After Bessie Smith

for string quartet

Chris Fisher-Lochhead

After Bessie Smith [2013] for string quartet

dedicated to the Spektral Quartet

Source Material

This piece draws its material from the song “Backwater Blues” by Bessie Smith and from the historically articulated performance practice that has accrued to it. In order to interrogate said materials, six recordings by different musicians were chosen and meticulously transcribed. The opening choruses of each performance were then superimposed, temporally stretched out, and orchestrated for string quartet. Between the sections that contain vocal material, the underlying harmonic progression was spectrally elaborated. Finally, the phonemic content of the song’s lyrics was then transposed onto the string instruments as timbral modulations.

Although not present in an immediately recognizable form, the original song appears as a nexus of musical potentialities, a vector of individuation within the field of an abstracted and generalized blues performance practice.

The recordings that were used as source material were made by the following artists:

Bessie Smith	Big Bill Broonzy
Skip James	Brownie McGhee
Memphis Slim	Dinah Washington

Notation

𝄲	3/4 tone (150 cents) sharp	𝄳	3/4 tone (150 cents) sharp
𝄰	2/3 tone (133 cents) sharp	𝄱	2/3 tone (133 cents) sharp
♯	1/2 tone (100 cents) sharp	♭	1/2 tone (100 cents) sharp
𝄯	1/3 tone (66 cents) sharp	𝄭	1/3 tone (66 cents) sharp
𝄮	1/4 tone (50 cents) sharp	𝄬	1/4 tone (50 cents) sharp
𝄯	1/6 tone (33 cents) sharp	𝄫	1/6 tone (33 cents) sharp

contact point staff: when present, this staff indicates the point at which the bow makes contact with the strings. The bottom line corresponds to extreme *sul tasto* while the second line from the top corresponds to extreme *sul ponticello.*

damp strings: with the left hand, damp the strings so that no pitch results from the action of the bow. The resulting sound should be short and noisy.

phrase marking: although it need not be played in a single bow, all of the material underneath a dotted slur should be phrased together. Bow changes should be as imperceptible as possible.

vertical bowing: when present, the motion of the bow should be primarily parallel to the strings, as indicated in the accompanying contact point staff (see above). If needed for the purposes of optimal sound production and/or bow placement, some horizontal bow motion is acceptable.

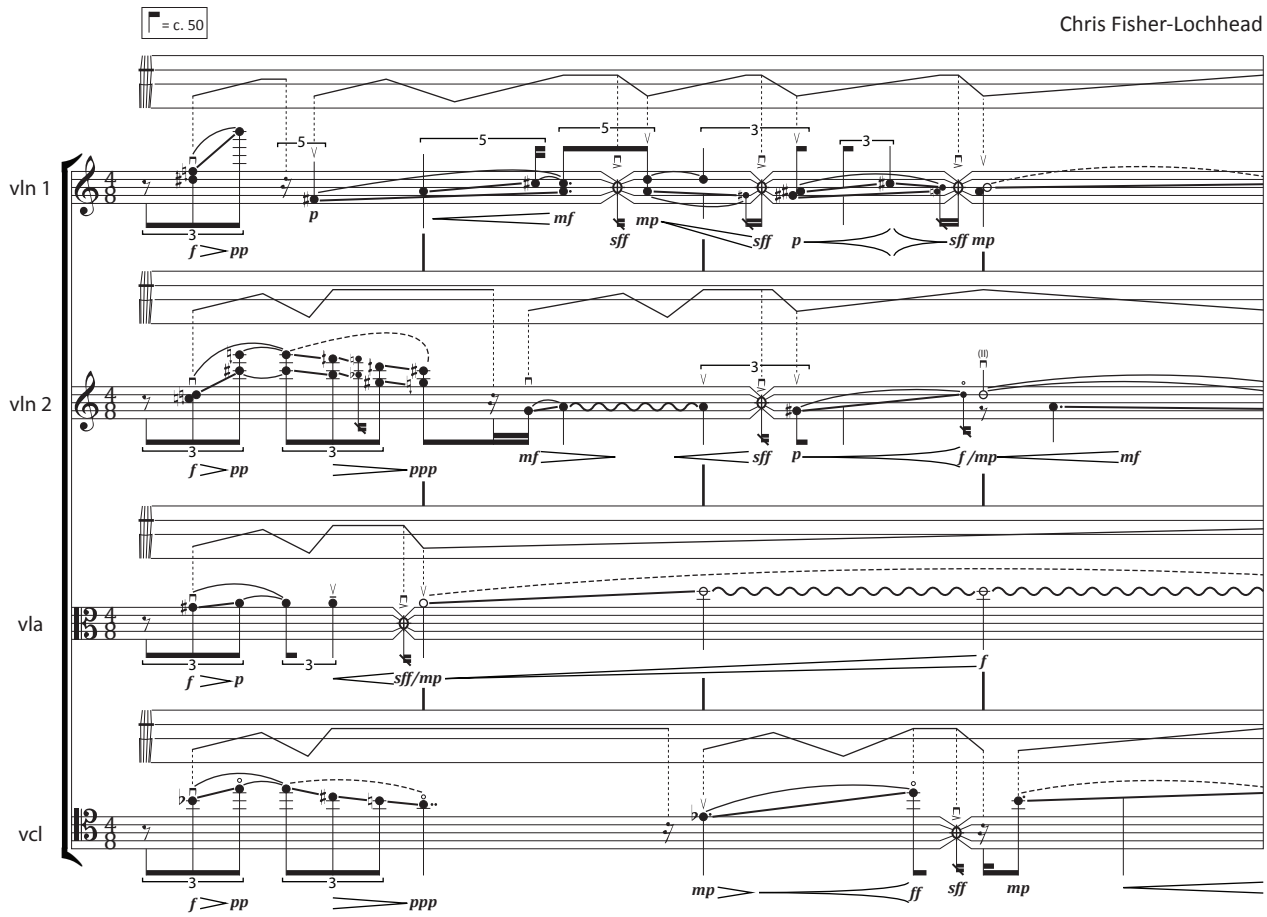
overpressure: pitch should still be present, although it need not be stable or pure.

