Kurago Tableaux

for
prepared piano

Kevin H. Gray

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Background

The present composition for prepared piano, the *Kurago Tableaux*, was completed in the fall of 2011, though the bulk of the work on it was done in 2010. It is an extensive revision and embellishment of materials extracted from my chamber ballet, *Kurago Katsu*, which was composed during the summer of 2008. The ballet, comprised of seventeen movements which run about seventy minutes, is scored for two bassoons, prepared piano, and pipe organ. The inspiration for *Kurago Katsu* came from certain aspects of Japanese puppet theatre (*bunraku*), and the music, as well as the dance, purports to explore the emotional and metaphysical interrelationships, real and imagined, between the puppeteers (or *Kurago*) and the puppets themselves. The present work, *Kurago Tableaux*, may be experienced with or without the programmatic trappings that permeate the original chamber ballet. Pianists may be interested in knowing that another work based on *Kurago Katsu* also exists: the four-movement *Kurago Suite*, which is scored for two bassoons and prepared piano. The music of *Kurago Suite* is extracted from different areas of the original ballet than that of *Kurago Tableaux*, so there is but little shared material between the two works.

Performance

An emotionally invested approach, rather than dry detachment, will likely best serve this score. Periodic slight *rubato* is an admissible expressive affectation here, as long as its utilization in no way compromises the work's particular rhythmic integrity.

The admonitions 'impassioned' and 'fervently' appear throughout the score. These terms both can readily be seen as approximate renderings of the Italian term 'appassionato,' but I intend for there to be a subtle distinction between them. I use the term 'fervently' to describe a playing style that is analagous to the manner in which a pianist might respond to the term 'appassionato' in an early Beethoven or late Haydn score: passionate playing that is nonetheless tempered by a Classical sense of poise and restraint. My use of the term 'impassioned' is meant to suggest a playing style akin to a pianist's response to Liszt's or Tausig's 'appassionato,' which generally evokes a sense of unrestrained, ecstatic abandon.

A few words about articulation are in order.

First, and most simply, accents should not be subtle, and must be easily perceived to stand out from their surroundings by even a casual listener.

Next, the staccato dot is intended to represent the shortest possible duration, irrespective of all and sundry considerations which, in the minds of many players of all instruments, often justify the lengthening of notes that bear a staccato dot. I find that when I coach players in performances

of my music, the first comment I am likely to make is to request shorter staccatos. Within the locus of my composition, the use of staccato is usually meant to evoke an abruptness bordering on violence, regardless of pedal use or volume level.

This brings us to the final relevant articulation mark, which is the dash sometimes referred to as the *tenuto* mark. This symbol's interpretation depends on context. If used in tandem with the staccato dot, it should function to mitigate the severity of the staccato effect, thereby subtly lengthening the duration of the affected note, producing what might be referred to as a slightly "fat" staccato. (For many players, this may be a *de facto* normal staccato, since my default interpretation of staccato seems to be more extreme than the norm, as it enthusiastically sacrifices concerns of tone quality on the altar of brevity.) Whenever the dot and dash are present beneath the same note, the dash's only purpose is the mitigation of the staccato dot, and no additional meaning should be inferred.

In those instances where the dash appears without the dot, its use denotes, for the note in question, an additional heft, weight, or darkening of the tone, perhaps similar to the manner in which most players might respond to the Italian term '*pesante*.'

The use of slurs to define phrases and invoke a legato playing style does not also necessarily imply obligatory patterns of dymanics, in most of my music. In other words, the presence of a phrase does not necessarily mean that the phrase is loudest near its center, and quietest at its edges. By shedding this confining stricture, itself an anachronism bequeathed to us from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an uncharted universe of expressive potential is now opened to us.

Please exaggerate contrasting articulations.

***Kurago Tableaux* contains frequent and specific pedal instructions. These instructions all deal with the sustaining pedal, which is the only one of the three pedals which is employed in this composition.**

There are four recurring instructions that deal with the sustaining pedal's pervasiveness, or lack thereof. The first of these, 'no pedal' requires no further comment. The second, 'sparse pedal' describes a style of pedal use in which all rests are interpreted as the Draconian extreme of absolute silence, during which the pedal must not intrude. In passages marked 'sparse pedal' the pedal should only be used to add heft or resonance to a given note's natural, proper duration, never to extend that duration.

The admonition 'pedal with moderation' takes a less sacrosanct view of rests, particularly the shorter-valued rests, and also permits occasional and moderate blending of adjacent harmonies when deemed appropriate. Passages governed by the 'pedal with moderation' mandate should be characterized by frequent pedal changes.

The indication 'pedal freely' describes an approach to the use of pedal that allows for extensive blending of adjacent harmonies, pedaling during rests if deemed desirable, and lifting or changing the pedal less frequently than would be the case under the mandate 'pedal with moderation.' The pianist is nonetheless reminded that the invitation to 'pedal freely' is not the same as constant, unchanging pedal, which, when required, is indicated in the traditional manner.

In addition, there are two non-standard pedal effects utilized during

the course of this piece. The indication 'unmeasured pedal vibrato' is the more commonly-used effect of the two, and its use denotes an irregular and arhythmic, but usually rapid, depressing and releasing of the pedal. The sound of the pianist's foot striking the pedal may be audible at times, if desired, and is intended to be a counterpoint to the sound of the strings abruptly being brought into audible vibration by brusk, unsubtle treament of the pedal.

The indication 'measured pedal vibrato' is similar in most regards, but the depressing and releasing of the pedal should correspond to the smallest feasible note value. The measured pedal vibrato is used only twice. The first instance occurs in the middle of measure 37, and continues through the end of measure 39. Pedal pulsation in eighth notes is recommended here. Measure 276 is where we find the other appearance of measured pedal vibrato. Here, the pianist has several choices: eighth notes, triplet quarter notes, or regular quarter notes are all viable options.

Several aspects of my approach to rhythm also warrant brief discussion.

First of all, my beaming choices do not always adhere to conventional expectations for a given time signature. In these cases, the decision to disregard convention is always purposeful, in that the unexpected beaming reflects the music's structure more clearly than conventional beaming would have done.

Secondly, I find the still commonly accepted perspective that tuplets may only begin on main beats to be unendurably restrictive. While I recognize that this practice of allowing tuplets to begin more or less anywhere creates counting dilemmas for some performers, I feel that persistence, a strong sense of pulse, and the ability and willingness to subdivide obsessively, can not only overcome any difficulties encountered, but also be quite rewarding.

Thirdly, while I do, in fact, view measures (and phrases, as well) as discrete musical events, I reject the notion that time signatures in post-modern music, and especially in my music, necessarily imply the presence of an unwritten yet obligatory accent structure. In the wake of the myriad rhythmic innovations of the twentieth century, the notion that measures and time signatures must continue to be interpreted just as they were in 1900 seems, at best, unrealistic, and at worst, anachronistic. The inherent beauty and intrinsic genius of the system of notation that we have commonly inherited, is, I feel, its unerring ability to adapt to the inevitability of shifting aesthetic priorities. My music embraces the concepts of measures and time signatures as organizational tools that allow the performer insight into the compositional process, without embracing most of the traditional strictures and ramifications normally inherent with their use.

Preparing the Piano

Preparing the piano for *Kurago Tableaux* is a relatively simple task, since all notes to be used are to be prepared in the same basic fashion. Several other of my pieces employ this same preparation technique. Mute the strings by firmly depressing commercially available silicone putty earplugs (or similar) to each applicable string nut. The amount of putty

required to achieve a uniform, muted tone over the specified area of the piano may vary with register, acoustics of the room, and type of piano. Please note that the goal of the preparations is uniformity of *tone*, rather than uniformity of size of the balls of putty. Some experimentation will be necessary. Prudence seems to dictate that neighboring notes at the periphery of the applicable range also be muted in the same manner, so that the effect of a possible wrong note in the heat of performance is not exacerbated by the sudden, unwelcome intrusion of a non-muted note. The resultant alteration of the responsiveness, tone quality, decay profile, and projection of the piano will be extreme, and the wise pianist will realize that practicing this piece on a piano that hasn't been prepared in the prescribed manner will be of limited value. In fact, a piano prepared in this fashion is essentially a new instrument, and should be approached accordingly.

It should be noted that, in the composer's opinion, this method of preparing the piano is completely harmless to the instrument, particularly if latex gloves are worn during the preparation. In the unlikely event that the silicone putty imparts a detectable residue, it may be safely cleaned with sterile cotton pads lightly dampened with denatured alcohol. Should a reader of these instructions nevertheless in any way damage a piano, please be advised that the composer assumes no responsibility.

It should go without saying that this composition should only be performed on an instrument which has been prepared according to these instructions, inasmuch as the writing at every moment has been carefully and specifically tailored to this, and no other, sound-source.

***Kurago Tableaux* is affectionately dedicated to Myron Myers, Charles Mosby, Samuel Viviano, and Joshua Oxford.**

Kevin H. Gray

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for Prepared Piano

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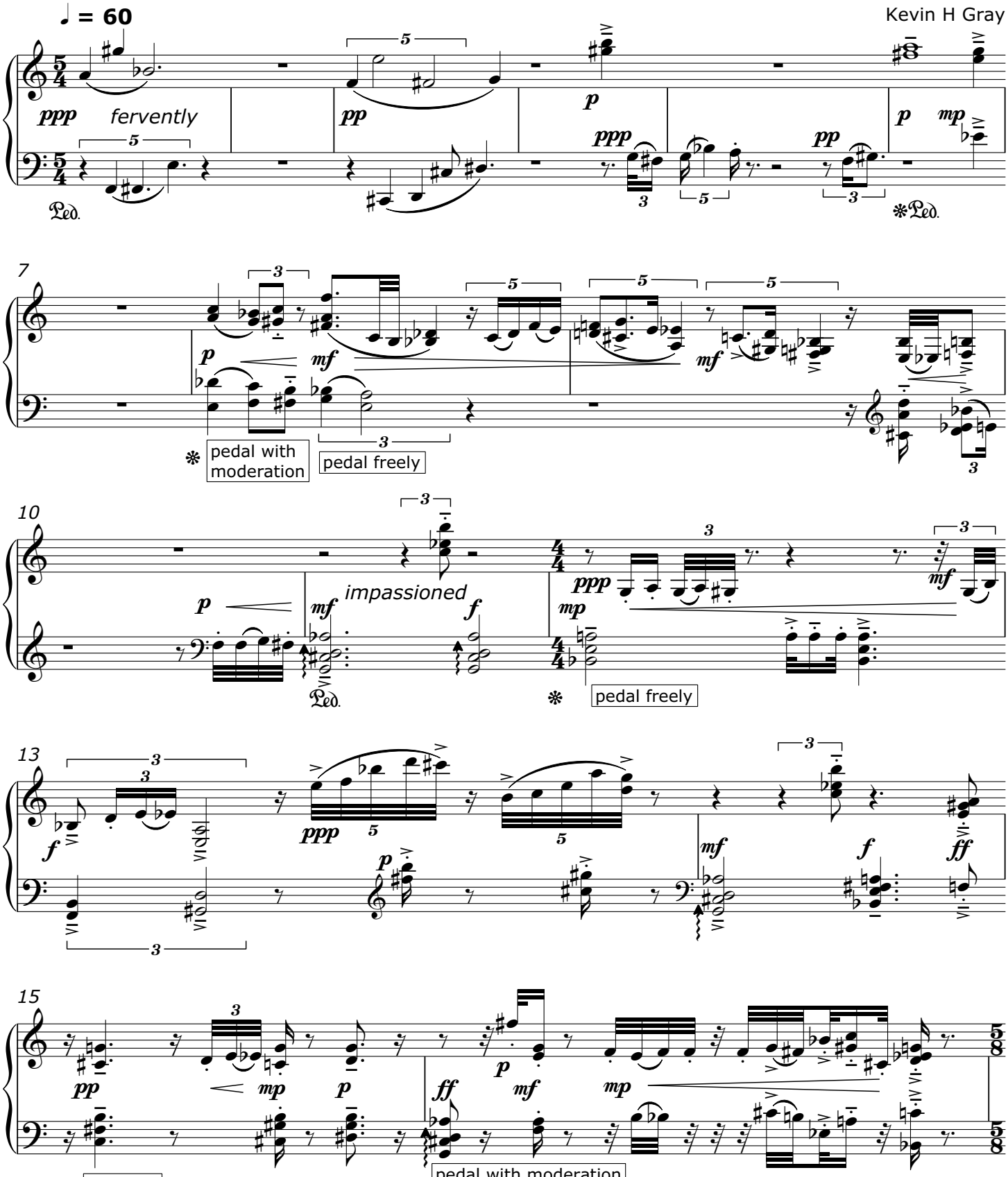

