War Is Just a Racket

for speaking pianist
text by General Smedley Butler

Kyle Gann
2008

War Is Just a Racket (2008)

When pianist Sarah Cahill asked me for an anti-war piece for an entire concert of such works, composer Brian McLaren had just alerted me to a wonderful 1933 speech by General Smedley Butler, called "War Is Just a Racket." Butler was a popular general who, in 1933, was approached by a bunch of plutocrats (including apparently Prescott Bush, father and grandfather of presidents) who wanted to stage a quiet coup, reducing FDR to a figurehead and setting up a government friendlier to Hitler and Mussolini. It was an attempt at a fascist takeover, and they thought with Butler on their side, the army would play along. Butler feigned interest for awhile, but after he'd gotten enough information, he marched straight to Congress and turned the bastards in. Apparently FDR agreed not to jail them all if they'd stand out of the way of the New Deal - and that's what it took to get the New Deal through.

The text is a speech Butler gave in retirement detailing his disillusionment with the purposes for which the U.S. Government uses its armed forces. I've come to think that political music is really only effective with text, and Sarah wanted a solo piece. So I borrowed the device that Christian Wolff used in his 1971 Accompaniments for Frederic Rzewski, whereby the pianist speaks the text at a normal pace, and chords associated with certain syllables are played along with the words, in a speech-determined rhythm. (My theater piece Custer and Sitting Bull was also indebted to Accompaniments, which seems to remain a pretty well-known work, even though Christian later disavowed its Maoist politics. As allergic as I am to all things military, this is the second time I've set to music words by a general.)

World premiere: March 12, 2009, Merkin Hall, New York City, by Sarah Cahill

Duration: 8 minutes

Text:

War is just a racket. A racket is best described, I believe, as something that is not what it seems to the majority of people. Only a small inside group knows what it is about. It is conducted for the benefit of the very few at the expense of the masses.

I believe in adequate defense at the coastline and nothing else. If a nation comes over here to fight, then we'll fight. The trouble with America is that when the dollar only earns 6 percent over here, then it gets restless and goes overseas to get 100 percent. Then the flag follows the dollar and the soldiers follow the flag. I wouldn't go to war again as I have done to protect some lousy investment of the bankers. There are only two things we should fight for. One is the defense of our homes and the other is the Bill of Rights. War for any other reason is simply a racket.

There isn't a trick in the racketeering bag that the military gang is blind to. It has its "finger men" to point out enemies, its "muscle men" to destroy enemies, its "brain men" to plan war preparations, and a "Big Boss" Super-Nationalistic-Capitalism. It may seem odd for me, a military man to adopt such a comparison. Truthfulness compels me to. I spent thirty-three years and four months in active military service as a member of this country's most agile military force, the Marine Corps. I served in all commissioned ranks from Second Lieutenant to Major-General. And during that period, I spent most of my time being a high class muscle-man for Big Business, for Wall Street and for the Bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism.

I suspected I was just part of a racket at the time. Now I am sure of it. Like all the members of the military profession, I never had a thought of my own until I left the service. My mental faculties remained in suspended animation while I obeyed the orders of higher-ups. This is typical with everyone in the military service.

I helped make Mexico, especially Tampico, safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank

boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefits of Wall Street. The record of racketeering is long. I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers in 1909-1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for American sugar interests in 1916. In China I helped to see to it that Standard Oil went its way unmolested.

During those years, I had, as the boys in the back room would say, a swell racket. Looking back on it, I feel that I could have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was to operate his racket in three districts. I operated on three continents.

