Greg Sandow

The Remembered Song

for string quartet

Commissioned by Classical Movements
for the Prague Summer Nights Young Artists Music Festival
as part of the Eric Daniel Helms New Music Program

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duration: about 11 minutes

for Neeta Helms

Notes on the Score

This piece flows through many short sections, and some silence, before it comes home.

The idea for it came from a passage in *A Course in Miracles*, a well-known spiritual book:

> Listen — perhaps you catch a hint of an ancient state not quite forgotten; dim, perhaps, and yet not altogether unfamiliar, like a song whose name is long forgotten, and the circumstances in which you heard completely unremembered. Not the whole song has stayed with you, but just a little wisp of melody, attached not to a person or a place or anything particular. But you remember, from just this little part, how lovely was the song, how wonderful the setting where you heard it, and how you loved those who were there and listened with you.

There could be many ways to understand these words. (Especially since the *Course* never insists that it's the only path to enlightenment.) They could be a vision of heaven, or in at least informal Buddhist terms, of Nirvana. Or, without metaphysics or religion, they could be an image of unity and perfect peace. Imagined — however you understand it — as the memory of a song we all once knew, but now only dimly recall.

The piece begins with this dim remembrance, as we hear the song only in fragments. They fade away, maybe in a cloud of dreams, and then the music brings up scenes from earthly life. We wake up, we stretch. We walk. We run. We dance. There's a horrible war, and then mourning.

And then comes peace. We walk in a quiet park. We go home, get drowsy, fall asleep. The haze returns. And then —maybe in a dream, maybe in our deepest reality — we hear the song. Now fully remembered, the same song we listened to with so many people we loved.

> Love, too [says the *Course*], would set a feast before you, on a table covered with a spotless cloth, set in a quiet garden where no sound but singing and a softly joyous whispering is ever heard.

Some purely musical points:

- The opening section, a viola solo with many long silences, should be played expressively, though with the rests counted out in strict time. But the silences should flow. The violist should settle calmly into them, as I hope the audience will.

- During this opening, the cello softly echoes some of the viola notes, overlapping for a moment with the next one, creating a brief, almost shadowy dissonance. There are similar overlaps in the Mourning section, now involving all four instruments. And there are both echoes and overlaps in the Remembered Song at the end. Whenever they occur, these overlaps should last just long enough for the dissonances to be felt. How long is that? The players should judge for themselves, listening to how the sound feels in the rehearsal or performing space. They don't need to play the overlaps precisely as notated. They shouldn't count them out in strict time.

- In places I've asked the musicians to tap on their instruments, instead of playing on the strings. After hearing various ways to do this, I've come to prefer tapping the instruments with the open fingers of the bow hand. Tapping the instruments with a knuckle — one of the alternate methods — produces too much resonance. But here's a caution. The cello, being larger, is more resonant than the violins and viola, no matter how it's tapped. So the cellist needs as much as possible to match the tapping sound of the others, especially in the last section of the piece, when the tapping should be gentle and light. (In an earlier version of this note, I'd said I was open to different kinds of tapping in the two places where it occurs, at letter D and letter P. I now think this wouldn't be right, and that the tapping

always should be done the same way. That helps bring the sections of the piece together, which seems important in a work that's so episodic.)

- At letter J, where the music is marked "ugly, distorting the sound" I want the tone to be greatly distorted. so it's a blend of scrunch and musical notes. It should begin really rough, and get rougher during the crescendo, so that at the *tutta forza* climax it's searing and unmusical. This represents the devastation of war.

- The four silent bars at the end don't have to be taken literally. They're just a way of showing that the music fades into silence. The musicians can hold the silence, without moving, for as long as feels right.

Every section of the piece in some way echoes something in the song. The "Stretching" section, for instance, begins with the song's alternation of A and A flat, and continues with its C to B to B flat descent. The one about walking in the park begins with C, B, and B flat, then echoes the beginning of the song with E, F, and G flat. And there's more. All of it evolved without much conscious thought on my part, and there's no great need for anyone to hear any of it. But I think these echoes help to hold the piece together. And, spiritually, might suggest that the song is present deep within us, all through our lives.

The Remembered Song

Listen -- perhaps you catch a hint of an ancient state not quite forgotten; dim, perhaps, and yet not altogether unfamiliar, like a song whose name is long forgotten, and the circumstances in which you heard completely unremembered. Not the whole song has stayed with you, but just a little wisp of melody, attached not to a person or a place or anything particular. But you remember, from just this little part, how lovely was the song, how wonderful the setting where you heard it, and how you loved those who were there and listened with you.

—A Course in Miracles

[The song in fragments, not quite remembered]

