Perles de l'Opéra

KNME version (1985)

Andrew Hugill

Perles de l'opéra (c. 1948) by Joseph Cornell

Perles de l'Opéra takes the listener on a surreal journey inspired by the world of artist and film-maker Joseph Cornell (1903-1972). Cornell made boxes, each of which is an intricate and mysterious object that evokes memories and imagination. One of his boxes, made around 1948, was entitled 'Perles de l'Opéra' and was covered in collaged scraps of sheet music featuring operatic arias. I first saw pictures of this box back in 1981 and treated it as a sort of proto-score, transcribing some of the music and using other elements as instructions for my composition.

The collaged coverings of the box reveal the words “Anne” and “Norma” as part of unseen longer words. I treat these as (unintended) names and so my composition features two voices who announce themselves at the start in short quotations: "Norma viene” (Norma is coming) from Bellini’s opera *Norma*; and (“да, я Прннцесса Нинетта” (Yes, I am Princess Ninetta) from Prokofiev’s *Love of Three Oranges* (I interpreted “Ninetta” as equivalent to “Anne”).

The main piece divides into two sections. The first section features fragments of operatic melodies sung by characters called Anne (or a name close to that), as follows:

- Weber: *Der Freischütz*. Ännchen sings: Grillen sind mir böse Gäste! Immer mit leichtem Sinn (Whims are bad guests of mine! Always a light heart)
- Prokofiev: *Love of Three Oranges*. Princess Ninetta sings: ты тот’у кого я ш (You are the one I have)
- Donizetti: *Anna Bolena*. Anna sings: Al dolce guidami (To sweetness guide me).

These fragments are extended to the point where they are unrecognisable as arias, becoming instead long sustained melodies that are shared between the two voices in the KNME version or two instruments (clarinet and cello) in the GWW version.

The second section similarly stretches fragments of melody, but here they are played entirely on instruments. The singer, or the spoken voice in the GWW and studio versions), identifies each fragment while we hear the descending chromatic phrase that may be seen wrapping one of the cuboid structures inside Cornell’s box. All the fragments come from Bellini’s *Norma*:

- Casta Diva (Chaste Goddess)
- Ah! bello a me ritorna (Ah! bring back to me the beauty)
- Oh, cari accenti (Oh, dear words)
- Oh, non tremare (Oh, don't tremble)
- Oh! Di qual sei tu vittima (Oh! Of which one are you the victim?)
- Teneri figli. (Tender children.)
- Deh! Con te, li prendi (Oh! With you, you take them)
- Qual cor tradisti (What heart did you betray?)
- qual cor perdesti (what heart did you lose?)

Other elements of the composition also 'read' the box as a kind of score. The two figurines play sousaphone and drum, which feature in the original studio version (in live performances the sousaphone is replaced by a tuba). The text H:CON suggested to me a repeated B (in German the note H is B), which is why the sousaphone/tuba sticks on a B despite what is going on around it (I dropped this constraint in the GWW version). The word "piano" appears more than once, hence the 2 pianos 8 hands, and I used typical accompanying figurations from the piano reductions of the operatic arias listed above.

However, all the music, its harmonic progressions and pacing, its layering and instrumentations, its formal structure and textures, are original. The "perles" are just the melodic fragments, which I set and recontextualise in ways that do not resemble opera at all. I think the drum patterns in the first part may have derived from the box somehow, but I cannot remember exactly how. The piano hands in the first part also play patterns that unfold at different rates (the higher the faster), but again I cannot recall exactly how this was organised. Finally, I'd note that the bass line in the second part includes a greatly slowed down version of the descending phrase that is sung by "Norma".

The piece so far exists in several versions. It is possible to envisage more arrangements.

- Studio version (1982) scored for two pianos 8 hands, two voices, sampled sousaphone and drum. This was multitracked by John Abram and myself in Keele University Recording Studio. Since neither of us was a singer, we recorded the vocal melodies on instruments and spoke the syllables of the lyrics. This version may be heard at https://andrewhugill.com/music/perles.html

- KNME version (1985) scored for two sopranos, two pianos 8 hands, tuba, drum. This version was performed only once, by the Keele New Music Ensemble conducted by Roger Marsh, at Keele University. The two sopranos sang the melodic lines, passing the sustained notes in the first half of the piece back and forth between them. A tuba substituted for the sousaphone.

- George W. Welch version (1991) scored for clarinet, tuba, piano duet, vibraphone, marimba, untuned percussion (drum, small tam-tam), violin, viola and cello. In this version, the clarinet and cello share the sustained melodic lines in the first half, and the spoken syllables were delivered on tape. This was performed at the Purcell Room and in subsequent concerts by the ensemble. A recording of this version was remastered by Ian Gardiner in 2024 and may be heard at https://andrewhugill.com/music/perles.html

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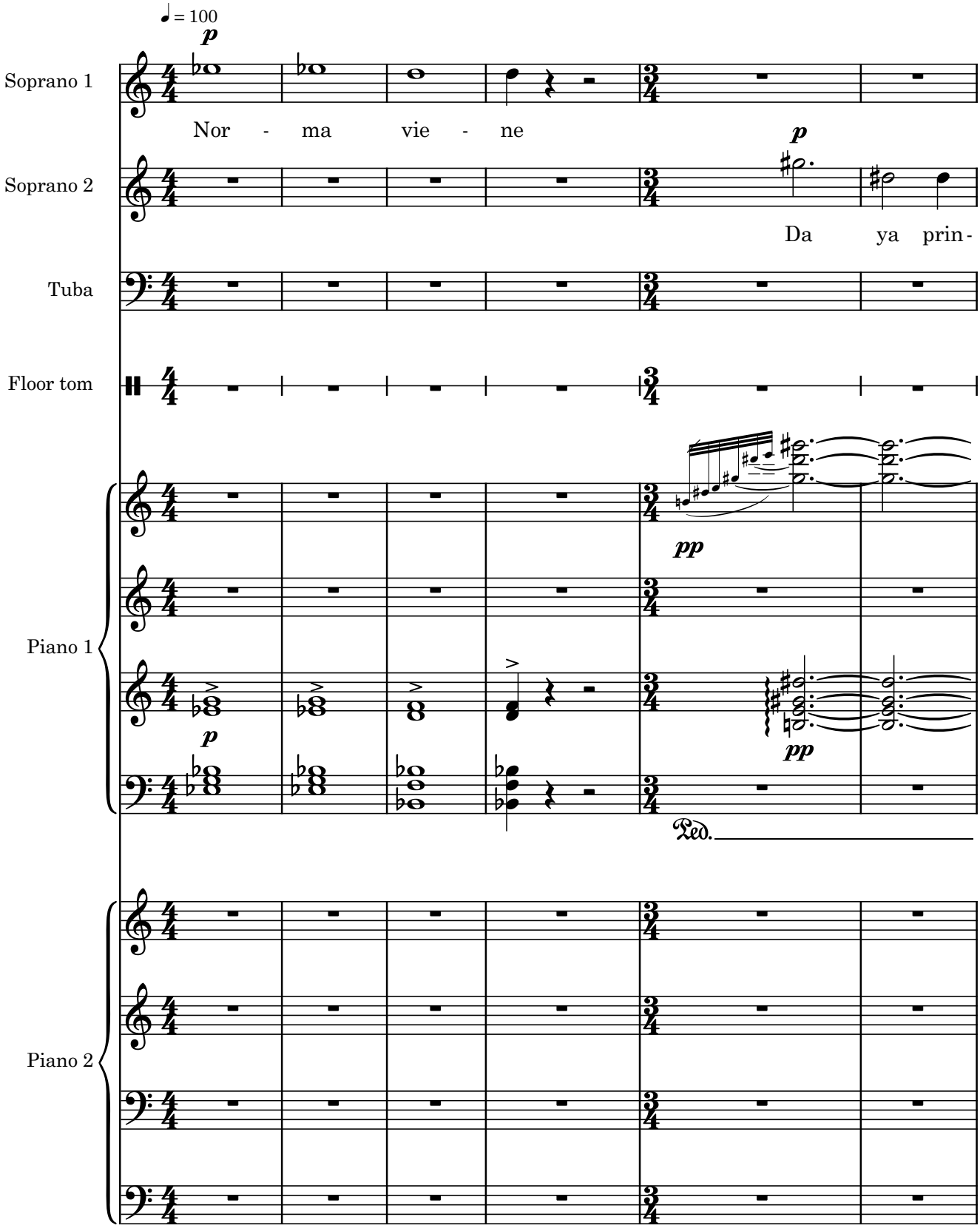

