[music for an unknown instrument]

The music presented here was collected in Baranikha, Chukotka, in the late 1960s. The manuscript was completed by V. K., a Moscow-based architect and art collector who was, from 2012 to 2019, the principal collector of paintings by my former spouse (http://www.agll.net). The account, as related to me by V. K. in late 2013, is as follows.

In the late 1960s V. K. and a group of friends and colleagues set out on a summer expedition to Chukotka to see the then newly discovered Pegtymel petroglyphs. One of the members of the group had family in Pevek, which facilitated the journey. During the group's stay in Baranikha (a settlement that has since disappeared), they met two older men, "Chukchas" according to V. K., who the locals described as shamans. During Soviet times and after the dissolution of the USSR especially, the word Chukcha was used in a derogatory manner to refer to any number of ethnic groups of the region; I doubt that the men were Chuckchas. The term "shaman" was quite probably misapplied in the same manner.

Although V. K. was aware of the "[frame] drums with drawings" shamans used, the older men had no such instruments. Instead, one of them played a string instrument with several sound boxes and a multitude of short metal strings. The pieces of music (if that's what they were) the man performed were very brief, contained extremely high-pitched sounds executed on very short strings, and V. K. was fascinated by them enough to attempt a transcription. He enlisted the help of Pavel N., a friend and former classmate in a Soviet state-run music school, who unlike V. K. had perfect pitch.

The transcription process was arduous. Language barrier (the performer spoke no Russian, while nobody in V. K.'s group spoke any language other than Russian, or rudimentary English) prevented the researchers from understanding the origin or the intent of the pieces, or sometimes whether or not a

piece was separate from the preceding one or a continuation of it. Although the high-pitched sounds would decay quickly, the performer would frequently make a point of muting an already silent string long after the sound died. And although the performer would happily repeat a piece over and over for the benefit of the transcribers, there was apparently a limit to the number of repeats of each particular piece per day – and although the performer would concede to playing the pieces again the next day, there was one piece V. K. and Pavel only heard three times on the second day of work, after which the performer apparently refused to play it completely.

The instrument itself was, from V. K.'s description, constructed from several sound boxes of various shapes and sizes, glued together into an instrument slightly larger than a guitar. It was decorated with textiles and pieces of leather, some with hair intact. The performer had a supply of strings, and on at least two occasions V. K. observed him replacing the strings, and on day three one of the sound boxes was removed and replaced by a different one.

I was unable to find any mention in literature of complex chordophones used by any of the non-Russian inhabitants of the region; nor did the music resemble anything quite like the recordings I am aware of (e.g. the relevant volumes of Buda Musique's *Sibérie*), in either instrumentation or melodic and rhythmic language. V. K. made several attempts to publish the music, but was unable to find an interested party. He allowed me to make photographs, typeset, and publish the music. He was unwilling, however, to let me use his full name, as the bad experience he had with a musicologist back in the 1960s made him uncertain of the transcriptions' worth; I, on the other hand, found much of the music breathtakingly beautiful, and, in time, it became a source of inspiration for my own compositions.

* * *

Typesetting was done from digital photographs of the original manuscript. The pages were neither bound nor numbered, and V. K. could not remember the original order (which would be difficult to determine in any case, given that the number and sequence of pieces were in question even at the time of transcription), so I proceeded in the order the pages were arranged in the file and introduced numbering. The amount of corrections in the manuscript is considerable – there are so many, in fact, that I had to discard approximately a third of the pieces because the corrections seemed to obscure the meaning, and not elucidate it. Tempo indications and dynamics are original, but time signatures are not. The original manuscript has every piece in 4/4 time, and the rhythms made little sense; strong beats were not accented (the accents can only be gleaned from dynamic indications). I opted for time signatures I hoped would make the music easier to read, and they do not imply any accents on strong beats.

Apart from that, the biggest editorial changes were:

1. switching from two voices on one stave to two staves. The original notation was far too cumbersome to read, and if a performance is to be arranged, two performers would have a better opportunity of playing this music than one, on whichever instrument.

2. using triplets and quintuplets instead of the original's highlighted passages accompanied by a note saying "this [passage is to be played] slightly faster", or other words to that effect. I may have given the music a different rhythmic drive, however, I don't believe the original can be replicated without a recording. Using triplets and quintuplets seemed to me like the best course of action, especially since triplets have already been employed by the transcribers.

I have introduced 8va and 15ma lines, which in the original were inscriptions below or above the piece, sometimes with an arrow pointing to a note or a passage, etc. In cases when the manuscript is

unreadable, but I could discern a transposition by an octave or by two octaves, I put a dotted line without an indication of an interval. It goes without saying that the pieces probably used a tuning system very different from equal temperament, and the pitches were approximated by the transcribers; likewise, the rhythms, durations of pauses, were likely made to fit the transcribers' preconceived notions about what constitutes proper rhythm. Unfortunately, this quite possibly also applies to the style of at least some of the pieces, but of course it is impossible to know for certain.

Some passages seemed to me to be impossible to execute on any string instrument. However, two points from V. K.'s account indicate how they might have been performed. Some of the smaller sound boxes were equipped with only a handful of strings, which were positioned to make every string of the group vibrate if any one was plucked. And for two pieces, the performer's companion assisted him by plucking a string at the right moment. Faced with the difficult choice of selecting the appropriate sound font to use for demonstration MIDI recordings, I ended up using the sound of a grand piano: using guitar harmonics would probably make a few more notes audible, however, they can be executed in many ways, and I didn't want to influence the music by choosing specific ones. (I confess that my personal affinity for piano's high register played a part in my choice as well, just as my preference for certain notational devices has influenced the engraving.)

* * *

My original intention was to publish the transcriptions together with the manuscript. This plan had to be abandoned in 2022, however. The digital photographs remained on a computer I had to leave behind when fleeing Moscow in early March 2022. Neither I nor my former spouse had contact with V. K. after that date because of his support of Russia during the Russo-Ukrainian war; the original manuscript remains with him. Pavel N. died in a car accident in the late 1970s, and as far as I have been able to determine, nobody else knows about this music.

Prior to publication, it has been suggested to me that the pieces might have been an elaborate hoax. I find the probability of that to be very low. The manuscript has been prepared with infinite care, because even to figure the notation out would've been a difficult task for such rhythmically complicated music. The would-be hoax author would then have an equally difficult task to introduce errors, corrections, and various inscriptions (in two different hands). Having spent this much effort, one would surely apply their energy to disseminating the music – yet this has not happened.

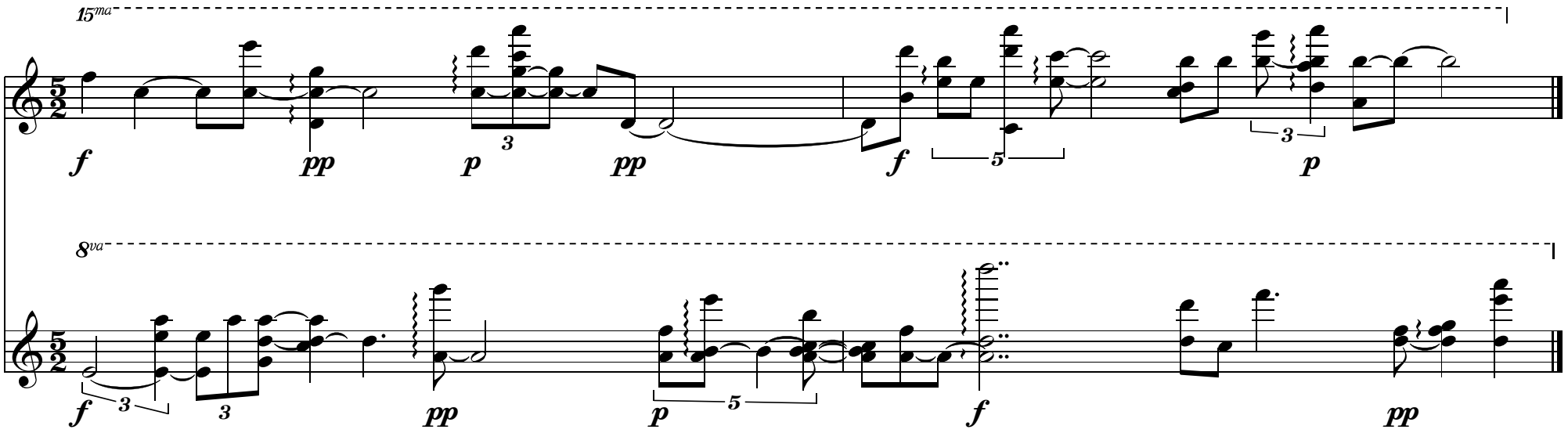
Another argument in favor of authenticity is that to be believable, the hoax would've had to have at least some passing resemblance to the music of an ethnic group belonging to the region; the authors could then claim it's an individual expression of a tradition, a composer who in his originality outgrew the tradition he was working in. Nothing of the sort is happening in these pieces, and this, in fact, may have been why they were rejected as lacking any interest for an ethnomusicologist – they didn't know what to make of this.