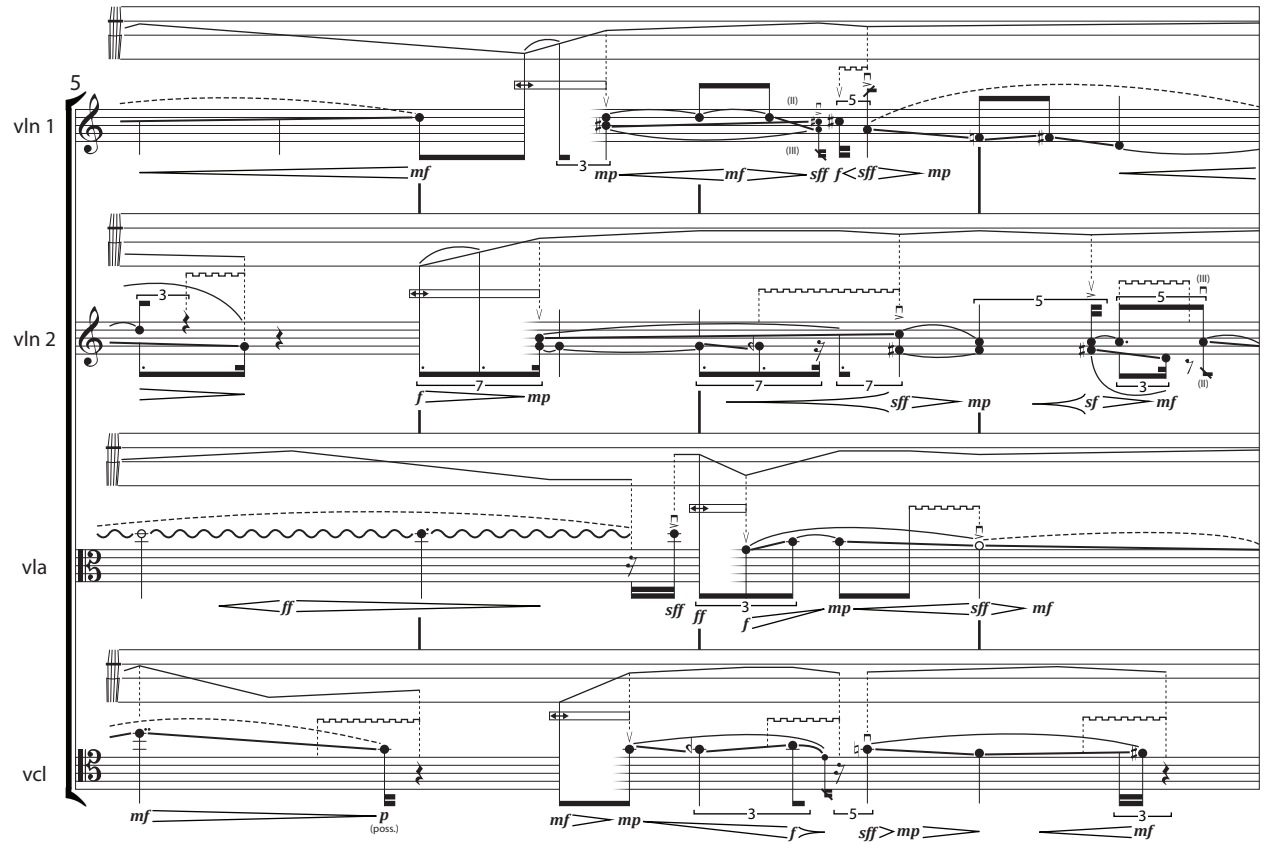
glissando

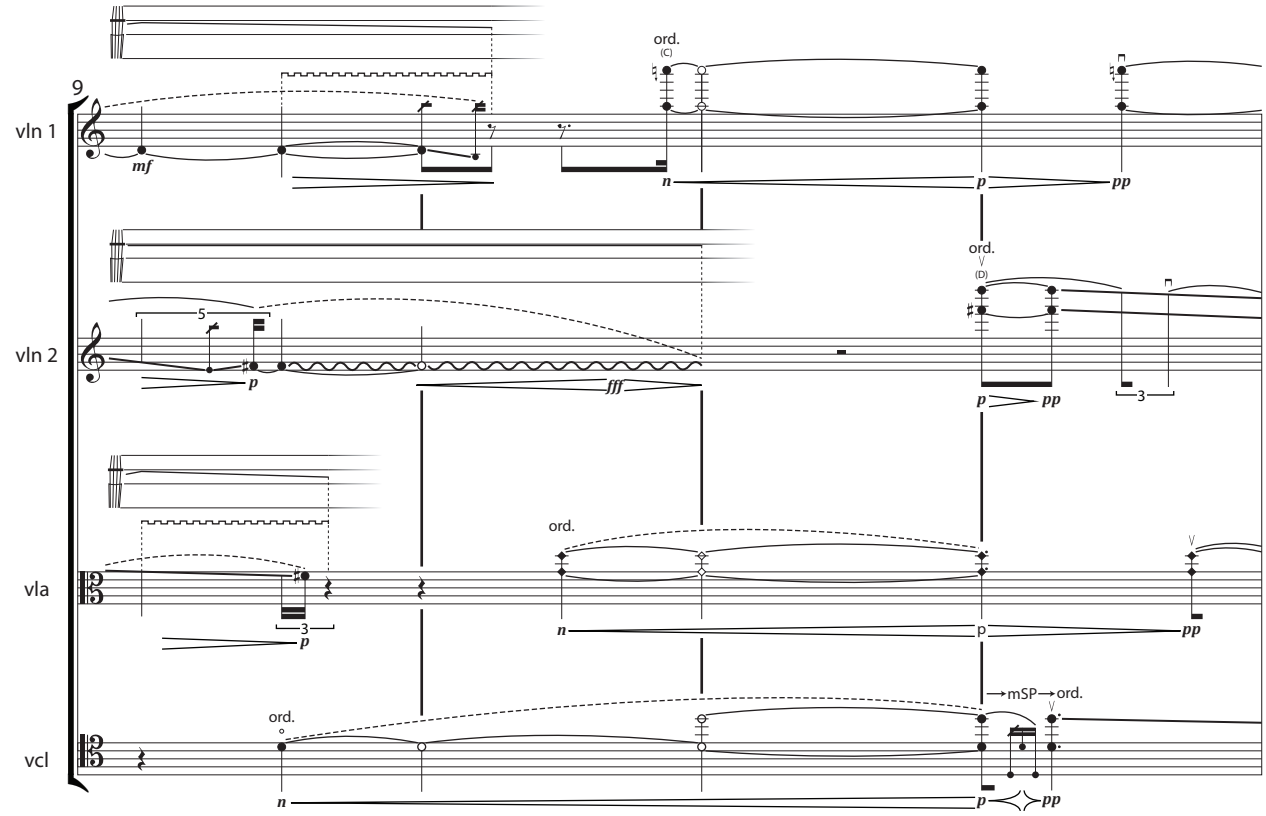
for the Spektral Quartet

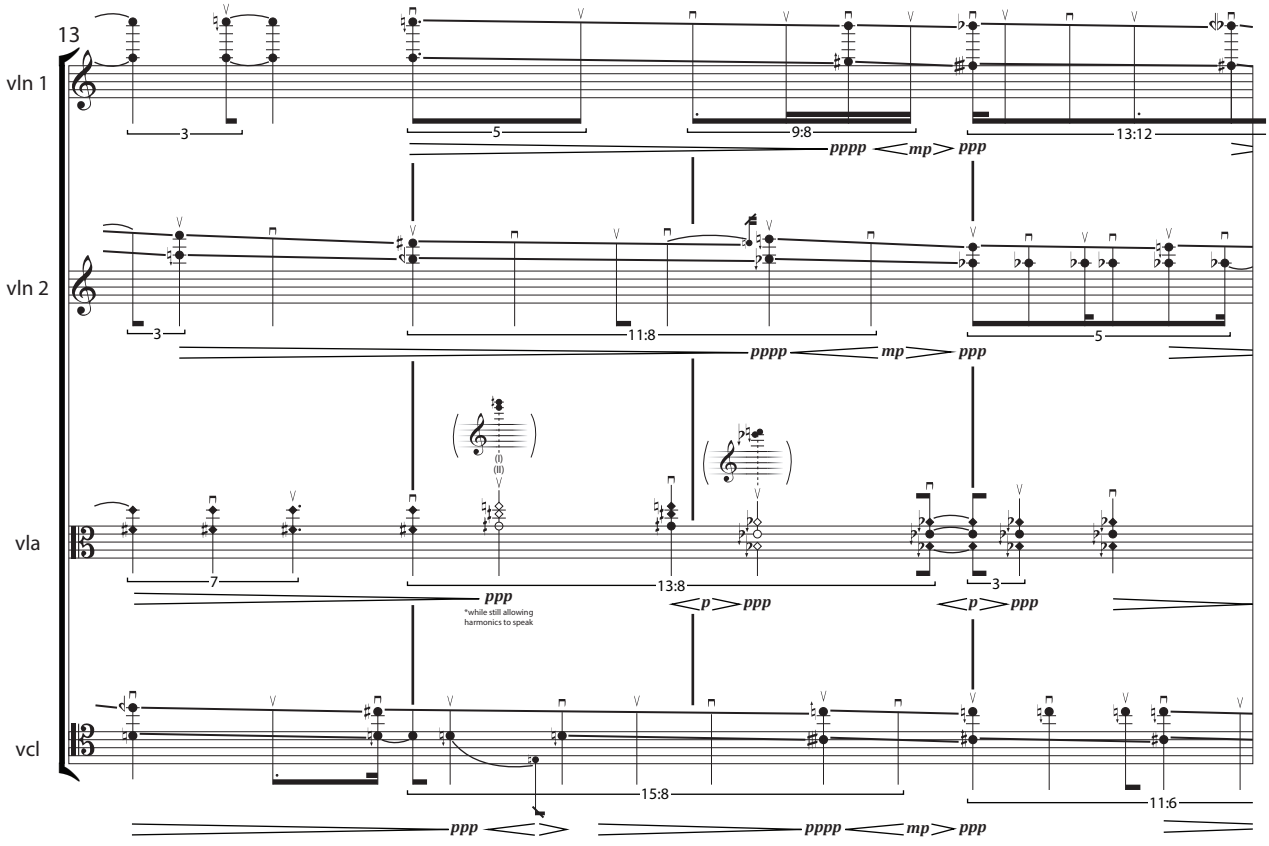
After Bessie Smith

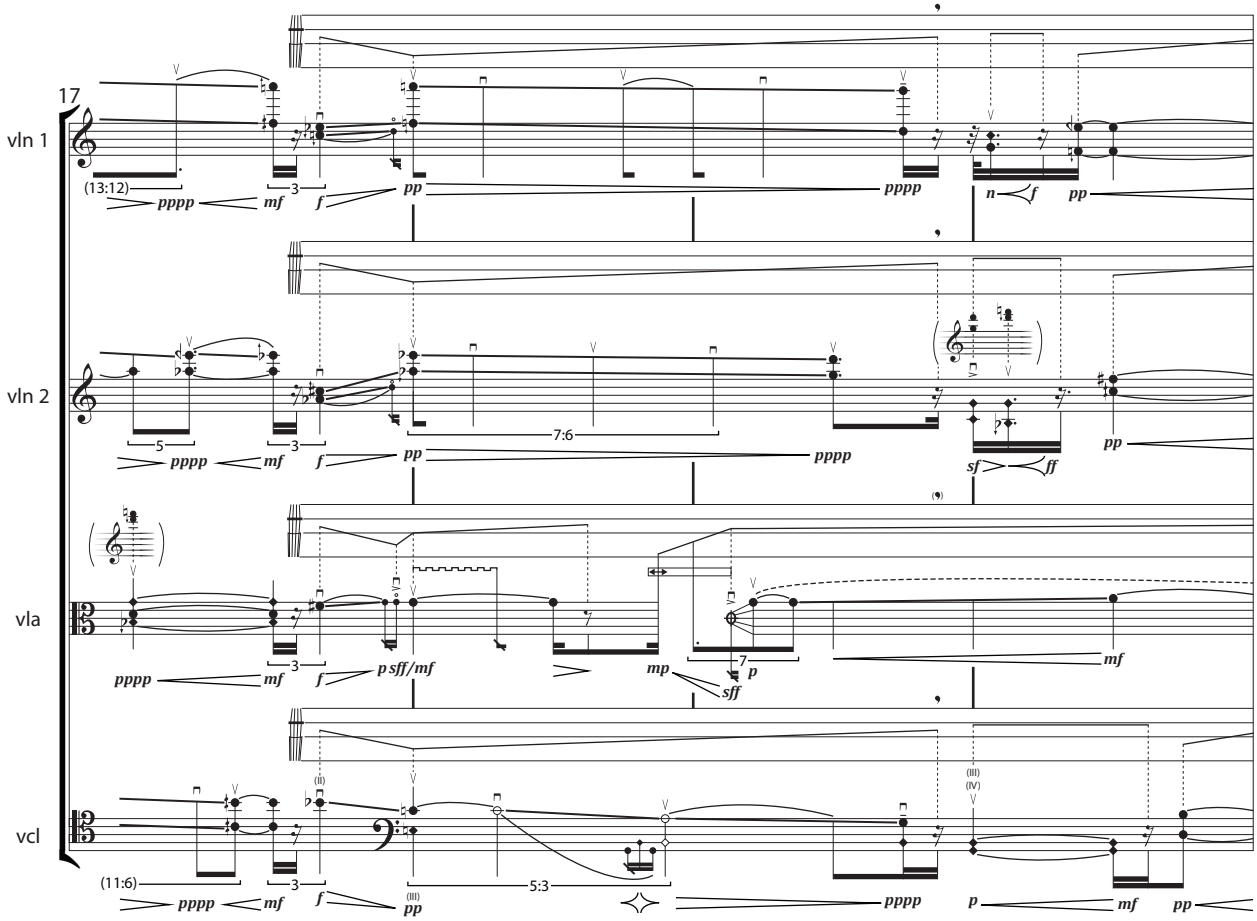
Chris Fisher-Lochhead