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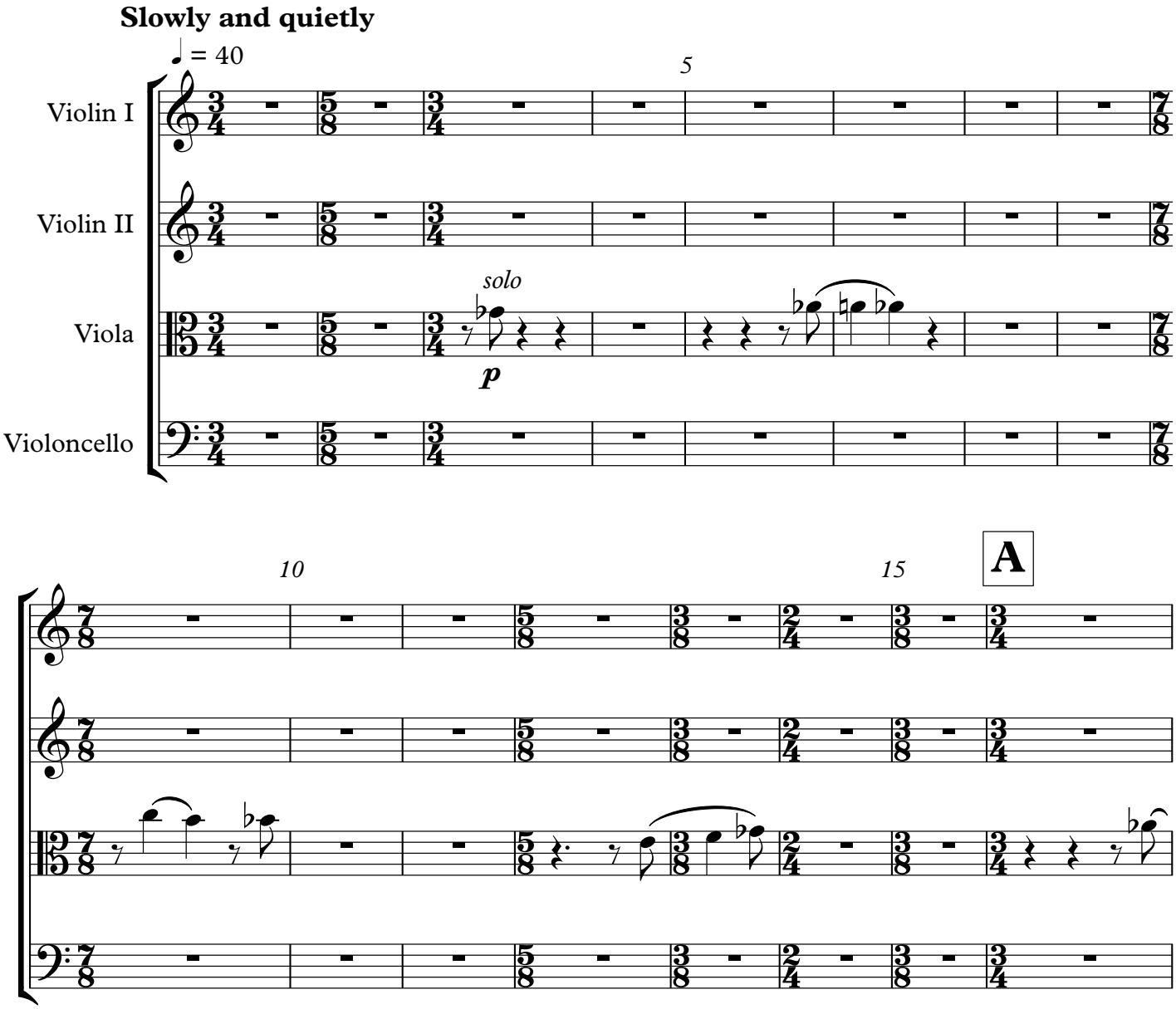
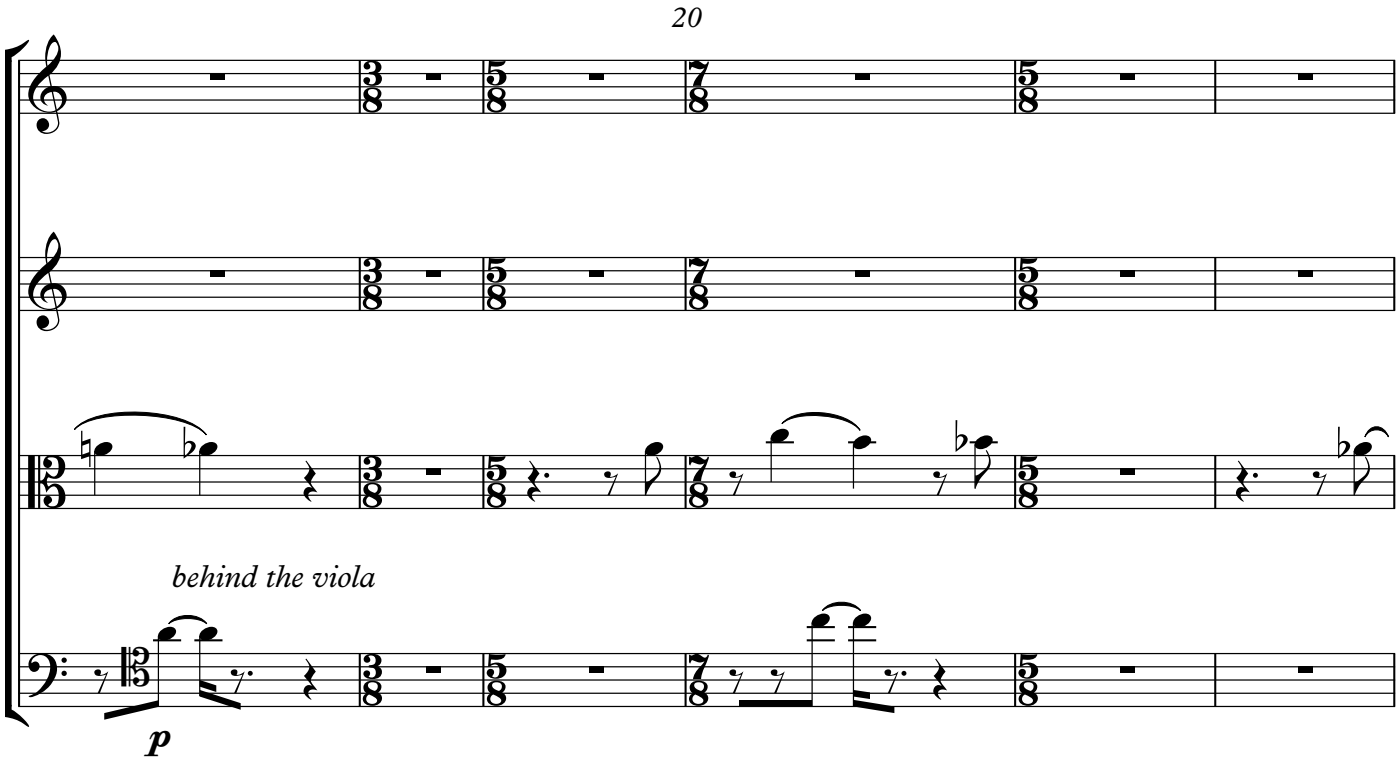
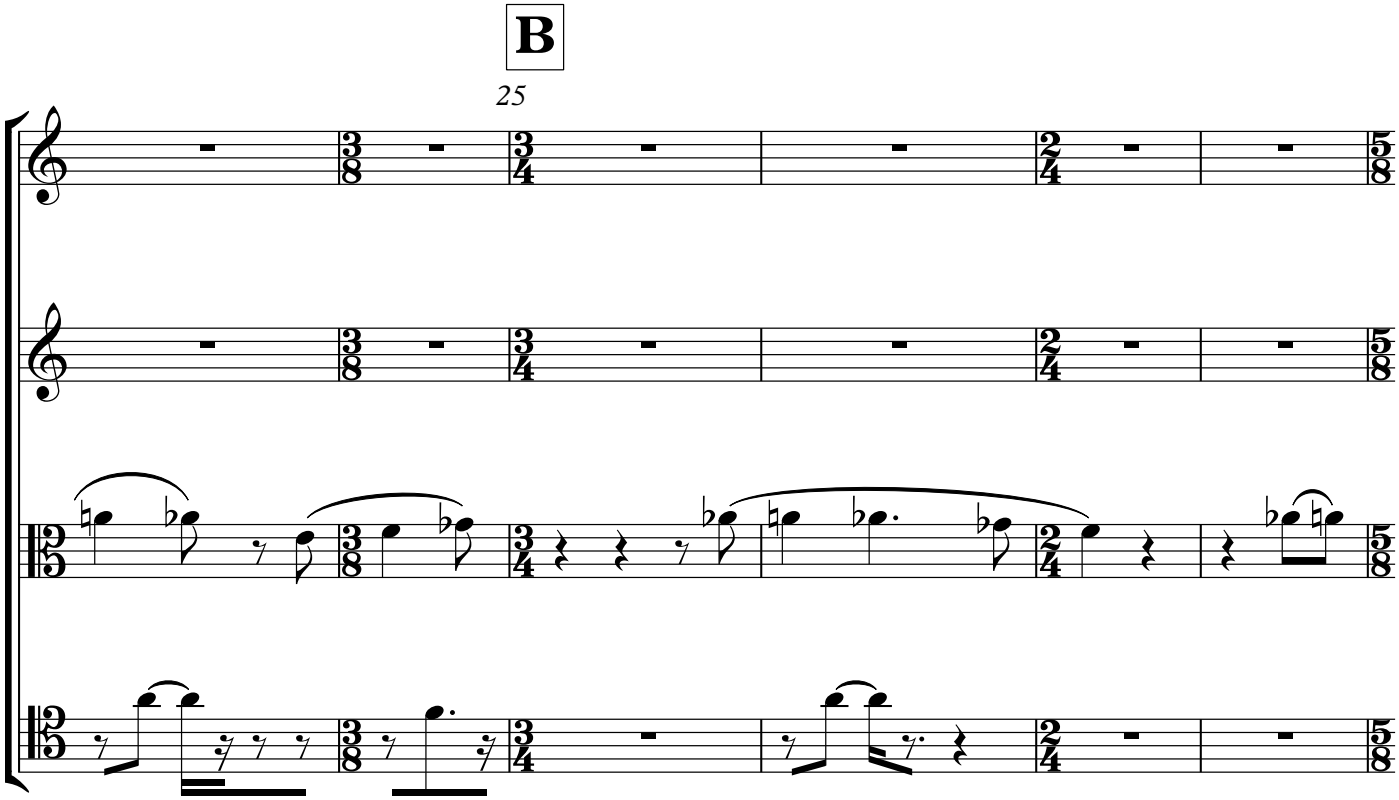
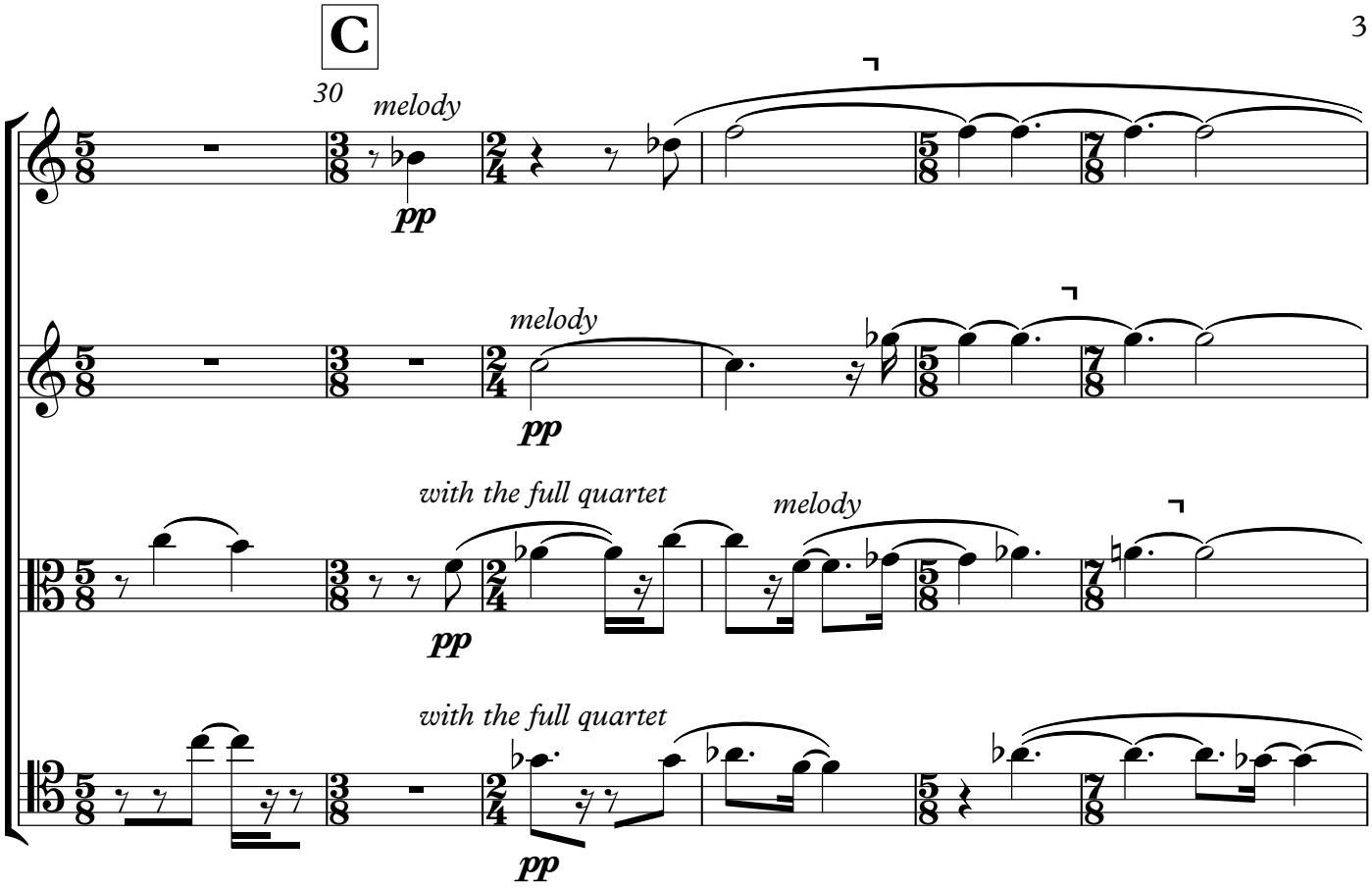
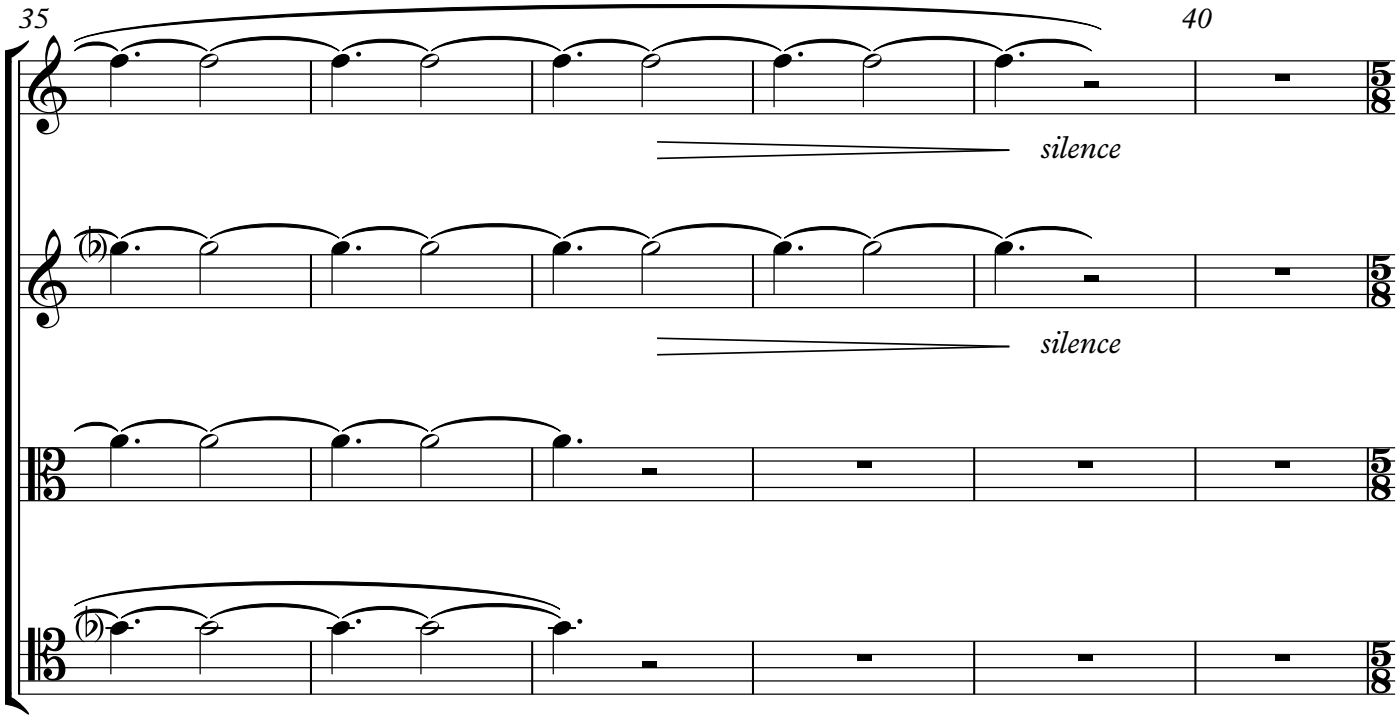
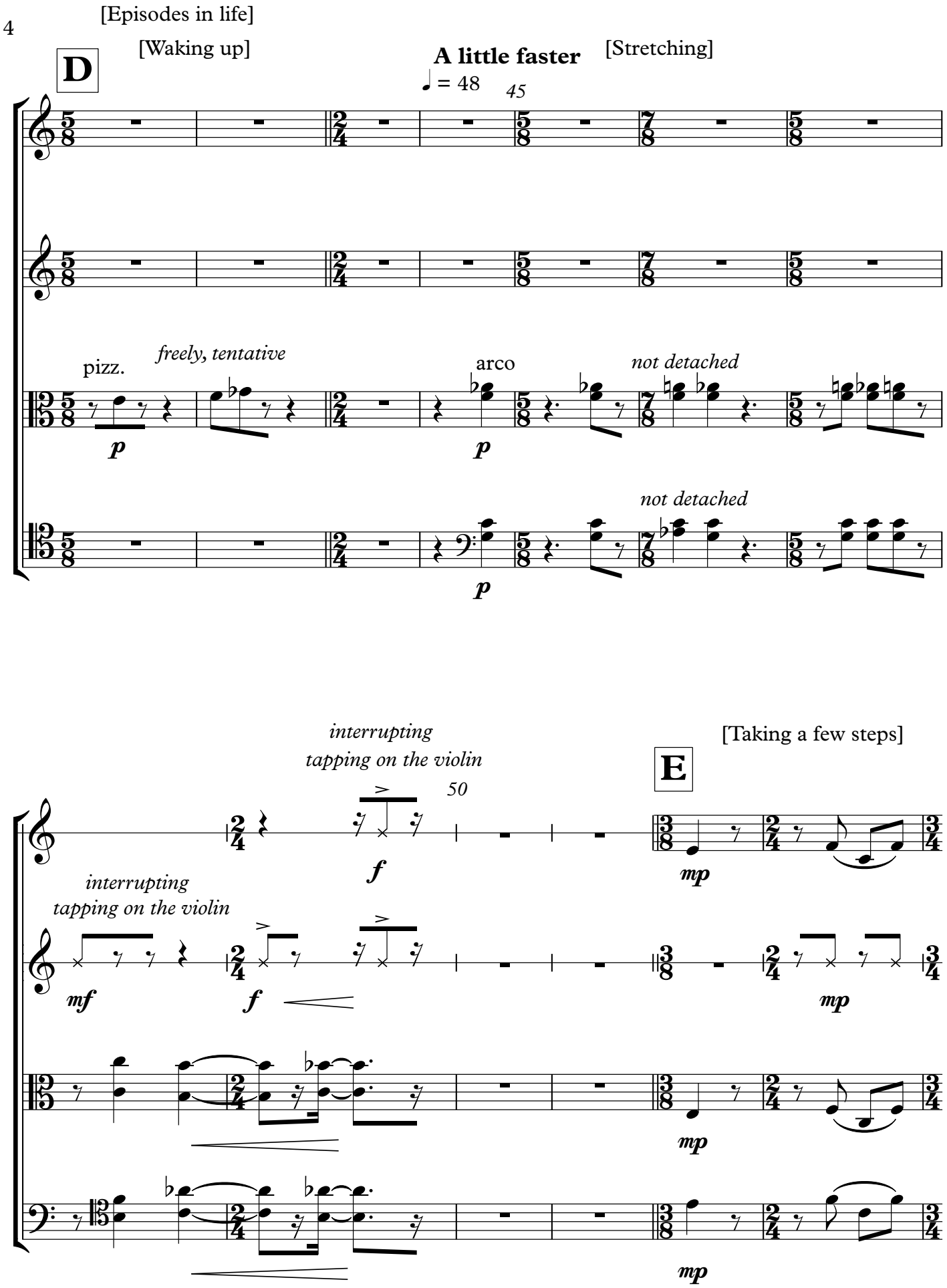