Whatever the true origin of these pieces, I am happy to be able to share it with fellow music lovers, performers, and composers. It may be a monument to one of those mysterious musical traditions that were annihilated by the Russian colonists centuries ago, and survived in small fragments only. And if it is indeed a hoax, I imagine it would make for a wonderful example of the spirit of camaraderie, optimism, and sense of wonder that existed for a brief time in Soviet academic circles, especially among the younger generations. Epitomized in literary works by the Strugatsky brothers, Ivan Yefremov, Alexey Okladnikov, and many others, with its many virtues – and perhaps equally many faults – it is now a culture long gone.

– Jashiin
Istanbul, May/June 2022

1

Lento



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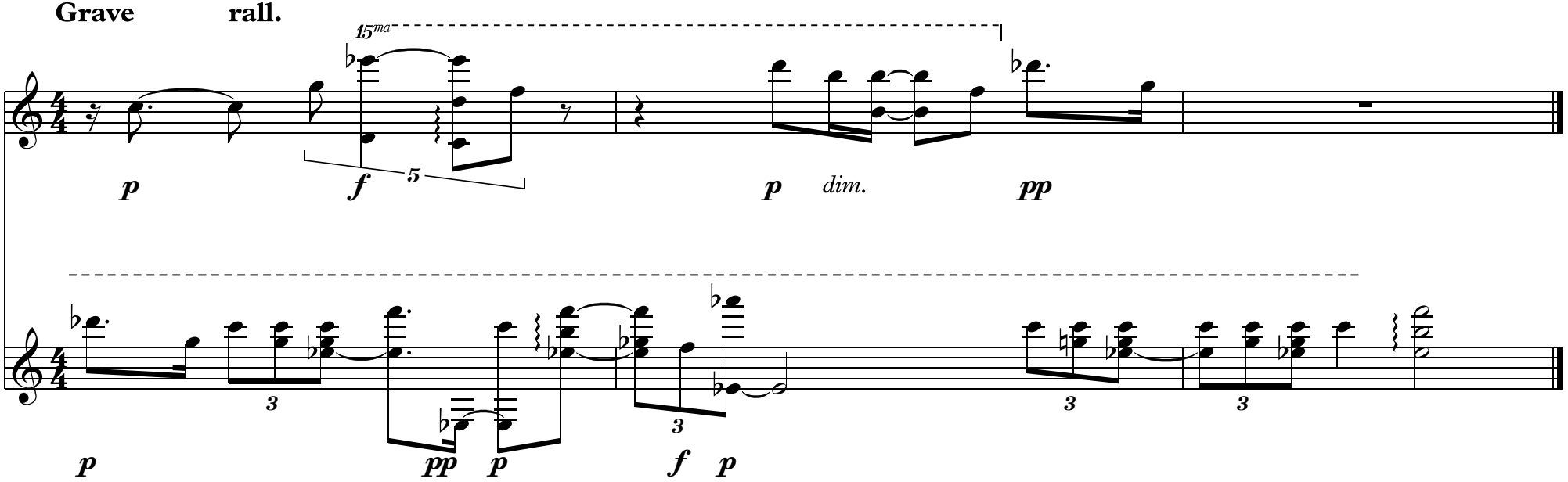

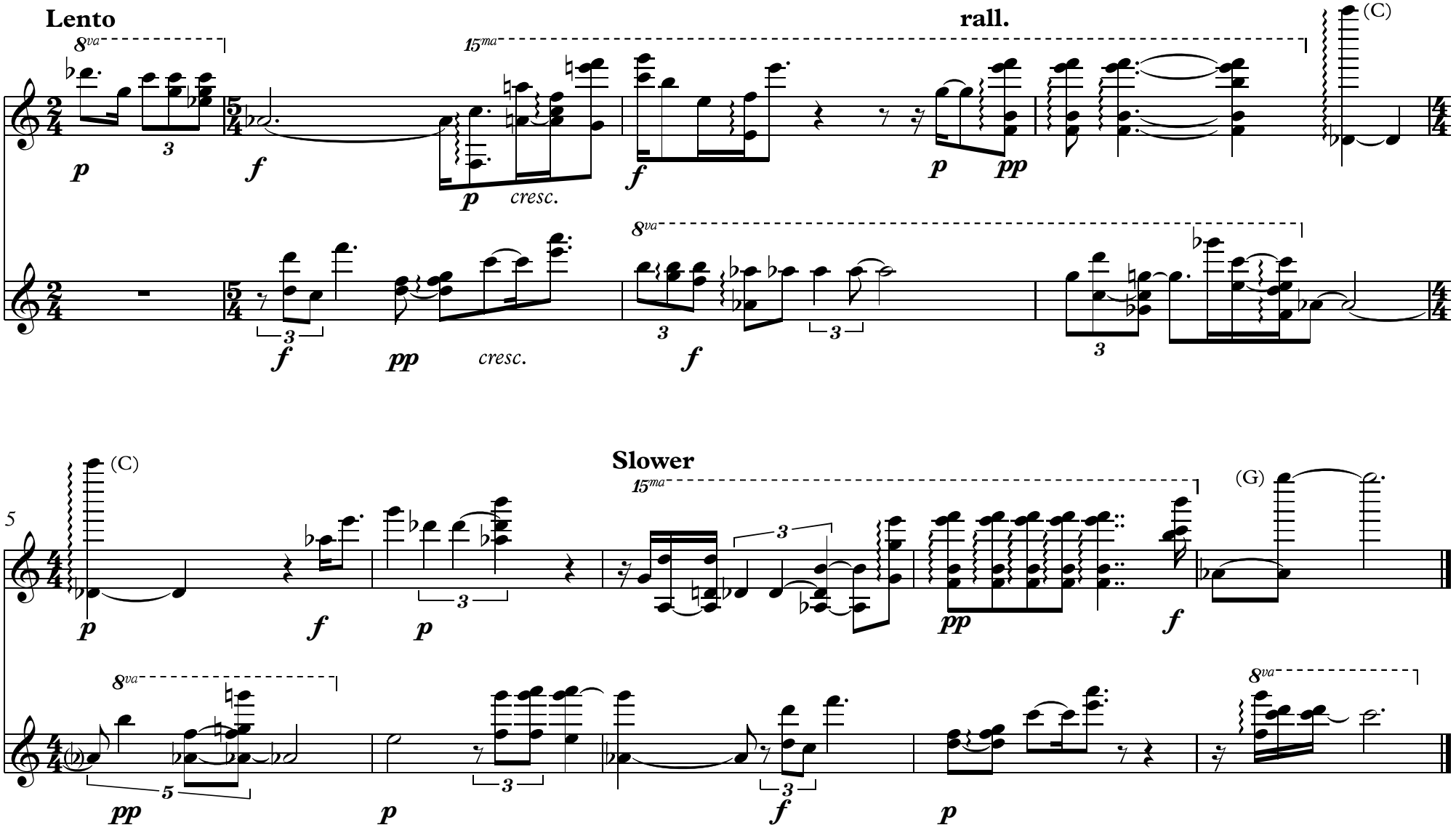
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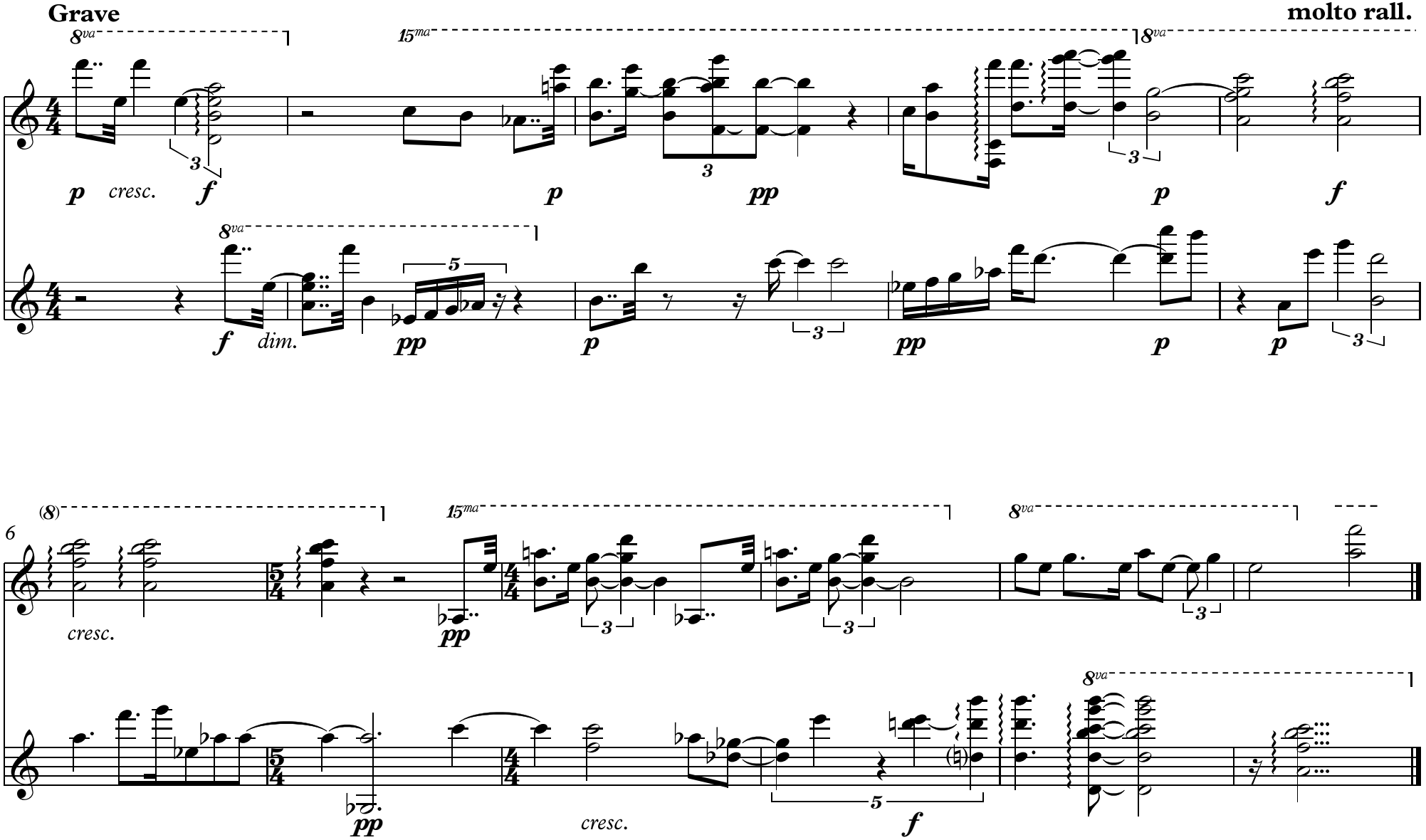

