"Simple Gifts" from ***Shaker Tunes for Brass Quintet***

A Musical Analysis by Gwyneth Walker

Within the Walker catalog are works which are described as "contemporary adaptations" of pre-existing sources (hymn tunes, folk songs, spirituals). These are not simply arrangements. For, there are enough alterations and additions to the original material to step beyond the definition of arrangements. Rather, these are "musical excursions," which start with a familiar song and move off into a creation of their own.

These "contemporary adaptations" alter the melody, harmony and rhythm of the original. And, they add new material, often interludes between sections or stanzas. The cumulative result is that the language of the new composition is that of the composer (Gwyneth Walker), rather than of the original source. The "excursion" is a new adventure, using the pre-existing material as a starting point.

An example of this genre is "Simple Gifts," the last movement of the ***Shaker Tunes for Brass Quintet****. This song is so familiar, and has been arranged so many times, that it posed a challenge for new adaptation. How could this material be treated differently enough to warrant the endeavor?*

The focus was on altering the tune enough to place it at least a century into the future from its creation. The language would be 20th-century American folk/rock/jazz. The concept was to enjoy the song, and attempt to add variety to its presentations.

Perhaps a discussion of the score will illustrate this approach.

The piece opens with the Trombone stating the first phrase of the melody. The key of D Major was chosen so that the Trombone, which ended the previous movement on a sustained A, could start this last movement on the same pitch (the 5th step of the scale), hence joining the two movements. The intended key for the majority of the movement was F Major. And, that arrives at m. 43.

In the opening section, words are placed above the instrumental lines to indicate the relationship to the original song. By m. 6, the melody is already slightly altered. The second note for Trumpet 1 in this measure should be the leading tone, C#. However, the C# is replaced by the pitch A, as a means of avoiding the leading-tone, and its associated tonal definition. Thus, a modal harmony (lowered 7th step) could be introduced later.

The "authentic" last 2 eighth-notes in m. 6, Tpt. 1, should be Es (second scale step) rather than the written F#-G in this spot. Liberties were taken with the melody in order to bring Trumpet 1 up to the high D, thus allowing room for Trumpet 2 on C natural, the step below. With the Trombone on G, these three instruments could

form a G/C/D sonority which, when superimposed over the A from the Tuba (m. 8, fermata), could form an unresolved Dominant structure that would give the piece a 20th-century American sound, within just the first eight measures. [Harmonically, the use of C naturals throughout places the theme in a Mixolydian mode, prevalent in Celtic and American folk music.]

In this manner, the opening section presents the original tune in a recognizable form, yet provides hints of melodic and harmonic changes. The listener would know that unexpected events might be forthcoming.

At letter A, a new, very lively tempo is set. Rhythmic patterns of eighths and sixteenths are introduced. These become the accompaniment for the theme, which appears at letter B, in rhythmic diminution. This is an especially energetic treatment of the theme. Emphasis is placed on idiomatic brass writing, with staccati articulation and rapid, separate tonguing of the 16th notes.

Letter D brings the second phrase of the theme (previously unstated). This presentation is completely altered, melodically and harmonically. There is only a slight resemblance rhythmically. Even the words are changed! However, this material lasts for eight measures, as did the original. Therefore, formal expectations are kept in order.

Letter E brings an Interlude section. This comprises repeated two-measure patterns characterized by a disjointed Tuba line, answered by syncopations in the Trombone and Horn, with interjections of 16th-notes in the Trumpets. The rhythms bring an element of jazz into the music.

This Interlude serves to prepare for the return of the theme at letter F. The statement of the theme this time is in original note values (compared to the diminution at letter B). Instruments are coupled in thematic materials, first the Trombone and Horn at letter F, and then Trumpet 2 and Horn at letter G.

Letter H brings back the second phrase of the theme, slowly this time. This is the occasion for harmonic exploration. Departing from the home tonality of F Major, the bass line now descends stepwise to E flat and then D flat. The harmonies become increasingly less tonal. By m. 63, an unusual sonority is reached. This is a G flat-7 harmony in the lower instruments, with a simple C/G Dominant of F in the Trumpets. By functioning as a variety of leading tones, these pitches guide the exploration back to a home in F Major at letter I.

Letter J initiates another Interlude, similar to the material at letter E, except that now the disjunct lines are given to the Trombone instead of the Tuba.

Letters K and L bring a return of the theme, more contrapuntally developed than before. Imitative entrances of the melody are featured, first in Trombone and Horn (mm. 79-80, mm. 82-3), and then in Trumpet 2 and Horn (mm. 85-6). The cadence is

extended into a series of 6/8 measures, which initiate some strong harmonic wandering. The bass line here descends stepwise from the tonal center of F to the Second Pole of B natural (at letter M). And indeed, the section at letter M presents the most harmonically complex structures of the composition.

The chord at letter M represents a bipolar "tug of war." For, not all of the pitches can be related to either the F Major basic tonality, or the B natural (perhaps to be considered enharmonically as C flat) tonality. This might be a C flat Major-7 chord (thus explaining the C flat, E flat and B flat). However, the F cannot thereby be explained.

It might be easiest to simply view this as a dissonant part of the piece. The Polar extremes have been reached. And, the harmonies for this 6-measure section will be abrasive, or, perhaps unsettling. The purpose of this may be that the Final, tonal statement of the theme will soon be coming. So, the section at letter M is needed to build up to the final statement.

If mm. 92-3 are seen as a clash of Poles, then mm. 94-7 may be seen as a purposeful increase in tension. Each instrument has its own role to play. Trumpet 1 will be sustaining the pitch of C, the Dominant, which will lead to the Tonic F at letter N. Trumpet 2 builds friction by playing B flats (a major 2nd dissonance against the C) and then a B natural (the more intense semitone dissonance). The resolution comes in an upward semitone motion to the note C in m. 98.

Meanwhile, the Horn and Trombone move in parallel thirds up to their "positions of dissonance" in m. 97. The Horn reaches a B flat (concert pitch) to create a cluster-clash with the Trumpets: C/B natural/B flat. The Trombone reaches G flat, a tritone dissonance with Trumpet 1. Both instruments resolve by semitones to the F Major chord at letter N.