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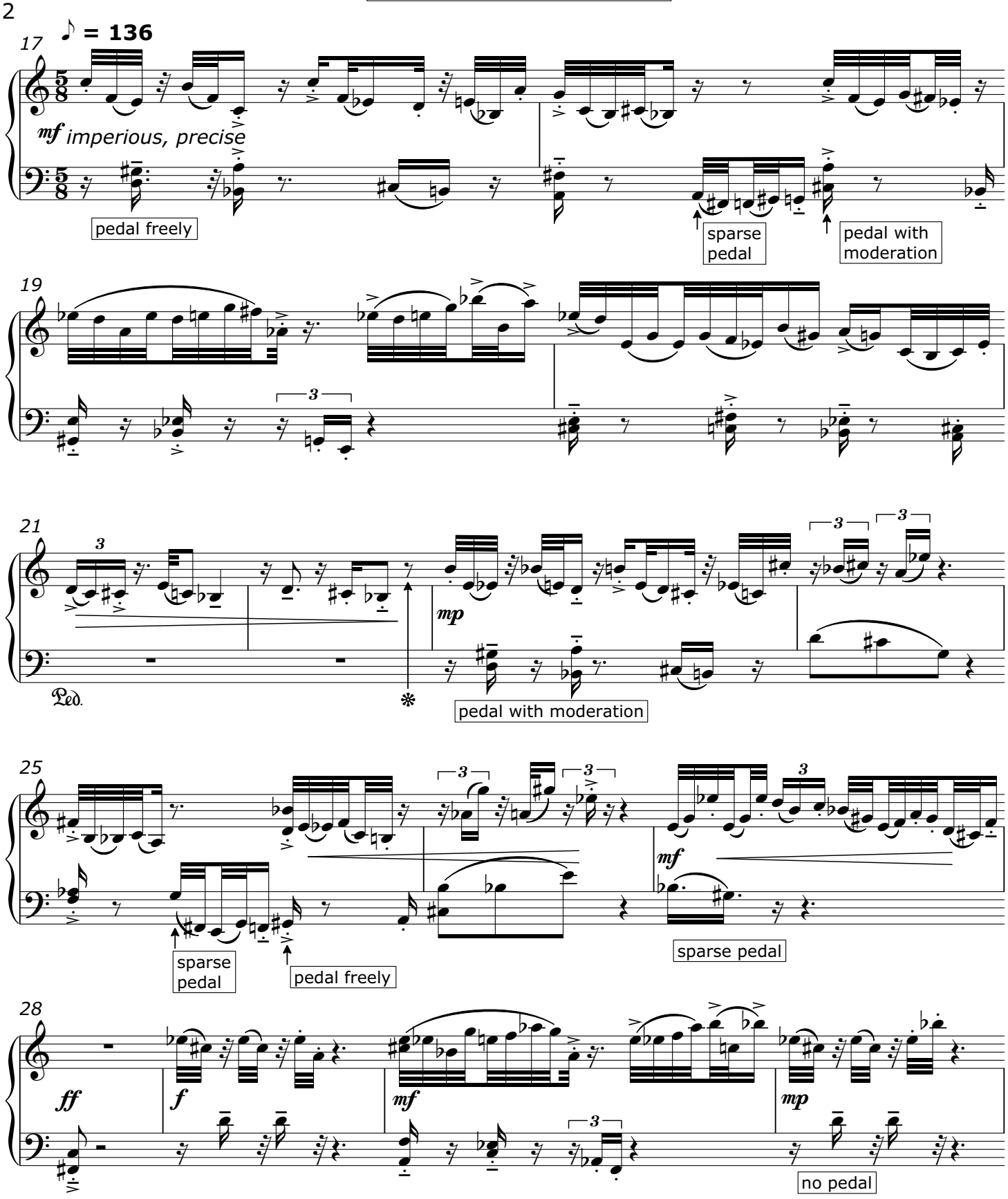

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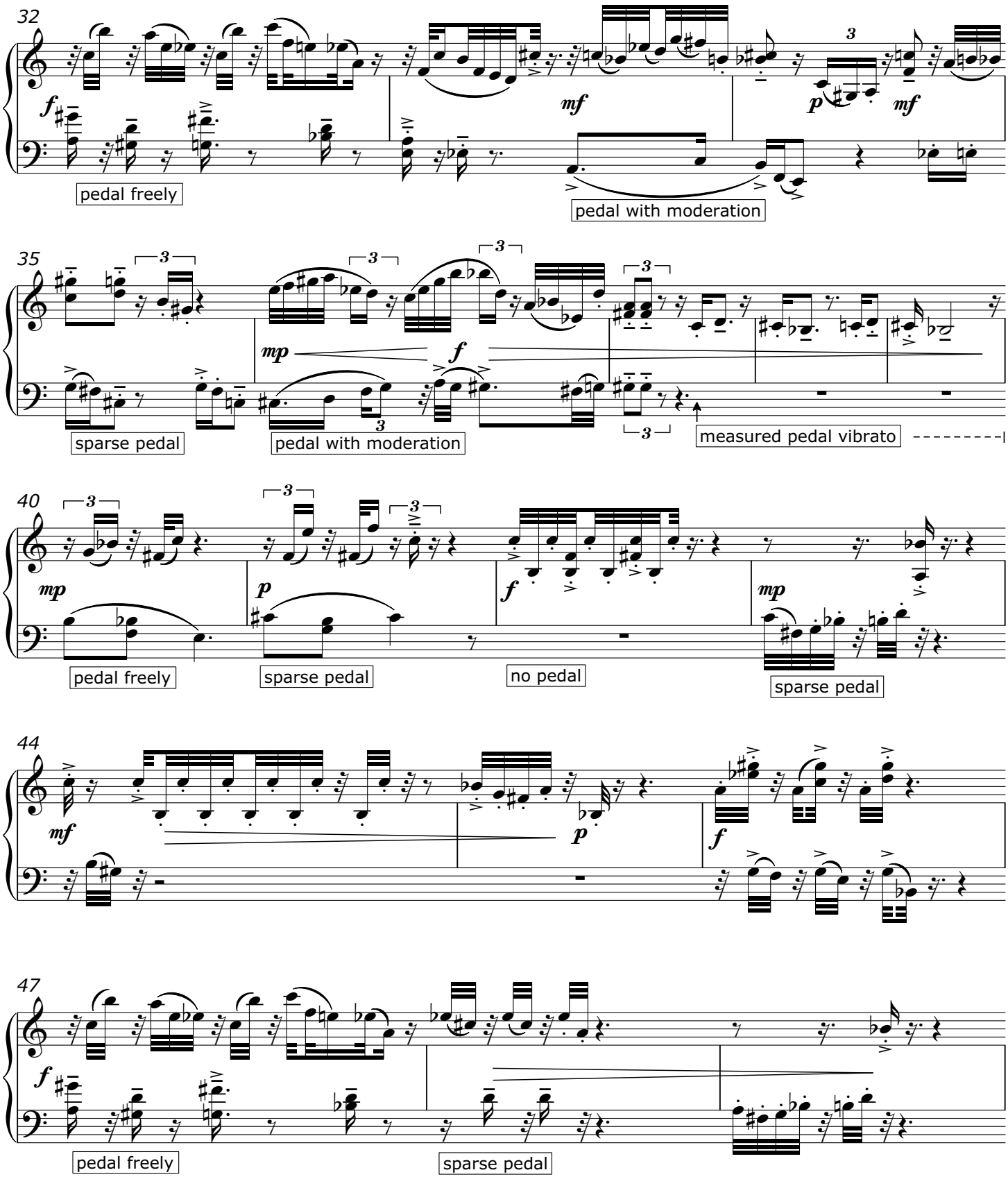

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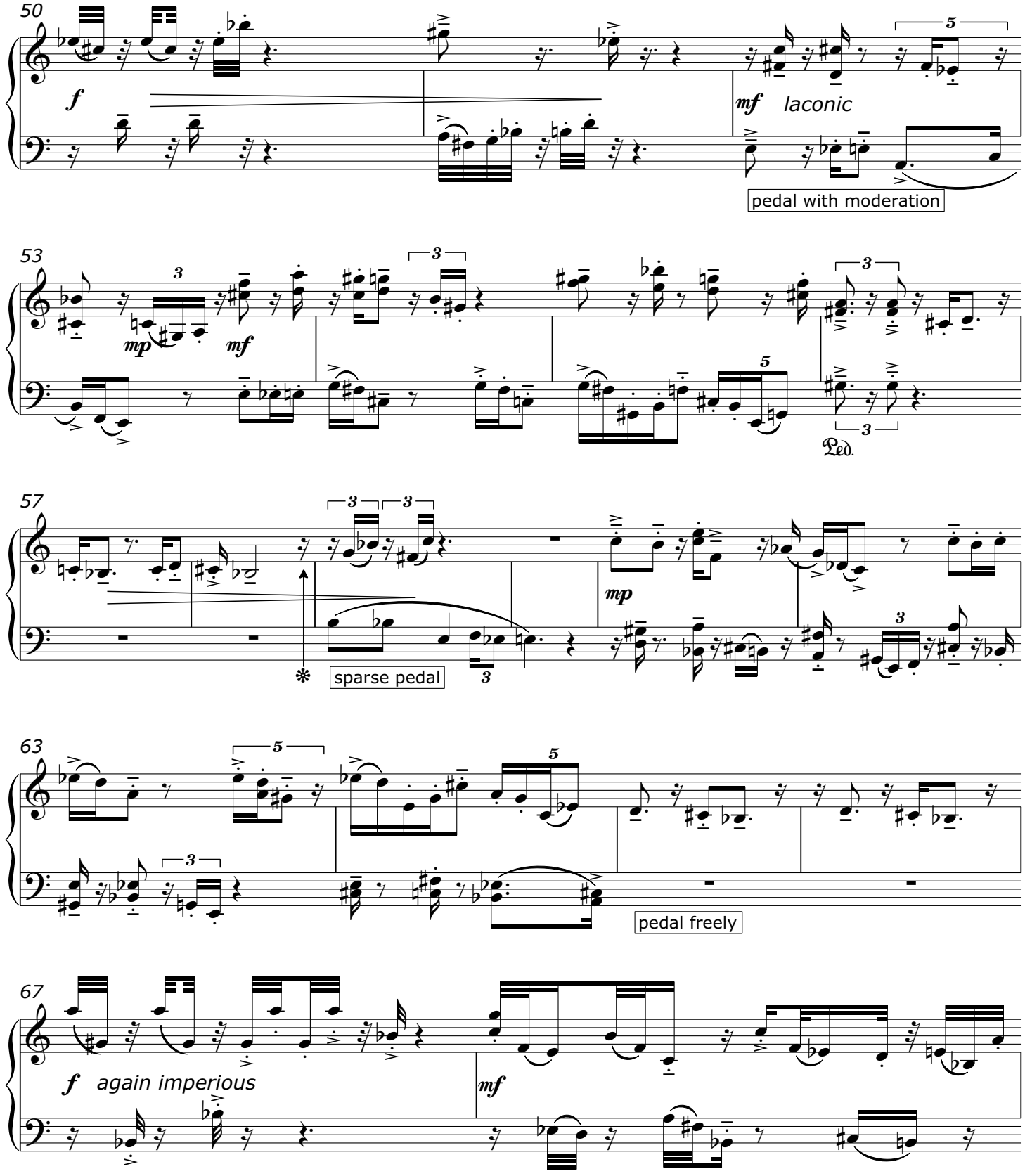