To Sarah Cahill

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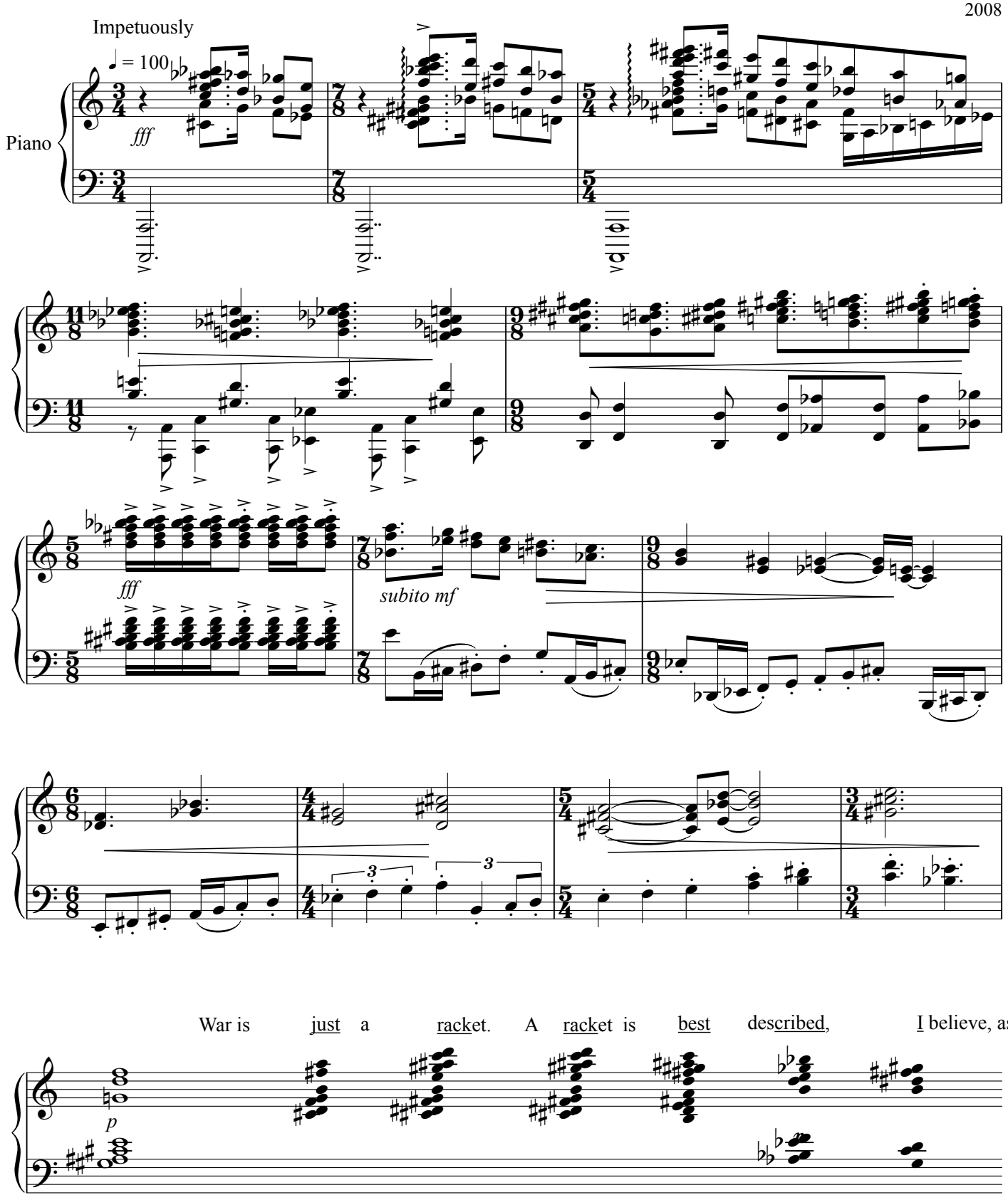

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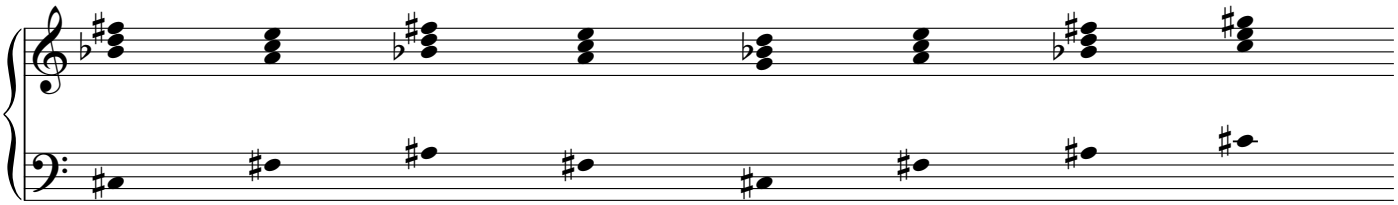

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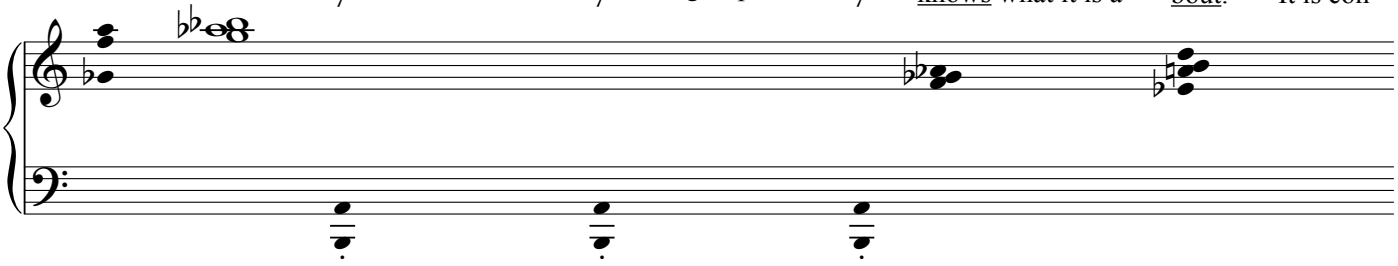

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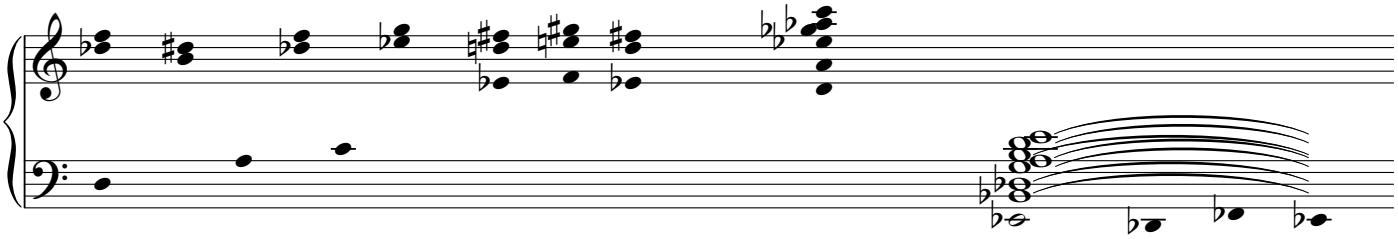

