Matthew Shlomowitz

Lecture about Bad Music

Composed: 2015

Duration: 42 minutes

First performed by Plus Minus at the Ultima Festival, Oslo, Norway on 11 September 2015

Commissioned by the Ultima Festival

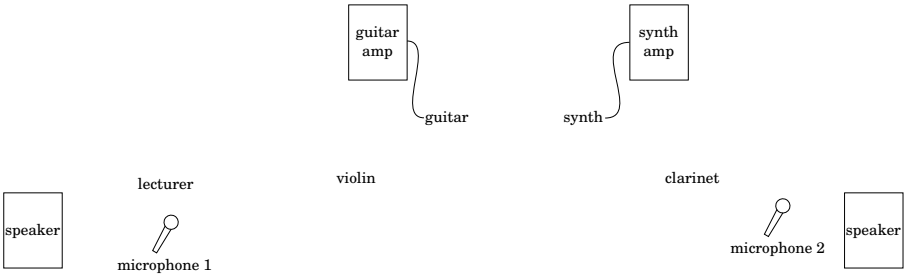
A lecture about bad music

For lecturer, violin, clarinet, electric guitar and synthesiser/sampler.

Performance instructions

The score is in C. Boxed texts in the score and parts are spoken by the lecturer throughout the performance. In the second part of *Novelty Piece*, there are three short texts spoken by the violinist, clarinettist and synthesiser player, the performers leave their playing position and walk to microphone 2 for these moments.

Set up



Required equipment

- Stereo PA
- 2 vocal microphones
- guitar amplifier
- guitar distortion and volume pedals
- 88-note keyboard
- keyboard amplifier

Synthesiser

Four synthesised sounds are specified:

- flute
- electro synth sound
- angelic synth pad
- viola (or other contrasting sound)

In *ABCDE Piece No. 2*, two pitches play different sounds. The synthesiser also controls the drum machine sounds — kick and snare drum samples assigned to two low notes, which are played by the lecturer in *Heavy Metal Piece* A 4-bar looping 'jungle' drumbeat sample at 160BPM is used in the *Finale*.

Lecture about Bad Music

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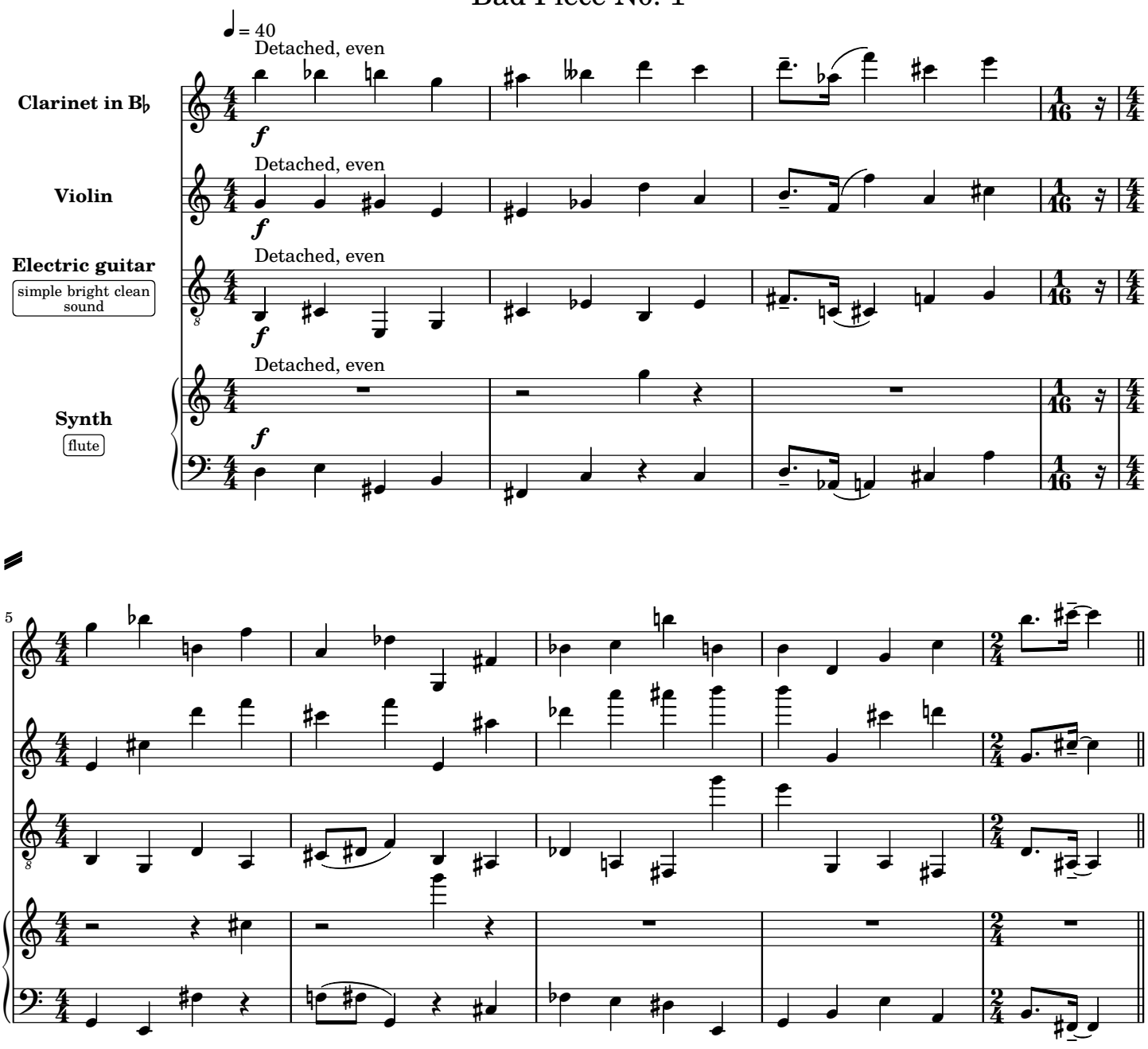
*The four musicians enter stage, taking the usual pre-performance bow. Play **Bad Piece No. 1** three times. At the end of each performance the musicians relax, wait a few seconds and then perform the piece again.*

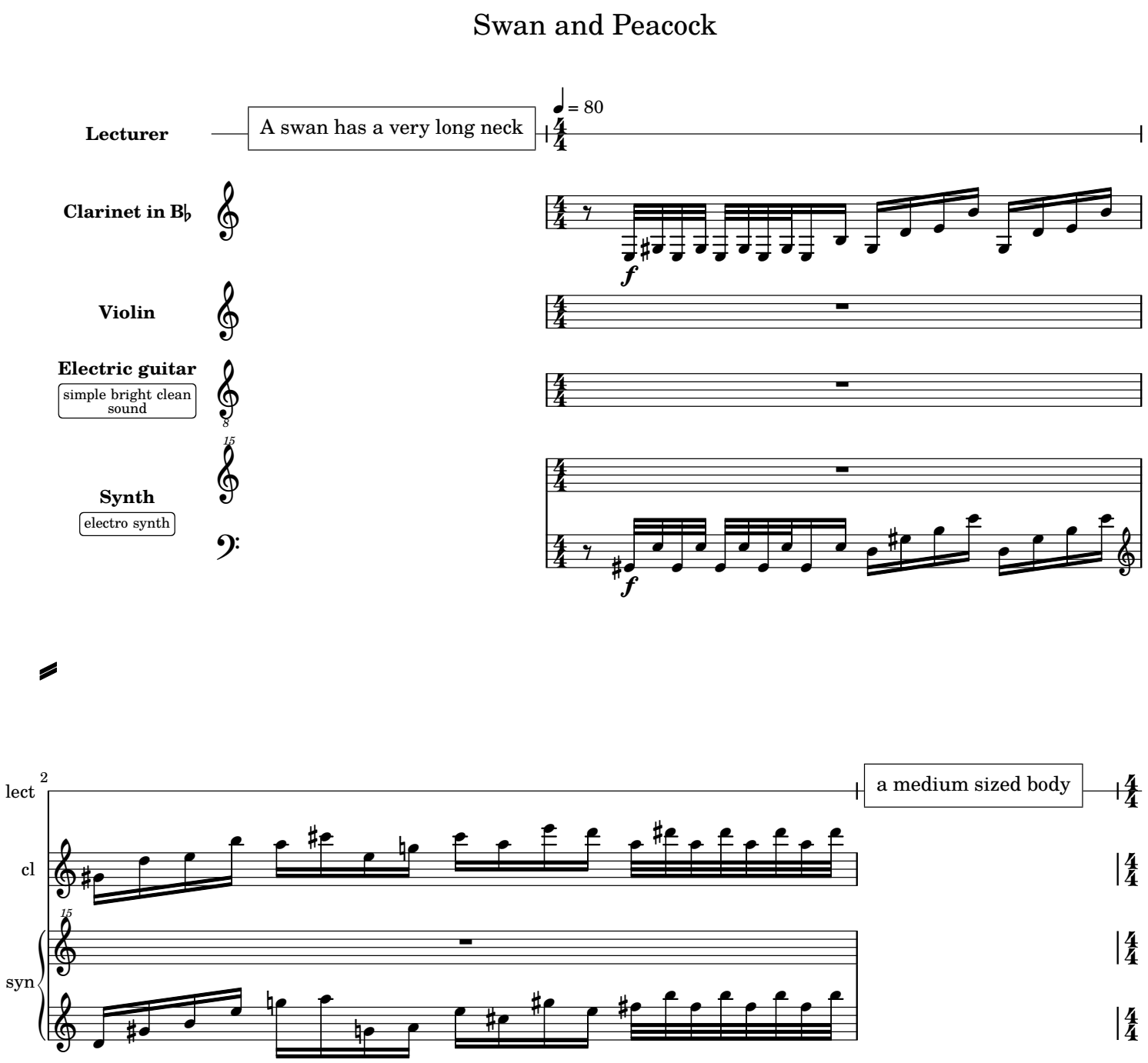


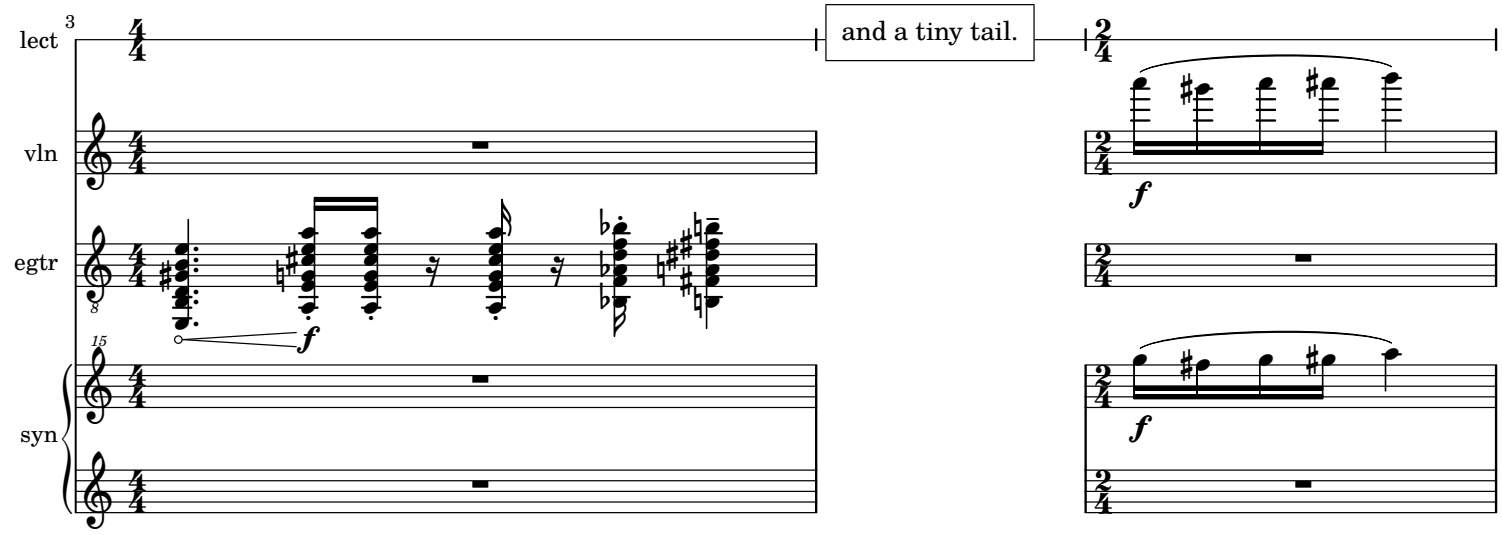
We are recreating an experiment the German psychologist Max Meyer conducted in 1903. You have now heard the same terrible piece of music three times. You should have hated it the first time you heard it. But, according to the results of the original experiment, you should have felt increasingly pleasure with each successive performance and, in turn, gradually revised your opinion of the piece in a positive direction. In psychology, this phenomenon — the phenomenon of first hating something, but then coming to like it through repeat experiences — is known as the 'exposure effect'.

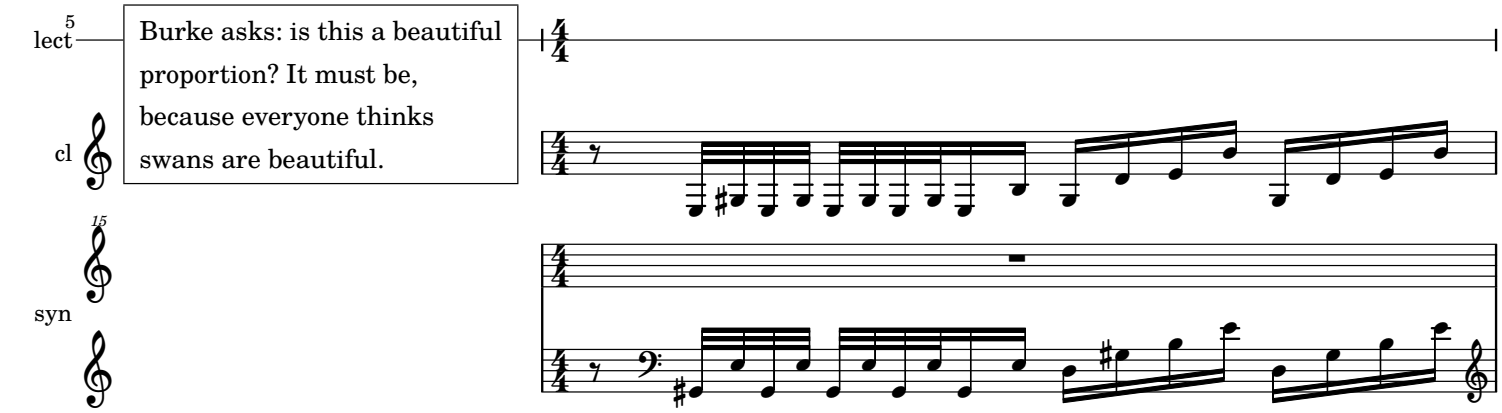
*Play **Bad Piece No. 1** two more times.*

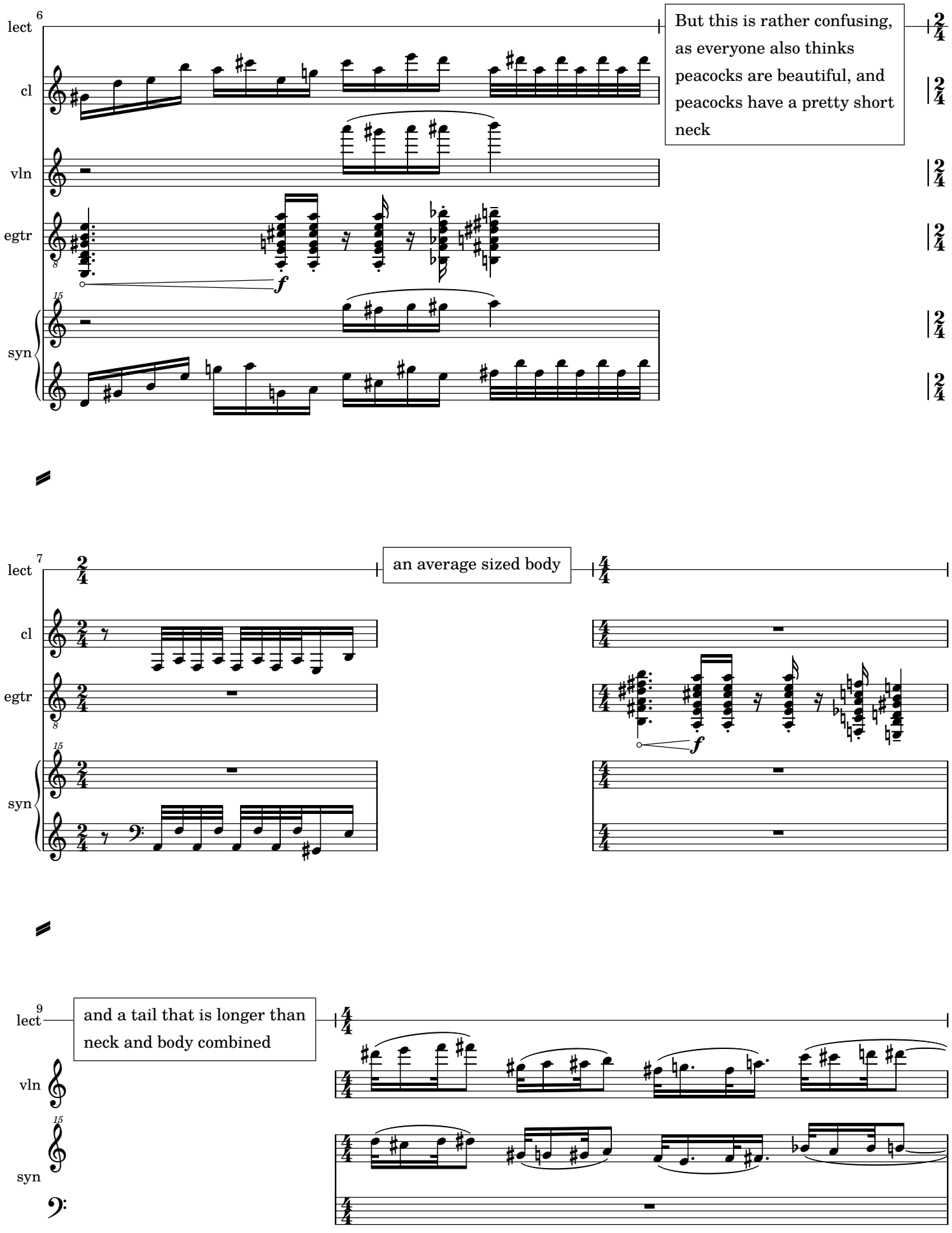
Can we say a piece of music is inherently bad, or are such judgements purely subjective? Historically, this question has been framed in terms of beauty. One of the big questions within the philosophical field of aesthetics is: can something be inherently beautiful? The classical philosophers believed in objective beauty. They believed a thing will be beautiful if the parts are organised to form a coherent whole and according to certain values regarding proportion, harmony and symmetry. An example of an appealing proportion is the ratio found in the golden section, a point we will reach later in this lecture! The inference is, that if you make something that adheres to these values, then beauty can reliably be achieved.

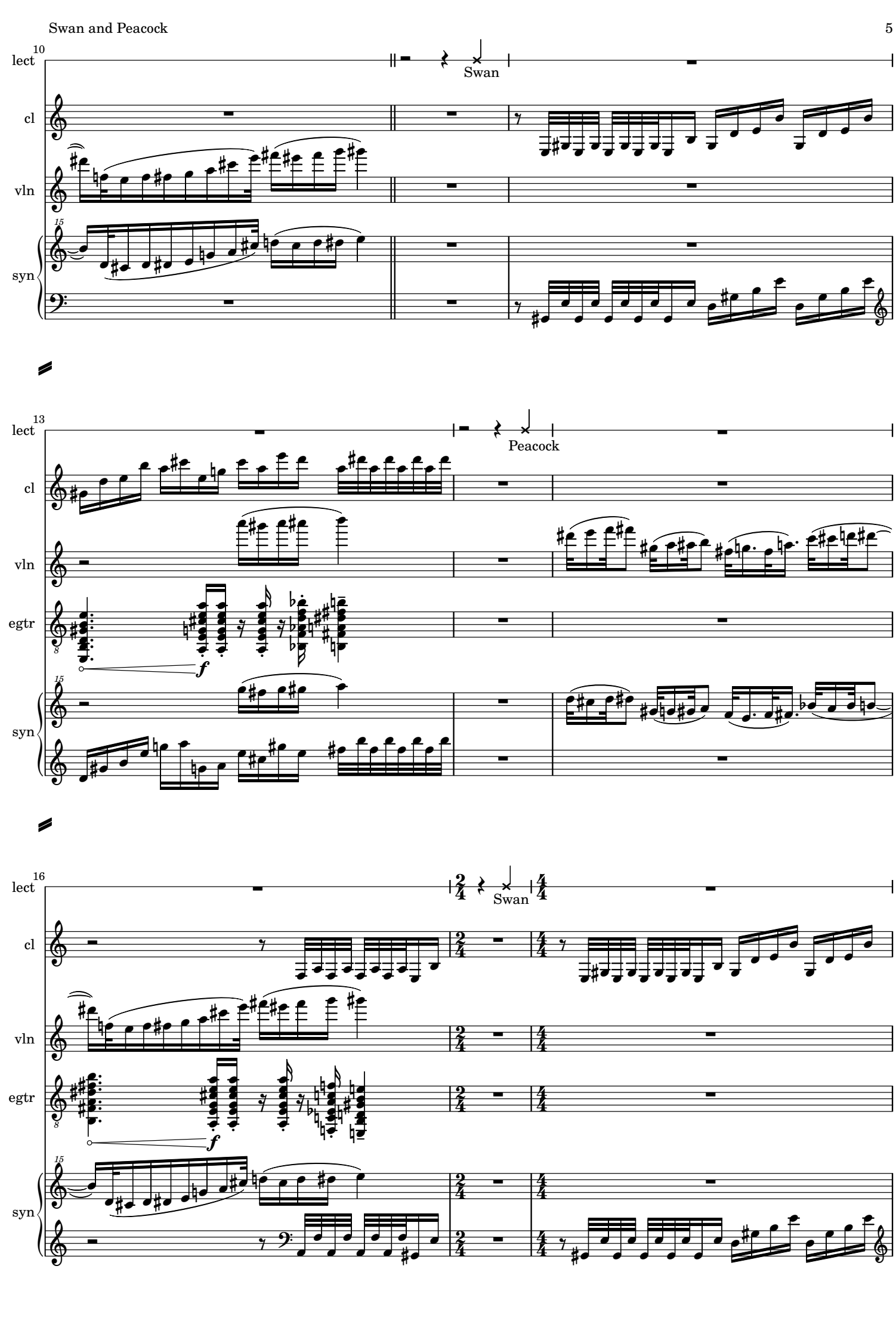
The notion of objective beauty was discredited during the eighteenth century. For instance, the philosopher Edmund Burke formulated the following example to make the point.

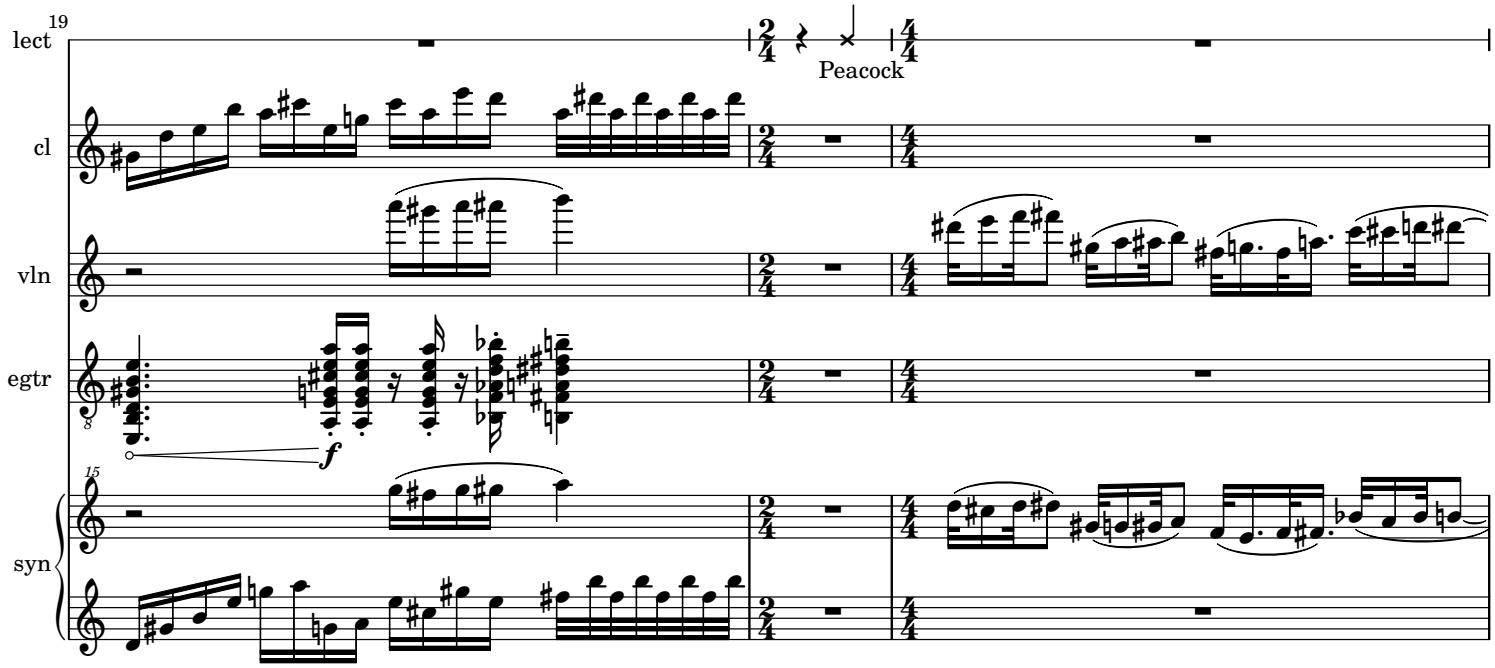


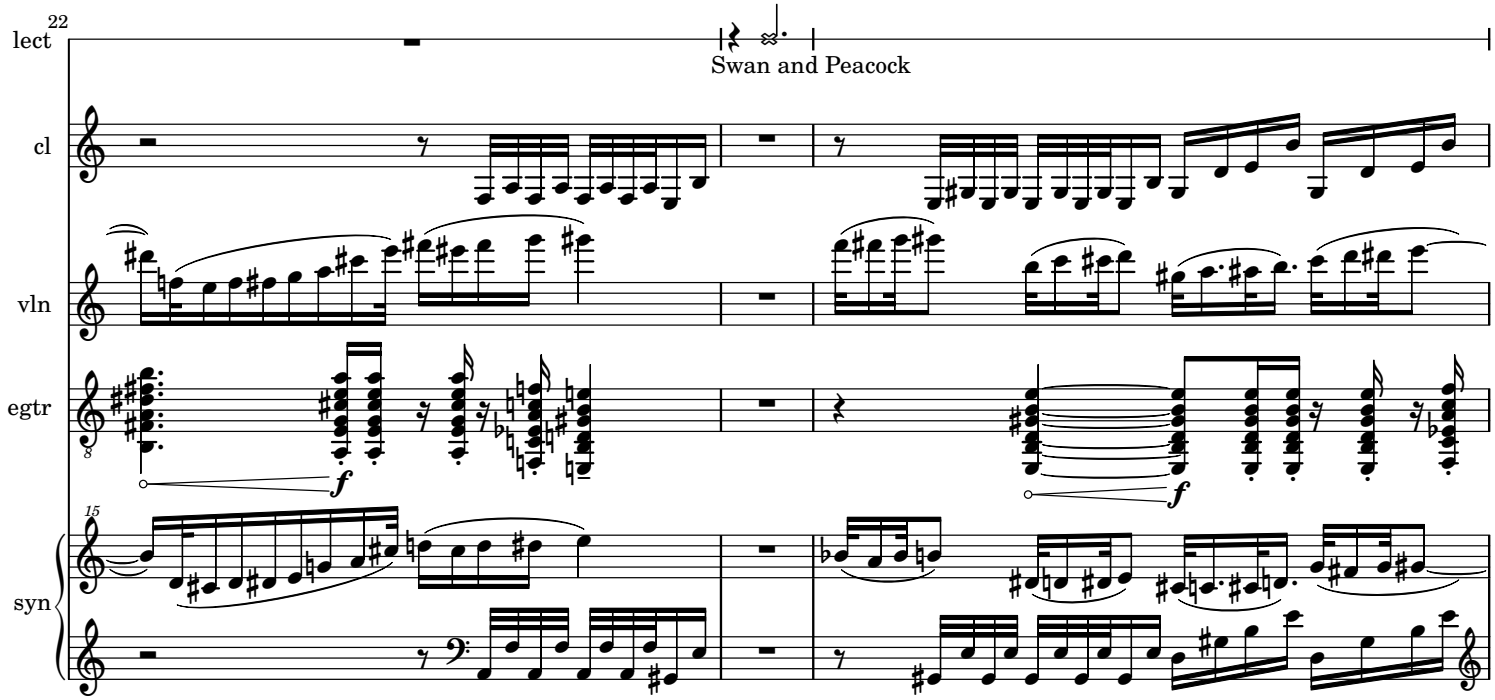

lect
3
and a tiny tail.
vln
egtr
syn
15
f
f
f

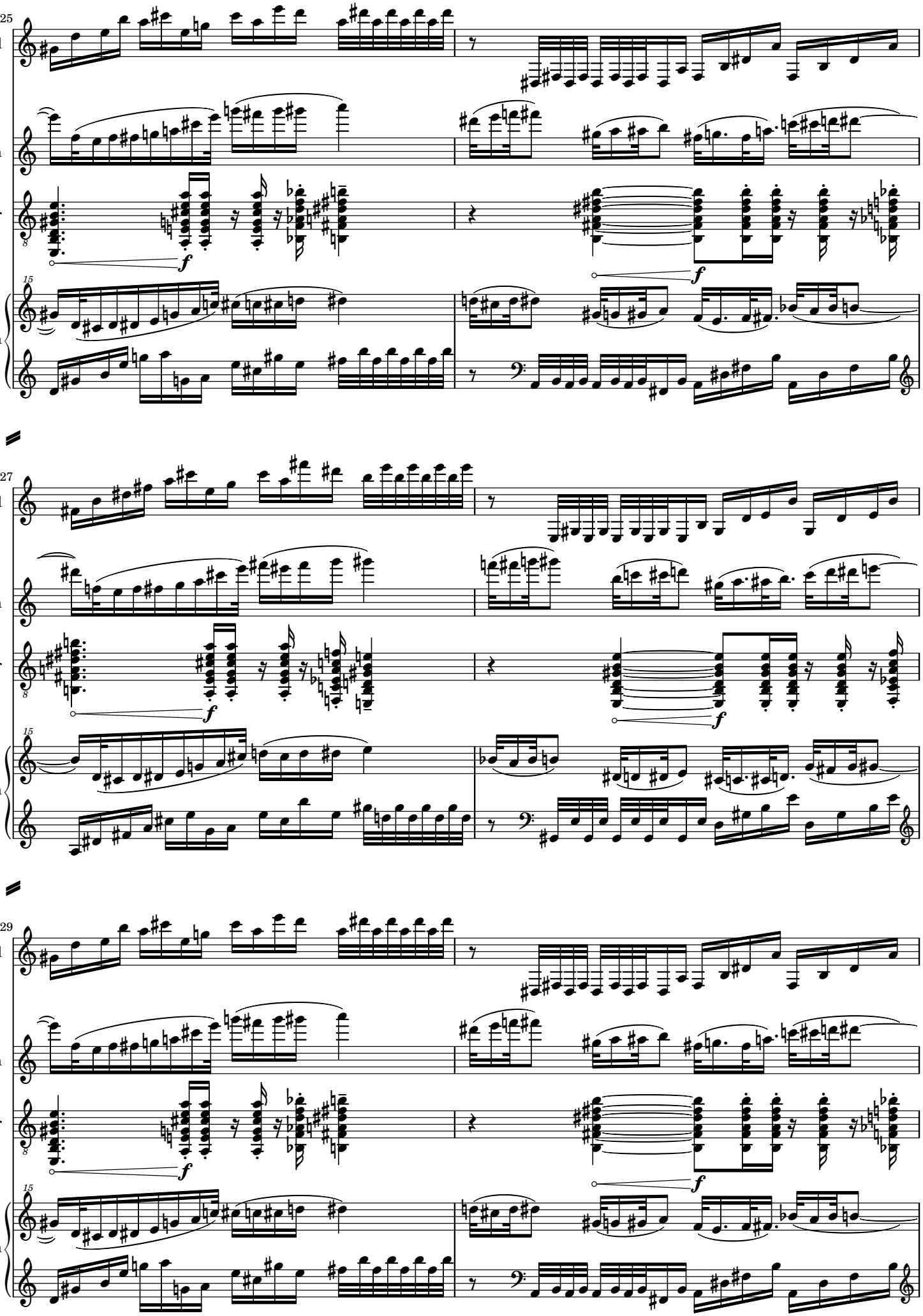

lect
5
Burke asks: is this a beautiful proportion? It must be, because everyone thinks swans are beautiful.
cl
15
syn


6
lect
But this is rather confusing, as everyone also thinks peacocks are beautiful, and peacocks have a pretty short neck
cl
vln
egtr
f
15
syn
7
an average sized body
9
and a tail that is longer than neck and body combined


10
lect
Swan
cl
vln
15
syn
13
lect
Peacock
cl
vln
egtr
f
15
syn
16
lect
Swan
cl
vln
egtr
f
15
syn


19
lect
Peacock
cl
vln
egtr
15
syn


22
lect
Swan and Peacock
cl
vln
egtr
15
syn


25
cl
vln
egtr
15
syn
f
27
cl
vln
egtr
15
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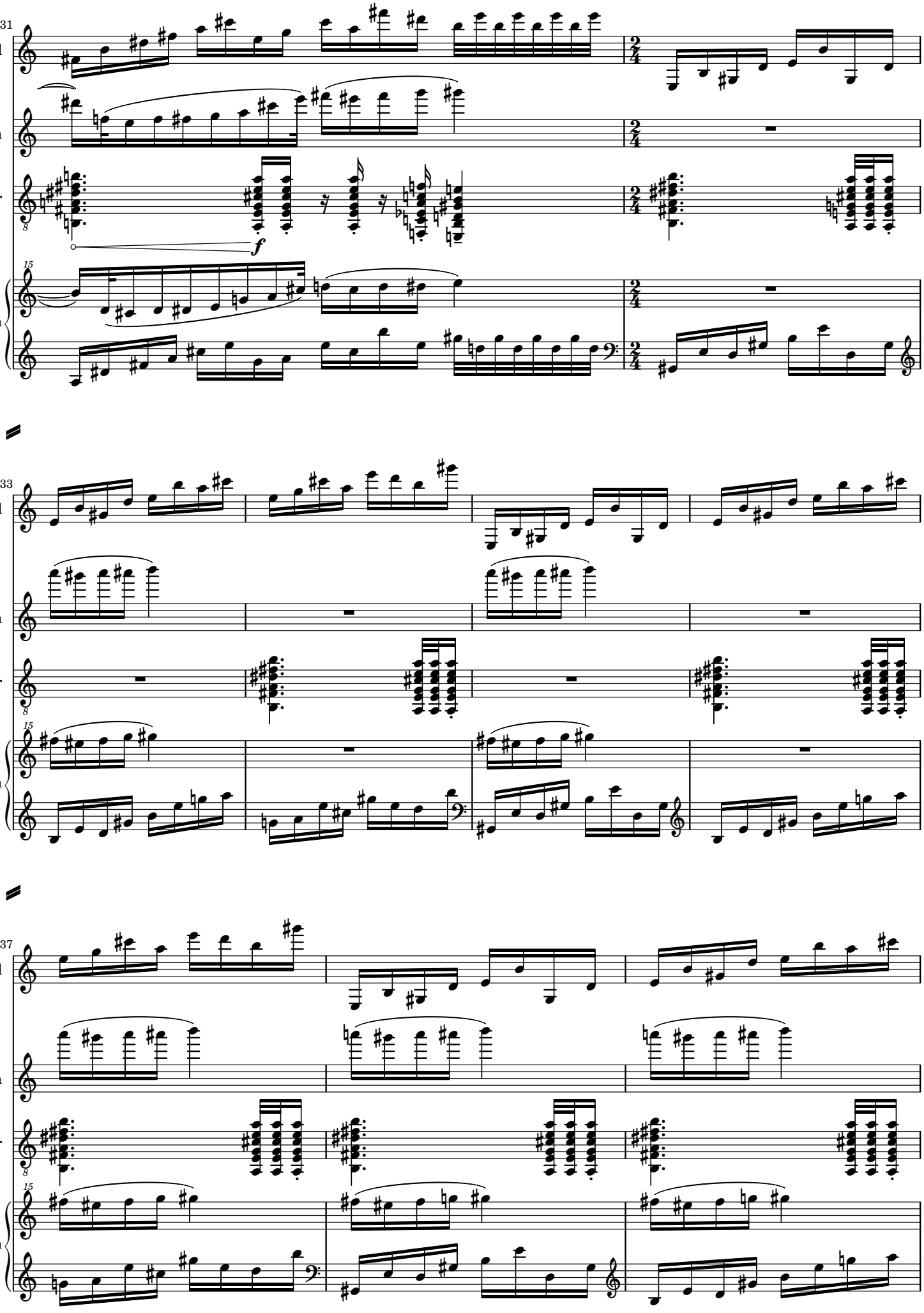
f
29
cl
vln
egtr
15
syn
f