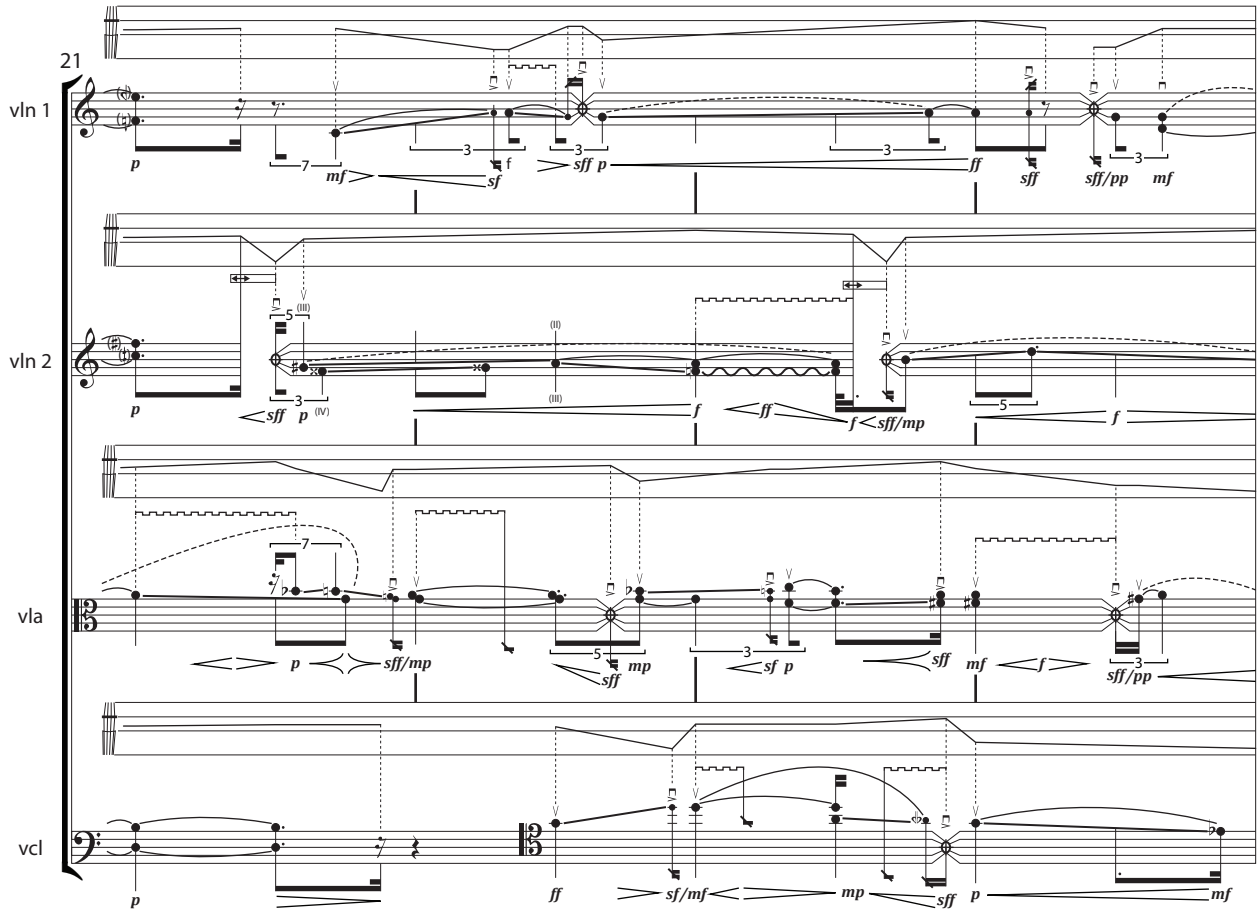


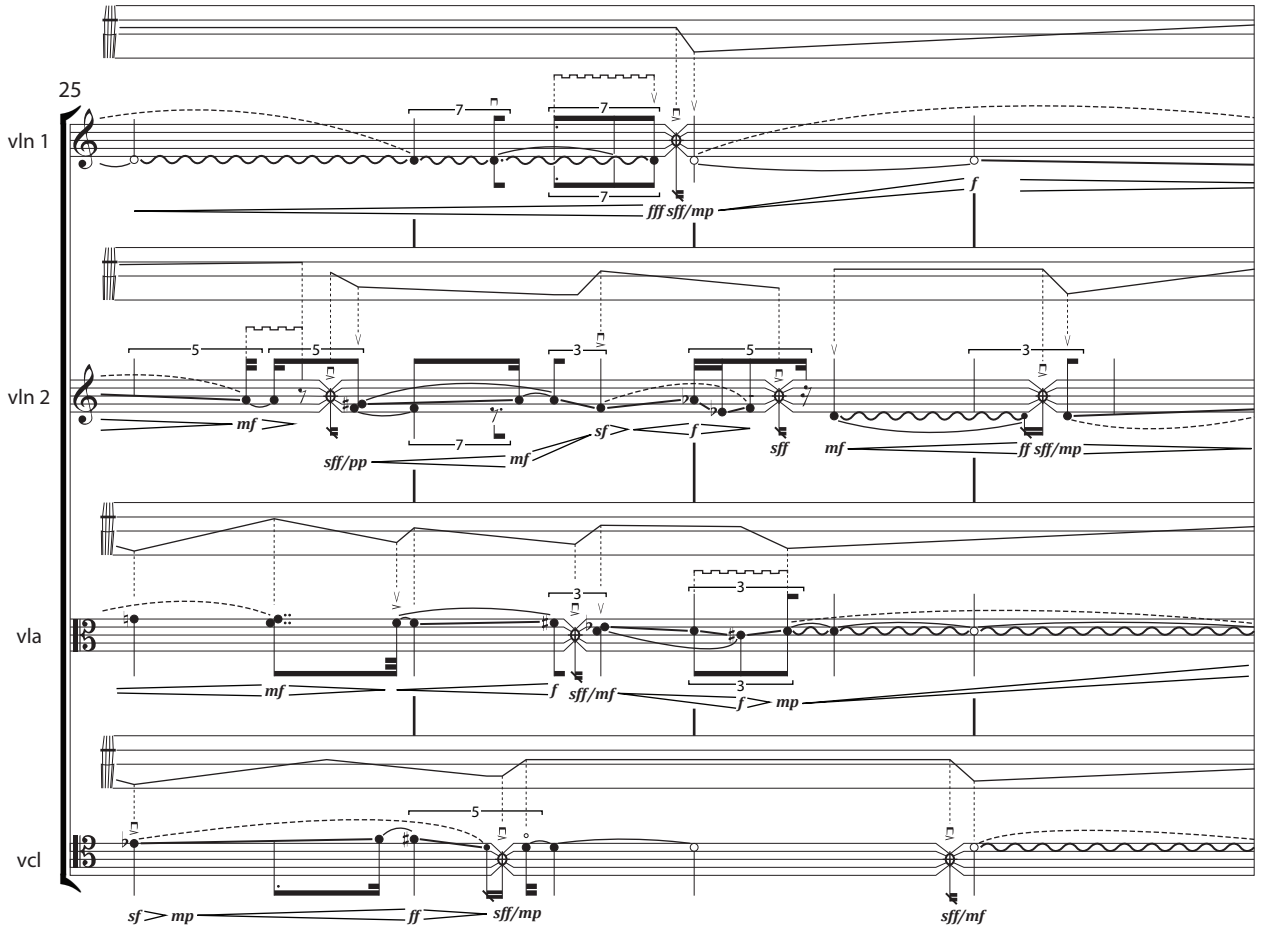


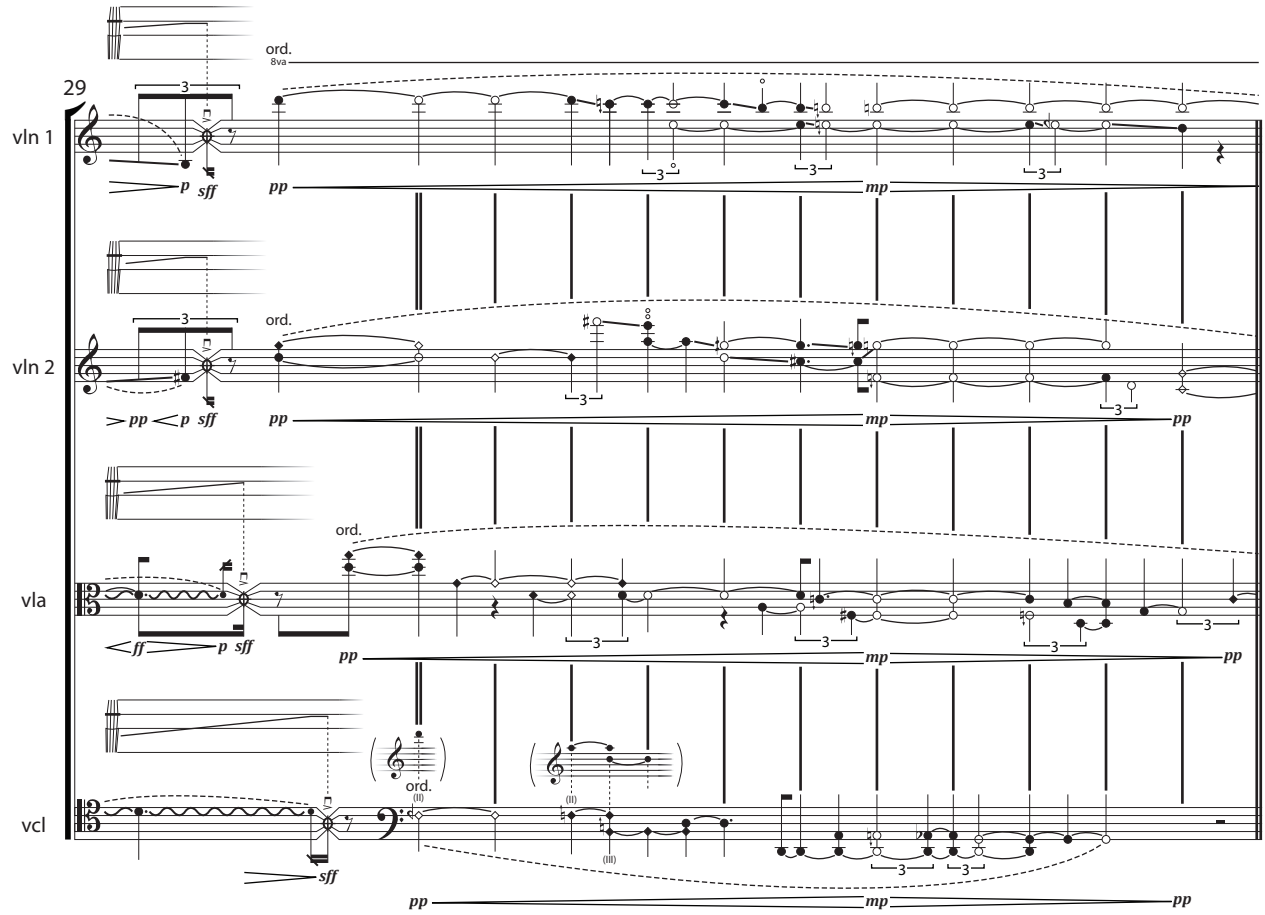

9
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl
ord.
(C)
(D)
mf
p
pp
fff
n
5
3
→mSP→ord.