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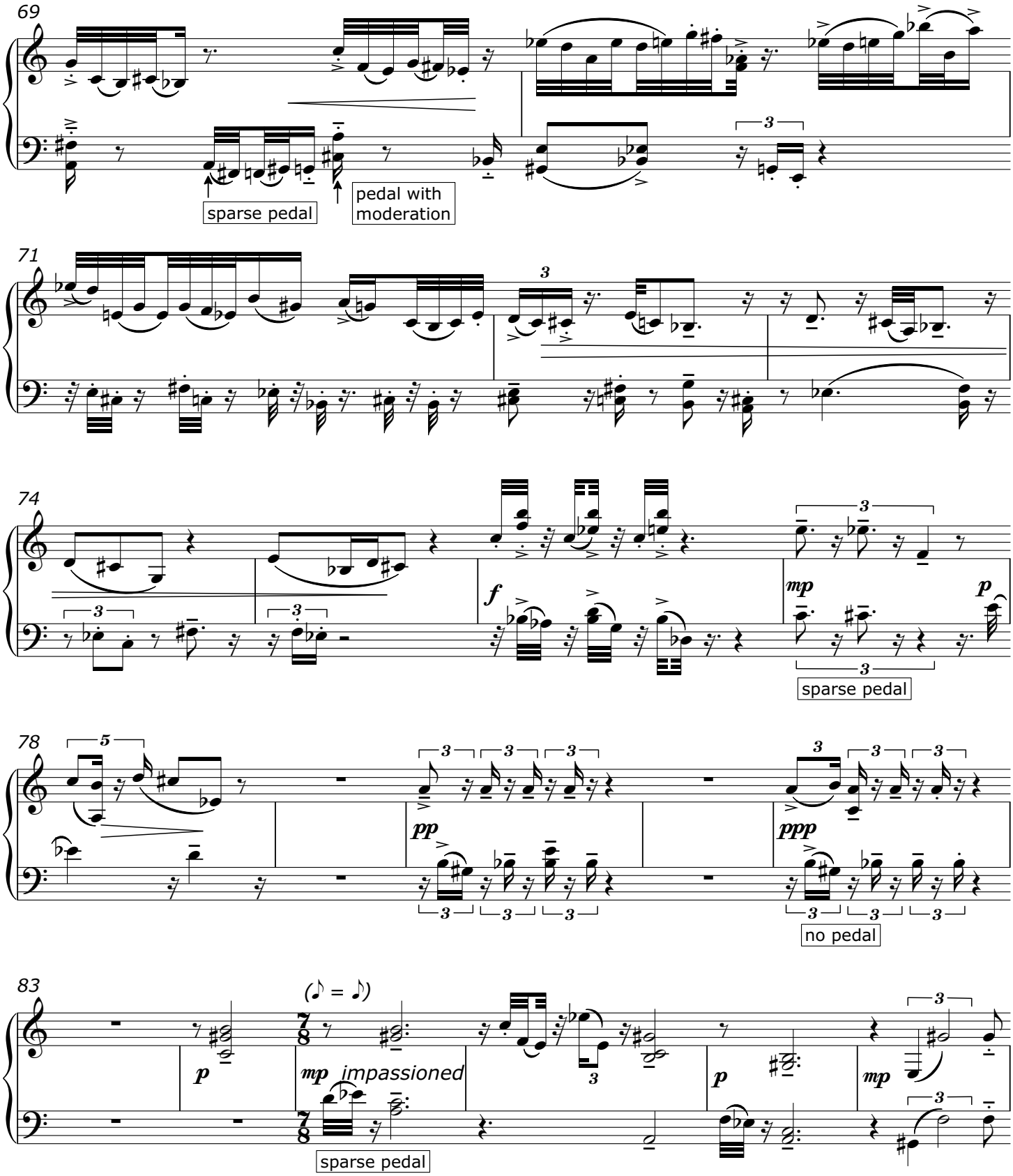

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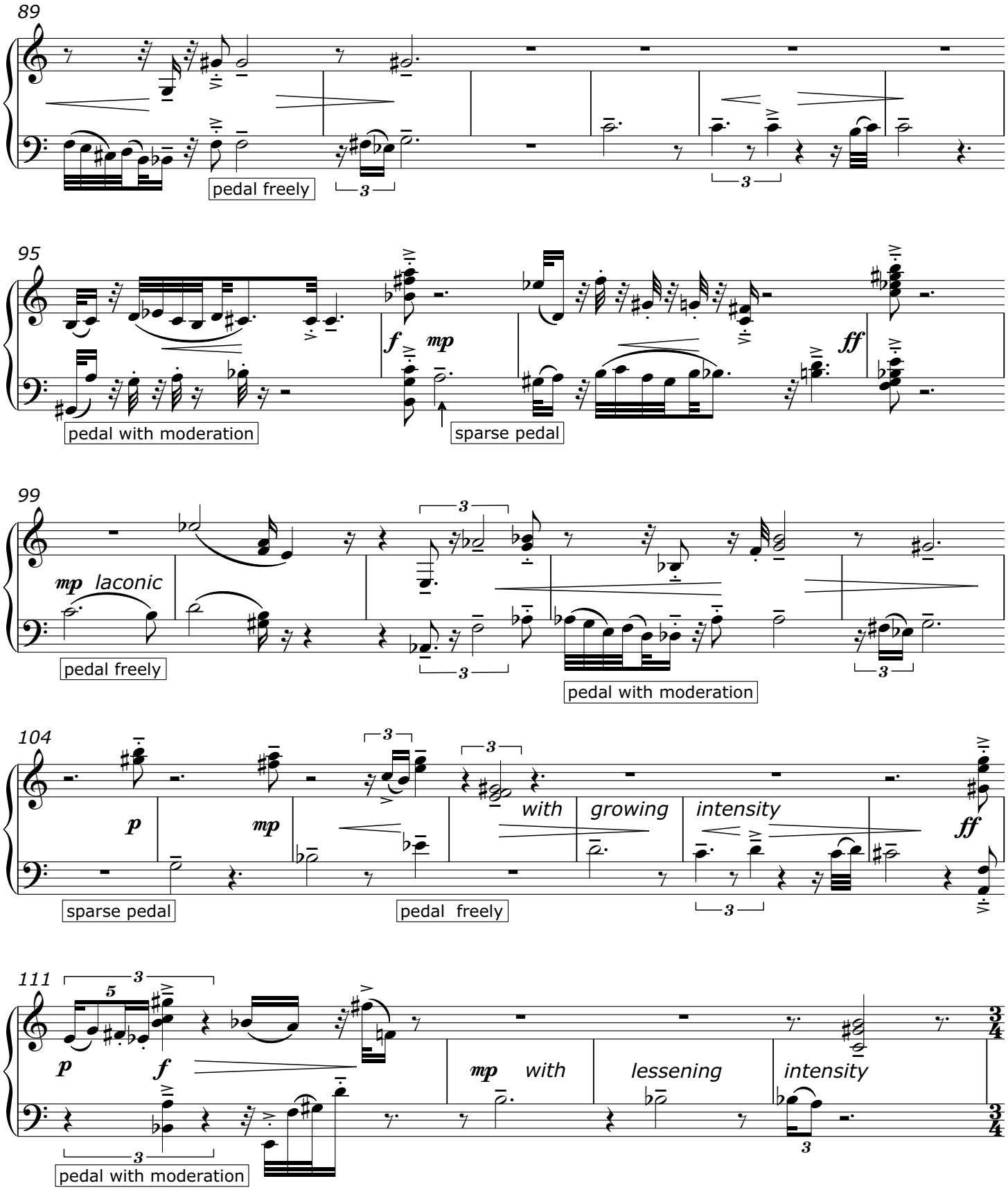

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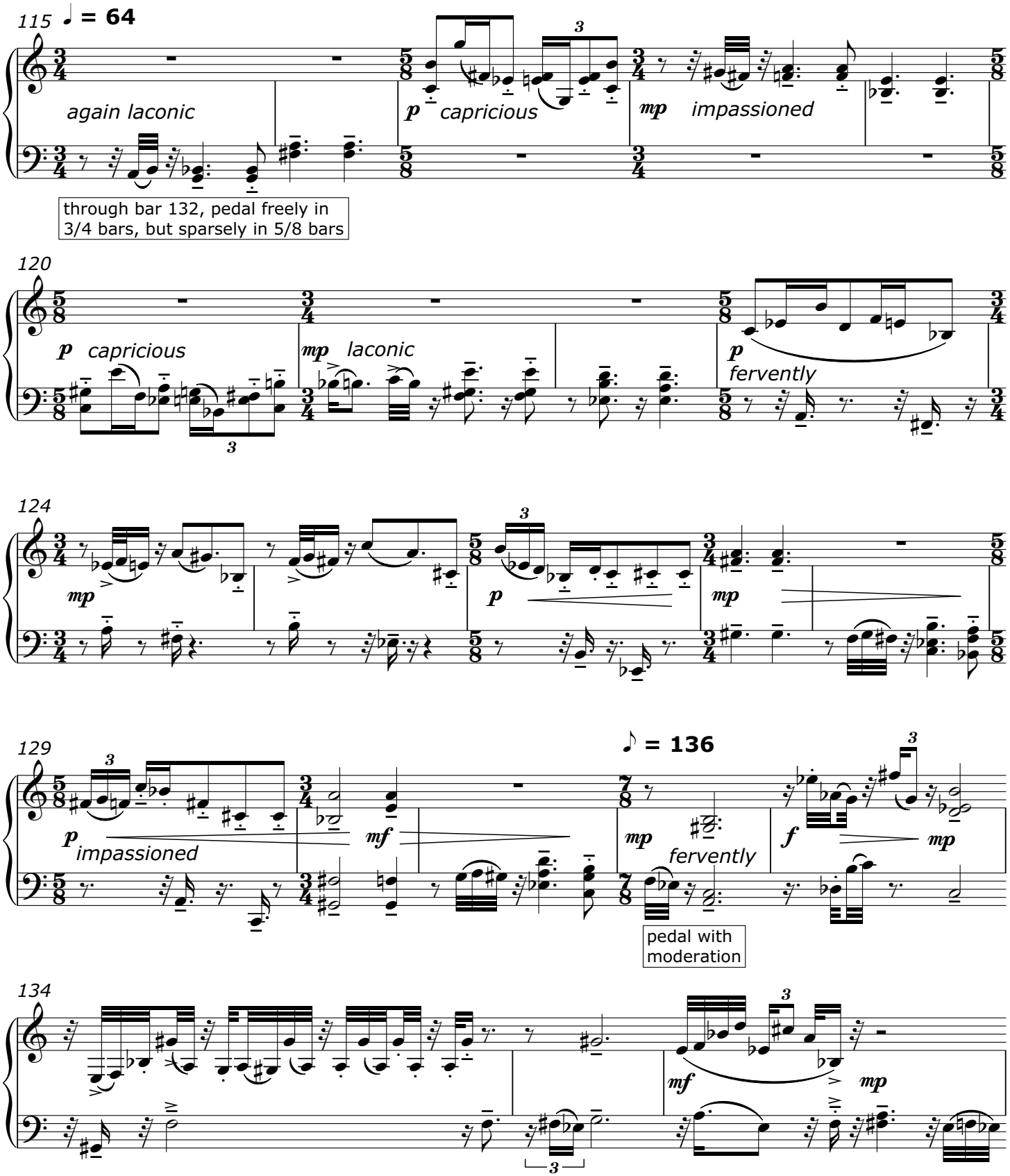