31
cl
vln
egtr
f
15
syn
33
cl
vln
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37
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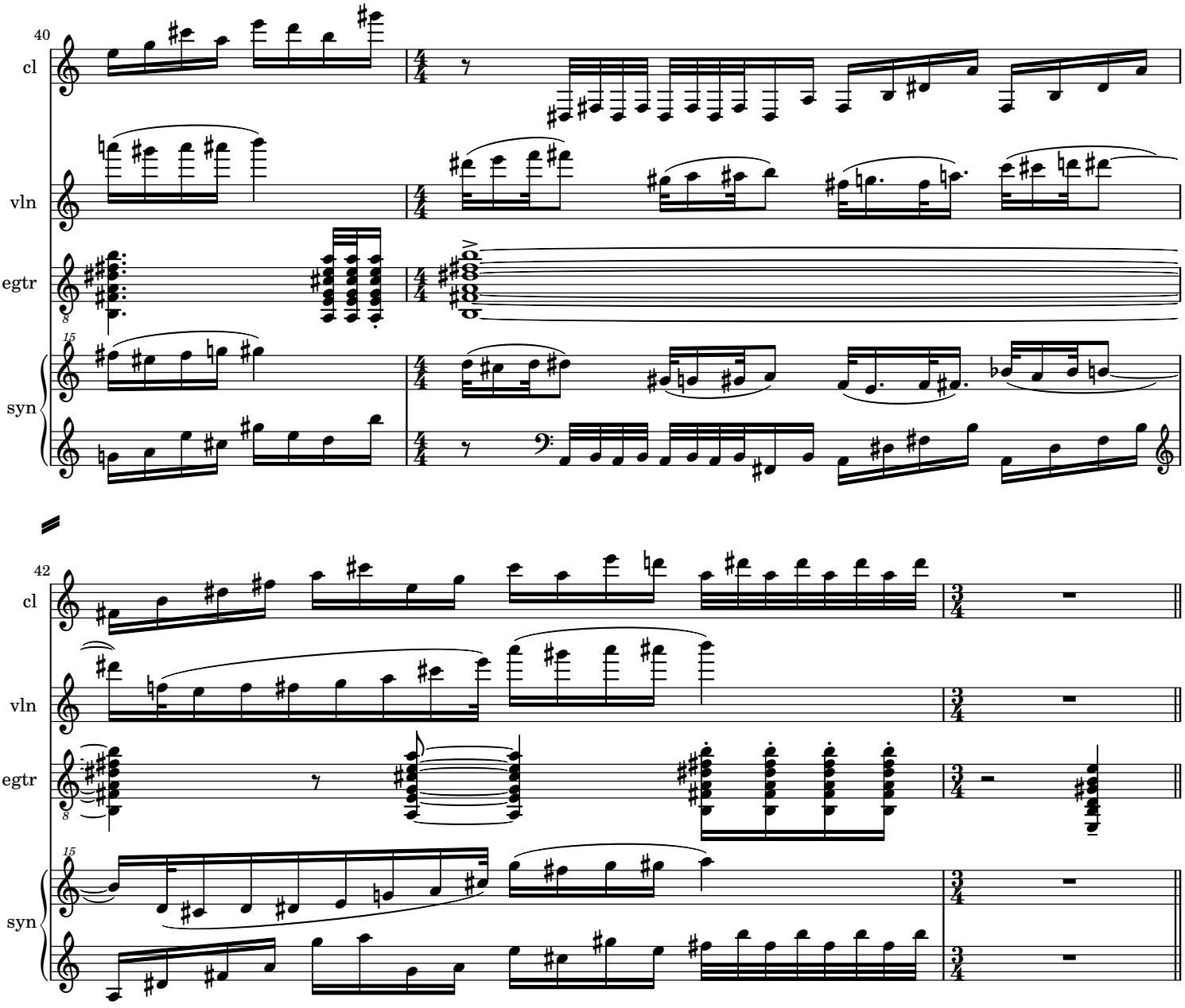
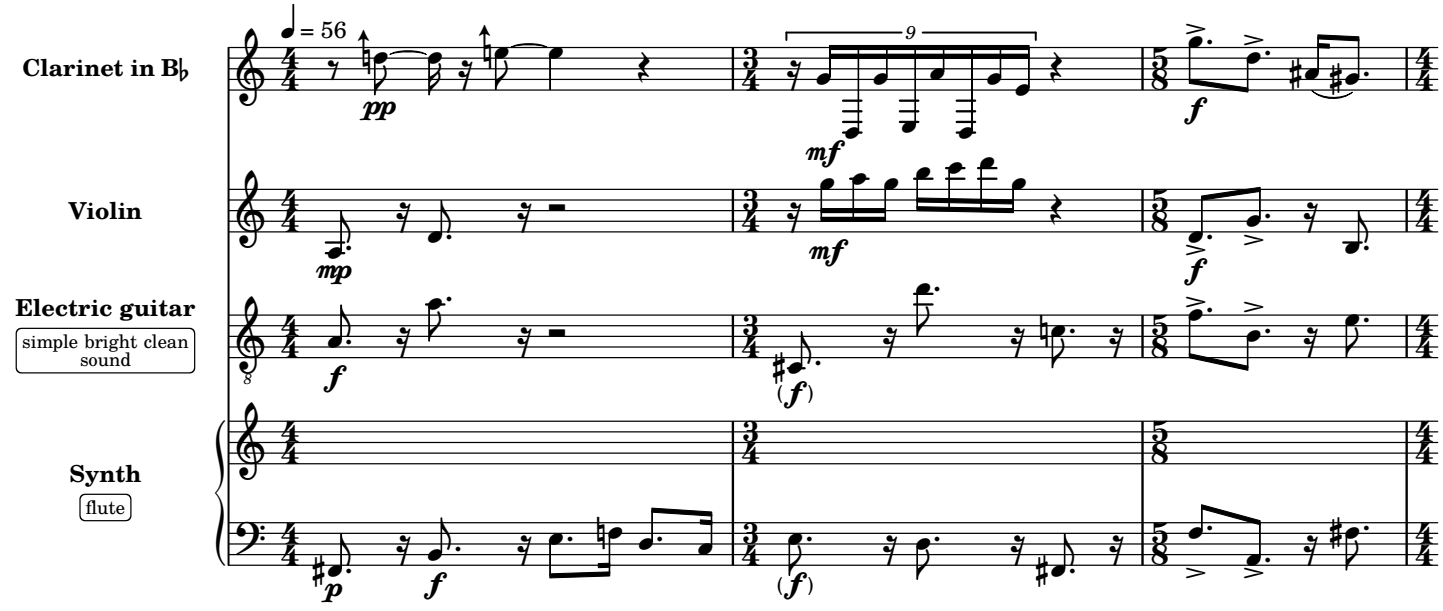
vln
egtr
15
syn

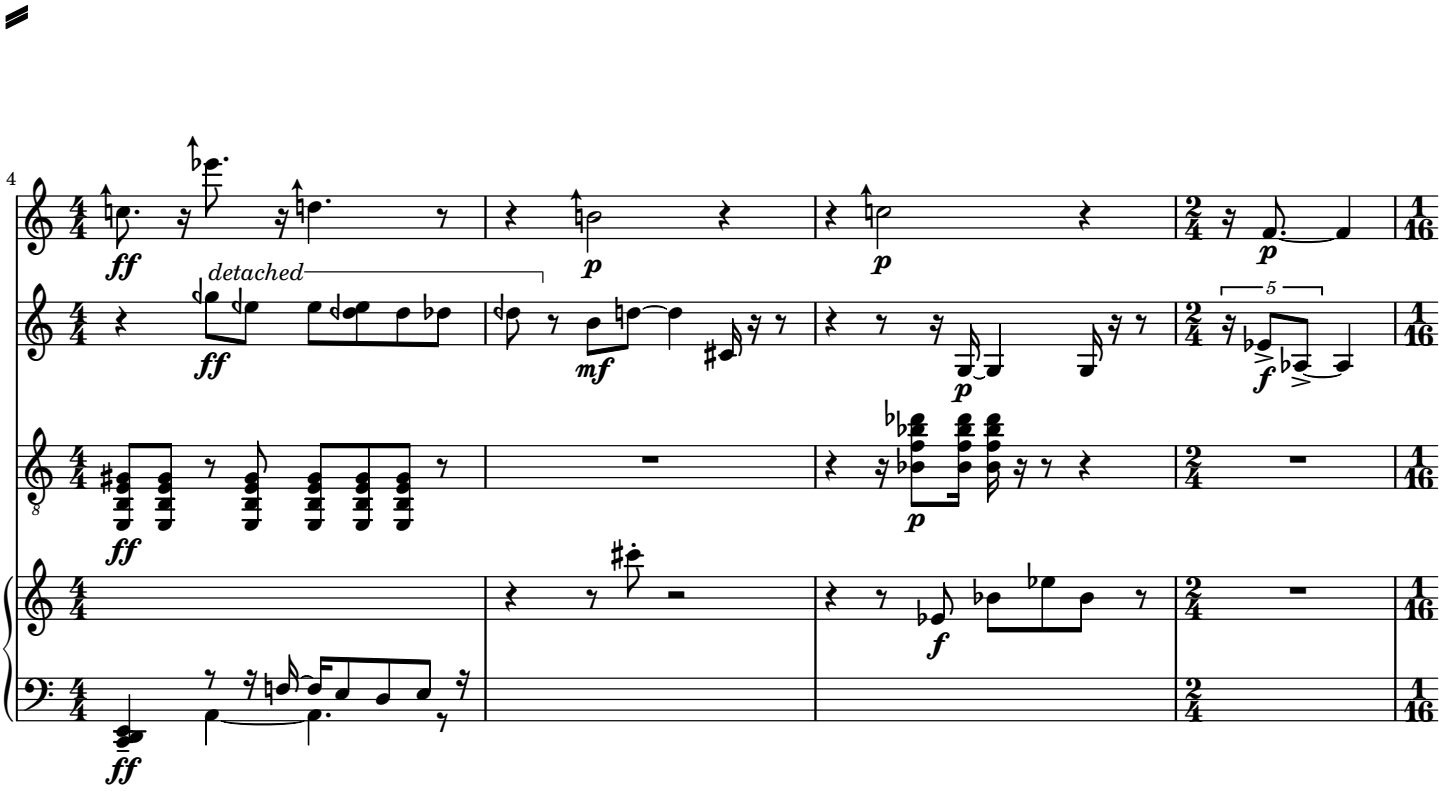


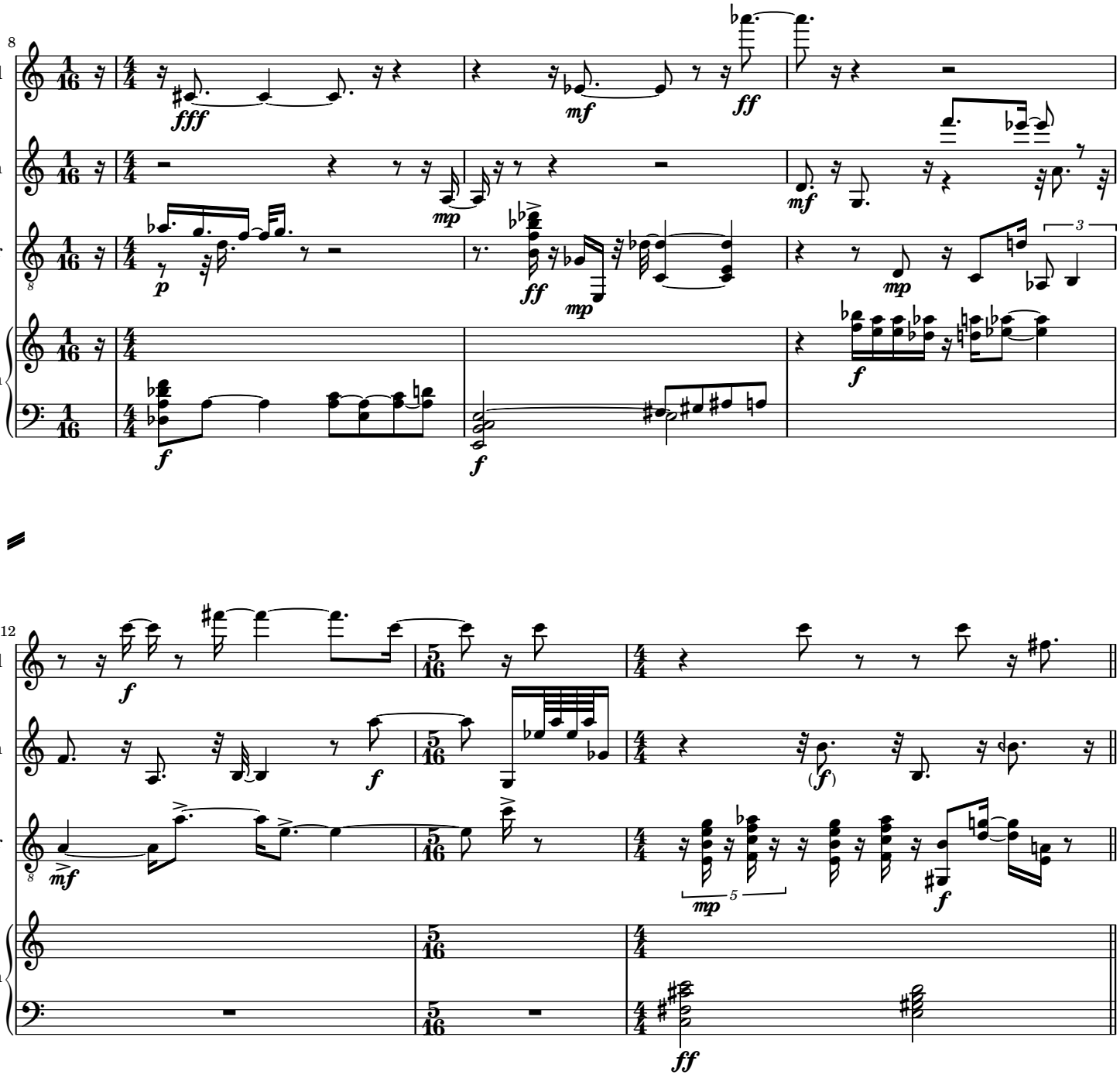
Does that simply mean that there is no objective basis to our judgements? We'll return to that question later, but now let's go back to the music you heard at the beginning. I composed that piece especially for this lecture. I tried to write a piece that has no inherently positive attributes. If I was successful, you should have experienced no pleasure the first time you heard it. But equally, according to the exposure effect, you should have begun experiencing a little pleasure when you heard the piece a second time and the amount of pleasure should have increased with each repetition. An interesting aspect of Max Meyer's experiment is that it begs the question: what constitutes bad music?

I found it harder then I expected to compose a bad piece, a piece that would give you, the audience, no feelings of pleasure. I began with the following proposition: music is inherently bad when it has no order. I set about composing music on my computer by assembling unrelated musical ideas in a random way. I wrote a bunch of pieces and played them to friends to get feedback. They told me that the pieces were not so bad and that they did perceive order and even a sense of cause and effect. I suppose the explanation is that our brains are wired up to look for, and even construct, a sense of cause and effect, even when it is not there. Here is one of the pieces I composed, but decided not to use.

Bad Piece No. 2





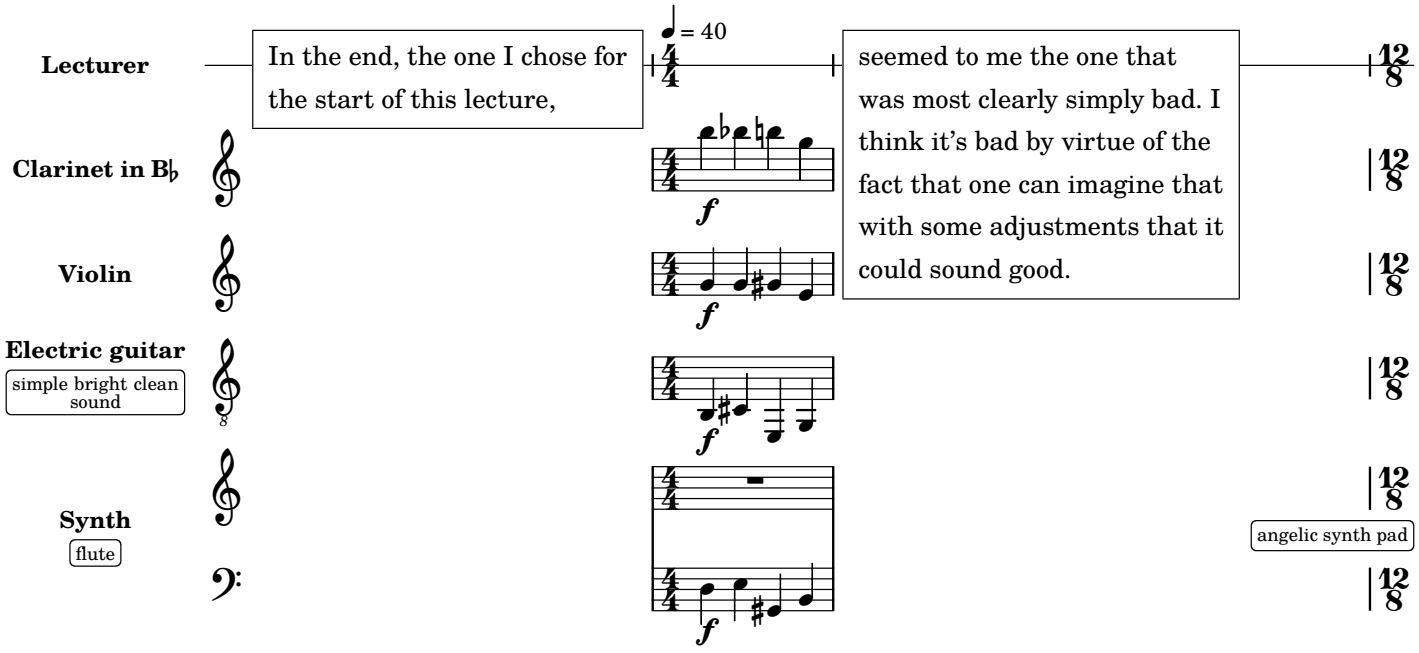


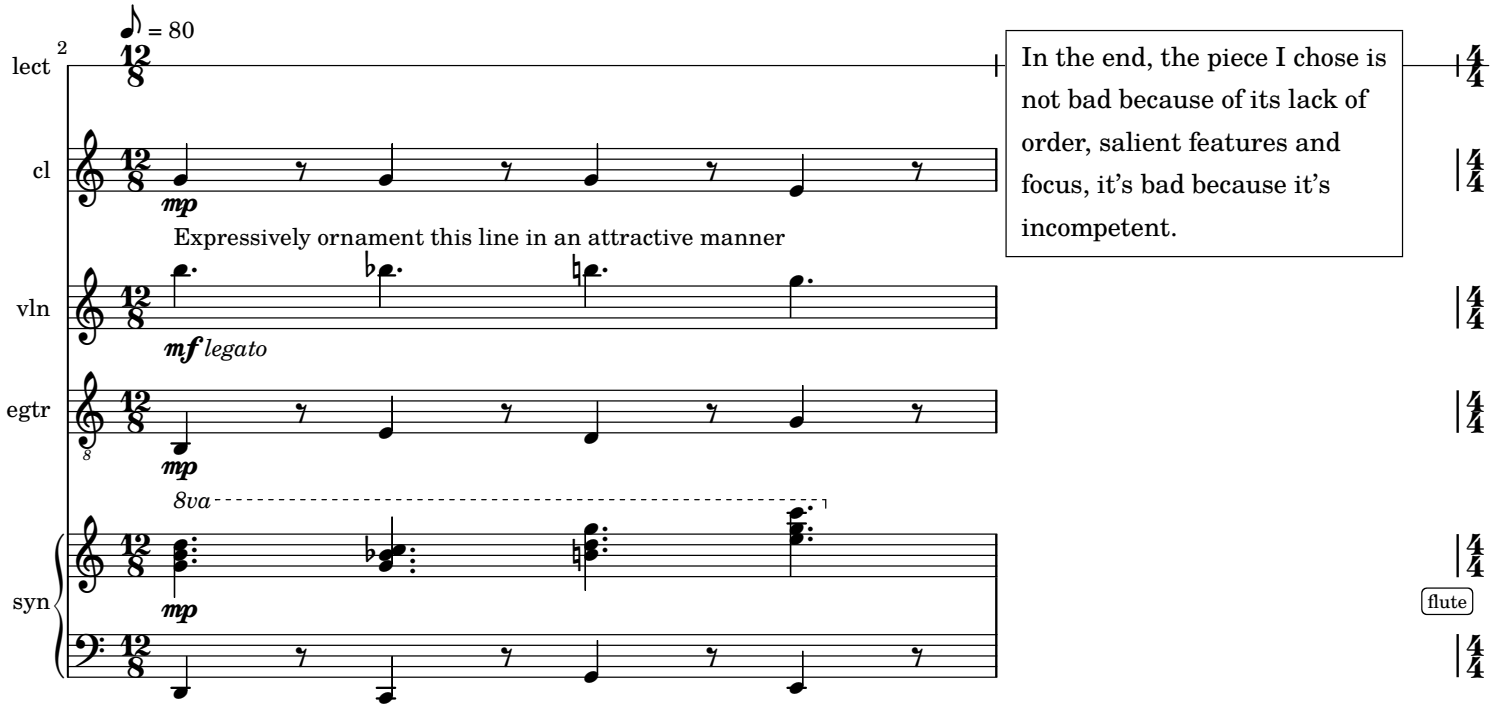
In that piece, I also tried to compose musical ideas that lacked salience. By salience I mean that the ideas lacked definition and identity, and lacked noteworthy or memorable features.

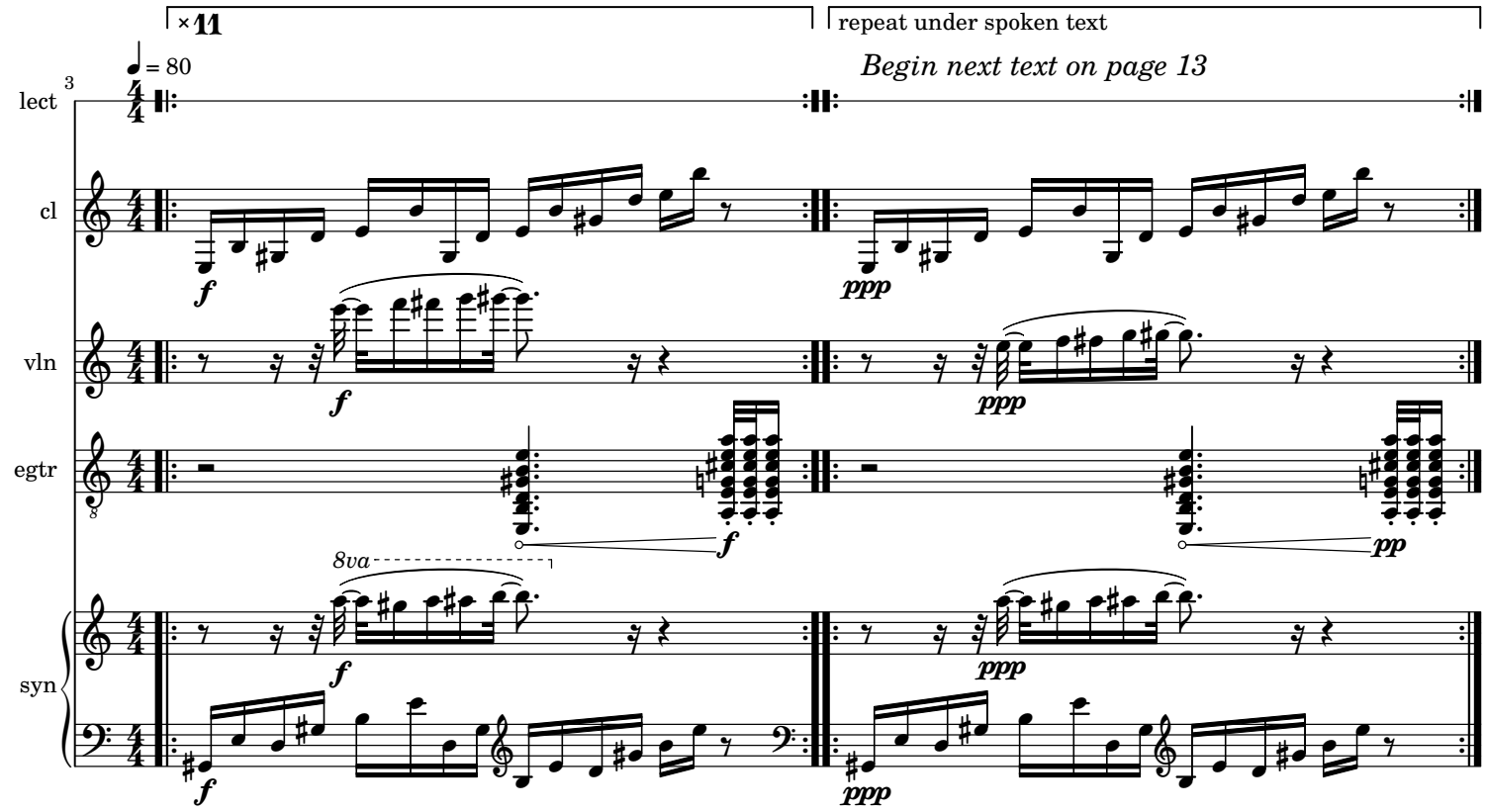
I also tried to make it unfocussed and lacking in purpose. But, I decided not to use that piece because I became worried that it in fact might have great clarity of purpose in expressing a state of confusion! After all, how can we tell the difference between a piece that is confused and a piece that has the aesthetic goal of expressing a state of confusion?

As I listened to my drafts over and over again, I was also becoming increasingly fond of them. I had the problem that as composer I was not immune from the exposure effect. I could not put myself back in the shoes of someone hearing these pieces for the first time.

Repetition Piece







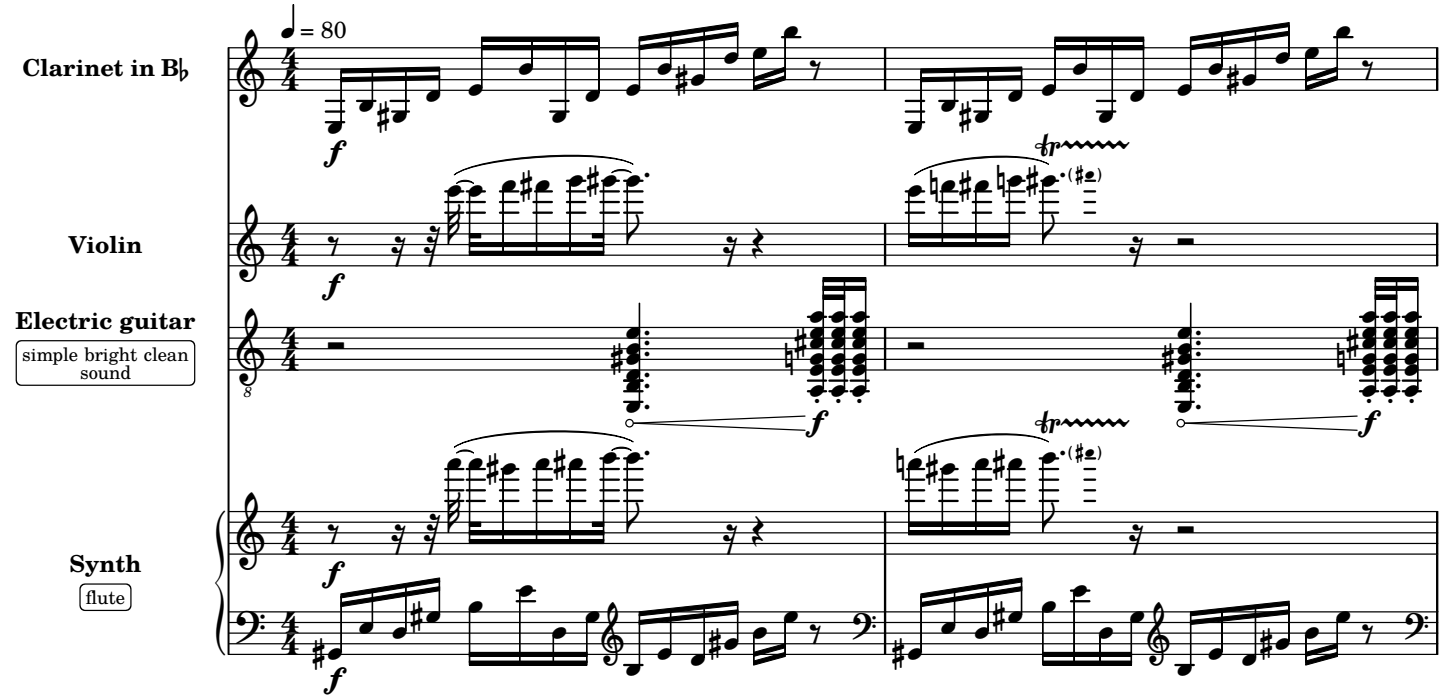
Repeating bar softly underneath spoken text

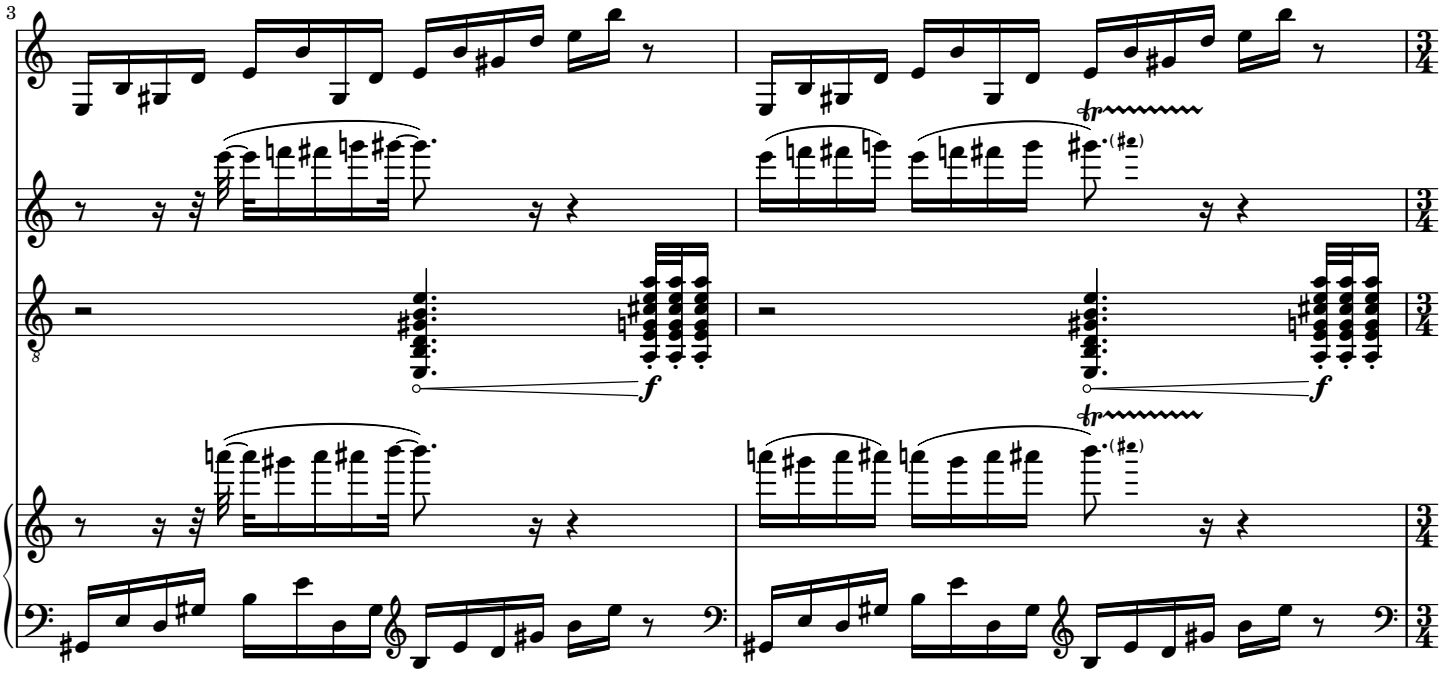
Another reason a piece of music might be inherently bad is because it is overly repetitive. In the field of Psychological Aesthetics there is a theory called 'processing fluency', which refers to the ease with which information is processed. The ability to process information fluently gives us pleasure. In turn, a highly repetitive work will produce a positive reaction. This pleasure will be short–lived, however, as once the listener understands what is going on, boredom will set in and a negative reaction results. The state of diminished interest is called 'habituation'.

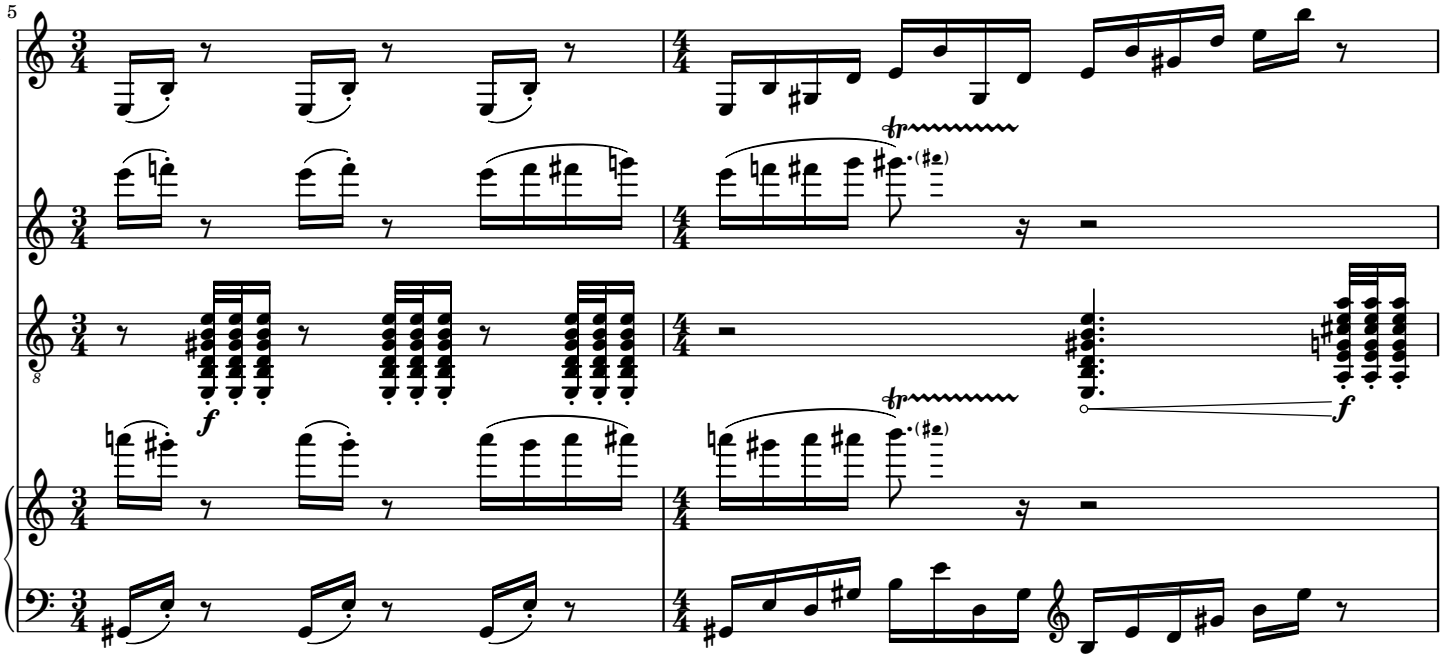
Lecturer pauses for a few seconds whilst repeating music continues

David Huron proposes that highly repetitive musical works will be experienced positively if that repetition is offset with a small degree of variation. The next piece has a large amount of repetition to engender the positive feelings that result from processing fluency, whilst the small degree of variation will defer the negative feelings that result from the onset of habituation.

