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Catalog No. 8336

David Conte

(b. 1955)

String Quartet No. 2

(2010)

I. Molto moderato	1
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Engraving by Joseph Stillwell

Program Note

String Quartet No. 2 was commissioned by the Ives String Quartet and composed between July 2009 and January 2010. I wrote my *First String Quartet* in 1979 as my Master's Thesis at Cornell University, and having composed a great deal of music for strings in the intervening thirty years, I was eager to return to a medium that I believe, next to unaccompanied choral music, shows a composer's strengths and weaknesses more clearly than any other.

Karel Husa was my primary composition teacher during my years at Cornell. He guided every phase of the composition of my *First String Quartet*, and I have studied deeply and been inspired by his string quartets. ***String Quartet No. 2*** is dedicated to him after thirty-eight years of friendship.

The first movement is at thirteen minutes the longest movement of any of my chamber music works. It begins *Molto moderato* with a very long introductory theme stated twice. In composing this theme, I was thinking of the very long first themes of the first movement of Aaron Copland's *Third Symphony* and the *Third Symphony* by Roy Harris, two works that I deeply love, and that I think share deep connections. The music quite suddenly breaks into an *Allegro* tempo, with a fast version of this introductory theme. The movement unfolds through many moods and tempos, ranging from agitated to passionately expressive, ending on a note of solemnity.

The second movement, marked *Allegro scherzando*, is slightly quirky, and is built out of contrasting sections of a main theme with partial statements of the chorale *How Brightly Shines the Morning Star* by Philipp Nicolai (1556–1608). (I used this chorale as the basis for the final scene of my opera *Firebird Motel.*) All the instruments take a turn in singing successive phrases of the chorale, culminating in a complete statement of it by the first violin at the end of the movement.

The third movement is a Fugue based on a subject that is a 12-tone row. Marked *Adagio serio*, the music has a very serious, introspective character. After all four instruments have stated the subject, the second half of the Fugue is a nearly-exact retrograde inversion of the first half, both rhythmically and pitch-wise.

The fourth movement is an Elegy, and is dedicated to the memory of my dear friend Ruth Knestrict Smith, who died in 2009. Ruth was a gifted singer and this movement honors her memory through its essentially vocal lyricism. Marked *Lento assai*, the Elegy is based on a single, *cantabile* theme first sung by the first violin, and accompanied by a chordal walking bass texture, thus giving the feeling of a rhythm section supporting a singer.

The fifth movement is a spirited and energetic *Allegro* in 4/4 meter. This finale is designed as a modified rondo form with three contrasting themes. The third of these is related to the second theme of the first movement and, like that melody, is consciously Romantic and expressive in character. The finale concludes with brisk coda in compound meter that concludes with a flourish in all instruments.

My thanks to the Ives Quartet, which includes my San Francisco Conservatory colleagues violinist Bettina Mussumeli and violist Jodi Levitz, and Stanford University faculty violinist Susan Freier and cellist Stephen Harrison, for the opportunity to compose this work for them. I am particularly indebted to Jodi Levitz, who gave me invaluable advice about bowing and phrasing and was a great support to me while composing this piece.

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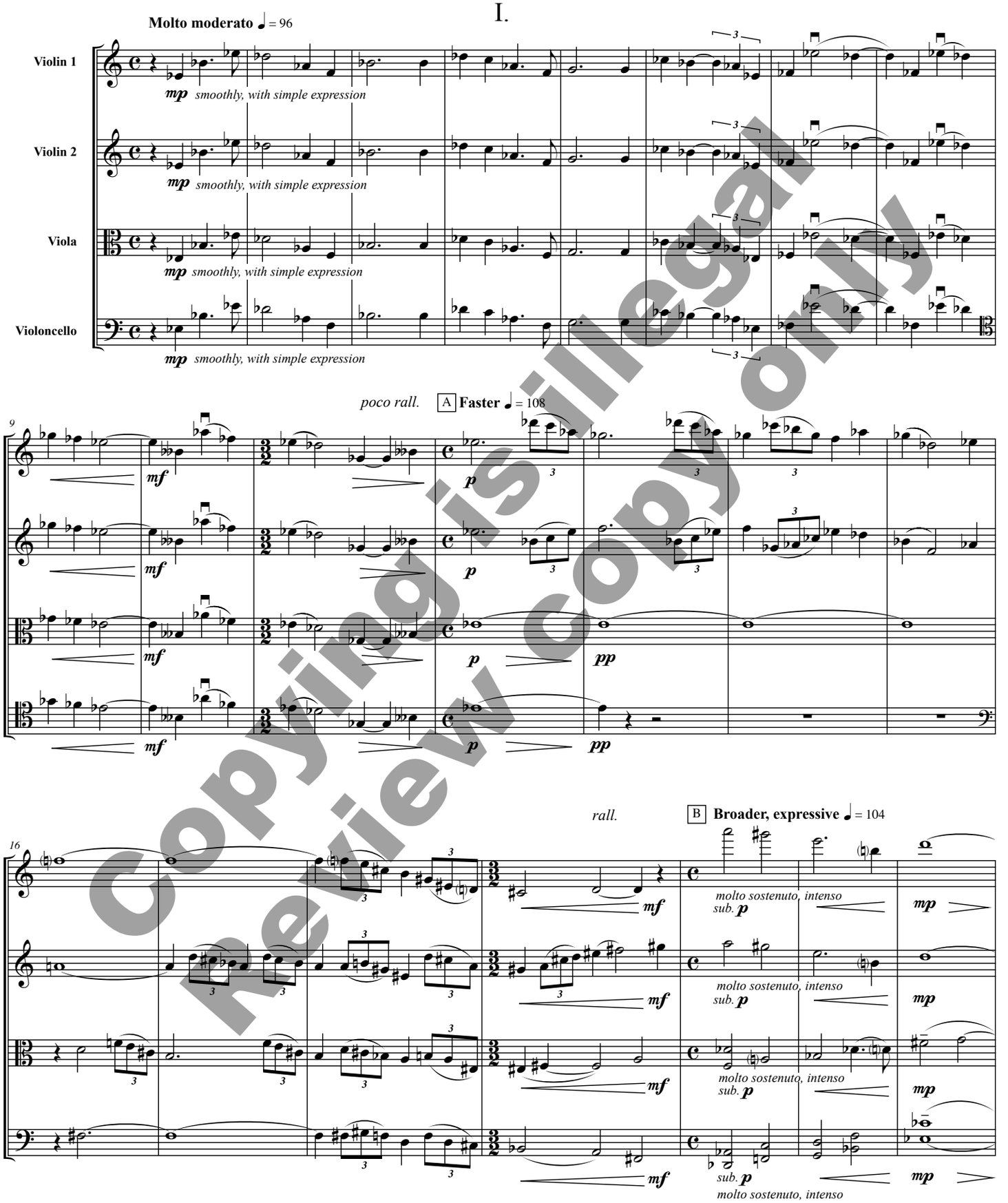
to Karel Husa

commissioned by the Ives Quartet

String Quartet No. 2

David Conte

I.



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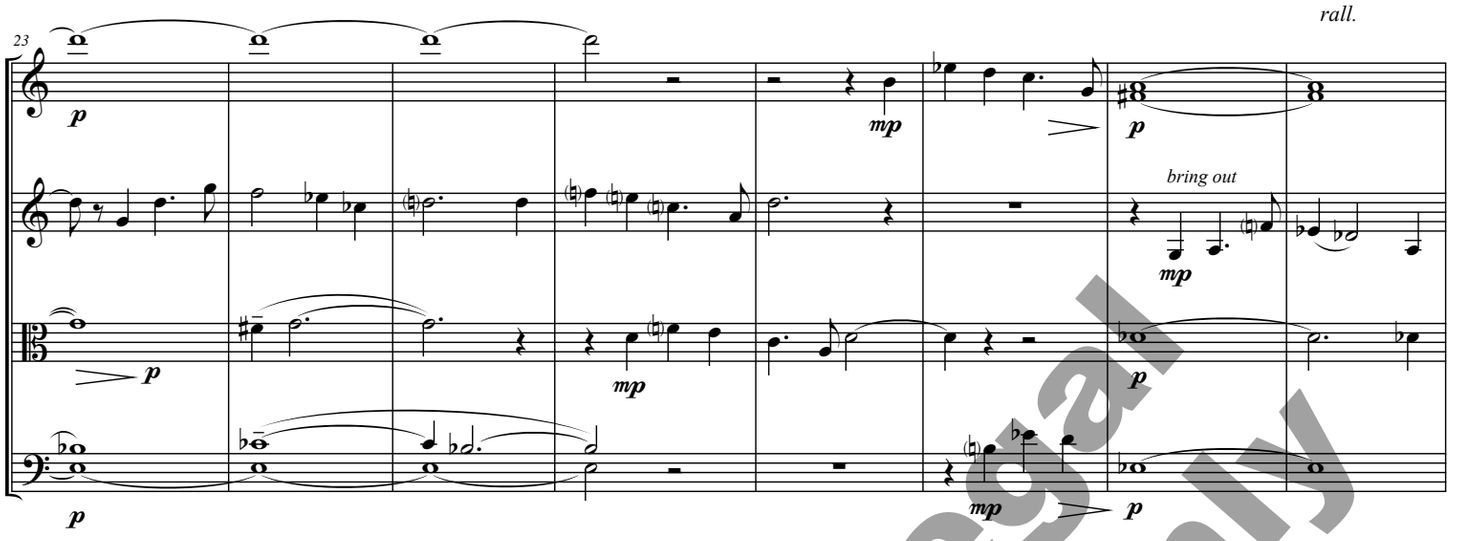