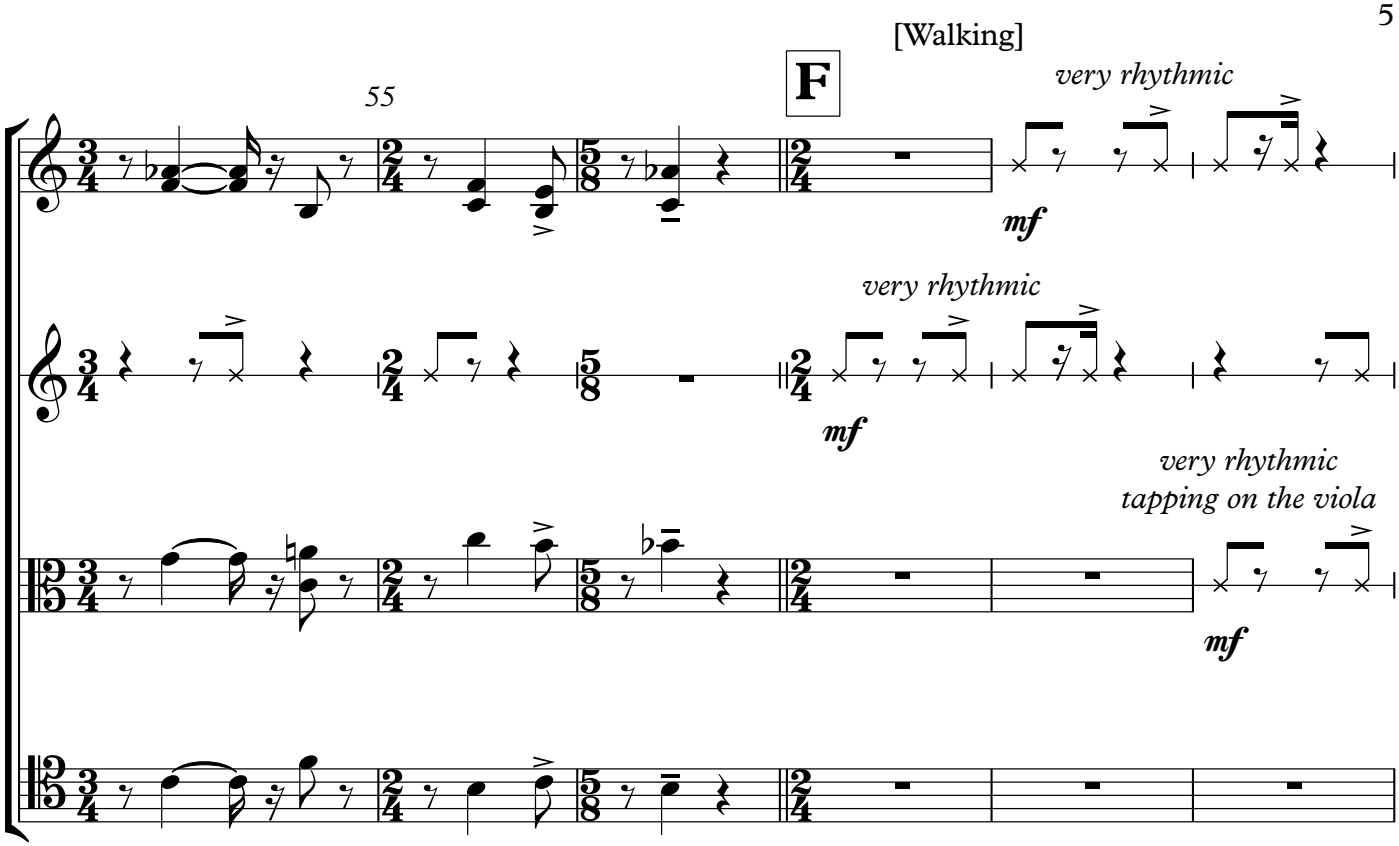

20
behind the viola
p

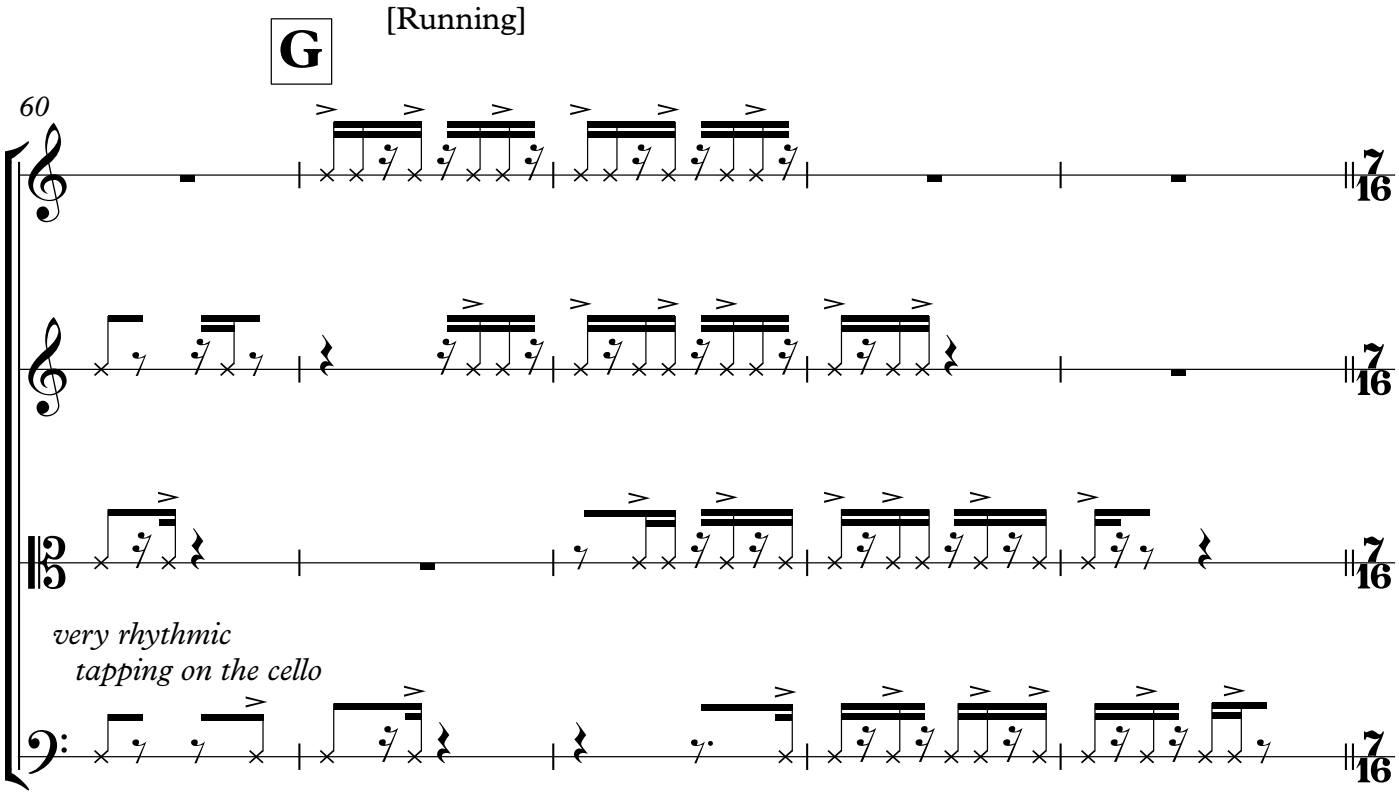

B
25

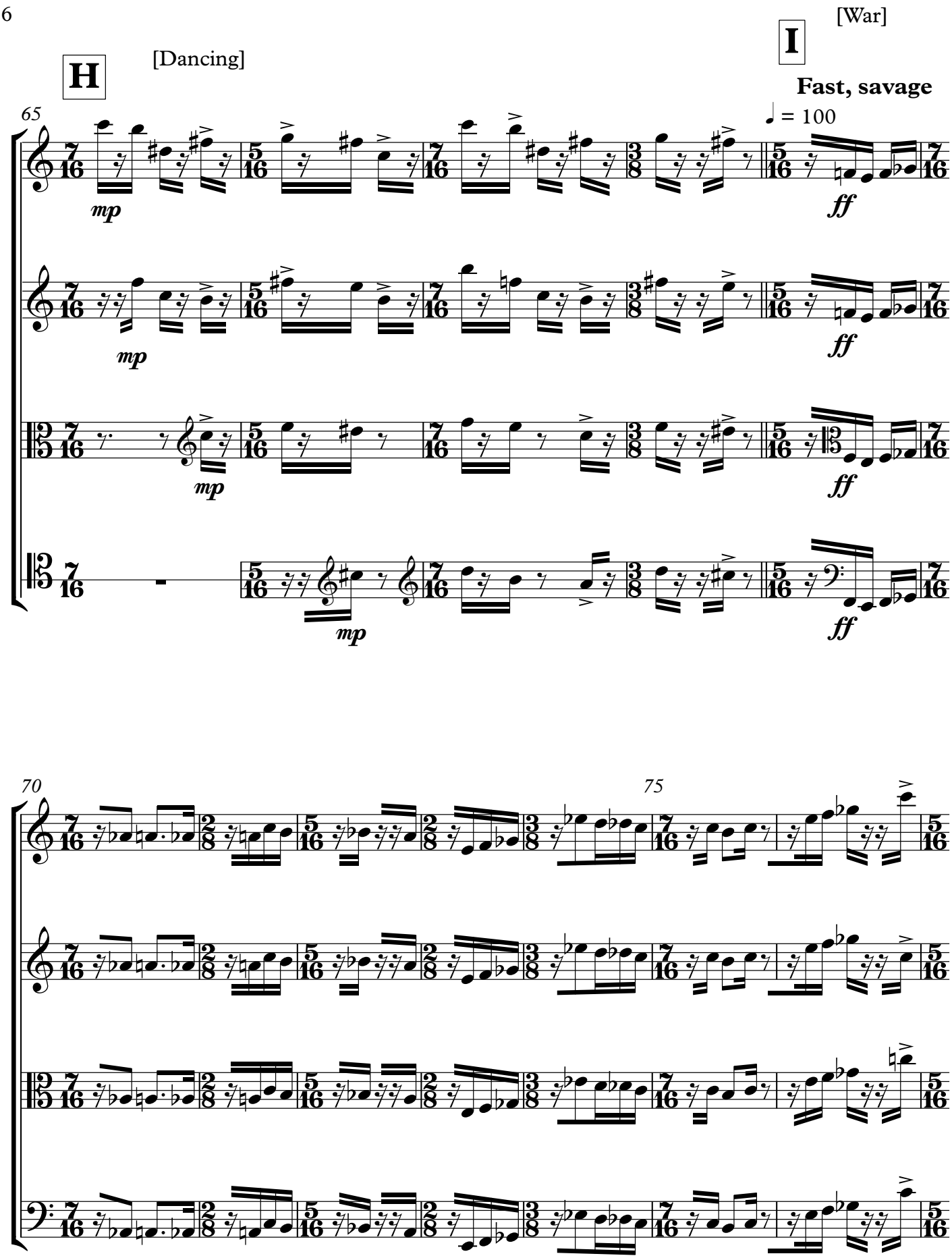

C
30
melody
pp
melody
pp
with the full quartet
melody
pp
with the full quartet
pp