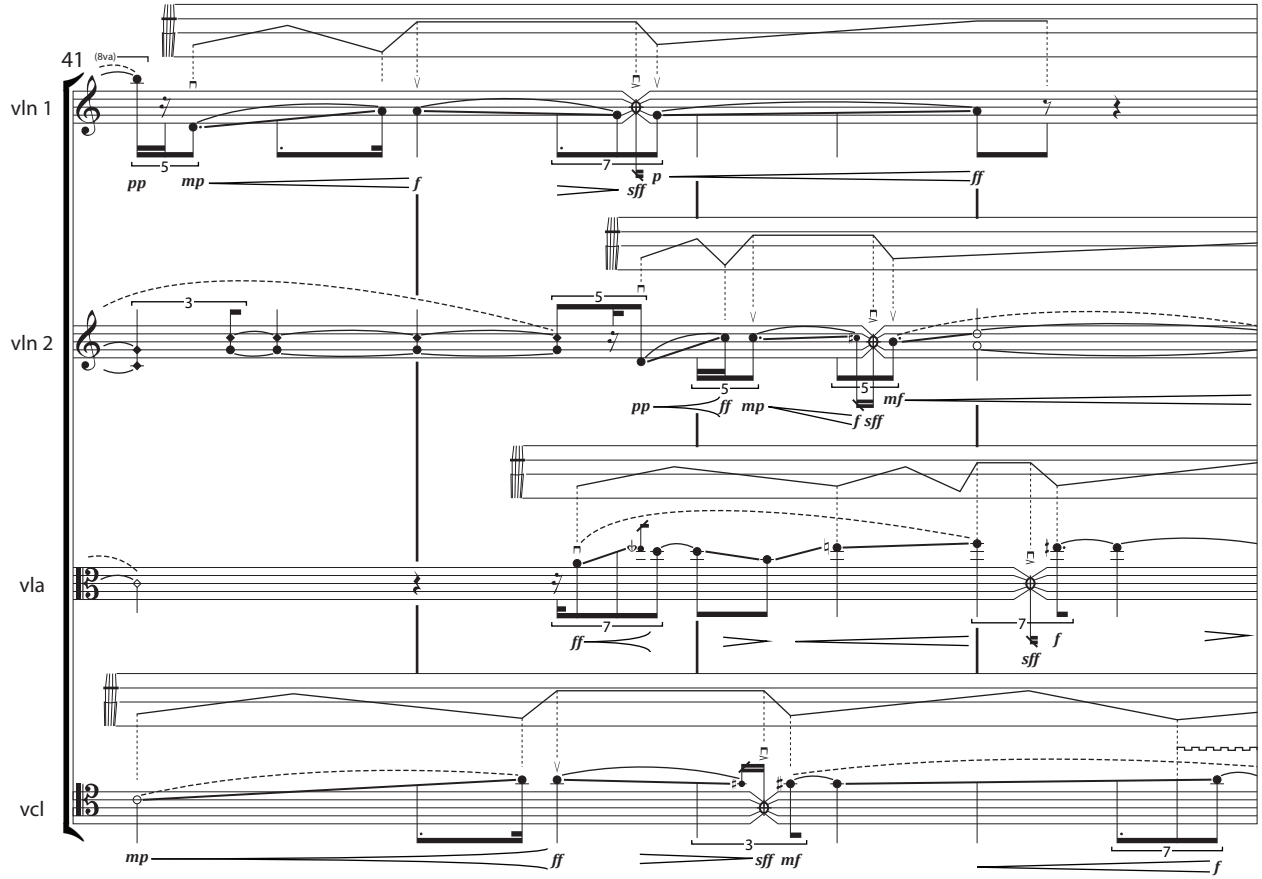

13
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl
3
5
9:8
13:12
11:8
7
13:8
3
15:8
11:6
pppp
mp
ppp
p
(I)
(II)
*while still allowing harmonics to speak

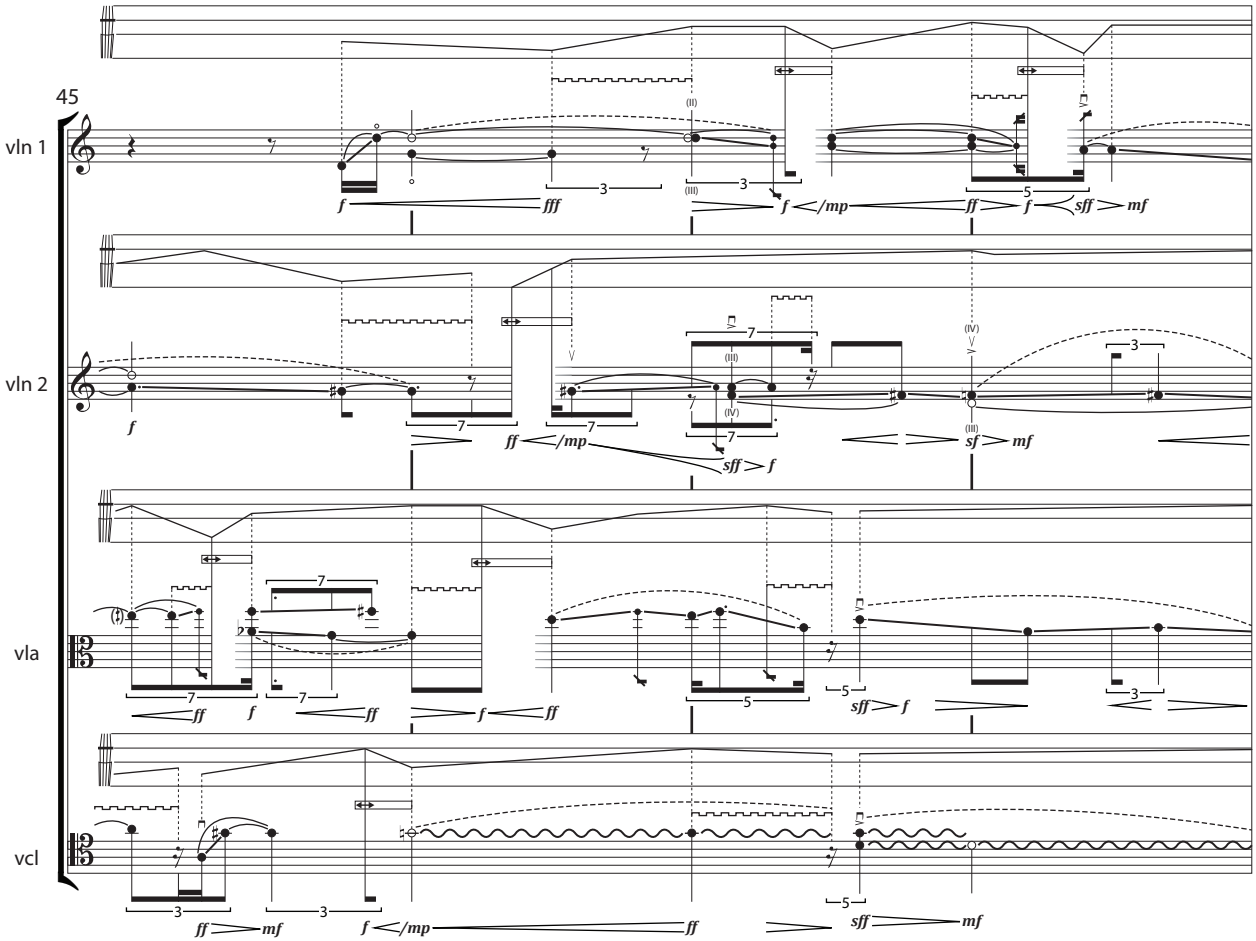

17
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl


21
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl


25
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl
fff sff/mp
f
mf
sff/pp
sf
ff sff/mp
sff/mf
mp
ff
sff/mp


29
ord.
8va
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl
p sff
pp
mp
ff
sff


