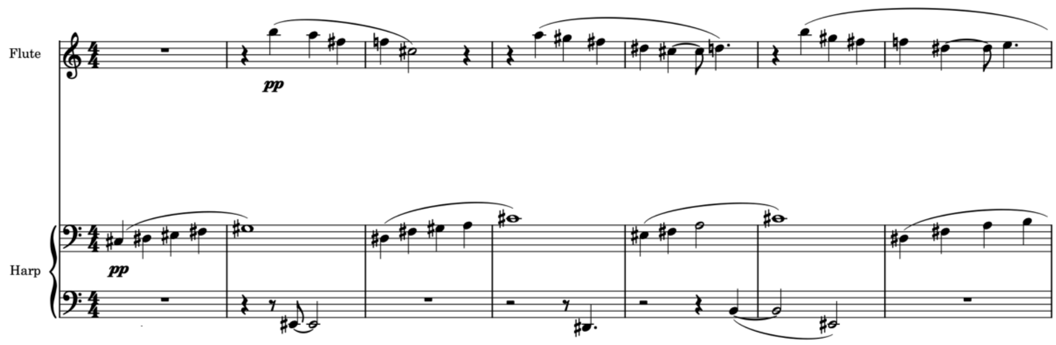


Figure 19 Opening moments of Mvmt. IV. (p. 20)

Reflections

Apollo & Marsyas marked a shift from the rhizomatic, decentralized form of *Discopia* to a more focused, narratively driven work. The decision to work with a more contained dramatic structure allowed for greater intimacy in storytelling, particularly in exploring the tensions of power, shame, and queer love. However, this change also introduced new challenges, particularly in how mythological material and modern themes were reconciled in performance as well as the true potentials of a project's staging.

One of the key challenges was ensuring that the music (both its live electronic elements) felt fully integrated into the dramatic structure. The use of diegetic music, where the characters actively 'perform' as part of the narrative, created a unique dramaturgical challenge; the music needed to function as both expressive vehicle and narrative tool. This framing of performance as not only something perceived by the audience, but also by the characters and their own fictional society, mirrors how queer relationships are performed and examined in the real world. While this dual function largely succeeded, I recognize that scenes (particularly the characters' final confrontation) could have played more with staging, rather than relying solely on textual and harmonic contrast. Rather than the two singers donning the Skinsuit and Bloodsuit without action between their characters, future performances would benefit from the duo interacting.

Collaborating with poet Spencer Mason was vital to the piece, and I learned a great deal about narrative structure and drawing musical implications from the text itself. Our co-writing process was deeply rewarding but also required careful negotiation of voice and perspective. Spencer's approach to text was poetically dense and expansive, often producing a wealth of material that, while rich in imagery and meaning, sometimes exceeded what could be effectively set to music. As a composer, I had to navigate the task of asking another artist to pare down their work. This was a difficult conversation, as every word felt essential to the story; I wanted to include it all, but due to the length specifications for the project, we decided to cut some sections of text or have them as spoken rather than sung. Spencer was extremely receptive and took this feedback in stride, producing a libretto where textually condensed sections (invoking classical recitative structure, such as the first and fifth scenes) dynamically contrast the aria-based portions (like scenes two and six).

In *Apollo & Marsyas*, I explored queer temporality and mythological recontextualization through Halberstam's temporal drag (2005), but I would like to deepen the piece's engagement with Deleuze's *Masochism* (1967) and Butler's theories of performativity (1990). Deleuze frames masochism, not just as suffering, but as a ritualized contract in which submission is both internalized and anticipated. Marsyas's fate mirrors this structure; his failure is predetermined by external forces, and his suffering transformed into public spectacle. Apollo's flaying of Marsyas and the act of donning his skin literalizes Butler's notion that identity is not inherent but rather performed. Apollo subsumes Marsyas's identity by wearing him, embodying a grotesque, forced becoming. This act also speaks to D&G's Body without Organs, where transformation occurs through deterritorialization and reinvention rather than a fixed self. Future iterations could push this further by having Apollo sing Marsyas's melodies in a fragmented, unstable manner, mirroring the act of wearing his flayed skin as a sonic and performative transformation. Just as the Body without Organs resists fixed form, Apollo's vocal identity would therefore blur, deterritorialized by this interaction and in the process of Becoming. The collapse of a distinction between victor/victim and self/other would reinforce the piece's engagement with queer masochism as both punishment and reinvention of the self, aligning itself further with the history of queer shame and defiance.

This project was a crucial step in my doctoral journey, as it allowed me to refine my approach to intimacy, power, and queer storytelling within musical drama. Moving from *Discopia's* abstraction to a more focused, relational narrative prepared me for the synthesis found in *Queen Midas*, where both the experimental structures of *Discopia* and the intimate intrapersonal conflicts of *Apollo & Marsyas* came together in new ways.

VI. *Queen Midas*

(2022-2023) [Duration: 01:03:00]

Figure 20 Georgie Malcom at the premier; The White Hotel, Salford. Photographed by Barney Cunningham - ThirdMan Productions.

Yet I remember: lips held; hands kissed.
A cocktail walkway and tokenised bliss.
We shag queens, elbows in knots.
Making wingspan of our friends,
Held hostage
To a lost night of one another.
Belly bouncing laughs
Of butch and rouge lippy,
Untangling the mealtimes
Of our foxglove mothers.

— Spencer Mason, *Queen Midas Libretto* (2023)[10]

Background and Conceptual Framework

Queen Midas is an opera for solo voice, projection, and electronics. Part exercise in aesthetic limitations and study into electronic maximalism, this piece retells the myth of Midas, a ruler who could turn anything to gold with just a touch. I use this theme of a 'fear of touch' as an examination of the fallout of the AIDS crisis and its continued impact. The piece integrates house music, a genre historically significant to queer culture, with the operatic tradition to explore the intersections of personal and communal trauma, as well as the construction of identity and reality. The libretto was written collaboratively between Spencer Mason and me. It was performed by soprano Georgie Malcom at The White Hotel in Salford on the 25th of June.

i. Historical Context

Queen Midas draws from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (c. 8 CE) and Ted Hughes's *Tales from Ovid* (1997) to ground its narrative. The central theme of Midas's 'fear of touch' is reimagined to parallel the societal and personal impacts of the AIDS crisis, emphasizing themes of queer trauma and identity formation. This link highlights the fear and isolation experienced by queer people during the epidemic, continuing to this day. Psychologist Walt Odets's *Out of*

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[10] See Appendix for full libretto

the Shadows (2019) explores the aftermath of the AIDS crisis and the sustained trauma affecting queer individuals. He discusses how queer people are often 'queered' by society before they have a chance to understand their own identities. This societal othering forces individuals to construct their identities in response to external caricatures and stereotypes (pp. 47-49). *Queen Midas* echoes these themes by portraying Midas's struggle with societal perceptions, reflecting the broader experiences of queer individuals who face ongoing transphobia and homophobia. The opera explores how these traumas are inscribed on the body and psyche, echoing Odets's analysis of the lasting impacts of societal prejudice on mental health.

The AIDS crisis, which began in the early 1980s, was a pivotal moment in queer history, devastating the LGBTQ+ community and exposing the severe shortcomings of public health systems and government responses. Randy Shilts's *And the Band Played On* (1987) provides a journalistic account of the early years of the epidemic, illustrating how political apathy and stigma around gay men exacerbated the crisis. Shilts meticulously documents the inaction of health officials and the Reagan administration, which allowed the disease to spread unchecked during its early years. As Shilts writes, 'By the time America paid attention to AIDS, it was too late' (1987 p. 13).

In the cultural sphere, works like *Angels in America* (stage play written by Tony Kushner in 1993, later adapted to a TV series in 2003), *Paris is Burning* (1990), and *Pose* (2018) provided nuanced depictions of the queer community's response to the AIDS crisis. *Angels in America* deals directly with the emotional, political, and spiritual impact of AIDS, portraying characters like Prior Walter, who confronts the realities of living with the disease and the broader neglect of the marginalized queer population (Kushner, 1993). The mini-series *Pose*, set in the late 1980s and early 1990s, similarly depicts the intersection of AIDS and ballroom culture, emphasizing the resilience of queer and trans people of colour, who were doubly marginalized by racism and homophobia during the epidemic (Canals, Mock, & Murphy, 2018). *Paris is Burning* (1990), while primarily a documentary on New York City's drag ballroom culture, also subtly reflects the impact of the AIDS crisis on the queer community, as many individuals in the film would later die of AIDS-related complications. The documentary touches on the importance of community and chosen family in an era where queer individuals were often abandoned by their biological families (Livingston, 1990). The musical language for *Queen Midas* draws heavily on the history of ballroom drag and the house music that still drives it today (artists like Aja LaBeija and LSDXOXO).

The devastation of the AIDS crisis brought about a newfound activism within the LGBTQ+ community, challenging both societal stigma and governmental indifference. Through art, literature, and activism, the crisis not only exposed the vulnerabilities of the community but also sparked the mobilization that would define future queer resistance.

VI. Operatic / Diva / House

The character of Queen Midas is portrayed as an operatic diva, a larger-than-life figure deeply intertwined with camp aesthetics, both celebrated and ostracized for her dramatic intensity. This characterization resonates with the long-standing tradition of the operatic diva in queer culture, where singers like Maria Callas were elevated to near-mythic status within gay communities. Wayne Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat* (1993) spends a chapter discussing how Callas's vocal excess and emotional vulnerability became a point of identification for gay men, highlighting the complex dynamics between queer audiences and the diva archetype. The diva is simultaneously revered for her strength and emotive power, yet also marginalized due to her perceived excess and emotionality, traits often seen as 'too indulgent' for heteronormative society (p. 134).

This diva archetype intersects with house music's 'diva house' subgenre, a style characterized by powerful, gospel-like vocals over pulsating beats. CeCe Peniston's 1991 track *Finally* is a prime example, where her emotive, full-throttle vocals resonate with the cathartic release sought on the dance floors of queer spaces. In the context of *Queen Midas*, this combination of operatic and house traditions creates a potent blend of musical and cultural practices, each shaped by queer histories and expressions of identity. The trope of 'diva' herself becomes a site for exploring the intersections of personal and collective trauma, excess, and the performative construction of identity. This not only situates Queen Midas within the lineage of queer divas, but also highlights the opera's engagement with broader themes of queer resistance and celebration, reflected in both the high art of the opera theatre and the subcultural spaces of the dance club.

VII. Deleuze, queer masochism, and becoming

I apply Deleuze's account of masochism to the ways queer individuals experience estrangement from their identities due to societal expectations and media representations. This estrangement forces them to construct reactionary identities responding to external caricatures and stereotypes. *Queen Midas* portrays this struggle through Midas's conflict with societal perceptions and internalized stigma. Her cursed touch symbolizes the isolating effects of societal othering and internal conflict, resonating with Judith Butler's examination of gender performance in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Moreover, embracing masochism as a form of resistance and empowerment is a recurring theme in queer theory and media. In the opera, Midas's journey towards self-acceptance, despite societal challenges, reflects Heather Love's idea in *Feeling Backward* (2007) that historical narratives of queer suffering can be sources of strength. Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) explores this further with specific reference to media depictions of 'campy, evil gay' characters. He provides a theoretical framework for understanding how characters like these are both subversive and appealing. By embracing failure, camp, and queer temporality, these characters offer a critique of societal norms and an alternative perspective on identity and success.

Further drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's work, *Queen Midas* explores the dynamic nature of identity. Deterritorialization, the process disrupting fixed and imposed identities, is seen in Midas's transformation from a queen to outcast. My appearance in the prerecorded material is a further division of self, as the boundaries between the self and the other are continuously transgressed as the work plays out. Midas's identity evolves through the show, aligning with the idea that identity is not stable but continuously changing. Becoming as a concept emphasizes this perpetual transformation of the self. The opera suggests that the fracturing and reconstruction of the self are creative processes, leading to new forms of expression and existence and escape from a limiting society. By embracing a masochism of identity, Midas finds freedom, challenging conventional expectations and celebrating the fluid nature of identity.

Extramusical Aspects

Unlike the two previous chapters on *Discopia* and *Apollo & Marsyas*, I will analyse the extramusical material in *Queen Midas* before the score and recordings. The examination of non-musical fields has specific impacts on the music and narrative structure. The venue, video, costuming, and set design all played a large role in the compositional process. I finalized several of these decisions early in the process before finishing the score; consequently, these choices informed much of the narrative and musical structure and is why I will address them first.

i. Venue and Location – Queering Territories

I selected The White Hotel in Salford as the ideal venue for our performance due to its history of hosting queer events and highlighting queer artists. This converted MOT garage is a prominent club in the UK underground music scene, drawing parallels to historic queer spaces like The Warehouse in Chicago, where house music was born. The venue's industrial ambiance and its eclectic range of events, from Euro-Rave nights to classical choral performances, reflect the opera's themes of multiplicity within artistic expression. The venue's raw, industrial aesthetic contrasts with the refined and sometimes elitist perception of classical music, creating a deliberate clash emphasizing D&G's deterritorialization. The decision to perform at The White Hotel also highlights the venue's role in supporting queer artists and providing a safe space for numerous expressions of identity. The club's reputation for hosting diverse events that range from 90s Euro-Rave—where attendees dress like characters from *The Matrix*—to moody ambient sets with audiences in flannel shirts and torn jeans underscores the venue's versatility and openness. This environment allowed the show to exist within a context that embraces both the high-energy, performative aspects of club culture and the introspective, contemplative, and grandiose nature of contemporary opera. Although not exclusively a gay club, the venue's inclusive ethos and diverse clientele provide a backdrop that resonates with the opera's exploration of queer identities and experiences. This setting enhances the narrative by situating it within a real-world territory that mirrors the opera's themes of community, transformation, and the blurring of boundaries between the personal and the communal. Additionally, the logistical support provided by The White Hotel was crucial in organising the event. The venue's staff helped organize the staging, lighting, sound booth, opening act, and (most-importantly) bar staffing, ensuring a seamless and immersive experience for the audience. This collaboration highlights the importance of community and support networks in the production of queer art. Due to this iconic location, I structured my opera much like an electronic set, with movements seamlessly transitioning between one another. During the performance, this also was of note, as members of the audience were free to dance, walk about, and grab a drink. This approach to operatic staging not only reflects Halberstam's queer spatiality, but also aesthetically matches the experiences at hand. I sought for the audience to feel like active participants, watching and engaging with the musical material, at times feeling distressed or awkward as Midas's emotions reach a peak and they think 'There's nothing much I can do about this except watch while Midas nears closer to her breaking point'. In essence, the audience act as an additional character, the 'kingdom' that disparages Midas. This restless energy and fluid dynamic between performer, music, and audience is necessary to drive the drama. Even for sections like Act II. Sc. 3 'Queen of Gold' (score p. 35 [0:25:18]) where the harmonic and rhythmic motions are slow, I use fast micro-timings and subdivisions to keep some level of feverish pulse throughout, encouraging this active participation in dancing with Midas.

VIII. Projections

Projections in *Queen Midas* serve multiple functions, from advancing the narrative and enhancing the musical drama to setting the stage for actions and exploring conceptual themes. All projections were shot in my home using a Fujifilm X-T4 and edited in Final Cut Pro. The video materials include a variety of visual motifs, such as disembodied close-ups of hands and face. These images reinforce the themes of disembodiment and the fracturing of identity, mirroring Midas's internal struggles. The use of slow-motion footage (shot at 240 fps) adds a surreal and dreamlike quality to the visuals. Deleuze's concepts from *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* heavily influenced my videography. Deleuze's exploration of how time and movement are represented in film provides a theoretical framework for understanding how projections can manipulate perceptions of reality and identity. The concept of the movement-image focuses on the dynamic relationship between images and their continuous transformation, which can be seen in the fluid transitions and overlays used in the projections, specifically Act IV. This approach creates a sense of movement and change that aligns with the opera's themes of transformation and becoming.

In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze explores a cinematographic image of time, first Bergson's discussed in *Creative Evolution* (1907), as a series of disjointed, nonlinear events. This concept is reflected in the use of slow-motion and time-stretching effects in the projections, as well as the fixation on static objects (such as the disco balls seen throughout) and how things in motion interact with them (like the clouds of fog in Act II. Scene 3 'Queen of Gold'). This kind of technique disrupts the linear flow of time and creates a disjointed and multifaceted representation of Midas's experience, mirroring her own fragmenting identity. The projections also play a crucial role in exploring the dichotomy of self and other through video effects. The final section, Act IV. Scene III. 'Epilogue,' features projections of my hands, torso, and face melding into one another. This blending of different clips to create visuals that are only possible in queer territories outside normative environments symbolizes the dissolution of Midas's imposed identity and her acceptance of a more integrated self.

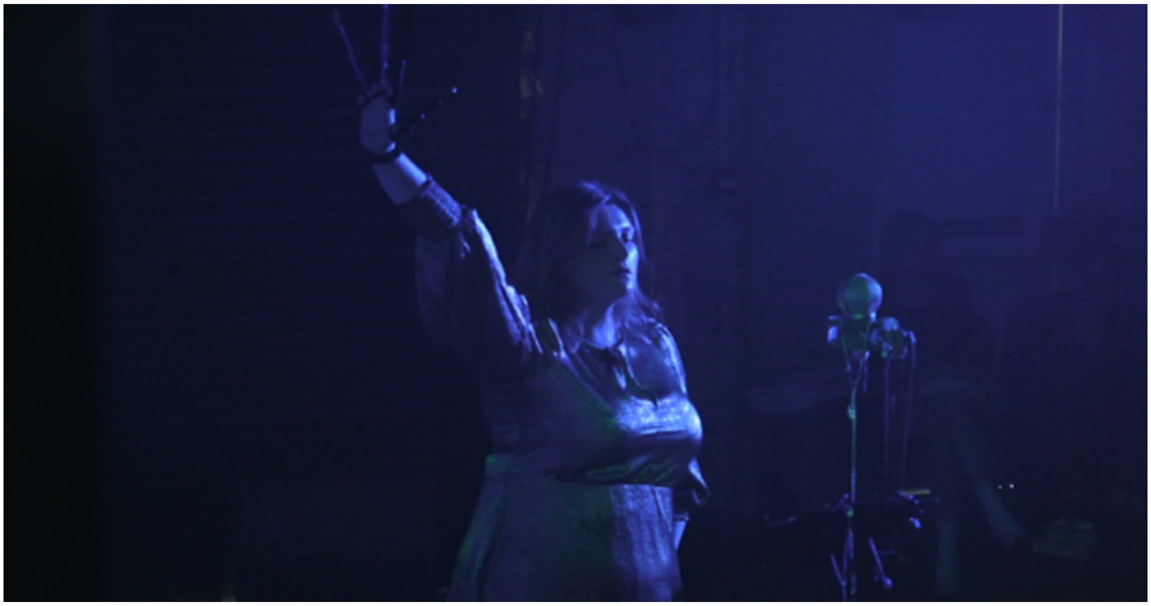

Figure 21 Georgie and The Claw. Photography by ThirdMan Productions.

IX. Costumes & Set

Costuming and set design are crucial in visually representing themes of transformation and alienation. The most striking costume piece is Midas's claw, which symbolizes the public's fear of her touch and the physical manifestation of her curse. This claw is mirrored in my hand tattoo, featured prominently in the projections, creating a visual link between Georgie and myself, emphasizing the themes of fear and othering as both external and internal experiences.

Midas's sparkling gold dress contrasts with the staging which resembles the aftermath of a house party. The room is littered with drinks, cigarette butts, confetti, and glitter, creating a chaotic environment reflecting Midas's internal turmoil and the broader societal decay she experiences. A singular condenser microphone stands in the centre of the stage, with a vintage look reminiscent of microphones used in the 70s, adding to the retro-futuristic aesthetic of the performance. This microphone not only serves a practical purpose but also acts as a symbolic anchor, connecting Midas's voice to this historical lineage. The staging and set design also play a crucial role in creating a sense of immediacy and presence with Midas. The audience was partially seated on chairs and tables illuminated by candlelight, some stood, all allowed to wander around. This levelling of the stage and the audience draws the audience into Midas's world and makes her struggles and triumphs feel personal and relatable as if they are onlookers to her plight. Moments like Act III. Scene 4 'All Alone' are made even more impactful by this intimacy.

Musical Vocabulary

Queen Midas features a musical language that blends synthesized sounds with samples and live vocals. In performance, the electronics are 'set it and forget it' on my part. In *Discopia,* I was involved as a performer of the electronics; in *Queen Midas*, I instead acted as stage manager and hype-person for Georgie during the performances, supporting and encouraging her from the sidelines. It is a big ask to any performer to carry an hour-long performance by oneself, so using the projections as another character and as something that develops the narrative helps structure the work. The projections are synced to the music which allows a rigidity in the visual material as I was able to plan where lights would shift, either gradually or on-beat.

The opera employs electronic music techniques like resampling and granular synthesis to curate a specific auditory experience. I sample primarily from Georgie's voice and recognizable elements of house (i.e. the 'house stab' of planing minor 7th chords and TR-808 samples used in Act II. Scene 2 – 'Is that her?'). The synthesized sounds in *Queen Midas* were crafted using my Elektron Digitone. It allows for the creation of complex, developing timbres that underpin the opera's evolving sound world. FM synthesis, known for its ability to produce both melodic and percussive elements, is used to generate various lead synths and rhythmic components.

As I worked on the dance tracks, Georgie and I would meet to score out the sung material. I would bring some small sections of looping dance music beats, words from Spencer, and together, Georgie and I would sing through the material, gradually forming the piece to suit both her voice and the music at hand. The compositional process thereby becomes a dynamic and fluid force, and Georgie has her own agency to make musical decisions. This is partially reflected in the score for *Queen Midas*, which takes a bare-bones approach. As most of this music was improvised and developed over several months, the score is used to orient Georgie within the music, rather than the score being a primary vehicle for the delivery of musical content.

i. Act I.

Scene 1 – 'Overture' (Score: p. 9, Recording: [00:00])

The opera opens with a simple scalar configuration, establishing the Deleuzian 'refrain' that serves as a foundational motif here just like as in *Discopia* and *Apollo & Marsyas*. The initial electronic samples of Georgie's voice are overlapped and distorted, setting the scene with a blend of familiarity and unease, a saccharine Lydian scale contrasted with increasing distortion applied to the sampled vocals. This technique of layering and manipulating vocal samples creates a texture evoking the duality of Midas's experience. The progression through the score is cued by pre-recorded spoken lines, ensuring Georgie can anchor herself in a very repetitive section of music.

In *Discopia* and *Apollo & Marsyas,* the Deleuzian refrains opening each were a genuine usage of this concept. However, in *Queen* Midas, I wanted to 'fake out' the audience. Georgie's lament over this wistful melodic pattern sets up traditional operatic expectations only to subvert them as electronic elements overtake Georgie's voice. This unexpected shift into a hyper-aggressive electronic music challenges the audience's preconceived notions of what opera should be in the split of a second, aligning with the theme of deterritorialization that runs throughout the piece.

Scene 2 – 'Gold in the Wind' (Score: p. 10, Recording: [0:04:35])

In 'Gold in the Wind,' the sound design becomes violently bright, providing a stark contrast to the comparatively placid material of the overture. This scene reflects Midas's emotional uproar – her aggression, regret, and the sorrow of losing her kingdom and friends. The lead synth, crafted from a single-cycle waveform of Georgie's voice, is layered to create a choir-like effect using my software synth, Arturia's Pigments. This synthetic choir is then doubled by the Digitone, adding depth and thickness to the sound. The use of compression, distortion, and phasing effects blends these sounds into a unified whole, creating a complex sonic texture. The bass and distorted 'barking' snare, both generated on the Digitone, enhance the aggressive atmosphere. The bass evolves from a transient-heavy kick drum to a sustained sub-bass, referencing the work of electronic music producer SOPHIE. The snare, characterized by its metallic 'dog-bark' quality, is a hallmark of FM synthesis, popularized by the Yamaha DX7 in the 1980s. This scene subverts the operatic tradition by integrating house music elements, creating a hybrid form that reflects Midas's turbulent struggles. The violent soundscape underscores this conflict and the harsh reality of her existence.

Scene 3 – 'Ha Dance' (Score: p. 14, Recording: [0:08:05])

This instrumental dance scene samples Masters at Work's iconic 1991 'Ha Dance,' a track deeply rooted in queer culture. It has been sampled countless times, including by artists like Cashmere Cat ('Adore' 2015), Ayesha Erotica ('Literal Legend' 2017), LSDXOXO ('Death Grip' and 'Angel Dust' 2016), and Gia Gunn (Crazy Cukoo Cunt' 2014). Using this sample directly connects the scene to the aftermath of the AIDS crisis, grounding the opera in a specific historical and cultural context. Heavily distorted TR-808 drum machine samples, affected with grain delay and spectral resonators, create a watery, washy texture, foreshadowing Midas's eventual fate.

Scene 4 – 'Lend Me Your Chorus' (Score: p. 15, Recording: [0:12:27])

In 'Lend me your chorus,' Midas regains her composure and pleads for divine assistance. The music employs isorhythm and sound selection techniques, reusing the vocal synth introduced in Scene II but removing the Digitone's doubling, as well as much of the distortion and compression. This creates a softer choir that elaborates on the religious allusions of prayer.

The running theme of reusing sounds in different contexts is evident here, as the familiar vocal synths are transformed to evoke a sense of divine presence. Midas's plea, 'I will dance for no hand and escape all temptation,' references both her claw and the hands of fate that have shaped her destiny. Her determination to avoid eternal damnation and find a new community is mirrored in the uplifting, yet solemn, music. She exits the stage, planning to move on with her life.

X. Act II.

Scene 1 – 'Rumours Soundscape' (Score: p. 22, Recording: [0:16:18])

'Rumours' is an instrumental soundscape that continues the thematic exploration of vocal manipulation. All sounds are derived from samples of Georgie's and my voice, but unlike the overture, these vocals are aggressively pitch-shifted and time-stretched to create an unsettling chorus of whispers and murmurs that increase in intensity as word spreads. This technique gives the impression of a crowd spreading malicious rumours. The addition of my voice buried in the mix (which will become more apparent as the opera continues) introduces the 'other,' emphasizing the separation of one's own voice from identity. The bass patch, created from pitch-shifting the vocal synth made from transposing Georgie's voice down several octaves and applying granular resynthesis, produces a dark, industrial sound complementing the distorted voices. I applied waveshape distortion that increases throughout the scene, imagining the sonic implications of 'backstabbing' and betrayal. The sarcastic line, 'They're all dead because of her,' delivered with time-stretched vocal effects, heightens the dark humour and underscores the cruel indifference of the public. As Midas re-enters, the crowd of voices diffuses, becoming a whisper.

Scene 2 – 'Is that her?' (Score: p. 23, Recording: [0:20:40])

Midas makes her rebuttal against the crowd's rumours. The bassline from the previous movement is reused, but with added pitch and volume envelopes, and a shortened portamento length between notes. This transforms the sound from a muddy, dark bass into a sharp, plucked bass, demonstrating the multiplicities available in electronic music and allowing me to explore many ways of manipulating sound to guide the story. The scene also introduces 'house stabs,' characterized by planing minor 7th chords, and the return of the 'Water 808' kit with heavily distorted kick sounds. These musical elements reflect Midas's emotional turmoil as she searches for someone to hear her pleas of innocence. Her anger turns to fear as the crowds ignore her; I take this idea from the widespread governmental indifference during the AIDS crisis, such as the delayed response from Reagan's administration. This scene maps onto the public fear of infection and the resulting heightening of stereotypes and violence towards queer people during the 80s.

Scene 3 – 'Queen of Gold' (Score: p. 35, Recording: [0:25:18])

This scene features a granular vocal synth sample from Act II, Scene I, used without the previous single-cycle technique. The reduction in grain number and length, along with a slower tempo, allows the pad's texture to be heard more clearly, creating a reflective atmosphere. Midas reflects on the crowd's violence and apathy, expressing her internal conflict through the lines: 'A woman who understands power you demand dismissed… The glitter sticks and scars, like shrapnel in my skin.' This scene marks the first indication that Midas begins to doubt her own experiences. However, as the music picks up tempo and switches to a more upbeat track with virtual analogue synths reminiscent of chiptunes, Midas dismisses these doubts and reasserts her identity, 'My name is Midas, Queen of Gold'. The simplistic character of these synths invokes Midas's fracturing identity and slipping grasp on reality. The 'Water 808' kit returns with kick, shakers, and claps, providing a rhythmic foundation that drives the scene forward. This combination of elements underscores Midas's struggle with self-doubt and societal rejection.

XI. Act III.

Scene 1 – 'Tar Soundscape' (Score: p. 45, Recording: [0:34:40])

This section is a solo electronic movement that reuses the bass patch technique from Act II, Scene I, but replaces Georgie's voice with mine as the source sample. The scene starts dark, with echoes of a cry for help, creating a haunting atmosphere. The projection visuals, showing kaleidoscopic droplets of tar turning a glass of clear liquid to black reinforce the sense of despair and the fear of contamination. Bell sounds made from spectral resonators excited by various frequencies in the bass add a layer of complexity to the soundscape. The Digitone pad synth patch from Act I. Scene 2 is reused without Georgie's vocal synth, showing through music how Midas's identity begins to unravel. As the bell sounds overtake the bass and the pad enters, a false sense of hope is instilled in Midas, suggesting that help might finally be on the way. However, this hope is quickly undermined by what is to come.

Scene 2 – 'Tar Dance' (Score: p. 46, Recording: [0:39:00])

'Tar Dance' is a frenetic movement for solo electronics featuring sardonic offers of help in the form of a glass of black tar. The music, made exclusively from my voice and the 'Water 808' kit, reflects themes of self-hatred and societal othering. The total fracturing of identity is symbolized by the projections, showing me drinking tar (golden syrup and black food coloring), referencing films like *Swallow* (2019) and *Jennifer's Body* (2009). The frenzied chanting, texturally reminiscent of Act II, Scene I ('Rumours Soundscape'), is now synchronized to a beat in this scene, creating a chaotic and oppressive atmosphere. This mirrors the cyclic creation and destruction of Identity necessitated by societal rejection, and transphobia, and homophobia, as well as the widespread substance abuse (allegories to 'consuming poison') within the queer community.

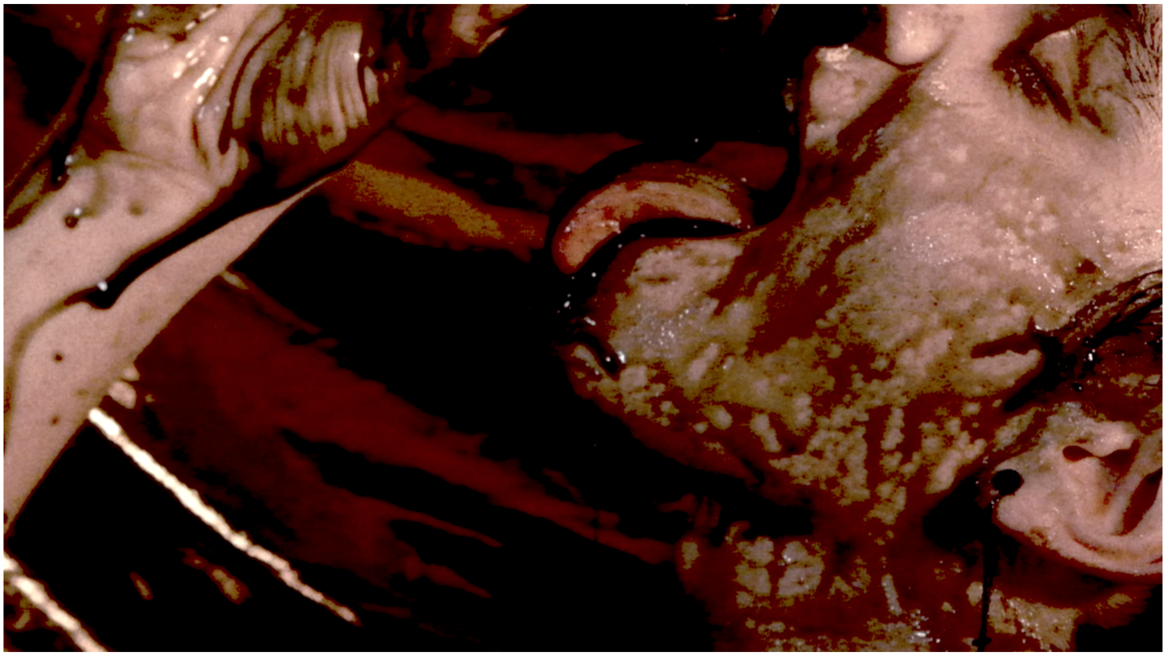

Figure 22 - Frame from 'Tar Dance' [45:00]

Scene 3 – 'A Queen's Delusions' (Score: p. 47, Recording: [0:42:11])

Midas re-enters holding a half-drunk glass of tar and stumbles around the room deliriously. The drums from the previous scene continue, but they become sparser, creating a disorienting and unsettling effect. Prerecorded samples of Georgie reciting lines are time-stretched with transients quantized to a rigid beat, giving a drunken, delirious pace to the lines. Midas hears hateful speech, such as 'Go back to where you came from, you hemaphroDYKE… Butch or bitch, we don't want your shit… Ghoul, wraith, faggot disgrace,' interspersed with distorted laughter. This verbal assault represents the societal vitriol directed at queer individuals. As Midas curls up on the couch, heaving in panic, the music and projections create a suffocating sense of despair.

Scene 4 – 'All alone' (Score: p. 48, Recording: [0:48:18])

'All alone' is the only a cappella section in the opera; Midas repeats these two words over and over. This scene revisits and transforms the opening material, symbolizing the multiple contained within one. The reuse of the 'refrain' as a final attempt to recapture home territory underscores Midas's ultimate isolation and the cyclical nature of her struggle.

The simplicity and repetition of this scene reflects on Midas's isolation and the broader themes of identity and rejection. The stark, unaccompanied vocal line emphasizes the raw emotional weight of Midas's experience, no longer accompanied by synths and drum machines, providing a moment of hollowness and desperation. Midas can barely hold herself together as she walks out of her current dwelling into the unknown.

XII. Act IV.

Scene 1: 'Yet I remember' (Score: p. 50, Recording: [0:51:08])

Midas reflects on her lost community, expressing anger and sorrow through lines like, 'Yet I remember, lips held; hands kissed… a cocktail walkway and tokenised bliss.' This scene juxtaposes memories of connection and joy with the pain of her isolation. Midas decides to drown herself to escape the anger that has consumed her, stating, 'I will drown myself in gold, instead of the blaze you've made me.' This decision represents a rejection of societal labels and a desire for self-destruction as a means of liberation. The narrative explores themes of acceptance and the destructive impact of societal rejection on self-identity.

Scene 2: 'Drown Me' (Score: p. 51, Recording: [0:53:23])

Here, I sing as Midas, replacing Georgie's voice and gleefully chanting 'drown me'. The projections show disembodied parts of my body (hands, torso, face) submerged in water, symbolizing the destruction of imposed identity and a clear reference to Deleuze's Body without Organs. The visuals and the drowning imagery reflect a detachment from physicality and the desire to escape societal constraints into something like Halberstam's queer spaces. The scene's chaotic and oppressive atmosphere, contrasted with an upbeat dance rhythm, underscores the themes of a joyful self-destruction and liberation from societal labels. The destruction of Midas's imposed identity becomes a form of catharsis and resistance.

Scene 3: 'Epilogue' (Score: p. 52, Recording: [0:56:17])

The 'Epilogue' features solo electronics and the only section of music with acoustic instruments (a chamber orchestra). This synthetic orchestra modulates operatic tropes explored in Act I, Scene I, and alludes to the afterlife, touching on music that is unknown to the current framework of the piece. These samples are the slowed-down recordings of two of my own pieces works: the first cover I put on SoundCloud, 'You're the One That I Want' from *Grease* (1978), and my first orchestral piece which I had written after attempting to take my own life at 16. To me (certainly the only person to know this at the concert), this symbolizes the transformation of my own shameful experiences into something meaningful and creative. Though an audience would not be able tell *how* this is important, they can tell *that* it is.

The disunity of the two voices of Midas (mine and Georgie's) is put to rest as I slide down and she climbs up, a metaphor for my drowning, her abandonment of the identity enforced by society, and the love and acceptance of queer self-identity.

Reflections

Creating *Queen Midas* was an exploration of the fluid boundaries between musical, philosophical, and personal identities, particularly as they relate to queer trauma, performance, and masochism as a mode of resistance. The opera situates itself at the intersection of high and low art, bringing together house and ballroom music—genres born from the queer Black and Latinx underground (Salkind 2018, Lapointe 2009, and Livingston 1990)—and opera, a historically exclusionary form that has, nonetheless, been reclaimed by queer audiences (Koestenbaum 1993). The fusion of these styles was central to my compositional process but also posed distinct challenges in terms of dramaturgy and musical pacing. In particular, the balance between hyper-saturated, club-driven electronic textures and the lyricism of operatic writing required careful negotiation to maintain clarity without compromising intensity or coming off as ludicrous. Though an essence of camp is to be expected, forcing this aesthetic would have been insincere. Though fantastical in nature, the story ought to abide by its own verisimilitude, such that all of Midas's actions come off as genuine and not hammy or farcical.

A major consideration in the writing process was the role of the diva as both subject and spectacle. Midas is both an operatic heroine and a club diva, her voice serving as a site of power and vulnerability. The diva is an inherently performative figure, often trapped between adoration and exile, a dynamic that mirrors Judith Butler's conception of identity as performative rather than intrinsic (1990 and 1993). Midas's struggle with public perception, her elevation and subsequent rejection, is a direct reflection of this idea; her identity is constituted through repetition and external affirmation rather than any fixed essence. As her power isolates her, her identity fragments, reflecting Butler's argument that all identity is precarious, maintained through continual reiteration rather than inherent stability.

The role of performance and the tension between excess and restraint were key to my collaboration with Georgie Malcolm. Our shared experiences of attending shows at The White Hotel and at The Warehouse Project in Manchester, a club series known for its high-intensity electronic music events, informed our understanding of how music operates in communal queer spaces. Having a friend sing as Midas, especially one that understands the musical vernacular of the role, allowed for a freedom of musical exploration. Georgie's and my shared love for SOPHIE, PC Music, and the exaggerated, plasticky aesthetics of hyperpop shaped many of the electronic elements, particularly the aggressive, metallic textures and distorted vocal processing in sections like 'Act II, Scene 1: Rumours Soundscape' and 'Act III. Scene 2: Tar Dance'. However, in a moment of dramaturgical contrast, we made a deliberate decision to strip things back in Georgie's solo aria, 'Act III. Scene 4: All Alone'. Initially, I had envisioned this section as something more abrasive and shouted, reflecting Midas's existential crisis. However, through the workshopping process, Georgie and I realized that allowing this moment to be quiet, raw, and unamplified made it more devastating and further lends itself to the realism of queer trauma. This decision ultimately enhanced the opera's dramatic trajectory by creating a stark contrast with the surrounding maximalism, drawing the audience into a moment of vulnerable intimacy before plunging them back into the aftermath of 'Act IV'.

This push and pull between excess and restraint mirrors D&G's notion of deterritorialization (1987), where identity and meaning emerge through destabilization and transformation. Midas's body and voice undergo this process throughout the opera. Her status isolates her, her image is consumed and fragmented by the projections, and in the final act, my own prerecorded voice merges with hers in 'Act IV. Scene 2: Drown Me', symbolizing her total dissolution (mirroring Marsyas's flaying in *Apollo & Marsyas*), but implying a transcendence of her imposed identity as an outcast. This moment is deeply tied to Deleuze's Body without Organs; Midas sheds the performative layers of selfhood that have been violently inscribed onto her and enters a space of pure Becoming. The drowning sequence is both annihilation and ascendance, a joyful collapse into an identity free from external expectations.

By performing my own face and voice in the projections, I placed myself within this cycle of self-destruction and re-creation, aligning with the opera's broader themes of queer failure (Halberstam 2011). The use of prerecorded video and live performance created a fractured temporality, where Midas existed in multiple iterations simultaneously, her past and future selves colliding in real time. This reflects the legacy of queer identity formation, where historical trauma is never fully past but instead remains embedded in the present (Muñoz 2009). The final scene, 'Act IV. Scene 3: Epilogue', underscores this tension. Through this section, I manipulate recordings of some of my early works. These artifacts of my own past, recontextualized within the opera, highlight how identity is always a process of reiteration, of queering one's own history through new acts of performance.

Queen Midas was, in many ways, the culmination of the ideas I developed in *Discopia* and *Apollo & Marsyas*. The destabilization of form and structure in *Discopia* found a more narratively anchored realization in *Midas*, while the exploration of queer shame and masochism in *Apollo & Marsyas* was pushed further through the multiplicity of identity (that Midas exists as both hero and villain, loved and dejected, personified through the differentiation of Georgie's and my portrayal). The creative process deepened my understanding of the intersections between queer temporality, performance, and sonic identity, highlighting the power of music as both a site of trauma and catharsis. The work ultimately affirms that queer identity is not just something performed but something continuously dismantled and reconstituted. Midas does not simply die; she is reborn in new iterations, just as queerness constantly reinvents itself, constantly positioned against the status-quo.

VII. Conclusion: Becoming-Queer

How can radical queerness be represented and retold through musical drama?

How has queer trauma impacted contemporary life, and how can this be documented?

How have these experiences informed my work as a musician?

The initial questions posed in this thesis seek to investigate the intersection of art, identity, and experience. Yet, framing the creation of art solely as a cognitive process, driven by the intent to have the audience 'correctly interpret' abstractions, is inherently limiting. Art is not bound by such linear pathways of understanding; it exists in queer temporality and spatiality, formed through acts of creation, destruction, and reformation, much like the fluid and shifting identities it seeks to represent.

Queer trauma, as examined in Walt Odets's *Out of the Shadows* (2019), highlights the psychological and cultural scars left by systemic homophobia, transphobia, and the AIDS crisis. These traumas manifest as both collective and personal scars, shaping queer identity in a world that often fails to fully recognize its existence. Documenting these experiences becomes a way of reclaiming narratives and histories that have been systematically erased. Throughout my portfolio, trauma is embodied, aestheticized, and framed within the confines of operatic and dance music traditions, spaces historically important for queer expression.

The blending of acoustic and electronic sounds destabilizes the traditional boundaries between genres and challenges the dichotomy between the virtual and the real, aligning with Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of deterritorialization and becoming. Each of the works—*Discopia*, *Apollo & Marsyas*, and *Queen Midas*—explores fluidity, where identity is not a stable endpoint but rather a continuous process of negotiation, shaped by societal pressures and internal resistance. The non-linear structure of these works mirrors Halberstam's ideas of queer temporality, suggesting that queer experiences unfold in a way that defies conventional chronologies, focusing instead on moments of rupture, transformation, and multiplicity.

My personal journey as a composer has been one of navigating these contradictions. The use of camp, the integration of Deleuze's ideas on the Body without Organs, and the fluid relationships between performer, audience, and space in these pieces embody a radical queerness that refuses to be pinned down. The pieces reflect this interplay of identity, self-acceptance, and societal rejection through a multimedia approach, combining house music, projections, and queer aesthetics (as outlined by Halberstam [2011], Booth [1983], and Sontag [1961]).

All three have deepened my understanding of queerness as an individual and as part of a wider community. *Discopia* takes the idea of queer temporality and spatiality to its fullest expression. Drawing on Muñoz's concepts of queer futurity and Halberstam's queer temporality and spatiality, the piece situates itself in a dystopian, post-apocalyptic landscape, challenging normative expectations of seemingly stable concepts. The modular, non-linear structure of the piece reflects the fluid, contingent nature of queer identity and community. Through *Discopia*, I was able to experiment with how queerness is manifested not just in narrative or character but in the very structure of a work, creating a musical and choreographic experience that mirrors the multiplicities of queer life.

Apollo & Marsyas, by contrast, engages with the theme of queer shame and the pressures exerted by societal expectations, as discussed in Odets' *Out of the Shadows* (2019) and Downs *The Velvet Rage* (2005). The relationship between the two characters, manipulated by external forces into a competition neither wants, becomes a metaphor for the internal and external battles many queer individuals face. The work's blending of classical mythology with a modern setting and libretto allows the piece to explore the tension between past and present, tradition and resistance. It is in this interplay between myth and modernity that I began to explore more deeply how queerness is not just a sexual identity but a collection of shared experiences that defy heteronormative assemblages.

In *Queen Midas*, the theme of a 'fear of touch' as an allegory for the AIDS crisis highlights how queer trauma continues to shape identity formation. The integration of house music with operatic traditions underscores the intersection of personal and communal grief, reflecting the historical exclusion and marginalization of queer people. Drawing on Butler's concept of gender performativity and Muñoz's notions of queer futurity, Midas's journey becomes a metaphor for the continuous process of becoming. It is a rejection of a stable, fixed identity and an embrace of transformative existence. Through this piece, I began to understand queerness as a radical act of resistance, an ongoing negotiation with societal norms and personal expression.

Ultimately, these works act as a testament to queer resilience and the ways in which artistic creation serves both as a critique of, and escape from, dominant societal narratives—those which enforce heteronormativity, binary thinking, and norms of productivity and success. Through these lenses, I have documented and explored my own relationship with queer trauma, positioning the creative process as a radical act of self-expression, reclamation, and resistance. This portfolio demonstrates that music, art, and creation serve as powerful tools for queer communities—not simply for communication or representation, but as something that exists, transforms, and thrives beyond the constraints of linear understanding. As Deleuze suggests, ‘‘There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons’ (1995, p. 346). Queerness, as I explore through these works, is that weapon; it reshapes territories, bodies, and futures towards a ceaseless becoming-queer.

VIII. Bibliography

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IX. Appendix

Apollo & Marsyas Libretto

By Spencer Mason (2023)

ARTEMIS
In a town of cannibal nights and warmonger mollusks,
Who eat babies in oat milk and tear pages of
Keats because his smile was an oil spill
And trees in Tollcross with pagan giggles and
Carcinogenic plasticky hit.

MUSES
Where the young teams ken to do one in
If one does rust and touch as the long
Boys buckle and fuck.

ARTEMIS
For cigarettes lit beneath blood moon or waning,
Entering savasana and iron lung
With a mind as soft as mother's kiss,
And touch like searing scalpel
To make this a kindness
Of polypropylene surgery and scathing, wolfish compliments.
Where the music of reggae and rage and post punk pints to rush
To a breakbeat and life-drawing class,
Using charcoal for class A's
And injecting vitamin D when we run dry—
This city with Rodin sculptures to be found on every continent
A bronze cast of man and his dog mewling like an only once tuned piano.
A decade of perennial neglect and stifling cuddles at the mantelpiece
Holding the dust of a love that would be remembered forever and

MUSES
Now you don’t know her middle name, but her birthday is the day
After your current partners’.

ARTEMIS
This city
Of light pollution and crimson cloud,
A wilting fox
Skinty ribs sticking like she was only fed on tricks
That nae cunt bothered to teach.
And the skinny autumn
Solidifies these puddles of minds into tar
And steals the dexterity tongues
Until a nation is as agile as a leech.

Meet Apollo.

My gornless twin,
My gallus kin,
My dreichit inevitability.

APOLLO
In the centurial moment,
On the eastern acropolis, where Helios’s final smile
Played gold over the gorbal’s closes,
And multies and post-modernist sins.
Athena dropped the panpipes, after our laughs, all malice and rancour,
Had made her scorn her own godly, puffing cheeks.

ARTEMIS
This satyr, boastful Marsyas, the ruefully musical,

Drew the metal from big sog dirt like
He'd found lavender on an olive branch,
And holding it to his lips, beneath a nose broad
His landing pad for ultraviolet.
This disciple of Dionysian debauchery,
Clad in merlot and cannaboid hue,
Made eternal melodies of this screech,
Made chaos into tune so erroneous
That my midnight pack echoed its woes in prayers of ceasefire,
yet my brother, new to notes of reed.

MUSES
Stopped.
Listened.
Grinned.

ARTEMIS
Under Selene's kiss, his plague-filled smile
Evoked my scheme.
'Call Calliope,' I whispered to him.
'No, call them all.'
And I left, met the musical martyr
Barrelling down six pints of black.

MARSYAS
In a beer hall whose walls screamed:
'Welcome to the wonk brigade.' Where the most
Prolific of bam patrols blasted blasphemy,
Like dad rock choruses
And popped pills like paracetamol

ARTEMIS

‘Oh, Mighty Marsyas,’ I said unto his stupor,
His face a sack of peeled clementines,
‘Think you, oh majesty of melodic intrigue.
Whose riffing and groove do make a God pine-
entreat blessings from a God of such a music as yours?’

MUSES
Would your fingers pull the strings of his ear?

ARTEMIS
And at last, all connivance and fat goad,
Could you best my brother? I spoke,
Sliding gin and slim
To swim and sift among the other spirits in his stomach,
All wit and no thought.

MARSYAS
Aye, then, sister of the sun,
I take gauntlet of your competishishisishon

APOLLO
Into starlight of sisterhood’s domain, he fell.
Till my eye cascaded his cheek.
Nursing his anvil brain, Marsyas wandered,
Through limpet alley and garish scaffolding,
To a street he’d never seen.

ARTEMIS
This crack in the city.
And found in the alcove the ten of them,
Suddenly surrounded by a skyline and
Nine muses and one God and no way out.

And I sat with my thickest mane in palm, pack leading
She-wolf that had fed Romulus and the loser.

MUSES
All faces watched.
And in Marsyas plundered,
To his trial by lyre.

MARSYAS
Morsht Vore, I mumbled,
Palm under a JCB digger in a hangover shitemare.
Peely wally pale cheek and knees concave,
Bated breath as, oh yes, Apollo
Twinkled the last string into tune.

MARSYAS
Flexing these mortal fingers to dance like
Cig butts in the breeze.
Cheeks Buckfast, crimson, and bulging
Like bubonic warts.
The sumptuous sunlight standing opposite
Turned to a diminished chord
And I saw, perhaps-

MUSES
As each of nine admired the great god
Apollo's growing, gargantuan member
Thinking-

APOLLO
I would swim in your smile even if it were the Styx.

MUSES/
And we watched as Eros climbed through a pore
Betwixt the ribs of the golden.

MARSYAS
Mad bloated effort,
Hypodermic syringes in trills and hammer-offs.
Frugal he lunged, reaching crescendo.

APOLLO
Stumbling into a drunken curtsy and enamoured grin.

MARSYAS
But I was tricked
For the muses' final challenge was to play and sing as one
To make harmony of chord and baritone and force my failure
To grow a second mouth.

MUSES
From gallus to gaunt, groping to haunted
As he realised, that even mighty Apollo,
Infinite but powerless to destiny
As dawn is to dusk.

ARTEMIS
Oh, frivolous twin,
Who would rather finger fuck this fool,
Would instead be forced to flay

A swarming screech as the scalpel sank
Peeling skin from bone like tide from sand.

MUSES
And we Muses dropped tears we played
As the sweat of feigning decision
As we saw Apollo draw real blood, not ichor,
Making the final incision.

APOLLO
And horror,
I, made plague filled lover,
Took up the saggy bag of lacking skeleton
And swept the death-sheet around my shoulder.

MUSES
Like he wished it were the shirt of Nessus.

MARSAYAS
Dressed only in silenced cicadas,
Awaiting Chiron on the riverbank,
no skin to bubble against the cold of hell.

ARTEMIS
And brought to this glow of gold a crimson flood,
Pores drinking every drop they could
Of this mortal better's blood.

Queen Midas Libretto

By Spencer Mason (2023)

Act: I. Scene: 1 – 'Overture'

(Repeated 'ah's)

Eye shadowed donned, glitter like shrapnel
Tearing through skin and cellular,
A scavenger of blood.
Ephemeral display to erotic dismay.
A gold touch bled black,
glittering, making the moon a disco ball.
The twilight of Queen Midas Day.

A: I. S: 2 – 'Gold in the Wind'
Just a touch of gold in the wind
To eat up the skies,
That's all I wanted,
But now they've all died.
My sombre friends,
I inhale your pain.
Bodies reduced to mere glitter in the vein.

Paying pica with a glass of tar,
You offer nevermore
Sufferance through one sip of this black.
Decaying remnants of an empty dance floor,
Smiles and laughs that will caress me no more.
Tchaikovsky, Donna Summer, Kylie, and Gaga,
The voices that ousted the voices of our fathers.

Blacksmith of gold, armorer of deceit,

Bring your alchemy to morph these chains of my dreams.

A: I. S: 3 – 'Ha Dance'
(instrumental)

A: I. S. 4 – 'Lend me your chorus'
So Gods, Oh Gods,
Lend me your chorus.
I will dance for no hand and abstain all temptation.
If only you promise these streets do not lead
To my eternal damnation.

A: II. S: 1 – 'Rumours (soundscape)'
Is that her?
They're all dead because of her.

A: II. S: 2 – 'Is that her?'
At least allow me rebuttal? Your rumours have no grounding.
No martyrs to rise against the truth of my providence?
I am but a woman scorned,
Home ravaged by an invisible war.

A touch like gold goes far in this city
Where the lassies wear waistcoats,
And the boys dress pretty.
Feather boas caught in cuddles
And islands drowned in gulps and bubbles.

Will you not pity this plight
Instead of insisting that I be further torn?
You have no right to fear my touch.
You have no right to be so rough.

If you segregate me to this isolation,
Then you leave me to wilt and die as such.

A touch like gold goes far in this city
Where the lassies wear waistcoats,
And the boys dress pretty.
Feather boas caught in cuddles
And islands drowned in gulps and bubbles.

How do you forsake a touch unknown?
How do you loathe the answer to a question unasked?

(spoken)
Help me.
I need help instead of hate.
Someone: God or Man.
Help me.

A: II. S: 3 – 'The Queen of Gold'
Despite my tender kiss,
You still call me witch.
But all I hear is this:
A woman who understands power
You demand dismissed.
But no, this cloud grows gold
The glittering tar wraps around my wrist
I beg you blind, do not witness this
The glitter sticks and scars, like shrapnel in my skin
It claws through veins and reveals sin within
Do not abandon me so, you don't know what
It is to have a nation demand you live alone.
Surely it is charming, to see a sun rise fractured by smoke?

But now I can taste the glitter, it clogs within my throat

I will not bow to the crown of blaming
I will not curtsy to the cuts you distain me
My name is Midas, Queen of Gold
My name is triumph of the lies which you scold

A: III. S: 1 – 'Tar Soundscape'
(instrumental)

A: III. S. 2 – 'Tar Dance'

DRINK THE TAR, DRINK THE TAR, DRINK THE TAR.
THIS BLACKNESS IS PURE, THESE TAR DROPLETS WILL CURE.
DRINK THIS LIQUID TO MAKE THE SLATE CLEAN ONCE MORE.

A. III. S. 3 – 'A Queen's Delusions'
Delusions distortions and Dionysian diatribes.
I stand as the victim of the wine god's grin,
As he contorts a pleasure out of this cities sin.
Wraiths of treacle-like tar coursing, corroding me,
Making mania of my mind.
They claimed it cure, claimed it pure, a sure thing,
Now there's no land free of fear and no love near here.
If I could call upon any seer to assuage my inquiry:
Was it me? was this my destiny?
Nation of isolation, am I mere desolation?
With a kiss with desecration, are my hands
Mere immolation? Am I just imitation
of the lives I forsook from salvation?
Am I a garrison of plague?
Is there no hope to be saved?

GO BACK TO WHERE YOU CAME FROM YOU HEMAPHRO-DYKE.
BUTCH OR BITCH, WE DON'T WANT YOUR SHIT.
FUCKING PLAGUE RAT, FUCKING PYTHON KISSER,
GO BACK TO THE GRAVE TO AGAIN KILL YOUR SISTERS
GHOUL, WRAITH, FAGGOT DISGRACE,
YOUR TONGUE AND YOUR TOUCH ARE A HEX UPON THIS PLACE.
TALK QUEER WORDS ALL PRETTY, GET THE FUCK OUT OF OUR CITY.

A: III. S: 4 – 'All alone'
Alone. All alone.

A: IV. S: 1 – 'Yet I remember'
Yet I remember,
Lips held; hands kissed.
A cocktail walkway and tokenised bliss.
We shag queens, elbows in knots,
Held hostage to a lost night of one another.
Belly bouncing laughs of butch and rouge lippy.

Watch me fall into an ocean, turn water to gold lame.
I will drown myself in gold, instead of the blaze you've made me.
Fuck your false prophecies and fuck your three charcoal, liquid meals
Your conspiratorial remedies have only driven this insanity.
Fine then.
Drown me.
And if you will not
I will drown me.
And if you try to stop it
I will make a tsunami of myself
And take all loss with me.
Making wingspan of our friends,

Held hostage to a lost night of one another.
A daughter lost to the blood she was bound,
Her heartbeat coursing veins as a hound.

A: IV. S: 2 – 'Drown me'
DROWN ME

A: IV. S: 3 – 'Epilogue (soundscape)'
(instrumental)

DISCOPIA

a dance piece for piano trio and live electronics

Devon Bonelli

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Instrumentation

Violin
Cello
Piano

Live Electronics

Duration

1 hour with an Interval

Dedication

For the members of the Larisa Trio:
Rosie Spinks, Elliette Harriss, Jasmin Allpress

For the members of Excessive Human Collective:
Imogen Reeve, Eva Leemans, Rachel Sullivan,
Lisa Chearles, and Annie Kelleher

Lots of Love,
Devon

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Performance Notes

Discopia is a multi-media piece for piano trio, live electronics, projection, and contemporary dancers reflecting on xenofeminism (Hester 2018, Storm and Flores 2019), queer futurity (Muñoz 2009, Branson and Hudson 2023), and queer temporality/spatiality (Halberstam 2005). The structure of Discopia draws on Gille Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of the rhizome and provides a method of applying this concept musically. Its development began in 2020, culminating with a pilot tour in September 2023 with performances in Leeds and Exeter. It is written for the Larisa Trio (pianist Jasmin Allpress, violinist Elliette Harris, and cellist Rosie Spinks) and the dance company Excessive Human Collective (choreographed by Imogen Reeve with dancing performed by Eva Leemans, Rachel Sullivan, Lisa Chearles, and Annie Kelleher). This project was funded by a Performing Rights Society Grant and an Arts Council England Grant.

The story of *Discopia* envisions a post-apocalyptic wasteland over-saturated in electric pink —a stark contrast to typical masculine stylizations such as in films like Blade Runner (1982) and Dune (2021). Within this landscape, four dancers find themselves lost among the remnants of human society. Artifacts of modernity (torn up garbage bags, motorized fans, projectors, dance music, abstracted TikTok dances) intermingle with those of bygone eras . This combination of polystylistic references, quotations, and allusions to old and new situates contrasting aesthetic practices thereby acting as a Deleuzian rhizome, an assemblage where listeners interrogate how and why these artifacts are connected. Rather than a narrative structure, *Discopia* explores this relationship between musical and physical material (electronic and acoustic instruments, humankind and the natural world, the virtual and the real) through a collage of tableaus depicting natural disasters, recollections of an untouched Earth, and abstracted genres of dance music. Drawing on Deleuze, these themes are figured as false dichotomies, and their relationships explored as lines of flight on a plane of immanence, in turn assessing the causal relationship between these supposed contraries.

Imogen's repetitive and deconstructed movement language—where group sections later transform into distorted solos—directly inform and mirror the compositional structure of Discopia. Dance grows alongside the music's evolution, where themes are introduced later broken down and recontextualized. The transformations from group to solo dance mimic the fluid, non-normative spaces where queer identities resist containment. The choreography's progression from cohesive group movements to fragmented, distorted solos reflect the way estranged bodies navigate both shared and isolated spaces, oscillating between moments of connection and alienation. Furter details on the movement can be accessed at www.excessivehumancollective.com/discopia.

Consisting of 16 movements in total, an 'authentic performance of *Discopia*' **does not** necessarily involve every movement in the specified order appearing in the score. Through several performances with Excessive Human Collective, movements were swapped or cut, dancers were added or subtracted. As such, this score captures **one possible version** of *Discopia*, performed at Centre for Live Arts Yorkshire (CLAY) Leeds on 16 Sept 2023. Subsequent performaces of this work may be adapted to suit each's needs. Please contact the composer to discuss arrangements, but generally, performers are free to adapt this score as necessary.

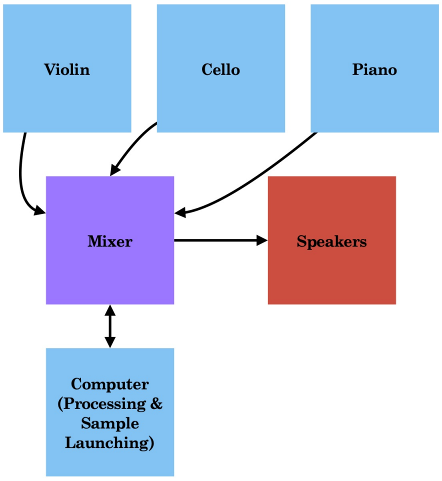
Electronics

Ableton Project File

A download of *Discopia's* Ableton Project File is available at the composer's website www.devonbonelli.com/downloads. This includes all samples, requestite processing/effects, and audio examples of sonic colour/palette. In lieu of this, a DAW-less setup is possible using a sampler and effects processing unit, such as an Elektron Octotrak. In such a case, the samples may be downloaded from the composer's website and imported into the performers' gear of choice. This score is intentionally vague to allow for each individual performance to adapt to their own location/acoustics/audeince/engineer. If any questions arise, please reach out to the composer from their website, and they will respond to any assistance ncessary.

Routing for Electronics

The trio (vln., vcl., pno.) are each amplified by microphones whose signal is fed into a mixer (electric instruments with built-in pickups may substitute). The mixer is connected to a computer (any sampler/effects processing unit may substitute) where the trio's acoustic sound is modulated by a series of electronic effects. The trio can be sent for processing as one single bus send or as three individual tracks. The computer additionally launches samples, so a mixer that supports USB audio is prefered, though this is up to each individual performance's technical requirements. This mix is then sent to stereo speakers through a venue's DI box. The trio can be monitored with individual headphones or a single monitor facing the ensemble.



Samples and Effects Processing

The samples (mentioned in the score as 'Crunching' Sample, 'Waves' Sample, 'Cycles' Track) are all accessible within the Ableton Live Set. These samples come as either pre-rendered tracks that may be played in their entirety OR as loops with live processing modulating the sonic characteristics. These two versions are reflected in the Ableton Scenes 1-40 (rendered tracks) and Scenes 50-90 (looping tracks with macros). The only samples that are tempo-synced are the drum loops in Mvmts. VI., XI., and XIV. ('Coda', 'Quake', and 'Dance').

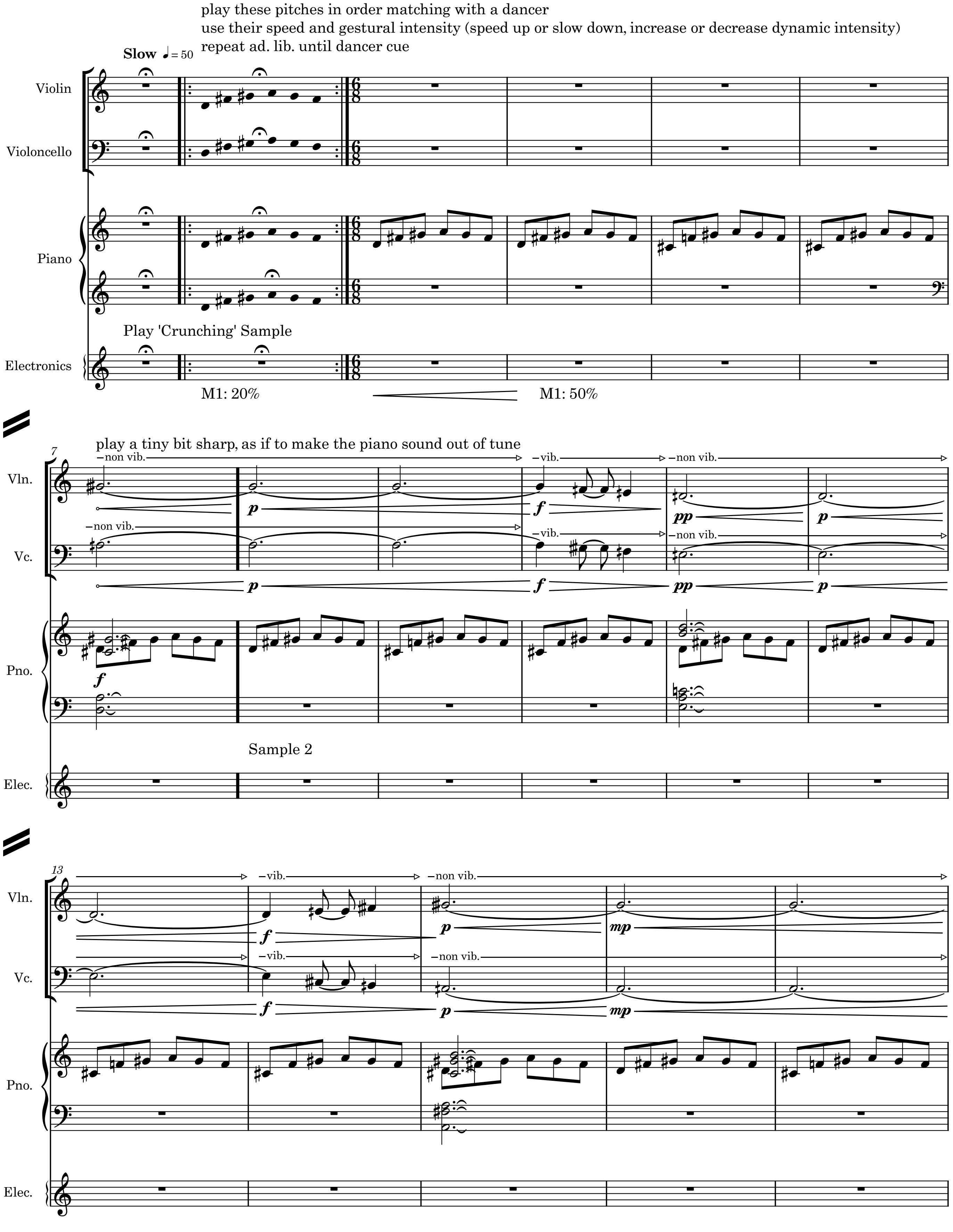
Within this score, the processing for the trio is notated using three macro knobs, labeled M1, M2, and M3. All effects are Ableton Stock Effects. Approximate intensity is notated using percentages and crescendo/decrescendo markings. Due to the piece's adabtible nature, these macro effects may be changed/swapped with whatever suits the performance. Refer to the Ableton Project File for specifics on the specificites of routing. A general guideline for the sonic character of each macro is as follows:

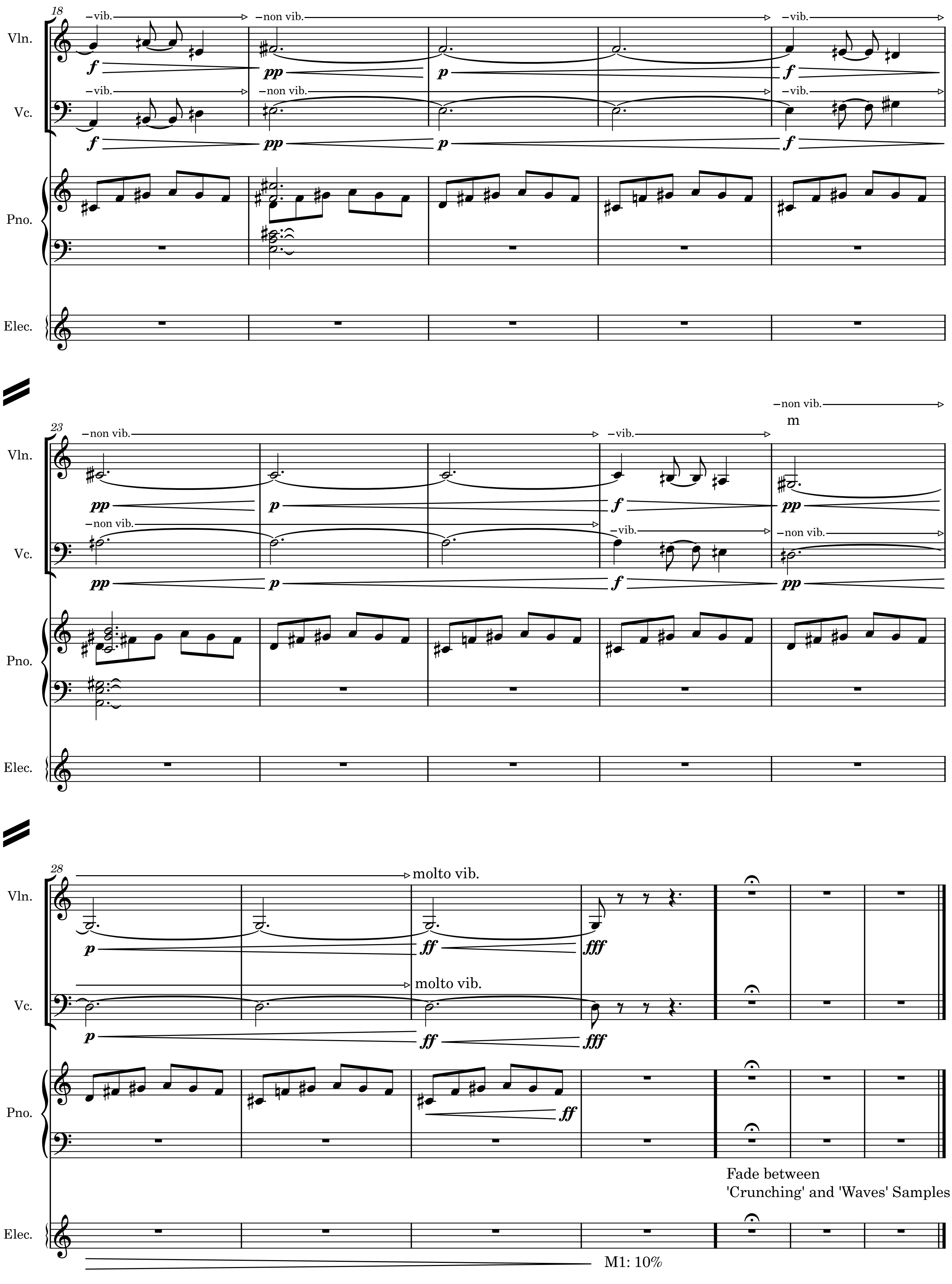
M1 - Granular Effect Unit (Diffuse) -> Large Hall Reverb -> Long Spatial Delay
M2 - Guitar Amplifier Distortion -> Short, Snappy Compressor -> Short Room Reverb
M3 - Small Room Reverb

Discopia

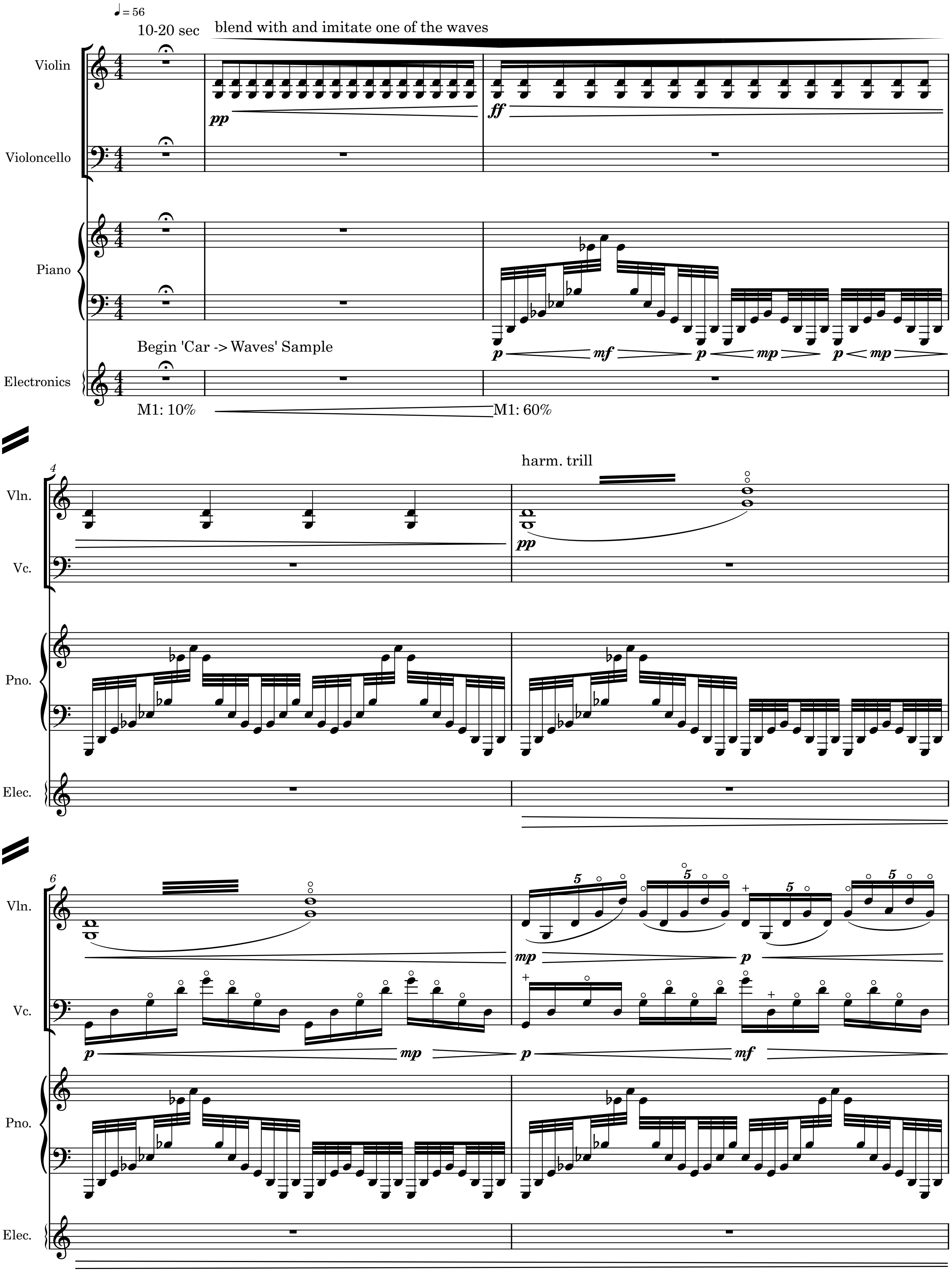
Devon Bonelli

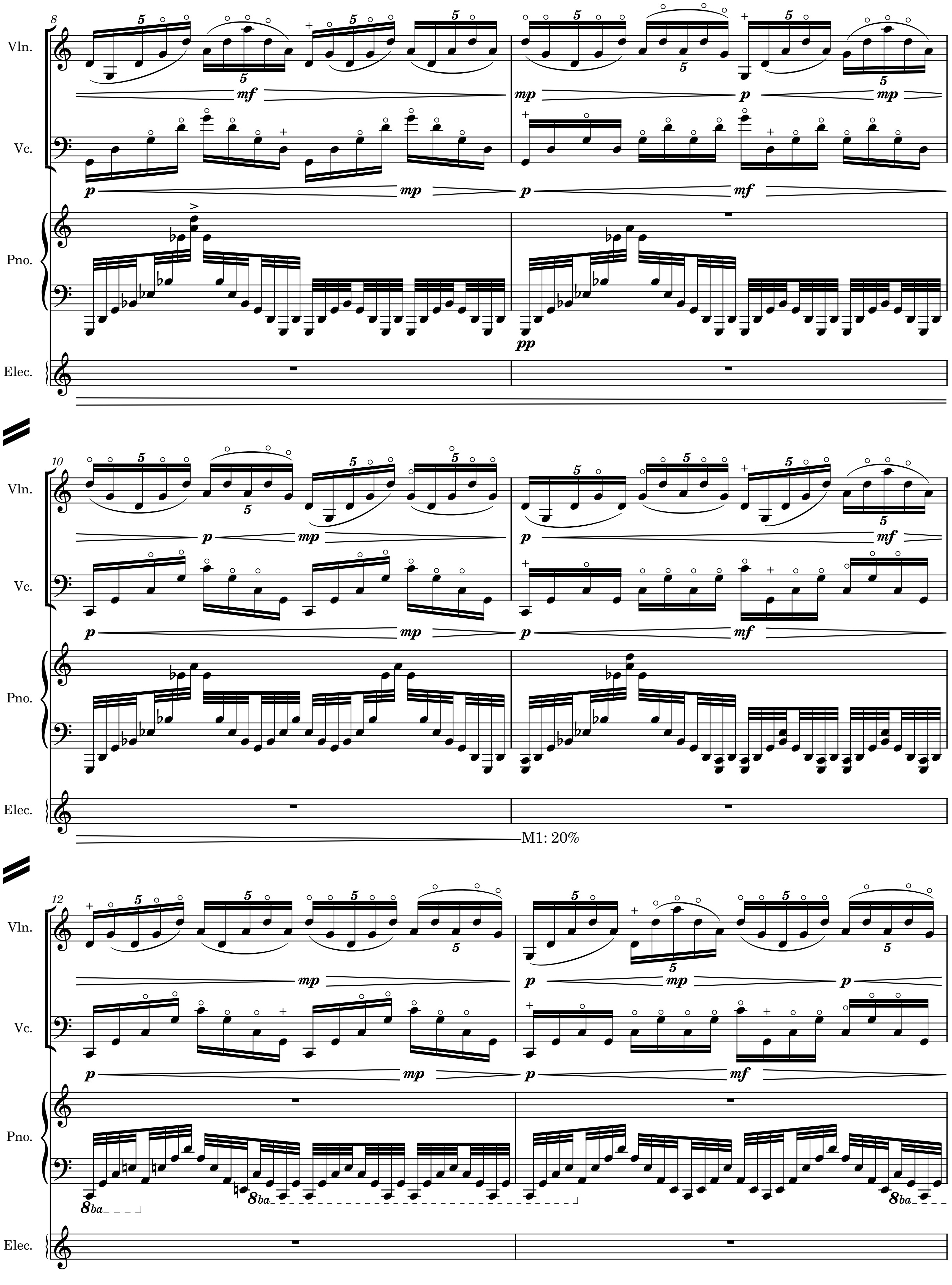
I. Introduction

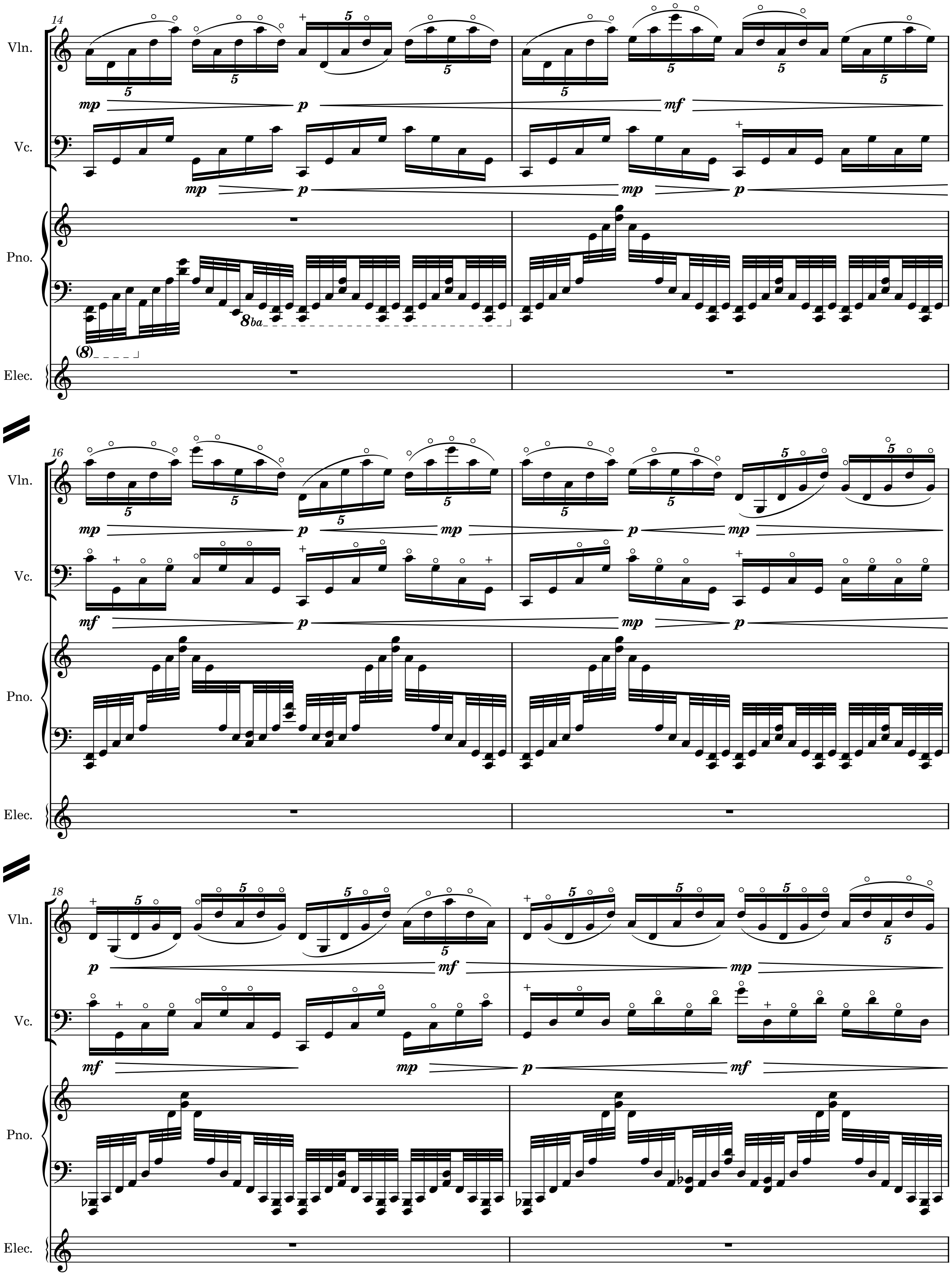

play these pitches in order matching with a dancer
use their speed and gestural intensity (speed up or slow down, increase or decrease dynamic intensity)
repeat ad. lib. until dancer cue
Slow ♩ = 50
Violin
Violoncello
Piano
Play 'Crunching' Sample
Electronics
M1: 20%
M1: 50%
7
play a tiny bit sharp, as if to make the piano sound out of tune
non vib.
vib.
non vib.
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Sample 2
Elec.
13
vib.
non vib.
p
f
pp
mp