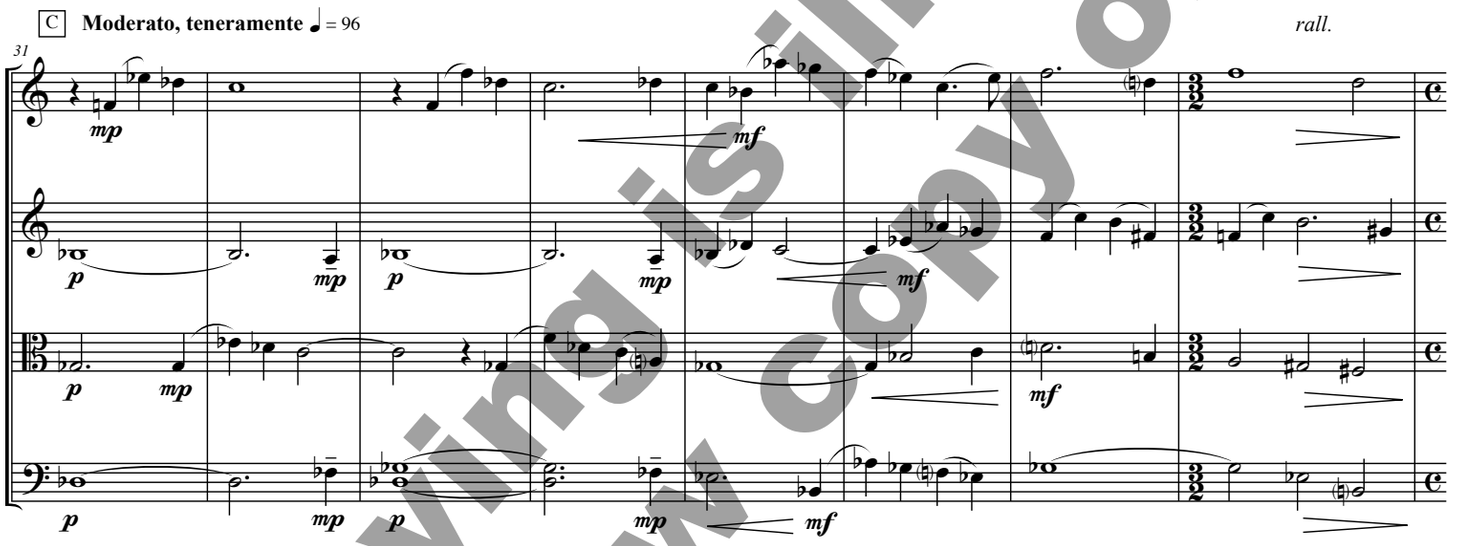

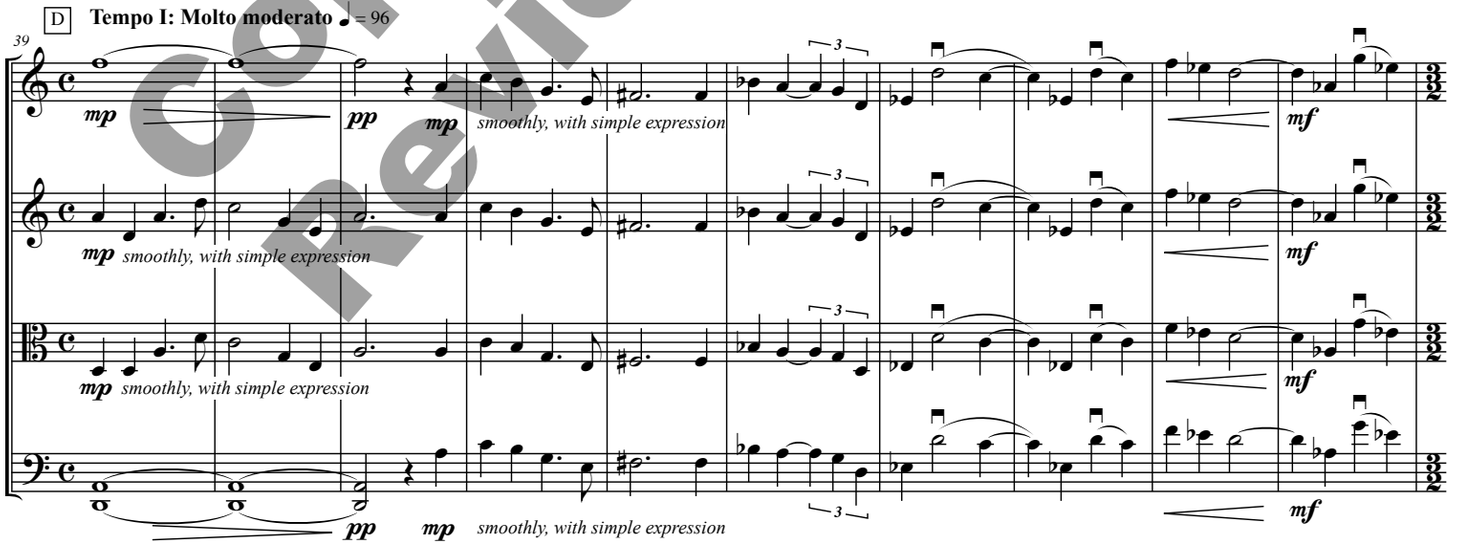

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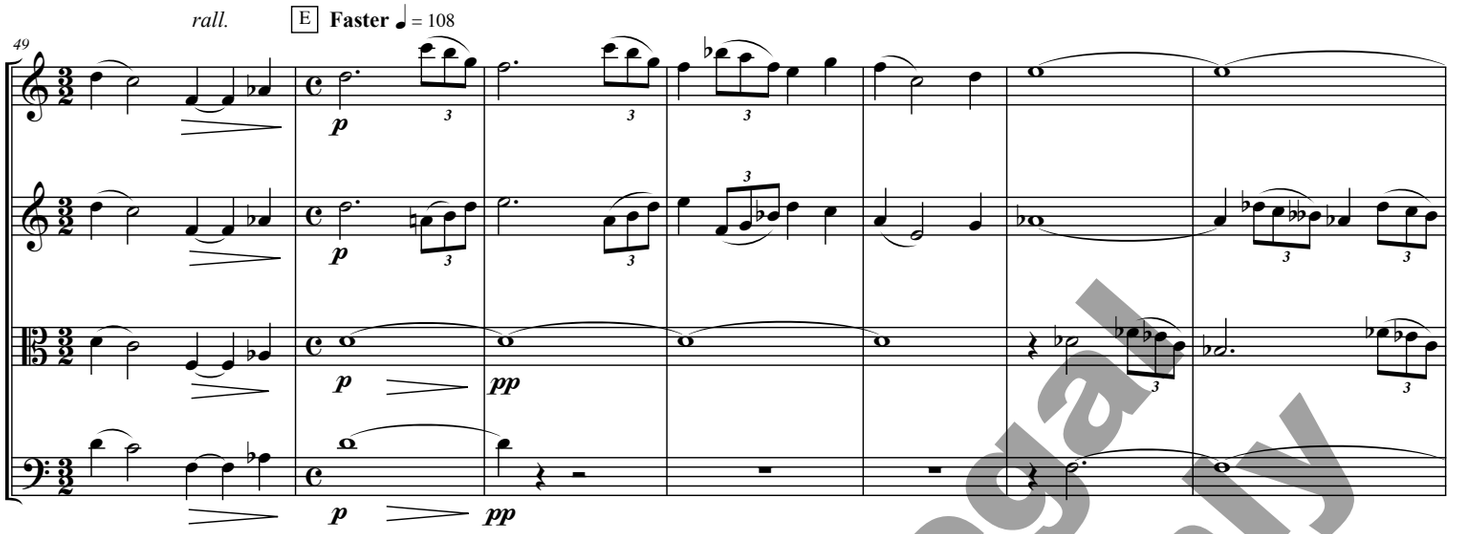

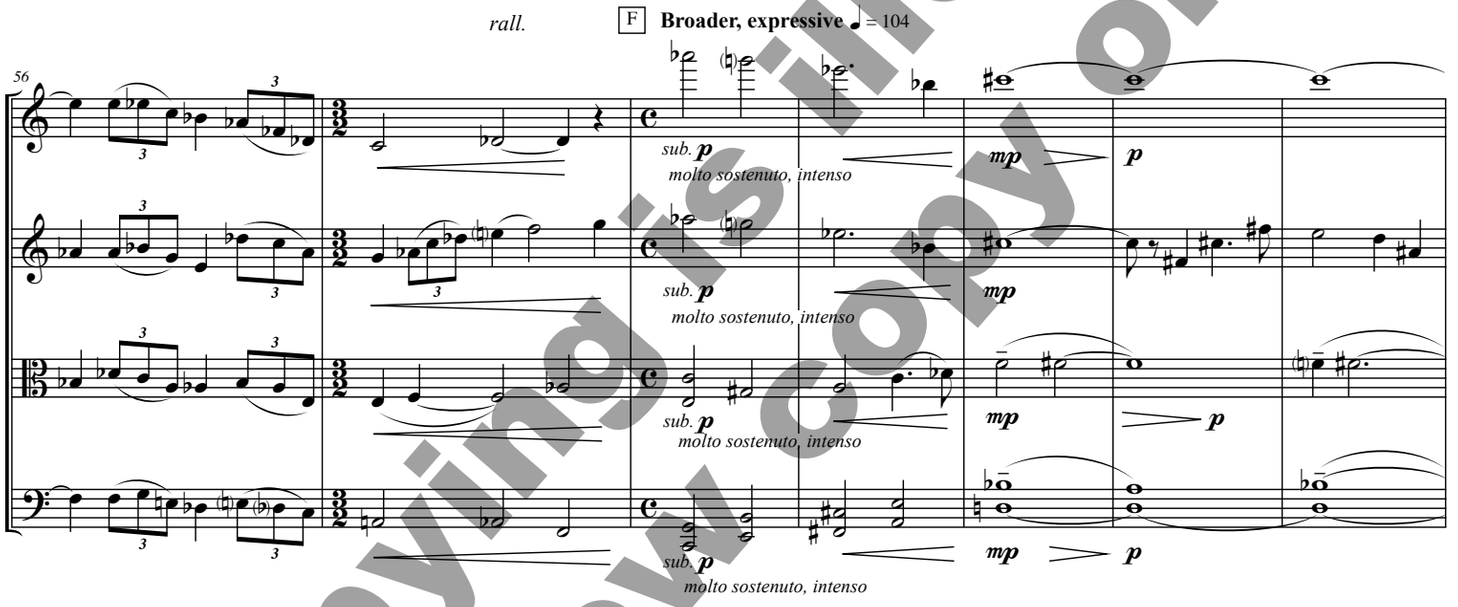

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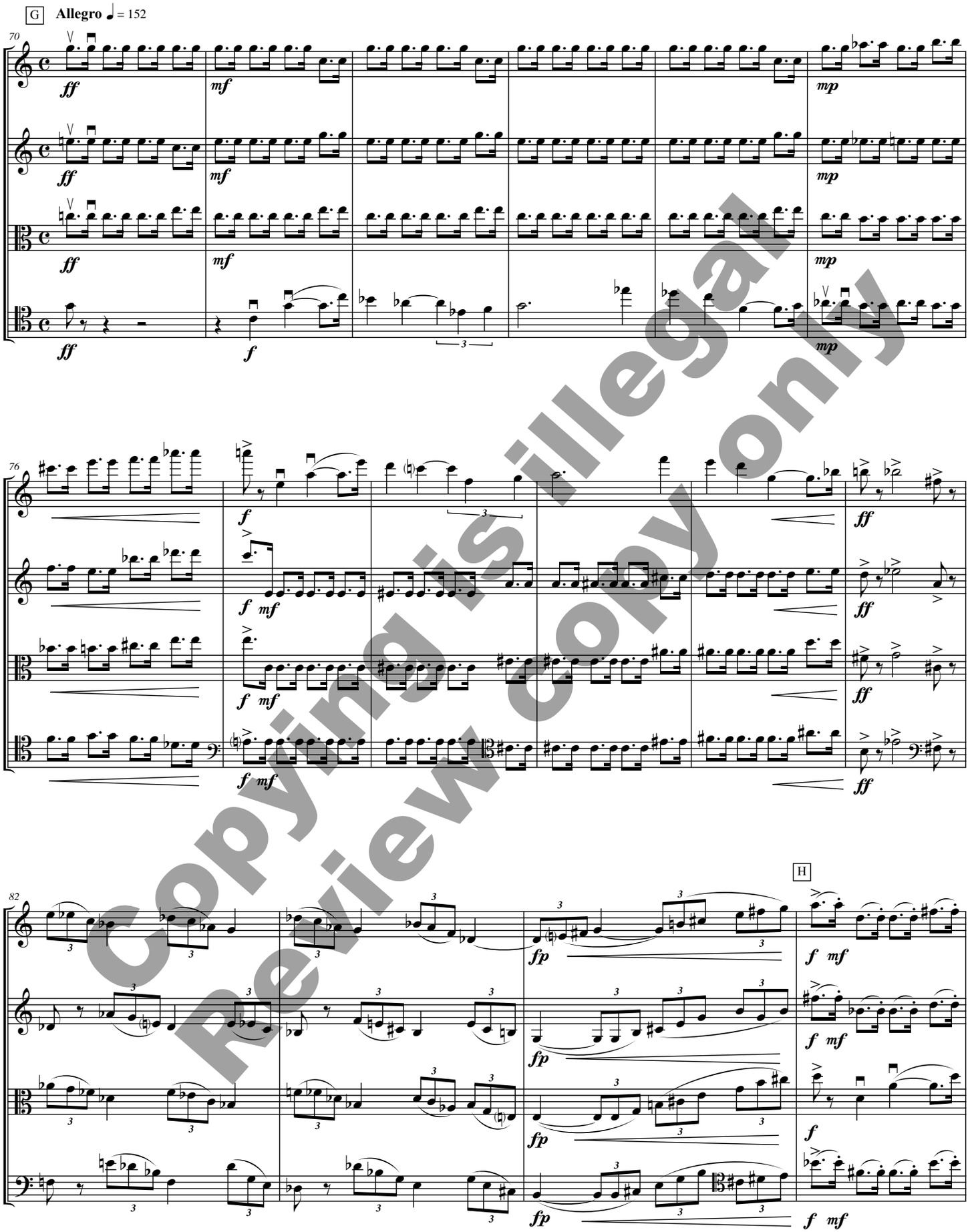