41
(8va)
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl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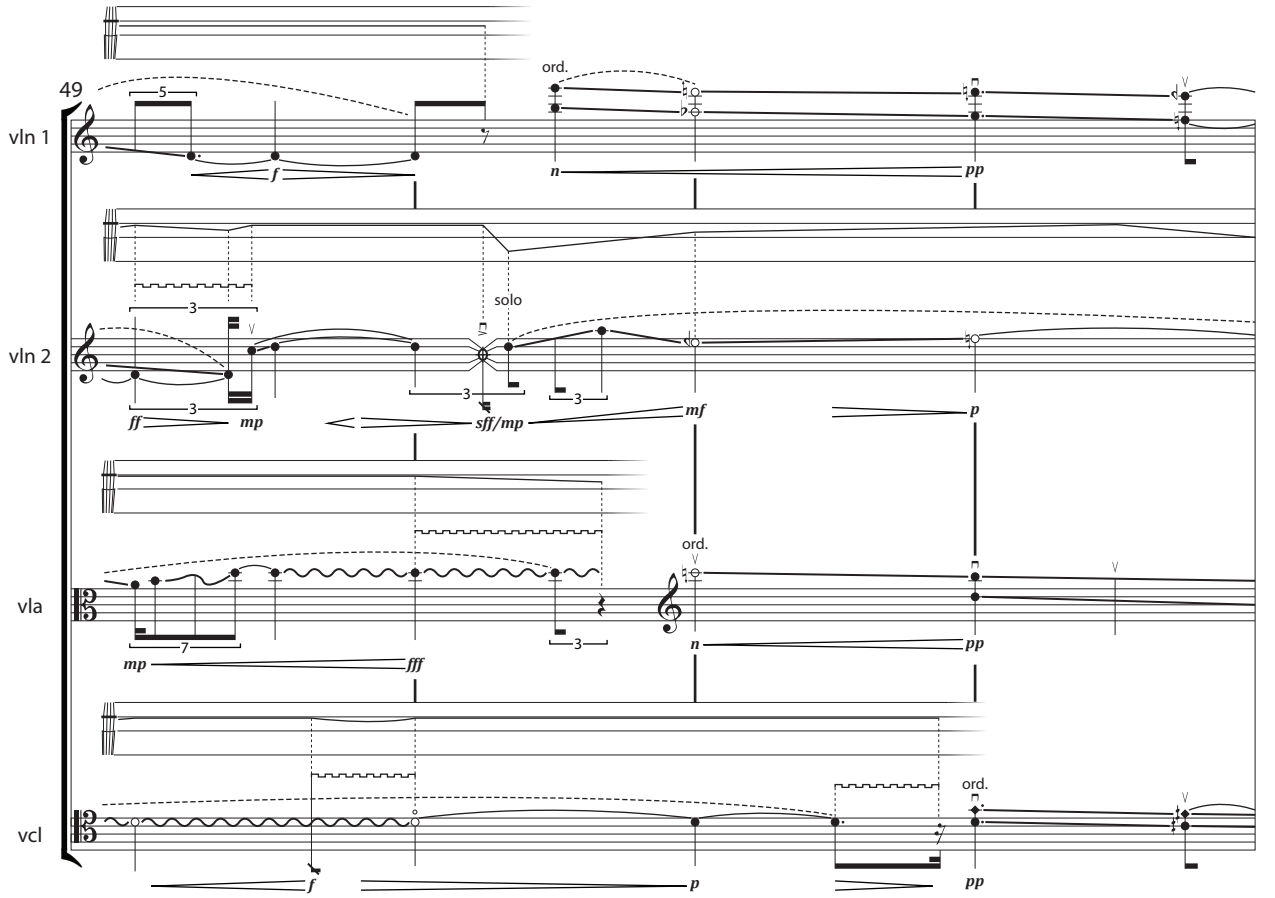
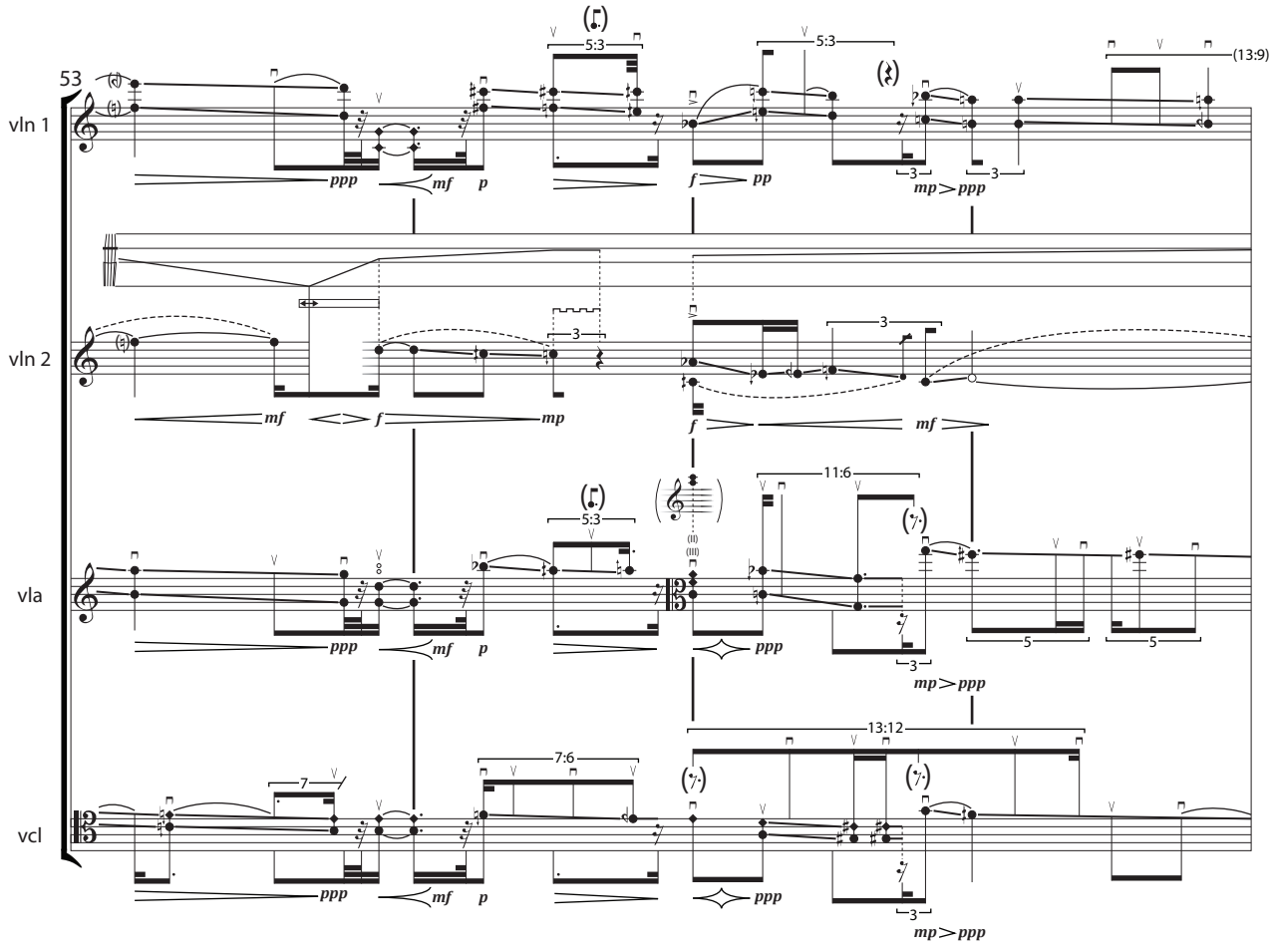
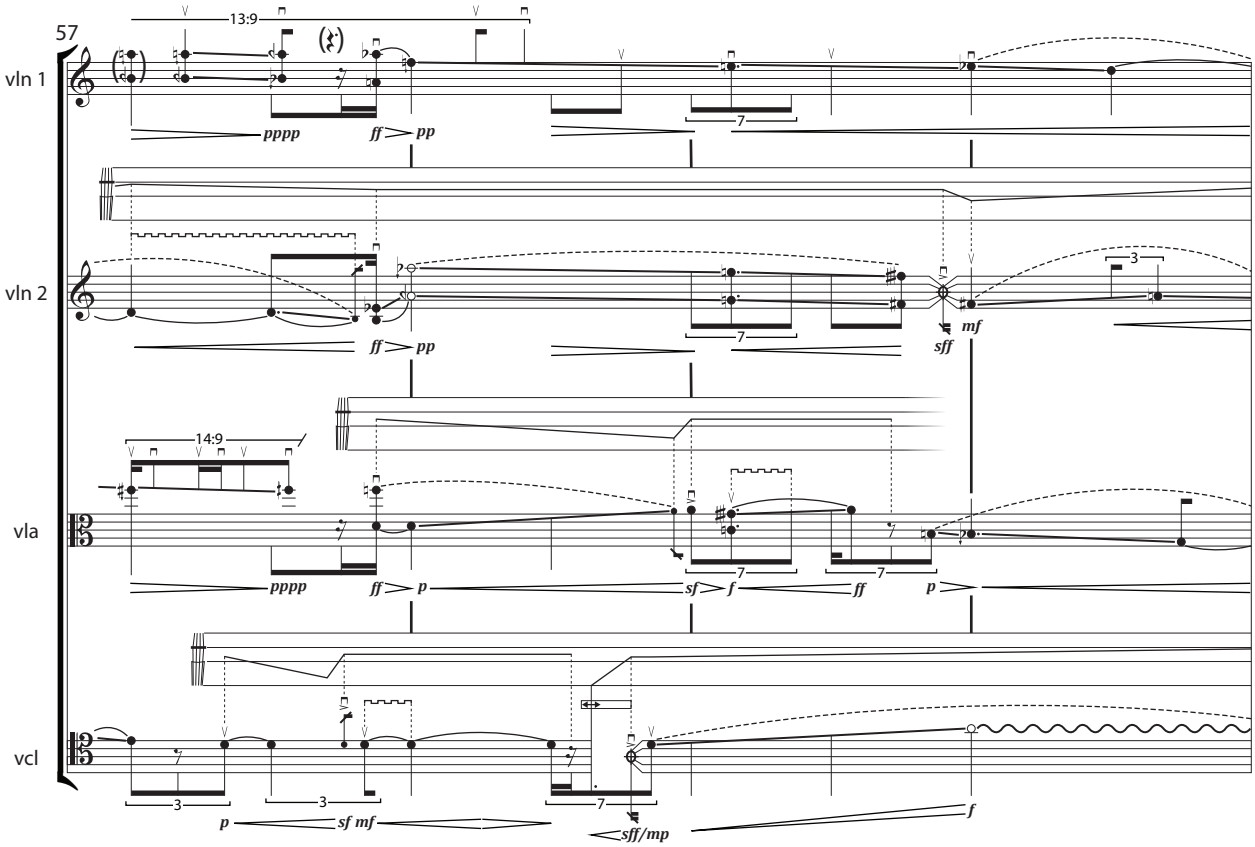
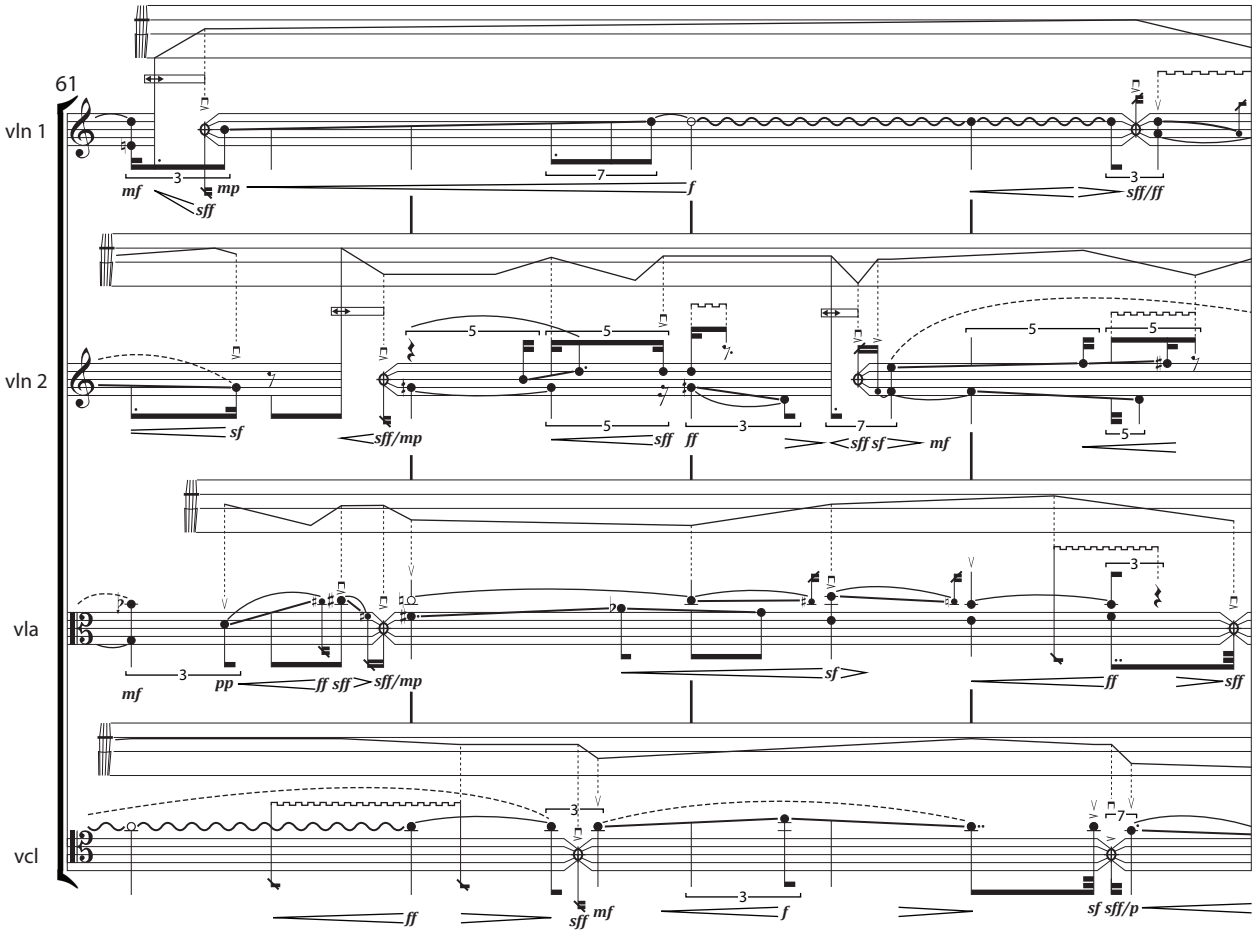
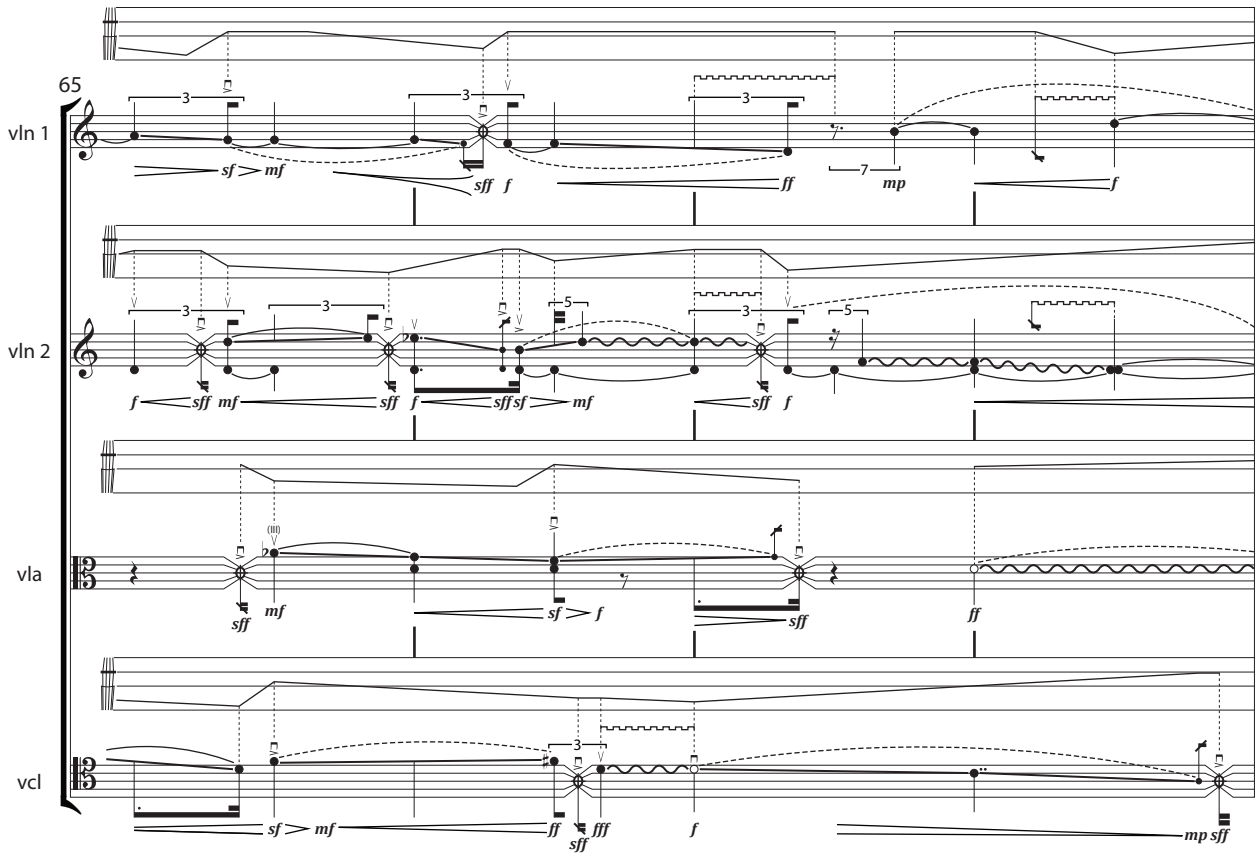
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl