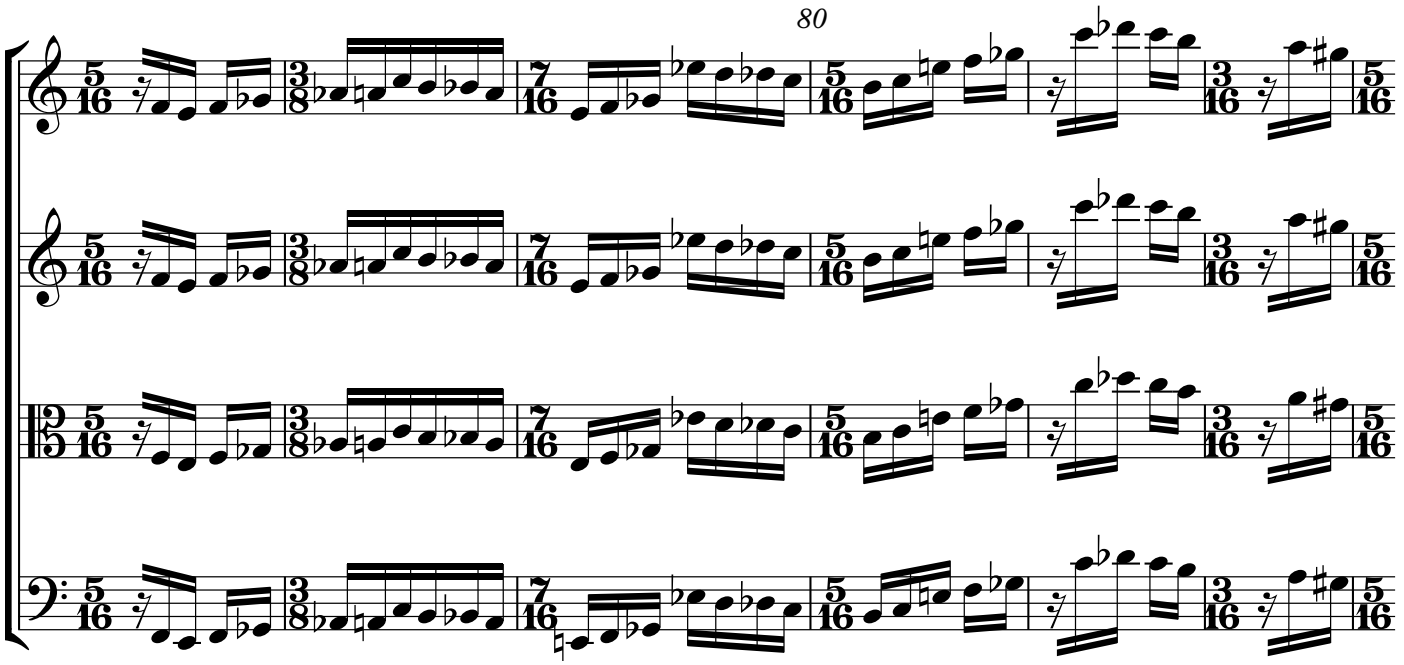

35
40
silence
silence

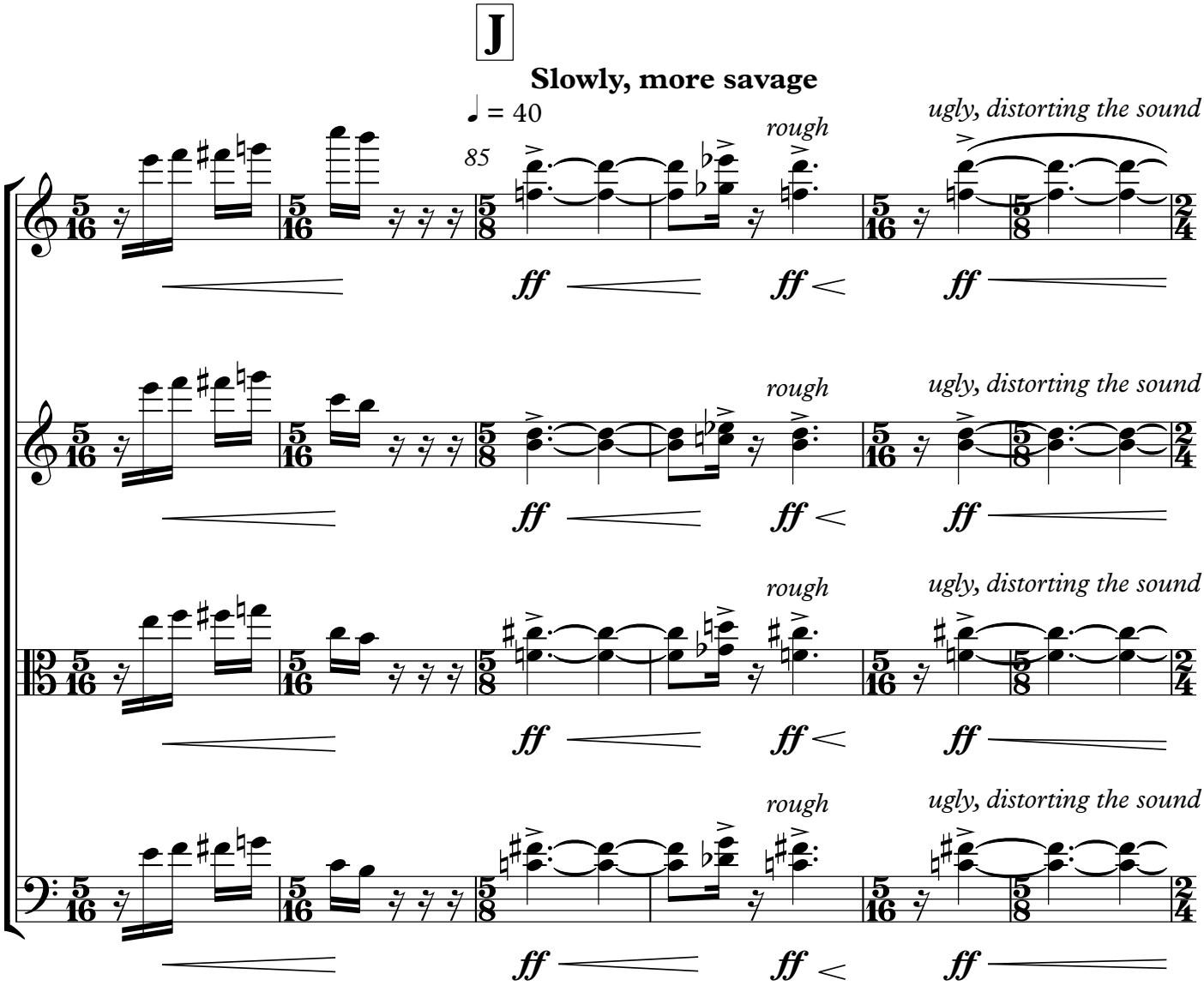

[Episodes in life]
[Waking up]
D
A little faster
♩ = 48
45
[Stretching]
pizz.
freely, tentative
p
arco
p
not detached
not detached
p
interrupting
tapping on the violin
50
f
[Taking a few steps]
E
mp
interrupting
tapping on the violin
mf
f
mp
mp
mp