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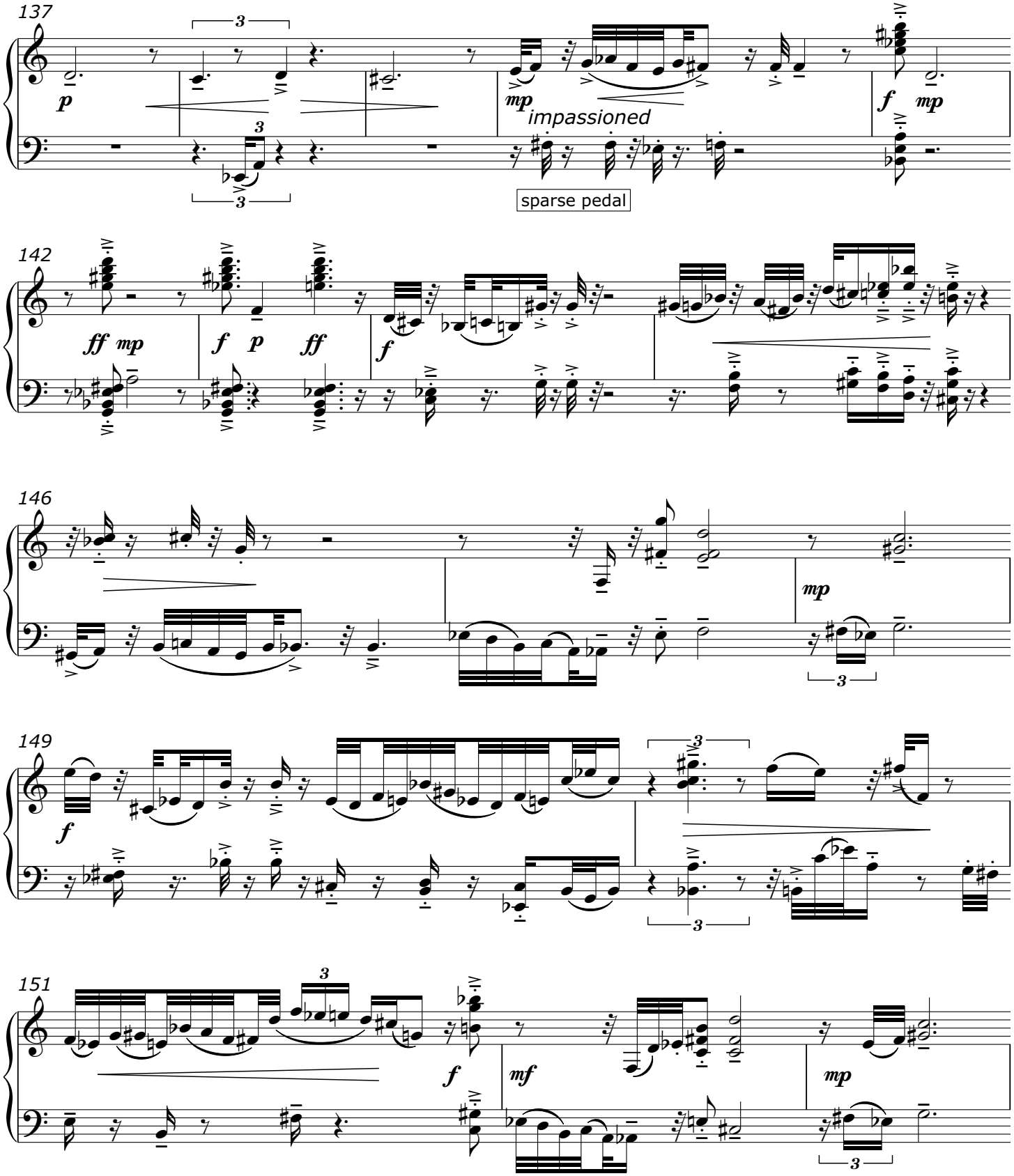

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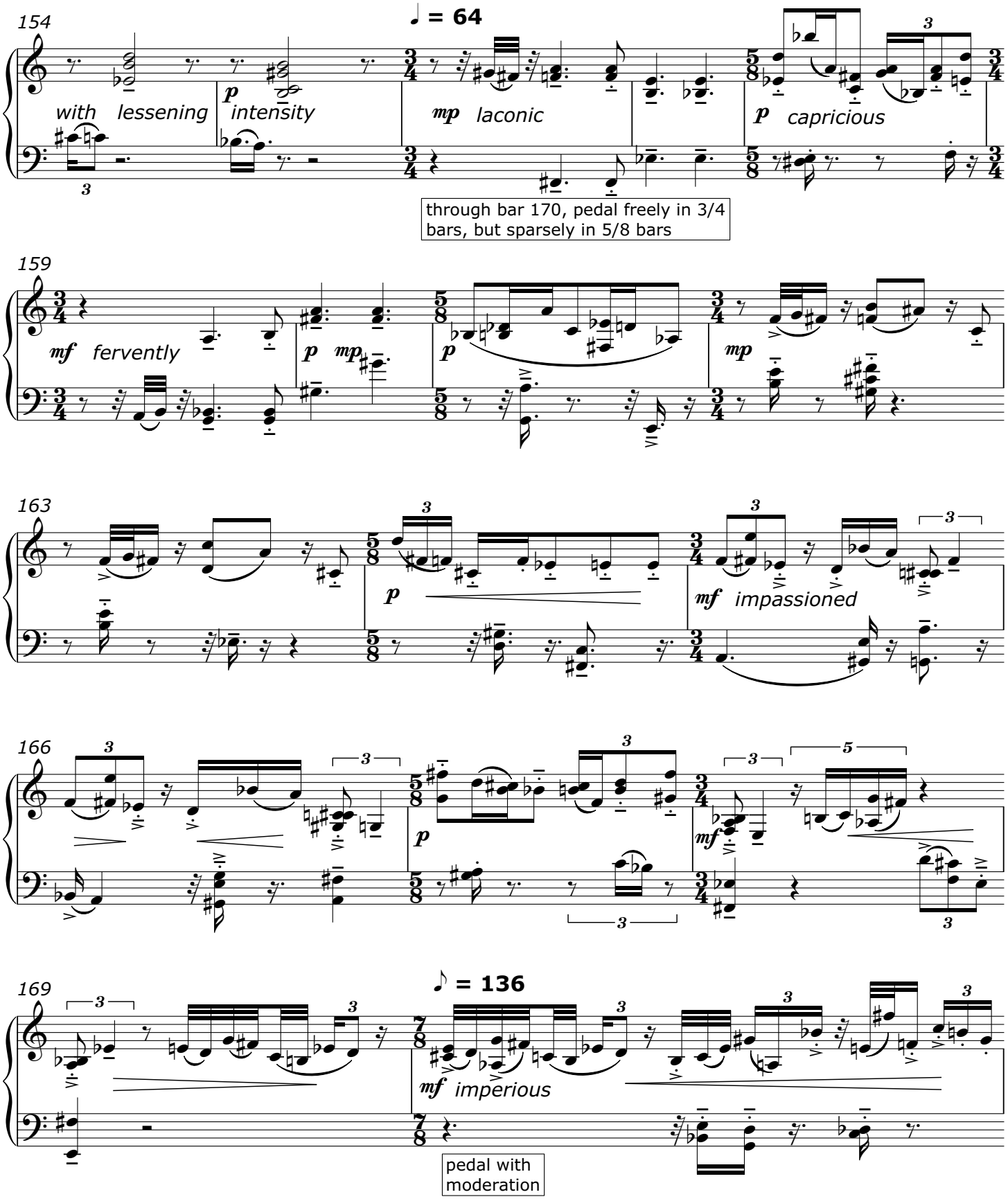

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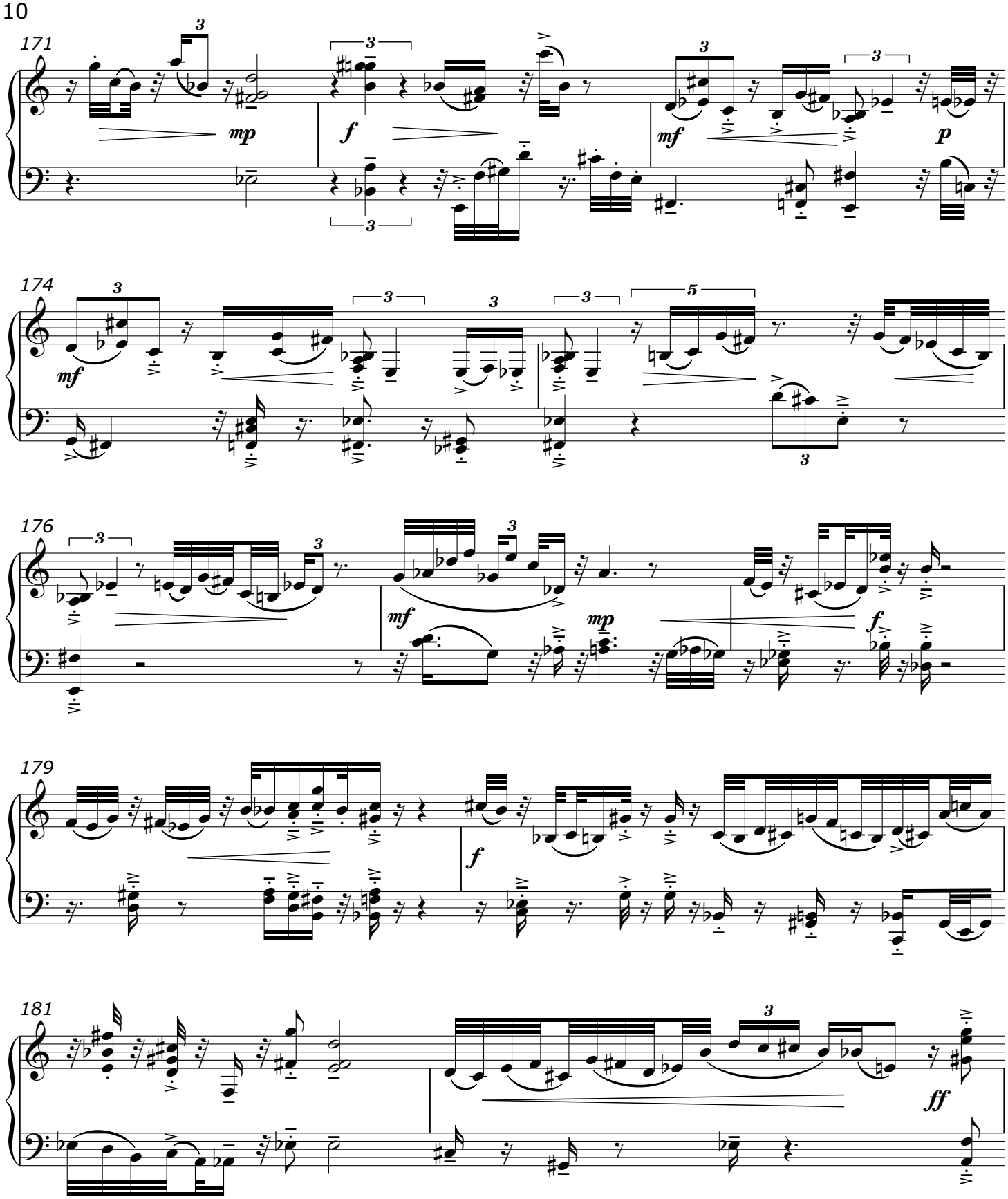

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183

mf ff f ff p f mp

Ped.

186

mf p

no pedal

Ped.