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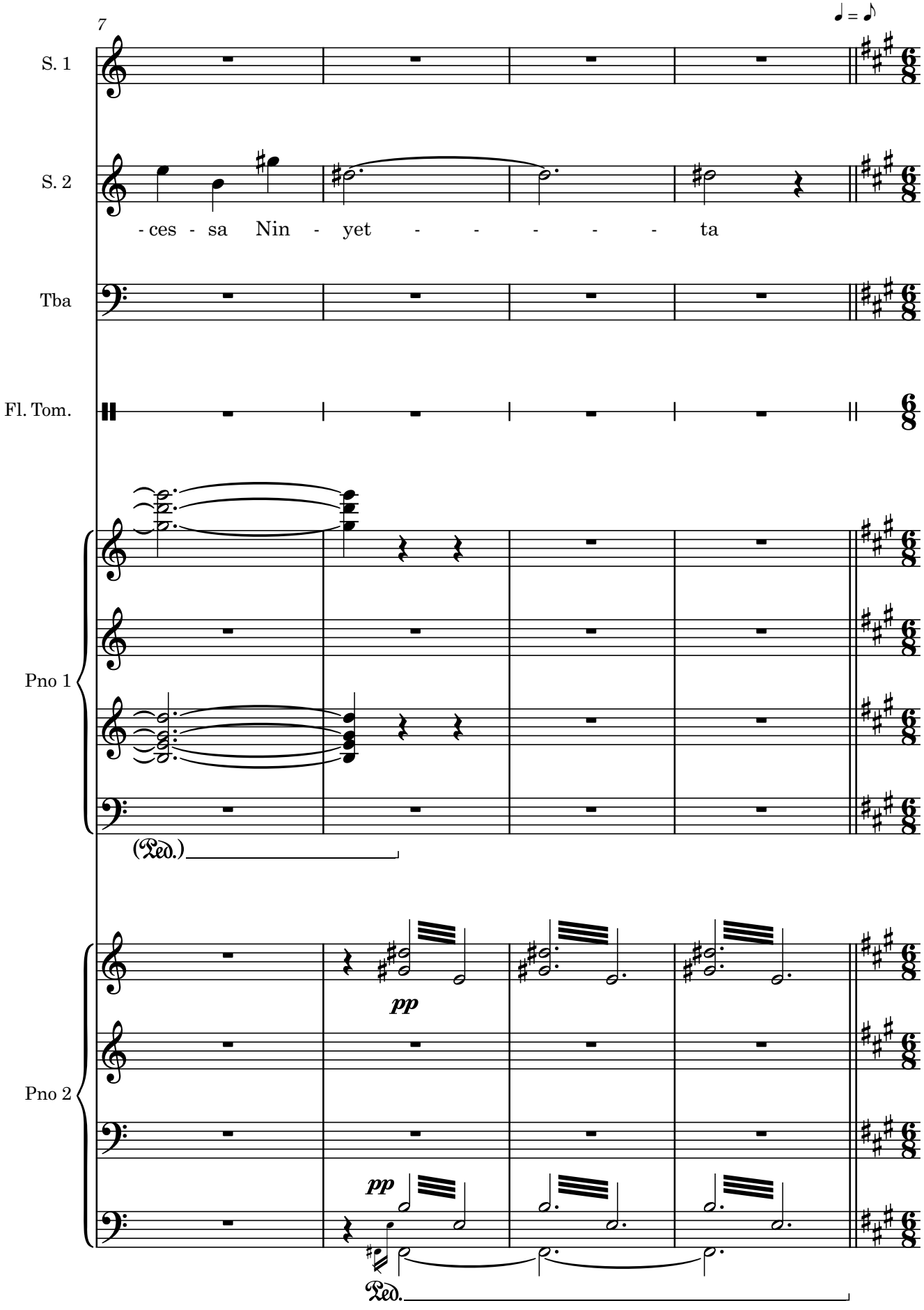
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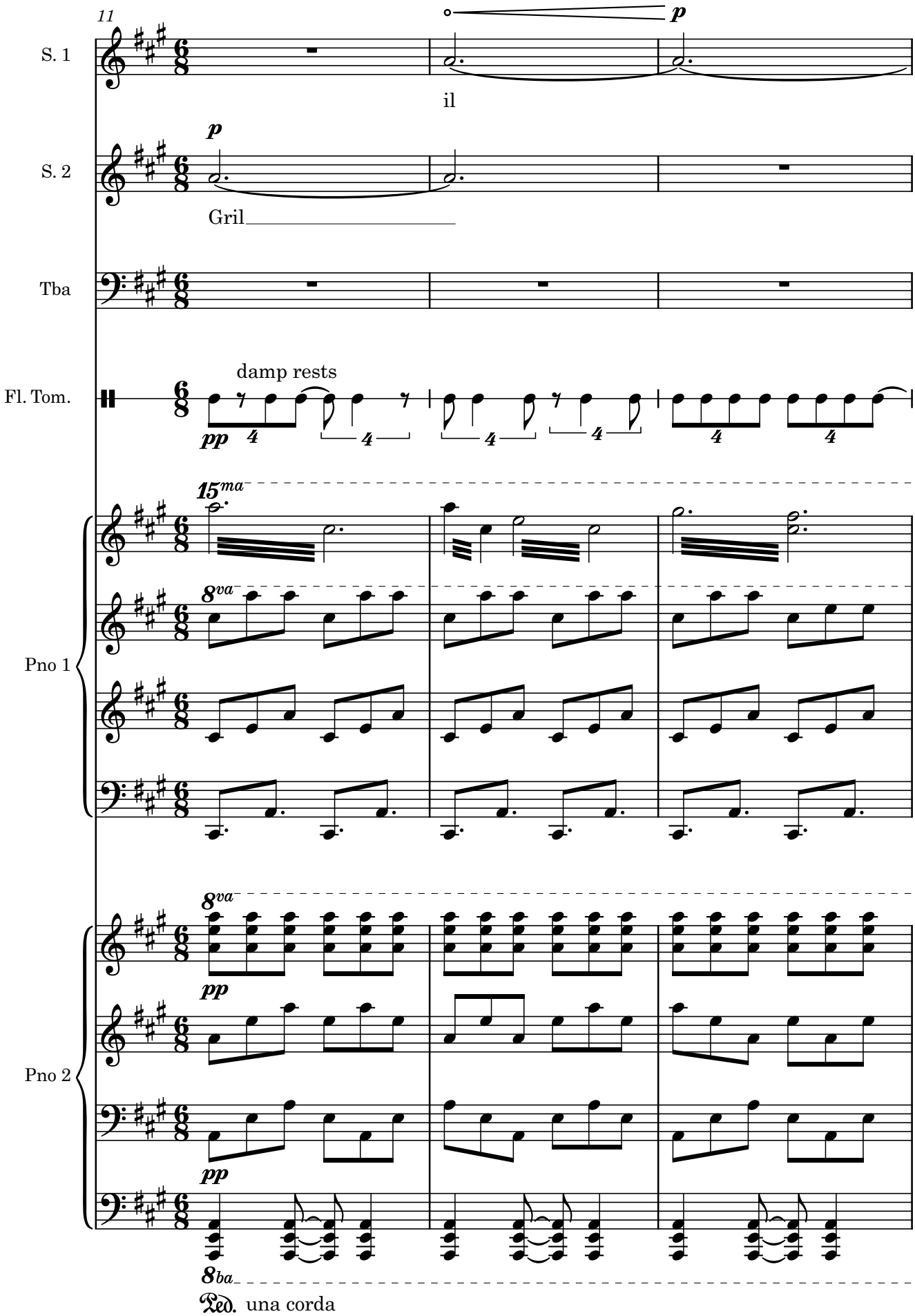
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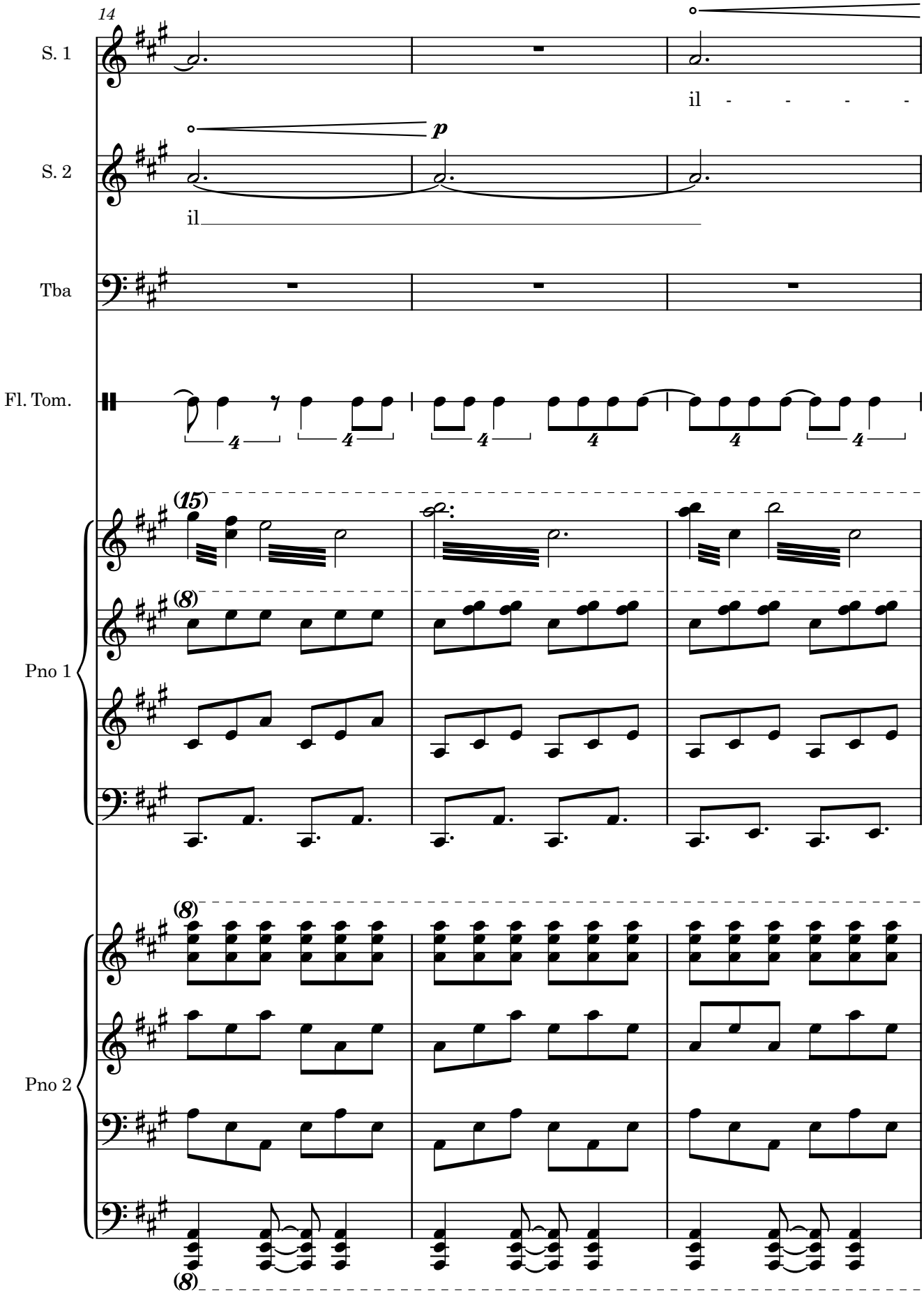
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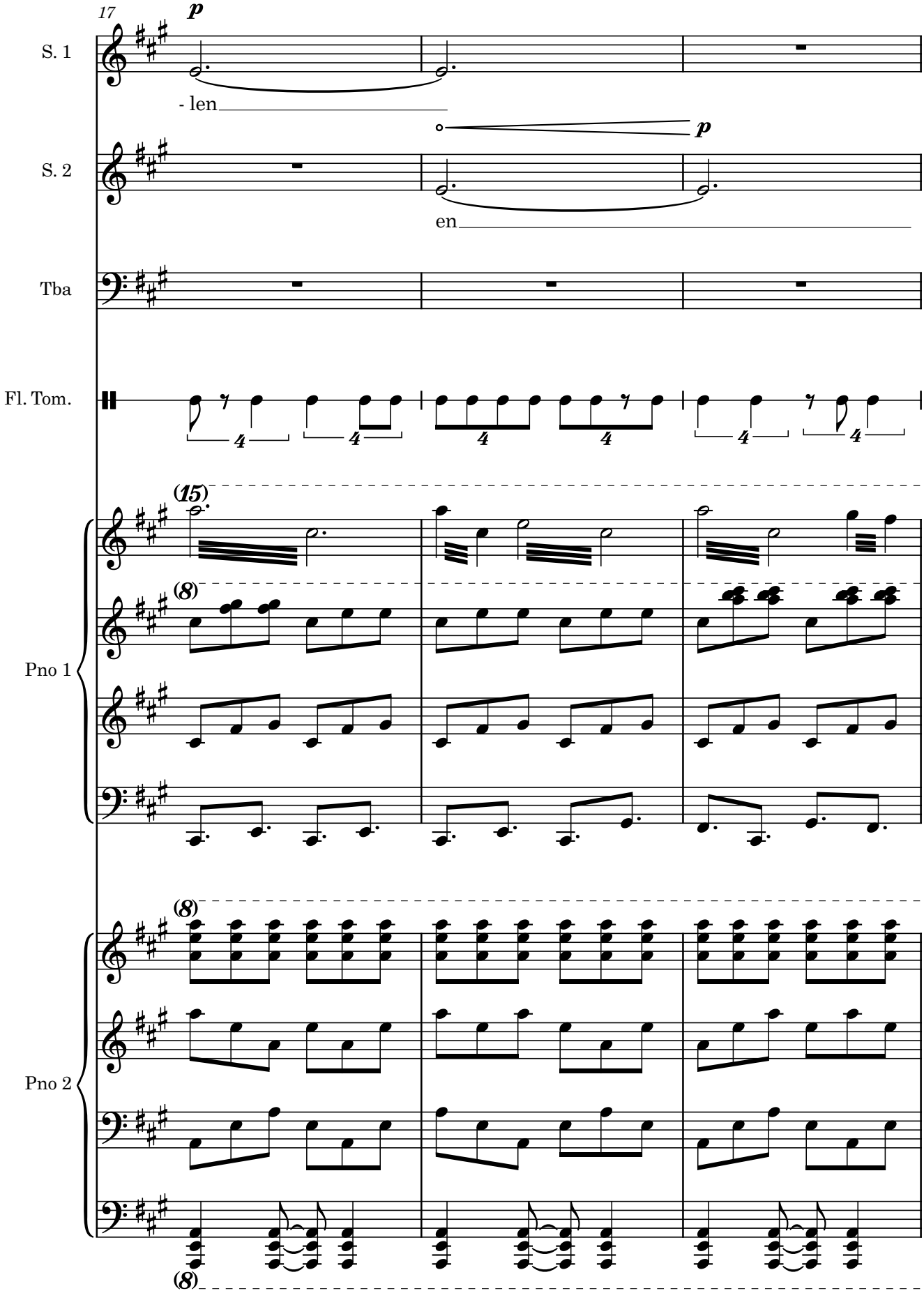
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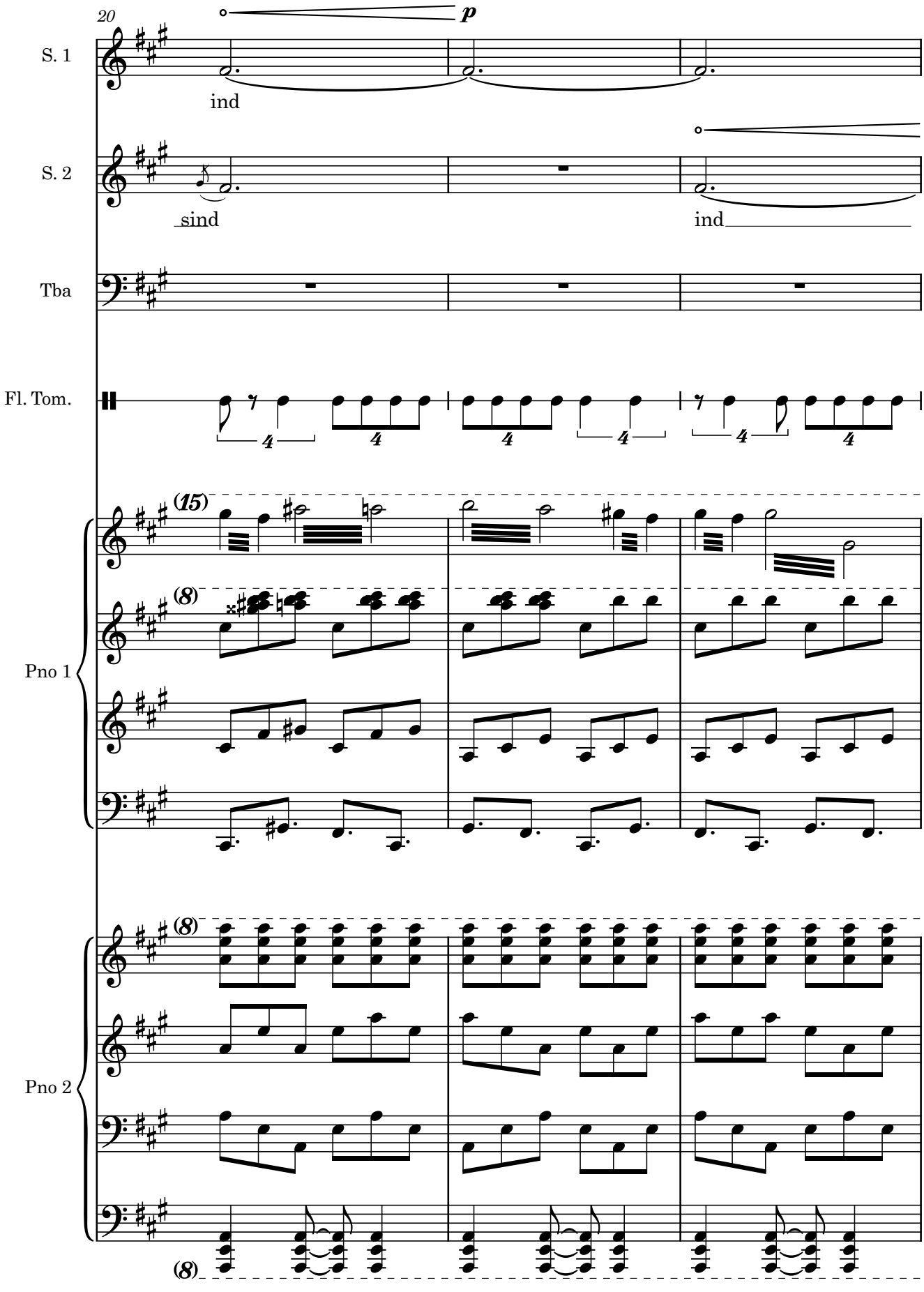
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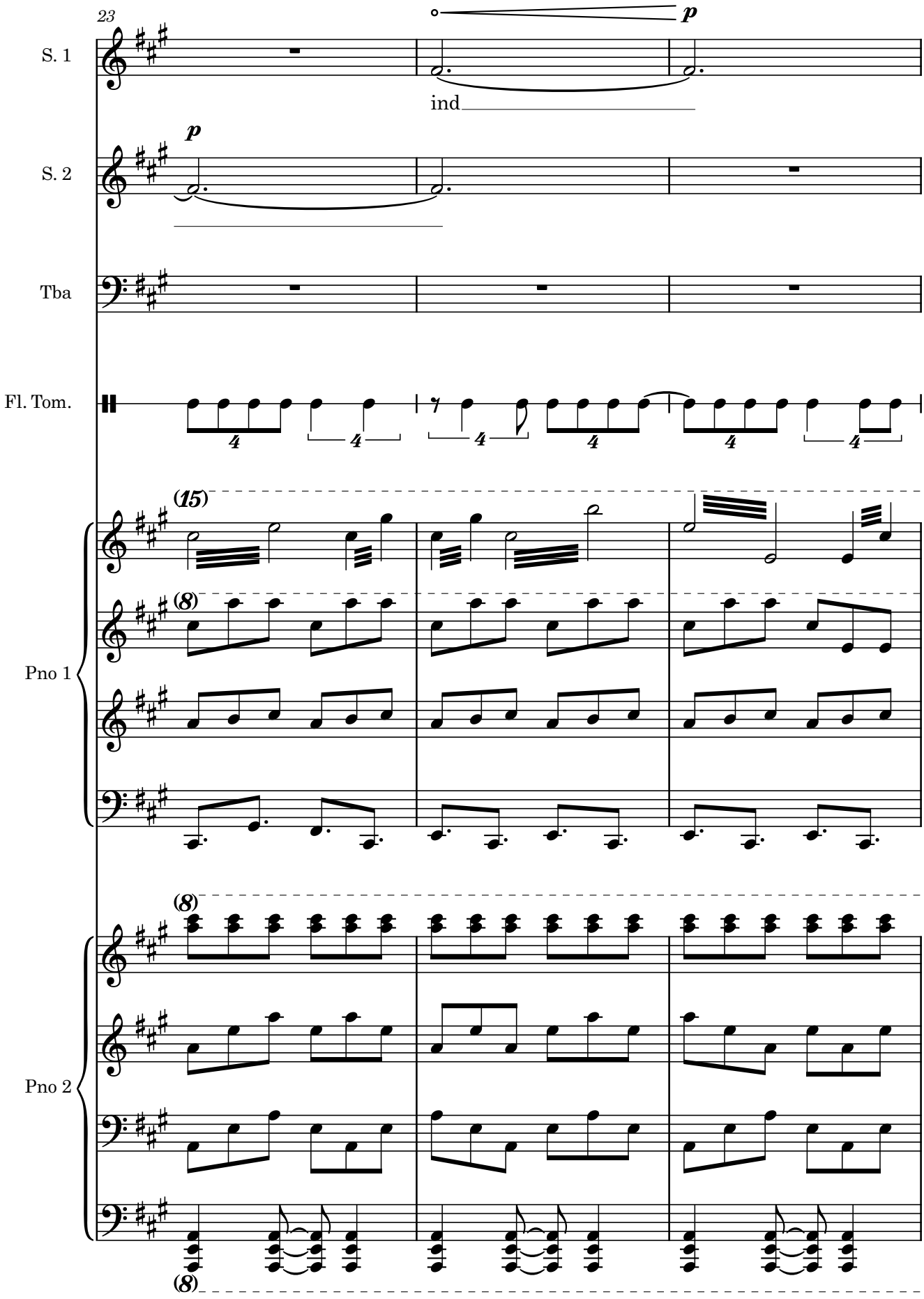
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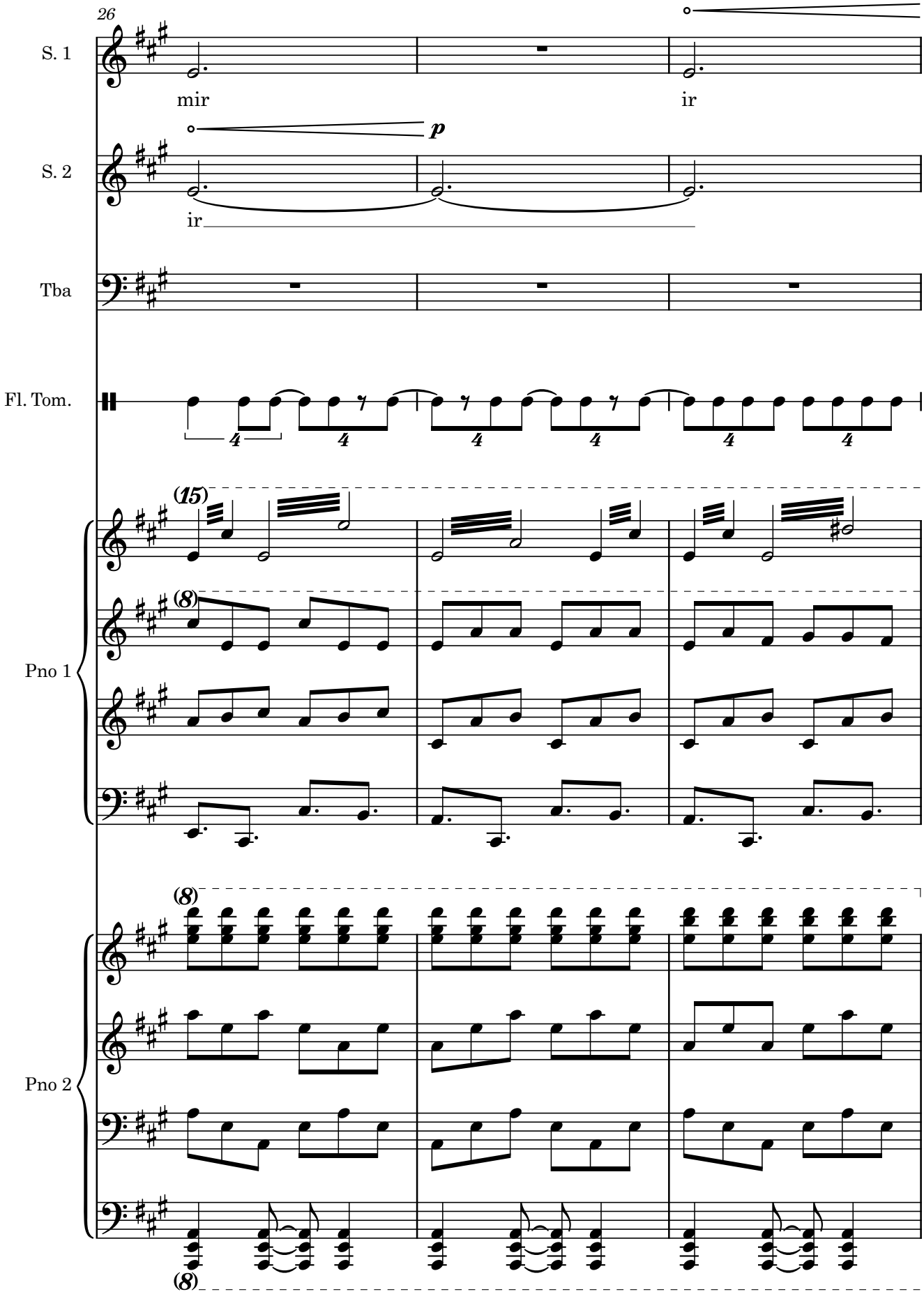
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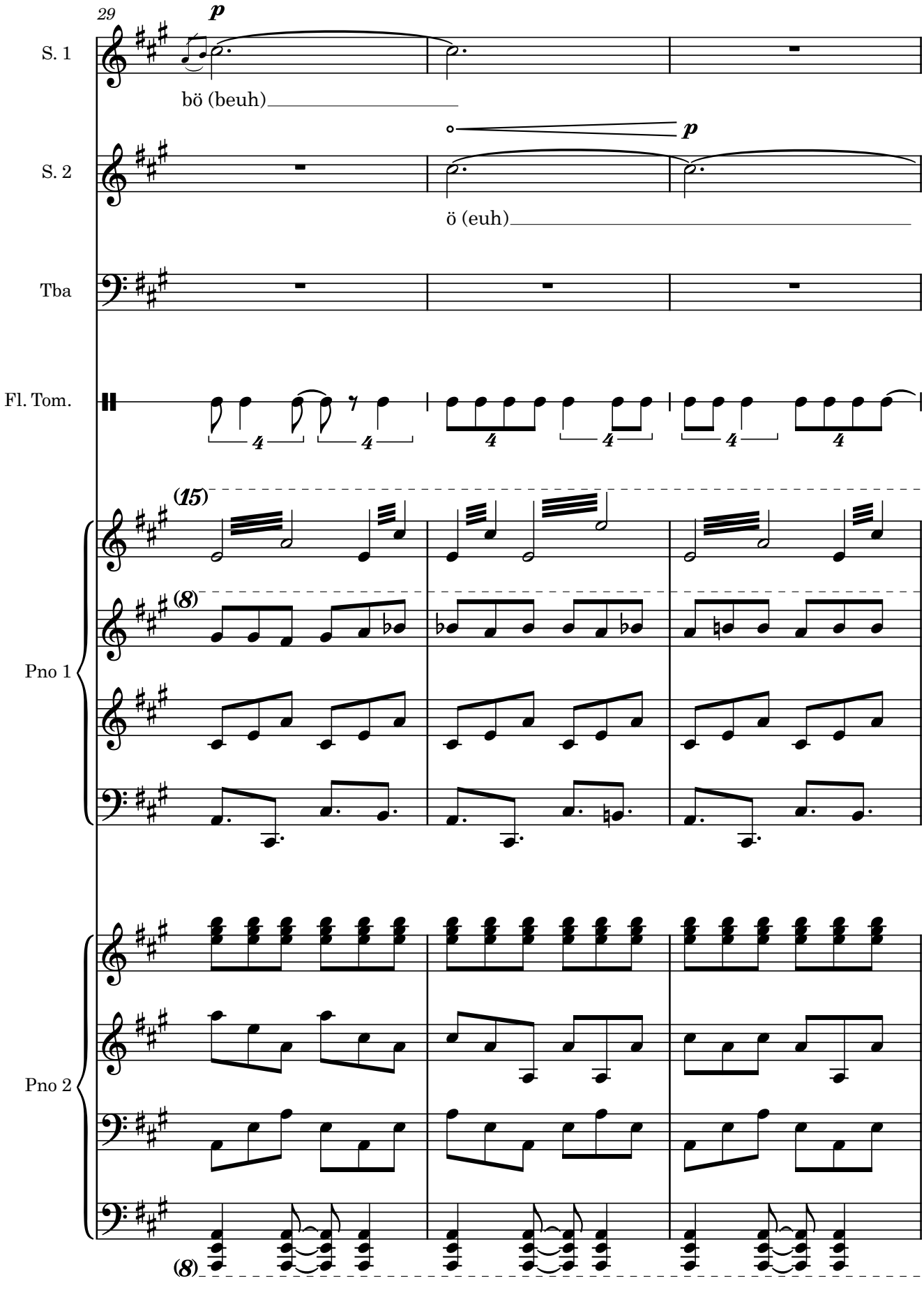
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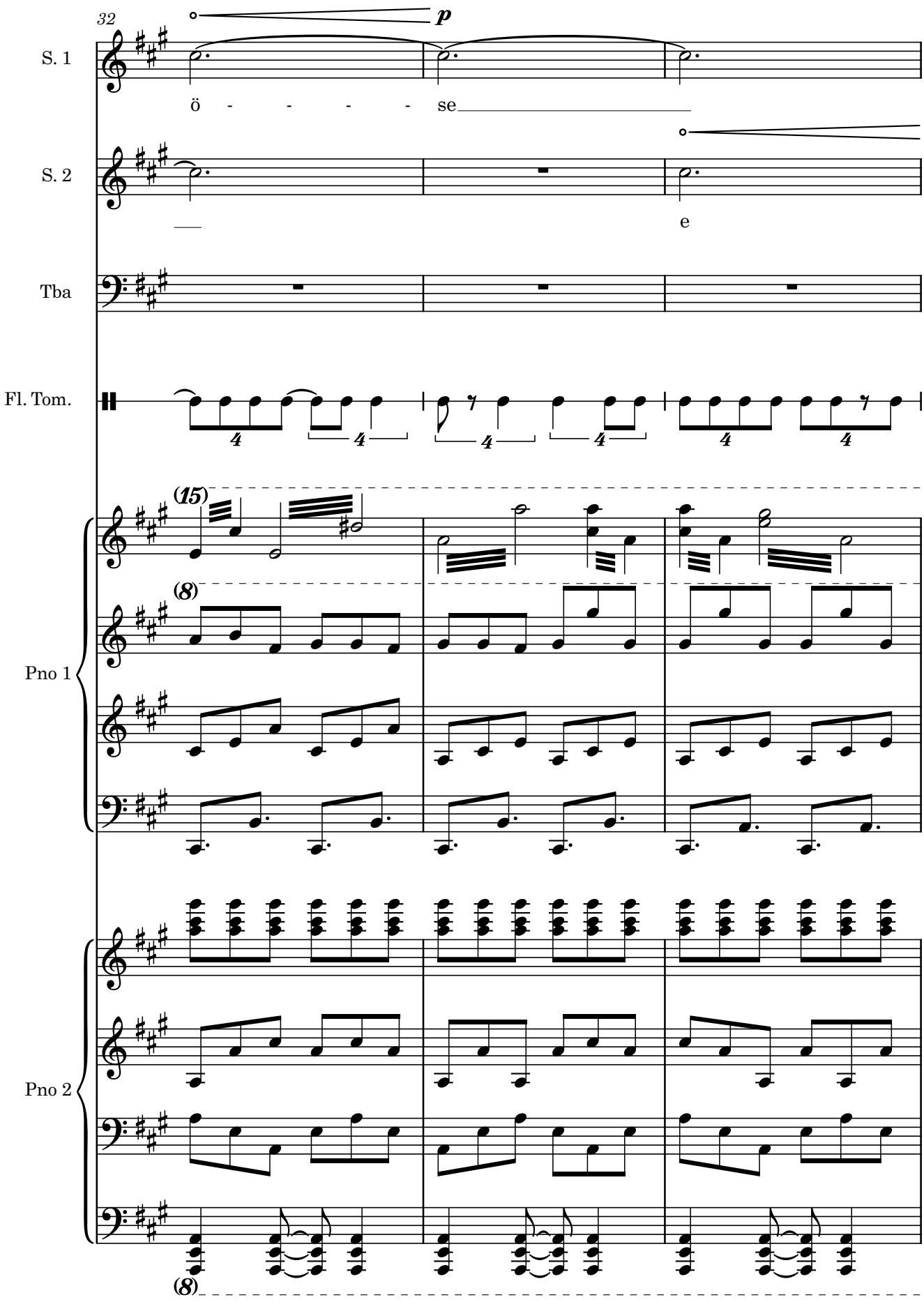
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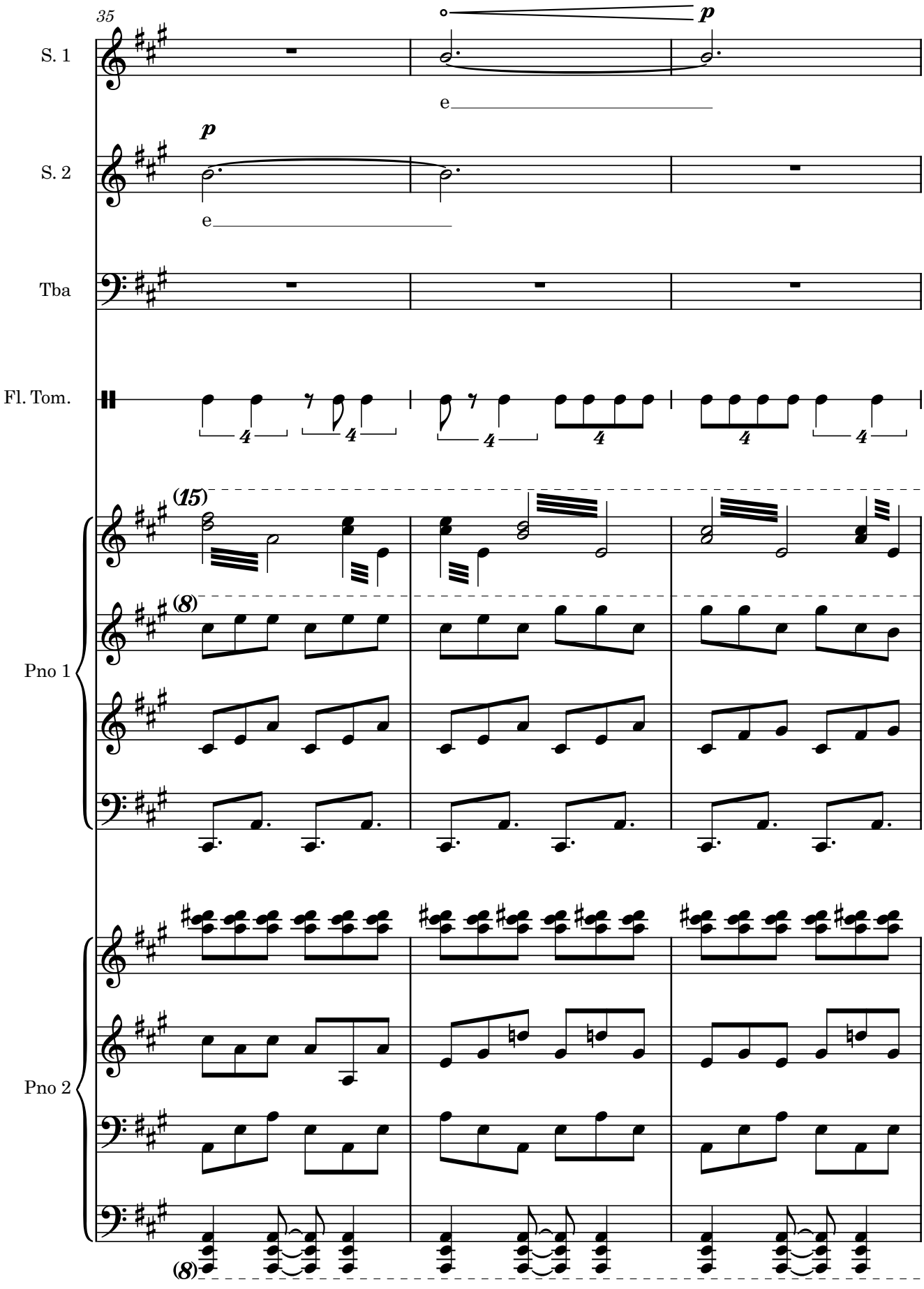
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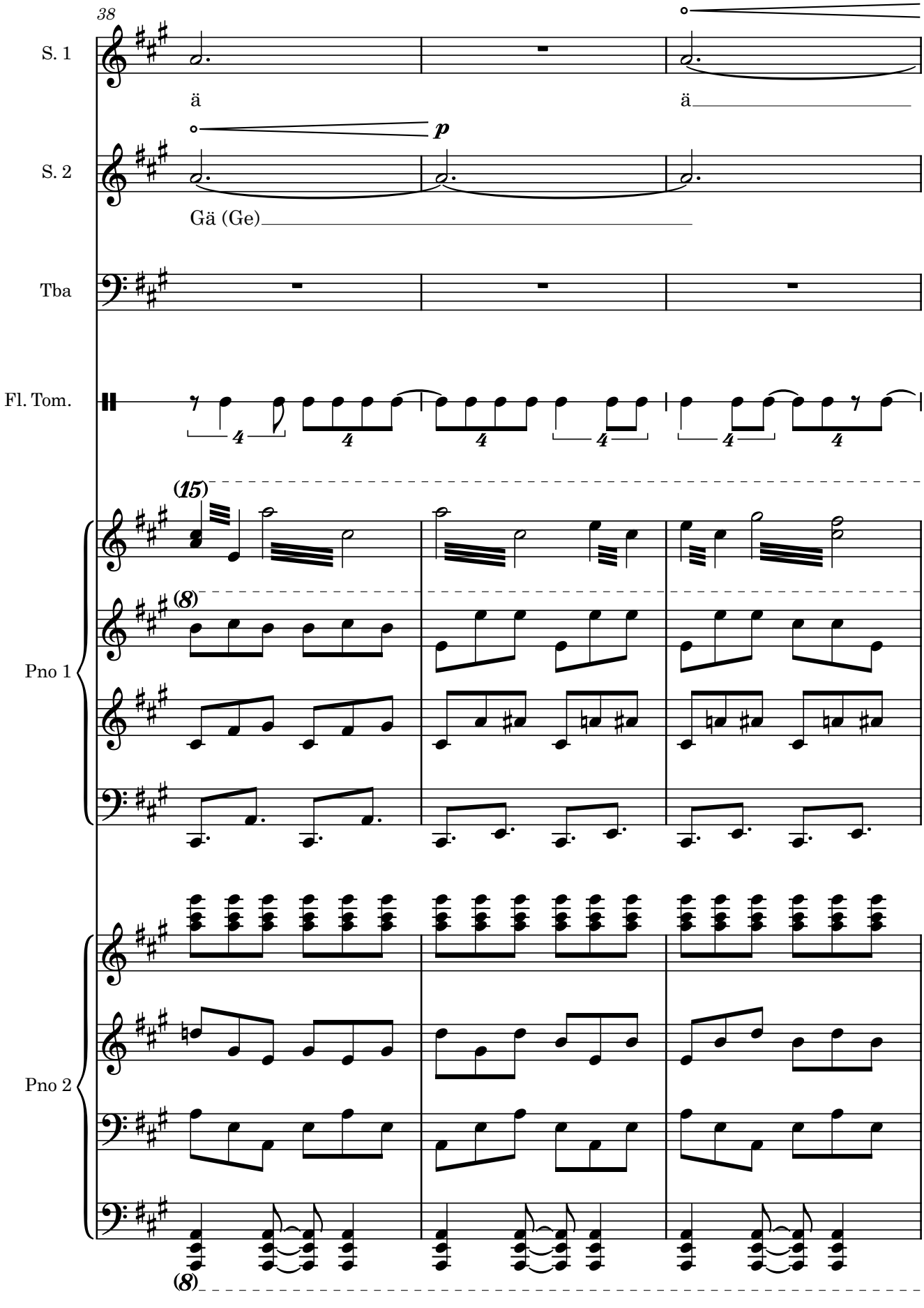
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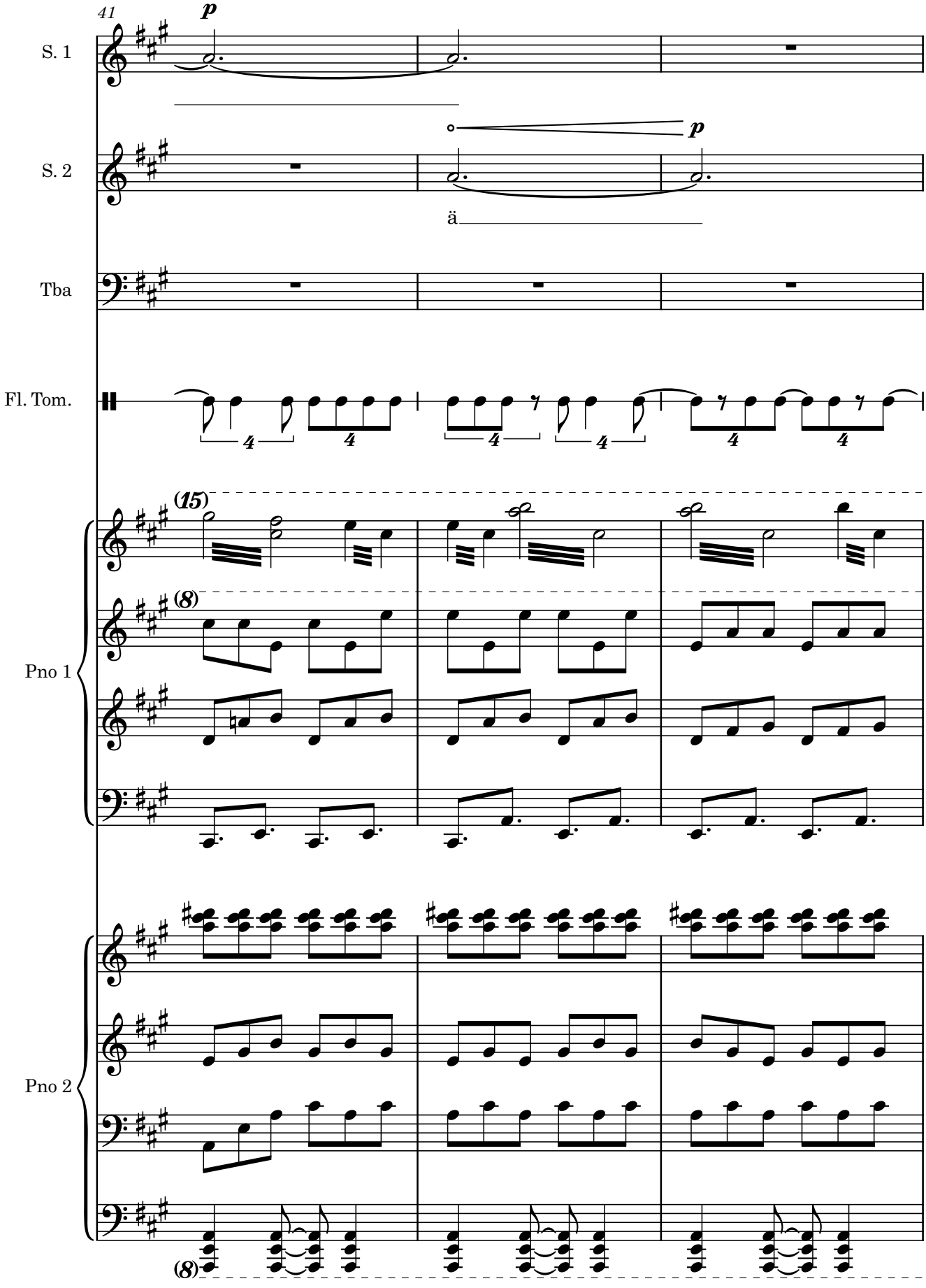
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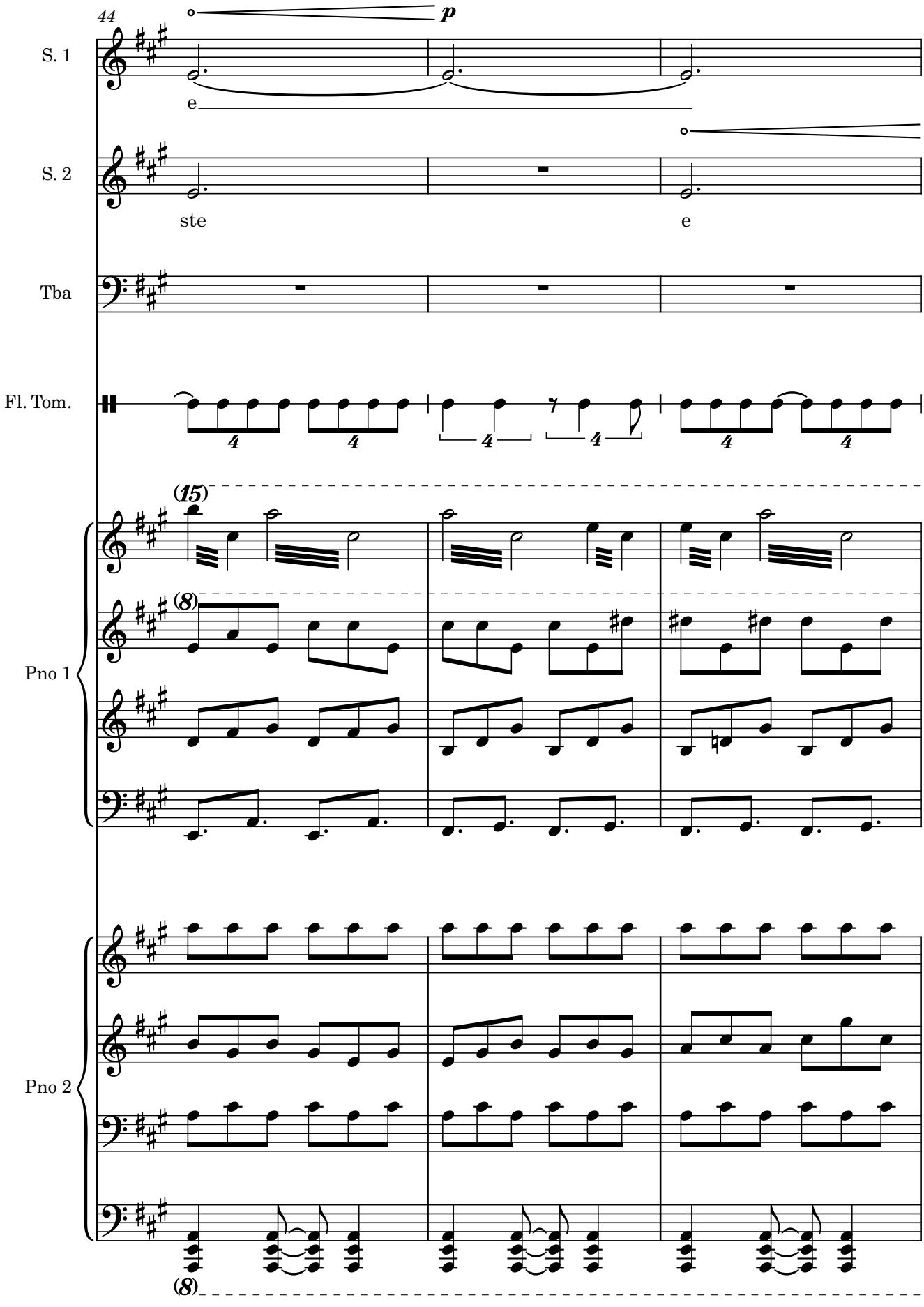
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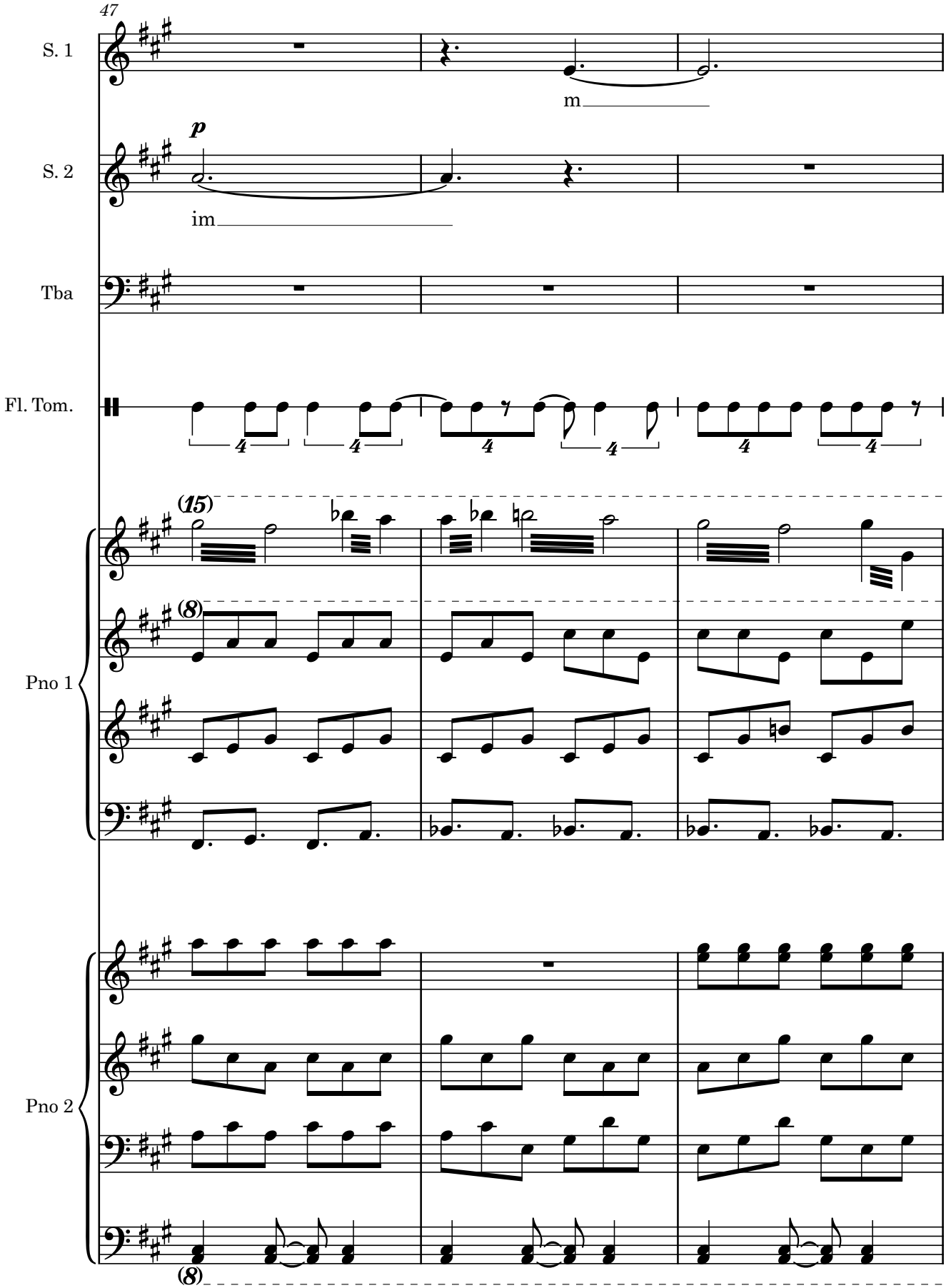
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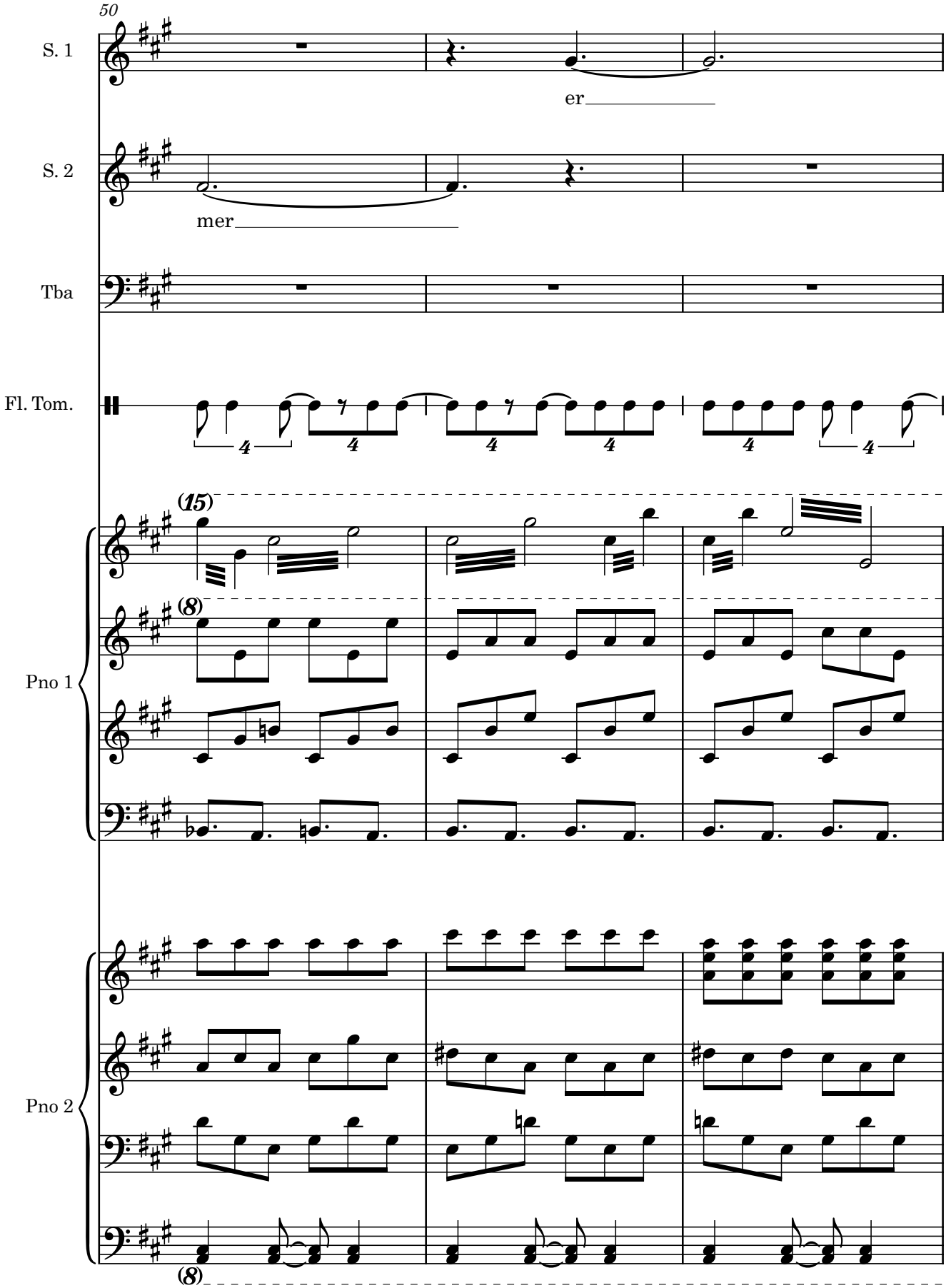
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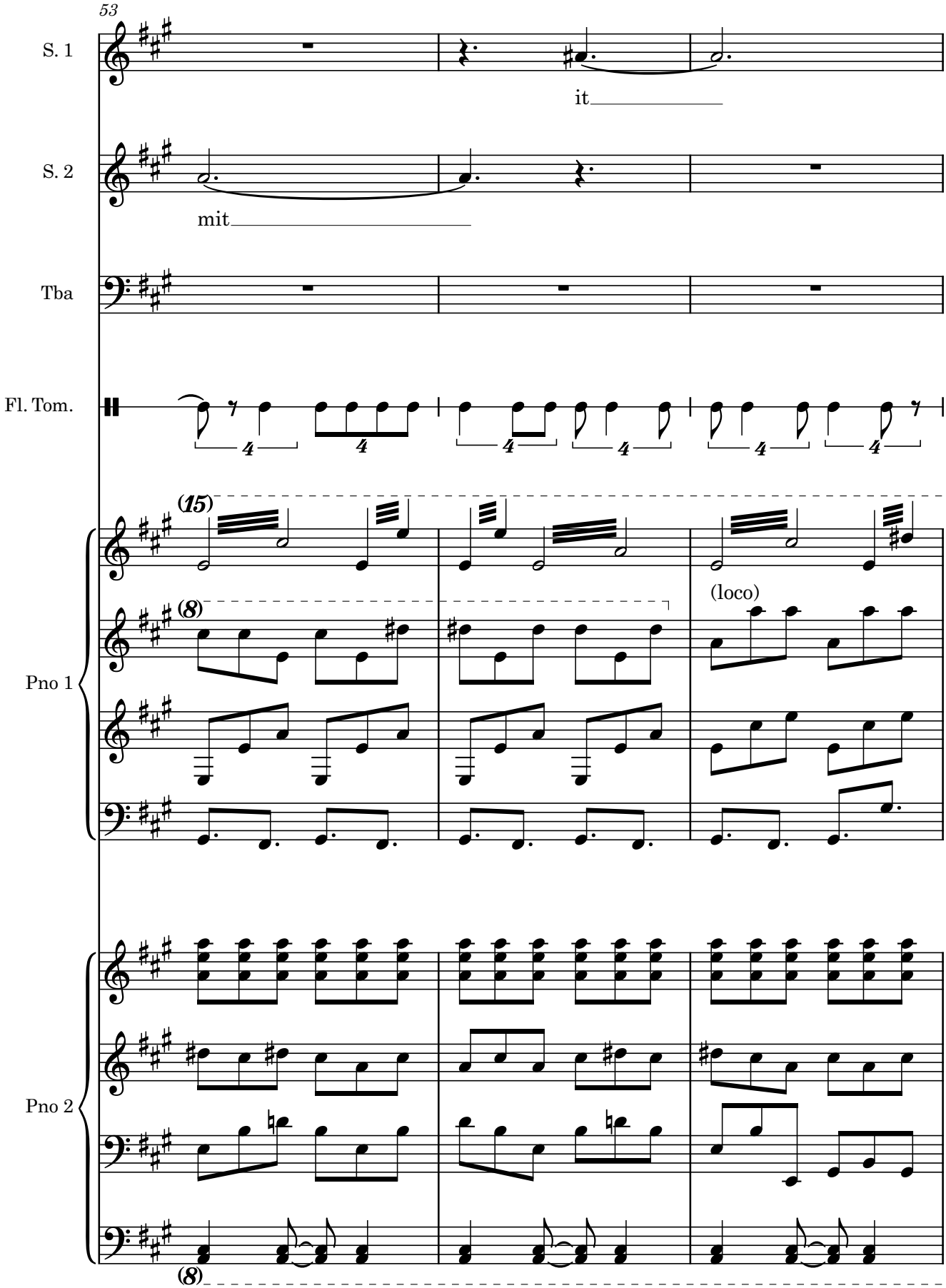
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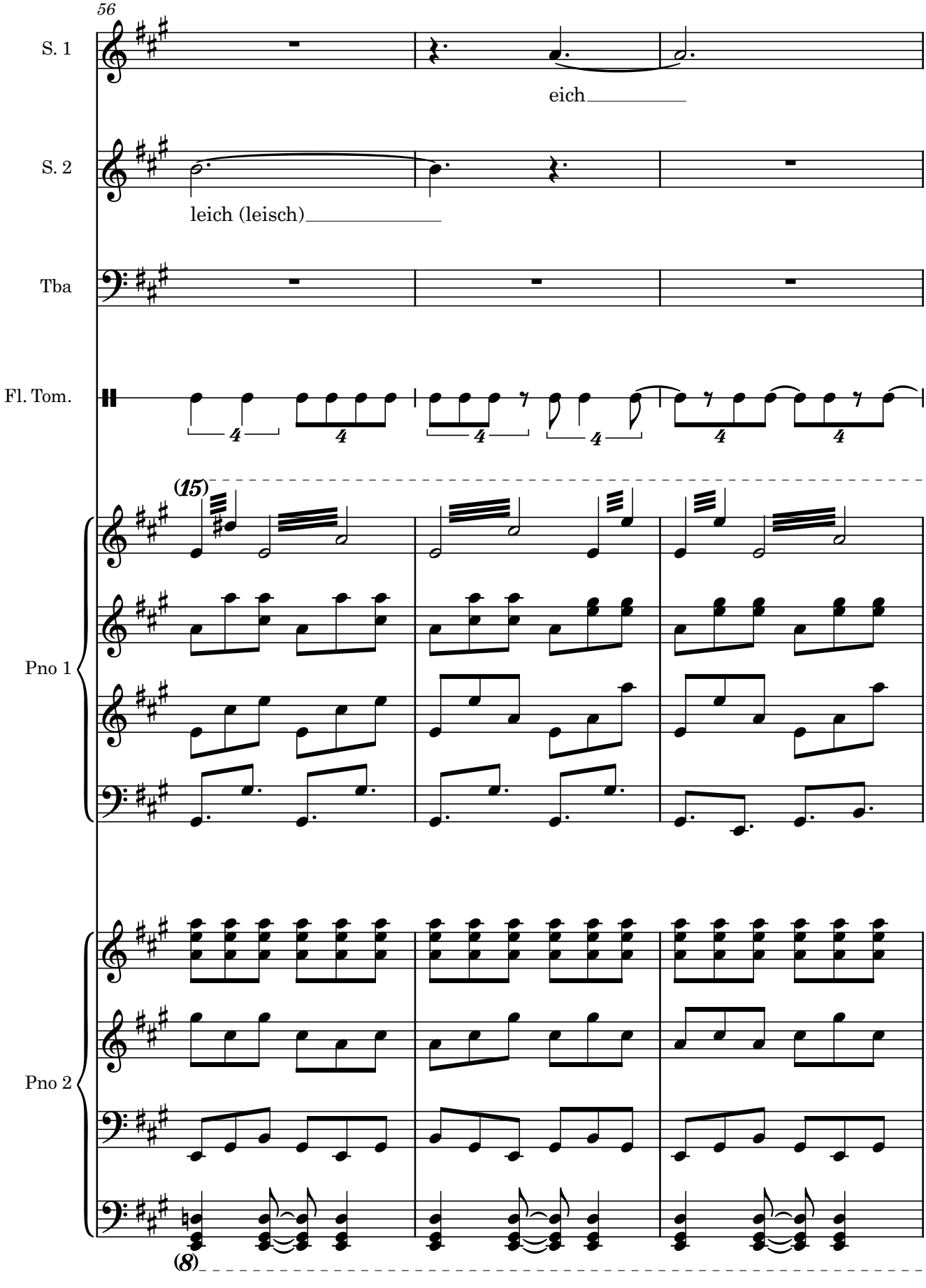
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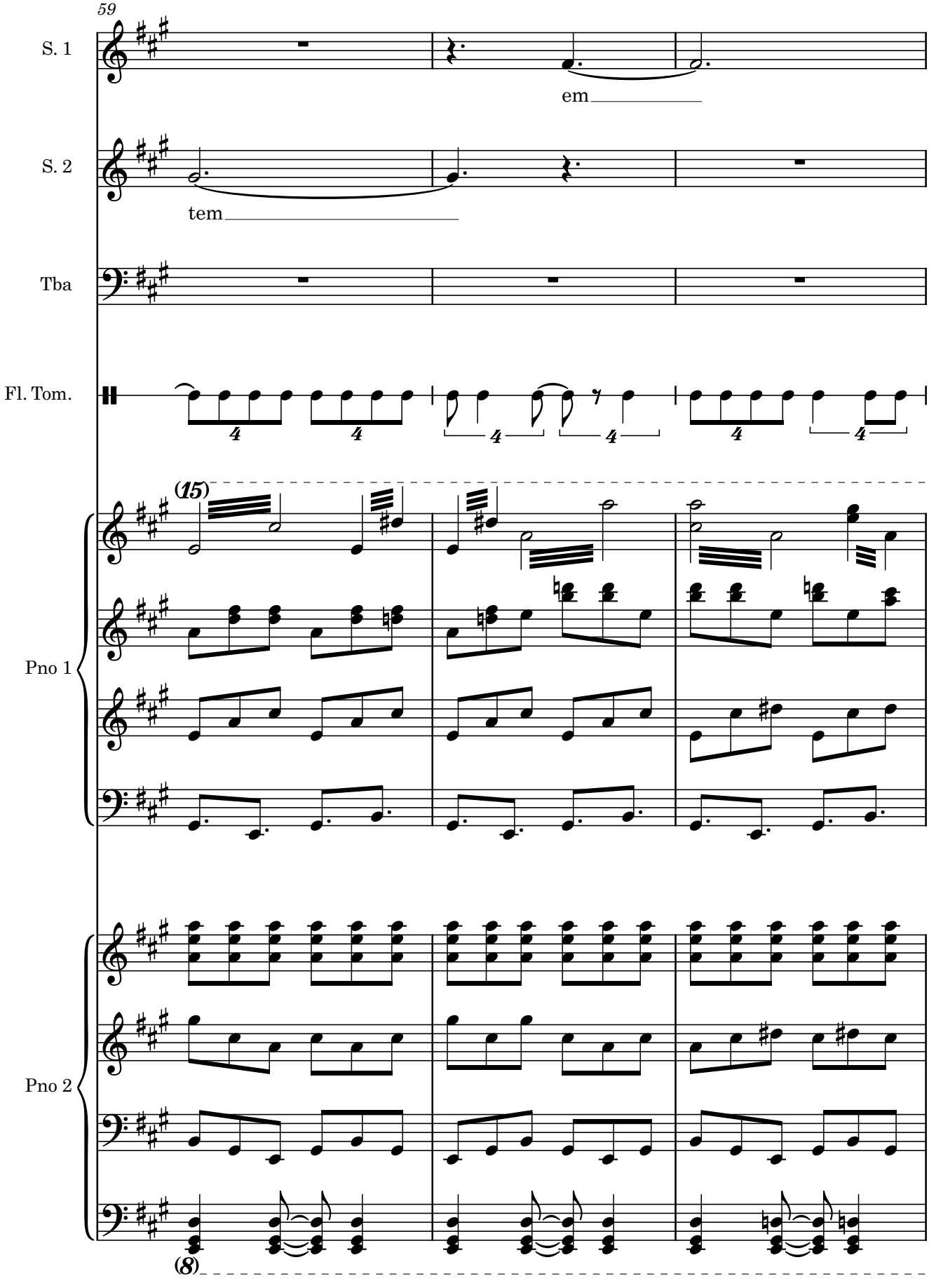
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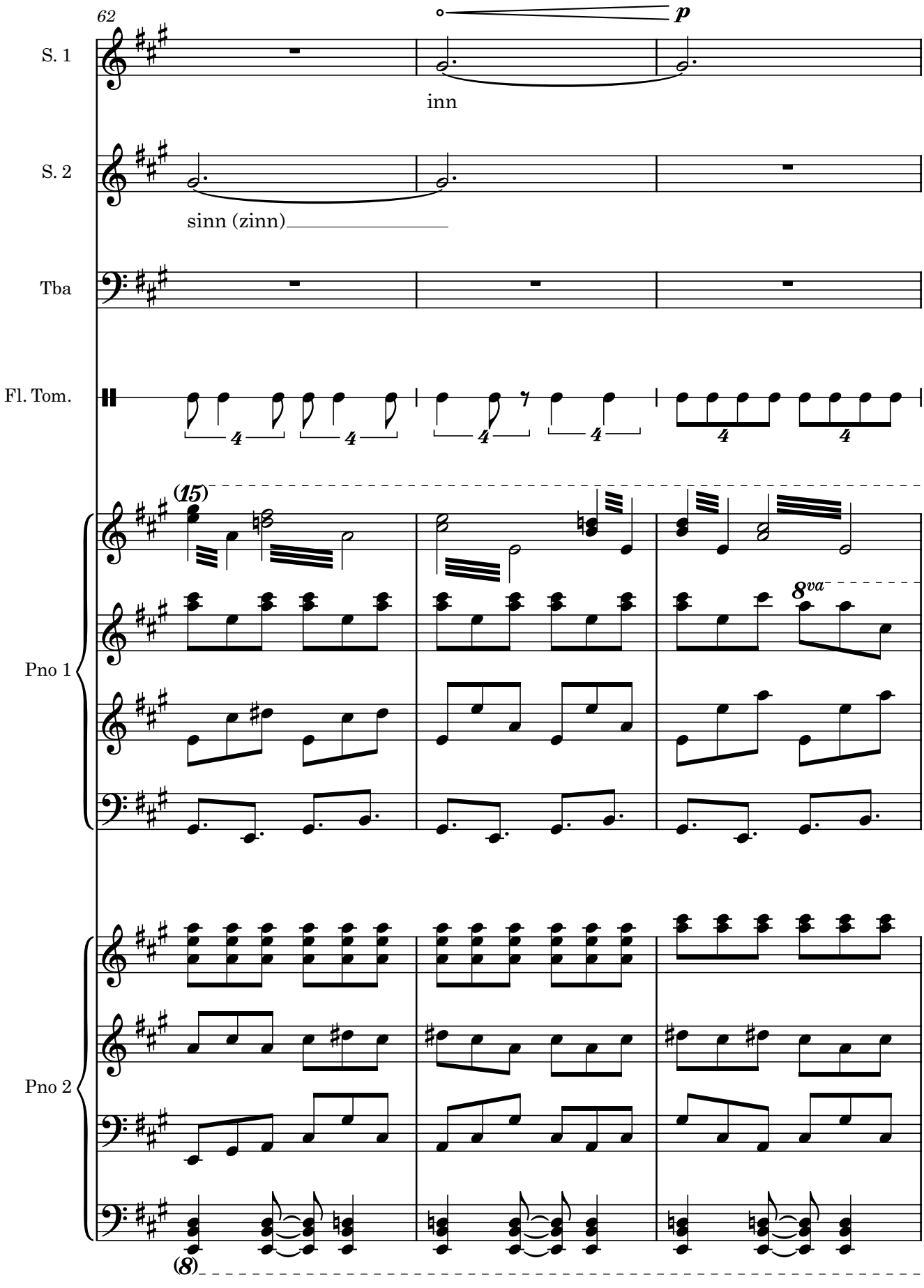
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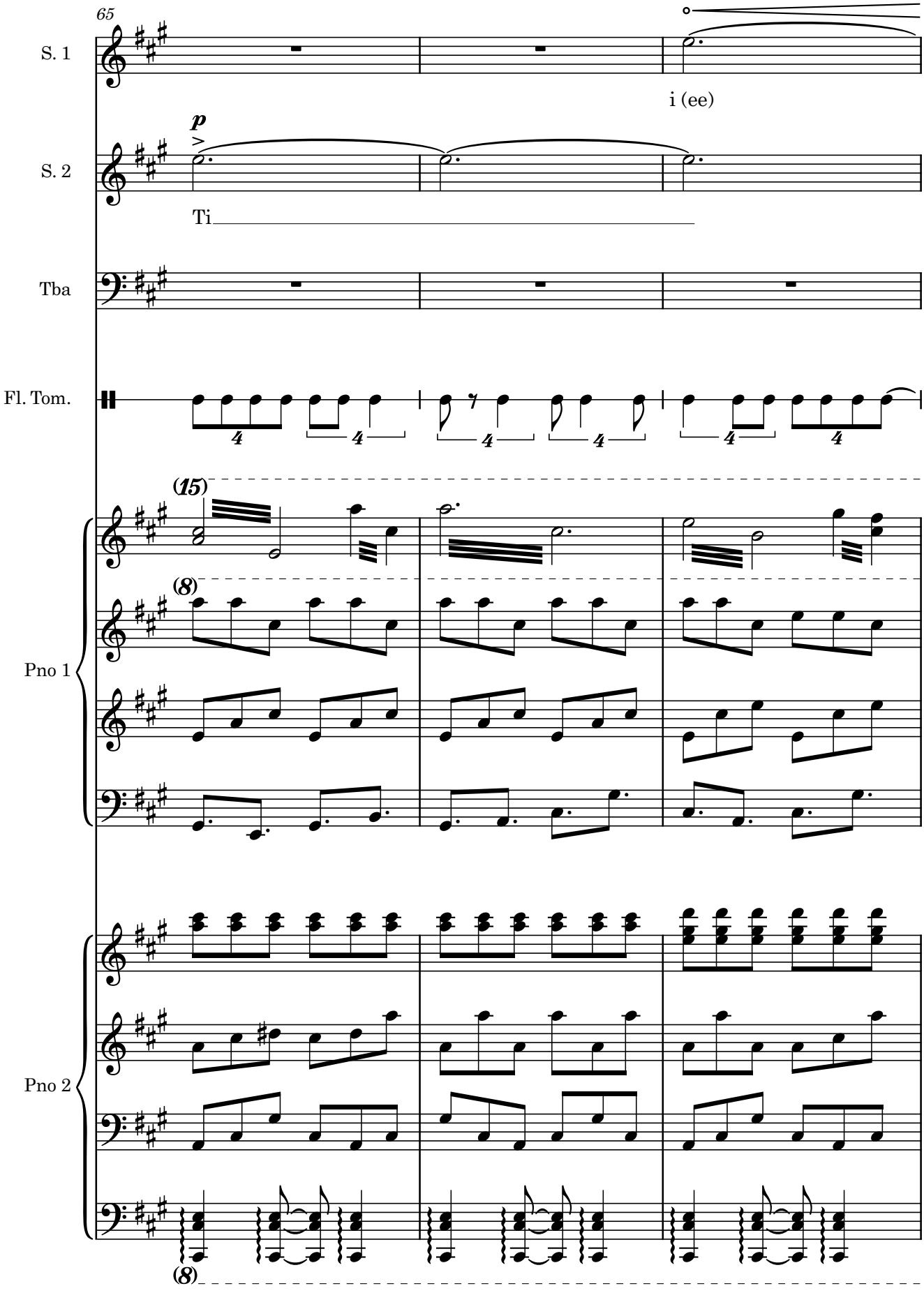
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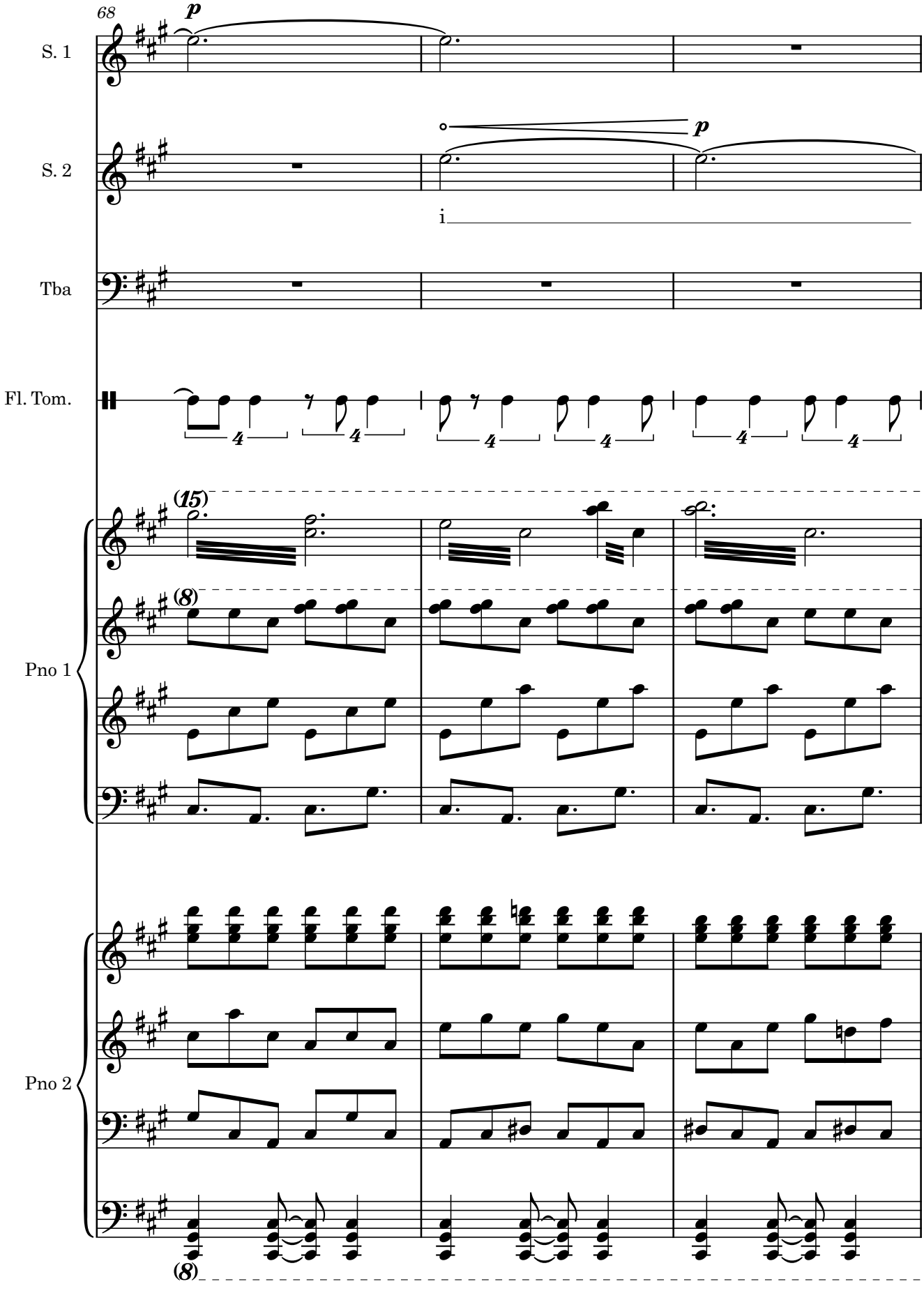
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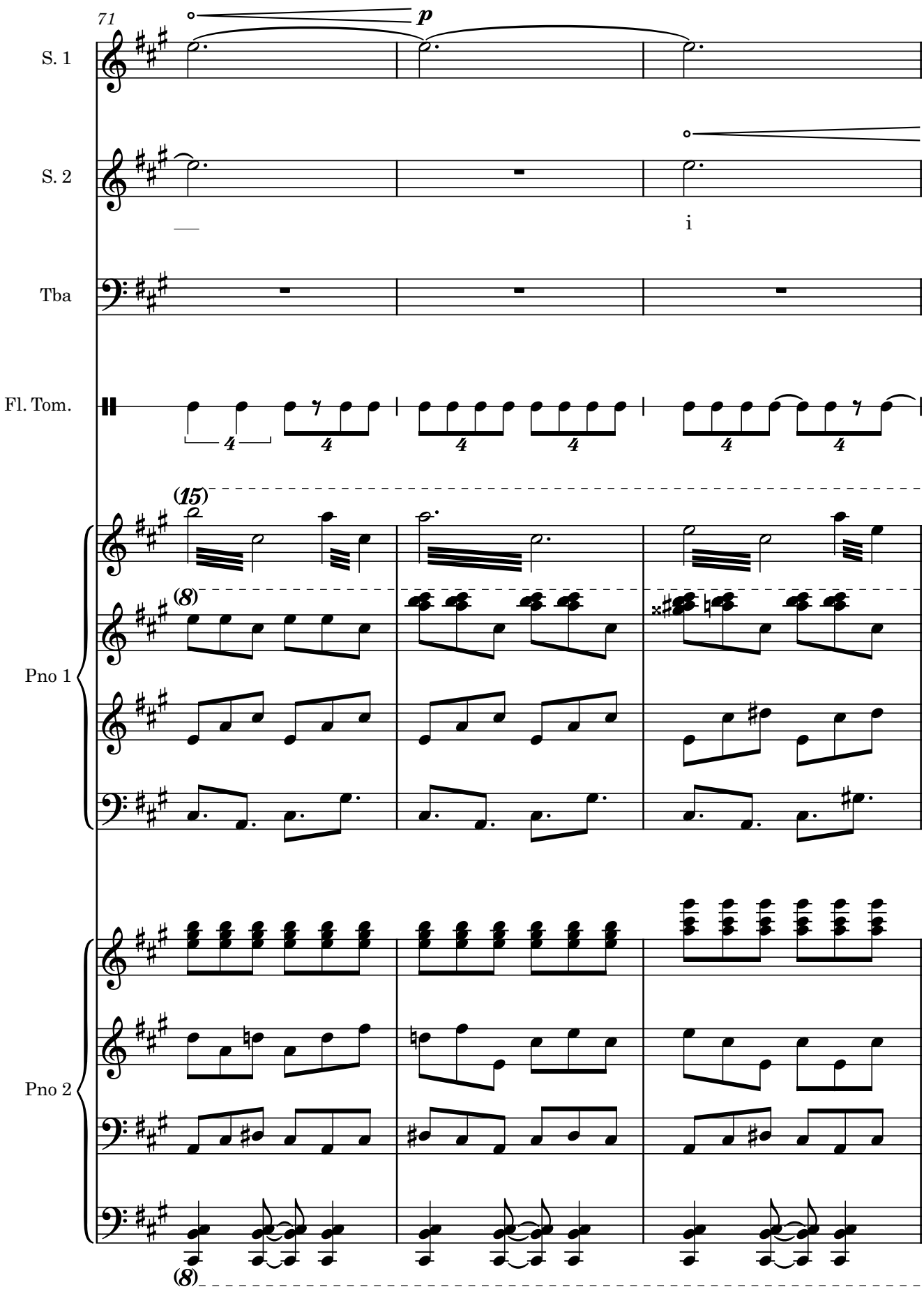