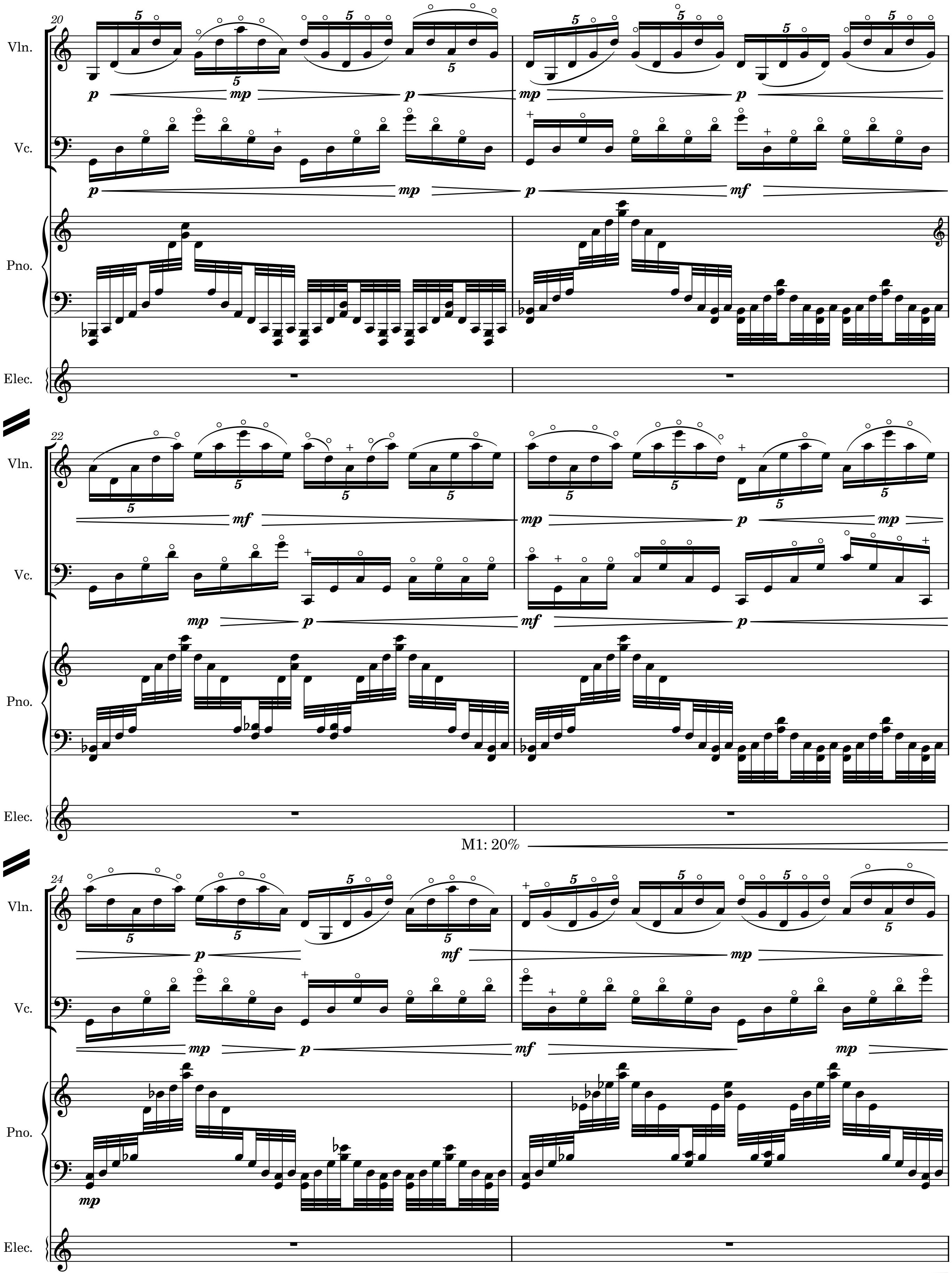

18
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
vib.
non vib.
f
pp
p
23
m
28
molto vib.
ff
fff
Fade between
'Crunching' and 'Waves' Samples
M1: 10%

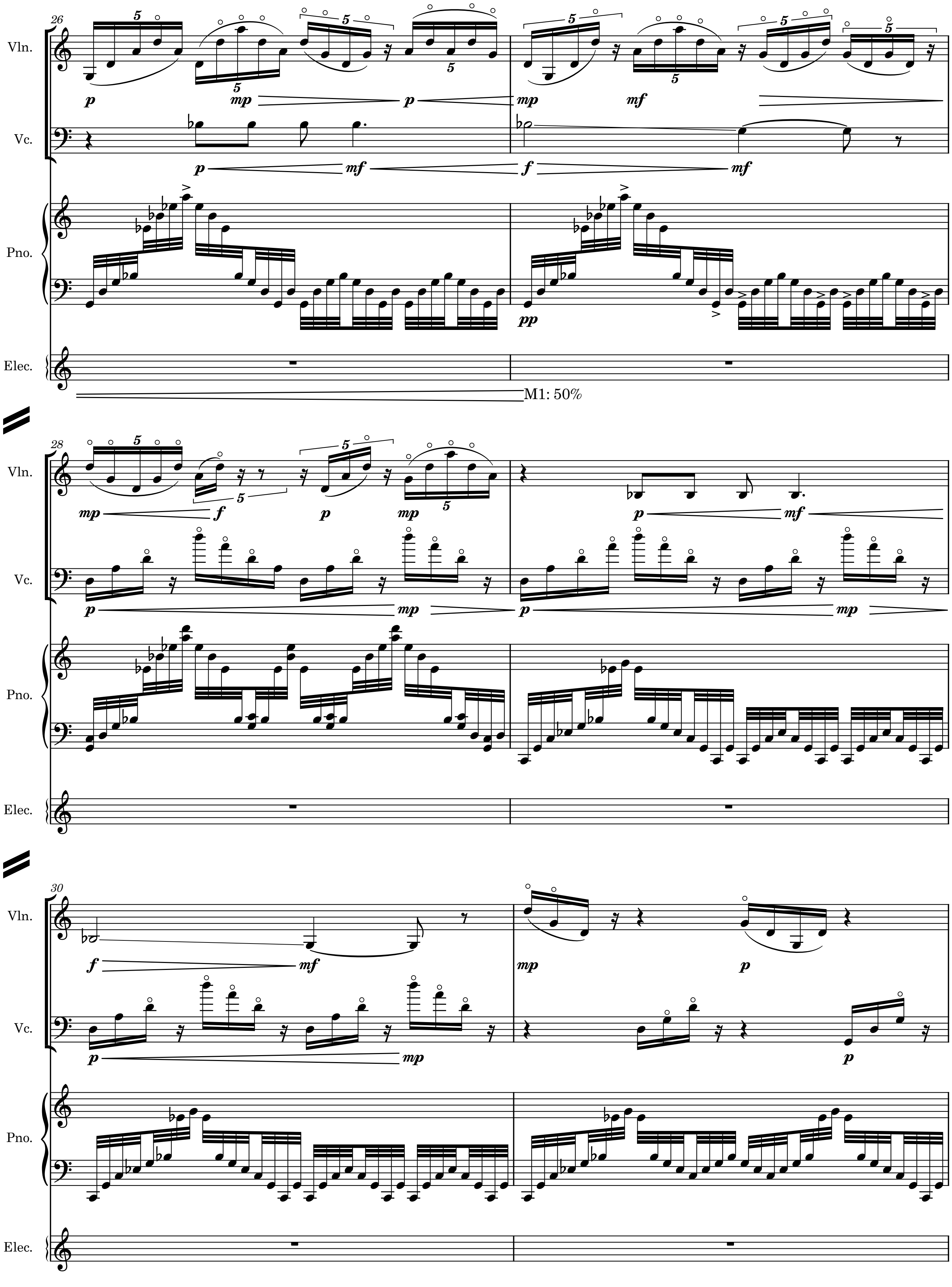
II. A City Underwater

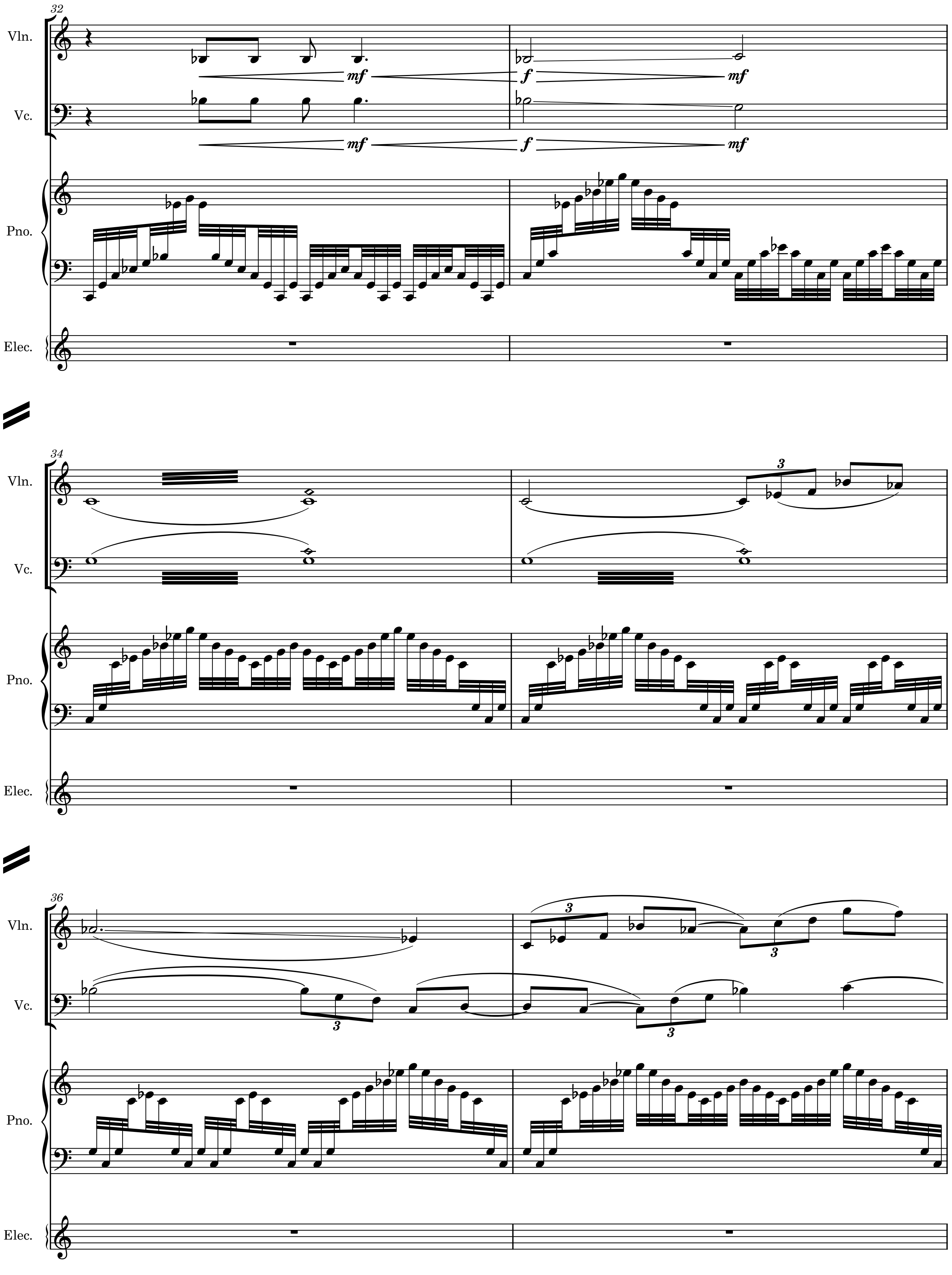

♩= 56
10-20 sec
blend with and imitate one of the waves
Violin
Violoncello
Piano
Electronics
pp
ff
p
mf
p
mp
p
mp
Begin 'Car -> Waves' Sample
M1: 10%
M1: 60%
4
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
harm. trill
pp
6
5
5
5
5
mp
p
p
mp
p
mf

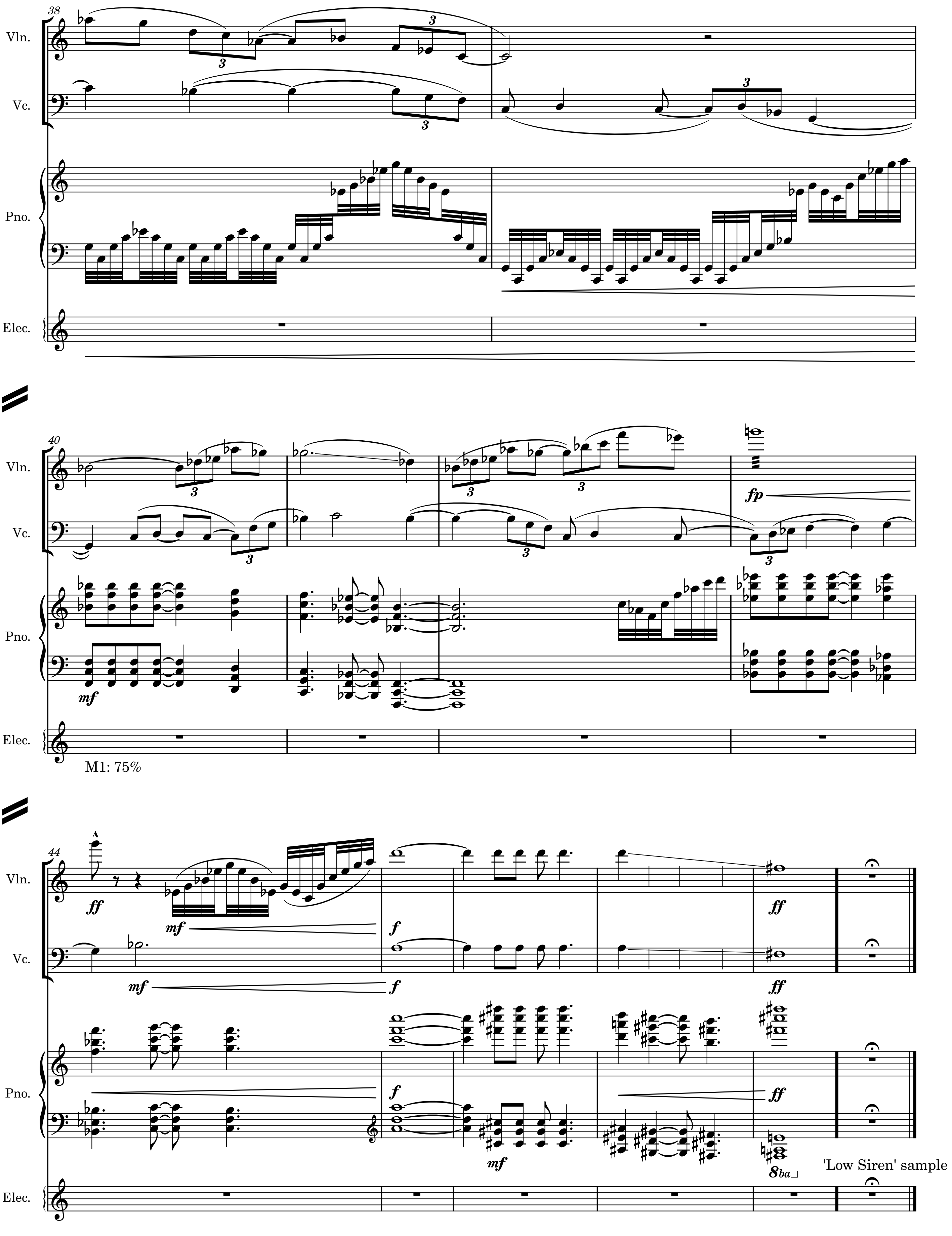

8
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
mf
mp
p
mp
mp
p
mf
pp
10
p
mp
p
mp
p
mf
M1: 20%
12
mp
p
mp
p
p
mp
p
mf
8ba
8ba
8ba


14
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
mp
p
mf
8ba
(8)
16
18
5

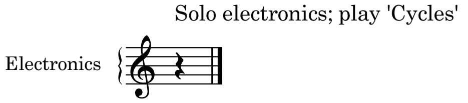

20
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
p
mp
p
mp
p
p
mp
p
mf
22
mf
mp
p
mp
mp
p
mf
p
M1: 20%
24
p
mf
mp
mp
p
mf
mp
mp
5


26
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
5
p
mp
mf
f
pp
M1: 50%
28
30

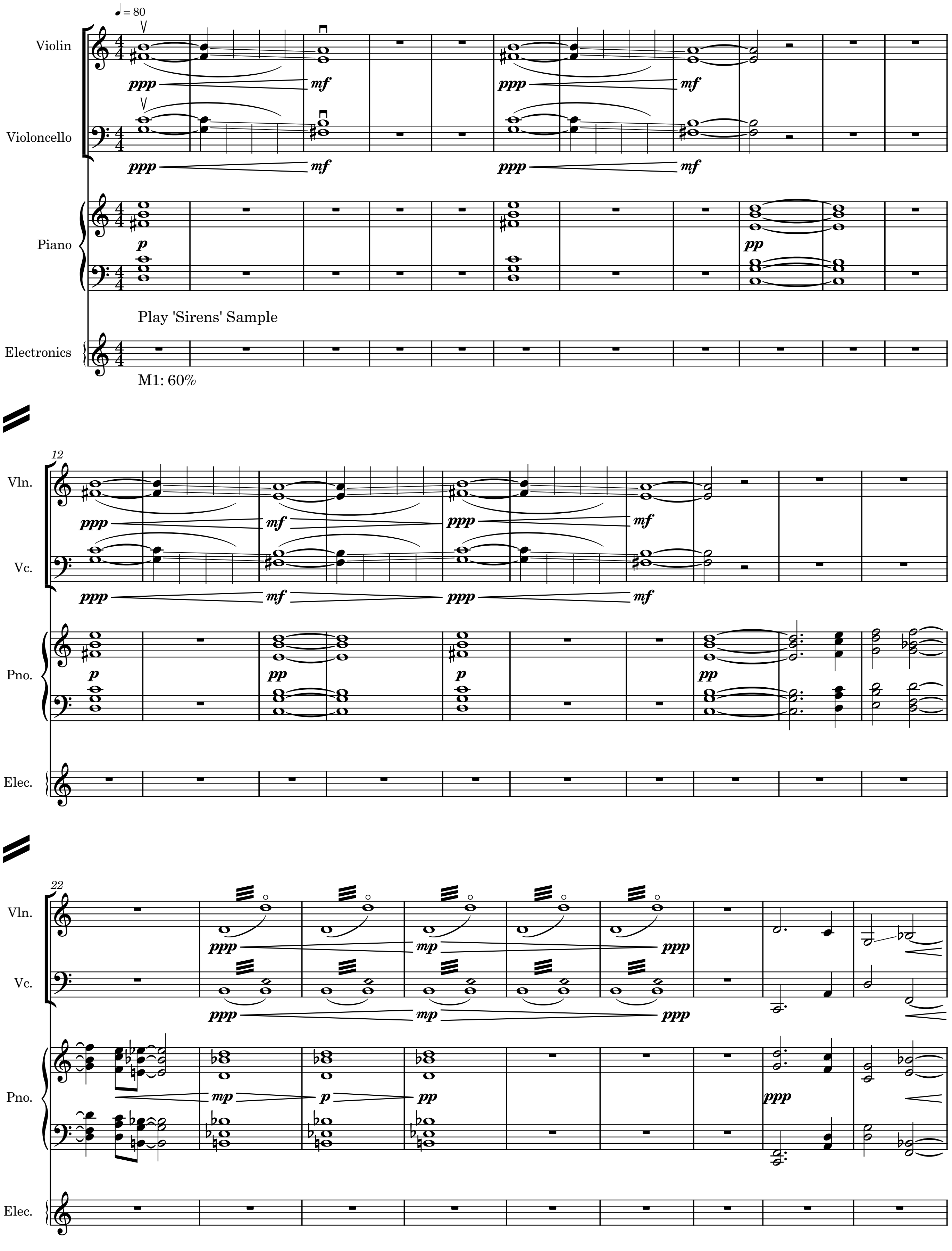

32
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
mf
f
mf
mf
f
mf
34
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
3
36
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
3
3
3
3

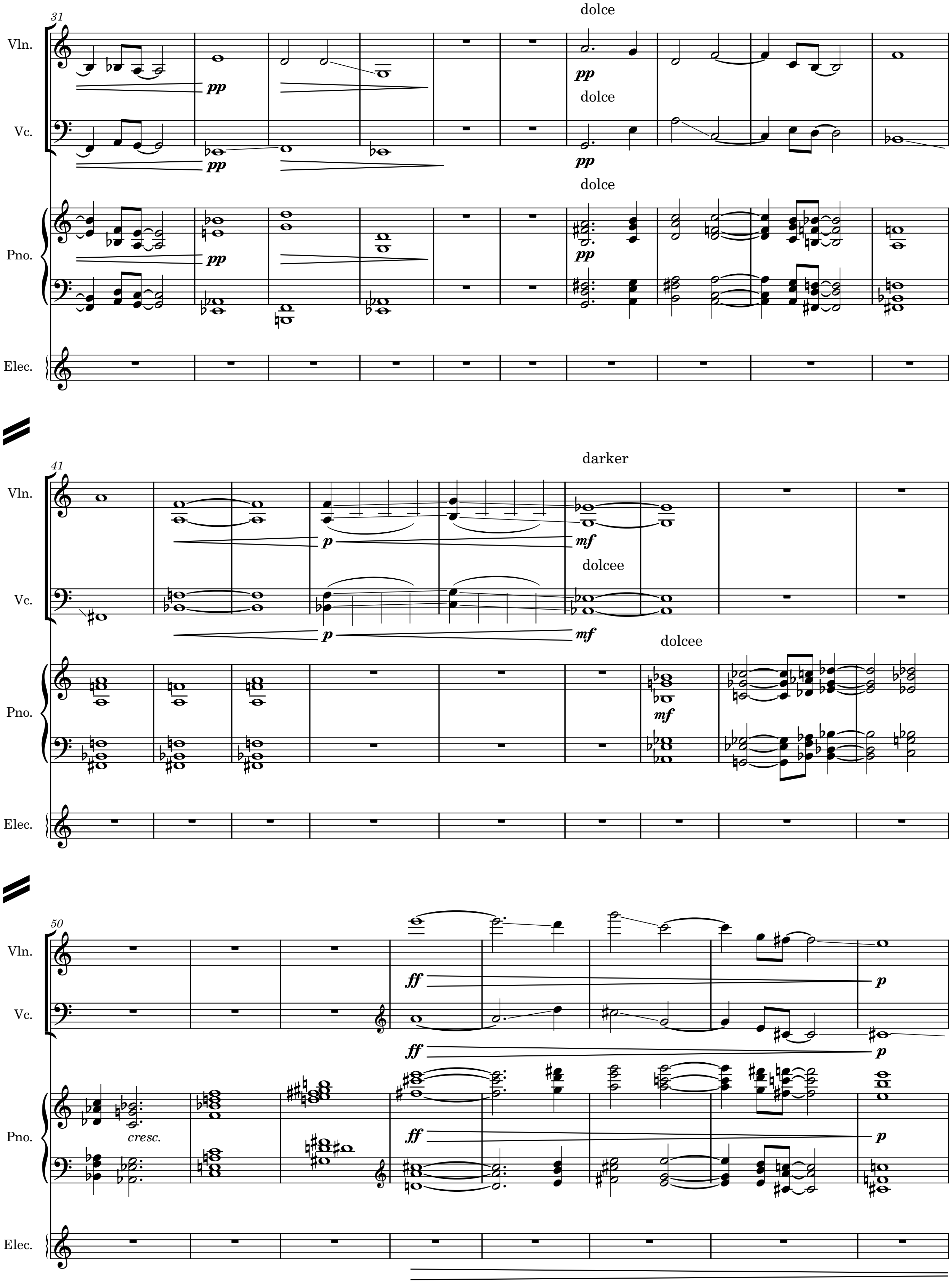

38
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
3
40
M1: 75%
fp
mf
44
ff
f
8ba
'Low Siren' sample

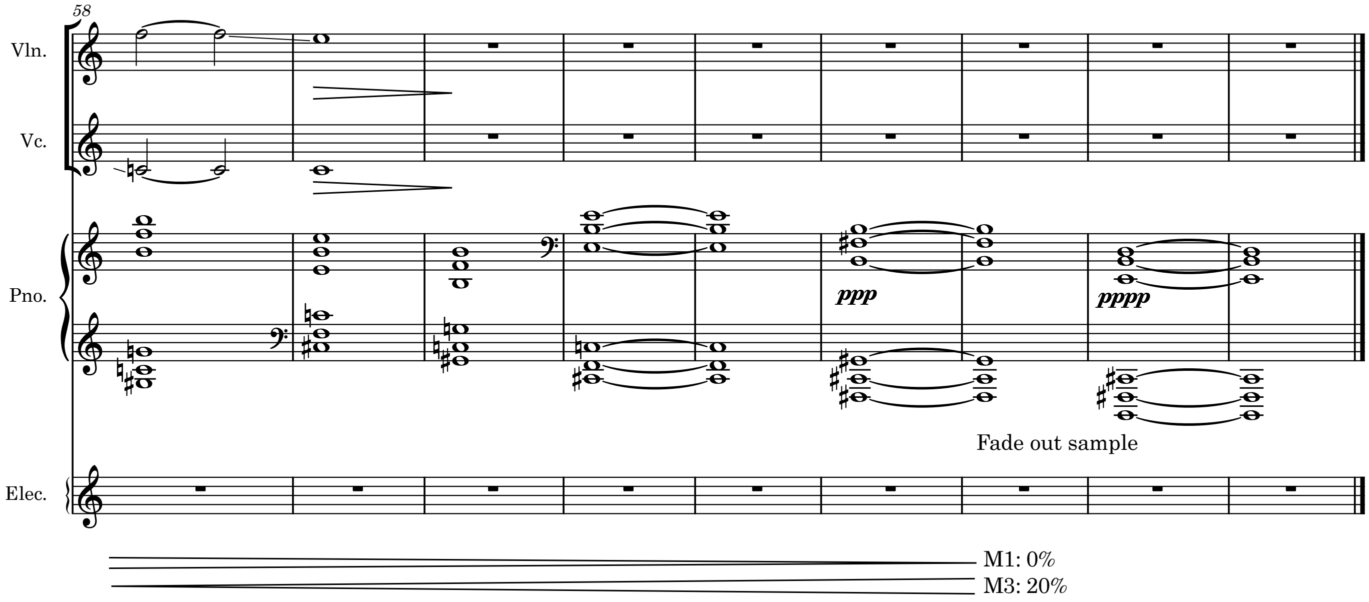
III. Cycles


Solo electronics; play 'Cycles'
Electronics

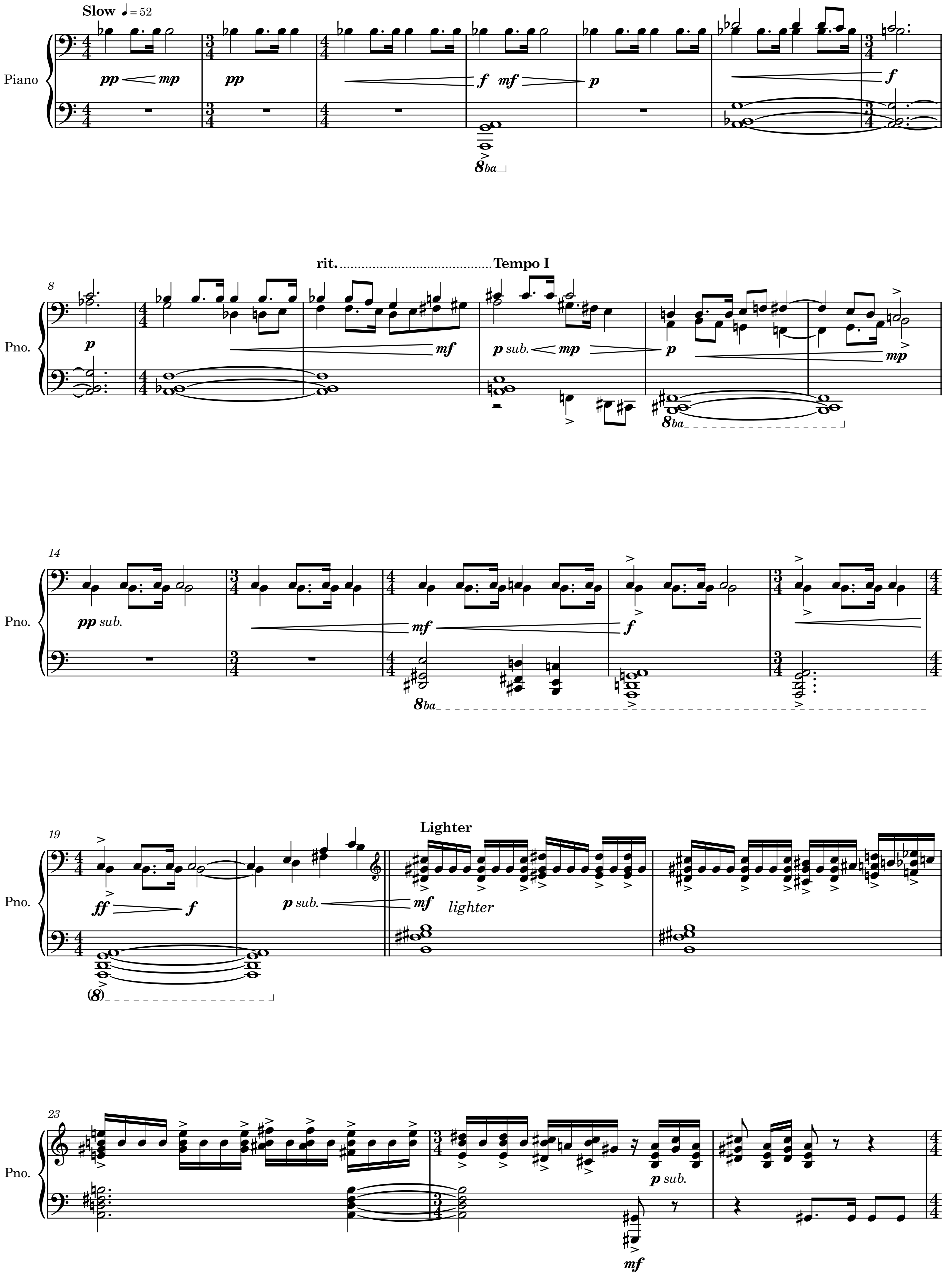
IV. Sirens // Drowning

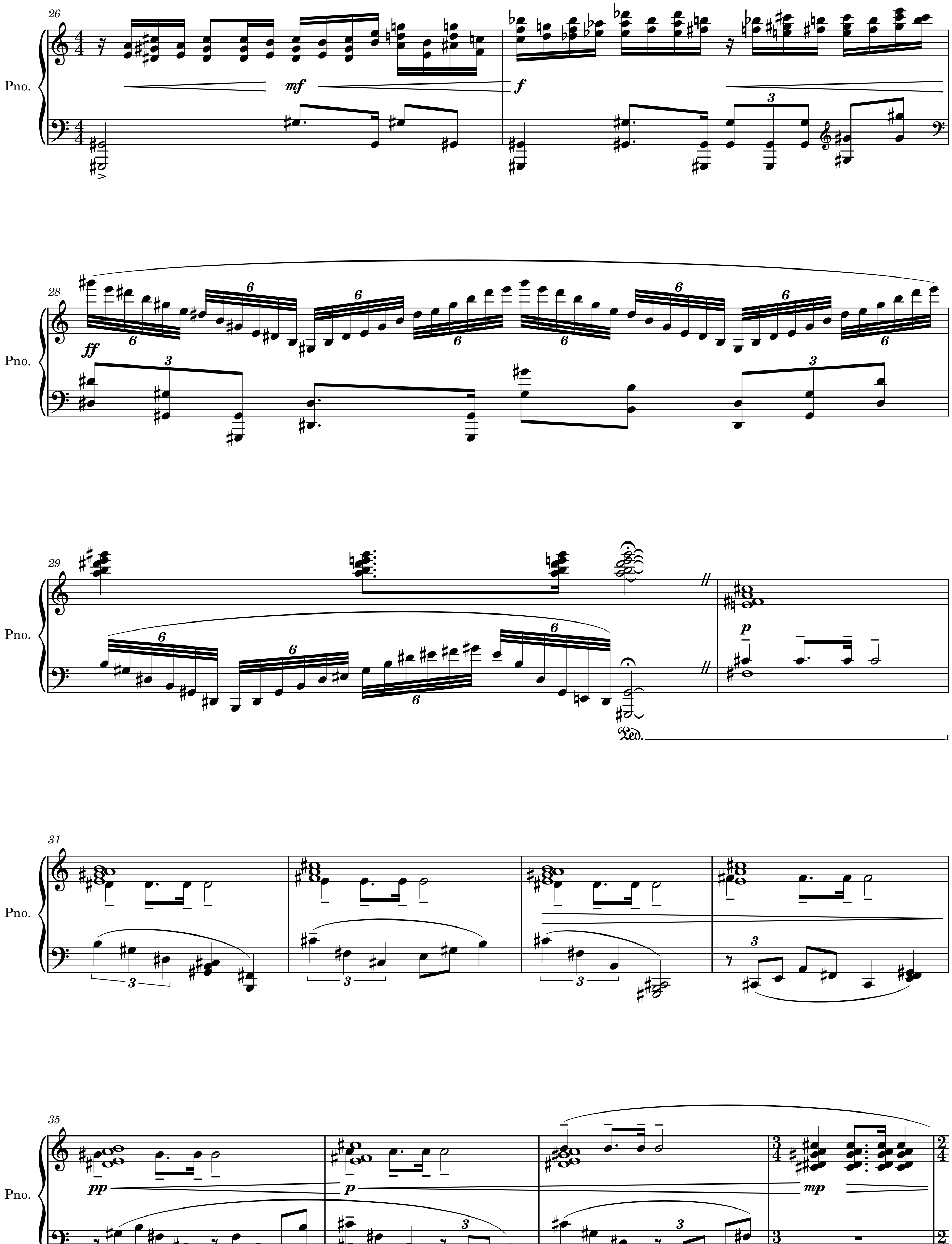

♩ = 80
Violin
Violoncello
Piano
Electronics
Play 'Sirens' Sample
M1: 60%
ppp
mf
p
pp
12
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
22
mp
ppp

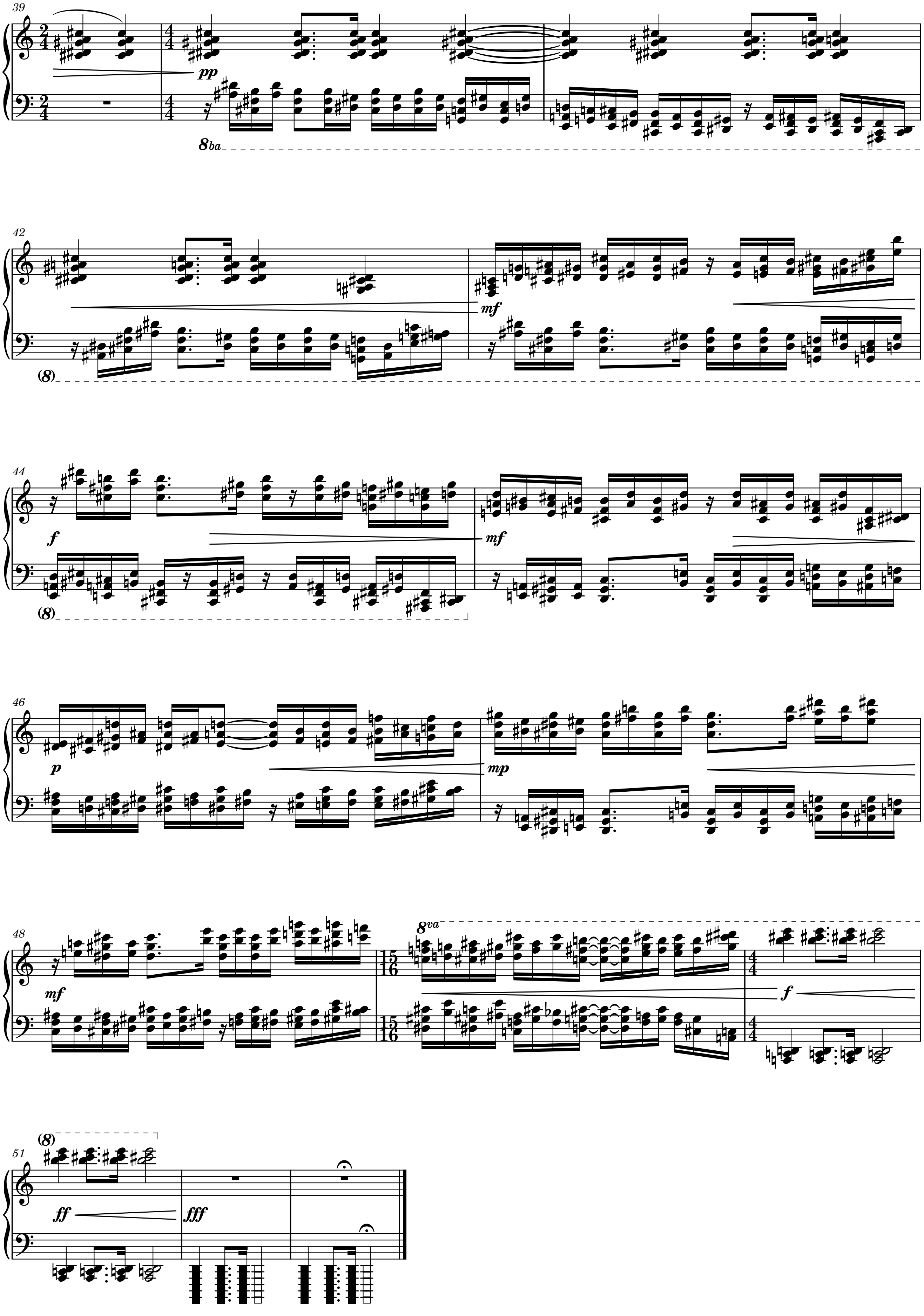

31
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
dolce
pp
dolce
pp
dolce
pp
pp
pp
41
darker
p
mf
dolcee
p
mf
dolcee
mf
50
ff
p
ff
p
cresc.
ff
p


58
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
ppp
pppp
Fade out sample
Elec.
M1: 0%
M3: 20%

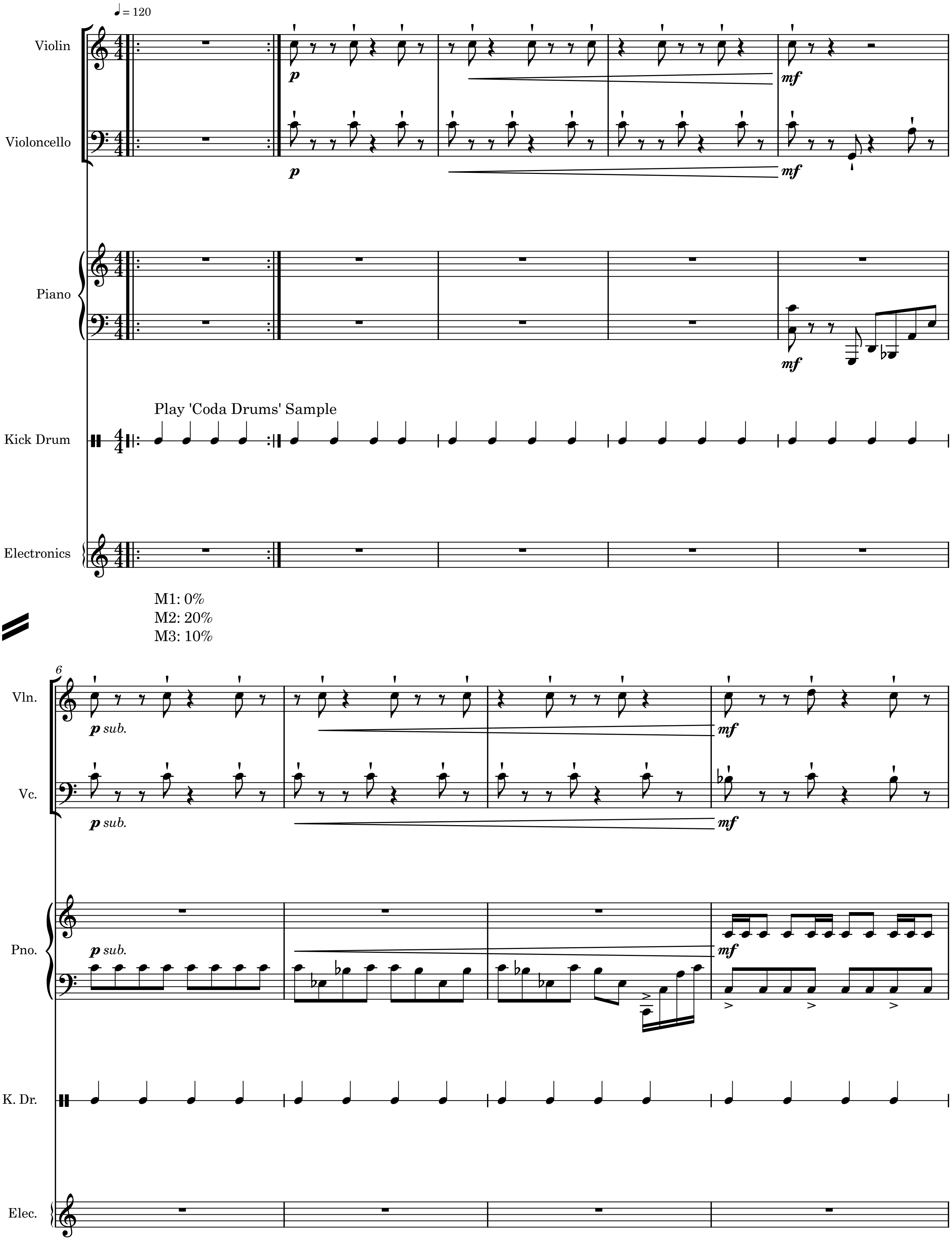
V. I saw your casket in my dreams last night

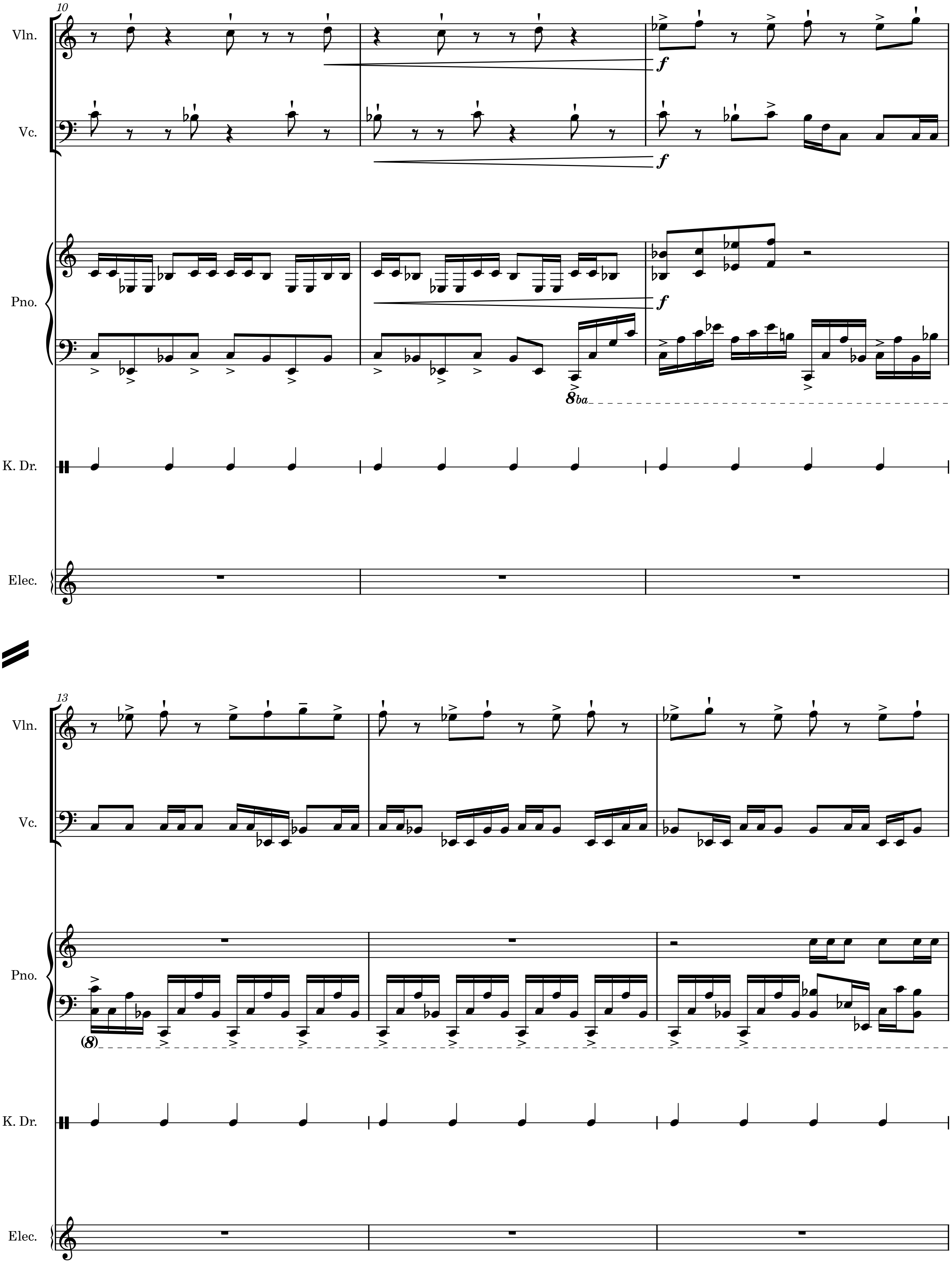

Slow ♩ = 52
Piano
pp mp
pp
f mf
p
f
8ba
8
Pno.
p
mf
rit.
Tempo I
p sub. mp
p
mp
8ba
14
pp sub.
mf
f
8ba
19
ff f
p sub.
mf
(8)
Lighter
lighter
23
p sub.
mf

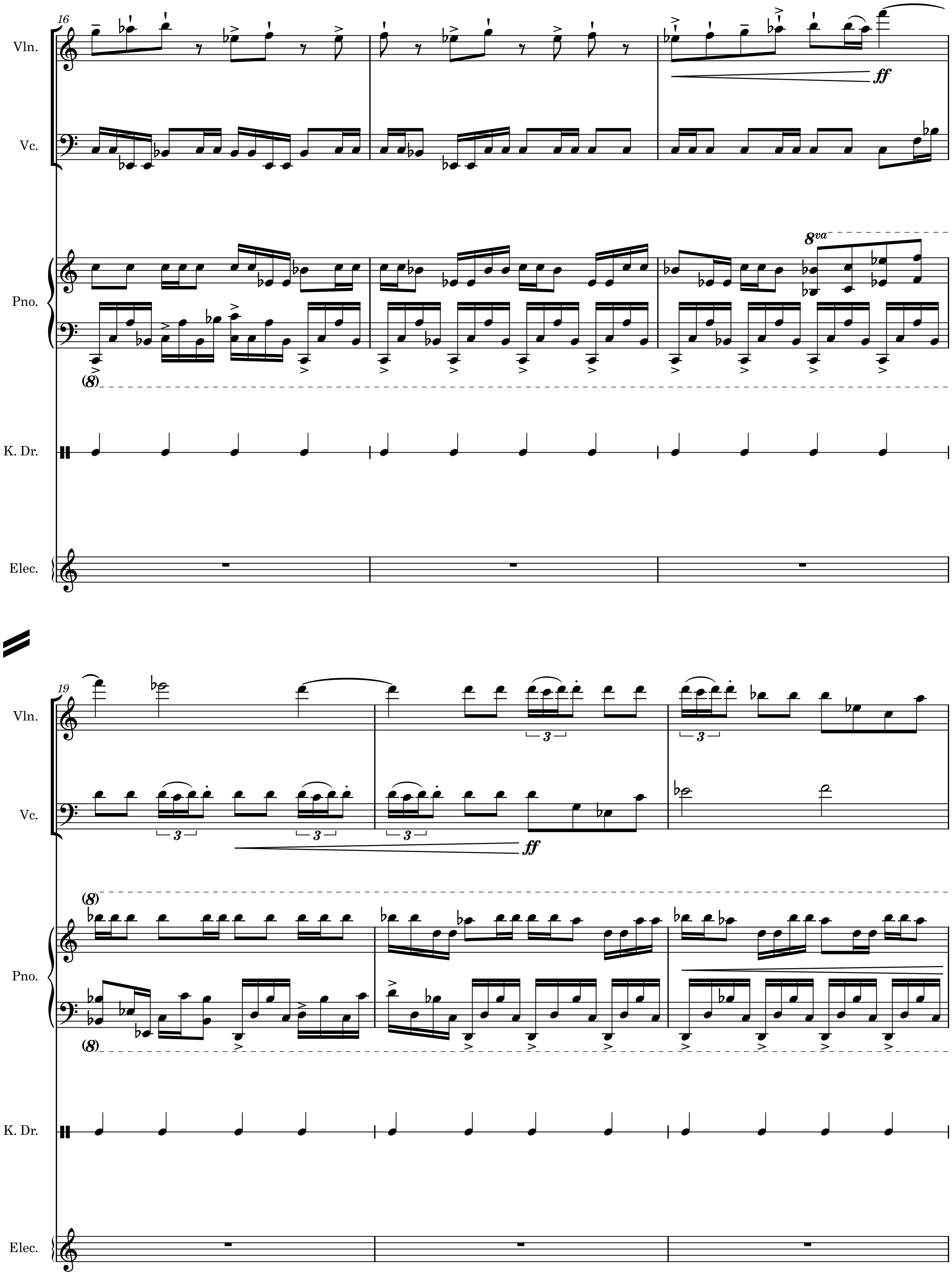

26
Pno.
mf
f
3
28
ff
6
3
29
6
Ped.
p
31
3
35
pp
p
mp
3

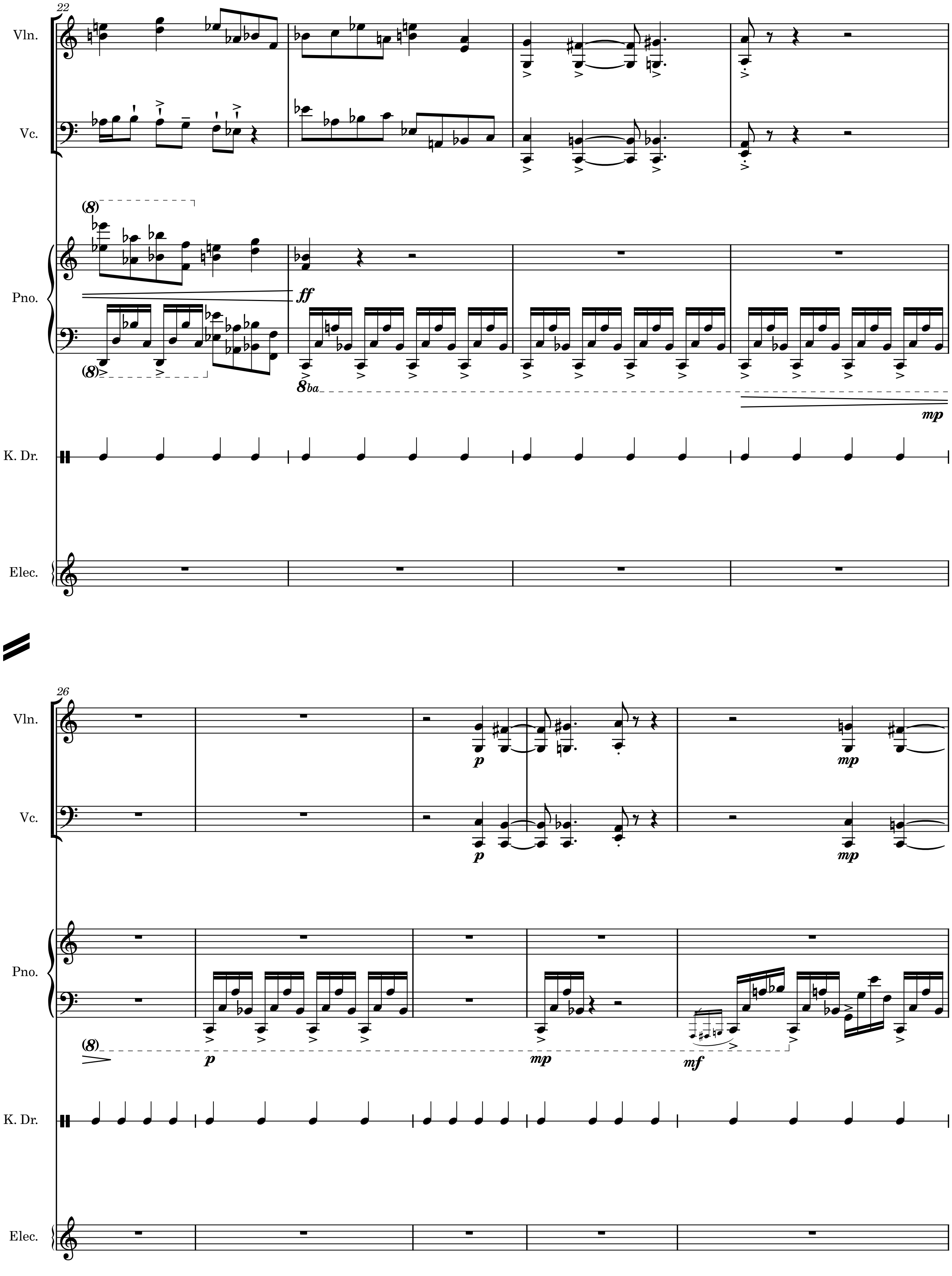

39
Pno.
pp
8ba
42
mf
(8)
44
f
mf
(8)
46
p
mp
48
mf
8va
f
51
(8)
ff
fff

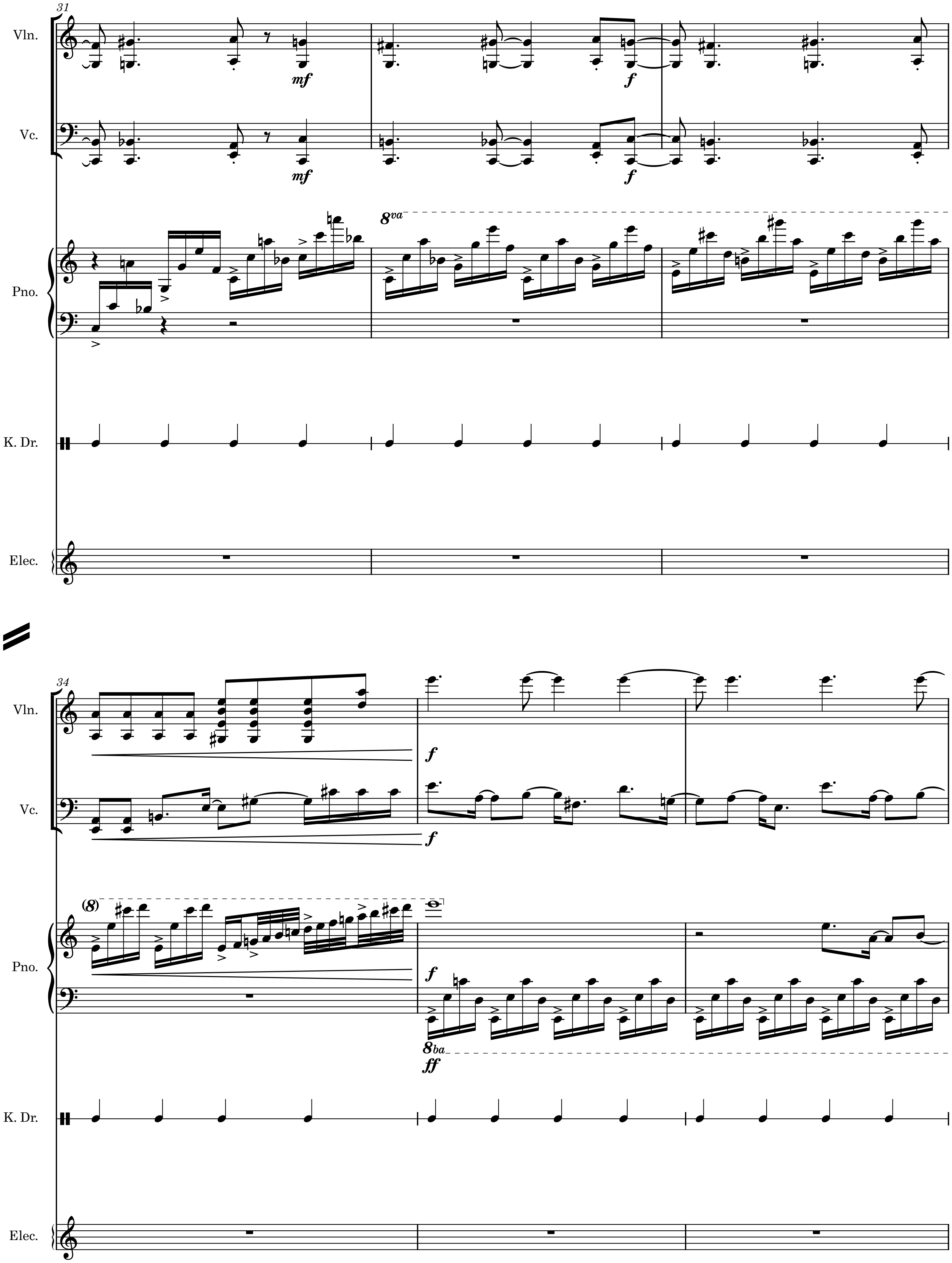
VI. Coda

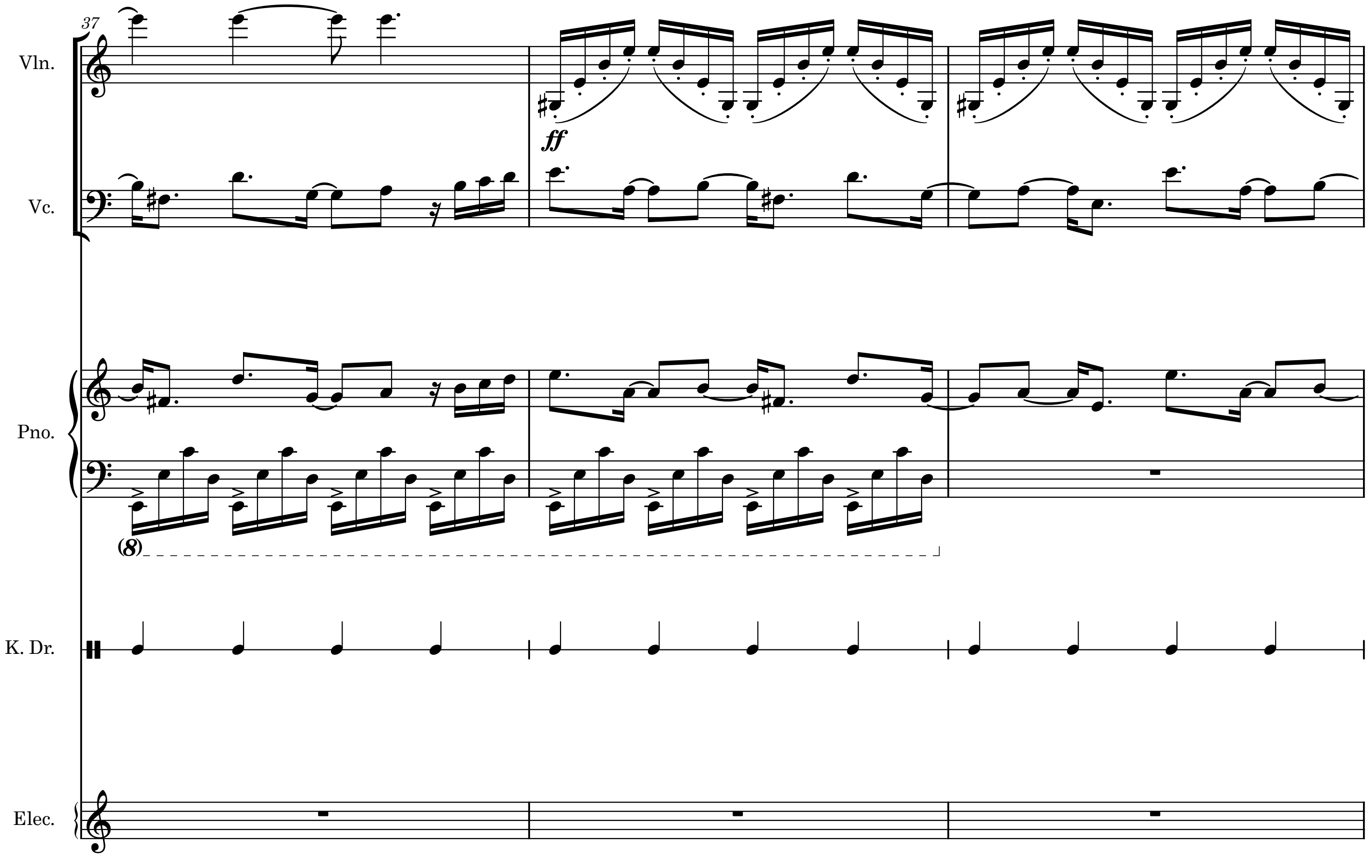

♩= 120
Violin
Violoncello
Piano
Kick Drum
Electronics
p
mf
Play 'Coda Drums' Sample
M1: 0%
M2: 20%
M3: 10%
6
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
p sub.
mf

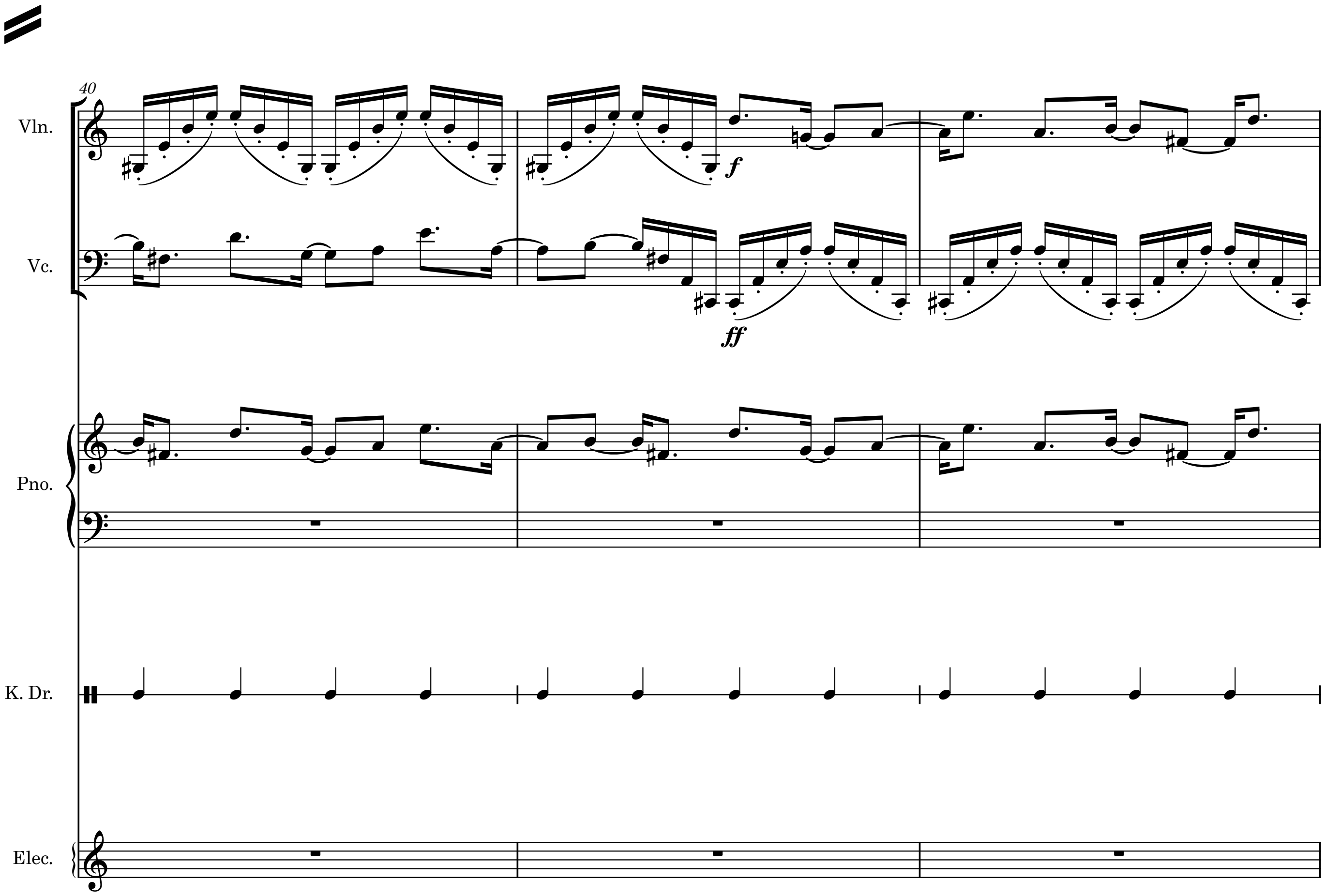

10
Vln.
Vc.
f
f
Pno.
f
8ba
K. Dr.
Elec.
13
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
(8)
K. Dr.
Elec.

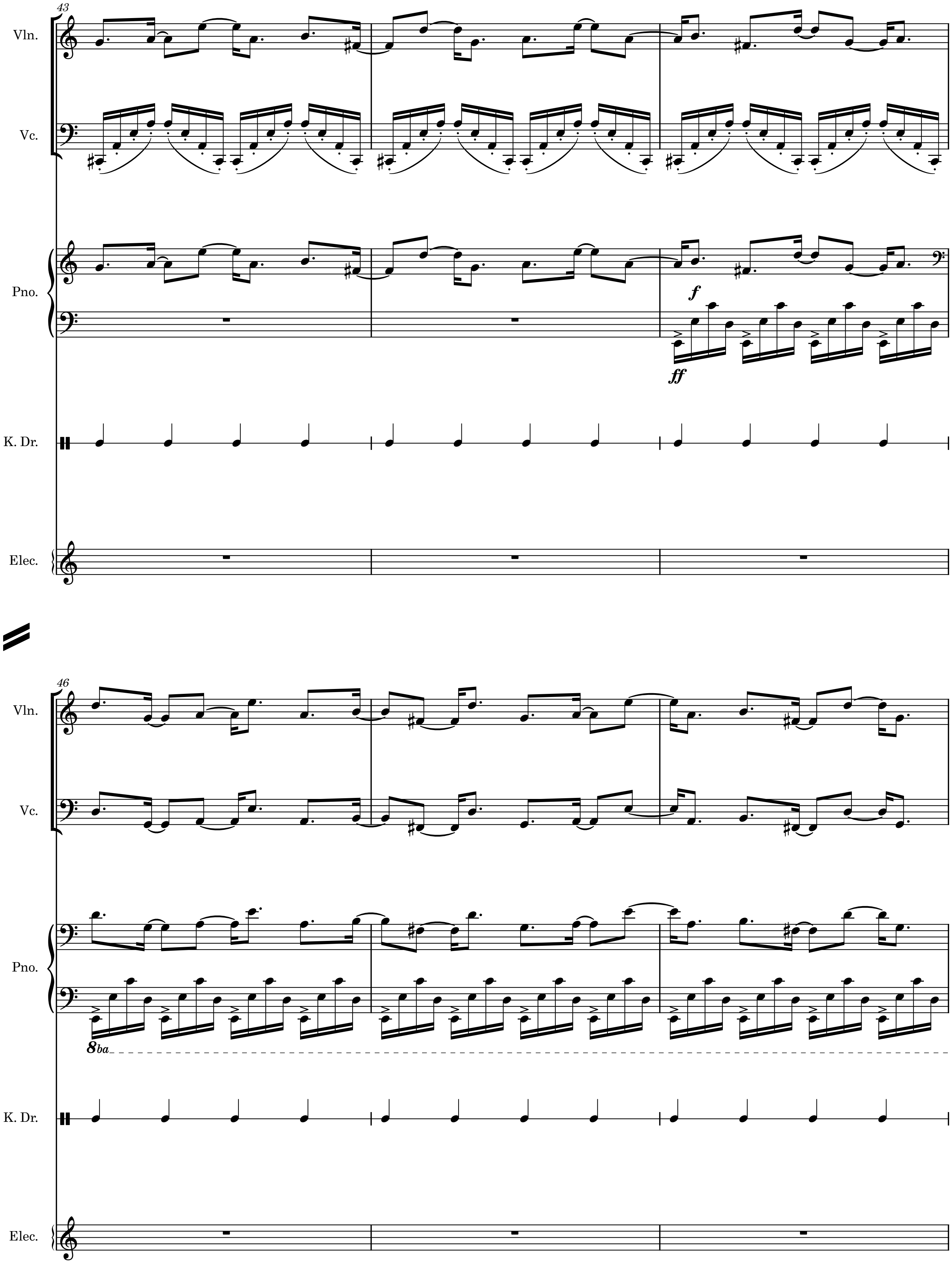

16
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
ff
8va
(8)
19
3
ff

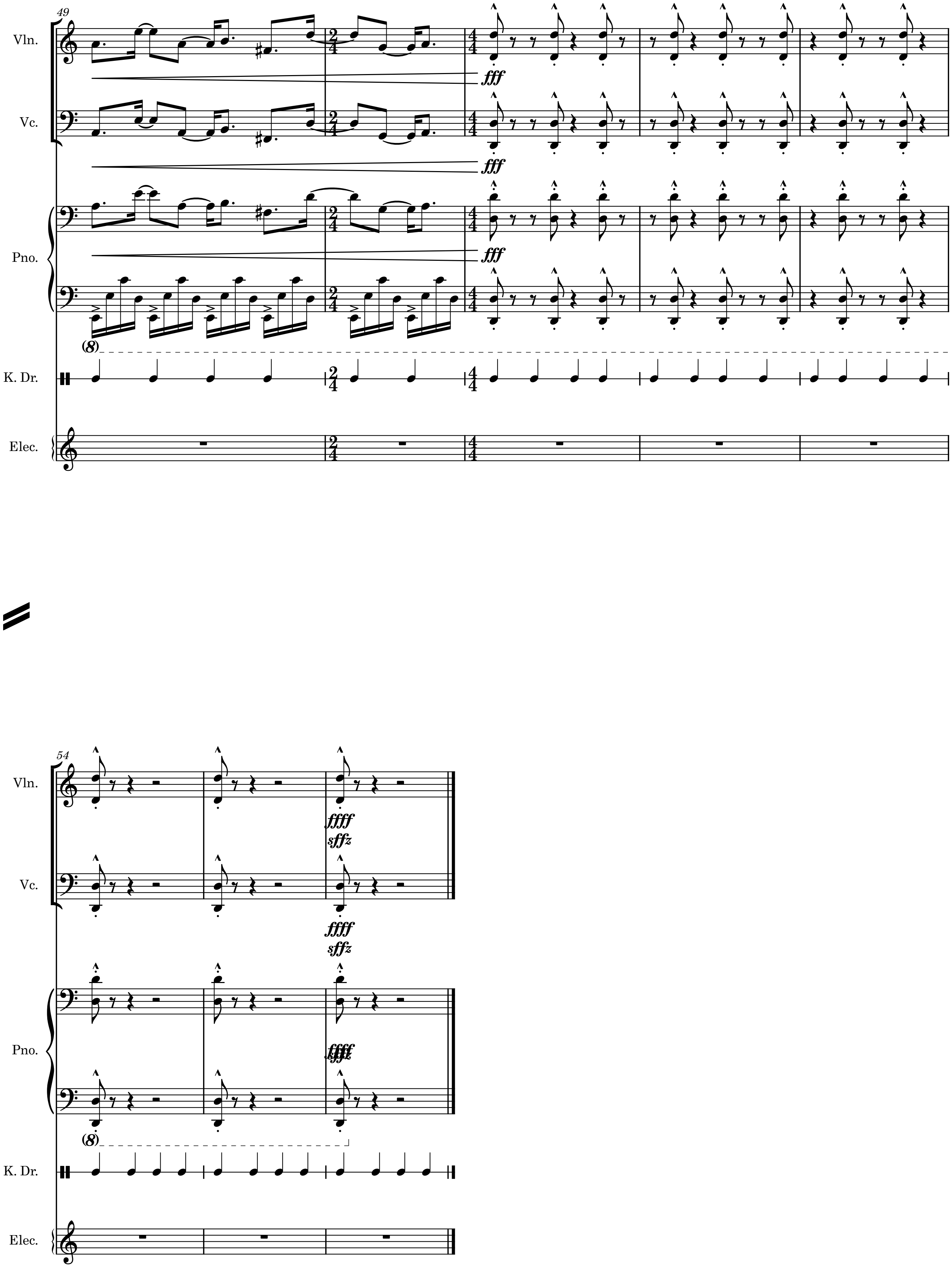

22
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
(8)
ff
8ba
mp
K. Dr.
Elec.
26
p
mp
mf


31
Vln.
Vc.
mf
mf
f
f
Pno.
8va
K. Dr.
Elec.
34
Vln.
Vc.
f
f
Pno.
(8)
f
8ba
ff
K. Dr.
Elec.

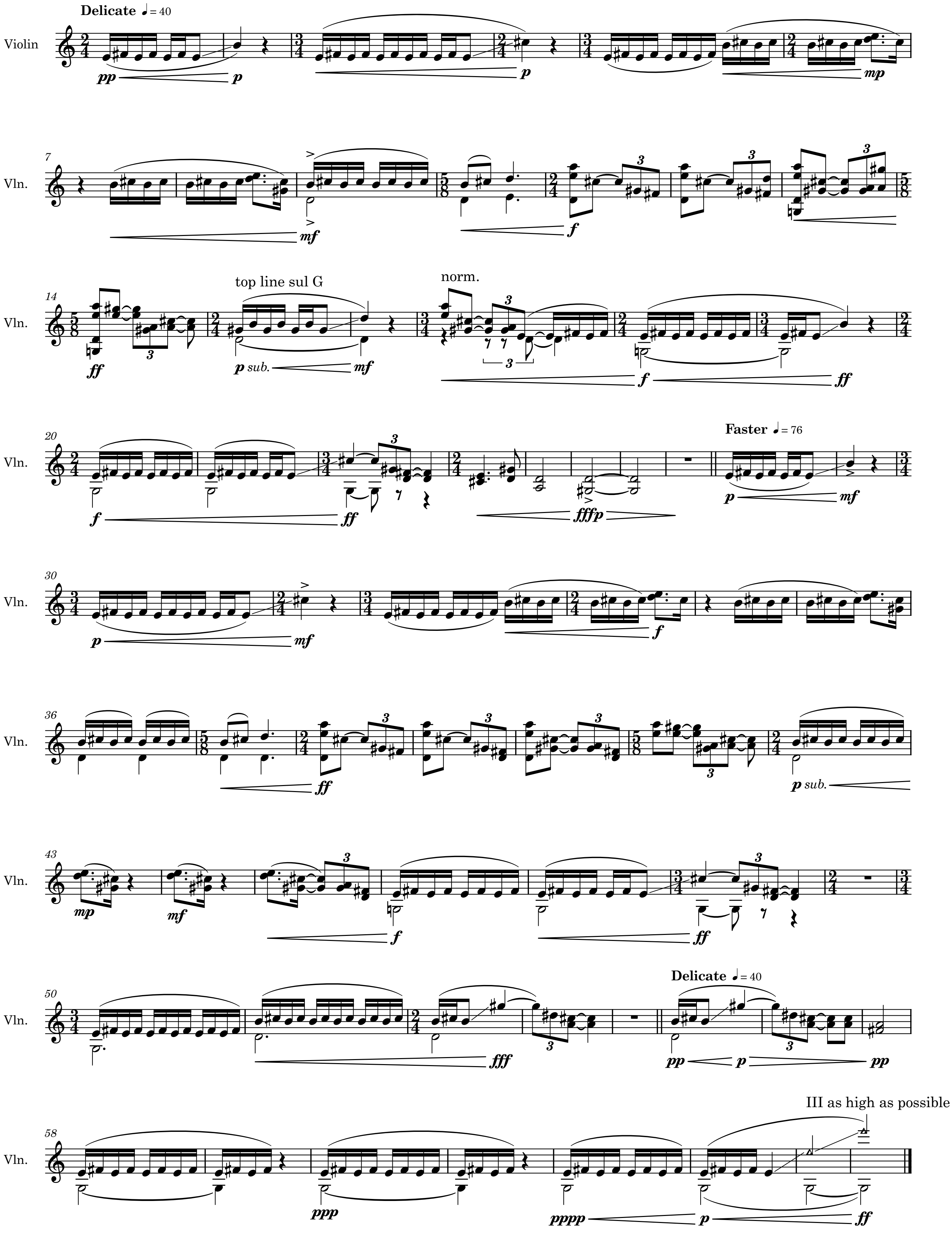

37
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
ff
(8)


40
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
f
ff

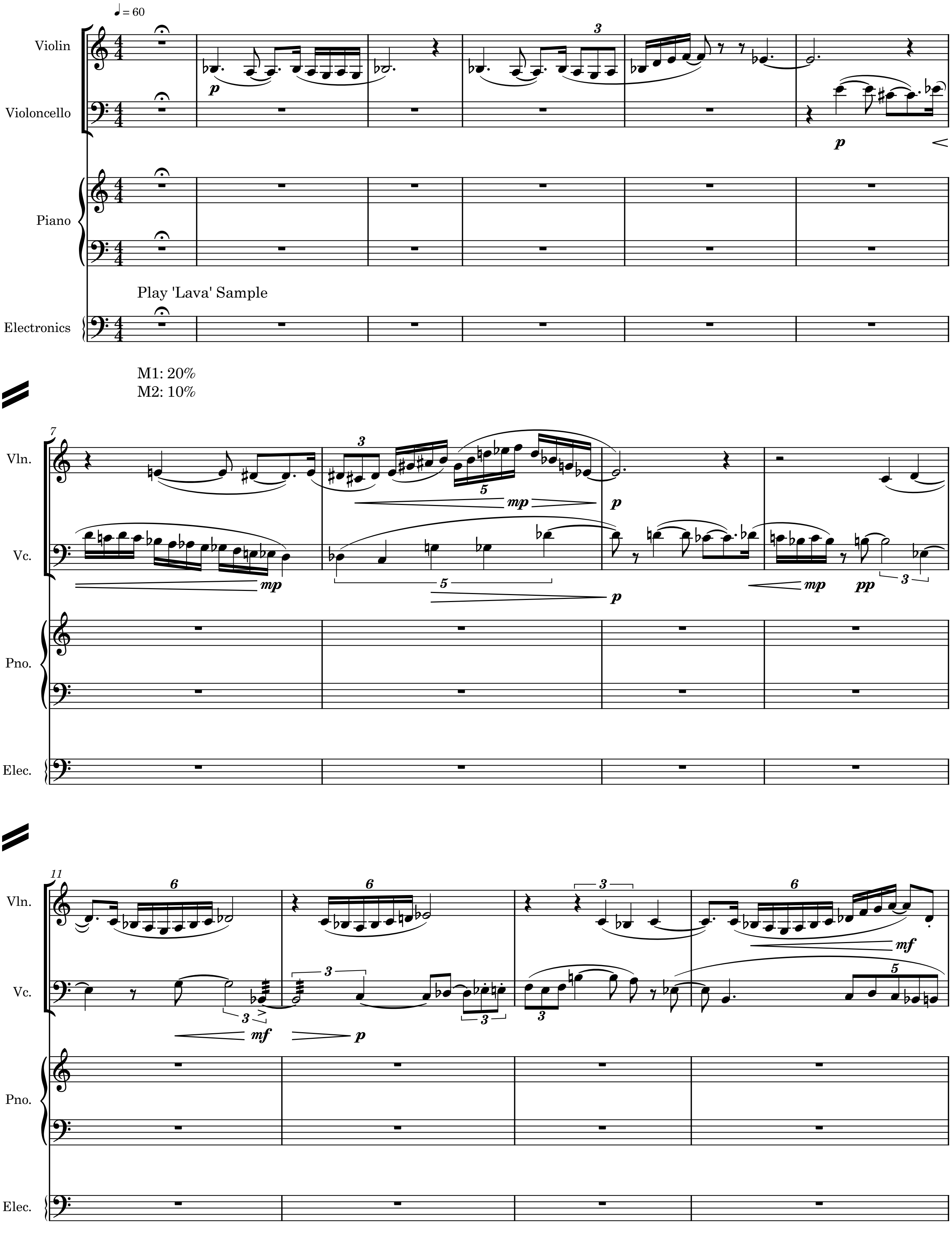

43
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
f
ff
K. Dr.
Elec.
46
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
8ba
K. Dr.
Elec.