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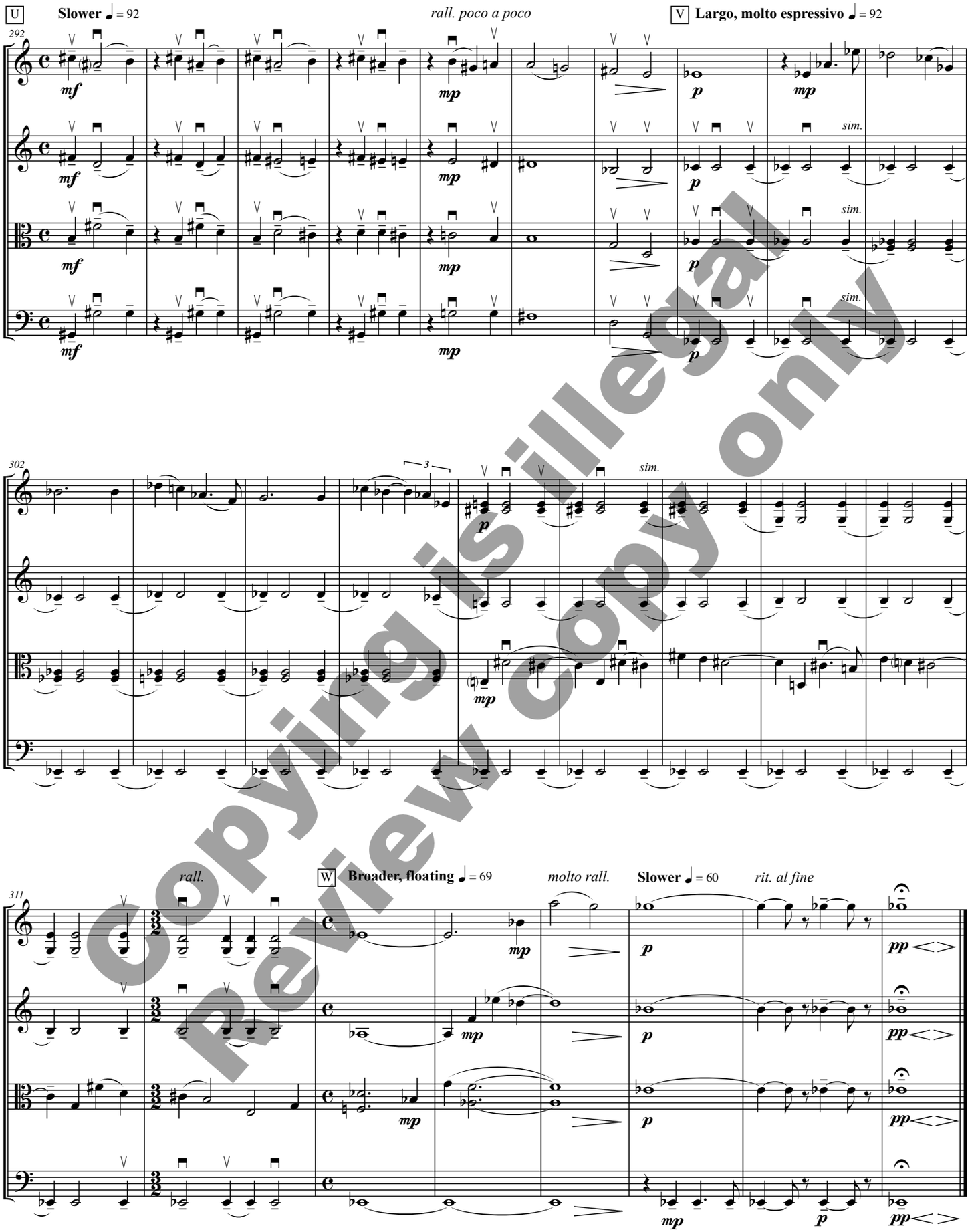

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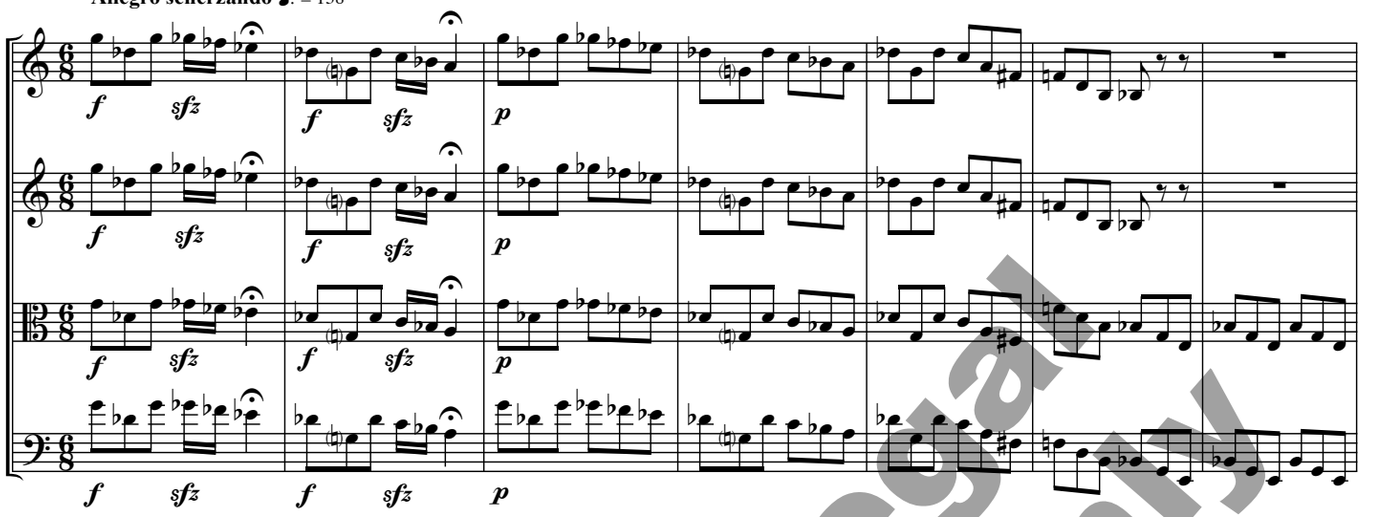
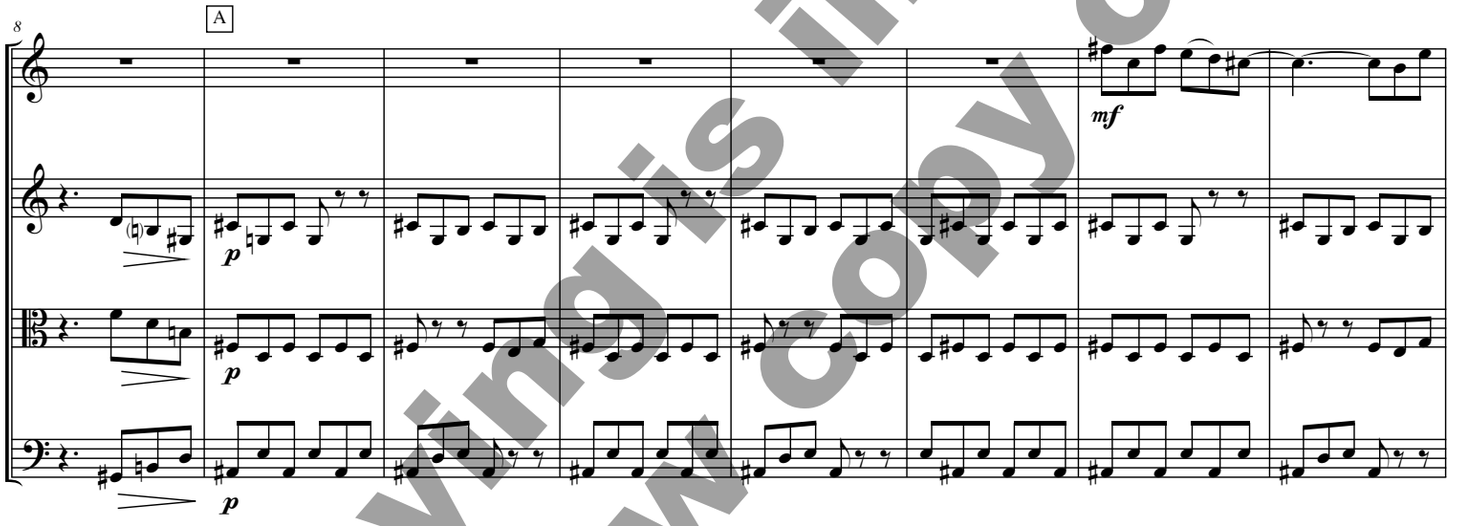
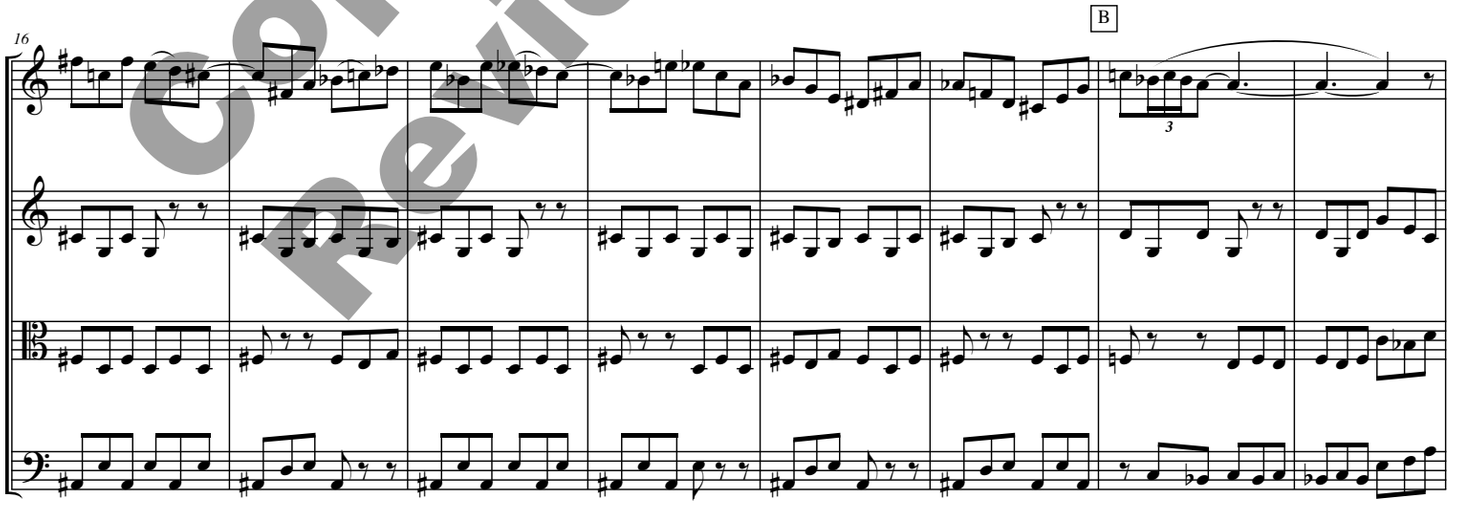
II. Scherzo and Chorale

Allegro scherzando ♩. = 138







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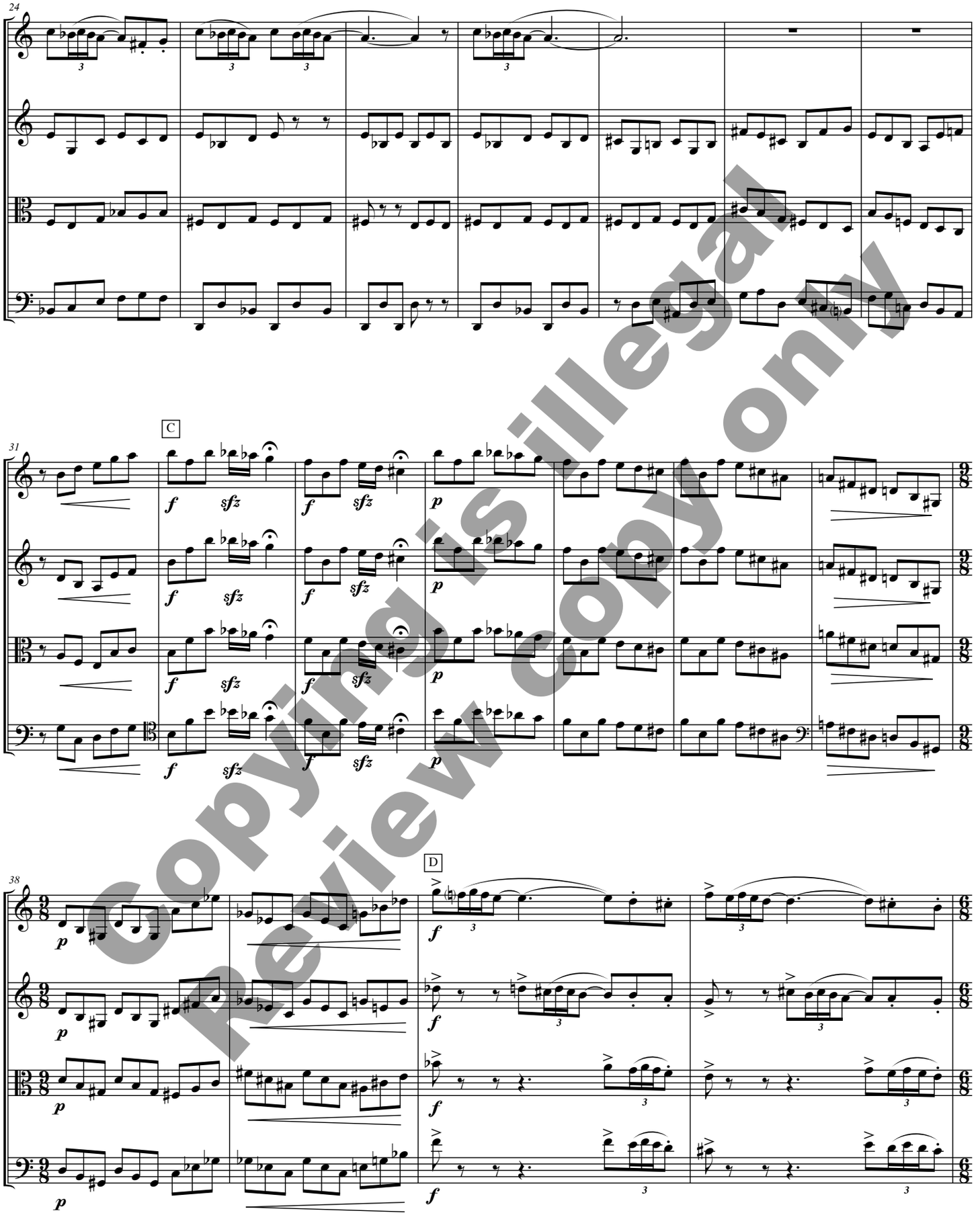