Variation Piece






5
cl
vln
egtr
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tr
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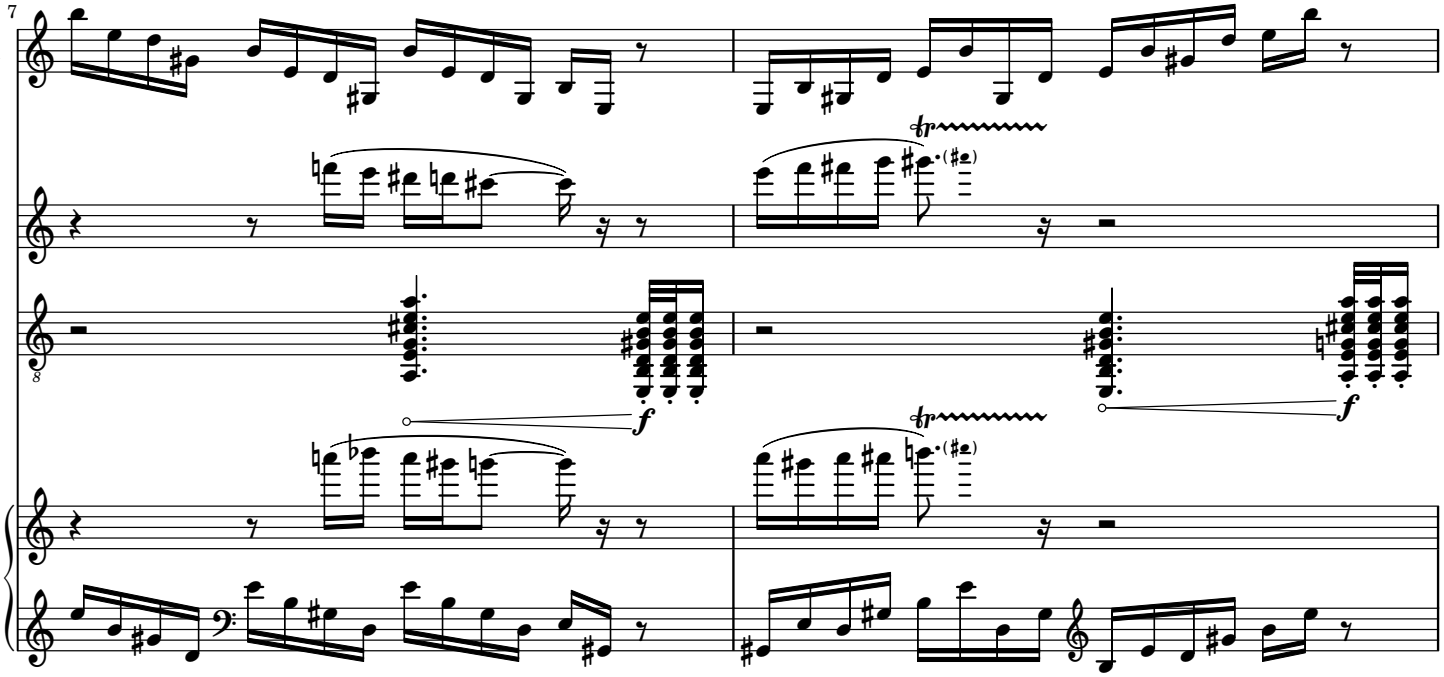
7
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vln
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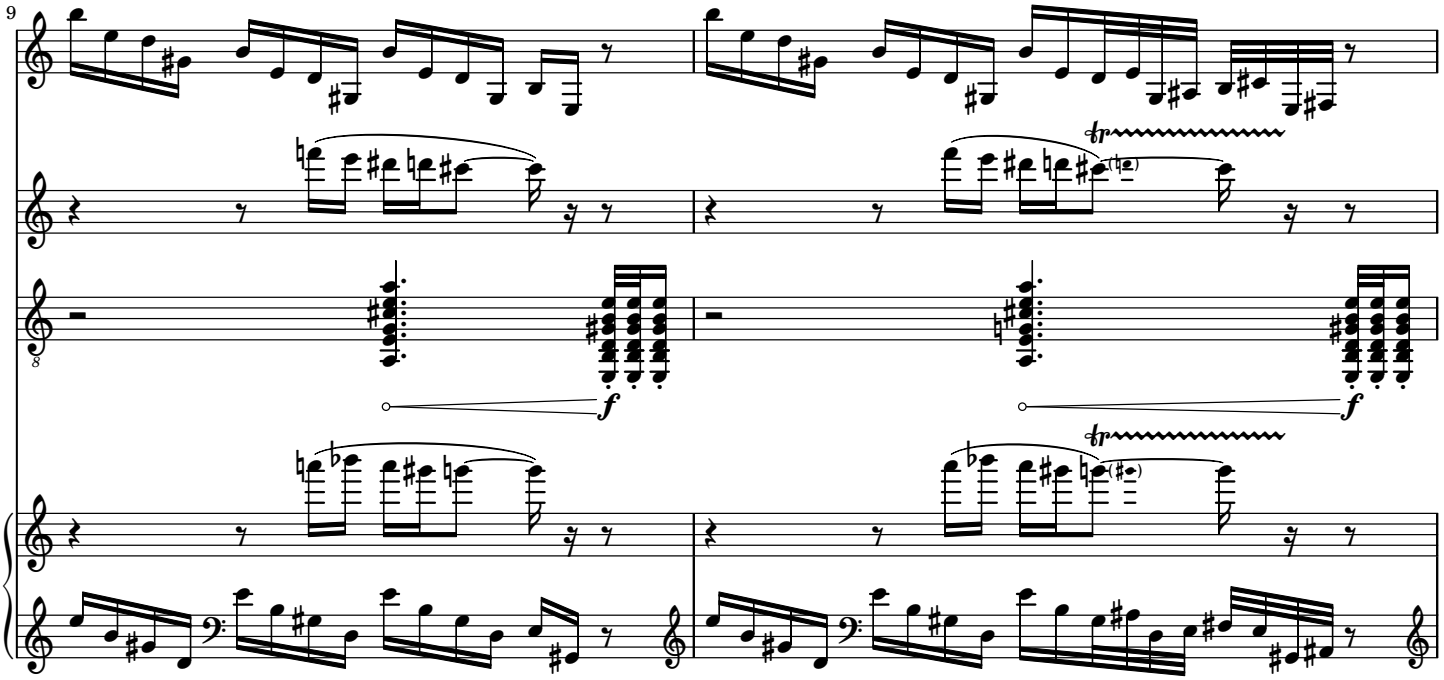
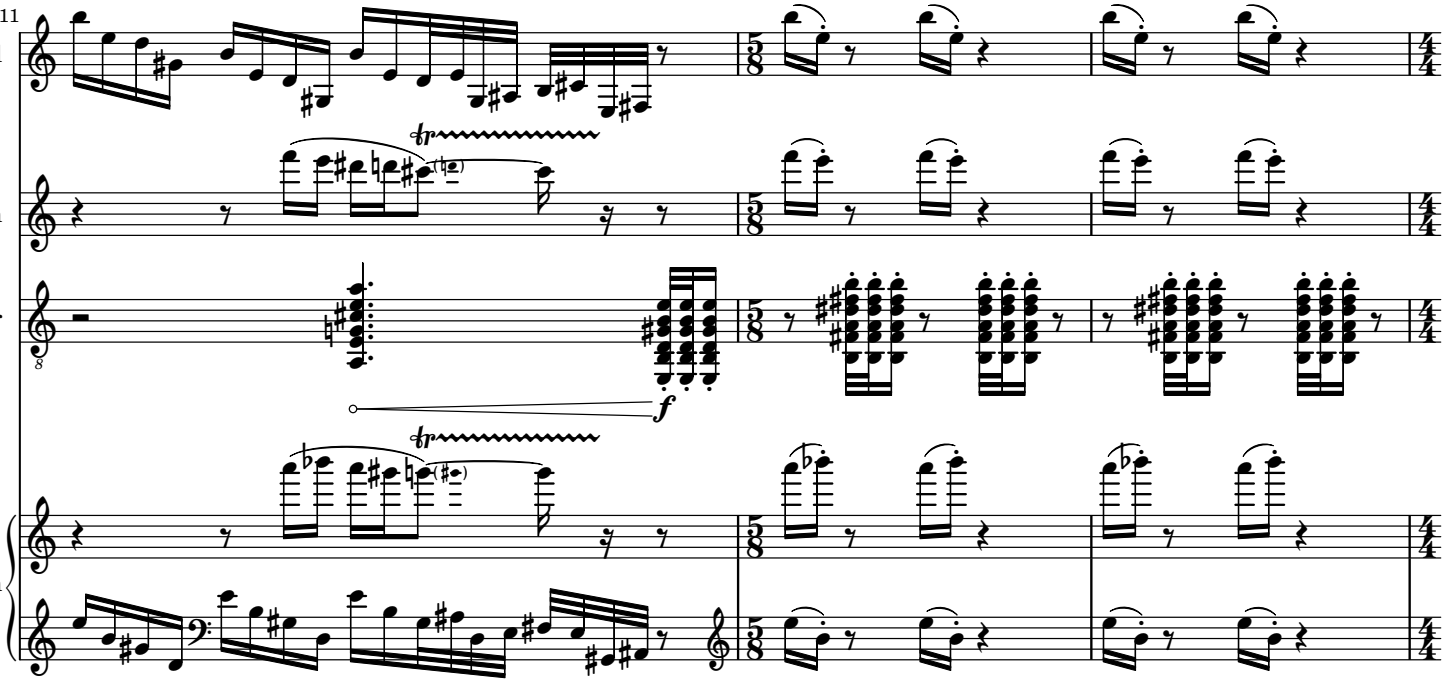
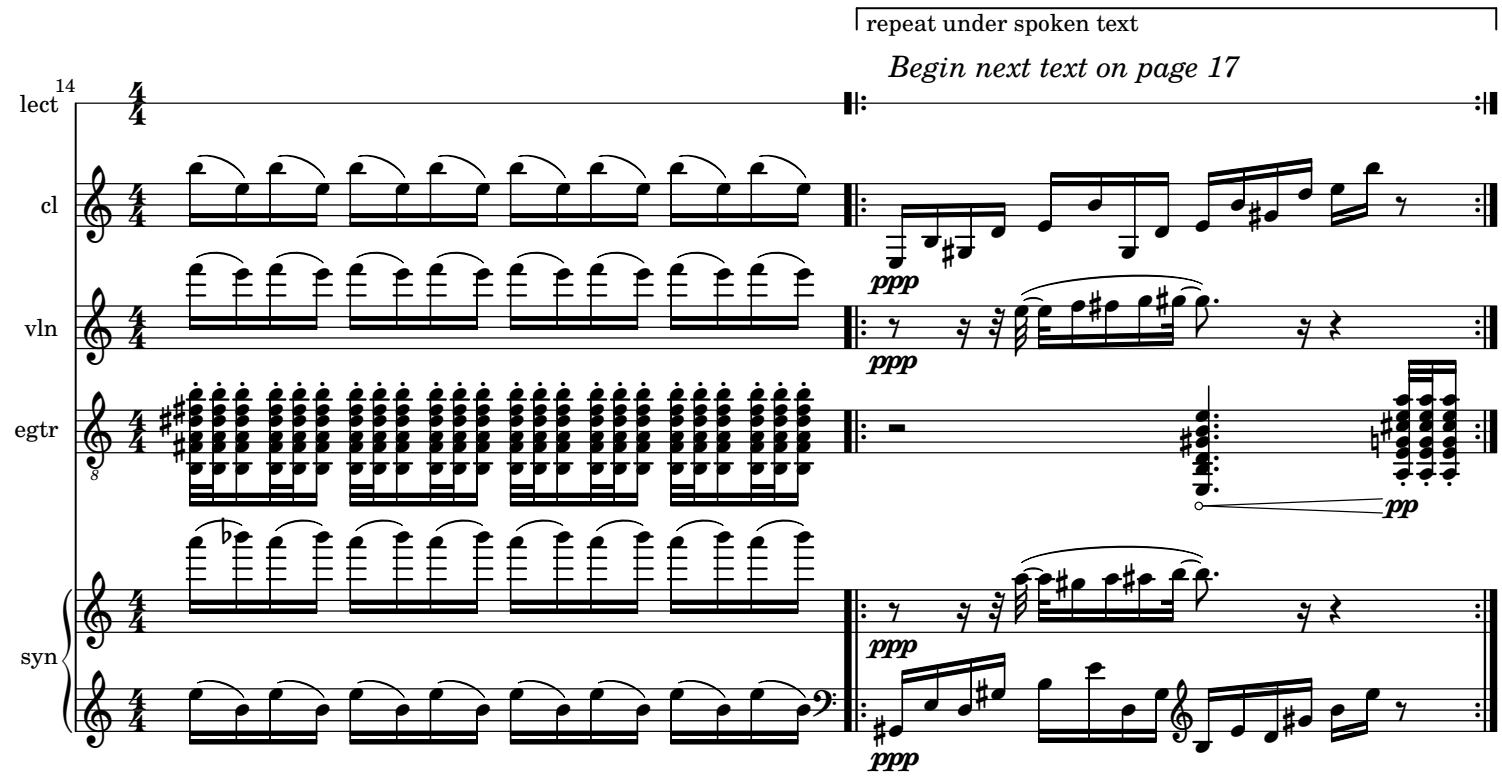
f


9
cl
vln
egtr
syn

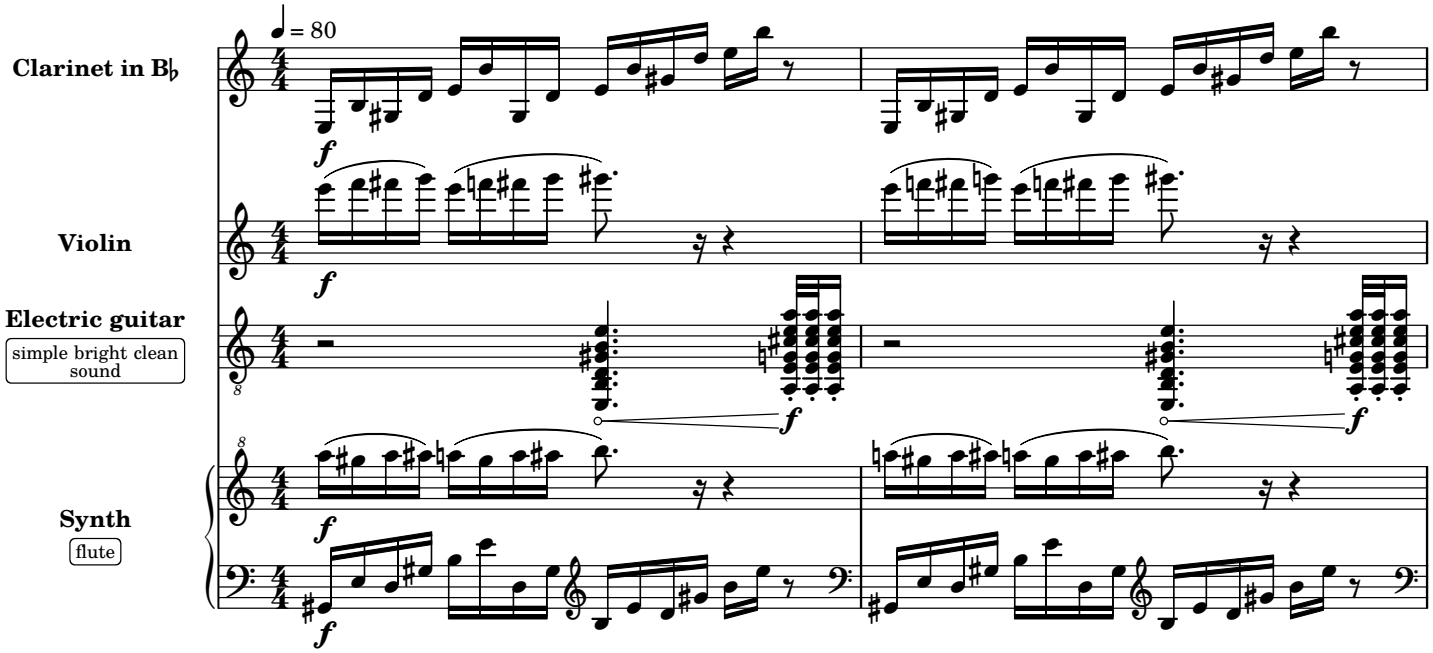

11
cl
vln
egtr
syn

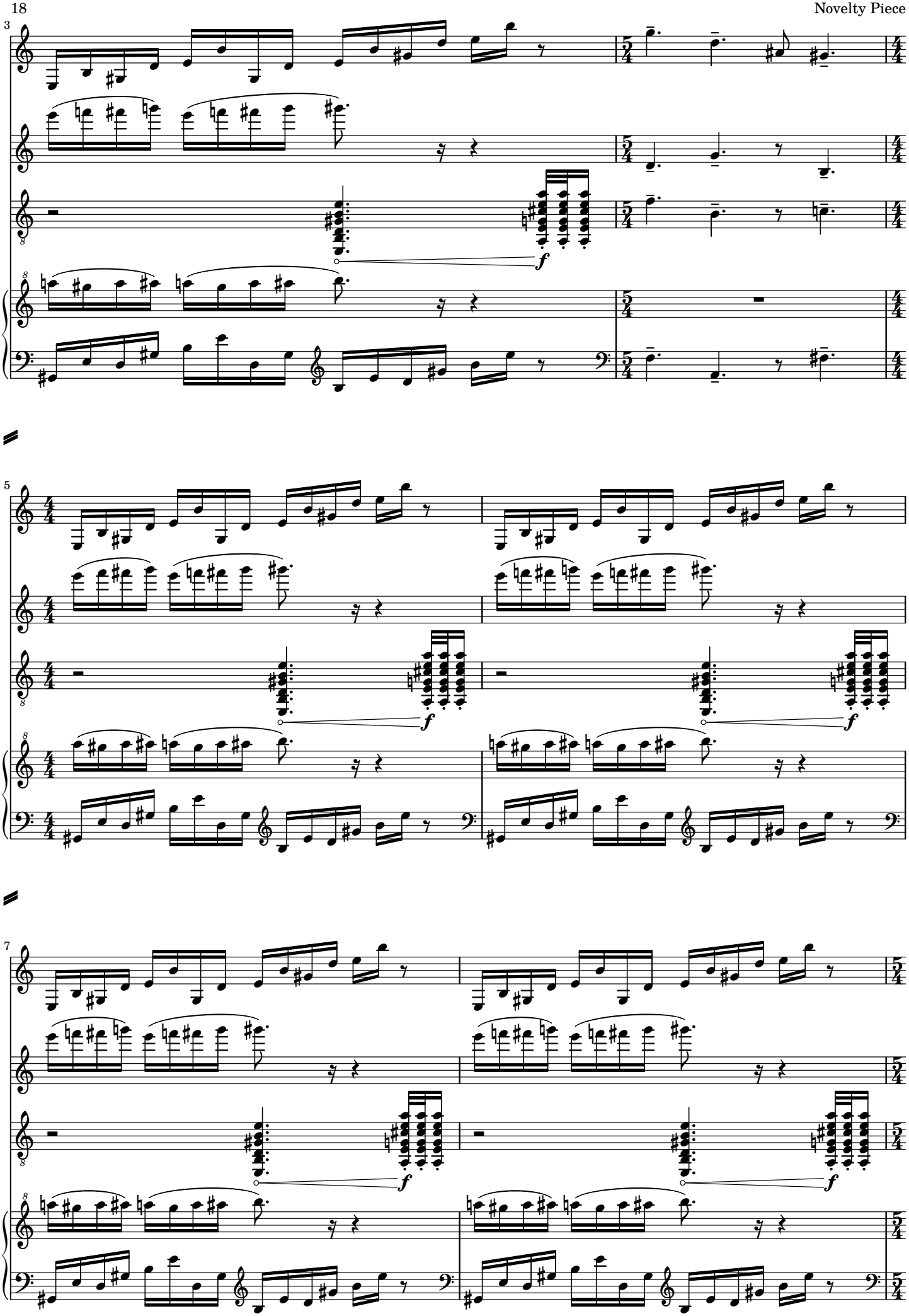


Repeating bar softly underneath spoken text; lecturer waits for a few seconds before beginning next text

Another way Huron suggests a composer can maintain listener interest with a minimum of composition effort is through the occasional deployment of novelty. Novel musical ideas will now be introduced at strategic moments to take care that you do not succumb to habituation.

Novelty Piece




3
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vln
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7
cl
vln
egtr
syn
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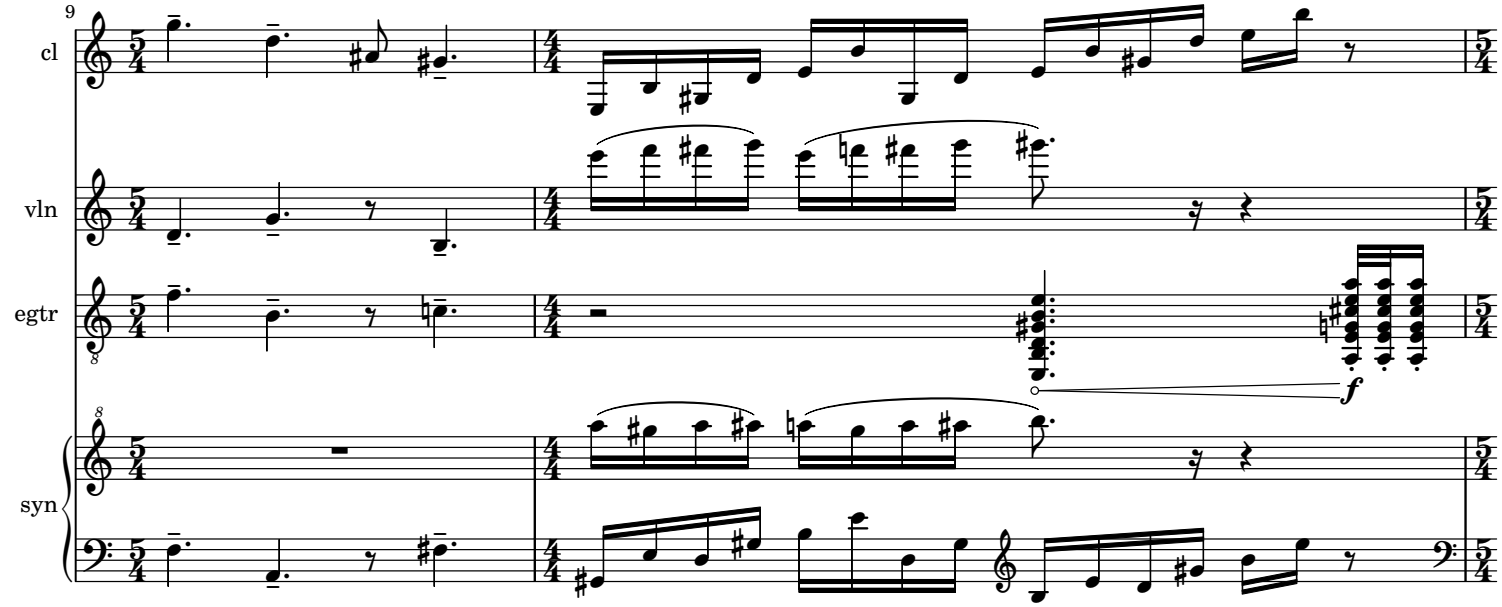
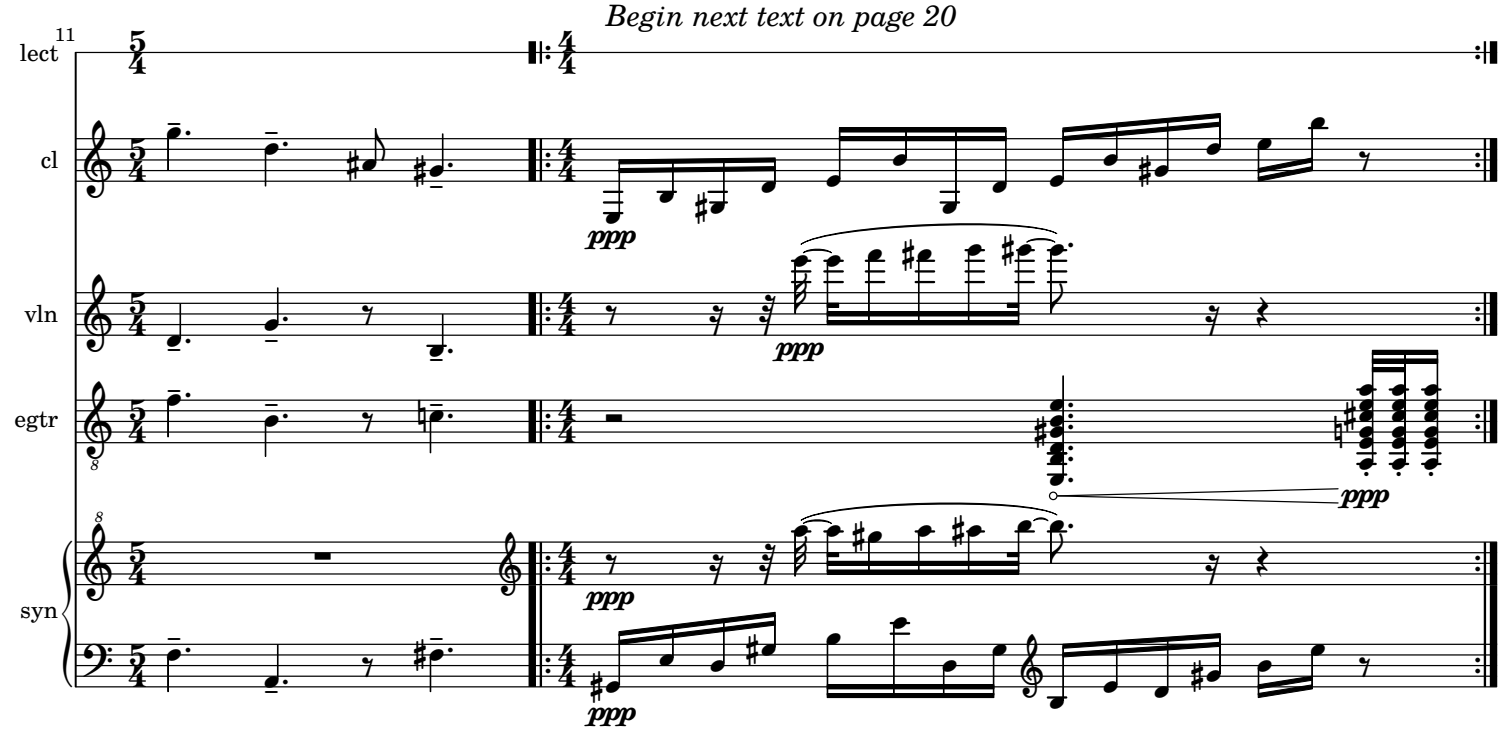


repeat under spoken text
stop immediately at the words
"A reflective person might pause,"

Begin next text on page 20



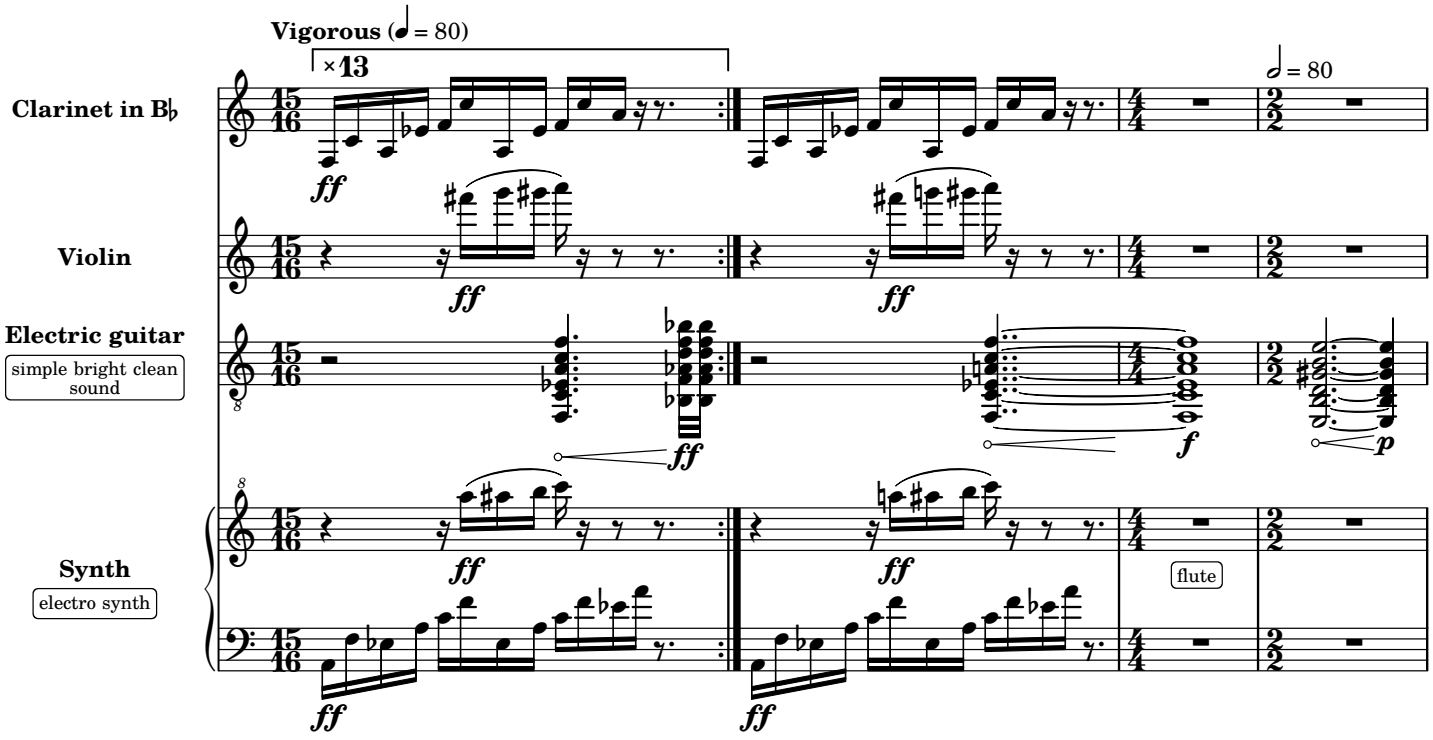
Repeating bar softly underneath spoken text; lecturer waits for a few seconds before beginning next text

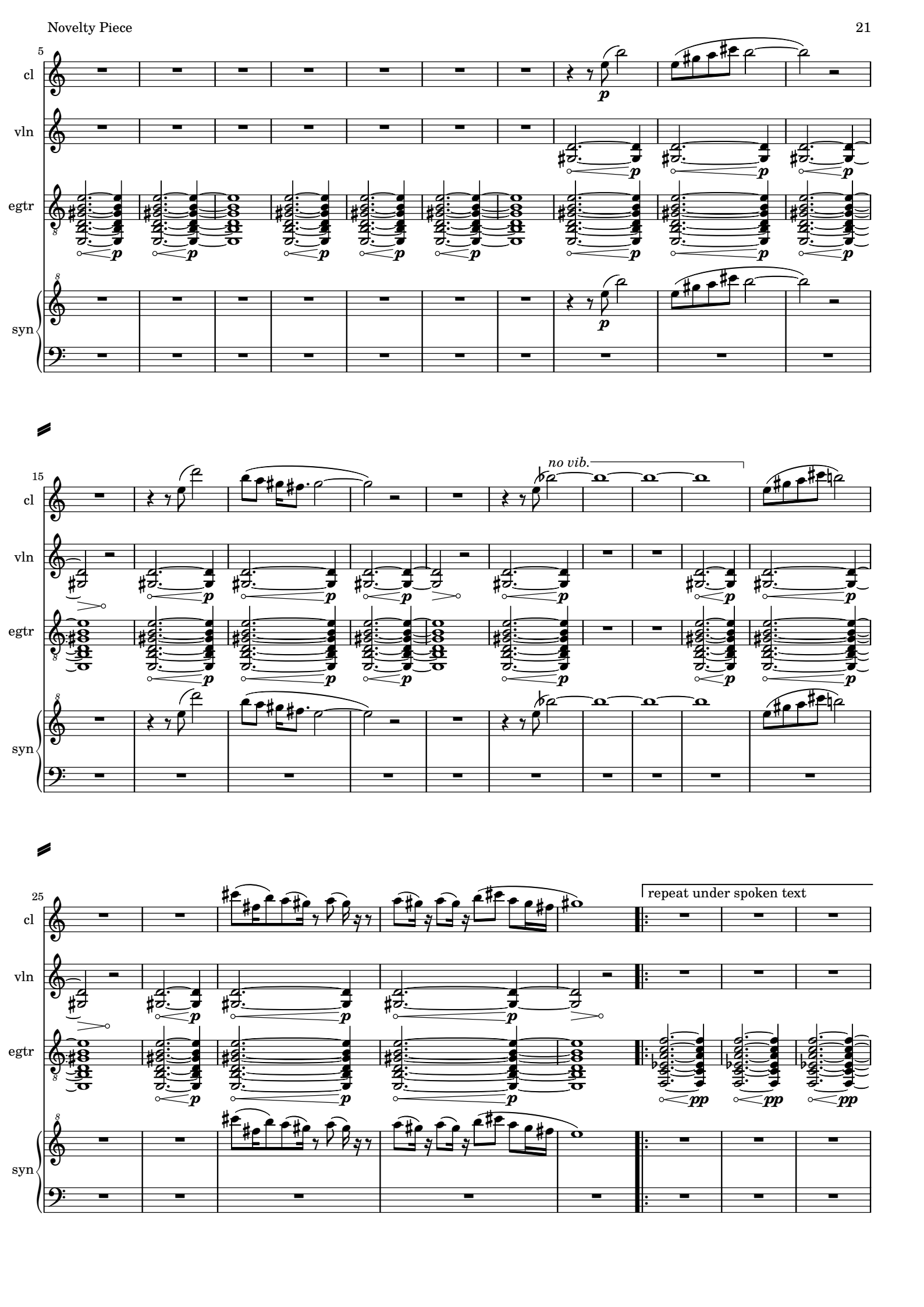
Let's now return to a state of pure repetition. Huron proposes that after a number of repetitions listeners will habituate and in turn responsiveness and pleasure will decline. On the face of it, that seems reasonable. But, let's now consider this statement: excessive repetition is an invitation to 'listen in'.

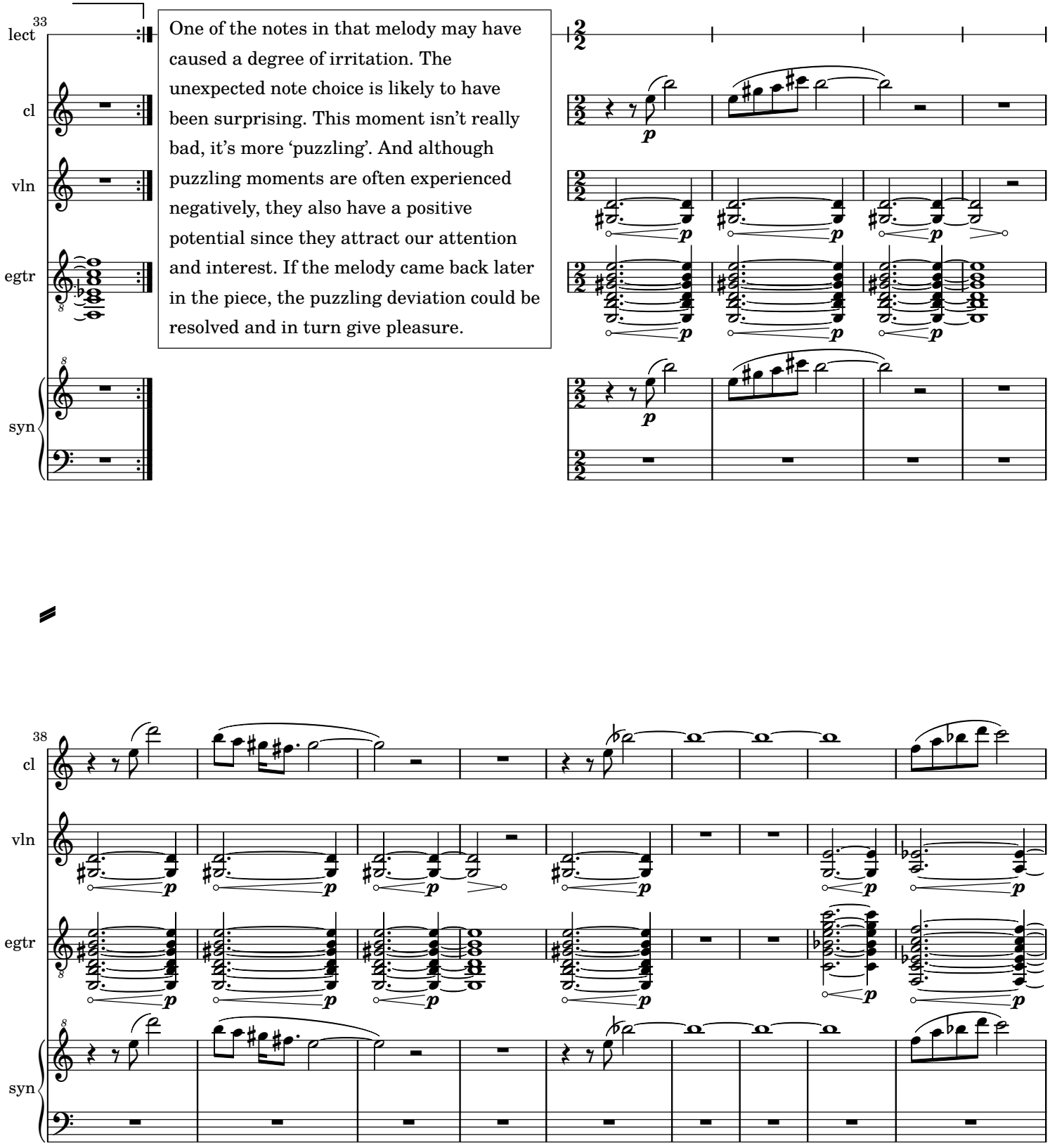
A purely repetitive work may lead listeners to a state of disinterestedness, but we can also imagine a listener who becomes highly interested. Highly interested in the way that the musical idea resonates in the space in which it is performed. Highly interested in the small details within the musical idea that they missed in the first 10 statements, including the incidental sounds - such as the sound of the guitarist's hand moving along the instrument's neck - and the environmental sounds of the room. This person might also tune in to non sonic aspects, such as studying the way the musicians communicate with one another. Such a listener might note that in this context of extreme repetition, one element that sometimes changes is the facial expressions of the performers. A reflective person might pause,

Musicians stop.

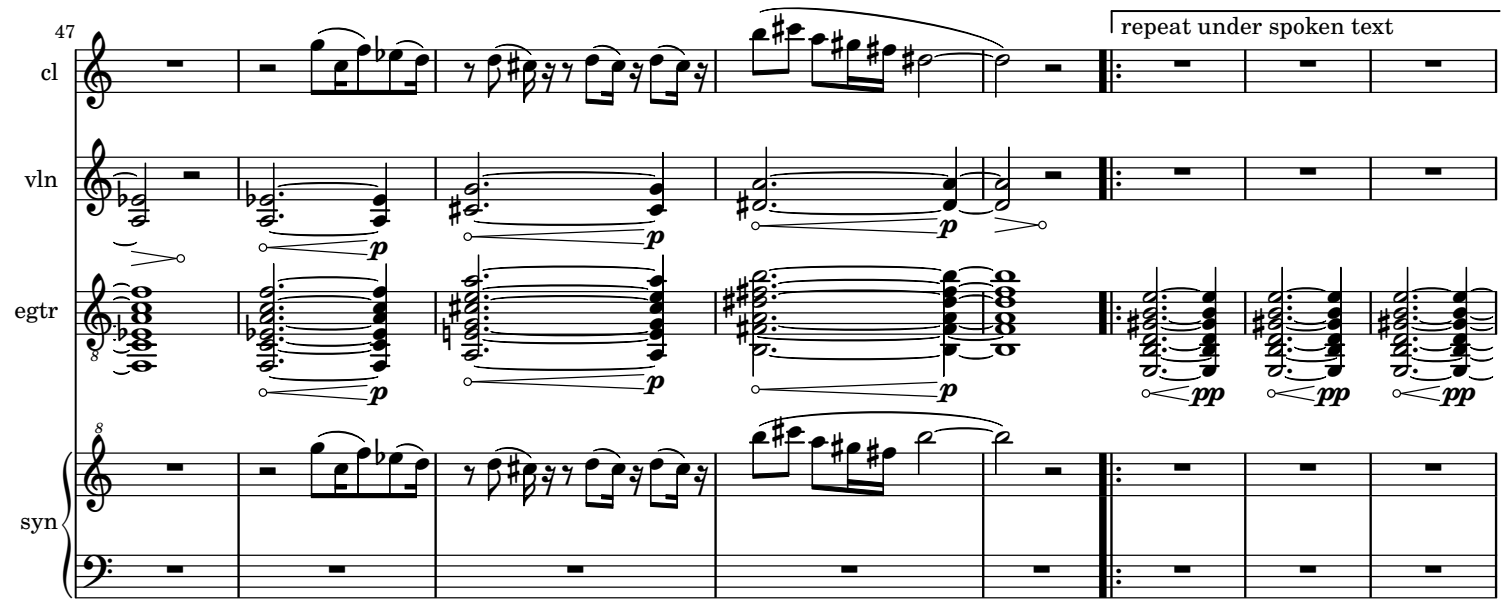
pause, to appreciate the physical feat involved in performing such vigorous music over and over again.