The Tuba has a course of its own. Rather than moving in small steps, as the other brass lines do, the Tuba moves downward in leaps of fifths. This lands the Tuba on a low A, which is certainly dissonant with the other brass. The A functions as a pseudo-Dominant (a substitute for a low C), and resolves easily to the low F at letter N. The increase of dissonance through these six measures is intended to drive the harmonic motion powerfully toward the resolution into F Major at letter N. This is the value of employing a variety of sonorities.

Letter N brings a chorale-style final statement of the theme, as a return to traditional language and earlier times. A sense of open space is suggested with the answering of the theme (Horn in m. 99, Trumpet 2 in m. 103). Perhaps these are echoes coming from afar. In m. 103, it might be noted that Trumpet 2 holds the dissonance of E natural (E flats had been predominant as the lowered seventh step of the Mixolydian mode) against the F in Trumpet 1. This creates a particularly sweet dissonance that seems in keeping with the nostalgic mood of this final statement of the theme

The original song has undergone many transformations. And new material has been inserted, in the form of the various interludes. The goal was to create a musical composition with contrast and growth, which related to, but did not stay within the boundaries of, a pre-existing source. The source was respected and enjoyed. But, the endeavor was for creativity.

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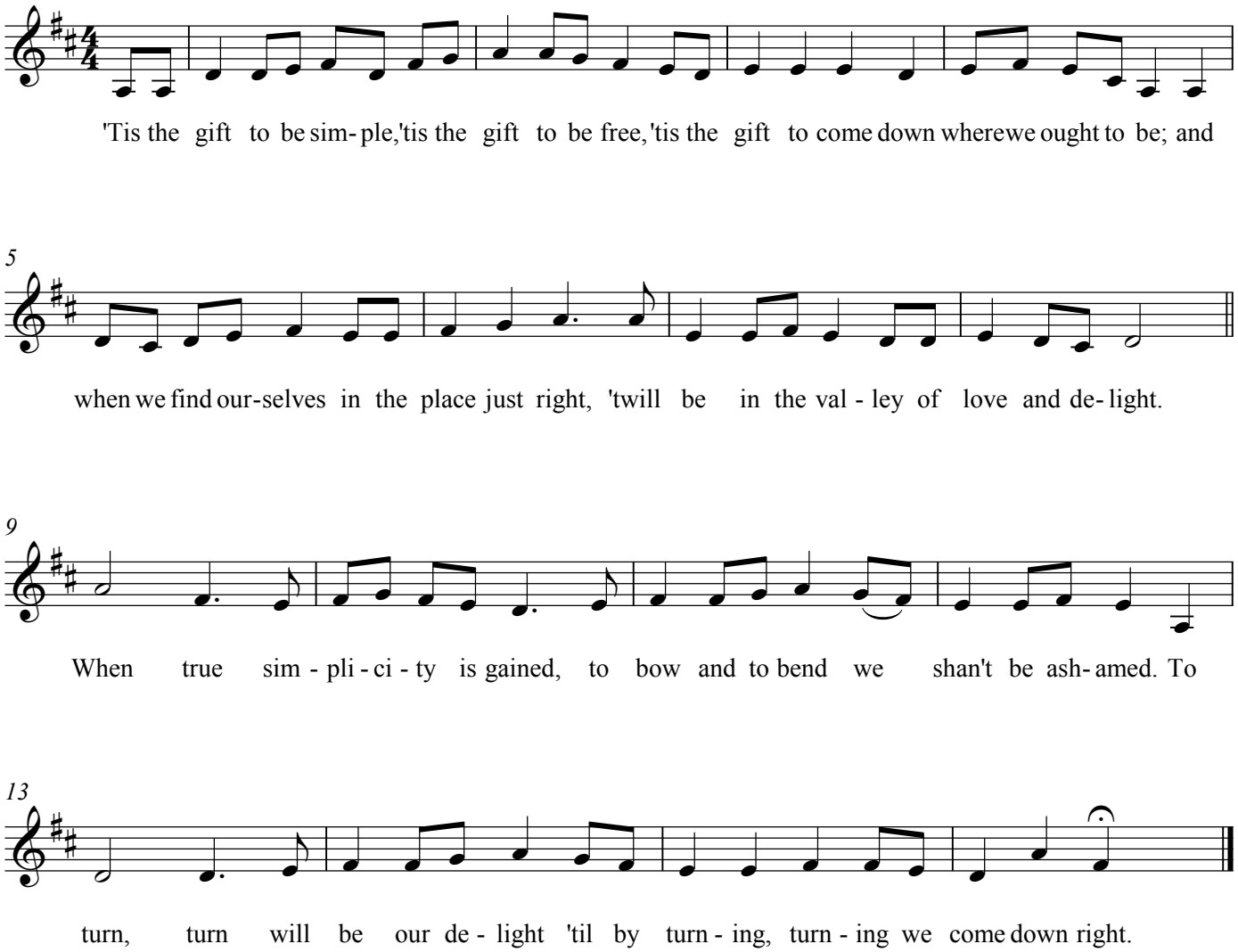
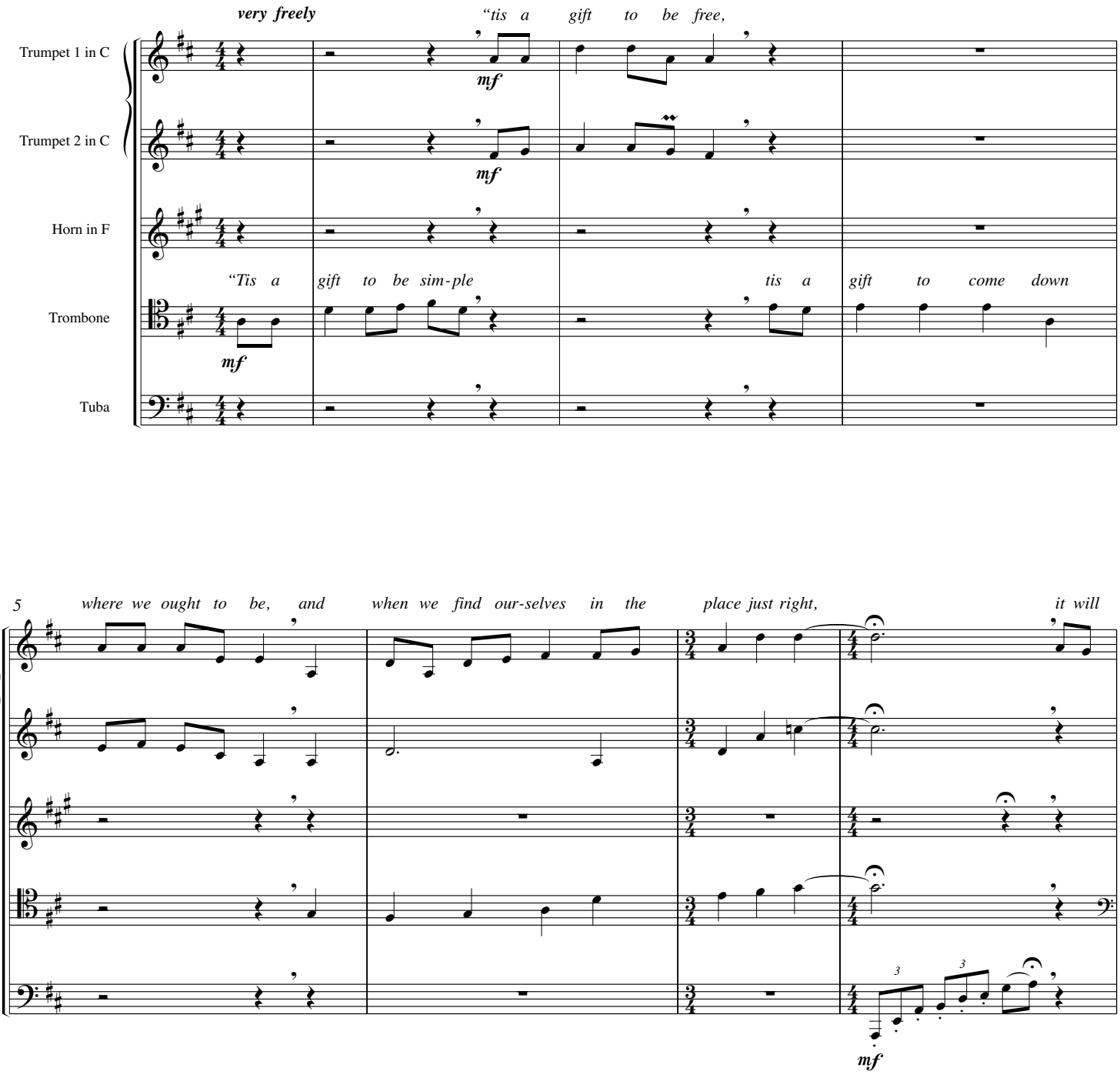
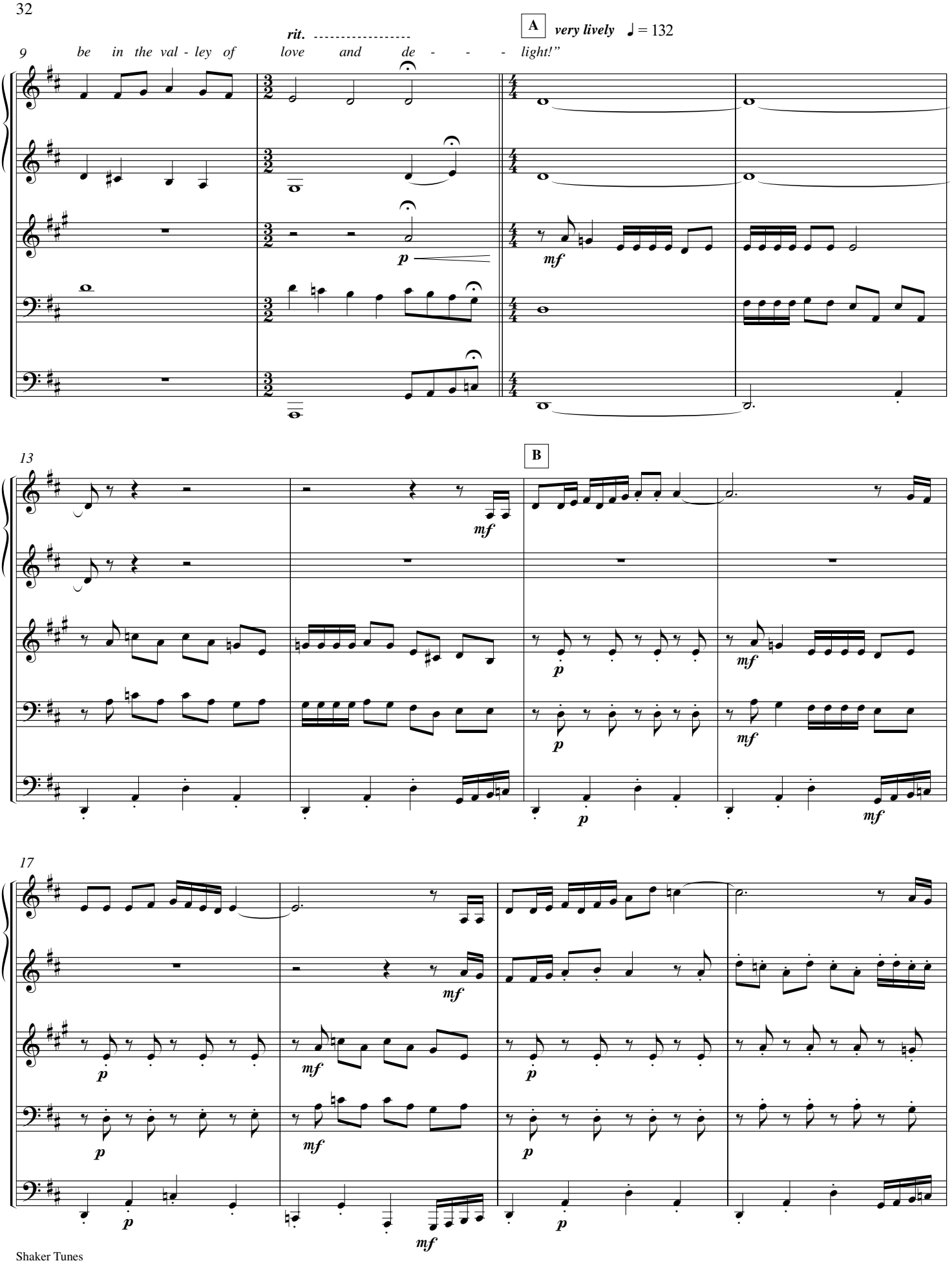
Simple Gifts