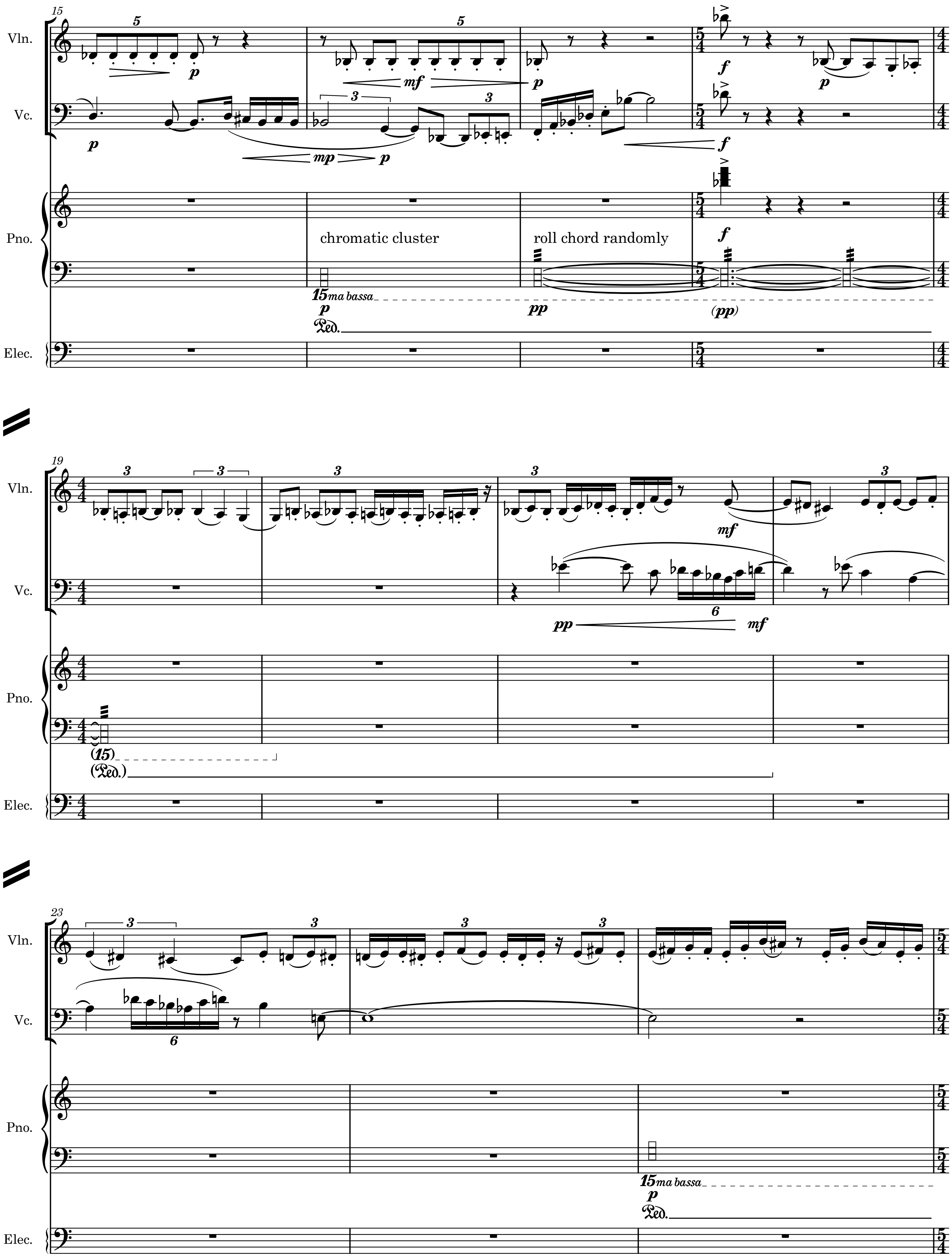

49
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
fff
fff
fff
(8)
54
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
ffff
sffz
ffff
sffz
ffff
sffz
(8)

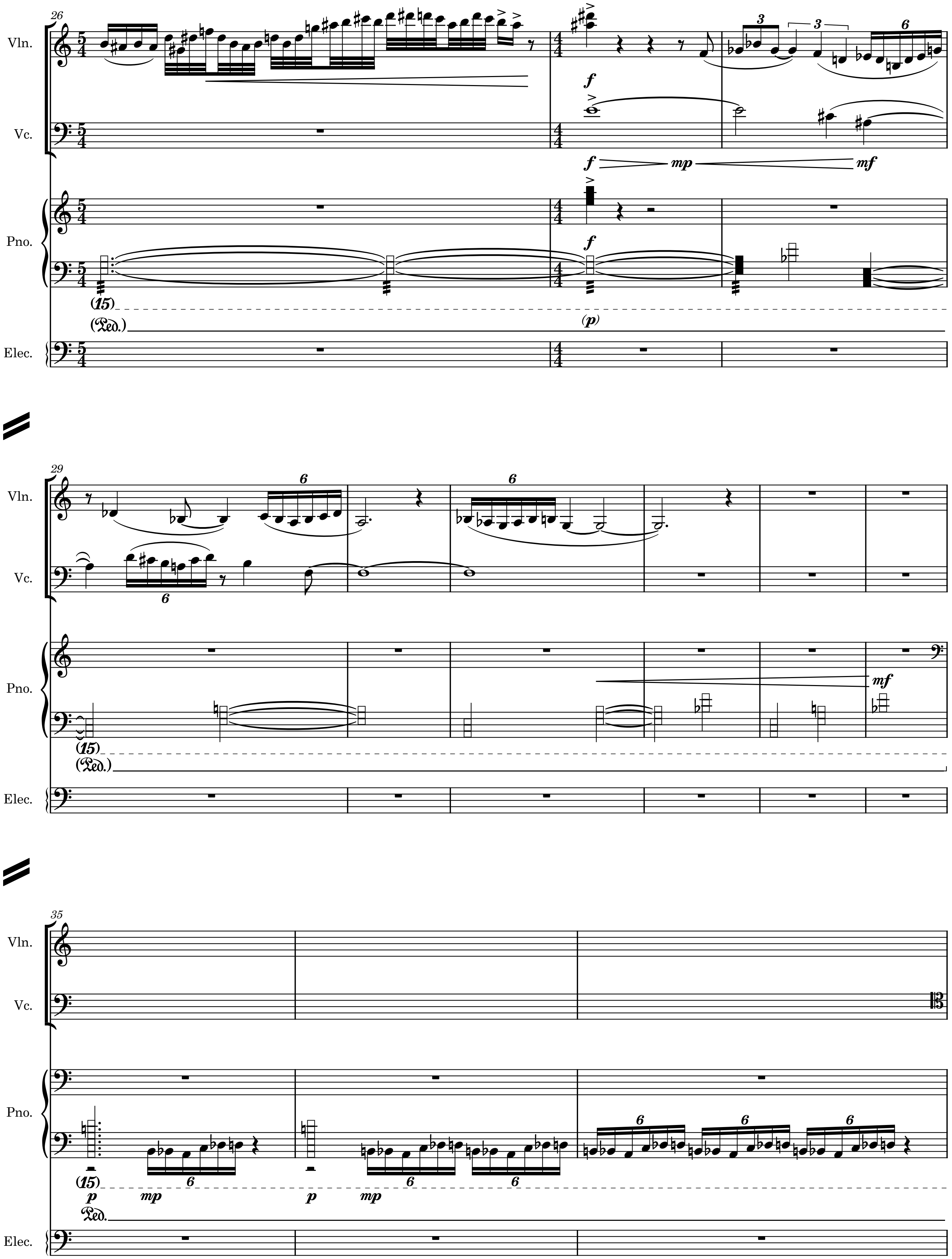
VII. Memories of birds and boats

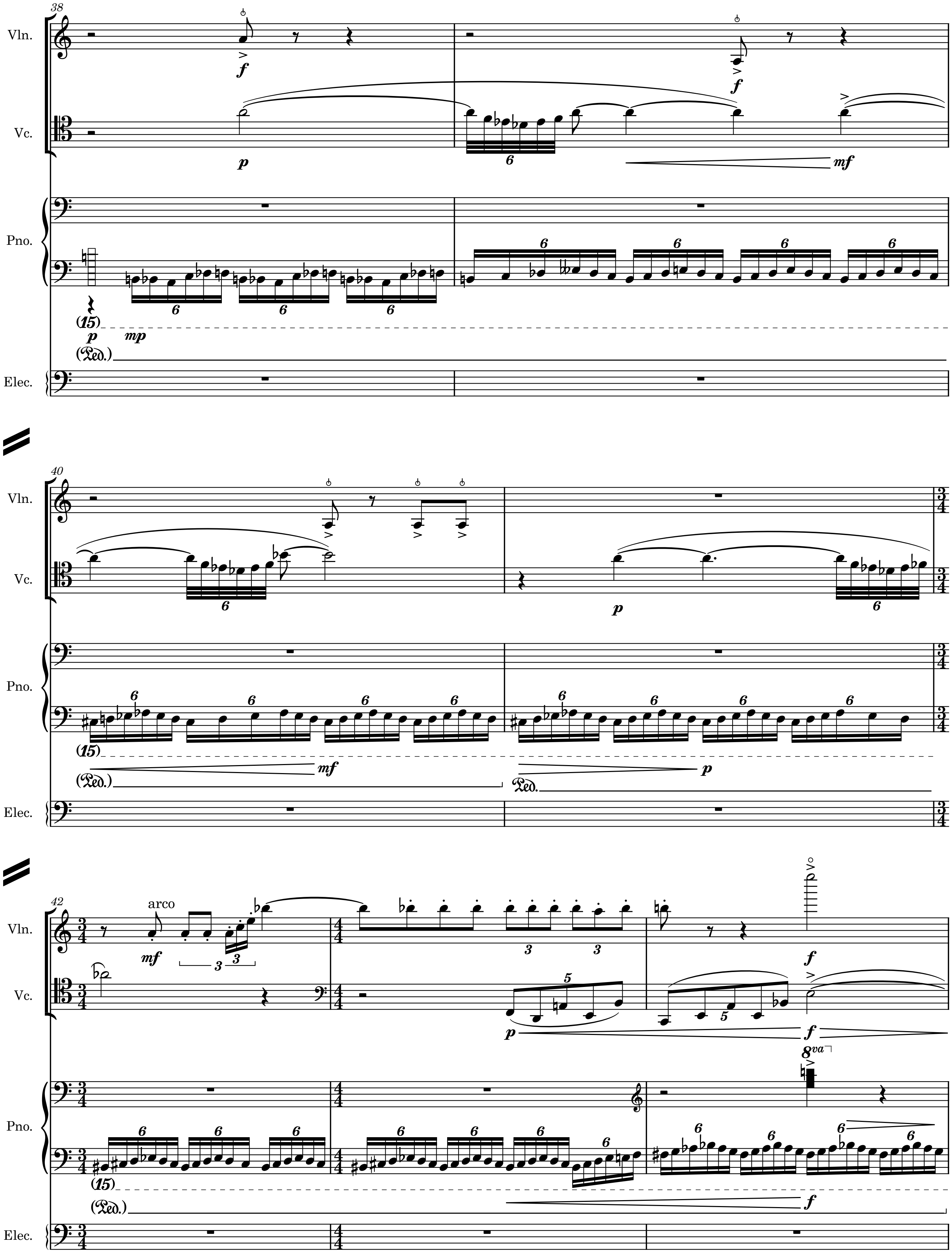

Delicate ♩ = 40
Violin
pp
p
p
mp
7
Vln.
mf
f
14
Vln.
ff
top line sul G
p sub.
mf
norm.
3
f
ff
20
Vln.
f
ff
fffp
Faster ♩ = 76
p
mf
30
Vln.
p
mf
f
36
Vln.
ff
p sub.
43
Vln.
mp
mf
f
ff
50
Vln.
fff
Delicate ♩ = 40
pp
p
pp
58
Vln.
ppp
pppp
p
ff
III as high as possible

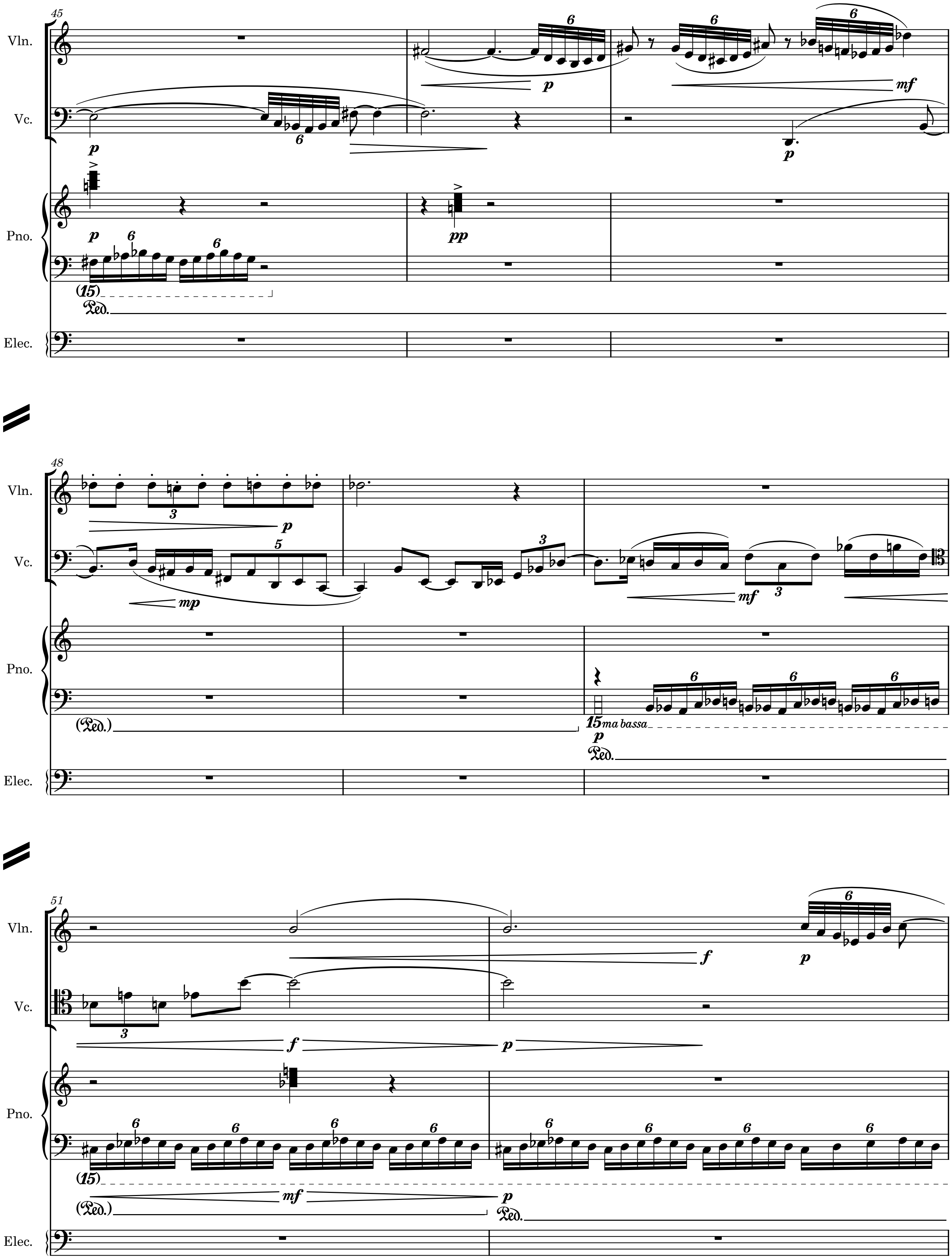
VIII. Dormant Eruptions

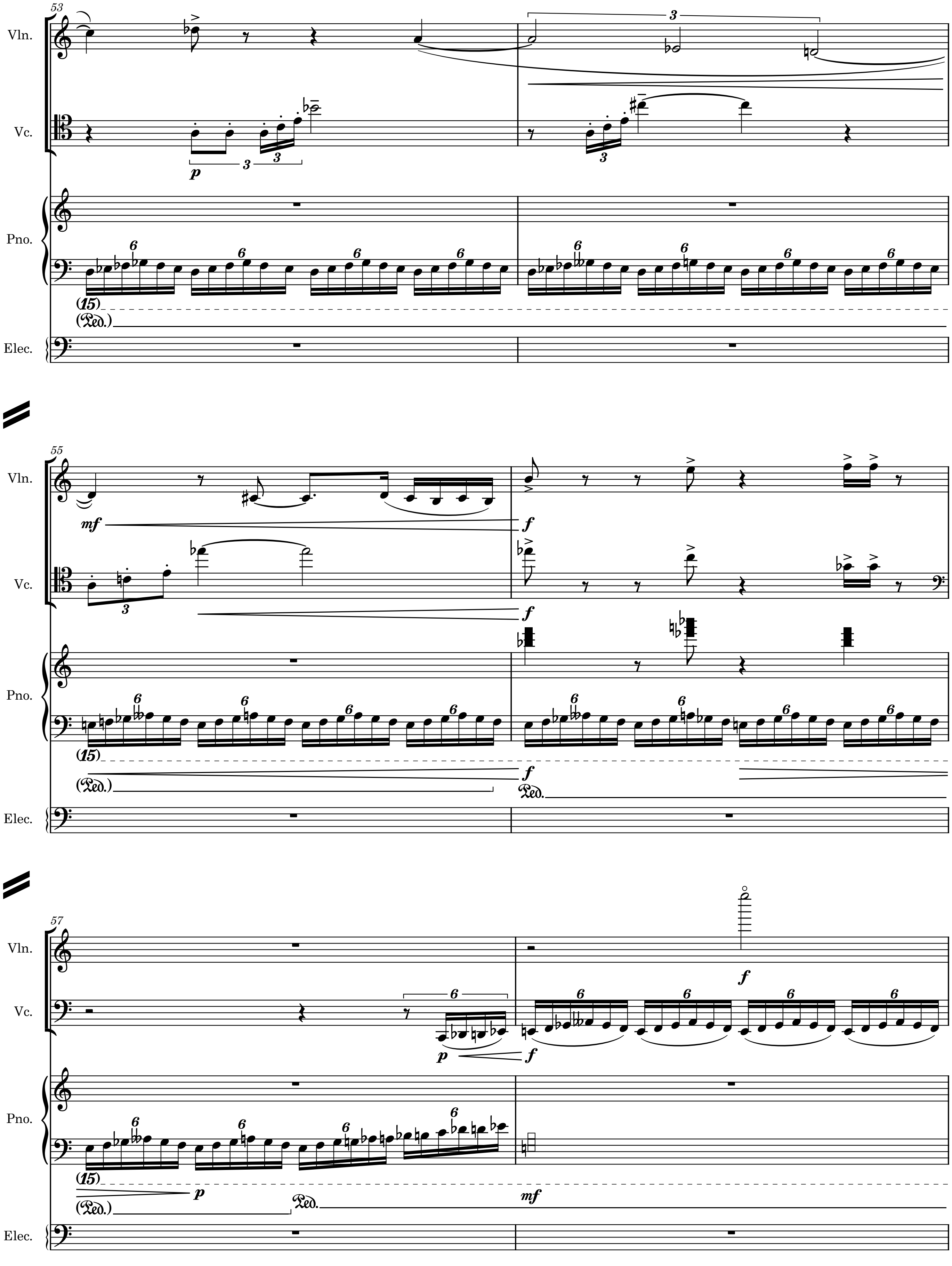

♩= 60
Violin
Violoncello
Piano
Play 'Lava' Sample
Electronics
M1: 20%
M2: 10%
7
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
11
p
mp
pp
mf
3
5
6

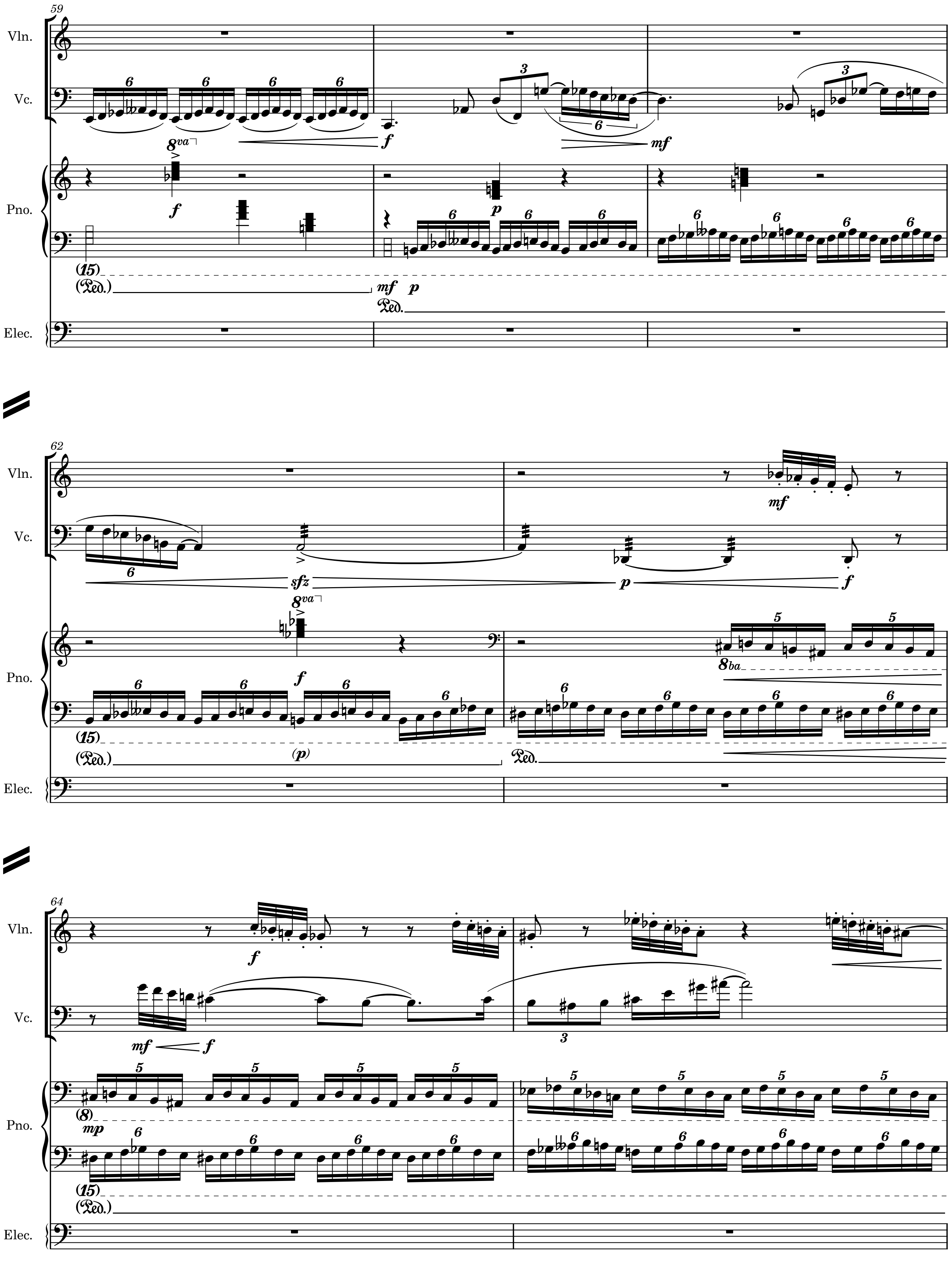

15
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
5
p
mf
mp
f
pp
3
chromatic cluster
roll chord randomly
15ma bassa
(pp)
Ped.
19
(15)
(Ped.)
6
23

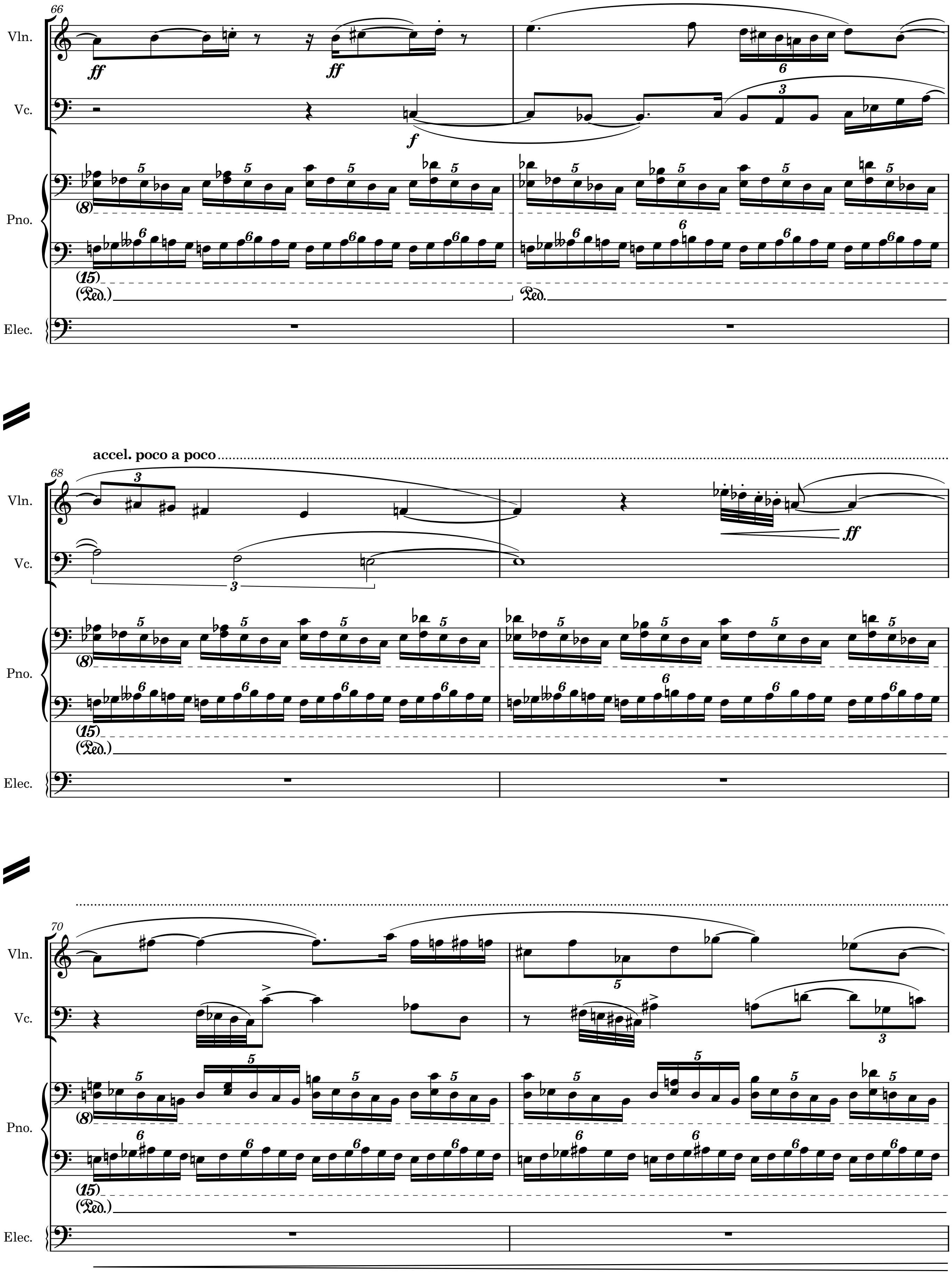

26
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
3
3
6
f
f
mp
mf
f
(15)
(Ped.)
(p)
29
6
6
6
mf
(15)
(Ped.)
35
6
6
6
6
6
6
(15)
p
mp
p
mp
Ped.

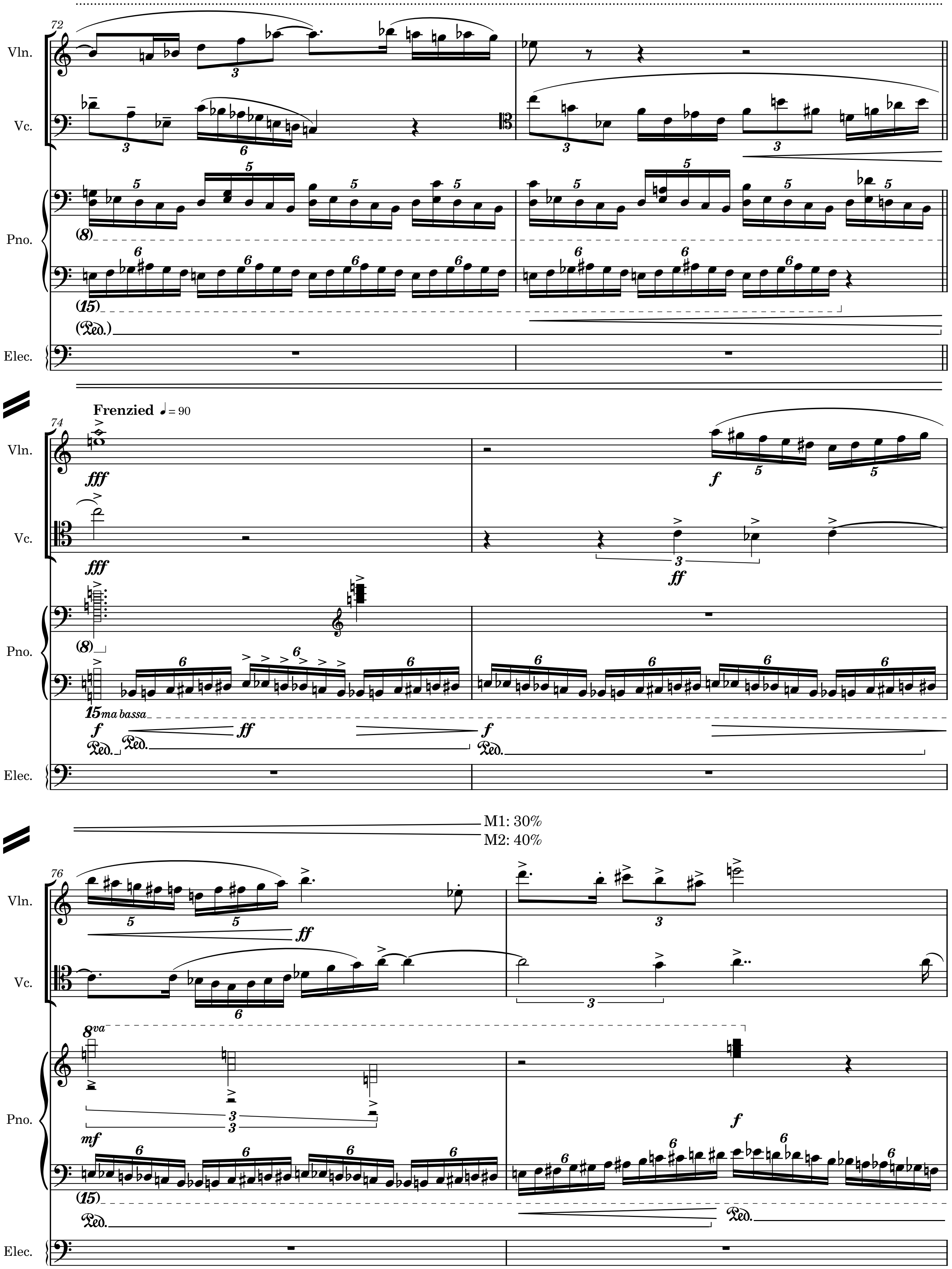

38
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
f
p
6
mf
(15)
mp
(Ped.)
40
mf
p
Ped.
42
arco
3
5
8va
3/4
4/4

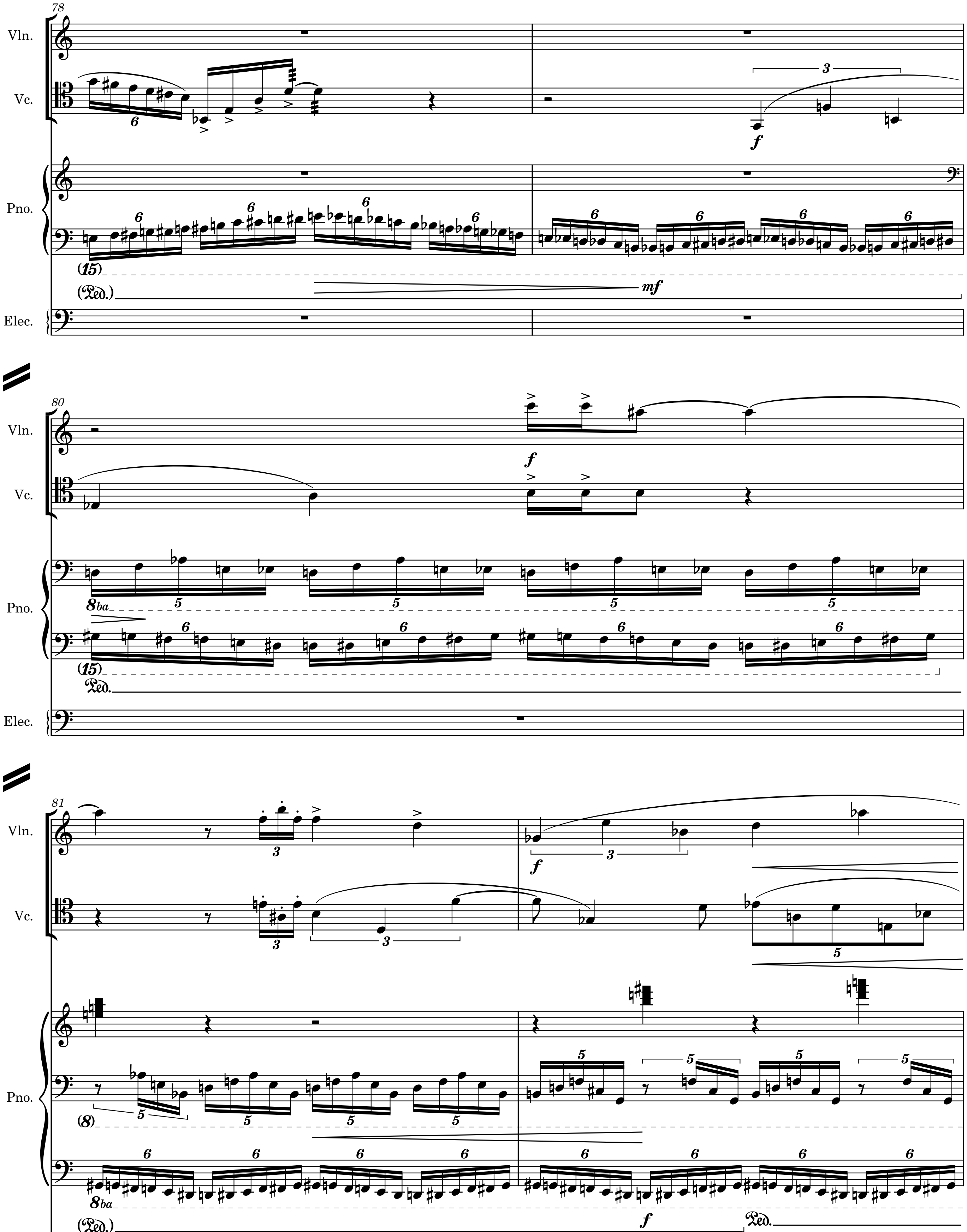

45
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
p
pp
mf
(15)
Ped.
48
mp
mf
5
3
6
15ma bassa
51
f
(Ped.)

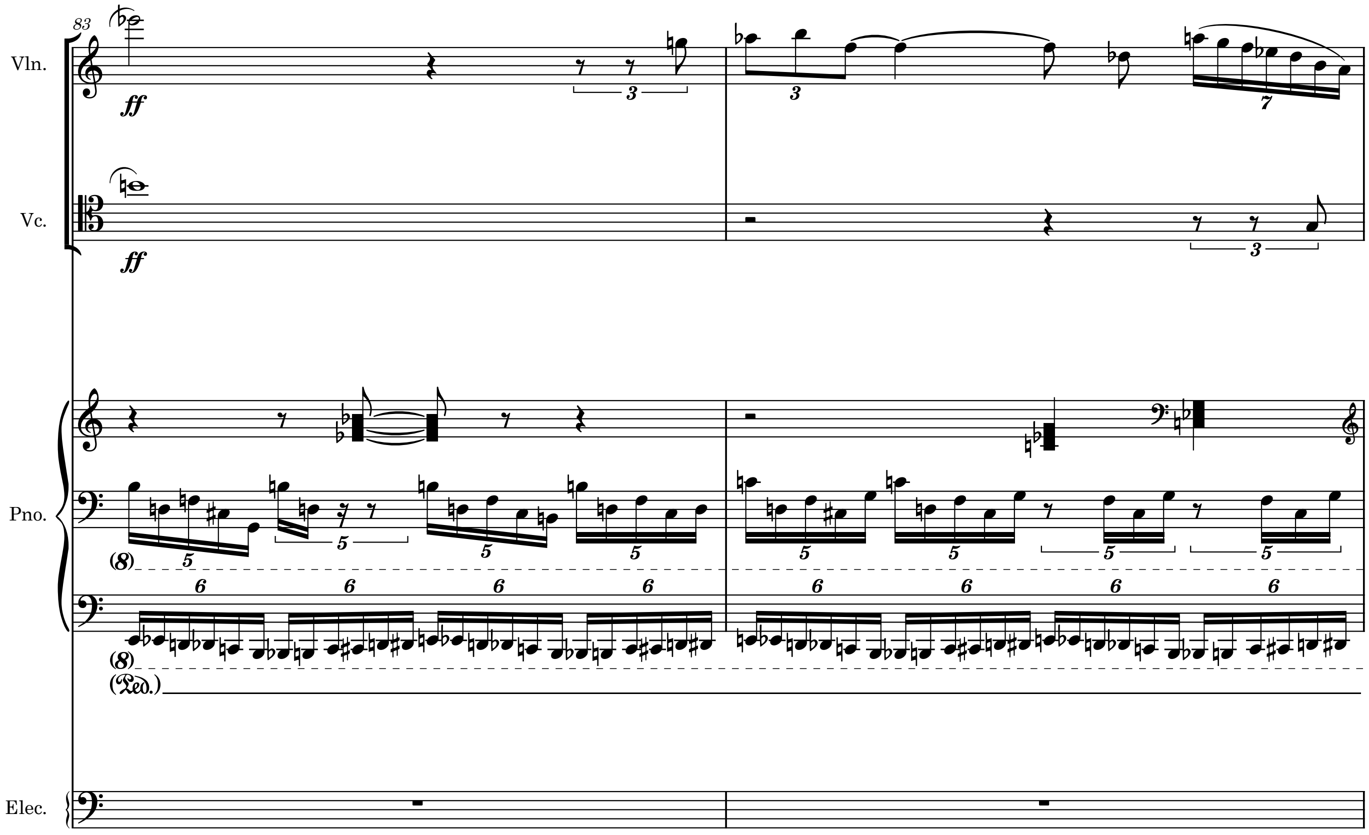

53
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
p
3
6
(15)
(Ped.)
55
mf
f
Ped.
57
p
mf

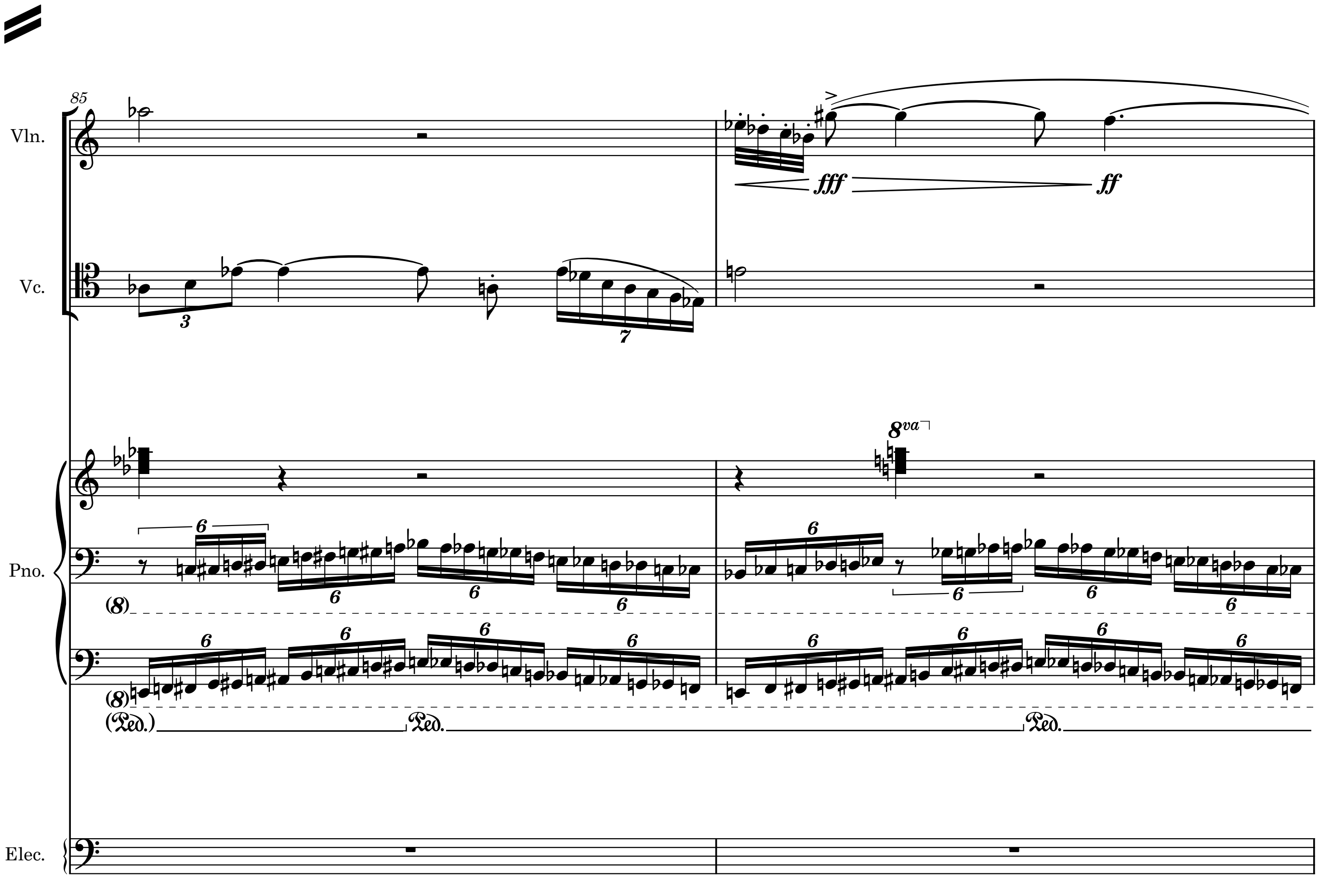

59
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
6
3
f
mf
8va
f
p
(15)
(Ped.)
mf p
Ped.
62
sfz
p
f
mf
(p)
5
8ba
64
f
mf f
mp
(8)

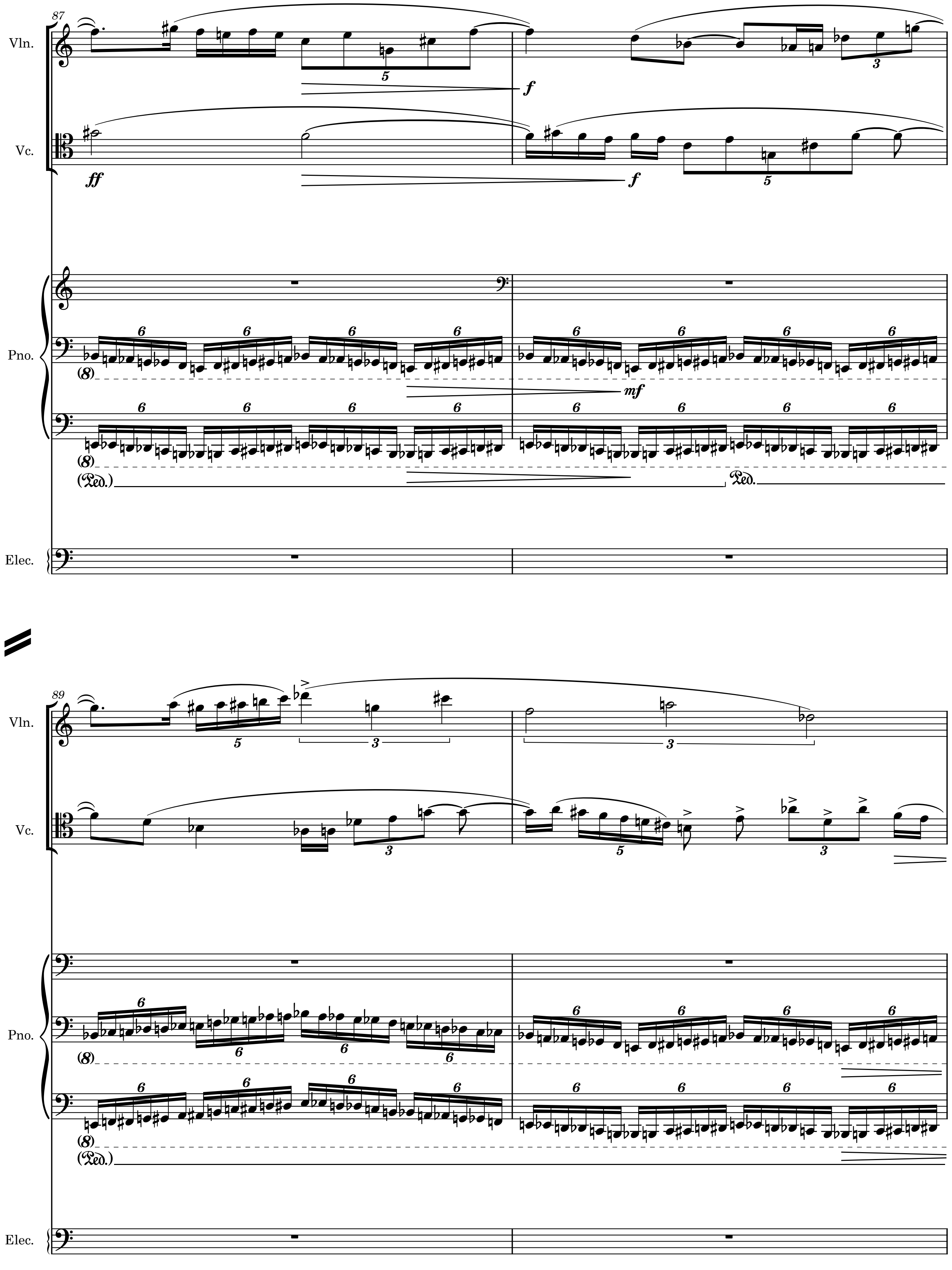

66
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
ff
ff
f
6
3
5
6
(8)
(15)
(Ped.)
Ped.
accel. poco a poco
68
70

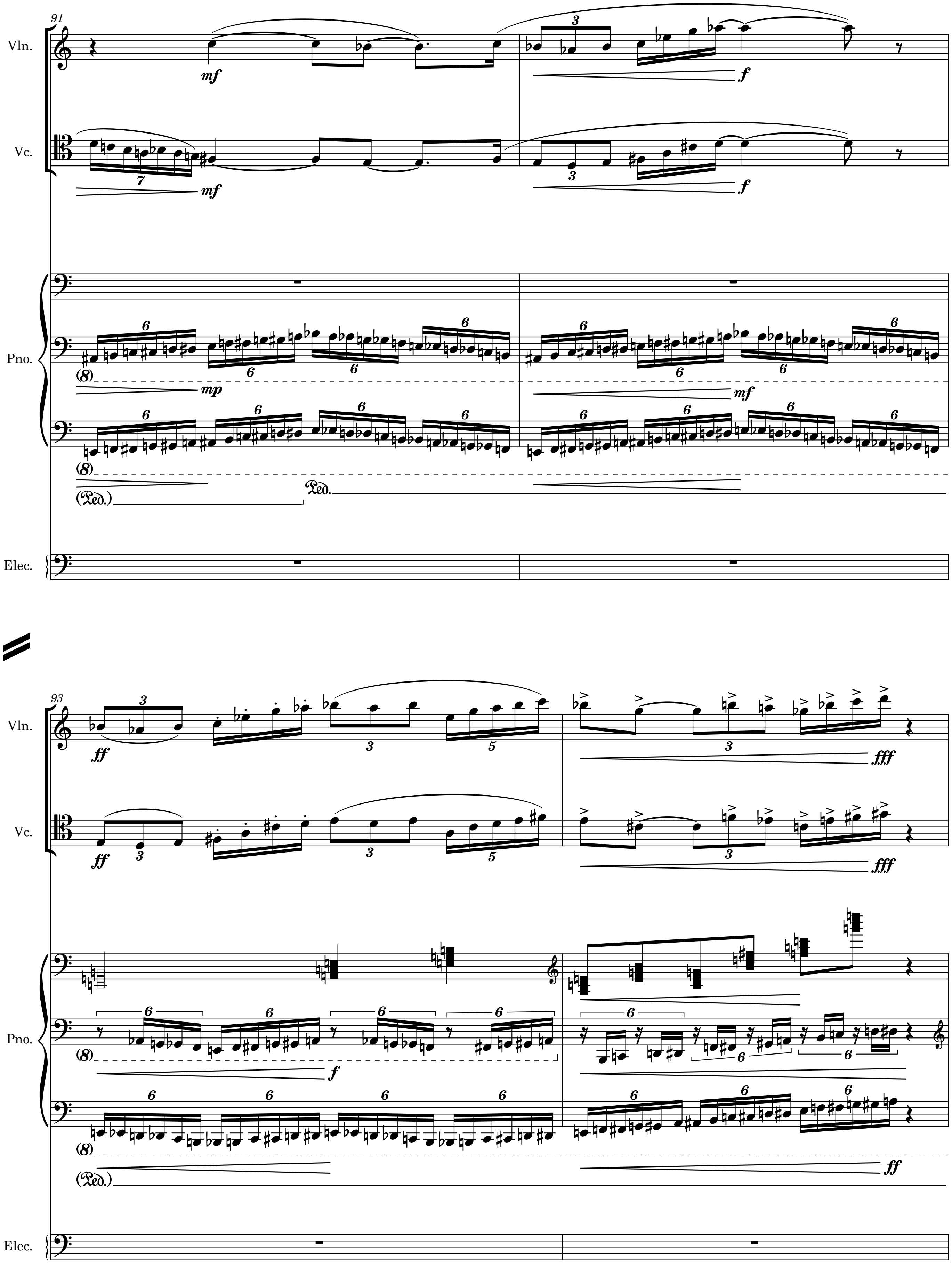

72
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
(8)
(15)
(Ped.)
74
Frenzied ♩ = 90
fff
fff
f
ff
f
ff
f
15ma bassa
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
M1: 30%
M2: 40%
76
ff
8va
mf
f
(15)
Ped.
Ped.

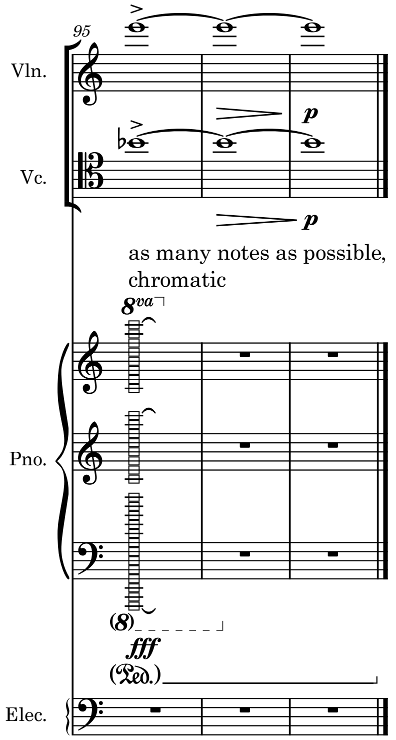

78
Vln.
Vc.
6
3
f
Pno.
6
(15)
(𝆮.)
mf
Elec.
80
f
5
8ba
15
𝆮.
81
3
5
(8)
f


83
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
ff
ff
3
7
5
6
(8)
(𝄎.)


85
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
fff
ff
8va
3
7
6
(8)
(𝄎.)
𝄎.
𝄎.


87
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
5
3
f
ff
6
(8)
mf
(𝒫𝑒𝑑.)
𝒫𝑒𝑑.
89


91
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
mf
f
mp
(8)
(𝄆Ped.)
Ped.
93
ff
fff
(8)
(Ped.)

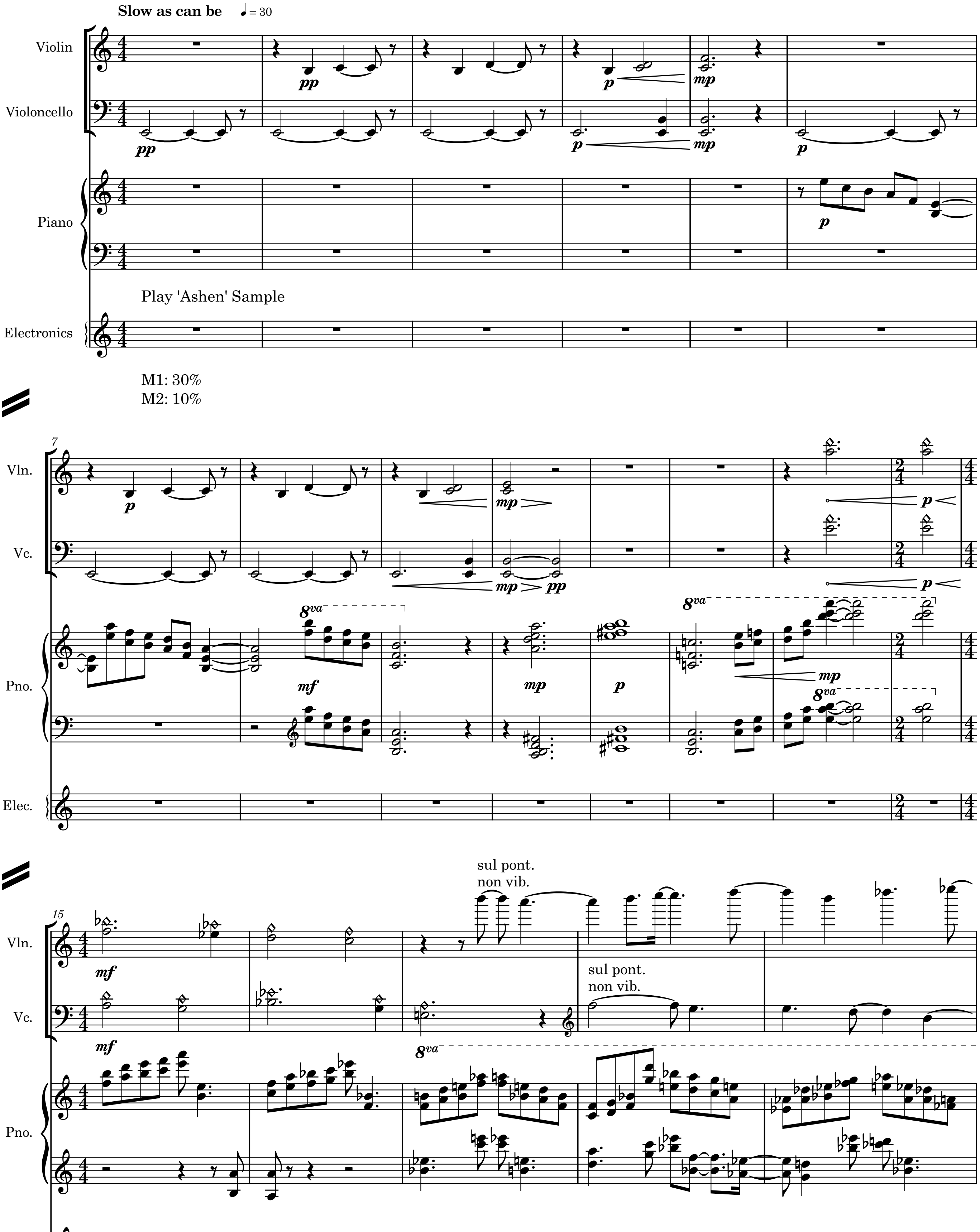

95
Vln.
Vc.
p
p
as many notes as possible, chromatic
8va
Pno.
(8)
fff
(Ped.)
Elec.

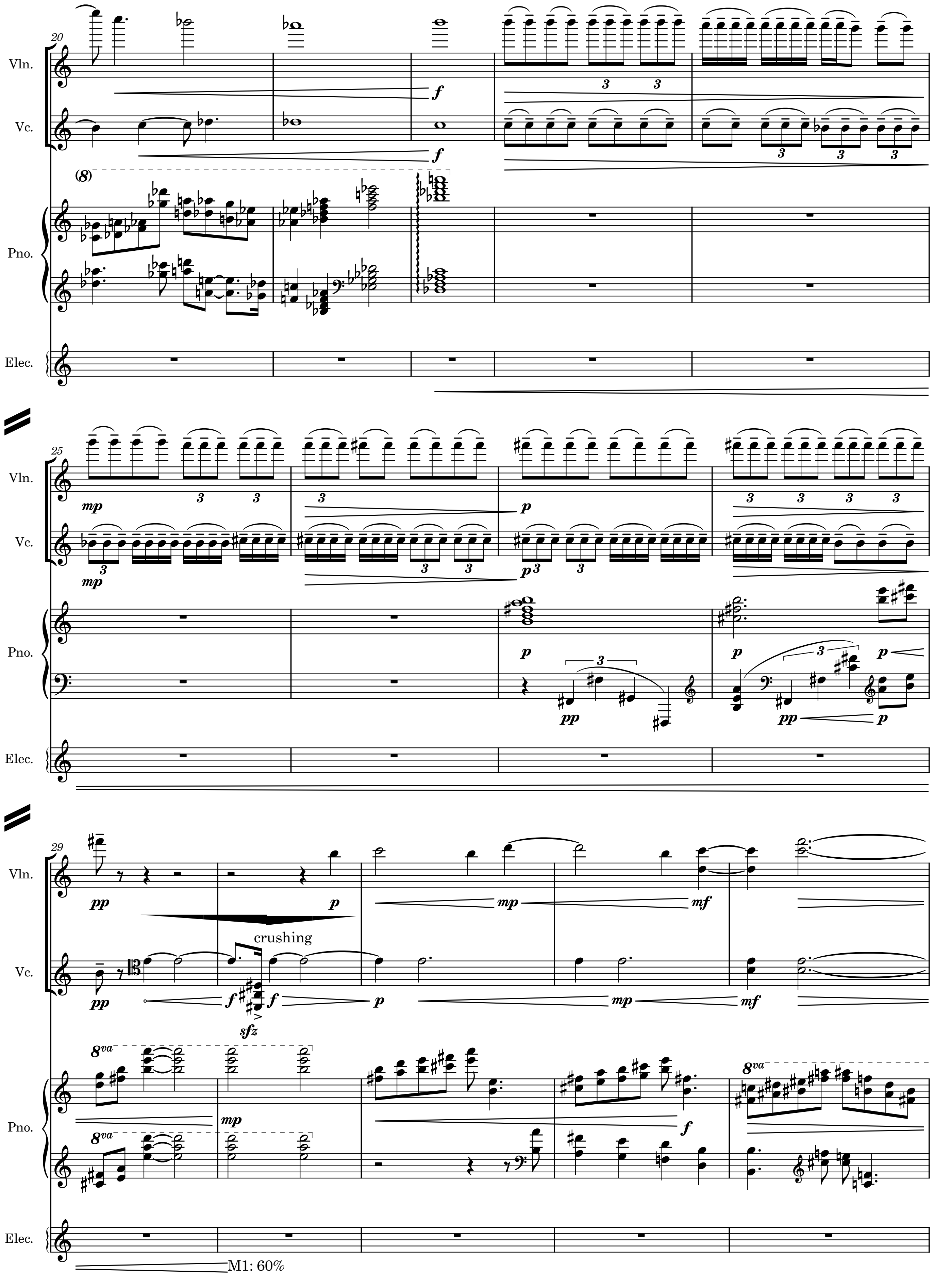
IX. Interval

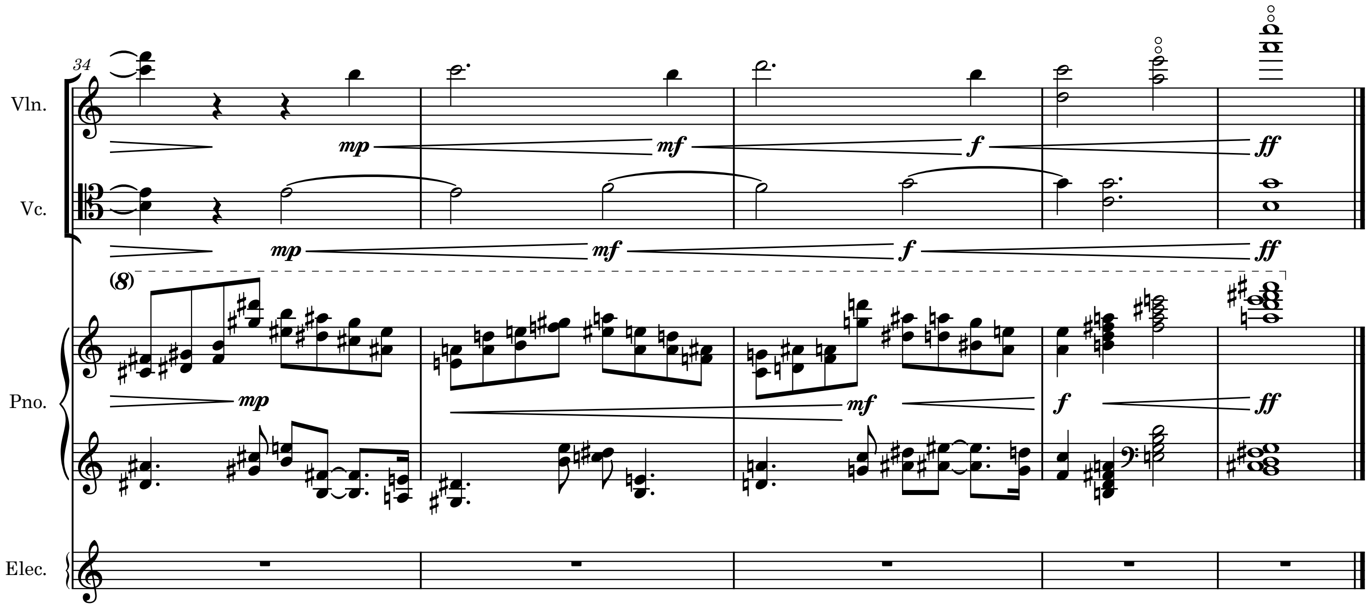
Solo electronics; Play 'Interval', reintroduce as audience re-enters

Electronics

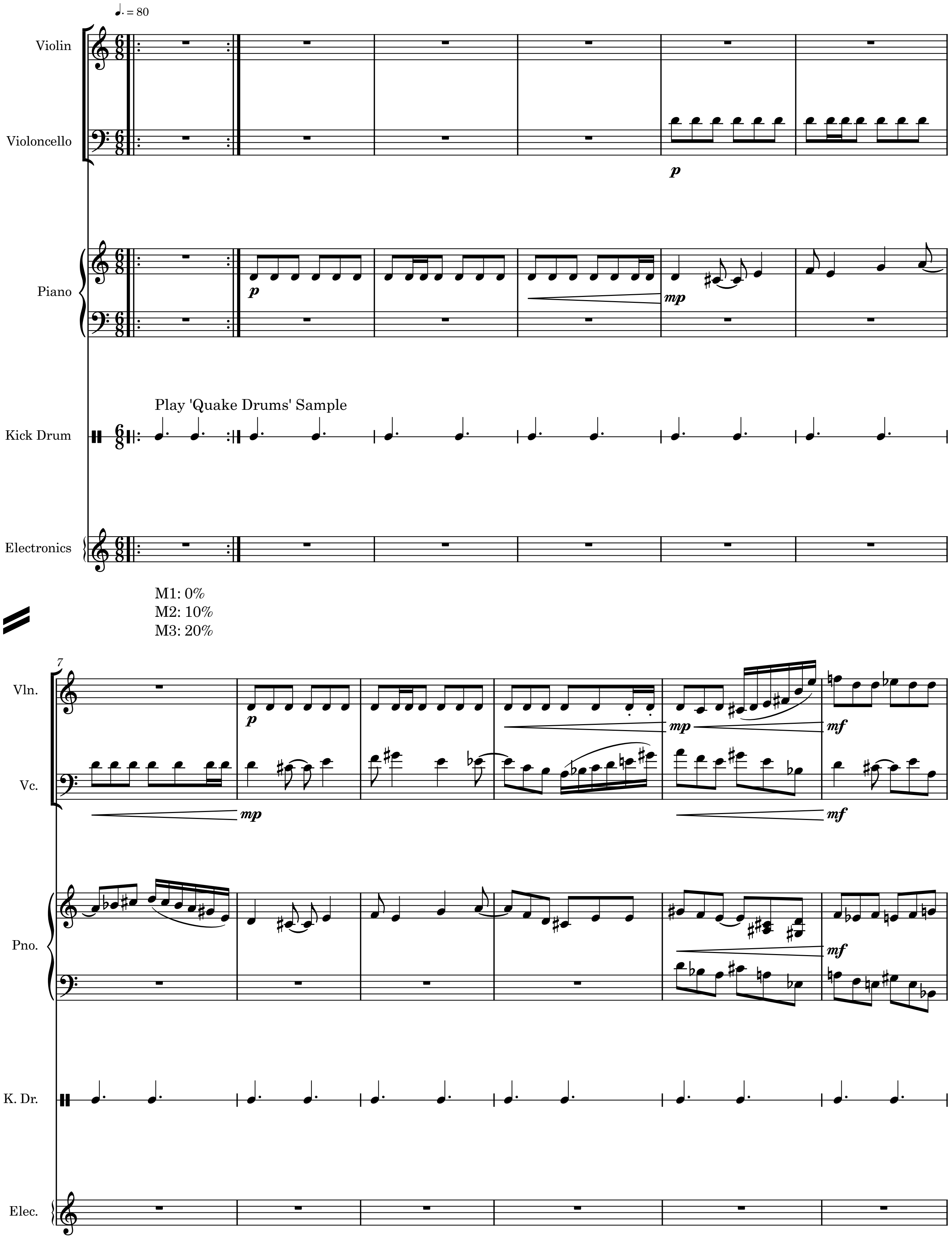
X. Ashen Forest

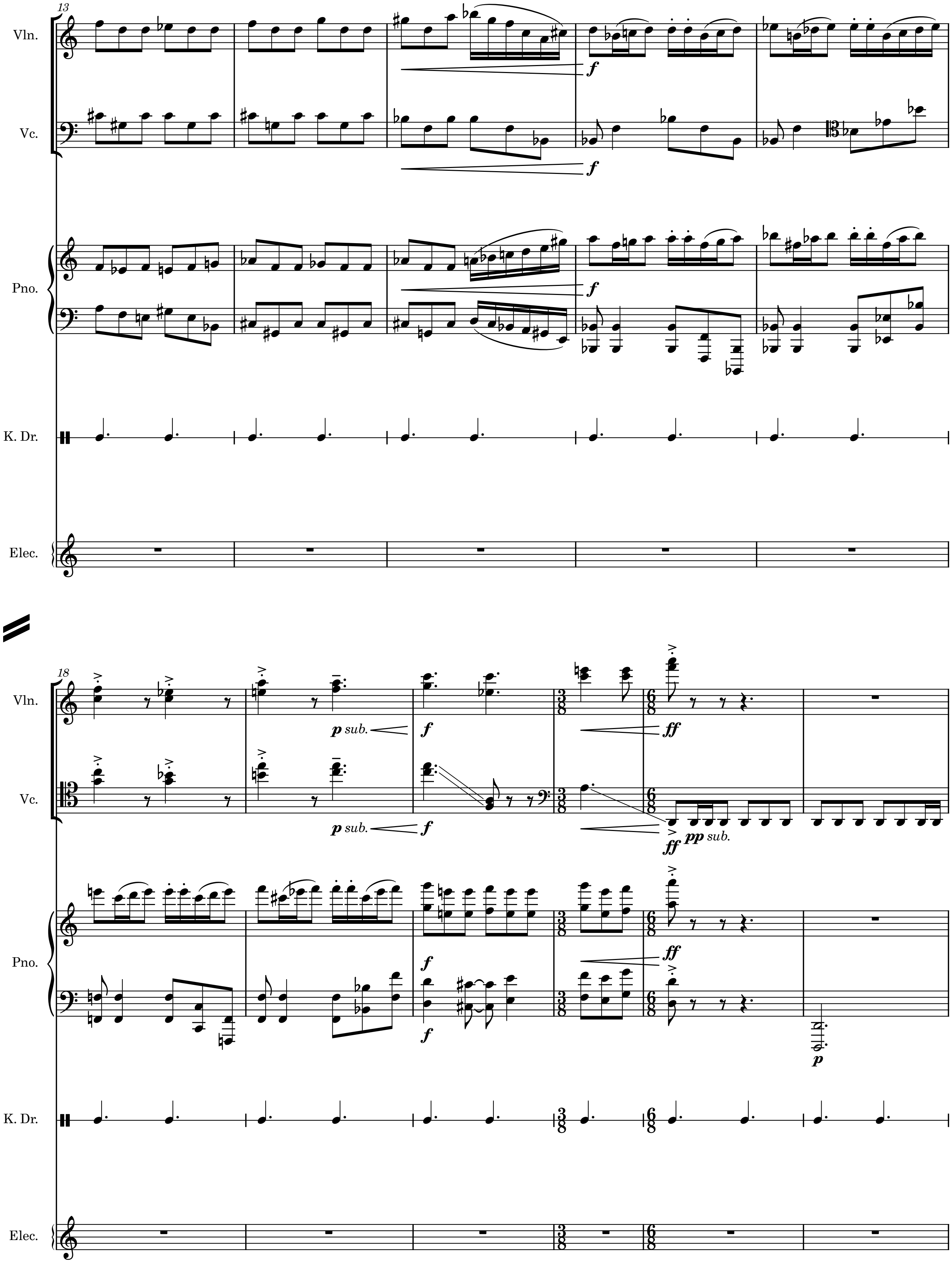

Slow as can be ♩= 30
Violin
Violoncello
Piano
Electronics
Play 'Ashen' Sample
M1: 30%
M2: 10%
pp
p
mp
mf
8va
7
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
15
sul pont.
non vib.
sul pont.
non vib.

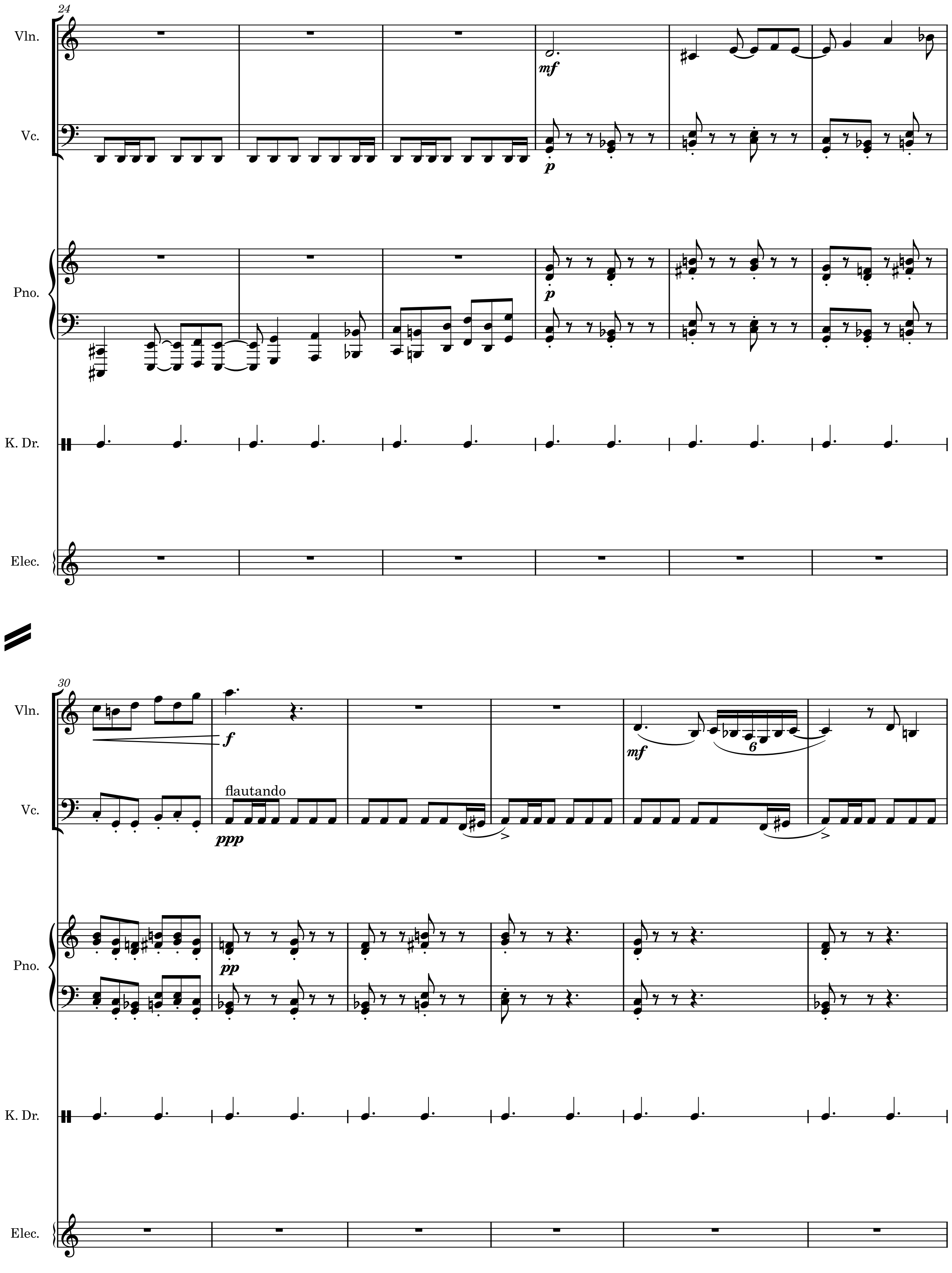

20
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
(8)
f
f
3
25
mp
mp
p
p
pp
29
pp
pp
p
crushing
f
sfz
f
p
mp
mp
mf
mf
8va
mp
f
M1: 60%

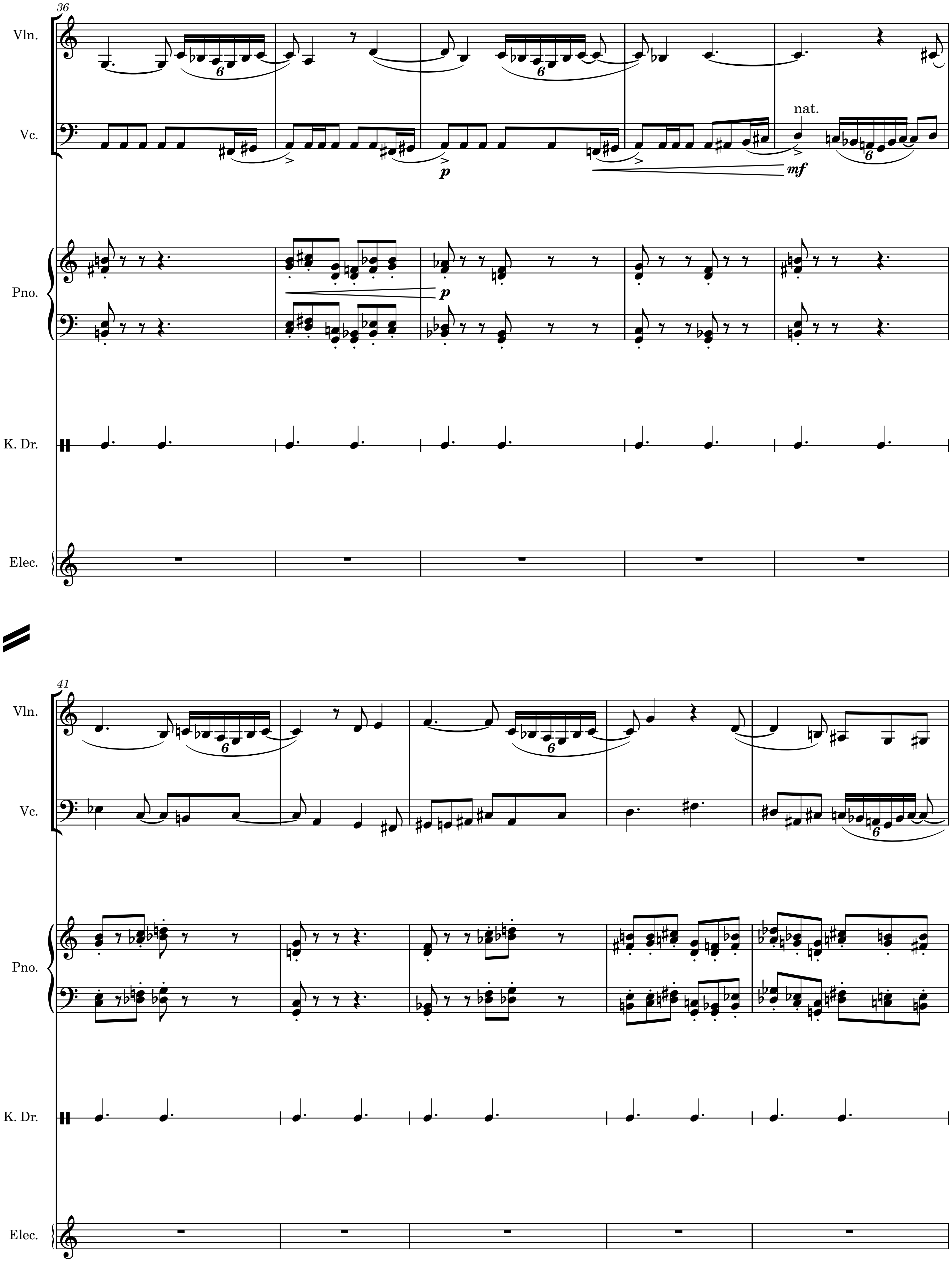

34
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
mp
mf
f
ff
(8)

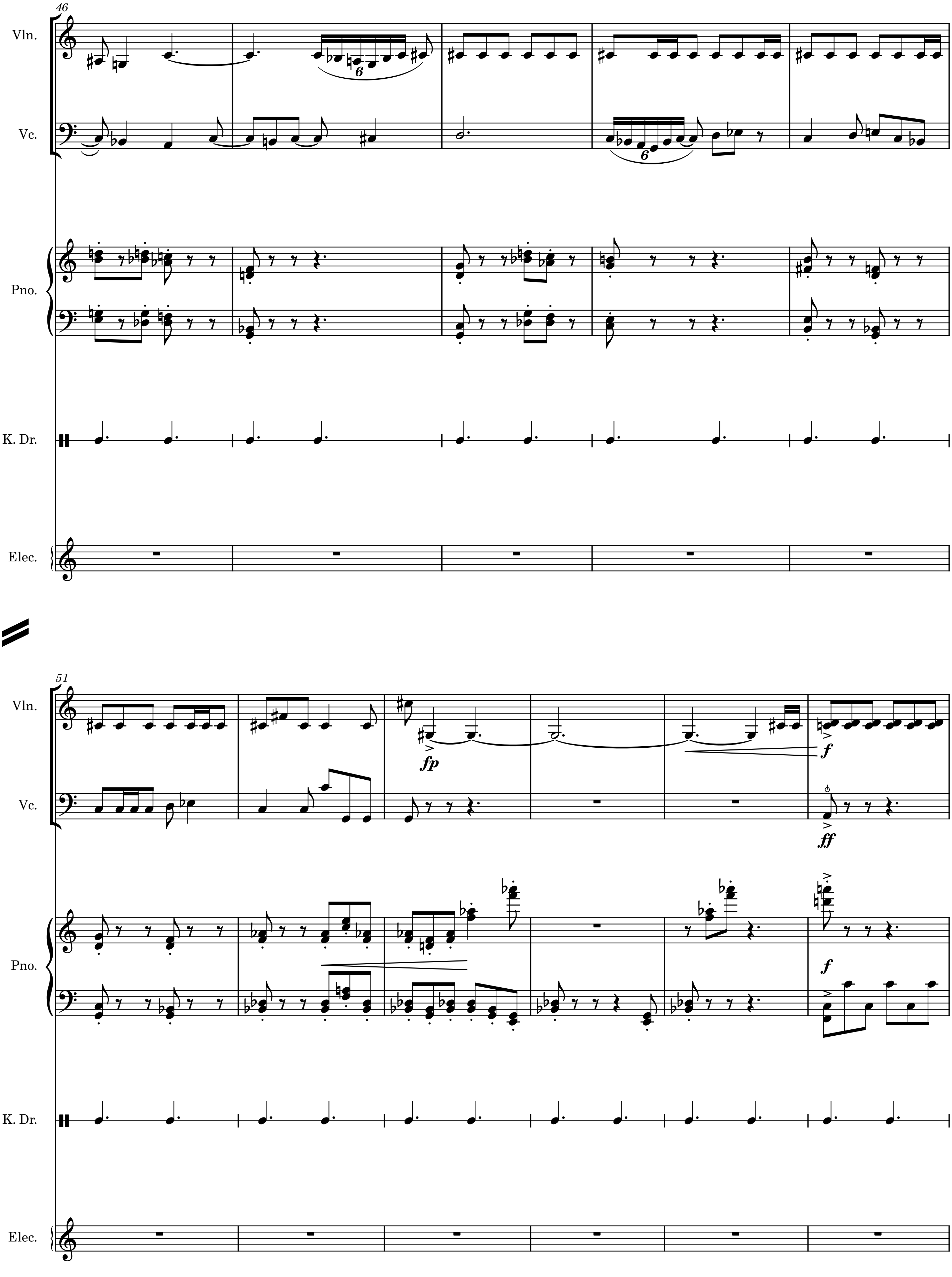
XI. Quake

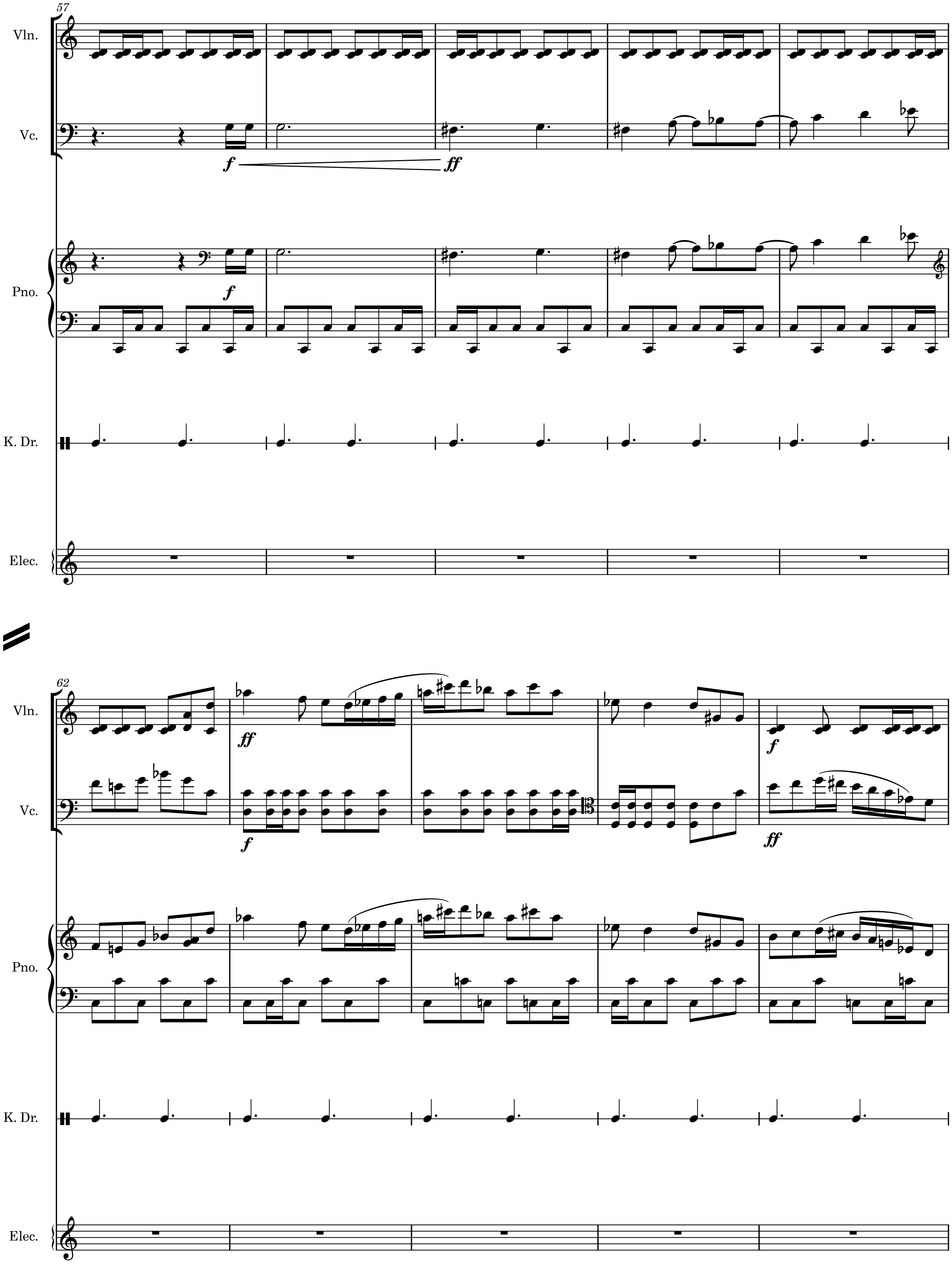

♩. = 80
Violin
Violoncello
Piano
Kick Drum
Electronics
Play 'Quake Drums' Sample
p
p
mp
M1: 0%
M2: 10%
M3: 20%
7
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
p
mp
mp
mf
mp
mf
mf

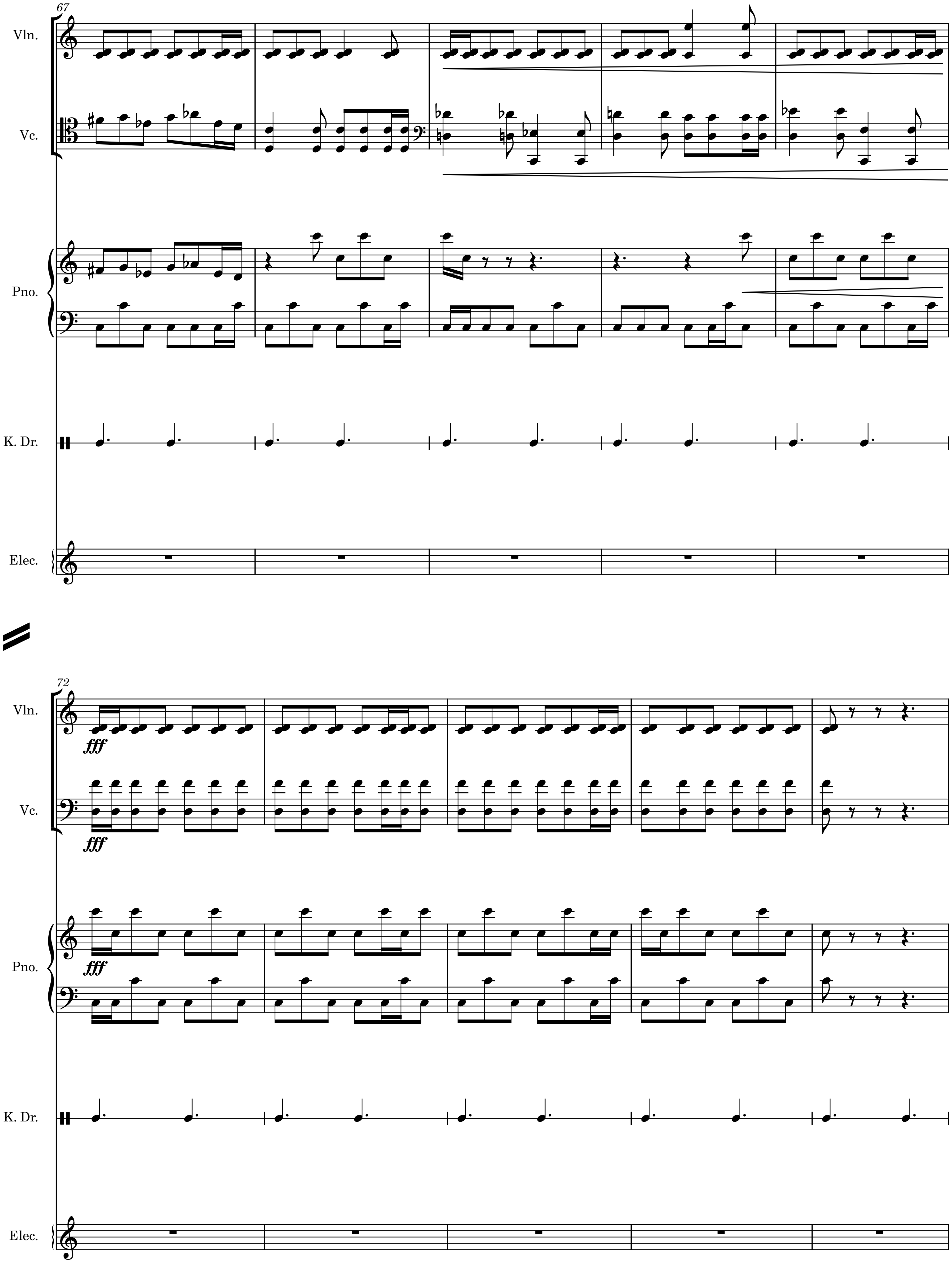

13
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
f
f
f
18
p sub.
f
ff
pp sub.
ff
p

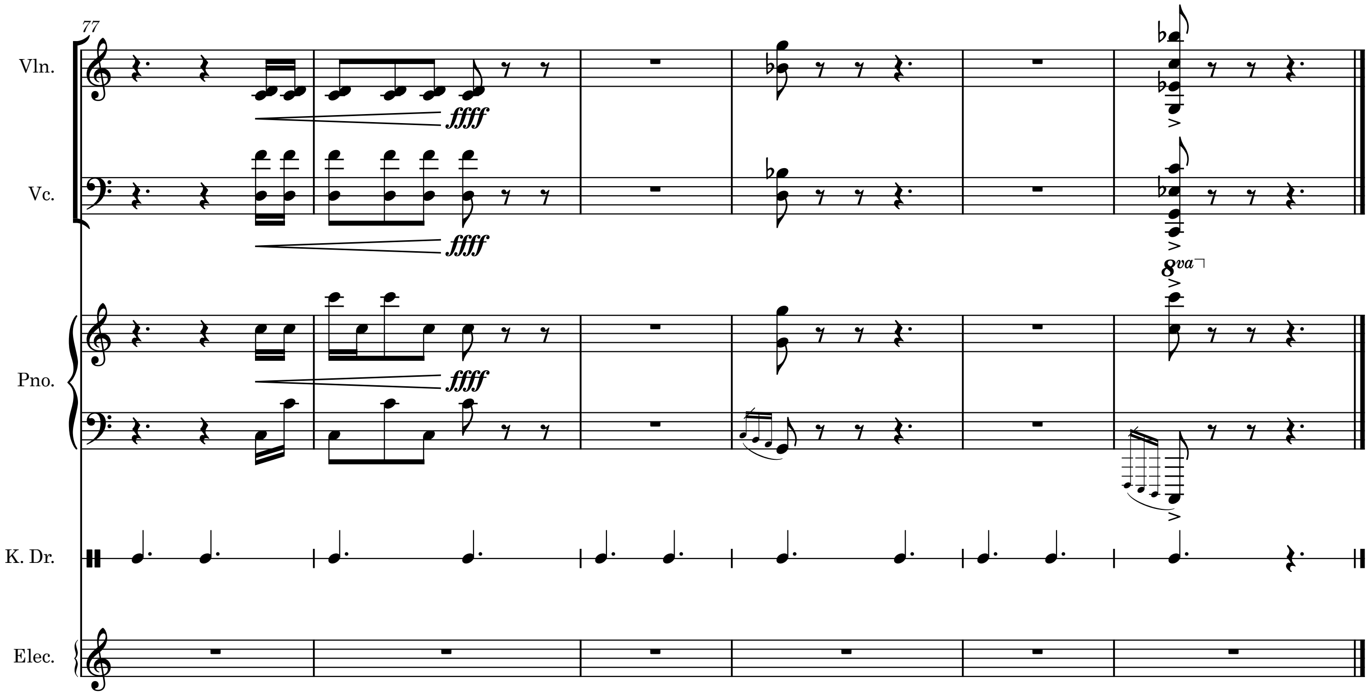

24
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
mf
p
p
30
f
flautando
ppp
mf
6
pp


36
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
nat.
p
mf
6
41
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.


