On Reading Emerson

for piano

by
Kyle Gann
2006

On Reading Emerson (2006)

Pianist Sarah Cahill asked me to write a piece about one of our mutually favorite authors, Ralph Waldo Emerson. I resisted the impulse to title the piece "Whim," though like Emerson, "I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation." Of course my conception of Emerson is filtered through Charles Ives, who wrote of him, "As thoughts surge to his mind, he fills the heavens with them, crowds them in, if necessary, but seldom arranges them along the ground first." To create that effect in music, I did the reverse: write a bunch of passages of music around a single (or double) idea, and arrange them along the ground before fitting them together. Because I think of Emerson as ever aware of the interpenetration of opposites, almost every chord in the piece contains a tone from the opposite chord, and because he is all encompassing, I have used, for the first time in my life, a 12-tone row. (It only appears twice, and elsewhere in fragments, and is never transposed, retrograded, or anything.) Like Emerson's writing, the piece is peppered with quotations, three of which the listener may recognize. The fourth will not be recognized; it is from a song that I began writing in college on Emerson's "The Rhodora" and never finished, because the only good phrase I wrote was the one I resurrect here, setting the lines:

> Why thou wert there, O, rival of the rose!
> I never thought to ask, I never knew....

I thank Sarah for giving that phrase a home at last.