♩ = 84

mf apprehensive

sparse pedal

ppp

192

mp ppp mp

194

mf ppp mf

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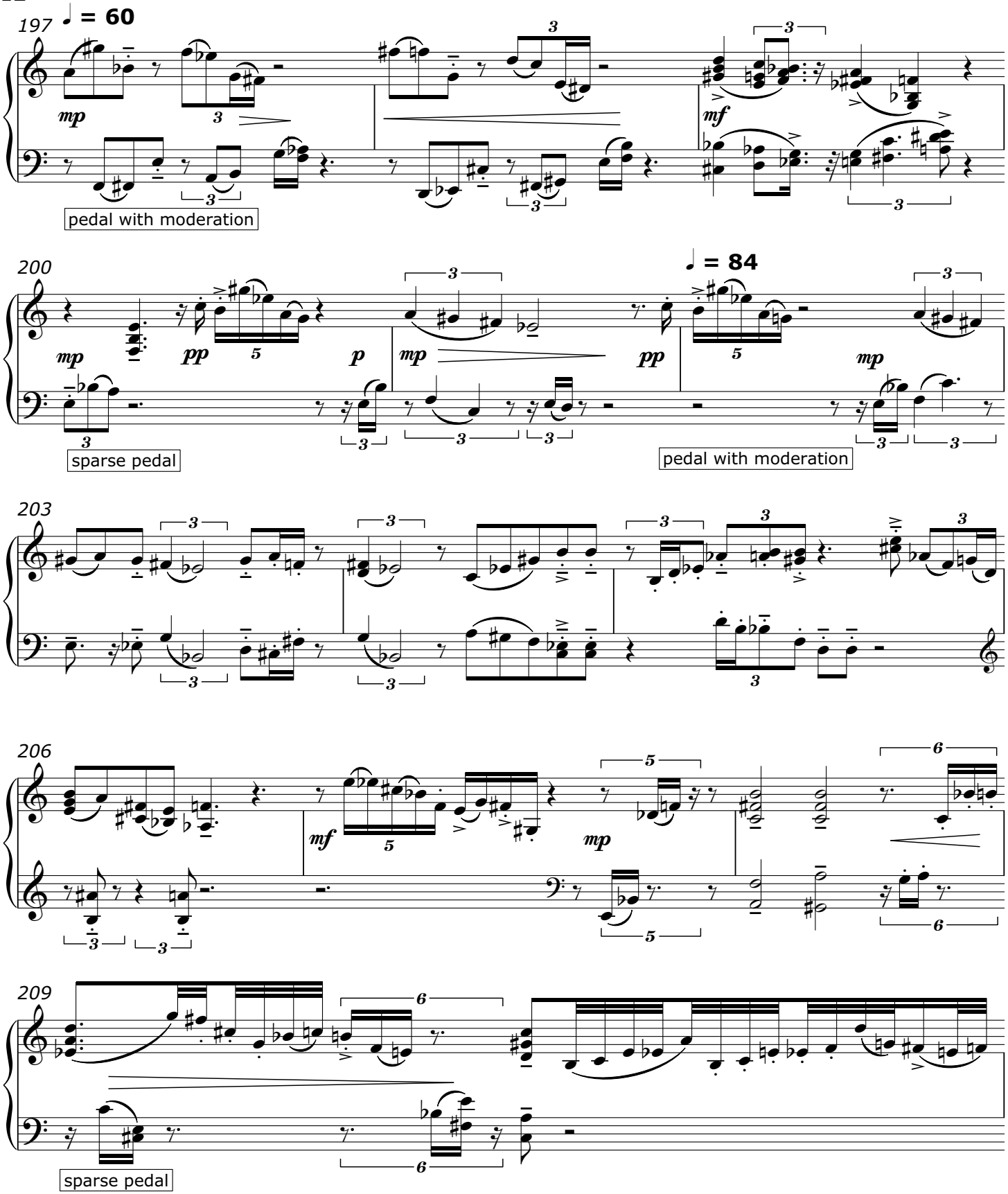

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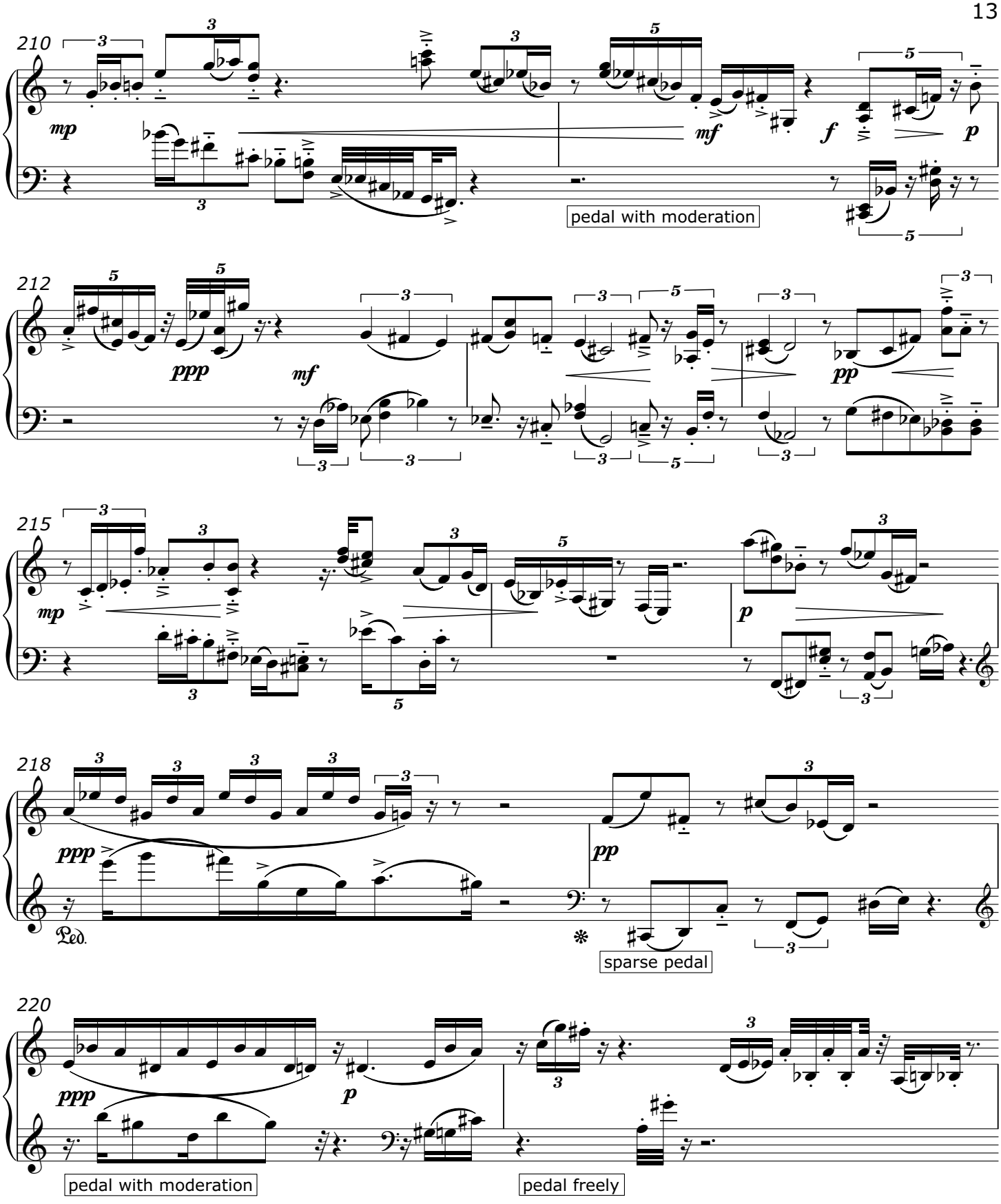

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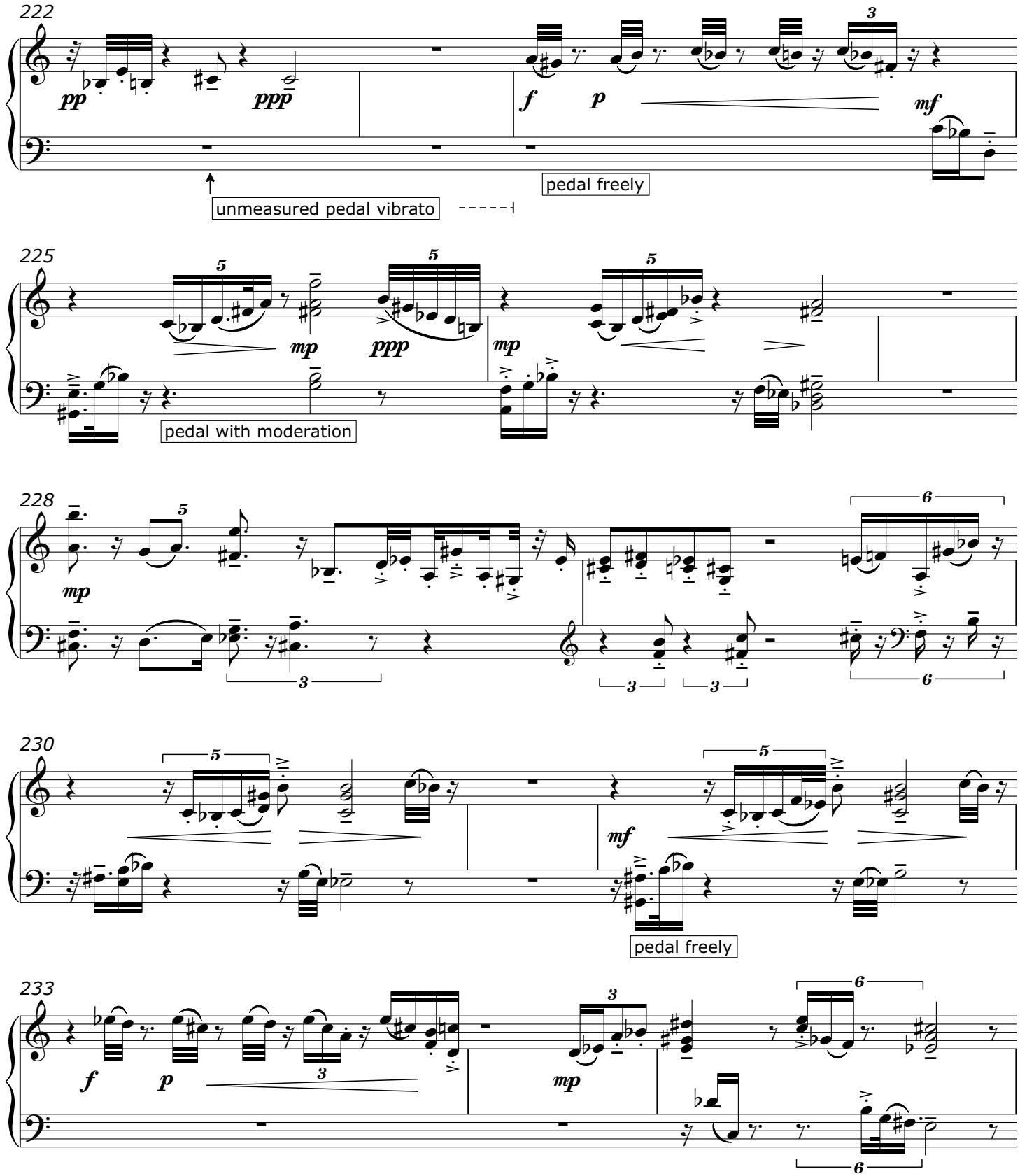