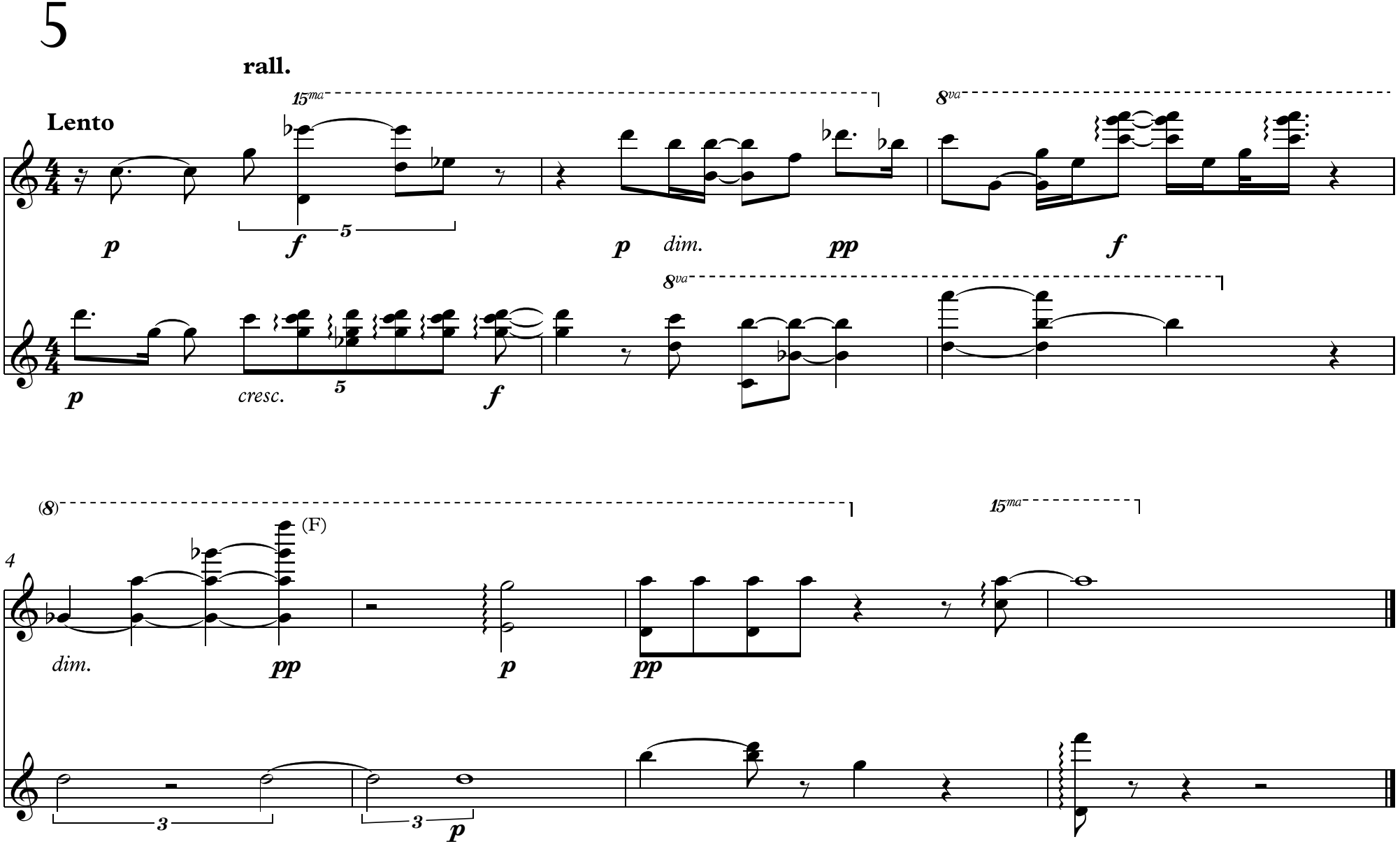
5
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Lento
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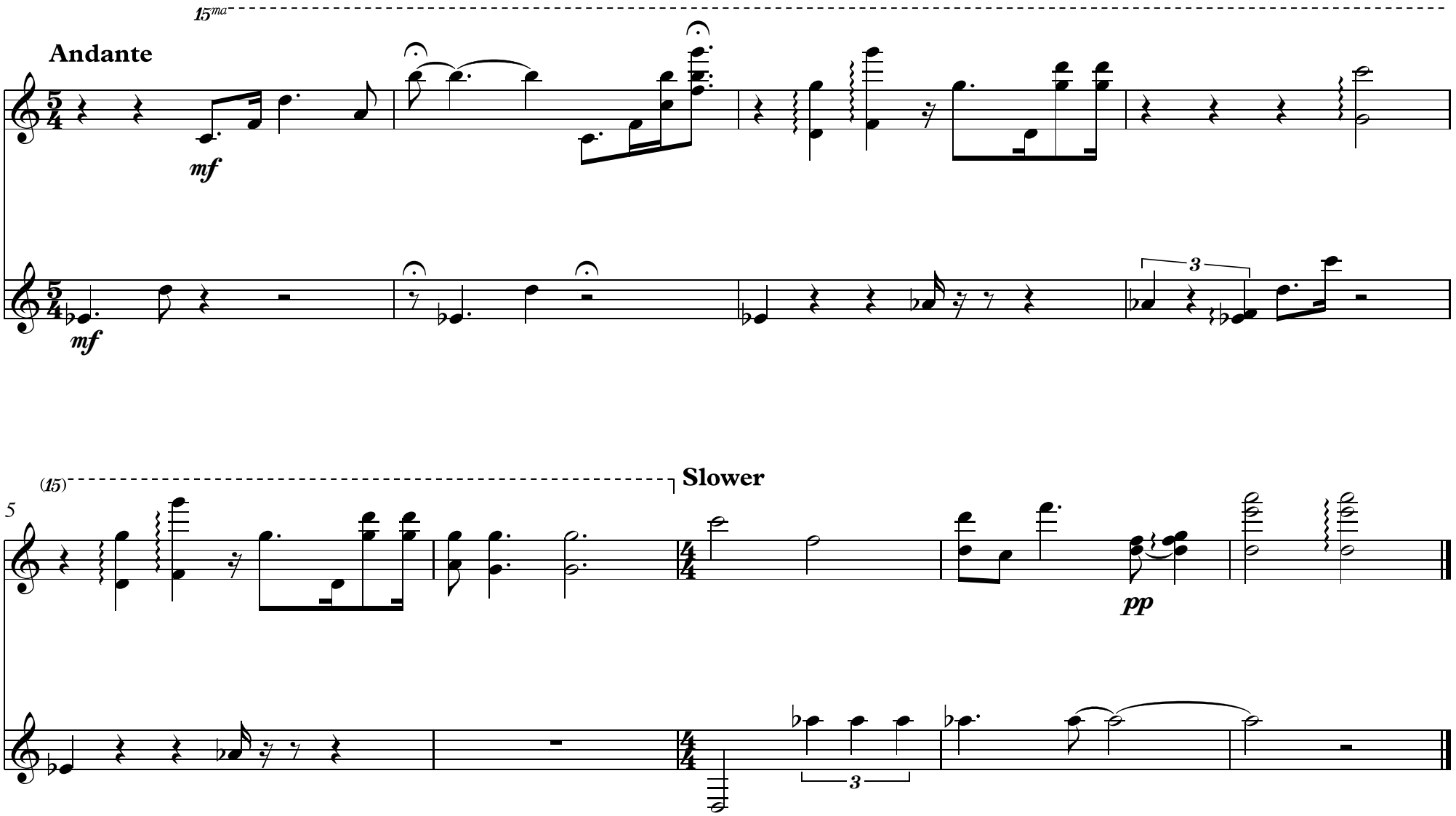
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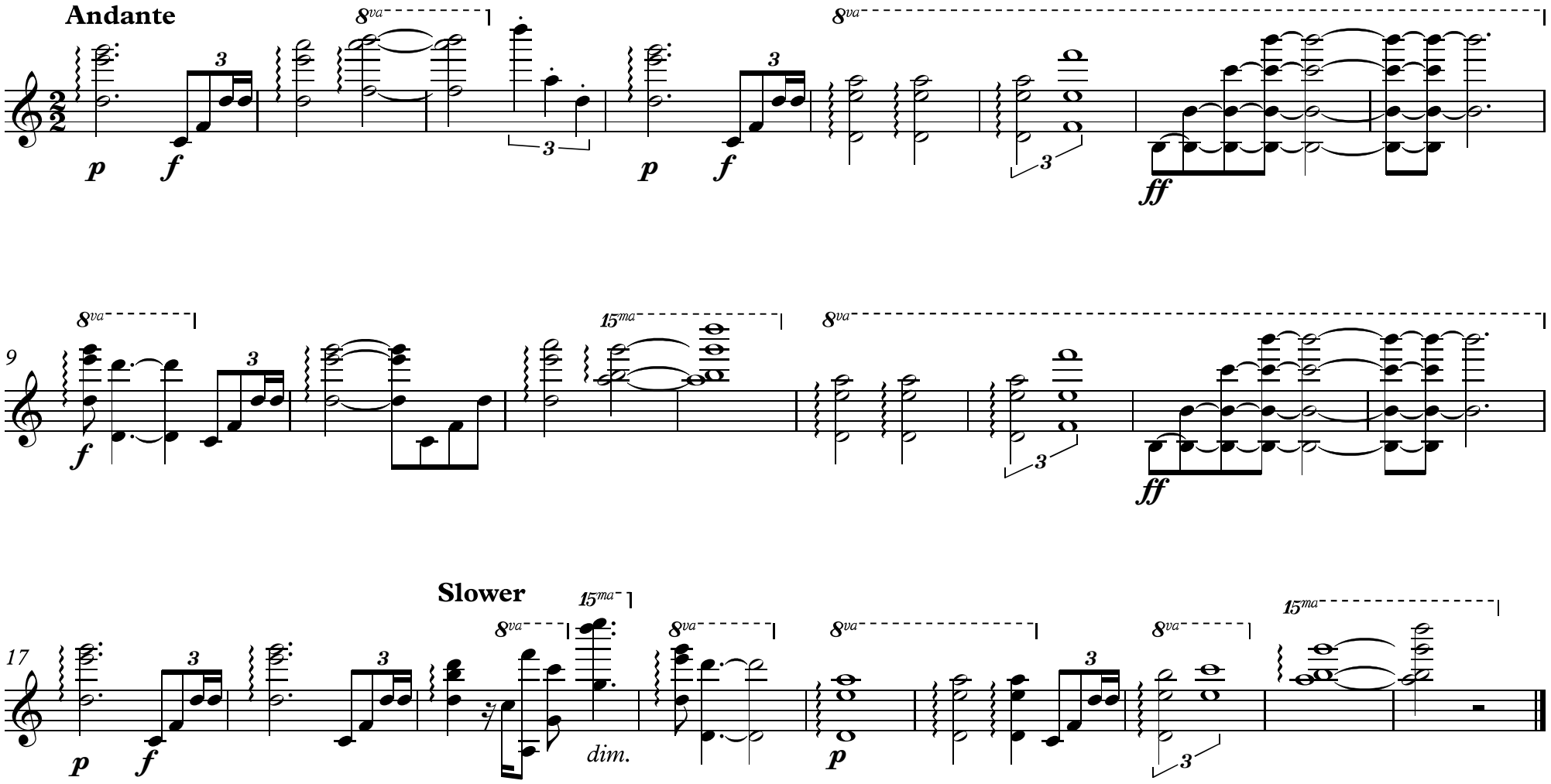