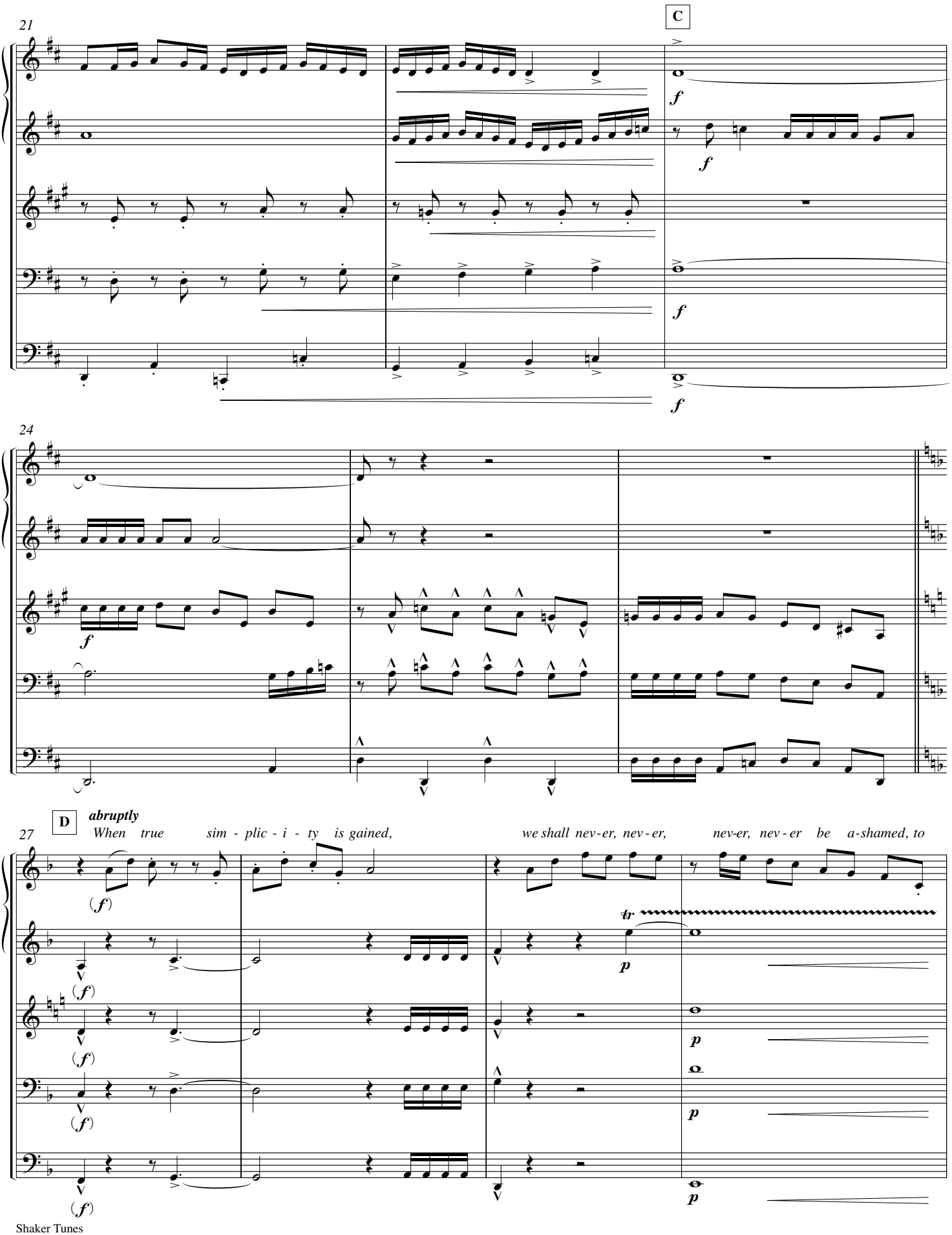
Elder Joseph Brackett, Jr. -- Alfred, ME 1848