- Kyle Gann

Duration: 8 minutes

for Sarah Cahill

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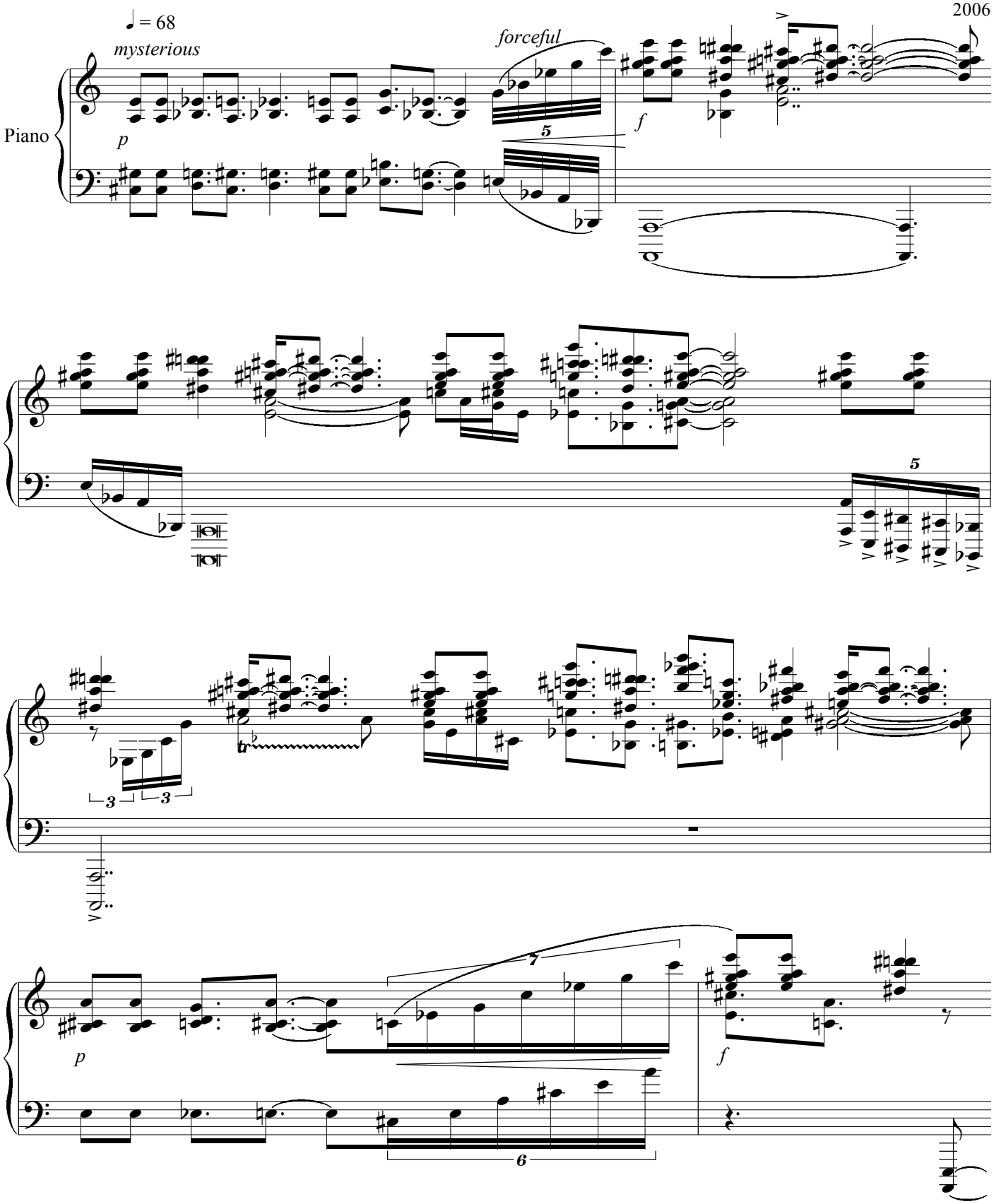
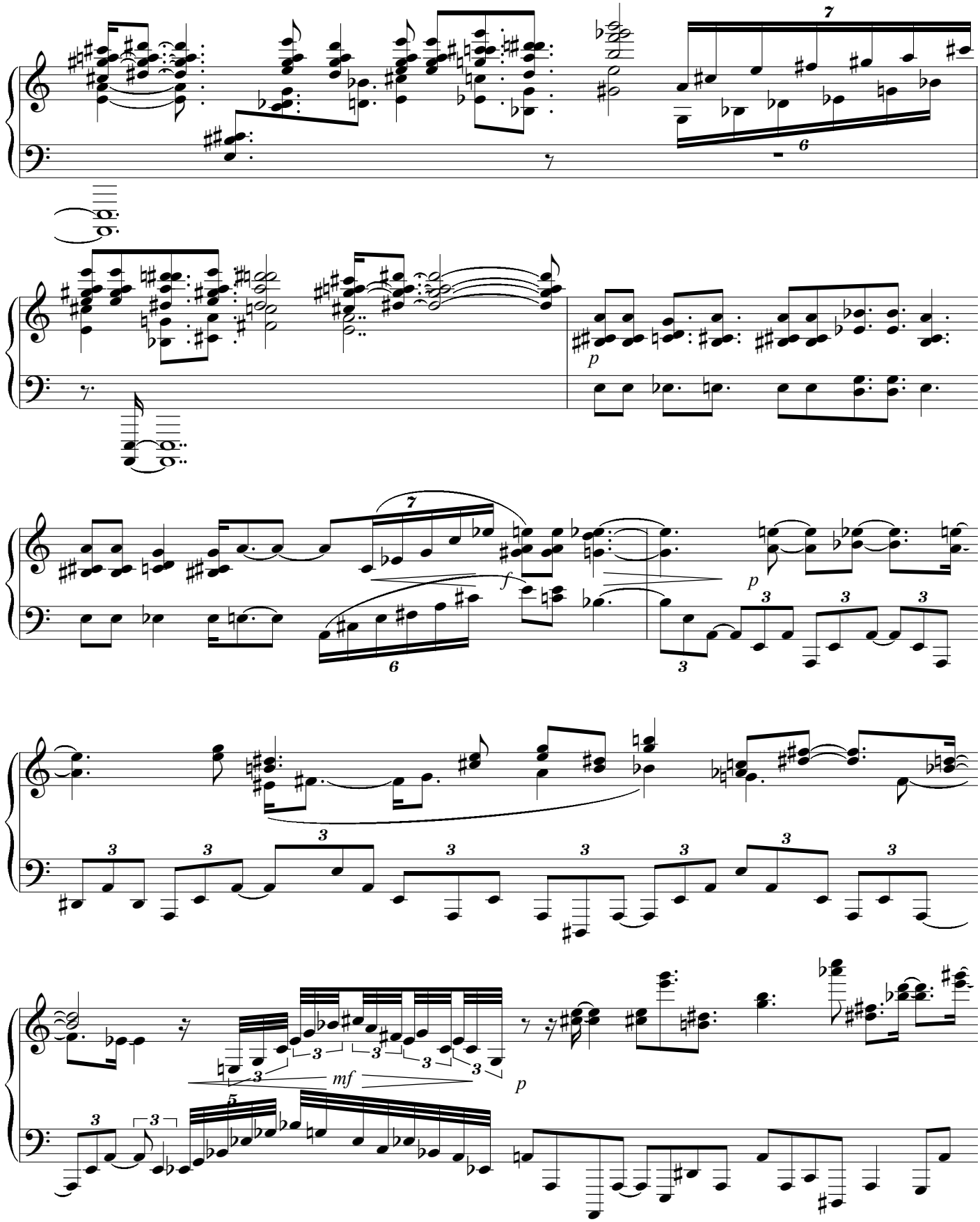