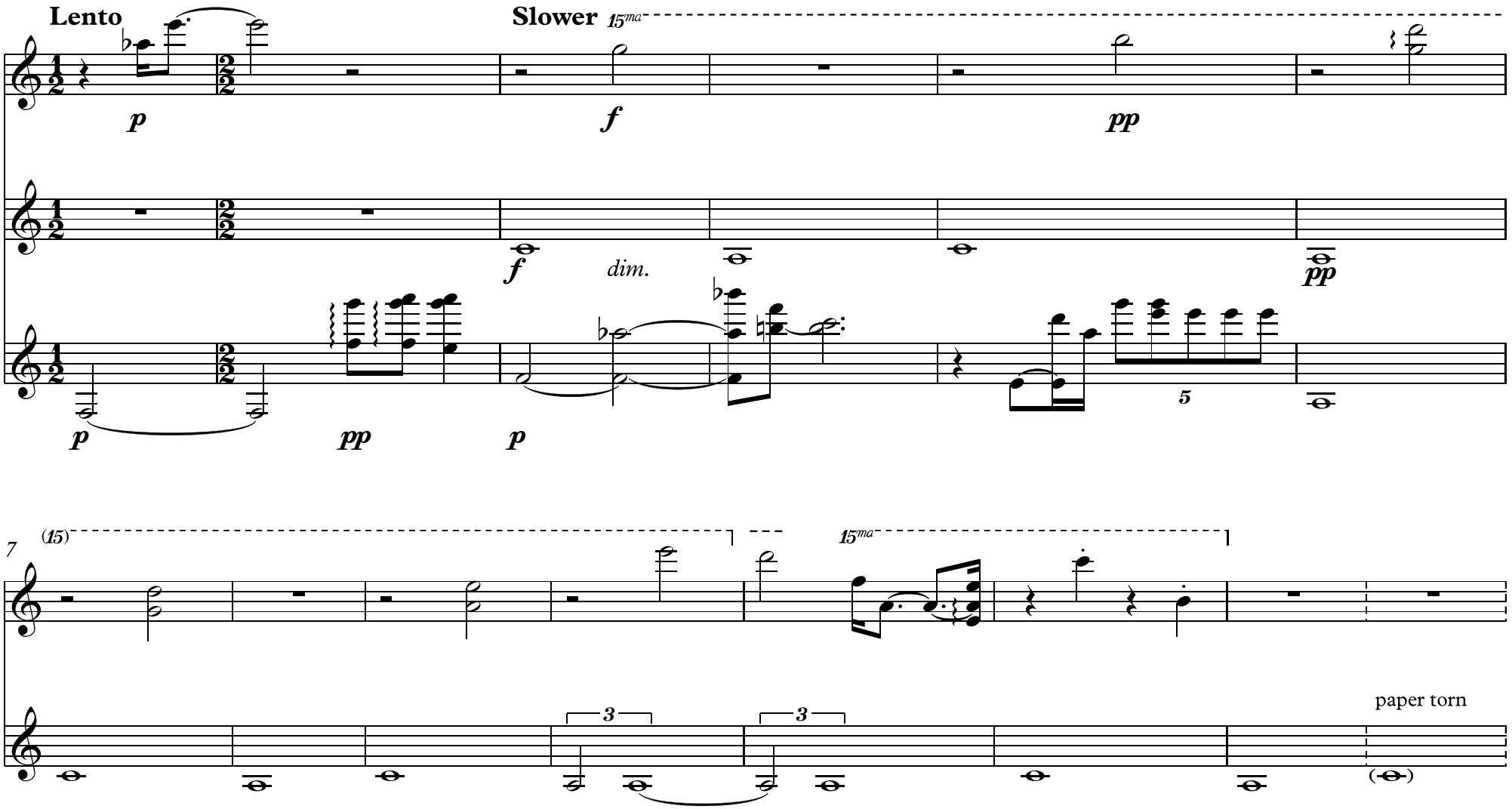
Lento
Slower
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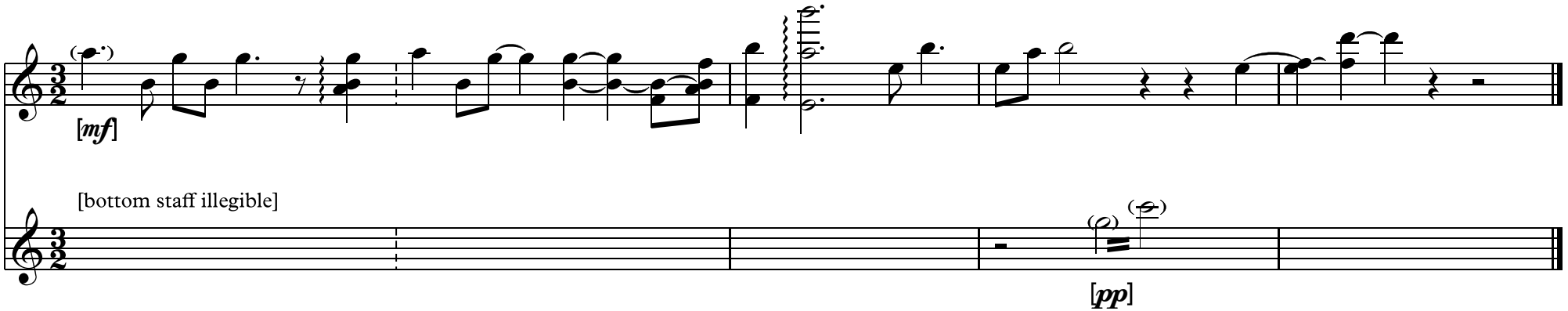
paper torn