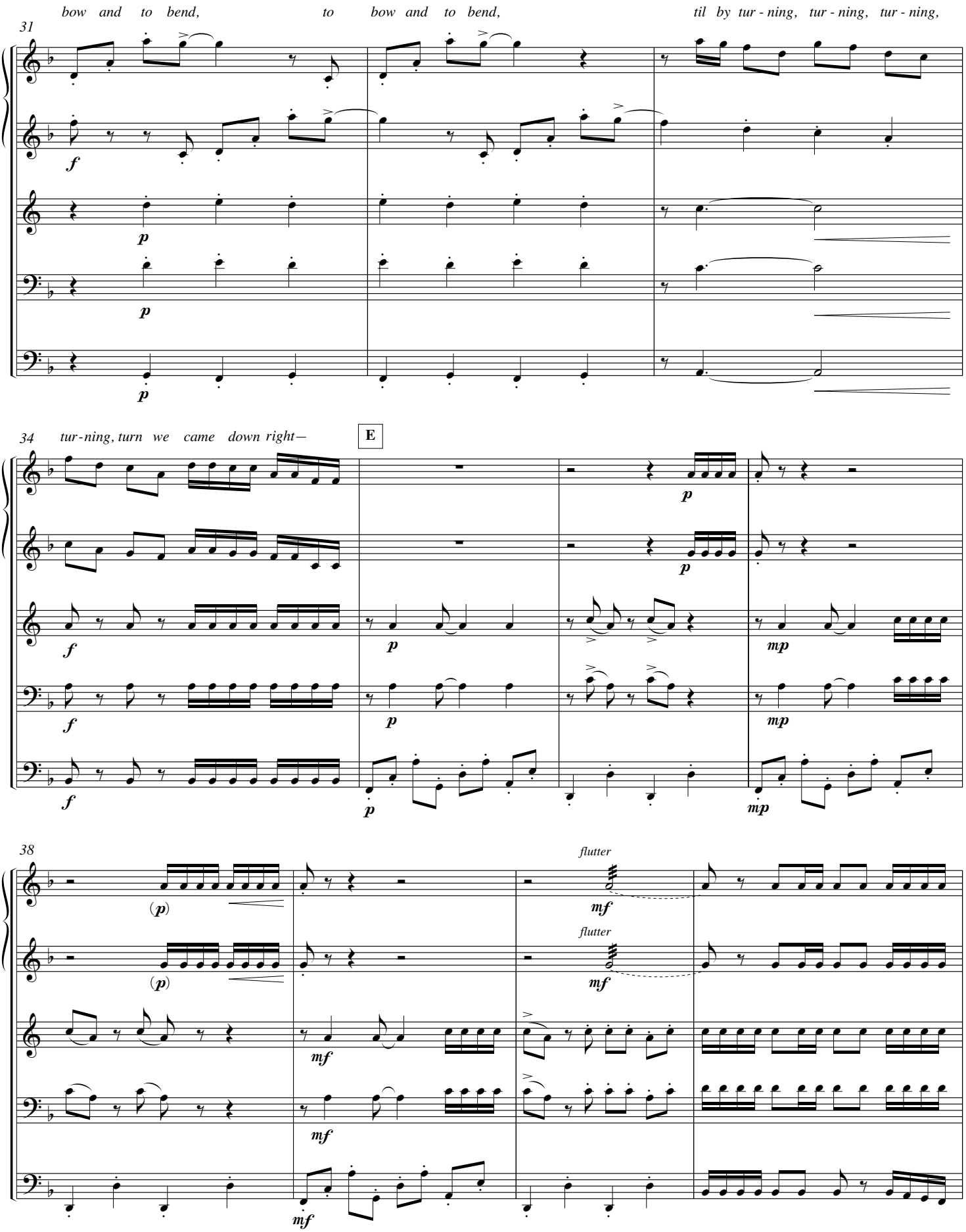


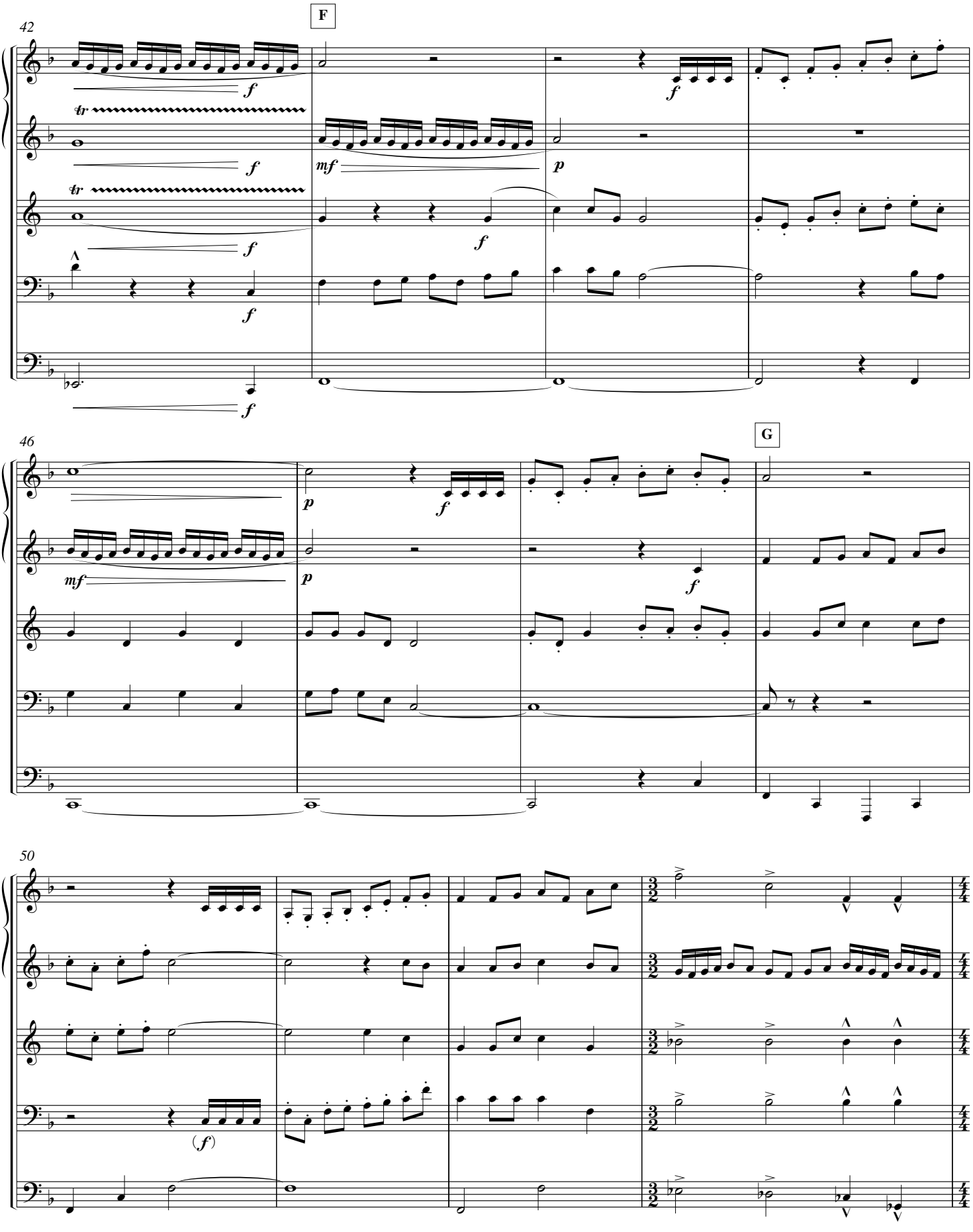
V. Simple Gifts

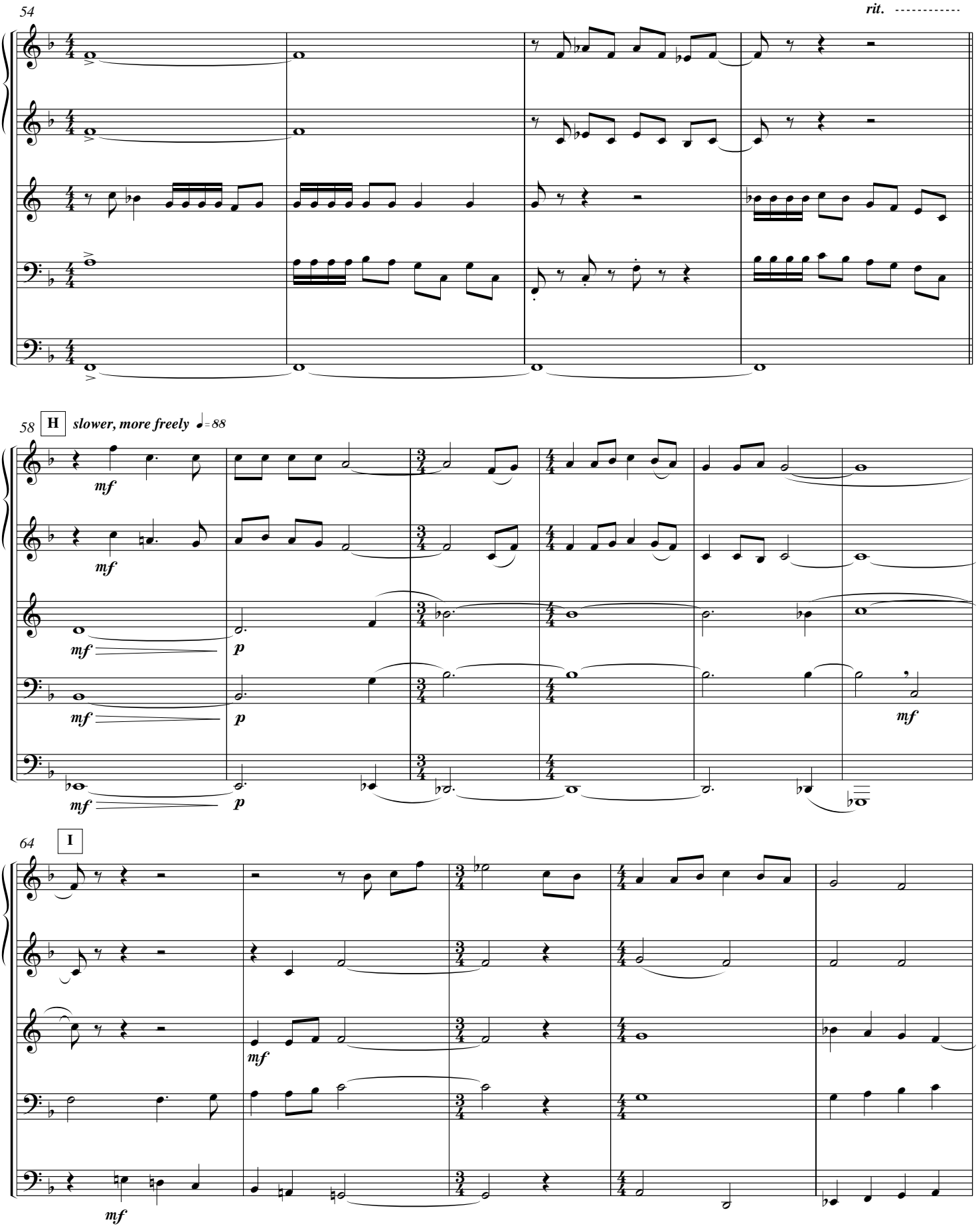


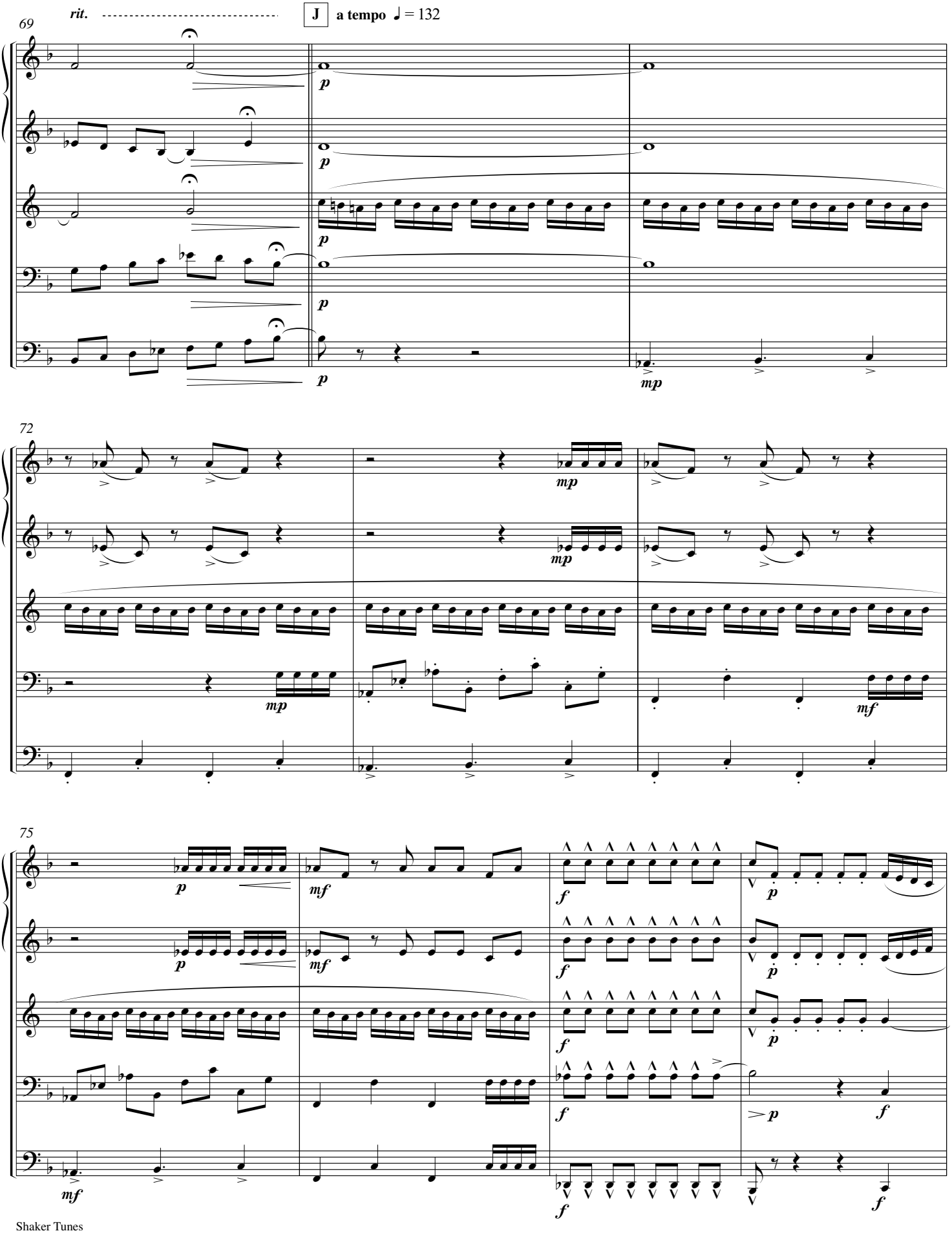

A
very lively ♩ = 132