46
Vln.
Vc.
6
6
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
51
fp
f
ff
f


57
Vln.
Vc.
f
ff
Pno.
f
K. Dr.
Elec.
62
ff
f
ff
f


67
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
72
Vln.
fff
Vc.
fff
Pno.
fff
K. Dr.
Elec.

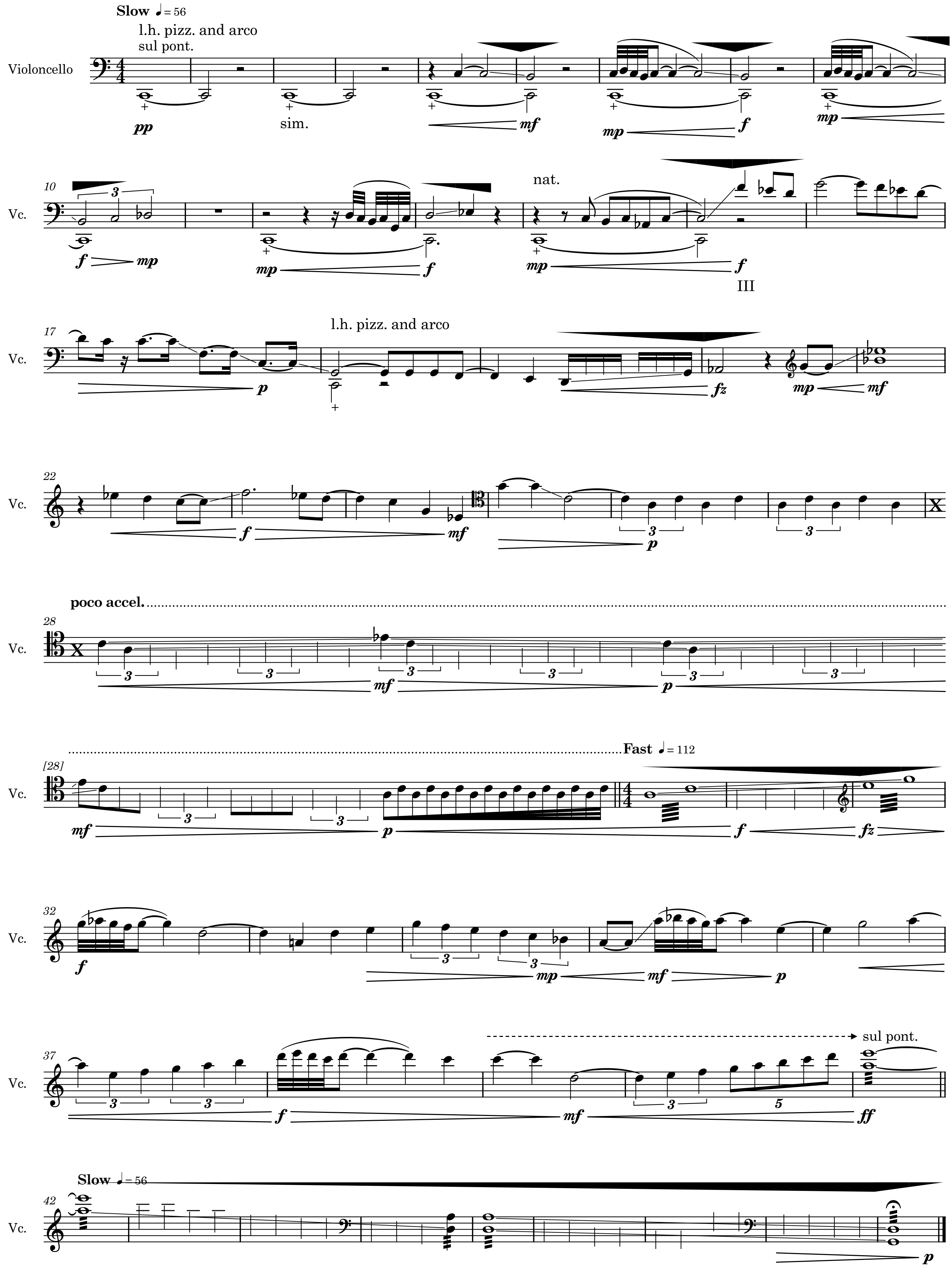

77
Vln.
ffff
Vc.
ffff
8va
Pno.
ffff
K. Dr.
Elec.

XII. Speed Bump // Bounce

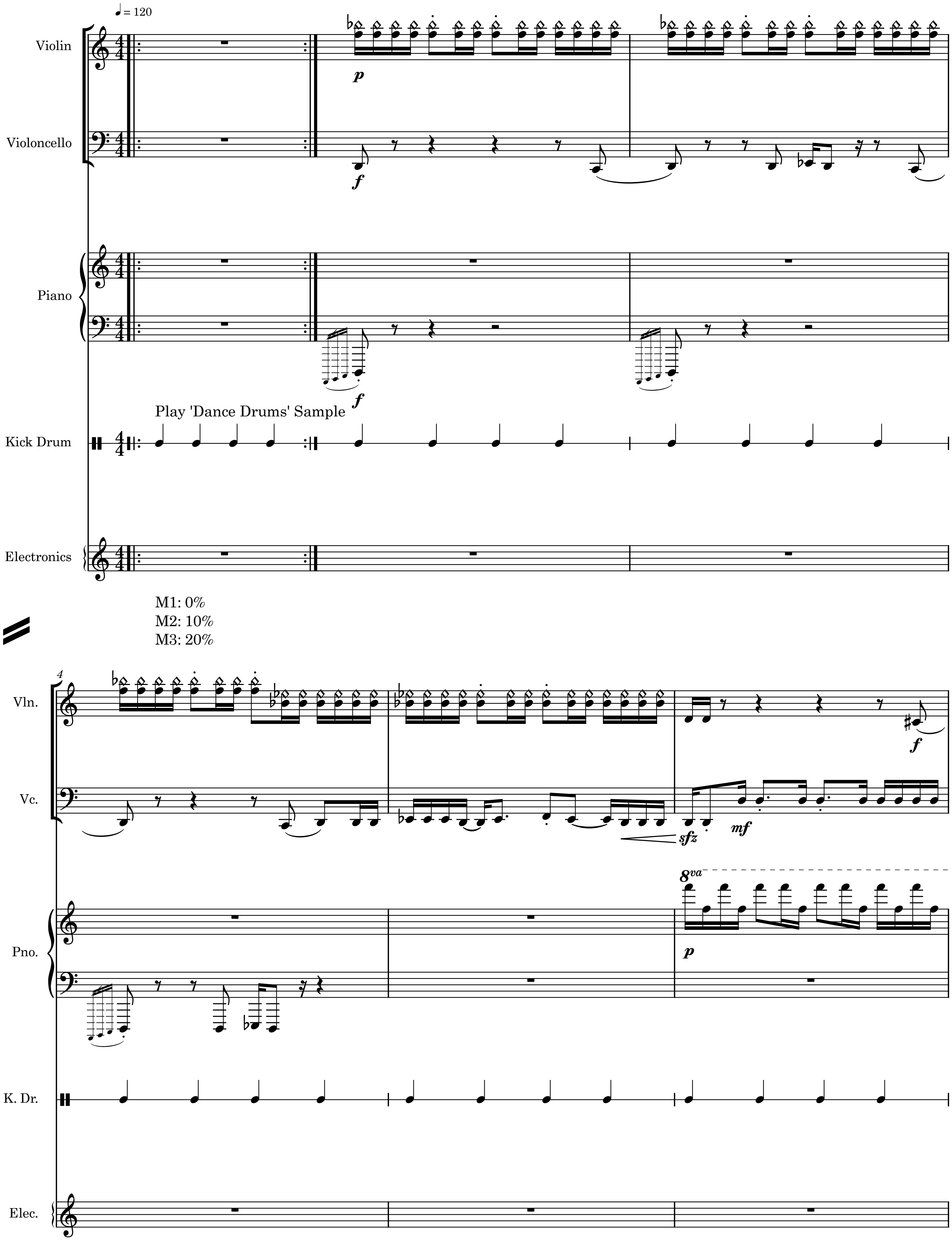
Solo electronics; Play 'Speed Bump // Bounce'

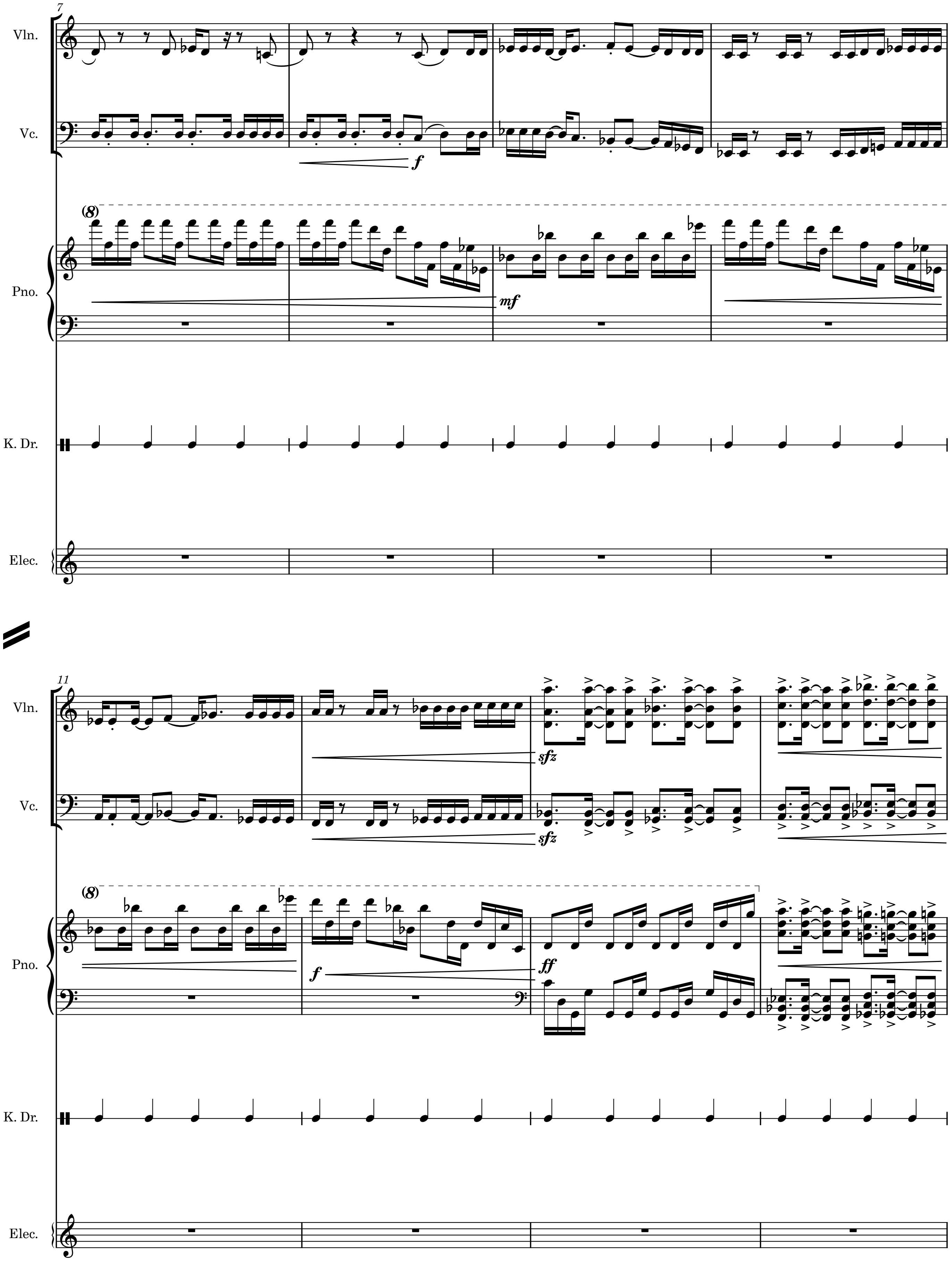
Electronics

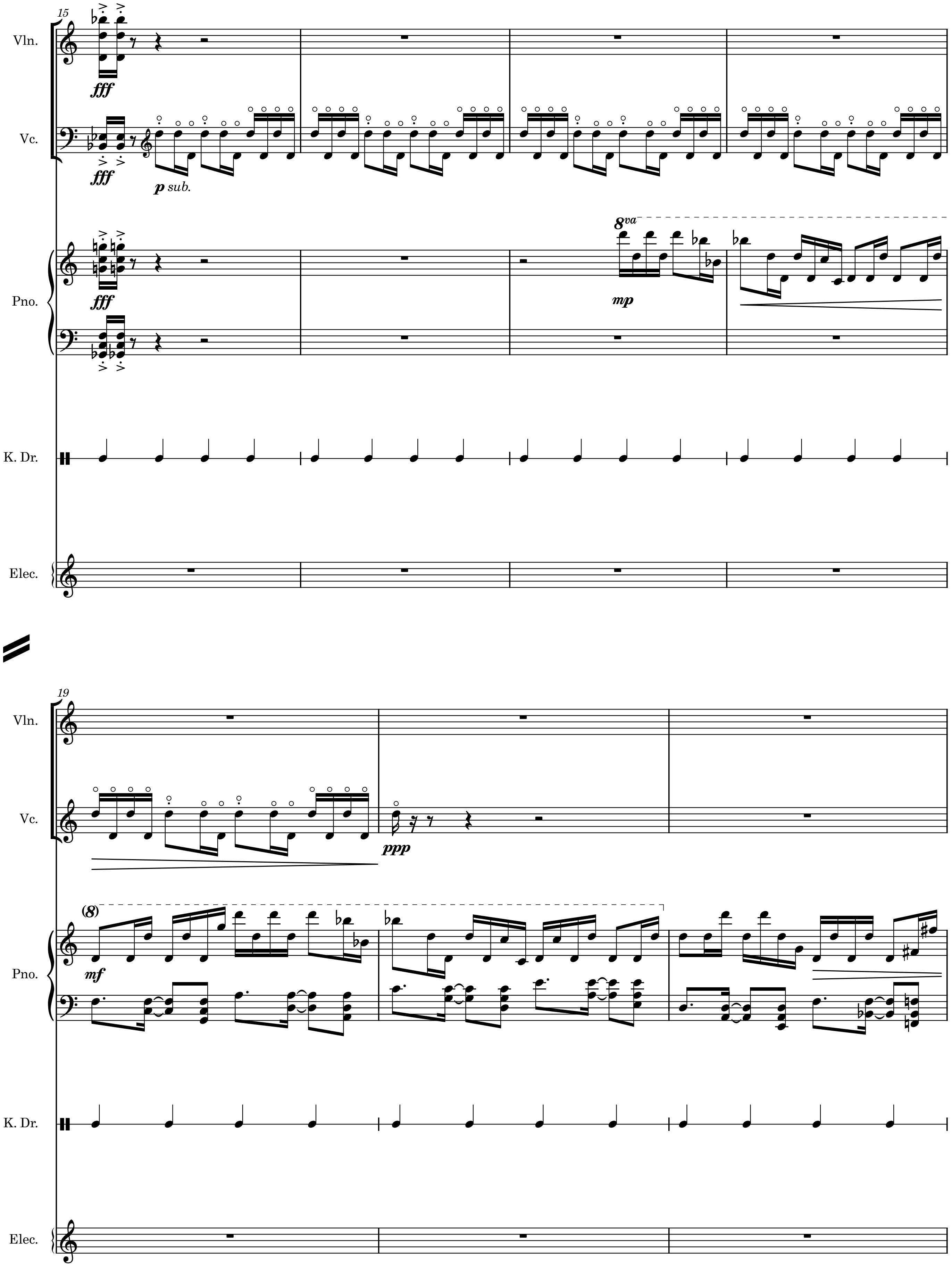
XIII. To Tear the earth in half

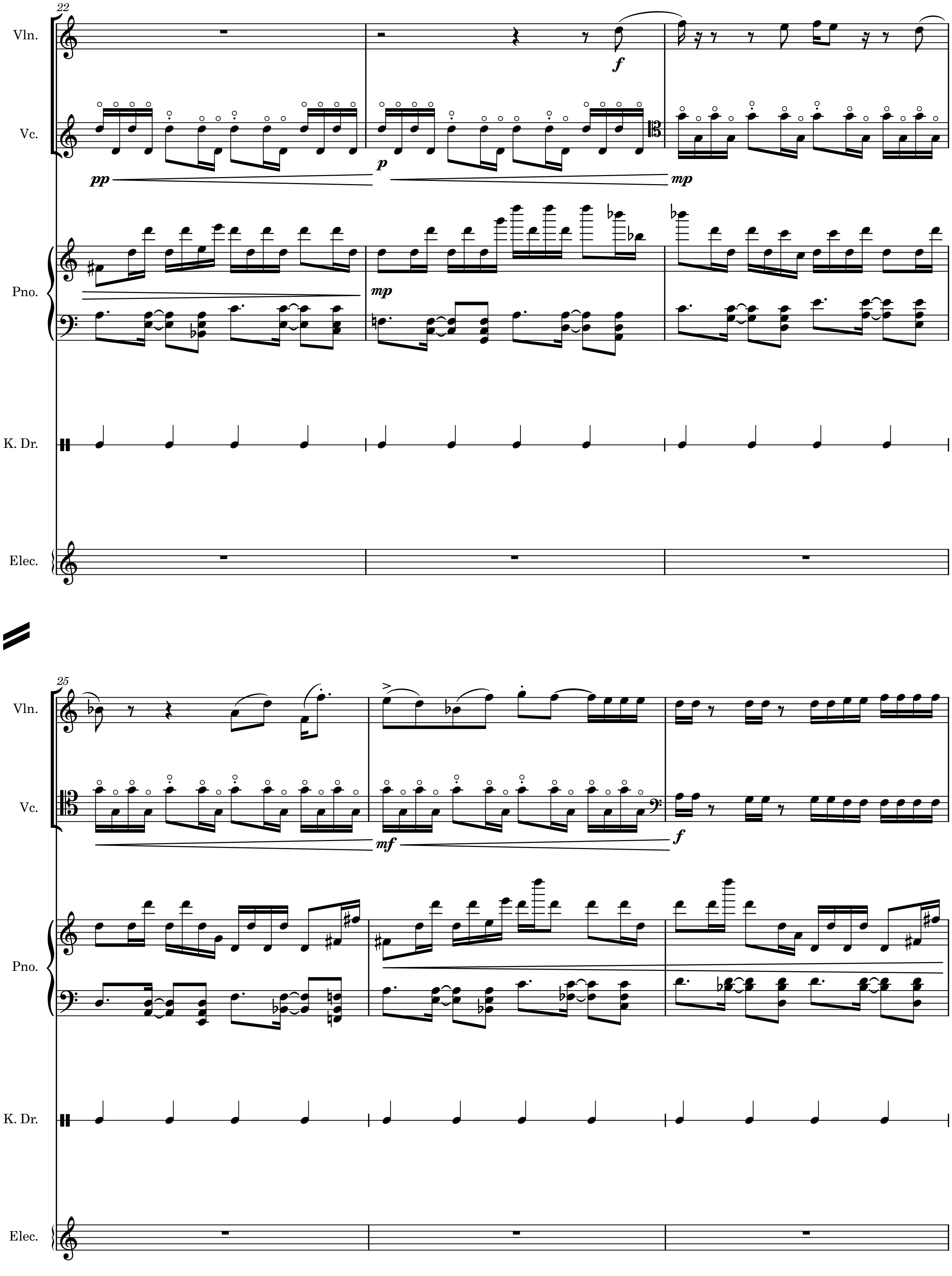

Slow ♩= 56
l.h. pizz. and arco
sul pont.
Violoncello
pp
sim.
mf
mp
f
mp
10
Vc.
3
f
mp
mp
f
nat.
mp
f
III
17
p
l.h. pizz. and arco
fz
mp
mf
22
f
mf
3
p
poco accel.
28
mf
p
[28]
Fast ♩= 112
f
fz
32
f
mp
mf
p
37
3
5
f
mf
sul pont.
ff
Slow ♩= 56
42
p

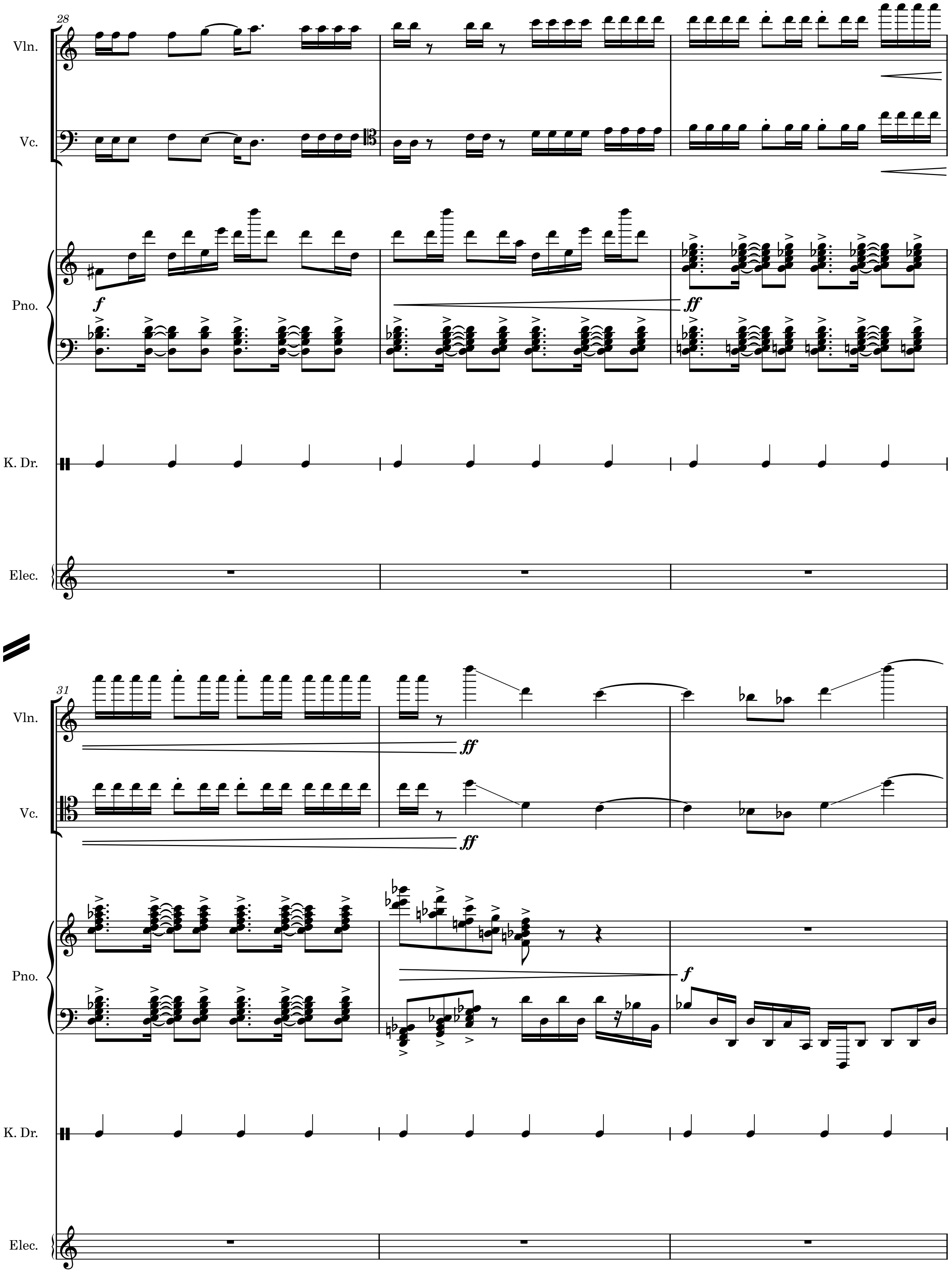
XIV. Dance

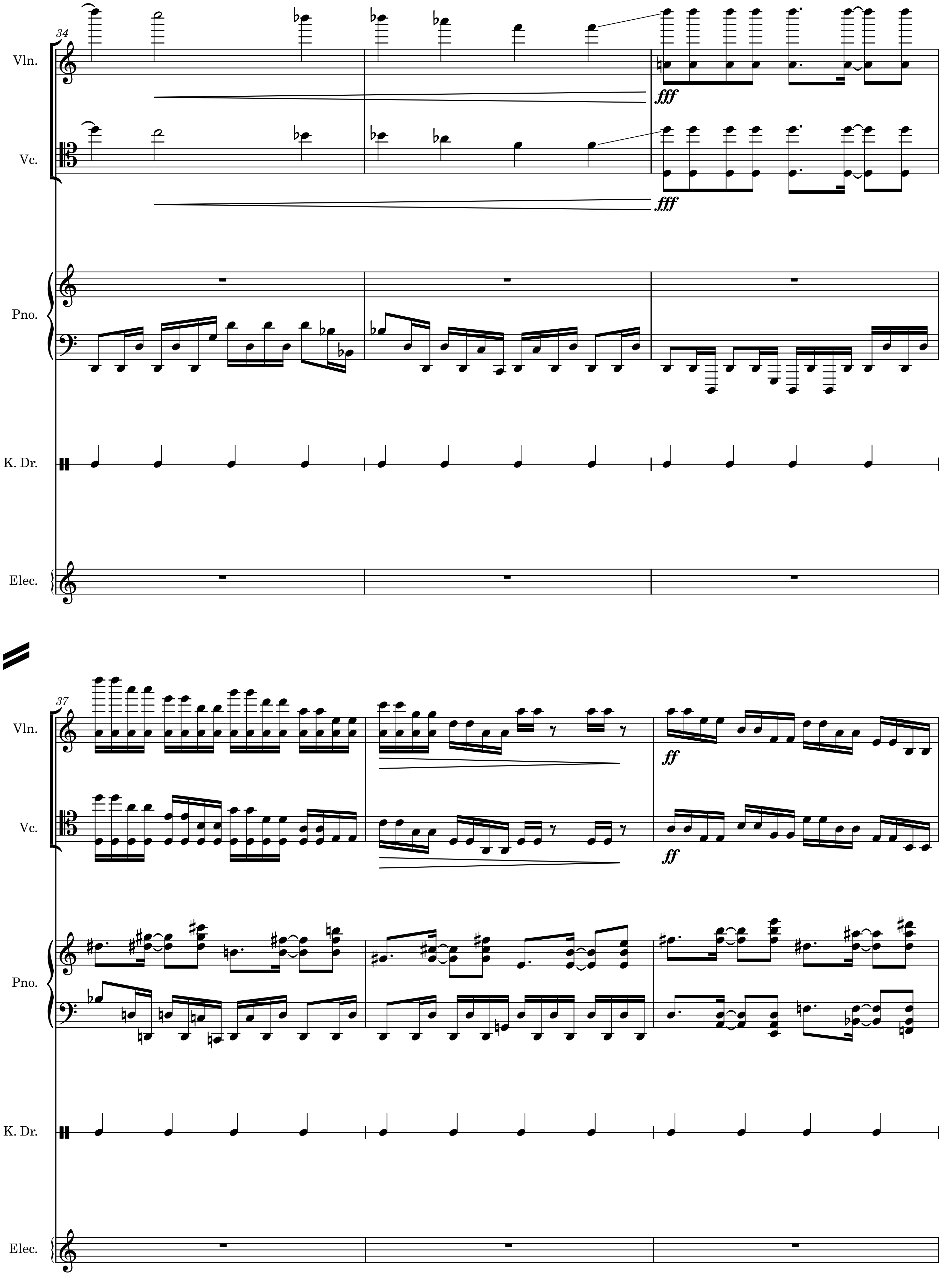

♩= 120
Violin
Violoncello
Piano
Kick Drum
Electronics
Play 'Dance Drums' Sample
p
f
f
M1: 0%
M2: 10%
M3: 20%
4
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
f
sfz
mf
8va
p

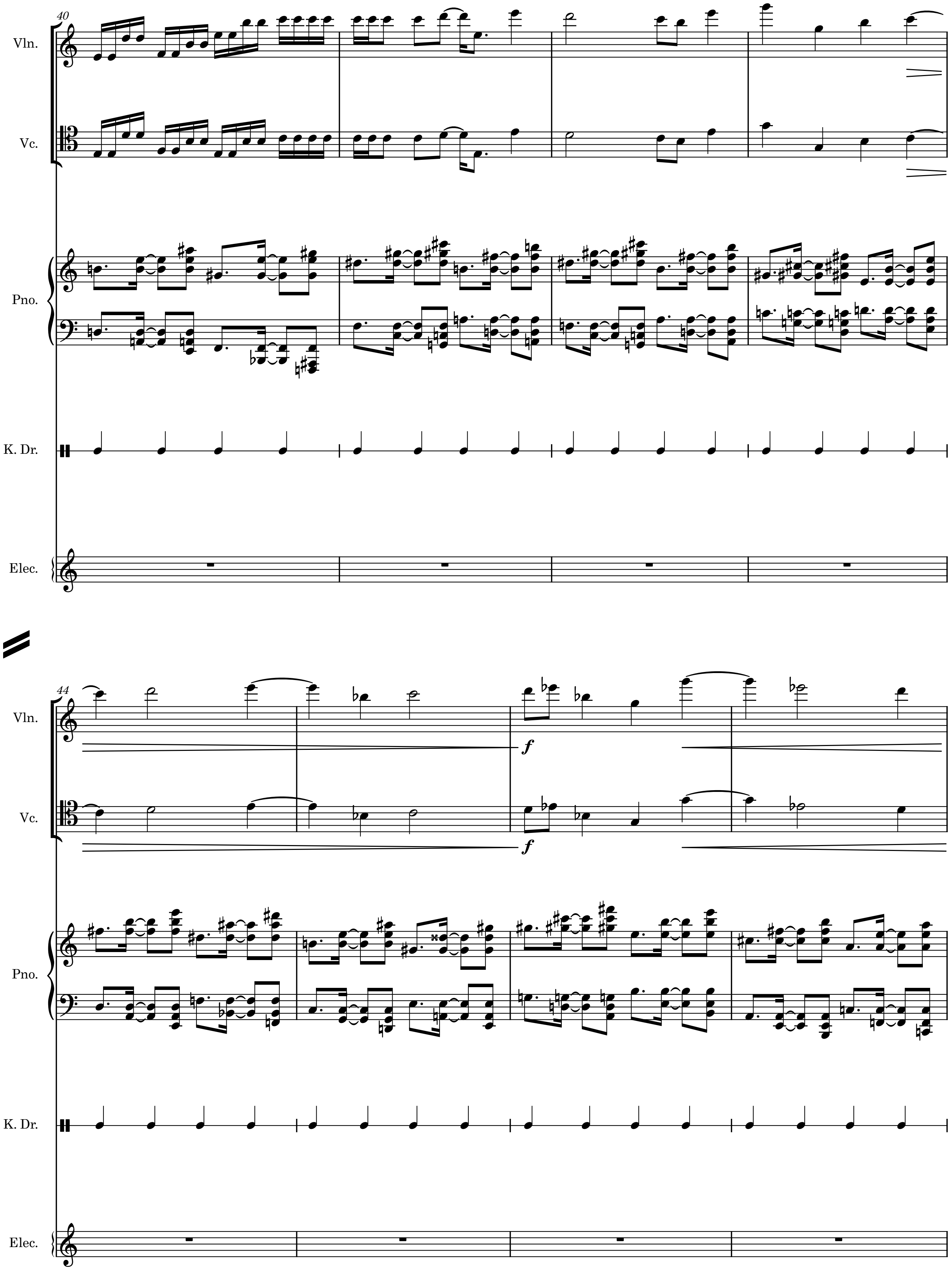

7
Vln.
Vc.
f
(8)
mf
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
11
sfz
sfz
(8)
f
ff

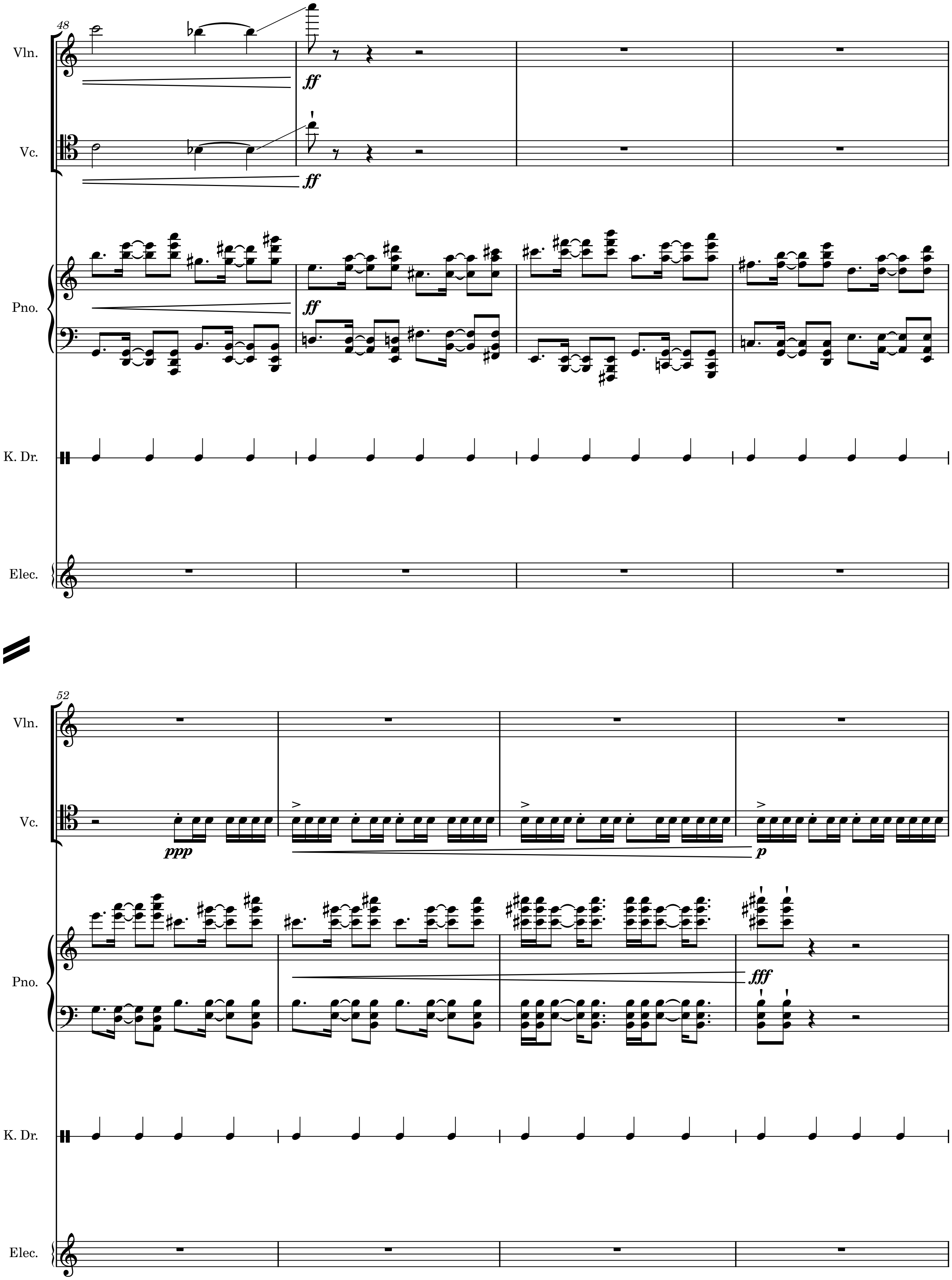

15
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
fff
fff
p sub.
fff
8va
mp
19
(8)
mf
ppp

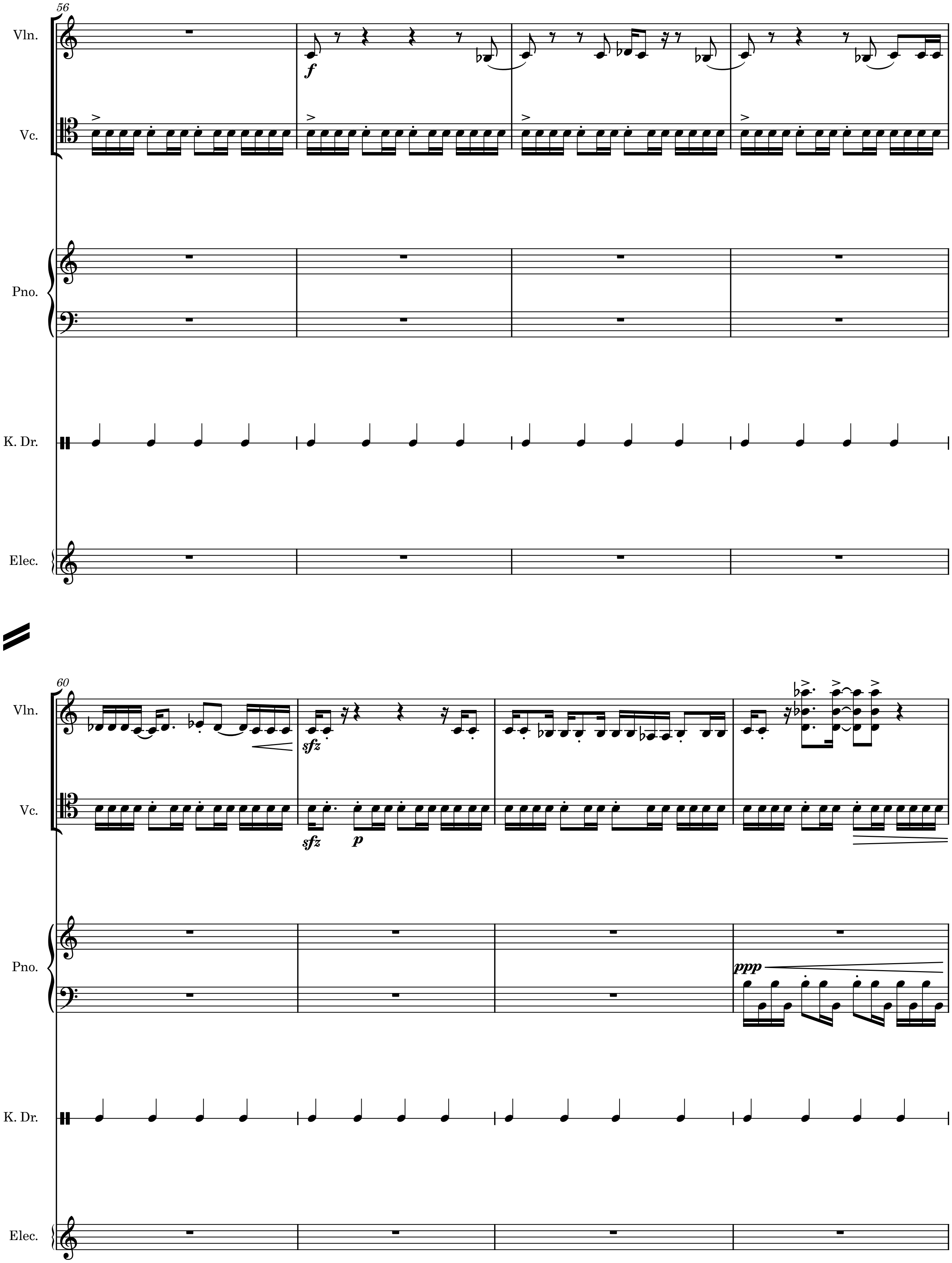

22
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
f
pp
p
mp
mp
25
mf
f

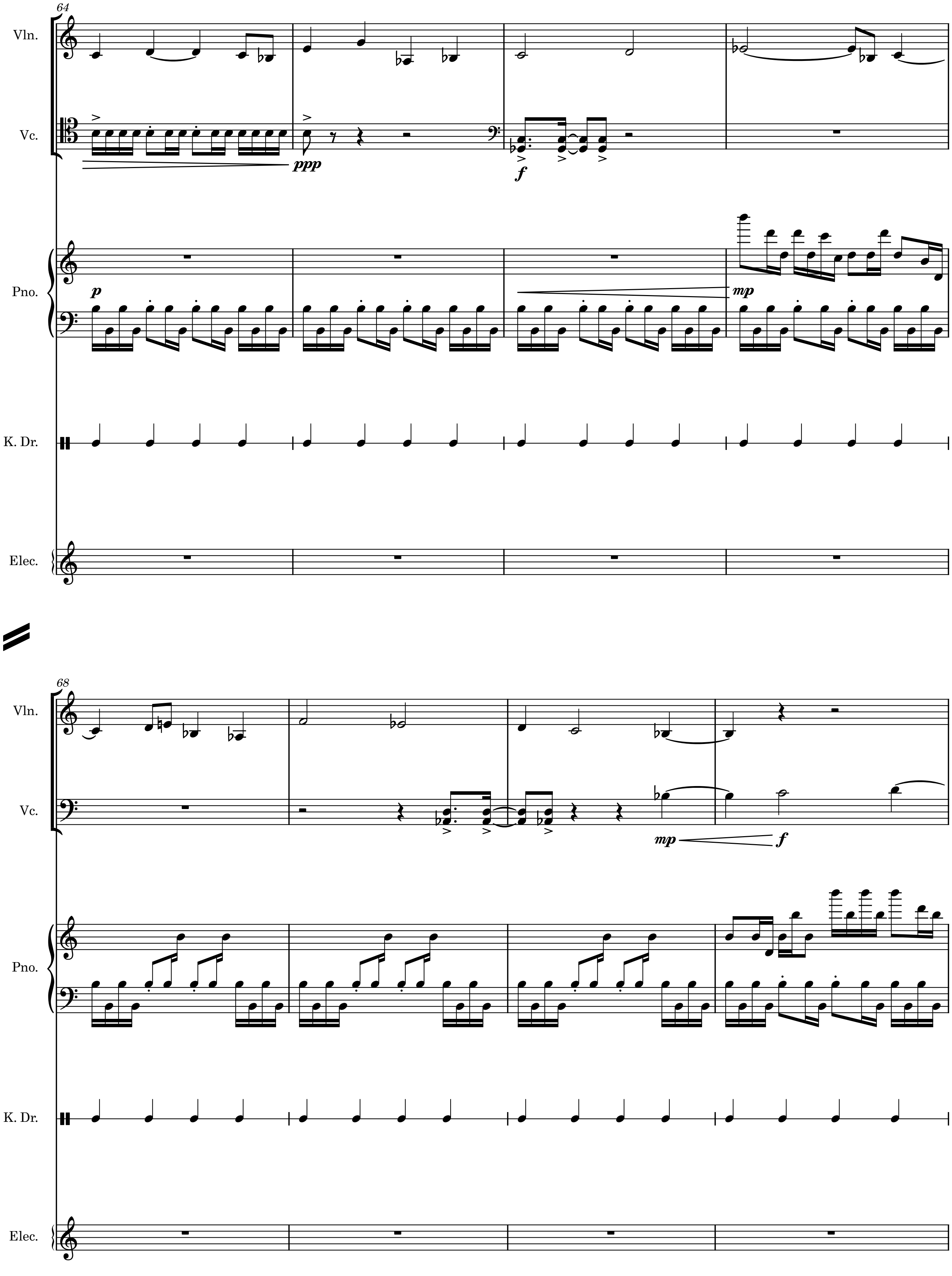

28
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
f
ff
K. Dr.
Elec.
31
Vln.
ff
Vc.
ff
Pno.
f
K. Dr.
Elec.

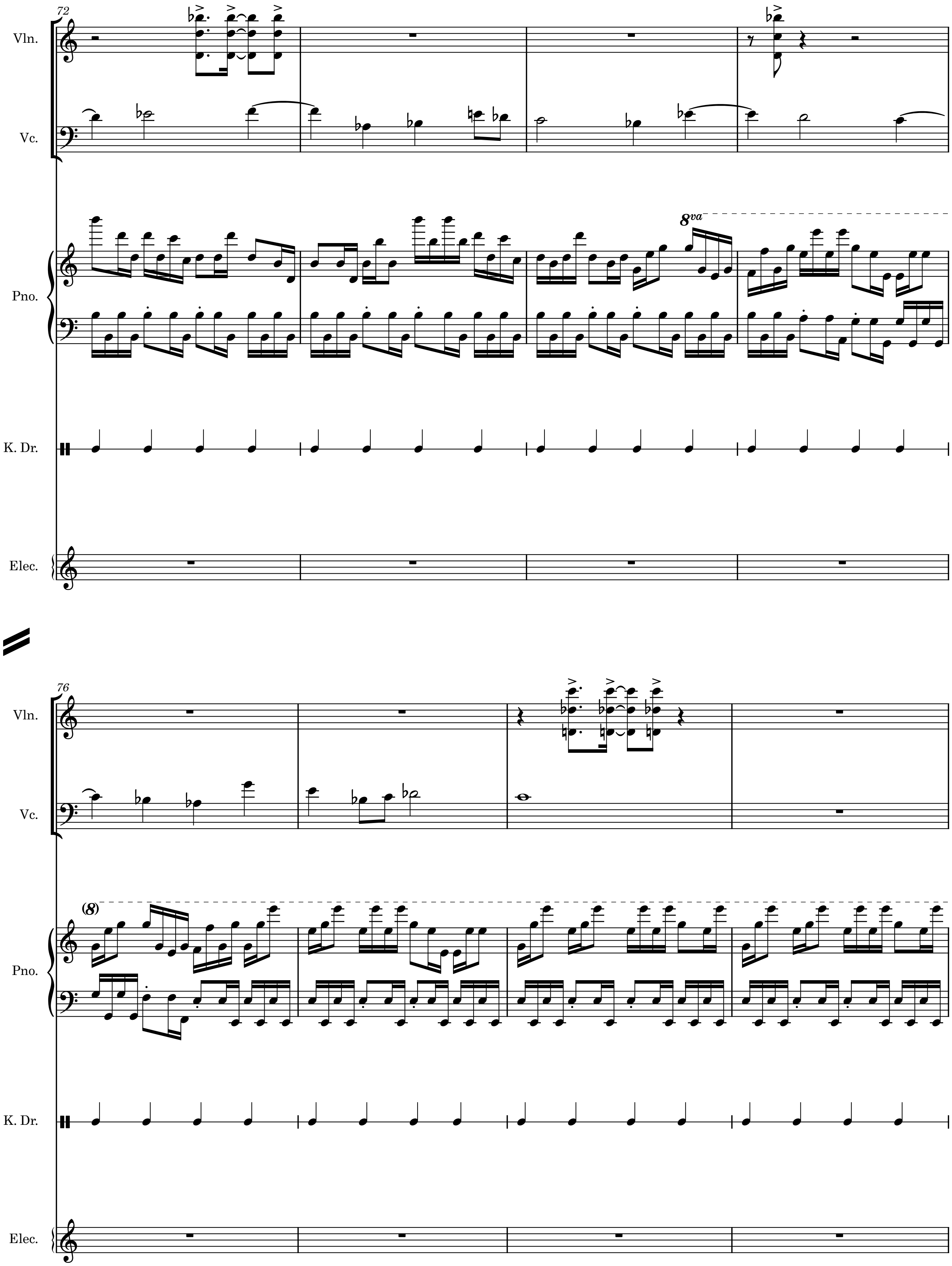

34
Vln.
Vc.
fff
fff
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
37
Vln.
Vc.
ff
ff
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.

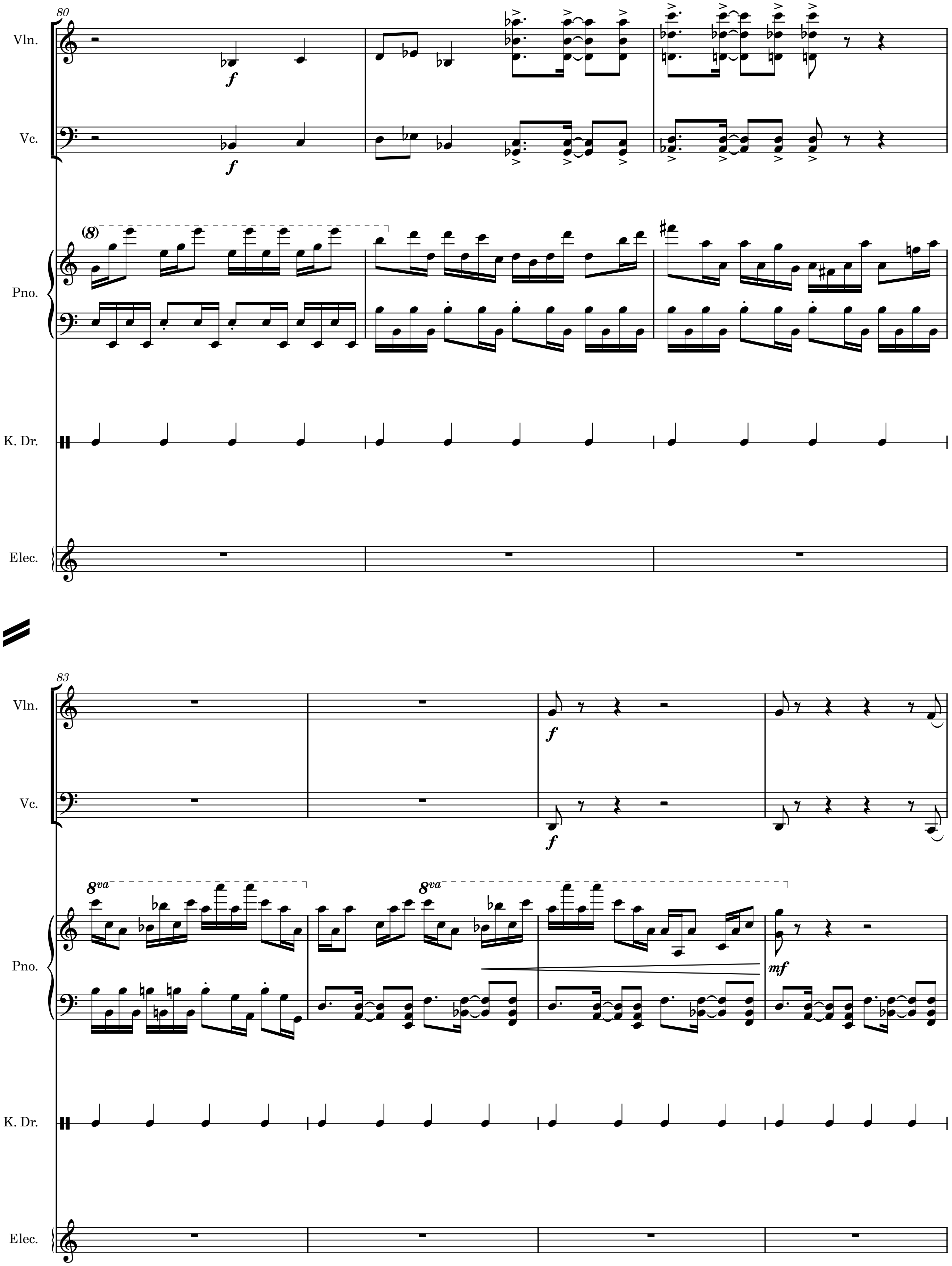

40
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
44
f
f

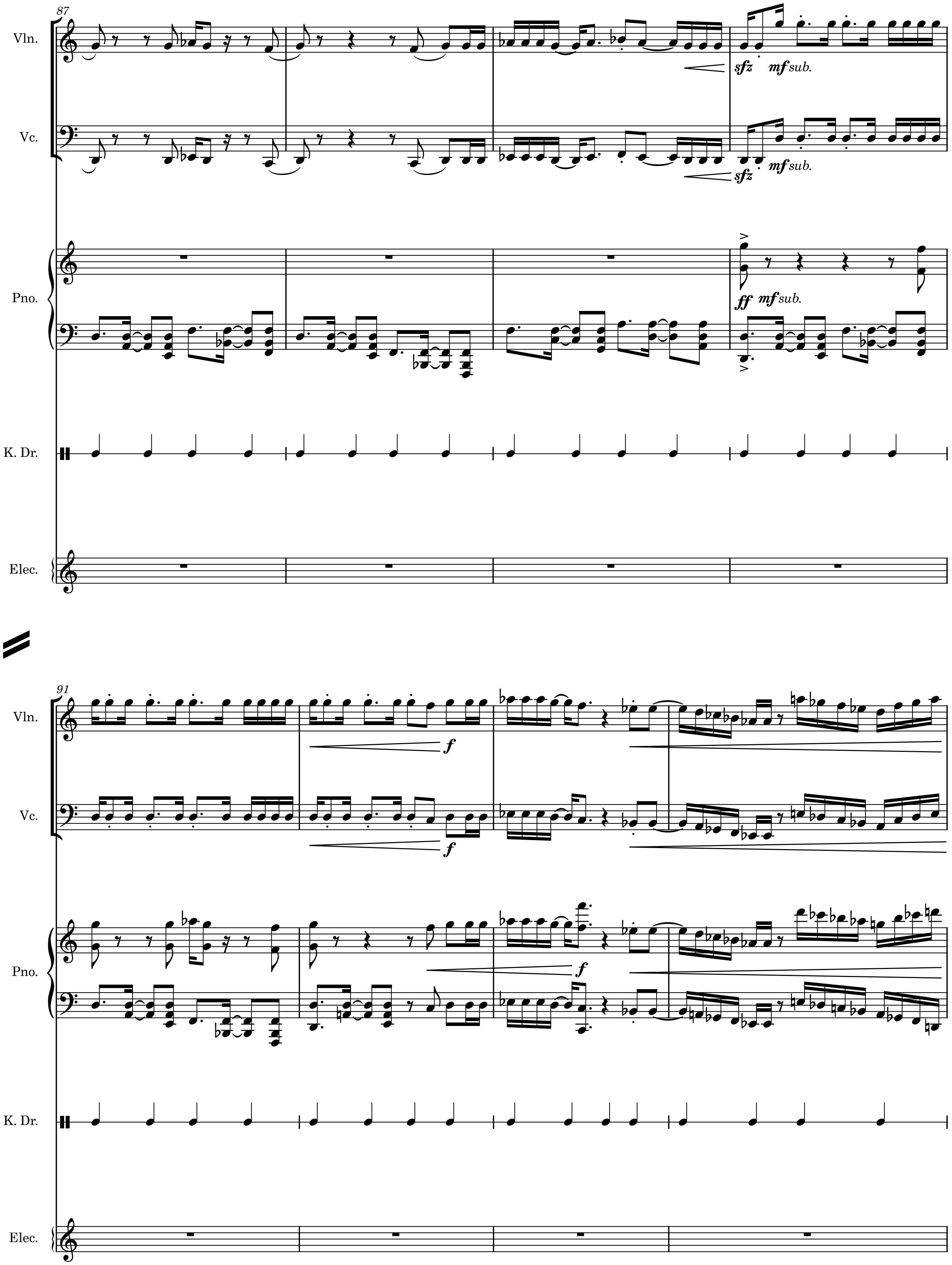

48
Vln.
Vc.
ff
ff
ff
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
52
ppp
p
fff

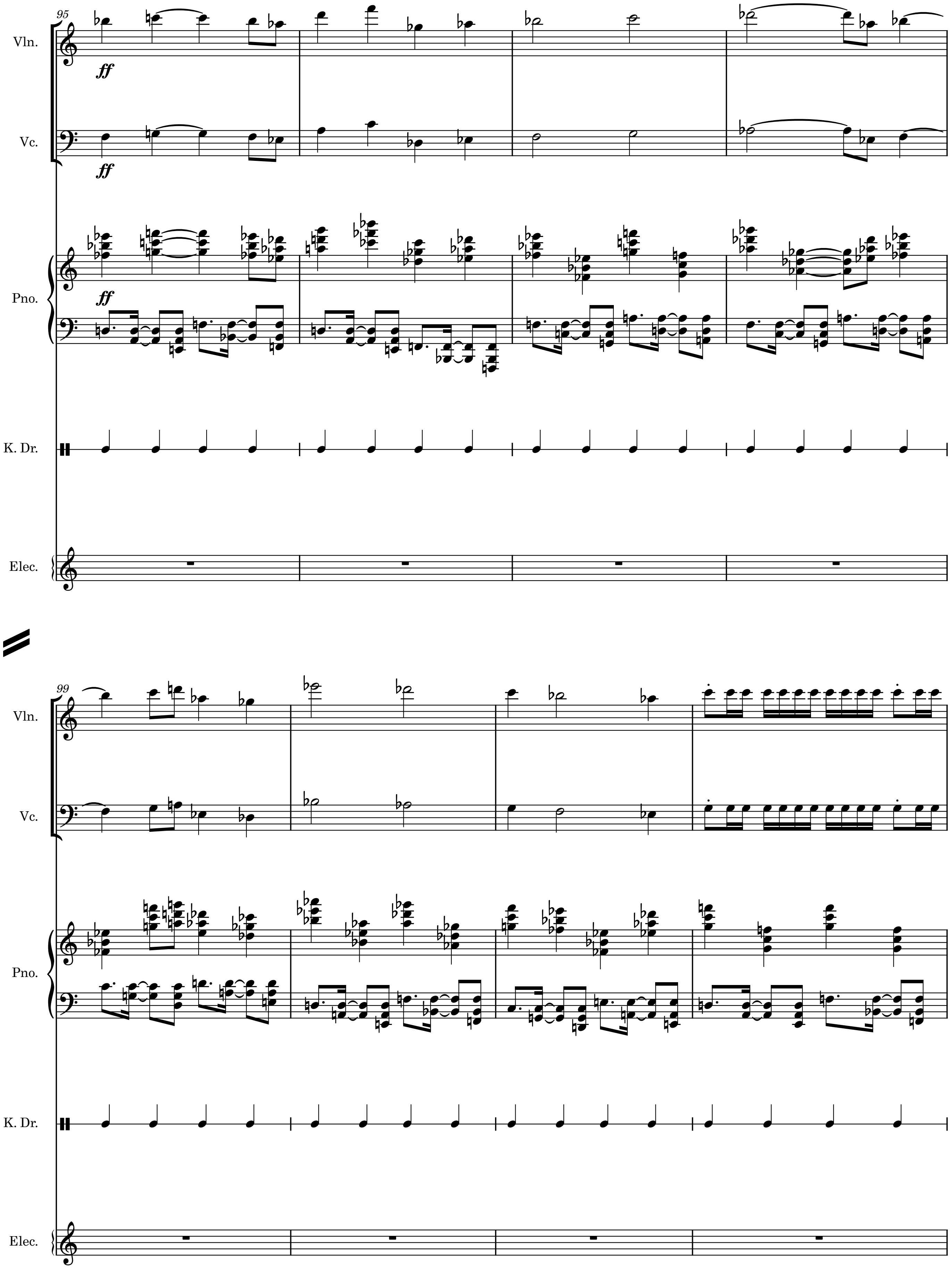

56
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
f
60
sfz
sfz
p
ppp

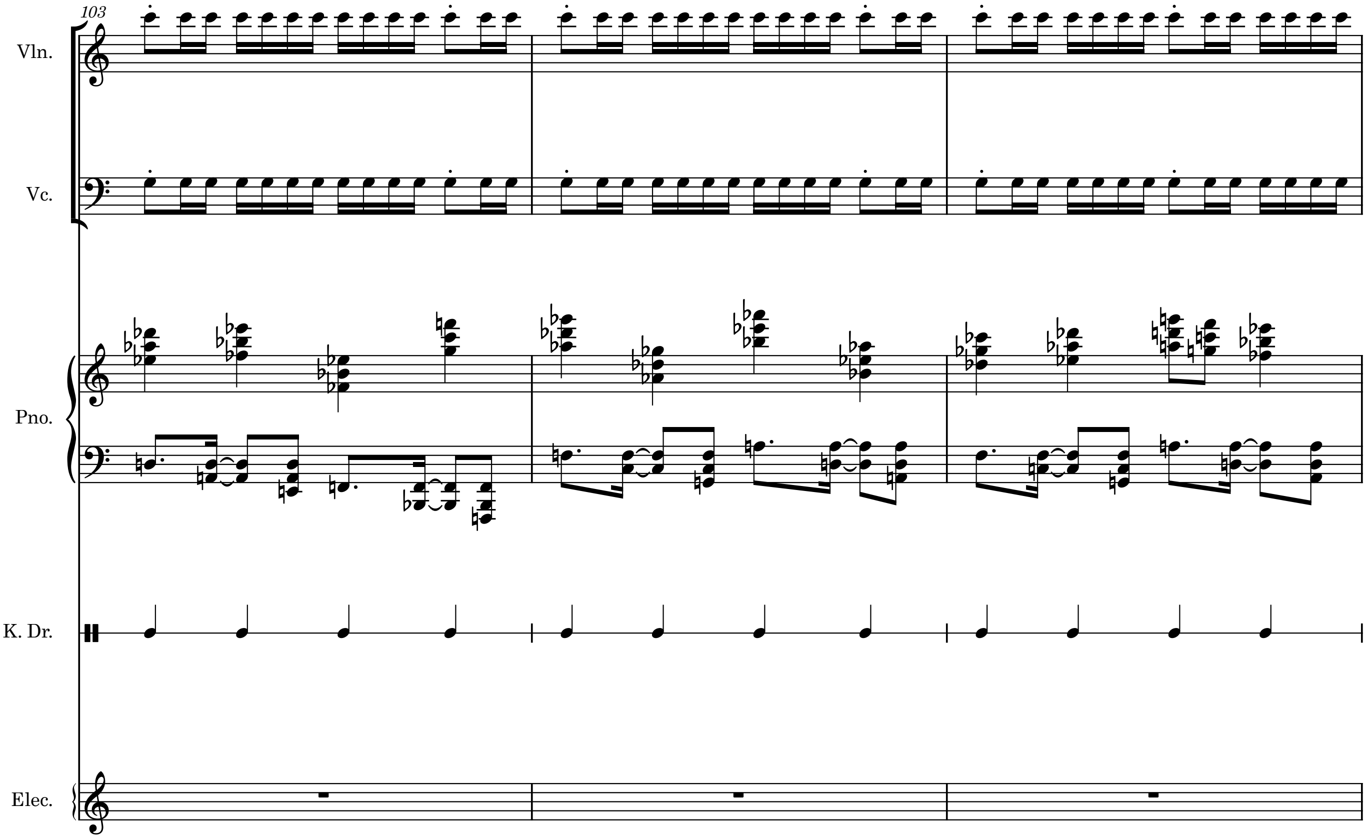

64
Vln.
Vc.
ppp
f
Pno.
p
mp
K. Dr.
Elec.
68
Vln.
Vc.
mp
f
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.

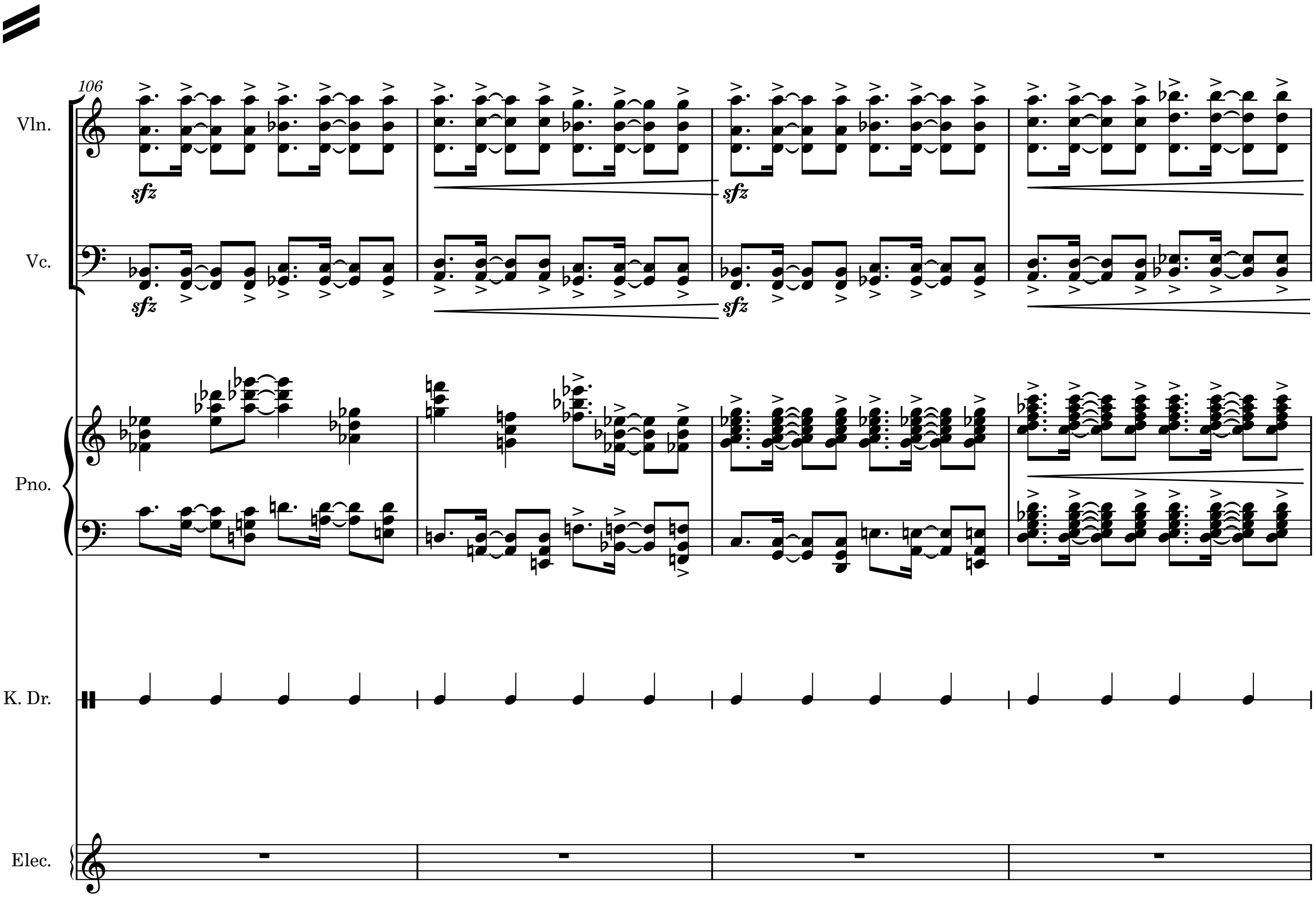

72
Vln.
Vc.
8va
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
76
Vln.
Vc.
(8)
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.

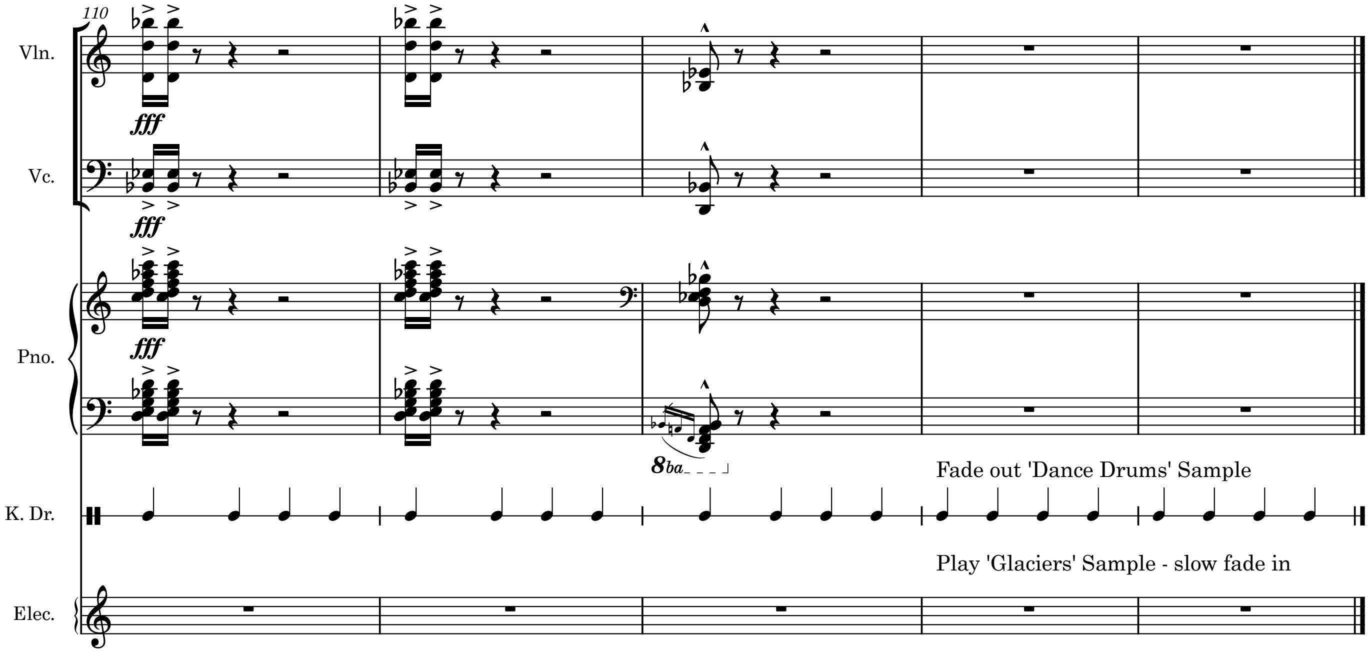

80
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
f
f
(8)
83
f
f
8va
8va
mf


87
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
sfz
mf sub.
sfz
mf sub.
ff
mf sub.
91
f
f
f

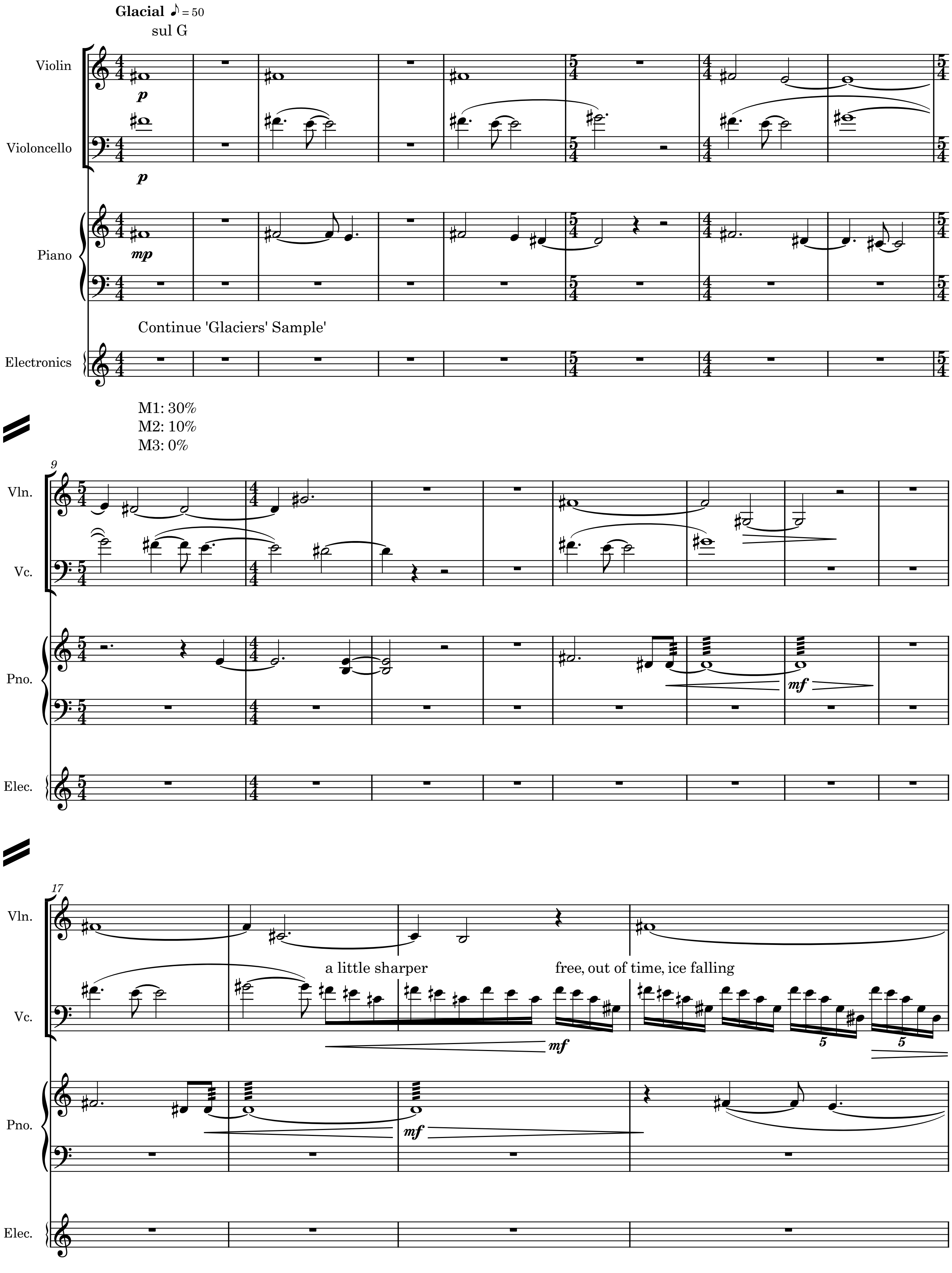

95
Vln.
ff
Vc.
ff
Pno.
ff
K. Dr.
Elec.
99
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.

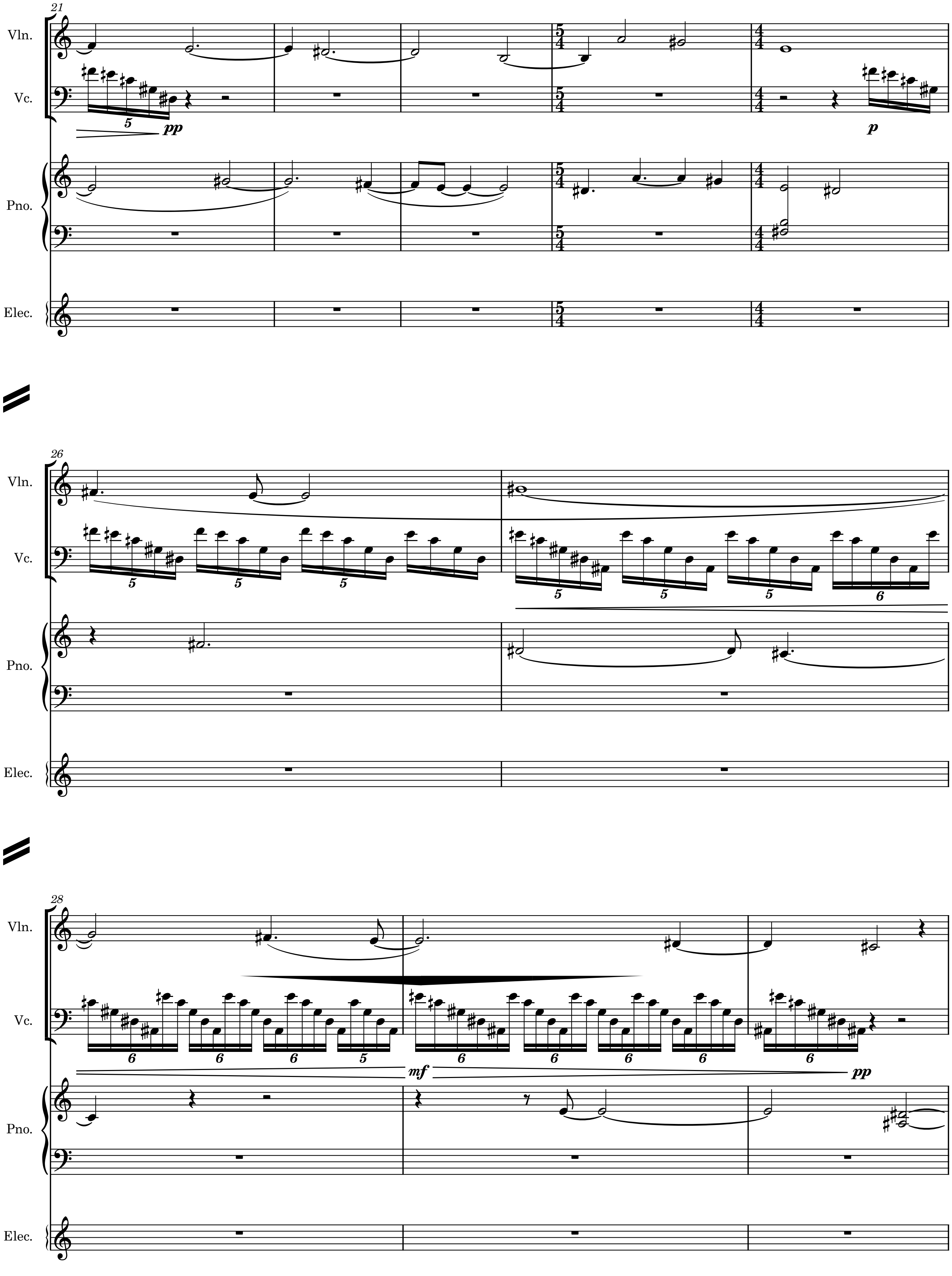

103
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.