9

[Andante]

[corner of the page torn]



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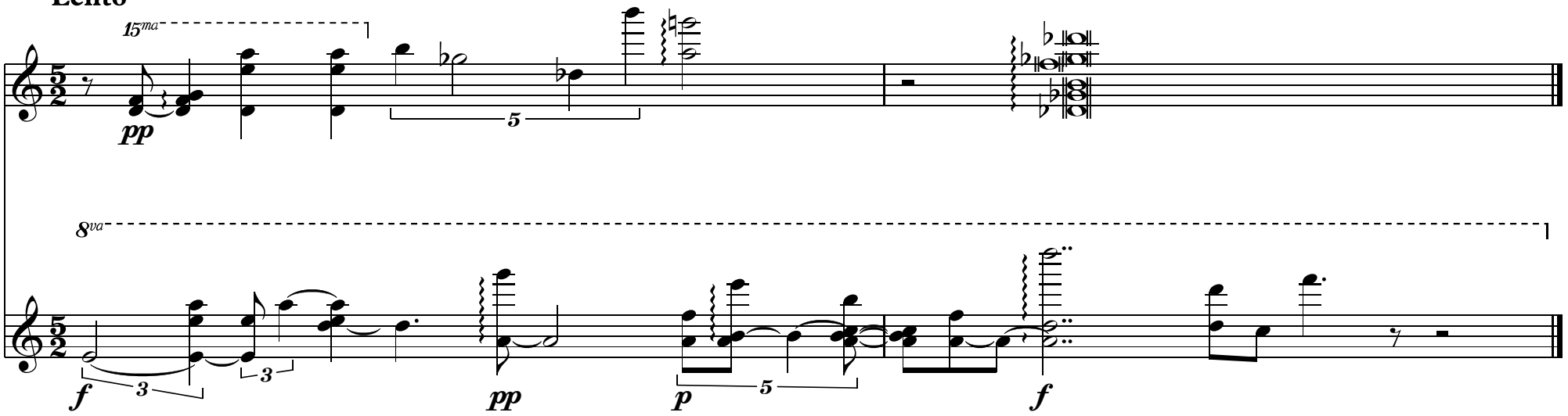

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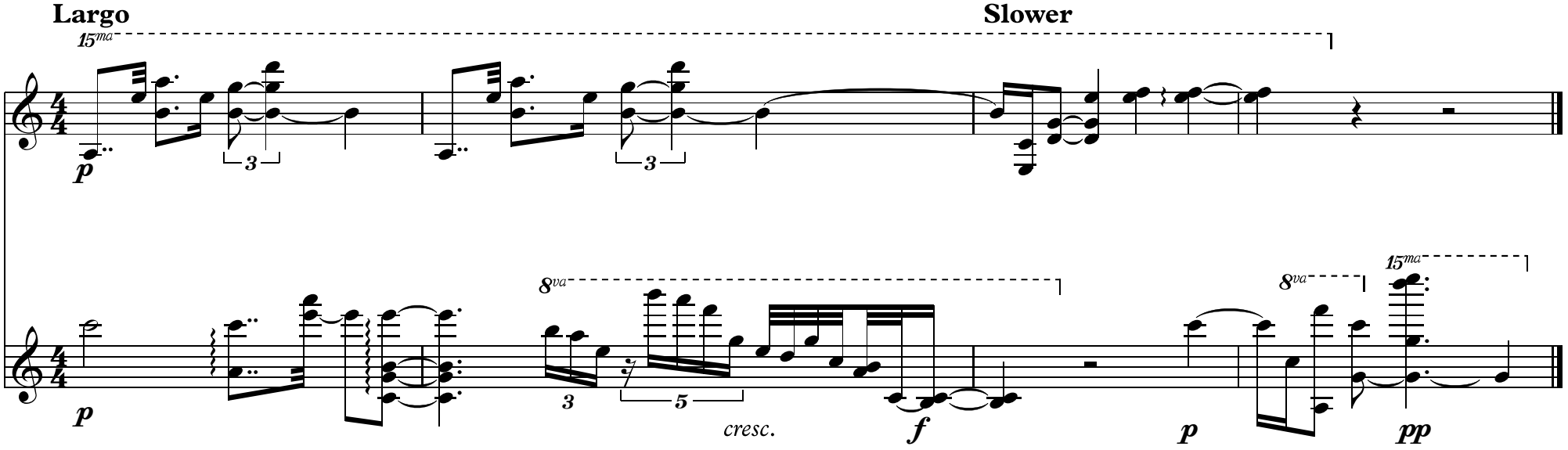