49
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl
ord.
solo
ff
mp
sff/mp
mf
p
pp
fff


53
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl
5:3
11:6
7:6
13:12
(13:9)
ppp
mf
p
f
pp
mp
ppp


57
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl
13:9
14:9
pppp
ff
pp
mf
sff
p
sf
f
ff
sff/mp


61
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl
mf
mp
sff
sff/ff
sf
sff/mp
ff
sff sf
pp
sf
sff mf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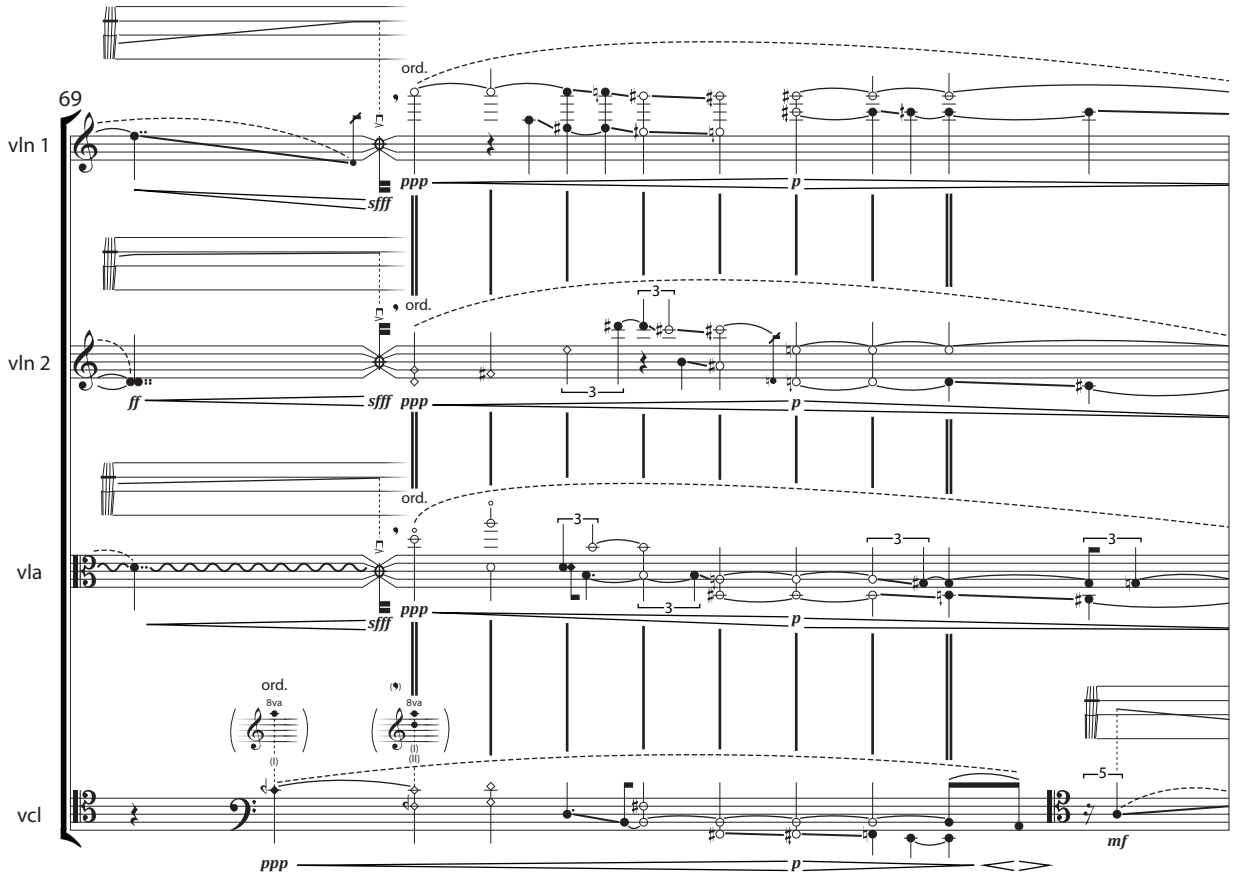
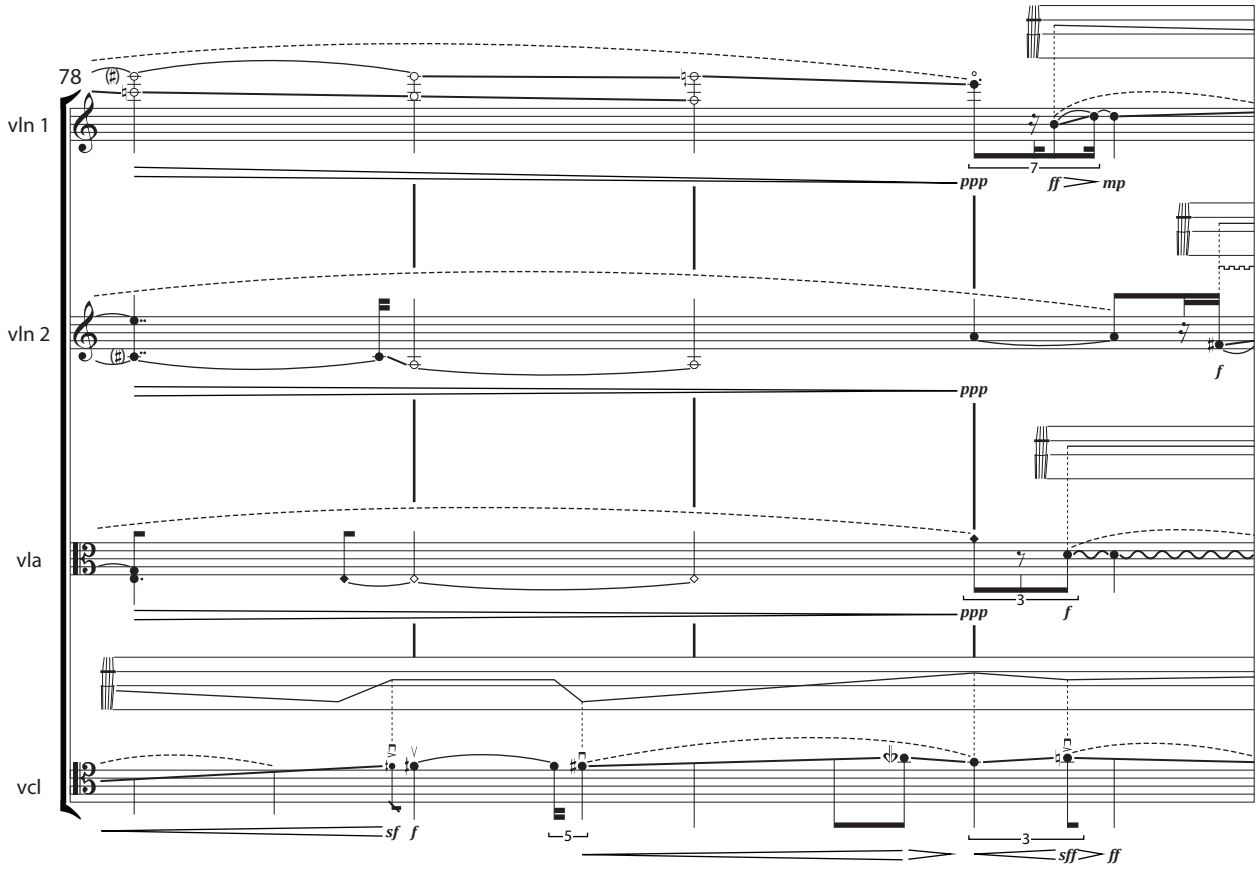
vln 2
vla
vcl