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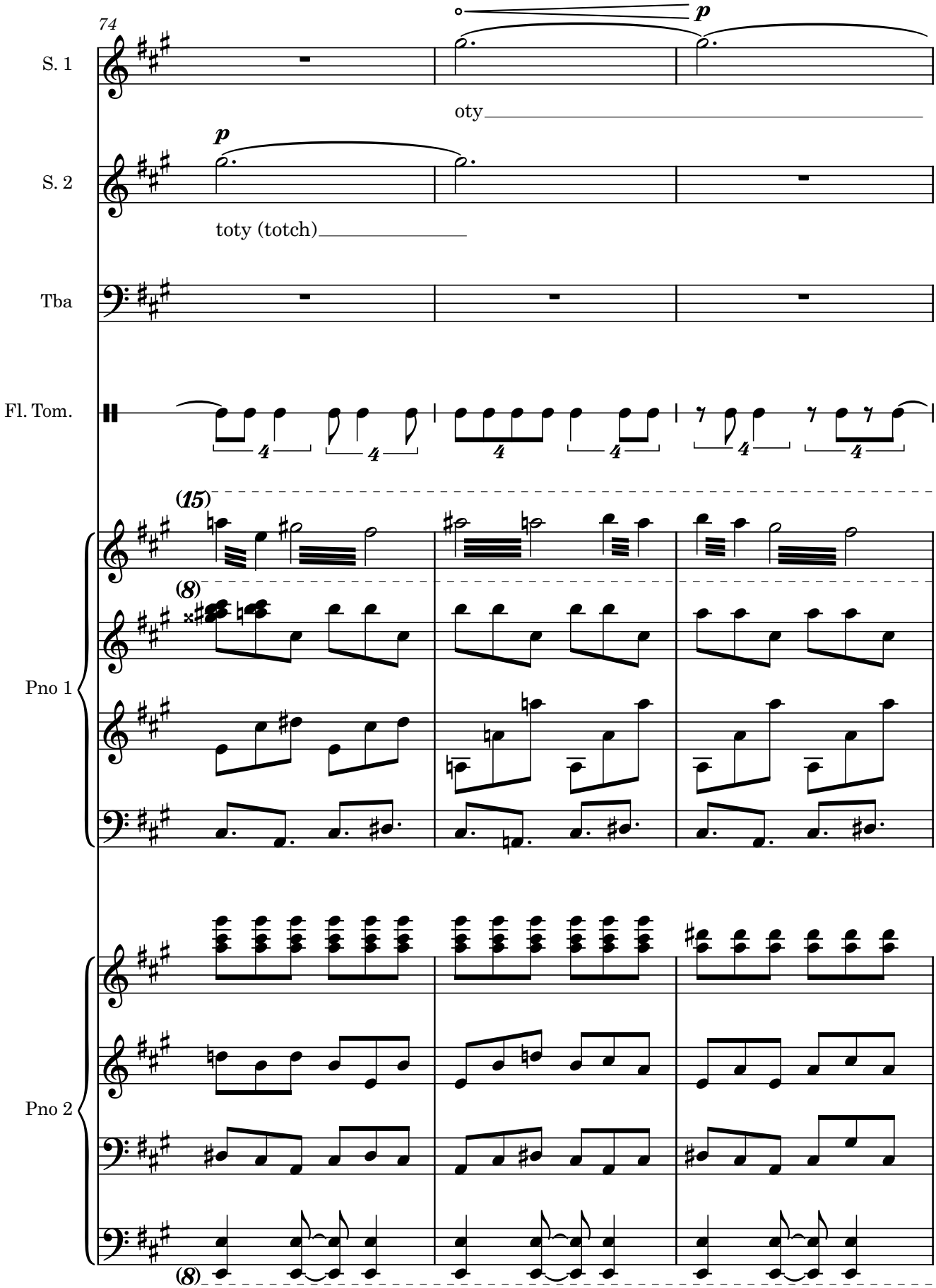
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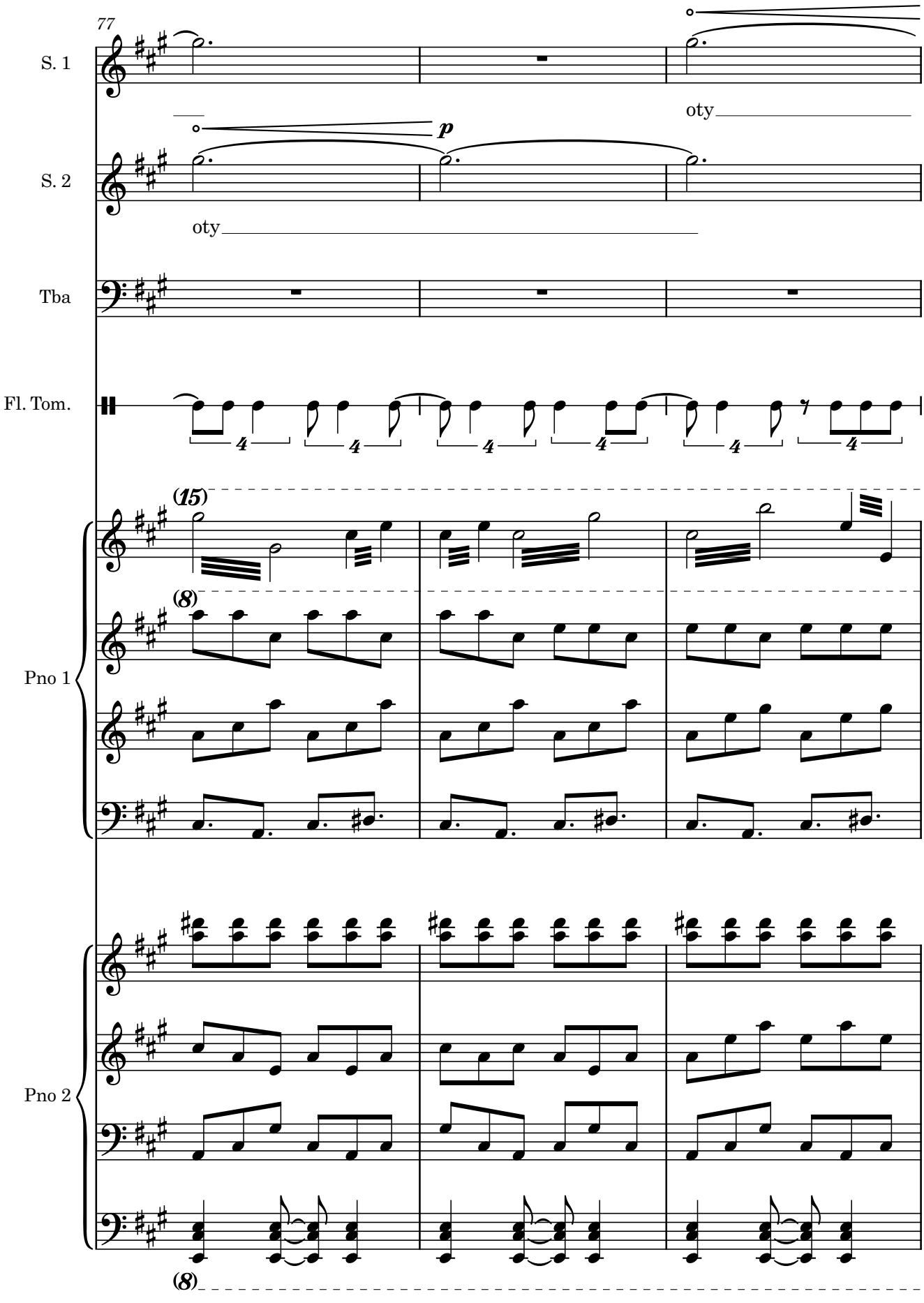
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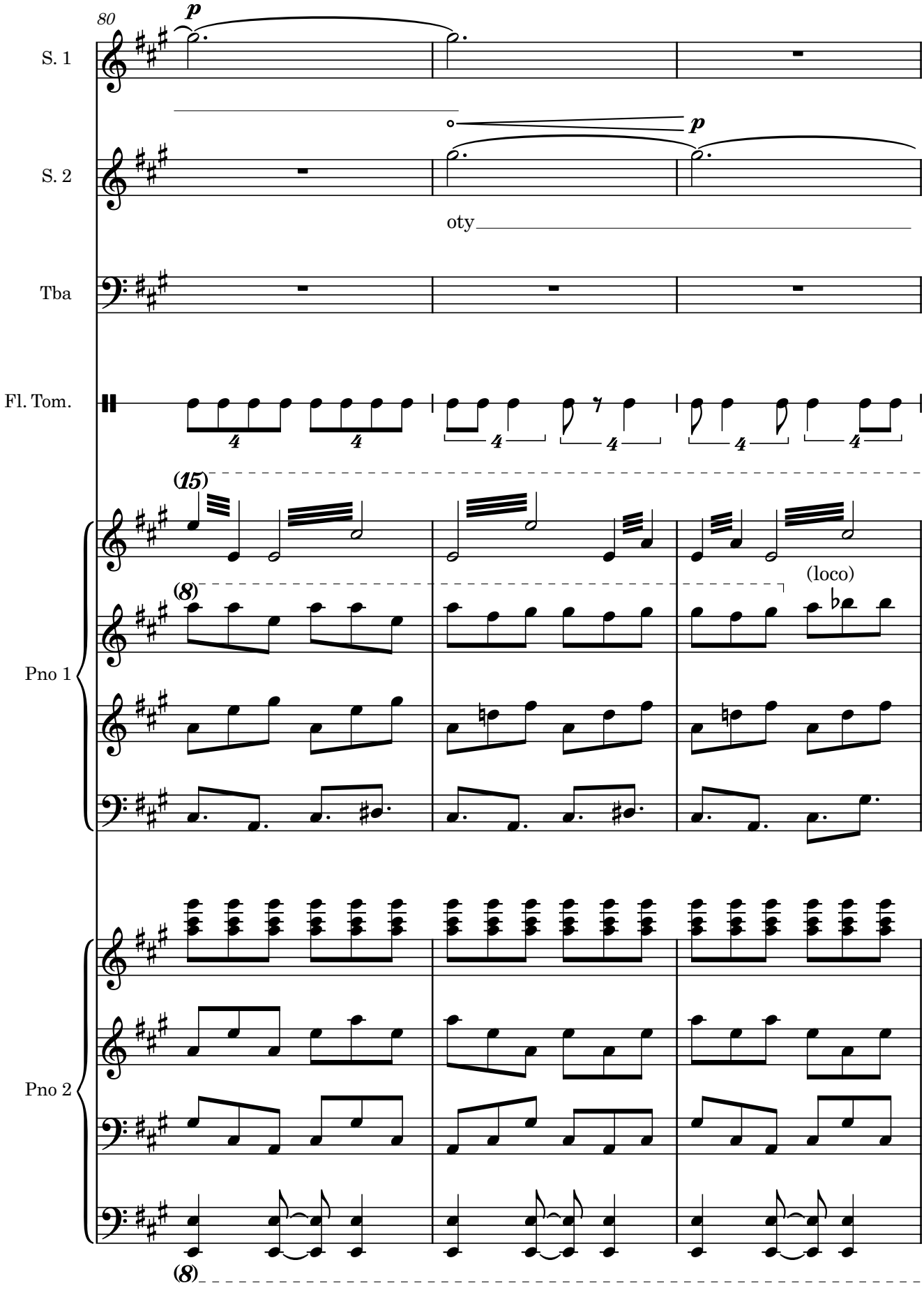
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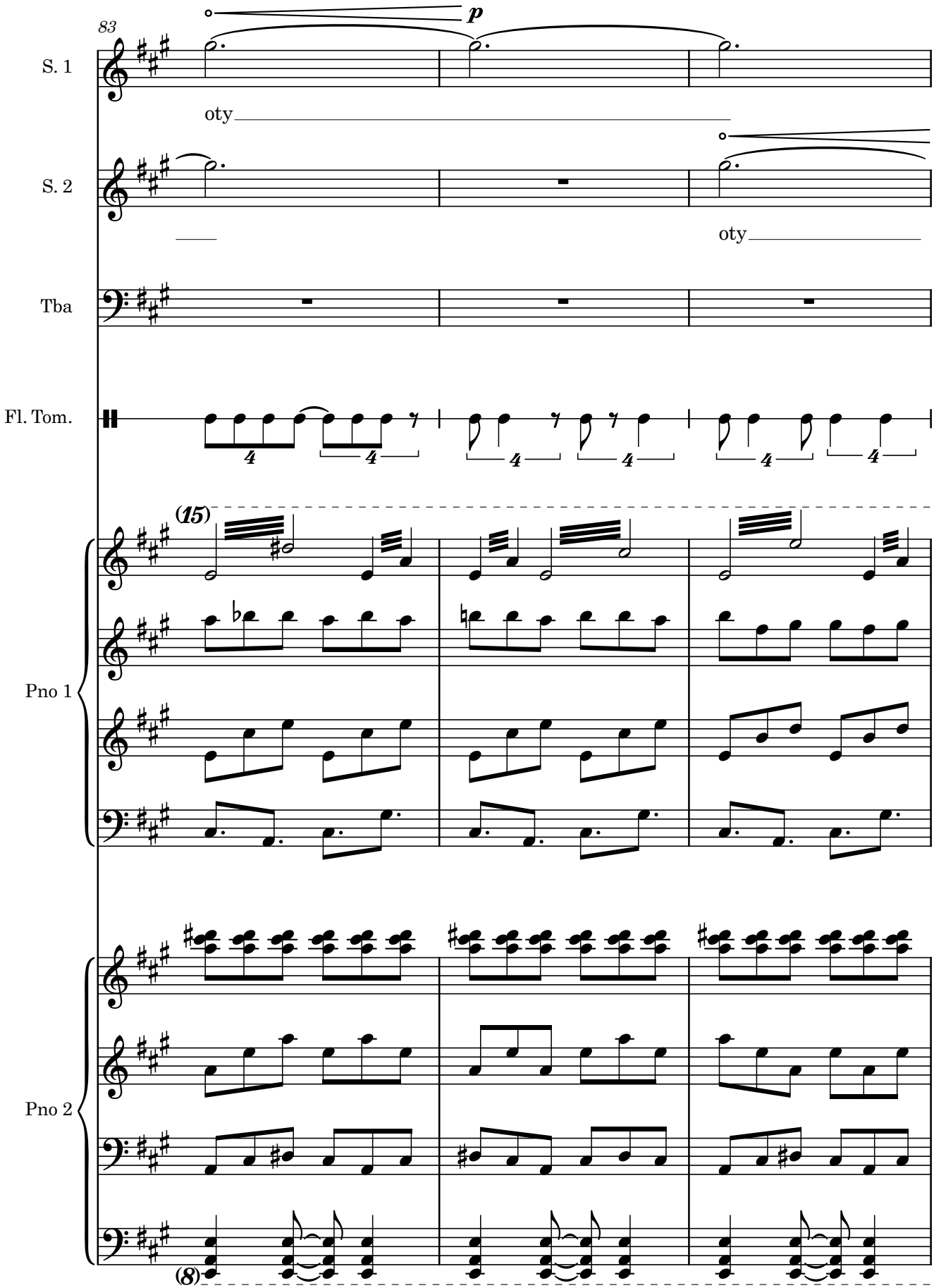
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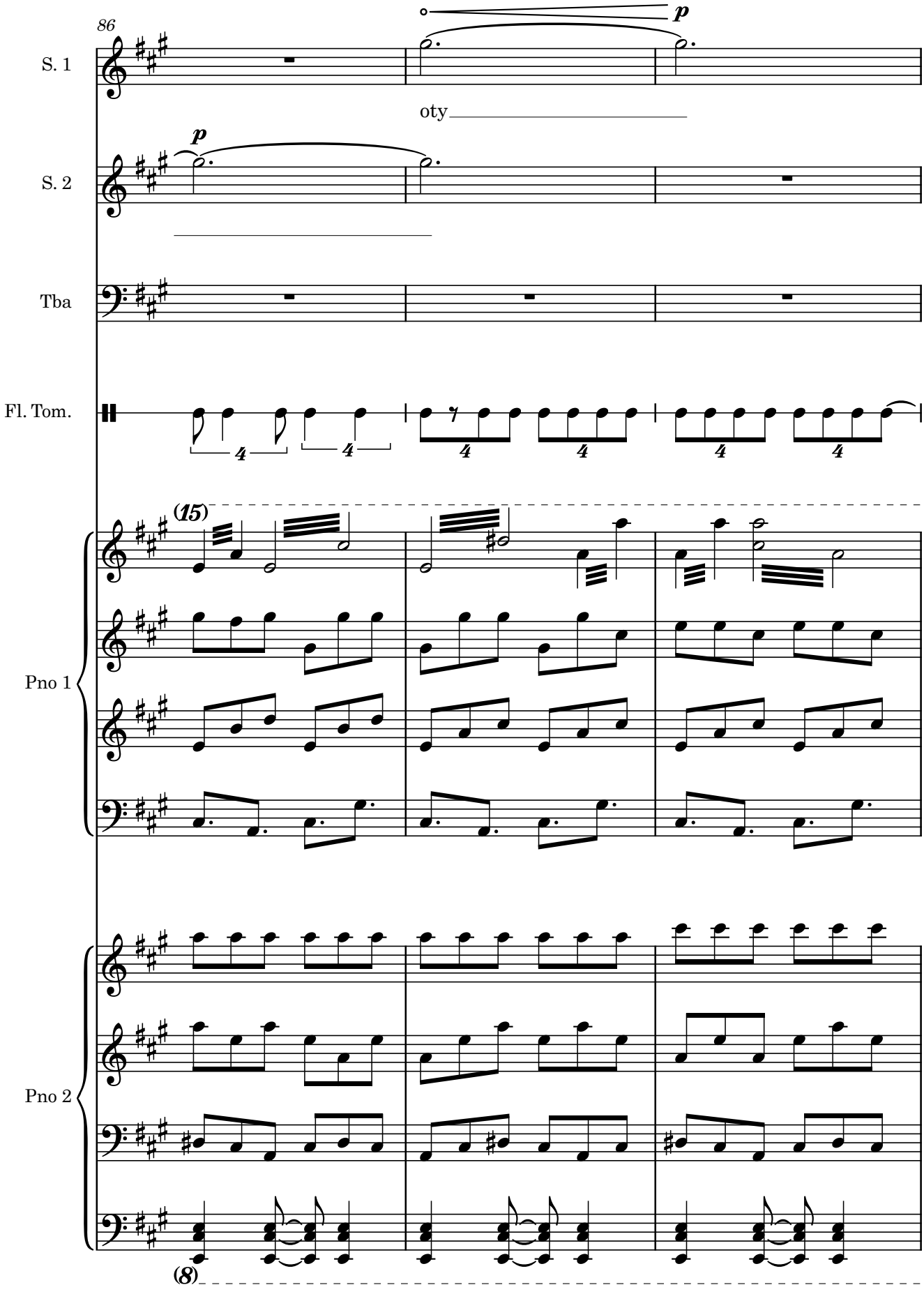
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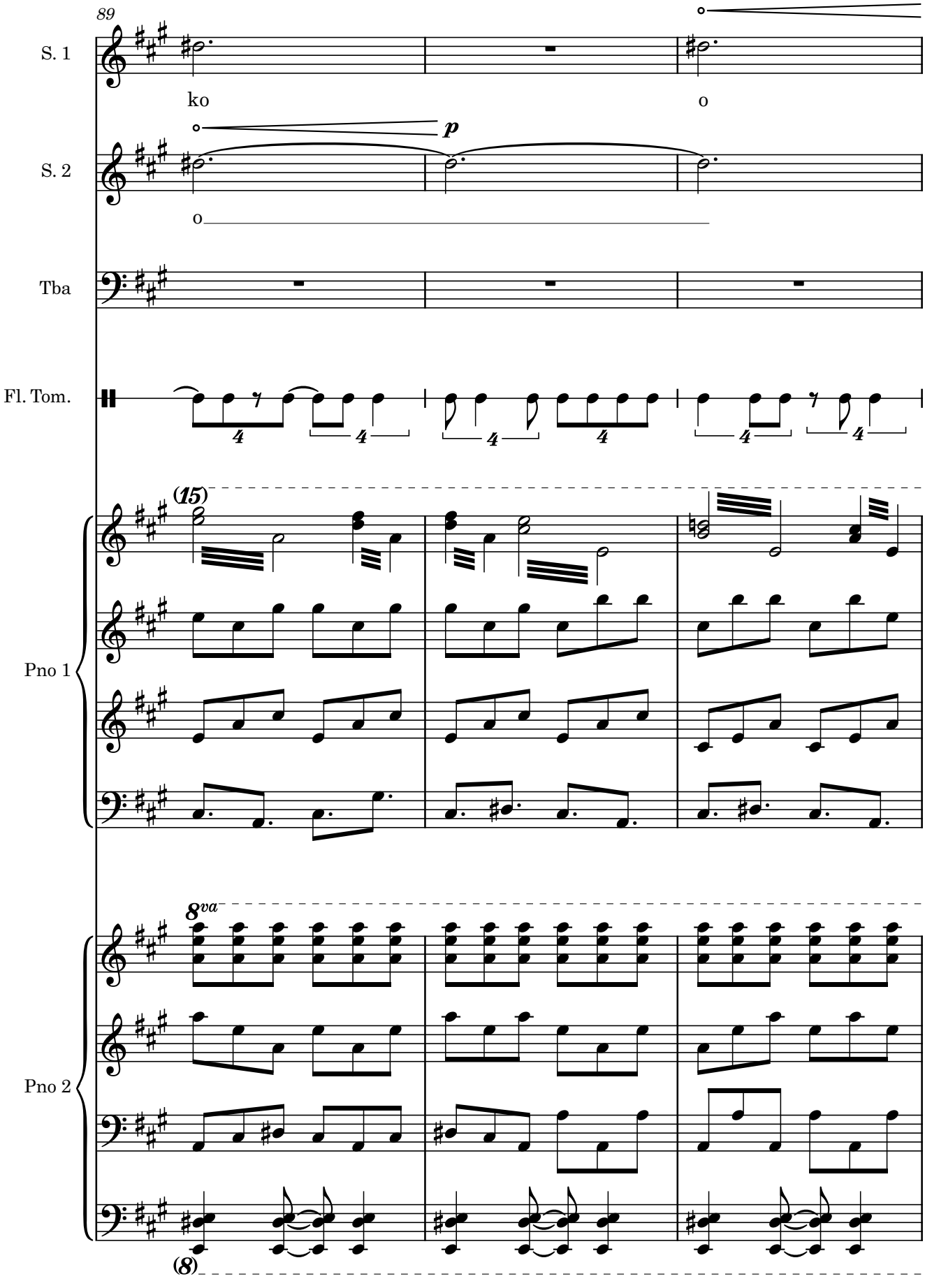
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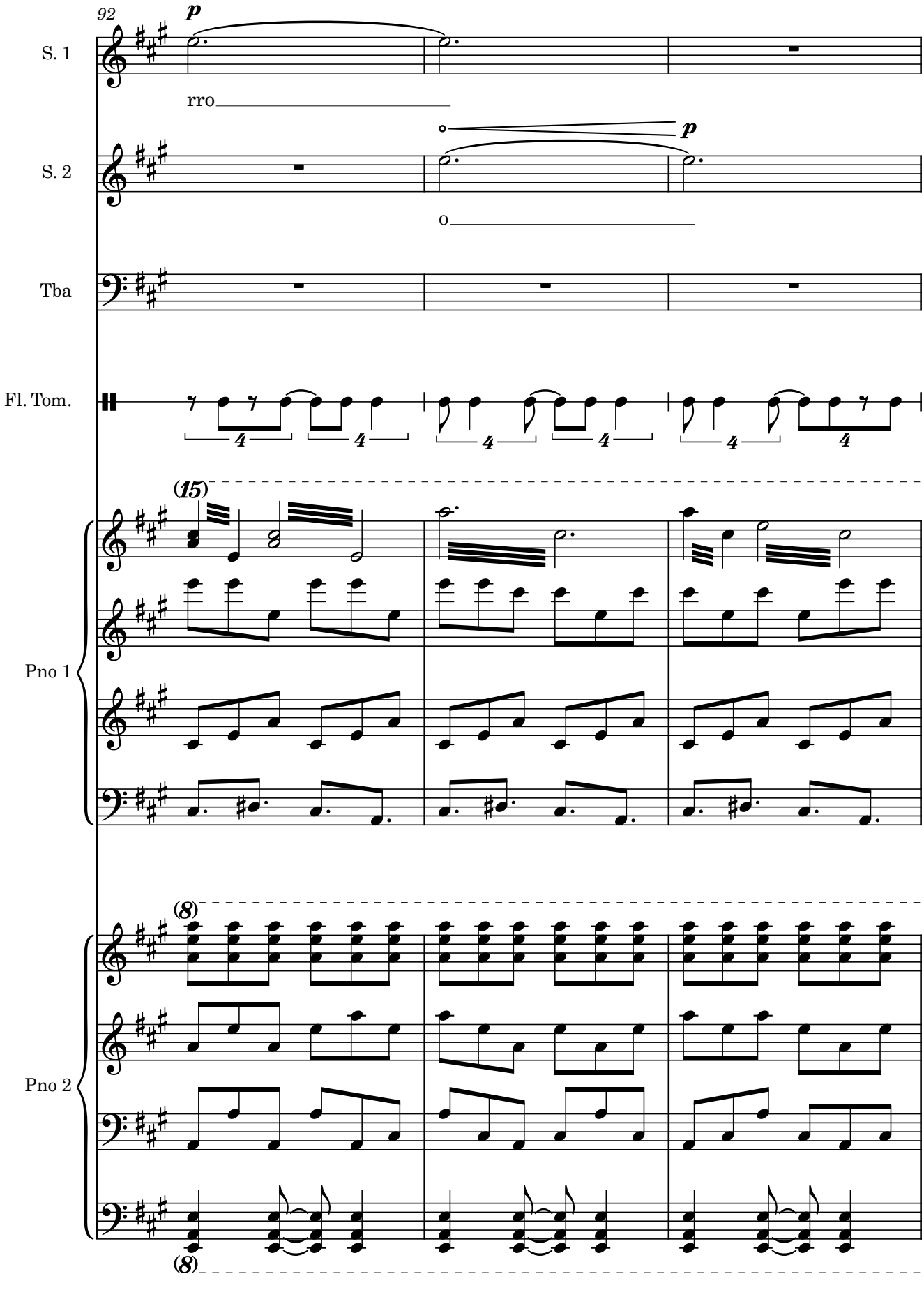
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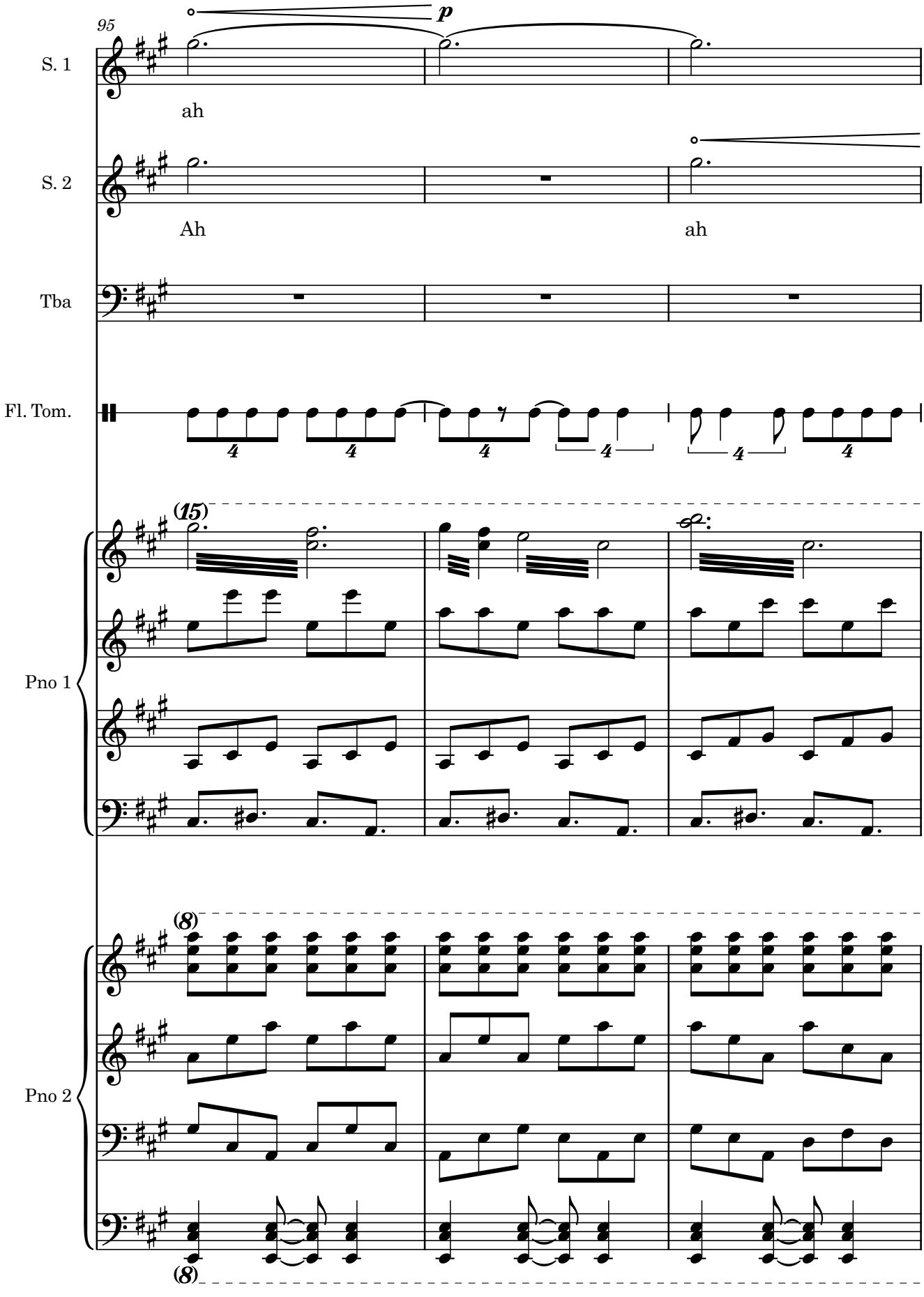
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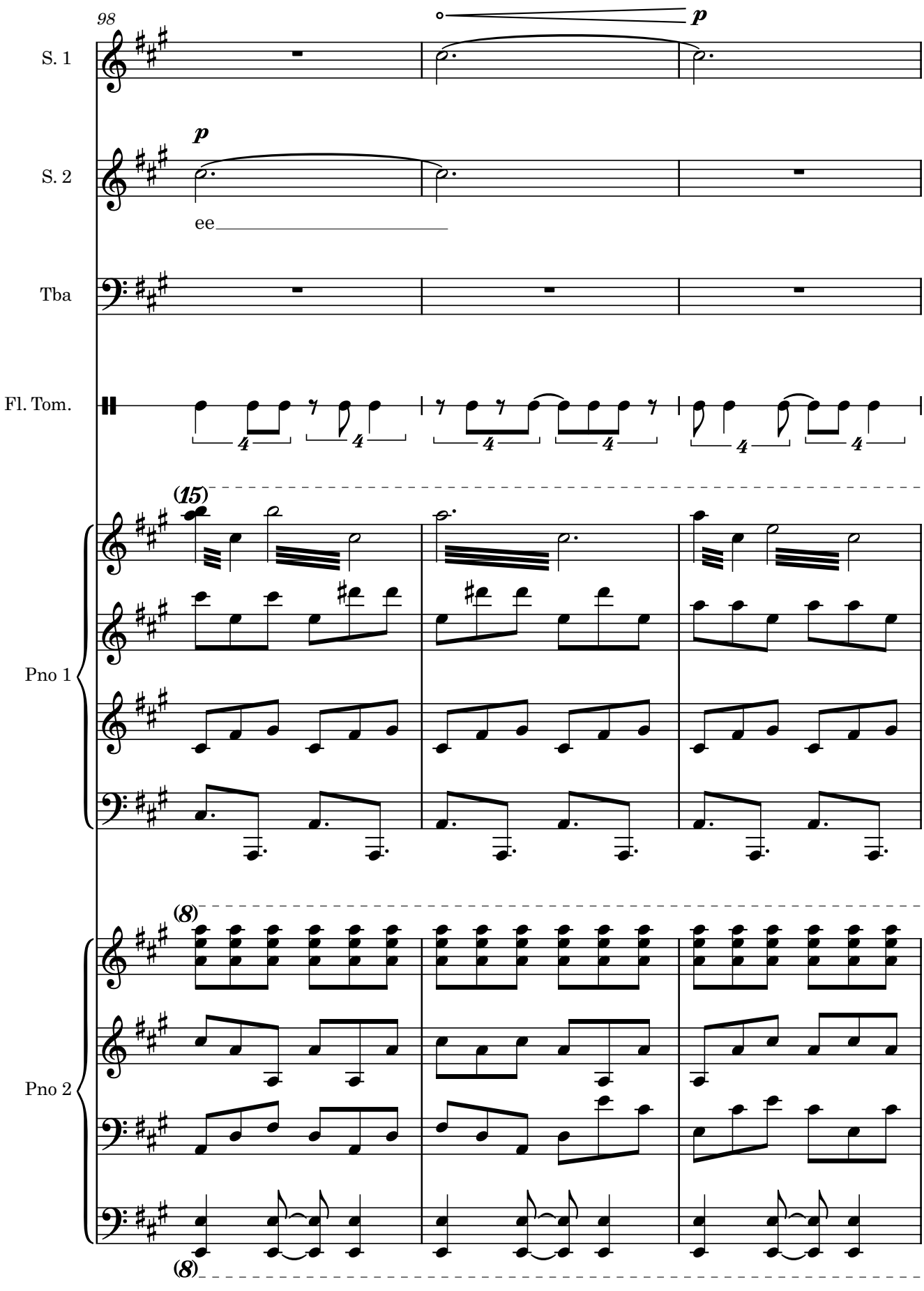
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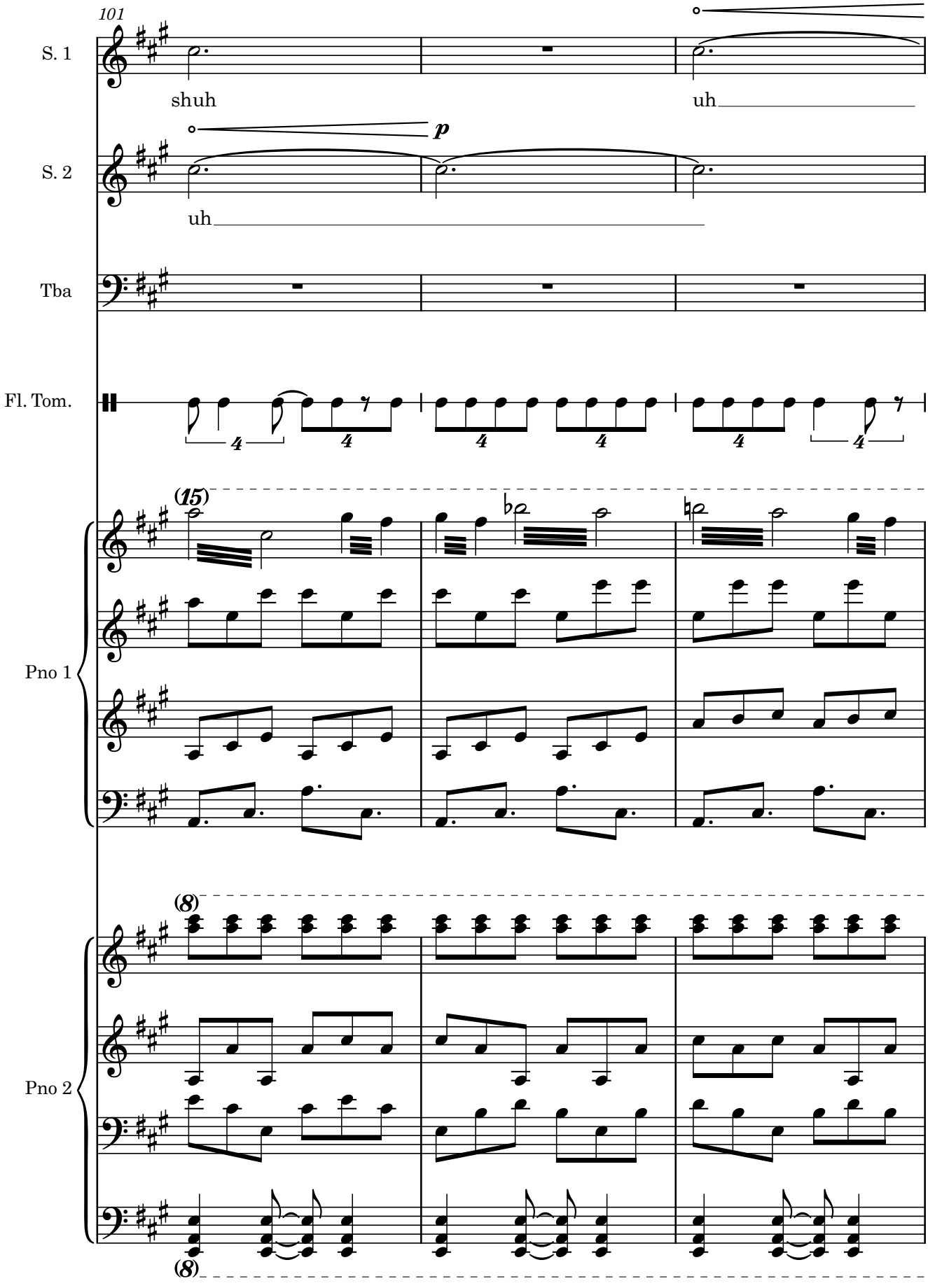
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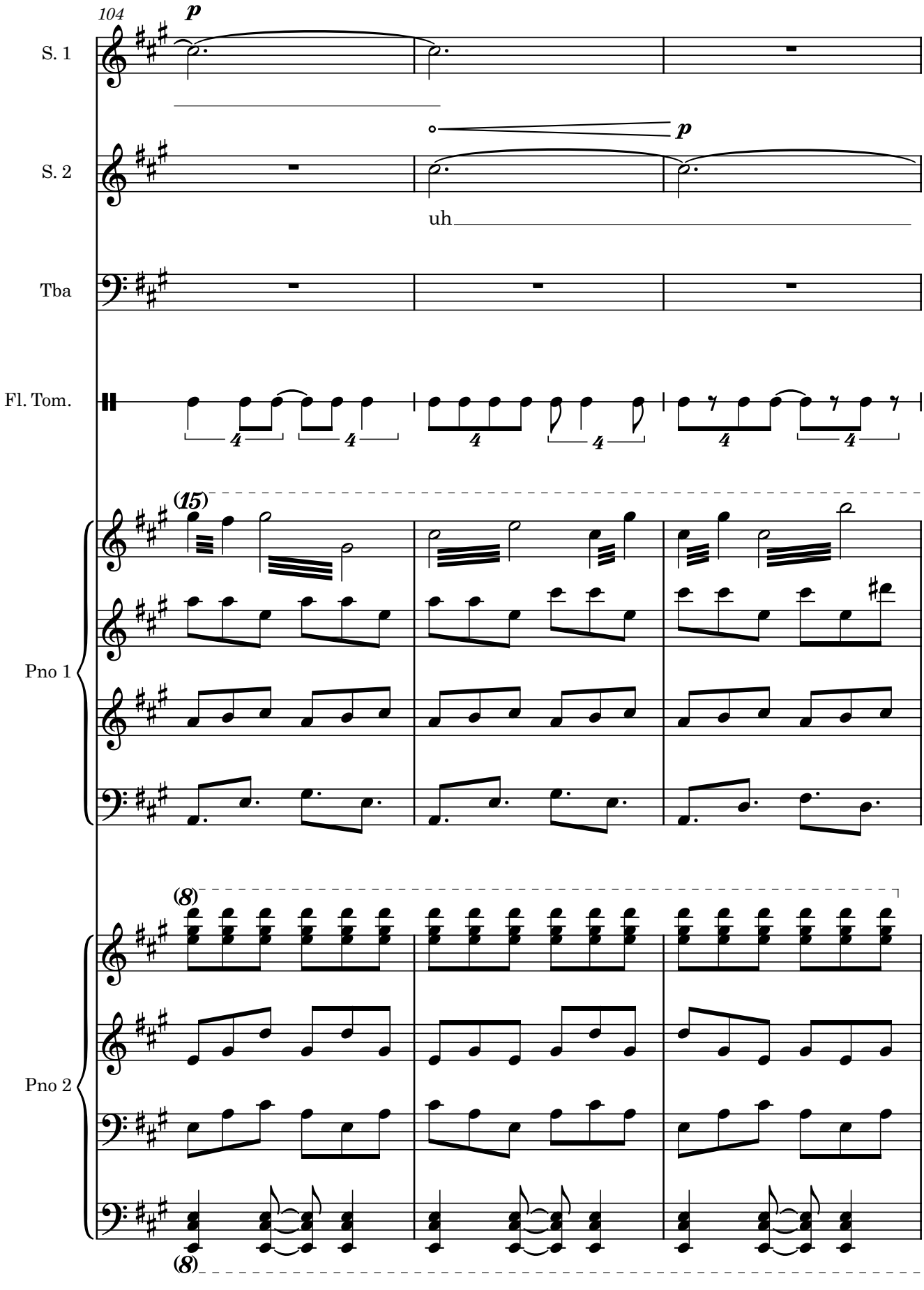
104
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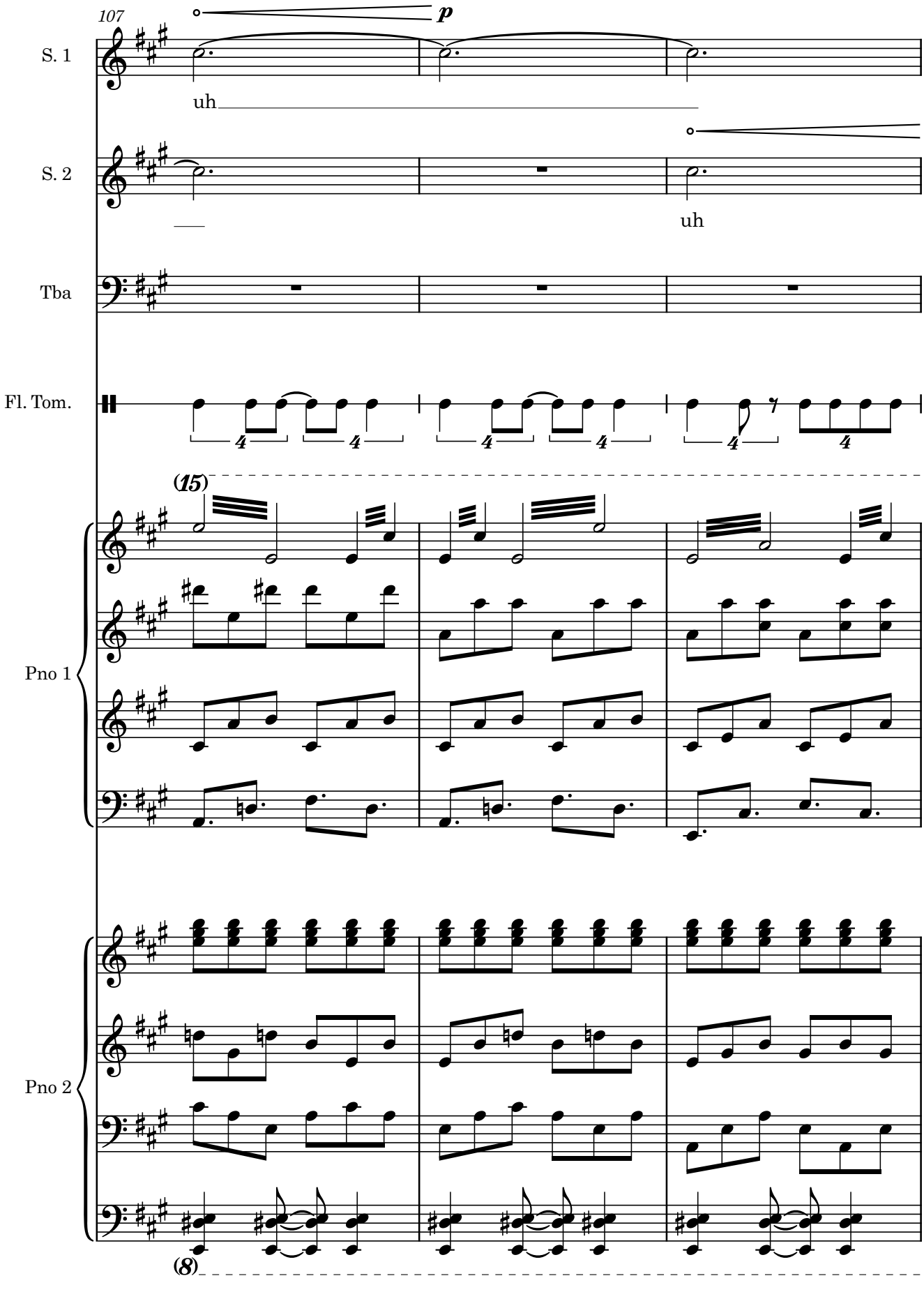
107
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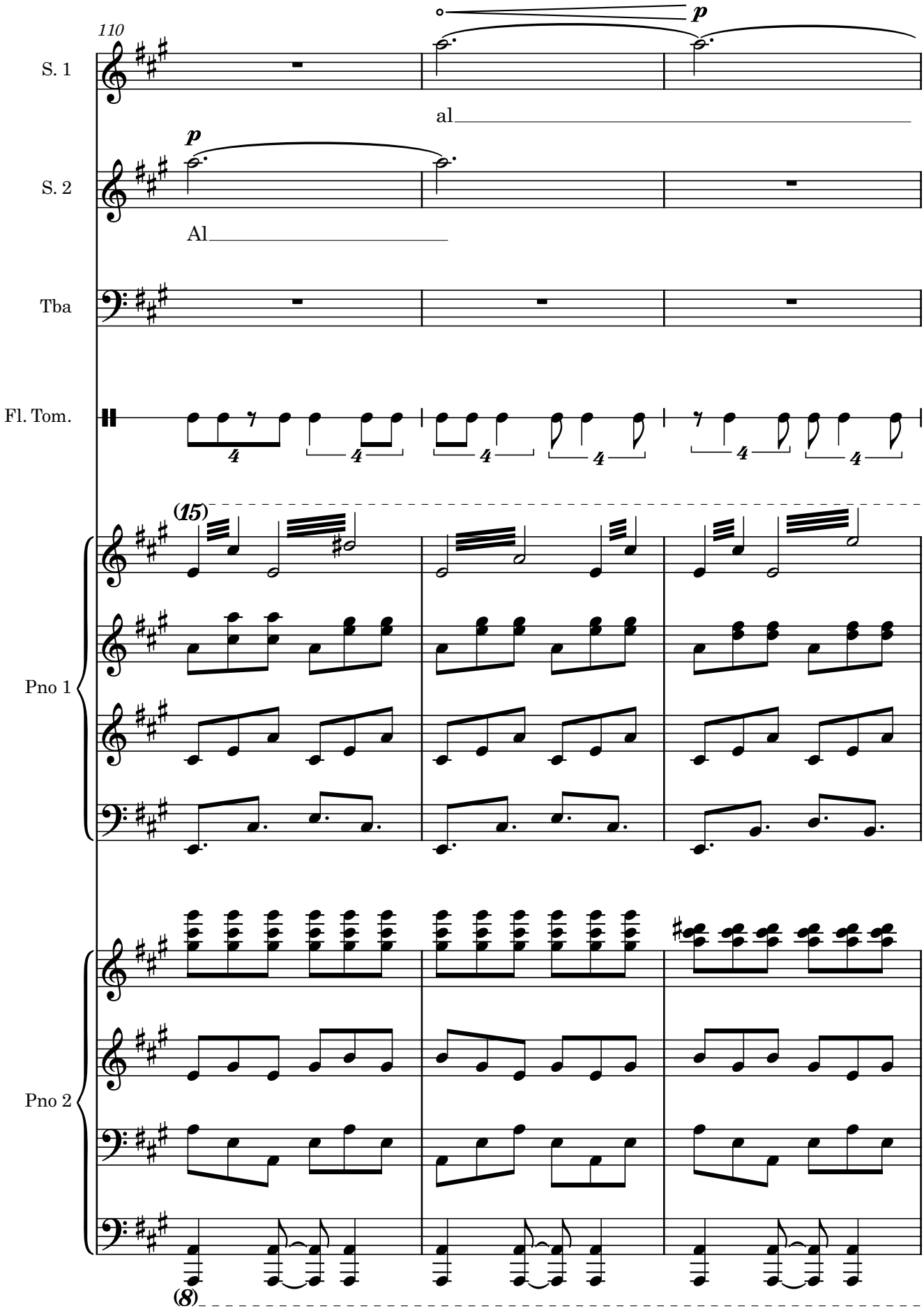
110
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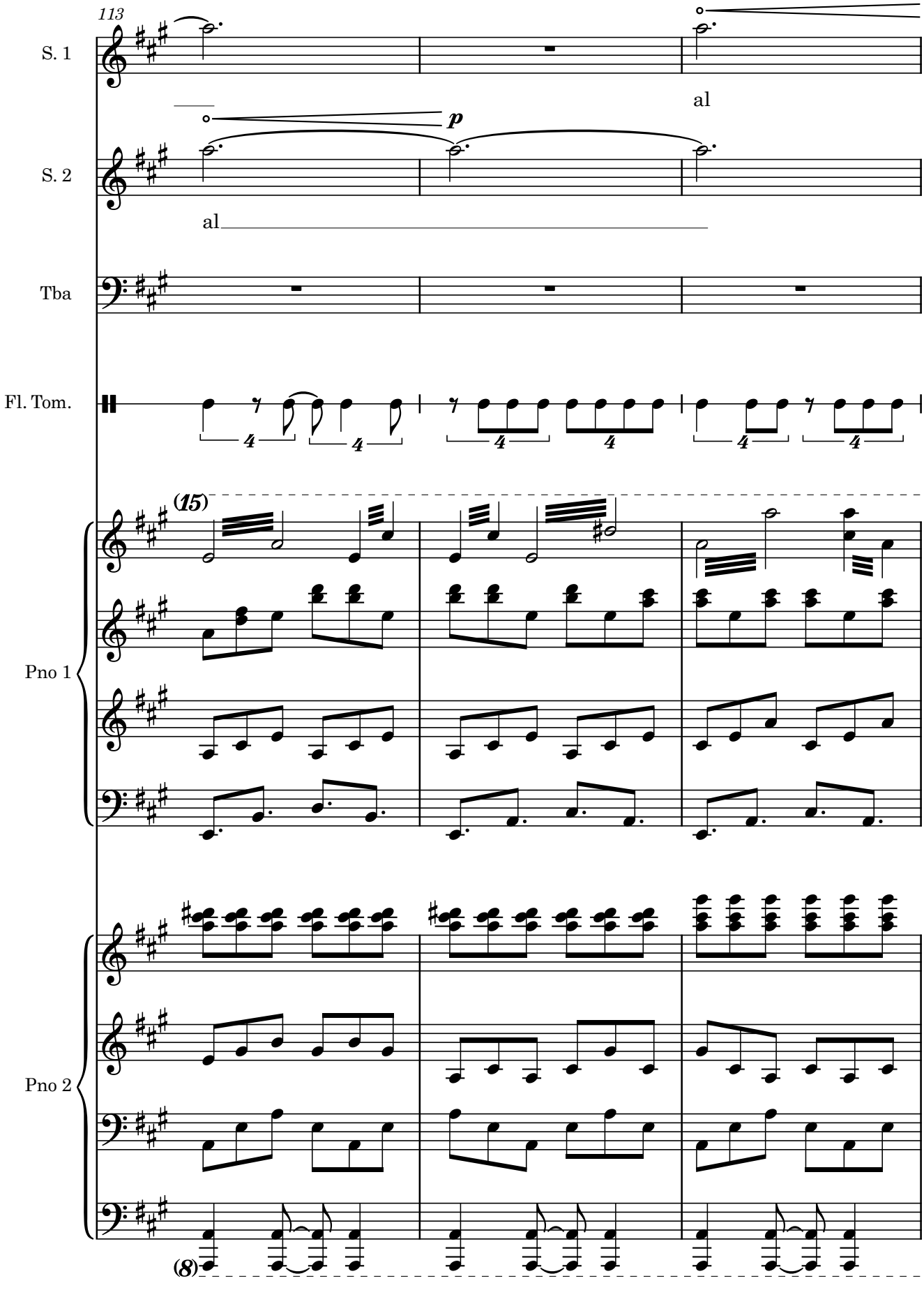
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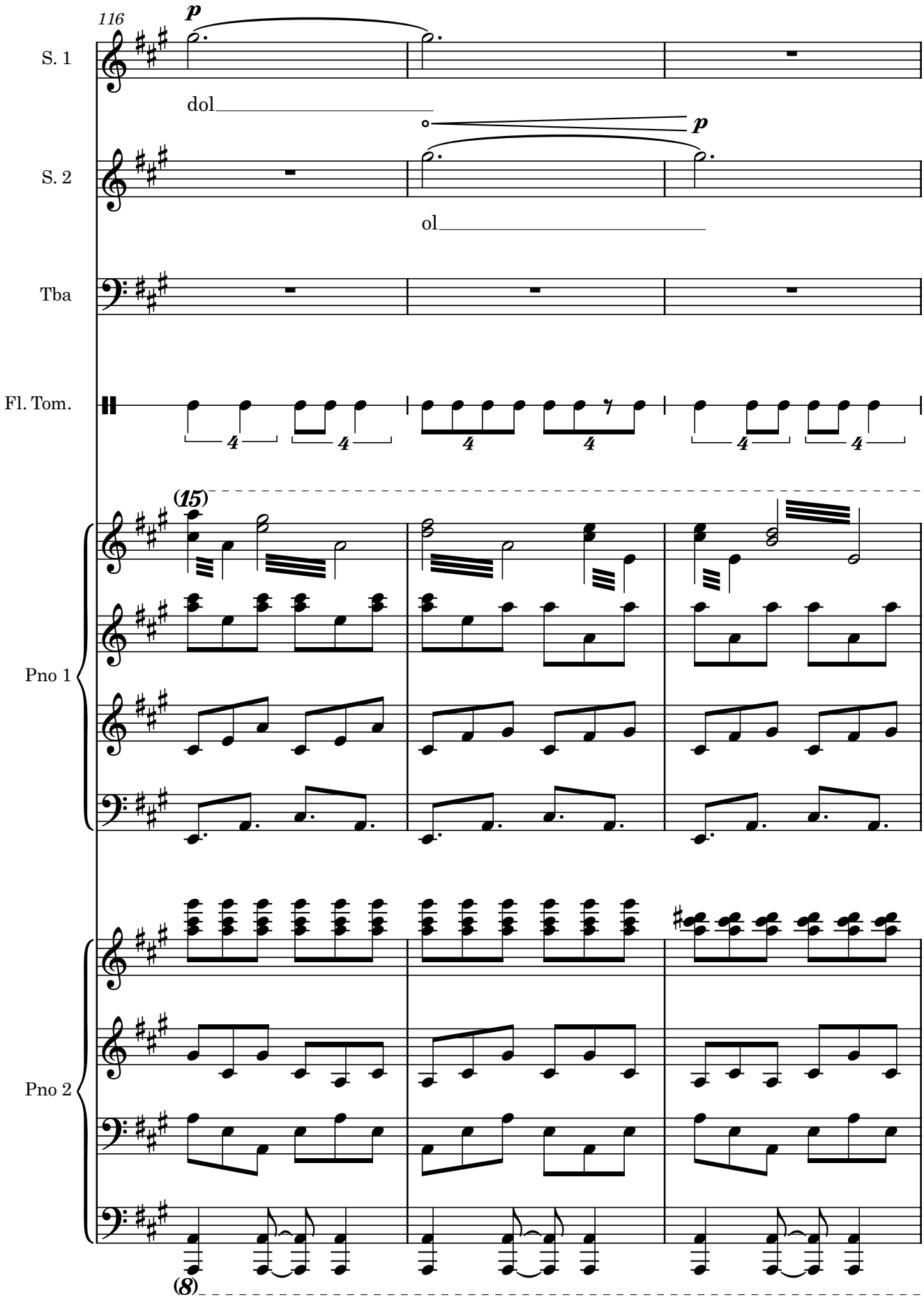
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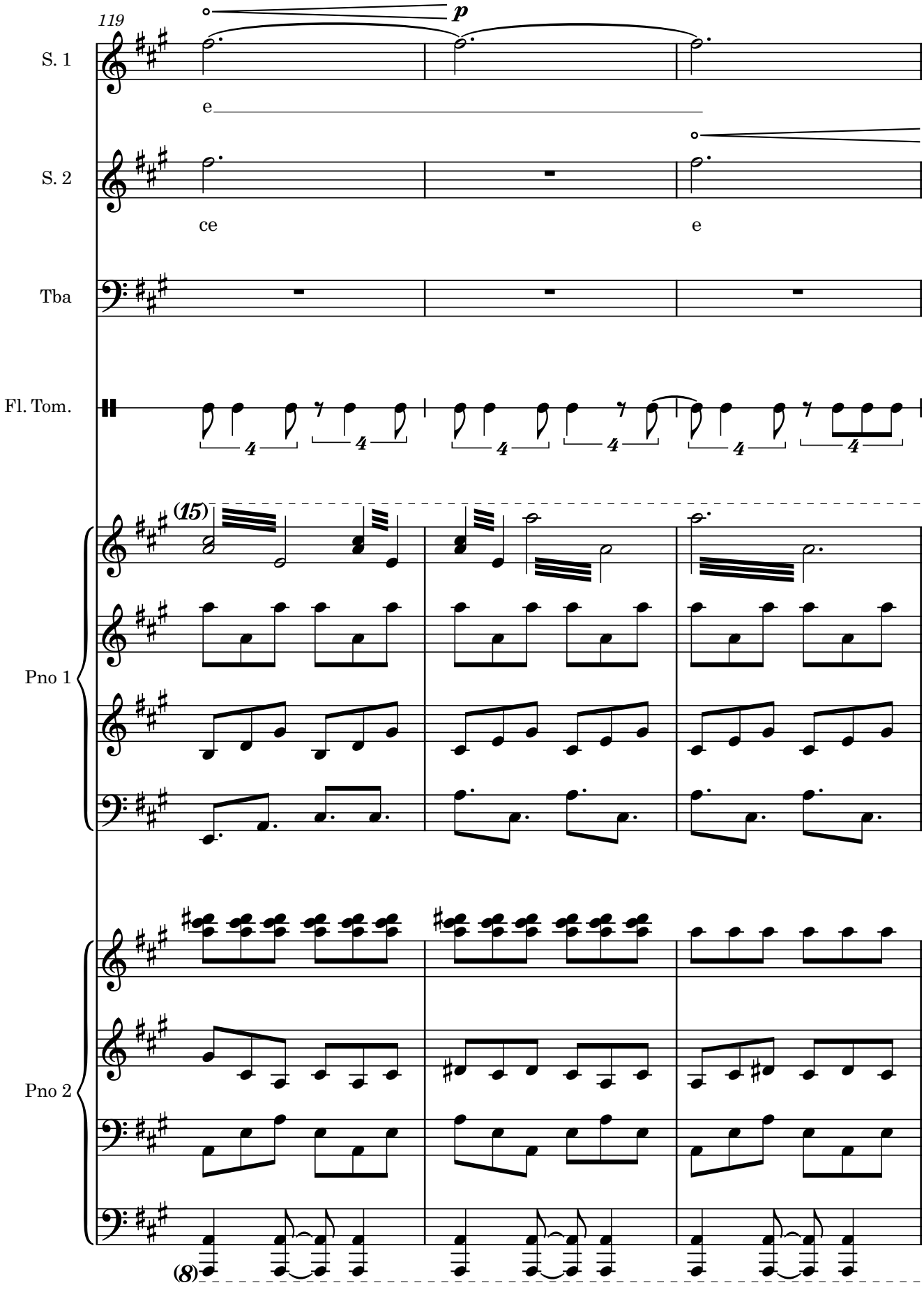
119
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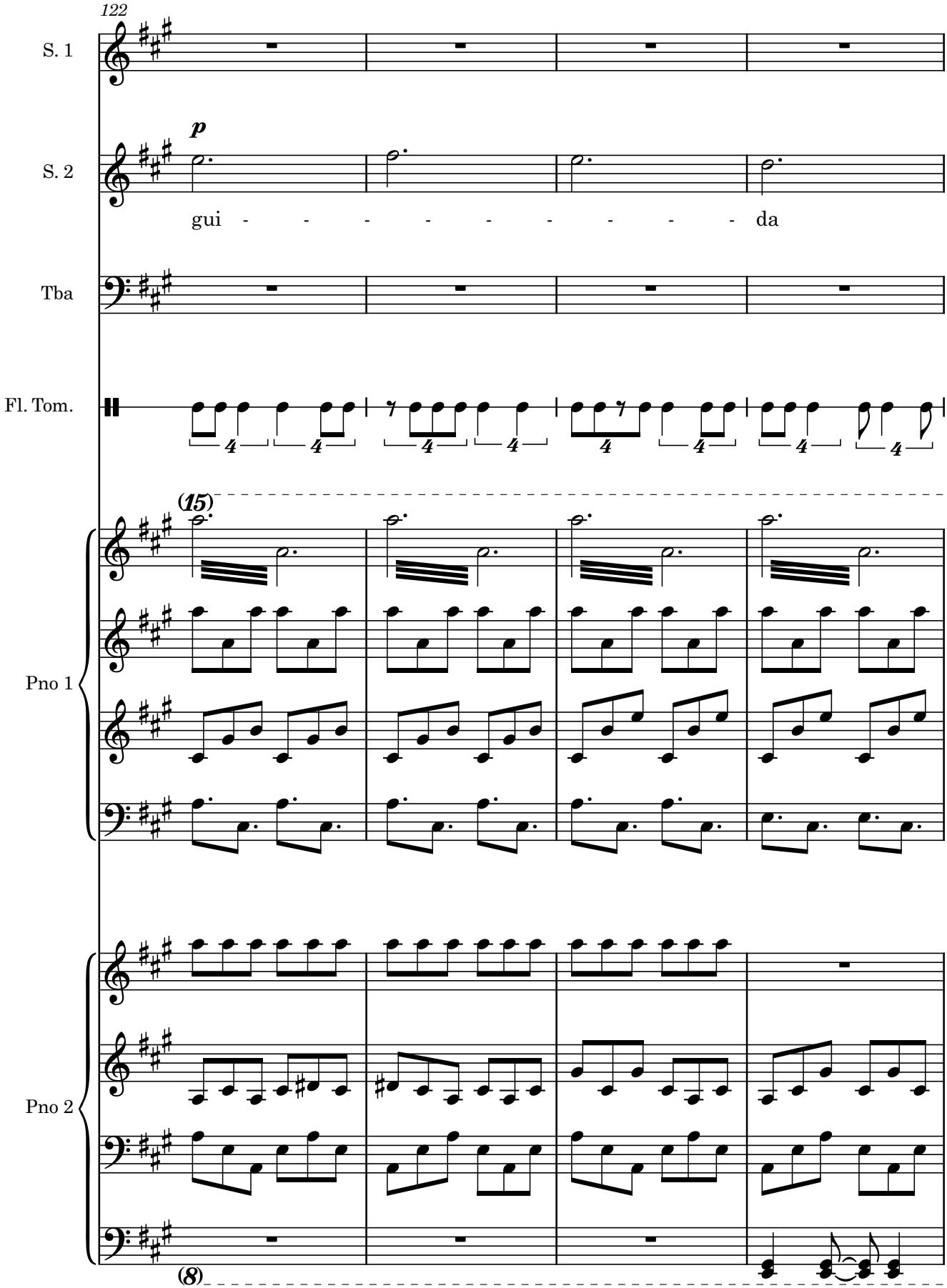
122
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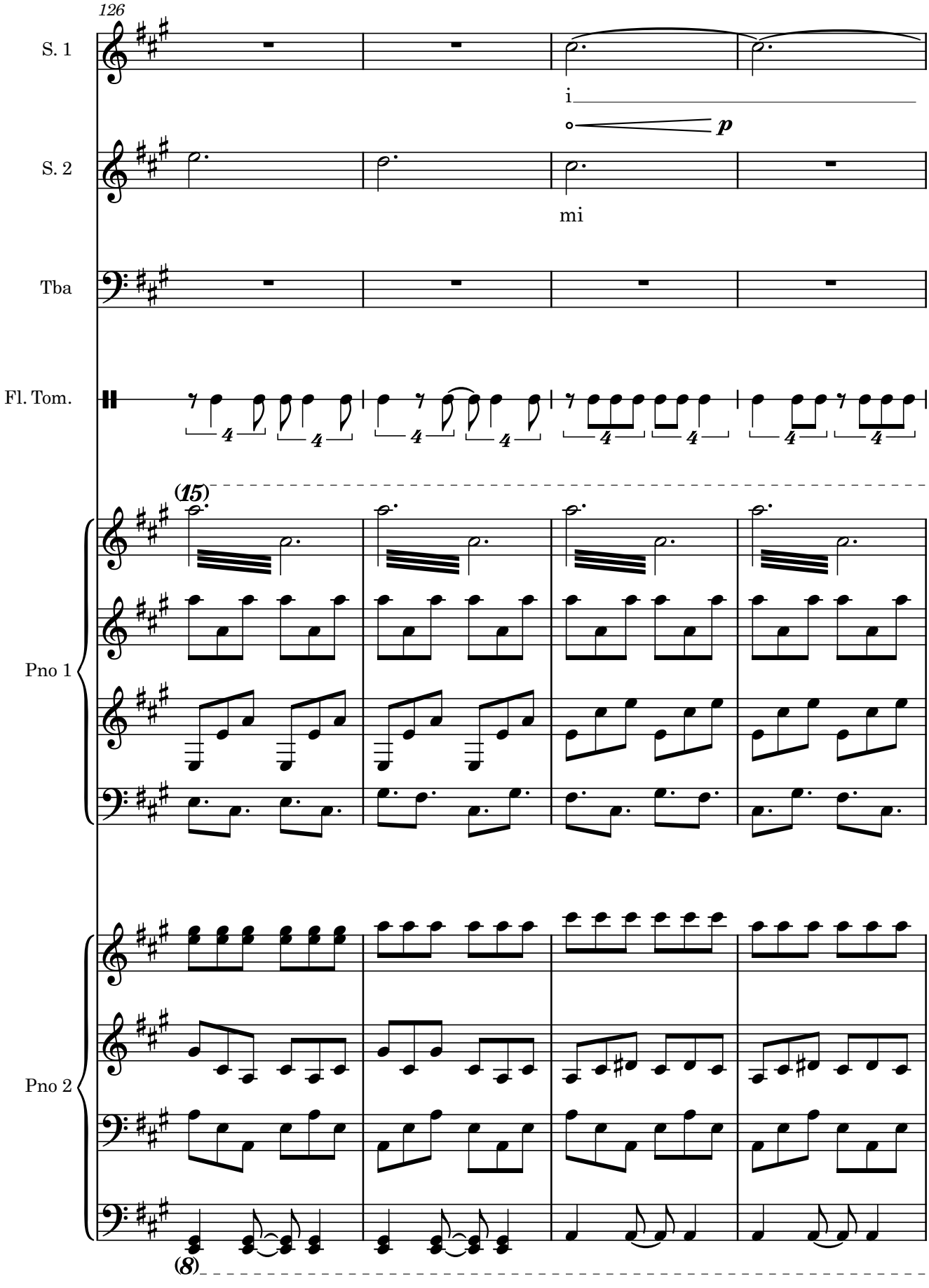
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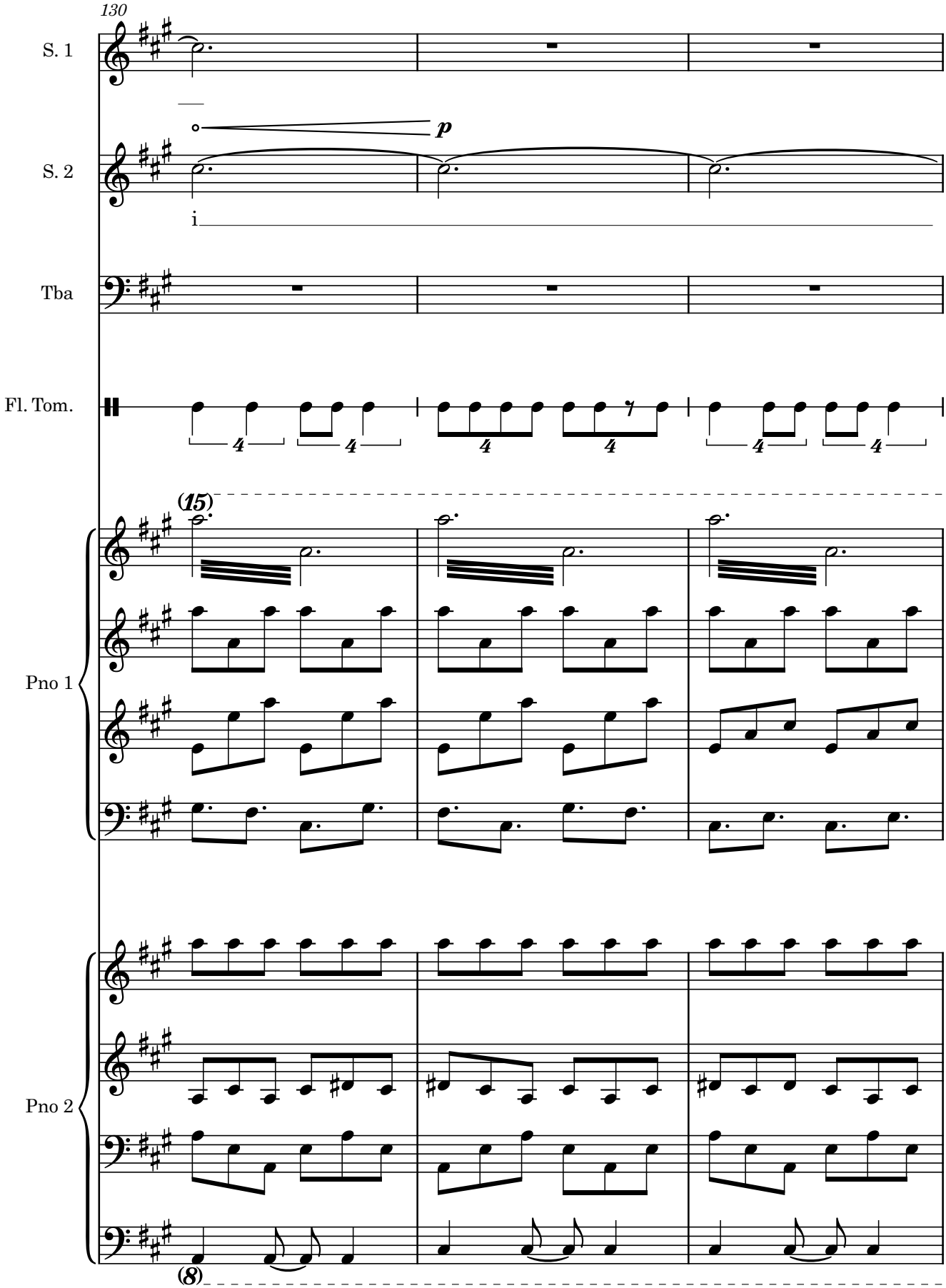
130
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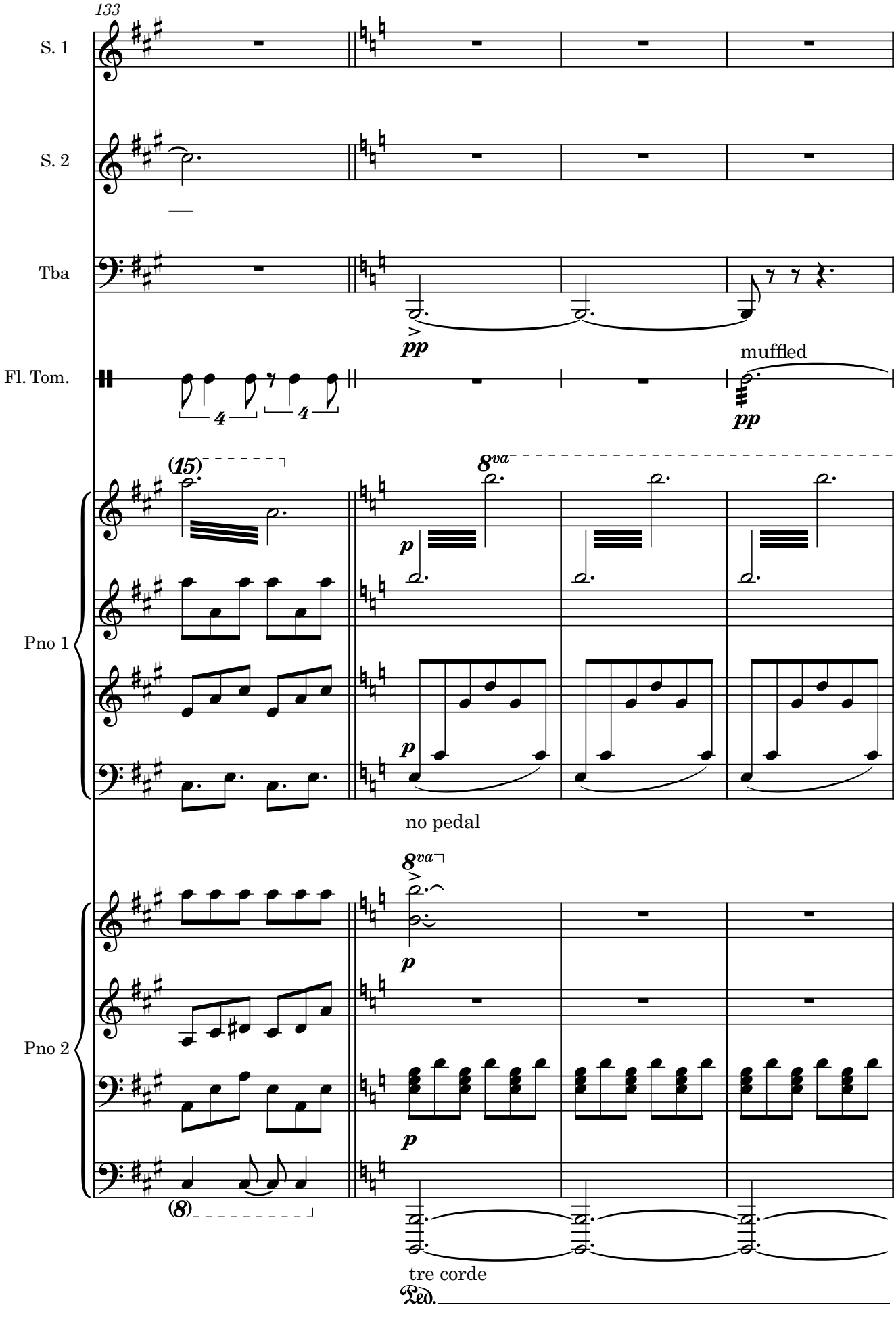
133
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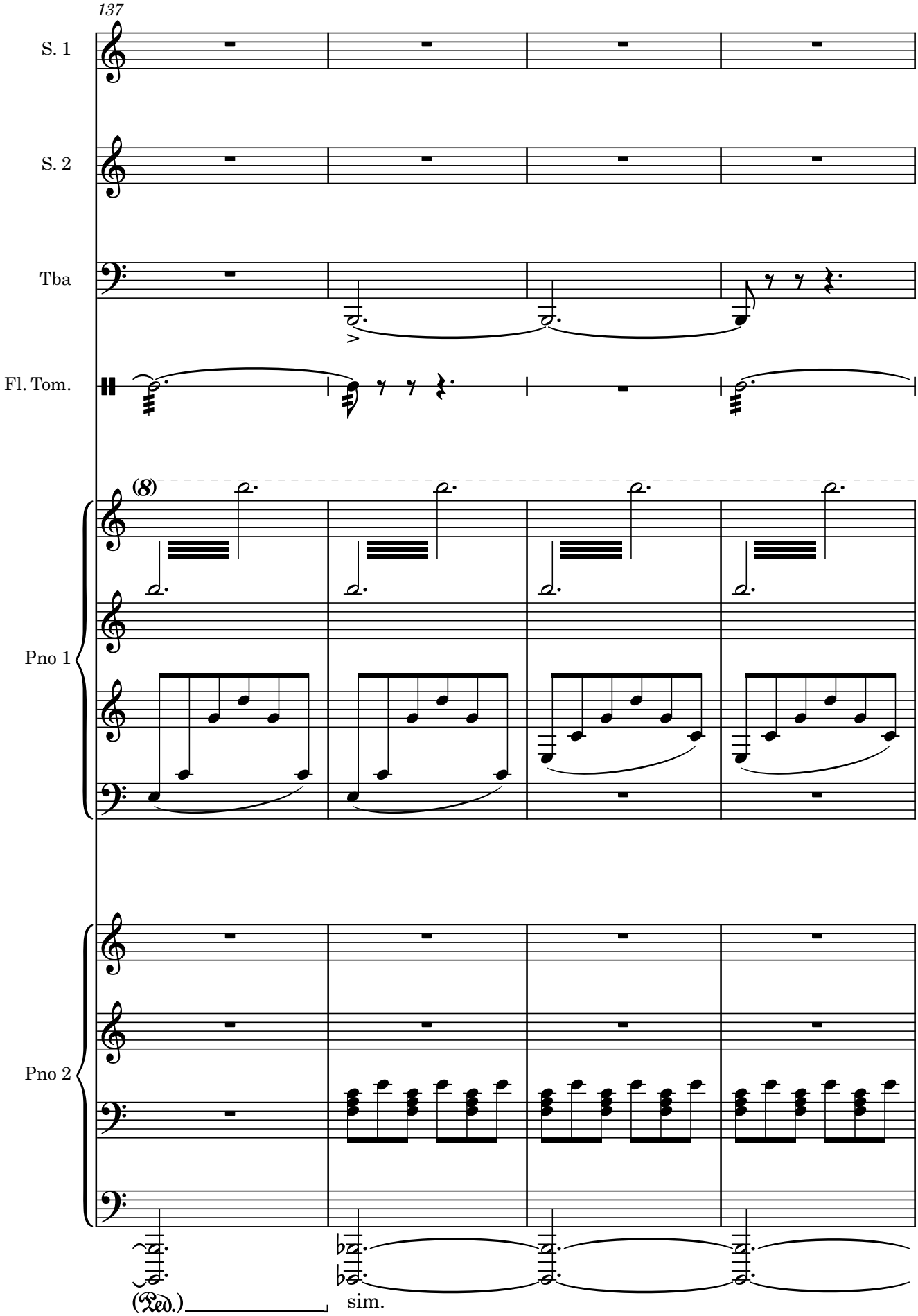
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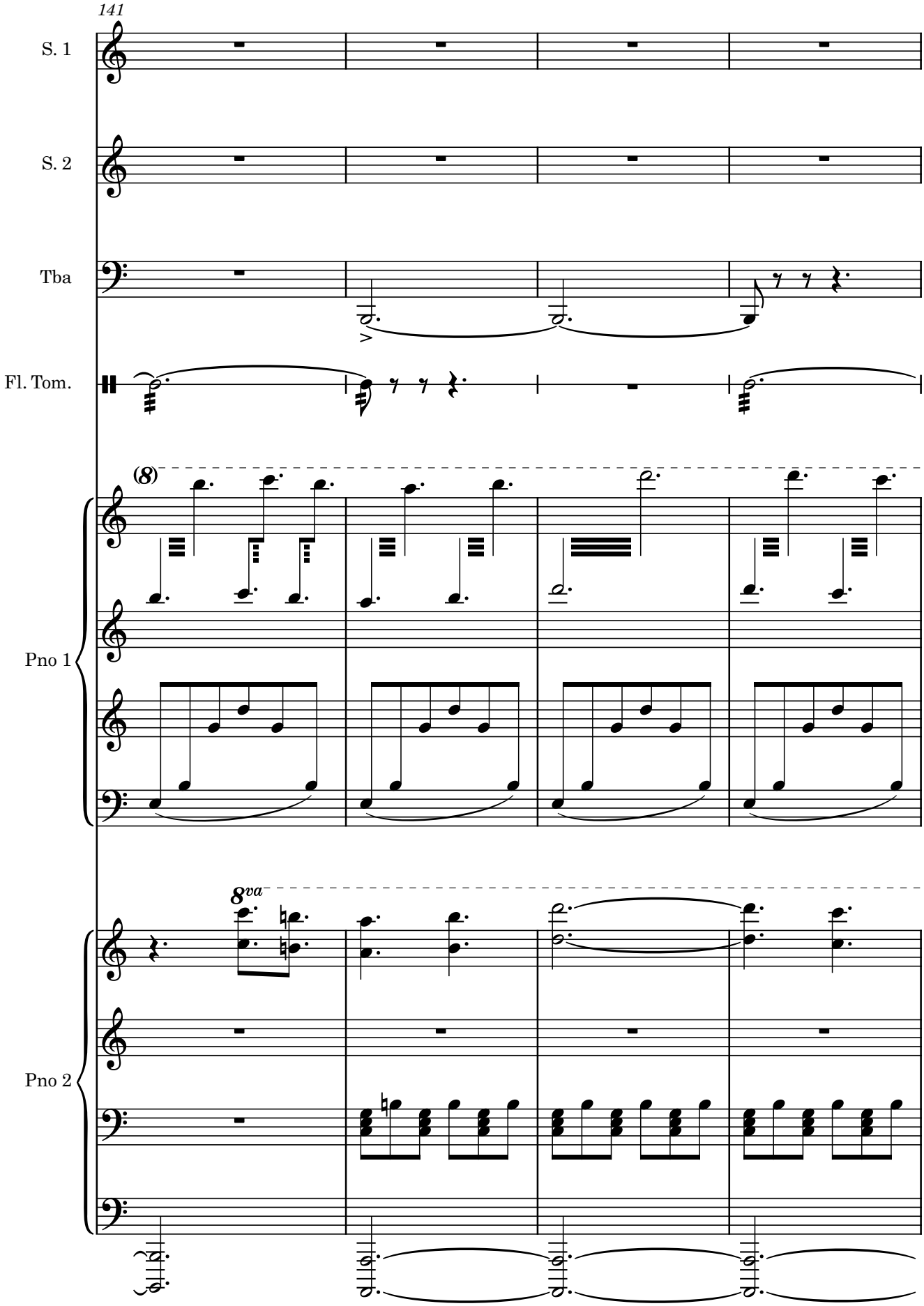