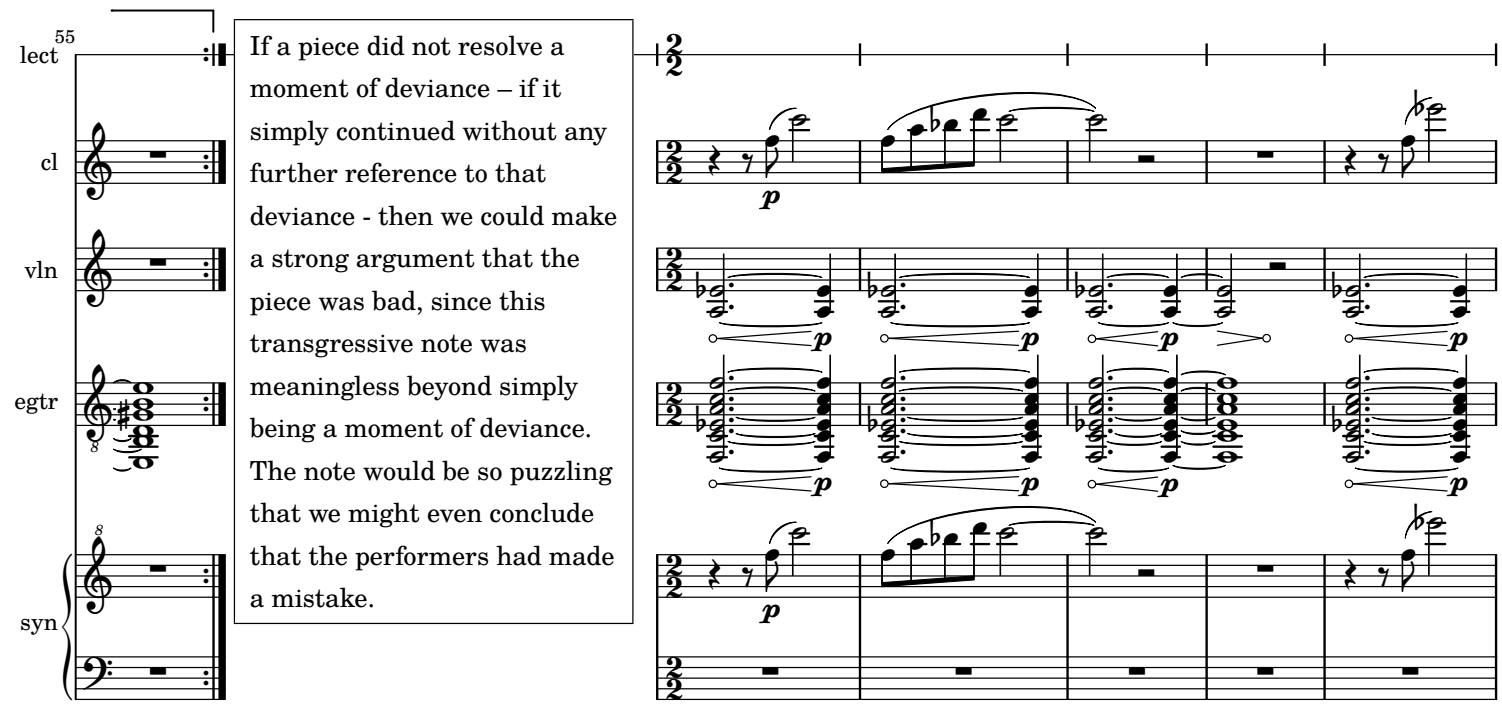


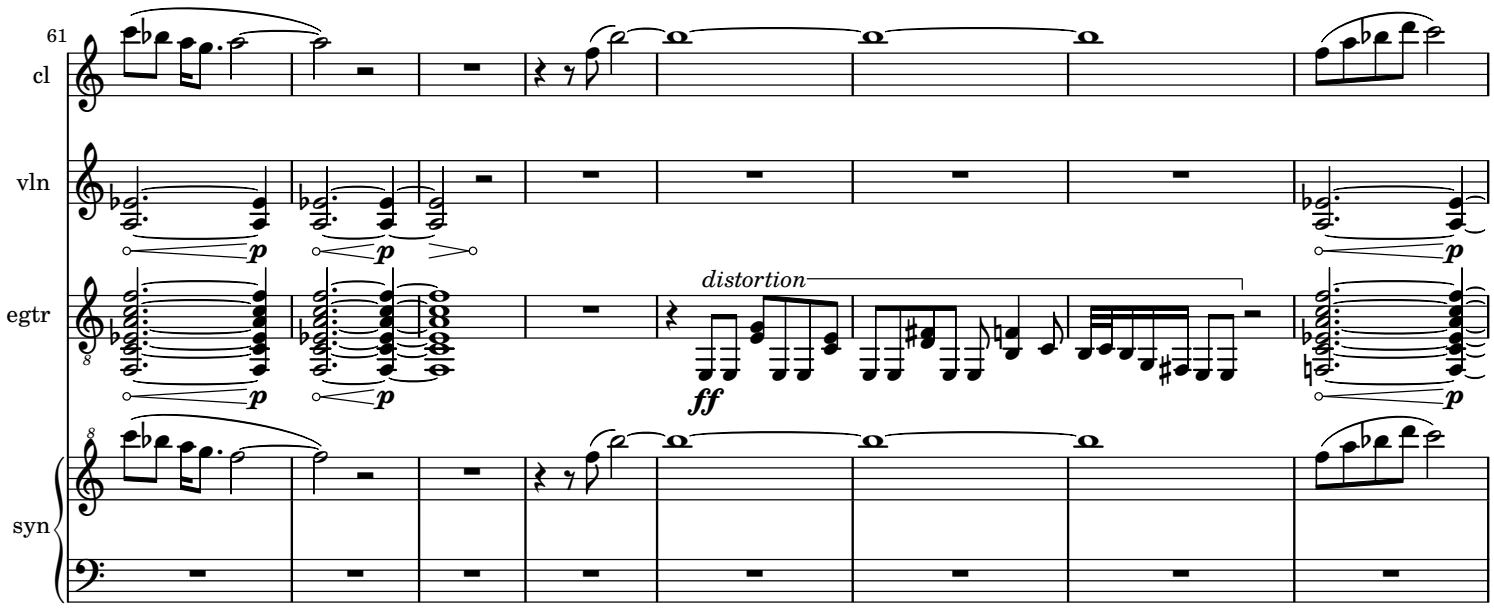

5
cl
vln
egtr
syn
p
15
no vib.
25
repeat under spoken text
pp

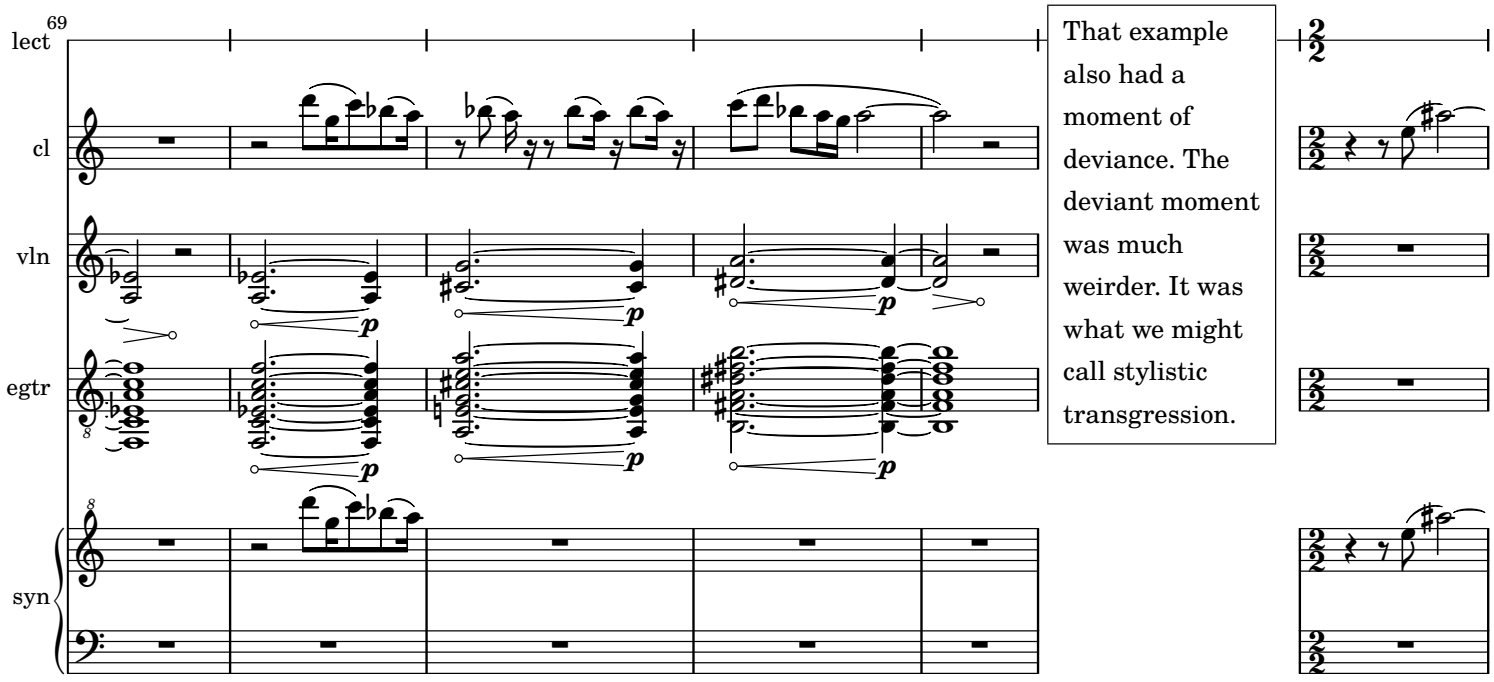

33
lect
cl
vln
egtr
syn
One of the notes in that melody may have caused a degree of irritation. The unexpected note choice is likely to have been surprising. This moment isn't really bad, it's more 'puzzling'. And although puzzling moments are often experienced negatively, they also have a positive potential since they attract our attention and interest. If the melody came back later in the piece, the puzzling deviation could be resolved and in turn give pleasure.
p

38
cl
vln
egtr
syn
p

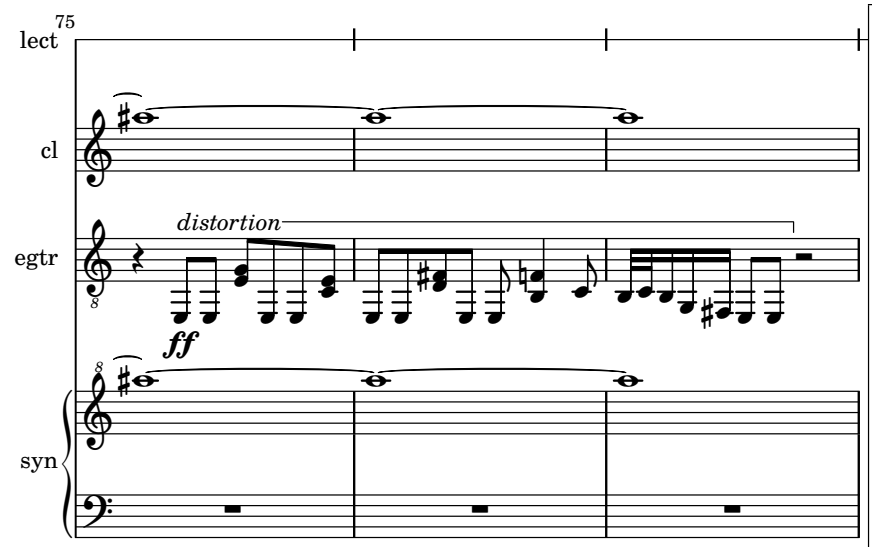

47
cl
vln
egtr
syn
repeat under spoken text


55
lect
cl
vln
egtr
syn
If a piece did not resolve a moment of deviance – if it simply continued without any further reference to that deviance - then we could make a strong argument that the piece was bad, since this transgressive note was meaningless beyond simply being a moment of deviance. The note would be so puzzling that we might even conclude that the performers had made a mistake.

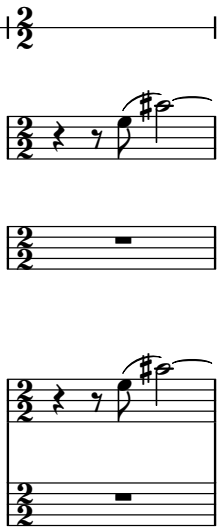


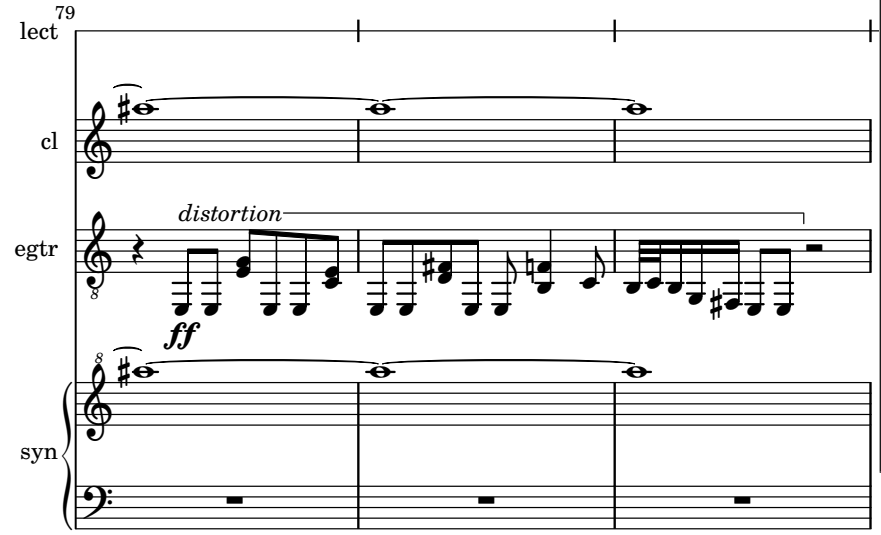


That example also had a moment of deviance. The deviant moment was much weirder. It was what we might call stylistic transgression.

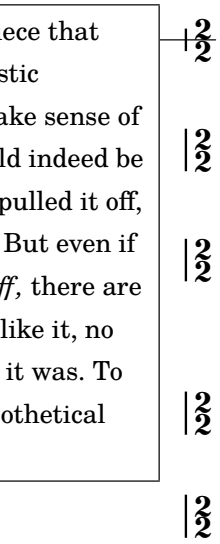


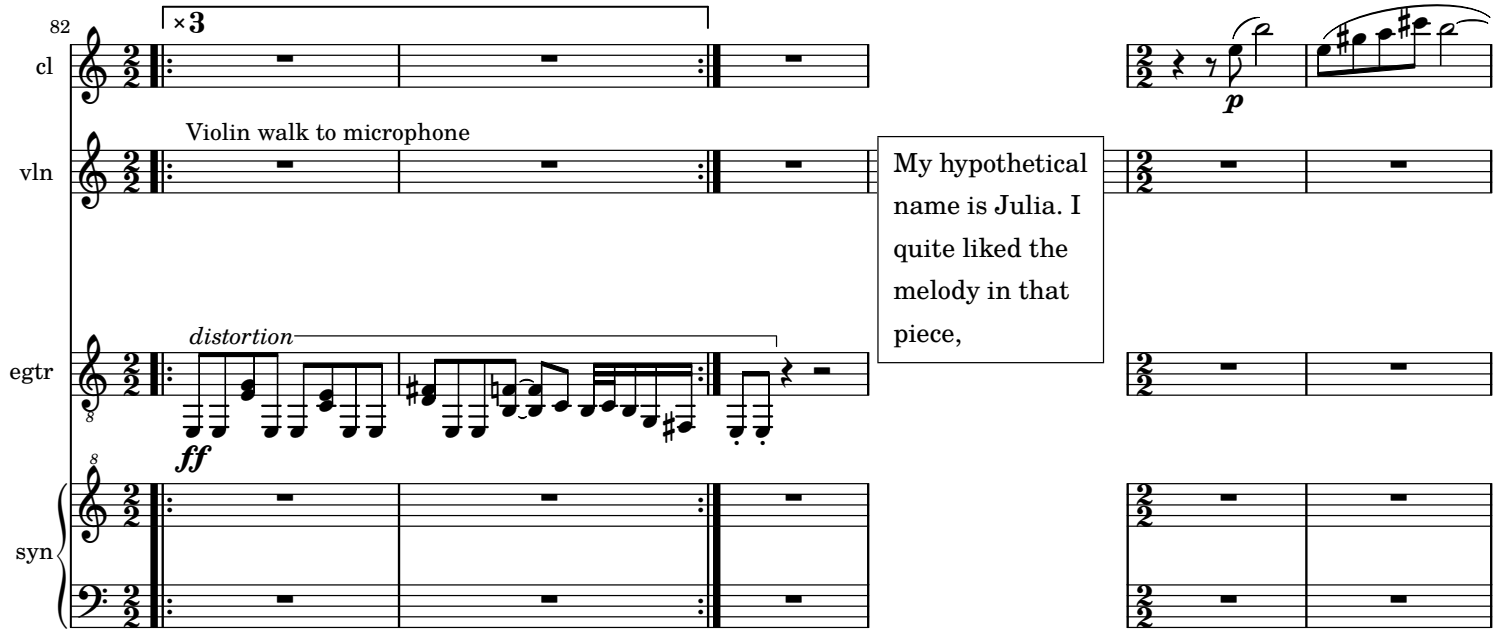
So far we have considered the matter of bad music primarily from a psychological perspective. We've explored whether an understanding of our mental processes can provide an objective basis for our judgements. But, the factors that shape our mental processes are much broader then we have acknowledged. We'll now look at why a piece of music might produce different reactions and what role context plays in our judgements.

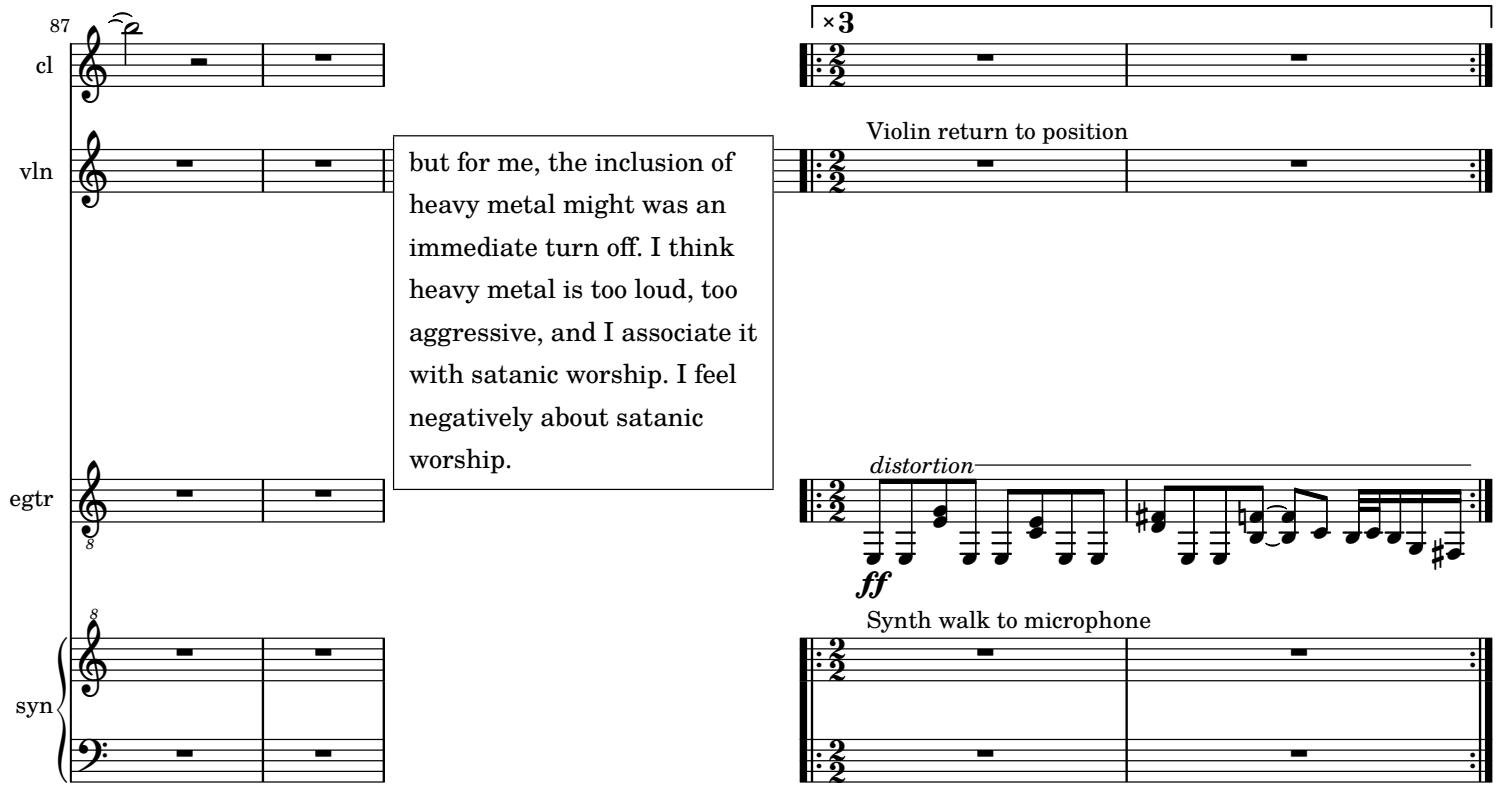


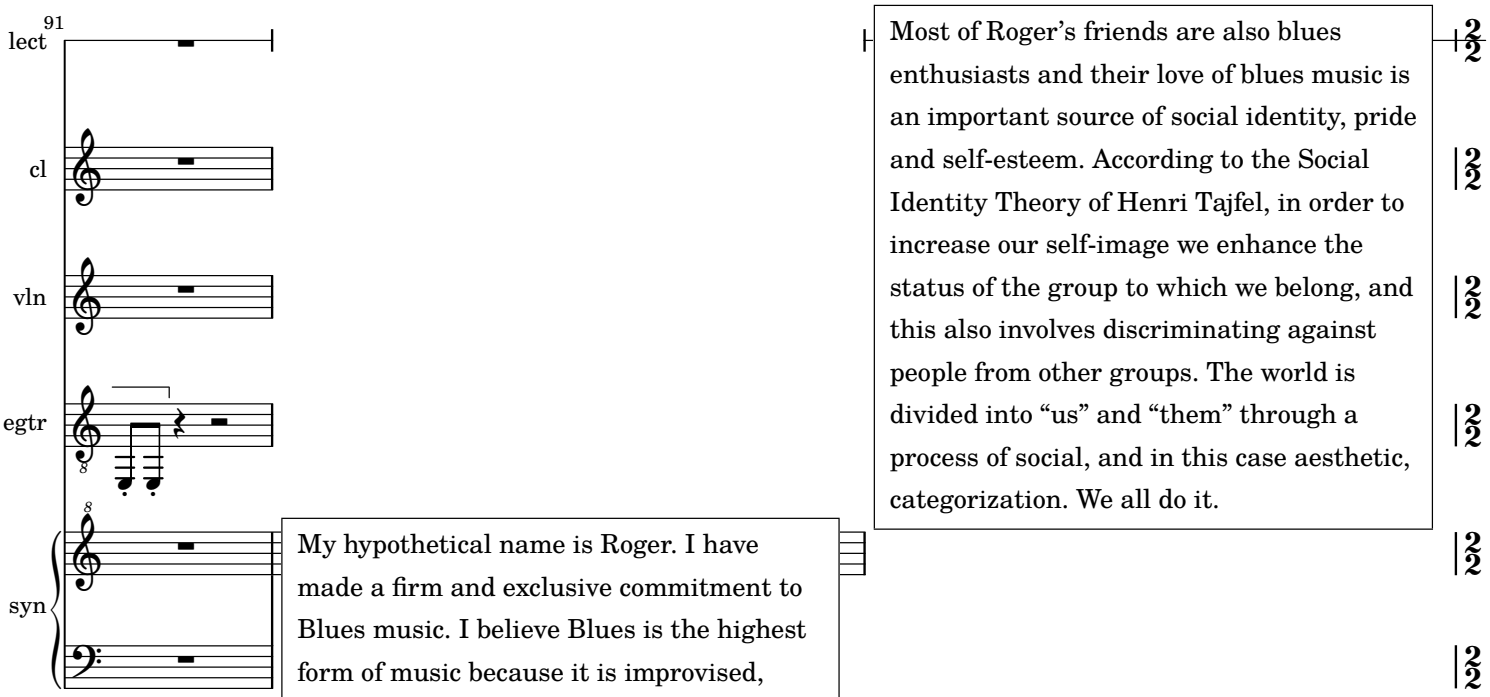


Imagine a continuation of the piece that attempted to reconcile this stylistic transgression. Attempting to make sense of that heavy metal confusion would indeed be an ambitious piece! If the piece pulled it off, that really would be something. But even if it did in some sense did *pull it off,* there are still lots of people who wouldn't like it, no matter how good and successful it was. To explore this, let's consider 3 hypothetical individuals.



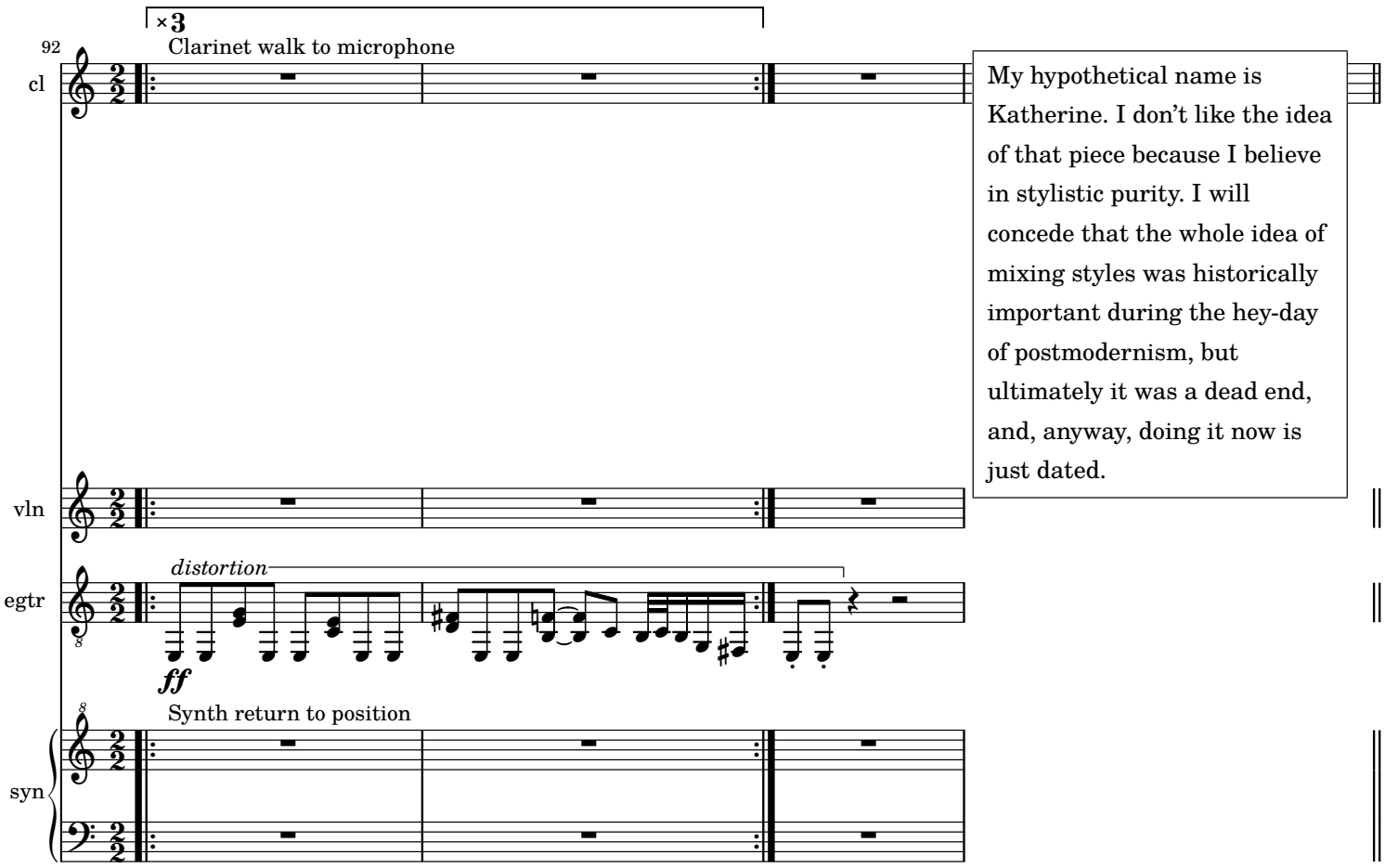

82
×3
cl
vln
Violin walk to microphone
egtr
distortion
ff
syn
p
My hypothetical name is Julia. I quite liked the melody in that piece,


87
cl
vln
but for me, the inclusion of heavy metal might was an immediate turn off. I think heavy metal is too loud, too aggressive, and I associate it with satanic worship. I feel negatively about satanic worship.
egtr
syn
×3
Violin return to position
distortion
ff
Synth walk to microphone

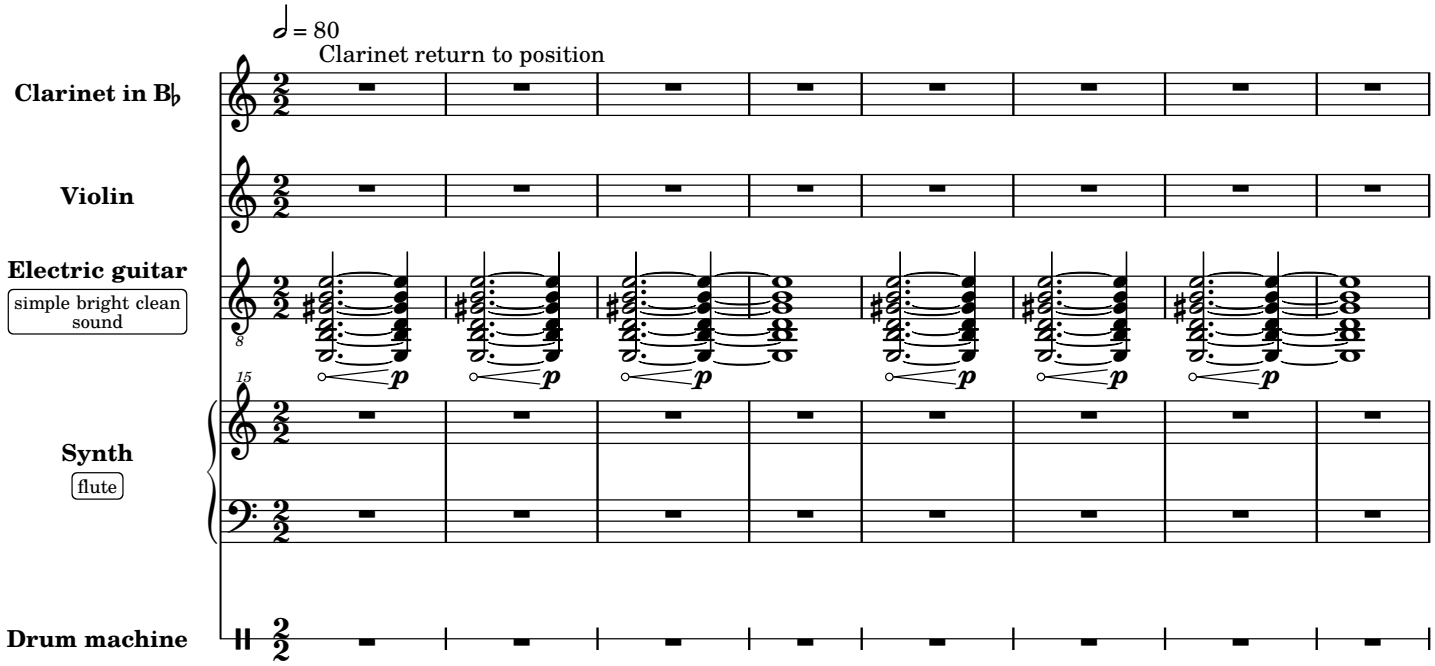


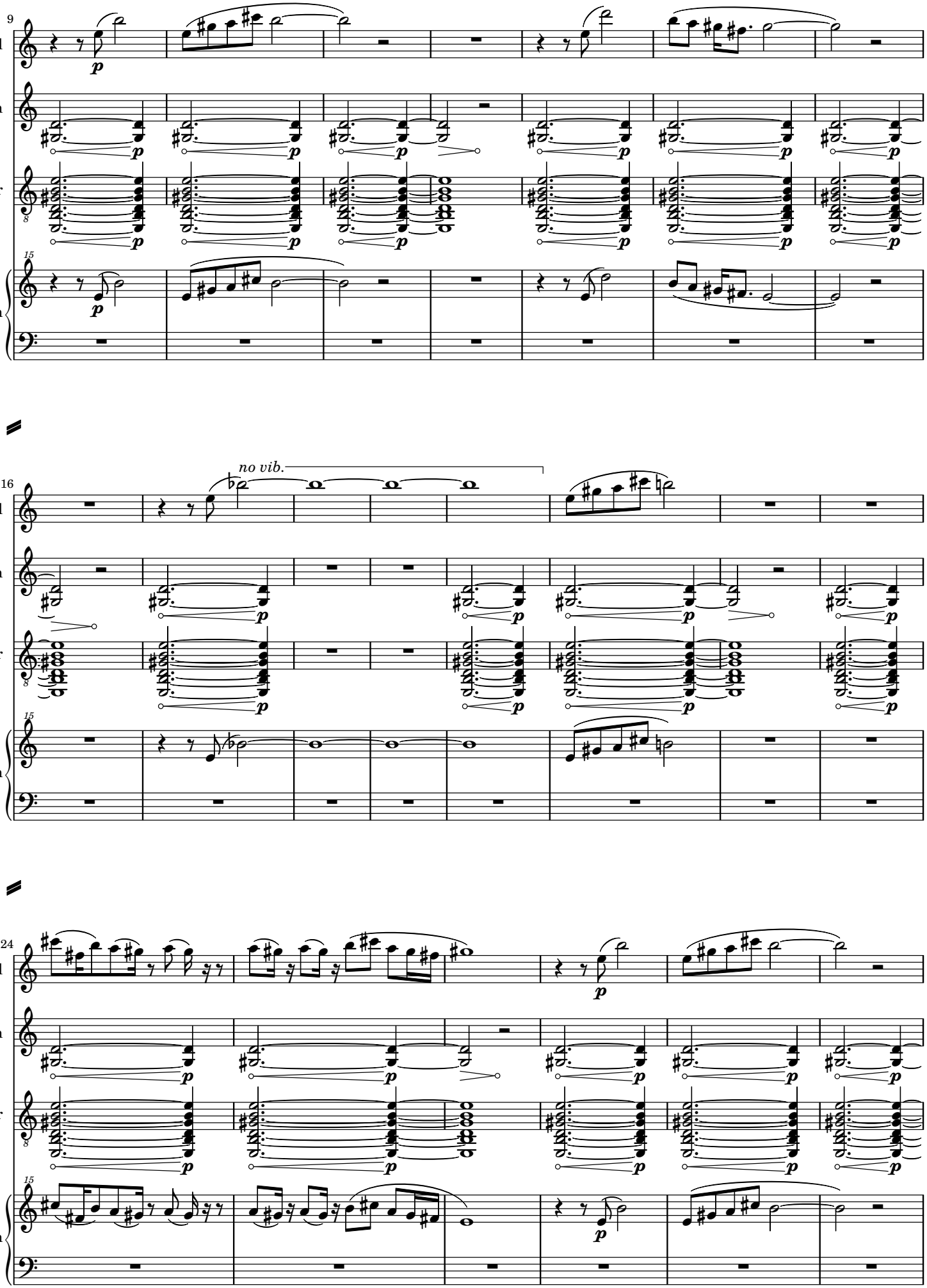
My hypothetical name is Roger. I have made a firm and exclusive commitment to Blues music. I believe Blues is the highest form of music because it is improvised, expressive, and deals with personal woes in a harsh world. The idea of an instrumental piece trying to reconcile two unrelated styles sounds bad to me. It has no lyrics and it sounds like an academic exercise. I think music should be concerned with the expression of feelings.

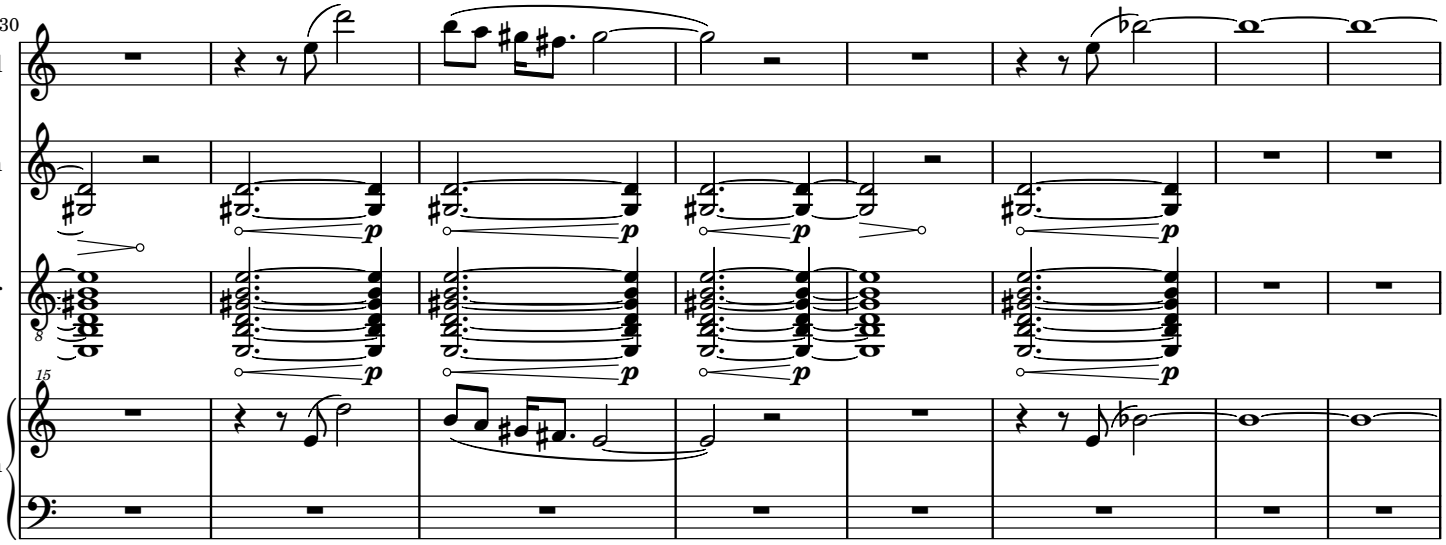
Most of Roger's friends are also blues enthusiasts and their love of blues music is an important source of social identity, pride and self-esteem. According to the Social Identity Theory of Henri Tajfel, in order to increase our self-image we enhance the status of the group to which we belong, and this also involves discriminating against people from other groups. The world is divided into "us" and "them" through a process of social, and in this case aesthetic, categorization. We all do it.