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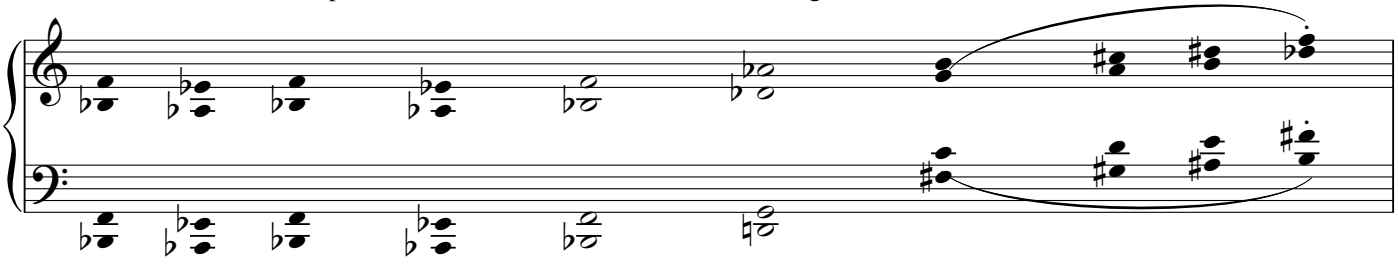
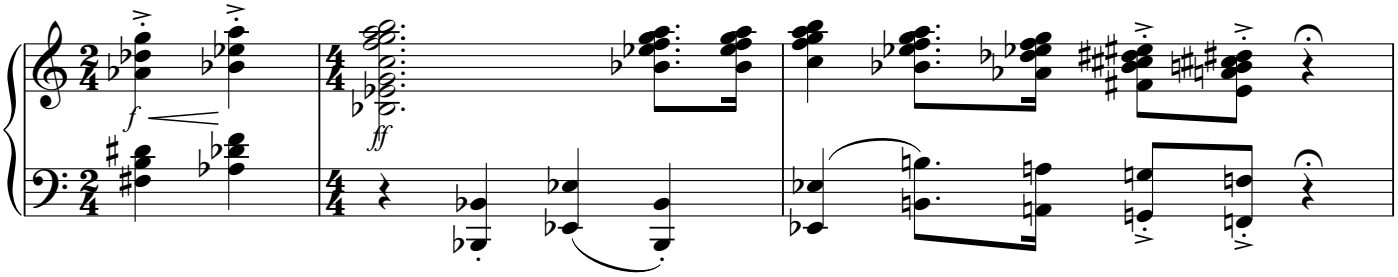
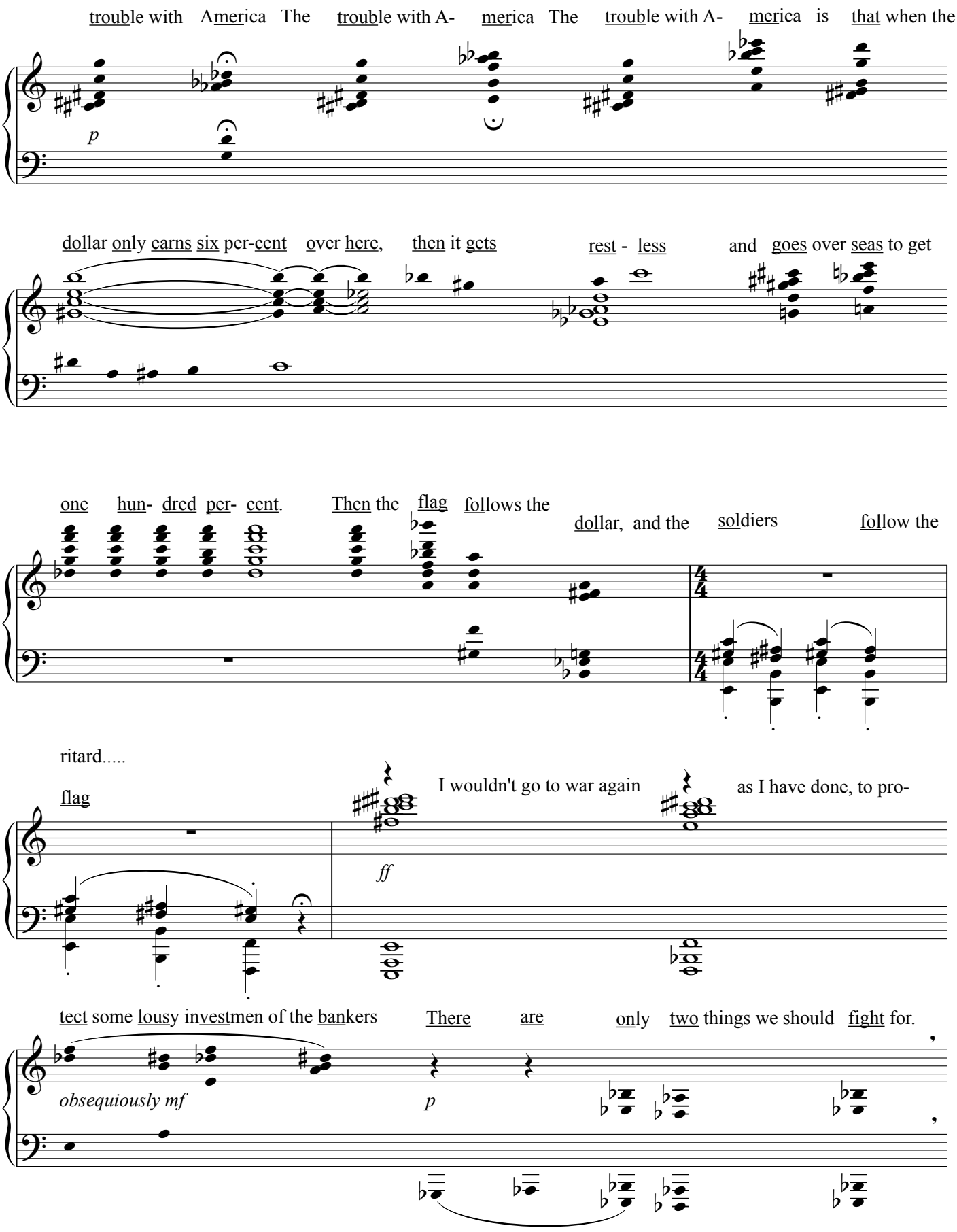


