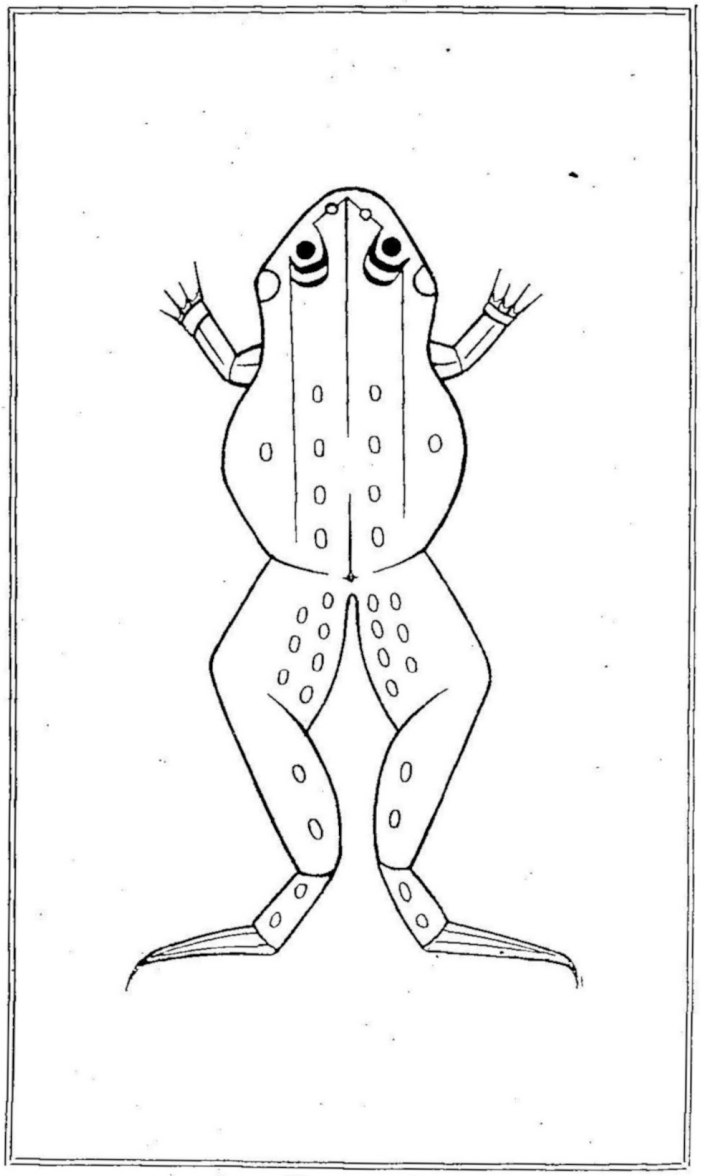
Catalogue de grenouilles (Catalogue of Frogs)



Grenouille vue en dessus.

Andrew Hugill

About

Catalogue de grenouilles (Catalogue of Frogs) was composed in 1987 for massed frog recordings and the ensemble 'George W. Welch'. Since then, it has been performed, broadcast and recorded many times around the world. Some of the most memorable performances have taken place in unusual locations such as halfway up a mountain in a winery near Xi'an, China, or in a bandstand in a park in central Lunel, France.

The piece is inspired by the writings of Jean-Pierre Brisset (1837-1919), a philologist and railway official, who theorised that Man is descended from the Frog and proved his ideas through incredible networks of puns in French. The title is a nod to Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, but my piece behaves rather differently, using actual recordings of frogs rather than imitations on instruments (although there are some imitations in there too). The way the piece works is that the many recorded frog calls are scattered throughout the auditorium. The human musicians play material that becomes similar to the frog sounds, in ways that make it difficult sometimes to work out who is making which noise: human or frog. The piano binds it all together.

Catalogue de grenouilles is not an attempt to create an "immersive soundscape" in the manner of an electroacoustic evocation of frogs in and around a lake. Rather it is a herpetological surrealist opera that collages together frogs from around the world, recorded at different times of the year and under varying circumstances. The very roughness of some of the recordings used in early performances was part of the purpose of the piece. Disjunction created by tape players stopping and starting emphasized the collage. As Ian Gardiner put it in an email to me in 2025: "*Catalogue de grenouilles* is a piece before its time. Having stood through two hours of 'installation' pieces at the Science Museum recently that used a huge ensemble and tons of gear, I thought of the Catalogue as a model of the simple collage of layers and pragmatic solutions to sound diffusion".

Over the years, the way the piece is realised has changed with developments in technology. In the earliest performances, all the frogs were on cassette. The background tapes played continuously and were placed in a ring around the auditorium. The middle-ground tapes were loops of varying lengths and with random amounts of silence interspersing the frog calls. These were placed in amongst the audience, for example under people's seats. The foreground or "diva" tape was a collection of solo calls that were operated by a roving performer (often myself) who wandered around the space, switching the cassette player on and off at will. In more recent years, the cassette tapes have been replaced by digital devices. People's phones have been used to create an element of audience participation. Various fixed set-ups have also been used. Creative solutions are encouraged.

The music includes several elements that have Brissetian reasons for being included. The piano part is built on a repeating bass motif that is taken from the opening of "Uranus" from Holst's orchestral suite *The Planets*. This is because Brisset remarks that frogs urinate through their anus (ure anus) which gives rise to the name of the father of the Gods: Uranus. The percussion team plays a rhythmical pattern of frog calls from Samuel Beckett's novel *Watt*, whose title evokes Brisset's assertion that the first word spoken by our frog ancestors was "quoi?" (what?). The string parts include a short quotation from John White's piece *Wut*, which he had composed for George W. Welch in 1987. That title also evokes the "what?" sound.

There were more like this - I can't remember the origin of every single musical element now, but I am sure they all had similar reasons for being included. The piano part is somewhat modelled on Satie and Debussy, although there is no direct quotation, but it does progress towards a simplified statement via chains of ascending chords made up largely of fourths.

I learned a valuable lesson during the composition of *Catalogue de grenouilles*. My first challenge was to gather many recordings of frog calls. This was during the days before the internet, so this was not as easy as you might think, because there were relatively few publicly available frog calls to be found. So, I started writing to herpetologists and one day ended up on the phone to the late great Professor Murray Littlejohn in Australia. He was very helpful and said: "I know someone in the UK who has a great collection you could probably use. His name is Dr Rob Oldham". "Where does he work?" I asked. "Leicester Polytechnic" came the reply. That was where I worked at the time! It turned out that he occupied an office at the end of my corridor on Scraptoft Campus. He was extremely generous and provided me with armfuls of his field recordings of frog calls. This experience taught me that often the richest potential for transdisciplinary collaboration is right under your nose. What you need is the openness to embrace it when it appears.

Performance Instructions

A performance of *Catalogue de grenouilles* may last any length of time. Most performances, however, have had a duration of between 13 and 15 minutes.

The most stripped-down version of the piece comprises frog recordings and solo piano. The other ensemble material provided here is therefore all optional. It is scored for the George W. Welch line-up, but other instruments could be used. For example, one performance that used piano and a wandering trombone was very successful. It is up to the performers to redistribute or rescore the materials as they wish. There is no limit to the number of players who could be involved.

Any frog recordings may be used. The frog recordings are categorised into three types:

- Background Frogs are distant recordings of groups of frogs or frog chouses. These provide general ambience and should play throughout the performance, being the first things to heard and fading out slowly at the end. In a live performance, these are best played back through fixed loudspeakers that encircle the audience.
- Middleground Frogs are shorter recordings of pairs or small groups of frogs. Each set of calls should be separated by silences of randomly varying durations. Calls may be repeated, but the idea is to keep an element of surprise. These recordings should be scattered around the auditorium, for example under people's seats or triggered by people who are planted in the audience.
- Foreground or "Diva" Frogs. This is a sequence of loud, prominent solo frogs, generally recorded at close quarters. The diva is operated by a roving musician who triggers short bursts of sound at will, in response to how the music feels. The aim is to show off the range and variety of frog calls, so assembling a fine collection for the Diva is a highly creative part of the preparation for a performance.

The percussion part may be performed by a single player or by a team of three. The pattern may be repeated as many times as desired. It works best if it is performed on groups of similar sounding instruments (for example, three wood blocks, or three guiros, or three cowbells) that have slightly different registers. The percussionist should perform their bursts of material at different locations around the auditorium. They perform at will, but within the timings given by the overall structure of the piece.

The wind/brass players perform the fragments of material in any order and as many times as they wish within the structure. Again, they may move around the auditorium, but it is not essential to do so. The imitations of frogs are particularly useful at key moments in the piece. Players should listen carefully to the sounds the frogs are making.
The string players remain at a single location (usually middle front) throughout the performance and play their fragments in any order and as many times as desired, within the structure of the piece.

The duration of the performance is set by the pianist, who should play through the piano part from beginning to end without stopping, once they have begun. The duration of each chord is a decision for the pianist, so the piece could last a very long time, depending on how the instruction "slow" is interpreted. The piano may be located anywhere in the auditorium. It is not essential that it is seen by the audience.

The general atmosphere of a performance is restrained and reflective, even a little sad. It is often assumed that frogs are comical creatures, but there should be no attempt to makes this into a comical piece.