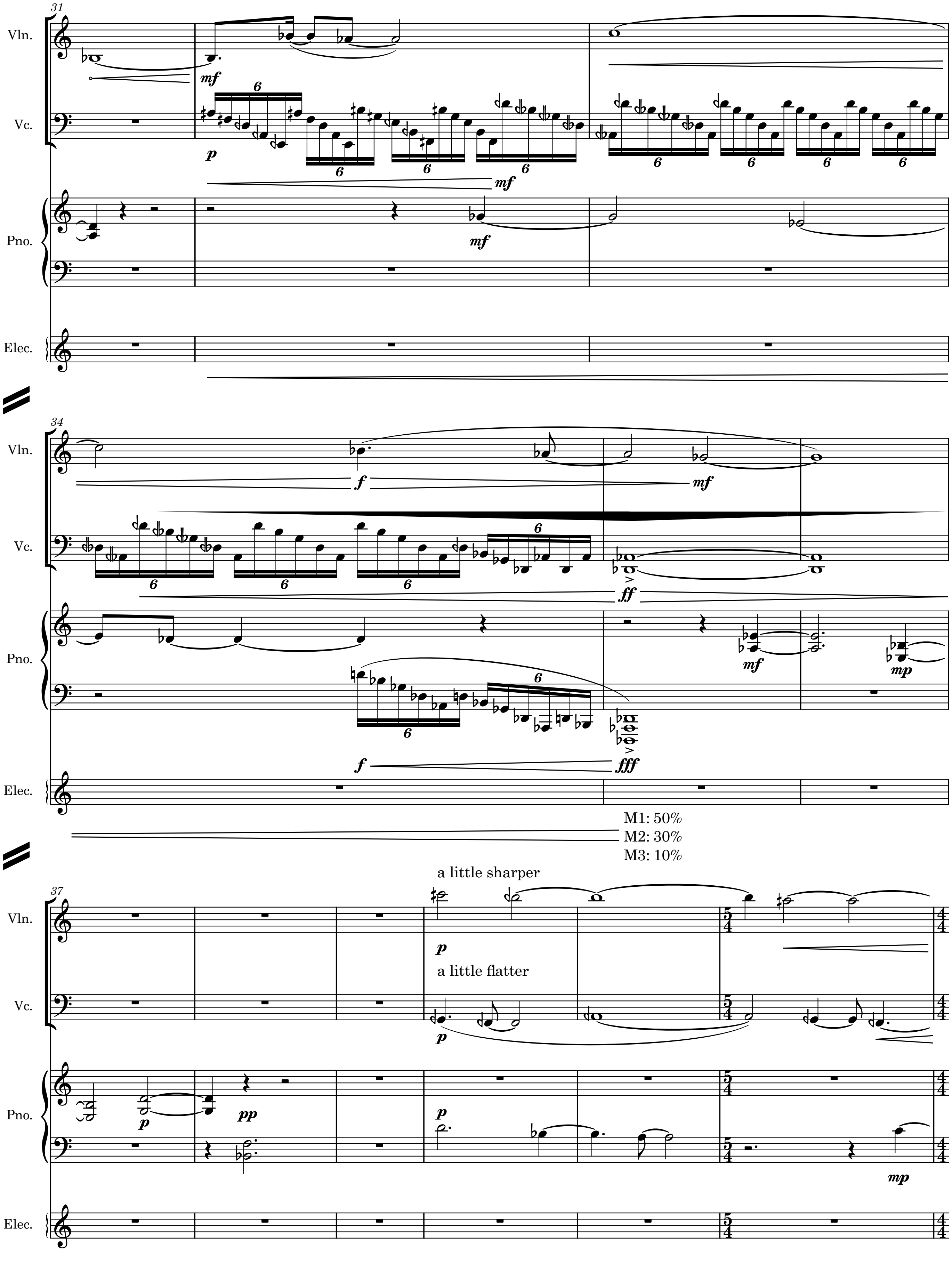

106
Vln.
sfz
sfz
Vc.
sfz
sfz
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.

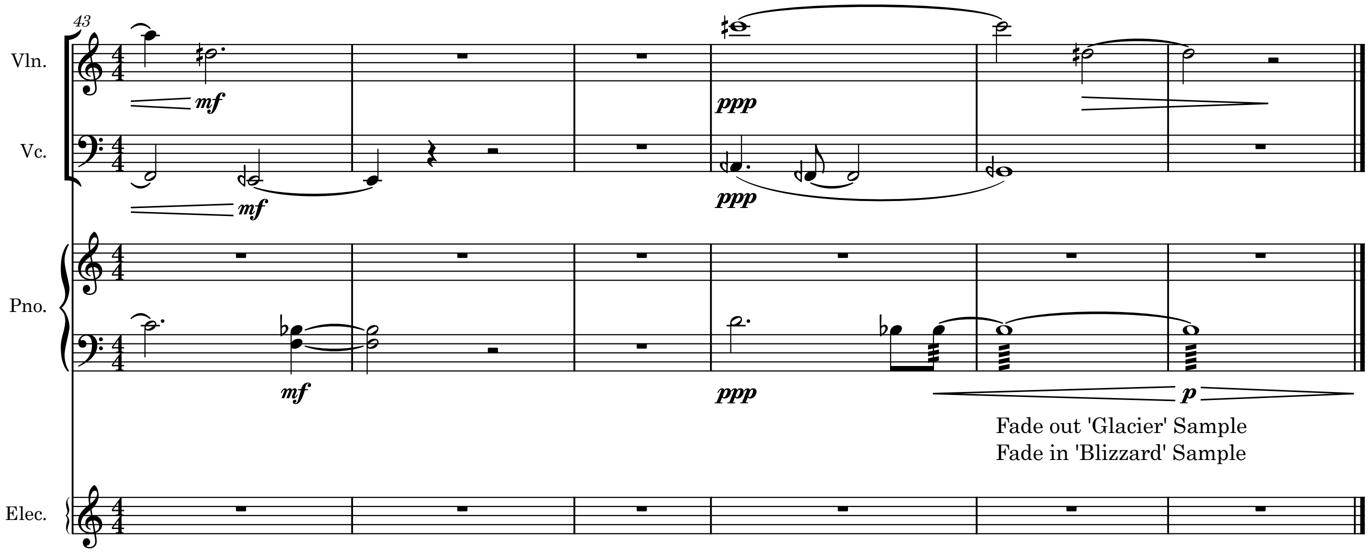

110
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
K. Dr.
Elec.
fff
fff
fff
8ba
Fade out 'Dance Drums' Sample
Play 'Glaciers' Sample - slow fade in

XV. Glaciers Melting

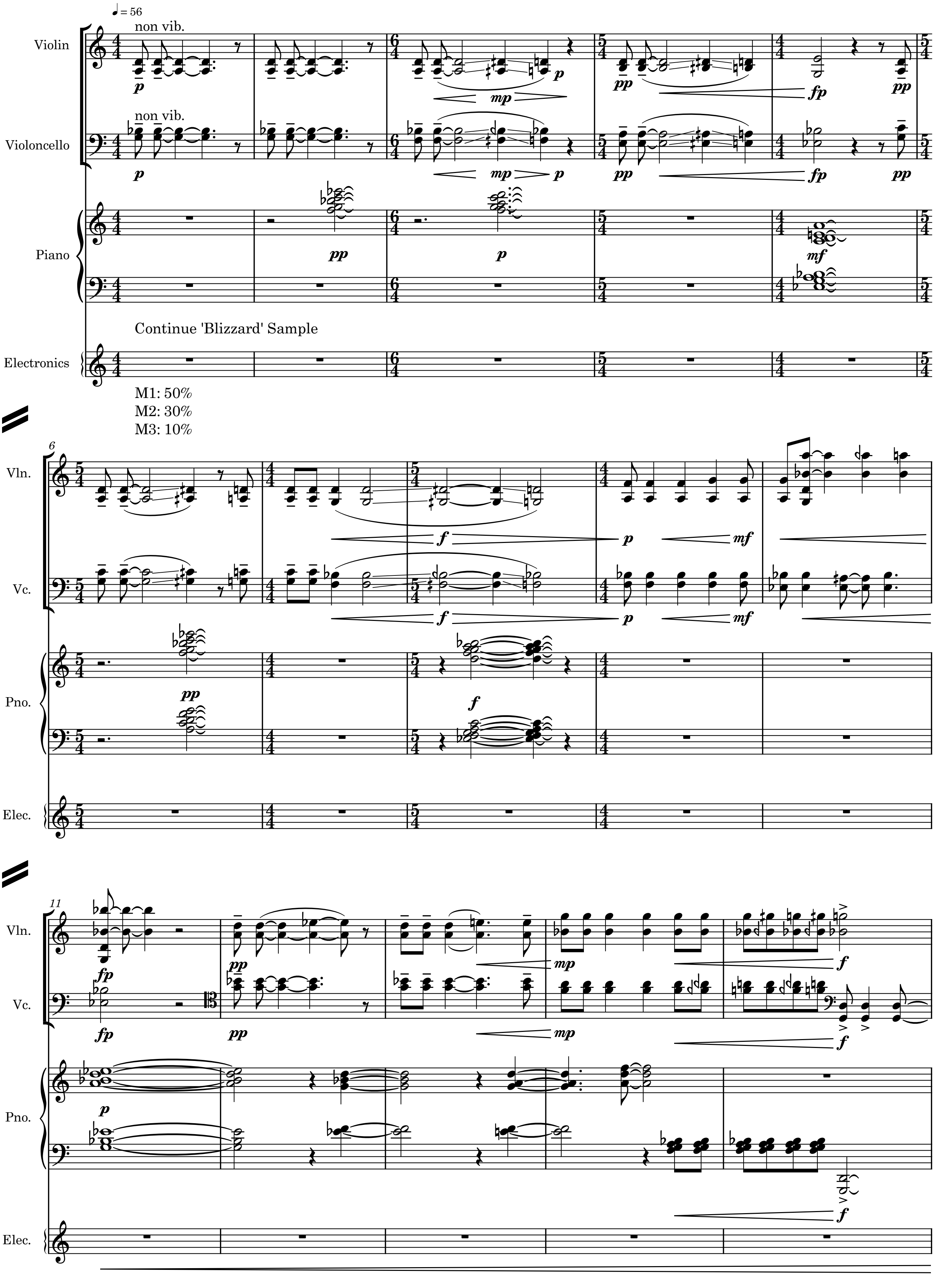

Glacial ♪ = 50
sul G
Violin
Violoncello
p
p
Piano
mp
Continue 'Glaciers' Sample'
Electronics
M1: 30%
M2: 10%
M3: 0%
9
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
mf
Elec.
17
Vln.
a little sharper
free, out of time, ice falling
Vc.
mf
5
5
Pno.
mf
Elec.

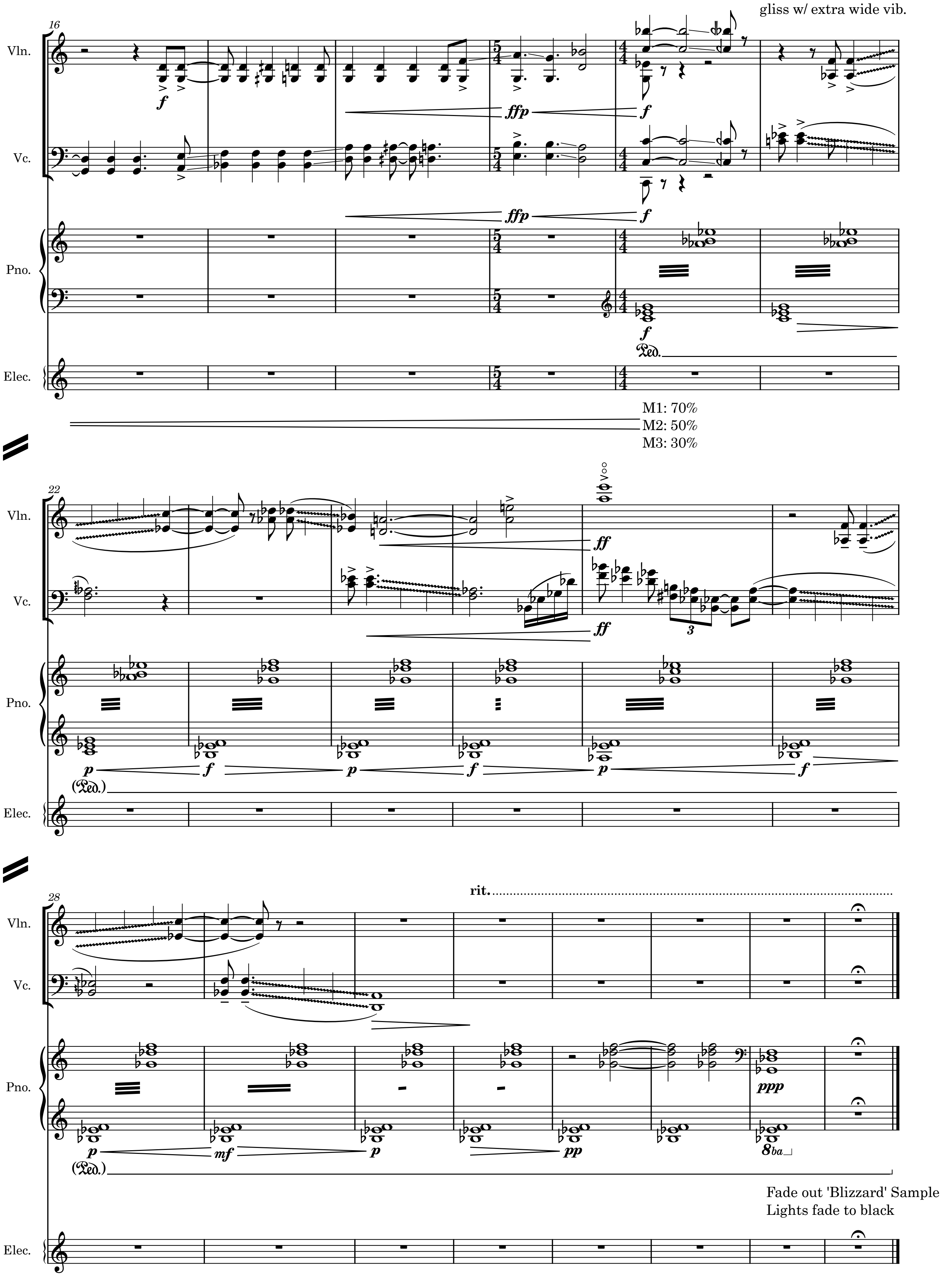

21
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
5
pp
p
26
28
mf
pp
6


31
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
mf
p
6
mf
34
f
mf
ff
mf
mp
f
fff
M1: 50%
M2: 30%
M3: 10%
37
a little sharper
p
a little flatter
p
pp
p
mp
5
4
4
4


43
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
mf
mf
ppp
ppp
mf
ppp
p
Fade out 'Glacier' Sample
Fade in 'Blizzard' Sample

XVI. Blizzard // Avalanche


♩= 56
non vib.
Violin
Violoncello
Piano
Electronics
Continue 'Blizzard' Sample
M1: 50%
M2: 30%
M3: 10%
p
pp
mp
fp
f
mf
6
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
11


gliss w/ extra wide vib.
16
Vln.
Vc.
Pno.
Elec.
f
ffp
f
ffp
f
f
Ped.
M1: 70%
M2: 50%
M3: 30%
22
ff
ff
3
p
f
p
f
p
f
(Ped.)
28
rit.
p
mf
p
pp
ppp
8ba
(Ped.)
Fade out 'Blizzard' Sample
Lights fade to black

APOLLO & MARSYAS

for narrator, two baritones, flute, harp, and electronics

Libretto by Spencer Mason

Music by Devon Bonelli

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Dramatis Personae and Instrumentation

Narrator - Artemis and the Muses
Baritone - Apollo
Baritone - Marsyas

Flute
Harp

Live Electronics

Duration

16 minutes

Libretto by Spencer Mason

ARTEMIS
In a town of cannibal nights and warmonger mollusks,
Who eat babies in oat milk and tear pages of
Keats because his smile was an oil spill
And trees in Tollcross with pagan giggles and
Carcinogenic plasticky hit.

MUSES
Where the young teams ken to do one in
If one does rust and touch as the long
Boys buckle and fuck.

ARTEMIS
For cigarettes lit beneath blood moon or waning,
Entering savasana and iron lung
With a mind as soft as mother's kiss,
And touch like searing scalpel
To make this a kindness
Of polypropylene surgery and scathing, wolfish compliments.
Where the music of reggae and rage and post punk pints to rush
To a breakbeat and life-drawing class,
Using charcoal for class A's and injecting vitamin D when we run dry—
This city of the Rodin sculptures to be found on every continent
A bronze cast of man and his dog mewling like a once tuned piano.
A decade of perennial neglect and stifling cuddles at the mantelpiece
Holding the dust of a love that would be remembered forever and

MUSES
Now you don't know her middle name, but her birthday is the day
After your current partners.

ARTEMIS
This city
Of light pollution and crimson cloud,
A wilting fox
Skinty ribs sticking like she was only fed on tricks
That nae cunt bothered to teach.

ARTEMIS
And the skinny autumn
Solidifies these puddles of minds into tar
And steals the dexterity tongues
Until a nation is as agile as a leech.

Meet Apollo.

My gormless twin,
My gallus kin,
My dreichit inevitability.

APOLLO
In the centurial moment,
On the eastern acropolis, where Helios's final smile
Played gold over the gorbal's closes,
And multies and post-modernist sins.
Athena dropped the panpipes, after our laughs, all malice and rancour,
Had made her scorn her own godly, puffing cheeks.

ARTEMIS
This satyr, boastful Marsyas, the ruefully musical,
Drew the metal from big sog dirt like
He'd found lavender on an olive branch,
And holding it to his lips, beneath a nose broad
His landing pad for ultraviolet.
This disciple of Dionysian debauchery,
Clad in merlot and cannaboid hue,
Made eternal melodies of this screech,
Made chaos into tune so erroneous
That my midnight pack echoed its woes in prayers of ceasefire,
yet my brother, new to notes of reed.

MUSES
Stopped.
Listened.
Grinned.

Libretto by Spencer Mason

ARTEMIS
Under Selene’s kiss, his plague-filled smile
Evoked my scheme.
‘Call Calliope,’ I whispered to him.
‘No, call them all.’
And I left, met the musical martyr
Barrelling down six pints of black.

MARSYAS
In a beer hall whose walls screamed:
'Welcome to the wonk brigade.' Where the most
Prolific of bam patrols blasted blasphemy,
Like dad rock choruses
And popped pills like paracetamol

ARTEMIS
‘Oh, Mighty Marsyas,’ I said unto his stupor,
His face a sack of peeled clementines,
‘Think you, oh majesty of melodic intrigue.
Whose riffing and groove do make a God pine-
entreat blessings from a God of such a music as yours?’

MUSES
Would your fingers pull the strings of his ear?

ARTEMIS
And at last, all connivance and fat goad,
Could you best my brother? I spoke,
Sliding gin and slim
To swim and sift among the other spirits in his stomach,
All wit and no thought.

MARSYAS
Aye, then, sister of the sun,
I take gauntlet of your competishishisishon

APOLLO
Into starlight of sisterhood’s domain, he fell.
Till my eye cascaded his cheek.
Nursing his anvil brain, Marsyas wandered,
Through limpet alley and garish scaffolding,
To a street he’d never seen.

ARTEMIS
This crack in the city.
And found in the alcove the ten of them,
Suddenly surrounded by a skyline and
Nine muses and one God and no way out.
And I sat with my thickest mane in palm, pack leading
She-wolf that had fed Romulus and the loser.

MUSES
All faces watched.
And in Marsyas plundered,
To his trial by lyre.

MARSYAS
Morsht Vore, I mumbled,
Palm under a JCB digger in a hangover shitemare.
Peely wally pale cheek and knees concave,
Bated breath as, oh yes, Apollo
Twinkled the last string into tune.

MARSYAS
Flexing these mortal fingers to dance like
Cig butts in the breeze.
Cheeks Buckfast, crimson, and bulging
Like bubonic warts.
The sumptuous sunlight standing opposite
Turned to a diminished chord
And I saw, perhaps-

Libretto by Spencer Mason

MUSES
As each of nine admired the great god
Apollo's growing, gargantuan member
Thinking-

APOLLO
I would swim in your smile even if it were the Styx.

MUSES/
And we watched as Eros climbed through a pore
Betwixt the ribs of the golden.

MARSYAS
Mad bloated effort,
Hypodermic syringes in trills and hammer-offs.
Frugal he lunged, reaching crescendo.

APOLLO
Stumbling into a drunken curtsy and enamoured grin.

MARSYAS
But I was tricked
For the muses' final challenge was to play and sing as one
To make harmony of chord and baritone and force my failure
To grow a second mouth.

MUSES
From gallus to gaunt, groping to haunted
As he realised, that even mighty Apollo,
Infinite but powerless to destiny
As dawn is to dusk.

ARTEMIS
Oh, frivolous twin,
Who would rather finger fuck this fool,
Would instead be forced to flay.
A swarming screech as the scalpel sank
Peeling skin from bone like tide from sand.

MUSES
And we Muses dropped tears we played
As the sweat of feigning decision
As we saw Apollo draw real blood, not ichor,
Making the final incision.

APOLLO
And horror,
I, made plague filled lover,
Took up the saggy bag of lacking skeleton
And swept the death-sheet 'round my shoulder.

MUSES
Like he wished it were the shirt of Nessus.

MARSAYAS
Dressed only in silenced cicadas,
Awaiting Chiron on the riverbank,
no skin to bubble against the cold of hell.

ARTEMIS
And brought to this glow of gold a crimson flood,
Pores drinking every drop they could
Of this mortal better's blood.

Performance Notes

Apollo & Marsyas is a collaborative piece with poet Spencer Mason. This sixteen-minute musical drama was performed with RNCM musicians Callum McCandless (playing Apollo), Will Jowett (playing Marsyas), Sinead Walsh (flute), and Ellie Wood (harp), along with Spencer narrating, and myself playing live electronics, on 25 April 2023. This 16-minute work explores themes of competition, societal pressure, shame, and isolation within the queer community. Drawing on *The Velvet Rag*e (Downs 2005) and *Out of the Shadows* (Odets 2019), *Apollo & Marsyas* examines how society, as abstracted through the Greek chorus, influences and condemns queer love.

Our research to construct the libretto began with Ovid's transcription of the tale, appearing in his Metamorphoses (circa 8 CE, Book 6, Chapter II, Lines 382-400) and Diodorus Siculus's and Hyginus's versions, both dating around the 1st Century BCE. These detail how Athena carelessly discards her aulos (an early Greek wind instrument). Marsyas, a satyr, finds the instrument and becomes proficient in playing it. In a drunken stupor and egged on by an angry Athena, Marsyas challenges Apollo, who played an Ancient Greek harp called the lyre, to a musical duel to be judged by the Muses. The nine Muses were part of the Greek pantheon (sisters and daughters of Zeus) and additionally described as Apollo's lovers in several myths (I am certain they judged this battle fairly…). At the battle's climax, Apollo sings while playing the lyre, an impossible task for Marsyas on the aulos. Unsurprisingly, Marsyas loses to the literal God of Music and is nailed to a tree. Marsyas's skin is ceremoniously flayed off by Apollo, a punishment for the satyr's arrogance in challenging a god.

Our research for Apollo & Marsyas included these Greek classics as well as contemporary retellings, notably James Merrill's *Marsyas* (1958), and Stephen Fry's The Mythos Suite (Fry and Wiseman, 2020). Both of us were taken by Fry's storybook-like approach, calling to mind other pieces for narrator and voice written for children's audiences such as Prokofiev's Peter and the Wolf and Britten's Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra. Contrasting the gruesome nature of the story, Fry's retelling explores how thematic violence can take on many forms.

We decided to write an inversion of these pieces; we would create something clearly placed in the modern era, yet still retaining these recollections and phantoms of Greek antiquity. This works as a tie-in to Halberstam's queer temporality; modernity and history are compressed into one story, exemplifying temporal drag, where past and present interact in a dynamic flow. This invokes an accretive model, where each of these elements is continually reordered, and a non-temporal theme emerges.

This piece was performed for the 2023 Rosamund Prize at the Royal Northern College Music where it was awarded the winning prize. The artistic team wishes to thank all the individuals involved in this piece's creation and the panel of judges at RNCM and Manchester Metropolitan University.

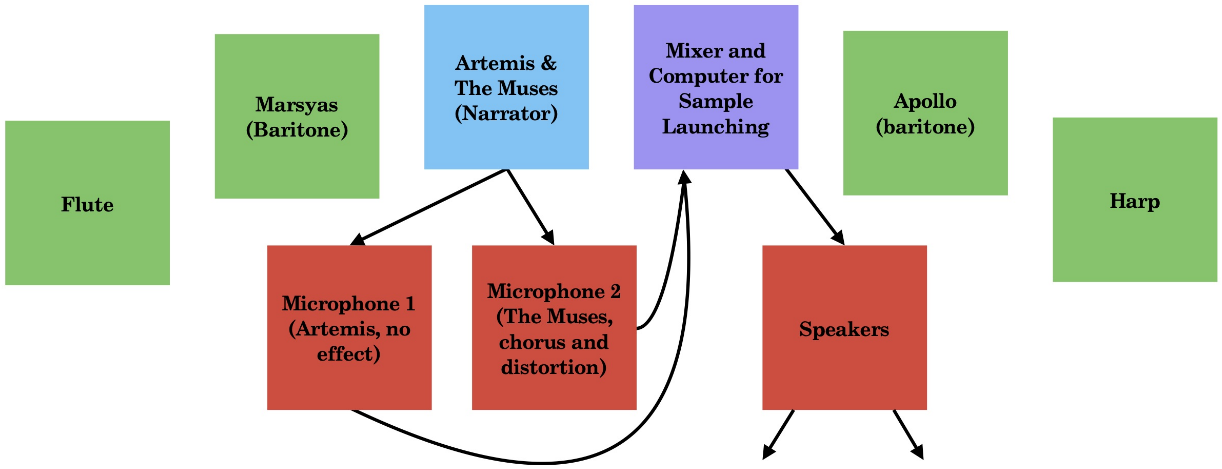
Electronics

Ableton Project File

A download of *Apollo & Marsyas*'s Ableton Project File is available at the composer's website www.devonbonelli.com/downloads. This includes all samples and audio examples of sonic colour/palette. In lieu of this, a DAW -less setup is possible using a sampler, such as an Elektron Octotrak. In such a case, the samples may be downloaded from the composer's website and imported into the performers' gear of choice. This score is intentionally vague to allow for each individual performance to adapt to their own location/acoustics/ audeince/engineer . If any questions arise, please reach out to the composer from their website, and they will respond to any assistance ncessary.

Routing for Electronics

Apollo, Marsyas, harp, and flute are unamplified and unprocessed. The narrator's voice is amplified using two microphones. When speaking roles as 'Artemis', the microphone is uneffected. When speaking as 'The Muses', the microphone has a light chorusing and distortion applied. The routing specifics are as shown:


Flute
Marsyas (Baritone)
Artemis & The Muses (Narrator)
Mixer and Computer for Sample Launching
Apollo (baritone)
Harp
Microphone 1 (Artemis, no effect)
Microphone 2 (The Muses, chorus and distortion)
Speakers

Samples and Mixing

The samples (mentioned in the score as 'Harp' Sample, 'Flute' Sample, etc.) are all accessible within the Ableton Live Set. These samples come as either pre-rendered tracks that may be played in their entirety OR as loops with live processing modulating the sonic characteristics. These two versions are reflected in the Ableton Scenes 1-40 (rendered tracks) and Scenes 50-90 (looping tracks with macros). The only samples that are tempo-synced are the drum loops in Mvmt V. These samples are all uncanny imitations of the acoustic instruments and evoke distorted human voices. These samples (and microphones from the Narrator) should be mixed as to be the same volume as their acoustic counterparts, sounding as an extension of the unamplified performers.

Contents

I.. 9

II...................................... 12

III..................................... 18

IV...................................... 20

V....................................... 23

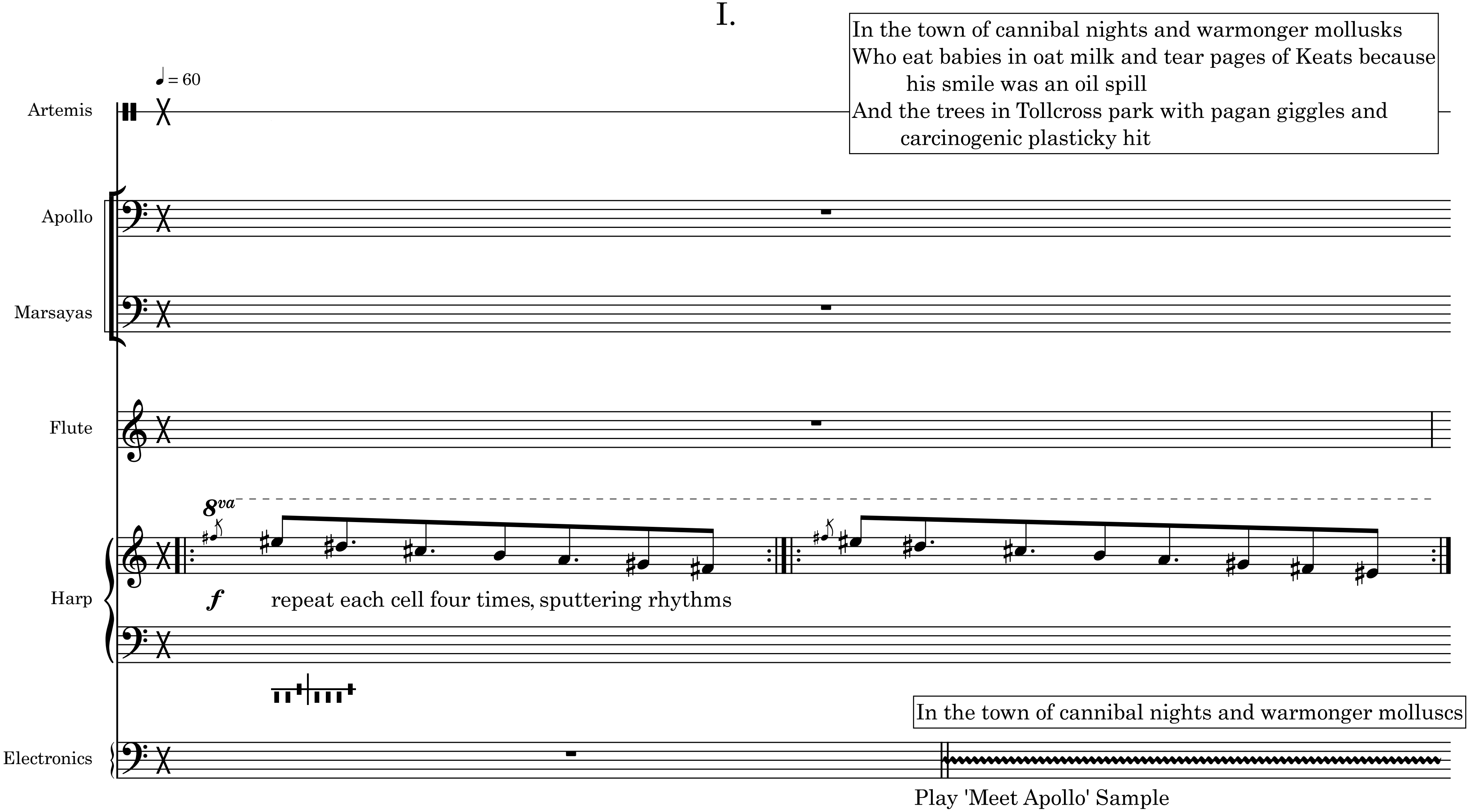
VI...................................... 37

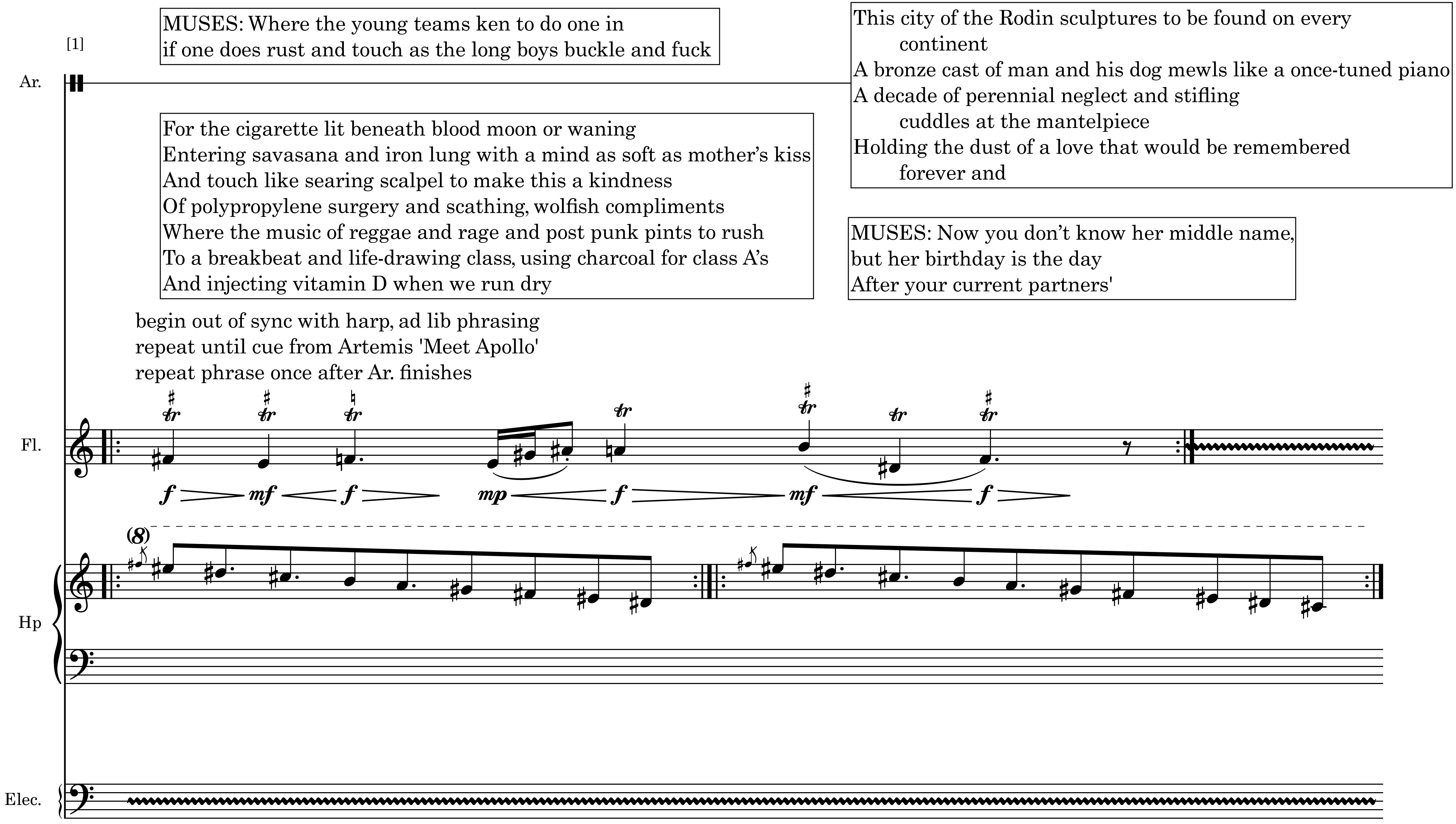
Libretto by Spencer Mason

Apollo & Marsayas

Music by Devon Bonelli

I.


In the town of cannibal nights and warmonger mollusks
Who eat babies in oat milk and tear pages of Keats because his smile was an oil spill
And the trees in Tollcross park with pagan giggles and carcinogenic plasticky hit
♩ = 60
Artemis
Apollo
Marsayas
Flute
Harp
8va
f
repeat each cell four times, sputtering rhythms
Electronics
In the town of cannibal nights and warmonger molluscs
Play 'Meet Apollo' Sample



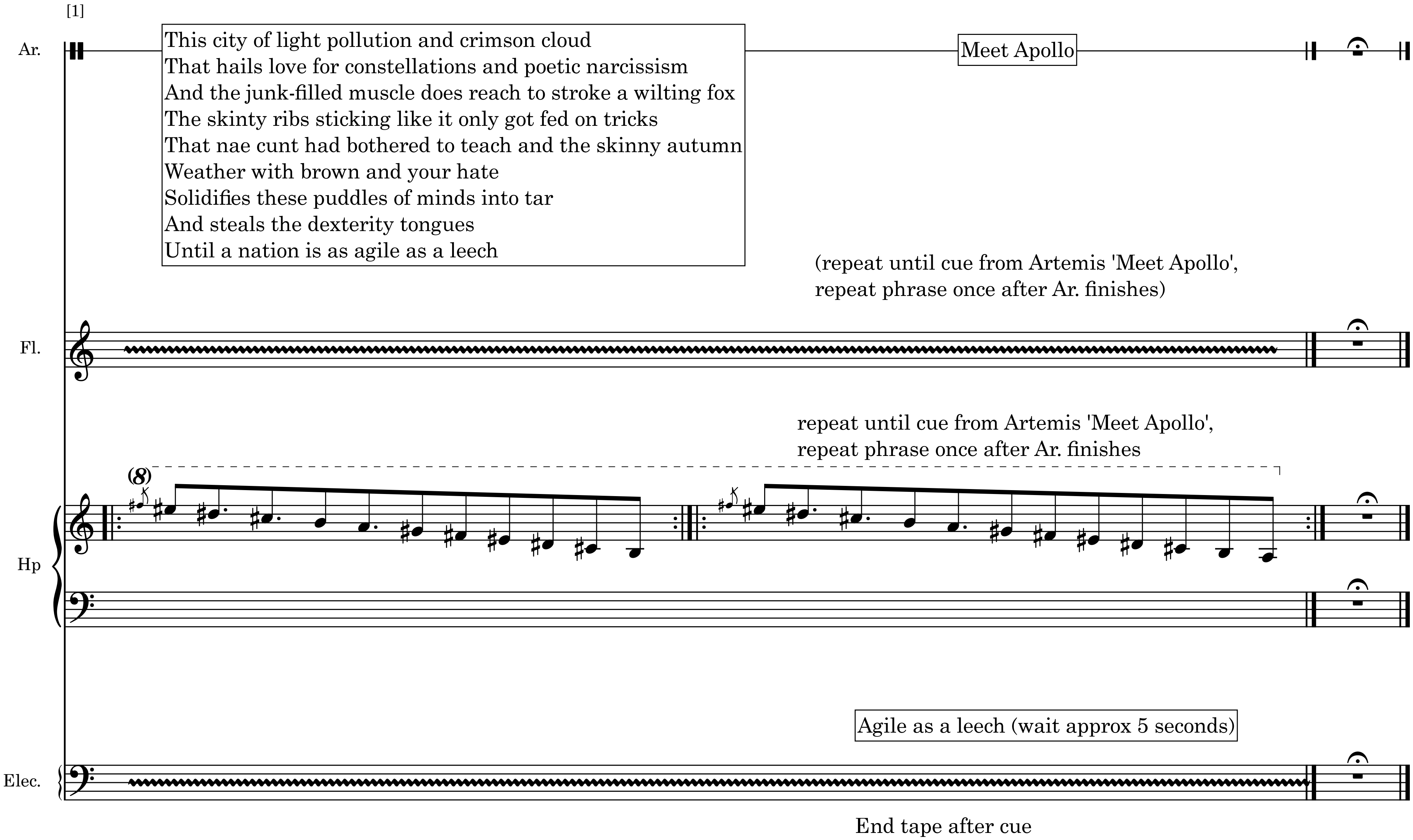
MUSES: Where the young teams ken to do one in
if one does rust and touch as the long boys buckle and fuck

For the cigarette lit beneath blood moon or waning
Entering savasana and iron lung with a mind as soft as mother's kiss
And touch like searing scalpel to make this a kindness
Of polypropylene surgery and scathing, wolfish compliments
Where the music of reggae and rage and post punk pints to rush
To a breakbeat and life-drawing class, using charcoal for class A's
And injecting vitamin D when we run dry

This city of the Rodin sculptures to be found on every
continent
A bronze cast of man and his dog mewls like a once-tuned piano
A decade of perennial neglect and stifling
cuddles at the mantelpiece
Holding the dust of a love that would be remembered
forever and

MUSES: Now you don't know her middle name,
but her birthday is the day
After your current partners'

begin out of sync with harp, ad lib phrasing
repeat until cue from Artemis 'Meet Apollo'
repeat phrase once after Ar. finishes



This city of light pollution and crimson cloud
That hails love for constellations and poetic narcissism
And the junk-filled muscle does reach to stroke a wilting fox
The skinty ribs sticking like it only got fed on tricks
That nae cunt had bothered to teach and the skinny autumn
Weather with brown and your hate
Solidifies these puddles of minds into tar
And steals the dexterity tongues
Until a nation is as agile as a leech

Meet Apollo

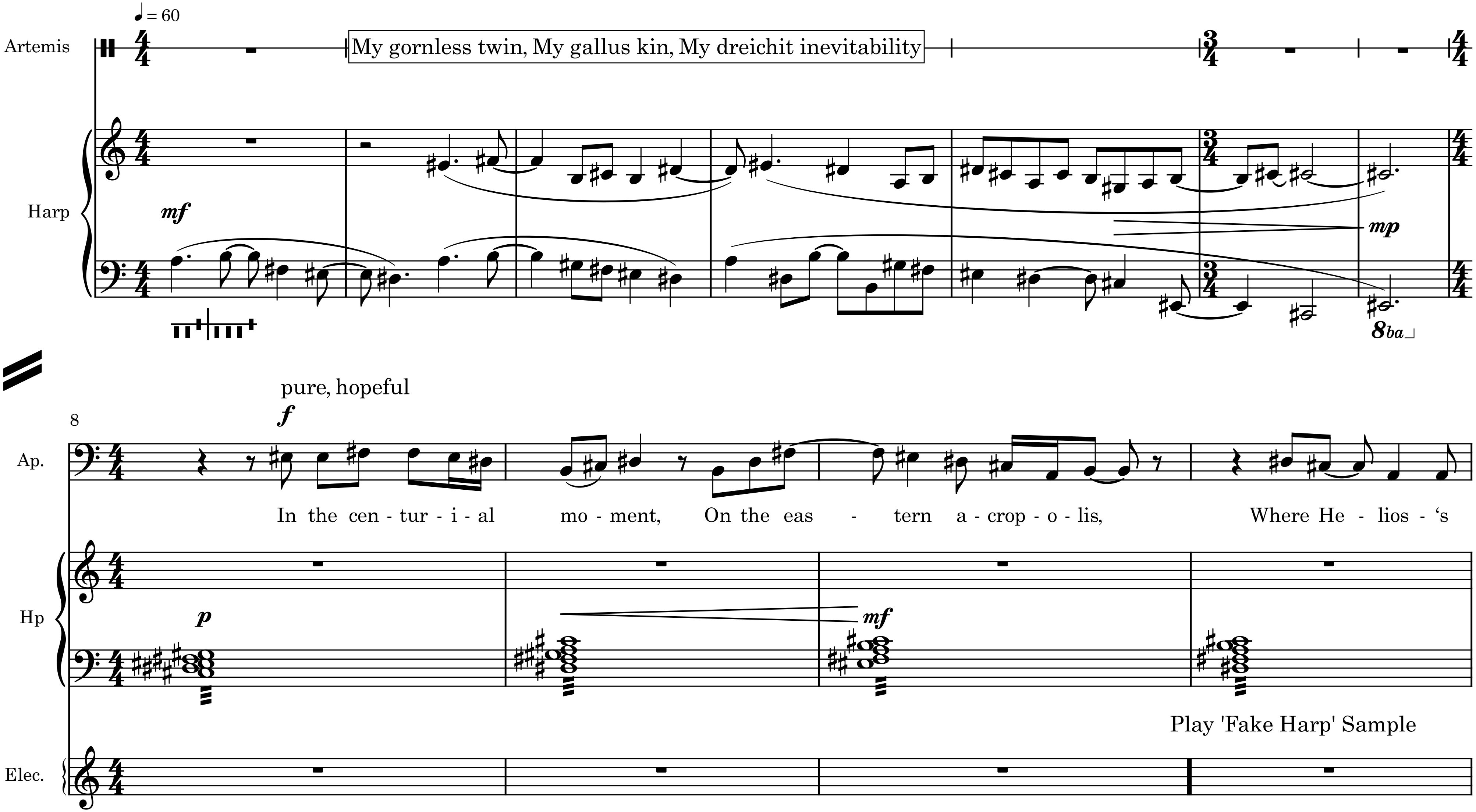
(repeat until cue from Artemis 'Meet Apollo',
repeat phrase once after Ar. finishes)

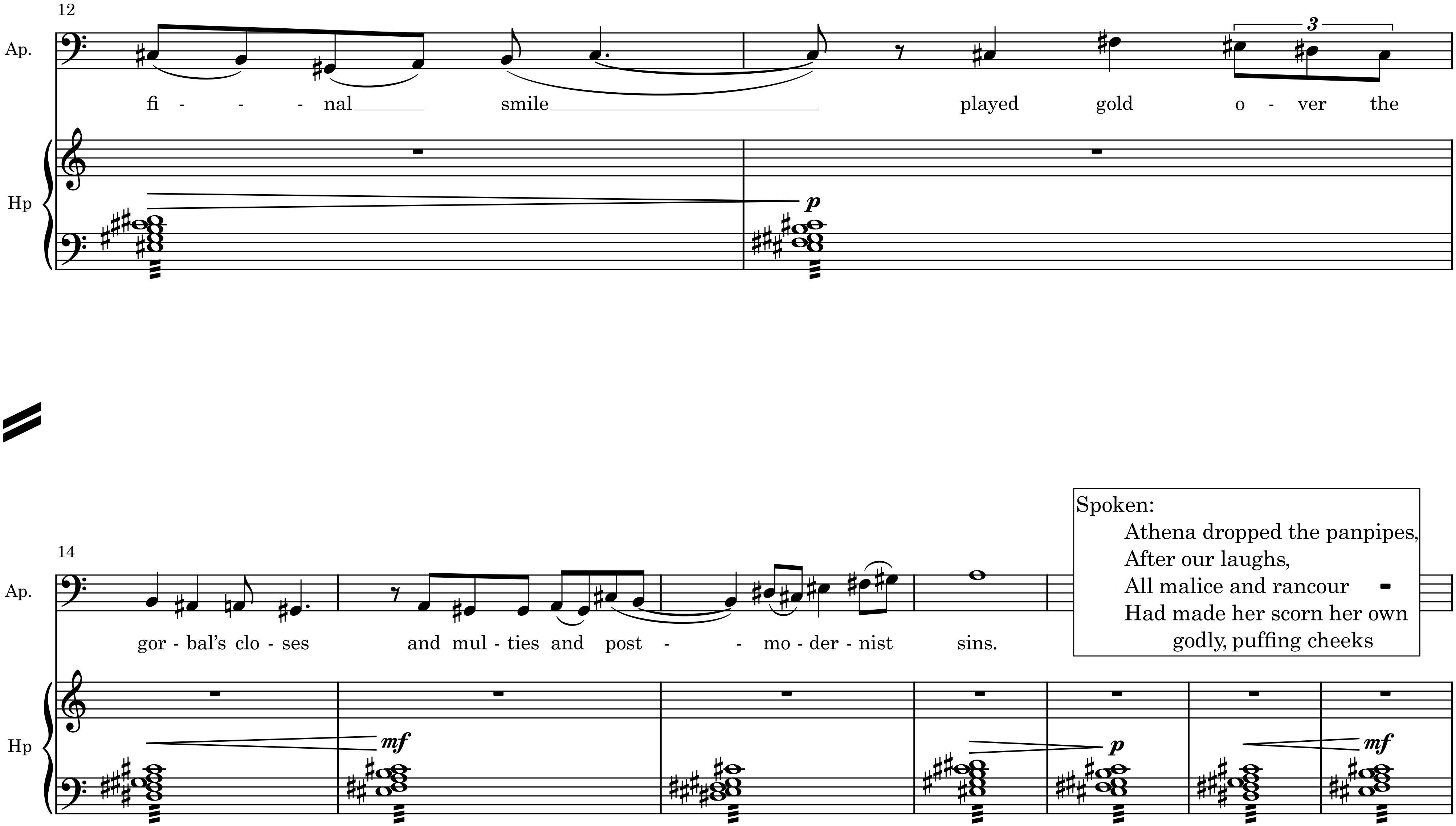
repeat until cue from Artemis 'Meet Apollo',
repeat phrase once after Ar. finishes

Agile as a leech (wait approx 5 seconds)

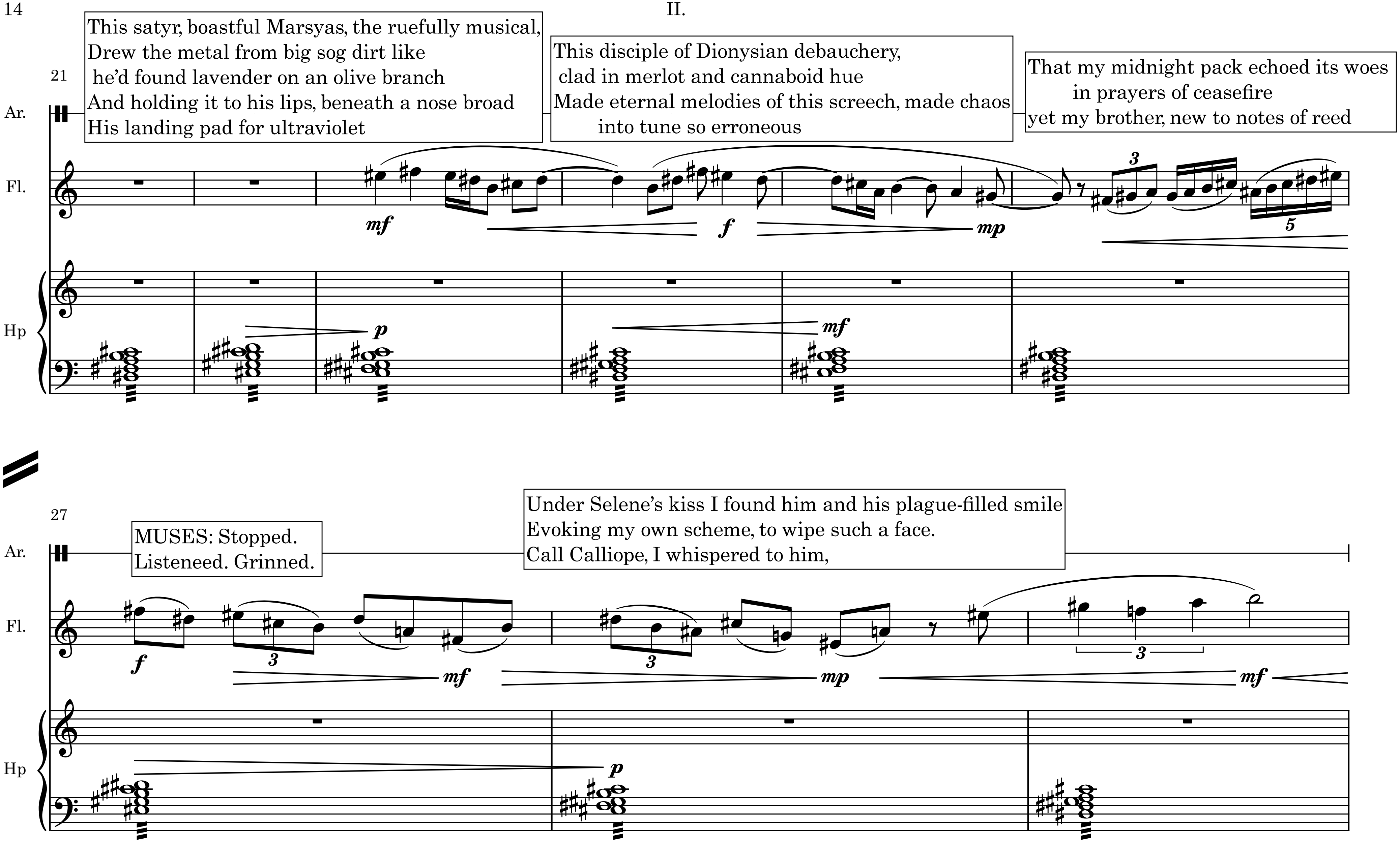
End tape after cue

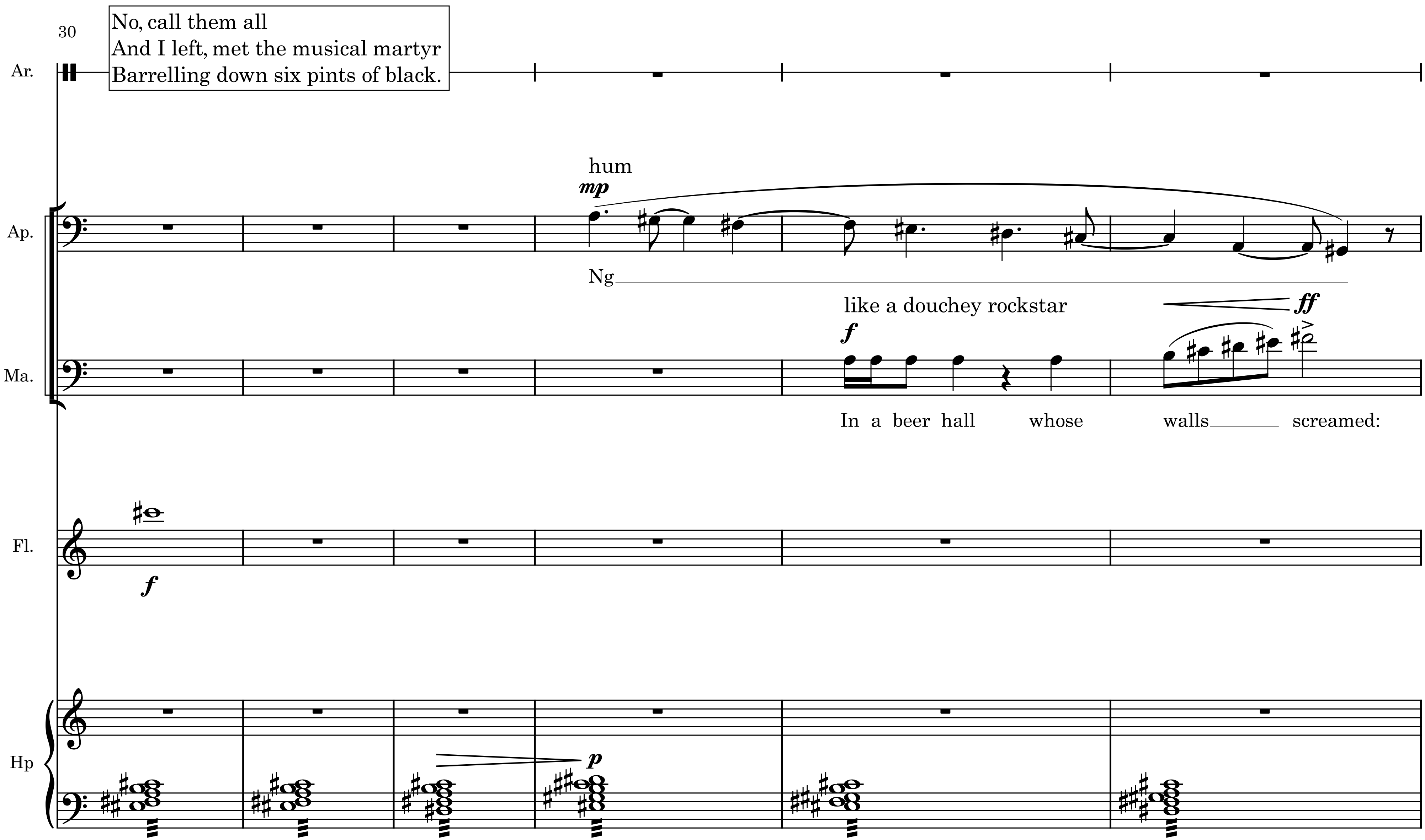
II.

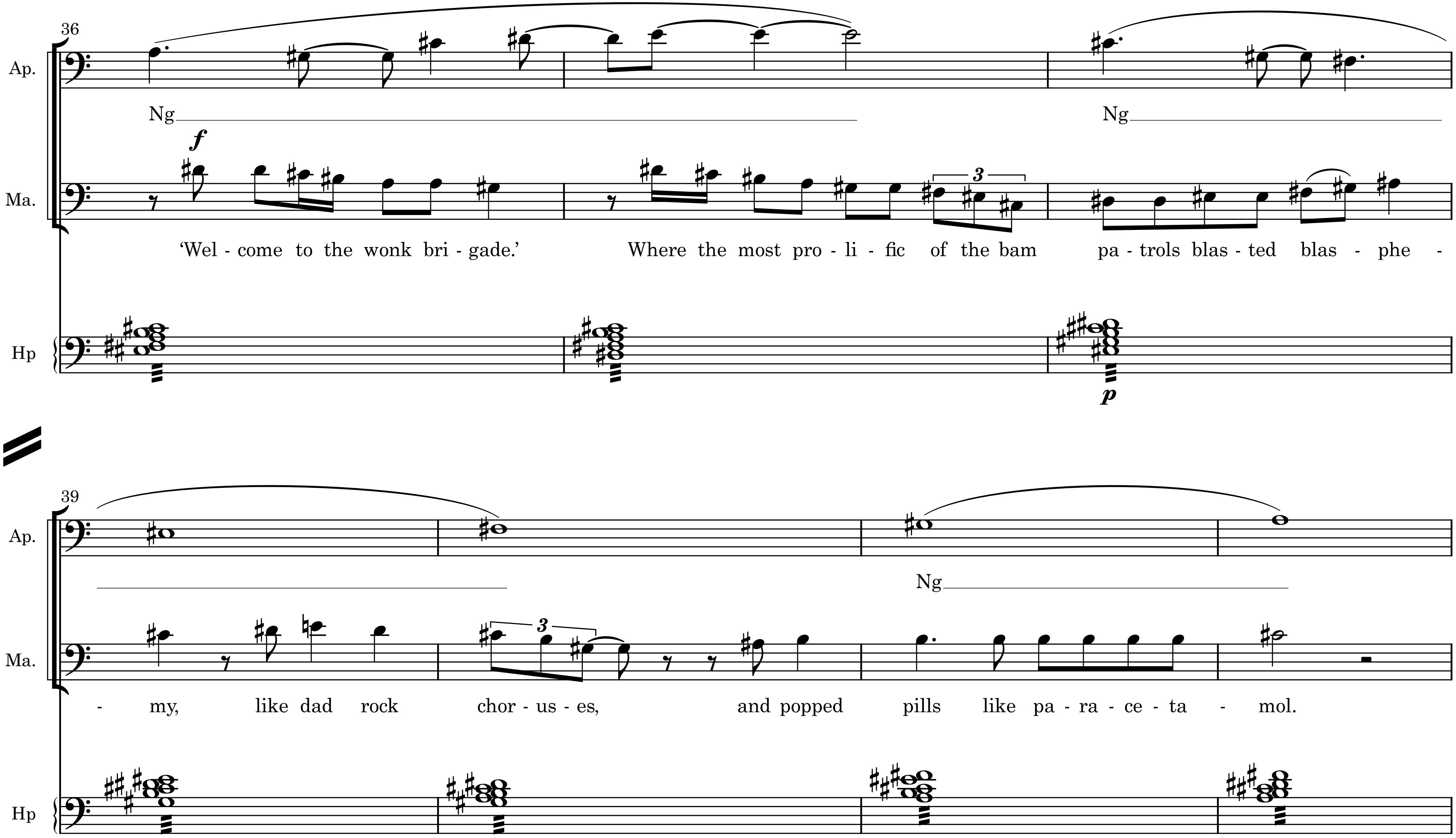

♩ = 60
Artemis
My gornless twin, My gallus kin, My dreichit inevitability
Harp
mf
mp
8ba
8
pure, hopeful
f
Ap.
In the cen - tur - i - al mo - ment, On the eas - tern a - crop - o - lis, Where He - lios - ‘s
Hp
p
mf
Play 'Fake Harp' Sample
Elec.

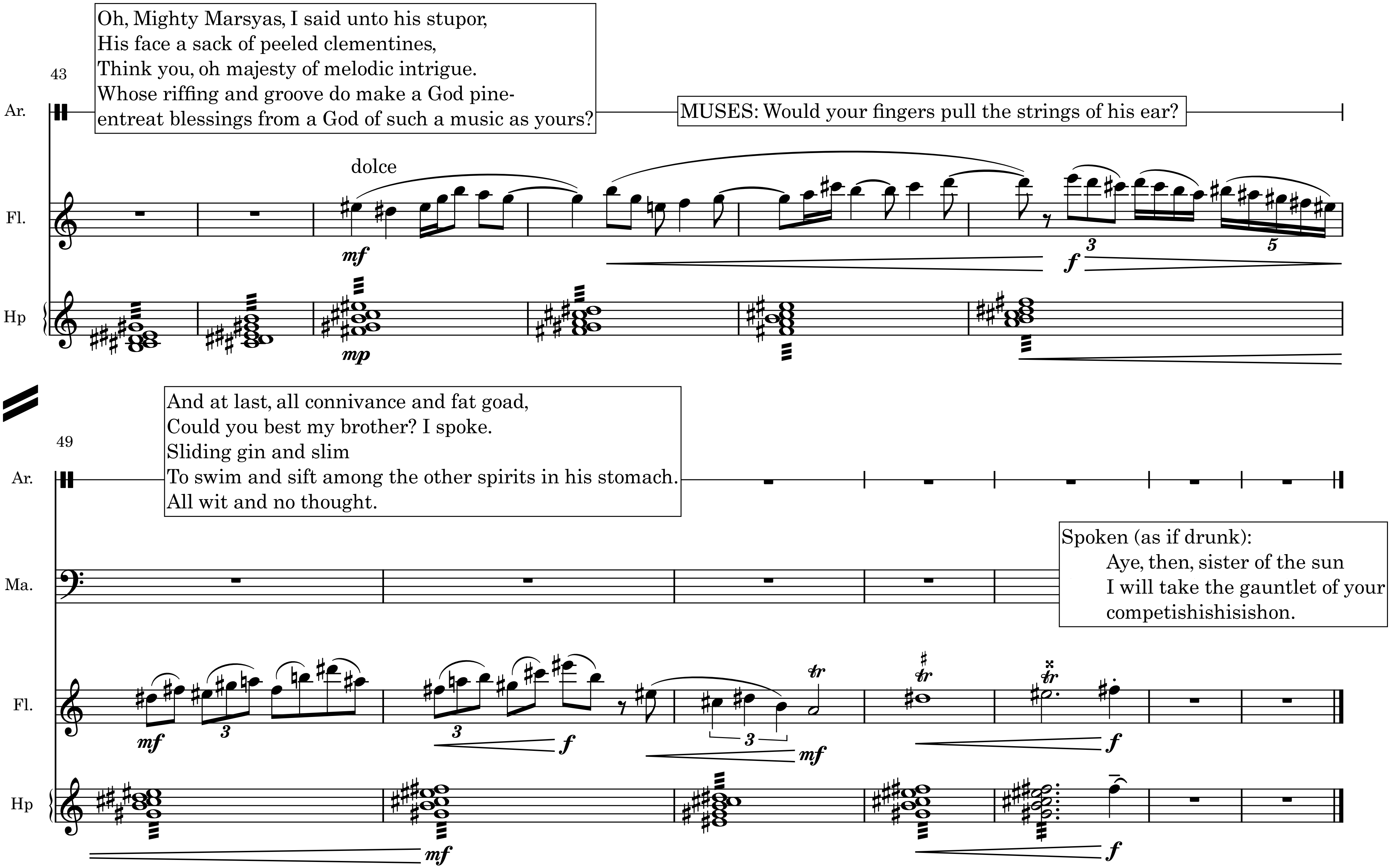

12
Ap.
fi - - - nal smile played gold o - ver the
3
Hp
p
14
Ap.
gor - bal's clo - ses and mul - ties and post - - mo - der - nist sins.
Hp
mf
p
mf

Spoken:
Athena dropped the panpipes,
After our laughs,
All malice and rancour
Had made her scorn her own
godly, puffing cheeks


21
Ar.
This satyr, boastful Marsyas, the ruefully musical,
Drew the metal from big sog dirt like
he'd found lavender on an olive branch
And holding it to his lips, beneath a nose broad
His landing pad for ultraviolet
This disciple of Dionysian debauchery,
clad in merlot and cannaboid hue
Made eternal melodies of this screech, made chaos
into tune so erroneous
That my midnight pack echoed its woes
in prayers of ceasefire
yet my brother, new to notes of reed
Fl.
mf
f
mp
3
5
Hp
p
mf
27
Ar.
MUSES: Stopped.
Listeneed. Grinned.
Under Selene's kiss I found him and his plague-filled smile
Evoking my own scheme, to wipe such a face.
Call Calliope, I whispered to him,
Fl.
f
3
mf
3
mp
3
mf
Hp
p


30
No, call them all
And I left, met the musical martyr
Barrelling down six pints of black.
Ar.
hum
mp
Ap.
Ng
like a douchey rockstar
f
ff
Ma.
In a beer hall whose walls screamed:
Fl.
f
Hp
p


36
Ap.
Ng
f
Ma.
3
'Wel - come to the wonk bri - gade.' Where the most pro - li - fic of the bam pa - trols blas - ted blas - phe -
Hp
p
Ng
39
Ap.
Ng
Ma.
3
- my, like dad rock chor - us - es, and popped pills like pa - ra - ce - ta - mol.
Hp



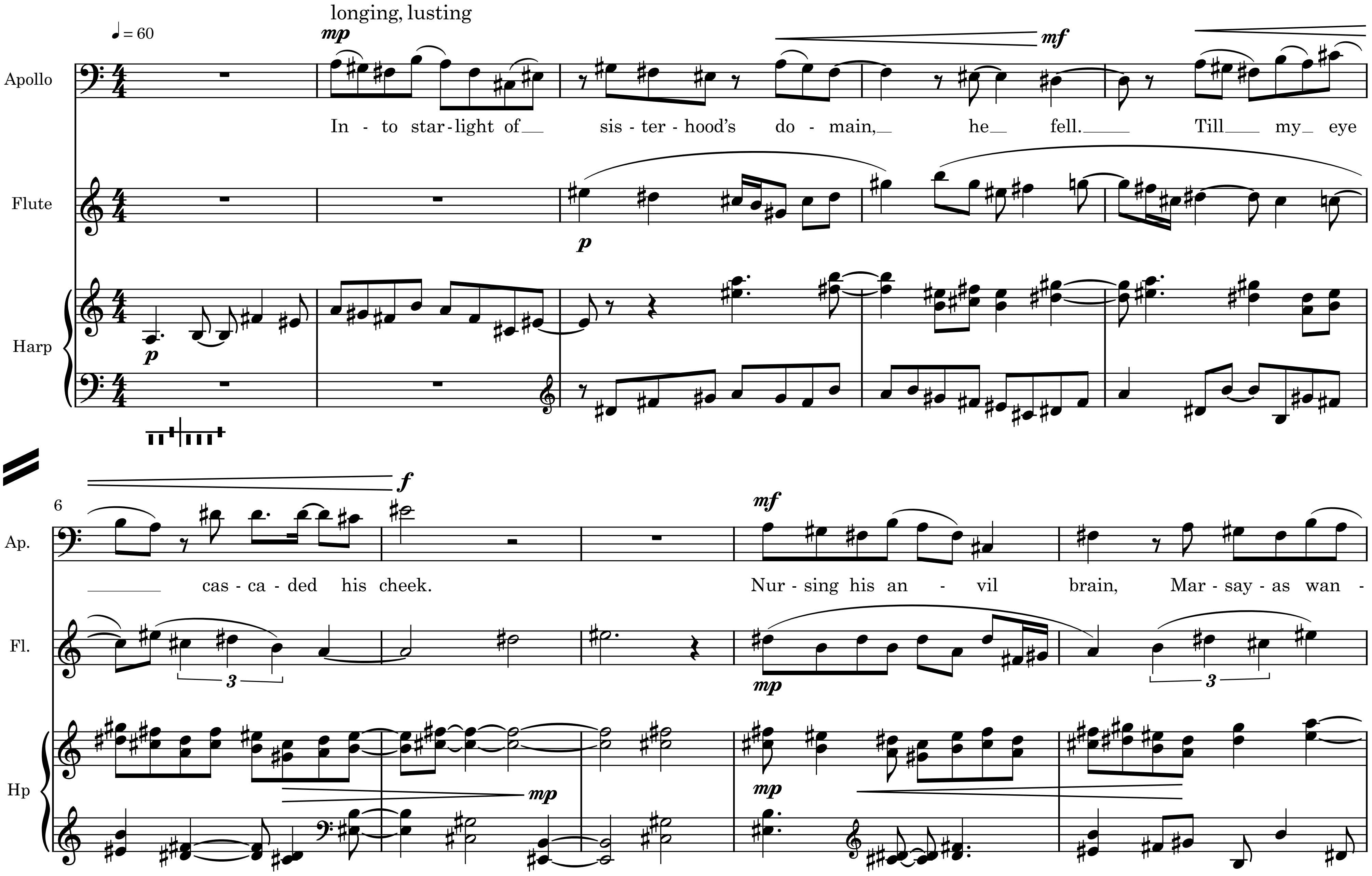
Oh, Mighty Marsyas, I said unto his stupor,
His face a sack of peeled clementines,
Think you, oh majesty of melodic intrigue.
Whose riffing and groove do make a God pine-
entreat blessings from a God of such a music as yours?

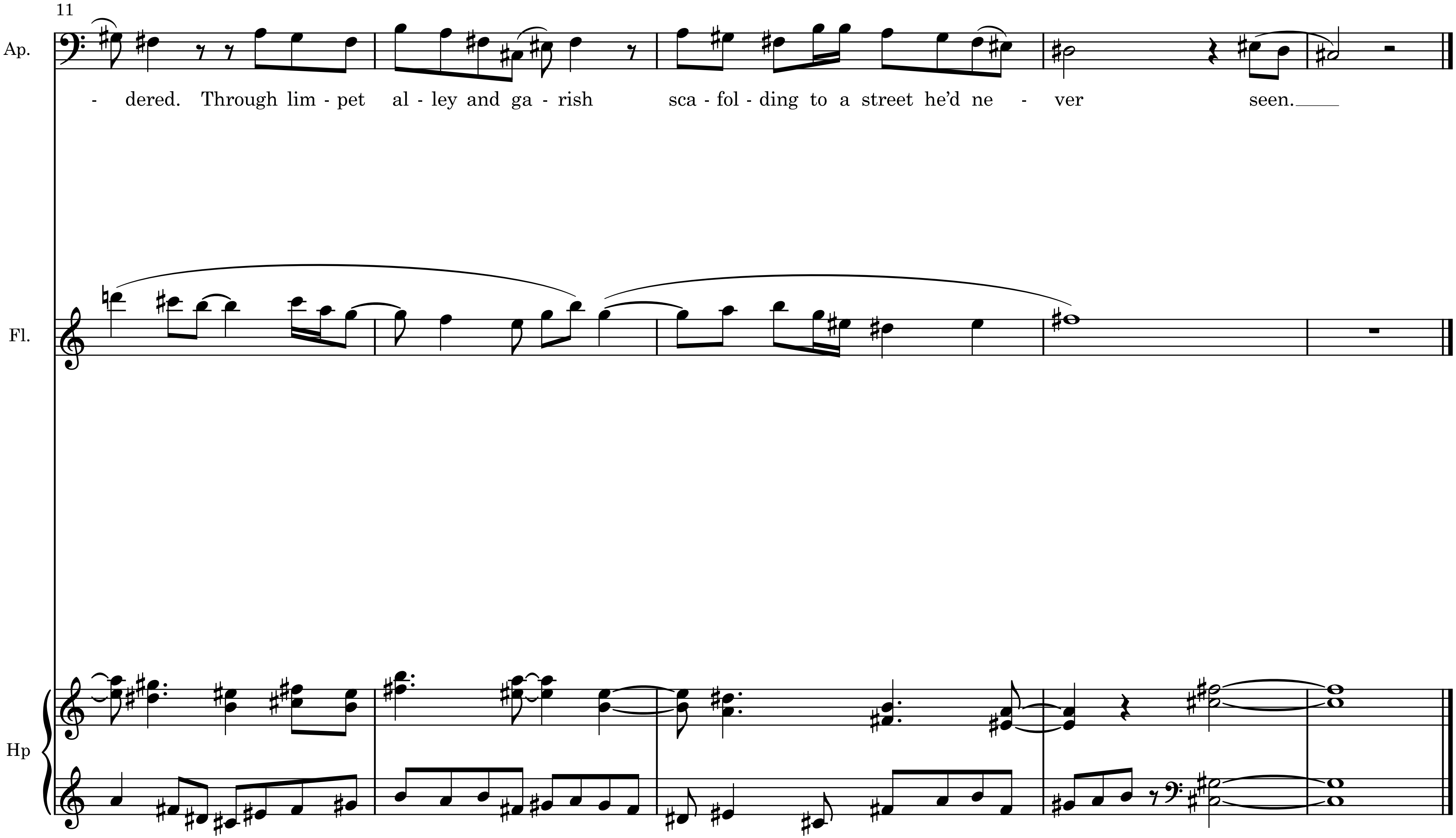
MUSES: Would your fingers pull the strings of his ear?

And at last, all connivance and fat goad,
Could you best my brother? I spoke.
Sliding gin and slim
To swim and sift among the other spirits in his stomach.
All wit and no thought.

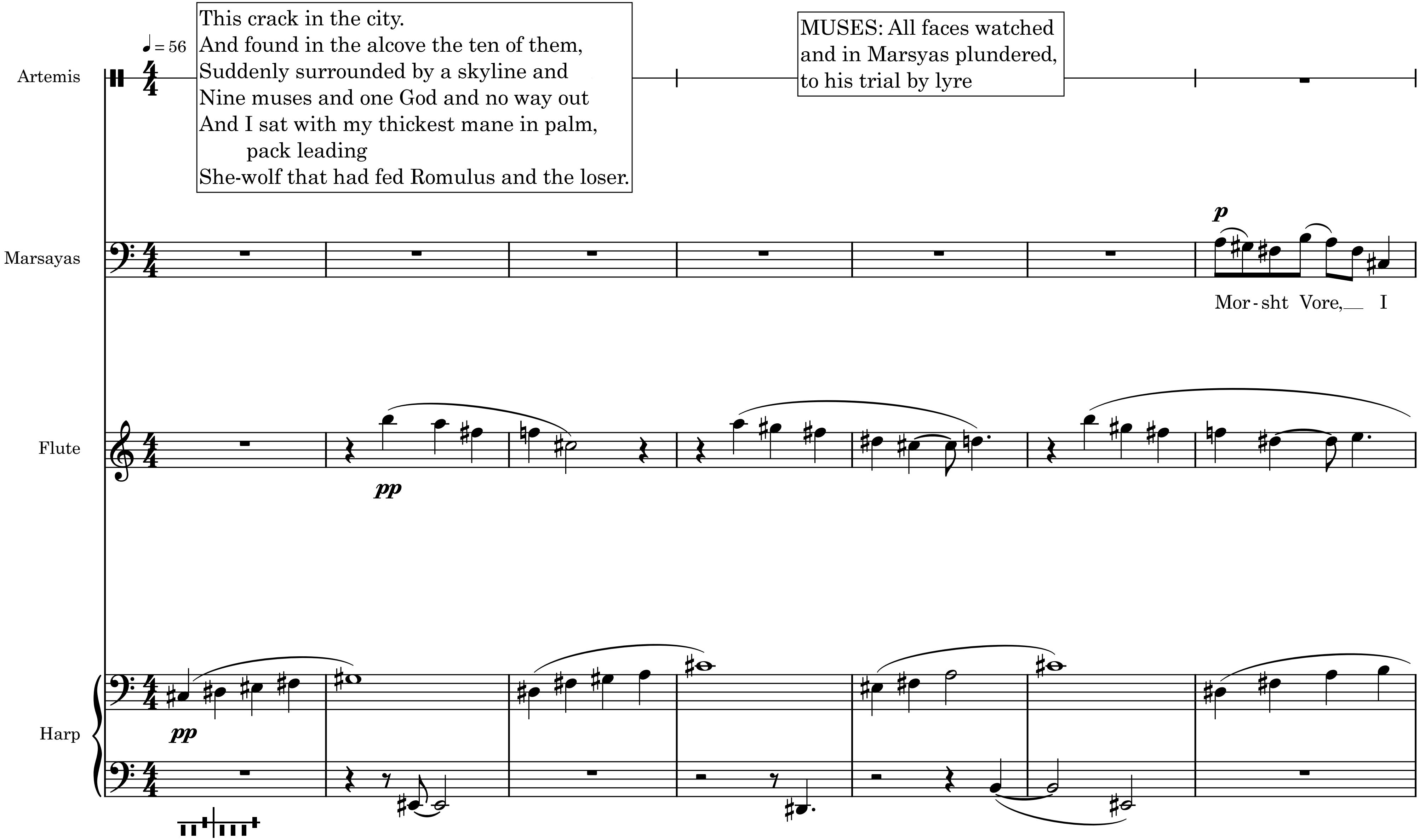
Spoken (as if drunk):
Aye, then, sister of the sun
I will take the gauntlet of your
competishishisisishon.

III.


♩ = 60
longing, lusting
Apollo
Flute
Harp
mp
mf
p
In - to star-light of sis - ter - hood's do - main, he fell. Till my eye
6
Ap.
Fl.
Hp
f
mf
mp
3
cas - ca - ded his cheek. Nur - sing his an - vil brain, Mar - say - as wan -


11
Ap.
- dered. Through lim - pet al - ley and ga - rish sca - fol - ding to a street he'd ne - ver seen.
Fl.
Hp

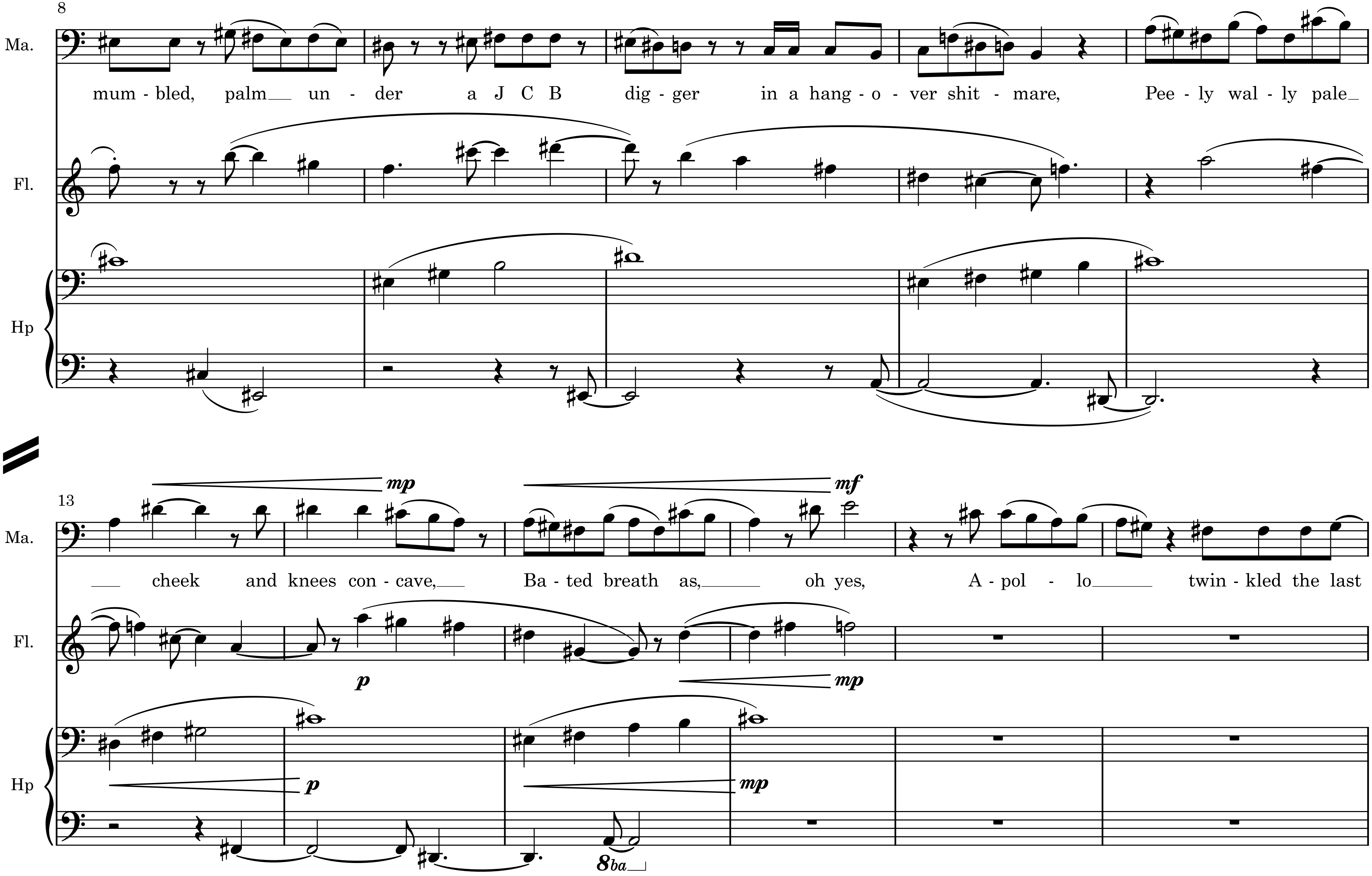
IV.

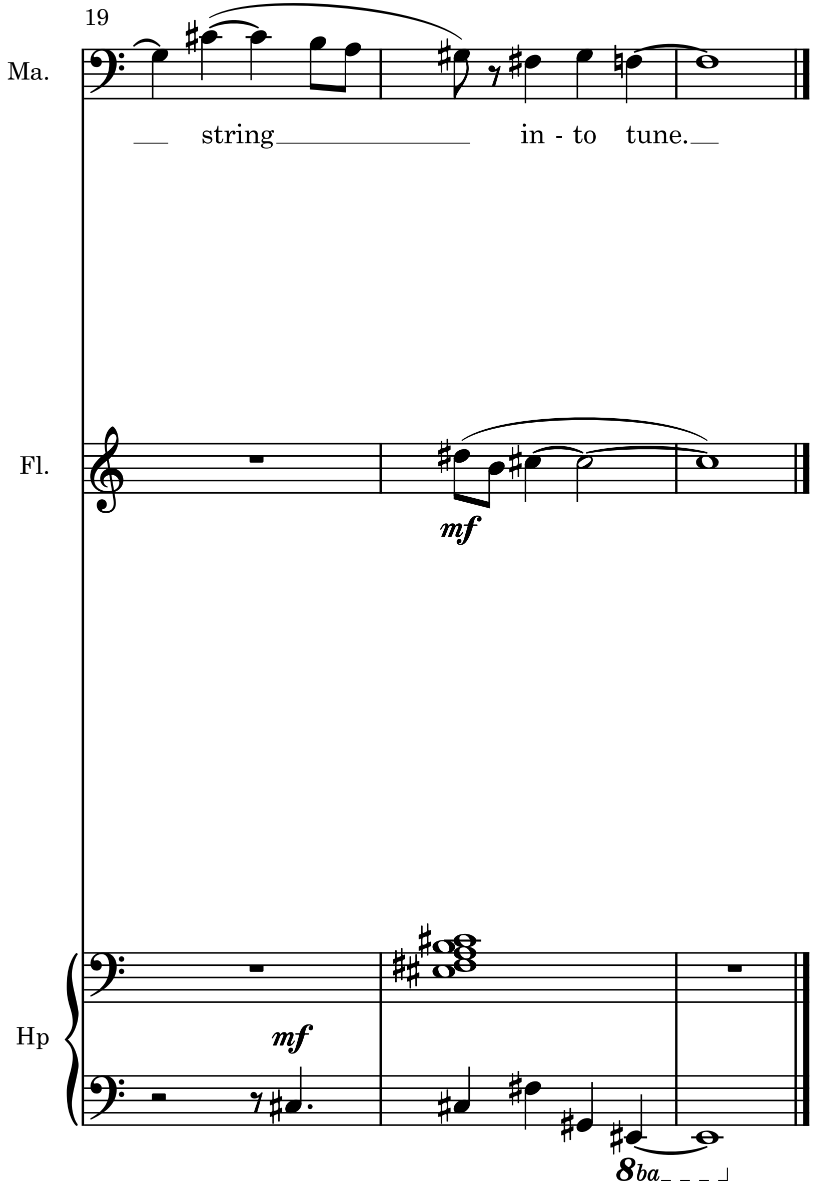


This crack in the city.
And found in the alcove the ten of them,
Suddenly surrounded by a skyline and
Nine muses and one God and no way out
And I sat with my thickest mane in palm,
pack leading
She-wolf that had fed Romulus and the loser.