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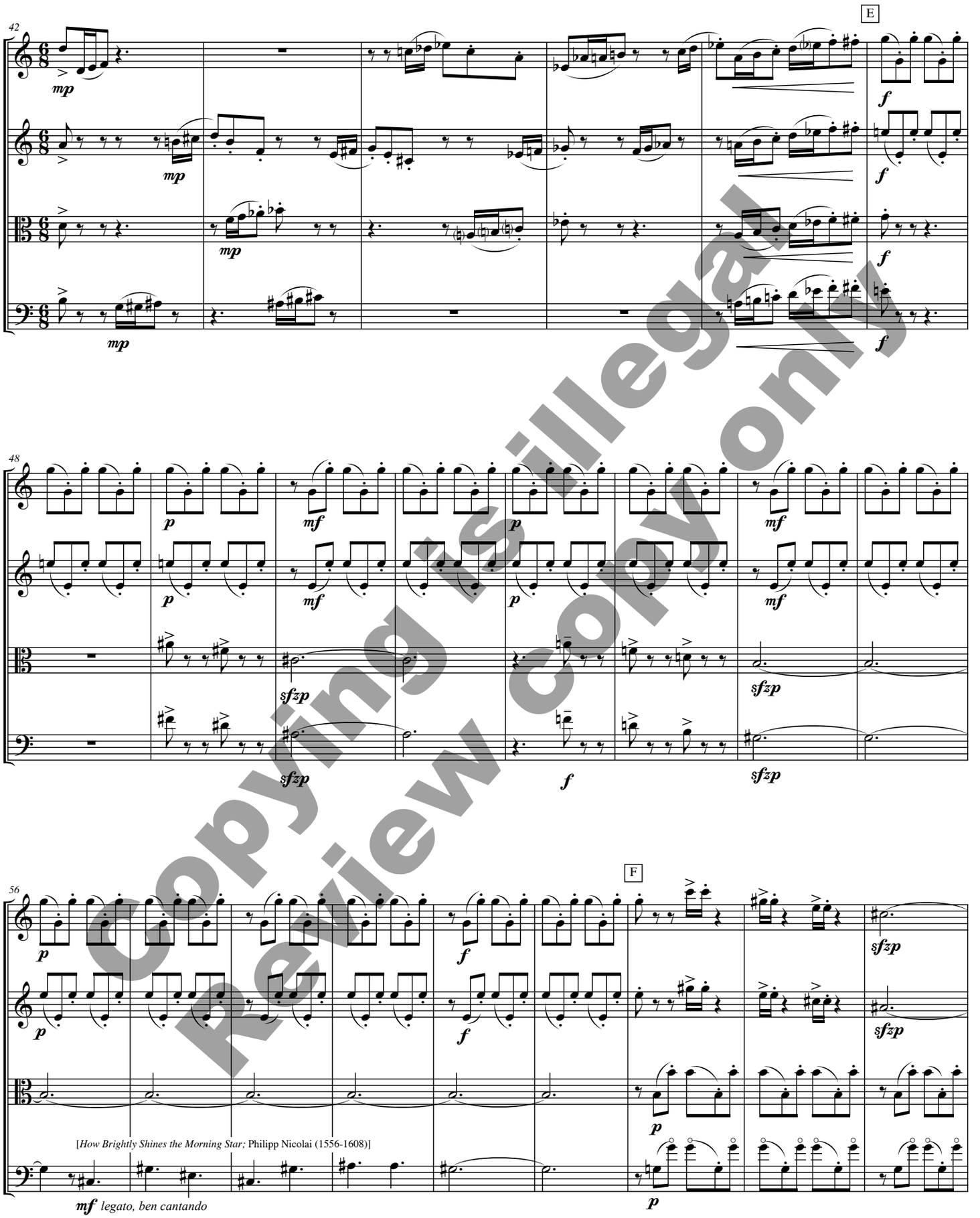

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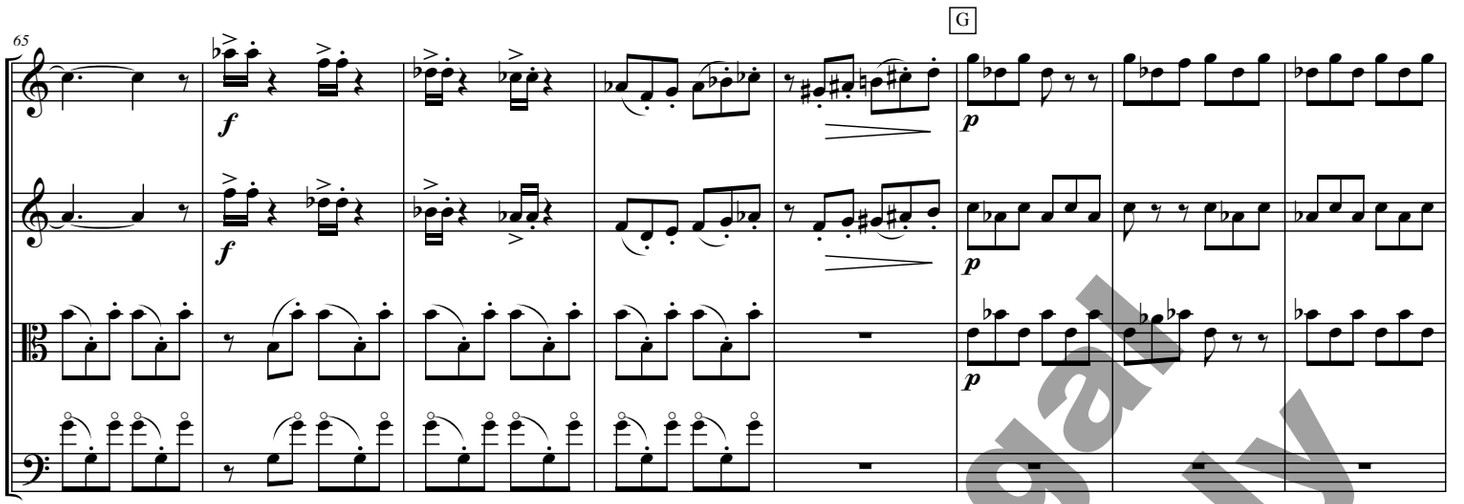