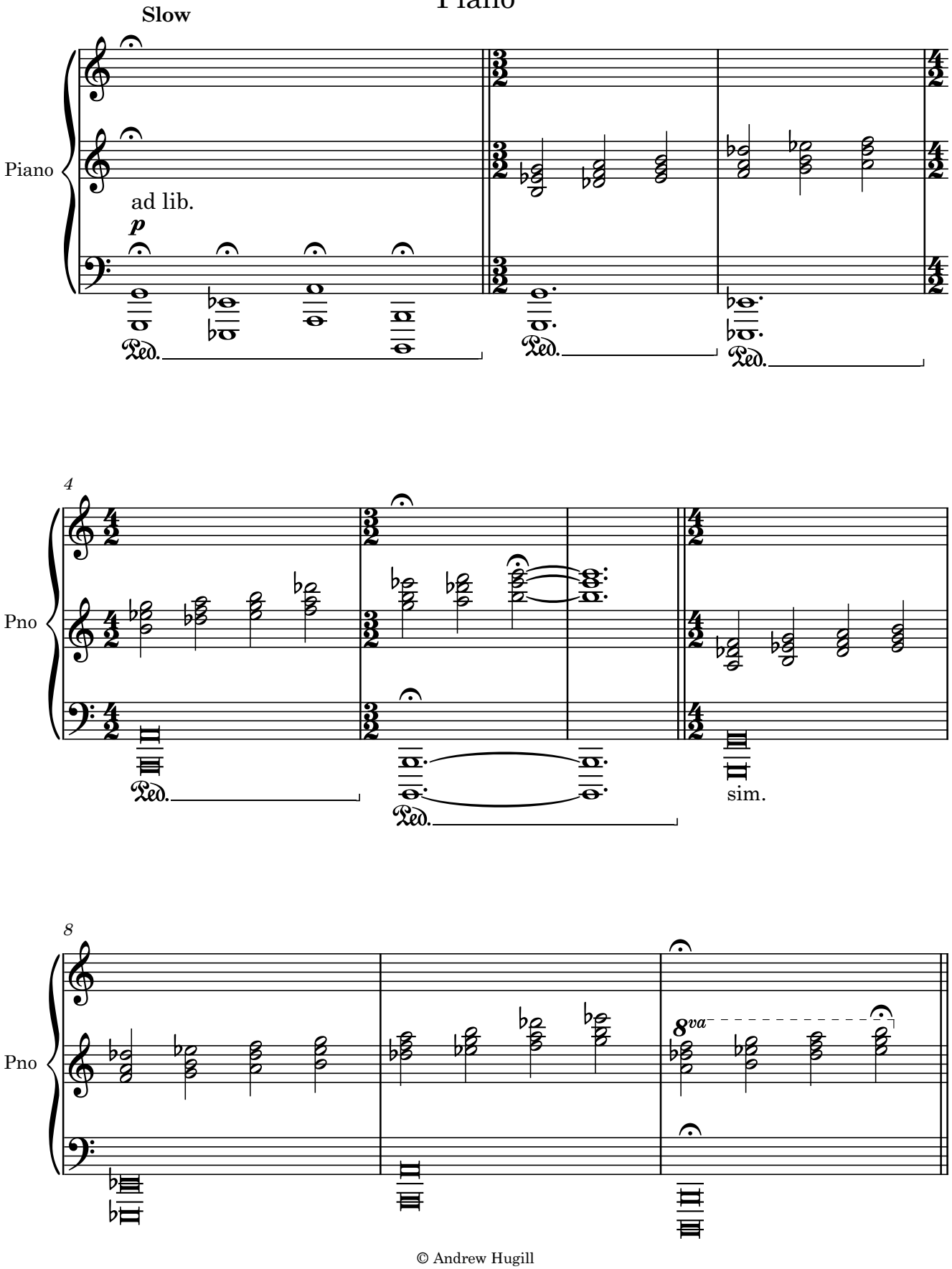
Structure

1. The Background Frogs slowly fade in, creating an atmosphere.
2. After a suitable period of time, during which the ambience should become well established, the Middeground Frogs may begin.
3. Once the effect of the Middlegroud Frogs has been sufficiently felt, the Piano starts to work through its material from beginning to end, at a chosen speed.
4. After the piano has started its journey, the Diva Frogs may begin to sing, treating the piano as a kind of accompaniment.
5. Once the Diva Frogs have begun, the Ensemble may perform their material. The idea is to reach a peak of activity somewhere around the middle of the performance.
6. The Ensemble and Diva will come to an end either shortly before or shortly after the Piano completes its material. There's no need to try to synchronise these endings.
7. Once the Piano has finished, the Middleground Frogs are slowly stopped.
8. Finally, the Background Frogs slowly fade away to nothing.

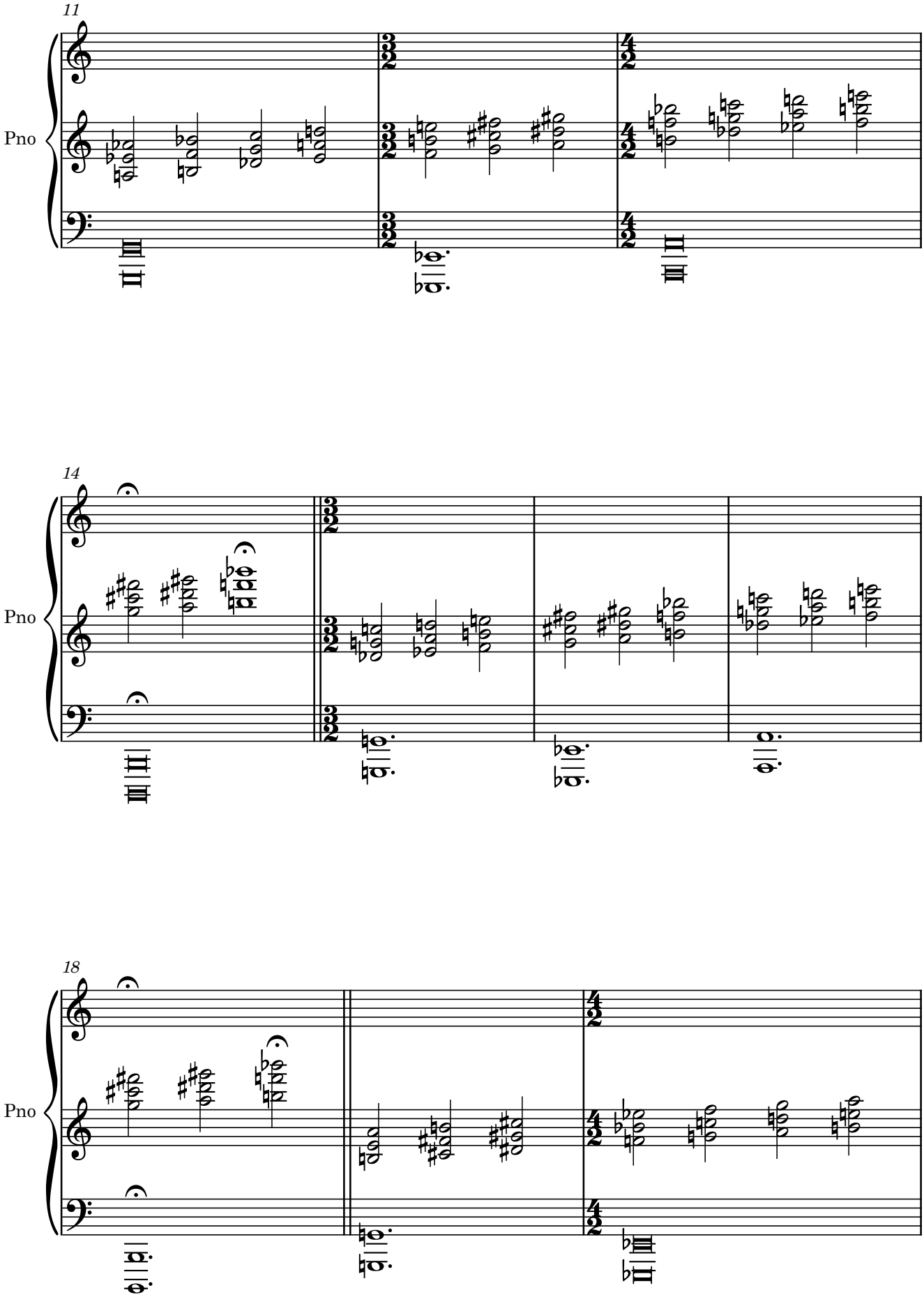
Catalogue de grenouilles
(Catalogue of Frogs)