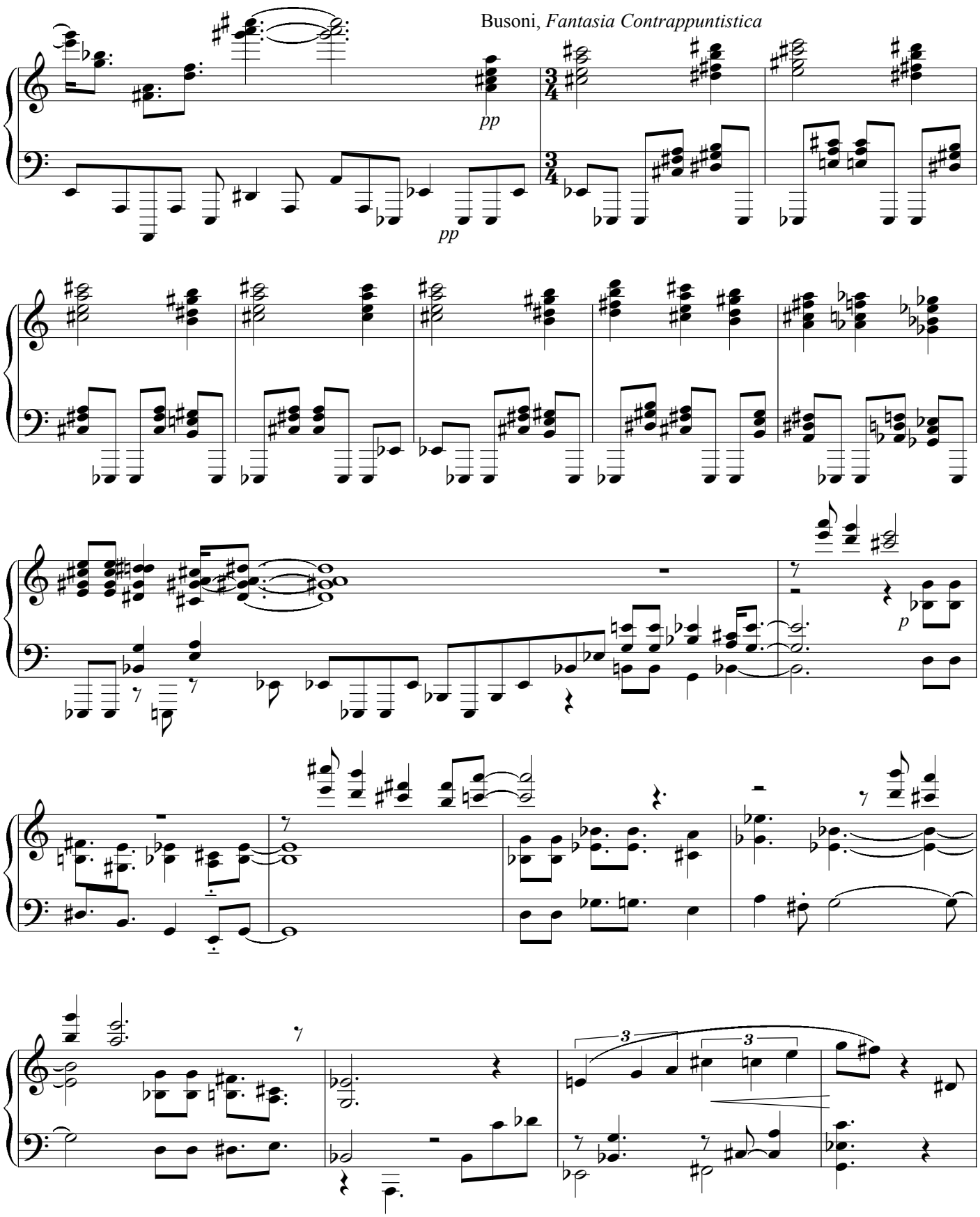
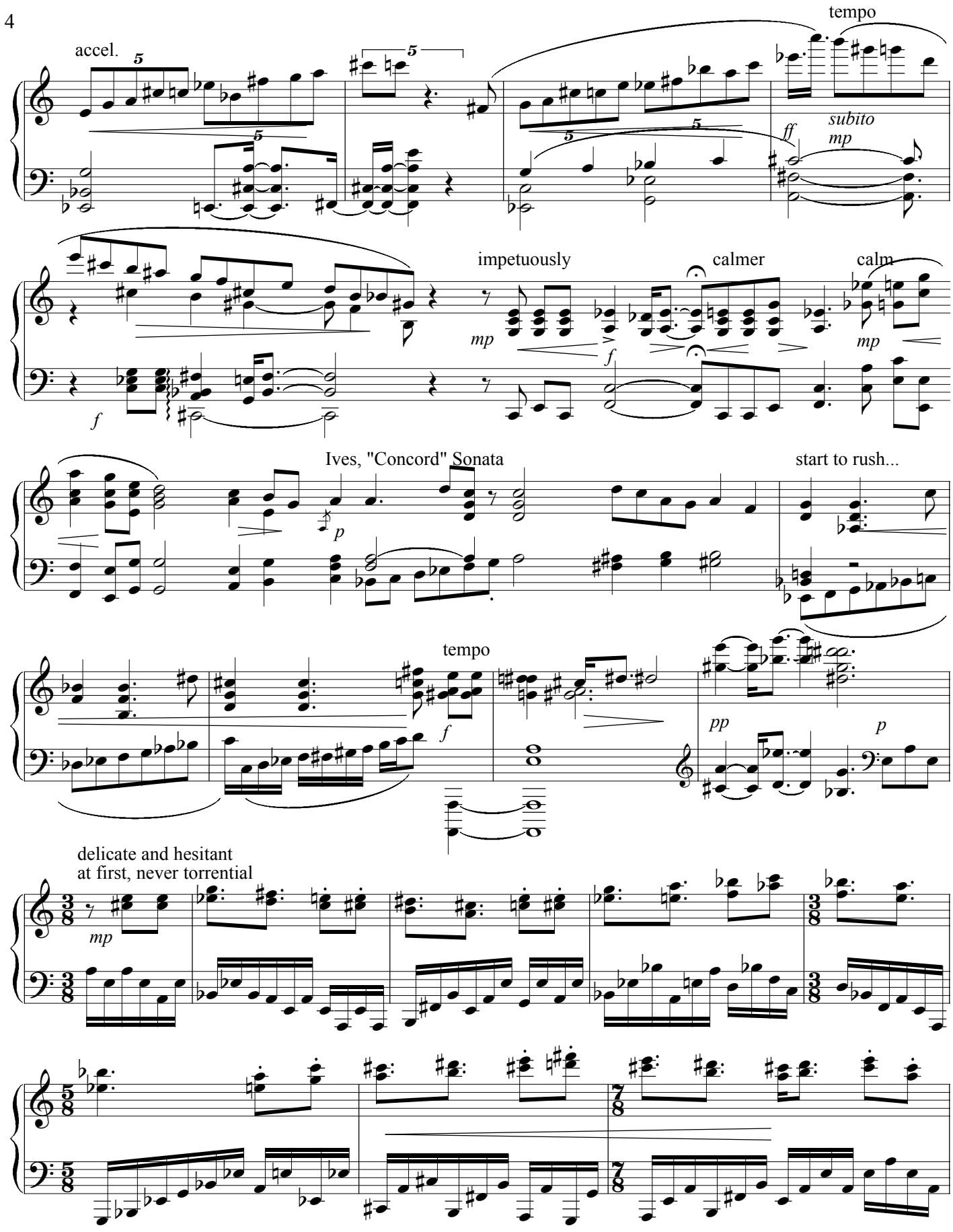