♩ = 100

then we'll fight! The

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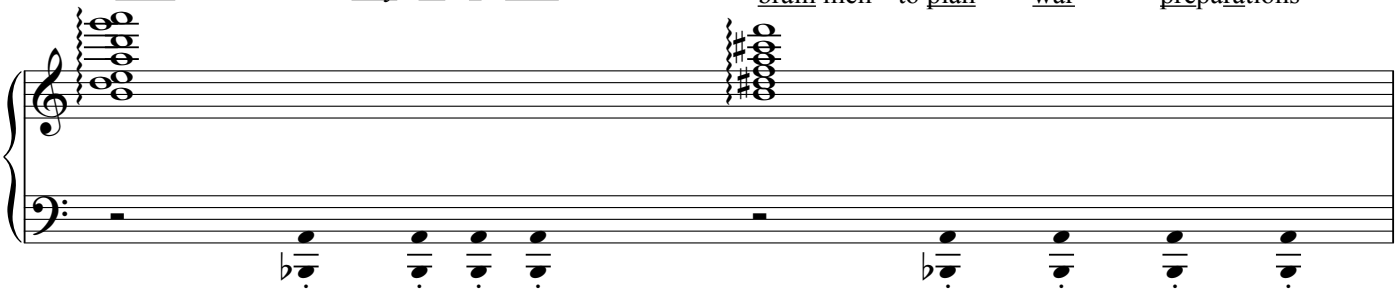

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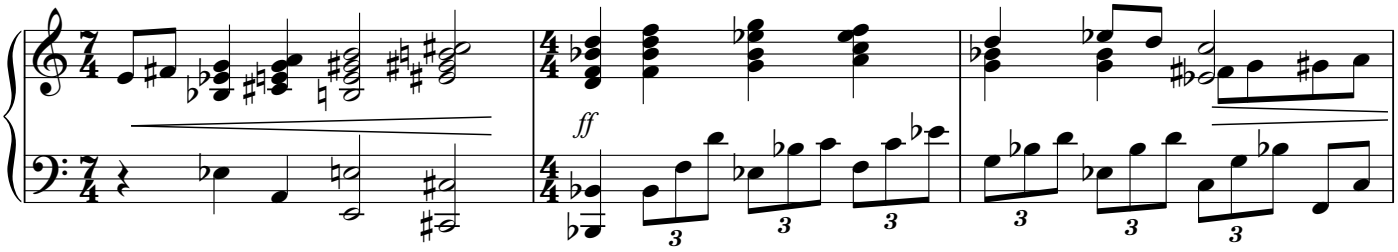
and a Big Boss Super nationalistic Capitalism



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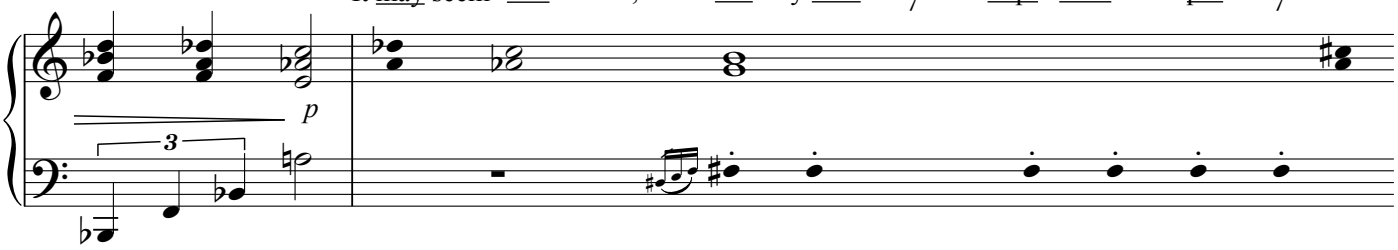