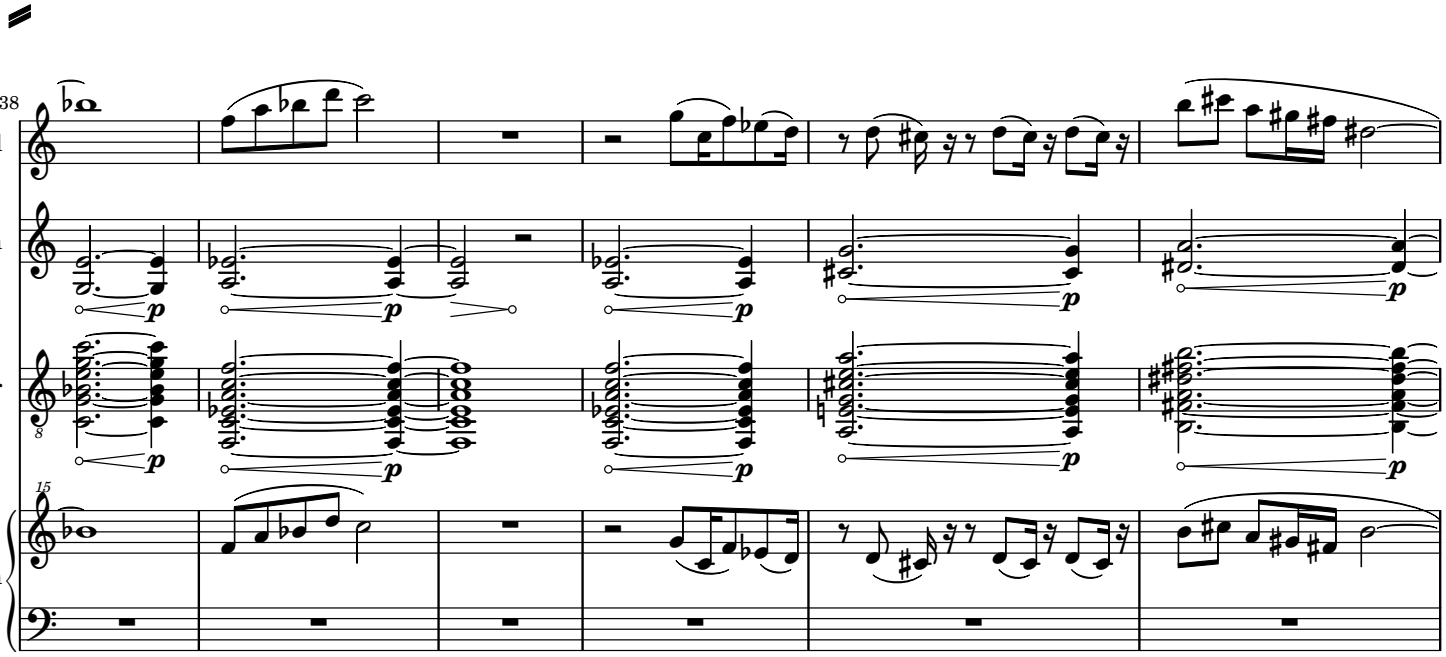


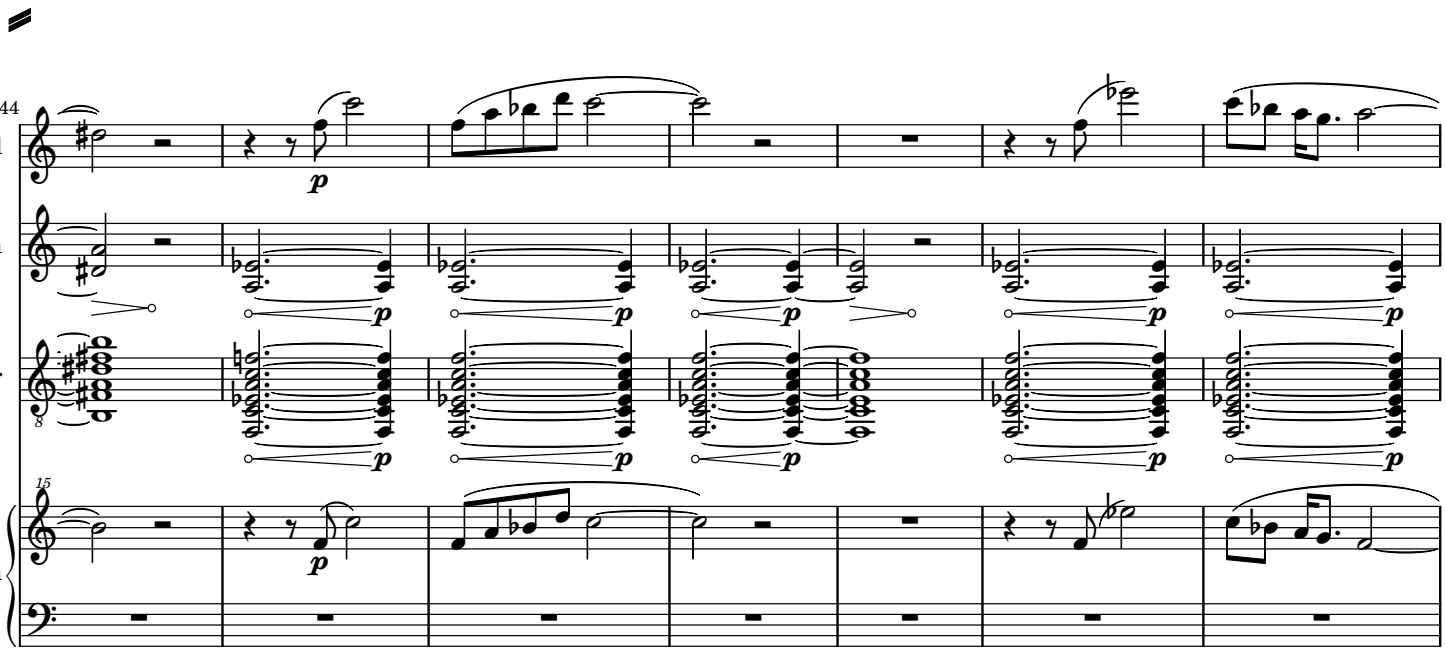
Heavy Metal Piece

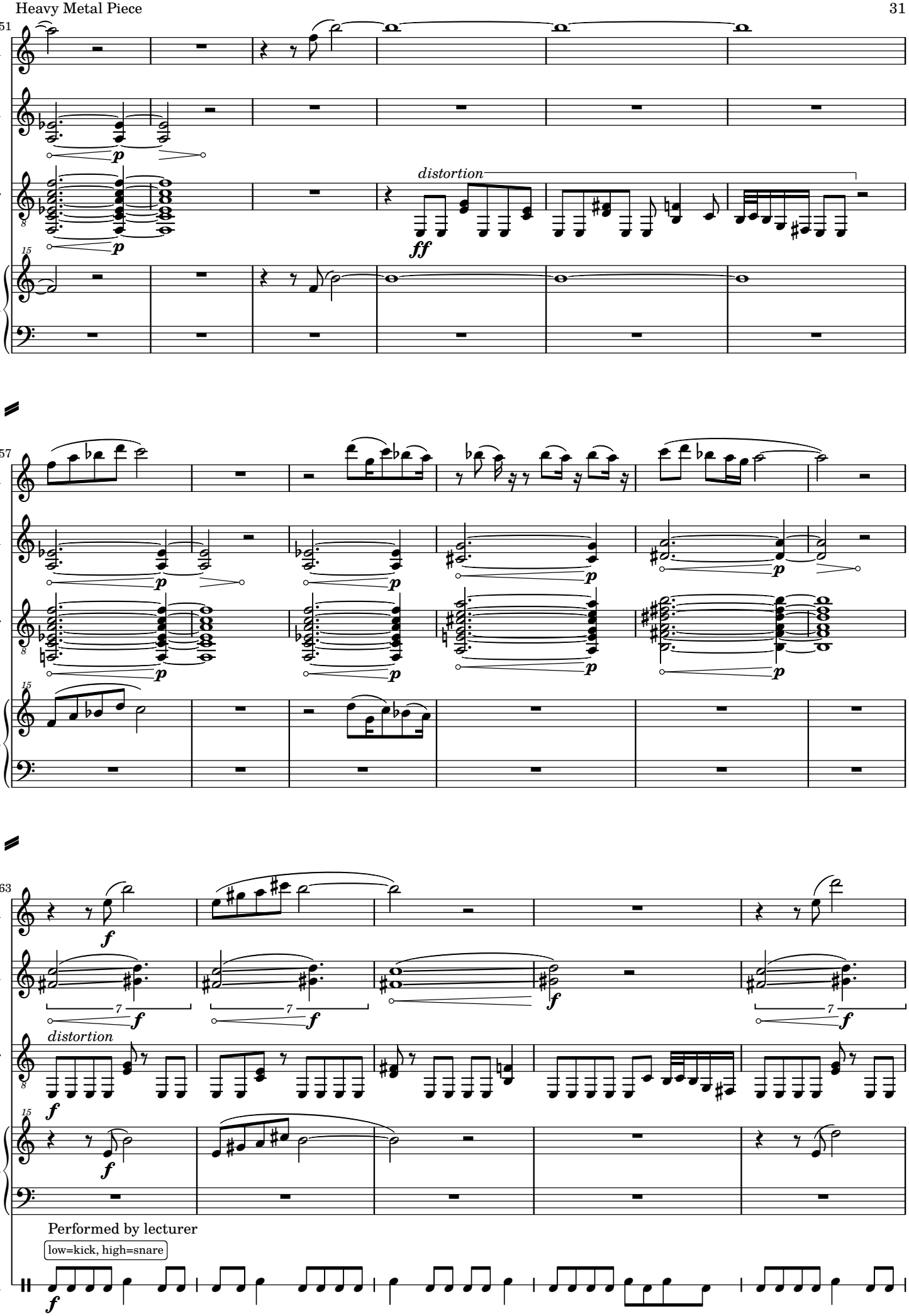


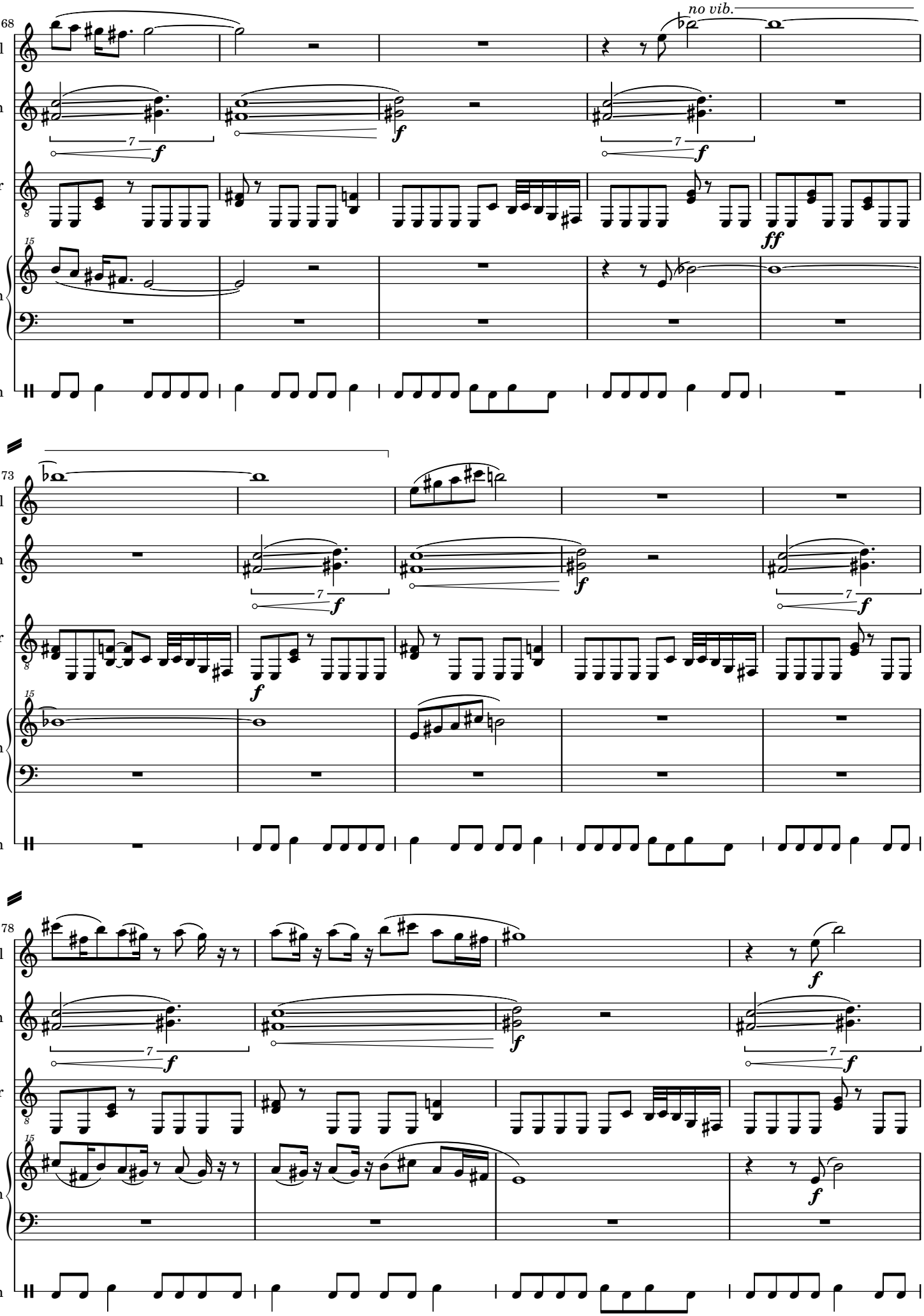

9
cl
vln
egtr
15
syn
p
16
no vib.
24

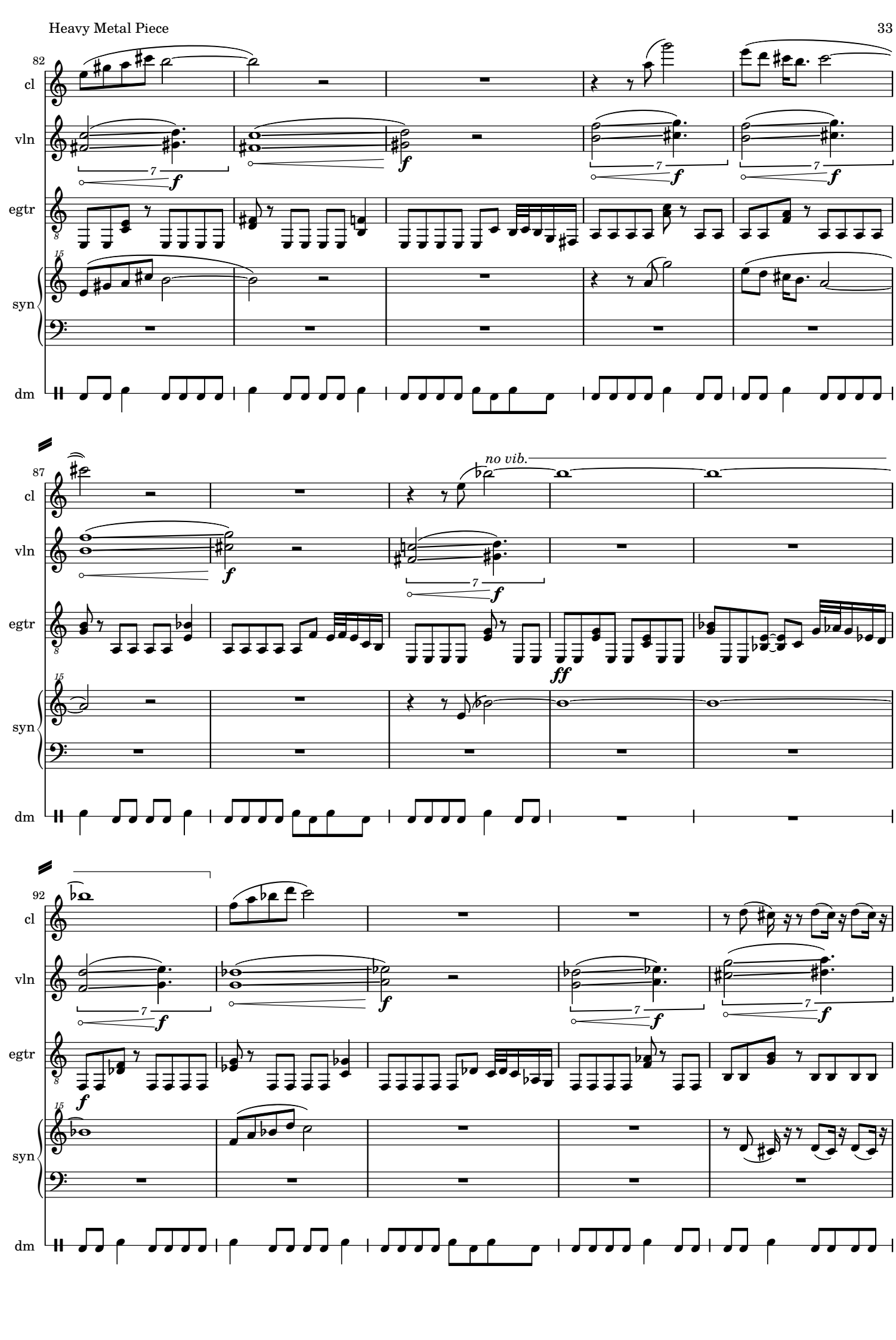

30
cl
vln
egtr
15
syn
p

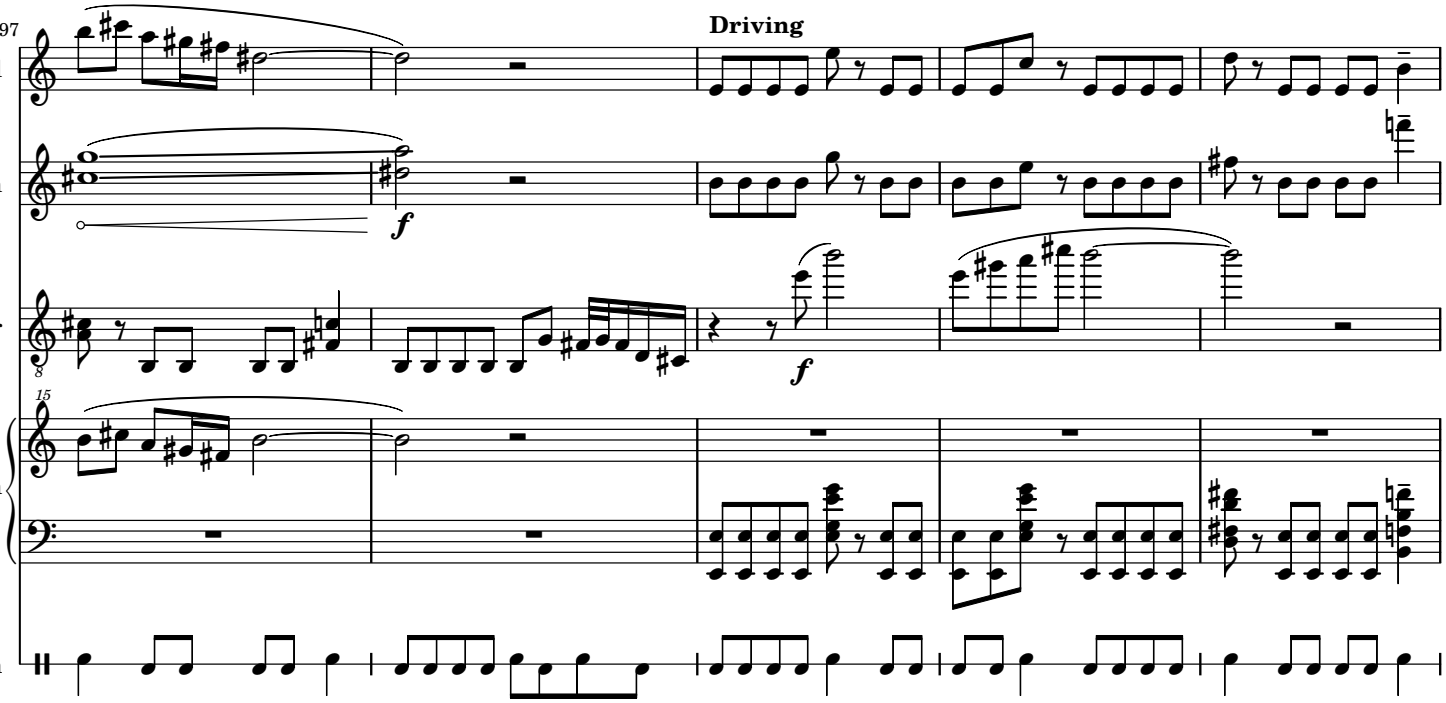

38
cl
vln
egtr
15
syn
p

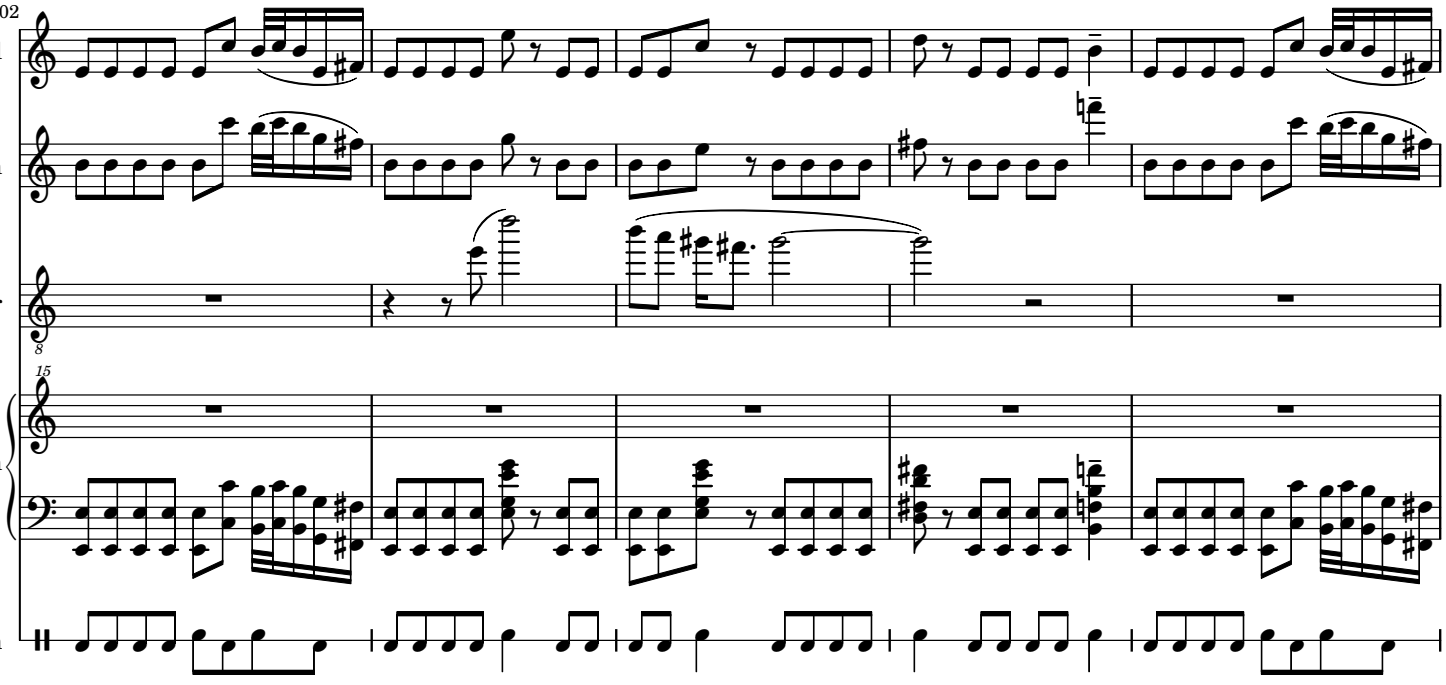

44
cl
vln
egtr
15
syn
p

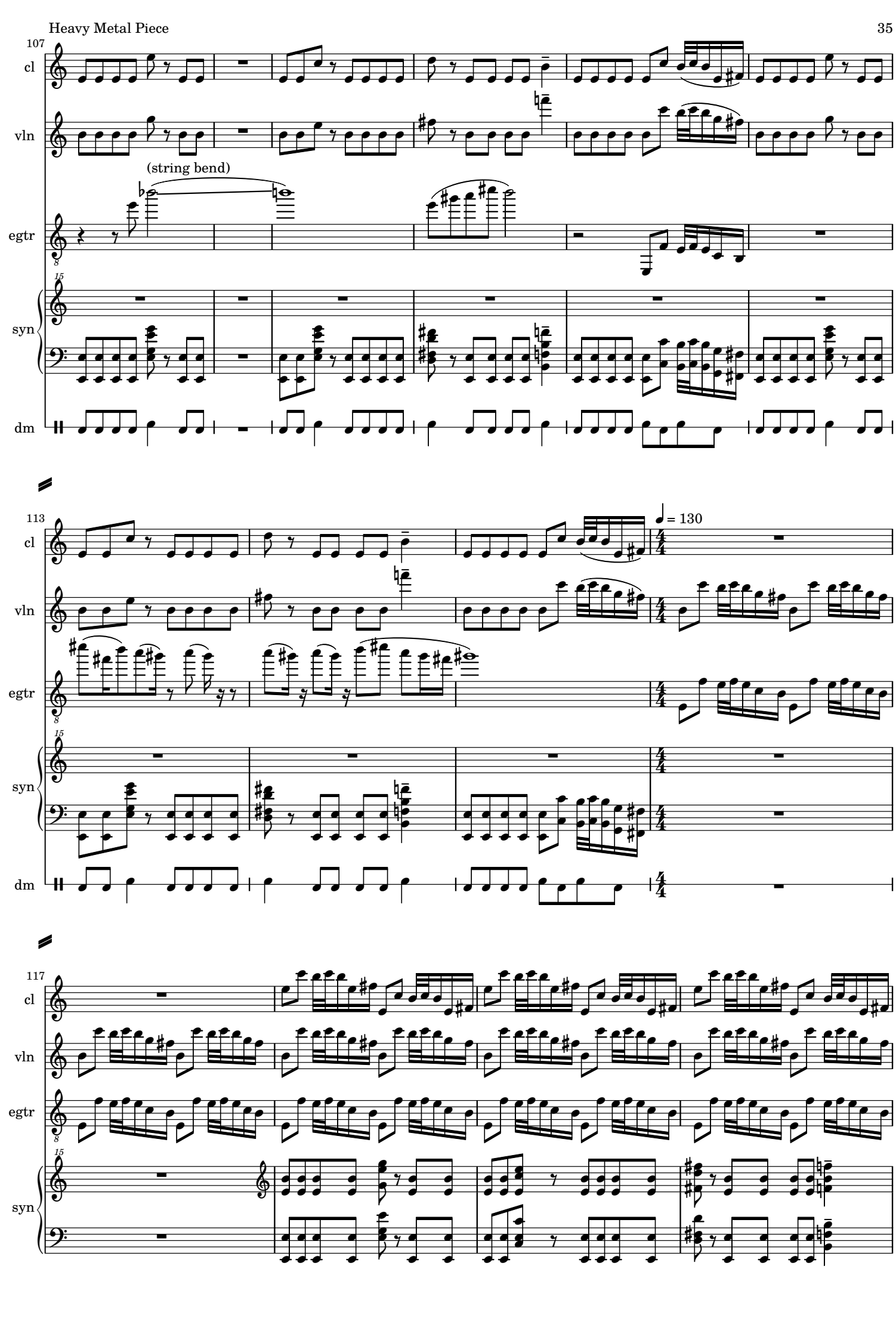

51
cl
vln
egtr
distortion
15
syn
57
63
Performed by lecturer
low=kick, high=snare
dm