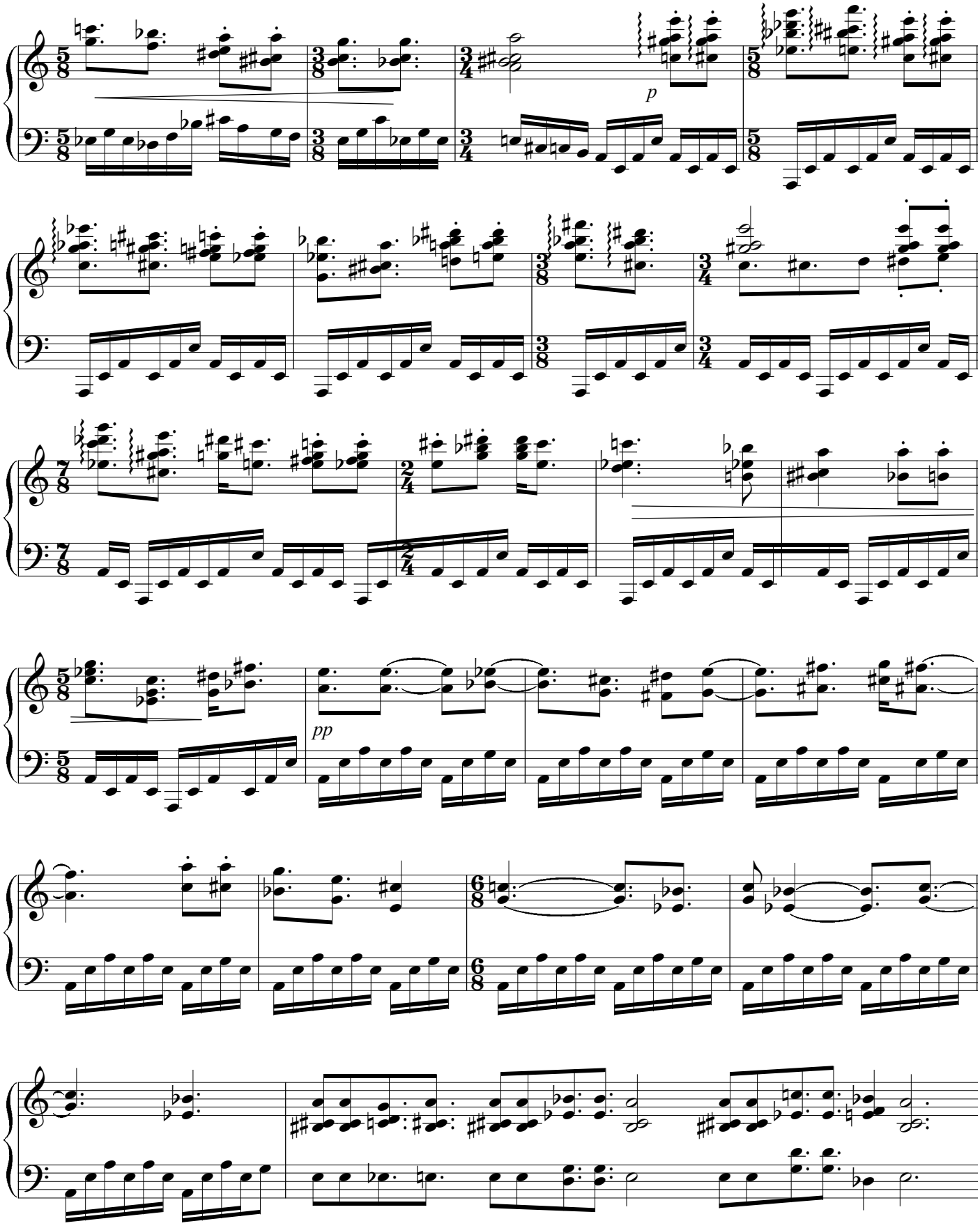
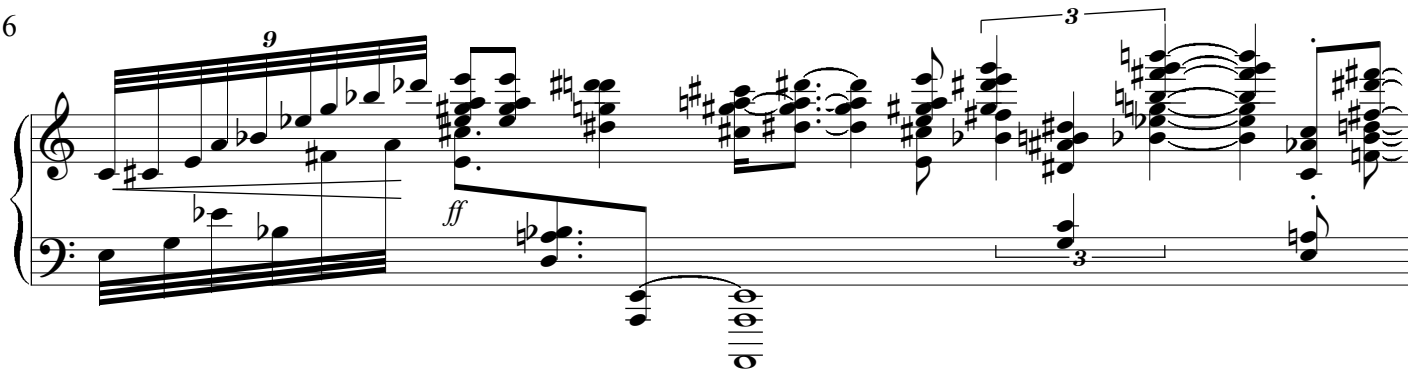