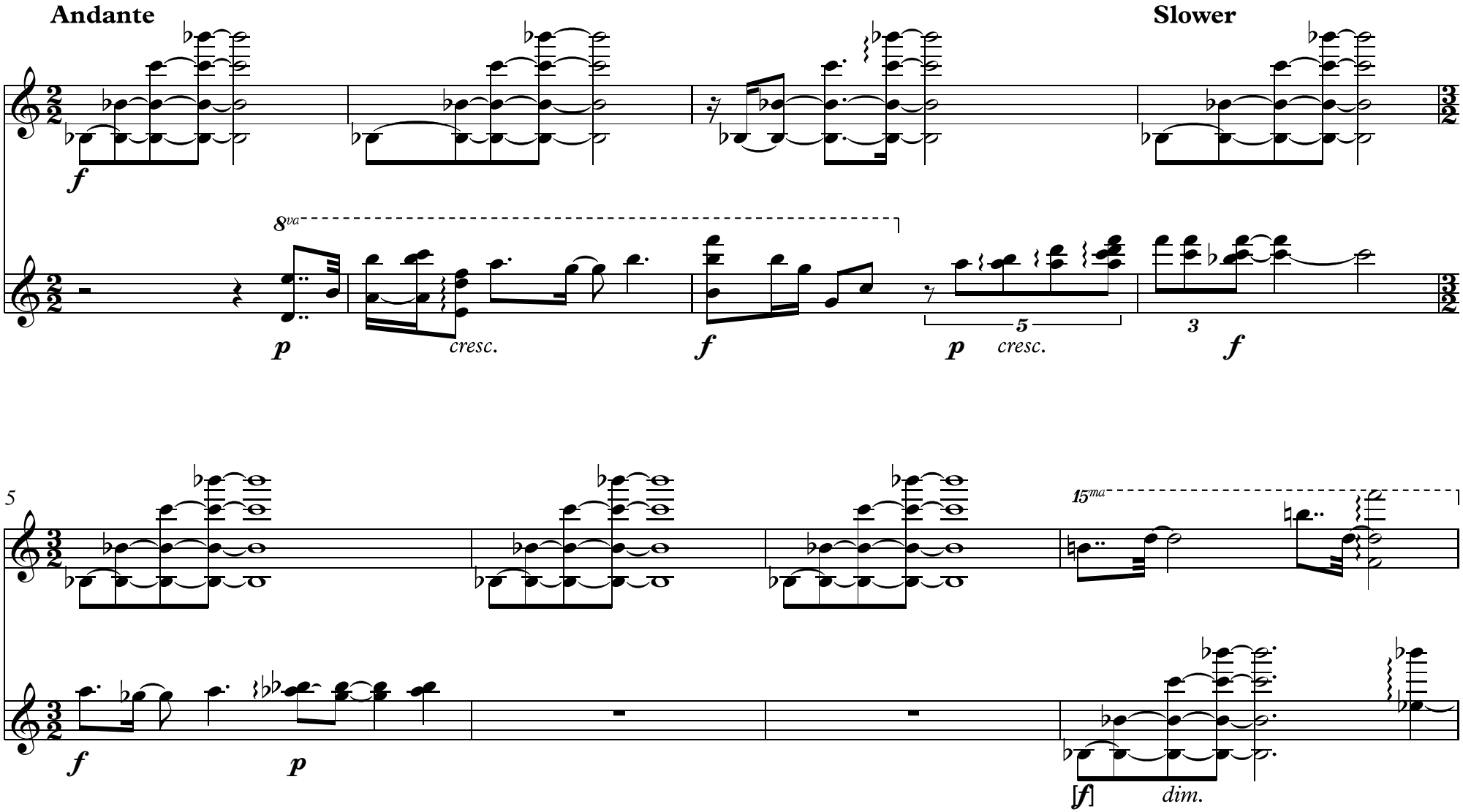
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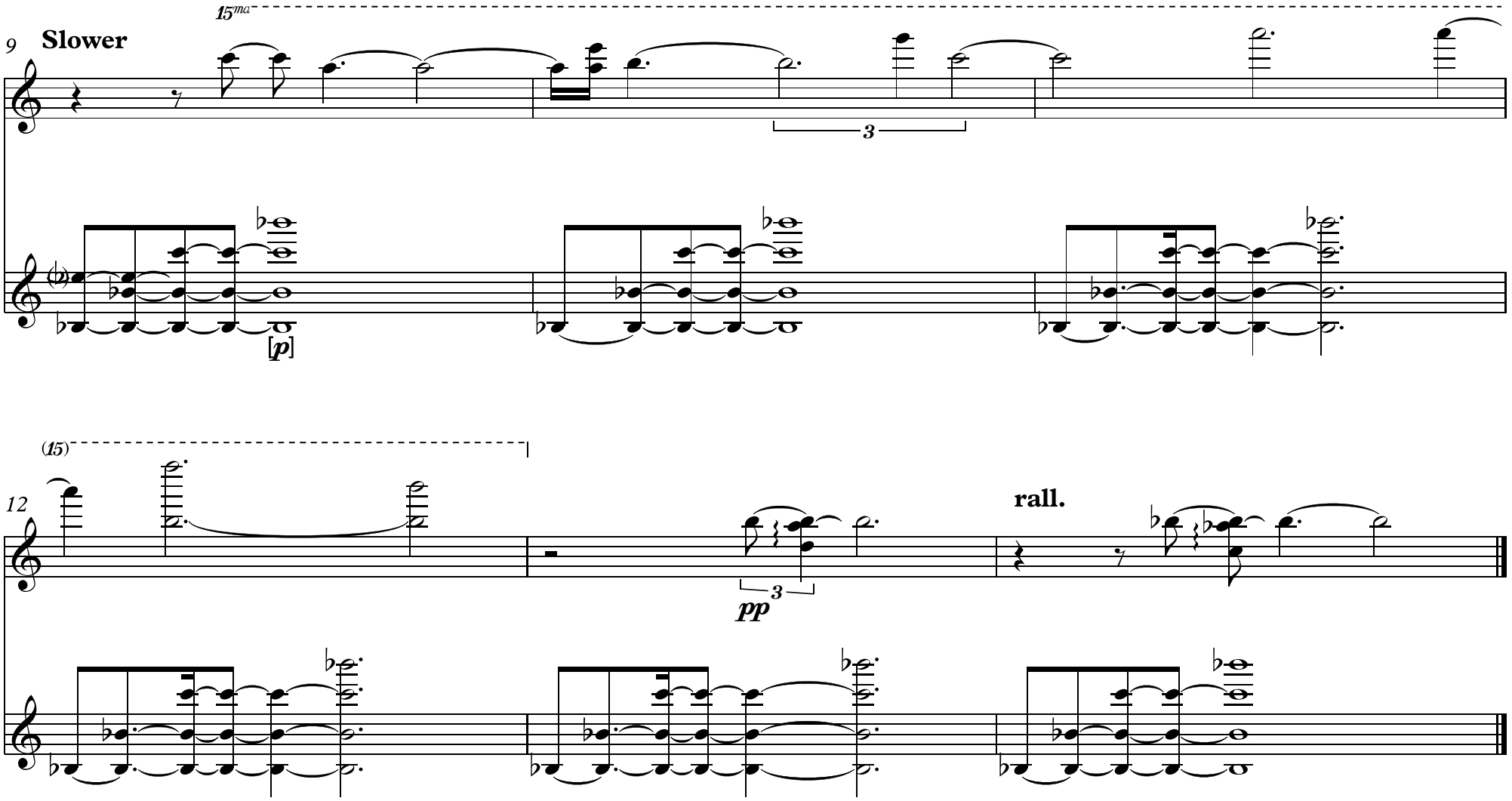
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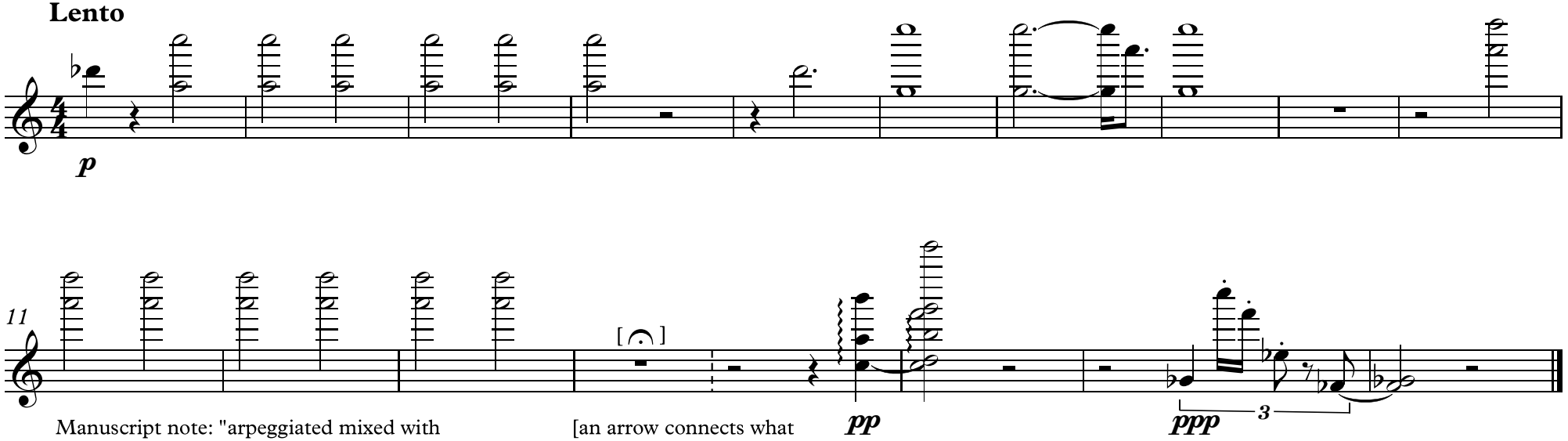
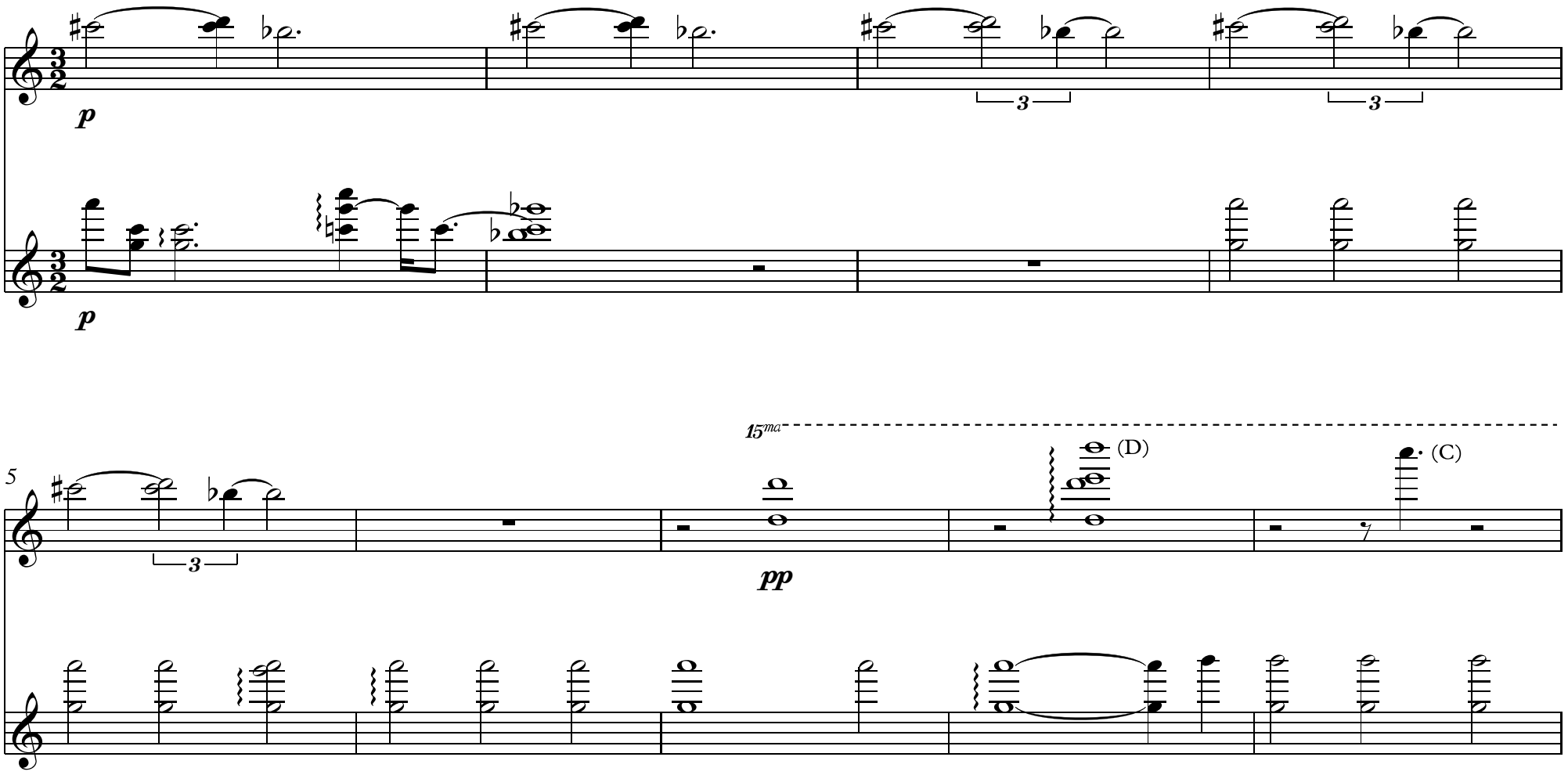