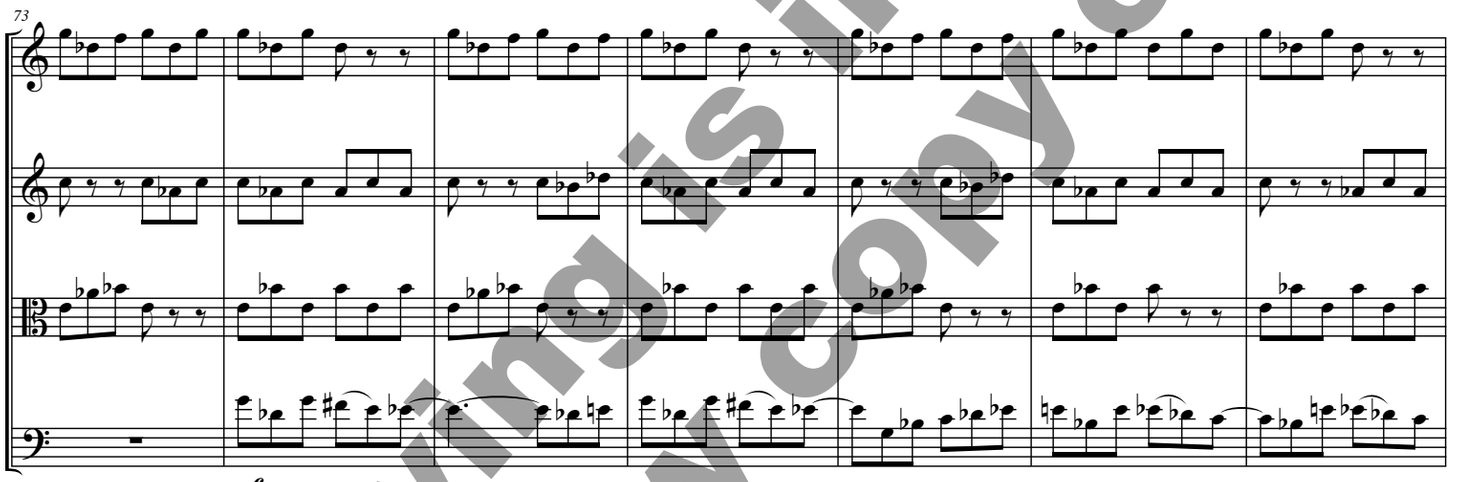

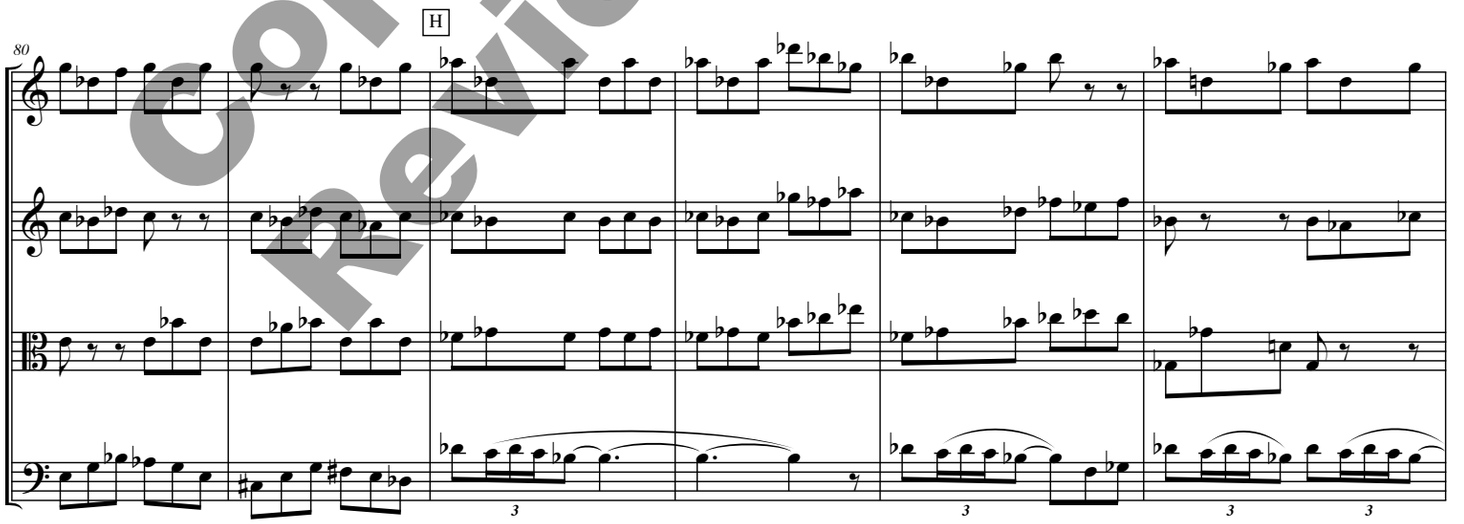

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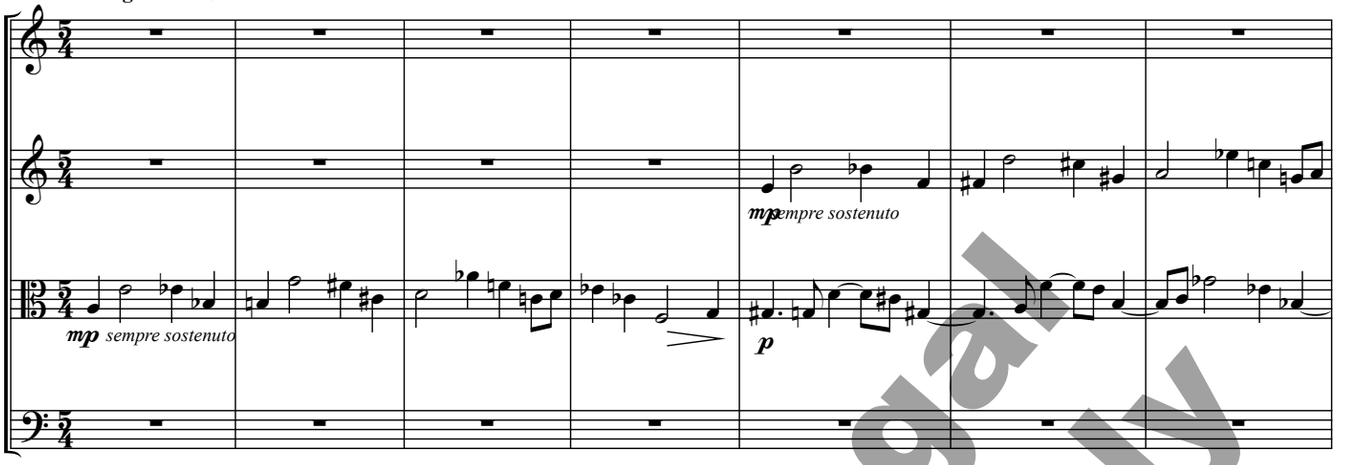
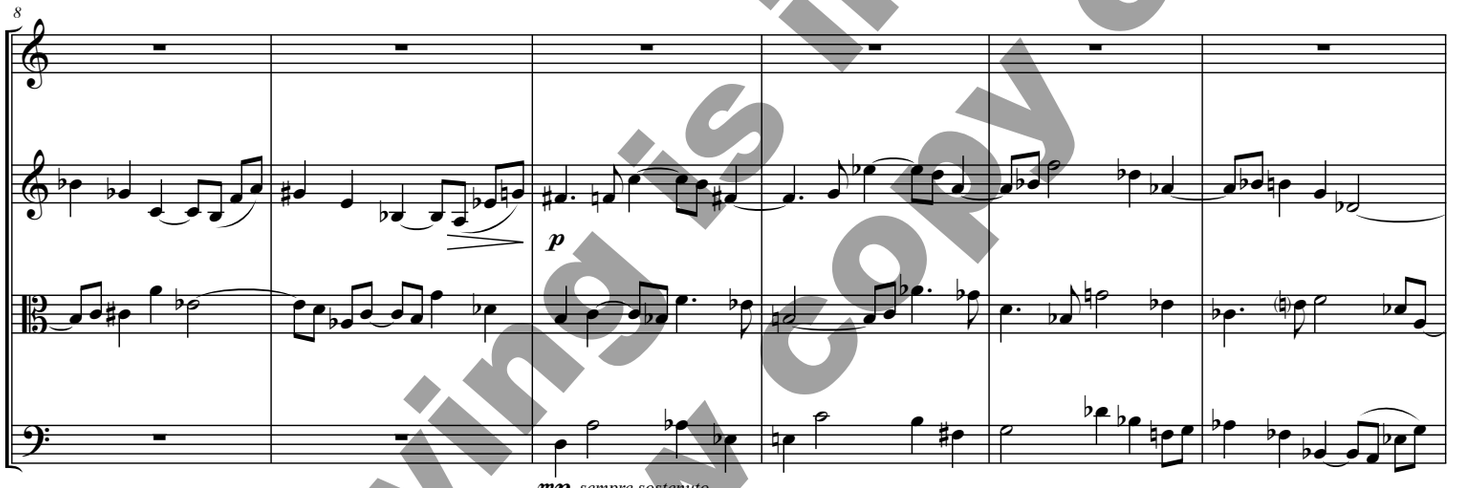
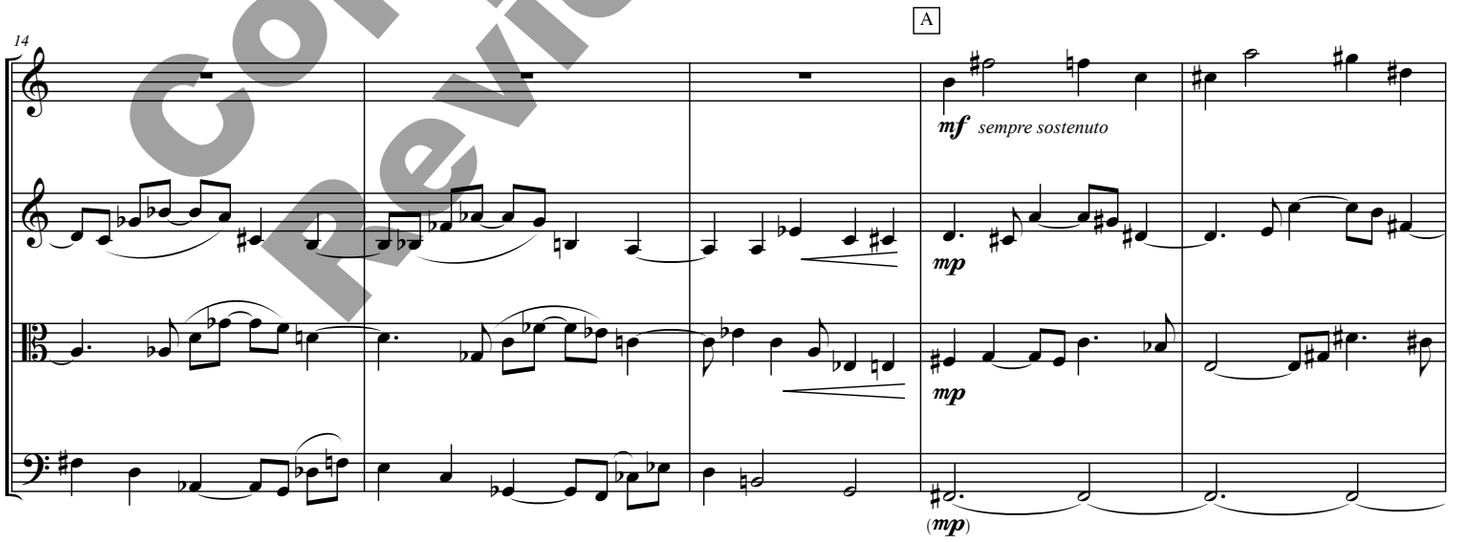
III. Fugue

Adagio serio ♩ = 56







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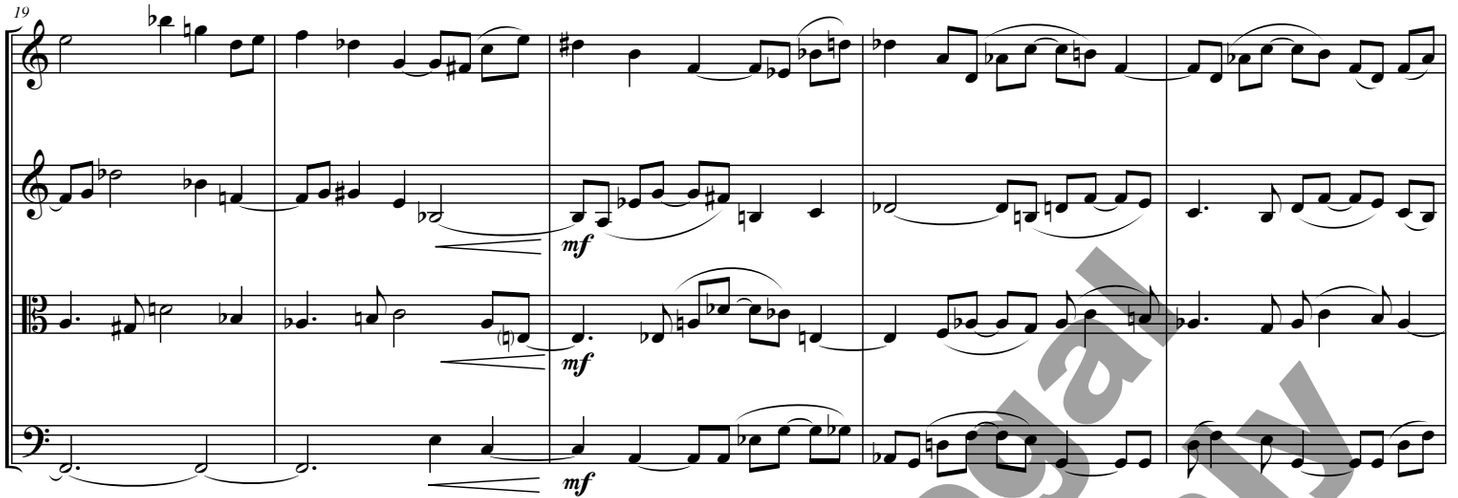