rit.
9
be in the val - ley of love and de - - - light!"
p
mf
B
13
17

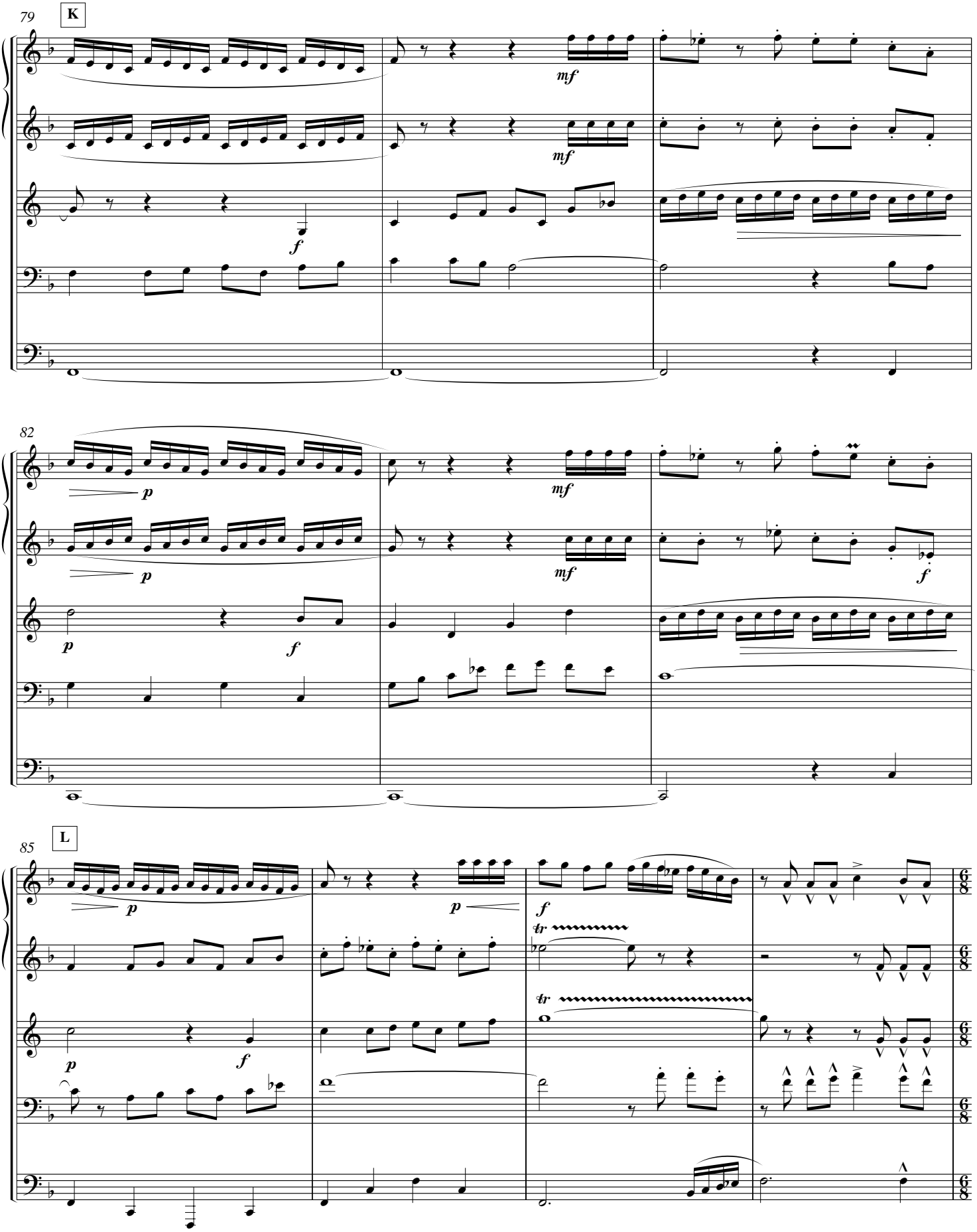

21
C
f
24
D
abruptly
27
When true sim - plic - i - ty is gained,
we shall nev-er, nev - er,
nev-er, nev - er be a-shamed, to
tr
p


bow and to bend, to bow and to bend, til by tur - ning, tur - ning, tur - ning,
31
34
tur - ning, turn we came down right—
E
38
flutter
flutter