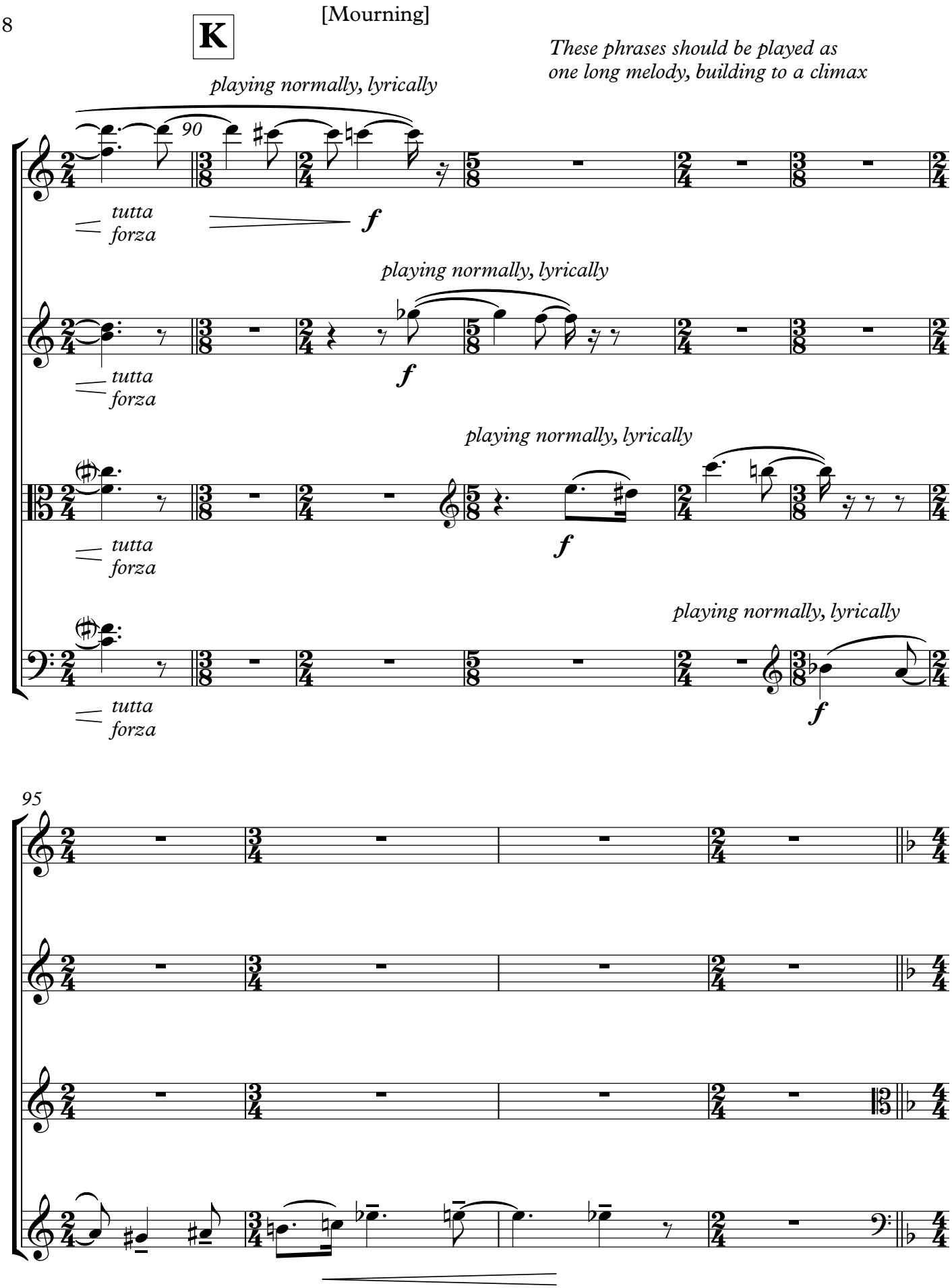

55
F
[Walking]
very rhythmic
mf
very rhythmic
mf
very rhythmic
tapping on the viola
mf

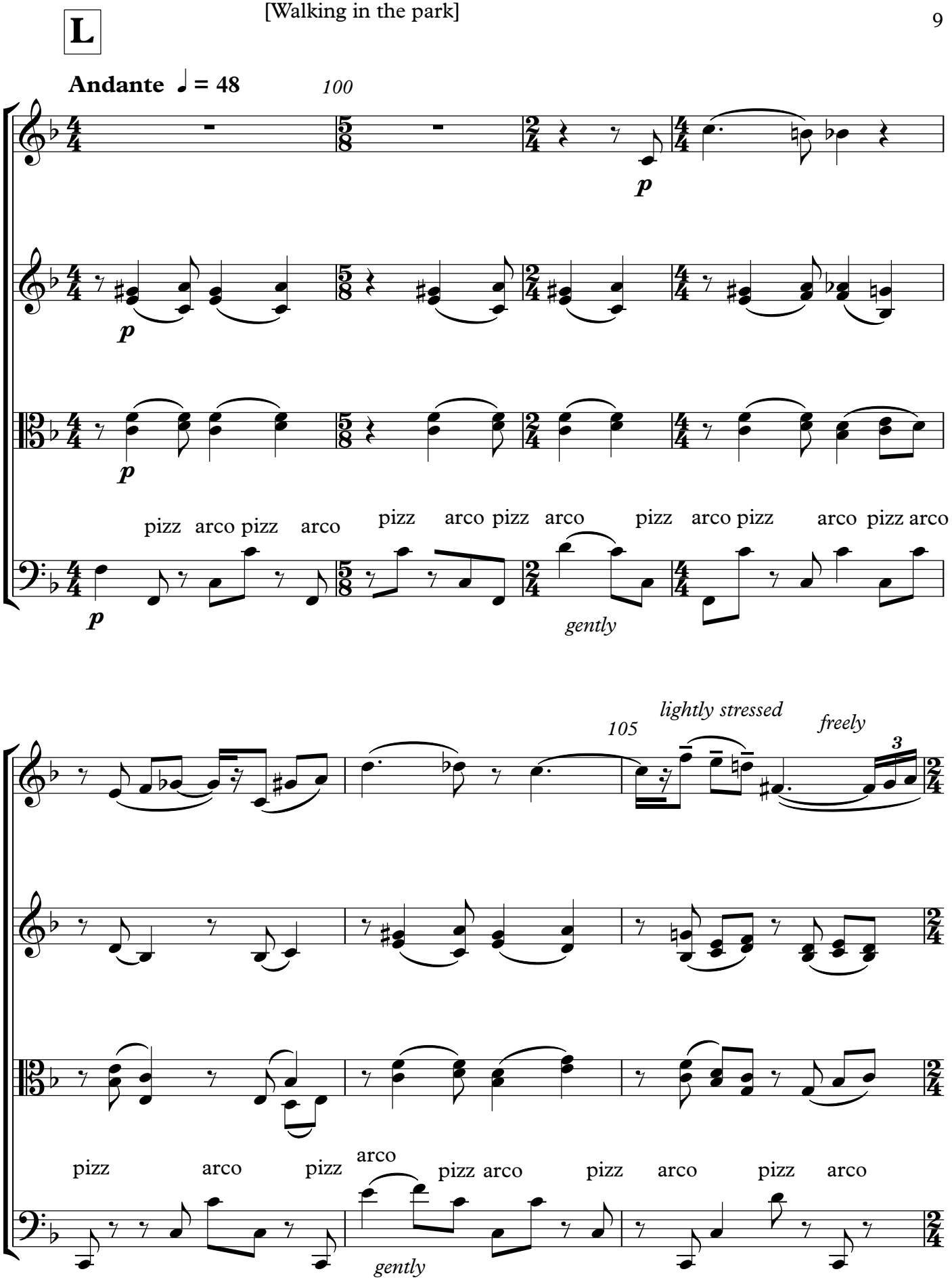

G
[Running]
60
very rhythmic
tapping on the cello

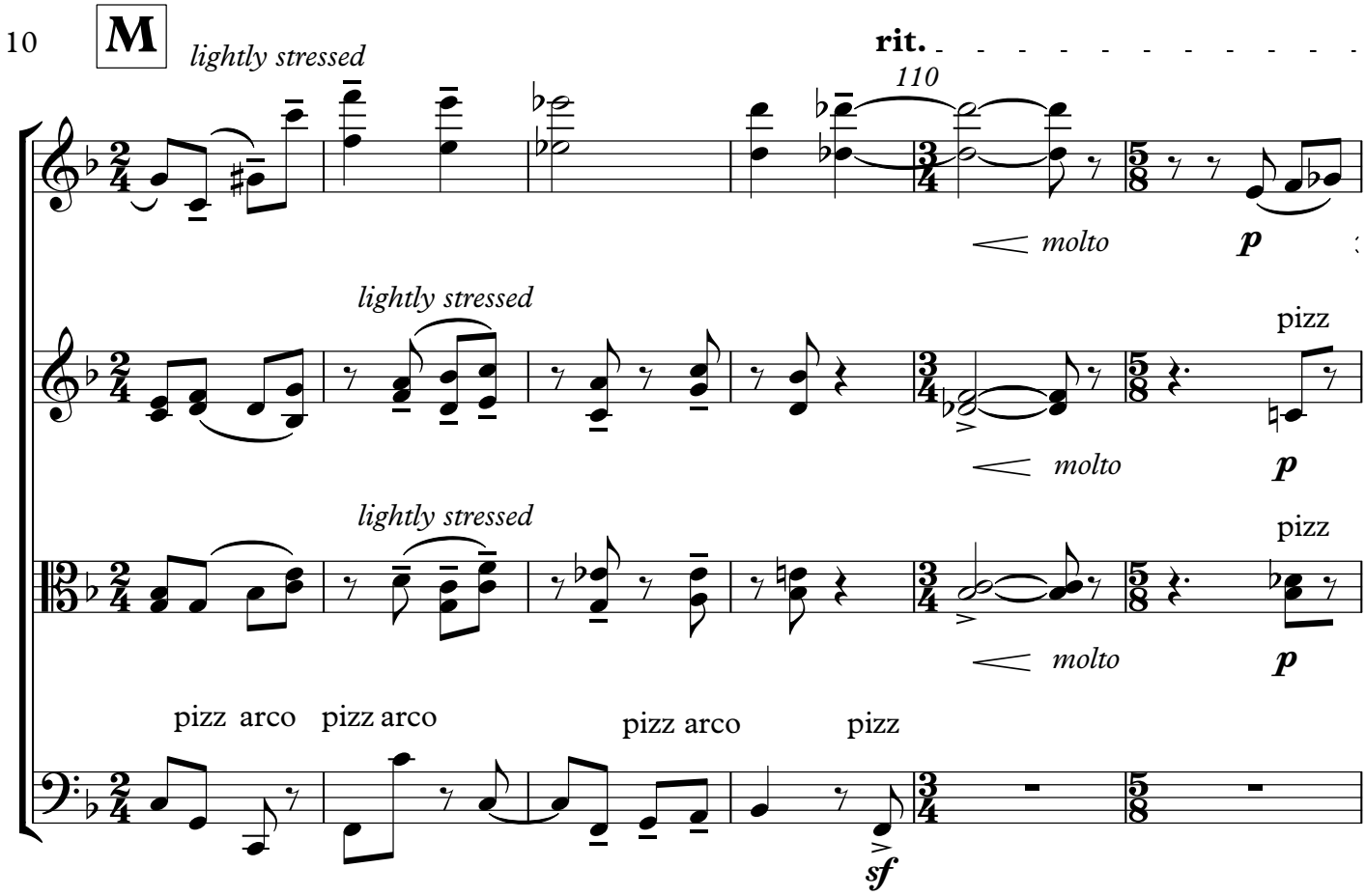

H
[Dancing]
I
[War]
Fast, savage
♩ = 100
65
70
75
mp
ff

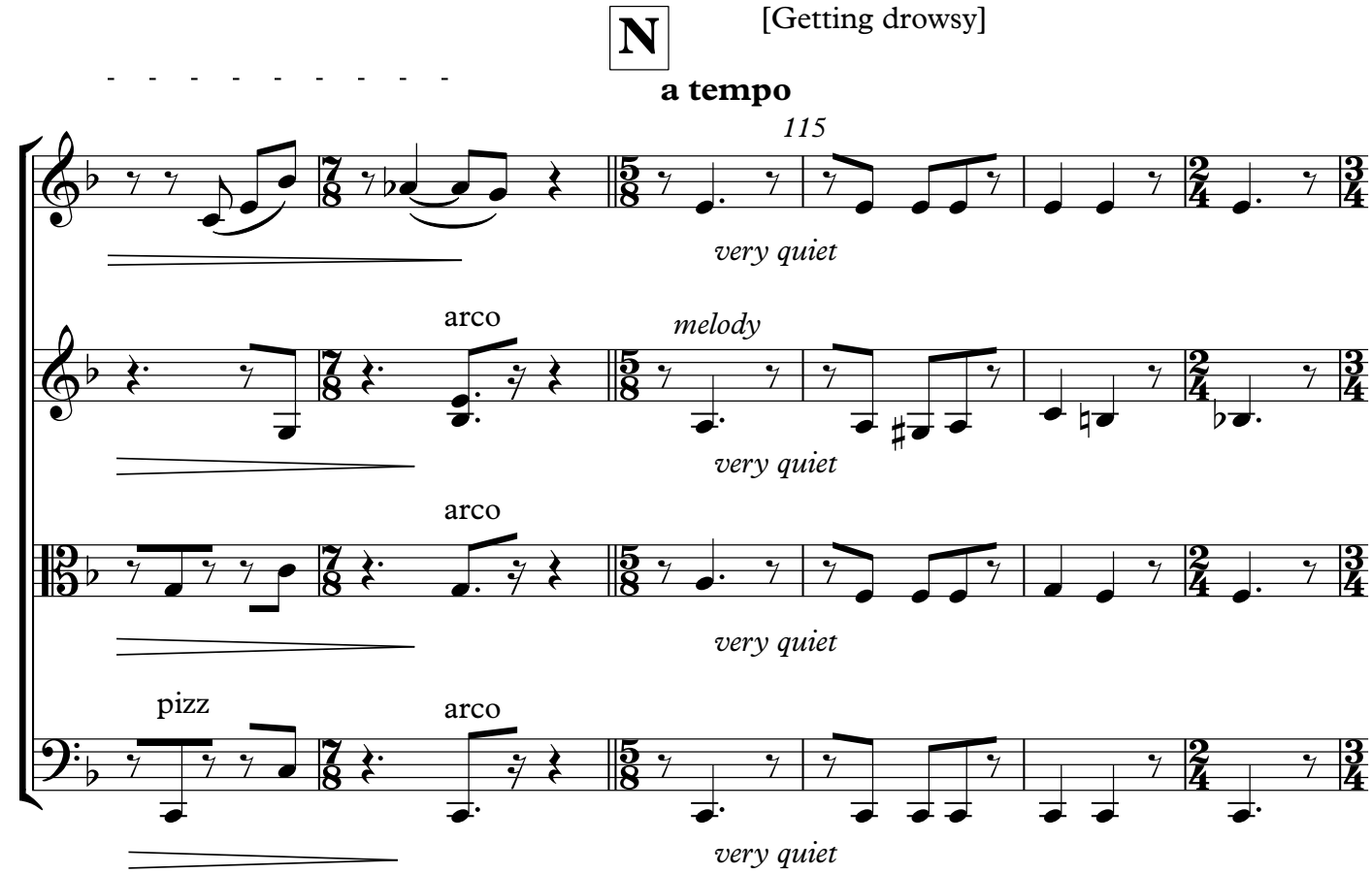

80

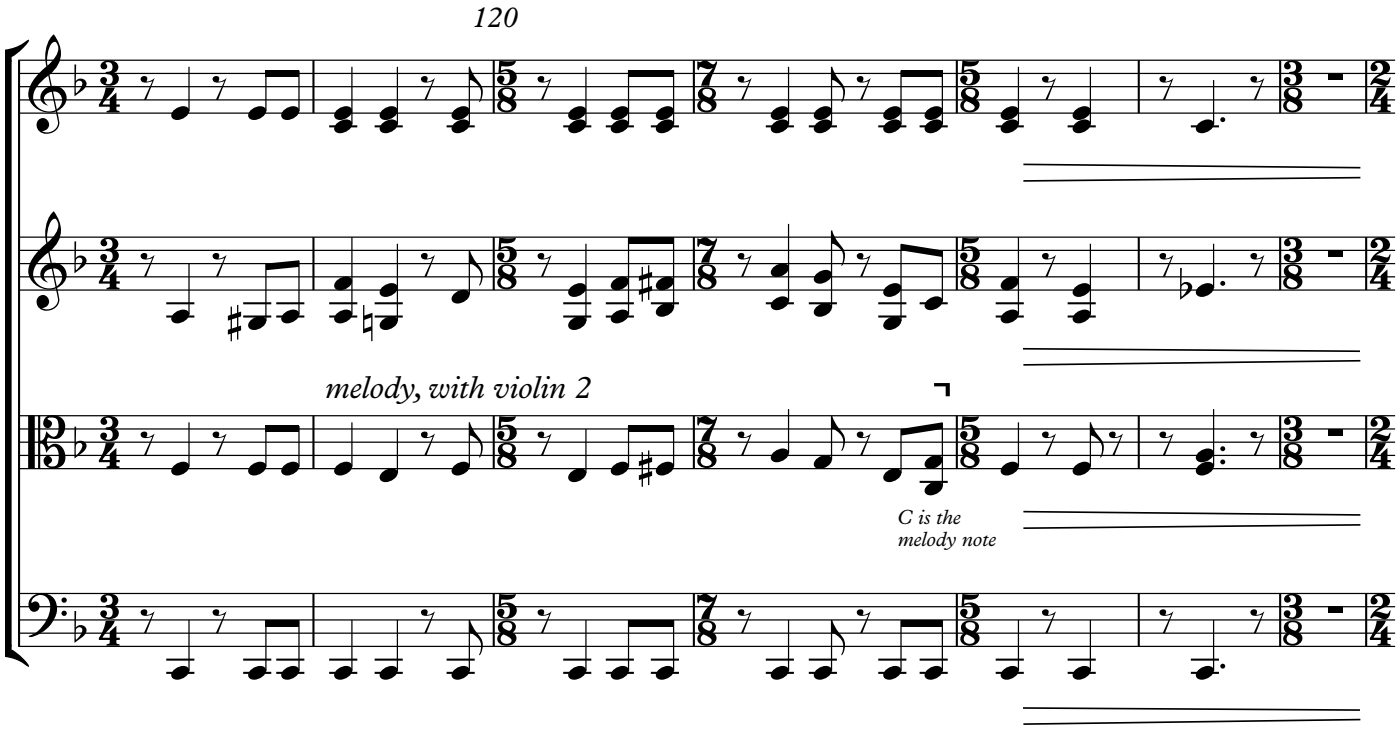

J
Slowly, more savage
♩ = 40
85
rough
ugly, distorting the sound
ff

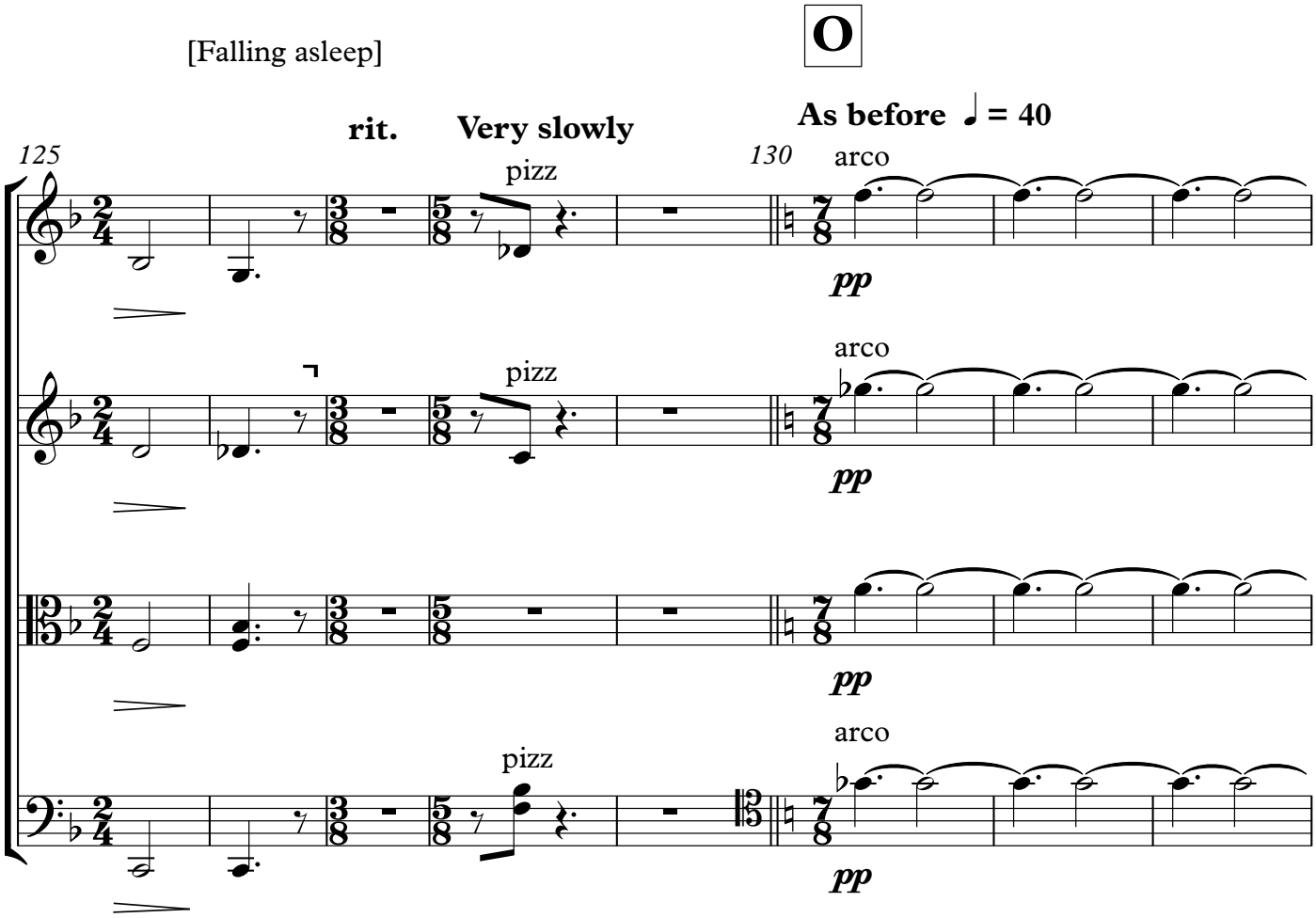

K
[Mourning]
These phrases should be played as
one long melody, building to a climax
playing normally, lyrically
90
tutta
forza
f
95


L
Andante ♩ = 48
100
p
p
p
p
pizz arco pizz arco
pizz arco pizz arco
pizz arco pizz arco
pizz arco pizz arco
gently
105
lightly stressed
freely
3
pizz arco pizz
arco
pizz arco
pizz arco pizz arco
gently


M
lightly stressed
rit.
110
molto
p
lightly stressed
pizz
molto
p
lightly stressed
pizz
molto
p
pizz arco
pizz arco
pizz arco
pizz
sf


N
[Getting drowsy]
a tempo
115
very quiet
arco
melody
very quiet
arco
very quiet
pizz
arco
very quiet