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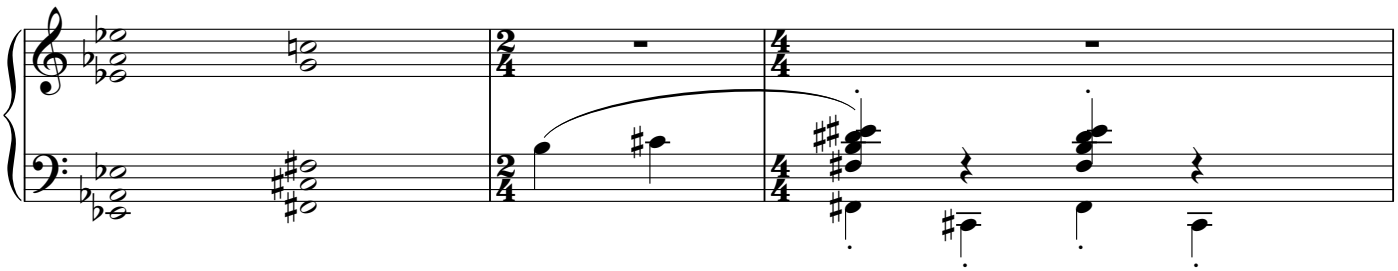
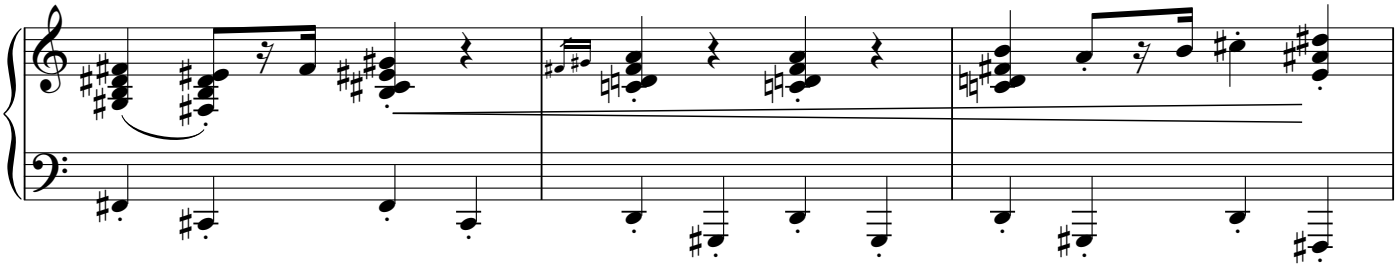
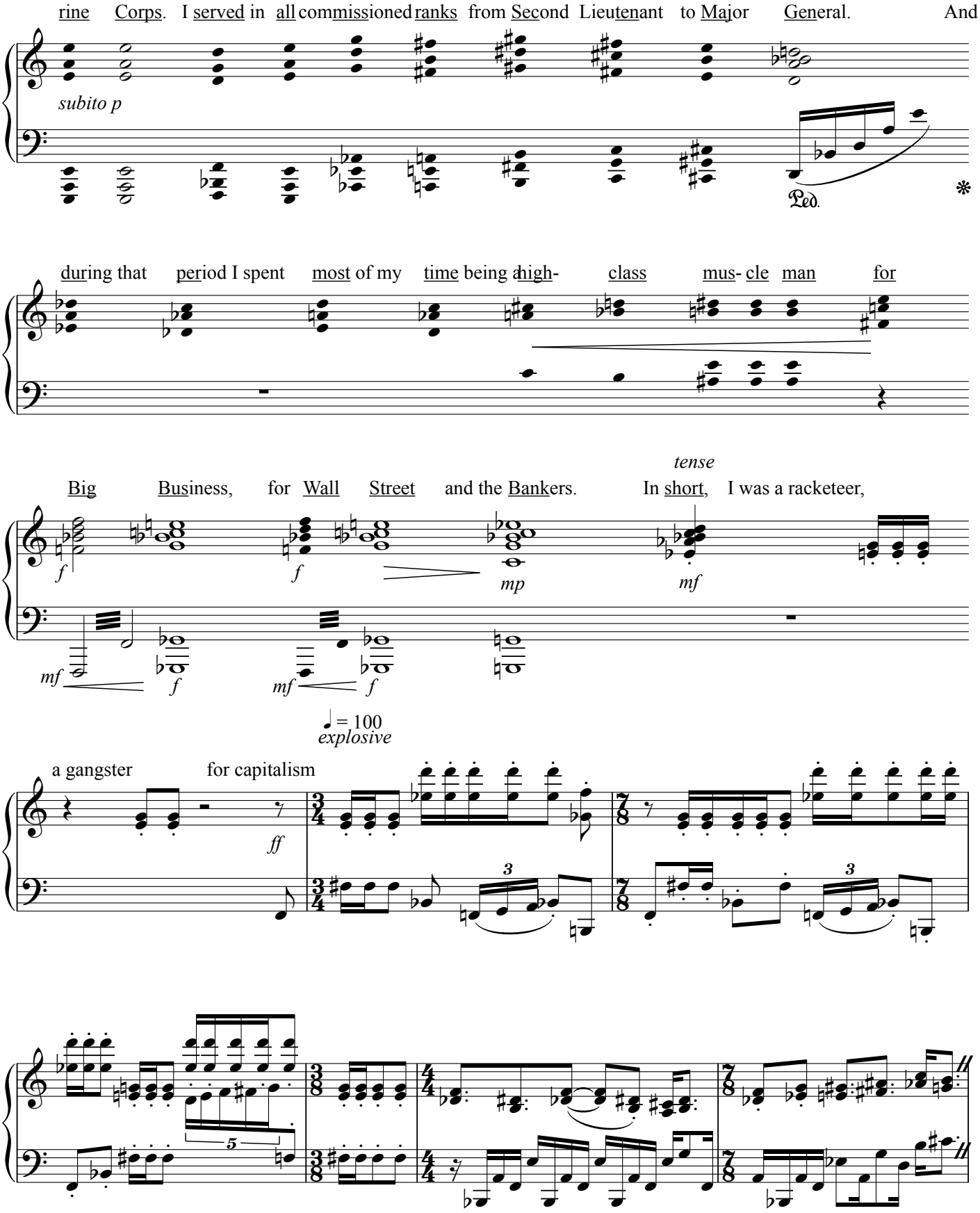
Truthfulness compels me to. I spent thirty-three years and four months 𝄾 in



active military service as a member of this country's most agile military force the Ma-




rine Corps. I served in all commissioned ranks from Second Lieutenant to Major General. And
subito p
Ped.
during that period I spent most of my time being a high- class mus- cle man for
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mf
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♩ = 100
explosive
a gangster for capitalism
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p, delicate