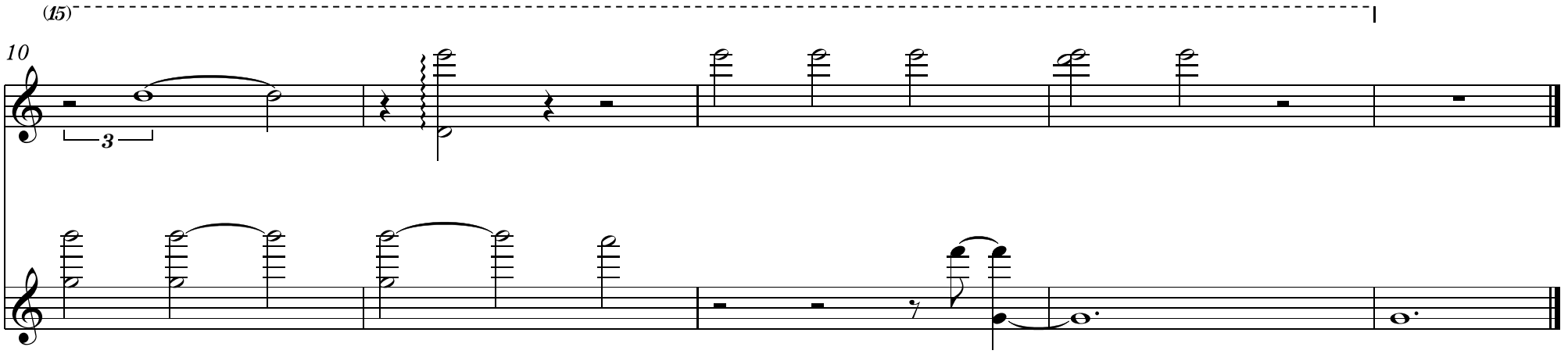
Manuscript note: "arpeggiated mixed with simultaneous, different sequence for every performance."

[an arrow connects what follows with the previous passage]

14

Lento

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Lento

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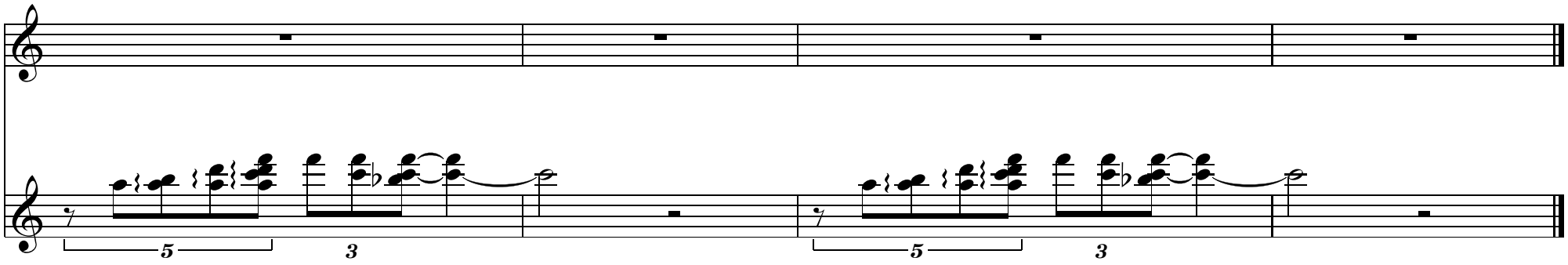
5 **Slower**