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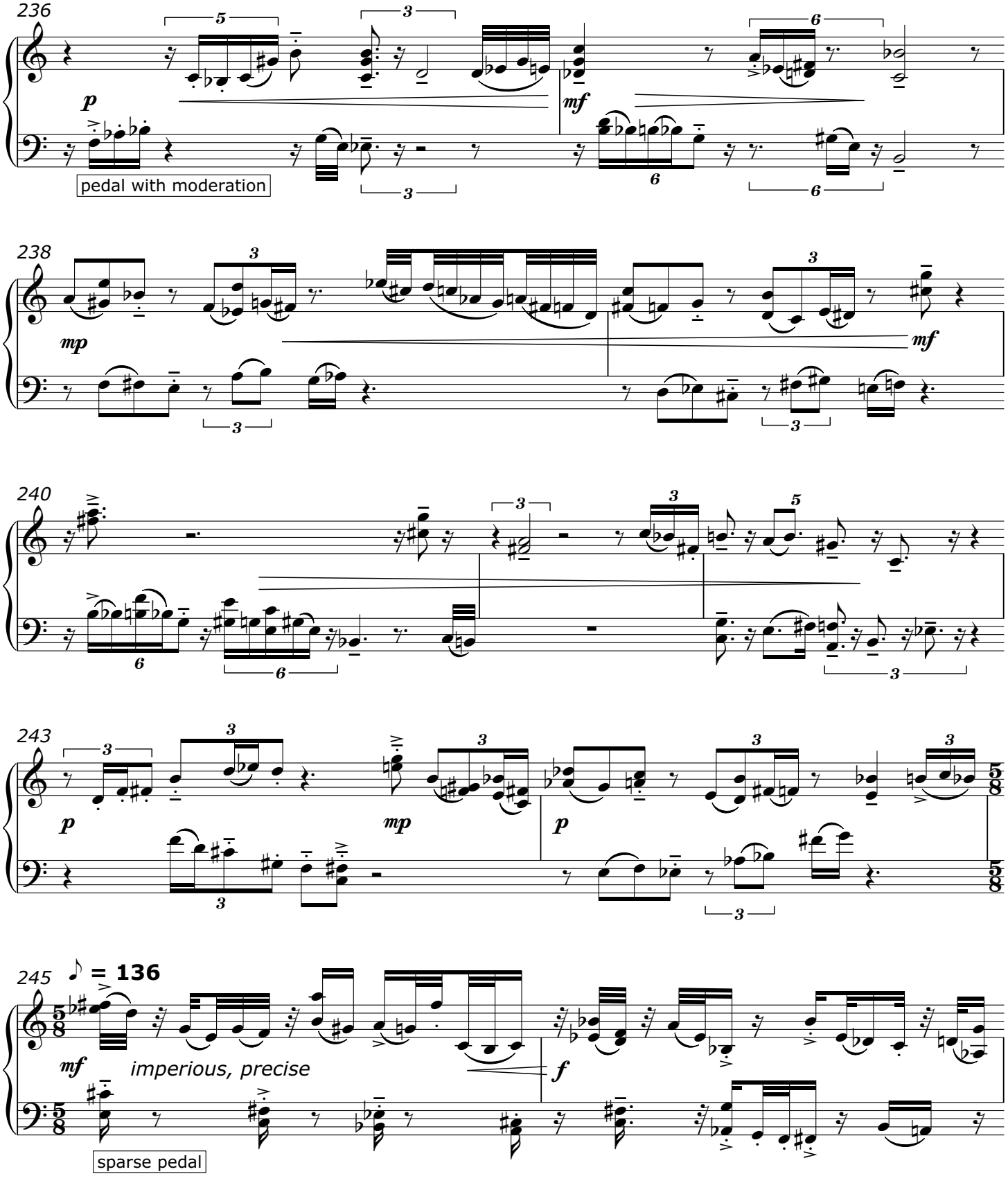

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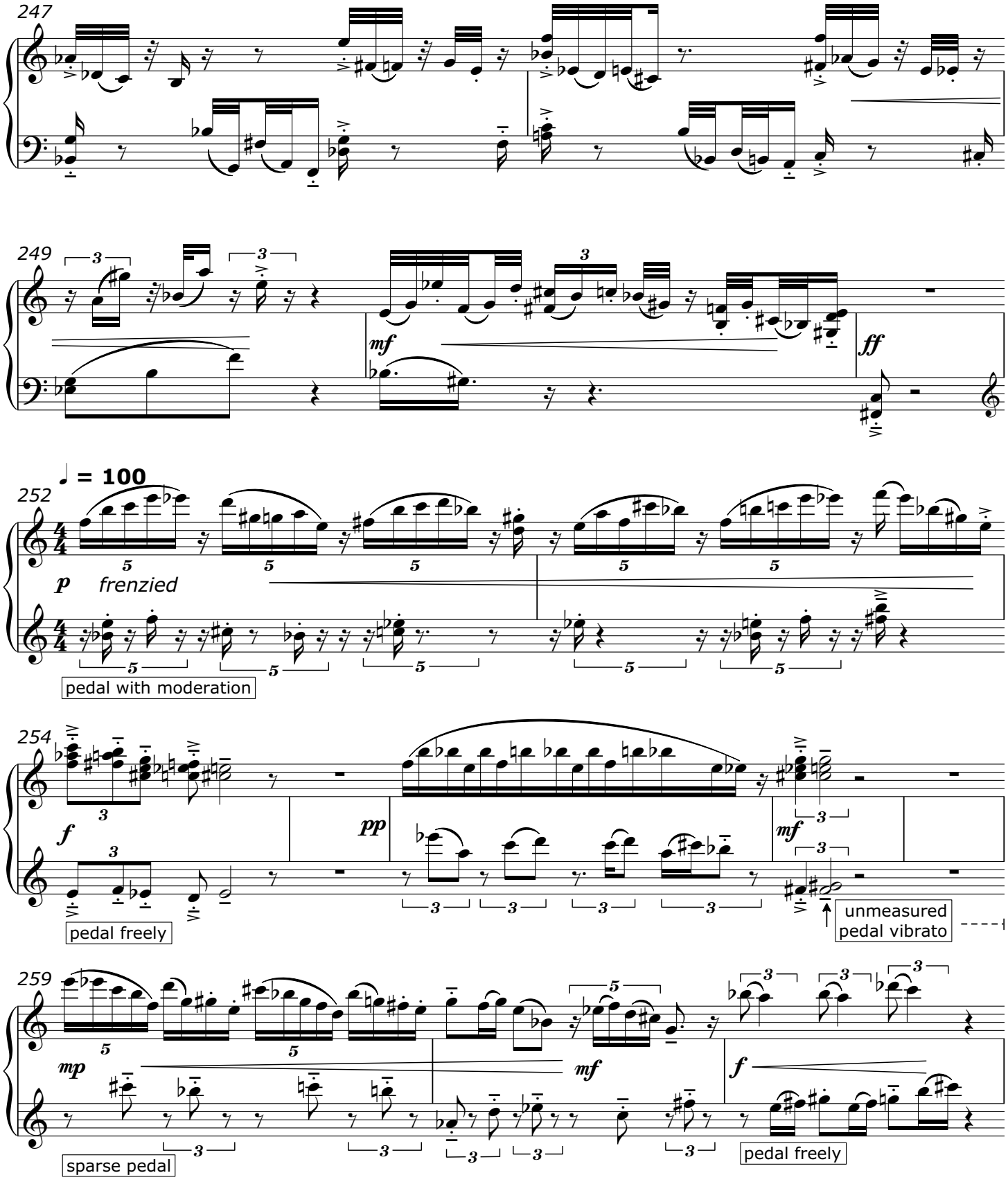

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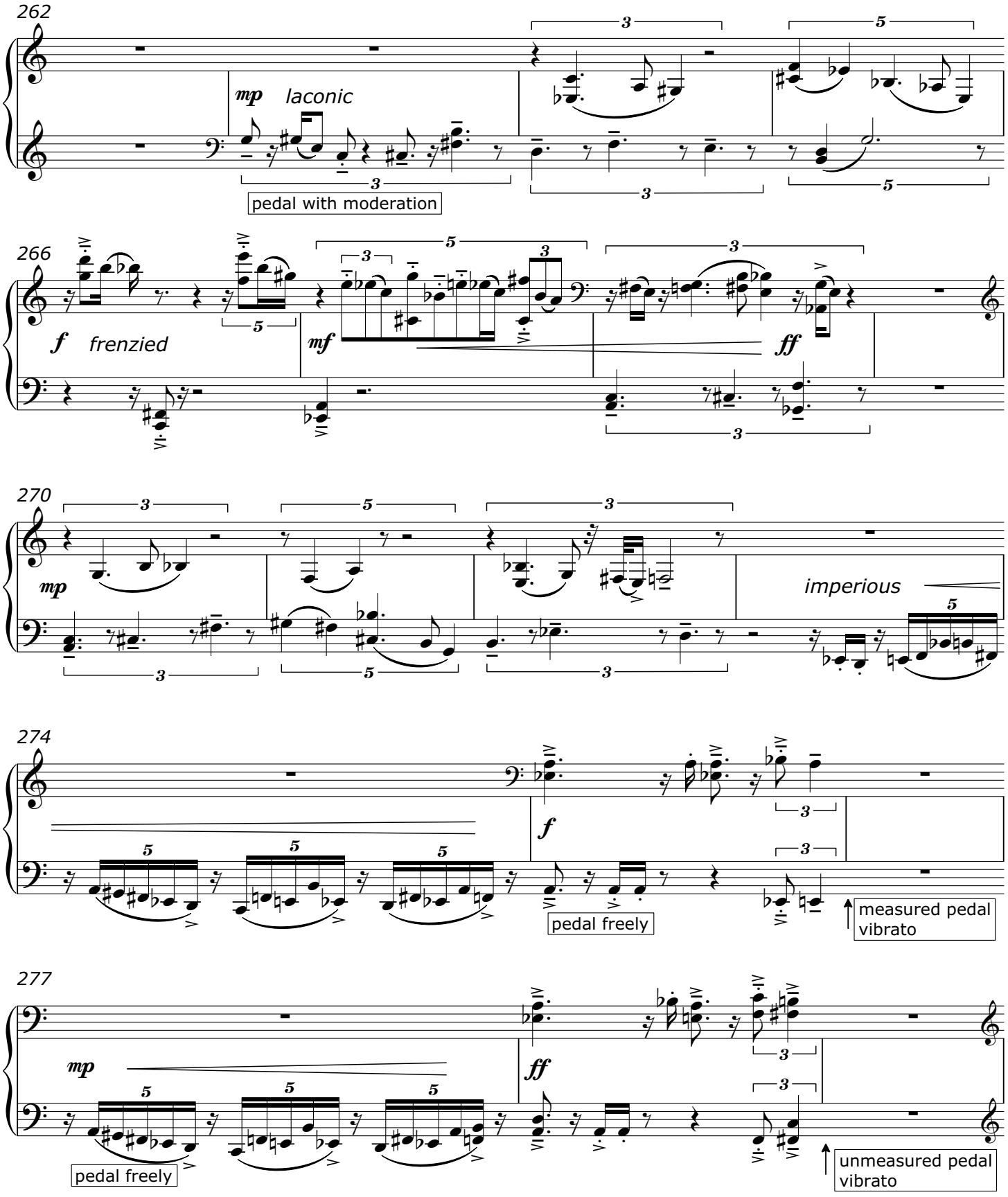

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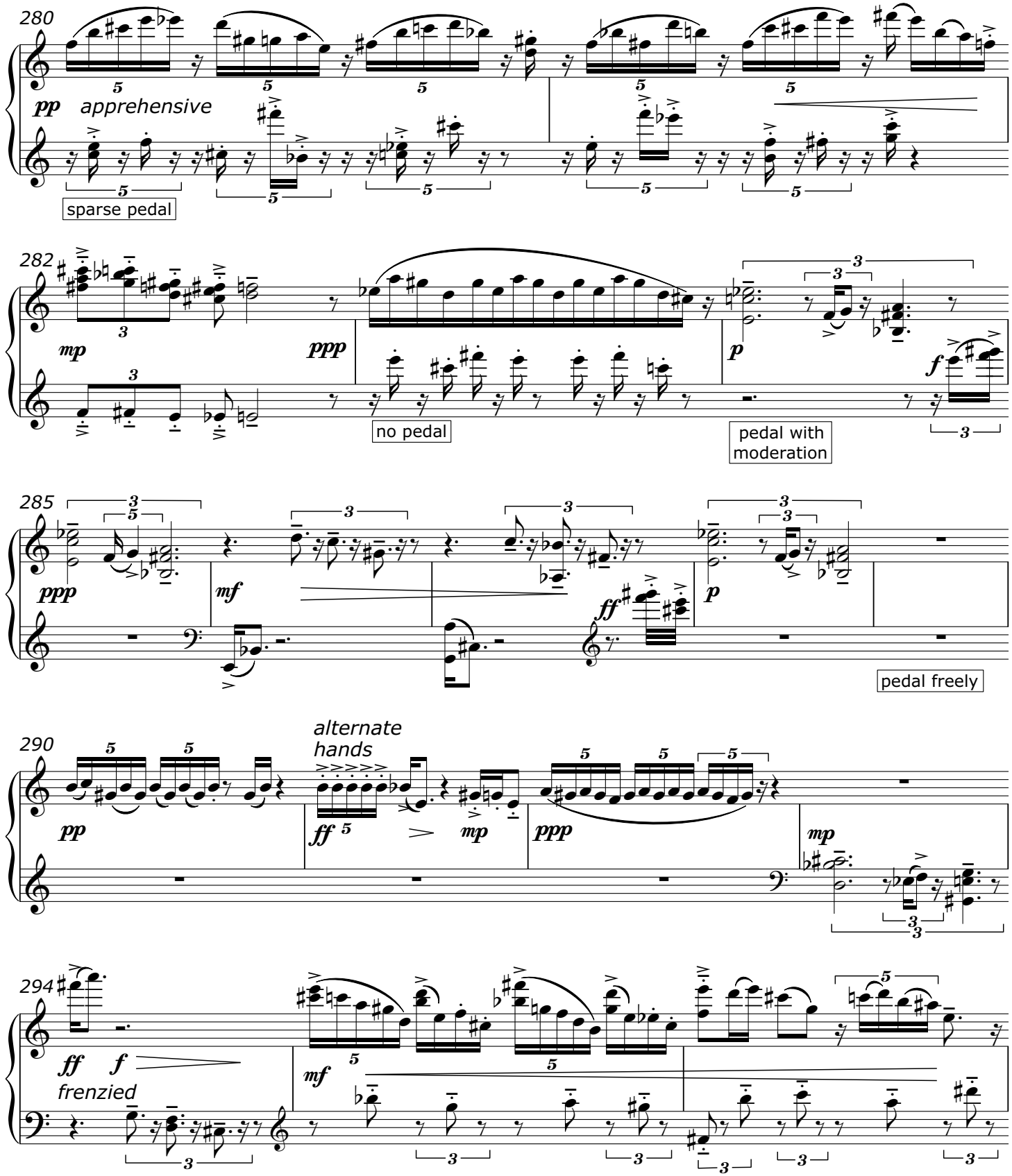