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. ✻

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pp

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♩ = 100

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mp *p*

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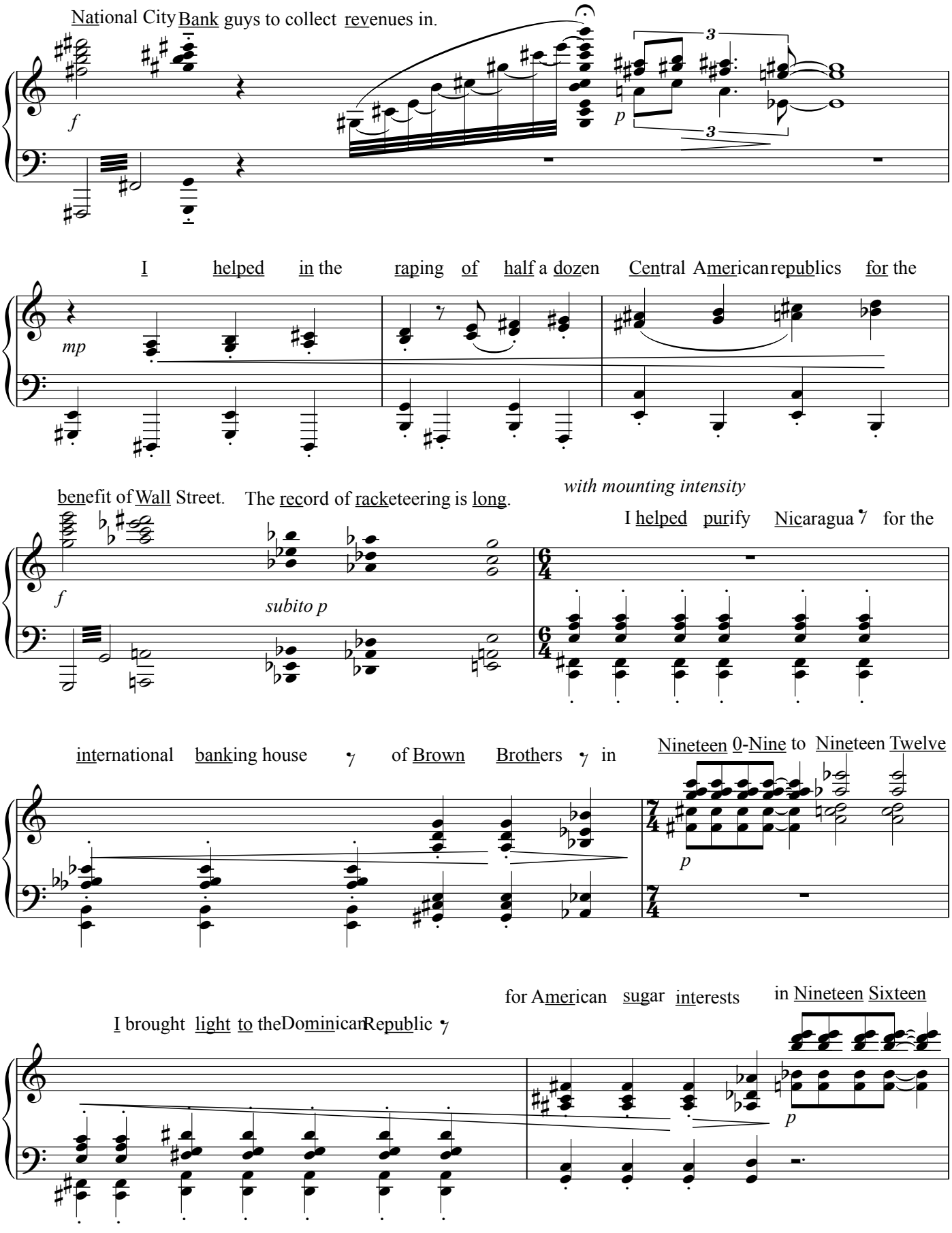