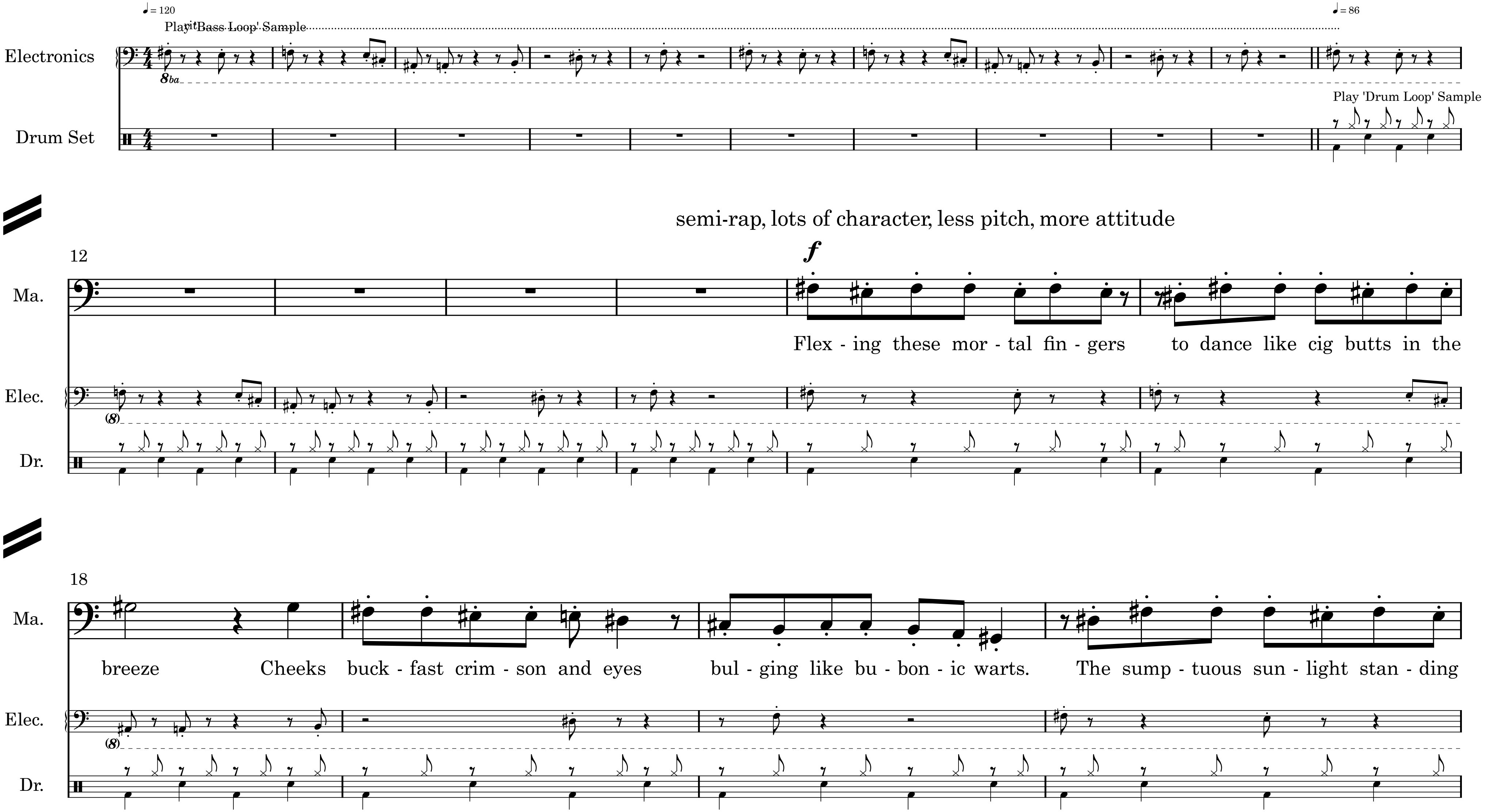
MUSES: All faces watched
and in Marsyas plundered,
to his trial by lyre

♩ = 56
Artemis
Marsayas
Flute
Harp
pp
pp
p
Mor - sht Vore, I

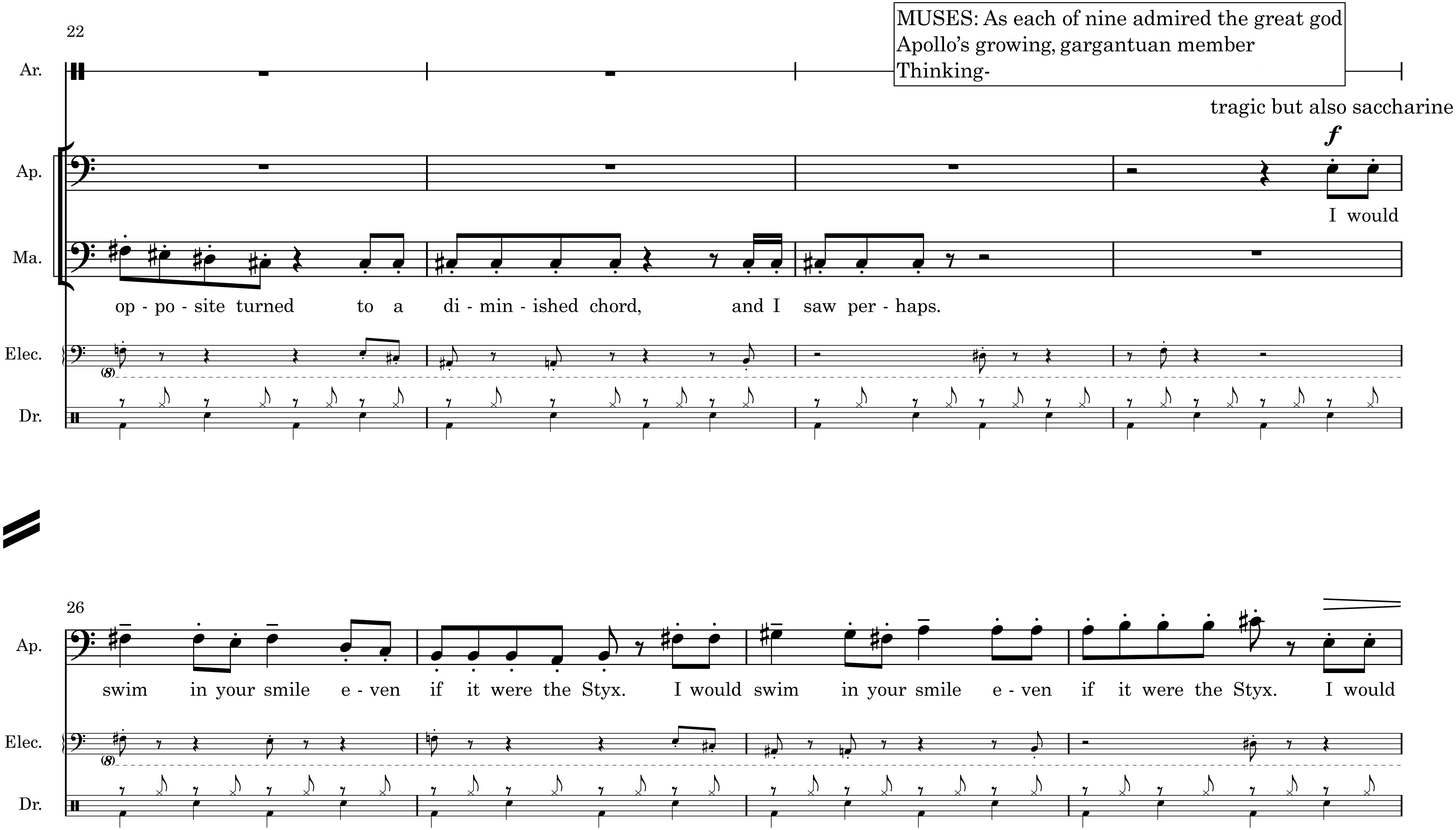

8
Ma.
mum - bled, palm __ un - der a J C B dig - ger in a hang - o - ver shit - mare, Pee - ly wal - ly pale _
Fl.
Hp
13
mp
mf
__ cheek and knees con - cave, __ Ba - ted breath as, ______ oh yes, A - pol - lo ______ twin - kled the last
p
mp
p
mp
8ba

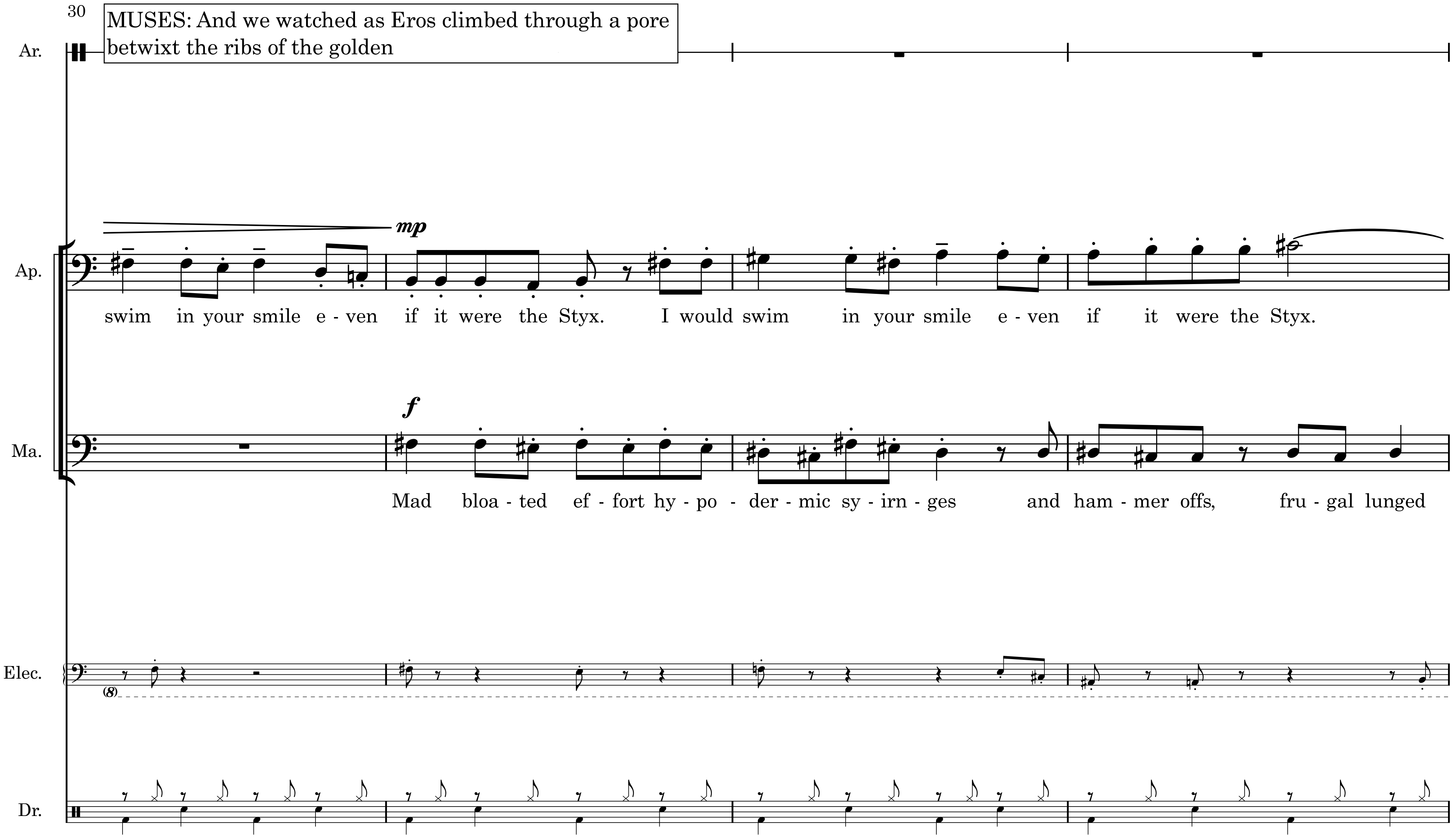

19
Ma.
string
in - to tune.
Fl.
mf
Hp
mf
8ba

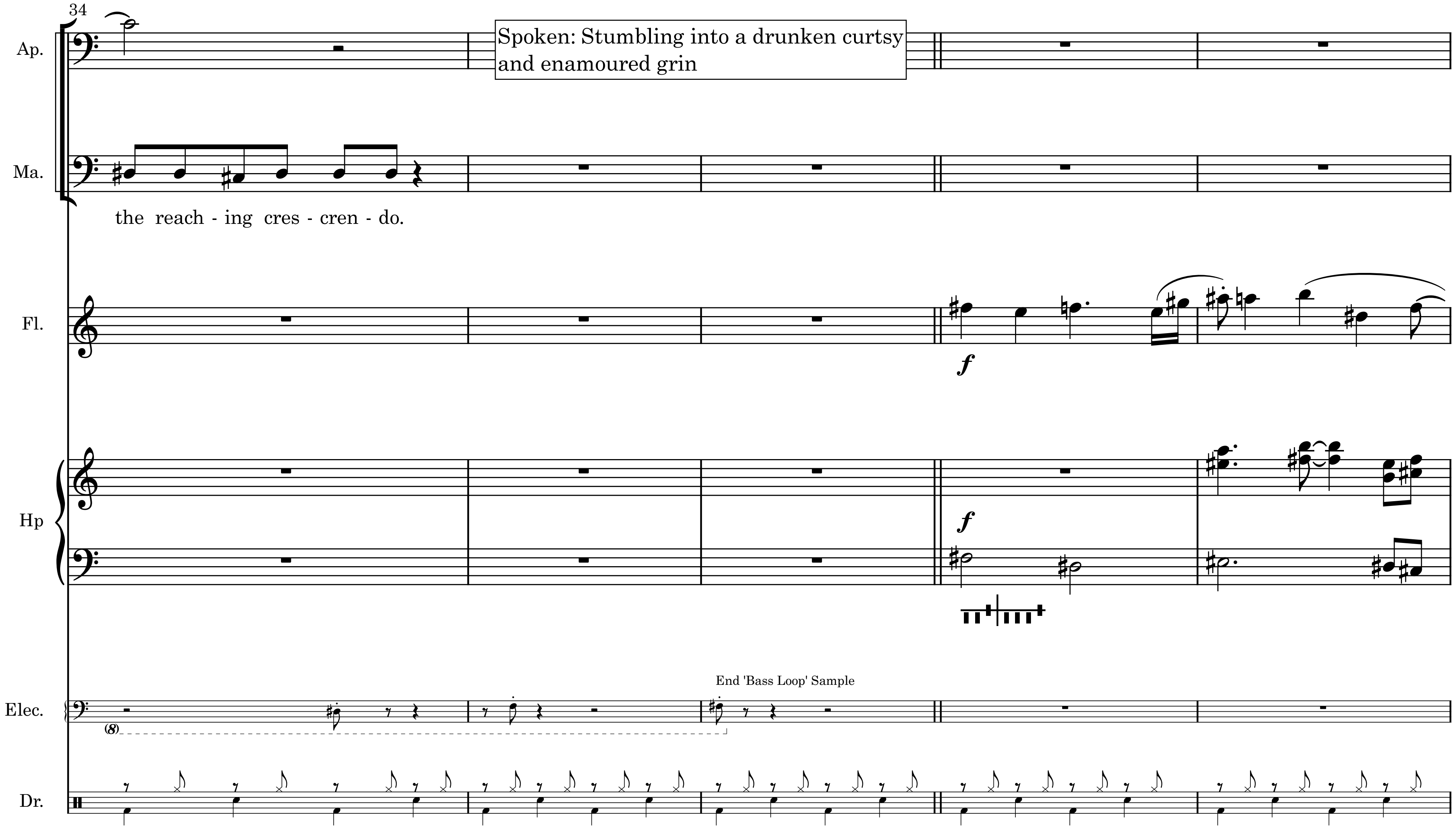
V.

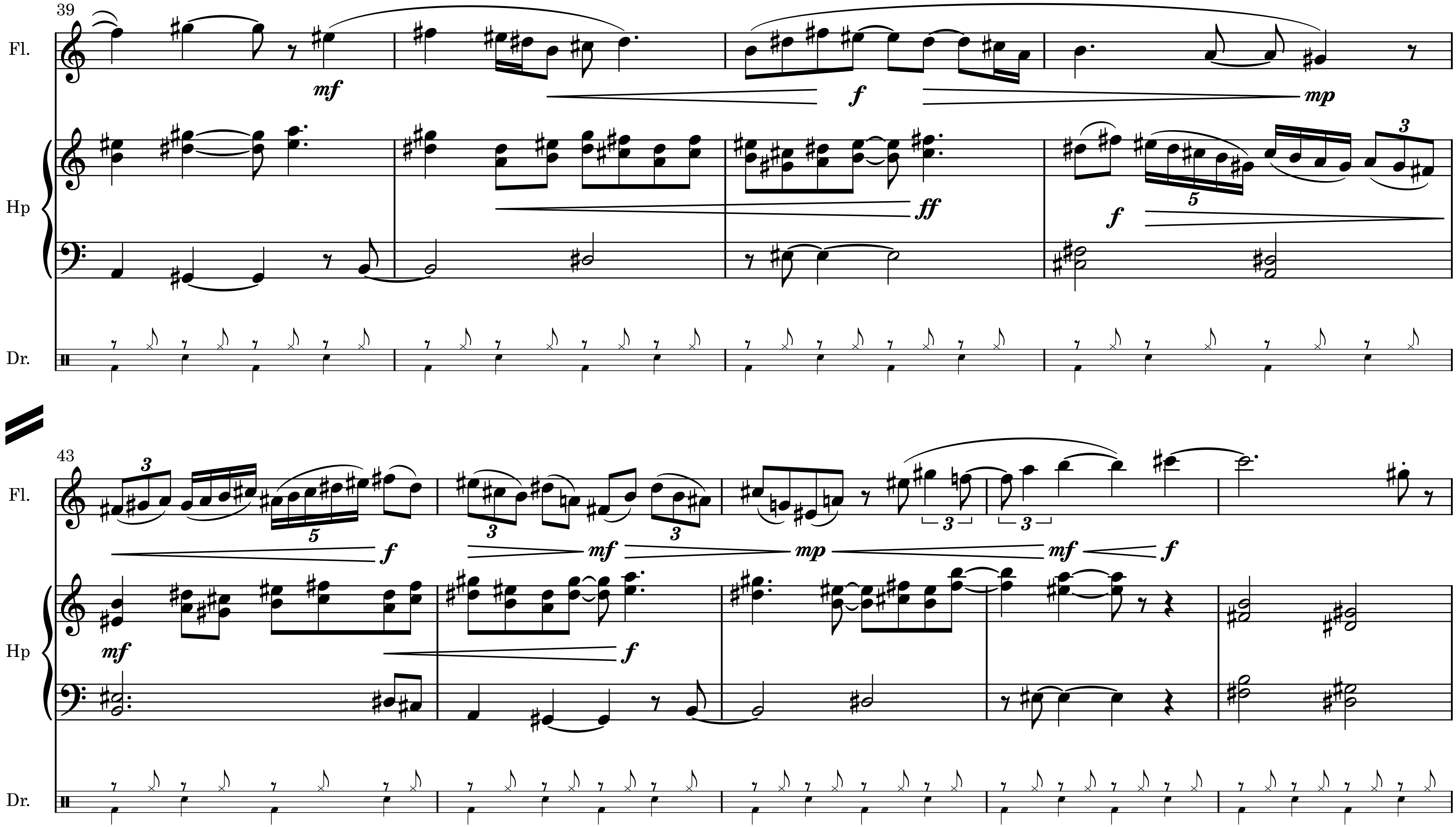

♩= 120
rit.
Play 'Bass Loop' Sample
♩= 86
Electronics
8ba
Drum Set
Play 'Drum Loop' Sample
12
f
Ma.
Flex - ing these mor - tal fin - gers to dance like cig butts in the
Elec.
(8)
Dr.
18
Ma.
breeze Cheeks buck - fast crim - son and eyes bul - ging like bu - bon - ic warts. The sump - tuous sun - light stan - ding
Elec.
(8)
Dr.

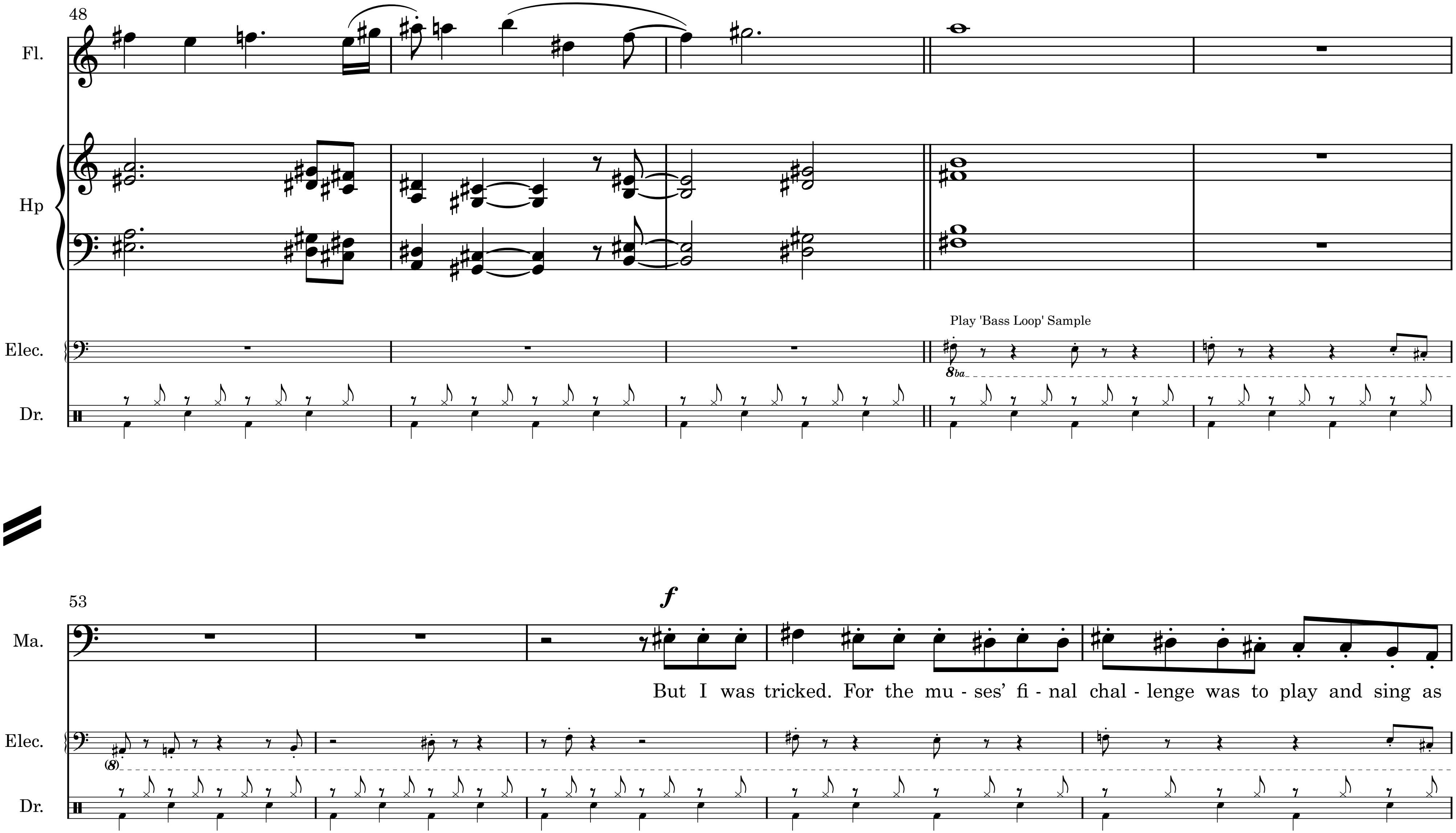
semi-rap, lots of character, less pitch, more attitude

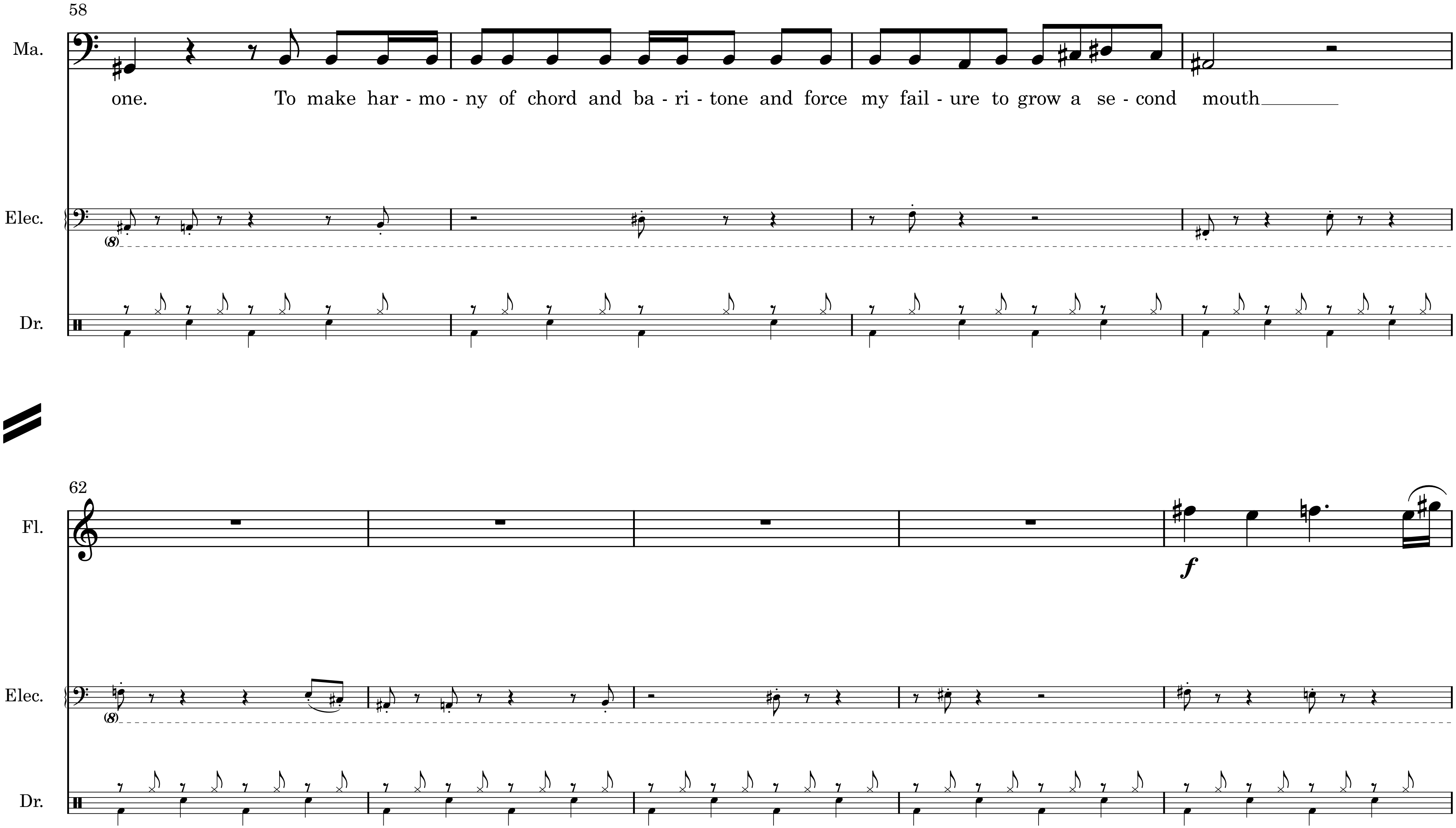

22
Ar.
Ap.
Ma.
Elec.
Dr.
MUSES: As each of nine admired the great god
Apollo’s growing, gargantuan member
Thinking-
tragic but also saccharine
f
I would
op - po - site turned to a di - min - ished chord, and I saw per - haps.
(8)
26
Ap.
Elec.
Dr.
swim in your smile e - ven if it were the Styx. I would swim in your smile e - ven if it were the Styx. I would
(8)

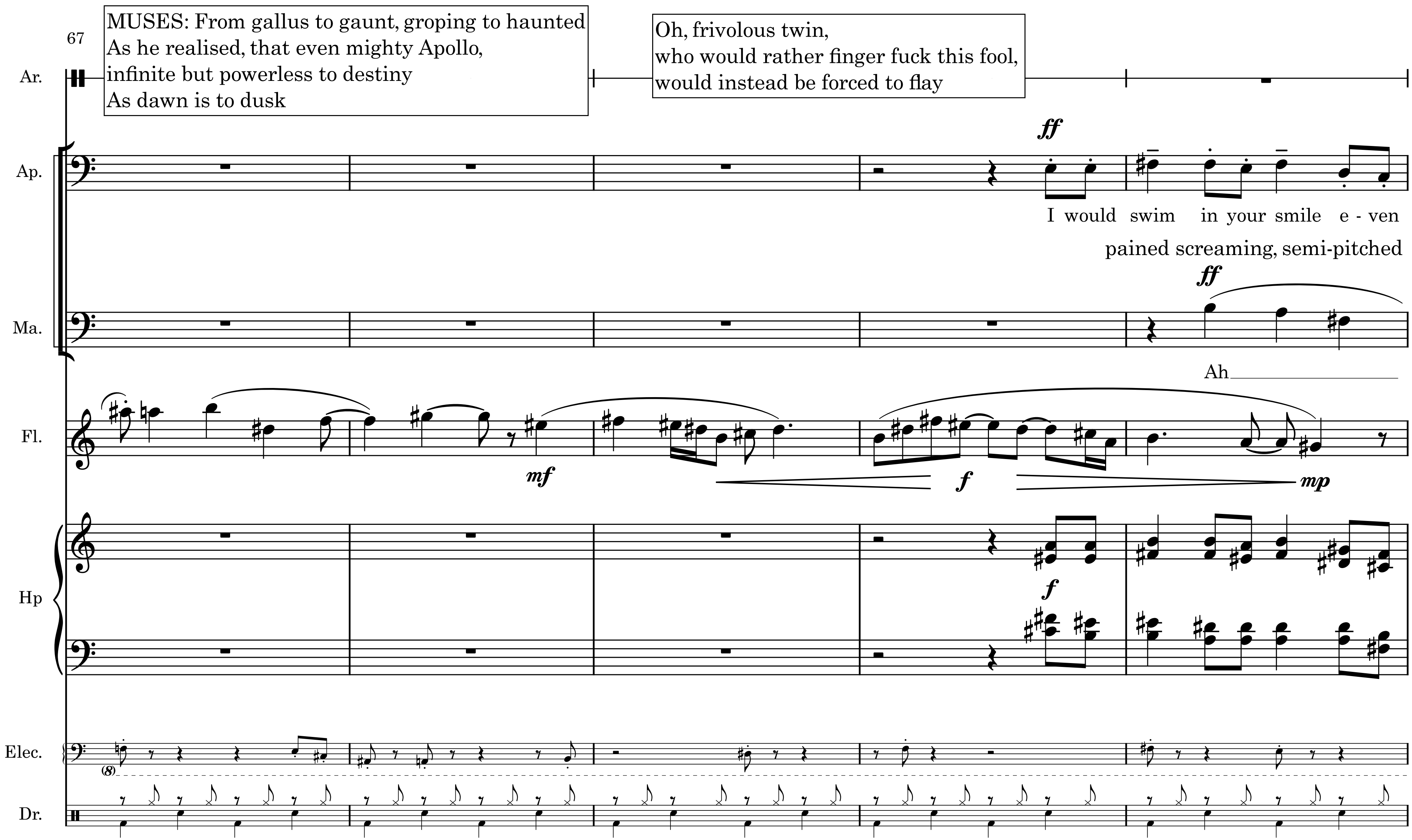

30
MUSES: And we watched as Eros climbed through a pore betwixt the ribs of the golden
Ar.
Ap.
mp
swim in your smile e - ven if it were the Styx. I would swim in your smile e - ven if it were the Styx.
Ma.
f
Mad bloa - ted ef - fort hy - po - der - mic sy - irn - ges and ham - mer offs, fru - gal lunged
Elec.
(8)
Dr.

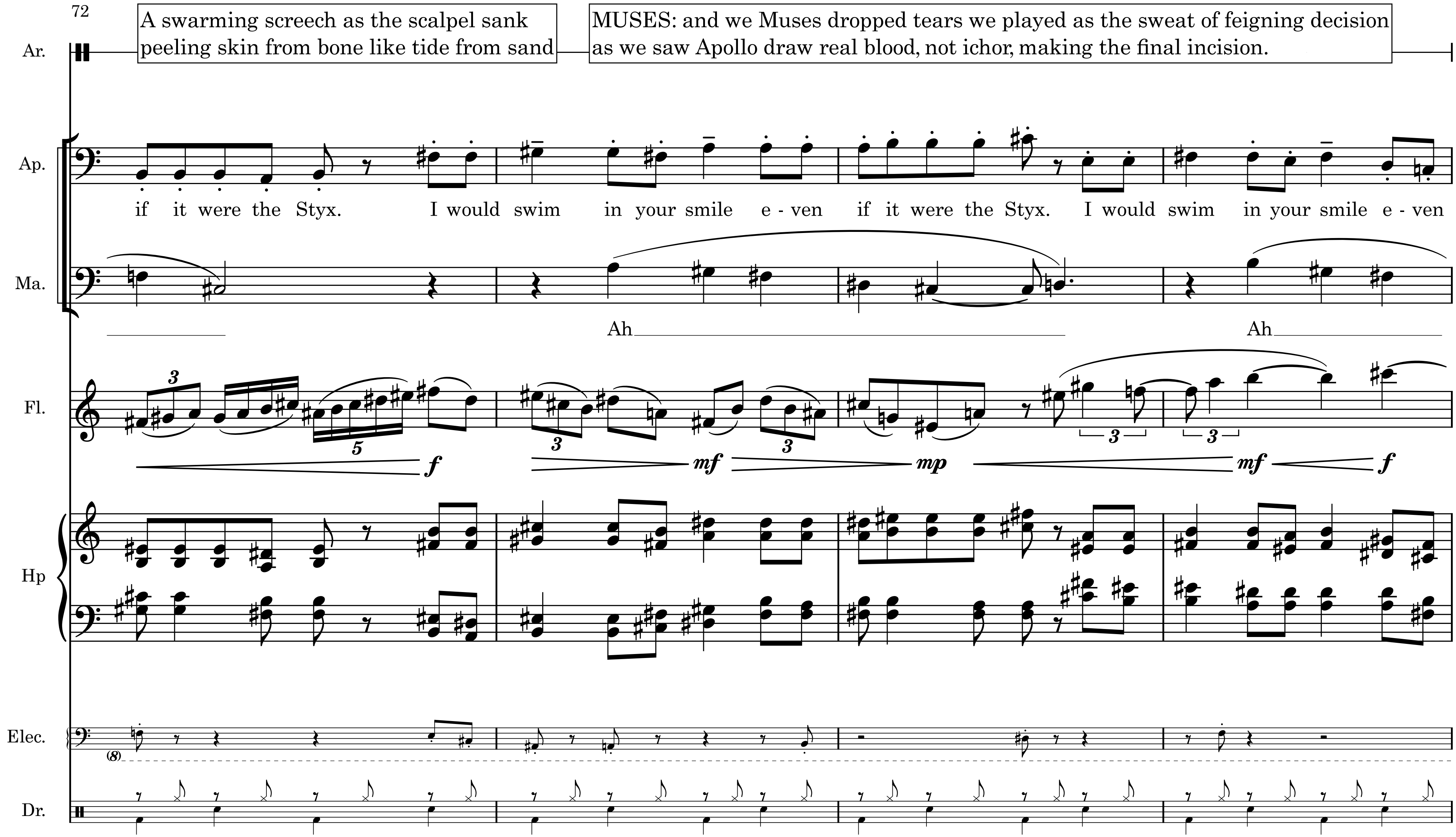

34
Ap.
Ma.
Fl.
Hp
Elec.
Dr.
Spoken: Stumbling into a drunken curtsy and enamoured grin
the reach - ing cres - cren - do.
f
f
(8)
End 'Bass Loop' Sample

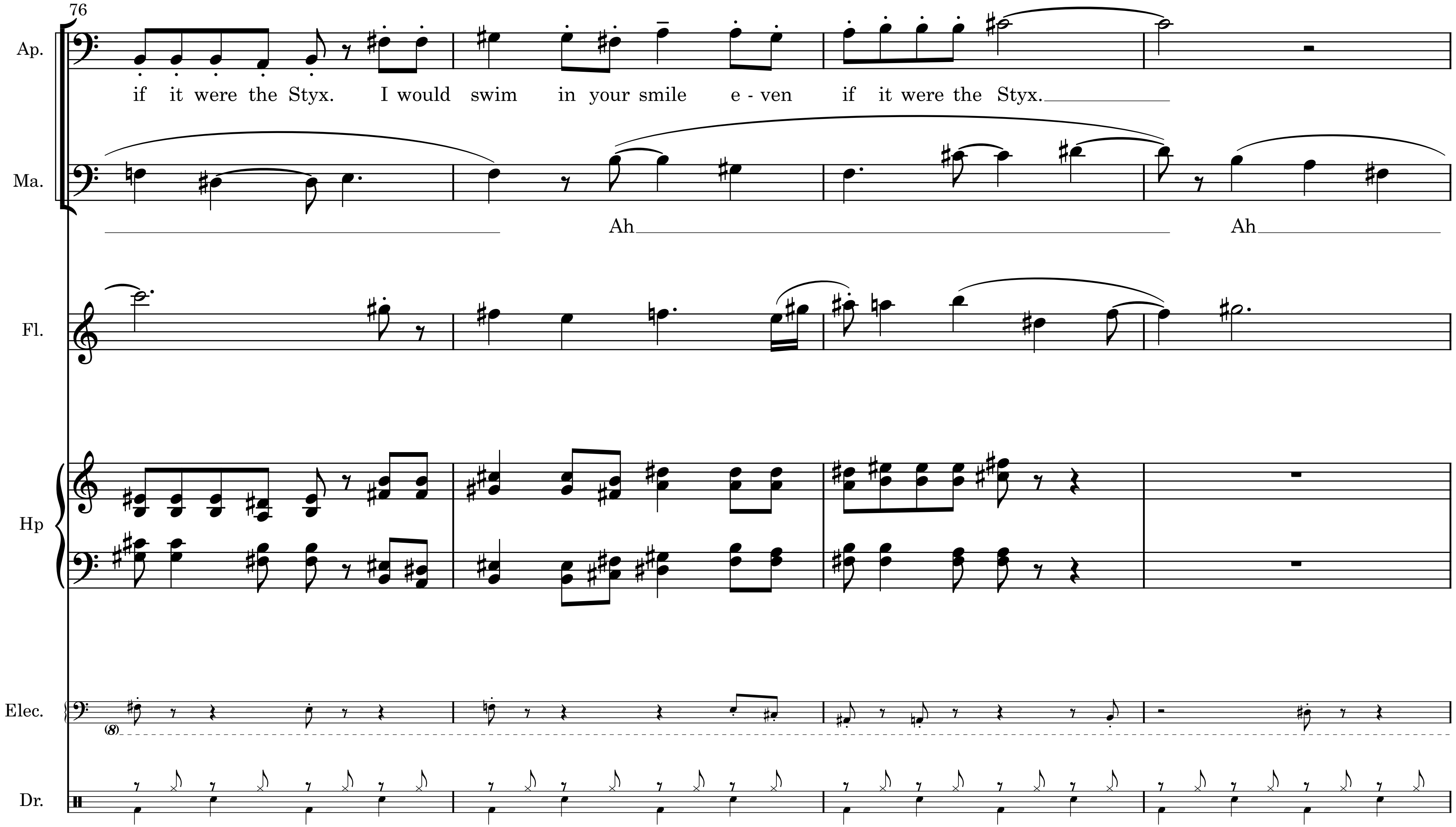

39
Fl.
Hp
Dr.
mf
f
mp
ff
3
5
43
mf
f
mp

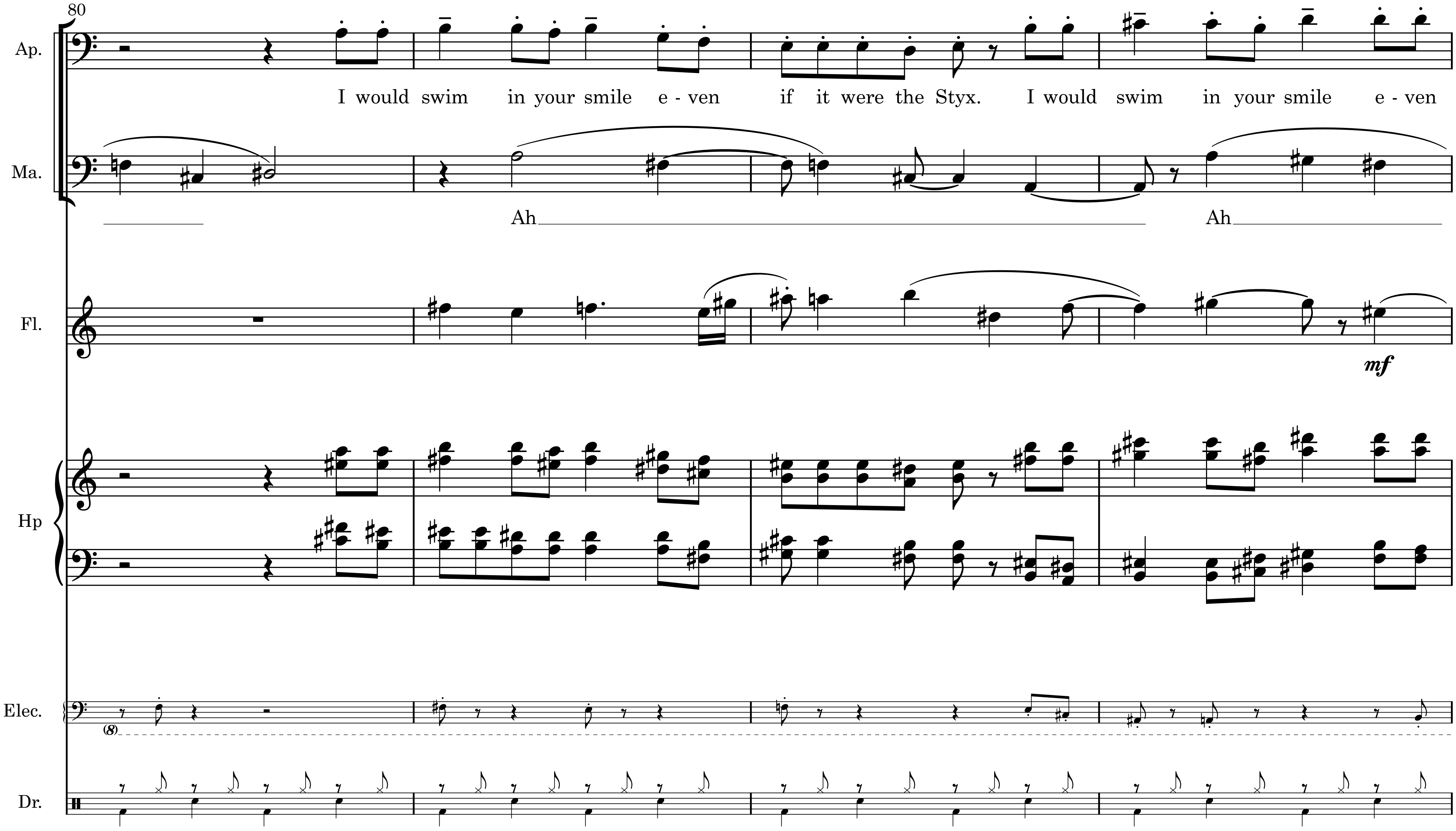

48
Fl.
Hp
Elec.
Dr.
Play 'Bass Loop' Sample
8ba
53
Ma.
f
But I was tricked. For the mu - ses' fi - nal chal - lenge was to play and sing as
Elec.
(8)
Dr.

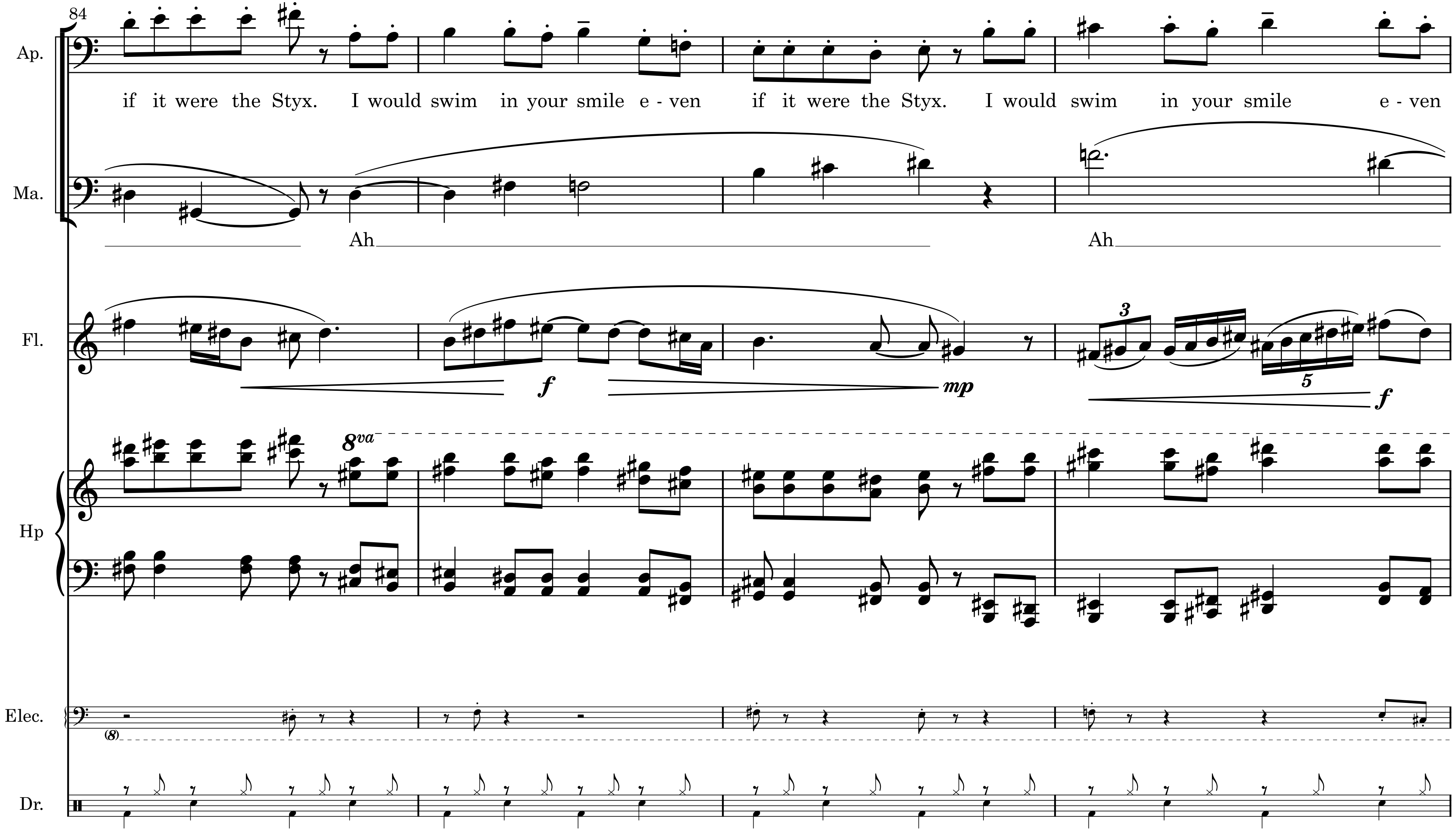

58
Ma.
one. To make har - mo - ny of chord and ba - ri - tone and force my fail - ure to grow a se - cond mouth
Elec.
(8)
Dr.
62
Fl.
f
Elec.
(8)
Dr.

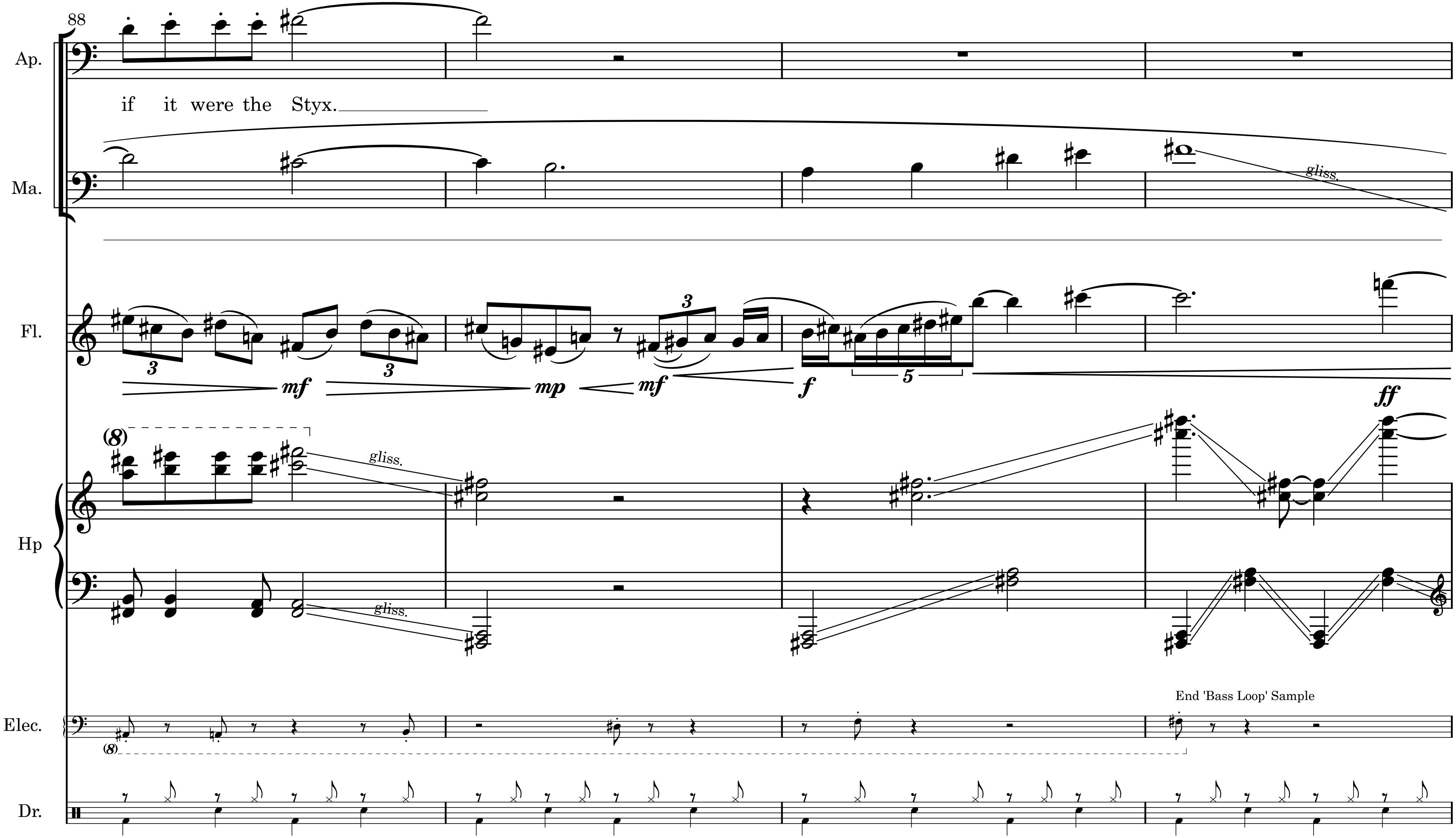

67
Ar.
MUSES: From gallus to gaunt, groping to haunted
As he realised, that even mighty Apollo,
infinite but powerless to destiny
As dawn is to dusk
Oh, frivolous twin,
who would rather finger fuck this fool,
would instead be forced to flay
Ap.
ff
I would swim in your smile e - ven
pained screaming, semi-pitched
Ma.
ff
Ah
Fl.
mf
f
mp
Hp
f
Elec.
(8)
Dr.

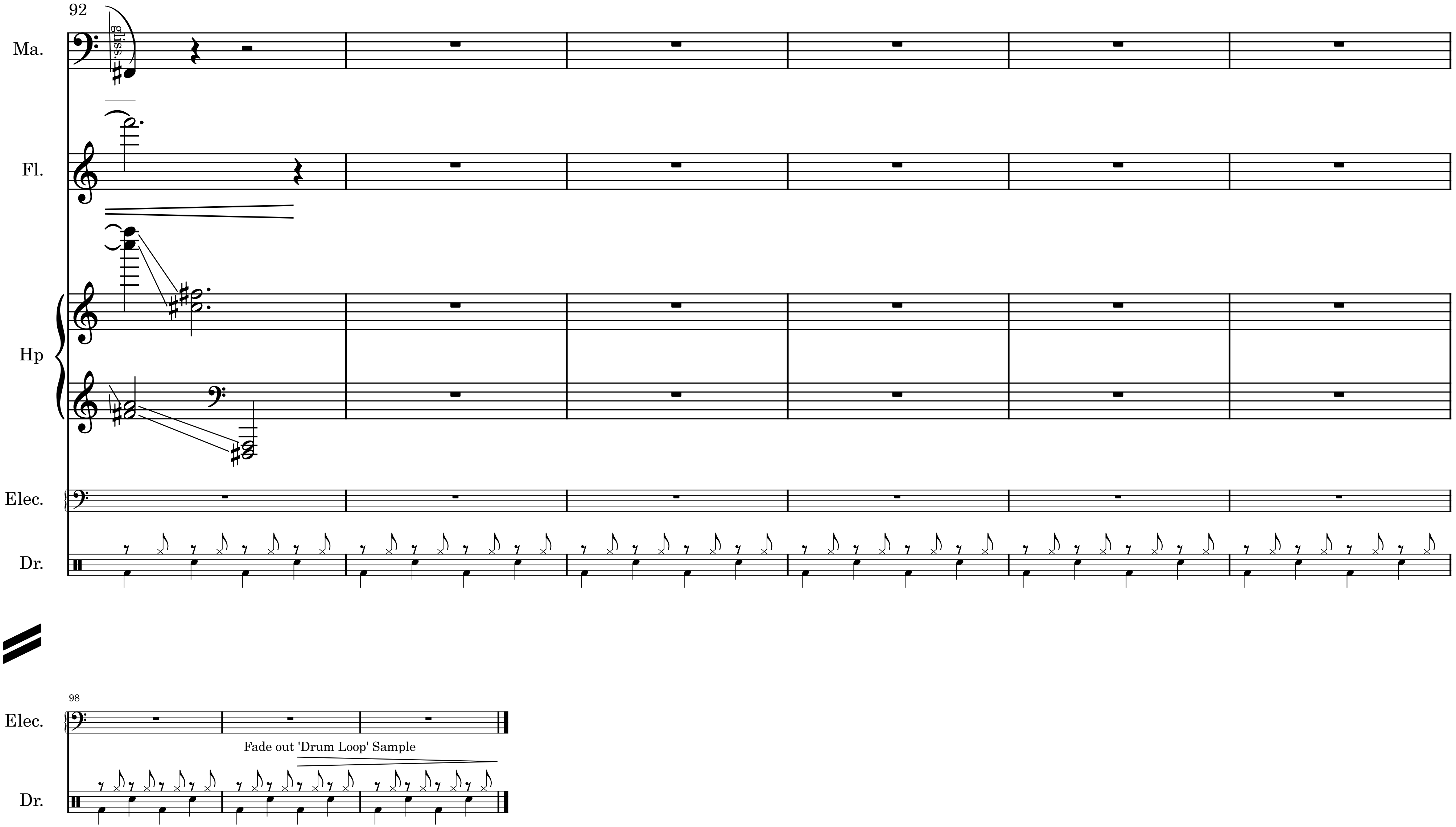

72
Ar.
A swarming screech as the scalpel sank
peeling skin from bone like tide from sand
MUSES: and we Muses dropped tears we played as the sweat of feigning decision
as we saw Apollo draw real blood, not ichor, making the final incision.
Ap.
if it were the Styx. I would swim in your smile e - ven if it were the Styx. I would swim in your smile e - ven
Ma.
Ah
Ah
Fl.
3
5
3
3
3
3
f
mf
mp
mf
f
Hp
Elec.
(8)
Dr.


76
Ap.
if it were the Styx. I would swim in your smile e - ven if it were the Styx.
Ma.
Ah
Ah
Fl.
Hp
Elec.
(8)
Dr.

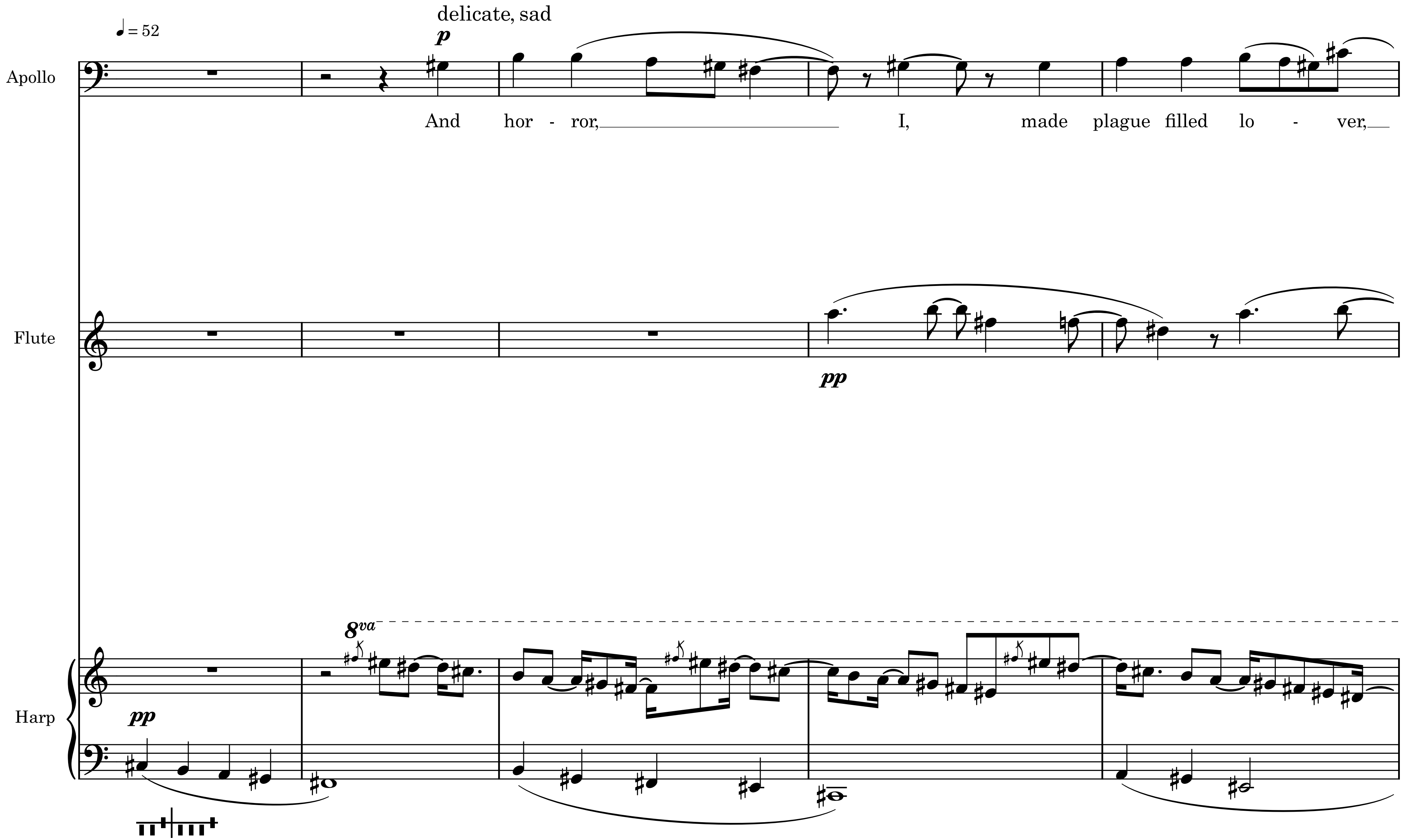

80
Ap.
I would swim in your smile e - ven if it were the Styx. I would swim in your smile e - ven
Ma.
Ah
Ah
Fl.
mf
Hp
Elec.
(8)
Dr.

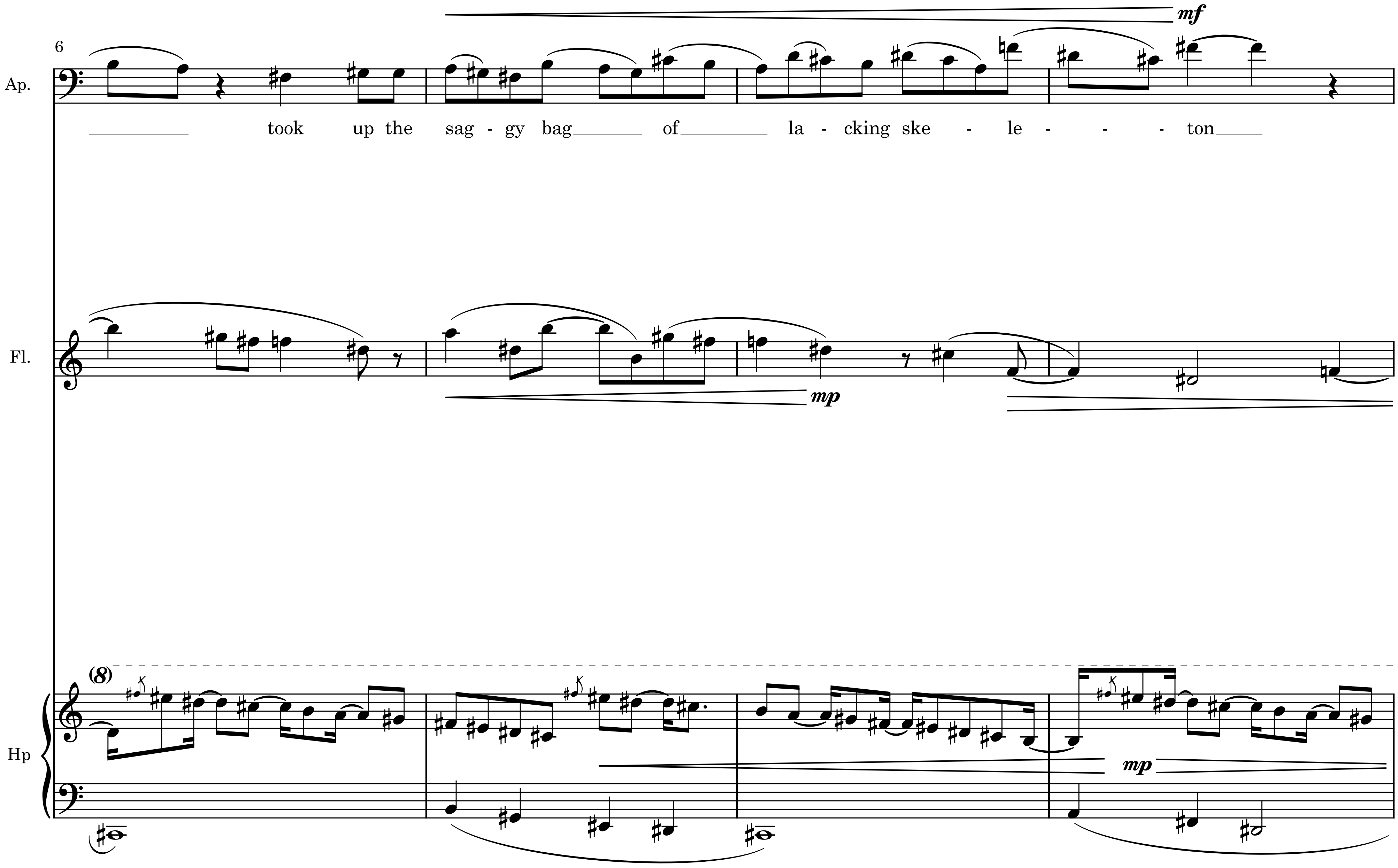

84
Ap.
if it were the Styx. I would swim in your smile e - ven if it were the Styx. I would swim in your smile e - ven
Ma.
Ah
Ah
Fl.
3
5
f
mp
f
Hp
8va
Elec.
(8)
Dr.

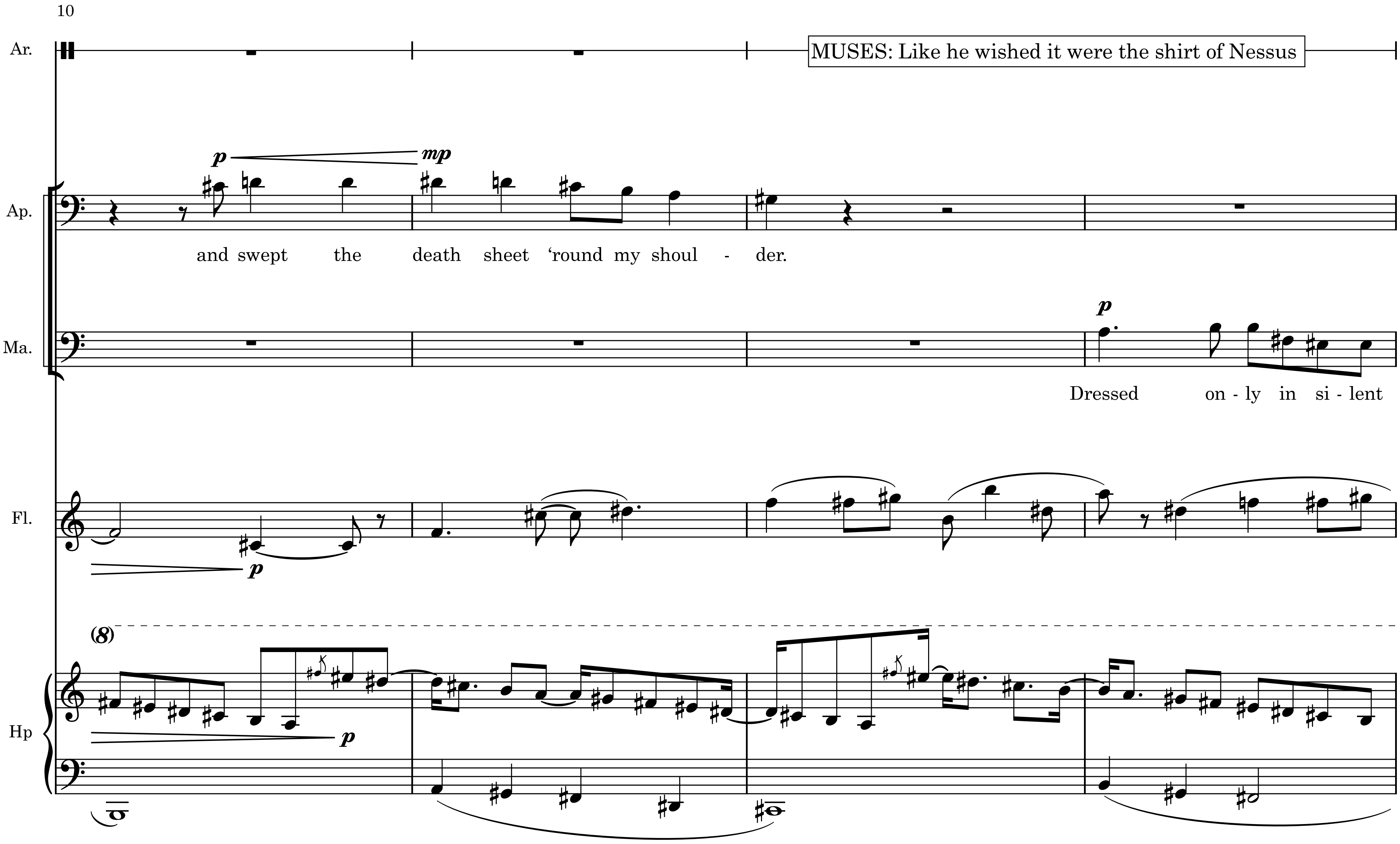

88
Ap.
if it were the Styx.
Ma.
gliss.
Fl.
3
3
mf
mp
mf
3
f
5
ff
(8)
gliss.
Hp
gliss.
End 'Bass Loop' Sample
Elec.
(8)
Dr.


92
gliss.
Ma.
Fl.
Hp
Elec.
Dr.
98
Elec.
Fade out 'Drum Loop' Sample
Dr.

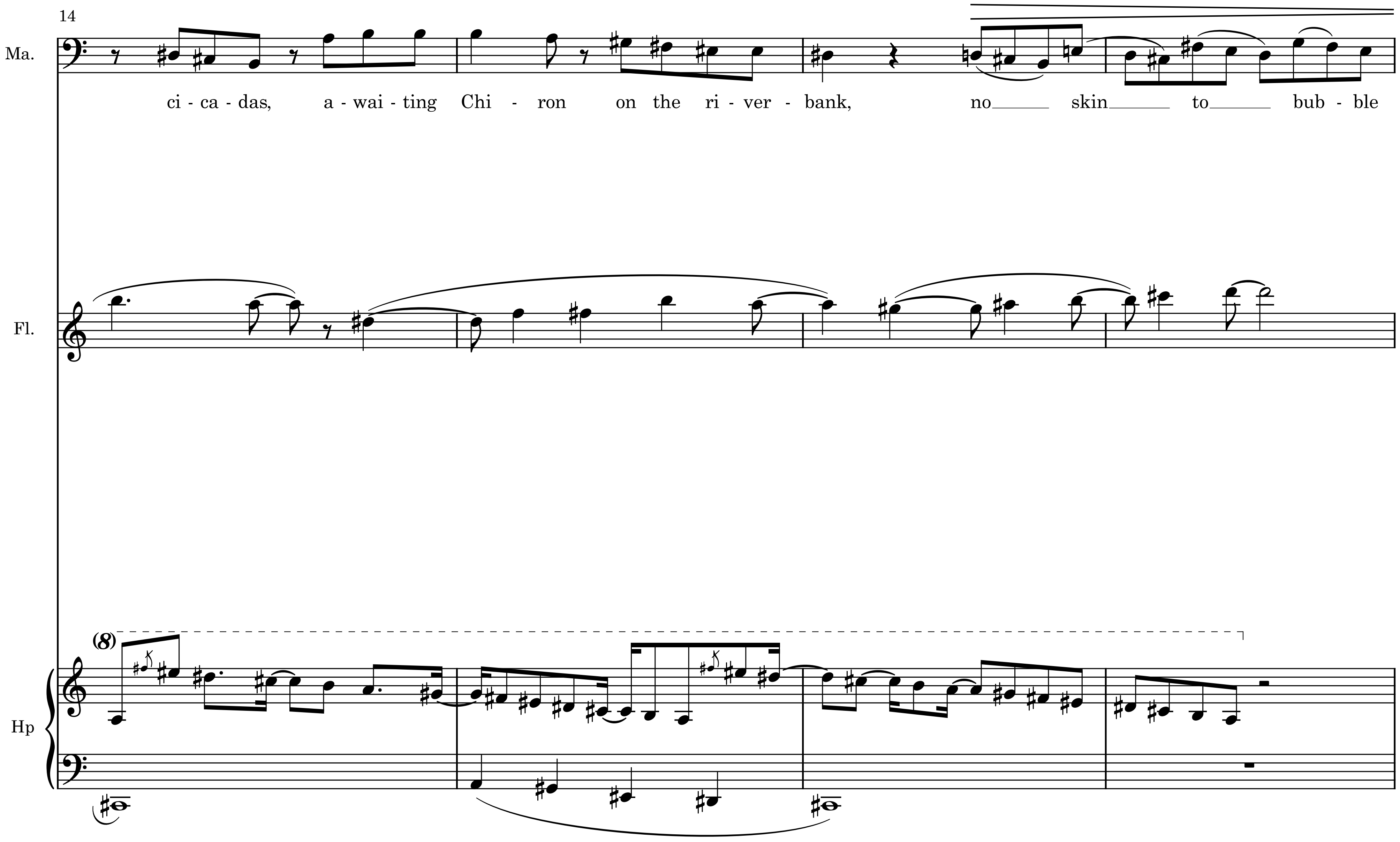
VI.

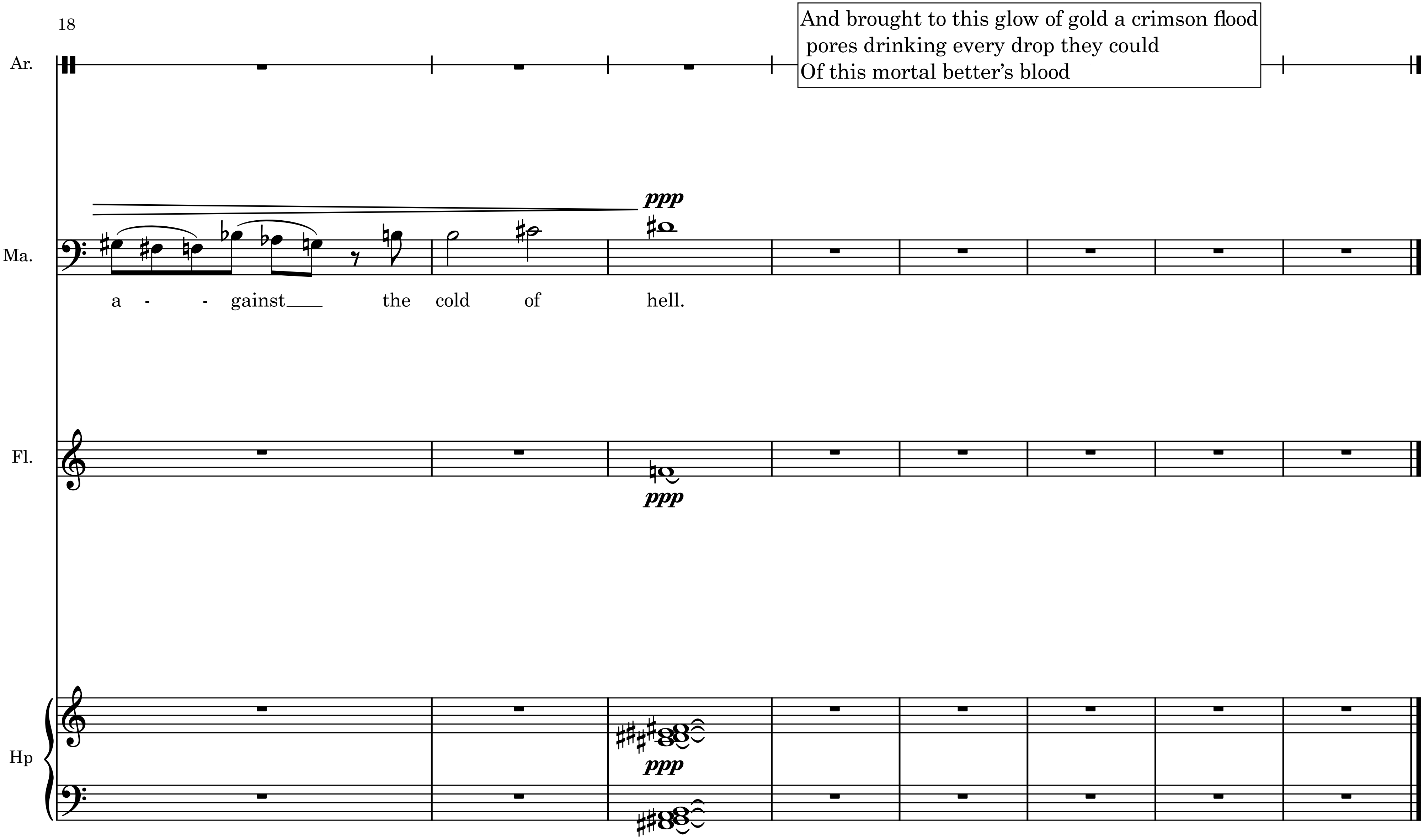

♩ = 52
delicate, sad
p
Apollo
And hor - ror, I, made plague filled lo - ver,
Flute
pp
Harp
pp
8va


6
Ap.
Fl.
Hp
took up the sag - gy bag of la - cking ske - le - - ton
mf
mp
mp
(8)


10
Ar.
MUSES: Like he wished it were the shirt of Nessus
Ap.
p
mp
and swept the death sheet ‘round my shoul - der.
Ma.
p
Dressed on - ly in si - lent
Fl.
p
Hp
(8)
p

VI.


14
Ma.
ci - ca - das, a - wai - ting Chi - ron on the ri - ver - bank, no skin to bub - ble
Fl.
(8)
Hp


18
Ar.
And brought to this glow of gold a crimson flood
pores drinking every drop they could
Of this mortal better's blood
Ma.
ppp
a - - gainst the cold of hell.
Fl.
ppp
Hp
ppp

QUEEN MIDAS

an opera for solo voice, electronics, and projection

Libretto by Spencer Mason

Music and Projections by Devon Bonelli

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Dramatis Personae and Instrumentation

Queen Midas - Soprano

Projections with Synced Audio

Duration

1 hour, no interval

Dedication

A big 'thank you' to everyone who made this project possible.
Georgie, thank you for undertaking such a behemoth role.
Spencer, thank you for your powerful words.
Imogen and Chloe at Excessive Human Collective,
Thank you both for your directorial advice.
Christ, Dee, and Baz at The White Hotel,
Thank you for hosting us for the first performance
And for all your kind encouragement through this.

You've all made this piece what it is,
And I am forever indebetted.

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Libretto

written by Spencer Mason

Act: I. Scene: 1 – 'Overture'
(Repeated 'ah's)

Eye shadowed donned, glitter like shrapnel
Tearing through skin and cellular,
A scavenger of blood.
Ephemeral display to erotic dismay.
A gold touch bled black,
glittering, making the moon a disco ball.
The twilight of Queen Midas Day.

A: I. S: 2 – 'Gold in the Wind'
Just a touch of gold in the wind
To eat up the skies,
That's all I wanted,
But now they've all died.
My sombre friends,
I inhale your pain.
Bodies reduced to mere glitter in the vein.

Paying pica with a glass of tar,
You offer nevermore
Sufferance through one sip of this black.
Decaying remnants of an empty dance floor,
Smiles and laughs that will
Caress me no more.
Tchaikovsky, Donna Summer, Kylie, and Gaga,
The voices that ousted
The voices of our fathers.

Blacksmith of gold, armorer of deceit,
Bring your alchemy to morph
These chains of my dreams.

A: I. S: 3 – 'Ha Dance'
(instrumental)

A: I. S. 4 – 'Lend me your chorus'
So Gods, Oh Gods,
Lend me your chorus.
I will dance for no hand
And abstain all temptation.
If only you promise these streets do not lead
To my eternal damnation.

A: II. S: 1 – 'Rumours (soundscape)'
Is that her?
They're all dead because of her.

A: II. S: 2 – 'Is that her?'
At least allow me rebuttal?
Your rumours have no grounding.
No martyrs to rise against
The truth of my providence?
I am but a woman scorned,
Home ravaged by an invisible war.

Will you not pity this plight
Instead of insisting that I be further torn?
You have no right to fear my touch.
You have no right to be so rough.
If you segregate me to this isolation,
Then you leave me to wilt and die as such.

A touch like gold goes far in this city
Where the lassies wear waistcoats,
And the boys dress pretty.
Feather boas caught in cuddles
And islands drowned in gulps and bubbles.

How do you forsake a touch unknown?
How do you loathe the answer to
A question unasked?

(spoken)
Help me.
I need help instead of hate.
Someone: God or Man.
Help me.

A: II. S: 3 – 'The Queen of Gold'
Despite my tender kiss,
You still call me witch.
But all I hear is this:
A woman who understands power
You demand dismissed.
But no, this cloud grows gold
The glittering tar wraps around my wrist
I beg you blind, do not witness this
The glitter sticks and scars,
Like shrapnel in my skin
It claws through veins and reveals sin within
Do not abandon me so, you don't know what
It is to have a nation demand you live alone.
Surely it is charming,
To see a sun rise fractured by smoke?
But now I can taste the glitter,
It clogs within my throat

(A: II. S: 3 cont.)
I will not bow to the crown of blaming.
I will not curtsy to the cunts who distain me.
My name is Midas, Queen of Gold!
My name is triumph
Of the lies which you scold!

A: III. S: 1 – 'Tar (soundscape)'
(instrumental)

A: III. S. 2 – 'Tar Dance'
DRINK THE TAR, DRINK THE TAR,
DRINK THE TAR.
THIS BLACKNESS IS PURE,
THESE TAR DROPLETS WILL CURE.
DRINK THIS LIQUID TO MAKE
THE SLATE CLEAN ONCE MORE.

A. III. S. 3 – 'A Queen's Delusions'
Delusions distortions and Dionysian diatribes.
I stand as the victim of the wine god's grin,
As he contorts a pleasure out of this cities sin.
Wraiths of treacle-like tar coursing,
Corroding me,
Making mania of my mind.
They claimed it cure, claimed it pure,
A sure thing,
Now there's no land free of fear
And no love near here.
If I could call upon any seer to assuage
My inquiry:
Was it me? was this my destiny?
Nation of isolation, am I mere desolation?
With a kiss with desecration, are my hands
Mere immolation? Am I just imitation
Of the lives I forsook from salvation?
Am I a garrison of plague?
Is there no hope to be saved?

GO BACK TO WHERE YOU CAME FROM
YOU HEMAPHRO-DYKE.
BUTCH OR BITCH,
WE DON'T WANT YOUR SHIT.
FUCKING PLAGUE RAT,
FUCKING PYTHON KISSER,

(A. III. S. 3 cont.)
GO BACK TO THE GRAVE TO AGAIN
KILL YOUR SISTERS
GHOUL, WRAITH, FAGGOT DISGRACE,
YOUR TONGUE AND YOUR TOUCH
ARE A HEX UPON THIS PLACE.
TALK QUEER WORDS ALL PRETTY,
GET THE FUCK OUT OF OUR CITY.

A: III. S: 4 – 'All alone'
Alone. All alone.

A: IV. S: 1 – 'Yet I remember'
Yet I remember,
Lips held; hands kissed.
A cocktail walkway and tokenised bliss.
We shag queens, elbows in knots,
Held hostage to a lost night of one another.
Belly bouncing laughs of butch and rouge lippy.

Watch me fall into an ocean,
Turn water to gold lame.
I will drown myself in gold
Instead of the blaze you've made me.
Fuck your false prophecies
And fuck your three charcoal, liquid meals
Your conspiratorial remedies have only
Driven this insanity.
Fine then.
Drown me.
And if you will not
I will drown me.
And if you try to stop it
I will make a tsunami of myself
And take all loss with me.
Making wingspan of our friends,
Held hostage to a lost night of one another.
A daughter lost to the blood she was bound,
Her heartbeat coursing veins as a hound.

A: IV. S: 2 – 'Drown me'
DROWN ME

A: IV. S: 3 – 'Epilogue (soundscape)'
(instrumental)

Performance Notes

Queen Midas is an opera for solo voice, projection, and electronics. Part exercise in aesthetic limitations and study into electronic maximalism, this piece retells the myth of Midas, a ruler who could turn anything to gold with just a touch. I use this theme of a 'fear of touch' as an examination of the fallout of the AIDS crisis and its continued impact. The piece integrates house music, a genre historically significant to queer culture, with the operatic tradition to explore the intersections of personal and communal trauma, as well as the construction of identity and reality. The libretto was written collaboratively between Spencer Mason and me. It was performed by soprano Georgie Malcom at The White Hotel in Salford on the 25th of June.