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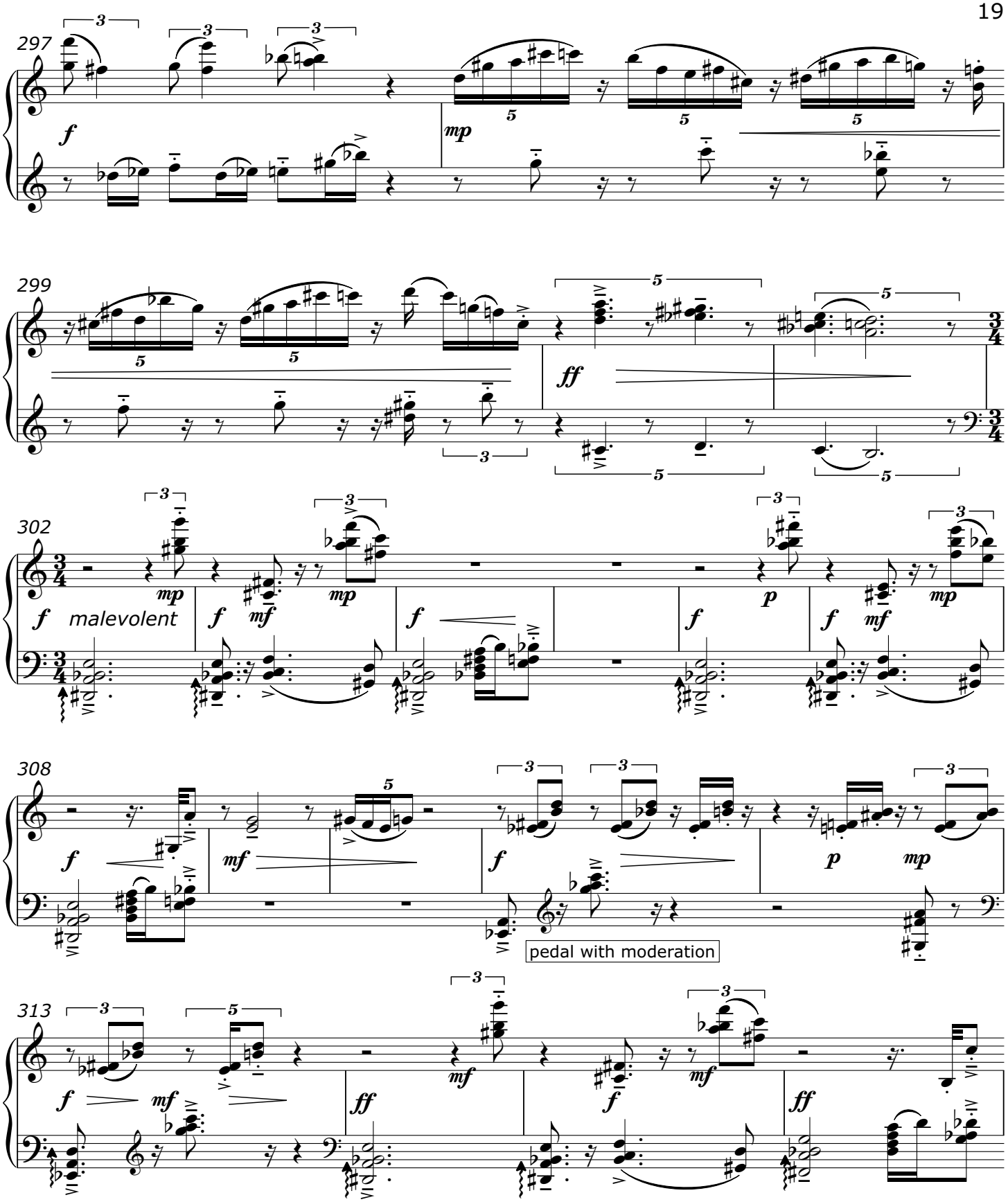

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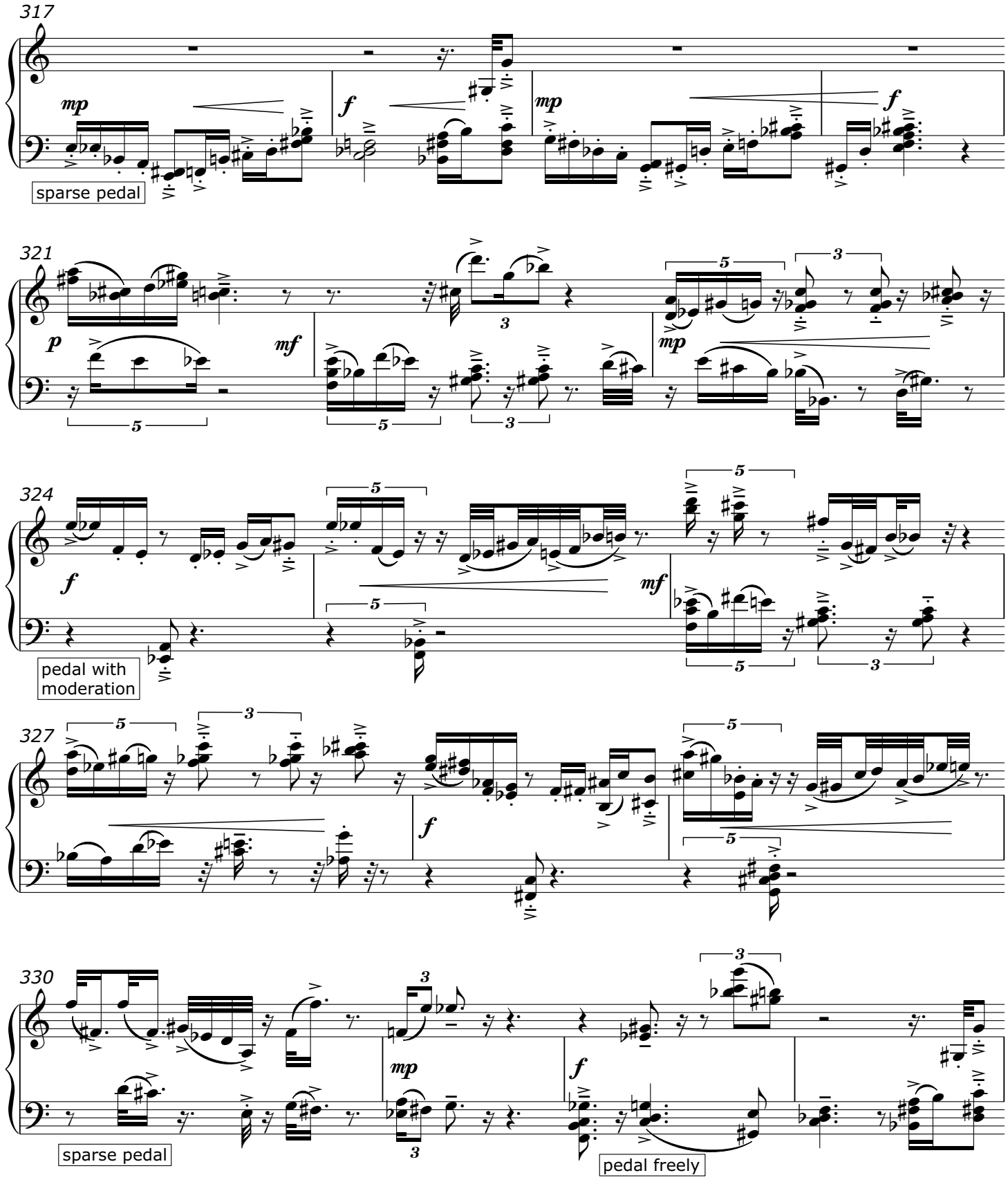

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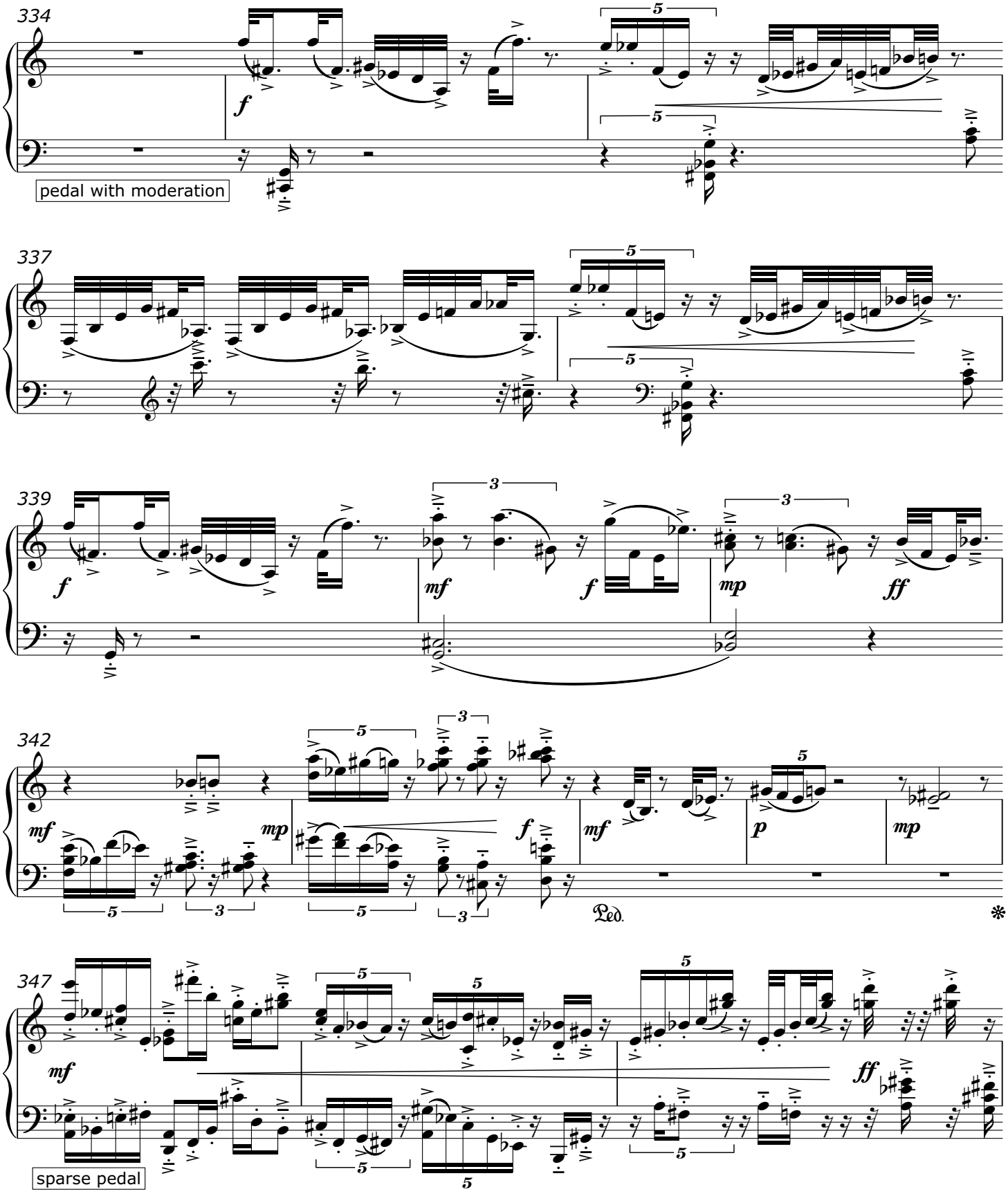