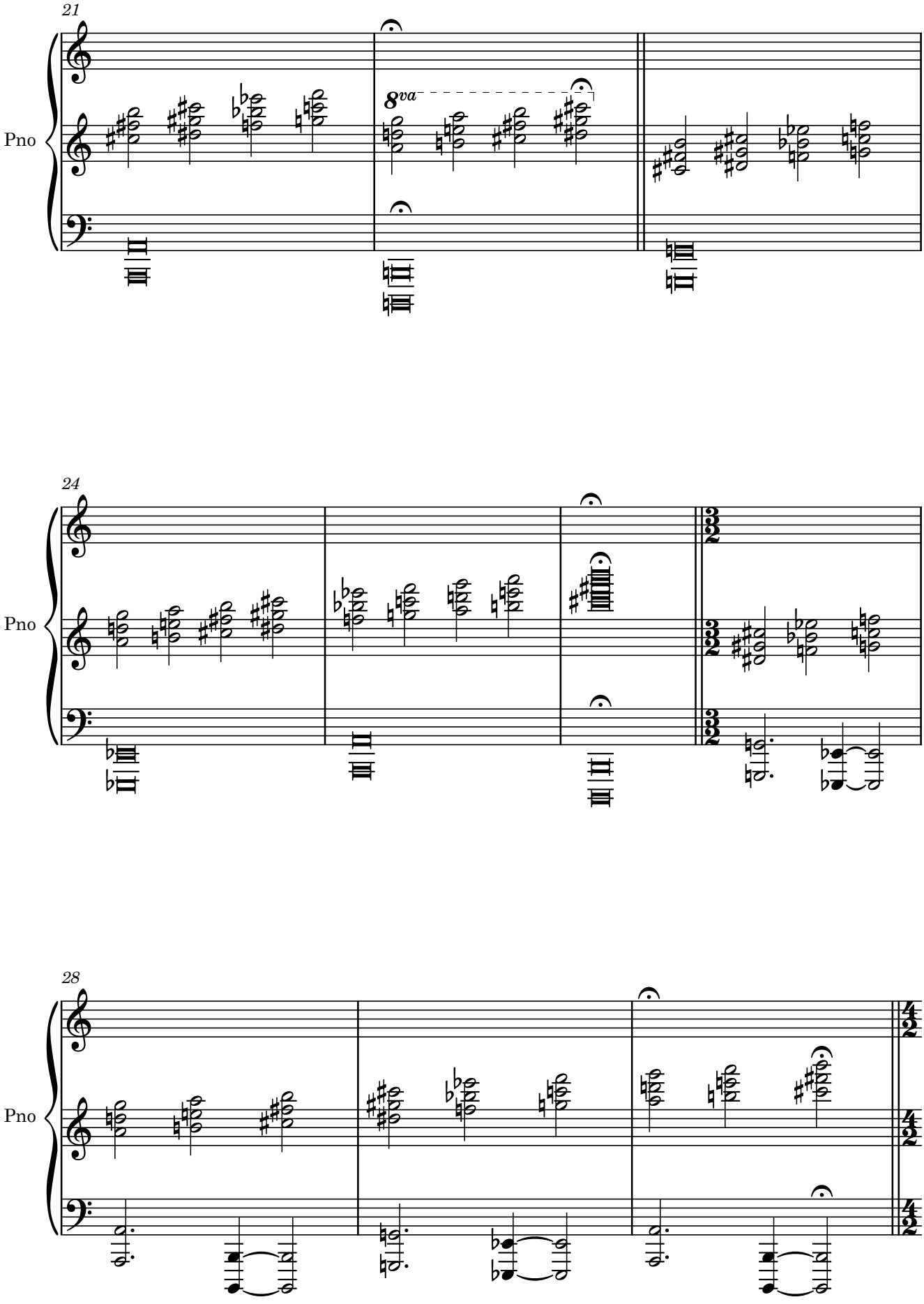
Andrew Hugill

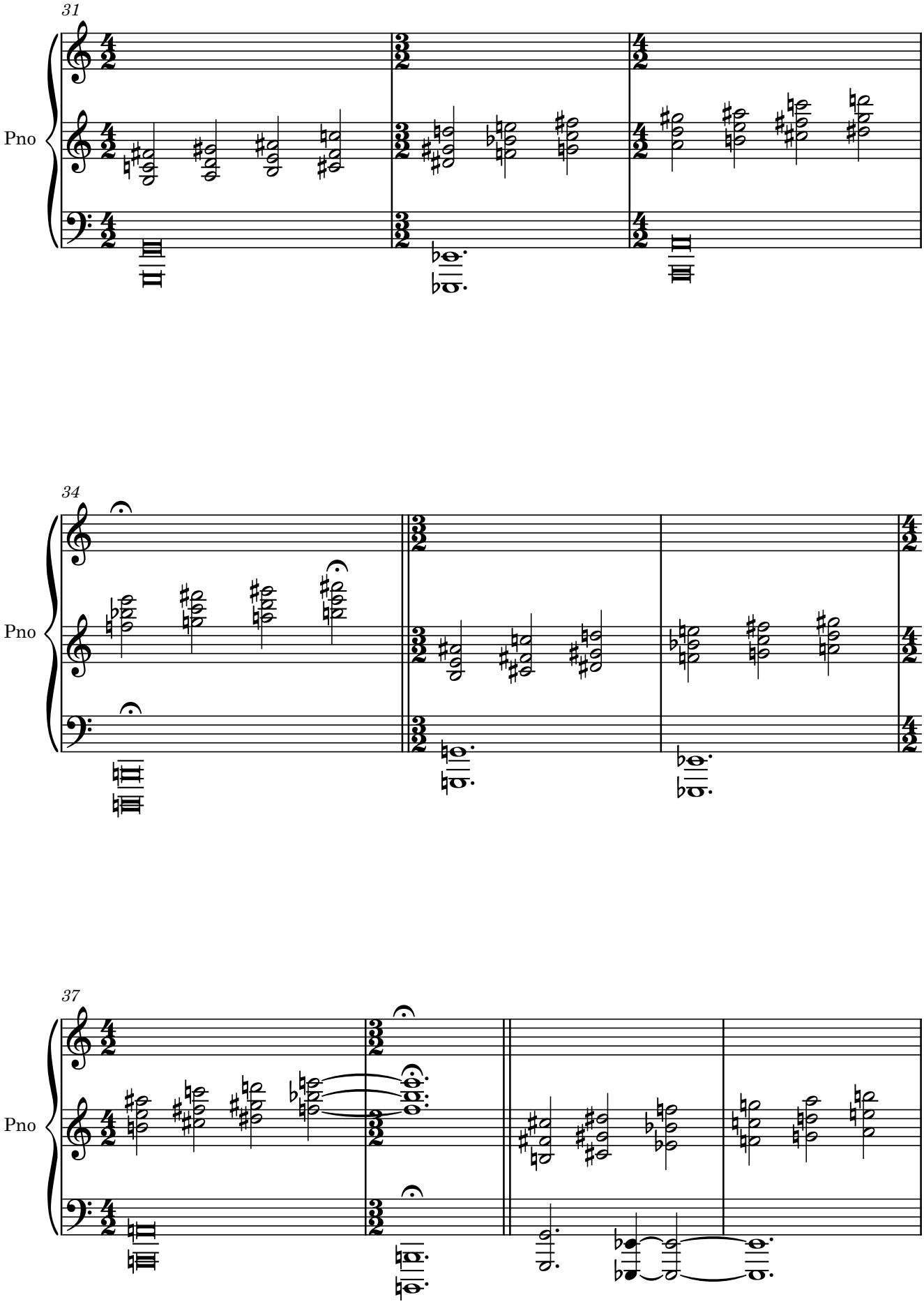
Piano

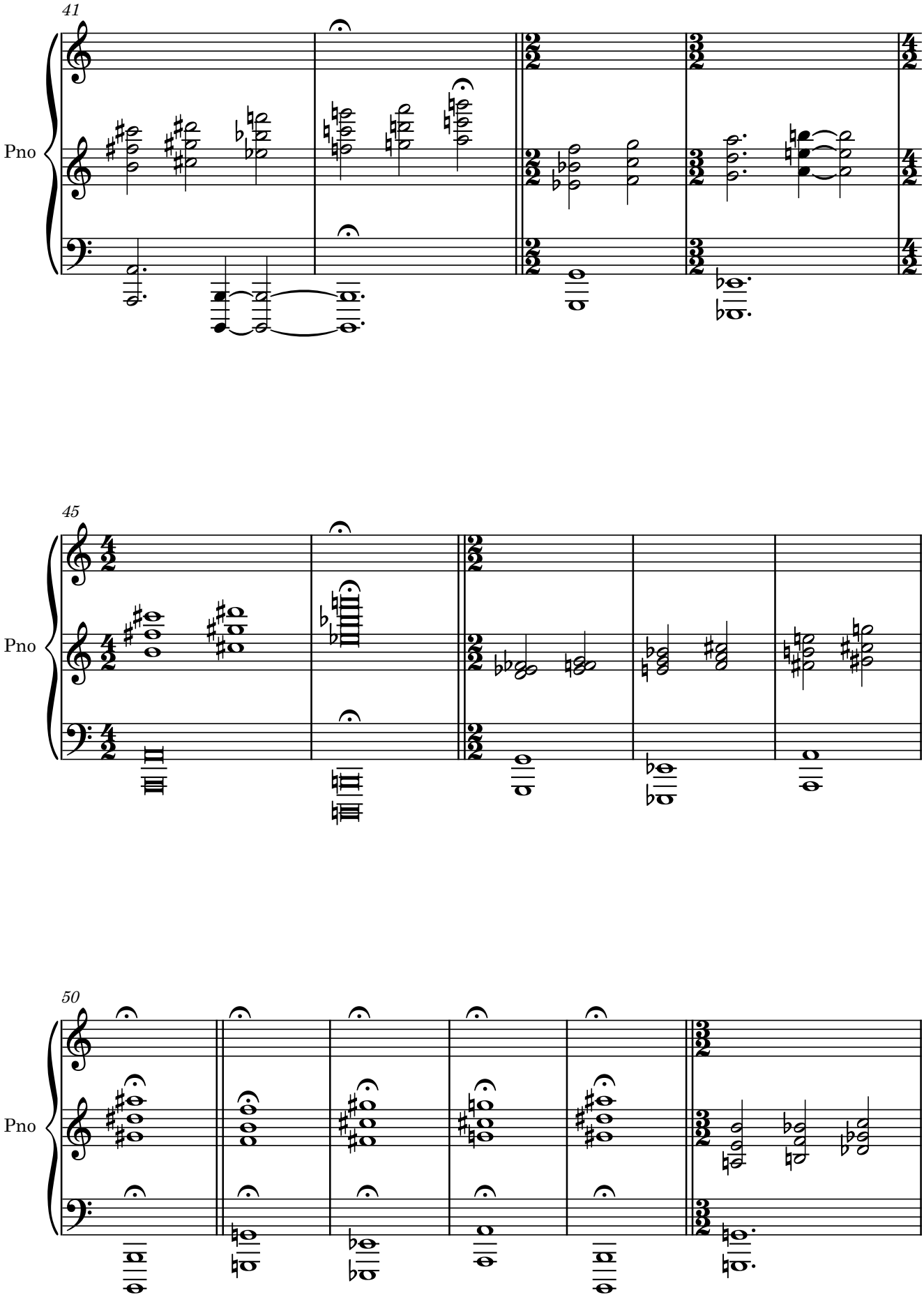


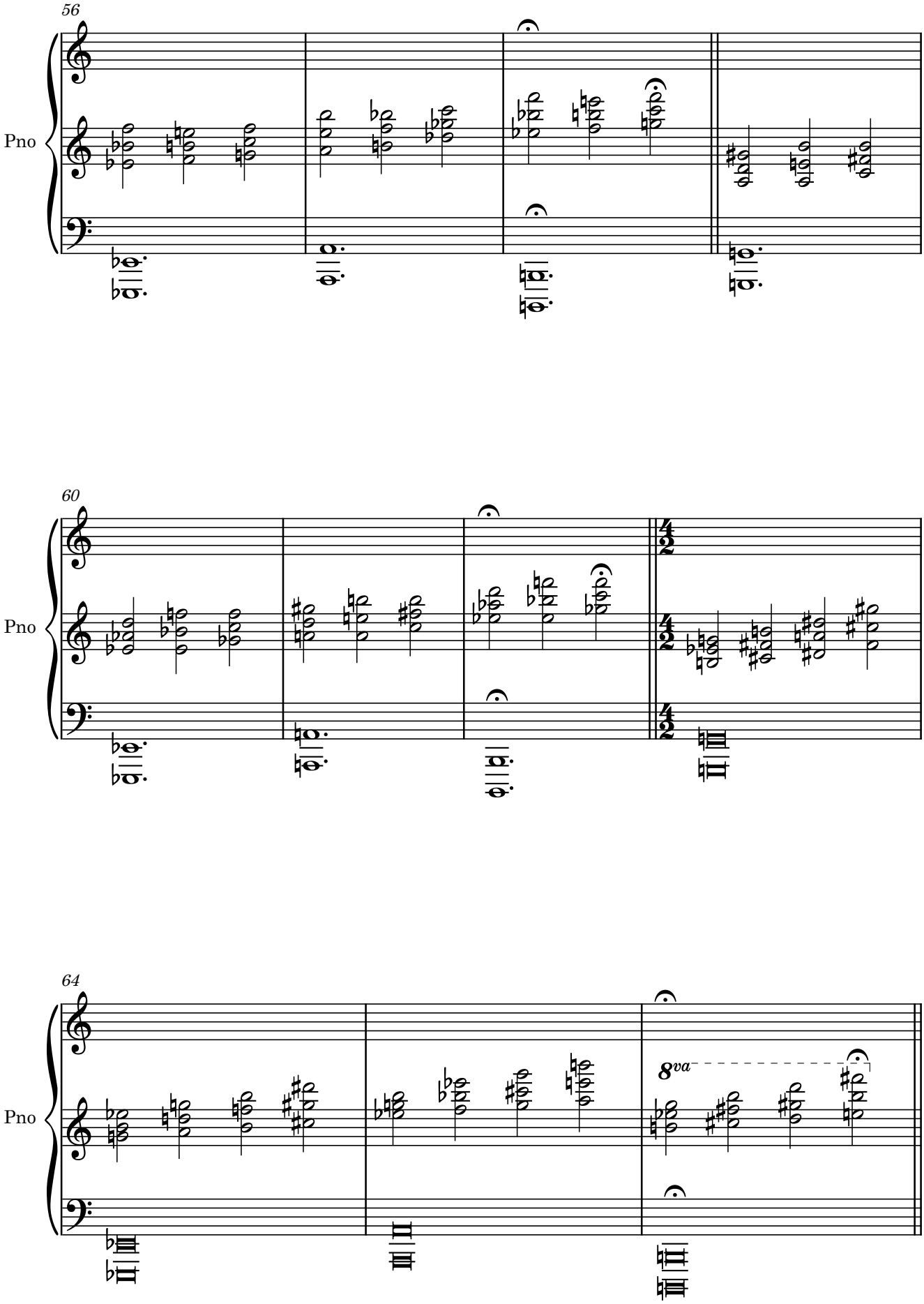
© Andrew Hugill