Queen Midas draws from Ovid's *Metamorphose*s (c. 8 CE) and Ted Hughes's *Tales from Ovid* (1997) to ground its narrative. The central theme of Midas's 'fear of touch' is reimagined to parallel the societal and personal impacts of the AIDS crisis, emphasizing themes of queer trauma and identity formation. This link highlights the fear and isolation experienced by queer people during the epidemic, continuing to this day. Psychologist Walt Odets's *Out of the Shadows* (2019) explores the aftermath of the AIDS crisis and the sustained trauma affecting queer individuals. He discusses how queer people are often 'queered' by society before they have a chance to understand their own identities. This societal othering forces individuals to construct their identities in response to external caricatures and stereotypes. Queen Midas echoes these themes by portraying Midas's struggle with societal perceptions, reflecting the broader experiences of queer individuals who face ongoing transphobia and homophobia. The opera explores how these traumas are inscribed on the body and psyche, echoing Odets's analysis of the lasting impacts of societal prejudice on mental health.

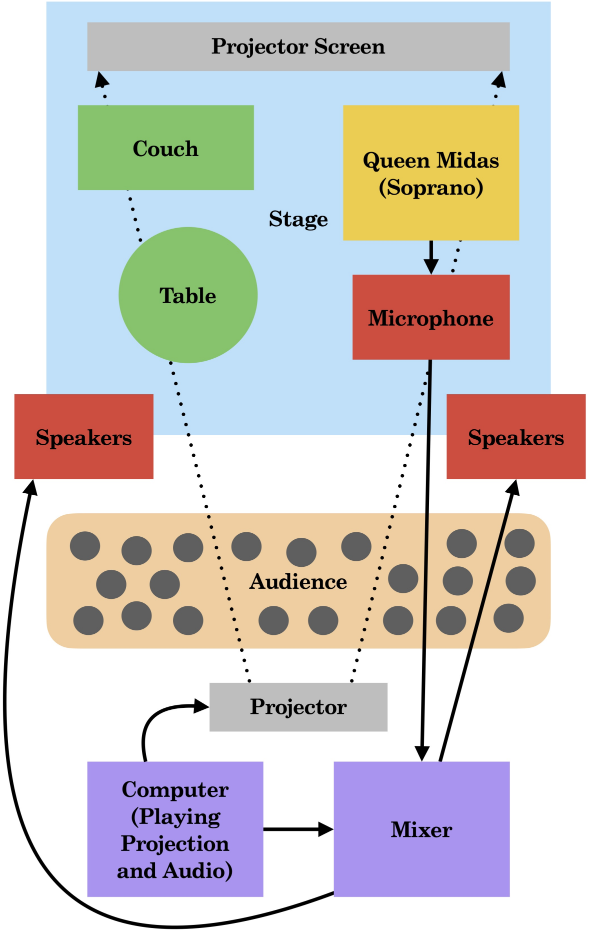
Expanding on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's work, *Queen Midas* explores the dynamic nature of identity. Deterritorialization, the process disrupting fixed and imposed identities, is seen in Midas's transformation from a queen to outcast. Midas's identity evolves through the show, aligning with the idea that identity is not stable but continuously changing. Becoming as a concept emphasizes this perpetual transformation of the self. The opera suggests that the fracturing and reconstruction of the self are creative processes, leading to new forms of expression and existence and escape from a limiting society. By embracing a masochism of identity, Midas finds freedom, challenging conventional expectations and celebrating the fluid nature of identity.

The opera employs electronic music techniques like resampling and granular synthesis to curate a specific auditory experience. I sample primarily from Georgie's voice and recognizable elements of house (i.e. the 'house stab' of planing minor 7th chords and TR-808 samples used in Act II. Scene 2 – 'Is that her?'). The synthesized sounds in Queen Midas were crafted using my Elektron Digitone. It allows for the creation of complex, developing timbres that underpin the opera's evolving sound world. FM synthesis, known for its ability to produce both melodic and percussive elements, is used to generate various lead synths and rhythmic components.

Electronics

Projection Files

The entirety of *Queen Midas*'s electronics come as two .MOV files (shot at 25fps) with audio synced to the film. These (and a demo recording) are available at www.devonbonelli.com/downloads. Projection I runs from Act I to III. Act III Sc. 4 'All Alone' is unaccompanied. Projection II should be started at the end of this scene once Midas exits.



Routing and Electronics

The projections should be loaded onto a computer running to a 1080p compatible projector, with audio send to a mixer. The projector may be placed in front of the stage or behind the projector screen. If projected from the back, the video should be mirrored so as to mirror any text that appears in the film. Midas sings into a microphone whose signal is also sent to this mixer. There should be a small amount of sidechain compression applied to the computer's audio, slightly ducking for Midas's voice. A small amount of hall reverb may be added to both to facilitate meshing of these two sound sources. Act III Sc. 4 'All Alone' should be sung without a microphone.

Staging and Costuming

The stage should be stylized as a 'night after a house party'. Include discarded drinks, cigarette butts, confetti, etc. A couch and table (depicted in green above) may be added to the scene if the venue has capabilities for this. Midas may freely interact with these as she chooses.

If possible, use a 'vintage' microphone like a Shure SH55 or SM35 to reference the stylistic allusions of this composition. **Under no circumstances should a 'forehead' microphone be used.** They look silly and ruin the vibe, truly to the detriment of many great performances. **Only if no other options are available** may a lapel mic be used. In such a situation, the more this is hidden in Midas's outfit, the better.

Midas should wear a gold dress. Additionally, Midas mat wear a 'claw' of some sort, drawing on the symbolism of 'a fear to touch'. Some examples of staging and costuming from the first show at The White Hotel on 25 June 2023 are included in the following page.

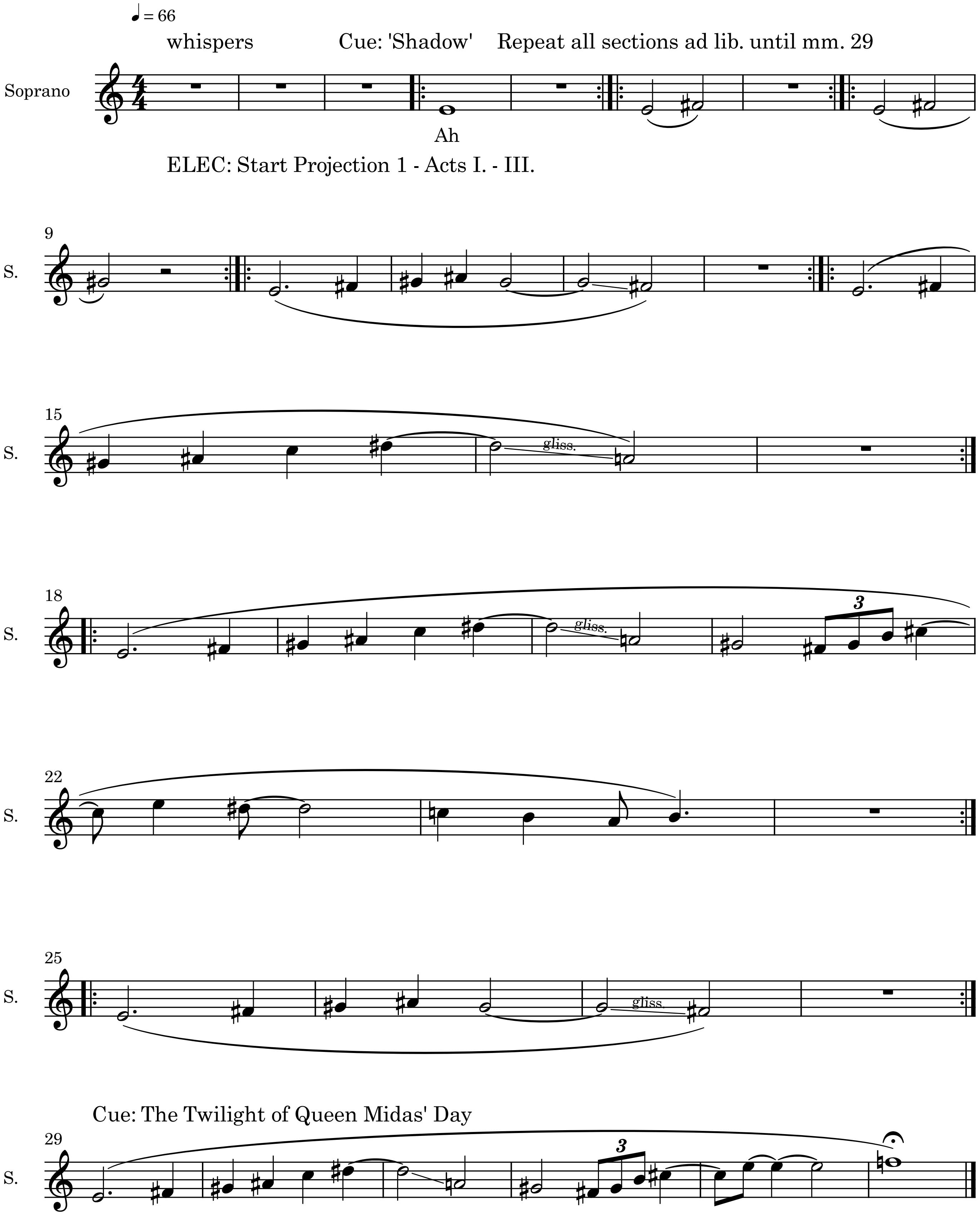
QUEEN
MIDAS
JUN 25 '23

Queen Midas

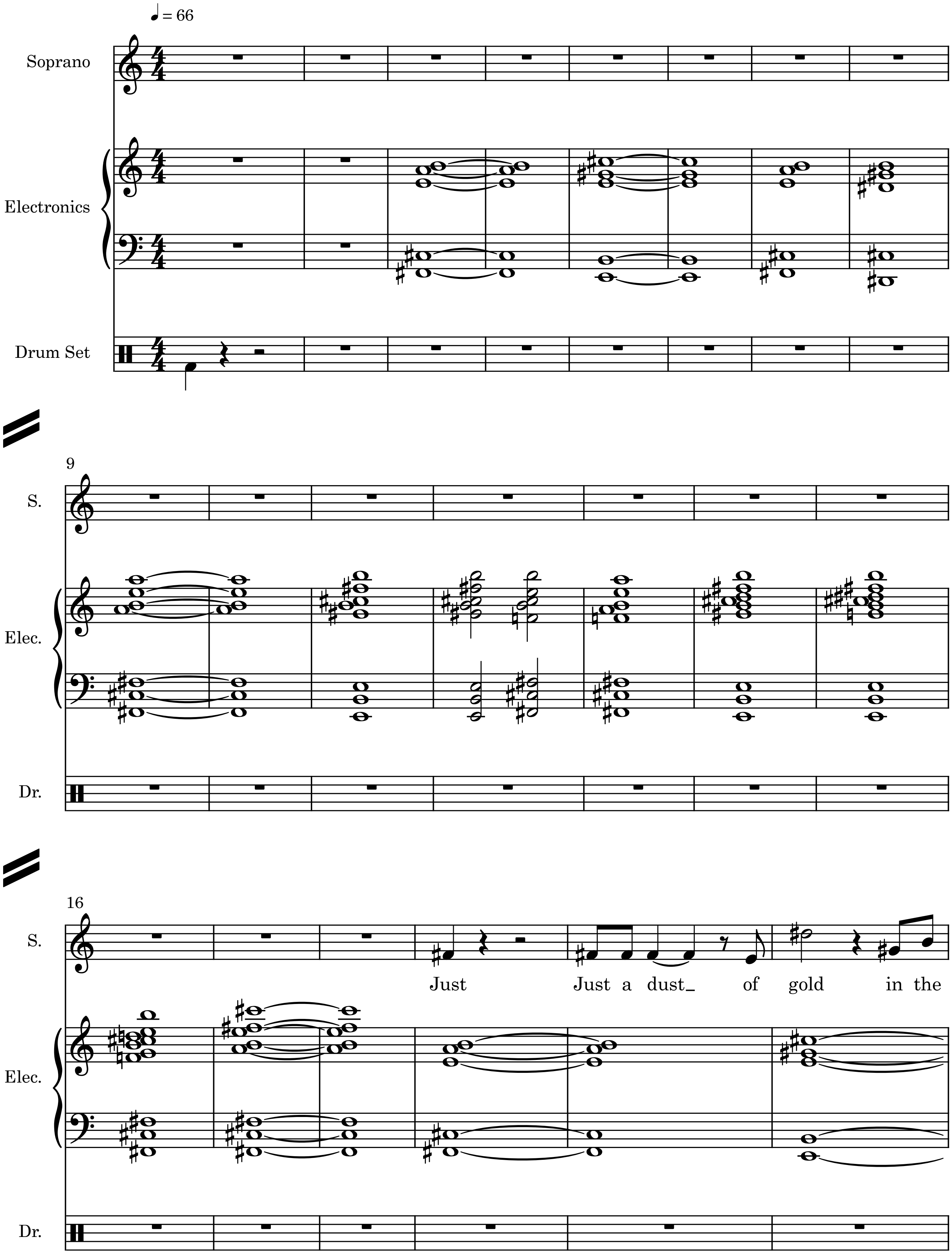
Libretto by Spencer Mason

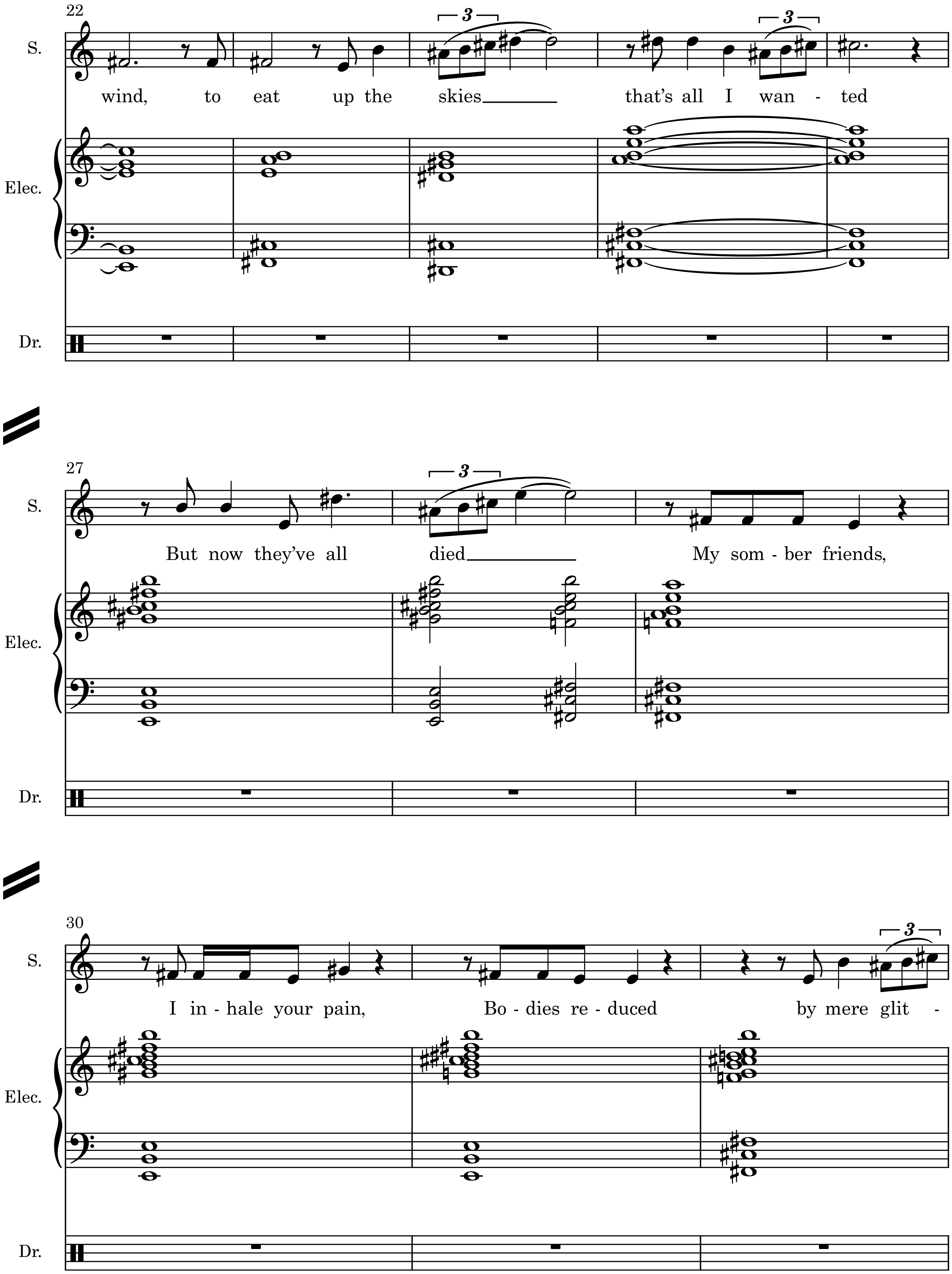
Music by Devon Bonelli

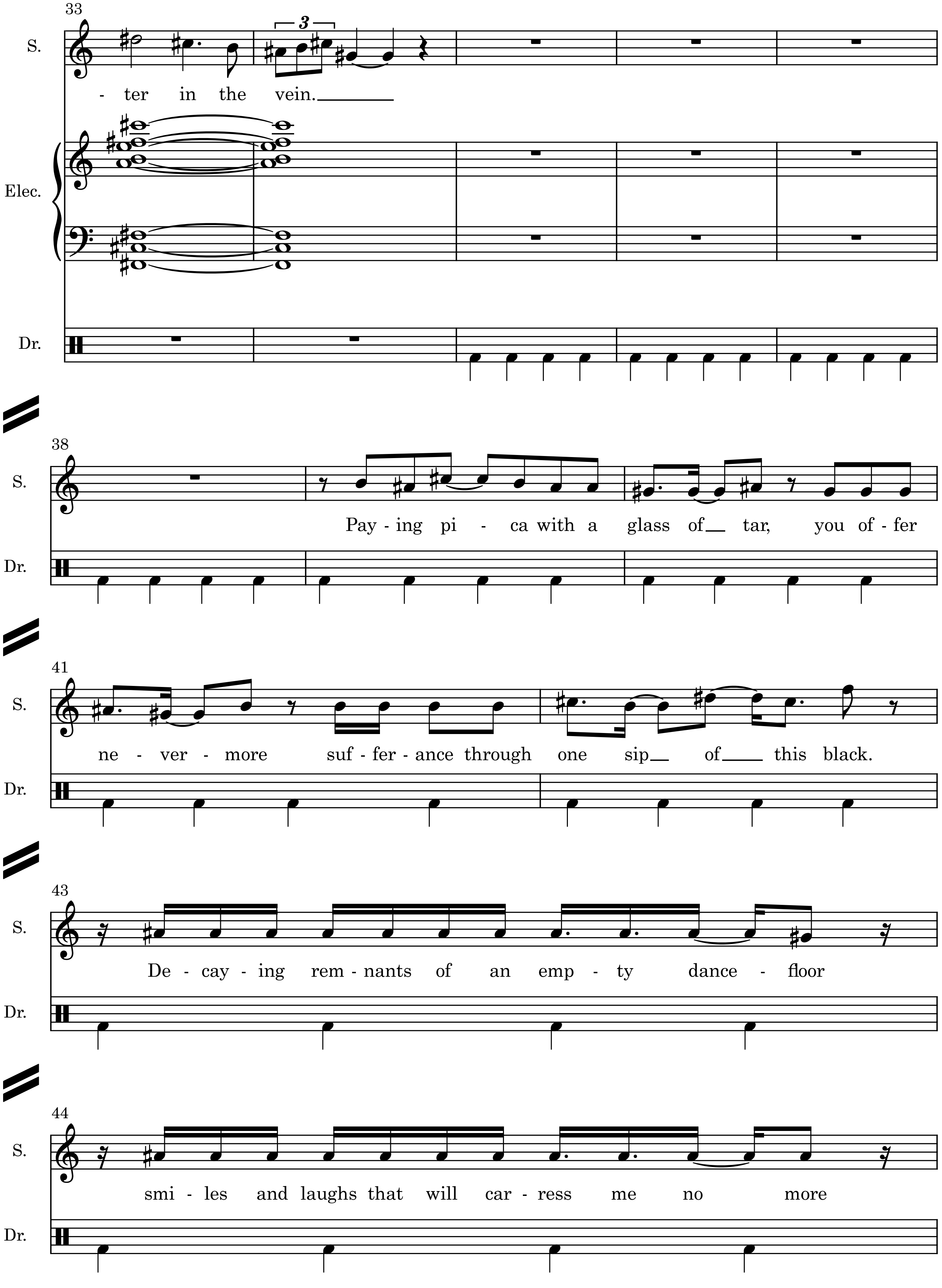
Act I. Scene 1 - ‘Overture’

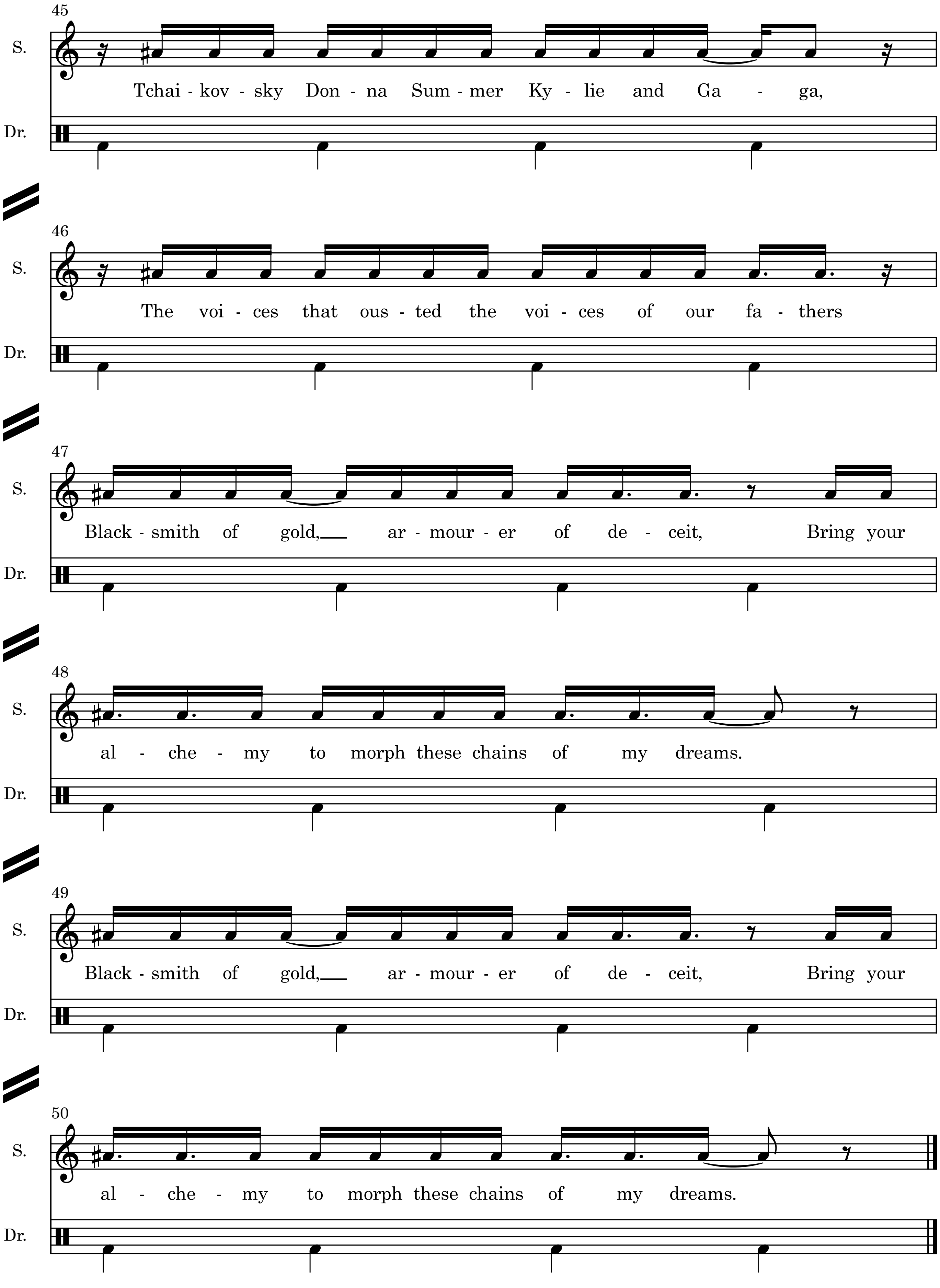

♩ = 66
whispers
Cue: 'Shadow'
Repeat all sections ad lib. until mm. 29
Soprano
Ah
ELEC: Start Projection 1 - Acts I. - III.
9
S.
15
S.
gliss.
18
S.
gliss.
3
22
S.
25
S.
gliss.
Cue: The Twilight of Queen Midas' Day
29
S.
3

Act I. Scene 2 - 'Gold in the Wind'

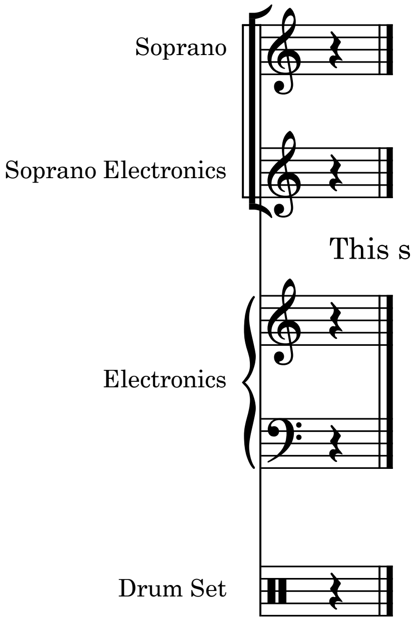

♩ = 66
Soprano
Electronics
Drum Set
9
S.
Elec.
Dr.
16
Just
Just a dust_ of gold in the


22
S.
wind, to eat up the skies that’s all I wan - ted
Elec.
Dr.
27
S.
But now they’ve all died
My som - ber friends,
Elec.
Dr.
30
S.
I in - hale your pain,
Bo - dies re - duced
by mere glit -
Elec.
Dr.


33
S.
- ter in the vein.
Elec.
Dr.
38
Pay - ing pi - ca with a glass of tar, you of - fer
41
ne - ver - more suf - fer - ance through one sip of this black.
43
De - cay - ing rem - nants of an emp - ty dance - floor
44
smi - les and laughs that will car - ress me no more

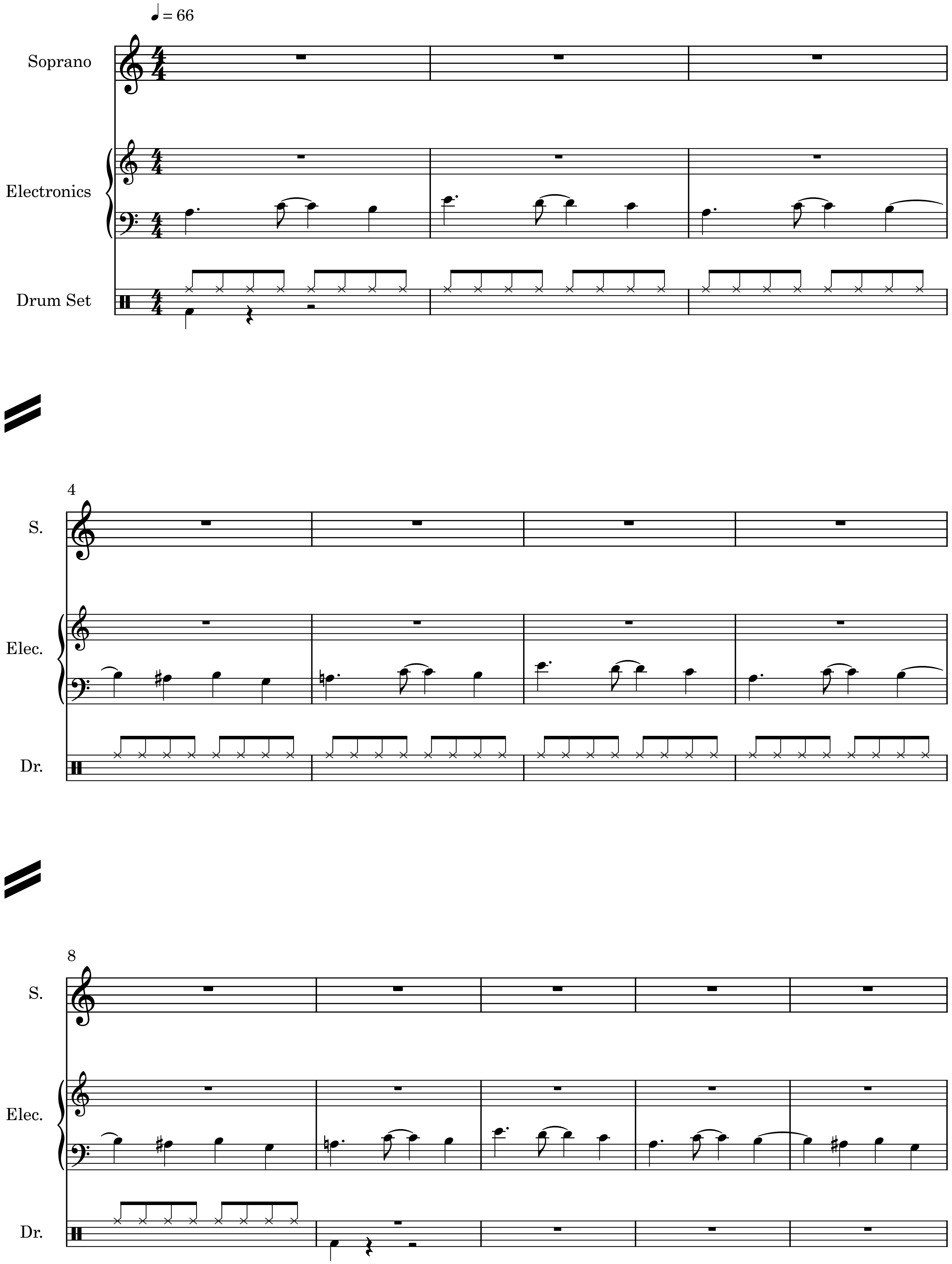

45
S.
Tchai - kov - sky Don - na Sum - mer Ky - lie and Ga - ga,
Dr.
46
S.
The voi - ces that ous - ted the voi - ces of our fa - thers
Dr.
47
S.
Black - smith of gold, ar - mour - er of de - ceit, Bring your
Dr.
48
S.
al - che - my to morph these chains of my dreams.
Dr.
49
S.
Black - smith of gold, ar - mour - er of de - ceit, Bring your
Dr.
50
S.
al - che - my to morph these chains of my dreams.
Dr.

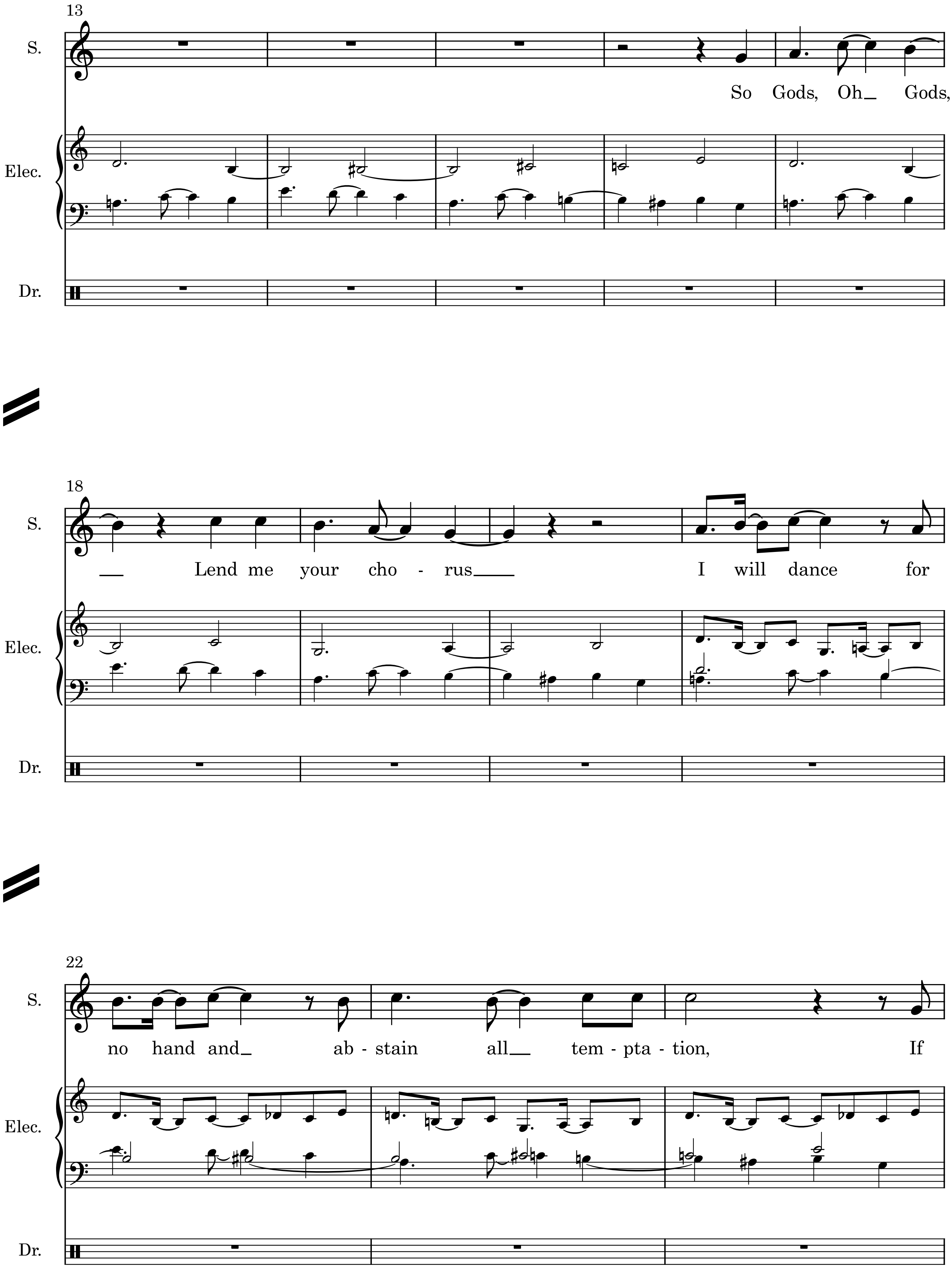
Act I. Scene 3 - ‘Ha Dance’

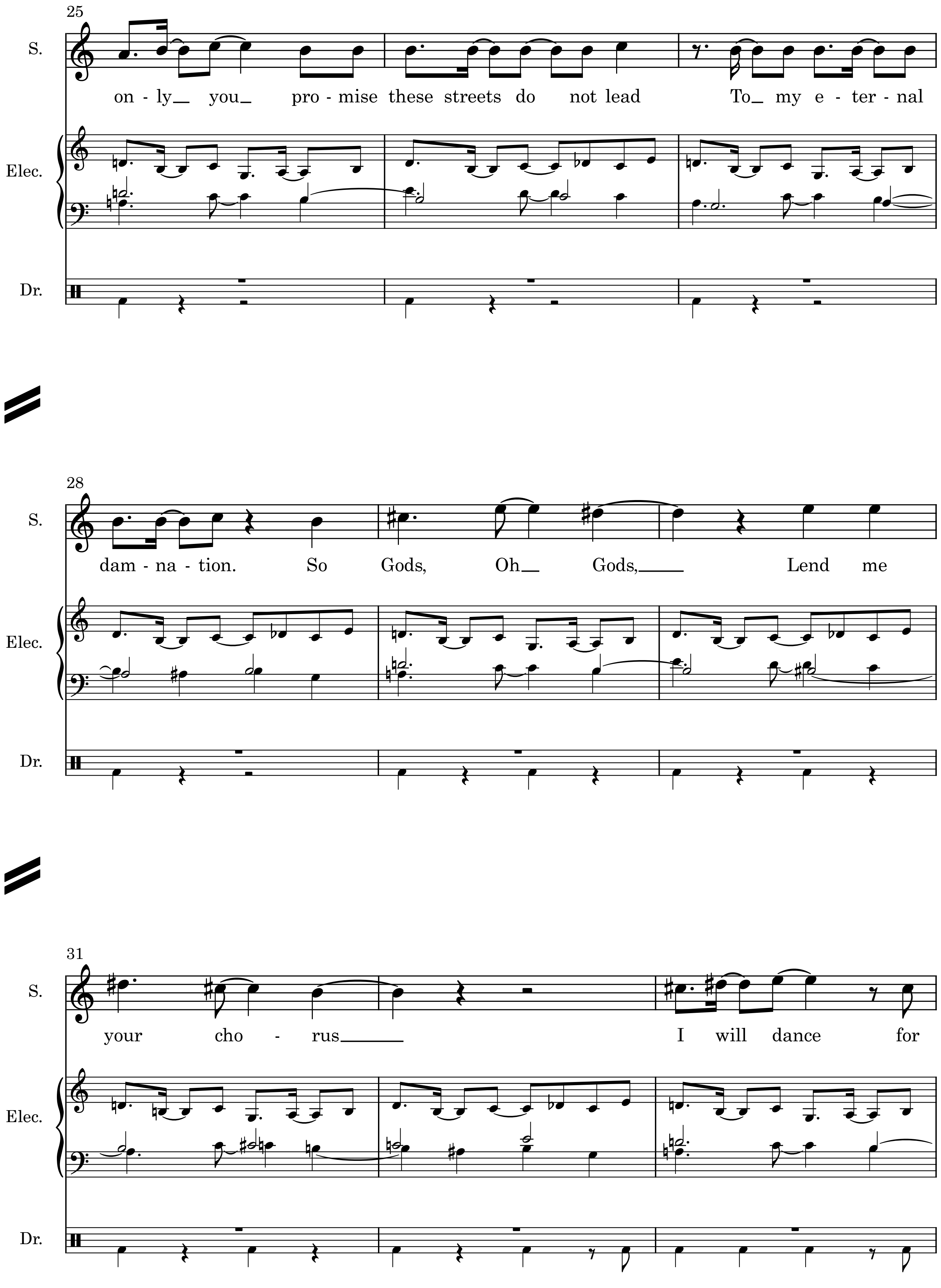

Soprano
Soprano Electronics
Electronics
Drum Set

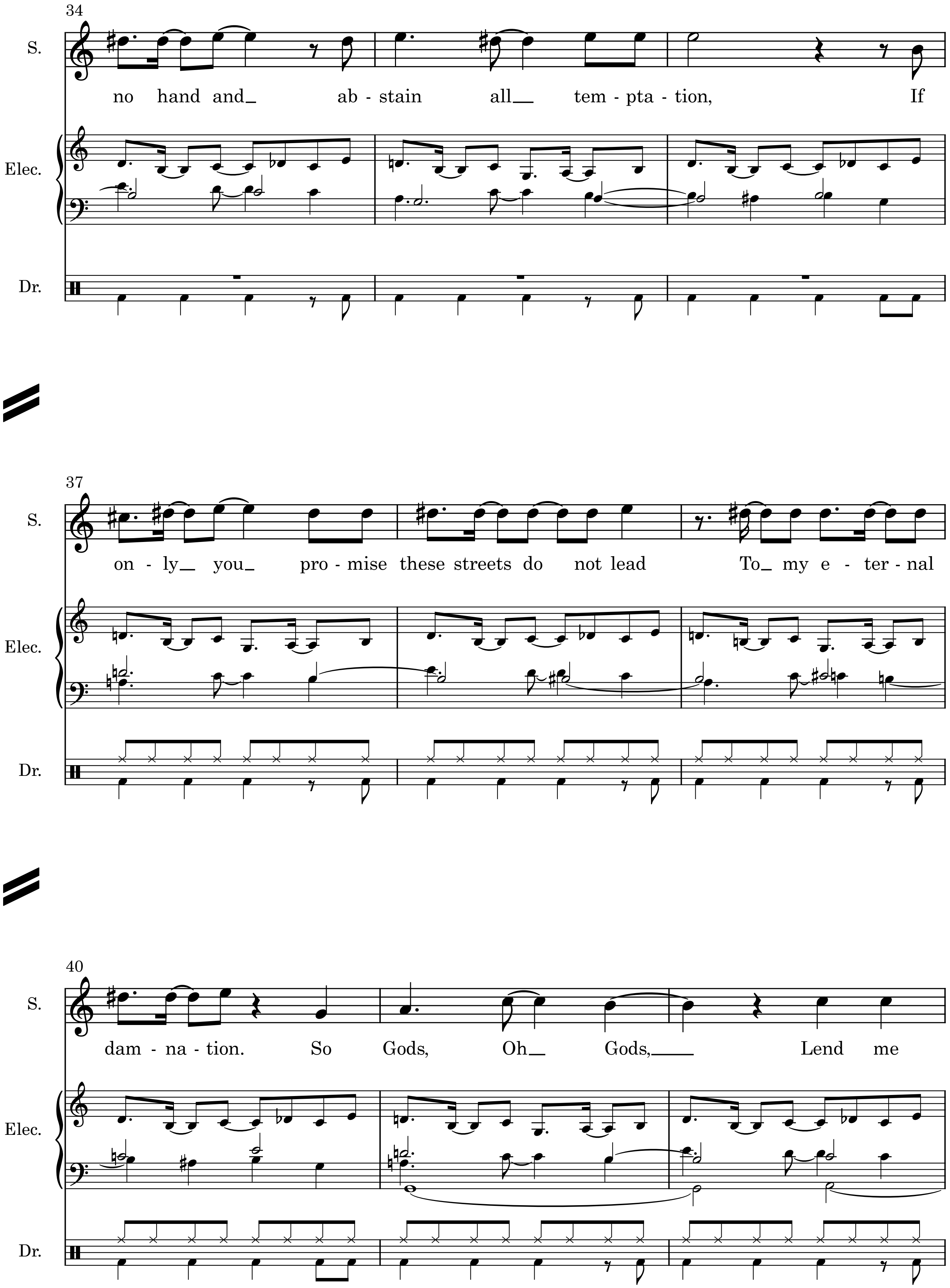
This scene is for solo electronics.

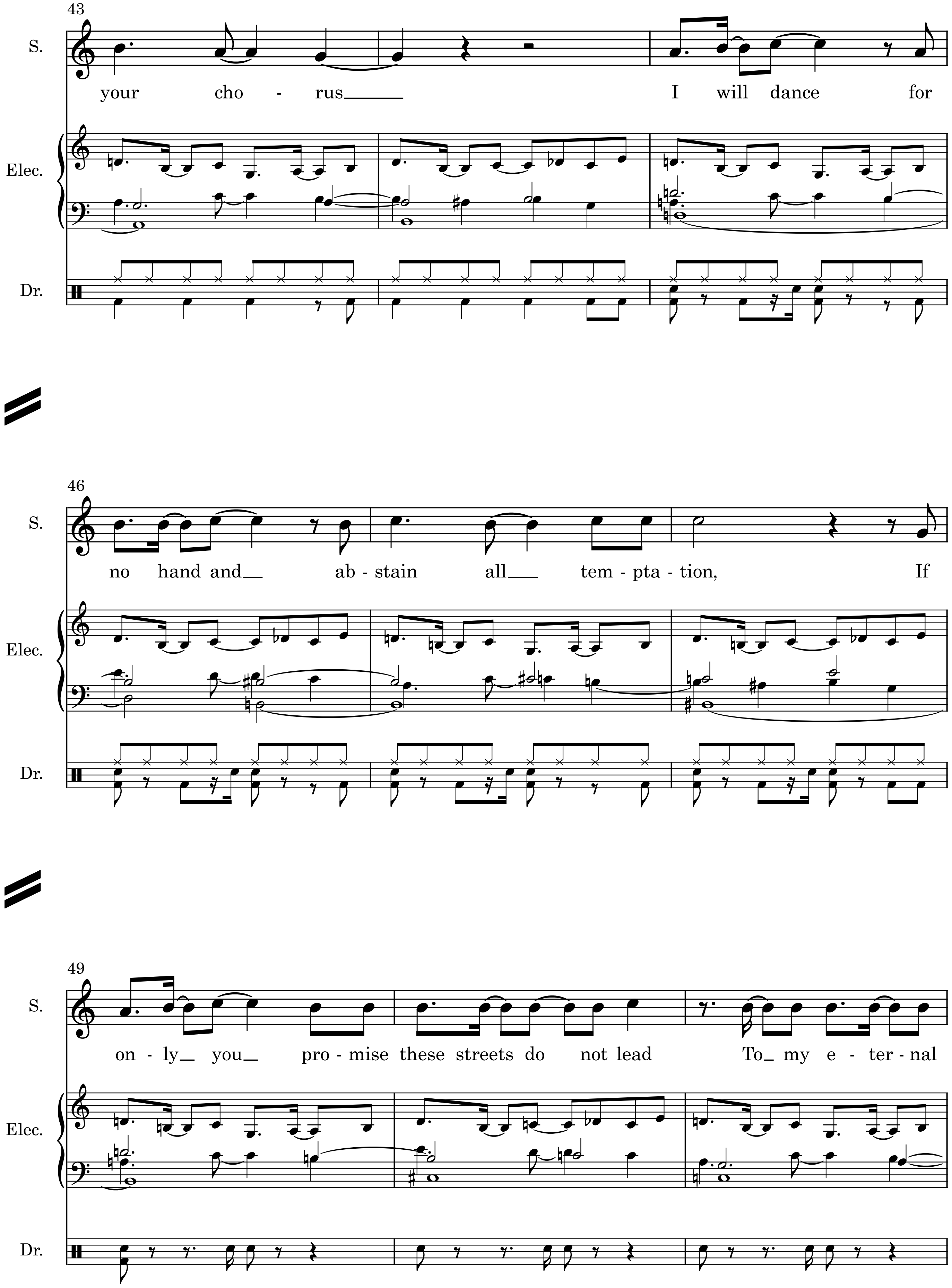
Act I. Scene 4 - ‘Lend Me Your Chorus’

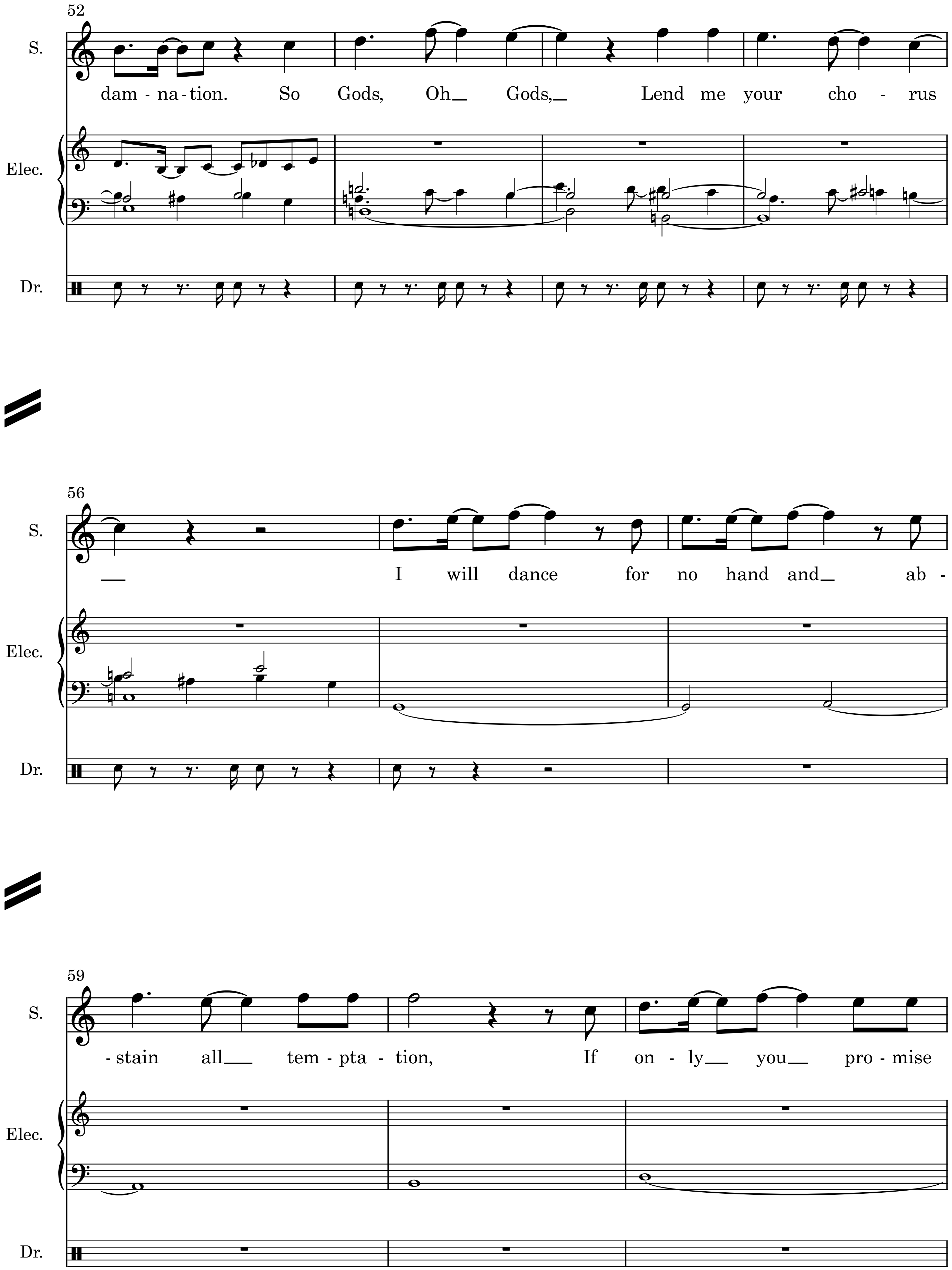

♩ = 66
Soprano
Electronics
Drum Set
4
S.
Elec.
Dr.
8
S.
Elec.
Dr.

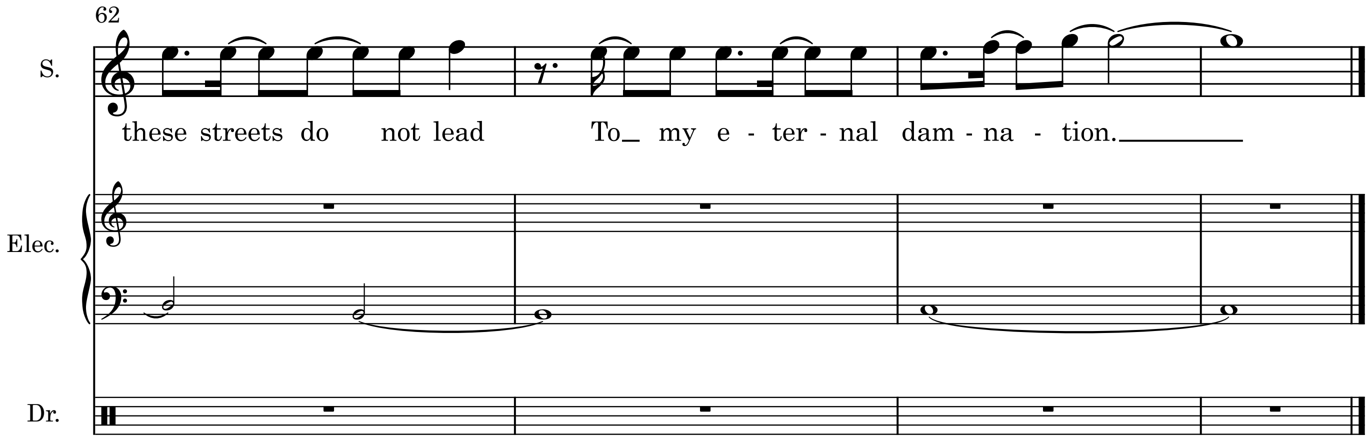

13
S.
Elec.
Dr.
So Gods, Oh_ Gods,
18
_ Lend me your cho - rus___ I will dance for
22
no hand and_ ab - stain all__ tem - pta - tion, If


25
S.
on - ly_ you_ pro - mise these streets do not lead To_ my e - ter - nal
Elec.
Dr.
28
S.
dam - na - tion. So Gods, Oh_ Gods,___ Lend me
Elec.
Dr.
31
S.
your cho - rus___ I will dance for
Elec.
Dr.

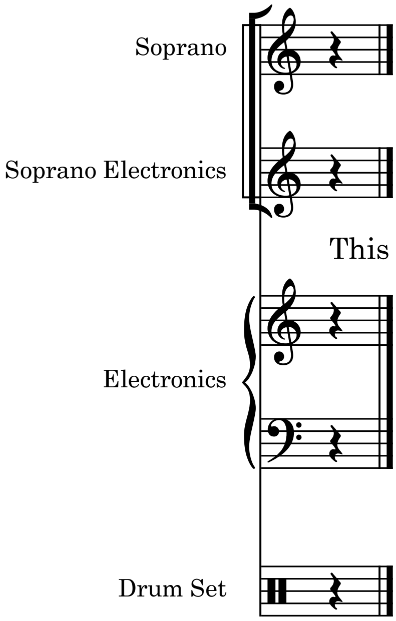

34
S.
no hand and_ ab - stain all_ tem - pta - tion, If
Elec.
Dr.
37
S.
on - ly_ you_ pro - mise these streets do not lead To_ my e - ter - nal
Elec.
Dr.
40
S.
dam - na - tion. So Gods, Oh_ Gods,_ Lend me
Elec.
Dr.


43
S.
your cho - rus
I will dance for
Elec.
Dr.
46
S.
no hand and ab - stain all tem - pta - tion, If
Elec.
Dr.
49
S.
on - ly you pro - mise these streets do not lead To my e - ter - nal
Elec.
Dr.


52
S.
dam - na - tion. So Gods, Oh_ Gods,_ Lend me your cho - rus
Elec.
Dr.
56
S.
_ I will dance for no hand and_ ab -
Elec.
Dr.
59
S.
- stain all_ tem - pta - tion, If on - ly_ you_ pro - mise
Elec.
Dr.

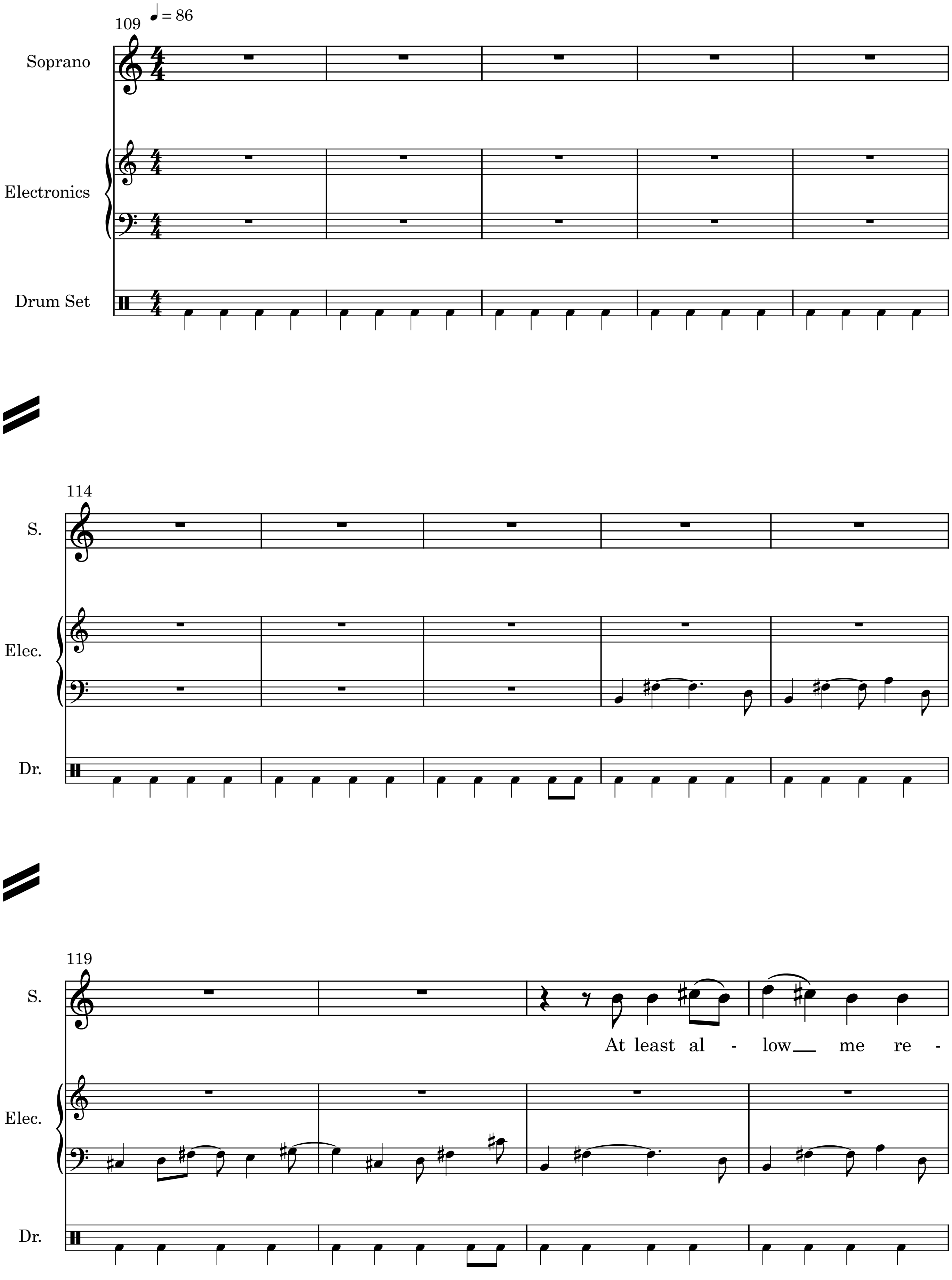

62
S.
these streets do not lead To my e - ter - nal dam - na - tion.
Elec.
Dr.

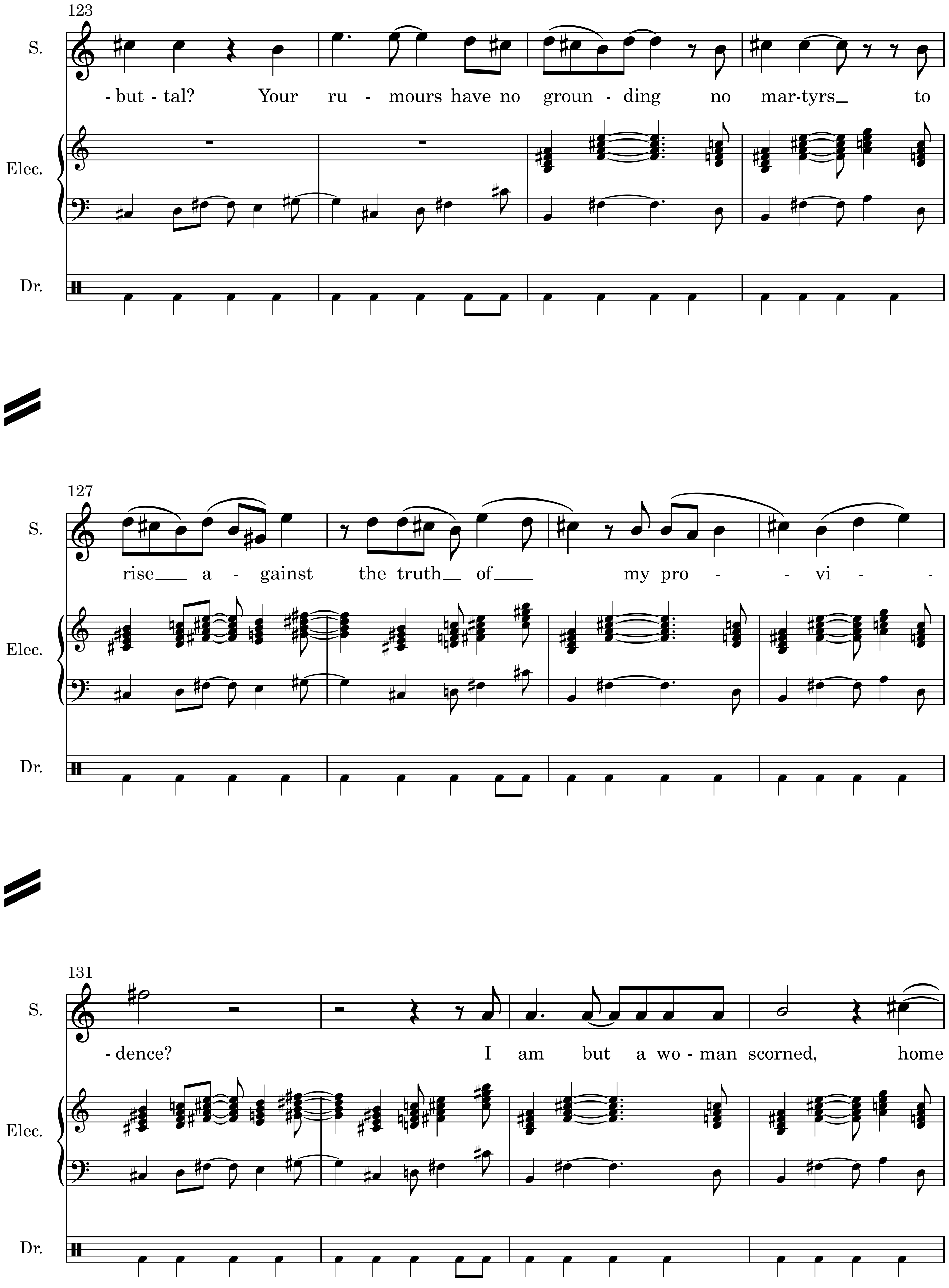
Act II. Scene 1 - ‘Rumours Soundscape’

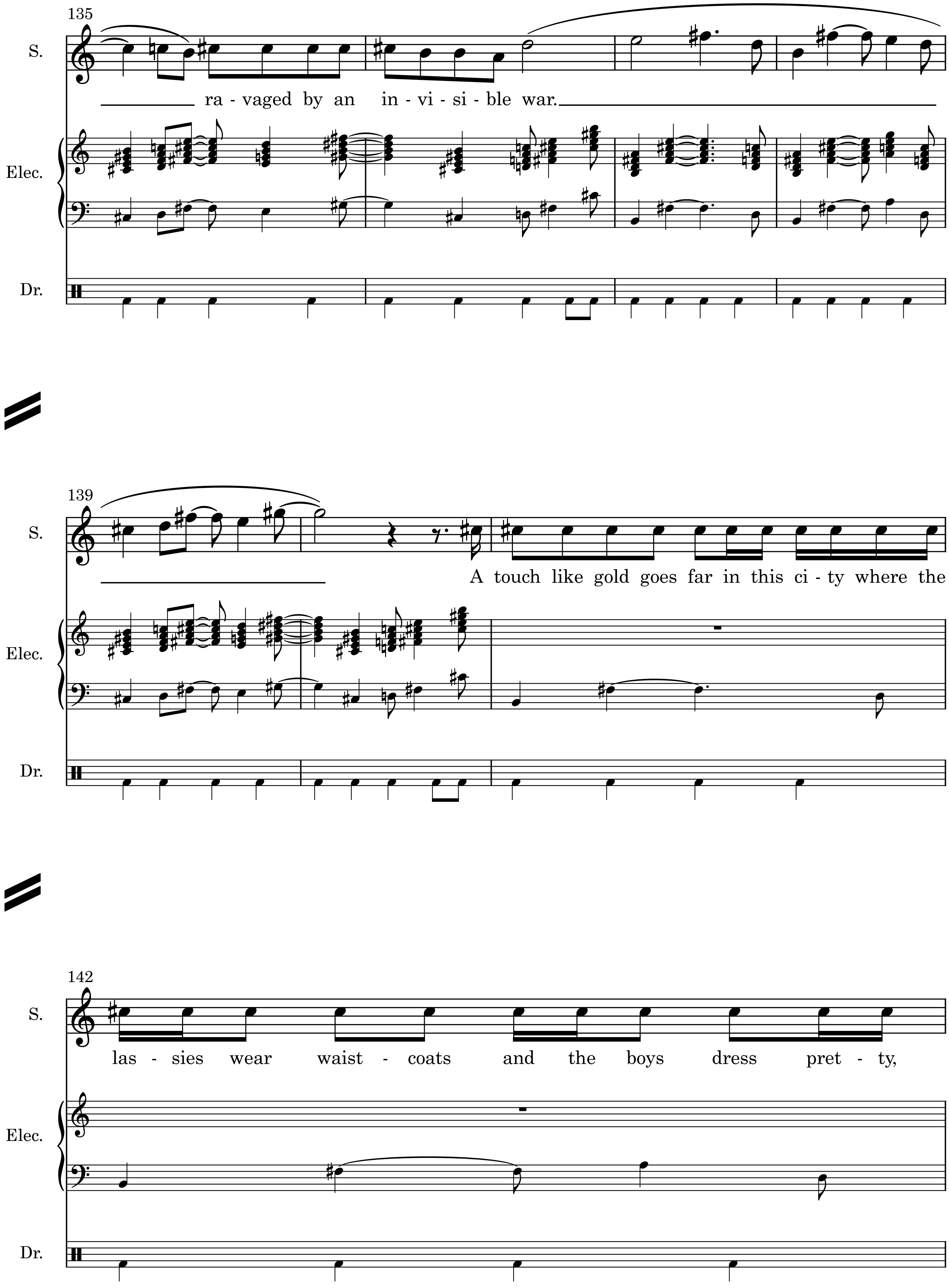

Soprano
Soprano Electronics
Electronics
Drum Set

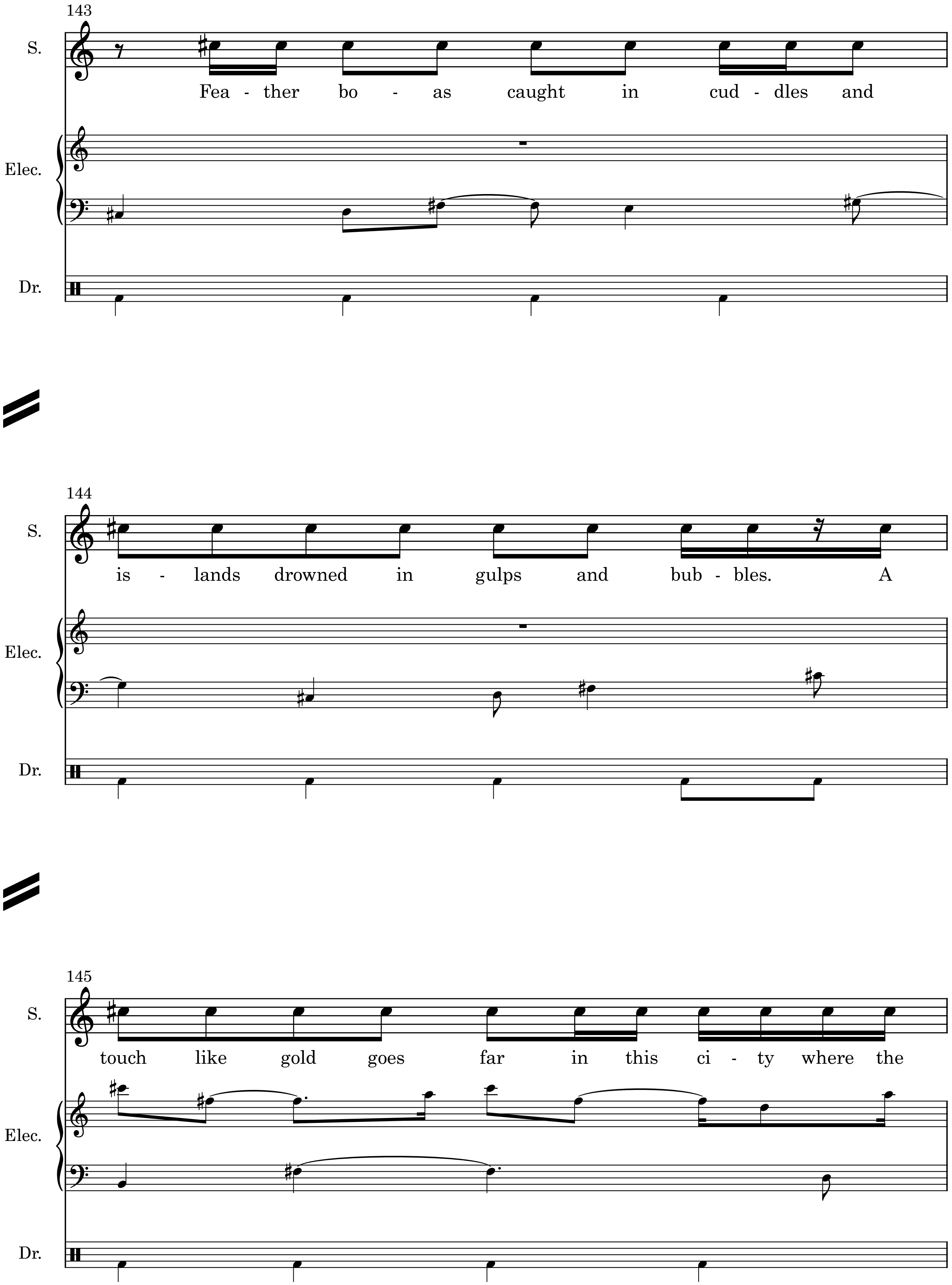
This scene is for solo electronics.

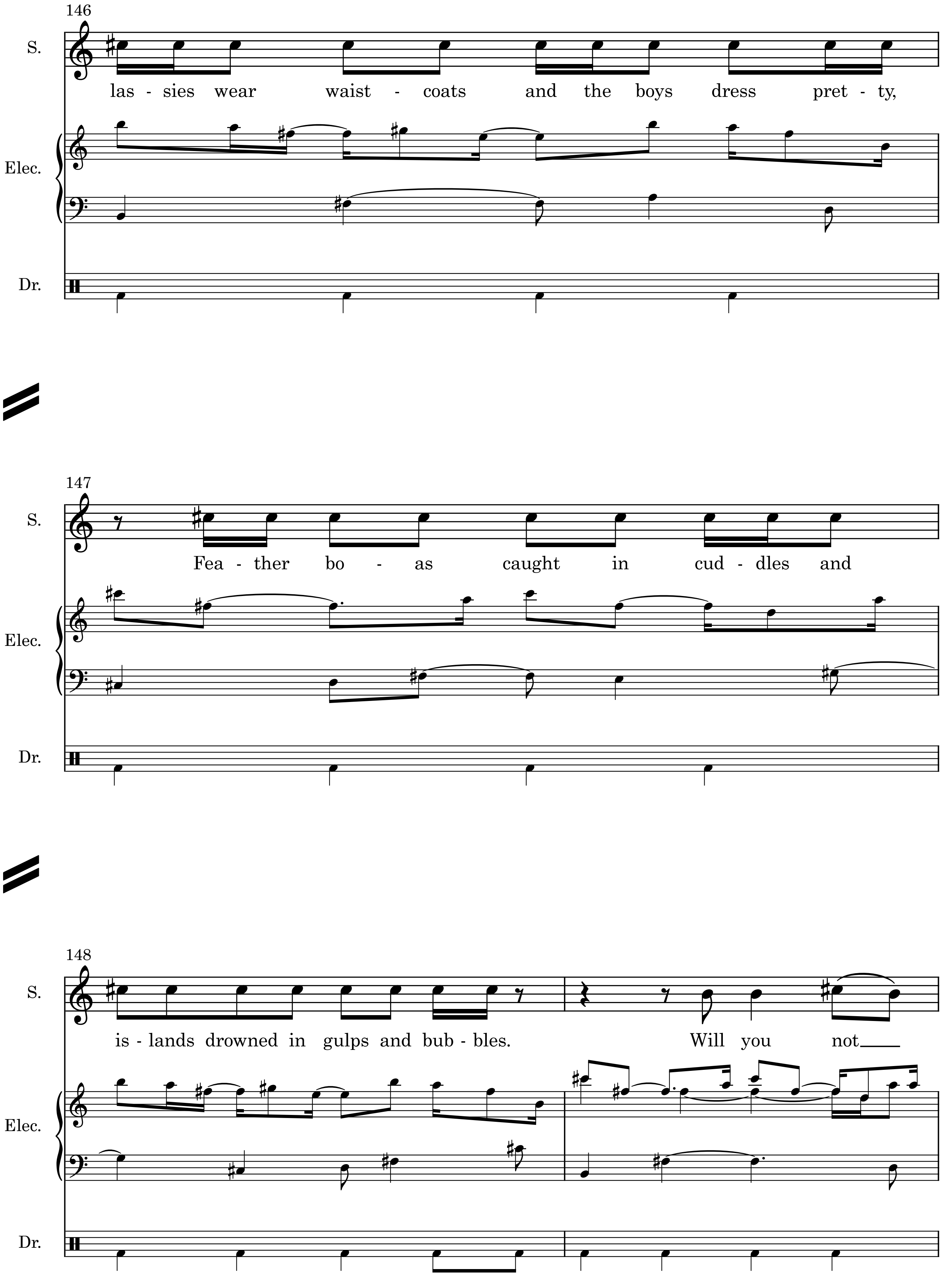
Act II. Scene 2 - ‘Is That Her?’

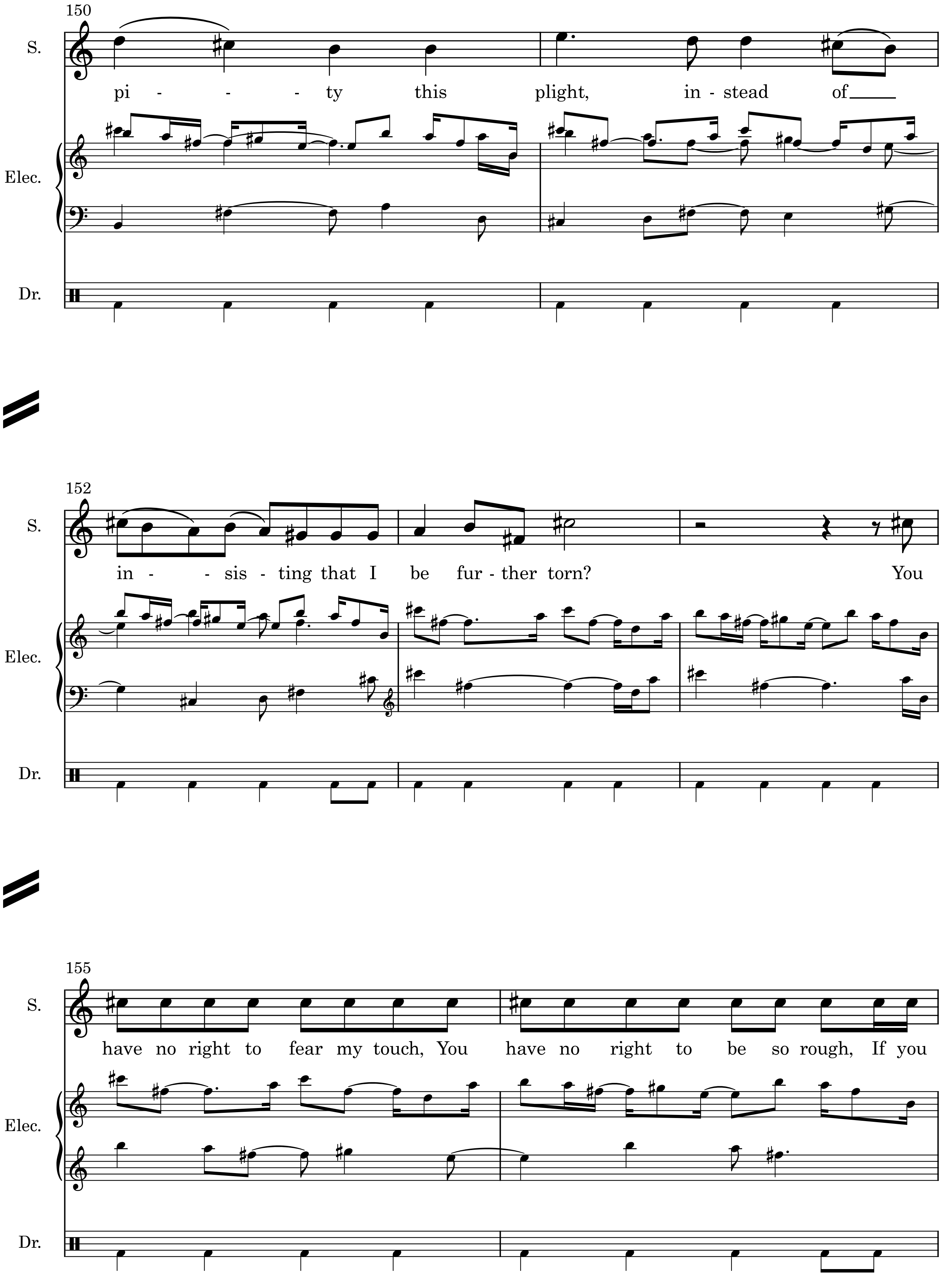

109
♩ = 86
Soprano
Electronics
Drum Set
114
S.
Elec.
Dr.
119
At least al - low me re -

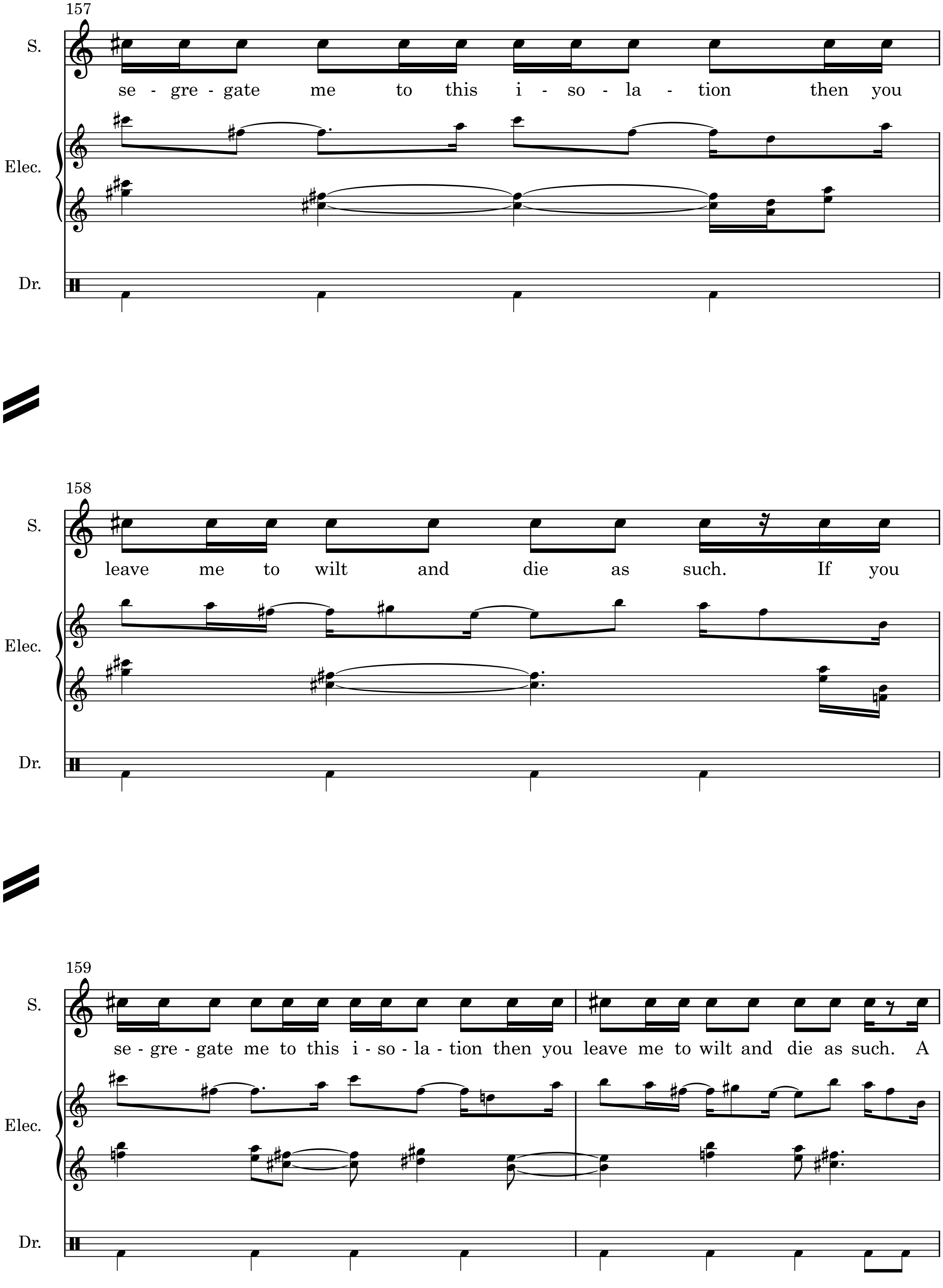

123
S.
Elec.
Dr.
- but - tal? Your ru - mours have no groun - ding no mar-tyrs_ to
127
S.
Elec.
Dr.
rise_ a - gainst the truth_ of_ my pro - - vi -
131
S.
Elec.
Dr.
- dence? I am but a wo - man scorned, home

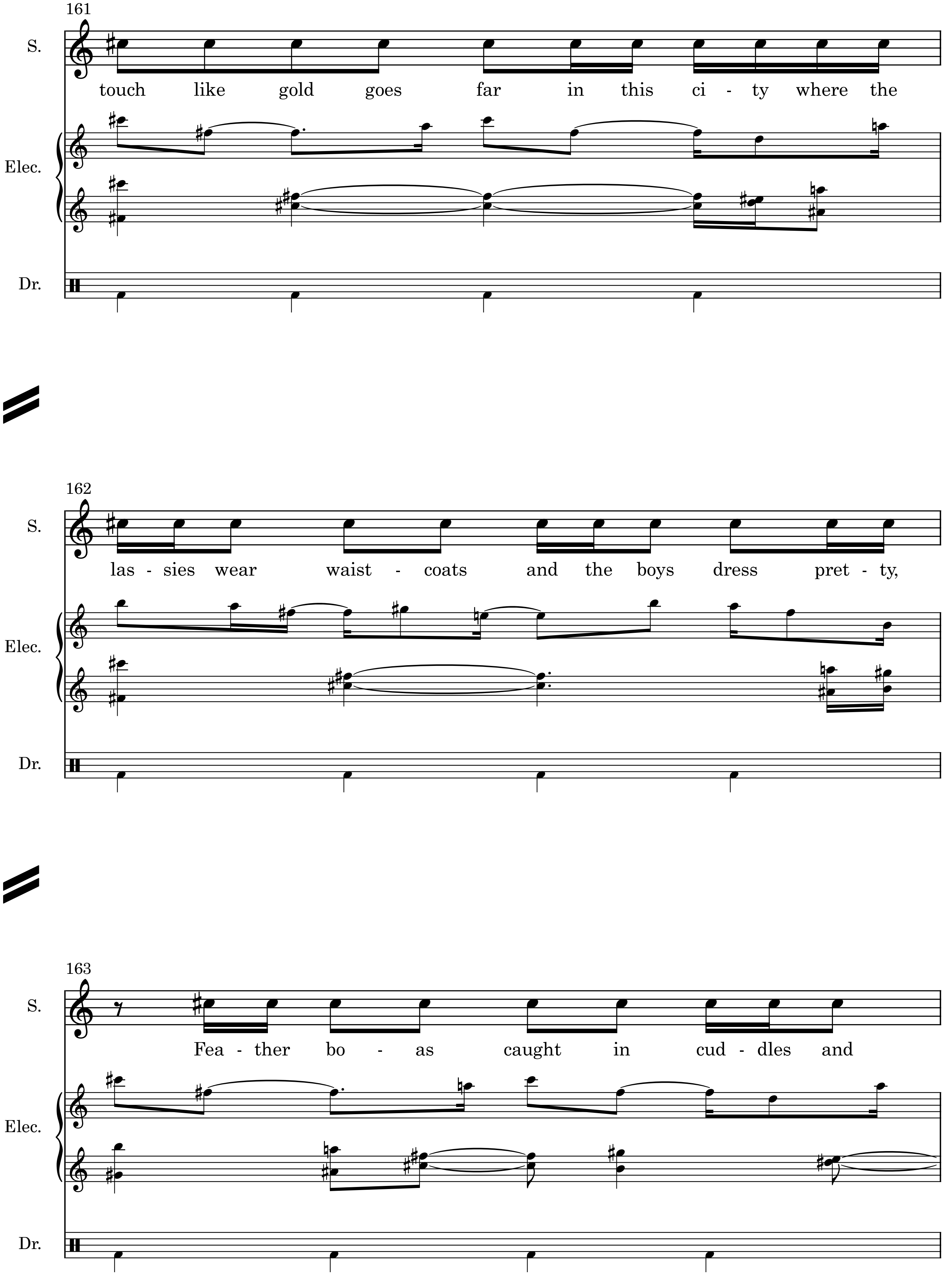

135
S.
ra - vaged by an in - vi - si - ble war.
Elec.
Dr.
139
S.
A touch like gold goes far in this ci - ty where the
Elec.
Dr.
142
S.
las - sies wear waist - coats and the boys dress pret - ty,
Elec.
Dr.