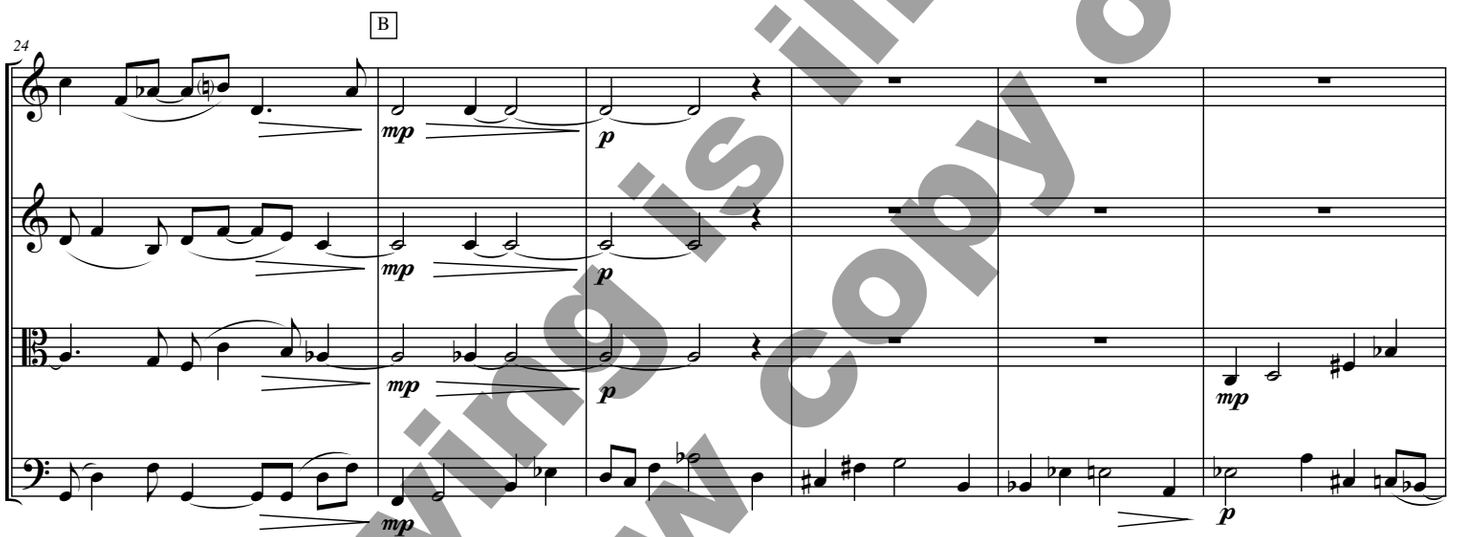

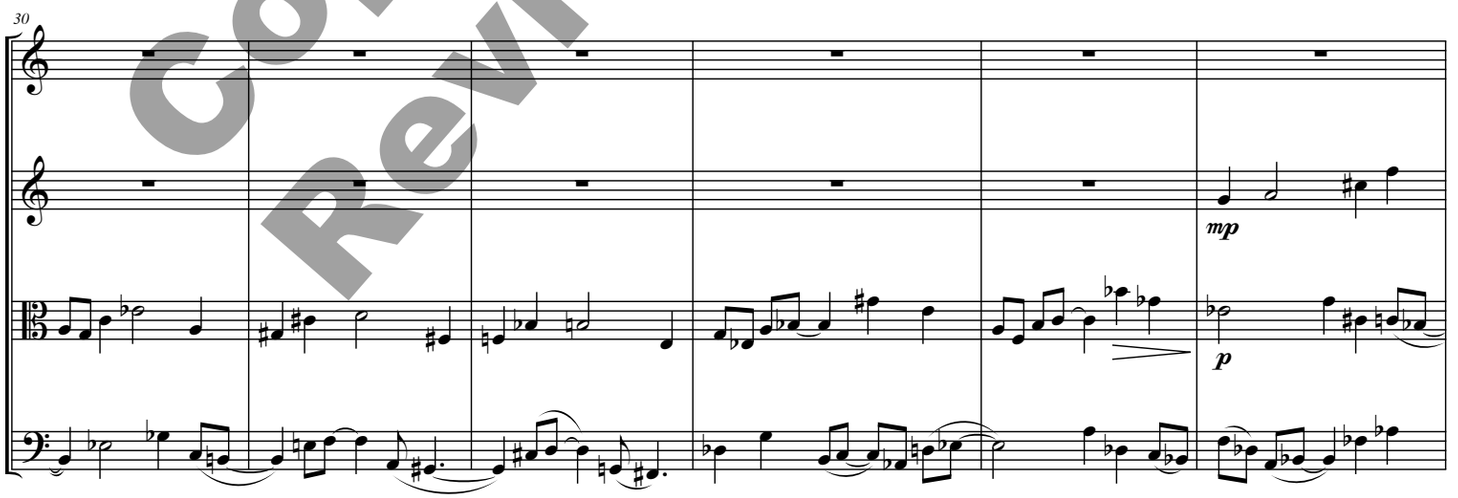

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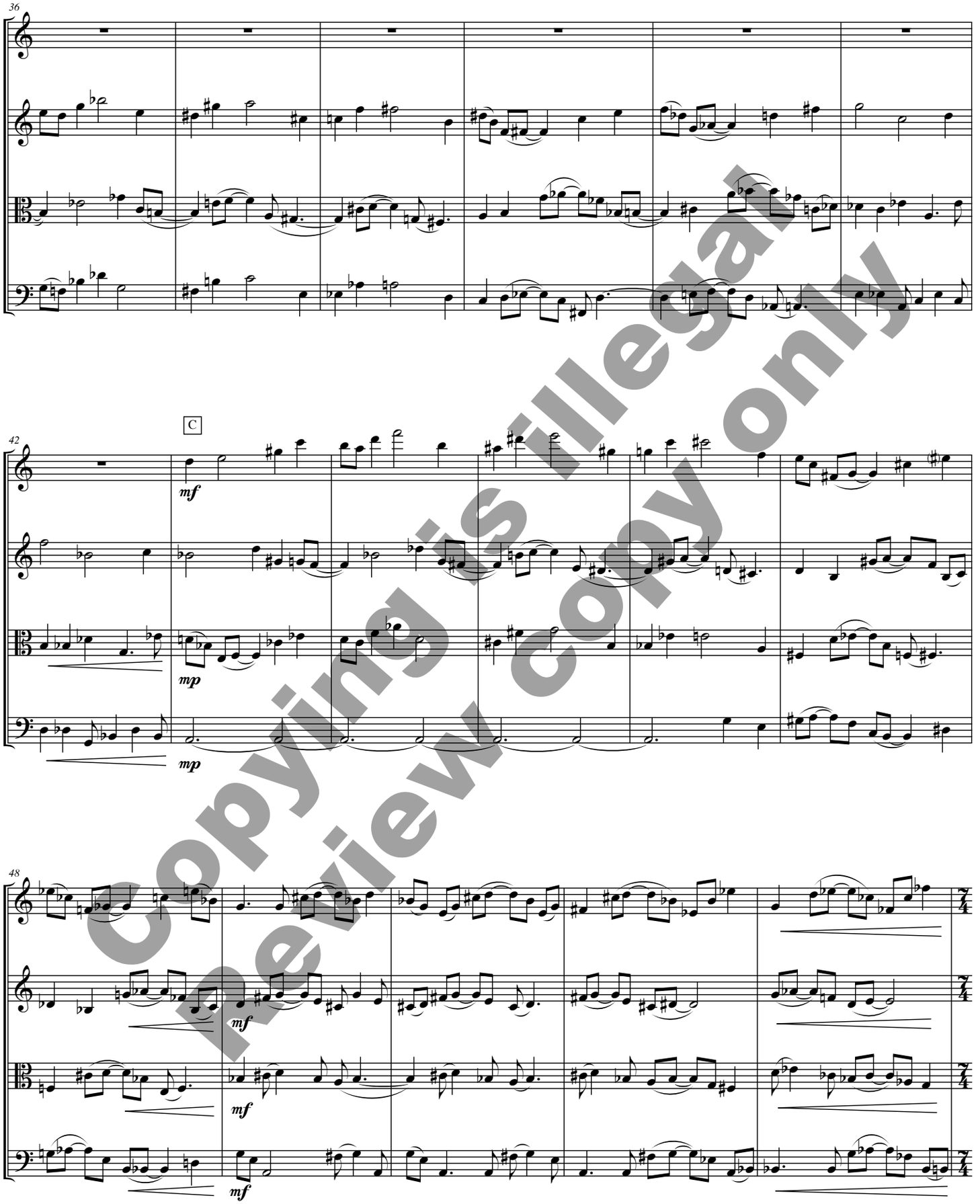

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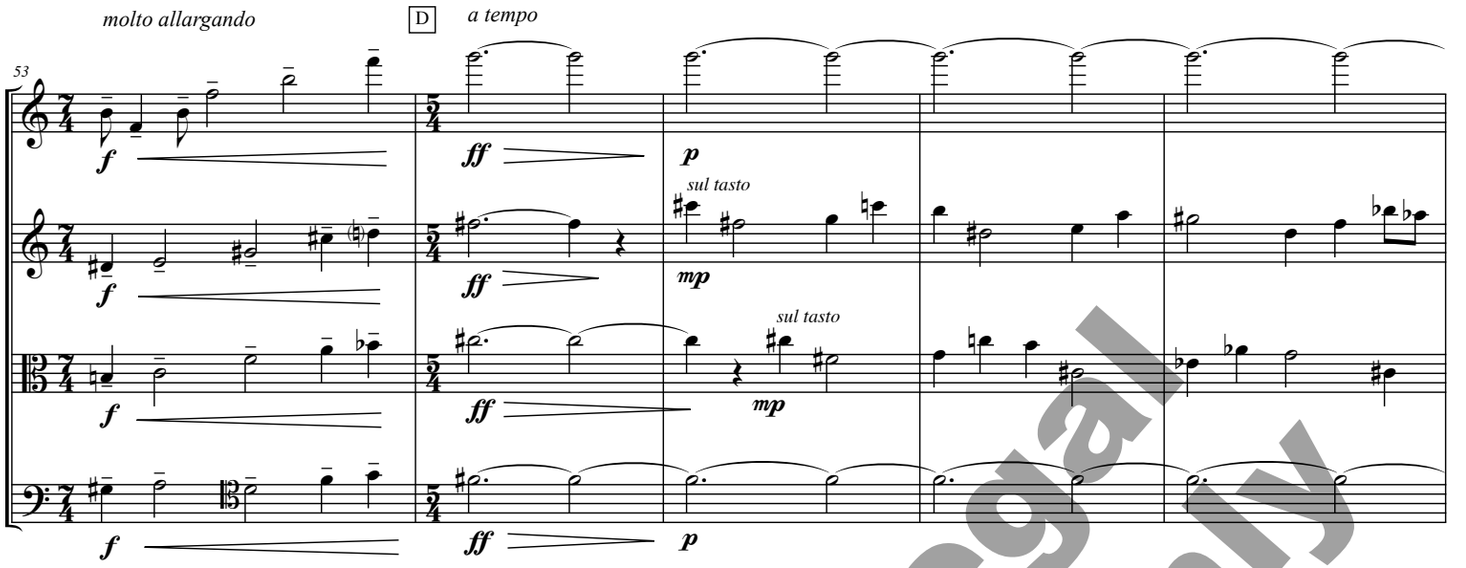
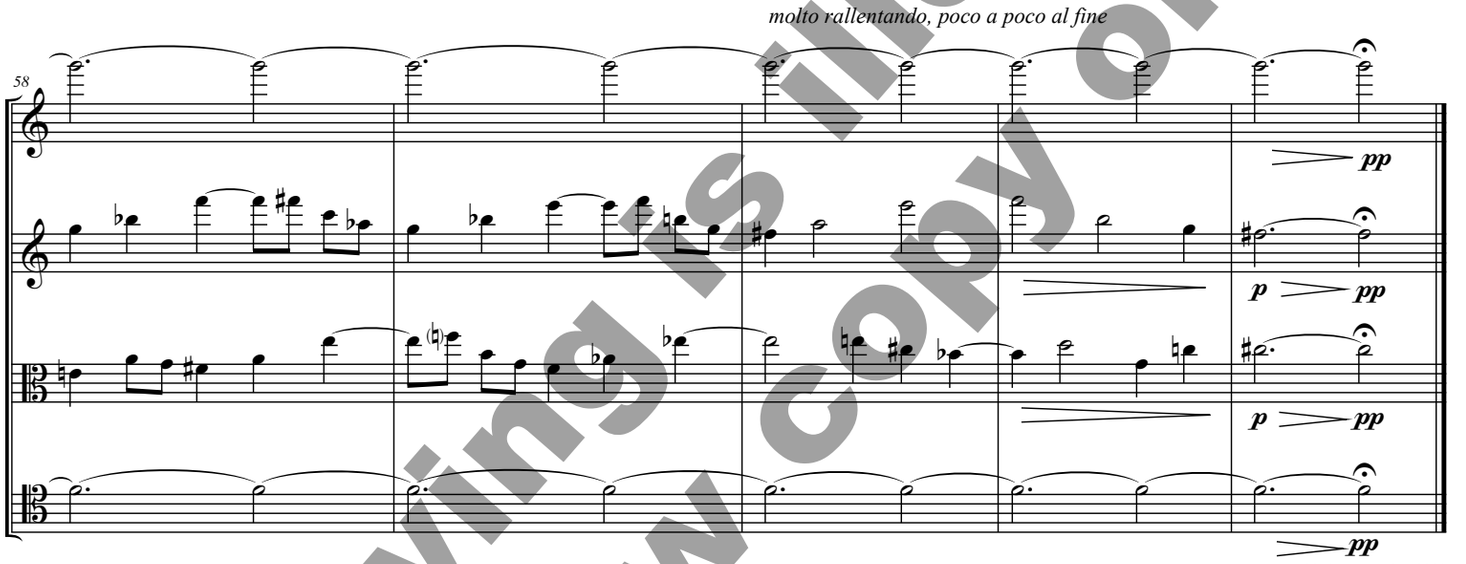
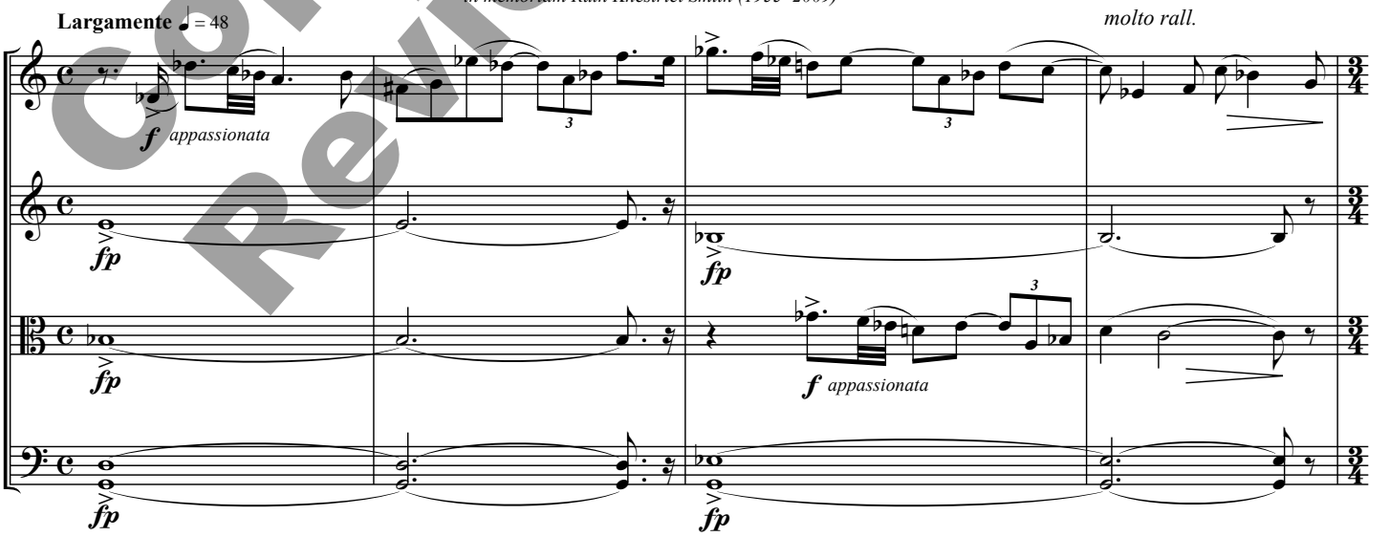