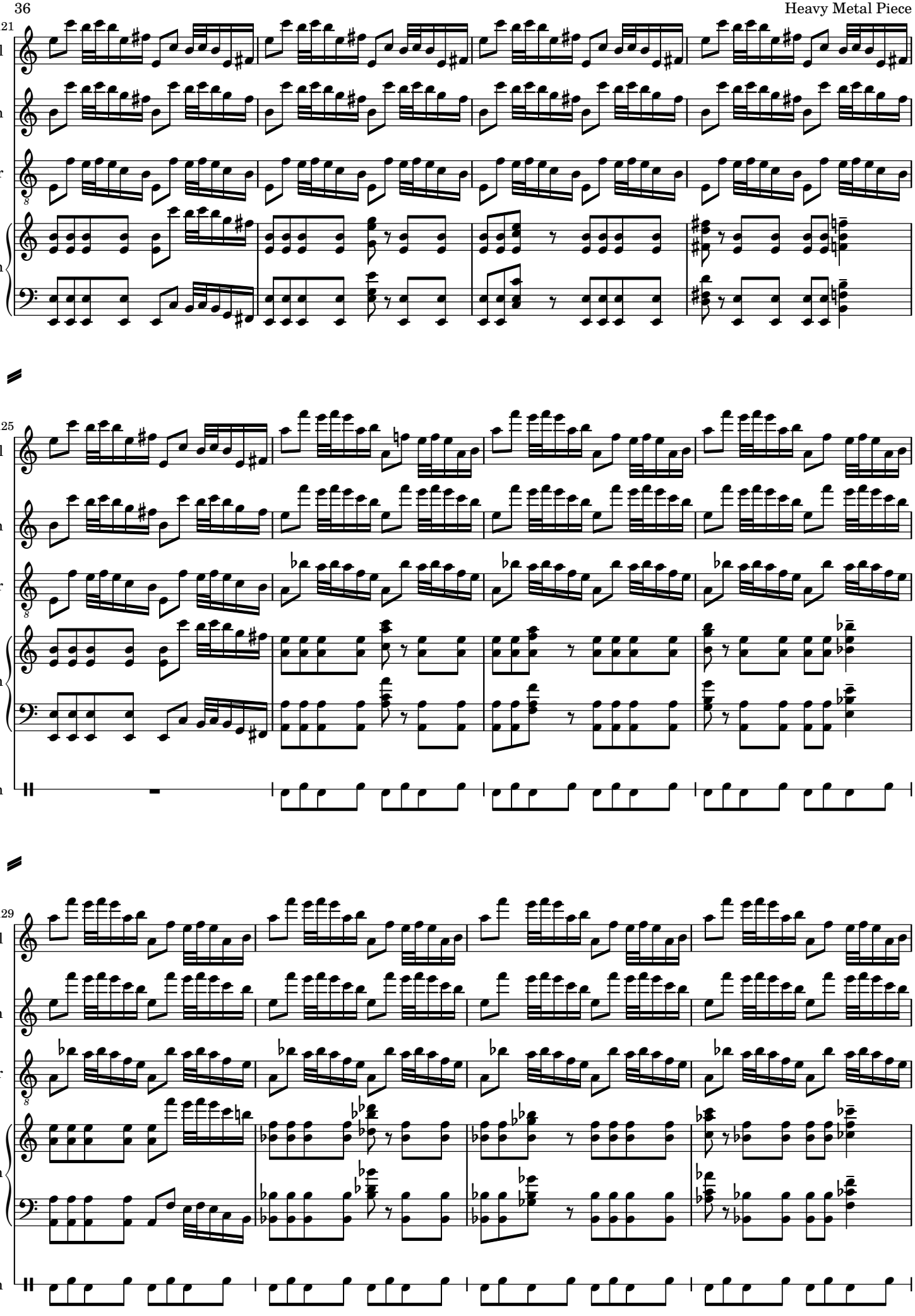

68
cl
vln
egtr
syn
dm
no vib.
f
ff
73
78

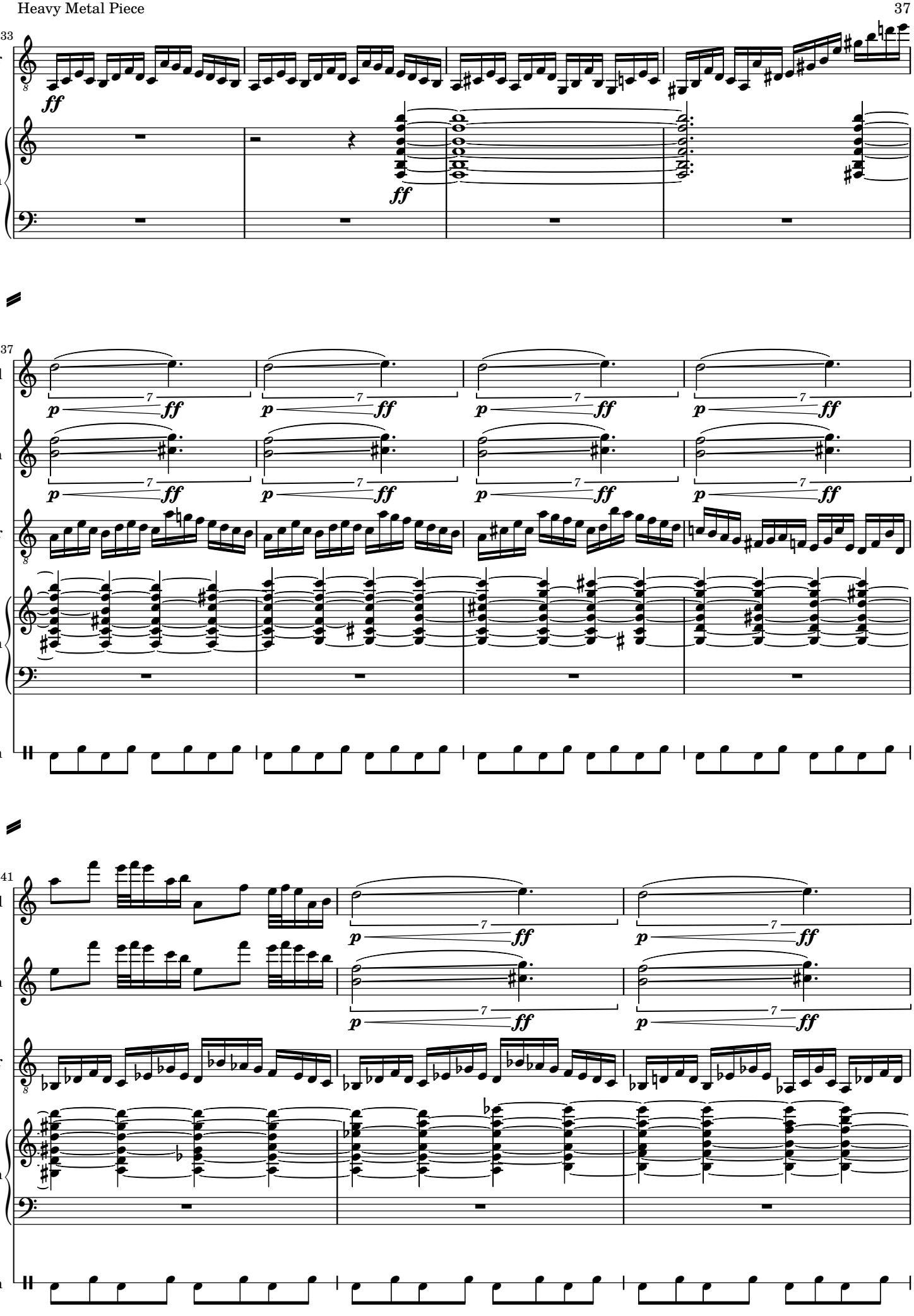

82
cl
vln
egtr
syn
dm
87
no vib.
92

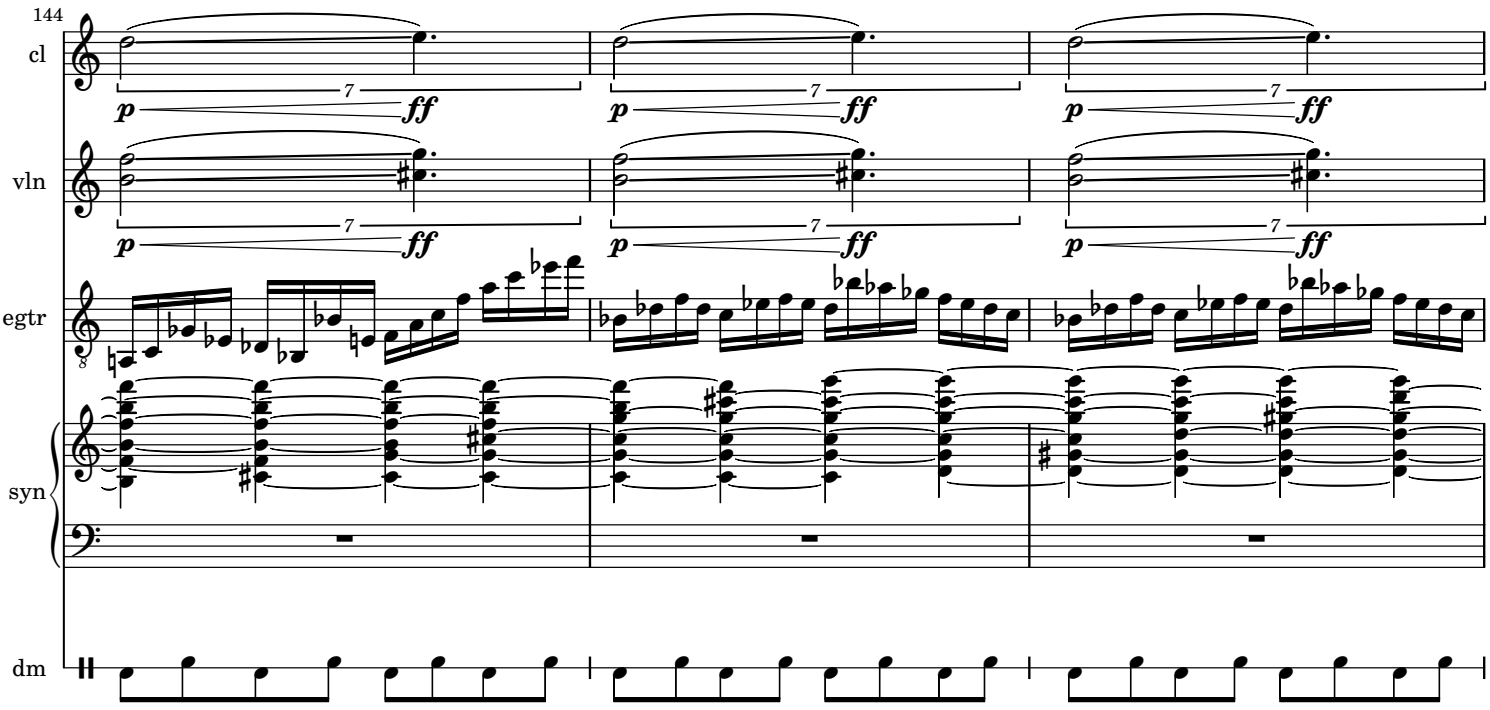

97
Driving
cl
vln
egtr
15
syn
dm

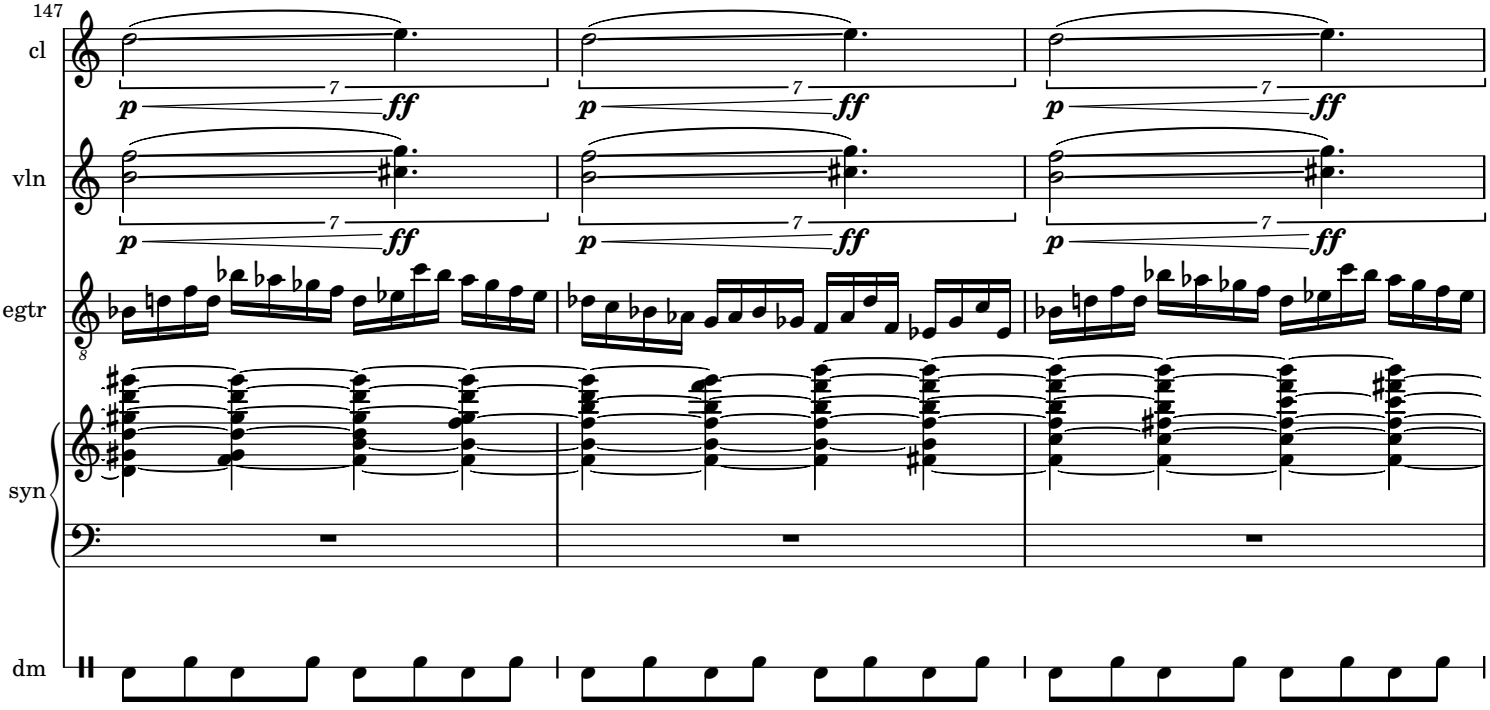

102
cl
vln
egtr
15
syn
dm

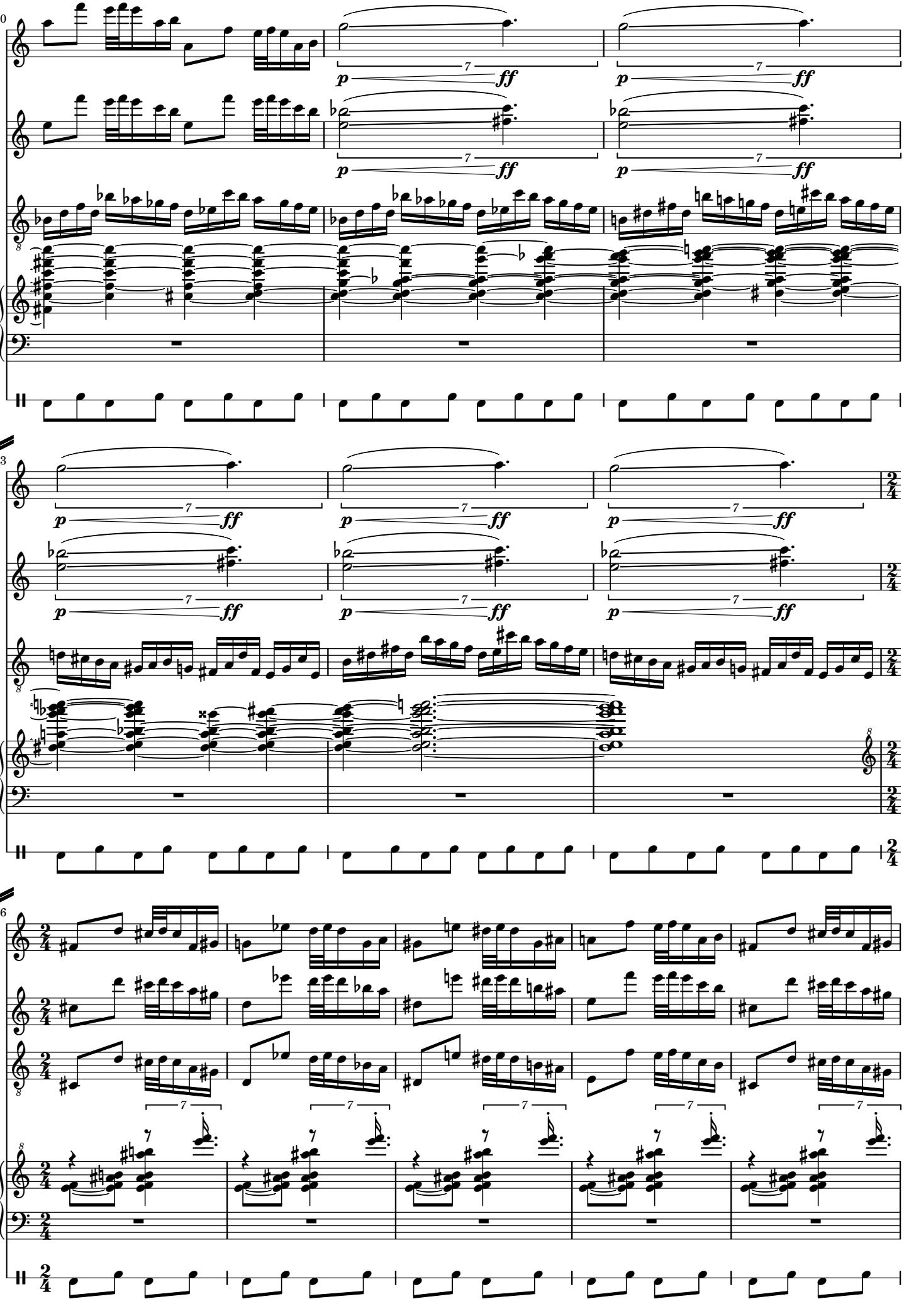

107
cl
vln
(string bend)
egtr
15
syn
dm
113
♩ = 130
117

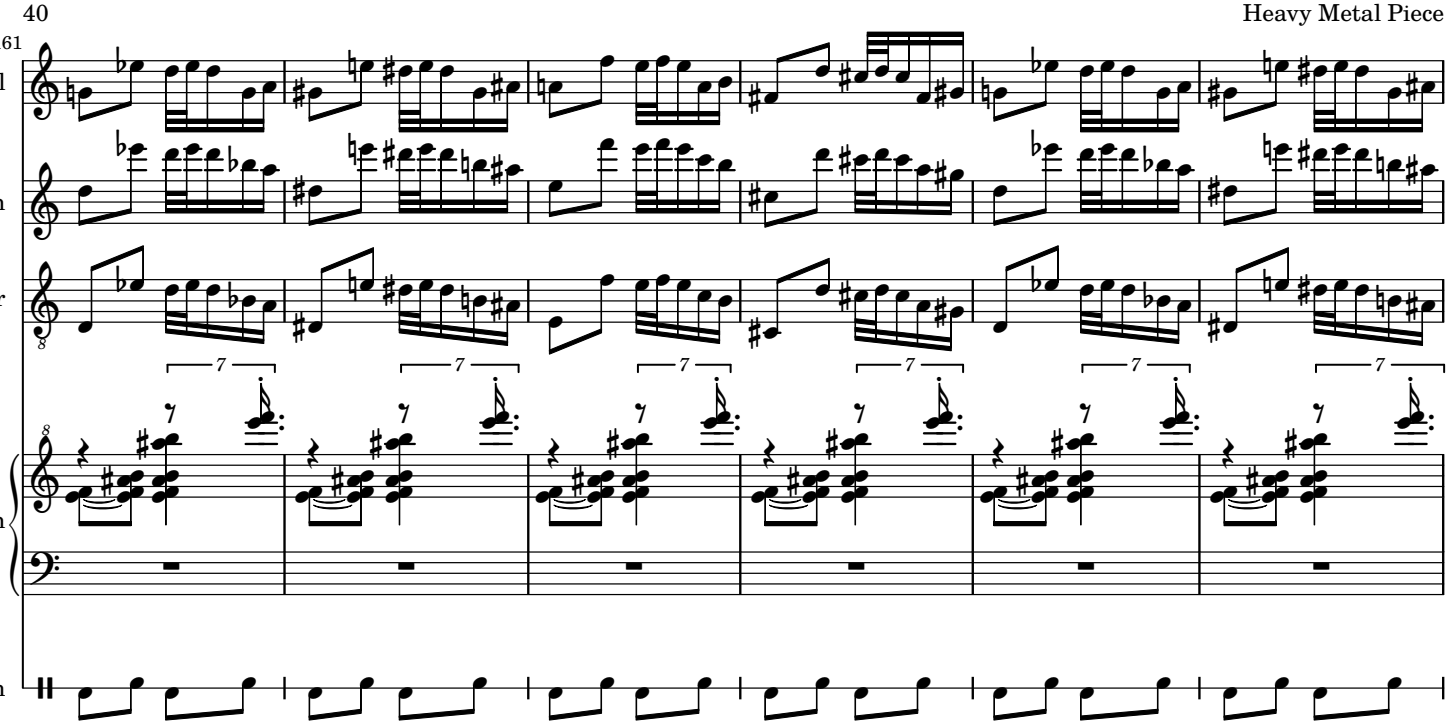

121
cl
vln
egtr
syn
125
cl
vln
egtr
syn
dm
129
cl
vln
egtr
syn
dm

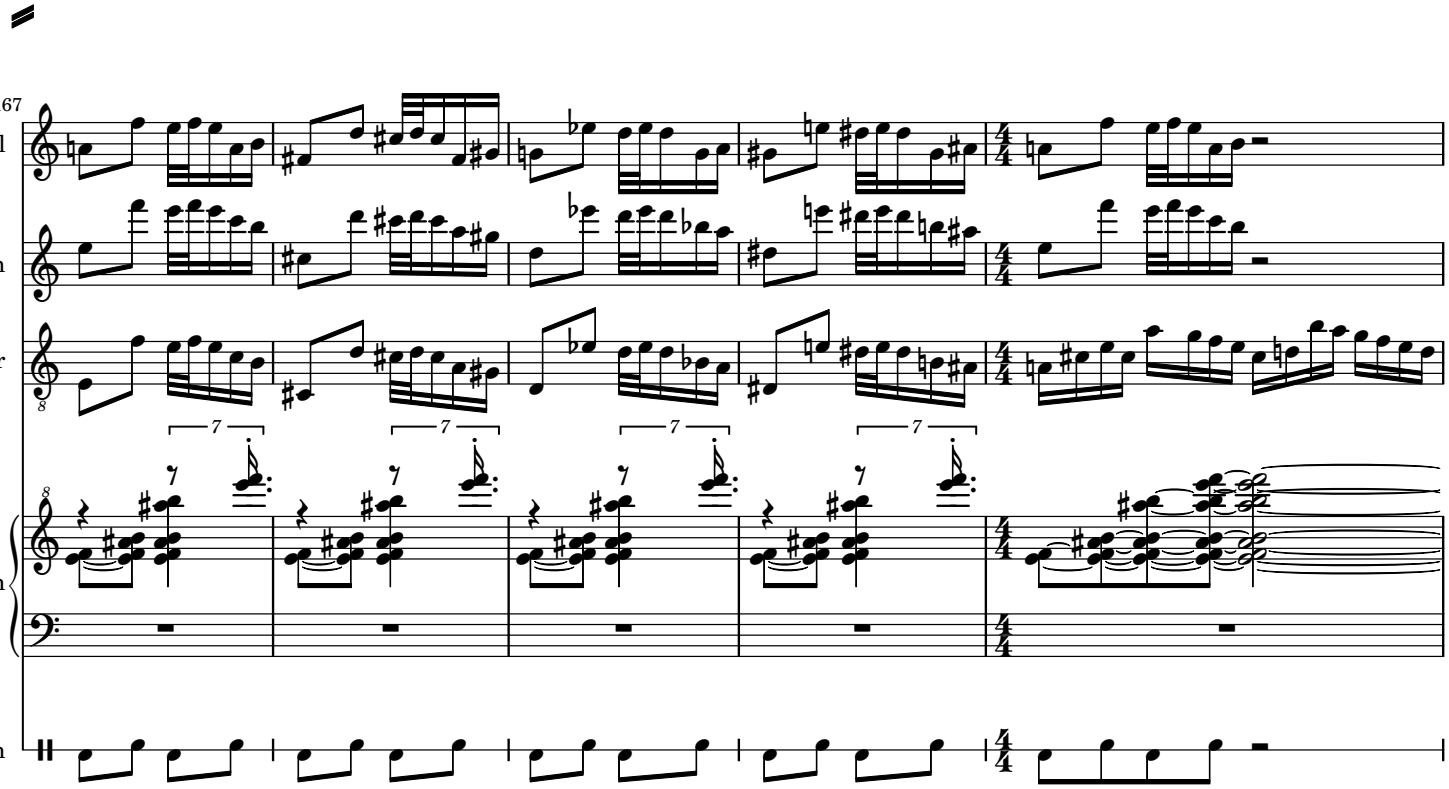

133
egtr
ff
syn
ff
137
cl
p
7
ff
vln
egtr
syn
dm
141
cl
vln
egtr
syn
dm

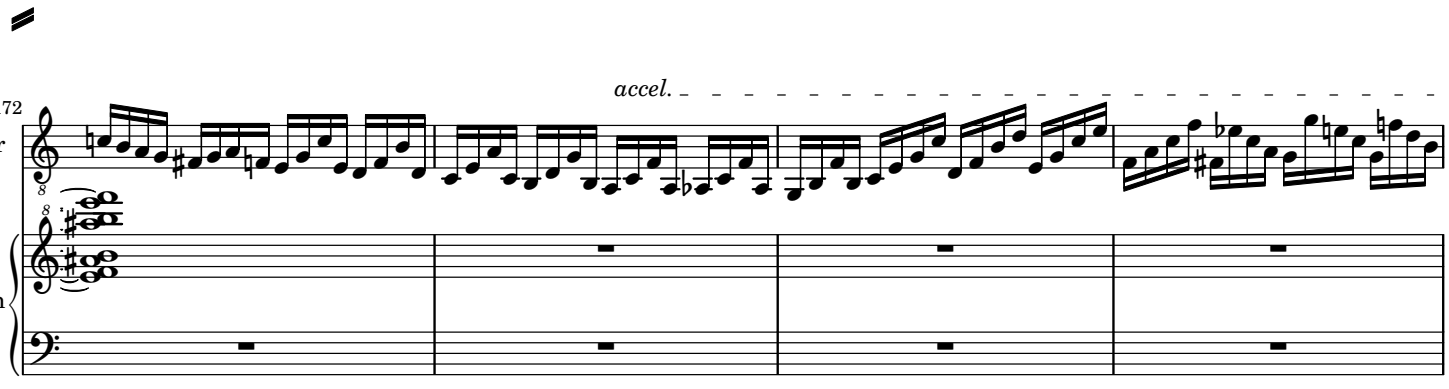

144
cl
vln
egtr
syn
dm
p
ff
7

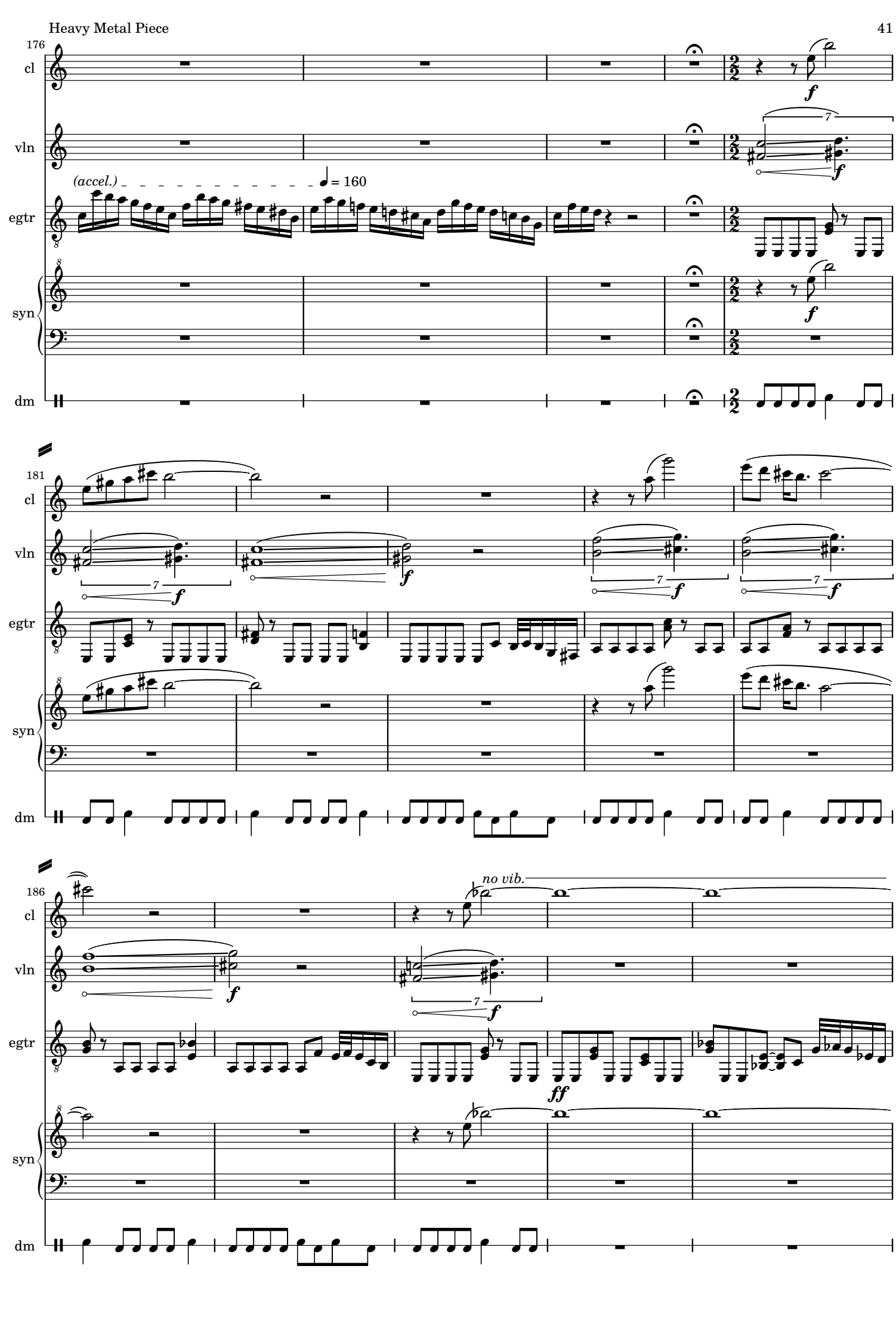

147
cl
vln
egtr
syn
dm
p
ff
7

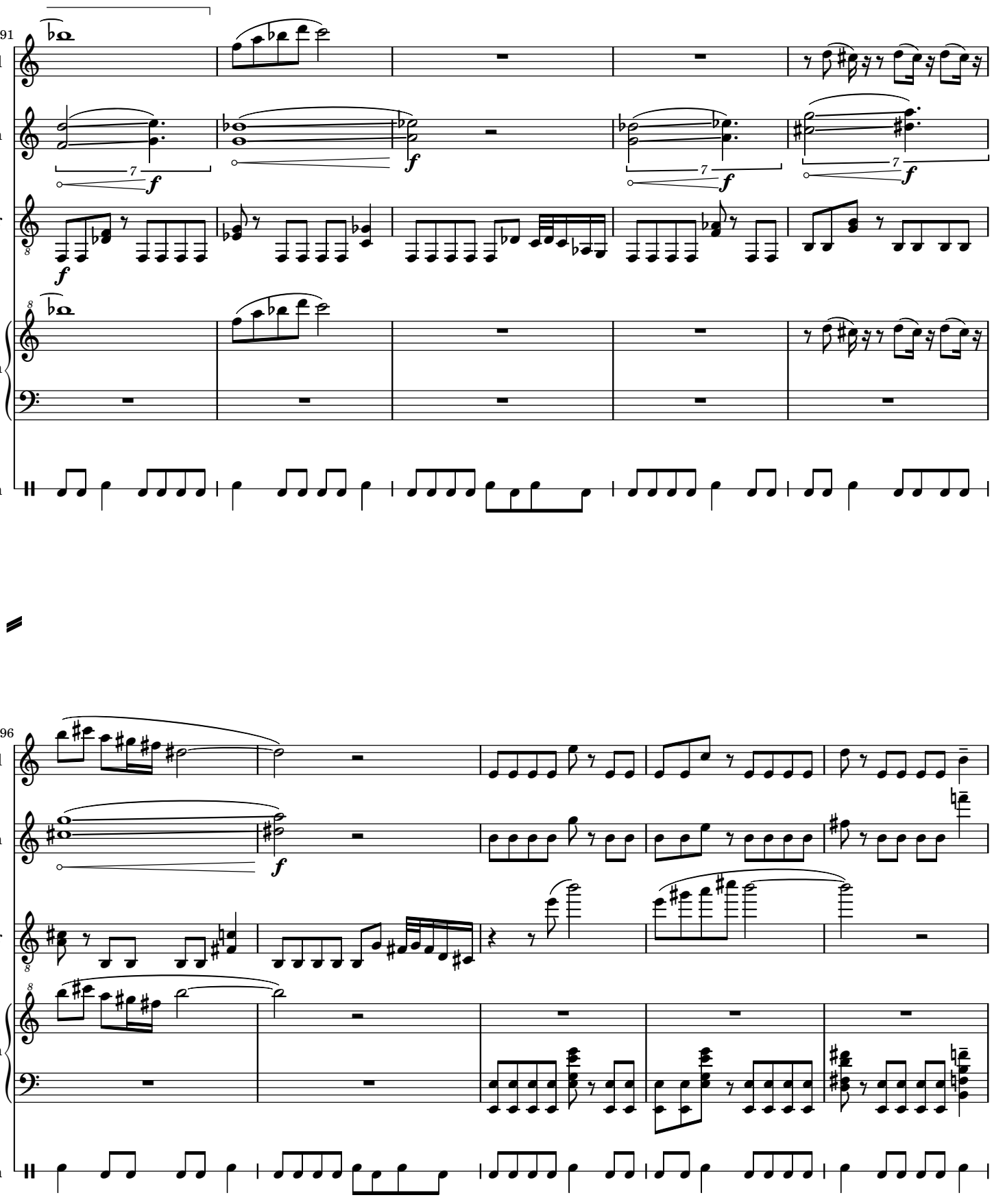

150
cl
vln
egtr
syn
dm
p
ff
153
156

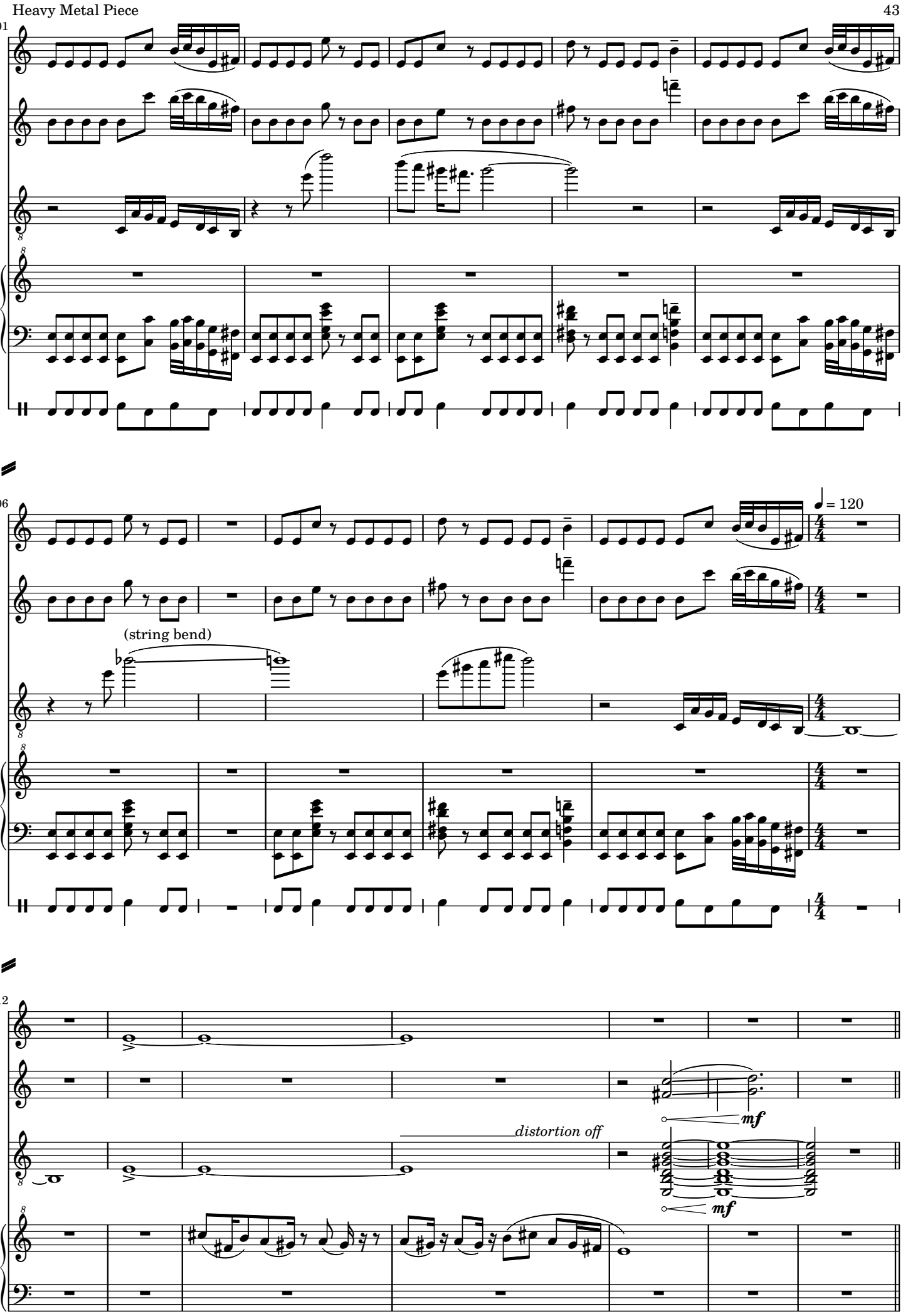

161
cl
vln
egtr
syn
dm
7


167
cl
vln
egtr
syn
dm
7
4/4


172
accel.
egtr
syn

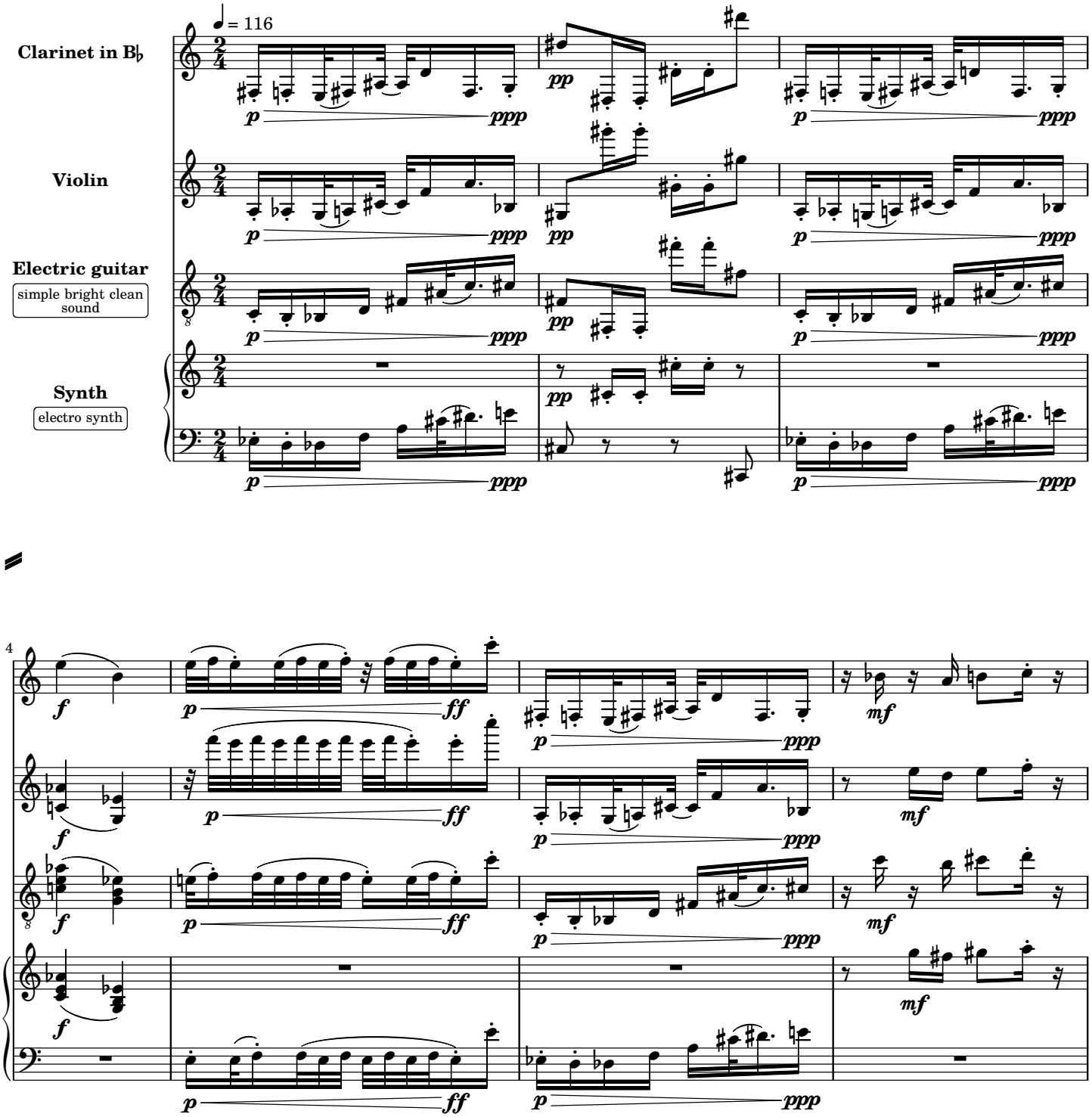

176
cl
vln
egtr
syn
dm
(accel.)
= 160
f
7
181
ff
no vib.
186

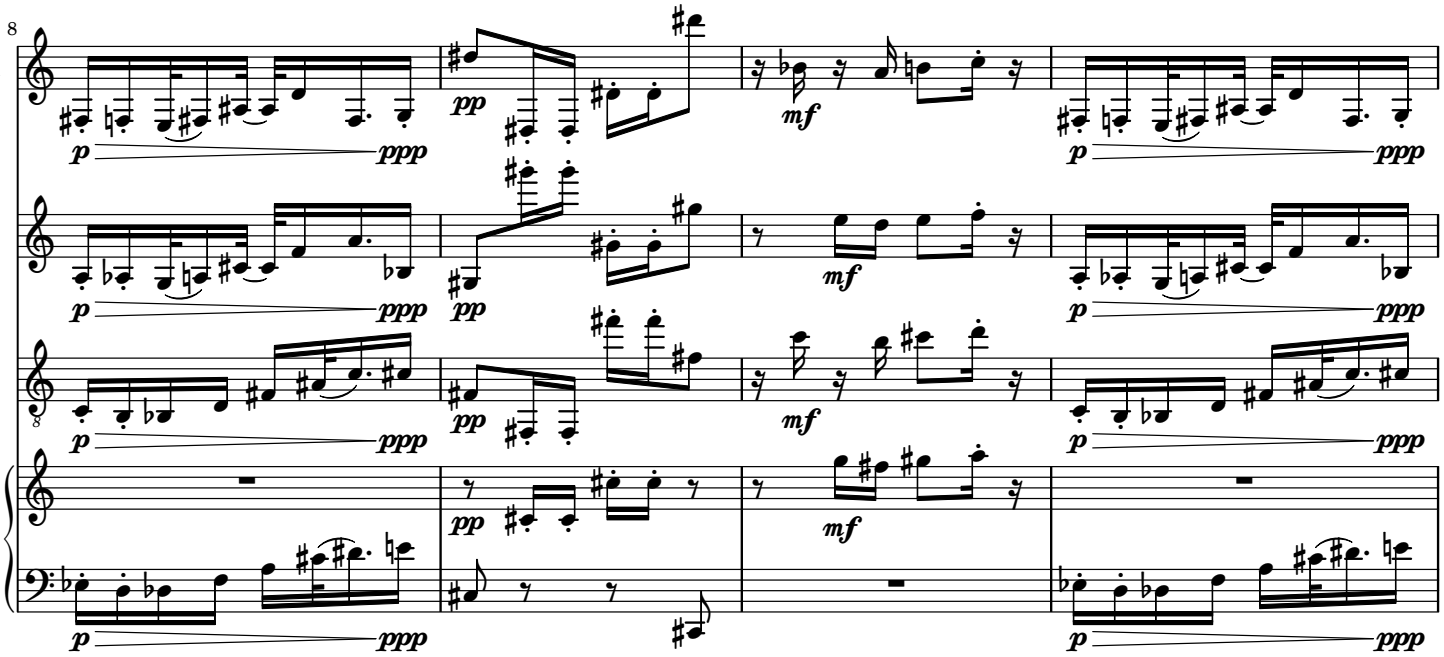

191
cl
vln
egtr
syn
dm
196
cl
vln
egtr
syn
dm

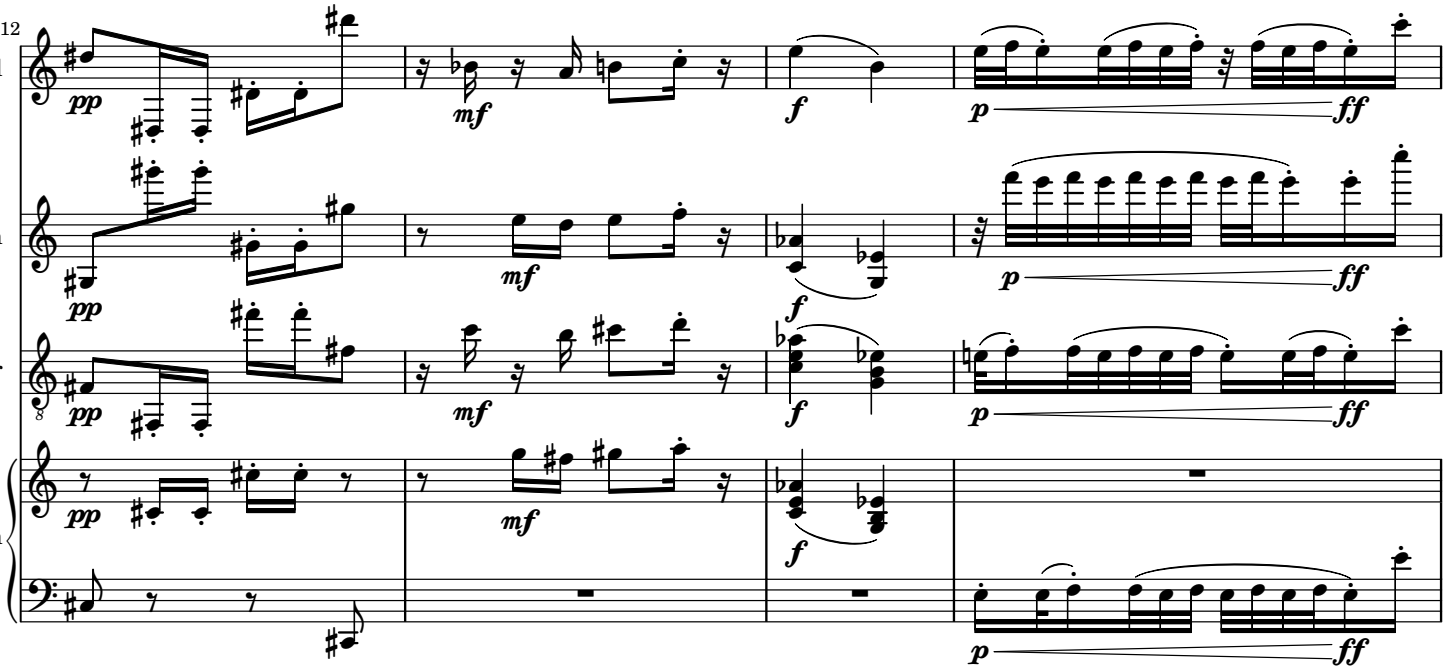

201
cl
vln
egtr
syn
dm
206
(string bend)
♩ = 120
212
distortion off
mf
mf

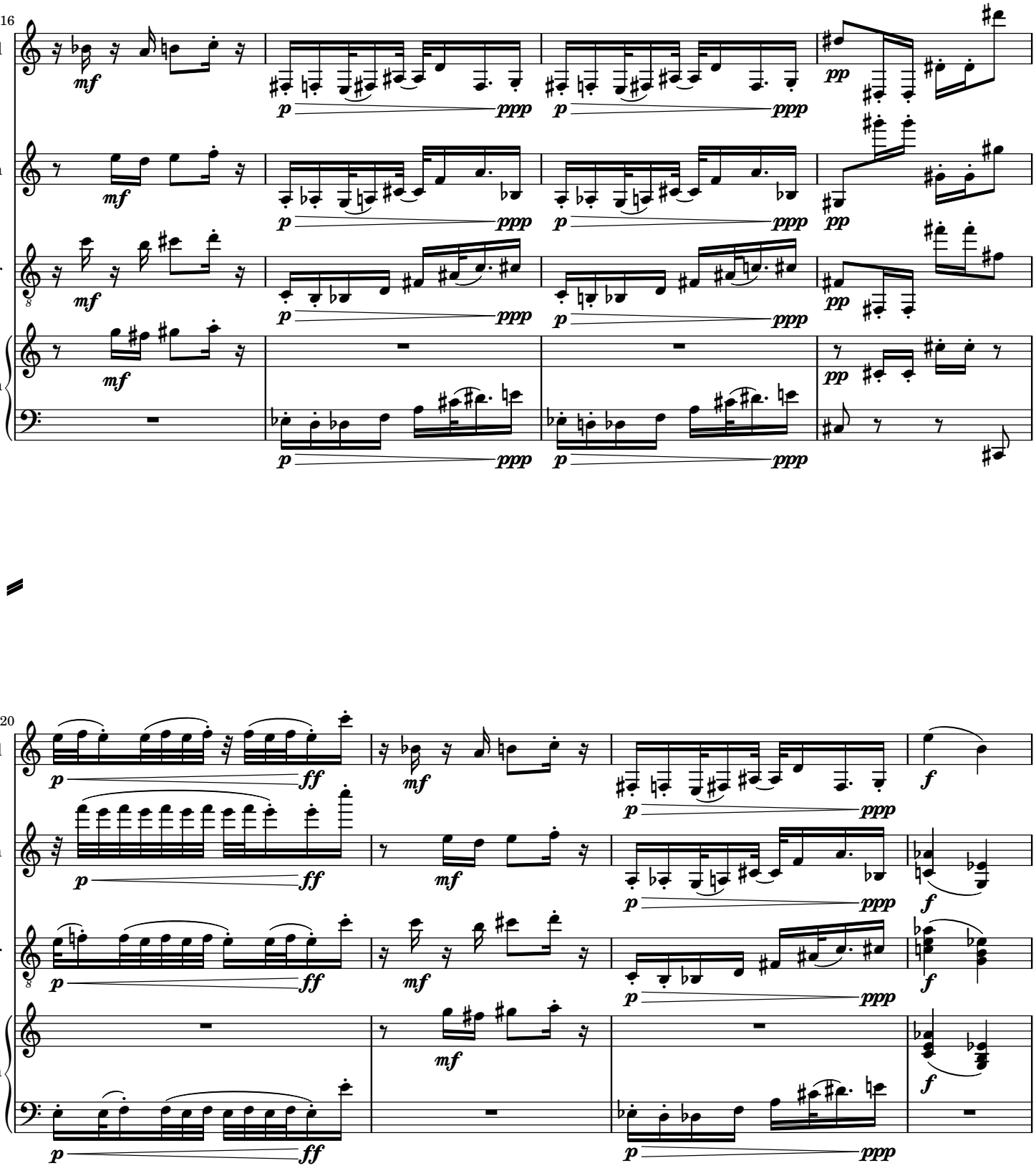
The Exposure Effect is a theory that tries to explain why we may positively revise our opinion of a musical piece. David Huron argues that exposure alone does not provide the full explanation. He argues that we like music when it gives us pleasure, and that being able to predict what will happen next gives us pleasure. When we are unable to predict what will happen next in a musical piece we don't experience pleasure and in turn we don't like the piece. But, if we hear that piece a number of times, we can learn to predict what will happen next, which gives us pleasure and in turn leads us to change our opinion.