42
F
46
G
50


54
rit.
58
H
slower, more freely
♩= 88
mf
p
64
I


rit.
J
a tempo ♩ = 132
69
72
75


79
K
mf
mf
f
82
p
p
mf
mf
f
p
f
85
L
p
p
f
tr
tr
6/8

89

M

94

rit.

sfp

sfp

sfp

sfp

98

N

slowly, stately ♩=72

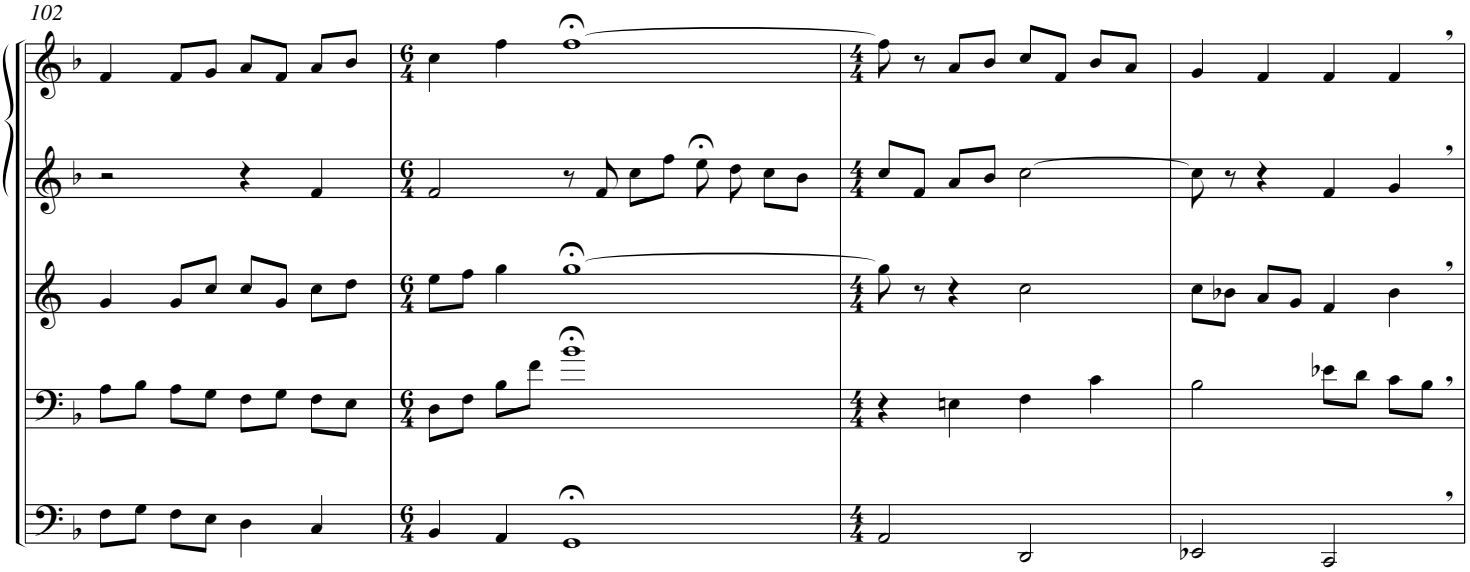
f

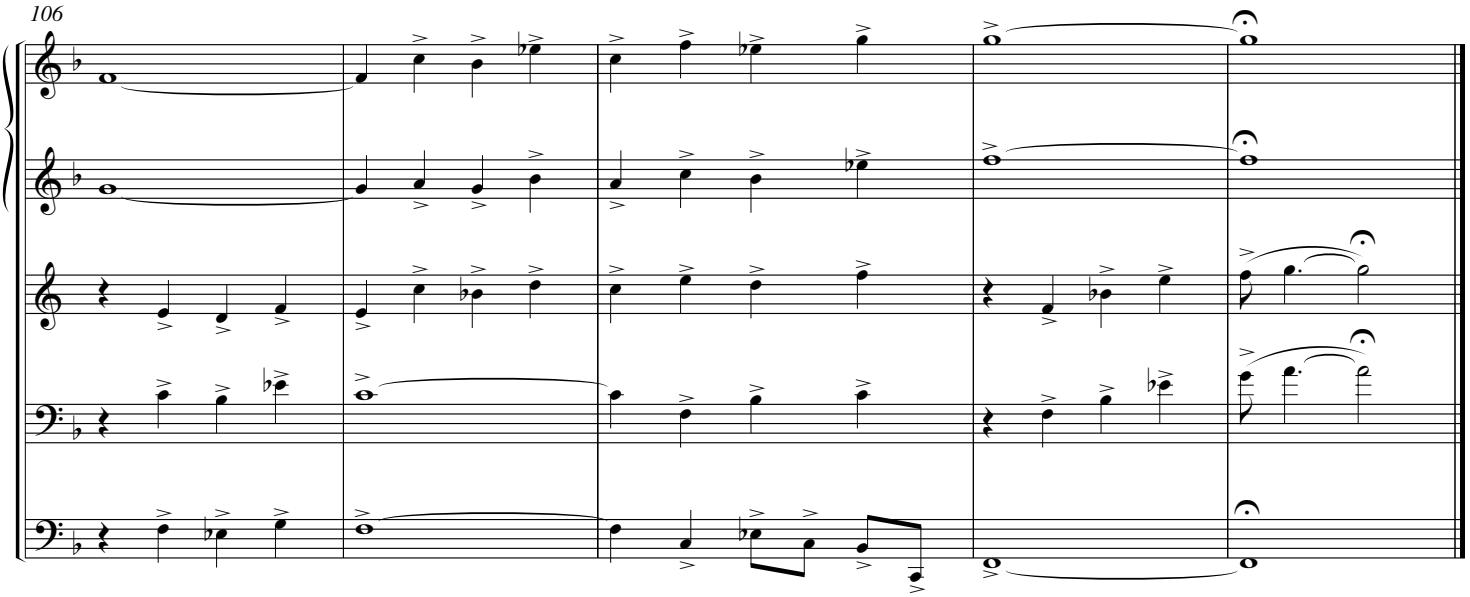
f

f

f

f





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