28–31 December 2009
San Francisco

IV. Elegy

in memoriam Ruth Knestrict Smith (1955–2009)



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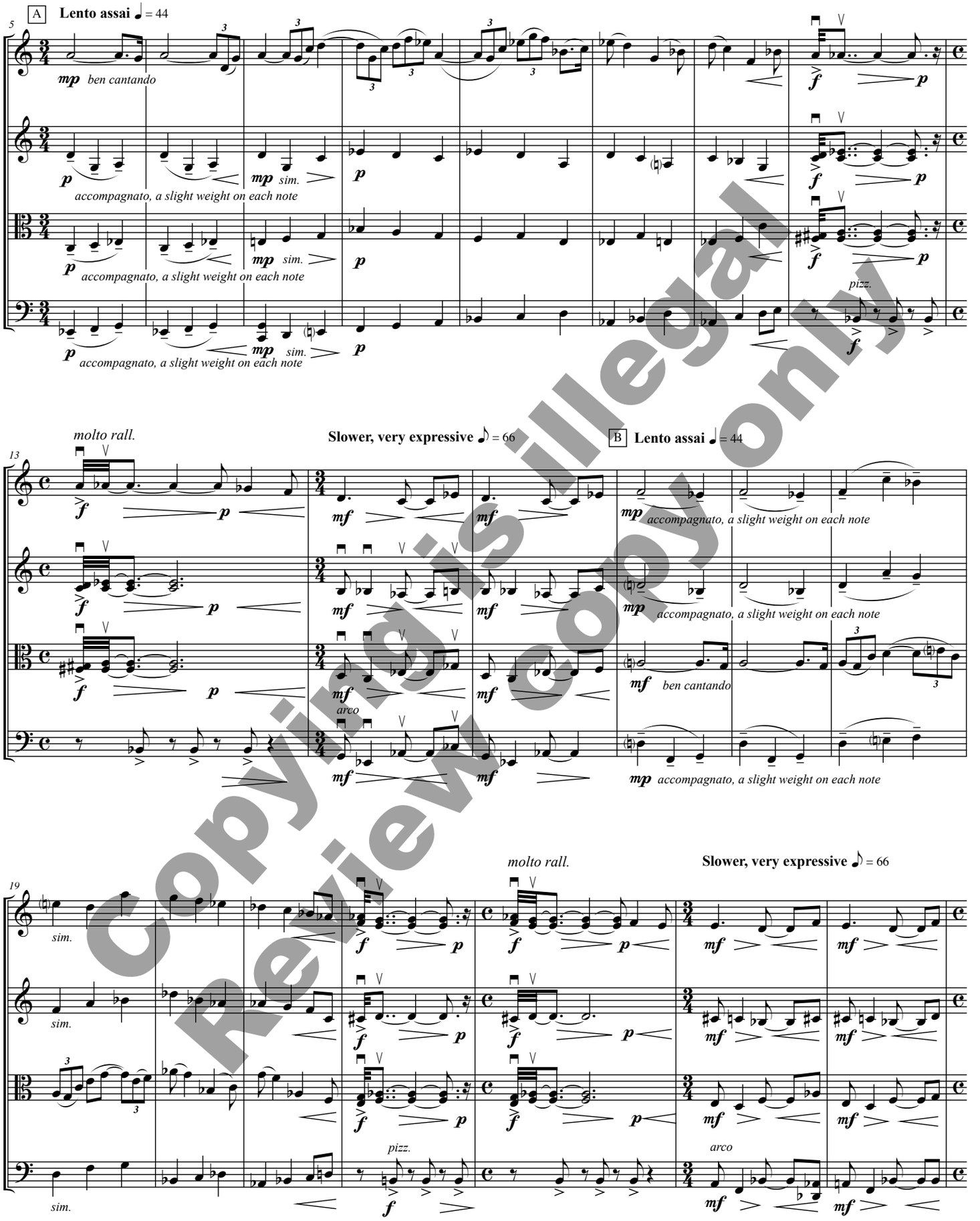

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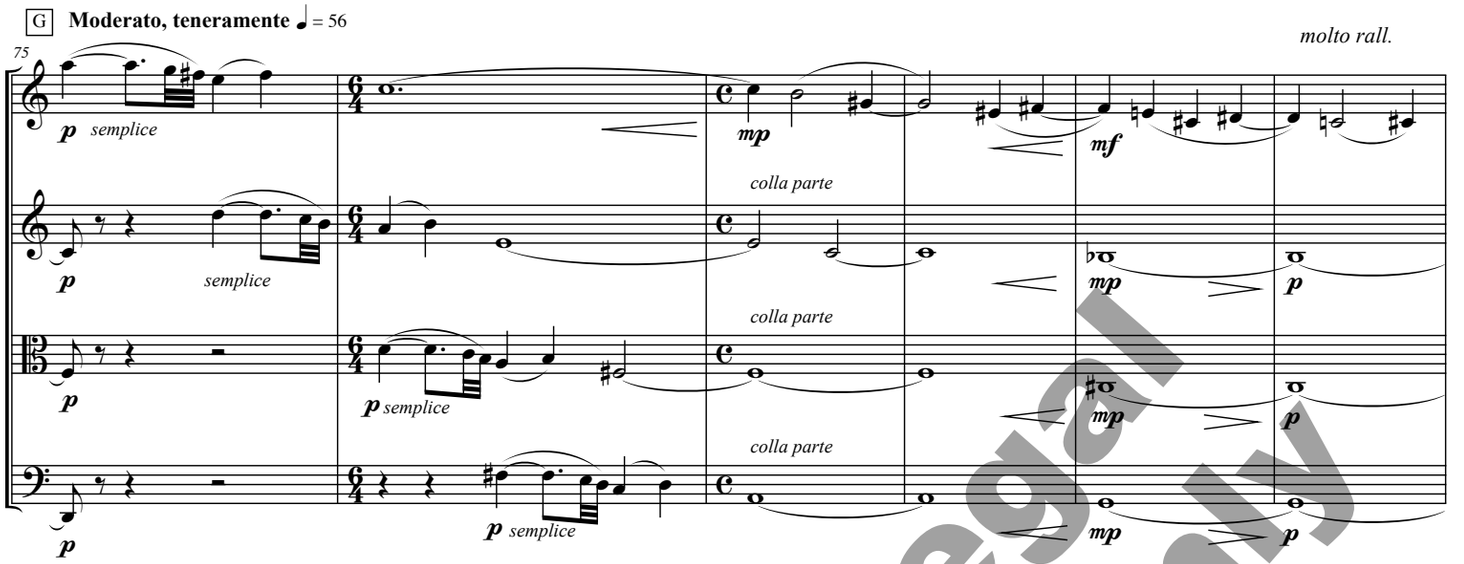

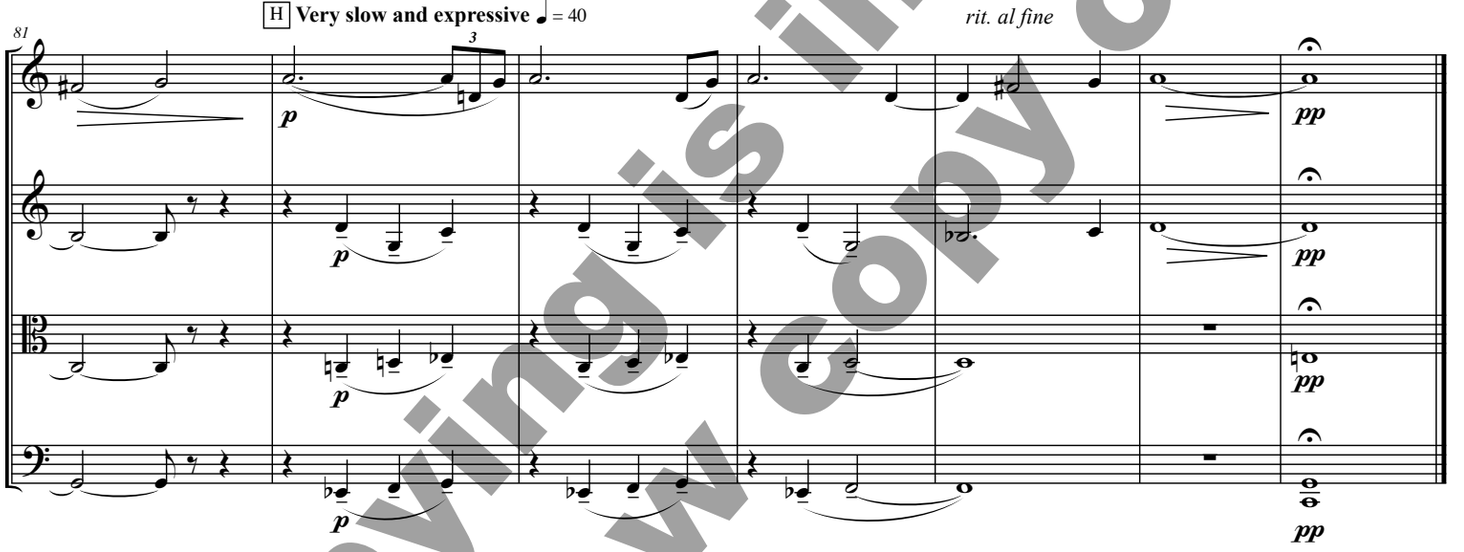

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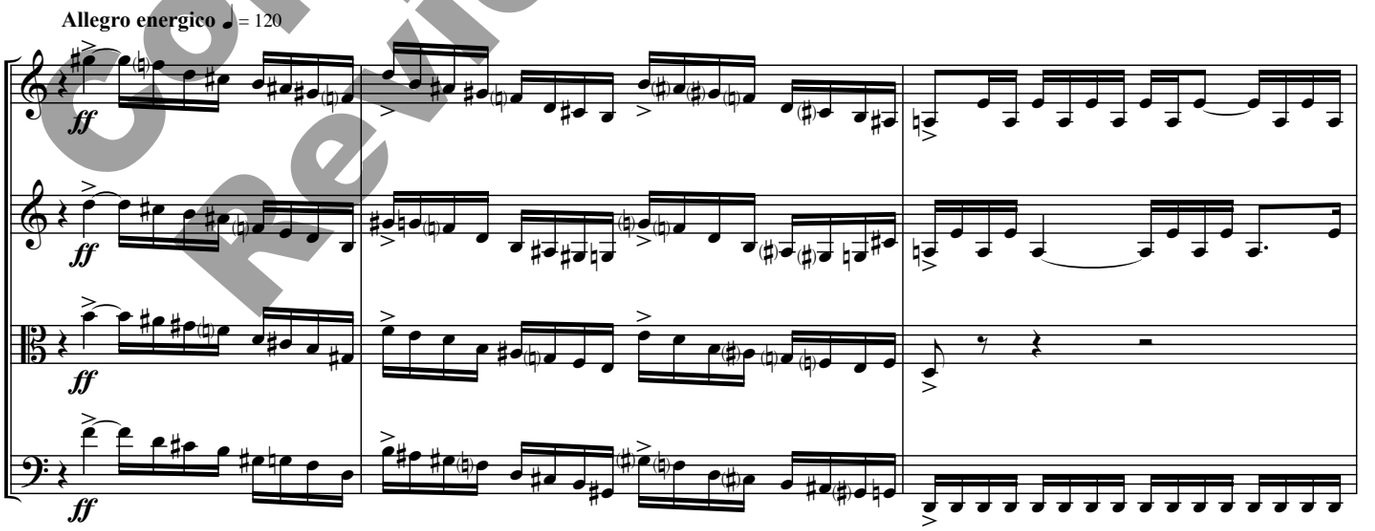