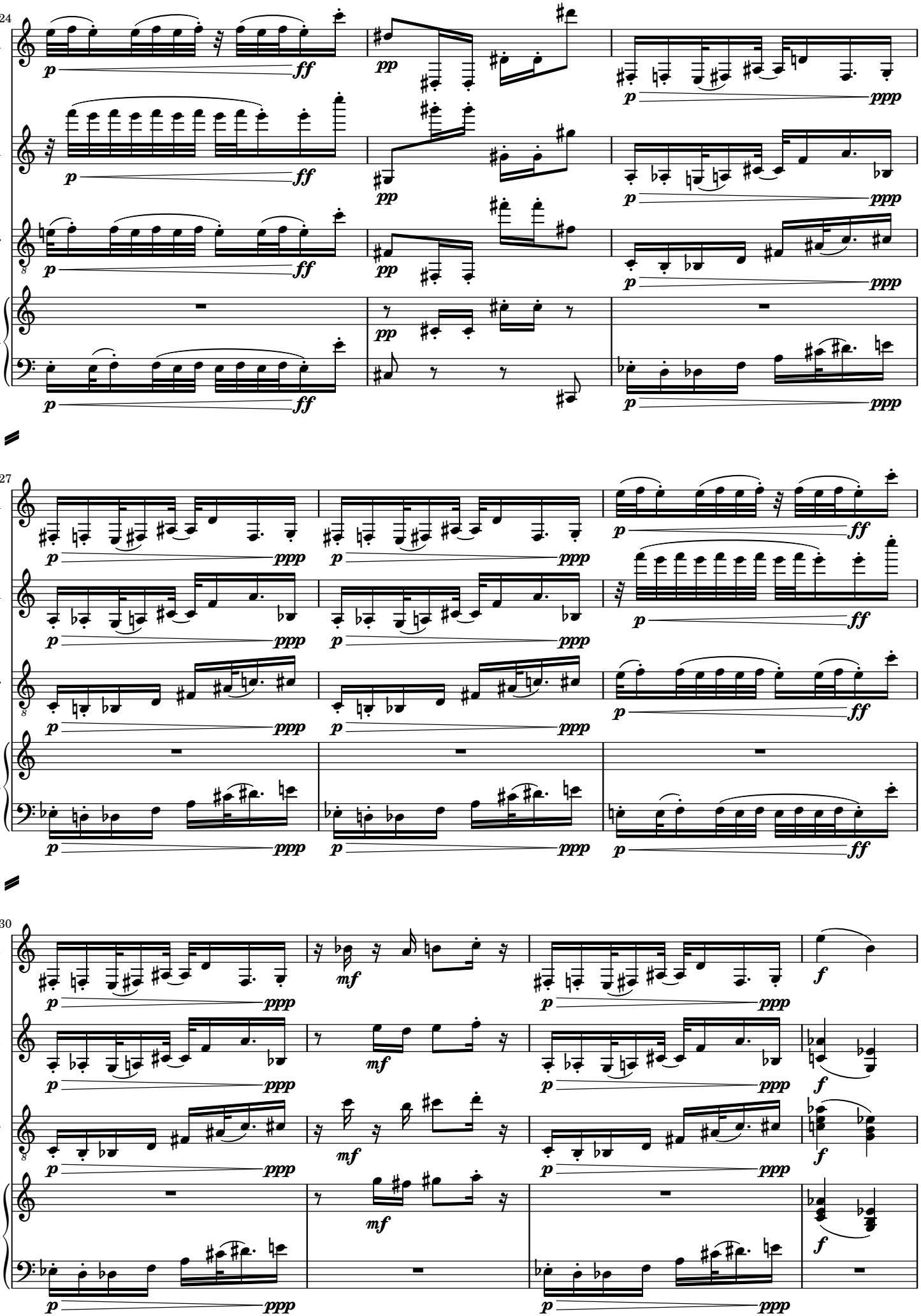
ABCDE Piece No. 1

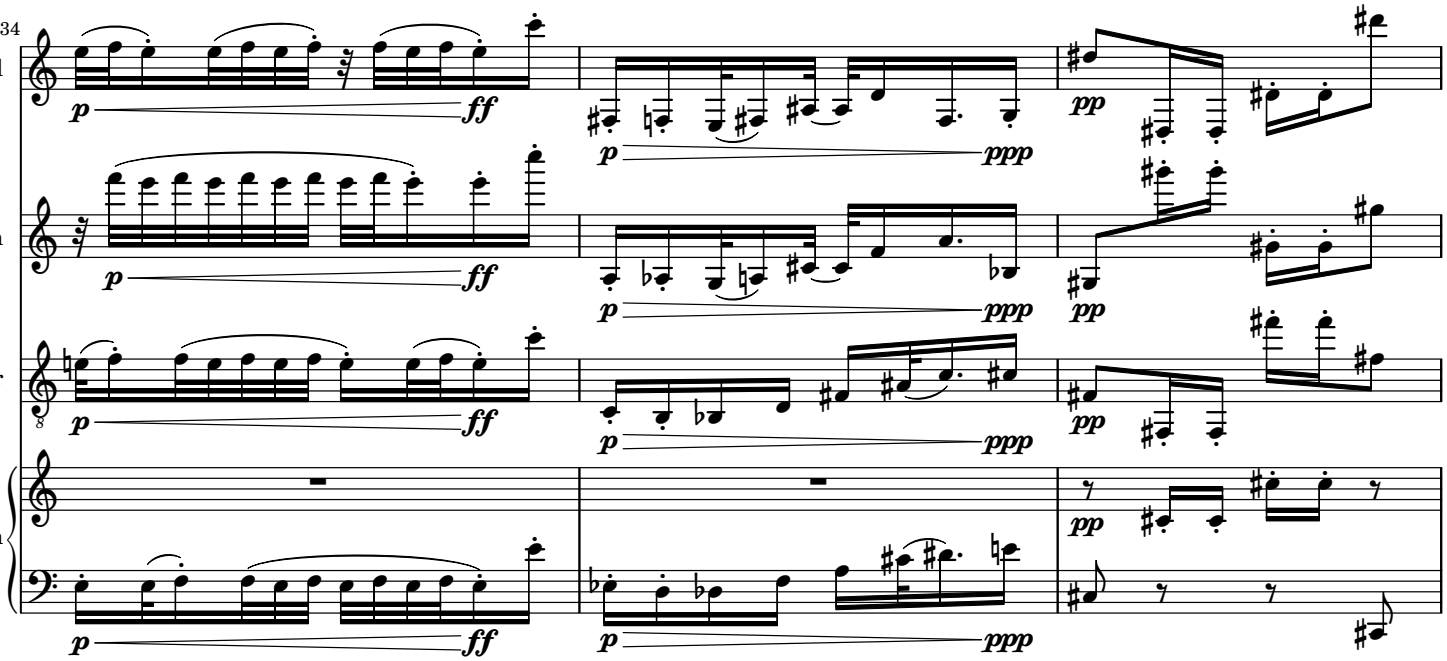


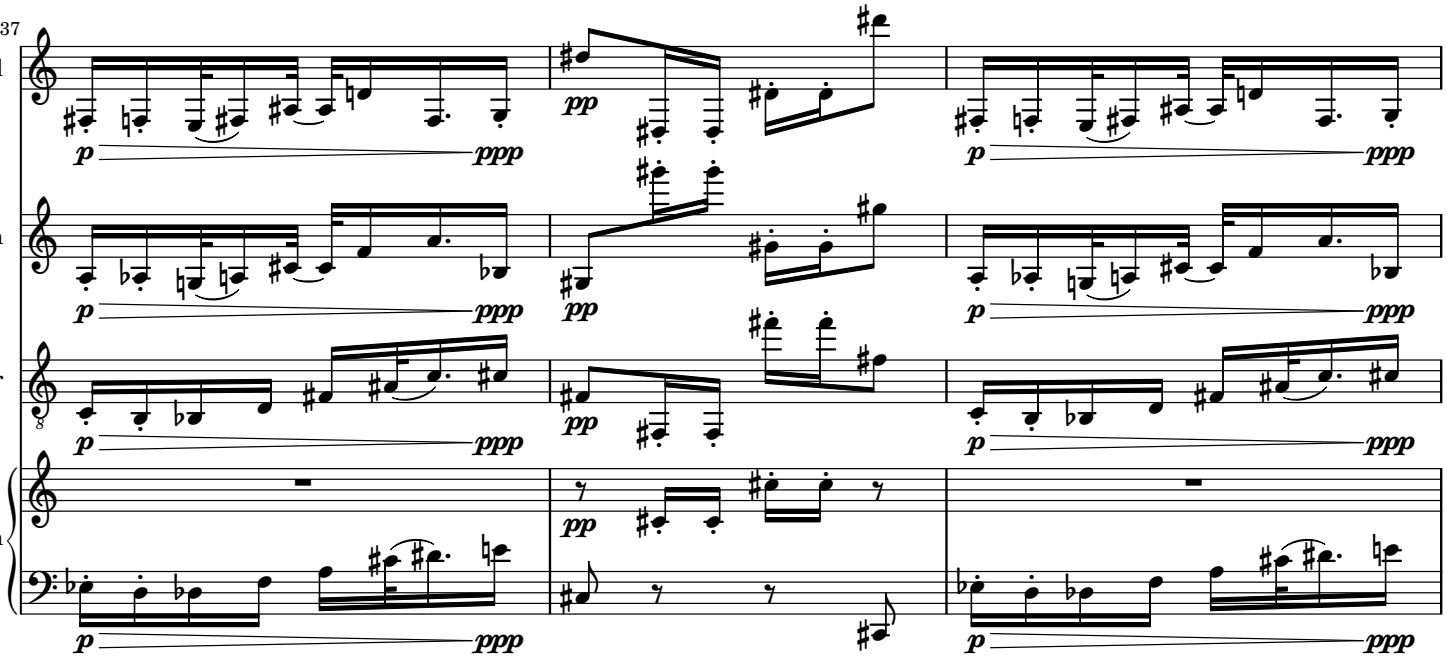

8
cl
vln
egtr
syn
p
ppp
pp
mf

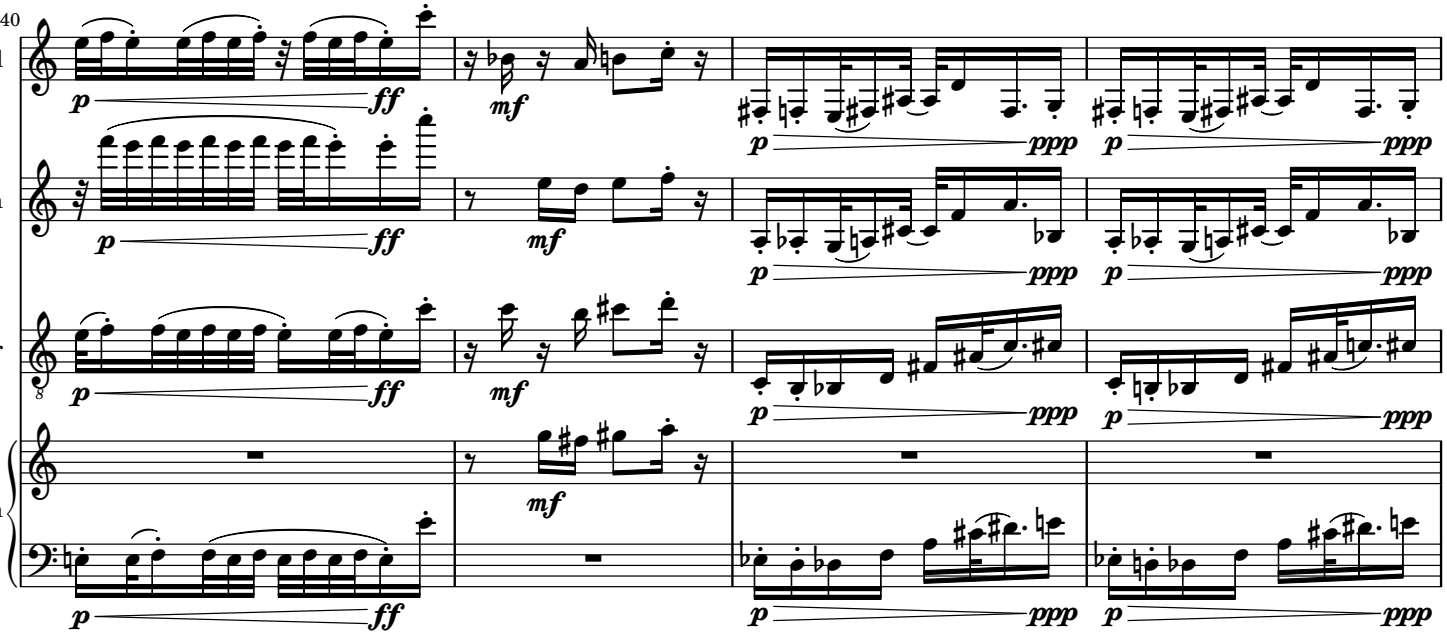

12
cl
vln
egtr
syn
pp
mf
f
p
ff

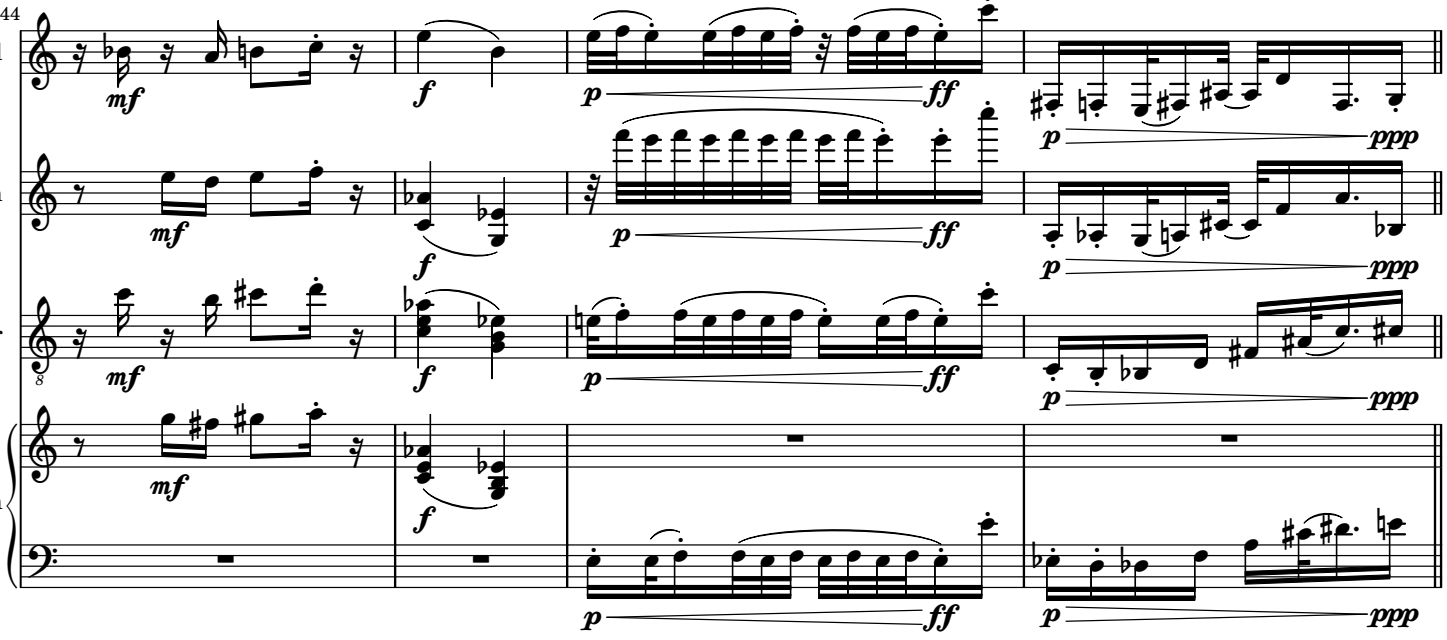

16
cl
vln
egtr
syn
mf
p
ppp
pp
20
ff
f


24
cl
vln
egtr
syn
27
30
p
ff
pp
ppp
mf
f

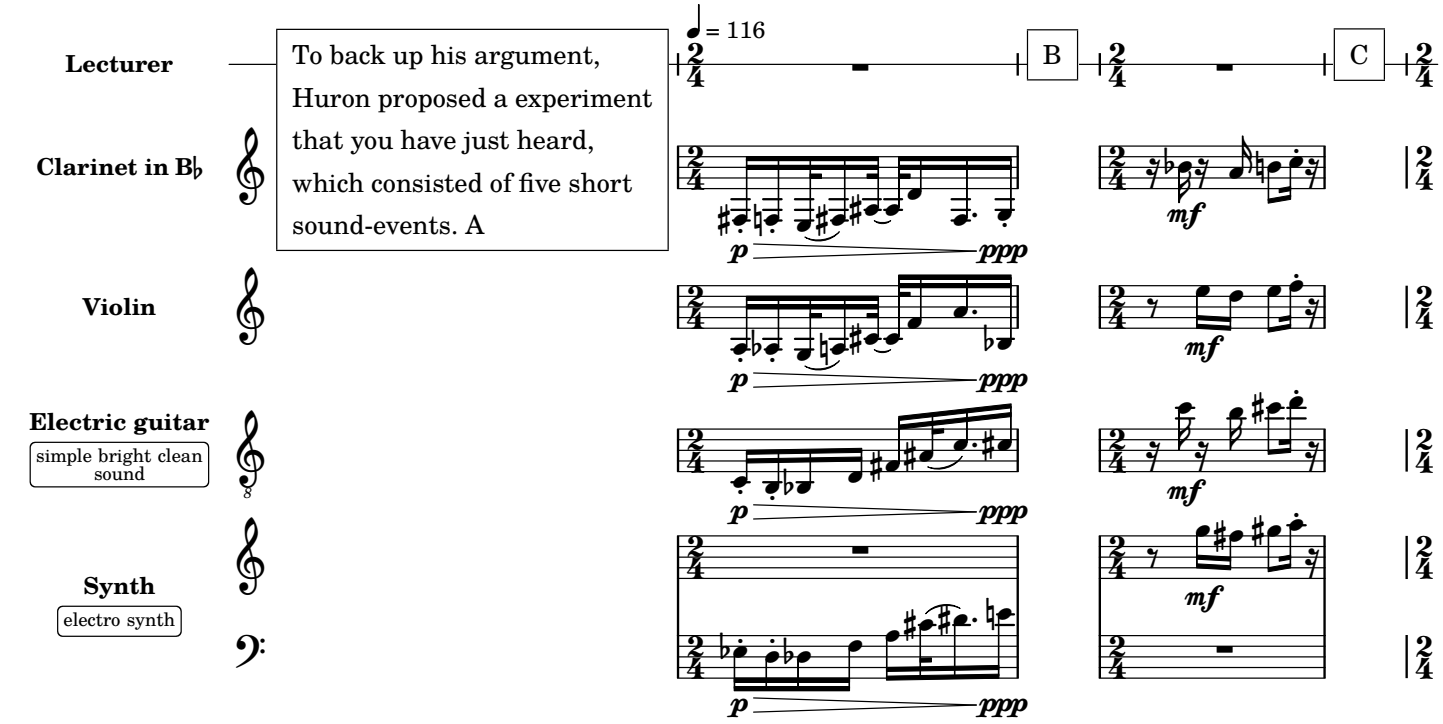

34
cl
vln
egtr
syn
p
ff
ppp
pp

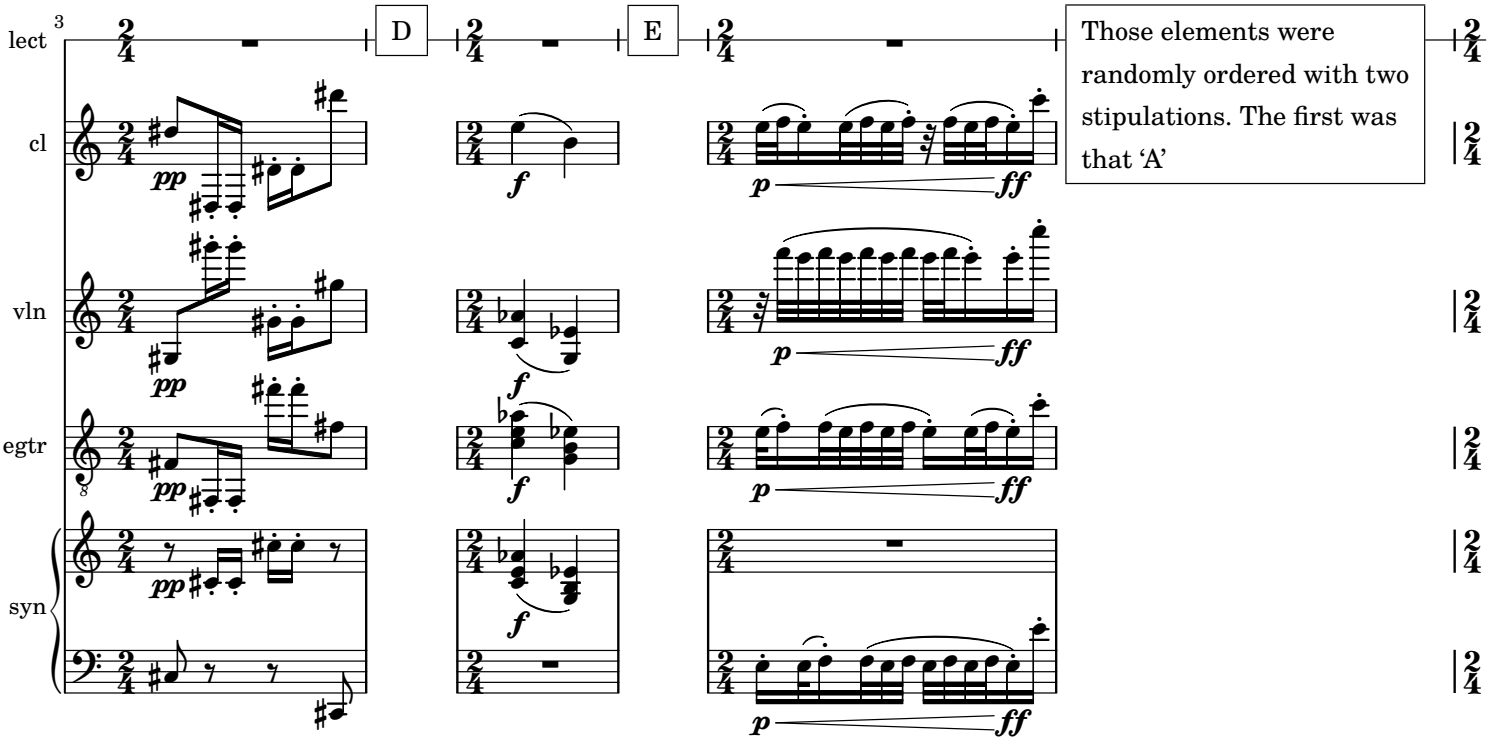

37
cl
vln
egtr
syn
p
ppp
pp

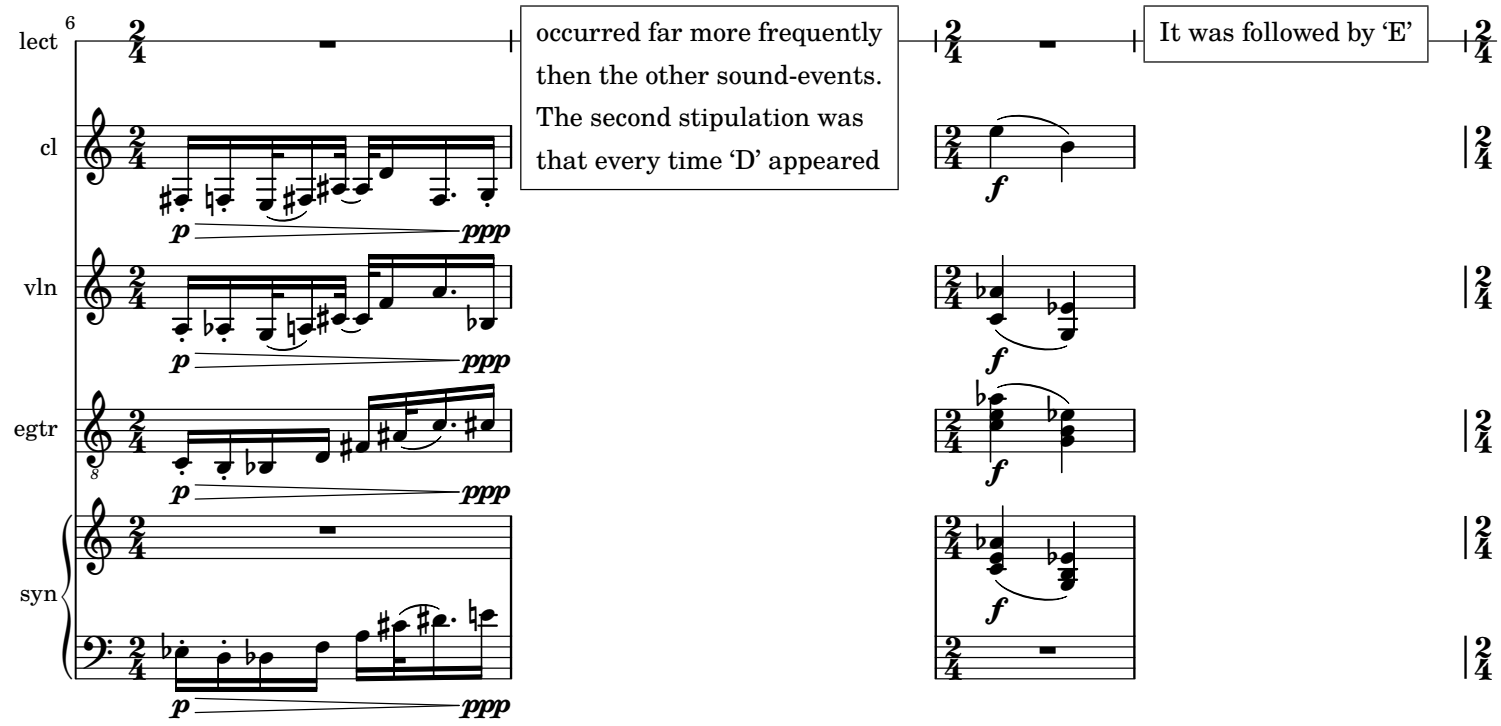

40
cl
vln
egtr
syn
p
ff
mf
ppp

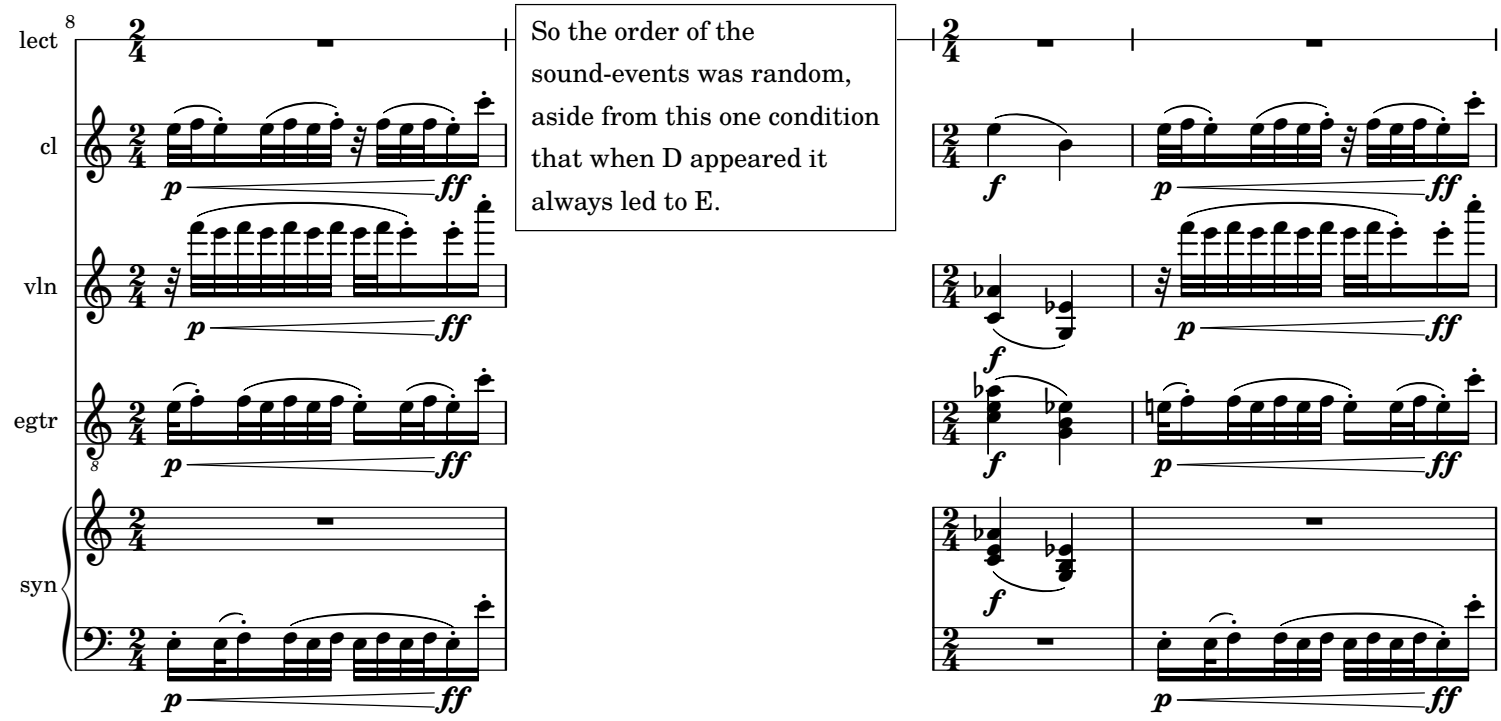

44
cl
vln
egtr
syn
mf
f
p
ff
ppp

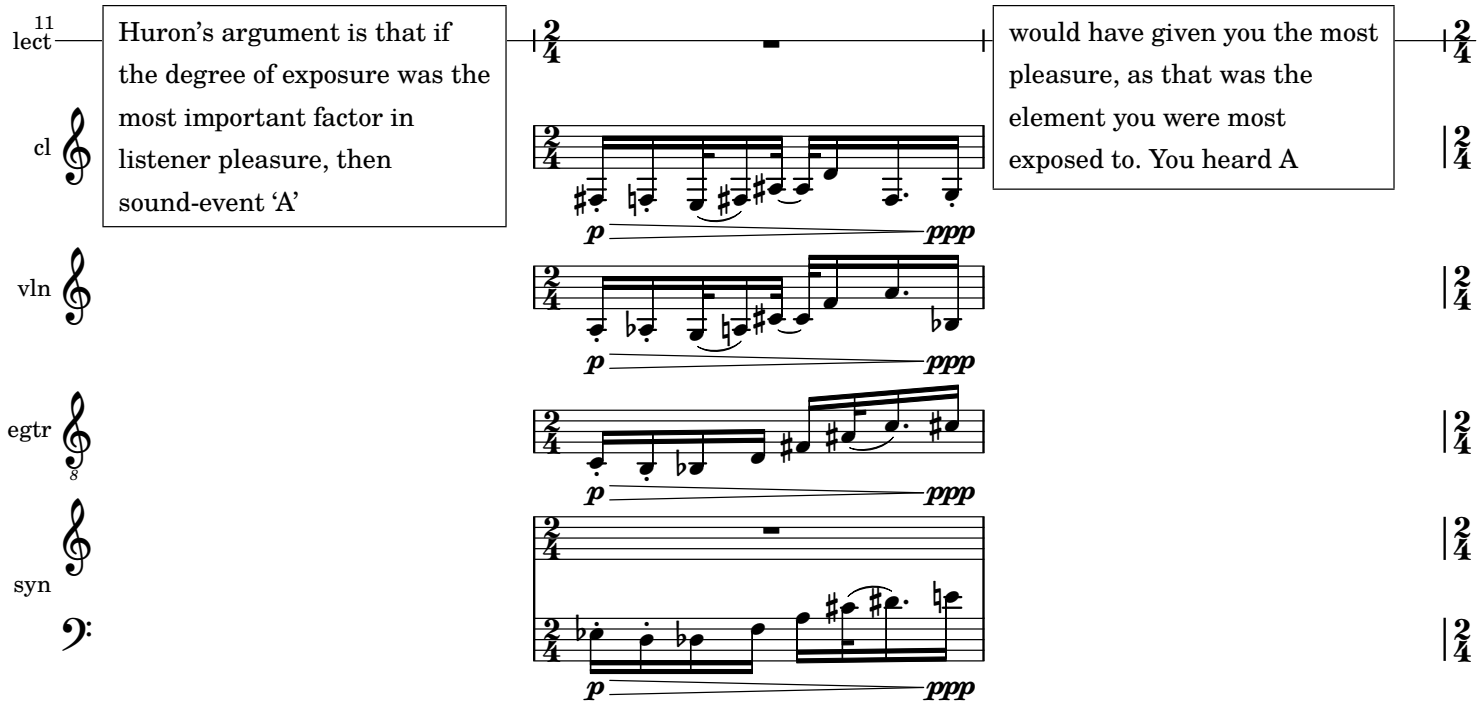
ABCDE Piece No. 2

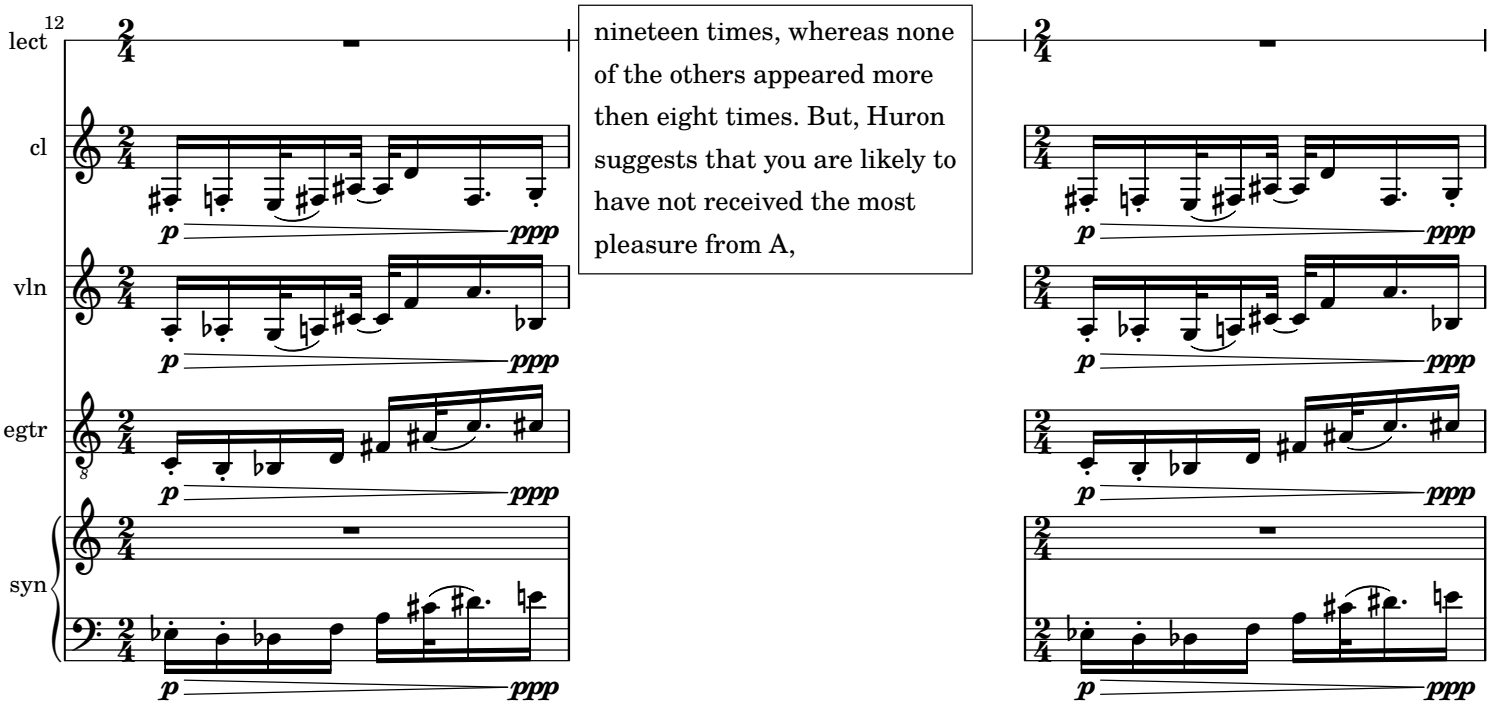


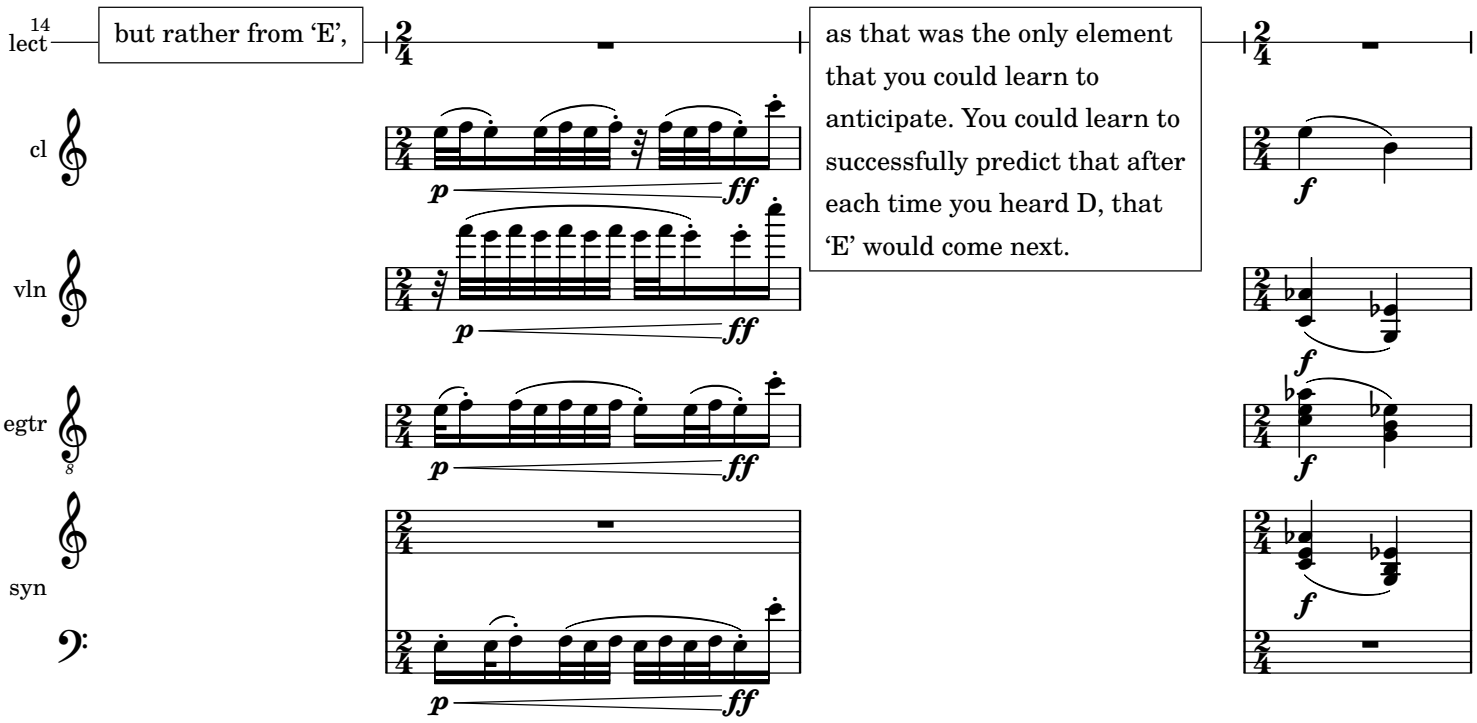


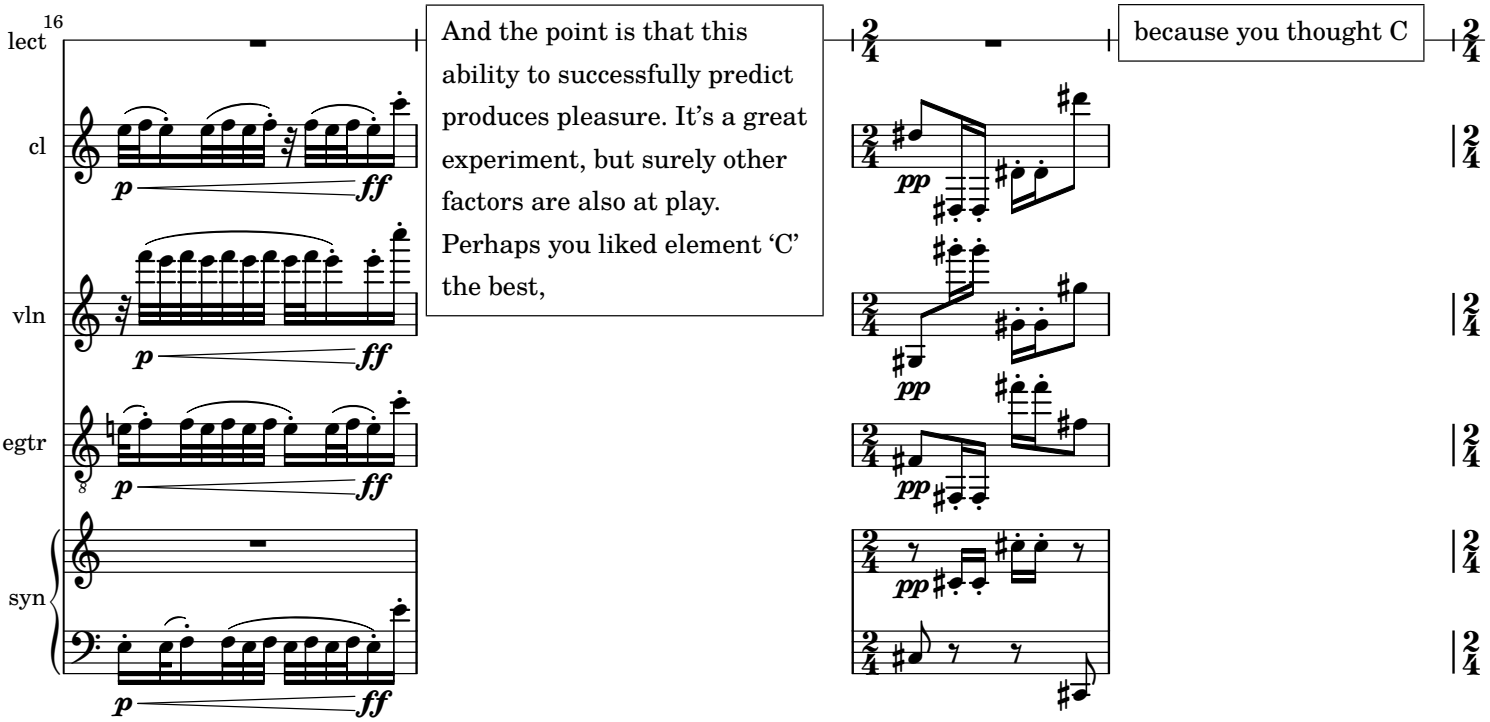

6
lect
cl
vln
egtr
syn
occurred far more frequently then the other sound-events. The second stipulation was that every time ‘D’ appeared
It was followed by ‘E’
p
ppp
f

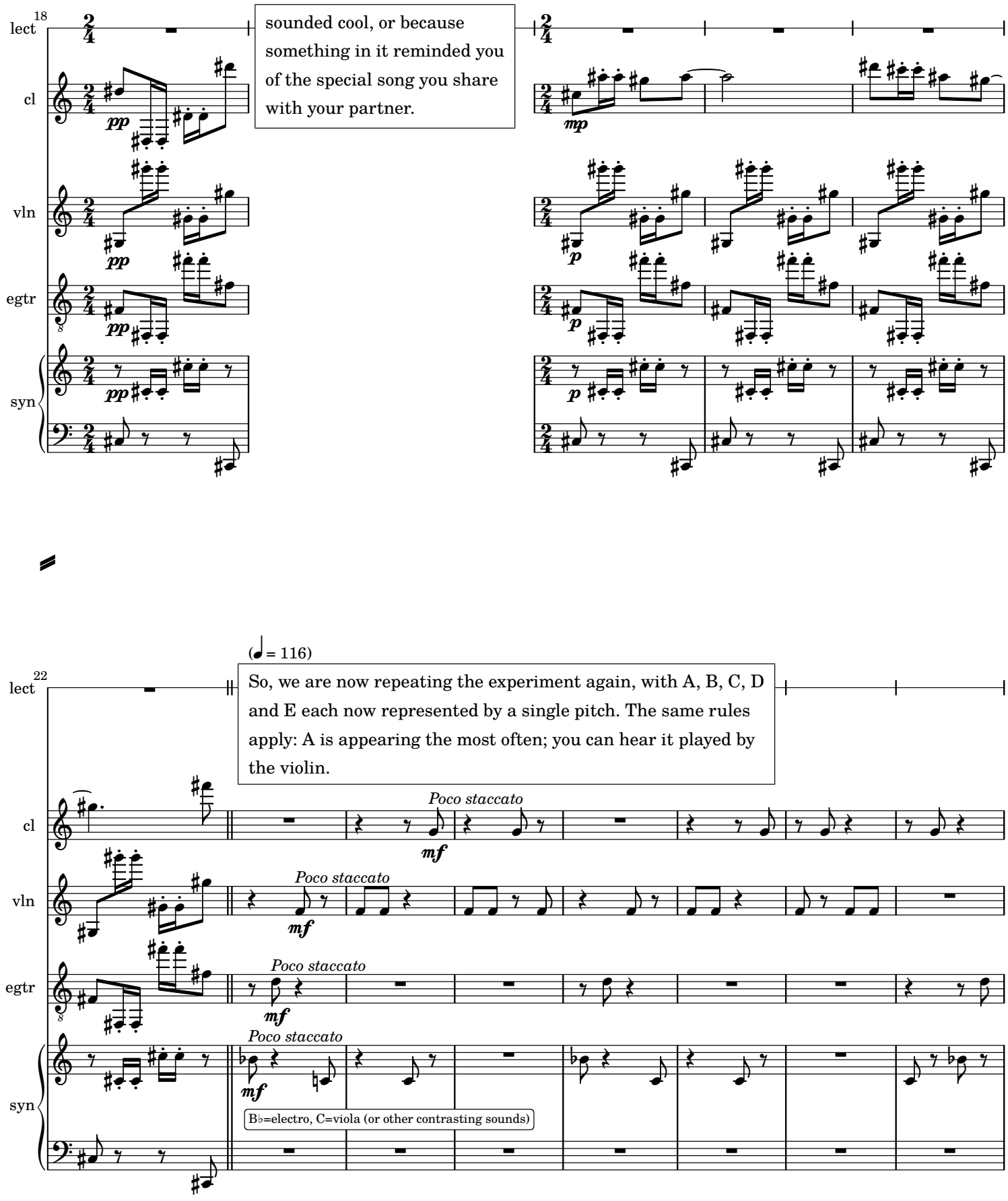

8
lect
cl
vln
egtr
syn
So the order of the sound-events was random, aside from this one condition that when D appeared it always led to E.
p
ff
f

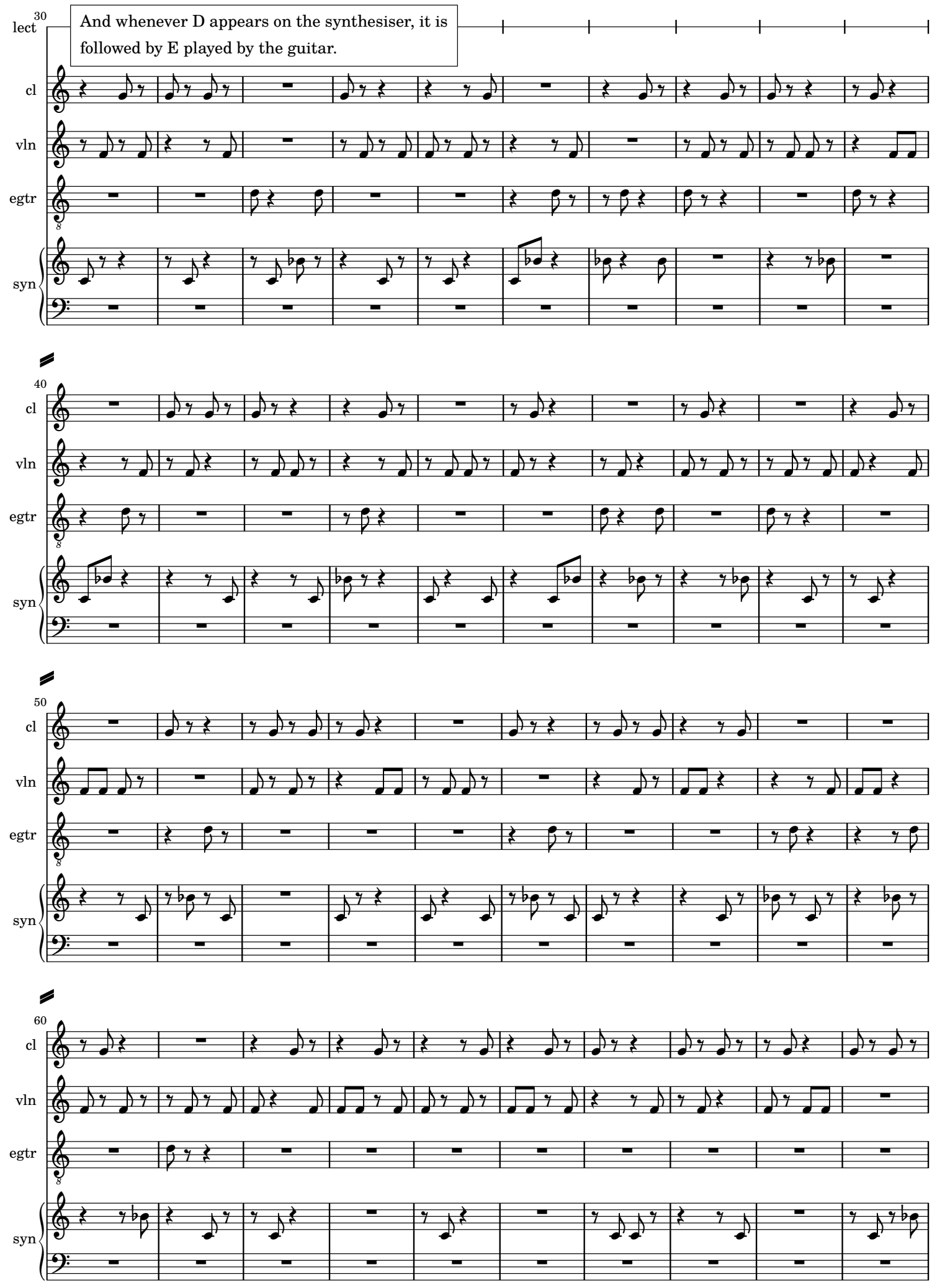

11
lect
Huron's argument is that if the degree of exposure was the most important factor in listener pleasure, then sound-event 'A'
would have given you the most pleasure, as that was the element you were most exposed to. You heard A
cl
vln
egtr
syn
p
ppp

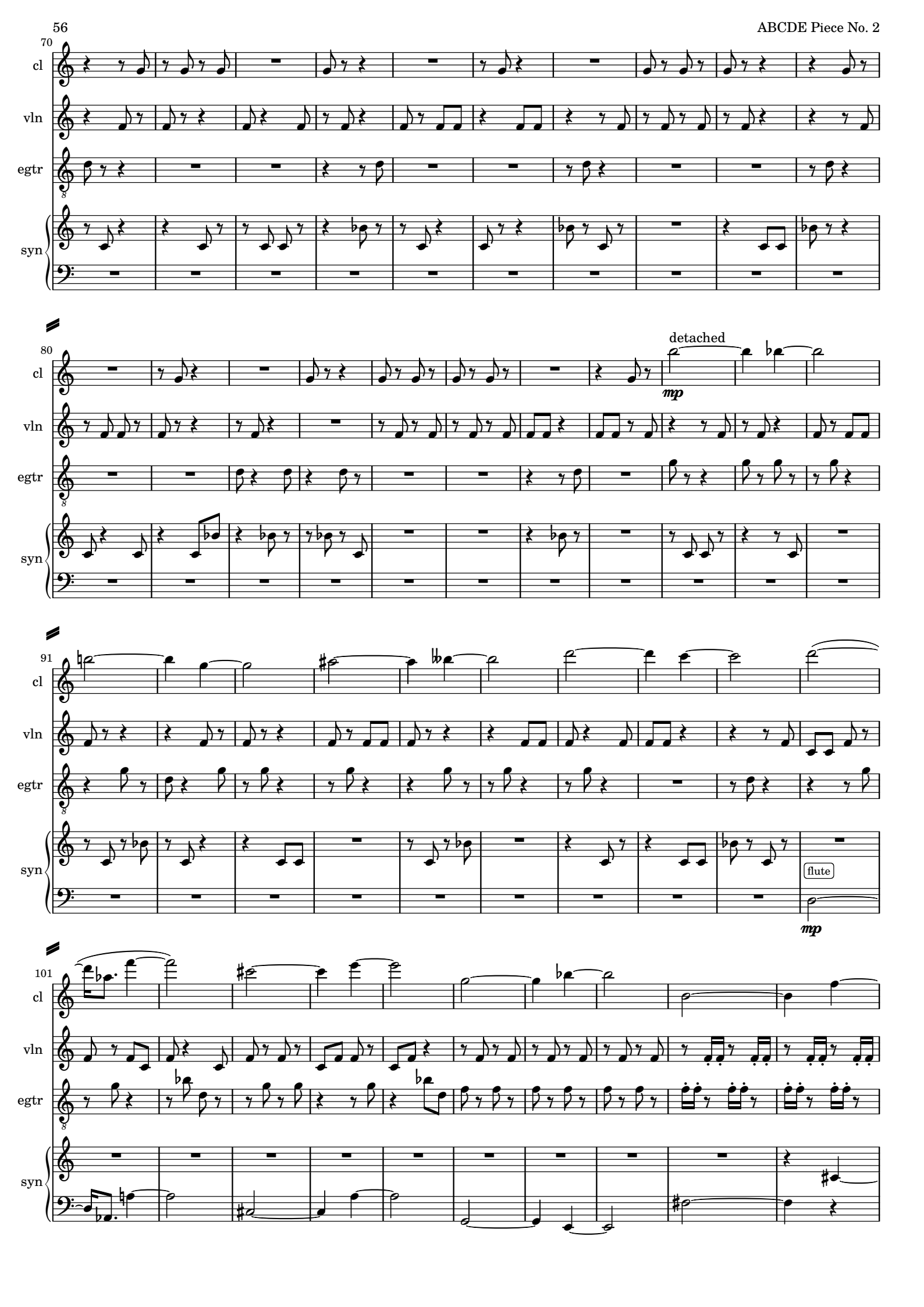

12
lect
nineteen times, whereas none of the others appeared more then eight times. But, Huron suggests that you are likely to have not received the most pleasure from A,
cl
vln
egtr
syn
p
ppp

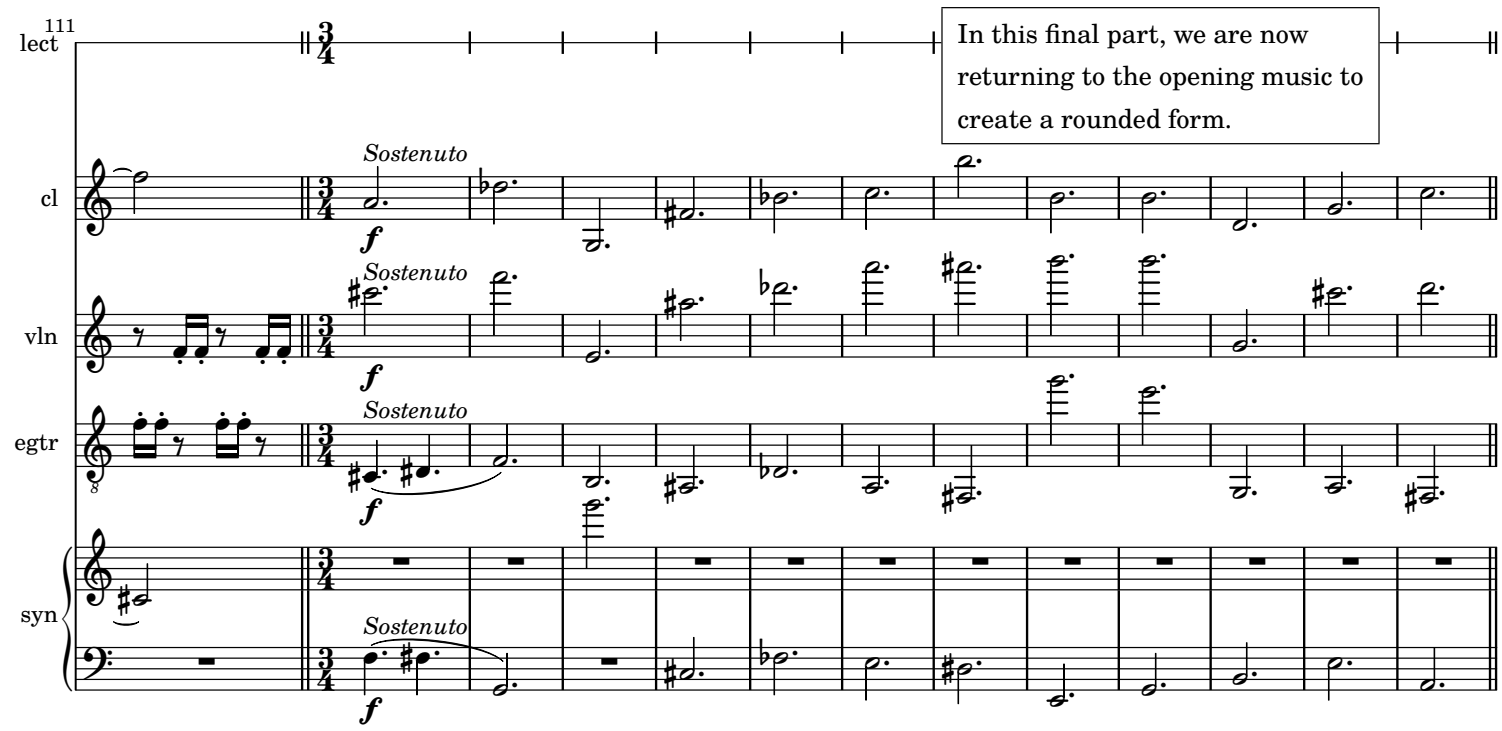

14
lect
but rather from ‘E’,
as that was the only element that you could learn to anticipate. You could learn to successfully predict that after each time you heard D, that ‘E’ would come next.
cl
vln
egtr
syn
p
ff
f


16
lect
And the point is that this ability to successfully predict produces pleasure. It’s a great experiment, but surely other factors are also at play. Perhaps you liked element ‘C’ the best,
because you thought C
cl
vln
egtr
syn
p
ff
pp


18
lect
cl
vln
egtr
syn
sounded cool, or because something in it reminded you of the special song you share with your partner.
pp
mp
p
(♩= 116)
22
So, we are now repeating the experiment again, with A, B, C, D and E each now represented by a single pitch. The same rules apply: A is appearing the most often; you can hear it played by the violin.