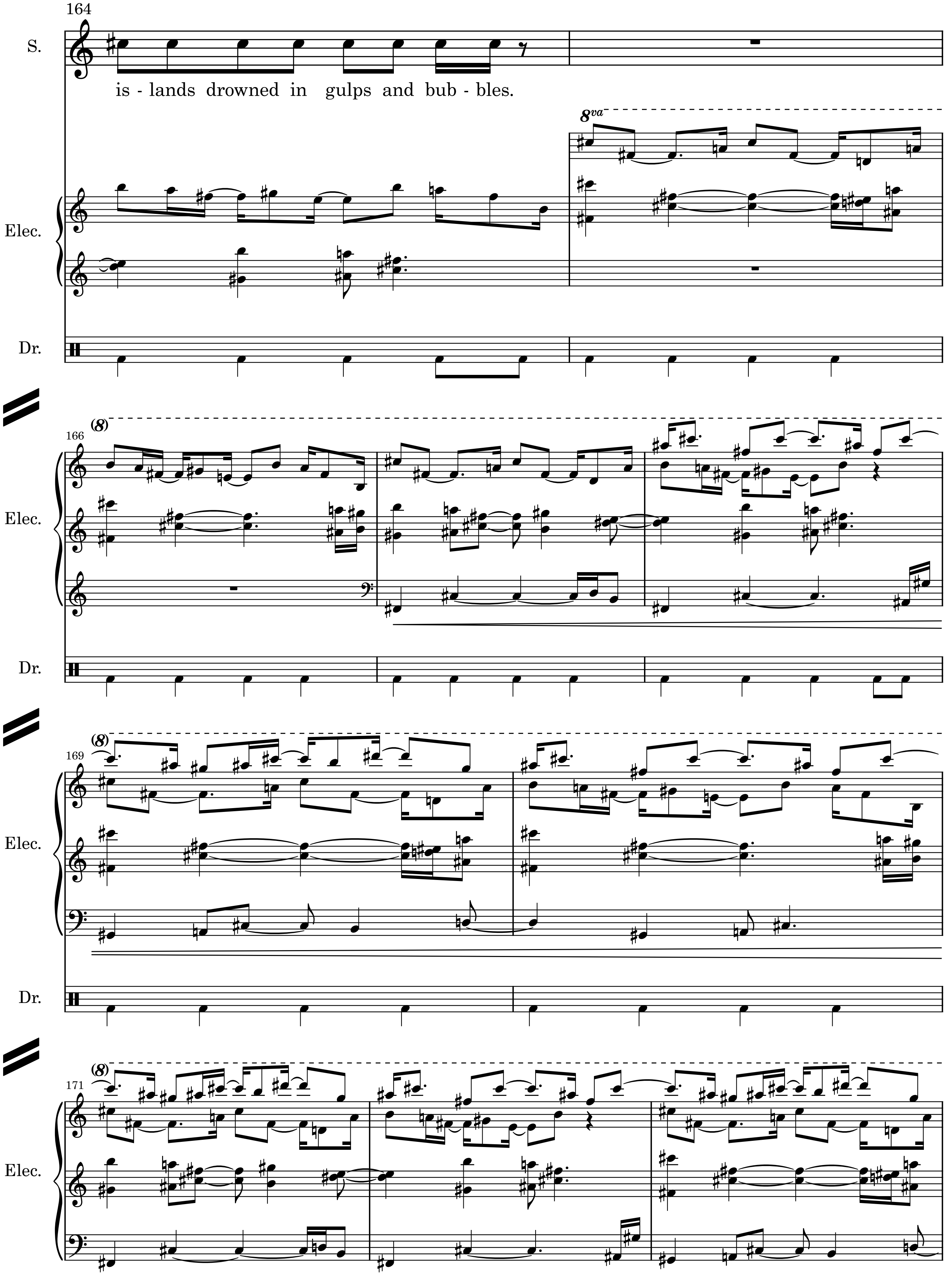

143
S.
Fea - ther bo - as caught in cud - dles and
Elec.
Dr.
144
S.
is - lands drowned in gulps and bub - bles. A
Elec.
Dr.
145
S.
touch like gold goes far in this ci - ty where the
Elec.
Dr.

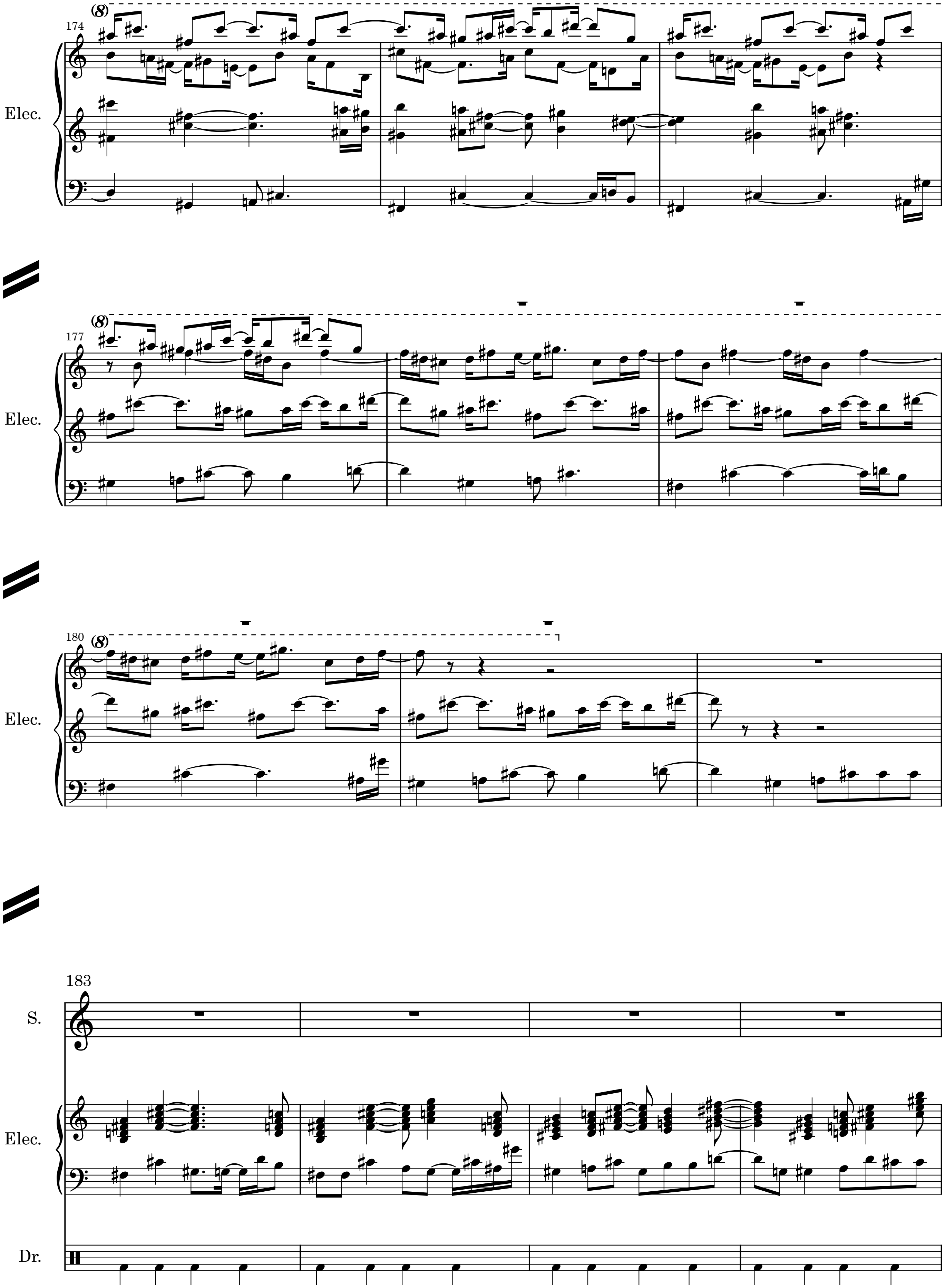

146
S.
las - sies wear waist - coats and the boys dress pret - ty,
Elec.
Dr.
147
S.
Fea - ther bo - as caught in cud - dles and
Elec.
Dr.
148
S.
is - lands drowned in gulps and bub - bles. Will you not
Elec.
Dr.

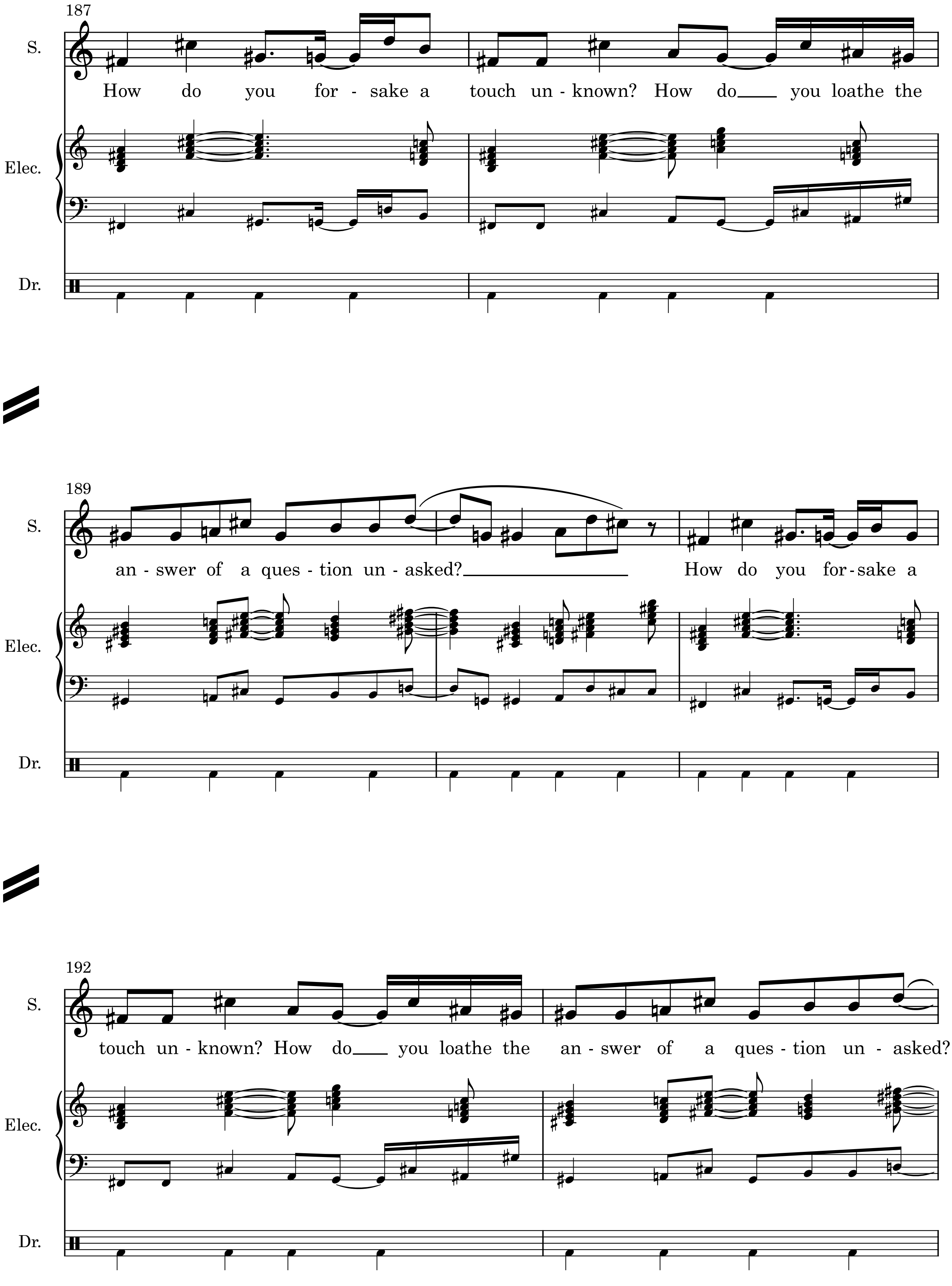

150
S.
pi - - - ty this plight, in - stead of
Elec.
Dr.
152
S.
in - - sis - ting that I be fur - ther torn? You
Elec.
Dr.
155
S.
have no right to fear my touch, You have no right to be so rough, If you
Elec.
Dr.

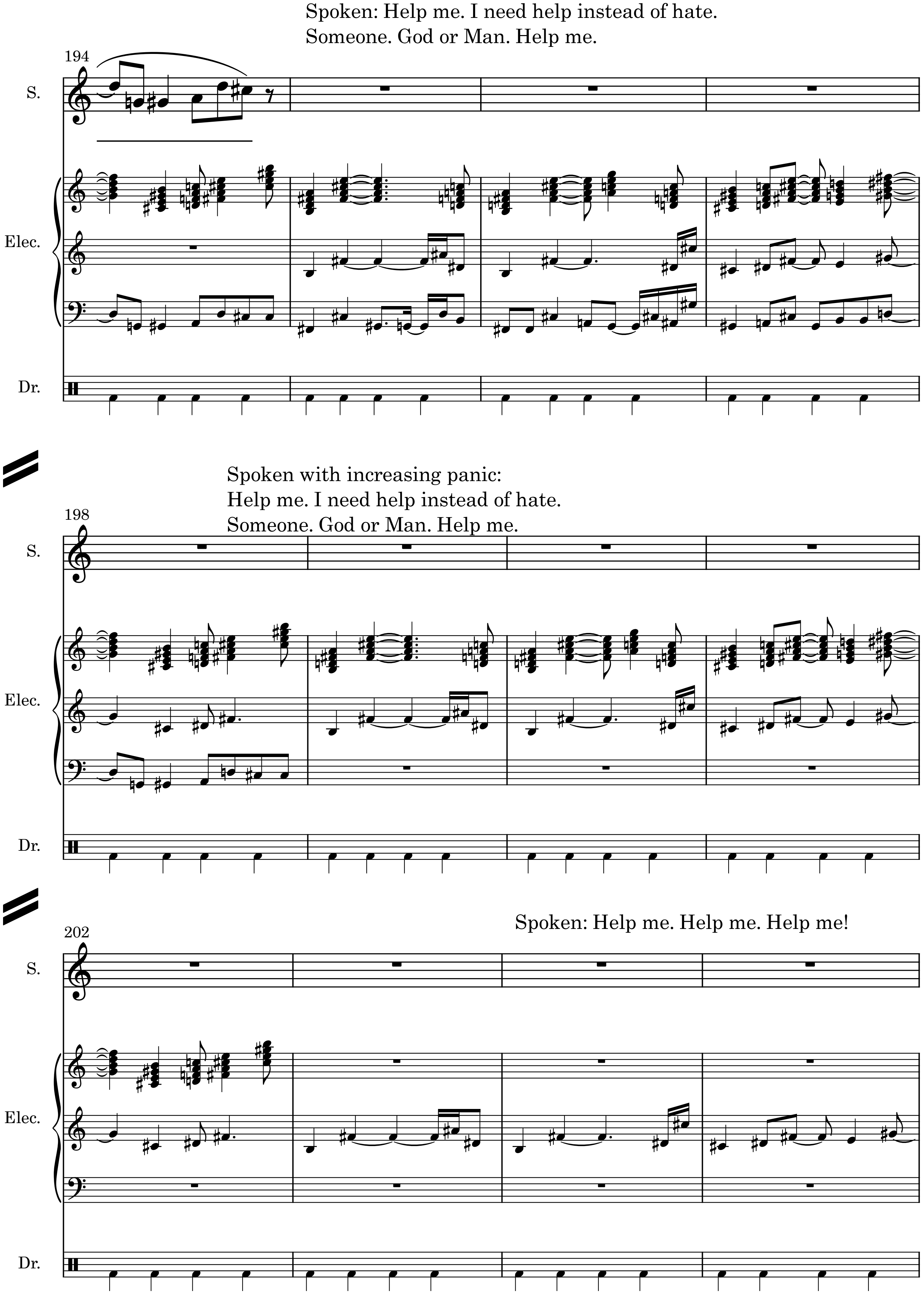

157
S.
se - gre - gate me to this i - so - la - tion then you
Elec.
Dr.
158
S.
leave me to wilt and die as such. If you
Elec.
Dr.
159
S.
se - gre - gate me to this i - so - la - tion then you leave me to wilt and die as such. A
Elec.
Dr.

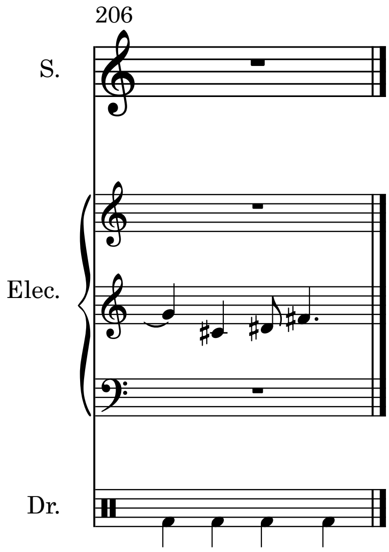

161
S.
touch like gold goes far in this ci - ty where the
Elec.
Dr.
162
S.
las - sies wear waist - coats and the boys dress pret - ty,
Elec.
Dr.
163
S.
Fea - ther bo - as caught in cud - dles and
Elec.
Dr.


164
S.
is - lands drowned in gulps and bub - bles.
8va
Elec.
Dr.
166
(8)
167
169
171

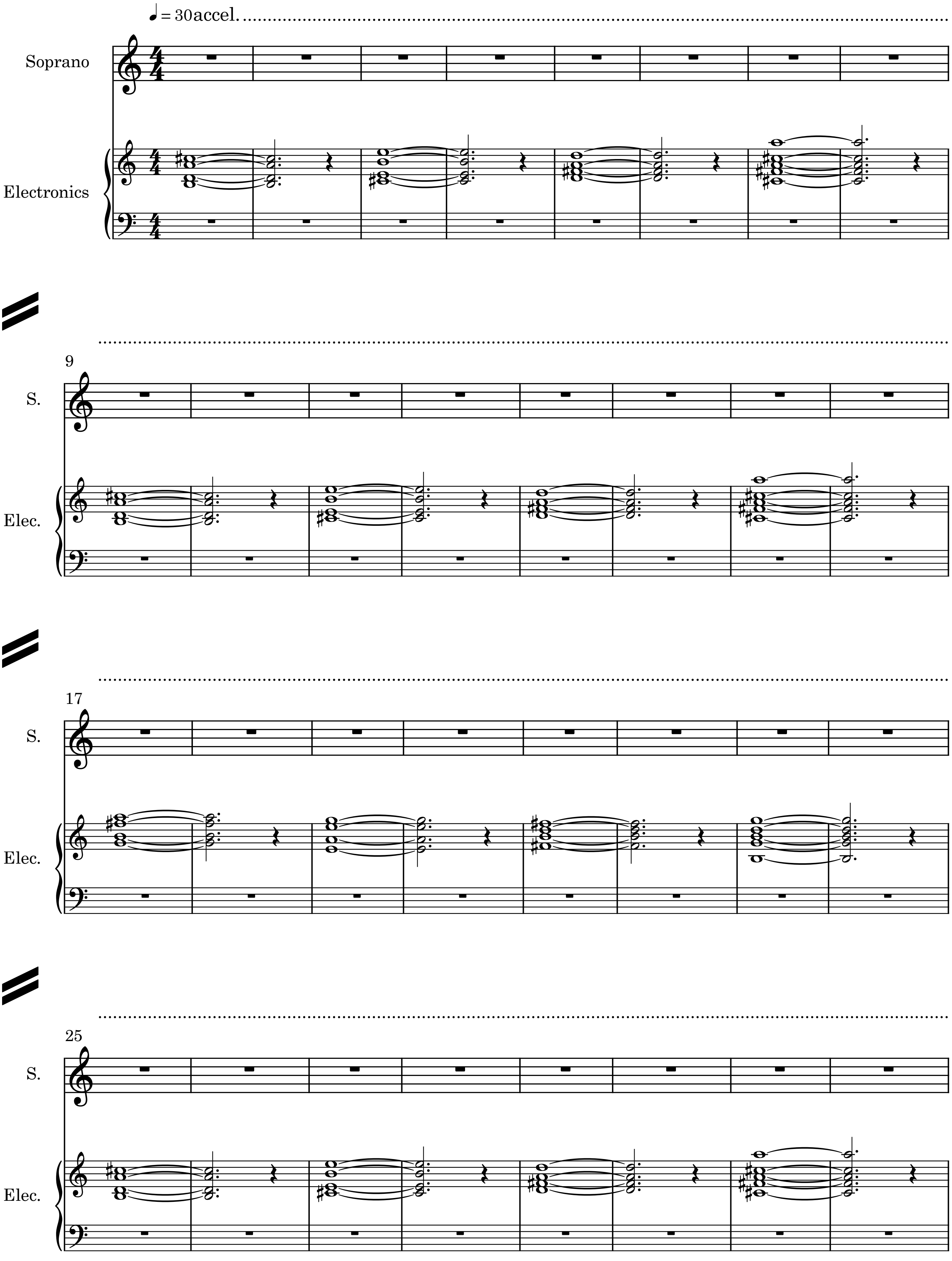

174
(8)
Elec.
177
(8)
Elec.
180
(8)
Elec.
183
S.
Elec.
Dr.

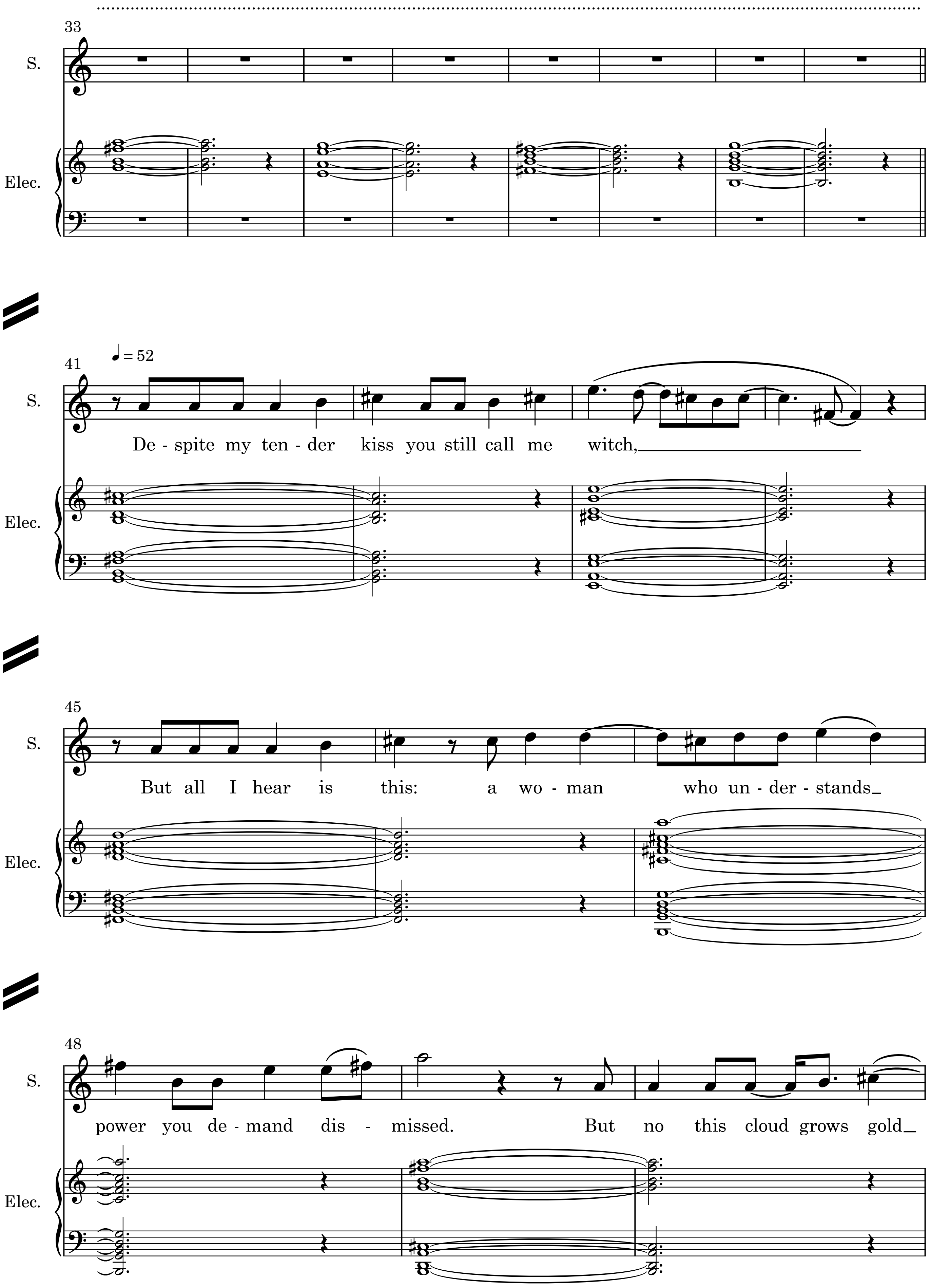

187
S.
How do you for - sake a touch un - known? How do you loathe the
Elec.
Dr.
189
S.
an - swer of a ques - tion un - asked? How do you for - sake a
Elec.
Dr.
192
S.
touch un - known? How do you loathe the an - swer of a ques - tion un - asked?
Elec.
Dr.

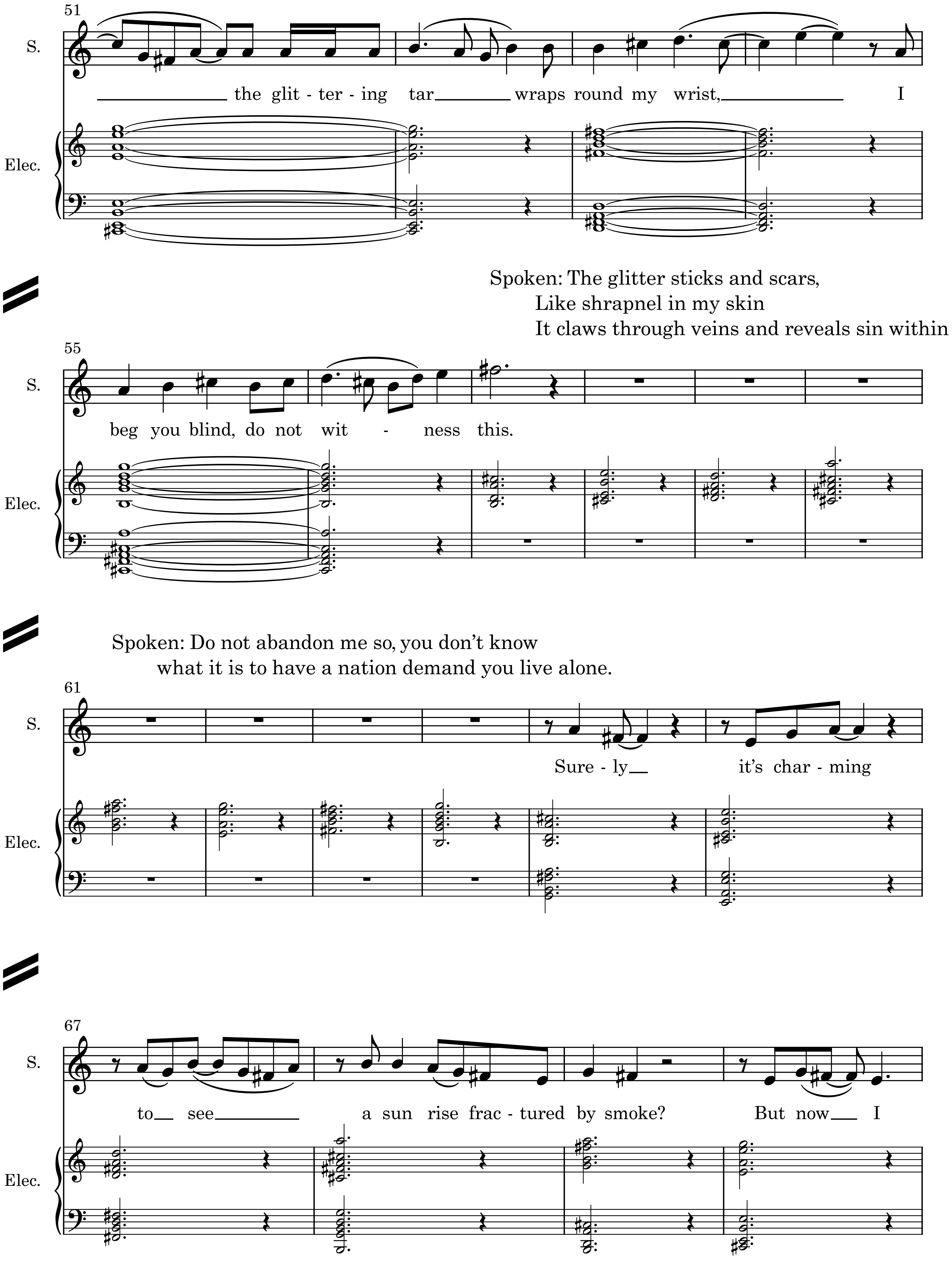

Spoken: Help me. I need help instead of hate.
Someone. God or Man. Help me.
194
S.
Elec.
Dr.
Spoken with increasing panic:
Help me. I need help instead of hate.
Someone. God or Man. Help me.
198
S.
Elec.
Dr.
Spoken: Help me. Help me. Help me!
202
S.
Elec.
Dr.


206
S.
Elec.
Dr.

Act II. Scene 3 - ‘The Queen of Gold’

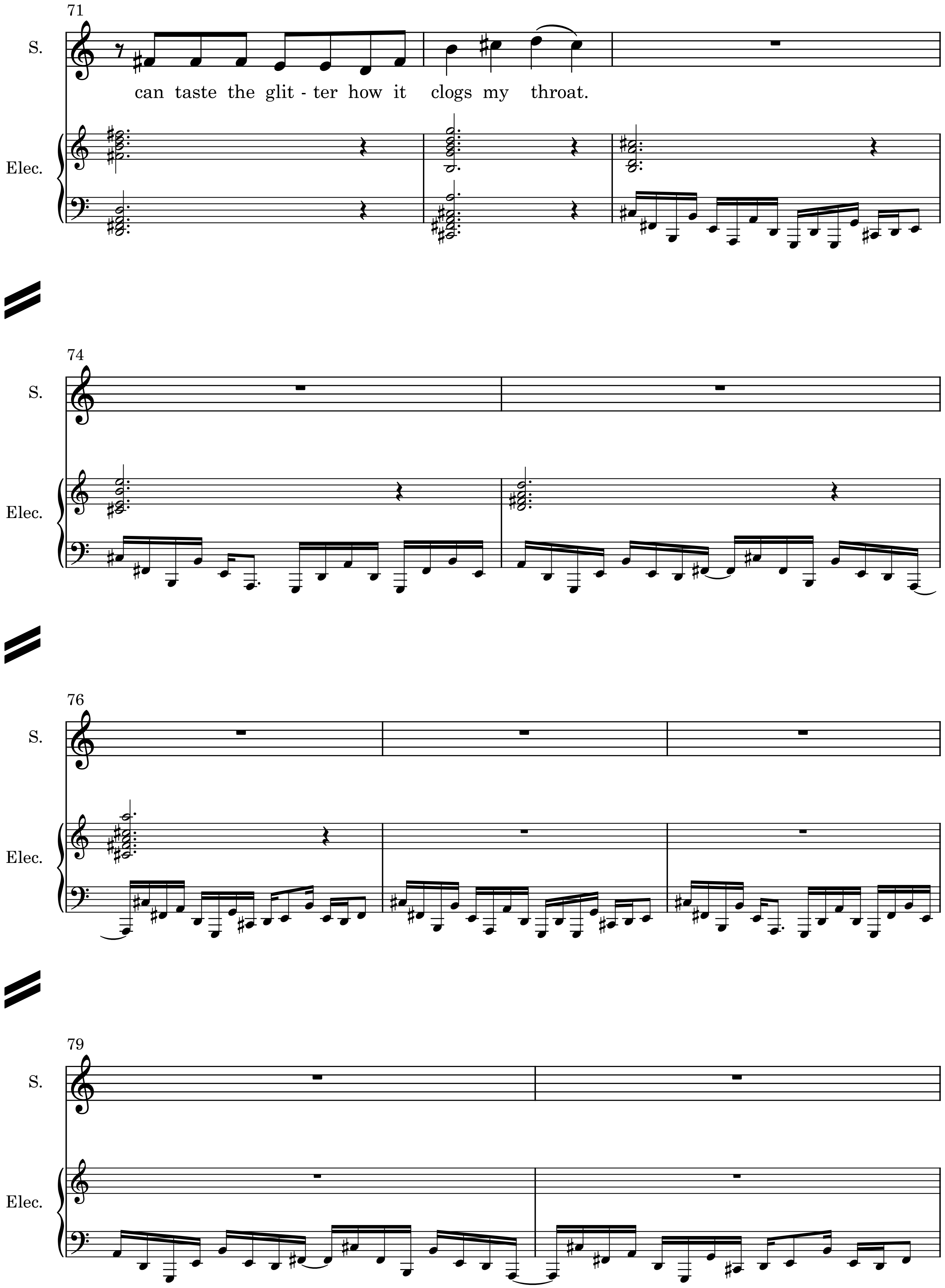

♩ = 30accel.
Soprano
Electronics
9
S.
Elec.
17
25

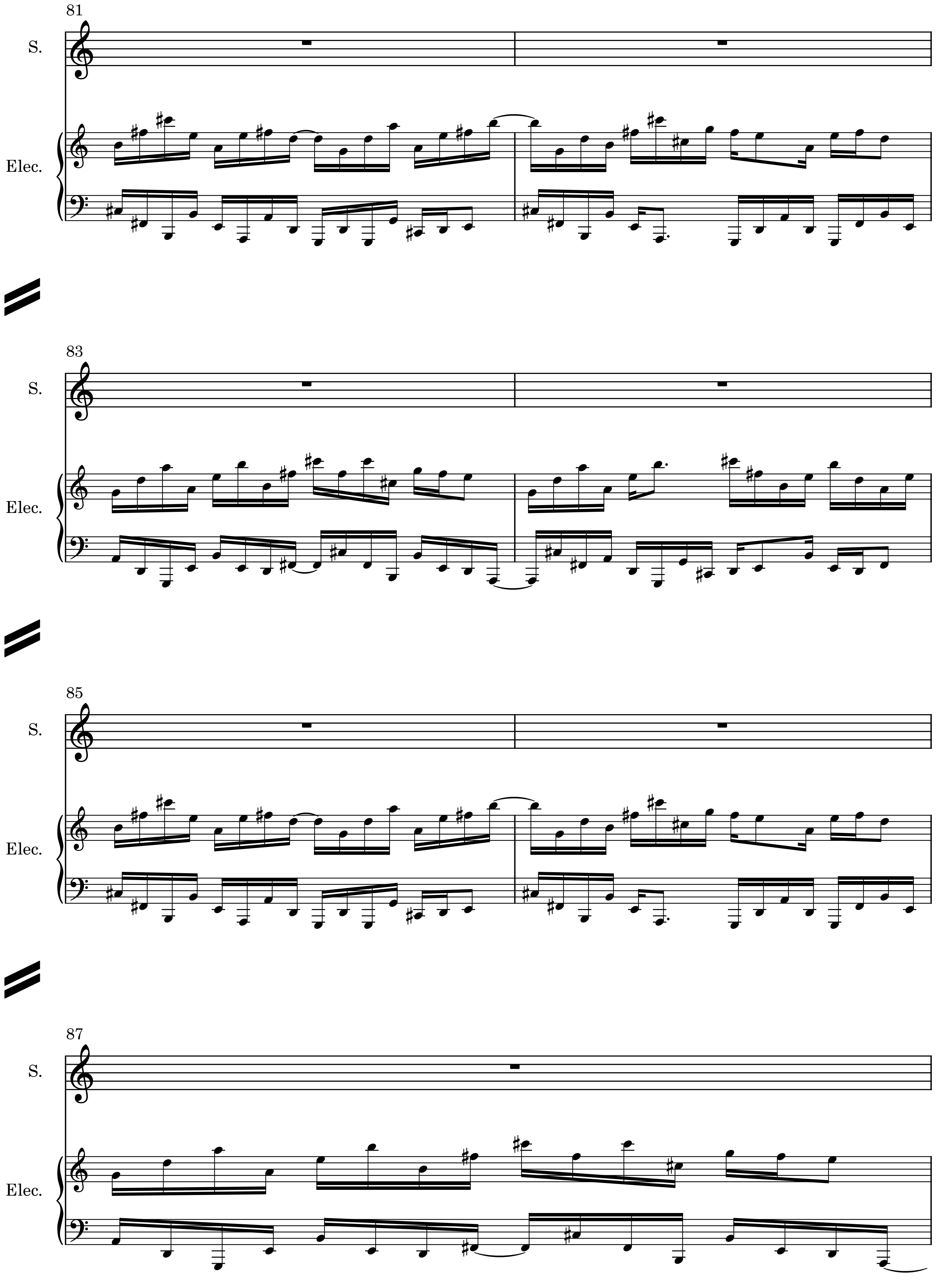

33
S.
Elec.
41
♩ = 52
De - spite my ten - der kiss you still call me witch,
45
But all I hear is this: a wo - man who un - der - stands
48
power you de - mand dis - missed. But no this cloud grows gold

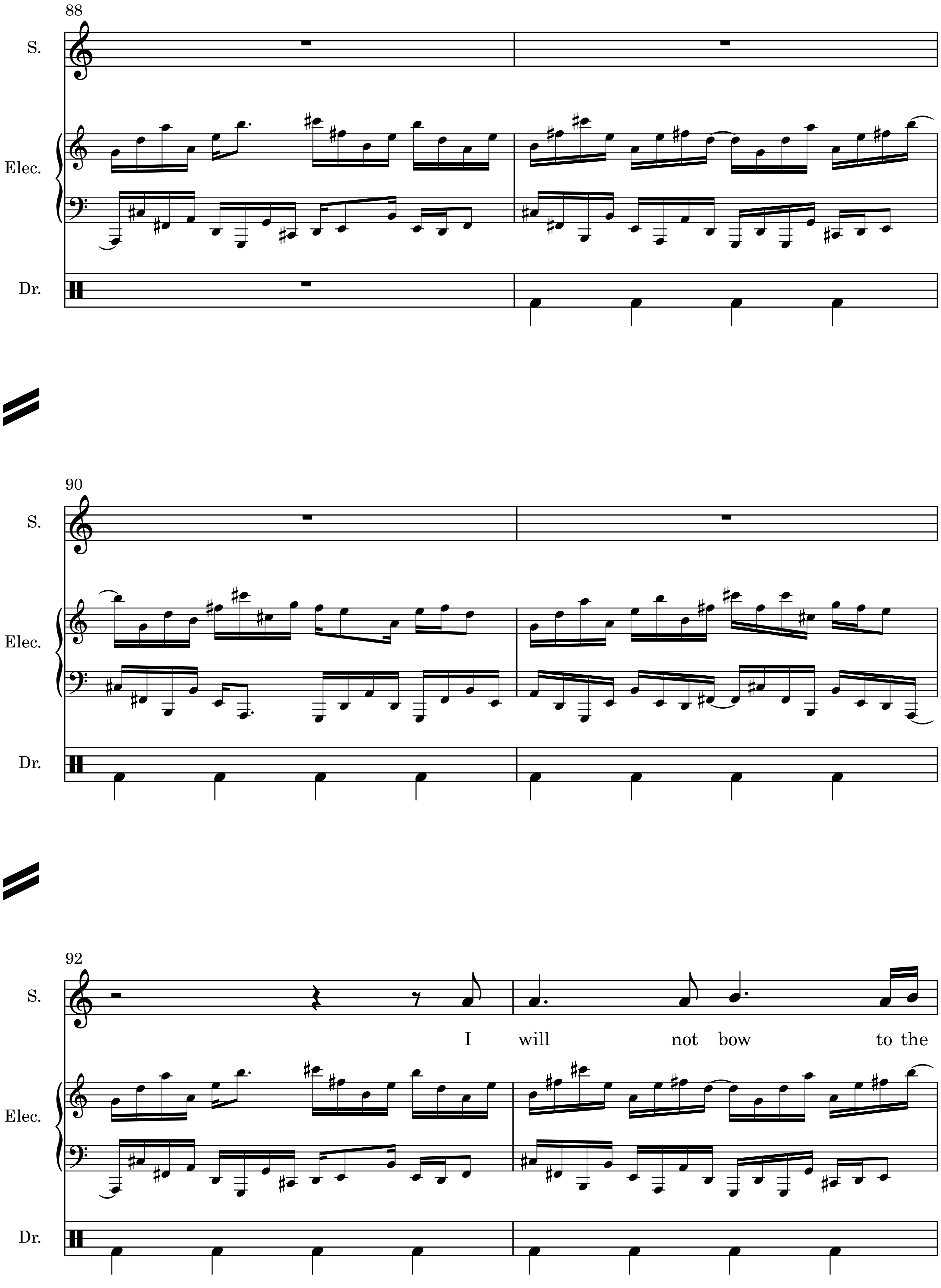

51
S.
Elec.
the glit - ter - ing tar wraps round my wrist, I
55
beg you blind, do not wit - ness this.
61
Sure - ly it’s char - ming
67
to see a sun rise frac - tured by smoke? But now I

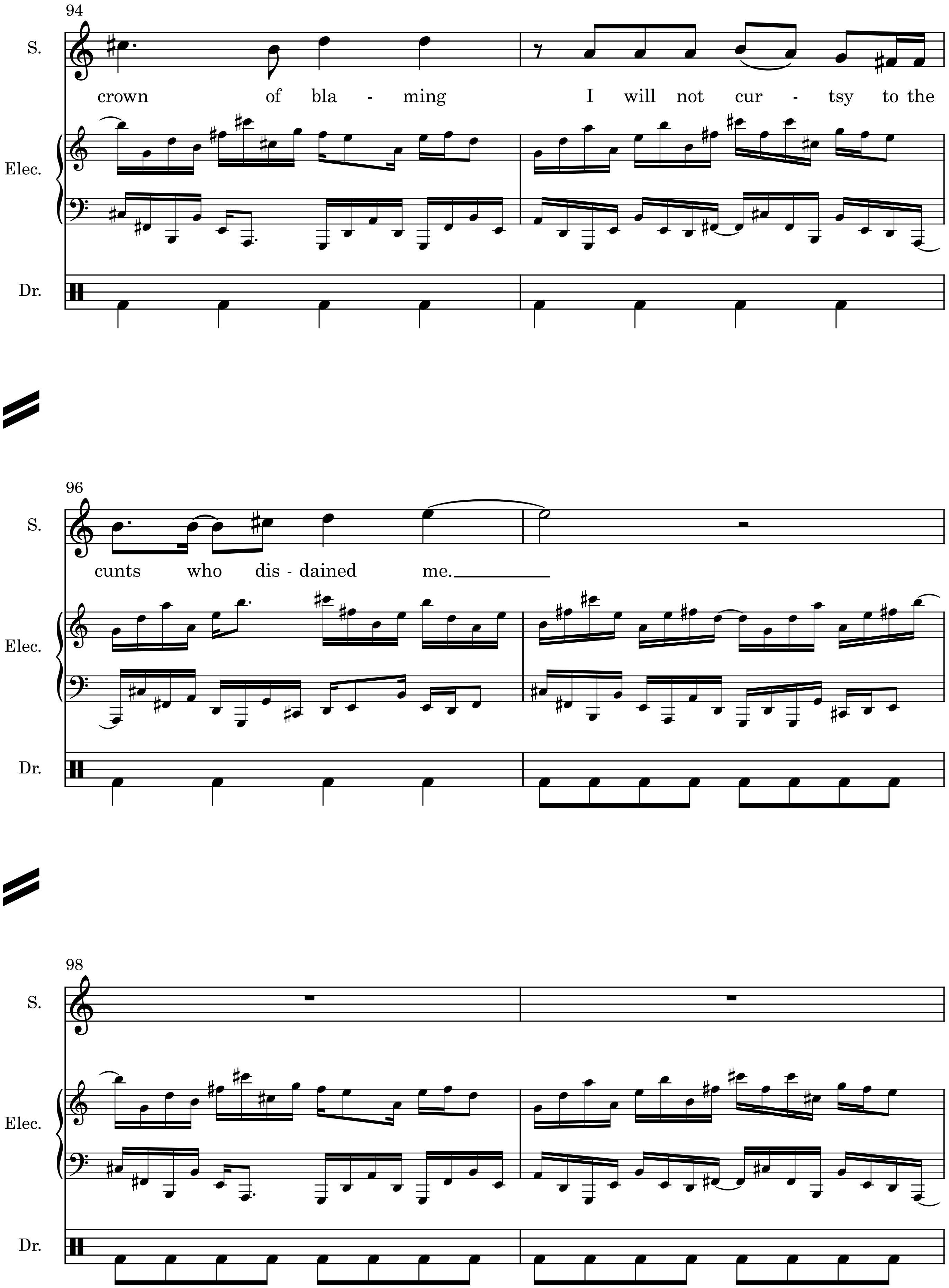
Spoken: The glitter sticks and scars,
Like shrapnel in my skin
It claws through veins and reveals sin within

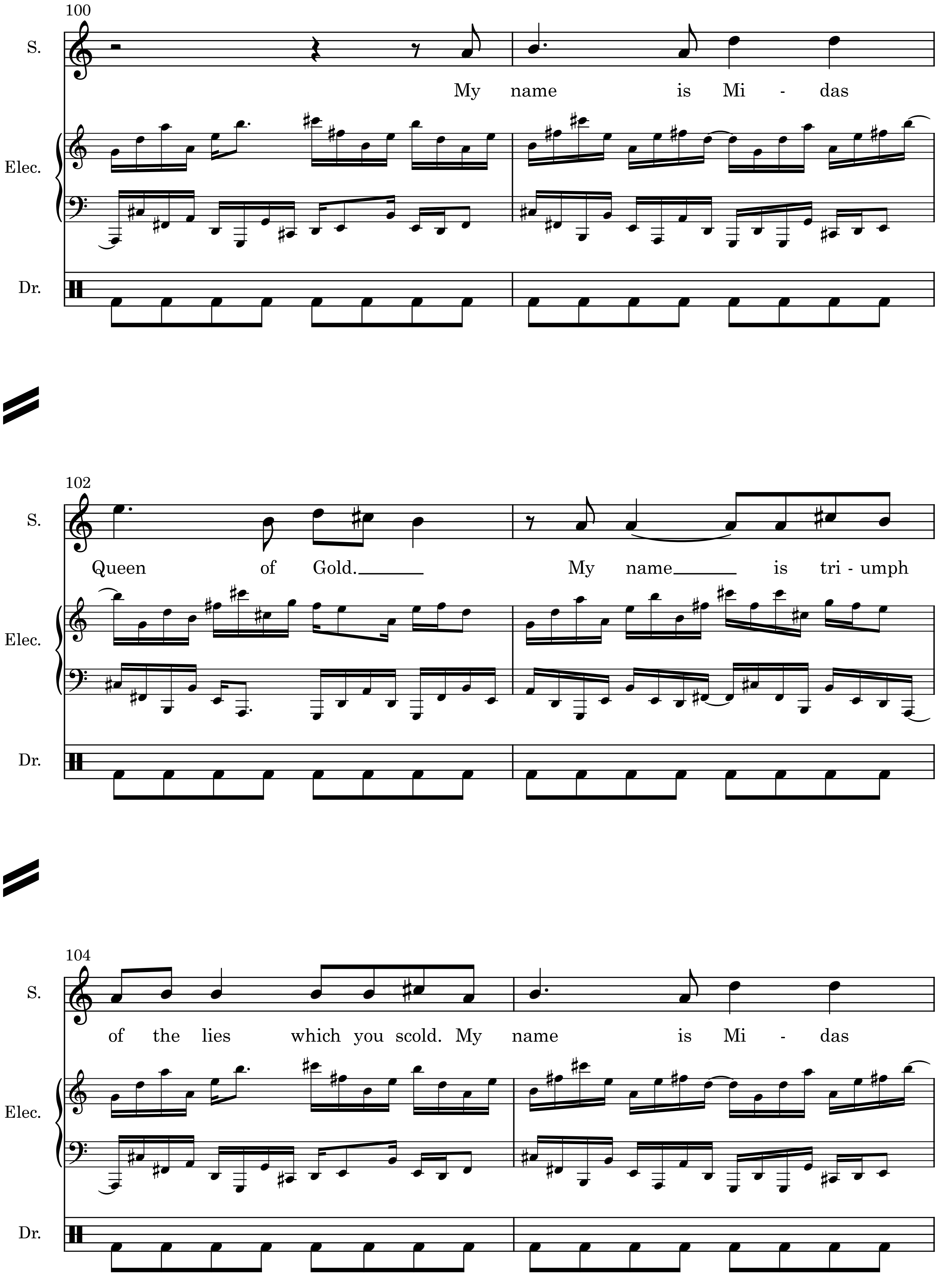
Spoken: Do not abandon me so, you don’t know
what it is to have a nation demand you live alone.

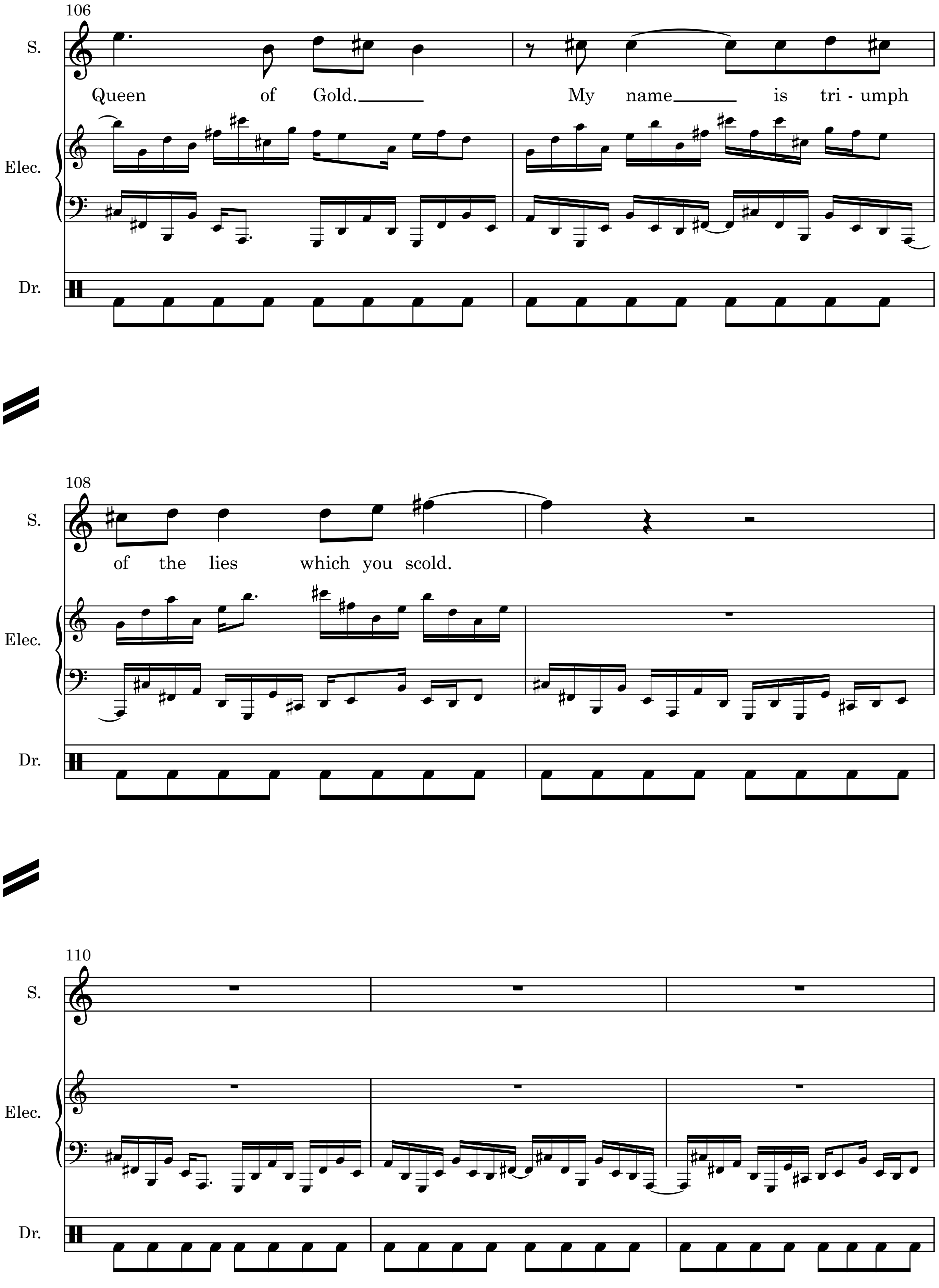

71
S.
can taste the glit - ter how it clogs my throat.
Elec.
74
S.
Elec.
76
S.
Elec.
79
S.
Elec.

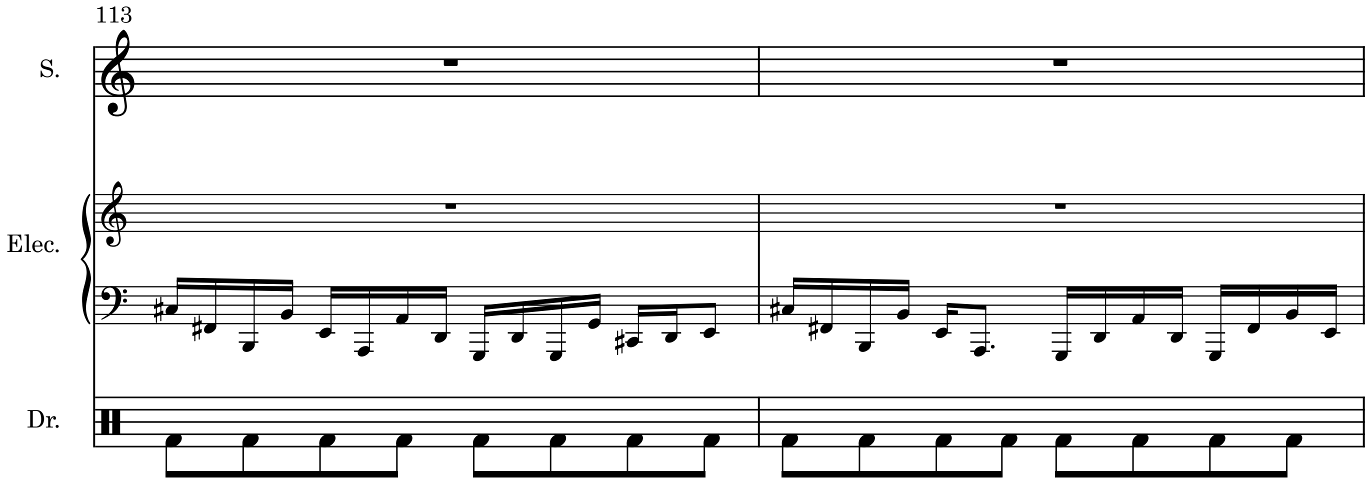

81
S.
Elec.
83
S.
Elec.
85
S.
Elec.
87
S.
Elec.

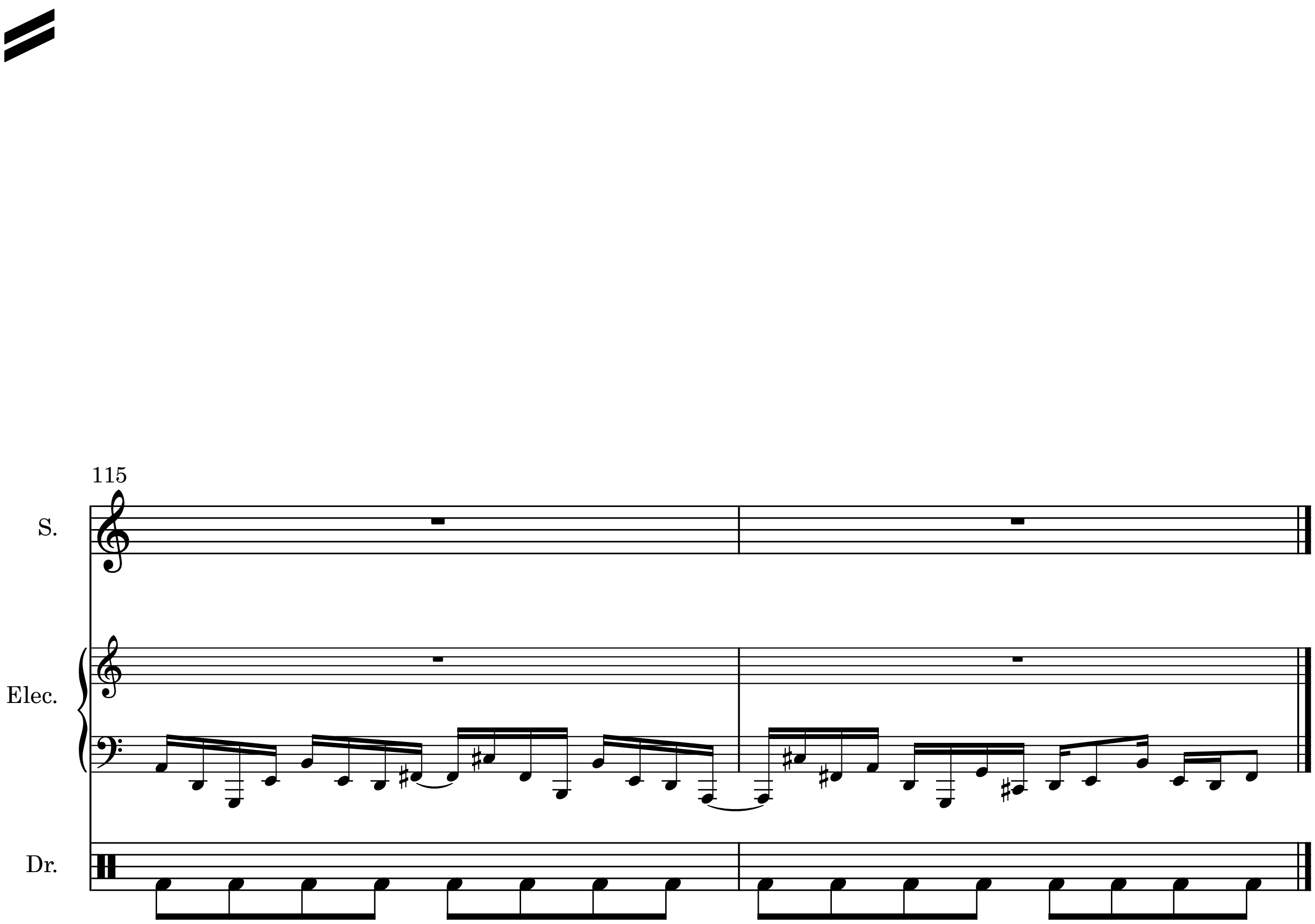

88
S.
Elec.
Dr.
90
S.
Elec.
Dr.
92
S.
I will not bow to the
Elec.
Dr.


94
S.
crown of bla - ming
I will not cur - tsy to the
Elec.
Dr.
96
S.
cunts who dis - dained me.
Elec.
Dr.
98
S.
Elec.
Dr.

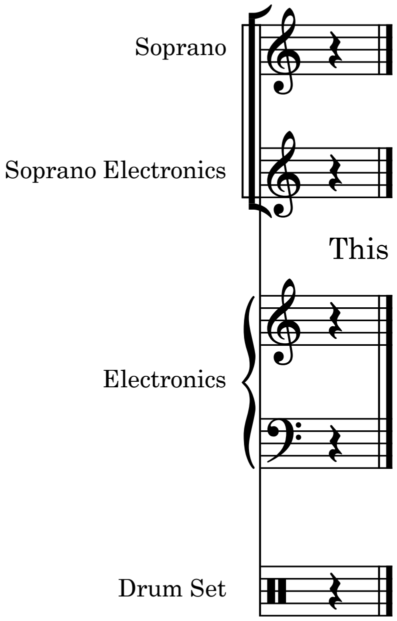

100
S.
My name is Mi - das
Elec.
Dr.
102
S.
Queen of Gold. My name is tri - umph
Elec.
Dr.
104
S.
of the lies which you scold. My name is Mi - das
Elec.
Dr.


106
S.
Queen of Gold.___ My name___ is tri - umph
Elec.
Dr.
108
S.
of the lies which you scold.
Elec.
Dr.
110
S.
Elec.
Dr.


113
S.
Elec.
Dr.

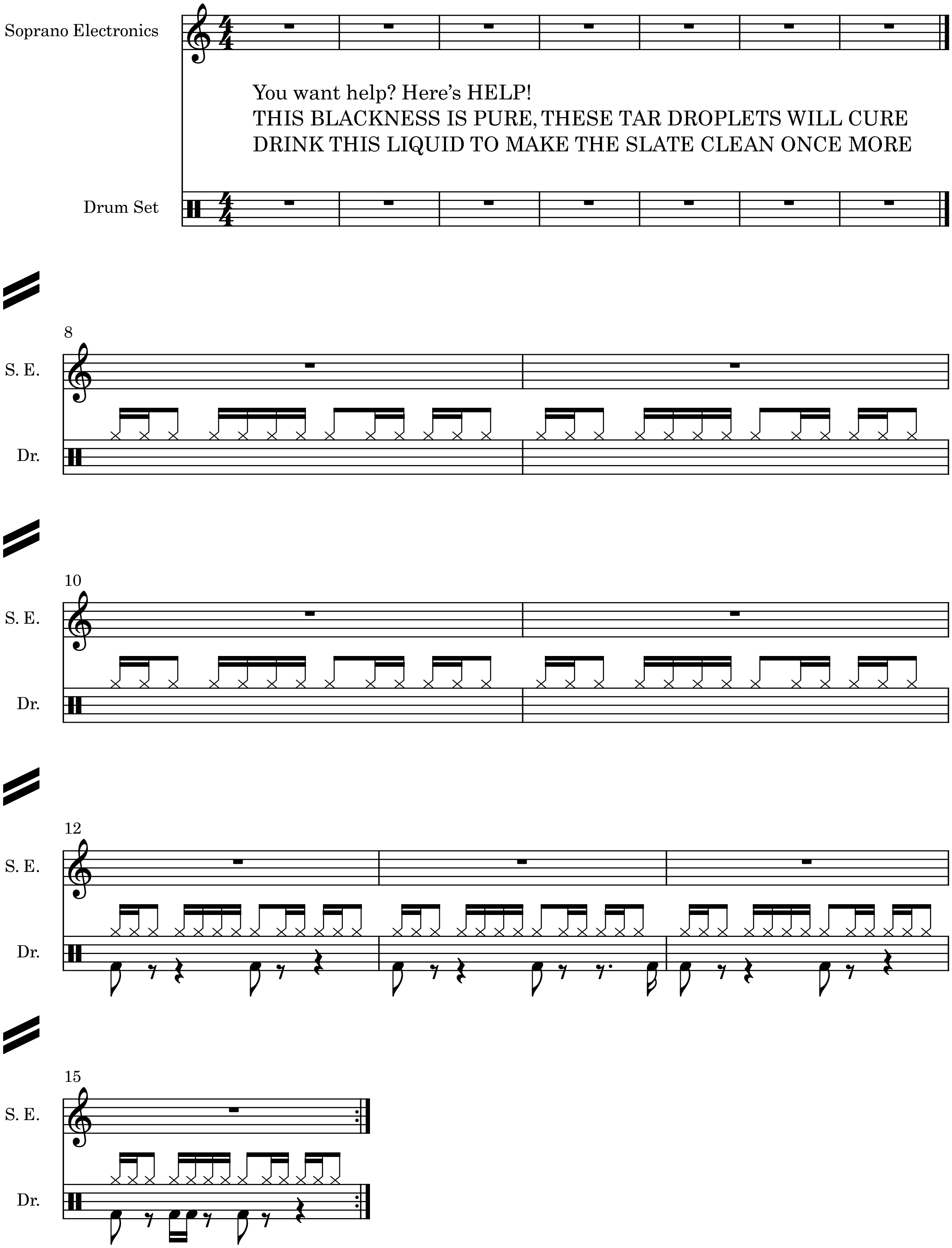

115
S.
Elec.
Dr.

Act III. Scene 1 - ‘Tar Soundscape’

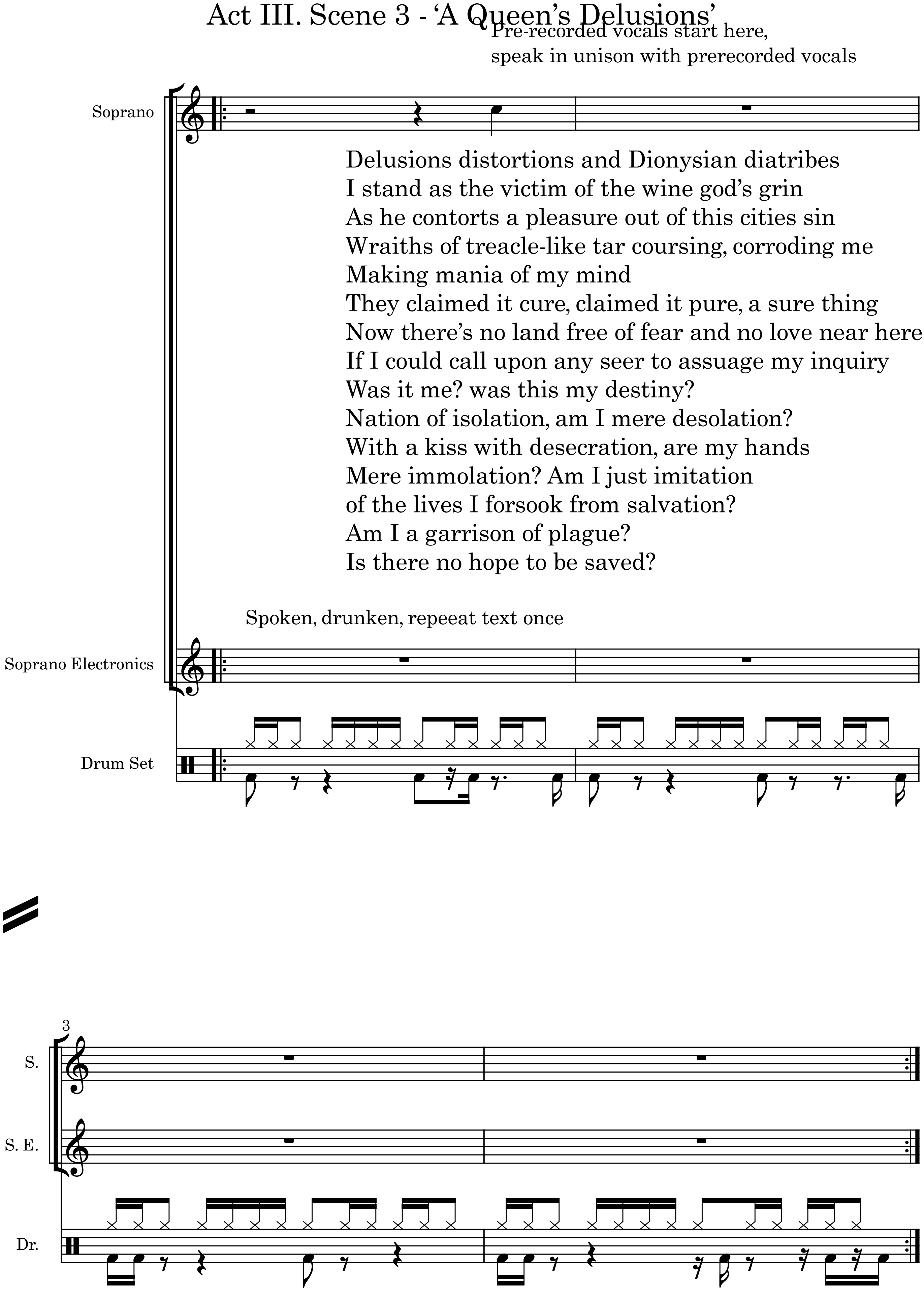

Soprano
Soprano Electronics
Electronics
Drum Set

This scene is for solo electronics.

Act III. Scene 2 - ‘Tar Dance’


Soprano Electronics
You want help? Here’s HELP!
THIS BLACKNESS IS PURE, THESE TAR DROPLETS WILL CURE
DRINK THIS LIQUID TO MAKE THE SLATE CLEAN ONCE MORE
Drum Set
8
S. E.
Dr.
10
S. E.
Dr.
12
S. E.
Dr.
15
S. E.
Dr.

Act III. Scene 3 - ‘A Queen’s Delusions’



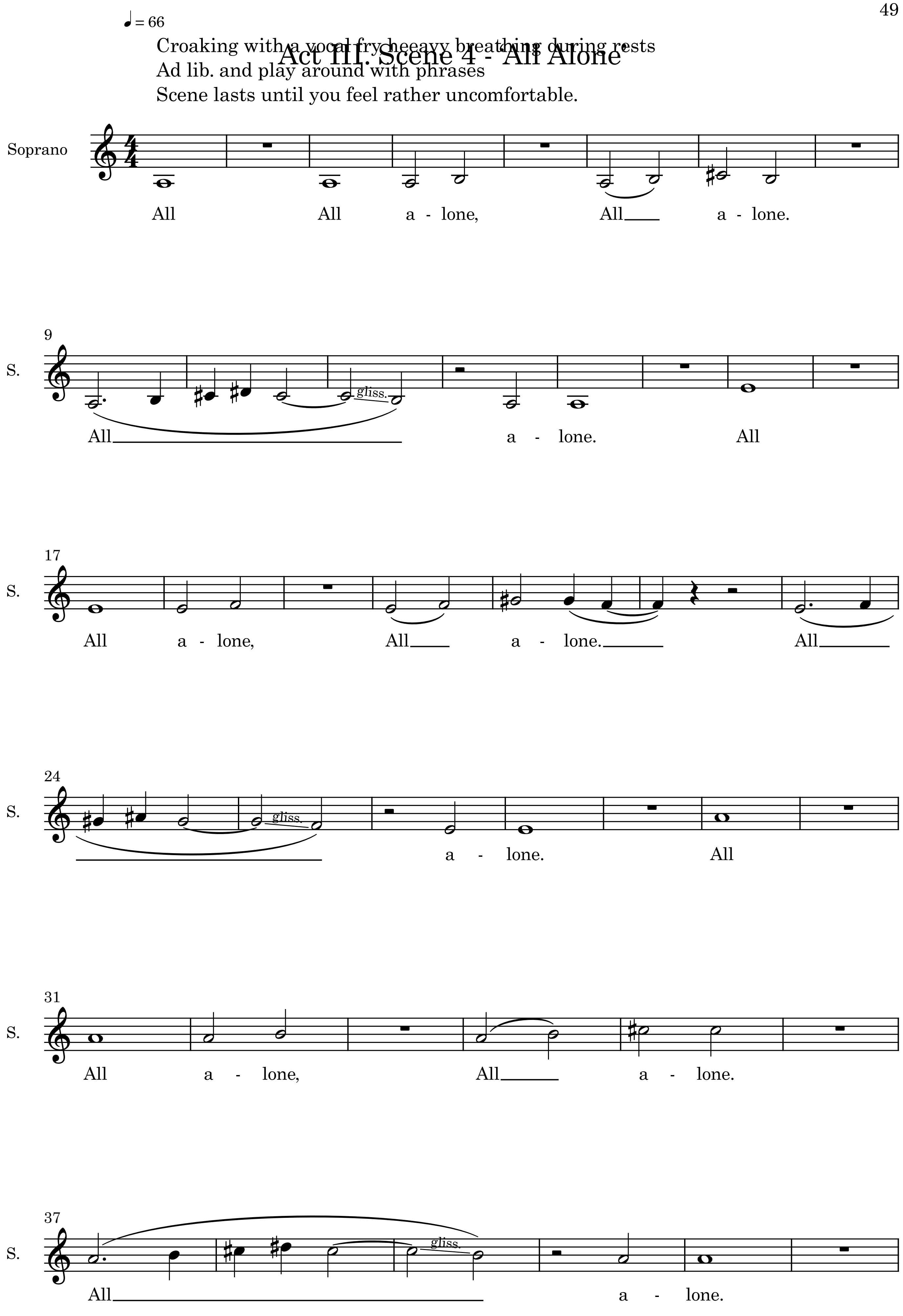
Pre-recorded vocals start here,
speak in unison with prerecorded vocals

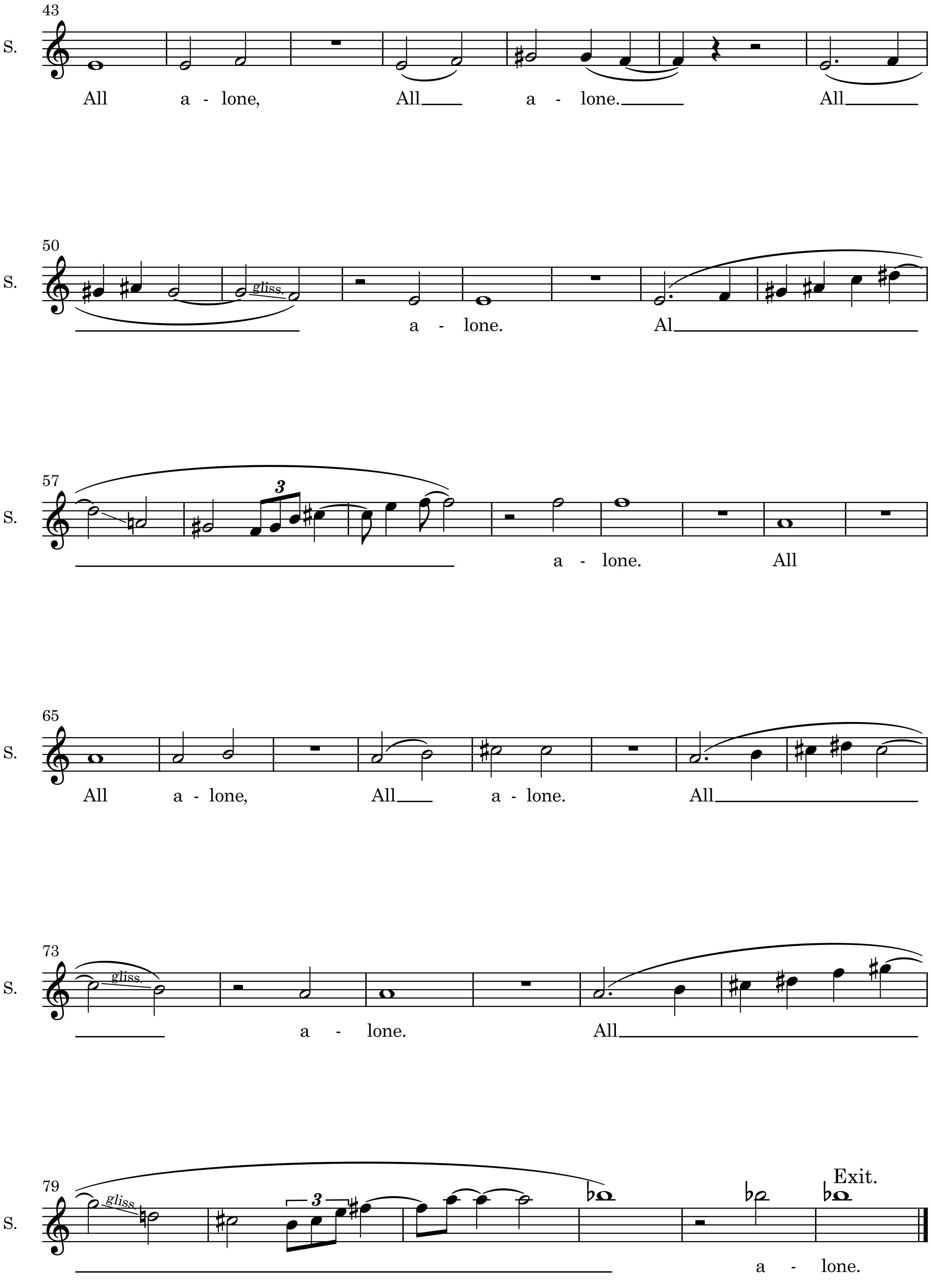
Delusions distortions and Dionysian diatribes
I stand as the victim of the wine god’s grin
As he contorts a pleasure out of this cities sin
Wraiths of treacle-like tar coursing, corroding me
Making mania of my mind
They claimed it cure, claimed it pure, a sure thing
Now there’s no land free of fear and no love near here
If I could call upon any seer to assuage my inquiry
Was it me? was this my destiny?
Nation of isolation, am I mere desolation?
With a kiss with desecration, are my hands
Mere immolation? Am I just imitation
of the lives I forsook from salvation?
Am I a garrison of plague?
Is there no hope to be saved?

Spoken, drunken, repeeat text once

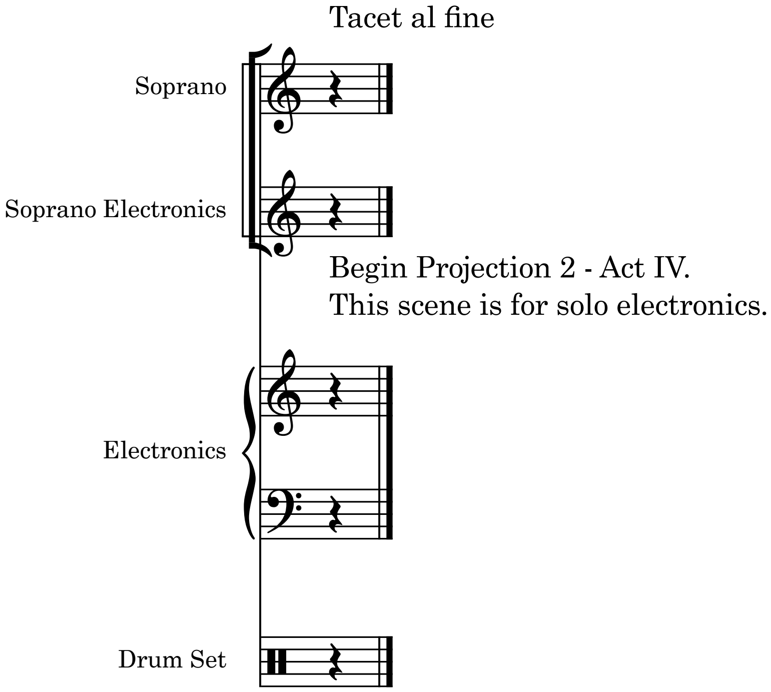
Act III: Scene 4 - All Alone

Croaking with a vocal fry heeavy breathing during rests
Ad lib. and play around with phrases
Scene lasts until you feel rather uncomfortable.

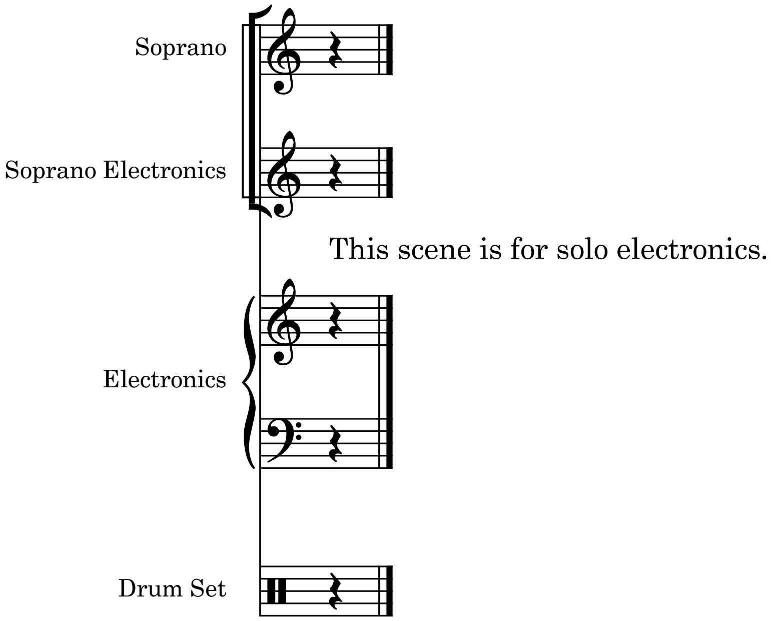

♩ = 66
Soprano
All
All a - lone,
All a - lone.
9
S.
All
gliss.
a - lone.
All
17
S.
All a - lone,
All a - lone.
All
24
S.
gliss.
a - lone.
All
31
S.
All a - lone,
All a - lone.
37
S.
All
gliss.
a - lone.


43
S.
All a - lone, All a - lone. All
50
S.
gliss.
a - lone. Al
57
S.
3
a - lone. All
65
S.
All a - lone, All a - lone. All
73
S.
gliss.
a - lone. All
79
S.
gliss.
3
Exit.
a - lone.

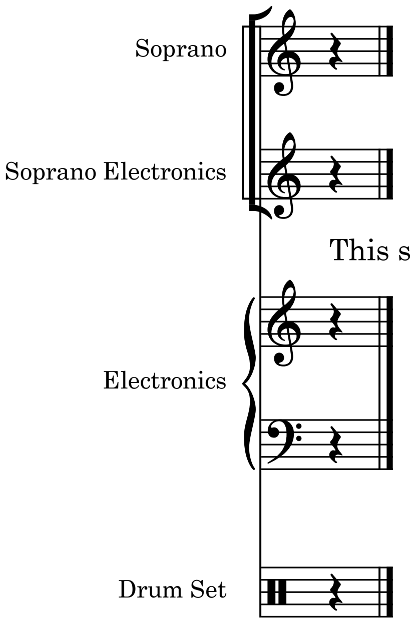
Act IV. Scene 1 - 'Yet I Remember'


Tacet al fine
Soprano
Soprano Electronics
Begin Projection 2 - Act IV.
This scene is for solo electronics.
Electronics
Drum Set

Act IV. Scene 2 - ‘Drown Me’


Soprano
Soprano Electronics
This scene is for solo electronics.
Electronics
Drum Set

Act IV. Scene 3 - ‘Epilogue’


Soprano
Soprano Electronics
Electronics
Drum Set

This scene is for solo electronics.