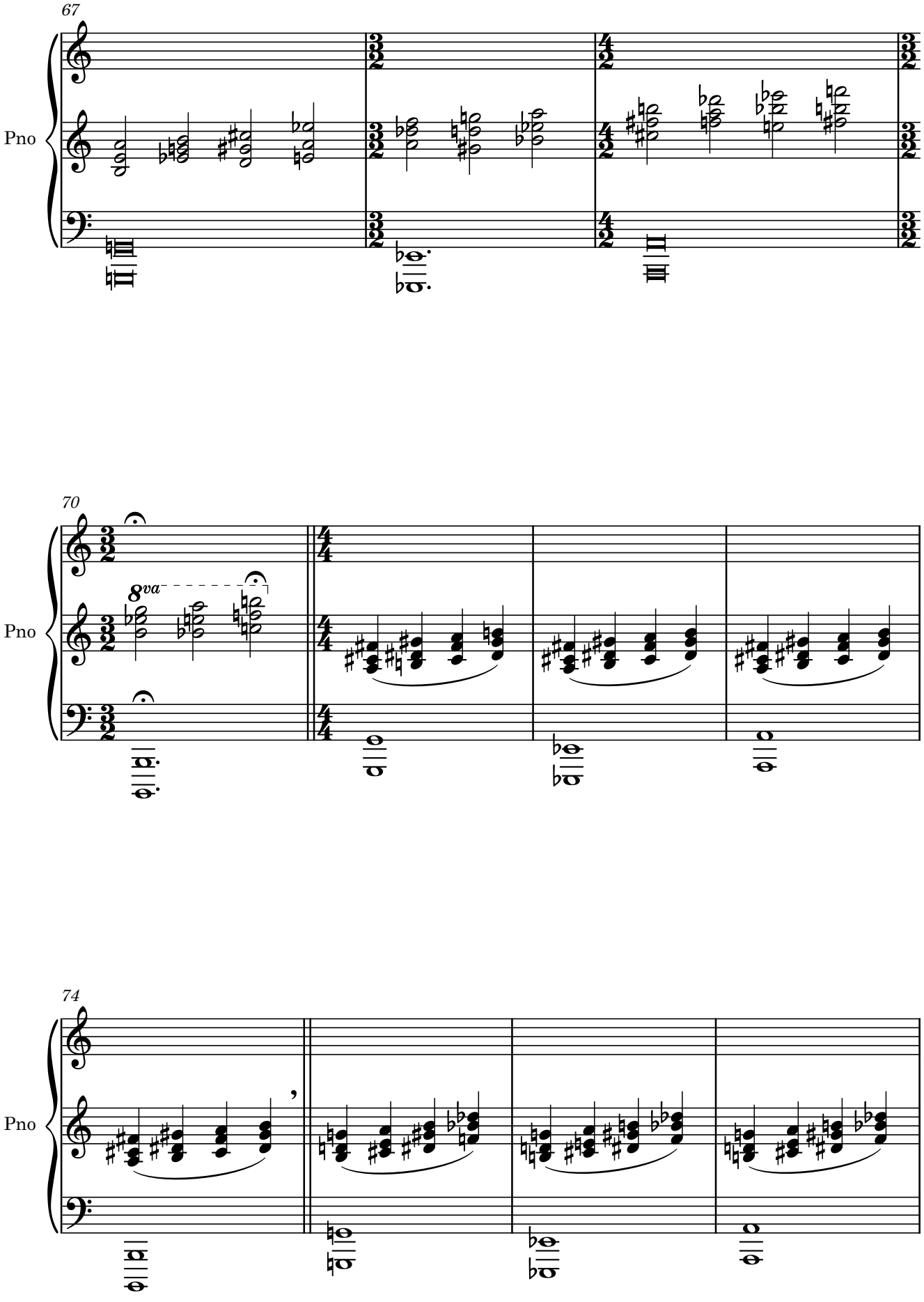

11
Pno
14
Pno
18
Pno

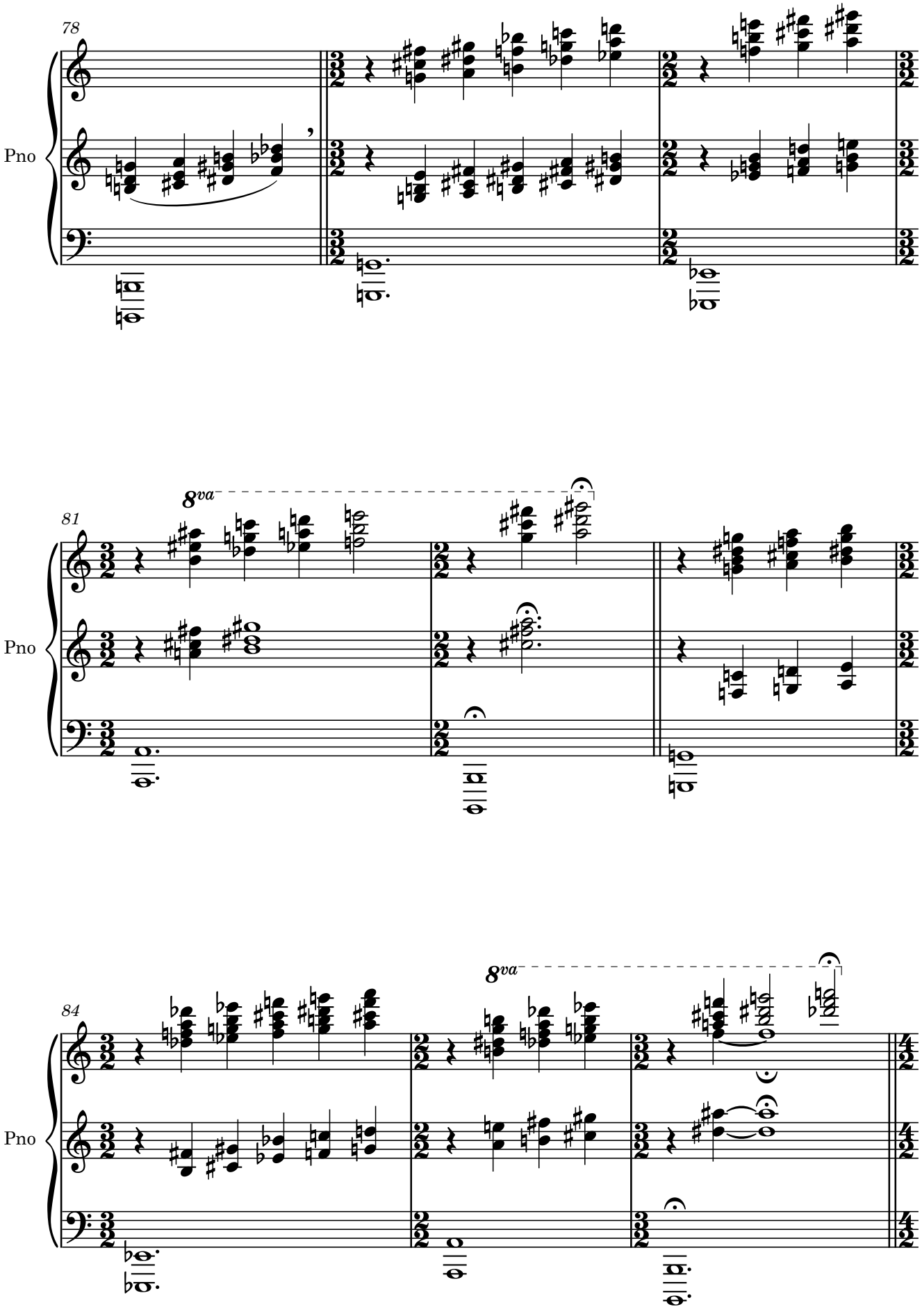

21
Pno
8va
24
Pno
28
Pno

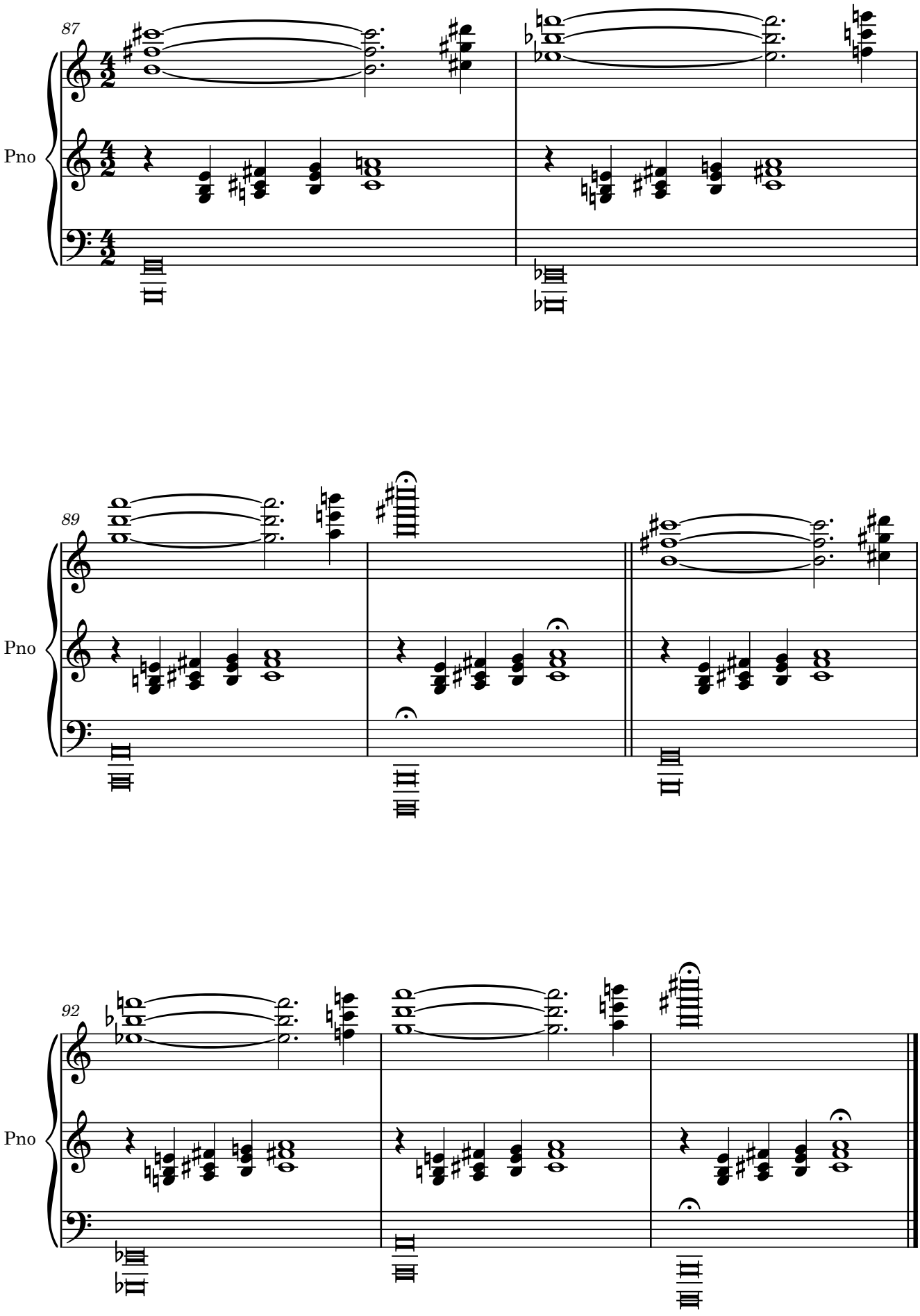

31
Pno
34
Pno
37
Pno