Poco staccato
mf
B♭=electro, C=viola (or other contrasting sounds)


And whenever D appears on the synthesiser, it is followed by E played by the guitar.
lect
cl
vln
egtr
syn
30
40
50
60


70
cl
vln
egtr
syn
80
detached
mp
91
flute
mp
101

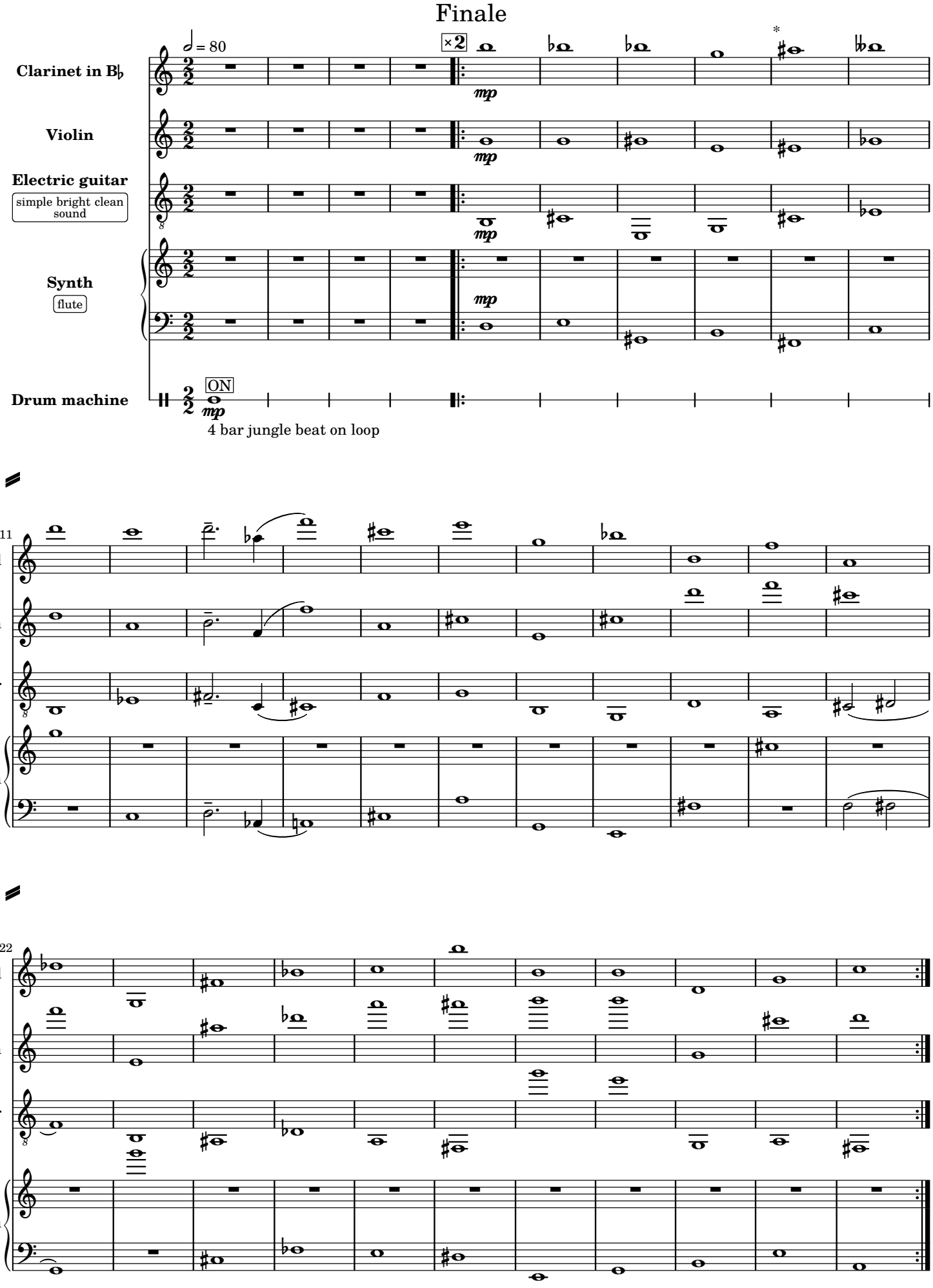


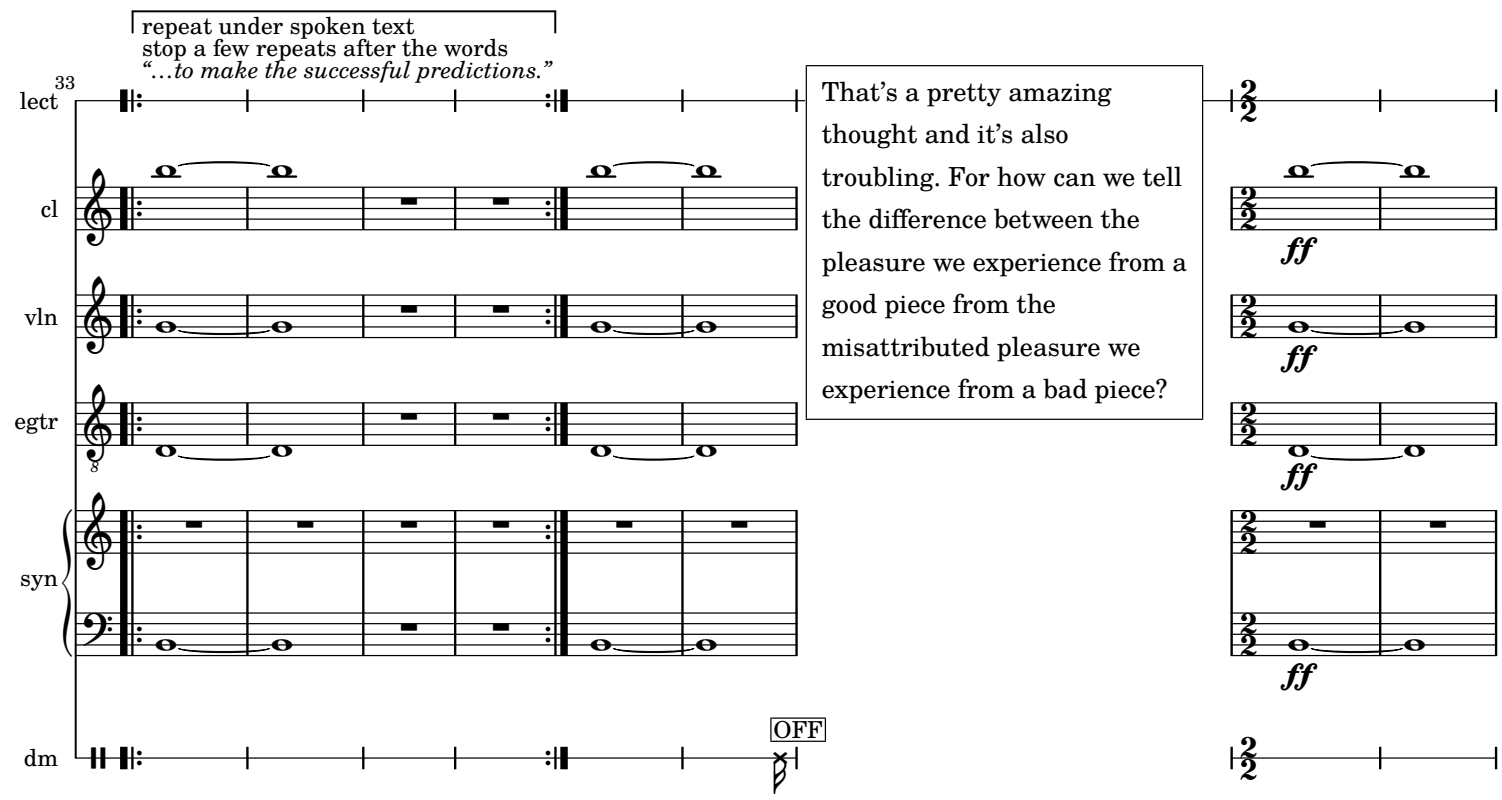
*Lecturer pauses whilst the **Finale** begins (drum machine starts and then instruments enter) and then continues with the following text at around measure 8.* *

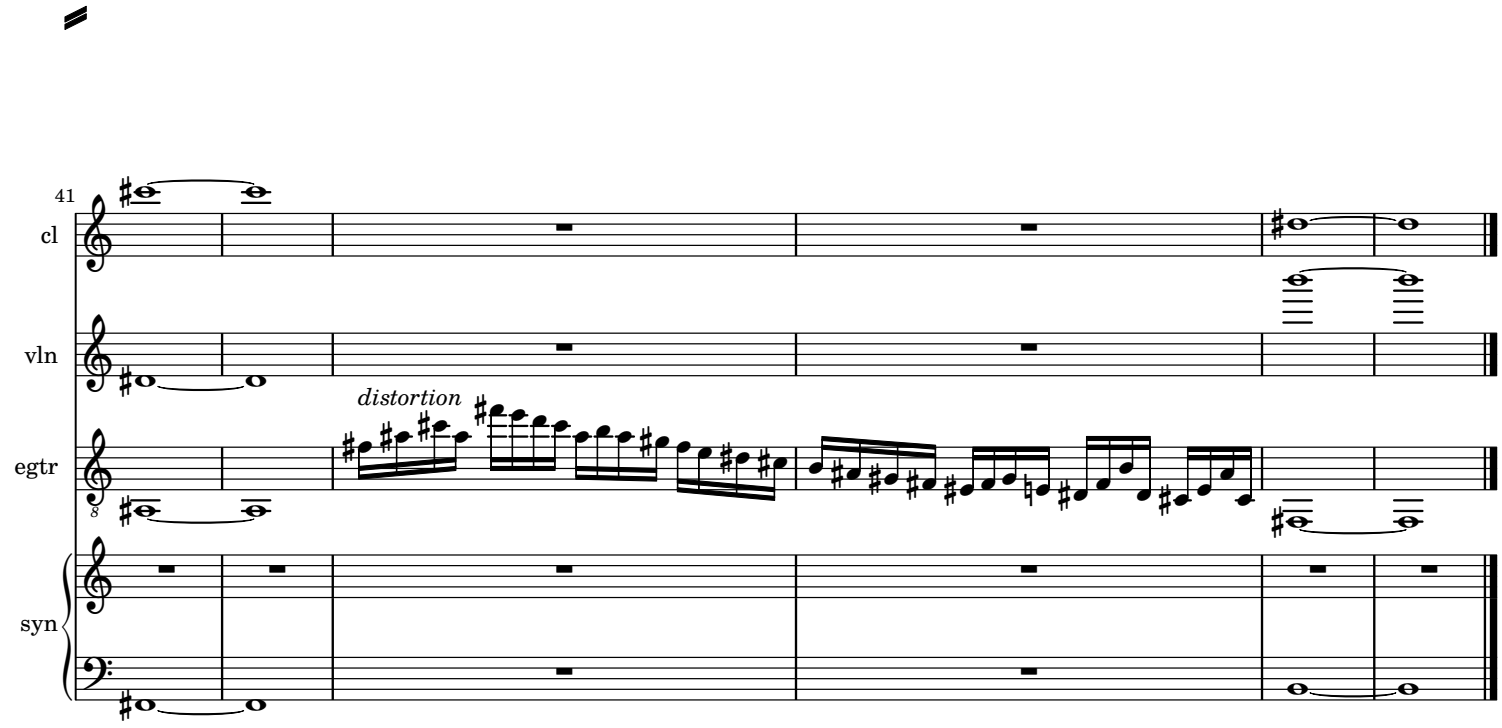
In his Practical Guide to Music Composition, Professor Alan Belkin suggests that a rounded form can convincingly conclude a piece through providing the listener with a sense of stability, relaxation, and closure. This textbook view of composition taps into the values of proportion, harmony and symmetry from the classical philosophers that we considered earlier. In creating a symmetrical relationship with the opening, I'm hoping to create a sense of tension between good and bad practice, as although the rounded form here might be good practice, the music is still bad!

Pause

But, in the end, can we say that this music, or any music, is bad? That's the question we posed at the start and from everything we've considered in this lecture it seems we must conclude that evaluating music is a subjective act. And yet, David Huron argues musical pieces can be objectively bad. Taking the example of the music you are listening to now, Huron might argue: this music is objectively bad. Yes, you have come to like it, but that is simply because of the pleasure you are now experiencing in being able to successfully predicting what comes next. That doesn't mean it is good. You are confused. This is a classic case of what psychologists call 'misattribution'. What's going on here, is that you are attributing the pleasure you are now experiencing to the music, when really the award for the pleasure should go to the mental circuit that has formed in your brain that has enable you to make the successful predictions.


Finale
♩ = 80
×2
Clarinet in B♭
Violin
Electric guitar
simple bright clean sound
Synth
flute
Drum machine
ON
mp
4 bar jungle beat on loop
11
cl
vln
egtr
syn
22
cl
vln
egtr
syn


repeat under spoken text
stop a few repeats after the words
"…to make the successful predictions."
33
lect
cl
vln
egtr
syn
dm
That's a pretty amazing thought and it's also troubling. For how can we tell the difference between the pleasure we experience from a good piece from the misattributed pleasure we experience from a bad piece?
OFF
ff


41
cl
vln
egtr
syn
distortion