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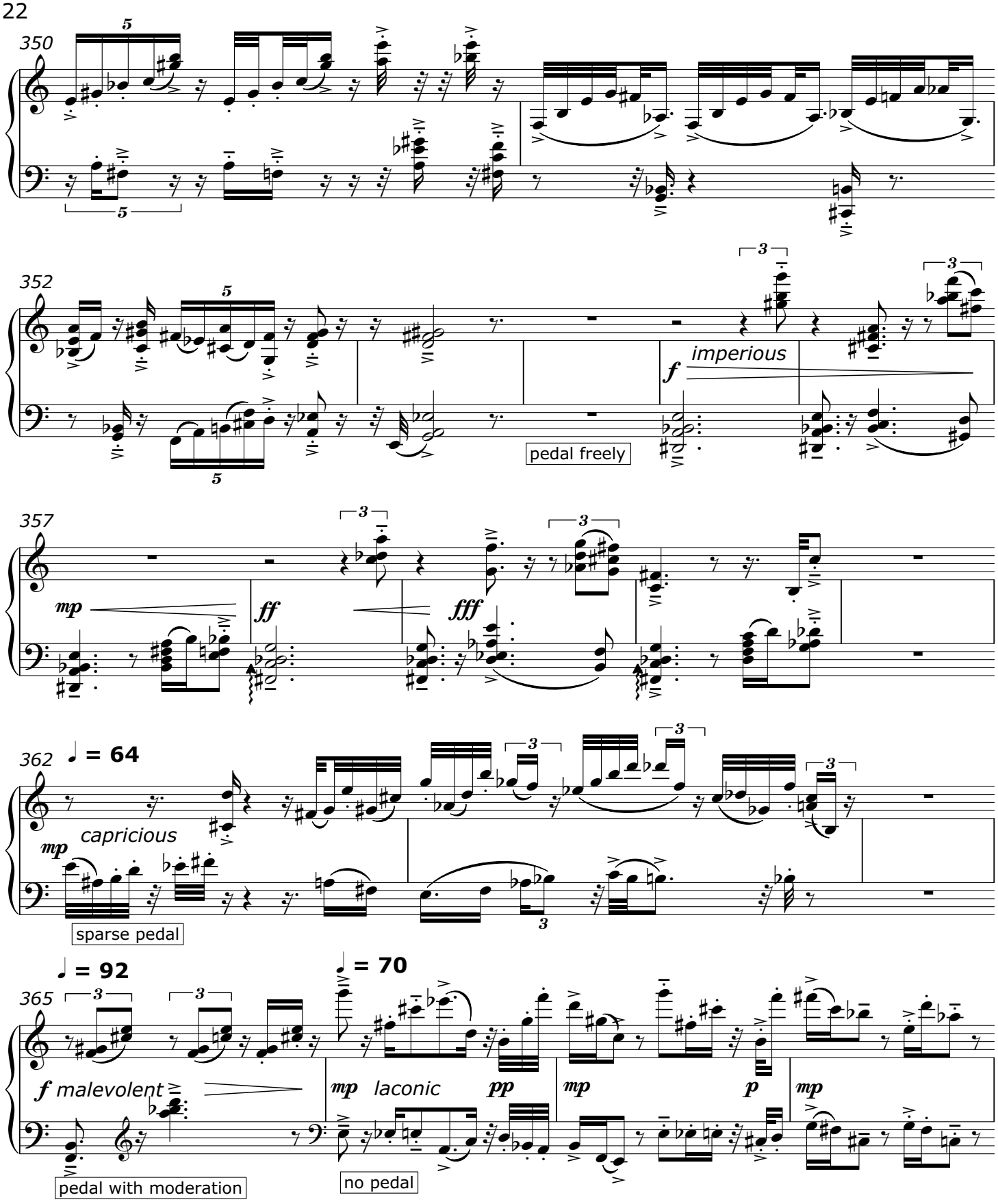

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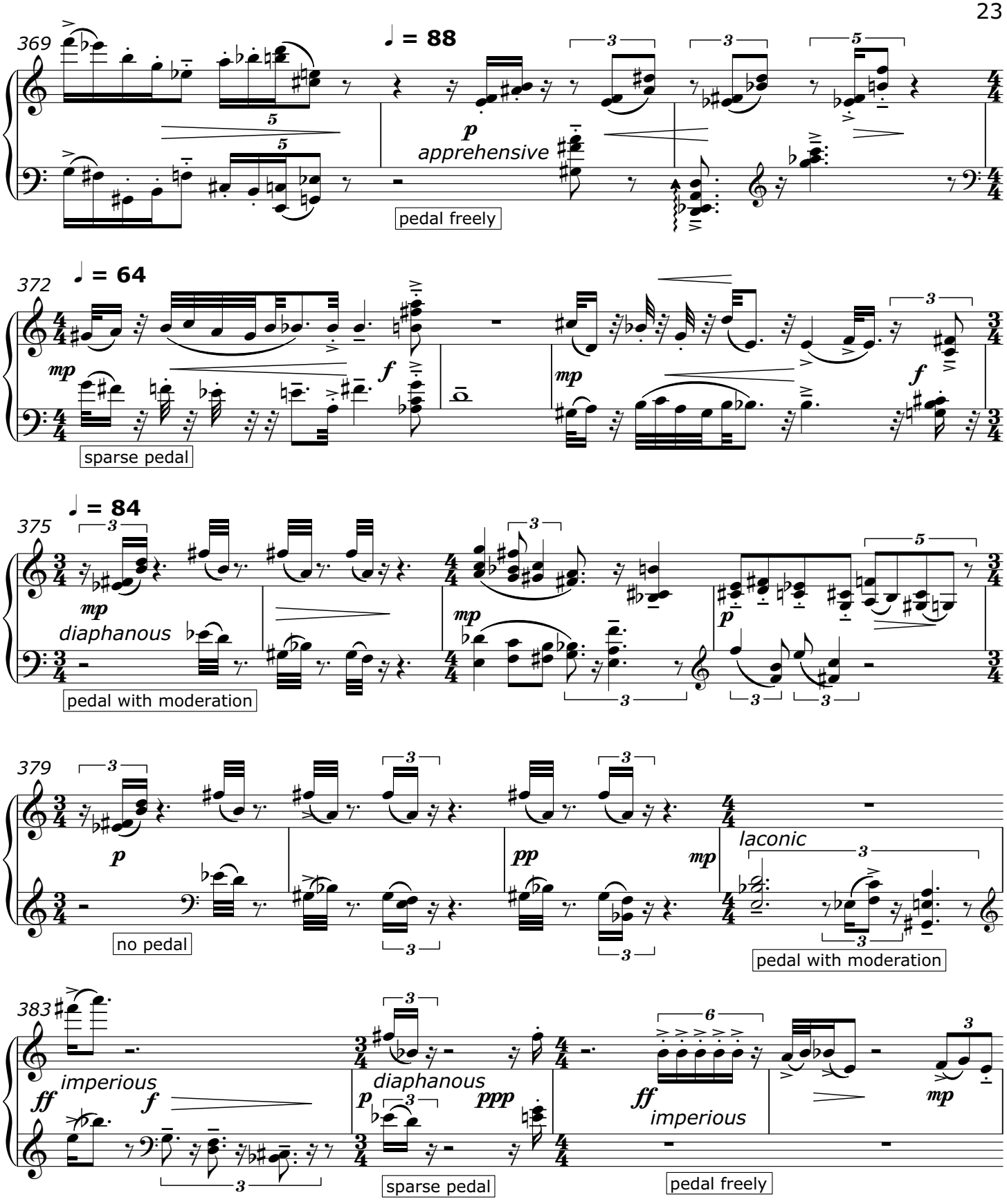
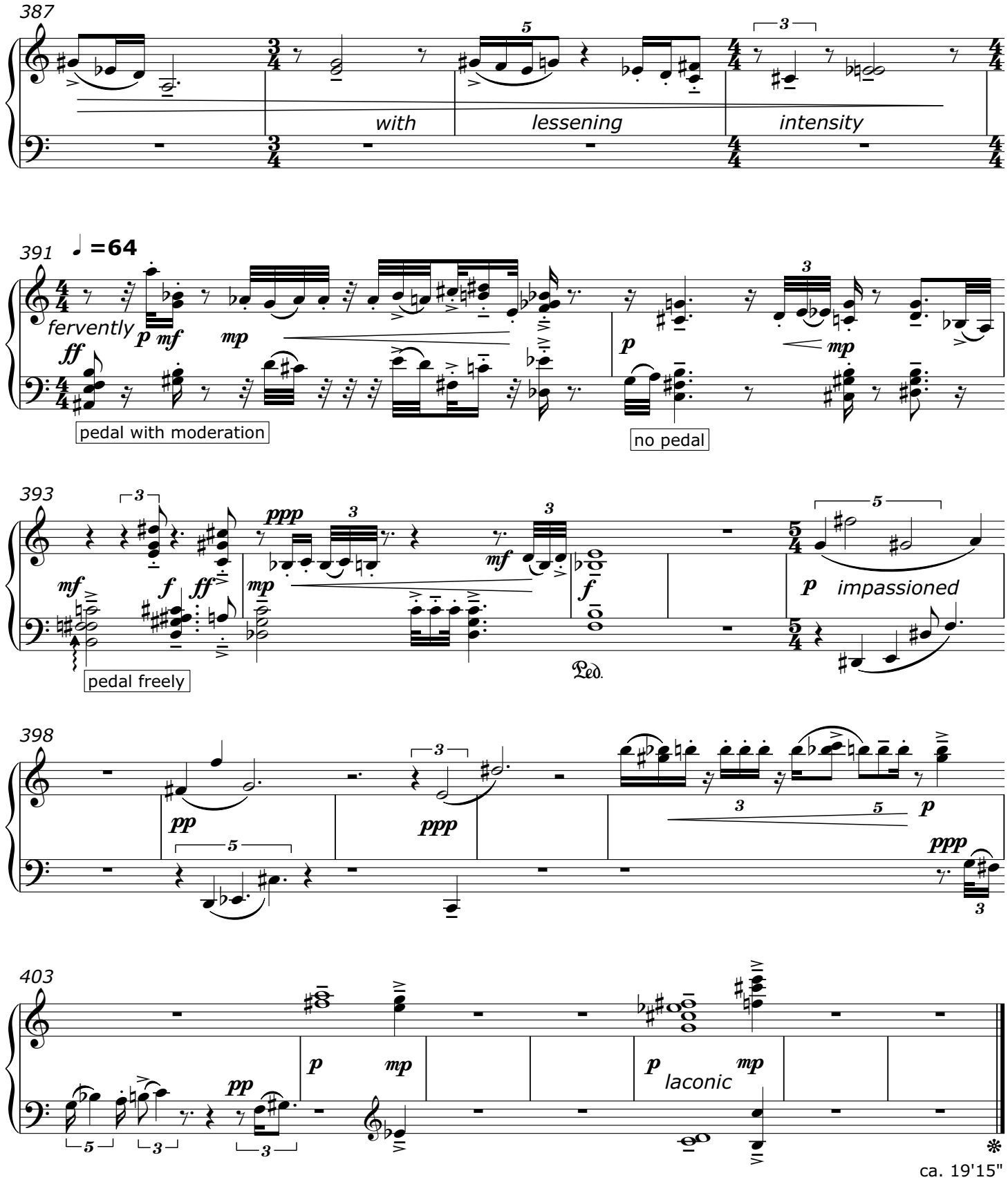
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