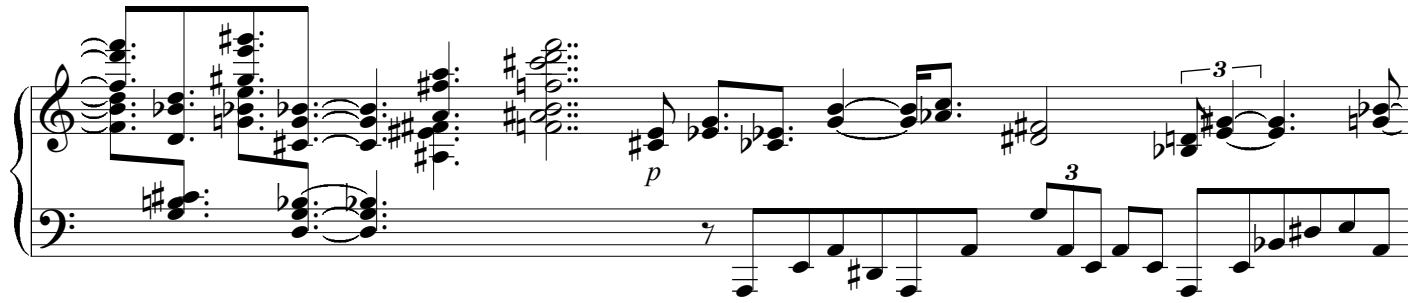

p
f
p
mf
p

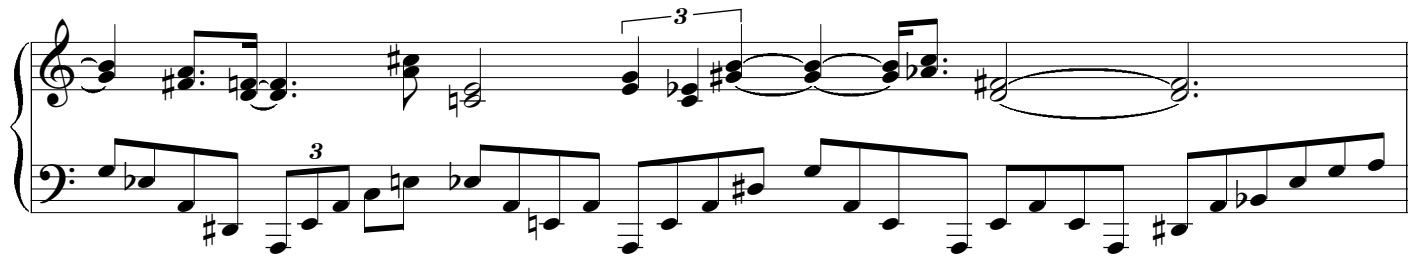

Busoni, *Fantasia Contrappuntistica*
pp
pp
3/4
3/4
p
3
3


accel.
tempo
subito
mp
ff
impetuously
calmer
calm
mp
f
Ives, "Concord" Sonata
start to rush...
p
tempo
f
pp
p
delicate and hesitant
at first, never torrential
mp