Even slower



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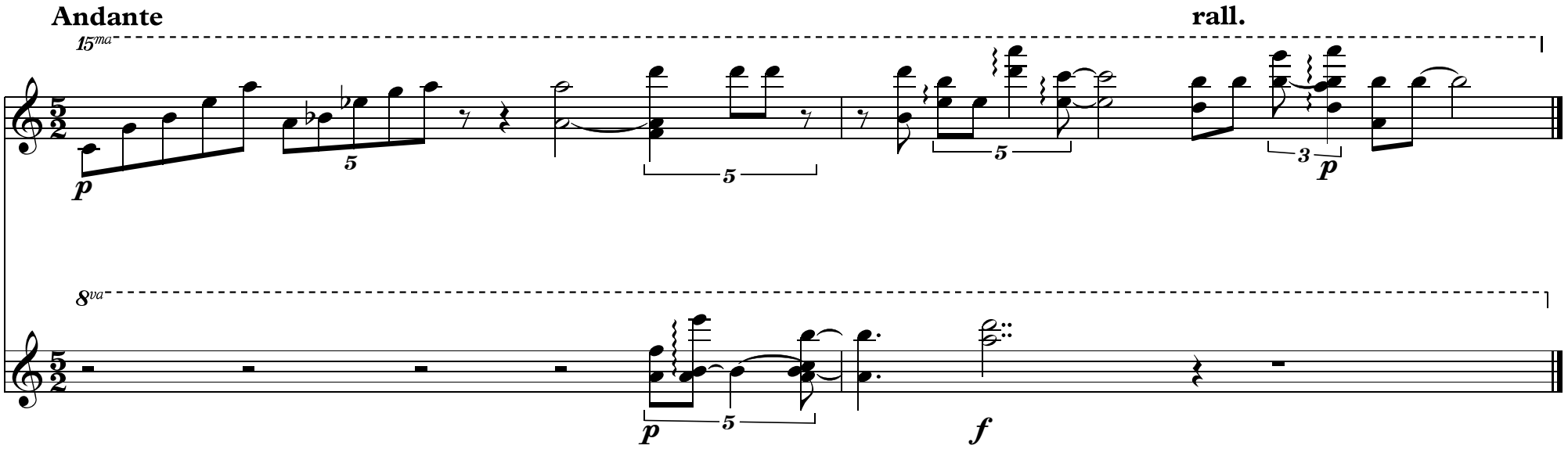

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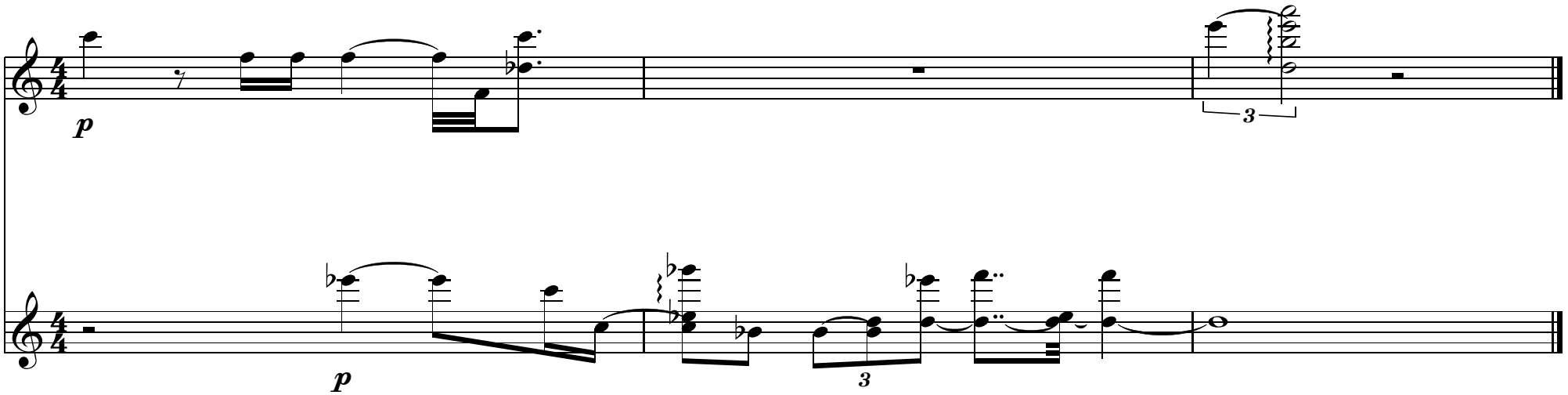

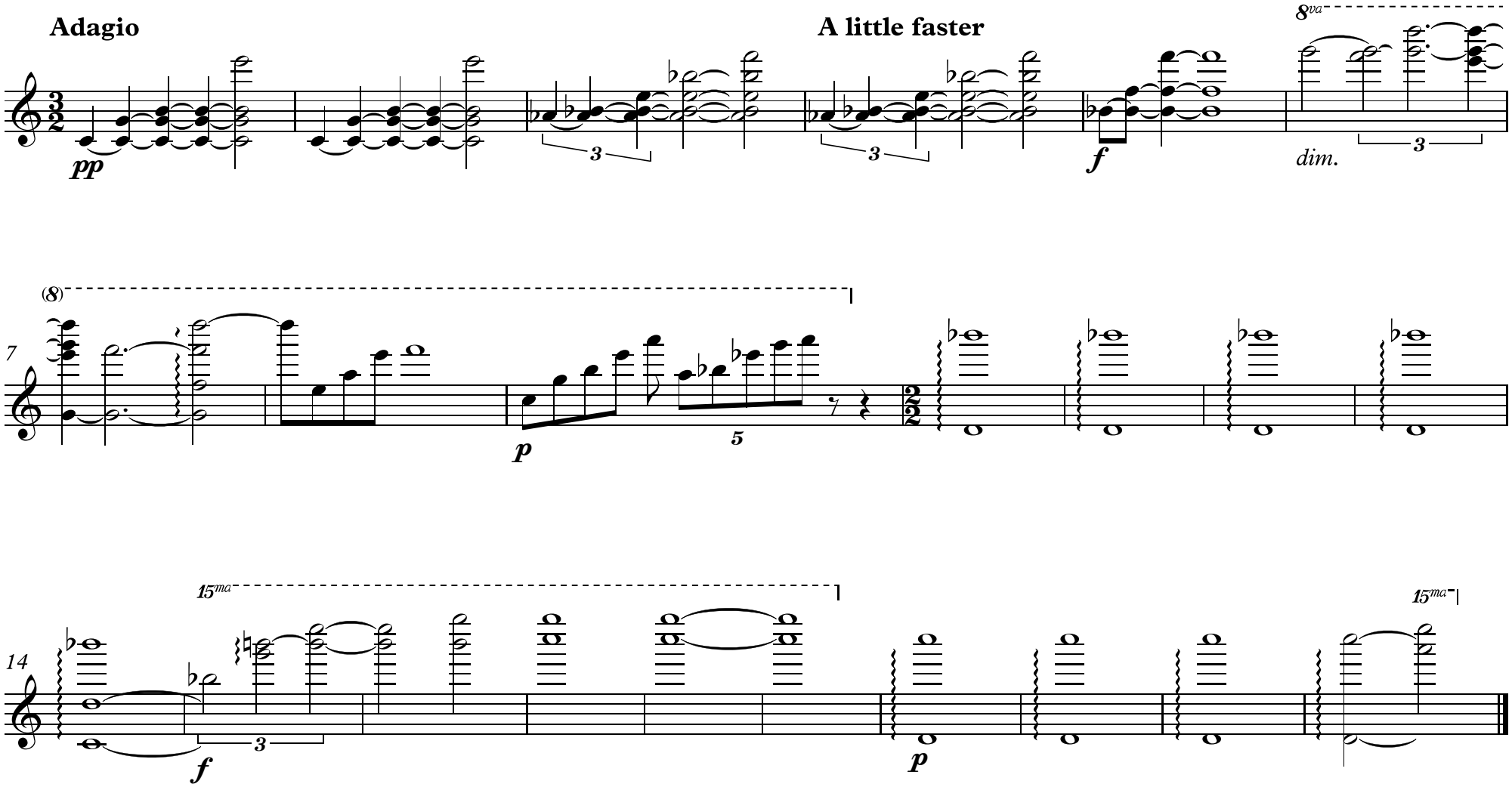
Adagio
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