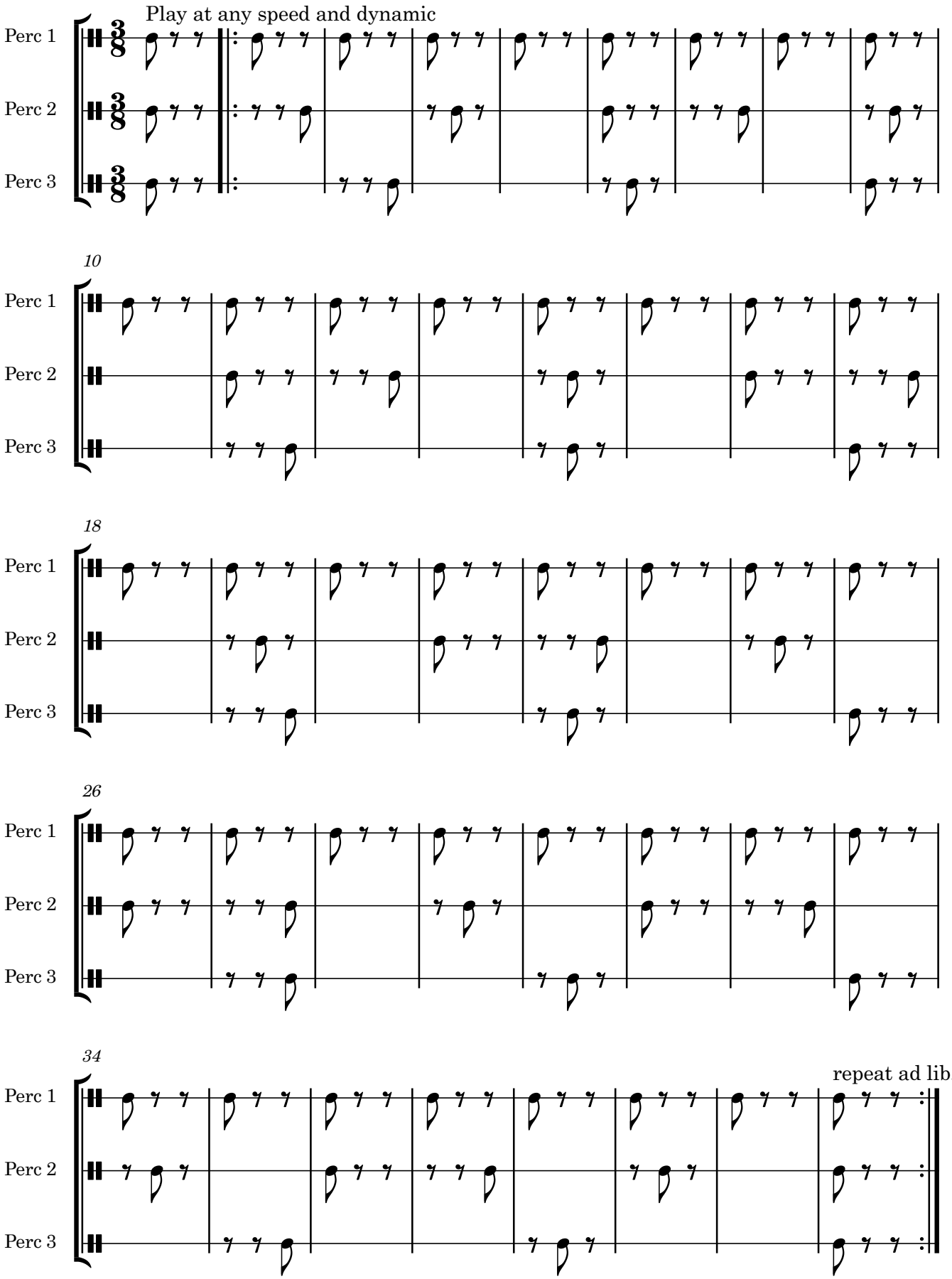

41
Pno
45
Pno
50
Pno


56
Pno
60
Pno
64
Pno
8va


67
Pno
70
Pno
8va
74
Pno


78
Pno
81
8va
Pno
84
8va
Pno


87
Pno
89
Pno
92
Pno

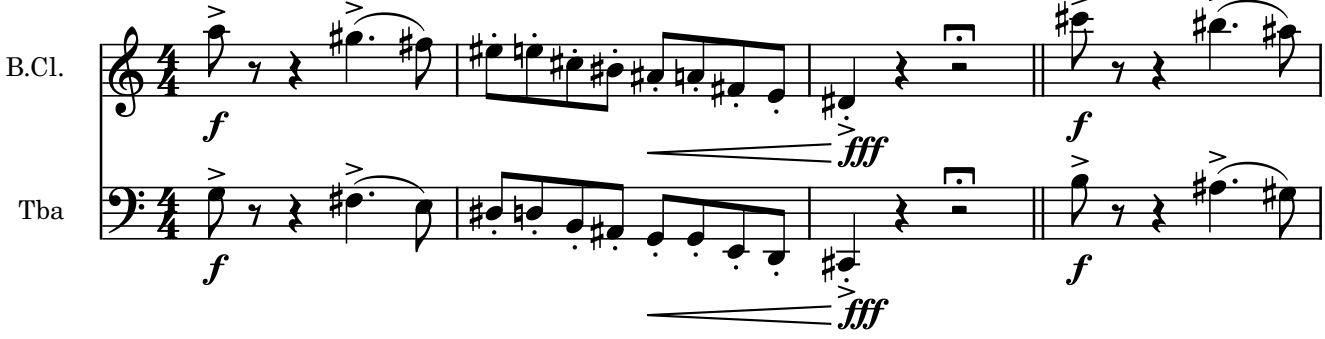