69
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl
ord.
8va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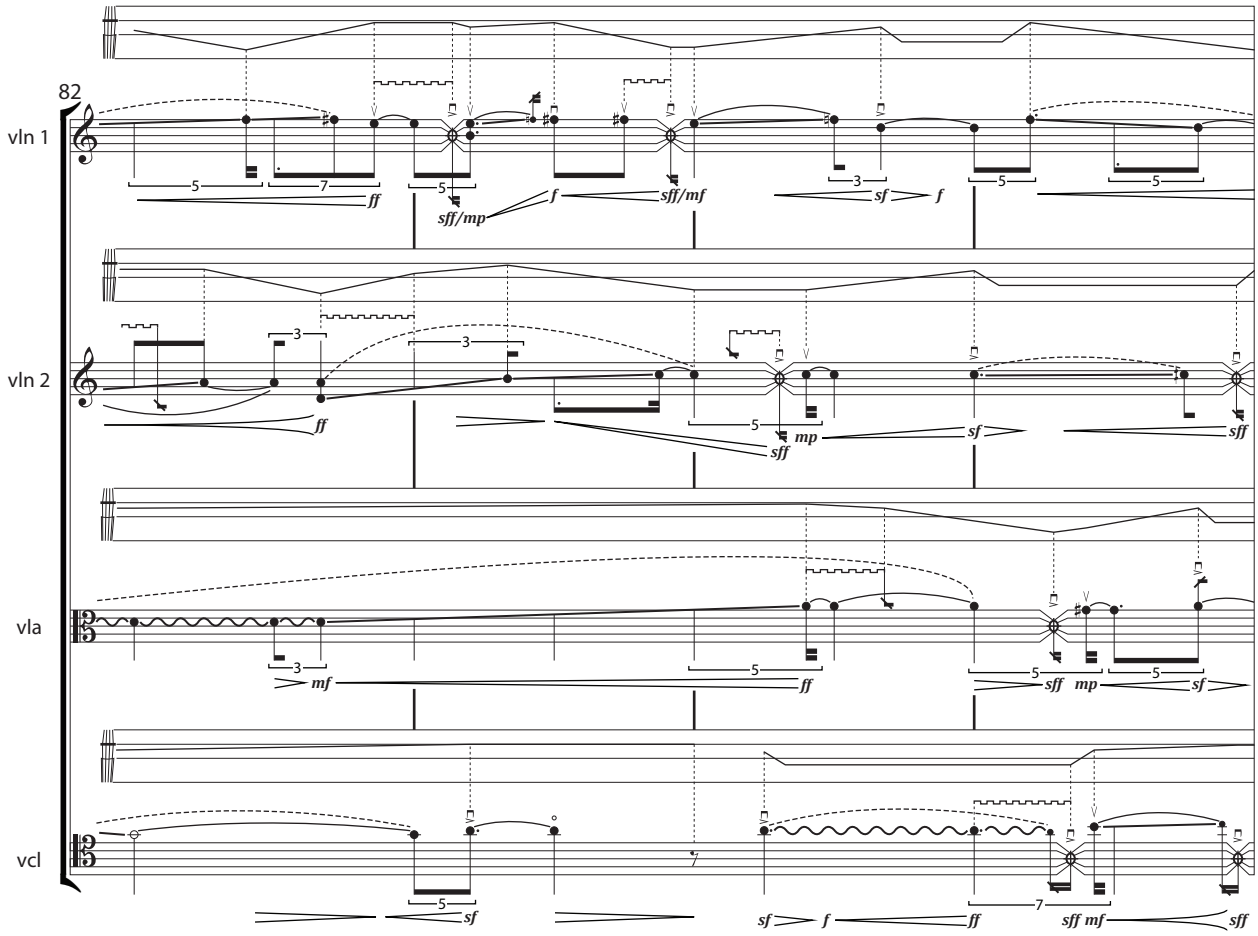
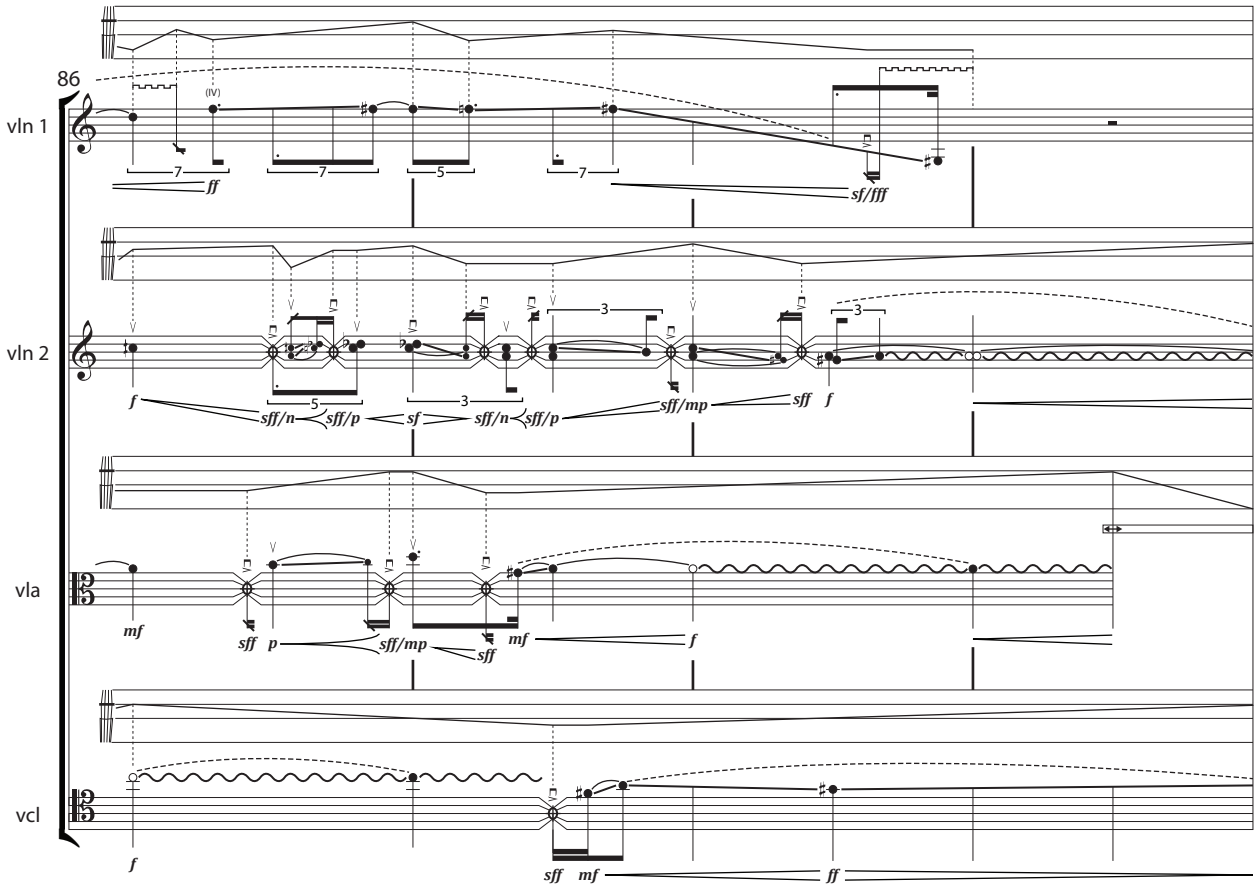
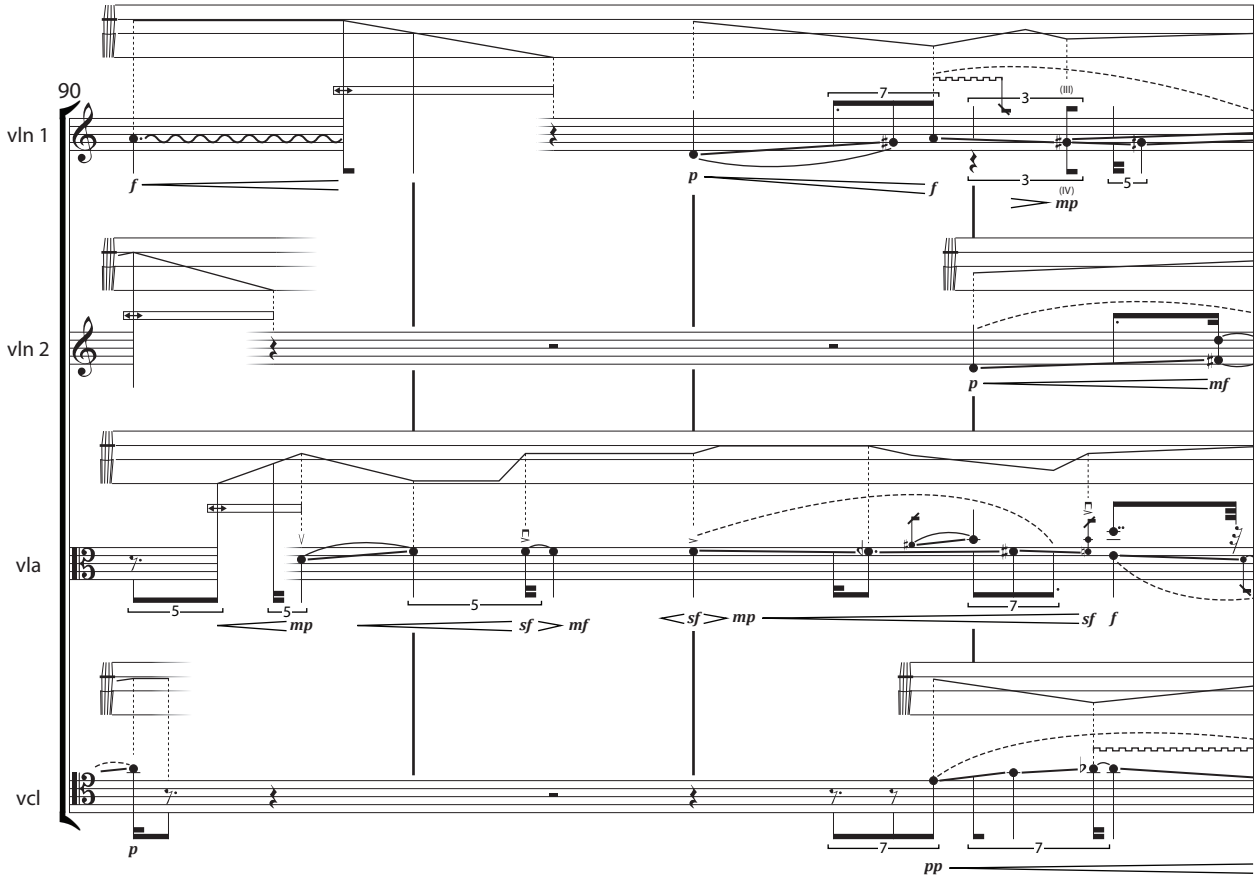
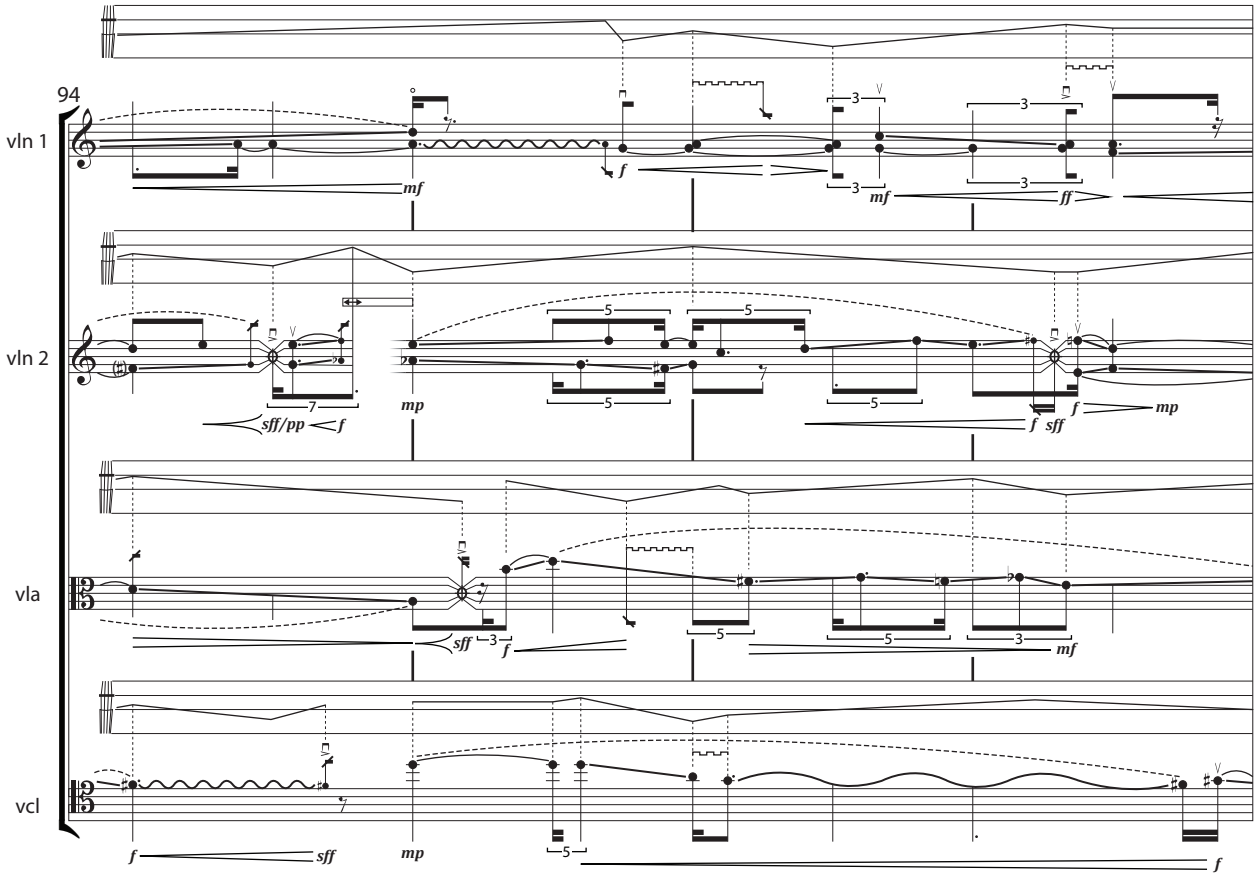
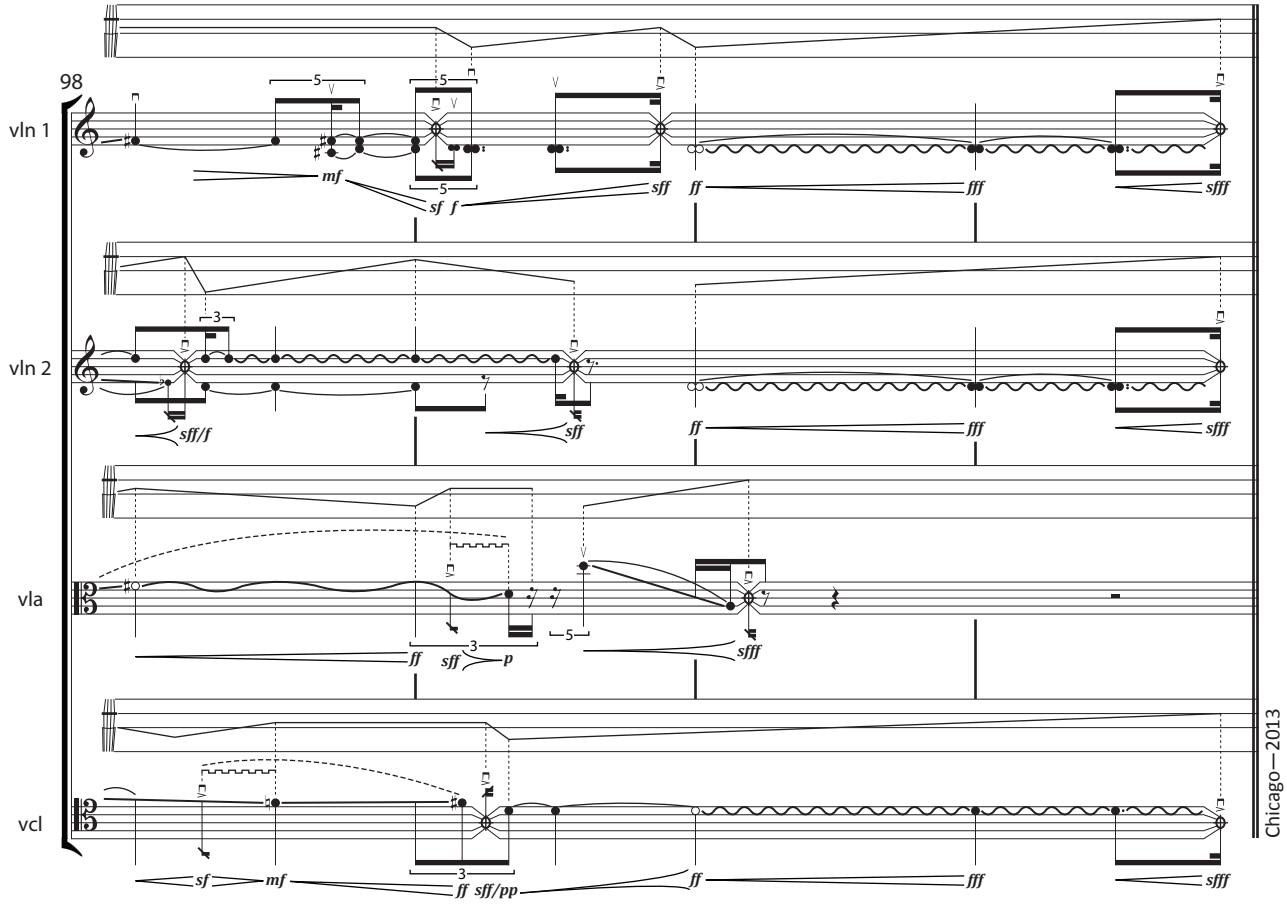
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl
ppp
ff
mp
f
sf
sff


82
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl
ff
sff/mp
sff/mf
mp
mf
sff
mf


86
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl
(IV)
ff
sf/fff
sff/n
sff/p
sf
sff/mp
sff
mf
f
p
pp


90
vln 1
vln 2
vla
vcl
(III)
(IV)
mp
sf
mf
f
p
pp





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