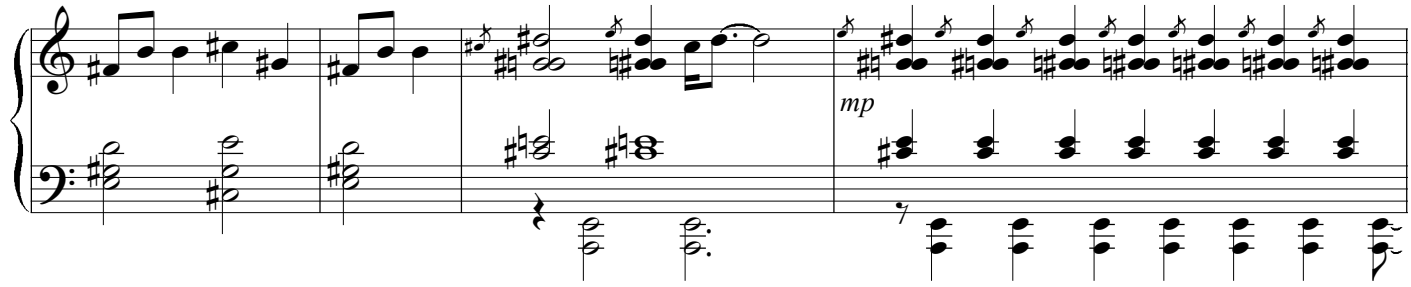

p
pp

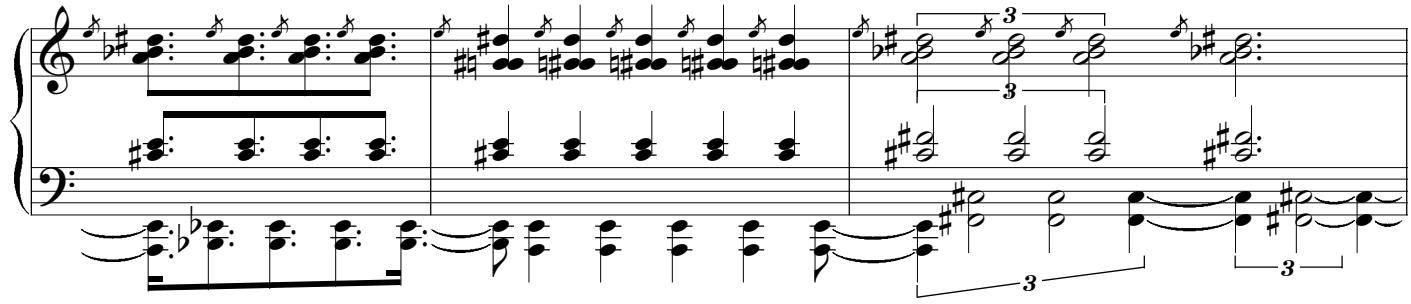






MacDowell, *Woodland Sketches*





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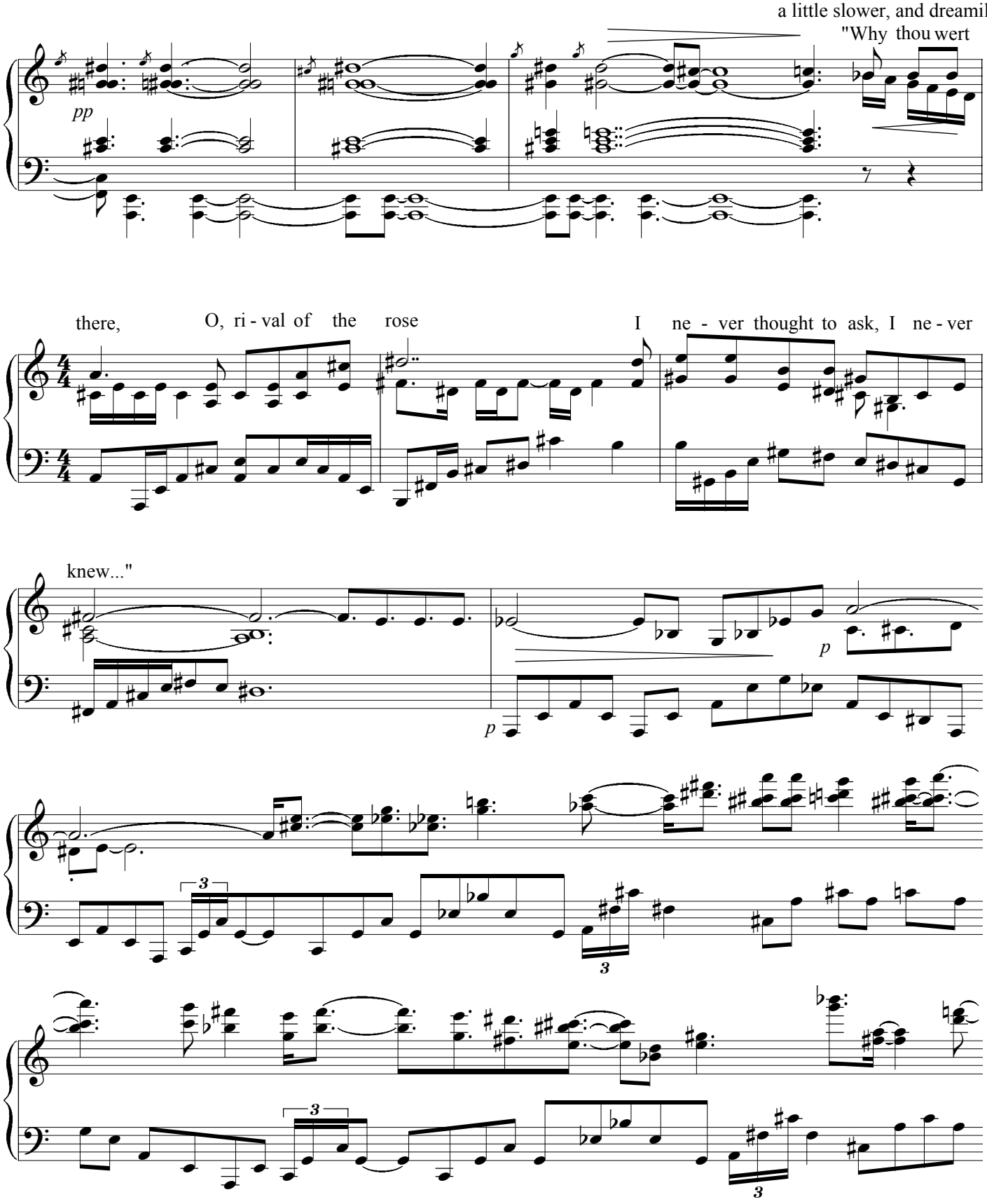