mp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with mounting intensity
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international banking house of Brown Brothers in
Nineteen 0-Nine to Nineteen Twelve
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for American sugar interests
in Nineteen Sixteen
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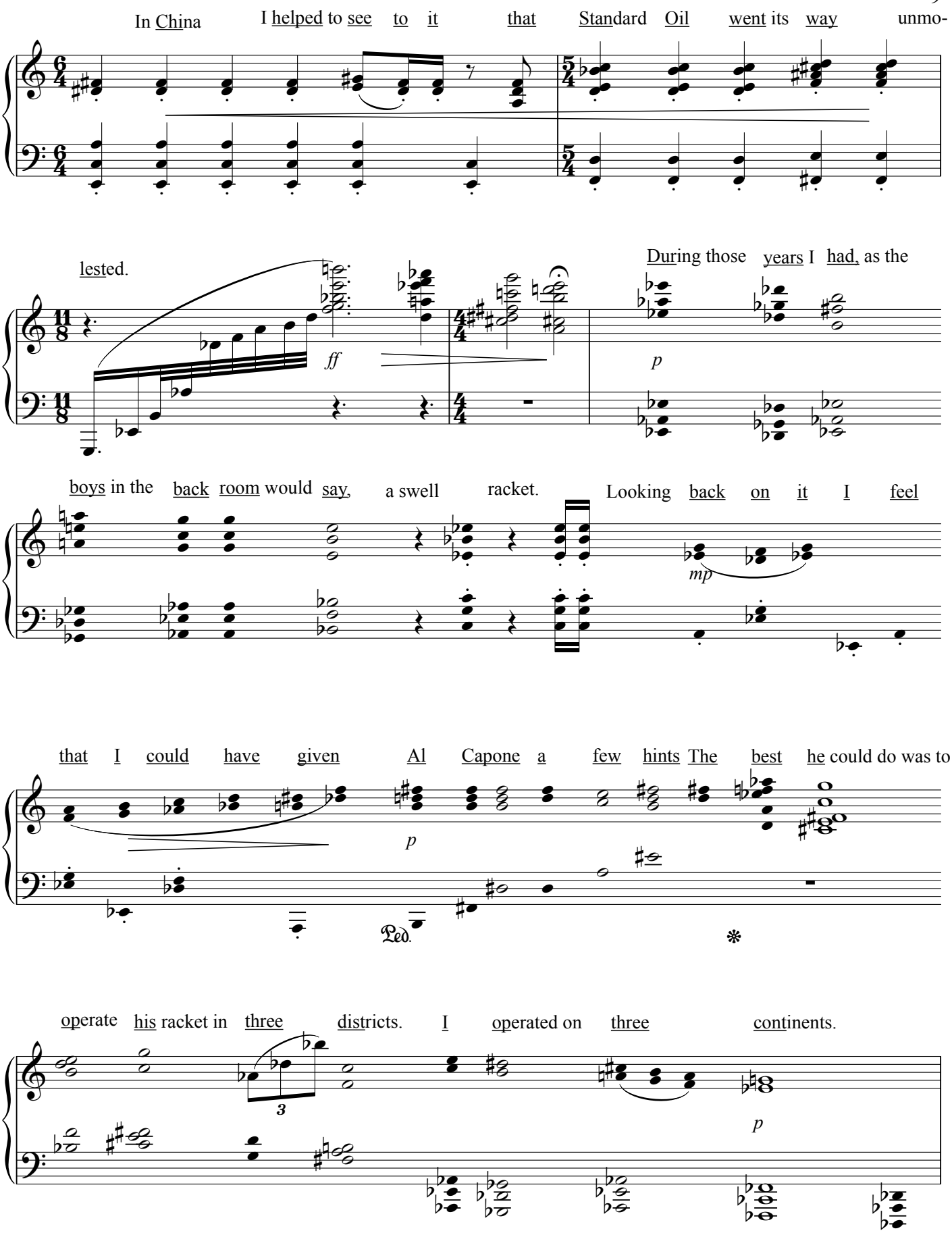