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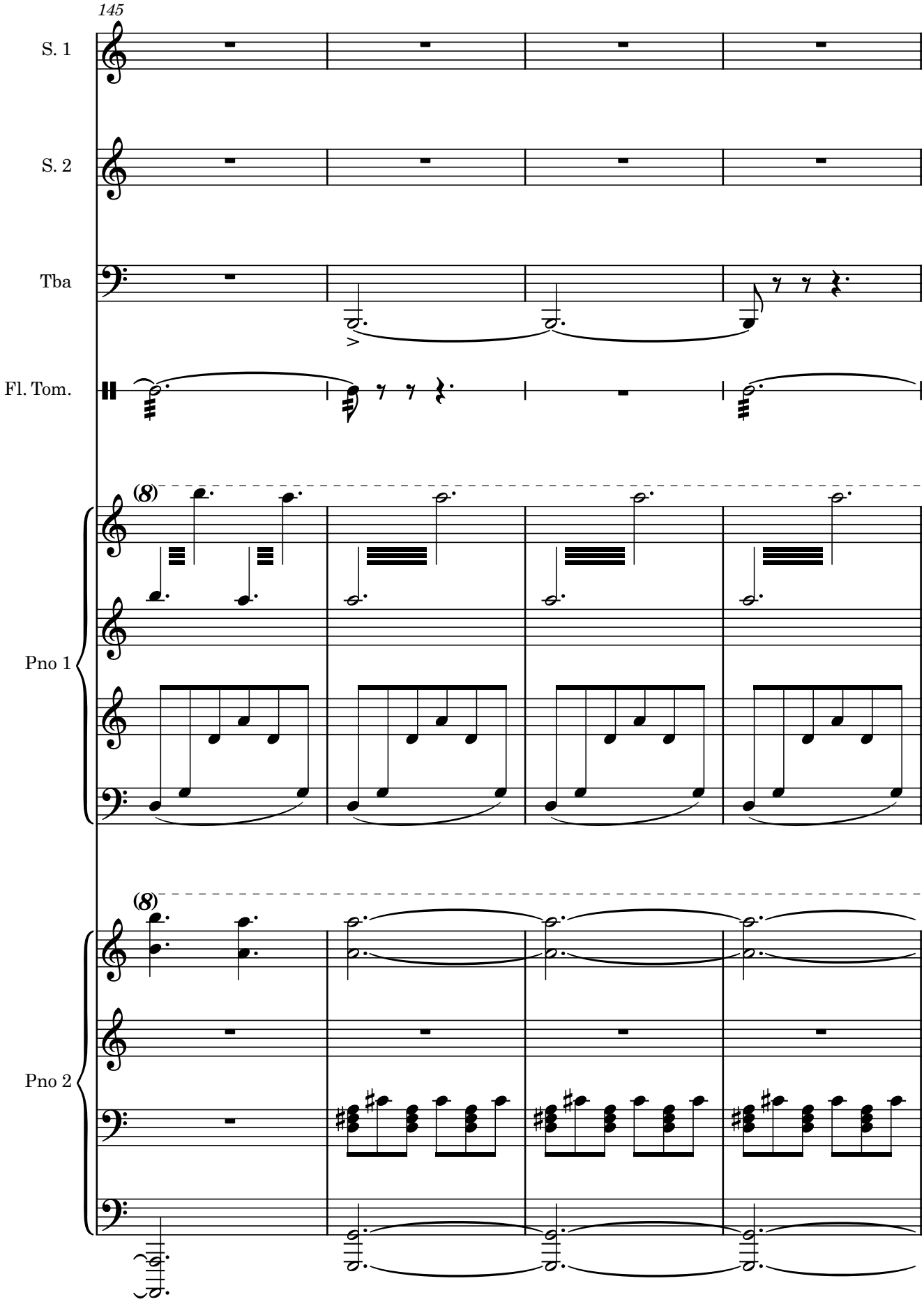
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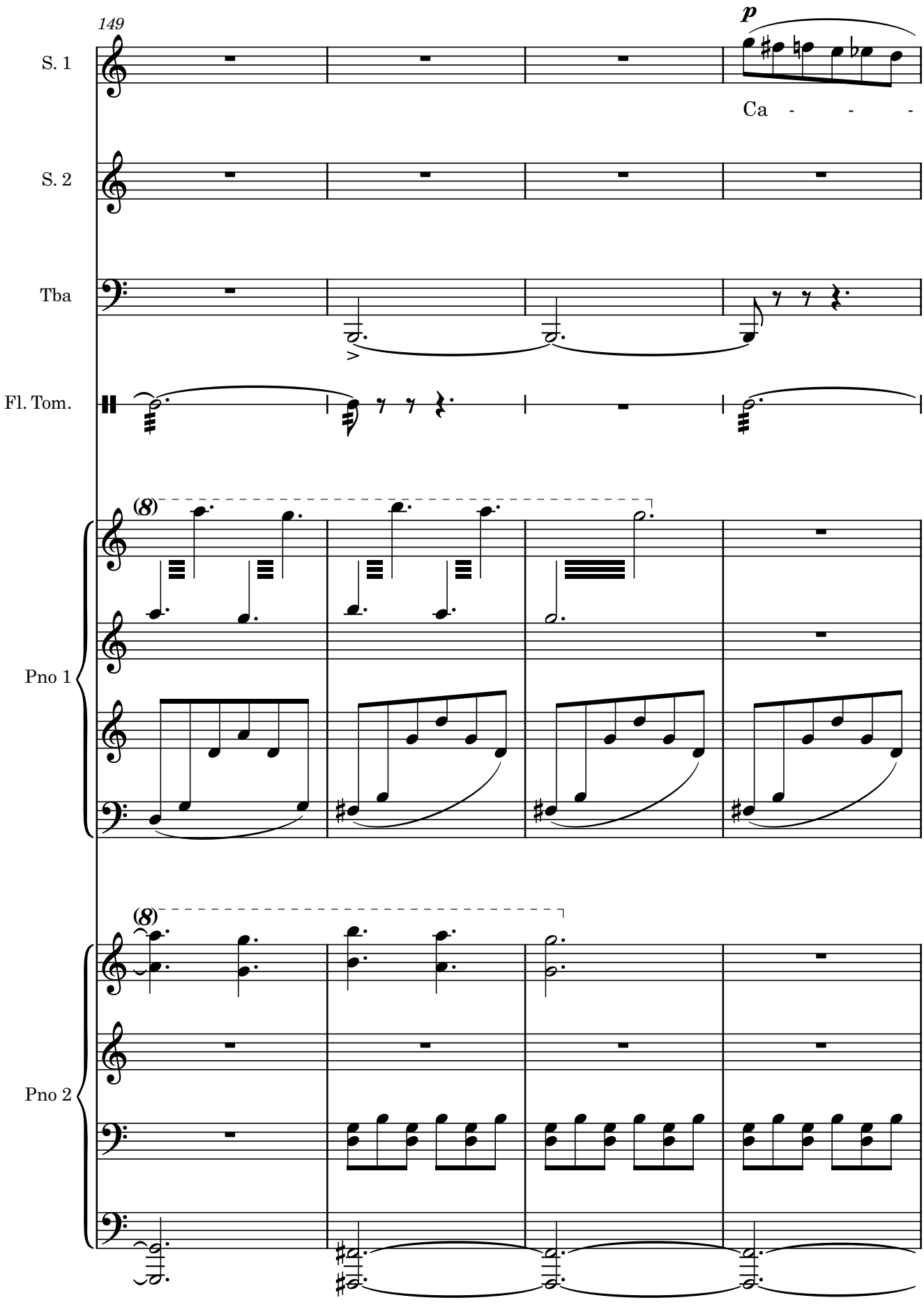
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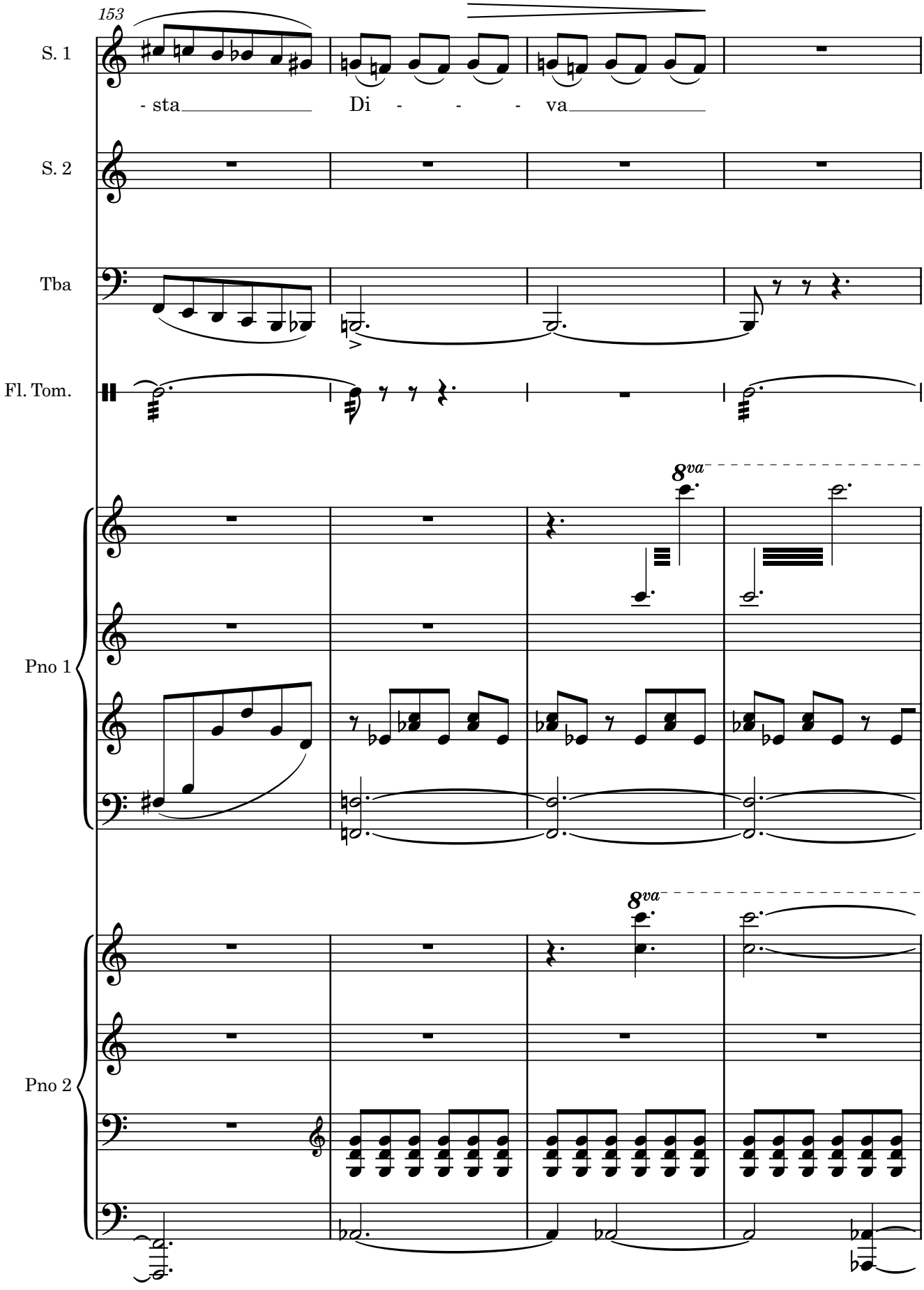
153
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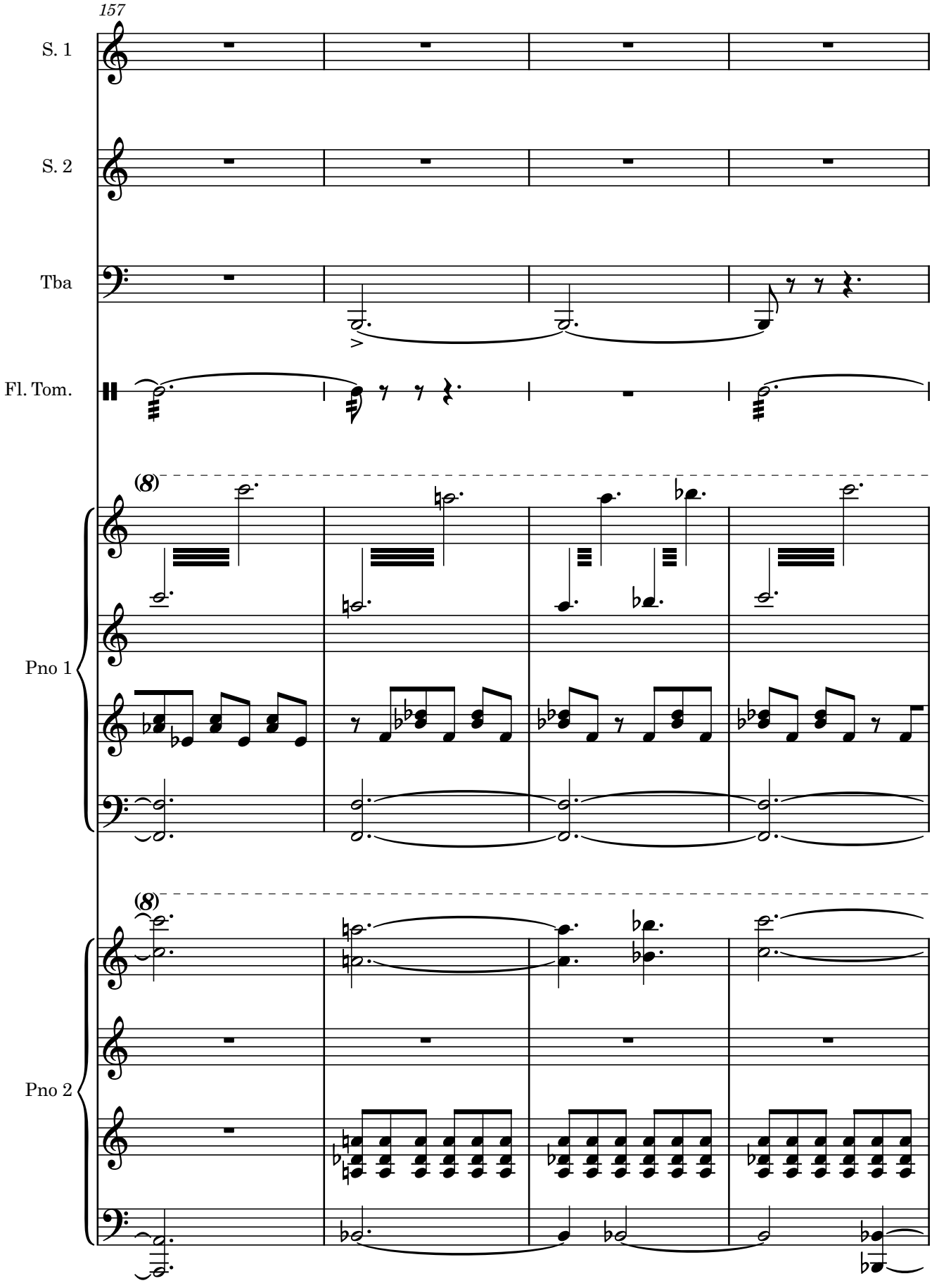
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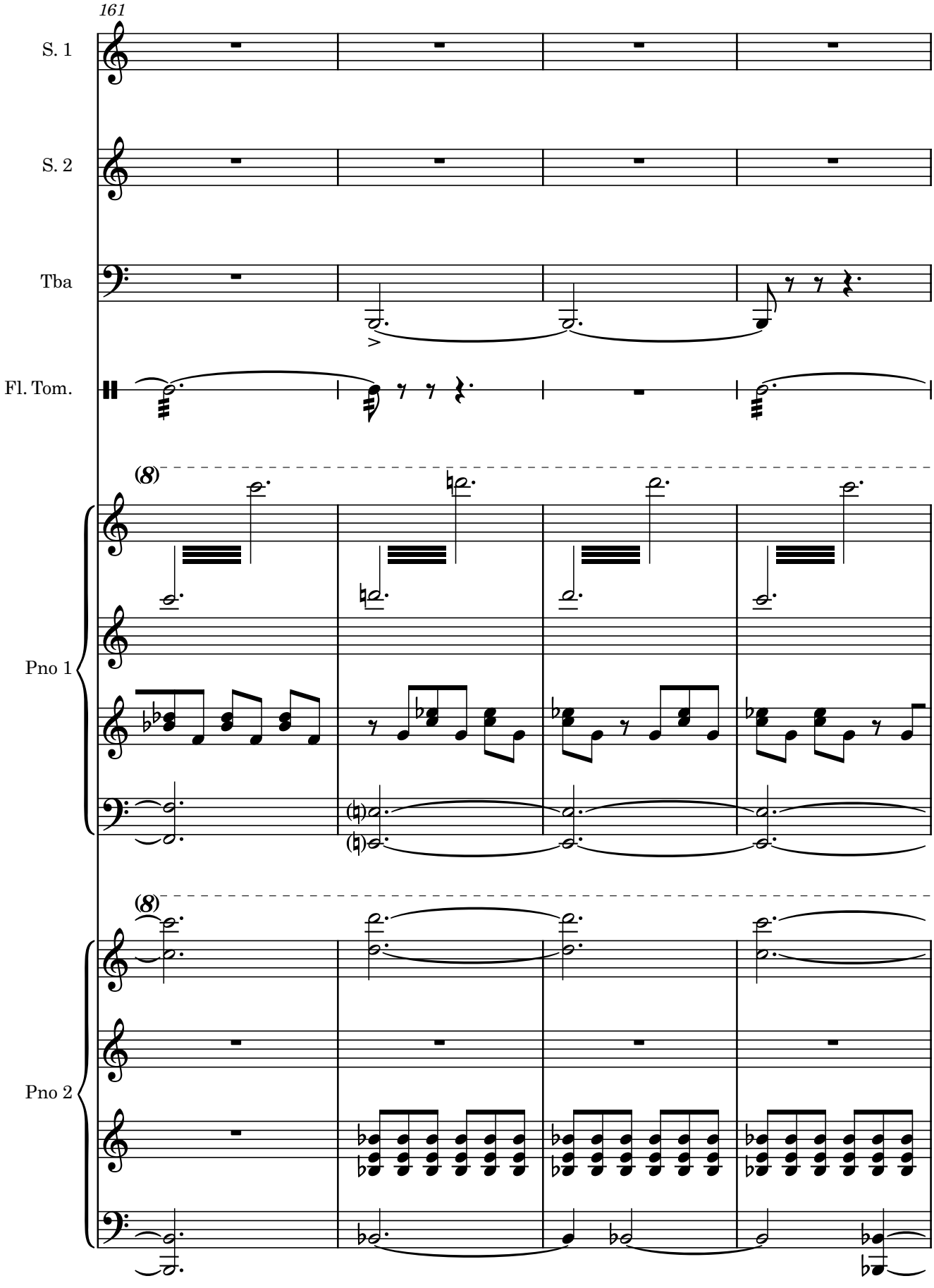
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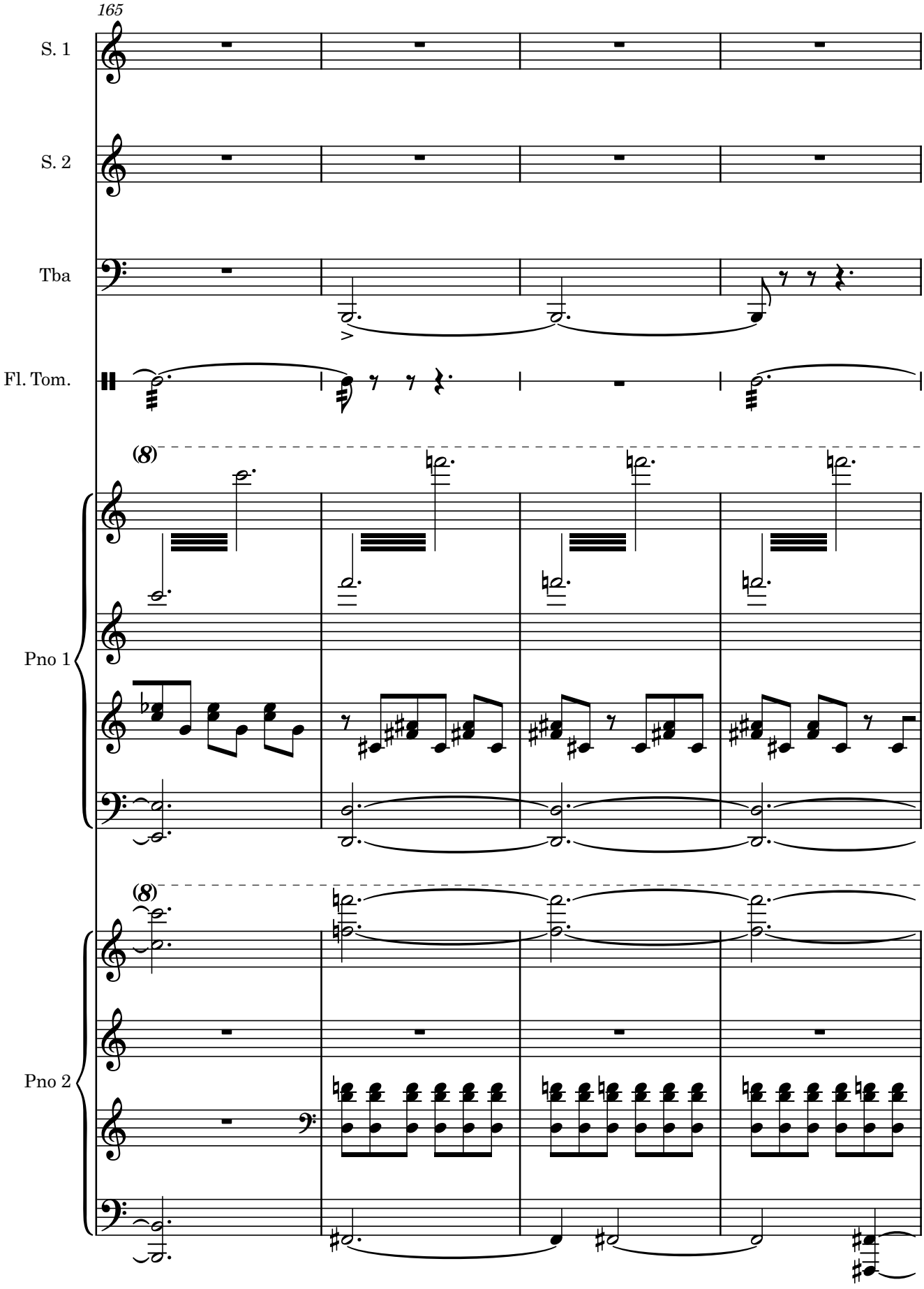
165
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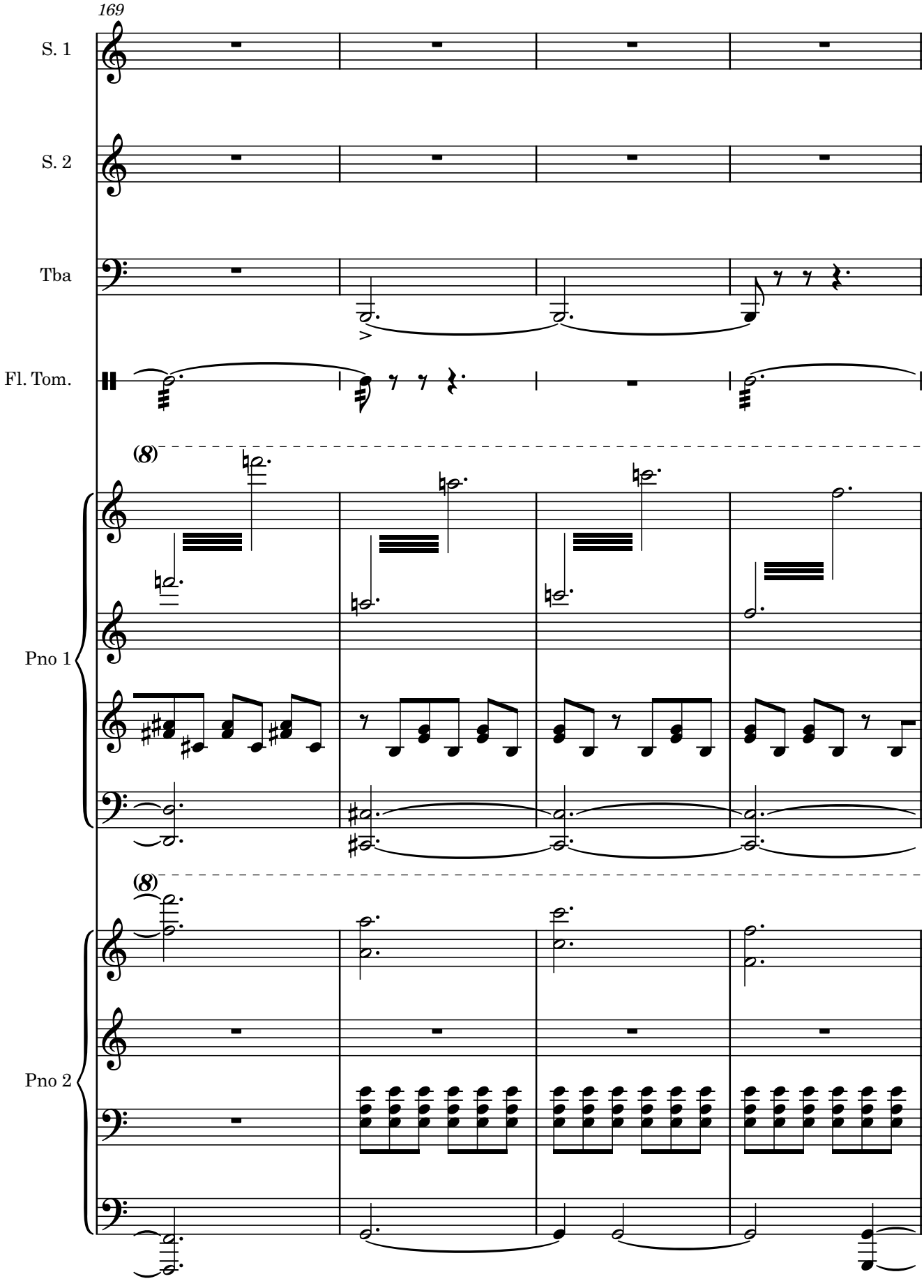
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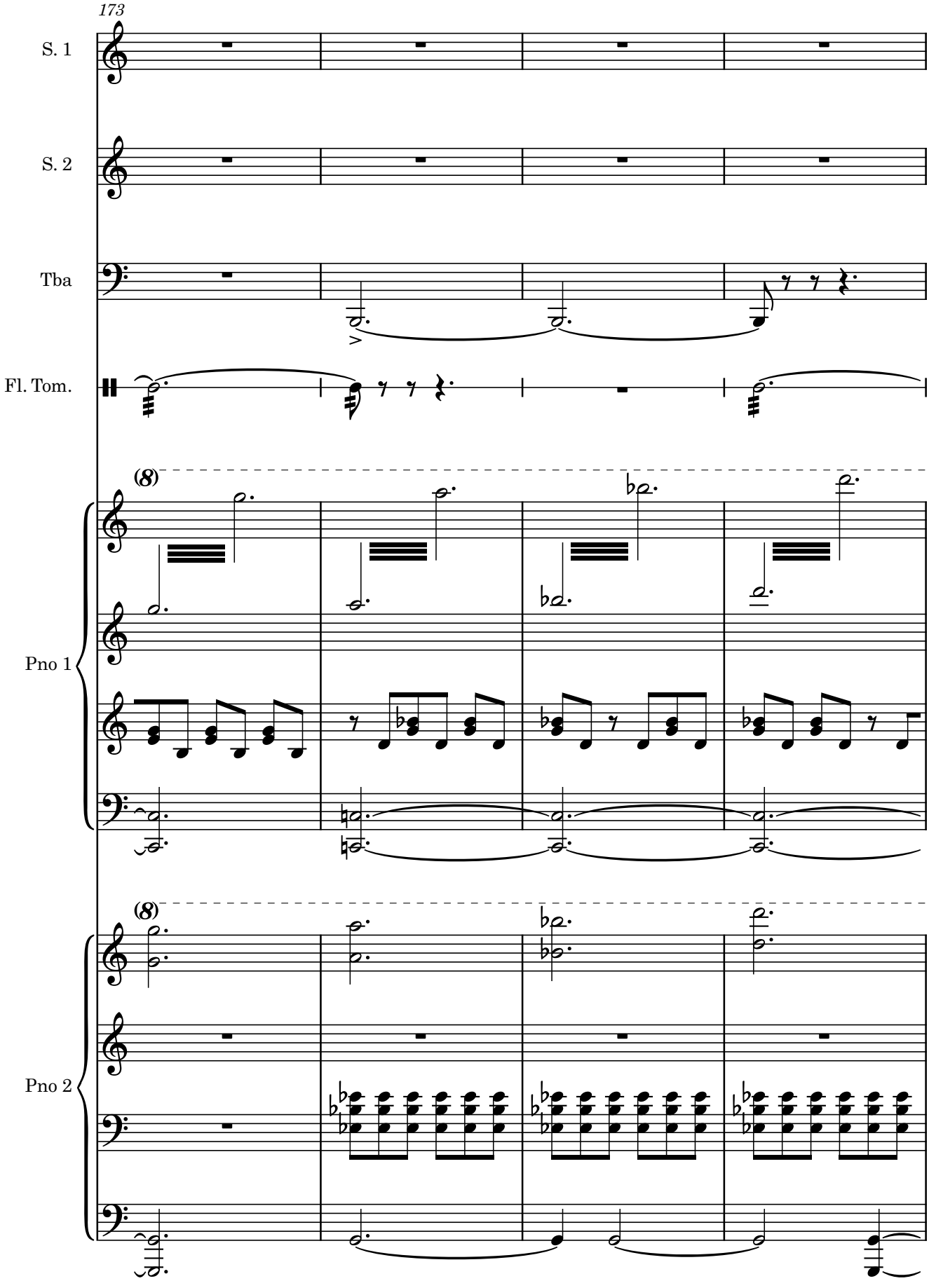
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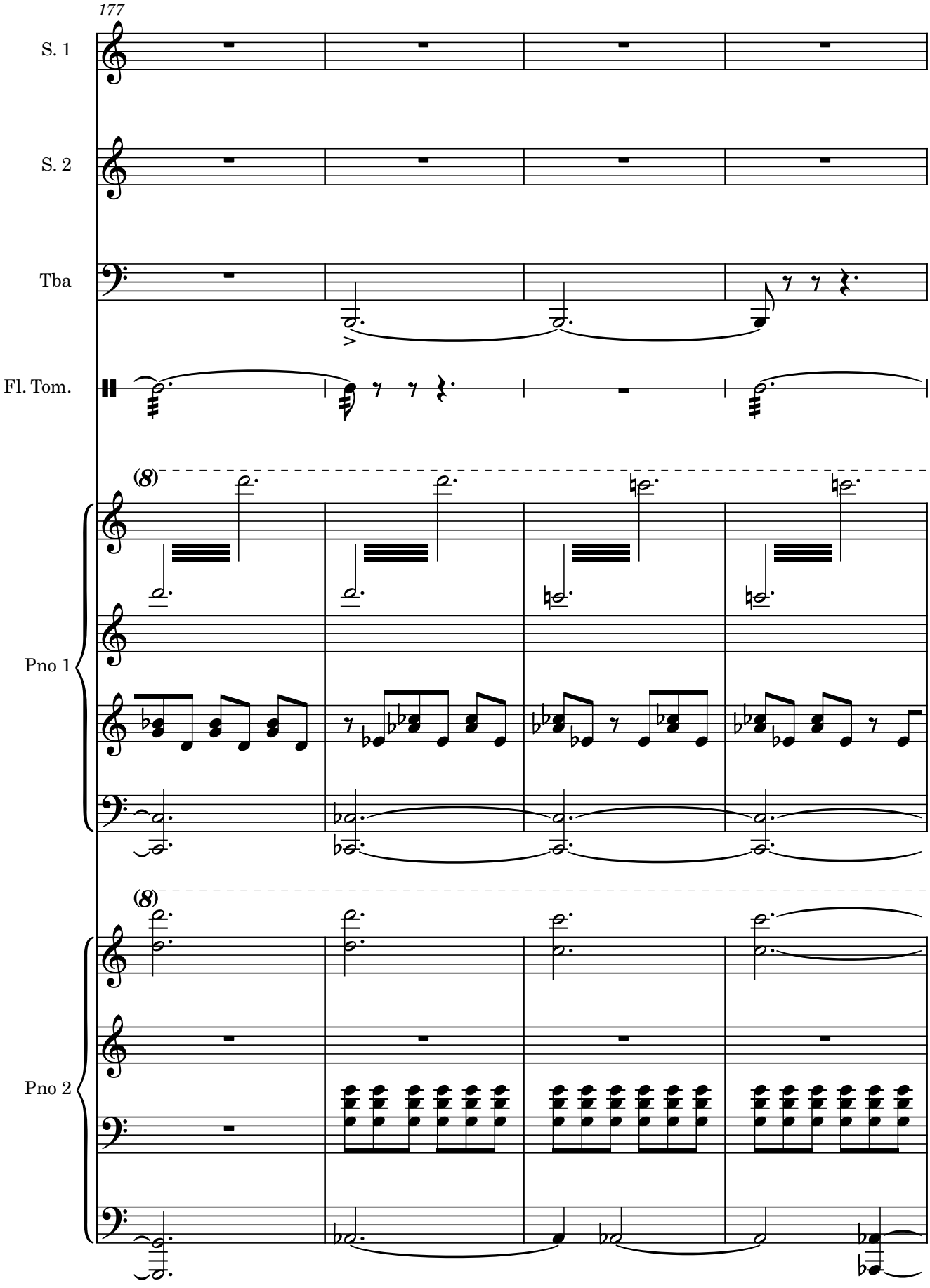
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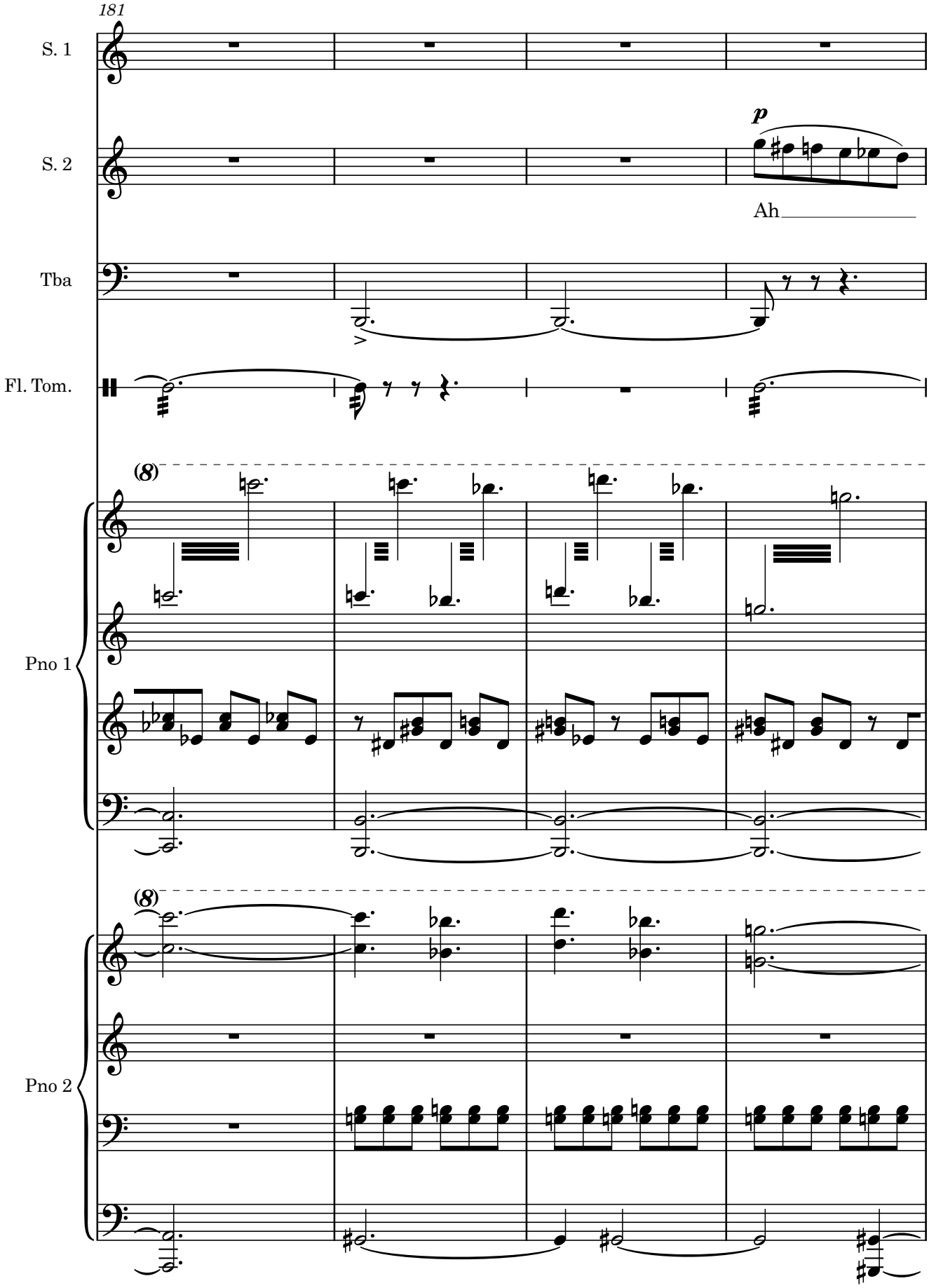
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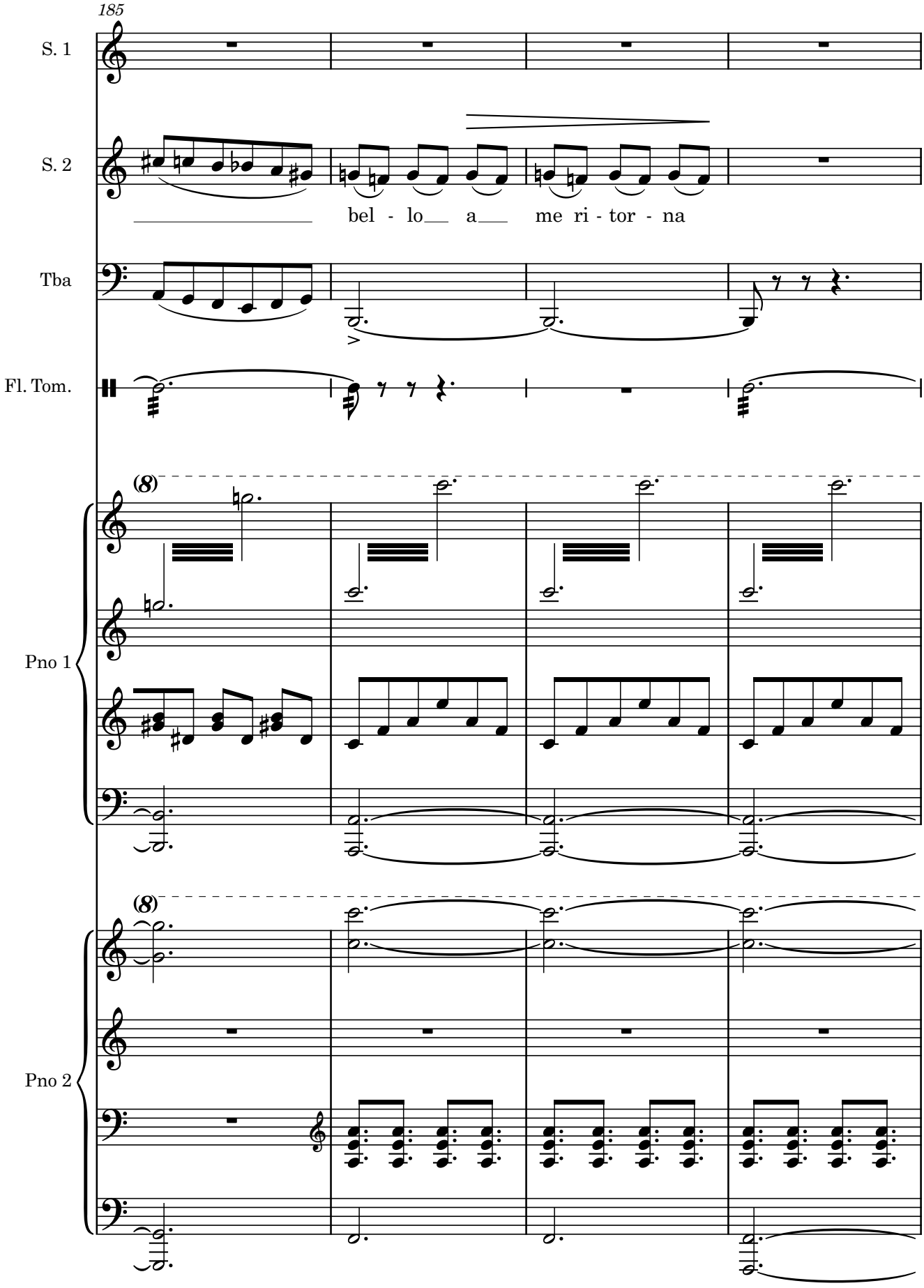
185
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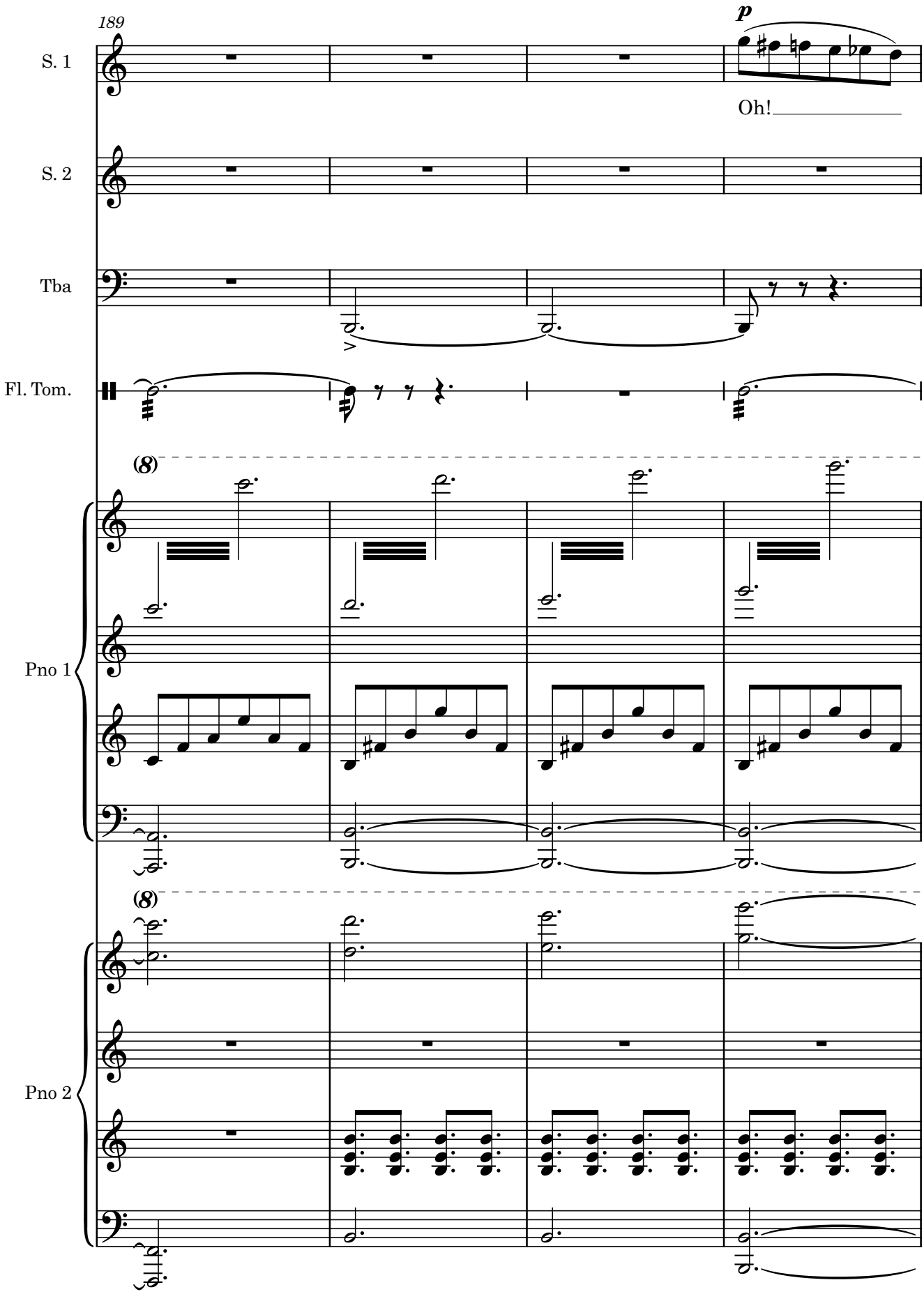
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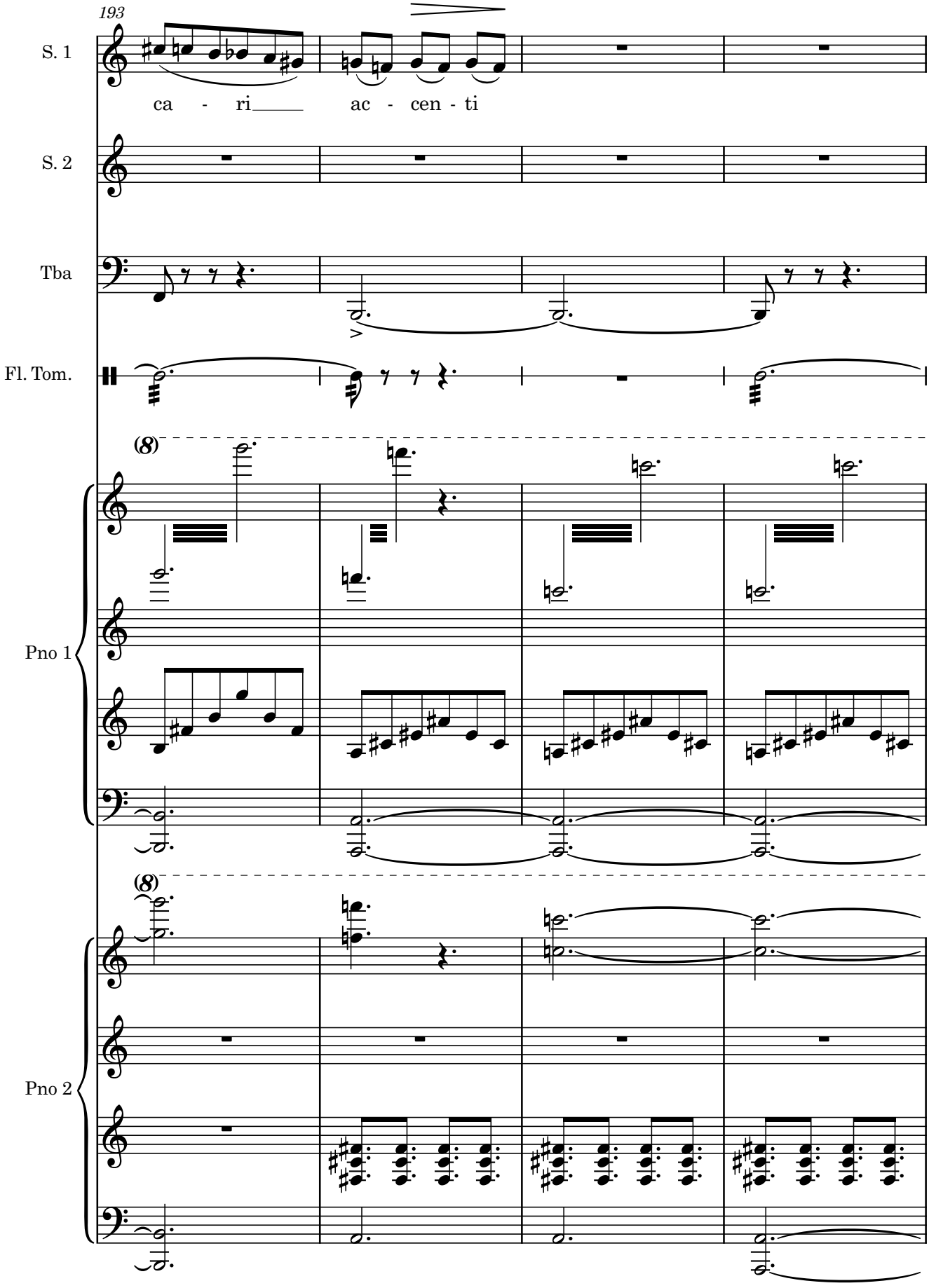
193
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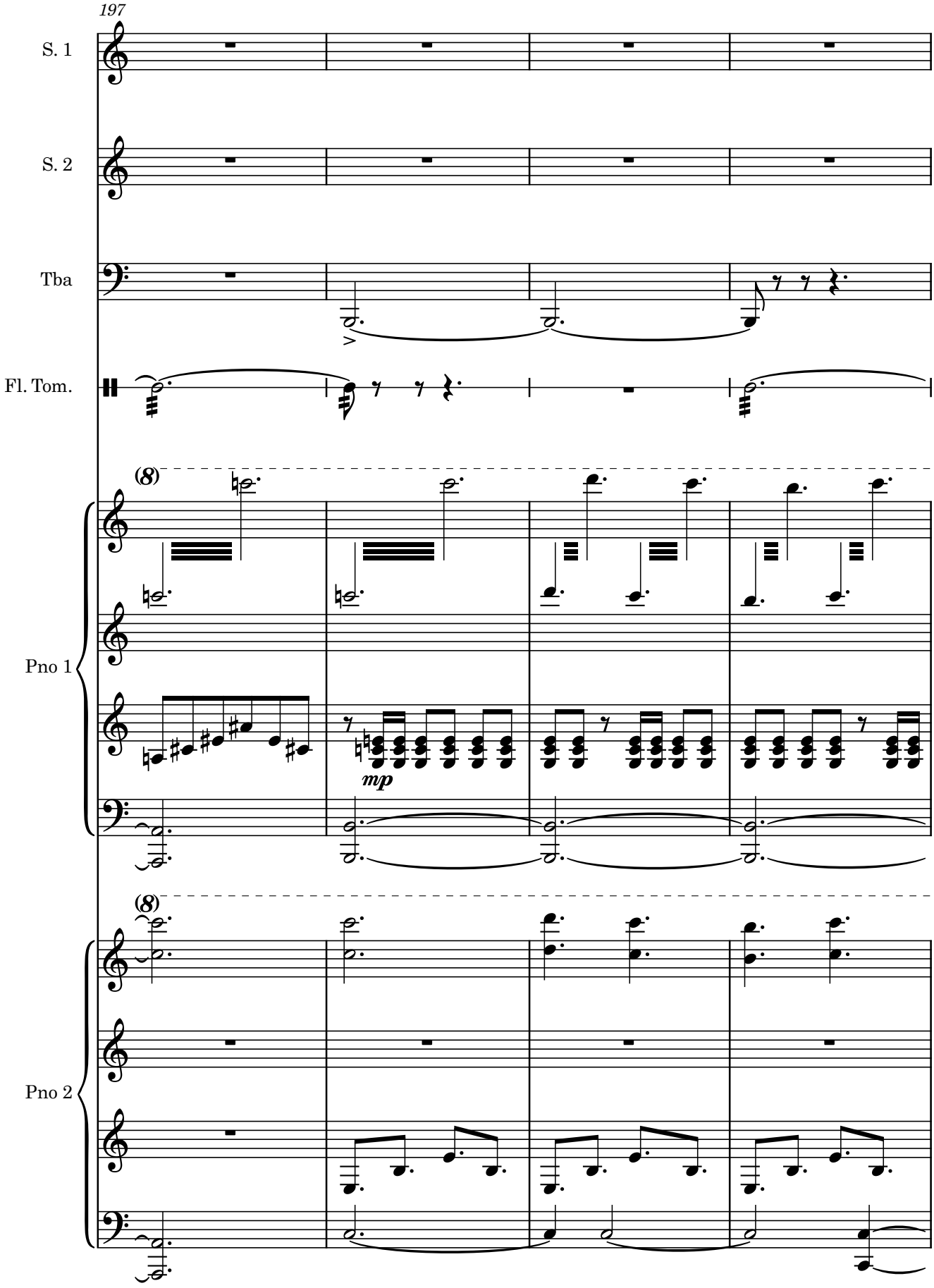
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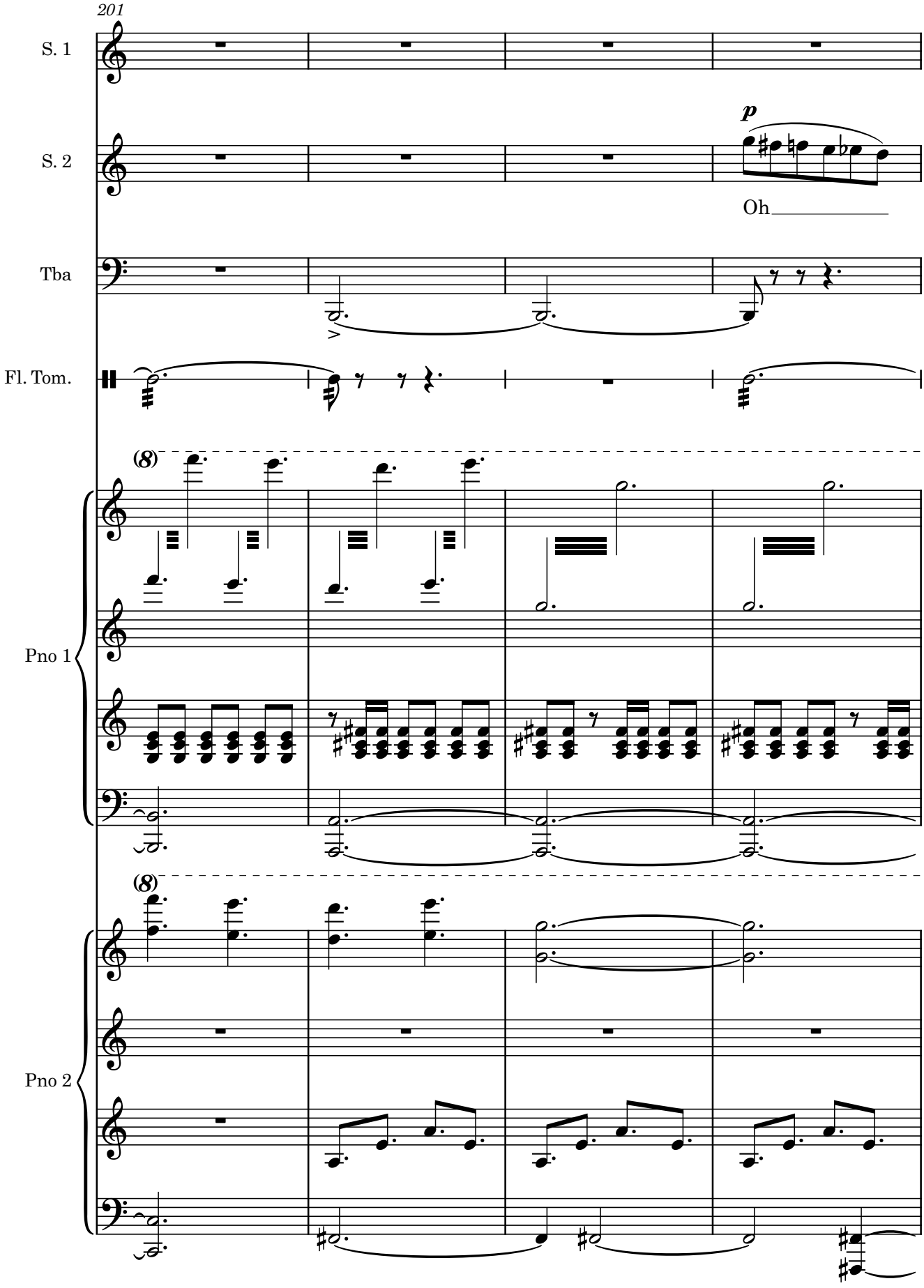
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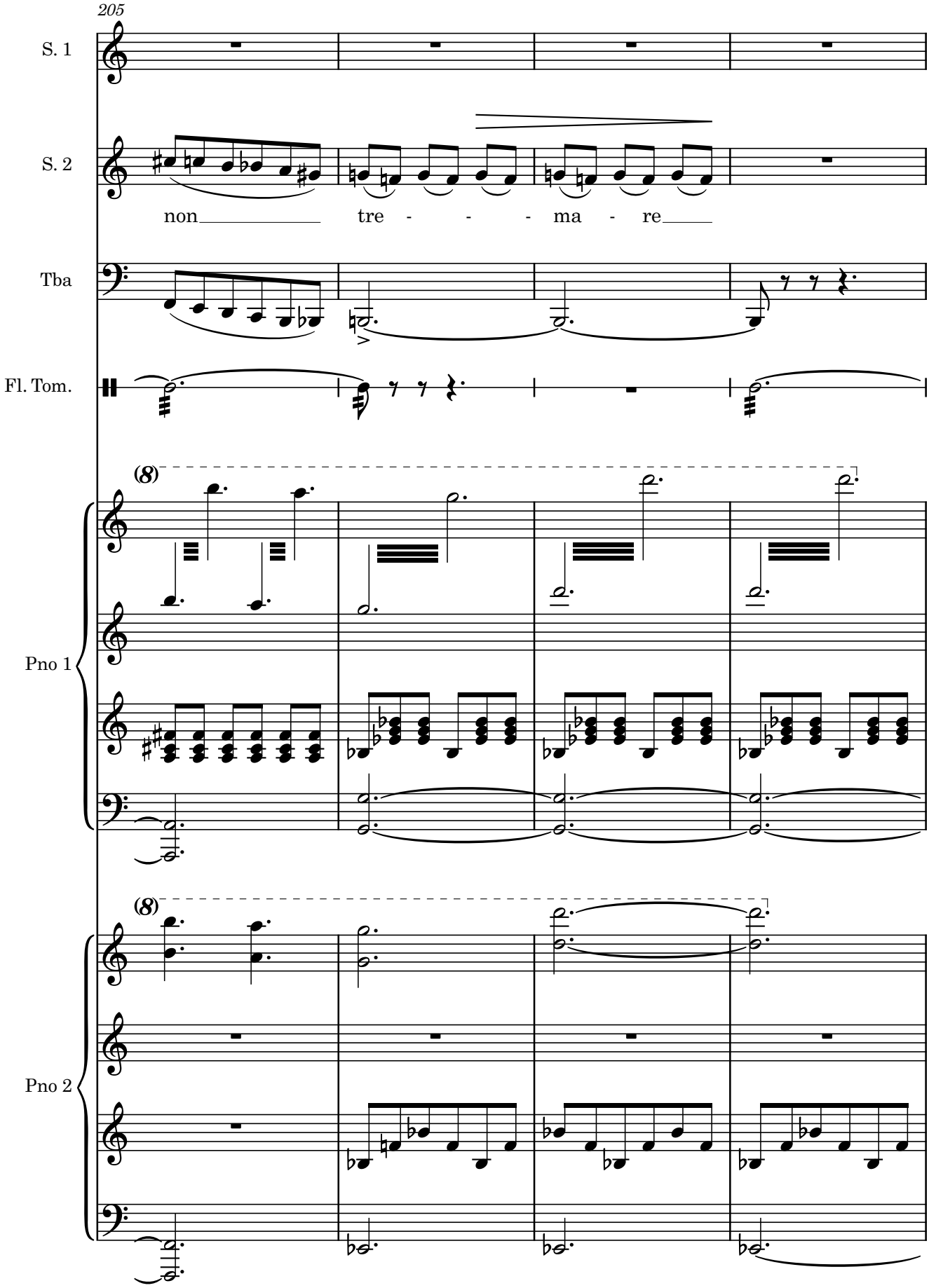
205
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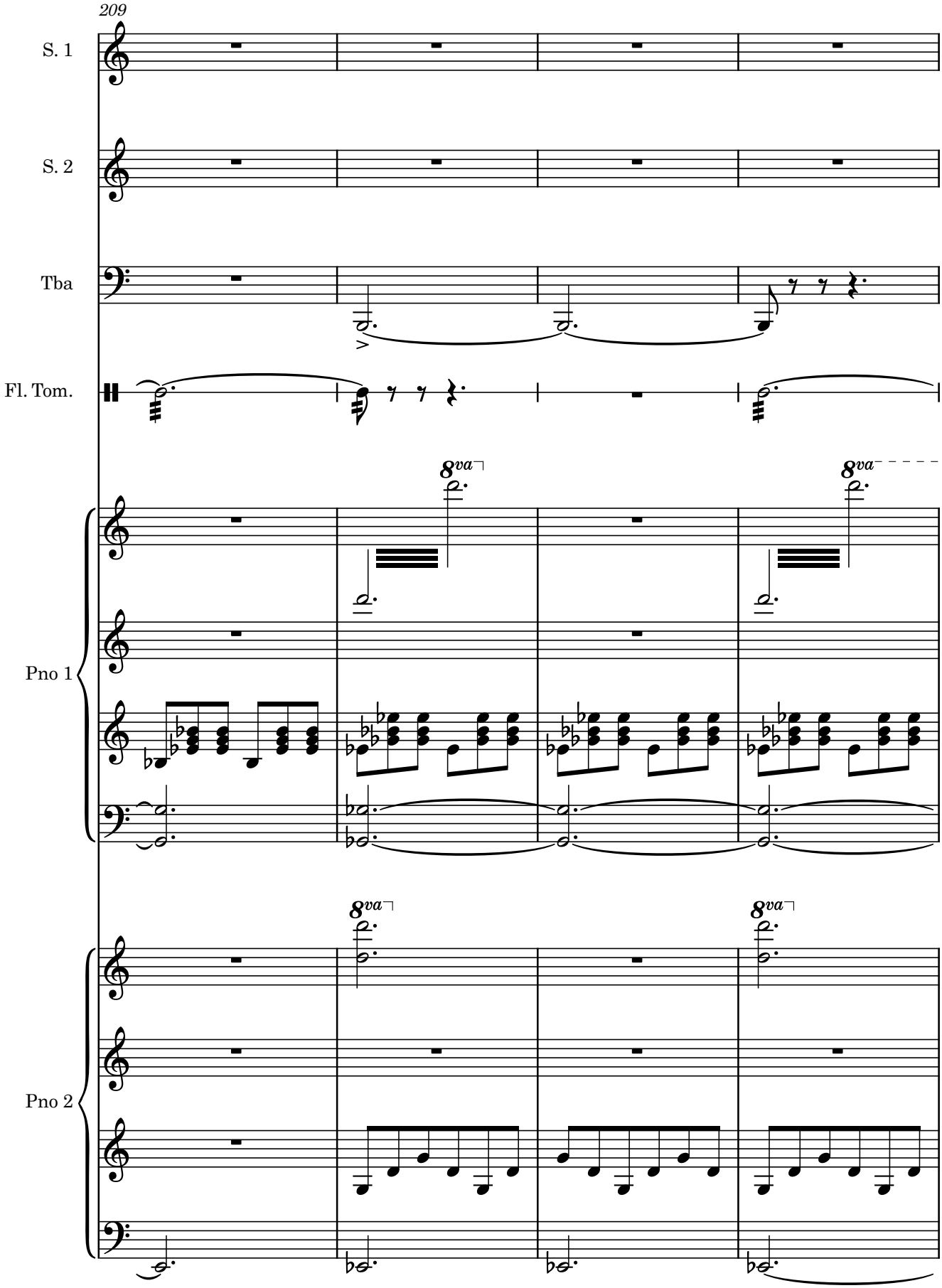
209
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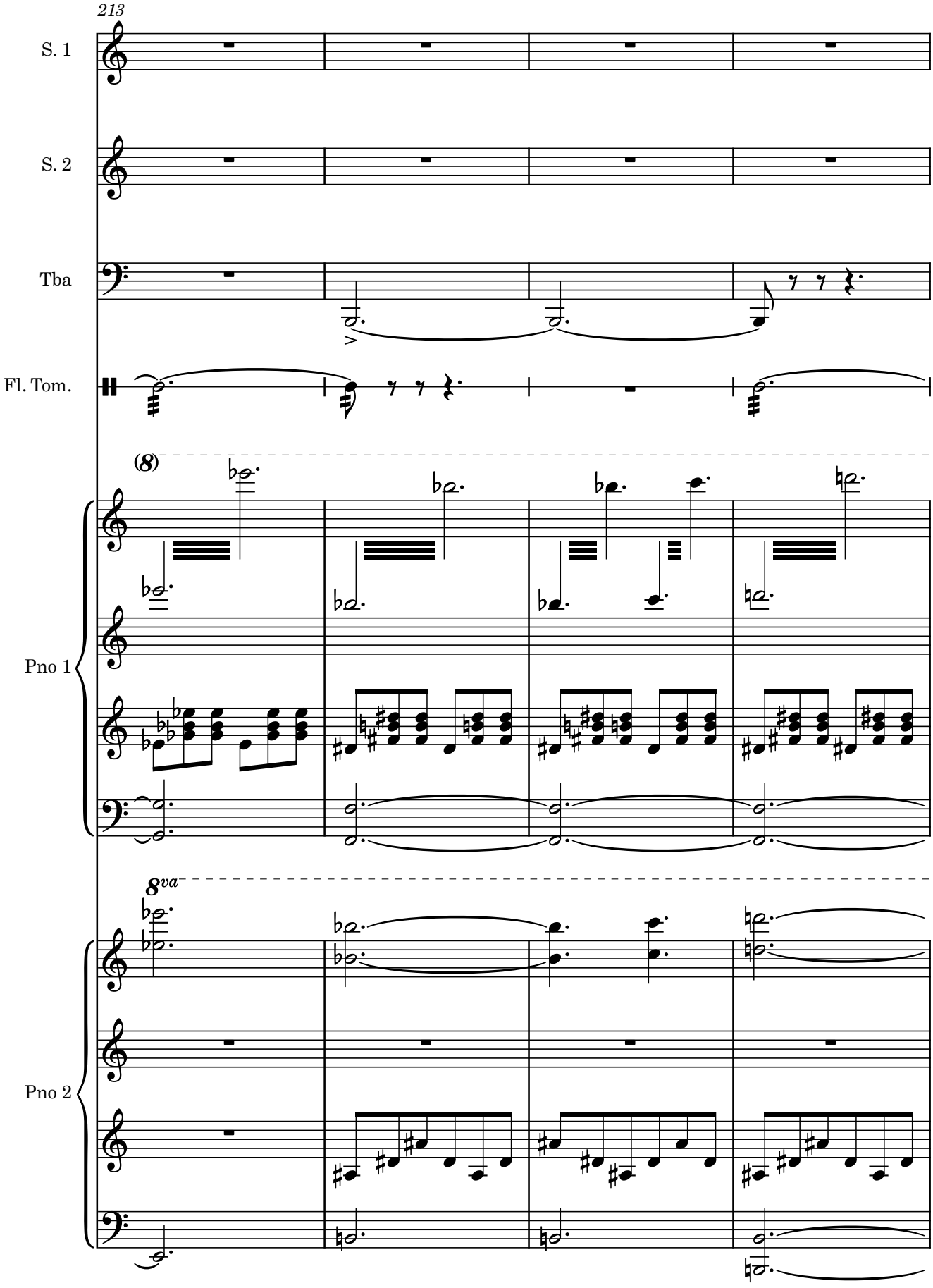
213
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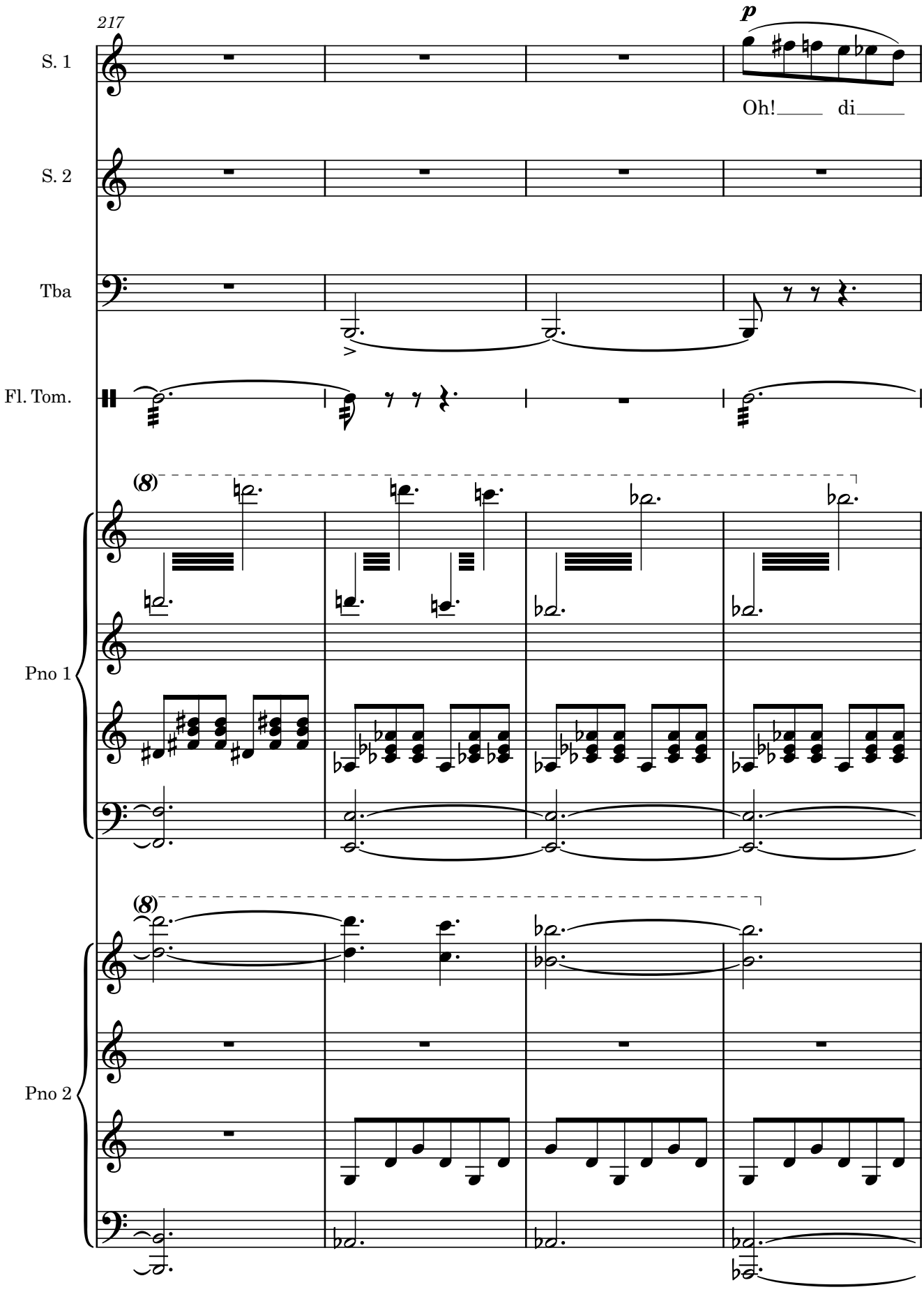
217
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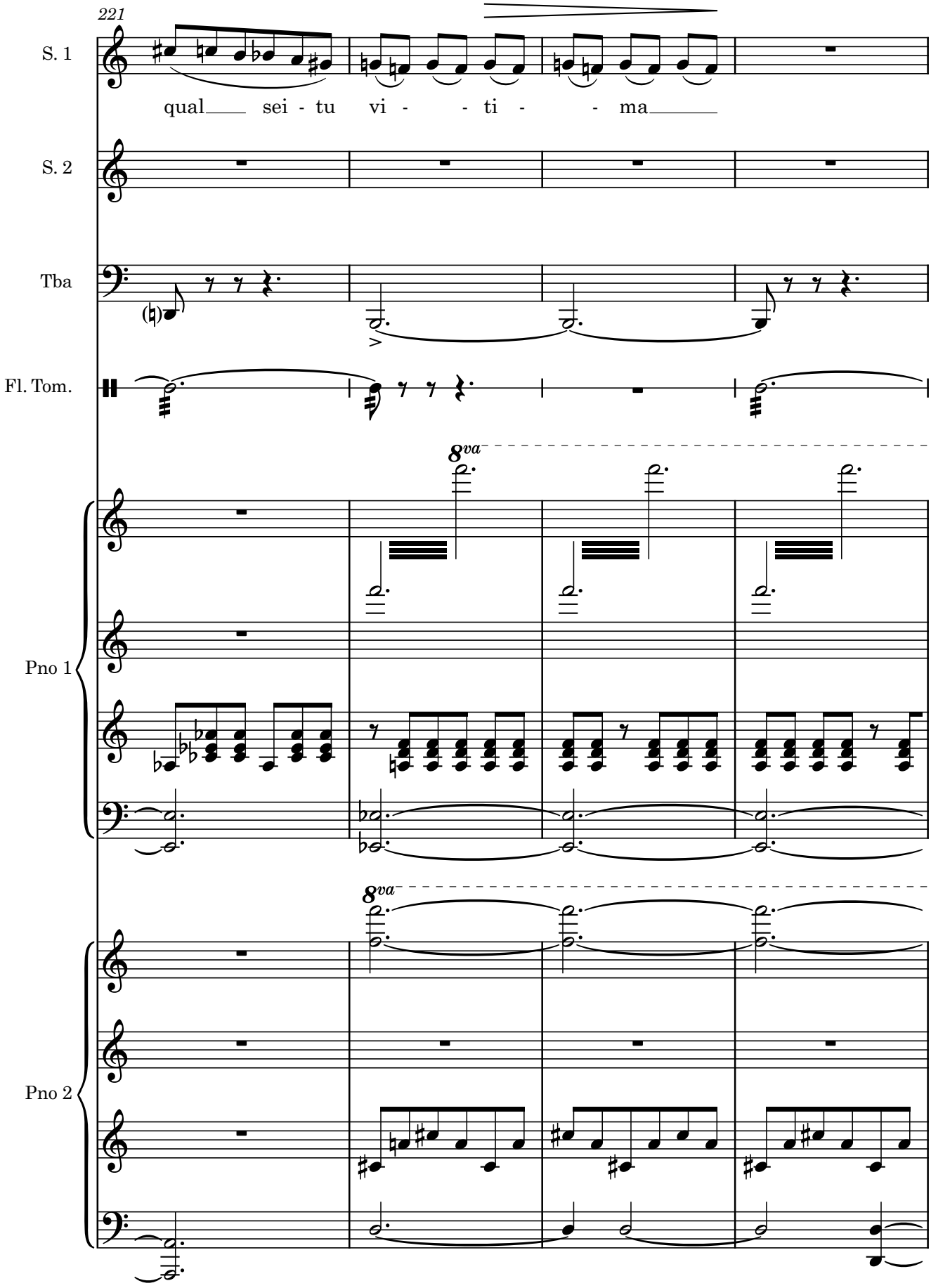
221
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S. 2
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Fl. Tom.
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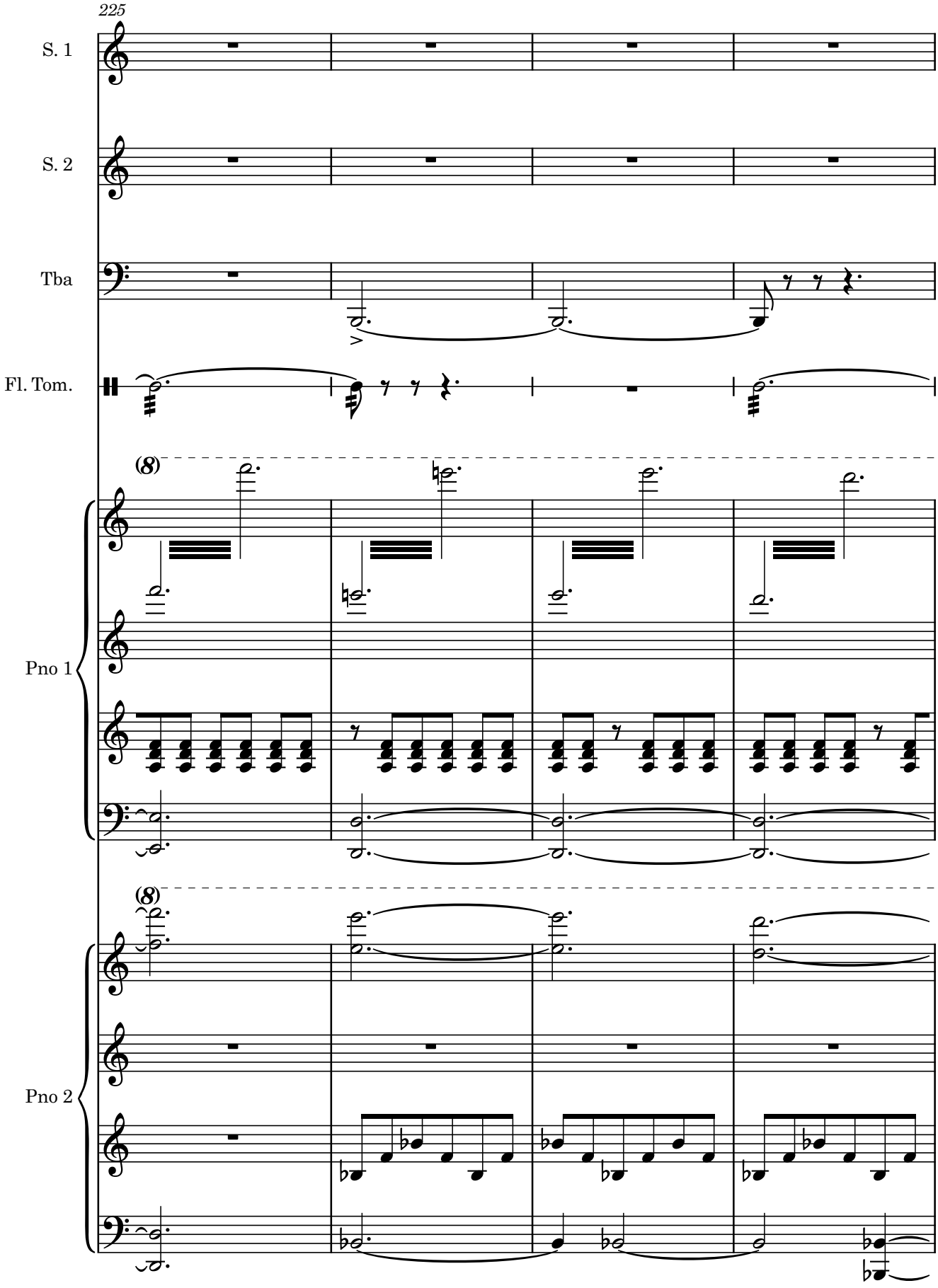
Pno 2