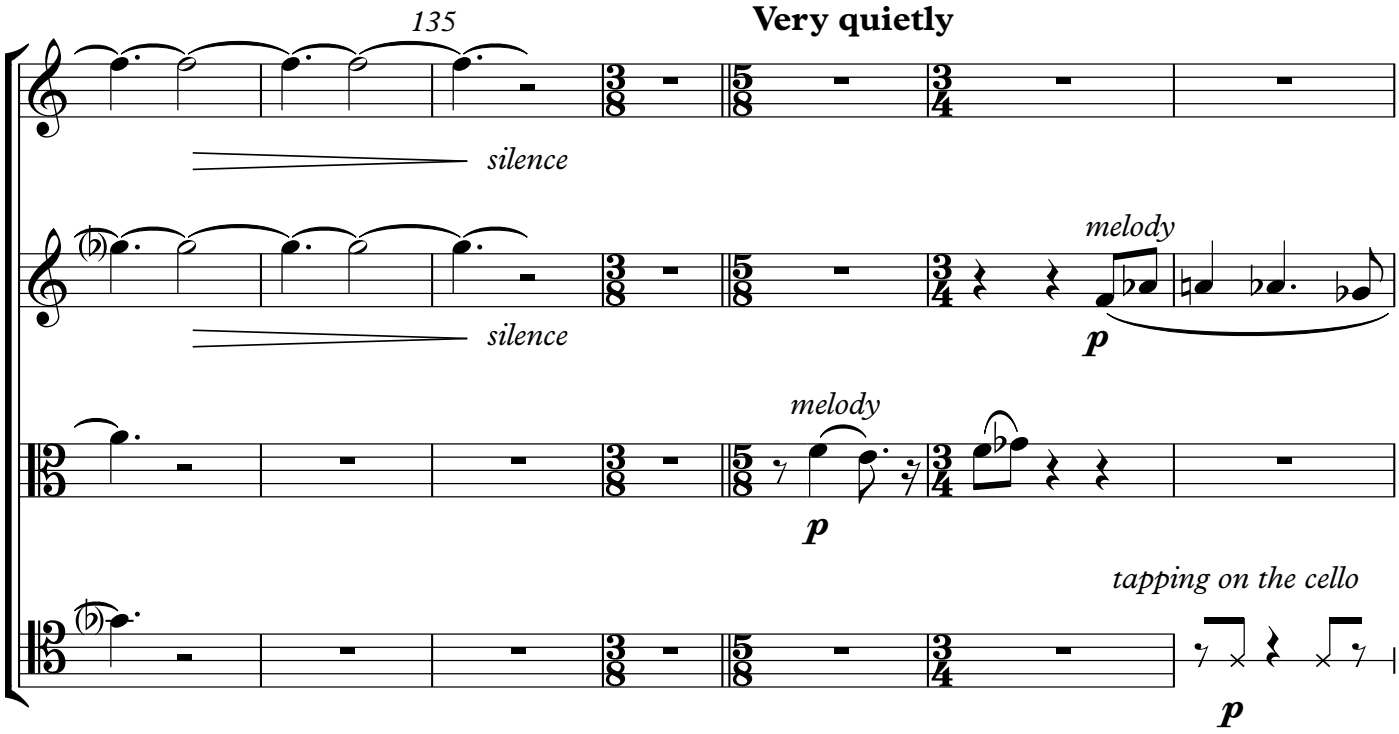

120
melody, with violin 2
C is the melody note

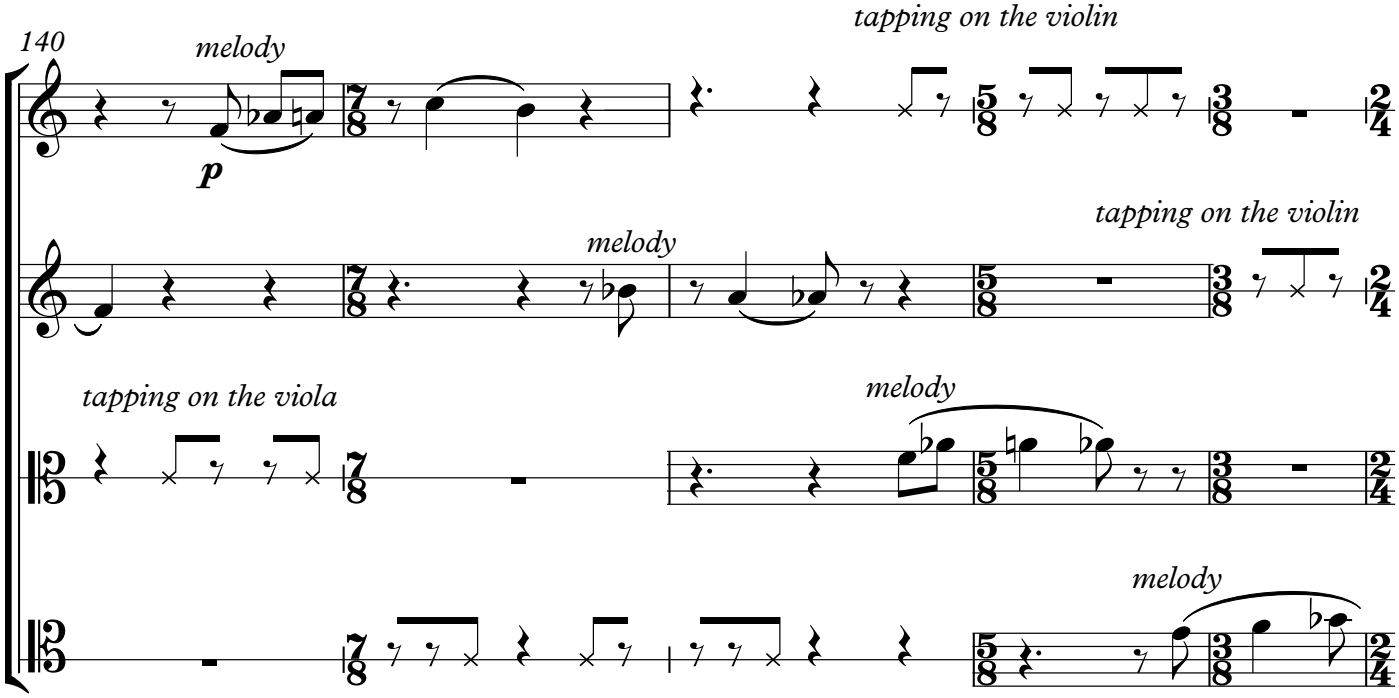

[Falling asleep]
O
rit.
Very slowly
As before ♩ = 40
125
130
pizz
arco
pp

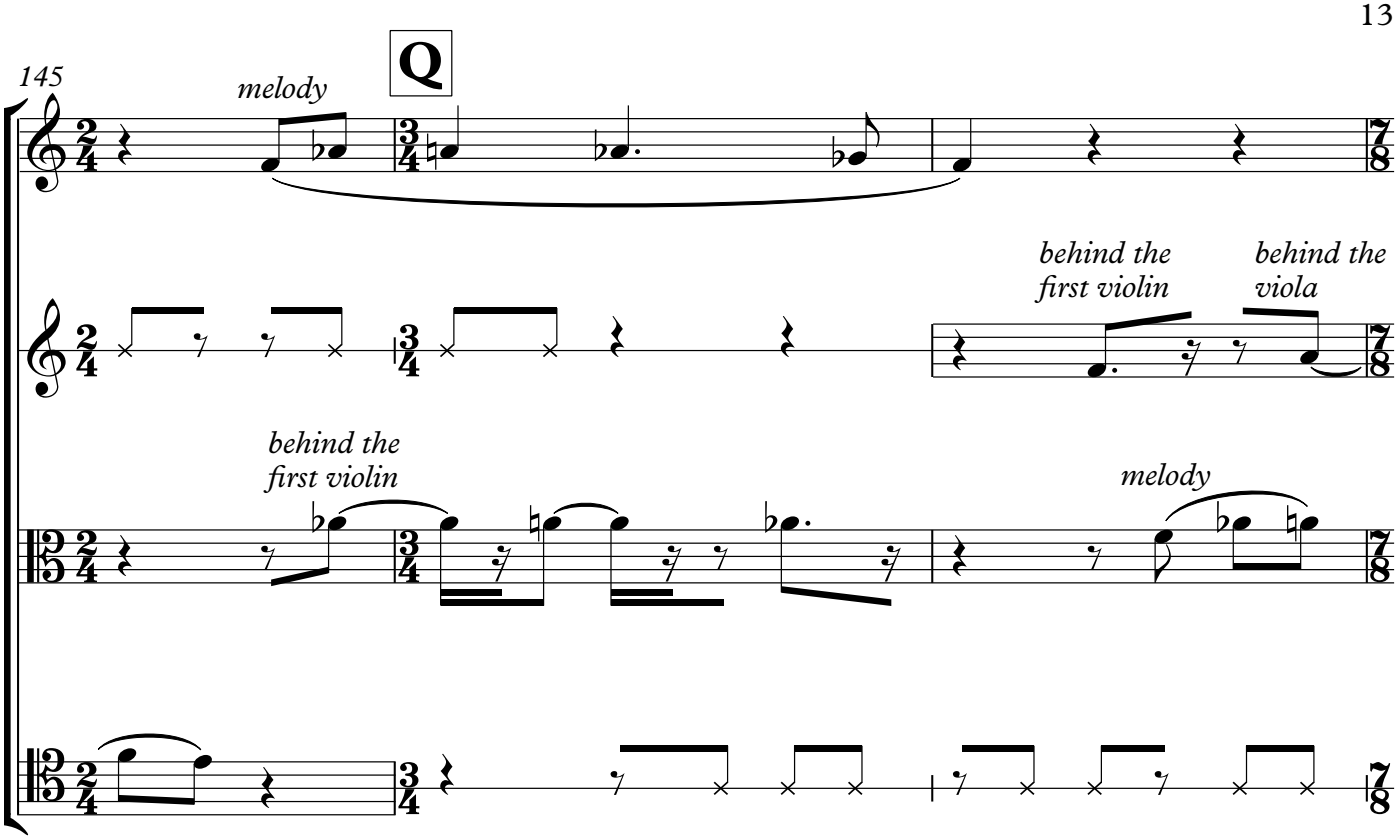
Love, too, would set a feast before you,
on a table covered with a spotless cloth,
set in a quiet garden where no sound
but singing and a softly joyous whispering
is ever heard.

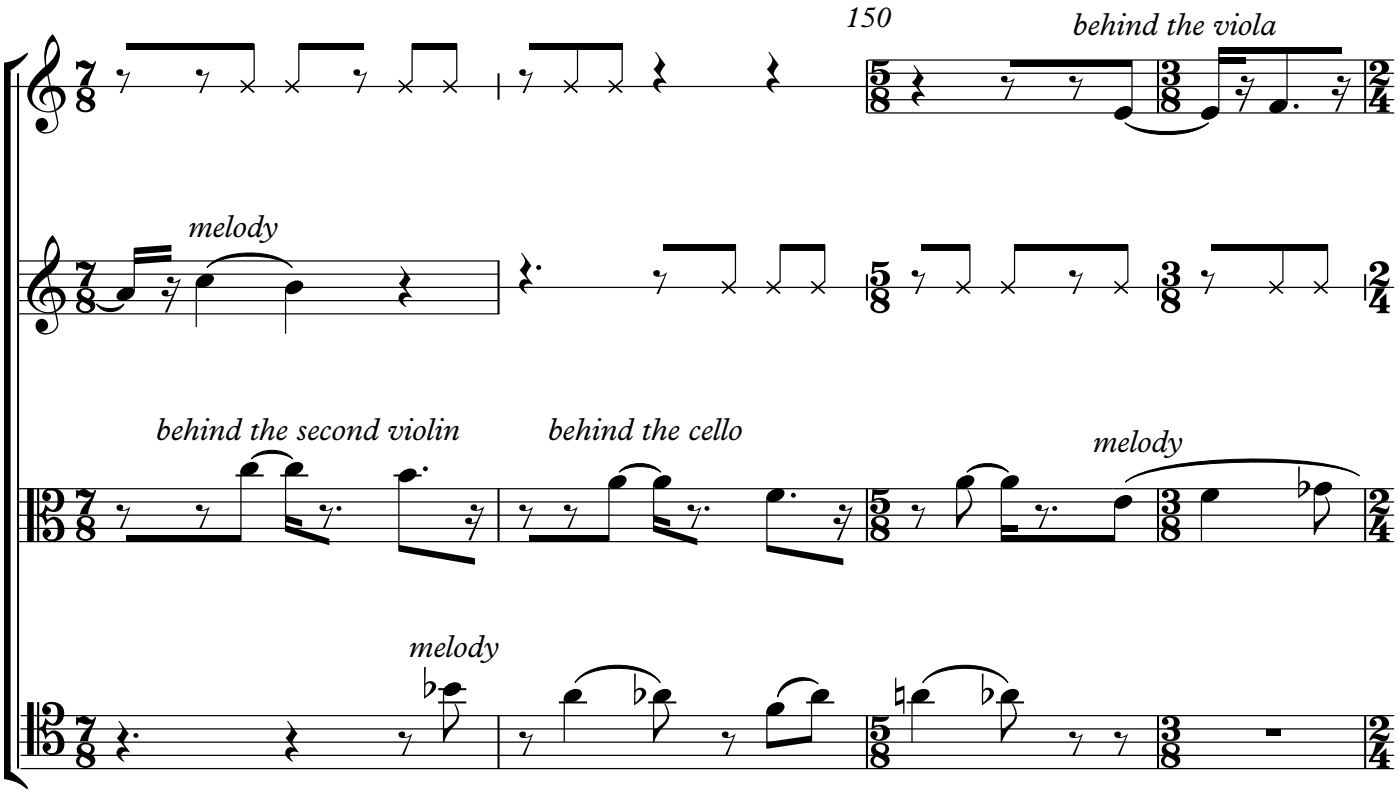
-- A Course in Miracles

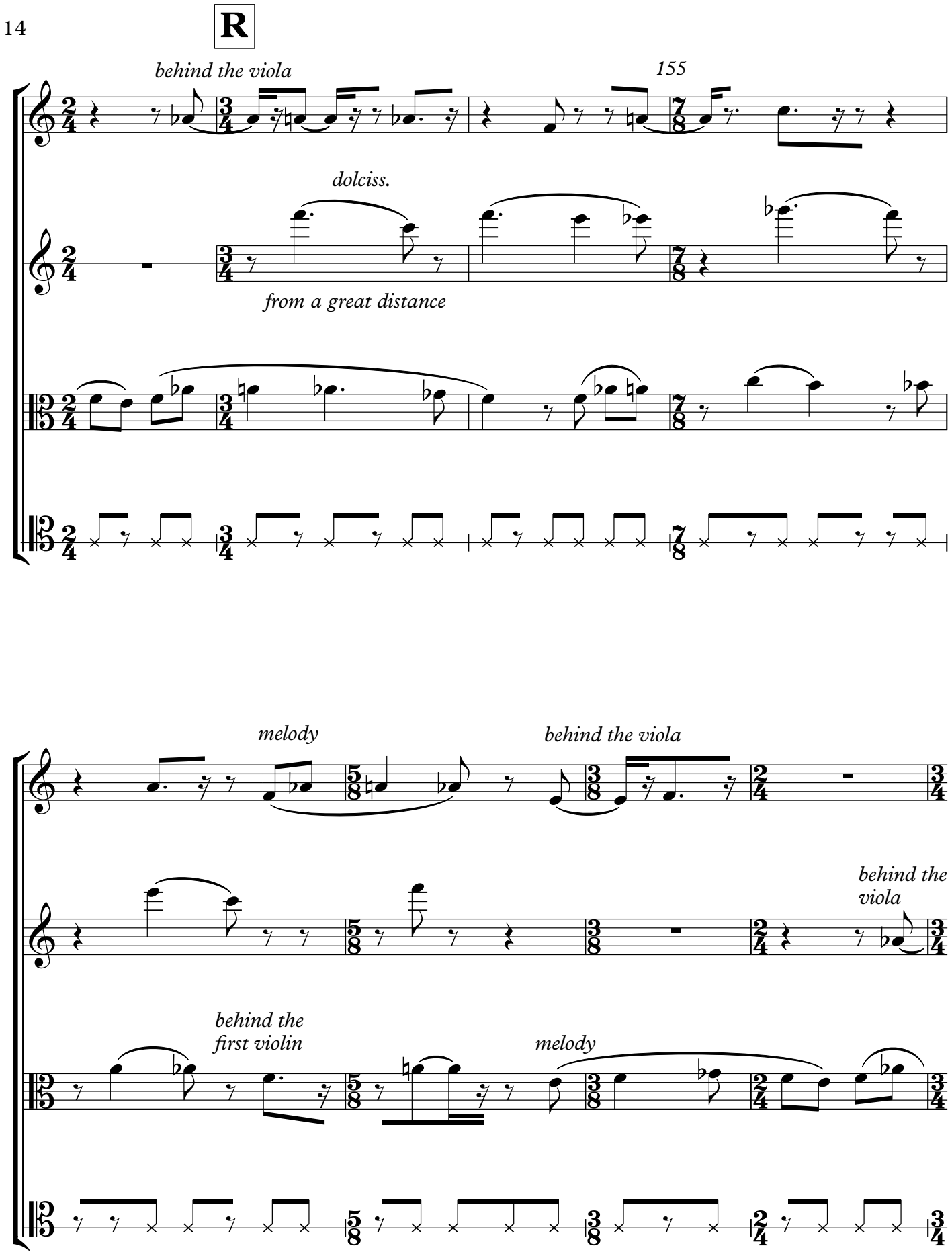
P [The remembered song]