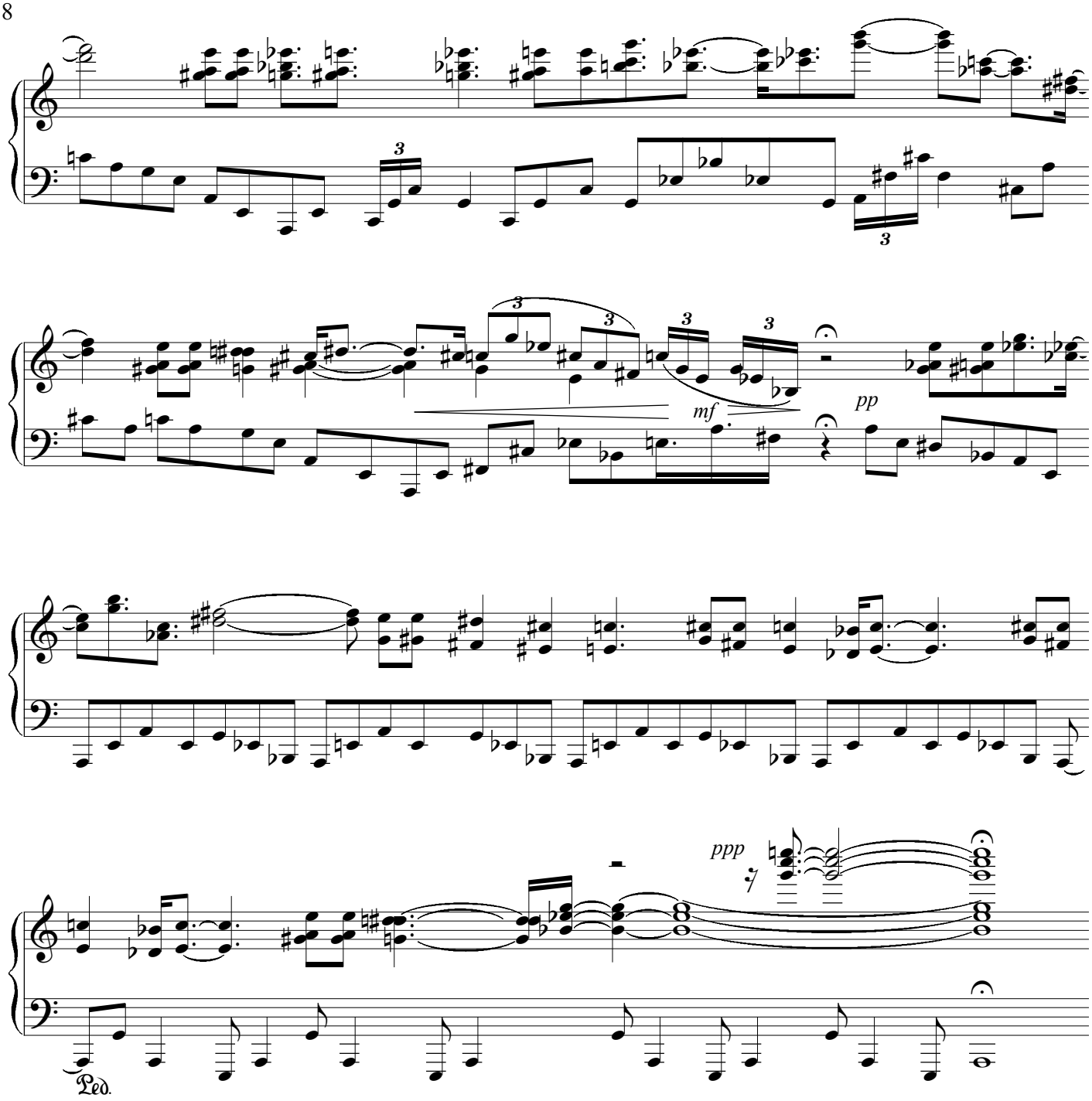

a little slower, and dreamily
"Why thou wert
pp
there,
O, ri - val of the rose
I ne - ver thought to ask, I ne - ver
knew..."
p
p
3
3
3
3



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