225
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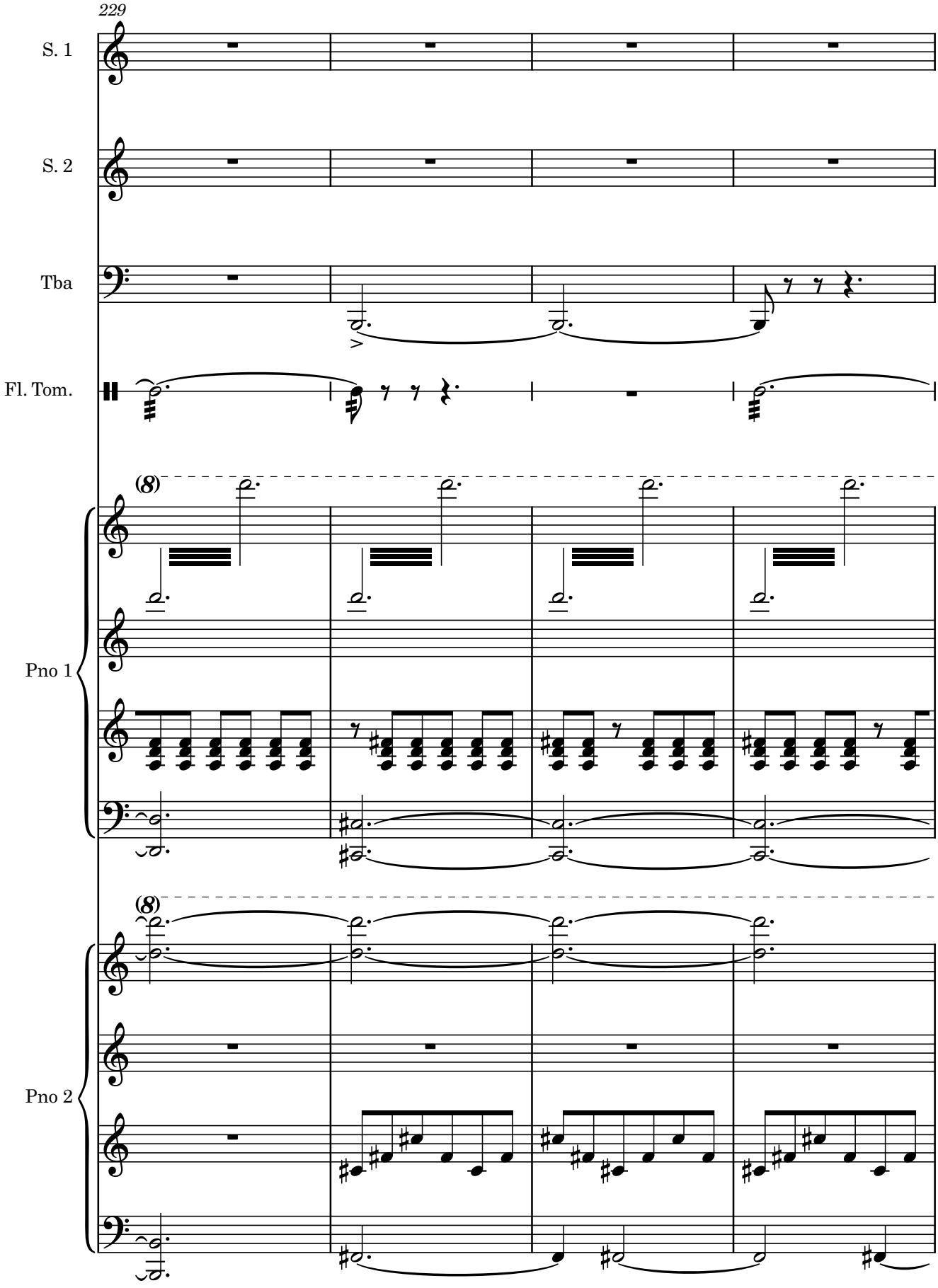
229
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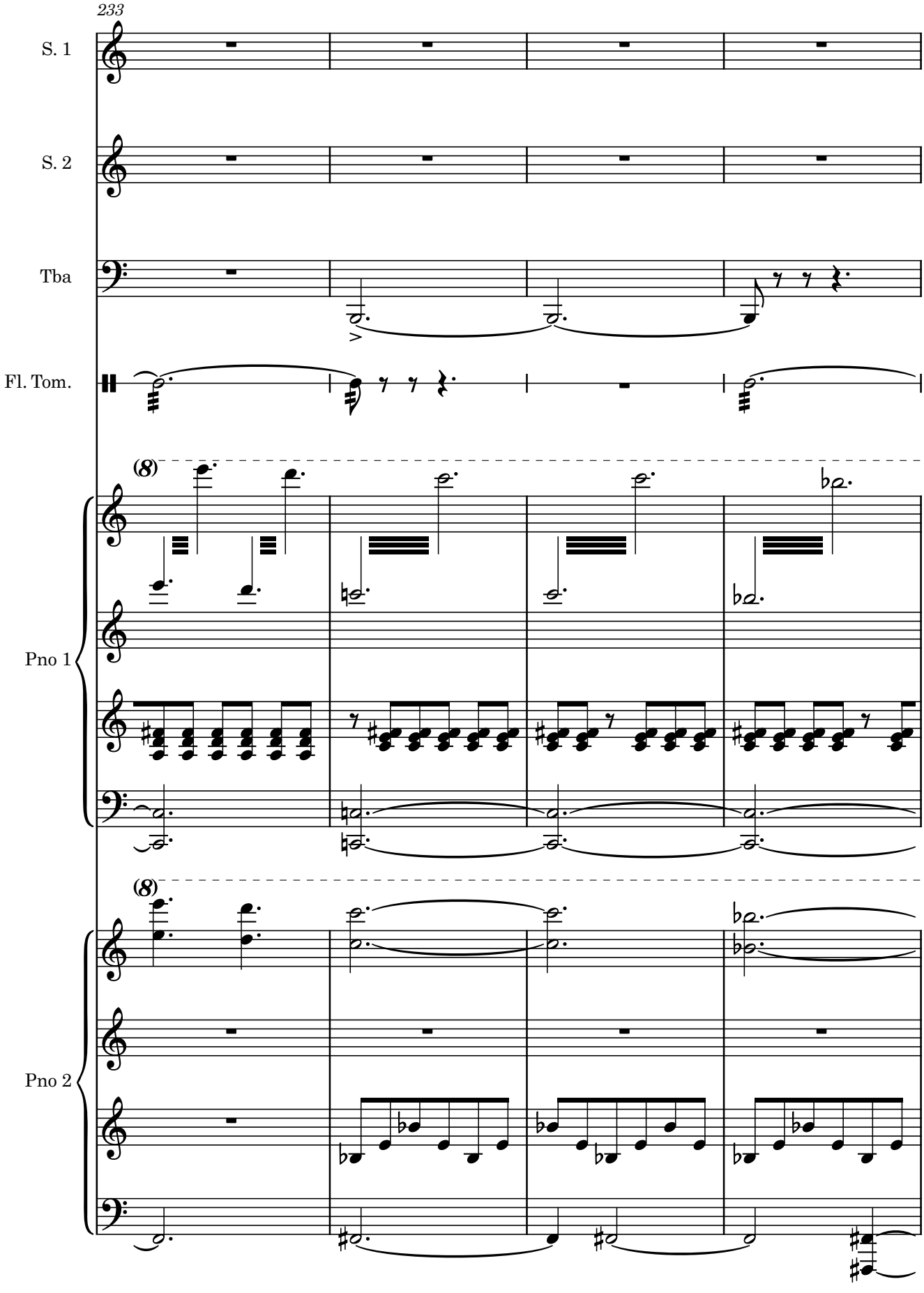
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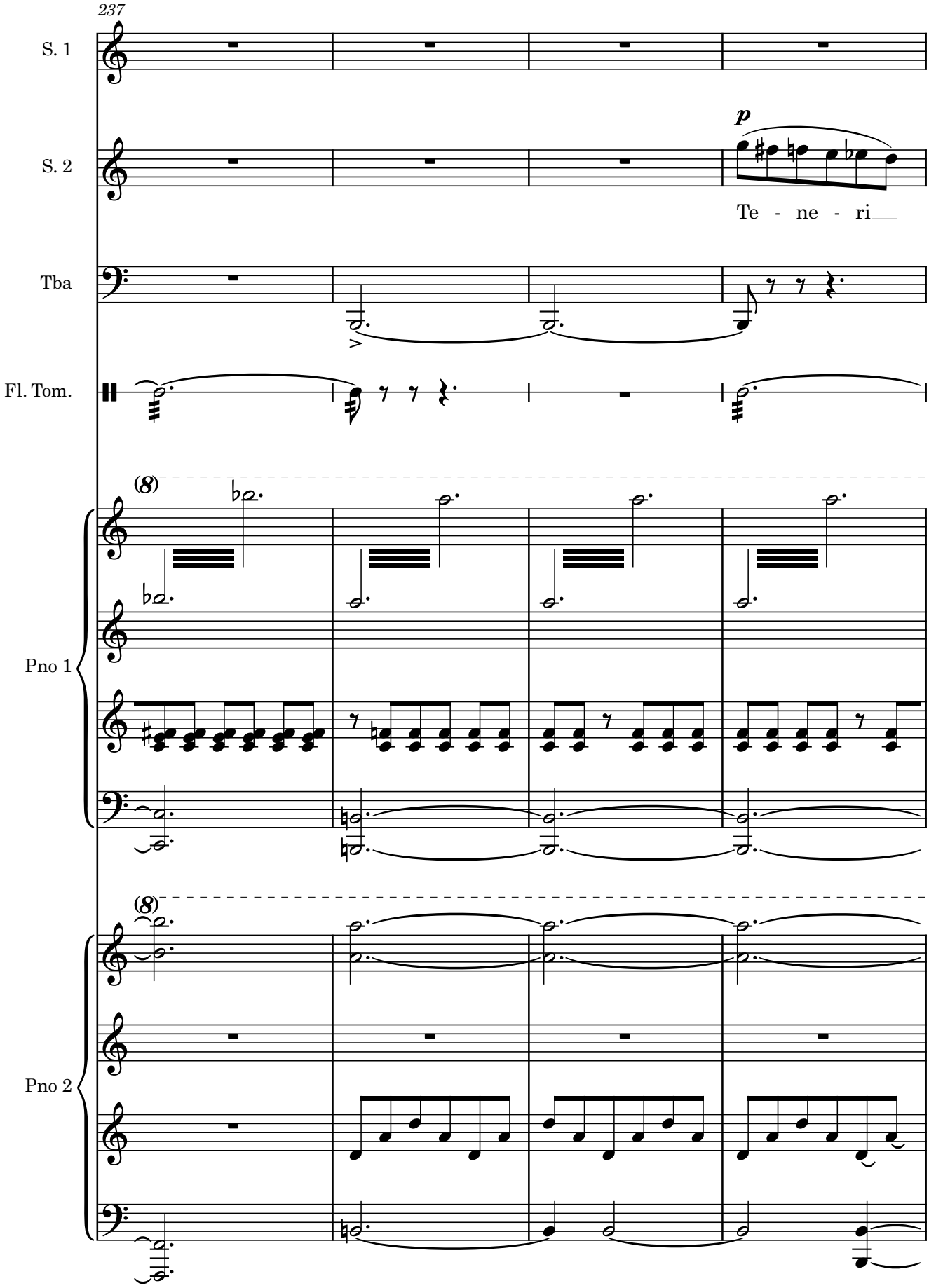
237
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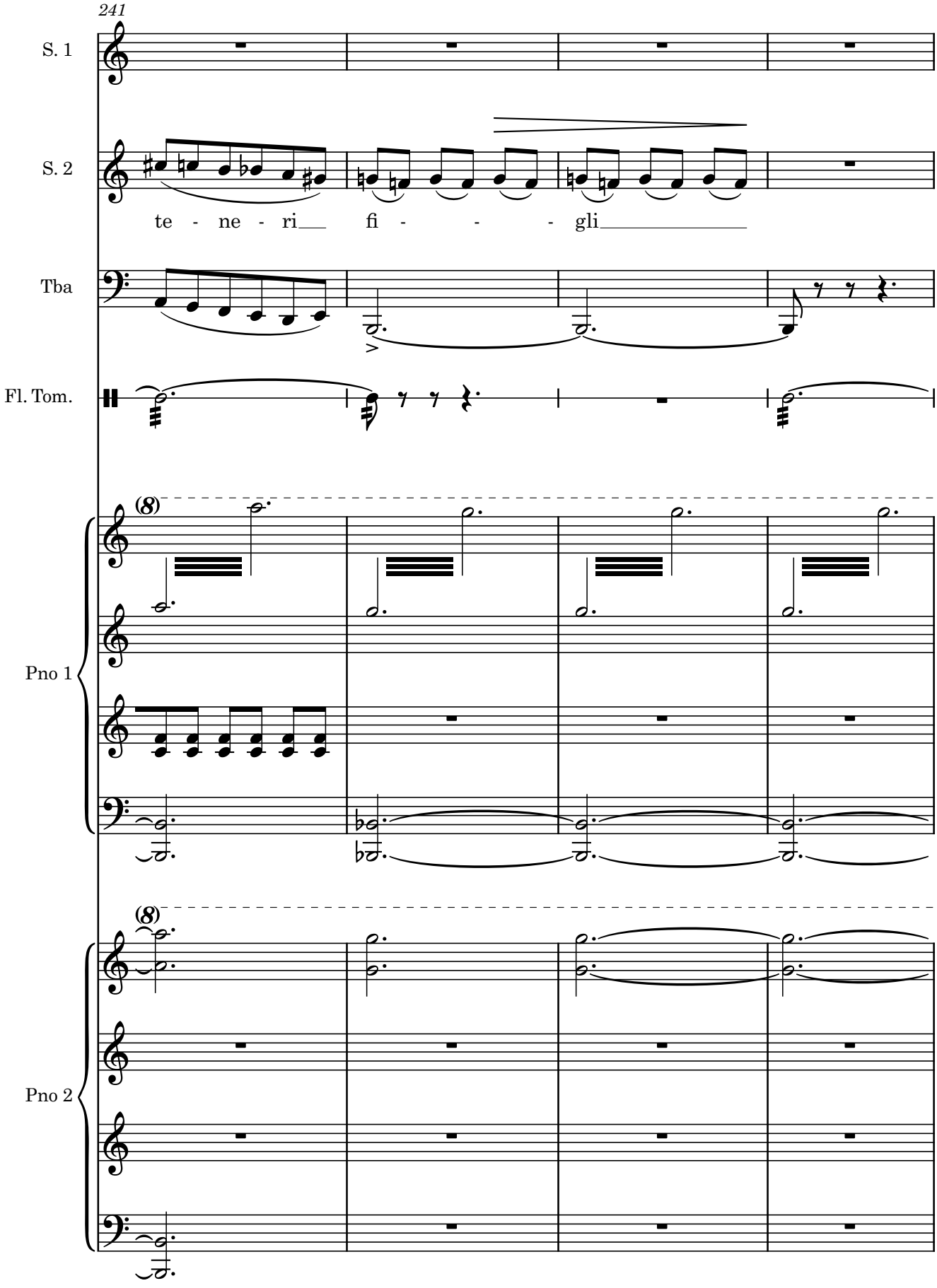
241
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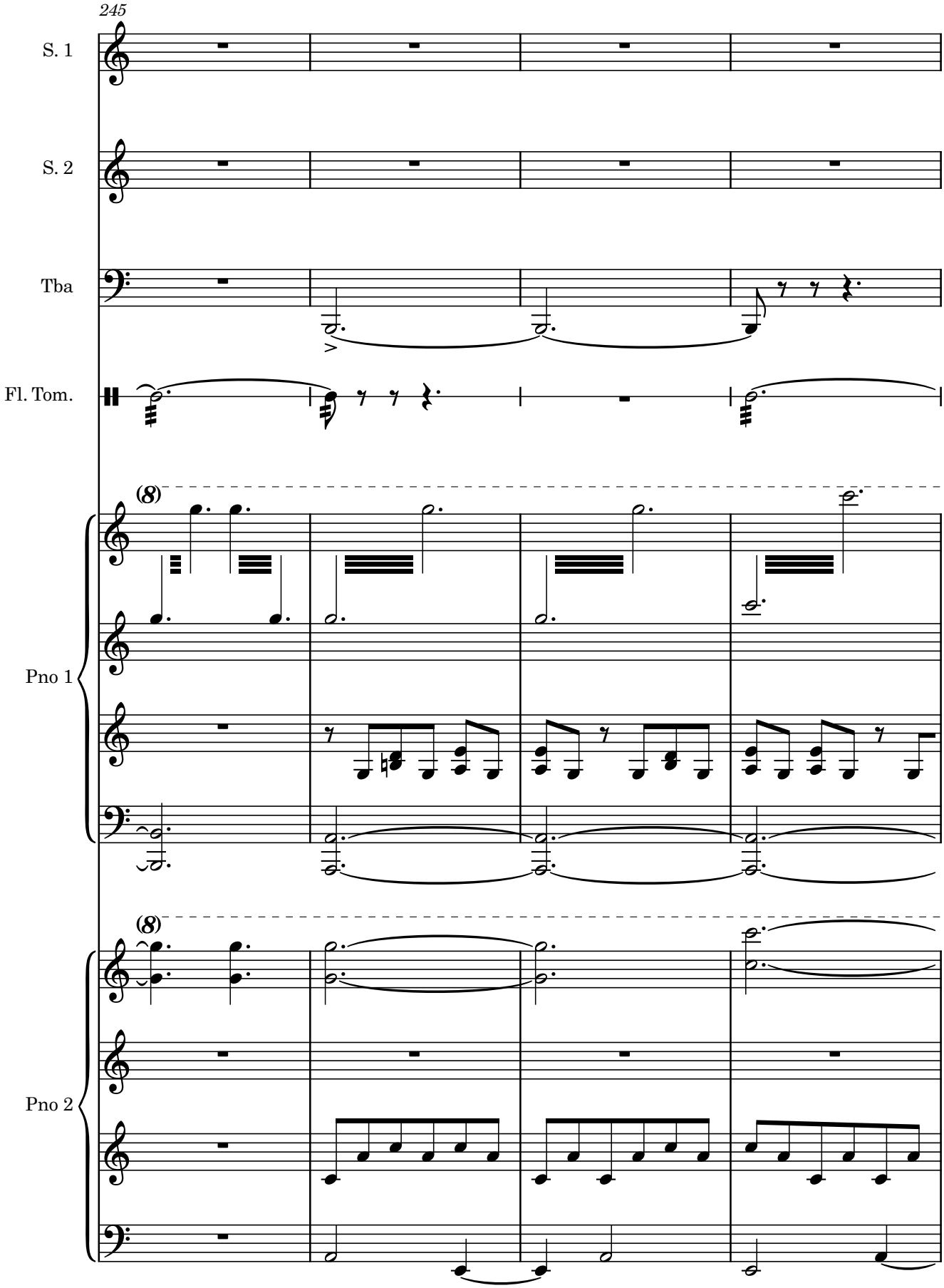
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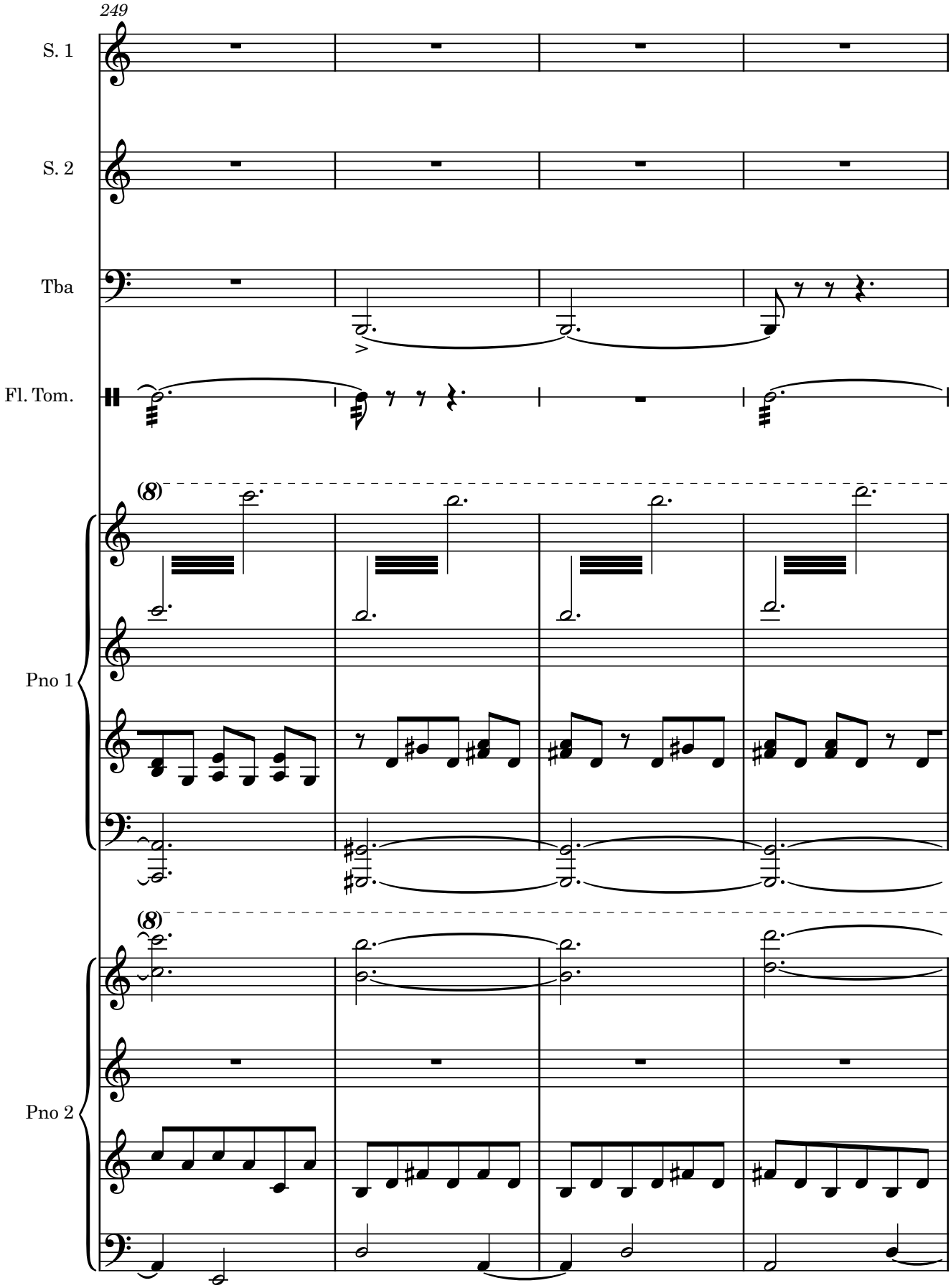
249
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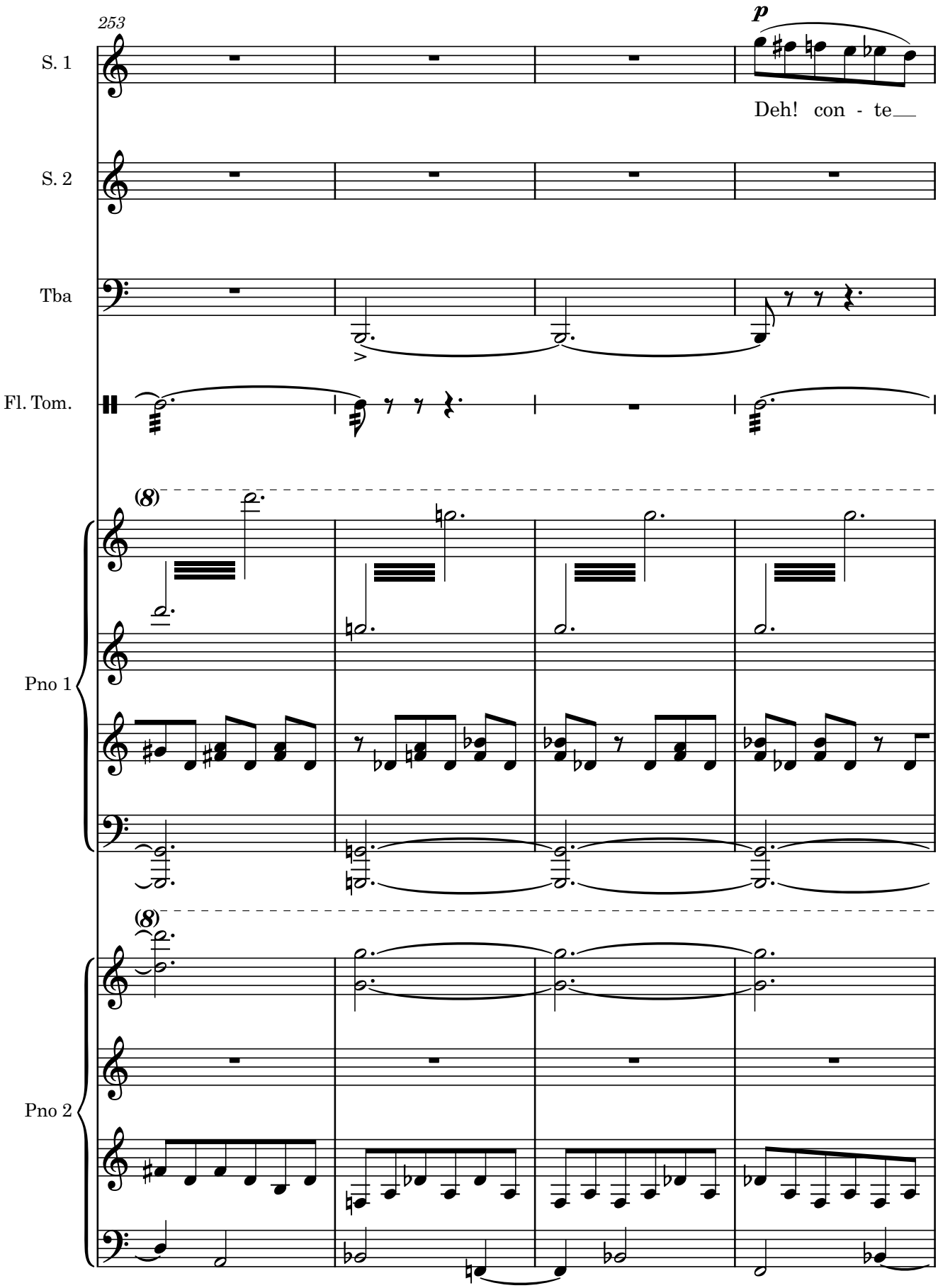
253
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S. 2
Tba
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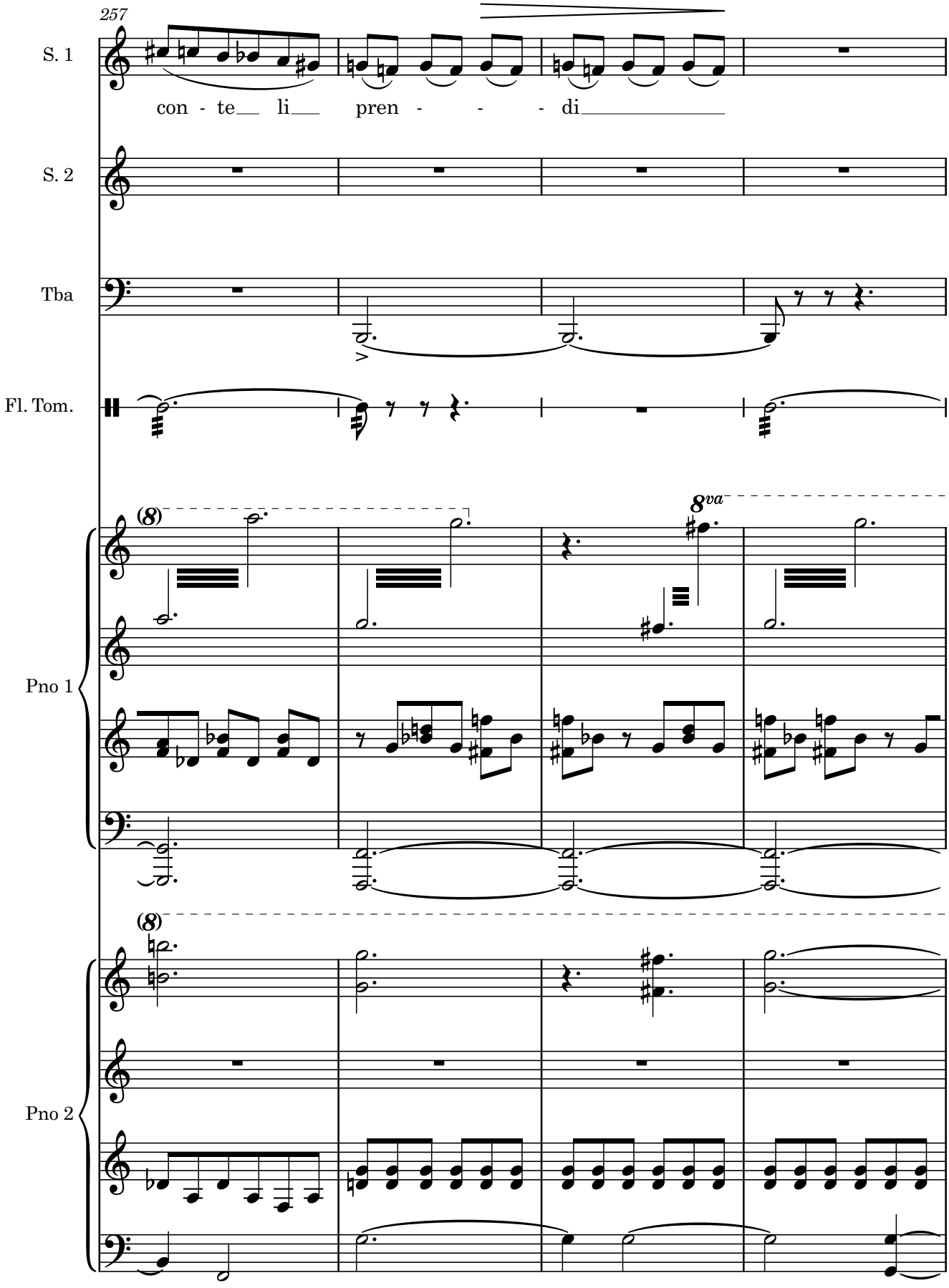
257
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Tba
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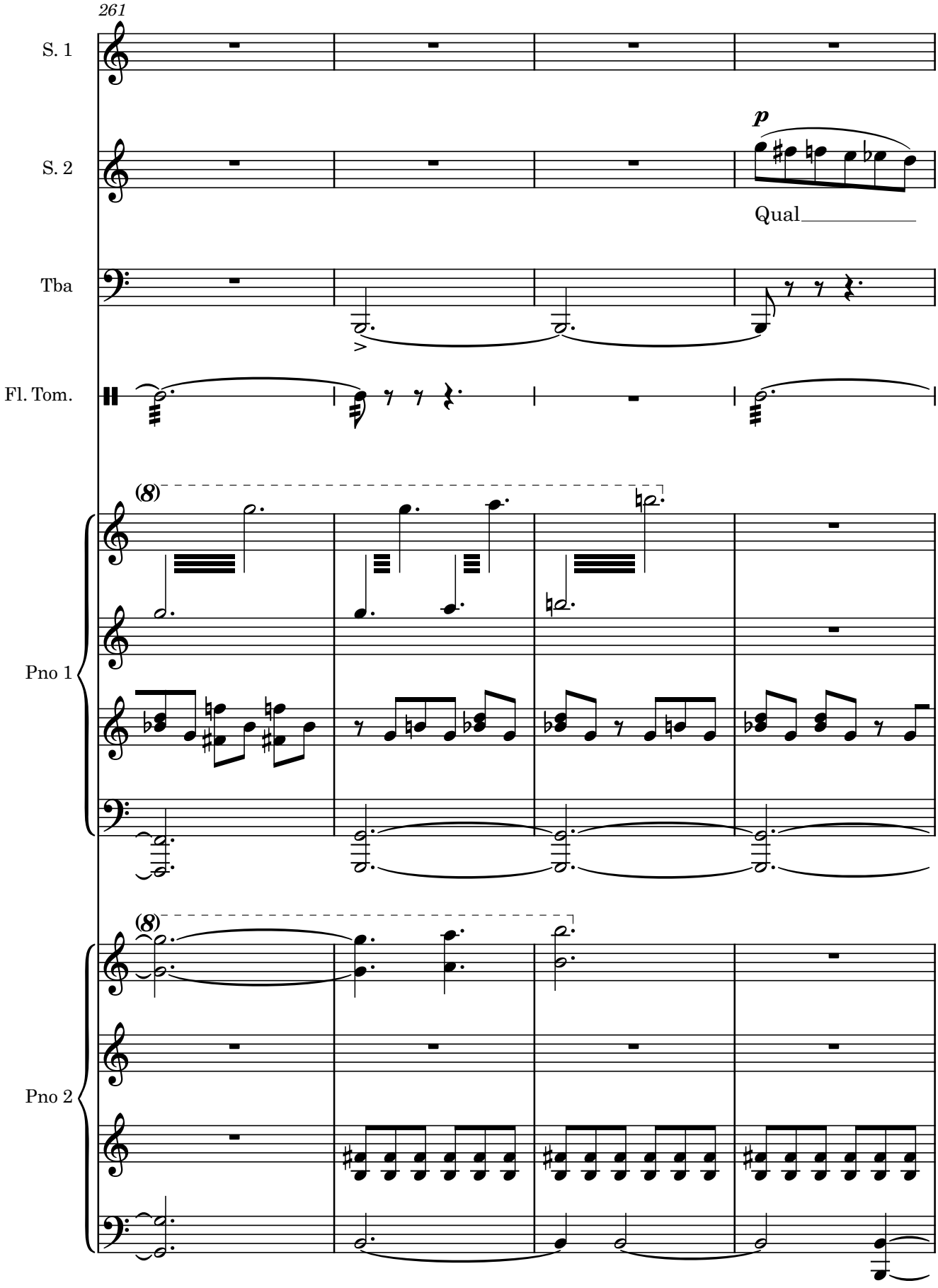
Pno 2