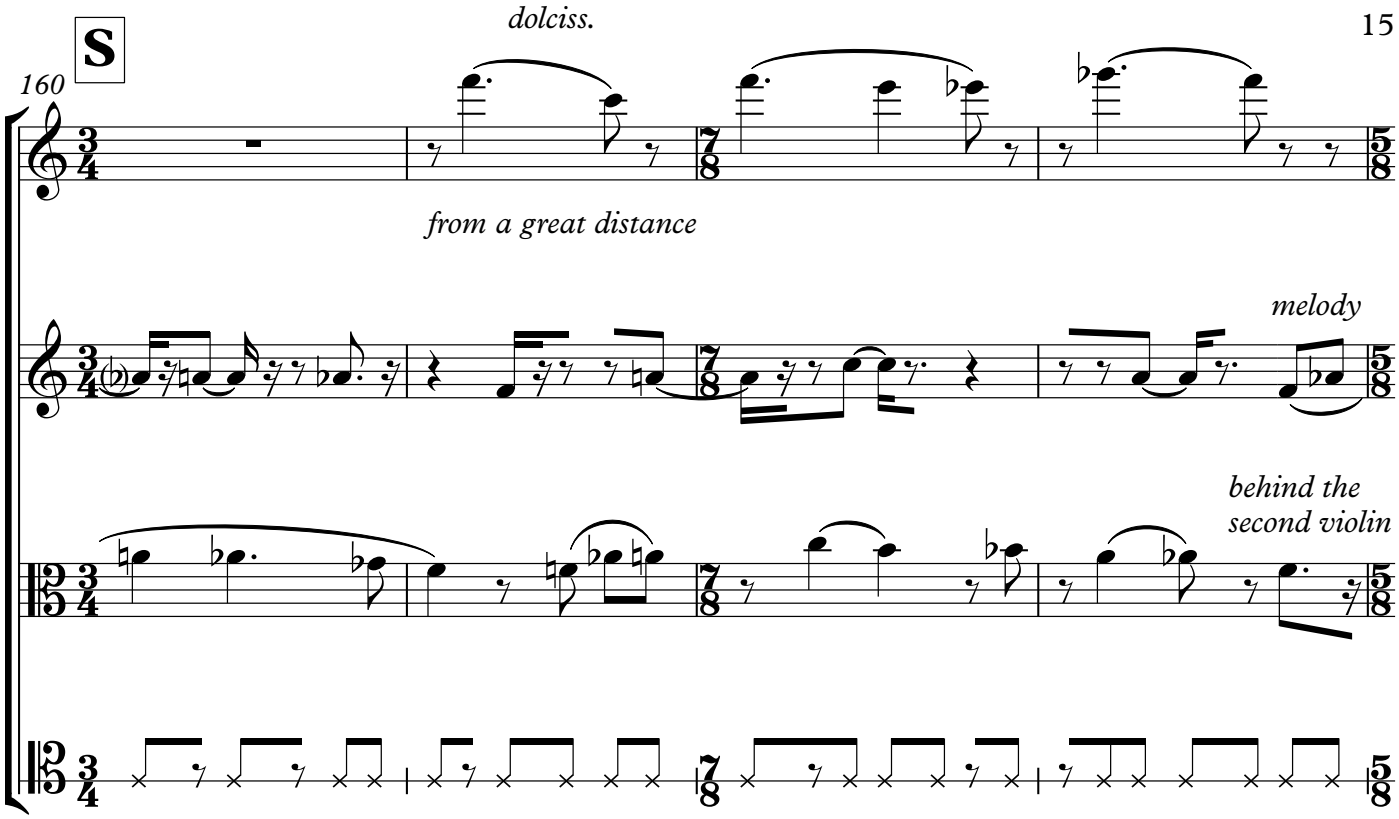


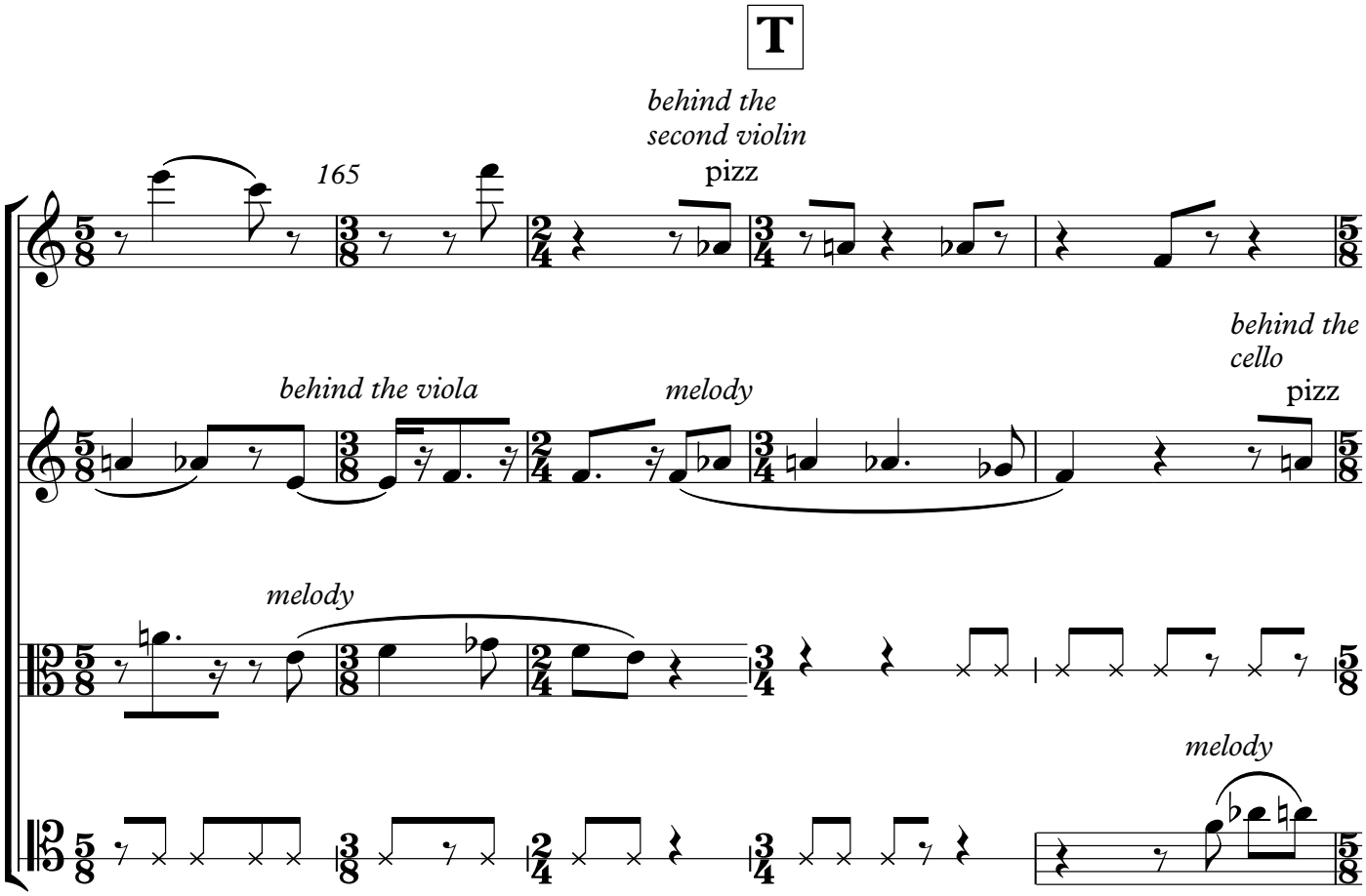


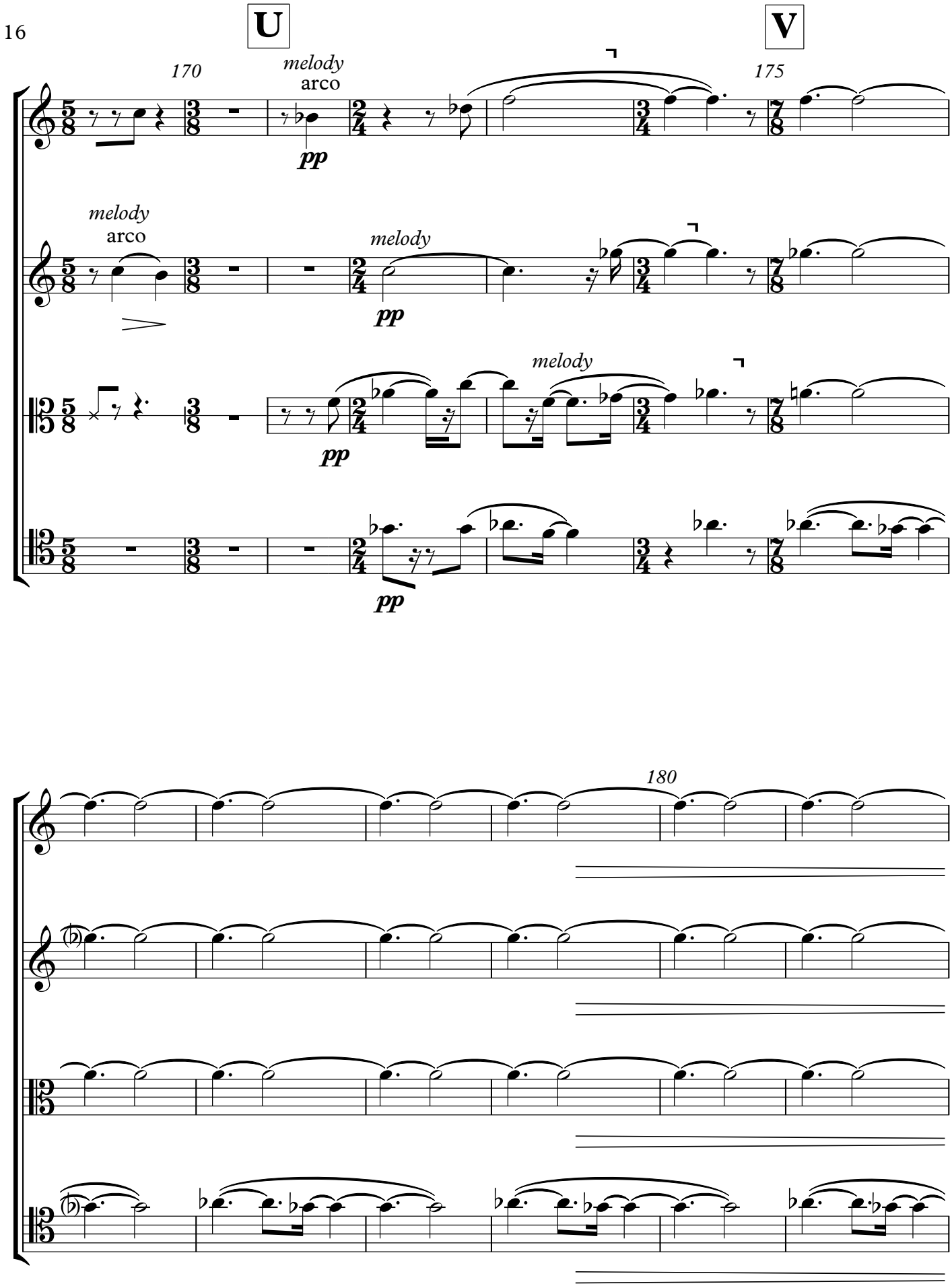

145
Q
melody
behind the first violin
behind the viola
behind the first violin
melody

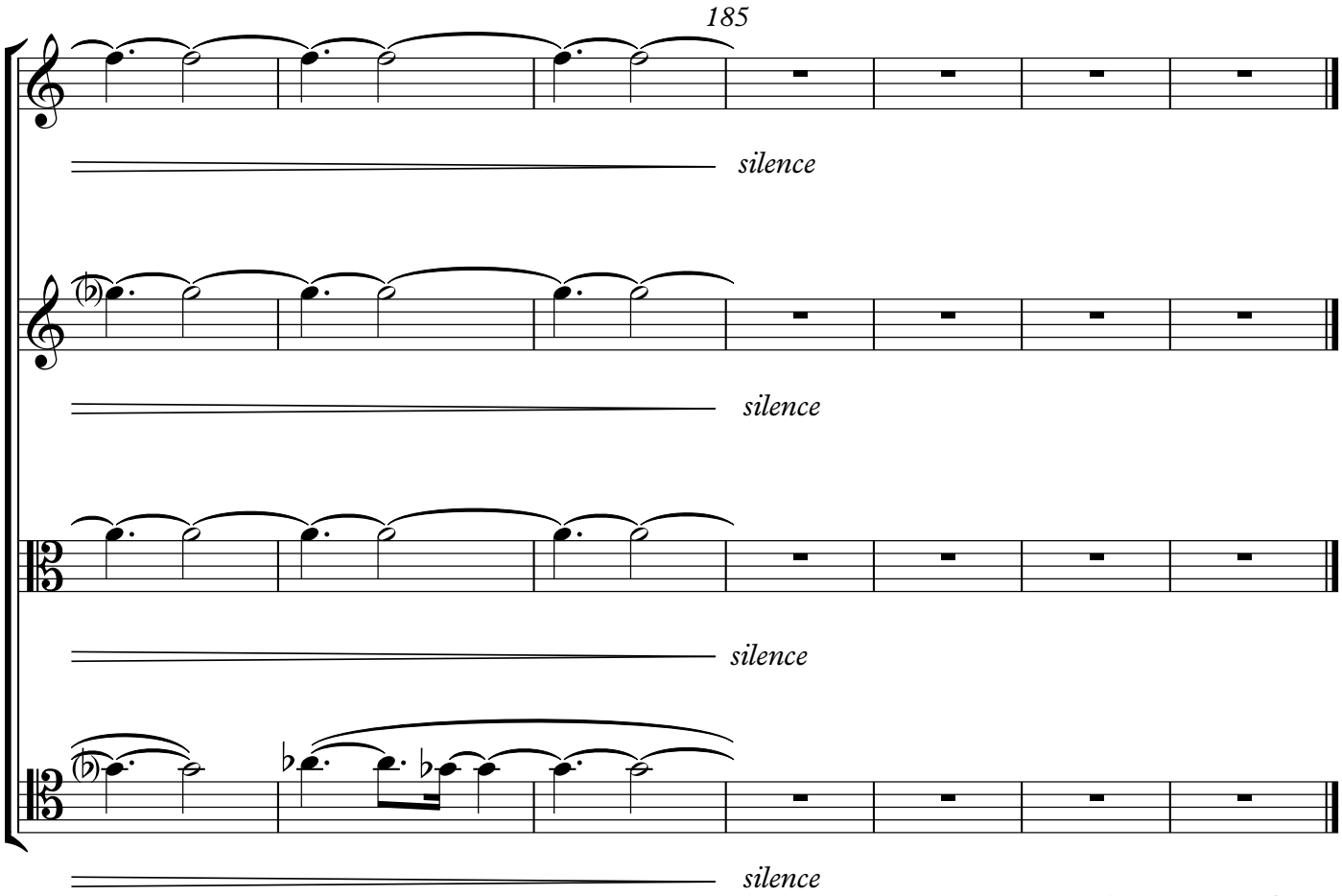

150
behind the viola
melody
behind the second violin
behind the cello
melody
melody


R
behind the viola
155
dolciss.
from a great distance
melody
behind the viola
behind the viola
behind the first violin
melody


S
160
dolciss.
from a great distance
melody
behind the
second violin


T
behind the
second violin
165
pizz
behind the viola
melody
behind the
cello
pizz
melody
melody


U
V
170
175
180
melody
arco
pp



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