Play at any speed and dynamic
Perc 1
Perc 2
Perc 3
10
18
26
34
repeat ad lib.

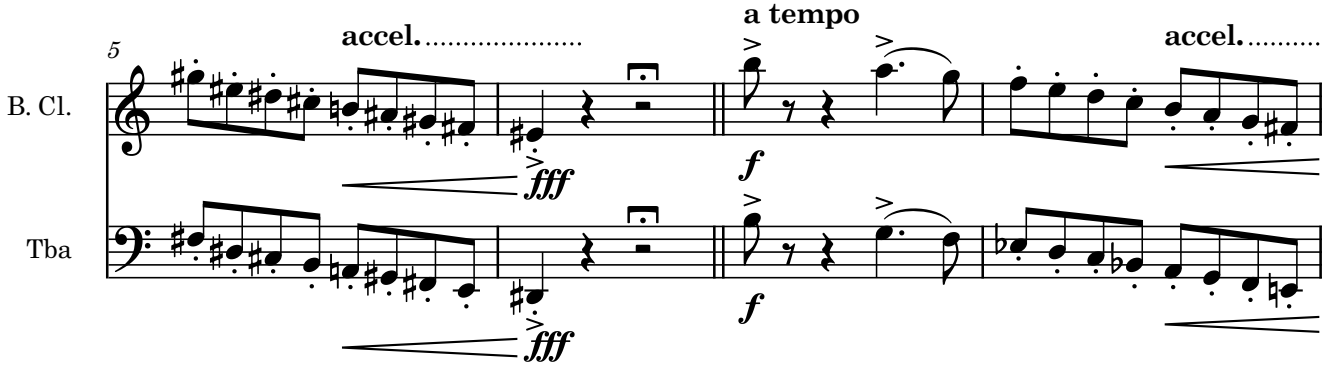
1 ♩ = 90

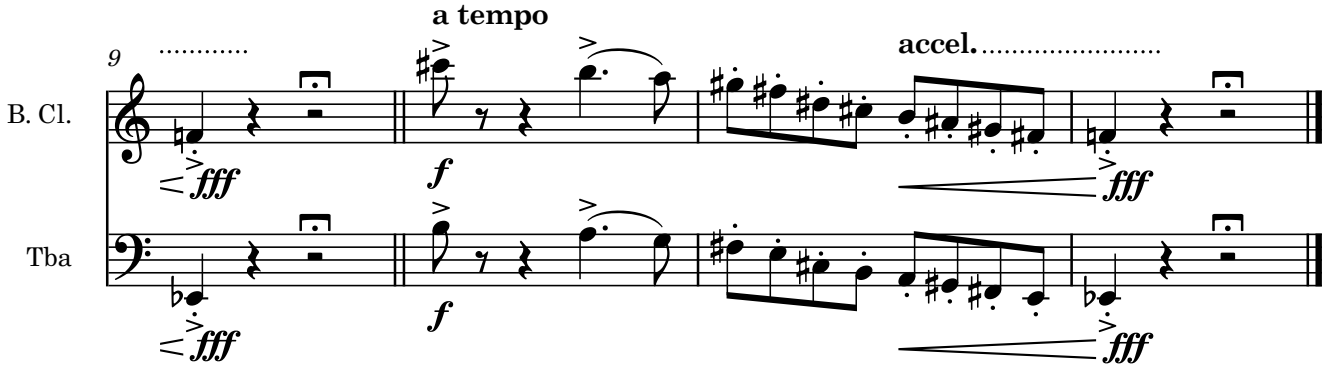
accel......