261
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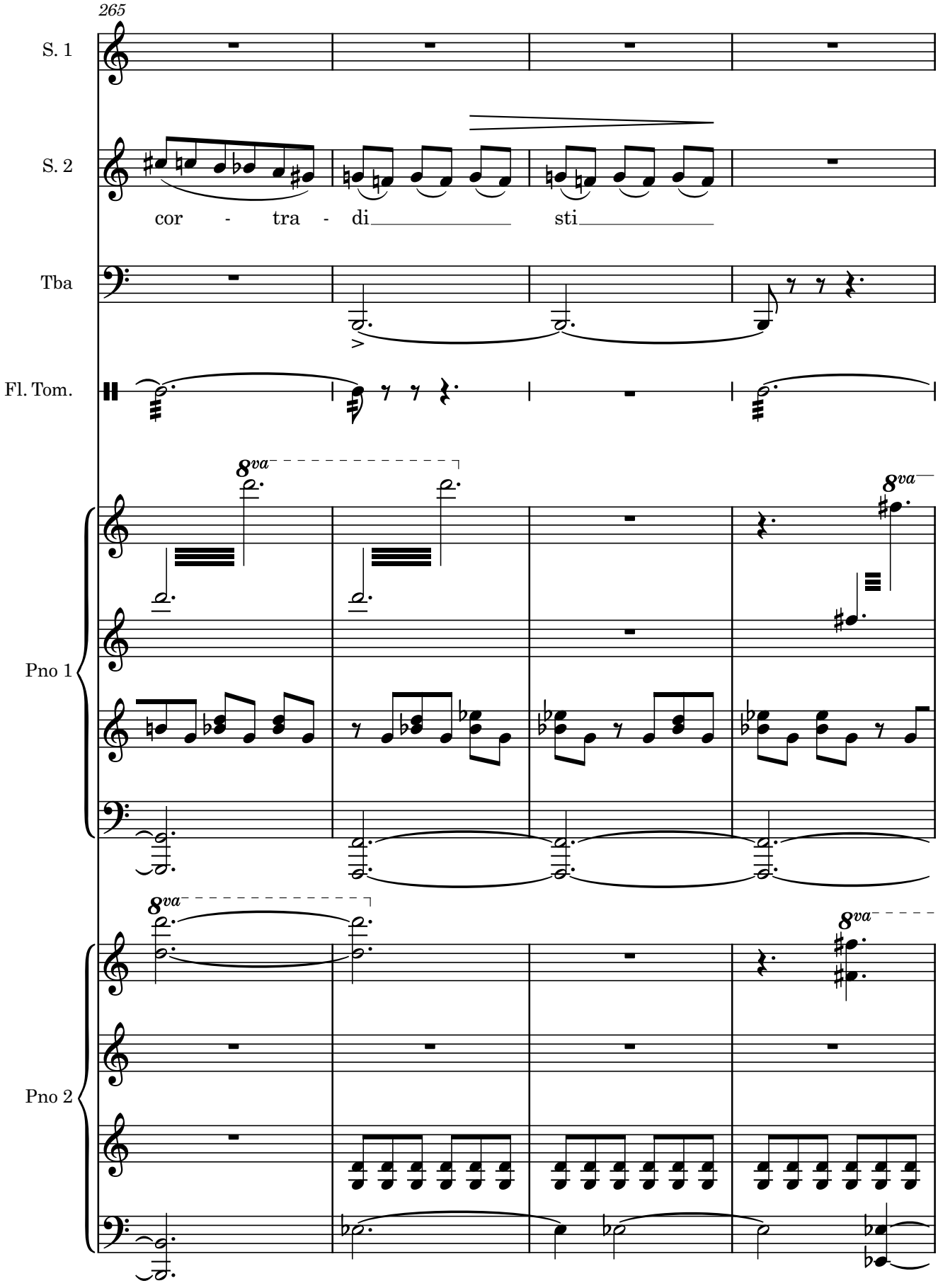
(8)
Pno 2