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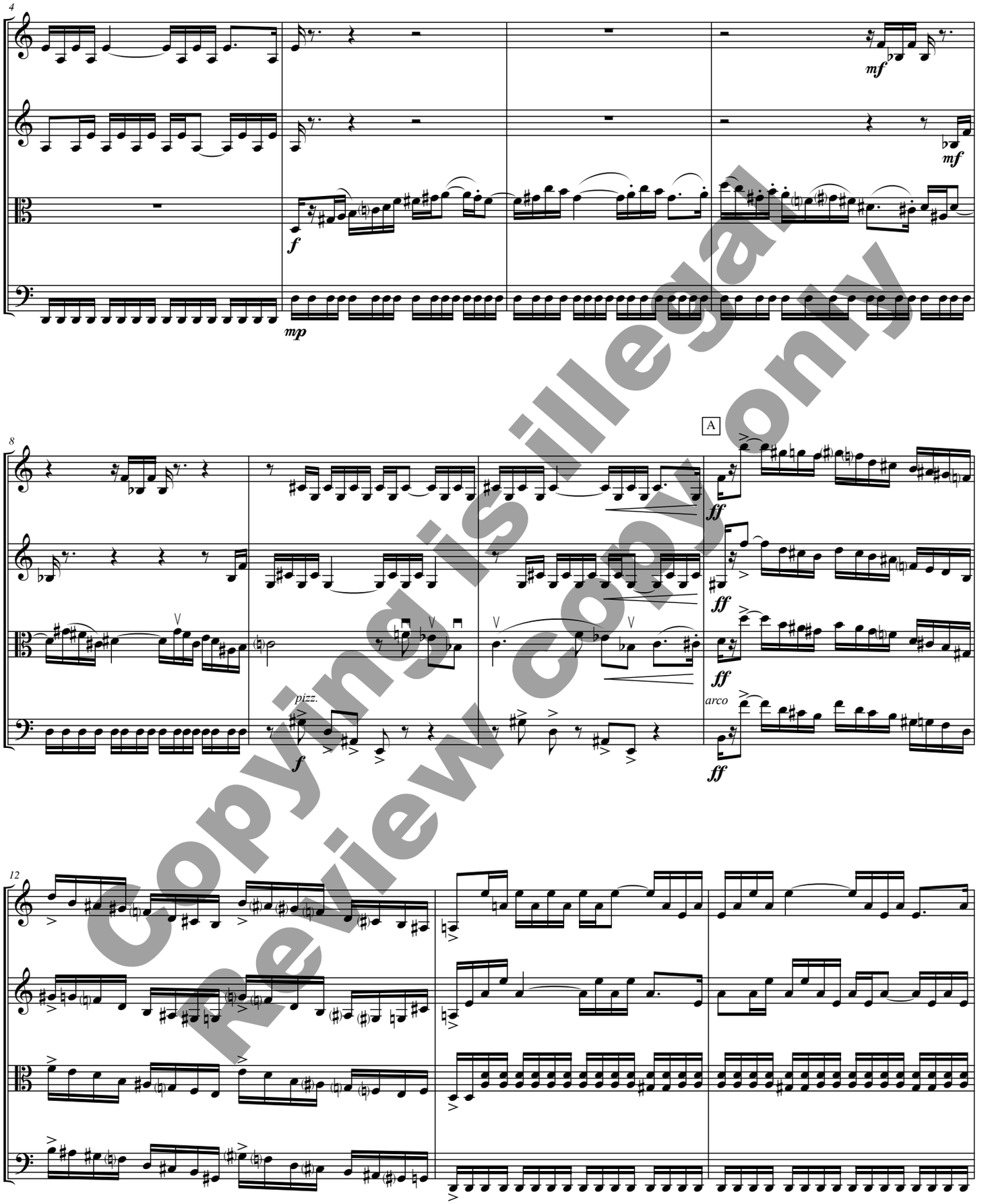

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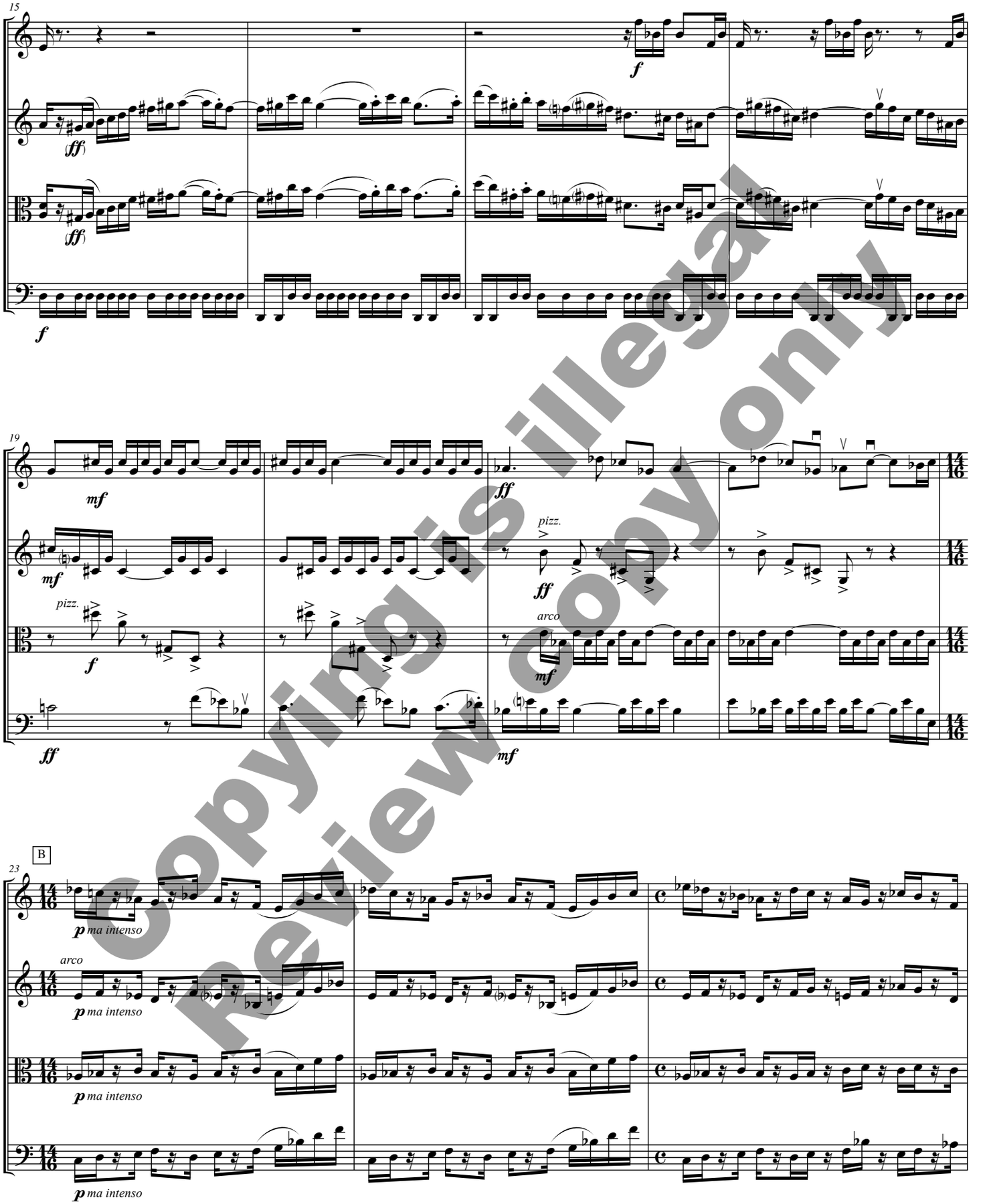

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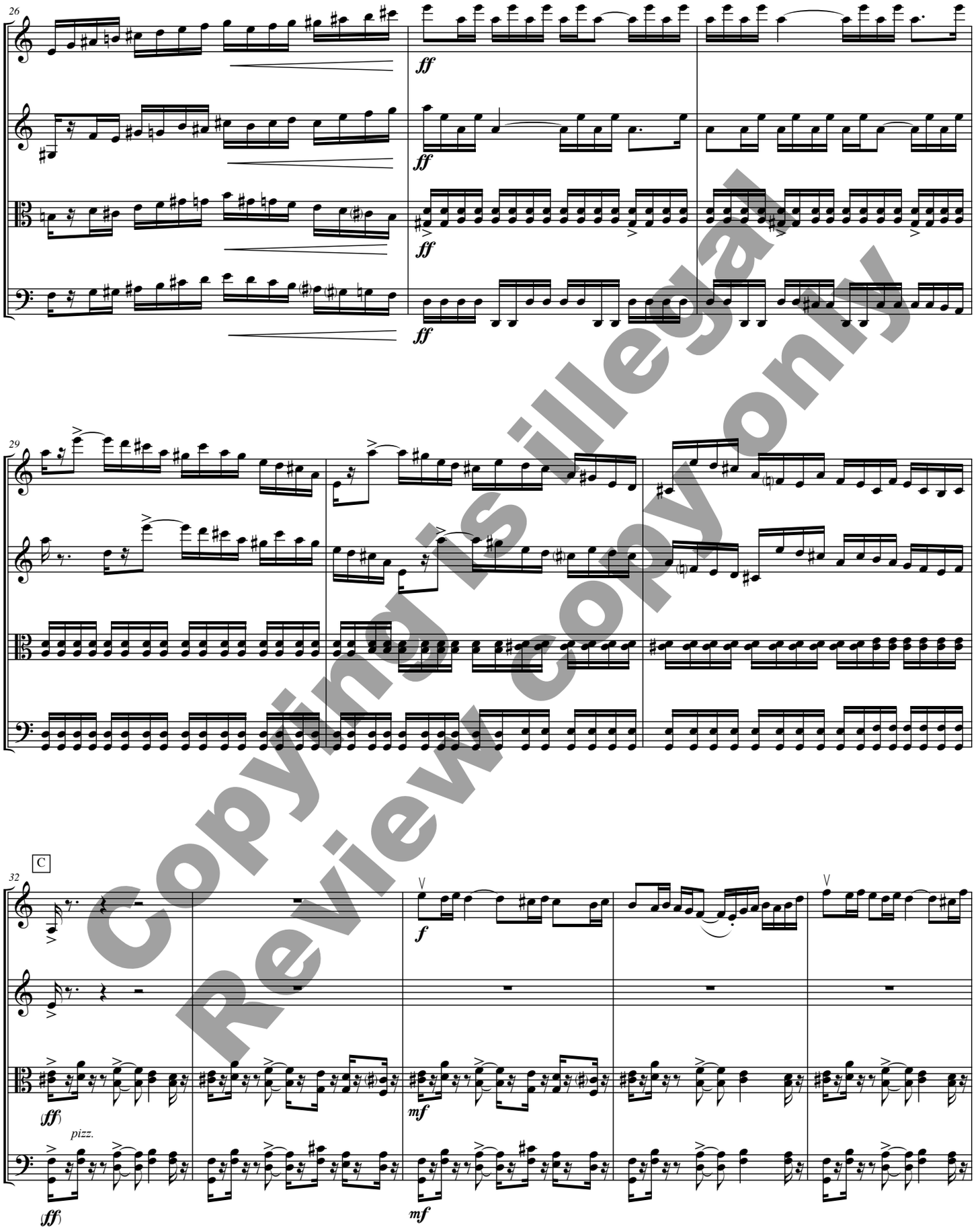

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