Play these scales in any order and any number of times

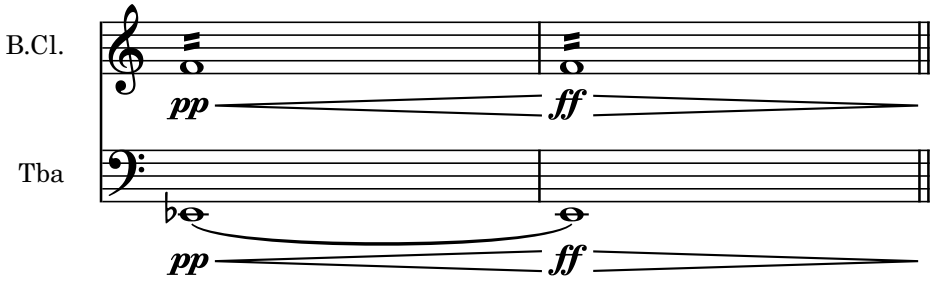
a tempo



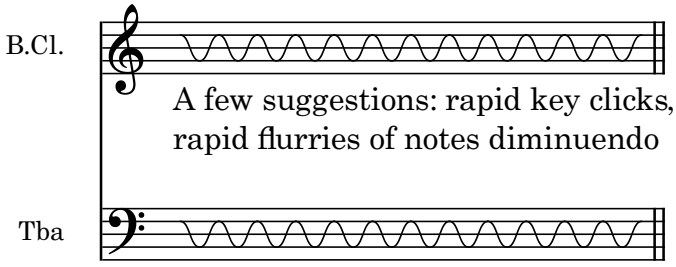




2 Repeat as often as you wish



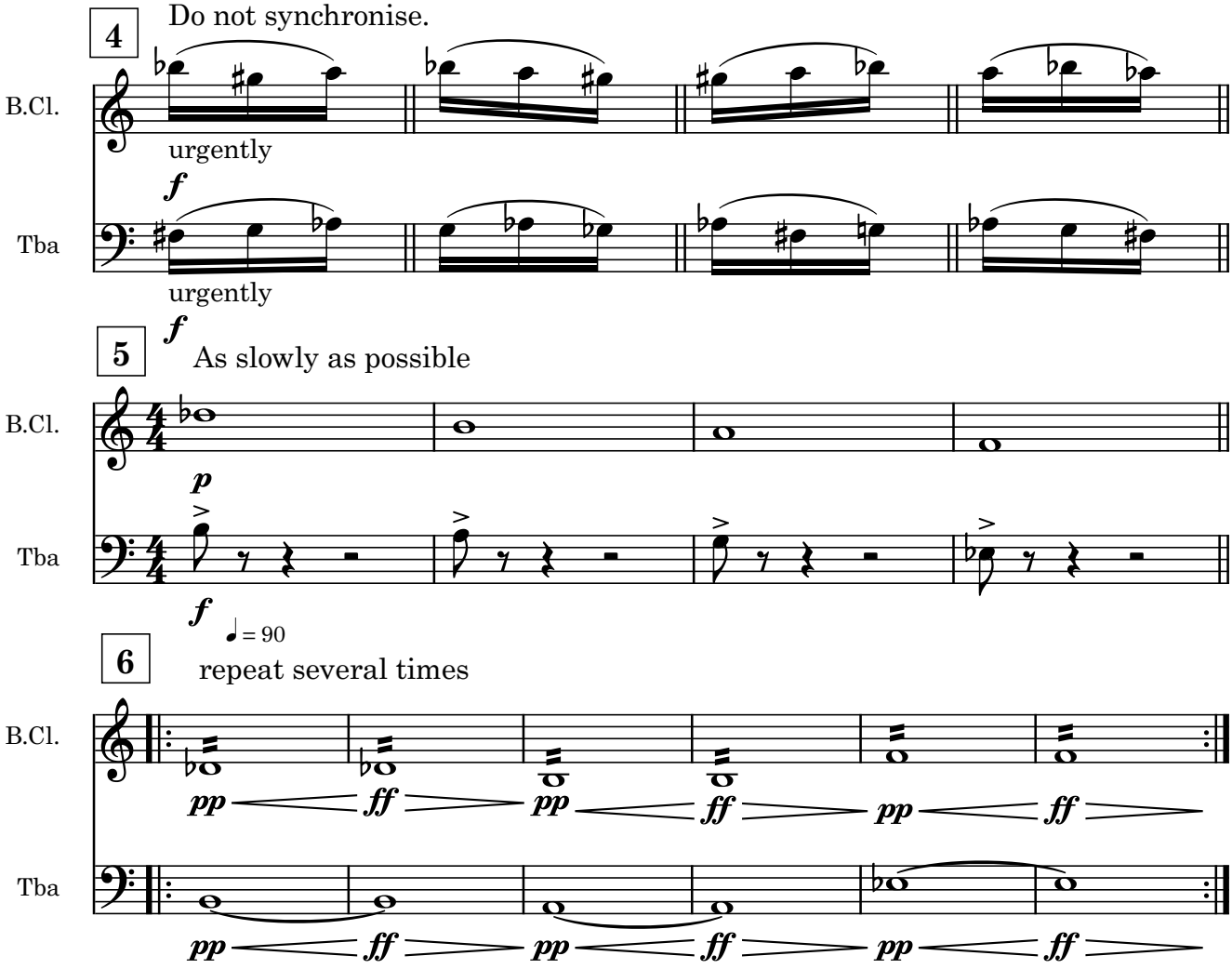
3 Imitate frog sounds



A few suggestions: rapid key clicks, high "cries", rapid flurries of notes diminuendo

A few suggestions: 'pop' by removing tubing, low 'grunts', spasmodic high two or three note repetitions.

Play these "cries" as quickly as possible. Repeat freely.
Do not synchronise.



7

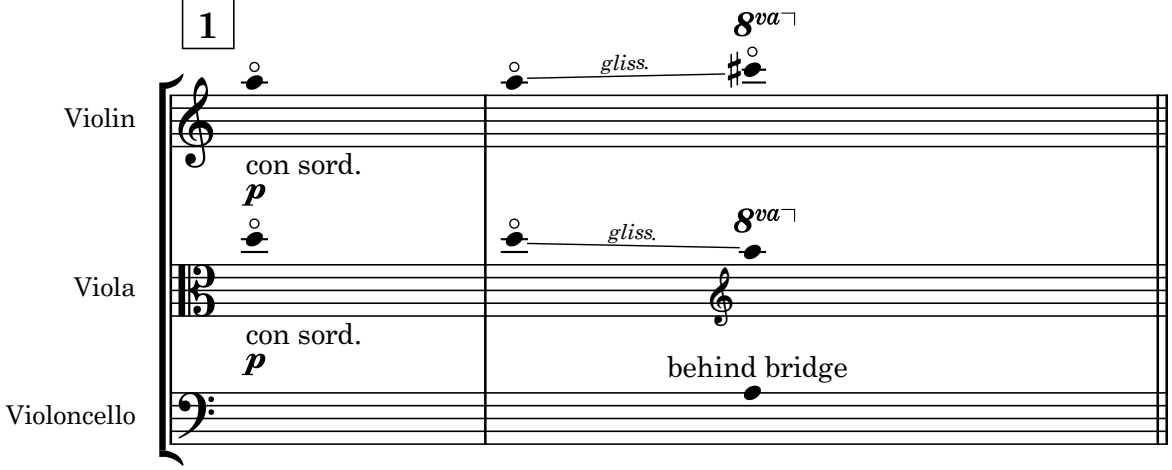
Imitate frog calls at any time and for as long as wished.
These frog calls should contain an irregular number of reptitions
borken by irregular length silences. All the calls should have a sense of urgency.

<u>B. Cl.</u>
Rapid tonguing with simultaneous slow ascending glissando.
Imitate 'phasing' on two notes a semitone apart.
High notes rapdily repeated in short bursts.
Key clicks in machine gun bursts.

<u>Tuba</u>
Short, punchy, staccato singl;e notes groupoed in ones, twos or threes.
Single notes steadily repeated with fairly long silences in between. Each note should glissando downwards.
Low throbbing, distant but articulated.

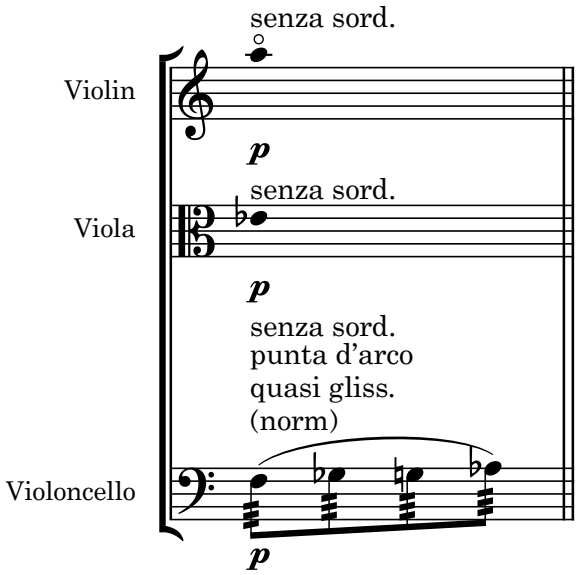
Play these fragements in any order and any number of times.
Double bar = lengthy pause
Open notes last more than 15 seconds
"Black" notes last less than 15 seconds