265
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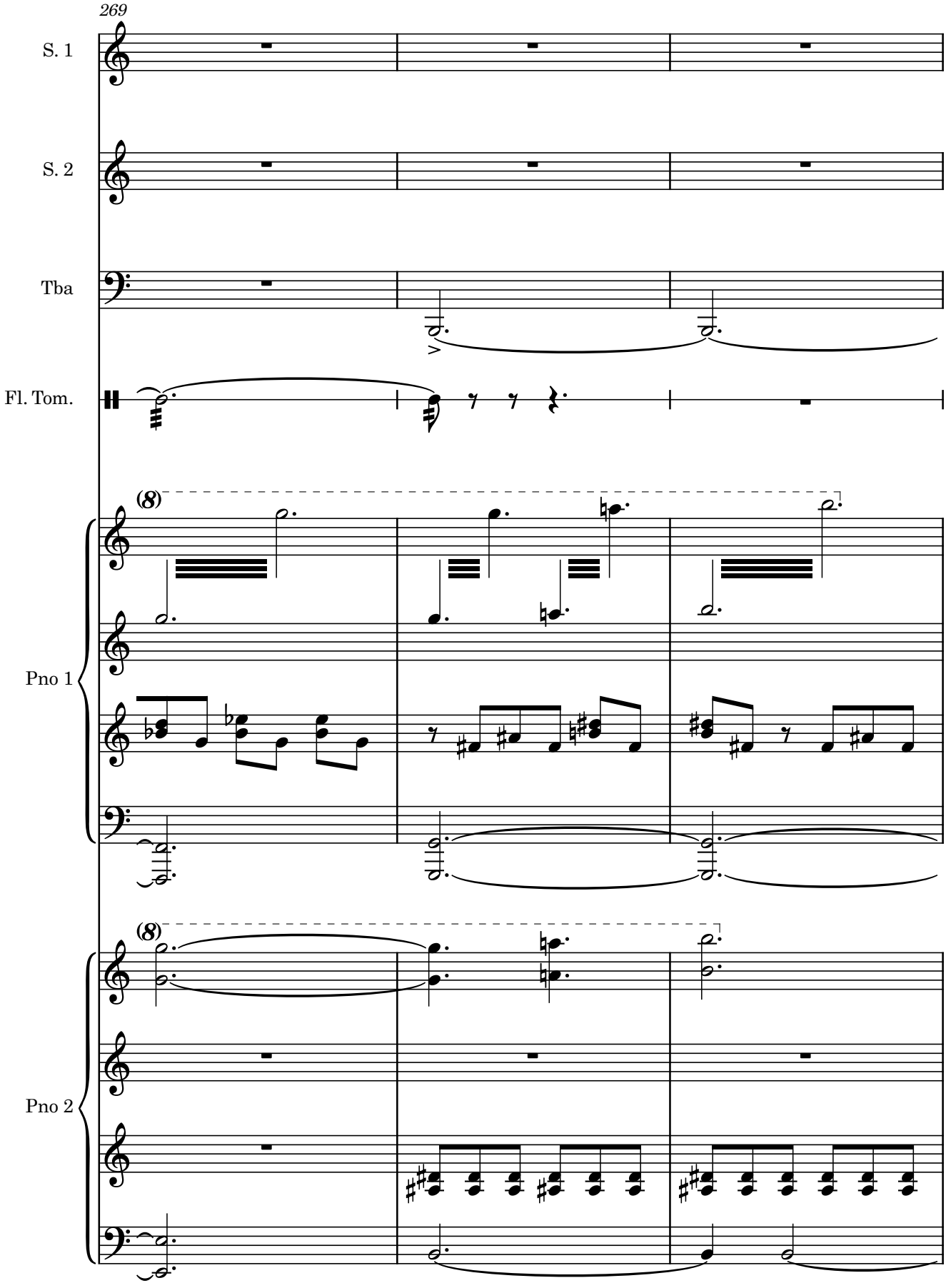
269
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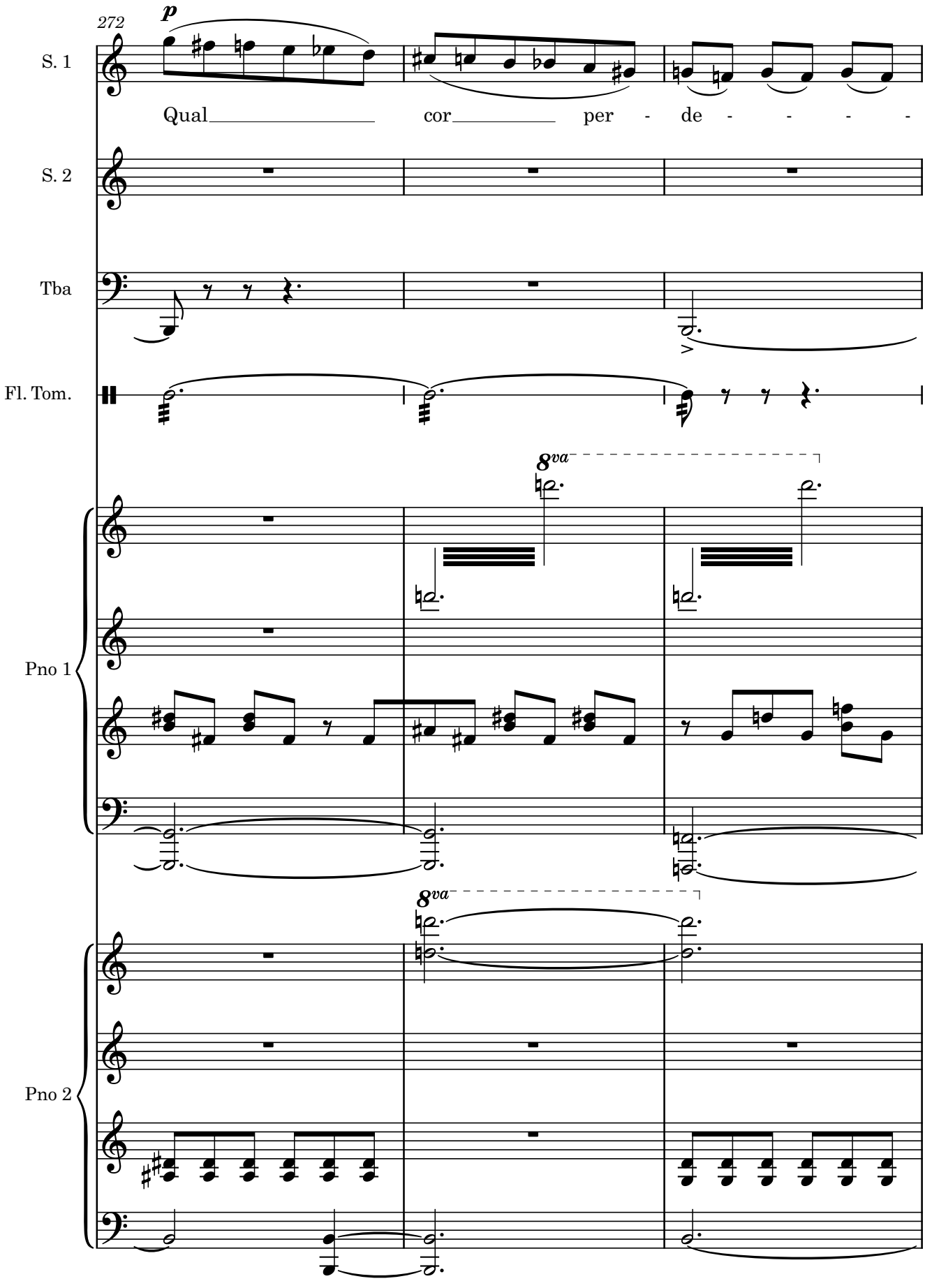
Tba
Fl. Tom.
Pno 1
Pno 2