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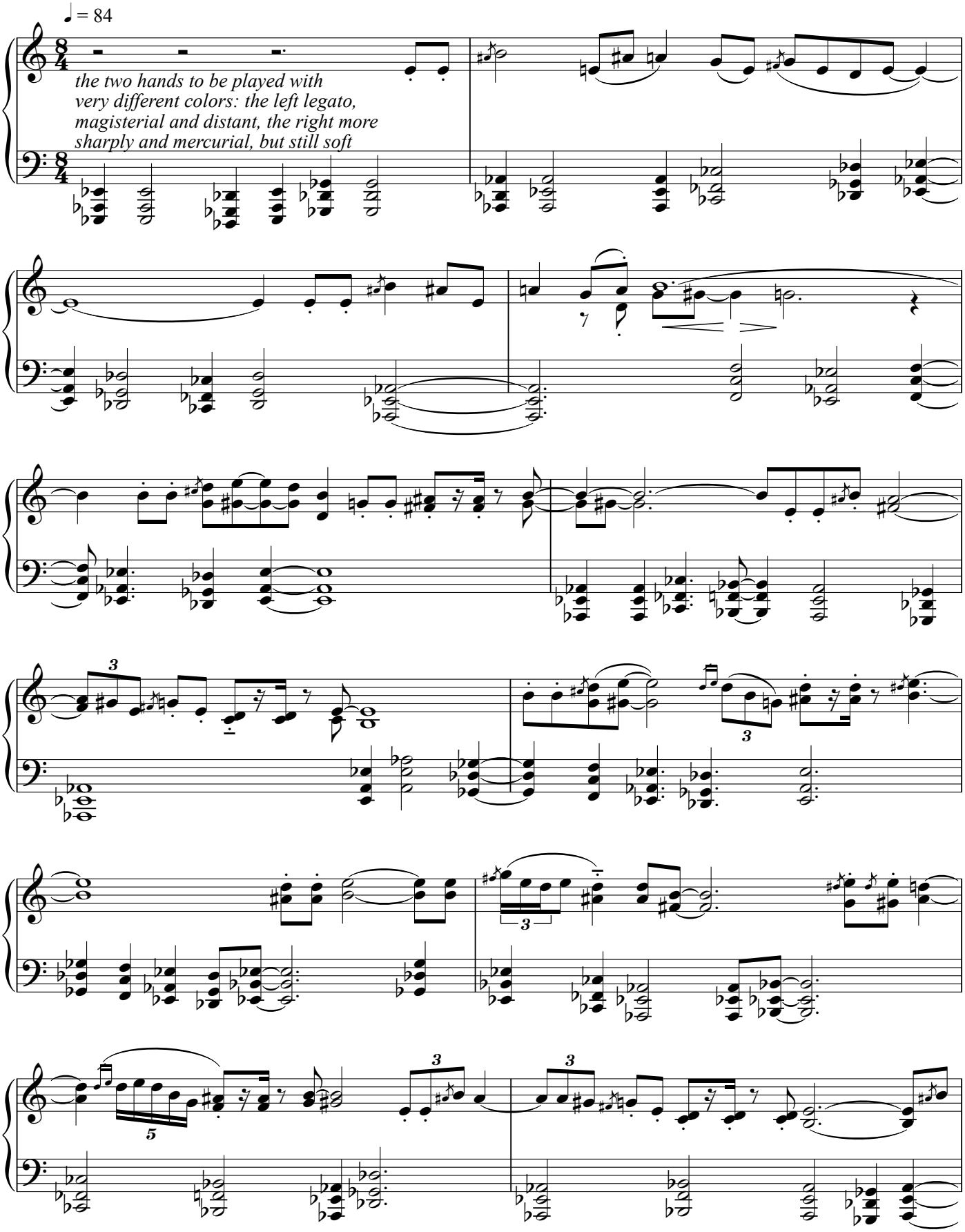
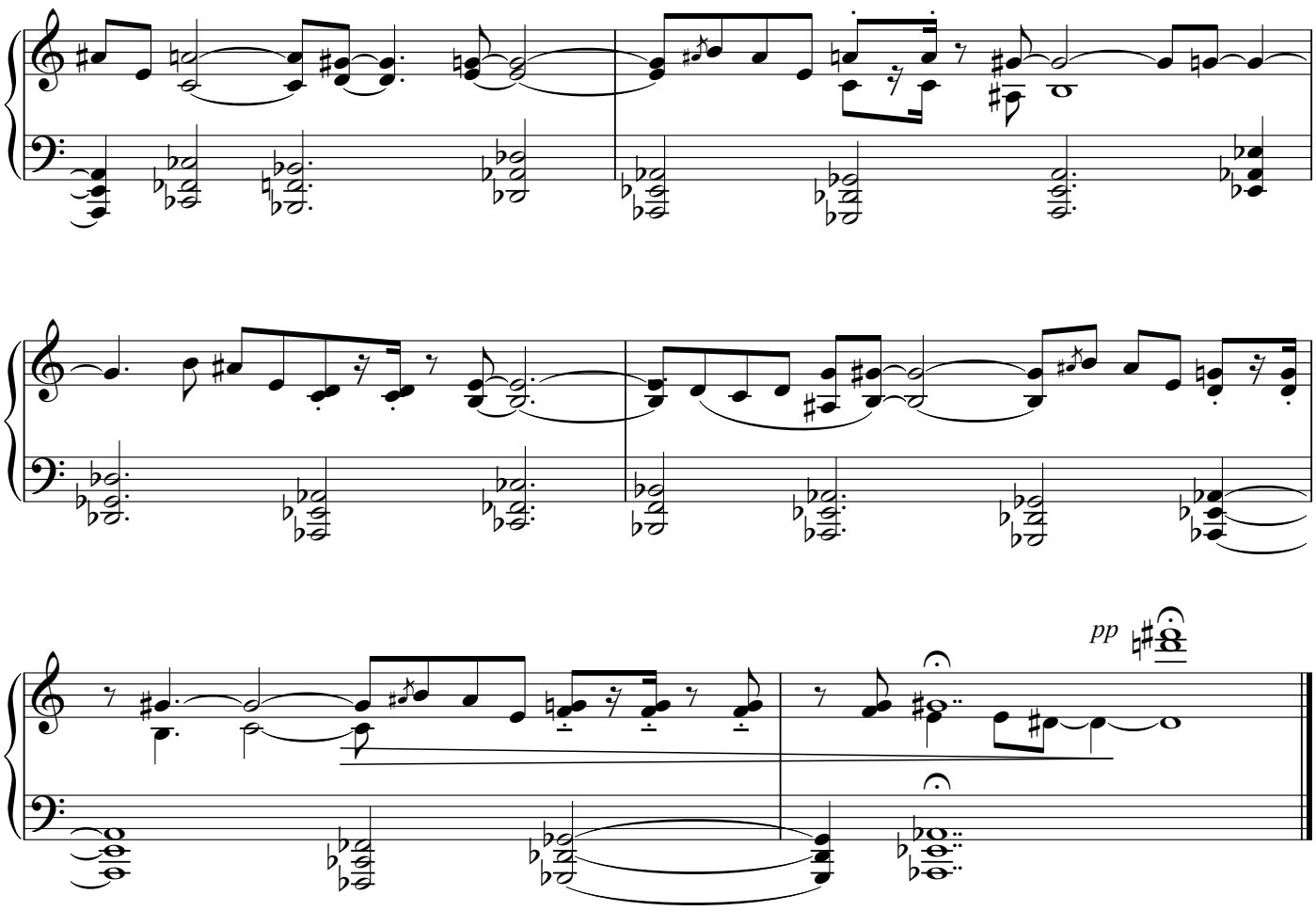

♩ = 84
the two hands to be played with
very different colors: the left legato,
magisterial and distant, the right more
sharply and mercurial, but still soft



April 21-December 14, 2008
Germantown, NY