1

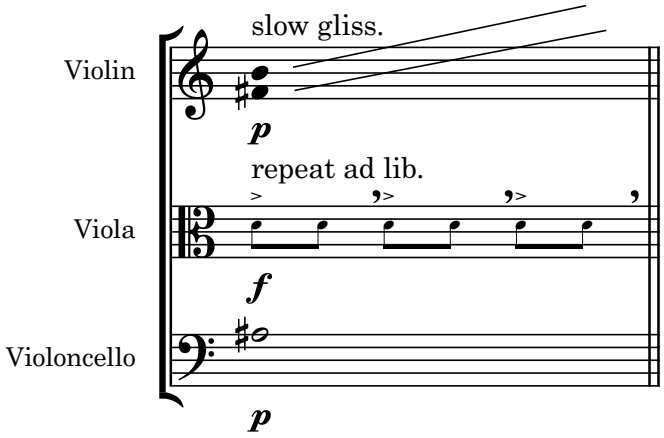


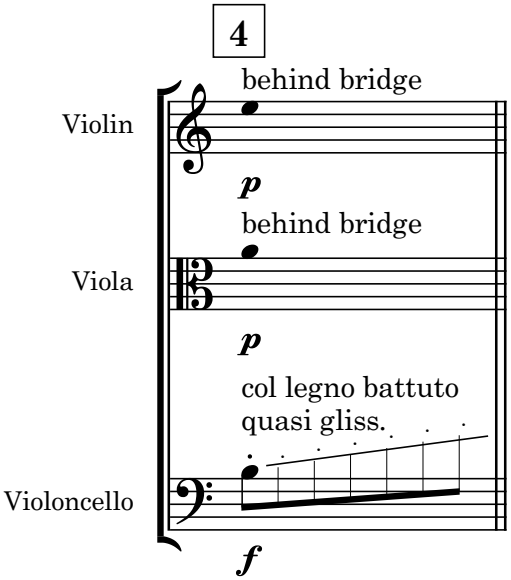
con sord. *p*

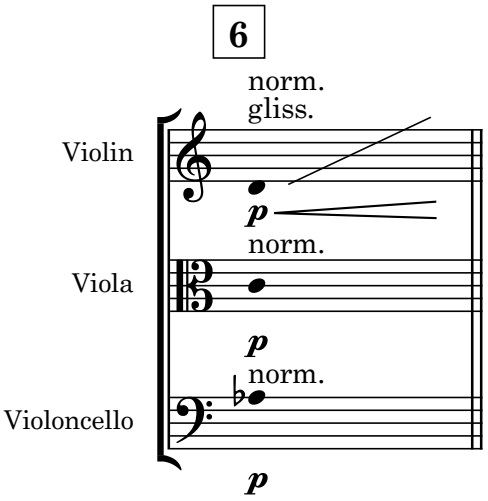
2

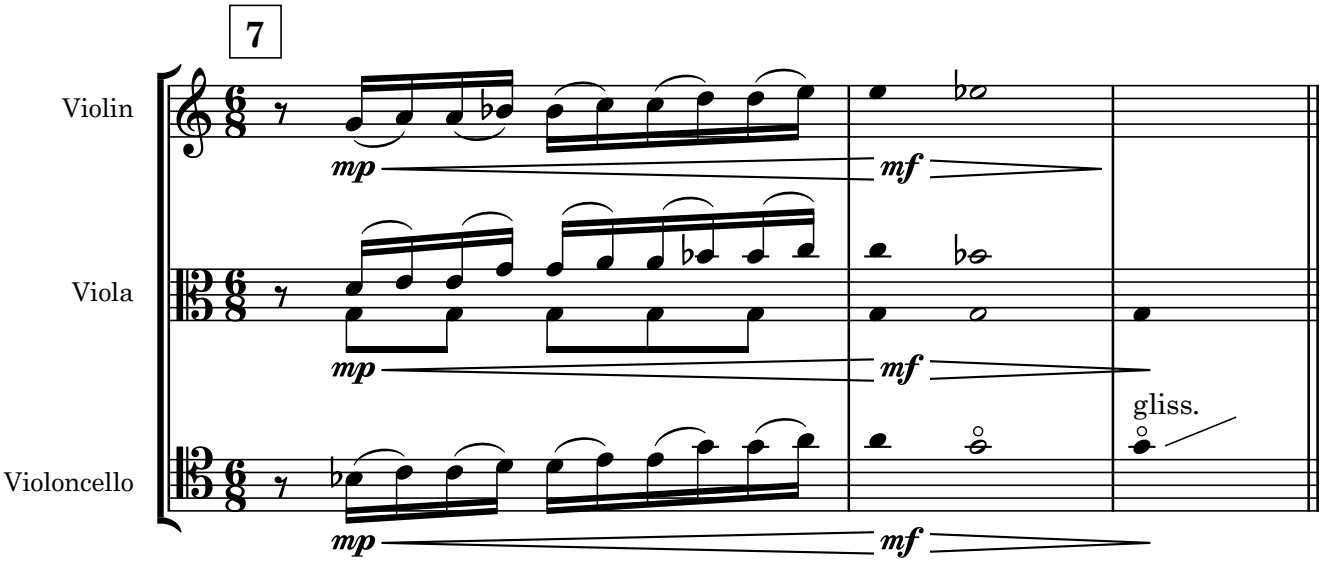


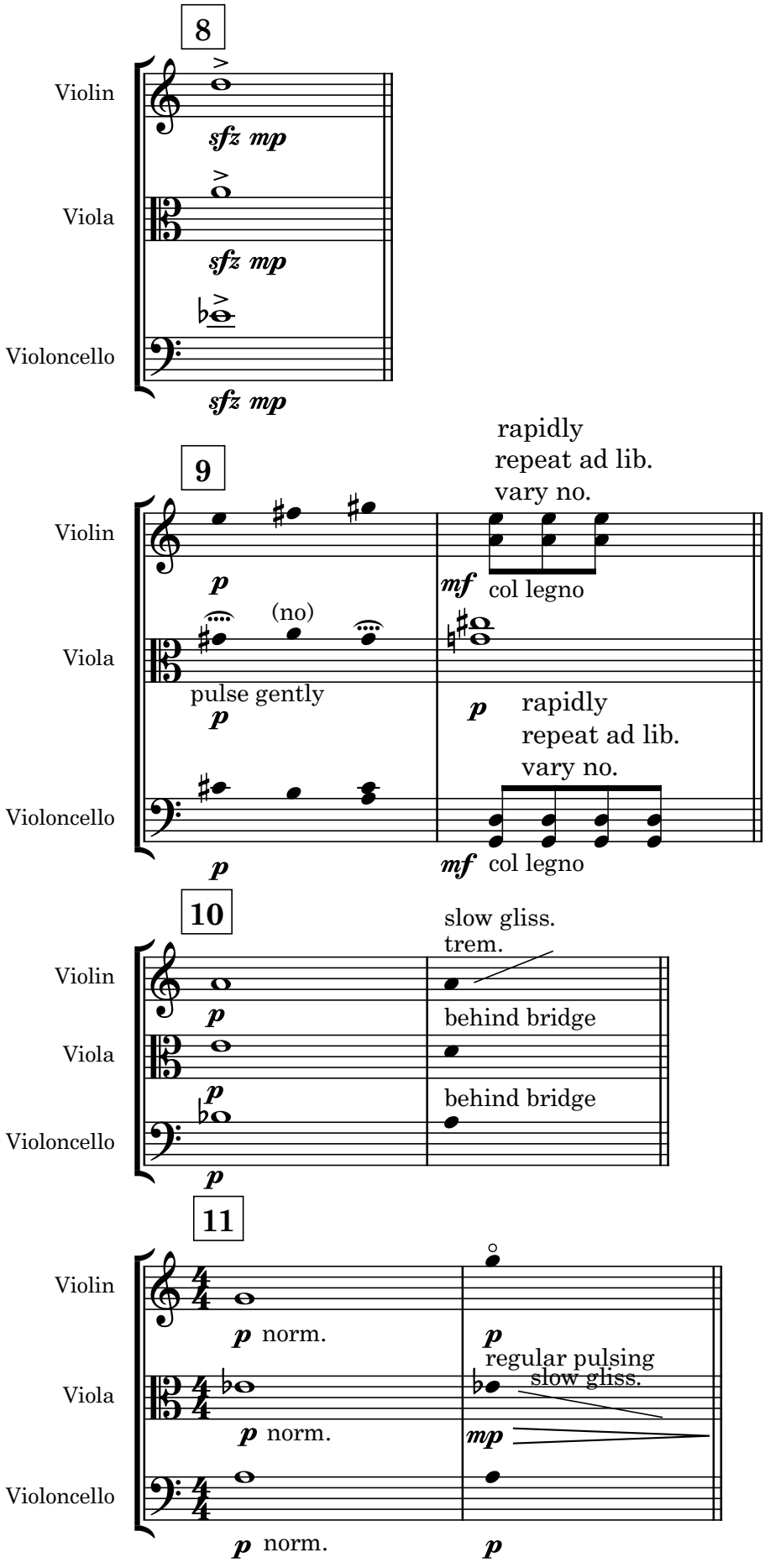
3




4
Violin
behind bridge
p
Viola
behind bridge
p
Violoncello
col legno battuto
quasi gliss.
f


6
Violin
norm.
gliss.
p
Viola
norm.
p
Violoncello
norm.
p


7
Violin
mp
mf
Viola
mp
mf
Violoncello
gliss.
mp
mf


8
Violin
sfz mp
Viola
sfz mp
Violoncello
sfz mp
9
rapidly
repeat ad lib.
vary no.
Violin
p
mf col legno
Viola
(no)
pulse gently
p
p rapidly
repeat ad lib.
vary no.
Violoncello
p
mf col legno
10
slow gliss.
trem.
Violin
p
behind bridge
Viola
p
behind bridge
Violoncello
p
11
Violin
p norm.
p
regular pulsing
slow gliss.
Viola
p norm.
mp
Violoncello
p norm.
p