272
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S. 1
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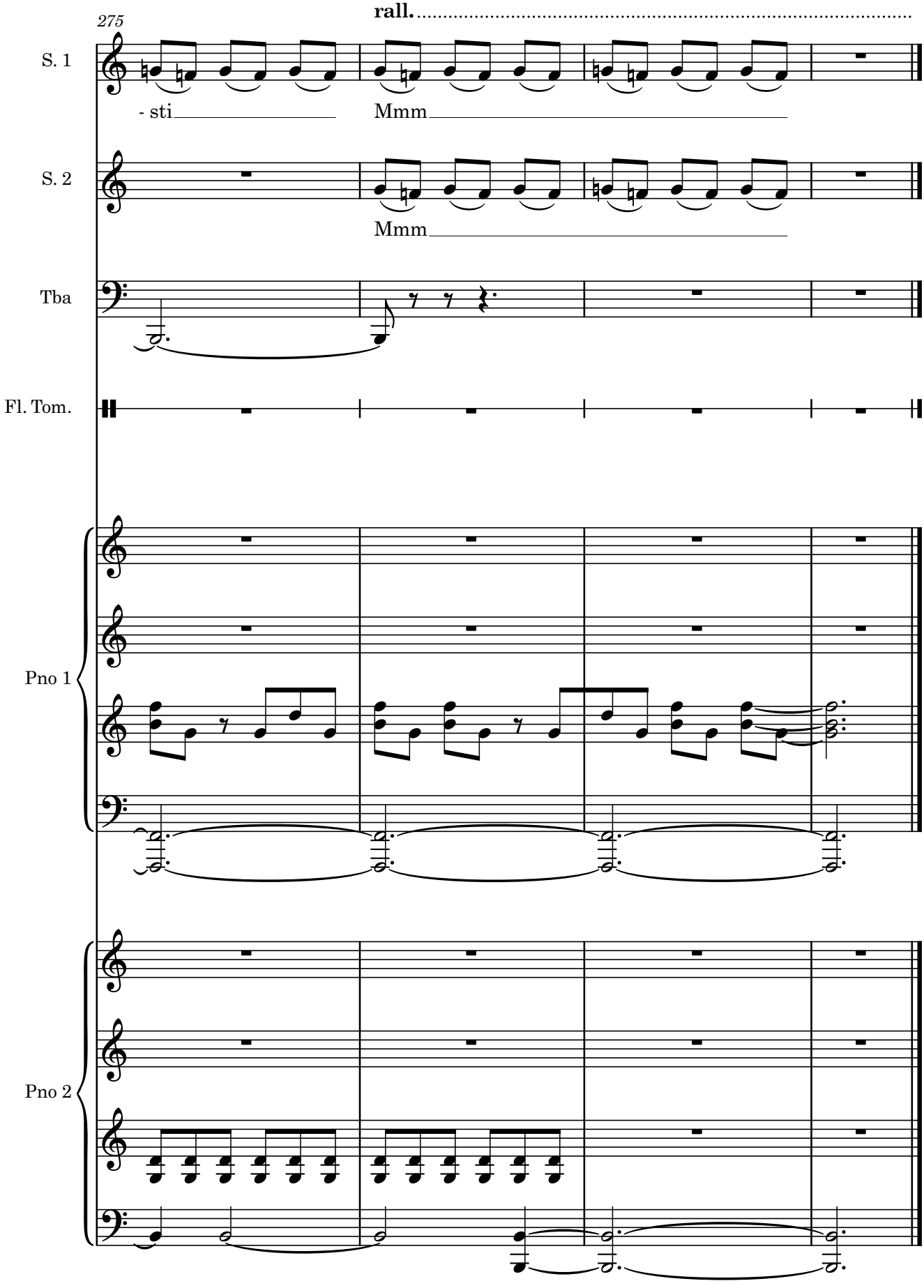
S. 2
Tba
Fl. Tom.
8va
Pno 1
8va
Pno 2


275
rall.
S. 1
- sti
Mmm
S. 2
Mmm
Tba
Fl. Tom.
Pno 1
Pno 2